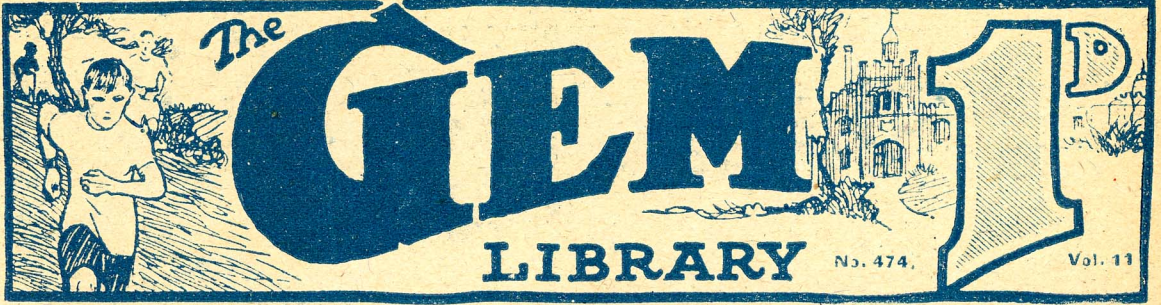


PARKER THE PRODIGAL!

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



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PARKER THE PRODIGAL!

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

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.

The Mystery of Parker.

"O LD Parker's back!" said Fatty Wynn, entering the study in the New House which he shared with Figgins and Kerr.

"Who says so?" demanded George Figgins.

"I do, chump! Saw him myself, in the tuckshop!"

Fatty had just come in laden with provender. That sort of thing was quite in Fatty's Wynn's style. When he had a remittance—as he had had that day—Dame Taggles was sure to have a visit from him before long.

But that sort of thing had not been at all in Parker's style, so far as St. Jim's knew yet. Neither Figgins nor Kerr had ever seen Parker in the tuckshop. More, the Terrible Three, whose study he shared, had told other fellows that Parker didn't care a scrap for pastry or cakes or anything of that kind.

After about ten days at the school, during which he had attracted more attention than any new fellow who had come into the Shell for a long time past, Parker had been called away, and had been absent fully a fortnight.

Some of the fellows thought he would never come back. Figgins and Kerr were among those who held this opinion. For they suspected that Parker was not what he seemed.

And they had their reasons.

Within a very short time of Parker's temporary absence—in fact, only the night before he went—Figgins, Kerr, and Fatty Wynn, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the School House, on their way back by rail from a visit to Wayland, had rescued Parker from serious danger. He had been set upon in the train by two roughs, who tried to chloroform him. The four, by way of the footboard, and at considerable risk, had gone to his rescue.

Fatty had been tumbled out with one of the scoundrels, and had snatched from him, almost unconsciously, a gold watch and chain, which turned out to be Parker's property.

But the queer thing about it was that if the watch really belonged to Parker—and there seemed no reason to doubt that—then Parker was not really Parker at all, but P. I. Parker-Roberts, a well-known journalist, on the staff of that great paper the "Daily Messenger."

Figgins had seen on the watch an inscription which gave away this fact. He had told his chums; but Fatty, who was feeling the effects of his tumble from the train, had gone to sleep almost as soon as he began, and they had let him sleep on. It did not matter much. It was the counsel of Kerr that Figgy wanted—not that of Fatty.

Now Figgins and Kerr looked hard at one another. Fatty, not in the least perceiving the excitement caused by his news, went on emptying paper bags, his eyes dwelling lovingly upon the contents of each as each was emptied.

"The chap's a rank impostor!" said Figgins, with a suddenness that gave Fatty quite a start.

"Who is?" he asked.

"Parker, of course! Only his name isn't really Parker, the sweep!"

"Oh, draw it mild, Figgy!" said Kerr.

"It's not quite so bad as all that, you know."

"Rats! It looks about as black as it can to me. The bouncer has pluck enough, I know, and he thanked us in quite a decent way; but—"

"I can't make out the least little bit what you're driving at, Figgy," said Fatty Wynn almost plaintively.

"Oh, buzz off to sleep, and dream about grub, you fat chump!" retorted Figgins. "This job needs brains!"

"What, go to sleep with all this grub waiting to be eaten?" said Fatty, his blue eyes wide open. "You must be off your rocker to talk like that, Figgy!"

Figgins and Kerr laughed, and drew up their chairs to the table. They were not so excited about the reappearance of Parker that they meant to go without tea. Especially such a tea as this! Fatty had done the thing in rare style, and the glowing rays of the fire, welcome enough on this sharp evening in early March, showed the board lavishly spread. Kerr took up the teapot from where it had stood to keep warm by the fire, and all was ready.

Rabbit-pies, sausage-rolls, cakes of three kinds, tarts, cheese-cakes, meringues, and other comestibles crowded the table. They crowded it to such an extent that it really seemed the boulder duty of the three to clear it a bit before doing any more talking. They proceeded to do their duty with praiseworthy energy.

Kerr and Figgins had good, healthy appetites, but they were nothing compared with Fatty Wynn. They had had enough while Fatty was still only half-way through, and not all his pressing could induce them to return to the charge.

"He's here under false pretences, anyway," said Figgy, going back to the subject of Parker.

"But that don't necessarily mean that he's up to any harm, old man."

"He's not up to any good, I'll bet!"

"Old Parker?" said Fatty, halting with a forkful of rabbit-pie on its way to his mouth. "Oh, I dunno, Figgy! Lowther was with him, and they were giving no end big orders for to-morrow. It was Parker's treat, I'm sure; he kept asking Lowther what he ought to get. The chap didn't seem to know a thing about grub, really. Extraordinary, I call it!"

"For to-morrow—eh?" said Kerr. "They must be going to have a spread in Tom Merry's study to celebrate Parker's coming back."

"Hope they'll ask us," said Fatty, with his mouth full.

"I shouldn't go," said Figgins.

"Oh, rot! I know jolly well I should! So would you, wouldn't you, Kerr?"

"I might be tempted," replied Kerr, with a grave face but twinkling eyes.

"The chap's a bag of mystery, but I don't think he's a villain."

"What's he here for? That's what I'd like to know!" said Figgins darkly.

"Why, what are we all here for?" asked Fatty.

"Oh, shurrup, you ass! Now then, Kerr!"

"I shouldn't mind knowing, myself," said Kerr. "But I don't see how we're going to find out."

"You're a bit of a 'tec, aren't you?"

"What-ho! Old Kerr is as good as

Sexton Blake and Nelson Lee rolled into one," said Fatty enthusiastically.

"Not quite, old scout. I've done a little thing or two in that line, Figgy. But I can't see my way to shadowing our friend, Pignacious Parker. We shall know all about it some day, perhaps. And even suppose we don't—well, what then?"

But Figgins was not to be satisfied so easily.

"Fathead!" he growled. "Is it likely that a grown man—and a journalist, too—would be here disguised as a boy if he wasn't jolly well up to something?"

"Journalists," said Kerr, "ain't usually criminals."

"You chaps are talking riddles to me," put in Fatty.

"Get on with your grub, you barrel of lard! Gorging's all you're good for!" said Figgins crossly.

"It's what was on the watch you're going by, I know, Figgy," said Kerr. "Tell us again what it was, and we'll see if we can make anything out of it."

"Figgy wouldn't ever have seen the watch if it hadn't been for me," said Fatty. "It seems as if I am some use, after all."

"Of course you are, old chap," said Figgins, relenting—for Wynn had spoken in rather an injured tone. "You've just stood a spread that was good enough for a king, and you bucked up like a Trojan that night. But do let us get on with the washing!"

"Go on, Figgy! What was on the ticker?"

"Can't remember the exact words. But it said that it had been presented to P. I. Parker-Roberts, of the 'Daily Messenger,' by some force of bobbies or other for his pluck in rescuing another bobby when attacked by burglars."

"My hat, that ain't any very black mark against him, anyhow," said Kerr. "I could just see old Parker doing it, too! He's a jolly cool one!"

"But if he's that chap, what's he want at St. Jim's?"

"It's possible that the watch wasn't originally his."

"Do you mean he boned it, Kerr?"

"Crumbs, no! But that Parker-Roberts chap may have been his pater, you know."

"Name ain't the same."

"He might have dropped the hyphen and the Roberts. What's the giddy good of hyphens?"

"It would have been the Parker he'd have dropped, not the Roberts."

"So it would," admitted Kerr.

"Besides, I've got evidence that Parker is really the 'Messenger' man!"

"Great Scott! You might have said so before, old scout, instead of arguing nineteen to the dozen."

With an air of triumph Figgins produced a number of copies of the "Daily Messenger."

"I got these straight from the publishing office," he said. "They go back six weeks or more—to before the time when Parker blew in. There are several articles by P. I. Parker-Roberts in the earlier ones. Pretty good articles, too. I couldn't have done 'em much better myself!"

"Do you think our man Parker's got all that in him, Figgy? The chap ain't such an ass as he looks, I know; but—"

well, it seems a wildish notion! Why, Raitton as near as could be caned him that day of old Gussy's gas-party!"

"I wish he had quite! It would have been something for the 'boulder to remember when he gets back to Fleet Street. But let me go on, Kerr. There ain't a single article during the time Parker was here. See any clue in that? But he goes off all in a hurry, and then the screeds begin again. And the first two are about a murder case—jolly clever articles, too! Don't tell me that it was anything but that case that made him sent for in a hurry! They hadn't got another man fit to handle it, that's my notion."

"But is it likely that such a nonsuch would be kind of wasting his sweetness on the desert air down here, Figgy?"

"No, it ain't a bit likely; but it happens to be so, that's all!"

Fatty had finished his tea, and had fallen asleep. The other two were too absorbed to notice Fatty. For once Figgins, not Kerr, had assumed the detective role. But Kerr had never doubted his chief's brains. They were as good as any among the St. Jim's juniors, he knew.

"You've made out a good case, old chap," he said. "But I can't see the object of his being here."

"I can't, either. But it's fishy, Kerr. Look here! If the articles dry up now, will you believe?"

"Yes, I rather think I shall. It would be hard not to."

"Since the murder case, Parker-Roberts has been over on a special mission to the Western Front. And when I talk to our Parker again, I'm going to spring a question or two about the Western Front on him. See?"

"I don't think you'll catch Parker hopping quite as easily as that, Figgy. But this is jolly interesting. Mind, I'm not willing to believe that Parker's here for any sort of harm; but I'm game to help watch him."

"Hallo, you fellows!"

It was Tom Merry who spoke, and Manners was with him.

"Welcome in peace," said Tom. "Fatty may slumber on. His consent is not in doubt. I haven't any doubts about you chaps, either. You don't usually say 'No' when invited to a feed."

That word aroused Fatty from his slumbers.

"Who said 'feed'?" he asked. "Was it you, Tom Merry? I thought at first it was all part of my dream. You chaps had the most scrumptious spread in your study, and Parker was inviting us to come along."

"'Twas the vision of prophecy, Fatty," answered Tom, grinning. "It is really Parker's do. Only he's too shy to go round asking the fellows."

"Our Pignacious has returned laden with wealth and in a much better temper," said Manners.

"I'm coming for one," said Fatty very decidedly. "To-morrow, I suppose? It's too late for it to-day."

"Besides which—"

Tom glanced at the table, with its array of empty dishes.

"Oh, that wouldn't really have mattered!" said Fatty. "I've pretty nearly forgotten that. But I dare say I shall be in better form by to-morrow."

"We can count on you all, I suppose?" Tom asked.

"Oh, rather!" replied Kerr.

"Yes, we'll come," said Figgins.

"Why, I thought you said you wouldn't go, Figgy?"

"That must have been in your dream, Fatty," answered George Figgins gravely.

CHAPTER 2.

Taking Mellish for a Walk.

"COMING along to footer, Parker?" asked Lowther, meeting the new boy after classes next morning.

"Thank you, but I think not. I do not feel quite up to the mark," replied Parker.

It was of no use to argue with Parker. When he made up his mind, he made it up good and hard. So Lowther hurried off to join Tom and Manners, who had gone ahead.

"Hallo, Parkah! All alone, eh? Aren't you comin' to footah, deah boy?"

This time it was Arthur Augustus. Parker liked Gussy very much; but just now he could not help regarding him as rather a nuisance.

"Not to-day, I think, D'Arcy," he answered.

"Oh! Not slackin' off, are you, Parkah, deah boy? That would be a pity, because Tom Merry says you have the makin's of a weally good half."

That rather pleased Parker. He had never played footer at all in the days when he had really been a boy. Now he had taken to it with keenness. He was old enough to be above the vanity of being pleased by a mere boy's favourable opinion—or he ought to have been. But it is a fair question whether anyone is too old for vanity in one form or another.

"No, I'm not slacking off," he said. "It's very good of Merry, I'm sure."

"I insidiah that he is quite cowwect, Parkah. You weally play a wippin' game for a fellow who has had so little expiewience. With a little coachin'—"

Arthur Augustus meant his own coaching, of course. Parker quite understood that.

"I'll get you to give me a wrinkle or two, D'Arcy," he replied.

"Wight-ho, deah boy! Tell you what, I'll cut footah for once myself, an' we'll go along to our studay, or to yours, an' have a weal good jaw about it."

But that did not suit Parker, either.

"I won't trouble you to-day, D'Arcy," he said.

"Oh, no twouble, deah boy! A pleasuah, I assuah you!"

Perhaps it would have been to Parker—at another time. Certainly it would have been to D'Arcy at any time. As Jack Blake rudely said, Gussy's favourite instrument was the jawbone of an ass.

But at the moment it did not suit Parker at all. He wanted to go to Rylcombe, and in sheer desperation he said so, though he knew that he risked having the company of the swell of the Fourth—which he did not want on this expedition.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I have an appointment in the village, and if I'm not to be late I must go at once."

He pulled out his watch to add colour to the fiction; for he had no appointment in reality, though he had reasons for going.

"That's a wippin' watch, deah boy!" said Gussy. "Is it the same one that Fatty Wynn saved for you that night?"

The watch was replaced in haste. Parker had remembered now the inscription on it, of which Gussy knew nothing. The New House chums had not taken D'Arcy into their confidence about that.

Arthur Augustus noted the quick return of the watch to its pocket, and there was something in it which rather nettled him. But he was still more nettled by what Parker said next.

"By the way, D'Arcy, I trust that you have not mentioned that little affair to anyone?"

"I was undah the impwession, Parkah,

that I gave my word that I would not. Affah that—"

"Oh, of course! Beg your pardon, D'Arcy, really!"

"Don't mench! I am not easily offended by the untbankin' indiscretion of a friend, Parkah, an' I think you are awaah that I wegard you as a friend."

But the manner in which Gussy stalked off, with his noble nose high in air, showed that he was a bit offended.

Parker was sorry for that. But, anyway, Gussy had been effectually choked off offering to come to Rylcombe.

Mellish was mooning at the gates as Parker passed out.

Now, it was curious that Parker, who did not want the company of D'Arcy, whom he liked, should go out of his way to secure that of Mellish, whom he despised and disliked. But he did so, and for doing so he had his reasons.

"I am going to the village, Mellish," he said. "You might come with me, I think."

"Oh, might I?" snarled Mellish, who was in a very bad temper. He was stony-broke, and it seemed to him the height of injustice that Racke, who was rolling in money, and Crooke, who had quite as much as was good for him, should have won his sorely-needed funds in that last little game of banker.

"Yes, I think it would be as well," said Parker.

"Well, I don't, and I'm not coming!"

"I think you are mistaken, Mellish."

"Go and eat coke! I'm not coming!"

"I am sure you are mistaken, Mellish, so let us have no more argument. Not that, in any case, an order to go and eat coke can be considered as an argument."

Mellish lifted his sulky eyes. They met Parker's, and they dropped before Parker's cool, imperious gaze.

"I suppose you think you can make me?" he said weakly.

"Be more gracious, Mellish, if you know how. Accept my invitation to take a walk with me."

"Oh, I reckon I may as well come!" said Mellish.

They walked away together. Ernest Levison saw them go, and wondered. But Mellish was no concern of Levison's; Levison had washed his hands of the sneak. And though Levison had come to the conclusion that there was something out of the ordinary in Parker, he had not yet got as far as entertaining any definite suspicions.

Sidney Clive, the South African junior, ran up and joined Levison. Both were on their way to footer, and a trifle late.

"Whew!" said Clive. "Shouldn't have expected to see Parker taking Mellish for a stroll."

"Same here," replied Levison. "Hope he'll enjoy it."

"But don't think so—eh?" grinned Clive. "I know I shouldn't. I suppose you're going to the spread to-night, old man?"

"Haven't been asked."

"Oh, yes, you have! Manners said both of us. I forgot, though, you weren't there."

"I'll go all serene," said Levison; "though blessed if I can see why they ask me!"

He was pleased, all the same. The occasional signs and tokens that his new footing among the juniors was recognised by the fellows whom he had always respected, in a queer way, even when he had hated them, were very grateful and comforting to Ernest Levison.

The two new chums went on their way. Parker and Mellish went on theirs, in silence for a time.

Mellish broke the silence.

"I suppose it's because of that silly bit

of paper that you think you can order me about as you like," he said sulkily.

"Your confession of blackmail, you mean?" returned Parker. "My views of a scrap of paper are not Hunnish, and I certainly do think that that particular scrap puts you in my power. But I have no wish to make myself unpleasant, I assure you."

"You might as well hand it over, then," said Mellish, trying hard to speak off-handedly.

"I think not. I don't want to be personal, Mellish, but I discern signs of the Hun in you."

Conversation languished again for some little time after that.

Parker was watching Mellish narrowly. It was queer that those two ruffians should have found out about his journey to town and the time of his return. And they must surely have found out, or they could not have been at Wayland on the qui vive for him.

Someone might have put them up to it. Parker's suspicions quite naturally flew to Mellish, the only fellow at St. Jim's, as far as he was aware, who knew his real identity.

