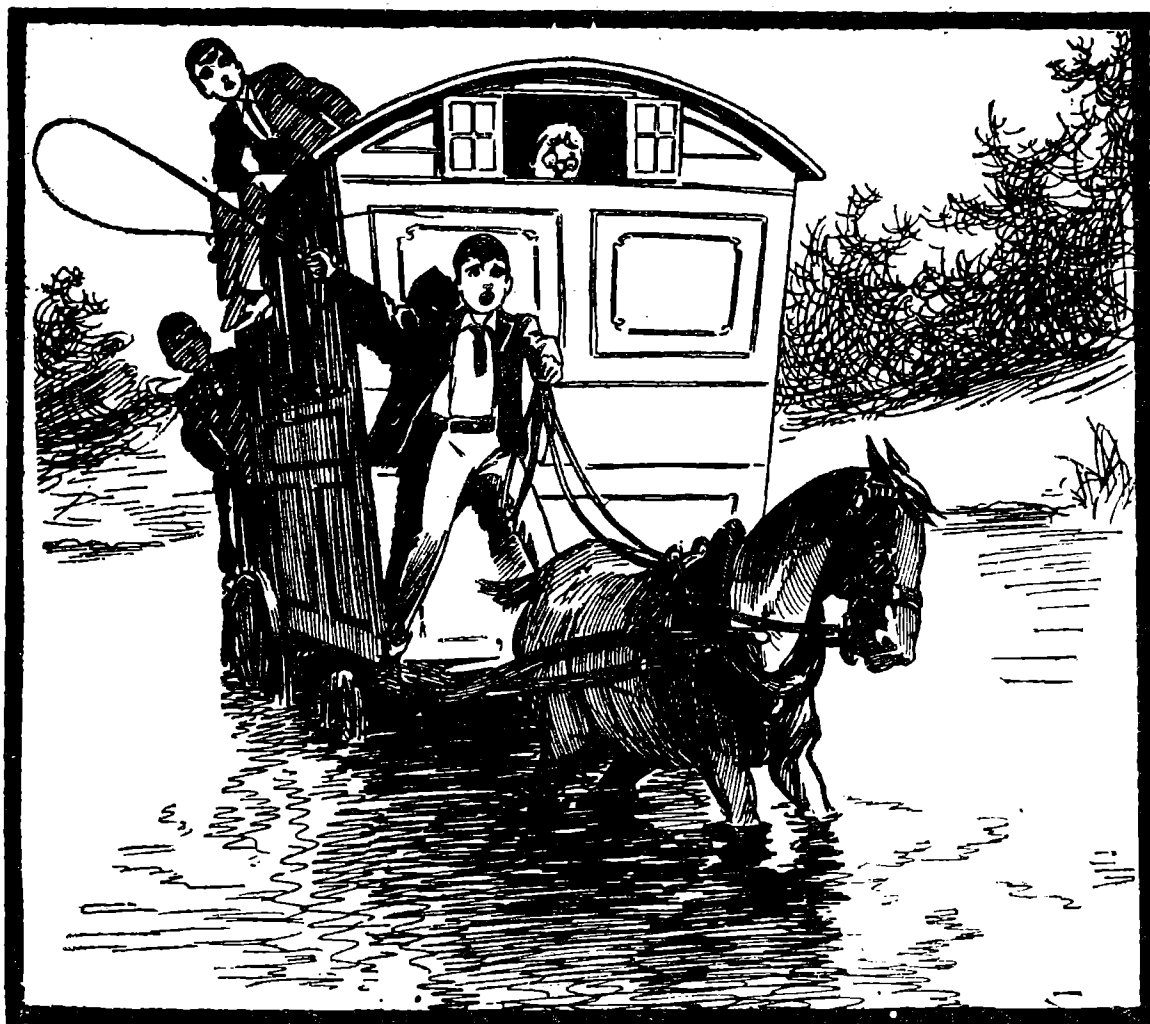


LONG COMPLETE SCHOOL STORIES BY
FRANK RICHARDS, MARTIN CLIFFORD, OWEN CONQUEST

The Penny Popular

No.
251.

Three Complete Stories of—
HARRY WHARTON & Co.—JIMMY SILVER & Co.—TOM MERRY & Co.



STUCK IN THE MUD!

(An Amusing Incident from the Grand Long Complete Tale of Harry Wharton & Co.,
contained in this issue.)

The Greyfriars Camp



A Magnificent Long Complete Tale, dealing with the early Adventures of
HARRY WHARTON & CO.
at Greyfriars.

By **FRANK RICHARDS.**

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Caravanners.

A CARAVAN, piloted by Harry Wharton & Co., the chums of Greyfriars, lumbered down the old High Street of Friardale, and many were the glances cast towards it.

But, however curious it looked to see the juniors in charge of the gipsy vehicle, there was no doubt that Wharton handled the horse well, and some of the glances were admiring.

The old High Street was narrow in places, and though there was little traffic, what there was frequently congested. In a strait, with a butcher's cart and a dray in opposition, Wharton brought off the caravan in triumph.

It was a half-holiday, and Harry Wharton & Co. had boarded their caravan, with the intention of having a jolly good time in the open country.

Wharton had mapped out the route. He had a pass from Wingate, the captain of Greyfriars: which allowed him and his friends to cut roll-call.

The chums had not to get back to the school until locking-up, which was at dusk, and at this time of the year dusk was very late.

There was ample time for a really extensive expedition, and the chums naturally wanted to get as far as they could from familiar surroundings.

So long as they were encircled by scenes they knew, the sense of adventure was to some extent lacking.

Wharton was driving. Bob Cherry sat on the roof of the caravan, with his legs dangling down in front, and Hurree Jamsat Raiu Singh and Frank Nugent were on the shafts. Hazeldene and Billy Bunter were inside the vehicle.

The Artful Dodger, which, by the way, was the name Bob Cherry had given the animal between the shafts, was on his best behaviour. But about a mile out of Friardale the travellers reached the first hill of any consequence, and there the Dodger began to show the cloven foot.

