

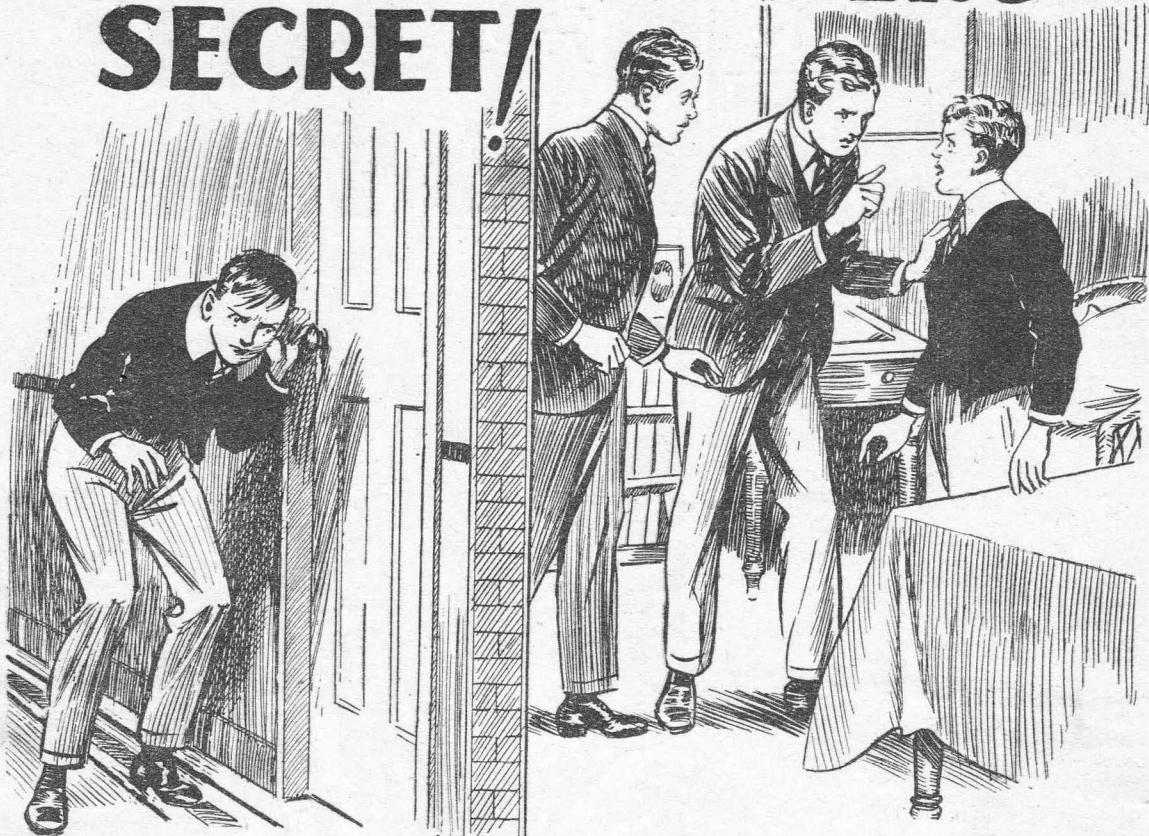
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The GEM ^{2d}



TOM MERRY IN TROUBLE! A Dramatic Incident from the Powerful St. Jim's Story Inside
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The SIXTH-FORMER'S SECRET!



CHAPTER 1.

The Wrong Customer!

"INK, please!" said Tom Merry.

"Here you are!"

"And some treacle."

"Here!"

"And a shovelful of soot!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Right-ho!"

Tom Merry stirred industriously.

Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther, the Terrible Three of the Shell Form at St. Jim's, were very busy. Tom Merry, with his shirtsleeves rolled up and a large ladle in his hand, was stirring at a weird-looking compound in a big basin. There were many ingredients in that compound, and Manners and Lowther were adding more as Tom Merry stirred away.

Red ink and black ink and treacle and soot were being stirred up into a fearsome liquid.

"Anything else?" asked Monty Lowther, with a chuckle.

Tom Merry looked thoughtful.

"What about a little pyro?" he asked.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good!" said Manners, the amateur photographer of the School House. "It's a pity to waste it, as it costs money, but it's in a good cause. Here you are!"

And he poured in the pyro.

Tom Merry stirred up.

"Keep an eye on the window, Lowther," he remarked. "Don't show yourself, or Figgins will be on the alert. Tell me when you see him."

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"Right-ho!" grinned Lowther.

And he stationed himself at the study window. It was getting dark in the quadrangle of St. Jim's, and the shadows of the old elms were very deep below. But there was light enough to see anybody who should come under the study windows.

Tom Merry stirred on.

There was a footstep in the passage.

Only one junior at St. Jim's knew that Arthur Langton, the Sixth Former, was in the grip of an unscrupulous moneylender, and that junior was Tom Merry. So when Langton's secret leaked out it was Tom who was held to blame—scorned and despised by his school-fellows as a sneak!

and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth looked into the study. He was about to speak when he caught sight of Tom Merry and his mixture. He remained with his mouth half-open in his astonishment and jammed his eyeglass into his eye to take a closer survey.

"Bai Jove!" he ejaculated. "What is that, Tom Merry?"

"Our special mixture."

"But what is it made of?" asked D'Arcy, in amazement.

"Ink, soot, treacle, and pyro, with water ad lib."

"Bai Jove! What's it for?"

"Figgins of the New House," said Tom Merry, stirring away. "I'm doing this specially for Figgins, out of sheer kindness."

Manners and Lowther chuckled.

"And what does Figgins want it for?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"That's just the little joke. He doesn't want it."

"Oh!"

"You see," explained Tom Merry, "Figgins doesn't want it, but he's going to get it. I'm doing this out of kindness. I dare say you are aware that Figgins & Co. have a weird idea that the New House is Cock House of St. Jim's."

"Yaas, wathah."

"They've got, to be cured of this idea, somehow, and we're going to try to do it with this mixture. I've just had a tip from Mellish that Figgins is coming over here—"

"Bai Jove!"

"He's going to chuck a cracker in at the window and give us a jump," explained Tom Merry, "but as we happen to know he's coming, we're getting ready for him. I think he will jump more than we do when he gets this on his napper!"

Arthur Augustus chuckled.

"I should wathah think so! But how

—POWERFUL LONG YARN OF DRAMATIC SCHOOL ADVENTURE AT ST. JIM'S!

By MARTIN CLIFFORD

did Mellish know? Figgins wouldn't be likely to tell a School House chap."

Tom Merry shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, I dare say Mellish heard them talking," he said. "Mellish often hears things other fellows don't hear. However, that's Mellish's business. I'm getting ready for Figgins."

"That stuff will spoil his clothes," said Arthur Augustus.

"Well, it won't improve them," agreed Tom Merry.

"It's wathah wuff to spoil a fellow's clothes," said D'Arcy thoughtfully. "Upon the whole, Tom Mewwy, I hardly approve of this jape!"

"Go hon!"

"I am speakin' quite sewiously. I do not approve of it."

"Then, of course, we'll chuck it at once," said Tom Merry gravely.

"Yaas, I should certainly recommend that, Tom Mewwy."

"You recommend me to chuck it?"

"Yaas."

"Right-ho! Here you are!"

Tom Merry picked up the basin in both hands and swung it into the air. Arthur Augustus made a wild jump into the passage.

"Bai Jove! You uttah ass! Don't chuck that at me!" he shrieked.

"Why, you asked me to—"

"You feahful ass! When I said chuck it, I didn't mean chuck it—"

Tom Merry put the basin down and recommenced stirring the contents, with a chuckle. Arthur Augustus peeped cautiously round the door.

"Don't put that feahful stuff near me, you awful ass!" he said. "If I got any of that on me I should give you a feahful thwashin'!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I came here to speak to you fellows," said D'Arcy, still keeping in the passage. "I'm vewy busy this evenin', and Langton has given me fifty lines. I want one of you fellows to do them for me. It will be all wight, you know—Langton nevah looks at the witin'—he's a decent chap, for a pwefect. I—"

"Somebody's coming!" said Lowther in a low voice from the window.

"Good!"

Tom Merry laid down the ladle and took the basin of mixture in both hands and stepped cautiously towards the window.

"I was speakin' to you, Tom Mewwy."

"Well, leave off for a bit. You can go on again presently," said Tom Merry.

"Weally, deah boy—"

"Quiet! Don't want to alarm Figgins!"

"Weally—"

"Shut the door on him!"

Monty Lowther closed the study door, shutting the swell of St. Jim's out into the passage. He put his foot against the door to keep it shut. Tom Merry rested

the basin on the window-ledge and looked out into the quad. It was dusky in the quad. A dim figure appeared in view, coming along at a good stride under the study windows.

"There he is!" whispered Manners, who was peeping out of one corner of the window. "That's Figgins—too tall for any other kid."

"Good!"

Tom Merry grasped the basin in readiness. The figure below came directly under the study window. Whether it was going to stop there or going to pass on was not discovered, for Tom Merry did not wait to see. He lifted the basin and shot the contents out and downwards in a swishing flood.

Swoosh!

There was a wild, choking yell below, and the dim figure staggered against the School House wall. Tom Merry put the basin on the floor, and leaned out of the window, and looked down with a

Nell.

"Ha, ha, ha! How did you like the special mixture?"

"Groogh!" came in a gurgle from below. "What—what! Tom Merry! How dare you!"

Tom Merry jumped.

For the gasping voice that came from below was not the voice of Figgins of the Fourth, the great chief of the New House juniors.

It was the well-known voice of Kildare of the Sixth, the head prefect of the School House, and captain of St. Jim's.

Tom Merry gasped.

"Kildare!"

CHAPTER 2.

An Unpleasant Position!

"KILDARE!"

Manners and Lowther echoed the name in tones of horror.

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Tom Merry. "I've done it now!"

The figure below, smothered and drenched with the special mixture, was gasping and gurgling in a suffocating manner. Tom Merry leaned out of the window and looked anxiously down.

The captain of the school presented a shocking sight.

In the dusk Tom Merry could not have made out his features; but he could make them out less than ever now, smothered as they were with ink and treacle and soot and pyro.

Kildare's head and shoulders were smothered. He gouged the mixture out of his eyes and ears, and glared up at the horrified junior at the window above.

"Groogh! T-Tom Merry!"

"I—I—"

"Did you throw this stuff over me?" roared the captain of St. Jim's.

"I—I— Yes! No—yes!"

"You young sweep!"

"It—it was all a mistake," stammered Tom Merry. "You—you see, I—I didn't see you plainly, and I—I thought it was Figgins."

Kildare spluttered.

"So you were going to throw this muck over Figgins?"

"Well, you see—"

"And you've thrown it over me instead!" roared Kildare.

"I—I—"

"Go to my study!" shouted Kildare. "Go to my study and wait for me there! Do you hear?"

"Yes."

Kildare disappeared in the gloom. Probably he was going to clean himself, which was not likely to be an easy or rapid process. From the darkness under the elms there came the sound of a chuckle.

"You've done it now, Tom Merry."

And Figgins of the New House looked up in the dark. Tom Merry glared at him.

"You ass! If you'd come a little sooner you'd have got it instead of Kildare."

Figgins yelled.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You New House bouncer!" roared Tom Merry, exasperated.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins, yelling with laughter, disappeared across the quadrangle. Tom Merry turned back into his study with a dissatisfied grunt. Monty Lowther and Manners looked at him in dismay.

"There'll be trouble now!" gasped Manners.

Tom Merry snorted.

"I suppose so. This means a licking. It's all Figgins' fault! Br-r-r-r!"

He opened the study door and strode out.

As he went downstairs he met Mellish. The cad of the Fourth paused, and stared at Tom Merry.

"Did it go all right?" he asked.

"No!" grunted Tom.

"Didn't you chuck the stuff?"

"Yes; but Kildare got it."

"Kildare! My hat! That means a licking for you. Ha, ha, ha!"

"What are you cackling at?" yelled Tom Merry.

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Mellish.

Tom Merry gave him a push, and he sat down on the stairs. Then the Shell fellow made his way to Kildare's study. Mellish sat on the stairs, and roared with laughter. He did not seem displeased with the fact that Tom Merry was to receive a licking for the mis-carriage of his little plot.

Tom Merry looked, and felt, gloomy enough as he entered Kildare's study in the Sixth Form passage.

Kildare, the popular captain of St. Jim's, was a great favourite with the juniors, and Tom Merry was really sorry that he had inadvertently anointed him with the mixture intended for Figgins of the New House.

But he felt sorrier for himself than for Kildare. His punishment would not be a case of lines. The offence would be met with a most severe caning. And Tom Merry rubbed his hands in painful anticipation.

The study of the St. Jim's captain was not lighted, and Tom waited in the

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dusk, looking out into the shadowy quadrangle.

But Kildare did not come.

Doubtless he was busily engaged in cleaning the stuff from his face and hair, and it was likely to occupy him for a considerable time.

The darkness was deepening on St. Jim's. Tom Merry turned away from the window. Kildare had commanded him to wait in the study till he came, so Tom Merry could not leave. He threw himself into the Sixth Former's armchair to wait.

Still Kildare did not come.

Tom Merry had been half an hour in the dusky study, and he wondered whether he might venture to switch on the light, and borrow one of Kildare's books to pass the time away. He was bound to wait, but he was tired of wasting time. But if Kildare came in and found the delinquent reading he was likely to take that as insult added to injury. It would be more judicious to assume a sad and repentant attitude.

Tom Merry wondered whether Kildare had forgotten all about telling him to wait in the study.

He yawned as he sat in the armchair waiting, and presently his eyes closed.

He had been playing a hard game of cricket that afternoon, and he was tired; and he nodded off to sleep as he sat in the armchair.

He did not quite realise that he was nodding off, and whether he quite slept or not he hardly knew; it seemed to him only a few seconds before the sound of voices fell upon his ears.

He started.

There was a light in the study; he blinked as it struck upon his opening eyes. For a moment he sat wondering where he was.

Voices were audible close to him; he recognised the tones of Kildare and Langton of the Sixth, without following the sense of the words.

Tom Merry sat upright in the chair as he understood. He had fallen asleep, and Kildare and Langton had entered the study without seeing him. The armchair was drawn up facing the grate, and the high back of it prevented the two seniors from seeing Tom Merry. They were standing just inside the study, and the table was between them and the big chair.

Tom Merry had just realised it, and was about to rise to his feet, when Langton's voice came clearly and distinctly, with words that made him start.

"I must have five pounds, Kildare, or I shall be ruined. If you can't lend it to me, I don't know what to do."

Tom Merry bit his lip.

Langton would certainly never have uttered those words if he had known that any ears beside Kildare's were there to hear them. Quite unintentionally, Tom Merry was playing the part of an eavesdropper. His cheeks burned red at the thought. Before Kildare could answer Langton, the junior sprang to his feet.

"Hold on!" he exclaimed. "I—I—"

Kildare and Langton swung round towards him—the former frowning and the latter turning white.

"I—I—" stammered Tom Merry.

Kildare gave him a furious look.

"Merry, you've been listening!"

CHAPTER 3.

Honour Bound!

TOM MERRY turned crimson. The angry accusation brought the red flush of shame and indignation to his face. For a moment he could not speak. Kildare strode towards him.

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"Merry, how dare you!"

Tom Merry's eyes flashed.

"I haven't been listening!" he exclaimed indignantly. "You ought to know me better than that, Kildare. You've no right to say that."

Kildare gritted his teeth.

"What are you doing here, then?" he asked angrily.

Tom Merry met his eyes steadily.

"You told me to come here and wait for you," he said. "I suppose you haven't forgotten. I've been waiting for you ever since."

"I did not see you when I came in."

"I fell asleep," said Tom Merry. "I was in the chair here. You woke me up speaking. I've been here an hour or more."

Kildare looked at him hard.

"Then you haven't heard what Langton was saying to me?" he asked.

Tom Merry shifted uncomfortably.

"Only his last sentence," he said. "I heard that. I didn't hear what he was saying before that. I just heard voices as I woke up, that's all; but I don't know what you were saying before that."

"What did you hear me say, then?" asked Langton in a low voice.

"You said you wanted five pounds, or you will be ruined!" said Tom Merry, flushing again.

Langton made a hopeless gesture.

"It's all up now," he said. "It will be all over the school in half an hour."

"You've no right to say anything of the sort," said Tom Merry, his cheeks burning. "Do you think I'm a sneak and a tell-tale?"

"You—you won't repeat—"

"Of course not."

Kildare was watching Tom Merry's face intently. He gave a nod as if satisfied.

"I think it's all right, Langton," he said. "I'm sorry I said you were listening, Merry. Will you give me your word of honour not to repeat to anybody what you've happened to hear in this study?"

"Yes, of course."

Kildare turned to Langton.

"It's all right," he said. "You can trust him, Langton. He will keep his word."

Langton looked dubiously at Tom Merry. He knew that the leader of the Shell was one of the most decent fellows at St. Jim's, and a fellow of his word. But to have his secret at the discretion of a junior was unpleasant for the Sixth Former. However, he had no choice but to trust to the word of the Shell fellow.

"Very well," he said. "I—I trust you, Merry."

"You can trust me all right," said Tom Merry. "Even if Kildare hadn't asked me to promise, I shouldn't dream of repeating anything that I heard by accident—especially a serious matter that's no business of mine. I shan't say a word."

Langton nodded.

"It's all right," he said. "I know you're to be trusted. Look here, Tom Merry, as I've no choice about trusting you, I'll explain a little—"

"I'm not curious."

"I'm in a difficult position through no fault of my own," said Langton, in an agitated voice. "That's why I've asked Kildare for help. That's all I need to tell you. Now, I rely on you to keep the secret."

"I'm going to keep it."

"Good!" said Kildare. "Buzz off!" Tom Merry hesitated.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" demanded the captain of St. Jim's.

"The licking!" said Tom Merry, with a grin. "That's why I came here, you know. I'd rather get it over at once, if you don't mind."

Kildare smiled.

"You jolly well deserve a licking," he said. "But in the circumstances I'll let you off. One good turn deserves another."

"Thank you, Kildare."

Tom Merry quitted the study.

He was glad enough to escape the licking, but his face was thoughtful as he went down the passage. Langton's secret was a worry upon his mind, partly from the fact that he hated keeping secrets, and partly from his regard for Langton, a most popular prefect of the School House, and Tom Merry was concerned to know that he was in trouble. It was known to some of the fellows—Tom Merry among others—that Langton had once been mixed up with evil associates, who had brought him into trouble, and very nearly into disgrace. Tom Merry wondered if the old associates whom he had thrown off were enforcing some old claim upon him, and trying to bring him back under their influence.

"Licked?"

The sudden question broke in upon Tom Merry's reflections as he reached the end of the Sixth Form passage. Mellish was waiting there, apparently for the satisfaction of ascertaining the extent of Tom Merry's punishment. There was no love lost between Tom Merry and the sneak of the Fourth.

"No," said Tom Merry curtly.

Mellish looked astonished.

"You don't mean to say that Kildare let you off after slopping all that stuff over his napper?" asked Mellish.

"Yes, I do."

"Blessed if I understand it, then," said Mellish, in amazement. "Did Langton get you off? I noticed that he went in with Kildare just now."

"No, he didn't!"

"Well, I don't understand it. Some more of Kildare's rotten favouritism, I suppose," said Mellish, with a sniff. "If I'd slopped that stuff over him, I should have been licked fast enough."

"Oh, shut up!"

"Well, I think it's rotten!"

"Did you want me to be licked, you cad?" said Tom Merry. "Look here, if you say anything more against Kildare you'll get a thick ear."

"Well, I don't believe in favouritism." Biff!

"Yaroooh!"

Tom Merry walked on, leaving Mellish leaning against the wall, holding his nose. The cad of the Fourth glared furiously after Tom Merry, who went on his way to his study.

Manners and Lowther were at their preparation, and they stopped and looked sympathetically at Tom Merry as he came in.

"Had it bad?" asked Lowther.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"Did it hurt?" asked Manners.

"No. I haven't been licked."

"Haven't been licked!" exclaimed his two chums together.

"No; let off."

"My only hat! Why?"

"Oh, never mind why!" said Tom Merry. "Kildare's a brick. Make room for a fellow at the table, and let me get my work done."

"Jolly queer he should let you off," said Lowther, in astonishment.

"Yes, wasn't it?"

And that was all the explanation Lowther and Manners could get out of Tom Merry.

CHAPTER 4.

Langton's Last Chance!

LANGTON stood silent in Kildare's study after Tom Merry had left. His face was very pale, and he breathed hard.

Kildare fixed his eyes upon the prefect's face, with a mingling of compassion and impatience in his look.

"Buck up, Langton, old man!" he said. "You can trust Tom Merry. He won't repeat a word of what he has heard here; I feel sure of that."

Langton nodded.

"It would be rotten if it got about the school," he said.

"It won't get about."

"Well, it's no good worrying about it,

As the figure came directly under the window, Tom Merry lifted the basin and shot the contents downwards in a swishing flood. Swoosh! There was a wild, choking yell from below. "Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Tom. "How do you like the special mixture?"

had ended for good. The Head understood that when he overlooked the matter, and pardoned you for having played the giddy goat as you did. Excuse my speaking plainly; it's the best thing in the long run."

"I know that; don't mind me."

"Well, if you broke off with that set, as you promised to do, what do you want five quid to settle an old debt for?"

