

16 FREE GIFTS FOR YOU—THE FIRST ONE NEXT WEEK!

The

GEM

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EVERY
WEDNESDAY.

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THIS ONE, IN COLOURS, NEXT WEEK

16 HANDSOME
PICTURE CARDS,

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"MARVELS of
the FUTURE"

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FIRST CARD in
NEXT WEEK'S ISSUE

YOU'LL ROAR WITH LAUGHTER OVER THIS COMPLETE STORY **30**

George Figgins gets a good laugh at Tom Merry's expense when Tom's guardian, Miss Priscilla Fawcett, pays her "darling nephew" a visit. But Figgy can't quite see the joke when his own aunt turns up and gives him the time of his life!



GEORGE'S

CHAPTER 1.

What's to be Done?

"O H dear!"
 "Hallo! What's the matter?"
 "Oh dear!"
 "Anything wrong, old chap?"
 "Oh dear!"

Lowther and Manners looked in no little concern at Tom Merry.

Tom Merry was Merry by name and merry by nature—as a general rule. But at the moment the leader of the School House juniors at St. Jim's was looking anything but his usual cheery self.

He was standing by the table in Study No. 10, and he

held a letter in his hand. His youthful brow was wrinkled deeply, and his face wore a look of dismay.

"Oh dear!" he repeated, for the fourth time.

"Understudying a giddy parrot?" asked Lowther. "If it's trouble, cough it up, old chap! Tell your uncles all about it. Hope it's not bad news from home?" he added, looking serious suddenly.

"N-nunno, not exactly."

"It is from home, isn't it?" said Manners. "It looks like your guardian's fist, Tommy."

"Oh, yes!"

"No remittance in it?" went on Manners. "Hard luck— for us all! Never mind; can't expect one with every giddy letter, you know. Take it smiling!"

"Nunno! It isn't that, either! Oh dear!"

—OF TOM MERRY & CO., THE CHEERY CHUMS OF ST. JIM'S!



AUNT!

by Martin Clifford

"What the thump is it, then—the cat got the mange, or has the parrot expired?"

"Nunno! You see—"

"Then it must be old Fido!" said Lowther, shaking his head seriously. "Has the old poodle gone at last? I always thought it a mistake for your aunt to put it to bed every night with two hot-water bottles and three chest protectors; makes 'em more delicate, you know, in the long run."

Tom Merry forced a smile.

"No, it's not quite so serious as that," he said, with a chuckle. "Fido's still going strong, and so is the cat and the parrot. The fact is, my guardian's coming here—calling for an hour to see me, while passing through Wayland, you know."

"Oh!"

Lowther and Manners received the news with broad grins and deep chuckles. They fancied they understood the reason for Tom Merry's dismay now.

Miss Priscilla Fawcett, Tom's devoted guardian, was a dear old lady, and Tom was very fond of her indeed, and

was always glad to see her. None the less, he usually had rather a trying time during her visits to St. Jim's to see her "darling Tommy"—though Tom himself would not admit it for worlds.

But the fact was undoubted. To Miss Priscilla, Tom was the most wonderful boy who ever lived—the cleverest, most handsome and intelligent. Moreover, she always insisted that Tom was very delicate. And as his aunt was wont to exhibit her affection for him before everyone, and also to express her fears for his health publicly, Miss Priscilla's visits were always very embarrassing for the unfortunate Tommy.

"Go on, grin away!" said Tom, glaring at his chums, with a crimson face. "It—it's not a grinning matter, you fatheads!"

"Of course not," said Lowther soothingly. "Hard lines, old chap! Still, you've got through the giddy ordeal before; and, after all, it always ends in a tip from the dear old lady."

"That's it!" said Manners, nodding. "Grin and bear it, old chap! The fellows grin at the time, but they soon forget. What's, it matter, anyway?"

"Matter?" snorted Tom witheringly. "You silly chumps! Think I care whether the fellows grin or not? Don't you understand? She's coming this afternoon—by the 4.30 at Wayland!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Oh crumbs!"

The grins faded suddenly from the faces of Tom's chums. They eyed Tom blankly.

"Coming this afternoon?" said Manners. "Oh, my hat! What about the match?"

"That's what I'm thinking about," said Tom Merry grimly. "I'm always jolly glad to see my guardian, whether you silly asses think I am or not! But it quite mucks up my playing in the House match."

"Oh dear!"

It was the turn of Tom's chums to look dismayed.

"But you can't drop out of the match, Tom!" exclaimed Manners, in great alarm.

"We shan't stand an earthly

against the New House without you in the team, you ass!"

"Figgins' lot will lick us, and they'll crow for weeks!" said Lowther. "Can't be done, Tommy! The fellows will mob you. Let Miss Fawcett visit the Head's wife until the match is over."

"That's the idea!" said Manners. "You can't cut the match, Tommy."

"Hallo! Who's talking about cutting the match?" said a voice in the doorway.

"Yaas, wathah! Who is the boundah?"

Blake of the Fourth, followed by Herries, Digby, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, marched into the room. They eyed Tom Merry grimly. Arthur Augustus jammed his monocle into place and subjected Tom Merry to an extra-specially severe scrutiny.

"Cough it up!" said Blake. "Did I hear Manners mentioning something about you cutting the giddy match, or did my aged ears deceive me, Tommy?"

"Yaas, wathah! Pway explain, Tom Mewwy!"

"Well, you did," said Tom, grinning ruefully. "The fact is, I'm in rather a hole. My guardian's coming this afternoon. You know what she is!"

"Ha, ha! Just a little! But—"

"Nothing to grin about, you idiots!" said Tom rather crossly, blushing again. "I—I can't hurt the old lady's feelings by refusing to meet her at Wayland; and there isn't time to write and explain, or anything. What the dickens is to be done?"

"Done?" ejaculated Blake. "You can't possibly cut the match, you awful idiot! Somebody else will have to meet the old lady, of course!"

Tom Merry shook his head dismally.

"Look at the letter!" he said briefly.

Blake picked the letter up and looked at it. Then he grimaced.

The letter was short, but very expressive. It ran as follows:

"Darling Tommy,—I have lovely news for you, dearest boy. To-morrow afternoon I am going to London to stay for a few days with a dear old friend. As I shall, of course, be passing through Wayland, and as I know it is your half-holiday, dearest Tommy, I have decided to break my journey at Wayland, and spend an hour or so with you. I shall arrive at the station at 4.30; and I do so hope that you will meet me there, for I am so very anxious about you, dear boy, and have so many, many questions to ask. I have grave fears that you are not taking care of your precious health. Be sure to keep your chest well covered in this changeable weather, Tommy—especially when playing at that dreadful game of football. Isn't it splendid to think we shall see each other so soon?"

"Your loving guardian,
"PRISCILLA FAWCETT."

"Oh, my hat!" chuckled Blake.

He passed the letter on; and Tom Merry glowered as he met the general grins of his chums.

"Go on—cackle!" he said bitterly. "I'll have to meet her at Wayland, of course!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head. "I am afraid it would disappoint the deah lady feahfully if nobody met her, Tom Mewwy. It is wathah awkward. I have vevy gweat wegard and wespsect for Miss Fawcett; but weally I considah it wathah inconsiderate of her to choose the aftahnnoon of the House match for her visit."

"She doesn't know about that!" said Tom gloomily. "Well, it can't be helped. I'll ask Dane to play in my place."

"Bai Jove! I have an ideah!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus reflectively. "Why not ask Figgy to postpone the match until Saturday, deah boys?"

"Just for this?" snorted Blake. "Fathead!"

"Well, it's worth trying!" said Tom desperately. "I hate the thought of disappointing Miss Fawcett, and we simply can't risk a licking from the New House. I've a good mind to try it."

"And get chipped to death for our trouble?" snorted Blake. "Figgy would laugh himself silly when he heard why."

"We can risk that," said Tom. "After all, Figgy's a decent sort, and he'll understand how I'm fixed—or he may."

"I'm!" said Blake. "He'll understand all right, but—well, please yourself. We'll come if you like."

"Good! Come on, then!" said Tom. "We've none too much time."

"Wathah not!"

And—looking none too sanguine himself—Tom Merry led his chums over to the New House to interview Figgins. That the New House fellows would postpone the match just because Tom Merry's guardian was visiting St. Jim's that afternoon was certainly a forlorn hope. But Tom meant to try it.

CHAPTER 2.

Not a Success!

"HALLO! School House worms!"

George Figgins, the lanky leader of the New House juniors, was standing at the window of his study. He had just caught sight of Tom Merry & Co. crossing the quadrangle below.

"Coming here?" asked Kerr, with little interest.

"Yes, looks like it!" chuckled Figgins. "Looks like a giddy deputation!"

"Oh, my hat!"

Kerr and Fatty Wynn joined their leader at the window. "Tom Merry's crowd, of course!" grinned Kerr. "Wonder what they're after?"

"Come to ask us to let 'em down lightly in the match, perhaps," murmured Figgins, stroking his chin reflectively.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,104.

"I say, what about a little booby-trap? Just a few books over the door to greet the little fellows—eh?"

"They're a bit too wide for an ancient wheeze like that," said Kerr, shaking his head. "Besides, they're seven to three!"

"Rot! We've only got to yell, and we'll have a crowd to the giddy rescue. We'll try it, anyway. Sharp's the word!"

Without stopping to argue the point George Figgins opened the door slightly. Then he gathered an armful of books and dragged a chair to the door. Fatty Wynn jumped to aid him, and in a few seconds the pile of books was nicely balanced on the edge of the door.

"There!" said Figgins, jumping down and moving the chair away. "Just a little surprise for 'em!"

"Waste of time!" scoffed Kerr. "You'll see! They're a bit too wide to be caught by a whiskery dodge like that!"

"My dear man, youth's memory is short!" said Figgins sagely. "By the solemn looks on their chivvies they're too occupied with business to think of booby-traps. Hallo! Here they come!"

There came the tramp of feet in the passage. It was Tom Merry & Co., right enough. Unfortunately for Figgy's plan, however, the School House juniors were not too occupied with business to think of booby-traps—at least, Monty Lowther was not.

He sighted the partly-opened door at once. "Hold on!" he grinned. "Notice the giddy door!"

"Yes; but what the thump—"

"When is a door not a door?" queried Lowther slyly.

"Eh? You silly ass! When it's 'ajar,' of course! But what are you—"

"Exactly! Well," grinned Lowther, "we spotted 'em up at the window; they saw us coming. And as the door's ajar it looks jolly suspicious—"

Lowther paused, for at that moment a junior emerged from a doorway higher up, and came towards them! It was Redfern, one of Figgins' supporters. He stopped and stared rather suspiciously at Tom Merry & Co.

"Hallo!" he said. "What are you School House rotters up to? What are you doing over here?"

"Just a peaceful deputation to interview old Figgy!" said Lowther affably. "Is he about anywhere?"

"In his study, I suppose," said Redfern. "At least, he was a couple of minutes ago. Hold on!"

Redfern was an obliging youth—even to deadly rivals. All unsuspecting now, he pushed open the door of Figgy's study, and looked in.

Swoop!
Whizz! Biff! Bang! Thump!

"Yaroooh!"

Redfern yelled fiendishly as the books swooped down upon his head in a cascade, and rattled about him to right and left. He sat down with a thump and a howl.

Redfern had done just what Monty Lowther had expected him to do, and Lowther led the roar of laughter from the School House fellows.

Inside the study Figgins & Co. were also roaring with laughter—not having grasped the identity of the victim yet.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ow-ow! Wha-at's happened?" gasped Redfern, sitting up dizzily and holding his head with both hands. "What—Oh! Oh, you—you—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" howled Figgins. "How d'you like— Oh crumbs! M-mum-my hat! It's old Reddy! What the— Here, keep off, you idiot! It was— Yarooooh!"

Bump!

Figgins sat down hard as Redfern's fist clumped home hard on his nose. Having grasped the position, Redfern had lost no time in showing Figgins his views on the matter.

The next moment the two were waltzing about, pummeling each other often and hard. Tom Merry & Co. stood round the doorway and howled with laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha! Go it, Figgy!" yelled Blake. "Give him socks, Reddy! Is this how pals treat each other in the New House, I wonder?"

"Bai Jove! This is weally wathah funnay, y'know!" chuckled Arthur Augustus. "Those wottahs meant that boobay-twap for us, deah boys!"

"Go hon!"

"Yaas, wathah! Ha, ha, ha! Bai Jove! Kerr—Fatty, pway do not spoil the fun, deah boys!"

But Kerr and Fatty Wynn did not heed. They could not help grinning themselves, but they felt the affair had gone quite far enough—too far, in fact. Fatty Wynn grasped Redfern and Kerr grasped Figgins. Between them they managed to hold the raging combatants apart.

"Leggo!" roared Redfern. "Lemme get at him! I'll teach the rotter—"

"You silly ass!" hooted Kerr. "Can't you see it was all a mistake? It was meant for those rotten School House

worms! They must have guessed it was there, and they let you in for it."

"Oh!" panted Redfern.

He understood now, and he fairly glowered at the chortling School House party.

"Your own fault, old chap!" said Tom Merry cheerfully.

"We didn't ask you to open the door, did we?"

"Ow! Oh crumbs!" gasped Reddy. "You awful ass, Figgy! You nearly brained me with those books, and now you've nearly bunged my eye up."

"Well, you've nearly busted my nose!" snorted Figgins, in great wrath. "You shouldn't have been such an ass as to let those worms take you in like that!"

"Oh, rats! Look here, sling the rotters out!" gasped Redfern, with sudden excitement. "Rag the rotters and sling 'em back to their own House!"

"Here, hold on!" said Tom Merry, ceasing to laugh abruptly. "Pax! We're here on a peaceful mission, Figgy! This little rumpus was your own doing—not ours, you know! Reddy would insist upon rushing in where angels like us feared to tread, and he deserves to pay for it! Pax, Figgy!"

"Oh, all right!" said Figgins, with a rueful grin. "Hold on, Reddy! We'll see what these School House duffers want, and if it's nothing worth the trouble of a peaceful discussion we'll sling them out as you suggest, old chap."

"Will you?" snorted Blake, starting to turn his cuffs back. "Why, if you jolly well—"

"Cheese it, Blake!" said Tom Merry hastily. "We've no time for rowing now. Look here, Figgy, old man, we've come about the—the—"

Tom Merry blushed and paused. Now he was face to face with Figgins he was beginning to see that their errand was rather unusual, to say the least of it. He hesitated.

"Buck up, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus encouragingly. "As it is such a delicate mattah, Tom Mewwy, pewwaps you had bettah leave the talkin' to me!"

"Oh rats! Look here, Figgy! I—I—"

"Cough it up!" said Figgins, dropping into a chair. "Plenty of time! Match starts in half an hour, but it can easily be postponed while you wag your chin!"

"You—you see," gasped Tom, blushing again. "I—I wondered if you would mind postponing the match until Saturday, old chap."

"Eh? What's that?" Figgins sat bolt upright and stared. "Postpone the giddy match! Why the thump should we? Well, I'm blowed!"

"You—you see—"

"I jolly well don't see!" snorted Figgins. "Why, d'you want to postpone it, Tom Merry?"

"Ahem!"

"Got a cough?" asked Kerr.

"Ahem!" Tom Merry coughed again. "You—you see, it's like this. I've got a—a visitor coming this afternoon. It was out at last!"

"And you want to postpone the match because you've got a visitor coming?" yelled Figgins.

"Ahem! Y-yes! You—you see—"

"Pway leave this mattah to me to explain, Tom Mewwy—"

"You ring off, Gussy—"

"You—you see, it's like this, Figgy," said Tom Merry, coming to the point in sheer desperation. "My guardian's coming this afternoon. You—you know what she is—what a lot she thinks of me. If—if I didn't meet her—"

"Oh, m-mum-my hat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Figgins. "So that's it! You want to postpone the giddy match because Miss Priscilla's coming to see her darling little Tommy!"



In the grip of a crowd of New House fellows Tom Merry & Co. were rushed to the head of the stairs and sent rolling down, one after the other. They arrived in a struggling heap at the bottom, with clothes rumped and dusty, and ties and collars torn adrift. "Ow!" "Yow!" "Groooh!" (See Chapter 2).

"Her sweetest little pet!" choked Kerr.

"Her dearest, dearest, most precious little Tommy!" gurgled Fatty Wynn.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins & Co. roared almost hysterically as they understood.

Tom Merry crimsoned.

"Look here—" he began heatedly.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Figgins. "He wants to postpone the House match because his giddy guardian wants to pet her darling little, sweetest little, popsy-wopsy Tommy can hug his—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, what a scream! Won't the fellows just laugh about this!" gurgled Figgins. "Postpone the match so that darling little, sweetest little, popsy-wopsy Tommy can hug his—"

"That's enough!" snapped Tom Merry, red with wrath and chagrin. "You—you won't oblige me, then, Figgy?"

"Not quite! Ha, ha! Not likely! Ha, ha, ha! Not much! Not even so that darling little Tommy can—"

"Right!" snapped Tom, his eyes gleaming. "Then here's

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,104.

something to make you laugh in another way, you cackling worm!"

"Look here— Yooooooop!"

Bump!

For the second time Figgy's nasal organ came into severe and sudden collision with a fist, and for the second time Figgins sat down hard.

Tom Merry had realised that the School House deputation had been worse than useless. There was "nothing doing" in regard to postponing the match. That much was very clear. Indeed, Tom wondered now how he could have been so foolish as to expect such a thing, much less humiliate himself and the School House by asking it of the fun-loving Figgins. It was really too much to expect that the New House would oblige him because Miss Priscilla Fawcett was coming! He might have known what the result would be—refusal and endless chipping to follow.

It was too late to draw back now; the damage was done. But it was not too late to let Figgins & Co. see that their hilarity and chipping were unwelcome.

So Tom Merry, seething with wrath, smote Figgy's badly-used nose, and the next moment the two were at blows. Tom had quite forgotten the fact that he was in the enemy's country, and that it was unwise to start a scrap there.

"Well, my hat!" gasped Kerr, staring. "Fancy coming here scrapping! Here, Fatty, we're not standing this!"

"Rather not!"

Kerr ceased to stare; instead, he rushed to Figgy's aid, just meeting a hefty left from Tom Merry as he did so. Fatty Wynn followed, as a matter of course.

That started it. It only needed the merest "scrap" to start trouble between New House and School House. Blake instantly piled in to help Tom Merry.

"Back up!" yelled Blake. "Give the cheeky worms socks, chaps! School House for ever!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Arthur Augustus, Herries, Digby, Lowther, and Manners piled in with a will, Redfern doing likewise and yelling for aid.

"Rescue! This way, New House! School House cads! Rescue!"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Tom Merry.

He realised the danger now—too late.

There was a sound of opening doors, followed by running feet. Then the door of Figgins & Co.'s study flew open, and Owen and Lawrence dashed in. They were followed by half a dozen other New House juniors. The cry of "School House" had been enough.

In a few brief seconds the room was full of struggling figures. The hapless School House fellows were simply swamped. Their game struggle to hold their own was hopeless.

"Out with 'em!" panted Figgins. "Cheeky rotters! Coming here—ow-ow!—looking for trouble! Pitch 'em out and roll 'em downstairs!"

"Good egg!"

"Bai Jove! Don't you dare— Yoooop!"

Arthur Augustus went through the door in the grasp of three New House fellows, and collapsed in a heap in the passage outside. He was immediately collared and rushed to the head of the stairs.

A moment later Tom Merry came after him, with a bump, and the rest of the "peaceful deputation" followed very quickly. They went rolling downstairs, one after the other. They arrived in a heap at the bottom, struggling and gasping, with clothes rumpled and dusty, hair dishevelled and wild, and ties and collars torn adrift.

"Ow!" gasped Tom Merry, sitting up dizzily. "Oh, my hat! Ow-ow! Oh, the—the—"

"Look out! The cads are coming down!" panted Blake.

He scrambled up and flew. After him went the rest of the School House warriors, pell-mell. A swift retreat was the only policy at the moment. It was useless for seven fellows to fight a House, as it were, and they had had quite enough.

They tore along the passage, through the hall, and out into the quad, laughter and triumphant jeers and cat-calls following them from the New House fellows.

Not until they reached the safety of the School House side of the quadrangle did they stop. Then they one and all turned upon the hapless Tom Merry.

"You—you born idiot, Tommy!"

"Letting us in for that, you ass! You might have known—"

"We told you so!"

"Yaas, wathah! We shall nevah heah the last of this," groaned Arthur Augustus, looking himself over in hopeless dismay. "And just look at the feahful state I am in! I consider Tom Mewwy an uttah idiot!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Bump him!" gasped Herries excitedly. "Bump him for letting us in for this!"

"Here, hold on!" gasped Tom Merry. "There's been

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,104.

enough scrapping for one afternoon, you asses. It was a wash-out, and I might have known it; I admit that. I was an awful ass to try it on. But it's done now, and can't be helped. As for the match—well, the only thing is for Danp to take my place."

"Rot!"

"Rubbish!"

"Yaas, wathah! It would mean a feahful lickin', and, on top of this w'etched waggin', would be the last staw, Tom Mewwy."

