A QUEER BARGAIN!

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

GUSSY!

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

BY

Martin Clifford.

CHAPTER 1.

Some Punctures!

"PUT the pace on, Tom!"

"Yaas, buck up, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's. "We are on their twack, bai Jove!"

"Let her rip, Tommy!"

Tom Merry's head went down over his handlebars, and he pedalled harder than ever along the road over Wayland Moor.

Behind him rode Manners and Lowther, the other two members of the Terrible Three, and D'Arcy, Blake, Herries, and Digby of the Fourth. They were lightly garbed for a hard ride, and were fairly scorching along now.

It was Tom Merry's turn to make the pace, and he was making it a cracker. One or two of those behind him gasped a bit.

But none of them had the faintest notion of dropping out.

Somewhere along the road ahead Figgins, Kerr, and Fatty Wynn, of the New House, also rode their hardest.

Arthur Augustus spoke with difficulty as Tom held on without slackening up a short hill. There was no reason why Gussy should have spoken at all. But, however difficult it was for him to speak, it was yet more difficult for him to refrain from speaking.

"I wathah fancy that at this wate—gwooh!—we shall vewy soon have those boundahs beaten, deah boys!"

Tom did not answer in words. He simply lammed on more pace.

The rivalry between New House and School House was keen in everything, and when that morning Figgins & Co had challenged Tom Merry and his chums to a cycle race over a given route acceptance had been instantaneous.

In such a hurry were the School House juniors to take on Figgy & Co., indeed, that some slight confusion as to the real recipients of the challenge had arisen. The chums of Study No. 6 were certain it had been meant for them. The Terrible Three had no doubt that they were right in taking it up.

And Figgins said that he and his were willing to race the whole blessed School House if necessary. It was not necessary; but it saved a squabble among seven members of the School House.

The conditions had easily been arranged. Figgins & Co. were sportsmen; there was no need to make rules to provide against their seeking to take unfair advantage. And at half-past two Kildare, the genial skipper of St. Jim's, had started Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn on their carefully-oiled machines, in tip-top running order, from the gates. A quarter of an hour later the seven School House juniors were given the word to get on their track, and did so with all speed.

The fifteen minutes between the two starts made the race all the more interesting. No one could tell which band was gaining, and no one could afford to slack in the very least. The one thing to do was to go as hard as one could go, and then try to go just a little bit harder.

The seven travelled at a fine pace across the bridge over the railway line. Suddenly Jack Blake's voice rang out:

"My turn to make the pace, Tommy!"

"Right-ho, old scout! Set it up!"

"Pway do not be too uttahly weckless, Blake," said Gussy, wheezing hard. "I am vewy much afwaid that in a moment Digbay will be dwoppin' out!"

"Rats!" snapped Dig.

"An' Hewwies is vewy distwessed——"

"You'll be distressed when I get my hands on you, Gustavus!"

Blake swung past them, and to the head of the column as pace-maker. If anything, he made the pace hotter than Tom had made it. No one was keener on beating Figgins & Co. than Jack Blake from Yorkshire.

If his nose had been a long one, it would have been in rather dangerous nearness to his lamp-bracket as he led the way along the dusty road.

The voice of Arthur Augustus was heard again.

"Someone ahead, deah boy!"

A discordant peal came from the bells of the seven. The cyclist in front drew quickly to the left. Blake went past him like a flash.

"I say, Blake——"

But Blake was past before he had time to answer—so quickly, indeed, that he failed to recognise Cardew of the Fourth.

And the others went past every bit as fast. They had no time to waste upon Cardew, who had a way of being extremely leisurely with what he had to say.

He shouted again, and rode hard after them. But not for long.

"Too dashed hot for chasin' them!" he muttered. "Let them rip!"

For another five minutes Blake made the pace. Then came a shout from his healthy lungs.

"Hooray! Figgy & Co. ahead!"

"What did I tell you, deah boys? We've beaten them alweady, bai Jove! If they still had their quawtah of an hour——"

"They wouldn't be in sight even with a telescope, Gustavus! Right for once, old ass!" replied Tom Merry cheerily.

But then there came another sound—a sound between a hiss and a plop. All cyclists know it, and dread it.

Someone's tyre had gone seat!

Blake threw up a hand, and drew to the side of the road.

"Punctured, you fellows! Never mind me! After them!"

"Yaas, wathah! Oh, bai Jove!"

The ominous sound was heard again, and this time it was Tom Merry's hand that went up.

"Me, too!" cried Tom. "Go on, you cripples! It's up to you now!"

"Yaas, bai Jove! Oh!"

"What are you stopping for, chump?" snapped Tom.

"Because both my wotten tyres are punctured, deah boy!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

The three stared at each other wonderingly. This thing went past a mere coincidence. Within a few seconds and a few yards all three of them had got punctures.

"Must be thorns!" said Blake. "I don't see any hedge-clippings, though. Rotten, I call it!"

He let his machine fall against the hedge.

"Well, the others have gone on. And Figgy & Co. weren't far ahead," said Tom hopefully.

He was no less bitterly disappointed than Blake and Arthur Augustus. But he knew that there were four good men and true left to uphold the credit of the School House, and there was something of the practical philosopher about Tom Merry.

"It is vewy wotten that this should have happened to the pick of our cwowd," remarked D'Arcy thoughtfully. "I have nevah felt in finah fettle than to-day, an' if I had been left to wide the wace on my own——"

"So you're the pick of our crowd, are you, Gustavus?" snapped Blake.

"Well, deah boy, I flattah myself——"

"You do! You're always doing it!"

The cling-clang of a bicycle-bell sounded from the road ahead. But the rider must be riding very slowly, they thought, for he did not yet appear, and he must be very nervous, for the bell kept on keeping on.

Then he came round the bend of the road. And behold, it was Herries!

"Hewwies! An' there's Dig behind!" gasped Gussy.

"And Manners is in the same boat!" Herries proclaimed dismally. "It's all up! There's only old Lowther left!"

"There ain't!" called Digby from behind him. "Lowther's jolly well punctured, too! I saw him jump off just as I turned to come back!"

"My oulay toppah!"

No one inquired politely which of the toppers of Arthur Augustus was to be regarded as his only one. The occasion was too serious even for chipping Gussy—a sport which had no close season.

There were five of them now; and for quite a minute D'Arcy's exclamation was the only speech of which any of the small crowd was capable. The other four stared at one another in blank amazement.

It was clean impossible to believe that this was merely a series of coincidences.

Tom Merry was the first to perceive the true inwardness of the situation.

He stooped, and looked very closely at Digby's front tyre.

"My aunt!" he cried, in wrath and surprise.

Sticking in the front tyre of Dig's machine, their wicked heads gleaming in the sunlight, were three long tintacks!

CHAPTER 2.

Startling Information.

"BAI Jove!"

Arthur Augustus broke the startled pause.

But it was not at Dig's front tyre that Gussy looked.

Both tyres of his own expensive and elegant machine were decorated with a curious assortment of small, brass-headed

nails, tintacks, and little, flat-headed brads. The tubes must have been punctured in a dozen different places.

"And look at mine!" yelled Tom.

"And mine!" cried Blake.

"Don't brag! They're not in it with mine!" growled Herries.

"Look at the road, too!" cried Tom. "Just look at the road, you chaps!"

It paid for looking at, though the sight was naturally not a pleasant one for the five.

A ten-yard square of the road had been liberally strewn with miscellaneous nails.

Digby dropped to his knees on the grass, and squinted along the surface. He could see the evil points sticking up, the heads glistening, wherever he looked over that section.

"Whole handfuls of 'em—giddy handfuls!" said Herries, breathing hard through his nose.

"What's it mean, Blake?" said Dig.

"Oh, ask me another! Dashed if I know!" replied Blake crossly.

"They must have been thrown down after Figgy & Co. passed," said Digby. "No one could have ridden over that little lot and gone unpunctured. But ——"

"It wasn't those chaps!" said Tom at once. "It couldn't have been—simply couldn't!"

"I didn't mean that it was," Dig answered. "They play the game. But that means it must have been done since they passed, don't it?"

"Yes; and by someone who knew we should be coming after them," said Blake. "That ought to give us a chance to find out. It's narrowed down to minutes."

"But we have seen no one, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "If the miscweant once got cleah—as it appeahs he must have done—it weally does not help us much to know when the howwid deed was put thwough."

"Oh, you're a fatheaded ass, Gustavus! It ought to help no end!" returned Herries.

It spoke volumes for the genuine respect that the School House chums entertained for their rivals of the New House that not one of them believed for a moment that Figgins & Co. could have been guilty.

And just as readily would the New House trio have scouted any insinuation against these fellows, had such been made.

They knew each other too well for this sort of thing to be possible. Any jape that was really a jape—but this was not. There were fellows at St. Jim's who would so have regarded it; but Figgins & Co. were most certainly not of their number.

"Who could have done it, Merry?" said Blake.

"Blessed if I know! At least—well, I know some fellows who are rotters enough, but that proves nothing, does it?"

"Unless we can find out that they've been along here," said Dig.

Arthur Augustus, with his famous monocle screwed into his eye, gazed down the road.

"Here comes Cardew, deah boys. Pewwaps he can tell us somethin'."

"As he was going the same way as we were, I don't see much chance of it," replied Tom.

"My hat, he's moving!" said Blake. "You don't often see old Cardew in such a hurry."

Cardew was certainly coming on at a great pace. Quite a little cloud of dust hung behind his rear wheel. And he rode up to them in a breathless state, most unusual in the languid, cool dandy of the Fourth.

"So you're all boxed?" he said, the cloak of languor seeming to fall upon him again, and the old drawl returning. "Rather reckless of you to buzz on as you did when I shouted to you 'way back there!"

"We were racing!" snapped Blake.

"An', of course, you couldn't be expected to cry 'Halt!' just for a chat by the wayside," Cardew replied. "Well, no; I see that. All the same, I fancy you'd have had a chance to put up a better race if you had paid heed. I spurted a bit to catch you up; but you chaps are so dashed vigorous! You've made me perspire as it is; an' it's against my merry principles, perspirin' unnecessarily. So it was here the rotters sprinkled the nails, was it?"

Tom Merry looked at Cardew hard. In these later days the School House brigade had come to like Cardew—yes, and to trust him, too. A term or two back they might have suspected that he had had a hand in their discomfiture. He had had a hand in worse things.

But it was impossible to suspect him now. The summer term had drawn closely together the chums of No. 9—Cardew and Ernest Levison and Sidney Clive—and Tom Merry's circle.

"Look here, Cardew, if you know anything——"

"I know somethin', Merry. If I were a particularly innocent an' confidin' chap, like our pal D'Arcy here——"

"Wats, Cardew!"

"But you are, you know, old man! Who else would have listened as you did to the siren song of Blinko Brothers? If I were like D'Arcy, I repeat, I might assume that I knew everythin'. Not bein' so, I reserve judgment."

"Oh, get on with the giddy washin', Cardew, do!" groaned Blake.

"No hurry," said Cardew coolly. "The race havin' petered out, owin' to the nefarious activities of some person or persons unknown, you chaps have all the time there is, an' that ought to be enough to hear my tale the way I choose to tell it."

"Seems to me, you don't choose to tell it at all," grumbled Dig.

"But, by gad, you fellows do interrupt so!"

"Cardew is quite wight," said Arthur Augustus. "The mannah in which intewwuptions——"

"Oh, ring off, Gustavus! You're doing it yourself!"

Arthur Augustus put up his monocle, and regarded Herries through it with severe disapproval.

"Weally, Hewwies——"

"Jawbone solo by our champion ass will take place in the next field—by order!" said Digby.

"Get on, Cardew!" said Tom.

A Narrow Squeak!
(See Chapter 9.)

"I happened to drop into an ironmonger's shop for some brads Clive wanted, and the chap who keeps the shop hadn't one left. He'd just sold out all his small nails."

"My hat!"

"An' it was to two St. Jim's fellows he'd sold out."

"Bai Jove!"

"Two bobs' worth—no less! Small stock for an ironmonger, of course. But it's war-time, an' I suppose all the giddy nails are needed for hammerin' into the merry old Kaiser's coffin."

"Bai Jove! Let's go back to Wayland at once, deah boys, an' discovah who the wottahs were!"

"You won't think there's any need when you've heard the whole yarn, D'Arcy," said Cardew, with his most cynical grin.

"Why not? Oh, did you get a descwiption of them, deah boy?"

"No. The ironmonger johnny wasn't a descriptive artist. All he could tell me

was that one of the merry conspirators called the other——"

Cardew paused in the most tantalising way.

"What?"

"Oh, go on!"

"One of them called the other Figgins!"

The five who heard gasped.

Arthur Augustus was the first to speak.

"We were quite suah it couldn't be, deah boys," he said. "But we were w'ong!"

"I reckoned you were safe to jump to a conclusion," said Cardew coolly.

"But weally, Cardew, why should one wottah call anothah wottah Figgins, if that was not the othah wottah's name?"

"Figgy ain't a rotter!" said Dig. stoutly.

"Because they were rotters!" replied Cardew.

"You mean——"

"I might call D'Arcy 'Railton'—it wouldn't be any big compliment to our esteemed Housemaster, I'll admit. Equally, an' likewise, it wouldn't prove that D'Arcy was Railton."

"But it might lead an outsider to suppose that it was his name, you mean?"

"You score a bull there, Merry!"

"Seems to me you don't believe it was Figgy, Cardew," said Blake.

"I? Oh, I haven't anything to do with the case!"

"But you don't believe it, all the same?" persisted Blake.

"I wouldn't hang a dog—I wouldn't even have Baggy Trimble scragged—on the evidence!"

"That's because you're sure Figgins & Co. wouldn't go in for so low a dodge," Herries said.

"My dear chap, I'm not goin' to guarantee anyone. It's not in my line. An' why should I have such pathetic faith in Figgins & Co., when it's extremely doubtful whether they would return the compliment? If the chap had said 'Cardew,' an' our dear friend Figgins had heard about it, I rather fancy our dear friend Figgins would require further evidence before he acquitted me without a stain on my character!"

"That ain't the thing. The thing is whether you believe that these chaps played us this low trick!" said Blake bluntly.

"Not at all! I'm not in it. The thing is whether you believe it," Cardew answered.

He was exasperating. But he was right. That was the real question.

"By the way, the other fellow was addressed as Kerr," added the dandy of the Fourth.

He seemed to enjoy their puzzlement.

Firm as was their belief in the straightness of Figgins & Co., they were genuinely puzzled.

Cardew's insinuations pointed to his notion that there was trickery at work. But then Cardew had proved himself tricky before this; and, though they were sure that he was not trying to take them in now, they were by no means sure that he was not suspicious without due cause.

It was hard to believe in the guilt of the New House fellows. For Tom Merry and Jack Blake it was more than hard—it was simply impossible.

Very much the same felt Digby and Herries. But Arthur Augustus, though as a rule the least apt of the five to entertain suspicions, took another view—which may have been due to what Dig called "ram-headedness."

"Look heah, it's a put-up job on us!" said Gussy. "Do you see, deah boys? There wasn't weally any wace at all. That was just part of the giddy jape!"

"Then it ain't at all the kind of jape I cotton to," replied Tom Merry seriously. "And it doesn't sound like the kind of jape Figgy & Co. would go in for."

"If it was that way——"

"Of course they might look upon it as a practical joke——"

"A vewy wotten pwactical joke!"

"It doesn't make me laugh," said Tom.

"Ha, ha, ha! It wouldn't, of course!" Cardew said.

"I don't see any point in it," remarked Blake.

"Try the tintacks," suggested the one who had not been a victim.

"Rats! We don't want any of your chipping, thanks, Cardew!"

"Well, you didn't seem to want my warnin'. An' you don't want my hints—though they might be useful. Have it your own way! I don't yearn to butt in, y'know."

