THE ST. JIM'S COMPETITION SYNDICATE!

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

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A PERILOUS CHASE!

A MAGNIFICENT, NEW, LONG, COMPLETE SCHOOL STORY OF TOM MERRY & CO. AT ST. JIM'S.

THE ST. JIM'S COMPETITION SYNDICATE!

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.
Stony!

MANNERS produced a penny and three halfpennies.

"You're welcome, old scout!" he said, with a grin.

Manners had just come in with his camera, and had immediately been hailed by Tom Merry, the captain of the Shell, with a request for a loan.

"My hat, if every blessed fellow in the place don't seem to be broke to the wide!" said Tom Merry desperately.

"Monty is, I know," said Manners. "I wanted some new films—twopence-half-penny don't go a long way when buying films—but he hadn't a sou. Tried Talbot?"

"Yes. Same there. Blake's penniless. Dig's ditto, and Herries is on the rocks. Gussy—who can usually flash fivers about—is stony."

"Figgins & Co.?"

"Same thing."

"My hat! It's a bit thick everybody going stony at once," said Manners thoughtfully.

"And it doesn't look exactly healthy for the rest of the term," Tom remarked, with a rueful face.

"I sha'n't get any for weeks. We're beginning to realise that there's a war on, Tommy."

"I may get half-a-sov. in a fortnight or so. Nothing before that."

"Well, half-a-quidlet's not to be sneezed at in these hard times. But a fortnight! Oh, crumbs, we may all be dead! What have we got that we can sell?"

"Nobody to buy, or else there's that old camera of yours——"

"You'll only sell that over my dead body!" snorted Manners wrathfully.

A mild tap sounded at the study door, and a milder voice inquired:

"May I come in, Tom Merry?"

"You may, Skimmy."

A studious and weedy youth with a bumpy brow entered. Behind him showed the smiling face of Monty Lowther.

"I regret extremely to trouble you, Merry——"

"No trouble, old ass!"

"But it is a sad fact that my latest and greatest invention, which is designed to put a summary end to the submarine menace——"

"By the simple process of putting salt on their periscopes directly observed——"

"Don't say capital, Skimmy! This is a serious matter."

"It is, Skimmy, old hoss! Fatty Wynn has taken in another tuck in his waistband to-day. If it lasts much longer you'll have him raiding your wardrobe."

"My invention is completely hung up for want of——"

"Don't say capital, Skimmy! This is the wrong shop for that!"

"And don't say interest, Skimmy, because we don't feet any," added Lowther.

"You have guessed it at once, Merry—a fact which reflects credit upon your intelligence. Is it not sad to think that an epoch-making——"

"They're all that, old chump, and they're all non-starters, every blessed one of them!" said Manners.

"N.G., N.G., Skimmy, old son. What you want is a loan."

"And what we want is to be alone—see, Skimmy?"

"Shurrup, Monty! Skimmy's above your brand of humour."

"Was Lowther being funny?" asked Skimmy. "Dear me! I never in the least realised it. Then you are really unable——"

"We are stony, Skimmy—stony as Stratford!"

"What a very curious thing it is that everybody appears to be in a condition of poverty at the present moment! Everyone to whom one can go without loss of self-respect, that is. Persons like Racke——"

"Even if you could make up your mind to part with your self-respect, old chap, Racke wouldn't part with his money."

"I really do not know what to suggest. The problem——"

"Don't suggest anything. Buzz off!" said Manners.

"If only you could think of something that would put a little tin in our pockets, we'd manage somehow to forget your troubles," Tom added.

"Oh, easily!" agreed Manners.

"Rejoice in them, in fact," added Lowther.

"Allow me to remark, Lowther, that that speech was scarcely a friendly one," said the philosopher, with dignity.

"It wasn't meant to be, Skimmy. I don't feel in charity with anyone. Go and eat coke, Skimmy, there's a good little ass! We've got our own worries."

"What's that in your pocket, Skimmy?" asked Manners.

"I do not know. Oh, yes, I remember now. Some foolish person employed by the newsagent at Rylcombe left this instead of my 'New and Bright Thoughts.'"

"You don't want it, then?"

"I certainly do not, Manners. I cannot afford to waste my valuable time in reading ephemeral weekly publications intended to appeal to the unthinking mob."

Manners collared the paper out of Skimpole's pocket. It was the "Red Weekly."

"I'll bag it," said Manners. "At another time I shouldn't want the rag; but when you have only twopence-half-penny, anything for nothing is something, even if it ain't much."

"You are entirely welcome, Manners," said Skimpole sedately.

He departed, with his hand to his massive brow.

"What's worrying me, is where we are going to have tea," said Lowther. "Even the caddy's empty. We are in no danger of running over the bread ration. The biscuit-tin would make a substitute for a drum; but the thought of the drum's hollowness gets home on one, suggesting painful reflections. Cake! Shall we ever see cake again?"

"Let's trot along and see if Blake & Co. are any better off," said Tom.

They went. Manners taking the "Red Weekly" with him.

Preparations for tea had been made in No. 6 of the Fourth Form studies. But it was a frugal tea—even more frugal than war economy made necessary.

There was a little butter. A few spoonfuls of raspberry jam lurked coyly in the furthest recesses of a large pot. But there was not butter for seven, and there was not jam enough even for the four chums of No. 6—Jack Blake, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, George Herries, and Robert Arthur Digby.

"Hallo, hallo, fellows!" said Blake. "We were thinking about dropping in on you to tea."

"This being—well, not exactly a land flowing with milk and honey," added Dig, with a wry grin.

Lowther produced from his pocket a small parcel. He unwrapped its contents, which had been most carefully packed in at least six sheets of newspaper.

"Behold!" he said dramatically.

A very small slice of bread was revealed.

"Yesterday's savings," he said solemnly. "I suppose there can hardly be much harm in our eating it now. It won't be very fresh the year after next, even if things have got worse then."

"You'll want a lot of help with that little lot," grinned Herries.

"We've got some bread, anyway," Blake said. "Look here, I'll go and borrow a couple of tins of sardines from No. 9. We'll make out somehow."

"Let's see what we can scrape together for the joint benefit first," said Manners.

And he planked down his twopence-halfpenny.

Lowther, with a flourish, added one penny.

Tom produced two buttons and a shilling.

"Corn in Egypt!" cried Digby.

"Chaff, I'm afraid, Dig," Lowther said sadly. "I know that boblet. Tommy's had it all this term—been waiting for a blind man to come along and give him change."

Blake fumbled, and handed out fourpence.

Herries sighed, and said:

"I pass!"

Digby found sixpence, and was hailed as a benefactor to the human race.

"Who says we're stony?" demanded Lowther. "One-and-three-ha'pence subscribed, and Gussy still to weigh in!"

"Ill, Gustavus?" asked Tom.

For all this time Arthur Augustus, who was certainly not remarkable for his taciturnity as a rule, had not spoken one single, solitary word.

He was seated in the study's one arm-chair, and was attentively engaged upon a paper with a red cover.

Blake elevated a rubber-soled foot, and gave him a poke in the back with it.

"Weally, Blake! I considah that you gwow moah gwossly wude with evewy day that passes ovah youah head! Be

good enough to let me alone, pway! My mind is fully occupied——"

"That's more than another organ of my anatomy is, Gustavus. But I'm hoping."

"It is a fund for the relief of distressed collegians of St. James' School, Gussy," said Lowther blandly. "The list now totals one bob and some odd halfpence. A tanner will help to save us all from being Tanners——"

"Eh?" said Digby.

"Dr. Tanner, Digby, was a celebrated fasting-man, unless my memory is at fault. Were he now alive——"

"He wouldn't be dead," interjected Herries. "But we shall be if we are kept starving much longer."

"I was about to say that he would be regarded as a benefactor to the nation—might even go down to posterity as the man who won the war by his noble conduct in doing without grub."

"Well, I'm not out for winning the war that way—not just yet," said Blake. "Gustavus, you image, have you any oof—cash—current coin of the realm—tin!"

"I've only half-a-cwown, Blake, an' I weally need that, or I should be delighted, I am suah! I had lent it to Reilly, but he wepaid me a few minutes ago."

"Half-a-crown! Oh, crumbs! Hand over at once!"

"Manna in the desert! Balm in Gilead!" said Lowther.

"A slice of cake each and three tins of sardines among us," Herries said. "'Tain't a giddy feast; but 'tain't starvation, which is something."

"But weally, deah boys——"

"Can't be did, Gustavus," said Blake kindly but firmly. "We'd let you keep that half-dollar all serene if we didn't need it so badly."

"But, weally, Blake, if you knew the gweat idea which has just entahed my head—an' the half-cwown's absolutely necessawy——"

"I'd rather have a chunk of cake and half a dozen sardines in the vacuum under my waistcoat than all the ideas that ever got into the vacuum you call your head, old ass!"

Arthur Augustus gave a heavy sigh, put his right thumb and forefinger into his waistcoat-pocket, and extracted half-a-crown. He looked at it hard, sighed again, and laid it upon the table.

Digby collared it, and bolted.

CHAPTER 2.
Wealth in Store!

"HALLO, Gussy! Have you got a copy of this rag, too?" asked Manners.

He looked from the paper taken from Skimpole to that which Arthur Augustus held.

"I do not considah it altogethah a wag, Mannahs. Indeed, it stwuck me as a vewy nice papah—for those people who like that sort of papah, you know. What I was weally intewested in was the pwize competition page."

"Prize competitions in war-time!" said Tom. "Haven't they chucked all that sort of thing?"

"It would appeah not, Tom Mewwy. Heah is a fellow who womped home with a hundwed of the best for four words."

Manners was turning over the pages of his copy in sudden interest. Just then George Gore of the Shell put his head in at the door.

"Thought I might find you here," he said. "I say, Manners, you've got my paper. I shall have to trouble you to hand over."

"Rats! Skimmy gave me this," replied Manners.

"How long ago?"

"About ten minutes."

"Well, he gave it to me an hour ago."

This was not strictly correct. Gore had seen the journal lying on the table in the study which he and Talbot and Skimmy shared, and had annexed it. But he had forgotten to stow it away, and Skimmy must have taken it up again, and put it in his pocket.

"Do you want it particularly?" asked Manners.

Tom was looking over one of his shoulders, and Monty Lowther over the other. The interest of all three had been aroused by what D'Arcy had said, and they did not want to part with the paper.

"It's the 'Red Weekly' you want, Gore, isn't it?" asked Lowther.

"Yes, ass!"

"Hand it over," said Gore, with some impatience.

"Look in again for it to-morrow, Gore," suggested Tom.

"Oh, that be hanged! I'm going to think out something to-night."

"With——"

"With my brains, of course, you silly chump!"

"Congrats, Gore!"

"What about, ass?"

"On your discovery."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Gore's face was very flushed and angry as he turned upon the grinning chums.

"Rats! I haven't discovered anything!" he snapped.

"Who was it, then?" asked Lowther blandly.

The Lost Lambs.
(See Chapter 6.)

"Right-ho! You shall have it when complete."

"Complete? What do you mean, you burbler?"

"When it's read, of course. But we haven't read it yet, so it's not yet the read weekly. See?"

"I see a shrieking ass," replied Gore roughly. "Hand over, do!"

"What do you want it for?" asked Manners.

"If you must know, I intend to go in for the giddy competition. I reckon I can do something as good as the johnny who walked off with the first prize."

"So do I," said Tom. "Here's the phrase he used—'Pigs might fly.' And he got a hundred quid for writing 'Pork's rising clearly indicated.' Nothing much in that."

"I don't know," said Lowther judicially. "I've seen worse things."

"In the comic column of the 'Weekly?'—so have I," said Herries. "I'm not sure that I have anywhere else, though."

"Here's Dig," said Blake, who was not yet interested. "Clear out, Gore, and take your mouldy old paper with you."

"Who was it what, you burbling, potty blatherskite?"

"Discovered your brains, of course."

"Oh, go to Halifax! You ought to be jolly well suppressed! It ain't decent to be talking such piffle in war-time. Are you going to hand over that paper or not, Manners?"

"Not!" replied Manners promptly.

"Not manners!" sighed Lowther.

"I suppose I can get another copy," said Gore sulkily. "You chaps needn't think you're going to keep me out of the competition by freezing on to that."

"Stay and have some tea, Gore?" asked Blake, as the Shell fellow turned to go.

"No, I won't!"

"Not manners!" sighed Lowther again.

Gore departed in high dudgeon.

The seven sat down to tea.

"It's worth considering," said Tom, between whom and Manners the paper lay, open at the competition page.

"Bwavo, Tom Mewwy!" said Gussy. "That is the vewy idea which occuwwed to me."

"See any sign of softening of the brain in me, you fellows?" asked Tom.

"Not more than usual," replied Blake.

"Which is enough, goodness knows!" added Herries.

"What are you talkin' about, Tom Mewwy?"

"It sounds a bit dangerous to be struck by the same idea as you, Gustavus!"

"Everyone will be sorry when you are taken off altogether, Tommy," remarked Lowther. "We shall miss you both. But they say chaps are made no end comfortable in those places. Lots of cricket and no classes. Food rations—well, I don't know!"

"What places?" asked Arthur Augustus innocently, while Tom grinned.

"Well—er—let's speak of them as institutions for cherishing the mentally deficient and——"

"Oh, don't wot, Lowthah, especially at a time when I particularly wanted to consult you about a vewy important affaiah!"

"A distinct sign of intelligence. Gustavus wants to consult me!"

"Yaas. This kind of thing should be in your line, as you are a chap who can make wotten puns an' jokes an' all such wubbish!"

"He's right, Monty. It's just your line. You could do something as good—or as bad—as this 'Pigs might fly' thing," said Tom.

"So could anyone," growled Manners.

"And what's the use of doing it? That's what I want to know," said Blake.

"Only to romp off with a hundred bright and beautiful quids," replied Manners drily.

"Or one hundred slips of paper illustrated by a St. George with a chest measurement that any recruiting sergeant would have sneered at in the early days of the war, putting it across a dragon that looks as dangerous as a domestic hen," amended Lowther.

"I don't mind the picture on it—if it was a heap worse than it is."

"It couldn't be, Blake!"

"Oh, yes, it could. I could draw a horse worse myself—without trying hard, either. And I'm not going to turn up my nose at a pound-note because they were hard up for artists. Let's look further into this bizney. Give me a pencil and a scrap of paper, somebody!"

"Wanting monish, Blake grows Hunnish," murmured Lowther.

"Eh?"

"Scrap of paper. See?"

"Blessed if I do! You'd talk a donkey's hind-leg off, chump!"

Lowther looked under the table.

"What are you after?" inquired Digby.

"Investigating the probability of Blake's needing a wooden leg very shortly, Dig."

