GRAND LONG CAMPING-OUT STORY!

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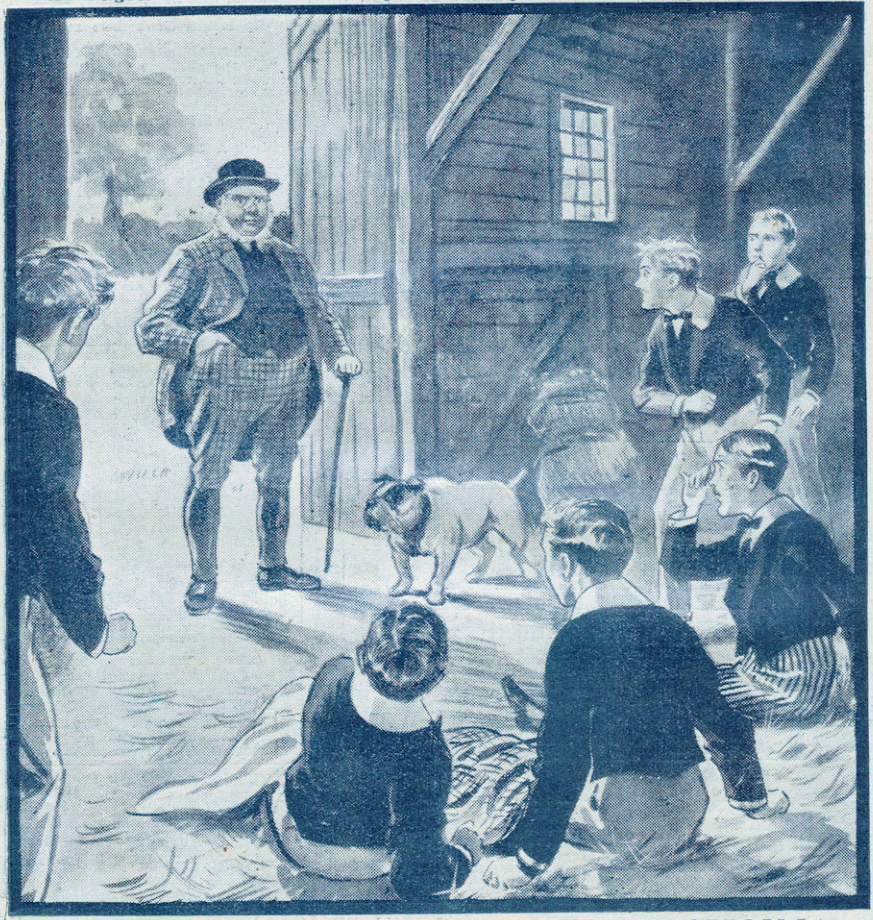

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HARD LUCK.

One broiling hot day, two perfect specimens of the tramp variety—Weary Walkington and Feeble Ferdinand—slouched slowly down the dusty lane. Soon they came across a half-crown lying unattended on the path. They gazed at the coin wistfully, then their eyes met.

"I'd pick it up, Ferdinand," said Walkington sadly, "only I've got my hands in my pockets."

Ferdinand gave a heavy sigh.

"So have I!" he groaned.—M. Holland, 50, Bounces Road, Lower Edmonton, London, N.

DRAWING THE SWORD.

A certain well-known professor was entertaining some students at his house. Taking down a magnificent sword that hung over the fireplace, he brandished it about, exclaiming:

"Never shall I forget the day I drew this blade for the first time!"

"Where did you draw it, sir?" asked one of the company.

"At a raffle!" was the quick reply.—C. W. Deakin, Mere Lake Cottage, Norton Canes, Cannock.

A WISE MAN.

There is a farmer who is Y Y
Enough to take his E E,
And study Nature with his I I,
And think of what he C C.
He hears the chatter of the J J
As they each other T T,
And sees that when a tree D K K
It makes a home for B B.
A yoke of oxen he will U U,
With many whoas and G G,
And their mistakes he will X Q Q
When ploughing for his P P.
He little buys, but much he sells,
And, therefore, little O O;
And when he hoes his soil by spells,
He also soils his hose.

H. A. Wrenn, 86, Macnaughten Road, Bitterne Park, Southampton.

THE EARLY BIRD.

A school-teacher, in order to express his meaning to his pupils, told them that it was the early bird that caught the worm. Next morning, his youngest scholar came to school crying.

"What's the matter, Tommy?" asked the teacher.

"Why," replied Tommy dolefully, "yesterday you said the early bird catches the worm, so I turned our canary out of doors to catch it, and it did not come back; and I caught the slipper from father!"—Stanley Smith, Church View, Botley, near Crewe.

NOT THE UNIVERSITY.

Mrs. Edwin was showing Selma, the new Swedish maid, the ropes.

"This," she said, "is my son's room. He is at Yale, you know."

Selma's face lit up with sympathetic understanding.

"My brother Dan's there now," she said.

"Is that so?" asked Mrs. Edwin.

"Yes," replied the girl; "the judge sent him there. The judge said, 'Sixty days in jail for you.'"—Miss Joan Dumaresq Eales, Berry House, Duckenfield Park, Morpeth, N.S.W., Australia.

A CHICKEN YARN.

A New Englander, hearing a great commotion in his chicken-house one dark night, took his revolver, and went to investigate.

"Who's there?" he sternly demanded, opening the door. There was no answer. "Who's there?" he shouted again. "Answer, or I'll shoot." Then came a trembling voice from the farthest corner:

"'Deed, sah, there ain't nobody hyah, 'ceptin' us chickens."—M. V. Sullivan, "Tara," Australia Street, Camperdown, N.S.W., Australia.

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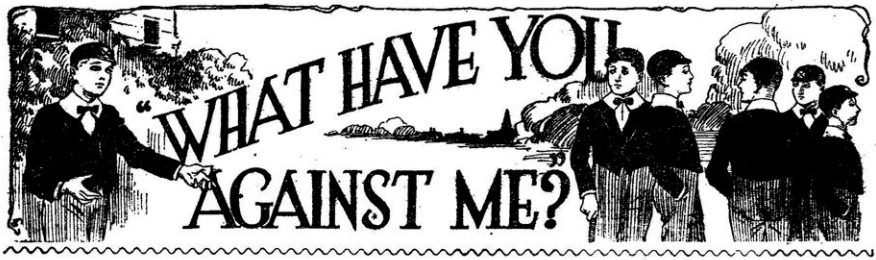


A Magnificent Story of Life at Millford College. By IVOR HAYES.

NEW READERS START HERE.

TOM MACE, whose father is a professional cracksman, wins a scholarship for Millford College. His father is rather pleased, for MR. BILL MACE has certain unlawful reasons for wanting to see the inside of the school. Mrs. Mace darns up her son's clothes, and Tom sets off for school. In the train he overhears a conversation between a man in a sea-green suit and a muffered ruffian. The ruffian is addressed as SPIKEY MEADOWS, and there is some suspicious talk that sets the lad thinking. At last he arrives at the school, only to be jeered at by the other juniors. He sees there a lad, SIMON LUNDY, son of the man who is the squire of that part of the country in which Tom lives. Tom tries to be friendly, but Simon cuts him dead. Just as Lundy & Co. are jeering with Tom's things, a new master appears on the scene. He is Mr. GORDON GALE—the man in the sea-green suit, whom Tom had seen in the train. Tom sees the headmaster, who is kind to him, and sees also MR. MULLINS, the master of the Fourth Form. He finds this man a snob, and he is feeling downhearted. He goes to Study B—Lundy and Bradshaw's study—to which he has been allotted, but he is thrown out. BOB PEEL finds him, is friendly, and offers to stand a feed at the tuckshop.

(Now read on.)

— —

The Fight in the Tuckshop.

Tom rose and followed the generous Peel across the deserted quadrangle to the little tuckshop that stood in the far corner in the shade of a chestnut-tree.

It was a quaint little shop, and Tom, when he got inside, felt at home. Kindly Mrs. Bunbury, behind the counter, gave them both a welcome smile.

"What can I do for you, Master Peel?" she said.

"Tarts, please, Mrs. Bunbury," said Peel. He indicated Tom. "This is the new boy—Mace."

"Good-evening, sir!" beamed Mrs. Bunbury over her spectacles. "Tarts for you, too?"

"Please," said Tom.

"And ginger-beer and—— Lemme see! Some ham. Oh, and we'd better have a slice of chicken to go with it, and some rolls."

Tom clutched his friend's arm and flushed slightly.

"I say," he whispered anxiously, "that'll cost an awful lot, you know! And—and I sha'n't be able to pay you back quickly."

Bob Peel laughed.

"You leave this to me," he answered.

And Tom allowed himself to be led, though not without misgivings. But when that small feast was spread on the table, and the two sat down and commenced it, Tom looked quite happy.

"What did I say?" chuckled Peel. "Say you're not hungry now?"

But the two juniors were not to have their meal in peace. Before they were half-way through there came an interruption.

"Here he is!"

Tom Mace stopped, with a piece of chicken half-way to his mouth, and stared in dismay as he saw the figure of Simon Lundy in the doorway, blocking out the afternoon sunlight.

"Scholarship brat standing you a feed, Peel?"

Bob Peel shrugged his shoulders.

"Go and eat coke!" he said gruffly.

"We've just chucked that cad out of Study B," said Simon Lundy. And Bradshaw, peering over his leader's shoulders, giggled his confirmation of that statement.

Peel nodded.

"And now we're going to chuck him out of the tuckshop!" went on the angry Lundy.

"Hear, hear!" chorused his companions.

Peel looked round at the small crowd in the doorway, and wiped his mouth thoughtfully on his serviette.

"Eight of you!" he said. "Yes, I suppose you could just about manage it!"

Simon Lundy frowned, and Luke Bradshaw murmured:

"Awful cheek!"

"Look here, Peel," resumed the angry and autocratic Lundy, "you've got too much cheek! You're only a parson's son yourself! One might expect you to take up with scholarship cads——"

"Oh, rather!" chimed in Bradshaw, feeling that something was required of him—if only his moral support.

"But if we see you palling with that gutter-brat," threatened Lundy, with venomous precision, "you'll get chucked out, too!"

"Oh, good!" nodded the unimpressed Peel, sipping ginger-beer.

But Tom's face wore a worried frown.

"I say," he whispered, "you—you go, Peel! I can stand it. I don't want you to fight my battles."

Bob Peel shook his red head, threw off Tom's detaining hand, and rose to his feet. With careful and ominous deliberation he placed his chair under the small table and rolled up his cuffs

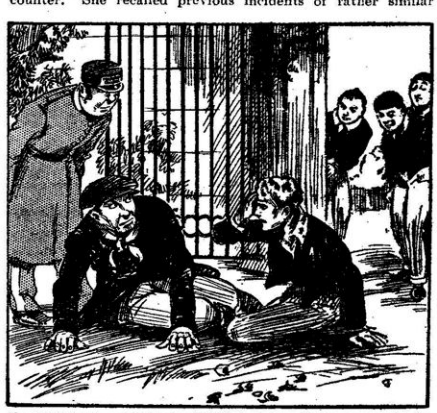
Then he turned to the crowd in the doorway.

Bradshaw, the aristocrat, with a muttered desire to see the time, sidled back. But Simon Lundy stood his ground, outwardly undaunted.

Peel, followed by Tom Mace's somewhat worried glance, strode forward, still rolling his cuffs.

"Well?" demanded Lundy aggressively.

"Now, now, gents!" implored Mrs. Bunbury behind the counter. She recalled previous incidents of rather similar



Tom Mace passed a hand dazedly across his egg-stained face, wiped away some yolk from his eyes, and stared with amazement at the angry man who sat before him.

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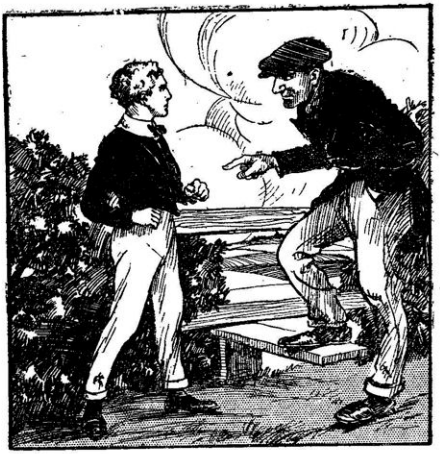

Tom Mace watched Spikey anxiously. "Listen!" whispered the man. "My boy, your chance 'as come. 'Tain't many lads that get on to a chance like this!"

nature, with effects not unconnected with smashed glass and ruined wares, and she gave an anxious glance at the war-like Peel.

But Peel, like the gladiator, heard, but heeded not.

"I'm waiting to be thrown out," he said. "My whole soul yearns to be flung willy-nilly into the quad, my cheery Lundy!"

"Don't be a fool!" snapped the squire's son. "We don't want to touch you, Peel. If you go your way, and let us go ours, we won't touch you——"

"Thank you!"

"Yah! Parson's son! Pauper's son!" came a voice from the back of the crowd.

Peel set his teeth. It was Bradshaw's unmistakable voice, but the youngest son of an earl's brother was conspicuous only by his absence.

Legs akimbo, Peel folded his arms.

"Well," he said stolidly, "get on with the chucking out!"

"Mr. Peel, please!" implored Mrs. Bunbury.

"Stand aside, you fool!" rapped out Lundy, attempting to brush past the vicar's son.

Tom, ill-at-ease, rose to his feet. He was not afraid, but he hated to think that his only way through the school was to fight through with his fists. Yet he could not desert his friend—the fellow who was willing to fight for him.

He walked to the doorway.

"Why can't you stop this foolery?" he asked quietly.

Lundy raised his eyebrows.

"Hark at the little errand-lad!" he scoffed. "From gutter-boy to preacher! Ha, ha! Oh, what a fine pair! What a beautiful two! Get into the pulpit! Tell us naughty, naughty boys our bad, bad ways!"

Peel flushed at this biting insult that the sneering Lundy was hurling at him through Tom.

"You rotten cad!" he shouted, and rushed forward. What he was called he cared not, but insulting references to his father aroused his fighting ire.

"Ow! Stop! Let me go!"

Lundy bellowed with fright as the vicar's son caught him in a vice-like grip by the collar.

"Help! Rescue!"

For a moment the crowd in the doorway hesitated. Then, like an incoming tide, they swarmed into the small shop. Peel went down, still holding the yelling leader of the snobs by his elegant neck.

"Draggimoff!" wailed Lundy.

Many hands, ungentle and unfair, laid hold of Peel.

Tom Mace dashed into the fray, and in a second the small tuckshop was the scene of a fiercesome fray. Mrs. Bunbury shouted, pleaded, implored, but all in vain.

Tom Mace, his back to a huge pile of biscuit-tins, fought as he had never fought before—as never before in his life had he needed to fight.

Left, right, left! Out swept his fists sure and hard.

One after another the snobs went staggering back. For every blow found a billet. The scholarship lad's blows were hard, and they went right home.

And Peel, lying on his back, lashed out with his fists, but he was overwhelmed. Beaten by brute force, yet still undaunted, he lay gasping on the tuckshop floor, with Luke Bradshaw sitting immaculately on his chest.