The pace of the caravan dropped to a crawl, and all, except the driver, of course, walked. But that lightening of the load did not inspire the Dodger with

new energy. He showed signs of exhaustion, and Bob Cherry uttered an exclamation of disgust.

"The beast!" he said. "We've been taken in with this brute, Harry! Look at him hanging his head! He's fagged out already!"

Harry Wharton laughed. He knew more than Bob Cherry did about horses.

"That's all right," he said. "It's only humbug. He could take this hill at the run if he wanted to. I'll give him a touch up."

A flick of the whip was all that was necessary. The Dodger bucked up at once, and the caravan rumbled up the incline at quite an active rate. They rattled cheerily over the hill, and down the opposite slope. Then Harry turned from the high-road into a rutty lane.

"No good following the beaten tracks," he remarked, as the caravan began to bump on the ruts of dried mud. "We shall get to the woods this way."

"Can we get the van through the trees?" asked Nugent.

"Yes, rather—gipsies often do."

"Well, it will be ripping," said Bob Cherry. "I suppose you know this way, Harry? I don't."

"I've a good idea of it."

The caravan bumped on. There was a glimmer of sunlight on flowing water ahead, and white stepping-stones glistened in the bed of a shallow stream.

"All aboard," said Harry, and those who were walking jumped into the caravan. The Remove captain brought the van carefully down to the stream, and the Artful Dodger took the ford cheerfully enough.

Splash! Splash!

"My hat!" said Bob Cherry. "This is exciting!"

"If we get stuck in the sand—" remarked Nugent.

"The excitement will be terrific!"

The water rose round the wheels of the van and over the axles. The horse's hoofs splashed up water and sand. In the middle of the stream the water was almost up to the floor-boards.

"Get on," said Harry, as the Dodger stopped.

But the horse did not move.

Crack, crack! rang the whip, and

then the lash curled round the horse's shoulders. The Dodger snorted, but did not advance. In the middle of the stream, with tricklets of water creeping in over the floor, the caravan remained at a stand-still.

"Come up!"

"Get on, you beast!"

"Go it!"

The whip cracked, and the reins jerked. But Dodger declined to move. He looked round once reproachfully at Harry, and then hung his head, and remained still.

"My hat!" said Bob Cherry. "This is lively! He wants us to stay here for the term of our natural lives!"

"The liveliness is terrific!"

"The brute!" muttered Harry. "It's only obstinacy; but if he won't go on, the wheels will get stuck in the sand, and we shall be anchored. One of you fellows jump down and lead him."

"No fear!" said Nugent promptly. "The water's too wet. See if it's dry on your side, Bob."

"No; it's wet over here, too," grinned Bob Cherry. "I'm relying on the driver. Wharton will bring us through all right."

Harry Wharton laughed rather ruefully. As he had taken charge of the horse, he was bound to bring the caravan through. But it was no joke to plunge up to the waist in water to lead the obstinate Dodger. He preferred to try the whip again. The lash curled round the Dodger, but he stuck fast, with a grim determination oftener found in a donkey than in the equine species.

"He likes that, I believe," said Bob Cherry, comfortably perched on the top of the caravan, and looking down with an air of detachment upon the scene, as if he were nothing more than a spectator at a show. "You'll have to try something else, Harry."

"Perhaps the van's too heavy," said Nugent. "We might reduce the weight by half by throwing Bunter out."

Bunter, who was looking out of one of the open windows, blinked at him in alarm, not knowing whether he was in earnest.

"Oh, really, Nugent—"

"Better get on," said Hazeldene, look-

ing out of the other window. "The water's beginning to come into the van." "You ass!" exclaimed Harry. "I'm not sticking here for fun!"

"Well, try and get on, you know. The water's coming into—"

"Go it, Harry!"

"Tli take the reins, if you like," said Nugent.

Harry sniffed. He gave the obstinate Dodger a touch again with the whip, and the Dodger heeded it this time. It was a gentler touch than he had had before, but perhaps the Dodger thought the joke had gone far enough, or perhaps he was tired of standing in the water.

At all events, he made a sudden plunge forward, and the caravan moved so suddenly that the juniors had to clutch hold to avoid being thrown off.

But Bob Cherry, sitting in an easy attitude on the roof, with his legs dangling, had nothing to hold on to. He made a desperate grasp at the chimney, but missed, and rolled off the roof.

Splash!

"Ow-w-w-w-w!"

The water splashed up over the caravan and the caravanners as Bob Cherry plunged into it. He went right under, but the water was shallow, and in a moment he was on his feet, the stream flowing round his waist.

"Ow! Oh! Br-r-r-r! Stop for me!"

But the caravan could not stop. The Dodger, having made up his mind to go on, went on, and the caravan splashed and rumbled through the stream rapidly, and was dragged up the opposite bank.

It was all Wharton could do to handle the reins, and keep the Dodger from wrecking the caravan in the mud, or stranding it in the rushes, without thinking of Bob Cherry. The unfortunate junior, drenched and dripping, plunged after the van, and scrambled ashore, gasping.

"Ow!" he roared. "Look at me! I'm drenched!"

"You do look wet!" gasped Harry, as he turned the caravan into the road again. "You might as well have got down and led the horse, after all."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bob Cherry did not join in the laugh. He grunted indignantly, and clambered into the van to change his clothes. Billy Bunter had a fire going to cook the lunch, but he objected strenuously to Bob using the stove to dry his clothes. The caravan rattled on merrily while the dispute raged inside.

"You're making everything wet, Cherry," said Bunter warmly. "I think you might show a little more consideration, I do, really."

"Haven't I got to change my clothes?" roared Bob, who was not in the best of tempers by this time.

"Well, I don't think you ought to make the place all wet. You're interrupting my work. Look here, couldn't you sit on the roof and get dry in the sun? You'd very likely be dry in an hour or two."

Bob Cherry did not reply in words. He gave Bunter a push on the chest that made him sit down in a great hurry, and proceeded to change his clothes.