"Oh, chuck it, Monty!" said Tom, laughing. "You really are the very chap for this job, if you'd only wade in at it. And I don't see why we shouldn't have a chance."

Lowther cast a glance over the table. A very few minutes had been enough for something like a complete clearance.

"As ten's over—though I can't say I've finished tea in the strict sense—I don't mind if I help you kids in your infantile games," he answered.

Monty Lowther was the last but one of the seven to succumb to the fascination of "Jestlets" and the lure of wealth.

Digby was the last. He had missed some of the early talk through his errand to get provender.

But Lowther and Digby were as keen as anyone when once they had started.

Herries caused surprise by weighing in with the first attempt.

"'Pigs might fly'—when porpoises propose," he said in triumph. "How's that, umpire?"

"Leg before!" said Tom Merry. "There's no 'w' in 'Pigs might fly,' and you have to begin your sentence with some letter in the example."

"You never said so, ass! Here, Gustavus, hand over that paper! I want to read the giddy rules."

"I will wead them to you, Hewwies."

"Bet you, you won't! That's too far round. Hand over, I say!"

"Oh, dwopit, Hewwies! You will teah the papah! There—now you have done it, and wight acwoss the coupon, too!"

"What's the odds, chump? You can get another for a penny."

"But at the pwesent moment, Hewwies, no one here has a penny!"

"'Pigs might fly'—You are no prophet," said Blake suddenly.

"Tosh!" said Lowther suddenly.

"Piffle!" agreed Manners.

"Oh, I don't know," said Tom. "It really ain't a heap worse than the thing that got the prize, you know. But it wouldn't stand a chance."

"Why not?" demanded Blake.

"Because they set different phrases every week, old chap; and that one must have been sent weeks ago."

There was a howl of indignation.

"Letting us waste our time like that!" said Digby, whose attempt had got as far as setting down on paper "Pigs might fly," and putting a capital P under it.

But now everyone was as keen as could be. Even at an ordinary time a hundred pounds was not a sum to be despised—as some scores of thousands of readers of "The Red Weekly," no doubt realised just as fully as the seven.

And at a time like this, when all were stony, the prospect of winning such a prize as that was very alluring indeed.

CHAPTER 3.
More Competitors.

"YOU have to send money with your shot, you know," remarked Tom.

"My aunt! Hanged if I didn't think there was some beastly catch about it somewhere!" snorted Digby.

"Weally, Dig, suahly you have heard before this of the sixpenny postal order bizney?"

"I s'pose I had; but I'd forgotten."

"That's what I wanted my half-cwown for," said Gussy. "But you fellows were so howwibly gweedy——"

"Don't tell me we've been and gone and eaten a hundred pounds, Gustavus!" chipped in Lowther. "For I must say, if that's the case, I certainly have not had value for the money."

"But they don't charge half-a-crown for a shot—it's sixpence for two," said Manners.

"To send in a numbah of entwies, howevah, would appweciably incwease our chance of pwize, deah boys," Arthur Augustus said thoughtfully.

"Kangaroo offered me a bob for my football pump. That will have to go," said Blake.

"And there's Manners' camera," added Tom cheerily.

"Oh, is there?" snorted Manners.

"But when it's for the common good——"

"'Common good be blessed! It's my camera."

"Oh, we ought to be able to raise five bob somehow," said Blake hopefully. "That will pay for twenty shots. Let's form a syndicate!"

"A whicher?" asked Digby.

"A syndicate, chump! Don't you understand plain English?"

"I don't call that plain English. What's a giddy syndicate, anyway?"

"It's a kind of association," explained Tom. "Each member puts in so much for expenses, and they divvy up profits."

"The only drawback to the scheme in this case being that no one has anything to put in," said Lowther. "Except for that, it's quite all right."

"It sounds all serene," said Dig. "Each chap hands over his whack and does his best, and he gets his share of the plunder even if it ain't his shot that wins the prize—eh?"

"That's the notion," said Tom.

"Well, I'm on. I haven't any tin just now——"

"Or any brains at any time," Lowther murmured blandly.

"Rats! I'm on. The only thing we've got to do is to raise the wind somehow."

"There is also the small matter of thinking out a winning phrase," Lowther reminded the eager Fourth-Former.

"If you can't do that, what blessed good are you?"

"Oh, put it on to me, do!"

"Of course. You're always telling us you're funny. Blessed if I can see it, except about the face! But you ought to be just the chap for this sort of tosh!"

"Look here," said Blake, "are we going to keep this thing to ourselves or let other chaps come into it?"

"Can't keep other chaps out," said Manners. "Any ass with a tanner can enter. And we haven't even got a tanner!"

"Though most of us make up for it by being strong on the other qualification," Lowther remarked.

"What qualification, ass?"

"Precisely that, Dig."

"We must widen the syndicate sufficiently to include someone who can finance us," said Tom.

"Yaas, wathah! If onlay I still had that half-cwown——"

"Rats! We'll find the cash ourselves somehow," said Blake. "No harm in asking one or two more to join, though. There's old Talbot—and there's Skimmy. Might let that old chump in."

Clive, of the Fourth, looked in.

"Any of you chaps got a rag called 'The Red Weekly'?" he inquired.

"Why?" asked Manners.

"Oh, nothing much. Somebody says there's a competition of sorts in it, and Levison and I thought we might have a shot."

"Not Cardew?"

"Crumbs, no! He says it's too big a fag. Besides, he always has all the chink he needs. Well, as you haven't got the paper——"

"But, as a matter of fact, we have, deah boy," said Gussy.

"Oh!"

"An' we are awwangin' a syndicate to send in entwies."

"Good egg!" said Sidney Clive heartily.

"You and Levison care to join?" Tom asked.

"Like a shot if you'll have us! Cardew not barred, I suppose?"

"Oh, no. But I judged from what you said he wasn't on."

"I don't think he will be, but I'd rather not have him feeling he is kept out."

"Of course," said Tom. "Cardew's as welcome as the flowers in May."

"Right-ho! I'll go and ask the bounders."

Hardly had Clive disappeared when there came an impatient tap at the door.

"Come in!" yelled Blake.

The great George Alfred Grundy entered.

"I've come to borrow a paper called 'The Red Rag,' or something like that," he said. "Somebody told me that you chaps had a copy of it."

"Somebody's error," replied Lowther. "We haven't."

"Why, what's this?" roared Grundy, snatching up the copy which lay at the elbow of Manners.

"Mine," returned Manners, gripping it.

"And not the 'Red Rag.' Therefore, no excuse for your behaving like a bull, Grundy."

"Oh, cheese that! I never did see a pottier ass than you are, Lowther!"

"You look as if your hair had never been brushed," answered Lowther sweetly.

"What do you want the paper for, Grundy?" asked Tom Merry.

"There's some sort of competition in it, with a first prize of a hundred quid. I could do with that. Mind you, I'm not hard up. 'Tain't that."

"Well, we are, and we don't mind owning it," said Digby.

"You chaps!" snorted Grundy. "Oh, I say, that's too rich! You don't suppose you're going to lift that prize, do you?"

"Don't be discouraging, Grundy," said Tom, with assumed humility. "There's no harm in our having a try, I suppose."

"No harm—oh, no—I shouldn't say there's any harm in it. Only it seems rather a waste of time. Because you naturally won't stand the ghost of a chance against me."

The seven glared at Grundy. But their glares did not affect him at all.

It really did not seem to the great George Alfred that it would be anything but foolish waste of time for anyone present to compete against him. He felt rather sorry for them and the other competitors, too. But he had just heard about the competition, and the notion of winning a hundred pounds by a few minutes' work had fired his mind; and it was really too much to expect him to stand out for the benefit of others, he considered.

"Are Wilkins and Gunn any good at this sort of thing?" inquired Lowther.

"Eh? I don't know. How should I? I don't even know what it is, except that it's some sort of a competition with a prize of a hundred quid. But it don't matter about Gunn and Wilky, anyway. They don't supply the brains in my study."

"Not? Then who does?" said Lowther.

"You thumping ass! I do, of course! Are you going to let me have that paper, Manners?"

"I am not, Grundy. We happen to want it."

"Oh, well"—Grundy was not really a boor, though his overbearing nature sometimes made him appear so—"I suppose it's yours, and I can't collar it if you don't choose to let me have it."

"Right on the wicket!" said Manners.

"But I consider you might be more obliging, and I really can't see what chance you think you will have against me. I'm not bragging; there's nothing I despise more. But when I put my mind to a thing——"

"Care to join a syndicate to enter for the competition, Grundy?" asked Jack Blake, winking at his chums.

"A—a what?"

"Syndicate. Sharing principles. Each contributes equally to expenses; each does his best at the job; best efforts sent up; prize, or prizes—if any—divided."

Grundy did not answer at once. It took some time for the great George Alfred to absorb anything in the way of a new idea.

"Then it's like this," he said at length. "I come in with you fellows and win the prize, and we go shares in it?"

"Certainly. And if one of us wins——"

"But that ain't what I'm thinking about. That ain't a bit likely. I should be very sorry to accuse you of trying to wangle a chap out of his chance, Blake, but your idea seems to me uncommonly like that."

"Oh, bump him!" yelled Manners. "That's the only thing to knock a little sense into his wooden noddle."

"I should like to see—— Yarooh! Stoppit! Oh, I'll——"

Grundy went out of Study No. 6 in the grasp of the seven. Grundy was sat down with considerable force on the floor of the passage. The process was repeated six or seven times, and the bumping was over.

"You silly bounders; You—you——"

"My dear chap, you asked for it," said Lowther.

"Asked for it be hanged! I did nothing of the sort! And I'm not going to put up with it, so that's straight!"

"What's the row, Grundy?" asked Talbot, coming along at this moment.

Levison and Clive also appeared.

"Oh, it's nothing," laughed Tom. "Merely Grundy after bumping. One of his phases. He's always just before or just after bumping, you know. And he never seems to get tired of the amusement."

Grundy stalked off, snorting with rage.

"You're wanted, Talbot," said Tom. "Come along in!"

"Are you fellows on the competition dodge, too?" inquired Talbot.

"Anybody else, then?"

"Besides Grundy?" grinned Lowther.

"Didn't know Grundy had succumbed. Of course, it's a dead cert for him—according to Grundy. But Gore's crazy about it, and lots of other chaps are taking it up, I hear. The thing's been running for months—years, for all I know; but I suppose no one here thought of it till now."

"Has Skimmy caught the epidemic?" Lowther asked.

"I think he's the only one who hasn't—at least, in the two Forms."

"Well, go and infect him. We're forming a syndicate to compete, and we want you and him in," said Tom.

CHAPTER 4.
Funds Needed!

ELEVEN juniors sat round the table in Study No. 6 in the Fourth Form passage. There were the four who shared the study, the Terrible Three, Talbot, Skimpole, Clive, and Levison major.

"Cardew wouldn't come in, then?" said Blake.

"No. Too much fag for him," answered Levison.

"Rather a pity," said Herries. "He could have financed us."

Levison grinned.

"You chaps broke to the wide, too?" he asked.

"We are. But we'll raise the chink somehow. It isn't much," Tom said.

"I'm expecting a remittance from home," said Clive. "If it comes that will be all right. But I can't be too sure. The mails have been irregular for a long time, and some beastly U-boat may have sunk my cash."

"It's rummy if we have to wait for a pound or two from South Africa—which may be at the bottom of the sea for all we know—while the war is costing something like seven millions a day," remarked Levison.

"Tain't our seven millions," said Digby.

"No, but there's plenty in the country, Cardew——"

"We can't ask Cardew, Levison. If he would have come in it would have been different. And, of course, there's nothing against you fellows borrowing for your shares. But it would hardly be the thing for us to."

"You're right, Tommy. Too much like sponging," said Manners.

Skimpole lifted his bumpy brow.

"I understand," he said, "that you have decided upon a plan for the obtaining of much-needed cash, my dear fellows, and that you desire me to undertake——"

"Wats! We do not desiah you to undahtake anything, Skimmy!"

It was the first time Arthur Augustus had spoken for quite a quarter of an hour. That was a long spell of silence for him. He had been busy with paper and pencil all the time; and the mental exertion appeared to have rather spoiled his temper, for it was unlike him to speak to the harmless Skimmy in the manner he had spoken.

Skimmy looked hard at D'Arcy—not in resentment, but in mild surprise.

"What's biting you, Gustavus?" asked Blake.

"The posish is this, Blake. I have alweady evolved quite a numbah of Jestlets all considewably superwiah to the effort which cawwied off the pwize this week. There is no necessity whatevah for anyone to twouble his head about the entwies. It is the entwance fees which pwesent difficulty."

"What a genius you are, Gussy!" said Levison admiringly. "Let's have a look at your Jestlets, will you?"

"I fear I do not compwehend, D'Arcy," Skimpole said, passing his thin hand over his bumpy brow. "Jestlets! The term is one unknown to me. Financial stringency is, I regret to say, by no means so unfamiliar. But I am not sure that I can suggest any way of overcoming——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Levison, Clive, and Digby had put their heads together over the brainy efforts of Arthur Augustus. Now all three were cackling. Gussy smiled upon them approvingly. He felt sure that they were struck with the brilliant humour of his Jestlets.

"Do you like them, deah boys?" he asked amiably.

Levison wiped tears from his eyes.

"Oh, no end, old scout!" he said. "But I didn't know it was the booby prize we were after."

"The—er——"

"Weally, Levison, I shall form a vewy low opinion of youah intelligence. What are you sniggering at, Digbay? Clive, I twust that—— Oh, weally, this is too much to be borne with patience! I shall have to administah a fwightful thwashin' to somebody——"

"Then it ought to be somebody who hasn't read your Jestlets," cut in Levison. "It wouldn't be playing the game to pile in on a fellow while he's weak with—— Ha, ha, ha! Read the second one out, Clive. It's the absolute giddy limit for—— Where are you going, Gussy"

"I uttahly wefuse to wemain heah an' have my wit made the subject of wibald jokes!" panted the Hon. Arthur Augustus.

"Oh, sit down, old ass!" said Blake. "I've got a wheeze for raising the wind."

Tom dragged Gussy back into his seat, and all eyes—even those of the indignant swell and the dreamy Skimpole—were turned upon Jack Blake.

"We must pop something," said Blake.

"Oh, weally, Blake——"

"It's an idea," said Levison. "I see no harm in it, for one. But what?"

"There's Manners' camera," said Lowther.

"There's your head!" snapped Manners.

"Certainly there is. And if a large sum were needed—— But where would the syndicate be without it? No; I don't think that will do. And certainly no other head here would be likely to fetch enough—unless we had the luck to find an uncle whose own was in the state commonly designated as potty," Lowther said, looking around him critically.

