

The

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EVERY
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LIBRARY



A BLACK OUTLOOK FOR GUSSY !

(An unusual incident taken from this week's fine long complete school story of the Chums of St. Jim's.)

A ROUSING SCHOOL STORY OF TOM MERRY & CO. OF ST. JIM'S—

Gussy Lends

There never was a fellow more ready to do anybody a good turn than Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, even though his well-meaning attempts in that direction usually have the opposite result. Certain it is, however, that none of them has ever ended so disastrously as his latest!

CHAPTER 1. Too Bad!

"**C**HUCK it, Monty!"

It was Tom Merry, the captain of the Shell at St. Jim's, who spoke.

The snow lay thick in the old quad, and Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther, the cheery trio known as the Terrible Three, had come out for a tramp in the keen wintry air before the bell rang for afternoon lessons.

"Just what I'm going to do, old chap!" retorted Monty Lowther, rapidly kneading a snowball. "Watch me—"

"Don't chuck it, then!" grinned Tom Merry. "You know what I mean, you silly ass! Let old Taggy alone!"

"I'm not going to touch the old chap," said Lowther. "I'm only going to knock his top-hat off!"

"He'll only report you—"

"I know; then I shall knock his topper off with another snowball, old chap. This one's for reporting me yesterday—just because I happened to let a jumping-cracker slip through his kitchen window, you know."

"Well, the old chap was asleep, and it must have made him jump—"

"It did!" grinned Lowther. "And serves him right—shouldn't sleep on duty! I notice the old buffer's never asleep at lock-up time; he's not likely to miss a chance of locking chaps out. Jever see such a mean old hunk?"

"Why not leave him alone, though, and then perhaps he won't be," suggested Tom.

"Rats! Watch me biff his topper!"

And Lowther let fly with his snowball.

It missed Taggles, the porter, by yards—not because Monty Lowther was a poor marksman, but because, just at the critical moment, Lowther spotted an approaching figure through the corner of his eye.

The figure was angular, and wore a cap and gown. The sight quite spoiled Lowther's aim—in fact the snowball would never have left Lowther's hand had he received warning a second earlier.

"Oh crumbs!" he gasped. "Ratty!"

It was Mr. Ratcliff, the Housemaster of the New House.

"Now you're for it!" said Manners.

Mr. Ratcliff floundered up. The New House master was, at the best of times, rather an irritable gentleman. But he hated cold weather, and he hated and detested snow. It was therefore one of Mr. Ratcliff's worst times, and he looked, and obviously felt, very irritable indeed.

His rather prominent nose was red, and his thin face pinched with cold. He gave the juniors a ferocious glare.

"Lowther!"

"Y-yes, sir?"

"I distinctly saw you throw a snowball at the school porter!" rasped the Housemaster.

"Y-yes, sir! Only a lark, sir!" gasped Lowther.

"Scandalous!" snorted Mr. Ratcliff. "I am glad to say that no boy of my House would so far forget himself as to assault one of the school servants."

Lowther doubted that—very much so. But he mumbled a "Y-yes, sir!"

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"Scandalous!" repeated Mr. Ratcliff, who never lost an opportunity of sneering at the School House juniors. "But I have long ago ceased to be surprised at the lack of discipline in the School House. I shall report your conduct to your Form master, and request him to cane you, Lowther."

"Yes, sir!" mumbled Lowther.

He had expected it, and got it! He only felt thankful that Mr. Ratcliff was not his own Housemaster, or Form master, and so entitled to cane him himself.

Mr. Ratcliff floundered on through the snow towards Taggles, the porter. That worthy hadn't seen Mr. Ratcliff yet. He was leaning on his shovel, abstractedly gazing at the snow-clad roofs and ancient battlements of the school. Taggles was a man who believed heartily in the medical theory that frequent rests between spells of work were beneficial, and he liked to make the work spells short and the rest spells long.

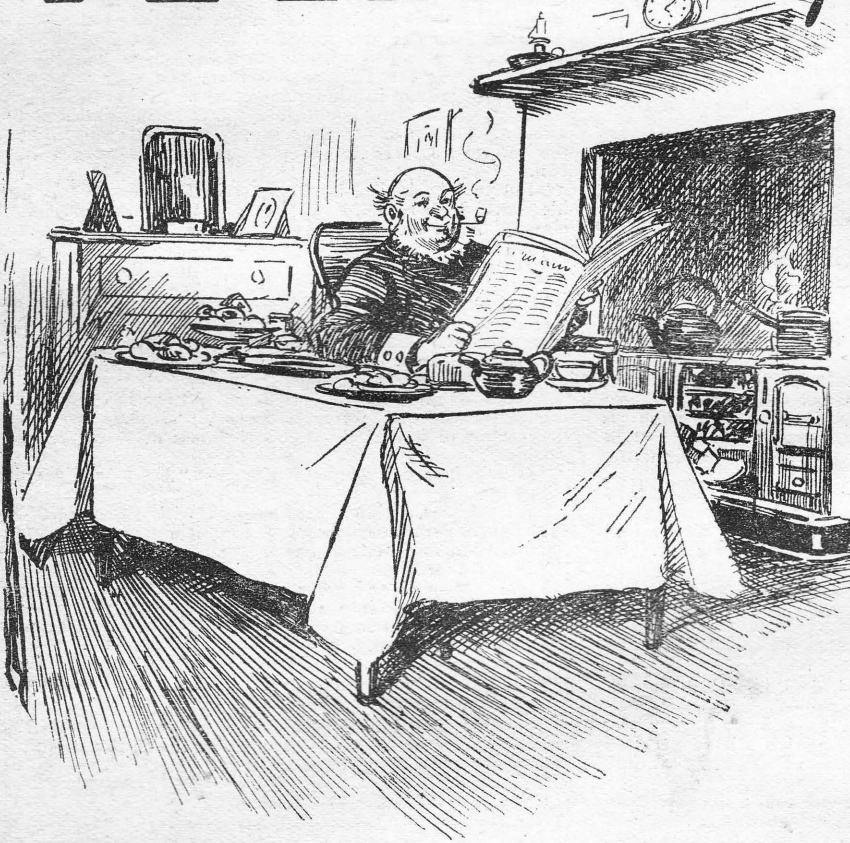
He jumped out of his brown study violently as Mr. Ratcliff barked at him:

"Taggles!"

"Ho, yessir!"

—STARRING ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY OF THE FOURTH!

A Hand! *by* Martin Clifford



glowering at the snowy path. "It's Taggles 'ere and Taggles there; I'm at the bloomin' beck an' call of everybody from the 'Ead to the cook. There ain't no rest for a man on this 'ere job!"

The juniors strove hard to restrain their grins. At the best of times Taggles was a somewhat disgruntled individual. But just now he seemed unusually upset and dissatisfied with the scheme of things.

"Goin' to report me, is 'e?" resumed Taggles, evidently referring to Mr. Rateliff. "Goin' to report me unless that there path is cleared afore tea-time! Bloomin' old slave-driver!"

"Better not let him hear you call him that!" grinned Manners.

"Think I cares?" said Taggles independently. "I am workin' 'ard from morn till night—"

"You do so much unnecessary work, Taggy," said Lowther, shaking his head. "Just think of the trouble you'd save yourself if you didn't report us chaps so much."

"Which I only does me duty, Master Lowther," said

Taggles, with dignity. "If a young gent comes in arter lock-up, then it's my duty to report 'im. Lookin' arter that there gate ain't so easy as you'd think. But that ain't 'arf of my job; I gets all sorts of jobs shoved on me as I didn't order do at all, me bein' gate-porter. There's this 'ere snow which ain't my job, by rights. And no hextra pay, nor no hextra time off for it, neither! What 'd you young gents think about that? I calls it himposin' on a man; I'm put on, I am!"

"Hard lines!" said Tom Merry, smiling. "Still, the Head isn't so bad—he's just given Mrs. Taggles a week off, I hear?"

"So 'e 'as," admitted Taggles, with a snort. "But that's just it. What about me? Where do I come in, I arsk you? I asked the 'Ead for a week's leave for me and the missus. Well, he gives the missus a week's 'oliday, and won't even give me a bloomin' 'arf-day off!"

"So that's what's upsetting you, Taggy?" grinned Lowther.

"Well, and wouldn't you be upset, Master Lowther?" snorted the old chap indignantly. "Arter me slavin' mornin', noon, and night like I does, I can't even get a 'arf-day off to attend a niece's weddin'. I calls it mean!"

"Oh, it's a wedding?" said Tom, understanding why the old fellow was so disturbed. "When is the glad event, Taggy?"

"Wednesday arternoon," said Taggles. "O' course, the missus 'as gone to 'elp get the 'ouse ready chiefly. I knows it's more himportant for her to go nor me. Still, why couldn't the 'Ead 'ave let me go to the bloomin' weddin'?"

The Terrible Three had no time just then to answer that question. For as Taggles finished speaking, a snowball whizzed past Tom Merry's ear, and Tom gave a yell:

"Look out!" His warning was too late. The snowball sent Taggles' silk-hat from his head with a loud plop. As it sailed away

"How long are you going to be clearing away the snow from these paths?" snapped the Housemaster testily. "It is now noon, and the path between the New House and School House has not yet been touched."

Taggles regarded the master morosely as he touched his battered silk hat. Taggles, like Mr. Rateliff, hated snow. Snow meant extra work, a thing he objected to on principle.

"Which as 'ow I bin busy with me or'nary work, sir!" he grunted sourly. "This 'ere snow makes hextra work for me, and what wi' me roomatieks, which is summat crool in this 'ere weather—"

"I am not at all interested in your ailments, Taggles!" said Mr. Rateliff coldly. "Your work at this school is exceedingly light, and you have had ample time to clear away this snow, my man."

"Ho, 'ava I?" snorted Taggles, fairly bristling with resentment. "Which as 'ow this 'ere job ain't so light as you think, Mister Rateliff!"

"You are insolent, Taggles!" said the Housemaster sharply. "Kindly remember to whom you are speaking, my man! And understand that if the path between the New House and School House is not cleared by the end of arternoon school, I shall report the matter to Dr. Holmes."

"Which as 'ow—"
"That is enough, Taggles! Kindly resume your work!" With that Mr. Rateliff tramped away.

Taggles scowled after him, muttering to himself. The Terrible Three joined him as the Housemaster vanished into the New House.

"Been ticking you off, Taggy?" asked Lowther, with a grin.

Taggles snorted with deep indignation. "Hinsolent, hey?" he snorted. "I'd 'ave told 'im off if he'd stopped a minute longer! I ain't afraid of 'im, Housemaster or not!"

"Oh, my hat!"
"I'm fed-up with this 'ere job, I am!" said Taggles,

the gate-porter made a grab at it, his feet slid from under him on the slippery snow, and he went down.

Bump!
"Ow!"

CHAPTER 2.

Poor Old Taggy!

"Ow!" grunted Taggles, as he sat in the snow. "Ow, ow!"
"Good shot, Wally!"
"Ha, ha, ha!"

A yell of laughter sounded behind the juniors, and they wheeled round. Three Third Form fags were standing a few yards away. They were Wally D'Arcy and his chums Curly Gibson and Jameson. Apparently that rusty old silk hat of Taggles had proved an irresistible target to those young rascals as well as to Monty Lowther.

"It's those cheeky young fags!" said Tom Merry. "Look out, they—Yooop!"

Another snowball flew with deadly aim, and this time it was Tom Merry who stopped it—with his chin. At the same moment Lowther stopped a second with his ear, while another took Manners on the nose.

Four snowballs, and four direct hits—but the Terrible Three showed no approval of the marksmanship of Wally & Co. They gave wrathful roars.

"Groogh!" gasped Tom Merry, spluttering snow from his mouth. "Groogh! Oh, my hat! Smash the young rotters! We'll teach 'em—"

He jumped to gather up a handful of snow, and his chums did likewise. But Wally & Co. did not wait; they had just caught sight of Blake, Herries, Digby, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy in the offing, and the prospect of being caught between two fires sent them scuttling across the quad, yelling with laughter.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Tom Merry. "The cheeky young—Hallo! What's the matter, Taggy?"

It was then that the Terrible Three became aware that the old gate-porter had not yet risen from the snow. He was still sitting there, groaning and gasping.

"Lend a hand here, you chaps!" rapped out Tom, in some alarm.

The Terrible Three gathered round Taggles. Just then Blake & Co. came up, and they joined the little group with looks of surprise and alarm.

"Bai Jove! What has happened, deah boys?" demanded Arthur Augustus. "Taggy, old chap—"

"Ooooooh!" groaned Taggles. "It—it's me leg, young gents! Me roomaticky leg, too! Which I'll report that young rip for this, you see if I don't! Young varmint! Grooogh! Oooooooh!"

Taggles started to get to his feet—he found the cold snow not a comfortable seat. The juniors helped him up. Arthur Augustus picked up his rusty topper, dusted the snow from it, and placed it on the old porter's head.

"Young Wally biffed a snowball at him, the young scamp!" explained Tom Merry. "Feeling better now, Taggy?"

"No bones broken, I hope?" asked Manners.

"Which there ain't no bones broken!" gasped Taggles, with another groan. "But me roomaticky leg 'urts summat awful! And that there fall's made me feel mortal bad, young gents! Oooooooh!"

"Too bad!" said Arthur Augustus, greatly disturbed as he eyed Taggles through his eyeglass. "That feahful young scamp—"

"He needs a good licking!" said Lowther, forgetting that he himself had intended to do exactly what Wally had done. "Still, he only intended to biff your topper off, Taggy—"

"Your slipping was an accident," said Tom Merry. "No need to report the young scamp, Taggy—leave him to us."

"Yaas, wathah! Pway take a west in your lodge, Taggy," said Arthur Augustus. "You look wathah woeky!"

Taggles certainly did. Luckily there were no bones broken: but the fall had obviously shaken the old porter. His hand trembled as he took the spade Manners handed him. Then he groaned as he blinked along the length of path still to be cleared.

"Which there ain't no chance of a rest for me, Master D'Arcy," he mumbled. "Look at this 'ere snow. If it ain't cleared by tea-time, Mr. Ratcliff says 'e'll report me! I got to go on with it if I drops, young gents. Who's goin' to clear that there snow if I don't?"

Tom Merry answered the question promptly.

"We will, old sport!" he said, giving his chums a glance. "You go and take a rest, Taggy—we'll see to this snow, and blow old Ratty!"

"Yaas, wathah! That is wathah a good ideah, Tom Mewwy!" agreed Arthur Augustus. "Pway leave the job to us, Taggy, deah boy!"

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Taggles eyed the juniors doubtfully.

"You young gents is jokin'!" he mumbled. "Which it ain't no easy job—"

"My dear old scout, we're as serious as judges," said Blake. "You buzz off to your little couch, and we'll soon shift this lot between us."

"And don't argue!" said Tom Merry severely. "You've had a bit of a shock, and a rest will soon put you right."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Now he saw the juniors were really serious, Taggles decided not to argue. As a matter of fact, such a fall to a man of Taggles' age was no light matter, and he was obviously suffering from shock, if from nothing else. Arthur Augustus took one arm and Tom Merry took the other, as the old porter limped away towards his lodge. The juniors felt very sorry for Taggles just then, and they were only too willing to help in the circumstances.

They left him lying comfortably on the couch in the lodge kitchen. Then, armed with a supply of shovels and brooms, the juniors returned to the path and got to work with a will.

"Put your backs into it, chaps," said Tom Merry, wielding his shovel with a will. "We've none too much time before classes. After all, we're Scouts, and this is our good turn for the day."

"Hear, hear!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The juniors set to work with a right good will, and soon made the snow fly. They had been at work for several minutes, when three juniors emerged from the New House and sighted them. Figgins, Kerry, and Patty Wynn stared at the enthusiastic snow-clearing "gang."

"Well, my giddy aunt!" exclaimed George Figgins, blinking across the quad in astonishment. "Do my aged eyes deceive me or is that those School House bounders actually working!"

"It is; it are!" grinned Kerr. "Shall we join in, Figgy?"

"We'd better, I think!" said Figgy, with a chuckle. "We can't allow 'em to overwork their little selves! Let 'em have it good and strong, chaps!"

"Yes, rather!"

Figgins stooped and gathered up a handful of snow, and rapidly kneaded it into a hefty snowball. His chums did likewise. The next moment three snowballs whizzed across the quad like bullets.

There sounded three separate "biffs," followed by three separate yells, as the snowballs flew with deadly aim and struck their targets.

One took Tom Merry between his collar and his neck, a second hit Arthur Augustus clean under the chin, and a third sent Blake's cap flying from his head.

"Yarooooh!"

"Yooop! What the— Look out!"

"Yow! Oh, bai Jove! New House wottahs!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Figgins. "Let 'em have 'em, chaps!"

Whiz, whiz, whiz!

Three more snowballs flew with deadly aim, and Tom Merry & Co. yelled with wrath.

"Here, we're not standing this!" shouted Blake. "Let 'em have it back, chaps!"

"Yaas, wathah! Gwooooh! Ow! You feahful wuffian, Figgy!"

Dropping their shovels and brooms, the School House juniors started to return the shots with good interest. In a matter of seconds the air was full of flying snowballs, defiant shouts, and yells of laughter.

Their task forgotten now, Tom Merry & Co. entered into the battle with gusto, and a terrific conflict was soon raging as School House and New House came rushing up to take part in the fun.

But Figgins & Co. and their doughty supporters were soon hopelessly outnumbered, and after a desperate stand they broke and fled for the shelter of the New House, a terrific volley of snowballs and yells of derision following them. And just as the battle ended thus, the bell for afternoon classes rang.

"Phew! That was warm work and no mistake!" panted Tom Merry, brushing the powdered snow from his clothes, with a cheery laugh. "Grooogh! There's about half a ton of melted snow down my neck. Never mind, we licked 'em!"

"Yaas, wathah!" panted Arthur Augustus. "Oh deah! My clobber is in a feahful state, deah boys! Howevah, we'd bettah return to our task now."

"Eh? What task?"

"Shovellin' that snow, of course!" said Arthur Augustus innocently. "We pwomised Taggy, you know—"

"Oh, my hat! So we did!" said Tom Merry. "But the bell's just gone, dummy!"

"That is wathah unfortunate!" said Gussy. "But we weally cannot let Taggy down. If the job isn't done, Watty

will report him, you know. I am quite sure Lathom will not mind under the circumstances."

"Won't he?" ejaculated Blake. "Why, you born idiot, he'll go potty if we cut class just to shovel snow, fathead!"

"I refuse to be called a fathead, Blake!" said Arthur Augustus, with dignity. "And I certainly refuse to bweak my word to Taggy. He is only westin' because he believes we are doin' his work, and it is quite impos for us to let the old fellow down. I refuse to do so, anyway!"

"But, you silly chump—"

"Wats!"

Blake was very fond of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. None the less, he found his chum very trying indeed at times. No other fellow in the Form would have "cut" lessons in order to sweep snow from the quadrangle—even to save Taggles from getting into hot water. No other fellow would have been so Quixotic—or such an ass, as Blake expressed it! But Arthur Augustus was a stickler on matters of principle—he had given his word to Taggles that the snow would be cleared before tea, and the promise had to be kept, come what might.

In their way, of course, Gussy's chums were particular



"Taggles!" snapped Mr. Ratcliff. "How long are you going to be clearing the snow away from these paths? You have had ample time to do it, my man!" "Ho, ave I?" snorted Taggles, fairly bristling with resentment. (See Chapter 1.)

Arthur Augustus ended the argument by walking away with his head in the air. Reaching the pile of shovels he selected one and set to work on the path with a will.

Blake breathed hard as he gazed after him.

"Well, the—fathead!" he gasped. "Fancy cutting class—just to shovel snow for Taggy! Come on, chaps, let's bring him in by the scruff of his silly neck—"

"Oh, let the born idiot rip!" snorted Herries. "If he wants trouble with Lathom, let him have it. I'm going in."

"Same here!" said Digby.

And as Herries and Digby walked indoors, Blake snorted and followed them, together with the rest of the grinning crowd of ruddy-cheeked snowballers. Meanwhile, the noble Arthur Augustus carried on with the good work, indifferent, apparently, to Mr. Lathom or classes. Gussy's word was as binding and adamant as the laws of the Medes and Persians of old. Lessons and Form masters were of no account in comparison.

CHAPTER 3.

Helping Taggles!

"BLAKE!"

"Y-yes, sir?"

Jack Blake groaned—he knew what was coming. Lessons had been in progress several minutes in the Fourth Form-room. But, up to now, Mr. Lathom had not seemed to become aware that one of his class was absent. Now, apparently, he had.

enough regarding their word, but they were not quite so particular in a case like this. They had fully intended to keep their promise to Taggles to the letter. But a combination of circumstances they could not have foreseen—Figgins & Co. and the ringing of the bell, to wit—had prevented them doing so. In any case, there was time enough after lessons to carry on with the good work.

But Gussy took a different view—he usually did. And his views very often got him into trouble. He looked like getting into trouble now, and Blake felt sorry, if not sympathetic.

"Y-yes, sir?" he said.

"I notice," said Mr. Lathom, blinking round the Form-room, "that D'Arcy is not present, Blake. Do you know where he is, and why he has not put in an appearance?"

"He—he seems to be late, sir!" gasped Blake, somewhat vaguely.

"I am well aware that D'Arcy is late, Blake!" said Mr. Lathom testily. "Kindly do not be absurd. I am asking if you know where D'Arcy is, Blake?"

"He's—he's outside, I think, sir!" stammered Blake.

"Outside—you mean outside the school?" boomed Mr. Lathom.

"Oh, no, sir! In—in the quad, I think, sir!"

Blake not only thought that, but he knew it. To his ears came the ring of a shovel on stone. There was no doubt that Arthur Augustus was still busy at work in the quad.

Mr. Lathom did not know it, however, yet. That knowledge was to come.

"It is obvious to me, Blake, that you are hiding the facts from me!" snapped the Form master. "You say that D'Arcy is out in the quadrangle—"

"He—he was a few minutes ago, sir!"

"Then he must have heard the bell for afternoon school!" said Mr. Lathom, with icy sarcasm. "Possibly something of greater moment than afternoon school is keeping him. Do you know what is keeping D'Arcy from obeying the bell, Blake?"