"Hold him down, dear boys!" shouted the courageous Bradshaw, having made sure that there was no danger. "Keep the rotter still!" He was grinding his heels into Peel's biceps, and the vicar's son bit his lip to keep back a cry of pain.

But Tom was fighting still.

Lionel Garnet, with the cunning of a weasel, crept under the scholarship lad's hammer-like blows, and pulled forward the pile of tins.

Crash, bang, crash!

Down tumbled the tins, and Tom gave a gasp of pain as they crashed upon his head. For a moment he dropped his arms, and in that moment one of the bolder snobs got home with a swinging right on Tom's unguarded jaw.

Down went the scholarship lad all in a heap. In a second they had swarmed upon him.

"The eggs!" shouted Lundy excitedly. And before the scared dame behind the counter could stop him the cad of Millford had gathered a handful of "new laids."

Smash, smash, smash!

One after the other the eggs burst upon the new boy's upturned face, smothering him. Try as he would, Tom Mace could not evade that fusillade.

They burst around his head, the yolk trickled down his neck, making him wriggle more than ever, and it ran down the front of his coat, and stained his collar.

The juniors that had been seated upon him sprang hastily to their feet lest they, too, should suffer a like fate.

Thus released, Tom, his face covered by his arm, staggered up. He tried to fight. But every time he lowered his arm more eggs got home with stinging force upon his nose, his chin, and cheeks.

"That's the way, by Jove!" shrieked Bradshaw. "Kick the bounder out, you know!"

A lane was made for Tom, and many boots assisted him through the small doorway. Peel tried to rise, but he was held down.

The scholarship lad landed on his hands and knees; but rough hands lifted him up again and hustled him to the gates. He was breathless, winded, and he could only struggle feebly.

Right to the gates they took him, and before the astonished eyes of the school porter flung him through the gateway.

Round he twisted, unable to stop himself. He made a faint attempt to draw back. But too late. There was a warning shout and a bump.

Crash!

Tom collided heavily with another figure—a man, who at that moment had been entering the gateway.

Down went Tom in the roadway, and down, too, went the man.

The nuts, no longer booing, gave a gasp of dismay.

Tom Mace passed a hand dazedly across his egg-stained face, wiped away some yolk from his eyes, and stared in amazement at the angry man who sat before him in the roadway, gasping painfully for breath. And well might Tom Mace be surprised.

For it was the man with the muffler—the man with whom Mr. Gale, the new master, had held that curious conversation in the train.

Tom gave a gasp beneath his breath.

"Spikey Meadows!"

The Tempting of Tom.

SPIKEY MEADOWS!

Tom Mace wiped the egg from his eyes, and glared at the gasping man who sat before him in the road-way. There was no mistaking who it was.

For Spikey was a man once seen never forgotten; there was something about his dark face so indubitably sinister that it imprinted itself on the mind indelibly.

But what was he doing here? These thoughts ran quickly through the scholarship lad's brain as he sat in the dusty lane, where the snobs of Millford College had thrown him.

Simon Lundy and the others in the school gateway looked on wonderingly, unable to understand the startled look in Tom Mace's eyes.

"My stars!" ejaculated Spikey Meadows. "Where—where did you come from, young shaver?"

No one replied, and the rascal glanced towards the gate-way in which the nuts stood, grinning spectators of the scene. Then he looked back to Tom.

"Thrown out!" he said.

"Yes," sneered Lundy. "We've thrown him out! He'll probably pal up to you; he's more your sort than ours!"

Several of the nuts sniggered at their leader's attempt at satire.

"Oh, rather, more your sort!" agreed the unoriginal Bradshaw. "Absolutely, begad!"

Tom Mace rose to his feet, and gave Meadows a doubtful glance. There was fear in the lad's heart that the man might know him. But then, Tom realised, though he knew Meadows, Meadows did not know him.

For, although the rascal was a friend of Tom's father, the lad had not seen him until that incident in the train, when Mr. Gale, the new master, had addressed the shabby-looking Meadows by his nickname.

Tom sighed as he realised that he was safe. He had the advantage of Meadows.

"Nice sorter thing!" mumbled Meadows, rising to his feet. "Bloke comes to visit a pal at the skule, and this is the kind o' welcome 'e gets!"

He lumbered complainingly to his feet, and surveyed the nuts in the doorway. Lundy grinned at him. To the elegant Simon it seemed very funny, as no doubt it was. But Meadows could not quite see the humour of the situation.

"Don't you try to come in here!" ordered Lundy dictatorily. "We've chucked out one tramp, and we don't want another!"

"Who's a tramp?" inquired Spikey Meadows aggressively

But before he could receive a reply, Bradshaw gave a warning hiss:

"Look out, it's the new master!"

Simon Lundy broke off sharply, and glanced down the lane. Sure enough there was Mr. Gale in his sea-green suit wandering up the lane.

"My hat!" gasped Garnet. "Bunk!"

The advice was too good not to be taken, and the nuts turned round, and ran helter-skelter for the School House, leaving Tom Mace and the astonished Spikey Meadows in the roadway.

Tom Mace's lip curled scornfully, and he turned to look at the approaching master.

But a strange thing happened. No sooner had Mr. Gale realised that there were figures ahead than he wheeled round sharply, and walked down the lane.

Tom gave a startled exclamation. Mr. Gale was afraid to meet Spikey Meadows! Meadows turned too late, and caught a glimpse of the retreating figure.

"Blessed lot o' funks, they are!" he vowed. "Why, the master's gorn!"

Tom Mace frowned, and nodded. He realised now that there was some conspiracy afoot. There was some mystery he could not solve. Why had Mr. Gale talked to Spikey Meadows in the train? He had spoken of some better "game." The lad had been surprised to find the man in the green suit at Millford—even more surprised when he recollected that conversation in the train. And now Mr. Gale had intentionally turned back at sight of Meadows. Why? asked the lad—why? Was it because he was there?

Spikey Meadows was eyeing him thoughtfully.

"Had a rough time?" he asked, glancing at Tom's torn clothes and at the many egg-stains.

Tom nodded.

"Yes," he said. "I have."

He made as though to walk into the school, but Spikey Meadows clutched at his sleeve.

"Not so fast, young 'un!" said the man. "You belong to this 'ere school?"

"Yes," answered Tom, with indrawn breath. "Why—why do you ask?"

Spikey Meadows paused.

"It's like this 'ere," he began. "I wants to see a chap what's just come to this skule. Now, what would you say if I asked you to fetch 'im? You're the boot-boy, or somethin', ain't you?"

Tom flushed; but perhaps the man's conclusion had not been without reason, for Tom, in his present attire, looked anything but the average well-dressed Milford junior.

"I—I am a scholar here," he said. "But whom do you want? You see, I've only just arrived, and I only know a few of the boys."

"Oh! Well, do you happen to know a fellow named Mace—Tom Mace? What's the matter, sonny? Hurt?"

Spikey Meadows started forward, for Tom had suddenly paled, and he had stepped back a pace.

"No, no!" answered the boy. "I—I am Tom Mace, that is all!"

Spikey Meadows stopped with the match half-way up to his cigarette.

"You are?" he said, in surprise. "Stars! Then you're the son of Bill Mace, my old pal?"

"I'm Bill Mace's son," answered Tom quietly. "Yes. What do you want? Please be quick!"

Spikey Meadows paused. He lit his cigarette thoughtfully, and threw away the match.

"I don't know as 'ow I can talk 'ere," he said. "Look 'ere, you come down the lane!"

Tom Mace hesitated. Dusk was falling. He wanted to get back into the school. But he knew that Meadows was not to be got rid of. If he refused to come, the man would probably return to the school on the morrow.

"All right," he said slowly, with a slight, worried frown. "I'll come along."

Spikey Meadows linked his arm with Tom's, and the two walked down the little lane.

The evening was drawing in, and the light was fading away, giving place to the blue-grey of twilight. There was a stillness in the air, and overhead the white puffs of cloud had disappeared.

Spikey Meadows halted at a small stile by the side of the lane. Far away, there stretched field upon field as far as the eye could see, and, save for the trees, the two were alone. No more ideal spot could have been found for a private conversation. And this was private, as Meadow's actions quickly showed.

He tiptoed to the hedgerows on either side, and peered over, to make sure that no one was listening.

Tom Mace watched him wonderingly and anxiously.

"Listen," whispered Spikey Meadows confidentially. "My boy, your chance 'as come! 'Tain't many lads that get on to a chance like this! I've been speaking to your father, an' he told me as you was comin' 'ere."

Spikey Meadows patted Tom's shoulder reassuringly.

"You mustn't mind yer old dad," he said. "Old Bill puts things the wrong way, you know. He rubs 'em all up the wrong way, Bill does. Now, Bill said to me, 'Spikey,' 'e says, 'we've got an inside 'and. My boy's going to Millford College.'"

Tom Mace frowned, but made no reply.

"Bill told me," resumed Spikey Meadows, "about 'ow 'e asked you to 'elp. But I expects 'e rubbed you up wrong. Now, don't you get ruffled, me lad. I know you think you're goin' to be some fine gent. But you mark my words. I can put you on to money—good 'ard cash—and more than that no fellow don't want."

He paused, but Tom was still silent.

The old crook glanced at him quickly and keenly, then resumed.

"Look 'ere," he said, "it's no good, Tom, you tryin' to be a gent. They're all agin' yer. Take my tip. Ain't they bin agin' yer—ain't they, now? Be honest, man!"

"Yes," muttered Tom. "But it will be different soon."

Spikey Meadows chuckled.

"That's what they all says!" he scoffed. "Just like the good old honest poor! And where'll it lead yer? They're all agin' yer, and it'll end up by you running away. I know it. Now listen to me, and I'll put you on to some money."

Tom shook his head.

"I'm not goin' to do anything shady," he said firmly.

"Shady?" echoed Spikey, in well-feigned injured innocence. "Now, would I be arskin' you to do anything not all right? All I wants you to do is to 'elp me an' yer old dad to make some money. All you've got to do is to leave a window open——"

"Yes——"

At this reply Spikey Meadows brightened, failing to see that he was being "drawn on."

"Leave open a window," he explained coaxingly, "and all is ours. I mean, all will be plane sailing. Nothin' dishonourable in leavin' a window open accidental like. Why, thousands and thousands leave 'em open every night. Why shouldn't you leave a window open if you like to? That's all we wants you to do. An' perhaps you can come and chat with me, and tell me orl about the skule an' how you like it—if you've got a nice room, and where it is. You know, be pally with me. It'll be nice for you to 'ave an old pal 'andy like." He stopped. "What do you think of it, sonny?"

(This splendid story will be continued next Wednesday.

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EDITORIAL.

My Dear Chums,—

Our grand new serial, "What Have You Against Me?" has proved a great success, and you may be sure that I am delighted that this is the case. In some ways I am more fortunate than my readers because, you see, I have the privilege of reading the story in advance without waiting for it to be published in the "Gem." I must confess that I have enjoyed every line of the yarn, and, believe me, you have a big treat in store for you, for the story gets more interesting each week. No wonder so many readers write to say how eagerly they look forward to each Wednesday when their favourite paper, the "Gem," is published. Martin Clifford's story this week is also a splendid one, and there is no doubt you will appreciate "Seven Schoolboys and Solomon." Next week there will be another of these fine outdoor stories of the popular heroes of St. Jim's. It is full of funny situations and exciting moments, and you must make quite sure of getting the next number of the "Gem." I continue to receive very interesting letters from my chums, and I hope readers who have not yet written to me will do so, and let me know their views about the "Gem." This week the specially enlarged number of the "Boys' Herald" is on sale, and in addition to the fine long complete story of "Stringer & Co!" and other excellent features, that remarkable new serial, entitled, "Don't Go to London, Lad!" starts. Everyone should read this engrossing life drama of a Lancashire lad in the Big City. The "Boys' Herald" is on sale everywhere on Tuesday. Don't miss it!

YOUR EDITOR.

ANSWERS TO READERS.

"ADMIRER OF DORIS LEVISON" (Blackpool).—I do not object in the least to answering your few questions. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy receives a fiver for pocket-money once in every three weeks. Harry Hammond receives three pounds a week. Baggy Trimble receives half-a-crown. Racke gets all the money he can possibly get through. Sometimes he manages on two pounds a week, other times he will go to London for a week-end, and get through a couple of hundred! He is naturally greatly envied by some of the boys at the school, but he only takes Gerald Crooke or Cardew—if that youth condescends to come with him. D'Arcy minor is thirteen, and Lord Eastwood gives him ten shillings a week for pocket-money. Bagley Towers and Trimble Hall only exist in Baggy's fertile imagination, I am afraid!

"A MODERN TOMBOY" (Reading).—Skimpole still continues to invent. It is likely that he might kill himself in an explosion one of these days, but we hope not. Harry Hammond originates from the Bethnal Green Road. Tom Merry is considerably older than Dick Brooke. Yes, Brooke has a sister. Bernard Glyn's people have a very large house. He once laid a garden railway over a large lawn, and Gore attempted to wreck it. He was foiled by Glyn's sister, Edie. Another occasion when she came in contact with the boys of St. Jim's was when Mr. Horace Ratcliff fell in love with her. That was worth reading, I can tell you!

"GENTEEL GEORGE" (St. German's).—There is very little difference between the boys in the Shell and Fourth. Another Special Number is coming shortly, so look out for it. By the time you read these paragraphs your favourite, Leslie Owen, will have appeared in our Portrait Gallery. You hope Tom Mace will win through and be able to stay at Millford? Well, we shall see! I have quite a number of readers at your town. The boys at St. Jim's have three months' holiday every year, but their adventures in the other nine are sufficient to pack the GEM LIBRARY so that we have them at school nearly every week. I will endeavour, though, to publish a series in which they go on holiday this summer.

"GOOD OLD 'GEM'" (Doncaster).—I have quite made up my mind to publish more Special Numbers in the future. Requests for copies of the Cardew Number pour in every week. Levison will be the next character dealt with. After him perhaps Gussy, perhaps Tom Merry, or Talbot, or just whoever is in most demand. Racke's features are extremely ugly. Among all the juniors at St. Jim's, I would say that Levison is the least likely fellow whom one could "get over" with a tale. Many thanks for your appreciation of the last two Cardew stories.

CHAT ABOUT ST. JIM'S AND GREYFRIARS.

I sincerely trust that last week's magnificent long story of Mr. Martin Clifford's pleased you all. I don't exactly know what your opinions are; but I really think that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy should have shown better judgment in the purchasing of a donkey than he did. It looks like a donkey, and that's about all. Of course, I dare not let the noble Swell of St. Jim's have my opinion verbally, for fear he deals me one of his severe "thwashin's."

From what I gather from Tom Merry, Harry Manners, and Monty Lowther, otherwise known as the Terrible Three, a pretty lively time is in store for the said Mr. Honest Joe, the man who tendered the "moke" for sale. Should he happen along either of their paths again, I can see him being ragged baldheaded. Oh, these Terrible Three!