"I'm not keen on the notion," remarked Clive.

More than one of the rest felt the same. But they were all keen on the competition.

"I could not dweam of lendin' my countenance——"

"Wouldn't be any good if you did dream of it, Gussy," said Dig. "There ain't a pawnbroker dotty enough to advance anything on that."

"Wats! You know vewy well——"

"Look here, if somebody don't muzzle Gustavus, we shall never get anything settled!" said Blake. "The pawning is my idea, and I'm ready to put it through if necessary—after we've settled what's to be popped. Can't say I'm keen on the job."

"The fairest way would be to draw lots," said Levison. "Two chaps to go over to Wayland together and put the thing through. As for what is to go up the spout—well, after all, any of us can find something worth five bob or so, I suppose, and that ought to be enough to give us a chance."

"I weally think that we should waise a biggah amount an' make a biggah entwy," said Gussy. "I am pwepared to sacwifice my watch for so good a purpose, though I do not like the ideah of its bein' in the hands of a pawnbwokah."

"That's all right. They hang them up," said Levison.

"I have no doubt whatevah that youah acquaintance with the mannahs an' customs of pawnbwokahs, Levison, is gweatah——"

"I haven't, either," Levison said coolly. "So we won't quarrel about that."

"Pewwaps you would wathah like to do the poppin' yourself?"

"Hanged if I mind much!"

"No; we'll draw lots," said Blake decidedly. "Fairest way—eh, Tom?"

Tom Merry nodded.

"Yes; because there would be a row if it was found out. But if it is we must all take a share of the blame."

"Well, let's settle who the giddy victims are to be!" Herries said.

Blake slit a half-sheet of paper into scraps, and marked two of the eleven with a black cross each.

"Now, Talbot, will you shake them up?" he said.

Talbot dropped the scraps into a straw hat without a glance at them, and gave the hat a twirl or two.

"Anybody else like to shake it?" he asked.

It appeared that everyone else wanted to shake it. As Levison remarked, it was Gussy's hat, and if the brim gave way he was certain to have half a dozen more straws in reserve. While to omit giving it a shake might throw out one's own luck—a far more important matter than a hat belonging to Gussy.

Then Talbot dipped. He announced, smiling, that he had not drawn a prize. Tom Merry also drew a blank.

"I'm not out of it!" cried Blake. "Hurrah!"

Lowther drew, and shook his head sadly. Nearly all of them thought one of the cross-marked slips had fallen to him. But it was not so.

"I'm sorry to say," he remarked, "that the best chance I've had of doing a truly heroic deed has gone west. Mine's a blank."

"So is mine," said Clive.

And Digby's was the same. And so was it with Manners.

There now remained only four to draw—Herries, Skimpole, D'Arcy, and Levison.

Herries drew a blank—and a sigh of relief.

Skimmy's turn was next.

"Dear me," he said, looking at the paper in his hand. "I did not anticipate this. I really did not consider——"

"Blow your considering!" said Digby. "Don't spout now," said Lowther. "Keep that for the visit to Wayland. You will have to do it then."

The joke, such as it was, was lost upon Skimmy. But he stopped his protest. He was in the syndicate, for better or for worse, and, after all, Skimmy had his own notions of playing the game.

Only Levison and Arthur Augustus were now left. To one of them must fall the honour—and responsibility—of conducting Skimmy to Wayland, and taking him into the pawnbroker's. For that was what it would amount to.

"Now then, Gussy!"

"Aftah you, Levison," said Arthur Augustus politely.

Levison took one of the two scraps left, and at sight of it his jaw seemed to fall.

"Oh, see here, you chaps!" he said. "This is too beastly thick for anything! Which of you would care to go to Wayland on a job like this with an absurd ass like Skimmy? I'm not going to do it, that's straight!"

They stared at him. Clive could hardly believe his ears.

"Why, you offered to go alone!" said Blake, with honest indignation.

"I dare say. But I've changed my mind. I'm not going—either alone, or with Skimmy!"

"Bai Jove, Levison, I am surpwised at you—weally I am! We are bound in honah to abide by the issue of the dwaw!"

"Do you mean to say that you'd be satisfied to toddle into Wayland with potty old Skimmy to pop something?"

Levison's eyes had a peculiar gleam in them as he asked that.

"Most assuahedly! Skimmay is one of the syndicate. I should weally be delighted, Levison!"

"Good egg!" said Levison, throwing a blank slip on the table. "For you've got to go, old scout!"

"You spoofer!" laughed Tom Merry. "You took us all in!"

"I—I——"

"No need to draw, Gustavus," Digby said. "There's only one ticket left, so you're a cert for the prize!"

"And what a happy dispensation it is that the lot should have fallen to one who will be delighted to go with Skimmy!" said Lowther blandly.

Arthur Augustus took out the remaining slip, looked at the fatal cross with sorrow, at Skimpole with hopelessness, and at Levison with anger.

But he rose to the occasion, as might have been expected.

"Skimmay, deah boy," he said, "you an' I must make our awwangements for a visit to Wayland. Pewwaps you will not mind submitting yourself to my fwiendly inspection aftah you have dwessed. You are not always so——"

"Oh, that's dead off!" said Blake.

"Rather! You don't have to look like dukes when you go to see uncle," said Dig.

"Pewwhaps you are wight, aftah all, Digbay," said the swell of St. Jim's. "But as I do not pwopose to do anything misbecomin' to a gentleman, it is weally as well that I should go dwessed as a gentleman."

CHAPTER 5.
The Wayland Expedition.

SKIMMY and Arthur Augustus were to go to Wayland on the Wednesday afternoon—a half-holiday. The syndicate had been formed on the Monday.

Between Monday and noon on Wednesday there had been something like a wholesale manufacture of Jestlets in the Shell and Fourth Forms of St. Jim's.

For almost every fellow in the two Forms had been bitten by the craze, and there were rumours that the Fifth and Sixth were also trying their lordly luck, while it was a fact patent to all that copies of the "Red Weekly" were to be seen among the fag Forms in even greater number than even such popular papers as the "Boys' Friend" had ever been seen there before.

Grundy & Co. were going strong. It is true that, so, far, every effort evolved by the great George Alfred had been open to the technical objection of not complying to the rules, besides being quite hopeless from any other point of view. It may have been true that, as the tale went in the Shell, the hair of Wilkins was growing thin from continuous scratching of his puzzled head, and that Gunn had contracted a permanent wrinkle between the eyes. But, nevertheless, Grundy & Co. were going strong, and in the mind of the great leader of Study No. 9 on the Shell passage, there was no doubt whatever as to where that hundred pounds would eventually find a resting-place.

Figgins & Co. were also at it. So were Redfern & Co. Julian and his chums had embarked upon the quest of the hundred. Noble and Dane and Glynn had succumbed, after holding out until classes were over on Tuesday. Tompkins was being called several kinds of asses by Mulvaney minor as they twain worked together. Lorne and Jones minor were at it. Baggy Trimble and Mellish sat together with blank faces and inky fingers, trying to work out a winning Jestlet. Gore and Gibbons, Boulton and Smith minor, all were at work. Even Racke and Crooke had fallen victims, rather from greed than need.

There were just a few exceptions. Cardew scoffed at the whole business. Contarini refused to attempt to understand it. Clampe had been caught out in some little escapade, and had been endowed with such a whack of lines as left him no leisure time to jest in. And Scrope, having attended a Green Man sitting with Racke and Crooke, was not feeling like brain work.

Nowhere had the manufacture of Jestlets been more copious than in the syndicate, however.

The mighty brain of Arthur Augustus had turned out twenty-seven on its own account.

No one else had been quite as prolific as that. Lowther came next, with twenty-one—some of them quite good. Digby brought up the rear with two. He said they were rippers, and they were certainly better than some of D'Arcy's.

A weeding-out committee was appointed. It consisted of Tom Merry, Talbot, Blake, and Levison—one from each study represented in the syndicate.

"Some of 'em are really pretty good," said Tom, when the four had finished their work, and had sorted out a couple of dozen attempts. "But I can't quite see any of them waltzing off with a hundred quid."

"Oh, I don't know!" replied Talbot. "I'm not banking on it. A good deal smaller prize would satisfy me. But we're not competing against great geniuses, you know, Tom, and fellows have scored with stiff not a bit better than this."

The sale of Blake's footer-pump realised enough to pay for two tickets to Wayland.

After dinner on Wednesday D'Arcy and Skimpole set out for the station together. Arthur Augustus had in his pocket the watch which was to be hypothecated, and Skimmy looked less untidy than usual, having meekly submitted to being groomed by his fellow-adventurer.

"But I don't half like it," said Tom to Talbot. "And old Blake don't, either, though he suggested the dodge."

"Rather a pity the lots should have fallen to those two," answered Talbot thoughtfully. "There's no getting away from the fact—that they couldn't have fallen worse."

"Look here, old scout, are you game to trot over the Moor to Wayland, to be on hand in case those two Chinese images make a giddy bloomer of the whole bizney?"

"Oh, rather! Good notion, Tom!"

"Blake will come, too. I don't know about the rest."

Lowther would not, it seemed. He was writing something or other for publication somewhere or other if somebody or other would accept it, he said. Manners was taking his camera out for a walk. Levison and Clive had already gone off with Cardew. But Herries and Dig were on.

So, in flannels and blazers, the five cut across to the bridge which spanned the river near the woods, and once over that headed straight for Wayland.

There was a nice breeze, and the afternoon was not too hot for running part of the way. The train from Westwood to Wayland, which called at Rylcombe, must have been very late, too, for the five had nearly reached the level-crossing just outside Wayland when they heard its whistle.

They were near enough to see faces at the windows as it rolled past.

"Twig that old owl, Skimmy?" said Blake. "But, of course, he didn't see us. Kim on!"

Some little distance had still to be covered before the town was reached, and the five made for the High Street instead of for the station, which they could only have reached too late to meet the pair.

Wayland was busier than usual. A fair was in progress, and the High Street had lost its usual sleepy aspect, and was quite bustling and crowded.

"There they are!" cried Tom. "Look at them! Old Skimmy mooning along with all the brains he's got left at St. Jim's with his invention—Gustavus prancing nobly by his side, with his aristocratic head right up in the clouds. Silly asses, they're never even thought of putting on plain caps!"

For a moment or two they lost sight of the two adventurers in the crowd.

"Stop thief!" sang out someone.

"Oh, I've been wobbed!" sounded the voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Out of the crowd burst a man with a low, cunning face. He was running his hardest, and he had in his hand something that glittered in the sunlight.

"Stop him, you fellows! He's got Gussy's watch!" sang out Blake.

The pickpocket dodged under an archway and down a narrow court.

After him went the five and some half-score members of the crowd. The rest gave up the pursuit, and there was no policeman in sight.

At the end of the court was a low wall. The thief jumped this. The five took it at an easy leap, and gained upon him.

He was now in a kitchen garden. Across it he rushed, with the five pursuing. But the rest of his would-be captors fell away.

The thief was not a young man, but he could run.

"Hi, there! Stop! What are you doin' of tramplin' down my garden?" yelled an angry man in the rear. "Do you know as there's a war on, and we may all come to starvin' yet? Do you know——"

They lost the rest. They answered not at all. But each of them made up his mind that some way other than this must be found when they went back to the High Street!

The thief blundered through a hedge. He was blowing hard now.

They jumped the hedge. But when they were in the lane beyond they stopped and rubbed their eyes.

Their quarry had disappeared.

"What on earth——"

"Lemme alone! Wharrer doin'? I ain't done nothin' to you!"

"There he is! Round that corner!" gasped Herries.

"And somebody's collared him!" said Talbot.

Round the corner they rushed, to find the thief down on his back in the dust, with Levison and Clive kneeling on his chest, and Cardew gazing down upon them!

"Oh, yours?" said Cardew coolly. "I'm sure we apologise—eh, you fellows? But I thought I recognised D'Arcy's watch, an' this merchant was so doosid anxious not to be stopped that it seemed quite a useful notion to stop him."

It was Cardew who had spotted the watch, and he had bowled the thief over, though the five did not learn that until later. Then, in his usual cool, indifferent way, he had allowed his chums to do the rest.

"Lemme go!" whined the pickpocket. "Tain't no business of none of you, is it?"

And he began to struggle again.

"What are we going to do with the rotter?" asked Tom.

"Lemme go!" pleaded the thief. "Don't go for to be rough on a pore starvin' feller! Young gents like you 'ad oughter 'ave some pity. Look 'ere—make up a little fund among yer—ten bob'll do me—'and over, an' take the bloomin' watch! It's a good 'un—you can pop it for ten times ten bob—ah, an' more, dead easy!"

"Well, hanged if you haven't a nerve!" gasped Blake. "Why, that watch belongs to a chum of ours!"

"And the rotter has the cheek to ask us to be receivers!" said Clive.

"Stand him up, old chap, an' I'll boot him," Cardew said.

"He ought to be booted," agreed Herries.

"Let's see what he's got on him first," suggested Levison. "There may be other stolen things, and it wouldn't be the thing to let him get off with them!"

But there was nothing else upon the thief. On the whole, he looked rather more like a tramp who had been tempted by the easy mark Gussy offered than a professional pickpocket.

He was furious when Tom Merry slipped the watch-and-chain into his pocket.

"Seems to me as yer practise the same trade as me!" he growled.

"Oh, right-about face!" snapped Tom, losing patience.

"Wharrer——"

Herries slung him round. He was now on his feet, and ready for a bolt, if necessary. But as the incriminating evidence had been taken from him he did not appear to think that there was any hurry about making himself scarce, and he stood using language more remarkable for picturesqueness than for choiceness.

Cardew's foot was the first to be raised, and he applied it hard.

"Yaroooogh!" howled the thief.

Other boots clumped upon him. It was rough justice; but it seemed to the St. Jim's juniors that to let the fellow off scathless would be mistaken tactics.

"Yah! Cowardly young 'ounds!" he yelled. "Eight of yer to one, an' 'im with no grub inside 'im to keep 'is pecker up!"

Cardew turned as they moved away, and flung the man a coin.

"What did you do that for?" asked Levison.

"Poor, miserable beast!" drawled Cardew. "Perhaps he really was hungry, you know!"

CHAPTER 6.
A Stroke of Luck!

"NOW we'd better go and find our two stray woolly lambs," said Blake.

Tom Merry grinned.

"We sha'n't find them at the sign of the three golden balls now," he said. "Gussy's ticker is in safe keeping, and Skimmy's turnip wouldn't pop for tuppence."

"Kim along!" said Herries. "But not over those vegetables again—we've done enough damage already—and if the war lasts fifty years everything may hang on the last cabbage."