Langton's lips quivered. The big, stalwart Sixth Former, the best bowler in the First Eleven, was looking down-cast, nervous, uneasy, under the steady gaze of the captain of St. Jim's.

Langton. "I've had some good tips from my uncle and some from my pater. They've all gone the same way—to clear off my debt to Simons."

"The pawnbroker in Wayland?" asked Kildare.

"Yes. He's a moneylender as well as a pawnbroker. I borrowed the money of him to finish settling with those cads, on reasonable terms, as I thought, but—but it turns out that there was a clause in the paper I signed that I didn't notice—I'm not much of a business man, anyway, and old Simons is as keen as a



hawk—and—and I found that I owed him as much interest as principal."

"The rotter!" exclaimed Kildare wrathfully.

"I've paid him everything that I have, but there's five quid more due to him," said Langton heavily. "I'm at the end of my resources now—everything's gone—and if I don't get five quid to finish with the cad to-day, I'm done in! I shall have to sign a fresh paper, and start the whole thing afresh, and—and I shan't be able to meet his claims. It means that he'll have me under his thumb all the time I'm at St. Jim's. I'd rather chuck the whole thing than submit to that! I'd rather clear out of the school!"

Kildare nodded.

"But you are not bound to pay the old shark anything," he said. "You're a minor."

Langton smiled bitterly.

"He knows that as well as I do; but he knows, too, that if he told the Head or my pater that I had had dealings with a moneylender, I should be ruined!"

Kildare looked keenly at the prefect. "And five quid would clear you of Simons?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll stand you the fiver," said Kildare. "You can let me have it back before the end of the term, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Langton. "In three weeks, I expect. But I want it badly to-day, so that I can tackle Simons before the date of my paper expires."

"Good, then!" said Kildare. "I've

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I suppose," said Langton. "It depends on Tom Merry, whether he holds his tongue or not. Do you think he really heard only that one sentence, as he says?"

"I think he told the truth."

"I hope so. Well, it can't be helped. To come back to the subject. Can you let me have the five quid?"

Kildare hesitated.

"Look here, Langton," he said abruptly, "before I lend you any money, I want to have this matter settled up. It was understood that your connection with those rotters down in Rylcombe

"They say these things never really end," he said, with a sigh. "It's easier to get into a scrape than to get out again. It's true that I broke off with Jolliffe and his set, and since my trouble with them I've never seen or spoken to any of them. I hope you can take my word on that subject."

"Yes. But now—"

"It's another man entirely. I owed these rotters money, and I've paid them up—every penny. But I borrowed money to do it."

"Oh!" said Kildare.

"I've managed pretty well," said

got a fiver that I was setting aside for my holiday next vacation, and I'll let you have it."

Langton looked relieved.

"It's jolly good of you, Kildare!" he said. "I shan't forget this. I know I've no right to bring my troubles to you in this way, but—but there's no other fellow at St. Jim's I should care to tell about it."

"That's all right," said Kildare. "I'm glad enough to lend you the money, if it will really get you quite clear of your difficulties."

"It's the last of them," said the prefect. "It's not my fault, either. Ever since that row over my going to Joliffe's I've been keeping quite straight, and only trying to keep clear of the gang."

Kildare unlocked his desk, and took out a crisp, rustling five-pound note from an envelope. He laid it on the table.

The prefect picked up the banknote.

"Thank you, Kildare, old man!" he said. "I shan't forget this, I promise you. I'll return you the money this term, and I shan't forget the obligation as long as I live. I shall feel a new man when I've got rid of that old scrape for good."

And he turned to the door.

There was a slight sound in the passage, and Langton stepped quickly towards the door, and opened it and glanced out.

The passage was empty.

"What's the row?" asked Kildare, looking at him in surprise.

"I thought I heard somebody," said Langton uneasily. "But there's nobody here. I suppose it was my fancy."

Kildare laughed slightly.

"Well, a listener couldn't have got to the end of the passage by the time you opened the door," he said. "You're all nerves to-day, Langton."

"I suppose I am," said Langton. "Thank you again, Kildare! I'll get off to Wayland at once, and get this matter off my mind."

"Good idea!" said Kildare.

Langton left the study and went down the passage.

His footsteps died away, and then, a few minutes later, the door of the study next to Kildare's opened, and a face looked cautiously out.

It was the face of Percy Mellish, the sneak of the School House.

Mellish was breathing fast.

"My word!" he murmured. "That was a narrow shave! If I hadn't popped into Darrell's study, or if Darrell had happened to be there—"

He shivered a little.

The passage was deserted now, and Mellish stepped out of Darrell's study and made his way as quickly as he could out of the Sixth Form quarters. The junior's eyes were gleaming with excitement.

He went slowly up to the Fourth Form passage, and into his own study. Levison of the Fourth was there. Levison was Mellish's study-mate and his only friend—if the tie between them could be called friendship.

Levison was in very bad odour in the School House just now. He had only just recently returned to St. Jim's, after a long absence, and, in spite of his unpopularity, Tom Merry & Co. had been kind enough to him on his return, and he had repaid that kindness with his usual treachery. And the result was that Levison was sent to Coventry by the whole House.

For some days nobody but Mellish was seen to speak to him. The sentence had relaxed somewhat lately, and fellows answered Levison if he spoke to

them, but the general distrust and dislike with which he was regarded showed little sign of abating.

Levison looked curiously at the sneak of the School House as he came into the study, with a flush of suppressed excitement on his face.

"Anything up?" he asked.

Mellish closed the door carefully. "Yes. I've found something out."

"Oh! What is it?"

"How do you feel towards Tom Merry?" asked Mellish.

Levison gritted his teeth.

"You know," he replied. "About the same as you do. I'd give a year's pocket-money to see him sacked from school. Not that it's likely to happen. And if you've got some scheme on against him, you can leave me out. I've got to be jolly careful for a bit."

Mellish grinned.

"Suppose there was a chance of getting him into Kildare's black books, and showing him up to the House as a liar and a sneak?" he asked triumphantly.

Levison started.

"Rot!" he said.

"Well, it's not rot—it's as easy as rolling off a form."

Levison looked incredulous.

"How are you going to do it?" he demanded.

"Listen!"

And Mellish began to speak in a low voice. Levison listened, and as he listened his eyes glinted, and he smiled a smile that boded no good to the hero of the School House.

CHAPTER 5.

Trouble for Tom!

TOM MERRY came out of the Shell-room after morning lessons the next day, and walked down the Form-room passage arm-in-arm with Manners and Lowther.

It was a favourite trick of the Terrible Three to walk down the Form-room passage with linked arms and push over all the fellows who got in their way.

They met Skimpole of the Shell on their way, and Skimpole disappeared under their feet, and sat up after they had passed, looking very surprised indeed.

The Terrible Three chucked and walked out into the quadrangle.

Langton of the Sixth met them there, and he paused as he saw Tom Merry. He seemed about to speak, but the presence of Manners and Lowther stopped him.

Tom Merry detached himself from his two chums and approached the prefect.

"Did you want to speak to me, Langton?" he asked.

Langton looked at him moodily.

"Not particularly," he said.

"I—I thought you did," said Tom Merry, surprised by the senior's manner.

"Did you keep your word, Tom Merry?" asked Langton abruptly.

Tom Merry turned red.

"Of course I did!" he said. "Do you think I've broken it?"

"You haven't said anything?"

"Certainly not!"

Langton looked at him searchingly.

"All right," he said. "I believe you. I suppose it's just a coincidence, that's all; but Rusden said something to me—never mind."

And with an abrupt nod, Langton walked away. He left Tom Merry standing very surprised and very disconcerted. Tom, in fact, had dismissed

Langton's affair from his mind altogether, and had almost forgotten the incident of the previous evening in Kildare's study. He was indignant at Langton's want of faith in him.

"What's the matter with Langton?" asked Monty Lowther, as Tom Merry joined his chums.

Tom Merry did not reply, and Lowther, giving him a very curious look, refrained from repeating the question.

Kildare stopped Tom Merry in the Hall when he came in later to dinner. The captain of St. Jim's was frowning.

"I want a word with you, Merry," he said abruptly.

"Yes," said Tom Merry.

"I suppose you have not forgotten the promise you made me yesterday?"

"No!"

"You have kept it?"

"You've no right to ask me that," said Tom Merry indignantly. "Langton's just asked me something of the same sort. What right have you to suppose that I haven't kept my word?"

"You are sure you have said nothing?" asked Kildare, taking no notice of Tom Merry's question.

"Quite sure."

"Well, it is very queer, then!"

"What do you mean?"

"It seems to have got out, that's all. Nobody but you knew what Langton came to my study for last evening, and you promised not to say a word about it."

"I haven't said a word about it."

"We shall see!" said Kildare grimly. "There is some rumour going about the House that looks as if the secret is out."

Tom Merry looked amazed.

"Well, I can't help it," he said. "I know I haven't said a word, and that's all I know about it."

"I hope that's so," said Kildare doubtfully. "I don't want to doubt your word, Merry, but if the story is out, it can only have got out through your talking about it."

And he turned away.

Tom Merry looked worried as he went into the dining-room. Some of the Shell fellows were looking excited, and there were whisperings going on up and down the table. Gore leaned over towards Tom Merry as he sat down.

"Have you heard about Langton?" he asked.

"What about Langton?"

"Of course Tom Merry's heard," said Crooke of the Shell. "Why, it came from Tom Merry in the first place."

Tom Merry looked fiercely at the speaker.

"What do you mean?" he asked hotly. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Mr. Linton looked sharply along the table.

"Silence there!" he exclaimed. And the talk died away.

But there was a good deal more whispering before dinner was over. When the fellows left the dining-room, the discussion broke out in louder tones. Other fellows, besides those in the Shell, appeared to know all about the latest topic of interest—and that topic was Langton and his proceedings.

"Wats!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was saying emphatically to a group of Fourth Formers, as Tom Merry came out. "I don't believe a word of it."

"It's true enough," said Mellish.

"How do you know, you wottah?"

"It's all over the House," said Mellish. "I don't know how it got started—I've heard that somebody was in Kildare's study, and heard him talking about it to Langton."

Tom Merry strode towards the group. "What's that?" he asked sharply.

Mellish looked round at him. "We're talking about Langton," he said. "You ought to know more about it than anybody else, Tom Merry."

Tom Merry clenched his hands. "I? And why?"

"Wasn't it you who was in Kildare's study last evening?"

"I was there certainly."

"Didn't you hear Kildare and Langton talking it over?"

"Talking what over?"

"About Langton going to a moneylender."

"Wats!" said D'Arcy. "If Tom Mewwy had heard anythin' of the sort he certainly would not wepeat it."

"Thank you, Gussy!" said Tom Merry. "You're quite right. If I had heard anything, I certainly shouldn't repeat it. If any story has got started in the House it doesn't come from me."

"That's all very well," said Crooke. "But whom does it come from, then?"

"How should I know?"

"It came from somebody," said Crooke, "that's jolly certain. I don't say there's any truth in it; I don't know anything against Langton. But somebody has started a yarn that he's in the hands of a moneylender in Wayland."

"Old Simons, the moneylender," said Bishop of the Fourth.

"Well, I haven't heard the name, but I suppose it would be Simons."

"The way I heard it was that Langton was trying to borrow twenty pounds from Kildare to settle with him," said Kangaroo of the Shell. "It's only a rotten yarn."

"I don't know," said Macdonald. "It's an open secret that Langton was mixed up in some very queer business not so very long ago."

"Faith, and there's no reason for believing a yarn against him now," said Reilly of the Fourth. "A chap who'd listen and repeat a yarn would make one up. I wouldn't trust the word of an eavesdropper."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Hear, hear!" said Blake. "If I were Langton I'd find out the chap who started this and give him an awful walloping."

"Hear, hear!"

"I heard that Tom Merry was in Kildare's study when they were talking it over," said Levison.

Tom Merry turned upon Levison. Every eye was on the captain of the Shell.

"Where did you hear that, Levison?" asked Tom Merry, between his teeth.

"I heard a fellow say so."

"What fellow?"

"I think it was Crooke."

Tom Merry fixed his eyes on Crooke. The cad of the Shell receded a little from him, but there was a very unpleasant look on his face.

"Did you say so, Crooke?" demanded Tom Merry.

"I only said what I'd heard," said Crooke sullenly. "But I didn't say I believed it. I don't know whether you were there or not."

"If you heard it, whom did you hear it from?"

"I heard a fellow say so."

"What fellow?" persisted Tom Merry. "I want to find out the chap who started it."

"Blessed if I remember," said Crooke. "Might have been Mellish."

"Was it you, Mellish?"

"I may have mentioned meeting you in the Sixth Form passage, after you had been a jolly long time in Kildare's study," said Mellish. "I certainly never said you had been there eavesdropping."

"I expect it comes partly from one chap and partly from another," said Crooke. "Hang it all, Tom Merry, if you didn't hear anything in Kildare's study last night, you've only got to say so, I suppose, and we shall take your word."

"Yaas, wathah! Nobody would dream of doubtin' your word, Tom Mewwy," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Rather not!" said Jack Blake.

"Speak up, Tommy, my son!" chimed in Kangaroo. "Just say out plain that you didn't hear anything about Langton in Kildare's study, and that will settle the matter."

Tom Merry stood silent, his face flushed. He could not give the denial, for he had been in Kildare's study, and he had heard the talk about Langton's difficulties. It was impossible to deny what was true. At the same time, he could not state the facts, because he had promised Kildare to say nothing.

It was an awkward position for the Shell fellow, and all the more awkward because the eyes of the crowd of juniors

(Continued on the next page.)

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were upon him, and they were all waiting for his reply. His silence caused the fellows to exchange very peculiar looks.

Monty Lowther touched his chum on the arm.

"Speak up, for goodness' sake, Tom Merry!" he exclaimed. "Can't you see the impression you are giving by keeping mum?"

"I've got nothing to say," said Tom Merry haltingly, his face very red. "I can only say that I haven't said a word about Langton, that's all. I expect the fellows to believe my word about that."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Of course," said Monty Lowther, looking very uneasy, however. "But why can't you say out plain that you never overheard anything in Kildare's study?"

"Yaas, pway be more explicit, deah boy."

"I've nothing more to say," said Tom Merry, flushing. "I've never said a word about Langton, that's all."

"But do you know anything about him?" demanded Mellish.

"Mind your own business."

And Tom Merry strode away.

"M-my hat!" exclaimed Blake, in surprise and dismay.

Mellish sniggered unpleasantly.

"He doesn't deny it," he remarked.

"Hold your tongue, you cad!" exclaimed Monty Lowther.

"Jolly queer bisney!" said Gore of the Shell. "I shouldn't have suspected Tom Merry of listening to fellows jawing, and then starting a scandal."

"Do you mean to say he has?" demanded Monty Lowther, advancing upon George Gore, with his fists clenched and his eyes blazing.

Gore backed away.

"N-no! But it looks—"

"Oh, shut up!"

The group broke up, but there was a great deal of muttering and whispering among the juniors. Tom Merry's peculiar conduct seemed to admit of only one possible explanation—that he had played the spy, and started the gossip, and did not dare to deny it. His own friends did not believe that, but there was every prospect that most of the fellows would.

CHAPTER 6.

Under a Cloud!

TOM MERRY passed a very unpleasant time in the School House that day.

The story of Langton's dealings with the moneylender in Wayland was all over St. Jim's.

Such a story was not likely to lose in the telling, and it was a topic that was full of interest, especially to fellows who did not like Langton.

The story was variously reported. Langton owed Simons ten pounds, fifty pounds, and a hundred pounds. Simons had been to see the Head, and Langton was to be expelled. There were many other variations of the story; but improbable as some of the variations were, the main facts were agreed upon—that Langton was in the clutches of the moneylender, and that someone had heard him say so to Kildare, eavesdropping in the captain's study to find out what Langton's secret was. And that somebody was Tom Merry.

Tom Merry's chums could not believe it. But Manners and Lowther, loyal as they were to their chum, were confounded by the fact of his silence.

Why did he not answer the charge?

His friends, who wanted nothing better than to stand up for him, were

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sorely troubled. Tom Merry was most troubled of all.

But he was in a hopeless position. He could not even mention his pledge to Kildare without admitting that there was a secret to keep, which would have amounted to betraying what he had promised to conceal.

How the secret had got out Tom Merry did not guess. Perhaps Kildare and Langton had spoken on the subject again incautiously, and an eavesdropper had heard them. Perhaps Langton had been seen at Simons' place in Wayland. Whatever the explanation, the secret was certainly out, and the fellows attributed the discovery to Tom Merry.

Kildare and Langton both believed that he had betrayed the secret. They were certain that they had said nothing in the hearing of anyone else, so they could hardly believe that Tom Merry had kept his word.

And the matter did not seem likely to die away. Mellish, Levison, Crooke, and other fellows of the same kidney were delighted with a chance of scoring over Tom Merry at last. And they were not sorry to have a chance of scoring off Langton, too. Langton was very popular as a prefect, but not with Mellish & Co.

When Tom Merry came into the Junior Common-room that night, he was greeted with very peculiar glances.

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He flushed as he noticed it. A gleam of anger came into his eyes.

Kangaroo of the Shell came over to him, and Tom Merry met him with a somewhat grim look. He knew what was coming.

"Look here, Tom, it's time for you to speak out!" Harry Noble exclaimed abruptly. "You know what the fellows are saying about you, don't you?"

"Yes," said Tom Merry.

"We don't believe it, of course," said Kangaroo. "We know you wouldn't play the rotten listener. But why can't you set the fellows' doubts at rest? You've only got to say plainly that you never overheard anything in Kildare's study."

"Yaas, wathah!" chimed in Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Why can't you deny the whole wotten stow, Tom Mewwy, and have done with it?"

"Oh, rats!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

Tom Merry turned a flushed face towards the crowd of juniors who were looking curiously at him.

"I've got nothing to say!" he exclaimed. "I told you before that I don't know how this story got started about Langton, and I never had a hand in it.

Fellows who can't take my word needn't trouble to speak to me again."

"Weally, you know—"

"That amounts to a confession," said Mellish.

Smack!

Tom Merry's open hand came with a ringing concussion upon Mellish's face, and the cad of the Fourth staggered away.

Tom Merry pushed back his cuffs.

"Now, if you want any more, say so!" he exclaimed.

Mellish apparently did not want any more. He backed away, with his hands to his face.

"Keep your fists for a fellow your own size," growled Gore.

Tom Merry turned upon him.

"Well, you're bigger than I am," he said. "Take that, and come on!"

Smack!

Gore gave a yell. He had more courage than Mellish, and he came on. In a moment the two Shell fellows were fighting hammer and tongs, and a crowd of excited juniors gathered round. But George Gore was no match for Tom Merry, big as he was, especially in the temper that the captain of the Shell was now. Gore went sprawling upon the floor, with the red streaming from his nose, and Tom Merry stood over him, panting.

There was a sharp voice at the door, as Kildare of the Sixth came in.

"Merry! Stop that at once! What are you fighting about?"

Tom Merry dropped his hands.

"It was Mellish," said Monty Lowther. "Gore only backed Mellish up. Mellish is making out that Tom Merry is an eavesdropper and a tell-tale, and he wants a jolly good hiding."

Kildare frowned.

"Well, if Mellish said that, Mellish told only the truth," he said.

There was a buzz in the room.

Kildare's word was as the word of an oracle. If the captain of St. Jim's condemned Tom Merry, there was no appeal. Manners and Lowther looked bewildered. Tom Merry uttered a cry:

"Kildare, what did you say?"

"You know it's the truth, Merry," said Kildare grimly. "You know what you've done. And if there is any more fighting, you'll hear from me."

Tom Merry's eyes blazed.

"Then you call me a spy and a tell-tale?" he asked.

"Yes, I do."

"It's a lie!"

The captain of St. Jim's seemed unable to believe his ears.

"What!" he exclaimed.

"It's a lie!" shouted Tom Merry.

Kildare strode towards him.

"You dare to say that to me?" he cried.

"Yes; to you or to anybody else!" said Tom Merry fearlessly. "Nobody is going to slander me without getting a straight answer."

"Chuck it, Tommy!" murmured Lowther, pulling Tom Merry back. "Chuck it! Don't be an ass! You can't slang the head of the Sixth!"

Tom Merry shook himself free from Lowther.

"I'll make the same answer to anybody who says what Kildare says!" he exclaimed.

"Bai Jove!"

Kildare looked at him grimly.

"This isn't a matter I can cane you for, Merry," he said. "You gave me your word of honour, and you broke it."

"I did not!"

Kildare shrugged his shoulders.

"The proof is pretty clear that you did," he said. "But I won't bandy

words with you. Go to your dormitory, and remain there!"

Tom Merry hesitated a moment; but his chums forced him away, and he went to the Shell dormitory. It was near bed-time for the juniors; and a little later all the Shell came up. They found Tom Merry sitting on his bed.

Hardly one of the fellows spoke to him. Kildare's word carried great weight with all of them, and they believed the captain of the school in preference to Tom Merry. Gore and Crooke gave him sneering looks, but did not speak.

Manners and Lowther looked very uncomfortable. The whole affair mystified them, and, in spite of themselves, doubts were creeping into their minds. Tom Merry undressed himself. As he pulled down the bedclothes a card on his pillow caught his eye. It bore one single word in large letters:

"SPY!"

Tom Merry's eyes blazed. He swung towards Crooke, catching up the card in his hand.