And not a fellow to be trusted, either. Of that Parker was sure; but he doubted whether Mellish was scoundrel enough to help the two with knowledge of their object. It was hardly likely that they would have confided it to him.

Parker was visiting Rylcombe that day on the off-chance of sighting his assailants.

He did not expect to recognise them, in any case, for he had not seen their faces on either occasion of their attempts upon him. But he had an idea that if he saw them he would know them for something other than rural denizens, and a question or two in the village might enable him to guess more.

He had been away for over a fortnight. He did not imagine that they had been hanging about Rylcombe all that time, awaiting his return. But he thought it more than likely that they would have followed him down again, for he had no doubt as to who was the man who had set these beasts of prey upon him. And he knew him for a man not easily baulked.

Mellish grew conscious of the fact that his companion was watching him, and did not like it a bit. So he began to make talk.

"Don't you find those chaps rather slow?" asked Mellish.

"I cannot say that I do," answered Parker. "You mean Merry and the rest, I apprehend?"

"Yes; swanking Merry and Lowther, who thinks himself so blessed funny, and gives you pains in your inside with his puffing jokes."

"I admit that I do not consider Lowther's jocular attempts invariably successful," said Parker drily.

Mellish was encouraged. "And that ass, Manners!" he went on. "Potty about photography. As for D'Arcy, he's nothing but a silly tailor's dummy!"

"D'Arcy is a friend of mine," broke in Parker.

"Oh, I forgot. Worth while to chum up to a lord's son, ain't it?"

Parker let that sneer pass.

CHAPTER 3. In the Village.

"**B**UT you must get a bit fed up with that saintly crew," went on Mellish. "Tisn't as if you were a kid still. I dare say you were a good little Georgie at their age, but—"

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"You had better moderate your tone, Mellish!" snapped Parker.

"Oh, well, I don't mean any harm," replied Mellish, who was merely being as offensive as he dared. "But you're a man, and I should think you'd have a man's tastes, or some of 'em."

"Such as?"

"Well, don't you smoke?"

"I have smoked, Mellish."

As a matter of fact, Parker, in ordinary life, was a fairly heavy smoker. He missed his pipe at St. Jim's a good deal. But he had a strong will, and could go without tobacco when he made up his mind to do so.

"And drink?"

"I am not a teetotaler."

"And play cards?"

"At times. Though I am not a confirmed devotee of any card game."

"And have a bit on a gee-gee now and then?"

"That is quite out of my line."

"Well, the Turf's a bit off just now. This beastly war has messed up the racing. But I can't see why you should cut yourself out of any sort of amusement all the time you're here."

"And how do you propose that I should obtain such amusement; all of it being, I assume, against the rules of the school?"

"Oh, crikey, yes! But that's no odds, you know. It don't matter a giddy scrap as long as you are fly enough not to be caught out?"

"So that is all that matters, Mellish?"

"Of course it is. What else should?"

Parker looked at Mellish in a queer way, so Mellish thought it.

But Parker was thinking hard.

He remembered that, in coming to St. Jim's, his main idea had been to study the worse side of public-school life. Not to study that side exclusively, of course. He had meant all along to be fair.

But he had certainly believed that that worse side was far more in evidence than he had actually found it.

There was not a lot of bullying at St. Jim's. There were a few bullies. But the general feeling of the school was all against bullying.

And there was not a lot of dissipation, as far as he had yet gathered. That there were a few gay dogs he knew; but, quite unmistakably, they were held in anything but high esteem by the rest.

But Parker had promised the great chief of the "Daily Messenger" that he should be heard from in the role of "Parker, the Prodigal." And he saw in the turn the conversation between him and Mellish had taken a chance of starting in on that role.

He would not like it a bit, he knew. He would far rather have gone on studying the Terrible Three, the chums of No. 6, Figgins & Co., Talbot, and the other fellows who had already given him new notions as to public-school life.

They would look upon him as a renegade if he took up with the doggy gang. But it could not be helped. The thing had to be done.

"That is one point of view, certainly," said Parker.

"Seems to me that it's the only point of view, for anyone but a blushing little Eric," replied Mellish, growing bolder as he thought he saw signs of Parker's coming round.

"Then I may take it that you are decidedly not a blushing little Eric?"

"Not me! Nor Racke, nor Crooke. There's Clampe, too, and Scrope, and Piggott. But he's only a kid, though, my hat, he's pretty fly for his age! And, of course, there are Cutts and St. Leger and Gilmore in the Fifth. And a Sixth Form chap or two. But I don't know much about them. They have to be

careful. A prefect gets it in the neck jolly hard if he's caught out."

Mellish was growing quite confidential.

"Racke is the war-profits person, isn't he? And Crooke is the heavy lout who scowls persistently at Talbot? I do not think, Mellish, that I should care about going out with Racke and Crooke; while I have not the—er—pleasure of Clampe's acquaintance."

"Levison would have suited you better. But that's dead off now," said Mellish, with regret.

"Levison does not—er—blag any more? Blag is, I believe, the accepted term?"

"Yes; that's what the silly asses call it. No, Levison's gone right off it. That's a pity, too, for he had ever so much more in him than Racke and Crooke."

Ernest Levison had often been rough on Mellish. There was no one at St. Jim's who knew better than Levison the true value of Mellish, which Levison was far from rating high.

But at his worst, Levison had been a better comrade than Racke or Crooke. They had scarcely even "thieves' honour." He had been ready "to stand by a pal."

"What of Cutts and his friends?"

"Well, of course, they're in the Fifth. That makes a heap of difference. They'll take up a fag sooner than they will a chap in the Shell or Fourth. There's young Piggott. They took him up. And Manners minor. But that didn't come to much."

"Have you any influence with Cutts and his worshipful company, Mellish?"

"I dare say I could work the oracle for you if you make it worth my while. After all, they are ready enough to be civil to a junior, if he has plenty of tin."

"Ah! We will talk farther of this, Mellish. Here we are at the village."

Parker was keeping his eyes open now for any sign of the two roughs.

Mellish was not thinking much about them. If he did think of them, it was only to assure himself that they had cleared out now, since he had not seen them for fully a fortnight. His gaze wandered round.

It stopped at last upon a confectioner's window. War-time economy had made a difference to the display in that window; but there was enough left to make the mouth of Percy Mellish water.

"I'd ask you in here, Parker," he said, in very friendly tones, "only, as it happens, I haven't a blessed sou to my name."

"Which means, I apprehend, that you wish me to ask you in?"

"I shouldn't say 'No.' And as you've dragged me down here, I think it's up to you."

"It will spoil your dinner."

"Rats! I don't mind that, anyway."

"Come in, then."

They went in.

"Have what you like," said Parker. He himself ordered a dry ginger-ale, and took a seat whence he could watch passers-by.

Mellish was in clover. His powers of consumption were not equal to Fatty Wynn's; but he was naturally greedy.

He ate fast, and he ate for quite a long time. Parker began to think he would never stop.

Confectionery of all sorts disappeared rapidly, and in what seemed to Parker a disgustingly mixed manner. Sausage-rolls, after cream-tarts, seemed something like the limit to Parker.

Mellish reached at last the stage at which he could get down no more solids. He had already drunk more than one bottle of ginger-beer. Now he topped

up with two more, and announced that he had finished.

Parker thought it was more than time, but did not say so. He settled the bill, and they passed out together.

"Do you feel—er—quite comfortable, Mellish?"

Mellish did not. Mellish was feeling that those last two bottles of ginger-beer had been a mistake. But he was not going to own it.

"Oh, yes, thanks, Parker," he answered, not very cheerily.

"There was a Roman emperor, Mellish, who, after gorging himself to repletion, used to have the back of his throat tickled with a feather, in order that he might—er—provide accommodation for more food by the process of—"

"Oh, don't be a beast, Parker! You make me feel sus—sus—sick!"

Parker smiled a grim smile. He considered that Mellish ought to be feeling sick.

Just then the ill-assorted pair caught sight of another badly-matched couple.

Parker saw Messrs. Smiler and Rusty before Mellish did, but only a second before. Mellish changed colour as his eyes fell upon them. That might have been due only to nausea, but Parker fancied otherwise.

Messrs. Smiler and Rusty were coming from the station. Parker guessed that they had been sent down from town for his benefit.

"I am going into the post-office, Mellish," he said.

"I guess I'll come with you," said Mellish.

"Better not, Mellish! There might be objections to your being—er—ill in there. And I really fear that you are going to be ill!"

Mellish groaned as Parker left him. Mellish hardly felt in form for keeping up his end with those two.

"Hallo, Mister Percymellish!" said Smiler affably. "An' 'ow's Mister Percymellish this fine day?"

"Oh, pretty well, thanks!" replied Mellish, feeling anything but well. "I say, you know, you'd better not stop and talk to me just now. He's in there."

He nodded in the direction of the post-office.

"Wot, our dear young friend Parker?" returned Smiler, with an oily grin. "'Ow we should rejoice to see our dear young friend again—eh, Rusty, old image?"

Rusty only grunted.

"You'd better toddle along this way about five o'clock this afternoon, Mister Percymellish," said Smiler, in a commanding tone that made Mellish feel still less comfortable.

How he wished he had never seen these two! Trouble would come of it, he knew, and Parker might be watching.

"I don't know that I can," he said weakly.

Smiler fixed him with a gleaming pair of eyes.

"You rotter!" he said briefly.

Mellish succumbed, like the coward he was.

"I'll come," he said. "Only do clear off! I don't want him to see us together."

But, of course, Parker had seen. It was for no other purpose he had left Mellish outside.

Messrs. Smiler and Rusty moved on towards the Green Man.

Parker came out.

"Friends of yours, Mellish?" he asked.

"Oh, no!" replied Mellish hastily. "They were asking the way, that was all. Nasty rough-looking chaps."

But, though he still felt internal uneasiness, Mellish was in better spirits when he reached the school. He had

managed to tap Parker for a loan, and had told him quite a lot more about Cutts, Racke, Crooke, and the rest of the bold, bad blades.

Parker the Prodigal would not be long in starting his career now.

CHAPTER 4.

Parker's Patrons.

IT could not be said that Mellish and Cutts of the Fifth were on intimate terms.

As a rule, Cutts steered clear of Fourth and Shell fellows in his amusements, even as Mellish had said. He might have lowered himself to be chummy with Racke, who fairly rolled in ill-gotten wealth; but so far Racke had shown no

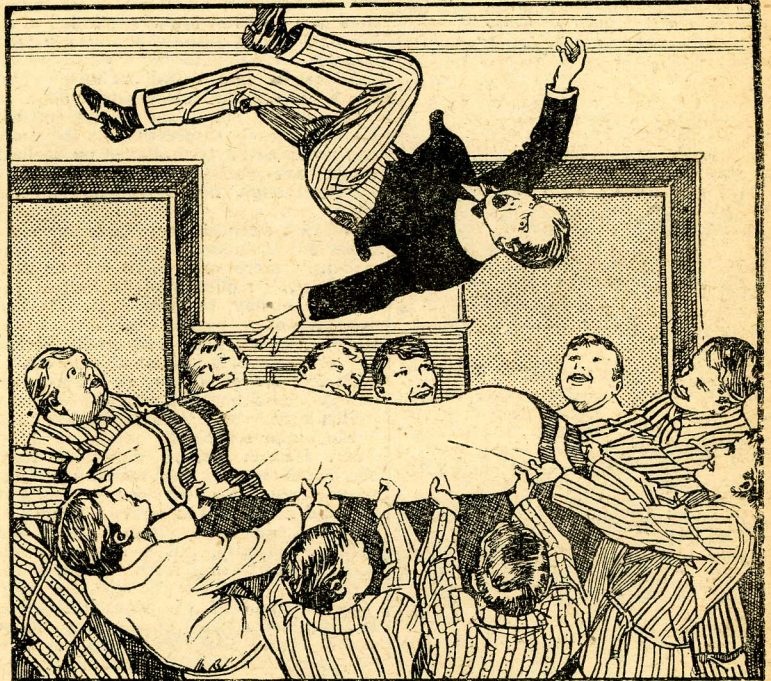
"May as well. He's an amusing little animal, anyway," yawned the great Gerald Cutts. "Cut along an' see if he's on his lonesome now."

Mellish obeyed the command, and less than five minutes later the dandy of the Fifth strolled into Study No. 10 on the Shell passage, where Parker sat alone, writing letters.

"Hallo, Parker!" said Cutts affably. "Heard you'd turned up again, an' thought I'd give you a look in."

"Very kind of you, I'm sure!" replied Parker drily. "Cutts of the Fifth, I think?"

"By Jove, we ought to know each other!" said Cutts. He did not bear malice to any very great extent, and Parker's attitude rather tickled him.



Parker shot up towards the ceiling.
(See Chapter 7.)

desire to be chummy with him. Racke liked to lead, and Cutts was too masterful.

But Mellish was a useful sort of jackal, and in that capacity Cutts could put up with him on occasion.

Mellish didn't expect any great measure of civility. He could eat dirt if he saw his profit in it.

So he went along to tell Cutts that Parker showed a disposition towards playing the gay dog, and might be persuaded to place himself under the wing of the great Cutts in pursuit of that end.

"I don't know that I want to have anything to do with the cheeky rotter!" growled Cutts, who had not forgotten or forgiven the fact that Parker had put him on his back before a crowd.

"He's got lots of tin, Cutts," said Mellish.

"Seen any of it?"

"Rather! He stood treat to me in Rylcombe to-day. No blessed limit. I had all I could eat or drink."

"Ah! I thought you were looking a bit off colour," said Cutts, with a grin. "You shouldn't be a pig, young Mellish!"

"It's all right now. I didn't want any dinner after it, that was all. Shall you look Parker up, Cutts?"

"Well, yes; so we ought," Parker replied. "Will you take a seat, Cutts?"

Cutts took one—on the table. That was not what Parker had meant, but he let it pass.

Parker guessed why Cutts had come, and because he guessed he made up his mind to bear the Fifth-Former's insolence as meekly as possible.

At least, Cutts was an improvement upon Mellish. Parker had a very low opinion indeed of Mellish.

"Find it slow here?" yawned Cutts.

Parker said that, on the whole, he found it a trifle slow. It was not precisely the truth, for he had never yet had a slow day at St. Jim's. But it seemed to Parker legitimate to deceive Cutts.

"Rather a collection of wash-outs, the Shell, on the whole—what?"

Parker intimated that, compared with the august Cutts, the Shell might be regarded in that light.

"Gettin' a bit fed up with them?" suggested Cutts.

Parker admitted, untruthfully, being rather fed up.

"Care about a flog—somethin' to relieve the giddy monotony—what?" asked Cutts, imagining himself to be getting along famously. He did not

begin to realise that he was playing right into the hands of this chubby-looking junior—this junior who had to arise early in order to shave a startling crop of bristles, and who was really at least ten years his senior.

Parker signified that a fling might meet his views, but naturally desired to know what sort of a fling Cutts proposed.

Cutts expounded his notion of a fling. It sounded to Parker very sordid and silly, and not in the least worth doing.

But Parker did not tell Cutts so. He only said:

"Is it not a bit risky?"

"Oh, that's half the fun of it," said Cutts.

This was a new light on the subject to Parker. Not quite, though. When he came to think of it, Mellish had made it clear that that queer fellow Levison had gone in for this kind of thing in much the same spirit. Mellish and Racke and Crooke had none of it, Parker fancied. Cutts had, it seemed. And so Parker preferred Cutts as a companion on such an expedition to any of them, though he himself saw no fun in such proceedings.

"When do you propose initiating me?" inquired Parker.

"By Jove, you're a rum 'un, Chubby! I doubt whether the Shell has ever had such a queer, dry old stick as you in it before. 'Initiate' is good—quite good!"

"My name is Parker, Cutts."

They had called Parker 'Chubby' over there in France. But that was a different thing from being called Chubby by Cutts.

"That's all right. Among pals, you know, Chubby."

Parker did not protest further, for at that moment Monty Lowther came in, laden with supplies.

"Hallo, Pigniacus! Have you asked Cutts to the spread?" said Lowther.

"None of your cheek, you impudent fag!" growled Cutts. "I don't come to kids' gorges!"

"Pleased to hear it," Lowther replied cheerily. "On the whole, Cutts, I think we shall be happier without you. Ta-ta, if you must go!"

Cutts departed.

"I shouldn't get friendly with that chap if I were you, Parker," Lowther said quite seriously.

Parker did not answer.

Now came along Tom Merry and Manners, also laden. They did not grumble that Parker took no share in fetching up the provender or even in setting the table. That was scarcely to be expected from Parker, who had a positively unnatural way—from their point of view—of considering a spread as a thing of very little importance.

But this particular spread was of some account in Parker's eyes. The pleasure of the Terrible Three in it pleased him, and he was also pleased to find that everyone asked was coming.

The table was set, and a fine sight it made. Tea was made, extra teapots and kettles having been borrowed for the occasion.

The guests began to arrive, among the first being the four chums of Study No. 6. Then came Clive and Levison, followed by Noble and Dane and Glyn. Lastly, arrived the New House trio and Talbot.

How everyone was crowded in was a mystery, although the Terrible Three's study was bigger than most of the other studies. But crowded in they were. And all—with the possible exception of the founder of the feast, and even he seemed to have a better appetite than usual—did full justice to the bountiful spread provided.

Figgins did not forget his intention of drawing Parker. But he got little

change out of that cool customer. Parker was quite ready to talk about affairs at the Front, but never by a word gave himself away.

And the great chief of the New House juniors found his hostility melting like snow in sunshine. It was not easy, after all, to believe that this fellow could mean any harm to St. Jim's or at St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 5.

Talbot Knows.

"YOU are quite sure of this, D'Arcy?" said Parker.

"Absolutely, deah boy! I taxed the wotth with it, an' he turned evvery colouah poss, with gween in the ascendant. That was while you were away, of course, and I had weally forgotten all about it till some-thin' you said last night weminded me."