"We should never hear the last of it!" snapped Blake. "It's no good, Tom Merry; you'll have to let someone else meet Miss Fawcett. After all, you'll be able to have tea with her after the match. The fellows would never forgivè you, and you'd be mobbed. You'd lose your giddy job of skipper for cutting an important match just for that."

"That's so," said Manners soberly. "No good, Tommy! You'll have to play. Someone else can meet Miss Priscilla."

Tom Merry groaned. He knew that his chums were right—that it would be very bad policy, being the skipper of the team, for him to cut the match for such a comparatively feeble reason.

"Gussy can meet her, for that matter," said Blake, with a grin. "It wouldn't do for any fellows who didn't know the old lady, and Gussy's about the least important member of the team; he wouldn't be missed."

"Bai Jove! Weally, Blake, you wottah—"

"Well," said Tom Merry, weakening, "I wouldn't mind Gussy taking on the job. I know he'd be decent and not laugh at the old lady."

"Bai Jove! Wathah not!" said Arthur Augustus, quite shocked at the mere thought. "But I must refuse, Tom Mewwy. I am weally vevy sowwy, but—"

"That's a pity, Gussy!" said Lowther, shaking his head gravely. "You're the only fellow capable of tackling such a job."

"The only fellow with tact and judgment," said Blake, following up Lowther's clue quickly. "Just the very man! Full of good-nature and self-sacrifice, too. I'm afraid any of us would make a muck of it!"

"Bound to," said Digby, catching Blake's wink. "Gussy's the man. We shall miss him in the team, but he'll have the satisfaction of knowing that he's saved the match for the School House."

"Saved it by his noble unselfishness and self-sacrifice," said Herries solemnly. "Besides, Gussy's the only fellow well-dressed enough to meet a lady and escort her to St. Jim's."

"Bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus frowned. He took out his eyeglass, polished it carefully, and placed it in his eye. Through this he regarded his chums' serious faces. "Bai Jove!" he remarked innocently, but hesitatingly. "If—if you fellows weally think I had bettah do it—"

"We do!"

"Most emphatically!"

"The only man capable of such a delicate matter requiring so much tact and judgment!"

"H'm!" Arthur Augustus frowned again. "Vevy well," he said, making up his mind with heroic effort. "I—I will undertake the job, Tom Mewwy. I will meet the lady at Wayland and escort her to St. Jim's, although I am afraid I am not at all keen on the task. However, you are quite wight. I flattah myself that I have wathah a way with the ladies, and it will be much bettah for me to meet her than any of you youngstahs—even Tom Mewwy. Vevy well!"

"You'll do it?" gasped Tom eagerly.

"Yaas, I—I will, deah boy. I must wush away at once and change my clobbah. It is now neahly two, and I have only about two and a half hours."

"Oh, my hat! Only that? Right-ho! Good man, Gussy!"

"Hear, hear!"

And so it was settled, and the juniors hurried indoors, Blake, Herries, Digby, Manners and Lowther grinning covertly, and Arthur Augustus looking rather thoughtful. Tom Merry was relieved at being helped out of his quandary, and he was feeling very grateful to the obliging swell of the Fourth. Whether his gratitude was destined to last very long, however, remained to be seen.

CHAPTER 3.

Nice for Tommy!

"AND is darling Tommy looking well?"

"Oh, yaas, ma'am; vevy well indeed!"

"He is a very delicate boy, you know!" said Miss Priscilla Fawcett anxiously. "You are quite, quite sure that the dear boy is looking well?"

"Oh, yaas—quite sure, Miss Fawcett!" gasped Gussy.

"He eats well, I hope?"

"Oh, yaas!"

"Does he still take the cod-liver oil and the other medicines I send him?"

"A-ahem! You—you see, ma'am gasped Gussy, avoiding that exceedingly awkward question. "He—he isn't in my Form, you know!"

"Ah! Of course, dear!" said Miss Priscilla, smiling at the blushing Arthur Augustus. "I do hope the darling boy takes care of his health. He is so thoughtless in such matters, you know. I hope he still wears flannel over his chest—he has such a delicate chest, you know."

"Bai Jove! I—I wea'ly do not know, ma'am!" gasped Gussy, though he had a very good idea. "But I—I assuah you, Miss Fawcett, that Tom is vewy fit indeed—in the vewy best of health."

Arthur Augustus really did hope that that would settle the matter of Tom Merry's health. Good-hearted as Gussy was, and much as he respected Miss Priscilla Fawcett, he did find her conversation regarding Tom Merry's health a little trying.

The swell of the Fourth had met the kind old lady at Wayland, and though she was obviously disappointed at Tom Merry's absence, she had bermed very kindly at Arthur Augustus, whom she had met on several occasions. Her first question after greetings had been exchanged had been regarding "darling Tommy's" health—and it had been the first of many questions on the same subject. They had lasted from the time the local train left Wayland Junction until it steamed and clanged into Rylcombe Station. They were now waiting for the taxi, and Gussy hoped devoutly that the topic would be dropped then.

But his hope was not realised. The taxi came up after a short wait, and during the journey to St. Jim's Miss Priscilla entertained the bewildered Arthur Augustus with the tragic details of darling Tommy's experiences with whooping-cough, mumps and measles. The sight of the school gates brought deep relief to the swell of the Fourth—though not for words would he have allowed the kindly old lady to see his relief.

"Heah we are, ma'am!" he said, smiling across at the old lady as the taxi stopped. "I pwesume you will visit Mrs. Holmes befoah comin' along to Tom Mewwy's studay?"

Miss Priscilla shook her head emphatically.

"Indeed, no, Arthur!" she said, looking quite excited. "I must see dearest Tommy without a moment's delay. He would never forgive me if I did not do so. I am sure. Did you say he was playing football—that dreadful game—my dear boy?"

"Yes, ma'am." Arthur Augustus restrained his desire to smile with difficulty. Football might not have been very far removed from bull-fighting by the way Miss Priscilla spoke of it.

"Dear me! Darling Tommy is so reckless, he will play these rough, dangerous games!" said the old lady. "I would feel much happier if he could play rounders instead, which is a much safer game."

"Bai Jove!"

"You are a dear, good boy," exclaimed Miss Fawcett. "It was very kind indeed of you to take Tommy's place and come to meet me, so that he can win the match. It must be very important—"

"Very important indeed, ma'am; he is captain of the team, and we should have vewy little chance of winnin' without him."

"Dear me!" remarked Tom Merry's guardian, beaming with pride. "How wonderful dearest Tommy is—so clever and so brave. I am sure everyone is kind to him. Please take me to him at once, if it is not troubling you too much?"

"Not at all, ma'am."

Arthur Augustus was only too eager to reach the football field, to find out how the match was progressing. He had grave fears that it would end in defeat for the School House—with him out of the team. The taxi buzzed away back to Rylcombe, and Arthur Augustus gracefully escorted Miss Fawcett to Little Side.

A roar of voices greeted them as they came in sight of the ground, dotted with footballers in jerseys and shorts.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Miss Priscilla, quite startled. "Whatever is that?"

"Bai Jove! That was a goal—to the School House!" answered Gussy in great excitement. "Fatty Wynn is just fishin' the ball out of the net. The game must be neahly ovah now; I wondah what the score is?"

Tom Merry's guardian hadn't the faintest idea what Arthur Augustus meant, but she was much too busy peering over the field in search of her darling Tommy to ask questions. Nobody saw Gussy and the lady he was escorting—the crowd of onlookers were much too engrossed in the match.

The ball had been taken back to the centre after the School House goal.

"How is the game goin', Goah, deah boy?" asked Arthur Augustus anxiously, addressing Gore of the Shell, who was just in front of them.

"New House leading, two-one," replied Gore, without looking round. "Tom Merry's just scored, with three minutes to go."

"Oh, bai Jove!"

A hush descended on the ground as the New House kicked off. With three minutes still to go before the final whistle went there was just time for the School House to force a draw—but only just. The grim faces of Tom Merry and his men spoke of the determination uppermost in their minds—to get that goal or perish in the attempt.

From the kick-off the New House forwards went up the field with a rush, the ball passing swiftly from man to man, and for a moment it seemed as if nothing could stop them. But only for a moment. The School House defence pulled itself together, and the rush was stemmed. Then followed some fast and furious play in mid-field, while the precious seconds slipped by.

There was a roar from the School House fellows on the touch-line as with a long punt Kangaroo sent the leather towards the New House goal at last.

And it was just at that moment that Miss Priscilla Fawcett caught sight of her darling Tommy.

As Tom Merry had been throwing himself heart and soul into the game it was only natural that he should show some signs of the strenuous struggle. His jersey was torn up the back, and he had gathered a considerable amount of mud in one way and another.

Not that he or anyone else paid the slightest attention to such an unimportant matter. To the sturdy captain of the Shell, used to giving and receiving hard knocks, it was a trifle light as air.

But as Tom's old guardian recognised him, she gave a faint scream of alarm that made everyone within hearing jump.

"Good gracious! Tommy—my poor Tommy, what have you done to yourself? Good gracious!"

With that Miss Priscilla ran on to the field, waving her ancient umbrella above her head in almost hysterical alarm.

"Oh great Scott!"

A roar went up round the ground at this amazing interruption. The ball had come to Tom Merry's foot ten yards from goal, and he was steadying himself for the shot that, if it succeeded, would save the game for the School House.

But as that familiar, affectionate voice reached his ears Tom Merry gave a startled gasp and turned suddenly. In an instant the ball had been taken from his toes and sent soaring up the field.

Pheeecep!

The next moment the referee's whistle shrilled out. For a brief moment the crowd stared in stupefied amazement at the scene, and then a great roar went up—a roar of mingled wrath and glee; the wrath came from the School House fellows and the glee from the New House supporters. But it quickly changed to a howl of laughter that swept round the ground as Miss Priscilla Fawcett threw aside her brolly, wrapped her arms round Tom Merry, and hugged him fondly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Dismayed and wrathful as they were, even the School House fellows could not help laughing as they understood the meaning of the sudden interruption.

Tom Merry wished devoutly that the earth could have opened up and swallowed him.

"Hold on, auntie!" he gasped, his face scarlet. "Please don't, dear! Oh crumbs!"

"Ha, ha ha!"

"You poor boy!" exclaimed Miss Priscilla, hugging the hapless captain of the Shell and scolding him affectionately. "How could you play this rough, dangerous game? How very fortunate that I came here at this moment, or you would certainly have injured yourself terribly."

"Oh crumbs!" groaned Tom Merry. "Oh, my hat!"

"Whatever are those boys laughing at?" said Miss Priscilla, seeming to become suddenly aware that others were on the field as well as her dear Tommy. "Dear me! They are all looking at us, and some appear to be quite cross!"

"P-please do let me go, aunt!" panted Tom, his face the colour of a beetroot. "The—the game's ended now. Let me take you to our study, dear. Oh crumbs!"

Not for worlds would Tom Merry have let the old lady know what she had done—that she had lost the game for

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the School House, and made him the laughing stock of St. Jim's.

All Tom Merry wanted now was to get away, to hide his blushes and utter dismay. The footballers were leaving the field now, and the whole ground was in an uproar. Most of the crowd were yelling with laughter, but many of the School House were looking decidedly annoyed.

Tom Merry dared not look up—dared scarcely raise his eyes—at first. But suddenly he raised his head. Taking the old lady affectionately by the arm, he smiled up at her. "Come along dear!" he said. "I'm so glad to see you! We'll have tea in the study and a good talk afterwards."

Then, staring round defiantly at the grinning faces, Tom escorted his old governess from the field. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy joined them, raising his silk hat politely. He was quite shocked at the ferocious glare Tom Merry gave him. As a matter of fact, Tom and the others had taken it for granted that Gussy would know better than to bring the old lady to Little Side.

But the damage was done now.

So startled, however, was Arthur Augustus at the look Tom gave him that he dropped behind, and there he was joined by Blake, Herries, Digby, and Manners, and Lowther.

"Bai Jove!" he began. "Tom Mewwy looked at me as if—"

That was as far as Arthur Augustus got. For as though moved by the same spring, Blake and the rest collared him and sat him hard on the ground—very hard. Then they raised him again, and for the second time he smote the ground.

"Yawwoogh!"

Fortunately Miss Priscilla Fawcett was too far ahead to hear Gussy's wild yell.

"There!" gasped Blake, fairly seething with wrath. "There, you—your footling dummy! Take that! We might have known you'd make a muck of it!"

"Yow! Oh, great Scott! Blake, you feahful wuffian," gasped Arthur Augustus, "how dare you treat me in this wascally mannah! What have I done, you uttah wottahs?"

"What have you done?" howled Herries. "Weren't you supposed to keep the old lady away until after the match? Wasn't that the idea, you born idiot? You want to know what you've done? Lost us the blessed match and made us a laughing stock! Figgy and his pals will never let us hear the last of this!"

"True, old beans! Ha, ha, ha!" Figgins himself came along just in time to overhear Herries' irate remarks. He was surrounded by a horde of triumphant, hilarious New House men. "Good old Tommy! Darling Tommy! Naughty, naughty Tommy! Come to me arms, sweetest pet! Yum-yum!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you cackling idiots!" gasped Blake, crimson himself with wrath and dismay. "Isn't it bad enough to lose the rotten House match without you idiots rubbing it in and cackling like old hens? I'll—I'll punch your silly head, Figgy, if you don't stop it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgy and his merry men did not stop it. They howled. "Oh, you—you rotters!" hissed Jack Blake. "Go for the cackling asses, chaps! Smash the cads! Show 'em we won't stand their silly cheek!"

"That's it! Back up—"

"No, it isn't it, lads! None of that, Blake! That's enough! Clear—sharp!"

It was Kildare, and he came up just in time. In another moment Blake & Co. and Figgins & Co. would have been at grips, and a regular House row would have started. But Kildare's voice was enough. The Sixth-Former himself was smiling grimly. Tom Merry's quaint old guardian was well known at St. Jim's, and Kildare, who had been refereeing the match, was as much amused as anyone. But he was not going to allow a riot to follow the match.

Blake and his dismal supporters trooped on ahead, shouts of hilarity following them from the New House fellows. It was a most depressing ending to the House match—for the School House fellows. But it was a remarkably good one for Figgins & Co. They had won a hard-fought tussle in a way that not only provided them with glory, but endless hilarity as well. And they were determined to make the most of it.

CHAPTER 4.

Lowther's Wheeze!

"ROTTEN!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Beastly rotten!"

"Hear, hear!"

"And all Gussy's fault!"

"Weally, Blake—"

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,104.

"Oh, dry up, Gussy, you footling idiot!"

"Bai Jove!"

Tom Merry & Co. were not in the mood to listen to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

It was bad enough to lose the House match, but the manner in which they had lost it—the School House fellows, at least, had no doubts as to that—was worse. And worse still was the chipping and "leg-pulling" to which they were subjected by the triumphant New House.

And they blamed Arthur Augustus for it. In their view the noble and well-meaning Gussy could easily have kept Miss Priscilla Fawcett away until the match ended. It was rather rough on Gussy, and he was not likely to see that he was to blame.

It was rotten for them all, however—and especially for Tom Merry himself. True, his own chums backed him up loyally. They neither chipped him, nor did they blame him for the unfortunate happening. Miss Priscilla—little dreaming of the trouble in which she had landed her darling Tommy—had expressed a desire to see his chums, and Blake & Co. had helped Manners Lowther and Tom to entertain the kind old lady to tea in Study No. 10.

They had listened with a great show of interest and sympathy to tales of Tommy's boyhood days and they had manfully restrained their smiles. Then, tea being over, they had accompanied Tom and his guardian to Rylcombe Station, and seen the old lady off—no even smiling at the deeply affectionate parting between her and dearest Tommy.

As a matter of fact, they were not feeling happy enough to smile at anything.

Now, on the way back to St. Jim's, Tom Merry & Co. were discussing the situation glumly. Tom Merry himself was fairly "in the dumps."

"No good blaming Gussy, I suppose!" he said dismally. "It's just rotten bad luck. Oh crumbs! I'm in for some chipping all round! Even Kildare and the prefects are laughing about it. And that rotter Figgy, won't let it be forgotten in a hurry."

"Hallo! There they are now!" grunted Blake, nodding towards the school gates. "Waiting for us to come in, I bet!"

"Let's mop up the road with 'em!" said Manners pug-naciously. "We'll give the rotters something else to chortle about!"

"Too many of 'em!" said Tom, frowning, as he noted that Figgins & Co. were in force. "No good making matters worse by asking for a ragging as well. Yes they're waiting for us right enough. Take no notice of the rotters!"

Figgins and his friends of the New House were undoubtedly waiting for Tom Merry & Co.'s return. They lined the school wall just by the gates, with broad and anticipatory grins on their youthful features.

"Here's the dear, darling little fellow now," said Figgins, as they came up, evidently referring to the crimson-faced Tom. "Don't look at dearest Tommy, you rude boys."

"He mustn't play those rough, dangerous games," said Kerr gravely. "He might suffer terrible injuries."

"It was too bad," said Figgins. "We ought to have agreed to postpone the match. It was too bad to rob darling Tommy of his fond nurse's hugs and kisses. Kiss me on my baby brow. Oh, my hat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Be sure and take the cod-liver oil—a spoonful every evening. And don't forget a hot-water bottle every night, too!" chortled Redfern.

"And mind you don't forget the flannel chest-protector, sweetest Tommy!" added Owen. "Is that a red-flannel mask he's got in front of his head now, or is it his face?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry's face certainly was red—scarlet, in fact. He blushed furiously, gritting his teeth to prevent himself making the mistake of answering. Figgins & Co. were good-natured fellows, but not quite good-natured enough to miss this chance of japing their rivals.

"Come on!" gasped Tom. "I shall have to go for 'em if we don't move on! Let 'em chortle, the rotters!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins & Co. did chortle.

The chums of the School House hurried on through the gates, heedless of the laughing, chaffing New House men. Monty Lowther looked round, and gave a satisfied grunt as he saw that Figgins & Co. did not follow.

"Oh, good!" he breathed, his eyes gleaming. "Hold on, chaps! We'll give them something to howl about in another way in a minute."

"Eh? What's the game, Lowther?"

Lowther looked round again. The laughter of the New House ragers could be heard—evidently they were still leaning against the wall.

"This way!" snapped Monty Lowther.

He led the way round by the flower-beds bordering the fringe of elms that lined the school wall. He stopped

"Do these nice boys belong to your school, Georgie?" asked Figgins' Aunt Sophy, beaming at Tom Merry & Co. "Y-yes, aunt!" panted Figgins, glowering at the grinning School House fellows. "They're—they're in another House, though!" (See Chapter 5.)



suddenly, and pointed to a coil of rubber hose lying on the lawn. The nozzle was there, but the end of the hose was not visible.

"It's connected to the turncock in Taggles' yard," said Lowther swiftly. "Just remembered spotting the gardener using it when we went out. He's left it connected—the careless ass! One of you cut off and turn the water on—sharp!"

"Phew! Good wheeze, Lowther!"

Manners saw the idea at once, and dashed off to the lodge a few yards away. Lowther grasped the hose-pipe and hurried to the wall, his grinning chums at his heels.

"I'll just shin up, and you chaps hand me the thing when Manners turns the giddy water on," said Lowther softly. "Quiet's the word!"

It was very necessary to be quiet. Beyond the wall they heard laughing and chatting. As Monty Lowther prepared to scramble up, Figgins' chortling voice was heard.

"I'm sorry for poor old Tommy!" he was remarking. "The dear old girl's a good sort, but she really is a scream! I've got a giddy aunt like her, myself—lives at Hampstead, you know. I've never seen the old girl, but my cousin says she's a holy terror—makes him look a perfect fool when she goes to see him in term time."

"Look well, if she comes to see you here, then, Figgy!" came Kerr's voice with a chuckle. "Better keep her away, old chap!"

"I'll watch she doesn't come here—not if I can help it!" said Figgy, with a frown. "She's an awful old frump, I believe—worse than Miss Fawcett, who's really not so bad at all. But my giddy Aunt Sophy's a giddy fright as well as a corker in other ways. I should faint, I think, if ever she turned up—What's that?"

"Only the giddy gardener watering the flower-beds," said Kerr, glancing up at the wall from beyond which a sudden sizzle of water had sounded. "I spotted him. Oh, look out!"

Kerr's words ended in a wild howl of warning. But it came too late—much too late!

Kerr just had time to yell as he caught sight of Lowther on the wall with the hose-nozzle in his hands, and the next instant—

Swoooosh!

A stream of water took Kerr full in the chest, and bowled

him over. Then it splashed into Figgins' startled face as he looked up. Fatty Wynn was the next one to receive attention, and he was sent staggering against Owen with a fearful howl of alarm that ended in a gurgle and a splutter.

"Yarroogh!"

"Ugh! Ow!"

"Oh, my—Grooogh!"

Splash! Swoosh! Swish! Sizzzz!

Yells of alarm and wild splutters rent the calm evening air as Lowther directed the nozzle of the hose full on the startled New House fellows lazily lining the wall below.

The five wilted, ducking and dodging madly in desperate efforts to avoid the stream of swishing water. Before they could jump out of range at least a score of them were thoroughly drenched. Monty Lowther was feeling very sore with the New House jokers, and he had no mercy on them. He fairly raked them fore and aft, so to speak.