"That's your work!" he exclaimed.

"It's the opinion the whole school has of you," said Crooke, with a sneer.

Tom Merry did not speak again. He rushed straight at Crooke. The cad of the Shell put up his hands, but his defence was knocked aside in a second, and Tom Merry's right crashed into his face. Crooke went sprawling back across his bed.

Langton of the Sixth came into the dormitory. His eyes gleamed as he turned upon Tom Merry. He was there to see lights out for the Shell.

"Fighting, Merry!" he said.

"Yes," said Tom Merry. "And I shall fight every time any fellow calls me a spy."

"That's the right name for you."

"Liar!"

"What!" yelled Langton.

"That's the right name for you," said Tom Merry grimly.

Langton rushed towards him. Tom Merry put up his hands, amid a buzz of amazement and consternation. It was evident that the captain of the Shell meant to defend himself, even against a prefect. But Langton paused, with a bitter smile.

"I won't touch you," he said. "I had no right to ask you for that promise last evening. I can't complain, because you've broken it. Go to bed."

"I haven't broken it."

Langton sneered.

"I won't argue that out with you," he said. "Get into bed, or I shall cane you!"

Tom Merry turned in.

Langton put out the lights, and retired. There was a buzz of voices in the Shell dormitory after lights out. But no one spoke to Tom Merry.

CHAPTER 7.

Accused!

THE Sixth Form were in their places in their Form-room on the following morning when Dr. Holmes came in.

The Head crossed to his desk, and gave a sudden start as he caught sight of a paper placed upon it, evidently intended for his eye.

He stood for some moments gazing at the paper, and then picked it up.

He turned towards the Sixth with a clouded brow.

"Langton!" he said quietly.

Langton shivered a little. He knew from the Head's tone that something

was coming. He rose in his place, his lips set.

"Yes, sir."

"Please come here."

Langton crossed over to the Head. Dr. Holmes held out the paper.

"Read that!" he said.

Langton looked at the paper. A sentence was written upon it in a large, backward hand, evidently disguised. It ran:

"How much does Langton owe Simons, the moneylender?"

That was all.

Langton's face went pale as he read it. It was out now, with a vengeance!

It did not matter whether Mellish or Crooke or Tom Merry had written that message and placed it there for the Head to read. The secret was out!

Dr. Holmes scanned the pale, troubled face of the prefect.

"I suppose that is simply a foolish prank of some junior, Langton?" he said, tearing the paper into halves and tossing them under his desk.

Langton was silent.

"I do not believe the charge that is contained in that wretched note, Langton," said the Head gently. "I only ask you in order that you may say that there is nothing in it."

"I can't say so, sir."

"Langton!"

The prefect stood silent and miserable. "Do you mean to say that you owe this man Simons money?" asked the Head, with a sterner ring in his voice.

"No, sir; not now."

"Then you have had dealings with him?"

Langton bowed his head.

"Yes, sir."

"I am astonished, Langton. You are a prefect, and—" The Head paused. "But this is no place to speak of it. Come into my study after lessons."

"Yes, sir," said Langton dully.

He went back to his place.

Kildare gave him an inquiring look.

"He knows!" muttered Langton.

"Someone wrote it on a slip of paper and left it on his desk."

"Oh!" muttered Kildare.

"It's all up!"

Langton relaxed into miserable silence.

He was absent-minded enough during the lessons that morning, but the Head, and Mr. Railton after him, did not appear to notice it. When lessons were over, and the Sixth went out, Langton made his way, with slow and heavy steps, towards the Head's study.

The Shell were just out, and Langton paused as he passed the crowd of Shell fellows in the Form-room passage. He gave Tom Merry a bitter look.

"You have done your worst now, Merry," he said, in a low voice.

Tom Merry started.

"What do you mean, Langton?"

"The Head has been told."

"I did not tell him!" said Tom Merry fiercely.

"No, I think you would stop short of that," said Langton bitterly. "But someone has told him. I think I can guess whom. But it does not matter. It is all up with me now. I hope it will be a satisfaction to you to know that you have ruined me by breaking your word."

Tom Merry was about to make a fierce retort, but the misery in Langton's white, drawn face disarmed him.

"Langton," he said earnestly, "can't you believe me? I swear that I never said a word—not a syllable has passed my lips about what I heard in Kildare's study on Wednesday."

"How did it get out, then?"

(Continued on the next page.)



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THAT REMINDED HIM!

"The house shook," said Brown, describing an earthquake he had experienced abroad. "Cups and saucers flew all over the place—"

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Jones. "That reminds me—I forgot to post my wife's letter!" Half-a-crown has been awarded to F. Batty, 10, Stuart Street, Pontefract, Yorks.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT!

Friend: "I suppose you adopt a special diet when you are writing your stories?"

Author: "Certainly. I eat oatmeal when I am writing a 'cereal' story!" Half-a-crown has been awarded to A. E. Bird, 25, Norbury Cross, Norbury, London, S.W.16.

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Diner: "This is a very small portion of ice."

Waiter (with a week's notice): "What, do you expect to skate on it for sixpence?"

Half-a-crown has been awarded to D. Hendry, Sedgford Lane, King's Lynn.

STORY FOR STORY!

Angler: "When my fishing colleagues tell me their stories, do you know what I do?"

Friend: "You just lie back, I suppose!"

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A SUCCESSFUL LOAFER!

Teacher: "Have you ever heard of anybody making a success loafing at his job?"

Boy: "Yes, sir—a baker!" Half-a-crown has been awarded to R. Coombes, 1, Charter Way, Chase Road, Southgate, London, N.14.

WHAT THE INSTRUMENTS SAID!

Violin: "I'm nothing without my beau."

Trumpet: "My hopes are blasted."

Harp: "Alas! I'm unstrung."

Banjo: "My master is nigger-dy."

Drum: "I admit I'm beaten."

Violoncello: "My position is un-knees-y."

Organ: "I'll be blown before I ever play again."

Hurdy-Gurdy: "One good turn deserves another."

Bones: "Give us a shake of the hand."

Tambourine: "I'm always being knocked about."

Half-a-crown has been awarded to J. Ward, 315, Queen's Drive, Walton, Liverpool 4.

"I don't know; but I never said a word. Don't you believe me?"

"No, I don't."

And Langton passed on. Tom Merry remained standing where he was, very white. Kildare stopped as he passed. Langton had gone to the Head's study, and Kildare, full of concern for his friend, was pale with anger.

As the captain of St. Jim's stood before Tom Merry the juniors gathered round. They could see that it meant trouble. The Shell, the Fourth, and the Third, fellows of both Houses, were nearly all there. Kildare looked over the swarm of juniors in the Fourth Form passage. He could not have wanted a bigger audience.

"I've got a few words to say, you fellows!" said Kildare, in a low, angry voice. "I want to tell you what Tom Merry has done. It isn't a thing I can punish him for, as captain of the school, but I hope there are decent fellows enough at St. Jim's to show him what they think of him for it."

"Kildare—"
"Hold your tongue, Tom Merry!" said the St. Jim's captain fiercely. "The fellows are going to know. They've a right to know the kind of fellow you are; the Shell ought to know whom they've selected as their Form captain."

"Weally. Kildare—"

"Dash it all!" exclaimed Figgins of the Fourth. "There's some mistake, Kildare. It's no good telling us that Tom Merry's done anything rotten."

"Wathah not!"

"We shan't believe it," said Manners.

"No fear!" said Lowther.

"Suppose you let Kildare speak?" suggested Crooke sarcastically.

"I'm going to speak," said Kildare. "The whole school ought to know, so that they can treat Tom Merry as he deserves. On Wednesday evening Langton came to my study, to speak about a private matter; and Tom Merry was there, hidden out of sight in my easy-chair, and he heard what Langton said."

"Oh!"

"He said he had fallen asleep there, while waiting for me—"

"I said what was true!" said Tom Merry.

"Don't interrupt me! I believed what he said then, and I asked him to promise not to repeat what he had heard Langton say to me. He promised, on his honour."

"I kept my word."

"The day after," said Kildare, "the story was all over the school. Langton and I had never spoken on the subject before—we have never spoken on it since. Nobody but Tom Merry knew a word about it. Langton, by no fault of his own, got mixed up with that rotten moneylender in Wayland. You fellows can all take my word for it that in this matter Langton was not to blame. But he knew, and I knew, how it would tell against him if it were made public property, and he asked Tom Merry to keep the secret, and he promised. He gave his word of honour. You all know how he kept it. Nobody but Tom Merry could have told the story—and it was told!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Either he couldn't hold his tongue, or he had some score to pay off against a prefect, I suppose," said Kildare. "Anyway, he broke his word, and that's a pretty clear proof that he was speaking falsely when he said that he was asleep in the chair. I believe now that he was deliberately hiding there and listening. He is a spy and a tell-tale. Spying and telling tales don't come

under the head of things juniors are caned for, and I am not going to punish him. But I hope all the fellows of St. Jim's will show him what they think of his action."

Kildare strode away.

Tom Merry stood almost stunned.

He had never expected this—and from Kildare, the fellow he liked and respected more than any other senior at St. Jim's!

He looked round almost wildly.

Dark glances were cast upon him from every side. Even his own friends drew a little farther away from him. This, then, was the explanation—and they had the word of the captain of St. Jim's for it. They did not need any more proof.

"So that's the story, is it?" said Crooke, with a sneering smile.

"Spy!"

"Tell-tale!"

"Cad!"

"Shut up!" said Monty Lowther fiercely. "Let's hear what Tom Merry's got to say! Tom, old man, speak up! We know it isn't true!"

Tom Merry tried to speak, but it seemed that words would not come. And from the crowd of juniors in the passage came a torrent of hissing.

"Cad!"

"Spy!"

"Shame!"

CHAPTER 8.

Standing by Tom!

TOM MERRY panted for breath. "It's—it's not true!" he gasped.

He gazed almost wildly at the crowd. There was condemnation in almost every face. As several of the fellows said, Kildare's word was good enough for them!

"It's not true," said Tom Merry huskily.

"So Kildare is lying, is he?" said Mellish.

"I didn't say that. It's all a mistake."

"I'd like to know where the mistake comes in," said Levison, with a sneer.

"It's a mistake! I will tell all you fellows what happened now!"

"Why couldn't you tell us before?" demanded Gore jeeringly.

"Hold your tongue, Gore! Give him a chance!" growled Kangaroo.

"I couldn't explain before," said Tom Merry haltingly. "I had promised Kildare to say nothing about hearing what I heard in his study. If I'd explained, it was as good as admitting that I'd heard this about Langton, and—and that would have given Langton away. That's why I said nothing. I couldn't! But now it's all out, I'll explain."

"Better late than never!" sneered Mellish.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Spy!"

"Shut up!" roared Manners, glaring round him. "Give him a chance, you rotters!"

"Yes, give him a chance," said Lefevre of the Fifth. "That's what I say. Go ahead, Merry."

"Kildare told me to go to his study on Wednesday evening," said Tom Merry. "You fellows know I slopped that stuff over him, instead of Figgins, under my study window. He kept me waiting a long time—more than an hour—and I sat in the armchair waiting for him to come in, and fell asleep. They woke me up, talking. I couldn't help hearing what Langton was saying as I woke up. Nobody who knows

me will believe that I was there to hear what they were saying."

"Wathah not, deah boy!"

"Langton was talking about a moneylender. I jumped up at once to let them know I was there. I heard Langton speak only one sentence before I showed myself. I couldn't do more than that."

"Quite wight!" said D'Arcy. "It was a most awkward posish!"

"Rats!" said Mellish.

"Silence!" roared Lowther. "Pile in, Tommy!"

"Kildare believed my explanation, then," said Tom Merry. "He asked me to promise not to say a word outside the study about what I had heard. I promised, and I kept my word."

"The story got out, all the same!" sneered Gore.

"I know it did; but I don't know how. Did I say a word to you about it, Monty—or you, Manners?"

"Not a word!" said Manners and Lowther together.

"Can any fellow here say that I've said a word to him about Langton?" demanded Tom Merry, looking round at the crowd of faces.

Mellish laughed.

"If you didn't, how did it get out?" he asked.

"Perhaps you were spying, Mellish," said D'Arcy minor of the Third. "It's a little way you've got, you know."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I dare say Tom Merry's friends would like to fix it on somebody else," said Mellish, with a bitter sneer; "but it won't work!"

Tom Merry was recovering his firmness.

"If I told what I'd heard in Kildare's study, I must have told some fellow first," he said. "If the story's spread from me, I must have told somebody. Whom did I tell? Let the chap who heard it from me stand forward and say so."

There was no reply.

"That's a fair challenge," said Jack Blake. "The thing was started by somebody being told. Who was that somebody? Who can say he heard it from Tom Merry?"

Silence!

"Nobody can say so!" said Tom Merry. "The story was started from somebody else—somebody who knew what Langton said to Kildare."

"That's too thin!" said Mellish. "Kildare himself says that nobody else could possibly have known."

"Perhaps Tom Merry will suggest that there was another chap hidden in Kildare's study all the time, listening, too?" sneered Gore.

"Do you suggest that, Tom Merry?"

"I don't suggest anything. I only say that I wasn't spying in Kildare's study, as he thinks, and I never repeated a word outside his study of what I heard," said the captain of the Shell.

"Too thin!"

"Won't wash!"

"Nobody else knew!"

"Kildare's word's good enough for us!"

"He ought to be sent to Coventry!" grinned Levison. "He was fast enough to propose that I should be sent to Coventry for a jape once."

"You mean, for a wotten, dirty swindle, Levison!" said D'Arcy.

"Send him to Coventry!" howled Mellish.

Tom Merry's eyes blazed.

"The fellows can send me to Coventry if they like!" he exclaimed. "I'd rather

be sent to Coventry by the fellows who can't take my word. I've told the whole truth."

"Rats!"
 "Yah!"
 "And I think my chums will stand by me," said Tom Merry. "I know I'll never speak again to a fellow who doubts my word."

"There's a lot of us you won't speak to, then," said Levison sneeringly. "Pretty nearly the whole school, I think!"

"Yes, rather!"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"

"And that isn't all," said Tom Merry, with gleaming eyes. "I'm going to find out who it was that started this story. I'm going to show up the rotten spy who found it out and told it round the House. There's a spy in the school, that's jolly certain, and I'm going to have him out in the daylight if I can!"

"Rats!"
 "Who's going to stand by me?" asked Tom Merry.

Manners and Lowther stepped to his side at once. Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy followed them, and then Figgins & Co. of the New House, and Redfern and Kangaroo joined them, and then Reilly. It was evident that Tom Merry was not without friends, after all.

"Oh, those fellows always stick together!" said Croke, biting his lip. "I don't believe they take his word any more than we do."

"You uttah wottah—"
 Clifton Dane and Bernard Glyn of the Shell, and Brooke of the Fourth

joined the group round Tom Merry, and two or three more fellows followed. It looked as if there would be as many for the captain of the Shell as there were against him.

But with the fellows who were on less intimate terms with Tom Merry, Kildare's words outweighed everything else. Kildare believed that Tom Merry had acted dishonourably, and he had given his reasons for his belief. That was enough for the majority of the fellows, even those who were not Tom Merry's enemies.

Many of the fellows passed him with scornful looks. The crowd surged out into the quadrangle, and Tom Merry was left alone with the faithful few who were sticking to him.

"It's all wight, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, tapping Tom Merry on the shoulder in a fatherly way. "We'll see you through, old son. Wely on us to see you wighted."

"Hear, hear!" said Blake.
 "Never mind those silly asses!" said Monty Lowther. "We're sticking to you, Tommy, my son, and we're going to have the truth out."

"We are," said Wally of the Third, who had joined the group round Tom Merry with Joe Frayne and two or three other fags. "We is! Buck up, old man!"

"Yes, buck up," said Figgins cheerily. "We'll see you through."

"Thank you, you fellows," said Tom Merry gratefully. "I knew you fellows wouldn't desert me, at least."

"Wathah not!"
 "And those silly asses will come round

when the truth gets out," said Monty Lowther. "That's what we've got to do now—show up the real spy, whoever it was."

"Yaas, wathah!"
 Tom Merry nodded. That was certainly the first task before him, but it did not appear to be an easy one.

CHAPTER 9.
Langton's Disgrace!

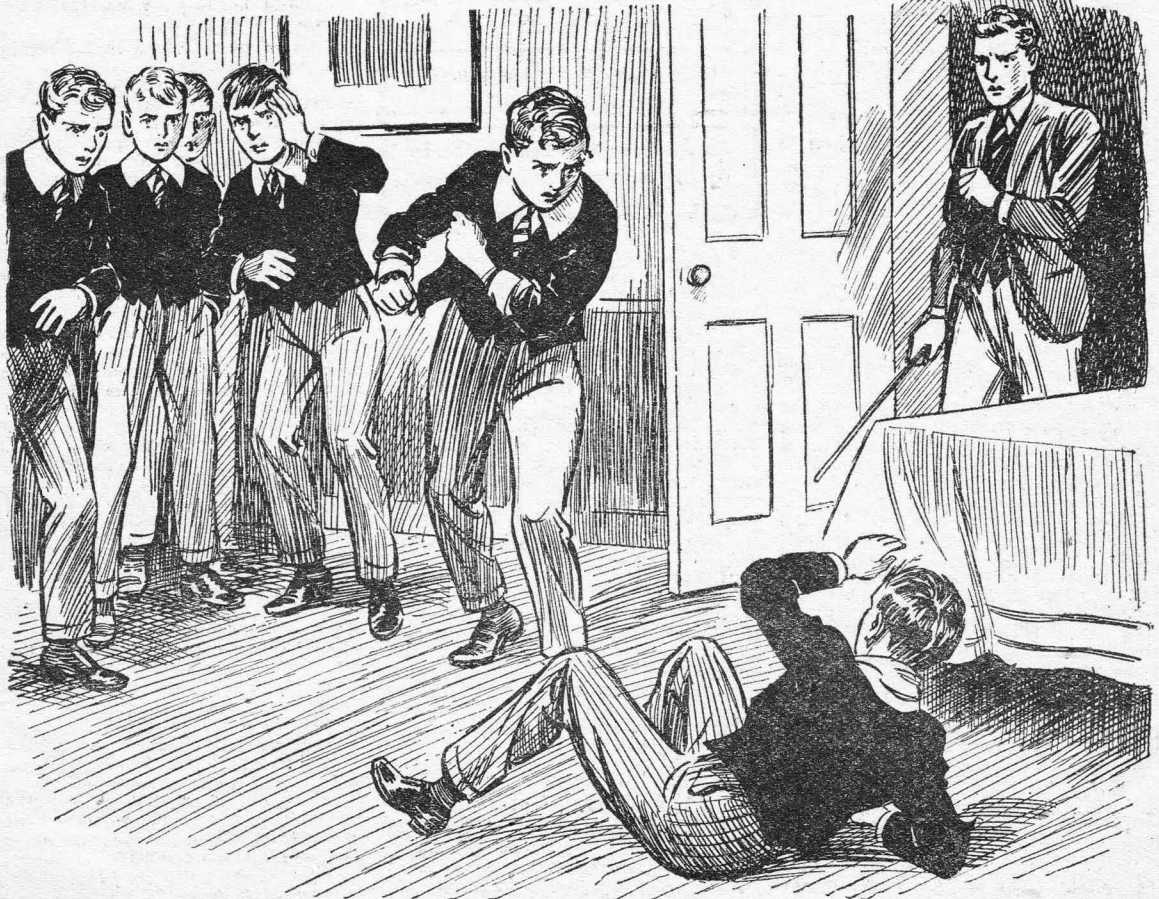
LANGTON entered the Head's study with downcast eyes. Dr. Holmes fixed his eyes upon the prefect.

There was a sombre shade upon the Head's brow. The discovery he had made that morning in the Sixth Form Room had been a shock to him. He had forgiven Langton for his reckless escapades once. But it had been upon the solemn promise of the Sixth Former that he would turn his back upon the past.

Langton could not meet the accusing glance of the Head. He stood before him, silent, his gaze upon the carpet. The Head broke the silence.

"Well, Langton," he said, "what have you got to say? It appears to be common knowledge in the school that you have been dealing with money-lenders."

"I—I couldn't help it, sir."
 "You remember the last time I called you before me in this study," said the Head quietly. "You remember the promise you made me, Langton. You had been guilty of reckless conduct, and



George Gore was no match for Tom Merry, and he was soon sprawling on the floor, with red streaming from his nose. There was a sharp voice at the door as Kildare of the Sixth suddenly entered. "Merry, stop that at once! What are you fighting about?"

I forgave you. Is it possible, Langton, that you have forgotten your promise and plunged into those reckless associations again?"

"No, sir, no."

"Then what does this mean?"

Langton cleared his throat. He did not expect the Head to forgive him. He hardly expected to be believed. But he had to explain.

"I—I needed the money, sir."

"I suppose you did. But you know very well that you should not have gone to a moneylender, especially a man who bears such a reputation as this man Simons."

"I—I know that, sir; but—but there was no other way."

"What did you need the money for?" demanded the Head sternly.

"To pay my debts. I—I wasn't clear at the time I told you about the matter, sir," faltered Langton. "I—I was ashamed to tell you how much money I owed. And—and I was pressed for it, and I was afraid that it would come up before you again, and I couldn't stand that. I—I borrowed the money of Simons to settle."

"Is that all?"