There seemed no help for it.

"He—he's shovelling snow, I think, sir—clearing the paths!" gasped Blake.

There was a chorus of chuckles at that bit of interesting information. Mr. Lathom's spectacles almost dropped off, so great was his astonishment.

"Sh-shovelling snow?" he gasped. "Bless my soul! Is it possible that—"

A sudden brainwave seemed to strike the master of the Fourth. He strode to the window, and looked out.

Then he jumped. Arthur Augustus was there as large as life. The industrious swell of the Fourth was going strong. But his strenuous industry brought no approving glance from Mr. Lathom.

He blinked and blinked at the busy Arthur Augustus in growing wrath and indignation.

"Bless my soul!" he articulated. "Has the boy taken leave of his senses?"

Mr. Lathom had another brain-wave. He threw up the window, and leaned out.

"D'Arcy! Boy!" he shouted.

Mr. Lathom's indignant voice floated over the waste of snow. Arthur Augustus heard it. He ceased work, and looked round at Mr. Lathom leaning out of the window. Every fellow in the Form-room stood up to get a view of the proceedings outside. There were chuckles and giggles as the industrious worker was sighted.

"Yaas, sir?" answered Gussy, a trifle breathlessly, turning a flushed but cheery face towards the window. "You called me, sir?"

"Yes, I most certainly did call you, D'Arcy!" hooted Mr. Lathom. "What ever are you doing, boy?"

"Shovellin' snow, sir!" said Arthur Augustus, in surprise.

Mr. Lathom spluttered. The chuckling of the entertained juniors changed to a laugh, and then to a roar.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence!" thundered Mr. Lathom, glancing round behind him. "That—that utterly absurd boy! D'Arcy, you hear me?"

"Oh, yaas, sir!"

"Come indoors this instant, sir!"

"But, weally, sir, I have nothin' like finished yet!" said Arthur Augustus, indicating the expanse still to be cleared.

"There is still—"

"Come indoors at once!" roared Mr. Lathom angrily.

"How dare you ignore lessons for such a purpose, D'Arcy! I order you indoors without delay!"

"But, weally, sir—"

"Come indoors!"

It was almost a shriek, and Arthur Augustus reluctantly threw down his shovel, and started for the School House doorway. It was really too bad to be interrupted in this manner, but even Arthur Augustus realised that a Form master had to be "given his head."

So Arthur Augustus reluctantly made his way indoors, removed his scarf, and went to the Fourth Form-room. He found Mr. Lathom waiting in a state bordering on fury. The Form looked at the ruddy-faced Arthur Augustus in grinning expectation.

"D'Arcy!" gasped Mr. Lathom, as the door closed. "Are you aware that you are several minutes late for class?"

"Oh, yaas, sir! But I have been wathah busy—"

"Do not be absurd!" hooted Mr. Lathom. "You heard the bell, I suppose—"

"Oh, yaas, sir! But—"

"Then why did you not come indoors with the rest of the Form?" said Mr. Lathom, gazing at the swell of the Fourth wrathfully. "Are lessons of such small moment that—"

"Not at all, sir!" said Gussy serenely. "I quite wealise the gweat importance of lessons, Mr. Lathom. But it was vevy necessawy for the snow to be cleahed away, you know."

You see, I gave Taggles my word that the work should be done before tea. It was, of course, quite imposs for me to bweak my word."

"Bless my soul!"

"I wegwet the fact that I am so late, Mr. Lathom," explained Arthur Augustus mildly. "I twust you do not think I intended any diswepect. But I weally could not let Taggles down, you see, sir."

Mr. Lathom could not answer that. He went to his desk, took out his cane, and returned to Arthur Augustus, breathing hard.

The swell of the Fourth gave a gasp of dismay.

"Oh, bai Jove! Pway allow me to explain more fully, sir—"

"I do not desire to hear any further explanation, you foolish boy!" gasped Mr. Lathom. "Enough time has been wasted, D'Arcy. Hold out your hand, sir!"

"But, sir—"

"Hold out your hand!" shrieked the justly incensed master.

"Oh, bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus held out his hand—there was nothing else for it.

Swish, swish!

"Now the other hand, D'Arcy!"

"Ow!"

Swish, swish!

"Now go to your place, D'Arcy!" gasped Mr. Lathom. "And possibly that will teach you that the school bell is not to be ignored with impunity, and that your work lies in the Form-room."

"Ow! Ow! Oh, bai Jove! Weally, sir, I must remark that—"

"Silence! Go to your place, D'Arcy!"

Arthur Augustus went to his place—wriggling. But he made no further attempts to explain the facts—which was just as well, perhaps. Amidst an atmosphere of chuckles and grins the lesson proceeded on the even tenor of its way. But as the juniors came out of the Form-room at afternoon break, Arthur Augustus gave vent to his indignation.

"I am vevy much surprised indeed at Lathom!" he said. "I weally cannot undahstand why he was in such a feahful wax, you know."

"Go hon!" said Blake.

"Unless he wegarded my ignowin' of the bell as diswepectful to himself—"

"He's hit it at last!" said Blake admiringly. "What a brain Gussy has, you chaps. He's worked that all out by himself!"

"Weally, you fellows, it is nothin' to laugh at!" said Gussy warmly. "Lathom ought to have allowed me to explain!"

"Jolly good job for Wally that he didn't!" said Blake grimly. "After all, Wally caused it—"

"Bai Jove! I nevah thought of that, Blake!"

"You never do think at all!" said Blake. "Shovelling snow is just about your weight, old chap. Anyway, we're wasting valuable time. Let's go and get on with that job."

"Gweat Scott! Yaas, wathah!"

The chums of Study No. 6 hurried out into the quad. To their surprise they found the Terrible Three busy at work, clearing the path where Gussy had left off.

"Here you are, you cripples!" called Tom Merry cheerily, as he shovelled away at the snow. "Come along; there's not much time—get busy!"

The Fourth-Formers were ready and willing. They grabbed shovels and set to work. There was not overmuch time before the end of break, and Tom Merry was anxious to get the job done. The seven juniors were working at full pressure when Mr. Railton, the Housemaster of the School House, came along.

He stopped and eyed the busy workers in some astonishment.

"You appear to be very busy indeed, boys," he remarked grimly. "And to what may I attribute this sudden burst of energy—this unexpected but praiseworthy exhibition of honest toil?"

Tom Merry stopped working and smiled, flushing a little.

"We—we're helping Taggles, sir!" he explained, with some hesitation. "You see, he had rather a nasty fall just before afternoon school, so we told him we'd carry on with the job for him."

"Dear me! I hope he is not hurt, Merry—"

"Only shaken up a bit, I think, sir!" said Tom. "So—so we thought—"

"Yes, yes, I understand, boys!" said Mr. Railton, smiling. "It was a very generous thought. Carry on, then—carry on, by all means, boys. It is healthy exercise for you, and much more useful than snowballing."

And, with a laugh, the good-natured Housemaster passed on.

"THE TITAN THREE"

The Radio Set You Cannot Do Without.

"Decent old sport!" was Blake's comment. "If it had been old Ratty now—"

"Blow Ratty!" said Tom Merry. "We're finishing this job if only to take him down a peg."

"Yaas, wathah!"

With renewed energy, the juniors resumed operations, and they had just finished, with a minute or so to spare before break ended, when a figure descended the New House steps.

It was Mr. Ratcliff, and he fairly glared as he sighted the juniors just putting the finishing touches to the cleared paths.

As a matter of fact, it was a disappointing scene to Mr. Horace Ratcliff. Taggles—like most of the domestic staff—did not like Mr. Ratcliff, and the dislike was mutual. Mr. Ratcliff had known Taggles couldn't possibly clear the path by himself before tea, and he had looked forward keenly to the pleasure of reporting him. Now he saw that pleasure vanishing before his very eyes.

"What does this mean, boys?" he hooted. "Am I to understand that you have interfered in the work assigned to the domestic staff?"

"We've cleared the paths for Taggles, if that's what you mean, sir!" said Tom Merry cheerfully.

"Scandalous!" was the Housemaster's retort. "I have never heard of such a thing! I am inclined to think that you have done this solely to annoy me, Merry."

"Not at all, sir! Just to help old Taggles, sir!"

"Rubbish! You were near when I warned Taggles, and you must have heard my remarks!" snapped Mr. Ratcliff, his nose glowing like a red signal of danger. "It is nothing less than insult to me. You will come with me at once—all of you!"

"Oh, yes, sir!"

The job was done now, and Taggles was saved from the spite of the mean-spirited Mr. Ratcliff, so Tom Merry & Co. followed cheerfully in single file as the Housemaster strode into the School House and led the way to Mr. Railton's study.

Mr. Railton was just sitting down at his desk, and he looked at his visitors in some surprise.

"Mr. Ratcliff—" he began questioningly.

Mr. Ratcliff waved his hand at the meek-looking juniors.

"I have brought these boys before you on a serious matter, Mr. Railton!" he snapped.

"I have caught them in the act of shovelling snow in the quadrangle—doing the menial tasks assigned to the domestic staff. As they are not in my House I have brought them to you for punishment!"

"Oh, indeed!" said Mr. Railton, raising his eyebrows a trifle. "But I fail to see what harm they were doing, Mr. Ratcliff. So far as I am aware, they were not breaking the rules of this school by shovelling snow from the paths."

"What—what—really, Mr. Railton—" Mr. Ratcliff spluttered.

"On the contrary, they appear to have been engaged in a generous and kindly act," said Mr. Railton. "Moreover, I was fully aware of what they were doing, and had given them my approval to carry on, Mr. Ratcliff."

"Oh!" gasped the discomfited New House master; that was all he could say at the moment. All the wind was taken out of his sails.

The juniors could not help smiling. Mr. Railton frowned at them.

"You should have explained to Mr. Ratcliff that you had my approval," he said severely.

"Mr. Ratcliff did not give us the chance, sir," said Tom Merry meekly. "He just ordered us to follow him, and walked indoors, sir."

"Oh! Ahem! Very well," said Mr. Railton, with a cough. "It is—a—er—a misunderstanding, of course. Mr. Ratcliff was not aware of the true state of affairs. In the circumstances you may go, my boys."

"Oh, yes, sir!"

"Thank you, sir!"

"Yaas, wathah! Thank you vevy much, Mr. Wailton!" And the juniors backed out of the study, keeping their

grins and chuckles until they got outside in the corridor, where they gave free vent to them.

"Oh, what a giddy scream!" chortled Blake. "What price dear old Ratty!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old Wailton!" remarked Arthur Augustus. "Weally, that has taken old Watty down a peg or two, deah boys. The hard work was worth it all, if only for that. Pewwaps he won't be in such a huwwy to intahieeah again."

"Yes, rather!"

And Tom Merry & Co. returned to their Form-rooms in high feather. They had kept their word to Ephraim Taggles, and they had scored over the unpopular Mr. Horace Ratcliff. And there they imagined the affair was ended. But, if only they had known it, in that they were making a very big mistake.

CHAPTER 4.

The Limit!

"WHERE'S Gussy?"

Really, it was most exasperating. It was tea-time in Study No. 6. The cloth was laid, likewise cups and saucers, plates and dishes. Beyond that, however, save for a loaf of bread, milk and sugar, there was little else on the study table.

Yet there would soon be more—when Arthur Augustus D'Arcy returned. That youth had been dispatched twenty minutes ago to the school tuckshop for a supply of delicacies, in addition to butter and ordinary fare. As the errand to the tuckshop should have only taken Arthur Augustus ten minutes at most, his chums were naturally exasperated.

But it was just like Gussy. "Can't send the ass anywhere without his getting lost or mislaid or something!" snorted Blake. "Where the thump can he have got to?" "Those Shell-fish will be here in a sec," said Herries. "They're here now!" grunted Digby.

The tramp of feet sounded in the passage outside, and Tom Merry, Lowther, and Manners came in cheerily.

"Here we are!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Hallo! We're too early, I see. Sorry!"

"Where's Gussy?" asked Lowther.

"That's just what we'd like to know!" said Blake, with some heat. "We sent him to the tuckshop for the grub twenty minutes ago."

"Phew!" said Tom Merry. "It shouldn't take even old Gussy as long as that!"

"Perhaps he's gone upstairs to change his necktie," suggested Lowther. "It usually takes him half an hour to do that, you know."

"Don't rot, Monty!" said Tom Merry severely. "This looks rather serious, you chaps. Think those New House wasters have collared him and raided the grub?"

"My hat! I never thought of that!" said Blake, in sudden alarm. "Look here, you Shell chaps take paws, and I'll run along to the tuckshop."

"Better all go!" said Tom. "If it is those New House worms, we may be needed in force."

"Well, that's so!" said Blake, nodding. "It's jolly queer, and it's clear something's happened to Gussy. Awfully sorry to keep you fellows waiting—"

"Not at all!" said Tom politely.

"Perish the thought!" said Lowther. "Accidents will happen—especially to Gussy."

The juniors got their coats and went out together. Blake, Herries, and Digby were very annoyed. They had asked the three Shell fellows to tea, and it seemed impolite to keep their guests waiting and put them to trouble like this. In such social gatherings inter-Form rags and rows were "off," and politeness was the order of the day. Whether it was Gussy's fault or not, his chums decided to bump him soundly at the first opportunity.

In Dame Taggles' absence Mrs. Mimms was in charge THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,093.

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of the tuckshop, and as a glance inside did not reveal the person of Arthur Augustus, Blake questioned the old dame. "Which Master D'Arcy 'as been here," she stated. "Twice he come, and took two lots of goods, Master Blake. He came back a few minutes ago for some pickles and some 'am and some sauce and some heggs."

"Pickles, ham, sauce, and eggs!" repeated Blake faintly. "What on earth's the awful dummy thinking of? We never sent him for stuff like that; we sent him for tarts and cakes and stuff. Oh, my hat!"

"Must have gone suddenly potty!" said Herries. "Suddenly, eh?" murmured Lowther. "Oh crumbs! It's been visible for ages!"

"And did he take the stuff?" demanded Blake. "Oh, yes, Master Blake—all exceptin' the cheese, which isn't in stock just now."

"Cheese? Oh crikey! Which way did he go? Did you see, Mrs. Mimms?"

"Across to the lodge, of course," said Mrs. Mimms, in surprise. "Leastways, I s'pose so, seein' as he said they was wanted for Mister Taggles' tea, sir."

"Mum-my hat!"

"T-Tut-Taggles' tea?" stuttered Blake. The startled juniors stared at Mrs. Mimms. Then Blake suddenly gulped and started for the door. His chums followed him as he rushed across the snowy quad towards Taggles' lodge. The theory that Figgins & Co. had raided the grub was abandoned now. The Terrible Three were grinning; they had guessed already something of the truth. Blake had also guessed, but he did not grin—far from it.

"Oh, the awful ass!" he gasped. "What silly game is he up to now?"

They soon knew. Blake knocked hard on the oaken door of the lodge. It opened after a brief wait, and then—all the juniors jumped.

It was not Taggles who came to the door in answer to their knock; it was none other than Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. And the swell of the Fourth appeared to be very busy. His jacket was off, and his shirt-sleeves were turned back. There was a smudge of coal dust on his face, and his hands were grimy.

"Bai Jove!" he exclaimed, eyeing the visitors to the lodge a trifle uneasily. "It is you fellows! Do you want to see Taggy?"

The juniors did not want to see Taggles. They could already see him lying on the couch before a big, roaring fire. Close by, the kitchen table was set for tea, and it appeared to be loaded with good things. Taggles had a plate before him, and he was apparently just finishing his tea.

"No!" gasped Blake, taking in all this at a glance. "We don't want to see Taggy; we want to see you, you awful duffer! What about our tea? What about the grub you were sent for, you footling idiot?"

"Weally, Blake——"

"What's this game?" gasped Herries. "You knew we were waiting; that these Shell-fish were coming to tea, Gussy!"

"Ahem! Oh, yaas!" said Arthur Augustus, regarding his chums calmly through his monocle. "It is vevy unforch, of course. I twust Tom Mewwy and his friends will accept my apologies. But it weally cannot be helped, deah boys!"

"Can't be helped, you awful——"

"Pway do not waise your voice, Blake!" said Gussy frigidly. "You are well aware that I stwongly object to bein' woaheed at."

"But—but——"

"I wegwet that I cannot join you fellows at tea," explained Arthur Augustus. "You see, poor old Taggy is wathah seedy after his fall this afternoon, and I feel obliged to wemain here to attend to his wants and help him."

"Oh, is he?" gasped Blake. All eyes turned upon Taggles. That individual eyed the wrathful juniors somewhat uneasily. Perhaps he had a guilty conscience, and felt they were not likely to accept that information as easily as did the innocent Arthur Augustus.

"Oh, is he?" repeated Blake, after his scrutiny of the invalid. "Well, you can help him as much as you like, you footling ass! But we want to know where our grub is?"

"Ahem! You—you see——" Arthur Augustus seemed to find difficulty in explaining. "You see, poor old Taggy requires great care and good gwub at pwsent, deah boys. He says so himself. I felt obliged to pvocure some gwub and delicacies for him, deah boys."

"Oh!"

"I twust you fellows do not object to that?" said Gussy. "But our grub—where's our grub?" almost yelled Herries.

"Pway do not shout, Hewwies!" said Gussy coldly. "I wegwet that afaik I had purchased the goods Taggy needed there was no money left for gwub for ourselves. You see,

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I only had a pound to spend, as you know. That is all gone now."

"Well, you—you——"

"I weally do twust you fellows will not be so mean and heartless as to gwumble about that," said Gussy. "If Gussy really did trust that, he was an optimist of the first water!"

Blake & Co. were so mean and heartless—very much so! "Oh, you—you born idiot!" spluttered Blake. "And you knew we others hadn't a blessed penny between us; and we haven't even got any butter for tea! And—and—— Oh, you—you——"

"Weally, Blake—— Weally, you fellows——"

"Come outside a minute!" gasped Blake. "Shut the door so that dear old Taggy won't catch cold!"

"Certainly, deah boy! That is vevy thoughtful of you, Blake!"

Arthur Augustus came outside, closing the door after him gently so as not to disturb poor old Taggles. As the door closed Blake gave Digby and Herries an eloquent look.

"Now!" he breathed. "Show him whether we mind or not!"

"Weally, Blake, I twust—— Oh, bai Jove! What—— Welease me, you wuff—— Yooooop!"

Bump!

The good-hearted and well-meaning Arthur Augustus smote the snowy earth with a terrific bump.

"Yawooooogh!"

"Now again!" hooted Blake. "Show the awful dummy just what we think of him! Done us out of our tea to feed that spoofing old buffer! Give him socks!"

"What-ho!"

And Digby and Herries aided Blake with a will. Then, leaving Arthur Augustus seated on the ground roaring with anguish, they trooped away with the grinning Terrible Three.

"Well, what's to be done now?" said Herries dismally. "That—that prize ass——"

"That awful tailor's dummy——" spluttered Digby. "Whose cash was it?" asked Tom Merry, with a chuckle.

"His own," said Blake, with a snort. "He was standing the feed, as we were stony. But we always share and share alike in Study No. 6, and he jolly well knows it, the——"

Words failed Blake. "Hard lines!" grinned Tom Merry. "Does this mean the giddy feed's off?"

"Y-yes!" said Blake. "We're awfully sorry, you fellows——"

"Don't mench!" said Tom politely. "We quite understand. If we had that prize ass in our study we'd keep him chained up. Still, things aren't desperate. We've got some grub in stock—luckily—and if you like you can come and tea with us. We'll come along to you some other time."

"Good wheeze!" said Lowther. "You'll be as welcome as the flowers in May! We've got a tin of sardines and some cake."

"That settles it, then—we'll come!" said Herries. "It's too bad!" mumbled Blake. "But——"

The prospect of tea in Hall was little better than the prospect of dry bread in Study No. 6. There seemed nothing else for it. In comparison to tea in Hall and tea in Study No. 6, Tom Merry's study would be a land flowing with milk and honey. So Blake & Co. thankfully accepted the invitation, and went along to Study No. 10. But the things they said regarding Arthur Augustus D'Arcy would have made that youth's hair curl could he have heard them.

CHAPTER 5.

Turning the Tables!

"THEY'RE up to something!" declared Tom Merry. "Sure to be!" agreed Manners.

"And something against us, of course!" said Blake. "When those New House worms go prowling about with their heads together——"

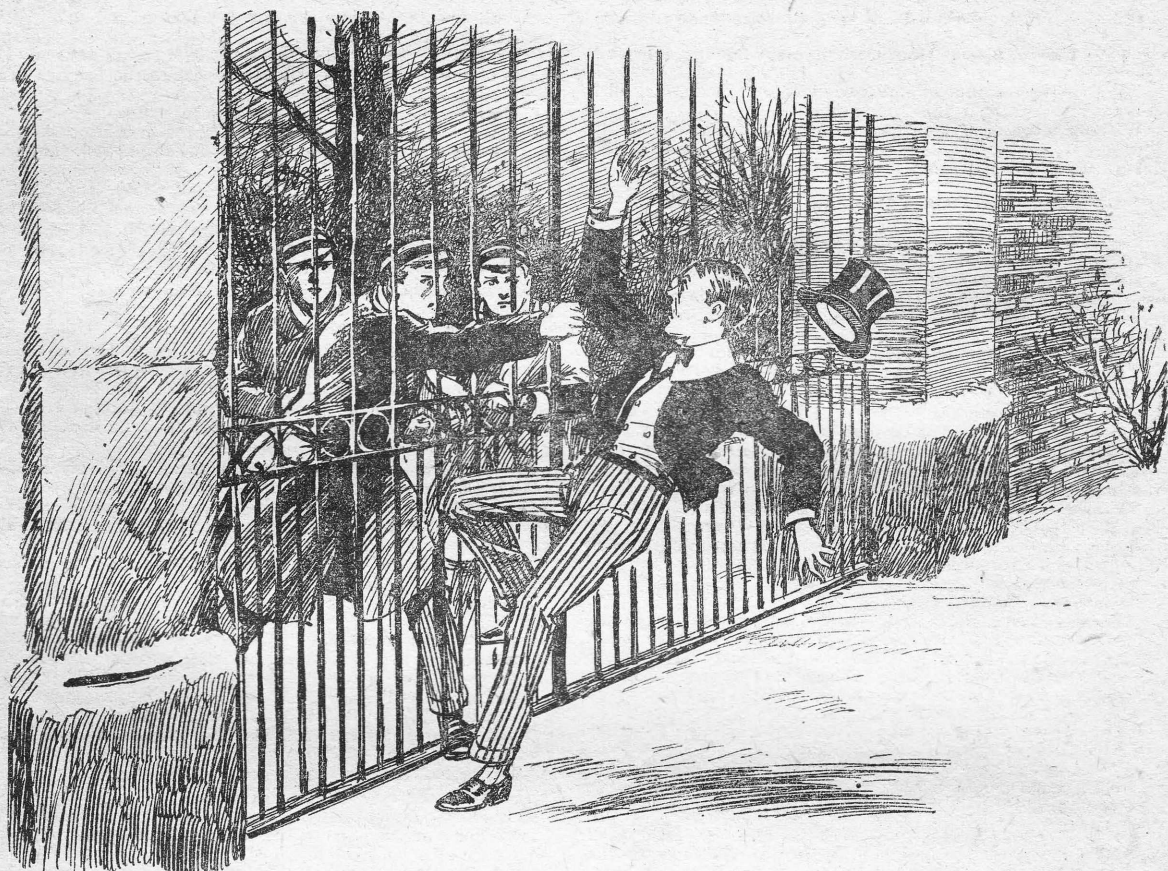
"I don't think it's exactly against us!" said Tom Merry, frowning. "I think they've some game on against old Gussy. I suppose the silly ass is still at the lodge?"

