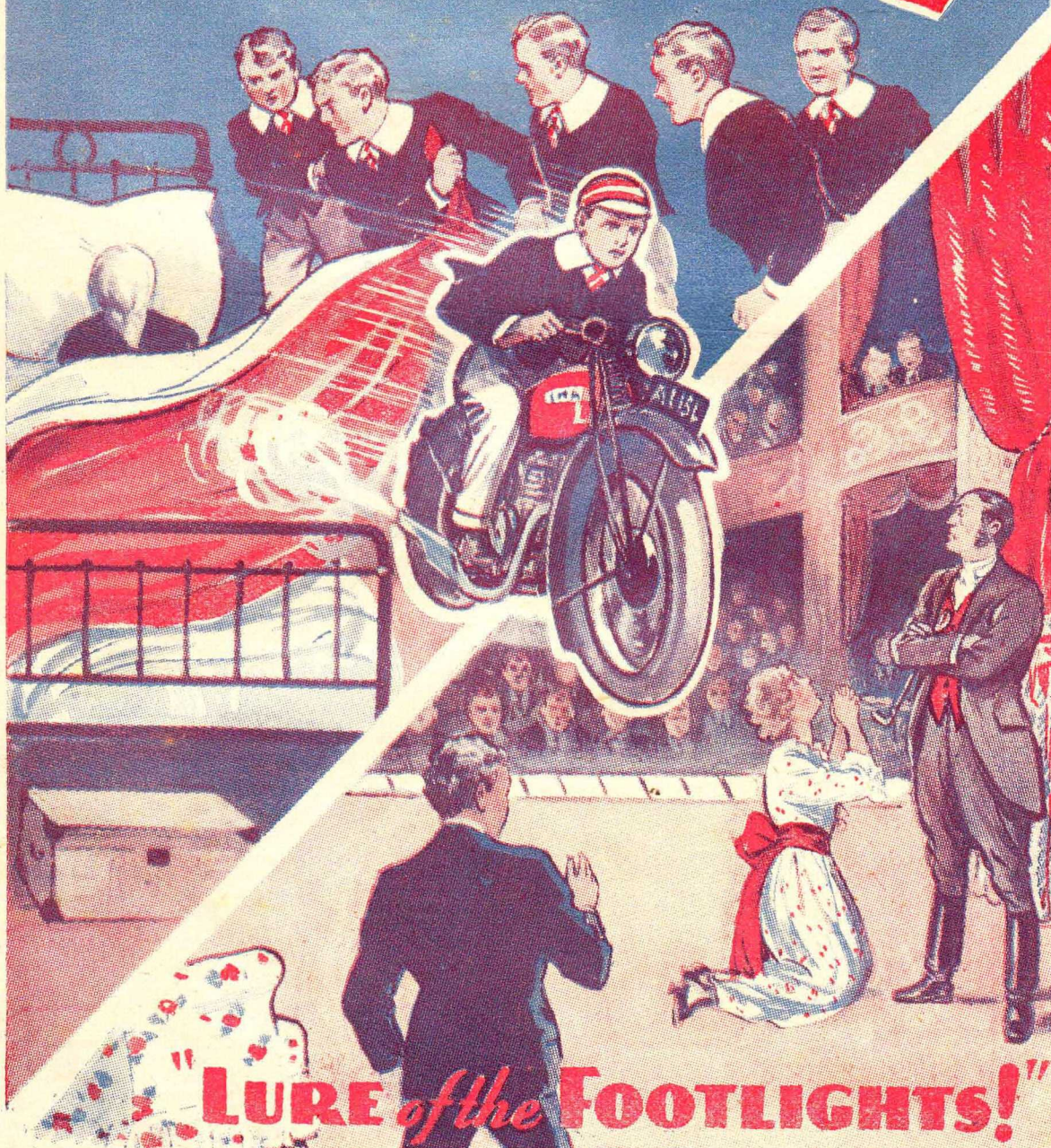


THIS WEEK'S BEST SCHOOL YARNS ARE INSIDE!
STARRING TOM MERRY & CO. AND HARRY WHARTON & CO.

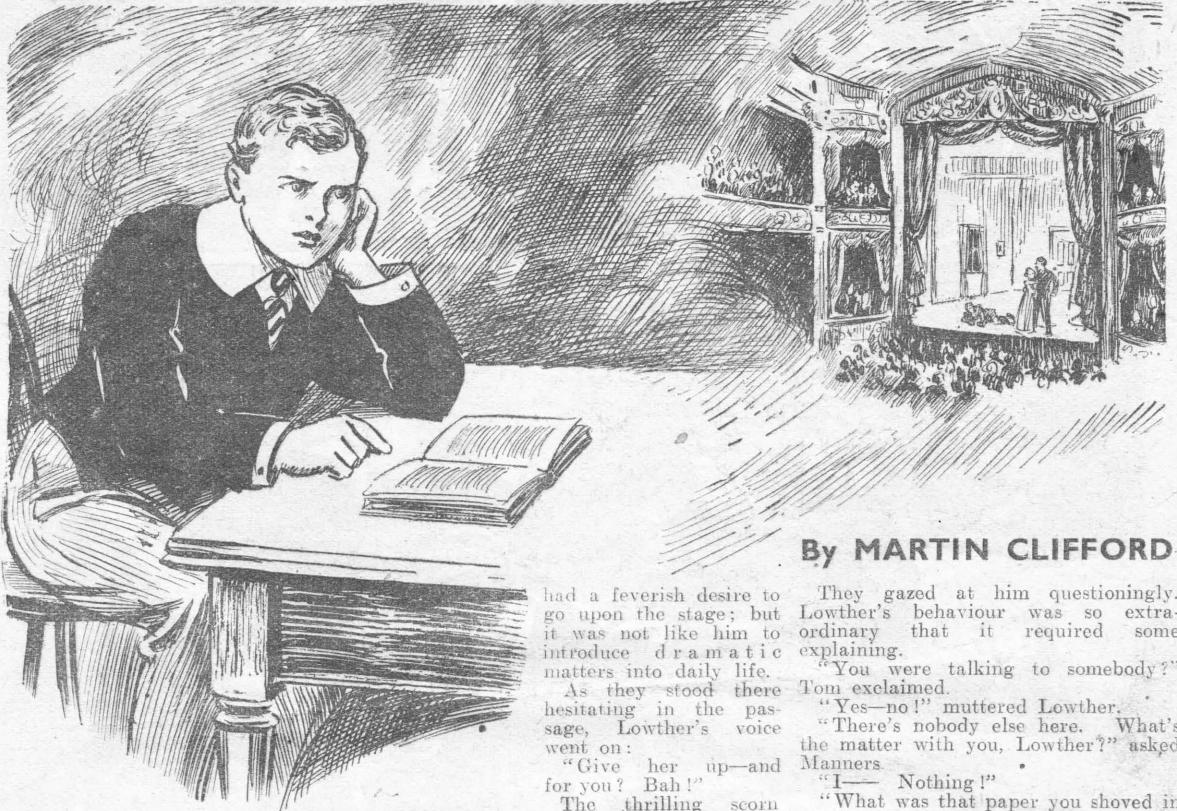
The GEM 2d



"LURE of the FOOTLIGHTS!"

THE ST. JIM'S JUNIOR WHO BROKE BOUNDS EVERY NIGHT TO PLAY HIS PART IN A SHOW!

LURE of the FOOTLIGHTS!



By MARTIN CLIFFORD

CHAPTER 1.

Lowther Has a Secret!

NEVER!" Tom Merry and Manners, of the Shell Form of St. Jim's halted in sheer astonishment.

They were coming along the Shell passage to their study to look for their chum Monty Lowther, when that loud exclamation struck upon their ears. It was uttered in a thrilling tone. The voice was familiar to them, for it was the voice of Monty Lowther; but that thrilling tone was something new. They stopped dead.

"Never! Once more—never!"

Tom Merry looked at Manners, and Manners looked at Tom Merry. Their faces expressed the blankest astonishment.

"What the deuce——" Tom Merry murmured.

"I thought Monty was alone there," said Manners. "Whom can he be talking to like that?"

"There must be something up."

And the chums of the Shell hesitated. If some sort of a quarrel was going on in the study between Monty Lowther and another fellow, they did not want to intrude upon it. But why was Monty speaking in that curious, dramatic manner? True, Lowther was the most enthusiastic member of the Junior Dramatic Club, extremely keen about amateur theatricals, and at one time

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had a feverish desire to go upon the stage; but it was not like him to introduce dramatic matters into daily life.

As they stood there hesitating in the passage, Lowther's voice went on:

"Give her up—and for you? Bah!"

The thrilling scorn Lowther imparted to the "Bah!" made his chums simply jump.

"My only hat!" whispered Manners. "He's quarrelling with somebody about a her—I mean a she—a girl!"

Tom Merry shook his head positively. "Rubbish! Lowther isn't such a silly ass as that. He's gone off his dot, or else he's doing this for a joke. Perhaps he's heard us coming. Come on!"

Tom Merry strode on to the study, and Manners followed him. They threw open the door.

Monty Lowther was standing in the middle of the study. He had a crumpled paper in his left hand. His right was raised in a threatening gesture. The juniors looked to see whom he was threatening, but there was no one else in the study. Lowther's gesture seemed to be addressed to the study window.

His arm dropped and he swung round, his face flushing crimson as his chums came in.

It was not often that Lowther of the Shell was taken aback. He was generally blessed with the proverbial coolness of the cucumber. But he was certainly taken aback now. His face was crimson, and his mouth was open like that of a fish out of water, as he stared at Tom Merry and Manners.

"What the dickens are you up to?" Tom Merry demanded.

"Poity?" asked Manners. Lowther did not reply. He slipped the paper he held in his hand quickly into the inside pocket of his jacket. Evidently he did not wish his chums to see it.

They gazed at him questioningly. Lowther's behaviour was so extraordinary that it required some explaining.

"You were talking to somebody?" Tom exclaimed.

"Yes—no!" muttered Lowther. "There's nobody else here. What's the matter with you, Lowther?" asked Manners.

"I— Nothing!" "What was that paper you shoved in your pocket?"

"N-n-nothing!"

Tom Merry burst into a laugh. "Ha, ha, ha! I understand, you duffer! You were rehearsing!"

"Rehearsing!" said Manners. "We're not doing a play now. You don't mean to say you're composing a new play for the dramatic society, Monty, without telling us anything about it?"

"N-n-no!" stammered Lowther. "Then what were you talking that piffle for?"

"I was—was—was going over some lines," stammered Lowther, "that's all. I didn't hear you fellows coming."

"But what were you doing it for?" asked Tom.

Lowther did not reply. "Is it a new play you're getting up?" No answer.

The amazement of the Shell fellows increased. It was not like Monty Lowther to be secretive. But it was evident now that he did not choose to explain to them.

Tom Merry and Manners could not help feeling a little huffed. Mutual confidence always reigned in the Terrible Three's study, and they disliked anything in the nature of secretiveness or mystery.

"I don't see why you can't tell us, if you're scheming some new play," said Tom Merry, a little tartly. "I suppose it's for the dramatic society, isn't it? You're not thinking of doing a play all on your lonesome?"

"It isn't that."

"Then what is it?"

A CRIPPING YARN OF STAGE AND SCHOOL ADVENTURE, WITH MONTY LOWTHER IN THE LEADING ROLE.

"I—I can't very well tell you."
 "Why not?"
 No reply.
 Manners wagged an admonitory forefinger at Lowther, and shook his head.
 "Don't you begin to keep secrets from your kind uncles, Monty," he said.
 "That's the way to get into trouble. You had better make a clean breast of it. Now, what are you playing the giddy goat for?"

Lowther broke out irritably.
 "Oh, rats! Don't ask questions."
 "Don't ask questions!" repeated Manners wrathfully. "Well, I like that! We come along, and hear you babbling like a tame lunatic in an asylum, and you tell us not to ask questions. I like your cheek!"
 "We're not only going to ask questions, but you're going to answer them!" said Tom Merry determinedly.
 "You—"

"Oh, let's drop the subject!" said Lowther irritably.
 "Not yet. Are you going to explain?"
 "No, I'm not."
 "You won't tell us what you're up to?"

"No, I won't!"
 "Then the rule of this study is that you are bumped until you do. Collar him, Manners, and we'll see whether the silly fathead won't explain!" exclaimed Tom Merry indignantly.

Lowther backed away as his chums advanced upon him. They were his old pals; but they were indignant now, and a little angry.

"Look here," began Lowther, "I can't tell you! You see—well, in fact—Hands off, you silly asses! I shall hit out, I warn you!"

Tom Merry and Manners grasped him before he finished speaking. Lowther struggled fiercely, but two to one were too many for him. He was swept off his feet, and Tom Merry grasped his shoulders, and Manners his ankles. They swung him in the air.

"Now, then, are you going to explain?"

"No!" yelled Lowther, struggling.
 Bump!

Monty Lowther descended upon the study floor with a sharp concussion. The dust rose from the study carpet, and there was a wild yell from Monty Lowther.

"Yow! Leggo! You silly asses!"

"Will you tell us what you are up to?"

"No!" roared Lowther.
 Bump! Bump!

"Yow! Owl! Oh!"

"What's the row?" demanded Talbot of the Shell, looking into the study.
 Lowther made a terrific effort, and tore himself away from his indignant chums. They grasped at him again, and Lowther kept his word and hit out. Manners received a sharp blow on the nose, and staggered back on Tom Merry. Monty Lowther darted out of the study and slammed the door after him.

Manners dabbed his hand to his nose. His fingers came away red.

"Groch!" gasped Manners. "Why, the silly ass—the fathead—I'll—I'll—"

He rushed to the door and tore it open. The blow on the nose had brought the water to his eyes, and he did not see clearly; and, besides, he was in a frantic hurry. There was a junior in the passage, and Manners rushed right at him, and in a second had his head in chancery, and was hammering at him.

"There, you ass, I'll teach you to thump me on the nose! Take that—and that—and that!"

"Yawwooh!" came a wild yell from Manners' victim. "Let go, you wottah! Ow, ow! Have you gone potty? Bai Jove! Dwaggimoff!"

"Why, what—?"
 "Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry, from the doorway of the study. "You fathead! It's D'Arcy! Ha, ha, ha!"

CHAPTER 2.

Gussy's Little Party!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's staggered against the wall as Manners released him, gasping for breath.

His aristocratic face was very flushed, and his noble nose seemed a size larger than usual. He was spluttering with wrath.

"You uttah ass! You feahful wottah! You—"

"Sorry!" gasped Manners. "I ran out after Lowther, and—and—"

"Lowtah just passed me. He seemed in wathah a huwwy. I was comin' to ask you fellows if you were weady to start for Bunchestah, and you wushed on me like a dangewous maniac—"

"I thought it was Lowther. Sorry!" Arthur Augustus' face cleared.

"Oh, all wight! Fwom one gentleman to anothah an apology is quite



The stage has always held a fascination for Monty Lowther of the Shell Form and he is prepared to risk the "sack" from St. Jim's rather than resist the lure of the footlights!



suffish," he said, rubbing his nose ruefully. "But you have thwown me into quite a fluttah. You have also considerably hurt my nose. What are you silly youngstahs wovin' with one anothah for?"

"It's Lowther," explained Tom Merry. "He's rehearsing a play, or something, and he won't tell us about it. So we bumped him, and he punched Manners' nose—"

Manners dabbed his nose with a handkerchief.

"And I'm jolly well going to punch his nose!" he exclaimed ferociously.

And he made a movement to pass D'Arcy in pursuit of the vanished Lowther. But the swell of the Fourth Form put out a detaining hand.

"Hold on, deah boy!"

"Rats! I'm going to—"

"But we've awwanged to go to Bunchestah to see the matinee this aftahnoon, and if we're goin' on our bikes there's no time to lose," said Arthur Augustus.

"I'm not going to have my nose punched for nothing—"

"I twust you youngstahs are not goin' to muck up the aftahnoon's excursion wovin' with one anothah!" said Arthur Augustus severely. "It is wathah a good show at Bunchestah, and I don't want to miss it. Blake, Hewwies, and Dig are getting out the bikes."

"You cheese it, Manners," said Tom

Merry. "After all, Monty had a good bumping, and we'll bump him again later if he doesn't explain himself. Let's get off."

"Lowther's coming, I suppose?" asked D'Arcy.

"I suppose so. We haven't told him yet. We were coming here to tell him, when we heard him spouting some silly rot. Come on, Manners, let's look for him. There's no time to waste."

Manners grunted a somewhat surly assent.

His nose was painful, and he dabbed at it with his handkerchief as he accompanied Tom Merry down the passage.

It was certainly an unfortunate beginning to an afternoon's excursion.

It was a half-holiday at St. Jim's, and it had been Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's idea to go to the matinee at Bunchester. Bunchester was a considerable distance from St. Jim's, but the juniors were good cyclists, and accustomed to long spins.

Arthur Augustus was in funds, and he wanted to stand treat for the matinee, but the funds would hardly have run to railway fares for so large a party.

It was necessary to start early on the ride, and so there was no time to waste. Tom Merry and Manners had received the kind invitation from the swell of the School House, and they had hurried up to the study to tell Lowther—and then that unfortunate incident had occurred.

"Huwwy up, you fellows!" Arthur Augustus called after them. "We'll wait for you at the gates!"

"Right-ho!"

Tom Merry and Manners looked for Lowther. It did not take long to find him. Monty Lowther was spotted in the quad, walking to and fro under the trees.

As they hurried towards him they saw him take out his watch and consult it, and then look at a time-table he drew from his pocket.

He hurriedly thrust the time-table out of sight as the chums came sprinting up. Both Tom Merry and Manners observed the action, and it had a further exasperating effect upon them. What was Lowther developing secretiveness in this way for?

Lowther looked very wary as they came up, but Tom Merry waved his hand in sign of peace.

"Pax, my son!" he said. "No time for ragging now. Come and get your bike out!"

"My bike!" repeated Lowther.

"What for?"

"For a long spin. Gussy's invited us to go with him to Bunchester."

"Where?"

"Bunchester. I know it's a good distance; but we can ride it, and we shall be in time for the matinee."

"The—the matinee?"

"Yes. You'd like to come, wouldn't you?" asked Tom, surprised by Lowther's curious manner.

"What—what matinee do you mean?" muttered Lowther.

"There's only one that I know of—the matinee at the Bunchester Empire," said Tom. "They have matinee performances every Wednesday and Saturday, you know. It's a jolly good entertainment. Come and get your bike out."

"But—but—"

"You don't mean to say that you don't want to come?" said Tom, in astonishment. "You're always so jolly

keen to go to any kind of a theatrical show."

"Ye-es; but—"

"Besides, there's an old friend of yours in the show," said Tom.

"An—old friend!"

"Yes. Don't you remember Mr. Curil?"

"Mr. Curil!" repeated Lowther.

"But—"
"You remember him—the actor chap who went on the halls. You haven't forgotten that you ran away from St. Jim's once to go on the stage, and the Head fetched you back?" grinned Tom. "Well, that man Curil that you cleared off with that time, he's at the Bunchester Empire now. I should think you'd like to see him again—wouldn't you?"

Monty Lowther made no reply. He was staring at his chums open-mouthed. His expression was so extraordinary that Tom Merry and Manners were quite alarmed. There was blank dismay in his face. There was no mistaking the expression. It was utter dismay.

"Don't you want to come?" asked Tom.

"No!"

"Why not?"

"I can't—I mean, I don't want to."

"If you don't feel up to the long spin, we can go by train," said Tom. "There's an express from Wayland does it in half an hour. We can raise the tin."

"I know. But it isn't that. You're not going?"

"Of course we are!" said Manners impatiently. "Gussy's asked us, and we've accepted—for you, too. We thought you'd like to come."

"You—you won't go, will you?" stammered Lowther.

"Yes, of course!" said Tom.

"But—but it's a long way to Bunchester."

"That doesn't matter."

"Suppose the—the Head mightn't like you to go there?"

"He lets us go to the Wayland Empire," said Tom, in surprise. "Why shouldn't we go to the Bunchester Empire?"

"But—but—but—"

"If you don't want to go, say so!" said Manners testily. "I'm blessed if I can understand you at all this afternoon, Lowther. First we find you spouting some silly rot, and you won't tell us what it's about. And now you raise difficulties about going on a jolly excursion. What's the matter with you?"

"I—I don't want you to go!"

"Oh, come!" said Tom uneasily. "That's a bit selfish, Monty. Still, if you're set on staying at home, and you want us to stay with you—why—"

Tom paused, and looked doubtfully at Manners.

"Oh, we'll stay!" said Manners, not very graciously.

Lowther uttered a quick exclamation.

"No, that isn't it! I—I'm going out!"

"You're going out! Do you mean you want us to come with you?" asked Tom. "That's different, of course. If you've got something on, and want us, we'll tell Gussy we can't join his party. What is it?"

"No, that's not it. I—I've got an engagement—I mean, I—I'm going alone."

"Then you don't want us to come with you or stay in?"

"N-no; but—"

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"Well, I must say you're a blessed dog-in-the-manger!" burst out Manners angrily. "You've something on for yourself, and won't ask us to join you; and you don't want us to go to Bunchester on our own. I call that beastly mean!"

Lowther flushed.

"If you're going out by yourself, Monty, it can't matter to you whether we go to Bunchester or not," said Tom Merry quietly. "I won't ask you where you're going, as you seem so jolly secretive about it. Ta-ta! Come on, Manners! They're waiting for us at the gates already."

"Hold on!" exclaimed Lowther. "You're going then?"

"Of course!" said Tom tartly.

"And—and if you don't, those Fourth Form chaps are going?"

"Yes."

Monty Lowther paused. Some inward struggle seemed to be going on in his breast, and his chums were more and more amazed.

It was impossible to understand Lowther that afternoon. He was evidently deeply disturbed about something, but what it was they could not make out in the least, excepting that it was connected with their excursion to Bunchester.

"Well," said Manners impatiently, "have you decided to come?"

"Ye-es— I'll come."

"And what about your engagement?" asked Manners sarcastically. "That blessed engagement you don't care to tell us anything about?"

"Never mind that."

"Well, if you're coming, buck up—we're keeping Study No. 6 waiting!"

Lowther followed them to the bicycleshed without another word. The Terrible Three got out their machines and wheeled them down to the gates.

Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy, and Talbot of the Shell were waiting for them there. Figgins & Co. of the New House had also joined the party. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had generously extended his invitation to the chums of the New House.