"Besides which," remarked Talbot, "there's a very angry man waiting for us there."

"That was what old Herries really meant," said Dig.

It was not difficult to find their way into the High Street again.

"This is really a mugs' game you chaps are playing," said Cardew. "What's the giddy matter with borrowin' a trifle from me? I'm not on the rocks. But these two asses say they won't do it, an' I suppose you stiff-backed merchants will say the same. Rot!"

They looked at one another. It had been rather foolish to send those two woolly lambs to Wayland on a pawning errand when there was a fellow ready and willing to lend.

And it was not in the least that they barred Cardew. None of them felt that way now.

"See here, we've got to get more copies of that red rag," said Tom. "If we don't get them here to-day there's no certainty that we'll get them at all. They may be sold out. St. Jim's has made a heavy run on them. But once they're in hand there are several more days before we need send along those coupons."

"And in that time anything may happen," said Blake. "You speak like a prophet, Tommy."

"So if Cardew will lend us a bob——"

"On our joint and several securities," grinned Levison.

"Rot! Take a quid. I can spare it, all serene—five if you want 'em!" said Cardew.

"No; only a bob," said Tom firmly. "And let's have it in sixpences, please, Cardew."

"Why not in merry ha'pence?" asked Cardew, fishing out two of the coins required. "Though I warn you that if you are meditatin' buyin' a ha'porth of bull's-eyes each, I shall wait outside."

Tom handed one sixpence to Blake.

"We'd better split up," he said. "Some of us go towards the station, some towards the river. And all of us keep our eyes open for copies of the 'Red Weekly' as well as for our lost sheep."

Blake, Herries, and Digby went in the direction of the station. The chums of No. 9 accompanied Tom and Talbot in the other direction, Cardew willingly foregoing the visit to the cinema they had intended. He remarked in his sardonic style that Gussy and Skimmy would

be much funnier than anything they were at all likely to see there.

It was this contingent which found the woolly lambs.

They stood together on the river bank, close to the bridge by which the railway spanned the Ryll.

The noble shoulders of the Hon. Arthur Augustus were hunched up despondently, and the serious face of Herbert Skimpole wore an even more serious look than usual.

The five were close behind them before Skimmy and Gussy had any idea of their nearness.

"Hallo, Gussy!" chortled Levison, slapping the swell of St. Jim's hard on the back.

"Meditatin' suicide, what?" asked Cardew.

"Oh, weally! Why, I had not the wewy slightest ideah that any of you were within miles, deah boys! You've put me in quite a fluttah. For a moment I weally took you for ghosts!"

"There is no sufficient scientific warrant for belief in the existence of ghosts, D'Arcy," said Skimmy gravely. "The so-called evidence of spiritualism is of the flimsiest description. But, even admitting the possibility of ghosts, yet the term would be inapplicable to our friends here. If they were visible to us in Wayland while still at St. Jim's, what we see must be their astral bodies——"

"Do you have to wind it up, Talbot, or is this how it was born?" inquired Cardew wonderingly.

"Ring off, Skimmy! No Balmycrumpet just now!" said Clive.

"Whence this worried look, Gustavus? Have you lost half-a-sov. and found a bad threepenny-bit?"

"No, Tom Mewwy. I have not half-a-sov. to lose—but it is worse than that—far worse! I have lost my watch!"

"That would rather put the tin-hat on things," said Talbot.

"Yaas. It is not onlay the value—though, of course, I valued it highly, as a gift of my patah—but it seems like failure in a twust. I fear, deah boys, that you will nevah again have the same confidence in my tact an' discwetion aftah this!"

"Oh, just the same! It won't make a scrap of difference, Gussy!" said Levison.

Arthur Augustus looked greatly comforted.

"Weally, it is vewy kind of you to say that, Levison, deah boy," he answered.

"Nothing in it! You see, we never——"

Tom Merry cut Levison short. Gussy was genuinely distressed, and it seemed unfair to chip him at such a time.

"How did you lose it?" Tom asked.

"A wotten thief snatched it in the cwowd."

"He may have been caught," said Clive. "Shall we trot along to the police-station and inquire?"

"No, Clive," returned Arthur Augustus sadly. "To chewish such hopes is mewely to indulge delusions. My watch has gone—I must wesign myself to that unpleasant fact. An' the worst of it is that I have nothin' heah that could be popped except my scarf-pin, an' as that was a gift fwom Cousin Ethel, it's quite imposs——"

"I have already informed D'Arcy," said Skimpole gravely, "that I am prepared to sacrifice my own watch, as I realise that I ought to have done something to prevent this catastrophe. I shall find it difficult to do without it, of course, though the loss will be less as it never keeps time. D'Arcy, however, will not agree."

"No, Skimmay! It is twuly kind of you. But I am suah that the pawnbwokah would wefuse to accept your watch, an' it would weally be too beastly to be turned down with despisewy by a pawnbwokah!"

Skimmy had dragged out his watch. He was prepared to make the sacrifice. The two woolly lambs had their points, after all. Nearly all D'Arcy's worry arose from his feeling that he had let his chums down. And Skimmy did not mean to let them down if he could help it.

"Put it up, Skimmy!" said Tom. "I doubt whether uncle would remember to give it a shake every half-hour or so."

"I regret to say that I sometimes forget myself, Merry. But——"

"What bwought you ovah heah, deah boys?" asked Gussy.

"Our legs!" answered Clive.

Arthur Augustus looked at them suspiciously. Something had dawned upon his massive brain.

"Bai Jove!" he said, breathing hard. "I do weally think that you came ovah because you had doubts as to my discwetion!"

"Who could have?" murmured Cardew.

"Don't you think they were justified, old ass?" asked Tom.

"Most assuahedly not! The theft of my watch was a thing that might have happened to anyone. I wegard such doubts as a feahful insult, an' I am surpwised, Tom Mewwy, that——"

"I am sure that neither Merry nor any other of our friends here has any intention of being insulting, D'Arcy," said Skimpole mildly.

"You are w'ong, Skimmay, uttahly w'ong! It is a base an' studied insult, and unless it is wetwacted——"

"What must we retract?" asked Levison. "Can't retract ourselves all at once—it's quite some distance to St. Jim's. And——"

"Will it do if I retract the watch, Gustavus?" asked Tom.

"Don't be absurd, Tom Mewwy! I—why you've got it! Well—oh, hold me up, someone! I feel as if I could be knocked down with a feathah!"

Tom had produced the watch. The rest were grinning—all but Skimpole, upon whose face sat an expression of owl-like gravity.

"We must look out for the pawnbwokah's sign now," said Gussy, all his resentment banished. He did not give even one sigh at the prospect of parting with his watch again at once.

"No need," replied Talbot. "We've chucked that wheeze. But you can keep an eye open for any copies of the paper in the news-shops."

"Rare stickers you chaps are, what?" said Cardew.

"Hallo! There are Blake and the rest," Clive said.

"My hat! Old Blake looks as if he had come into a giddy fortune!" said Tom.

"Eureka!" cried Blake, as he sighted them. The faces of Herries and Dig were every bit as cheery as Blake's.

"You're another! What do you mean, anyway?" said Tom.

"Dutch for where's the nearest post-office, that's all."

"We've just passed one," said Talbot.

"Right-ho! Way for the man who can save the situation!"

And Blake dashed into the post-office.

He came out a minute later flourishing over his head a flimsy, oblong paper, printed in red.

"I made it ten bob," he said. "We can sort out some more efforts worth sending in—or do some more. Anyway, here's the needful postal order to go with them."

"But how on earth did you get it? Been robbing a bank?"

"No. Ran against an old buffer I knew at the station—friend of the pater's. He was waiting for a train—apologised for being so near St. Jim's and not looking in—tipped me a quid—and went, with our blessing. I ain't quite sure I didn't kiss him good-bye, I was so jolly excited."

"You tried to, old ass, but he dodged it," said Digby.

"Rats, you chump! Here, catch hold of this order, Talbot. You're the safest chap to be in charge. And another time, kids, just trust your Uncle Blake, and don't get flying off on the wings of desperation to the uncle at the sign of the three golden balls!"

CHAPTER 7.
An Envoy Extraordinary!

"GEN'L'MAN to see you, Master D'Arcy," announced Toby, the School House page, looking in at the open door of Study No 6, and smiling.

"Wheah is he?" inquired Arthur Augustus, in some surprise. "Who can it be, deah boys? I am not expectin' a visitah—not in the wewy least, you know."

"Says somethink about being red and weakly, he does. Can't make out what he means," said Toby, sniggering.

"'The Red Weekly'—that's what it is—must be!" cried Blake. "Gussy, old chump, we've struck oil!"

There was considerable excitement in No. 6. Digby darted off to tell the Terrible Three the good tidings.

It was the Wednesday following that on which the expedition to Wayland had been made. The week's competition had only closed on the Monday. The syndicate had sent in their postal order for ten shillings, with forty carefully-selected Jestlets from the hundred and fifty or so evolved by their joint efforts, on the Friday, to be in good time.

They had learned that the editor of the paper was in the habit of sending an envoy to announce to the winner of the first prize his good luck, and to interview him as to his career.

What could they think now but that the winning effort had been among their batch?

Several hands had assisted in filling up the coupons. But D'Arcy had signed them all. That was due to a suggestion of Levison's.

"Jolly sight more likely to score if the things have a name on them with a handle to it!" he said. Of course, it's really small potatoes being a 'Honourable,' but you never know when you may run up against a first-class snob. And if the judges ain't snobs they won't take any notice of it, so we shall be no worse off."

Dig had wanted to add "son of Lord Eastwood," to make it perfectly clear. He did not desire any undue advantage over others, as he tried to explain before they shut him up, on the ground that this would have meant showing their hand altogether too plainly.

But there were other fellows at St. Jim's who had entered the competition—many others. The attempts forwarded from that seat of learning to the "Red Weekly" office in that particular week must have filled a good-sized mail-bag, though no one knew of any entry during the preceding months in which the competition had been running.

And some of these other fellows had learned of the coming of the envoy.

This explained why he had taken so long to reach Study No. 6. He had been waylaid.

Wally D'Arcy was the first to tackle him. At Wally's heels were his chums—Levison minor, Manners minor, Frayne, Gibson, Hobbs, and Jameson. These young gentlemen had put their pence together to buy a postal-order, and had sent

in two attempts that they felt were bound to score.

"Look here, you know, you chaps," said Wally, "Toby's making a silly bloomer. Stands to reason that we are a jolly sight more likely to have pulled off the hundred than that ass of a major of mine! Of course, I shouldn't grudge old Gus it if he'd really won it; but I'm blessed if he's going to wipe up my prize!"

"Ours, you mean!" said Manners minor.

"Oh, ours, of course, ass! I'm not a hog! But my giddy name was on the whatyoumaycallit, and if I chose to play it low and bag the lot, you chaps couldn't say a word, you know!"

"Couldn't we?" said Jameson, with infinite meaning.

"We shouldn't say a lot. But we should get busy doing something!" added Curly Gibson.

"Wally wouldn't do such a thing," said Levison minor.

"Course he wouldn't!" chimed in Joe Frayne loyally.

"He better hadn't try!" said Manners minor.

"There's the bounder!" said Wally. "Crumbs, I don't cotton to the look of him!"

"What's it matter about his looks?" asked Hobbs. "You ain't all you might be that way yourself, Wally."

But Wally paid no heed. He had marched up to the emissary of the "Red Weekly" boldly.

The emissary of the "Red Weekly" was a gentleman whose name was spelt "Shister," and—according to himself—pronounced "Shiss-ter," not "Shyster." But he looked as if Shyster would have been the more fitting version. His eyes were too close together, and his mouth was a bad one—like the mouth of a rat.

"Are you from a paper called the 'Red Weekly'?" asked Wally.

Mr. Shister produced his card. From this it appeared that his Christian name was "Marmaduke," and that he was from the journal named.

"Looking for a chap named D'Arcy?" inquired Wally.

"I have that honour," replied Mr. Shister, with a smile that the Third-Former thought very oily.

"Well, that's my name!"

"I am delighted to meet you, my dear D'Arcy!" said Mr. Shister effusively. He seized Wally's paw and wrung it in a moist, hot palm.

"Thanks!" murmured Wally, not at all effusively.

"It's me you want, isn't it?" said Wally. "I'm Walter D'Arcy, you know. I've a brother here—in the Fourth. Mine's the Third. But I expect I'm the one."

Mr. Shister looked rather as if he considered himself taken in.

"Ah! I regret to say—er—in point of fact, it is your brother to whom I have been sent," he said. "But no doubt—well, let us hope that on some future occasion—in short, stick to it, my young friend, and your luck may be good yet!"

"Oily beast!" said Wally, as Mr. Shister moved on.

A burly form pulled itself up just in time to avoid knocking down Mr. Shister, which the fags—watching from afar—thought rather a pity.

"Here, I say, are you the chap from—oh, what's the name of the rag—the 'Something-or-other Weekly, ain't it?"

"I certainly represent the 'Red Weekly,'" said Mr. Shister stiffly.

"That's it! Come to see me—what?"

"That depends upon whether your name is——"

"Grundy—that's my name—George Alfred Grundy! That's the name you want—eh?"

Skimmy stops Shister!
(See Chapter 13.)

"It certainly is not!" answered Mr. Shister coldly. There was mutual aversion at the first glance between him and Grundy, which was not surprising, for, with all his faults, Grundy was absolutely honest, and Mr. Shister—if looks could be trusted—but Mr. Shister's looks were not the sort which led him to be trusted by most people who met him.

He passed on, and Grundy stood almost dumbfounded.

The great George Alfred felt sure that there must be some mistake. It was inconceivable to him that the envoy of the "Red Weekly" should be sent to St. Jim's—but not to him!

In actual fact, not a single effort of Grundy's had gone in. George Alfred had so persistently disregarded all the rules of the competition that his attempts would have been ineligible even had they been smart—but they were not smart.

But Wilkins and Gunn were not without tact. They knew how to manage Grundy. A dozen lines of their composition—none of them very striking—had been sent along; and Grundy really believed himself the author of all of them, with two exceptions. Those two exceptions appeared to him weak, and, consequently, could not be his.

Toby ought to have led Mr. Shister up to No. 6. But Toby said afterwards that he "hadn't fancied the look of the feller."

But before the envoy could be tackled by any more eager competitors Gussy arrived in the quadrangle, and took him in charge.

No. 6 was no longer poverty-stricken. Gussy had received a fiver. But a fiver does not last for ever, and before its coming the balance of Blake's tip had gone, like last winter's snows. And the Terrible Three were still hard up, and Clive's remittance seemed to have gone to the bottom of the sea. As for Levison, it was seldom he was otherwise than short of money.