It was really a case of the donkey being bought, and the famous aristocrat of St. Jim's being "sold."

I hear now that Paul Pontefex Prout of Greyfriars has caused some little excitement. The story has it that whilst our worthy master of the Fifth was out shooting, he had the misfortune to "pop off" a bird from Miss Bunn's hat. Naturally enough, the young lady from the tobacconist is very much upset. I feel sure poor old Prouty didn't mean this to happen. Although he may have been out hunting for game, it does not follow that he's hunting for trouble.

Alonzo Todd wishes me to inform all concerned that William George Bunter contemplates "rounding" up his creditors. Believe me, we shall hear next that he is "squaring" them all up.

Anticipation, we learn, is better than realisation. We repeatedly hear that the Owl of the Remove is anticipating the arrival of a postal-order from a titled relation. Surely realisation would be better in his case!

Harry Manners, the amateur photographer of St. Jim's, has enlightened me to the fact that his birthday occurs next month. Strange, photography itself reaches its eighty-second birthday also in this month.

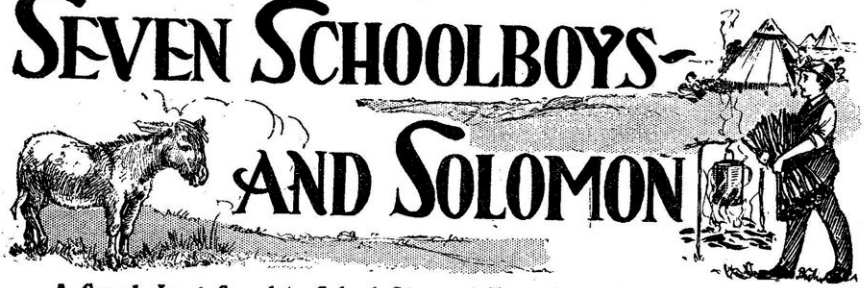
You will all be surprised to hear that David Llewellyn Wynn has been called over the coals for stealing a kiss from one of the school maids. On cross-examination, it was proved that at the time of the offence plaintiff was eating a piece of toffee. The Falstaff of St. Jim's has been let off with a caution.

A local newspaper states Ernest Levison to be detained in hospital. What hospital it is we can't say, neither are we sure that he is the missing Levison from St. Jim's.

Many are the inquiries asking the distance between St. Jim's and Greyfriars. Well, roughly, I should say as far as from Greyfriars to St. Jim's.

By the way, don't forget the GEM Library reaches its seven hundredth number next week. Your friends should all read this record-making number.

SEVEN SCHOOLBOYS—AND SOLOMON



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

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.
Camping Out!

"WE'RE hungry!"

"Weally, you fellows——"

"Hungry as hunters!"

"Yaas, but——"

"Where's tea?"

"Tea is not quite weady, deah boys. But——"

"Br-r-r-r-r-r!"

Six voices were inquiring after tea. Tom Merry & Co. were hungry, and they made no secret of the fact. Rather, they dinned it into the ears of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

It was a blazing afternoon.

Tom Merry & Co. had camped, but there was no camp-fire. A camp-fire on that sultry afternoon would have been rather too much of a good thing. But a camp-fire was not needed for getting tea. Arthur Augustus was master of the ceremonies, and Arthur Augustus knew what he was about, or was under the happy delusion that he did!

On a grassy bank, Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther were seated in a row. Blake and Digby were sprawled in the grass. Herries was sitting near on a log, carefully feeding Towser with a biscuit. Close at hand, Solomon, the donkey, was tethered with a dog-chain. Tethering Solomon with a rope was no use. Solomon made little of a rope, and he was given to wandering. But a dog-chain defied even the wisdom of Solomon.

It was Gussy's turn to cook, and there were six fellows ready and waiting to do full justice to the cookery. They had agreed to stroll around for a time while Gussy got tea. And they had strolled around, and strolled back, and still tea was not ready. It was going to be a "high" tea. There were new-laid eggs galore, purchased at a neighbouring farm; there were rolls, and there was butter. There was going to be tea when the water boiled, and the eggs were going to be boiled in what was left after making the tea. It was perfectly simple, as easy as falling off a form. Six fellows wondered why Gussy couldn't get on with it. But the swell of St Jim's seemed to be in difficulties.

In his shirt-sleeves, with a ruddy, perspiring face, Arthur Augustus bent himself heroically to his task. His comrades helped him with suggestions, criticisms, and jeers, especially jeers. They seemed to fancy that Gussy did not really know that they were hungry. Yet he ought to have known, for every fellow had told him so at least fifteen times, and was still telling him.

At Lexham, where the schoolboy tramps had taken up their baggage, and loaded it upon the patient back of Solomon, Arthur Augustus had purchased a Patent American Wickless Stove.

That was the trouble.

Like so many American inventions, that wickless stove worked out to perfection in theory, but in actual practice it was found wanting.

You simply had to fill it with the best paraffin, and pump it with the attached pump, and light some methylated spirit round the burner, and then the stove burned with a clear, steady flame, according to the card supplied with the stove.

The trouble was, that it wouldn't do it.

Arthur Augustus had filled it with the best paraffin obtainable at the last village the walking party had passed. He had pumped it with great energy. He had poured methylated spirit into the proper place, and applied a match as per instructions. And the methylated spirit had blazed away, and the stove hadn't lighted up. Again and again Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had weighed in with the methylated spirit, until his stock was running very low, and still the obstinate stove refused to burn with a clear, steady flame, or, indeed, any flame at all.

Round Arthur Augustus, in the grass, were strewn match-sticks, like leaves in Vallambrosa. He had used a whole box of matches already, and nearly a pint of methylated spirit, and very nearly all his patience. His fingers were black, there was a smudge of black on his noble nose, and there was a strong methylated scent all over him. Criticisms and objurgations were very hard to bear in such circumstances.

"If you fellows would dwy up for a little while," said Arthur Augustus, "I might get this stove to go wight."

"You'll never get it to go white," said Monty Lowther gravely. "It's gone jolly black."

"When I say wight, Lowthah, I mean wight!"

"What about tea?" inquired Blake.

"Pway give a fellow a west, Blake! This stove is bound to light up in the long wun."

"Isn't it an American stove, the very latest invention?" asked Lowther.

"Yaas."

"Then what on earth makes you expect it to light?"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"What about lighting a fire?" suggested Manners. "I'm jolly hungry! Gussy can keep on, and no doubt he will have the water boiling for brekker to-morrow."

"He ought, with luck!" agreed Tom Merry.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"We can gather some sticks here," said Herries. "For goodness' sake, let's get somethin' going!"

"Weally, Hewwies——"

"We'll give Gussy another minute!" said Manners, taking out his watch.

"I twust that anothah minute will be enough, Mannahs. Pway lend me a box of matches, somebody!"

"My only hat! Have you finished that box?"

"Yaas."

"Any methylated left?"

"Just enough for one more twy," said Arthur Augustus hopefully. "I wathah think it will go all wight this time. I am goin' to give it a jollay good pumpin'."

Arthur Augustus jerked the remnant of the methylated spirit into the pan round the burner, and lighted it with a match from the new box. Then he pumped industriously.

Perhaps he overdid it. That triumph of Yankee genius, the wickless stove, required very delicate handling.

"Bai Jove! It's caught!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus gleefully.

"Hooray!"

"Only an hour to start it!" exclaimed Blake enthusiastically. "Who wouldn't have a wickless stove to save time?"

The wonderful stove was burning at last. But it wasn't burning with a clear, steady flame as per programme. It was a thick and smoky flame, with a powerful smell. Perhaps Gussy had been too vigorous on the pumping. Certainly the paraffin was coming up the tube and burning, instead of gas. Six juniors backed further off from the smoky and evil-smelling invention.

"That doesn't seem quite wight!" said Arthur Augustus, backing away from his handiwork. "Pewways it wequiahs more pumpin', though?"

"Perhaps it requires less?" suggested Dig.

"Weally, Dig, I can give it some more; but I do not see how I can give it less at this stage of the affaih."

"Go hon" said Dig sarcastically.

"What it really wants," said Lowther, "is chucking into the nearest ditch, and carefully covering up with clods. Now Gussy has done his song and dance with the wickless horror, let's get some sticks and start a fire."

Arthur Augustus sniffed.

"Weally, Lowthah, if you pwefer a camp-fire to this stove——"

"I rather think I do," grinned Lowther. "We want something to eat before the end of the vac, you know."

"Weally, you know——"

But the juniors were already gathering wood, and a fire was soon started. Arthur Augustus was still wrestling manfully with the wickless stove when the kettle, suspended over burning sticks, sang and boiled. In a tin can suspended beside the kettle the eggs were boiling. Tom Merry sliced bread and butter, Manners carved ham, Lowther handed out pepper and salt. Tea was ready when Arthur Augustus turned a ruddy and smudgy face from the wickless stove.

"I wathah think it will be all wight now, you fellows, if I can get some more methylated spiwit. Will one of you chaps cut back to the village for some spiwit?"

"Will we?" murmured Lowther.

"It is only about a mile——"

"Don't all speak at once!" said Lowther. "I can see that everybody wants to go. Just a walk of a mile, that's all—and then Gussy will be able to do his turn again——"

"I cannot light the stove without methylated spiwit, Lowthah."

"The spirit is willing, but the stove is weak?" suggested Lowther.

"Weally, you ass——"

"Come and have tea, Gussy!" said Tom Merry, laughing. "We haven't found a camp for to-night yet, you know, and we've no time to cut to waste. We can't camp on this roadside if we can find anything better."

"Yaas; but——"

"Aren't you hungry?" demanded Blake.

"Yaas; but——"

"Come and have tea, ass!"

"Oh, vewy well!" said Arthur Augustus. "But if you gave me time to get this stove weally going I am suah that you would be surpwised at the wesult."

"We should be surprised if there was any result!" agreed Lowther. "Here's your ham and eggs, ass, and here's your tea. Pile in and dry up!"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

Arthur Augustus really was very hungry. He sat down to tea, and the wickless stove was left—at a little distance—to burn and smell at its own sweet will. There was a clink of the dog-chain as Solomon, the donkey, moved along towards the smoky stove, apparently curious to learn what kind of thing it was. Solomon was an animal with an inquisitive turn of mind, much given to investigating matters that did not concern him. In his thirst for knowledge, he wedged his muzzle a little too near the stove, and started back with a husky squeal.

"Bai Jove! That sillay ass is burnin' his nose!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus.

"Never mind—it's his own nose!" said Lowther.

"Weally——"

Arthur Augustus started up. But Solomon, the donkey, had already backed away from the stove, one application being enough for him. Solomon wheeled round, and brought his hind legs to play on the stove. Solomon was good at kicking; it was one of his many gifts. He needed only one kick at the offending stove.

Crash!

"Bai Jove!"

The wickless stove whizzed away, one or two loose fragments of it dropping about en route. Solomon, satisfied now, moved off, and began to crop the grass again. There was a howl of laughter from the campers. Only Arthur Augustus did not laugh. He rushed after the wrecked stove, and came back with a mangled object in his hand and a look of dismay upon his face.

"It's wuined!" he said distressfully. "It won't light now, you fellows!"

"Well, it wouldn't light, anyway!" said Blake comfortingly.

"Weally, Blake——"

"I propose a vote of thanks to Solomon!" said Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We shall have to get this wepaired somewhah," said Arthur Augustus. "It looks as if it will wequiah a wathah extensive wepairin'."

"It does—it do!"

"It is not a laughin' mattah!" said the swell of St. Jim's warmly. "I have a vewy gweat mind to whack that beastly donkay. I would give him a feahful thwashin', only—only—it would hurt him. Pway stop gwinnin', you uttah asses, and give me some tea!"

And tea was finished, while Arthur Augustus mournfully contemplated his famous wickless stove, which, as Monty Lowther remarked, was not likely to be of much further use now that both donkeys had done with it—a remark that elicited a scornful sniff from the Honourable Arthur Augustus.

CHAPTER 2.

The Good Samaritan!

"GEE up!"

"Now then, Solomon!"

"Get a move on, you beast!"

Tea over, the schoolboy campers had broken camp, and the baggage had been piled on Solomon. So far Solomon had been found very useful as Minister of Transport. He was strong and he was sturdy, and he would "go"—except upon occasions when the spirit moved him to decline to go. He could carry easily all the impedimenta that the seven schoolboys needed for camping, for Tom Merry & Co. were experienced campers, and they knew how to travel light. Only Arthur Augustus was rather given to accumulating articles that were not strictly necessary—such as wickless stoves. More than once some article purchased by Gussy had been mysteriously lost en route.

Solomon was packed; but Solomon had now lain down in the grass, and he declined to stir.

Tom Merry & Co. had camped only for tea, intending to push on to look for a camp for the night. Solomon evidently had supposed that this camp was the camp for the night.

He had a strong objection to going farther.

He lay in the grass in calm repose, while seven exasperated schoolboys stood round him and talked to him.

"He will have to be whacked if he doesn't go," said Tom Merry decidedly. "We can't hang on here all night. Come up, you brute!"

"Get a stick!" snapped Blake.

"Hold on, deah boys!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, whose gentle soul shrank from the thought of whacking even an obstinate donkey. "There are othah ways of makin' him go, you know. A donkay can be led on by holdin' a cawwot befoah his nose."

"Ass!"

"Pway let us twy that first befoah whackin' him."

"Have you got a carrot to dangle before his nose?" roared Blake.

"Bai Jove! I nevah thought of that! Pewways one of you fellows could twot back to the village and buy some cawwots?"

"You—you owl!" gasped Blake.

Whack!

Jack Blake's patience was exhausted. He gave the donkey a smart "lick." Solomon turned a reproachful eye upon him.

"Pway don't whack him, Blake!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "I will twy to persuade him. Pewways he will come up if I pull him along a little by the yahs."

Arthur Augustus took a determined grasp upon Solomon's ears. There was plenty of room for a good hold!

Arthur Augustus pulled with all his strength. Solomon sat tight.

"Come up, you wottah!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "Get a move on, you beast! Bai Jove! Come up!"

"Go it!" chuckled Lowther. "Pull devil, pull baker! Which donkey do you fellows back to win?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hallo! He's going!"

The drag on his long ears perhaps disconcerted Solomon. He rose quite suddenly and started on.

Arthur Augustus was not prepared for that sudden surrender.

He sat down with a bump and a howl. Solomon stepped over him as he started on his way. One of his feet was planted on Arthur Augustus' waistcoat.

"Gwoogh! Oh deah!" Arthur Augustus sat up dazedly. "Give me that stick, Blake, and I will thwash him——"

"No, you won't!" grinned Blake. "It's rather rotten to whack a donkey, you know!"

"Wats! I——"

"Anyhow, he's going!" said Tom Merry. "Come on! Mind he doesn't lie down again!"

Solomon, once started, condescended to keep on. The walking-party of St. Jim's walked on with him. Tom Merry cast a rather anxious glance at the sky. The afternoon had been a blazing one, and there was a feeling of thunder in the air. Tom's experience as a Boy Scout had given him some knowledge of weather signs, and he had little doubt that rain was coming.