"Must be! The silly idiot hasn't been in for his tea yet!"

"Perhaps he's had some grub at the tuckshop," suggested Tom Merry. "But—this looks interesting, chaps. I vote we do a bit of stalking. Come on!"

"What-ho!"

Tea was over in Study No. 10, and the chums of the School House had gone out into the quad for a stroll. And not without intention, their stroll had taken them in the direction of the lodge. They were very interested indeed in the doings of Arthur Augustus, and they wondered if he was still "on the job."



While Grundy & Co. raged on the other side of the locked gates, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy leisurely drew out his gold watch and peered at it in the gloom. "Bai Jove!" he began, in some alarm. "Taggy's clock must be— Yooooop!" Gussy's remark ended in a sudden yell as Grundy's fist took him full on the nose. (See Chapter 8.)

When near the lodge, however, Tom Merry had suddenly given a warning, and called a halt, as he sighted three forms lurking round by the rear of the lodge. It was getting dusk now, but Tom had easily recognised the three as their deadly enemies—Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn, of the New House.

Knowing the cheery New House trio as they did, Tom Merry & Co. were suspicious at once. Long experience—often bitter indeed—had taught them to be so. There was never any knowing what Figgins & Co. were up to.

With great caution, Tom Merry led the way as the School House party left the path and began to skirt the wall of the Head's garden. Moving over the thick snow, they made no sound, and very soon they were in hiding within a few yards of the three New House juniors.

They were very soon convinced that their suspicions were not without foundation.

Figy & Co. were undoubtedly up to something. All three were now at the rear of the lodge, whispering together as they peered round the corner of an outbuilding.

Unseen in the dusky quadrangle, Tom Merry & Co. watched expectantly.

They soon grasped something of what was "on."

Quite suddenly, a form appeared from the back yard of Taggles' lodge, and the watchers soon recognised it as that of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. He had a big parcel under one arm and, without a glance about him, he started along the path towards the School House.

As he did so, the New House trio chuckled and slipped round the outhouse and vanished silently into the yard from whence Gussy had come.

"That settles it!" said Tom Merry. "They've got some game on, either against Gussy or old Taggy; but I fancy it's against Gussy!"

"And if it's against Gussy, then it's against us!" said Blako.

"Exactly! You chaps wait here a tick while I spy out the land!" said Tom.

With the stealth of a Red Indian on the war trail, Tom Merry slipped to the wall of the lodge yard. At the spot where the wall joined the house was a large rain-water butt, and in a moment Tom had scrambled up the wall by the aid of this.

Cautiously he peered over the wall into the yard.

Nobody was there, but from a shed in the far corner came the sound of muttered voices and soft chuckles. Deciding to take a risky chance, Tom slipped over the wall into the yard. In another moment he was peeping into the shed through the crack of the partly opened door.

Figgins & Co. were there—Tom Merry gaped as he saw what they were doing. Fatty Wynn was holding open the lid of a large, dilapidated hamper, while Figgins and Kerr were carefully emptying something into it from a black sack.

What that something was, Tom could smell, as well as see. It was soot!

"Phew!" murmured Tom to himself. "Now, what's that for, I wonder?"

He got an inkling the next moment, as Figgins gave another deep chuckle and spoke.

"Won't Tom Merry be awfully pleased to get this nice present?" he remarked. "A most sootable present, ain't it? He'll be so grateful to dear old Gussy. I expect he'll tip him for carrying it up!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"So that's the game!" breathed Tom. "The awful bounders!"

Keenly interested now, the captain of the Shell watched the proceedings. Having filled the hamper to the top, the lid was closed, and then Figgins took a tie-on label from his pocket and scribbled upon it. Then he tied the label to the handle of the hamper.

"Lend a hand, chaps!" he chuckled. "We'll shove it with the other things, and then we'll make ourselves scarce!"

"Right-ho!"

Kerr lent a hand, and only just in time did Tom scuttle out of sight as Figgy & Co. emerged from the shed. They carried the hamper across the yard and dumped it down by a little pile of boxes just inside the doorway of the lodge scullery. Those parcels and boxes had, apparently, been delivered at the lodge by the station carman, and should have been delivered to their respective owners by Taggles. Apparently, Figgins & Co. knew that Arthur Augustus had undertaken the job to help Taggles, and it had prompted them to do this dark deed.

Tom Merry left his hiding-place when the coast was clear, and then he hurried across to the hamper. In the deepening dusk he peered at it.

On the label, scribbled in pencil, was the address:

"Tom Merry, School House, St. James' College, Sussex."

"I thought as much!" gasped Tom. "Little me, eh? Well, we'll see about that, my pippins!"

Without more ado, Tom took a piece of indiarubber from his pocket, and rubbed out the name and address on the label. In place of it he wrote another:

"G. Figgins, New House, St. James' College, Sussex."

Then, with a soft chuckle, Tom hurried out of the yard and rejoined his companions.

"Well, what's the game?" demanded Blake. "Should we have collared Figgy? He's just gone off with his pals."

"Nunno!" said Tom. "Jolly good job you didn't, you fathead!"

And then he explained what he had seen—and done.

"Well, the cheeky bounders!" grinned Blake. "Just as well we spotted 'em—though poor old Gussy would have had the worst of it. But it's rather a feeble wheeze—"

"Don't be so sure of that!" chuckled Tom. "That hamper's an ancient one, and looked as if it was falling to pieces. If it doesn't bust when Gussy's carrying it, then it's bound to do when he dumps it down in Figgy's study."

"Phew! I see!" grinned Blake. "Great! And it'll teach that ass, Gussy, not to be such an awful chump! In the ordinary way I would stop the potty chump. But, after doing us out of our tea—"

"He deserves it!" said Herries.

"And more!" added Digby.

All were agreed upon that. In the opinion of his chums, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy needed a lesson, and they were going to see that he got it. Whether the noble Gussy would be grateful for that lesson, however, was a very different matter.

CHAPTER 6.

A Black Business!

"OH, gweat Scott! How vevy twyin'!"

Thus Arthur Augustus D'Arcy as he gazed down at the big hamper in the doorway of the scullery at Taggles' lodge.

Arthur Augustus was rather surprised to see the hamper there at all. He wondered how he could have missed seeing it earlier. Still, there it was, and it was addressed to Figgins of the New House.

It was certainly rather trying. Save for a sandwich and a cup of tea, Arthur Augustus had not had anything to eat or drink since dinner. He had been much too busy. Not that Arthur Augustus minded much about that. The flesh-pots never did tempt him overmuch, and he always was a very self-sacrificing youth. Somebody had to do Taggles' work. Taggles himself could not do it. He was still suffering severely from shock, and his rheumaticky leg was hurting him "summat erool." Taggles himself had told Gussy that.

Gussy was very sorry indeed for poor old Taggy. Some fellows might be suspicious of Taggles; might even have entertained the belief that he was making the most of an imaginary injury in order to dodge his work. But not so Arthur Augustus!

He felt deeply sympathetic in the goodness of his innocent heart. He also felt to some extent responsible for Taggy's unfortunate condition. His young brother Wally was responsible for the old gate-porter's fall in the quad, and as that young scamp was unlikely to make reparation Gussy felt it his duty to do so. He looked upon it as a sort of family debt towards Taggles.

Moreover, Gussy did not want the old porter to get into trouble with the authorities. He knew that Taggles had been getting into hot water of late for neglecting his duties in various ways. Gussy had heard the Head himself reprimand the old porter severely only the day before for allowing packages to accumulate at the lodge instead of delivering them at once.

He also knew that both Mr. Selby and Mr. Rateliff had reported the old chap for insolence. It was also well known that the authorities did not look upon Taggy's weakness for "strong waters" with approval—nor his weakness for "snoozing" when he should be awake.

On the whole, Ephraim Taggles was not exactly popular with the fellows at St. Jim's, either. If a fellow arrived at the gates to find Taggles just locking them, no amount of pleading would persuade the old porter to relent and let them in "on time." On such occasions "dooty" was "dooty" with Taggles.

Yet Arthur Augustus had always found him respectful, and at times almost genial. Possibly, however, this was because Gussy was inclined to be generous with his tips.

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At all events, Arthur Augustus was resolved to aid him in his time of need. Yet he looked at the big hamper rather ruefully now. The thought of carting that up the stairs of the New House did not appeal to the elegant swell of St. Jim's in the slightest.

"How vevy twyin', bai Jove!" he murmured again. "It looks feahfully heavy, and those New House wottahs may twy to wag me. Howevah, it is a tuck-hamper and they may be vevy pleased."

Arthur Augustus decided to get the job over before tackling the remaining packages. He raised the hamper, and, to his surprise, found it lighter than he had supposed. It did not feel as if it contained heavy pots of jam and jellies and other heavy foodstuffs, at all events.

Gussy thought it rather strange, but he wanted to get the job done, and, with another glance at the label, he raised the hamper on to his shoulders and started off with it.

The fear of a ragging from stray New House fellows decided him to enter the New House by the back way, and take the back staircase to his destination. Several times on the journey he felt something from the hamper trickling over his shoulders and down his neck, but he concluded it was only sawdust, and ignored it.

He arrived at Figgins' study without incident, to find nobody in the study, though the gas was lit. From the study next door came laughter and a hum of voices, amongst which he recognised those of Figgins, Kerr, and Fatty Wynn.

"Watah lucky the boundahs are not in," murmured Gussy.

Eager to get his errand over, Gussy lowered the hamper and dropped it with a bump on the carpet. Next moment he gave a gasp as the lid, purposely tied insecurely by the humorous Figgins, burst open, sending a flood of soot over the carpet.

"Oh, bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

He fairly blinked and blinked at the soot.

Then, taking out his eyeglass, he jammed it into place and blinked at it again.

"Oh, gweat Scott!" he gasped faintly.

He could scarcely believe his eyes.

But it was undoubtedly soot, and even as he blinked at it the door of the next study was heard to open, and he heard Figgy's voice loudly.

The sound brought the realisation of his own danger to Gussy. His noble brain did not work very quickly at times. But something of the truth came to him in a flash. Somebody—most likely a School House joker—had planted the hamper on to him, intending him to take it to Figgins. If Figgins caught him there with it he knew what to expect—a record ragging!

For once, Arthur Augustus acted swiftly.

He shoved down the lid, grasped the hamper in both arms, and made a rush to get out of the study with it.

Unfortunately, he had not anticipated Figgins also being in a hurry.

As Gussy went rushing out George Figgins came rushing in. The two collided violently in the doorway, and both staggered backwards and sat down simultaneously with resounding bumps and gasps.

The consequence was not so serious in so far as Figgins was concerned. But it was for the unfortunate Gussy. As he staggered back and sat down with the hamper in his arms the lid flew open, and the contents swept over his chest and features in a black, smothering cloud.

"Gwoooooogh!" gurgled Gussy.

He sat there, on the carpet, fairly wallowing in soot. There was soot to the right of him, and soot to the left of him, and soot all over him. Gussy seemed to move and breathe and have his being in soot.

Figgins sat and gazed as if transfixed at the sight. His chums, Fatty Wynn and Kerr, stood in the passage behind him and blinked into the study in great amazement.

"Mum-my hat!" gasped Figgins. "It—it's that hamper of soot, you fellows! What the—the—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Wynn and Kerr; they could not help it.

"It—it's nothing to laugh about!" bellowed Figgins, spluttering with wrath as he saw that his little plot had somehow gone astray. "Look at it—look at the dashed soot—all over our carpet and things! Oh, my hat!"

"Gwoooooogh!" gurgled Gussy. "Oh, bai Jove! Ugh-gwoooogh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Despite the state of their study carpet, Fatty Wynn and Kerr could not restrain their laughter. Other fellows came to see what the joke was, and they also roared as they sighted the luckless Arthur Augustus.

Figgins fairly danced around the sprawling swell of St. Jim's.

"Gussy, you fearful bounder!" he bellowed. "What the

thump did you bring that here for? It wasn't addressed to us, you born idiot!"

"Gwooooh! Gug-gug-gug! Yaas-gwooooh!—it was!" gurgled the hapless and sooty Gussy. "Oh deah! My clobbah will be wuined! Gug-gug-gug!"

"What the dickens does it mean?" chortled Redfern. "Is this old Gussy's idea of a jape against us? If it is, then I don't think that kind of a jape 'soots' him at all!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
A sudden idea sent Figgins suddenly to the hamper, and as he read the label on it he gave a roar that would have done credit to Stentor of old.

"My hat! We've been done, you chaps!" he bawled. "Those School House bounders must have tumbled and altered the label! Look at it!"

Fatty Wynn and Kerr gasped aloud as they looked at the label.

"Bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus was looking in growing suspicion at Figgins & Co. "Bai Jove! Then this—gwooooh!—is a wotten twick of yours, Figgay, you feahful wuffian!"

"It was!" groaned Figgy, as he looked round at the havoc. "But it's gone wrong! We filled that hamper with soot, meaning you to take the rotten thing to Tom Merry's

was about as black as Gussy, and he was getting by far the worst of the scrap.

The onlookers were nearly hysterical with laughter—excepting Kerr and Wynn, who were as concerned for the study carpet as they were for Figgy.

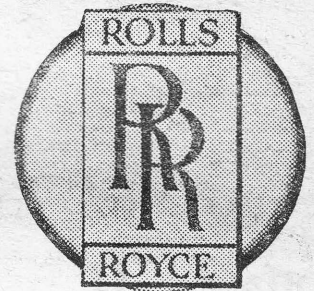
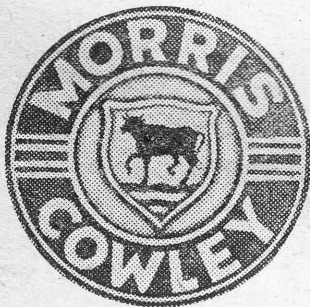
"Help!" roared Figgins. "Gussy, you raving lunatic, I'll smash you if you don't leggo! Fatty—Kerr, you awful rotters, why don't you—yooop!—lend a hand? I'll slaughter you for this!"

Fatty and Kerr would have preferred to let Figgy have Gussy all to himself. But after that appeal—not to mention the dire threat—they could not ignore it. Fatty looked dismally at Kerr, and Kerr returned the look and nodded. Then, with one accord they braved the soot and went to the rescue.

From that moment the gallant Gussy—enraged and ferocious as he was—stood no chance whatever. In a matter of seconds he was flat on his back with the panting Figgins on his chest, Kerr on his legs, and Fatty Wynn holding his arms.

Both he and Figgins looked fearful and wonderful sights. They resembled Christy Minstrels. Fatty Wynn and Kerr were black enough themselves.

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study and dump it there. But—but those awful bounders must have tumbled and changed the label; it's addressed to me now, anyway."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Redfern and the rest. As it was not their study carpet that had suffered they could afford to laugh.

But Arthur Augustus did not laugh. He understood now. He had got rid of some of the soot from his eyes and nose and other features, and, jumping up, he made a wild, furious rush at George Figgins.

"Yarooooop!" roared Figgy, in great alarm. "Keep him off! Keep— Oh, my hat!"

Nobody attempted to keep Gussy off—they had too much respect for their clothes to do that. And Figgy had Gussy all to himself. Clashed in each other's arms in a deadly embrace—an embrace that was not of Figgy's seeking—they waltzed about the room, and then went down and rolled over and over, the noble and justly irate Gussy punching often and hard.

Figgins fairly howled. He seemed heedless of the punches in his frantic efforts to get away from Gussy's sooty waistcoat.

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"Help, you cackling dummies!" shrieked Figgins. "Dragginoff! Leggo, you silly lunatic! Yooooop! Oh, my hat! Help!"

CHAPTER 7.

A School House Score!

"H A, ha, ha!"
The study was in an uproar. By this time the pile of soot was considerably smaller—Gussy and Figgy having collected a great deal about their persons as they rolled about in it. Figgy

"Hold him! Hold the School House sweep!" gasped Figgy, with unconscious humour. "We'll teach the raving lunatic to come here playing games like this!"

"Why, you feahful wuffian," shrieked Arthur Augustus from the floor, "you are responsible for this, Figgay! Welease me, you feahful wottahs! I will administah a tewwible thwashin' all wound for this!"

"Will you?" gasped Figgins, almost hysterical with wrath. "We'll see about that! Chuck that soot out of the thumping window, and we'll send the raving chump back to his casual ward in the hamper!"

"Good egg!" panted Fatty Wynn. "That's it!" said Kerr wrathfully. "Chuck that soot out of the hamper, you fellows, while we hold the footling dummy!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Not much!" laughed Redfern, tears of merriment streaming down his cheeks. "I'm keeping my distance, old beans!"

"Same here!"
"Yes, rather!"
"Ha, ha, ha!"

Nobody was keen to handle the hamper—nor to come near the soot. Figgins glared at the chortling crowd round the doorway.

"You cackling dummies!" he roared. "Afraid of soiling your blessed hands! Well, I'll have to do it. Hold him, chaps!"

Figgins released his hold on Arthur Augustus and laid hands on the hamper, which still contained a certain amount of soot. It was an error of judgment which Figgy soon had cause to regret.

For Arthur Augustus was not done yet—far from it. He had no intention of being sent back to the School House inside a sooty hamper—if he could help it. Exhausted as

he was, the prospect of that humiliating indignity endowed him with strength born of desperation.

Before either of the New House trio of practical jokers had grasped the fact he had wrenched himself free. Then, ducking his head, he butted Fatty Wynn in the waistcoat, sending him sprawling backwards with a howl to sit down with a terrific bump amid the soot on the carpet. The next instant Kerr had been treated likewise.

But Figgins came off worst. Before he had realised just what was happening the gallant Gussy had snatched the hamper from him. Quick as lightning he raised it aloft and brought it down clean over Figgy's head, effectually bonneting that startled youth.

Then Gussy made a frantic leap for the door.

"Look out!"

"Oh, my hat!"

Had the noble Arthur Augustus been a ferocious tiger the crowd round the doorway could scarcely have scattered more quickly.

With yells of alarm they jumped away to right and left, and Gussy went through them like a knife through butter. Then he fairly flew, reaching the stairs in a matter of seconds. By the time Kerr had jumped to the door he had vanished.

"After him, you footling asses!" yelled Kerr.

But there were no takers; the crowd howled with laughter, but they made no attempt to go after Arthur Augustus. In any case, that worthy was already well away. They crowded round the doorway and stared in at George Figgins.

That hapless youth was a sight worth seeing.

If he had been black before he was doubly black now. There had been quite a quantity of soot still in the hamper, and Figgy had got most of it. It was thick on his head and on his shoulders; he wallowed in soot. The hamper had gone right down over his shoulders, but he had dragged it off now, and was standing, gasping and spluttering as if for a wager. His eyes gleamed white from his black face, as did his teeth.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Redfern. "You—you do look a sight, Figgy!"

Such a shocking sight did Figgins look that the laughter subsided for a moment. But Redfern's somewhat unnecessary remark broke the spell. The next moment the crowd howled with helpless laughter.

It proved too much for the hapless Figgins.

With a spluttering roar of wrath he made a rush at the doorway. The crowd scattered again with frantic haste, and this time they did not return—Figgy looked far too ferocious for that.

"Ow! Grooogh!" gurgled Figgins, shaking himself like a dog just out of water. "Grooogh! Oh, that—that School House villain! Pooff! I'll—I'll—I'll—"

Words failed George Figgins.

"It's no good wailing!" groaned Francis Kerr. "We've been done this time—dished and diddled and done brown—black, in fact," he added, with grim humour. "Those School House worms have scored, and no mistake! Let's go and clean ourselves up, for goodness' sake! We'll never hear the last of this!"

"Grooogh! Gug-gug-grooogh!" gurgled Figgins.

It was all he could say at the moment. He gave himself another frantic shaking, and then he led the way towards the nearest bath-room. It was a sad, bitter day for Figgins & Co.

Meanwhile, Arthur Augustus had managed to get out of the New House safely. After shaking as much soot from his person as he could, he made his way into the School House. Several fellows were chatting in the hallway, and they yelled as they sighted the black apparition. But Gussy did not give them the chance to ask questions; he just bolted up the stairs, taking them three at a time. At the top of the stairs he met Kildare, and that worthy stared after him blankly and shouted. But Gussy ignored the shout. On the Fourth Form passage Gussy almost collided with Blake, Herries, and Digby, who were just emerging from their study.

"What the—who—" began Blake.

"It's Gussy!" gasped Herries. "Oh, my hat! It's Gussy!"

"Oh crumbs!" gasped Digby. "What the—the—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Blake & Co. seemed to grasp the position, and they roared as they did so.