But Gussy was very glad indeed of that fiver. Without it he would not have been able to give Mr. Shister such a hearty welcome as he considered that gentleman's due as the herald of joy.

Blake and Herries sped to procure additions to a spread that was already beyond the war-time average. Arthur Augustus went down to act as escort to the journalist.

Gussy was overflowing with good feeling, and Gussy was not a particularly good judge of character. But somehow part of Gussy's enthusiasm evaporated when he saw Mr. Shister. The nose was long, and rather foxy; the eyes were too near it; the mouth was unpleasant. Altogether Mr. Marmaduke Shister had not a winning countenance.

But there he was, and the tidings he brought must surely go far to redeem his face. For no editor would send a special emissary to tell a competitor that he had failed!

"Yaas, I am D'Arcy," said the swell of St. Jim's. He glanced at the card handed to him—Toby ought to have brought that, of course; and Gussy made a mental note as to the necessity of instructing Toby in etiquette. "I am pleased to see you, Mr. Shistah!"

"No, no! Excuse me, I pronounce my name 'Shisster,' not as you give it!"

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Shisstah! But pway come this way!"

CHAPTER 8.
Not Popular.

BY the time they got upstairs there was quite a gathering in No. 6. It chanced that Figgins & Co. had been asked to tea—an invitation not likely to be refused in any case, still

fass likely as things were. For Figgins & Co. had also been among the competitors, and were, naturally, much interested.

"This, Mr. Shistah, is Tom Mewwy, whom I may term the chaiahman of our syndicate."

"I am not sure that I follow you," said the envoy, giving Tom an unpleasantly moist handgrip.

"Oh, natchuwally you would not know! I twust it is not against the wules; but a numbah of us—eleven, to be pwecise—clubbed togethah to entah the competition."

"It does not matter in the least. But, of course, we only recognise as the winner the person who signs the coupons—in this case yourself, D'Arcy. The cheque will be made payable to you, and the matter of its division among your young friends will be your affair."

The word "cheque" had a grateful and comforting sound to all, and made some amends for what was lacking in Mr. Shister's manner.

And there was a good deal lacking.

Arthur Augustus, punctiliously polite, as always, presented each member of the party to Mr. Shister.

Mr. Shister shook hands with them in what Figgy described later as "a disgusting manner," yawned in the faces of one or two, and was plainly not in the least interested in any of them but D'Arcy.

But he was interested in the tea. He needed no pressing to start in upon it.

"There are fourteen of you here," he remarked, as he seated himself at the table.

Everyone but Gussy regarded that as either a hint that grub might run short, or that fourteen made a crowd—a complaint which might have been held to have more reason in it, but certainly not one a stranger should have made.

"Figgins an' Kerr an' Wynn were competitors on their own account, not as membahs of our syndicate, though they are fwiends of ours," Gussy explained, nodding towards the New House trio.

Shister looked at them in a way all three resented. It was as though he was thinking Fatty the stoutest boy he had ever seen. Very likely Fatty was; but he did not care to have a fellow such as this look at him in that way. And Figgins resented yet more the words addressed by Shister to him.

"So you weren't in the syndicate, Piggins?" he said. "Ah, you never know your luck!"

"You never know your luck," he repeated, in a manner Talbot thought odd. There was something almost sinister about it.

"I don't take to that merchant a little bit," whispered Levison to Figgins.

"I should think not! The rotter called me 'Piggins'!" answered the leader of the New House juniors, with wrath.

Arthur Augustus frowned upon them.

But Mr. Shister did not mind their whisperings. It was evident that, to him, they were mere junior schoolboys—persons of not the least importance.

There were fifteen to crowd in. Mr. Shister took up fully a quarter of the available room, though less might well have served him.

He expressed himself as partial to steak-and-kidney pie, and seemed capable of telling the truth about that, at least. On the other hand, he appeared to have hearkened to the voices of those who urged that bread should be eaten in strict moderation. Mr. Shister gave it a miss altogether, indeed.

He got his cup of tea before anyone else, of course. From his pocket he produced a flask. An aroma of spirits pervaded the room as he tipped into his cup some of the contents of the flask.

"Doctor's orders, D'Arcy," he explained. "Digestion a little weak. A spoonful of brandy in my tea an absolute necessity!"

"The doctor may have said a tablespoonful," said Lowther, in the ear of Manners.

"Ugh! Fat lot the matter with his digestion! See him wolf pie!" was the reply.

"Hang the chap!" said Blake aside, to Clive. "Anyone might think we walked off with a hundred every other day! He don't seem half as interested in that as in his blessed gorging!"

"He don't get any of the hundred, you see," answered Clive. "Do you notice that when he grunts he grunts to Gussy? The rest of us are hardly on the earth for him."

The pie was cleared up before Mr. Shister had quite finished with it—so it appeared by his hurt look on discovering the dishes empty—though not before he had had two big helpings. Thereafter he toyed with half a pound or so of ham, and then condescended to sardines. He did not care for sweet stuff, he said, it did not suit his digestion.

Among the rest at the table only one did himself full justice. That was Fatty Wynn. Fatty Wynn was not disturbed by the doubts which were troubling some there.

They were in the throes of curiosity. To which of them really belonged the honour of having produced the winning line? No one but Gussy thought it at all likely that Gussy had done it.

Would the interview be with the syndicate or merely with Gussy?

Would all their portraits be published or only Gussy's counterfeit presentment?

These were some of the questions they were inwardly debating. Not all to the same extent, of course. Tom Merry felt that he did not much care, anyway. Talbot was watching the envoy in a way that Tom noted. Levison had quite made up his mind about the fellow. But, as he said later, where would have been the use of saying anything? The thing looked as straight as a gun-barrel, on the face of it.

Tea was over. The flask was empty. Mr. Shister pushed his chair away from the table in a manner that could only be called reckless in such a crowded space, and took out a cigarette-case.

"Excuse my mentioning it," said Talbot, quite politely, "but smoking is not allowed here."

Mr. Shister looked at Talbot in a very offensive way.

"Excuse me, my lad," he said; "but do you share this cupboard with my young friend, D'Arcy?"

"I don't, as it happens. We do not call the studies cupboards, by the way. But the fact remains that smoking in them is against the school rules."

"I do not recognise your right to criticise me. I appeal to my honourable friend, D'Arcy!"

Arthur Augustus went the colour of boiled beetroot, and cast an imploring glance at Talbot.

"Oh, bai Jove, considewin' the circs, Talbot, you know!" he said.

"As a matter of fact, I was about to suggest that the Puritanical young gentleman and the rest of your friends, D'Arcy, might give me a chance to interview you by clearing out," said Mr. Shister, without any excess of politeness.

They went. Not one of them envied Gussy that interview. They trooped out, led by Talbot, without a word more to Shister.

CHAPTER 9.
Gussy Shells Out!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS began the interview with a query very much to the purpose.

"Can you tell me when the cheque is likely to come along, Mr. Shistah?" he asked.

"It would have given me the greatest pleasure to place it in your hands, my dear fellow," said the envoy. "But we are governed by routine, and that is our method. It has to be signed, you know, and — er — countersigned — and — er — booked up—and all that sort of thing. I am not a business man—a mere writer, though of some repute."

Mr. Shister, whose manner now was positively fawning, might have added that his repute—either as a writer or as a man—was rather worse than indifferent wherever he was known.

"You will probably get it by, say, Saturday," he added, seeing that D'Arcy looked rather blank.

"Now I wondah whethah you can tell me which of the lines womped off with the pwize?" said Gussy.

"I am not sure that—for the moment the winning line—what a thing an imperfect memory is! But perhaps you can remember some of them?"

"Theah was one of Blake's that he thought wathah good — 'Ultimate triumph—Huns trust to unterseeboats'."

"Blake's, you say? Oh, no, the winning line bore no resemblance to that—none whatever!"

"Was it Lowthah's 'Great deed—Germans es-chewing their dinnah'?"

"Oh, no! Candidly, I consider that merely silly."

"Dig thought 'Off the wails—Submarines' offensive tactics' was a winnah."

"No one else would," said Mr. Shister, in a manner that plainly implied contempt for the quality of Digby's brains.

"Oh, weally! It is vewy difficult indeed to guess," said Gussy.

"You have not told me any of your own, my dear fellow," said Shister oilily.

"The othahs did not appeah to think a vewy gweat deal of them," confessed Arthur Augustus.

"Jealousy, D'Arcy, jealousy, pure and simple! I could see at a glance that you were far in advance of any of your friends mentally. I should say that you have a distinct turn for wit—not mere humour, you understand, but real wit!"

Gussy liked that, naturally. But he might have enjoyed the compliment more coming from anyone who impressed him more favourably than Mr. Shister.

"Well, theah was one I wathah fancied, though the othahs were not stwuck," he said "It was 'Giddy girls—Give soldiers glad eye.'"

"That was it! A gem—a positive gem!" cried the enthusiastic Mr. Shister. "Real wit there—an apt illusion alliteratively—er—handled. Let me congratulate you once more, my dear fellow!"

"Weally, Mr. Shistah, you overpowah me!" said Gussy, after enduring again that moist grip. "But I am vewy glad to know that it was only one of my efforts which hit the bull."

"There you are again! 'Hit the bull,' a singularly apt expression. D'Arcy, my boy, you talk in epigrams without realising it!"

Guileless as he was, Arthur Augustus began to feel uncomfortable. Shister was not delicate; he laid on his flattery with a trowel.

"Now let us get to the interviewing," said Shister, whose cunning eyes read his face quite easily. "You are the son of Lord Eastwood, I believe?"

"Yaas, that is so. But there is weally

no need to mention that, I considah. No one heah wegards it as of any importance."

"Ah! St. James' is touched with Radicalism, I gather? That's a note of interest."

"Weally, that's quite w'ong! We are not in the vewy least Wadicals—except in so far as evewybody who thinks at all is a bit of a Wadical nowadays—considahs the working-man a jollay good fellow when he's all wight, you know, an' all that sort of thing."

"Very interesting indeed! And are those Lord Eastwood's views, may I ask?"

"Oh, wing off! Bai Jove, though, I beg your pardon, Mr. Shister! But please do not dwag the patah in; he would not appweciate it at all!"

"H'm! We'll see. It is really almost too interesting to be omitted. But you will not find me difficult to deal with in such matters as this, dear boy."

Somehow—but rather from the manner of the speaker than from the words—there came to D'Arcy a vague feeling of discomfort—a doubt that he could not explain.

"Have you been competing in Jestlets long?" asked the envoy.

"Bai Jove, no! This was my first attempt."

"You are, indeed, to be congratulated!"

But this time Gussy managed to overlook the moist hand extended to him.

"I gather that you sent in a considerable number of efforts?"

"The syndicate did, but there were not many of mine among them, though I signed all the coupons. You see, I was not on the committee which selected the phwases considahed the best," confessed D'Arcy ingenuously.

"Ah, jealousy, jealousy! The green-eyed monster even here!" murmured Mr. Shister, turning up his eyes to the ceiling.

"That I am quite suah it was not!" said Arthur Augustus sharply. "Tom Mewwy an' the west are my fwiends. Their taste may be at fault, but they would not be knowingly unfaiah."

"You have a generous nature, dear boy! I will put it down, but I may not include it. Yet it would make rather an interesting par. Radical combine to suppress the son of a peer of the realm! In a small way, of course—but small things interest our readers."

"If you pwint anything like that, Mr. Shister, I shall simplay wefuse to handle one single pennay of the pwize!"

"And leave it all to your critical friends, eh? Really, I should not advise any such self-denial as that!"

Gussy's gorge was rising. With every minute he spent in the company of Mr. Shister he liked the fellow less.

"Have you a portrait of yourself which we might reproduce?" the envoy asked.

Gussy produced one taken by Manners—a really excellent snapshot.

"That is by Mannahs—one of us. You will wemembah Mannahs?"

"I remember bad manners—on the part of everyone but yourself!" returned Mr. Shister viciously.

Well, there had been some behaviour that Gussy had not approved. But certainly no other guest had behaved half as badly as Shister himself, and the fault was really his. He had fallen short in even ordinary civility.

"A poor photograph—it does not do you justice in the very least," said the envoy.

"But Mannahs is weally an excellent photogwaphah! Mr. Wailton himself says so."

"Oh, for a mere amateur—and a mere schoolboy at that—no doubt! But I dare say this can be made to do."

"Is that all, Mr. Shister? asked Gussy, quite tired of being interviewed. He liked compliments; but he had no taste for hearing his chums sneered at.

"Well, there is just one more little thing I should like to mention before we part—to meet again, I trust," said Mr. Shister, lowering his voice.

Gussy hoped devoutly that they would not meet again. He had had more than enough of this long-nosed sneering fellow.

"My people are screws," said Mr. Shister confidentially. "Awful screws! Five pounds a week may sound a fair salary, though it is absurd for a man of my abilities. But out of that I have to pay exes, and the railway fares are simply terrible! St. James' is not very far from London, of course; but last week I had to journey to Aberdeen, and the week before to Galway."

"Oh, I considah that you should most assuahedly have your exes paid, Mr. Shistah!" said Gussy, sympathetic at once, though he disliked the man.

"They think I can rely upon the generosity of the winners!" replied the envoy bitterly. "Their generosity, indeed! Some of them are worse screws than are to be found in the 'Red Weekly' office—and more than that one can't say."

"Pewwaps you will allow me——"

Gussy blushed as his hand met Shister's. It was not he who should have blushed—unless for his credulity. But Mr. Marmaduke Shister had never been the blushing sort.

"Noblesse oblige!" said he. "I felt sure that you would feel in that way about it, D'Arcy."

It was Arthur Augustus's favourite motto he had used; and, somehow, Gussy had a feeling that it had been dirtied by Shister's use.

Two pound notes were transferred to the pocket of Mr. Shister. But he was not satisfied.

"How about that interview?" he said. "Of course I am at liberty to write what I like; but—perhaps you would like to see a proof, and strike out anything that displeases you?"

"Yaas, wathah!" replied Gussy. He did not want sneers about his chums, or references to Lord Eastwood's quite imaginary Radicalism, to appear in that interview.

"Ah! That might be managed, though I will not disguise from you that it may present some slight difficulty. Nothing, of course, that cannot be overcome by tact and—er—a small—er—application of what the vulgar call palm-oil."

"Tact" was a word that usually sounded well in Gussy's ears—especially when spoken by himself. It did not sound as well as usual now, and "palm-oil" sounded even worse. Gussy actually begun to suspect—what any of his chums would have been certain of—that Mr. Marmaduke Shister was on the make.

"Weally," he said, with rising indignation, "this seems to me insuffewable, Mr. Shistah! Are you to go away an' w'ite down things that I nevah said, an' then ask me to pay you to keep them out of pwint?"