"Here they are!" exclaimed Blake, as the Shell fellows came down to the gates. "We've been waiting for you."

"Sorry," said Tom Merry. "We're ready now."

"Come on, then!"

They wheeled their machines out of the gateway, and mounted in the road. Down the leafy lane went the whole eleven of them, and most of the party in the highest spirits.

But the Terrible Three were not in such high spirits as usual. There was a cloud upon Monty Lowther's brow—a cloud of uneasy care. What was worrying him his chums could not guess, but they could not help noticing it, and feeling a little resentful of his secrecy.

For Lowther did not utter a word; whatever might be on his mind, he evidently had no intention of confiding it to his friends. And the Terrible Three were always so frank and open to one another, that Tom Merry and Manners could not help feeling the change keenly.

CHAPTER 3.

On the Road!

MONTY LOWTHER'S brow grew darker and darker as the miles flew under the rapid wheels.

Whatever was the secret worry that preyed upon his mind, it grew

more and more pressing as the party drew nearer to Bunchester.

The Terrible Three were riding together, the other fellows being in advance, and so Lowther's clouded face was not noticed by the rest.

But Tom Merry and Manners could not help seeing it, and marking how darker the cloud on Lowther's brow grew all the time.

"Monty, old man"—Tom drew his machine a little closer to Lowther's as they rode—"Monty, what's the matter with you?"

Lowther seemed to start out of the depths of a gloomy reverie.

"Matter with me? Nothing!"

"You're worrying over something."

"Oh, nonsense!"

"Then what are you looking so glum about?"

"Am I looking glum?"

"Yes, you are," said Tom, a little nettled.

"I'm all right!"

"If you've got something on your mind, Monty, you might as well tell your old pals," said Tom reproachfully. "I suppose you can trust us?"

Lowther did not reply.

"Now I'm speaking of it, I might as well tell you that you've been acting in a rather queer way lately," said Tom, determined to have the matter out. "You've got into the habit of mooching off by yourself, and going out for spins on your bike all alone. You can't expect a fellow not to notice it. It's queer."

"Is it?" muttered Lowther restlessly.

"I can't forget," said Tom quietly, "that you once very nearly got mixed up with Cutts & Co. of the Fifth in their rotten games; and if it's anything of that kind again, any kind of playing the giddy goat—"

Lowther laughed.

"It's nothing to do with Cutts! Do you think I've taken to backing dead certs and putting my pocket-money on cards, ass?"

"It's nothing of the kind, then—no trouble?"

"Of course it isn't."

"But there's something," persisted Tom.

No reply.

"You're in trouble of some kind, Monty, or you wouldn't be pulling a face a yard long."

"I'm not in trouble."

"On your word?"

"Yes."

"Then what the deuce is the matter with you?" demanded Tom Merry impatiently. "What are you looking glum for? You've got a secret of some kind that you won't tell your pals—who never have secrets from you."

"Don't ask questions, and I won't tell you any whoppers," said Lowther.

"I'm not in any kind of trouble, and that ought to satisfy you. As a matter of fact, I'm in luck."

"In luck! You don't look it!"

"Blessed if you do!" said Manners, on the other side of Lowther. "What kind of luck, Monty? Must be jolly queer kind if it makes you look like that."

Monty Lowther grunted impatiently.

"Why can't you tell us, Monty?"

"Because it might lead to trouble, and I don't want you fellows to be landed in it, that's why," said Lowther desperately. "Now, don't ask me any more questions, because I won't answer them!"

And he pushed his bike a little ahead and joined D'Arcy and Blake, who were riding abreast, to escape further questioning.

Tom Merry and Manners exchanged

a frowning glance. Lowther had admitted that there was something "on"—something in which they were not to share, and of which they were to have no knowledge. They could not help resenting it.

As for the danger of "trouble" following, they were willing to risk that. The Terrible Three always stood shoulder to shoulder. Besides, if Lowther was in no trouble, as he said, how could trouble follow his admitting them to his secret, whatever it was? The chums of the Shell felt uneasy, anxious, and decidedly irritated.

But they did not ask Lowther any more questions. It was pretty clear that he would not answer them. He was speaking to Arthur Augustus now.

"So it was your idea to go to the matinee at Bunchester, Gussy?"

"Yaas, wathah, deah boy," said D'Arcy. "I saw the notice of the matinee in the papah, you know, and I was wathah stwuck with the pwo-gwamme. Our fwient Mr. Cuwil is in the company there now, singin' somethin' or othah. You weineimbah Mr. Cuwil—the tenah chap who was always gettin' squiffay?"

"Bet you Lowther remembers him," chuckled Blake. "Didn't the howling ass run away from school once to go on the stage, and the Head brought him back? It was Curil he went with."

"Yaas, so it was. You'll be wathah glad to see your old pal again, Lowthah. I suppose you haven't seen him lately?"

Lowther did not seem to hear the question; at all events, he did not reply to it. He went on rather hastily:

"Good programme—eh?"

"Yaas. One of the items is a sketch of a wathah twagic chawactah, I think, called: 'His Love Against the Earth,' or somethin'—"

"'His Love Against the World,' you mean."

"You know about it, then, Lowthah?"

"I—I've heard—"

"I think you are w'ong about the title, though," said D'Arcy. "I think it is 'His Love Against the Earth,' or else 'The Earth Against His Love,' I forget which."

"Ass!" muttered Monty Lowther impatiently. "I tell you—" He broke off abruptly.

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Not much good spending a summer afternoon in a stuffy theatre," said Lowther. "Why not make an outing of it instead?"

"You are quite welcome to make an outin' of it, deah boy. We are goin' to the Bunchestah Empiah!" said D'Arcy rather stiffly.

"It will be a good outing riding there and back," remarked Jack Blake. "It's a good fifteen miles from St. Jim's, I believe."

Monty Lowther fell into silence. Tom Merry and Manners had heard the talk, and they felt a curious impression. Lowther did not want the party to go to the Bunchester Empire for the matinee. It was inexplicable; but there could be very little doubt about it. How it could possibly matter to Lowther whether they went or not was a mystery, and they were growing exasperated with that mystery.

They knew Lowther's love of the stage, which had once led him into the reckless step of clearing off from St. Jim's to join a travelling company. They knew his old connection with Mr. Curil, the thirsty tenor. Had he renewed some dealings with Mr. Curil,

which he was afraid the visit to Bunchester would bring to light? Even so, why should he be afraid of his chums knowing? Mr. Curil was not exactly a choice acquaintance, but there was no harm in him, and all the juniors were friendly with him.

"I say, I'm tired," said Lowther abruptly. "We've got plenty of time, haven't we, Gussy?"

"Yaas, deah boy."

"What do you say to a bit of a rest?"

Arthur Augustus nodded, and called to the others:

"You fellows like a rest? Lowthah's fagged."

The party came to a halt. They were about eight miles from St. Jim's now, and were crossing a very lonely tract of country. It was a long, rolling "down," crossed by a well-worn bridle-path, with wide pasture-lands sweeping away on all sides.

The cyclists halted under one of the trees and jumped off their machines.

Figgins & Co. were grinning a little derisively. They were fit for any distance yet, and they were inclined to be amused at the idea of the School House fellow being "tired."

"Did you bring a pillow with you, Lowther?" Kerr asked.

Lowther grunted.

"Oh, we may as well have a rest!" said Tom Merry. "No need to scorch all the blessed way; and the sun's warm, too!"

"Sit down and let Lowther rest his head on your shoulder, Tommy," said Fatty Wynn. "I will fan him with my cap!"

Lowther reddened.

"Look here, you New House chumps—"

Figgins made a soothing gesture. "Don't excite yourself when you are tired," he murmured. "Dear boy, you must take care of yourself. You've done nearly eight miles—that's a lot for a School House chap!"

"Weally, Figgins—"

"Hush! Let Lowther go to sleep."

The juniors grinned at the gentle chaff of Figgins & Co.; but Lowther did not grin. His brow was darker than ever. He seemed to be taking the chipping in very bad part. Tom Merry regarded him rather anxiously. He had never known the cheery, good-natured Lowther in this peculiar and uncertain temper before. He was more puzzled than ever to know what was the matter with him.

"You silly asses!" said Lowther sharply. "I'm tired of cycling for a bit, but I'm not so fagged as you are!"

"B-r-r-r!"

"Rats!"

"Draw it mild!"

"Let's stretch our legs a bit," said Lowther. "I'll race you all round that knoll yonder and back here!"

"Done!" said Figgins at once. "I'd race any School House fellow off his legs any time!"

"You could not wace me off my legs, Figgins," said Arthur Augustus. "I should wun like anythin', and leave you simply stwanded!"

"Bow-wow!" said Figgins.

"Weally, you New House ass—"

"Come on, the lot of you!" said Lowther. "Line up and start!"

The juniors were not averse to stretching their legs with a little run. They lined up, and Tom Merry gave the word, and they all started at the same moment.

The knoll was a hundred yards away



As his chums grasped at him Lowther hit out. Manners received a sharp blow on the nose and staggered back into Tom Merry. Lowther darted out of the study and slammed the door.

—a sharp rising in the ground, with a clump of bushes on the summit. It was, perhaps, five hundred yards round it and back to the tree where the bicycles stood packed round the trunk. The juniors started off in fine style, Lowther putting on a spurt and going ahead. Figgins soon passed him, grinning, his long legs simply flying over the ground.

And the School House fellows bucked up for all they were worth, determined that a New House bouncer should not win the race. Monty Lowther dropped farther and farther behind—which made it all the more necessary for the other School House fellows to put on steam, if the New House were not to win.

They reached the knoll, and went racing round it. But Lowther only waited till the rest were hidden from view by the knoll. Then he stopped, and ran back to where the bicycles stood under the tree. Five minutes at least must elapse before the juniors, racing round the bushy knoll, came in sight of the tree again, and in that five minutes Lowther was very busy.

CHAPTER 4.

Left in the Lurch!

TOM MERRY and Figgins were abreast as they came sweeping round the knoll and came in sight of the tree by the path again. The rest of the juniors were close behind.

They were all running hard. "Lowther's down and out!" Figgins chuckled, with a backward glance. "He's not half round yet!"

But Tom Merry uttered a breathless shout.

"Lowther! My hat! What the dickens—"

They were in full view of the path again now, and a most surprising sight met their gaze. Monty Lowther was there, mounted upon his machine, and starting off.

Figgins gave a yell. "The spoofer! He was pulling our leg! He hasn't been round at all!"

"Oh, the bouncer!"

"Bai Jove! What a wotten joke!"

The juniors did not like it. They had pelted round the knoll in a race, and Lowther had evidently let them get out of sight, and then coolly walked back to the starting-point. Tom Merry shouted after him:

"Monty, wait for us!"

Lowther was on his machine, riding onward—so fast that he certainly did not look tired. He was a good distance already, and if he heard Tom's voice he did not heed it. He pedalled on, without looking back, in the direction of distant Bunchester.

The juniors, breathing hard from the foot-race, came back under the shadow of the tree where the bicycles stood. Tom Merry and Figgins were in first—a dead-heat—but the others were very close behind.

"The ass!" sniffed Figgins. "He knew he couldn't do the run, so he turned it into a rotten joke! Don't see the joke myself!"

"What the deuce has he started off for without us?" exclaimed Blake. "Does the silly ass want to race us to Bunchester, and steal a start to begin with?"

"Seems to me to be off his silly rocker!" growled Herries.

Figgins snorted.

"We'll jolly soon catch him up! Get on!"

They were dragging their bicycles away from the tree into the path. Then there was a chorus of yells and angry exclamations.

"Punctured!"

"Flat as a pancake!"

"Punctured, bai Jove!"

"My valve's out!"

"Look at my tyres!"

"Great Scott!"

"What's the matter with the blessed jiggers?"

"What the dickens—"

The juniors held their machines and gazed at them in enraged astonishment. Not one of them was fit for riding. On every machine the tyres were quite flat. On examination, it proved that they

were not punctured; the valves had been jerked out and taken away.

"Lowther's done this!" said Figgins. There was no doubt about that. Lowther had deliberately disabled their machines, and left them stranded in that lonely place, miles from everywhere.

"If this is Lowther's idea of a joke," said Blake, with forced calmness, "I admit that I don't see the humour of it."

"Same here," said Talbot. "It's a caddish trick!"

"The utter beast!"

"The rotter!"

"The cad!" snorted Blake. "That's what he is, a cad, to muck up our excursion like this for nothing! We can't go to Bunchester now!"

Tom Merry and Manners were silent. They had not a word to say in defence of their chum. What could be said?

In fact, they could hardly believe the evidence of their eyes. They were astounded, almost overcome.

The figure of Monty Lowther, riding hard, vanished in the distance. He was gone, and his companions were left—very much left!

"He was fooling us all the time!" said Figgins, gritting his teeth. "That was why he pretended to be tired, and fooled us into racing round the knoll to get us out of sight while he crippled the jiggers!"

"Bai Jove!"

"But what's he done it for?" howled Blake. "If it was only you New House bouncers, it would be a rotten thing to do, but a fellow could understand it. But it's us, too—and his own pals!"

"It's a beastly twick!"

"A dirty trick!"

"Caddish!"

"Mean!"

"I—I say, I'm sorry for this, you fellows!" said Tom Merry. "I can't understand why Lowther should do a rotten thing like that. We'll talk to him pretty plainly about it."

"I'll do more than talk to him!" roared Blake in exasperation. "What are we going to do now? Walk to Bunchester—seven or eight miles—and drag the machines?"

"No good walking to Bunchester!" growled Figgins. "We should be too late for the matinee!"

"No good going there for nothing!" snorted Kerr.

"It's a three-mile walk back to the first place where we can get the jiggers put in order," said Talbot. "No chance of getting it done and riding on to Bunchester in time for the show. We're dished!"

"Dished by that rotter!"

"Oh, I wish I was in hitting distance of him!" said Blake, brandishing his fists. "I'd show him how we like his little jokes!"

"Yaas, wathah! I would give him a fearful thwashin'—"

"We'll rag him bald-headed when we get him home!" said Kerr. "There isn't any fun in this kind of trick!"

Tom Merry and Manners did not join in the chorus of denunciation. But they were feeling angry, too—all the angrier because it was impossible to defend Lowther's conduct, and he was their chum. They felt that his cruel and inconsiderate action reflected upon them. They had brought him into the party, and he had stranded the party on the lonely down, spoiled the excursion, and left them with a weary tramp before them.

"I believe he's done it simply to keep us away from the matinee," said Blake. "He seemed to want us not to go for

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some reason. He proposed to Gussy to chuck it."

"Yaas, so he did!"
Tom Merry knew that Lowther's desire to keep the juniors away from Bunchester must have been very strong to drive him to such a desperate resource. And he had gone on himself! Was that the engagement he had spoken of—at Bunchester? Had he intended to go by train, and joined the cycling party with the secret intention of somehow baulking their journey?

Tom Merry realised that his chum must have been guilty of that duplicity.

"Well, he's not going to have his way," said Figgins, setting his teeth. "We'll go on to Bunchester. We may be in time for the finish of the show. Wait a bit. I've got a cycling map in my pocket. I'll figure it out."

Figgins spread out his map on the turf, and the juniors bent over it eagerly. Figgins pointed out the route with his finger.

"Look here! It's two miles to a place with a railway station; and goodness knows when a train starts for Bunchester in this forsaken place! But it's a chance. We can walk on to that place—Gunford—and leave the bikes there, to be sent home by train, and take the first train to Bunchester—if there is one. Anybody got a timetable?"

"I have!" said Kerr. Kerr could always be depended upon to have useful things of that sort about him.

"Out with it!" said Blake eagerly.

Kerr ran over the timetable.

"Train from Gunford to Bunchester at three," he said.

"And the matinee begins at three exactly!" growled Fatty Wynn.

"Arrives Bunchester three-forty," said Kerr.

"And the show's nearly half over then!"

"But we shan't miss it all," said Kerr. "We've got time to wheel the bikes into Gunford by three and take the train. The question is, is it worth while to spend the railway fares and pay for admission to see about a half of the matinee?"

There was no doubt in the juniors' minds on that point. They were determined not to be "done."

Arthur Augustus, who had the honour of standing treat, so far as the tickets for the matinee were concerned, chipped in at once:

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Hear, hear!" said all the rest.

"Come on, then," said Figgins, folding up his map. "We'll see as much as we can of the show, and deal with Lowther afterwards. We may run across him in Bunchester. He's gone there."

And the juniors, with a considerable lowering of their high spirits, wheeled the bikes away across the sunny down towards the distant village of Gunford, tramping on, wearily and angrily, in the hot sun.

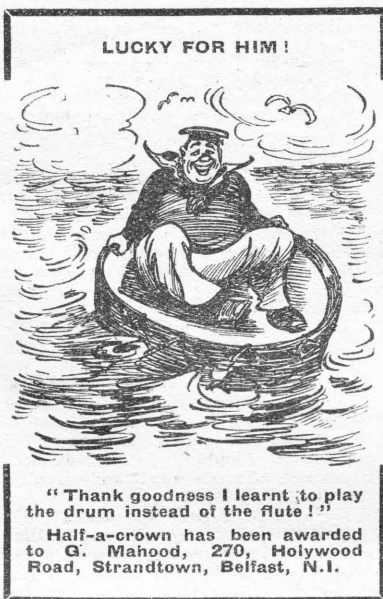
CHAPTER 5.

At the Empire!

TEN dusty and angry cyclists came tramping into the quiet village of Gunford, wheeling their machines, as the quarter to three struck.

"Good time!" said Kerr.

They wheeled the machines on to the railway station, and consigned them there, to be sent back to St. Jim's. Then they took their tickets, with a few minutes still to spare.



wathah excitin'. Old Cuwil was in it. Look at the dwamatis personæ."

The juniors glanced at the cast of the sketch they had missed. The name of Mr. Curil was there, and they were annoyed at having missed seeing their old acquaintance. It was one more item to the account of Monty Lowther.

"HIS LOVE AGAINST THE WORLD.

Scene: The Library of De Vere Castle.

Lord de Vere.....Mr. Snooke Mooker.
Baron Bellerby.....Mr. Horatio Curil.
Gerald Fitzroy.....Mr. Montague.
Cicely.....Miss Gloriana
Gilhooley."

"I was wathah cuwilous to see how Lord de Vere would play up," said Arthur Augustus regretfully. "And there was a wicked bawon, you know, and pistols and poison and things. Quite excitin'. And we've missed it owin' to that boundah Lowthah!"

"Never mind. There are some good things in the second half," said Blake. "There's an acrobatic display, and trick cyclists and a conjuring show."

"My hat!" exclaimed Figgins, in a suppressed voice. "There's that rotter Lowther—in a box, by gum!"

All eyes were turned on the box.

There, within a dozen feet of the juniors from St. Jim's, Monty Lowther sat talking with their old acquaintance Mr. Curil.

"There's time to go round to the box and scalp him before the show begins again," said Blake, in a hurried whisper.

Arthur Augustus shook his head.

"Can't make a wow here, deah boy. It will keep till we get back to St. Jim's."

"Yes, rather!" said Manners. "Keep quiet, for goodness' sake!"

"He's spotted us," murmured Talbot. Lowther's glance had fallen upon them as he looked over the house. He gave a violent start, evidently surprised at seeing the juniors there. Then he leant towards Mr. Curil and whispered to him, and they both laughed.

That laugh exasperated the juniors almost beyond bounds. At the least, Lowther might have been sorry for what he had done.

Mr. Curil looked towards the juniors in the stalls, and waved his hand to them in his old airy way. He was the same old Mr. Curil—a little older, a little more "wobbly" all over, as it were, probably owing to his devotion to the cup that cheers and at the same time inebriates; otherwise unchanged.

Evidently Lowther had told him of the trick he had played on the chums of St. Jim's, and Mr. Curil looked upon it in the light of a good joke. It made Tom Merry & Co. feel much less kindly towards that distinguished—and almost extinguished—tenor.

The orchestra gave the "Soldiers' Chorus" a rest, and the audience settled down for the second half of the programme, and the juniors ceased from making signs to Monty Lowther expressive of deadly vengeance to come.

The performance started with trick cycling, which interested the juniors very much, especially Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, who confided to Blake in a whisper that he really thought he could do that himself.

"Bai Jove! I'll twy that dodge of widin' on the back wheel when we get home!" Arthur Augustus declared.

"Insure your silly neck first!" growled Blake.

"Weally, Blake——"
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They were tired and dusty and ratty. While they were waiting on the platform at Gunford the matinee would be starting at Bunchester. It was too bad, and their feelings towards Monty Lowther grew very bitter. He had arrived in Bunchester long ago, and if he had gone to the theatre, he was securely ensconced there, seated comfortably to see the show, while they had a forty minutes' run before them still, and then had to make their way to the Empire.

The trick he had played them was so inexplicable that it added to their angry annoyance. It would not have been so bad if they had been able to imagine a reason for it. But they could imagine no reason.

They refreshed themselves with lemonade and buns while they waited for the train. It was a few minutes late, but it came in at last.

They crowded into the train and started for Bunchester. The train was a slow local, stopping at every station, while slow country passengers got in and out. The juniors' impatience was almost at fever-heat. But they arrived in Bunchester at last, five minutes later than the scheduled time. It was a quarter to four when they stepped from the train.

"Here's the place," said Blake, as they came out of the station in Bunchester.

The local Empire, fortunately, was not far from the station. It was, in fact, almost opposite.

The juniors hurried across the road, and presented themselves at the box-office. There was a little delay there in taking so many tickets, especially as Arthur Augustus had to change a five-pound note. But that process was gone through at last, and they were shown into their seats.

The orchestra was playing the "Soldiers' Chorus" from "Faust." It was the interval. The first half of the programme was ended.

Arthur Augustus jammed his eyeglass into his eye, and looked over a programme.

"Wotten!" he said. "The sketch was in the first half. We shan't see that. 'His Love Against the World,' you know. Lowthah was wight about the title, aftah all. It seems to have been

"Lowther's gone," said Figgins, with a glance up at the box. "He's behind the scenes, the cheeky bounder!"

"He bound to stay to the end, though," said Blake. "We'll go round to the stage door and call on Mr. Curil, and—"

"And find Lowther!" said Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies, I t'wust you are not thinkin' of makin' a wov with Lowthah behind the scenes," said Arthur Augustus sternly. "It would be fwightfully bad form to make a wov in somebody else's quartahs."

"I'm going to punch Lowther's head the minute I see him, wherever it is!" said Herries obstinately.