He stripped off the wet garments and arranged them round the little stove, and a thick steam was soon rising.

Hazeldene went out on the step at the back to make more room; but Billy Bunter sat on a stool and glowered through his big glasses.

"Gimme a towel!" roared Bob, so suddenly that Bunter nearly fell off the stool.

The juniors had brought towels, in case they should have an opportunity to get some bathing. Bob rubbed down his

wet limbs and dripping hair with a rough towel, and felt better. But although the first half of the changing was easy, it was not so easy to finish.

The caravanners had made no provision for such an accident, and there was no second suit of clothes in the caravan. Bob Cherry eyed Bunter grudgingly.

"You'd better get those things off, and let me have them," he said. "You can wear a sack or something for a few hours."

Whether Bob was serious or not, Bunter didn't know, and he didn't stop to inquire. He rolled out of the door of the caravan, and scrambled up in front on the shaft.

Bob chuckled, and looked round for some sort of clothing. There was an ancient pair of trousers in the caravan that had belonged to the former owner, and Bob looked at them long and doubtfully. But there was nothing else, and he had to take them or nothing.

Hazeldene looked at him and chuckled. He stripped off the jacket, and Bob Cherry put it on. It was tight for him; still, it completed his attire, and made it possible for him to show himself in public.

The tight school jacket, and the huge, baggy trousers of a loud check, patched with big patches of different colours, gave Bob an aspect that made Hazeldene chuckle. The unlucky junior stepped out into the road, and as soon as his comrades caught sight of him, there was a roar of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha! Any old clothes!" gasped Nugent.

"Rags and bones!" chuckled the Nabob of Bhanipur. "The rag and boneliness of our worthy chum's honourable attire is terrific."

Bob Cherry doated.

"I suppose it does look a picture," he growled. "All the fault of the silly ass



The Dodger made a sudden plunge forward, and Bob Cherry, sitting in an easy attitude on the caravan roof, with his legs dangling, had nothing to hold on to. He made a desperate grasp at the chimney, and missed, and rolled off the roof. Splash!

With a grunt he slipped the garment on. They were baggy, and they came down below his ankles, but he fastened them on with his belt, taking in great folds of the thick cloth, and then rolled them up at the ankles, till his feet were clear.

Billy Bunter, who never forgot anything that could conduce to his personal comfort, had brought a pair of slippers, and Bob immediately put them on.

They were small for him, but he made them easier for his toes by cutting some slits with his pocket-knife. Then he gave Hazeldene a poke in the back that nearly rolled him into the road.

"Here, hold on!" exclaimed Hazeldene, holding on himself.

"Will you lend me your jacket?" asked Bob.

"I want it, ass!"

"Look here, you can go in your shirt-sleeves for a bit—I can't go about like this. Lend me your jacket."

who drives a van and pitches a fellow overboard."

"My hat!" said Wharton, looking at him, and bursting into a laugh. "I'd recommend you to keep inside the van in that rig, Bob."

"I'm not going to be shut up in a rotten van a whole rotten afternoon. It's a free country, and I'm not going to be bottled up to please anybody."

"There's some cyclists coming!" grinned Hazeldene.

"Let 'em all come!"

Wharton, from his higher seat, saw the cyclists more clearly, and he gave a sudden chuckle.

"I say, Bob, better get inside—"

"Rats!"

"They're ladies."

"I tell you I won't go in," growled Bob Cherry, a little less resolutely, however. It was not pleasant to cause surprise and amusement to lady cyclists,

and he could not punch their heads, as he might have done with cyclists of the masculine gender.

"My hat," exclaimed Hazeldene suddenly, "it's Marjorie!"

"What!"

"It's my sister, and Clara."

"Oh!"

Bob Cherry made one bound into the caravan, and slammed the door shut. The next moment the little blinds were rattled over the little windows; and then Bob sat, with his grip on the handle of the door, holding it shut and trembling.

THE SECOND CHAPTER, Rough on Bob Cherry.

MARJORIE HAZELDENE glanced at the caravan, and recognised her brother, and the chums of Greyfriars. She stopped and alighted from her machine, and Miss Clara followed her example as Harry Wharton drew the horse to a halt.

The juniors raised their hats, and Hurree Singh, in an excess of Oriental politeness, waved his round head.

"How awfully jolly to meet you!" exclaimed Wharton. "You haven't seen our caravan yet! A ripper, isn't she?"

"Yes, isn't it delightful!" said Marjorie, in great admiration; and Miss Clara, who was addicted to slangy expressions, pronounced that it was ripping.

"Are you in a hurry?" asked Nugent. "You'd like to have a look at it?"

"I should, very much! No, we are only going to the village. But you must not allow us to delay you—"

"Not a bit of it! Our time's our own up to half-past eight-to-night!" said Harry Wharton cheerfully.

"Then we should awfully like to see it," said Miss Clara, allowing Nugent to take her machine and lean it against a tree. "What great fun it must be, caravanning! What a beautiful caravan—and what a sweet horse! I suppose you have all the things for cooking and so on inside?"

"Yes, everything," said Harry. And then, as Miss Clara went towards the door, his face fell a little. He suddenly remembered that Bob Cherry was inside, too, in his unique and remarkable clothes.

"How utterly lovely!"

"It's close on time for our lunch," said Nugent, looking at his watch. "If you are not hurried for time, you ought to camp with us for lunch. It's near tea-time, you know—it's really a high tea."

"We shall be delighted!" said Marjorie.

Bob Cherry, who heard everything from within the van, was not delighted.

As a rule Bob Cherry was willing to take a great deal of trouble to meet Marjorie Hazeldene, but the present was not one of those occasions. The idea of appearing before the astonished Marjorie in his present attire, and of meeting the mocking glances of Miss Clara, made him turn hot and cold.

He was tempted to change back as quickly as he could into his clothes, wet as they were—but he knew he would not have time. He dared not let go the handle of the door.