And Cardew wheeled his bike along the grass till he had reached what seemed a clear stretch of the road, mounted, and pedalled slowly away, with a weather eye open for the glimmer of nails.

Again the five looked at one another. Then they looked up the road. Manners and Lowther were approaching together. Cardew got off and spoke with them. The sound of his laughter came to the ears of the five, and they did not feel pleased with him.

"It ain't a thing to chortle about, look at it any way you like!" Herries said.

"I shall have to get a new inner tube," groaned Dig. "And they're up. Everything's up, on account of the jolly old war. It can't have been Figgy & Co., and yet——"

That was how the rest felt.

It could not have been Figgins & Co. And yet——

CHAPTER 3.
For Sale!

"HAS anyone a repair outfit?" asked Tom Merry.

No one had. Everyone was travelling light. Mudguards and wallets had alike been removed.

"The rotters who did this ought to be bumped on their beastly nails!" said Manners wrathfully.

He and Lowther had joined the other five. Manners was as angry as anyone, and the humorous Monty could see no joke in this affair.

"Look here," said Tom, "we don't want anyone else to come to grief on this chevaux-de-frise, so——"

"This which, Tommy?" inquired Lowther, with a hand to his ear.

"Oh, you wouldn't understand, not being intelligent. Look it up in the dic.! Anyway, we ought to have a shot at removing those nails."

"I thought they were shevo-de-freezes, or something in Hebrew like that," Lowther said.

"You didn't. You can't think!" rapped out Tom.

"If Lowther had had a scrap of sense he'd have gone on and caught those bounders!" said Blake. "He was the last to puncture, and he did it after he'd got ever so far from where it happened to us!"

"Activo with me—I did it! Passive with you—it happened to you! I perceive the difference, Blake," replied Lowther, blandly. "As to sense, I've enough to keep me from going down on hands and knees to pick tintacks off the road. It may be for the benefit of posterity; but, as another genius remarked before me, what has posterity ever done for me?"

"If it did what you deserve, it would jolly well scrag you!" said Herries.

"I'm content to wait for it to—— that is, if I must be scragged," replied Lowther.

"Who talked about going down on hands and knees, ass?" snapped Tom. "Ah, that's the game, Dig! You were born with more sense than this old piffler will ever have if he lives to the age of Old Parr."

"Whose male parent was old pa?" asked the irrepressible.

But no one paid any heed to him.

Digby, always practical, had cut a branch with plenty of leaves and small twigs upon it, and was using it as a broom to sweep the road. It proved pretty effective, too. Lowther, indeed, expressed his opinion that, as a dust-raising instrument, it deserved patenting.

"Best thing we can do now is to cut along to Mrs. Kemp's, and get an outfit or two," said Tom. "The old lady always keeps some."

"Bai Jove, I'd quite forgotten that we were anywheah neah Mrs. Kemp's," said Arthur Augustus.

"It isn't more than half a mile, and if that bit's out of our way it will be a heap better than hoofing it all the way back."

"Oh, wathah!"

The seven wheeled their bikes up a narrow side-road, till they came to a small shop.

It did not look a particularly good place for even the smallest of shops, and, as a matter of fact, it was not. Mrs. Kemp's wants were modest, and there was a hamlet of a hundred souls or so just round the corner, and somehow the good old dame had contrived to keep going.

Now, however, she seemed to have reached her limit.

"Hallo! What's happened?" asked Jack Blake, in surprise that was almost dismay.

It was some time since any of the seven had visited Mrs. Kemp's establishment. But they had always liked the old lady, and her clean, neat little cottage, with its diamond paned windows, in one of which an assortment of sweet-bottles, bootlaces, and the like, testified to the fact that the place was an emporium—as Lowther said—as well as a residence.

They had had tea in the garden there more than once—a homely tea, but with everything of the best, and made by Mrs. Kemp herself.

But now the garden presented an appearance by no means inviting. The once spick-and-span flower-beds were overgrown with weeds, and the lawn was covered with long seeding grasses.

Blake pointed to a notice-board nailed to a tree by the gate.

They all read the notice. It was a long one, giving details of all that counted for anything in the cottage and garden. And all was for sale, it said.

"Something pretty serious must have happened," remarked Blake.

"It looks as if Mrs. Kemp is wetiahin' fwom business, bai Jove! And yet one can scawcely imagine her havin' made enough cash in this little place for that," said Arthur Augustus thoughtfully.

"Scarcely ain't the word," said Dig. "She simply can't have done."

And the notice said "must be sold," and "no reasonable offer refused," which suggested other causes than retirement on a competence.

Blake pushed open the gate. He had forgotten all about his punctured tyre. Blake had been fond of Mrs. Kemp. She was very much like an old nurse of his childish days.

But they had all liked her, for that matter. The silvery-haired old lady had had a way of making them feel that they were guests, not merely customers. And she had given good value always.

She stood behind the little counter,

looking much older and more worn than when any of them had last seen her. But the old kindly smile welcomed them.

"It's a pleasure to see you all again, young gentlemen," she said.

"Yaas; but the pleasuah is on our side——"

"We ought to have——"

"Look here, Mrs. Kemp, why are you leaving Ivy Cottage?" asked Blake, in the blunt way he had that was so seldom rude for all its bluntness. "We've seen that notice, of course. But surely you aren't giving up business altogether?"

The old lady smiled tremulously.

"I—— Well, then, Master Blake, I must! There's no two ways about it!" she answered. "I leave here next Thursday!"

"That's the day of the sale," remarked Tom.

"Yes. I shall leave as soon as it's over."

"And where are you going, Mrs. Kemp?" asked Lowther. "We mustn't lose you altogether, you know!"

"I don't know yet."

The old lady spoke with a quiet, resigned dignity; but her hands fidgeted nervously with the scales—those scales which had weighed out so many pounds of the best home-made toffee to generations of St. Jim's juniors.

"It's over forty years since I came here," she said. "That was after my husband died. Of course, I never made big profits. But I always paid my way, and I could have gone on doing so but for this terrible war. There are so few visitors now, and money seems scarce round here, though they tell me the workers are better off in many districts. All my little savings have gone in trying to hold on. And now the end has come!"

"Bai Jove, I am sowway, Mrs. Kemp!" said Gussy. And—which was not always the case—Gussy voiced the feeling of all present.

"But the sale ought to bring in quite a decent sum," said Manners.

"It won't raise the eighty pounds I owe for rent and repairs and debts for stock, I fear. If it does, indeed, I shall be almost happy. I hate the thought of anyone's losing money through trusting me."

They understood that, even at best, there was unlikely to be anything coming to Mrs. Kemp out of the sale.

"I don't believe you can be turned out," said Herries. "I know there are new laws about that sort of thing since the war began."

Mrs. Kemp shook her head.

"I have been told that. It is nothing to me, Master Herries. You see, I could not bear to go on living here like that when I knew that the landlord could find another tenant to pay the rent, once I was out."

"But what in the world are you going to do?" Dig asked.

"I haven't had time to make plans yet."

It looked like the workhouse for Mrs. Kemp. But anyone of the seven would have bitten his tongue out sooner than have spoken that hated word in her hearing.

"Can't the landlord wait?" asked Tom Merry.

"He has waited. I consider that he has been very kind. But he is really a stranger, and the war has hit him hard, too. The rent has piled up, and there were repairs that I had to do, by my lease, and that he was good enough to advance the money for. It got so that I couldn't ask him to wait any longer. The load of debt was crushing me."

"But you could go on if it was paid?" Blake asked.

"Oh, yes. My living expenses are very small indeed. But I cannot go on without stock, and I have made up my mind that it would not be honest to incur a single penny more of debt."

"Then, if you had eighty pounds now, Mrs. Kemp, evewythin' would be all wight?" asked D'Arcy eagerly.

"Yes, Master D'Arcy. But what is the good of wishing? It seems to me now that I might as well wish for eight thousand!"

"Wubbish, Mrs. Kemp! Oh, I beg your pardon! I do, twuly! It was vewy wemiss of me to speak in that way to a lady. But I absolutely wefuse to wegard eighty pounds as an impossible sum. It is not weally a large sum at all. An', undah the pwesent circs, it simplay must be waised somehow. Pway don't let this cloud pwess too heavily upon you, my deah old fwiend! You will find that it has a silvah linin' all wight!"

Gussy spoke very earnestly indeed, and no one felt disposed to grin at his optimism. But really he was much too optimistic. The other six could see no warrant at all for his raising hopes in Mrs. Kemp's mind.

"Gustavus, you ass!"

"It is wude to whispah, Blake, an' I emphatically wefuse to be interwupted!"

"But——"

"Pway wefwain fwom waisin' sillay objections! You know vewy well that the ideah of Mrs. Kemp's bein' turned out of house an' home for a sum like eighty pounds is imposs—absurd!"

"But——"

"The money must be waised, deah boys!"

They stared at him blankly. Their will was as good as his. Anyone among them would have practised self-denial cheerfully to help the good old lady out of her heavy trouble. But a large sum was needed in a very short time; and self-denial methods were quite plainly of no use for that.

"Pway set your mind completely at rest, Mrs. Kemp!" said Arthur Augustus. "On my word of honah, the eighty pounds shall be pwoduced by Thursday!"

The other juniors gasped. Mrs. Kemp smiled wanly, and a tear trickled down her lined face. But he was so very much in earnest that she was evidently comforted.

Arthur Augustus walked out with his noble chin in air. There was a lump in Tom Merry's throat as he asked for the repair outfits needed. He felt almost angry with Gussy. And yet—when had they ever known D'Arcy to go back on his word of honour?

Had he something up his sleeve?

They trooped out after the stuff had been paid for. Anything they could have said would have been an anti-climax after the astonishing promise of Arthur Augustus.

In the garden they swarmed round him.

"You burbling jabberwock!" said Lowther. "The thing can't be done, and you ought to have the sense to see it!"

"If it had been four months!" said Herries.

"But it's only four days!" chimed in Manners.

"When a thing can't be done it's of no use whatever to stand there looking like a silly ass and say it's got to be!" snapped Lowther.

"You've made her hopeful. That only means a horrid slump for the dear old girl when she knows the truth," Blake said dismally.

"I have given Mrs. Kemp my word of honah, Blake!" replied Arthur Augustus stiffly.

"But her landlord won't take that instead of cash down," Lowther reminded him.

"We must have a whip wound. I have funds. Aftah all, it was not so vewy great a misfortune that I was not able to keep my ponay."

"How much have you?" asked Tom.

"Wathah ovah twenty pounds, deah boy. If I had known soonah, there would have been a gweat deal more. I considah Mrs. Kemp was wemiss in not informin' us at once."

There was no need to ask whether Arthur Augustus was willing to part with all he had for the old lady's sake. That was plain, and he took no credit to himself for it, either. To Gussy's generous spirit it seemed the inevitable thing to do.

"That's something," said Dig thoughtfully. "The worst of it is that nearly everyone else is stony-broke just now. Even the seniors haven't much so near the end of term. You can't raise nearly sixty quid in boblets. And some of us can't spring even a bob!"

"We shall have to put our heads togethah——"

"Wood to wood won't bring Mrs. Kemp out of the wood, Gussy!" said Lowther.

"You're no end of a decent little ass, Gussy," Tom Merry remarked. "And your cash may help Mrs. Kemp a goodish bit, I should say. We'll add what little we can to it, of course, but——"

"I have given my word of honah, Tom Mewwy! If you cast furthah doubts upon the affaiah aftah that I shall considah you vewy offensive indeed!"

For the moment there was no more to be said. And, indeed, they all felt that it would be unfair to Arthur Augustus to say more in the circumstances.

But there is a wide gap between twenty odd pounds and eighty!

CHAPTER 4.

Figgins & Co. Are Annoyed.

"HERE they come!"

"School House duffers!"

A crowd of New House juniors had gathered at the gates. Figgins, Kerr, and Fatty Wynn were among them, of course, and in high feather.

On the face of it the New House had scored heavily in that cycle race. Their representatives seemed to have romped away with it. The quarter of an hour ahead had long since been worked out, and the minutes had piled up since then, and Figgy & Co. and the rest of the New House fellows interested had waited until they were nearly sick of waiting.

Now, pedalling hard down the road, as if still racing, came the Terrible Three and the four chums of Study No. 6.

The New House crowd cheered ironically. But Figgins and Kerr were puzzled—especially Kerr, whose face was very thoughtful indeed.

Of course, Figgins & Co. had expected to win. They always did expect to when up against the School House. And sometimes they did it, though rather more often their expectations came to nought.

But this was not a win. It was a walk-over!

There must be something behind it.

Yet if for any reason the School House seven had been forced to give up the race, why were they coming in at racing speed now?

"Come on, you cripples!" roared Figgins, preferring, naturally, to accept the view that he and his chums had won hands down—at any rate, until he knew of anything to the contrary. And, anyway, they had won, there was no denying that.

On came the seven, faster than ever.

"Wace, deah boys!" gasped Gussy.

And the dear boys raced. None of them had a watch. They did not know how long they had been at Mrs Kemp's, or how fast—or slowly—their rivals might

have travelled after they had been sighted ahead, but they hoped for the best.

"Only twenty-five minutes behind us, that's all!" shouted Figgins, as they jumped off, breathless, one and all.

"What?"

"That's only ten minutes, as they started fifteen ahead. Not so bad, after all!" said Dig.

"Rats! It's twenty-five beyond the fifteen!"

"You chaps must have been under a delusion," remarked Redfern.

"My hat! Fancy their imagining they can ride!" added Owen. "Of course, the kids can stick on, but riding's another thing. Challenge 'em again, Figgy, and let us in. Ten-mile course, and an hour's start for the School House duffers!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The New House crowd appeared to find the situation very amusing indeed.

But Arthur Augustus D'Arcy turned in wrath upon Figgins & Co.

"You wottahs know vewy well that in a weal race you would have no gidday chance against us," he said hotly. "We should simplay wipe the flooah with you! That, I appwehend, is why you turned the whole affaiah to a gidday farce by your sillay jape!"

"It is a bit of a farce, certainly!" said Figgins slowly. "But I jolly well don't see what we did towards making it so. We covered the distance in good time, and you were never in sight——"

"Wrong! We were!" snapped Tom.

"Well, we didn't see you!"

"That doesn't prove anything."

"You chaps aren't taking your licking very nicely, I must say," remarked Fatty Wynn.

"We were not licked!" snorted Herries.

"Oh, rats! Do you know what a licking means?"

"If this wasn't one——"

"It wasn't!" said Blake decidedly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It was not a pwopah wace!" stormed Arthur Augustus.

Figgins & Co. opened their eyes very widely at that.

"And why wasn't it a proper race, D'Arcy?" inquired Kerr quietly.

"Oh, well, we undahstand that it was a jape, of course, but——"

"What was a jape, you burbling idiot?" snapped Figgins. "We haven't been japing, I can tell you that. We took the race seriously."

"That's where you made a mistake," put in Redfern. "You overrated the opposition, Figgy, old scout!"

"I don't call it a jape," Tom Merry said.

"If you'd call it something that would give us half a chance of understanding what happened, it would be a bit of a help," replied Kerr.

"Did anything happen at all? asked Fatty Wynn, wiping perspiration from his forehead. Fatty was so puzzled that he felt as hot as though still racing.

"Don't you boundahs know that we were punctahed? You must have known that we should be punctahed!"

"How could we know, you prize idiot?" demanded Figgins wrathfully.

"You couldn't all have been punctured," said Lawrence.

"Don't believe any of them were," Pratt said. "It's just a blessed excuse. They're better hands at excuses than at riding bikes—that's the fact of the matter."

"Shut up!" yelled Dig. "I shall go for you if you say again that we were lying, Pratt! We leave that to New House cads!"

"Weally, Figgay, I must say that you are scawcely playin' the game," remonstrated Arthur Augustus. "It was all vewy well, deah boy, to bwing off a jape——"

"You howling idiot, don't I tell you I haven't been japing?" roared George Figgins.