"We've got to find a camp pretty soon, and get the tent up!" he said. "Keep your eyes open, you fellows."

The fellows were keeping their eyes open. But a favourable spot for a camp was not to be found very easily. The juniors were following a long white road over the down now, and it was bordered on one side by a dense wood, on the other by a high park wall. That wall seemed to stretch away almost to infinity.

Splash!

It was the first drop of rain—a big and heavy drop. It landed on the noble nose of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, and made him jump.

"Bai Jove!" Gussy rubbed his nose. "We shall weally have to find shelter, you fellows! We don't want to be

dwenched. We ought weally not to have halted for tea——"

"We oughtn't to have waited while you played the goat, you mean!" grunted Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies——"

"No good crying over spilt milk!" said Tom Merry cheerily. "Hallo, here's a gate! Perhaps we can wedge in here."

Several more drops fell, and there was a dark overcasting of the sky. It was clear by this time that a thunderstorm was coming.

But the long park wall had ended at last, and it was succeeded by high, green hedges, with golden broom thick among the green. On a wide, low gate a young man was seated, smoking a cigar. He glanced at the walkers as they came up, and they glanced at him. He was not a nice-looking young man; he had a pimply complexion, a red nose, a ragged moustache, and an unshaven chin. But the schoolboys were glad to see anybody of whom they could inquire for a suitable camp. Behind the gate on which the pimply gentleman sat was a wide, green field, with a large barn in it. That barn looked like a very welcome shelter to the travellers, with the rain coming down in heavy drops. They halted.

"Good-afternoon!" began Tom Merry.

"Arternoon!" said the young man, blowing out a cloud of smoke from his cigar. "Seen a man on the road?"

"No."

"Where has he got to?" demanded the young man, as if Tom Merry ought to know. "Here I've been waiting for him nearly an hour. Nice, ain't it, with the rain starting!"

"Sorry we haven't seen him," said Tom Merry politely. "We're looking for a camp——"

"A which?"

"A camp——"

"If you mean the air camp, it's about six miles from here," said the young man with the pimples.

"I don't mean that. I mean we're looking for a place where we can camp," explained Tom Merry. "Walking tour, you know."

"Oh, I see!" said the young man, regarding the St. Jim's juniors with renewed interest. "Camping out—what?"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus.

"Perhaps you know this district, and can tell us where we can pitch our tent," suggested Tom Merry. "We'd be much obliged."

The young man looked thoughtful. He seemed very interested in the St. Jim's party. He nodded at last, and waved his hand towards the field and the barn behind him.

"That suit you?" he asked.

"Yes, rather, if we can get permission——"

"Leave that to me," said the young man genially. "This land belongs to my friend Parkinson—the man I'm waiting here for. I'm sure he would be pleased if you camped here. I'll mention the matter to him as soon as I see him, and you can take my word for it that it will be all right."

"You're awfully good!" said Tom gratefully.

"Not at all, my boy," said the pimply gentleman airily. "Only too pleased to be able to give you a helping hand. I've done these walking stunts myself, and know what it's like. Just trot in, and I'll make it all right with Parkinson."

The obliging young man jumped down, and threw open the gate.

Gladly enough the St. Jim's juniors led Solomon into the field. The rain was thickening, and the open doorway of the big barn was very inviting. The pimply young gentleman held the gate open while they passed in, and then closed it after them.

"Make yourselves at home!" he said. "Camp in the barn. You'll find it dry, and some straw there. I'll just walk along the road and meet Parkinson, and explain to him."

And the pimply young man, whose hospitable kindness was so little in accord with his looks, waved his hand, and strolled away down the road. And the St. Jim's campers thankfully filed into the big barn.

CHAPTER 3.
"Pay Up!"

"BAI Jove! This is all wight!"

"Yes, rather!"

"We're in luck!"

There seemed no doubt that the St. Jim's voyagers were in luck. In the big, dry barn there was plenty of room for them, and for Solomon. It was not necessary to erect the tent; the barn was a much better shelter than any tent could have been, in the storm that was coming on. Outside, the rain was splashing down heavily.

There was a roll of distant thunder, and a glimmer of lightning in the clouds. Every member of the party was devoutly thankful for the solid roof overhead.

"Any port in a storm!" said Monty Lowther. "But this is a jolly good port. That young fellow is a real brick."

"Yaas, wathah! And this should show you that you ought not to judge by appeawances, you fellows," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, in his most fatherly manner. "I was wathah pwejudiced against that young man by his looks. I should weally have supposed that he was wathah a doubtful customah on his appeawance. But——"

"Better not light a fire in the barn!" said Manners doubtfully.

"You are intewwuptin' me, Mannahs——"

"I know! We can boil water on the spirit-stove and make cocoa," went on Manners. "That will warm us up, and bread-and-cheese will do for supper."

"I am afwaid the wickless stove is not quite in ordah, Mannahs——"

"Bother the wickless stove," answered Manners. "We've got a common or garden methylated stove, that cost a bob, and that will do."

"My hat! The rain's coming down!" said Tom Merry, looking out of the open doorway. "Jolly lucky we got into this."

"Yaas, wathah!"

The sky was almost black now, forked by lightning, and the rain came down in torrents. Rivulets were running close by the doorway; the grass and the hedges and trees were weeping, and the lane, lately thick with dust, was churning into mud. Raindrops splashed into the building, and Tom closed one leaf of the big door.

In one corner of the barn Solomon lay down contentedly in the straw. Towser sat and watched the doorway, and blinked at the rain. In another corner—a safe distance from loose straw—Manners lighted the "common-or-garden" methylated stove, which had cost only a "bob," but was certainly more useful than Gussy's expensive purchase. The kettle was soon singing merrily.

It was cold enough in the big barn as the night descended. Tom Merry lighted a lantern, which shed a dim light over the camp in the barn. The juniors gathered round cheerfully to a supper of hot cocoa and bread-and-cheese.

"Beastly weather!" grunted Digby.

"Why grouse?" said Tom Merry cheerily. "We might have been much worse off if we hadn't got into this."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"My hat! How it's coming down!"

"Hallo, here's somebody else looking for shelter!" exclaimed Blake, as there was a footfall in the rain outside.

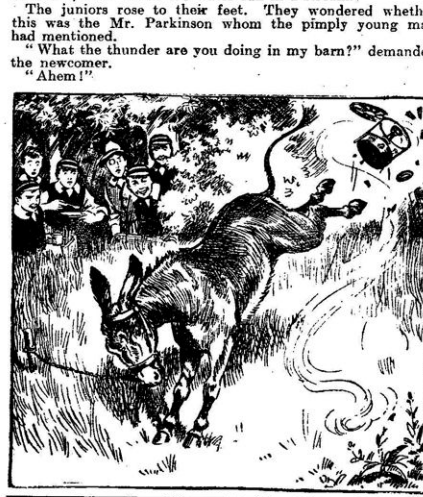
The juniors all looked round.

A rather burly man, with his coat muffled up about his ears and a streaming umbrella up, stood in the doorway. He stared at the campers, and the expression on his mottled face was very grim. He strode into the barn, and lowered the umbrella, from which the water ran in a stream.

The juniors rose to their feet. They wondered whether this was the Mr. Parkinson whom the pimply young man had mentioned.

"What the thunder are you doing in my barn?" demanded the newcomer.

"Ahem!"



Solomon wheeled round and brought his hind legs to play on the stove. He needed only one kick at the offending stove. Crash! The stove whizzed away, one or two loose fragments of it dropping about en route.

"Weally, sir——"

"Are you Mr. Parkinson?" asked Tom Merry.

"That's my name, and this here is my barn. I'd like to know what you mean by camping in it!"

"Hasn't your friend told you——" began Tom, rather dismayed.

"What do you mean?"

"We were given permission to camp here," explained Tom.

Mr. Parkinson grunted.

"I never gave you permission! I don't allow tramps on my land!"

"Bai Jove! We are not twamps——"

Mr. Parkinson pointed to the door.

"Clear off!" he snapped.

"We can't clear off in this rain!" exclaimed Herries indignantly.

"That ain't my business! You shouldn't have come here! I know that you can't camp in my barn!"

"But we had your permission!" exclaimed Dig.

"Rubbish!"

Tom Merry set his lips. He was considerably incensed by the big man's unpleasant manner; but he felt that there was a misunderstanding. Apparently the pimply young man had not met Mr. Parkinson, and explained, as he had undertaken to do.

"Let me explain, please," said Tom quietly. "We were given permission to camp here by a young man——"

"Name?"

"I don't know his name. He was sitting on the gate, and he said he would explain to Mr. Parkinson, and it would be all right."

"Nonsense!"

"A young man with—with pimples," said Manners. "He said he was a friend of yours."

"Well, I don't know anything about him," said Mr. Parkinson; "and, anyhow, he hadn't any right to let tramps into my barn! There's the door!"

"But——"

"'Nuff said! If you can pay for accommodation, you can have it, but you're not camping here for nothing!"

Tom Merry's lip curled.

"Oh, if that's all, we can arrange the matter all right!" he said. "We are quite willing to pay for using the barn."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We'd rather pay than take it as a favour from you, Mr. Parkinson!" growled Herries indignantly.

Mr. Parkinson smiled sarcastically.

"Well, now you're talking," he said. "It will cost you five pounds."

"What!" yelled the juniors.

"You ain't deaf, I suppose? Five pounds is the sum, or I'll call my men to clear you out, bag and baggage, and then prosecute you for trespassing!" said Mr. Parkinson grimly. "And I'll keep that there donkey as security for payment, too."

"My hat!"

"Why, you—you rotter!" gasped Tom Merry. "How dare you ask us five pounds for camping in your barn? Five bob would be nearer the mark."

"Do you want me to call my men to deal with you?" demanded Mr. Parkinson sourly.

"Call 'em, and be blowed!" said Herries. "I dare say we can handle them, and they'll be jolly sorry if my bulldog begins on them!"

"I—I suppose we could start!" said Digby, with a very doubtful glance at the pouring rain outside.

"Rot! We can't go out in this!" said Manners. "Nice weather to look for a camp in!"

"Pay or clear!" snapped Mr. Parkinson.

"We certainly sha'n't pay you five pounds!" said Tom Merry angrily. "If you like to name a reasonable figure——"

"Pway don't argue with the fellow, Tom Mewwy!" said Arthur Augustus loftily. "It is beneath our dig to banday words with such a person! Let us pay the wottah what he asks!"

"Dry up, Gussy!" implored Blake. "No need for you to rattle your chin, you know! Trouble enough without that."

"Weally, Blake——"

"We will go as far as a pound, if that will satisfy you, Mr. Parkinson," said Tom Merry quietly.

"Well, it won't! Make it two-pound-ten, and I'll let you stay till morning!" snapped Mr. Parkinson.

"Rats!"

"Then clear off!" roared Mr. Parkinson.

Tom looked at the rain again. It was coming down almost in sheets. He shook his head.

"We're staying here," he said. "We had permission, though there seems to have been a misunderstanding. We're doing no harm here, either."

"That's my business, as it's my barn."

"Yaas, a fellow is bound to wespect the wights of pwoperty," said Arthur Augustus sagely. "This boundah is an awful cad, you fellows, but he has a wight to have his pwoperty wespected. I suggest——"

"Dry up, Gussy——"

"Weally, Mannahs——"

"I'll make it two pounds!" said Mr. Parkinson. "Not a penny less! And if you don't pay up, you are trespassing young rascals——"

"Oh, cheese it!" said Tom Merry. "We'll pay you two pounds, and be hanged to you!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Let's see the colour of your money!" sneered Mr. Parkinson.

Four ten-shilling notes were produced. Mr. Parkinson took them, examined them, sniffed, and put them into his pocket. Then he jerked his umbrella open.

"That'll do!" he said. "Stay here as long as you like!"

And he put up his umbrella, and tramped out into the rain, and disappeared, followed by glances of contempt and disgust from the juniors, which had no effect on Mr. Parkinson's broad back.

Over the remains of their supper the St. Jim's walkers discussed Mr. Parkinson and his greed, with remarks that ought to have made Mr. Parkinson's hair curl if he had heard them. They would have been still more disgusted if they could have followed Mr. Parkinson after he had quitted the barn, and observed what happened next. In the lane a hundred yards away, under a clump of trees, Mr. Parkinson stopped as he met a young man with a pimply complexion.

"What luck?" asked that gentleman.

"Thirty bob!" answered Mr. Parkinson untruthfully.

"You ought to have stuck them for more than that!" said the pimply young man discontentedly.

"Well, it's fifteen bob for each of us, and easily earned!" said Mr. Parkinson.

And the two gentlemen walked away, heading for the nearest refreshment-house.

CHAPTER 4.
Quite a Surprise!

GRRRRRRRRRR!

It was the dulcet voice of Towser, the bulldog, and it awakened Tom Merry.

The St. Jim's party had slept soundly enough through the night in their blankets and the straw. Outside, the rain lashed down till nearly midnight, when the storm rolled away, and there was silence. But the juniors, sleeping soundly after a day's march, did not note the difference, and they were still asleep when a summer dawn came up bright and rosy over the wet fields.

The door of the barn was flung wide open suddenly from outside, and it was then that Towser growled.

A flood of sunshine poured in at the wide doorway, and Tom Merry blinked in the light as he sat up and rubbed his eyes.

Gr-r-r-r-r-r!

Towser growled again.

"Quiet, Towser!" said Tom.

Gr-r-r-r-r-r!

A broad-shouldered man, in shooting-clothes and gaiters, stood in the doorway, with a pipe in his mouth and a whip under his arm, staring at the campers in evident amazement.

The newcomer looked like a farmer, and he had a round and ruddy and good-natured face, fringed by white whiskers. His ruddy face was full of amazement at the present moment.

"Bust my buttons!" he ejaculated.

Arthur Augustus sat up.

"Bai Jove! Is that that wottah come back?"

"Hay!" ejaculated the farmer.

"Bai Jove! I beg your pardon, sir. I was thinkin' it was quite anothah wottah—I mean, anothah chap——"

"What the thump are you boys doing in this here barn?" demanded the farmer, striding in.

Grrrrrrrr!

Towser plainly did not like his intrusion. He made an offensive movement towards the intruder, and the farmer backed away in some alarm.

"Call that dorg off!" he exclaimed.

Gr-r-r-r-r-r!

"Call that beast off!" roared the farmer, mounting a ladder in the barn.

"Towser!"

"Call him off, Herries, you ass!"

Herries struggled out of the straw, and grasped Towser's chain. Towser unwillingly allowed himself to be dragged back from the foot of the ladder. But he still eyed the red-faced man morosely.

"My word!" The farmer stepped down from the ladder, but stepped upon it again as the chain rattled, and Towser made an effort to reach him. "Keep that brute away, I tell you!"

"He's all right," said Herries.

"He doesn't look all right!" growled the farmer.

"Speakin' as a fwiend, sir," said Arthur Augustus, "I should advise you to wemain on the laddah. That bulldog

has no wespect whatevah for a fellow's twousahs, as I have fwequently wemarked to Hewwies."

Gr-r-r-r!

