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EVERY WEDNESDAY.

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FREE— WITH THIS ISSUE

A LONG COMPLETE STORY OF TOM MERRY & CO., OF ST. JIM'S—

RIGHTED

CHAPTER 1.
Cleeve Asks For It!

"CLEEVE!"

Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell, at St. Jim's, spoke in a voice that was not loud, but deep.

Many fellows in the Shell looked round at Cleeve.

There was thunder in the air in the Shell Form-room that morning.

Mr. Linton, to begin with, had not been in the best of tempers. But the best-tempered of Form masters might have been exasperated by Victor Cleeve, the new fellow in the Shell.

All through third lesson Cleeve had been, as the juniors expressed it, asking for it.

Now it looked as if Cleeve was going to get what he had asked for so persistently.

Tom Merry had a rather concerned look on his face. He did not like Cleeve much more than the rest of the Shell did—or the rest of the House, for that matter. But he was sorry to see any fellow asking so obstinately for trouble.

Cleeve was not a very cheery fellow at the best of times. But that morning he was in one of his blackest moods. And when Cleeve was in that mood he did not seem to care what he did or what he said.

He had given no attention whatever to the lesson. Perhaps he had other matters on his mind. That, however, was not likely to placate Mr. Linton, even if he guessed it. Fellows were not supposed to have other matters on their minds when they were receiving valuable instruction from the master of the Shell.

"Cleeve!"

The new junior did not answer.

He sat in his place, staring sulkily and sullenly before him, apparently deaf to his master's voice.

Mr. Linton's eyes glinted.

"Do you hear me, Cleeve?"

The junior took heed at last.

"Oh, yes, sir," he answered, in a weary voice—as if it was his intention to make it clear to the master of the Shell that he was fed-up with him.

It was not an uncommon thing for Shell fellows to feel fed-up with their Form master. But it was exceedingly uncommon for any fellow to acquaint him with the fact.

"I think, Cleeve, that you are the worst pupil in my Form," said Mr. Linton. "Your construe this morning would have disgraced a boy in the Third."

Cleeve gave a slight shrug of the shoulders.

The quality of his "con," evidently, did not worry him very much, whether it worried his Form master or not.

"You have answered me several times almost at random, Cleeve," went on Mr. Linton. "You refuse to give me the least attention. I have caned you once, and it has made no

—IN WHICH VICTOR CLEEVE TAKES A LEADING PART!

AT LAST! by Martin Clifford

Ever since Victor Cleeve came to St. Jim's he's been under a cloud. Sulky and friendless, he's nursed his bitter secret. Yet that secret is destined to "come out," and with it dawns a new Victor Cleeve.

difference. I shall have to take severer measures if you do not amend your conduct."

No answer from Cleeve.

"I shall be sorry to send you to your headmaster for special punishment," said Mr. Linton. "But——" He paused. "Mr. Railton tells me that you were head of your Form at your last school. I fully expected Mr. Railton's nephew to be a credit to my Form. You are a disgrace to it!"

"Hear, hear!" murmured Monty Lowther; taking care, however, not to let that expression of approval reach his Form master's ears. It might have turned the vials of Mr. Linton's wrath in Monty's direction.

"You did not, I presume, indulge this carelessness, and this sullen temper, at your last school, Cleeve," said the master of the Shell.

No answer.

Some of the Shell fellows grinned.

There was a general impression in the Shell that Victor Cleeve had been "bunked" from his last school; and that he had only succeeded in getting in at St. Jim's because his uncle was a Housemaster there.

Cleeve's present proceedings seemed to indicate that he was getting ready to be "bunked" from St. Jim's, too.

"If so, I am not surprised that you left," went on the master of the Shell. "I warn you, Cleeve, that sullen obstinacy and insolence will not be tolerated here."

He paused again.

But if he paused, like Brutus, for a reply, the result was the same as in the case of Brutus. There was no reply.

Mr. Linton drew a deep breath.

"Cleeve!" he snapped.

"Yes, sir," grunted Cleeve sullenly.

"You will be detained this afternoon. I shall set you a task to occupy you until five o'clock."

"Oh!"

Cleeve almost started up from his form.

Whatever he had expected from his Form master, evidently he had not expected that.

The colour wavered in his face.

"Detained, sir?" he stammered.

"Yes!" snapped Mr. Linton.

"I—I can't be detained, sir!" stammered Cleeve.

"What?" thundered Mr. Linton.

"I—I mean——"

"You need say no more, Cleeve. It is only my respect for your uncle, Mr. Railton, that prevents me from sending you to Dr. Holmes for a flogging. You will be detained."

"I—I——"

"Silence!"

"I—I don't mind going to Dr. Holmes, sir—I don't mind a flogging," stammered Cleeve. "I—I'd like you to let me off with that, sir, if you'd be so kind."

"My only hat!" murmured Manners.

All the Shell were staring at Cleeve now.

A fellow who preferred a Head's flogging to a detention was rather a curiosity in any Form at St. Jim's.

But Cleeve was evidently in earnest. He seemed to be overwhelmed with dismay at the sentence of detention. The look on his face struck even Mr. Linton, incensed as he was.

An explanation occurred to his mind. Fellows who were booked to play in House or School matches were never detained. Mr. Linton turned to Tom Merry, the captain of the Shell.

"Is there a cricket match to-day, Merry?"

"No, sir."

"Oh! Then Cleeve is not playing for the House?"

"Oh, no, sir," answered Tom.

Tom Merry was surprised, like all the rest, by Cleeve's dismay—indeed terror. There was fear in his startled face, though what it could mean was a mystery.

"Then, what does this mean, Cleeve?" exclaimed Mr. Linton, fixing his eyes upon the most unpopular member of his Form again.

"I—I've an engagement this afternoon, sir," faltered Cleeve.

"Of what nature?"

Cleeve did not answer that.

"Do you hear me, Cleeve? What is this engagement that seems to be so very important?"

"I—I was going out of gates, sir."

"Where?"

"Oh! Nowhere in particular, sir," stammered Cleeve.

Mr. Linton gave him a keen, searching look. His suspicions had been aroused—sharpened a little, perhaps, by his knowledge of the fact that Victor Cleeve had had to leave his last school. Why he had had to leave was not known; but it was no secret, all through St. Jim's, that he had had to leave. His keeping secret the name of his former school was taken as a proof of it.

"You will be detained, Cleeve," said Mr. Linton at last. "After what you have said, I shall not dream of allowing you to go out of gates this afternoon."

"But, sir——"

"Silence!"

Victor Cleeve was silent at that. Third lesson in the Shell Form-room finished in rather an electric atmosphere.

CHAPTER 2.
Up Against It!

TOM MERRY glanced at Cleeve, at the dinner-table that day, once or twice, with a rather thoughtful face. Tom, like all the other School House fellows, had been fed-up with the Housemaster's nephew, and had wished sincerely that Victor Cleeve had stayed at his old school, wherever that was, and never honoured St. Jim's with his presence. But Tom Merry's feelings had rather undergone a change of late.

The way Cleeve had played up at cricket, in the Greyfriars match, and saved the match for the school, had made many fellows think better of him—Tom Merry most of all. And since the Greyfriars day, Cleeve had been assiduous at games practice, and had joined in a House match and played well for his house. Tom looked on him as a rod in pickle for Rookwood, when Jimmy Silver & Co. came along to play cricket; and so, unless Cleeve gave further offence, Tom was not likely to keep up any grudge. Though the new fellow seemed as moody and discontented as of old, he also seemed to wish to avoid giving offence in Study No. 10 if he could.

Since Cleeve had confessed to Tom that he had been forced to leave his old school, the captain of the Shell had had a rather clearer understanding of his position; and he could make allowances for the moody bitterness of a fellow who was labouring under a sense of wrong and injustice. So if Tom did not exactly like him, at least he wished him well; and he was sorry to see him "up against it," as he evidently was to-day.

At the dinner-table, Cleeve stared blankly at his plate, and exchanged not a single glance or word with any fellow. He hardly seemed to see what he ate; his thoughts evidently were elsewhere.

Mr. Linton, at the head of the table, observed it, with a stern brow and cold, disapproving eyes.

The junior had no special reason—at least no reason that he could state—for going out of gates that afternoon. Yet obviously he was quite knocked over by his detention. The master of the Shell could scarcely help being suspicious—and perhaps he wondered, not only why Cleeve so keenly desired to be at liberty that afternoon, but whether the junior was engaged in some secret shady proceedings; and whether it was from that cause that he had had to leave his former school. Certainly Mr. Linton was not likely to relent in the matter of the detention; neither was Cleeve likely to be given an opportunity of "bolting." When dinner was over, Mr. Linton called to the Housemaster's nephew as the Shell were going out.

"Cleeve! You will come to my study at two o'clock for your detention task."

"Yes, sir!" answered Cleeve.

And he went out.

Tom Merry's glance followed him as he tramped into the green, sunny quad, his hands in his pockets, taking no heed of the other fellows. Some of the Shell grinned—Racke winked at Crooke, who laughed. The two black sheep of the Shell had no doubt that Cleeve had an appointment with some shady acquaintance that afternoon, and was prevented from meeting him by detention. Such things had happened to Aubrey Racke and Gerald Crooke.

Tom Merry was about to follow Cleeve, when Manners and Lowther joined him. Manners and Lowther had no time to waste on the unpopular Shell fellow.

"Where are you going?" asked Monty Lowther, catching at Tom's arm.

"Only to speak to Cleeve."

"Blow Cleeve! We're taking a boat out this afternoon," said Lowther. "No time to waste on that sulky bounder."

"He's in trouble," remarked Tom.

"The whole Form heard him asking for it," said Manners. "An angel would have lost his temper with him—and Linton isn't an angel."

"Not exactly," assented Tom, laughing. "But the chap seemed to be quite knocked out by his detention. If he's got something on for this afternoon, and is kept in, we may be able to help him—a message or something——"

"If the message can be sent by water, yes," grinned Lowther. "We're going up the river, Tommy."

"We are—we is!" said Manners. "I'm going to get some photographs on the island——"

"Well, let's speak to Cleeve, anyhow," urged Tom. "The chap's in low water, you can see that!"

"Oh, bother him," said Lowther peevishly. "He's made himself disliked by the House—we were all ready to greet old Railton's relation with open arms; and he made himself as unpleasant as he possibly could. Let the brute go his own way, and be blowed to him."

"Hear, hear!" assented Manners.

"If he had to leave his old school——" said Tom.

"No if about it! He was bunked from his last school, and all St. Jim's knows it," said Manners.

"Well, it may not have been his fault."

"Rats!"

"Rubbish!"

"If he's had injustice, that might account for his temper being so ratty, you know," urged Tom Merry.

"Possibly; but I don't like ratty tempers, all the same," said Lowther, dryly. "You're a soft ass, Tom. Let the chap alone."

"He played splendidly in the last School match."

"So did other fellows. I know cricket is the beginning and the end of all things to you," said Lowther sarcastically. "Still, there are one or two trifling little things going on in the universe, off Little Side."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Don't get stuffy, old bean," he said. "I'd like to speak a word to Cleeve. You men wait if you don't want to chip in."

"We'll give you three minutes, by the School clock," said Lowther. "If you're not finished by then, we'll come and walk you off by your silly ears!"

"Fathead!" said Tom cheerily.

And leaving his chums in the quad, the captain of the Shell walked under the elms, and joined Victor Cleeve, who was leaning against the trunk of a tree, scowling into vacancy, careless of what eyes might be upon him.

He did not look up as Tom arrived; and was evidently quite indifferent to his coming.

"Cleeve, old bean," said Tom.

"Well?" snapped Cleeve, still without looking up.

"You seem up against it."

"No business of yours, is it?"

Tom Merry coloured with vexation. This was Cleeve's unpleasant manner, unchanged—the manner that had made him disliked through his House. A fellow might be in trouble; but that was no excuse for insulting rudeness. Tom Merry wished, for the moment, that he had not taken the trouble to speak to the fellow. But he remembered that day in the study when Cleeve had told him, quietly and earnestly, that he had had to leave his old school, from no fault of his own; and had offered to help Tom out of his difficulties in the match with Greyfriars. There was good in the fellow—and it was likely enough that a rankling sense of injustice, of undeserved disaster, might change an otherwise decent fellow into a moody misanthrope. Tom Merry suppressed his annoyance, and went on quietly.

"Anything a fellow can do to help?"

"No."

"If there was anything——"

"You can't do anything for me except leave me alone."

That was too much even for Tom Merry's good nature.

"All serene. I'll let you alone!" he answered, and he turned away. Cleeve looked after him with a gloomy scowl; but the expression on his face changed, as if his better nature had broken out through his black and savage temper.

"Hold on Merry! Hold on a minute!" he exclaimed.

Tom turned back.

"I'm sorry," said Cleeve, flushing. "I never meant to be rude! I'm up against it, as you said; and ready, I suppose, to bite anybody that comes near me, like an ill-tempered dog. Sorry!"

Tom Merry smiled faintly.

"Why grouse?" he said cheerily. "That won't do any good. You're detained, and all the fellows could see that you had something on out of gates this afternoon. If I could see to it for you, I would."

"You wouldn't."

"I've said I would!" said Tom sharply.

"You don't know what it is," muttered Cleeve.

Tom's expression changed a little. It began to dawn upon his mind that Cleeve's engagement out of gates, whatever it was, might be something that would not bear the light. Racke and Crooke had guessed that at once; but Tom's thoughts did not run on the same lines as Racke and Crooke's.

Now that he thought of it, however, it made him feel extremely uncomfortable. He had offered to help Cleeve, but certainly he did not want to be mixed up in any secret or surreptitious proceedings.

"You see, you're backing out already!" said Cleeve sardonically, easily reading Tom Merry's thoughts in his face.

"Not at all," answered Tom. "If it's anything a decent fellow can do for you, I'm your man. I don't think you're the kind of chap to have appointments with bookmakers' touts, like Racke."

Cleeve made a gesture of disdain.

"Nothin' of the kind, of course. I've been a fool at my old show, but never that kind of a fool."

"Well, I felt sure that old Railton's nephew wouldn't be that kind of a fool," assented Tom. "But if it's nothing

of that kind, there's no reason why I shouldn't help you."

Cleeve paused before he spoke again.

"You remember, a week or two ago, your friends found me scrapping with a gipsy—a man named Ives?" he said.

"I remember."

"Well, that's the man I was going to see this afternoon."

"Oh!" said Tom.

"Yo saw me giving him money," muttered Cleeve. "I know you did, so there's no use denying. Will you see him instead of me this afternoon, and—and give him something from me?"

Tom Merry was silent.

What he would have answered he never knew, for at that moment Manners and Lowther came up.

"Time's up!" said Lowther.

"Oh, chuck it, Monty," exclaimed Tom. "Do give a fellow a rest for a minute. Cleeve was just telling me something."

"Well, he can tell you now we're here, I suppose?" said Lowther. "You're not keeping secrets from your old pals, are you?"

"No; but——"

"Cough it up, Cleeve!" said Manners, with a rather suspicious eye on the new junior. "What are you landing Tom into?"

Cleeve bit his lip.

"Nothin'," he answered. "I was goin' to ask him to do somethin' for me which would very likely have landed him into trouble. But I've changed my mind, that's all."

Cleeve walked away with that, leaving Manners and Lowther staring.

"Cleeve!" called out Tom.

The Housemaster's nephew did not answer or look back. He went into the House and disappeared from sight.

CHAPTER 3.
Kind of Gussy!

"YOU fellows!"

"Hallo!" yawned Blake.

"I've been thinkin'——"

"Good gracious!" ejaculated Blake of the Fourth, in astonishment.

"Weally, Blake——"

"What on earth with?" inquired Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies——"

"Pulling our legs?" asked Digby.

"Weally, Dig——"

"Now, what about this afternoon?" remarked Blake. "It's a half-holiday, my beloved 'earers, and there's no cricket on. What price a boat?"

"I was makin' a wemark, Blake!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy stiffly.

"Eh? Haven't you done your funny turn?" asked Blake.

"I was not doin' a funnay turn, you uttah ass! I wemarked that I had been thinkin'——"

"You exaggerate, old chap," said Blake, with great gravity "It's a bad habit. Drop it. Your mental processes, such as they are, can't be described as thinking. Now, a boat on an afternoon like this is just the idea. I wonder if we could trust you to steer, Gussy, without running down half the other craft on the Rhyl?"

"I twust that you fellows will not be goin' out in a boat," said Arthur Augustus.

"Eh? And why not?"

"Because I shall not be able to come with you, deah boys, and I feah that you may wun into some twouble, and pewwaps get yourselves dwowned or somethin'," said Arthur Augustus. "You weckless youngstahs need an eye on you when you go on the wivah."

Blake and Herries and Dig gazed at their noble chum in silence. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's fatherly concern for their safety in a boat seemed to have taken their breath away.

"I have been thinkin'," resumed the swell of St. Jim's, taking advantage of the pause, "about that man Cleeve, you know. You fellows must have noticed that he is a vewy unpleasant beast. I had a scwap with him, you know, and should have given him a feahful thwashin' if it had gone on to a finish. His mannahs are weally shockin', and he is the most ill-tempered wottah I have evah come acwoss. But——"

"You frabjous idiot!" said Blake, finding his voice at last.

"Pway do not intewwupt me with wude wemarks, Blake. I have been thinkin' about that fellow Cleeve. He is pwactically an outcast in the House. It is owin' to his own beastly unpleasantness and swank and cheek, of course. But I do not like to see old Wailton's nephew in such a vewy unpleasant posish. Old Wailton is one of the best."

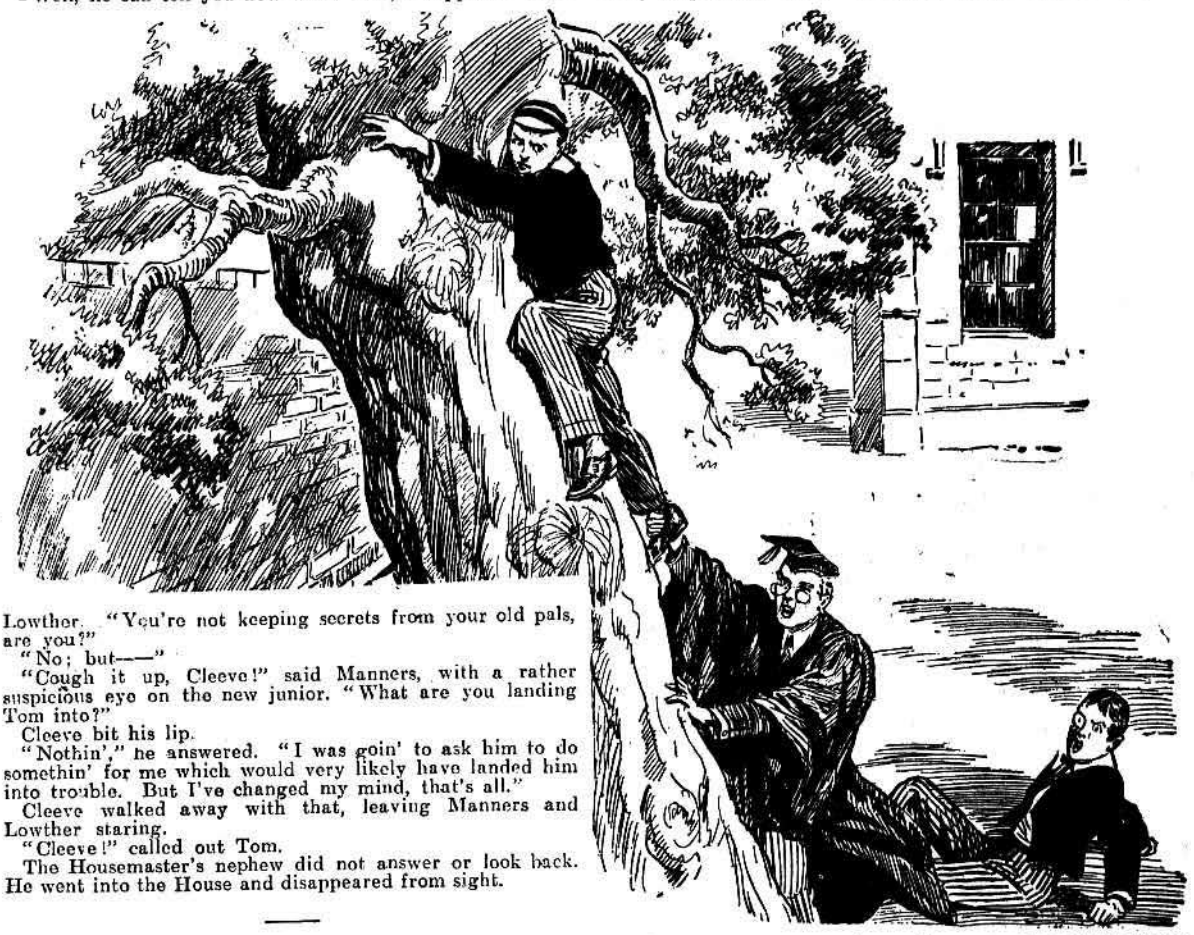
"My hat!" said Blake. "That's quite a sensible remark!"