"Yarroogh!"

"Grooogh!"

"Oh, help!"

"It's those School House cads!" howled Kerr. "After them—round by the gates, quick, you idiots! Come on!"

He dashed away madly for the gates, being the first to regain his scattered wits.

Lowther immediately turned off the tap on the nozzle, and dropped down from the wall to join his chums who were roaring with laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Run for it!" gurgled Lowther. "Oh, what a giddy surprise!"

Yelling with laughter, Tom Merry & Co. ran for it. They were dashing into the sanctuary of the School House doorway almost before the hapless and drenched New House juniors were inside the quadrangle.

But Tom Merry & Co. were taking no chances. They flew up the stairs to Study No. 10 and locked themselves in there. Then they held each other and roared.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Tom Merry, wiping his streaming eyes. "What a giddy score! That's got a bit of our own back, anyway!"

"Yaas, wathah! Lowthah, you deserve well of your country, bai Jove! That has stopped their wotten gwins for a time at all events!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And it's done something else, my lads!" said Lowther, ceasing to laugh suddenly and looking reflective. "I say, did you hear what Figgy was gassing about—I mean about having an aunt something like Tommy's guardian?"

"Eh? Yes; but what—"

"Well, I think I've got an idea," said Lowther, his eyes beginning to glimmer. "Yes, by jingo! I believe it could be worked! What about Figgy's old aunt visiting him at St. Jim's?"

"Eh?"

"I mean what I say," said Lowther. "Why not arrange for Aunt Sophy to visit dear old Georgie-porgie Figgins?"

"Bai Jove! I fail to undahstand you, Lowthah! How can you awwange such a thing?"

"Easily enough!" said Lowther, with a deep chuckle. "Figgy says he's never seen the old girl; that makes it easy as winking. And you chaps know what I can do in the impersonating line. Why shouldn't I dress up and visit Figgy as his giddy Aunt Sophy? I bet I could do it, and I bet I'd make old Figgy wish he'd never been born! Those New House worms have done enough nagging about Miss Priscilla, haven't they? Why not let us have a turn?"

"Bai Jove!"

Tom Merry & Co. looked at each other in growing excitement as Lowther delivered himself of his great wheeze. Then Tom Merry grasped his chum round the waist and began to waltz him about the study in his joy.

"Chuck it!" gasped Lowther, laughing. "Well, is it a go, Tommy?"

"Go!" yelled Tom Merry gleefully. "It's great—ripping! My hat! It'll be paying those cackling rotters back in their own coin fairly. It's great! There isn't a fellow in the School House can beat you at masquerading, Monty! Yes, for goodness' sake do it, old man! We'll back you up!"

"Hear, hear!"

"But how is it going to be wangled?" said the practical Manners. "How—"

"That's what we've got to work out," said Lowther cheerfully. "It can be worked easily enough. Didn't Figgy say the old girl lived at Hampstead?"

"Yes, yes. But how—"

"Then that's all we really want—to get a wire sent from Hampstead somehow—though Wayland would do for that matter."

"Better from Hampstead—much better!" said Manners, shaking his head. "Figgy's wife, you know, but he wouldn't dream of suspecting anything wrong if the wire came from there."

"That's the snag, though!" said Tom, frowning. "How on earth—"

"Hold on!" said Digby, grinning. "I fancy I can work that, old beans. What about that cousin of mine—the old boy who was here for Speech Day last term?"

"Phew! Would—would he do it?" breathed Tom Merry.

"Like a shot!" grinned Digby. "He's a terrific practical joker himself—even now. Remember that jape he played on old Ratty when he was here? He's a medical student now, and he has diggings at Hampstead. I'll drop him a line to-night if you like."

"Oh, good man, Dig!"

"Easy as falling off a house, then!" chuckled Lowther in great glee. "That settles it!"

"Better not do it right away, in any case," said Tom. "or old Figgy will smell a rat. Wednesday afternoon will do nicely. I'm fed-up with Figgy's leg-pulling, and this ought to put a stop to it for good and all. Now, let's clear these tea things away, and get down to details, while Dig's writing to his giddy cousin. Figgy's scored to-day, but I fancy he'll wish he hadn't before we've finished with him."

"Hear, hear!"

In high good humour now Tom Merry & Co. cleared away the crockery, and settled down to the details of Lowther's scheme for putting the "kybosh" on George Figgins of the New House. And when the chums of the School House went to bed that night they were smiling quite cheerily.

Tom Merry did not seem at all disturbed by the grins and remarks regarding his dear nurse—nor was he at all annoyed when a note came over from Figgins close on bed-time reminding him anxiously not to forget his dose of cod-liver oil, his hot-water bottle, and his flannel vest. Tom only chuckled.

It was the same the next day and the next. The New House fellows were obviously determined not to allow Tom to forget Miss Fawcett's visit, and they chipped him and ragged him unmercifully. But Tom was not to be drawn—he kept his temper and smiled. Wednesday was coming, when George Figgins was to have his turn—if all went well with Lowther's little jape!

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CHAPTER 5.

Aunt Sophy Arrives!

"YOU ready, Figgy?"

"Nearly, old chap."

"Buck up! I'm hungry already!" complained Fatty Wynn.

"Hungry, my hat!" snorted Figgins. "Why, you've only just had dinner, you fat cormorant!"

"I know. But the thoughts of tea in the open air always makes me feel hungry," said Fatty Wynn. "You're sure you packed the rabbit-pie, Kerr, old man?"

"Yes—quite sure!" grinned Kerr.

"And the sardines, and the lobster-paste sandwiches and the plum cake?"

"Yes; they're all in the basket, old chap! Don't worry, Fatty!"

"I can't help worrying," said Fatty, shaking his head seriously. "I know how careless you fellows are about grub. You don't seem to realise that grub's the essential thing in life. For goodness' sake buck up, anyway!"

Figgins and Kerr chuckled. It was Wednesday afternoon, and a gloriously fine day, with a cloudless blue sky and a warm breeze. It was just the afternoon for a pull up the river and a picnic on the green banks of the Rhyll. That was how Figgins & Co. had planned to spend that half-holiday, and all three were looking forward keenly to it. But Fatty Wynn was getting very impatient, though it was barely one-thirty yet.

"I'm ready now, Fatty!" grinned Figgins, finishing lacing a pair of canvas shoes and donning his boating blazer. "We'd better dodge round by the back of the school with the basket of grub, in case any of those School House rotters spot us. We don't want to be raided and lose the grub."

"My hat! Rather not!" said Fatty Wynn, horrified at the bare thought of such a tragedy. "Come on!"

He was just starting for the door, when it opened, and Redfern looked in. He pitched a postcard on the study table, with a chuckle.

"For you, Figgy!" he said. "Just spotted it in the letter-rack; must have come by the noon post, old chap. So-long!"

He vanished; and Figgins picked up the card and glanced at it. He gave a start as he saw that it was a picture-postcard with a view of Hampstead upon it.

Next he frowned rather apprehensively as he noted the writing. It was small and angular.

Then he read the card, a look of almost ludicrous amazement spreading over his ruddy features as he did so. He gave a gasp as he finished reading, and the card fluttered from his nerveless fingers. He collapsed, with a horrid groan, into the easy-chair.

"What on earth's the matter, Figgy?" demanded Kerr, looking down at him in great alarm. "Bad news?"

"Somebody dead!" asked Fatty Wynn, his good-humoured, podgy features suddenly grave.

"Groooogh! Oh crumbs!"

Another horrid groan of deep anguish came from George Figgins. With a feeble wave of his hand he indicated the postcard, motioning them to read it.

Kerr read it and whistled. It ran as follows:

"At last, my dearest Georgie, I am proposing to visit your school—a pleasure I have denied myself until now, though I have often visited your dear Cousin Jack at Wodehouse. But I am really coming this time, Georgie, and I hope to arrive at Wayland Junction to-morrow afternoon, darling. Will wire time of train to-morrow, dearest boy. Fondest love.

"AUNT SOPHY."

"Oh!" gasped Kerr, with a faint grin. "Oh, my hat! Who the dickens is Aunt Sophy, Figgy?"

"Don't ask me!" groaned Figgy, wagging his arms feebly. "It's come at last—the blow has fallen! I always feared the old girl would take it into her head to come here. I've been lucky so far, though I've taken jolly good care never to write and encourage her. But my Cousin Jack has—the silly chump!—and he's fairly paid for it. He thought it would bring him tips, but it brought only her; and she gives him an awful time when she does go to Wodehouse to see him. Oh, my hat!"

"Phew! I remember now," said Kerr, grinning. "She's the old lady you mentioned the other day, Figgy."

"That's it! A Tartar she is, with queer ideas and terrible ways, I believe. My cousin's tried going into sanny and all sorts of stunts to dodge her. But it's been no good. Oh crumbs! And this afternoon, too! Oh, why did that born idiot Reddy bring that card just now? Oh, my hat!"

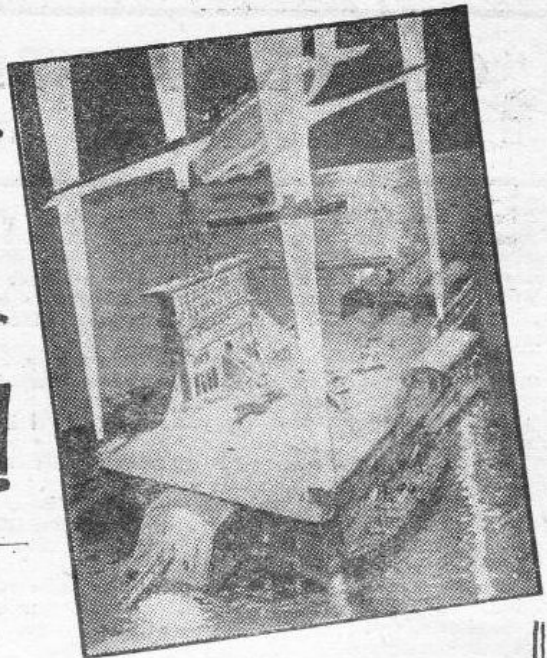
Fatty Wynn looked alarmed.

"Look here, Figgy," he said anxiously, "you—you don't mean that this is going to muck up our picnic?"

Figgins nodded and groaned deeply again.

(Continued on page 12.)

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This first "baby" seadrome is to be 1,200 feet long, 400 feet wide, and 70 feet above the level of the sea. On it there are to be built big hangars, repair shops, replenishment depots, houses for the staff, and an up-to-date hotel where air passengers can dine in luxury, beguile with amusements the time they have to spend waiting for the next 'plane when they change their route, and, if necessary, sleep.

The new floating airport will need a crew of over forty men, to look after the visiting air liners, to run the workshops, and to take charge of the wireless directing apparatus that will guide aircraft within hundreds of miles of the floating seadrome. In addition there will be the hotel and restaurant staffs. So altogether it will be a busy little artificial island!

How is it going to "stay put"? Seadrome Number One is to be anchored in place by enormously strong chains, each four miles long, attached to great sea-anchors and piling. And altogether the making of this amazing mid-Atlantic island will use up 6,000 tons of steel and 2,000 tons of iron!

2,000 FATHOMS DEEP!

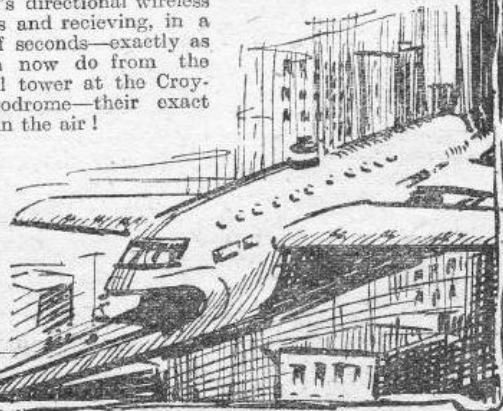
The shallowest parts of the ocean will be chosen for the mooring of these triumphs of engineering skill, to start with. Then, when experience has been gained, the obstacle at present existing in the way of anchoring seadromes in the deepest water will be overcome. It is a difficulty, a very great one. For on the Atlantic route the depth of the sea is round about 2,000 fathoms!

To anchor a big mid-sea air port to the bottom of the sea at that depth, the anchor chains between the floating island and the sea-bed—there would have to be at least two—would each weigh over 1,500 tons before the anchor went overboard. A tremendous weight, that, for the seadrome to carry, and in a raging storm the anchorage might break at any moment! But that is a problem which the engineers of the future will solve.

Yet another suggested scheme is to have great aircraft carriers stationed at intervals across the ocean, in the route of the air liners. They would cruise around in a small circle, and thus be in some degree able to dodge the worst fury of big storms. They would send out their immediate position by wireless, at regular intervals, and powerful search-lights would be a further guide to 'planes wanting to make a mid-ocean landing.

But it is the anchored seadromes, built on lines shown in next week's wonderful Free Picture Card, that will meet with most favour, for their equipment will be absolutely complete. Air liners that have lost their bearings will be able to speak into space, calling up the officer in charge of the seadrome's directional wireless apparatus and receiving, in a matter of seconds—exactly as they can now do from the wonderful tower at the Croydon Aerodrome—their exact position in the air!

(Next week's article deals with "A Trans-Continental Coach!"—another dream of the future—which is the subject of the SECOND Free Gift Picture Card.)



"GEORGE'S AUNT!"

(Continued from page 10.)

"Looks like it," he said dismally. "I—I simply daren't dodge it now. The old girl's got heaps of tin, and—well, my pater would play Hamlet with me if I did! I've got to meet her, of course—though you bet I shan't make a fuss of the old girl. Oh crumbs! If only I'd gone a minute earlier we should have been well away now before this dashed card came!"

"Perhaps she won't come," said Kerr hopefully. "You can't very well dodge her now, Figgy—I see that. A wire may come saying she can't come, or something."

"Some hopes!" groaned Figgy. "Well, we'll have to make the best of it."

"Couldn't you go alone, and bring her up the river after us?" asked Fatty Wynn, avoiding Figgy's eyes.

"No fear! Look here, you chaps have got to back me up in this," said Figgins warmly, giving Fatty a look of deep reproach. "Play the game! It's rotten; but, after all—Come in, fathead!"

The door opened, in response to Figgy's impolite request, and a New House fag entered. In his hand was a buff-coloured envelope.

It was the wire.

Figgins tore it open with trembling hands and read it. The look of disgust on his face was enough to tell what it contained. Figgins threw it down and jumped on it. Then he grasped the astonished fag by the collar, ran him out of the study, and planted a boot behind him—greatly to the fag's wrath and indignation.

The wire obviously contained unpleasant news.

"She—she's coming, then?" mumbled Fatty Wynn.

"Yes. Train gets in Wayland at 2.15. She wants me to meet her there. Oh, blow the luck! Sooner we get off the better!"

Fatty Wynn almost wept at the thought of the picnic, but Figgins was not the fellow to dodge what he felt was a family duty.

"After all," he said glumly, as they started out for Rylcombe Station, "she may like me better than Jack, and she may stump up handsomely. You never know with these old girls."

It was a ray of hope, at all events, and it kept the New House trio from dull despair during the short train journey to Wayland.

They got there just a few minutes before the London train steamed into the junction.

"Hallo!" said Kerr suddenly, frowning. "There's those School House rotters! What the dickens are they doing here?"

"Oh crumbs!" gasped Figgy, in alarm.

He fairly groaned aloud as he caught sight of Tom Merry and Manners, with Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy, standing at the station bookstall. They appeared to be deeply engrossed in the contents of the stall, however.

"They haven't spotted us!" breathed Fatty Wynn. "Perhaps they'll clear off before your aunt arrives, Figgy."

"I jolly well hope so! Let's keep out of sight, anyway."

The three New House fellows discreetly retired round a corner of one of the station buildings. Their hopes were soon dashed to the ground, however. As the London express steamed in Tom Merry & Co. came strolling along the platform. They seemed quite surprised at sight of Figgins & Co.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Tom Merry, grinning cheerily.

"Fancy meeting you New House worms here—so far from home without a keeper! Come to see the puff-puffs, my little men?"

"Rats!" said Figgy, glowering at them. "What are you rotters doing here, anyway?"

"We've just been buying a 'Magnet,' old chap," said Tom, waving a copy of the weekly paper he held. "Any objections to us coming on your station to buy a paper, Figgy?"

Figgins did not answer that sarcastic inquiry. The train was disgorging its passengers now, and he was scanning them almost feverishly. It was the most awful bad luck that his deadly rivals should have happened along just then! He was hoping, more devoutly than ever, that Aunt Sophy would not materialise.

It was a vain hope.

A shrill, feminine voice struck suddenly on Figgy's ears.

"Georgie dear—is that Georgie?"

"Mum-my hat!"

George Figgins wheeled abruptly. Behind him was a

short, rather plump lady with a somewhat ruddy and smudgy complexion. Her hair straggled from beneath an ancient bonnet, in which was stuck a yellow feather. Her dress was of a greenish colour, ancient as regards fullness and length. Beneath it showed a pair of high-laced patent-leather boots. She wore a blue cloak, and carried a large, bulky gamp, also a huge, old-fashioned handbag.

Figgins almost fell down as he sighted the apparition.

Instinctively he had a horrid sort of fear that this was his aunt. Certainly he had not seen her alight from the train, but here she was.

He gazed at her, speechless with dismay. If this was Aunt Sophy, then his Cousin Jack's description of her as an "old frump" was decidedly complimentary.

"Oh crumbs!" he gasped. "Are—are you Aunt Sophy?"

The lady beamed delightedly.

"My dear, dear boy!" she said affectionately. "I knew it was Georgie—I remember your photograph. I saw it when I visited your home last. But how you have grown! And so like your darling daddie!"

With that Aunt Sophy put her arms round the crimson Figgins and hugged him, kissing him fondly on both cheeks.

"I—I say!" gasped the hapless Figgy. "P—please don't, aunt! I—I—"

"And are these your little playmates?" she interrupted, smiling kindly at the scared Fatty Wynn and Kerr.

"Y—yes, aunt. They share my study at St. Jim's. But—"

Oh crumbs!"

Figgy gave a startled gasp as Aunt Sophy hugged and kissed Fatty and Kerr in turn—greatly to the utter dismay of those startled juniors. He had heard that his aunt was rather "hard"—a terror, not at all given to demonstrations of affection.

"The dear little darlings!" commented Aunt Sophy, drawing back and eyeing them kindly. "What sweet little faces they have! And do those other boys belong to your school, Georgie dear? They look very nice boys."

"Y—yes, aunt!" panted Figgins, glowering at the grinning Tom Merry & Co. "They—they're in another House, though. But shall we go now, aunt—this way! If you will—Yoop!"

As he turned, Aunt Sophy also turned, and the handle of her gamp—by accident, possibly!—caught him a crack on the head.

"Oh!" gasped Aunt Sophy, in great distress. "My poor, darling Georgie! Do let me kiss it better, dear!"

Smack!

She kissed Figgins soundly on his forehead. Tom Merry & Co. broke into involuntary giggles of glee. Figgy went crimson, rubbed his forehead hastily, and glowered at them.

"Oh, you—you cads!" he hissed in an undertone. "Why can't you be decent and clear!"

"What did you say, dearest?"

"I—I was talking to those—those fellows!" gasped Figgins, flushing again. "If you'll come along now, aunt—"

"One moment, dearest! You're sure you are not badly injured, my poor boy? It was terribly careless of me! Please let me stroke—"

"Nunno! It—it's all right, aunt!" said Figgins, hardly knowing whether he was on his head or his heels. "Shall we go—please let us go now, aunt!"

"But my luggage—I must see to my luggage, sweet one!"

"Your—your luggage?"

"Yes. I have two rather heavy bags, dear. You see, I have decided to stay near St. Jim's for some time."

"Oh—oh dear!"

"My rheumatism," explained Aunt Sophy. "I am very hopeful that the Sussex air will do me a great deal of good, and it will be so very, very nice for me to be so near one of my nephews. I do hope we shall see a great deal of each other, darling Georgie."

"Oh, y—yes, aunt! But—"

"Perhaps you will like to take me out in the bathchair sometimes, Georgie?"

"The—the bathchair?"

"Yes, dear. Rheumatism is a terrible affliction, Georgie! But I am forgetting—how careless of me; I have brought you a nice present, dearest."

She fumbled in her handbag and brought to light three sticks of mint-rock. Tearing the paper from one she handed the sticky toffee to Figgins, who almost fainted—as did Fatty Wynn and Kerr, as she stripped the other two sticks and handed them one each, with a beaming smile.

"How fortunate that I brought three!" she said. "Now, shall we— Ah, there is my bathchair and luggage!"

She ambled off along the platform to where a truck half hid a bathchair and two big leather bags. Figgins gave his two chums hopeless looks and followed, his ears burning as he caught the almost hysterical giggling of Tom Merry & Co.

"Oh, the—the cads!" he breathed to Kerr and Wynn. "Just like them to turn up at a time like this! My hat! This is awful!"

Kerr and Wynn did not answer—they were incapable of

answering. But for their stalwart loyalty to their hapless leader they would have turned tail and sneaked away. Ignoring the giggles of their rivals, they stamped after Figgins, the sticks of toffee having been hurriedly crammed into trouser pockets out of sight.