"I shall wefuse to allow anythin' of the sort. I considah—"

"Oh, you can go and eat coke!" said Herries disrespectfully. "Curil was grinning at us, too, as well as that Shell bounder. Jolly good mind to punch his head, too!"

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"Don't let's have any ragging here, for goodness' sake!" said Tom Merry uneasily. "I know Lowther ought to be ragged for what he's done, but we can leave it till we get home."

"Anyway, the bounder's going to explain what he did it for," said Blake. "And I want to tell him what we're going to do to him when we get him at St. Jim's!"

Indeed, the juniors were so keen to interview Monty Lowther that they were not sorry when the performance came to an end.

Tom Merry & Co. made their way round to the stage door to call upon Mr. Curil, though whether they wanted to see Mr. Curil as much as they wanted to see Monty Lowther was a question.

CHAPTER 6.

A Great Actor At Home!

MR. CURIL received the juniors of St. Jim's in his dressing-room with much graciousness of manner.

As his dressing-room was only twelve feet by eight, there was not very much room for ten juniors and Mr. Curil, but they came in somehow.

"Sit down, my boys!" said Mr. Curil, with noble hospitality. "Make yourselves at home. I rather expected to see you. Quite an honour!"

It was not quite clear where the boys were to sit down, there being only two chairs in the room. Mr. Curil half-leaned and half-sat on the edge of the dressing-table, which gave an ominous creak every moment or two, as if extremely reluctant to support his weight. His weight was considerable, for Mr. Curil, like many great tenors, was inclined to what the French politely call *embonpoint*. Not being inclined to adopt the Eastern custom of sitting on the floor, the visitors decided to stand.

"Vewy glad to see you again, Mr. Cuwil!" said Arthur Augustus courteously. "Sowwy we missed your show."

Mr. Curil smiled a somewhat melancholy smile.

"That was nothing to what I have done. You should have seen me in the old days, when I was with the Roser Moser Company," he sighed. "They were the days! You never heard me sing the Prize Song, did you?"

"Never."

"No; it was before your time," said Mr. Curil sadly. "Those days are over. Things are not what they used to be. Music in this country, gentlemen, has fallen into the sere and yellow leaf."

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We live in the age of the Philistines now. A tenor who has seen crowded houses rise to him has no resource but to go on the halls! Ha, ha!"

"Too bad, deah boy!"

"Boy!" called out Mr. Curil sharply.

Arthur Augustus started, thinking for the moment that he was being addressed. But Mr. Curil's ejaculation did not refer to him.

A shock-headed youth looked in at the door, with an expression upon his face which did not seem to imply that he felt the greatest possible respect for a great tenor, once a shining light in the Roser Moser Company.

"You young gentlemen would like some refreshment?" said Mr. Curil hospitably. "Name your poison."

"Ahem! You—you see—"

"Of course, of course!" said Mr. Curil hastily. "I understand. Very wise of you. Avoid strong drink, my boys, all your lives; keep out of the way of temptation, and never put an enemy in your mouths to steal away your brains. As for myself, I have to take a little spirituous refreshment by doctor's orders, for the sake of my voice. I use it as a kind of gargle; very beneficial to the vocal cords—"

"Did you want anythink, Mr. Curil?" the shock-headed youth interrupted at this point.

"Johnny Walker," replied Mr. Curil mysteriously.

"Is that the name of your thwoat gargle, Mr. Cuwil?" asked Arthur Augustus, with interest.

"Ahem! Yes, I—I should not recommend it for the use of youths. It is—ahem!—ordered specially for me by my physician."

"Most accommodating physician!" murmured Kerr sotto voce.

"I'm waitin', Mr. Curil," said the shock-headed youth.

Mr. Curil turned upon him a glance of the most lofty dignity.

"And what are you waiting for, Henry?" he demanded.

"The money," replied Henry, unabashed.

Mr. Curil coughed.

He made a process of going through the pockets of his jacket, though it was pretty evident that they contained nothing in the shape of cash. He turned out an old tobacco-pipe, half a cigar, and several documents which looked suspiciously like bills; but no coin of the realm came to light.

Henry showed signs of impatience.

"It's very odd!" said Mr. Curil, looking at the juniors with a curious expression. "I have mislaid my purse somewhere. Very odd indeed! Not that I take much care of these things. I hold with the immortal William, 'Who steals my purse steals trash.'"

"Especially as there's probably nothing in it!" Kerr murmured again, unheard, of course, by Mr. Curil.

"Pway allow me to oblige, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, who had some remembrance of Mr. Curil's little ways from a previous meeting. "If ten shillin's would be of any use for the moment—"

"For the moment only," said Mr. Curil, taking the note with alacrity and tossing it to Henry. "Disappear! Hurry! Bring ginger-beer for the young gentlemen, and my special for me. You comprehend? Get out!"

The shock-headed youth grinned and got out.

"Pray remind me of this before you go, my young friend," said Mr. Curil to the swell of St. Jim's. "I have a shocking bad memory for these trifles."

That was quite true. Arthur Augustus

had a dim recollection of another ten-shilling note he had parted with in similar circumstances. But he forbore to mention the fact. He had a great regard for the feelings of a celebrated tenor reduced from his high estate.

The ginger-beer and Mr. Curil's own special arrived. Mr. Curil disposed of his gargle in a single gulp—which seemed to D'Arcy an extraordinary way of using a throat gargle—and he immediately dispatched Henry for another.

The juniors discussed the ginger-beer with much satisfaction. They were thirsty after their journey and the stuffy theatre.

"You had a pal of ours in the box with you," Blake remarked. "Is he still knocking about?"

"Ah! You mean my young friend Monty?" said Mr. Curil. "A rising genius, my young friends. Master Lowther will be a great actor some day."

"I don't think!" murmured Kerr.

"Is he still here?" asked Figgins.

"No. He could not have known that you were calling on me, or he would certainly have waited for you. He left a few minutes before you were shown in."

The juniors exchanged glances. There had been some minutes' delay before they were shown into Mr. Curil's dressing-room, and they guessed that it had been to allow Monty Lowther time to get clear.

"Never mind—we'll see him at St. Jim's," said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Henry returned with the second supply of gargle which followed the first. Mr. Curil bade him fetch a third, explaining to the juniors that he had to prepare his voice for the evening performance. Whether Mr. Curil's voice was benefiting from the peculiar application of the gargle, which smelt remarkably like whisky, was doubtful, for it was growing quite husky now. His seat on the edge of the dressing-table, too, was somewhat unsteady, and the table creaked more and more ominously. Arthur Augustus watched him in a sort of fascinated way, wondering how long it would be before Mr. Curil and the dressing-table went to the floor together.

Under the softening influence of the gargle, Mr. Curil became more and more reminiscent and pathetic over his departed glory, and his sad fate in coming on the halls. When Henry came in with the third dose of gargle, Mr. Curil's hand was so shaking with emotion that he could hardly receive it. Henry looked at him with an unsympathetic grin.

"Don't splash it over them trousis, Mr. Curil!" he said.

"Begone!" said Mr. Curil.

Henry grinned more widely and departed. Mr. Curil held the glass in his hand, shaking, and blinked solemnly over it at the juniors.

"Here's to you, and me, and all of us!" he said, and the third whisky disappeared down Mr. Curil's thirsty throat, and the glass slipped from his hand and broke on the floor. Mr. Curil stared at it, as if in great surprise, and then gazed at the juniors with the solemnity of an owl. "My young friends, I—"

Tom Merry and Blake seized him and jerked him away from the dressing-table just as he was about to collapse on it. They sat him down on one of the chairs, and he smiled at them in a melancholy way.

"Thank you, my young friends!" he said. "I—I am obliged to prepare for

the evening show in this way, much against the g-g-grain. My doctor orders it. Master D'Arcy, pray introduce me to your brother!"

"My brotther!" said Arthur Augustus, in surprise. "My minah is at St. Jim's, Mr. Cuwil."

"I did not refer to Master Wally," said Mr. Curil. "I refer to your twin-brother."

"B-b-but I haven't a twin!" said Arthur Augustus, in perplexity.

Mr. Curil blinked at him. "You have not a twin-brother?"

"Certainly not!" "Then who is that young gentleman who bears such an extraordinary resemblance to you, standing close by your side?" demanded Mr. Curil.

Arthur Augustus looked round almost in alarm. He had never been aware that he possessed a double. But his double was visible only to Mr. Curil's eyes. The existence of the double was due to Mr. Curil's reckless use of the gargle he took in such large quantities by the order of his physician.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "He's dwunk!"

And Mr. Curil immediately proved the correctness of this surmise by sliding off the chair and collapsing on the floor.

"Gweat Scott!" "Poor old Curil!" said Tom Merry.

"Poor chap! It's wathah wuff on him to have to use that stuff for his voice when it has this wotten effect on him!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" "Weally, deah boys, it is not a laugh-in' mattah—"

"I think we'd better clear," said Figgins; and the juniors, having put a cushion under Mr. Curil's head, left him comfortably asleep on the floor, and took their departure.

During the train journey home to St. Jim's, the juniors amused themselves chiefly by discussing the punishment that was to be visited upon Monty Lowther for his sins, and when they reached the school—just before locking-up—their first inquiry was for the humorist of the Shell.

CHAPTER 7.

Paying the Piper!

MONTY LOWTHER had returned to St. Jim's.

He had caught an earlier train home from Bunchester, and was at the school a good hour before the visitors to the Bunchester Empire.

Tom Merry & Co. came in, tired from their journey. They met Kangaroo of the Shell in the doorway.

"Lowther come in?" asked Blake.

"Yes," said Kangaroo. "I say, what's the matter with him? I thought you fellows all went on your bikes?"

"So we did!" growled Figgins.

"Lowther brought his bike home by train, so he told me," said Kangaroo, "and you fellows have come home without any bikes at all. Had a set of accidents?"

"No; the accident is going to happen to Lowther—now!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Lowther seemed rather queer," the Cornstalk junior remarked. "I asked him where you were, and he said you were probably looking for him in Bunchester."

"So we were!"

"The wottah!"

"The beast!"

"We're going to scalp him!"

"Seems to me he's a bit off his crumplet!" said Kangaroo. "I passed

his study a few minutes ago, and he was shouting out, 'Never! Never, Baron Bellerby!' I looked into the study, and he was quite alone—not a soul there. Has he developed a habit of talking to himself? Or is he barmy?"

"Barmy!" said Blake. "Is he in his study?"

"I think so."

"Come on, you chaps!"

Ten determined juniors made their way to Tom Merry's study. The voice of Morty Lowther could be heard as they came up the passage.

"Cicely! Cicely de Vere! At last, my heart's own!"

"Bai Jove! He's got a lady visitah!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, in surprise. "We had bettah put off the waggin' till she's gone, deah boys!"

"Rats!" said Blake. "It's only some more of his rot! Come on!"

Blake threw the study door wide open.

Monty Lowther was alone there. He started a little at the sight of the juniors, and backed round behind the table. A cricket bat lay on the table, probably placed in readiness for an

"If you've got any explanation or excuse to make, we're willing to hear it," said Talbot.

"Yaas; but buck up, you wottah!"

"You—you see, I couldn't let you chaps go on to Bunchester," said Lowther. "I was surprised to see you there at all. I thought you'd have to give it up."

"We weren't going to give it up for you!" growled Blake. "But we missed half the show!"

"Why did you play that rotten trick to keep us away from the theatre?" asked Figgins wrathfully.

"Ahem! I—I thought you'd better not go!" said Lowther. "Upon the whole, you young chaps ought not to frequent places of amusement in that reckless way, and expend your pocket-money in riotous living!"

"You cheeky ass—"

"You feahfully impertinent wottah—"

"Look here," said Tom Merry, "you had some motive for playing that rotten trick. There's nothing to be said in defence of it that I can think of. If you had any real reason for doing it, tell us what it was."

"I had a good reason."

"Well, what was it?"

Monty Lowther was silent.

"Out with it!" growled Herries.

"I can't really explain," said Lowther. "I might as well have let you go as explain the reason why I kept you away. It was strictly necessary."

"Necessary for what?"

"For a very important purpose," said Lowther.

"What purpose?"

"I can't tell you."

"Nuff of this silly rot!" said Blake. "I knew you hadn't any excuse to make. It was just a rotten trick—one of your beastly practical jokes—and you're going to be jolly well ragged for it!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Hold on!" said Tom Merry.

"Rats! You Shell bounders can clear out if you like, and leave him to us," said Blake. "I tell you, he's going through it."

Tom Merry and Manners hesitated. The edge of their resentment had worn off by this time, and they remembered that Monty Lowther was their chum. But they could not interfere on his behalf against the just indignation of the juniors.

"Well, you've brought it on yourself, Monty," said Tom. "It's no business of mine. Whatever you get serves you right. I must say that."

"My sentiments exactly," said Manners. "Don't wreck the study, you chaps; you can wreck that silly ass as much as you like."

And Tom Merry and Manners walked out of the room, followed by Talbot. The other fellows closed round Monty Lowther with grim looks. Lowther gripped the bat.

"Now, keep your distance," he said. "I don't want to hurt you, but—"

Yaroooh!

A cushion, deftly aimed and hurled by Blake, caught the Shell fellow on the chest, and he sat down, and the cricket bat clanged into the grate. Before he could rise, the enraged juniors were upon him. Lowther struggled desperately in seven pairs of hands, all eager to get at him.

"Bump him!"

"Wallop him!"

"Wag the wottah!"

For the next ten minutes the scene in the study was beyond description.

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emergency, and Lowther's fingers closed on the cane handle.

"So you've got back?" he said genially.

"Yaas, you wottah!"

"Yes, you beast!"

"Yes, you outsider!"

"What did you play that rotten trick on us for, Monty?" exclaimed Tom Merry indignantly.

"Explain yourself, you rotter!"

"Keep your distance!" said Lowther. "I'll explain as far as I can. I'm sorry if you were put to any inconvenience—"

"If!" howled Figgins. "We had to wheel the bikes two miles, and send 'em home by train. We missed the first half of the show."

"And we saw you in the box cackling at us!" said Fatty Wynn.

Monty Lowther grinned.

"It was too bad," he said. "I own that. But in the circumstances—"

"What circumstances?"

"Ahem! You see—" Lowther hesitated.

For ten minutes it seemed to Monty Lowther that he was the centre of several earthquakes, hurricanes, and cyclones. The juniors had great wrongs to avenge, and they avenged them in the most thoroughgoing manner.

The delinquent was bumped, rolled over, licked, clawed, hustled, and ragged without mercy.

When the breathless juniors had finished with him, he lay on the floor, leaning back against the wall of the study, his collar gone, his jacket slit, his hair a mop, his face crimson. Ink, jam, and treacle had been swamped over him, till he was scarcely recognisable.

"There! I think that will do!" panted Blake at last. "I think it will be a long time before he gets over that!"

"Groogh!" gurgled Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah! I twust that you will not play any more wotten pwactical jokes on us, Lowthah."

"Groogh!"

And the avengers marched out of the study, quite satisfied, leaving Monty Lowther anything but satisfied.

CHAPTER 8.

Gussy Sees It All!

THE next day Monty Lowther was still feeling the effects of that terrific ragging.

Perhaps that accounted for the thoughtful expression and the subdued manner of the humorist of the Shell.

As a rule, Lowther was full of high spirits, and he frequently annexed the lion's share of the conversation wherever he found himself.

Now all was changed.

The most sociable fellow in the Shell showed a desire for solitude that was quite inexplicable; and when he was with the other fellows he was very quiet, and hardly spoke at all. His thoughts seemed to be always busy, however, and many times he was caught muttering to himself.

Tom Merry and Manners were greatly puzzled.

Lowther did not seem to be any longer the old Lowther they had always known; a strange change had come over him.

He was one of the keenest of the supporters of "Tom Merry's Weekly," and whatever contributions failed to come in, Lowther's comic column had always been a dead cert.

But comicality seemed to be no longer a part of his nature. The famous "Weekly" did not appear regularly—as Lowther had remarked, it was "weakly" in its appearance—but Tom Merry had determined that a number should come out that week. He was surprised to find that Lowther had lost all his keenness.

"You can leave out the comic column this week," said Lowther, when Tom Merry mentioned that copy was wanted.

Tom stared. Lowther had often suggested leaving out the contributions of lesser lights; but he had always regarded the comic column as a sine qua non.

"Leave it out!" repeated Tom Merry.

"Yes, the fellows say that it's all chestnuts, you know, and they've heard 'em all before, so we'll give 'em a rest this time."

"You've never cared what the fellows said about your little jokes before," said Tom.

"Or you wouldn't have made 'em," added Manners thoughtfully.

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"Well, I don't care now; but I don't feel up to producing any humorous contributions at present. Got more serious things to think of."

"What things?" asked Tom.

"Oh, things!" said Monty Lowther vaguely.

"Well, there's your serial," said Tom. "We shall expect the usual instalment of the 'Adventures of Archibald.'"

"Can't be done! Put in a note—instalment left out owing to the death of the author, or something of that sort."

"If you don't do the instalment I shall ask Blake to do it."

"All right; ask Blake."

That put the lid on, so to speak. At any other time Monty Lowther would have been simply furious at the idea of any other fellow doing an instalment of his serial. Now he did not seem to care in the least.

Tom Merry and Manners were astounded. They stared at their chum; but it was evidently useless to ask questions. Lowther's lips were set obstinately.

"Then you'll be right out of this number?" said Tom.

Lowther yawned.

"All right; I don't mind."

"It seems to me," said Manners, "that you're going right off your chump, Monty. First of all, you play a rotten practical joke on us, in a particularly beastly way. Now you chuck up the 'Weekly.' You're always sneaking off somewhere by yourself, and when a chap sees you, you've never got a word to say—always muttering to yourself about some silly rot—"

"It's not silly rot!" said Lowther indignantly.

"What is it, then?"

"Ahem! Never mind."

"You're keeping a secret," said Tom Merry sharply, "or else you're putting on all this idiotic mystery for a joke! I don't like that kind of joke!"

"Sorry!" said Lowther. "Excuse me now, you fellows."

And Lowther walked out into the quadrangle, leaving Tom Merry and Manners looking at one another in amazement and annoyance.

They had been talking in the Form-room passage, just after coming out from lessons. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had been looking on, with a most thoughtful expression upon his noble brow.

"Bai Jove!" he murmured. "There's no doubt about it."

"No doubt about what?" asked Manners. "Do you think he's dotty?"

"Yaas, in a way. I weally think I have hit upon the solution of the mystewy," said Arthur Augustus, with a nod. "Howevah, I shall make sure. Poor old Lowthah!"

"What are you saying poor old Lowther for, ass? What bee have you got in your bonnet now?" demanded Tom Merry.

"I commisewate poor old Lowthah, because I've been through it myself," explained Arthur Augustus loftily.

"Through what?"

"Through what's twoublin' poor old Lowthah," said Arthur Augustus. "I've hit upon it. I think pewwaps I had bettah tell you chaps, as you are his fwiends. Don't tell all the fellows, or he will be laughed at no end. I can see it all!"

"All what?" howled Tom Merry and Manners together.

"You see, in a delicate mattah of this kind, it requires a fellow of tact

and judgment to spot what is the mattah. But I can see it all," said D'Arcy, with a sage shake of the head. "Poor old Lowthah!"

"My only hat! I believe you're as dotty as Lowther!" said Tom Merry crossly. "If you know what's come over him, tell us, you silly chump!"

"I wufuse to be called a silly chump, Tom Mewwy! Howevah, as you are his fwiends, you two chaps, I think I ought to tell you, pewwaps."

"Tell us, then!" roared Tom.

"You see"—Arthur Augustus looked round cautiously and lowered his voice—"I know all about it; I've been there in my younghah days." Arthur Augustus might have been a centenarian, at least, by the way he said that. "I've been through it, and I know all the signs. Lowthah is—"

He paused dramatically.

"Well, he's what?"

"He's in love!" said D'Arcy, in a whisper.

Tom Merry and Manners jumped. They stared blankly at Arthur Augustus for a moment, and then burst into a roar of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus raised his eyeglass, carefully jammed it into his eye, and glanced loftily and disdainfully at the hilarious Shell fellows.

"I fail to see any cause for this wibald laughtah," he said. "It's a sewious mattah to a kid of Lowthah's age when he falls in love."

"In love! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Tom Merry, wiping his eyes. "Oh my only Aunt Josephine! You ass! Monty is a silly fathead, but he's not such a silly fathead as all that!"

"I know the signs," said Arthur Augustus calmly. "Chuckin' up all one's usual bizney, and goin' about alone, and avoin' one's fwiends, and muttewin' to oneself. I am quite sure that I have hit the wight nail on the head. Poor old Lowthah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Pway don't cackle, deah boys. It is weally not a cacklin' mattah for poor old Lowthah. It would be bettah to talk to him sewiously."

"Come on!" exclaimed Manners. "Let's talk to him seriously. We'll ask him."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The three juniors followed Monty Lowther into the quad. They caught sight of him under the old elms, walking to and fro. He was evidently deeply buried in thought, for he did not observe their approach, and they could see that he was muttering to himself. As they came up Lowther was seen to stretch out both his arms in a supplicating manner, and they heard him exclaim:

"Oh, Cicely—Cicely! My own—my own!"

Tom Merry and Manners halted, thunderstruck. Arthur Augustus gave them a triumphant glance. Lowther's sudden exclamation came as a convincing proof of D'Arcy's theory.

"What did I tell you, deah boys?"

"My hat!"

"Great Scott!"

"The silly youngstah is in love!" said Arthur Augustus. "I told you I could see it all. You can always wely on a fellow of tact and judgment—"

"The silly ass!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"My deah chap, it might happen to anybody. I wemembah once myself—"

"But Lowther never was such an asinine ass as you are," remarked Manners.



There was a chorus of yells and angry exclamations as the juniors took hold of their bicycles. "Punctured!" "Flat as a pancake!" "My valve's out!" "Look at my tyres!" The juniors gazed at their machines in astonishment. "Lowther's done this!" said Figgins, glaring after that youth, who was fast disappearing in the distance.

"Weally, Mannahs—"
 "Lowther!" shouted Tom Merry.
 Monty Lowther came to himself with a start and glared round at the juniors.
 "Hallo! What do you want?"
 "Who's Cicely?"
 "What?"
 "Who is it? What are you jabbering about Cicely for?"
 Lowther turned crimson.
 "Go and eat coke!" he exclaimed.