Miss Clara was already trying the door on the outside.

"Dear me, the door won't open!"

That was not surprising, as Bob Cherry was holding it inside. Nugent hurried to the rescue.

"Won't it? Let me try!"

Hazeldene chuckled, and Billy Bunter THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 251.

let off a cachinnation that startled the birds on the trees overhead. Nugent wrenched at the door.

"Hallo, Bob!" he called out. "Open the door!"

"Is Cherry in there?" asked Marjorie in surprise.

"Oh, yes! Open the door, Bob!"

There was no reply, and the door did not open.

"Perhaps he's asleep!" suggested Marjorie.

"Oh, no, he isn't! Open the door, Bob!"

Nugent wrenched at the handle, and the door came open. There was no help for it now, and Bob gave himself up for lost.

Marjorie and Clara started back in surprise and alarm as a strange figure appeared in the doorway of the caravan. It was Bob Cherry, with flaming cheeks!

"My goodness!" exclaimed Clara. "Dear me!"

"I—I—I'm sorry to startle you!" said Bob.

"Oh dear, it's Cherry!"

"Yes, I'm Cherry," said Bob, with a furious glance at Nugent, who was doubled up with mirth. "I—I—I—"

Stop that cackling, Frank, or I'll jump on you!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Nugent. "I remember how you cackled when I was boy-scouting in girls' clothes! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Shut up!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Marjorie and Clara joined in the laughter—they could not help it. Bob Cherry's appearance was so utterly absurd that an owl might have been excused for laughing. But as she saw the look of real vexation on Bob's face, Marjorie became grave again at once.

"Oh, please forgive me!" she murmured. "But—but—"

"But you do look—er—odd, you know!" gasped Miss Clara.

Bob Cherry's face relaxed.

"Well, I suppose it is a bit odd," he said. "You see, I was ducked in the stream over yonder, owing to the way Wharton was driving—"

"Here, draw it mild, Bob!"

"Owing to Wharton's rotten driving," said Bob firmly. "And I had to get a change somehow, and this was the best I could do. I suppose it's funny."

"Funny isn't the word!" gasped Nugent. "Bunter, get your camera!"

"Don't you do anything of the sort!" roared Bob Cherry. "If you bring that camera near me, I'll jump on it!"

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

"Here's a jolly spot for camping!" said Harry Wharton, pointing to a patch of rich grass under the shelter of the trees by the roadside. "There's a spring on the other side of the hedge, too. If you're going to be outside the van, Bob, you'd better put a coat on."

"It's too jolly hot for a coat."

"Well, take your choice!" said Harry, laughing. "This road is pretty frequently used, and you will get chipped!"

"We might put him in a cage, and charge for admission to see him," suggested Nugent. "I'd write a notice—A Jolly Good Laugh, Twopence a Time!"

"Oh, cheese it!" growled Bob. "Perhaps I'd better put the coat on."

And he did.

THE THIRD CHAPTER, Ladies to Tea.

THE caravan was drawn up at the roadside, and the horse was tethered in the grass to feed, released from the harness while the juniors camped. Billy Bunter was soon busy at the stove in the van.

It was a hot afternoon, and the stove in the van made the interior decidedly sultry. But Billy Bunter did not mind. He took off his jacket and rolled up his cuffs and set to work.

While Bunter was poaching eggs and cutting up corned-beef and bread-and-butter, the juniors dragged out stools and cushions to make seats for the girls.

From the spring in the field fresh water was obtained in abundance, and Bunter was impressed with the necessity of carefully boiling it before using, in case of accidents. As it was only wanted to make tea, however, that caution was hardly needed, as Bunter wasn't likely to brew with cold water.

Plates and other crockery were in the van in abundance. A few of them had belonged to the previous gipsy owner, but most had been bought by the juniors to stock the van. There were more than enough plates and cups—a rather unusual state of things at a junior feed.

Billy Bunter, glowing with heat and hospitality, came out of the van with a huge dish loaded up with poached eggs, all done to a turn and piping hot.

"Ripping!" said Nugent. "You're worth your weight in gold, Billy, when it comes to cooking."

"I'm sincerely glad you can appreciate me in some respects, Nugent. I'd like to see your feed if I hadn't come with you."

"You'd always like to see a feed, wouldn't you?"

"I mean—"

"Pass the eggs! You're keeping Marjorie waiting."

Eggs and corned beef, and ham and watercress and radishes, and huge piles of bread-and-butter and cake, made a lunch that was very enjoyable to hungry juniors, but it was a little too solid for the girls to do it full justice.

However, they did their best; though if they had eaten half of what their hosts wanted them to eat, they would have rivalled Billy Bunter.

The tea proceeded merrily, and Billy Bunter beamed with delight at the keen appreciation shown for his cooking. The tea was pronounced delicious.

"I say, you fellows, this is really ripping!" said Billy Bunter. "I suppose we'd better have a bit of a rest after tea, hadn't we? I'll give you some ventriloquism if you like."

"Give us some cake instead," said Bob Cherry, passing his plate.

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

"Hallo! What are you doing here?"

The campers started and looked round towards the road. A man in the garb of a keeper, with a gun in the hollow of his arm, had stopped, and was staring angrily at them. They looked at him without replying.

"What are you doing here?"

Wharton's temper began to rise at the bullying tone, but he answered quietly:

"I should think you could see—we are having tea. What business is it of yours?"

"This is private land."

"I was not aware of that."

"Well, you're aware of it now," said the man roughly. "There's a notice up at the end of the lane warning you not to picnic on the grass. Get off at once!"

"We shall do nothing of the sort," said Harry quietly. "If the land is private it ought to be enclosed. You can get on."

"Get off this land!" said the keeper angrily.

The girls began to look a little scared, but the boys did not. Even if they had been trespassing they would never have given in to a bully. The man's tone and manner were quite enough to put their backs up at once.

There was a ditch between the grass-land and the public road, but no fence of any sort, and the ditch was covered in for a considerable part of its length, rendering access easy.