"It was not a vewy bwainy twick, Figgay. I considah it unworthay of you. But it is not like you to deny it, I must say."

"Deny what? I haven't done anything, don't I tell you?"

"Look here, Gussy, you're taking a heap too much for granted!" put in Tom Merry. "No one but you is ass enough to feel sure that these chaps played that low trick, in spite of——"

"What low trick?" Figgins yelled, clenching his hands. "I'm going to punch the head of any rotter who says we played low tricks!"

In spite of their annoyance, and the circumstantial evidence which made it seem probable that Figgins and Kerr had been the guilty parties, none of the seven volunteered for having his head punched.

It was not because they feared the wrath of George Figgins, though that wrath was great; but because it was impossible for most of them to believe Figgins guilty—as Figgins took it like that. If there had been guilt, there would have been grins.

Only Arthur Augustus stuck to the theory he had adopted—that of a moderate or qualified guilt on the part of Figgins and Kerr. He held that they had done it, but that the manner of their doing it had made it a bad joke instead of a low trick.

"The nails you spwead in the woad, Figgay——"

"Wha-a-a-at? Say that again!"

"We wode ovah them, you know! You must have known we should wide ovah them!"

Nails in the road? And you footling, silly, idiotic imbeciles think we put them there?"

"But not to win the race—onlay to jape us, deah boy!"

"If you think that's our sort of jape—— Oh, hang it all! It may be the School House sense of humour, but when we say a race we mean a race—not beastly cads' tricks!"

There was silence for a moment. Figgins was observed to shake off the hand that Kerr laid on his arm.

Kerr was quite calm. But Fatty Wynn was only less angry than his chief.

"Did you believe for a moment that we put the nails there, Merry?" snapped Figgins.

"If I did think so, it was only for a moment," replied Tom honestly.

"Blake?"

"Don't jump down my throat, Figgins! Suppose I did think so, I had reason, hadn't I?"

"Not a scrap! Not an atom! Kerr, these rotters say we plotted to muck up the race by puncturing them!"

"I heard," said Kerr. "I should have had to be a bit deaf not to hear you, Figgy! There's some mistake, you know!"

"Mistake be jolly well hanged! They've made a false charge against us because they've imagined what it seems to me no decent chap would imagine. I've done with them! Come on, Kerr! Come on, Wynn!"

"I didn't think you chaps would play it so low down as this!" said Fatty, ambling after his leader.

"Hold on, Figgy!" cried Kerr.

"Hold on, Figgy!" echoed Tom Merry.

"Gussy, as usual, has opened his capacious mouth too wide, and put his elegant foot in it!"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"Are you coming, Kerr?" shouted George Figgins.

"I suppose I shall have to go," said Kerr. "Look here, you fellows. I can see there's something more than Figgy thinks at the bottom of this. As a matter of principle, I support Figgy. But if any of you wants to explain, I'm cool enough to listen, if Figgy ain't. Any of you but D'Arcy, that is. I've heard all I want to from him for a little while!"

"Bai Jove, there's somethin' howwibly mystewious about this!" said Arthur Augustus, gazing through his monocle at the retreating three. "Figgay seems quite angwy, an' Kerr was positively uncivil to me!"

"There's a blatant, burbling, piffling ass in it!" answered Monty Lowther, with unwonted bitterness. "Why are you so cocksure when no one else is, Gussy?"

"We all doubted it but you!" said Blake crossly.

"Weally, aftah what Cardew told us!"

"Didn't he tell us that—— But never mind! It's no good talking reason to you! The pap you call your brain can't get on to it!"

"I pwotest, Tom Mewwy——"

"Go and protest to your grandmother! You're enough to make a saint curse!"

CHAPTER 5.

Figgins & Co. Show Their Annoyance.

"THE silly, burbling chumps!"

Figgins smote the table with a heavy fist.

Tea was over, but not so the wrath of the mighty Figgins.

And it was really not to be wondered at.

If the School House fellows had been so unwilling to credit the possibility that Figgins & Co. should have been guilty, because the trick was too low for them, was it strange that Figgins, who knew himself innocent and would never have stooped to so blackguardly a trick, even against his worst enemy, should feel wrathy that friends should seem to suspect him?

That was at the bottom of his wrath.

However high might run the feud between School House and New House, Figgins & Co., Tom Merry & Co., and the chums of No. 6 would always be friends at heart. A real injury to one was an injury to all. And when the Terrible Three, or Blake and his band wanted help, it was usually of Figgins & Co. they thought next after one another—even before Levison & Co., of Study No. 9, who were always ready, or Noble and Dane and Glyn, or Julian & Co. Likewise the New House trio were apt to go to the School House for support in any but a House matter, even before Redfern & Co., staunch though those three scholarship boys were, and hefty as well as staunch.

So it hurt Figgins muchly, though Kerr was cooler, and Fatty had been mollified by a rather special tea.

Several more of the New House juniors had crowded into the study of Figgins & Co. Redfern and Owen and Lawrence and Pratt and Thompson were all there. And they were all inclined to egg on Figgy, which Kerr was not. Kerr was very level-headed indeed, and he suspected more than anyone else in this matter.

"The utter rotters!" said Figgy.

"Oh, draw it mild, old scout!" Kerr said. "After all, it was only old ass Gussy. The rest——"

"They believed it! Merry and Blake admitted as much!"

"They must have had some reason."

"You'll be telling me next we did it, Kerr!"

"I don't think so, Figgy. I've a pretty good memory, and it don't seem to hold anything of the sort."

"It's a House affair!" said Figgins angrily. Having hurt his fist by banging at the table, he had now taken up a ruler. "They have got to be japed properly—for their own good, you know."

"Oh, if it's for their own good, I'm on!" Kerr answered.

"I don't agree with tarring and feathering, as a rule, but that blithering peacock of a D'Arcy has fairly asked for it!"

"Good egg!" said Redfern. "Gussy in tar and feathers would be quite a pleasant change. When shall we do the dread deed, Figgy, and how shall we catch our hare?"

Tap, tap!

"Oh, come in!" howled Figgins.

And the hare entered.

His monocle was in his eye; his hair was nicely parted in the exact centre; his tie was a thing of beauty, and his waistcoat even more so; his trousers had no creases where they should not be, and had obvious creases in the right places. Solomon in all his glory would scarcely have outshone Arthur Augustus as he stood at the door, beaming in upon them.

"Pway excuse this intwusion, deah boys——"

"Oh, we'll excuse that all serene," said Figgins, with deadly calm.

Owen and Pratt got between Gussy and the door.

"We were just talking about you, Gussy," said Fatty Wynn.

"You do me honah, deah boys."

"I ain't so sure about that," Fatty replied, with an ample grin.

"I simplay had to wush acwoss to you fellahs diwectly tea was ovah," said the swell of the Fourth, still beaming.

"Oh, you had, had you?" growled Figgins ominously.

"Pleased to see you!" Kerr said, quite cheerfully.

"I believe Tom Mewwy and the west are comin' acwoss before long."

"We'll be ready for them!" Figgins said grimly.

"But as it appeahs poss that your natural indig should be diwected chiefly against me, on account of the mere accident that I said wathah more——"

"That ain't any accident, you chump! You always do say 'wathah more' than anybody else!" broke in Redfern.

"And 'wathah more' than is good for your health," added Lawrence.

"Deah me! You fellahs appeah quite on your ecahs about somethin'. Now, whatevah can it be? As a person of tact an' judgment——"

"As a which-er?"

"A person of tact an' judgment," repeated Gussy firmly. "Your mannah is hardly polite, Figgins. We weally had vewy good weason to believe that you stweyed nails——"

"That's enough! Seize the chump, you chaps!" roared Figgins.

"Bai Jove! What do you mean by it, Pwatt? Take your paws off me, Owen! Weally. Wedfern——"

Arthur Augustus went under, struggling hard. Before he had time to collect his thoughts the eight New House juniors had collected him.

"Wescue, Tom Mewwy! Wescue, School House!" he yelled.

"Oh, sit on his silly face, Fatty!" said Figgins. "We shall have Ratty up if he goes on like that!"

"No, jolly fear! I don't like being bitten, Figgy!"

"You uttah wuffians! I came here to apologise——"

"Well, you can do that after we've finished with you!"

"Yow! Weally!"

"Shove him on the table, you chaps! That's it! Hold his legs down, or he'll kick. Donkeys always do!"

"You're simplay wuinin' my collah, Figgins, you weckless——"

"I'm going to be a dashed sight more reckless than that, you fatheaded dummy! Got that old kilt of yours, Kerr? And I want the paint-box, too. And something to put on the bounder's napper!"

"What are you goin' to do? I wefuse——"

"You'll see. Refuse all you jolly well like! This is where we get even with you for your beastly slanders!"

"I nevah in all my life slandahed——"

From the cupboard under the bookcase Kerr produced a kilt of the most startling tartan.

There were at least a dozen different colours in it, and the blending of them was by no means artistic; in fact, they were rather chucked together than blended, and they fairly set on edge the teeth of Arthur Augustus.

"This ain't the tartan of my clan," said Kerr, grinning. "That's too inconspicuous to show up properly on the boards. But no one could say there's any lack of hit-you-in-the-blessed-eye about this!"

"Grooh! I won't be seen dead in it!" spluttered Gussy.

"You won't. But you'll be seen alive, which will be better. Look well over his fawn-coloured bags, eh, Reddy?"

"Oh, my hat! Oh, crumbs!"

Redfern & Co. were chortling with delight.

It was Fatty Wynn who produced the dilapidated fishing-basket.

"This make a bonnet for him, Figgy?" asked Fatty.

"Rath-er! Good egg! It will have to be tied on, though. D'Arcy doesn't seem to appreciate our kindness a little bit!"

Gussy certainly did not. He wriggled and threatened and expostulated. But to no avail. The only effect he produced was that of making George Figgins much better tempered. Figgy was working off his wrath—at Gussy's expense!

"Take it off! I won't have that howwid thing on me! The person who designed it must have been a colouah-blind lunatic! An' that beastly basket, too! It smells of fish! Yarooogh!"

"Well, you wouldn't expect it to smell of violets, would you?" asked Pratt.

Kilt and basket were securely fastened. Then Figgy turned to the paint-box.

"Oh, you wottah!" cried Arthur Augustus.

"Not at all, Gussy!" said Kerr. "A black nose will go nicely with that tartan. Don't use green or yellow or purple, or red or blue, Figgy; you've got 'em all down below. Black's the only wear for the noble nose!"

"Ay, ay! Black it is!" replied Figgins. And very carefully, very gently, with soft strokes that were ever so much more annoying than a hard dab or two would have been, he painted the nose of Arthur Augustus a fine, jet-black.

"That will do," he said, standing back to admire his handiwork. Gussy's hands were tied behind his back, and noblesse oblige prevented him from using his feet. He was tempted, but did not succumb.

"Figgay, you uttah wuffian! It is imposs that I should expose myself to wibald mewwiment in this disgustin' clobbah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the New House eight.

"It's one of those impossible things that have simply got to be done," said Kerr.

Figgins only said:

"Bunk before worse happens to you!"

"Nothin' that you wotten Huns could do could possibly be worse! Oh, you howwid wottahs!"

"Think not? What improvement can you suggest, Reddy?"

"Might hobble him at the ankles," replied Dick Redfern, grinning.

"Or fasten his ears together at the back of his head!" said Owen.

"Or put a ring in his nose," suggested Pratt.

"I don't think his face is properly finished," said Lawrence.

"A streak of white across the forehead and a yallery-greeny chin," was Thompson's idea, delivered after careful thought.

"You chaps are no artists!" snapped Figgins. "His face is simply IT! But we might hobble his ankles!"

But Gussy did not wait for that. He bolted downstairs in hot haste.

The kilt hampered him. He had never before worn "the garb of old Gael," but he suspected that when old Gael had donned it, old Gael—whoever he may have been—must have had it fastened up differently.

There was such a lot of it, and it clung round his knees, and got under his feet, and made him feel desperate beyond words. And his hands were tied. He could not do a thing.

He could not do much, anyway. But even with his hands tied together he contrived to get a grip on the awful garment and pull it up a trifle. He waited an opportunity to cross the quadrangle unseen. There was no chance of the assistance of a friend until he got across. At that moment he had no friend in the New House. And he felt that he would never be able to call any fellow there a friend again—not after this horrible treatment of a fellow who, impelled by his own notion of the decent thing, and knowing well the superiority of his own tact and judgment to those qualities as manifested in his chums, had taken upon himself a mission of apology and reconciliation!

Empty words! What did those New House pagans know of such things? They were utterly incapable of appreciating fine feelings. They were Huns—pariah dogs—outsiders!

But it did seem pretty obvious that they were not strewers of nails. They would not have been so drastic in their methods had they been guilty of that!

No use to wait longer. For a brief moment the quadrangle was clear.

Arthur Augustus choked in his throat, and faced the dread passage like a man.

He staggered out of the doorway, and bolted for shelter.

From above came roars of laughter. The New House juniors were leaning out of their window. Figgins, Kerr, and Fatty were in front, of course. Gussy could not see the rest. But he had no desire to look upon their faces at that moment—or ever again!

"Is that how you like it done, Gussy?" they yelled in chorus.

CHAPTER 6.

Several Rotters About!

"MY hat! Just look, Baggy!"

Percy Mellish, the sneak of the Fourth, had just ridden up to the school gates. Behind him wambled the fat form of Baggy Trimble.

Mellish had jumped off his machine, and was staring across the quadrangle. It was at Arthur Augustus he stared. And at first he quite failed to recognise him. But the monocle, still fixed in Gussy's eye, gave him a clue.

Baggy had not jumped off. For some mysterious reason of his own, Aubrey Racke, the cad of the Shell, had lent Baggy his machine. It could not have been from good-nature, because Racke simply hadn't any. It could not have

been love of Baggy. No one loved Baggy.

So it must have been something else!

Trimble was not at all a good rider. He was rather afraid of a bicycle, which seemed a thing with a very cross-grained will of its own when Baggy mounted it.

Racke's bike had a free wheel, of course. Also, of course, it had a brake—or it had had. That brake, being now out of action through Baggy's clumsiness, may be spoken of in the pluperfect tense.

Baggy was free-wheeling. He could not stop. Anyone else could have stopped, but that did not prove Baggy's ability to do so, Baggy being a most uncommon duffer.

So Baggy howled out to Mellish to clear. It was not so much on Mellish's account that Baggy objected to a collision as on his own.

Mellish, who knew Baggy's capacities for doing the wrong thing, would certainly have got out of the way in ordinary circumstances, even though the road was wide enough for a dozen cyclists, and there seemed no special reason why Baggy should bear down straight upon him.

But so fascinated was Percy Mellish by the sight he saw that the bellow of Baggy went unheeded.

"Yarooogh!" howled Mellish, as Baggy's front wheel struck him in the rear with force sufficient to send him sprawling on his face.

"Yooop! You silly idiot!" shrieked Trimble, as he floundered on top of him.

Mellish flung Baggy aside. Mellish got up, scowling and threatening. Baggy was the one fellow in the Fourth whom Mellish could terrorise. He did not often do it, for there was not much of the bully in him. But he was angry now.

"You blundering, barging, fat ass!" he yelled. "Take that!"

He gave Baggy a resounding slap on one fat cheek. Baggy did not exactly turn the other; but it was within reach, so Mellish slapped that, too.

"Yah! Stoppit! Oh, you beast!" burbled Baggy.

"Perhaps you won't be in such a blessed hurry to run me down again!" snorted Mellish. "Take another!"

Mellish was really too liberal. Baggy did not want another. But he had to take it.

"Yow-ow! I couldn't help it, Mellish! Why didn't you get out of the way? You know my brake won't act!"