"Weally, Blake——"

"How did you come to do it?" asked Blake. "This is the second time I've heard you talk sense since you came to St. Jim's."

"You uttah ass!" roared Arthur Augustus.

"Well about that boat," said Herries. "We shan't get



As Mr. Linton came running on the scene, Cleeve turned and clambered up the tree again. "Cleeve! Descend at once! How dare you!" said the Form master. The new boy did not heed. The next moment Mr. Linton reached after him, grasped his foot, and dragged him down. (*See Chapter* 4.)

a boat if we stay here much longer listening to Gussy wobbling his chin."

"I wepeat that I have been thinkin'——"

"You can repeat it till you're black in the face, old bean, but you won't get anybody to swallow it," said Blake.

"Pway dwy up, you cheeky ass! I was goin' to say——"

"Tell us as we go down to the river," suggested Blake. "You can walk ahead while you tell us all about it, and we shan't hear, so all parties will be pleased. Come on!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I see nothin' whatevah to cackle at in Blake's wude wemarks, you fellows. As I was sayin', I don't like to see old Wailton's nephew left out in the cold in this way. It must be wathah wotten for old Wailton. He sees evewything, you know, though he doesn't always let on. Cleeve is a vewy unpleasant beast, but he must have his good points, bein' the welative of a wippin' man like Wailton. And look at the way he played up in the Gweyfwiahs match, too. I am goin' to chum up with him this afternoon."

"That's what you've been thinking, is it?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Might have expected something of that kind, when you get your brain to work," said Blake. "Don't do it, Gussy. Thinking isn't in your line. Give it a miss."

"I mean it, Blake," said Arthur Augustus firmly. "I am goin' to look for that man Cleeve, and cheer him up a little. I hate to see a fellow moochin' about all by himself on a half-holiday."

"You're going to keep him company?"

"Yaas."

"And do you expect that to have a cheering effect on him?" asked Blake, with a perplexed look.

"Weally, Blake——"

"You don't think that it may give him the horrid blues and plunge him into fearful depths of depression?" asked Blake.

"You uttah ass!"

"Still, serve him right," added Blake. "He's an ill-mannered cad, though I admit he can play cricket. Find him out, Gussy, and stick to him all the afternoon. And serve him jolly well right."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Blake & Co. walked away, grinning, and Arthur Augustus gazed after them most expressively. Having thought the matter out, in the kindness of his noble heart, D'Arcy had made up his mind to do the lonely fellow that good turn; but he had been rather worried by the thought that his own chums might miss him sorely. Blake's view of the matter therefore came as a surprise to the Honourable Arthur Augustus.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus at last. And he turned away and went to seek Cleeve of the Shell. Blake & Co., judging by appearances, were able to bear the loss of his company that afternoon with a considerable amount of fortitude, and Arthur Augustus had no doubt that Cleeve of the Shell would be glad of the company that Blake & Co. dispensed with so cheerfully. Like other fellows in the School House, D'Arcy had begun to think better of the Housemaster's nephew since his great game in the Greyfriars match, and he had generously resolved to give Victor Cleeve another chance.

"D'Arcy!"

Arthur Augustus glanced round as his name was called as he was going along by the masters' windows. It was Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell, who called to him, and Mr. Linton was looking very cross. Crossness on the part of any Form master but his own, however, did not worry Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. He came politely up to the window.

"Yaas, sir?"

"Have you seen Cleeve of my Form?"

"No, sir. I'm just lookin for him," answered Arthur Augustus.

"Very well!" snapped Mr. Linton.

It was now past two, and at two Cleeve had been ordered to come to his Form master's study for his detention task. Arthur Augustus, happily ignorant of the fact that the Shell fellow was under detention, and that his Form master was expecting him to come to the study, meandered on, still looking for Cleeve.

Mr. Linton stood staring from the study window, his brow growing darker and darker.

He had already suspected that the detained junior might disobey his command, but he had disdained to keep an eye on him till the time came for detention. He was intensely exasperated now. He could see nothing of Cleeve in the quad, and the Shell fellow did not come to his study. After a few moments' thought, Mr. Linton left the study—and there were now two persons seeking for Cleeve of the Shell.

CHAPTER 4.
Caught in the Act!

"BAI JOVE! Heah you are!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy came suddenly on Cleeve.

Cleeve of the Shell had been lounging under the elms near the school wall. It was a shady and secluded spot, and D'Arcy would not have been likely to find him there had he not been specially looking for the fellow.

He sighted Cleeve at a little distance and started towards him briskly. Cleeve undoubtedly looked as if a little bright and genial society would do him good that afternoon.

For a long time he had been standing there thinking out his problem. He had to see the gipsy, Isaac Ives, that afternoon; and if he did not keep the appointment he hardly dared to think of what the man might do. He might come on to the school, as he had threatened, and then the whole miserable tale would come out—of the accusation of theft, and the expulsion from Barcroft.

The St. Jim's fellows suspected—or, rather, knew—that Cleeve had been turned out of his former school, but more than that they did not suspect or know. If they knew all that Isaac Ives could tell them, Cleeve knew that he could not remain; he could never look the fellows in the face if they knew. St. Jim's itself was little enough to him, though, in spite of his discontent, he had grown to like some of the fellows there—especially Tom Merry, the captain of his Form. Cleeve's heart was still at his old school. But Barcroft was closed to him for ever; and, with all his sullen dissatisfaction, Cleeve knew well enough what a great chance it had been for him when his uncle's influence had gained him admission to a school like St. Jim's, in spite of the shadow of shame that hung over him. If he had to leave St. Jim's he would not have another chance.

To break detention—to go out, in spite of his Form master's direct command—was a serious matter; and there was his uncle to be considered, too. He had told Mr. Railton nothing of the gipsy who had followed him from Norfolk; it was not a matter in which the Housemaster could have helped him, so far as he could see. Mr. Railton would be grieved and angry when the master of the Shell reported Cleeve's conduct to him, and he would have no choice but to report his nephew to the Head for a flogging.

Cleeve, thinking it out under the elms, could not make up his mind; and two o'clock sounded from the clock-tower, and found him still undecided.

But he made up his mind at last, as he saw D'Arcy of the Fourth coming towards him. He took it for granted that the junior had been sent to call him to the House for his detention, now over-due; and he realised then that he dared not leave the gipsy waiting at the appointed place on the tow-path by the Rhyl.

He turned his back on Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and hurried towards the school wall at a spot where a slanting oak-tree grew and gave aid to a climber. It was a secluded spot, well known to all the Lower School at St. Jim's, where many fellows had climbed out unknown to masters and prefects.

Arthur Augustus stared after Cleeve as the Shell fellow grasped the trunk of the oak to climb.

"Bai Jove!" he ejaculated.

Why a fellow should climb out secretly over the school wall on a half-holiday when he could walk out of gates if he liked was a mystery to Arthur Augustus. His aristocratic brain was not always quick on the uptake, and it did not occur to him for the moment that Cleeve might be under detention and might have a very good reason for getting out of the school precincts unseen.

"Cleeve!" he shouted.

The Shell fellow did not answer, or look round. He clambered up the slanting trunk of the oak actively.

"Hold on, Cleeve!" yelled Arthur Augustus. "I was lookin' for you, you know."

The swell of St. Jim's came on at a run.

Having made up his noble mind to be kind to Cleeve that afternoon, Arthur Augustus was not to be denied. Besides, his friends had gone out and left him to be kind to Cleeve, and it was too late to rejoin Blake & Co. in their boat on the river. Arthur Augustus came up to the slanting oak at a breathless run.

"Cleeve!" he shouted.

As the Shell fellow still clambered on without heeding, Arthur Augustus reached up and grasped his ankle just before it whisked out of reach.

"Cleeve, deah boy, hold on!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "Oh cwumbs! Oh cwikey! Oh, my hat!"

Crash!

Cleeve's hold on the trunk of the tree was not very secure; that climb had to be made carefully. The jerk at his ankle brought him slithering down the tree, and he landed on Arthur Augustus.

The swell of St. Jim's rolled over under the shock, and Cleeve sprawled over him.

"Ow!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "Wow! Gewwoff! Oh cwumbs!"

"You fool!" yelled Cleeve furiously.

"Weally, Cleeve! Gwoooogh!"

"You born idiot!"

Cleeve staggered to his feet. Arthur Augustus, fortunately, had broken his fall, but he was shaken and breathless. Arthur Augustus was still more shaken and still more breathless. He sprawled on the ground, gasping and spluttering.

"You dummy!" hissed Cleeve. "What did you drag me down for, you idiot? You born lunatic!"

"Gwoogh!" Arthur Augustus sat up. "What did you fall on me for, you clumsay ass? I wegard you as an uttah chump! Oh deah!"

Cleeve turned savagely from him and clambered at the oak again. A tall and angular figure came through the elms.

"Cleeve! Stop! Descend at once!"

Cleeve looked round desperately. Mr. Linton—probably guided by the dulcet voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy—had arrived on the scene. Forgetting the slow and stately pace suitable to a gentleman of his years and his dignity, Mr. Linton fairly ran towards the oak, his eyes gleaming with anger.

Cleeve hesitated a moment, and then he clambered desperately on. Mr. Linton shouted to him.

"Cleeve! Descend at once! How dare you! Upon my word, this is too much! You young rascal, descend from that tree!"

Cleeve clambered on.

Mr. Linton reached after him. Cleeve was already out of D'Arcy's reach, but Mr. Linton was a tall gentleman with a long arm. His grasp closed on Cleeve's foot, and with a powerful jerk he tore the climbing junior away from the tree and landed him at the foot of the trunk.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus, blinking at them.

"Cleeve! You have dared to attempt to break bounds when you are under detention!" exclaimed the master of the Shell, his voice high with anger.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus again. He realised what he had done now—in the kindness of his heart.

Mr. Linton dropped a hand of iron on the shoulder of the breathless Shell fellow.

"Come with me, Cleeve! I shall cane you severely, and you will be locked in for your detention, as I cannot trust you! Come!"

With a drooping head, and something like despair in his face, the Housemaster's nephew moved away, with Mr. Linton's grasp still on his shoulder.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy picked himself up. He jammed his celebrated monocle into his noble eye, and gazed after the Form master and the Shell fellow, as they progressed towards the House.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus once more.

And he drifted disconsolately away, wishing that he had not made up his noble mind to be kind to Cleeve that afternoon. Probably he did not wish it quite so fervently as the Housemaster's nephew did

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CHAPTER 5.

Taking a Passenger!

"PENNY for 'em!"

Monty Lowther made that offer rather sarcastically.

Manners grunted

There was a shade of worry on the usually sunny face of Tom Merry. The Terrible Three of the Shell were sitting in a boat, gliding easily down the current of the Rhyl. Manners was steering, and Monty Lowther occasionally pulled an oar, but Tom Merry's oar was idle, and the boat glided slowly with the stream.

Tom made no answer to Lowther's sarcastic offer. Monty Lowther echoed Manners' grunt.

"Fathead!" he remarked.

"Same to you, old chap," said Tom.

"Ass!" growled Lowther "What the dickens do you want to bother your head about that outsider Cleeve for?"

"I'm not exactly bothering about him," answered Tom. "But I hate to see any fellow down on his luck."

"Isn't it his own fault?" demanded Lowther.

"I don't know."

"You do know!" hooted Lowther. "All St. Jim's was ready to give him a rousing welcome, on old Railton's account. We never even kicked at having the fellow planted in our study. And he turned out to be a swanking, ill-bred cad—the most unpleasant beast ever landed on St. Jim's. It's as plain as the nose on your face that he was bunked from his last school, and I don't think any the better of Railton for landing him on St. Jim's after that, either."

"Railton must have believed that it wasn't his own fault. He would never have asked the Head to let Cleeve in, otherwise."

"Railton can believe what he likes," sniffed Lowther. "I know I can't stand the fellow. I know he played up well for School in the Greyfriars match—you needn't tell me that again. He can play cricket. But I never saw such a sulky, sullen, stiff-necked rotter in my life. I jolly well wish they hadn't bunked him from the school he keeps so secret!"

"Hear, hear!" said Manners.

"I don't think he's a bad chap," said Tom mildly. "I think he believes that he's had injustice, and it's soured his temper a little——"

"A lot, you mean!" grunted Monty.

"Well, a lot, then, if you like. If he really got turned out of his school under some mistake, it must have been pretty rough on him."

"If!" said Manners, shrugging his shoulders. "Gammon!"

"Well, old Railton standing by him looks like it," argued Tom. "Railton's not the man to let a bad hat into the school, relation or no relation. He put Cleeve into our study, and tried to make us his friends. That shows that he thinks Cleeve all right. Look here! Since Cleeve has been at St. Jim's he's done nothing rotten. I admit he's got unpleasant ways and a rotten temper; but he's been decent enough—no shady blackguardism about him, like Racke, or Crooke, or Chowle——"

"It wasn't for that he was sacked, I suppose," grunted Lowther. "But it was for something. Fellows ain't bunked for nothing."

"Might have been some awful mistake——"

"His headmaster might have made an awful mistake—just because Cleeve knocked up runs and took wickets in the Greyfriars match?"

Tom Merry laughed.

"Sounds like logic, doesn't it?" grinned Manners.

"Well, no," said Tom. "But——"

"And I'm not so sure, either, that he's so jolly above-board," said Monty. "We saw him with that disreputable gipsy, Isaac Something-or-other, and he was giving the man money. That doesn't look above-board."

"That rotter has some hold over him," said Tom.

"How could he have any hold over him, if he hadn't any rotten secrets to keep?" snorted Lowther.

Tom Merry made no reply to that. It was not an easy question to answer.

"Hallo!" ejaculated Manners suddenly.

"What?"

"There's the giddy gippo."

Manners jerked his thumb towards the towpath. The boat was a good distance from the school now, and the towpath by the river was deserted and solitary. Sprawling on a sloping bank of grass, smoking a cigar, was the disreputable gipsy outcast with whom the Terrible Three had seen Cleeve of the Shell a week or two before. Tom Merry looked at him with a darkening brow.

This was the man Cleeve had asked him to meet in his place that afternoon—though the Shell fellow had changed his mind at once, and had carefully avoided Tom Merry after that. His fear of the blackmailer evidently had urged him to catch at any straw; but he had changed his mind, and that could only have been from a good motive. He would not, for his own sake, allow the captain of the Shell to come into touch with the rascally outcast. Tom Merry understood that clearly enough and it made him think better of Cleeve.

"That's the man!" said Tom.

"He's waiting there for somebody," grunted Lowther. "Is he waiting for Cleeve? Is that why the fellow was so cut-up at being detained to-day?"

"Nice sort of a merchant for a St. Jim's man to be meeting!" said Manners, with a curl of the lip.

"He fairly asked for that detention," said Lowther. "Perhaps the joy of looking forward to meeting that blackguard upset his jolly old nerves."

"I dare say it worried him," said Tom.

"He shouldn't have anything to do with the man, then.

"I fancy he can't help himself."

"Bosh!"

"Hallo, he's calling to us!" said Manners.

Isaac Ives had sat up in the grass, as he sighted the boat, and stared hard at the juniors. No doubt he recognised them. He shouted to them, and Manners steered the boat a little closer in.

"What do you want?" he called out.

Isaac Ives stood by the margin of the river, staring into the boat. It occurred to Tom that perhaps the gipsy had expected to see Cleeve with them. He had no doubt that

this was the appointed place where the Housemaster's nephew was to have met the gipsy. Isaac had evidently been waiting for someone.

"Ain't that pal of yourn come with you?" asked Isaac.

"Who?" snapped Manners.

"Young Cleeve."

"He's not a pal of ours."

"No more than you are, my dusky friend," said Monty Lowther.

Isaac grunted.

"Well, I been waiting ere long enough," he said. "I ain't waiting much longer. I ain't the man to be turned down, so I tell you. If he's kicked over the traces, so much the worse for him. I've stood all the cheek I'm going to stand from young Cleeve, s'elp me!"

Lowther's oar dipped.

"Let's get on," he said in disgust. "This man gives me a bad taste in the mouth, and we don't want to hear anything about Cleeve."

"Hold on!" said Tom.

"Yes, you 'old on, if you're a friend of young Cleeve," said the gipsy, his shifty, rat-like eyes on Tom Merry. "P'r'aps you've got a message from young Cleeve."

"No," answered Tom. "But he can't come out of school to-day; he's detained by his Form master. I happen to know that."

Manners and Lowther gave Tom a glare. They did not "see" mixing themselves up in Cleeve's business with this disreputable rascal.

"Can't come, can't he?" growled Isaac. "And he's sent you to tell me so, has he? Well, he'd better come, if he knows what's good for him. If he ain't here by four o'clock, I'll call and see him at the school, like I've told him!"

"Do!" said Manners. "You'll be kicked out fast enough if you show your blackguardly mug at St. Jim's!"

"Not afore I've told about young Cleeve!" sneered Isaac.

"You can't see Cleeve if you go to the school," said Tom quietly. "I've told you he's under detention."

"Has he sent anything beside a message?" demanded Isaac.

"I haven't any message from him. I saw you here by chance," said Tom, "and I certainly have no money to give you, if that is what you mean."

"Yes, that's what I mean, jest that," said Isaac, with a sneer. "Well, you go back to Master Cleeve, and tell him that I'll wait till four, and if he ain't here by then, I'm coming up to the school!"

"I can see us doing it!" said Manners contemptuously. "Let's get on, Tom. I'm sick of this rotter!"

Tom Merry stood up in the boat, resting the end of his oar in the grass of the bank. He was quite as keen as his comrades to have done with the rascal on the towpath, but he could not help thinking of Cleeve. Whatever might be the secret between the Shell fellow and Isaac Ives, even if Cleeve was to blame, he was down on his luck, and Tom was the fellow to help anyone who was down on his luck, without inquiring too closely whether it was his own fault or not.

"We cannot take a message from you," he said, "but I've told you that Cleeve cannot leave the school to-day."

"You can tell me what you like," sneered Isaac. "I dessay he's sent you along 'ere to tell me lies. I mean what I say."

Tom Merry's eyes flashed.

"You're going up to the school, then?"

"I am that!" said Isaac emphatically.

"For goodness' sake let us get on!" exclaimed Manners impatiently. "Is this a thing for us to get mixed up in, Tom, you ass?"

"No," answered Tom. "But we're going to chip in, all the same. I don't know what Cleeve's done, or hasn't done, but I know that this blackguard isn't going up to St. Jim's this afternoon! Bear a hand!"

Tom Merry jumped ashore.

"Look here——" exclaimed Lowther.

Tom Merry did not heed him.

Lowther and Manners, with very uneasy looks, brought the boat close to the rushes, and Manners held it steady to a bush while Lowther jumped on the bank.

"Get into the boat, Ives!" said Tom.

"What?"

"Get in!"

"I ain't getting into the boat, you young cheeky 'ound!" answered the gipsy, eyeing him uneasily.

"You are!" said Tom grimly.

And with that, he put up his hands and ran straight at Isaac Ives. The gipsy struck at him savagely, but the blow was guarded, and the next moment Tom Merry's clenched fist struck the ruffian full in the face, and he went crashing backwards.

"Lend a hand, Monty!" panted Tom.

"But——" gasped Lowther.

"Lend a hand, I tell you!"