They reached the bathchair, and, to their great astonishment, Aunt Sophy immediately plumped herself into it and drew the rug over her knees, tucking it in comfortably.

"Now, do be careful, Georgie dear!" she said anxiously. "I am so very nervous—especially in traffic. Be careful also not to go over stones; bumps are very bad for my rheumatism."

"But—but, aunt," stammered Figgy faintly, "the Rylcombe train goes from the station here. It'll be in within ten minutes. Would—would you like to wait in the waiting-room?"

"But is there any necessity to take the train, darling?" said Aunt Sophy pleadingly. "Please do not say it is necessary, for I do so hate the stuffy railway carriages. How far is it to the school by road from here?"

"M-my hat! Oh, about three miles, aunt!"

"Then we must certainly go by road, dear! The fresh air will do my rheumatism a great deal of good," said Aunt Sophy, smiling kindly at her nephew. "Besides, it will save

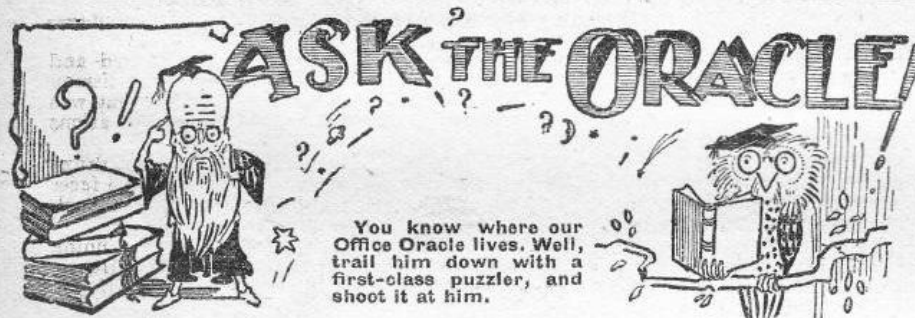
fares, and I am most economical. I am most anxious to get all the fresh air I can."

"But—but—" "Please do, Georgie! I know you will do anything to oblige a poor old lady with rheumatism, won't you, dears?" she said, smiling archly at the flabbergasted three. "I would never dream of taking train for such a short journey, my dear boys. I am quite, quite sure that two such kind-looking boys as your friends would not mind carrying my bags. Would you, dears?"

"Oh, n-nunno, ma'am!" gasped Kerr faintly. "N-not at all, ma'am!" stammered Fatty Wynn. "And you, Georgie, will push my chair, dearest. Now we can start."

And they did start—there was nothing else for it. Figgy was a good-natured youth, and not for worlds would he have dared to refuse in the circumstances. With crimson cheeks and a dejected look at his chums he started to wheel the bathchair out into the street. Kerr and Fatty Wynn lugging the heavy bags along in the rear. And behind them came Tom Merry & Co., nearly doubled up with helpless laughter. Undoubtedly the turn of George Figgins had come.

(Continued on next page.)



I'm handing you the straight goods!—are to be found right here in li'l old England. Yes, sirree! So put that in your exam. paper and you'll get full marks.

Q. Who was Chagul?

A. I thought a long time over your question, H. T., and I have come to the conclusion that you mean "What is a chagul?" A chagul is the name of the complete skin of an animal used in Eastern countries for carrying water.

Q. What is the Kaaba?

A. The shrine at the Great Mosque of Mecca visited by many thousands of Mohammedan pilgrims yearly. It is covered with a cloth of black brocade, which is renewed from time to time.

Q. What is a carnivorous plant?

A. As a botanist I have few equals, so I can answer this question without thinking. Carnivorous is the species of plant that entrap and feeds upon insects. The one illustrated on this page is the pitcher. Inside the cup of this plant is a liquid that drowns adventurous insects who have the misfortune to sidestep over the edge.



An amazing plant that traps insects

Q. What is a Bath Oliver?

A. A biscuit first made in Bath and popular everywhere. Ask the good lady who runs the school tuck-shop to get you some to sample, Jimmy. You'll find they'll go down well!

Q. What is canvas made of?

A. Thanks for your ten-page letter, "Boy Scout," but regret I can only answer one of your fifty-seven questions on this page. British canvas is made of flax; and American canvas is made of cotton. A "bolt" of canvas is about forty-two yards, and sail canvas is made twenty-four inches in width. The canvas bears a brand and the maker's name, and each bolt of canvas bears a number which indicates the weight. Jolly glad to hear that the chap you call "Foghorn" Jones has joined your troop. He'll be a grand addition to the choir for helping out with the merry old war-whoops!

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,104.

GREAT excitement was caused in the office the other morning by our Oracle discovering a distinct enlargement of the office-boy's cranium. His first suspicion that this was due to dawning intelligence, gave place to his former resignation when he learnt that the junior sub. had knocked a paste-bottle from a shelf on to the lad's skull!

Q. What is the difference between a awn and a faun?

A. A fawn, as you rightly state, "Literary Critic," is a young fallow deer. On the other hand, a faun relates to Latin mythology, and was a rural god with horns and a tail.



An Angone—a familiar piece of architecture.

Q. What is the name of the German Parliament?

A. Certainly, "John Peel," I am always glad to answer political questions as well as any others relating to science, literature, sport, astronomy, gastronomy or silk-worm breeding. The name of the German Parliament is the Reichstag.

Q. What is loco?

A. On my desk before me I have a letter from George Guffard of Galashiels, who has been having a slight argument with his friend, Jock McMickel. In the height of the row, Jock told my correspondent that he was loco, "or, in ither wor-r-rds, in loco parentis." I see what Jock was driving at, George. As politely as he could in the heat of the moment, he was trying to inform you that you had bats in the bellry, or an upper storey for rent. Loco, in short, means off your onion.

Unfortunately, Jock got the wrong derivation; *in loco parentis* is Latin for "in place of a parent." At the time, no doubt, he himself was somewhat *non compos mentis* (which was the Latin phrase he was seeking).

Q. What is an Angone?

A. Angone, my friend from Scotland, is an architectural term for a piece of masonry that is intended to support a cornice. You can see these in churches and public buildings.

Q. Is it true that the United States has the best roads?

A. No, Syracuse P. Platten, in residence at O— college, L— university. Guess you've got another guess coming, Sy! The great United States have sure got the best skyscrapers, baseball stars, and brands of chewing-gum; but when it comes to roads—say, you'se folk from the place Columbus lighted on, hev jest got to take a seat in the second row. The world's best roads—and mind you, Sy,



Carrying water in the East, in a whole animal's skin.

CHAPTER 6.
Awful!

"Do be careful, Georgie!"

"Yes, aunt!"

"Be—be careful of that lamp-post, dear!"

"Yes, aunt!" gasped Figgy.

"Oh dear! I do believe that horse is going to take fright! Keep—keep well away from it, dear!"

"Oh! Yes—yes, aunt!" gasped Figgy, steering clear of the ancient cab-horse near the pavement. "It—it's all right! That horse couldn't take fright if it wanted to."

"Dear me! Not quite so fast, Georgie dear!"

"All right, aunt!"

Figgy groaned in bitterness of spirit.

He wanted to hurry; heavy as the bathchair was to push he was desperately anxious to get out of Wayland High Street at the earliest possible moment. As it was a half-holiday it was more than likely that both St. Jim's fellows and Grammarians would be in the market town. But evidently Aunt Sophy did not wish to hurry. She was undoubtedly nervous—very nervous.

To add to Figgy's despair, a glance behind showed him that Tom Merry & Co. were following. They had mounted their bikes, and were cycling along at a snail's pace some yards behind. Figgy gritted his teeth as their gleeful chortles reached him.

"Oh, the cads!" he breathed.

It was only too clear to Figgy that Tom Merry and his chums intended to follow the bathchair. And yet he knew he could scarcely blame them; it was just what he himself would have done in like circumstances.

Tom Merry & Co. had happened upon them by chance, and they were determined to get all the fun out of Figgy's plight that they could. Not for one moment did the New House leader dream that they had come there purposely—and that they knew "Aunt Sophy" better even than he did.

Half-way down the High Street the little procession met three St. Jim's juniors—Racke, Croke, and Mellish. Not being the sort of fellows to be mindful of hurting an old lady's feelings, Racke & Co. first stared blankly at the sight, and then they doubled up and howled with laughter.

A little farther along, the luckless New House trio met Kildare and Darrell, who also stared hard, and then turned away, hiding grins. Still farther on they met Lacy & Co., of the Grammar School, and those shady juniors shouted rude remarks and yelled with hilarity.

Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn were scarlet with mortification. That promenade along Wayland High Street was a perfect nightmare to Figgins & Co.

But worse was to come. They all breathed deeply with relief on reaching the open country at last; but then their troubles redoubled in another way altogether.

The bathchair was heavy—there was no doubt about that. And the bags were far from being light. And the warm sun that had been so welcome at the beginning of the afternoon was the last straw! With the perspiration streaming from them, the hapless three trudged along.

Up hill and down dale they wended their weary way, Aunt Sophy kindly but firmly insisting that they did not rest. She was so very excited and eager to see the school where her darling Georgie lived and had his being! Figgins had almost more than he could do to push the chair, and Wynn and Kerr were staggering with heavy bags. Up the hills Figgy toiled and pushed manfully, his two chums lagging behind wearily.

Behind them rode Tom Merry & Co., scarcely able to keep on their bikes. They were almost as tired as the three New House fellows—with laughing.

The cross-roads outside Rylcombe were reached at last. There Figgins halted and wiped his streaming brow. As a matter of fact he was in a quandary now. If he took the turning to the right he would have to pass the Grammar School!

"To the left, Figgy!" breathed Kerr frantically.

The thought of passing the Grammar School pushing such a "frump" as Figgy's aunt in a bathchair was too much for him.

Figgy nodded, and was turning to the left when Aunt Sophy chipped in.

"No, no, Georgie, darling!" she protested, kindly but firmly. "Please take the turning to the right. Doesn't it go to St. Jim's, dear?"

"Oh, y-yes. But—"

"Then we will follow it, dear. It is much, much smoother. The other road looks so bumpy."

"Oh, bl— I mean, oh, all right, aunt!" gasped Figgy, with a groan.

The hapless trio turned to the right. After all, one route was nearly as bad as the other. Figgins prayed that no

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,104.

Grammarians would be outside the Grammar School gates—a forlorn hope, as he well knew

The gates hove in sight at last, and Figgy groaned in dismay as he sighted a score or more of juniors hanging about in the roadway chatting. He gave a deeper groan as he sighted four of them just emerging from the gates towards them. They were Gordon Gay, Frank Monk, Harry Wootton, and Carboy.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Kerr. "Now for it, Figgy."

Figgins & Co. pushed on. By this time, indeed, they were scarcely in a state to care what happened. They were footsore and weary, and the hands of Fatty Wynn and Kerr were sore and cramped beyond measure. Had they only known that those heavy bags contained nothing but brick ends their state of mind would have been indescribable.

But that was one of the little things Wynn and Kerr did not know. Nor did Figgy know that the figure he had pushed all the way from Wayland was in reality Monty Lowther—which was undoubtedly just as well for that cheery youth.

Tired as he was, Figgy put on speed as the four Grammarians came towards them.

But it was useless. Gordon Gay stared, his chums stared. Then all four of them stopped, broad and delighted grins spreading over their youthful faces.



Before any sprang feet head. Wh

"Well, I never!" said Gordon Gay.

"Did you ever?" commented Frank Monk.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

With scarlet faces the New House trio pushed on, giving the Grammarians savage looks. Gordon Gay & Co. immediately fell in line behind the little procession.

"Well, my only silk topper!" said Gordon Gay. "Who's the giddy old girl, Kerr, old chap?"

"Go and eat coke, you cads!" hissed Kerr, who was almost on the point of collapse.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Who is it?" roared Gay. "My hat! Have St. Jim's fellows started in business as bathchair attendants? I say, run and fetch the chaps here, Carboy. This is too rich for anyone to miss! Is the old girl a relation, Figgy!"

Figgy did not answer—he couldn't. But Aunt Sophy could, and did!

"Stop, Georgie!" she ordered, in quite a firm voice. "Stop, dearest boy! Who are those rude, wicked-looking young ruffians?"

"They—they're Grammarians, aunt!" stammered Figgins. "Don't—please don't take any notice of them!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the Grammarians.

"Dearest Georgie! Oh, my hat!"

"Run away, you rude boys!" chortled Monk.

"Come on, chaps, for goodness' sake!" groaned Figgy.

The three Saints hastened, but Gordon Gay & Co. also quickened their pace. They linked arms, and fell into step behind the procession.

"Stop!" cried Aunt Sophy, rather shrilly this time. "I will deal with those rude boys, Georgie, my pet. Do not be frightened, dearest one. I will protect you! Stop!"

Figgins was obliged to stop, for Aunt Sophy was attempting to climb out of the bathchair whilst it was in motion. Gordon Gay & Co. came to a sudden halt.

They stood in a row, with linked arms, and broad grins on their cheery faces. But the grins faded suddenly, and there arose a sudden chorus of startled yells as Aunt Sophy, with amazing agility, sprang from the chair and rushed at them, her huge broolly waving above her head.



But the four Grammarians could even move, Figgins' Aunt Sophy her bath-chair and rushed at them, her umbrella waving above her head, whack, whack, whack! "Yoooop!" "Yarooooh!" "Oh crikey!" (See Chapter 6).

Whack, whack, whack, whack!

Before any of the four could even move she was upon them, striking them—striking out with terrific vim and energy.

"Yaroooogh!" howled Gay fiendishly, as he caught one whack on his back. "Yoooop!"

"Yoooop!"

"Yaroooogh!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Oh, great— Yooooooop!"

Whack, whack, whack, whack!

Aunt Sophy followed them up, smiting with a will. Gordon Gay tripped over a stone and measured his length in the dusty road. Aunt Sophy jumped over him, and brought her broolly into play with a will. It sounded like the vigorous beating of a carpet, and Gay's howls awoke the echoes.

"Yarooooooogh! Oh, help! Murder! Drag her off; she's mad!" he howled. "Yarooooooh!"

Whack, whack, whack!

Three final, terrific whacks with the broolly, and then the old lady drew off. Gordon Gay scrambled up and flew for his life after his routed chums.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! What a seweam! Ha, ha, ha!"

The laughter did not come from Figgins & Co. Grimly satisfied as they were with the sudden turn of events, they were too done up even to laugh.

But Tom Merry & Co. fairly howled. They had dismounted from their bikes, and they were looking on in high glee.

"Good for you, aunt!" gasped Figgins, amazed beyond measure at his aunt's warlike spirit. "Look here, dear, now give those other rotters a turn behind—those with the bikes. Let the rotters have it, aunt!"

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Aunt Sophy, breathing rather heavily but looking triumphant. "I fear I shall suffer terribly from rheumatism after this unwonted exertion. But I am not the person to submit to insults from anyone, Georgie! I am a meek woman in the ordinary way, but when I am roused by injustice or persecution—"

She climbed back into the bathchair and drew the rug around her.

"But—but what about those fellows behind, aunt?" said Figgins, in great disappointment.

"I am exhausted, darling! Please proceed, dearest!" panted the old lady. "And those boys are such nice-looking boys. I would not dream of harming them, dear! You are surely making a mistake in thinking they are like those other rude boys."

The procession moved on again, Tom Merry & Co. mounting their bikes and keeping pace behind, though they could scarcely keep their seats, nor did they trouble to stifle their laughter now. Outside the Grammar School gates the little crowd was staring open-mouthed at the occupant of the bathchair and her attendants. But, though the Grammarians grinned and chortled delightedly as they recognised Figgins & Co., they passed no rude remarks—in Aunt Sophy's hearing. They had seen the fate which had befallen Gordon Gay & Co. and they took no risks. Nevertheless, Figgins & Co. were more than thankful when they were well past the Grammar School that afternoon.

CHAPTER 7.

Up the River!

NEVER had Figgins & Co. been more thankful at the sight of the ancient buildings of St. Jim's as they were on that terrible afternoon. They could scarcely drag one foot after the other. All three were exhausted. Several times between the Grammar School and St. Jim's they simply had to pause and rest, despite Aunt Sophy's eagerness to reach the school. They were getting used to being stared at now, however. The curious stares and the chortles of the St. Jim's fellows they met in Rylcombe Lane they scarcely heeded. Much as they had dreaded arriving with the quaint and remarkable Aunt Sophy, they were glad to see St. Jim's at last.

"Here we are at last, aunt!" panted Figgins. "There's the school ahead."

Figgins was feeling rather ashamed of himself. After all, though undoubtedly queer and eccentric, Aunt Sophy was his aunt, and she seemed a very kindly old lady on the whole. True, she had fairly startled them with her warlike behaviour against the Grammarians. But he had known that she was a "holy terror" in many ways. It really did not surprise him, from what he had heard from his Cousin Jack about Aunt Sophy.

Not for one moment did Figgins suspect anything. He hadn't the faintest idea that Tom Merry & Co. had overheard his remarks to his chums; indeed, Figgins had forgotten making them. And had he known they were aware he had an Aunt Sophy he would not have suspected.

But he had been wishing his aunt far away, and he could not help feeling guilty and ashamed.

Moreover, the worst was over now—or he imagined so. Once inside their study, Figgins was determined to keep Aunt Sophy there until it was time for her to go. The knowledge that she was staying in the district was distinctly disturbing, but Figgins was a fellow who lived one day at a time.

"So this is St. Jim's!" said the old lady, beaming about her, as Figgy wheeled her through the gates. "Very nice—very nice indeed! That building over there is beautiful, so old and mellowed. But that horrid building over there—the new building—is ugly and monstrous, darling! It reminds me of a workhouse or a lunatic asylum, Georgie dear! What building is that?"

"That—that's the New House—our House," said Figgins, with an effort.

"And the other one—the beautiful old pile—"

"That—that's the School House!" gasped Figgins.

"Dear me! What a great pity you do not belong to the School House, Georgie!"

"I—I'd rather be in the New House!" gasped Figgy.

He glowered round at the fellows who were beginning to collect around the bathchair. The appearance of a bathchair

in the ancient quadrangle of St. Jim's was not a usual one. And the sight of the three leaders of the New House escorting it was an amazing one to the St. Jim's fellows. Figgy's cheeks burned hotly as he heard the remarks and chuckles. Evidently his aunt was causing a sensation. Luckily, however, there were few fellows about at that time.

Aunt Sophy commented upon it as they crossed towards the New House.

"It's a half-day, of course, aunt," said Figgins gloomily. "They're all out enjoying themselves."

Poor Figgins could not help a touch of bitterness creeping into his voice.

"Dear me!" said Aunt Sophy, as if she had noticed it. "And you dear, good, unselfish little boys have sacrificed your half-holiday in order to welcome me. I do hope, darlings, that you have not had to give up an outing or a game for my sake, dearest Georgie!"

"It—it's all right, dear!" gasped Figgy, regretting he had spoken thus. "We—we were only going to have a picnic up river. But it doesn't matter. We can go on Saturday, easily enough, instead."

"Oh, but that is too bad!" said the old lady in dismay. "It was perfectly sweet of you to meet me in view of that, darling. You dear, good little boy, Georgie!"

And to show her gratitude and admiration, Aunt Sophy, who was just climbing from the bathchair outside the New House steps, clasped both arms round Figgins and kissed him soundly on both cheeks.

"You dear, good little pet!" she beamed, proud admiration in her face. "I am so proud of you, Georgie darling! You are a wonderful boy! So handsome, and— Dear me! What are your schoolfellows laughing about, Georgie?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was rude and ill-mannered, perhaps, but even the New House fellows could not restrain their laughter. The School House fellows did not attempt to restrain it—for most part, at least. They stood round, highly entertained.

"He, he, he!" chortled Baggy Trimble. "I say, Figgy, old chap, who is the old girl? Your giddy charlady from home?"

"Eh? What did you say, boy?" exclaimed Aunt Sophy, looking round suddenly. "Did you refer to me as a charlady, you disgustingly fat boy?"

"Yes," grinned Trimble, not at all disturbed by the question. "Aren't you? Or are you Figgy's giddy aunt—and a relation of Charlie's aunt? He, he— Oh crumbs! Here, keep off! Yarrooooooh!"

Whack, whack, whack, whack!

Trimble flew, yelling, and dodging frantically as the gamp clumped about his head.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Go it! Oh, my hat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Auntie!" gasped Figgins desperately, almost collapsing with shame and dismay. "Don't do that here! Please don't! I'll deal with that fat rotter later! Please—"

"My dear, dear Georgie, how kind and forgiving you are!" said Aunt Sophy affectionately. "I will let that young rascal go, though I hope it will be a lesson to him not to insult helpless ladies again. Ow! My rheumatism! Give me your arm, Georgie!"

"Y-yes, aunt!" said Figgins, glaring defiantly round at the grinning faces, and giving his arm promptly. "Come on, aunt! This way!"

Figgins had got beyond caring now what happened. In the background he beheld Tom Merry & Co. fairly rolling about with laughter. It surprised Figgins very much—as well as made him seethe with helpless fury. Not being aware, as they were, that the old lady was none other than Monty Lowther, he was amazed that they were acting in such a rude and ill-mannered way.

"Oh, the cads!" he breathed to himself. "I always thought them decent chaps, at least! Oh crumbs! This is awful! Come on, you chaps!"