"You—you cacklin' wottahs!" spluttered Gussy, seething with indignation and wrath. "This is all through your wotten tickewy, Blake—I know it is! Figgins said—"

"Our rotten trickery?" said Blake, ceasing to laugh suddenly and adopting a tone of injured innocence. "Oh, Gussy, what have we done?"

"Done!" hooted Arthur Augustus. "It was you who changed the label on that w'etched hampah!"

"Eh? What hamper?"

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"You know quite well what hampah!" shrieked Gussy. "It was at Taggles' lodge, addressed to Figgins. And Figgins said it had been addressed to Tom Mewwy, and that Tom Mewwy or you had changed the label. And it was filled with wotten soot, and I took it up to Figgins' studay!"

"You did? Yes, but what did you want to cart a hamper of soot up to Figgy's study for, Gussy?"

"How did I know it was beastlay soot?" howled Gussy. "I took it up and it burst open there."

"But how the dickens did you get in this awful mess?" asked Blake.

"Figgay went for me," spluttered Gussy, "and in the scwap we wolloed in the soot. Then Kerr and Wynn joined in, and the awful wuffians were goin' to send me back here in the beastlay hampah!"

"Awful!" gasped Blake. "And then—"

"Then I went for them!" gasped Gussy. "I bowled Kerr and Wynn ovah, and then I tipped the w'etched hampah ovah Figgay's head and bolted."

And Arthur Augustus paused, gasping with deep indignation and wrath.

Blake had heard all he wanted to know now, and as Gussy finished he doubled up and roared with laughter; and Herries and Digby joined him.

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Blake. "So it came off—beautifully! Oh, what a scream! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Then—then you did do it, you uttah wuffians?" hooted Gussy.

"Yes, old top! Ha, ha, ha! You shouldn't have— Oh, my hat! Look out!"

Blake did not stay to finish—he turned and bolted, with Herries and Digby hot on his heels, as Arthur Augustus made a ferocious rush at them. They vanished round the corner of the passage, and after chasing them for a few yards the justly irate Gussy gave it up, and made his way to the nearest bathroom. There, behind a locked door, he scrubbed and rubbed, while over in the New House, Figgins & Co. did likewise in a state of mind that boded ill for future relations between the rival Houses. And while they were thus engaged, Blake, Herries, and Digby were telling the story to Tom Merry & Co. in Study No. 10—a story that made the Terrible Three laugh until they wept. Once again the School House juniors had turned the tables on their rivals.

CHAPTER 8.

Leave it to Gussy!

"I TWUST you are feelin' much bettah now, Taggy, deah boy?"

"Jest a little, Master D'Arcy—jest a little, thank you kindly, sir!" said Taggles in a faint, weary voice. "All I needs is rest—specially for this 'ere leg! Wot I says is this 'ere, Master D'Arcy—if all the young gent's was like you it would be a pleasure ter be gateporter at this 'ere school."

Arthur Augustus smiled—he was only human, and he was far from being proof from flattery. But it was rather a twisted smile—almost ghastly, in fact, especially as traces of soot still seemed to hover like a halo round his person.

It is said that to do a kindness to another brings pleasure to oneself. But Arthur Augustus, undoubtedly, was not getting much pleasure out of helping Taggles. In fact he found it very trying indeed.

Yet Arthur Augustus meant to stick it out. He had put his hand to the plough, and he was the last fellow to turn back, or aside. Someone, obviously, had to help Taggles in his present weak and helpless state. D'Arcy had tried to persuade Taggles to allow him to report his sickness to the Head, but the old porter had stoutly refused to give in.

"Which I shall be right as rain presently, Master D'Arcy," he told him. "It ain't worth worryin' the 'Ead about. And he wouldn't understand, neither—not like a kind-'earted young gent like you. I'm put on 'ere I am, that's what it is—worked like a 'orse, and it ain't no wonder as I'm laid up like this 'ere."

So Arthur Augustus had respected the old chap's wishes, and was still ploughing a lone furrow, so to speak—nobody else, apparently, being willing to aid Taggles in his dire extremity.

But it was very trying for Gussy, and he had been most unfortunate so far. The affair of the hamper of soot alone was enough to make any other fellow cease acting the Good Samaritan there and then. But not so Arthur Augustus; he was a sticker, and his heart was stout and proof against misfortune—even against soot. The moment he had finished in the bathroom and had changed his clothes, Arthur Augustus had hurried back to finish his job of delivering the rest of the parcels and packages. Then he had got coal in for Taggles and chopped firewood for the morning.

Now he was taking leave of Taggles—it being close on call-over.

"That is quite all wight, deah boy," he answered. "I am vewy glad indeed to heah you are a little bettah. Are you quite sure there is nothin' else I can do?"

Taggles gave a groan, and shook his head.

"Nothin' as you can do, Master D'Arcy, thank you kindly, sir," he said faintly. "There's that there gate to be locked in about 'arf a minute," he added with a glance at the kitchen clock. "But I s'pose I'll 'ave ter drag meself out and crawl out somehow to do it. Though goin' out in that there cold—"

"Bai Jove! Pway do not think of such a thing, Taggy," said Gussy promptly. "That is a vewy easy job—"

"Not so easy as you think," said Taggles. "It ain't everybody as can look arter that there gate as I does, Master D'Arcy. And what the 'Ead would do if anythin' 'appened to me, I don't know."

Taggles spoke as if being a gate-keeper was a job requiring more than the usual skill and ability. In his view, the job of gate-porter was a sort of axis upon which the little world of St. Jim's revolved, and without which it could not exist.

"Still," he added, eyeing Gussy anxiously, "if you thinks as 'ow you can manage it, Master D'Arcy—"

He paused hopefully. As a matter of fact, Taggles was feeling for too comfortable where he was, to wish to go out into the cold to look up. Gussy had built him a big fire, and Taggles was lying very comfortably on the couch in front of it, with a pipe in his mouth and a glass and a bottle, both containing a colourless liquid, at his elbow. There was no label on the bottle, but Taggles had assured Gussy that it was his medicine for his rheumatism which he got from the chemist in Wayland.

"Yes, I can manage it all wight, Taggy," said Gussy, with a smile. "At all events I will twy. Is this the key, Taggy?"

"Yes, Master D'Arcy," said Taggles, removing his pipe from his mouth. "And I 'opes as you does it properly. If any young gent comes in arter you locked it—yes, that's the key," he added, as Gussy took it down from a nail by the door. "Mind you lock it safely. That there lock is—'old on, Master—"

But Arthur Augustus did not hear that last remark—unfortunately. He had hurried out, anxious to get the job done. Taggles had been about to inform him that the kitchen clock was two minutes fast—a little fact Gussy was unware of.

The door slammed behind him, and Taggy's last remarks were wasted upon the desert air. The lodge door was a massive affair of oak, and though Taggy shouted, his voice failed to reach the swell of St. Jim's.

Out in the open, Gussy took a deep breath of fresh air—he felt he needed it, badly. The kitchen was hot and stuffy, and the tobacco smoke had made Arthur Augustus nearly choke. Moreover, a most powerful smell came from Taggy's "medicine." Gussy was an innocent youth, but he was well aware of Taggy's "strong weakness" for gin, and he could not help suspecting that Taggy's medicine had come from a very different place than that of the Wayland chemist's.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Gussy. "I wewly do hope the poor old chap will soon be well again. Aftah a night's west I wathah think he will be, though, and an aftahnoon off to-morrow will do him a gweat deal of good. I am vewy glad indeed that I thought of that wippin' plan to let him off. Bai Jove, it is wathah dark."

It certainly was dark, and very slippery and sloppy. A thaw had set in, and the snow was turning to slush rapidly. Gussy splashed his way to the gates, and managed to close them. Then he turned the key. He had scarcely done so, and was just turning away, when he heard a wrathful shout, and three forms came rushing up to the gates through the slush and darkness.

"Taggles, you old fraud!" came a wrathy bellow.

"Bai Jove! Gwunday!" murmured Gussy.

He returned to the gates and peered through the bars. Through them he could see the angry features of George Alfred Grundy of the Shell. Behind Grundy were his chums, Wilkins and Gunn.

"Taggles, you old rotter—" spluttered Grundy.

"Taggles, you old curmudgeon!" hooted Wilkins.

"Taggles, unlock these dashed gates!" spluttered Gunn.

"Bai Jove! Wewly, you fellows—"

"Great pip!" ejaculated Grundy. "It's that born idiot, D'Arcy! What the merry thump—"

"D'Arcy, you idiot—"

"D'Arcy, you fooling dummy—"

"Bai Jove! Wewly, you fellows—"

"Unlock these dashed gates!" howled Grundy. "Well, of all the cheek! Who told you to lock the rotten gates, D'Arcy?"

"Where's that old fool, Taggles?" hooted Gunn.

"Taggy is indisposed, Gunn!" said Gussy frigidly.

"There is wewly no occasion to lose your tempahs, you fellows. I am helpin' poor old Taggy, and I have locked up for him."

"What?"

"Pway do not shout!" said Gussy severely. "It is your own fault—you should not be late, you know."

"But we weren't late, you fooling idiot!" shrieked Grundy, glowering through the bars of the gate and shaking them.

"We had at least a minute to spare, and if you hadn't locked up too early, you fooling dummy—"

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus indignantly. "That is wathah stwong, Gwunday. It was at least a minute aftah seven when I locked up—"

"It wasn't—it's only on the stroke now—in fact!" yelled Grundy furiously. "If you don't open this dashed gate, D'Arcy, we'll smash you to smithereens."

"Your thwats do not fwighten me," said Gussy with some heat. "You are late, Gwunday, and it will be my duty to give your names to Taggy for him to weport to Mr. Waiton."

"Oh, you—you—"

"Duty is duty!" said Gussy severely. "It would not be wight for me to allow you—"

"Will you stop gassing and open the gates!" shrieked Grundy. "I tell you it's not—why, there goes seven now!"

"Oh, bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus jumped as the deep notes of seven struck from the school clock tower at that moment.

"Oh, bai Jove!" he gasped. "Taggy's kitchen clock must be w'ong, then! Gweat Scott!"

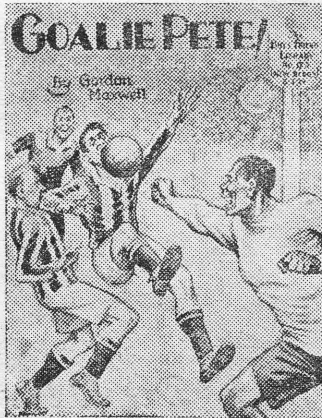
As if to make quite sure that the school clock was not also "w'ong," Arthur Augustus leisurely drew out his own gold watch and peered at it in the deep gloom.

"Bai Jove!" he began, in some alarm. "You fellows are quite wight, aftah all. Taggy's clock must be— Yoooooop!"

Something came suddenly through the bars of the gates with the force of a battering-ram. It was Grundy's fist, and

(Continued on next page.)

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it took Arthur Augustus full on the nose, his remarks ending in a yell that floated over the silent quadrangle. “Yoooooop!”

Gussy sat down with a thump and a splash in the slush. He was still seated there, gasping, when Grundy came swarming over the gates. He was followed immediately by the raging Wilkins and Gunn; like Grundy, they did not intend to wait any longer for Arthur Augustus to open the gates at his leisure.

They landed one after another, and then they all made a simultaneous assault upon Arthur Augustus.

They grasped him, and they bumped him, and then they rolled him over and over in the slush. Gussy's wild roars echoed through the darkness of the quad.

“There, you footling idiot!” panted Grundy. “Perhaps that'll teach you not to lock chaps out of gates, you cheeky owl! Come on, you chaps—perhaps we'll just do it, after all!”

“Yes, rather!”

“If we don't we'll make mincemeat of this born idiot!”

With that Grundy & Co. dashed away and vanished into the darkness towards the lights of the School House.

Arthur Augustus sat up, gasping and groaning. He was almost beside himself with amazed wrath. He knocked as much slush off his person as he could, and then he hurried into the lodge, hugging his nose, which had suffered considerably in its sudden collision with Grundy's powerful fist.

Taggles eyed him in great anxiety and alarm.

“What's 'appened, Master D'Arcy?” he demanded. “I thought as 'ow I 'eard a 'owl—”

“It was those feahful wuffians, Gwunday and his friends!” panted Gussy, dabbing dismally with his handkerchief at his nose. “I locked them out too early, Taggles. I was not awah—”

“Which I'm sorry about this 'ere, Master D'Arcy,” said Taggles, though he did not look it. “But I shouted arterter you as this 'ere clock was fast, like. I 'ope as those young gents won't say nothin' about it an' get me inter trouble?” he added anxiously. “You'd better run orf now or you'll be late for call-over.”

“Oh, bai Jove! Yaas!” said Gussy in alarm. “I weally must wush off at once, Taggy.”

“And you won't forget that there rising-bell?” asked Taggy, doubt and anxiety in his tone. “You won't go an' ring that too early—”

“Wathah not!” said Gussy hastily. “Wely on me, Taggy. Leave that to me, deah boy! And I do twust that your extwa hour in bed will do you a gwent deal of good.”

With that Arthur Augustus hurried out of the lodge and made tracks for the School House. He found that the fellows were just dispersing from calling-over. Luckily, Mr. Railton did not “spot” his damaged nose, but he made the unfortunate Gussy a present of one hundred lines for being late.

It was about the last straw for Arthur Augustus. He was finding the job of temporary gate-porter a far from smooth and pleasant one. And his face was gloomy as he made his way to Study No. 6 to begin prep.

CHAPTER 9.

Arthur Augustus Is Obstinate!

“THAT ass—”
“That piffing duffer—”
“That born idiot—”

It was to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy that Grundy, Wilkins, and Gunn were referring. They were just relating Gussy's “latest” to the Terrible Three, and Blake, Herries, and Digby, on the way back from Hall after calling-over.

“He's all that!” agreed Blake, with a sigh. “We've tried to make him see sense, but he won't and can't. He's beyond hope, I'm afraid.”

“But is that really a fact?” asked Tom Merry, with a deep chuckle. “Did he really lock up for Taggy?”

“Aren't we telling you so?” snorted Grundy. “And he locked up about two minutes before time.”

“Just what he would do!” grinned Blake.

“Well, he did!” said Gunn warmly. “And kept us waiting outside in the dashed cold while he wagged his chin.”

“We only just managed to scrape in for call-over!” added Wilkins. “Another second would have done us.”

“Still, we lammed him!” said Grundy, with some satisfaction. “I gave him my right on his boko, and then we rolled him in the slush! Well, I'm going to do my prep.”

And Grundy & Co. passed on to their own study. Tom Merry & Co. followed them, chuckling.

“It's too bad!” said Tom Merry. “Poor old Gussy's a good sort, and he always means well. It's too bad for him to get it in the neck all round like this.”

“Well, he only gets what he asks for!” chuckled Lowther.

“Yes, but he doesn't always deserve to get what he

asks for,” grinned Tom. “That old fraud Taggy's playing on Gussy's good nature, of course. He should have got over that bit of a fall this afternoon by now. But as long as he can get some ass to do his work and keep him supplied with delicacies—”

“And gin!” chuckled Lowther.

“Well, Gussy wouldn't buy him gin knowingly,” said Tom. “Still, the old fraud—Hallo, here's Gussy now! Cheerio, Gussy!”

Arthur Augustus seemed to be going to ignore the Terrible Three, but a thought seemed to strike him. He paused, eyeing the grinning three frigidly through his glimmering eyeglass.

“I would like a word with you, Tom Mewwy,” he said coldly.

“Speak on, O Noble One!” said Tom. “I hear you've been putting it across those New House worms, Gussy. Good man! I believe old Figgy looked a sight after you'd finished with him!”

“Good man, Gussy!” said Lowther heartily.

“Well done,” added Manners. “You deserve well of your House, Gussy.”

“It was great, from what I hear!” said Tom solemnly. “You fairly put it across Figgy and his pals, Gussy. You

IT is a truism that no cricket side can be considered absolutely complete unless there is a left-hander in the side. Warwick

Where The Left-

The left-handed batsman holds the unique position side and a special “

Armstrong, the man who led Australia so successfully during the period when he was captain, used to say: “There is something better than having one left-hander in the side, and that is to have two left-handers.”

I wonder if you have ever thought of the many ways in which the left-hander—the fellow who does things the wrong way round—“scores”? Let us think over some of these ways in which the left-hander in a cricket side is a special nuisance or a special advantage according to whether he is against you or on your side.

In the first place it is a certainty that the arrival of a left-handed batsman at the wicket has a tendency to upset the field. They have all got their allotted places for the ordinary right-handed batsman. In comes the left-hander, and all the fielding ideas of the side have to be revised.

LEFT-HAND “NUISANCES!”

And the longer the left-hander stays the greater the nuisance he becomes. A player like Philip Mead comes to the wicket, and the probability is that he stays most of the afternoon, not getting runs quickly but getting them pretty regularly, and mostly in singles.

Now every time a single is run when a left-hander is at the wicket the fielders must change over. This means a certain amount of disorganisation, but even worse than this it has a tendency to make them tired. Especially does this apply to Test matches in Australia, when the heat is often trying. Tired fielders drop catches and give away runs, and the bowlers become less and less lively in consequence. The captain who has two left-handed batsmen on the side doesn't arrange his batting order so that they are both in together. Oh, dear no. To do that would be to lessen the “nuisance” of the left-hander to the other side.

DANGEROUS SINGLES!

There are people who swear that left-handers, on the average, hit the ball harder



A. P. F. C.
England's

than right-handers, any real foundation doubtful.

Even in the field, he can be a bit of a nuisance and they sometimes get that the ball left-handed fielder.

put the kybosh on 'em properly—especially when you tipped the hamper over Figgy. We've heard about it. Splendid!"

"Tophole!"

"Bravo, Gussy!"

But the soft answer failed to turn away Gussy's wrath on this occasion.

"I wufuse to accept your congwatuations in the mattah, Tom Mewwy," he said icily. "You are well awah that I was tweated in a wuffianly and wascally mannah, even though Figgay got the worst of it. I am also well awah that you were responsible for we-addressin' that wotten label, thus sendin' me into the enemy's countwy on a fool's ewwand, bai Jove!"

"Oh, Gussy—"

"Gussy, old man—"

"I do not wegard you as fwends of mine fwom this moment onwards," went on Arthur Augustus heatedly. He was turning away haughtily when he remembered something. "By the way, Tom Mewwy, I stopped just now to tell you that I shall be unable to attend footah pwactice to-morrow aftahnoon, as I shall be othahwise engaged."

"Oh, will you?" said Tom, frowning. "But—"

"He's going to be busy helping Taggy!" grinned Lowther. "I am certainly goin' to spend the aftahnoon doin' some-

thing for Taggy," said Gussy coldly. "I see no weason why you should not know that, Lowthah. I do not wish you to think it is because I am not now on speakin' terms with you fellows."

"But—but look here, Gussy," said Tom Merry warmly, "this won't do at all. You can't go neglecting the footer just to help that slacking old fraud Taggy."

"Taggles is not a slackin' old fwaud, Tom Mewwy. I am wathah surprised—"

"Of course he is!" said Tom. "The old buffer's taking advantage of your good-nature, Gussy. For goodness' sake chuck this silly rot! You'll be getting him sacked as well as yourself if you go on like this!"

"Wubbish—uttah wubbish!"

"The Head's already a bit fed up with him, I believe," said Tom. "Don't you encourage the old slacker and make him worse, Gussy. That's just what you're doing. Take my advice and chuck the silly game. If the Head knew you'd looked up for Taggy this evening—"

"He'll be ringin' rising-bell for the old spoofer next!" chuckled Lowther.

"I see no weason why I should not help Taggles to that extent at all!" said Arthur Augustus heatedly. "You are talkin' uttah wubbish, Tom Mewwy. As a mattah of fact, I have awwanged to wing wising-bell for Taggy in the mornin'."

"You—you've what?" yelled Tom.

"I have awwanged to wing the wising-bell," said Gussy coldly and calmly. "Taggy is vewy feeble and weak, and an extwa houah or so in bed will do him a world of good. I intend to get up vewy earlay in the mornin' to do so. It is a vewy small mattah, and will be a gweat help to poor old Taggy."

"Small matter! Oh, my hat!"

"Yaas. But I twust you fellows will keep it to yourselfs," said Arthur Augustus. "One nevah knows—Wailton might waise objections."

"Might! Oh, great pip!" gasped Tom. "Why, you footling idiot—"

"I wufuse to be called a footlin' idiot, Tom Mewwy!"

"But look here—"

"I wufuse to look heah. I have already told you that I am not now on speakin' terms with you wottahs."

"But—"

"Wats!"

Arthur Augustus, having remembered—rather late—that they were not now on speaking terms, ended the discussion by marching away with his head in the air.

The Terrible Three stared after him—Manners and Lowther chuckling, and Tom Merry frowning.

"The—the awful duffer!" gasped Tom. "He'll end up by getting the sack yet! Look here, let's go after him—"

"Let the fathead rip!" grinned Lowther. "In any case, the more you talk to him the more stubborn he gets. Let him rip!"

"Oh, all right!" said Tom. "But I'd better mention this to Blake, and get him to stop the awful idiot!"

And the Terrible Three went in to prep, Tom Merry fully intending to speak to Blake on the subject in the Common-room that night. Unfortunately, by the end of prep, the captain of the Shell had forgotten all about it, as had his chums. Prep, followed by a heated argument on footer, had quite swept Gussy's intention from Tom's mind.

Meanwhile, Arthur Augustus went to his study. He found his three chums already at prep. They all looked up at him, trying hard not to smile. The story of Gussy locking the gates for Taggy had caused no little entertainment in the Lower School.

"Hallo, here you are, Gussy!" said Blake cheerily. "Make room for Gussy at the table, Herries! Feeling better, old man?"

Arthur Augustus got out his books with calm deliberation, and seated himself at the table. Then he spoke—icily and with dignity. If anything, Gussy felt more annoyed with his own chums than he did with Tom Merry & Co. He felt—perhaps somewhat justly—that they ought to have been more loyal over the matter of the hamper of soot.

"Kindly do not address me, Blake," he said. "Aftah what has happened this evenin' it is impossible for me to wegard you as fwends any longer. You have tweated me with wuffianly diswespect and diswegard. Kindlay wemembah that in futuah I do not know you, nor shall I evah speak to you."