And he strode away angrily. Arthur Augustus wagged his head sagely at the two Shell fellows. He had not the slightest doubt as to the correctness of his theory; and Tom Merry and Manners were inclined to agree with him now.

"In love!" murmured Tom. "It looks like it! But who's Cicely? I never heard the name, that I remember."

"Bai Jove!"
 "Well, ass, what is it now?" demanded Tom.

"Don't you wemembah?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus excitedly. "Cicely is the name of the lady in the sketch at the Bunchestah Empiah."

"Great Scott!"
 "The mystewy is explained," said Arthur Augustus. "Lowthah has fallen in love with the lady at the Bunchestah Empiah, and that's why he was twyin' to keep us away yesterday."

Tom Merry and Manners staggered against the elms in helpless state of merriment. If that was the explanation of Monty Lowther's mysterious conduct—and it really seemed as if Arthur Augustus had hit upon it—they could not regard it as a serious matter, in spite of D'Arcy's assurance that it was very serious. They yelled with laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "It weally isn't a laughin' mattah to—"

"Isn't it?" roared Tom Merry. "If that's what's the matter with Monty, we'll jolly well laugh him out of it—the silly ass! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Manners.
 Arthur Augustus' theory, whether correct or not, was soon known to all the School House fellows. Monty Lowther, when he came in a little later, was surprised to find himself greeted with a howl of laughter.

"How's Cicely?" demanded Kangaroo.

"When is it to be?" howled Gore.
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 Lowther stared at them and flushed, and, without replying, went to his study and slammed the door.

CHAPTER 9.

Help Required!

TOM MERRY and Manners were smiling when they came into the study to do their preparation.

Lowther was there alone. He had been alone there for a long time. He looked up with a frown at their entrance, and frowned more deeply as he saw their smiling faces.

"Well, what's the joke?" he growled.
 "You are!" said Tom Merry cheerfully. "You mustn't mind a fellow smiling if you make such a giddy ass of yourself, Monty."

"How old is Cicely?" asked Manners.
 "Forty or fifty?"

"Cicely! What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the lady in the sketch at the Empire—His Love

Against the Giddy Earth," grinned Manners. "The charming creature you are in love with. Ha, ha, ha!"

"You silly ass!" said Lowther. "Her name isn't Cicely. That's her name in the play. Her name is Gloriana Gilhooly."

"My aunt! What a stunning name! And when is she going to become Gloriana Lowther?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "You fathead! She is thirty years old, and a respectable married lady, you howling ass! What put that silly idea into your fat head?"

"Isn't it true, then?" demanded Manners. "Aren't you in love?"

Lowther snorted.
 "Do I look that kind of idiot?" he demanded.

"Well, you're several sorts of an idiot, so I don't see why you shouldn't be that sort," retorted Manners. "But if you're not in love with Cicely—I mean Gloriana—what are you always muttering her name and calling her sweet things for—eh?"

"Oh, rats!"
 "I must say I'm shocked at you, Lowther," said Tom Merry solemnly. "When Gussy falls in love, he always chooses ladies not more than ten years older than himself, and always unmarried ladies."

"Always!" said Manners.
 Lowther jumped up.
 "Look here, you silly idiots, I won't have this! If you can't stop talking rot I'll get out of the study!"

Tom Merry made a soothing gesture. "Take it easy," he said. "If you say you're not in love—"

"You—you crass idiot, of course I'm not!" howled Lowther.

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"Well, we'll take your word for it. Gussy's on the wrong track. But if it's not that, what is the matter with you?"

"Br-r-r-r!" said Lowther.
"Oh, keep your silly secret!" said Manners impatiently. "Blessed if I'm going to ask you any more! Go and eat coke! If a fellow can't confide in his own pals, I should say there was something jolly shady about his beastly secret, that's all"

"You don't understand," said Lowther. "And if you were good pals you'd try to help me, instead of chipping and cackling like a pair of silly geese. I want your help, too—only you won't—"

"Of course we'll help you," said Tom at once. "What can we do?"

"Any old thing!" declared Manners. "Command us! Do you want to hire a motor-car to carry Cicely off? Or an aeroplane? Once aboard the aeroplane, and the gal is ours, you know."

"I've got to get out to-night," said Lowther, without heeding Manners' humorous suggestion. "I don't know how to manage it. I've got to be somewhere at nine—"

"Buncheater?" asked Tom Merry.
"Well, yes, Buncheater," said Lowther. "This is in confidence."

"You mean to say that you're thinking of going to Buncheater to-night?"

"Yes, I'm going."
"But you can't go!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "If it's the show at the Empire, what do you want to see it for? You've seen it once."

"I can't explain, or you'd be up against it at once," said Lowther.

"And yet you want us to help you out?"

"Yes, I do. I'll tell you this much—there's no harm in it. It's nothing shady or fishy—nothing in the line of Cutts of the Fifth. I'm doing quite right; only—only the Head wouldn't look at it like that, or Mr. Railton either. And you chaps—" Lowther paused. "You chaps wouldn't understand. But I've got to get out to-night, to get to Buncheater, and—and you've got to help me!"

"It's impossible!"
"I'm going," said Lowther determinedly.

"But you can't!" exclaimed Tom Merry, quite aghast. "Look here! Bed-time's half-past nine. Kildare sees lights out for us to-night. If you're not in the dorm he will miss you. What would happen then? You'd be waited for, and marched in to the Head the minute you came back! Breaking bounds at night! You'd be flogged!"

"I don't care."
"Or be sacked," said Manners.
"I'm willing to risk it."

"We're not willing to help you risk it," said Tom. "You're jolly well not going. Look here, Monty, have a little sense. You can't do it!"

"I can—and will—and must!" said Lowther. "I've given my word, and if I don't go I shall be leaving a chap in the lurch, and in a jolly difficult position, too! I've got to go, and if you fellows help me it will be all serene. I'll pretend to go to bed early, and make up the bed with a bolster and pillows and things. Kildare won't notice any difference when he comes into the dorm if you're careful. You can keep him from spotting that I'm not in the dorm. After lights are out you can sneak out of the dorm and open the catch of the box-room window so that I can get in. It will be as safe as houses!"

Tom Merry and Manners looked at

him blankly. Of all the hare-brained schemes they had ever heard this seemed the wildest.

"It's almost sure to come out," said Tom at last.

"Not if you're careful."
"You can't get to Buncheater," said Manners. "There's no train at this time of night."

"I'm not going by train. I've hired a motor-bike, and it's ready for me outside."

"Great Scott!"
"I've got to be at Buncheater by nine, and—"

"What for?"
"Lots of things—keeping my word's one of them."

"If you've really promised—"
"I've given my word."

"Well, then— But—but it's impossible!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"If you fellows don't help me I shall go without," said Lowther quietly. "I'll just walk out of the school and chance everything."

"You ass, you know what that would mean!"
"Well, help me, then. You call yourselves my pals, don't you? A pal's business is to help a fellow out of a hole!"

"Seems to me we should be helping you into one, more likely," said Tom. "What about your preparation?"

"Hang that!"
"It will mean trouble with Linton in the morning."

"Hang Linton!"
There was a silence in the study. Tom Merry and Manners were utterly taken aback. At the same time it was clear that there was no arguing with Monty Lowther. He was determined, and if his chums did not aid him in getting out of the school secretly he would go openly.

And, uneasy as they were, and heartily as they disapproved of the whole business, the two Shell fellows felt that they were bound to stand by him. That there was nothing "shady" in the business they felt assured. Lowther's word was good enough for them. But the secret was intensely exasperating. Shady or not, Lowther was getting himself mixed up in something that would lead to no good; they were sure of that.

"Well, are you going to help me?" asked Lowther at last.
"I suppose we must," said Tom. "I suppose this means that you are mixed up in something or other with Mr. Curil?"

Lowther did not reply.
"You say you've given your word?"
"Yes."

"Then I suppose you've got to keep it. But you were a silly ass to make any promise of the kind. We'll do the best we can."

"I don't like it," said Manners; "but I suppose we've got to do it."
Lowther brightened up at once.

"That's all right!" he exclaimed. "I'd do as much for you!"

"You wouldn't find us playing the giddy goat in this way!" snapped Manners.

"I'll go up to the dorm now," said Lowther. "I've got rather a headache owing to the way those idiots handled me yesterday. You chaps be in the dorm in good time, and keep it up that I'm in bed. Good-night!"

"When will you be back?"
"I don't know—before midnight, anyway."

Monty Lowther quitted the study. Tom Merry and Manners remained in silence, looking at one another. They were in a state of the utmost dismay,

and they more than half regretted their promise to help Lowther in his wild scheme.

And yet there was nothing else to be done. He was determined to carry out his project, and only by their help could he hope to do so without discovery. And discovery would have meant the most unpleasant consequences for him. They could imagine the Head's face if he learned that a junior of the Shell had broken bounds at night to visit a theatre fifteen miles away.

"Well, this beats it!" said Manners at last. "Monty is simply asking for the sack, and if we don't look after him he'll get it!"

"We've got to look after him, then," said Tom glumly.

But they were not cheerful about it.

CHAPTER 10.

The Death of Lowther!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY was in the passage when Monty Lowther came out of the study.

The Shell fellow would have passed him, but D'Arcy was not to be passed. He had come out there to see Lowther, and he meant to see him.

"Pway don't huwvy, deah boy," he said. "I want to speak to you."

Lowther paused impatiently.
"What is it?" he snapped.

"Don't be watty, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, his look very sympathetic and his tone very soft. "I undahstand perfectly. I know exactly what is the mattah, and I sympathise with you vevy much. I have been there myself."

"I know you've been there!" growled Lowther. "I saw you there with the other silly idiots yesterday!"

"I was not alludin' to the Buncheater Empiah, deah boy. I mean, I have been through what you are goin' through now."

"What on earth are you talking about?" demanded Lowther, in astonishment.

"I am alludin' to your tendah wegard for Cicely—"

"Oh, you ass!"
"Don't be watty!" said Arthur Augustus, with a soothing motion of the hand. "Pway confide in me, deah boy. You may wegard me as an old hand in these mattahs. As I have remarked, I have been there myself. Indeed, I have actually pwoposed once. Fortunately it went no furthah than that!"

"You—you—you—" Lowther gasped. "Oh, you're too funny to live! Let me pass!"

"Won't you confide in me, deah boy?"

"I've got a headache, and I'm going to bed," said Lowther.

"So bad as that?" asked D'Arcy sympathetically. "Pewwaps you would like me to come to the dorm with you and talk it ovah?"

"No, I wouldn't!"
"It would pewwaps make you easiah in your mind to confide the whole mattah to me," Arthur Augustus urged. "You may wegard me in the light of an eldhahy welahon. Ow! Lowthah, you wottah!"

Arthur Augustus staggered against the wall as Lowther lost patience and gave him a push. The Shell fellow strode away.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus, rubbing his chest. "I wegard that as watah ungwateful aftah the kindly intewest I have taken in him. But I suppose I must excuse a chap who is desepwately in love. Poor old Lowthah!"

And Arthur Augustus shook his head sadly.

Monty Lowther proceeded to the dormitory. He mentioned to several fellows on the way that he had a headache and was going to bed early. In order to keep within the truth, he did go to bed. Croke of the Shell looked curiously into the dormitory, and found Lowther in bed, and grinned at him.

"Heartache?" he inquired.
 "Clear out!" growled Lowther.
 Croke chuckled.
 "We're all feeling awfully sympathetic," he explained. "Would you like me to sit beside you and hold your hand while you talk about Cicely? Ow! You beast!"

A boot whizzed through the air, and Croke dodged out of the dormitory just in time, slamming the door after him. When he was gone Lowther turned out of bed again. He was glad that he had been seen in bed; it made it less likely that suspicion would be roused.

He arranged the bolster and some clothes in the bed, and covered them up, giving the dummy the appearance of a sleeper. Then he turned out the light.

He waited a few moments, listening at the dormitory door, and then, satisfied that Croke was gone, he left the dormitory and hurried to the box-room. A few minutes later he was outside St. Jim's.

Meanwhile, Tom Merry and Manners were busy with their preparation, but they were giving it much less careful attention than usual. They could not help thinking about Lowther in those same minutes speeding away from the school on a motor-bicycle for his unknown and mysterious business at Bunchester.

They intended to do their best for him, and yet there was every possible

risk that his absence would be discovered. And then— They did not like to think of what would follow.

It was about half an hour after Lowther's departure that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy looked into the Shell dormitory.

All was dark there. Arthur Augustus listened for a few moments, and then turned on the electric light. In Monty Lowther's bed the figure of a sleeper was outlined.

Arthur Augustus tiptoed towards the bed.

"Lowthah, old man!"
 No response.

"Lowthah, deah boy, if you are asleep I won't disturb you. I only want to remark that I don't beah any malice for your havin' been watty. I quite undahstand your feelin's, old fellow. I have been there myself. And I wepeat my offah to listen to you if you care to confide in a kindwed spiwit. I assuah you that you will find me vevy sympathetic. I quite undahstand these mattahs, deah boy."

Still silence.

"Bai Jove, I suppose he's asleep!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "I should have pwesumed that he was lyin' in a state of anguish, meditat' upon the awkward posish. I am atwaid that I shall have to wake him up. Lowthah, deah boy, I twust you will not be offended if I speak to you wathah plainly."

Not a sound or a movement. Arthur Augustus put his hand upon the shoulder of the sleeper, or what would have been a shoulder if the sleeper had been there. He shook the dummy gently. If the dummy had been Monty Lowther certainly the shake would have awakened him.

"Lowthah, deah boy, you should not

covah your head with the sheet in that way; it's awfully unhealthy to sleep undah the bedclothes. Can you heah me?"

Arthur Augustus paused for a reply; but it did not come. The swell of St. Jim's was a little nettled.

"Now, weally, Lowthah, I know you are awake, and can heah evvery word I say. It is weally somethin' important I have to say to you. Pway don't be an obstinate ass, but sit up and listen to me!"

The sleeper did not move.
 "Vevy well. I will speak to you all the same. Lowthah, I have made a vevy painful discovevay."

Arthur Augustus' tone was very serious and solemn, and ought to have had a considerable effect upon the occupant of the bed. But the bolster and the pillows and the folded coat under the bedclothes showed no sign of emotion.

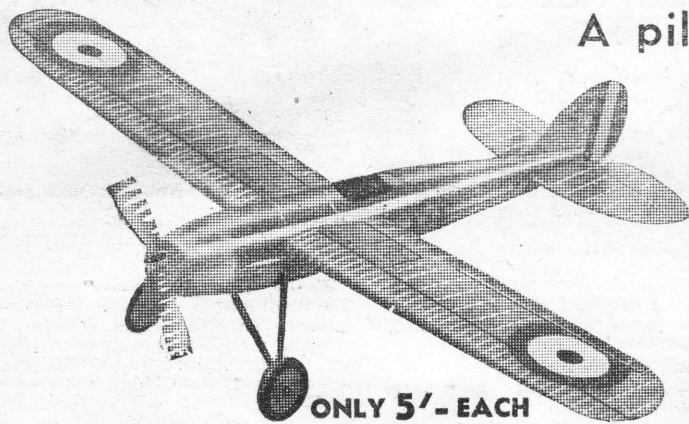
"Lowthah, I have been weadin' a notice of the sketch, 'His Love Against the World,' in the papah. The lady who plays the part of Cicely de Vere is mentioned—Miss Glowiana Gilhooly. Pwepare yourself for a painful communication, Lowthah!"

No sign from the bed.

"Pwepare yourself, Lowthah! I wepeat that I undahstand your feelin's. I have been there myself. But you must ovahcome it, Lowthah. Monty, old man, the papah distinctly states that Miss Glowiana Gilhooly is a mawwied lady!"

Arthur Augustus, firmly convinced as he was that Monty Lowther's secret trouble was caused by a romantic devotion to Cicely, of the Bunchester Empire, expected to see him leap up

(Continued on next page.)



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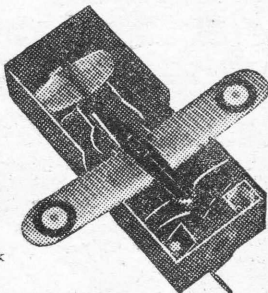
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from the bed in wild agitation at this impressive announcement. But he didn't. Deeply impressive as the announcement was, it had no perceptible effect whatever upon the bolster and the pillows.

"Lowthah," said Arthur Augustus, after a dramatic pause, "I twust you fully wealise the sewiousness of this. The papah states that Miss Glowiana Gilhooly acts undah her unmawwied name, but is the wife of Mr. Gilhooly, the conductah of the orchestwah at the Bunchestah Empiah. You will see, deah boy, that you are bound as an honouvable chap to dwive this attachment entiahly out of your mind."

Still no answer. Arthur Augustus began to lose patience. Certainly Monty Lowther ought to have shown some sign of emotion by this time.

"Lowthah, will you speak?"

Silence.

"Bai Jove, there must be somethin' the mattah with him!" murmured Arthur Augustus uneasily. "I twust he has not fainted. I—I twust he is not ill!"

He bent over the bed, but could hear no sound of breathing. He was quite alarmed by this time. He listened for a full minute, but there was no breathing in the figure under his anxious face. Monty Lowther could not be holding his breath all that time. D'Arcy's face became quite pale.

He passed a somewhat trembling hand over the sleeper and felt for his breast to ascertain whether the heart was still beating.

There was not the slightest pulsation to be discerned beneath the bedclothes.

Arthur Augustus jumped back from the bed as if he had touched something red-hot. There was horror in his face now. He would have turned back the sheet to see whether there was a sign of life in Lowther's face, but his nerve failed him. He felt that he could not bear to look upon the lifeless face of that victim of an unfortunate attachment.

"G-good gwacious!" groaned Arthur Augustus, in utter horror. "The poor chap! Poor old Lowthah! It was my fault for bweakin' it to him so suddenly. But he must have had heart disease, or somethin'. Poor old Lowthah!"

He backed away from the bed. So overcome was he by the horror of the situation that he dared not remove his eyes from the bed, and he reached the door backwards. Then he dashed out of the dormitory and flew downstairs to the Shell passage, and burst into Tom Merry's study.

Tom Merry and Manners were working dismally at their preparation. They jumped up in alarm as Arthur Augustus burst in upon them. The horror in his agitated face startled the chums of the Shell.

"What on earth's the matter?" exclaimed Tom Merry.

D'Arcy clung to the table, hardly able to articulate.

"Lowthah!" he gasped.

"Lowther! What's the matter? Has he been nailed?"

"He—he—he——" stuttered D'Arcy.

"He—he—he!" repeated Manners.

"What are you he-he-heing about?"

"He—he—he's dead!"

"What!"

"It's true!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, sinking into a chair. "He's dead, and it's my fault for bweakin' it to him so suddenly. He's died of a bwoke heart!"

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CHAPTER 11.

Crooke Knows!

TOM MERRY and Manners stared blankly at the swell of St. Jim's. Their first thought was that Arthur Augustus had gone out of his senses.

But the Fourth Former, though evidently very much agitated, was quite in his right mind. He was a prey to the deepest emotion, that was all.

"Poor old Lowthah!" he groaned. "Poor old Lowthah! And only yestaday we were waggin' him. Pewwaps that had somethin' to do with it. I will nevah wag him again—I mean, I will nevah wag anybody again. A bwoke heart! Poor old Lowthah! It's howwible, deah boys!"

Tom Merry grasped him by the shoulder and shook him.

"Tell us what's the matter, you silly owl!" he said. "What are you talking about? Is anything the matter with Lowther?"

"He's dead in his bed—not a bweath, and his heart isn't beatin'!"

Then the two Shell fellows understood. It was not surprising that the dummy in Lowther's bed was not breathing, and it would have been very surprising indeed if its heart had been beating.

"Oh, you fathead!" said Manners, in relief.

"You silly josser!" said Tom Merry, equally, relieved.

"It isn't all wright!" said Arthur Augustus. "It's all w'ong. And it's party my fault. I bwoke the dweadful news to him so suddenly!"

"What dreadful news?"

"About the one he's in love with."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Pway don't laugh, Tom Mewwy! It sounds howwible at a moment like this. I had just discovahed that Miss Gilhooly was a mawwied lady, and I felt it my duty to acquaint Lowthah with the fact. So I went and told him. I expected him to be vewy much cut up, of course, but he nevah moved or spoke."

"Go hon!" said Manners.

"Then—then I touched him," said D'Arcy, with a shudder, "and—his heart wasn't beatin'! So I wan down at once to you fellows."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus sprang up, indescribably shocked by the burst of laughter from the two Shell fellows.

"You heartless wottahs!" he exclaimed. "I did not think you would take it like this. I wegard your laughah as howwible. Poor old Lowthah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry. "Did you look at him?"

"I did not. I was too howwah-stwicken!"

"Well, Lowther's all right," said Tom, wiping away his tears. "Lowther isn't in bed at all; it's only a dummy, you duffer!"

"What?"

"And he isn't in love with Cicely, after all, and there's no need for Mr. Gilhooly, of the Empire, to be jealous!"

laughed Manners. Oh, Gussy, you'll be the death of me some day. I know you will!"

"Then where is Lowthah? Isn't he in bed?" demanded D'Arcy.

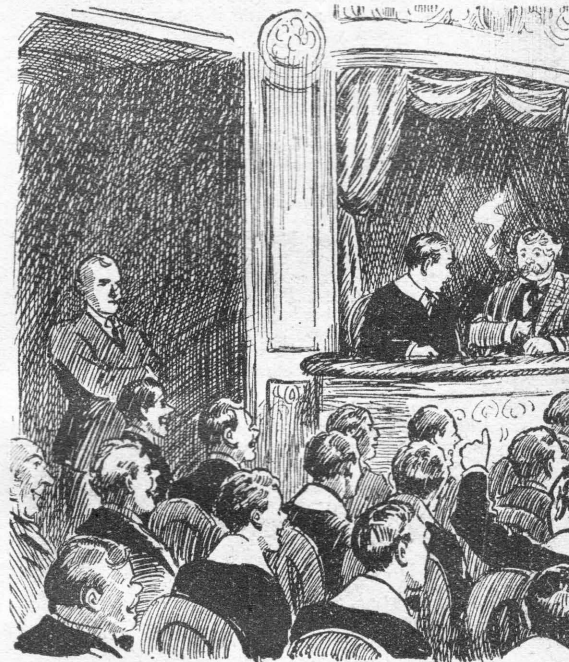
"The silly ass has gone out. Keep it dark," said Tom. "He won't be back when Kildare sees lights out; that's why the dummy's there. I hope you haven't told this silly rot to anybody else!"