Fatty Wynn and Kerr were even more furious than Figgins. They wearily picked up the heavy bags again, and followed Figgins as he escorted Aunt Sophy up the stairs. Only their stout loyalty to their leader kept them from dropping the bags and bolting from the scene.

Fatty Wynn, especially, was in a most deplorable state—both of mind and body. Walking was not Fatty's strong point, and his nightmare journey from Wayland with the heavy bags had almost finished him. Moreover, he was famished, simply famished! Still, Fatty was feeling better now at the thought of the basket in the study—the basket containing the rabbit-pie, the cake, and the other good things for the picnic. He intended to suggest tea the moment they reached the haven of rest—the study.

They reached it at last, toiling along manfully with the heavy bags—of bricks! Figgins was obliged to release Aunt Sophy's arm in order to help Fatty upstairs with the bag.

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"Thanks, Figgy!" gasped Fatty Wynn faintly, as they entered their study thankfully and dumped the bags down. Why Aunt Sophy had insisted upon her bags being brought upstairs, they all three could not imagine. But she had, though Figgy had urged her to leave them in the hall. Her excuse had been, however, that they would be safe in darling Georgie's care until she could get rooms in Rylcombe. "Thanks, Figgy!" repeated Fatty. "Would—would your aunt like tea now?" he added eagerly. "There's the picnic-basket!"

"Picnic-basket!" exclaimed Aunt Sophy, before Figgy could answer. "Oh, how perfectly sweet! Is that your picnic-basket, Georgie?"

"Y-yes, aunt!"

"For your picnic up the river, darling one?"

"Yes. But we'll have tea in here now, of course."

"But I have a better idea than that, George," said Aunt Sophy, with impulsive eagerness. "It is still early—too early for tea, my dear boys. Why not have the picnic just the same? I should just love it. It would just remind me of my own boy—I mean, girlhood days!"

"But—but really, aunt—" gasped Figgy, aghast.

"I insist—my darling boy, I must insist!" said Aunt Sophy firmly. "I refuse to spoil your afternoon's enjoyment. It is quite—quite early yet, and I should just love to picnic by the green banks of a murmuring stream."

"But—but your rheumatism, aunt!" said Figgins desperately.

"The open air will do me a great deal of good, darling. How noble and unselfish of you to think of my infirmity!" said Figgy's aunt, giving him a fond hug. "But I insist upon the picnic, my darling boy. I shall not feel that I have spoiled your afternoon's enjoyment then. Come, let us start. How fortunate we have my bathchair! We will be able to carry the basket with us in that."

Figgy looked at his chums appealingly, and groaned. But there was no help for it, and Kerr and Fatty Wynn nodded mutely. They picked up the basket, and followed Aunt Sophy and Figgy out of the room and down the stairs to the quad again. They found a group of grinning juniors round the bathchair. They seemed as interested in it as if it had been a racing car. As a matter of fact, several of the juniors were just about to give each other rides round the quad in it. The arrival of Figgins & Co. and Aunt Sophy, however, frustrated that intention.

Amidst grins and chuckles, the old lady boarded the bathchair, and Figgy, blushing furiously, tucked her in, his face the colour of a fresh-boiled lobster as she thanked him kindly and patted his head.

They were just about to start off for the river when a tall, angular figure came along from the direction of the School House. It was Mr. Horace Ratcliff, the unpopular Housemaster of the New House.

He fairly blinked at the bathchair and its attendants.

"G-good gracious!" he snapped, eyeing Figgins sternly. "Who—who is this—this lady, Figgins? How dare you bring that—that vehicle into the quadrangle, Figgins?"

"It—it's my aunt, sir!" stammered Figgins, looking angry. "She's called to see me!"

"H'm!" snorted the master. "I have received no notification of your relative's intended visit, Figgins. This is most unusual! However, you may proceed!"

Mr. Ratcliff had been about to create a scene. He was an irritable, interfering gentleman, and his intention had been to make George Figgins look very small. But as he caught a rather warlike gleam in the old lady's eye just then he thought better of his intentions.

The bathchair began to move. Unfortunately, Aunt Sophy twisted the handle of the steering-wheel the wrong way, and there came a fearful yell from Mr. Ratcliff as it went over his foot.

"Yooooooh!"

He danced about the quad, clutching his foot frantically. Being the unfortunate possessor of several corns on that foot, Mr. Ratcliff was, naturally, suffering acute anguish. He danced, and glowered furiously at Aunt Sophy.

"Dear, dear me!" gasped the lady, in some distress. "How very careless of me, my dear sir! Was that your foot?"

"Ow! Ow—yow!" gasped the Housemaster, his face twisted into an extraordinary expression. "It was careless of you, madam—confoundedly careless! I—I—I—"

"Go on, Georgie dear!" called Aunt Sophy, interrupting Mr. Ratcliff indignantly. "I refuse to stay and hear such expressions! What a fearfully ill-tempered man! I do hope that he is not a master here—though I suppose, from his appearance and language, that he is only a porter or gardener. Please hurry, Georgie darling. Let us escape from his contaminating presence at once!"

Figgy was only too eager to do that. Knowing Mr. Ratcliff from painful experience, he trembled as he saw the look of rage on that gentleman's acid features. He pushed

away, and, with help from Kerr and Wynn, the bathchair rumbled away towards the gates, Mr. Ratcliff glowering after it and still hugging his foot. Excepting for the little adventure with Gordon Gay & Co., it was the only bright incident that afternoon for the hapless Figgins & Co.

As they rumbled away along the gravel path Aunt Sophy happened to catch the eye of the grinning Tom Merry. She winked and moved her head slightly—a slight action that Figgins & Co. failed to see. They would have been much astonished indeed had they seen it.

"One moment, Georgie dear!" she said, giving the giggling Tom Merry & Co. a bright, kindly smile. "Are not these the boys who smiled at me so nicely at the station?"

"Y—yes, aunt—I suppose they are!" said Figgins, giving Tom Merry a fierce, bitter look. "But never mind—"

"But I have another idea, Georgie darling. You are so kind—so generous! I am sure you would like to ask those nice boys to join us, dearest?"

Figgins gritted his teeth. His aunt's words must have reached Tom Merry & Co. clearly.

"No, aunt!" he said in a sort of strangled voice. "I would much rather not. They—they're fearful bounders really. Besides, the grub—I mean the food wouldn't be enough. I'd much prefer not to, aunt."

"Very well, dearest! They seem very sweet boys to me, though—that darling little boy with the eyeglass especially! His dear baby-face is so sweet and innocent. I would have loved him to join us in our picnic up the river, dear! However, I am sure you know best, sweetest."

"Bai Jove!"

The bathchair rattled on over the gravel, and turned out through the gateway. Tom Merry & Co. watched it go, and then they grasped each other convulsively and howled.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ho, ho, ho!"

"What price Figgy's face?" sobbed Tom Merry.

"Oh dear! This will be the death of me!" gasped Blake, tears of merriment streaming down his face. "Gussy, your dear baby-face is so sweet and innocent!"

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus, frowning. "I will punch Lowthah's wotten nose for that when I see him again! Howevah— Ha, ha, ha! This is weally the seweam of the term, deah boys! Are we goin' aftah them?"

"My hat! Yes, rather!" gurgled Tom Merry. "Did you spot Lowther's wink? And he purposely mentioned the picnic up-river for our benefit. That means he's got some little game on; wants us to collar the grub. I should think, Yes, rather! Come on!"

And Tom Merry led his nearly hysterical chums out through the gates in the wake of the bathchair and its double burden of Figgy's aunt and the picnic basket. Tom Merry felt quite certain that the japer of the School House meant that basket to change ownership at an early date.

CHAPTER 8.
Very Strange!

"Oh, do be very careful, Georgie!"

"Yes, aunt!"

"Hold me tightly, darling! Be sure not to let the boat move. I'm so nervous on the water. Do—do you think it quite safe in this small boat?"

"Quite safe, aunt!" said Figgy soothingly, hiding a grin.

"The—the water looks terribly rough, dearest boy!"

"Oh, my— Ahem! It—it's really quite smooth, aunt; no danger whatever. Isn't it, you fellows?"

"Quite safe, ma'am," said Kerr solemnly.

"Certainly!" said Fatty Wynn.

"Shall I be seasick, do you think? I do dread being seasick. And this horridly small boat—"

"Oh crumbs! Nunno! There isn't much danger of being seasick on the Rhyl, aunt!" gasped Figgins faintly. "We—we're ready now, if you'd like to get in, dear."

Figgins & Co. were ready—they had been ready several minutes now. Aunty Sophy had insisted upon Fatty Wynn and Kerr holding the boat, while Figgy himself held her whilst she boarded it.

But Aunty Sophy was undoubtedly very nervous—much more nervous than she had been in the bathchair. She made a score of attempts to get into the boat, but each time she drew back again in fear.

Figgins & Co. were feeling thoroughly "fed-up," yet they could not help grinning—though they were rather ghastly grins. For at least a score of juniors and seniors were looking on from the boathouse, and all of them were highly entertained. Tom Merry & Co. especially were really disgracing themselves by their audible chuckles. Even Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, whose manners were of the very best, seemed to have quite fallen from his lofty estate in that

(Continued on next page.)



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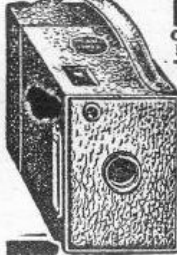
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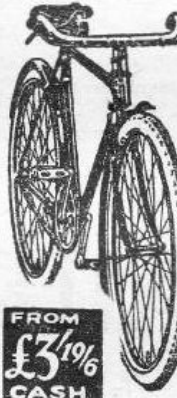
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2 WEEKLY

respect. He also seemed quite careless as to the danger of hurting Aunt Sophy's feelings at all.

It was all very trying to the hot, flustered, and bothered Figgins & Co.

"Do try to get in, auntie!" went on Figgins desperately, his face as red as a beetroot, as he glanced round. "It's quite safe—couldn't be safer! Please get in, dear!"

"I—I will try, darling sweet! Do hold fast, boys!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

They held fast. Aunt Sophy made a determined stride for the boat—she appeared to have braced herself for the dangerous operation in earnest this time. In mid-air, however, she seemed to lose her nerve once again. Her arms flew out to balance herself; one clenched fist took Figgins just under the chin, and the other just missed Kerr's face. But it caught the top of his head, knocking his cap into the water. Kerr overbalanced, knocking against Fatty Wynn, who only just saved himself from going into the river.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a howl of laughter from the onlookers.

Figgins hugged his chin convulsively. Really, considering her manifold infirmities, Aunt Sophy was an unusually and remarkably powerful lady. Figgins' jaw ached terrifically.

"Dear me! How very, very unfortunate!" said the old lady, recovering herself with a wild feat of acrobatics. "My poor, dear Georgie! I am quite sure you must be fearfully injured, for my hand is quite painful. Say you forgive my terrible awkwardness."

She grasped Figgy and hugged him fondly.

"It—it's all right, auntie!" panted Figgy, releasing himself desperately. "Do get in! We'll never get off at this rate."

"I really will try to be brave, dearest, for your sake! Hold me fast!"

"Yes, auntie!" almost hissed Figgy.

He held fast. Aunt Sophy took her courage in both hands this time, so to speak. She fairly leaped for the boat, dragging the startled Figgy with her. Auntie landed fairly in the boat on her feet. Figgy sprawled headlong over a seat, catching his head a fearful crack on the gunwale as he did so.

"Yoooop!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The boat rocked sickeningly, and Aunt Sophy screamed shrilly.

"Help! We are sinking! Oh, help!"

"It's all right!" panted Figgins, scrambling up, heedless of his aching skull. "Get off chaps, for goodness' sake!"

"Oh, my hat! Yes, rather!"

Aunt Sophy flopped into the stern seat, apparently in a half fainting condition. From the folds of her skirt she drew a small bottle and started to sniff at it audibly. The bottle, apparently, held smelling-salts. Figgins and Kerr

grasped the sculls, whilst Fatty Wynn joined Aunt Sophy in the stern and took up the rudder-lines. The boat began to glide out on to the sunlit river amidst a chorus of ironical cheers from the boathouse.

"Oh dear!" groaned Figgins. "This—this is too awful for words! Are—are you all right, aunt?"

Sniff, sniff, sniff!

Aunt Sophy was sniffing at the smelling-salts at a great rate, apparently on the verge of collapse. But she soon recovered.

"Oh!" she gasped. "What a"—sniff, sniff!—"terrible experience! Are—are we safe now, dearest?"

"Safe as houses!" said Figgins reassuringly.

"Aren't we sinking?"

"Nunno!"

"Dear me! I feel terribly afraid on this wild waste of waters! Shall we land now before a storm comes on, darling?"

"Oh, my hat! Nunno! We're quite all right. We'll land higher up river for the picnic, dear."

There really was not much chance of a storm coming on. The river was like a shimmering sheet of silver, and as smooth as a duck-pond. The sky was azure blue, dappled here and there with faint, fleecy clouds. It was, in fact, a warm spring afternoon. Figgins had intended to take things easy—for it was still fairly early in the afternoon—but the sight of Tom Merry & Co. following them in another boat made him change his mind about that, and filled him with a seething rage.

It had been an awful afternoon—and it was not over yet. But the worst of it all was, from Figgins & Co.'s point of view, that their deadly rivals of the School House had witnessed practically all that had happened. Figgy groaned in deep bitterness of spirit as he foresaw the endless days of chipping that were bound to follow.

"Put it on, Kerr!" he panted in a grim undertone. "We don't want those School House rotters to see where we land. Oh, the—the beastly cads! I never knew Tom Merry was such an outsider!"

Kerr nodded, glumly, hopelessly. Loyal as he was to his chum, he wished from the bottom of his heart that he had kept out of the business altogether. He was more than "fed-up." The afternoon had seemed like one long, horrid dream to Figgins & Co.

A bend in the river hid the boat behind from them at last, and Figgy gave the word hastily to Fatty Wynn to pull inshore. They did so, and despite Aunt Sophy's shrill cries to be careful, Figgins leaped desperately ashore, anxious to land and drag the boat into concealment.

But it was not to be. Figgy sprang ashore, as did Fatty Wynn, while Kerr held on to the bank until Aunt Sophy had landed.

But to land Aunt Sophy was easier said than done. She stood up, and then she sat down again in trembling indecision—or it seemed so!

"Do jump, auntie!" pleaded Figgins, his eyes anxiously scanning the river. "It's only a foot at most, and quite safe. Do jump, please!"

"I—I will try, you dear, brave boy!"

She did try. Figgins stretched out his hand and she gripped it hard.

"Now, dear!" said Figgy encouragingly. "Just step on the gunwale, and—Here—what—"

Splash!

Figgins staggered forward, slipped over the low bank, and splashed into three feet of water over his knees. By what seemed a miracle, Aunt Sophy—who had drawn back at the last moment, taking Figgy with her—kept her balance and flopped back into the seat again.

"Oh, great Scott!"

"Help!" screamed Aunt Sophy. "The darling boy is drowning! Help!"

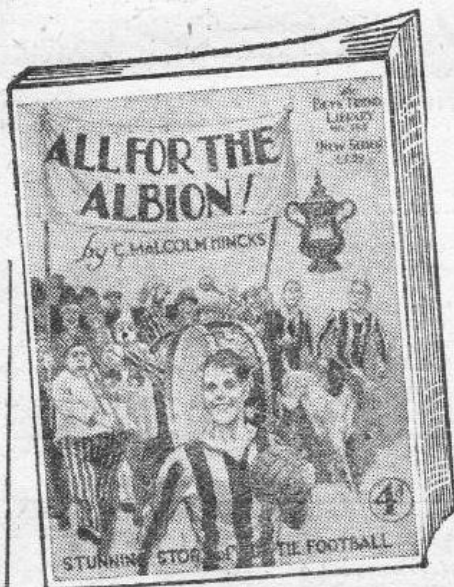
"Oh crumbs!"

Aunt Sophy's frightened screams rang over the river. George Figgins scrambled ashore, biting his lips with vexation and chagrin. It was too late to think of hiding the boat now. The School House boat had already turned the bend and was in sight.

"The—the old cat!" breathed Figgins.

He really could not help it. He was soaked through well up above his knees, and he felt decidedly uncomfortable. That grip of the hand had been like a

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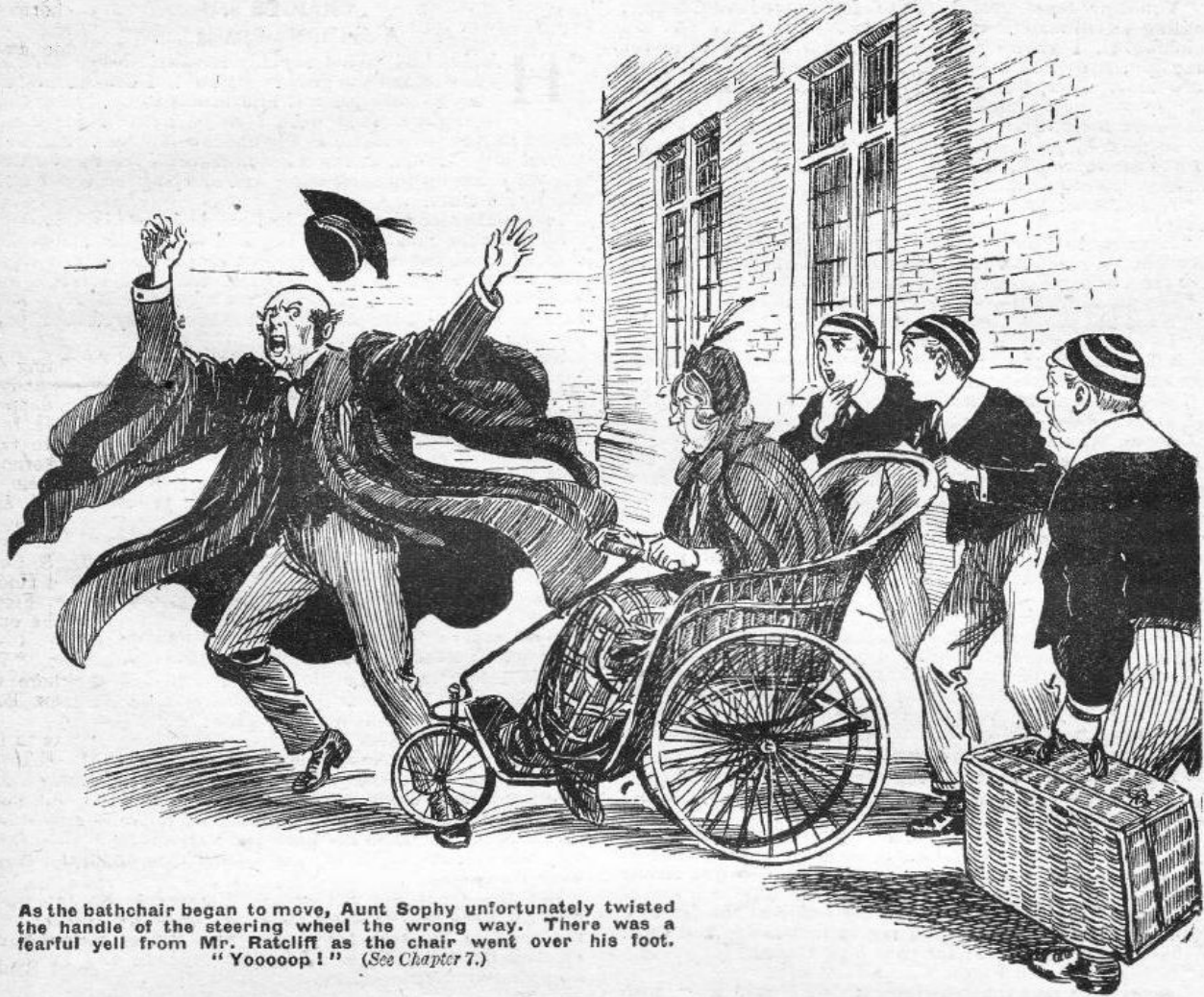
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As the bathchair began to move, Aunt Sophy unfortunately twisted the handle of the steering wheel the wrong way. There was a fearful yell from Mr. Ratcliff as the chair went over his foot. "Yoooooop!" (See Chapter 7.)

vice, and the pull Aunt Sophy had given was remarkably strong. He couldn't help feeling that she was nothing like as feeble, or such an invalid, as she made herself out to be.

Though one of the best-hearted and sympathetic fellows in the world, George Figgins was really beginning to feel almost homicidal towards his Aunt Sophy.

"Auntie!" he gasped, almost sulphurously, "will you please try to jump ashore? Those fellows over there are laughing at us. It's nothing at all to be afraid of. Wynn will hold the boat steady. Do be quiet!"

"Oh!" Aunt Sophy ceased to shriek as she opened her eyes and saw her darling Georgie safe on the bank. "Oh, how fearfully thankful I am to see you safe, my dear, brave nephew! I—I feared that the worst had happened! For your sake, dear, I will be brave, Georgie!"

She stood up, placed one foot gingerly on the gunwale, and then she jumped desperately even before Figgins could hold out his hand to aid her.