"He's all right if you don't annoy him," said Herries. "He doesn't like you butting in like this, my man. What the thump do you want here, anyhow? You've disturbed my dog."

"Disturbed your dog!" spluttered the farmer. "You cheeky young rascal! What do you mean by bringing a savage dog into my barn at all?"

"Your barn!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Bai Jove!"

"My barn!" snorted the farmer. "I find a gang of young rascals camped in my barn, without having had the good manners to ask permission, and you tell me I'm disturbing your dog! My word! I'll—I'll——"

"But—but is it your barn?" stuttered Tom Merry, in bewilderment.

The farmer gave an angry snort.

"It's on my land, ain't it?" he demanded. "Did you think it was public property when you moved in?"

"But—but isn't it Mr. Parkinson's barn?" exclaimed Tom.

"Never heard the name. It's my barn, and my name ain't Parkinson. My name's Robinson!" snorted the farmer. "Keep that dog away! I'll brain him if he comes sniffing any nearer!"

"Keep on the ladder and he won't touch you!" suggested Herries.

"Can't a man step on the ground in his own barn?" roared Mr. Robinson, in great indignation.

"If it's your barn, who's Mr. Parkinson?" exclaimed Blake. "We've paid two pounds for the use of this barn for the night."

"Nonsense!"

"But we have!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "A man who called himself Parkinson——"

"Then you've been swindled!" growled the farmer. "You're a set of young donkeys, that's what you are! Why didn't you come up to the farmhouse and ask permission?"

"We—we saw a man——" stammered Tom Merry.

"Who told us——" stuttered Manners.

"And—and——" babbled Monty Lowther.

"Chain that dashed dog up, Herries!" growled Tom Merry. "This chap is the owner of the place, plain enough."

Herries grunted. But he consented to fix Towser's chain to a staple in the wall, so that Mr. Robinson could descend from his own ladder, into his own barn, with safety. It was really only a small concession to make to a property-owner on his own property.

Mr. Robinson stepped down, looking very exasperated. Evidently he had not been pleased by his reception in his own barn.

"If you're the owner, sir——" began Blake doubtfully.

"If" snorted Mr. Robinson. "Don't I keep on telling you that this is my barn, you young jackanapes?"

"But the other chap said it was his barn——"

"And he stuck us for two pounds to put up here for the night!" exclaimed Digby.

Mr. Robinson's frowning face broke into a grin.

"Well, you've been done," he said. "You ought to have had more sense. Anyhow, this is my barn, and it isn't an hotel. Catch on?"

"Look here! If you want us to pay for using the barn, we shall jolly well want proof that you're the owner!" said Herries warmly. "We're not going to be done twice!"

"You've took a lodging for the night here without asking permission," said the farmer. "But I don't want you to pay anything. I want you to clear off. You don't seem to have done any harm."

"Bai Jove! I quite believe it is your barn, sir," said Arthur Augustus. "We have been swindled by a vewy wascally swindlah, who told us that it was his barn."

"A pair of swindlers, you mean!" growled Tom Merry, as a light broke in on his mind. "That pimply fellow was in league with the other rascal. He got us to camp here, and then sent the other rotter to extort money from us!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Clear as anything now!" grunted Blake. "By gad! I hope we shall come across them again."

"Not likely. They've walked off with our two pounds!" said Tom. "We were rather asses to be done like that."

"Pway speak for yourself, Tom Mewwy! You may wemembah that I wemarked that I had wathah a pwejudice against that pimply boundah——"

"Are you staying in this barn till I call my dog to you?" inquired Mr. Robinson gruffly.

"Better not, sir," said Herries. "Towser wouldn't leave much of your dog if you called him in."

"My word! I——"

"Pway dwy up, Hewwies! We owe this gentleman an apology!" said Arthur Augustus. "Mr. Wobinson, I wegwet vewy much that we should have camped on your land without askin' permission. I twust you will believe that the twansgwession was quite inadvertent on our part."

Mr. Robinson stared at Gussy. Probably that noble youth's fine flow of language surprised him.

"By George!" he murmured.

"We all apologise most pwofoundly, sir!" said Arthur Augustus. "And we will welieve you of our pwesence, if we are unwelcome, without any unnecessawy delay!"

"We'll get going, sir," said Tom Merry. "Get ready, you fellows. We can get some brekker along the road later."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Solomon was persuaded out of the straw, and the juniors proceeded to pack. Mr. Robinson watched them, his broad, good-humoured face relaxing more and more.

"Hold on!" he said. "You can't camp here for breakfast, as my men will be coming into the barn soon. But what's the matter with coming up to the farm for breakfast?"

"Bai Jove!"

"I'll be glad to have you," said the farmer, smiling. "You seem to have been swindled by some rascal, who made out that my barn was his barn. Come along to the house, and I'll see you through for breakfast. Bust my buttons, I'll be glad to see you round my table!"

"You're awfully good, sir," said Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Not at all. Trot after me!" said the bluff old gentleman. And the St. Jim's party "trotted" after him with light hearts and smiling faces. The rather peculiar adventure had not turned out so badly after all.

CHAPTER 5.
A Happy Meeting!

"'ONCE more upon the waters—yet once more!'" quoted Monty Lowther, as the seven schoolboys and the donkey started on their way again after breakfast with the hospitable Mr. Robinson. After the rain of the night it was a glorious summer's morning. Drops of water hung on the hawthorns by the way, and there was mud in the lanes, but the sun shone down from a sky of brightest blue. And the hearts of the St. Jim's walkers were light and free of care.

Arthur Augustus turned his eyeglass upon Monty Lowther with a rather perplexed expression.

"Pway wepeat that wemark, Lowthah," he said.

"'Once more upon the waters!'" said Lowther.

"I fail to follow your meanin', deah boy. We are not upon the watahs; we are upon dwy land—or neahly dwy," said the puzzled swell of St. Jim's.

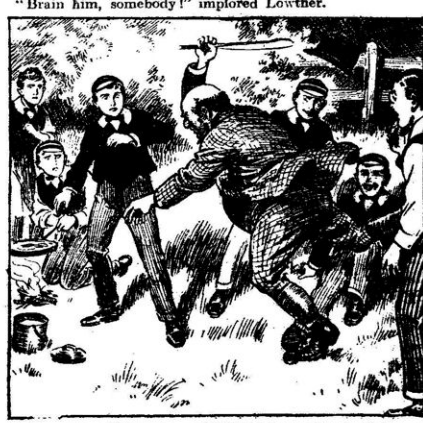
"Dear man!" said Monty Lowther.

"Weally, you know——"

"It's a quotation, ass!" howled Lowther. "Haven't you ever heard of Byron, who was supposed to be a poet by our giddy grandfathers?"

"Yaas, I have certainly heard of the chap," said Arthur Augustus, with a nod. "But I fail to see how his wemark applies to the pwesent posish, as we are not upon the watah at all, but——"

"Brain him, somebody!" implored Lowther.



Mr. Greggs made a jump at Monty Lowther with his whip raised. Blake put out a foot just in time, and Mr. Greggs stumbled over it, and came with a crash to the ground. (See page 15.)

"I should uttahly wefuse to be bwained, Lowthah, and I quite fail to see how Bywon's wemark applies——"

"A quotation," said Tom Merry, "need not hit the bullseye, Gussy. Besides, when a chap wants to quote poetry, he must quote what he knows, whether it fits or not——"

"Yaas, but——"

"Keep an eye open for Mr. Parkinson and the merry merchant with the pimples," observed Blake. "We might drop on them——"

"I was wemarkin'——"

"They owe us two pounds!" said Tom Merry. "I dare say the rascals have boozed it away before this; but if we drop on them we'll take it out of their hide."

"You bet!"

Anxious as they were to meet Mr. Parkinson and his pimply confederate, the juniors did not allow the swindle of the previous night to weigh upon their minds. In the bright sunshine they tramped on in great spirits, and even Solomon seemed to feel the genial influence of the sunny morning, and trotted on contentedly with the packs. Arthur Augustus had a very thoughtful brow as he walked on. Perhaps he was trying to think out how that quotation from Byron applied to the march of the schoolboy tramps. Arthur Augustus did not like to leave a problem unsolved.

It was high noon when the walking-party camped again. They were hungry, and they were ready for a rest as well as for a feed. And they had plenty of time on their hands. The best of a walking tour, as Blake had remarked, was that you went where you liked and arrived when you liked, and needn't worry if you didn't arrive anywhere at all. Ultimately the party were going to arrive at Stratford-on-Avon, and "do" Shakespeare's birthplace; but if they didn't arrive there it wouldn't matter. Indeed, Monty Lowther observed that, in that case, it might be all for the best, as they would be saved the fearful bore of "doing" the sights.

"This field will suit us," remarked Tom Merry. "There's a lot of thistles along that ditch, too, and they'll do for Gussy—I mean, Solomon——"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"Better get the farmer's permission to go in," said Blake. "They ain't all as good-natured as merry old Robinson."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"This chap looks as if he might be the owner," remarked Manners, as a portly gentleman came round a bend of the lane.

The juniors saluted the portly gentleman politely.

"This your field, sir?" asked Tom Merry, with a gesture towards the gate he had stopped at.

"Yes, my boy."

"Would you mind if we camped in it for lunch?"

"Not a bit."

"Thanks, sir!"

"Don't mention it," said the portly gentleman, with a smile. "You're welcome to camp in the field—if you think you'll be comfortable there." And he walked on.

Tom Merry led Solomon up to the gate, and Blake unlatched it. The portly gentleman turned his head.

"Perhaps I ought to mention that there's a bull in the field," he added genially.

"A—a—a bull?"

"Yes—a rather savage animal. But, if you don't mind, I don't!" And, with a chuckle, the portly gentleman walked on.

Blake fastened the latch of the gate again very quickly. He stared after the portly gentleman, who was still chuckling as he departed.

"Silly ass!" growled Blake.

"Bai Jove! He was pullin' our leg, deah boys!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus.

"Go hon! Has that just dawned on your powerful intellect, old scout?" asked Monty Lowther sarcastically.

"Weally, Lowthah——"

Tom Merry laughed.

"Let's go farther on," he said. "After all, there's no hurry."

"Pewwaps we had bettah keep on to the next town, Tom Mewwy. We have to get the wickless stove wepaired, you know."

"The wickless stove!" ejaculated Lowther. "Where is it?"

"Isn't it in the pack, Lowthah?"

"I wonder!" said Lowther, closing one eye at his comrades. And there were six distinct chuckles. Only the noble Gussy was unaware that the celebrated Patent American Wickless Stove had been left behind, concealed under straw in Mr. Robinson's barn. Six members of the walking-party had had quite enough of that fearful and wonderful invention.

The juniors walked on for another mile, and stopped where a broad belt of grass ran by the road. They halted on the grass.

"Camp here!" said Tom Merry. "There's a farmhouse across the field, Blake. Your turn as buyer."

"Right-ho!" said Blake. And he started across the field with a bag and a can for provisions and milk.

There was a footpath across the field to the farmhouse, with a narrow stile in the hedge by the roadside. Blake disappeared behind the hedge, and a moment or two later his chums were astonished by a loud shout.

"This way, you fellows!"

"What——"

"Parkinson and Pimples!" yelled Blake.

"Oh, my hat!"

There was a rush across the stile.

Two rather frowsy-looking gentlemen were lying in the grass on the inner side of the hedge, evidently resting after a morning's tramp. And they were easily recognisable as Mr. Parkinson and the pimply young gentleman who had so kindly offered the juniors the use of somebody else's barn.

They sat up in the grass, disturbed out of their afternoon's nap. And they blinked at the juniors in some alarm.

"Hallo!" said the pimply young man, with a feeble attempt at humour. "Fancy meeting you again! J'have a good night's rest?"

"I 'ope you did!" said Mr. Parkinson.

"You pair of dashed swindlers!" exclaimed Tom Merry wrathfully. "You did us out of two pounds! We saw the farmer in the morning——"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Two pounds?" shouted the pimply young man. "You give him two pounds?"

"Yes, rather! And you had a hand in it——"

The pimply young man jumped up.

"He told me thirty bob!" he roared. "He was going halves, and he only shelled out fifteen bob for me!"

"Bai Jove! You awful wottahs——"

"Somebody said once there was honour among thieves!" grinned Monty Lowther. "Whoever the chap was, he was off-side."

"I—I say, Bert——" stammered Mr. Parkinson.

"Shell out, you swindler!" shouted the pimply young man, in great wrath. "Didn't we agree on 'alves if I put you on to it?"

"Hold on!" ejaculated Tom Merry. "It's us that you've got to shell out to! We want that two pounds!"

"You'll be jolly clever if you get it!" groaned Mr. Parkinson. It's all gone, and I've got a 'ead on me like a blooming pumpkin in consequence. These 'ere drinking-places oughter be shut up! A man do feel bad next day!"

"Bai Jove! The uttah wascals have wasted our money in wiotous livin', deah boys!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus.

"They look like it!" said Manners, with a sniff of disgust. "We'll take it out of their hide!"

"I weally considah that they have asked for a feahful thwashin'——"

"'Ere, 'ands off!" roared Mr. Parkinson, and he leaped to his feet as the St. Jim's juniors closed on him.

Bert, the pimply gentleman, had looked like committing assault and battery upon his associate, but he changed his mind as the juniors collared them both. He made a jump to escape, and jerked himself away, and burst through the hedge and fled along the road. Mr. Parkinson sought to follow him, but Blake used the milk-can just in time. The can came down on Mr. Parkinson's head with a loud clang, and the rascal roared and rolled over in the grass.

"Yaroooh! 'Elp!"

"Bai Jove! Well hit, Blake, deah boy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bump him!" yelled Herries.

"Yow-ow-ow! Let a man alone!" spluttered Mr. Parkinson. "Wharrer you up to? Lemme be, I tell yer! I'll 'ave the lor of yer! Oh, my heye!"

Seven pairs of hands grasped Mr. Parkinson, and he was lifted out of the grass, and bumped down again on the cold, unsympathetic earth. There was a howl from Mr. Parkinson that rang across the wild field.

"Give him another!"

"Yow-ow-ow! 'Elp!"

Bump!

Mr. Parkinson landed again, yelling, and rolled away. Before he could be collared again, he had bounded to his feet, and was fleeing for his life.

"After him!" roared Blake.

"Collah the wogue, deah boys!"

Mr. Parkinson took the stile with a flying leap, and landed in the road. He rolled over there, but jumped up again and ran. There was a rattle of a chain; fortunately for Mr. Parkinson, Towser was secured to a peg. But a deep growl from the bulldog accelerated Mr. Parkinson's flight, and he vanished down the road in a cloud of dust.

"Bai Jove! I wathah think those wottahs wegwet their wascality by this time!" chuckled Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Tom Merry & Co. settled down to a roadside lunch in great spirits. But two dusty and forlorn gentlemen, tramping away in the distance, felt in anything but great spirits—especially Mr. Parkinson. That gentleman had at least six or seven aches in various parts of his disreputable person, and he felt dismally that he had thoroughly earned the two pounds he had extracted from the schoolboy campers.

CHAPTER 6.
Carrots!