"Oh, my hat! But look here, Gussy—"

"Wats!"

"Now, Gussy—"

"Listen to me, Gussy—"

"Gussy, old chap—"

Blake, Herries, and Digby spoke in a sort of chorus. But Arthur Augustus did not answer. His chums apologised

Under "Scores."

of being a special advantage to his own "ce" to the other!



PPMAN,
pper.

whether there is such an idea is

er, the left-hander ce to the batsmen, the penalty of for- been driven to a me explain. The

batsman plays a ball a little bit wide of the left hand of a fielder at, say, extra cover. If the fielder has to pick up the ball with his left hand and

transfer it to the right hand before throwing, a single can be run with safety. But if the batsmen try the run on the assumption that the ball will have to be changed from the "picking up" hand to the other hand, and then find that the fielder is a left-hander, well, one of them may only discover the gravity of the mistake when he is on his way back to the pavilion run out.

A SET-BACK FOR THE BOWLER!

It is undoubtedly true, too, that the arrival of a left-handed batsman puts some of the very best bowlers out of their stride. They don't like the left-hander, partly because their field has to be changed, and possibly because the left-hander is able to deal much more easily with their best ball.

You will probably remember the wonderful bowling of Jack White, the English amateur, in the Test match at Melbourne just recently when he had the amazing experience of bowling 57 overs at a cost of only 64 runs, 30 of those overs being maidens. White is a particularly difficult bowler for the ordinary batsman to score from at all freely. But it is noticeable that left-handers have often reaped a rich harvest off White, and this is well explained by Major the Lord Tennyson, the Hampshire captain.

Referring to the bowling of White, Lord Tennyson says: "It has always been my policy to go for White, and this has brought me a fair measure of success against him. Maybe it is because I am left-handed that I have not been seriously troubled with White, as his best ball is the one which comes with his arm into the body of the right-handed batsman."

You see the point of the foregoing, don't you? That ball which is coming into the body of the right-handed batsman, and is specially difficult to play, is a comfortable and comparatively easy to hit ball for the left-hander. It isn't coming into his body—it is going away.

So remember, when you're picking your cricket eleven this coming season, to include a "left-hander" in your side—if he's good enough, of course!

humbly and contritely, but as in the case of the Terrible Three Arthur Augustus was adamant and heartless to their appeals. And after trying for some time in vain, Blake, Herries, and Digby gave it up as a bad job. Gussy was on his high horse, and only time would bring him down from it.

In the meantime, as his chums knew from long experience, he would have to be given "his head." Thus it was that when they retired to bed that night, Blake, Herries, and Digby knew nothing of Gussy's intention to ring the rising-bell. That was a surprise in store!

CHAPTER 10.

Saving the Situation!

TOM MERRY was usually the first awake and out of bed in the mornings at the sound of the rising-bell, winter and summer alike.

On this particular winter's morning, however, Tom Merry awoke with a curious feeling that something was wrong somewhere. No sound of a distant bell clanging reached his ears, and possibly it was the lack of this that made him feel that something was amiss.

He sat up, rubbed his eyes, and stared about him in the gloom of the early morning. Then he reached for his watch on the locker at his bedside. At that moment he became aware that Monty Lowther, in the next bed, was already peering at his own watch.

"Hallo, Monty!" sang out Tom cheerily. "I say, what the dickens is the time? I didn't hear the rising-bell go."

Lowther glanced at his watch, and then he gave vent to an explosive chuckle.

"It's just twenty-past seven!" he ejaculated. "Oh, my hat!"

"Twenty-past seven!" almost yelled Tom, as his eyes roved round the sleeping dormitory. "But—but what the dickens—"

"Have you forgotten?" gurgled Monty Lowther. "What about dear old Gussy?"

"Gussy! Why, what— Oh, my hat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" Lowther gave an uncontrollable yell of laughter as he saw the look of understanding in his chum's face.

"Oh, great pip!" gasped Tom, in great alarm. "That awful ass Gussy! I remember now! He was going to ring the bell for old Taggy. He must—oh, my hat!—have forgotten or overslept himself!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Lowther. "Just what we might have expected!"

"I did expect it!" gasped Tom. "And I intended to get Blake to persuade the silly chump to drop the idea. Oh, my only aunt! Twenty minutes past now, and the bell ought to have been rung at seven! It's nothing to cackle at, Monty, you ass! Something's got to be done!"

Gasps of amazement came from almost every bed as the juniors' watches verified the startling news that the rising-bell had not been rung. By this time practically all the dormitory was awake. Such a thing had not happened in the recollection of the oldest inhabitant. Tom hurriedly dressed, warned his chums not to mention Gussy in connection with the matter, and then rushed from the room.

Something had to be done if Taggles—and the luckless Arthur Augustus—were to be saved.

The captain of the Shell found practically all the Fourth Form dormitory sitting up in bed. The only fellows, apparently, who had not yet awakened were Baggy Trimble, Mellish, Herries, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

That youth slumbered on peacefully, quite unconscious—as yet—of the latest sensation at St. Jim's.

He was soon to be made conscious of it.

"It beats the band!" Blake was just remarking to the dormitory in general. "It's the first time I've ever known old Taggles to miss—though he has been late often enough. But twenty minutes! Oh, my hat! The Head will rave!"

"Hallo! Here's Tom Merry!" said Digby. "I say, Merry, d'you know why—"

"Yes, I jolly well do!" gasped Tom Merry breathlessly. "Wake that awful ass Gussy, for goodness' sake!"

Without waiting for anyone else to carry out his order, Tom grabbed at the bedclothes and swept them off Arthur Augustus.

"Oh, bai Jove! What—what— Mewwy, you wuffian!" Arthur Augustus sat up, rubbing his eyes sleepily. Then he gave a gasp of wrath as he saw who it was who had so ruthlessly roused him from his beauty sleep.

"You champion chump!" gasped Tom. "What about rising-bell? D'you know it's after twenty past seven!"

"Oh! Oh, bai Jove! Oh, gweat Scott!" Arthur Augustus almost jumped out of his skin as he remembered. Blake stared aghast.

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"What—what the thump d'you mean by that, Tommy?"

"I mean that this dangerous lunatic promised old Taggy to ring rising-bell this morning!" said Tom grimly. "He's overslept himself, of course, the born idiot!"

"Oh, great pip!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors remembered Gussy's adventures when locking up the gates for Taggles, and they howled with laughter as they understood.

They were still laughing when Kildare, skipper of St. Jim's, looked in. Kildare himself had only just hurriedly dressed, and he looked almost dazed.

"Buck up, kids!" he snapped. "Come on! Out of bed, you lazy young rascals!"

"Risin'-bell ain't gone yet, Kildare!" said Cardew meekly.

"I'm aware of that, kid!" said Kildare grimly. "Never mind questions now! Out you get, and the chap not downstairs in ten minutes from now gets a lick with my ash-plant."

Kildare vanished, evidently to rouse the occupants of the other dormitories. As he went, Tom Merry grabbed Arthur Augustus, who was about to hurry after the Sixth-Former in his pyjamas.

"Let me go, Mewwy," said Gussy, in great distress: "This is weally vewwy sewious. I must explain to Kildare so that Taggy won't be blamed."

"You'll do nothing of the kind, Gussy!" snapped Tom. "Just look after your tame lunatic, Blake. He's done enough damage already. If something isn't done quickly, they'll both be for the long jump, or something."

"Bai Jove! Weally, Tom Mewwy—" spluttered Gussy. "Leave this to me," said Tom, giving Blake a meaning look. "I've got a weezy, I think. Not a word about Gussy, you fellows."

"Right-ho!"

Amidst a chorus of chuckles, Tom Merry ran from the room. Most of the fellows seemed to think it a screaming joke; but Tom knew that the authorities would be extremely likely to look upon the matter with a very different eye. The Head was a great stickler for punctuality, and with Taggles already in bad odour—

Something must be done to save the situation, at all costs.

Reaching the corridor outside, Tom Merry looked rapidly up and down. But nobody was in sight—even the masters always relied upon rising-bell, and they also had overslept to a man. Taking his courage in both hands, as it were, Tom Merry sped to the staircase, and went down by way of the banisters with a rush. A moment later he had reached the hallway.

He found the big double doors wide open. Close by was a pail of water and scrubbing-brushes and a broom. Apparently the maids were hard at work—the rising-bell meant nothing to them. But at the moment the hallway was deserted—a fact Tom was thankful for.

In a flash he was outside, and speeding for the lodge. It was still dusky in the quadrangle, and not a soul was about. Most of the snow had gone, but it was very wet underfoot.

Keeping well out of range of any of the bed-room windows, Tom soon reached the porter's lodge. As he expected, the blinds were down, and no smoke came from the kitchen chimney. Evidently Taggles was enjoying his unwonted extra bit of welcome slumber, little dreaming of the sensation his extra "forty winks" was arousing!

Tom's scheme was a daring one, and he knew only too well the risk he was running.

He went first to the shed in the yard of the lodge, and soon found what he wanted. It was a long coil of rope, and Tom cut it into two lengths with his pocket-knife.

One end of the rope he tied securely to the handle of the door—a massive iron affair—and the other he tied to an iron hook he found driven into the brickwork of the wall, making the rope as tight as he could.

Then Tom hurried to the front door, which was of oak and studded with nails, with an iron ring for a handle. Tom tied one end of his second piece of rope to the ring, and the other end to one of the wooden posts that held the chains in the front of the lodge.

"There, that should fix dear old Taggy up," murmured the captain of the Shell, with a chuckle. "It'll take a stronger man than Taggy to open either front or back door with those ropes there. And if the old chap isn't a helpless idiot, he'll know what it means and play up!"

With that, Tom gave several hard raps on the door. He soon heard sounds of movement within the lodge, and as he did so he gave another soft chuckle, and made tracks for the School House.

Again he was lucky, and he managed to reach Study No. 10 without meeting a soul. And there he waited, not daring to risk going upstairs again. Very soon he heard the tramp of feet as the fellows began to come down from the dormitories.

Tom left his study then, and waited in the passage until his chums came along. Arthur Augustus was with them, and he was arguing heatedly with Blake. Apparently Gussy had quite forgotten the sad fact that he was not on speaking terms with his faithless chums.

"I tell you I must!" he was exclaiming wrathfully. "I insist upon goin' at once to Mr. Wailton and explainin' mattahs, Blake. If you do not welease my arm, I shall be obliged to administrah a feahful thwashin', Blake!"

"Oh, dry up!" returned Blake wearily. "It's a home for idiots you ought to—Hallo! Oh, good! Here's Tommy now."

"Yes, here I am!" grinned Tom Merry. "You haven't left it loose, then—"

"Weally, Mewwy, you wottah—"

"No," said Blake, ignoring Gussy. "It's tried hard to get free, though. Well, what's the game, Tommy?"

"All serene, I think," said Tom. "All depends on Taggy now. If he gives the game away—well, I've done my best, and it can't be helped. Let's go out and see what happens, chaps."

It was safe enough now, for Tom knew there would soon be plenty of fellows in the quad, if there weren't already.

And he proved to be right. Everybody seemed to want to know what had happened to old Taggy, and quite a number were standing round the lodge by the time the juniors arrived there.

They had scarcely got within a few yards, when they became aware of a furious hammering and thumping going on within the lodge. Above the general din they also heard Taggles' wrathful voice.

"Good!" breathed Tom Merry, with a chuckle. "He's playing up all right!"

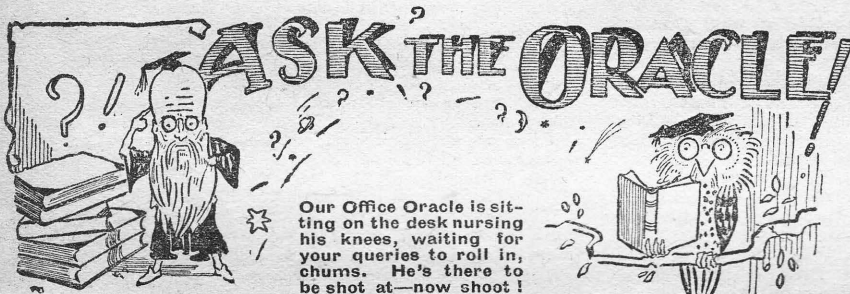
"Weally, Tom Mewwy, what—"

"Wait and see!" grinned Tom. "Haven't you spotted those ropes yet? You'll see the wheeze—"

He was interrupted by a warning hiss from Blake, as Mr. Railton came rustling up to the lodge. The Housemaster's face was angry and puzzled. He had scarcely arrived when, from the direction of the New House, came the tall, angular figure of Mr. Ratcliff.

"What are you boys doing here?" demanded Mr. Railton, frowning round at the little crowd. "What— Bless my soul! What does that commotion mean? Is it Taggles? Is the man mad, I wonder?"

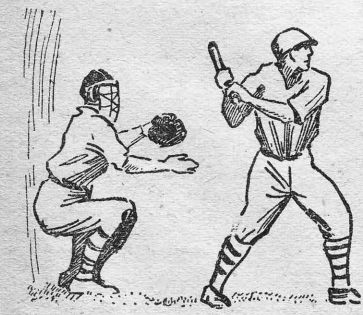
(Continued on next page.)



Our Office Oracle is sitting on the desk nursing his knees, waiting for your queries to roll in, chums. He's there to be shot at—now shoot!

Q. What are the most popular American sports?

A. A Second-Former, Reggie Scudder, writing from St. Beleyby's School, informs me that his master "had the neck" to set this "obscure and obtruse" question in class the other day. And, thinking that if he contemptuously ignored it, as it deserved, he might displease his teacher, Reggie had a cheerful shot at it by setting down as his answer: "Rounders, basket-ball, and chewing gum," with the result that up to the time of his writing to me, he found some discomfort in sitting down. Now get this, Reggie, as our American cousins might say: The most popular sport of all in the great United States is baseball, which perhaps you had in mind when you wrote "rounders." Football of a kind known as the "college game" still has a vogue and is played on a field marked in squares called the "gridiron." Basket-ball is perhaps more of an indoor game and played considerably by girls. Tennis and golf, among the "softer" sports are as well liked as over here, while in many northern States lacrosse is played almost as much as it is in Canada.



Baseball—the most popular game in America.

Q. What is a teredo?

A. A kind of worm that lives in water and often causes much damage through boring into the hulls of wooden ships and into the piles of piers, jetties, and quays.

Q. What is a tonga?

A. This, F. F. C., is a two-wheeled vehicle of a type much used in India and sometimes drawn by oxen. The name is derived from the Hindustani word, tanga. When I was fifty years younger and touring in India with fellow members of the Psychological Reactionary-Metamorphosists Society, I travelled full many a mile in one, and never once got giddy because of the speed at which I was whirled along. A tonga that travelled over two and a half miles per hour would probably be chased—hot-foot by the Indian speed-cops.

Q. For what purpose was the Marble Arch in London built?

A. Ah-ha, that is what a good many people have wanted to know, Johnny Meadows. But I will do my best to enlighten your mental darkness on the subject. The Marble Arch was put up in the year 1828, and its original purpose was to serve as an entrance to Buckingham Palace, the London home of the sovereign. In 1850 it was pulled down, but erected again in the following year in the entrance to Hyde Park and quite close to the notorious old Tyburn Tree. In 1908 great alterations were made in the roadway near the Arch to permit of the easier passage of traffic, and the Arch itself was thus left isolated as you may see it to-day.

Q. How deep is the sand in the Sahara Desert?

A. Here, give us a chance, Bill Jones, of Bromley and Bow! I had a bad enough headache before I came to your question. However, after taking several aspirins, I set off to visit the various prominent Egyptian officials in London, and, at the end of several days, discovered one whose brother's cousin on his mother's side had been out with a surveying party

in the African backblocks. In consequence I am able to inform you, Bill Jones, on the most unimpeachable authority, that the depth of the sand in the Sahara Desert is about thirty feet.

Q. What does the constellation of stars known as the Southern Cross look like?

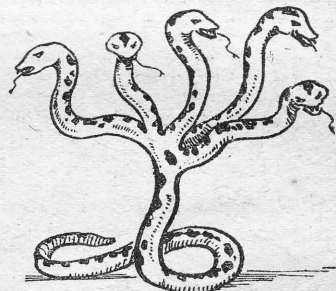
A. It is shaped rather like a kite, and certainly not like a cross at all. It is not correct, Tom Purser, that it can only be seen if you are in the Southern Hemisphere of the world. It is also visible at times from parts of the globe as far above the Equator as the Red Sea.

Q. What do the following mean as applied to ships: 1. H.M.S. 2. R.M.S. 3. S.S.?

A. 1. His Majesty's ship. 2. Royal Mail Steamer. 3. Screw steamer.

Q. What is a hydra?

A. This, my dear Pontefract reader, was a snake in Greek mythology whose many heads grew again as fast as they were cut off. The term is used nowadays to describe any evil that is very hard to exterminate. Also there is a water-snake



The illustration above depicts a reptile that lives only in Greek mythology—a hydra.

called by this name although it has only one head. I regret I cannot read your name to print it, my chum, but then your letter unfortunately has as many blots as the mythological hydra has heads!

Q. Who were the Dirty Half Hundred?

A. The Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment. They gained the name back in 1809 at Vimiera. In the heat of action on the battlefield they used the black cuffs of their sleeves for wiping the perspiration from their faces with the result, it is recorded, that they made themselves look like a bunch of sweeps from the dye. But that detail did not prevent them from fighting like heroes!

"Somebody seems to have fastened him in his lodge, sir!" said Darrell, who had been sent by Kildare to investigate the reason for Taggles' non-appearance on duty. "Look! It evidently wasn't Taggles' fault at all that the bell wasn't rung!"

Mr. Railton jumped as Darrell pointed out the rope stretched across from the post to the front door.

"Bless you, Darrell!" murmured Tom Merry.

"The back door's fastened in the same way" said Darrell, "Looks to me like somebody's idea of a joke, sir!"

The Housemaster's frown grew deeper.

"Lemme out!" came Taggles' voice in a roar from within the lodge. "Which I'll report you for this, you young varmint! Open this durned door, some of you! Wot I says is this 'ere—"

What Taggles said further was smothered in the din of his hammering on the door. Darrell took out his pocket-knife and cut through the rope, trying to hide his own grins. Mr. Ratcliff gave a snort.

"Mr. Railton, what has taken place?" he asked sourly. "Are you aware that the rising-bell did not ring this morning?"

"Yes; I am well aware of the fact, Mr. Ratcliff!" said Mr. Railton grimly. "Some miscreant—"

"I have long felt that Taggles was unfitted for the post of porter at this school!" said Mr. Ratcliff. "After this, I trust he will be dismissed at once! His general slackness and insolence, coupled with his disgusting addiction to intoxicating liquors—"

"In this case, I do not think Taggles is to blame!" said Mr. Railton. "Somebody appears to have fastened the doors of the lodge, and thus prevented the porter from leaving to carry out his duties. It was probably done last night after dark, and is somebody's idea of a joke."

"Good heavens!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff. "Impossible!"

But it was possible—even Mr. Ratcliff had to admit that as he saw the rope. As Darrell cut through it, the door was dragged open, and Taggles appeared. He was red in the face with anger.

"Wot I says is this 'ere—" he was bawling, when he paused at the sight of the two Housemasters.

"Taggles!" said Mr. Railton sternly. "Are you aware that the rising-bell was not rung this morning? Are we to understand that this trick with the rope—"

"Which it weren't my fault, sir!" gasped Taggles, fairly swelling with indignation. "Wot I says is this 'ere—'ow could I get out of this 'ere lodge when the doors was fastened w' them ropes?"

"Then—then you have no idea who fastened you in in that scandalous manner?" demanded Mr. Railton.

"O' course not, Mister Railton!" said Taggles. "'Ere 'ave I bin tuggin' an' tuggin' at that there door and at the kitchen door for hours an' hours, but they wouldn't budge an inch!"

This was not strictly true—by a long, long way. But Taggles was not always particular to state the facts exactly as they stood. As a matter of fact, Taggles was, naturally enough, deeply grateful for those ropes. He had almost had a fit when he had awakened and glanced at the clock, and then out of the window. At that time the quadrangle was usually filled with fellows going across to chapel. He had known at once that the bell couldn't have gone; that Gussy had "let him down." And the knowledge had filled him with horror.

Then he had discovered that the doors would not open, and he had jumped at the chance to save himself. Taggles had the wit to see that the fact of his being fastened in the lodge "saved his bacon," so to speak.

And he meant to make the most of it.

But he had no need to say more. Even Mr. Ratcliff had to admit that Taggles could scarcely be blamed for not ringing the bell, in the circumstances. With the doors fastened, and the windows much too small to allow him to get out, it was impossible for the school porter to carry out his duties.

"You see that, of course, Mr. Ratcliff," said Mr. Railton, as he pointed this out to the New House master.

Mr. Ratcliff scowled.

"It is a scandalous outrage, Mr. Railton!" he said sourly. "I suppose some unruly junior is responsible. I do not think for one moment that any member of my House would dare to do such a thing!"

"That remains to be seen, Mr. Ratcliff!" said Mr. Railton stiffly. "The headmaster must be informed of this, of course."

"Of course!"

"The matter must be thoroughly investigated," proceeded Mr. Railton grimly. "If the miscreants are found they will be punished very severely indeed. I have never heard of such a thing. But it is time for chapel now. Boys, go at once and get ready for chapel."

"Oh, yes, sir!"

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And the crowd broke up, grinning and discussing the amazing affair excitedly. Tom Merry gave a deep chuckle as he and his chums crossed the quad.

"All over, bar shouting!" grinned Tom. "We know what that 'thoroughly investigated' means. It'll fizzle out; it always does. The giddy beaks can't touch Taggy; it would be a giddy injustice if they ragged him and old it even. Yes, I fancy I've saved your bacon, Gussy—and old Taggy's, too. Take my tip and let Taggy go his own giddy way after this."

"I am vewy, vewy gwateful to you, Tom Mewwy," said Gussy, with some warmth. "You took a vewy gwecat wisk on my behalf, and I think it was vewy decent of you, deah boy. I—I think— Yaas, on weflection, deah boys, I think I will ovahlook what happened last night, and we can all wemain fwriends, if you wish it."