It was a remarkably good leap for an infirm old lady scarcely able to walk from rheumatism—rather too good a leap, in fact. For she crashed full into George Kerr, sending him crashing backwards, head-over-heels. Kerr howled as he landed in a bed of nettles.

"Yoooooop!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

From out on the wide bosom of the river came a perfect shriek of merriment.

"Dear me!" gasped Aunt Sophy hysterically. "What has happened, Georgie dear? Did—did I knock that poor boy down? I seemed to strike something; but I am so terribly flustered and bewildered. Are we safe now?"

"Yes, aunt," gasped Figgins. "You—you're not hurt, Kerr, old man?"

Figgy was afraid that Kerr might lose his head and create a scene. But Kerr was a fellow with unusual control over his feelings. He staggered up, crimson in the face.

"It—it's all right, ma'am!" he choked. "It—it was an accident."

"Get that basket ashore, chaps!" gasped Figgy hastily. "Come on, aunt!"

He gave Aunt Sophy his arm, desperately eager to get out of sight of the river. In the ordinary way, the New House trio would never have dreamed of leaving their boat unattended with the enemy—in the shape of Tom Merry & Co.—in sight of it. But, though their opinion of Tom Merry & Co.'s manners and standard of "decency" had undergone a change that afternoon, they did not dream their rivals would interfere with the boat as a lady was with them.

So the party trudged off into the wood, Aunt Sophy leaning heavily on Figgy's arm and glancing nervously about her.

"Are we still in danger, dear?"

"Nunno, aunt!"

"There are no robbers about here?" asked Aunt Sophy.

"Oh, my hat! Nunno!"

"No terrible poachers?"

"I'm quite sure not, aunt. Please do not worry—you're quite safe with us. Hold on, chaps—I think this place will do."

"Right, Figgy!"

The picnic-basket was lowered to the ground. Fatty Wynn, beginning to look quite happy now, fumbled with the fastenings eagerly.

"Dear me! You are surely not thinking of tea so early?" exclaimed Aunt Sophy, her old-fashioned ringlets shaking as she shook her head. "But I am not a bit hungry, you kind little darlings. Let us have games first."

"G-gug-games, ma'am?" stammered Fatty Wynn, his podgy face looking dismayed.

"Yes, dear boy; I really could not eat a thing yet. Shall we have a romp first, Georgie dear?"

"A—a romp, aunt?" gasped Figgins.

"Yes; certainly, sweetest! Let us play at rounders. It is years since I played rounders, though I consider it rather a rough game. But I am sure you boys would love it. We always used to play rounders when I was a little girl and went to Sunday-school treats."

"Mum-my hat!" mumbled Figgy; and he went crimson as he caught the looks on the faces of Wynn and Kerr. "D-d-did you, aunt? But—but shall we have tea first—"

"You dear, sweet, unselfish boy!" interrupted Aunt Sophy, smiling affectionately at her nephew. "It is me you are thinking of, I know—you imagine I am hungry after my long journey. You are simply dying to play games, I am quite sure. Now, I insist upon games first—I am not a bit hungry yet, darling. I insist. I assure you that you will please me much, much better by waiting until I have gained an appetite by playing rounds. You would never wish me to lose my share of the picnic by having tea when I am not hungry, would you, darling?"

"But—but we haven't a ball, dear!" choked Figgy helplessly.

"Dear me! How— Oh, but I have a splendid idea, Georgie. We will run races; in my girlhood days we always ran races at our Sunday-school treats."

"Oh, great pip! I—"

"What did you say, darling one?"

"I—I was saying, of course we'll—we'll run races if you wish it, dear!" stammered Figgins. "You—you fellows will run races, won't you?"

There was a pleading look in Figgy's face.

"Y-yes," gasped Kerr.

"Y-yes," groaned Fatty Wynn. "Oh dear!"

Aunt Sophy clapped her hands.

"You dear, sweet boys!" she chirruped. "I myself, of course, am unable to run owing to my rheumatism. But I shall be so happy seeing you enjoy yourselves. But we must have prizes—it would be no fun at all without that. What a pity I brought no toys with me. But a money prize will do just as well, won't it, darlings? A pound note for the winner—"

"Oh! Oh, yes, rather, aunt!"

"Certainly!" agreed Fatty Wynn and Kerr with remarkable promptness.

A money prize of a pound note would certainly be worth winning. It would make up for a great deal. Figgins was rather surprised, for Aunt Sophy had the reputation, though being wealthy, of being very "close." Yet her eccentricity would account for this, of course.

"How splendid!" she went on, fumbling with her handbag. "How fortunate I brought my bag and purse! Now, where shall we hold the races?"

She began to look about her. Through the fringe of trees, bordering the wood inland, could be seen a smiling meadow. She led the way through the trees, pausing on the fringe.

"There!" she said, pointing to the hedge at the far end. "You will start from here and run to that hedge and back. Will—that be too far for your legs, though?"

"Not at all," said Figgy, with a faint grin.

"We can manage that all right, ma'am!" said Kerr, with a sickly smile.

"Get ready, then, dear boys," said Aunt Sophy, with a beaming smile. "I will count one—two—three, and then—Go!"

The three New House fellows lined up. They were not at all feeling up to racing that afternoon—far from it. But the prospect of a pound note for the winner was a great inducement. Also, they did not wish to hurt the feelings of the kindly but quaint old lady. She evidently imagined that she was entertaining them—finding them amusement and sport.

The next moment they were off at Aunt Sophy's shrill cry of "Go!"

From the start George Figgins' long legs gave him an easy lead, Fatty Wynn bringing up the rear, his fat little legs going like clockwork.

But, strange to say, Aunt Sophy did not seem at all delighted at her nephew's progress—she didn't even stay to watch it. She watched until the three runners were well away, and then, with a deep chuckle, she turned and dashed back to the picnic-basket.

Meanwhile, Figgins kept his lead. He reached the far hedge twenty yards ahead of Fatty Wynn and ten yards ahead of Kerr. Turning, he made for home, going great guns, heedless of his fatigue. It was not until he was half-way back across the meadow that he noticed that Aunt Sophy was not visible at the finishing post.

But he kept on, finishing a good five yards ahead of Kerr. Fatty Wynn came home, panting and gasping, a dozen yards in the rear.

"Phew!" panted Kerr. "That little run will last me for a bit. Why, where the thump—"

"Blessed if I know!" said Figgins, looking about him in mystified wonder. "Where the dickens can the old girl be? Must be with the basket!"

"Queer!"

"Jolly queer!"

Figgy led the way back to where they had left the picnic-basket. They soon found the spot. But they did not find the basket. Like Aunt Sophy, the picnic-basket and the feed had gone!

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CHAPTER 9.

A Sad Home-Coming!

"H A, ha, ha! What a giddy scream! Now, for that basket and the grub! My hat! I deserve well of my country for this afternoon's work!"

Really, they were strange remarks for Aunt Sophy to make—eccentric as she undoubtedly was. She also looked very strange as she scudded through the trees, holding her skirts up with one hand, and carrying her broly and bag in the other.

In a matter of seconds she had reached the picnic-basket.

Slinging the handle of the bag and the loop of her broly over one arm, she stooped gathered up the basket, and staggered away with it as best she could. She made straight for the boat. On reaching it she did not appear at all surprised to find another boat there—with Tom Merry & Co. just jumping ashore.

They blinked at Aunt Sophy as she staggered down to the bank with her burden. She looked such a quaint sight that Tom Merry & Co. almost went into fits.

"Quiet, you silly idiots!" hissed Aunt Sophy in a remarkably youthful, boyish voice. "Quiet, you thumping dummies! I've got the giddy grub. Don't spoil all by yelling. Quick! Give me a hand and let's get away from here."

"Oh, great pip!"

"Oh crumbs!"

"Oh, bai Jove! Lowthah, you weally are a corkah!"

"Shurrup!" snapped Aunt Sophy, in most unladylike tones. "If you muck us up I'll give you one on the boko, Gussy!"

With explosive chuckles Tom Merry and the rest helped Lowther to scramble aboard with his burden.

"Hold on!" said Lowther. "Better take their boat, too—they can't chase us then! Get across to the far bank and get into the woods with the grub!"

"Phew! Yes, rather!"

At top speed the New House boat was tied to the School House craft. Then the juniors pushed off Tom Merry and Blake pulling strongly but quietly at the oars. They did not bother to ask any questions yet. Lowther himself—otherwise "Aunt Sophy"—sat in the stern and stared back at the bank they had left, trembling to hear a shout that would tell they were discovered.

But the shout did not come. Figgins & Co. at that moment were just finishing their run blissfully ignorant of the surprise in store for them. The School House boat reached the far bank in a very few seconds, and Lowther immediately sprang ashore.

"You come just to help me with the grub, Tommy," he said briskly. "Rest of you take the giddy boats round the bend. Hide 'em there, and cut round here—only mind you're not spotted on shore. As long as I'm not seen in the boat with you it won't matter much, though."

"But why—"

"My dear man," said Lowther, with a chuckle, "Aunt Sophy isn't done yet by a long way. After the feed I've got to get across to the other side without being spotted. Savvy?"

"Bai Jove!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors in the boat chuckled again, and the boat moved off downstream, towing the other boat behind it. Tom Merry and "Aunt Sophy" grabbed the basket-handles and rushed into the wood with their prize. They stopped on reaching a grassy glade some distance inland. Then they waited, Tom whistling cautiously now and again. They had not long to wait. Suddenly Blake, followed by Manners, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy came trotting through the trees, broad grins on their faces.

As they sighted "Aunt Sophy" waiting there with Tom Merry and the picnic-basket, they doubled up, howling with laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ho ho ho!"

But Lowther had other business in view, and in a few seconds he was opening the basket, spreading out the contents on the grass.

"Rabbit-pie, ha, and lobster-paste sandwiches," he murmured. "Cheese-cakes, jam tarts, chocolate-biscuits, plum-cake and meat-pies—not to mention lemon-squash. Good! Distinctly good! I think we can fairly claim to have scored over the New House this time, chaps!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yaas wathah! You are weally a seweam, Lowthah!"

"Come to my arms!" sobbed Tom Merry.

He hugged Aunt Sophy, and fairly walked her about the sunlit glade.

"Chuck it!" gasped Lowther. "Mind my giddy skirts, you idiot! There, you've dropped my smelling-bottle!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I've got to get busy," explained Lowther, grabbing

a meat-pie. "Hand that squash here, Blake! Thanks! You see, I want to get back before they give it up and go home. I shall have to tramp back to the boathouse, but I do want them to take me to St. Jim's in my bathchair. How much did they charge you for the hire of it for the afternoon, Tommy?"

"Five bob," said Tom, "in advance!"

"Well, it was worth it!"

"Hear hear!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Now don't bother me," said Lowther.

And he got busy—very busy indeed. There were plenty of good things to go round—and they went round, Lowther himself going great guns. Seated on the grass they waded into the contents of Figgins' picnic-basket, and every now and again almost choking as a fresh fit of laughter gripped them. Lowther rose at last, breathing rather heavily.

"Well, I feel better now," he remarked. "I really ought not to have overdone it, for I hope to persuade them to give darling auntie a study tea when we get in. Now who's going to row me over?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry and Blake volunteered to row the japer of the School House over. They tramped through the deep woods to the spot where the boat was tethered. Lowther jumped in, and the other two followed. They pulled across to the far bank, and Lowther jumped ashore, taking his gamp and hand-bag. Then he waved his hand cheerily to his chums and tramped away hastily, leaving them to row back.

Lowther was looking a trifle thoughtful now. It was scarcely likely anything had been seen by Figgy & Co., even supposing they had rushed straight to the river. If they had seen Tom Merry & Co. in the boat from the high bank they could scarcely have suspected the truth. Yet Lowther realised that the situation would need careful handling.

He had a fairly clear idea where the clearing was which had been chosen for the picnic—the picnic that was to be but a dream for the luckless Figgins & Co. As he walked through the trees he heard voices shouting some distance away.

"Figgy shouting for auntie!" chuckled Lowther. "Well, here I am!"

He raised his voice to a shrill scream.

"Georgie dear! Georgie darling! Help!"

Then, gathering his skirt in one hand, and waving his broolly and bag, Lowther dashed madly through the trees, still screeching for "Georgie darling!"

He came suddenly upon Figgins, Fatty Wynn, and Kerr, who were hurrying towards him. Lowther dashed towards them, waving his broolly madly.

"Help! Oh, Georgie dearest! How relieved I am to see you! You've got it! Those wicked boys have stolen our picnic-basket!"

"What—what—"

Figgy staggered back and almost fell as Aunt Sophy wrapped her arms about him and hugged him, throwing her broolly one way and her bag the other. The broolly caught Fatty Wynn on the chin, and the bag missed Kerr's face by a hairs-breadth.

"P-please don't, aunt!" gasped Figgins, more than a trifle crossly. "What—what's happened? Who's taken the grub?"

"The—the what, Georgie?"

"The food—the picnic-basket!" almost hooted Figgins. "You said—"

"Oh, those awful boys!" sobbed Aunt Sophy. "Those rude little boys—and I thought them such nice, kind boys! They had such dear, innocent faces, you know! If—if only I had caught them though," went on Aunt Sophy indignantly. "I would have punished them with my gamp! Come, Georgie, let us go to the police-station at once!"

"The—the police? Oh, my hat!"

"Come quickly, Georgie! We may be able to get our property back yet! The police—"

"But—but hold on, aunt, for goodness' sake!" gasped Figgy, as Aunt Sophy started to drag him along. "Look here, you—I mean, look here, aunt, we can't have the police on a job like this. It was only a jape—"

"A—a what?"

"A practical joke!" said Figgins dismally. "They were following us, and they watched their chance. Oh, my hat! Which way did they go, aunt?"

"Up that way," said Aunt Sophy, pointing vaguely. "They must have taken our boat, too, the wicked boys."

"We saw the boat had gone, and we guessed what had happened," groaned Figgins. "Oh, the—the rotters! We've been searching about, wondering what had happened to you, aunt. Oh crumbs!"

"Let's follow along the bank, Figgy," said Fatty Wynn dolefully.

"What's the good of that?" said Figgins, with a hollow groan. "They'll be miles away by this time, and all the grub will be scooped, too!"

They won't give us the chance to find them; and if we did they're too many for us. Oh, the—the—the—"

Words failed George Figgins.

There was nothing else for it. They started back along the towing-path for the boathouse. It was a dismal, depressing walk, during which Aunt Sophy developed a severe attack of rheumatism, and had to be carried almost by the miserable Georgie.

But they reached the boathouse at last. The bathchair was brought out, and Aunt Sophy dropped into it with a sigh. Figgins grasped the handles with a deeper sigh, and the party started for St. Jim's, Fatty Wynn and Kerr pushing on either side. All three were too depressed to heed the grins and chuckles of the fellows at the boathouse and on the road to St. Jim's. Figgy's cup of bitterness was nearly full; and Monty Lowther, as he looked at the New House trio's woeful faces, congratulated himself on the fact that his wonderful jape was succeeding even better than he had dared to hope.

CHAPTER 10.

Hard Lines on Figgins & Co.

"HERE she comes! He, he, he!"

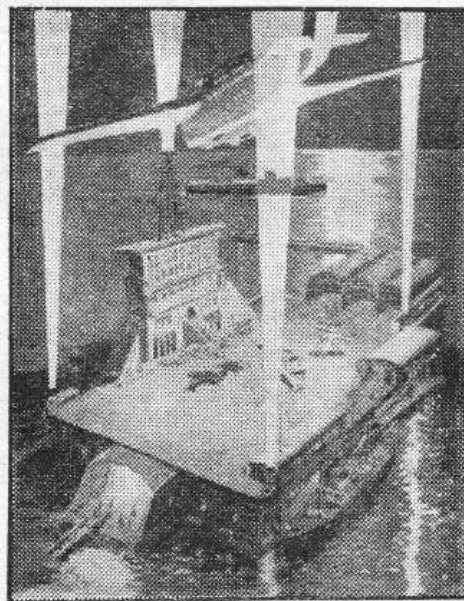
Baggy Trimble made the announcement gleefully. Baggy had not forgotten those fearful clumps from Aunt Sophy's broolly, and he was feeling vengeful. His idea of revenge had been to spread the news of Aunt Sophy's arrival far and wide, with a highly-coloured account of her appearance and behaviour.

Naturally, everybody wanted to see Aunt Sophy in consequence.

There was a gasp as the bathchair came into sight, with the perspiring Figgins & Co. pushing behind,

Your Editor Says—

Next week—next week, and then you will have the first of our wonderful picture cards in your hands. Aren't you excited boys? What-ho! "Marvels of the Future" will constitute the finest series of coloured picture cards that has ever been given away with any paper; sixteen cards in all, each dealing with the rapid strides mechanical science is certain to make in the years to come. As a fitting commencement to this unique series "Gemites" will be presented with a handsome coloured card, measuring 2½ by 3½ ins., showing the Mid-Atlantic aerodrome of the future. From the black and white reproduction shown below my readers will be able to get some idea of what this fine card will look like in full colours. It's number one of the series, don't forget, so be sure and get it in next week's bumper issue of the GEM.



And don't forget, too, chums, that there's the opening chapters of a brilliant new serial to look forward to next Wednesday, also the start of a splendid new series of St. Jim's stories—the first of which is entitled: "Vote For Tom Merry"—the usual "Ask the Oracle" feature, and a special article dealing with those famous locomotives of the L.M.S. Railway, of the "Royal Scot" class. You'll order your copy early, of course. Cheerio, chums!

YOUR EDITOR.

Aunt Sophy was looking a little dishevelled now. Figgins & Co. very depressed indeed. George Figgins especially looked a sight, with his scarlet, hopeless features, and his soaked trousers flapping about his legs, and his feet squeaking in his wet shoes.

"M-mum-my hat!" gasped Grundy of the Shell, as he sighted the little, depressed procession. "Blessed if Trimble wasn't telling the truth for once! Did you ever?"

"No, never!" chortled Gore.

"Hardly ever!" chuckled Lumley-Lumley.

There was a rush to follow the bathchair. St. Jim's fellows, as a rule, were not given to staring, or rudeness of any kind. But they were really interested in Figgy's queer aunt. They wanted to see more of her.

But it was not to be. Aunt Sophy seemed frantically eager to get indoors. As a matter of fact, Lowther had spotted Mr. Railton on the School House steps, and he felt it was time to depart to safer quarters. Mr. Railton was a very keen gentleman, who might very easily see through his disguise, clever as it undoubtedly was.

They arrived at the New House steps with a rush, and Aunt Sophy showed really remarkable agility in jumping from the chair. Leaving it standing there, Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn hurried her upstairs, Kerr and Figgy being obliged to almost carry her most of the way.

But the sanctuary of their study was reached at long last. Figgy never felt so thankful in his life when he closed the door upon the curious crowd which had followed.

Aunt Sophy immediately collapsed into an easy-chair and closed her eyes.

"Oh!" gasped Figgy. "What—what the dickens shall we do?" he added helplessly, in a whisper, looking at his chums dismally. "Hadn't we better send for someone—the matron, or someone?"

Aunt Sophy opened her eyes sharply at that.

"Dear, darling Georgie," she said faintly, "please don't trouble anyone, dear. Oh, I am so very sorry to be such a trouble. But I shall be quite all right in a minute. These terrible attacks soon pass away.

"But—but perhaps you would like to go to see Mrs. Holmes, aunt?" said Figgy hopefully. "In any case, visitors are always supposed to see the Head, or the House-master. We'll take you over there at once, dear!"

Aunt Sophy shook her head.

"Oh, I really couldn't, darling Georgie! Please don't ask me to meet any strangers in my present state. All I wish is to remain in perfect peace and quietness for a few minutes. D-did you say we should be having tea soon, Georgie?"

"Yes, aunt. I was just going to the tuckshop for some things for tea. I—I thought you might care to see Mrs. Holmes or the Head while we're getting tea ready," stammered Figgins.

Aunt Sophy shook her head again, and closed her eyes.

"Impossible, darling. Please go and get the food, however, by all means, Georgie. After a good meal, I think I shall quickly recover. It is faintness due to lack of food, of course, combined with the sea air—I mean, river air," she said faintly. "I—I think it will be better if you all go—leave me alone for a few minutes. In a quarter of an hour or so I shall be quite, quite better, darling."

"Shall—shall I put the kettle on first?" gasped Fatty Wynn. "If you don't mind, ma'am—"

"Oh, yes—do, my dear!"

Fatty soon had the oil-stove going, and put the kettle on. Poor Fatty was on the verge of collapse himself. Not for a long time had he gone so long without food of some kind. The Falstaff of the New House had gone through tortures that afternoon.

With a nod to his chums, Figgins led the way from the room, and they went out, closing the door gently behind them.

They returned later, carrying bags of tarts and cakes. They found Aunt Sophy lying on the couch sniffing at her bottle of smelling-salts.

They also found her in a far from amiable mood. Apparently—or so they imagined—she was cross at having to wait so long for her tea.

"Ah! Here you are, George!" she said severely. "What a dreadfully long time you have been! I am surprised at you! I did not think it possible that my nephew could be so heedless of my sufferings as to keep me waiting so long. I do not think I shall visit you again, George. You are more heartless and thoughtless and inconsiderate than even your dear Cousin Jack!"