Tom Merry grasped the gipsy as he sprawled in the grass. Lowther lent him a hand, and Isaac, struggling and yelling, was flung bodily into the boat. He crashed there and lay spluttering, and Tom and Monty jumped in after him. A shove from an oar sent the boat rocking out into the middle of the river, and Isaac Ives sat up and stared at the receding shore, and spluttered oaths.

"Put a bloke ashore!" he roared.

"Shut up!" snapped Tom.

"S'elp me, I'll——" Isaac staggered up, his fists clenched, his eyes blazing with fury.

Tom Merry unceremoniously drove his oar against the gipsy's chest, and Isaac sat down again quite suddenly, with a concussion that made the boat rock. He sat and spluttered while the boat glided on down the sunny river.

CHAPTER 6.
Marooned!

"TOM, you ass——"

"Tom, you duffer——"

Tom Merry's chums stared at him in amazement. They had backed him up, as they always backed up their leader, but they simply did not understand.

"It's all right," said Tom coolly. "It won't hurt us to take a passenger for a trip down the river."

"Nice passenger!" murmured Lowther. "What the merry thump do you want him for, Tom?"

"He's not going to St. Jim's!"

"You ass!" exclaimed Manners. "I suppose he can do as he likes, after we've landed him?"

"We're not landing him yet."

Isaac sat up again, his dark, stubbly face black with fury. He cast a glance at the bank, but the boat was in the middle of the stream now, and there was no escape for the gipsy until the juniors chose to put him ashore.

"You young 'ounds!" he muttered between his teeth.

"Hold your tongue!" said Tom curtly. "Open your mouth again and you'll get another clump from this oar!"

And Isaac eyed him in savage silence. He did not want the oar at close quarters again.

"Well, what are you going to do with the brute?" asked Manners. "Blessed if I want his company!"

"Neither do I," answered Tom; "but we're keeping him on board for a couple of miles. That's as far as Smith's Island."

"Oh!" exclaimed Manners. "You're going to drop him there?"

"Just that."

"Hear, hear!" chuckled Monty Lowther. "Once aboard the lugger the gal is ours! My gipsy friend, you can regard yourself as kidnapped, to be marooned on a desert island."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Isaac scowled savagely at the juniors.

Tom Merry and Lowther were pulling at their oars now, and the boat glided rapidly down the Rhyl. Manners was grinning, and Monty Lowther chuckling, both highly entertained by the idea of marooning the gipsy on the island in the river. Certainly if he was landed on Smith's Island, he was not likely to visit the school that day. Smith's Island was a good distance down the Rhyl, and was seldom visited—Mr. Smith, to whom it belonged, being a City gentleman who came down to the district only very occasionally for the fishing. The island rose in the middle of the widest stretch of the river, and reaching the bank by swimming would have been a hefty task even for a good swimmer. It was not a task that a fellow like Isaac was likely to essay, even if he could swim. Once on the island, he was safe till a boat was sent for him, and Tom Merry could please himself about that. Cleeve of the Shell would not, at all events, see the gipsy at St. Jim's that day.

Isaac sat scowling in uneasy silence as the boat pulled on between ever widening banks. Other craft were on the river, and the juniors gave them as wide a berth as possible; and once, when Isaac seemed inclined to shout to another boat, Tom made a threatening motion with his oar, and the gipsy changed his mind again.

"Look 'ere, you put a bloke ashore!" said Isaac, breaking his savage silence at last.

"We're putting you ashore when we get to the island," answered Tom.

"Is there a blinking boat there?"

"There is no boat there, blinking or otherwise."

"'Ow am I going to get off, then?" demanded Isaac.

"You're not going to get off," answered Tom coolly.

"What?" roared Isaac.

"Not unless you swim for it, and I warn you that the

The gipsy was grasped and flung bodily into the boat. Tom Merry and Lowther jumped in after him. Using the ends of their oars, the two juniors forced the man into the bottom of the rocking boat. "Put a man ashore!" roared the gipsy. "Shut up!" snapped Tom Merry grimly. (*See Chapter 5.*)

currents are dangerous round the island if you feel inclined to try it on."

"Burn you! I can't swim!"

"All the better," said Tom. "You'll stay on the island till you're sent for."

"And who's going to send for me?" demanded Isaac.

"The police, I hope."

"What?" gasped Isaac.

Tom Merry gave him a scornful look.

"I'm going to speak to Cleeve, and advise him to let his uncle deal with you," he said. "If he takes my advice, Mr. Railton will know what to do with a scoundrel who has been threatening his nephew for money. You'll wait on the island till then."

"Young Cleeve has put you up to this!" muttered Isaac hoarsely.

"Cleeve knows nothing whatever about it."

"That's a lie!" hissed the gipsy. "I ain't afraid of what young Cleeve can do, nor his uncle, either! He thinks he can scare me off with a trick like this—the young thief!"

Tom Merry started. Manners and Lowther exchanged a glance.

"You rascal!" exclaimed Tom, his eyes glinting. "How dare you call Cleeve that!"

"I'll call him that afore all his new school!" snarled the gipsy. "I'll shout it out for all the place to 'ear, arter this! I'll let his new school know that he was expelled from Barcroft, in Norfolk, for stealing!"

"It's false!" exclaimed Tom.

But his heart was sinking. If it was true, it accounted for all that had puzzled and perplexed the St. Jim's fellows about Cleeve; it accounted for the undoubted fact that he feared the gipsy and was paying him to keep away from the school. If it was true, Tom Merry, while intending to help him, might have landed Cleeve in disaster. If it was true, Isaac had only to tell his tale at St. Jim's, to make it impossible for the Housemaster's nephew to remain there. But was it true? Could it be true?

"I tell you Cleeve will be sorry for this," said Isaac venomously, "when all his school knows what I can tell them——"

"Hold your tongue!" said Tom savagely. "You won't tell us anything, at any rate! Say another word, and I'll knock you over the head with my oar!"

And Isaac was silent again.

The boat pulled on, and Smith's Island came in sight—a tiny islet in the midst of the two branches of the Rhyl. It was thickly wooded, but there was no habitation or shelter of any sort save the thick trees. The banks of the river on either side were wide-stretching pasture-land, and only in the far distance a thin spiral of smoke told where a farmhouse lay. The juniors pulled the boat into the island.

"Get out!" said Tom.

"I ain't going to be landed there!" snarled Isaac. "I'll 'ave the law on you for this! This 'ere is kidnapping, this 'ere is!"

"You can have all the law you want—a little more than you want, I hope!" answered Tom contemptuously. "You're going ashore here. You can step out of the boat, or you can be kicked out, just as you like. Take your choice!"

"I think I'd rather kick him out!" remarked Lowther, rising to his feet. "I feel as if it would do me good to kick him."

"Are you getting out?" snapped Tom.

Isaac eyed the juniors savagely. But if he was thinking of a struggle with the three of them, he gave up that idea. With a muttered curse he jumped from the boat, and tramped up the bank of the little island.

Tom Merry shoved off at once.

The gipsy stood staring after the boat, pouring out a stream of oaths, as the juniors pulled up the river, back to St. Jim's. But in a few minutes his voice died away, and he was lost to sight.

"Well, this is a go!" commented Manners. "I suppose you'll take to piracy on the high seas when you're grown up, Tom, if you begin with kidnapping and marooning while you're still at school!"

Tom Merry laughed.

"That brute won't call at St. Jim's to-day, anyhow!" he said.

"He won't, for a cert!" chuckled Lowther. "He won't call anywhere—unless he calls for help on the giddy island. That's the only call he can make now!"

"Nobody will hear him if he calls!" said Tom, laughing. "I fancy he's safe till to-night, at least."

"He can make signals of distress like a giddy shipwrecked mariner," said Lowther, chortling at the idea. "But I've heard that old Smith was twenty-four hours on that island once, when he let his boat drift. The gippo seemed rather excited when we left him; but if he stays there twenty-four hours I dare say he will have time to cool down. But, I say, Tom, what do you think of what he said about Cleeve?"

"It can't be true," said Tom.

"It would explain a lot of things," said Manners.

Tom shook his head.

"Railton must know why his nephew left Barcroft, if

that's the name of Cleeve's old school, as that rotter said. If it was for stealing, Railton would never have brought him to St. Jim's. That stands to reason!"

"Railton believes in him, of course—avuncular prejudice," said Monty Lowther. "I've got an uncle who wouldn't believe anything against me, if I knocked Linton on the head with a Latin dictionary and buried him in the Head's garden!"

"Fathead!"

"Anyhow, it's a rotten affair, and I don't see getting mixed up in it," said Manners. "Blessed if I see what you wanted to butt in for, Tom!"

"Same here," agreed Lowther.

"Well I believe in Cleeve," said Tom slowly. "I don't know exactly why, but I do. He told me it was not his fault that he had to leave his old school, and, somehow, I believed him. And——"

"And what?"

"Well he plays a jolly good game of cricket! Look how he pulled the game out of the fire in the Greyfriars match!"

"After which, nothing remains to be said!" remarked Monty Lowther, with withering irony. "He handles a cricket bat jolly well, so we're bound to believe that he's been tipping that gippo to stay away from the school for no reason whatever. He can do the hat trick, and so it stands to reason that if his headmaster bunked him the old gent was making a serious mistake! He makes ripping catches in the field, and so it's perfectly clear that his beastly temper is only his own original way of showing how nice he is! You ought to take up logic as a study, Tom. It's your strong point!"

"Blow logic!" was Tom Merry's cheerful reply. "And if you've coughed up all your sarc, old bean, pull on your oar, or we shall never get back to tea!"

"I must say you're the biggest ass at St. Jim's, old chap!" remarked Manners.

"And the howlingest chump!" added Lowther.

"Present company excepted!" suggested Tom Merry.

"Fathead!"

"Ass!"

And the boat pulled on up the shining river, and bumped on the St. Jim's raft at last.

CHAPTER 7.
Uncle and Nephew!

MR. RAILTON unlocked the door of Study No. 10 in the Shell as five o'clock sounded from the old tower of St. Jim's.

The Housemaster's face was very grave.

He pushed the door open, and entered the study, and a junior who was standing by the window turned to face him.

Mr. Railton closed the study door behind him, put the key on the inside of the lock, and faced his nephew.

Cleeve flushed, and his eyes dropped. The School House master glanced at the study table; only a glance was needed to tell him that Cleeve had not touched his detention task.

"Victor!"

"Yes, uncle?" said Cleeve dully.

"You have not done the task set you by your Form master?"

"No."

"You have not even commenced it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I—I couldn't!"

"You do not mean to say that Mr. Linton set you a task beyond your powers, Victor," said the Housemaster quietly.

"Eh! Oh, no! Nothing of the sort! I didn't mean that!" muttered Cleeve. "I dare say it was easy enough. I haven't looked at it."

"Why have you not looked at it?"

No reply.

"Mr. Linton has acquainted me with what has happened to-day, Victor," resumed the School House master, after a pause. "He has also told me a great deal that I did not know before, of your carelessness and impertinence in class. You have exhausted your Form master's patience, Victor, and Mr. Linton has told me plainly his opinion that you ought not to be here."

"I—I'm sorry!"

"It seems that you were careless, impertinent, indeed insolent, in class this morning, and that your Form master detained you, in consequence. You attempted to break bounds in spite of his order."

"Yes," muttered Cleeve.

"This is not what I expected of you, Victor!"

"I—I know!" muttered the junior. "I'm sorry! I never meant to cheek Linton this morning. I—I was bothered about something."

"About what?"

No answer.

"About the circumstances in which you left Barcroft, Victor?"

"Yes, and other things."

Mr. Railton regarded his nephew long and attentively. Cleeve did not meet his glance. His eyes were on the floor.

"This cannot go on, Victor," said the Housemaster at last. "It was only with the greatest difficulty that I prevailed upon Dr. Holmes to give you a chance here. I had to tell him the whole story of your misfortune at Barcroft, and he was kind enough, generous enough, to take my view that you had been the victim of circumstances. Whether he was quite able to believe this, I cannot say; but, at all events, he consented to allow my nephew to come here and make a fresh start. But it was understood that you would give no cause for complaint here—that you would be at least sensible enough to take advantage of the chance given you, even if you could not be grateful for it."

"I'm not ungrateful," muttered Cleeve. "But—but——"

"I can make every allowance for you," said Mr. Railton. "But there must be a limit to repining and brooding. What happened to you at Barcroft would have utterly ruined any other boy there. You were given a second chance. I believe that you were innocent of the theft charged to you; but you cannot deny that suspicion was brought upon you by your own folly. Common sense should urge you to make the best of things here; yet you seem to have set out from the beginning to make the very worst of them. This cannot continue. If I have made a mistake in bringing you here, it can be remedied, so far as that goes."

Cleeve started.

"You're going to send me away?" he stammered.

"What can I do?" exclaimed Mr. Railton. "You have made yourself thoroughly unpopular in the House and the school; you have set your Form master against you; you have made the worst of everything instead of the best. I had believed that I saw a change in you—that you realised your folly, and had made up your mind to do better. Now this has happened."

"It couldn't be helped."

"That is absurd! Your Form master desired to be kind to you, if only on my account; and now you have set him against you. Tom Merry and his friends would have welcomed you with open arms as my nephew; and you deliberately provoked their dislike."

"I—I'm friendly with Tom Merry now," said Cleeve in a low voice. "I—I like him. He's friendly enough, since I've taken up cricket. I get on all right with the other fellows in this study, too. And—and I never meant to cheek Linton. I was worried——"

"That is no excuse for insolence to a Form master, Victor. You carried your disobedience so far as to make it necessary for Mr. Linton to lock you in your study for your detention, instead of sending you to the Form-room. He believes that you had some questionable motive for seeking to break bounds this afternoon. What else can he believe?" Again the Housemaster's eyes searched his nephew's face. "I cannot think so, Victor—yet—tell me why you were so anxious to go out of gates to-day?"

Cleeve did not answer.

The Housemaster did not repeat his question, but his grave face became very stern.

"If you cannot be frank with me, Victor, I am afraid that I have no choice but to believe as Mr. Linton believes."

Cleeve looked at his uncle, his face almost haggard. It was upon his lips to tell Victor Railton of the gipsy and his threats. That would have justified him, at least, in his uncle's eyes.

But he did not speak. What was the use? Isaac Ives knew what he knew, and he had to be kept silent if Cleeve was to remain at St. Jim's. Mr. Railton, assuredly, would never have submitted to a blackmailer's demands. How he would have dealt with Isaac, Cleeve did not know; but at all events he never would have bought the rascal's silence. That was a certainty. He could not tell his uncle.

"Am I to understand, Victor," said Mr. Railton, after a long pause, "that you have made undesirable acquaintances outside the school, and that it was for this reason that you defied your Form master to-day?"

"No! No! But——"

"But what?"

"Nothing," said Cleeve dully.

"You cannot explain?"

"No."

"You are shaking my faith in you, Victor," said Mr. Railton, with deep pain in his voice. "When I first heard of your trouble I could not and would not believe that my sister's son had been guilty. But what am I to believe now, if you are forming evil associations outside the school and that is the only possible explanation of your conduct to-day."

"It's not so," muttered Cleeve miserably. "I've never done wrong, either here or at Barcroft. I know what it looks like—but it's not so."

"I hope you are telling me the truth," said Mr. Railton, with a sigh. "But you have shaken my faith in you, Victor. If I have made a terrible mistake—if I have brought a guilty boy to this school, perhaps to contaminate others—I can never forgive myself. If something disgraceful should occur here, as at Barcroft, I should have to resign my position at once—I staked my career on my faith in you. This is not how you should have repaid me, Victor."

The Housemaster turned away and left the study without another word.

Cleeve leaned against Tom Merry's bookcase, breathing hard.

He had been guilty of many faults since he had come to St. Jim's; faults of temper and faults of conduct. He knew that well enough. He had carelessly excited hostility on all sides—he had antagonised fellows who, he knew, wished him well and would have been his friends. Always, at the back of his mind, had been the thought that, if the truth came out, he would rather that only hostile or indifferent ears should hear it—that no friendly face should harden at his approach—that no pal should turn from him in scorn. Yet in spite of the bitterness in his heart he had unconsciously felt a change—he had grown to like Tom Merry, to wish to stand well in his opinion—he had joined in the school games, and felt all the better for it; he had come to realise that he could break with the past and drive bitter recollections from his thoughts; and then like a ghost from the past, the evil face of Isaac Ives had come between him and his new hopes.

"I've made plenty of enemies since I came here," hissed Cleeve. "I didn't want to come to this school. You've put on friendliness—you've made me think you wanted to be decent to me, and now you've ruined me!" He rose to his feet and shook his clenched fist at Tom Merry across the table.
(See Chapter 9.)

The past was not to be broken with!

He had been guilty of many faults, but it was not his fault that he was in deep trouble now. For his uncle's sake, if not for his own, he had to keep the gipsy quiet—once the tale was told through the school, he would have to leave St. Jim's—and what would Victor Railton's position be then? Could the Housemaster remain, when all St. Jim's knew that his nephew had been turned out of another school on a charge of theft, and that the Housemaster had known it when he brought Cleeve to St. Jim's? It was ruin for him, and ruin for his uncle, if the gipsy was not bribed to silence.

The afternoon's detention had been torture to Cleeve.

Had Mr. Railton known what was on his mind, he would not have been surprised that the junior had not touched his detention task.

At every moment the unhappy boy had expected to hear that Isaac had come—that he was carrying out his threat to expose him at the school.

Isaac had not come, though Cleeve could not guess why. But the sword of Damocles still hung over his head.

His uncle was losing his loyal faith in him—that was the last and the heaviest blow. But he could not help it! What could he do? What could he do, but keep the gipsy silent at any cost—to save himself and to save the Housemaster from disgrace.

Cleeve moved restlessly about the study. His detention was over now, but it was useless to think of meeting the gipsy on the tow-path in the appointed place—Isaac would not have waited so long. Yet he had not come to the school! What did he intend?

The sound of footsteps and cheery voices in the Shell passage interrupted Cleeve's gloomy thoughts. His study-mates were coming in—and Cleeve composed his face as he heard them coming, and his habitual manner of disdainful indifference returned to him. His look was cool and indifferent, while black care was eating into his heart.

CHAPTER 8.
Tea in Study No. 10!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY was adorning the doorway of the School House with his elegant person when the Terrible Three came up from the river. He bestowed a nod on the Shell fellows as they came in.

"You fellows goin' up to tea?" he asked.

"Guessed it in once!" said Monty Lowther. "How do you do these things, Gussy?"

"Weally, Lowthah, it was quite easay to guess that you were comin' in to tea, as it is past tea-time——"

"Easy for you," said Monty gravely. "You have the intellect to do these things. But common mortals——"

"Wats! I was goin' to wemark that if you are goin' up to tea, you had bettah hang on a few minutes."

"To enjoy your improving society?" asked Monty. "Thanks, no end—but I think I'd rather have my tea. I'm hungry."

"Wailton has gone up to your study."

"Railton has!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Well, he's welcome," said Lowther. "I hope he won't bag the cake in the cupboard. But, after all, I suppose a Housemaster can be trusted with a cake."

"You uttah ass! Cleeve is locked in the studay, you know," said Arthur Augustus. "He has been kickin' ovah the twaces."

"Some fellows are born to hunt for trouble," observed Manners. "Cleeve seems to be one of them. Never knew a man so keen on trouble."

"Wasn't he detained in the Form-room?" asked Tom.

"Yaas; but he hooked it. Shockin' bad form to hook it when a fellow's undah detention," said D'Arcy, shaking his head seriously.

"Awful!" agreed Lowther. "It's what you did, I remember, the day you met Cleeve over at Abbotsford, before he came to St. Jim's."

"Circumstances alter cases, Lowthah," said Arthur Augustus stiffly.

"Oh, quite! It's shocking bad form in another fellow, but in your jolly old self it's rather nobby. Is that it?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, wats! As I was sayin', Cleeve was goin' out instead of bein' detained, but, of course, I never knew he was detained, at the time. I had wesolved to take him up for the aftahnoon, and look aftah him a bit, you know, and so I stopped him when he was scootin' out at the slantin' oak. Owin' to my stoppin' him, Linton came up and bagged him. Of course, I was actin' with the vewy best intentions——"

"You always are!" grinned Lowther.

"But Cleeve seemed wathah annoyed——"

"Go hon!"

"Quite watty, in fact! Linton marched him away by the collah, and he was locked in his studay for his detention, instead of bein' put in the Form-room. Linton said he could not twust him."