Tom Merry & Co. assured him solemnly that they did wish it, and Arthur Augustus beamed. Gussy was himself again at once.

"It is, howevah, impossible for me to let Taggy go his own way, howevah—at least, until aftah this aftahnnoon, deah boys," explained Gussy calmly. "You see, I have pwomised him this aftahnnoon off."

"You—you've whatter?"

"Pwomised him this aftahnnoon off, to go to his niece's weddin', y'know," said Gussy. "I thought the change might do him a gwecat deal of good. I thought it was also too bad of the Head to wefuse to allow him to go. So—"

"But—but who the dickens are you to give a member of the domestic staff an afternoon off?" yelled Blake. "And in defiance of the Head, too! Are you absolutely off your dot, Gussy?"

"Not at all, deah boy," said Gussy calmly. "You see, I have worked it all out, and I have a weally wippin' scheme. Yaas, wathah!"

"But Taggy will be missed, you footling ass!"

"Not at all! You see, I shall be Taggy—for one aftahnnoon onlay, deah boys!" said Arthur Augustus, with a modest grin.

CHAPTER 11.

Gussy Gives Way!

TOM MERRY & CO. stared at Arthur Augustus blankly. But they were on the chapel steps now, and as if he did not consider his remarks required further explanation, Arthur Augustus marched into chapel, and his chums followed gasping.

It was not until after breakfast that they had the chance to tackle Gussy about it.

They collared him as they came out of the dining-hall.

"Gussy, you awful ass!" began Blake breathlessly. "What the dickens did you mean about being Taggy for this aftahnnoon? Are you potty?"

"Pottier than usual!" murmured Lowther.

"Not at all!" smiled Arthur Augustus calmly. "It is vewy simple, deah boys. You fellows know what a weally clevah chap I am at impersonatin'."

"Clever!" gasped Blake. "Oh, my hat! Gussy—a clever impersonator! Did you ever?"

"No, never!" chuckled Lowther. "Gussy, thy name is Modesty! My dear fathead, about the only person you're over likely to impersonate with success is an inmate of Colney Hatch—one who dresses and looks like a tailor's dummy—and wears an eyeglass, of course!"

"Weally, Lowthah, you wottah—"

"Cheese it, Monty!" gasped Tom Merry, in some alarm. "This is no laughing matter, you ass! Gussy, you don't really mean it?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"But you can't impersonate," said Blake, with a snort. "You've as much chance of getting away with it as an elephant would, Gussy. For goodness' sake, chuck that idea up!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"You'll only make a fearful muck of it!" said Tom Merry earnestly. "Taggy's an easy chap to copy, I know, but you couldn't do it. Lowther could; he's a born impersonator."

"What wot!" said Gussy. "Weally, I am beginnin' to think you fellows are feahfully jealous of me!"

"Oh crumbs! Gussy—"

"It was my ideah," said Arthur Augustus indignantly; "and I insist upon you fellows keepin' off the gwass. I have pwomised Taggy to do it, and I weally cannot let him down now. I uttably wefuse to be turned fwom my purpose."

"But—but listen, Gussy—"

"Wats!"

Arthur Augustus walked away with his noble nose in the air. He was naturally annoyed at his ability to impersonate being questioned, and he was afraid the peace might be broken if he stayed to argue the matter.

"Oh, the—the ass!" groaned Blake. "He gets more and more hopeless every day!"

"Oh, let him rip!" snorted Herries. "I'm getting fed-up with his silly rot! In any case, he won't be running much risk—so long as he keeps out of sight, that is. Taggles is rarely wanted on a half-day; and if Gussy keeps inside the lodge he'll be safe enough!"

† This was some comfort certainly. But Blake and the others were very worried indeed about it all. Gussy had only just escaped serious trouble by the skin of his teeth, and now it looked as if he was going to plunge into still more serious trouble.

During first lesson Blake worried about it a great deal, as did Tom Merry. At morning break they tackled Gussy again; and, though it was to no purpose, Arthur Augustus did not seem quite so emphatic about it.

At dinner-time the swell of St. Jim's was less emphatic. The fact was that Gussy himself was beginning to have his doubts. Moreover, he felt he had had quite enough

Taggy, I can get into the New House without raising suspicion; and I'll make things hum, you bet!"

"Look here, Monty," said Tom, in alarm. "None of that—it wouldn't be fair to Taggy to take any risks—no more than are necessary, at all events. No larks, mind!"

"No fear!" said Blake. "Just do the job, that's all!"

"Oh, all right!" Lowther was disappointed, but he mentally resolved that he would get fun out of the situation



"Kerr!" "The spoofer!" "After him!" Tom Merry & Co's yells were truly ferocious as, heedless of Mr. Ratcliff as the window, they made a wild rush towards the spoofer master. But George Francis Kerr did not wait to see what they wanted for his life. (See Chapter 13.)

excitement of late, and he was already regretting his rash promise to Taggles. If he were discovered it would be a serious matter—it might even mean the sack!

When Tom Merry and Blake started again after dinner he coughed and shook his head doubtfully.

"Yaas," he said slowly, "it is wathah a wisk; and weally the job of helpin' Taggles has pwoved vevy twyin'. I have just been to see him; and, weally, he smells tewwibly of gin—at least, I am afwaid it is gin. Still, a pwomise is a pwomise, and I cannot possibly back out now, deah boys. In fact, I uttahly wefuse to do so."

"Then let Lowther do the job," said Tom Merry. "You know Lowther could do it on his head. He wouldn't make a muck of things, at all events."

"Weally, I—I——" Gussy was visibly weakening; and Tom pressed home his advantage.

"You ought not to take the risk for Taggy's sake," said Tom. "If you fail it will be your fault if Taggy gets sacked—as he probably will be. I'm thumping well surprised that the old bounder will take such a risk himself."

"It's the thought of the free gin and stuff at the wedding," grinned Lowther. "The temptation's a bit too much for dear old Taggy. What time has he promised to come back, Gussy?"

"At six o'clock, deah boy," said Gussy. "If—if you weally would not mind takin' the wisk, Lowthah——"

"My dear man, give me the chance, that's all!" grinned Lowther, his eyes dancing. "I'm on, like a bird! But I'm not staying in the lodge all the afternoon—oh dear, no! I'm going to make the most of my chances. Made up as

without taking risks—somehow. He little dreamed who would get the fun!

"So that's settled!" said Tom Merry, in relief. "We'll help you to get the make-up wanted, and you can sneak it along to the lodge. Let's get busy, anyway. What time is Taggy going, Gussy?"

"Two o'clock, deah boy!"

"Then buzz off and tell him—no time to lose!" snapped Tom. "Come on, Monty! I don't like the business, but—well, as Gussy won't drop it altogether, then the sooner we get busy the better."

"Yes, rather!"

And with that Tom Merry & Co. got busy—Gussy to explain matters to Taggles, while the others hurried indoors with Lowther to get the "props" ready.

CHAPTER 12.

Figgins & Co. Take a Hand!

"THAT was rather queer!" said Francis Kerr. "What was?" demanded Fatty Wynn, with his mouth full.

"Didn't you see that rotter, Lowther?" breathed Kerr, his eyes full of suspicion. "I spotted him just as we came out of the tuckshop. He was sneaking behind those elms—making for Taggles' lodge."

"Well," said Fatty, without interest, "what about it?" "It looked suspicious to me!" said Kerr, wrinkling his

brows. "Ha! he's gone into Taggy's back yard. And he's got a bag with him—a big bag."

"My hat!" said Fatty Wynn, interested at last. "Think it's grub, Kerr, old chap?"

"Oh, blow you and grub!" snorted Kerr. "All you think about is grub, you fat guzzler!"

"Well, if it isn't grub he'd got, why bother your silly head about him?" grumbled Fatty. "Catch me, anyway! I say, try one of these jam-tarts, Kerr—they're spiffing! Mrs. Mimms picked 'em out specially for me."

"B-r-r-r-r!" said Kerr, whose thoughts were on matters more important than mere grub. "Can't you see that Lowther must be up to something? Else why would he want to sneak round to the lodge like that—he obviously didn't want to be spotted. We must tell Figgy this."

"Oh, rats!" said Fatty Wynn. "Well, if you don't want one of these ripping tarts I'm going to finish the lot."

And Fatty proceeded to do so.

But Kerr's thoughts were far from grub just then. He was just thinking of scouting round the lodge to investigate Lowther's peculiar actions when he saw a familiar figure come through the gates wheeling a bicycle.

It was George Figgins, and Kerr gave an exclamation of satisfaction as he sighted him.

"Oh, good! Figgy's got back from the village then," he said quickly. "Come on—he'll be jolly interested about Lowther's little game, if you aren't, Fatty."

Figgins was—his eyes gleamed as he heard Kerr's report.

"That's no end queer!" he said, frowning thoughtfully. "Especially as I met old Taggy himself just going into Rylcombe station. The old buffer was dressed in his Sunday best, and he looked jolly uneasy when he spotted me—just as if I'd caught him up to something wrong. Now, I wonder—"

He paused, and then went on musingly.

"The Head refused to let Taggy have this afternoon off, I believe—because he's been slacking a lot lately," he murmured. "He wanted to go to his giddy niece's wedding, I believe. Now, I wonder if there's any connection between Lowther sneaking to his lodge with a giddy bag, and Taggy sneaking off in his Sunday best?"

"Phew!" said Kerr. "I—I believe there is, Figgy!"

"They've scored over us enough lately," said Figgins, evidently referring to Tom Merry & Co. "It's time we got our own back, you men. Come on—let's squint round the lodge a bit."

Fatty Wynn preferred to finish off his jam-tarts, so Kerr and Figgins scouted round on their own. Approaching the lodge stealthily, they soon reached the kitchen window, and, after making sure they were unobserved, the two peered cautiously into the room.

What they saw almost made Figgins yell out in amazement.

For Taggles was there—at least, some individual was who resembled the old porter amazingly. He was dressed in Taggy's uniform, and he had Taggy's portly circumference, and Taggy's fringe of hair, and fringe of beard, likewise his rather red nose and ruddy cheeks. He was, in fact, Taggles to the life.

And he was seated comfortably before the kitchen fire, as Taggles himself was wont to do. Yet hadn't Figgy himself seen Taggles, dressed in his Sunday best, just entering the station?

Then who was this individual?

Figgins soon guessed that.

"Phew!" breathed Kerr. "It—must be Lowther, made up as Taggy. He's taken over Taggy's job so Taggy himself can go to the giddy wedding. You know those chaps have been helping the spoofing old bounder lately."

"That's it!" breathed Figgins, dragging at his chum's arm. "Come away, quick! I've got a wheeze, Kerr!"

"Good man!"

Figgins drew his chum to the rear of the lodge.

"Two can play at the giddy impersonating game, Kerr," he said. "And you're the fellow for the job. You can beat Lowther at that. Everybody knows and admits it. Why not dress up as old Ratty, and put Lowther through the hoop?"

"Well, I could!" grinned Kerr. "But—"

"Easy as falling off a form!" said Figgins gleefully. "You could make Lowther do just what you liked. He daren't refuse in case you reported him—as Taggles. He wouldn't want to get Taggles into a row with the beaks. He'd do anything rather than that. Besides, he'd be afraid for his own skin. We've got him!"

"My hat! Yes, rather! I'll do it!" grinned Kerr.

Kerr was a past-master in the art of make-up, and there was nothing he revelled in more than impersonating. For a few moments the two conspirators whispered together, and then they made for the New House. When Figgins emerged at last some twenty minutes later he was alone. A couple

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of seconds later another form emerged from the New House portals.

It was Horace Ratcliff, M.A.—or, at least, everybody at St. Jim's would have certainly taken him for that unpopular master. But it was actually George Francis Kerr, and that daring youth walked boldly out and made his way across to the porter's lodge with Mr. Ratcliff's well-known, irritable steps.

As a matter of fact, Kerr knew quite well that Mr. Ratcliff was going through examination papers with Mr. Railton in the Head's study, or he would not have been quite so bold, perhaps.

He reached the lodge and rapped sharply on the door.

Inside the lodge Lowther got up with a chuckle. He was hoping someone would come to cause a little excitement. Sitting in the lodge did not suit Lowther at all.

He looked a trifle uneasy, however, as he opened the door and saw Mr. Ratcliff—or whom he supposed was that individual.

"Ah! Here you are, Taggles!" snapped Kerr, in Mr. Ratcliff's well-known, rasping tones. "Sitting comfortably in your lodge when there is work to be done outside, my man!"

"Wot I says is this 'ere," said Lowther, in a grumbling voice, that resembled Taggles' voice to a remarkable degree, "if a man can't 'ave a few minutes rest of an arternoon—"

"Silence!" snapped Mr. Ratcliff. "I did not ask you for insolence, Taggles! Kindly follow me—I have work for you to do!"

"Ho, 'ave you?" grunted Lowther—he really was disgusted to hear that. Lowther didn't want work, at all events, any more than Taggles himself did.

"Yes, I have!" rapped out Mr. Ratcliff. "And kindly say 'sir' when speaking to me, Taggles."

"Ho, yessir! Suttingly, sir. Werry good, sir! O' course, I will, sir! In future I allus will, sir! Rely on Taggles, sir!"

"Taggles!" thundered Mr. Ratcliff. "Your insolence is becoming beyond bearing. Come with me, at once!"

"Werry good, sir—suttingly, sir! At once, sir!"

Mr. Ratcliff—otherwise the daring Kerr—flounced away, and Taggles—otherwise the equally daring Lowther—followed him, grumbling audibly, as Taggy himself would have done.

As they crossed the quadrangle, one behind the other, six juniors emerged from the School House. They were Tom Merry & Co.—and, really, it was most unfortunate—for them—that they did emerge just at that moment.

Mr. Ratcliff called to them.

"Yes, sir?" said Tom Merry, not very cheerfully, as they came up to him.

"Come with me, boys—at once!" ordered Kerr.

He walked away with Taggles, and the juniors had to follow—Lowther giving them a dismal glance as they did so. Mr. Ratcliff led the way round the rear of the New House, and paused by a wide lawn, railed in with posts and chains, and half covered with melting snow.

"Boys," he rasped. "I found you yesterday afternoon taking great pleasure in helping Taggles with his work."

"Y-yes, sir!" admitted Tom. "At least, we were helping him, sir."

"Very good!" snapped Kerr, in Mr. Ratcliff's gloating way. "Then possibly you will not object to helping him still further. I wish this lawn to be cleared of snow, and then rolled with that roller over there. I shall expect the task completed before five o'clock, boys."

Taggles gasped—they all gasped. They looked at Mr. Ratcliff as if they imagined he had taken leave of his senses.

"Wot I says is this 'ere—" began Taggles indignantly.

"Silence, Taggles! Kindly go and get your implements at once. What is that, Merry—you actually decline to aid Taggles?"

"It—it's a bit thick, sir!" said Tom Merry desperately. "It's a half-day, for one thing, and—and if you'll excuse me saying so, sir, you are not our Housemaster. You've no right to order us to do anything of the kind."

"Oh, indeed, Merry!"

"Yaas, wathah! Tom Mewwy is quite wight, sir."

Kerr smiled.

"Very well!" he retorted, with vicious delight—so it seemed to the juniors. "Then I shall have no other recourse than to report you for punishment in regard to the matter of the rising-bell this morning; also, Merry, in respect to that audacious trick of fastening Taggles in his lodge."

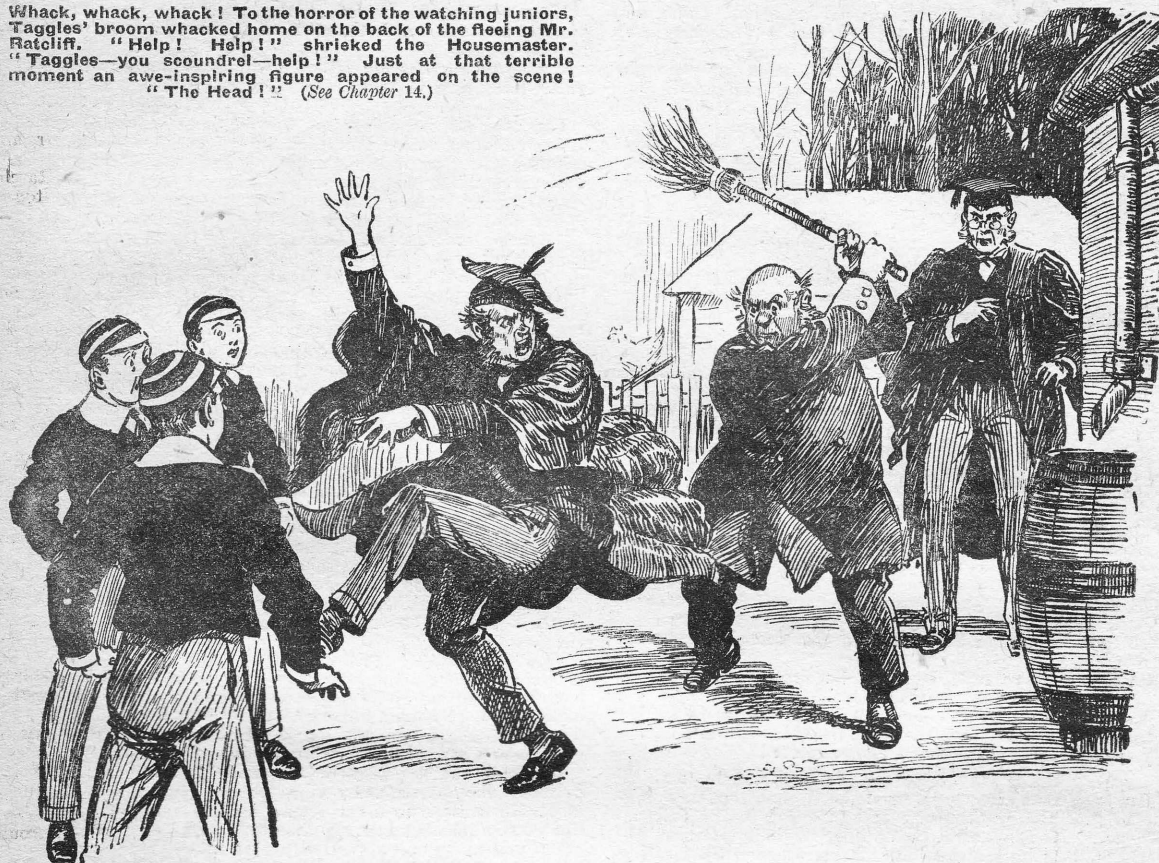
"Oh!"

"Oh, bai Jove!"

Tom Merry & Co groaned deep and long. Now "Ratty" knew the truth about that—Ratty, of all people!

"I had intended to leave your punishment in other hands," resumed Mr. Ratcliff. "But I am well aware that in that case you will be treated far too leniently by your House-

Whack, whack, whack! To the horror of the watching juniors, Taggles' broom whacked home on the back of the fleeing Mr. Ratcliff. "Help! Help!" shrieked the Housemaster. "Taggles—you scoundrel—help!" Just at that terrible moment an awe-inspiring figure appeared on the scene! "The Head!" (See Chapter 14.)



master. So I am punishing you in this manner. Well, will you take this punishment from me, or—"

He paused.

Tom Merry groaned. There was no help for it. If they were reported to Railton then Taggles would be "for it" as well as themselves. "It would mean the sack for poor old Taggles. It was just like the mean-spirited Ratty to do this kind of thing.

"But—but it will be an awful job to clear away all this slush," said Tom.

"Not at all; it will keep you busy and warm, Merry. I shall keep a very close eye upon you from the study window," warned Kerr. "And I will allow no slackness whatever. Kindly get your spades and other tools and make a start without delay. The sooner you get to work, the sooner I shall be in a position to release you. Taggles, how dare you pull absurd faces at me, sir!"

"Wot I says is this 'ere—"

"Silence! That is enough!"

Mr. Ratcliff stalked away with a final scowl at the astounded and wildly indignant juniors. They watched him as he vanished round a corner of the building. Then Blake drew a deep, deep breath.

"Well," he said—"well, of all the howling rotters! This is how he's getting a bit of his own back out of us! And I bet he gives us away in the end to Railton! Oh, the awful sweep!"

"Yaas, wathah! I weally did not think that even old Watty—"

"Oh, you dry up!" said Blake crossly. "This all comes through your fooling foolery!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Oh, don't squabble, for goodness' sake!" groaned Tom Merry. "Let's get to work! Sooner we get going, the sooner we'll be finished. Where are your dashed tools—My hat! I was almost forgetting you weren't Taggy, Lowther! Well, you've landed us in for something, my lad!"

"Eh? Well, I like that!" snorted Lowther in his own voice. "How can I help it? You shouldn't have come butting along just then, and you'd have missed the old brute! Still, I suppose I should have had this job all to myself if you hadn't. B-r-r-rr!"

And Lowther gave vent to his feelings with a ferocious growl. Then he led the way dismally to Taggles' lodge for spades and brushes and the rest of the tools. There was

no help for it. "Old Ratty" had the whip-hand, and they would have to bear it, even if they could not grin!

CHAPTER 13.

Done Brown!

"O H dear! This is awful!"

"Too awful for words!"

"Yaas, wathah!" panted Arthur Augustus faintly. "I weally shall faint if I keep on much longah, deah boys!"

"Talk about the treadmill!" groaned Lowther. "I can scarcely keep my whiskers on, and the sweat's washing off all my thumping grease-paint! Ow, ow, ow!"

Tom Merry & Co. were really having the time of their youthful lives.

It had been bad enough clearing the slush from the lawn; it was much worse rolling it with the huge horse-roller. It had taken the juniors more than an hour to clear away the slush—or what part of it they could clear away. It had been almost a relief to get busy with the roller after that.

Now "Taggles" and his unwilling helpers would have given anything on earth to drop the roller. They were dizzy, and they were aching and breathless with tramping up and down, hauling at the heavy thing. Tom Merry had a dazed sort of impression that the earth was moving beneath them instead of them moving over the earth. His brain reeled. Breathless and panting, the hapless band tramped backwards and forwards. Every now and again Mr. Ratcliff—or they believed it was Mr. Ratcliff—appeared at his study window to watch them. Several times he had called out to them sternly when they had showed signs of slacking, and they had struggled on with the job again. But for the thought of getting Taggles the sack they would have defied the New House tyrant and thrown up the job regardless of possible consequences.