"I passed Cwooke as I came down," said D'Arcy. "He asked me what was the mattah."

"Did you tell him?" yelled Tom.

"Yaas, of course!"

"Oh, you ass! You fathead!"



"My hat!" exclaimed Figgins, pointing. "There's Lowther the box, where Lowther sat talking"

"Weally Tom Mewwy——"

The Shell fellows did not stay to listen for more. They rushed out of the study and up to the Shell dormitory. Arthur Augustus, much relieved in his mind, followed them. Tom Merry expected to find Crooke prying in the dormitory, and he was not mistaken. The cad of the Shell was there.

He was standing beside Monty Lowther's bed, with a grin on his face. He had turned back the bedclothes, and the dummy was revealed to view. Arthur Augustus turned pink as he saw it, and realised that it was to that bundle of pillows and bolsters and old coats that he had been making his tragic communication respecting Miss Gilhooly.

"Hallo! What's the little game?" said Crooke, with a laugh. "What's Lowther up to now?"

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "I've been taken in!"

"I wasn't taken in, though!" chuckled Crooke. "I came to see. Where's the Lowther, you fellows? What's the little game?"

The Shell fellows did not reply. They were stricken with dismay. Crooke was an enemy of the Terrible Three, and he was a sneak. Lowther's secret was

in his keeping now, and they realised that it might as well have been shouted from the housetops.

Crooke evidently realised that he held the whip-hand now. He grinned with glee at the idea. He had caught Monty Lowther out!

"Out of bounds, I suppose?" he went on. "This is a little game to take old Kildare in, is it? Where's he gone—to see Cicely? Ha, ha, ha!"

"Never mind where he's gone," said Tom Merry at last. "This has got to be kept dark, Crooke."

Crooke chuckled. "Kept dark! You bet! I'm jolly well going to tell all the fellows now!"

kept, and it was useless to appeal to Crooke's good nature—he hadn't any. It was still more useless to appeal to his sense of honour, for that quality was still more conspicuous by its absence.

"Look here, Crooke," said Tom quietly, "this has got to be kept a secret. Do you understand? Not a word outside this dormitory."

Crooke shrugged his shoulders. "You can get Lowther into a row if you like," continued Tom Merry, "but if you do we'll make you pay for it! If you say a single word—" He paused.

"Well?" sneered Crooke. "If you say a word about this you'll get a hiding to start with—the hiding of your life!" said Tom Merry.

"And besides that, have you heard that people who live in glass-houses shouldn't throw stones? Do you want me to tell Mr. Railton that you smoke cigarettes in your study, and that you went last Saturday afternoon to play billiards with that rotter Lasker in Rylcombe?"

Crooke stared. "So you're going to start as a sneak?" he asked sneeringly.

"If you do, I will!" said Tom determinedly. "If you had a rag of decency it wouldn't be necessary to threaten you. As it is, that's the only way to keep your beastly mouth shut! Mind, I mean what I say. If you utter one word I'll go straight to Mr. Railton and give you away, and you'll be had up before the Head. I mean it!"

"Yaas, wathah! In the circle, I quite approve," said Arthur Augustus. "Don't be a beastly sneak, Crooke."

"I wasn't going to tell Railton," said Crooke sullenly.

"I know exactly what you were going to do," said Tom, with a curl of the lip. "And you're jolly well not going to do it. Understand? If Lowther is bowled out I shall put it down to you—"

"Somebody else may spot this—"

"Not unless you give them the tip. Anyway, I'll chance that. If it comes out, your little goings-on will come out, too. I give you my word about that!"

Crooke clenched his hands. Crooke had more to fear from being given away than Monty Lowther had, wherever he was at the present moment. Crooke realised that he did not hold the whip-hand, after all, if Tom Merry chose to turn his own methods upon him. That was a thing Crooke had never anticipated, and it enraged him so much that for a few moments he could hardly speak.

"Well, what do you say?" asked Tom Merry grimly.

"I'm not going to say anything," muttered Crooke.

"Mind you don't! If this gets out, I shall put it down to you, and you'll suffer for it. You know you've done enough to be sacked a dozen times if the Housemaster were once put on the track. And he will be, if this comes out."

"I tell you somebody else may spot it, and—"

"If that happens, all the worse for you. I shall put it down to you."

"Look here—"

"Enough said!"

Tom Merry turned out the light and walked out of the dormitory, followed by Manners and D'Arcy. Crooke followed slowly, gritting his teeth. Tom Merry did not even look at him again.

Crooke's discovery remained a secret within his own breast, anxious as he was to publish it. He could keep a secret when he liked. But though he said nothing, he thought the more, and he consoled himself with the reflection that he was only hiding his time.

CHAPTER 12.

Keeping it Dark!

HALF-PAST nine was bed-time for the juniors of St. Jim's, but at twenty past Tom Merry made his way to the Shell dormitory with Manners. They wanted to be on the scene before the rest of the juniors came up, in order to keep watch and ward, as it were, over Monty Lowther's bed. To keep the dummy in Lowther's bed from being discovered by the other fellows—and, above all, by Kildare—was not an easy task, and the closer it came the more it worried them. But there was no help for it now. Monty Lowther was miles from St. Jim's, and his escapade had to be hidden.

The two juniors had to act a part, and acting a part was extremely repugnant to them. They would have made the matter easier by confiding in chums they could rely upon—such as Talbot, Kangaroo, Glyn, and Clifton Dane—but they shrank from bringing other fellows into what might prove a serious scrape. For if Lowther's absence were discovered, all the other fellows who were helping to conceal it would certainly have found themselves in trouble, as well as the absentee himself.

When the rest of the Shell came into the dormitory, Manners was seated on the side of Lowther's bed, taking his boots off, and apparently had been chatting with the junior, who had gone to bed early. So far appearances were kept up. But Lowther's having a headache and going to bed early was such an unusual circumstance that the other fellows could hardly help remarking on it.

"Poor old Lowther!" Kangaroo remarked, coming towards the bed. "Is he asleep—dreaming of the beautiful Mary Jane? Did you say her name was Mary Jane, or Mary Anne?"

And the Shell fellows chuckled.

"That was only Gussy's rot," said Tom Merry. "It's nothing of the sort, really; Lowther told us so."

"Let him answer for himself," grinned George Gore. "Lowther, speak up! Art thou in love?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

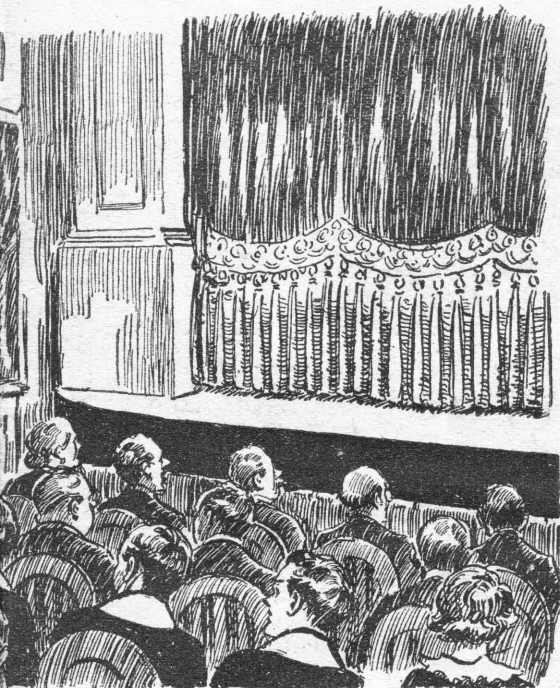
"Silence gives consent," said Dane, as no answer came from the bed. "Lowther is smitten! Lowther has succumbed to the antiquated charms of Gertie Gilhooly. Did you say her name was Gertie, Lowther?"

"Sulky—eh?" remarked Gore. "Why don't you speak, Lowther?"

"He's shy!" chuckled Bernard Glyn. "He doesn't like to own up! Lowther, old man, confide the whole bizney to your bosom chums! I claim to be best man!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Rats!" said Kangaroo warmly. "I'm jolly well going to be best man!"



in a box, by gum!" The St. Jim's party looked towards their old acquaintance, Mr. Curil.

And he made a movement towards the door.

Tom Merry closed the dormitory door, and put his back to it. Crooke's chuckle died away, and he looked a little alarmed. He was shut up in the dormitory with three fellows with whom he was on the worst of terms, any one of whom could have licked him quite easily. His satisfaction diminished considerably.

"Here, no larks!" he exclaimed uneasily.

Manners rearranged the bed, and concealed the dummy from view. Crooke looked at him with a sneer. He did not intend to keep his discovery dark—not he! Not that he intended to go directly to the Housemaster or a prefect with the information that Monty Lowther was out of bounds. But he knew that as soon as Lowther's device became the talk of the House it would not be long in reaching a prefect's ears. Then Kildare would be very careful to ascertain whether Lowther was in the dormitory or not when he saw lights-out for the Shell.

Tom Merry fully understood what was in Crooke's mind, and his expression became very grim. The secret had to be

Lowther, aren't I going to be best man?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Now, tumble in, you kids!" said Kildare of the Sixth, looking in at the door. "What's all this cackling about? Turn in!"

"We're only sympathising with Lowther," explained Gore. "Lowther's fallen in love with Miss Gilhooly, of the Bunchester Empire, and—"

"Don't talk rot!" said Kildare. "Turn in!"

"Well, ask him," said Gore. "He's only pretending to be asleep. He's covered up his face so that we shan't see his blushes. Haven't you, Lowther?"

"Do shut up!" said Tom Merry angrily. "Why can't you ring off, Gore?"

"If Lowther wants me to ring off he can say so," said Gore. "I don't like sulky beasts. What is he sulking for?"

"Hurry up! I'm waiting!" said Kildare.

The Shell fellows turned in. Tom Merry and Manners were in a state of uneasiness, as the prefect's attention was thus directed towards Lowther's bed. But there was nothing in the appearance of the bed to excite suspicion, and Kildare did not give it a second glance.

The two chums breathed more freely when Kildare turned out the light and quitted the dormitory.

Lowther was safe from discovery by the head prefect of the School House, at all events, now. But there was still danger from other quarters. The Shell fellows did not drop the subject; they continued to make remarks to Lowther and to talk "at" him, little dreaming that the object of their chipping was not in the dormitory at all.

"What a blessed sulky beast he is!" said Gore at last. "Not a word! I say, Lowther, have you gone deaf, or dumb, or both?"

"Do shut up, and let's go to sleep!" said Manners.

"I've a jolly good mind to get up and chuck something at him!" growled Gore. "What does he mean by keeping mum like this?"

"Do be quiet!"

"Rats! I'm going to make him speak."

Gore sat up in bed, and a clothes-brush whizzed through the air and dropped upon the still form in Lowther's bed. Thud!

"Won't that make him speak?" growled Gore. "By Jove! I'll chuck a boot next!"

"No, you won't!" said Tom Merry, sitting up in bed. "If you start chucking boots about, I'll swamp a jug of water over you, so look out!"

"Well, why can't the sulky brute speak?"

"Oh, shut up!"

Gore grunted, but he did not throw the boot. He did not want a jug of water in return.

The Shell fellows settled down to sleep at last, getting tired of chipping Lowther, as there came no reply to their remarks.

Glad enough were Tom Merry and Manners when the voices died away, and there was silence in the dormitory.

Discovery had been staved off, though they had been kept on tenterhooks until the other fellows were asleep.

Neither Tom nor his chum thought of slumber. They were too worried and anxious for that. Lowther was at Bunchester, and they could not help wondering what he was doing there.

D'Arcy's ridiculous theory was mistaken; and Lowther had assured them that there was nothing "shady" in his

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mysterious excursion. Then what was he doing—what had he gone to Bunchester for? Something that would exasperate the Head, if the Head knew of it; that they knew from Lowther himself.

But the mere fact that he had gone out at night would be enough to earn him a flogging, if the Head or House-master discovered that nocturnal visit to Bunchester. And there was still danger that he might be "spotted" coming in.

The missing junior's chums had thoughts quite troublesome enough to keep them awake, as the minutes crawled by, and the hours struck slowly from the clock tower.

Half-past eleven had rung out, and still Lowther had not appeared. Manners dozed off now, but Tom Merry remained wide awake.

A slight sound at the door of the dormitory caught his anxious ear at last.

He started up in bed.

"Is that you, Monty?" he asked in a whisper.

"Yes."

"Thank goodness you've got back!"

"It's all right."

Monty Lowther undressed quickly in the dark.

"Not spotted coming in?" asked Tom.

"No."

"Good luck!" The captain of the Shell drew a deep breath of relief.

"I've been on tenterhooks all the time."

"You don't mean to say you've kept awake?"

"Yes, I have."

"No need to," said Lowther. "Besides, you can't keep awake every night."

Tom Merry peered at him in the darkness.

"Every night!" he repeated. "What do you mean? You don't mean to say that you are thinking of playing this fool trick again?"

"I must!"

"Monty!"

"I tell you it's a success!" said Monty Lowther. "I—"

"What's a success?"

"Never mind. My hat! I'm jolly tired." Lowther sank down in bed with a sigh of relief. "I shall sleep like a top. I know that."

"You haven't asked whether anybody's spotted your trick here," said Tom.

"No; has anybody?"

"Gussy and Crooke—nobody else, luckily."

"Crooke!" Lowther sat up. "That cad! Then he's given me away."

"I found a way of shutting him up. But you can't do anything of the kind again, Monty. It's out of the question."

"We'll talk about that to-morrow," yawned Lowther. "Good-night!"

"Good-night!" said Tom shortly.

Lowther was asleep in two or three minutes. He must have been very tired. Tom fell asleep himself at last, but his sleep was troubled by dreams, in which he saw Monty Lowther scouring off on a motor-bike, with the Head pursuing him, and Mr. Curil waving a glass at him. The clang of the rising-bell in the morning awoke Tom from a troubled sleep, and he sat up, yawning, feeling very much the effects of the loss of rest overnight.

Monty Lowther was still fast asleep; the rising-bell had failed to wake him. The Shell fellows all glanced towards Lowther as they turned out.

"Still asleep, by Jove!" said Gore.

"He's a hog for sleep! Wake up, Lowther!" And he jerked away Lowther's pillow, and the Shell fellow awoke with a start and rubbed his eyes.

"My cue?" he exclaimed confusedly. "All right; I'm ready! Dastard, I will never—" He broke off as he realised where he was.

"Hallo! What are you calling me?" exclaimed Gore.

"Eh? I wasn't calling you anything. I suppose I was dreaming," said Lowther. "Still, I'll call you something if you like. Fathead!"

"Well, you've found your voice, at any rate," said Kangaroo. "Why couldn't you speak a word when we were talking to you last night, Lowther?"

Lowther coloured.

"My dear chap, a bed's a place to go to sleep, not to hold a conversation," he said. "Grooh! I feel sleepy!"

"You've had more sleep than we've had."

Lowther stared, and then remembered that he had been supposed to go to bed early. He grinned.

"Chap can't sleep when silly asses are jawing to him," he said calmly. "If I go to bed early to-night, I'll be glad if you'll shut up and let me sleep."

"You're not going to bed early to-night," said Tom Merry in a very decided tone.

Monty Lowther gave him a curious look.

"I think I am," he said. "It's good for me. I find I require quite a lot of rest." And he plunged his face into refreshing cold water, and said no more on the subject.

Tom Merry and Manners said no more then, but they looked very determined.

CHAPTER 13.

On the Track!

THERE was trouble for Monty Lowther in the Form-room that morning.

In the first place, he had wholly neglected his preparation the evening before, and was not prepared to face Mr. Linton, his Form-master. In the evening he had cheerfully said, "Hang Mr. Linton!" But in the morning he had to deal with that severe gentleman face to face, and it was as impossible to elude him as to hang him.

Lowther made a very poor show, and the master of the Shell was decidedly angry. Two hundred lines were Monty Lowther's reward, as well as several sharp remarks from his Form-master.

In the second place, Lowther had missed a third part of his night's rest, and it showed its effect upon him. He was yawning and half asleep all the morning, much increasing Mr. Linton's irritation with him.

It was a great relief to Lowther when the Shell were dismissed after morning lessons. He came down the Form-room passage with his chums, yawning portentously.

"Sleepy. I suppose?" growled Manners.

"Yes, a little bit," said Lowther.

"No wonder, after staying out till midnight, and scorching about the country on a motor-bike half the night," said Manners. "What have you done with the bike?"

"I leave it in Rylcombe."

"You leave it— Do you mean to say you're going to use it again?"

"To-night," said Lowther calmly.

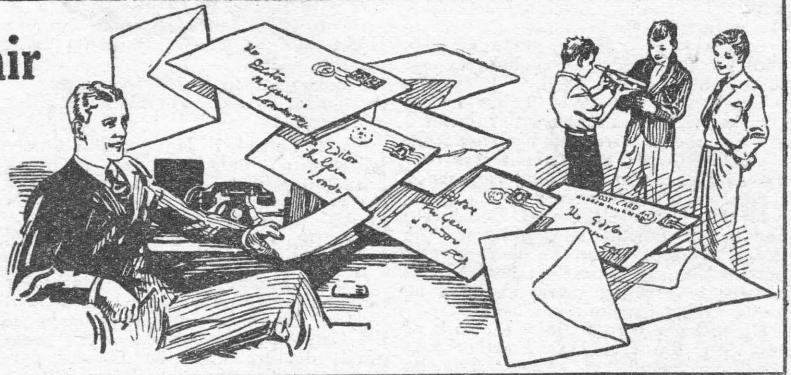
Tom Merry exchanged a glance with Manners. They had been expecting this, and they were ready for it.

"Now, look here, Monty," said Tom in a low, resolute voice. "You've got to chuck up this silly rot. We've stood by you once, and it was trouble enough.

(Continued at foot of opposite page.)

The Editor's Chair

Let the Editor be your pal.
Drop him a line to-day,
addressing your letters to:
The Editor, The GEM,
Fleetway House, Farring-
don Street, London, E.C.4.



HALLO, chums! Last week I was squeezed out of my place on this page, and this week, owing to the St. Jim's story running longer, it nearly happened again. But I was determined to get my nose in, so to speak, for I simply had to tell you the good news of a great series which is starting next Wednesday.

I wonder how many readers remember that popular story "The Mystery of Tom Merry," which appeared in July last year? It received many votes as one of the ten best yarns of 1936. Well, the coming series introduces the amazing character who figured in "The Mystery of Tom Merry." His name is Reggie Clavering, and he is exactly like Tom Merry in looks, but just the opposite in character. He's a waster and a young blackguard who has been expelled from his own school for bad conduct.

The title of the first story of the series is:

"TOM MERRY'S DOUBLE!"

and it deals with the serious trouble which falls upon Tom owing to the reappearance in the district of his rascally double. It is not by accident that Clavering has returned. He is now the tool of a scheming scoundrel seeking to disgrace Tom Merry—for, unknown to Tom, there's a large fortune at stake!

Clavering, masquerading in Tom Merry's name, does his worst to bring about the expulsion from St. Jim's of the captain of the Shell. How near he comes to achieving his treacherous object I will leave Martin Clifford to tell you next week. But believe me, chums, this is a school story in a thousand—one that will always stand out in your memory.

PEN PALS COUPON

24-4-37

HARRY WHARTON'S ENEMY!"

Frank Richards is also in first-class form in his next yarn of the early adventures of the Greyfriars chums. Having come a cropper with his sleight-of-hand tricks and been severely punished by Mr. Queleh, Ernest Levison attributes his misfortunes to Harry Wharton's interference. In consequence, he forces a fight upon Harry—a fight which only adds to the woes of Levison!

You'll enjoy every word in next Wednesday's grand number, so take my tip and order your GEM early.

Before I close down I should like to thank the hundreds of readers who have so kindly written to me recently. I'm sorry, but it's humanly impossible for me to reply by post, but I shall do my best to answer on this page during the next few weeks as many letters as I can.

All the best, chums! Cheerio!

THE EDITOR.

(Continued from previous page.)

Crooke's bowled you out, and I could only keep his mouth shut by threatening to give him away to Railton if he talked. That's not pleasant for me. We didn't get to sleep till you came in, either. It was a bare chance that Kildare didn't spot the dummy in your bed. It can't be done again—it's too risky. You're not going to do it."

"I must!"

"Why must you?"

"I can't tell you now. I'll tell you next week, if you like, when it's all over," said Lowther. "It's the chance of a life-time for me, and I'd rather be sacked than lose it. But you fellows wouldn't understand—you'd only think of the risk. If you don't choose to help me, you must do as you like, but I'm going."

"You'll take the risk yourself if you do," said Tom abruptly.

"All right."

"You'll be bowled out."

"I'll chance it."

"Oh, you ass!"

Lowther yawned again.

"I think I'll get a snooze," he remarked. "I feel quite tired. So-long!"

He walked away, leaving his chums feeling dismayed, angry, and helpless. There was evidently no overcoming Lowther's determination, but the risk the obstinate fellow was running quite scared his chums. It had been almost a miracle that discovery had been evaded the previous night. The wild escapade could hardly succeed a second time.

"What on earth's to be done, Tom?" said Manners in a helpless sort of way. "It's no good talking to him."

Tom Merry's jaw set grimly.

"No good talking to him," he agreed.

"What's wanted is action—not words. We'll prevent him from going out to-night if we have to collar him and hold him down."

"Good egg!" said Manners heartily.

"I'm getting fed-up!"

"I'm quite fed-up!" growled Tom.

Monty Lowther did not mention the matter again that day. He seemed more thoughtful and absent-minded than ever. It was not only too clear that his mind was not at St. Jim's; that all his thoughts were dwelling upon his mysterious business at Bunchester.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy sought him out after lessons, still determined to be sympathetic. He repeated the tragic communication he had made to Lowther's dummy in the Shell dormitory the previous evening. To his surprise, Lowther burst into a roar of laughter.

Arthur Augustus gazed at him in astonishment and indignation.

"Weally, Lowthah, in the cires, as Miss Gilhooly turns out to be a mawwied lady, it is up to you to dwive this thing wight out of your mind—you undahstand that—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Lowther.

"Bai Jove! It's hystewics!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "Calm yourself, Lowthah, deah boy! Pway calm yourself!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Poor old Lowthah! I wealisc that this is a dweadful shock for you—but pway calm yourself! Shall I get some watah?" asked D'Arcy anxiously.