Whether or not they were entitled to camp there, the Greyfriars juniors did not mean to be ordered off by a bully. And Harry suspected very strongly that the keeper was only attempting to extort a tip, which he determined not to give.

"Are you going?" shouted the man.

"No!"

"Then I'll shift you!"

And, leaning the gun against a tree, he laid his hands roughly upon Harry's shoulders. Wharton's eyes blazed. His fist came up like lightning, and it caught the fellow under the chin with a hammer-like blow.

The keeper staggered back helplessly, and, losing his footing on the edge of the ditch, went backwards into it with a splash.

There was more mud than water in the ditch, and when the man scrambled to his feet he was a shocking sight. He was smothered with mud from head to foot, and almost stuttering with rage.

The juniors grinned at his appearance, and even Marjorie and Clara smiled, alarmed as they were.

Bob Cherry picked up the caravan whip, and made the lash whistle in the air.

hand, as they pedalled away. They looked back and waved their hands at the bend of the lane, and then disappeared towards Friardale.

"We'd better get on, too," said Nugent. "Lend us a hand with the horse."

The Dodger seemed somewhat unwilling to resume his place between the shafts. But as he had been tethered, he had no chance to show his heels, and he was brought up to the van.

Nugent backed him into the shafts, and very nearly backed him over Billy Bunter, who got in the way. The harness was adjusted, and in less than five minutes the caravan was rolling merrily along the road once again.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Man Behind the Gun.

THE sun was sinking lower in the west, and the stream was red in the sunset, while the shadows lengthened in the wood. The Greyfriars juniors had just eaten their last meal of the day, and they lay lazily at rest in the grass, with a sense of luxurious idleness that was very pleasant to lads who were usually hard and keen workers. A glorious summer afternoon was drawing to its close.

"This is ripping!" said Bob Cherry

picked up the frying-pan and Hurroo Singh a stick. Hazeldene and Wharton clenched their fists—they had no weapons at hand.

The three ruffians had cudgels in their hands, and if they attacked it was likely to go hard with the juniors of Greyfriars. And there was little doubt of their intentions.

"Hold on, there!"

It was Bob Cherry's voice from the caravan.

The junior was looking out of the window, and in his hands glimmered a levelled gun.

Wharton started at the sight of it.

The gun had been slung on the wall inside the caravan, but he knew perfectly well that it was a useless old weapon belonging to Telengro, the gipsy, and that there was no ammunition for it in the caravan.

But Bob Cherry's face was grim and threatening. He had levelled the gun through the van window, and his eye glanced along it in a businesslike manner. His finger was on the trigger, and the muzzle of the gun bore directly upon the three poachers.

They stared at him dumbfounded.

Through the little window of the caravan they could only see the levelled gun, and the threatening face of the boy behind it.

"Hold on!" said Bob Cherry. "Throw

REMEMBER THE DATE—AUGUST 13th!

ON THIS DATE

"FRANK RICHARDS' SCHOOLDAYS!"

A Magnificent New Series, dealing with the School Life of the Famous Author of the Tales of HARRY WHARTON & CO.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD

Will Appear in

THE BOYS' FRIEND.

TELL ALL YOUR CHUMS ABOUT THIS GREAT ATTRACTION!

"I give you one second to clear," he said grimly.

The man looked at him, and cleared. He shook his fist at the juniors as he went tramping furiously down the road. Bob threw down the whip.

"Good riddance," he said, seating himself again. "What a beast!"

"He may come back," murmured Clara.

Wharton laughed carelessly.

"If he does he shall go into the ditch again," he said. "Never mind him! Another cup of tea for Marjorie, Billy."

"Certainly," said Bunter, taking up the teapot. "You handled that chap well, Wharton. I was just going to tackle him myself; but I'm glad you did it. If I had been roused I might have hurt him too much."

The tea finished cheerfully, without any sign of the discomfited keeper. In the merry chatter over the teacups the incident was forgotten.

Marjorie rose to her feet at last.

"We must get on," she said. "Thank you so much; it was a splendid tea."

"Ripping!" said Miss Clara cheerily.

Wharton and Nugent wheeled the bicycles into the road, and the two girls mounted, while the juniors stood, hat in

drowsily. "Jolly ripping! I think I'd like to be a gipsy."

"And mend cans for a living?" asked Harry, laughing.

"There's worse ways of getting a living than that," said Bob sententially. "There's that chap who paid us a visit, for instance. Speaking of him, we haven't seen him again."

"No; I hope we sha'n't, either."

There was a rustle in the thickets. Harry raised his head, and looked round. The next moment he was upon his feet. "Jump up, you chaps!"

The juniors scrambled up.

Three rough-looking fellows had come out of the thickets—one, the man in the gaiters, whose face was still greasy from the frying-pan—and two more very like him in appearance.

Billy Bunter gave them one blink, and scuttled into the caravan. Bob Cherry, for a reason of his own, followed him.

Harry stood erect, facing the three ruffians as they advanced. There was an unpleasant grin on the greasy face of the leader.

"I've kim back," he remarked.

"I see you have," said Harry. "What do you want?"

The juniors drew together. Nugent

those cudgels down, or I'll pull the trigger. Quick!"

The ruffians glared at him furiously. One cudgel, and then another, went into the grass, but the man in the gaiters still gripped his savagely.

"You dare not!" he yelled.

"You'd better not try me!"

"You dare not fire!"

Bob Cherry pressed the trigger slightly so that the hammer began to rise.

The ruffian changed colour.

"Now then," said Bob crisply, "I give you while I count two, and if the stick isn't down by then I pull the trigger, and you take the consequences."

"Hang you! I—I—"

"One!"

"I will not—"

"Two!" roared Bob.

"Stop! Stop!"

The cudgel clattered down on the others.

"Just in time!" said Bob Cherry.

"Pick up those cudgels, kids!"

The juniors quickly obeyed.

"Now, get off, you scoundrels! Quick!"