"Only—only he piled on the interest, and there was a trick in the paper I signed, and I found I owed him more than I could clear," said Langton. "It was out of the frying-pan into the fire. Then I asked Kildare to lend me some to get clear."

"And he did?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you have no connection with this man Simons now?" asked the Head, his brow relaxing a little.

"No, sir."

"He has no claim upon you?"

"None, sir."

"And you declare to me that you are paying this loan from him simply to clear off an old debt, contracted before the time you made your confession to me?"

"On my honour, sir."

The Head was silent.

"I—I hope you'll believe me, sir," faltered Langton. "Kildare does. He will speak in my favour, if you care to ask him."

"That makes a difference," said the Head. "I do not like to doubt your assurance, Langton, but you know very well what a serious matter it is to get mixed up with this kind of thing, whatever the reason or the temptation. It would have been better for you to ask me for assistance, or to confide in your father, than to have recourse to a moneylender."

"I know it, sir—now. But I was ashamed. And—"

"I can understand that, too. But the fact remains that you have had dealings with this disreputable man, and I have simply your bare word that it was for the purpose of settling an old debt. In ordinary circumstances, I should take your word without question, but the circumstances have not been such that I can trust you implicitly. You must be aware of that yourself."

"I am aware of it, sir."

"You, from your position as a prefect, are supposed to set an example to the juniors. Instead of that, you have acted in a way that has caused nothing short of a scandal in the school," said the Head. "Even if I exonerate you, so far as to admit that you have acted only foolishly, that fact remains. It is clear that the matter is the talk of the school."

"I am afraid so, sir."

"That gives the matter a different aspect. If your connection with this

moneylender was so slight, and came to an end, how is it that everybody at St. Jim's seems to know all about it?"

Langton gritted his teeth.

"It was the work of a spy in the school, sir—a junior who listened to what I was saying to Kildare the other evening, and then spread it over the school."

"You were very reckless to speak in the hearing of a junior," said the Head.

"I did not know he was there; he was hidden in Kildare's study, listening."

"Indeed! What junior was it?"

"Merry of the Shell."

The Head started.

"Merry!" he exclaimed. "I cannot believe this, Langton."

The prefect flushed crimson.

"It is true, sir."

Dr. Holmes shook his head.

"I cannot credit such an accusation against Merry. I know the boy's character so well. You are doing him an injustice, Langton."

"Kildare will tell you the same."

"Then Kildare is mistaken, too," said the Head sharply. "What proof have you to offer of such an accusation

Kildare, with a look of concern at his friend's white and strained face.

Langton smiled bitterly.

"I'm not a prefect any longer," he said.

"Is that all?"

"Yes, that's all."

"Well, you've got off lightly," said Kildare, with a breath of relief. "There was no telling how the Head would take it. It's bad enough, I know, but it might have been a jolly lot worse, Langton."

"I suppose it might. But it's bad enough—to be sacked from the prefectship, and to be talked about by the whole school."

"Yes, it's rotten."

Kildare did not say that it was all Langton's own fault at the start, as he might have done. It was of no use rubbing it in. He was silent.

"And I owe all this to Tom Merry!" said Langton savagely. "If he had kept his word there would have been none of this rotten trouble. I'm disgraced before the whole school, because he couldn't keep his promise after spying on us."

Kildare nodded.

"I think he will be pretty well punished," he said. "I've told the whole crowd, and they're down on him. I shouldn't wonder if he's sent to Coventry."

"The cad—he deserves it!" said Langton savagely. "And I'll see that he's punished, too!"

CHAPTER 10.

Wally Looks Into the Matter!

TOM MERRY'S usually sunny face was very clouded that afternoon.

Although his own personal friends were rallying round him in the most loyal way, the rest of the fellows were decidedly unpleasant.

It was very seldom that Crooke or Mellish or Levison had any following in their Forms, but they seemed to be taking the lead now. It was the weight of Kildare's condemnation that told against Tom Merry. The captain's word was law, and if he declared that Tom Merry was a spy, and had broken his word, the whole School House was prepared to believe it.

There were whisperings and mutterings in the Shell Form Room that afternoon, directed against the captain of the Form, which Tom Merry pretended not to hear.

After lessons were over the Terrible Three left the Form-room together. Monty Lowther and Manners linked arms with Tom Merry, as an outward and visible sign to the whole school that they were standing by their chum when he was down on his luck.

"Come down to the cricket," said Manners.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"I—I'd rather not," he said, in a strained voice. "I don't want to mix with the fellows just now. It would only lead to unpleasantness."

"Oh, blow the fellows!" said Lowther.

"Yes, blow 'em!" said Manners.

There was a yell along the passage:

"Spy!"

Tom Merry turned crimson.

"You hear that?" he said bitterly. "That's what I'm going to get now, pretty thick. You fellows go out. I'll go into the study for a bit."

"Oh, I don't know that I want to go out!" said Manners. "I've got some films to develop, too. I'll come up to the study."

"So will I," said Lowther. "I'll help you with the giddy films."

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against one of the finest lads in the school?"

"He was in the study, and nobody else could hear us speaking, sir."

"Probably the matter leaked out in some other way. You cannot expect to make these disreputable acquaintances, Langton, without the facts becoming known," said the Head. "When you are older and more experienced you will know that secrets are never kept for long—they always leak out sooner or later. But whether the betrayal was due to Merry or some other person, it does not alter the fact—the whole school apparently knows of your dealings with this man Simons."

"I suppose so."

"I shall accept your assurance that you borrowed the money to clear off an old debt, Langton. I believe that you have not resumed the reckless proceedings you promised should never recur. But you will see for yourself that, in the circumstances, I cannot possibly allow you to remain a prefect."

"I—I suppose not, sir."

"I shall relieve you of your post as prefect," said the Head. "I shall consider in the future whether I can restore it to you. Nothing further need be said upon the matter, Langton. You may go."

"Very well, sir."

Langton left the study.

Avoiding the sight of the other fellows, he made his way to his own room. He was joined there by Kildare.

"What does the Head say?" asked

"Don't let me keep you in," said Tom Merry in distress.

"Oh, rats!"
And the Terrible Three went up to their study in the Shell passage.
"Spy!" yelled a voice after them on the stairs.

It came from Mellish.
The Shell fellows turned round furiously, and Mellish fled downstairs three at a time. Unfortunately for him he met Wally of the Third and Joe Frayne, who were coming up.

The two fags grasped him, and bumped him over on the stairs.

"Ow!" roared Mellish. "Lemme go!"
"Not just yet," said D'Arcy minor coolly. "I think you called out something just now to my respected friend Tommy."

"I 'eard 'im," said Joe Frayne.
"I—I didn't! I mean—let go!" yelled Mellish, in terror lest the fags should detain him until the Terrible Three reached the spot.

Wally glanced up the stairs to the Shell fellows on the landing.

"It's all serene," he called out. "You can leave him to us!"

"Wotto!" chuckled Frayne.
The Terrible Three went on to their study. Wally sat on the chest of the Fourth Former, pinning him down by sheer weight. Mellish struggled violently.

"Lemme go, you cads!" he shouted.

"Not till you've begged pardon for being a cheeky kid," said Wally placidly. "Are you going to say you're sorry?"

"No! Oh!"
"Jump on his head, Frayne."

"Certainly!" grinned Frayne.
"Oh! Keep off! Ow! I'm sorry!" shrieked Mellish.

"Awfully sorry?"
"Ow! Yes!"

"Good!" said Wally. "Always own up when you're in the wrong, you know. Roll him down the stairs, Joe, my son!"

"Wotto!"
And the two fellows rolled Mellish down the stairs, and he reached the bottom in a dusty and dishevelled state.

Wally and his chum chuckled, and continued on their way upstairs. They followed the Terrible Three into Tom Merry's study.

"Cheer up, Tommy, my infant!" said Wally cheerfully. "Not dead yet, you know. We're going to look into this matter."

Tom Merry smiled faintly. He had not very great hopes that Wally's looking into the matter would lead to any surprising results.

"Thank you!" he said.
"The chaps are all silly asses," said Wally. "We're taking this matter up, ain't we, Joe?"

"We is!" grinned Frayne.
"Langston's an ass, and Kildare's an ass, and they're all asses," said Wally.

"When you want real, solid horse-sense, you have to come to the Third—eh?"

"Wotto!" said Frayne. "Me and Wally knows you are all right, Master Tom. We know you wouldn't do anything rotten, whatever they say. We know that, Master Tom."

"Not so much of your Master Tom!" said Wally severely. "You'll make these Shell bouncers swell-headed, kid. Look here, Tom Merry, we're looking into the matter. You didn't repeat what you heard in Kildare's study, did you?"

"No!"
"Then somebody else must have heard those giddy goats jawing, and told the fearful tale," remarked Wally. "Don't

JUST MY FUN

Monty Lowther Calling



Hallo, everybody! To the cobbler, the first thing is the last. What is a C.I.D. man? Copper In Disguise. Come on, now! What is the outstanding runner this season? The scarlet one. Reminds me of the man who thought his scarlet runners weren't trying because they weren't out of breath. "Well," said the proud horseman, "what would you do if you had a fine horse like this?" "Sell it and buy a motor-bike!" replied Wally D'Arcy. "Have 'clocks time on their hands?" asks Herries. It would take me "hours" to "figure" that out. Now, what's the diff between forms and ceremonies? You sit on forms and stand on ceremonies. Why is a caterpillar like a hot roll? It's the grub that makes the butterfly. Herries again. He asks: "Can larks take a joke?" I expect they'd give it the "bird." A waiter writes to say he fears there is no such thing as a "tipical" Scot. "What is the easiest way to lose control of your car?" inquires Gore. Miss an instalment on

cackle, young Frayne. This is a serious matter."

"Orlright, Master Wally."

"I suppose so," said Tom Merry. "Unless Kildare or Langton let it out, somebody else must have heard them."

"Kildare or Langton didn't let it out, you can bet your boots on that," said Wally. "It was somebody played the spy—somebody who was very anxious to put it down to you, too. Was there anybody else in the study when you had that little nap on Wednesday evening?"

"Nobody."

"After you left, did they go on jawing?"

"I dare say they did."

"Then somebody might have heard them; suppose there was somebody with a special gift for investigating a key-hole—Levison or Mellish, for instance."

"I suppose it was something like that," said Tom Merry.

"Well, Kildare has said that they didn't talk of the matter again; so if they were overheard, it must have been on that occasion, Tommy. Therefore, if another fellow played the spy on them, it must have been jolly soon after you left the study—before they left off jawing on the subject."

"Yes."

"When you left Kildare's quarters, then, did you see any other chap hanging about—any chap who'd be likely to listen?"

Tom Merry started.

"By Jove! Yes; Mellish was there!" Wally gave a chuckle of triumph.

"Mellish! He's our bird, then!"

"Wotto!" said Joe Frayne.

"You are sure you saw Mellish on the spot?" asked Wally, in a cross-examining manner, wagging his forefinger at the captain of the Shell.

"Quite sure. He knew I was going to Kildare's study for a kicking, and he was waiting there to see me come out, licked. He was disappointed to find that I hadn't been licked, and I biffed him!"

it. "Let me know when you're going to loop the loop again," said the nervous passenger. "Sorry, I'm not always certain," replied the amateur pilot. Funny thing, bank managers are often "touchy," but you can't "touch" them. Skimpole thought Canning Town was where the tinned salmon came from. Policemen are a cheerful lot. They often whistle at their work. No, Gibson, all-in wrestling is not so called because it goes on until one of the combatants is all-in. The new name for a sore throat is "Piromentalithyrochosis." Cheer up! If you can say it, you haven't got it. How's this: "You ask too many questions," said the old cricketer. "I'd like to know what would have happened if I'd asked as many questions when I was a boy." "Perhaps," suggested the youngster, "you'd have been able to answer some of mine." Our printer has a black eye. He tells me his young son hit his first cricket ball yesterday! An "eye-opener"! Remember, if you chase your hat amid traffic you may get a halo instead. A Wayland firm advertised: "Everything dispatched immediately. We never keep our customers long." Are they dispatched, too? "I'll recommend you to some people I know," said the departing visitor. "But I thought you said you were very uncomfortable?" asked the landlady. "Yes, but I've got a grudge against them!" said the visitor. Gore returned to his camping comrades drenched. "Did the farmer give you a bucket of water, Gore?" asked Frere. "Yes—but he kept the bucket!" answered Gore. Make a splash, boys!

"Aha! Now we're getting to it!" said Wally shrewdly. "He was inquisitive, of course; he knew that Kildare must have had some awfully special reason for letting you off a licking after you had slopped that fearful stuff over his napper. He's an inquisitive beast, and we know he ain't above listening at keyholes; he's been caught at it. Did he know Langton was in the study?"

"Yes; he mentioned that he'd seen him go in," said Tom Merry, recollecting.

"Good! Better and better!" said D'Arcy minor. "Didn't I tell you that we were the proper persons to take up this giddy investigation, Joe?"

"You did, Master Wally," said Frayne gravely.

"Now, that's how I work it out," said Wally, tapping his finger on the study table. "Mellish was curious; he always is. He knew Langton and Kildare were jawing in the study. He wanted to know what awfully special reason Kildare had for letting you off. You hadn't told him, and he sniffed a mystery. So he buzzed along, and listened at the keyhole."

"Ear, 'ear!" said Joe Frayne.

"Then, of course, he saw his chance; one up against you, and one up against Langton, by repeating the yarn up and down the school," said Wally. "What do you think of that, Tom Merry? Haven't I worked it out beautifully?"

"Rippingly!" said Tom Merry.

"There's only one weak point—Mellish would deny having done anything of the sort, and you've got no proof."

"Ye-es, that's so," admitted Wally.

"But it's something to know the facts. We can look for the proofs afterwards. Sexton Blake always gets at the facts first. We're going to find the proofs, ain't we, young Frayne?"

"What-ho!" said Joe Frayne. "Certainly, Master Wally!"

"Now, if Manners had only been

along there with his camera," said Wally regretfully, "a snapshot of Mellish listening at Kildare's keyhole would have been a splendid proof!"

Tom Merry laughed. "Never mind," said D'Arcy minor, more cheerfully. "We've got to find some proof, or to make some up. I'm going to clear this matter up! Come along, young Frayne!"

And the two fags quitted the study, Wally with his brows very much wrinkled in a deep effort of thought.

"Looks to me as if that young beggar is on the track, though," said Monty Lowther thoughtfully. "I shouldn't wonder if he's worked it out all right."

"Very likely. But it can't be proved."

"No; I suppose not."
But that remained to be seen!

CHAPTER 11.

Many Witnesses!

THE chums of Study No. 6 were in that famous apartment, working away at their preparation that evening, when Wally came in, kicking open the door in the free-and-easy manner which he cultivated, in spite of his major.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy fixed a severe glance upon him, which did not seem to abash him in the least.

"Weally, Wally—" said D'Arcy major.

"Don't you begin, Gus!" said Wally appealingly. "I didn't come here for a sermon! I'm here on business!"

"Do you see the door?" asked Jack Blake politely.

"Eh—yes."

"Well, shut it after you!"

Wally grinned.

"I'm not going yet!" he said. "I've come here on business, not simply to enjoy your good manners!"

There was a chuckle from the passage, betraying the fact that Joe Frayne was waiting outside for his chum.

"I'm looking into this affair of Tom Merry," Wally explained, in an airy way. "I'm going to make the facts known. A thing of this kind is rather above the weight of the Shell!"

Another chuckle from the passage.

"I want you fellows to help me," said Wally.

"Do you mean to say you've found anything out?" demanded Blake.

"Yes."

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus.

"Vevy good! What have you discovered, deah boy?"

"The giddy culprit!"

The Fourth Formers stared.

"I don't quite catch on," said Blake.

"I don't expect you to," said Wally cheerfully. "They forgot the Fourth Form when brains were handed out! Well, it wasn't Tom Merry who yarned about Langton and his little game; it was another chap who listened at the door!"

"My hat!"

"I've spotted the giddy criminal, but I've got to prove it."

"Yes," said Blake sarcastically; "I dare say there will be a little bit of proof required!"

"I'm going to get the proof," said Wally, "and you fellows have got to help me. I want you as witnesses."

"Witnesses! How?"

"You see, I've got a scheme on to make the culprit confess," Wally explained. "But it's no good his confessing to me. He'd deny it afterwards."

"Yaas; vevy likely."

"But if you fellows, and half a dozen

more, are hanging around, and you hear him—of course, without the rotter seeing you—he can't deny it afterwards, can he?" demanded Wally triumphantly.

Arthur Augustus shook his head.

"Do you mean that you want us to be there without the fellow knowing it, Wally?"

"Just so."

"And listen to him confessing?"

"Exactly!"

"Then I'm afraid it can't be done!" said the swell of St. Jim's. "You would be putting us into the position of listeners, deah boy. Imposs!"

"Oh rats!" said Wally impatiently. "It's not eaves-dropping in this case; it's getting evidence. Detectives do it."

"I wegard it as vevy wotten of them if they do!"

Wally snorted.

"Is it more rotten than leaving Tom Merry to be sniffed at and called names because of something he hasn't done?" he demanded.

"Well, no; that is wotten, too."

"It's the only way to get the facts out," said Wally.

"I don't say that it's a specially ripping kind of scheme; but there's no proof against the villain unless he owns up, and his owning up won't be any good unless it's done in the presence of witnesses. So there you are!"

"Yaas; that puts a watah diffewent complexion on the mattah," assented Arthur Augustus thoughtfully. "Howevah, I don't like the ideah!"

"Well, you can stay here and polish your silk hat!" growled Wally. "I suppose you other fellows will come?"

"Yes," said Blake, "if there's anything in it. I suppose this isn't one of your giddy Third Form japes, is it?"

"No, ass! It's honest Injun!" said Wally. "I tell you I've spotted the criminal, and it's up to us to nail him down. I'm going to interview him, with a dozen fellows within hearing. If he owns up, he's done in; if he doesn't, there's no harm done, and you fellows needn't show yourselves. If any of you can suggest a better way of clearing Tom Merry, I'm willing to follow your lead!"

"I can't for one," said Digby.

"Sure you're not on the wrong track, Wally?" asked Blake doubtfully.

"I know I'm not."

"Who's the fellow you suspect?"

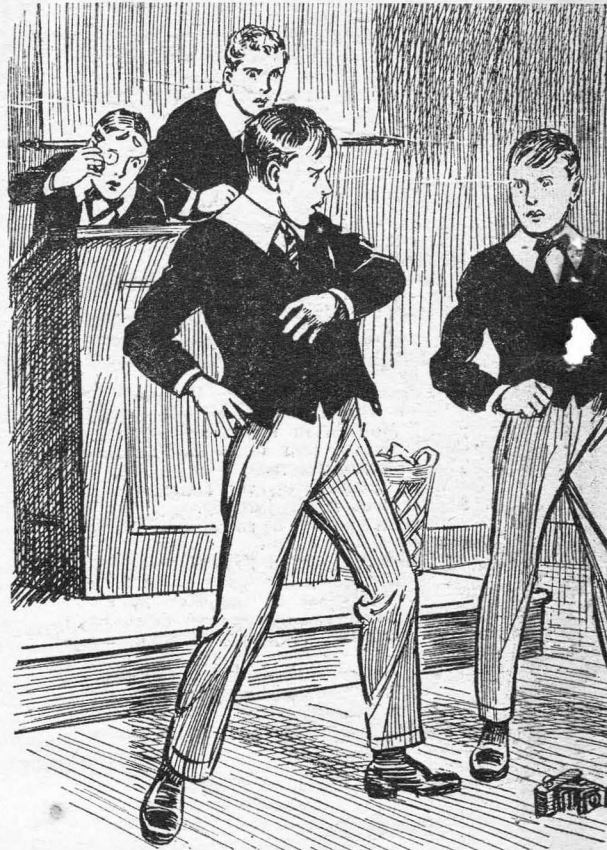
"That's my secret till it comes out," said Wally coolly. "I'm not giving it away. You fellows might jaw and put the rotter on his guard."

"Weally, Wally—"

"No time for talk," said Wally briskly. "I want you all to get into one of the Form-rooms—the Fourth Form Room will do, as there won't be anybody there. Get out of sight—in the cupboard, or behind old Lathom's desk, anything you like—so that the fellow won't see you when he comes in with me."

Blake hesitated.

"Well, I don't mind doing it, if it's a chance of setting Tom Merry right with the fellows," he said.



"Gentlemen," called out Wally, "kindly step into view and corrupt a respectable youth!" Immediately the door of the o Tom Merry and Gussy appeared from behind the Form-

"It's the only chance," growled Wally.

"We'll do it, then. When?"

"Better get down there at once. I'm going round to tell some more of the fellows, so they'll join you there. If I keep you waiting a bit it can't be helped. You'll know when I'm coming; I'll whistle in the passage."

"Good!"

And Wally, looking very important indeed, retired.

The chums of Study No. 6 looked at one another and grinned.

"Think there's anything in it?" asked Herries.

Jack Blake nodded.

"I shouldn't wonder," he said.

"Wally is a deep young beggar. But if he gets the rotter to own up in the presence of witnesses, I shall be pleased—and surprised. Still, we'll give him the chance. I'd do more than that to help get Tom Merry set right with the House."

"Yaas, watah!"

The four chums left the study and made their way to the Fourth Form Room on the ground floor. As they entered it, they found Kangaroo and Reilly there. Kangaroo greeted them with a grin.

"Hallo—more giddy witnesses?" he asked.