"No; you've got enough on your brain, Gussy," gurgled Lowther. And he walked away, chuckling explosively.

"Bai Jove, you wotah, if you insinuate that I suffah fwom watah on the bwain—" But Lowther was gone.

"I've told Lowthah!" Arthur Augustus announced to Tom Merry and Manners, when he encountered them in the quadrangle.

"Told him what?" asked Tom, puzzled.

"The feahful twuth!" said D'Arcy impressively. The Shell fellows grinned.

"And how did he take it?" murmured Manners.

"He went into hystewics!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Howevah, I am suah that upon reflection he will wealisc that there is only one thing to be done, as an honouable chap. I think he will chuck it up now. I fail to see any weason watevah for cacklin', Tom Mewwy."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It really looked as if Tom Merry and Manners were suffering from hysterics also.

Arthur Augustus walked away with his noble nose in the air. He felt that he had done his duty, a painful duty, and he did not see any reason whatever for merriment upon such a painful and, indeed, tragic subject. But the Shell fellows evidently did.

There was another fellow in the School House who was very thoughtful that day as well as Monty Lowther. It was Crooke. Crooke was thinking the matter over very carefully.

He had heard all about Lowther's peculiar conduct on the half-holiday, when he had stranded the cyclists on their way to Bunchester—the ragging that had followed had made that affair the talk of the House for a long time. Why had Lowther wanted to go to Bunchester alone—and why had he taken such extraordinary precautions to keep the other fellows away? That was

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a very interesting question for Crooke, smarting from the treatment he had received from Tom Merry, and anxious to turn his knowledge to the disadvantage of the chums of the Shell.

There was something going on at Bunchester, in connection with Lowther's visit to the theatre and his friendship with Mr. Curil; and Crooke was convinced that it was something very shady indeed, or why the secrecy?

It was pretty clear that Bunchester had been Lowther's destination the previous night, when he had secretly absented himself from the school. What had he been doing there, and was he going again? Crooke asked himself.

He did not care to take the risk of revealing the fact that Lowther was breaking bounds at night. But he realised that if he could discover Lowther's mysterious business at Bunchester, it might be easy to arrange for the discovery to come about of itself.

After thinking the matter out carefully, he determined to ascertain whether Lowther cleared off that night in the same manner, and act accordingly.

With that intention in his mind, he kept an eye on Monty Lowther after lessons. He noted that Lowther did his preparation very early, and probably left it unfinished; for at quite an early hour he appeared in the Common-room, and remarked that he was going to bed early. Crooke grinned as he heard that remark; he knew what it meant, especially as he saw the expression of Manners and Tom Merry as they heard it.

Lowther strolled out of the Common-room, and went to the Shell dormitory. A quarter of an hour later Crooke took his way thither. It was dusk in the dormitory, and in the dusk he made out the form of a sleeper in Lowther's bed. In one minute he had ascertained that it was a dummy—Lowther was not there. Crooke left the dormitory quietly.

"He's gone again!" he murmured. "Gone to Bunchester, of course, to the theatre there! What's his little game? He doesn't miss a single performance—why?"

It was a puzzling question, but Crooke was determined to get to the bottom of it. For the next ten minutes Crooke was busy in his study with time-tables. But he shook his head savagely over them. There was no train for Bunchester.

"How the dickens does he do it?" he muttered. "He can't bike it—and he can't get his bike out at this hour without being spotted. I suppose he can't afford to hire a motor-car, and he can't walk it. A motor-bike, perhaps. I remember he had one out last week from the garage in Wayland—on Saturday afternoon. Yes, that's it, he hires a motor-bike; perhaps it is brought for him near the school, ready to mount when he sneaks out. But what is he doing at Bunchester? That's the question. Something awfully shady—something he would be sacked for if it was known, you bet! And if I knew what it was, and where it was, I could arrange for a prefect to be there some time and spot him!" Crooke grinned at the idea. "What a dot in the eye for Mr. Magnificent Merry if his best chum got the sack from this school!"

Crooke thought it over.

"I can't get over there to-night—there's no train—or I'd jolly well go over to Bunchester and spot him. What's his little game? I know he ran away from school once to go on the stage, the silly ass, and the Head pardoned him on his promising never to play the giddy goat like that again! It

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was with that chap Curil that he went—Curil who's in the company at the Bunchester Empire. My hat! Is it possible—"

Crooke jumped to his feet in sudden excitement as a thought flashed into his mind.

"Is it possible? He wouldn't dare—he wouldn't—only he dares to break bounds like this of a night, with all the chances against him, so why wouldn't he dare the rest? My only sainted aunt, if it's that—and if he could be spotted in the very act—"

Crooke looked round the study for the Bunchester paper, in which he had read a review of the performance at the Empire. It was open at the paragraph dealing with the Empire performance. Crooke remembered a name he had seen there—remembered it now with a new meaning. Yes, there it was—in the cast of "His Love Against the World!"

Lord de Vere.....	Mr. Mooker.
Baron Bellerby.....	Mr. Horatio Curil.
Gerald Fitzroy.....	Mr. Montague.
Cicely.....	Miss Gloriana
	Gilhooly.

"Mr. Montague!" said Crooke, in almost an awed voice. "Mr. Montague! MISTER MONTAGUE!—as Gerald Fitzroy! Oh, my only hat! And now, what does it say?" He read down the paragraph. "Mr. Mumper, who played the part of Gerald Fitzroy in the brilliant sketch entitled 'His Love Against the World,' is the unfortunate victim of a severe attack of influenza, and his part is now played, with scarcely less merit, by Mr. Montague, who, in spite of his very youthful appearance, is certainly quite equal to a very trying role."

"His very youthful appearance!" murmured Crooke. "Mr. Montague! If those silly asses saw this, I wonder if they'd guess?"

And Crooke sat for a long while with the paper in his hand, his brows wrinkled in deep thought.

He had made a discovery—at all events, he was satisfied that he had; and he felt that he held Monty Lowther—and through Monty Lowther his chum Tom Merry—in the hollow of his hand! Which was a very satisfactory feeling for the cad of the Shell.

CHAPTER 14.

A Surprise for the Shell!

TOM MERRY wore a worried look that evening.

He knew that Monty Lowther had announced his going to bed early, and had gone to the dormitory, with the intention of leaving a dummy there and clearing off, as he had done the night before.

Tom Merry and Manners had talked it over, and they had determined that Lowther should not be allowed to go. And they quietly stationed themselves in the box-room, by the window of which they expected Lowther to leave, with the determination of stopping him, and keeping him indoors. The box-room was a quiet, secluded spot, suitable for an argument which might prove to be a very warm one.

But Lowther did not come there.

Perhaps he had a suspicion of the kindly intentions of his chums. At all events, after waiting half an hour in the box-room, the Shell fellows were driven to the conclusion that Lowther did not intend to get out that way.

They accordingly left their hiding-place, and repaired to the Shell dormitory. There they found Lowther's bed prepared for inspection, with a dummy in it, but no Lowther.

They looked about the House for their chum, but without finding him. It was only too clear that Lowther had gone out, and that he had selected another way out. As that knowledge forced itself upon them, the two Shell fellows looked at one another with feelings almost too deep for words.

"He's gone!" said Tom, at last. "No doubt about that!" Manners agreed. "He knew we were going to stop him, and he's dodged us—the deep beast!"

"And—and I suppose we've got to keep it dark, if we can," said Tom Merry uneasily. "It's up to us, I suppose."

Manners grunted discontentedly. "How long is it going on?" he demanded.

Tom Merry shrugged his shoulders. They were very anxious when bedtime came. Arthur Augustus, of course, had kept the secret, and so far Crooke appeared to have said nothing. But it was scarcely likely that the dummy in Lowther's bed would pass muster with the Shell a second time. The fellows were sure to speak to Lowther again, and his peculiar silence would make them suspicious at last. They felt that it would happen—and it did happen.

When the Shell fellows came into the dormitory, all eyes turned on Lowther's bed, and the usual chipping began.

"Sulky again!" said Gore, as no reply came from Lowther's bed. "Look here, you chaps, why not make him answer?"

Kangaroo grinned, and took a sponge from his washstand, and dipped it into the jug. Then he approached Lowther's bed cautiously. The other fellows watched him, grinning. Tom Merry ran into the way.

"Chuck it, Kangy!"

"Shush!" said Kangaroo. "I'm going to wake him up. Too much sleep is bad for him. He was nodding off all day in the Form-room. Get out of the way, you duffer!"

"Look here, Kangy," said Tom desperately. "Let him alone! I tell you—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" burst in a sudden roar from the Shell fellows. Gore had gone to the other side of Lowther's bed, grasped the bedclothes, and jerked them off.

The roar of laughter died away suddenly in a gasp of stupefaction.

The juniors gazed at the bolster, pillows, and folded coats arranged in the bed, as if they could scarcely believe their eyes.

"Why—why—why—" stammered Gore. "He—he—he's not there!"

"My hat!"

"It's a dummy!"

"Where's Lowther?"

Kildare's step was heard in the passage. Tom Merry caught the bedclothes hastily and covered the dummy up again.

"Hush!" he exclaimed. "Not a word! Keep it dark, for goodness' sake!"

The astounded juniors began to undress, and Tom Merry made a pretence of saying good-night to Lowther, his cheeks burning.

"Hallo, not in bed yet?" said Kildare. "Buck up!"

Kildare glanced at the juniors cautiously; he could see that there was some unwonted cause of excitement in the dormitory.

"No rags here to-night," he said

warningly. "If I have to come up, I shall bring a cane with me."
 "All right, Kildare!" muttered Tom Merry.

The juniors turned in. A word was enough to betray Lowther's absence; but the word was not uttered. Kildare put out the light and left. The moment the door closed behind him, however, every voice was heard at once.

"What's the little game, Tom Merry?"

"Where's Lowther?"

"Where has he gone?"

"Was he out last night, too?"

"Breaking bounds at night! Gone pub-haunting!" said Gore. "That's it! That's the way you fellows amuse yourselves on the sly, is it? Well, I'm not surprised. There's always something behind it when chaps keep up such jolly good appearances."

"Oh, rats!" said Kangaroo.

"Lowther's not your sort, Gore!"

"Well, where is he, then?" demanded Gore. "I don't see why we should keep it dark. Lowther's said nasty things to me about a game of billiards with Lasker. What's he gone out for himself, I should like to know?"

"It's nothing of that kind," said Tom Merry.

"Then what is it?"

"I—I don't know."

"Kildare ought to be told," said Gore virtuously. "Lowther's up to something, and it's no business of ours to keep his beastly secrets."

"Gone to see Cicely, perhaps," grinned Kangaroo.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's no business of ours to sneak, either, Gore," remarked Clifton Dane. "It's Lowther's own affair, not ours. We don't want any sneaking in the Shell."

"That's all very well," said Gore. "But Lowther has been jolly uppish towards other fellows who slip out now and then. It's pretty certain that he was out last night, too. Making a regular habit of it, of course. Rotten, I call it."

Tom Merry and Manners said nothing more, while the talk ran on. The secret was out now—all the Shell—the School House portion of the Form, that is—knew it. Nobody was likely to "sneak," perhaps, but it would be talked all over the House on the morrow, that was certain. It could only be a question of time before it came to older ears now.

Then Lowther would have to explain himself—not to his chums, but to his Housemaster. No wonder it was a long time before the chums of the Shell slept. But they were both asleep when Lowther came in, and they did not wake until the rising-bell clanged out on Saturday morning. They looked at once towards Lowther's bed; he was there, sitting up and yawning and rubbing his eyes. And a chorus of inquiry broke from the Shell fellows.

"Where have you been, Lowther?"

"What time did you get back?"

Lowther glanced reproachfully towards his chums.

"It's all out now, Monty," said Tom Merry sharply. "We couldn't help it. It's your own fault."

"Tell us where you've been, anyway," said Gore.

"Mind your own business!" said Lowther.

He said no more, and he was still silent when the Shell fellows went downstairs. But he did not look alarmed. His thoughts were elsewhere; and, thoughtful as he looked, it was not his danger that he was thinking about.



When the juniors had finished with Lowther he lay on the floor, his collar gone, his jacket split, his hair a mop, with ink, jam and treacle smeared all over his face. "Groogh!" gurgled the unhappy Lowther. "I twust, Lowthah," said Arthur Augustus, "that you will not play any more pwactical jokes on us!"

CHAPTER 15.

The Secret Out!

MONTY LOWTHER was the object of general curiosity in the School House that morning.

He did not seem to notice it.

After dinner that day, Crooke knocked at Kildare's door. There was no first eleven match on that day, and Kildare and Darrell of the Sixth were discussing a pull up the river. The captain of the school looked round at Crooke as the latter entered, and noted that he had a letter in his hand.

"For me?" he asked.

"Yes; I thought I'd bring it up, Kildare," said Crooke.

"Thank you!" said Kildare, rather surprised. It was not like Crooke to take any trouble for anybody, unless he had to. Most of the School House juniors liked to fag for Kildare, but Crooke had never shown any desire that way before. The Shell fellow left the study, and pulled the door shut after him, but left it an inch ajar, and did not walk away.

Kildare turned the letter over in his hand.

"Buncheater!" he said, looking at the postmark. "I don't know anybody in Buncheater. Excuse me, old man." He opened the letter. "My only hat!"

Darrell looked at him inquiringly. Kildare held up two bluish printed slips, numbered.

"Two stalls for the Buncheater Empire," he said. "There's no letter. Somebody's sent me two seats for the matinee this afternoon."

"Well, that's odd," said Darrell, with a whistle.

"Jolly odd!" said Kildare, in great

surprise. "No letter, either—just as if I had written for the tickets myself—but I didn't! I've thought of going over there, only it's a jolly long way. Some Good Samaritan has planted the seats on me. I suppose there can't be any mistake?" He looked at the address on the envelope again. "No, there it is, right enough—Eric Kildare, Esq., School House, St. James' School. They're for me!"

"You're in luck," said Darrell, laughing, "and you don't know who's sent them?"

"No; they've come straight from the theatre, I imagine; somebody must have ordered them for me," said Kildare, puzzled. "Somebody wants to stand me a theatre, and is jolly modest about it. It's queer. I don't see why I shouldn't use them, though. Would you care to come? Plenty of time to get over there, and I've heard that it's a good show. We'll make it the Buncheater Empire this afternoon instead of the river—what?"

"Thanks; good idea!" said Darrell.

Crooke walked quietly away down the passage, grinning.

"Six bob!" he murmured. Crooke was the son of a millionaire, but he was usually careful with his money. "Six bob of my own money! But it's worth it, for I'm going to be there, too, and watch Kildare's face when he sees Mr. Montague on the stage. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hallo!" exclaimed Blake. "You seem awfully tickled about something, Crooke."

Crooke started, and looked round. "Oh, nothing!" he said. "You're playing the New House this afternoon, Blake?"

"We are," said Blake. "It's the first

House match of the season. Would you like to score?"

"No fear! I'm going out. Is Lowther playing?"

Blake shook his head.

"No; he's standing out, the ass! What are you cackling at now?"

"Oh, nothing!" chuckled Crooke; and he walked away, leaving Blake perplexed. Blake did not see any cause for amusement in the fact that Monty Lowther was standing out of the House match that afternoon.

Lowther was, indeed, out of the School House junior team, and Tom Merry found it very exasperating. He had a reserve to put in in Lowther's place—that was all right. But he guessed where Lowther was going.

"Buncheater, I suppose?" he asked.

"Well, yes," said Lowther.

"I'm getting fed up with Buncheater," said Tom Merry. "You know very well that you ought to play in the first House match of the season."

"Play next Saturday," said Lowther lazily.

"That won't be a House match. I must say I think it's pretty rotten of you to desert your pals this way."

"Sorry!" said Lowther, looking at his watch. "Hallo! I must be off! I'm going by train this afternoon, and it goes in a quarter of an hour."

And Lowther hurried away, leaving Tom Merry with a dark shade on his brow.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, who was on the School House steps, put up his eye-glass and glanced after Lowther, with a sad shake of the head.

"Weally, I wegard this as wotten of Lowthah!" he murmured. "Aftah my bweakin' the dweadful twuth to him, it's his duty as an honouvable chap to keep away from the Buncheatah Empiah. Don't you think so, Tom Mewwy?"

"Oh, rats!" was Tom Merry's reply.

Kildare and Darrell came out of the School House a little later. Tom Merry hailed them.

"Going to umpire for us?"

"No," said Kildare, laughing. "If you kids want to make yourselves useful you can fetch our bikes round."

"Like a bird!" said Blake at once. And Blake and Herries hurried away for the bicycles of the two great men of the Sixth.

Kildare and Darrell had trouser-clips on their ankles, and were wearing their caps.

"You kids have seen the show at the Empire at Buncheater?" Kildare remarked.

"Part of it," said Tom. "We went last Wednesday, but missed the first half."

"There is a wathah good sketch in the half we didn't see," Arthur Augustus remarked. "It is called 'His Love Against the Earth'—I mean, the 'World'—and is vewy excitin', I believe. I was vewy sowwy to miss it—owin' to that wottah Lowthah—"

Tom Merry felt a little uneasy.

"You're going to the Empire, Kildare?" he asked.

The captain of St. Jim's nodded.

"Yes; somebody's sent me two tickets—some Good Samaritan I don't know. So we shall have a good spin, and a matinee at the end of it. I suppose it wasn't any of you kids sent the tickets?"

Tom Merry looked astonished.

"You don't know who sent them?" he asked.

"Not in the least."

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"Bai Jove! That's vewy odd."

Blake and Herries came back with the bicycles, and the two Sixth Formers wheeled them away to the gates. A dark and thoughtful frown was on Tom Merry's face. Manners gave him an uneasy and inquiring look.

"What are you thinking of?" he asked, in a low voice.

"Lowther!" said Tom abruptly. "He's at Buncheater—I mean, he's gone there. He's at the Empire—doing I don't know what. If Kildare runs into him—"

"No harm in being there on a half-holiday," said Blake. "If Kildare had run into him last night it would have been different. What's the harm to-day?"

"I don't know," confessed Tom Merry. "Lowther hasn't let us into the secret. But it's queer about Kildare getting tickets for the matinee without knowing where they came from. Who could have sent them?"

"Blessed if I know!" said Blake, with a yawn. "Never mind Lowther now; I'm fed-up with Lowther. Let's go and have a look at the pitch."

The Fourth Formers strolled away. Manners made a move to follow them, but Tom Merry signed to him to stop.

"What's up?" asked Manners.

"Nothing, perhaps," said Tom uneasily. "But—but what is Lowther up to at Buncheater?"

"He hasn't deigned to take us into his confidence about that," said Manners, with a shrug of the shoulders. "I don't know, and I don't much care."

"Who sent Kildare those tickets?" said Tom. "Somebody who wanted him to go over to Buncheater this afternoon. Crooke, perhaps!"

"But Crooke can't have been there—"

"Fathead! He could write for the tickets. He would only have to send them a postal order, with instructions to post the tickets to Kildare here."

"Catch Crooke treating anybody to anything!" said Manners, laughing. "And he doesn't like Kildare! You're off your chump, Tommy!"

"He would spend his last bob to get

Lowther caught by Kildare, if Lowther's up to anything he could get into trouble over," said Tom, with a very worried look. "I think I'll go and speak to Crooke."

"You won't get any truth out of him." "I'll thump it out, if necessary. Come with me."

The two Shell fellows looked for Crooke. He was not in the quadrangle or in his study. But as they came down the passage to look into the Common-room they heard a sound of chuckling, and recognised Crooke's ill-natured chuckle among the others. They looked in, frowning. Crooke and Mellish and Gore were standing in a group by the window, and Crooke was holding a newspaper. They did not see the two Shell fellows at the door.

"Mr. Montague!" chuckled Crooke. "His own Christian name, you know!"

"He wouldn't have the nerve, surely!" said Mellish.

"Why not? Didn't he run away to go on the stage once?"

"But the Head came down on him. He overlooked it that time; but if it happened again Lowther would get it in the neck."

"And I fancy he will get it in the neck if he's seen playing Gerald Fitzroy on the stage at the Buncheater Empire!" grinned Crooke.

Tom Merry and Manners stood rooted, as it were, in the doorway.

A thunderclap in the Common-room could hardly have astonished them more.

Crooke's words let in a flood of light upon their perplexed thoughts. They did not need any proof; they only wondered now that they had not thought of it before. So that was the secret Lowther was keeping!

No wonder he had kept it a secret! For if his chums had known that he was running that risk they would have tied him down to his bed, if necessary, to keep him within the walls of St. Jim's in safety! If the Head knew— "But you can't be sure," Gore remarked.

"I'm sure enough!" said Crooke. "Why doesn't he miss a single performance at the Empire? He's not running the risk of being sacked for nothing, I suppose. And he's always mumbbling over something or other about Cicely, or Baron Bellerby, or something—the lines of the play, of course! And see what it says here in the paper about a very youthful actor taking the place of Mumper, who played the part last week! Lowther's got it—through the influence of his valuable friend Mr. Curil, of course. I'll bet he hasn't told Curil he's doing it unknown, and without permission. That's why he played that trick on those duffers last Wednesday. If they'd got to the matinee they'd have seen him on the stage—or else he'd have had to keep off it. It's as clear as daylight."

"But he's not likely to be spotted there," said Gore. "Buncheater is a long way from here."

"I think he's jolly certain to be spotted," said Crooke coolly.

"Why?"

"Because Kildare and Darrell have gone to the matinee to-day."

Gore whistled expressively.

"Then it's all up with Lowther! My hat! I'd tip him a warning if—"

"Too late for that!" said Crooke coolly. "Let him be spotted! I—"

"You cad!" shouted Tom Merry, finding his voice at last. "You—you knew all that; and you sent Kildare the tickets!"

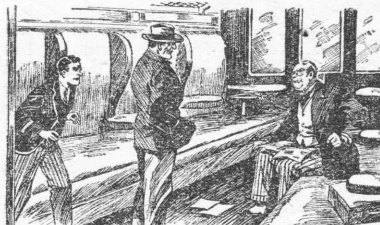
Crooke & Co. looked round.

"Hallo!" said Crooke. "I didn't

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know you were listening. Has anybody sent Kildare tickets? If so, it wasn't I. Which reminds me that it's time I started for the Bunchester Empire."

And Crooke walked out of the room, leaving his comrades laughing, and Tom Merry and Manners a picture of dismay. Their first impulse was to "pitch into" Crooke; but that would have done no good, and would have taken time. And there was, after all, no proof that he had sent those tickets to Kildare.