The rascals glared at him in helpless rage. They had expected to find easy

THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 251.

victims at the juniors' camp, but the sight of the gun had completely turned the tables upon them. They were not prepared to face firearms; and what added to their alarm was the knowledge that a gun with a boy's finger on the trigger wasn't a safe thing to be near, anyway. Even if Bob did not intend to fire, the gun might go off at any moment.

"Sharp's the word!" said Bob, making a motion with the gun. "Clear off!"

"You young hound—"

"Are you going?"

The men exchanged glances of helpless rage, and turned away. They plunged into the thickets.

The foliage rustled for a few moments, and then was silent.

They were gone.

Bob Cherry came out of the van, grinning, with the ancient gun in his hand. Seen at close quarters, old Telengro's gun did not look so dangerous. The probability was that if it had been loaded and discharged, it would have burst.

"My only hat!" gasped Nugent.

"What a bluff!"

"The bluff-fulness was terrific!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Bob. "I wonder what those johnnies would say if they knew the gun hadn't been loaded for a dog's age?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors laughed loud and long over the adventure—as they could afford to do now. But for Bob's prompt action, however, it would probably have ended very differently.

Billy Bunter blinked round the door of the caravan as he heard the reassuring sound of laughter.

"Are they gone?"

"Ha, ha! Yes. You can come out now!"

"Oh, really, Vaseline—"

"It's quite safe," said Nugent. "You can show yourself."

"Oh, really, Nugent, I hope you didn't think I was getting in the caravan because I was afraid! I was just going for my camera."

"Your camera!"

"Yes. I was going to—take a snapshot of those rotters, you know!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, really, you fellows—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bunter blinked indignantly at the laughing juniors, but it made no difference. Bunter as a hero was not to be believed in. His friends would sooner have believed in the reality of the remittances he was always expecting.

"We'll keep these cudgels," said Nugent. "They may come in handy. We may come across those brutes again, and they'd rob us as soon as look at us if they had a chance. About time we harnessed up, I think."

"Yes, rather! We'll go home by way of Linford, and over the hill."

"Help us catch the Dodger, then?"

"Oh, he's all right!" said Bob Cherry confidently. "I can get him easily enough. He's given up his little tricks, I think."

And Bob Cherry walked over to where the Dodger was lazily reposing in the grass. The horse looked at him out of the corner of his eye.

"Come on, old hoss!" said Bob, with the collar in his hand ready to slip over the horse's head. "Come on!"

The Dodger whisked to his feet.

He had been sleepy and drowsy for some time, but now that he was wanted to draw the caravan he became lively all of a sudden.

Bob reached the collar towards him, and Dodger calmly dodged it. Bob tried to get hold of his mane, but it was fessed away from his reach. Then the horse backed away, keeping his eyes upon Bob.

"Dodger! Dodgy! Come on, old hoss!"

But Dodger persisted in backing away. Bob Cherry looked round at his grinning chums.

"You'd better lend me a hand, you chaps!"

"Ha, ha! I think we had better—rather!"

"The ratherfulness is terrific!"

Wharton, Nugent, Hazeldene, and Hurree Singh approached the horse on different sides. Harry rather regretted now that he had not either tethered or hobbled the horse; but the Dodger had been so good that he had not thought it necessary, especially as the wood was too thick for him to stray. But he did not know the Dodger yet.

With five juniors round him, closing in on him, and the thick wood behind, the horse seemed certain to be caught. But the Dodger was never at the end of his resources. He suddenly whinnied, and ran right at Hazeldene, and the junior weakly jumped out of the way and let him pass.

The Dodger dashed on, and plunged into the thickets, and was lost to sight in a moment.

—

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Camping Out.

"**W**HIEW!"

"My hat! He's gone!"

"The beast!"

The juniors stood in a group, staring after the horse. The Artful Dodger could be heard trampling and plunging in the thickets.

"We've got to get him!" said Harry.

"Come on!"

"Right you are!"

And they dashed in pursuit of the steed.

The Artful Dodger looked at them from the bushes, and allowed them to come quite close, and it seemed as if he would be caught peacefully; but all of a sudden he threw up his heels and tore away.

This time he did not stop.

The juniors heard him plunging through the thickets, but though they rushed after him, the sounds soon died away in the wood.

They halted at last, breathless and excited.

"He's gone—the brute!" growled Nugent. "What asses we were to give him the chance! I suppose we shall get him back some time!"

"We shall have to pay Milsom to a pretty tune if we don't," said Hazeldene.

"Oh, he'll turn up!" Harry remarked slowly. "But we can't get him now. He's gone. What the dickens are we to do?"

"Give it up."

"We can't walk back to Friardale from this distance, and we can't abandon the caravan. It was lent to us."

"Quite true!"

"There's no capturing that beast now. What the dickens—"

"And we shall have to stay out, that's all!"

"And camp in the wood all night!" said Bob Cherry gleefully. "It will be ripping fun!"

"It won't be fun facing the Head tomorrow, though."

"Well, this is beyond our control, too," said Bob Cherry. "That beast of a horse is beyond anybody's control, I should think."

"Something in that, I suppose we shall have to take our chance."

"It will be great fun!"

"No doubt—in a way."

They returned to the camp. Bunter

was awaiting them there, and methodically finishing up the cold ham and beef.

"Got the horse?" he asked.

"Yes; he's in my waistcoat-pocket," said Bob Cherry sarcastically.

"Oh, really, Cherry! If you haven't got the horse, how on earth are we to get back to Greyfriars? It's high time to start."

"We're going to camp here all night!" Bunter jumped up in alarm.

"You're jolly well not! Why, those brutes might come back and knock us all on the head in the dark! We can't stop here. Can't you find the horse?"

"Of course we can't, ass, or we should have donè it!"

"I say, you fellows, I can't stop here! I—"

"Then clear off!" said Bob Cherry. "Nobody wants you to stay, that I know of! Get off the earth!"

"I can't possibly walk to Greyfriars, and you know that jolly well! I'm exhausted already!"