"So he tried to bolt, and, owing to your good intentions, he didn't get away with it. All the better for him, perhaps."

"Yaas, wathah! I fancy Wailton has gone up to let him out," said Arthur Augustus. "I thought I would mention it, as you do not want to butt in while old Wailton is slangin' Cleeve."

"Not exactly," agreed Tom Merry. "We'll wait till Railton has tired out his chin."

A few minutes later Mr. Railton came down the stairs, and the Shell fellows noted that his face was deeply clouded. After the Housemaster had gone, they went up to the Shell passage, but stopped before going on to Study No. 10. They knew now that Cleeve was there; and it was necessary for Cleeve to be told what had happened on the river that afternoon. But neither Manners nor Lowther was anxious to have much to say with the fellow who was almost an outcast in his House.

"I suppose he's got to be told!" Manners grunted.

"Yes," said Tom. "I'll tell him, after tea. You fellows can cut and leave me with him, if you like."

"We'd like all right," said Monty. "But I don't like you getting mixed up with him like this, Tom."

"He won't do me any harm," said Tom, laughing. "Besides, I believe he's all right; only he's had bad luck."

"Bow-wow!"

"Oh, come on!" said Manners. "We've got to have tea, anyhow. I'm as hungry as a hunter after that pull up the river."

And they went on to their study. Victor Cleeve gave them a careless glance as they came in.

Certainly, his look did not betray the stress of mind he was in. He had courage and self-control, at least, and he was not a fellow to wear his heart upon his sleeve.

"Got through your detention all right?" asked Tom.

"Oh, more or less!"

"Is that blank sheet of paper all you've done?" asked Monty Lowther, with a grin, as he glanced at the table.

"That's all."

"Linton will be pleased."

"Linton can be pleased or not—it's of no consequence to me!"

Monty Lowther shut his lips rather hard. The reply irritated him, as so many of Cleeve's remarks did.

Cleeve crossed to the door. Apparently he did not intend to "tea" with his study-mates.

"Hold on, Cleeve," said Tom Merry. "We're just going to have tea. You haven't had yours?"

"No."

"Tea with us, then."

Cleeve hesitated. Often, with all his sulks, he had found it hard to resist Tom Merry's good nature. And at that moment he was feeling so deeply plunged in the depths of depression, that Tom's cheery look and tone came as a tonic to him.

"Right-ho—with pleasure!" he said, forcing himself to reply cheerfully. "I'm feeling rather rotten after being shut up all the afternoon, you know. It doesn't exactly brighten one."

"No fear. Take a sprint round the quad, and get back to tea—ready in ten minutes," said Tom cheerily.

"You're awfully good!" said Cleeve; and there was a touch of real gratitude in his tone. "I'll do it."

And he left the study.

Monty Lowther scanned Tom Merry, looking him all over very carefully, as if in search of something.

"What on earth are you blinking over me like that for?" demanded the captain of the Shell, mystified.

"I'm looking to see if the wings are sprouting."

"The what?"

"Wings! Chap must be an angel to stand that fellow as you do, and give him the milk of human kindness in exchange for his vinegar. It's about time the wings began to sprout."

"You silly ass!" hooted Tom Merry, while Manners yelled.

"Hadn't we better get in something special for tea?" went on Monty, still sarcastic. "With such distinguished company, we can't make too big a fuss. We don't tea every day with a fellow who has been bunked from his school, and who pals with footpads, and cheeks his Form master, and——"

"Oh, chuck it, Monty!" said Tom. "Let's get tea. I've told Cleeve it will be ready in ten minutes."

"Only too happy to help get tea for Cleeve—a fellow who has been bunked——"

"Cheese it, old chap!"

Monty Lowther kindly "cheesed" it at last, and the Terrible Three set about getting tea in the study. It was ready when Cleeve came in, looking much brighter after his sprint in the fresh air.

The juniors talked cricket over tea. Manners and Lowther had a decided objection to discussing Isaac Ives, and they had no doubt that the topic was equally distasteful to Cleeve. They were more than content to leave that subject to Tom Merry later. The approaching match with Rookwood School was a topic in which all four of the Shell fellows could join; and Cleeve was keen enough on cricket. It was an understood thing that he was to play for St. Jim's when the Rookwooders came along; and whatever Manners and Lowther might think of him personally, they certainly had no objection to raise to that. The fellow from Barcroft was as good a man at the game as any fellow in the Lower School at St. Jim's, even including Tom Merry and Talbot of the Shell.

After tea, Manners and Lowther lost no time in getting out. They did not want to be present when the subject of the gipsy came up. Cleeve's eyes rested on them as they went, and then turned to Tom Merry. He knew that there was something in the minds of the Shell fellows. Tom Merry met his glance, and coloured a little.

"I've something to tell you, Cleeve," he said, coming to the point at once now that his friends were gone.

"About the cricket?"

"Oh, no!"

"If you've changed your mind about playing me against Rookwood, you needn't make any bones about telling me so," said Cleeve coolly. "I know I'm unpopular here, and a lot of fellows don't like to see me playing for the school. I shan't complain."

"I'm not leaving out one of my best men, if I can help it," answered Tom. "It's nothing to do with the cricket. It's about that—that gipsy."

Cleeve's face hardened.

"No need to speak about that," he said. "I asked you to meet him for me and put him off; I was wrong to ask it, and I realised that at once. If you'd agreed, I should not have let you do it. Don't speak of him. I think I'll be getting out for a stroll before call-over."

"Hold on," said Tom. "I must speak of the man, though it's as unpleasant to me as it can be to you. We saw him to-day. He was waiting on the tow-path the other side of Rylcombe, and we happened to go a good distance in our boat; that was how it was."

"No harm in seeing him; I suppose you didn't speak to him." Cleeve eyed Tom Merry uneasily. "You're not the chap to pry into a fellow's secrets, I know that, though you may think badly of him for having secrets."

Tom Merry's colour deepened.

"The man spoke to us," he said. "He wouldn't believe that you were prevented from coming, and he said he would come to the school."

"He never came."

"I stopped him."

Cleeve started.

"You stopped him! How?"

Tom Merry explained quietly.

Cleeve listened, his face growing paler and paler. When Tom had finished, the Shell fellow sat silent, with a stunned look on his face. For a full minute there was silence in the study. Then Cleeve rose unsteadily to his feet, his face ghastly.

"You fool!" he said, between his teeth.

"Cleeve!"

"You've ruined me! You fool—you meddlin' fool!"

CHAPTER 9.
Ruined!

TOM MERRY did not answer that angry outburst. If his own anger rose, it died away again at the look on Victor Cleeve's face.

"You fool!" muttered Cleeve. "You've ruined me now! Why couldn't you mind your own business? Why couldn't you?"

He sank into his chair again, his elbows on the table, his face dropping into his hands.

Tom Merry looked at him.

The sight of the fellow so utterly overwhelmed with despair gave him a pang at his heart.

"Cleeve!"

"Let me alone," said the Shell fellow hoarsely, without raising his face from his hands. "Let me alone! You've ruined me! I suppose that was what you wanted! Well, you've done it now! Let me alone!"

"I think I acted for the best," said Tom quietly. "If the man had come up to the school, as he threatened——"

"He might not have come. He knows he will get nothing more out of me if he does. If he had, it could not have been worse. What will he do now—he's sure to think that I put you up to it—that I had a hand in it, at any rate. He's as spiteful as a cat. I'm done for now. I shall be kicked out of St. Jim's as I was out of Barcroft! And—and my uncle——" Cleeve's voice broke off in a groan of utter misery.

"Your uncle!" repeated Tom. "Whatever the man can do to you, he cannot hurt Railton."

"That's all you know. Do you think my uncle can stay on here after his nephew is branded with disgrace before all the school?"

"Oh!" said Tom.

"You've ruined him as well as me. I hope you're glad!" said Cleeve, with deep bitterness.

Tom set his lips.

"If what the man said was true, you ought never to have come here," he said. "You're driving me to believe that it was true."

Cleeve raised his head.

"What did he say?"

"That you were sacked from Barcroft, your last school, for theft!"

"It's true."

"True!" exclaimed Tom Merry, aghast.

"Why shouldn't I tell you?" Cleeve gave a wild laugh. "All the school will be ringing with it to-morrow. After what you've done, Ives will not hold his tongue. You can shout it out all over the House if you like."

"I'm not likely to do that," said Tom. "I can't make it out! I'd never have believed it. I knew pretty well that you'd been bunked from your last school. But theft—Railton's nephew—it's impossible! Railton would never have had a hand in your coming here! He couldn't have, if you were a thief! I can't believe it."

"Believe what you like!" hissed Cleeve. "I've made plenty of enemies since I came here—where I never wanted to come—but you've put on friendliness—you've made me think you wanted to be decent to me—and now you've given me this stab in the back. Oh, you rotter—you rotter!"

He rose to his feet again, and shook his clenched fist at Tom Merry across the table.

Tom eyed him steadily.

"That's rot, and you know it, or you'd know it if you were cool," he said. "I advised you before to confide in your uncle, and I advise you the same again. Go straight to Railton——"

"Fool!"

"Railton is the man to deal with that scoundrel——"

"Fool!" hissed Cleeve. "Haven't I told you that Ives knows that I was sacked from Barcroft as a thief? Can Railton make him hold his tongue if he chooses to talk? Let me alone!"

"But——" began Tom.

"Let me alone, I tell you! I must think this out—it may not be too late now—when did you leave him on the island?"

"Two hours ago."

"You don't think he's got off?"

"I know he hasn't."

"Then he's still there—and I may be in time——" Cleeve pressed his hand to his brow, in an effort of thought. "If I get to him in time, I may shut his rascally mouth—I may stave it off yet."

"You're going to see that scoundrel?" exclaimed Tom.

Cleeve gave him a fierce look.

"Do you think I'm going to let my uncle be ruined, if I can stave it off, after all he's done for me? If I can see Ives in time——"

"You can't!" said Tom. "The island is three miles from St. Jim's, and you can't get to it without a boat."

"I can get a boat——"

"The boat-house will be locked up now."

"I can get a boat at the village, and pull down to the island," muttered Cleeve. "I may be in time."

"It's close on call-over——"

"Hang call-over!"

"Cleeve, have a little sense!" exclaimed Tom Merry angrily. "You can't break bounds at lock-up to go and see that villain. You must be mad to think of such a thing."

"It's my only chance."

Cleeve strode to the door, and turned back suddenly. His eyes fixed with bitter hostility on Tom Merry.

"You've got my secret now," he said between his teeth. "You have no right to know it, but you do know it! If I can keep that villain Ives quiet, are you going to give me away?"

"I shall not say a word, as you know very well," answered Tom Merry. "But if it's true that you are a thief, I don't ever want to speak to you again."

"I've never asked you to speak to me. Keep to yourself, and be hanged to you for a meddling fool."

And with that answer, Victor Cleeve tramped out of the study and ran down the Shell passage to the stairs. He hardly stayed to catch up his cap before he darted out into the quad. It was close on calling-over now, and the fellows were coming into the House.

"Cleeve!"

Kildare of the Sixth called to the junior as he was hurrying down towards the gates.

Cleeve looked back.

"Where are you going?" asked Kildare, with a searching glance at the junior's disturbed face.

Cleeve breathed hard.

"It's lock up now," added Kildare. "Go into the House, wherever you were going."

There was resistance plainly written in Cleeve's face. But he realised the hopelessness of it at once. With despair in his heart, he turned back, and tramped into the House.

Victor Cleeve answered to his name when roll was called in Big Hall. Mr. Railton was taking call-over, and he glanced at his nephew as he called his name. More than one fellow noticed that old Railton's face cleared when Cleeve's voice answered "adsum" from the ranks of the Shell, and wondered whether the Housemaster had supposed that his nephew was cutting call-over. It was very probable that some such thought had been in Mr. Railton's mind, in view of the happenings of the afternoon.

However, Cleeve was there, and he went out with the rest of the Shell when the school was dismissed. Tom Merry gave him a glance, and received a fierce stare in return. Lowther and Manners looked very curiously after the Housemaster's nephew as he tramped away.

"His nibs looks decidedly ratty," remarked Lowther. "Did you pass on the glad news about his gipsy pal, Tom?"

"Yes," said Tom shortly.

"It seems to have bucked him," said Monty, with gentle irony. "Never saw a fellow look as if he was enjoying life so thoroughly. I say, Cleeve!"

Cleeve stared round impatiently.

"Come and have a chat in the games-room, old bean," called out Lowther pleasantly.

"Go and eat coke!" retorted Cleeve. And he tramped on.

Monty Lowther smiled.

"What lovely manners!" he yawned. "How they must have loved him at his old school! And how I wish they still had him there!"

Tom Merry hurried after Cleeve, leaving his chums. The House was closed now, and Cleeve had gone upstairs. Tom Merry overtook him on the first landing.

"Hold on a minute, Cleeve!" he said.

"Let me alone!"

"If you're thinking still of breaking bounds——"

"Mind your own business!"

"Listen to me!" snapped Tom. "That man Ives is safe on the island—he can't get off till he's fetched off. I hoped that you would tell Railton, and that the police would be sent to fetch him off!"

"Fool!"

"You're your own master," said Tom, "but at least take time to think over the matter. To-morrow——"

"Leave me alone!"

"The man can't get away! A night on the island will serve the scoundrel right! You needn't worry about him!"

"You fool! Do you think I'm worrying about him?"

"I suppose not! Leave it over till to-morrow, then! Take time to think it out before you play the fool!"

Cleeve turned on the captain of the Shell as if goaded and struck at him with his clenched fist.

Tom warded the blow in time. He set his lips and stepped back. Cleeve gave him a fierce look and seemed about to follow up the attack. But if that was his intention, he abandoned it and turned and hurried away. Tom Merry did not follow him farther.

CHAPTER 10.
Missing!

KILDARE of the Sixth came along to Study No. 10 in the Shell, tapped on the door, and opened it.

Three fellows, busy at prep at the table, met the gaze of the captain of St. Jim's as he stared into the study.

Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther rose to their feet.

"Trot in, old chap!" said Monty Lowther politely. "Supper is not yet on; but if you've come to supper, Kildare, we'll cut prep. We're always ready to cut prep for a really good cause."

"Where's Cleeve?" asked Kildare, taking no notice of Monty's playful badinage.

"Not knowing, can't say," answered Lowther. "I'm not really interested in Cleeve. If you're asking a Shell man to supper in your study, what about little me?"

"Cleeve hasn't been here?" asked Kildare, looking at Tom Merry.

"Not since call-over," answered Tom.

"Do you know where he is?"

"No."

"Very well!"

The prefect shut the door and walked away, and the Terrible Three looked at one another.

"More trouble!" said Manners. "What the giddy deuce is that fellow up to now? Out of bounds, I dare say."

"Must be potty if he's bolted now!" said Lowther. "He must know that all the beaks have their eyes on him!"

The chums of the Shell resumed prep. They had not finished when Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth looked in.

"Cleeve not heah?" asked Gussy, surveying the study through his celebrated eyeglass.

"Cleeve seems to be in demand this evening," remarked Lowther. "He's not here, old bean; but if you're looking for really high-class company, we're all at home. If there's supper in Study No. 6, we'll try to wangle it in with our other engagements!"

"There is no suppah in Studay No. 6, Lowthah! I was goin' to wemark——"

"Don't take the trouble, old chap. If you've not come to ask us to supper, fade out, and let us get our prep done!"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"Like to look out some words in the dick for me, Gussy?"

"Not at all, deah boy!"

"Then pass on, friend, and all's well! Shut the door after you!"

"I was goin' to wemark——"

"Think better of it, old bean, and don't!"

"You uttah ass! I was goin' to wemark——"

"Isn't it curious?" observed Lowther thoughtfully. "Gussy is always either making a remark or going to make a remark! How does his chin stand the strain? It must be a remarkable chin!"

"Pway wing off, Lowthah! I was goin' to wemark that that fellow Cleeve is bein' looked for all ovah the House. He seems to have gone out aftah lock-up." Arthur Augustus shook his head seriously. "What the thump has he gone out of bounds for now?"

"Hunting trouble!" said Manners.

"He will find some!" assented Lowther.

"Thwee or four pwefects are inquirin' aftah him," said D'Arcy. "They've been dwawin' the studies for him. He doesn't seem to be about anywhah. Linton is lookin' vewy waxy and Wailton as solemn as a judge! That man Cleeve is askin' for the sack, you know!"

"Well, he's used to the sack by this time," said Lowther. "He may like it. Sort of acquired taste."

Arthur Augustus shook his noble head again very gravely and drifted away. Prep went on in Study No. 10, but Tom Merry was thinking little of his work now. He had no doubt that Cleeve had stolen out of the school to make an attempt to reach the island in the river where the gipsy had been marooned, and that knowledge troubled Tom deeply.

After prep the Terrible Three came down from the study, and they found that Cleeve was a general topic in the House.

Kildare and other prefects had been looking for him. They had not found him, and it was established that he was not in the House at all. It was drawing near bed-time for the juniors, and most of the fellows were amazed by Cleeve's recklessness in breaking bounds and staying out so late. He was, as Blake remarked, fairly asking for it.

Cleeve was not seen till the Shell were going to their dormitory. Then he joined the Form, coming from no one knew where. Darrell of the Sixth was seeing lights out for the Shell that night, and as soon as his eyes fell on the Housemaster's nephew he called him.

"Cleeve!"

"Yes, Darrell!"

"You are to go to Mr. Railton's study at once!"

"Very well!"

Cleeve walked away to the stairs.

"Silly ass!" commented Monty Lowther. "He must have got in by the box-room window. He couldn't have expected not to be bagged."

Whatever Cleeve had expected, his manner was calm as he went down to the School House master's study.

He tapped at Mr. Railton's door and entered.

The School House master rose to his feet. His face was set and stern. For the first time there was no trace of kindness or affection in Mr. Railton's face as he looked at his nephew

captain. Grundy, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, Herbert Skimpole, Aubrey on, chums. The warlike Grundy, ever ready to "dot someone in the egant swell of the Fourth, who thinks more of the crease in his trousers le, he of the dome-like napper, with a passion for absorbing the works it and fatuous peeping Tom, the slacker, the wholesale whopper-teller ies for blagging in any shape or form. What do you think of 'em? How Yet such fellows have the awful nerve to think that they'd make a the chance to try their luck.

ool yarn entitled:

BE CAPTAIN?"

aptaincy. Miss this rousing yarn and you'll be missing the best treat

OF THE "GEM" TO-DAY!

"So you have come in?"

"Yes," said Cleeve in a low voice.

"You have been out of bounds?"

"Yes."

"I thought so," said the Housemaster. "I suspected as much, and had inquiries made for you. You were missed at once. You left the House after lock-up, and have returned only at bed-time."

Cleeve did not speak.

"Where have you been?"

"Out of the school!"

"That is no answer! I require to know where you have been, and how you have been occupied, and whom you may have met! I am speaking not as your uncle, but as your Housemaster!"

Cleeve's lips set.

"Will you answer me?"

"I've nothing to say!"

Mr. Railton drew a deep breath.

"Unless you can explain at once, and explain in a manner that will remove my doubts of you, Victor, there is only one step I can take! I must go to the Head, and confess to him that I made a mistake in begging him to allow you to enter St. Jim's, and you must leave!"

"I know."

"You realise that?"

"Quite!" said Cleeve quietly.

Mr. Railton looked at him hard.

"I am disappointed with you, Victor," he said. "I begin to doubt whether I was right in taking your part in the unhappy occurrence at Barcroft. At all events, you cannot remain here. I shall arrange for you to leave the school at the end of the week quietly, and you will return to your Uncle Maurice. I shall consult him as to your future, but your schooldays will be at an end. You are not sorry to leave St Jim's?"

"Yes," said Cleeve. "But I understand that I must go. And as I must go, the sooner the better. Why not to-morrow?"

"That is not for you to decide. You may go to bed now."

Cleeve turned to the door. But he turned back.

"Uncle," he said, and his voice was trembling now, "I know you must think badly of me, but I'm not ungrateful, as you think. I know I've made mistakes here—a lot of mistakes—but I've done nothing wrong. I've done nothing that I'd be ashamed for you to know. I can't say more than that, but that much is true."

"Then tell me where you have been out of bounds this evening."