"WHOA!"

Solomon, the donkey, stopped. Solomon was always prepared to stop; it was starting-up that sometimes presented difficulties. When the order "Whoa!" was uttered, Solomon was a model of obedience, and a shining example to all donkeys.

The St. Jim's party, a little dusty but very cheery, had walked into a village as the sun was sinking; and there they were going to make purchases for their camp farther on. There was only one shop in the village, which was a general store, post-office, draper's, and milliner's, all combined. Solomon halted outside, and Tom Merry, whose "turn" it was to buy for the party, entered the shop with the necessary supply of cash. And the six other fellows lounged about the quiet village street and waited for him. Several natives came along to stare at Solomon, who often attracted attention. There was a rattle of wheels, and a greengrocer's cart drew up outside the shop. Then Solomon displayed signs of animation.

The greengrocer's cart was well laden with vegetable productions. At the back were several thick bunches of carrots, one of which fairly overhung the tail-board. Solomon's eyes glimmered as he looked at the carrots. They were his favourite article of diet. If Solomon had been offered a six-course dinner, half a dozen of the courses would have consisted of carrots, with perhaps a few thistles by way of hors d'œuvre. That would have been Solomon's choice, at least. So naturally his sleepy eyes woke up at the sight of those tempting bunches, and he moved on a pace or two, just behind the greengrocer's cart, to get them within reach.

The juniors were not looking at Solomon; they were chatting and looking about the street. So they did not observe the donkey snip off a carrot and proceed to enjoy himself in his own way. It was the greengrocer who observed him, when he came out of the shop; and the greengrocer immediately looked rather excited.

"Hi, young feller!" he shouted to Arthur Augustus, who was the nearest of the St. Jim's party. "'Ere! You with the glass eye!"

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus fairly jumped at being addressed in that manner. He spun round, and turned the "glass eye" upon the excited greengrocer.

"Did you addwess me?" ejaculated Gussy.

"That's jest what I did! Is that there donkey yours?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"He's eating my carrots."

"Bai Jove!"

"I ain't drove these 'ere wegetables into the village to feed stray donkeys!" asserted the greengrocer emphatically.

"Weally, I hardly expect that you would do anythin' of the kind!" said Arthur Augustus. "It would be a kind, Chwistian act, of course, but it is weally not to be expected of a stwangah."

"What I mean is this 'ere!" exclaimed the greengrocer. "Them carrots is for sale. Your donkey has nipped off a bob's worth. Who's going to 'and out the bob?"

"Echo answers, who!" murmured Lowther.

"Keep him back; he's arter them agin!" exclaimed the greengrocer. "My eye! Keep 'im back, I tell you!"

Blake jerked Solomon back just in time. Solomon gave him a reproachful look. He wanted more carrots; and he did not see why he shouldn't have more carrots. They weren't his carrots; but that did not matter to Solomon. He was perhaps a bit of a Socialist.

"I'm waiting to be paid for them carrots!" said the greengrocer aggressively. "You let your donkey eat my carrots, and you'll 'ave to pay for his feed. That's fair play, ain't it?"

"Yaas, wathah! I quite agwee with you, my deah fellow," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I assuah you that I have the gweatest wespect for a fellow's pwivate pwoperty. It appeahs that we owe you a shillin'."

"That's it!"

"Can you change a five-pound note, deah boy?" asked Gussy, taking out his natty little Russia-leather pocket-book.

The greengrocer blinked.

"Ask me arter the next war!" he replied sarcastically.

"Bai Jove! Pway shell out a shillin', one of you chaps."

"Here you are!" grinned Digby.

The shilling was shelled out, and the greengrocer pocketed it, and mounted into his cart. He seemed to be in a hurry to get home before dark, and he rattled away at a good speed. Solomon gazed after the departing carrots, as Dido probably gazed after the departing ship of Æneas. They were going from his gaze like a beautiful dream. It was too much for Solomon; he was a well-brought-up donkey, but carrots were carrots. He jerked his head suddenly away from Blake's detaining hand, and made a rush in pursuit of the greengrocer's cart.

"Hi! Stop!" roared Blake.

"Bai Jove! Aftah him!"

"Stop him!"

Blake rushed after the donkey, and D'Arcy rushed after Blake. Lowther and Manners, Herries and Digby, joined in the hot pursuit, and Towser brought up the rear. Tom Merry, coming out of the shop with three parcels, was surprised to see his comrades tailing off in the distance.

"Hallo! Hold on!" he shouted.

"Come on, Tom Merwy!" yelled back Arthur Augustus. "That howwid beast has bolted!"

"Oh, my hat!"

Tom Merry broke into a run.

There was a chuckle from the villagers who had gathered round, and a number of the younger generation joined in the pursuit, apparently finding something entertaining in it.

The juniors yelled to the donkey, and the youthful villagers yelled to him; but Solomon went on his way regardless.

The greengrocer looked back, probably surprised by the uproar in his rear, and grinned.

He did not rein in his horse; he was in a hurry to get home. Possibly, too, he was doubtful about receiving further payment if Solomon got within reach of the carrots. Anyhow, he whipped up his horse.

"Stop!"

"Solomon, you brute!"

"You awful wotten beast, stop!"

"Oh crumbs!"

Solomon had sometimes shown himself a donkey that wouldn't go! But he was going now, with a vengeance!

He did not gain on the greengrocer's cart, but he kept his distance well, with his head stretched out, and his heels going like castanets on the hard white road.

Clatter, clatter, clatter!

"Stop!"

"Somebody stop him!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"What a life!" gasped Lowther.

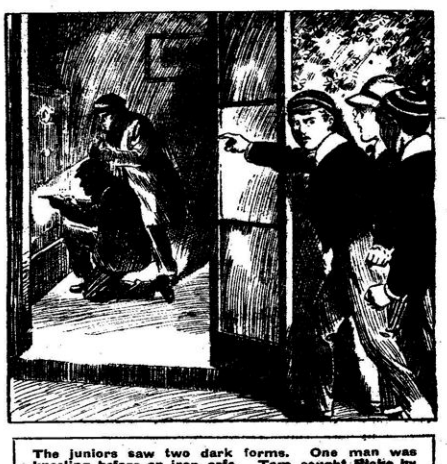
"He won't take any notice, you know!" panted Arthur Augustus. "He can heah us vewy well—I know that!"

"He heard it, but he heeded not!" grinned Lowther. "Talk to him in his own language, Gussy—you ought to be able to do it!"

"You uttah ass! Is this a time for wotten jokes?" gasped Arthur Augustus breathlessly.

The juniors ran on hard.

Blake was nearest to Solomon, but he was a good six yards from the donkey's stumpy whisking tail. Lowther and Manners and D'Arcy ran neck and neck a few feet behind Blake. Then came Herries and Digby, and last of all Tom Merry with his parcels. And at least a dozen urchins of various ages kept pace, shouting encouragement. From one of Tom Merry's parcels eggs began to drop one by one, crashing on the road.



The juniors saw two dark forms. One man was kneeling before an iron safe. Torn caught Blake by the arm. "You see that chap—the one kneeling?" he whispered. "You recognise him?" "Parkinson!" breathed Blake.

"I—I—I'll flay that donkey!" gasped Tom, as he came to a halt. His parcels seriously required attention.

"Come on, deah boys! Wun like anythin'!" shouted Arthur Augustus.

"Stop, you awful beast!"

"Haw, haw, haw!" roared the greengrocer, glancing round again. He gave his horse another flick with the whip, and drove on merrily. It was only too clear that that greengrocer was a man with a misdirected sense of humour.

But Solomon was gaining now.

The prize before his longing eyes drew him on like a magnet, and with a splendid effort Solomon came clattering up behind the cart. He reached over and jerked away a huge bundle of carrots.

Then he stopped.

The greengrocer, still chuckling, drove merrily on; but probably he would have ceased to chuckle if he had looked round just then and seen Solomon with the bundle of carrots. The cart turned a corner and disappeared.

Solomon was busy with the carrots when the juniors came up, panting, and streaming with perspiration. They gathered round Solomon, who took not the slightest notice of them. He was busy negotiating the carrots, and evidently enjoying life.

"Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "I hate bein' wuff on animals, you know, but I weally think that that disobedient beast had bettah have a feahful thwashin'."

"I'll skin him!" gasped Blake.

"I—I—I'll mangle him!" spluttered Lowther.

"Got him!" said Tom Merry, coming up with his parcels. "I say, the eggs are nearly all gone——"

"Well, you must be an ass——"

"And the tea came open——"

"Bai Jove! You are an awfully careless chap, Tom Mewwy!"

"All the fault of you silly asses for letting the donkey get away!" howled Tom Merry. "What did you do it for?"

"He bolted——"

"Ass!"

"We're jolly well going to thrash him!" said Digby.

The youthful villagers who had come up in the pursuit gathered round with renewed interest to see the donkey thrashed. But the exasperated juniors did not want an audience.

"Clear off, you young beggars!" snapped Lowther. "Here, let's get on—we shall have half the county staring at us soon!"

He jerked at Solomon's head. Solomon had finished the carrots now, and he was happy and contented. The St. Jim's travellers went on their way, with a cheerful and contented donkey. When they halted a mile further on, the punishment of Solomon was debated. It was unanimously agreed that he wanted, and was going to have, a terrific hiding. But now that their wrath had had time to cool, the schoolboy tramps did not seem eager for the job of executioner. Solomon was looking meek and inoffensive, as if he were unconscious of having committed the slightest fault—indeed, as if buttor wouldn't melt in his mouth, though evidently carrots would.

"He's got to be thwashed!" said Arthur Augustus firmly. "There is such a thing as discipline, you know."

"He's a most exasperating beast!" agreed Tom Merry. "But—but I wonder whether he'll understand what it's for?"

"He's a knowing brute!" said Lowther. "He knows jolly well. But——"

"But——" said Manners.

"We must be firm, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus. "We must not let that beastly donkay think he is mastah. We are takin' him twavellin', and he seems to be undah the impwession that he is takin' us! It is our painful dutay to cowwect that impwession."

"Yes; but——"

"It's up to Gussy!" said Monty Lowther. "Take a big stick, Gussy, and give him jip. Don't spare the rod and spoil the donkey."

"Yaas; but——"

"Go it, Gussy! Don't shrink from a painful duty."

"Vewy well, deah boys; you can leave it to me. I will make an example of him," said Arthur Augustus reluctantly.

Arthur Augustus selected a stick, and approached Solomon. That extremely knowing donkey nuzzled his muzzle under Gussy's arm in the most affectionate manner. The Co. watched Gussy with great interest. He swept the stick into the air with a look of great determination, and it came down on Solomon's hairy back with a touch that would not have brushed a fly off. Then Arthur Augustus threw away the stick.

"I think that will be sufficient lesson for the bwute for the pwesent," he said. "But next time, you know, I'll weally give him beans!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, you fellows——"

Solomon laid down to rest quite contentedly. His night's repose was certainly not disturbed by the punishment Arthur Augustus had administered.

CHAPTER 7.

Mr. Greggs is Not Pleased!

"NO!"

Mr. Greggs, the proprietor of Greggs' Farm, in the county of Bucks, spoke with unnecessary emphasis.

His portly figure almost filled the doorway of the farmhouse as he frowned out at the group of schoolboys.

Night was falling, and the St. Jim's walkers were looking for a camp once more. They had found a quite delectable spot; and they had come up to the farmhouse to ask leave to camp. But they made the discovery that all farmers were not built upon the lines of the genial Mr. Robinson. Mr. Greggs was quite another sort of gentleman. He was emphatic in his refusal, and he was not polite.

"We're willing to pay——" began Tom Merry.

"No!"

"But——" said Blake.

"No; that's final!" said Mr. Greggs. "I don't have tramps on my land at any price! Sheer off, and take your donkey with you!"

"Bai Jove! If you are undah the impwession that we are twamps, sir——" began Arthur Augustus warmly.

Certainly the St. Jim's party looked rather dusty; but only a very prejudiced eye could have mistaken them for tramps.

"I don't care whether you're tramps or not!" said Mr. Greggs. "I know you're not squatting on my land. Get a move on, afore I call the dog!"

"Oh, go and eat coke!" said Tom Merry. "Come along, you fellows."

"Yaas; but——"

"Come on, Gussy!"

"I am goin' to speak to Mr. Gweggs first," said Arthur Augustus. "I feel that, in the circs, I am bound to make a wemark." The swell of St. Jim's fixed his celebrated monocle upon Mr. Greggs with a look of great severity. "Mr. Gweggs, you have a perfect wight to wefuse hospitality to stwangahs, but you should wemembah that politeness costs nothin'! Your mannahs, sir, leave vewy much to be desiahed!"

And with that crushing Parthian shot, Arthur Augustus turned and walked away, with his noble nose in the air.

Slam! Mr. Greggs, who seemed unnecessarily emphatic in all he did, closed the farmhouse door.

Tom Merry & Co. returned to the road. Darkness was coming on, and the green fields, stretching away to the river, looked very inviting. But the fiat had gone forth.

"Better move on," said Blake. "We've got to find a camp somewhere."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Hold on!" said Monty Lowther. "What's the matter with camping here by the roadside? It's common land outside that grumpy old codger's fences."

"Not a very comfortable spot——"

"Still, it will be rather a lark to camp almost under the old codger's windows," said Lowther. "He can see our camp from his house, and it's bound to please him—or otherwise."

Tom Merry smiled.

He was annoyed with the gruff Mr. Greggs, and he was rather taken with Lowther's suggestion. Certainly, the wide belt of grass that ran between the road and Mr. Greggs' fence was common land, where any citizen of the British Empire had the right to camp if he wanted to. It was quite certain that Mr. Greggs would be annoyed; but there was no need for the campers to worry about that.

"Good egg!" said Herries. "Let's dig in here!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy looked thoughtful.

"I wathah think the Gweggs man will be watty!" he remarked

"All the better."

"Yaas; but isn't it wathah beneath our dignity to——"

"Dear old Gussy!" said Monty Lowther affectionately. "Always talking, and generally rot!"

"Weally Lowthah——"

"Dignity isn't any use on a tramping tour," said Blake. "You should have left your dignity along with your silk hat at St. Jim's, Gussy."

"Weally Blake——"

"We camp here!" said Tom Merry. "I'm jolly tired, anyhow!"

"Same here!"

"Yaas; but——"

"Unpack the giddy donkey! Gather some sticks along the hedges for a fire," said Tom. "Dry up, Gussy, old chap! Give your dignity a rest, and let's get some supper!"

Six of the party, at least, were utterly regardless of the

question of dignity; and Arthur Augustus was overruled. The schoolboys proceeded to camp between the road and the fence, as they had a right to do. Solomon was tethered, to feed on the grass. Blake fetched water from the river, and a fire was built of dried sticks and twigs. In a very short time the kettle and the tin can were simmering over the fire.

Through the palings, the campers could see the farmhouse windows, and undoubtedly they could be seen. They wondered whether Mr. Greggs would have anything to say; they were quite prepared to stand their ground in any case. Tom Merry was frying eggs and rashers over the sticks when the farm-gate swung open, and Mr. Greggs came stamping out, with a riding-whip under his arm, and a black look on his angry face.