"Yes; did Wally send you here?"

"Yes; he's got some scheme for clearing Tom Merry, he says, and he's asked us to help," said Kangaroo. "I don't know whether there's anything in it, but we're giving the cheeky young beggar a show."

"Faith, and it's worth the trouble, if anything comes of it," remarked



and behold our respected friend Mellish trying to bribe and the cupboard was flung open and the juniors rushed out, and form-master's desk. The cad of the Fourth was trapped!

Reilly. "We've got to get out of sight when we're all here."

"How many are coming?" asked Blake.

"Tom Merry, Manners and Lowther yet, I think."

A few minutes later the Terrible Three came in. They were followed by Figgins and Redfern of the New House.

"That's the lot!" said Tom Merry with a nod to the assembled juniors. "I suppose all you fellows know what you're here for?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"If you don't like the bisney, you can clear off," said Tom Merry. "I don't want to drag any chap into it."

"That's all right," said Kangaroo. "Let's give Wally a chance. There may be something in his scheme."

"Yaas, wathah! I don't exactly approve of the ideah, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, "but in the cires, I don't see that there's anything else to be done. But I weally can't say that I wholly like the ideah, you know."

"Oh, rats!" said Monty Lowther cheerfully.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy turned his monocle upon Lowther.

"Did you say wats to me, Lowthah?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then I shall have no wesource but to—"

"Order!" said Blake. "We haven't come here to see a dog-fight. Shut up!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"If Gussy's going to make a row, it won't do Wally's scheme any good,"

remarked Manners. "Better chuck him out."

"I should uttably wese to be chucked out."

"Then be quiet!" said Blake. "Can't you get out of the limelight for once? You're dead in this act!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Time we got into cover," said Monty Lowther. "Some of you squeeze into the cupboard, and some behind the big desk. That will be all right."

"In the cires, Lowthah—"

"No, in the cupboard," said Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You uttah ass! In the cires, I shall let you off—"

"My hat! I'm not a gun," said Lowther in astonishment.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You feahful ass! I mean—"

"Never mind what you mean," said Tom Merry, laughing; "let's get into cover."

Arthur Augustus, after bestowing an indignant glare upon Monty Lowther, stalked away behind the Form-master's desk. It was very dusky in the Form-room, only a glimmer of evening light coming in at the high windows.

Blake, D'Arcy, and Tom Merry found cover behind the high desk, and the other fellows crowded into the wall-cupboard, where easels, blackboards, and other paraphernalia were kept. They drew the door almost shut behind them, leaving it an inch or two ajar for air—and to hear.

"Bai Jove!" murmured D'Arcy. "I don't like this—"

"You've said that before," said Blake. "Can't you put on a new record?"

"I'm not alludin' to the bisney, deah boy. I'm thinkin' of the knees of my twousahs."

"Blow your silly trousers."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Shurruup!"

"I'm afraid I'm makin' my bags dusty. Pewwaps I had bettah get into the cupboard aftah all."

"Hist! Shush!"

From the Form-room passage without came the sound of a tune whistled—very shrilly. It was the musical effort of Wally of the Third.

"Weally, you fellows—"

"Hush!" whispered Tom Merry.

"Yaas, but—"

Blake put his hand firmly over the mouth of his elegant chum, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy relapsed into silence. The Form-room door opened.

CHAPTER 12.

The Wiles of Wally!

"JUST step in here, Mellish."

Mellish of the Fourth hesitated. There was a tone of authority in D'Arcy minor's voice, which made Mellish inclined to box his ears—only it was not a safe proceeding to box the ears of the scamp of the Third.

"Look here, what do you want, young D'Arcy?" he demanded. "You said

that you had something to say to me."

Wally nodded.

"Something important, I said," he replied. "So I have."

"Well, you can say it here, I suppose," growled Mellish.

"Yes, I can—if you want fellows to come along the passage and hear," said Wally cheerfully. "But you'd better step into the Form-room."

"Look here, what have you got to talk to me about?"

"About what happened on Wednesday evening."

Mellish started.

"About Tom Merry in Kildare's study, do you mean?" he asked.

"No; about you outside Kildare's study," said Wally coolly.

Mellish looked at him uneasily. He no longer demurred, but stepped into the Form-room, which was usually deserted at that hour, and seemed deserted now. Wally followed him in and closed the door.

They stood looking at one another in the deepening dusk, and the signs of inward uneasiness were very easily visible in Percy Mellish's face.

"I suppose you know what I'm going to say now?" said Wally. "The question is, whether I give you away or not. That depends."

"Look here," broke out the cad of the Fourth savagely, "don't beat about the bush. What have you got to say?"

"I'll tell you." Wally groped under his jacket, and took out a little pocket camera. "You know what this is, I suppose?"

"Yes; a rotten cheap camera," said Mellish.

"It may be a cheap one, but it takes good photos," said Wally. "I've taken a lot of good snapshots with that camera."

"Blow your camera, and your silly snapshots! I don't care about them. I didn't come here to hear you jaw photography," said Mellish irritably.

"I'm open to sell that camera," said Wally.

"I don't want to buy one."

"With a film in it, too," said Wally.

"Not unused films, either—one of them has been used."

Mellish stared at him blankly.

"I begin to think you're going off your dot," he said, with a glance towards the door. "I suppose I don't want to buy up used films, do I? What's the good of them?"

"To destroy."

"Eh?"

"I thought you might like to destroy the film," explained Wally.

"Oh, you're dotty!" said Mellish impatiently. "If this is a joke, I'm blessed if I see where it comes in. I'm off."

He turned towards the door.

"Right-ho!" said Wally. "If you prefer me to sell the film to Tom Merry, I dare say he will take it off my hands. He would be interested to see the snapshot of the Sixth Form passage, with a fellow about your size kneeling outside Kildare's door, with his ear to the keyhole."

"Wh-what's that?" he gasped.

"Getting deaf?" asked Wally.

"Wh-what did you say?"

"You heard what I said."

"You—you've got a snap of the Sixth Form passage in that camera?" asked Mellish, who seemed to be breathing with difficulty.

"What-ho!"

"Taken when?"

"You can work that out for yourself. Try to remember the exact minute

you were listening at Kildare's door," said Wally calmly.

"I—I wasn't—"

"I can tell you the time, if you like, that you were there. It was just after Tom Merry came out of Kildare's study."

"You—you spying young hound—"
"Well, I like that!" said Wally indignantly.

"You—you're a blackmailing young villain!" hissed Mellish. "You took that photograph to get money out of me!"

"Business is business, you know!" said Wally. "I'm open to sell you this camera."

"With—with the film in?"

"Certainly!"

"Three-and-six!" said Mellish, with a glance at the camera.

"Three-and-six!" exclaimed Wally, in astonishment. "Why, it cost me that!"

"You can get them for that anywhere, that kind," said Mellish, fumbling in his pocket. "I'm willing to give you the price of a new one."

"The price has gone up," said Wally calmly. "The price of that camera, containing my snapshot, is ten shillings."

"What?"

"Getting deaf again?" said Wally calmly. "The price of that camera is ten shillings."

"You extortionate young villain!"

"Ten bob is cheap. I can't afford to take snaps for nothing. You can keep the picture as a souvenir—you can keep it by you all your life, to remind you in your old age how you started in life as a criminal," said Wally.

Mellish snapped his teeth.

"Look here, you young cad!" he hissed. "If this gets out, it means trouble for me; but I shall let all the fellows know about your trying to get money out of me to keep it dark. That's blackmail."

"You ought to like me better for that, old son. It's in your line, you know. Are you going to buy this camera for ten shillings, or are you not?"

"I—I'll give you five."

"Ten bob is the price. A really effective picture of Mellish in his favourite attitude, with his ear at the keyhole—"

"Shut up!" said Mellish anxiously, breathing hard. "Anybody might pass the door and hear you, you young fool!"

"Everybody in the School House will hear me soon, if you don't come to terms," said the fag. "Now then!"

Mellish's eyes glittered. He made a sudden spring towards Wally, and snatched the camera from his hand.

Crash!

The camera descended upon the floor, with all the force of the Fourth Former's arm behind it. There was a smashing sound.

"My only Aunt Jane!" ejaculated Wally.

Mellish regarded him with a sneering grin.

"There, you young cad. Now I'll give you nothing. What's become of your proofs now?" he exclaimed. "You should have taken the three-and-six while you had a chance."

Wally laughed.

"Well, the camera isn't much good," he remarked. "But I'll take ten bob for what is left of it. Also the other film."

Mellish started in dismay.

"The—the other film!" he stammered.

"Custom of mine to take two snaps of any picture I'm very particular about,"

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said Wally cheerfully. "You see, I guessed that you might do something of that sort. There was only one used film in that camera, and it's gone to pot. The other is in my locker in the Third Form Room. Price ten bob, net."

"You—you awful young thief!" gasped Mellish. "Suppose I pay you for the film, how do I know that you haven't got others?"

"You'll have to take my word for that," said Wally coolly. "Still, if you'd prefer to see the finished print hung up on the wall in the Common-room for all the fellows to see—"

"Hold on! I—I haven't ten bob now—I'll give you five now and the rest to-morrow!" panted Mellish.

"Shell out!"

Mellish, with trembling fingers, extracted the shillings from his pocket. Wally switched on the Form-room light.

"Gentlemen," he called out, "kindly step into view, and behold our respected friend Mellish trying to bribe and corrupt a respectable youth!"

Mellish gave a yell of terror. For, at Wally's words, the door of the wall-cupboard was flung open, and the concealed juniors rushed out, and Tom Merry, Blake, and D'Arcy rose into view from behind the Form-master's desk.

They advanced upon the cad of the Fourth with grim looks.

CHAPTER 13.

Brought to Book!

TOM MERRY & CO. surrounded the exposed plotter.

Mellish did not make an effort to escape.

He knew that the game was up, and the chums of the School House were too many for him.

He gazed at the accusing faces round him, and his jaw dropped with fear.

"So it was you!" said Tom Merry grimly.

The coins fell from Mellish's nerveless hand, and rattled upon the Form-room floor. He gasped painfully for breath.

"Bai Jove!"

"It was Mellish, then!" said Blake.

"Listened outside Kildare's door! The awful cad! And then told the story and put it on Tom Merry!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I—I—I—" stammered Mellish. His voice died away. He could not deny what he had admitted in words in the hearing of all the juniors. He realised that he had been caught in a trap, and his brain was reeling with it.

"It's cost me a camera!" said Wally regretfully. "But it was worth it."

"I'll buy you a new camera," said Tom Merry gratefully, "and a jolly good one. You were a deep little beggar, Wally."

"Yaas, wathah! I wegard you as as havin' twacked this awful wascal in a weally clevah way, Wally, deah boy."

"Well, I had to look into the matter," said Wally modestly. "You Shell fellows were hardly up to it, you know."

Tom Merry laughed.

"You can gas as much as you like after this, kid," he said.

"What are we going to do with Mellish?" asked Kangaroo, with a menacing glance at the cad of the Fourth.

"Bump him!"

"Frog-march him!"

"Rag him baldheaded!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Collar him!"

Mellish staggered back against the door.

"I—I say! Hands off!" he gasped. "It was only a—a joke! I was going to own up, all the time, you know. And—and Levison and Crooke knew the facts, too. They—they helped me fix this on Tom Merry, and—and—"

"Beautiful set of rotters!" said Monty Lowther. "We might have suspected something of the sort. Pah!"

"Bump him!"

"Hold on!" said Tom Merry quietly.

"He's got to go to Kildare and Langton and own up before them. Then we can let the cad off. He's not worth soiling our hands on."

"Vewy twue, deah boy."

"Good egg!" exclaimed Blake.

"March him along!"

The juniors closed round Mellish. They took him by the arms and marched him out of the Form-room.

In the midst of the crowd he was marched along to the Sixth Form passage, and up to the door of Kildare's study.

Tom Merry knocked at the door and opened it, and the crowd poured in.

Kildare jumped up in surprise.

"What do you want?" he exclaimed.

There were two other seniors in the study, Langton and Darrell.

They stared at the juniors in surprise, and Langton's brow darkened at the sight of Tom Merry.

Tom Merry met his gaze fearlessly.

"We've got the giddy criminal!" exclaimed Wally.

"What?"

"It's true!" said Blake. "Mellish has owned up that he listened outside your door on Wednesday evening, and heard you and Langton talking. Then he fixed it up with Crooke and Levison to give the story away, and pretend that it came from Tom Merry!"

"My hat!"

"He's owned up," said Figgins. "The awful cad!"

"I—I remember thinking there was somebody at the door!" exclaimed Langton. "You remember, Kildare. But when I opened the door there was nobody there."

Kildare fixed a stern glance upon the trembling cad of the Fourth.

"Is this true, Mellish?" he demanded.

The question was hardly necessary. Mellish's looks were enough. The cad of the Fourth cast a wild glance round him.

"I—I—I—" he stammered.

"He admitted it, and all of us heard him," said Tom Merry.

"I—I only did it for fun," groaned Mellish. "And—and it was really Levison's idea, not mine. And—and Crooke backed me up. I—I only meant to give Tom Merry a bit of a whack, you know, because—because— But I was going to own up."

"You wouldn't have owned up if I hadn't made you," said Wally.

Mellish licked his dry lips. He was shrinking from the eyes of the St. Jim's captain, but there was no escape from him.

"So you listened at my door?" said Kildare.

"I—I—I—"

"Yes or no!" rapped out the captain of St. Jim's.

"Ye-es!"

"You heard Langton telling me about Simons."

"Ye-es."

"And you told the other fellows?"

"I—I let it out."

"With the intention of allowing us and all the fellows to suppose that Tom Merry had broken his word of honour, and betrayed the secret?" said Kildare grimly.

(Continued on page 23.)



Let the Editor be your pal. Write to him to-day, addressing your letters :
The Editor, The GEM, The Amalgamated Press, Ltd., Fleetway House,
Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

HALLO, chums! Seen the announcements on other pages? What do you think of the wonderful news? Ripping FREE GIFTS are on the way, and, believe me, they will delight you all. For three weeks these grand Free Gifts will be presented in the GEM—from to-day fortnight until week ending September 7th. What form the gifts will take I am keeping a secret until next Wednesday, but every boy will want them. Therefore, the only way to make sure of getting all the Free Gifts is to place a standing order for the GEM at your newsagent's. Meanwhile, tell your friends the splendid news, so that they, too, can have a share in them.

Another important item of welcome news concerns our St. Jim's stories. From next week they will be extra-long. I have had many requests from readers for these yarns to be increased in length, and so, with the "Packsaddle Rebellion" series coming to an end in this number, it is now possible to publish the longer stories. We shall all be sorry to lose the popular pals of Packsaddle School, whose thrilling adventures have entertained us for many weeks, but we will not bid them good-bye. We'll just say au revoir for the present, for—who knows?—they may appear in our pages again before long.

The third item of good news is that a super new serial story is starting in the first of our Free Gift numbers. It is written by Mr. E. S. Brooks, and the yarn features the thrilling school adventures of the boys of St. Frank's. Mr. Brooks has put in a special effort to make this the very best story he has ever written, and I have no hesitation in saying that he has succeeded. For Mr. Brooks to beat his previous best was not an easy task, when we think of "The Secret World!" and other stories. But when you read the opening chapters you will see how admirably he has accomplished it.

"RAGGING MR. RATCLIFF!"

Here's the title of the first extra-long St. Jim's yarn, and the story is a wow!—full of fun, frolic, and amusing adventure. Of course, you all know what a nice, pleasant master Mr. Ratcliff is. He simply beams good-humour—I don't think! He is more addicted to frowning than to smiling, and the unfortunate fellows in the New House frequently have to suffer because of his indigestion and irascible temper. In next Wednesday's sparkling yarn "Ratty" is on the warpath with a vengeance, and Figgins, in particular, has a rough passage. But it's a safe bet that Figgins & Co. won't take their unfair persecution lying down. The

chums of the New House hit on a corking wheeze for putting a stopper on Ratty's tyranny, and the resultant rag will keep you in fits of laughter. It's a bright, breezy yarn that you can look forward to with enjoyment.

The final chapters of our short St. Frank's serial appear in next week's number, and in them you will read all about the mystery of the mill and how it is solved. The St. Frank's boys, of course, are in at "the kill," which is exciting even for those hardy juniors.

Readers' prize jokes, and "Just My Fun" complete this grand number, which, as I have said, will tell you what our Free Gifts are to be. Look out for this ripping issue!

MODEL GLIDERS—FREE!

So that you and all your friends will have an opportunity of taking up model gliding, Quaker Oats, Ltd., are repeating their offer made in a previous issue. Turn to page seven, and there you will see the Puffed Wheat and Rice announcement. It contains a coupon for your convenience, to be sent in with two packet-tops for a fine realistic glider, that flies, banks, loops—it is absolutely FREE.

If you want more than one glider, or any of your friends would like to get one, simply write to Quaker Oats, Ltd., 11, Finsbury Square, London, E.C.2, giving your name and address and enclosing two packet-tops from Puffed Wheat or Puffed Rice for each glider required. (You don't need to send a coupon if you mention the name of this paper when writing to Quaker Oats, Ltd.)

SOMETHING NEW IN LESSONS!

Teaching boys how to cook! That's something new in the ways of lessons for schoolboys, and I wonder how the innovation is being received by the boys of Park Street School, Brighton, where it has been adopted.

Fatty Wynn thinks it's a fine idea, and suggests that it might be started at St. Jim's to take the place of Latin. But as Fatty is already a good cook, he wouldn't need any lessons. It is to be regretted that the Fourth Form Falstaff is thinking more of sampling the finished products of the culinary art than taking lessons in the actual cooking!

To return, however, to the experiment being tried at Park Street School, cookery lessons will only be taught to

seniors soon to leave. The knowledge will probably come in useful at some time or other, and it is well to know how to grill a nice juicy steak when one is pushed to do it.

But the senior boys at Park Street School are not having it all their own way. The senior girls are to be taught a thing or two in doing household jobs which usually fall to the lot of father. After all, it is just as important for the fair sex to know how to do a bit of painting without painting themselves as it is for the opposite sex to know how to boil water without burning it!

At a school in Bristol, too, a new idea in lessons has been started which is very popular among the pupils. The girls are being taught how to make their own clothes—not only how to cut out the material and sew it together, but how to actually weave the cloth. And the boys are playing their part, too. They make the looms in which the girls weave their materials.

CHRISTMAS MAILS.

It seems early to start talking about Christmas when there are twenty more weeks to go, but already the first Christmas tidings, parcels, and other supplies are being carried to their destinations, hundreds of miles away. Every year the Nascopie, the Canadian Government steamer, sets off on a voyage into the frozen North, carrying Christmas mails to the far outposts of the Dominion, and once again she is on her way. The Nascopie will cover 10,000 miles in all, unloading supplies at twenty-three ports, from where the goods are conveyed over frozen wastes to lonely stations in the Far North.

THE SPEED-RECORD BREAKERS.

Bonneville Flats, which is a hundred miles from Salt Lake City, Utah, J. Barnes, of Putney—is the place where John Cobb, the famous British racing car ace and his co-drivers recently broke all the existing world's speed records from 50 kilometres to 4,000 kilos, and those from one hour to twenty-four hours. It is a ten-mile track, and the sun-baked salt is an excellent surface for racing cars; but the heat in the daytime and the salt-laden winds at night made the task of John Cobb & Co. very trying. At one time the heat reached 117 degrees in the shade, and it is no wonder that one of the drivers was overcome. But in turn they stuck to the wheel through it all for twenty-four hours, maintaining a speed of nearly 135 m.p.h., in spite of running on a flat tyre for six miles! The car covered 3,235 miles in all. The previous twenty-four-hour record of 127.22 m.p.h. was held by Ab Jenkins, an American driver.

PEN PALS

G. O. Pringle, Owen Street, Umtata, Transkei, Cape Province, South Africa; age 17-21; sports; British Isles, Australia, Canada.

Miss M. E. Barlow, Hope Street, Oudtshoorn, Cape Province, South Africa; girl correspondents; age 19-24; England, France, Spain.

Clifton Merles, 11, Acland Street, Guildford, N.S.W., Australia; stamps; Egypt, Fiji, Jamaica, South Africa, Ireland.

Cyril Forrest, 193b, Macalister Road, Penang, Straits Settlements; stamps, wireless.

THE EDITOR.

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PEN PALS COUPON

10-8-35

VICTORY FOR THE REBELS OF PACKSADDLE SCHOOL!

BILL RIDES HERD!



"If that shebang ain't in proper order by sundown," said Bill, "I'll sure quit you a few!" "Aw, can it, Bill!" exclaimed Slick. "You ain't come back to handle the quilt on this bunch, and—whoop! Yaroop!" Whack, whack, whack! Slick roared as Bill got busy with the quilt.

Tit For Tat!

"**S**AY, you young gecks!" snorted Job Wash.

"Can it, Job!"

"I'm telling you—"

"Pack it up, old-timer."

"I'm telling you," roared Job, "that I'm honing for some eats!"

There was a chuckle from the Packsaddle bunch.

The bunch were all in the school-room. Dinner was going on. The bunch sat around on desks and pinewood benches, eating canned beef, washed down by cold water from the cistern.

"Eats" were running rather short at the cow town school. Short for the bunch, they were shorter still for Job. Job was not getting any!