"I—I can't!"

"Enough!" said Mr. Railton curtly. "Go to your dormitory!"

Cleeve left the study at that.

In the Shell dormitory there was a buzz of voices when he came in.

"Sacked?" asked two or three fellows.

"Up for a flogging?" inquired Racke.

Cleeve made no answer.

He went to bed without speaking a word, and made not a single reply to the many questions that were called to him after lights out. But long after the rest of the Shell were asleep Victor Cleeve lay wakeful, his sleepless eyes fixed on the high windows, where the summer stars glimmered. It was the finish for him at St. Jim's. As he had to leave his old school, so he had to leave his new school. A few more days and the gates would close behind him for ever. And, heavy as the blow was, he was glad to go, not for his own sake, but for the sake of another.

CHAPTER 11.

Cleeve Speaks Out!

MR. LINTON glanced at Cleeve in the Shell Form-room the following morning, but after that one cold, disapproving glance took no further note of him.

Nothing was said of the neglected detention task, nothing on the subject of breaking bounds. Those matters seemed to have been allowed to fall into oblivion.

It was a surprise to the Shell fellows, who had expected to see Cleeve "up" for a Head's flogging at least.

Racke and Crooke whispered of favouritism, and opined that any fellow but a Housemaster's nephew would not have got off so cheaply. Other fellows guessed more accurately that Cleeve was leaving. In class that day he was very subdued, and unusually attentive and respectful to Mr. Linton. But the Form master carefully passed him over, and perspicacious fellows could see that Cleeve's presence in class was only a matter of form. They could guess that the Form master regarded him as no longer a member of the Shell at all.

"He's going!" said Manners at tea in Study No. 10 that day.

"Looks like it," said Tom Merry.

"It's a cert," declared Lowther. "Quite plain. Railton's going to let him drop out quietly, to save talk, that's all."

Tom Merry nodded. That was his impression.

"Can't say I'm sorry," said Lowther.

"There will be a lot of dry eyes in the House when he clears," concurred Manners.

That Cleeve was going admitted of little doubt. He had already taken some of his personal belongings from the study to pack in his box, and he had told Tom Merry not to count on him for the Rookwood match the following week. Tom asked no questions. None were needed. He knew that Cleeve would not be at St. Jim's when the Rookwooders came.

Certainly, there were few fellows in the House or the School who were likely to regret Victor Cleeve when he went. He had made himself too unpopular for that.

Tom Merry, probably, was the only one really concerned. He hardly knew whether he liked the fellow or not, but there was no doubt that he felt deeply concerned in his fate. Yet if it was true that he had been turned out of his former school for theft, he could not leave St. Jim's too soon.

When the Terrible Three came down after tea that day Cleeve was at the foot of the staircase. He came towards them.

"I'd like to speak to you, Tom Merry," he said in a low voice.

"Go ahead!" said Tom.

"I mean—" Cleeve glanced at Manners and Lowther.

"Come along to the games-room, Manners," said Monty, and Manners nodded and followed him.

Cleeve coloured.

"If you'd rather I didn't speak——" he muttered.

"What rot!" said Tom. "Let's get out!"

They went into the quad together, and walked a little distance in silence. Cleeve sat down on a bench under the elms at last, and the captain of the Shell sat at his side, wondering what was coming.

Cleeve evidently had something to say; and found considerable difficulty in saying it.

Tom waited patiently.

"I suppose I'm rather an ass to tell you," said Cleeve at last. "but—but you're about the only fellow here whose opinion I care two straws about; and I'd rather not leave you thinking too rottenly of me when I go."

"You're going, then?"

"You'd guessed that already?"

"Well, yes," said Tom.

"I'm going on Saturday," said Cleeve. "I'm not sacked, as I was before." He smiled faintly. "I'm going quietly. They let me go quietly at Barcroft, as a matter of fact—nothing was said in the school, partly to save scandal, and partly on Railton's account. But I was sacked. It's not the sack now—only I've got to go."

"Because you cleared out last night?"

"No! I could explain that if I liked, and my uncle would stand by me, as he's stood by me before. But I'm not letting him."

"I don't understand," said Tom. "I know you'd rather be at Barcroft than St. Jim's; that's natural. But you can't go back to Barcroft."

"No, that's impossible."

"You don't want to leave school for good?"

"No, but I've got to go. My uncle has stood by me like a brick, and I'm not letting him down. If I don't get out of St. Jim's, Railton will have to get out. That's rather too thick, after all he has done for me. I didn't realise that quite clearly at first, but I've got it clear now, and I'm goin' before anything happens."

Tom looked hard at him. He was quite mystified.

"If it won't bore you too much, I'll tell you how it is, before I go," said Cleeve, with a touch of his old jeering manner.

"I'd like to know," said Tom. "I certainly don't catch on so far."

"I was sacked from Barcroft on a charge of theft. I told you so—that man Ives told you so. It was true! But it wasn't true that I did what they believed—that wasn't true. Who did it I have no idea—but I never did. Still, I can't blame them for fixing it on me; I asked for trouble there as I've asked for it here. It's my way, I suppose."

"If you were innocent——"

"I was innocent."

"But surely, in that case——" Tom Merry hesitated. He wanted to believe what the Shell fellow was telling him, but it was not easy.

"I'd like you to believe me," said Cleeve, a little wistfully. "Railton believed me—but, of course, he's my uncle, and he's been fond of me since I was a little kid. My other uncle stood by me, too. They simply couldn't believe that I'd done a vile, rotten thing like that."

"But your headmaster——"

"He hadn't much choice about it," said Cleeve. "I was out of my dormitory, downstairs, at the time of the theft, and there was no one else he could have suspected, and I wouldn't explain why I was out of bed."

"Oh, my hat!" said Tom. "You didn't leave the Beak much choice in the matter, then."

Cleeve laughed harshly.

"No. I was a fool! And yet I was as innocent as you are! It came about this way. I was junior captain of my House, and the senior captain of the House, a fellow named Lovelace, had been jolly decent to me, helping me on in cricket, and lots of things. I liked him immensely, and would have done anything for him. Only he was a reckless ass in some matters—betting on races, and that sort of tosh, like Racke here, and some other fellows I've noticed. It was no business of mine, of course; he was a senior, a Sixth Form man—a sort of little tin god to us juniors. Well, that man you've seen—that rascal Ives—used to fetch and carry messages for him."

"He looks that sort," said Tom.

"Lovelace couldn't always get out of the House, of course, and he had a trick of giving the man messages from a window at times. Of course, it was frightfully risky for a Sixth Form man—a prefect, too—it would have been the sack for him, short and sharp, if he had been spotted. Like a fool, I used to take notes for him sometimes, and sneak down from my dormitory in the night, and shove the paper out to Ives, waiting outside the window."

"I see," said Tom.

"I've done it lots of times. I never liked it—only Lovelace was a splendid fellow in other ways, and I'd have taken more risk than that to do him a good turn. It happened lots of times without anything going wrong. But, of course, something was bound to happen at last. One night I sneaked down from the dorm as usual, and the Head and another master were sitting up on the watch. I dare say something had got suspected."

Cleeve paused a moment.

"I was bagged. I never got as far as the dormitory after seeing Ives at the window. I gave him Lovelace's message, as usual; and sneaked upstairs again, and fairly ran into their arms. They looked into the dorm and found a bed empty. I couldn't explain without giving Lovelace away, and so I held my tongue. I was asked if I'd been out of bounds, and I said that I hadn't—that was true enough. What had I been doing, then? I refused to say. It was the sack for old Lovelace if I'd said. I didn't think the matter would be very serious then—a flogging, perhaps. Only——"

Cleeve caught his breath.

"It was just frightful ill-luck! They began to root about the House, perhaps thinking I'd been up to some trick. And they found that a drawer in the Head's desk, in his study, had been forced open, and money taken out of it. I was fairly knocked over. Of course, they fancied I had done it. I don't blame them—what else could they think?"

Tom Merry looked fixedly at Cleeve.

The story was a strange enough one; and if the Housemaster's nephew was a victim of circumstances, certainly he had done all he could to help circumstances.

"And what then?" asked Tom.

"The next morning all the show knew that I was in trouble, though they didn't know the particulars. Only old Lovelace, of course, guessed that I had been nabbed taking his confounded message down to the gipsy at the window, and, like a real brick, he went to the Head and owned up. He had to leave, of course."

"Serve him right!" grunted Tom.

"Well, I was sorry; but I was too jolly cut up about myself to have much sorrow to waste even on him," said Cleeve. "It was explained how I came to be downstairs, that was all; Lovelace knew nothing about the theft; I don't suppose he's heard of it yet, for that matter. The Beak had believed at first that I went down specially to steal from his desk; but when it was explained why I had gone down, he took it that I had made the most of my time while I was down on Lovelace's business. It didn't do me much good."

"Was the money ever found?"

"No."

"And no one else suspected?"

"No. It was a clear case."

"But you suspect somebody, I suppose?"

Cleeve shook his head.

"No. I can't say I do. It's just a mystery. I almost began to believe that I really must have done it, walkin' in my sleep or somethin', it was so puzzlin'. Still, I never did do it; never knew it had happened till I was charged with it."

He gave Tom Merry a glance, and smiled faintly.

"You don't believe me?"

"I'm trying to," said Tom. "It sounds a jolly steep yarn. Your uncles must have had a lot of faith in you to believe you."

"They had! They did believe me, and stood by me. Chiefly on Railton's account, the matter was kept dark. I just left, and went home to my Uncle Maurice with a letter from my headmaster explaining. He telegraphed to Uncle Victor, and he came at once and never doubted a word I told him."

Tom Merry remembered the telegram that had come for Mr. Railton, which Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had opened by mistake, and which had first apprised St. Jim's that the Housemaster's nephew was in trouble.

Cleeve rose from the seat.

He stood before Tom Merry, his hands in his pockets, his moody eyes fixed on the captain of the Shell.

"I was knocked right over by what happened," he said. "I came here a sulky, discontented brute—you can't wonder at it, I think. But I was beginning to pull round. Barcroft was a long way away—and even at Barcroft they were never told why I left. Only that gipsy, Ives, knew that I had an uncle who was a Housemaster at St. Jim's; and he followed me here. He came along to see whether my uncle had got me at this school—and found that he had. You remember I destroyed the photograph Manners happened to take of him——"

"I remember."

"I hoped he might be simply passing this way by chance. But it was not that. He had followed me to blackmail me. You found me scrapping with him one day. That was how I answered him at first. But I knew I had to knuckle under. He threatened to tell the school why I had left Barcroft. I couldn't have remained after that."

Tom nodded.

"I cut up rusty yesterday when you told me you'd planted him on the island in the river. I'm sorry."

"That's all right," said Tom.

"I was frightened out of my senses I knew he'd be wild with rage, and if he got off the island he'd come straight here and give me away. I wasn't thinking only of myself. Railton couldn't keep on here as Housemaster after the school knew—the uncle of a thief whom he had admitted to St. Jim's! It would have finished him here."

"I suppose so."

"I got out and got a boat at the village and pulled to the island, and took the scoundrel off," said Cleeve. "He was raging—almost mad with fury! I had taken all the money I had with me—and I gave it to him—and he cooled down at last. If he'd got off the island before I'd got there, I believe he would have come straight to the school. But——"

The Shell fellow made a weary gesture.

"I'm sick of it! It can't go on! He's demanded more money—I have to see him again next week and pay him. I can't do it! I believe it's always the same in a case of blackmail—they keep on till you can't pay any more. I came back to St. Jim's last night knowing that it was all up with me here. I've got to get out before anything happens. After I've gone he can come if he likes. I shan't be here to disgrace Railton. They won't be able to say that there is a thief in the school, and that Victor Railton brought him here. But, of course, he won't come here after I'm once gone. He will have nothing to gain, and he knows that he could be given into custody on a charge of blackmail—he won't risk that for nothing. It will be all right when I'm gone! But I've got to go before something happens."

Cleeve broke off.

"That's all!" he said abruptly. "I wanted you to know. I'd like you to think as decently of me as you can after I'm gone."

Without waiting for Tom Merry to reply, the Housemaster's nephew turned and walked quickly away.

Tom Merry looked after him with a clouded, troubled face.

Did he believe the strange story that Cleeve had related? He hardly knew. He was trying hard to believe it, at least.

CHAPTER 12.
Guilty!

"I'VE been thinkin'——"

"That's the second time this term!" remarked Blake. "You'll exhaust your intellect at this rate, Gustavus."

"Wats! I've been thinkin' about Cleeve——"

"It was about Cleeve last time. When your poor old brain fails under this pressure, it will be Cleeve's fault."

"I weally wish you would be sewious, Blake! That man Cleeve has mannahs of which I cannot appwove," said Arthur Augustus. "But there is no denyin' that he is a tip-top cwicketer."

"Oh, quite!" yawned Blake, apparently not interested in Victor Cleeve and his cricketing abilities.

"The fellows are sayin' that he's goin' to leave."

"Let's hope they're right."

"Yaas, wathah, I cannot say I shall miss the chap vewy much. He has sevewal times tweated me with the gwossest diswespect. But the Wookwood match comes along next week, and he was down to play against Jimmy Silver's team. We shall wathah miss him fwom the cwicket, if not fwom the House."

Blake nodded. He quite agreed on that point, though it did not seem to disturb his equanimity.

"Still, we can beat Rookwood without Cleeve," he said. "We've beaten them before, and we can beat them again. You can hand out some of those centuries you were going to make against Greyfriars—and forgot!"

"I did not exactly forget, Blake; but they did not come off somehow. But about Cleeve——"

"Bless Cleeve! Do you want us to give him a send-off when he goes because we're so jolly fond of him?" asked Blake sarcastically.

"Wats! I was thinkin' that it was a pity for him to go just before the Wookwood match, when he would have come in vewy useful. Of course, it is not official about his goin'. He may be stayin', aftah all."

"Let's hope not!" said Blake. "His old school is

(*Continued on next page.*)

welcome to him—or any other school in the kingdom. I'd present him to Eton with a pound of tea, or to Harrow with a box of choes! Let him rip!"

"Still, it's wathah a pity. If he goes befoah the Wookwood match we shall miss him in the game, you know. Of course, old Talbot will be in the team, and we shan't want Cleeve so much as last time. But I'd be glad to see him playin'."

"Thank you!" said a quiet voice at the doorway of Study No. 6.

Blake & Co., who were at tea in that celebrated study, looked across at Victor Cleeve, who had stepped into the doorway. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy bestowed a nod upon him, but Blake and Herries and Digby did not look very cordial.

"Twickle in, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus politely. "If you've not had your tea, dwaw a chair up to the table."

Cleeve stepped inside the study.

"I haven't come to tea," he said, with a faint smile. "I'm leaving St. Jim's to-morrow morning and going home." He paused. "Most likely I shan't see you again; and—and I think I owe you an apology, D'Arcy. We've had one or two rows, and I've cut up rusty sometimes, and it was my fault, and—and I'm sorry!"

"My deah chap," said Arthur Augustus, with great cordiality, "that is all wight. Fwom one gentleman to anothah an apology is quite suffish. Pway forget all about it. I'm sowwy you're goin' just befoah the Wookwood match."

"Going back to your old school?" asked Herries.

Cleeve coloured.

"No; I'm going home."

"Hold on a minute!" said D'Arcy, as Cleeve was stepping to the doorway again. "I'm weally sowwy you're goin'. I suppose it is because of your playin' the giddy ox last night and goin' out of bounds? Of course, you've been a vewy sillay ass! But can't anything be done?"

"I'm afraid not," said Cleeve. "There's nothin' doing! Good-bye!" And he walked out of Study No. 6.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy sat down again with a very thoughtful expression on his aristocratic face. Cleeve's frank apology for the offence he had given had quite placated the swell of St. Jim's, and he was feeling concerned about the fellow.

"It's vewy wuff!" he remarked.

"What rot!" growled Herries. "Can't you see that he was up to something when he was out of bounds yesterday? That's why he's got to go."

"I don't think he's a bad sort. Hewwies."

"You don't think at all, old chap."

"Weally, Hewwies——"

"Oh, give him a rest!" said Blake. "Pass the jam, old man. I suppose the fellow's been pub-haunting, or something of the sort. I dare say that was the trouble at his last school."

Arthur Augustus shook his head.

"I'm suah he's not that sort of chap," he said. "I had a scwap with Cleeve, and he was feahfully wude about his camewah bein' bwoken, but I believe he is quite a stwaight chap. Pwobably the whole mattah could be set wight by a fellow of tact and judgment, if he would confide in me."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake & Co.

"Oh, wats!"

After tea, Blake & Co. went down to Little Side for half an hour at the nets. Cleeve was there, and Talbot of the Shell was bowling to him. The Housemaster's nephew was in great form, and a good many fellows were looking on—among them Tom Merry.

"Bai Jove! That chap knows how to hit, Tom Mewwy!" remarked Arthur Augustus. "He would be a wod in pickle for Wookwood!"

"I wish we could play him," said Tom. "It's rather rotten. Even old Talbot can't touch his wicket. He would make Jimmy Silver sit up and take notice."

"Yaas, wathah! I weally think I should find it wathah hard to knock his sticks ovah, you know."

"I fancy you would, old bean," said Tom, laughing.

"Howevah, I will twy," said Arthur Augustus. "Chuck the ball this way, Talbot!"

"Now look out for the giddy fireworks!" said Blake. And there was a laugh from the juniors.

Arthur Augustus sent down half a dozen balls, each of which flew hot from the bat. Arthur Augustus was a good bowler, but perhaps not quite so deadly with the round red ball as he believed. Certainly Cleeve did not seem to be much troubled.

"Bai Jove! He's some bat!" said Arthur Augustus. "It is a wotten pity he won't be here to play Wookwood."

"Give Fatty the ball," said Figgins of the New House. "It's time that wicket went down."

"Blest if I think even Fatty Wynn could send him out!" said Tom.

"Bow-wow! Go and give him the kybosh, Fatty."

Fatty Wynn, the deadliest junior bowler at St. Jim's, took the ball. There were few junior wickets that could stand up to the bowling of David Llewellyn Wynn of the Fourth.

But Cleeve's was one of the few.

Fatty Wynn gave him an over, and put into it all he knew. But the wicket remained intact, and the ball was knocked all over the field, with scarcely an effort on Cleeve's part. More and more fellows gathered round to watch the contest, even Kildare coming over from Big Side to look on.

"You've got a good man there, Tom Merry," said the captain of St. Jim's.

"One of the best," agreed Tom regretfully. He would have given a good deal to keep Cleeve at St. Jim's till the Rookwooders came.

Cleeve was certainly at his best when he was playing cricket. The cloud of despondency was quite gone from his handsome face. He was flushed and looked happy. His unpopularity in the House did not prevent the fellows from giving him a cheer.

"Can't touch the man," said Fatty Wynn, with a grimace. "Like to try him, Kildare?"

Kildare laughed.

"Give me the ball," he said.

There was a murmur of excitement as the captain of St. Jim's went on to bowl to Cleeve. It was not likely that any junior would be able to stand up to the bowling of the Sixth Form cricketer. But it was the unlikely that happened. Cleeve stopped ball after ball, and the news that a Shell fellow was putting "paid" to the bowling of the captain of the school brought half St. Jim's on the scene.

"Hallo, here comes old Railton!" grinned Blake. "He's heard that his giddy nephew is making history on Little Side."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Mr. Railton came through the cheering crowd. But the look on his face as he came up startled the fellows who saw him. Evidently it was not cricket that had drawn the Housemaster there. His face was white, his lips set in a tight line, his brow wrinkled. Kildare glanced at him and came off the pitch with a smile on his face.

"I was sending a few down to your nephew, sir," he said. "He's some bat! I never saw a junior like him."

Mr. Railton did not answer. He did not seem to have heard Kildare's remark. His eyes were fixed on the handsome figure at the wicket.

"Cleeve!"

The batsman started and glanced round.

"Yes, sir."

"Follow me to my study at once."

Mr. Railton strode away, leaving the fellows staring. Something was "up"—something extremely serious. That was clear. The brightness died out of Cleeve's face as he came off and unbuckled his pads.

"What's the wow, deah boy?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"I don't know."

"Wailton looked fwightfully sewious."