"What does this mean?" he demanded.

Tom looked at him.

"Which?" he asked pleasantly.

"Ain't I ordered you off my land?"

"Dear man," said Monty Lowther, "this isn't your land. This land belongs to the British nation, of which we are humble members. Catch on?"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "You are vewy welcome to stand there, howevah, if you like, Mr. Gweggs. You have as much wight heah as we have."

Mr. Greggs seemed on the point of exploding.

"As much right!" he gasped. "As much right—outside my own gate!"

"Just as much!" said Lowther sweetly.

"Do you think I'm going to have a gang of tramps tramping here almost under my winders?" roared Mr. Greggs.

"Dear man, I think you can't help it. Those eggs done, Tom?"

"Nearly."

Mr. Greggs shook his riding-whip at the juniors.

"I order you to move on!" he thundered.

"Go hon!"

"What a nice, entertaining old gentleman!" said Monty Lowther admiringly. "Must be a regular blessing in the family circle, I should think. Do you always do these funny stunts of an evening, sir?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Greggs did not answer Monty Lowther's question. He made a jump at the St. Jim's humorist with his whip raised. Blake put out a foot just in time, and Mr. Greggs stumbled over it and came with a crash to the ground.

"Ow! Oooop!"

Mr. Greggs sat up. One of his big boots was poking into the fire, and he withdrew it very hurriedly. His hat had rolled off, and Arthur Augustus picked it up and presented it to him very politely.

"Your hat, sir," said Gussy.

"You young scoundrel——"

Mr. Greggs grabbed the hat, and jammed it on his head. Then he bounced to his feet.

"Which of you young scoundrels tripped me up?" he roared.

"Pway modewate your language, sir——"

"You—you young villains——"

"These wemarks, sir, are not at all suitable for youthful yahs to yah," said Arthur Augustus severely.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you——"

Mr. Greggs gripped the whip, and was about to rush on again when Towser introduced himself into the scene. Towser opened his mouth and emitted a deep growl, at the same time showing as fine a set of teeth as a dentist could have dreamed of.

Fine as those teeth were, they seemed to impress Mr. Greggs unfavourably. He jumped back in alarm.

"Keep that dog away!" he roared.

"Gr-r-r-r-r!" said Towser.

Mr. Greggs backed further away. He disappeared in at the farm gate at last, and Tom Merry & Co. turned cheerfully to their supper. They were very pleased to have done with Mr. Greggs.

CHAPTER 8.

Looking After Solomon!

"THAT blessed moke!"

"What's the mattah, deah boy?" asked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy drowsily.

"Solomon's gone!"

"Never mind—pewwaps he'll come back."

Arthur Augustus turned his head on his pillow and closed his eyes again. The hour was midnight, and at that hour the swell of St. Jim's wasn't interested in wandering donkeys.

In the low tent, on the ground-sheets, seven schoolboys had been sleeping, fairly closely packed, but well sheltered. Close by the opening, Towser slept—with one eye open as usual. Solomon, the donkey, had been tethered on the grass close by—his tether consisting of several lengths of dog-chain fastened together. So far, that chain had baffled Solomon's predilection for night rambles. But the strength of a chain is in its weakest link; and a weak link had been found at last by that knowing quadruped. Tom Merry had awakened to hear the clinking of a chain, and he had looked out in time to see Solomon disappearing. Whether Solomon knew, or not, that there was a kitchen-garden on the other side of the farmer's fence Tom could not tell; but he would not have been surprised if Solomon did know. The wisdom of that donkey was really uncanny, and well worthy of the ancient sage after whom he was named.

"He's gone into the farmer's grounds," said Tom.

"Oh, he'll come back," murmured Manners. "Go to sleep, old chap, and let us go to sleep!"

"He's gone through the fence," said Tom. "I just caught sight of him disappearing. There's a paling out, I suppose——"

"The farmer ought to have his palings mended."

Tom Merry scrambled up.

"It won't do!" he said. "We can't have Greggs on our track to-morrow, with a complaint that our donkey's been rooting up his kitchen-garden. We're bound to keep our donkey from doing damage."

Tom squeezed out of the tent.

"Going after him?" yawned Manners.

"Yes."

"Give him a whack for me, then."

"And a thump for me," said Lowther. "Good-night, Tom, and a pleasant walk with your giddy relative!"

"Oh, rats!" said Tom Merry. "Isn't somebody coming along with me?"

"Wouldn't interrupt your touching meeting with your long-lost brother for anything, old chap!"

Arthur Augustus sat up.

"Are you suah, Tom Mewwy, that Solomon is twespassin' on the farmah's pwivate pwoperty?" he asked.

"Yes, ass. I saw him."

"Then we are bound to wope him in," said Gussy. "Pwivate pwoperty must be wespected. We are not Bolsheviks. We should not like a donkay twespassin' on our gwounds, if we had any."

"There's a silly ass treading on my neck!" howled Blake.

"Gerroff my ankle, you chump!" came in a ferocious hiss from Herries.

"I am vewy sowwy, Hewwies, if I am tweadin' on you. Space is wathah limited in this tent, you know. But I wegwet vewy much——"

"Gerroff!" shrieked Herries.

"Yaas, I am just goin' to—I was only explainin' that I wegwet vewy much that—— Yawoooooh!"

Arthur Augustus broke off as he followed Tom Merry out of the tent in a very hurried manner. A boot had been the propelling force behind him. He dropped on his hands and knees outside.

"Gwoooogh! What silly wottah kicked me?" roared Arthur Augustus.

There was a sleepy chuckle from the darkness of the tent.

Tom caught the noble Gussy by the arm, and dragged him away. Jack Blake slipped out of the tent and joined them.

"I'd better come, or you'll get into some trouble!" he remarked.

"Weally, Blake——"

"This is where he went in," said Tom, stopping at the gap in the fence. "I dare say we shall find him rooting up the garden. Be quiet—we don't want to wake the house. Greggs would probably be ratty if we woke him up at midnight."

"Yaas, wathah!" chuckled Arthur Augustus.

The three juniors squeezed into the opening, and stood within Mr. Greggs' grounds. There was a glimmer of starlight, and it was not easy to see objects. Solomon, the donkey, was not visible. He was somewhere on the inner side of the fence, that was certain; but where, was the secret.

"Listen, and we may hear the beast moving!" whispered Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Hush!"

"Weally, Blake——"

"Dry up, you ass! I can hear something!"

"I was only goin'——"

"Shush!" hissed Tom Merry.

Arthur Augustus gave an indignant sniff, and relapsed into dignified silence. Blake and Tom Merry were listening intently. From the direction of the house, they thought they heard a sound of some movement in the shrubbery. They strained their ears to listen, and the sound was repeated.

"It's him!" whispered Blake excitedly and ungrammatically. "Don't make a sound—the brute will dodge us if he can. Creep on him!"

"Yaas, but——"

"Silence!"

(Continued on page 18.)

The INVISIBLE HAND

JOHN SHARPE.

Vitagraph

IRON HAND.

Now Readers Start Here.

John Sharpe, the great analytical detective, is engaged by Chief Burnett, of the Secret Service, to track down the band of organised and dangerous criminals operating under the guidance of Iron Hand, a fearless, clever man of dominating personality. Marna Black, one of the band of crooks, is captured, and Burnett induces Anne Crawford, a woman agent of the Secret Service, to assume Marna's identity and get into the confidences of Iron Hand.

She is instructed to keep her real identity a secret even to Sharpe; but she often assists him and sends him information concerning the movements of the gang, and he is puzzled to know just where it comes from.

Iron Hand has a number of hiding-places in different parts of the country, which are referred to as "Nests," the most important of which is Eagle's Nest, situated on a deserted cliff. The leader's chief assistants are Potsdam and Black Flag. John Sharpe has had many big tussles with the gang, and has foiled many of their deepest schemes. The gang are now plotting to secure a large number of notes and bonds in preparation for the South American Republics.

Iron Hand's Idea.

MR. WELSH was making some notes in a book which rested upon his desk, and he ceased his labours and looked up with interest when Iron Hand spoke.

"This is a hurry-up order," said the leader of the gang. "It is most important, and I want you to start at once. I must also have your pledge of absolute secrecy in the matter."

Mr. Welsh nodded in agreement. Then Iron Hand felt in his pocket, and produced a wallet containing his notes. He counted off a number which would be sufficient to pay for the property he desired. Then he separated another lot, and these he handed to Mr. Welsh for his personal expenses.

The agent's eyes bulged with delight when he saw them. It was obvious that he was highly impressed at the sight of so much ready-money.

"I'll leave at once and carry your orders through," the man announced. "How can I communicate with you, if necessary?"

Iron Hand considered for a moment, then he pretended to have a good idea.

"We're strangers in this part," he said. "How about renting a small room here in your office until you return? Then you can write to me here."

Mr. Welsh was quite agreeable to this proposal, and he was very anxious to pick up any money which this rich stranger had to dispose of. He said he would be only too glad to accommodate them.

"Very well," said Iron Hand; "when you are writing you can address us by our firm's name, which is Keir & Co."

Mr. Welsh jotted down the name, and when he had done this he handed the key of the downstairs door to Iron Hand.

"I'll inform the superintendent of the building," he told the leader, "that you have taken a room here, and I'll be back at the end of the week."

Then Mr. Welsh bade his visitors good-bye, and departed, in order to carry out his instructions with regard to buying the property.

When he had gone Iron Hand and Potsdam exchanged glances. The second-in-command could not help admiring the clever way in which his chief obtained the use of the office, which was so necessary to their scheme.

Iron Hand then took a piece of Mr. Welsh's headed notepaper, and, after glancing round the office, he made a rough sketch of the premises. When he had finished he got up from his seat, and, turning to Postdam, instructed him to wait here till he received word from Black Flag.

"When news arrives," he added, "join me at the hotel. Ask for Miss Roberts' room."

Iron Hand put the plan which he had drawn into his pocket, and went out, while Potsdam settled down for a wait.

Iron Hand went out, and found himself alongside the entrance of the large building, from which the employees were emerging in order to go for their lunch.

Presently Black Flag appeared on the scene, and although he noticed Iron Hand, he gave no sign of recognition. In his hand he was carrying a small package. He casually walked over to where Iron Hand was standing, and accidentally dropped the package in front of him. Black Flag instantly stooped to pick it up again.

Neither of the men looked at each other, but Iron Hand's lips were moving slightly, and he said guardedly, as Black Flag straightened himself after picking up the package:

"Go to Potsdam, in Welsh's office just above you."

There was no sign on the face of Black Flag that he had heard anything. He strolled off in the opposite way without even so much as glancing in the direction of Iron Hand, and nobody standing about could have suspected that the two men were old acquaintances.

The Plotters.

IN the hotel that was serving as the temporary headquarters of the gang, Iron Hand, Potsdam and Anne Crawford were waiting for the return of their comrade Black Flag.

The leader was idly chatting with Anne, while Potsdam, who hated the girl more and more, looked on in a bored manner.

The party started up with eagerness as they heard footsteps approaching in the distance.

A few moments later Black Flag entered the room, holding something under his coat. He pulled forth two thin pieces of board. These pieces of wood represented the top and end boards of the boxes in which the valuable bonds, which the gang were after were to be packed.

Black Flag next took out from his pocket several small brass screws. He put these down rather carelessly, and some rolled to the floor.

Anne quickly stooped and picked them up. She replaced all except one of them on the table. The other she retained without any of the others knowing it, and when her opportunity came she placed it carefully in her pocket.

Iron Hand eagerly asked Black Flag what he had to report.

"The bonds are to be put in boxes made of that white pine. Put together with brass screws like these," he said, as he indicated one of the screws. "The first lot of bonds, to the value of five million, will be off the printing-presses shortly."

Iron Hand smiled with satisfaction, then he produced a ruler and asked Potsdam to hand him a piece of paper.

Potsdam secured one of the hotel letter-heads, and placed it before Iron Hand. Then the leader measured the two pieces of wood which Black Flag had brought, and carefully jotted down the dimensions.

"How many boxes are there?" Iron Hand inquired when he had done this.

"There'll be five of the boxes," replied Black Flag. "These bonds are in large denominations, and won't take up too much room."

Iron Hand jotted this information down on the paper also. Then he produced the sketch of Welsh's office, and showed it to Black Flag. "This is a plan of the office I told you about. Tell me just where the bond-boxes will be stored on the floor beneath."

Black Flag carefully consulted the sketch for a moment or two, and pointed out the spot.

"There's a fire-proof vault, with an ordinary combination-lock on it," he remarked. "That's where they'll be kept during the night."

Iron Hand nodded. He was greatly pleased with the information which his assistant had obtained.

"Good!" he said. "We'll make duplicates of these boxes, and the following night we'll do the job."

Then, as a precaution, he tore up his

ANSWERS
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sketch of the office, and threw the pieces of paper on the table.

Anne pointed to them, and also to the information on the hotel paper, which Iron Hand had written down.

"Would it not be better," she asked, "to burn the heading on that paper?"

"Why, yes, of course," replied Iron Hand, pleased with her shrewdness.

Anne took the piece of hotel paper and tore off the top bearing the printing, and, after doing so, handed the measurements back to Iron Hand. Next she picked up the pieces of the office sketch, and walked over to the window.

As she looked for a box of matches she concealed the piece with the hotel name on, and also that part of the sketch bearing Welsh's name. Her back was turned to the others, and they could not see what she was doing.

Then the girl struck a match and set fire to the other pieces on the window-sill. Soon the pieces were consumed.

Potsdam watched her closely, but he failed to see that Anne had secreted the two important pieces of paper. As she returned to the group, Iron Hand said:

"I'll order the boxes. Potsdam will get the newspapers and stay at Welsh's office, and Black Flag will do his work at the printing-office. Everything should go off quite well."

Anne, who had been listening, interrupted and asked pleadingly:

"And what am I to do?"

Iron Hand smiled at her.

"There's nothing for you to do in this job," he said, in soft tones. "Just amuse yourself."

Anne listened and pretended to be disappointed that she was not to have an active part in the affair, but she decided not to protest too strongly, and Iron Hand changed the subject by suggesting that they should all have something to eat, a proposal that was heartily agreed to.

Meanwhile, at Captain West's camp, Sharpe was busily engaged in conversation with the officer, an old friend of his.

In the background were a number of troopers amusing themselves by indulging in trick riding.

Sharpe looked at them with eyes full of interest. But West could see that he was restless, and presently the detective remarked, half-apologetically.

"It is very entertaining, but the inaction is getting on my nerves. I want to get back on the track of Iron Hand and his crew again!"

The officer laughed.

"Yes, you're like a hound that's lost a trail," he replied.

"The waiting unsettles one," continued Sharpe. "If nothing turns up by the day after to-morrow, I'll go and take a look myself. Meanwhile, I suppose, I may as well enjoy myself."

Sharpe and West again turned their attention to the troopers, and presently Sharpe took part in them, and gave an exhibition of a little trick riding of his own.

Securing the Notes.