"Oh crumbs!" Figgy was quite startled at the sudden change in his aunt. Up to now she had been kindness itself in her tone and attitude. It was clear that either her hunger or rheumatism, or both, had made her tired and irritable. "I—I'm sorry, aunt!" he gasped. "We—we found it difficult to get back here."

This was true enough. Figgins had had to gather together all his courage to return to the study—and his dear

aunt. He had had to use even threats to get Fatty Wynn and Kerr to accompany him back.

"Please hurry up with the tea, then!" snapped Aunt Sophy. "I have been looking round your study, George."

"Yes, aunt!"

"It is in a disgraceful state, George! I am shocked at the condition of the floor, and of the furniture, and the general untidiness. After tea I will help you to tidy and clean up the room."

"Oh! Y-yes, aunt!"

"Have you any water?"

"Y-yes, aunt!"

"That is all I desire for my tea—water, and a few tarts and cakes. I am not very hungry."

This, again, was true. Figgins & Co. little dreamed that they had already provided Lowther with an excellent tea out of their picnic basket.

"Oh, very well, aunt! I'll see to tea at once."

And whilst Aunt Sophy sniffed away at her bottle—which contained water only—George Figgins, Fatty Wynn, and Kerr busied themselves preparing tea. Whether Aunt Sophy wanted much tea or not, they themselves were famished, and they intended to make up for lost time.

CHAPTER 11.

Bowled Out!

"TEA'S ready, aunt."

"Very well, George," said Aunt Sophy, her voice a trifle cold. "Kindly help me to my chair."

"Oh, yes, aunt!"

Figgins helped Aunt Sophy to her chair; then he sat down on his own—or, at least, he attempted to do so. But at the critical moment, unfortunately, Aunt Sophy's elbow shot out, catching the chair and moving it away.

George Figgins sat down with a bump on the carpet.

"Ow!"

"Dear me!" gasped Aunt Sophy. "How very unfortunate! It was a sudden twitch of rheumatism. I often get them, and— Good gracious! My poor boy!"

It was another spasm of rheumatism, just as the old lady was lifting her glass of water to her lips. The contents of the glass was jerked out over the unfortunate Figgy just as he was scrambling up. In her startled agitation, Aunt Sophy jumped up, her knees caught the table and jerked it. A howl came from Kerr. Fatty Wynn just happened to be pouring boiling water from the kettle into the teapot, which stood on the table. The boiling water splashed on the table and in Kerr's lap.

"Yarroooooogh!"

"Good gracious!" gasped Aunt Sophy. "What has happened now? Are you hurt, dear?"

Kerr was hurt. He grabbed a handkerchief and rubbed frantically at his trousers. Figgins staggered to his feet, looking very red, water streaming from his face and hair. He also brought a handkerchief into use.

Figgins glared at his aunt; Kerr glared at her also. She smiled at them, in no little concern.

"Oh, I'm so very sorry, boys! I am afraid that was my fault to some extent, George."

Figgins & Co. more than agreed with her there, but they said nothing. Tea proceeded, Aunt Sophy starting on the tarts. Tea was poured out, and Figgins took a gulp—he felt he badly needed some sort of a refresher.

Only one gulp he took, and then he sprang to his feet, choking and gasping and spluttering.

"Dear me! Really, Georgie, what ever is the matter?" gasped Aunt Sophy, eyeing him very severely. "Is this how they teach you to behave at table, George? I am surprised—very much surprised!"

"Ow! Grooogh!" choked Figgins, swallowing the mouthful of salted tea with a gulp and a horrid grimace. "Ow! The—the beastly stuff's full of salt! Fatty, you idiot, what did you put salt in the tea for—blow you?"

"Georgie—" gasped Aunt Sophy, quite shocked.

Fatty Wynn was staring, open-mouthed, at his chum. Just then Kerr—who had just sampled the tea to see what was the matter with it—also leaped to his feet. He had found out. Spluttering frantically, he ran to the fireplace. But, thinking better of his intention, he followed Figgy's noble example, and manfully swallowed the salty tea.

"Some fool's been monkeying with the tea!" shouted George Figgins, quite cross now. "Fatty, you born idiot—"

"Oh, really, Figgy!" said Fatty Wynn, taking a bite of a sandwich. "I just put the tea in in the ord— Ow! Grooogh! Yarroooooogh!"

Fatty Wynn sprang to his feet, nearly upsetting the table, an agonised expression on his fat features. His mouth was full, and twisted into the most weird contortions. He fairly danced about, spluttering and choking. Tears were streaming down his scarlet face.



As the disguised Monty Lowther scrambled up he felt that his wig and bonnet were hanging loose. It was obviously time for the School House japer to go, and he went—with a rush. "After her!" roared George Figgins. "After her—him!" (See Chapter 12.)

"Groooogh! Ow-wow! Groooogh! Putting mustard—gug-gug!—into the sandwiches. Groooooogh!"

He fairly tore the door open and ran from the room.

"Well, this beats the band!" gasped Figgins, giving the astonished Aunt Sophy a strange look. "Look here, aunt, did anybody come in here when we were out?"

"I certainly saw nobody; though I had my eyes closed for a part of the time, dearest George. But what ever is the matter? I really cannot stand the shock of this extraordinary behaviour. I—I am very much disappointed in you, George. I have a very good mind to complain to your father of the manner in which you behave to your relatives when they visit you."

Figgins groaned. He hardly knew whether he was on his head, or his heels. Somebody had obviously been playing tricks with the food. Little did he guess that it was the work of Aunt Sophy.

"I—I'm sorry, aunt!" he stammered. "Somebody's been playing tricks in here. Don't touch the sandwiches, dear. I'd better examine the rest of the grub."

He picked up the milk jug, and was examining the contents closely, when Aunt Sophy's arm jerked upwards just as she was reaching for another tart.

Splash!

The contents of the milk jug shot up into Figgy's face. He jumped back, milk streaming down his face and waist-coat.

"Good gracious! Oh, I am so very, very sorry, Georgie dear!" gasped the old lady, in great alarm. "It was another twinge—a most severe one! I really do trust that my long stay in Sussex will cure me of my distressing complaint. Here, do let me wipe you down, darling one. How very, very unfortunate!"

And Aunt Sophy jumped up impulsively from the table.

Unfortunately, her dress caught in the tablecloth—or so it seemed—and there came a yell from Kerr.

"Look out, ma'am!"

"What—why—"

Crash!

Clatter, clatter, clatter! Crash, crash, crash!

"Yarroooooogh!"

What had happened was scarcely clear for the moment. Apparently Aunt Sophy heard the warning cry too late. She pulled the tablecloth half from the table as she moved, to begin with. Then, as Kerr shouted, she wheeled completely round with a jerk—quite finishing the job in real earnest.

The cloth swept off the table, and a cascade of crockery and foodstuffs went to the floor with fearful crashes. The teapot landed on Kerr's knees before following the rest to the floor. Naturally that hapless junior howled fendishly as the hot tea splashed over him in a flood.

"G-good gracious! What ever has happened, Georgie? Oh dear! The shock— Ow! I believe I am going to faint away again, Georgie! P-please hold me! I— Ow!"

Aunt Sophy clutched feebly at George Figgins. That youth, already startled out of his wits by the "accident," was far from being prepared to act as a support for a fainting lady. He promptly staggered backwards and sat down, Aunt Sophy falling on top of him with no little force.

"Yarroogh!" came in a gasping yelp from the hapless Figgy. "Ow! You—you're squashing me, aunt! Ow!"

At that moment the door flew open. Outside was a swarm of scared juniors, attracted to the spot by the terrific crash of breaking crockery.

They fairly blinked in at the scene. Fatty Wynn almost fell down as he squeezed into the room and eyed the havoc.

"Mum-my hat!" he gasped.

"O-oooooooooch!" came from Aunt Sophy in a long gasp.

"My—my smelling-bottle, Georgie dearest! P-please get me m-mum-my smelling-bottle—quick! I d-dud-do believe I'm going off again, Georgie! My smelling-salts! O-oooooooooer!"

George Figgins, a ludicrous expression of hopeless despair on his rugged features, scrambled wearily to his feet. But he did not immediately rush for the smelling-salts. He ran to the door and sent it crashing-to, greatly to the disgust of the highly-entertained onlookers in the doorway. But their

disgust was short-lived. Aunt Sophy gave a hysterical shriek.

"Air! I must have air, Georgie darling! Open the door! Open the window! Quick! Air! The door, my sweetest sweet! Open the door! O-ooooooooo!"

The dazed and bewildered Figgins opened the door. There was nothing else for it. Figgins was really at his wit's-end by this time. Then he rushed to his aunt, and, with Kerr's aid, the two managed to get her into a chair.

She very quickly recovered there, with the aid of the smelling-salts. The crowd in the doorway looked on, not knowing whether to be alarmed or to go off into fits of laughter.

"Oh!" gasped Aunt Sophy, sitting up at length. "I feel much better now. I think you had better take me out in my bathchair now, dearest Georgie!"

"But—but—" Figgins gulped, and gazed helplessly at the crockery and foodstuffs on the floor.

"Dear me, yes!" exclaimed his aunt, following his glance and frowning. "We really cannot leave the room in this terrible state. We must clean it up, my dears. Of course, I intended to help you to tidy up the room, didn't I? No; please do not close the door yet, Georgie. I must have air! You had better clear away this terrible mess whilst I am recovering, darling."

"Y-yes, aunt!"

Figgins exchanged dismal glances with his chums, and they set to work clearing up. The broken crockery they picked up and shoved in the coal-scuttle. What was left of the food they piled into the cupboard.

"Now we must take the carpet up, dears," said Aunt Sophy.

"The—the carpet?"

"Yes. We must scrub the floor, dearest. It is in a shocking state. It is not healthy to live in a room that is in such a state, boys. I feel it a duty I owe to your dear daddie, Georgie, to insist upon this floor being thoroughly swept and scrubbed. Is there a bucket and a scrubbing-brush anywhere, dearest?"

"Y-yes, I suppose so, aunt. But look here—"

"Then get it. Be quick, please!"

"But, aunt," began Figgins, looking mutinous, "it's a bit thick! I—I—"

"Will you refuse to obey your aunt, George?" snapped Aunt Sophy, in an ominous tone. "I am a very sweet-tempered woman in the ordinary way. But I will not allow a nephew of mine to disobey me. I am surprised at you, George! Go and get a bucket of water and a scrubbing-brush this very moment; also some soap and a sweeping brush. I intend to take you in hand, George, during my stay here. I fear you are inclined to be lazy and untidy, not to say dirty. Go!"

"Oh crumbs!"

Figgins went, pushing angrily through the grinning crowd in the doorway. But he went. He was beginning to think his aunt was not in her right mind, in addition to being what his Cousin Jack had said she was, a "holy terror." It was the fact that she had the reputation of being a holy terror that made George Figgins obey now. He had a feeling that if he didn't he would be treated to a dose of Aunt Sophy's terrible gamp, in addition to being reported to his parents.

Meanwhile, Aunt Sophy had ordered Kerr and Fatty Wynn to take up the carpet. They started to do so, not daring to refuse, the crowd round the doorway looking on in great amazement and delight. Aunt Sophy leaned back in the easy-chair and directed operations, passing remarks that made the ears of Fatty and Kerr burn, and brought gleeful gurgles from the onlookers.

Then Figgy came back, staggering under the weight of a bucket of water in one hand, and a bar of soap and a scrubbing-brush in the other. He had managed to obtain them from the kitchen regions—when the cook wasn't looking.

The crowd round the doorway opened out to make room for him. Water slopped from the bucket over the floor and over Figgy's legs.

"Here you are, aunt!" mumbled Figgy, almost savagely. "I couldn't get hold of a sweeping-brush."

"Never mind, George. We will dispense with the sweeping-brush. You had better scrub the floor, and your two friends can use cloths to wipe it dry afterwards."

"Oh crumbs!"

Figgy had imagined that his aunt intended to scrub the floor herself. He had been wondering what on earth the fellows would think about such a thing—a relative of a St. Jim's fellow visiting the school and scrubbing one of the floors. Certainly they would realise she was eccentric—perhaps worse. But now Figgy realised the truth. She only intended to direct operations.

It was too thick for words. But it had to be done.

Figgy knelt down and made a start, after a savage glare at the cackling crowd and a truly ferocious glare at his aunt. Figgins felt no affection whatever for Aunt Sophy.

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Fatty Wynn and Kerr felt less than that; but they rummaged in the cupboard, found some old rags, and the unhappy trio began the job, anxious only to get it done as swiftly as possible.

Scrub, scrub, scrub, scrub!

It was a back-aching, tiring job, and very wet and sloppy. Subdued but almost hysterical chuckles and cheers greeted their efforts from the crowd in the doorway. They couldn't quite understand the business, excepting that it was pretty clear the "old girl" was "potty," and Figgins & Co. were "pottier" still to obey her. But it was all very amusing and entertaining.

It did not go on for very long, however. Just as Figgins himself was making up his mind to "chuck" the wretched job and chance the consequences, there came an interruption.

From outside the open window, in the quad below, the sound of rushing wheels on gravel and yells of laughter had been heard for some moments in the distance. But now they became clearer suddenly, and then followed the sounds of shouts and struggling, mingled with laughter.

"Dear me!" gasped Aunt Sophy. "What ever is the matter?"

She rose and leaned out of the window. As a matter of fact, Aunt Sophy—otherwise Monty Lowther—was feeling a bit tired of the game. Moreover, he saw quite clearly that Figgy & Co. were on the verge of open mutiny, and that it could not last much longer—for that day, at all events. So Lowther welcomed the interruption, hoping it would give him the chance to make his departure safely.

What he saw in the quadrangle below was what he had half-expected to see. Around the ancient bathchair a swarm of juniors were struggling and fighting desperately, amid yells of laughter and wrath. Tom Merry, Blake, Manners, Digby, Herries, and D'Arcy were fairly in the midst of it, hopelessly outnumbered by New House fellows. But others were rushing up to join the fray from every quarter.

What had happened was simple enough. In the absence of Aunt Sophy and Figgins & Co., the New House juniors had taken charge of the bathchair, and were having a high old time giving each other rides round the quadrangle in it. Then Tom Merry & Co. had happened on the scene. As they had hired the chair for the afternoon, and as they were responsible for its safety, they naturally "chipped in," to save it from damage at the hands of the hilarious joy-riders.

The sight of the commotion below gave Lowther his chance, however—or he imagined it did. He gave a shrill shriek, and shook his fists at those below.

"My bathchair!" shrieked Aunt Sophy. "You fearful young ruffians! My dear old bathchair! I must save it from the hands of those vandals!"

With that Aunt Sophy made a rush for the study doorway. Unfortunately, she trod on the piece of soap just by Figgy's wet hand.

The next moment the onlookers were treated to a strange feat of acrobatics, as Aunt Sophy strove desperately to keep her balance. But it was in vain.

Her feet went from under her and, clawing desperately at Figgins she went down with a crash, knocking the bucket over as she did so.

The next moment Aunt Sophy, Figgins, and Kerr were mixed up in a yelling heap on the floor, fairly wallowing in the soapy, dirty water that flooded the floor.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A certain amount of restraint had been shown until now by the giggling crowd round the doorway, which had grown considerably by this time. But as Aunt Sophy performed her weird and wonderful evolutions before crashing downwards, they could not help laughing.

They roared.

Figgins, Kerr, and Aunt Sophy roared in a different manner. It was a real accident this time, and Lowther himself was hurt. He was also very wet. He scrambled up desperately, for in a vague sort of way he felt that his wig and bonnet were hanging loose. His ringlets were certainly dangling before his staring eyes.

It was obviously time for the School House japer to go, and he went—with a rush!

CHAPTER 12.

After the Feast—The Reckoning!

"Y ARROOOGH!"

"Look out!"

Crash, crash!

Monty Lowther charged the crowd in the doorway like a bull at a gate. Yells of startled amazement went up. The crowd parted—Monty Lowther sent them spinning to right and left by the sheer force of his rush.

"After her!" roared George Figgins, scrambling frantically to his feet. "After her—him!"

A sudden, terrible thought had come to George Figgins of the New House. He had caught only a glimpse of the disarranged bonnet and hair, but it had been enough. In a flash George Figgins thought he saw it all, though he never dreamed, as yet, the identity of the masquerader.

But she—ho—obviously was a masquerader!

It was a terrible thought, and yet one that brought relief to George Figgins. But the thought was accompanied by something else—a seething, burning rage that brought Figgy to his feet with a wild howl of fury.

"After him!"

He dashed out, making confusion worse in the passage. Kerr followed, his own face crimson with sudden rage and humiliation. He also had "tumbled"—having got a better view of Aunt Sophy's disarranged headgear and wig—for it clearly was a wig!

"After the howling rotter!"

There was a brief, scrambling struggle in the passage, and then, leaving the crowd to sort themselves out, Figgins and Kerr tore on again. They sighted the female figure ahead just swarming on to the banisters.

Lowther meant to get downstairs quickly by the time-honoured method of sliding down the banisters.

Unfortunately for him, he had overlooked the fact that he was wearing a skirt.

That skirt was Lowther's undoing—in more ways than one!

Unfamiliar with the New House banisters, he failed to notice that where the stairs turned was a knob sticking up from the smooth, shining rails. It was a "snag" which New House fags and juniors for generations had regretted.

Lowther sighted it as he was sweeping down at a terrific speed, and he put on the brake as best he could. By a superhuman effort he just managed to pull up in time, but the sudden jerk caused him to overbalance.

"Look out!"

"Oh, great Scott!"

From above came yells of alarm as Lowther lurched over—yells of alarm that turned to howls of laughter as Lowther was seen to be hanging upside down by his skirt, which had caught on the knob in some miraculous manner.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Lowther's trousers were in full view of all, and a perfect shriek of laughter went up as the fellows, rushing along the landing above, arrived, saw, and understood.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Help!" roared Lowther frantically. "Help! Oh crumbs! Help, you cackling idiots!"

There really was little danger, for the floor was only a few feet below him. But he would certainly have had a nasty crack had he fallen, and so Lowther howled for help.

The help came quickly enough.

"Collar him!" hissed Figgins. "Hold him! Keep him like that!"

Half a dozen New House men grabbed at Lowther's skirt and held on. Reaching down, Figgy grabbed at his wig and bonnet. Both came off, revealing a youthful crop of short hair.

It was quite enough to show the identity of the masquerader.

"Lowther!"

"That—that rotter Lowther!"

It was a howl from Kerr, and a perfect shriek from George Figgins.

Figgins choked.

As the events of a lifetime flash before the mind's eye of a drowning person, so the events of that terrible afternoon flashed across the mind's eye of George Figgins.

Before his wild rush from the study George Figgins had thoughtfully grabbed up Aunt Sophy's broly, and he was glad he had now.

"Hold him!" he choked. "Put him across the banisters!"

The next moment the broly was brought into play with a will, and Lowther was in a very suitable position to receive punishment, the New House fellows having hauled him up half across the banisters, with his head hanging downwards.

Whack, whack, whack, whack!

"Yarrooooooop!" roared the practical joker of St. Jim's.

"Yooooooo! Stoppit! Oh crumbs!"

Figgy did not stop it—he laid on with a will. But he stopped abruptly as a cry sounded.

"Cave! Ratty!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Bring him to our study!" panted Figgins. "Quick—yank him along!"

"What-ho!"

The cry of cave had come from downstairs somewhere, and without waiting for the Housemaster to show himself, the New House fellows laid hands on the struggling Lowther

and fairly ran him to Figgins' study. They rushed aside and closed the door.

"Now," panted Figgins, "we've got you, my pippin! Oh, you—you—you—!" Words failed Figgins.

"Smash him!" gasped Kerr. "Smash him! Remember what we've gone through, Figgy!"

"Don't forget the grub!" howled Fatty Wynn, almost dancing in his rage as he remembered the picnic-basket. "That's why the grub disappeared this afternoon! Put the awful spoofer through it, Figgy!"

"And our study!" shouted Redfern. "He's ragged our study—made a fearful muck of things. Scrag the rotter! Rub his head in this muck on the floor!"

"Good wheeze!" snapped Figgins. "Then we'll paint his silly chivvy with that green paint you got for your locker, Kerr! On the ball!"

"Leggo!" roared Lowther in great alarm. "It was only a j-joke. Leggo!"

But the New House fellows wanted their joke now. And they had it—at Lowther's expense this time. His head was rubbed over the sloppy floor, and then it was rubbed in the cinders in the hearth. Next, a bottle of ink was poured over his back, and finally his face was painted a vivid green with the paint Kerr had bought for his locker.

In his female attire, the hapless Monty Lowther looked a most weird and wonderful sight. The New House fellows howled with laughter—all excepting Figgins & Co., who hadn't a ghost of a laugh between them.

"Now a dozen good ones with a cricket-stump, and then we'll collar his blessed bathchair—goodness knows whom it belongs to—and tie him in it!" snapped Figgins. "Then we'll give him a procession round the blessed quad. Buck up! We've none too much time!"

"Good egg!"

"Ow! Grooogh! Look here—"

But Lowther's protests were unavailing. His captors were merciless. He was placed in a suitable position across a chair, and then a cricket-stump was brought into play. George Figgins wielded it, and he did not err on the side of mercy.