Cleeve did not need telling that. He made no reply, and lost no time in leaving the cricket ground. Many glances followed him as he went. The unpopular Shell fellow was in trouble already, and he was booked for more trouble, and many faces were sympathetic now. On the cricket ground, at least, Cleeve had the esteem of his schoolfellows.

But Cleeve had forgotten cricket as he went into the House. The look on his uncle's face had startled him, and sent a chill to his heart. He had never seen Mr. Railton look like that before. Something had happened—something that had stricken the Housemaster like a blow.

He entered Mr. Railton's study.

The School House master was standing by the table, his hand resting on it. He signed to Cleeve to close the door, and the junior obeyed.

"Hallo, here comes old Railton," grinned Blake. "He's heard that his giddy nephew is making history on Little Side." Mr. Railton came through the cheering crowd, his face white and set. Kildare came off the pitch. "I was sending a few down to your nephew, sir," he said. "He's some bat! I never saw a junior like him!" (*See Chapter* 12.)

"Uncle," muttered Cleeve huskily, "what is it? Why are you looking at me like that? What have I done?"

The Housemaster made an effort to speak. His lips seemed dry. The words came at last.

"Victor, I believed in you—my brother believed in you! But now——" His voice seemed to break. "Victor, Victor, what have you done?"

"What have I done?" stammered Cleeve. "What do you mean? I've done nothing! What——"

"I have received a letter from your headmaster at Barcroft."

Cleeve waited.

"You may not have known that, as the money taken from his desk was never recovered, the numbers of the stolen notes were circulated."

"I never thought about it."

"Several of the banknotes have now been traced."

Cleeve stared.

"Three of these notes," resumed Mr. Railton, "have been passed in Wayland—near St. Jim's. It is not known at present who passed them. They seem to have passed through a publican's hands in that town. Victor, the theft was committed in Norfolk. You denied all knowledge of it. Yet some of the stolen notes have been passed in the neighbourhood of St. Jim's—since you came to the school. Victor, what have you to say?"

Cleeve looked almost wildly at his uncle.

"I—I can't understand it," he stammered. "You can't suppose that I passed the notes—that I had them when I came here? Good heavens!"

"What am I to think?" said the Housemaster.

"I know nothing of it!" said Cleeve hoarsely. "I never touched the money—never knew anything about it!"

"Yet the notes have been passed in a town near your present school—a little country town a hundred miles from Barcroft. Your headmaster has written, to open my eyes, as he says. Victor, what am I to believe?"

The unhappy junior groaned.

"I know nothing of it, uncle! Believe me, I know nothing of it!"

The Housemaster's lips quivered.

"You have nothing to tell me? Nothing to confess?"

"Nothing!"

"I will try to believe you," said Mr. Railton. "Leave me now. I will try, at least, to keep my faith in you."

Cleeve walked almost blindly from the study.

CHAPTER 13.
The Darkest Hour!

TOM MERRY stopped suddenly. Manners and Lowther stopped also, with startled faces. From Study No. 10 in the Shell, as the three juniors approached the door, came a low sound—the sound of a stifled sob.

Only Cleeve could be there—that sob could have come only from Cleeve. It startled the three Shell fellows, and almost alarmed them. Cleeve was about the last fellow in the House to be expected to "blub": he was of anything but a crying kind.

Monty Lowther gave a subdued whistle.

"That's Cleeve!" he said. "Something jolly serious is up! I knew that by Railton's face on Little Side. Look here! Let's keep clear, and let the fellow rip. He won't want to be seen blubbing."

"Let's!" agreed Manners.

The two juniors turned back along the Shell passage. That stifled sob in the study had told that Victor Cleeve had broken down, that for the moment, at least, his self-control was gone, and they would not put him to shame by finding him in tears.

But Tom Merry did not follow his chums.

He waited till they were gone, and then moved on towards the study, treading heavily, and humming a tune, to give Cleeve due warning that he was coming.

That warning was enough for Cleeve.

When Tom entered the study Cleeve was standing by the window, with his back to the light, his hands in his pockets. From his attitude, at least, no one would have guessed that he was the fellow who had sobbed a few minutes before, a sob of utter misery and despair. And his face was in the shadow. The sun was setting over the school, and the study was dusky.

"Oh, you've chucked cricket!" said Cleeve, as Tom came in, and his voice was steady, or almost steady.

"Yes; light going," said Tom.

"I think I'll take a stroll round before lock-up."

"Hold on, Cleeve."

Tom was aware that Cleeve wanted to get out of the study before the light was put on. His face would have betrayed him. Tom, however, did not turn on the light. He closed the study door and faced Cleeve in the dusk.

"Don't think I'm butting in, Cleeve," said the captain of the Shell quietly. "You called me names the other day, for trying to help you, but——"

"I've said I'm sorry for that. You meant well, and I don't know that you did any harm, after all."

"I think I was right in what I did," said Tom. "I think you would have done well to take my advice, and let the police fetch that villain Isaac Ives off the island. I think you'd have done well to tell the whole story to your uncle. I still think that."

Cleeve shook his head.

"Never mind about that now," he said wearily. "Don't let's speak of it. The—the fact is, something's happened that's given me rather a knock. I'd rather get out of doors."

"I know something's happened," answered Tom. "I could see that in your uncle's face. I'm not asking you questions, Cleeve; but you've told me that you value my opinion. You've told me things you've told no other fellow here. You've treated me as a friend, and I'd like to be your friend, if you need one."

"Heaven knows I need one!" said Cleeve, and his voice trembled. "Tom Merry, did you believe what I told you—about Barcroft?"

"Yes," said Tom. "I admit it was a bit of a twist—if you don't mind my saying so—but I did believe, and do believe it now."

"Thank you for that! Something has happened to cause my uncle to lose faith in me," said Cleeve. "I—I'm quite knocked out. I always counted on him. My old headmaster has written—never mind what—but it makes Railton disbelieve me. Railton was a friend of my old Head—it was mostly for his sake that my disgrace was hushed up. But—but I'd rather all the world knew than that Railton lost faith in me."

"And he has?" asked Tom

"Yes."

"Then something new has occurred?"

"Yes. Positive proof from my old headmaster's point of view. And Railton thinks the same now. He's trying not to, but he does."

Tom Merry sat on the edge of the study table, his brow very thoughtful. He was taken aback by this new and unexpected development.

"You don't care to tell me what it is?" he asked.

Cleeve was silent.

"I'm not asking out of curiosity, of course," said Tom. "I've been thinking over what you told me, Cleeve—thinking hard—and I've thought of something you seem to have missed; but which I believe Railton would have hit on at once if you'd told him your trouble with the gipsy. If something fresh has turned up, it may knock my theory on the head. But——"

"If I told you what's cropped up now, you'd turn me down at once as a liar!" muttered Cleeve.

"Never!"

"I'll tell you! They've traced the money that was taken from the headmaster's desk at Barcroft—some of it, at any rate. It was in notes, of course; and I find now that the numbers were circulated. Some of the banknotes have been found in circulation."

"Then surely that let's you out!" exclaimed Tom.

"It puts the lid on," said Cleeve. "The notes have been passed in the neighbourhood of this school. We're more than a hundred miles from Barcroft as the crow flies. But the notes have been passed here! Whoever stole them was at Barcroft at the time of the theft, of course—now he's come over here to the vicinity of St. Jim's! No wonder my old headmaster thinks the case proved. No wonder Railton thinks so! Of course, they believe I had the stolen notes in my pocket when I came to St. Jim's, and that I've been getting rid of them since."

Tom Merry drew a deep breath.

"You say you believe in me," said Cleeve bitterly. "You can't believe in me after that, I suppose? It makes me almost think that I must have been the thief—could anything be clearer?"

"No!" said Tom slowly.

"It's not true—it's not true—but what's the good of denying it?" said Cleeve huskily. "What's the good of telling Railton that a thief at a school in Norfolk has got all this way into Sussex to change his notes? Why should he choose a little town in Sussex? Besides, a fellow can't leave Barcroft in term time. He would have to get special leave! It sounds unthinkable! This has put the lid on! I'm done now!"

"They say that the darkest hour is just before the dawn," said Tom. "I think there's something in it. I believe that what has happened is a bit of luck for you, Cleeve."

"What?"

"It bears out the idea I had in my head," said Tom.

"I don't understand," said Cleeve, staring at him blankly. "They've got clear proof now that I had the stolen notes with me when I came to St. Jim's—proof so clear that I should believe it myself if it concerned any other fellow."

"Listen to me," said Tom quietly.

"Well?"

"You told me that the affair was hushed up at Barcroft—nothing was said publicly on account of your headmaster's friendship for Railton."

"Yes."

"Yet Isaac Ives has been threatening to let the school here know that you were expelled from Barcroft for theft."

"Yes, yes."

"How did he know?"

"I—I suppose he wormed it out somehow," said Cleeve. "I wondered at first—I never knew he knew when I first saw him here. He was in touch with two or three other sportsmen at Barcroft, as well as poor old Lovelace—he must have got it from them."

"But if it was hushed up——"

"Something must have leaked out, I suppose. Anyhow, Isaac Ives knows the whole story," said Cleeve impatiently. "I've told you that."

"And that set me thinking," said Tom. "It put an idea into my head, which seems to me proved by the notes being passed near this school."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"What if Isaac Ives was the thief?"

———

CHAPTER 14.
Light at Last!

VICTOR CLEEVE stared at Tom Merry. Evidently no such thought had entered his mind.

"Isaac Ives—the thief!" he repeated blankly.

Tom Merry nodded.

"But—but——" stammered Cleeve.

"Look at it," said Tom quietly. "The matter was hushed up—nothing was said publicly by your headmaster; yet Ives knows why you left Barcroft. He knows that a theft was committed. How does he know? If your headmaster intended to keep the whole thing dark for Railton's sake, he would not be likely to let anything leak out afterwards. He must have told the police that his banknotes had been stolen—he would not mention your name. He couldn't, if he was hushing it up. Even if he did, he would not tell the school. Then where did Isaac Ives get his information?"

Cleeve stood silent.

"He knew," said Tom. "How did he know? He followed you here from Norfolk to squeeze money out of you to keep it dark. He's done that! I dare say he's made a good thing out of it."

"He has!" said Cleeve, between his teeth.

"He may have had another reason for leaving Norfolk, as well as hounding you down," said Tom. "If he had stolen notes to pass, he would want to get to a good distance from the place where they were stolen."

"If—if it's possible——" panted Cleeve.

"Some of the notes have been passed near here. That proves that the thief is near St. Jim's."

"At St. Jim's, they think," muttered Cleeve.

"Near St. Jim's," repeated Tom. "Isaac Ives is near the school—hanging about in the neighbourhood. That settles it, to my mind."

"Oh!" muttered Cleeve. "If—if that was true——"

"I believe it is. You say you took messages down to the gipsy at a window, more than once. He must have hung about the place a good deal at night. The man is a thief—a blackmailer is a thief, and worse. As likely as not he used that window more than once to get into the place and look for plunder. On that particular night he was lucky."

"Good heavens!" breathed Cleeve. "I—I never thought of anything of the kind, of course. I never dreamed that the rotter had ever got into the school. Of course, he could have got in easily enough if he'd liked. I took it for granted that something must have leaked out—when I found that Isaac knew the whole story. But——"

"He knew there had been a theft, because he had committed it," said Tom Merry. "When you left Barcroft the next day it was easy enough for him to guess that the theft

had been put down to you. He knew there must be a good reason for your going so suddenly—and it was a reason he would think of at once. He knew somebody must be suspected when the money was missed—and a fellow leaves suddenly the following day! He only had to put two and two together—knowing about the theft."

"Knowing about it, yes," muttered Cleeve. "And he could only have known about it if he had done it."

"Just that!"

"And that's why the banknotes have been passed in this neighbourhood—because Isaac Ives is here." Cleeve gritted his teeth. "The awful villain! Tom Merry, I believe you've hit it. The banknotes have been passed through some publican's hands—that's just the way the brute would get rid of them. But—but—there's no proof—no proof! Why, the brute may have taken the risk of passing them about here, because as I'm here it would be taken for granted that I'd passed them! You may have hit on the truth, Tom Merry, but it doesn't do me any good."

"It does!" said Tom. "Think a bit further, Cleeve! If Isaac is passing the notes, he's got them with him. Only some of them have been traced. Some may be still in his pockets."

"Oh!" ejaculated Cleeve.

"And if he is taken by the police he may be identified as the man who passed the notes in Wayland."

"Oh!" repeated Cleeve.

Tom Merry dropped his hand on Cleeve's shoulder.

"Cleeve, old man, I told you you were making a mistake in not telling your uncle the whole story. Go to Railton now."

"But—but——" muttered Cleeve.

"Tell him the whole thing, and leave him to act. It needs an older head than yours or mine," said Tom.

"If I tell Railton, he will have Isaac taken into custody at once. He can't do anything else. Then the whole thing will come out. St. Jim's will hear every word of it. If it's proved up against Isaac Ives, well and good—but if not—if not——"

"Trust Railton," said Tom.

"I tell you, I'm not thinking of myself, but my uncle—it will ruin him here, I tell you——"

"I know, I know! But that's for him to settle! Cleeve, there's a chance of clearing your name—a chance at least—and Railton is the man to act. Go to him at once!" urged Tom Merry. "Take my advice this time, old chap—as you ought to have taken it before. You know where Ives is to be found?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Go to Railton at once and tell him everything."

For a long minute, Victor Cleeve stood hesitating. But his mind was made up at last; his face set, and he went to the door.

"I'll take your tip!" he said. "Heaven knows how it will turn out—but I'll take your advice, Tom. I'm going to Railton."

And he left the study.

Two minutes more, and he was in the presence of the School House master—and Mr. Railton was listening to the strange story. Victor Railton sat silent till his nephew had told him all. Cleeve's voice died away at last, and he stood silent, white-faced, almost trembling.

"You should have told me this before, Victor," said the Housemaster at last.

"I—I know! But——"

"My poor boy!" said Mr. Railton softly. "You feared for me—and for that reason you allowed me to believe——" He broke off. "That scoundrel shall be dealt with at once. If it meant instant ruin, I would still hand him over to the police to be punished for the crime of blackmail. I should not hesitate one moment."

"I—I knew it," faltered Cleeve. "That was why——"

"I understand. My dear boy, I understand now what you have been passing through. Leave me now—leave the matter in my hands. I shall lose no time."

And the Housemaster certainly did not lose time. It was only one hour later that Inspector Skeet, of Wayland, arrested Isaac Ives in his camp by the Wayland Road.

CHAPTER 15.
Cleeve's Last Day!

"MERRY!"

"Yes, sir."

The Shell were coming out of their Form-room after morning class on Saturday when Mr. Railton called to Tom.

The Housemaster was standing in the corridor, waiting for the Shell. Tom Merry stayed behind as the other fellows passed on. Victor Cleeve was among them. All the Form knew that Cleeve was to have left that morning; but to the surprise of the juniors, he had turned up for class; and to their further surprise, they had noted that Mr. Linton had been very kind to him. Something, apparently, had happened to cause the master of the Shell to change his opinion of that troublesome member of his Form.

Tom Merry waited for his Housemaster to speak. There was a slight smile on Mr. Railton's face.

"Merry, I understand that it was by your advice that my nephew came to me last evening."

"Yes, sir," said Tom, rather uncomfortably.

"When my nephew came to this school, I desired him to make a friend of you if possible," said Mr. Railton. "He seems to have succeeded better than I could have supposed. You have been a good friend to him, Merry—and in a way I could never have anticipated. He came here, as you know, under the shadow of disgrace. That shadow has been lifted—thanks to you."

"Oh, sir!" said Tom.

"What my nephew fortunately confided to you has been the means of saving him from disgrace and clearing his name," said Mr. Railton. "I need not say that I am grateful, Merry. You know that."

Tom's face brightened.

"Then—is all clear now, sir?" he asked.

Mr. Railton smiled.

"Quite," he answered. "Isaac Ives was arrested last night, and he is now in custody. A number of the banknotes stolen at Barcroft have been found hidden in his caravan."

"Oh!" exclaimed Tom.

"He has also been identified by two public-house keepers as the man who passed the notes that have been traced," said the Housemaster. "It is definitely proved now that he was the thief at Barcroft. Had my nephew confided in me sooner, the matter would have been cleared up before; but it was due to you that he confided in me at all, and I thank you for it, Merry."

"I'm jolly glad, sir," said Tom.

"I have written a full account of the matter to his old headmaster in Norfolk; and Isaac Ives, of course, will be tried and sent to prison, which will place the matter beyond the shadow of a doubt. My nephew will return to his old school in all honour—there can be no doubt about that now. He owes it to you, Merry—and I owe it to you. The less that is said about the matter, of course, the better—there is no need for talk in the school."

"I understand, sir," said Tom.

"I thank you once more, Merry," said the Housemaster, and he shook hands with the captain of the Shell and dismissed him.

Tom's face was bright as he went into the quad. Cleeve cut across to meet him as he came out.

"My uncle's told you?" he asked breathlessly.

"Yes. Congratters, old chap."

"I owe it to you," said Cleeve. "Thank goodness you gave me advice, Tom, and I took it. I'm going back to Barcroft." He smiled and coloured. "Of course, I shall be glad—but I'm sorry to leave St. Jim's, all the same. Sorry to leave you, old fellow. I'm staying on here till matters are arranged at my old school—a few days more, I suppose."

"Then you'll be able to play in the Rookwood match?" said Tom, with a smile.

Cleeve laughed.

"Certainly, if you want me!"

"Your name goes down at once."

The St. Jim's fellows hardly knew Cleeve of the Shell in the following days. All the moody discontent, all the sour disdain were gone; the shadow had been lifted, and Cleeve was his true self again—a happy, friendly fellow, the fellow who had been popular at his old school, and would decidedly have become popular at St. Jim's had he stayed on there.

When the list was posted in the games-room for the Rookwood match and the name of V. Cleeve appeared in it, no one had any objection to make. There had been a storm when Tom Merry played him in the Greyfriars match; but matters were different now.

"Good!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, when he read Cleeve's name in the list. "You fellows wemembah that I told you it would be a pity if Cleeve went befoah he had helped us to beat Wookwood. I'm awfully glad that he's stayin' on for the match."

"Same here," admitted Blake. "Something seems to have happened to the chap—he looks as merry and bright as a giddy skylark!"

"Yaas, wathah! Nothin' like the sulky bwute I scwapped with, you know," said Arthur Augustus. "As a mattah of fact, I thought he was wathah a decent sort of chap—you fellows may wemembah that I said so."

"I don't remember!" remarked Blake.

"Nor I!" said Dig.

"Same here!" assented Herries.

"Weally, you fellows——" said Arthur Augustus. "Hallo! Heah's Cleeve! Congwats, old bean, you're down to play Wookwood. Jollay glad you're stayin' for the game!"

"Thanks!" said Cleeve, with a smile.

"I heah fwom Tom Mewwy that you're goin' back to your old school aftah all," said Arthur Augustus.

"That's right."

"Bai Jove! I weally had an ideah that you had been bunked fwom your last school, Cleeve?"

"Thanks again."

"Sowwy, old bean! All the House thought so," said D'Arcy. "In fact, the whole school thought so."

"You're really going back?" asked Blake.

"My old headmaster is coming over here on Wednesday, and he is taking me back to Barcroft with him," answered Cleeve.

"Bai Jove! Then the old bean will be able to see you playin' for St. Jim's," said Arthur Augustus. "Awfully glad you're goin' back."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake and Herries and Dig, while Cleeve grinned.

"I do not see anythin' to cackle at in that wemark, you fellows. I'm weally awf'ly glad you're goin', Cleeve. I mean, of course, I'm sowwy you're leavin'," added Arthur Augustus, as Blake & Co. roared. "Glad you're goin', and sowwy you're leavin', if you undahstand me."

"Quite!" said Cleeve, laughing.

"Here, Cleeve," Manners of the Shell called in at the doorway. "Coming along to the dark-room to help me do some developing?"

"Yes, rather!"

And Cleeve walked away cheerily with Manners. He was on the best of terms with all the members of Study No. 10 in the Shell now.

The fact that Cleeve had been the most unpopular fellow in his House was quite forgotten. When Wednesday came round, and Jimmy Silver & Co. arrived from Rookwood, there was hardly a man at St. Jim's who was not glad to see the Housemaster's nephew in Tom Merry's eleven.