Mellish picked up his bike from the ground, and strode towards Gussy. Baggy limped after him, wheeling Racke's bike and goggling until the eyes nearly dropped out of his head at the weird work of Figgy & Co.

"What is it, Mellish? Is—is it d-d-d-dangerous?" he stuttered.

"Rats! I dunno! He might bite you, you're so rotten fat! But I never heard that Gussy was a cannibal."

"Oh! It's D'Arcy, then?"

Baggy peered at Arthur Augustus in a wondering sort of way. At the best, Baggy's brains were slow to work.

Gussy had dodged back into something that offered more or less cover. It was only the side of a buttress, but it was better than nothing.

High hope was in Gussy's breast. He did not like either Baggy Trimble or Percy Mellish, and probably he was under no delusion as to the extent of their affection for him. But now he felt that they were welcome exceedingly to his sight.

For it hurt him far less that they should see him thus made a mock to the eyes of St. Jim's than that his own chums should. What did the opinion of Baggy and Mellish matter, anyway? But Blake and Tom Merry and the rest would say things about fact and judgment, and butting in—things that would make the soul of Arthur Augustus hot within him.

"Thank goodness you have come!" he said, as the two approached.

"I can't see that it's a fat lot to be thankful for," replied Mellish, not at all pleasantly.

"It is a gweat deal, for, of course, you will welease me, deah boy!"

"Oh, that's of course, is it?" sneered Mellish!"

"He, he, he! Why should we let him off now we've got him cornered?" chortled the magnanimous Baggy. "I vote we punch his head, Mellish!"

"You shut up, you fat worm!" retorted Mellish politely.

"Twimble, I wegard you with the most complete dispisewy!" breathed Arthur Augustus.

"He, he, he! I dare say you do. And I regard you as a silly ass, D'Arcy, and a tailor's dummy, and—and——"

Baggy's memory was poor, and he had no originality. But if he could think of no other opprobrious epithets to hurl at Arthur Augustus, he could go on chortling in triumph. And he did!

"Mellish, I beg——"

"Half a mo'! You quite love me, don't you, D'Arcy?"

"I cannot twuthfully say that I wegard you with affection, Mellish. I must admit that there are chawactewistics in you, Mellish, that I should be vewy weluctant to discovah in anyone for whom I had a weally fwiendly feelin'. But I wish you no harm, an' I may say that I have done you more than one good turn in the past."

"Oh, have you? I don't remember 'em. And, s'pose you have, you've chucked them at me as a chap might throw a bone to a dog! Even now, you have the dashed cheek to tell me that you think me an outsider!"

"If you have the least spark of decency in you, Mellish——"

"But according to you I haven't! All right! You've got yourself into a hole—shoving your silly, turned-up nose in where it wasn't wanted again, I s'pose—and you may jolly well get yourself out of it! I won't help you!"

"Hadn't I better punch his head, Mellish?" bleated Baggy. "He's often ragged me, you know!"

"As you like. I'm not going to. The chaps would say that was off. But they can't say anything against my leaving this swanking ass to it!"

Mellish turned on his heel, and went. It was rather an unusual exhibition of petty spite on the part of Mellish, who had not the rancour of Racke and Crooke. But Mellish had been in hot water more than once of late. Public opinion in the Form had made it warm for him; and when public opinion among the St. Jim's juniors lifted its head two fellows were sure to be in the forefront—Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and George Alfred Grundy. Those two were always sure something ought to be done, though they usually differed as to what.

Baggy stayed behind.

There was enough weak spite in Trimble, though he had the hide of a hippopotamus, and did not properly appreciate the contempt with which decent fellows regarded him. He could remember things D'Arcy had said that even to his obtuse brain could not be twisted into compliments, and he would very much have liked to punch the head of Arthur Augustus then—if he had only dared.

But, even as the eye of the brave man is said to have a quelling power over the lion, so the eye of D'Arcy—who was brave enough, anyway—quelled Baggy, who could not be considered by any means lionlike.

Twice and thrice Baggy lifted a podgy fist; but he let it fall without doing anything.

And then there occurred to him a better way—a way infinitely more precious.

"He, he, he! It was only my fun, Gussy, old pal," he said. "I wouldn't think of hurting you really."

"You had bettah not, Twimble!" snapped the swell of the Fourth. "You will wue it if you do!"

"But I ain't going to. What's the good of getting cross with an old pal, Gussy?"

Baggy put his fat face very close to the countenance of Arthur Augustus.

"Gwoooh! Don't bweathe down my neck, you fat wottah! I am no fwiend of yours, Twimble, an' I will not pwetend to be. But if you have any decency in you——"

"What will you pay me?" asked Baggy, with a wink.

Gussy's elbow made painful contact with his fat ribs.

"You—you w'etched blacknailah! You wotten shystah! You—— Oh, take that!"

It was lucky that the ankles of Arthur Augustus had been left free. He kicked Baggy with plenty of vigour.

"Ow! Yow! Yooop! Don't!" howled the heir of all the Trimbles.

But he howled in vain.

Monty Lowther heard his howls, and looked from the window of Study No. 10 in the Shell passage.

He saw a sight. Gussy, garbed more or less in the garb of old Gael—though it is not on record that old Gael wore a fishing-basket as headgear—was propelling Baggy Trimble across the quad by a series of vigorous kicks.

"Tommy, Manners! Oh, hurry up! You mustn't miss this!"

They didn't. Nor did Blake and Herries and Digby, who chanced to be coming out of the School House. Nor did many others. There was a rush. Julian and Noble, Grundy and Reilly, Dane and Gore—one after another they poured out.

But the later comers saw only Arthur Augustus floundering on his face, and Baggy Trimble running for dear life. That was none so bad; but it did not equal the spectacle of the kilted swell kicking the howling Baggy before him.

Gussy was picked up, and taken in, the centre figure of a hilarious mob. Everybody thought it very funny—except Gussy and Baggy.

"New House scores!" roared the voice of George Figgins across the quad.

New House had scored undoubtedly. But even Figgins owned a little later, when Tom Merry and Blake and Manners went across to make peace, that, on the whole, it had been a trifle rough on Gussy, who had meant well. For the matter of that, Gussy always meant well!

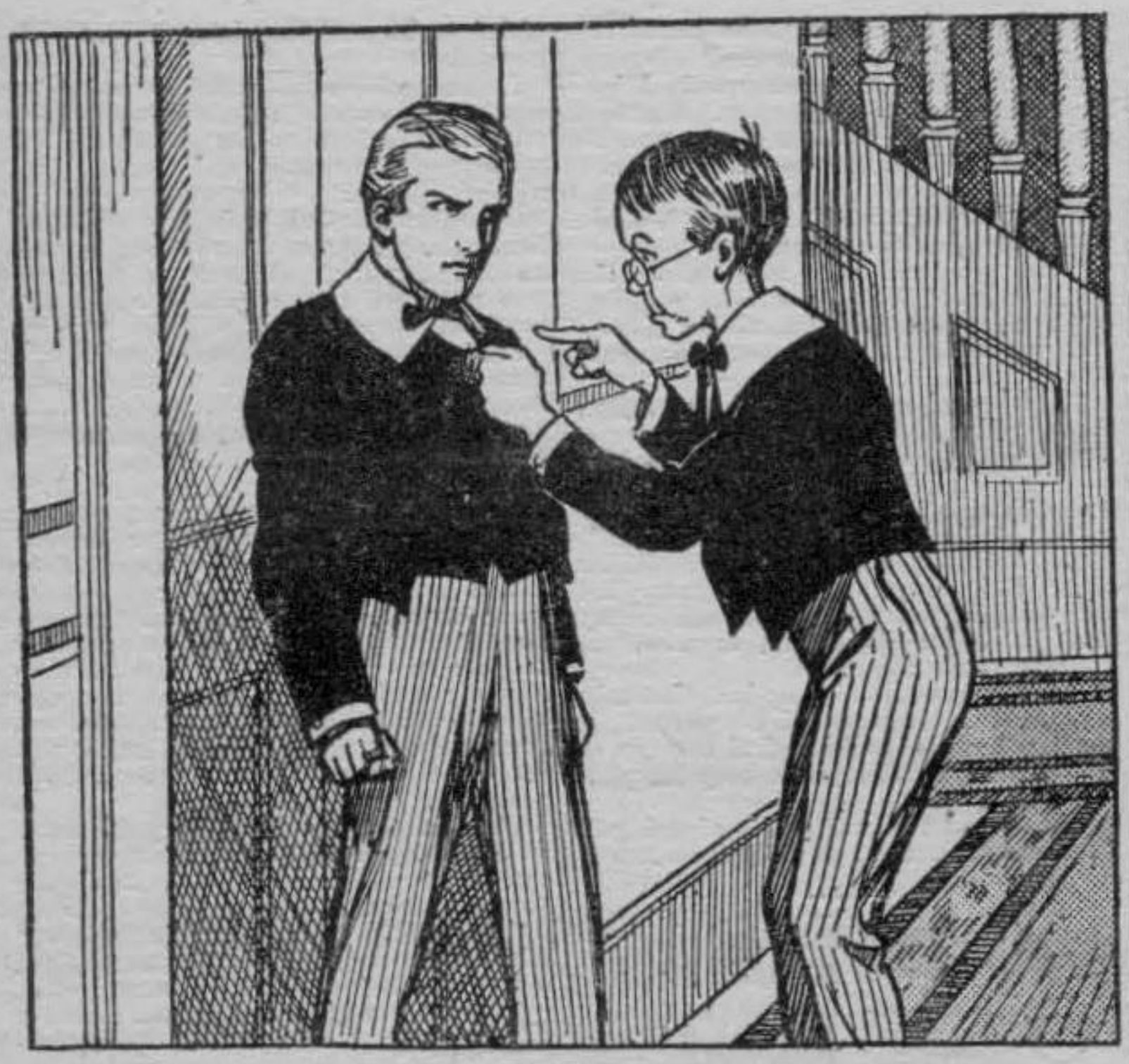
"The thing is, to find out who the rotters were that used our names!" said Kerr.

"Unless these chaps still believe that it was us—in which case, I'm not taking any trouble to find out myself!" snorted Figgins, only half appeased.

"Rot! We never did believe it, really! Even old ass Gustavus was sure that if you did it you meant it for a jape," said Blake.

"It ain't very pleasant to have anyone thinking a chap would go in for a jape like that!" Fatty Wynn growled. Fatty, as a matter of fact, had been left out—for fairly obvious reasons—but he felt it, all the same.

"Figgy, old chap," said Tom quietly, "we've ragged each other all ends up,



Buttonholing the New Editor!
(See Chapter 9.)

and called each other pet names without end; but——"

"That's enough, Merry! We know all serene. I'm sorry I got on my car. I say, though, it was a bit caddish of Mellish and that fat beast not to give your prize ass a helping hand! There are several rotters about. Two of them did that nice little bizney with the nails. It's up to us all to find out who they were, if we can. But those two were pretty nearly as bad."

"We'd skin anyone in this House who refused a helping hand after a House rag like that," said Kerr.

"Well, you may have to skin Clampe some day. He's capable of letting you down," said Tom. "I can't think of anyone else among your crowd. We've more, worse luck! There's no need to mention names, and I'm not going to say who I think played the nail trick. But—well, I fancy it must come out in the long run. By the way, you fellows know old Mrs. Kemp as well as we do."

"Oh, rather! What about her?" said Figgy.

Tom told the tale, and the sympathies of the New House trio were enlisted at once.

"We'll see to the whip-round here," said Kerr.

"But eighty pounds! Oh, great Scott!" groaned Figgy.

CHAPTER 7.

Cardew Has His Suspicions!

"YOU fat rotter!"

"I—I—— Oh, see here, Racke, you can't talk to me like that, you know! I'm not going to stand it!"

These words fell upon the ear of Ralph Reckness Cardew as he halted outside the bike-shed.

"You won't stand it—you!" roared Racke.

"No, I won't! Now, then! Your old bike ain't much damaged—not half as badly as it was when Skimmy bagged it. I——"

Cardew pushed the door open, and walked in.

He had just got back from his outing, and had missed the treat of seeing Arthur Augustus in the garb of old Gael. But it seemed that he had dropped upon something else interesting. He thought it interesting, anyway.

"No end kind of you to lend your jigger to Baggy, Racke!" he said. "Kind, but reckless—dreffle reckless! Now I wouldn't trust Trimble a yard with my bike."

"Mind your own business!" growled Racke, releasing Baggy, whom he had gripped by the collar.

"That is my business," replied Cardew calmly, "not lendin' Baggy bikes. Not half a bad line, either! Try it next time, Racke! Don't let your notorious kindness of heart get the better of your judgment. Dare to be a Daniel—a denying Daniel! Say 'No,' and mean it!"

"Are you squiffy?" demanded Racke, glaring at him.

"Not more so than usual, dear boy. I've been out for the afternoon, an' where I've been would be tellin', but I haven't come home rollin'. I've chucked all that, you know. Why don't you take a leaf out of my book?"

"Get out of this, you fat cad!" snapped Racke, pushing Baggy away, and hastening that much disgruntled youth's departure by a savage kick.

"I've a jolly good mind to tell——"

Another kick got home.

"Ow!" yelled Baggy.

He bolted.

"That wasn't kind, Racke," said Cardew.

"Rats!" snorted Racke.

"It wasn't, really. Of course, Baggy's hardly human; but there is such a thing as kindness to animals. Ever heard of it, by any chance?"

"Oh, stop your piffling rot! I'm fed up!"

"I perceive that the dear Baggy has not improved your bike. What induced you to lend it to him? But I know—sheer kindness of heart! It comes in spasms, doesn't it, an' the last spasm had worn off good when you booted the object of your benefactions just now!"

"I didn't say I lent him the bike," said Racke uneasily.

His face was a curious study. One might almost have thought he was afraid of something. It could hardly have been of Cardew, who did not look combative, but, on the contrary, seemed far more cheerily conversational than he was wont to be with Racke.

"No, you didn't. I inferred that from what Baggy said, deah boy."

"Baggy's a liar!"

"Shush! Baggy certainly does play all round the truth without ever gettin' perceptibly nearer to it. But liar's a harsh word."

"I'm not a mealy-mouthed idiot, Cardew!"

"Nun-no, Racke! Wonder what it could have been Baggy thought of tellin' me?"

The red spots on Racke's mottled face grew deeper.

"Whatever he tells you, it will be a lie!" he snapped.

"Even if he says Racke was kind to him?"

"Oh, go to blazes!"

"Thanks, no. I think I'll go to Baggy."

And Cardew lounged off.

Racke gazed after him with a look of bitter hatred on his face. There were not many things Racke would not have done to take the dandy of the Fourth down a peg or two, if they could be done without risk.

But, as more than one person at St. Jim's had learned, there was very real risk in meddling with Cardew.

"Hallo, Levison! What's the joke?" asked Cardew, entering Study No. 9 Study, on the Fourth Form passage, which he shared with Ernest Levison and Sidney Clive.

"Have you seen Gussy?"

"Frequently, dear boy!"

"Oh, that ain't what I mean, ass! Ha, ha, ha! Did you ever see anything funnier in your life, Clive?"

"Not often, old scout!" admitted the South African junior, on the broad grin.

Levison had got no further than that. He was wiping tears of mirth from his eyes.

"D'Arcy, though a connection of mine—not my fault, y'know—is undoubtedly a comic stunt; but I have not observed in him lately anythin' that would justify this—er—'wibald mewwiment,' to use his own eloquent language."

"Then you haven't seen him, Cardew! My hat, it would have made a brass monkey have fits!"

"I don't own any brass monkeys at present, so even that loomin' peril leaves me calm an' unmoved. What's happened?"

Clive told the story. Levison was helpless.

"H'm! So Figgins & Co. repudiated the accusation with scorn an' other miscellaneous emotions, an' played Fifth of November with my unfortunate kinsman, to signify the same?" said Cardew.