"My dear D'Arcy, you misunderstand me most completely! Far be it from me to practise thus upon you! I am poor—bitterly poor—a man in feeble health, overworked, over-worried; but I trust I am honourable!"

"I apologise, Mr. Shistah—twuly, I do!" said the swell of St. Jim's in haste. Something like a tear—a crocodile tear, no doubt—had appeared in the fishy left optic of the envoy. And it hurt Gussy to hurt the feelings of anyone.

"You have wronged me; but I forgive you," said the mananimous Mr. Shister. "I am used to being misunderstood. It seems to be my fate. But when I think of the bailiff's man who sits enthroned in my humble home, almost frightening my poor wife into fits—then, I confess, my feelings are too much for me!"

This flight of the imagination overcame Arthur Augustus completely.

"Wait a moment, Mr. Shistah!" he said, and darted off to No. 9.

He had never borrowed from Cardew before, though Cardew had plenty of money, and was a relative of his. He did not like borrowing now. But he had only ten shillings or so left, and what was the use of that small amount to a man with an execution in his house?

Cardew was there, and alone. He lent at once, and without a single question. Gussy darted back.

"Pway do no feel that I am takin' a libahty, Mr. Shistah!" said Arthur Augustus, quite in a flutter as he pressed two five-pound notes into the sponger's ready hand.

"It cuts me to the quick!" groaned Shister. "And yet—why?"

Why, indeed, when he had worked up to it from the first, ready to beg or to blackmail as need might be?

But D'Arcy did not look at it in that way. He was almost overcome when Shister pressed his hand in a moist, warm grip, and breathed in his ear:

"Heaven bless and preserve you, dear boy! And now I must be off, or I shall lose my train!"

CHAPTER 10.
Undoubtedly a Wrong 'Un.

"I WILL escort you to the gates, Mr. Shistah," said Arthur Augustus.

And he did so.

There was quite a crowd in the quadrangle; but though the crowd looked hard at Mr. Shister, Mr. Shister kept his fishy eyes turned away from the crowd. At the gates he did not stay five seconds; and, when he did get started, he went off at a round pace.

Then the crowd swarmed round Gussy. Nearly all the Fourth and Shell were there. Cardew had just come down from No. 9, and stood with Clive and Levison. Gussy wondered whether he had told anything.

Anyway, the crowd was full of suspicion. They knew Arthur Augustus—an easy mark for a swindler! And somehow they had come away from No. 6 quite sure that Shister was not straight.

"Touched the giddy pot yet, Gustavus?" asked Blake.

"No, deah boy. Mr. Shistah says, howevah, that it is pwob the cheque may awwive on Saturday."

The half-promise did not appear to give anyone much pleasure, and, now that Gussy came to think of it, he himself did not feel that that hundred pounds was as much like money in the bank as he had done.

"I don't believe a blessed word that shifty bounder said!" announced Herries. And he seemed to mean it, too.

"Oh, weally, Hewwies, it must suahly be all wight!"

"The whole thing's a swindle if you ask me," said Racke, with a sneer.

"We don't!" retorted Tom Merry.

"Oh, Racke's opinion about a swindle is certainly worth having," said Lowther blandly. "If you wanted to know anything about soot you'd ask a chimney-sweep, wouldn't you, Tommy?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the crowd, and Racke scowled.

"Do you know what I think?" squeaked Baggy Trimble.

"Didn't even know you could," said Manners.

"We'll notify the fact to Lathom to-morrow," said Cardew. "He ought to

be no end pleased to hear of his favourite pupil's thinkin'."

"I think the man's a rank impostor. I don't believe he comes from any paper at all!" bleated Baggy. "He's a shady character, I'm sure!"

"Don't tell us he's a customer at the Trimble Arms, Baggy!" said Lowther imploringly. "Spare us that awful shock!"

Arthur Augustus had been trying to catch the eye of Cardew. He had failed somehow. Now he discovered that the eyes of Tom Merry, Talbot, Blake, and Levison were all upon him.

"What's the wow, deah boys?" he asked.

"It must be all right as far as Shister's coming from the paper is concerned," said Manners. But his tone did not sound too confident.

"Why? Rotters do get hold of things," said Mellish, with an unpleasant grin.

"They do," Lowther said, looking very straight indeed at Mellish.

"Nobody else could have got hold of this," said Digby.

"What puzzles me most," Talbot said, "is his being along so soon after the competition closed. That was on Monday, and you would hardly have thought they could possibly have got the whole thing settled up so soon."

"Not if they examine all the entries," agreed Levison. "But perhaps they don't. I thought of that objection. But if the thing is a do, I must say I can't quite see how it has been worked."

"That's a detail. It is a do!" sneered Racke.

"Just what I think," Crooke said.

"What you hope, you sweeps!" flashed Clive.

Figgins & Co. had been silent. Now Tom Merry turned to them.

"What do you chaps think?" he said.

"I can't stand the Shister-bird. But that don't say he's a thief. I can't stand Racke and Crooke, for that matter," answered blunt George Figgins.

"H'm! I hope he's a little straighter than they are," said Lowther.

"I should hope he's a good deal straighter. If he ain't——"

"See here, Manners! I'm not going to put up with——"

"If you like, Crooke! Come along to the gym. Racke, too, if it suits him."

The temper of Harry Manners was on edge. So were other tempers. There was not one member of the ten of the Competition Syndicate present who any longer felt confident. Skimpole had gone back to his invention.

"What's your opinion, Kerr?" asked Talbot.

"If I'd lent that chap money, and wanted to see it back, I should think it best to keep him in sight," the canny Scots junior replied. "All the same, I can't see how he can have done you fellows down."

"Unless he rooked Gustavus," said Blake.

A crimson flush flooded the ingenuous face of the swell of St. Jim's, and a half-mocking smile played about the lips of Ralph Reckness Cardew.

"Gussy!" said Tom Merry sharply. "You don't mean to say——"

"I have no intention whatevah of sayin' anythin' heah, Tom Mewwy. It is not the place to discuss business affaiahs," said Gussy, with dignity.

"Let's get inside. Come along, you fellows!" cried Blake.

"Come along, Figgy, Kerr, Fatty!" said Tom Merry.

The New House trio accompanied the members of the syndicate, and Levison insisted on Cardew's coming along, too.

Behind them they left sympathisers and chortlers. The sympathisers might chip them later, if the announcement of their having won the prize of £100 turned out to be a swindle; but it would be in a friendly way. But the chortlers would chortle with malice and with glee.

"Serve the swanking, silly cads right!" they heard Crooke say.

"It would if it were you, Crooke!" snapped Dick Julian.

"I don't see that it's any tremendous score over them, anyway," remarked Kangaroo of the Shell. "Any one of you would have received that merchant with open arms if he'd come with the same yarn to you."

"We shouldn't have shelled out to him. An' I'll bet a tenner that ass D'Arcy has!" sneered Racke.

"Of course you wouldn't, Racke," said Dick Redfern. "Who ever heard of your giving anything away?"

"And who ever heard of your having anything to give away, you scholarship cad!" snarled the heir of Racke & Hacke's war profits.

So the wordy warfare went on in the quad. Upstairs, in Study No. 6—upon his native heath, as it were—a crimson-faced swell confronted a dozen or so of his friends rather as if they had suddenly become his deadly enemies.

"Don't look at me like that!" snapped Arthur Augustus. "I have done nothing to be ashamed of, I assuah you!"

"How much did that slimy rotter worm out of you?" asked Blake.

"That is my bizney, Blake. I do not pwopose to charge against the expenses of the syndicate one solitawy penny of it."

"Then you did——"

"Bai Jove, you fellows would dwive a saint mad with your quewies!"

"There's one lucky thing. He can't have got as much out of Gussy as he might have done at some times, because the old ass hadn't more than a pound or two," said Digby.

Arthur Augustus caught the eye of Cardew now, and would have gone redder still had it been possible. But it wasn't.

Somehow he understood that Cardew did not mean to give him away, and he was grateful. But he knew that he would give himself away if this inquisition lasted much longer.

"How much did you shell out, fat-head?" asked Blake, ever direct and polite.

"I gave the poor boundah his exes," replied Gussy, feeling like a liar. "His w'etched papah does not pay them."

"Rats!" said Levison. "He took you in, Gussy!"

"And how much besides exes, Gustavus?" asked Tom Merry.

"Oh, weally! You——"

"How much?" snapped Blake.

"I—— Oh, hang it all, what can you do when a chap has a wotten bailiff in his house?"

"You can't pay him out—anyway I can't," said Levison, who was always short.

"But you can let him stay there," said Monty Lowther.

"You mean to say that you—— Oh, you burbling chump! You champion ass!" Blake exploded.

"But you hadn't cash enough for anything like that, you know, Gussy," said Digby.

"I bowwowed a tenner,—I mean, I bowwowed a twiffle—well, not exactly a twiffle—but it was fwom Cardew I bowwowed it," faltered Arthur Augustus, looking from one to another of the accusing faces

Some of them were turned towards Cardew now.

"Oh, don't blame me!" said Cardew lightly. "I wasn't told it was to pay a bailiff out, you know!"

Clifton Dane looked in.

"If the meeting ain't too strictly private," he said, with a grin, "I should like to butt in."

"You're doing it!" snapped Lowther.

"To the extent of informing you chaps that old Parker—I mean, Mr. Parker-Roberts, of course—has just turned up, and seems anxious to see you chaps," went on the Canadian junior imperturbably. "No accounting for tastes, and Parker always was a queer bird!"

CHAPTER 11.
Pursuit.

"WHO on earth is Parker-Roberts?" asked Cardew of Levison, as he found himself rushed headlong with the excited crowd.

"You've heard about him, surely? The journalist chap who came here as a boy just before you blew in, and did us all brown for a bit!"

"Oh, that bounder!" returned Cardew.

"He isn't that. Jolly good sort! Better not let Gussy hear you run him down. Or Talbot, or Tom Merry and that lot. Matter of fact, we all think a heap of old Parker!"

"Well, I should say he might be an improvement on this Shister specimen, though he's in the same trade."

"Oh, rather!" said Levison.

They had dropped a bit behind the rest now, and Clive joined them.

Out in the quadrangle they found an eager throng surrounding Mr. Parker-Roberts, of the "Daily Messenger," a short and somewhat chubby individual, who looked particularly fit just now.

"My hat, it's good to see you again, Parker!" cried Tom Merry. "Oh, I forgot! Beg pardon!"

"The old name's good enough, old chap," said the journalist, smiling.

"I shall never get used to Parker-Roberts," sighed Lowther, as he gripped the hand of the one-time intruder upon Study No. 10. "Pignacious comes much more easily to the tongue."

"But may lead to thick ears," said Parker-Roberts. "Hallo, Manners! How's the photography getting on? Talbot, you're looking fit. Where's my friend Skimpole? Ah, D'Arcy, what's the matter? Your customary cheerfulness seems to be rather under a cloud."

The grip between these two was very warm, for the man knew how to appreciate the boy at his true worth. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy might be several kinds of an ass, but he was also the most utterly chivalrous and unselfish fellow Philip Ignatius Parker-Roberts had ever met in the course of a wide and varied career.

"Gussy's been done down again," said Herries.

"Oh, dwy up, Hewwies! Parkah—theah, I cannot wemembah to call him—he doesn't want to heah about that, you know."

"Do you know a rotter named Shister—Marmaduke Shister—who's on the staff of a paper called the 'Red Weekly,' Parker?" asked Blake.

"I do. What of him?"

"He's done Gussy in the eye for——"

"Oh, weally, Blake, this is altogethah too bad of you!" protested Gussy, with tears of vexation in his eyes. "Parkah—I mean Mr. Parkah-Woberts, of course—does not want to heah——"

"But I do," said the journalist gravely.

Half-a-dozen fellows began to tell him the story at once.

"I think I should get it sooner if only one of you talked," Parker-Roberts said

mildly. "You, Blake, if you don't mind."

Blake did not mind. And he was as capable as anyone there of telling what had to be told briefly and clearly.

"You say that it was only last week you entered for this competition?" came the sharp query.

"That's right."

"Then the visit of to-day is a swindle beyond all doubt! No, not the competition—that is as straight as anything can be, and I happen to know a very great deal of care is taken in the judging—a fact which renders it all the more certain that the work cannot have been done yet. How long has this fellow been gone?"

"He hadn't been out of the gates a quarter of an hour when you blew in," said Tom Merry.

"Then there is time to catch him!" snapped Parker-Roberts. "That is the thing to do. I will go with you—it is out of the question that D'Arcy should be robbed like this. For it is a bare-faced fraud, and I can see quite plainly how it has been worked."

"I say, Parker, hanged if I can! Tell——"

"No time for that now, Manners! Who will lend me a bicycle? Shister will have caught the train from Rylcombe, no doubt, but he will have to wait some little time for the up-train from Wayland, and we should run him down there."

A dozen bicycles were offered him at once. It was time for prep; but few remembered that, and Parker-Roberts was not one of the few.

"Come along!" cried Clive; and a rush was made for the bike-shed. It looked as though Shister would be pursued by a small army.

"Where is the machine that was promised me?" asked the "Daily Messenger" man, as bike after bike was rushed out. "You were one of those who promised to lend, I think, Lowther?"

"I over-rated my generosity," replied Monty Lowther, grinning. "You see I can't possibly consent to stay behind, Parker, and so I shall want my bike myself. Take Tommy's!"

"That was also offered, but——"

"Here, have this, Mr. Parker-Roberts!" said Levison, pushing a bike up.

"Yours, Levison? Thanks, very much!"

"Well, no—it isn't exactly mine," replied Levison, with his most impish grin. "I believe it belongs to Baker of the Sixth—or Gilmore of the Fifth—or somebody. Whoever it is, he won't mind, I'm sure—and it's no odds if he does?"

Already they were streaming towards the gates—at least half of the Fourth and Shell. Racke, with a sneer, said that it was no bizney of his, and, on the whole, he rather admired a chap for doing down Gussy. He did not go, and Crooke stayed behind with him. And Mellish and Trimble, and Scrope and Clampe, and a few more of their kidney, stayed also. There were others, who thought any fun to be got out of the chase would be paid for too dearly by the row that would be sure to follow for the cutting of prep and the absence at call-over.

But the Terrible Three went, of course, and the chums of Study No. 6, and Talbot, and Figgins & Co., and Clive and Levison and Cardew, and Redfern & Co., and Dick Julian & Co., and Noble and Glyn and Clifton Dane, and Lumley-Lumley and Gore and Mulvaney minor and Tompkins, and Grundy and Wilkins and Gunn, and Gibbons and Jones minor and Lorne and Pratt, and a dozen others. Perhaps Cardew was the only fellow among them all who had not entered the competition; and, anyway, they were not going to be out of a thing like this!