And Cleeve proved well worthy of his place in it.

Rookwood were in first, and a roar of cheering on Little Side reached Mr. Railton in his study and told him that his nephew had performed the hat trick. And in the home innings Victor Cleeve was fifty not out.

St. Jim's were ahead on the first innings. As Tom Merry had predicted, Railton's nephew was making Jimmy Silver & Co. sit up and take notice. But Jimmy had brought a good team over from Rookwod, and in their second innings they pulled gallantly ahead. And when St. Jim's batted again, fickle fortune turned her smiles from them; even Talbot of the Shell was dismissed for four by Jimmy Silver's bowling, and Mornington of Rookwood sent Arthur Augustus home with a big round nought to his credit—much to the astonishment of the swell of St. Jim's. Even Tom Merry found the Rookwood bowling hard to play when he partnered Cleeve at the wickets, and when a wicket went down it was Tom's.

When last man in was called, St. Jim's wanted twenty to tie. Last man in was Fatty Wynn of the New House—a great bowler, but not one of the best bats. But Fatty was good at stonewalling, and he played up to Cleeve manfully, content to leave the limelight to the man who could make the runs. And Cleeve made the runs. Four and four and four—and the St. Jim's crowd roared applause.

It was then that Mr. Railton came down to the ground, with a portly and majestic gentleman walking by his side.

Fellows who looked at that portly gentleman guessed that he was Mr. Railton's old friend, the headmaster of Barcroft—Cleeve's old "beak."

A single run brought David Llewellyn Wynn to the batting end. There he stonewalled cheerily to the finish of the over. And when Cleeve had the bowling again, he made the fur fly, as Tom Merry remarked, with a delighted chuckle. Four, and then two, and St. Jim's wanted one more to tie, and two to win. Jimmy Silver put all he knew in his next ball to Cleeve—and as Cleeve sent it travelling, and the batsman ran, and ran again, there was a roar on Little Side that rang and echoed from one end of St. Jim's to the other—and Mr. Railton's deep voice joined in it; and the portly gentleman by his side was seen to clap his majestic hands.

"Bravo, Cleeve!"

"Hurrah!"

"St. Jim's wins! Hurrah!"

Victor Cleeve left the field mounted on the shoulders of Tom Merry and George Figgins. They landed him, amid thunderous cheers, almost at the feet of his old headmaster; and there were more cheers as the portly gentleman shook hands with him. The Housemaster's nephew had been through hard days; but at that moment he had full compensation—his cup of happiness was full now to overflowing.

. . . . . .

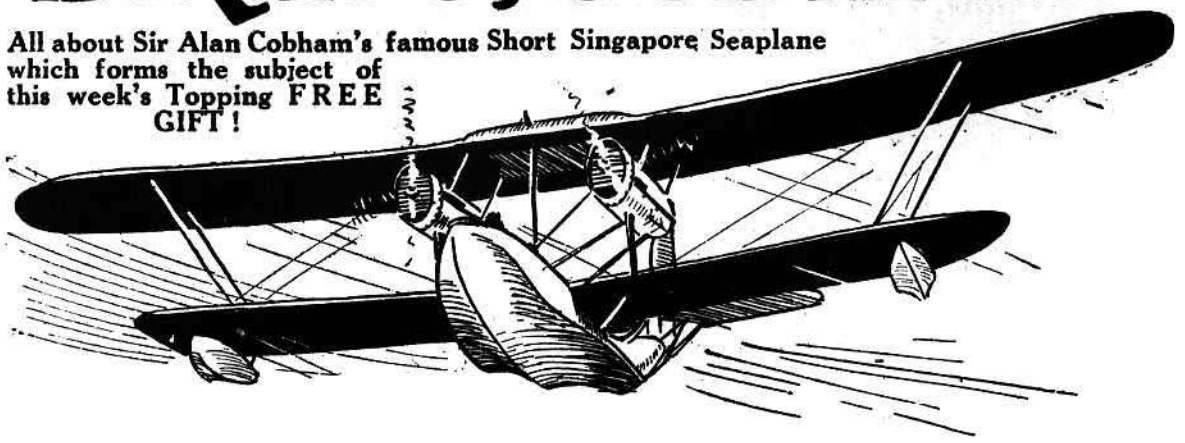
Victor Cleeve has gone. Tom Merry & Co., and a crowd of St. Jim's men, gave him a send-off when he left with the Barcroft headmaster; and their best wishes went with the Housemaster's nephew, who had been righted at last!

THE END.

(Now and then various juniors have stated their opinions that they would make better skippers than Tom Merry of the Shell. But none has been given the chance of proving his words. Next week, however, a great sensation is caused at St. Jim's when these ambitious fellows make a bold bid for the captaincy. But therein lies the tale, which you will find in next Wednesday's issue of the "GEM." Don't miss: "Who Shall Be Captain?" By Martin Clifford.)

BRAVO, COBHAM!

All about Sir Alan Cobham's famous Short Singapore Seaplane which forms the subject of this week's Topping FREE GIFT!



WHEN anyone breaks a record, or builds something on a larger scale than has ever before been attempted, someone quickly comes along and does his very hardest to go one better. Whoever attempts to outbuild the builders of the mighty flying-boat which Sir Alan Cobham piloted recently for over 20,000 miles will have to—well, break a magnificent British record which at present seems quite unbreakable.

Sir Alan Cobham's performance, too, was so splendid that it will probably be a long time before pioneer work of equal value to the British Empire—or any other empire— is carried out.

The flying-boat, which carried, in addition to Sir Alan, a crew of four—including Lady Cobham, who acted as cook during the long flight—is the largest of its kind in existence and well-nigh startled the wits out of the African natives who saw the "Great Bird," as some of them called the flying-boat, swooping down over their woolly heads.

Natural enough, that surprise, when you consider that at very many places in and around Africa where Sir Alan's flight took him not even an aeroplane had ever before been seen. When a Rolls-Royce flying-boat, carrying five people and all their kit, suddenly appears from the sky, even African warriors, decked out in war-paint and paddling their war-canoes, have ample excuse for being scared.

The object of this recently completed round-Africa flight was a survey such as could have been accomplished in no other way. It was undertaken chiefly with the idea of planning a scheme for linking Britain to Africa by an imperial air-route.

Some of the sights which fell to the lot of the crew of this enormous flying-boat were strange enough to sound like fiction. For hours on end the machine would be speeding over trackless regions, then suddenly the scenery would change. The jungle-swamps below would be teeming with herds of trumpeting elephants.

The most romantic spots of the Dark Continent have been visited by this smart "turn-out," among them the patch of ground where the famous meeting between Dr. Livingstone and his "rescuer" Stanley took place years ago. And the immense Assouan Dam, which supplies parched Egypt with most of its water; the Blue Nile; Khartoum—at all these the flying-boat has stopped.

When Cobham left Khartoum for the next stopping-place—Mongalla—it is doubtful if even he realised how the flying-boat was going to eat up the air-miles as it did. It is over eight hundred miles between those two places, and the gallant craft did it in eight hours.

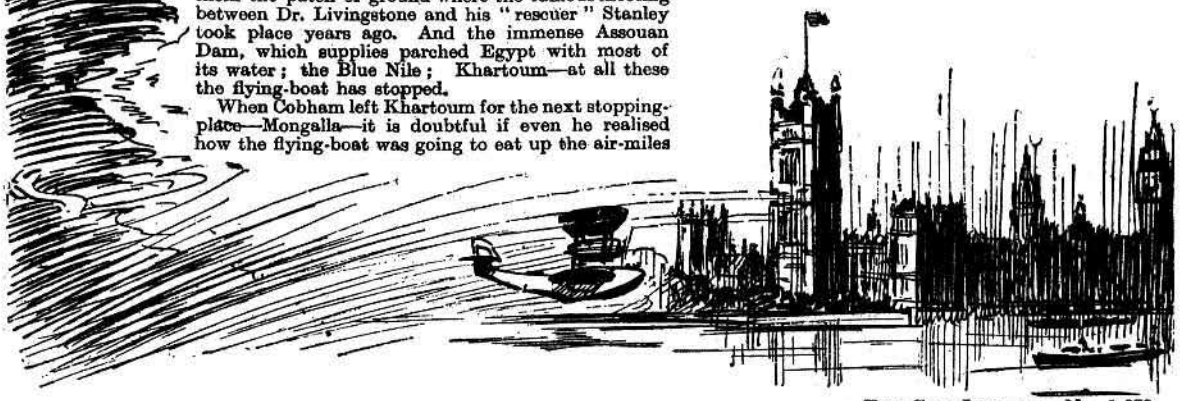
The imagination almost reels at that, for, you know, the ordinary time taken over that trip, when you do it by steamer in the usual way, is a clear fortnight. It is figures and facts such as these which make you realise what Sir Alan has done for flying as a commercial proposition—and what the builders of air-craft have done and are doing to put the British Empire in the forefront of all other nations in the air.

As for the man himself—the pilot and chief of this all-metal flying-boat, which was lent to him specially for this history-making survey flight by the British Admiralty, has a remarkable record. He has done things which no other man would have dreamed of trying to do.

His start in life was unpropitious enough, for he commenced in life as a quite ordinary sort of farm pupil. But the rolling stone—or perhaps we should say the roaming bird—element in his blood jerked him out of that stolid occupation and flipped him on to an office stool.

From the office he went to the World War. He saw his spell of hard fighting, and then began to shape his real course. The Royal Air Force beckoned him; and so we got our super-airman. The War over, young Cobham—a title and other honours were still to come to him—went in for flying in a civilian capacity. He carried thousands of air-passengers, without a single accident, during the months immediately after the War, and then his achievements began to come about rapidly.

From a 5,000 miles' flight round Europe he switched over to a job of air-work on behalf of Spain, then covered another 8,000 miles—around North Africa and Europe. He soon capped that with a 12,000 miles' trip by air, established a record for Britain by crossing the Channel in a light plane, won a few cups and other trophies for air-races, and then completely startled the world by flying from Britain to Australia and back.



A SIX THOUSAND POUND ORDER FOR THEIR FIRST DAY'S WORK! NOT BAD, IS IT? BUT JINGO, BOYS, JACK AND FRED HAD TO SPEED SOME! TRY A SKID WITH 'EM NOW!

'SKID' KENNEDY—SPEED KING!

THE OPENING CHAPTERS OF A BRILLIANT NEW SERIAL OF MOTOR-RACING ADVENTURE, STARRING JACK KENNEDY, A YOUNG SPEED MERCHANT.

WRITTEN SPECIALLY FOR THE "GEM" BY

ALFRED EDGAR.

(The Motor-Racing Author.)

INTRODUCTION.

JACK KENNEDY drives a Saxon car belonging to his brother BEN in the great T.T. car race in Ireland. Acting as his mechanic is his chum—

FRED BISHOP, who has been sacked with Jack and his brother from the Falcon Six Works owing to the jealousy of—

PHILIP SLADE, the Falcon star speedman. Slade is against them in the race, prior to which he had been responsible for an injury to Ben's arm which prevented him driving. The race is a terrific event, and Jack drives so well that the crowd nicknames him "Skid" Kennedy. Towards the end, Slade endeavours to drive him off the road, with the result that both the Falcon Six and the Saxon crash. Afterwards, Ben is taken on the Saxon racing staff, while Jack is given a job in the London showrooms, with Fred to help him. On their first morning a transport magnate named Fletcher comes in; he wants six cars and doesn't know whether to choose Falcon Sixes or Saxons. Jack takes him out for a trial run in a Saxon, and the car is followed by Slade in a Falcon. As Jack is driving up a very steep hill, Slade roars triumphantly past, trying to show that his is the better car. As he thunders by the Saxon, Mr. Fletcher exclaims: "If he can leave us standing like that, then Falcon Sixes are the cars I shall buy!" It looks as though Jack and Fred have failed on their first big job.

(Now read on.)

Their First Order!

WITH the steep hill rearing up before them, the two cars hurtled on, Slade's Falcon Six leaping ahead.

"He passed us as though we weren't moving!" Mr. Fletcher exclaimed. "Saxon cars will be no good to me, I'm afraid!"

"We'll be yards in front of him before he gets to the top of the hill, sir!" Jack yelled cheerfully, then——

Whoooom—rah-ah-ah-ah! sang the Saxon's mighty exhaust as he changed down and the car spurted forward in third gear, leaping to the Falcon's tail in one jump.

Jack heard the rival machine's exhaust boom as the gradient forced Slade to change gear, and a moment later the two machines were level, with the Saxon drawing ahead!

From the corner of his eye, Jack could see Slade gritting his teeth as he flogged the Falcon on, but it was travelling at its limit already, and it dropped farther and farther behind as the summit of the hill swooped down.

A moment after and they were hurtling over the top of it, Slade a dozen yards behind them!

"What d'you think of that, sir?" Jack smiled, as he turned to the magnate. "The Falcon Six rushed the hill, that's how he managed to get past us. I don't think it's a better car. There's an arterial road a little farther along; I'll open out along there, and we'll touch about ninety-five miles an hour!"

Mr. Fletcher was glancing back, and there was a faint smile on his lips. He could understand now what was happening. Only too plainly Slade had followed them and was trying to put it across the Saxon—and failing!

Jack swung the machine on to the broad stretch of the arterial road. For eight miles the highway ran almost dead straight ahead, broad and wide and safe. He put his foot down on the accelerator pedal, and Mr. Fletcher huddled in his seat as he watched the speedometer needle climb slowly round the dial, always with the Falcon Six coming up behind them.

Jack kept ahead of him—seventy—eighty—eighty-five miles an hour! He could hear the screaming roar of the Falcon's engine as the car closed in on them. Ninety! The Saxon was steady on the concrete surface of the broad road, skimming smoothly along despite her terrific speed.

Slade had failed to put it across them on the hill, and now he was determined to pass them on the level. It became a race between the two machines, with the rival speedman thrashing his car madly to overtake and pass them. The Falcon Six was bucking as it thundered almost level, and as the Saxon's speed lifted to ninety-five miles an hour, Slade forced his machine up until they were running wheel to wheel.

Tyres singing as they threshed on the road, wide-mouthed exhausts booming, the cars held to their furious pace, and the speedometer needle was tipping on the hundred miles an hour mark when Jack saw something appear out of cross-roads just ahead!

It was a giant haycart, driver asleep in his seat in the warm sunshine, horses ambling placidly sheer across the road, full in the path of the hurtling hundred-miles-an-hour machines!

Instantly Jack trod on the brake pedal, stamping it home as he hauled on the hand-brake lever. Through the thunder of the machines came the shrill whine of brake-shoes, and it felt as though a tremendously powerful hand had clutched at the Saxon, slowing it.

For all that, it seemed that they must hit the cart. The Falcon Six had shot ahead, skidding all over the road under the straining bite of the brakes as Slade tried to bring it to a stop.

"He'll hit that wagon!" Fred yelled from the rear seats, and Fred was right!

The Saxon stopped dead five yards short of the moving mountain of hay.

The Falcon Six smacked its radiator against one iron-shod rear wheel, and, as the tail of the skidding machine kicked upwards, Slade was tossed high into the air, to strike the lowering mass above him with a gasping cry which sounded clear above the crashing impact of his car!

Jack, Mr. Fletcher, and Fred jumped hastily to the road, just as a great mass of hay detached itself and, with Slade in the middle, dropped off the cart at the side of his wrecked Falcon.

The speedman scrambled to his feet, while the startled carter woke and stopped his scared horses and came down from his perch to find out what had hit him.

Both the front wheels of Slade's machine were buckled, and it looked as though the front axle had been pushed back somewhere under the gearbox. The radiator was smashed, spitting water and steam.

Slade had hay in his hair and tangled in his clothes, and he stood staring half-dazedly at his wrecked machine. Then his gaze lifted to Jack and Fred.

"You did it!" he gasped. "You—you——"

"Well I like that," said Fred coolly. "He blames us for

everything, doesn't he, Jack? He's made a nasty mess of his car; that's the worst of having rotten brakes!"

Slade was stumping out of the hay, striding towards them, his face venomous. He had started out with the intention of showing Jack and his car up; instead, he had been made to look a fool and had wrecked his own machine.

His lips were twitching as he came on, but his path was blocked by the carter.

"What d'ye think you're a-doin' of?" he demanded. "Look at my hay, all over th' road! An' look ye at the great scratch ye've made in my wheel—took a bit out o' one o' the spokes, an' all, by golly ye have! Ye'll have to pay for this damage, young feller!"

Three dabs with a paint brush would put right all the harm that the sturdy farm-cart had suffered, that was plain enough But the front part of the thousand-guinea Falcon Six was a shattered wreck, and Slade gasped anew when the carter began complaining. The speedman tried to push him aside, but the carter grabbed his arm and started a heated argument.

"They're blocking up the road," Jack commented, as he watched. "We'd better lead the horses to one side and leave Slade to finish it."

"His trouble is entirely his own fault," said Mr. Fletcher. "It's a lucky thing that there's no greater harm done."

The boys led the horses out of the way, pulling the cart off the road, leaving the Falcon Six, a crumpled wreck, at the kerb as they returned to their own machine.

"We'll send a breakdown van out from the first garage we come to!" Jack leaned over the side and shouted to Slade as he sent the Saxon forward. The speedman tried to break away from the carter, but the man clung to him; Slade punched wildly at his head, and at that the carter loosed his hold.

He jumped back a yard, tore off his coat, and then waded into Slade with both fists, while from the road out of which his cart had come, a policeman and a couple of farmhands appeared, racing to the scene, reaching it just as Slade went down in a mixture of oil and hot water spilled from his Falcon.

"Serves him right!" chortled Fred. "All right, carry on, Jack! If we're wanted as witnesses about the accident Slade knows who we are!"

The Saxon slid on, and as it went Mr. Fletcher observed:

"You've got marvellous brakes on this machine! I didn't think you could possibly stop in time, but you had fifteen or twenty feet to spare!" He was silent for a space, then he said: "Well, that last little incident has decided me! I'll buy six of these cars for my transport company, and if you'll run me back to your office, I'll sign the contract for them immediately!"

Secret Service Work!

JUST an hour later, Jack and Fred bowled the Saxon up a yard which led to the back of the big show-rooms, having left Mr. Fletcher at a side entrance to the offices.

They alighted from the machine and handed it over to a squad of cleaners, who would restore the car to show model finish, then the chums walked into the show-room again, not a smile on their faces.

The immaculate head salesman, Carnaby, looked up as they entered, and a thin, smirking grin dawned on his lips, while his eyes narrowed as he stepped to meet them.

"You've lost that order—I can see it!" he exclaimed. "Bishop, I told you to tell Kennedy to hand that customer over to me!"

"That's right," Fred gulped.

"You didn't give him my message," rasped Carnaby. "Let me tell you that Mr. Fletcher was a very important customer, he intended not to buy one car, but six! He wanted fast machines so that his overseers could nip from one transport convoy to another while they were on the road—and he had just seen the Falcons before he came here! You've lost that order for the firm!"

His voice rose, while his lips curled in a sneer as he looked at Jack's oil-smudged, old suit and Fred's grubby overalls.

"That's what comes of letting a couple of ragamuffins into a show-room like this," he said, and into his voice there crept more than a hint of satisfaction as he went on. "You don't know the first thing about demonstrating cars, or about salesmanship. If we'd got that order, it would have been close on six thousand pounds to the firm. I'll see that Mr. Lloyd knows about this," and he turned to the telephone which stood on a table near at hand.

"I say!" Jack started forward, "there's no need to phone Mr. Lloyd, you'll only——"

"Oh, you've changed your tone, have you?" Carnaby sneered. "You were very bumptious when you first came in here. You deliberately refused to hand that customer over to me for attention; now you'll pay the penalty!" and he lifted the receiver.

"Half a tick!" Fred exclaimed. "Don't make an ass o' yourself! It's——"

He broke off as Carnaby turned his back and spoke into the telephone, asking for the director who had put Jack and Fred into the show-room. The boys glanced at one another; Jack wanted to stop the overweening, elaborately-dressed salesman, but Fred caught his arm.

"Let him get what he's asking for," he said. "It's too late, anyway, he's talking to Mr. Lloyd now!"