"That's about the size of it," replied Clive. "And, of course, they didn't do it. That sort of thing is not in their line. It's all very well for Gussy to say that they might have done it for a jape; but it was no jape, however you look at it."

"No, they didn't do it," said Cardew. "I'll answer for that."

"Do you know anything about it,

then, Cardew?" asked Levison, having managed to stop short of hysterics.

"Yaas, I know somethin' about it," answered Cardew, strolling to the door.

It shut behind him. Then it opened again, and he put in his head.

"I didn't do it, either, Levison," he remarked.

"Who ever dreamed——"

"Wasn't sure. Suspicious character, y'know, an' I can't deny havin' been near the scene of the tragedy, for Merry an' his little pals happened to see me! Ta-ta! I'm goin' to call on Trimble an' Mellish!"

"Silly idiot! As if anyone would think he'd do it!" said Levison.

"Of course no one would. But what's the weird beggar up to with Baggy and that oily rotter Mellish?"

"Dunno. Might be able to guess better if I knew where those two had been this afternoon," said Levison significantly.

It would not have been like the keen Levison to let so plain a hint pass him by. But his suspicions were mere formless ones. Cardew had something definite to go upon—the fact that Racke had lent his bike to Baggy Trimble!

"Come in!" howled Mellish, as Cardew tapped politely at the door of No. 2.

There was a slight smell of tobacco in that apartment. But it was not smoking that made Mellish look sick as Cardew asked:

"Either of you fellows got any nails you could let me have?"

"N-n-n-nails?" stuttered Mellish. And Baggy got down to look under the table for something that he knew was not there.

Baggy was afraid his face would give him away. He had no objection to lying; but he had learned that Cardew did not swallow lies easily.

"Yaas. I don't mean finger-nails, even if you use your knife to 'em first," replied Cardew, looking down scornfully at the grubby finger-tips of Mellish, in strong contrast to his own carefully-manicured digits.

Cardew might take too much care of his hands. Mellish was in no danger of erring in that direction, however.

"W-w-what kind of n-n-n-nails?" asked Mellish.

"Any old kind. Not too big. Tintacks would do the trick, or brads."

"W-w-w-what do you w-w-want 'em for?"

"That's hardly your concern, is it? I don't ask you what you buy nails for. I've merely asked you whether you can let me have a few."

"Well, I can't," said Mellish, plucking up courage to speak without stammering.

"Oh! Used them all up? Have you any nails, Baggy? Besides those you chew when there's no other grub about, I mean. I've no use for them."

"Grooh!" came from under the table. Mellish had given Baggy a gentle prod with his foot, which, taking Baggy in the waistcoat, was not so gentle but that it hurt.

"Sea-sick?" asked Cardew. "Stay under there if you are. I don't desire to be a witness to the disgustin' exhibition."

Baggy emerged, breathing like a grampus.

"No, I haven't any nails, Cardew," he said. "I haven't bought any for—oh, for ages! I don't believe you can buy them now. The Government want them all!"

"Ah! Kind chap, Racke, ain't he, Baggy?"

"Racke's a beast!" howled Baggy. "Bust his old bike!"

"Well, you did very nearly bust it," replied Cardew. "By the way, I hear D'Arcy's been put into kilts!"

"My hat! You ought to have seen him, Cardew! You never——"

"I think I'd rather see you in Highland garb, Mellish—or Baggy! Not sure which. But it ought to be one of you!"

And with that parting shot Cardew went.

"The brute knows!" groaned Mellish. "He's tumbled to it somehow!"

"But what did he mean about the kilt, Mellish?"

"You fat ass! Didn't I call you Kerr—and you called me Figgins—at Wayland, you know?"

"Bub—bub—but Cardew wasn't there!" bleated Baggy.

"He's found out, though! Oh, I wish we'd never let Racke and Crooke get us into this mess!"

"Do you think he'll let on, Mellish?"

"Do I think? Oh, you imbecile bladder of lard! He may not let on at once; but he'll hold it over us like the old johnny and the sword—Androcles, or whatever his silly name was!"

Mellish meant Damocles; but, that mistake apart, he was not so far wrong. It chanced to suit the whimsical humour of Ralph Reckness Cardew to keep the plotters in suspense.

"Got 'em all on a little bit of string!" he murmured, as he went back to No. 9.

CHAPTER 8.

Cardew's Bargain!

"ORDER, order, order, you noisy bounders!" said Jack Blake.

"Yaas! Pway contwol yourself, Digbay! I am chaiahman of this meeting'——"

"Oh, are you, Gustavus?" howled Digby. "Who elected you, I like to know?"

"Nobody has elected me as yet, but——"

"And nobody's going to! What do you think we want with a shrieking ass in the chair?"

"Must have Gussy," said Tom Merry soothingly. "Gussy's planking down the giddy dibs in a way that I can only describe as noble."

"Wats, Tom Merry! Any of you would have done as much, I know that vewy well, deah boys!"

"Then any of us has just as much right to be chairman!" snapped Digby.

"Do you want to be chairman, Dig?"

"Well, no, not specially, come to that, Tommy. You can be if you like. If you haven't got the dibs you've got more common-sense than some potty idiots!"

"The very shadow of a ghost of a compliment, that, Dig!" remarked Lowther. "Who are the potty idiots who have more sense than Tommy?"

"I didn't say——"

"I vote Gussy takes the chair," cut in Tom.

No one dissented—not even Dig. Arthur Augustus suffered his ruffled temper to be smoothed down, and took the chair.

The matter before the meeting was, of course, the raising of funds for Mrs. Kemp's benefit.

Already something had been done. There had been a hasty whip round in both Houses. And the result had been good—from one point of view.

Scarcely anybody had refused to help. But it was near the end of term, and there was little money about. St. Jim's was not a specially wealthy school, and those who had money to spare were among the few who refused.

Lumley-Lumley would have put down a substantial sum. But he was away—sent for in a hurry a few days earlier. Racke could have contributed generously, but Racke refused even a shilling. His money was not going to help the friends of fellows he would not be seen dead with, he said.

Crooke, who would not have missed a couple of pounds, certainly would not miss his contribution, for he offered sixpence, and was rude when it was declined without thanks.

Glyn had spent all he had on an invention. His people were away, and though he had written to them for a fiver, he was not sure that it would reach him before the fateful day.

Most of the contributions were in small sums, ranging from the twopences and threepences of the fags—Wally and Frank Levison had accepted no refusal except from Piggott, who was told to go and boil himself for a mean cad—to the half-sovereigns of a few who were able to raise such sums. Kildare's last half-sov went, and Darrel's and Talbot's. Dick Julian saw his uncle, Mr. Moss, and £5 went down on the list as from "Anonymous." Baggy Trimble, whose name did not figure, told Mellish, also a non-starter, that he wished he knew the chap with the foreign name who chucked fivers about. But it is to be feared that it was not for the sake of Mrs. Kemp Baggy wished to know "Anonymous."

But the net result was very far from what D'Arcy had hoped. It exceeded the expectations of the rest, truly. But it did not meet the bill.

"We positively must get it somehow," said Arthur Augustus. "I have pledged my word of honah to Mrs. Kemp——"

"We know all about that, and a rotten silly thing it was to do!" growled Herries. "You well-meaning asses are always making a mess of things!"

"I disdain your vulgah abuse, Hewwies," said Arthur Augustus frigidly. "At a time like this I have too much wespect for my dig to wetaliate by word or by force. The point is that I have pledged my honah!"

"Well, you haven't pledged ours, though it was only because you couldn't," retorted Herries.

"I'm not so sure," said Tom moodily. "I feel as if mine were in pawn. I can't help thinking of the old lady's face. She's depending on us, you know. And we can't do a giddy thing more than we've done, and that ain't much! Oh, hang it all!"

"Just how I feel," admitted Blake. "And it don't help things to say that Gustavus has got us into a hole, and must get us out of it. The old ass has done a heap. 'Taint our fault that we haven't quids to shell out, but no one's got a right to jump on Gussy!"

And Blake looked hard at Herries.

"That's right," said Herries frankly. "I beg your pardon, old scout! I can't say any more, can I?"

"Don't mench, deah boy," replied Arthur Augustus, with dignity. "But what are we to do?"

Lowther looked up from the list of contributors.

"Queer thing," he said. "I don't see Cardew's name here! He was in your lot, Gussy. Surely you didn't let him refuse?"

"Cardew wouldn't do that," said Tom at once. "There's no more open-handed chap here than old Cardew, though he's a bit queer in his way of chucking it about. I should have let Racke and Crooke pad the hoof home from Westwood, but he let even those cads have a quid."

"Thanks for a quite unsolicited testimonial, old sport!" drawled the voice of Ralph Reckness Cardew. He had entered unperceived.

"I did knock," he said. "But as no one heard I imagined the genial 'Come in, ass!' an' came in accordin'ly. How did you come to forget me, D'Arcy? I ain't a giddy philanthropist, an' I don't

know your friend, Mrs. Kemp, as it happens; but I've a fiver to spare, an'——"

"Oh, my poor bwain!" gasped Gussy.

"Poor, indeed!" murmured Lowther. "But there's some hope now you've seen it!"

"I clean forgot you, deah boy! I am weally most excessively sowwy!"

"Cardew was going to say something else," remarked Manners, with his eyes upon the face of the newcomer.

"Was I? 'Fraid I'm like Gussy, then. I've forgotten what it was! It don't matter. What I have to say ain't worth a heap, as a rule. Who's treasurer?"

He laid a five-pound note on the table, and Tom picked it up.

But Cardew was too keen not to perceive that the fiver did not put things straight.

"How much short?" he asked.

"Rather more than thirty-five pounds," answered Tom.

"H'm! The old lady appears to have been plangin'! Do you chaps really think you ought to encourage that sort of thing in the aged?"

"Wats, Cardew! Mrs. Kemp has done nothin' whatevah that calls for wepwehension. She has stwuggled like a Bwiton. She is uttahly honest, an'——"

"Sorry I spoke! I'll take your word for the good lady's extreme probity, D'Arcy," said Cardew, with more feeling than it was much in his way to show. He saw that the committee were very much in earnest, and rather in trouble, too.

He did not go. They looked at one another. Apart from Racke—who was out of the question—Cardew was the only fellow at St. Jim's who could put this matter straight.

Cardew had as much money as he wanted—far more than was good for him. His grandfather, old Lord Reckness, refused him nothing. It was possible that he had enough on him to make up the eighty pounds, even then.

"Look here, Cardew——"

Jack Blake began boldly, but paused.

"I'm lookin', Blake!"

"Can you advance us this? It's a jolly lot to ask, I know. But the old lady will do all she knows how to pay back—we're sure of that—and if she can't—well, then we must! You may have to wait, but——"

"I'll do it! An' I won't ask for the dibs back. But I'll only do it on conditions!"

"Good man! We don't care what the conditions are. We accept!" cried Blake.

"Yes, wathah!"

"Do you say that, Merry? You're rather specially concerned, as a matter of fact."

"I don't follow you, Cardew. Not more than the rest, I suppose? I don't see how, anyway."

"A bit more than the rest. An' Lowther an' Manners may consider they're more affected than these fellows of my Form. Because my condition is that I edit one number of your epoch-makin' weekly!"

"You edit 'Tom Merry's Weekly'?" gasped Herries.

"Yaas, that's the idea."

"But—what do you want to do it for?" asked Tom.

The question was a natural one. Cardew had shown no great leanings towards journalistic notoriety. Now, if it had been Lowther! But Lowther was already quite as much editor as Tom, in point of fact. Or Gussy. He was always being hurt because his stuff was turned down. Or Figgins. Figgy wrote serials of wonderful adventure, which did not receive the respectful and sympathetic consideration which Figgy thought their due. But Cardew!

"Put it any way you like, dear boy. Why shouldn't I be plagued with the cacoethes scribendi——"

"The which-er?" inquired Digby.

"The itch for writin', old sport. Didn't know Lathom had let you off Latin, by Jove! But there it is. Take it or leave it, Merry!"

"You're not willing to do it without that, Cardew?"

"I don't see why I should! I haven't the pleasure of the beneficiary's acquaintance. This is only a whim of mine, of course, but——"

They knew what Cardew's whims meant. He was as set on them as an ordinary fellow would be on what he called a resolution. He had always been used to having his own way, and there were times when he seemed prepared to go to almost any length to get it.

"What do you want to do with the little rag? asked Tom.

"Just what I like!"

"But what do you like?"

"That's tellin'."

"Oh, let him!" said Dig. "It's not much, after all."

But it was rather more to the Terrible Three than to Digby. They had nursed "Tom Merry's Weekly," slaved long hours over it, made it a genuine success. And Cardew was such a weird bounder! One never knew what he might be at.

"What do you say, Monty?" asked Tom.

"I can bear it, if you can bear it, Tommy!"

"Manners?"

"What do you say, Tom?" replied Manners.

"It's a go, then, Cardew!"

"One moment! I haven't the money on me. I shall have to write to granddad for it. Granddad will pony up! I've brought him up in the way he should go! An' he won't ask questions. But I may not be able to get him all in a minute. When's the oof needed?"

"Day after to-morrow," said Blake.

"None too much time. The old bird ain't quite as regular in his habits as you might expect an ancestor of mine to be. But I guess it can be done."

"We shall depend on you, Cardew."

"Right-ho! You might pin your faith to a more righteous chap who was less dependable. An' it's understood that I take over the next number of the 'Weekly'?"

"Oh, that's understood all serene," said Tom.

"Again, right-ho! I sha'n't require the help of any of you fellows, by the way. But you won't mind that, of course. Ta-ta!"

CHAPTER 9.
A Near Thing!

"WHAT will the bounder do with it?" Tom asked, when Cardew had gone.

Some such uestion as that was asked by a good many fellows when they heard the news.

Levison grinned when people asked him, grinned, and looked knowing. Clive, on the other hand, professed total ignorance; and, of course, he was ignorant, for Clive was reliable.

But it is to be doubted whether Levison knew all.

A good many fellows thought that the change might be for the better. There were quite "some" unappreciated geniuses hanging about St. Jim's, as Cardew remarked.

Grundy, in his lofty way, proffered contributions. He was willing to let bygones be bygones, he said. Cardew said it was no end noble of him. But the sentiment was not both-sided, and he must ask Grundy to get, as he was busy.

Skimpole buttonholed Cardew in the passage, and offered him a treatise on transcendentalism.

Cardew asked its length. Skimpole indicated a minimum of 25,000 words.

"Just a small piece too long," said Cardew. "If you boil it down to about ten, I'll consider it. Or you might do me a severely sarcastic article on the subject of Mr. Ratcliff, Skimmy. No vulgarity, you know. Nothing he could get hold of. But calculated to make him frizzle an' kick the cat, an' say eloquent things. Have you got me?"

But Skimmy, with bony hand to bulging brow, had to confess that the required contribution was beyond him, though he seemed hopeful of being able to boil down the transcendental article to 19,999 words—or thereabouts. And Levison volunteered to do what he profanely termed "the Ratty skit."

Cardew was very busy indeed. He seemed to be writing most of that number himself. Other fellows offering help seemed, like Skimmy, unable to get on to the idea—perhaps because Cardew was not explicit enough. But there were reasons why he shied at telling too much.

He had wired to his grandfather; but no reply came. It did not worry Cardew greatly; but it worried the Mrs. Kemp Committee. Unless the money came by Thursday it would be too late.

It had not come by Wednesday evening. Cardew had heard nothing, but was confident he would hear soon. Tom Merry & Co. were not so confident. It was not that they doubted Cardew's assurances; but, as Manners said, lots of things might have happened to prevent Lord Reckness' getting either wire or letter. And anyway, they all felt that they would be happier when the money was actually in hand.

Thursday morning came, and still there was no reply!