Lowther roared with anguish.

But the price had to be paid. Really, Lowther had more than overdone things that afternoon. Now it seemed that Figgins was determined to overdo things also.

The ordeal ended at last, however. Then the hapless practical joker was rushed downstairs and out into the quad.

Apparently Tom Merry & Co. had been routed by superior numbers, for the New House were in possession of the bathchair, which was looking rather battered by this time.

"In with the rotter!" panted Figgins.

Lowther, his green-painted face contorted still with anguish, was forced into the bathchair and tied there. Then a big card was produced and tied across his chest. On the card was the inscription:

"LOWTHER, THE JOKER!"

Three Shics for Nix!

Roll Up And Take Your Turn!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the New House fellows.

The procession started, a hurried search being made for suitable missiles to throw at Lowther, the Joker.

"Help!" shrieked Lowther. "Help! Rescue, School House! Rescue! Oh, my hat! School House! Rescue!"

Almost at once the call was answered—fortunately for Monty. There was a rush of feet, and Tom Merry's voice rang out clearly:

"Go for 'em! School House for ever!"

"Yaas, wathah! Give the wottahs socks, deah boys!"

"Back up, New House!"

"Yooooop!" roared Lowther, as the tide of battle surged round the bathchair, and half a dozen fellows fell struggling over him. "Oh, my hat! Help!"

Amid a chorus of hoots and yells, the battle swarmed now one way and now another. But the School House fellows were coming up in force now, and gradually the New House, guarding their prisoner desperately, were forced back.

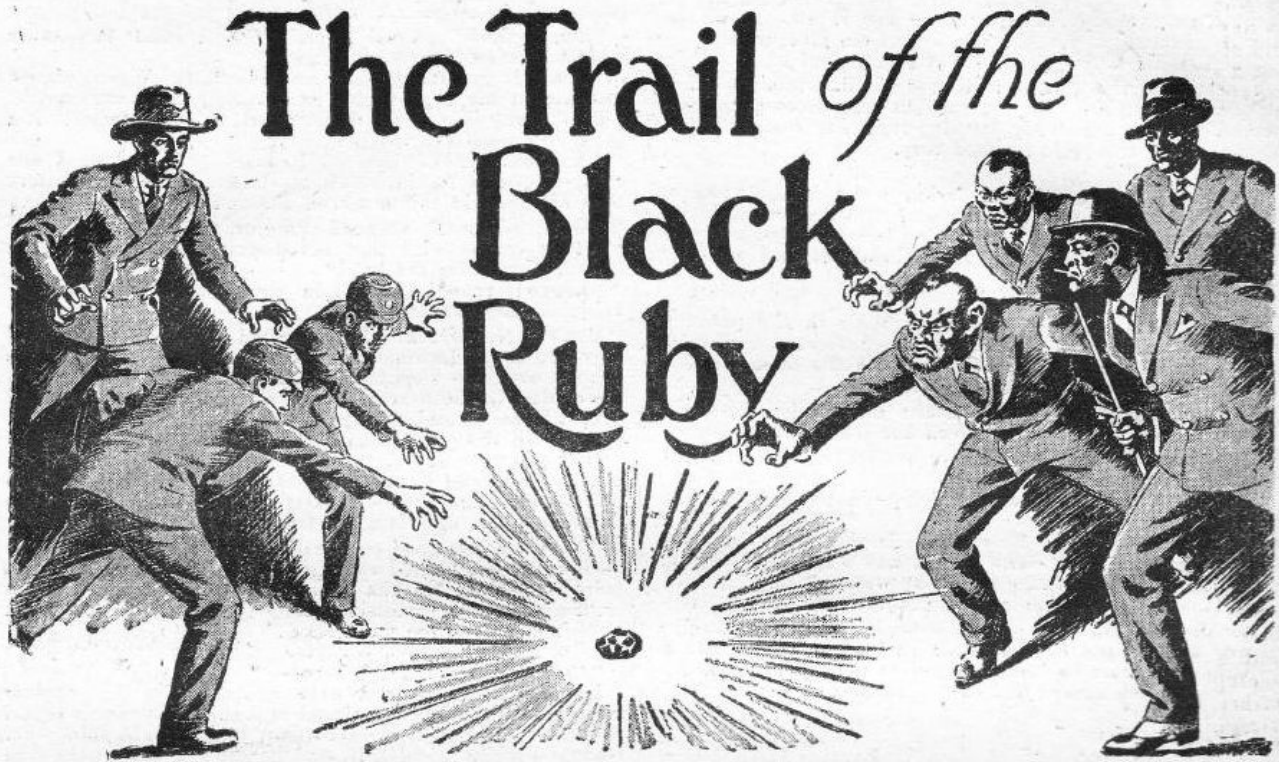
"They've got Lowther!" roared Tom Merry. "Go for 'em! No quarter, chaps!"

A shout of alarm suddenly sounded above the uproar, however, followed by the unmusical swishing of a cane. A chorus of howls followed that.

(Continued on page 23.)

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THE CONCLUDING CHAPTERS of our rousing adventure serial, in which the three pals reap their reward in the heart of Australia!



By PERCY A. CLARKE.

INTRODUCTION.

Trilled across two continents by a gang of cunning crooks, Steve Barrett in possession of a Black Ruby, eventually reaches England. With the aid of this Black Ruby, Steve has hopes of making his fortune, for the ruby is the key to a claim of land in Stony Gorge, Queensland, rich in precious stones. The crooks, however, succeed in gaining possession of the Black Ruby and make good their escape. Steve enlists the services of Bob Crompton and Syd Dyson, two plucky athletic fellows, with whom he sets off in a wild dash south on the trail of the Black Ruby. After a series of exciting adventures, the chums retrieve the precious stone and board the Maharanee, bound for Australia. Sweetman and his gang also get aboard, but their efforts to regain the coveted jewel prove of little avail, for the chums jump ship when nearing Perth and reach shore under cover of darkness. Later, they are waylaid by a gang of toughs in the pay of Sweetman. Although Steve is wounded in the fierce fight which ensues, the chums succeed in fouting the enemy. Their perilous journey across the terrible expanse of arid desert seems all in vain, for when Steve dashes off to register his claim, Sweetman and his gang crowd into the camp, strip the chums of their knives, and secure their wrists behind their backs.

(Now read on.)

Sweetman is Desperate!

KARL SWEETMAN came shouldering his way through the throng of toughs, with Twisty Baker close beside him. He eyed the pals leeringly, and lit a cigarette. Then he frowned, turning to Ah Wong.

"Found it?" he asked.

The Chink shook his head sullenly.

"Frisk 'em for it!" ordered Sweetman.

Bully Mahon searched Syd, then Bob, then Gentleman Jack. Karl Sweetman sat on a rock and watched the proceedings. Most of all, he was interested in Gentleman Jack.

"I've met you before somewhere," he said. "Who the dickens are you, anyway?"

"Me? Oh, I'm Gentleman Jack! And I know you, Sweetman, as the biggest crook Down Under."

Sweetman didn't proceed with the matter.

"Where's Steve Barrett?" he wanted to know.

"Sure I don't know," grinned Gentleman Jack. Sweetman's face flushed angrily.

"I'm not in the mood for fooling!" he snarled.

"Where's Barrett? You boys going to spill the beans?"

"Is it likely?" queried Bob sneeringly.

"Awfully sorry you miss him so much!" mocked Syd.

Sweetman tossed away the stub of his cigarette, rose to his feet, and stood before his prisoners.

"You haven't got the ruby?" he snapped.

"No, boss," agreed Bully Mahon. "Not on them."

"And it doesn't matter a lot," continued Sweetman.

"You have kindly staked the claim for me. What I want to know is, where is Steve Barrett? I want the answer—quickly!"

"Find out!" rasped Bob. "That's the only answer you'll get."

Sweetman leered triumphantly.

"I'm no fool," he said. "We thought we'd stampeded a horse last night, but I s'pose Steve got away to register this claim."

"What a brain!" murmured Gentleman Jack.

"But I can spoil that game!" snarled the crook boss. "Suppose I say I staked this claim and you guys jumped it? What about that? And what's the penalty for jumping claims in this part of the world? Tell me that!"

Twisty Baker grinned and jerked his head towards the side of the gorge. A tree grew there, about the only tree for miles, and that was dead, without a leaf upon it. The gaunt trunk stood there with about a couple of sturdy boughs, stark and bare.

"We've got some rope," he suggested.

Sweetman nodded.

"Better make it snappy," he said. "Dead men—and boys—tell no tales. If Barrett should turn up with a posse of Rangers—String 'em up, boys! I'll teach 'em to double-cross me!"

The toughs seized the pals and hustled them across the gorge with scant ceremony to the gaunt skeleton of the one and only tree. Twisty Baker came with rope, forming a noose as he came, a grin on his thin face.

Syd and Bob looked tense and stern. This was not the sort of end to their adventures they would have planned. It seemed as if Gentleman Jack's gamble against time was a gamble against overwhelming odds, and he had lost.

But Gentleman Jack was grinning. He idly scanned

the sides of the gorge. His eyes were keen. From long living in loneliness in the bush he could read the signs of Nature quicker than most. He was as good a scout as any black fellow. And over the rocky ledges at one end of the gorge was cloud, hardly distinguishable, and yet a cloud—not a rain cloud, but a dust cloud.

Gentleman Jack went on grinning.

The End of the Trail!

IN a grim crowd the toughs gathered around the gaunt tree. Twisty Baker tossed one end of the rope over one of the sturdy boughs.

"Who's first?" he wanted to know.

"One of the boys!" snapped Sweetman.

"But wait a bit, boss," put in Bully Mahon. "We can pop them off any old time. Why not get rid of the big guy?"

Gentleman Jack laughed outright.

"Thanks for the compliment," he said. "That means I'm the most dangerous. It's open to argument, isn't it, Sweetman, seeing that these two pals have got the better of you after all, although you chased 'em round the world?"

"I'm not arguing with you!" snarled Sweetman. "If you want to go first, you can. I don't mind."

"Please yourself—it's all the same to me," said Gentleman Jack pleasantly, one eye on that cloud of dust, which was coming nearer and growing darker. "But let's get this straight."

"Get what straight?" queried Sweetman.

"Well, you'll have to account for us being missing, won't you? When Steve comes back he'll get worried if we're not here to receive him."

"Don't you worry!" snarled Baker. "If Steve comes back he'll join you wherever it is you're going."

"Sure, that's tough on Steve!" grinned Gentleman Jack. "But what I mean—you're going to tell the world you staked this claim and we jumped it."

"That's it," agreed Sweetman.

"But won't the officials wonder why you never sent someone to register the claim, seeing you've got about a hundred bullies to help you bump off one man and two young fellers? Rather strange you never registered the claim."

"How d'you know I haven't?" snapped Sweetman.

"Simple!" retorted Gentleman Jack. "You don't know the measurements and the situation. Steve does, and Steve has registered, if you want to know anything."

Sweetman rapped out an oath, and waved his hand.

"String 'em up!" he cried. "I'm not going to stand here arguing with that double-crosser."

"But how will you explain things to the Government officials?" persisted Gentleman Jack.

"What's that to do with you?" snarled Sweetman.

"You're going where there isn't any Government and no Black Rubies, either. Get busy, Baker. Take one o' them boys first."

"No. I'll go first," said Gentleman Jack. "Age before honesty, so to speak."

"I won't have that," put in Bob. "Hang it all, this isn't really your quarrel."

"Quite right," agreed Syd. "We've come across the world on this stunt, and Sweetman has more up against us than him."

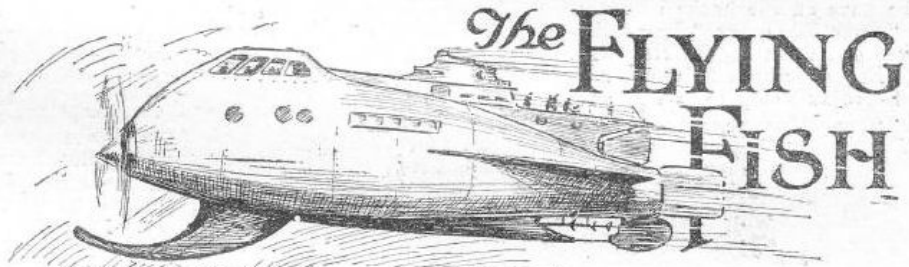
Bully Mahon chuckled grimly.

"If this doesn't beat all!" he cried. "Gosh! Who ever heard of guys having a row over who's going to have his neck stretched first!"

"But listen," said Gentleman Jack. "I'm older than you two. I live alone in the bush. If I go out no one will worry a lot. I know Steve would be sorry, and he wouldn't rest until he'd got Sweetman and everybody who helped him inside gaol. You hear that, Sweetman? You may have the whiphand, but Steve will get you sooner or later. I give you fair warning."

"Oh, finish it, Baker!" snapped Sweetman.

(Concluded on page 28.)



Against the watery western sunset hovers a huge grey shadow, shapeless at first in the gathering gloom, then becoming more clearly defined as it moves down seawards. A low drumming sound fills the air, and awakens faint echoes among the gaunt, highly-coloured cliffs of Devon.

Swish! The grey shape gently touches the swirling water, and salt waves wash over it as it comes to rest.

From out of the sky, from out of the unknown, this grey monster has come, to rest under the shadow of the Devon cliffs. Mysterious figures move to and fro over the grey hull—voices, strange and foreign, drift with the breeze to the shore. Then all is still and silent again.

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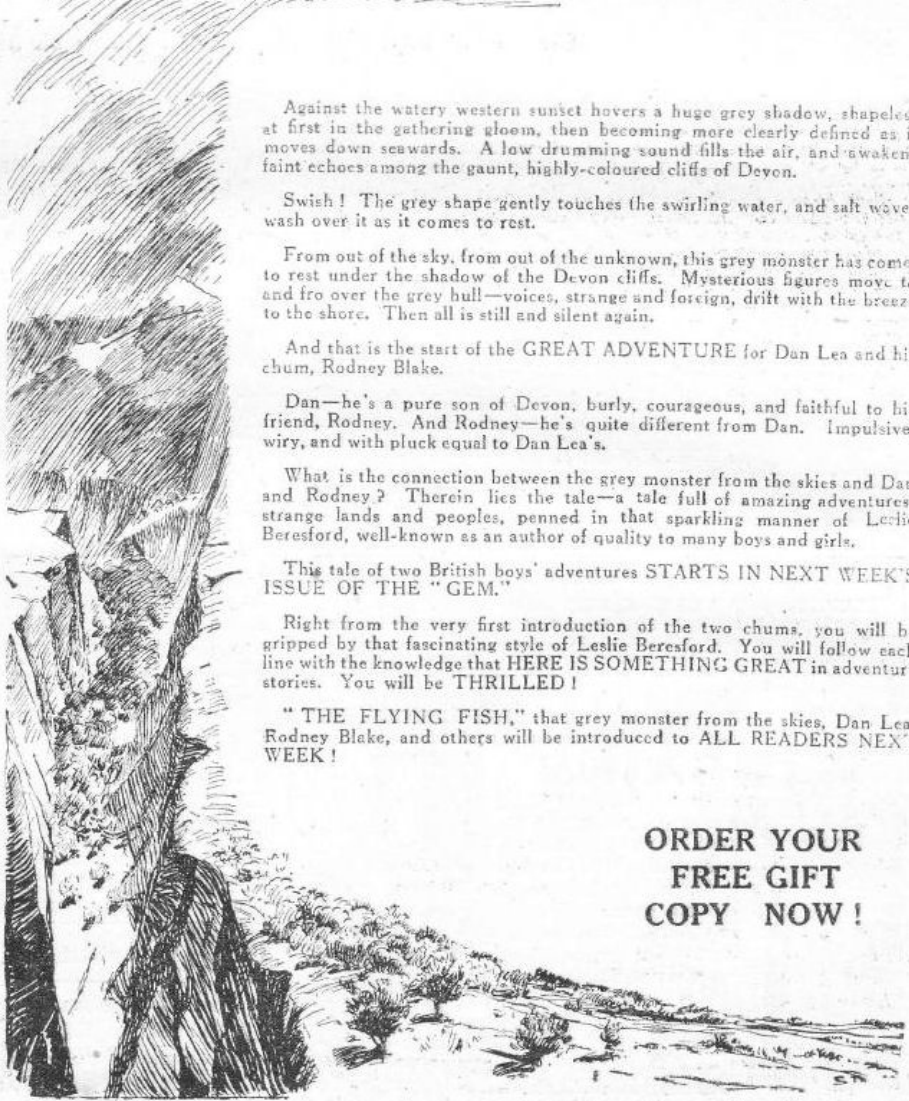
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Gentleman Jack stepped forward towards the rough-and-ready gallows.

"All right," he said, grinning. "I'm ready, if you are. But let me say my last say. You fellows here are due for a shock before long. If there is anyone here prepared to release me and stand by me and these two boys, I'll promise to plead for them at the court."

"Plead?" echoed Bully Mahon. "At the court? What court?"

"Court of law, thick head!" retorted Gentleman Jack. "Now—"

"String him up!" roared Sweetman. "You pack of idiots! Can't you see he's wasting our time for the purpose? Baker! String—"

But Gentleman Jack guffawed as, with a whoop of triumph, came a crowd of horsemen into the gorge.

"Steve!" yelled Gentleman Jack hilariously.

There was Steve leading the way. The scarlet coats of the bush Rangers made a welcome splash of colour in the rock-strewn valley as they charged to the rescue.

The crooks broke and fled up the gorge, but another posse came in at the other end, and they were trapped.

Dusty, perspiring, but grinning, Steve dropped from his horse and severed their bonds with his clasp-knife. He gripped hands with Gentleman Jack and slapped the boys on the backs heartily.

"Done it, chums!" he cried. "And the Rangers have sure got them crooks corralled."

"Registered your claim?" asked Bob.

Steve suddenly looked fierce.

"Sure, I've registered OUR claim!" he retorted. "Because, now you're here, chums, you two stand in with me, equal shares. Guess you've earned it."

Gentleman Jack nodded agreement.

"And must you really go back into the bush?" queried Syd.

"It isn't a case of must, chum," replied Gentleman Jack. "I prefer it."

And a few hours before sunset, when all was peace in Stony Gorge, Gentleman Jack quietly rode back towards his lonely glen amongst the mountains to the west, close to the heart of the Never-Never Land.

By that time Karl Sweetman and his gang were under lock and key in Stonyville. Much wanted by the police, Sweetman, Ah Wong, Twisty Baker, and Bully Mahon duly received life sentences, while their reinforcements were punished according to the enormity of their offences.

Steve, Syd, and Bob remained in Stony Gorge and gradually extracted a fortune apiece from the floor of the valley.

The Trail of the Black Ruby had come to an end!

THE END.

(Well, chums, I can almost hear you say how sorry you are that this magnificent adventure yarn has come to an end. But why worry, there's another treat in store in: "THE FLYING FISH!" the opening instalment of which will appear in next week's GEM. Make sure you read it by ordering your copy WELL IN ADVANCE.)

"GEORGE'S AUNT!"

(Continued from page 25.)

"Look out! Kildare!"

"Oh, my hat!"

It was the signal for hostilities to cease. Nobody dreamed of keeping on—with Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, also on the warpath. The crowd broke and scattered. Piggins—a last sporting act—cut Lowther free before he dashed away. Tom Merry and Manners grabbed the gasping practical joker and rushed him towards the School House. The riot was ended. In one minute only Kildare—and the battered armchair—were left on the field of battle.

Lowther spent the next two hours in the bathroom, scrubbing and rubbing until his face was sore and piebald, so to speak. When he appeared in public again that evening there were still signs of green paint on his features and ink on his hair.

But he was quite happy and quite chippy. In the School House Common-room he told the story of his adventures as "Aunt Sophy," and the whole Common-room rocked with laughter. He was the hero of the hour. All agreed—in the School House at all events—that, despite the sad ending to his little joke, it had been a terrific success, and fully deserving the title of the jape of the term.

Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn did not appear in the Common-room over in the New House, however. They had certainly taken it out of Lowther to some extent, but it gave them little comfort—very little indeed! They knew that the story would soon be all over the school, and they shuddered at the thought. They could have kicked themselves round the quad at the realisation of how blind they had been—how innocent and unsuspecting. They could scarcely understand it when they looked back at what they had done—and what they had allowed Lowther to do in his capacity as "Aunt Sophy."

They were obliged to hide their diminished heads even in the New House—the juniors of which had a feeling that Figgins & Co. had let the House down—and they did not fail to let the hapless trio of unfortunates know it.

For weeks St. Jim's laughed over the story of Figgins' Aunt Sophy and her darling Georgie. In fact, it was a very long time before her dear "nephew" was allowed to forget it. And it was longer still before Figgins ventured to mention the name of Miss Priscilla Fawcett to Tom Merry. All the humour in that joke had vanished as a result of the never-to-be-forgotten visit of George's Aunt!

THE END.

(There will be another grand long story of Tom Merry & Co. in next week's Free Gift Number of the GEM entitled: "VOTE FOR TOM MERRY!" It's a treat of a yarn, chums, and no "Gemite" can afford to miss it.)

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