So it was Mellish who had put that note of invitation to the meeting which the juniors had called "Gussy's gas-party" under the Housemaster's door.

Parker was not in the least surprised. He had vaguely suspected it at the time, and no sneaking trick played by Mellish would have astonished him.

But, though not surprised, he was angry.

Mellish's offences were piling up. He had attempted blackmail. He was evidently more or less in league with those two scoundrelly emissaries of Parker's enemy, the Big Boss. He had put Cutts on to Parker, and, though that suited Parker's book very well, Parker did not believe it had been done out of good feeling. And now, as it appeared, he must also be held responsible for a particularly slimy trick against the whole junior school.

Mr. Railton would doubtless have been attracted to the meeting in the crypt by the horrid din, in any case; but that did not alter the guilt of Mellish.

Parker got away from Gussy, not without difficulty, put a slipper in his pocket, and went forth to look for Mellish.

In his periods of stony-brokenness Mellish had a way of mooning about alone. Racke and Crooke did not care for over much of his company, and Mellish had no desire for over much of Trimble's. Even Percy Mellish looked down upon the egregious Baggy.

So Parker found Mellish in the quadrangle, and rounded him up into a secluded corner.

"I have a word or two to say to you, Mellish," he said.

Mellish was quite sure that those words were not going to be pleasant ones. He made an attempt to avoid the conversation.

"I haven't got time just now," he said weakly.

"I think you have," replied Parker, not in the least weakly, but quite politely.

"Well, what is it?" whined Mellish. "Since I came to St. Jim's, Mellish, I have heard a good deal about bumping. I have seen bumping in progress; it strikes me as a somewhat forcible, but not wholly improper, way of expressing public opinion. That is what may be termed bumping proper, which needs several pairs of hands. But I take it that bumping is a term which may be used in a wider significance to express—"

"What a beggar you are to gas!" "That, Mellish, is a rude remark! I take it, I say, that bumping has a wider general significance; that it means, considered largely, punishment inflicted on the principles of justice, but without authority. In that sense, Mellish, I am going to bump you! My method may not be the orthodox one, but I promise

you that it shall be equally effective, and on the whole not less—in fact, rather more—painful!"

"What do you mean? You may be a man all right, but you ain't much bigger than I am. And you are jolly well not going to knock me about without my showing fight!" blustered Mellish.

"In the current speech of St. Jim's, Mellish—rats! You will not show fight simply because there is no fight in you. You are a non-combatant, Mellish; one of those Conscientious Objectors without consciences, who have done their little best to drag the name of Britain in the mud!"

"You'll see, Mr. Parker-Roberts!" "That cock won't fight, Mellish! We are alone. I propose to see."

"Anyway, you ought to say what it's for before you begin piling in on me!" Mellish whined.

"You are coming to a more amenable spirit, Mellish, I see. But I do not propose to explain. I do not consider it necessary. Be good enough to put yourself over my knee! This buttress will render the attitude possible, and it will be the most convenient one for me."

Parker took the slipper out of his pocket. It was a stout slipper, but with a nice flexible sole.

"W-w-w-what?" spluttered Mellish.

"Put myself over your knee so that you can lam me with that slipper?"

"You have taken my meaning aright, Mellish."

"I'm hanged if I do!"

"I would not care to guarantee you against being hanged whether you do or not," Parker replied dryly. "A course of conduct such as yours may lead anywhere, Mellish—positively anywhere—except, of course, to a good end. But if you do not put yourself over, I shall most certainly put you over!"

"You can't do it!"

Mellish was wrong. Parker could do it, and he did.

He did it at some risk to himself, for Parker-Roberts would still have been serving his King and country on the Western Front had he been fit. The doctors had warned him expressly against any undue exertion. But he had been disregarding their warnings for some time now, and no harm had come of it. He did not think harm would come of a brief tussle with Mellish.

"You are merely saving your face at the expense of your trousers-seat by resistance," he said grimly.

The struggle was but brief. Mellish had had no idea that Parker was so strong. When he found that the end must be submission in any case, he submitted.

Squatting against a buttress. Parker wielded that slipper with a heavy hand. He had a muscular arm, and he did not mean to spare Percy Mellish's feelings.

Whack, whack, whack!

"Yoop! Ow-yow! Stoppit, you bully!"

Whack, whack, whack!

"Yaroooogh! I'll be even with you for this, you— Yoooop!"

"I do not know what a yoop is, Mellish," said Parker; "but the term is evidently not intended as a compliment, and it must be withdrawn."

"Yaroooogh! All right; I withdraw—I withdraw everything! Ow! Stoppit, I say!"

"Not yet, Mellish!"

Whack, whack, whack!

It was worse than a caning. Mellish squirmed and wriggled unavailingly. Still the slipper rose and fell.

"Really, Mellish, you ought to dust your clothes a little oftener, I think," said Parker mildly.

"You beast! You bully! Oh, you—you Parker-Roberts!"

Talbot must have heard that. For now Talbot appeared and spoke.

"Don't you think that's about enough, Parker?" he asked.

"He has deserved it all," replied Parker.

Whack, whack, whack, whack!

Then Parker ceased. He liked Talbot; but he did not consider that it was for Talbot to say, "Hold—enough!"

Mellish was released. Mellish bolted. Parker turned to Talbot, breathing hard and rather pale.

The pallor seemed unnatural, and the hard breathing was not quite mere breathlessness, Talbot thought.

He put out an arm just in time to save Parker from falling.

"I say, what's the matter?"

It was fully a minute before Parker could answer. Then he said:

"It is nothing of importance. Since I was wounded—I mean, since an accident I had—"

"Don't say any more until it's passed off," said Talbot, kindly but very seriously.

"I am all right now," answered Parker.

A tinge of colour had come back to his face. It never had much.

"Do you know, Parker, you're rather a mysterious sort of chap," said Talbot.

If anyone else—even D'Arcy or Tom Merry—had said that Parker would have frozen at once. He could not have explained why he should be able to take it better from Talbot; but so it was.

"You handled Mellish as a man would," Talbot went on. "I'm pretty strong myself; but I'm not so strong as you are. You tumbled Cutts over as if he were a kid. You were too much for Grundy; and old Grundy's stronger than the average man."

"There is not much in that, Talbot."

"Not alone. But I've been half minded to tell you several times that I know why you have to get up early every morning. I saw you shaving on the first morning you were here!"

"Proceed, Talbot!"

"Mellish, who evidently knows something, called you 'Parker-Roberts.' As it happens, I know that name. And you let out something about a wound. A fellow doesn't say 'wotand' when he means 'accident.'"

"You do not miss much, Talbot!"

"I don't. And I suppose you know why? You have heard that I came here under false pretences, haven't you?"

"I have. It has never made any difference in my opinion of you."

"Thanks! I won't ask what that opinion is, for you have always been friendly, and I know that wasn't humbug. And I don't want to seem unfriendly now. But—"

"You think you have a right to know my secret. Is that it?"

"Not precisely. I believe I know it already. All but what you're here for. You've got me guessing there, I'll own."

There was silence for a moment. Parker was asking himself whether he could afford to tell Talbot everything.

Talbot spoke.

"I don't want to pry. That's not in my line. I only want you to assure me that you're here for something that is in no way for the harm of St. Jim's, and I will promise to keep dark."

Again Parker was silent.

Could he give that assurance?

If he ever wrote those articles which he had been commissioned to write, they would hardly be for the good of St. Jim's.

But certainly he was no enemy to the school.

No enemy! Why, it went deeper than that—far deeper.

For the first time he realised most fully what he had vaguely glimpsed before.

Even the brief time he had spent at the old school had bred in him a loyalty for her in some sort like the loyalty which these other fellows felt without talking about it. Yes, though he was a grown man, and they were mere boys; though until a few weeks ago he had had but little belief in public-school training.

"I'm not sure that I can tell you that without in some measure deceiving you, Talbot," he said haltingly, at last.

"Then don't tell me! But look out for yourself if you try anything against the school. There was a time when it was the only home I knew; when Dr. Holmes was more than a father to me. I'm willing to be your friend—if you care about that—but if the ways part in that fashion, just remember this—I'm for St. Jim's all the time and every time!"

Talbot spoke almost roughly. He was strongly moved.

"Let me explain."

"I don't want any explanation!"

"Don't be an absurd young idiot!"

Parker-Roberts, the man, spoke in those snappish words.

Talbot turned upon him a look as manly as his own, and more open, for Talbot had nothing to hide.

"I can't argue with you," he said.

"But you know now how I feel, and what I mean."

He strode away. Parker stood gazing after him, thinking hard.

Parker was thinking that Talbot was a dangerous enemy to make, for the same reasons that made him so loyal a friend.

Had Talbot any inkling of the truth?

Parker rather thought he had.

Would those articles ever get written now?

Parker rather thought not.

But, however that might be, he had still the part of Parker the Prodigal to play on the stage of St. Jim's. He had promised his chief that, and he must keep his promise!

CHAPTER 6.

A Plot Against Parker.

IT seemed as though the day of the spread had marked the zenith of Parker's popularity at St. Jim's.

His absence for a time had wiped out any feeling against him for having the cheek to imagine that he, a new boy, could improve the tone of the school. The spread had been a lavish one; and, though those invited to it were not the sort of fellows to be bribed, that fact had counted.

Lowther had confided to Tom Merry the same evening that he really thought Pignacious was going to settle down and be one of them—quite a good, reasonable little Parker, in short.

But Pignacious had not done anything of the sort.

He had begun to go badly astray within twenty-four hours, and that in a completely unexpected way.

For who that knew him could have dreamed of Parker's taking up with the bold, bad blades of the Fifth?

Racke and Crooke grinned and chortled. Ernest Levison looked on with his old, sarcastic smile. Mellish, much worried, had not the spirit even to grin. The toils were around Mellish now, and he was horribly afraid.

Talbot held aloof. He had suddenly become far less inclined to make a friend of Parker. Arthur Augustus shook his noble head sadly. The Terrible Three were genuinely troubled. They had grown to like "the intruder."

"You're seeing too much of Cutts and that gang, Parker," said Tom two or three days later.

"So D'Arcy has told me in very plain terms," answered Parker.

"Gussy's right for once in his fat-headed life!" growled Manners.

"There's one consolation. It isn't us who will suffer by this idiot's fooling round with rank outsiders," said Lowther, for once too serious to jape.

"Then I really cannot see that it is any affair of yours!" said Parker, with a snapp in his voice.

Parker was writing lines. He resented that, and the fact did not tend to improve his temper. It seemed to him an utterly absurd thing that Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell, should be in a position to give him imposts.

If there was one thing Parker prided himself on it was being eminently reasonable. But, as will be seen, he rather wanted to have it both ways—to be a boy and a man at once!

"There's fifty to help you out, old scout," said Tom.

"Fifty what?"

"Lines, of course! Linton won't know. Your writing isn't much worse than mine—when I'm doing imposts."

"Thank you, Merry; but you also have lines to do."

"Wrong! I've done 'em. Bit more practised at that sort of thing than you, you know."

Parker smiled, thinking of the reams of copy he had turned out for the "Messenger."

The smile nettled Tom.

"Take 'em, or leave 'em!" he said shortly.

"I will leave them," said Parker. "The whole system of impositions is rather absurd; but I do not care to show up the work of another as my own."

"Cutts wouldn't be so jolly particular," said Manners pointedly.

"What Cutts would do is in no sense my affair."

"Oh! Thought you'd taken him as your model, that's all!"

An angry silence fell after that. It marked a new period in the relations of the four in Study No. 10.

Parker was going from bad to worse! So the Terrible Three agreed a day or two later. They were seeing little of him now. He would not even come to footer.

For that there was a reason. Parker was not fit for footer, as he had found after one attempt to play following on his slipping of Mellish. The warnings of the doctors had not been so unnecessary as he had imagined.

He was frequently seen with Cutts, Gilmore, and St. Leger—and the Terrible Three particularly barred that trio. He had even spent an evening in the study shared by Racke and Crooke, and if the Terrible Three barred anybody more than those Fifth-Formers it was Racke & Co.

"Pignacious," said Lowther, "will have to be put through it. He must understand that public opinion—meaning chiefly our opinion—simply does not tolerate the going over of a fellow who might be decent to the ranks of the blaggers!"

Tom Merry and Manners, Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn were all there. Talbot had been there, but he had gone. The rest were beginning to notice that Talbot would not discuss Parker.

"Good egg!" said Figgins heartily.

"He's asked for it, and he'd better have it!"

Kerr looked hard at his chief. He could not quite fathom Figgy's attitude. They had agreed to believe that Parker was really a man. But putting him through it in any ordinary way did not strike Kerr as the kind of treatment applicable in that case.

The Scots junior was more logical than his chief. Figgins was very apt to forget

that Parker was not a genuine junior—one of themselves, and to be treated as being so.

"What do you chaps mean to do?" asked Kerr.

"Tossing in a blanket seems about the thing to meet the case," suggested Manners.

The rest seemed to approve of the notion. Kerr saw no great objection to it. There was no special reason why Parker-Roberts, of the "Daily Messenger," should not be tossed in a blanket, Kerr thought.

"To-night?" asked Figgins. "We'll come across and give a hand in the execution."

"Right-ho!" replied Tom Merry. "We'll expect you about half-past nine, say. But don't go letting Ratty catch you out!"

"No jolly fear!" grinned Figgins.

"I don't see much sense in it," said Fatty Wynn unexpectedly. "I like to stay in bed when I get comfy there. What do you want to toss Parker in a blanket for, anyway? I don't care what was on his watch, and it's not our bizney—"

"What's that about Parker's watch?" asked Manners.

"Oh, nothing!" replied Figgins hurriedly. "Shurrup, fathhead!"

"All serene. I don't want to let out any secrets, Figgy. But it's rot!"

"You needn't come!" Figgins growled, and got Fatty away as soon as he could.

Figgins & Co., with Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, were keeping one secret of Parker's. The Terrible Three were keeping another. Talbot also knew what he would not tell—yet!

They were all loyal. But there was an eighth fellow who had a secret of Parker's—Mellish—and he was not loyal!

Mellish was not taken into the secret as to the putting of Parker through it.

That operation would naturally take place in the Shell dormitory, and though the Fourth would be represented by some of its leading members—including the New House trio—the Form, as a whole, was not concerned.

Parker was alone in Study No. 10 that evening after prep when Cutts looked in.

"Hallo, Chubby!" said Cutts. "Arc you game for to-night?"

"Yes," replied Parker.

He was not by any means keen. But, on the whole, he thought it would be just as well to go through with this, get it over, and leave St. Jim's for good. Parker liked popularity, and the present attitude of the fellows whose friendship he really valued hurt him, though he knew it was what he might have expected. Indeed, he would have been disappointed had it been different, and yet he did not like it!

"Meet us on the upper corridor about half-past nine, then," said Cutts.

"I will do so," said Parker. To himself he added:

"This once, but never again!"

To go out once with the Fifth Form blades would be quite enough for him, he was sure.

CHAPTER 7.

Putting Parker Through It.

"O H, he'll come, Gil!" said Cutts. "A regular lamb, the chap is—fairly eats out of my hand."

"He didn't look quite the lamb when he put you on your back on the footer-ground," said Gilmore.

St. Leger guffawed, and Cutts scowled.

"That's a bygone," he said. "Chubby has apologised handsomely for that, and what more can you expect a fellow to do?"

"Only come and be fleeced, like the

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lamb you say he is," said St. Leger; "and according to your account he's coming along to-night. My hat, he'll find us ready!"

But the blades of the Fifth were to be disappointed that night. Other arrangements had been made for their lamb, and though the lamb himself had no share in making them he was helpless when the time came.

It was a dark night when Figgins, Kerr, and Fatty Wynn stole out of the New House, and crossed to the quarters of their rivals. Fatty went, after all. When it came to the pinch he would not be left behind.

No one else knew anything about the project in the House they had left. Few there, indeed, knew very much about Parker.

In the Shell dormitory of the School House, Parker lay awake, and wondered why others did not go to sleep. Time passed, and half-past nine was drawing near. Still the buzz of talk continued.

But it was so dark that he felt sure he could creep out of bed and dress without being spotted. So, about the moment that the three from over the way started on their risky journey, he got out.

The talk went on. But no one said anything that suggested he had been heard.

It was cold as well as dark. Parker did not feel keen at all. But he had told Cutts he would come, and he had promised his chief, Mr. Malleston, to investigate the methods of the bold, bad blades of St. Jim's. So the thing had to be done.

Fumbling a little, he dressed pretty quickly, nevertheless. It was not easy to deal with tie and collar in the dark. But that job was got through somehow. He slipped on rubber-soled shoes, and stole towards the door.

But just as he reached it the door opened, striking him in the face, and he gave vent to a half-stifled exclamation.

"Hallo! Who's that?" demanded the familiar voice of Jack Blake.

Others besides Blake were there. Parker tried to wriggle past in the darkness.

But Herries caught at his elbow, and Digby flung an arm lovingly around his neck.

Someone in the rear struck a match.

"My hat! If it isn't Pignacious, trying to do a bunk!" cried Blake.

"Don't make such a row out there!" sounded the warning voice of Tom Merry. "You'll have someone hear!"

"We've captured your giddy Parker!" announced Levison, putting his head in.

The Shell fellows tumbled out of their beds. Some of them were not in the plot, but they could guess that there was something more than common in the wind. The Fourth-Formers crowded in, bringing their prisoner with them.

Parker did not resist. It was useless. And, really, he was not so frantically eager to join Cutts & Co. that it seemed worth while to make a fuss.

But Parker was not yet aware of the treat in store for him.

"Parker, I'm ashamed of you!" said Tom.

"What on earth do you mean, Merry?" snapped the prisoner.

"It isn't a very plucky thing to do a bunk rather than be put through it for your sins, Pignacious," said Lowther, shaking his head solemnly.

The dormitory was lighted now. Parker glared round him.