Now Cardew got anxious. Not for anything would he have let down these fellows or Mrs. Kemp, though not for anything would he have admitted that there was any danger of their being let down by him. At the worst, he meant to go along and do what might be done to stop the sale. But even he, cool as he was, recognised that it was a bit unlikely that the auctioneer would accept a schoolboy's guarantee for the money!

Between breakfast and classes he sent off wires to at least half a dozen places, at any one of which he thought Lord Reckness might be.

Trimble made threepence out of one of them. He did not tell Cardew, but it was quite easy—to Trimble's mind—to strike out six words and bring the wire down to the ninepenny minimum. The six words struck out left it unintelligible, but Baggy did not think that really mattered. And as the telegram failed to reach Lord Reckness it did not!

"What's to be done?" asked Tom Merry.

No one could suggest anything. No one blamed Cardew. They would have been as utterly at a loss if his queer bargain had never been made. And they knew that if he failed to keep it he would not be really at fault.

"But I have pledged my honah!" almost wailed Arthur Augustus.

"We can't leave the old lady in the lurch," said Tom. "It's up to us to—to——"

"I have it! We must go ovah an' explain things to the auctioneah! If he is a weasonable man he will wait. An' Cardew says the money may come by wiah any moment."

"Ass! How can we go over? It's likely we can get off classes for that, isn't it?" snapped Dig.

"I will go to the Head an' tell him all

about the affaiah. If it is pwopahly put to him by a fellah of tact an' judgment, I feel suah that he——"

"And I'll go with you, Gussy," said Tom.

"That's the style, Tommy! Then we sha'n't be afraid that Gussy's tact and judgment will give the Head a fit!" said Lowther.

But the mental state of Arthur Augustus was such that he allowed Lowther's rudeness to go unrebuked.

They were not gone long, and they came back with beaming faces.

"Looks as if the Head had handed you the cash to make up the whack," said Digby.

"Well, he didn't do that; but he put a quid down, like the real good sort he is. And he hinted that we might have gone to some of the other masters," said Tom. "But there isn't time now, and anyway, they wouldn't have made up the thirty-five."

"But what about going? Are you to go?"

"All of us! The whole giddy seven! Now isn't the old boy the brickiest of bricks?"

"Hooray!" yelled Digby. "All we want now is the money."

"And a pretty big all, too!" said Herries.

Cardew came up.

"Lathom says he doesn't require my presence this mornin'," he announced. "Seems to think he can manage the Form without my help. Queer, but true! Will one of you direct me to the place where the Shylock is performin' on your aged lady friend?"

"Why, we're all goin'!" cried Gussy. "Come along, Cardew!"

"Not cuttin' classes, I hope? Not playin' the wag, in classical language? I really couldn't countenance that, especially after I have been so virtuous as to ask leave of Lathom. As a sheep for the time bein' it would be out of character for me to mix with the giddy goats."

"Ass! We've got the Head's leave," said Tom.

"Oh! Well, let's get a move on us. We've time to run into Rylcombe first, an' wait for the second delivery, haven't me? Levison has promised to see to the wire, if one turns up."

There was some delay, for Arthur Augustus' bike needed repairs. The rest said it was Gussy's fault, of course; but he was sure that one of the patches made necessary by the puncturing trick must have worked off, and how could that be blamed to him?

But they were off at last, and they went at a round pace. Arthur Augustus was leading as they free-wheeled down a hill with a sharp turn near the front.

"There's someone coming! Ring your bell, idiot!" rapped out Blake, just behind him.

"It won't wing, confound the thing! Wing yours, Blake!"

"Haven't got one!"

"Bai Jove!"

Gussy had the narrowest squeak of a collision in rounding the corner.

"Yooop! You near done me in!" yelled a shrill voice.

Arthur Augustus gave vent to a shout of delight, and jumped off recklessly.

"It's a telegraph-boy!" he howled.

"Well, that ain't any reason why I should be run down an' killed, is it?" asked the boy, who had also alighted.

"Anythin' for me?" drawled Cardew. "These minor questions can wait, my lad."

"Name of Cardew?" inquired the messenger.

"That's the name, my son. Fork out!"

"I dunno—agin the regulations, that is. I ought to go up to the school and deliver to you there."

"But I sha'n't be there, you young chump!"

"Well, you could come back alonger me——"

"Wouldn't it be wiser to save us both an unnecessary journey?"

"I dunno about that. S'pose I delivered it to the wrong 'un?"

"These fellows can tell you who I am."

"He's Cardew, right enough," said Tom Merry.

"Well, 'ere you are, sir."

"Thanks, my son. Here's a bob for you," said Cardew, as he took the telegram.

He slit it open, and then he called the boy, who was just mounting, back.

"Here's half-a-crown for you," he said. "Cut along, bud, or you may get more."

"I dunno but what I'll stop," said the boy from the post-office.

But he went, well satisfied.

"It's all wight, Cardew? Oh, tell us it's all wight, pway!" cried Arthur Augustus, his eyes dancing.

"Yaas. We have only to toddle down to the office an' collect the cash."

"Hope they'll have enough," said Digby anxiously.

As a matter of fact, the postmaster had to borrow from his private till; but the sum was made up somehow, and Cardew placed forty pounds in notes in the hands of Tom Merry.

"But this is too much," said Tom.

"May be exes or somethin'. Don't give the change to Baggy—that's all! I ain't quite sure he deserves it."

"I say, aren't you coming with us, old chap?" asked Blake, as Cardew turned away.

"No. I don't really belong to the rescue party, you know. An' poor old Lathom may be pinin' for me."

He rode rapidly off.

"Rummy chap; but one of the best," said Tom.

"Come on, you cripples! No nails in the road to-day!" sang out Blake.

"I've a large-sized suspicion that Cardew has found out more about that bizney than we have," remarked Lowther.

"I've thought the same myself," said Manners. "But the bounder won't tell us till he thinks he will."

They rode hard for Ivy Cottage.

The sale had not yet begun. There were two or three carts outside, brought by intending buyers, no doubt. In the little shop were as many people as it could comfortably hold. When the seven had pushed in, it did not hold them comfortably; and there seemed no chance of getting near Mrs. Kemp, who was in the background, and had not yet seen them.

"Shall you hand it over to her, Tommy?" asked Lowther.

"Blessed if I know!"

The auctioneer began to speak. He said a few very kindly words about Mrs. Kemp, and called upon a Mr. Wallis, who stood among the crowd, and whose name some of the juniors remembered as that of a Wayland solicitor.

Mr. Wallis also spoke of sympathy with the old lady, and said that the landlord, whom he represented, had been very loth to allow of the sale; it was only the stubborn honesty of Mrs. Kemp—for which she deserved the respect of all—which had made it inevitable.

When he ceased, Tom pushed forward.

"You are here for the landlord, sir?" he asked.

"I may say that I represent all the creditors. There are but few," was the courteous, though surprised reply.

"If I handed you over the full amount owing—it's about eighty pounds, I know—the sale needn't go on, I suppose?"

"Certainly not! But——"

"Here it is, sir!"

"Bless my soul!"

Mr. Wallis stood staring at the little pile of notes that Tom had put into his hand. Mrs. Kemp tottered as she tried to make her way to her rescuers. The crowd moved back for her, and some kindly neighbour started a cheer.

Tom could not deny afterwards that Mrs. Kemp fell upon his neck and hugged him. And, though Tom Merry had the natural boyish dislike of emotional scenes he always maintained that he did not mind.

He got away as soon as possible though, and so did the rest. The crowd was making too much fuss, and Mr. Wallis and the auctioneer asked too many questions. But both were plainly pleased at the turn of events, and all the seven felt that it was quite safe to leave Mrs. Kemp in their hands.

They could go back later on and learn how she had fared. And they did. But Cardew refused to go and be hugged, he said!

CHAPTER 10.
Cardew as Editor.

THERE remained of all the tangle only two things which needed clearing up—the mystery of the nail-sprinklers, and the problem of what Cardew would make of his own special issue of "Tom Merry's Weekly."

In the eyes of the seven both were minor matters beside the difficulty out of which that queer bargain had helped Mrs. Kemp.

But Figgins & Co. still hankered to know who had taken their names in vain, and the Shell and Fourth generally were on the tiptoes of expectation concerning a journalistic enterprise that—so Levison said—was going to knock spots out of creation!

Cardew would not say when it would be out, or what would be in it, or why he had done it—or, in fact, anything but "Wait an' see!"

And they waited, and in due course they saw!

Somebody yelled up to No. 10 of the Shell studies after classes one morning, and Tom Merry looked down to find the quadrangle waving with the pages of a certain popular journal. It had always been popular; but under Cardew's editorship it seemed to have leaped at a bound into vastly increased popularity. The fellows were chortling over it, showing each other paragraphs, snatching copies from unwary hands.

It was Digby who had yelled to the Terrible Three, and he was chortling, too. The "Weekly" was not quite as dear to Dig as to some of the brotherly band.

But Blake hardly looked joyful, and Arthur Augustus showed a face of consternation. Gussy was more easily shocked than some of his chums.

He was shocked now.

"Bai Jove!" he burst out, his countenance the colour of beetroot, as Tom and Manners and Lowther joined the crowd. "Weally, this passes all bounds! It is full to the vewy bwim of the most scuwwilous mattah about mastahs!"

"It's hot stuff, Tommy," said Blake. "I'm afraid it means a jolly row for old Cardew. The silly ass didn't think about that. Listen to this stuff about old Selby. No; read it for yourselves. I'm not going to shout it out. I draw the line somewhere!"

Tom collared Gussy's copy, and Lowther took Blake's, and Gussy read with his chin on Tom's shoulder, and

Manners shared Lowther's paper, and they read:

"QUITE IMAGINARY—OF COURSE!

"The Editor—for this issue only—is a real live wire, and has no sort of use for an otherwise interviewer. So you may take it that, as he got a line on me for the job, I am also a live wire.

"'Go,' said he, 'and interview the gentleman—for a terminological inexactitude may be a very present help in time of trouble, and I have no desire to call anybody out of his name, except for the sake of politeness——'

"'You are getting mixed in your met-her-afores,' I told him. 'Cut the cackle, and come to the steeds with flowing manes and the speed of the wind in their polished hoofs.'

"'Wrong there!' says he. 'This one is plain donkey. Five letters to his name, and the same likewise to the designation and description of the Form over which he rules so Cainfully—I mean ably, of course—same old family!'

"So I wended my way, hoping for the best, but precognising in my mind that I was not going to the precise location where it was likely to eventuate and transpire.

"Mr. S—— to adopt disguise, though what avails disguise where all is so plain? Plain is not a word of sufficient power; but let it stand. It has one letter more than the correct epithet, and I shall insist on payment by line rates from the Editor. It is hardly likely to be lines for me should the object of the interview ever feast his codlike orbs upon this ebullition of my miscellaneous genius!

"Mr. S——, then, was present (not pleasant, Mr. Printer—don't libel him!) when I opened the door. I almost shut it again in the haste of my hurry, for I deemed that I saw the red signal flash which, to the perspicuous eye, betokens and portends danger! But at a second eye-shot I perceived that the ruby glow proceeded from the nasal organ—vulgarly conk or proboscis—of——"

"Oh, bai Jove! Mr. Selbay's nose!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

"Yes, I recognised it myself," said Lowther, with a grin which soon faded. "I say, Tommy, it's putrid rot, though funny enough in a way. He's been modelling himself on O. Henry, that American short story writer he's crazed about; but, of course, he couldn't be bothered to keep it up properly, and has stuck in bits of his own. My aunt, there won't be half a row if Selby sees this!"

"Scoot round, and tell the fellows to get the thing out of the way, **Blake!**" said Tom. "Selby may barge along any minute. Oh, and here's something just as bad about Ratty!"

"There's the Head, too!" added Manners. "But that's not so bad. The Head dreams that he's Toby, and is reading blood and thunder yarns, and gets excited no end, and wants to scalp people."

Blake did not usually take orders from the leader of the Shell, but Blake was hurrying about now, doing what Tom had bade. Copies of the "Weekly" were being hastily folded up and thrust into pockets. There was a stream of fellows indoors. Everyone wanted to read the stuff; but few wanted to get Cardew into trouble. And there would be heavy trouble if the eyes of any master every lighted upon those profane pages.

Three or four there were who seemed to have no desire to shield Cardew.

"I've paid for the dashed rag!" growled Racke. "I suppose I can read it where I like?"

"Do you want to get a chap the sack?" snapped Blake.

"Is the chap a particular friend of yours?" sneered Racke.

"Yes, he is!"

"Then I do!" was the pleasant answer.

"You rotter!" roared Blake. But he saw that it would not help Cardew's cause to make a row in the quad. Racke would keep. He passed on.

"Oh, I say! Look here, Racke!"

Percy Mellish and George Gerald Crooke were with Racke, and it was Mellish who uttered that exclamation. He had turned almost green.

Blake saw and heard. There was something on one of the middle pages of the paper which alarmed Racke & Co. That was evident by the manner in which they scuttled for shelter, as if dreading the wrath to come.

The quad had practically cleared. Blake went to Taggles' lodge.

"Who brought the parcel from the printer's?" he asked.

"'Is boy, Master Blake. I was told as 'ow I might distribute of 'em, an' keep the money for myself. That's hall right, hain't it? Them was Master Cardew's orders, anyways."

Blake almost groaned. Just like Cardew, that was! He had gone to work in a way calculated to insure the biggest circulation in the shortest time.

"Got any left, Taggles?"

"Couple o' dozen or so, Master Blake."

"I'll take them."

"Hall right! 'And over the dibs, that's hall I harske. I was thinkin' as I might put the price up, but not to you!"

"Oh, hang it! All serene! I haven't the money on me, but you shall have it within an hour, honour bright!"

And, only just in time, Blake snatched up the parcel, thrust it under his jacket, and bolted past Mr. Selby, who was coming up to the gate.

There were two masters at St. Jim's whose interest in the "Weekly" was still keen, though the rest seldom looked at it nowadays. But if Mr. Selby or Mr. Ratcliff chanced to see a copy it would be pounced upon. They knew themselves despised and disliked, and half hoped, half dreaded, to find themselves libelled.

It would never do for either of them to see this issue!

Mr. Selby scowled at Blake. But that did not mean much—it was Mr. Selby's amiable way to scowl.

Blake ran upstairs. There was a crowd in No. 10, and the whole crowd seemed to be slanging Cardew and Levison.

"You silly asses!" hooted Tom. "You'll be getting sacked if any master sees **the thing!**"

"Do you think they will be absurd enough to take it as seriously as that?" drawled Cardew. "Now, I consider it as quite legitimate skittery!"

"It's vulgah in the extweme, I considah!" said Arthur Augustus hotly. "A joke is all vewy well, but——"

"Oh, ring off!" said Cardew. "You won't be sacked, anyway."

"It's a bit rough on us," said Tom, "We shall have the little rag suppressed. Not that that will matter nearly as much as the row you'll get into, Cardew."

"Won't it, by gad! I'll stop that, Merry! The Head can't blame you fellows after I've weighed in with my explanation. What's the matter, Blake? You seem to have found somethin' pleasin' in my vile production. What is it, by Jove? I'd like to know, D'Arcy's valuable opinion bein' so terribly adverse."

"It's what didn't suit Racke and that gang," said Blake chuckling. "They turned pinky-greeny-yallery when they spotted it, the rotters!"

"Anythin' at all like the Macbeth tartan?" asked Cardew blandly.

"Is that the one with about twenty-nine distinct and different colours in it?" asked Tom.

"Yaas, dear boy. The one D'Arcy adopted y'know. I don't think he has any right to it; anyway, William's merry old murderer ain't in my family tree," Cardew answered, shaking his head.

Gussy's protest was drowned in the voice of Blake as he read aloud:

"PERSONAL QUERIES.

"Is it correct that the glass of fashion and the mould of form in the School House has lately visited the Herald's Office?