The Third tumbled to what was going on a minute or two too late. They were wheeling out machines when Kildare came along and ordered them in to their Form-room for prep at once. And they did not find Mr. Selby in any pleasant humour, for, instead of his coming in to take charge of a waiting Form, he had come along to an empty room to wait for them.

Last of all to take the road was Skimpole.

He had known nothing about the affair until a word from Scrope had enlightened him. Then, throwing to the winds his scientific pursuits, and totally forgetting prep, he made hot-foot to the bike-shed.

There was no machine there belonging to him. At an ordinary time this might have given him pause.

But this was no ordinary time. For once Skimmy had been woke up. He felt that he must go in chase of Shister with the rest. Fellows said afterwards that Skimmy believed that the hundred pounds depended on the capture of Shister, and his latest and greatest invention upon his share of the hundred pounds.

Anyway he went, paying not the slightest heed to Kildare, who was yelling to him to come back before he reached the gates. Racke did not yell to him; but probably he would have done if he had not already gone in to prep—and if he had known whose bike it was Skimmy had collared. Skimmy did not know; but Racke would have done—because it happened to belong to him.

CHAPTER 12.
Trouble on the Way.

THE pursuers of Mr. Shister took the Rylcombe road.

It was farther to Wayland by the road than by the path across the moor, but it was better going, and should save time in the long run they thought. Moreover, there was just the chance that Shister might not have gone to Wayland at all. There was a train in the other direction—to Westwood—about this time which he might possibly take.

An inquiry at Rylcombe station would dispose of this doubt. It was but a small one, in the eyes of Parker-Roberts, who felt sure the swindler would make for town.

In advance rode Tom Merry, Talbot, Gussy, and Blake, with the journalist, upon whom they were counting for the rounding-up of Shister. For, on the face of it, they had no right to demand back from him the money he had cadged from Arthur Augustus. But Parker-Roberts seemed to think that he could force him to hand it back, and they were full of faith in Parker-Roberts.

"I can't get the hang of it yet," said Tom. "Will you explain, Parker—oh, hang it all. I can't remember to——"

"Stick to 'Parker,'" said the fellow who had borne that name at St. Jim's, with a genial smile. "It isn't hard to explain. Shister's a hack journalist—not without abilty, but no real good to any paper—lazy, and dishonest. At the present moment he ought to be in the Army, but he's wangled out somehow—by means that may yet land him in gaol, if the story I hear is correct. He must have got his job on the 'Red Weekly' quite lately; I know he was not there a month ago. Probably in connection with the competition; they employ a number of men in sorting out the coupons before the real judging takes place."

"But wouldn't he wisk his job by——"

"He may be under notice already—or have found that he is expected to put in hard work at the 'Red' office—hard work and Marmaduke Shister never did agree. I take it that in sorting out the coupons he came upon D'Arcy's name——"

"Yaas, that's vewy pwob—I signed them all, you know, deah boy."

"Struck by the 'Hon.'—looked up D'Arcy in the 'Peerage'—found he was the son of Lord Eastwood—smelt oof—and made up his mind to come down here, pretending to be the special envoy sent out to interview first prize-winners," went on Parker-Roberts, in jerks, for the pace Tom and Talbot set was beginning to tell upon him.

"But he couldn't have known how soft our Gustavus is," said Blake.

"Weally, Blake——"

"You think there isn't a dog's chance that we really have won anything, then, Parker?" said Tom.

"I don't say that. But—not a dog's chance—that Shister—was sent by the editor to tell you—you had."

"Same thing!" said Tom rather sadly.

"Not quite. You still have whatever chance you would ever have had on your merits, you know."

But that was too big a drop from the supposed certainty of a hundred pounds to be much consolation to anyone.

Parker-Roberts was glad of the halt at Rylcombe station. He was still blowing a bit when Tom and Talbot came out to announce to the dismounted crowd that Shister had taken the train to Wayland, as had been expected.

Then it was off and away again, with a yell that set the sleepy village wondering what could be afoot. The excitement of the chase was upon them all; and there was more need to hurry than they had thought. For the station-master had told Talbot that the up main-line train had been put forward a quarter of an hour, which left them very little indeed to spare.

"Better not talk to old Parker," said Tom. "He will need all the wind he has before we get to Wayland at this pace."

He was right. The journalist had done but little cycling for years past, and, though he might look fit, he was not quite so.

They pedalled hard along the Wayland road. By this time the slower riders were tailing off, and the result was a long procession, with a travelling cloud of dust that might have puzzled anyone watching from a distant height.

The fork of the road beyond the quarries drew near. It was a sharp corner, and a blind one on the right-hand side.

They were stringing across the road in a swerve to the left before they realised that there was danger.

"Oh, look out!" yelled Blake. "Look out, all of you!"

A heavily-laden farm-waggon was coming from Wayland, and a dog-cart, with a high-stepping horse, driven by a lady, was just about to overtake it.

Blake shot past in safety, right under the noses of the horses.

Next moment there was a sound like the report of a pistol, and a wild yell came from Blake.

The lady driver, her face pale with alarm, tried her best to rein in. The waggoner, nodding on his perch, seemed quite unaware that there was any need to to do so. The cyclists, in their hurry, were going at too big a speed to pull up at once, with so many following; and for a moment a series of nasty accidents looked quite on the cards.

But one after another, Gussy, Tom, Talbot, and Parker shot past the waggon horses, past the reined-in high-stepper between the dogcart shafts, and on to the grass by the side of the road, and the splinters of broken bottles with which

someone seemed to have been sowing it! And after them, swerving up the road, and then wheeling round to get on to the grass and pass the block made by the two vehicles, came Herries and Digby, Levison and Clive, Manners and Lowther, Figgins and Julian and Redfern—every rider in the first batch save three!

Not one of them saw what had happened to Blake and his nearest followers. It was at the horses they were looking. But now they had to jump off in haste, for all along the strip of grass bordering the road their leaders had dismounted, and even they were too late to avoid catastrophe.

What had chanced to Blake had chanced to them all.

A cart laden with bottles had been capsised there. The result was punctures! Punctures wholesale—back wheels and front wheels! Not one of the eighteen in the lead escaped damage to one tyre. Many of them had both deflated.

A chorus of lamentation arose. The dogcart passed on. The waggoner woke up, grinned, and passed on likewise.

And the three who had been just behind the leading crowd passed in safety along the road, having slowed down in time.

"Collar the bounder, and hold on to him until we come!" sang out Tom Merry.

"Don't let him escape, you chaps!" roared Blake.

"Right-ho!" answered Kangaroo.

CHAPTER 13.
Brought to Book.

KERR, Harry Noble, and Cardew—they were the three.

They rode on their hardest. Not one of them had been in the syndicate. But that made no difference. They were just as keen on catching Shister as any of those in it could be, though Cardew might pretend that the whole affair rather bored him than otherwise.

It hardly looked as if he was bored. Cardew had rather a way of being lazy—or posing as lazy—but he kept pace now with Kangaroo and Kerr, two good riders pedalling their hardest.

Hardly a word was spoken. But when they reached the High Street of Wayland, Kangaroo, looking up at a clock over a jeweller's shop, said:

"Sha'n't have a heap of time to spare."

"Ought just about to do it," answered Kerr.

And they did just do it. The train was signalled when they reached the platform. Mr. Shister was not to be seen. But as the train rolled in he emerged from the refreshment-room, wiping his mouth.

"We've got to stop him," said Kangaroo resolutely; "but I'm hanged if I see how. It wants a bobby with a warrant, really."

"I'll attend to the creature, if you like," drawled Cardew.

"Good egg!" replied Kerr. "Blessed if I know what to say to him!"

And it was not often George Kerr was taken aback.

Cardew stepped coolly up to Shister.

"Travellin' by this train?" he asked.

"Yes, I am. But it is no business of yours. You had better get out of my way."

Cardew had planted himself between Shister and the train. Kerr and Kangaroo stood near, ready to do anything necessary.

Shister had evidently taken alarm at the sight of the red-and-white, St. Jim's colours. Perhaps he had recognised Kerr, too.

"Your mistake," said Cardew. "You're not. Some friends of mine have expressed a flatterin' desire to interview you, an' I am here to detain you with light an' airy conversation—or otherwise, if you're ass enough to prefer it—till they come up."

"I decline to submit to any such barefaced illegality!" Shister almost shrieked. "If I miss this train——"

"Don't say 'if.' You're goin' to," Cardew said calmly.

"I shall appeal to the station-master!"

"Better appeal to a policeman. The station-master is not a legal authority, you know, my man. Or, if you like it better that way, we'll speak to the bobby. He's tolerably sure to be wanted before the thing's through, anyway."

"But I have no desire to see your friends, whoever they may be, and your veiled threat is utterly absurd!"

"Don't want to be interviewed. Much pleasanter, an' more profitable interviewin' people, especially soft-hearted, generous chaps like D'Arcy—eh?"

Shister was white to the lips now, and his hands were trembling.

Kangaroo admitted afterwards that he felt half sorry for the beast. And Noble was no sentimentalist. Kerr said he did not enjoy it, and Kerr had no sympathy with rotters. But Cardew seemed to find it quite to his somewhat peculiar taste. He had felt some pity for the thief who had stolen Gussy's watch. He seemed to have none for this educated swindler.

The train would be going in another two seconds. Shister stood irresolute.

The whistle blew. Then only did the fellow try a bolt.

But Cardew seized him by the collar in a strong grip, and Kangaroo and Kerr grabbed each an arm.

The train began to move. Shister writhed and swore. A porter came up.

"What's all this to-do about, young gents?" the man asked, looking suspiciously at them.

"Better call a bobby, I think, Kerr," remarked Cardew, in a low tone that the porter did not catch.

"It is nothing, porter. I am—er—only talking to my young friends here," said Shister.

"An' uncommon lovin' your young friends seem to be—not 'arf!" replied the porter, grinning.

"It will be some time before the other chaps come up," said Kerr; "and we can't stand here and hold this bounder till then. Let's get him locked up somewhere."

"I give you my word of honour——" began Shister.

"Nothin' doin'!" snapped Cardew.

"There's the lamp-room," said the porter, "if so be as he's been up to anything off the rails like. Or I could fetch the station-master. He's got the cut of a wrong 'un all over."

"I think the lamp-room will serve the purpose," said Cardew. "Has it a good lock, porter?"

"Well, there's a lock of sorts; but I wouldn't advise you to stroll too far from the door."

Shister went meekly to the lamp-room. The train had gone, and he seemed to have resigned himself to his fate.

"I'll ride back and meet the other chaps, and tell them he's caught," said Kangaroo.

"Do," said Cardew, yawning slightly. "And hurry them up. Kerr an' I aren't exactly cut out for the prison-warder job, you know."

Off went Kangaroo. The other two sat down on a bench close to the door of the lamp-room. Cardew shut his eyes, and looked bored. Kerr, who had the gift of silence when he chose to exercise it, did not talk.

The minutes crept by. Kerr kept glancing at the clock. Cardew seemed to have gone to sleep.

The rumble of a train on the down-line was heard. The sound must have muffled the bursting of the lock on the lamp-room door, for neither Kerr nor Cardew heard it go. But on a sudden Cardew jumped to his feet, snatched at Kerr's arm, and yelled:

"Stolen away! Yoicks! Tally-ho!"

Down the platform sped Shister, and hard on his heels went Cardew. Kerr, taken by surprise, was some ten yards behind them.

"Oh, look out, Cardew!" shouted Kerr, in dismay.

Right across the lines Shister had bolted. Cardew, not expecting the swerve to the right, had overrun himself at the end of the platform. But he wheeled round at once, and was again in pursuit.

The down-train was very near. Shister, in his desperation, had darted across, right in front of the engine. His risk of being run over was small, unless he slipped; but it was a risk the average man would have shied at, and that would have been far too big for Shister to take had he been less desperate.

But Cardew? To Kerr it seemed that he was not merely running a risk—it looked more like a leap to certain death!

He never hesitated. Right across the path of the mighty engine he leaped, and the wind of it seemed to take him in the air and draw him to it. And, plucky as he was, Kerr put his hands in front of his eyes, and groaned aloud in his fear.

The train was an express. It did not stop at Wayland. With rush and clatter and clang, it passed through, and the few seconds before it was clear of the end of the platform were to Kerr as hours!

At last! He saw—saw Shister clambering over a fence some little distance away, and Cardew scrambling to his feet beyond the down-track!

Kerr rushed across.

"After him!" said Cardew. "I'm out of the hunt—hurt my confounded leg somehow!"

"You idiot! It was a hundred to one chance you'd have been smashed up!" gasped Kerr.

"Hundred to one against—yes," said Cardew, with his sardonic smile. "An' ten to one's long enough odds for a sportsman, you know. What are you lookin' so blessed pale about, Kerr? Cut after him—do!"

And Kerr ran on. But he felt queer inside. Cardew's danger had affected him as danger to himself would not have done. George Kerr was not in his best form for running after what he had seen—and what he had expected to see!

Had he been, he would soon have caught up Shister, though catching him might have presented more difficulty. Kerr was not a big fellow.

As it was, Shister gained on him for a while. He kept to the fields, away from the town, and headed—Kerr knew that, though perhaps the fugitive did not—for Wayland Moor.

And now he was out on the moor, and a full hundred yards ahead of his pursuer. He stopped, panting for breath. Kerr held on.

Shister began to run again, and managed to keep his lead for a time. But now Kerr was feeling better, and

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Shister's laboured breathing showed that he was nearly at the end of his tether.

Kerr began to gain. Then, over a rise in the moor, came the figure of a cyclist, and the cyclist had upon his head the red-and-white cap of St. Jim's!

Shister ran with his head down, half-blind with sweat and weariness. Kerr would not shout yet. He waited till the fugitive and the cyclist were within a few yards of one another. And then, even as Kerr yelled, he saw that the cyclist was Skimmy!

"Stop him! Oh, hang it, what's the blessed good! It's Skimmy, and if he understands he'll—— My hat, but he has!"

Skimmy had ridden straight at Shister, and had stopped him in quite an effective way.

Something that he did not understand—something of the combative spirit against which he so often preached—something of loyalty to St. Jim's and his friends—but he had never preached against that—had sprung suddenly to life in Skimmy's great mind. And before he had time to think twice he had acted!

When Kerr came up Skimmy and Shister were sitting face to face staring at one another stupidly, and the bicycle, rather worse damaged than either of them, lay a few yards away, with its wheels still revolving slowly.

"I stopped him—Kerr—as you—will observe!" gasped Skimmy.

. . . . . .