"A bunk? I really fail to understand you, Lowther!"

"Here come the merry New House bouncers!" said Jack Blake.

Figgins & Co. walked in. They stared at the sight of Parker, fully dressed,

"Hallo!" said Figgins. "What was the giddy victim after?"

"If you are referring to me as the victim, Figgins, I may say at once that I have no intention of taking any such role—"

"It ain't so much what you intend, Parker, old chump, as what we do, you see," put in Digby.

"And if I choose to take a walk at night—"

"Against the wules, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head.

Gussy had come along with the rest, but he felt rather like a traitor.

"And jolly rotten bad form to take a walk at night with Cutts & Co!" said Figgins severely. "It won't do, Parker."

"Not at no price whatsomever!" chimed in Kerr.

"It's just what we're going to teach you not to do," said Blake.

"He wasn't going out with Cutts. He'd got wind of what you fellows were after, and was going to bunk rather than face it!" sneered Croke.

"That is a wascally lie, Cwooke!" said Gussy hotly. "Parkah does not funk anything whatever!"

Parker's heart warmed to Gussy.

"What did you bring your tame idiot along for, Blake?" asked Manners. "He won't help, and he's only in the way."

"I most assuheadly shall not help!" said D'Arcy firmly. "I considah that you fellows are gwoosly in the w'ong. To wemonstwah with Parkah is wasounable. I have done that myself—"

"No further proof of its reasonableness being needed, of course," said Lowther. "We quite understand, Gustavus!"

"I shall bear no part in this gwoos outrage," said Gussy.

Talbot had not got out of bed. He, too, would not bear a hand.

So Arthur Augustus went and sat upon Talbot's bed.

"You must, really, drop Cutts, you know, Parker!" said Figgins.

"He's bound to contaminate your innocent little mind!" added Dig.

"Anything fresh about Cutts?" asked Tom Merry.

"We saw 'em," replied Kerr.

"Thought at first it must be Railton, or someone who mattered. But it was only Cutts & Co., waiting for their little friend Parker."

"They tried to hustle us out again," said Figgins, grinning; "but it was no go—because we wouldn't be hustled out, and, on the whole, they were funnier about being caught than we were."

"They were, and that's saying something," added Fatty Wynn. "It gave me an awful start when we ran into them—I don't mind owning that—but they've gone back now. It's no go for to-night, Parker!"

"Enough of this!" said Parker sharply. "I can see no reason for the excessive amount of interest which is apparently taken in my private affairs. Please be good enough to allow me to get into bed!"

A burst of laughter was the only answer to this.

He tried to push his way through.

But that was no go.

Figgins shouldered him against Digby, who passed him on to Kerr, who shoved him against Levison, who transferred him to Manners, who parted with him in favour of Lumley-Lumley, who handed him to Herries, who barged him into Noble, who moved him on to Lowther.

Parker was getting bruised, but was not getting any nearer his bed.

He was furious, of course; but no one seemed to mind that a bit.

"Aren't you coming, Talbot?" asked Tom.

"Rather not, thanks!" answered Talbot.

"Now then, Gustavus, kim on!" said Blake.

"I am not comin', Blake! I do not in the vewy least agwee with these pwoceedin's."

Skimpole also stayed in bed, but the rest were all there. Racke, Crooke, and the few others of their type were all ready to help in putting Parker through it, even though their opinion had not been asked on the matter in advance.

"Here's a blanket!" said Manners. "Come along, Pignacious!"

"I absolutely refuse to be tossed in a blanket!" said Parker.

"Of course you do!" said Figgins soothingly. "We didn't expect anything else. But it doesn't make a scrap of difference. Get into the blanket, like a sensible chap, and go on refusing as hard as you like. We'll see to the rest."

"If we thought you would like it, Pignacious, we shouldn't be on," remarked Manners.

"You are insulting, Manners! The presence of a crowd may protect you, but—"

"Is that a challenge?" snapped Manners.

"A challenge to fight? Do not be absurd! I should not lower myself to fight with you!"

"Well, I don't see what you could do to me without, and I'm quite ready to risk anything you can do to me in that way," answered Manners.

"It is a pity that you cannot see that we are acting for your own good, Parker," said Lowther solemnly.

"Oh, out the cackle, and come to the horses!" said Clive.

Now the critical moment had come, and what could Parker do?

To resist would be vain. Already he had suffered more handling than he found easy to bear.

It seemed better to go through the ordeal without further attempt to keep up his end.

Beds were pushed back to give more room.

Blake and Lowther caught him by the legs, gave him a sudden heave, and deposited him in the blanket, held a foot or so above the floor by a dozen pairs of hands.

That was not painful. Even what followed was hardly to be styled painful, but it was very humiliating.

Everyone who could get a hand to the blanket assisted. Those who could not get near enough scrambled for places. Talbot, D'Arcy, and Skimpole were the only spectators.

"It's weally too bad of them," said Gussy, though he could not help grinning even as he spoke.

"Oh, it won't hurt him!" replied Talbot.

"I am not so sure, Talbot," said Skimmy ponderously. "The damage will be moral and mental rather than physical; but—"

"One, two, three!" counted Tom Merry.

"And up with him!" cried Figgins.

Up went Parker. He shot towards the ceiling. He descended with a whack that threatened danger—to the blanket.

"One, two, three—go!" cried Figgins.

Up went Parker again.

"You're making a beastly row!" Talbot warned them.

Parker came down, his arms and legs flying wildly.

This time there was a rending sound. The blanket gave way, and the victim dropped on to the floor.

"Cave!" hissed Levison.

"Out with the candles! Under the bed, you fellows!" ordered Tom Merry.

CHAPTER 8.

Parker and Kildare.

THE lights were put out on the instant. Manners rolled Parker off the torn blanket without any ceremony, and made a bolt for

bed with it. Figgins & Co., Blake & Co., Clive, Levison, and the rest of the visitors made for safe hiding under the beds, while the Shell fellows scrambled between the sheets.

But Parker lay where Manners had rolled him. He could not get up. A sudden attack of the same weakness that had seized him after the slipping of Mellish had come upon him. It was as though his heart had stopped beating, while something in his head hammered painfully.

"Now that you've all stowed yourselves nicely away, I'll light up," said the voice of Kildare, with a note of genial sarcasm in it.

The light revealed more than it should have done. It could not help but reveal Parker, who lay there, gasping:

"Plain for all folk to see" but it showed more than that.

"There's a foot sticking out from under Lowther's bed," said Kildare.

"Will the owner of that foot be kind enough to show his other end. I can't recognise him by the sample offered."

No one came out for a moment. No one knew whose bed he was under. Then Clive appeared, and Blake and Lumley-Lumley. But it was not from under Lowther's bed that any of them came!

The foot still protruded. It belonged to Levison major, and Levison major was quite slim enough to take any chance of escape that offered itself. He did not know that he was giving himself away, and he was in no hurry to emerge.

Kildare walked over to the bed, and gave the foot a tug.

"Oh, it's you, Levison, is it?" he said.

"Playing the ostrich game—eh? It's hardly worthy of you. Now then, come out, the rest of you! I'm not going over the Fourth roll-call, you know!"

Parker still lay where he had been rolled. Kildare turned to him.

"It might be safer to get up, Parker," he said. "This dormitory seems a bit crowded to-night, and you might be trampled upon."

But Parker did not move.

Talbot jumped out of bed, remembering something. He lifted Parker's head.

"I rather fancy he can't move, Kildare," he said quietly.

Most of them had thought till that moment that Parker was shamming, with intent to make the case against them as black as possible.

Some of them still thought so. But not the Terrible Three or the chums of Study No. 6. They were genuinely alarmed.

Quite a small crowd had gathered from under the beds. But Figgins & Co. stayed. There was still a chance for them in doing so, and no one but the cads would hold it against them, they knew.

"Blake, Herries, Levison, Digby, Clive, Lumley-Lumley—"

Kildare rattled off the names.

"Julian, Hammond, Kerruish, D'Arcy, Reilly—five hundred lines, each of you! Get off to your dormitory at once!"

But they lingered. Every eye was turned upon Parker and Talbot.

Kildare walked over to Manners' bed. Manners had got into bed with the blanket screwed up in a heap in his arms, and the keen eyes of the skipper had spotted it.

"Rummy way of using a blanket, Manners!" said Kildare. "Not your usual way, I suppose?"

"Nunno, Kildare. I—I only—"

"Better not say any more. A satisfactory explanation is beyond your powers, and the true one would not be satisfactory. Parker, I take it that you have been tossed in a blanket?"

Parker had got to his feet now, though he had to lean upon Talbot.

"I prefer—not—to—er—to—discuss—the—subject," he panted painfully.

"Oh, don't be a young idiot! I'm not asking you to sneak. The thing is as plain as the nose on your face."

Parker was quickly recovering by this time.

"Then there is all the less reason for talking about it," he snapped.

Kildare did not like his tone.

"You're getting a bit above yourself," he said, frowning. "I expect a civil answer from a junior."

"Then you should not ask futile questions," said Parker hotly. He could not bring himself at that moment to feel in the least like a junior, and the temptation to say that he was nothing of the sort was strong upon him.

"You mean—"

"I mean that this is my business, not yours."

Talbot was doing all he could to stop Parker. But friendly hints were in vain.

"That's enough, Talbot!" said the skipper sharply. "Parker, our opinions differ entirely on this matter, but I shall not ask you any further questions."

Parker should have held his peace then. Kildare, seeing that he had been through a bad time, wanted to let him down as lightly as possible.

But Parker did not hold his peace. He snapped:

"That is as well, for I should refuse to answer them!"

It was too much for the captain's patience.

"You will take five hundred lines, like all the rest!" he said.

"I say, you know, Kildare, Talbot wasn't in this, or Skimmy, or D'Arcy!" said Tom.

"Talbot and Skimpole are excused. D'Arcy should have stayed in his dormitory—I cannot excuse him. Now, Parker, hurry back into bed!"

Kildare could not have failed to notice that Parker was fully dressed, but he said nothing about it. Perhaps that was because he had told Parker he would ask him no more questions.

The Fourth Form fellows were clearing out. Parker undressed and got heavily between the sheets.

The light was put out. The captain moved to the door.

"Kildare!" rapped out Parker.

"Well, Parker?"

"As you appear to consider that I am as much at fault as anyone—a totally illogical position, to my mind—do you not think you had better let everyone else go scot free, and award the whole punishment to me?"

"Ass!" hissed Tom Merry.

"That does not strike me as good logic, Parker. But perhaps the Shell hasn't got as far as the study of logic. It sounds to me more like sarcasm, and sarcasm from you to me is simply cheek!"

"Have it as you like!"

"Awfully good of you, I'm sure! Don't be an absurd young ass! You were not punished for being tossed in a blanket, but for impudence."

Kildare went.

Figgins & Co. crept out of their hiding-places, and beat a hasty retreat.

"Parker's little scheme didn't come off!" sneered Racke.

"What scheme?"

The curt question did not come from Parker, but from Talbot.

"As if we didn't see through it!" said Crooke. "He tried to make out the tossing had upset him, and lay there like a blessed deader, just to make things worse for us, the worm!"

"That's a lie, Crooke, and you'd better not repeat it! I happen to know that Parker wasn't shamming, or anything of the sort."

"I don't see how you can know," said Racke.

"I don't care whether cads like you and Crooke believe me or not! But I don't mind telling the decent chaps here that I've seen Parker taken like this before, and I know the cause of it. After that, I'm prepared to get out and punch the head of anyone who slanders the fellow by dirty suspicions!"

Talbot was letting himself go to an extent quite unusual with him; but he remembered that the cause of Parker's collapse was a wound received over there, where men were proved, and he never doubted that Parker had proven his manhood as well as any other.

"Same here!" said Tom Merry. "But you might have given us a hint, old chap!"

"I ought to have done, Tom," replied Talbot.

Parker had not been surprised that Tom had ranged himself by Talbot, but he was a trifle surprised when Lowther spoke up.

"I says ditto to Tommy. Who touches the honour of our Pignacious touches mine!"

And Manners chimed in, too.

"Rot about shamming! Old Parker's above that kind of thing."

Not a word did Parker answer to any of them. But he fell asleep, feeling much less at odds with the little world of St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 9.

Trying to Escape the Toils.

CUTTS & CO. were disappointed. They heard of what had happened in the Shell dormitory, and recognised that Parker had not been to blame for not keeping his appointment. But Cutts at least was in no mind to let Parker off the shearing process.

Gilmore and St. Leger felt otherwise.

"It would be a pretty rotten job if the chap had one of these fainting fits, or whatever they are, while he was out with us, you know," said Gilmore.

"I should say so!" agreed St. Leger. "Rats!" said Cutts. "You fellows are going to be regular old women! The fainting-fit was a dodge, I'll bet!"

"I'm not going to risk it," St. Leger replied.

And Gilmore, too, was firm. Cutts could not persuade them.

Somehow or other Cutts did not fancy an expedition alone with Parker. Gilmore and St. Leger had failed him. Whom should he ask?

He thought of Racke and Crooke, but dismissed the idea. He thought of Levison, whom he would have preferred to either of those two; but even the Fifth knew now that Levison was going straight. Then he thought of Mellish, and smiled sardonically.

"It ought to be rather good fun," he thought. "Mellish will be in no end of a funk all the time, and it will be better than running Chubby alone."

So he sent for Mellish.

Percy Mellish was having a pretty miserable time of it in these days.

He was deep in the toils—deeper than he had ever meant to get. He had had occasion to write to Smiler, and that

worthily held his letter over his head—a veritable sword of Damocles! For if anyone in authority at St. Jim's saw it, Mellish's career at the school would come to a sudden end.

There was even worse than that. Mellish knew something now of the two attacks upon Parker. When once Smiler felt sure that the wretched junior was fairly in his power, he had taken little trouble to deceive him any longer.

Mellish knew now that between the man who had sent these two rascals to Rylcombe and Parker-Roberts there was something more than a mere unfriendly wager.

Deadly harm was intended to Parker-Roberts—harm that might stop short of murder, it is true, but even of that the miserable junior felt none too certain.

The knowledge had come upon him by degrees. If it had come in one lightning flash of illumination, it would have gone near to sending him mad.

He had lost all his spite against Parker now. Even the slipping had not really reawakened it. With all his faults, Mellish lacked the deep-seated rancour of Racke and Crooke. He had never hated Parker as Racke hated Levison, or as Crooke hated Talbot. It simply wasn't in him.

So it may be guessed how little he relished Cutts' plan.

Smiler and Rusty knew—through him—that some night before long Parker might be expected to break bounds after lights out and visit the Green Man. They expected to hear from him in advance which night it would be. But they were on the watch every night—that much was certain.

Their plans were laid. Mellish had to think out something to thwart them.

It was hard enough in any case. The wretched junior had racked his brains in vain.

But Cutts' command made it even harder. Never, in his worst forebodings, had Mellish contemplated being taken right into the midst of the affair like this!

At worst, he had pictured himself as lying sleepless at St. Jim's, knowing that something was happening, but out of it all personally.

"I'm going to take the great Chubby out to-night, Mellish," said Cutts, in his lordly way. "You can come with us if you like."

"Oh, thanks, Cutts, no end! But I don't think I will," replied Mellish, trying hard not to show how much the prospect dismayed him. "I've got rather a nasty cold."

"Rats!" said Cutts. "You're snuffing, I can see; but then you're always doin' that. You are a snuffing sort!"

"I don't care about coming," said Mellish sulkily.

"That's no odds. I say you're to come!"

"I don't see why I should run all that risk when I'm not a bit keen."

"I don't care twopence what you see or don't see! You're coming!"

"I—I can't, Cutts!"

"That's utter rot! You can, and you will! I've made up my mind, and there's no more to be said about it!"

The junior's obstinacy only awoke all the bullying instinct in Cutts. It was not his ruling instinct. Cutts could be pleasant enough when he got his own way; but he was quite capable of being a good deal of a brute when crossed.

"I don't see how you can make me," whined Mellish.

Cutts took him by the ear.

"There's one little thing I can do," he said savagely, "and that is to give you away to Parker!"

The effect was electrical. Cutts had

not dreamed that it would be so instantaneous.

But the very last thing the wretched Mellish wanted was to have Parker suspecting that he had been plotted against. He did not know that Parker already felt pretty sure that Mellish was in some sort leagued with his enemies, and he feared that what Cutts might tell the Shell fellow would put him on the scent of other things.

"I—I—oh, I say, Cutts, you'd rot up everything if you did that, you know!"

"Not at all, Mellish. I should not rot up anything that mattered to me. Chubby would think me a real friend for putting him on his guard against a dangerous character—see?"

"He—he wouldn't believe it!"

"Wouldn't he? He'd believe anything I told him. He loves his Uncle Gerald. Eats out of my hand, he does. I call him 'Chubby,' and he never protests a protest. But he'd be down on you like a thousand of bricks, Mellish!"

"I—oh, look here, Cutts, I'll come if you want me particularly, though I'm not a bit keen!"

"That's more like it, Mellish! We'll have some fun with Chubby to-night!"

Mellish did not expect any fun. He crawled away from Cutts' study in an agony of fear.

What was to be done? On one side were Smiler and Rusty, waiting for their prey. On the other were Parker, who had him in a cleft-stick, and Cutts, who also had a strangle-hold upon him, through his fear of Parker.

Verily, the way of the transgressor was hard! Mellish resolved to order his life on a different model if he could once get clear of this scrape.

To whom could he go for help?

Crooke was out of the question. He knew something about the affair; but though he might have helped in a scheme for plundering Parker, there was not the faintest chance of his aiding Mellish to get out of the pit he had dugged for himself.

Racke? Worse than Crooke! Coldly selfish, with no thought for another.

Levison? A chance there, but only a slight one. Mellish dared not risk telling Levison all, and Levison was too wide awake to be satisfied with less. He despised Mellish most heartily now.

Talbot? Tom Merry & Co.? Here there seemed a little more hope.