"And did he discover there that he can trace his descent from a certain King of Scotland, made of evil fame by the immortal pen of the Bard of Avon?

"And is it true that a few days ago he made his first public appearance in the Macbeth tartan?"

"You wottah, Cardew! Bai Jove, I shall give you a most feahful——"

"Shut up, Gustavus! You needn't mind—that's the mildest thing in the blessed paper! Listen here, you chaps!"

Blake read on.

"Are the rumours correct which suggest that a School House junior of a figure rarely seen in the Highland garb proposes to wear in future the tartan of the renowned and ancient clan of Kerr?

"If so, does he really consider an ironmonger's shop a suitable place for ordering his kilt and sporran?"

"Baggy!" shouted Herries.

"But an ironmonger's shop! I say, Cardew——"

"Don't you see, Dig? One chap called the other Figgins, and the other——"

"My hat! That's it! The sweeps!"

Blake read on.

"May we ask whether a corner in nails is contemplated?

"May we suggest that what's bred in the bone will come in the blood?

"And that it does not need a prophet—or even a profiteer—to tell that what is strewn on the road may come into the tyre?

"And that Crooked ways are not wise nor well?

"And that we shall be on the Racke of suspense till our queries are answered?"

Figgins burst into the room, with Kerr and Fatty Wynn at his heels. Figgins was flourishing a copy of the paper.

"Oh, you're here, Cardew! Are you dead certain of this?"

"Baggy's owned up, if that's good enough," replied Cardew coolly. "I dare say you can get a confession out of Mellish. Racke and Crooke will deny it, of course; but you might ask Racke how he came to lend Baggy that flash bike of his."

"I'm going to!" said George Figgins, with grim determination. "Any of you chaps coming along?"

"Seven of us, anyway," answered Blake grimly. And Tom Merry nodded.

"We'll come to see fair play," said Levison.

Racke and Crooke and Mellish were put through it with precise and particular care. Baggy hid in a box-room, and when found got off more lightly. Cardew said he ought to escape something as having turned, in a manner, "King's evidence."

And the holidays came without any masters having seen that issue of the "Weekly."

THE END.

(Don't miss next Wednesday's Great Story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's—"TROUBLE IN THE THIRD!" by Martin Clifford.)

THE TWINS FROM TASMANIA

Our Great New Serial Story.

NEW READERS START HERE.

The TWINS FROM TASMANIA are PHILIP and PHILIPPA DERWENT—known to their friends as FLIP and FLAP. They have with them a remarkable cockatoo, named Cocky.

The boy is bound for Highcliffe School, the girl for Cliff House close by. At Victoria Station, on their way, they run across JOHNNY GOGGS, of Franklingham, who has an encounter in a waiting-room, where he has been left in charge of Cocky, with GADSBY of Highcliffe.

The brother and sister travel in the same compartment with this fellow, and his chums, PONSONBY, VAVASOUR, and MONSON MINOR. Flip knows nothing of the trouble between Goggs, who has now gone on his way to his own school, and Gadsby; but his sister is aware of it.

CHAPTER 4.

The Communication-Cord is Pulled!

"OH, I don't know, by gad! We may as well have a hand or two," said Pon. And he produced from his pocket, with a lordly flourish, a handful of silver, with the gleam of gold in it.

Not many sovereigns and half-sovereigns are seen nowadays; but Cecil Ponsonby thought it all rot that gold should be held taboo to a patriot. In fact, at the bottom of his heart, Pon rather considered patriotism rot.

Philippa was not impressed. She might have been unpleasantly so if she had known that the speaker was one of Flip's future schoolfellows; but she did not even guess that as yet.

Nor was Flip impressed. He had never come into contact with a gambling set. He felt that it was not his sort of amusement; and, with the lordliness of fifteen, he rather despised these fellows.

Monson produced the cards again, and Pon insisted upon bridge. They cut for partners, and the consequence of their cutting was that Gadsby, who was to partner Monson, had to shift next to Flip.

He darted a baleful glance at Cocky.

Cocky annoyed him, because the sight of the bird reminded him of his defeat at Goggs' hands. But Flap annoyed him still more. He felt that he hated her, for he knew that she held him of no account.

He had no ill-feeling against Flip—as yet. That was to come later, and was to colour all Philip Derwent's first term or two at Highcliffe.

"I suppose we shall find merry old Highcliffe just the same dull hole as usual," remarked Pon, as Vavasour dealt.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the little start that the girl gave—saw, and understood.

Until then it had mattered nothing to her that these boys should gamble. But now, all at once, it had come to matter. And Pon, who had cleverness enough in such things as this, felt sure why it was.

The boy was going to Highcliffe, and the girl was none too confident of his ability to take care of himself.

That was Pon's deduction, and it was correct.

They were twins, of course. Anyone could see that with half an eye. The girl was emphatically pretty, and the boy was so much like her that no one could deny his being handsome. He would be a credit to the nutty brigade, Pon thought.

That was, of course, providing he had money to burn. The nuts were all well off, though not all so well off as Pon, and none of them so well off that they ever ceased to be anxious for pigeons to pluck.

They would pluck this pigeon, to start with, if he was worth it; and thereafter, unless he turned nasty in the process, he could be allowed to throw in his lot with theirs, and help to pluck others.

"My hat!" said Gadsby, in astonishment. "What on earth are you doin' with that knave, Pon? You threw away on that suit hand before last!"

"Oh, by gad, did I? Never mind. I suppose my attention wandered."

And Pon glanced at Philippa Derwent, as a hint that it was she who had caused it to wander.

But all Flap's attention seemed to be given to Cocky. It did not wander to Pon.

"That's absolutely rotten, Pon!" said Vavasour. "Buck up, old sport!"

"You won't hurt. You're well heeled," replied Pon, paying out on his own account with a better grace than usual. For Gadsby and Monson had claimed for the revoke, and their opponents had lost the first game.

"Confound that beastly bird!" said Gadsby irritably, a minute or two later. "I never meant to play that card!"

Cocky was talking a good deal now. Peanuts in plenty seemed to have a distinctly livening effect upon his conversational powers.

Neither Flip nor Flap tried to check him. That was not because they desired him to annoy Gadsby, but because they knew that any attempt to check Cocky only made him talk more than ever.

Flip looked round at Gadsby. It was not an angry look, but it was rather a critical one; and Gadsby did not like it a bit.

Then Flip leaned forward, and he and his sister began to talk in low tones.

Gadsby did his best to hear what they said, and played so badly that Monson was soon growling, while Pon and Vavasour chuckled.

They were talking about him! That chit of a girl was telling the boy what Goggs had done to him!

Gadsby was quite sure of it.

But Gadsby was quite wrong.

Flap had not seen the beginning of the trouble between Goggs and Gadsby, and Goggs had told her nothing about it. And she had not even mentioned it to Flip. She did not mean to mention it.

With all her heart she hoped that her brother would find friends of a very different type from these four at Highcliffe. And now she was trying to dissuade Flip from telling them that he was bound for their school.

Flip did not see what harm there could possibly be in it. Flap did not see what good there could be.

Cocky's talk did not disturb them. They were used to it.

But it disturbed Gadsby very much—or Gadsby chose to imagine that it did. The fact was that he resented not being able to hear Flip and Flap far more than he did being obliged to hear Cocky.

"That wretched cockatoo—the thing ought to be scragged!" he grunted.

"Oh, dry up!" snapped Pon. "The bird's doin' no harm."

"Sorry if he bothers you," said Flip, politely enough, but more airily than Gadsby considered proper; rather, Gadsby thought, as he himself might have spoken to a fellow whom he had just heard of as having been put on his back by an ass of a chap in goggles.

"It's worse than annoyance!" Gadsby growled. "He's puttin' me off my blessed game!"

"Well, that's not much odds," replied Flip. "Gambling's a silly wheeze, I reckon."

Gadsby stared at him offensively. Flip returned the stare without any visible tremors.

The girl was trying to catch her brother's eye. She did not want him to row with Gadsby, or with anyone. Flip was not exactly quarrelsome; but he had a quick temper, and he feared nobody.

"When I want your confounded opinion, hang you, I'll ask you for it!" said Gadsby, with any amount of venom. "An' as I don't know you, an' ain't likely to, it will be a doosid long time before I do that!"

Pon grinned. He rather fancied that his chum Gaddy was likely to know this fellow before long. Pon scented ructions.

He did not mind. The nuts were not given to worrying about one another's damages.

Flap did not grin. She flushed. But her thoughts were much the same as Pon's. For she knew that Gadsby and her brother were sure to know one another in the future, and she foresaw trouble between them.

In another way her thoughts chimed with Pon's, too. Neither wanted trouble just now. Pon much preferred that it should come after the brother and sister had separated.

Flip would not look at Flap. He knew what he would see in her eyes. But for her sake he kept back the hot answer that was upon his lips.

He simply turned his back upon Gadsby.

But that did not help matters. Gadsby, not usually warlike, was fast working himself up to a combative pitch.

"Your deal, Gaddy!" said Cecil Ponsonby. Leaning forward, he spoke in a low tone: "Ring off, or you'll quarrel with me! You can't make a row with the chap while his sister's with him, by gad!"

"Oh, can't I?" snarled Gadsby. "What's she to me? I don't care a scrap about flappers!"

Flip heard that, and his face came round at once. He scented an insult to his sister, whom he had more than once addressed by her familiar nickname. But next moment he remembered. It would not do to imagine that Philippa was being referred to whenever anyone said "flappers." The word was in too common use for that.

So Flip gave Gadsby the benefit of the doubt. But his heart was very hot within him. He would have to punch this fellow's head before long, he was sure!

Gadsby had a bad hand, and played it worse than badly. Monson said things, and Gadsby grew ever more furious.

"Phil-ip! Cocky wants a pea-nut!" spoke the shrill voice of the white bird.

"Of all the pifflin' kids' games I ever heard of, by gad!" howled Gadsby, thrusting out an elbow so that it took Flip sharply and unpleasantly in the ribs. "Look here, you

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chap, if you can't keep that dashed bird quiet, I'll throw the dashed thing out of the window!"

"I'll send you after him if you do!" snapped Flip.

The two were glaring into one another's faces now.

Flap laid a hand on her brother's knee. He shook it off. Pon gripped Gadsby by the shoulder. Pon's hand was not easily to be shaken off; but the angry nut writhed under it, and Cecil Ponsonby realised that neither his influence over his chum, nor Gaddy's very considerable objection to the risk of getting hurt, would stave off an explosion very much longer.

"We'd better chuck the game, Gaddy!" said the leader of the nuts. "You're a bad loser to-day, old man."

"Rot!" snarled Gadsby. "It ain't that I mind losin', but I think it's too beastly thick for people to shove themselves in on us like this, an' bring a giddy menagerie with them."

"Drop it!" snapped Pon.

"Oh, ain't he raging, raving, tearing mad!" shrilled Cocky.

That was too much for Gadsby. It was too true. He did not stop to think that cockatoos are not generally credited with reasoning powers. The folks who imagine they cannot reason would have some difficulty in explaining away some of their apt speeches. But Gadsby had no notion of trying to explain anything away.

He was sure that the bird meant to be insulting, and that one of the twins had put him up to it.

Before Pon had time to do anything he was upon his feet, his face beetroot red with rage. He snatched at the cage, and tore it from the grasp of Flap, who had also gripped it.

Flip went for him.

They struggled together furiously, each holding on to Cocky's tenement.

"Get on to the seat, Flap!" cried Flip. "I'm not going to have you hurt by this cad!"

"I'll see that she isn't," said Pon.

Flip was grateful, which was more than Flip's sister was. She did not want Cecil Ponsonby to look after her.

But it did not seem to matter what she wanted. He got her out of the corner and into his own seat.

"Yaroooh! Keep off my toes, Gaddy, you idiot!" howled Vavasour, snatching up an elegantly-shod foot in his hand.

"Come off it, Gaddy, you lunatic!" growled Monson. "It ain't decent!"

But Gadsby paid no heed. As for Flip, Flap knew all too well that it was useless to say anything to him while that look was on his face.

Philip Derwent was made of fighting stuff.

The train, nearing a station, slowed down. That was uncommonly lucky for Flip.

A savage lunge from Gadsby, who had suddenly loosed his hold on the cage, sent him staggering up against the door.

The catch must have been loose, or the handle had not been fully turned.

"Oh!" screamed Flap, as her brother, still clutching the cage, tumbled out backwards.

"Now you've done it!" yelled Monson. "That chap's neck will be broken for a dead cert."

"Absolutely!" quavered Vavasour.

Pon said nothing, but he did that which astonished his chums beyond measure.

He sprang out of the open door!

Monson tugged desperately at the communication cord. This was no time for thinking about fines.

The girl was at the door before Gadsby. For a moment he was almost stupefied with fear.

"Don't touch me!" cried Philippa, as Monson flung his arms around her waist. He was afraid she meant to fling herself out after her brother.

"Hurrah!" yelled Monson, still holding her, and craning his neck to look over her shoulder. "They're both getting up!"

CHAPTER 5.

Pon the Hero!

FLIP had never tumbled from a train before, but he had tumbled out of trees, saddles, boats, buggies, and pretty nearly everything else that an active and adventurous boy could well tumble out of.

And he had never been really hurt.

He was not hurt now. A bruise or two—or a dozen. But what did bruises matter to Flip Derwent?

Something mattered, though. The cage rolled down the steep embankment with a bang and a rattle. Goggs was thorough-going in all he did, but he would not have warranted his repairs to the catch to stand all that. They did not stand it.

The door of the cage flew open, and Cocky fluttered out just as Flip picked himself up.

"Here's a jolly go!" said Cocky, and started out on his own to explore a neighbouring spinney.

Flip heard the voice of Ponsonby behind him, and turned.

Pon was picking himself up. He was not hurt either, and not so much bruised as Flip, for Pon had jumped, while Flip had tumbled; and moreover, the pace of the train had decreased during the few seconds between tumble and jump.

But it would not have been like Cecil Ponsonby if he had admitted that he was not hurt.

He had shown courage which had surprised his chums. Perhaps it had surprised Pon himself. But he had no notion of making light of it. Having played the hero, Ponsonby expected to be accorded the hero's bays.

"Hurt?" asked Flip, as he helped Pon up. "I say, though, did that silly idiot barge you out, too?"

"Gadsby? Oh, by gad, no! Gadsby didn't touch me!"

"Did you jump, then?"

"Well, yes; I suppose you might put it so. Dashed anxious about you, you know. You might have broken your neck, by gad!"

"Wouldn't have made things any better if you had broken yours, too!" replied Flip, with a grin. "But neither of us has, so that's all right!"

"You take it jolly coolly, but your sister was knocked over, I can tell you!" said Pon, who thought that this fellow took it a trifle too coolly, seeing that the valuable neck of Cecil Ponsonby had been put more or less in jeopardy—and more or less for his sake.

"You don't mean that that brute you call Gaddy——"

"Of course I don't! Gaddy wouldn't hurt a girl. He didn't really mean to hurt you."

"Oh, didn't he? All I've got to say, then, is that he looked as if he did."

"I mean he didn't intend to shove you out."

"S'pose not. That would have been too awkward for him if anything had happened. He's a rotter! But I must say it was jolly decent of you. I dunno that it was very sensible. What do you mean about my sister?"

"She was confoundedly upset."

"Didn't scream and faint, did she? That wouldn't be like Flap. She knows I always come out right end up or thereabouts at the finish. She'll soon get over it, if she was frightened for the moment. What I'm worrying about is Cocky."

Pon did not care a scrap about Cocky. He was examining his bruises. One shin was nicely barked, and the ankle of the other leg had got a knock which made Pon limp.

Flip, who was letting his bruises wait till he had more time to attend to them, looked at him curiously.

He failed to understand Ponsonby, but he was very much inclined to like him, and to wonder that he should be a friend of Gadsby's.