Job was the fattest guy in Santanta County, Texas. He was accustomed to parking eats on a large scale. Job ran the biggest store in the town of Packsaddle, and he was the best customer at his own store in the eats department. If Job had ever missed a meal, it was so long ago that he had forgotten it—till he became a prisoner of the rebels of Packsaddle School. Now he was missing one meal after another—and he was getting frantic.

In the days when Bill Sampson, the six-gun schoolmaster, rode herd at Packsaddle, the bunch had fed in the chuckhouse, and there was plenty of provender. Bill would have stared if he could have seen the bunch now.

But Bill was far away, punching cows on the Kicking Mule ranges. The schoolboys were barricaded in the schoolhouse, holding the fort till Bill came back. It rested with Job Wash, chairman of the Packsaddle school committee, whether Bill came back or not.

Job was an obstinate hombre. He was no quitter! But even on the obstinate Job it was dawning that he might have to quit.

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Outside in the sunny playground were Hair-Trigger Pete and his gang of roughnecks, whom Job had enlisted at five dollars a day to help him put down the rebellion. But they had not got by with it. Elias Scadder, his brand-new headmaster, was over the way in Small Brown's cabin—all ready to take control if Job could work the raffle! And the rebels had captured Job; they had got him a prisoner in the schoolhouse—and now they ate canned beef and chuckled, while Job raved with wrath.

"You ornery young ginks!" yelled Job, brandishing fat fists at the grinning bunch. "You figure you're going to starve a guy?"

"You said it, Job!" grinned Slick Poindexter.

"You figured you was going to starve

By FRANK RICHARDS

us out, Job!" chuckled Mick Kavanagh. "Now you got it coming to you."

Dick Carr laughed.

"Sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, Mr. Wash!" he remarked. "You started this trouble. You jawed the school committee into dismissing Mr. Sampson. You got a gang of roughnecks to handle us, and they can't do anything—"

"Not a thing!" chuckled Pie Sanders.

"Then you settled down to starve us out!" said Dick Carr. "We got in on a lot of grub, and your crowd were too watchful to let us get in another lot. So we got you!"

"By the short hairs, Job!" said Slick.

"And now we're playing your own game on you!" said Dick cheerfully. "You can chuck in your hand as soon as you like."

"You pesky young piecan, I'll tell a man I'm hungry!" roared Job.

"You're going to stay hungry, old-timer!" grinned Slick. "You've got no kick coming, Job! Wasn't you going to starve us into giving in?"

"You was," said Mick, "and now we're giving you the same goods, Job. Chew on that, old-timer! You won't have nothing else to chew on."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Job Wash breathed fury.

No doubt, from the point of view of the rebel bunch, it was fair play to give him what he had aimed to give them. Every other method had failed, and Job had banked on starving out the bunch. Now they were going to starve him out!

"You see," explained Dick Carr, "the food's running short! With your gang on the watch, we can't get in any more. We haven't any to waste on prisoners, Mr. Wash!"

"Not by a jugful!" agreed Pie.

"We're going pretty short now, and there won't be a bite left in a couple of days more!" went on Dick Carr. "We're not giving in, if we have to eat our boots and belts! We want Bill back!"

"And we're going to have Bill back!" said Poindexter. "When you get really hungry, Job, you sing out to them gecks in the playground to hit Kicking Mule and tell Bill he's wanted. You won't get any eats till then."

"Not a chew!" said Mick.

"I guess you'll be so thin when you get back to your store that the guys there won't know you!" chuckled Pie.

"You figure you're keeping me roped in hyer without any eats?" shrieked Job.

"Surest thing you know!" assented Slick.

Job clenched his fat fists. He had eaten nothing for twenty-four hours. The prospect of another forty-eight without a chew was appalling. And even then, if the rebel bunch came down to

—THRILL-PACKED YARN OF WILD WEST ADVENTURE!

eating their boots and belts, what was to happen to Job? Job was desperate.

He made a sudden rush and grabbed a can of beef from the hand of Hunky Tutt.

Instantly the bunch jumped up. Job had no time for a single bite! Dick Carr, Slick, and Mick grasped him and rolled him over.

Hunky clutched away the can. Dick, Slick, and Mick continued to roll fat Job.

They rolled him the length of the school-room. Shortage of foodstuffs had not yet reduced Job's girth. He rolled like a barrel.

Wild yells came from him as he rolled. But he rolled on. From the end of the long school-room, they rolled him back again to the other end.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the bunch. "I guess that lets you out, Job, old-timer!" grinned Slick. And the school-boys returned to their interrupted meal, leaving Job in a gasping heap on the pine planks.

He lay there and gurgled for breath. He almost forgot that he was hungry. His chief need at the moment was wind; and he gasped and gurgled and spluttered for it.

Unheeding the hapless chairman of the school committee, the Packsaddle bunch finished their meal; and the remainder of the provender was safely locked up in Bill's room. Not a morsel was left out to be clutched by the hungry Job.

None of the bunch had had enough. They were still feeling hungry—but the rations were growing thin, and had to be dealt out sparingly. So there was no sympathy for Job, though he was hungrier. Job could get the squarest of square meals as soon as he liked by giving in and recalling Bill Sampson to his old post as headmaster of Packsaddle. So long as Job continued obstinate, Job had to continue hungry! The Packsaddle bunch had got the chairman of the school committee by the short hairs, and it was up to Job to quit!

Enough For Scadder!

"YOU Scadder!" yelled Job Wash. Job was standing at a window in the school-room.

Across the window were nailed big planks, torn from interior walls. Job stared out through the space between two planks into the sunlit playground.

The bunch grinned as they watched him. They were ready to cinch Job and hog-tie him if he made any attempt to shift the planks and get out. But Job had tried that game before, and knew the results. So long as he contented himself with yelling, the bunch did not mind. They were prepared for his followers to make an attempt to rescue him—in fact, they would have welcomed it for a little excitement and liveliness. They had beaten off every attack hitherto, and were confident that they could beat off any more that came along.

Elias Scadder, the new headmaster, was standing at a distance, blinking at the barricaded schoolhouse. He was not looking happy. His new post at Packsaddle School was not turning out as expected.

Elias had stacks of book-knowledge. In that line, Bill Sampson was not in the same street with Elias.

But Bill Sampson had been able to handle the rough and tough school bunch. Elias couldn't.

Elias was prepared to use the cane

to any extent. Indeed, he had used it not wisely, but too well, for he had a vicious temper. But his cane did not enforce respect like Bill's quirt.

Mr. Scadder was beginning to wonder whether it was good enough. He was beginning to doubt whether Packsaddle School would be good for his health, even if Job succeeded in putting him in control. And it seemed very doubtful now whether Job could!

Hair-Trigger Pete and his gang were standing by the chuckhouse in a group, talking together. Mr. Scadder gave them occasional uneasy glances. He was fearfully nervous of that gang of bullwhackers. More and more Elias was doubting whether Texas was a healthy country for him.

He started as Job yelled his name from the school-room window. He approached a little nearer to hear what Job had to say.

But he approached very warily. He did not want to stop a whizzing inkpot or bullybeef can with his long thin visage.

"Mr. Wash—" he squeaked.

"You Scadder! You pesky mugwump!" roared Job. "What you doing leaving me hyer with these pesky young ginks this-a-way! You call yourself a schoolmaster you piefaced prairie-rabbit?"

"My dear sir—" gasped Scadder. "What can I do?"

When the rebels of Packsaddle School turn the tables on Job Wash and give him a taste of his own medicine—starvation—the chairman of the school committee is only too thankful to bring back Headmaster Bill Sampson to "ride herd" again!

Really it was a difficult question to answer. Hair-Trigger Pete and his gang could not handle the bunch—how could Scadder? But Job was not in a reasonable mood. He was never a very reasonable guy at the best of times, and missing eats made him more unreasonable than ever.

"You pesky, slabsided mugwump!" he roared. "Didn't I fire Bill Sampson, and make you headmaster of this caboodle? What's the good of you for a schoolmaster, with the school making whoopee this-a-way? You figure they'd be putting across this jamboree if Bill Sampson was here?"

"But, my dear sir—" gasped Scadder.

"Didn't I fire Bill because I figured that you was a dandy noo headmaster what would run the bunch better'n Bill did?" roared Job. "I'm telling you that if you don't pull up your socks and get going somehow, you'll get fired so quick it will make your head swim."

"But what—"

"Ain't I got to pay them guys five dollars a day to put this thing through?" roared Job. "You herd them this way, and tell them they got to get me out of this, or I ain't paying them a continental red cent."

"I—I—I will try, sir!" gasped Elias.

"But—"

"Pack it up!" hooted Job. "I tell you, I ain't had any cats for twenty-four hours! You get me out of this,

you Scadder, or you're fired—and them geeks is fired too! You get me?"

Elias Scadder turned away, and approached the gang of roughnecks gathered by the chuckhouse. The bunch watched him from the windows with grinning faces.

They could not hear what was said, but they could see signs of excitement in the roughneck gang. Then Hair-Trigger's bawling voice came across the playground.

"Lissen, you'uns!" chuckled Slick.

"I guess you're going to take a hand, Scadder! You figure that we're honing to cinch sockdolagers on the cabeza while you stand rubbering like you was a country Rube at a rodeo? Forget it! We'll sure foller you."

"We sure will!" said Yuma Dave.

The Packsaddle bunch chuckled. Elias Scadder was ready and eager to cane the bunch to any extent once they were brought under control. But he was not eager to take a hand in getting them under control.

"You're schoolmaster, ain't you?" roared Hair-Trigger. "Waal, you get going! We'll come arter you."

It was clear that the bullwhackers were not keen to come to blows with the bunch again. At the same time, no doubt, they realised that it was up to them to earn the dollars Job had promised for their support. But the whole crowd agreed that it was for Scadder to lead.

Elias Scadder's face was a study. He was not sure, by this time, that he wanted the job of riding herd at Packsaddle School. And he was quite sure that the enraged Job would fire him if he did not get him out of the hands of the bunch. Finally he seemed to make up his mind.

"Follow me!" he squeaked. "Watch out!" yelled Slick. "They're coming."

"I guess we'll put paid to the guys!" chuckled Mick.

Job waved a fat hand encouragingly between the planks at the window. But Job was not wanted there now that the attack was coming. Slick and Mick grasped him and spun him away.

Mr. Wash rolled across the school-room, crashed into a desk, and stopped there. He lay gasping.

The bunch packed the windows. Every fellow had a weapon or a missile in his grasp. The door was too strongly barricaded for the enemy to have a chance there. With Scadder in the lead they headed for the largest window, Hair-Trigger and Yuma carrying a heavy log between them to crash on the planks and make an opening.

Whiz! whiz! whiz! flew inkpots, chunks of wood, and bullybeef tins through the apertures at the windows. An inkpot landed on Mr. Scadder's long nose—a beef can on his chin—and a billet of wood on his waistcoat. The long, thin Scadder folded up on the ground, and the roughnecks rushed over to him.

Crash! came the log on the windows. Missiles rained on the assailants, and wild yells woke all the echoes of Packsaddle. But crash it came again, and again, and the planks flew.

Hair-Trigger Pete clambered, Yuma Dave and Tanglefoot clambered with him. The rest of the gang pressed on behind.

But the window was packed with the bunch. Cudgels and quirts rained hefty blows on heads and shoulders.

Dick Carr and Slick Poindexter caught up one of the fallen planks

between them, and charged with it at the window. The end of the plank caught Hair-Trigger under his red-bearded chin.

He gave a gurgling yell, and went spinning back. He landed in the playground with a terrific crash. Hair-Trigger's impression was that his chin had been driven through the back of his head. He rolled on the earth, roaring, amid trampling feet.

"Give them socks!" yelled Dick Carr. "Pile in, you galoots!"

"That's for you, Yuma!"

The roughnecks surged back. Hair-Trigger and Scadder, sprawling on the ground, were hors de combat. The bunch were holding their own—more than holding their own; and setson hats were little protection against crashing blows. Back went the enemy out of reach, panting and gasping.

Hair-Trigger staggered to his feet. But it was not to lead on again. He tottered away, holding his red-bearded chin in both hands, and moaning. And the rest of the gang followed him.

Slick brandished his quirt from the window.

"Come on!" he roared. "You're not licked yet! Say, I'll tell all Texas, you ain't whipped yet, not by long chalks!"

But the Packsaddle roughnecks were evidently of a different opinion. Whipped or not, they had had enough, and they retreated.

"I guess that's their last kick!" chuckled Mick Kavanagh. "Them guys sure ain't honing for trouble with this bunch."

"You said it!" chortled Slick. Job Wash, almost dancing with rage, glared after the retreating roughnecks. He glared at Elias Scadder, who was sitting up in a dazed state, feeling his features with bony hands, as if to ascertain that they were still there.

"You Scadder!" shrieked Job. Elias blinked at him. Elias seemed rather uncertain whether he was on his head or his heels.

"You getting me outer this?" raved Job.

"Urrrghh!" gurgled Scadder. "You get me outer this, you pesky mugwump, or you're fired!" yelled Job.

Elias Scadder staggered to his feet. "You fat old fool!" he yelled back.

"Hay? What you spilling?" gasped Job.

"Fired?" hooted Elias. "Pah! You may get some other schoolmaster to take charge of this menagerie, Mr. Wash! I've had enough of it! I've had more than enough of it, Mr. Wash! I would not stay here for twice the salary you have offered me—got that? I am going, Mr. Wash! Do you hear, you cantankerous old idiot? I'm going—and going now."

And Elias went. Job stared after him blankly. And the Packsaddle bunch roared:

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Roughnecks Quit!

"QUITTING?" asked Slick Poindexter, with a grin.

Job Wash groaned. It was the following morning. The Packsaddle bunch, up with the sun, were breakfasting in the school-room—a frugal breakfast.

Frugal as it was, there was a bite or two all round. But for the unhappy chairman of the Packsaddle school committee there was not a single chew!

A day more, and the bunch would be in the same state as Job—without a bite! Even so, they were not going to give in.

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Somehow, anyhow, they were going to pull through and keep up the tussle till their dismissed headmaster came back. But it seemed likely that it would not come to such a pinch, for Job was now in a state to chew boot-leather. Job was no quitter—he prided himself on it. But if he wanted an excuse for quitting he had one—his new headmaster was gone, fed-up with Packsaddle School, the school committee, and the school bunch. Even if Job gained the upper hand now his troubles were not at an end—he had to send for Bill, or root out another schoolmaster. And schoolmasters did not grow on every bush in Santanta County.

"You ornery young piecan!" groaned Job. "I'll say I'm hungry! But I guess I ain't quitting! Nope!"

"You'll quit!" grinned Mick Kavanagh. "But sure you can take your time, old-timer! You got it coming."

"Surest thing you know!" chuckled Slick.

Job groaned dismally as he watched the bunch eat. He sighed with deep gloom when the few remnants of provender were locked up after the meal.

He knew that rations were getting short. Starving out the bunch was, in fact, a practical proposition. But starving along with them was a dismaying prospect. Certainly the hungriest of the bunch could hold out longer than Job.

But, still clinging to his obstinacy, Job would not quit. He tightened his belt and chewed an empty pipe. No doubt he still had some hope in the gang of roughnecks. They had failed to rescue him, but Job's idea was that they could pull it off if they put all their beef into it. And if anything could make them put beef into it, it would be the prospect of losing the promised reward for their assistance.

So he watched for them to turn out. Hair-Trigger Pete & Co. were not early risers. So far as scrapping went they had had a hard time at the cow town school—and there were few of them who had not captured bumps and bruises and all sorts of painful damages. But in other respects they took things easy.

It was quite a late hour of the morning when they turned out of the bunkhouse and cooked themselves breakfast in the chuckhouse. They were taking things all the easier, now they were no longer under the master's eye.

Having fed, they came out of the chuckhouse into the playground to smoke in the shade of the buildings.

Job watched them from the window with intensifying fury.

If they figured that he was paying them five dollars a day each to sleep and feed and smoke, while he remained a famished prisoner in the hands of the bunch, Job reckoned that they had another guess coming.

He waved and beckoned for quite a long time before Hair-Trigger Pete took the trouble to lounge across to the schoolhouse to chew the rag with him.

Hair-Trigger was not looking good-tempered. There was a bump on his chin bigger than an egg where the plank had crashed, and he had an ache like toothache all over his extensive jaw. And his temper was not improved by the greeting he received from Job Wash.

"Say, you pesky, doggoned, white-livered, sneaking son of a mangy rabbit," hooted Job, "how long you leaving me here? I'm telling you it's

nix on the eats for me, and I sure could chew the tail off'n a Mexican burro! You getting me out of this, you long-legged, whisky-faced clam!"

"Aw, pack it up!" snorted Hair-Trigger. "Ain't we tried and tried agin, and ain't we all got hammered like we was nails in a fence? What you let them cinch you for? I'm telling you, Wash, you want a whole lot for your dollars, and I'll mention that we done enough, and then some, and some over!"

"You getting me out of this?" howled Job.

"Git nothing!" retorted Hair-Trigger. "They got you by the short hairs, and we can't help you none. I'll tell all Texas, Wash, we've had enough of that goldarned bunch!"

Job shook a fat fist at him.

"Then you're fired, same as Scadder!" he roared. "You hit the trail, and hit it quick!"

"I'll say we're ready to hit the trail and willing!" answered Hair-Trigger. "You hand out the dollars—"

"Nix on the dollars!" hooted Job. "You figure I'm paying you to loaf around and look pretty? Forget it!"

Hair-Trigger glared at him. Hair-Trigger & Co. were beginning to doubt whether five dollars a day was worth the damage they were getting at Packsaddle School. The idea of getting the damages, without getting the dollars, got Hair-Trigger's goat.

"Why, you pesky old piecan!" he roared. "You ornery, doggoned old lobo-wolf—"

"Pack it up!" hooted Job. "I guess I've paid you more'n enough for setting around like a bunch of Mexican monkeys a-setting on their tails, and you skeered of a bunch of schoolboys! You get me outer this pronto, or you don't touch a continental red cent more from me, and I'm telling you so!"

"Doggone you!" roared Hair-Trigger. "I'll say—Yaroooop!"

A bullybeef can, whizzing from the window, caught Hair-Trigger Pete on his already-damaged chin.

He roared and retreated.

"You hear me?" shrieked Job after him, as he went. "Not a doggoned dime, not a continental red cent, if you don't get me outer this pronto! You hear me yaup, you pesky, slab-sided scallawag?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the Packsaddle bunch.

"I'll say that outfit won't help you a lot, Job!" grinned Slick Poindexter. "You quitting, old-timer?"

Job snorted. He watched the roughnecks gathered in an excited crowd by the chuckhouse. Job still hoped that his threat of a stoppage of pay would stir them into action. The Packsaddle bunch, more than ready for another scrap, hoped so, too.

But the bunch, as well as Mr. Wash, were disappointed. Hair-Trigger & Co. had had enough in the way of hard knocks. They were prepared to "set around," as Job expressed it, and starve the bunch into surrender—but they were not prepared to attempt once more the impossible task of carrying the barricaded schoolhouse by assault.

There was a loud and angry discussion—and then the whole gang streamed away towards the gate.

Job's fat jaw dropped. "They're going!" exclaimed Dick Carr.

"They're sure vamoosing the ranch!" chuckled Mick Kavanagh.

"Hitting the trail, surest thing you know!" roared Slick Poindexter. "Say,



From one end of the school-room to the other Dick & Co. rolled Job Wash. Shortage of foodstuffs had not yet reduced his girth, and he rolled like a barrel, yelling wildly. "Ha, ha, ha!" roared the bunch.

Job, I guess you come out at the little end of the horn."

Job stared blankly after his retreating army. He waved a fat hand frantically through the barred window.

"Say, you ginks!" he yelled.

Hair-Trigger turned in the gateway to shake a brawny fist at him, his other hand claspng his chin! Then he tramped out into the trail, and disappeared after the rest.

"Search me!" gasped Job.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"They've sure beat it!" chuckled Pie Sanders.

The bunch watched from the windows.

The roughnecks were gone—the playground was deserted. It remained deserted, and at length, sure that the coast was clear, Dick, Slick, and Mick dropped from a window, ran to the gate, and closed and barred it.

Then the whole bunch came out of the schoolhouse, glad to get into the open air again. Once more Packsaddle School was in possession of the rebels.

So was Job!

If Mr. Wash fancied for a hopeful moment that the bunch were going to let him loose he had another guess coming. They marched across to the chuckhouse for dinner, and they took Mr. Wash with them.

Job watched them eat! He feasted his eyes—but he had no other feast! After dinner he was locked in Small Brown's cabin.

There was a small window to that cabin, at which Job's fat and furious face immediately appeared. The bunch, rejoicing in their freedom, were making whoopee in the playground. Job watched them with a dismal and baleful eye. Even upon Job Wash's obstinate mind it was borne in that the time had come to quit."

Bill Takes the Reins!

BILL SAMPSON rode up the school trail with a rugged brow. The six-gun schoolmaster was deeply worried.

Bill, fired from his post at Packsaddle School, had gone back to punching cows on Kicking Mule and tried to forget that he had been a schoolmaster. He had hoped that Elias Scadder would be able to make good. But the more news he received from Packsaddle the more worried he was. The thought of the bunch besieged in the schoolhouse by a gang of the toughest roughnecks in the Frio Valley kept Bill awake at nights in the bunkhouse at Kicking Mule. Many times he had been tempted to ride over to the school to see what was going on. Now at last he was coming to give Packsaddle the once-over. And as he approached the school gate he heard a roar of cheery voices over the ten-foot fence.