Tom dragged his chum away. "Where now?" asked Manners. "The bikes!" said Tom briefly. "Bunchester."

"But the House match—"
"Blake can look after that. Don't you see, we've got to keep Lowther from making a fool of himself. Suppose he comes on the stage, with two prefects in the audience!"

A few hasty words to Blake, and the elms of the Shell mounted their bicycles at the gates and rode away. Tom Merry and Manners were riding hard—riding as if for their lives. They had need to ride hard, if they were to save their chum from the consequences of his own wild recklessness. But could they save him?

CHAPTER 16.

Exit Mr. Montague!

MR. CURIL uttered an ejaculation of amazement.

"My esteemed young friends! What—"

Mr. Curil was "making" up in his dressing-room at the Bunchester Empire before the glass, when two dusty and perspiring juniors came in, after a hasty knock. Mr. Curil was not alone in the room. Another glass was on the wall now, and before it stood a youthful figure—also engaged in making-up. Monty Lowther looked round, with a stick of grease-paint in his hand, as he heard Mr. Curil's ejaculation.

"You!" he exclaimed. Tom Merry panted.

"Thank goodness we're in time!"

Lowther frowned darkly, with a queer effect upon his half-finished visage.

"So you've bowled me out!" he said coolly. "Well, I tried to keep it from you. It's no good your saying anything; it won't make any difference. If it comes out, and it comes out, too, that you knew it, you'll get into trouble as well as me, but you've only got yourselves to thank for it. But I can't talk now; it will be our cue soon."

"Ahem!" said Mr. Curil. "Do I understand that Master Lowther has engaged in this—ahem!—this debut upon the histrionic boards without the sanction of his masters?"

"Oh, that's all right!" said Lowther hastily. "Don't you bother, Curil. The overture's gone already, and the sketch comes in the first half, remember."

"But, my dear young friend," protested Mr. Curil, "when I made you this offer I certainly understood that you would obtain the permission of your masters."

"I said they wouldn't object," said Lowther.

"Yes, that is the same thing."

"You can't go on the stage, Lowther, so you may as well chuck that up at once," said Tom Merry grimly.

"Rats!"

"Kildare and Darrell are in the audience to-day!"

Monty paused.

"My hat! Are you sure?"

"Yes. Somebody's sent them tickets—Crooke, very likely—so that they could come here and spot you. Crooke



knew somehow. We've chucked the House match to come over and warn you."

"Very good of you," said Lowther, deliberately turning back to the glass again. "But I can't leave Mr. Curil in the lurch. I've studied the part, and taken it on during the illness of Mr. Mumper. It was the chance of a lifetime for me. If I don't go on this afternoon the sketch can't be played; they can't get a substitute at a moment's notice. I can't do a thing like that."

"I tell you Kildare will know you at once!" shouted Tom.

"I can't help it."

"They'll take you straight to the Head."

"Can't he helped."

"B-b-but," stammered the bewildered Mr. Curil, "if the headmaster doesn't object—"

"He doesn't object because he doesn't know," said Manners. "That's what that silly says means!"

"My esteemed young friend, Montague," said Mr. Curil, with dignity, "you have—I will not say deceived me—but you have been pulling my leg. The slight fee of two quids shall be returned to you—ahem!—when—when I can conveniently spare them. I will telephone for Mumper at once."

"But Mumper's down with the flu," said Lowther.

Mr. Curil smiled.

"Mr. Mumper's flu has been gone for some time," he remarked. "Mr. Mumper, being naturally sympathetic towards a youthful aspirant for histrionic honours, very generously allowed you to take his role, especially—ahem!—as there was no question raised of the salary being paid to anyone but Mr. Mumper. My esteemed young friend, you will excuse me, while I hasten to telephone for Mr. Mumper."

And Mr. Curil left the dressing-room.

"Good! I'll clean this stuff off and change, and we'll see the show; that's the next best thing to acting in it," said Lowther. "I can use a box here; they're always half-empty. It will be rather a joke for Crooke to see me in a box instead of on the stage."

Then Tom Merry and Manners laughed, too.

A quarter of an hour later the Ter-

rrible Three were in a box, Monty Lowther in his Etons, and looking as unlike Gerald Fitzroy as possible. The theatre was pretty full, and the Shell fellows were not long in spotting Kildare and Darrell in the stalls. They discovered Crooke entering just before the sketch was announced; the cad of the Shell had ridden over, but he did not ride like Tom Merry and Manners, and he was late.

Another ten minutes, and the curtain rose upon the thrilling sketch, "His Love Against the World." Crooke had been looking at his programme, and he found "Mr. Montague's" name in its place there. He was quite satisfied. He gazed eagerly at the stage. Lord de Vere was there, with Lady Cicely, and Baron Bellerby, the villain of the piece, entered, alias Mr. Horatio Curil. And when Baron Bellerby exclaimed: "Aha! Who comes? 'Tis he, my rival!" Crooke's eyes glittered. For it was Mr. Gerald Fitzroy who was to enter next, under the eyes of Kildare and Darrell.

The Terrible Three were watching Crooke's face.

Gerald Fitzroy came on in the scene, and Crooke's jaw dropped.

His eyes seemed almost to start from his head.

He took a hasty look at his programme again, then stared blankly at the hero of the thrilling sketch. Mr. Montague or not, it certainly wasn't Monty Lowther. Any amount of make-up could not have given Lowther the height and the girth of the hero of the sketch. It was not Monty Lowther, and Crooke felt as if his head were swimming.

Was his discovery a mare's-nest, after all? Were all the calculations entirely wrong? And, worst thought of all, had he paid for seats for the two prefects, and ridden fifteen miles himself, in order to see a perfectly commonplace actor go through a perfectly commonplace part?

The expression on his face tickled the Terrible Three immensely. They suppressed their merriment with difficulty, taking care to keep well back in the box out of Crooke's view. Crooke was gazing at the stage with a stony expression.

At the end of the sketch the Terrible Three left the box and the theatre. Monty Lowther seemed quite comforted for the loss of his part. As he remarked cheerfully, the sight of Crooke's face in the audience was worth it.

As there were no more mysterious absences on Lowther's part, and as he had certainly not appeared on the stage when expected to do so, Crooke was driven to doubting his own cunning for once. Excepting Tom Merry and Manners, there was only one fellow in the School House who was quite satisfied that he knew all about the matter. That one was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. And for quite a long time Arthur Augustus persisted in condoling with Lowther on his disappointment in love, at the same time applauding his good resolutions, which were worthy of an honourable chap, being quite convinced that he, and he alone, had hit upon the true solution when Monty Lowther had been unable to resist the lure of the footlights.

(Gripping series starring Tom Merry starts next Wednesday. Look out for "TOM MERRY'S DOUBLE!"—and don't forget to order your GEM early.)

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THE MISSING WATCHES THAT TURNED UP MYSTERIOUSLY IN BILLY BUNTER'S
POCKETS!

THE CONJURER OF THE REMOVE!

A Mysterious Affair!

"ANYONE seen my watch?" It was Harry Wharton who asked the question in the Remove dormitory at Greyfriars. The rising-bell had ceased to ring, and the juniors were tumbling out of bed. Wharton, who was always an early riser, was almost dressed, and for some minutes he had been looking about him with a puzzled expression.

"Has anybody seen my watch?" Bob Cherry turned a red and dripping face round from his washstand. "Look under your pillow." "I've looked there." "Look in your pockets, then." "I have." "By Jove!" exclaimed Frank Nugent suddenly. "What's the matter, Nugent?" "Where's my watch?" "Your watch?" said Harry Wharton. "Yes. I'll swear it was in my waistcoat pocket. Now it's gone!" "Rats!" said Bulstrode. "Do you mean to say that there's a pickpocket in the dormitory?" "Well, it's gone." "Look in your trousers pocket," suggested Levison. "Oh, don't be an ass! I tell you it's gone!"

"I suppose this is a lark of some of you chaps," said Harry Wharton. "I can't say I see where the fun comes in; but, anyway, the joke has gone far enough. I'll be glad to have my watch."

"And I to have mine," said Nugent. "Who's got it?"

There was no reply. "Whoever has taken the watch may as well own up," said Harry Wharton impatiently. "There's no sense in keeping up a joke like this."

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" exclaimed Bob Cherry.

"Have you found it?" "Found it?" repeated Bob Cherry, who was groping in his pockets. "No—I've lost my watch!"

"Hallo, this is getting interesting!" exclaimed Levison. "I suppose, as a matter of fact, Cherry is at the bottom of the lark—"

"Then you're wrong, as you usually are!" retorted Bob Cherry. "I don't know anything about it."

"I say, you fellows—" began Billy Bunter.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Bulstrode, feeling in his pockets. "Mine's gone, too! What rotter has taken my watch?"

"My hat!" said Nugent, with a whistle of amazement. "There's been a regular raid. Anybody else lost any watches?"

There was a general anxious investigation. Exclamations from various quarters announced the discovery that articles were missing. Skinner, Russell, Trevor, and Smith missed their watches.

"Eight watches gone," said Nugent. "Well, it was a harvest for somebody, and no mistake. I suppose it is a lark, but I'm hanged if I can see anything funny in it!"

"I should say not!" exclaimed Harry

By Frank Richards.

(Author of the grand long yarns of Greyfriars appearing every Saturday in our companion paper, the "Magnet.")

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Wharton. "The fellow who has taken those watches had better own up, or else look out for trouble."

"But who is it?" "Own up, you rotter, whoever you are!" said Bob Cherry.

"I say, you fellows—"

"Was it you, Bunter?" "Me!" exclaimed Bunter. "Oh, really, Cherry—"

"Well, then, don't jaw. Now, you fellows—"

"But I have a suggestion to make," said Bunter. "Very likely one of you fellows has been walking in his sleep and collaring all the watches—"

"You're the only chap here who walks in his sleep," said Levison.

"Yes; but—"

"It wasn't done in the night," said Harry Wharton impatiently. "My watch was in my hand ten minutes ago."

"And mine was in my pocket," said Nugent.

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Sleight-of-hand tricks are simple to Ernest Levison of the Remove, but he conjures once too often when he tries to make his Form-master look small!

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"It's a silly lark of some silly ass!" said Bob Cherry.

"The larkfulness is rotten, and the rottenfulness is terrific!" said the Nabob of Bhanipur, in his purring voice. "The trashfulness would be the proper caper."

"Who's got those watches?"

"Own up, you rotter!"

The rotter did not own up. The Remove proceeded to dress themselves, with puzzled and angry looks. At first it had seemed that the abstraction of the watches was merely an absurd practical joke. Now matters began to take on a more serious aspect.

The joke had gone quite far enough. If the watches were not restored, it looked as though the purloiner did not intend to restore them.

"Look here!" exclaimed Harry Wharton, when he was ready to go down. "Before we leave the dormitory, this matter ought to be settled. If it gets out, the other fellows will jump to the conclusion that there's a thief in the Form. The chap who has taken those watches ought to own up at once. I think it was a stupid joke, but I'm willing to say nothing more about it if the matter is finished up now."

"That's fair and square," said Bob Cherry. "Own up, you silly ass, whoever you are!"

"The fairness and squarefulness are terrific, and the ownupfulness should be immediate!" said Hurree Janset Ram Singh.

But there was no reply to Wharton's appeal.

"Oh, I'm going down!" said Levison. "We shall be late for breakfast if we wait here listening to Wharton's orations."

And he quitted the dormitory. The others followed him slowly.

"What do you think of it, Wharton?" Bob Cherry asked as they went down the stairs. Harry shook his head.

"I don't know what to think. It looks like a lark."

"I suppose it's no worse than that?" "I hope not, at any rate."

The Remove entered the dining-hall. They had been delayed by the strange affair in the dormitory, and Mr. Quelch, at the head of the Form table, gave them a somewhat severe glance as they came in. They took their places.

"You are late," said the Form-master sharply.

"Sorry, sir!" said Wharton. "It's not our fault!"

"Indeed!" The keen eye of the master noted the signs of disturbance in many faces, and he saw at a glance that something was wrong. "Has anything happened?"

"Nothing of any consequence, sir."

"Was it a matter of no consequence that made you all late for breakfast?" said the Remove master, with a frown. "In that case, I shall see what will be the effect of a hundred lines apiece in hastening your movements another time!"

Harry Wharton would rather not have acquainted the Form-master with what had occurred, but a general impot of a hundred lines for the whole Form was not to be thought of.

"If you please, sir—"

"Well, what is it?"

"Someone has been playing a joke on us, and a lot of watches have been taken," said Harry. "We were delayed by that, sir."

"A very foolish sort of joke," said Mr. Quelch. "You are excused, in the circumstances. But do I understand that the watches have not been restored?"

"Yes, sir."

"Indeed! That looks to my mind a more serious matter than a joke," said Mr. Quelch, with a frown. "I warn the jester, whoever he may be, not to let the joke go any further, or I shall inquire into the matter again."

There was a buzz on one side of the table, where Billy Bunter sat, and Mr. Quelch glanced in that direction with a frowning brow.

"Silence, there, immediately!"

"I say, you fellows—"

"It's Bunter!"

"He's got them!"

"I haven't! I say, you—"

"You have!"

"Why, you can hear them ticking!" Mr. Quelch rose in his place. He fixed his eyes on Bunter.

"Bunter," he rapped out, "stand up!"

"Yes, sir. I really—"

"Now, then, some of you appear to

## THE CHUMS OF GREYFRIARS ARE IN GREAT FORM IN THIS SPARKLING YARN OF THEIR EARLY SCHOOLDAYS.



"Turn out your pockets immediately, Bunter!" commanded Mr. Quelch. "Y-yes, sir," said the Owl of the Remove. He turned out his pockets and stared in blank amazement as a handful of watches came to view—the missing watches of the Removites!

think that Bunter has the watches. I think I heard you say so, Hazeldene."

"So he has, sir. I can hear them ticking in his pocket," said Hazeldene.

"I say, Vaseline, that's a whopper—"

"Turn out your pockets immediately!" said Mr. Quelch.

"Y-yes, sir."

Billy Bunter turned out his pockets. His jaw dropped, and he looked the picture of dismay and amazement when a handful of watches came out first.

"That's my watch!" exclaimed Bulstrode.

"And mine!" said Nugent.

"I—I—I say, you fellows—"

"So you are the perpetrator of this absurd joke, Bunter!" exclaimed Mr. Quelch sternly.

Billy Bunter looked utterly bewildered.

"I, sir? Certainly not, sir! I should be sorry—"

"You will be sorry if you play a joke like this again!" said the Remove master angrily.

"Restore those watches to their owners immediately!"

"But, sir—"

The watches were seized quickly enough by their owners. Several more were turned out of Bunter's pockets, till the whole eight were recovered. Bunter watched them in utter dismay and amazement.

"I hope," said Mr. Quelch in cutting tones, "that you intended to restore them to their owners, Bunter."

"I, sir? Certainly not, sir!" gasped Billy Bunter, who hardly knew what he was saying in his bewilderment.

"What!" thundered Mr. Quelch.

"Do you know what you are saying, Bunter?"

"Yes, sir. I wouldn't have done anything of the sort."

"Bunter, you will come to my study before first lesson."

"Yes, sir; but—"

"Silence! You have said quite enough."

"But, sir—"

"Another word, Bunter, and I shall send you to my study at once, and you will miss your breakfast."

That threat was more than sufficient. Bunter would not have missed a meal for any consideration. He relapsed into silence, and the Remove fell to at their breakfast.

### The Conjurer!

"WHAT the dickens does it all mean?" asked Harry Wharton, when the Remove came into the Close. "Where is Bunter?"

"Here I am," said Billy Bunter.

"What do you want?"

"What did you take those watches for?"

"I didn't take them," said Bunter.

"I told Quelch that I wouldn't have done anything of the sort."

"You young ass!" exclaimed Nugent.

"You told him that you didn't mean to give the watches up."

"Oh, really, Nugent—"

"That was what you said, anyway."

"Of course, I didn't mean that—I meant—"

"Did you take the watches or not, Bunter?"

"No, I didn't."

"Then how did they come into your pockets?"

"Ask me another," said Billy Bunter. "I don't know. I hadn't the faintest idea they were there till Hazeldene said he could hear them ticking."

"Do you think that somebody put them in your pockets for a joke?"

"I suppose so."

"Weren't they in your pockets when you put your jacket on?"

"I don't know. I didn't look, you see."

"Ass! You'd have felt the weight of them, I should think—eight watches—"

"Well, I didn't notice the weight."

"Then somebody slipped them in your pockets as you came downstairs?"

"I don't see how they could without my knowing it."

"Ass! Is there any other explanation?"

"Not that I know of."

"I'm blessed if I see how it could have been done," said Bob Cherry.

"It would want a conjurer to perform a trick like that."

Harry Wharton started.

"By Jove, you've hit it!"

"What do you mean?"

"It was a conjurer!" exclaimed Harry Wharton excitedly.

"This is another trick of Levison's!"

"My hat!"

"You know he has played conjuring tricks before—played one on us once and nearly got licked for it."

"Then he'd better get quite licked this time," said Bob Cherry. "I don't like this kind of conjuring trick."

"The trickfulness is great and the rottenfulness is terrific," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"I say, you fellows—"

"Let's go and find Levison," said Harry Wharton. "The fellows will be saying that Billy Bunter stole the watches."

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"You young thief!" exclaimed Bulstrode, striding up to the Owl of the Remove and shaking him violently by the shoulder.

"You'd have had my watch for good if Vaseline hadn't heard it ticking, wouldn't you?"

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"Ow! Don't shake me, Bulstrode. You'll make my glasses fall off, and if they get broken you'll have to pay for them—"

"You young rascal—"

"Let him alone, Bulstrode!"

"You mind your own business, Wharton! The young bouncer stole those watches, and he admitted to Quelch that he wasn't going to give them up—"

"It's all a mistake!"

"Rot! He's a young thief!"

"N-n-nothing of the s-s-sort, Bulstrode. I—"

"Let him alone!"

"Shan't!"

Harry Wharton grasped Bulstrode by the shoulder and jerked him savagely away from the fat junior.

"You'll let him alone, you bully!" he exclaimed. "I believe you know perfectly well all the time that Bunter did not intend to steal the watches!"

Bulstrode jerked himself free:

"Keep your hands off me, Wharton!"

"Keep your hands off Bunter, then!"

"What was he doing with the watches? He had the whole lot in his pockets, and he wasn't going to give them up—"

"It was a trick, and I believe Levison was the one who played it," said Harry Wharton quietly. "I'm going to see."

"Oh, rot!"

"You'd better come with us, Bunter."

"Certainly, Wharton."

Levison was found strolling by the cricket ground, alone, as he usually was. He looked a little surprised as the Famous Four came up, with half a dozen fellows following them.

"Anything wrong?" he asked, in his usual unpleasant, half-sneering tone.

"Yes," said Harry shortly, "Did you put those watches in Bunter's pockets?"

Levison laughed.

"What put that idea into your head?"

"I know you can perform conjuring tricks, and I believe you are the only fellow who could have done it."

"I don't see why I should be questioned by you—"

"Will you answer my question?"

"Not unless I choose."

Harry Wharton felt greatly inclined to knock him down. It was not easy to be patient with Ernest Levison.

"I've asked you a civil question," he said, as quietly as he could. "I expect an answer. Did you play the trick with those watches?"

"Better own up!" growled Bob Cherry.

Levison shrugged his shoulders.

"Are you going to answer?"

"Perhaps."

"There is no 'perhaps' about it. You're going to own up, or you're going to be licked!" said Harry Wharton.

Levison's eyes gleamed.

"I'll fight you, if you like!"

"I don't want you to fight me," said Harry, with a disdainful smile. "I could knock you out in one round, and you know it."

"You're welcome to try!"

"I'm not going to try. If you don't tell the truth about this matter of the watches, you'll be licked with Hurree Singh's cane!"

"You'd better not—"

"Now then, that's enough talk! Are you going to own up?"

"No, hang you!"

"Then we'll jolly soon make you. Collar him!"

Levison struck out savagely. Bob Cherry received a hard blow on the

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mouth. But the chums had Levison pinioned in a few seconds.

"Shove him across your knee, Cherry!"

"Right-ho!"

"Let me go!" screamed Levison, struggling frantically.

"Hold the rotter tight! Hand me your cane, Inky!"

"Certainly, my worthy chum, though I should have terrific pleasure in administering the castigation myself."

"Don't touch me with that cane, Wharton!"

"You'll get a dozen if you don't own up. Did you play the trick with those watches—yes or no?"

"Suppose I did?" growled Levison, helpless in the grasp of Cherry, Nugent, and Hurree Singh. "What then?"

"I only want to know."

"Well, I did. I only put them into Bunter's pockets for a joke; there was no harm in it."

"Let him go, you chaps."

Levison was released. He pulled himself together and set his collar straight. His expression was not pleasant to see.

"Well, now you have it, you cads!" he snarled. "You wouldn't have made me speak if you hadn't been four to one."

Wharton smiled contemptuously.

"If you hadn't been a cad you would have owned up at the breakfast table," he said. "If you've got any decency, you'll go to Mr. Quelch's study instead of Billy Bunter."

"Certainly," said Bunter. "Levison ought to go. Quelch is going to cane me—and—"

"I shall certainly not go!" said Levison, turning on his heel.

"Do you mean to say you'll let Bunter be caned?" demanded Harry hotly.

"Bunter can say what he likes."

"Well, I don't want to sneak, you fellows," said Billy Bunter, "but I think it's only fair to let Mr. Quelch know how matters really stand."

"That would be sneaking."

"But, really, Wharton—"

"It's all right, Bunter, I'll go," said Harry, laughing. "You won't get your caning, I promise you that."

"Oh, that's all right, then!" said Bunter, considerably relieved. "Of course, I don't care who gets it, so long as I don't."

"I'll see Quelch now, then," said Harry, and he walked away.

### The Missing Book!

"COME in," said Mr. Quelch.

The master of the Lower Fourth had taken down his cane and laid it on the table ready for use. He glanced up as the door of his study was opened, and looked surprised as Harry Wharton entered.

"Wharton! What do you want?" he asked, laying down the cane.

"I've come instead of Bunter, sir, because he was the victim of a joke. A fellow in our Form who does conjuring tricks had collected up the watches and put them in Bunter's pockets without his knowing anything about it."

"Ah, I see!"

"I thought I ought to explain that to you, sir. Bunter hardly knew what you were saying when you questioned him; he was too bewildered."