"Well, shut up, then!"

"Look here, couldn't you chaps manage to pull the caravan? I could get inside, and, with you five fellows tugging at the shafts, you ought to be able to manage it. I wish you wouldn't go away while I'm talking, Wharton! Listen to me! I—"

But no one was listening, and Bunter desisted at last in disgust. The sun was sinking, and it would be sooner dark in the wood than in the roads, and the juniors had their preparations to make for the camp.

There was certainly nothing else to be done; they had to camp out for the night.

The distance to Greyfriars was great, and if they had walked it they would certainly not have arrived there till hours after locking-up. And after an afternoon spent on the road, none of them felt inclined for a record walk in the dark lanes.

And, in spite of the hour of reckoning on the following day, there was something very taking in the idea of camping out all night. It was a real adventure, at all events—and the juniors were only half sorry that they were compelled to do it.

They began by collecting a huge pile of firewood for the fire, to keep it going all night. Warm as the day had been, the night was likely to be colder, and the juniors were not provided with the necessaries for camping-out.

There were only two coats in the party, and no bedding or blankets in the caravan. In the caravan, too, it was hardly possible for six fellows to sleep—there wasn't room. And on the bare boards their sleep would have been decidedly uncomfortable.

But in the rich, thick grass, beside a glowing, ruddy camp-fire, there was no reason why a comfortable night should not be spent.

Heaps of grass and ferns and leaves were gathered to furnish them with beds, and the fire was banked up with wood. The deeper and deeper silence of the wood as darkness descended was somewhat awesome to the boys.

Billy Bunter cast many uneasy glances into the deep shadows of the trees, and he carried a heap of ferns and leaves into the caravan, to pass the night there. He intended to fasten himself in, and if any danger should arise it was not likely that the fat junior would show himself.

He was allowed to do as he liked, and he did it with an injured expression, as if he had something very much up against his comrades for getting him into this scrape.

By the time the sun had gone the juniors had finished getting ready for the

—

—

—

—

—

—

—

—

night, and the aspect of the camp was really cosy.

The ruddy fire leaped and danced, reflected on the stream and the glimmering foliage of the trees round the camp.

Cake and hot coffee formed the supper of the Greyfriars caravanners, and they enjoyed it greatly. By the time it was disposed of they were sleepy enough.

Billy Bunter crept into the caravan, fastened the door, and laid down to sleep in his bed of ferns, and soon unmelodious snores were heard proceeding from the interior of the Saucy Susan.

The juniors laid round the fire, with their feet towards it, half-hidden in the ferny beds, and one by one they dropped off to sleep.

There was no need to keep watch, for Harry did not believe that the poachers would return; and, besides, it was hardly possible for anyone to approach the camp through the thickets without making sufficient noise to awaken some of them.

The fire grew less ruddy as the fuel was consumed, and long, dark shadows played to and fro over the camp.

The woods were strangely, eerily silent, save for the faint rustling as animals stole forth from their coverts in the gloom.

A stoat looked out of the thickets and blinked at the twinkling fire, and rabbits scuttled through the grass within reach of the sleeping juniors.

They slept soundly—the sleep of health and fatigue.

Suddenly, through the silence, a louder sound became audible.

It was the sound of rustling foliage and the parting of twigs as a heavy body brushed through.

Still the juniors slept on.

The fire was dying down now, and the red glow of what was left was dull, and gave only a dim light a few feet away from it.

The noise in the thickets came closer.

Harry Wharton started, and awoke. He sat up in the grass, rubbing his eyes, and looking round him dazedly. He had been dreaming of the school, and he woke up expecting to find himself in bed in the Remove dormitory at Greyfriars.

In a moment, however, he realised where he was. He shivered a little, and stretched out his hand for fuel to make up the fire. As he did so he started, and his hand was arrested.

The noise in the thickets caught his ear, and he remained still, breathing hard, listening.

Crackle, crackle, crackle!

It was the parting of twigs and leaves as a body was pushed through the undergrowth. The thought of the poachers rushed into Harry's mind at once.

He was upon his feet the next moment, grasping the cudgel he had laid by his side in the ferns, in case it should be wanted.

Crack, crackle, crack!

Somebody, or something, was approaching the camp slowly and cautiously in the darkness.

Harry Wharton stooped and shook his companions into wakefulness.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" murmured Bob Cherry drowsily.

"What's the matter?"

"Someone is coming!"

"Phew!"

Bob Cherry jumped up. Nugent and Hazeldene and Hurroc Singh were up in another second, grasping their sticks. They listened intently in the darkness and silence of the lonely wood.

Crackle, crackle!

Closer and closer the sound came to the camp, and then suddenly ceased.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.
A Night Out!

HARRY WHARTON listened with almost painful intensity. Whoever it was that was approaching the camp, had stopped suddenly when within a dozen paces of them. The thickets hid the intruder.

"He's seen us!" muttered Bob Cherry. "There's enough fire to show us here. He knows we're awake."

"Looks like it."

"It must be those rotters again," murmured Nugent.

"No doubt."

"Hang it, I wish they'd show themselves!"

The juniors all wished that keenly.

Whatever foes they had to face, it was better to face them than to wait there with beating hearts and thrilling nerves, listening.

The minutes slowly passed away. Each one seemed like an hour to the group of juniors, standing there weapon in hand, with thumping hearts.

through the dry fern and boughs, and played in radiance over the camp.

In an instant the whole scene was as light as by day, and the flame danced upon the foliage and the glistening waters of the stream.

The light reanimated the juniors; in the light danger was not so unerring as in the darkness.

"Suppose you hail him," said Nugent. "It will show the cad we know he's there, anyway."

Harry nodded; he was thinking the same himself. He watched the thicket steadily as he called out.