"Carry me home to die!" ejaculated Bill.

It did not sound like trouble at the cow town school. It sounded more like a jamboree.

Bill pulled in his bronco at the gate and stared over with surprise in his face under his stetson hat.

The playground was crowded with schoolboys. There was no sign of Hair-Trigger Pete and his gang. Bill, who had thoughtfully packed a gun in case of trouble with Hair-Trigger, realised that it would not be wanted. There had evidently been a change in the state of affairs at Packsaddle. The whole bunch were rejoicing.

Dick Carr was the first to see the bearded face looking over the gate.

He gave a yell:

"Bill!"

"Bill!" roared Slick Poindexter.

"It's sure Bill!" yelled Mick.

They rushed to the gate. Bars were dragged away and the gate swung open. Bill, still amazed, rode in. There was a roar of cheering from the Packsaddle bunch. Evidently they were glad to see Bill again.

"Welcome home, Bill!" shouted Dick Carr.

"Say, this is a sight for sore eyes!" howled Pie Sanders. "You come back to be schoolmaster, Bill?"

"I'll say we're glad to see you, Bill!" shouted Slick. "I guess you've come to stay, old-timer."

Bill shook his head. "Forget it!" he said. "Scadder's your schoolmaster, you young ginks—"

"Scadder nothing!" chuckled Slick. "Old Wash fired Scadder yesterday and he's gone! Nix on Scadder!"

"We're standing for you, Bill!" said Dick Carr. "We're not having any other schoolmaster at Packsaddle!"

"Not so's you'd notice it!" chuckled Slick. "If a noo schoolmaster comes along we'll sure chew him up a few! But I guess Mr. Wash ain't looking for any noo schoolmaster."

"Where's Wash?" demanded Bill.

There was no need for the schoolboys to answer that question. Job Wash, glaring from the window of Small Brown's cabin, spotted Bill and howled to him.

Never had Job been so glad to see any guy as he was to see the six-gun schoolmaster! To Job, as well as to the bunch, Bill Sampson was a sight for sore eyes.

"Say, Bill!" yelled Job.

Bill Sampson stared round in wonder. He did not spot the fat face at the cabin window for the moment.

"Say, where's that pesky guy?" he ejaculated.

"Bill!" roared Job Wash. "This way, you galoot! I guess I want to get out of this! Hump it, you bonehead!"

"Carry me home to die!" exclaimed Bill, in astonishment. He rode across

the playground to Small Brown's cabin and pulled in his bronco, staring at the fat face framed in the little window.

The bunch followed him. Dick, Slick, and Mick exchanged looks. If Bill came back to ride herd, they were prepared to give him the glad hand. But if not, they were going to carry on till he did!

"That you, old Wash?" gasped Bill. "What do you call this game, you pesky old piecan?"

"You git me out of this!" howled Job. "I'll say I'm honing for eats! I'm sure pinning away for eats, Bill!"

"Eats!" gasped Bill.

"Jest eats!" moaned Job. "Say, you won't leave a galoot to it, Bill, jest because you was fired! You make them young guys loose me out."

Bill looked round at the bunch.

"O.K., Bill!" said Slick. "Mr. Wash was sure going to starve us out, and I'll tell a man we was powerful short on the eats. But I guess a stunt like that works both ways and now we've got Job and we're sure starving him out. He ain't going to chew nothing till he quits."

"Search me!" gasped Bill.

Job gave the former headmaster of Packsaddle a beseeching look.

"You'll sure get me out of this, Bill!" he pleaded.

Bill gave him a cold look.

"I ain't got no authority to interfere in this game, Mr. Wash," he answered. "I ain't a schoolmaster—I'm jest a cowpuncher from the Kicking Mule. You got a noo schoolmaster to handle this bunch—"

"I guess he can't handle them!" groaned Job. "I'll say I've fired that guy because he couldn't begin to handle them young gecks!"

Bill grinned.

"Not with all that book-knowledge that you told me about?" he asked. "Waal, I'll say you've bitten off a piece you can't chew, Mr. Wash!" He wheeled his bronco. "So-long, old-timer! I reckoned I'd give the old school the once-over, and I'll say I'm plumb glad to see things going so lively! S'-long!"

"Pull in, you ornery old geck!" yelled

Job Wash in alarm, as Bill started to ride away. "Pull in, you pesky piecan!"

"I guess I got to get back to punching cows, Mr. Wash!"

"You're staying, Bill!" exclaimed Dick Carr.

"You young gink! I ain't your schoolmaster now, and I got to get back to punching cows! S'-long, Job!"

"Pull in!" shrieked Job. "You ain't leaving me like this, Bill!"

"Sure!" answered Bill. "A cowpuncher ain't got no call to horn into a goldarned school, Mr. Wash. You better send for Mr. Scadder—"

"Doggone Scadder!" yelled Job. "I guess I—I was going to send for you, Bill. You can handle this bunch! Say, you figure that you'd like to be schoolmaster ag'in? I guess I'll fix it with the school committee easy—they was all agin firing you, Bill."

"I guess I'm wise to that!" said Bill. "It was your stunt, first and last, you ornery old jay! Now you done it, you want to make the best of it! S'-long!"

"Stop!" yelled Job. "I'm quitting! Don't you get me, you pesky cowpuncher? I'm asking you to come back and ride herd here! I'm asking you to be schoolmaster of Packsaddle ag'in! Pull in, Bill! Say, you ain't going off on your ear jest because a guy's made a mistake! I own up I was a bonehead—I'll tell a man, I was the biggest boob from Boobsville! Ain't that good enough for you, Bill?"

Bill Sampson seemed to be considering it. Job watched him, almost in anguish.

He was not only ready to quit; he was eager to quit. First and foremost Job wanted eats. Second, he wanted to get away from the Packsaddle bunch and keep away! Job had been determined that Bill should not come back. Now he was terrified to think of what would happen if Bill refused to come back.

"Say it's a cinch, Bill!" he pleaded.

"Say yep, old-timer."

Bill made up his mind.

"Yep!" he said.

And Job gasped with relief.

Bill slipped from his bronco. He threw the reins to Dick Carr.

"Put that cayuse in the corral!" he said.

"What-ho!" chuckled Dick.

"You let Mr. Wash out, you Slick."

"Sure!" grinned Slick.

Job was let out of the cabin. He made a bee-line for the chuckhouse. Bill walked across to the schoolhouse. He frowned as he saw the state that it was in.

A lot of work was required before school life at Packsaddle resumed the more or less even tenor of its way.

"I guess," said Bill, "that you'uns are going to be busy—and then some. If that shebang ain't in proper order by sundown, I'll sure quirt you a few, and a few over! Get going!"

"Aw, can it, Bill!" said Slick warmly. "I guess we've stood for you and got you back, and if we hadn't you'd still be punching cows! I guess you ain't come back to handle that quirt on this bunch, Bill, and I'll say—Whooh! Yaroooh! Oh, great gophers! Yaroooh!"

Whack, whack whack!

"Aw, let up, you old geck!" yelled Slick.

Whack, whack!

Slick dodged away from the quirt, roaring.

The bunch looked at one another. They had stood for Bill and they had got him back! Perhaps, after so long and successful a rebellion, they were not quite prepared to toe the line and submit to authority. But they were not dealing with Scadder now—they were dealing with Bill!

"Say, Bill, you pack that up!" said Mick Kavanagh. "I guess—"

Whack, whack!

The quirt rang round Mick's legs. He dodged and yelled.

"Look here, Bill—" gasped Dick Carr.

Whack!

"Yoo-whoop!"

Bill glared round over the bunch. At that moment, the Packsaddle bunch were not quite sure that they were glad that they had got Bill back! But they had got him—and that was that!

"Say," roared Bill, "you young gecks figure that you can give me backchat like I was a slabsided bonehead of Scadder's heft? Forget it! And forget it pronto!"

And the Packsaddle bunch forgot it pronto!

They set to work, under Bill's eyes, getting the schoolhouse into order again. Slick grinned ruefully as he rubbed the places where the quirt had landed.

"I'll say Bill's a man, anyhow—ow!" he remarked.

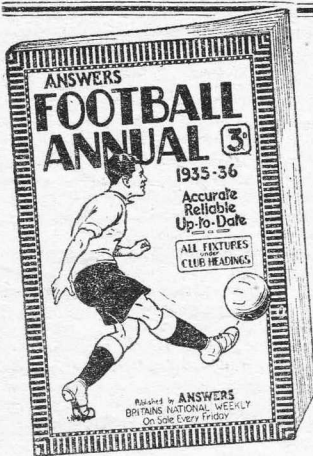
"He's sure a man—wow!" said Mick.

There was no doubt that Bill was a man—and the man the Packsaddle bunch needed to handle them. Job Wash, packed with eats, rolled down to the gate and looked back—to see the whole bunch toiling away like one man under Bill's eye, jumping to orders almost before they were uttered. It was a startling change after what had been going on at Packsaddle, and even Job realised that Bill was the right man in the right place.

It was a tired bunch that turned into the bunkhouse that night. But the school-room was in order, ready for Small Brown to resume teaching in the morning. The rebellion at Packsaddle was over—and there was never likely to be another so long as Bill was riding herd.

THE END.

(Well, that's the end of the Packsaddle rebellion, and we'll say an revoir to the bunch. Don't forget, next week there's an extra-long St. Jim's yarn on the programme.)



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STARTLING THINGS HAPPEN TO THE BOYS OF ST. FRANK'S AT THE—

MYSTERY MILL!



"Look out!" exclaimed Willy. Just in time Nipper dodged back, for next moment a large balk of timber whizzed down from the opening above. By a fraction of an inch it missed Handforth's head and thudded heavily to the floor.

By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS.

Time for Action!

THREE Third Form fags of St. Frank's — Willy Handforth, Chubby Heath, and Juicy Lemon — make the surprising discovery while boating on the Stowe that the fish in a stretch of the river are all dying.

Later, their boat capsizes when a senior craft nearly collides with it, and Juicy Lemon has a narrow escape from drowning. He is ill after his ducking and falls unconscious, but recovers. It is evident to Willy Handforth that the river has been polluted in some way, and he tells Nipper & Co. But they all agree to say nothing about it yet.

While the Third Form are at lessons the same day, Lemon's face and hands turn a vivid yellow! Mr. Suncliffe, the master, orders Willy and Chubby to take Juicy to the school doctor.

"Remarkable!" said Dr. Brett, at last. "In fact, most extraordinary!"

He had given Juicy Lemon a very close inspection, but could make nothing whatever of the case; and Dr. Brett was quite a clever medical man, too. Willy Handforth and Chubby Heath had been sent back to the School House, and Juicy was now alone with the doctor.

"Is—is it serious, sir?" asked the fag timidly.

"Really, Lemon, I cannot tell you," replied Dr. Brett, frowning. "It is certainly serious in the sense that your appearance is utterly grotesque. But I am hoping that you will return to the normal."

"I'm hoping that, too, sir," said Juicy fervently.

"And you cannot tell me how this strange thing first occurred?" asked the doctor. "You cannot give me any clue as to its cause?"

Juicy Lemon felt that he could, but he remembered the compact.

"I just came like it, sir," he replied.

"Wait here, Lemon," said Dr. Brett, rising to his feet. "I shall not be long."

"Yes, sir."

Dr. Brett went out, and if Juicy had had any idea of escaping, this was soon knocked on the head. For Dora Manners, looking very charming in her nurse's attire, came in to look after Juicy during the doctor's absence.

Brett went straight to Nelson Lee, and gave him the details.

"I would like you to come and have a look at the boy, Mr. Lee," concluded the doctor. "You are, I know, an expert on poisons, and I feel sure that this boy is poisoned in some way."

"It is certainly a strange case," said Nelson Lee, with some concern. "But surely, doctor, if the boy had been poisoned, he would show other symptoms, too. You tell me that he is quite normal in every other way?"

"Yes," said the doctor. "That's the infernally funny part of it. His pulse is normal, his heart is beating strongly, and he assures me that he feels no pain."

"Then it cannot be particularly serious," smiled Nelson Lee, with some relief. "Are you quite sure that it isn't a trick? Some of those boys are past-

masters in the art of spoofing, you know. They think it is a great joke to rag a master, or a doctor, and—"

"There's nothing like that about this case," interrupted the doctor, shaking his head. "Young Handforth was up there, and he assured me, on his honour, that none of the boys have been playing tricks. And I know Handforth minor well enough to be able to accept his word."

Five minutes later, Nelson Lee was examining Juicy Lemon very closely. And the famous schoolmaster detective was very astounded. He had hardly expected to find Juicy so vividly yellow.

"The doctor tells me, Lemon, that you feel no pain," said Lee. "Your pulse is normal, and there are no indications of poisoning. At least, not ordinary poisoning. When did this strange effect first become apparent?"

"Just before lessons, sir."

"Why did you not report your condition to your Form-master, or to a prefect?"

"I didn't think anything of it at the time, sir," replied Juicy. "Besides, I thought I would get right. And, instead of that, I got a lot worse. I shouldn't have said anything about it, even then, only all the chaps were staring at me, and Mr. Suncliffe sent me here."

"What have you been eating this morning, Lemon?"

"Nothing, sir—only breakfast."

"You are sure of this? You haven't indulged in any cooking, by any chance?" went on Lee. "You haven't made some concoction—"

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"No, sir—honest!" replied Juicy. "All I've had since last night has been breakfast and a couple of doughnuts from the tuckshop."

"What did you have last night?" put in the doctor.

"Nothing, sir—only the ordinary supper, and perhaps a sardine or two, and some cakes," said Juicy. "I haven't eaten anything yellow, sir. I haven't taken any pills or—anything."

He badly wanted to explain about the river, but he loyally kept mum. Willy Handforth had said he mustn't say anything—until this evening, at all events—and so Juicy obeyed his leader's orders. Of course, one word from him on that subject would lead to an immediate investigation in the river. But as Nelson Lee and Dr. Brett knew nothing whatever of the Stowe's strange condition, they were naturally in a quandary concerning Juicy Lemon.

The fag himself was feeling no pain—indeed, he felt as fit as a fiddle. All the effects of his ducking in the river were gone—except for this yellowness.

"Well, Lemon, we shall have to keep you here in the sanatorium," said Nelson Lee. "I don't think you need get into bed, as you seem to be so fit. But until the cause of your present condition is discovered we shall have to keep you under observation."

"Yes, sir," said Juicy resignedly.

After all, it might not be so bad. He wouldn't be in bed, so he could just laze about, reading and having a good time generally.

At break, Willy and Chubby made a point of seeking out Nipper and Handforth and the other juniors who were "in the know." They reported on this unexpected development.

"Phew!" whistled Nipper. "So Juicy is in the sanny now? Have you heard what happened?"

"Yes. I nipped across and had a word with Dora a couple of minutes ago," replied Willy. "Juicy seems to be as right as rain, and he's having a good time in there. But he's still yellow, and both Dr. Brett and Mr. Lee are flummoxed. They can't understand what's the matter with the chap."

"But didn't you explain about the river, you young idiot?" demanded Handforth.

"Of course I didn't, Ted!" replied Willy. "We're going to investigate the river ourselves, aren't we?"

"By George, yes!"

"If we had explained anything, the river would have been out of bounds in a tick!" went on Willy. "And then we shouldn't have been able to do a thing. My idea is to keep mum about the whole affair until we've had a look round. And then, if we can't find anything, we'll go and report to Mr. Lee. But an hour or two won't make much difference, and I'm as keen as mustard on this investigation."

"I think you're right," said Nipper keenly. "That was jolly brainy of you, Willy. In the cirs, we'll go up the river immediately after lessons—and, if necessary, we'll cut dinner."

And all the others were so eager to probe the mystery that dinner, for once, had become a matter of insignificant importance.

The Investigation!

"LOOK! It's just the same!" said Willy keenly. "Oh, poor beggars! Look at them—floating down on the water, dead!"

They were on the river. Lessons had been over for less than ten minutes, and yet the investigators were already on the bosom of the Stowe.

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There were six of them all told. Handforth & Co. were, naturally, there, and they occupied one boat. Nipper and Willy and Chubby Heath were in the second boat. Archie Glenthorne had been too slow, so he had been left behind.

It was a gloriously sunny day, and it seemed incongruous that there could be any danger in the river. The waters were sparkling, and on every hand there was the green of the spring countryside. There was no hint of anything wrong. Nothing—except the fish on the surface of the water, gasping painfully, and now and again a little body, glinting all colours in the sunshine, would drift past the boats.

On every hand the glory of spring—but in the river, death!

None of these juniors cared a fig about dinner. They were gladly missing the meal. Something had to be done about Juicy Lemon—and it had to be done quickly. For if these juniors could not solve the mystery themselves, they would have to make a report. Juicy's strange condition necessitated this. But they badly wanted to have a look up the river on their own account before telling anybody else.

In these upper reaches of the river all was solitude. The Stowe meandered along between grassy meadows, with patches of woodland on either hand. Now and again there would be a bridge, where some little by-lane crossed the stream. But there was hardly a house or a cottage to be seen. It was a very quiet, peaceful stretch of country.

And after a while the juniors began to feel strangely weak. They were quite fit in the ordinary sense, but they were listless. It became an effort to wield the oars. They felt dull and heavy.

"It must be the river!" said Nipper, after Chubby Heath had commented upon this phenomenon. "There's some rottenly poisonous stuff in it, and perhaps the sun is causing it to evaporate, and we're getting it in the form of gas. That's the only explanation that I can think of."

"Then—then we shall all turn yellow, like Juicy?" asked Chubby Heath, in dismay.

"No, I don't think so," replied Nipper. "We're not getting enough of it for that. Don't forget that Juicy swallowed nearly half the giddy river!"

A hail came from the other boat, which was a little in advance.

"I say, you chaps, things are worse here!" shouted Handforth. "There are lots more dead fish now. Half a mile down the river they're only gasping, but here they're dying!"

"They'll probably recover when they drift lower down the stream, Handy," called Nipper. "That's how I figure it out, anyhow. The pollution isn't so bad farther down, and when the fish get there they recover. And in due course they become normal. Only the weaker ones die."

"In that case, the trouble must be somewhere along here," said Willy keenly, as he eyed the prospect ahead. "But, dash it, where can the poison come from? It's all rot, Nipper!"

"It's certainly very peculiar," agreed Nipper. "If there were a chemical factory near the river, I could understand it. Chemical factories often pollute streams and kill the fish. But there isn't a chemical factory in the whole district."

"In this particular section of the river there's nothing except that old mill," said Willy, nodding towards a picturesque building, some little distance up the stream. "The trouble can't be coming from there, can it?"

This old water-mill was a familiar

landmark up the river. It was a deserted place—a ramshackle building near the water's edge, and at this point, too, there was a deep mill-pool. The old mill itself had not been used for many years. It was, indeed, partly a ruin.

Slowly, the two boats rowed past and went along to the next reach of the river, where the stream widened out into a stretch of wonderfully placid water. Here, above the mill, was the anglers' paradise. But this morning the river was deserted.

"My only hat!" ejaculated Willy suddenly. "Pull up, you chaps! Stop rowing!"

"Why, what's the matter?" asked Nipper.

But he ceased rowing, and Handforth & Co., in the other boat, drew alongside. Everybody copied Willy's example, and stared downwards into the crystal depths.

"Not many fish here," said Church at length.

"Not on the surface," said Willy. "But if you look closely enough you'll see one darting about, every now and again, far down. There's one, look—speeding like the dickens!"

"Well, what about it?" demanded his major.

For a few moments they continued staring. And now and again they could see fish, large and small, darting about in the depths of the water. Nipper's eyes were keen when he looked up.

"You've got it, Willy!" he said crisply.

"What do you mean?" asked Handforth. "What has Willy got?"

"My dear chap, don't you understand?" said Nipper. "The fish up here aren't affected at all! They're darting about with full energy. There's not a single one gasping on the surface."

"That proves that the pollution is only below the mill," said Willy. "And, unless you're absolutely dense, Ted, the inference is obvious."

Handforth started.

"By George!" he ejaculated. "You mean that the pollution—or the poison, or whatever it is—is coming from the mill itself?"

"Exactly!" said his minor.

The Mystery of the Old Mill!

WITH one accord, the investigators turned and stared at the picturesque ruin, only a couple of hundred yards down the stream. It seemed incredible that the poisoning of the river should come from that peaceful-looking spot.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Church breathlessly.

"Well, anyhow, we've located the source of the trouble," said Willy, with satisfaction. "And that's what we came out to do, isn't it? Up here, above the mill, the river is perfectly pure. But down-stream, below the mill, the fish are dying by the dozen. That proves that the poison is flowing into the river from the mill. We'd better investigate."

"Just what I was going to say!" declared Handforth. "Come on! It won't take us long to get to the root of the trouble now!"

"Poor old Juicy! He must be really poisoned, then!" said Chubby Heath, with concern. "Very likely the water is flowing through a cellar or something, and perhaps it's full of some horrible fungus or rotting vegetation. I expect Juicy has caught a fearful disease."

"Don't be a young ass!" said Nipper, with a grin. "We're all agreed that Juicy has been affected by some kind of poison or drug. But it's not a disease. His temperature is normal, his pulse is

all right, and in every ordinary way he's fit. So there's nothing to worry about. At the same time, it'll be a relief to know exactly what has happened to him."