Mr. Quelch nodded.

"I know I can take your word, Wharton, and it is right of you to tell me this. It was very wrong of the boy in question not to own up when he found that Bunter was to be punished. Who was he?"

Wharton shifted uneasily.

"I'd rather not tell you his name, sir, if you don't mind."

"Very well," said Mr. Quelch, with a slight smile. "Part of your reason for coming here instead of Bunter was that you thought Bunter might give away the name of the practical joker?"

Harry turned red.

"I—I didn't want him to sneak, sir. Bunter is rather dense at times, and might easily do something that would get the other fellows down on him, without intending it."

"I understand, Wharton. Well, the matter is at an end now. You may tell Bunter that he need not come."

"Thank you, sir!"

"And as for this boy with a taste for ill-natured practical jokes, you may tell him that such tricks may get him into trouble," said Mr. Quelch. "This matter, if not cleared up, might have placed Bunter under an unpleasant imputation. You may go, Wharton."

Harry Wharton left the study. Levison and Bulstrode were in the passage when he came out, and the former stepped into his path, with a sneer on his face.

"I suppose you have given me away to Quelch?" he said.

Harry looked at him steadily.

"I've done nothing of the kind."

"You haven't mentioned my name?"

"No."

"What about Bunter?"

"It's all right. I've explained to Quelch that it was a joke, and Bunter isn't to go."

Levison drew a breath of relief.

"That's all right," he said. "You mayn't believe it, but, as a matter of fact, I was going to own up if Bunter was to be caned."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"You don't believe me?"

Wharton hesitated.

"I hope it's the truth," he replied, after a moment. "I dare say you have some good points, though you've never shown them, to my knowledge."

"Thank you!" said Levison, with a sneering smile. "I don't care whether you believe me or not; you can suit yourself."

"Mr. Quelch says—"

"I don't want to hear what he says," interrupted Levison curtly, and he walked away, leaving Harry annoyed.

"By Jove, I don't know how long I shall be able to keep my hands off that fellow!" he muttered, as he made his way to chapel for morning prayers.

It was strange enough that Harry Wharton should be patient with the provoking Levison.

He had a hasty and passionate temper, and he had come to Greyfriars one of the most difficult fellows to get on with.

Perhaps it was consciousness of his own former shortcomings, to which his eyes had been opened, that rendered him patient with one in whom some of his own early faults seemed to be repeated.

When the Remove assembled for morning lessons, Mr. Quelch glanced sharply once or twice at Levison. The amateur conjurer of the Lower Fourth noticed it, and he looked at Wharton very significantly.

He saw that the Form-master suspected him, and in his suspicious way he attributed the fact to Wharton's interference. It was probably out of sheer bravado that Levison chose that inopportune time for a further display of his ability as a conjurer.

In the Latin lesson Mr. Quelch had stood by Billy Bunter for five minutes, patiently trying to drive some faint comprehension of the lesson into his head,



Bunter submitting with the resignation of a martyr.

Mr. Quelch had laid down his book on the desk, and when he had finished with Bunter he put out his hand for his book again. It was not there. He glanced along the desk, but the desk was bare.

"Did I not lay my book there, Skinner?" he asked.

"I think so, sir," said Skinner.

"Have you seen it?"

"I saw you lay it there, sir, a few minutes ago."

"I suppose it must have fallen on the floor. Look for it, some of you."

Skinner, Levison, Bunter, and Nugent looked for the book under the form, but there was no sign of it there. There was a slight grin on Skinner's face, which he was careful, however, not to let Mr. Quelch see.

"Can't find it, sir," said Nugent.

"What can have become of it?"

Mr. Quelch looked on his own desk and round about. There was no sign of the book. He glanced at the boys sitting at the desk where he had laid it.

"Have one of you boys purposely removed it?" he asked.

"No, sir," replied the juniors.

Mr. Quelch was puzzled. His glance rested on Levison very suspiciously. He beckoned to the amateur conjurer of the Remove.

"Stand out here, Levison!"

Levison stepped out before the class with a nonchalant air.

"My book must have been removed purposely from the desk," said Mr. Quelch. "I have known you to play absurd tricks before, Levison. Turn out your pockets."

"Very well, sir!"

Levison turned out his pockets quietly. There was no sign of the little book in them.

"You may take your place," said Mr. Quelch. "I am sorry I suspected you."

"Yes, sir."

Levison sat down again. Skinner was grinning, and this time his grin caught the eye of Mr. Quelch.

"Skinner," rapped out the Remove master, "what is it that you find so amusing?"

"I, sir? Nothing!"

"Then you were laughing for nothing. That is a bad habit to get into, Skinner. You will take fifty lines for laughing in class, and fifty more for having done so with no reason."

"Ye-e-cs, sir!" gasped Skinner.

"It is very curious that my book has disappeared," said Mr. Quelch. "I shall look into this matter further. Meanwhile, we will continue."

About ten minutes later Mr. Quelch had occasion to put his hand in his pocket. A very curious expression came over his face as he did so.

His hand came out of the pocket, and there was a murmur in the Remove as they saw that there was a book in it—the missing book.

Mr. Quelch's face was a study as he looked at it.

Perhaps it was the blank astonishment in the master's face, or perhaps it was the absurdity of the fact that the book had been all the time in his pocket; but the whole Remove burst into a roar of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Quelch turned to the class with a frown on his face that speedily stifled the laughter.

The roar was followed by a dead silence. The Remove waited for what was to follow.

"Someone in this class has had the unheard-of audacity to play a trick upon his Form-master," said Mr. Quelch, in a voice which was low, but seemed to cut like a knife. "I call upon that boy to stand out here."

No one moved.

Mr. Quelch's expression was not inviting, and it was hardly to be wondered at that the culprit preferred to sit where he was.

"Very well," said the Remove master, "I shall sift this matter to the bottom. I shall administer an exemplary punishment to the culprit, which, I think, will teach him that his Form-master is not a proper subject for practical jokes. Levison, stand up!"

Levison turned a trifle pale as he obeyed the order.

He had succeeded in the object of his audacious trick in making the Form-master look absurd in the eyes of the class, and raising a laugh at Mr. Quelch's expense. But after the feast came the reckoning, and that was what he had to face now.

"Levison, I think I have heard of you as a conjurer," said Mr. Quelch.

"Have you, sir?"

"Yes. Did you play this trick on me?"

Levison was silent.

"Answer me!" thundered the Form-master.

"Is it quite fair to ask me to condemn myself?" said Levison, with a glint of defiance in his eyes.

Mr. Quelch's brow was like a thundercloud.

"Levison, I command you to answer me!"

Levison was silent, and his face set obstinately. Mr. Quelch waited some moments, but he did not speak. The class waited with breathless interest for what was to follow.

The Remove had the reputation of being the most unruly Form at Greyfriars, but there was no one in the Form who would have cared to confront Mr. Quelch when he had his "back up," as they expressed it.

He certainly had his back up now, and Levison's obstinacy was ill-timed. Skinner ventured upon a friendly whisper.

"Own up, you ass! It'll make it lighter for you."

Levison took no notice.

"What have you to say, Levison?" said Mr. Quelch, in an ominously quiet tone.

"Nothing, sir."

"Very well. Come with me to the Head."

Levison changed colour. He had not expected that, and the bravado faded out of his manner. A caning, however severe, he could have faced, supported by his sullen obstinacy and the knowledge that he would appear as a kind of hero in the eyes of some of the more timid boys. But to be "sent up" was another matter. Obstinate as he was, he had no mind to face being flogged by the Head.

"I—I— If you please, sir—" he faltered.

Mr. Quelch, who had already turned to the door, looked back.

"Well, Levison?"

"I—I did it, sir!"



"There's an easy way of getting your own back on Wharton," said Bulstrode. "How would you like to see him expelled from Greyfriars?" "Is it possible?" asked Levison. "Quite possible," replied Bulstrode. "Pretty pair of rotters!" murmured Billy Bunter, as he listened on the other side of the tree.

Facing the Music!

THE shout of laughter rang through the Remove-room, and the noise startled the Form-master out of his blank astonishment.

"I thought you did. You took the book off the desk and conveyed it to my pocket?"

"Ye-e-es, sir. I only meant it as a joke!"

"I am quite aware of that. But a joke played upon a Form-master in the class-room is a more serious matter than you appear to think. I think I shall not be wrong in assuming that it was you who also played the trick with the watches this morning, and almost caused an innocent boy to be caned!"

"I know Wharton has told you——"

"Wharton told me nothing," said Mr. Quelch sternly. "He shielded you, which you did not deserve at his hands. Go to my study!"

"But, sir——"

"Go to my study and wait there till I come."

Levison, with a scowl in the direction of Harry Wharton, quitted the class-room. The lessons were resumed, but there was a very painful feeling in the class, and all were under constraint. The Remove knew that Levison would receive a severe punishment, and many sympathised with him. His accusation against Wharton, too, had taken root in the minds of some of the fellows.

The juniors were glad when they were dismissed. The Remove crowded out into the Close. Mr. Quelch, with a stern brow, made his way to his study, where Ernest Levison had been cooling his heels for the last hour.

Levison was sitting in Mr. Quelch's armchair when the Form-master entered the room. He did not rise, and Mr. Quelch's brow grew darker.

"Stand up, Levison!"

Levison rose slowly to his feet, his eyes on the angry master. Mr. Quelch

took the cane which had been intended for Billy Bunter's hands that morning.

"If you think to improve your position by this studied insolence, Levison, you are under a great mistake," said the Form-master. "It is my duty to punish you severely, and I can only hope that the lesson will not be lost on you. Hold out your hand!"

Three strokes Levison received on each hand, and each stroke was laid on with a powerful arm, and, by the time the punishment was over, Levison's face was as white as chalk.

He had not uttered a cry, however, and his lips were quivering but silent when Mr. Quelch laid down the cane.

"You may go!" said the Form-master sharply.

Levison left the study quietly and closed the door. Outside in the passage he pressed his hands under his armpits, and squeezed them there in a vain attempt to assuage the smart of the stinging cuts he had received.

As he came out into the Close the Famous Four were standing near the steps, and their glances seemed to Levison so many taunts.

He walked unsteadily towards them.

"Well, you've had your way, Wharton," he said thickly.

Harry looked him calmly in the face.

"I don't pretend not to know what you mean," he said. "But you are in the wrong. I didn't wish you to get into a row, and it was your own fault for playing a fool's trick like that on a Form-master."

"You gave me away this morning."

Wharton's eyes burned for a moment. But he saw how much the other was suffering, and he controlled his temper and answered quietly:

"I did not give you away, Levison. All I told Mr. Quelch was that the trick with the watches had been played by a conjurer. I could not say less to get Bunter off a licking."

"Quelch knew that it was I."

"That was your own fault. You have played conjuring tricks before—generally ill-natured ones—and I suppose Quelch had heard something about it."

"That's all very well."

"If you mean that you doubt my word, Levison, you had better clear off. I wouldn't like to hit you at present, at any rate, and I've no other reply to make to a fellow who calls me a liar!"

"Well, I call you a liar!"

Wharton clenched his hands. Bob Cherry pulled him back.

"Keep your wool on, Harry! The ass has had a big licking, and he doesn't know what he's saying."

Harry Wharton nodded.

"Right-ho, Bob! I'm not going to touch him!"

"You dare not!" said Levison, between his teeth.

"Oh, don't be a silly ass!" exclaimed Nugent angrily. "You know as well as I do that Wharton could lick you all round the Close if he liked."

Levison sneered.

"He shall have the chance then. He's got to fight me or confess that he's afraid."

Harry laughed contemptuously.

"I'm not likely to do that," he replied. "And as for fighting, you're in no condition to think of anything of the kind now."

"Oh, I know that; but later——"

"Later I hope you'll have cooled down, and have more sense. Come on, you chaps, let's get down to cricket. No good arguing!"

The chums of the Remove walked away, leaving Levison to nurse his injuries, real and imaginary. He was still standing under the elms, rubbing his aching hands, when Bulstrode joined him.

#### Billy Bunter's New Idea!

"I SAY, you fellows——"  
"Can't stop, Bunter! We're going to the nets for some practice."

"I suppose you can spare a minute?" said Billy Bunter, blinking at the chums of the Remove through his big glasses. "It's rather an important matter."

"Oh, go ahead!" said Bob Cherry resignedly. "But do cut it short, there's a good chap!"

"I've got an idea."

"Go and boil it, then!"

"Really, Cherry——"

"The rottenfulness of the idea is probably only equalled by the fatfulness of the head of the esteemed Bunter," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Look here, Inky, if you'll listen a minute——"

"Cut it short!"

"Oh, really, Nugent! This idea is a regular ripper. The only thing is that it will require a certain amount of money to carry it out. That's why I'm suggesting it to you, because I happen to be stony."

"Such a rare state for you to be in, too!" said Bob Cherry.

"Well, I'm not really stony, you know, because I've got ten shillings coming to me this evening in a postal order."

"Same old postal order!"

"Really, Cherry, if you're going to cast doubt upon a fellow's word this

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discussion had better cease!" said Billy Bunter, with great dignity.

"Sooner the quicker," said Bob Cherry.

"I say, you fellows, don't go yet. I haven't finished. I've got a postal order coming this evening. When it comes, I—"

"When it comes it belongs to Inky," said Bob Cherry. "I seem to remember that he lent you some tin the other day on the strength of that postal order."

"This isn't that postal order—it's another one," said Billy Bunter, in a tone of patient explanation.

"Did that one come?"

"No. Unfortunately there was a lot of delay, and it never came at all; but directly it comes, I shall, of course, hand it over to Inky."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I don't see that there's anything to laugh at. But, as I was saying, this postal order has nothing whatever to do with that one, and Inky wouldn't want me to hand over to him a postal order that didn't belong to him."

"Especially as the esteemed postal order will never be a comeful one," remarked the nabob.

"Oh, this one's coming all right! If it had come by the morning's post I shouldn't have been under the necessity of bothering you fellows. But as it is I must trouble you for five bob."

"You needn't trouble, Bunter. You won't get it."

"Really, Nugent, I must have it, you know. I've got a ripping idea. I'm thinking of taking up hypnotism."

"Taking up what?" said Nugent.

"Hypnotism," said Billy Bunter modestly. "I've felt for a long time that I had a gift that way. You've

heard of the wonderful power of the human eye to quell the savage breast?"

"I thought it was music that had charms to soothe the savage breast."

"I shouldn't wonder. But, as I was saying, the power of the human eye is wonderful, and some fellows have the gift of mesmerism, you know. You make passes with your hands and hold a chap with your glittering eye, and he goes off into a sort of doze and does idiotic things."

"Any hypnotists in your family, Bunter?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Thought you might be under the influence of one, if it makes a chap do idiotic things."

"Oh, really, Cherry! I know I've got a gift that way; I've proved it."

"How have you proved it?" asked Nugent, with interest.

"There's Farmer Jones' dog—you know, that beast that always runs after you and barks if you pass the gate. He ran after me yesterday, and I turned round and looked at him; I made a face like this—"

Nugent covered his face with his hands.

"Oh, don't—don't!"

"I tell you I made a face like this and fixed my eyes upon him sternly, concentrating all my powerful will into a steady glare, and he set up a howl and ran away."

"I'm not surprised at that, Bunter. If you could have seen your face in a mirror just now you'd have howled and run away."

"I say, you know, I'm not joking. I really think I ought to cultivate my marvellous gift. I've got a cutting here of an advertisement of Professor

Foozleum, and he sends you his book on hypnotism for five bob, post free."

"Ass!"

"Oh, really, Cherry! When I once get that book I shall make some of you fellows stare. It will be great fun to hypnotise old Quelch in the class-room and make him dance, for instance."

"You utter ass!"

"Of course, you think I couldn't do it. You just wait till I've got Professor Foozleum's book, that's all. But the matter to settle now is—which of you is going to lend me five bob? You can have it back out of my postal order this evening."

"Better wait till your postal order comes."

"Well, you see, I'm in a hurry to get to work, and I want to catch the afternoon-collection with my letter to Professor Foozleum," explained Billy Bunter. "It's all the same to you fellows, I suppose, if I let you have it back this evening out of my postal order?"

"My dear Bunter, you must be a little more moderate. When you want tin you must keep to tanners," said Harry Wharton. "Five bob is a little too big a pull on a Remove fellow, you know."

"Yes, but if I settle up this evening, and—"

"Oh, rats!" said Bob Cherry.

"If you doubt my word, Cherry—"

"Cheese it, Bunter! When we see that postal order we'll believe it. And the amount of hypnotism you'll ever learn wouldn't be worth five bob."

"I don't see that it matters to you how I spend my money," said Bunter, with great dignity.

Bob Cherry grinned.

"Only it isn't your money; it's our money you want to spend," he said.

## PEN PALS

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"It's rather mean to make a fuss about a trifle like that."

"I say, we shall never get any cricket practice if we wait till Bunter's stopped talking!" said Nugent. "Bunty, take a little run!"

"But, I say, you fellows—"

"Oh, cut off!"

The chums of the Remove walked away. Billy Bunter blinked after them indignantly through his glasses.

"Well, of all the rotters!" he muttered. "Fancy not trusting a fellow for a few hours with a paltry five bob—and the money's as safe as if it were in the Bank of England! It's rather hard cheese that I should have to put off developing my great powers as a hypnotist because of their meanness over a few bob. I wonder whom I can borrow it of?"

Billy Bunter walked away, turning over that weighty problem in his mind. He was still thinking it out when he sat down on a seat under one of the shady old elms, his brow wrinkled with thought. He had not come to a satisfactory conclusion when his reverie was interrupted by the sound of voices near at hand.

### Black Treachery!

**L**EVISON, old chap—  
It was Bulstrode's voice. The bully of the Remove was speaking in a very friendly tone, different from the bullying one he usually adopted in speaking to smaller boys.

Bunter listened idly. He had more than once played the eavesdropper, but it was not from any evil in his nature—being more from inquisitiveness than anything else.

"What do you want?"

Levison's voice was by no means good-tempered. His castigation had been severe, and the pain in his hands seemed to be growing worse instead of better.

Neither of the juniors was visible to Bunter, the big trunk intervening between them and the seat upon which the fat junior was sitting. Bulstrode and Levison could not see him, nor had they the remotest idea that he was there. This did not occur to Bunter at first, but he realised it as the talk went on.

"I want to speak to you, Levison."

"Well, you can speak, I suppose?"

"You've had a licking from old Quelch."

"I know that without your telling me!"

"Don't get ratty. I can tell you a way of getting even with Wharton."

Levison's manner changed. He ceased rubbing his aching hands and

looked quickly at the bully of the Remove.

"What do you mean, Bulstrode?"

"It was Wharton gave you away to the beak, wasn't it?"

"I suppose so."

"Depend upon it, he gave you away. Anyway, whether he did or not, what he said made Quelch jump to the right conclusion."

"That's certain enough."

"I suppose you want to get even with Wharton? You're not going to take this lying down?" said Bulstrode, with a half-sneer in his voice.

Levison gritted his teeth.

"No; I'm going to fight him as soon as I'm fit."

"Fight him!" Bulstrode laughed scornfully. "What the dickens do you think you can do against Wharton? Do you know he licked me? And there's not a fellow in the Remove I couldn't lick!"

"Well, I'm going to tackle him, at any rate!"

"And get knocked into a cocked hat," said Bulstrode contemptuously. "I can show you a better way than that."

"What do you mean?"

"There's an easy and certain way of getting your own back on Wharton," said Bulstrode, lowering his voice a little. "How would you like to see him expelled from Greyfriars?"

Levison started.

"Is it possible?"

"Quite possible."

"What has he done? Do you mean to say he's done anything that would lead to his being expelled if he were found out?"

Levison's tone left no doubt as to his eagerness in the matter.

"Pretty pair of rotters!" murmured Billy Bunter to himself. "Wharton can hardly do less than stand me the five bob when I tell him this."

And the Owl of the Remove listened with all ears now.

Bulstrode laughed shortly.

"It doesn't matter whether he has done anything," he replied. "He can be made to appear to have done something—and that's enough."

"I don't understand."

"You're jolly clever as a conjurer."

"What has that to do with it?"

"Lots. You know, a lot of fellows jumped to the conclusion that Bunter was a thief over the affair of the watches."

Levison laughed.

"Well, you see, it would be perfectly easy to work off a trick of the same kind on Wharton. You could plant something on him belonging to somebody else without his knowing it, and then raise a hue-and-cry—"

Levison stared at the bully of the Remove blankly. He was a trickster himself, and sometimes there was a vein of ill-nature in his tricks, but it was plain that such rascality as this had never crossed his mind.

"What do you mean, Bulstrode?"

"I'm speaking in plain English, I think. You can plant something on Wharton and make all the fellows think he's a thief. He'll be sent to Coventry; and if he isn't expelled, he'll have no choice but to get out of Greyfriars."

"Are you joking?" asked Levison.

"Of course I'm not!" said Bulstrode testily. "I'm showing you an easy way of getting rid of a high-and-mighty fellow who's a thorn in the side of both of us."

"You cad!"

"What's that?"

"You cad!" said Levison. "I always knew you were a rotter, but I never thought you were such a rotter as this!"

Bulstrode almost gasped with rage.

"Then you refuse?"

"Yes, you cad!"

"After what you played on Billy Bunter—"

"That was only a joke."

"It might have been a serious joke for Bunter. Now you are putting on virtuous airs to me! You rotter!"

"Oh, shut up, and don't bother me!"

"I'll bother you!" said Bulstrode, pushing back his cuffs. "I'll give you the biggest hiding you've ever had, you hypocrite!"

"Keep back!"

Bulstrode was advancing with clenched fists and angry face. There was no doubt as to his intentions. Levison faced him with a sneering smile on his face. He did not want for pluck.

"Don't touch me, Bulstrode," he said quietly. "If you do I'll go straight to Mr. Quelch and tell him what you've just proposed to me."

Bulstrode stopped.

"Sneak!"

"Are you the sort of fellow to call anybody names?" said Levison contemptuously.

"Quelch wouldn't believe you."

"I'll give him the chance, anyway."

Bulstrode's hands dropped to his sides. He glared at Levison for a few moments as if undecided whether to spring on him or not, and then turned on his heel and walked off.

Levison shrugged his shoulders.

Billy Bunter rose quietly from the seat and slipped away.

*(What will Bunter do now? Needless to say, he puts his foot in it and causes serious trouble between Wharton and Levison! Make sure you don't miss next week's exciting chapters.)*



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