It was some little time before anyone else came up; but there was no need for Kerr and Skimmy to sit upon Shister. The fellow had surrendered without terms. Skimmy had knocked all the opposition out of him—as well as a good deal of the enamel off Racke's bicycle.

The pursuers had spread in various directions; but the party which was first to sight the trio luckily included Parker-Roberts, upon whose handling of the matter everybody depended.

Tom Merry and Talbot and Figgins and Levison were also there. Levison came up a little behind the rest, with Cardew, who limped badly, on his arm.

"It's up to you, Parker," said Tom.

"I do not know this person," snarled Shister, who was recovering his normal pose by this time. "I refuse to talk to him. And I warn you all that you stand in danger of the law for these highly illegal proceedings!"

"Oh, I think you know me, Mr. Shister," returned Parker-Roberts coolly. "You are not an individual whose acquaintance I should be in a hurry to claim, of course; but circumstances alter cases. As for the law, I should very strongly advise you to let that dog lie. Apart from a very slim little trick in connection with your liability to military service—but we won't go into that. After all, the Army is not so hard put to it for men that it needs such very poor counterfeits of the genus homo as you are."

"What do you want?" whined Shister.

"For myself—nothing. But you have played upon the sympathies of my friend, D'Arcy, by lying stories. You have come down here on a pretended errand with the express purpose of swindling someone. You will return to D'Arcy the money you extorted from him. After that, all I have to say to you is that you are a horrible disgrace to an honourable profession. And whatever D'Arcy and his friends may choose to do to you by way of punishment, I shall not protest by as much as a word!"

Shister's ugly face was so full of woe that the tender heart of Arthur Augustus was touched again.

"Weally——" he began weakly.

"Shut up!" growled Blake.

"Shell out!" said Tom Merry to Shister.

The swindler was utterly cowed. With great reluctance he produced the two fivers and the two currency notes. Blake took them, handed the larger notes to Cardew, and pocketed the others.

"You can go, you rotter!" said Tom. "You aren't worth lynching."

Shister passed his hand over his forehead, stared at them dumbly, and turned his face towards the station.

Cardew spoke to Parker-Roberts. No one heard what he said; but all heard the reply.

"I don't care a hang whether he has or not! Let him walk!" snapped Parker-Roberts.

Cardew limped after Shister. The baffled swindler faced round with a scowl.

"You may have a use for this. Paddin' the hoof all the way back to town's a bit tirin', eh?" said Cardew.

And he put a currency note into Shister's hand.

The swindler crumpled it up, thrust it into his pocket, and then cursed the giver with vigour and fluency.

"You're a dashed pleasant character, I don't think!" yawned Cardew.

No one protested against the gift. If it had not been for the three outside the syndicate—and Cardew in particular—Shister would have escaped with his ill-gotten gains.

For the three—and Skimmy! It seemed quite absurd that Skimmy should have played a part in the rounding-up of Shister. But Skimmy had—though he had as little desire to discuss it as Cardew had to be ragged about that mad leap of his in front of the engine. Skimmy had done a thing of which, upon reflection, he could not conscientiously approve, and yet for which he found himself unable to feel sorry.

The golden dreams of the syndicate had vanished into thin air.

Parker-Roberts wrote to D'Arcy from town to tell them that Shister had been kicked out of the "Red" office on the morning of the day upon which he had come down to St. Jim's.

But a week later came a wire from the "Messenger" man.

"Editor 'Red' rung up saying prize £20 won D'Arcy. Congratulations," it ran.

Thus, after all, the St. Jim's Competition Syndicate had scored!

THE END.

(Don't miss next Wednesday's Great Story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's —"THE GREAT GRUNDY!" by MARTIN CLIFFORD.)

The Editor's Chat.

For next Wednesday:

"THE GREAT GRUNDY!"

By Martin Clifford.

George Alfred Grundy's self-conceit gets him into a good many comic and undignified positions, for which he really has only himself to blame. He is so perfectly convinced that he knows it all better than anyone can tell him that he is bound to get frequent and heavy falls. But he is really a good and decent fellow, straight and plucky and generous; and one sees something of the better side of him in this story—as well as some of the other side. His Uncle Grundy, giver of handsome tips, visits St. Jim's, much to George Alfred's pleasure. But Uncle Grundy brings bad news. Grundy takes it in manful fashion. Levison helps largely to straighten out a tangled coil, and one expects Grundy—well, not exactly to fall on the neck of Levison and hug him, because that would not be at all like Grundy, or at all what Levison would like. But one does expect him to be grateful. Is he? Read and learn! A rare good story, this!

TO LOYAL READERS.

Some complaints as to the recent cutting-down in size of the GEM have reached me. I cannot understand how anyone should fail to understand the absolute necessity of this step. Paper pulp has almost ceased to be imported, and no one knows how long the war will last. Therefore, paper must be economised. It is natural and reasonable that we should want to economise without losing in circulation, for there is a circulation figure—varying according to the expense of production—at which a paper ceases to pay its way, with the inevitable result that before long it ceases to appear! I have no fear of this in the case of the GEM; but I don't want my loyal readers to cease their good work of getting new supporters for us. As long as the new reader gives his order to his newsagent there is no waste of paper, and every new reader helps to keep the flag flying.

BUFFALO BILL.

A good many boys had thought of Buffalo Bill as a mere invention of the romancer—or, at most, as a famous showman—till he died recently. Then, perhaps, they learned that he was a real hero. His true life is a romance, though, of course, there is no truth in many of the tales written round him. From some American paper "Stars and Stripes" has cut a poetical tribute to the great old Indian fighter and scout which it gives me pleasure to reproduce here, as I am sure it will give many readers pleasure to read it:

"BUFFALO BILL"—DIED JANUARY 10th, 1917.

A Tribute by James J. Montague.

Steel giants thunder on his trail across the snow-topped range,
And cities rise beneath the skies that he found lone and strange.
The hum of harvester and mill ascends to greet the dawn;
The West he knew and wandered through, the West of old, is gone.
He met Adventure unafraid; he knocked at Danger's door;
His camp he made on plain and glade where none had been before;
And though on many a lonely scout stern Death was hovering near
And Terror lay along his way, he never learned to fear.
The lurking red-skinned foe is gone, the hordes of buffalo,
The waggon-trains that tracked the plains are of the Long Ago.
His work is done; he found the West, he saw that it was fair,
And, with high courage in his heart, he led the White Man there.

NOTICES.

Correspondence.

W. H. Green, Annfield Terrace, Denman Street, Nottingham — Home, Foreign, and Colonial Correspondence Exchange — more members needed—also agents. Correspondence in French, German, Russian—Allies specially welcome. Also wants back numbers "Gem" and "Magnet" for soldiers at Front. Any number. Payment offered.

A. McLeod, 115a, Morgan Street, Montreal, Canada, wants correspondence with boy reader about 15.

Your Editor

THE CASE OF THE TEUTON'S TROUSERS.

An Adventure of Herlock Sholmes.

BY PETER TODD.

I.

DURING the spring of 1917, Herlock Sholmes was busy upon very many important cases. A Government pledged to efficiency could scarcely fail to avail itself of the services of my amazing friend. To Sholmes was due the discovery of the dastardly plot to assassinate a prominent Minister by introducing earwigs into his ear-trumpet. It was Sholmes who tracked down the miscreant, afterwards sentenced to ninety-seven years' penal servitude, who was convicted of consuming three sardines upon a fish-less day. It was Sholmes' eagle eye that detected the huge hoardings in Trafalgar Square, under the very nose of the Food Controller.

So far as money went, these were prosperous days in Shaker Street. The fees received by Sholmes for solving the mystery of the Substitute Sausage were very considerable. For the first time for many years my amazing friend was able to face without flinching the gentleman who called for the instalments on the furniture.

In my notebook for this period I find many cases of the first importance. Some of these must be held over till the end of the war, but will doubtless be read with great interest by our great-great-grandchildren. There can be no harm, however, in giving here the details of the celebrated case of the Teuton's Trousers.

The shortage of trousers had been very severely felt, especially during the winter. The matter was, however, promptly and efficiently taken in hand by the Bags Department, and a Kecks Controller appointed. A trouserless day once a week had been suggested, but the suggestion was dismissed owning to opposition in every part of the kingdom except the Highlands of Scotland. The order of the Kecks Controller, prohibiting the extravagant use of these articles—except in the case of railway trucks—was obeyed promptly by all patriotic citizens. Even the "knuts" of Whitehall cheerfully submitted to a decree which debarred them from renewing their elegant encasements till after the close of hostilities. But the pro-German element in our midst was, as usual, busy; and it was soon suspected that these miscreants were making a deliberate attempt to cause a trousers' famine. By this traitorous means, a breach was made in the national defences—in fact, more than one breach; but Herlock Sholmes, as usual, was ready to throw himself into the breaches.

Indeed, it is not too much to say that Sholmes in these days of stress saved the nation from being compelled to resort to the universal use of knickerbockers.

I found him one morning in our sitting-room at Shaker Street, standing before the glass. He was endeavouring to compose his features into an expression of complete vacancy, approaching idiocy. This was not a difficult task for Herlock Sholmes.

He turned to me with a smile.

"A new disguise, Jotson," he remarked.

"What character, Sholmes, do you intend to assume?" I asked.

"That of a Government official, Jotson. In that character I shall be able to keep an eye upon the miscreants without risk of exciting their suspicion."

"True!" I exclaimed.

"I am already on the track, Jotson," said Sholmes. "If you care to accompany me to-day, I have no doubt I shall be able to show you a very interesting denouement."

"I am at your service, Sholmes. I had arranged to attend the funeral of one of my patients, but when duty calls——"

"Exactly, my dear doctor. There is no doubt," continued Sholmes, "that huge quantities of trousers have been bought up and hoarded by pro-Germans, for the sake of causing embarrassment at this critical time. But where are they concealed, Jotson? That is the question." He knitted his brows. "That problem, Jotson, I think I shall be able to solve. But you must be disguised."

With a few magic touches of his hand, he disguised me as a Member of Parliament, and we quitted the house together. We were on the track.

II.

"HUSH!" said Sholmes.

I hushed.

Sholmes' eyes gleamed as they were fixed upon a stout gentleman who was walking before us.

His blonde face, his expansive smile, and his generally well-fed appearance, indicated that he was a Teuton.

"Is that the miscreant, Sholmes?" I whispered.

"That, Jotson, is the miscreant."

I felt in my pocket for my revolver.

"Hush, Jotson! We must use strategy," said Sholmes. "He must be shadowed. Take care that he does not observe you."

By the simple process—suggested by Sholmes—of dodging behind one another, we screened ourselves from the miscreant's observation, as we shadowed him.

The fat man entered a tailor's shop.

"Sholmes," I whispered, thrilling with excitement, "he has gone to buy trousers!"

"Undoubtedly."

"We will seize him as he comes forth——"

"He may not come forth, Jotson. He may come third or second," said Sholmes, with his usual swift astuteness.

"True!"

"Moreover, as every citizen is allowed two pairs of trousers, Jotson, there is no proof against him so far."

"But——"

"Shut up, Jotson!"

I obeyed my amazing friend's injunction without question.

In a short time the fat Teuton came out of the shop. To my surprise, he was carrying no parcel.

"Sholmes, he has not, after all, purchased trousers——"

"Follow me, Jotson!"

We shadowed the Teuton along the street, keeping out of sight by the same simple device as before.

In a few minutes he entered another tailor's establishment.

When he came out again he was carrying no parcel. I was beginning to feel disappointed with this fruitless quest.

But Sholmes appeared satisfied.

For the third time the fat gentleman disappeared into a tailor's shop.

"Sholmes," I murmured, "the man is undoubtedly simply looking at the goods, and making no purchases."

Sholmes only smiled his inscrutable smile.

For several hours we shadowed the fat Teuton successfully, and watched him enter tailor's shop after tailor's shop, but on each occasion he came out empty-handed.

At last he hailed a passing taxi.

"Aha!" said Sholmes. "Our friend's morn-expedition is finished. It is time for the denouement, Jotson."

Sholmes uttered a sharp whistle.

Inspector Pinkeye and half a dozen special constables immediately appeared from behind a lamp-post.

"There is your man, inspector!" drawled Sholmes. "Arrest him!"

A moment more and the handcuffs clinked on the wrists of the Teuton. He was bundled into the taxi, and Sholmes followed him, leaving me in profound amazement.

III.

HERLOCK SHOLMES was in great spirits when he returned to Shaker Street, where I was anxiously awaiting him.

"Success, Jotson!" he announced. He laid a bundle on the table. "I have received my fee from the Kecks Controller, Jotson, and we are going to have kippers for supper. Call Mrs. Spudson!"

The kippers having been handed over to Mrs. Spudson for treatment, Sholmes sat down, carelessly resting his feet on the back of my neck, and lighted a pipe.

"Ah, you are in your usual state of astonishment, Jotson!" said Herlock Sholmes genially.

"Exactly! So far as I was able to observe, the Teuton made no purchases at the tailors' establishments he visited."

"Yet you have studied my methods, Jotson."

"True. But——"

"On the contrary, Jotson, at each of the tailors' shops the miscreant purchased a pair of trousers," said Sholmes.

"Yet he came out empty-handed——"

"I did not look at his hands, Jotson."

"You did not, Sholmes?"

"Certainly not! On each occasion that he visited a tailors' shop, Jotson, the scoundrel was a little stouter when he came out."

"I did not observe it, Sholmes."

"Naturally. But to the trained eye, Jotson, there is a distinct difference in the appearance of a man who is wearing a large number of pairs of trousers from that of a man with the usual supply."

"But——"

"The rascal's method was this. Under the order of the Keck's Controller the possession of these useful articles is limited to two pairs for every citizen. When he purchased trousers he donned the garments upon the spot."

"Sholmes!"

"By representing himself to the tailor as a Dutchman, Jotson, he avoided exciting suspicion. You are aware of the Dutch custom of wearing several pairs of nether garments at the same time?"

"True!"

"Each tailor, utterly unsuspicious of the trick, sold him one pair of trousers," explained Sholmes. "By donning the garments upon the spot, he concealed those he was already wearing, and at the next shop, of course, only his latest purchase was in sight. At the police-station he was searched, Jotson, and no fewer than two hundred and seventy-seven pairs of trousers came to light."

"Sholmes!"

"And this game has been played under the eyes of the official police for a long time," smiled Sholmes. "Inspector Pinkeye would never have noticed the trifling detail that put me on the track—the fact that after each visit to a shop the rascally Teuton's circumference had increased. But it is upon such apparently trifling and unimportant details, Jotson, that the trained mind founds its deductions."

"Wonderful!"

"Elementary, my dear fellow! But here come the kippers!"

THE END.