But not by open confession. They would insist on warning Parker, and that meant ruin for Mellish. For well he knew that if Parker spared him, Smiler would not.

Mellish was a coward, but he had brains; and if ever in his life he had needed to make the fullest use of those brains, he needed to do so now!

He buried his aching head in his hands, and laboured to think out a plan.

And at last he hit upon one. It entailed running with the hare and hunting with the hounds, but that he did not mind.

He would let the two scoundrels in the village know that they might expect to get a chance of seizing Parker that night.

And he would let Tom Merry know that danger hung over Parker, and trust to Tom and his chums to avert that danger. They would not dismiss the warning as an idle yarn, for already—as Mellish knew now—they had seen for themselves that Parker had enemies.

Mellish was quite pleased with his scheme. It had one great drawback—the fact that he himself, because he could not get out of accompanying Cutts and Parker, would be in the thick of danger, if danger came. But he hoped not to be recognised.

CHAPTER 10.

A Warning and Two Secrets.

TOM MERRY opened his Latin-English lexicon, and saw inside it a sealed envelope, addressed to himself in printed characters.

The study had settled down to prep. Parker's head was bent over the works of Cicero. Manners and Lowther were also engaged upon those works, which they appreciated less than Parker did. The queer new fellow was well ahead of the Form in classics. For him Cicero meant no new difficulty, only an effort of memory.

Tom read the note without saying anything. It was the best that Mellish could manage after at least a dozen attempts. Thus it ran:

"TO TOM MERRY.

"IF PARKER GOES OUT TONIGHT, SOME OF YOU HAD BETTER FOLLOW HIM, AND THE MORE THE SAFER. HE WILL BE IN GREAT DANGER!

"A FRIEND."

Tom stared. But for what had happened before, he would have dismissed this as a bad joke; but he could not do that now. He had not the least idea who had written the warning, but he felt it must be taken seriously.

He touched Lowther, put a finger on his lips, nodded towards the studious Parker, and passed him the note.

Monty read it, lifted his eyebrows in surprise, and, with the same precautions, passed it on to Manners.

Parker went on studying Cicero.

They could not concert plans then. All three were of one mind—that to tell Parker, and thus try to stop him from going, was useless.

Parker continued to give his attention to the words of the great Roman orator; but the Terrible Three had but small attention to give to prep. They were thinking of Parker, not of Cicero.

"I've finished," said Tom, half an hour or so later. During that time he may have read twenty lines of Latin, but he had not understood a word of it. "I think I'll run across and see Figgins & Co."

"I shouldn't, Tom!" growled Manners. "What do we want to drag them into it for?"

Parker looked up suspiciously. It was but natural that he should imagine further schemes on foot against him.

But Tom disregarded the suspicious look. He also disregarded the advice of Manners. In a matter like this, Figgins and Kerr were worth half a dozen ordinary fellows; and Fatty was good value, too.

Tom went—carefully and quietly, of course, for there was bound to be a row if he was caught in the New House during the hour of prep.

"Why don't the silly idiot mobilise the training corps, turn out the fire brigade, and ask the Head to take a hand?" said Manners.

"Oh, don't talk rot, old chap! He's right," said Lowther.

Parker looked up. It seemed time to look up when Manners growled sarcasms, and Lowther answered him seriously. Such a change of roles meant something, surely!

"I am at a loss to know what you are talking about," said Parker.

"You can stay so. We ain't going to tell you," replied Manners.

Parker subsided into Cicero again, quite offended.

Over in the New House Tom found Fatty Wynn still stodging away at his prep, Figgins reading an old copy of the "Messenger," and Kerr working out some abstruse mathematical problem.

It was quite a peaceful scene. But Tom's coming—rather, his disclosure of what he had come for—was like the dropping of a bombshell into it.

"See here, Figgy! What do you think of this?"

Tom had expected exclamations of disbelief. "Bunkum!" "Sheer rot!" "A silly ass joke!"—that sort of thing.

But not one such exclamation was uttered.

No one even looked greatly surprised. The eyes of Kerr and Figgins met, and somehow Tom felt sure that these fellows already knew a good deal.

"It's a rum thing, in a way," said Fatty slowly. "But we know Parker's been in dan—"

"Shurrup!" snapped Figgins.

"I say, though, how do you fellows know that?" asked Tom.

"My aunt, who should know it if we didn't?" demanded Figgins.

"Now you're letting it out, Figgy!" said Wynn.

"Well, I think we might know it, considering that—"

would it not have been the height of folly that they should not compare notes, and thus help to get some understanding of the nature and extent of that danger?

"A secret is a secret," said Figgins slowly. "If it was only a secret, I'd sooner tell Tom Merry than any other fellow outside this study!"

"Same here!" said Kerr.

"Of course," added Fatty Wynn.

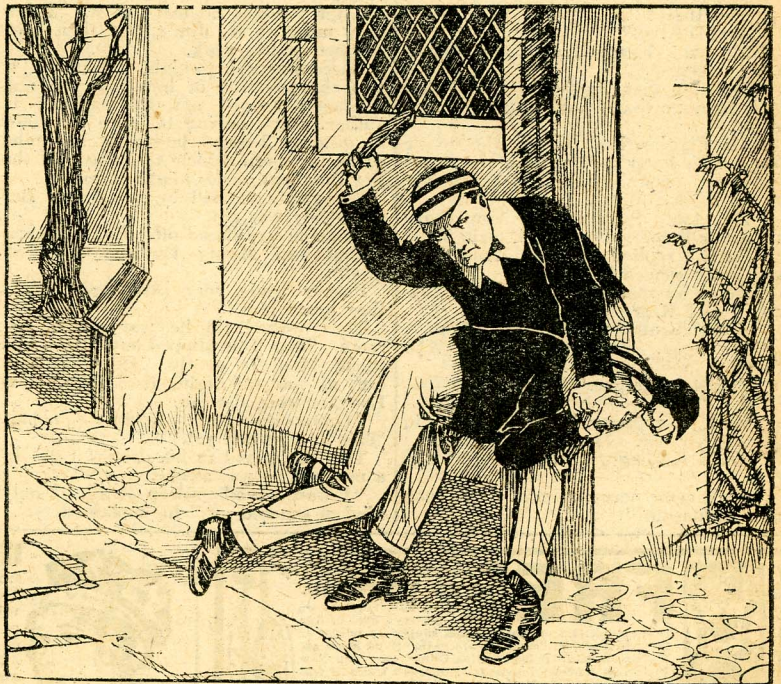
It was a high compliment, as Tom recognised.

"But a promise is a promise," went on Figgy. "A chap mustn't break a promise, you know!"

"That's how I feel, Figgy," said Tom.

"I'm not so dead sure that this case isn't rather outside the ordinary run of things," said Kerr thoughtfully. "Figgy, old sport, we've a right to tell what we found out for ourselves, anyway. We didn't promise Parker to keep that dark!"

"Of course we didn't. I'm for telling Tom Merry everything," said Fatty. "I think as much of my promise as you



Parker wielded the slipper with a heavy hand.
(See Chapter 5.)

Tom pulled himself up short. He and his chums had promised Parker not to tell.

It was a difficult situation. What did these chaps know? If it was what the Terrible Three knew, how had Figgins & Co. found it out? And if it wasn't, what could it be?

"Considering what?" asked Figgins pointedly.

"I haven't a right to tell you," replied Tom. "What did Fatty mean?"

"We're not at liberty to say," answered Figgins.

It looked like a deadlock. These fellows knew one another well. Each knew that the other's word of honour was a sacred thing; but—

There was a "but"—a big "but"!

The anonymous letter told of some danger to Parker. Tom had come to enlist the help of these three in warding off that danger.

If honour had not stood in the way,

fellows do; you know that. But I hate secrets, unless they're about a jape. They spoil my appetite."

"Do you know who Parker really is, Tom?" asked Figgins abruptly.

"Himself, I suppose. A jolly queer bird, but not a bad sort, though he seems going downhill now."

"Rats! He ain't himself at all! He's Parker-Roberts, the 'Daily Messenger' special crime investigator."

"My—only—aunt! I say, Figgy, are you talking through your hat?"

"Ask Kerr."

"It's O.K.," said the Scot briefly.

"After that everybody had better cough up all he knows," said Fatty. "It's for the chap's own good."

"But what on earth—"

"Never mind that, Merry! I begin to think Fatty's right. The thing is too big for us to handle if we are working in the dark. I hate breaking a promise—but

here goes! Is your secret anything about an attack on Parker?"

"That's not telling yours; it's asking me—"

"Do you think I'd ask you to do what I shirked myself?"

"No, I don't, old chap. Yes, it is."

"Where?"

"In Rylcombe Wood."

"When?"

"Some time ago. Soon after that mysterious merchant got here."

"Who?"

"Two rough-looking scoundrels in black masks."

"And you three rescued Parker?"

"Well, yes, I suppose you'd call it that."

Figgins, Kerr, and Fatty looked hard at one another.

The two secrets were two, not one, as they—and as Tom—had thought possible.

Now Tom became the questioner.

"Where did your affair happen?"

"In the train between Wayland and Rylcombe."

"You three?"

"And D'Arcy."

"My hat! Fancy Gussy being able to keep a secret!"

"Come to that, he seems to be better at it than we four," said Kerr, grinning wryly.

Now Figgins had to tell the whole story, with Fatty putting in a word now and then. Kerr could keep quiet, but it was beyond Wynn.

"My Aunt Sempronia! You chaps are giddy heroes, all of you!" said Tom.

"Rats!" replied Figgins. And Kerr and Fatty echoed him.

"Not a bit more than you chaps, any way," said Kerr.

"What about to-night?" asked Tom.

"We're on. You know that. Who else?"

"Talbot, of course. And Blake & Co., I think."

"Well, I suppose it wouldn't do to leave Gussy out. That makes eleven."

"And a rattling good team, too!" said Tom.

"We'll come across to your dorm soon after lights out."

"I've a better plan. Parker might smell a rat. Wait in our study."

"Why not the Fourth dorm?"

"Who wrote that letter? Either a Shell chap or one in the Fourth, I should say. No, Figgys, you fellows are better outside either dorm. We'll give you word to join us in time."

"I dare say you're right. I suppose it's no good giving Parker the tip, and trying to keep him in?"

"Not a bit! Besides, if it was, there'd be no end to this sort of thing. What's needed is that it should be squashed once for all."

"And we're the chaps to do it," answered Figgins modestly. "Rely on us, old scout!"

CHAPTER 11.
Eleven on the Trail.

PARKER got out of bed. He had never been keen on this expedition. But he had the part of Parker the Prodigal to play, according to promise, and he must play that part.

After to-night no more of it. A few days more at St. Jim's, and then back to town and to work.

There was risk to-night, he knew. It was characteristic of him that the risk of being caught out by someone in authority and having to leave St. Jim's in disgrace loomed larger in his mind than any peril which the wiles of the Big Boss' emissaries might occasion.

Everybody seemed to be asleep. But everybody was not.

Manners had dozed off. But Tom and Talbot and Monty Lowther were all awake.

Parker made very little noise. But they heard him.

They waited till he was out of the room. Then Tom slipped out of bed, and shook Manners gently. He could see, dim as was the light, that Talbot and Lowther were also out.

"Grooo-ooo-oo!" Lemme alone!

"Tain't rising-bell yet."

Tom whispered in his drowsy ear. In a moment he was awake.

"I wasn't really asleep at all. I only kind of snoozed off," he explained.

They did not argue that question. Talbot slipped off to fetch the Fourth Form fellows.

Talbot came back.

"They'll be with us in a brace of shakes," he said. "I say, here's a rum go, Tom! Blake says Mellish got up and went out some minutes ago."

"Whew! Mellish! Well, I'm blessed! That lets out something, I should say."

"Not so sure," said Lowther. "Can any of you fellows fancy Mellish being keen to go where danger waits him?"

"I can't," confessed Tom.

"All the same, he's just the sort of rotter who would write an anonymous letter," said Manners.

"This was rather an unusual kind of anonymous letter, though," Tom said.

They were talking in very low voices, and stood as far from the beds as possible.

"I think it was Mellish, and I think he may have meant well, in his under-hand way," said Talbot gravely. "I happen to know that there is something up between him and Parker."

"See here, Talbot, you know a heap more than we had any idea of," said Tom. "Do you happen to know who Parker really is?"

"Yes," was the surprising answer of Reginald Talbot.

Then you know more than we do," remarked Lowther, "for we were under the absurd delusion that Parker was just Parker."

"Just what the beggar isn't," Tom said, with a grin that was lost in the darkness.

But now the four from the other dormitory turned up, and a start was made. Lowther and Manners must wait for an explanation of Tom's cryptic saying.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, this is something like an adventchah! It is a jolly good thing you called us in to help. A bizney of this sort natchuwally needs a fellow of tact, an—"

"Shurrup, fathead! Two more words, and I shall insist on your bunking back to bed!" said Tom, in an angry whisper.

"Bai—"

"One more, and off you go!" Gussy shut up.

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"If you chaps hadn't dried up, I should have gone back, for one," said Blake. "I don't mind giving old Parker a hand, but we're not asking for it in the neck, I suppose?"

"Seems to me you are, Blake," Lowther said. "Your sententious brevity is as bad as—"

Talbot laid a hand on Lowther's arm, and Lowther realised that he also was talking too much.

"Who goes there?" came a whisper in the Shell study passage.

"Friends?" replied Tom.

"Advance, friends, and give the countersign!"

"Pigs might fly," said Tom.

Gussy gave a nervous little giggle. He was not the only nervous one there. But every heart was staunch. Nervousness and funk are not the same thing.

"Pignacious hath flown," whispered Figgy. "Also Cutts. And likewise Mellish."

"Mellish was twiggled," said Tom.

They made their way to the box-room, and clambered on to the roof of the out-building below it. Thence, one after another, they dropped to ground.

The only mishap was to Fatty Wynn. He stumbled as his feet touched earth, and measured his width upon it.

"Ow-w-w!"

"Shurrup, chump!"

Figgins gave Fatty a hand.

"The truth of the matter is, Figgy," whispered Wynn, "I was never cut out for this sort of thing."

"I told you you'd better not come, ass!"

"Rot! You don't suppose I'd trust you chaps out without me, do you?"

Figgins only grunted in reply.

It was not very dark in the quadrangle, and as yet it was far too early for everyone at St. Jim's to be in bed. But as it chanced no one saw the little band go. Windows were shut in by thick blinds, and only the merest glimmer of light came from any of them.

Over the outer wall they went. Tom Merry came last, and he alone had to do without help from below. But there was help from the top, and he scrambled up without much difficulty.

Once outside, they felt safer.

But they were a bit puzzled.

Cutts would make for the Green Man, of course. Closing hours would not matter in the case of a valued patron like Cutts. Joliffe took many risks of that sort.

But they could not wait outside the Green Man. Besides, an attack upon Parker there was most unlikely.

There was no certainty that the attack would be made on the return journey at all; but that seemed more likely, as it would be later.

Parker would hardly agree to go through the wood, even if Cutts wanted to. He had been attacked there once, and he was no fool.

It would be somewhere along the road that the attempt would be made. That much seemed certain. And except for the chance of its being made before the three had reached the Green Man there seemed no occasion for hurry, as Cutts and his companions might stay some time in the high-class resort to which they had gone.

The juniors could talk freely now that they were clear of the school premises. And, of course, there was a good deal to be told. Blake, Herries, Digby, and Talbot had been quite in the dark about the two previous attacks; but it was impossible to keep them so longer.

"My hat! What licks me is that our Gustavus actually kept a secret! It's the eighth wonder of the world!" said Blake.

"It's more than that—it's incredible,"

said Herries solemnly. "He never did it before, and—"

"Weally, Blake—weally, Hewwies—that is too bad! I—"

"Are you sure Gustavus was there, Figgy, or did you dream it afterwards?" asked Digby.

"Oh, dry up, you chaps!" said Tom. "Gussy played up like a good 'un, and you'd be down on anyone who said he didn't. Question is, what we're to do now?"

"What this biznez needs," said Arthur Augustus firmly, "is bwaains."

"You're right, Adolphus. Better buzz off back, hadn't you?"

"What do you mean, Lowthah?"

"I was agreeing with you, Algernon. As brains are wanted, I suggested that you should buzz off back!"

"You are most decidedly off your wockah!"

"Oh, stop that rotting!" said Tom.

"See here, Figgins and Blake and Talbot and I are all agreed—"

"Now we know who's really skipper!" murmured the irrepressible one.

"That is wide, Lowthah! The post of leadah is one wequiwun' a fellow of tact an' judgment."

"Ring off, you two maniacs! We have agreed that we'd better divide up into three squads. One will be posted here—it's a likely enough place for an attack. Lowther, D'Arcy, Wynn, and Kerr, please. And you're in command, Kerr."

"Another giddy general!" murmured Lowther. "It's like the great Amurrican army. Please, Tommy dear, may I be a colonel or a lance-corporal, or something?"

"It seems impos for you to be anything but a silly ass. But you must try," replied Tom crushingly.

"Without diswespect to Kerr, for whom I entahtain a vewy high wegard, I considah—"

"Nuff said, Gustavus! You're under Kerr's orders."

"It's all serene," said Kerr. "Gussy can be boss—till things begin to happen!"

"Weally, Kerr—"

The other seven passed on, leaving Gussy arguing.

Some distance farther along Tom stopped again.

"Will you take this post, Blake?" he asked. "It seems to me another likely place."

"Right-ho!" answered Jack Blake.

"Who're my squad?"

"Manners, Herries, and Dig."

The four fell out. Tom, Talbot, and Figgins passed on.

No one of these three was at all disposed to make a joke of the affair. They realised that, taking the best steps they knew how to take, they could not be sure of being on the spot at the critical moment.

But they hoped something from Cutts. The Fifth Former had plenty of friends, but he was no coward.

CHAPTER 12.