But the juniors felt in honour bound to keep going, rather than bring trouble upon Taggles. And as they tramped back and forth they gasped and groaned and made remarks that would have startled the real Mr. Ratcliff could he have heard them; at least, Arthur Augustus confined his remarks to Mr. Ratcliff, while the rest were divided between Ratty and Arthur Augustus.

To make matters worse for them, Figgins, Fatty Wynn,

and about a score of New House fellows had made an unwelcome appearance, and their remarks and laughter added a great deal to Tom Merry & Co.'s misery.

Figgins and Wynn had only just turned up—though actually they had been watching the proceedings all the time from their study window. Both looked as if they had been weeping, as indeed they had—with laughter.

"Let's chuck it!" gasped Blake ferociously. "I'm dashed if I'm going on any longer, Taggles or no Taggles! Let's chuck it and go bald-headed for those cackling New House sweepers!"

"Better not!" said Tom Merry dismally. "We've stuck it so far, and— Look out! Here's that beast Ratty now!"

The juniors had missed seeing "Mr. Ratcliff" at the window for some time now, and they gave him ferocious looks as he came round the corner of the New House and advanced towards them.

"Go on, boys—do not slack!" he called angrily. "What are you stopping for? How dare you laze in this scandalous manner!"

"Look here, sir!" panted Tom Merry desperately. "We've done enough; we're all whacked to the wide. We've hardly stopped a moment all the afternoon. If we were doing any good it would be a different matter—"

"Good!" hooted Kerr. "Are you not helping your friend Taggles? And—and," he added, with what sounded remarkably like a chuckle, "are you not entertaining the boys of my House? It is but seldom that I can obtain the services of performing monkeys to entertain my House in this manner."

"Oh, bai Jove!"

"Great Scott!"

Such remarks from a Housemaster were certainly remarkable

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Figgins & Co. from their positions at the edge of the lawn. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"What the dickens—" began Tom Merry blankly. He stared in amazement towards the false Mr. Ratcliff. "I—I say, you fellows, that—that's rather queer!"

They all thought so, too—and Kerr meant them to think so. In fact, that cheery japer deemed that the time had come to give the game away, and to enjoy to the full the amazement, the rage, and discomfiture of their victims. He was about to make the situation clearer when with startling suddenness a voice sounded in very familiar tones. It was Mr. Horace Ratcliff's voice—the real thing this time—and it came from his study window above their heads.

"Boys—boys, how dare you! What in the name of goodness are you doing there with that roller? Have you taken leave of—of—of—" Mr. Horace Ratcliff's voice died away in a sort of strangled gasp.

He had just caught sight of his double.

The situation was electric. Tom Merry & Co., with eyes nearly starting from their heads, stared up at one Mr. Ratcliff, and then they lowered their eyes and stared dizzily at the other.

Then they seemed to understand, and from all of them came sudden roars—roars of rage and enlightenment.

"It's spoof—it's all spoof, you fellows!" roared Tom Merry. "That's that rotter Kerr! Oh, why on earth didn't we think of it! It's Kerr—that rotter Kerr!"

"Yaas, wathah! Oh, bai Jove!"

"After him—never mind old Ratty! Smash him—boil him in oil!"

Tom Merry & Co.'s yells were truly ferocious.

They released their grip on the big shafts of the roller, and they all made one wild rush towards the startled Kerr.

But that youth was wise in his generation—he did not wait to find out what they wanted him for!

He turned and flew for his life, his gown flying behind him in the breeze.

With wild howls of rage Tom Merry & Co. went in pursuit at a great rate, their drenched boots squelching, and their wet trouser-legs flapping. Pursued and pursuers vanished round the corner of the New House buildings.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins & Co. held each other and roared and roared, ignoring the wildly gesticulating Mr. Ratcliff at the window above. Then suddenly Mr. Ratcliff vanished.

"Come on—no need to wait until he comes down!" wept George Figgins. "Oh, my hat! This is too rich! Let's go and see what happens to dear old Kerr—mustn't let him get collared!"

"Rather not!"

Figgins and his followers, nearly helpless with long sustained laughter, went hot foot in the wake of Kerr and Tom Merry & Co. They came round the corner into the quadrangle just in time to see Kerr make a break for the gates with the crowd howling at his heels.

It looked as if Kerr was going to get through the gates safely, but just then Grundy, Wilkins, and Gunn entered the quad.

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Kerr turned in his tracks, hesitated the fraction of a second, and then made a rush as if to take refuge in the Head's garden.

But again he was cut off—this time by Levison, Cardew, and Clive, who happened to be strolling along the fence there.

The luckless impersonator turned in his tracks again, hesitated once more, and then in sheer desperation, with enemies all around him, made a desperate dive for the wall surrounding the yard of the lodge.

He reached it, and with a spring grasped the coping and pulled himself up. Then he vanished over the wall.

"After him!" bawled Tom Merry. "Don't let the rotter get away."

"He's done!" groaned Figgins, pulling up suddenly. "He's done, I'm— No, he isn't! That sounds as if he's taken refuge in Taggy's old shed!"

Bang, bang, bang!

A furious banging and hammering sounded from beyond Taggles' yard wall the next moment as the School House pursuers vanished through the gate of the yard. Obviously Kerr had taken refuge in the shed, and his enemies were trying to get him out.

"Come on!" gasped Figgins, his eyes gleaming. "We'll rescue him yet. Come on, Reddy—you and I will manage it. You chaps stay here and chip in if we get collared."

"Right-ho!"

Figgins and Kerr made for Taggles' vegetable garden, which was behind the big shed. They rushed through the school gates, round by the school wall, and, scaling this, they dropped down into the garden.

They could hear the commotion coming from beyond the shed, but they could see nothing of the School House fellows.

"Quick, Reddy!" gasped Figgys.

Diving through the cabbages and other vegetables, the two New House would-be rescuers soon reached the back of the shed. It was an old, rickety building in a sad state of disrepair. Figgys pointed to a gaping hole in the boards, and grabbed an old spade lying handy against the wall.

Inserting the flat edge of the spade in the hole, Figgins prised at the boards, using all his force. It gave a little, and as Redfern came to his aid with his fingers, they soon had one of the boards away. Suddenly Kerr himself—still in his gown and make-up—appeared before them. He gave a gasp of relief as he recognised his chums, and saw a chance of escape.

From the double doors of the shed came a furious banging.

"Quick!" gasped Figgins. "Another board will do it! Out with it!"

"What-ho!"

Between the three of them they soon had another board out, and with some difficulty Kerr managed to squeeze through.

"Hip-pip!" chuckled Figgins. "We've done 'em brown, and no mistake. Let 'em go on banging as long as they like now. Come on, Kerr, old man. Better get those things off first, before you show yourself!"

"My hat! Yes!" gasped Kerr.

He hurriedly divested himself of his gown and mortar-board, then his whiskers and false hair. Then he rubbed the grease paint from his features, and followed his chums with a rush over the school wall into the lane beyond. Then, fairly safe now, the three made their way by a devious route back to the safety of the New House.

New House had scored with a vengeance this time.

Meanwhile, Tom Merry & Co., little dreaming of what had happened almost before their eyes, were still banging on the doors furiously.

Bang, bang, bang!

CHAPTER 14.

Tragic!

BANG, bang, bang!

"It's no good!" said Tom Merry, after they had been trying to open the doors, in vain, for nearly ten minutes. "These dashed doors have done us! It's a waste of time keeping at it. We'll fasten them so he can't get cut, and then we'll leave it until Taggy comes back. He'll know how to get the dashed things open."

Whatever might be said regarding the rest of the shed, the doors were stout enough, at all event. They were made of new wood, and they resisted all efforts of the avengers.

Evidently there were bolts inside, or some means of securing the doors from inside, for all their efforts to open them were in vain.

"You might as well give in, you howling rotter!" hooted Tom Merry through one of the cracks for the twentieth time. "We've got you trapped, and you can't get clear! Open this dashed door, blow you!"

There was no answer as before.

"It's queer!" panted Blake. "I mean, it's queer the rotter doesn't answer us. You're quite sure you saw him go in, Tommy?"

"Of course I did!" gasped Tom Merry wrathfully. "I saw him rush in just as I dashed into the yard, and I heard him fastening the doors. We'll get him later, never fear! And when we do we'll boil him in oil."

The captain of the Shell didn't really mean that ferocious and ghastly threat, but he meant a good deal. After the terrible afternoon he and his chums had spent, and with the horrid thoughts of the endless chipping before them from the New House, they were not likely to let Kerr off lightly. There was to be a terrible reckoning when they collared George Francis Kerr.

But he hadn't been collared yet. Tom Merry would probably have collapsed had he known that at that very moment Francis Kerr was enjoying a cheery tea over in his study at the New House—a meal at which there was much more laughing than eating or drinking.

It was a merry afternoon for Figgins & Co. Their time had come, and they made the most of it.

But Tom Merry & Co. were unaware of the true state of affairs. They still looked forward to the moment when their dire vengeance upon Kerr would be possible.

"We'll wait in Taggy's kitchen—there's a good fire there," said Tom Merry. "Better stay here in force, in case Figgy takes it into his napper to try to rescue his pal."

"Yaas, wathah!"

The School House juniors swarmed into the kitchen and made themselves comfortable, leaving Herries and Manners on guard in the yard. Scarcely had they settled down when the front door of the lodge opened and Taggles himself—back earlier than was expected—came rolling through into the kitchen.

The juniors eyed him grimly. It was very evident from Mr. Ephraim Taggles' flushed features that he had been partaking somewhat freely, not wisely but too well, of the liquid refreshment provided for the guests at the wedding.

In his turn Taggles eyed the crowd of juniors grimly. As a matter of fact, Taggy was not at all in a good temper. He had wanted to stay later at the wedding celebrations. But Mrs. Taggles—noting that her lord and master was overdoing things a trifle—had insisted upon his returning early. Hence Taggy's ill-humour.

"Wot I says is this 'ere," he began, eyeing the juniors in great wrath, "can't a man go away from his 'ouse for a bloomin' few 'ours without it bein' over-run by a swarm of young varmint. Hey?"

"Weally, Taggy, deah boy—" "I wants none of your soft soap!" snorted Taggy, regarding them somewhat dazedly. "If this 'ere ain't the bloomin' limit. You young rips get hout of my lodge, d'you 'ear? Houtside!"

"Taggy, old chap—" "Houtside!" roared Taggles. "Hout— Well, I'm blowed!"

Taggles suddenly caught sight of Monty Lowther, still wearing his uniform and make-up. The sight almost made the old porter collapse. He had evidently forgotten completely his arrangement with the juniors at noon—for the time being, at all events. But as he stared at the grinning face of his double, recollection seemed to come back to him.

"By hokey!" he gasped. "Is—is that you, Master Lowther?"

"Little me, Taggy!" grinned Lowther. "Aren't you ready to commit suicide now you've really seen just what you look like?"

But Taggy was incapable of grasping Lowther's humour at the moment. He saw things as through a glass darkly, so to speak.

"Wot I says is this 'ere, Master Lowther!" he said, his gnarled old face breaking into a grin. "You're a clever young gent, you are! I s'pose nothin' ain't gone wrong?" he added anxiously. "Not as it would upset me if it did, like," he added. "I ain't afraid of old 'Olmes, I ain't!"

"Old who?" "Olmes! Old Dr. 'Olmes! The bloomin' 'Ead! I bin at this 'ere school, man and boy, longer nor he 'as! An' wot I says is this 'ere—I ain't puttin' up no longer with 'is—"

Taggles halted, his eyes fixed with a glassy sort of stare at something lying on the kitchen table. It was his rusty silk hat—or what was left of it. For just at present it looked like a crushed concertina.

It wasn't Lowther's fault exactly. The hat had blown off in the middle of the chase of Kerr, and the fellows running behind him had trodden upon it—either by accident or evil design.

At all events, there it was—squashed almost as flat as a pancake.

Taggles' eyes nearly started from his head as he gazed at it.

"By hokey!" he gasped. "That—that ain't my 'at?" "What's left of it, Taggy!"

"What's left of it!" roared Taggles. "Well, I'm blowed! If you done that, Master Lowther—"

"Perish the thought!" grinned Lowther. "If you want to find the chap whose fault it really was—"

"Find 'im!" roared Taggles, grabbing the squashed hat and glaring at it in towering wrath. "Let me get 'old of 'im, that's all. My uniform 'at that is! Wot I says is, who done it?"

"He's fastened himself in your shed, Taggy!" grinned Lowther. "That's what we're waiting here for—we want you to get him out"

Tom Merry explained something of the position to the muddled Taggles.

"Fetch 'im hout—hey?" bawled Taggles. "I'll soon 'ave 'im hout of that! Dressed hup as old Ratcliff, is 'e? We'll see about that! I'll give 'im Master Kerr—the young varmint!"

With that Taggles rushed out into the yard, the swarm of grinning fellows following. The old porter reached the shed door and started to bang at it. But he soon gave that up.

"It ain't no good; he's fastened that there door with wood, or summat!" he bellowed. "But I knows 'ow to get 'im hout! Follow me, young gents. There's some loose boards at the back of this 'ere shed, like."

The juniors followed him round to the back—just in time to echo Taggles' roar of disappointment at the sight of the hole where the loose boards had been. It only took two seconds to discover that the bird had flown.

Tom Merry & Co. nearly wept.

"Gone, 'as 'e?" snorted Taggles. "It's a good job for 'im 'e 'as! I'd 'ave laid this 'ere broom about 'im, young gent or no young— Why, there 'e is!"

Taggles ended with a bellow as he suddenly sighted a form in cap and gown just coming in at the yard gate.

Actually it was Mr. Ratcliff himself—the real, genuine article, as it were. Mr. Ratcliff, having failed to get the truth of the astounding affair from the fellows in the quad from his own House had come after Tom Merry & Co. and Taggles. Not getting any answer to his knock at the front door, Mr. Ratcliff, seething with wrath, had, naturally enough, come round to the back.

And now, in his present muddled state, Taggles took him for the disguised Francis Kerr.

It was a most unfortunate mistake.

Before any of the startled juniors could stop him—before they could even raise a voice to warn him—Taggles had rushed forward with a mighty bellow, his broom raised to smite.

Mr. Ratcliff saw him coming—bleary-eyed and raging—and, quite naturally, he jumped to the conclusion that he had a raving madman to deal with. The Housemaster gave a shriek and turned to bolt for it.

"Help, help! Taggles, you ruffian—Taggles, stop! Help!"

Whack, whack, whack!

Taggles was upon his victim before he could escape. To the horror of the juniors the broom whacked home on the back of the fleeing master. Mr. Ratcliff shrieked. The whacks had not been heavy, but they had hurt, for all that. But it was more from sheer fright that Mr. Ratcliff shrieked.

"Help, help! Taggles, you scoundrel— Help!"

"I'll larn you, you young rip!" bawled Taggles. "Take that!"

Whack! Once again the business end of the broom came down with a whack, and Ratty roared. And just at that terrible

(Continued on page 28.)

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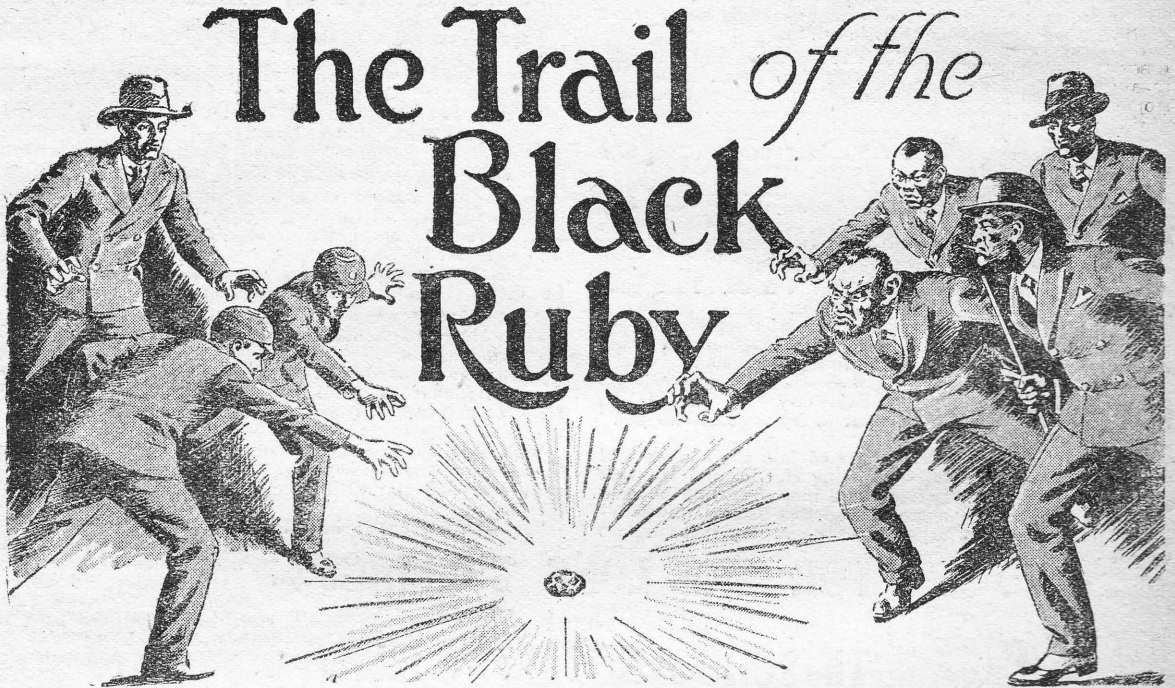
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Some Light on the Mystery!

IT took some time to force the door of the room. And after five minutes' work the door swung inwards, and Syd and Steve Barrett paused a moment on the threshold, staring at the darkness within. Cautiously Syd passed his hand round the door-post and felt for the electric switch, found it, and pressed it down.

Click!

Immediately the room was flooded with light. Barrett was pale beneath his tan—a ghastly, sickly grey. Syd stared, his eyes agog with amazement. They beheld their chum Bob lying on the floor, bound hand and foot. And on his chest was the snake, its venomous-looking head swaying gently, wickedly, from side to side. Now and again the forked tongue came into view.

Bob lay there watching that tongue, fascinated. He was white, his eyes were bulging.

"By George! The fiends!" growled Barrett.

He was half afraid to move for fear that reptile should strike the helpless boy. Very slowly his right hand went to his hip-pocket for his gun.

"I might use it," he said hoarsely. "I'll try! It'll have to be one shot—and only—"

"Steady!" warned Syd

He was stepping forward, watching the snake, turning his head this way and that to get a good look at the reptile. And suddenly he grinned. He took half a run forward—half a run and half a hop. And his foot shot out, for all the world as if he were a centre-forward taking a pot at goal.

The toe of his boot caught the snake just below the head and flung the reptile across the room. It crashed against the opposite wall and dropped to the floor, stunned by the impact.

"By George!" exclaimed Barrett. "It worked! But a madman's trick!"

"Rubbish!" grinned Syd. "It was harmless. For two pins I'd have kissed the thing."

"Harmless!" echoed Bob, amazed.

"Certainly," explained Syd. "Don't you see, the head is oval-shaped. Now, if the head had been diamond-shaped, it would have proved the existence of poison sacs on either side—"

"Pack it up!" growled Bob. "Cut me loose from these

ropes. I'm not in the mood for a lecture. Gosh! If I get my hands on that Chink, I'll knock his head loose from his pigtail! I'll give him shocks! Scared me with a large-sized worm! Great Caesar's ghost, that's one I owe Ah Wong, and I'll pay the debt sooner or later! I'll give him snakes. I'll—"

"But how come you like this, sonny?" queried Barrett.

Bob came back to business. They had untied his ropes and he was massaging his numbed limbs back to life and feeling.

"I thought I had a chance," he explained briefly. "I saw the Black Ruby. I got in through the window to grab it, and they grabbed me instead. But that hardly matters now. I heard their plans. They are off to Marseilles to get aboard a boat, and we'd better follow—smartly!"

"Dingoes!" snarled Barrett, scowling at his watch. "What's the use? The Gare du Lyons is ten minutes by taxi from here, and I know that train for the coast! It leaves in two minutes. Them crooks'll only just catch it, and we'd miss it! They've gone! And what'll we do next?"

"Buy, beg, borrow, or steal a powerful car!" said Syd. "That's the next move. We'll go by road—take it in turns to drive while the others snatch a bit of sleep."

"The very thing!" cried Bob. "Let's get moving. They aren't going to get away with that Black Ruby scot free while I'm on their trail. Twice I've seen it, but the third time I'll grab it and keep it!"

"Don't talk too big, sonny," warned Barrett. "We're up against the smartest, slickest gang of crooks in the world, not a lot of school kids! I tell you straight, pardners, that Karl Sweetman has brains and uses 'em. Guess we've been careless, but let's get on the trail again and raise the dust. In future, when you're close handy to them crook guys, hit first and ask questions afterwards. See? Now, let's go. This way, gents!"

He backed out of the room into the corridor, and immediately a husky voice hailed him.

"Hola, m'sieur!"

Bob and Syd froze in their tracks. Was this a fresh dilemma? But Barrett had given advice, and he was the sort to practise what he preached. Maybe this was one of the crooks come back, or else a gendarme likely to make unpleasant inquiries and delay them. Steve wasn't wasting time.

"Hola nothing!" he rasped, spinning round.

A white-clad figure loomed before him, and he hit out at

Smack!

His bunched knuckles connected with the man's jaw. With a shriek, the harmless chef's assistant, bearing a great tray of crockery, toppled backwards. A mat went flying, and he went crashing down the stairs.

For a minute or two the air was filled with startled cries, with bumps, as the chef's assistant hit every stair in his descent. Plates and dishes were flying about and smashing to atoms. The hotel detective came up with a rush and stopped a coffee-pot with his bald head, collapsing at the foot of the stairs.

"Mon Dieu!" he howled. "I'm stunned!"

Syd rushed to Barrett, who stood there gaping at the mess he had caused.

"You idiot! Is that what you mean by hitting first? He was only warning you not to bump into him! Still, he'll be all right in a minute."

"He should have said what he wanted. How was I to know?"