Words were fairly tumbling from the salesman's lips. His little eyes were shining gloatingly as he told all that had passed in the show-room; how the boys had taken over the important customer when they should have left him to Carnaby——

"——and so you can see that they're absolutely hopeless here, sir! They've lost us that order, and they——What!" The boys saw him almost jump out of his chair. "They—they've got the order, sir? Six cars—Mr. Fletcher's just signed the contract for them? You—you want me to send the boys up to you at once, sir? Yes, sir, I will. I—I——" then the receiver almost fell from his hand to the hook as he turned and stared with dropped jaw at the chums.

"We tried to tell you that we'd got the order, only you wouldn't listen," Jack informed him. "Mr. Lloyd wants to see us, doesn't he? Come on, Fred!"

They strolled past the salesman; the other three men in the show-rooms were gaping goggle-eyed at the boys as they went. Two kids like these had booked a big order right under their noses, had pulled off something which they—trained salesmen!—would have given their ears to have accomplished!

There was malice, and envy, and anger, on Carnaby's face as he watched the pair push open a mahogany door and disappear on their way to the director's office, then his expression changed to puzzled cunning, and he glanced across the road towards the Falcon Six show-rooms.

Presently, he strolled towards them, apparently looking for someone.

Jack and Fred tapped on the door of Mr. Lloyd's office and entered. The place was furnished in business-like fashion, and behind the desk sat the grey-haired man. He rose as they came in and shook hands with them.

"You two haven't lost much time in getting to work," he said. "I don't know how you managed to impress Mr. Fletcher with the performance of our cars, but we've landed his order and got his deposit. The amount involved comes, roughly, to six thousand pounds; five per cent commission on that is three hundred pounds. You'll get your cheque for that amount at the end of the week."

"Cheque for three hundred!" gasped Jack.

"Yes, commission," answered Mr. Lloyd. "We give all our salesmen five per cent commission on all orders. You two have made three hundred pounds for yourselves this morning!"

"No wonder old Carnaby was wild!" Fred exclaimed. "My hat, three hundred quid! What are we going to do with it, Jack?"

"Never mind talking about that just now, you can discuss it later," said Mr. Lloyd. "There's another matter that's more urgent. You remember that the three Saxon cars we put in the T.T. race all conked out?"

The boys nodded. Mr. Lloyd's manner had changed, and for the moment they forgot the comparative wealth which had come to them for their work that morning.

"Well, they conked out because they had been tampered with," said Mr. Lloyd slowly. "I'm not going to say who was responsible for that, but I'll just tell you that two of the drivers on those three cars have now gone over to the Falcon works to drive with Slade."

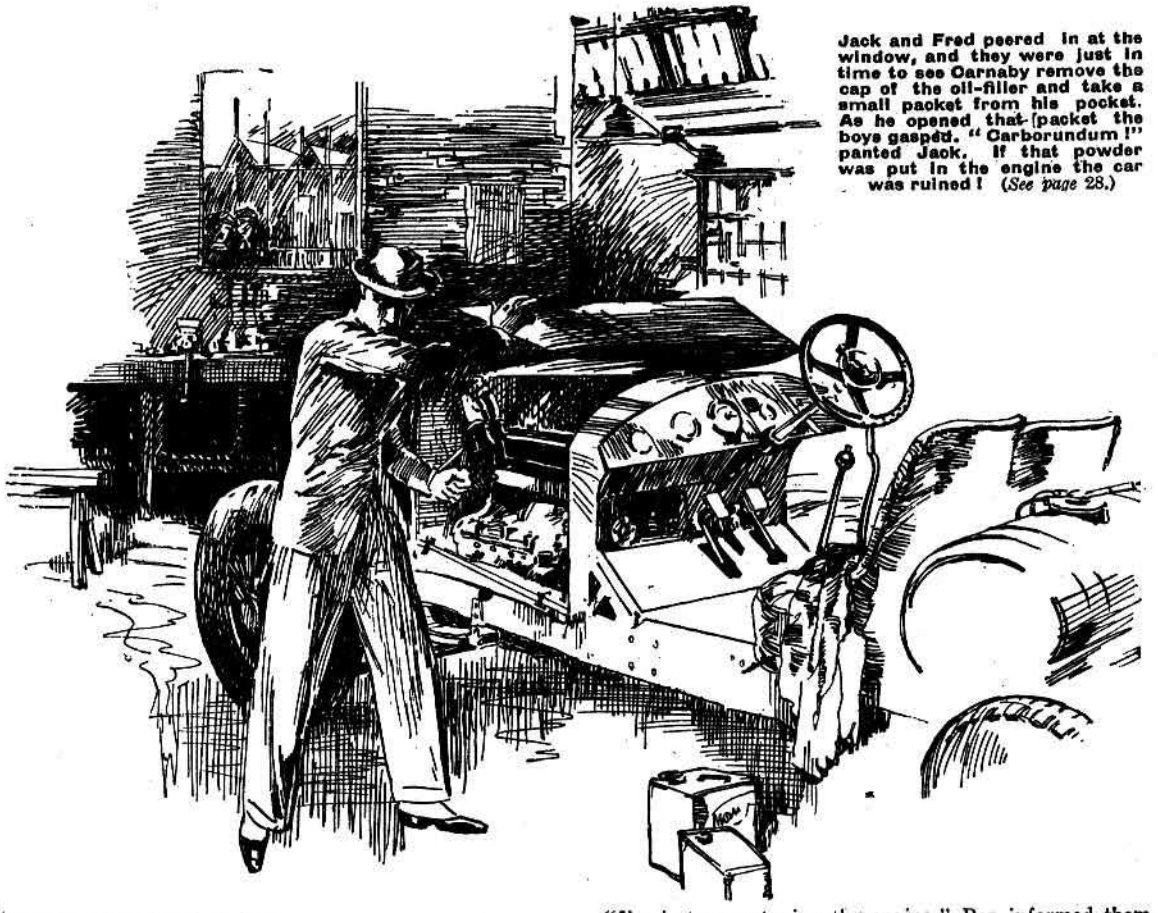
The two stared at him. Both knew at what he was hinting, and Mr. Lloyd went on:

"I tell you this, because I know you can keep it to yourselves. Also, because I want you to do something for me. Doing so badly in the big race has hit the firm rather hard: we are going to try and get back a little of our prestige in the Cragside Hill climb."

Jack nodded as Mr. Lloyd glanced at him. The Cragside Hill Climb was one of the biggest events of the motoring season, and the world's most famous cars took part in it. A hill climb is an event in which cars race up a difficult and dangerous hill, the one who climbs it in the shortest time being the winner.

The machine which proved victorious at Cragside had to be a mighty good car, and winning always did a lot of good to the firm which had built the machine.

"Well," Mr. Lloyd went on, "Ben is now working on the car which will race in this event. He started on the job yesterday. Jack, you impressed me with your driving in the T.T., I believe that you could put up a good show with this car if you were to drive it. Would you like to try?"



Jack and Fred peered in at the window, and they were just in time to see Carnaby remove the cap of the oil-filler and take a small packet from his pocket. As he opened that packet the boys gasped. "Carborundum!" panted Jack. If that powder was put in the engine the car was ruined! (*See page* 28.)

"Me?" Jack stared at him.

"Yes, you," said the director, and he smiled a little. "I've had a talk with Ben, and he tells me that you could win. And, frankly, I've not got anybody else that I can trust. Also, you'll be up against Slade on a specially-built Falcon!

"The Falcon Six is trying to smash us," he went on. "You'll have noticed that they've opened show-rooms right opposite our own, and I'd particularly like to put it across them at this hill climb. I know you've never driven in a similar event, but you can get in a bit of practice between now and the actual climb. Well, what do you say, will you drive for us?"

"Of course he will," grunted Fred. "An' what's more—he'll win!"

The boys did not go back to the show-room; they travelled out to the Saxon works and made straight for the racing shed. This was a big building set at the back of all the others, with benches around the walls and, in one corner, the half-burnt wreck of Ben's Saxon, just as it had been brought back from Ireland.

At one side of the shed stood the three cars which had conked out in the race, and mechanics were busy stripping them down to repair the damage they had suffered. In a little bay, all to himself, Ben was working with the two other mechanics

His left arm was still in a sling, but he was using a tool with his right hand as he bent over the car for the great hill climb. It was very low, and it had no body. Set behind the wheel were only a couple of bucket seats, with a rounded petrol tank in rear of them..

Everything about the car had been nickel-plated, so that it shone like silver in the sunlight which came through the windows of the shed.

"Hallo, you two!" Ben glanced up as they came across. "Want to have a look at your bus? You're going to drive it aren't you, Jack?"

"You bet!" Jack exclaimed, as he eyed the rakish machine.

It was enormously powerful and fierce-looking—almost savage. He had never seen a car like it before.

"I'm just super-tuning the engine," Ben informed them. "You'll be able to take her out for a test run to-morrow. The climb comes off on Saturday, but you won't be able to make practice runs with the car up the actual hill, because the regulations don't allow it. Still, there are plenty of other hills you can practise on. And now you're here, you might as well give me a hand."

They worked with him for the rest of the afternoon. When the works whistle signalled knocking-off time all the other mechanics in the shed came across to stand around and talk about the car or to help where they could.

Jack and Fred liked these mechanics. They were men who had worked for years in the Saxon racing stable, and they knew a lot more than either of the boys about racing cars. But none of them had the itch for speed which gripped Jack Kennedy, and none of them were born drivers.

They all appreciated his pluck and his daring; they knew what he had endured in the T.T. race, and admired him for it. They were only too ready to do any little thing that they could to help now, and the following afternoon they came in a bunch when the car was taken out for its first tests on a hill not very far away.

This hill was nothing like so difficult as Cragside, but it was stiff enough to let Ben see how the car would behave, and for him to tell how Jack would handle the machine when the big event came off.

With Jack behind the wheel and Fred at his side, the car shot away, its powerful engine roaring fiendishly. The car fairly rocked up the slope to the single bend on the hill.

The drone of the exhaust bellowed above the scuttering of the slithering tyres as Jack skidded the machine round in one long, breathless slide, then flung the car on to the summit, the wind howling in the ears and Fred hanging on with both hands.

A dozen times they went up this hill, and after each run Ben made some adjustment to the engine, then the machine was run back to the racing shed.

"You'll do!" Ben told Jack. "If you come over on Friday afternoon I'll have the car absolutely ready for you to make a last practice spin."

The boys spent the Friday at the show-rooms, and both

(*Continued on page* 28.)

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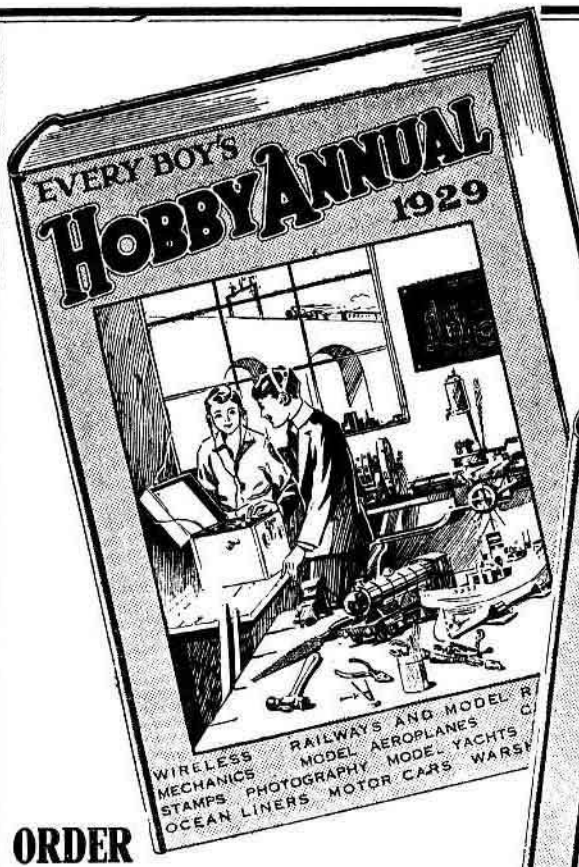

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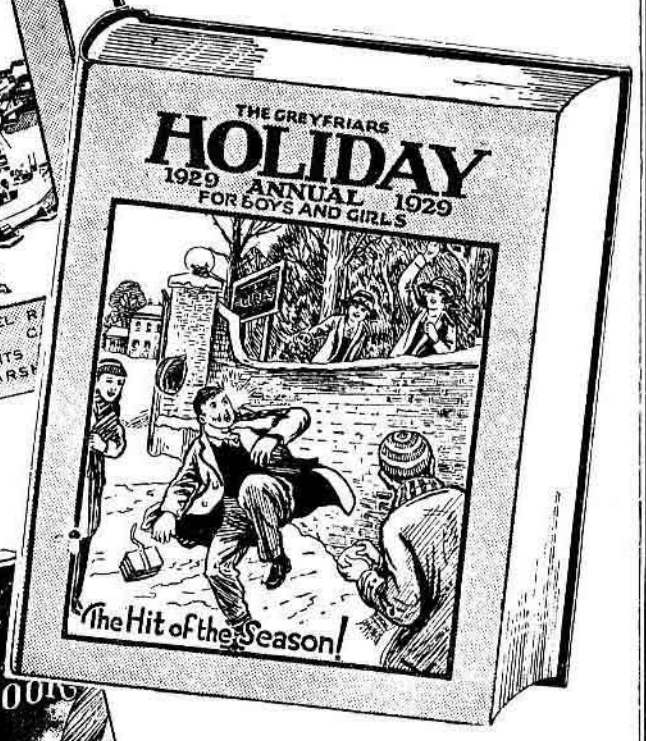

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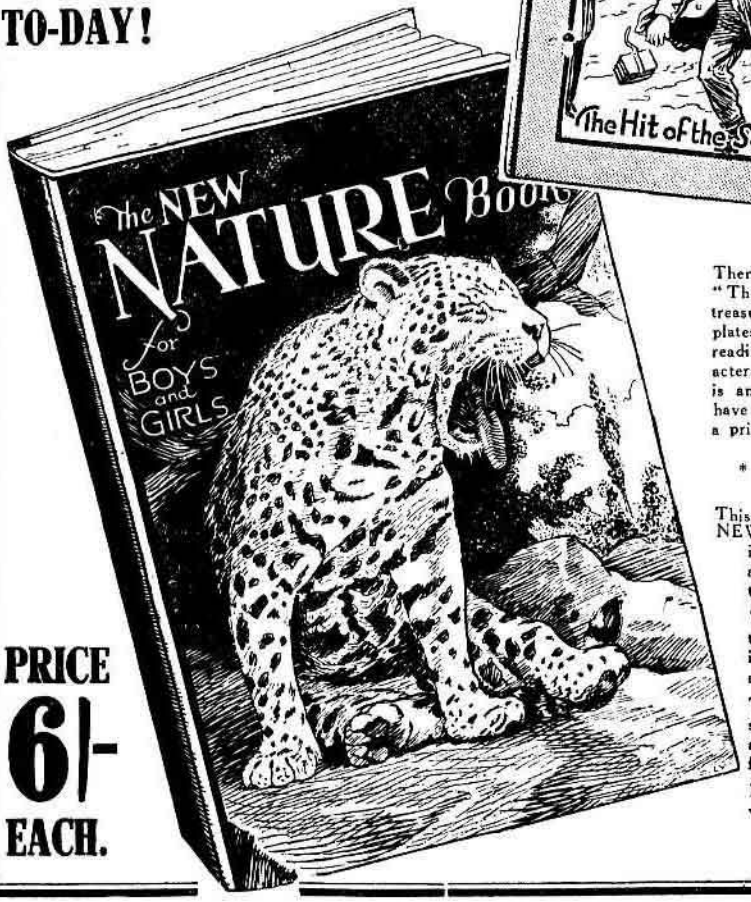

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"'SKID' KENNEDY—SPEED KING!"

(Continued from page 26.)

noticed that Carnaby was trying to be friendly. They wondered why, but they discovered that he was interested in the silver machine. He wanted to know all about it—what speed it would do, if they thought the machine would be likely to win, what its gear ratios were, and a lot of other technical details

The chums told him absolutely nothing, and they cleared off at the first opportunity for the racing shed. The car was ready and waiting for them, and they took it out at once. Jack made three runs up the hill, each one faster than the last.

The mechanics checked his time with stop watches, and they gasped when they discovered how fast he had come up the hill on his last run. When Jack ran the glittering machine to the foot of the hill again they met him with a cheer.

"You could make that car climb the side of a house, Skid!" a man roared.

"She's a winner all the way, young 'un!" Ben told him, and his brown face was one big smile.

They surrounded the shining racer, congratulating Jack and Fred as they climbed down. Half-way to the ground Jack paused. His eye was caught by a figure moving amongst some bushes; only a glimpse did he have of the man, but he recognised the sneering features of Carnaby.

Jack said nothing, but he was watchful on the run back to the works. There the car was carefully put away. The mechanics stayed an hour or more, rubbing over its nickel and making certain that it was absolutely in trim for the morrow. They had almost finished when Jack drew his brother aside.

"I'll get along with Fred if you don't want me any more," he said.

"Aren't you going to wait for me?" Ben asked. "I shan't be long."

"No; we've got a little job we want to do," Jack told him; and he caught Fred's arm as he moved towards the door.

"First I've heard about any 'little job'!" Fred exclaimed when they were outside. "What is it?"

"It's Carnaby!" Jack said grimly. "I spotted him at the bottom of the hill watching!"

"Well, what of it? He's in the firm, isn't he? He's entitled to watch if he wants to," said Fred.

"Yes; but not if he hides amongst the bushes to do it," Jack told him. "I believe he's after something. He's been taking a lot of interest in the car. I vote we hang about somewhere out of sight, and just make sure he doesn't try anything funny!"

Fred looked at him quickly, but he said nothing. Jack scouted round the side of the shed, and presently the two were hidden away behind a pile of old tyres tucked in an angle of the wall. From here they could watch the front of the shed and one side of it.

They saw the mechanics leave with Ben, while the foreman locked the shed door behind them.

"Betcher anything you like young Skid pulls it off tomorrow!" a mechanic said, as they left. "That kid's a young wizard with a car!"

"The way he took that bend the last time beat anything I've ever seen!" grinned the foreman. "He could skid a car round a threepenny-bit, Skid could! He'll make Slade's Falcon Six look like a squashed sardine tin!"

The others laughed, then they tramped off out of hearing. Half an hour passed. In some of the shops which made up the works men were on overtime. Their electric lights had come on when, from out the gathering gloom, there strolled an exquisitely-clad figure. Both boys recognised Carnaby.

He moved perfectly naturally towards the racing shed and tried the door. He found that it was locked, and he moved around to the side. The boys saw him reach up on tiptoe to peer through a window into the building. He stared for a minute or two, then furtively he looked around him.

It was a quiet corner of the works, and there was no one in sight. The boys saw him try the window, and, to their surprise, they saw that it was unlatched.

"That's funny!" Fred whispered. "The foreman always goes round and fixes the windows before he locks up."

"Somebody might have undone it afterwards!" Jack said tensely. "Hallo, he's getting in!"

They saw the window go up. Again Carnaby glanced round him; then, with a quick, astonishingly agile movement, he leaped over the sill and disappeared inside.

Instantly the two shot from their hiding-place, with Fred hissing:

"Darn lucky thing you thought o' stopping behind, Jack! The perisher's up to something all right!"

Soft-footed, they sped over the open ground to the window, reached up, and peered cautiously in.

Carnaby was standing by the gleaming shape of the racing hill-climber. He was peering about it, and he moved to the engine-cover. He flung the straps back, twisted off the clips which secured it, then flung the cover up.

The boys saw him remove the cap over the oil-filler. He took out the filler and laid it carefully aside ere he reached into one coat pocket. He drew out a small packet and the boys saw it clearly as he tore it open.

Carborundum!" Jack gasped.

Carborundum is a powder that is harder than steel. Carnaby meant to pour it into the oil. The moment the engine was started up the stuff would be carried round the power unit, scoring into everything, wrecking the bearings, grinding great gashes in the cylinders. In a matter almost of seconds the engine would be utterly ruined!

Aghast, the two saw him poise the packet; then, with a combined shout, they hurled themselves through the window and into the shed!

(One split second to act, one breathless moment in which to save their car from the hands of the ruthless Carnaby. But will Jack and Fred do it? See next week's instalment of this powerful motor-racing serial for an answer to that question, chums!)