Somebody Nabbed.

CUTTS, Parker, and Mellish were a very ill-assorted trio.

Mellish was in a blue funk,

Parker in a state of depression, and even Cutts none too cheery. It was hardly worth while, after all, to take so much trouble just to have the pleasure of rooking Parker, Cutts thought. But, like Parker, he meant to go through with it.

"It's a silly trick to wear that light overcoat, Chubby," growled Cutts, who wanted something to grumble about.

"What does it matter? In this gloom a light coat does not show up any more than a dark one.

Messrs. Smiler and Rusty, warned by Mellish's traitorous message, watched the three steal into the yard of the Green Man. The light of a passing motor-car chanced to show up Parker's light coat rather conspicuously.

"We'll know our bloomin' bird by 'is fancy overcoat," whispered Smiler to Rusty.

Parker did not find the Green Man at all to his liking. Host Joliffe was bad enough; but Banks, the bookie, over on one of his frequent visits, and Crooke's friend, Lodgey, struck Parker as the absolute limit. He could not understand Cutts's suffering their familiarity, though, as a matter of fact, they were far more deferential to Cutts than they were accustomed to be to their junior patrons.

They played billiards on a very lumpy table, and Cutts was surprised to find that the fellow who had been brought out to be rooked was more than a match for him.

They smoked, of course. Parker refused the Green Man cigars, but smoked more than one cigarette. He did not appear to be upset. On the other hand, Mellish not only appeared to be, but most distinctly was.

And at last Parker expressed an emphatic opinion to the effect that it was time they were getting back. Cutts agreed sulkily. It had been wasted time for Cutts. Mellish said nothing. He was trembling like an aspen leaf, and sick with smoke and fear.

Their coats hung in a dark, smelly little passage. Mellish, first out, seized a coat and dragged it on without looking at it. When they got outside, Parker noticed that it was his coat Mellish had donned, while he was wearing Mellish's old raincoat. But he said nothing, as it chanced. They could not stop there to exchange.

They were a hundred yards or so from the village when they saw a market-cart standing in the road, seemingly unattended.

"Somebody's lost it," said Cutts. "It wouldn't be half a bad notion to whip the gee up and send him racing down the road."

Cutts was feeling that he wanted to take it out of somebody.

"Don't do anything so foolish—"

Parker's speech was cut short.

Out of the gloom sprang two men. One of them struck savagely at Cutts with the butt of a cart-whip.

Cutts dodged the blow, and bolted. He did not want to be recognised, and, of course, he knew nothing at all about the danger to Parker.

Rusty seized Mellish, taking him for Parker, and clapped a sack over his head before he could cry out. He stuffed the corner of the sack into Mellish's mouth without compunction. There was nothing half-hearted about the methods of Rusty.

Parker went for Smiler like a lion. But Smiler tripped him up, and hurled him into the hedge.

Mellish was now enveloped in a pig-net, and bundled unceremoniously into the cart.

Before Parker had time to scramble out of the hedge, the two rascals were in the cart, and Rusty was plying the whip fiercely.

Parker yelled for help. But he only shouted once; and when Tom Merry, Figgins, and Talbot came rushing up from their post a short distance away, he seemed quite cool and composed.

The curlew call that they all knew went sounding down the road, and Jack Blake heard and answered, and called to Kerr's squad farther back. But Cutts pounded on. He passed Blake's squad

without seeing them, though they saw him. Kerr's commando pulled him up.

"Weally, Cutts, I am supwised at you!" said Arthur Augustus indignantly. "I knew you were a wottah, but I did not considah you a funk!"

"What do you mean, you young idiot? What are you all doing here?" demanded Cutts roughly.

They did not wait to explain. They bolted off, in obedience to some call that Cutts also heard.

The Fifth Ferner hardly knew what to do. He thought of going back. But that seemed a pretty useless sort of thing. So he decided to go on. Parker and Mellish would be all right; and if they were not—well, it really did not matter very much to Gerald Cutts!

"Some of their silly scouting game, I suppose," he muttered. "It isn't like that kid D'Arcy to cut out at night, though. Oh, hang it, it's no concern of mine!"

Kerr and his squad came up at a run. But when they reached the rest, it looked as though nothing had happened, for at first they failed to notice that there were but eight where nine should have been.

Parker was in the midst of the group. They could hear his voice.

Kerr was the first to note the absence of Mellish.

"I say, though, where's that rotter, Mellish?" he asked.

"In the cart," replied Parker coolly. "I am not sure that he was really wanted. But he had put on my overcoat by mistake, so it is possible they have mistaken him for me. On the other hand, there does not seem any particular reason why they should want me, does there? They are certainly not friends of mine."

"We know that," said Talbot quietly. "They are enemies. That's why we came along."

"It strikes me," returned Parker, "that you fellows know a great deal more than I can tell you."

"No," said Lowther; "but we know a great deal more than you have told us!"

"That is evident. But before we discuss the matter further—"

"It's no use thinking of discussing anything till we have got that outsider, Mellish, back," said Tom.

"Do you really want him back, Merry?"

"Oh, rats, Parker! Don't talk in that cold-blooded way! Who knows what those rotters may do to the poor beast when they find out their mistake?"

"He's St. Jim's, though he is an outsider," added Blake.

"Be quite easy in mind about Mellish. I am sure that nothing will be done to him beyond the infliction of some bodily pain; and that he well deserves. Unless I am very far astray in my suspicions, the kidnapping gentlemen are by way of being friends of Mellish, though they are scarcely likely to treat him in very friendly fashion after their mistake."

"Do you mean that Mellish has been helping them? I say, Parker, that's pretty hot, you know!" cried Tom. "If he did a thing like that—"

"Even that isn't the question," put in Blake. "The question is, what are we going to do about it?"

"I should suggest that Mellish should be left to find his way back, like the character in the nursery rhyme—or was it the sheep?"

Parker's coolness annoyed them all. All except Talbot, that is.

"It's quite hopeless," said Talbot. "That cart will be a mile or two away by this time. I am inclined to think, as Parker does, that nothing very dreadful will happen to him. It was Parker they wanted; they have no use for Mellish. They may give him a good hiding before he's let go, but that will be the worst of it."

"But what did they want Parker for?" asked Herries.

"That Parker can explain a good deal better than I can," said Talbot drily.

"Expound, Pignacious!" said Lowther. But Parker turned to Tom Merry, and asked sharply:

"Why are you all out here at this time of night? If you intended playing guardian angels to a prodigal, it was wasted effort. I am quite capable of taking care of myself!"

"I had an anonymous letter, saying that you were in grave danger, and these fellows agreed to come along with me to give a hand," said Tom, rather stiffly. "We don't ask for thanks—"

"But you can't stop me from thanking you," broke in Parker. All the cool sarcasm had gone from his voice now. He remembered how gallantly some of these very juniors had helped him before.

With eyes that seemed able to pierce the gloom better than most there, he looked round him. Eleven of them! He had not realised that he had so many well-wishers.

"Merry, Talbot, Lowther, Manners, Figgins, Kerr, Wynn, Blake, D'Arcy, Herries, Digby," he said.

There was something out of the ordinary in the way he ran over the names. It was not like a master calling a roll, though in more than one thing he had said the note of authority which some of them had resented in the past had rung out.

No; it was rather as a fellow might run over names that he meant to commit to memory as the names of staunch friends.

And it was just that. They may not have realised it at the time; but as long as Philip Ignatius Parker-Roberts was in the land of the living, not one of them could ever lack at least one friend.

CHAPTER 13.

The End of the Mystery.

"I AM very much obliged to you all. I hope that if I have given any of you reason to dislike me, he will accept my sincere apology for such offence given. Some time later I may explain all this; but at present—"

"Between me and you, Parker, it won't take so much explaining as you may fancy," said Tom Merry bluntly.

"After I got that warning some of us did a thing that isn't much in our line—we broke promises!"

"We couldn't keep it in any longer, you know, Parker," said Figgins.

"And we'd found out a bit more about you than you had told us yourself," added Kerr.

"Yes; that would be Talbot," said Parker.

"I haven't told anyone a thing," Talbot said quietly.

"It was old Figgy," said Fatty Wynn. "I thought Kerr was a real knock-out 'tec, but Figgy's gone one better this time!"

"Oh, dry up, Fatty! It was dead easy after I'd seen the inscription on that watch!" protested the blushing Figgins. "So you saw the inscription, did you?" asked Parker. "And what precisely did you deduce from that, may I ask?"

"There were other things," replied Figgins. "But that helped most. You're Parker-Roberts, the 'Daily Messenger' man. And I don't want to be rude, but I jolly well shouldn't believe you if you denied it!"

"I am not going to deny it," Parker said coolly. "You fellows shall hear the whole story; but not here. Mellish will find his way back to the school, no doubt. Do you not think we had better return now?"

"What beats me is—who sent that warning?" said Figgins, as they made their way back.

"I do not know. But I strongly suspect Mellish," replied Parker.

"But how could he know anything about it?" objected Herries.

"There again, I do not know, but I suspect him of having entangled himself with those scoundrels, who carried him off. Then, no doubt, he got frightened, and paid you fellows the compliment of leaving you to put right what he had put wrong."

"Mellish is a rotter," said Digby. "But—well, that's pretty steep, you know, Parker!"

"I admit that it is—er—pretty steep, Digby. But you will find that I am justified, I believe."

"If it's true, it means the sack for him," Tom said.

"Why should it?"

"Do you mean that you'll keep it dark?" asked Jack Blake.

"I should certainly prefer to keep it dark, for many reasons. And I should also prefer Mellish to have another chance. I do not think he will ever be a credit to St. Jim's, but I should be sorry if I had anything to do with his being cast out."

There was silence for a minute or two after that little speech. Not a fellow there but felt more kindly disposed to Parker because of it, and more ready to believe that he was right about Mellish because his suspicions were so evidently not prompted by any ill-feeling.

Then Manners broke the silence with these words:

"You're a brick, Pignacious!"

"I may or may not be—er—a brick. But my mme is certainly not Pignacious," replied Parker drily.

They got in without difficulty and without detection. They saw nothing of Cutts. That worthy had betaken himself to bed, doubtless.

But they did not go to bed. It was no use thinking of it till Mellish came back. Rotter as he was, they were anxious about him.

"We can't wait in this hole," said Tom Merry, as they paused in the box-room. "Better take it in turns here; two will be enough. The rest of us can go to our study. I dare say the fire isn't quite out yet, and if it is we can re-light it."

Manners and Gussy volunteered for the first half-hour, and the rest sat in the gloom of No. 10, with no light save that of a sulky fire, talking in whispers. They learned something then of why Parker had really come to St. Jim's; and of his feud with the Big Boss, the unscrupulous scoundrel who had sent down Smiler and Rusty to dog him; and of his early days, so different from theirs, which had shaped him into something very unlike them, and yet, as they saw, into a man, too, and a plucky, cool-headed man; and even of his experiences at the Front, though of these he would talk little.

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After a bit Digby and Kerr, very loth to go and leave Parker still discoursing of things they would hear only at second-hand, relieved the first two watchers.

And still Mellish did not come. But someone came; and that someone was Baggy Trimble.

He appeared suddenly, like a fat and unwelcome ghost.

"He, he, he!" he chuckled nervously. "So you're here, you chaps? I thought perhaps you might be."

"What do you want?" growled Tom Merry.

"He, he, he! Has Mellish run away?"

"You fat worm, what are you driving at?" snapped Blake.

"There's something up with Mellish. I've heard him talking to Crooke about that chap Parker. Yes, and about two rough customers down at Rylcombe who wanted to get at Parker; a bet or something, he said it was, but I don't really know any more. It doesn't matter much. Parker's no account, is he? He, he, he!"

Baggy had not seen Parker till that moment. When he did see him he fairly goggled, and before anything else could be said had a wild shot at taking back his words.

"I—I—I didn't know you—I meant Mellish was no account, you know! I couldn't have meant you, Parker, because I respect you highly; as I'm sure everybody does."

Parker merely smiled. Baggy's respect, real or pretended, did not amount to anything worth discussing.

"What do you mean about Mellish?" asked Talbot.

"There's something up with Mellish. He's in a beastly hole; not that I care, of course. I haven't any sympathy for anyone so unprincipled. But I found these papers in his waste-paper basket, and I must say they look fishy."

They did! For the papers were serawls in Mellish's handwriting—drafts of the anonymous letter to Tom Merry. They proved his guilt in that matter beyond all doubt. But they also showed that he had repented in a measure of his treachery. A poor, weak-backed, faint-hearted repentance. But what better could one expect of Percy Mellish?

Blake took Baggy by the ear, and escorted him back to the Fourth Form dormitory. Baggy seemed hurt that no gratitude was expressed to him. He thought Parker might at least have shown some. But Parker appeared to despise him even more heartily than the rest, who knew him better, and could never be surprised at any meanness from Baggy.

Herries and Talbot went off to do sentry-go. Tom Merry and Figgins relieved them later. Then Blake and Lowther stood their trick of watching. But still Mellish did not come.

One or two fellows dozed off from time to time, in sheer weariness. But no one would go to bed. They were all getting very worried; even Parker admitted that he did not like it.

Fatty was snoozing. Everyone but he and Parker had now taken a turn in the box-room.

"Don't wake him," said Parker gently. "Poor old chap, he's dog-tired! I will watch alone."

But just at this moment Blake and Lowther came in, and between them walked the miserable Mellish.

He was coated with mud, and had evidently been rolled in it. His eyes were wild with pain and fear. His face looked like an old man's in its haggard woe.

That he had been through it there could be no manner of doubt.

He was even too utterly dispirited to

lie. He blurted out the whole wretched story, admitted everything, and appeared to have resigned himself to the notion that he had done for himself at St. Jim's once for all.

When he learned that there was yet another chance for him he bucked up a little, and managed to tell what had happened to him. How he had been taken off, rolled up in the pig-net, and driven some distance along a road he did not know in the gloom, to a small, lonely cottage; how his captors had found that they had not secured Parker-Roberts after all, and had taken it out of him for their disappointment, thrashing him, rolling him in the mud, and finally leaving him to find his way home alone along the dark roads; and of his miserable, hopeless trudge, with nothing before him but the last disgrace of expulsion!

Parker came out in a new light then. Of them all, it was Parker who was least down upon the wretched young rascal. It was Parker who took him up to the bath-room, and helped him to get decent—outwardly, at least—and saw him into bed.

Was Mellish grateful? No one ever felt quite sure about that, but they could all see that there was no such change in his ways as there must have been had he changed his heart. He went slow for a time; that was all.

Parker went, of course. St. Jim's was no place for him now that more than a dozen fellows knew his true identity.

But he went with flying colours. He had it out with the Head and Mr. Raiton like a man, accepted meekly their reproaches for the deceit he had practised, and gladly their forgiveness, and left them good friends.

"We shall be pleased to see you again as a visitor, Mr. Parker-Roberts," said the Head.

"Say, rather, as an old boy, sir," said Victor Raiton, smiling.

"I should be pleased and proud to come back in that capacity, gentlemen," said Parker-Roberts.

Not a line of those articles he had planned was ever written. He had told the two masters that he relinquished his purpose. He told his eleven rescuers more.

"Wild horses wouldn't drag me to it," he said. "You fellows behold a convert; more than that, an old St. Jim's boy, who would not for anything breathe a word against his alma mater! The Head agrees to my taking that honorary distinction, and I hope my other friends here will not object."

It was not likely. Now that he was going they would have given a good deal to keep Parker, and teach him yet a thing or two, as Figgy said.

But that was impossible. Parker was a man, with a man's work to do. The Rhine might see him yet, for he hoped, as he confessed, to be fit for campaigning again before the war was over.

There was a sumptuous spread in No. 10 before he went, and again Parker was the founder of the feast.

"Here's the health of our esteemed friend Pignacious!" cried Monty Lowther. "Drink it standing, and with one foot each on the table—all but Herries; there won't be room for one of his. You don't mind that name for the last time, do you, Parker?"

"But I mind having my feet—"

Parker struck in across Herries quite in the approved St. Jim's style, without any consideration of the amelioration of manners at that classic foundation.

"I don't mind a bit, Lowther. But it's not the last time; I shall come back!"

"Ah, but I shall never dare to call you Pignacious then," replied Lowther sadly.

"May it be soon!" said Talbot.

"For he's a jolly good fellow—"

Tom Merry started the strain, and they all took it up. They sang it again at the station.

"Come back to us, Parkah!" were the last words that the intruder of so short a time before heard as the train rolled out.

"Bless them all!" he said, and blew his nose hard.

THE END.

(Don't miss next Wednesday's Great Story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's —"CARDEW OF THE FOURTH!" by MARTIN CLIFFORD.)

CORRESPONDENCE WANTED.

J. B. White, Osborn Avenue, Beulah Bay, North Kensington, South Australia With readers of 16-17.

Eric G. Patterson, 283, Burnley Street, Burnley, Melbourne, Australia—With readers of 15-18 in United Kingdom—in Scotland especially.

W. A. Tilley, jun., 89, Glyn Road, Homerton, London, N.E.—With lonely French or Belgian soldier on active service, with a view to sending him cigarettes.

Miss Nellie O'Halloran, Sebastian, via Bendigo, Victoria, Australia—With girl readers of 16-17.

Miss Vera Landreth, 28, Larkspur Terrace, Jesmond, Newcastle-on-Tyne, and Miss Amy Boss, 55, Sanderson Road, Jesmond, Newcastle—With a girl reader of 11-16 in South or Central Africa.

A. Read, 182, Edmund Road, Clive Vale, Hastings—With readers interested in poster advertising stamps and match-box labels.

L. E. Palmer, care of Post Office, Feilding, New Zealand—With readers generally.

BACK NUMBERS, ETC., WANTED.

By J. Gastall, 94, Haywood Street, Accrington—"Gem" Christmas Numbers 1910, 1911, 1912, and 1913. Threepence each offered.