"If we get clear of this inside twelve hours—" Bob began.

But Syd was in command again.

"Quick! This way!" he hissed, and led them hurriedly along the corridor and down to the lounge.

They saw people rushing about and yelling things about thieves, burglars, and apaches, who had foully battered the chef to death. They saw the injured chef's assistant staggering away with a pile of broken crockery, and they hid behind a hat-stand until he had gone.

Then Syd paid the bill and they went with a rush, dodging every gendarme, to the nearest garage.

Steve said he knew Paris; but he didn't know all of it, and he lost his way. Down one street, up another, taking alleged short cuts down dark alleys, they rushed like madmen, looking for the garage that Barrett had told them was only a stone's throw away.

"By George!" panted Steve. "They've altered this darned city since I was here last! Or else—"

The words trailed off to a growl. A man, heavily shrouded, suddenly darted out from a dark doorway. There was the gleam of cold steel for a split second. But Bob saw and was quick—and his action was not expected. He lunged forward; his fist struck home full in the would-be assassin's face. The man went back; his head crashed against the wall, and he dropped—dazed, stunned.

Other men came rushing. The alley was full of them. Hooded robbers, they were—apaches! They thronged behind the pals and before them. They were fighting. Knives were out. Bob floored the nearest one. Syd jumped back against the wall and hit out savagely. His assailant went down howling.

Steve grabbed the bandit nearest to him, swung him aloft with consummate ease, and used him as a flail. He tossed him away, and in his fall the stunned robber floored half a dozen of his pals and cleared a path.

"This way out!" roared Steve.

Syd and Bob were with him. They leapt over the fallen bandits and fled—not that flight was best liked by them, but it is sometimes safer. The footpads were far too many in that alley.

Helter-skelter the pals came out of that alley and sped off down the murky street, round the corner, and— And there was the garage!

"There! I knew I'd find it!" panted Steve.

Bob grinned at him.

"As a guide," he said, "you're a wash-out. But why did those thugs set on us? Was it a plant? Did Karl Sweetman—"

"Ask me something easy, sonny!" growled Barrett.

"And wait till bed-time," put in Syd. "We can't waste any more time gossiping. We want a car."

"And we've got to get the ruby!" rasped Bob. "Before those thieves have a chance to sell it!"

"Sell it!" snapped Steve Barrett.

"They'll never sell it. See here, boys, I'll put you wise to a bit o' the truth. That ruby is the key to a claim out in Queensland—of land what's chock-full of precious stones. You get me? It's the key to a fortune. Can't tell you more than that now; but don't forget it. Those crooks won't sell out. Not likely! They'll make tracks for 'down under' just as hard as they can lick; and we've got to get that sparkler back, and beat 'em to it. That fortune is mine. See? Mine! And they shan't cheat me out of it!"

"Not if we can help it, they won't!" said Bob tersely. "Come on! Let's hit the trail."

Ten minutes later the trio were careering out of Paris, heading south, on the trail of the Black Ruby. Bob was at the wheel to begin with. Steve leant forward in his seat so that he could talk in Bob's ear. Syd leant forward so that he could hear what was being said.

"Boys," Steve said tersely, "a secret shared is a secret no longer; but I guess I've just got to pill some of the beans to you two, and waste no time about it. You know there's more in this business than meets the eye. That Black Ruby is worth ten thousand quid in Amsterdam; but it's worth a sight more than that out in Australia, as I've told you already. But a fellow has got to know how to use it when he gets there. See?"

"Does Sweetman know?" asked Syd.

"I doubt it," replied Steve. "He knows what it's worth, and what it's the key to. But how to use it exactly he can't know; though he might find out, or he may hit on the truth by chance. Only two guys really know. I'm one; and my pard down under, name of Gentleman Jack, is number two."

"Rummy name, too!" said Bob.

"Sure it is!" grinned Steve. "But that's how he's known. He's my pard, and because of that you can trust him till the Sphinx winks, supposing you get out there without me."

"And where can we find Gentleman Jack?" queried Syd.

"Don't ask me," retorted Steve. "I don't know. He lives in the bush. He likes that life best. See? And it isn't healthy to ask him why. Once upon a time he had to take to the bush, but now he does it from choice. But that's not your business. Should you reach Brisbane without me, just insert an advert in the 'Agony Column' of the 'Brisbane Herald.' You'll word it exactly as I tell you. 'G. J. Young boss under river!' Sounds funny, but he'll know you're genuine. Of course, you'll add name of hotel and number of room; and he'll come to you somehow when you least expect it. And he'll tell you exactly how to use that Black Ruby in Stoney Gorge. I'm not going to tell you now, because it's better you shouldn't know yet awhile."

"No need," said Syd. "I have an idea. That Black Ruby is like a chart for buried treasure, or something."

Steve grinned and puffed at his pipe.

"Buddy," he said, "you're warm, but you're not accurate. And we'll leave it at that. You're next at the wheel. Better sleep."

Syd saw the sense of that. He curled up on the floor of the car and slept, while Steve sat smoking and thinking.

"Plucky pair o' pards I've got!" he mused. "And I'm running 'em into big trouble and danger. But, dingoes, they wouldn't thank me for turning 'em back now!"

The Black Ruby Again!

ALL through the night sped the great car. Bob relinquished the wheel to Syd for a spell, and later on Steve took his turn. But it was all progress in the right direction—headed south on the trail of the Black Ruby.

How they kept to the road was a mystery in the darkness. The speedometer needle wavered between fifty and sixty miles an hour. The monotonous lines of gaunt poplar-trees sped past on either side, blurred into the likeness of an enormous hedge. The headlights lit up a scene for a split second, then it flashed past and was gone. The road unfolded before them in the glare of the lights—a weird, mysterious, wild drive, with none of them knowing exactly where they were, except that they were speeding through the black, starless night, on the trail of the Black Ruby.

Steve Barrett was at the wheel—possibly the least competent driver of the three. He was more accustomed to pack-mules and ox teams on the banks of the Murrumbidgee than six-cylinder cars. But he kept her at it ruthlessly.

Behind him, in the tonneau—one on the seat, one on the floor—Syd and Bob snatched what sleep they could, until the grinding of the brakes and a hoarse shout from Barrett brought them out of their troubled dreams, with a start.

"Hallo!"

"What's up?"

Barrett was pointing. They stared, and in the darkness saw a line of brilliant lights, like a fiery snake.

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INTRODUCTION.

Trailed from the backblocks of Australia across two continents by a gang of powerful, cunning crooks, Steve Barrett, in possession of the most wonderful of precious stones—a BLACK RUBY—eventually reaches the residence of Sir Charles Crompton, a wealthy business man. With the aid of this black ruby Steve Barrett has hopes of making his fortune, providing he can get someone to finance him. For this reason he had called upon his old chum, Sir Richard. The consultation that follows, however, is interrupted by the entry of a member of the gang—a fierce gorilla-looking man—who, at the pistol's point, holds up the party, grabs the Black Ruby, and escapes. Determined to retrieve the precious stone, Steve enlists the services of Sir Richard's nephew, Bob Crompton, and his school chum, Syd Dyson, two plucky, athletic and cute fellows. With their "Aussy" pal, Bob and Syd are instrumental in tracking the crooks to their lair at the Hotel Generale, in Paris, where Bob daringly succeeds in gaining access to the crooks' private rooms. He is about to make a grab at the coveted ruby, when he is pounced upon by Ah Wong, a Chinese member of the gang, who securely trusses up the youngster and leaves him prone on the floor with a snake coiled on his chest, its little forked tongue stabbing perilously near to Bob's face. Fearing for the safety of their chum, Barrett and Syd leave their own apartment and approach the door of the crooks' room.

(Now Read On.)

"The Marseilles express!" cried Barrett. "Must have been held up somewhere by signals. We've caught up with her, and—"

"Then what are you stopping for? Maybe we'll get aboard her at Lyons!" snapped Bob. "Step on the juice! Hit her up! What on earth are you stopping for?"

Barrett waved his arm wildly, indicating the railway embankment, the train—everything.

"Don't you see?" he yelled. "The signal—at danger! And she's run past it and— Look! By George! Look!"

A great black shape loomed up ahead of the express. Engine-whistles shrieked in despair. In the distant ruddy glare of the furnace of the express engine were the fleeting black shapes of men leaping to safety.

Then the crash—the vast, metallic, tearing, rending, ear-splitting crash!

For a brief moment the two engines that had met head-on seemed reared up against each other, smoke-box to smoke-box. Then they toppled sideways and rolled down the embankment in an inferno of hissing, escaping steam.

The lights snapped out of the long line of carriages. Some of them were dragged down from the rails by the falling engines. Wood splintered and wrenched apart, metal broke and twisted. Men shouted hoarsely; women screamed.

The trains were interlocked—the express to Marseilles and the goods train. Where the engines had fallen over the embankment was a mass of tangled debris. Already men were busy rescuing the injured. The night that a moment ago seemed so black, so quiet, and deserted was now an increasing crescendo of noise, confusion, horror.

The rending crash of the collision had been heard for miles. The roads were alive with cars speeding to the spot. There were plenty of people there to help, to rescue, to tend the injured. They were swarming along the permanent way, many with flares.

But lights were not required for long. In the centre of the mass of debris was shot a tattered tongue of flame, and the terrible cry sounded through the tortured night:

"Fire!"

Steve Barrett got the car to the side of the road, where it could not get in anybody's way. He brought it to a standstill and leapt out.

"By George, it's awful!" he gasped. "We've got to do something, boys! Can't stay here idle while— Dingoes! Look at them flames!"

But Bob demurred.

"What can we do? That fire is where the engines are!" he said curtly. "The rescue gang will get it under. Anyway, they'll keep the fire from spreading to the coaches. Gosh, there must be hundreds of people there to help! What can we do, except get in the way? Syd can talk French like a native, but what good we can do I don't know, unless—"

"Unless we go looking for Karl Sweetman's gang!" ripped out Syd. "That's where we're hit. Sweetman and his toughs were aboard that train. They have the Black Ruby with them."

"Jumping wallabies, you're right!" cried Barrett.

"We must search for them," said Syd. "I'll take the front of the train; you, Steve, take the centre; and Bob had better look in the rear. And we'll meet again here. You get me?"

"Like Lucifer, we do!" grinned Barrett. "But listen, sonny; if in trouble yell blue murder, and we'll come and help. See? Now scatter!"

The trio mingled with the confused mass of people and approached the wrecked express.

Doctors were busy in the light of flares; nurses sprung from no one knew where, hurried hither and thither; Gendarmes were busy with stretchers; willing helpers were

here, there, and everywhere. And in the thickest of the confusion the three pals parted company.

Bob went to the rear of the train. Here the coaches were still on the rails, but the shock of the collision had had its effect. There was not a scrap of glass left. It had splintered. No lights were there. The dazed, frightened passengers walked to and fro on the permanent-way in gloomy, bewildering darkness.

Bob scrutinised everybody carefully, moving from group to group trying hard to appear as if he, too, were a passenger looking for a friend, but he saw no one suspicious. All was so dark and so confusing. How on earth were the crooks to be found in this mess?

But something happened. Strong, wiry fingers closed on Bob's throat, choking him, from behind. Two words formed themselves in Bob's mind—"Twisty Baker!"

Apparently it was Twisty Baker's strong suit to throttle folks—from behind! Bob had felt the pressure of those wire-like fingers before, and he was sure he was not mistaken.

He knew what to do. He had made a mistake once—at the hotel in Paris.

He neither struggled nor attempted to force himself out of that throttling clutch. Instead, he seemed to give way—to fall backwards. And his head came back with a jerk; the back of his hard skull crashed against the crook's chin. The force of it half dazed Bob, but it must have stunned the crook—or nearly stunned him.

That throttling grip loosened, and Bob became active. He wriggled himself free; he spun round like a prize-fighter. He saw Twisty Baker, tall, wiry, recoiling from him, not yet having recovered from the surprise of having a tooth knocked out.

Lashing out with both fists, Bob went for him. Twisty Baker stopped them both—with his jaw, with his nose. And he was propelled backwards into a group of distressed passengers.

"Robbers! Looters! Assassins! Apaches!"

The scared people screamed the warning. Gendarmes came rushing, and Bob mingled with the crowd, looking for Twisty Baker; but the crook had vanished, and Bob felt, somehow, that he had let the Black Ruby slip through his fingers!

Meanwhile Steve Barrett was searching high and low and finding nothing. He forced his way ruthlessly through the groups of excited, terrified people who thronged the top of the embankment. Rudely he peered into people's faces. He clambered between two wrecked coaches, and came out on the other side—came out to knock into two men.

A sudden flare lit up their faces. One was a Chinaman and the other—

"Bully Mahon!" roared Barrett.

He leapt but Mahon was quick. He side-stepped, and Steve missed, staggering past his enemy. The crook hit out as Barrett half fell. His enormous fist landed on Steve's ear and dropped him, dazed.

Recovering, Steve squirmed in the cinders of the permanent way.

Mahon called to Ah Wong:

"Come on, you yellow dog! Gotta find de boss! Make it snappy!"

Steve began to see daylight. Not only were they looking for Karl Sweetman, but the crooks were doing the same. It was an even bet that the Black Ruby was in the possession of the crook boss.

Steve acted swiftly. His long arm shot out. He gripped Ah Wong's ankle, and tugged.

(Continued on page 27.)

Next week's special programme contains a topping long yarn of St. Jim's, entitled: "TAGGLES' BARRING-OUT!" by Martin Clifford; another trenchant instalment of our new Serial Story: "THE TRAIL OF THE BLACK RUBY!"; an interesting article dealing with the present series of TEST MATCHES; and last, but not least, our popular "ASK THE ORACLE" feature.

The Wise "Gemite" will Order this Bumper Twopennyworth of Fun and Fiction NOW!



As the room was suddenly flooded with light Syd and Barrett started back in horror at the scene before them. There on the floor lay their chum, bound hand and foot. And on his chest was a snake, its venomous-looking head swaying gently, wickedly, from side to side! (See page 24.)

The Chinaman screamed, lost his balance, and fell headlong down the steep slope of the embankment.

Bully Mahon gaped, then went after Ah Wong, helter-skelter, pell-mell, down the slope, each stride taking him yards on his way, as if he was afraid of losing touch with his confederate.

Steve scrambled to his feet and went down after them. Like Bob, Steve had an idea that he was letting the Black Ruby slip through his eager fingers. He just had to keep those crooks in sight.

But he didn't. In the dense bushes of the coppice that grew close to the foot of the embankment, he lost them altogether, and moodily returned to the scene of the railway accident.

Meanwhile, Syd was having better luck. He was searching the fore part of the train, where the smash had been worse, where the engine had fallen over the embankment and had dragged the first three coaches with it.

Here the confusion was greatest. Here the crowds of people—the injured and the helpers—were thickest.

For some time Syd mingled with the crowds, but found no one answering the descriptions of the crooks. He had never set eyes on any of them, except Bully Mahon. Yet he kept in his mind Bob's vivid descriptions of them, as told to him on the wild ride through the night from Paris, and he scrutinised every man he met, and found no one suspicious.

He clambered up on to the embankment. Here were still injured people lying about. And on the far side of the permanent-way he came upon the unconscious form of a man. He was interested in him. He recalled Bob's description of Karl Sweetman—swarthy, debonair, suave, and wearing a gold watch-chain.

Syd was vastly interested. He went down on one knee beside the man, and studied him intently. The master crook—if he was Sweetman—had an ugly-looking bruise on his forehead—no doubt the injury that had rendered him unconscious. He was, despite the paleness in consequence of his injury, swarthy. In ordinary circumstances he would have been debonair, but his terrible experiences had bespattered the striped trousers with dirt and mud, had torn the black lounge jacket, and ripped open the black waistcoat. And the gold watch-chain was broken into two pieces; hanging loose from the waistcoat pockets.

Syd felt sure, and yet—looting the injured in a railway smash—it didn't seem right. And yet it was the Black Ruby, Steve's life work, in a way, his fortune, at stake!

Syd gritted his teeth. It wasn't a job he liked, but it had to be done. He ransacked the breast pocket of the lounge jacket for means of identification. There were several passports, in various names, a wallet containing money, which Syd immediately replaced, and that was all. Nothing to say that the unconscious man was Karl Sweetman. The crook was too astute to give himself away unwittingly in that manner.

And then Syd started on the waistcoat pockets. He noticed something bulky in one pocket—rather too bulky for a waistcoat pocket. It was a jeweller's cardboard box, of a fair size.

Tremblingly, Syd grabbed it, opened it, and stared, eyes agog, at the cottonwool inside. His heart was pounding, his pulses throbbed. He knew, before he actually saw, that this was what he sought—the Black Ruby!

There seemed to be no feeling in his fingers as he lifted the top layer of the cottonwool. He drew in his breath sharply as he lifted the jewel from its downy bed—the great Black Ruby, the ruddy light from its flares setting all its glossy facets alight with rich colour.

The sight of it numbed his senses for the moment. Thrilled, he closed his hand on the jewel and allowed the cardboard box to drop unheeded to the permanent-way.

And he heard a grunt—that was all it was—a grunt, half of surprise, half of suppressed rage!

He glanced up, and his blood ran cold. Three pairs of eyes regarded him over Sweetman's unconscious form. Three men crouched there, glaring at him, poised ready to spring. Three pairs of eyes glinted rage and defiance at him.

There was the ape-man, Bully Mahon! There was the tall, impassive, wire-like, Twisty Baker, his thin fingers curled suggestively, reaching out already for Syd's throat. And there was the yellow, rage-enflamed face of Ah Wong, the narrow eyes blazing venomously!

And the Black Ruby, held tightly in his hand, seemed to burn Syd. He had to get away with it—he just had to! But how? Even as he stared, Bully Mahon stealthily reached behind him for his gun, and Ah Wong's hand was inside his jacket feeling for a knife. Syd was cornered, outnumbered, alone—with the gang against him!

(It looks as if Syd's number's up, doesn't it, chums? But you can bet he won't give in without a fight! Don't miss next week's thrilling instalment whatever you do, chums. It's crammed full of thrills!)

"Gussy Lends a Hand!"

(Continued from page 23.)

moment, who should appear on the scene but the august and awe-inspiring headmaster of St. Jim's!

"Oh, bai Jove!"

"The Head! Oh, great pip!"

"That's done it! That's done it!" groaned Tom Merry.

It had, indeed—though the damage was already more or less done! Whacking a Housemaster with a broom was serious enough. But when it happened before the very eyes of the headmaster—

Tom Merry shuddered for poor old Taggles

That hapless worthy seemed suddenly to become aware of his tragic error, and the knowledge came to him just at the moment he sighted the Head.

He dropped the broom as though it had suddenly become red-hot.

"Taggles," thundered Dr. Holmes, "have you taken leave of your senses? Are you mad? How dare you assault one of the masters of this school! Are you mad or intoxicated?"

Mr. Ratcliff staggered to his feet, and pointed a shaking finger at the old school porter.

"He—he is intoxicated, sir!" he stammered, almost beside himself with rage. "He smells abominably of drink, Dr. Holmes! He—he has attacked me—a Housemaster of this school! I request—nay, I demand, sir, that he be instantly dismissed!"

"Be assured, Mr. Ratcliff," said Dr. Holmes sternly, "that the wretched man will be dismissed! It is impossible for me to allow him to stay at this school after this!"

"Dr. Holmes—sir!" groaned Taggles.

The Head raised his hand majestically.

"That is enough, Taggles! To-morrow you leave this school. Your wages will be handed to you, with an additional week's pay in lieu of notice. I have tolerated your slackness and abominable behaviour long enough, Taggles. I have warned you times without number, and you have chosen to ignore my warning. Only this afternoon you have defied my orders and left the school and your duty. I was just coming to speak to you in regard to the matter when I witnessed this outrage!"

"But—but look to me, sir! Which I never knew as it was Mister Rat—"

"Silence! That is enough! Nothing can excuse this final act of ruffianism, Taggles. To-morrow you will leave this school! You are dismissed!"

With that, Dr. Holmes marched away, still in a state of towering and majestic wrath.

Mr. Ratcliff gave the hapless porter a vicious glare, and followed the Head.

Taggles groaned—a groan that went to the hearts of the juniors. Taggles was sober enough now. His gnarled old face was quite white, and he looked completely broken up.

"Taggy!" muttered Tom Merry. "Taggy, we—we're awfully sorry about this!"

"Beastly sorry!" said Blake quietly. "But don't give way yet, old chap! You're not gone yet!"

"Not gone yet!" said Taggles, in a voice that trembled with emotion and grim resolution. "No, I ain't; and, what's more, I ain't a-goin' to go!"

And Taggles, with that defiant statement, went into his lodge and banged the door.

The sacking of Taggles caused a sensation at St. Jim's when the news became known. And his vow that he wouldn't go was greeted with grins by the majority. There was a certain amount of sympathy for him in the school, of course. But all agreed that he had asked for it. A junior who biffed a master—much less a servant who biffed a master—could scarcely expect anything else but the sack.

Taggy had asked for it and got it. On the morrow St. Jim's would know him no more.

That it was hard lines on the old chap, almost everyone was agreed. In his way, he wasn't such a bad old fellow. St. Jim's felt they could forgive Taggles many things now he was going. It was a case of "Poor old Taggy!" now, and not that "old fraud Taggy," as of yore. Taggles was going, and the general feeling was one of sympathy for the old fellow.

But was he going?

Only Tom Merry & Co. had any doubts about that. Taggy had vowed that he wouldn't go, and they knew he had meant it, if nobody else did. Nor was that all. Tom Merry & Co. were determined to prevent him from going—if they could. Not only were they sorry, but they realised only too well that it was partly their fault—or, at least, the fault of Arthur Augustus. If Taggy was determined not to go, then they were equally determined to back him up in his decision. That was the resolve of Tom Merry & Co., and they meant it just as much as Ephraim Taggles himself. It looked as if there was going to be trouble at St. Jim's.

THE END.

(Be sure you read the sequel to this grand yarn, entitled:—"TAGGLES' BARRING-OUT!" which will appear in next week's GEM. You'll vote it TIP-TOP!)

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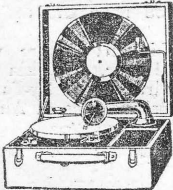
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