At the time appointed, Iron Hand struck with all his cunning and skill. It was early night, and the scene was outside the office of Mr. Welsh, which showed up but dimly in the dark.

Presently the door to the hall slowly opened, and a silhouette of Iron Hand could be seen, quickly followed by that of Potsdam. Both men carried two cases each.

Potsdam put down his cases and pulled down the blinds, and when Iron Hand entered he switched on the lights.

The men speedily opened the suit-cases and unpacked them, and an extraordinary range of articles came into view, all of which were to play their part in the scheme.

Amongst other things, saws, a rope-ladder and a brace and bit were produced from the bags.

Suddenly the men started, for they heard a noise at the hall-door, and their consciences were by no means easy. They glanced around with tense expressions.

But there was no need for alarm. The newcomers were friends, not enemies!

Two more outlaws, each carrying two suit-cases each, increased the number of men in the room, and when their cases were opened, they were seen to be filled with boards with which to make boxes.

Other cases were filled with newspapers.

Each man knew what his job was, and all worked rapidly and silently.

Some time later one more outlaw, also carrying a bag, added to the party. He had been followed, unknown to himself, by Anne Crawford, the girl known to them all as Marna Black.

Anne did not enter the building.

She walked as far as the doorway and paused. Then she looked up at the office window from the other side of the street and settled herself to wait.

The work was proceeding very quickly with the gang. Each man had his own special job to do.

In the printing-office below, a faint light showing through the window illuminated Black Flag. Presently he passed the window, and stealthily crouched down behind the desk.

A minute later the door opened, and a watchman with a lantern entered.

He flashed a light around the room several times, and satisfied himself that everything was all right.

Then he looked at the vault door, and found that the lock was quite secure.

Black Flag, scarcely daring to breathe all this time, crouched down out of sight of the watchman. The man seemed to be an unearthly time. In his hand Black Flag had a revolver ready for instant use should it prove necessary.

The watchman assured himself that all was well, and departed. He made his way to the hall and closed the door behind him.

Black Flag gave him a few moments, then he obtained a long window-pole and lifted it up towards the ceiling. He thrust it against the ceiling two or three times.

Iron Hand and the others who were at work above, stopped their jobs when they heard the signal. All the men listened in rapt attention, as Iron Hand knocked on the floor twice with his heel in reply.

"All's clear, now," said Iron Hand delightedly. "Get to work everybody!"

The outlaws returned to their jobs.

Iron Hand and Potsdam moved a chair, and then, withdrawing the rug, indicated the place where the hole was to be bored. Then one of the men started working rapidly with his brace and bit.

By this time Black Flag had commenced operations on the lock belonging to the vault. Very soon the hole had been bored through the floor, and the end of one of the saws was pushed through, and the sawing of the ceiling commenced.

Black Flag paused for a moment when he noticed how successfully things were progressing. Then he resumed his task of forcing open the lock.

Very soon a section of the floor had been sawn through, and this exposed a hole large enough for a man to get through.

Iron Hand and Potsdam speedily affixed the rope-ladder, and dropped one end through the hole. Then the leader made his descent.

As he neared the bottom he looked towards the vault until he caught sight of Black Flag.

The man signalled to his chief to come on, and that the road was quite clear. Then the door to the vault was opened, and the leader entered.

Anne was still in hiding in the doorway. She received a scare when a policeman on his beat came along. But she managed to stand back out of sight without being discovered.

Then an idea came to Anne that it might be a good plan to inform him of what was going on. It was a great temptation, but on second thoughts she decided that perhaps it would be wiser not to.

From the vault Iron Hand emerged, with two boxes in his hands. These were very similar in shape to an ordinary suit-case, but a trifle smaller, and so they would very easily fit in the bags which the men had brought with them.

Iron Hand passed the boxes up through the hole, while Black Flag disappeared in the vault, and came out again with three more. All of these Iron Hand passed up by means of the rope-ladder to the floor above.

Iron Hand then climbed up through the hole. So far everything had gone off swimmingly for the gang, and the leader chuckled to himself with glee as he thought of the vast wealth which would soon be his.

Potsdam had put aside the five real boxes containing the bonds, and pushed the dummy boxes forward.

Iron Hand addressed him when he reached the top again:

"Where is the stencil that Black Flag made?" he asked eagerly.

One outlaw produced it, and also a brush and some ink, and then prepared to mark one of the boxes.

It was stencilled with the words "Confederated Republic of South America, Cons. Agents, Los Angeles, California."

This inscription corresponded exactly with the one on all the real boxes.

Potsdam next climbed through the hole, and the first of the stencilled dummy boxes was handed down to him. The other outlaws, meanwhile, were quickly stencilling the others. The gang had left nothing out of their calculations.

Black Flag was waiting at the end of the rope-ladder below, and Potsdam climbed half-way down, carrying with him the dummy box.

He handed it to the assistant, and then received a second box through the hole, and when Black Flag had deposited the first in the vault, he handed him the second one.

This process was repeated, and each time Black Flag disappeared in the vault with one of the dummy boxes.

At last the final one was handed down through the hole to Potsdam, and Black Flag deposited it. Then he closed the door of the vault and locked it.

Potsdam climbed up the ladder again, while Black Flag gave a final look round the room below, brushed away the sawdust from the floor, and removed other tell-tale marks.

Then he climbed up the ladder and took his place with the others in the room above.

The gang had in their possession five boxes filled with valuable notes and bonds belonging to South American States, and in their place were deposited dummy boxes containing scraps of worthless newspaper.

(To be continued.)

SEVEN SCHOOLBOYS--& SOLOMON!

(Continued from page 15.)

"Weally, Blake——"

Tom and Blake crept away towards the dark mass of the farmhouse, and Arthur Augustus followed them. They made no sound, or scarcely a sound.

Tom Merry stopped suddenly.

Through the darkness there came a faint glimmer of light from one of the lower windows of the house.

The juniors had supposed the farmhouse to be buried in slumber at that hour, and the light startled them.

"Hallo! They're still up!" whispered Blake. "Back out!"

Tom Merry breathed quickly.

"Hold on——"

"But——"

"They're not up!" breathed Tom Merry. "That light wasn't there a minute ago—and the window's open. It's burglars!"

CHAPTER 9.

Fairly Caught!

BURGLARS!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Quiet!" whispered Tom.

The three juniors stood in the darkness, gazing towards the window, which was that of the farmhouse parlour. It was a French window, and one side of it was open. The light within was faint and flickering—it turned off once or twice into complete darkness. But it shone again. And through the window, in the light, the juniors made out two dark forms. One of them was kneeling before an iron safe fastened in the wall; the other was holding a lantern to show him a light. It was only too evident that the two rascals were burglars, whom the juniors had surprised at their nefarious work.

Tom caught Blake by the arm.

"You see that chap—the one kneeling?" he whispered. "You recognise him——"

"Parkinson!" breathed Blake.

"Bai Jove!"

"And the other rascal is Pimples, I fancy," muttered Tom. "We've dropped on them again."

"Yes, I can see his face now." Blake chuckled softly. "They haven't the ghost of an idea that they're being watched! I—I suppose we're going to chip in, what?"

"We're bound to," said Tom. "Greggs is an inhospitable brute, but——"

"But we are bound to return good for evil, deah boys," murmured Arthur Augustus. "We cannot let even that cwabby old codgah be wobbed."

"What are we going to do?" breathed Blake.

"Cut back quietly and call the other fellows, while we watch," whispered Tom Merry. "Tell 'em to bring their sticks with them. We'd better all be on hand when the tussle comes."

"Right-ho!" whispered Blake. And he disappeared silently into the darkness.

Tom Merry and Arthur Augustus watched the window. Only a small circle of light showed now, sufficient to guide the cracksman who was at work on the safe. Parkinson and Pimples went on steadily with their rascally task, in utter unconsciousness of the fact that they were discovered and watched. The two juniors waited anxiously, and Tom drew a deep breath of relief when there were faint sounds in the darkness behind him, and Blake and the rest of the party came quietly up.

"I've brought your stick, Tom," whispered Lowther. "What a game! We're going to heap giddy coals of fire on the Greggs-bird's head. I suppose we mustn't let Pimples go ahead and cry halves?"

Tom Merry suppressed a chuckle.

"Dry up, Lowther, you ass! We don't want to alarm them yet. You fellows ready for a scrap?"

"What-ho!" said Herries.

"You bet!" said Digby.

"You go to the front door, Gussy, and start hammering," said Tom, in a whisper. "We'll close up, and collar the rascals as they come out. They're sure to try to buzz off when the alarm's given."

"Wight-ho!"

Arthur Augustus moved off, and the rest of the party drew quietly and cautiously closer to the half-open French windows. Mr. Parkinson and Pimples, intent on their task, did not even look towards the window. The steel drill was silent now. Tom Merry could see that the iron door of the safe was open, and that Parkinson was handing out the contents into a small sack held by his confederate.

Bang, bang! Crash!

Bang, bang!

Arthur Augustus was thundering at the farmhouse door, and the sudden din rang through the night like thunder.

There was a stifled exclamation from the dim room.

"Look out!" breathed Tom Merry.

"What-ho!"

The juniors crouched in the shadows close by the window. They were ready for Mr. Parkinson and Pimples when they emerged.

Bang, bang, bang!

There was a sound of a window being flung up in the front of the house. Then came the deep boom of Mr. Greggs' voice.

"Wot the thunder——"

"Burglahs!" yelled Arthur Augustus. "Wake up, my deah sir! Burglahs! They are wobbin' you!"

"Stuff and nonsense!" roared Mr. Greggs. "You're one of them tramps. I know you! I'll——"

"You fwightful old ass!" yelled Arthur Augustus. "It would serve you wight to let you be wobbed! Come down, you old donkey!"

Arthur Augustus did not stay for more. There were the sounds of a desperate struggle at the side of the house, and Gussy rushed to the aid of his comrades.

As Tom Merry had anticipated, the two thieves, interrupted by the sudden alarm, had emerged from the French window, thinking only of escape. They ran fairly into the arms of the waiting juniors.

Arthur Augustus arrived on the scene to find Mr. Parkinson and Pimples sprawling on the ground, struggling frantically in the grasp of Tom Merry & Co.

"Pin 'em down!" gasped Blake.

Blake and Herries and Digby were grasping Pimples, and that young man was wriggling painfully, but helplessly, under their weight. But Mr. Parkinson was giving the Terrible Three more trouble. With Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther clinging to him, he struggled furiously, and almost succeeded in tearing himself loose. Arthur Augustus rushed in and caught him round the neck, dragging him down, and the Terrible Three piled on him again.

Then Mr. Parkinson gave in. With four juniors scrambling on him, holding his wrists and his hair and his neck, he had no more chance.

There was a heavy tread in the room. Mr. Greggs, half-dressed, with a thick oak cudgel in his hand, came out of the French window. He stared at the startling scene in bewilderment.

Tom Merry jumped up, panting.

"Wot the thunder——" gasped Mr. Greggs.

"We've got them, sir," said Tom. "You'll find your safe busted, but the stuff's all here—in that sack! And we've got both the burglars."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Well, my eye!" said Mr. Greggs. He picked up the sack in a dazed way. "There was three hundred pounds in that there safe——"

"Wathah luckay for you we camped outside your gates, sir!" chuckled Arthur Augustus.

"Oh, my eyes!" said Mr. Greggs. "I—I—I—ahem!—I—I—I'm sorry. I'm real sorry, and—and—and——"

"Pway don't mench!" said Arthur Augustus. "If you will get these wascals locked up somewhah, we will wetire fwom your gwounds, sir. We weally have no desiah to twespass."

And Mr. Greggs actually blushed, probably for the first time in his life.

. . . . . .

Mr. Parkinson and Pimples spent the remainder of the night in a room at the farm, with Towser watching them. In the morning they were driven off to the police-station. And Mr. Greggs, greatly repentant, fairly begged Tom Merry & Co. to camp on his land as long as they liked, and they graciously consented to do so. And Mr. Greggs did not utter a word of grousing when the extent of Solomon's thievings in his kitchen garden was discovered. Solomon had not been wasting his time while Tom Merry & Co. were busy with the burglars. He was a wise donkey, and always made the most of his opportunities. What Mr. Greggs would have said in other circumstances was unimaginable. But in his gratitude to the schoolboy adventurers he said nothing. And he was hospitality itself while Tom Merry & Co. remained in camp, though perhaps he was not inconsolable when he bade good-bye at last to the seven schoolboys and Solomon!

THE END.

(There will be another grand long story of Tom Merry & Co. in next week's issue of THE GEM LIBRARY. Make sure you order your copy EARLY.)

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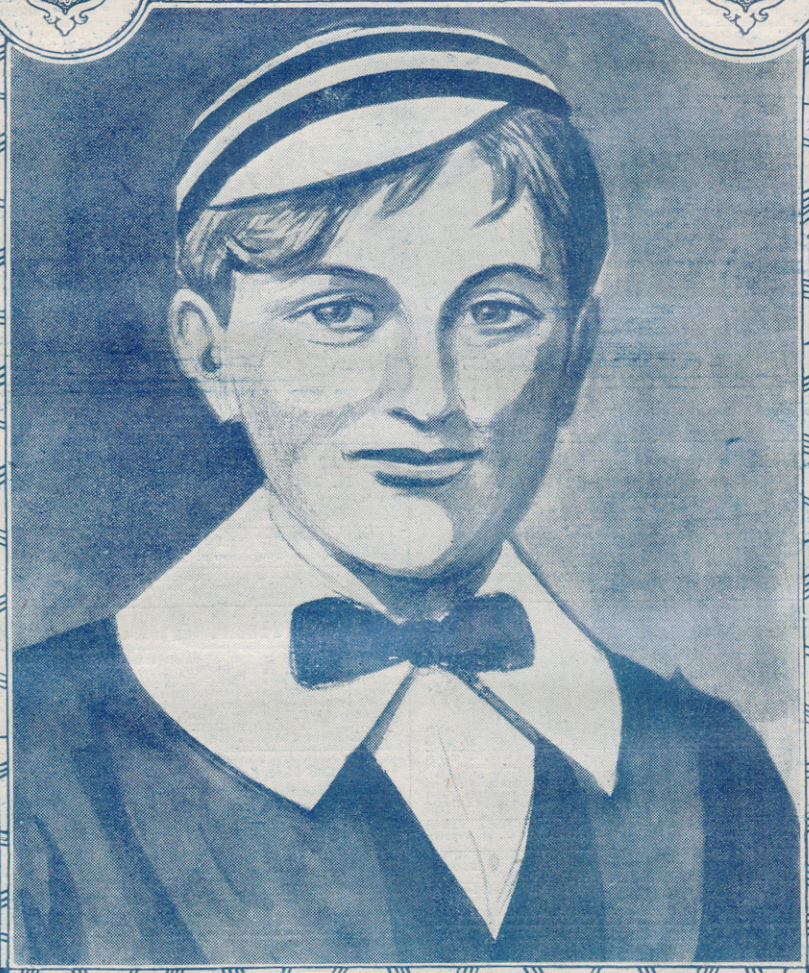

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DN