By D. Pawlett, P.O., Box 79, Portage La Prairie, Manitoba, Canada—All double numbers of "Gem" and "Magnet" up to No. 250 in each case. Twopence-halfpenny each offered.

By Leslie Jukes, 233, New John Street West, Birmingham—Clean copies of Nos. 7-12 of the "Magnet," and Nos. 2-8 of the "Gem."

By Leslie R. Smith, 20, Greenbank Road, Devonshire Park, Birkenhead—"Gem" No. 416.



NEXT WEEK'S SPECIAL ATTRACTION.

Besides the long complete story our next issue will contain another story of St. Jim's, entitled—

"THE BLACKMAILER!"

lifted from that popular organ

"TOM MERRY'S WEEKLY."

Don't fail to order your copy in advance—and tell your chums about it!

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 474.

THE EDITOR'S CHAT.

For Next Wednesday:

"CARDEW OF THE FOURTH."

By Martin Clifford.

The Levison yarns which have appeared of late have been so popular that I am sure my readers will welcome the news that our next story will begin what may be described as a new Levison series. We are not going to lose sight of Frank Levison, the plucky, straight-going kiddie, who must be ranked among Mr. Clifford's greatest successes in character-drawing; but he will not be quite so prominent in this new series, the chief figures in which will be his elder brother and a new boy, Ralph Reckness Cardew, who shares No. 9 Study with Levison major and Clive. This new junior is a fellow of very complex character, who is likely to puzzle readers as much as he puzzles St. Jim's. He has any amount of pluck, and if only for that reason he never, even at his worst, completely kills one's sympathy. But he is a good deal of a snob, and his contempt for law and order is early apparent. What will be the consequences of a chum such as this upon a fellow like Levison? He has only lately found his footing on the path of honour. But there is sterling stuff in Levison, in spite of all his faults; and I don't think his many friends among our readers need fear that in the long run he will be found wanting.

TELL YOUR CHUMS ABOUT THESE GRAND NEW STORIES!

A BRISTOL READER'S LETTER.

"Dear Mr. Editor,—For some time past I have read with amazement the weird letters written by 'Accuser' and other asses of his kind.—May I assure you that if some of these anonymous funks were revealed they would get even more drastic punishment than that meted out to the Peace cranks? I have read the GEM for some time, and in my opinion it gets better every week. It is not enjoyed by boys alone, either. I often lend my copy to a lady I know, and she is keen in appreciation of it. I hope you will never believe that these rotten letters, written by people who dare not give their names, express the feelings of the vast majority of Gemites!

"Yours very sincerely, "A."

I don't!—Ed.

MORE AMERICAN ARGUMENT.

I have heard again from my New York correspondent, who calls himself "Stars and Stripes."

He says that this section of the paper ought to be called "The Argument Page"—not the Chat. But when he wrote that he did not know of my reformation. In future I am going to see that no such name as he suggests shall fit it. But he will be worse disgruntled than ever, if I pay no heed to his arguments.

And he is still disgruntled. Neither Mr. Richards nor Mr. Clifford pleases; and, as far as I can gather, I am rather worse than either of them. Well, I am in good company, anyway!

His new cause of complaint is against Mr. Owen Conquest, who has made a French-Canadian boy in the fine Rookwood yarns talk British school slang. Terrible! I myself have heard dusky-skinned fellow-subjects from "India's coral strand" say "Rats!" and the like without appearing at all abashed, and

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have been adjured by a young Russian "not to talk out of the back of my neck." This is a phrase which may, or may not, be familiar to denizens of the U.S.A. It ought to be. They do a lot of what it means.

For instance, "Stars and Stripes" is talking out of the back of his neck when he says that it is absurd that another correspondent should not recognise the fact that everything American is essentially superior to everything British.

If the British Navy had not been superior to the American Navy, the U.S.A. probably would not have been able to keep out of the war so long as this. At the time of writing they are not definitely in it; but the first plunge has been taken, and any hour may bring news of a declaration. Then what becomes of the "too proud to fight" theory? I don't want to say anything offensive, but I cannot understand the pride that could go on dipping its flag to Germany's pirate rag till the time came when American interests were menaced directly. That is not real pride, as we understand it on this side.

"Stars and Stripes" has a good word to say for Mr. Duncan Storm, who has actually allowed that an American regiment can fight well! (See "The Red Raiders," the fine story which lately finished in the "Boys' Friend"—1d. weekly, and worth a lot more!) Who ever denied the American people courage? Not I—not Mr. Richards—not anyone writing in the papers with which I am connected. Not, I think, anyone worth considering. Certainly not anyone who knows American history!

Think of the heroes of America's two great wars—the men who followed Washington and Grant and Robert E. Lee! Think of the pioneers who helped to make the nation—men like Boone, and Crockett, and "Bowie of the Broken Blade," and George Rogers Clark, and Sam Houston, and Custer, and Cody! Think of their sailors—Farragut and Dewey and many more! Who would look for braver men?

But they were never too proud to fight!

GEM AND MAGNET LEAGUES.

A Reader writes me thus:

"I have seen notices inserted in the GEM, such as 'So-and-So wants to form a "Gem" and "Magnet" League.' After two years' work upon such a league, I think I am entitled to say something about it. I believe that many readers who insert these notices have not the faintest idea of the work that even a moderately sized league entails. They often begin by asking the members to contribute some such sum as 6d. per week. The 'members' don't agree, and the league shuts up shop. Others add an artistic flourish to their notices by announcing that a magazine will be published monthly. The mere notion of such a thing is absurd, especially in war time. When the promise is carried out the members are asked to pay about 3d. for four small pages or thereabouts of very indifferent matter! This also chokes off members, of course. They want something for their money, and they do not get it in this way. I am running a league which is successful; but I am doing it on special methods, and we have a committee elected by the members—not nominated by the president. The general idea with these organisations seems to be that the president's will is to be law. I should be glad

to co-operate with anyone else running a league. I feel sure that amalgamations of that sort would be useful; but I also feel sure that you only have the power to bring all the leagues together by making it clear to those who run them."

This is quite an interesting letter, but I think my correspondent goes astray when he says that I have the power to bring about an amalgamation of leagues. No argument would weigh for a moment with some of the rather young gentlemen who have elected themselves league presidents.—Unless they can boss the show they have no use for it. This has been made plain to me by letters I have received. I am not inclined to take them very severely to task for this attitude; it is natural for a boy to want to lead, and if he can get others to follow, and does not lead them out of the right path, there is no harm in it. On various other points touched upon in my correspondent's letter I may have something more to say in a future Chat. Meanwhile, if the president or other boss of any existing league would like to be put into communication with him, I will send his name and address with pleasure.

NOTICES.

Correspondence, Etc.

Lost on November 25th, near Ludgate Circus, a Russia leather cigarette-case, of little value except to owner. Jas. T. Hayley, 6, Gaywood St., London Rd., S.E., will pay a reward for its return.

A reader of the companion papers, aged 16, lately came to Aberdeen, wants to make the acquaintance of another boy reader, with a view to real friendship. K. Hargreaves, Gordon's Lodge, Woodside, Aberdeen.

H. C. Treweske, Windaroo, Powell St., Neutral Bay, Sydney, Australia, would be glad to correspond with readers, especially those in South Africa and America, interested in stamp-collecting.

T. F. Brady, 13, Power St., Adelaide, South Australia, wants to correspond with an English reader interested in art and photography.

Dan Lloyd, No. 1 Mess, H.M.S. Spitfire, care of G.P.O., London, would be greatly obliged if any reader would send him an old one-stringed Japanese fiddle or similar instrument.

(TBALL.

Matches Wanted by:

BLUNDELLS F.C. (16).—H. Dean, 29, Elgar St., Rotherhithe, S.E.

6TH WALTHAMSTOW TROOP (14½)—2-mile r.—G. S. Mace, 4, St. James's St., Walthamstow.

CALEDON THISTLE (14-16)—2-mile r.—G. McKenzie, 151, Sword St., Dennistoun, Glasgow.

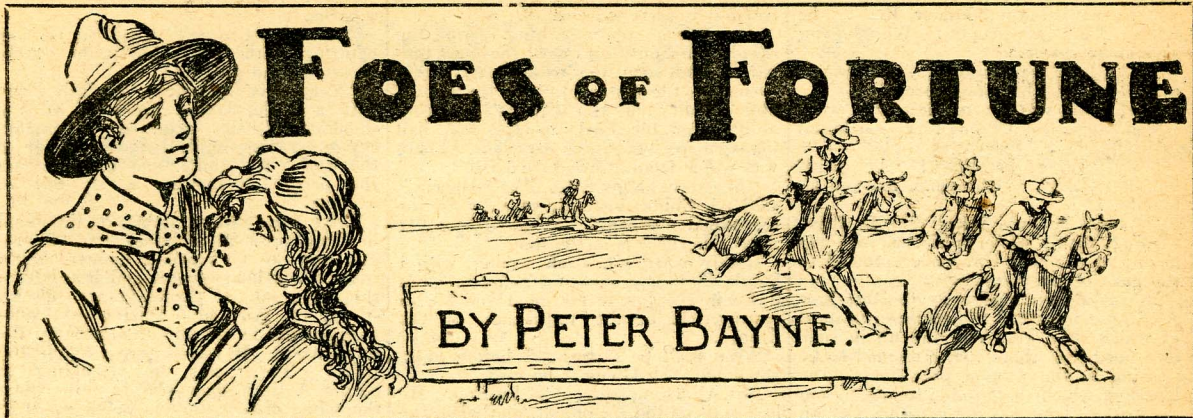
Leagues, Etc.

Readers wanted for a good amateur magazine: capital stories and other attractions; passed round to members of circle.—Stamped and addressed envelope for particulars to Wm. McNally, Glenview, Glencuce, Wigtownshire.

Boys (14-16) in Portsmouth district wanted to join club.—Write A. Crocker, jun., 98, Dickens Rd., Portsmouth.

Your Editor

OUR GREAT ADVENTURE SERIAL.

THE PRECEDING CHAPTERS
TOLD HOW

CARTON ROSS, a lonely and friendless youth, sole heir to a great fortune, though unaware of it, is hunted by a party of outlaws led by DIRK RALWIN. He is befriended by HARVEY MILBURN and his daughter LORNA, who lose their home, and are separated in an attempt to defend him from his pursuers.

Ross is captured by the brigands, but, with Lorna's help, recovers his wallet—containing papers which prove his identity—and escapes. Later they fall in with RODDY GARRIN, an Englishman, and his companion, AH CHING, a Chinaman. The outlaws continue the chase, together with HUXTON FENNER, a Yankee, who had previously been a companion of Garrin and Ah Ching, but had deserted them.

They pass through many thrilling adventures, and, later, Harvey Milburn succumbs as a result of the privations he has suffered whilst a prisoner under Dirk Ralwin.

One night, while the four companions are asleep, Lorna and Ross are carried away by Huxton Fenner and a band of Dirk Ralwin's outlaws. Fenner has no intention of taking them to Ralwin, as he hopes to obtain Ross' papers and claim the fortune for himself. Ralwin is warned of the American's teachery by one of his spies, JAQUNY, an Indian. The outlaw, with a band of his men, hurries to San Ramo, where it is expected Fenner and his captives will board a steamer. Ralwin, by covering the captain of the vessel he is on with a revolver, forces him to pursue a smaller boat, which contains Fenner and his prisoners.

The launch runs aground on the bank, and Ross and Lorna contrive to escape. But the girl is soon recaptured, and, in order to force Ross into his hands again, Fenner threatens her.

Carton Ross surrenders himself to Fenner to save Lorna from death, and the two captives are carried farther into the forest. Fenner is surprised by Aytan Aylman and an armed band. The two outlaws come to an understanding, though each is resolved to obtain the fortune for himself. Roddy Garrin and Ah Ching push on through the jungle, to find at last they are close to the place where Dirk Ralwin is encamped.

They capture a waterplane, and discover the whereabouts of Carton Ross and Lorna. The fugitives are about to escape on the flying-machine when it breaks down.

The fugitives make their way to a ruined temple, and only escape capture owing to their pursuers being attacked in their turn by Dirk Ralwin.

(Now read on.)

The Escape in the Night—The Great
River—A Strange Awakening.

With Carton Ross and Lorna leading the way, the little party of fugitives hurried forward through the dense jungle, and it was now that the brave girl began to show signs of fatigue.

"You can keep on?" asked Carton Ross anxiously.

"Oh, yes! But I am thinking of you—of the peril ahead. Dirk Ralwin will be returning with his men, and, situated as we are, it seems impossible to elude him."

Ross tried to reassure his companion, but he was feeling pretty well convinced himself that their plight was desperate. Just ahead of them now gleamed the wide river, shining in the bright light of the moon.

"We must get across, Lorna," he said. "I will help you, and—"

He was interrupted by the piping voice of the Chinese.

"Make us all velly wet, Mister Ross," said the little man, seeming to shrink into himself as he spoke the words.

In truth, Ah Ching was not at all himself, the very rough usage he had received, in addition to the hurt to his dignity by the shocking misuse of his pigtail, having deprived him of his customary spirit.

It was Roddy Garrin who replied to his fellower's protest.

"It's all right, Ah Ching," he said. "A drop of water won't do us any harm, and," he went on, turning to Ross, "it is imperative that we put the river between us and possible pursuit. Dirk Ralwin is bound to pick up our trail by the dawn."

No further objection was offered, and the four companions went forward to the water's edge, Ross ever and again darting a glance of apprehension at Lorna. The girl stood looking out across the sweep of tossing waters, and then, with an odd little laugh, she made as if to dive in.

"It is for freedom," she said softly. "Maybe we are at the end of our troubles. There is a chance that we may gain Quito and find help, for the life of Dirk Ralwin is forfeit."

"Yes," replied Carton thoughtfully, though to his mind the day was yet far distant when the scoundrelly outlaw would be called upon to pay the penalty of his myriad crimes.

Lorna gave a little laugh, and the next moment she had plunged into the glittering water, Roddy Garrin and the Chinese—the last-named very reluctantly—following. Carton was already swimming steadily, keeping at Lorna's side. There was the murmur of the dreamy water-

way in his ears; but he had only one thought then—namely, to watch over the safety of his plucky girl companion, who had faced untold perils for his sake.

The course of the river swept them southward; but they were all strong swimmers, and at last the low-lying bank of the opposite shore was gained.

Carton Ross assisted Lorna to her feet, and the four comrades pushed through the swampy undergrowth towards the higher ground. The moon had sunk behind the clouds, and already the pale light of morning was illumining the forest.

"Velly safe here, Mister Ross," said Ah Ching. "My wantee sleep velly muchee. My velly tired."

"Wait a bit, Ah Ching," said Roddy Garrin. "You shall have your nap directly."

Ah Ching looked indeed the picture of misery. He was feeling the bedraggled-looking object which had formerly been the smart pigtail, of which he was so justly proud, and did not seem in the least interested in the council of war which his three friends were holding.

"We must rest here for a bit," said Ross, his eyes on Lorna.

Roddy Garrin gave a nod. He was ready to drop. By common consent the little party selected a sheltered spot on a little plateau and lay down, a loud snore from the Celestial being immediately heard. Ah Ching was already in dreamland, probably travelling back into his own country, which he had quitted so long before.

It seemed to Lorna as if she had only been asleep for a couple of minutes, when she opened her eyes to see Carton Ross standing near her on guard. She started to her feet, and her hand was on the young man's arm.

"You have been asleep, too?" she inquired, her voice trembling.

"Yes; but Roddy and I had to share the guard. You never know what Dirk Ralwin may be up to. He has means of crossing the river which are denied to us, and we aren't taking any chances, not this journey."

He gave a merry laugh, and changed the subject, for he read Lorna's anxiety for him in the girl's eyes.

"Roddy Garrin is making up for lost time, as you see. They both turned and gazed at where the Chinese was lying, probably just as he had dropped down hours before, his face turned to the rising sun. "Ah Ching is doing the best for himself. Here, wake up!" he cried, going over to the sleeper and touching him with his foot. "Are you going to sleep all day?"

Ah Ching gave a nervous jump, seemed

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about to twist himself into a knot, then sat up, and blinked at Carton Ross.

"Oh, so it's you, Mister Ross?" he cried. "My so sleepee! Wantee few momentee restee."

"You have had enough, Ah Ching!" said Ross. "What about breakfast?"

Perhaps it was the magic of the word which caused the Chinese to give a broad smile.

"My gettee breakfast!" he cried enthusiastically. "Chinaman knowee all aboutee!"

"I hope he does," said Carton Ross, turning, with a smile, to Lorna, who was gazing at the beautiful scene enfolded to the gaze of the wanderers.

It was always a mystery to Ross how Ah Ching managed to contrive the meal of which they were one and all in such dire need, but there really seemed to be nothing in the way of provisioning the larder of which the humble follower from the flowery land was not capable. Carton Ross and Lorna were speedily joined by Roddy Garrin. The brilliant morning inspired them all with fresh hope, and Ross was glad in the extreme when Roddy Garrin mooted the advisability of their remaining where they were for that day at least.

The two moved a few paces up the wooded hill, leaving Lorna seated on the trunk of a mighty tree, rooted up by some long-past storm.

"What I am thinking," said Ross, "is that Lorna cannot go on until she has had a rest. She has been bearing up magnificently, as you know. It seems to me that we shall be safe here—safe as anywhere in the country, for a few days at least."

Roddy Garrin was about to reply, but ere he could do so there was a cheery hail from Ah Ching. The two friends, joined by the girl, quickly made their way to the spot where the little Chinese was hard at work. Ah Ching ceased his work at piling on fresh wood to feed the fire he had lighted, and came running up to the three friends.

"Allee rightee!" he said ecstatically. "My findee place where we can sleepee, where Mister Ralwin never findee—never! Come! This way!" He hurried on ahead through the wonderful glade, which lay shoreward from the plateau, sending back delighted remarks as he ran. "You leave allee to Ah Ching, My knowee! Caughtee bird! All rightee!"