"Cocky!" he yelled, and then whistled shrilly.

The whistle was echoed, and from the spinney Cocky called:

"Flip!"

"Come along here, Cocky!"

"No jolly fear!" replied the cockatoo promptly.

"It's no go!" said Pon. "You'll never catch the beggar now that he's once got away in open country, by gad! Chuck the cage in the hedge an' come along. The train won't wait, you know."

"Come along without Cocky? Not likely!" answered Flip, in surprise.

"Not likely!" echoed Cocky from the spinney.

"What about your sister?"

"She'd be disgusted with me if I went along and told her I'd left Cocky behind. You don't understand. We brought Cocky from home—in Tasmania, you know—and he's been in our family years and years; long before we were born. They live no end of a time."

"He won't live long now he's got away, by gad!"

Pon did not feel well disposed towards Cocky, and would much have preferred leaving him to his fate as a stranger and an alien in the Kentish countryside.

"Dare say not—if I left him. But I'm not going to. S'pose the train goes on? There'll be others, won't there? I'm not asking you to stop—unless you choose, of course."

"Here's some of the fellows," Pon replied. "I'll stop, of course. Let the train go on. But you won't catch that dashed bird, I bet!"

"I say, you and those other chaps are Highcliffe, aren't you? I'm going there. Thought I might as well tell you."

"Really?" said Pon, with a quite successful pretence of not having suspected it until that moment. "Glad to hear it, by gad! Shake hands! My name's Ponsonby, an' I'm in the Highcliffe Fourth—for my sins."

This was not wholly true. And some who knew him might have said that Pon's sins would have justified his being put in a far worse place than the Fourth Form quarters at Highcliffe.

"Mine's Derwent," said Flip, gripping the slim and manicured hand of Ponsonby with his hard Colonial paw. "I say, Highcliffe's all right, though, isn't it? Of course, that fellow Gadsby——"

"Gaddy's all serene when you know him. I wouldn't care to say as much for some of the Fourth crowd."

"I don't want to know him any better than I do now!" replied Flip, with plenty of resolution. "I think he's a swanking cad, and I ain't fond of swanking cads. But, of course, as he's a friend of yours, and all that——"

"Don't imagine that I agree with his deplorable exhibition of bad temper, dear boy," said Pon quickly. "But it was only temper, by gad! Must have eaten somethin' that disagreed with his little inside, y'know."

"He's going to get something that will disagree with his outside!" said Flip. Then he called again: "Cocky!"

"Phil-ip, Cocky wants a pea-nut!" was the reply. It came from somewhere close at hand, but the white bird was not visible.

"Come and get it, then, you old duffer!"

Then Monson and Vavasour came up, looking sulky, and with them a fellow Philip Derwent had not seen before—a slim and elegant fellow with a lazy manner, who looked every bit as big a swell as Ponsonby, but somehow different.

"Pon the hero!" drawled the stranger. "Congrats, Pon, on escapin' a broken neck! By gad, Highcliffe would have bored me to extinction if the dear Pon had paid the price of his heroic recklessness, an' the light of his beamin' countenance had ceased to illuminate those scholastic shades. We never know how much we value a thing till we are in danger of losin' it, by gad!"

"Rats, Caterpillar!" replied Pon, with the suspicion of a scowl.

"Ah, that's your blushin' modesty, Pon, by gad! As the rescuer, will you introduce me to the rescued?"

"This chap's Derwent, new boy, from Saskatchewan, or Natal, or somewhere—a Colonial, anyway; I know that," Ponsonby said. "This is De Courcy of ours, Derwent. You might take him for a chortling ass by his talk, but he's keen enough when he likes."

"You flatter me, Pon," remarked the Caterpillar, as he and the new fellow shook hands.

"As for rescuer an' rescued, that's all dashed rot, an' you know it!" Cecil Ponsonby said.

"Oh, I don't know!" put in Monson. "Old Pon went out after the kid like a plucked 'un—dashed if he didn't!"

"Absolutely!" chimed in Vavasour.

"It was nothin'. You'd have done the same, y'know, Caterpillar," Pon said.

Rupert de Courcy shook his head very gravely.

"'Fraid not, Pon," he replied. "We can't all be merry heroes, by gad! But we know how to value one when we run up against him—eh, Derwent?"

"It wanted nerve," Flip answered. "I wouldn't have done it—at least, I don't think so."

"But I was given to understand that you did, by gad!" the Caterpillar said, in tones of surprise. "Didn't you jump out after an emu, or an ostrich, or an ornithorhynchus? That's the tale as I heard it."

"I didn't jump; I just tumbled out."

"Ah! Perhaps, after all, Franky's right. He generally is, though I thought there might be room for doubt in this case," the Caterpillar remarked, looking at Flip in a quizzical way that he did not half like. "There goes the merry train, by gad, Pon! We shall all have to wait until the next comes along."

"What d'you mean about Courtenay?" snapped Pon. "He has nothin' to do with

this, you know, an' I'm dashed if I'm goin' to put up with his rotten interference!"

"You aren't called upon to do so, Pon, my buck. It is with the bright Gaddy that Franky is concerned. Gaddy was in a desperate hurry to get to Highcliffe, but Franky, understandin' from our engagin' young friends here that there might be a merry charge of manslaughter or somethin' of the kind against the cheery Gaddy, took it upon himself to check Gaddy.

"At the present moment, by gad, I believe that he's sittin' on Gaddy's—er—chest upon the platform as a measure of restraint. Or he may have relinquished that post to Wharton or Cherry or the dusky gentleman from India's coral strand. They were all waitin' for the train, but they didn't go on. Some of the Cliff House charmers are also there. Oh, that reminds me, Derwent! Your sister's all serene, though naturally worried about the result of your little acrobatic interlude. If you won't think it cheek on my part, I might hint to you that—— Oh, I forgot! Bein' pushed off a movin' train by the merry Gaddy is hardly proof that you have a habit of gettin' off before the train stops, by gad!"

Ponsonby gritted his teeth, and his face darkened. Flip could not understand what so angered him. There was nothing in the chaffing words of the fellow they called the Caterpillar to account for it, to his mind.

But he was soon to learn that the very sound of the name of his cousin, Frank Courtenay, was to Cecil Ponsonby as a red rag to a bull. Pon hated the captain of the Highcliffe Fourth with a deadly hatred.

And as if it was not enough that Courtenay should have meddled with one of Pon's henchmen, it appeared that some of the Greyfriars crowd, whom Pon loved not at all, were also concerned.

The leader of the nuts turned in wrath upon Vavasour and Monson.

There was time and to spare for argument. Already the train that should have borne them upon their way had steamed out of the station. Clouds of white smoke against the blue sky marked the track of its going. Now to their ears came the rumble of its passage over a bridge.

CHAPTER 6.

Gadsby Puts Up His Fists.

"WHAT on earth have you asses been saying?" snapped Pon.

Vavasour and Monson looked rather sulky. The Caterpillar glanced from them to Derwent. But the new boy had shifted. He was making a gap in the hedge at the foot of the embankment to get into the spinney beyond.

"Cocky!" he called. And from the spinney the voice of the cockatoo answered:

"Here, Flip, old son!"

The Caterpillar turned back to the three nuts. He took a queer sort of pleasure in seeing them at loggerheads one with another.

"Do you hear me?"

"Oh, see here, Pon, we're not goin' to have you talk to us in that fashion!" said Monson, plucking up spirit. "I don't know exactly what we may have said, but it ain't so very dashed strange if we thought that kid's neck was broken. An' yours, too, by gad, like as not!"

"Somethin' to that effect was the burden of their complaint, Pon," said the Caterpillar lazily. "They mourned for you with loud lamentations, dear boy, even as for one dead on the field of honour. An' they also expressed temperate regret for the supposed demise of Derwent, though appearin' to regard Gaddy as in some sense an injured party."

"Absolutely hally rot!" said Vavasour crossly.

"Have you come back wound up to run on for ever an' ever, De Courcy?" sneered Monson. "If so, I'm dashed if I wouldn't be glad to hear you talk a little sense!"

"You don't seem to have been talkin' much at the station, Mon!" Ponsonby said disagreeably.

"Well, we were jolly well upset! Anythin' might have happened, y'know," answered Monson vaguely.

"Absolutely anythin'!" murmured Vavasour.

"An' the guard kicked up no end of a beastly fuss about me pullin' the communication-cord," went on Monson. "Said there wasn't any need; we were close to a station. Dashed ass! As if a fellow had time to think about that! Stationmaster backed him up, too. An' there were Courtenay an' this blessed idiot——"

"Meanin' me?" asked the Caterpillar. "Yes; I perceive by the scowl upon your ingenuous face that I have scored a bull this time, Monson. Go on. Don't mind about bein' polite!"

"Yes, I do mean you, you sneerin' ass!" roared Monson. "There were these two, an' a small crowd of the Greyfriars rotters, an' two Cliff House girls, an' a lot of strangers, all with faces as long as fiddles. How was a chap to keep his head?"

"Especially with a head so very doubtfully worth keepin'," the Caterpillar murmured. "Don't mind me, Monson. I'm only talkin' little inanities to myself, you know, as you aren't appreciative, by gad!"

Flip appeared among them, with Cocky sitting on his shoulder. Cocky had a pea-nut in his beak.

"I perceive that the ornithorhyncus has come to heel—or, to be more precise, to——"

"He's a cockatoo, not an ornithorhyncus," said Flip. "Help me to get him into his cage, there's a decent chap! It must be all ready before I lift a hand to take him down. Getting out like that has made him a bit wild—got into his silly old head, you know."

Cocky dropped the pea-nut.

"Wide old Cocky!" he said. "Cocky knows a thing or two, you bet your boots!"

"I believe you," murmured the Caterpillar, picking up the battered cage and opening the door.

"Cocky never, never, never told a lie!" said the bird.

"Ah, now you strain my belief considerably!" replied Rupert de Courcy.

The other three had ceased their argument to watch.

But, contrary to Flip's expectation, Cocky gave no trouble. Just one little peck at the hand put up to take him—that was all. It did not look a little peck, for the sharp beak went down quickly, and the nuts expected to see blood drawn. Flip, who knew that that peck was no more than Cocky's way of kissing, did not.

In the cage again, Cocky put his head on one side, and looked up into the Caterpillar's face.

"Ha, ha!" said Cocky. "You're a knowing one! You're a leery cove, you are!"

"My hat!" gasped Monson. "There's the very deuce in that bird! Fancy him seein' through the Caterpillar like that!"

The Caterpillar bowed—first to Monson, then to Cocky.

"My best thanks for your extremely flatterin' remarks, gentlemen!" he drawled.

"Here come those Greyfriars sweeps!" growled Ponsonby. "Trust them for shovin' themselves in where they aren't wanted!"

Flip Derwent looked with interest at the three fellows, in the blue-and-white caps already familiar to him, who approached now.

He did not think they had the appearance of being either rotters or sweeps; and, though he was disposed to like Ponsonby, he had no notion of taking that gentle youth's opinions or prejudices as oracles.

The handsome fellow with the curly hair, who held his head high; the slim youngster, with a touch of the girl about his good-looking countenance; the more sturdily built boy with the merry face—they all looked the right sort to Flip.

And he was to find them so—in the long run.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" said Bob Cherry. "No one killed, then?"

"We had begun to think something must be wrong, though we saw that it wasn't as bad as that," Frank Nugent remarked.

"Derwent wouldn't come away without his dashed bird, an' the thing had escaped an' flown into the spinney," growled Ponsonby.

He shook hands with the Greyfriars trio; but there was no heartiness in his grip. And Flip noticed that Vavasour and Monson looked at the three in anything but a friendly way.

It was the Caterpillar who, with his usual urbane grace, introduced Derwent to the three chums from the rival school. De Courcy was still a puzzle to Flip. He was to remain so for some time to come. But Flip had no doubt that he liked these fellows, and that they were fond of him.

Bob Cherry slapped the Caterpillar on the back, and Frank Nugent grinned as he said:

"There were no pieces to be picked up, by gad! Dashed disappointin', ain't it?"

"I think you'll manage to bear up under it, old scout," said Harry Wharton, laughing.

"Yaas—oh, yaas! I couldn't spare Pon. Life would be dull without Pon. An', of course, I don't know Derwent well enough yet to have any real yearnin' to see his neck broken. Now, if it had been the festive Gaddy——"

"Gaddy ain't so very festive at this moment, Caterpillar," said Bob. "He's in an awful stew!"

"Surely a hero like Gaddy—a member of a band of heroes, with my heroic friend Pon as leader——"

"Ring off, De Courcy!" snarled Pon, with an angry scowl.

"Surely Gaddy is not in fear an' tremblin' lest his victim should seek vengeance?"

"I don't know that he's thinking about that," said Wharton. "But it was enough to upset him, for the fellow naturally didn't mean to do it."

"He'd better think about it!" said Flip. "I know he didn't mean to sling me out. But he was trying to chuck old Cocky through the window, and I mean to reckon with him for that!"

There was no least hint of bragging in the new boy's tone. But there was any amount of resolution, both in voice and face. Flip's mouth set as he made an end of speaking; and the thin-lipped mouth was that of a fighter all over.

The other seven all looked at him hard. And on the whole they all agreed with the Caterpillar when he said:

"I fancy, dear boys, that the merry Gaddy will find our new friend rather hot stuff, by gad!"

Two fellows tried to soothe Flip. The role of peacemaker was no new one to Harry Wharton; but it was surprising to find Cecil Ponsonby taking it up.

"Can't you let it drop, Derwent?" said Pon. "The chap's had an awful fright."

"He'll say he is sorry, I'm sure," Wharton added. "You might let it go at that."

"He tried to kill my bird, and he gave my sister a worse fright than he got, for if he was funked it was only for himself," replied Flip doggedly. "And unless he can thrash me, I'm going to thrash him!"

"Which looks uncommonly like a dose for the merry Gaddy, Cherry," said the Caterpillar.

"Hope so," answered Bob frankly. "This fellow seems a decent sort, and his sister's a jolly nice girl—a good-looker, too! I never could stand Gadsby at any price."

The eight were tramping along between the two lines of rails now, and as they drew near to the station they saw that Gadsby was more or less in charge. No one was actually sitting on him; but a good-looking fellow who Flip felt sure was Courtenay, as he wore the Highcliffe colours, a sturdy and thick-set boy whom he learned later to know as Johnny Bull, and a lissom, dusky-skinned, dark-eyed Indian, who, of course, was Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, Nabob of Bhanipur, evidently had him in ward.

Three girls stood together farther along the platform. Now, one of them left the other two, and ran to meet Flip.

Pon limped a bit; but Flip had forgotten all about his bruises. He wanted to say just a word of reassurance to Flap, and then to set about his business with Gadsby.

"You're not hurt, then, Flip?" cried the girl, in a ringing, musical voice. The rest had halted behind Flip, lifting their caps or hats. But she had eyes only for her brother.

"Not a bit, Flap," he answered. "I never do get hurt when I fall; you know that. It's all right, kid. Sorry it upset you! Are those other two Cliff House girls?"

"Yes. Miss Hazeldene and Miss Howell. And they're ever so nice! Come and——"

"No jolly fear! Not yet. I don't mind later on—if I ain't too much marked."

"You're not going to——"

"Bet you I am! And you know jolly well he deserves it, Flap!"

Flap did know. And, according to the code these two shared, there was no more for her to say.

"I'm not afraid of your getting licked, Flip," she whispered. "Good luck, old chap!"

"Keep them out of the way till it's over," was all the reply Flip made to that.

Then Flap returned to Marjorie Hazeldene and Phyllis Howell, and Flip strode up to Gadsby.

Gadsby's fists were up before he reached him.

"Not here!" said Flip, with contempt in his voice. "There are girls about. I reckon that field over there will do us, though."

(To be continued next week.)