The boats were turned about, and they went swiftly down the stream towards the old water-mill. Pushing through the rushes, they bumped against the river bank, and the investigators landed. Then, in a body, they approached the building.

They were silent as they drew near, and nothing could be heard, except for the rustling of the breeze in the tree-tops, and the twittering of the birds. A more peaceful haven could scarcely have been imagined.

And yet, strangely enough, the juniors felt a sinister influence. Probably it was only the working of their imaginations. They knew what had happened to Juicy Lemon—they knew what was happening to the fish in the stream. They knew, also, that the source of it was here, in this old mill. And so it seemed sinister to them.

There was an old stone bridge just near the mill, carrying a quiet by-lane over it. Nipper glanced towards the lane as they neared the gaping opening in the mill which had once been a doorway.

"Isn't this the lane that leads round into the Bannington main road?" he asked.

"Yes," said Willy, nodding. "It's hardly ever used, though. In the winter-time it's nearly always flooded, and in the summer-time the surface is too flinty for cyclists. Since the mill went out of commission the lane is hardly ever used."

They spoke with hushed voices after they had entered the mill. Everything was so quiet—so still. And everywhere they looked there was nothing but mouldering walls and floors. Every-

thing was old and mildewed, while there was a dank, musty smell in the air.

"Well, there doesn't seem to be much here," said Handforth at length. "I say, what a rotten disappointment! And I was expecting to find all sorts of things."

"We've only examined the ground floor, so far," said Nipper. "Let's go upstairs and have a look round there."

"Yes, we might as well make a thorough job of it while we're at it," said Willy. "Although it's far more likely that we shall find something instructive down in the cellars."

"Well, let's try the cellars first," said Nipper.

"Yes, but where are they?" asked Handforth, looking round. "This old place is nothing but a ruin, and—"

"Listen!" ejaculated Church, suddenly grasping at Handforth's arm.

"Eh? What the—"

"I—I thought I heard something just now!" panted Church. "Listen, you chaps! I heard footsteps!"

"Footsteps?"

"Yes—from somewhere on the upper floors!"

They all stood perfectly still, rather startled by the dramatic nature of Church's statement. They were in the main part of the building, and in one corner there was a big wooden stairway, leading upwards into the mysterious gloom.

And then, as they all stood perfectly still, they heard something. A stealthy footstep—a creak? Or was it merely the imagination? Had that creak been caused by their own presence? Perhaps they had disturbed the old building by their tramping about.

"Did you hear?" whispered Church.

"Yes, but I wouldn't be sure of it," said Nipper softly. "We mustn't get any silly ideas into our heads—"

"There you are!" broke in McClure. "I heard it again, then!"

Creak—creak!
In spite of themselves, the juniors were startled. Something was up there in the gloom!

A Strange Adventure!

NIPPER was the first to make a move.

"Well, we can't leave it like this, you chaps," he said in a low voice. "Who's coming up these old stairs with me?"

"I am!" said all the others in one voice.

"No, we can't all go," said Nipper. "I think you'd better come, Willy, as you are Juicy's chum."

"Rats!" said Handforth. "If you think I'm going to let my minor go—"

"But you're needed down here, old man—in case there's an attack from the enemy!" said Nipper solemnly.

"There's no telling in a place like this. There may be danger."

"Oh, by George!" said Handforth. "Perhaps you're right! Still, if there's anything rummy up there don't forget to yell. And we'll come up as quick as lightning!"

Nipper led the way to the old stairs, and Willy was close behind him. As a matter of fact, Handforth was there, too—for Edward Oswald meant to remain at the bottom of the stairs on guard.

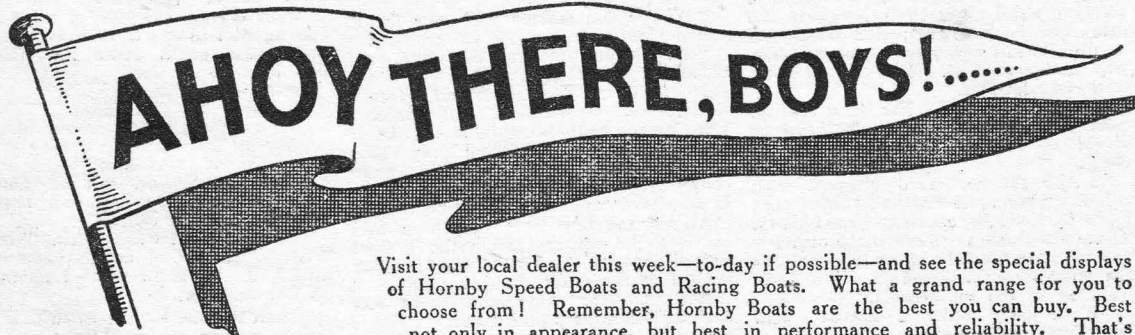
"Chuck it, Willy!" said Nipper, as the fog tried to mount first. "I'm leading the way, if you don't mind."

"Blow you! All right, then!" said Willy.

Nipper started to mount the staircase, and at the exact same moment a gasping yell came from Willy.

"Look out!" he exclaimed.

(Continued on the next page.)



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Nipper instinctively dodged back. Just in time, too, for next moment something came whizzing down from the opening above.

By a fraction of an inch it missed Handforth's head and thudded heavily to the old floor. The juniors leapt aside, staring blankly. There on the floor was a heavy balk of timber.

"Did it hit you, Handy?" asked Nipper quickly.

"No!" gasped Handforth. "But I felt it whistle past my ear! Phew! I might have been brained!"

"One of the narrowest squeaks I've ever seen!" said Church unsteadily. "The murderous hound!"

"Who?" said Handforth, jumping round.

"Why, the chap who threw it, of course," said Church. "That great chunk of wood couldn't have come down by itself! Somebody threw it—deliberately. There's somebody up there—some scoundrel! The rotter who has been poisoning the river! He tried to murder one of us!"

There was a pause, and the juniors glanced at the stairs.

"Well, what are we going to do?" asked Willy. "Is it worth risking? Shall we go up?"

"Better not!" advised McClure. "There's no sense in asking for trouble, you know. I'm not a funk, goodness knows, but this is a horribly dangerous position. One fellow above there could easily kill the lot of us."

Nipper held up a warning hand. "Hey!" he called loudly. "What's the idea up there? What's the game?"

They all held their breath, but no sound came in reply. Nothing but a mysterious creak or two, which might easily have been made by any ordinary natural cause.

"Well, let's go up," said Nipper briskly.

But while he spoke he still held a warning hand up to the others. In the meantime he had grasped a stick, and he pushed this against the rickety stairway and moved it. He was standing well clear himself.

It was a good ruse. For if, in reality, some enemy were lurking overhead he would be fooled. But there was no result.

"I thought so," said Nipper, with relief. "We must have dislodged that piece of wood by accident, you fellows. There's nothing to prove it, of course—and we may possibly be wrong—but it's the most likely assumption. We don't want to be too sensational."

"Well, let's make a move!" said Handforth impatiently.

Again Nipper held up a warning hand.

"No!" he said, with a note of finality in his voice. "We won't risk it. We won't go up these stairs at all!"

But almost before he had finished speaking he made a sudden rush at the old stairs. In less than five seconds he was at the top, and the others had hardly had time to realise the meaning of this new manoeuvre. While they were still gazing, Nipper's voice came down to them.

"O.K.!" he sang out. "There's nobody here, you fellows. You can come up as soon as you like."

They all scrambled up, forgetting that they were supposed to remain below while Nipper and Willy investigated. And when they arrived at the top they found themselves in a kind of loft, with bins surrounding the place, most of them without lids. Everything here, too, was rotting with age and disuse.

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"I'm not so sure about there being nobody here!" said Handforth, as he peered round. "This is a huge place, and there might be half a dozen men hiding, for all we know. Look at those great bins! We'd better be ready for a fight, anyhow."

Handforth was rather disappointed. He had already been imagining all sorts of dramatic possibilities, and they were all tumbling to the ground.

This upper part of the mill was indeed a labyrinth of mystery. Beyond this big open section, with the bins surrounding it, there were places where the building narrowed, and one could peer right through into the other lofts. There were piles of broken timber, there were other great bins, and, here and there, dangerous holes yawned in the floor.

Nipper noticed that the floors were, on the whole, perfectly dry and clear. It wasn't possible to detect any footprints on them. So, even now, nothing definite could be decided. Perhaps there was somebody up here—some strange, mysterious enemy; perhaps there was not. Who could tell?

But, in spite of themselves, the juniors could not believe that the great balk of timber had fallen down accidentally.

The Next Victim!

"WELL, come on!" said Nipper briskly.

"We haven't half looked over the place yet!" protested Handforth.

"I'm not suggesting that we should go down again," said Nipper. "But this is a big place to explore, and we'd better get busy on it."

"Hadh't we better take some of these old pieces of wood?" suggested McClure. "They might be handy, you know, in case there's any trouble."

"What's the matter with our fists?" asked Handforth.

"We haven't all got fists like you, old man!" retorted Mac.

It was an excellent idea, and before a minute had elapsed all the investigators were armed with formidable chunks of wood, which they had found lying about on the floor. They felt much more comfortable with these in their hands. If an attack came they would be ready.

All the old bins were examined, and found to be empty. Then the juniors passed through, and went into another section of the great, rambling loft.

But wherever they went there was nothing but silence and decay.

No sign of life—nothing to indicate that other human beings had recently been here, or were here now. In fact, everything went to disprove this, for on more than one occasion birds went fluttering and scurrying out through gaping holes in the roof.

"I think we're the first here for months!" said Nipper, as he paused. "Those birds wouldn't use the place if any men had recently been here. It's only a deserted ruin."

"Hallo!" said Willy. "There's another staircase here, leading downwards. I expect it goes down into the back part of the mill. Shall we chance it?"

"Yes, rather!" said his major.

"Let's finish exploring up here first," said Nipper. "Although there's little chance of discovering anything, we might as well make a thorough job of it."

And so, for the next ten minutes, the juniors went into every corner—into every gloomy recess. They examined

every hole and crevice. But they were not rewarded.

And so, at length, they gingerly descended those stairs. These hadn't been tested, so it was necessary to go with caution; and when at last they found themselves at the bottom, they were now on a much lower level than before.

This second staircase went down much farther—right down to the water's level, on the river side of the mill. They could hear the current gurgling somewhere, and everything here was of stone. The walls reeked with moisture, and there was a great, rusty iron cog-wheel in view, and an even rustier iron shaft.

"I think we're pretty near to the old water-wheel," said Nipper, as he looked round. "In fact, this must be a kind of basement—almost a cellar."

"There are lots of dark corners and holes, anyhow," said Church, with a shiver.

The temperature down here was very low. Compared with the warmth of the August day outside, this cellar was chilly; and, in spite of themselves, the juniors felt rather creepy. There was certainly something sinister about the old place.

And it was exasperating to take all this trouble and to find nothing. Not a single clue had they obtained.

"I think we'd better start afresh, you know," said Nipper, as the others grouped round him. "We've been rather put off the track by that chunk of wood that fell down."

"How were we put off the track?" demanded Handforth, who always liked to argue.

"Well, my dear man, we came here to discover the reason for the river being polluted," replied Nipper. "And ever since that balk of timber fell we've been looking for mysterious enemies. I think we'd better concentrate now upon another track. Let's see if there is any rotting stuff in any of these cellars—anything that could cause the poisonous flow into the stream."

Willy was sniffing the air. "I say!" he ejaculated. "Do you notice a rummy niff about the place?"

They all started sniffing keenly. "I noticed it at first," said Nipper. "It is a bit peculiar, isn't it? Different from the ordinary dankness that one associates with a cellar."

"That's what I was thinking," nodded Willy. "It sort of catches you in the throat, if you know what I mean. A bit like methane."

"Then it must be due to rotting vegetation, or something like that," said Handforth firmly. "Everybody knows that there's methane in things that have gone rotten."

"Yes, but this is different, as Willy says," remarked Nipper, as he went probing round. "Well, it won't take us long to explore this part of the place. There's only this stone basement, and a passage leading from it. No cellars, or anything like that. If we go down this passage, I expect we shall find ourselves outside somewhere."

"Let's go and see!" said Handforth eagerly.

They went crowding out, and Willy remained behind for a moment, still sniffing the air in a suspicious way. He turned at last and made off after the others, who were now crowding down the narrow, tunnel-like passage.

And then suddenly came a hiss. It was a most peculiar hiss—very much as though some steam had suddenly escaped. Willy spun round, but he could see nothing. The next second, however, he clapped his hands to his face and uttered a wild gasp.

"Oh! I—I— Quick, you fellows! I'm blinded! I—"

He broke off, choking. He reeled back, and collided against the wall.

But the others had been talking so loudly in the confined passage that they had heard nothing of Willy's gasps.

Gulping chokingly, reeling from side to side, Willy followed. He didn't know how he got out of that passage, but he managed it somehow. And just when he got to the end Chubby Heath turned and saw him.

"Hallo!" ejaculated Chubby. "What the dickens— Hi, you chaps! Something's happened to Willy!"

"What!" yelled Nipper, dashing back.

He was just in time to see Willy Handforth stagger into Chubby's arms, and then sink to the floor in a limp, silent heap!

Baffled!

"OH, what's the matter with him?" panted Chubby Heath desperately.

Willy Handforth was lying on the grass, with the sunlight pouring down upon his face, and he was utterly unconscious. In some dramatic fashion he had been struck down—just as Juicy Lemon had been struck!

"Oh crumbs!" said Handforth huskily. "My minor, you know! What's wrong with him? There's isn't a bruise on him, or anything! He hasn't been hit!"

"He's got some of the same poison as Juicy!" said Nipper grimly. "By Jove! What on earth can it mean? We only left him behind for a moment, and I'll swear there wasn't a soul there! What happened to him? It's no good asking him questions, because he can't answer!"

"But how are we going to bring him round?" asked Handforth in dismay.

They had only brought Willy out a moment or two before, and they were now standing round him, breathless. Out there, in the sunshine, everything seemed safe and peaceful. They were all relieved to be outside, in the warm air. But this sudden disaster had startled them all.

"Look here, I'm going to dash back!" said Nipper swiftly. "I want to have a look at that cellar again—while the 'rail is hot. You other fellows had better do all you can for Willy. Put some water over his face, and massage him."

"Hold on! I'm coming with you!" said Handforth.

"But your minor—"
"The others can look after him!" said Handforth. "It can't be anything serious—his heart's beating all right, and he isn't injured. I'm coming with you, Nipper!"

They went back, but all in vain. The cellar reeked more strongly than ever of that strange odour—it caught them in the throats. Indeed, after a while their eyes were watering, and they found it rather difficult to breathe. But there was nothing to account for the strange collapse of Willy.

"We'd better get out of here!" muttered Nipper at length. "By Jove! It will get us next, Handy! I can feel it now—clutching at my throat. Come on!"

They stumbled out and reached the open air again. They found Church and McClure and Chubby gathered round Willy, thumping him, rubbing him, and generally knocking him about.

This treatment, although drastic, had an excellent result. For after about ten minutes Willy opened his eyes, and looked blearily about him.

"Chuck it!" he muttered. "Lea' me alone! Wha's the time? I didn't hear the rising-bell— Eh? Oh crumbs! Where am I?"

He recovered rapidly, and looked about him with growing understanding.

"It's all right, Willy, old son," said Handforth, dropping on to his knees. "You're safe enough. We're out here, at the old water-mill—"

"Yes, I remember now," said Willy, rubbing his eyes. "Yes, I was in that old cellar, wasn't I?"

"That's right," said his major. "Well, what happened?"

"That's what I want to know," said Willy unsteadily. "But I'm jiggered if I can explain it. I heard a sort of hiss, as far as I can remember, and when I turned round something surged into my face—a sort of rotten gas. It caught me in the throat, it blinded me, and it choked me."

"But didn't you see anything?" broke in Chubby.

"Nothing."
"Not even the gas?"

"No," said Willy. "It was an invisible gas—like most other gases. It just hit me in the face, and took me in the throat. I don't know how the dickens I got out of the place!"

There wasn't much satisfaction in this account. For the investigators, even now, could not tell how that deadly stuff had been released.

"Perhaps it's a kind of natural gas," said Nipper thoughtfully. "Perhaps it's released periodically, you know—just like the geysers in New Zealand. And perhaps it condenses, and trickles down into the river in the form of liquid."

"Rot!" frowned Handforth. "There's dirty work afoot! You're not going to

tell me that all this is natural! There must have been someone in that cellar—in a secret recess, or something—and he suddenly loosed off some of that rotten stuff at Willy. Tried to murder him!"

Nipper glanced at his watch.

"Well, it's getting on, you fellows," he said. "We'd better give it up for now, and get Willy back to the school. Even as it is, we shall only arrive in comfortable time for afternoon lessons. If we hurry, we might be able to have a snack at the tuckshop before the bell goes."

They were all ravenously hungry, having gone without their dinners, and this suggestion appealed to them. Somehow, their keenness for exploring the old mill had worn off. All they wanted to do was to get away from it.

And so they made their way round to the mill, found their boats, and pushed off into midstream. As the minutes elapsed Willy declared that he was feeling practically himself again. He had a sensation of sickness, but this was passing.

"I shall be all right," he declared. "But I'm blessed if I can understand what happened. I don't like it, you chaps; I don't like being dished in that way. Unconscious for over a quarter of an hour—eh? Beats me!"

They wasted no time in getting back to the more familiar stretches of the river. As they approached the St. Frank's landing-stage, near the big bathhouses, they became aware of a commotion near the bank. And now they saw a crowd of Fourth Formers there, with Buster Boots and Bob Christine prominent amongst them.

"Hallo! What's the trouble here?" asked Nipper, as his boat glided up against the landing-stage.

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"It's no good asking me!" said Buster Boots, looking round. "Two of our chaps, like fatheads, decided to have a bathe—"

"A bathe!" yelled Willy.

"You needn't be so startled about it," said Buster. "The two chaps were Yorke and Talmadge, and they were all right for a bit, but Yorke suddenly started shouting for help. Said that he felt weak and dizzy. And then Talmadge started on the same stunt."

"My only hat!" said Handforth blankly, as he glanced at the other Removites.

"You fellows seem to know something!" said Boots, looking at them closely.

"Perhaps we do," said Nipper. "But tell us what happened. We're very interested!"

John Busterfield Boots was joined by Bob Christine and Clapson, and one or two of the others.

"Well; nothing happened much," said Boots. "We took a boat out, and hauled the fatheads in. They complained of feeling weak and ill, and they're changing in the dressing-sheds

now. I suppose the water must have been too cold for them."

"I don't believe it," put in Bob Christine. "The water isn't so cold as all that—and, besides, it wouldn't make them feel ill. I've heard other rumours this morning, too. Some of the seniors were complaining. They went on the river, and they came back as groggy as the dickens, and they're something fishy about this!"

(The strange river mystery that is disturbing St. Frank's is cleared up in a sensational manner in next week's chapters. Look out for the final thrills.)

The Sixth-Former's Secret!

(Continued from page 16.)

"It—it was only a lark," groaned Mellish.

"Yes or no?"

"Yes."

Kildare turned to Tom Merry.

"I beg your pardon, Merry," he said. "I'm sorry I doubted you. My excuse is that I couldn't be expected to suspect anybody of being so base as this. Mellish is a bit outside my experience."

"Same here!" said Langton. "I'm sorry, Tom Merry."

Tom Merry's face was very bright now.

"It's all right," he said. "I never broke my word, and I only wanted it to be established that I hadn't. I don't want to hurt that squirming cad. But I think you ought to tell all the fellows, Kildare, and set me right with them."

"I shall, certainly!" said Kildare. "But why has Mellish admitted this? Is there any proof outside his own confession?"

"It was Wally's work, dear boy," said Arthur Augustus.

"I had to look into the matter," explained Wally. "It was up to the Third to see it set right, you know. I worked out that it was Mellish, and I made him own up in the presence of witnesses."

"The young cad was spying himself," said Mellish spitefully. "He took a snap with a camera—"

"A snap of Mellish kneeling outside your door, and listening at the key-hole," said Herries. "Blessed if I know what you wanted to get up that scene in the Form-room for, young D'Arcy.

The film would have been enough, without Mellish confessing?"

Wally grinned.

"Only, you see, there isn't any film," he explained.

"Eh!"

"That was a little bit of spoof," said Wally coolly. "I didn't tell Mellish I had snapped him listening at Kildare's door. As I hadn't done it, I couldn't say so. But I dare say he concluded I had, from what I said to him."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mellish ground his teeth. He realised, a little too late, how completely he had been tricked.

"I was very careful to keep inside the facts," said Wally. "But Mellish certainly got the impression that I had that photograph. He agreed to buy it of me, and that was what I wanted. He owned up to the whole business with these chaps hidden in the room. It was the only way I could think of to make him own up."

"You lying young villain!" shrieked Mellish. "You told me you had two snapshots of the Sixth Form passage, and—"

"So I had. I took them this afternoon, so as to have facts on my side," said Wally coolly. "If you hadn't had a guilty conscience, you'd have spotted the wheeze at once. I had to get you to own up. It was the only way, and now you've owned up."

"Yaas, wathah! I weally don't quite approve—"

"Oh, rats!" said Wally. "It was up to me to clear Tom Merry, and I've done it. And somebody's got to get me a new camera."

"I'm going to do that—a first-class one, too," said Tom Merry.

"You have done vevy well indeed, Wally. But weally—"

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