A moment later he was pointing gleefully at a ruined hut, obviously the habitat once upon a time of some Indians. The place was made at the entrance to a cavern, and was half concealed by overhanging ferns and wild lianas, whose tendrils drooped curtainwise across the dilapidated woodwork.

Roddy Garrin and the others stared in utter wonderment at the welcome discovery.

"We can lie up here for a bit, anyway," said Ross.

Ah Ching was standing close behind him, a smile on his olive-complexioned face.

"All rightee?" he asked.

He did not wait for a reply, but darted back to the scene of his culinary operations a few paces away, and speedily the appetising smell of cooking rose in the still air. They were in the wilderness, indeed, and for a time it seemed as if they could forget the perils of the past.

Dirk Ralwin would not find them there in that now trackless region, for, though the hut was proof enough of native hunters having been there long since, yet

it was tumbling to ruin, and showed with ample plainness that its one-time owner had left it for good and all.

Ah Ching was working with the rapidity of lightning to get the meal prepared, and soon the whole party were seated on the ground testing the admirable quality of the Chinese's cooking ability, for the bird the Celestial had managed to secure was excellent. There was water from a stream hard by.

"We velly happy here, Mister Garrin," said Ah Ching, beaming proudly on the assembled company. "My go seekee what else there is in the hut."

Roddy called him back, saying, with a laugh, that they were not going to settle down in the jungle for good and all, as appeared to be the impression of the Chinese.

"We shall be setting off before long, you know, Ah Ching," he said.

But Ah Ching was out of hearing. He had only waited a moment, and when the others went to see what he was doing, it was to discover him busy in the large-sized room of the hut, a place which gave on to the interior of the cave. This last had evidently been utilised by its original resident as a storage-place for food.

"Allee rightee!" sang out the Chinese delightedly. "My makee the furniture, grow things in the garden."

"Stop, stop!" cried Garrin. "We haven't got a garden, and there won't be time for you to plant a garden!" He looked at Ross and Lorna, keen amusement in his eyes. "Ah Ching apparently imagines that we have come to stay."

Lorna gave a sigh, as if she, too, thought it would be pleasant to linger in that wondrous land, now that they seemed to have left the danger which had menaced them.

Carton Ross saw her walk to the end of the rough apartment, one side of which was the rock wall of the cave, then pass slowly and thoughtfully out into the warm sunshine, where many coloured birds were fitting amidst the trees.

The young man joined her. The two paced on together, and suddenly Ross saw that there were tears in the girl's eyes. He did not speak, but Lorna answered his unheard question.

"I was thinking of what your duty is," she said, "for now it seems as if you were really free of the clutches of those wretches. I suppose you will be trying to make your way back to England, where your duty lies?"

"I do not know," said Ross meaningly.

He knew in his heart that even the Old Country, of which his father loved to speak with such affection, might mean but little to him now, for he had made friendships out in the wilds which, in one case at least, would prove dearer than life itself.

They left the resourceful Ah Ching to his devices, with Roddy Garrin looking on, and went slowly on up the wood-clad hill into the glory of the day. From far below came the sound of the Chinese explaining what he wished to do, but as they pressed on the voice died away.

"I feel as if this were my country, too," said Ross suddenly, without looking at his fair companion. "If only Master Dirk Ralwin would leave me alone, I think this place itself might seem like home."

Lorna looked at him, the former sadness on her lovely face a thing of the past, a laugh on her lips.

The Coming of the Troops—The Trap.

Ah Ching did not oversleep himself the following morning. He had been up with the dawn, and had everything ready

when the others joined him, Ross and Garrin having been down to the river for a bathe.

"Allee velly nice?" cried the Chinese, pointing, with pardonable pride, at the repeat he had prepared.

"Very nice indeed!" replied Ross, with a smile, laying his hand on the shoulder of the grinning Chinaman. "You are the supplementary wonder of the world, Ah Ching, and I award you the prize for making a lot out of nothing."

They were sitting down to the meal in the shadow of the trees, almost careless now as to possible danger, when there was a hoarse command heard from the other side of the leafy screen. All sprang up, Ah Ching staring in a woe-begone way in the direction whence the shout came. It was repeated again and again. There was the trampling of horses distinguished plainly now, then the sound of more orders being given in a military tone.

Lorna glided towards Carton Ross, an expression of anguish on her face.

"We shouldn't have tarried here," she said, in accents of distress. "I loved it, but we should have gone on. That is Dirk Ralwin and his men, with Huxton Fenner, too, most likely. They will have made it up between them." She stood listening intently, her face pale as death. "Oh, Carton"—there was agony in her tone—"I feel as though I could bear no more, no more danger for you!"

Roddy Garrin and the Chinese raced up to them.

"I say, old chap, we must run for it!" cried Garrin.

He knew just as well as did Carton Ross the hopelessness of flight, for now the shouts seemed to come from all sides, while the strangers, or whoever the newcomers might be, were advancing from the side of the forest, effectually cutting off retreat, since behind the fugitives rose the rocky wall of the cavern-studded hill.

But had they been able to flee there would have been no time. Suddenly there was a rush from out of the forest, and a strong posse of mounted men trotted forward, to surround the little party, while their leader shouted out a question, addressing it to Carton Ross, who stood nearest.

Lorna gave a wild cry. The strangers were certainly not Dirk Ralwin's men. They were in the uniform of the State troops, and their leader bore the insignia of a colonel in the army of the Republic.

"Hallo, young sir!" cried the chief to Ross. "I suppose you and your friends there are not in league with the outlaw, Dirk Ralwin, for whom I am looking?"

Carton Ross approached the speaker.

"No, sir," he said. "We have been in danger of our lives from Ralwin." He briefly related the position of himself and those with him. "When we heard you, we fancied that Dirk Ralwin had discovered our retreat."

Colonel Garcia nodded his head. At his order his men dismounted, and for a time the commandant remained chatting with Ross and Garrin, who learned of the determined effort being made to stamp out the system of brigandage which the outlaw, Dirk Ralwin, had brought to such a pitch.

"I have no doubt we shall get him and his gang all right," said the colonel, "and short work will be made of them down at the capital when we do succeed in laying them by the heels."

The detachment rested their horses before going on, the leader telling the four companions they had better remain where

(Continued on page 20.)

FREE TOILET GIFT FOR YOUR HAIR.

Public Distribution of 1,000,000 "Cremex" Shampoo Powders.

WILL MAKE THE SCALP FREE FROM SCURF & DANDRUFF & THE HAIR SILKILY SOFT.

A MILLION Free Gift Packets of "Cremex" Shampoo Powders are to be distributed.

This Free Gift is all the more timely in view of the greater need to-day of scalp and hair cleanliness, owing to the 3,000,000 extra men, women, and girls now working amid the dust and dirt of munition factories, and in other occupations, the conditions of which cause the hair to become choked with dirt, and, if neglected, malodorous with perspiration.

These Free Trial Packets of "Cremex" will serve to show how the scalp and hair can be kept daintily clean and wavy, instead of clammy and otherwise unpleasant to the senses of sight and smell.

A WONDERFUL CHANGE IN 10 MINUTES.

Within ten minutes the "Cremex" Shampoo Powder will make a wonderful difference in the condition of the scalp and hair. Just wet the hair in warm water and rub in the Shampoo Powder—previously mixed with water—to dissolve it—with the finger tips. Rinse the hair well and dry.

That is all—very simple, very quick—but notice the result—the vast improvement. The scalp is freed from every vestige of Dandruff, Scurf, Dust, and Dirt; the hair is silkily soft and fragrant.

Most important of all, the scalp is made splendidly cool and fresh, and not left harsh and dry, or the hair dull and brittle—as is usually the case when ordinary Shampoo Powders or soap and soda water are used.

This is because "Cremex," whilst removing all excessive oil and grease, does not rob the hair of its natural oil. Thus the hair remains bright and smooth, and does not split.

THE HAIR "STAYS-UP" AFTERWARDS.

And because the hair has not been robbed—because it had not been rendered rough and "dry"—there is no trouble in getting it to "stay up" after the "Cremex" Shampoo, as there is so often when ordinary shampoo powders or soap and soda water are used.

By Shampooing the hair regularly with "Cremex," it is kept in good health as well as good appearance. Healthy hair is strong and vigorous—it does not "split," become

thin and straggling, or fall out. And it retains its natural colour for years longer than it would otherwise do, thus maintaining the youthful appearance of its owner.

"Cremex" heightens or "brings out" the colour of the hair, giving it a halo-like radiance, which rejuvenates, and adds animation and charm to the entire countenance. Further,

IT MAKES THE HAIR LOOK "MORE."

The reason of this is that "Cremex" cleanses the hair so thoroughly that there is no tangling or matting. Each hair plays its part, keeps its place and does "not lean on its neighbours."

Every man and woman whose hair is

- Scurfy
- Dull
- Dry
- Splitting
- Straggling
- Greasy
- Malodorous
- Matted
- Thin or
- Falling Out

should at once commence to shampoo it regularly with "Cremex."

"Cremex" is sold by all Chemists and Stores in packets of 2d. each, or in handy boxes, containing seven packets, for 1s.

Try a packet to-day, or take advantage of this Free Gift offer, by filling in and posting the Coupon below, together with a penny stamp to cover postage, for a full-size trial packet.



A penny is the small cost of making your scalp free from scurf, and delightfully cool and comfortable, and your hair silkily soft. By sending the Coupon below, with a penny stamp to cover postage, you can get a full-size packet of the wonderful, easy-lathering "Cremex" Shampoo Powder FREE. "Cremex" shampooed hair "keeps up" after washing, and looks "more." Send Coupon to-day.

FREE "CREMEX" COUPON.

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FOES OF FORTUNE.

(Continued from page 18.)

they were until the return of the force, when they would have an escort to the city, and be secure from all further molestation.

Ross saw the soldiers ride away, a feeling of intense relief in his mind. It seemed at last as if all were going to be well.

None the less, as night came on, he and Garrin shared the watch, not feeling disposed to trust the safety of the camp to Ah Ching, for the Chinese had been very busy all day, and was already showing symptoms of sleepiness.

Roddy Garrin had taken the second spell, and was standing at the entrance to the hut, when suddenly from out of the night a shadow fell across the open space close by where he stood on guard. There was another, then another, and then a sound smote his ear—the whispered order to advance in the unmistakable tones of Dirk Ralwin. There flashed through Garrin's brain the thought that he had given the colonel the information that the outlaw would not be able to gain that side of the river below the rapids.

But Dirk Ralwin was there, sure enough. He had managed to track down the fugitives, and the help of the troops sent out by the Government could not now come in time. He wished that he had decided with Ross and the others to press on, but it was no use regretting. Even as he turned to give the alarm to Carton Ross and the Chinese, a dusky form flung itself upon him, and he was borne back, yelling to his friends, although the cold rim of a revolver-barrel was pressed against his forehead. Despite his frantic efforts to free himself, he felt himself overmastered, a second enemy gripping his arms from behind, and pinioning them.

"Got them at last!"

It was Dirk Ralwin who uttered the words. Roddy Garrin saw Carton Ross being dragged out of the hut, and a groan escaped him as Lorna was led forth before the exultant gaze of the desperado. "So you are in my power at last!" growled the outlaw triumphantly. "You will not escape me this time!"

Carton Ross said nothing. His thoughts were travelling fast. When would the party of soldiers return? Colonel Garcia was an officer who knew the country well, and he would leave nothing undone to bring his mission to a successful conclusion by rounding up the band which had exercised a species of terrorism for long past.

Torches gleamed now, lighting up a strange scene. Lorna and her two faithful friends were hurried back into the hut, to remain there till morning broke, under a strong guard.

"What ever's become of Ah Ching?" muttered Garrin to Ross as he sat crouched on the low bench to which he was secured by lariats. "I suppose he saw his chance and made a bolt for it."

"He's not the chap to desert us," replied Carton Ross, turning his head to where Lorna sat, a prisoner the same as himself. "I hope he was not done in in his sleep. He was asleep, I had been looking at him a minute before."

In the adjoining room the guards were making themselves comfortable. There was laughter as some coarse jest was recounted. Carton Ross winced, and felt ready to curse himself for not having acted differently.

The night wore on. There was no sign of Ah Ching. The three friends were

ready to give him up as lost, for on comparing notes they found themselves all agreed that the Chinese would never have sought safety without them.

It was just about the dawn. A faint light stole into the room. A sleepy-looking guard came into the place, examined the captives' bonds, and went out again. Carton Ross tried to stretch himself, fought against the sense of misery which was invading his being, when on a sudden he forgot everything else, for from somewhere not far distant he heard the thud-thud of horses' hoofs on the soft, yielding ground.

He nudged Garrin. Perhaps it was only a dream. But the next moment he knew it was no deception of the night, or, rather, of the dawn. There was a rifle-shot, a cry of agony, then a rush from out of the shadowy forest, followed by a volley of imprecations, and the fierce struggling of men taken by surprise.

The next thing that the prisoners knew was that Ah Ching was cutting their bonds, talking excitedly the while.

"Ah Ching knowee," said the Chinaman. "No time to givee alarm. Ah Ching been nabbed same as Missie Lorna and you. Ah Ching slippee off, find Mister Colonel, bring him, that allee!"

It was a month later.

Carton Ross was standing on the deck of the liner which was to take him to England, he and the beautiful Lorna, the girl who was to be his bride.

The future looked full of sunshine.

If he had one regret it was that Roddy Garrin had remained behind, he and Ah Ching, for the land of adventure held them both still.

None the less, Roddy Garrin knew that he had a lifelong friend in Carton Ross, who would be one of the most powerful men in England, by reason in part of the enormous fortune which was his, also because he was a man who possessed the grit and nobility of character, without which money is of poor account indeed.

THE END.

GRUNDY'S MISTAKE.

Told by George Wilkins, and lifted from "Tom Merry's Weekly."

I GUESS there will be ructions in No. 3 Study when this yarn appears. Old Grundy is a terror for getting on his ear about things, I must say. I am not running the chap down. Gunn and I get on with him all serene and there are lots of good points about him. But he can't stand being chipped. He calls it "cheek." And because he can't stand it is why he gets so much of it, I suppose.

It's really for his benefit I am telling this yarn, though I don't expect him to see it. But when you hear what an ass he has been made of, you will understand better how he came to make such an ass of himself.

Grundy's notions about his own form at footer and cricket, and so on are not exactly the same as Tom Merry's notions. I am not going to say which of them is right. I don't go round asking for thick ears, and old Grundy can hit out straight, if he can't do anything else. [Editor's Note.—If our friend Wilkins avoids a thick ear for that last statement, he will not owe his escape to diplomacy, anyway.—T. M.]

I suppose the fellows thought he had been swanking too much, and needed a lesson. Who the particular fellows were I am not sure; but if I guess they hang out in No. 11 Study, I don't think I shall need to guess again.

A fag brought a note for Grundy. It was young Levison. That kid can look no end solemn when he likes, and he

looked as innocent and serious as a cherubim or a seraphim just then. [May I remind G. W. that "Cherub" and "seraph" are the usual words, unless the plural is meant?—T. M.]

Grundy opened the note. "Good!" he said, beaming like a gargoyle.

"Any answer?" asked Levison minor.

"Yes—or—no. I'll go up and see old Kildare myself."

"If it's a licking," said Gunn, who tries to be funny now and then, "you'd better. Kildare might not take to a deputy, even if you could find one."

"Ass!" snapped Grundy. "He knows better than to think of licking me. As a matter of fact, Kildare has offered me a place in the First Eleven on Saturday."

"W-w-what?" we stammered together.

"You idiots seem surprised," said Grundy scornfully. "It shows how very little sense you've got. I'm not surprised—not a bit!"

Of course he wasn't. Grundy would not have been surprised if the U.S.A. had cabled across to him to go and be President. And I must say—[Deleted. Political references barred here. Besides, it's no compliment to Grundy to make such comparisons.—T. M.]

If we had believed it we should not have been surprised; we should have been stupefied. But, of course, we didn't believe it.

But to tell Grundy so would not have had the slightest effect. He went off in high feather, after remarking that he rather thought the centre-forward position was about his mark, though he should not insist upon it if Kildare was particularly anxious he should play elsewhere. He only barred goal.

He had left on the table, open, Kildare's note. At least, what he had taken for Kildare's note. It did not look to Gunn and me at all like the skipper's fist. We saw no harm in taking a squint at it, for old Grundy is not a chap who goes in for secrets—not often, anyway.

He thought Kildare had been watching his form at practice, and had shown more judgment than Tom Merry. It was just the sort of thing Grundy would think. But he wasn't thinking it when he came back.

There was a terrific scowl on his face.

"Is it centre, old scout?" asked Gunn.

"If you want a thick ear, William Gunn—"

"Thanks, but it's war-time, and I'm off all luxuries," said Gunn, in a hurry.

It was spoof, of course. We thought it wisest to say no more. But a few minutes later Kangaroo looked in. Now, it's a queer thing, but both Gunn and I had thought that note seemed much more like Noble's fist than Kildare's. It was the sort of thing that Grundy never did think of—till too late.

"I say, Grundy—"

"Gerrout!" hooted Grundy.

And Kangaroo went, as if he had found out all he wanted to know.

Two minutes later Mellish of the Fourth stuck his ugly head in.

"Railton wants you, Grundy," he said.

"Whaffor?" growled Grundy, suspicious this time.

"Oh, I fancy he's going to ask you to take on a job as prefect," said Mellish, grinning.

"Tell Railton he can go and eat coke!" roared Grundy.

Mellish went and delivered the message—as beastly mean a trick as I ever heard of.

It was a good thing it was Railton, though. He is never unreasonable, and he understands old Grundy better than Grundy thinks. If it had been Ratcliff of the New House—oh, crumbs!

Even as it was, Grundy didn't exactly enjoy it.