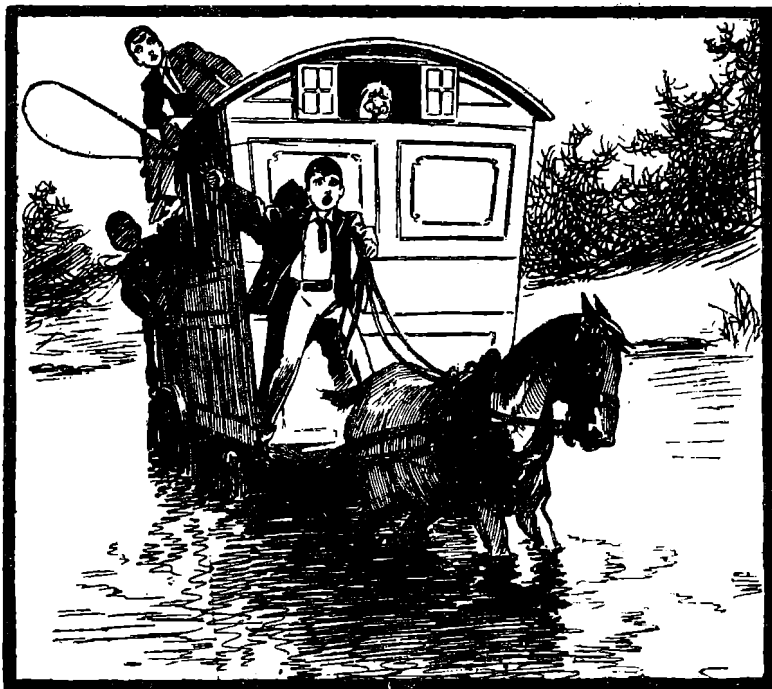
"Hallo, there!"

The silent wood echoed back his shout, but that was the only reply. A thousand echoes seemed to die away in the glades. Then there was silence again.

"Hallo, there! Who are you?"

"You!" rang back the echoes of the wood. But no voice replied.

"Show yourself, you cad!" shouted Bob Cherry. "Show yourself, you measly worm, if you're not afraid to!"



Crack, crack! rang the whip, and the lash curled round the horse's shoulders. The Dodger snorted, but did not advance. In the middle of the stream, with tricklets of water creeping in over the floor, the caravan remained at a standstill. There was worse to follow!

Still no sound came from the stranger. "He's gone!" muttered Bob Cherry at last.

Wharton shook his head.

"We should have heard him go, Bob."

"True!"

"Hang him!" muttered Hazeldene nervously. "What is he lurking there for, then? Why doesn't he come or go? Suppose we go for him?"

"There may be a gang of them," said Nugent.

They waited and listened. They started anxiously as there was a rustle in the thicket. It was audible for a few moments, then dead silence again.

Harry Wharton gritted his teeth. He watched the thicket from which he expected the attack, while Bob Cherry threw a mass of fuel upon the fire, and stirred it with his cudgel.

The fire smoked blackly for some seconds, and then the flames shot up

Still silence, save for the echoes. Wharton's eyes glinted.

"Look here, we'll have him out—or them—whichever it is!" he exclaimed. "We can't go to sleep again without. Come on!"

"Right-ho!"

And Harry Wharton ran towards the thicket. There was a sudden rustling, and he heard the stranger moving hastily away. The sounds of retreat encouraged the boys. They rushed on resolutely. Bob Cherry caught his foot in a trailing root, and went heavily to the ground, and Nugent rolled over him.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" gasped Bob. "Gerroff!"

"Oh! Ow! I'm hurt!"

In the darkness of the thicket the sounds of falling and gasping voices naturally gave the others the impression that a fight was going on. Wharton and

Thurce Jamset Ram Singh dashed upon the spot, with Hazeldene close behind.

"Got him?" gasped Wharton.

"Ow! I— Oh!"

Nugent gasped as Harry, falling over him in the darkness, came a cropper, and bumped him heavily upon Bob again.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Harry. "Is that you, Nugent?"

"Ow! Yes. Groo! Fathead! Yes." "Well, I couldn't see you. Have you got him?"

"I've got a silly dummy called Bob Cherry."

"Oh!"

The juniors, breathless and a little bruised, scrambled to their feet. They soon discovered that only themselves were in the thicket. But from the wood came the sound of rustling repeated.

"He's going!" gasped Nugent.

Harry Wharton listened keenly.

"He's going towards the stream," he said in a whisper. "He wants to sneak into the camp. I expect, while we're out here in the tangle. Come on—only keep together this time! It's no good rushing in the dark."

"Right you are! Let's get after him!"

More cautiously this time the juniors crept through the thickets. The rustle of the stranger ahead guided them. He, too, must have heard the brushing of the boys through the undergrowth, but seemingly it did not alarm him. The sound of his movements ceased.

"He's got as far as the stream," muttered Harry.

Bob Cherry clutched his arm suddenly.

"Listen!"

"What—"

"He's drinking!"

"Phew! My hat!"

There was no doubt about it. From the darkness towards the stream came a sound of lapping and trickling water, as if someone were drinking greedily of the stream.

"Beast!" muttered Bob Cherry, in disgust. "He's lapping up the water like an animal."

"It's a chance to catch him now. Come on!"

They crept forward through the bushes. In this spot the undergrowth grew right down to the water's edge, and in the shallow water, and they had to part the branches and foliage as they advanced. The sound of the drinking grew louder and clearer, and then suddenly stopped.

"Careful now!" whispered Bob.

There was a crashing in the thicket by the stream, as if the drinker were turning round to come back the way he had gone.

The juniors halted abruptly.

Harry grasped his cudgel hard.

"He's coming back!" he whispered.

"No need to go on any further."

"He must have heard us."

"Well, he's coming back. It sounds as if he's going to walk right into us. Mind how you handle those sticks. Don't brain one another. You can't see an inch in the dark here. Collar the cad if you can without hitting him."

"That's sensible!"

"My worthy chum is right," murmured the Nabob of Bhanipur. "If the esteemed asses use the sticks in the darkness, the brainfulness will be terrific."

"Quiet!"

"Ready!"

Crackle, crackle, crackle!

The stranger was coming right on to them.

The juniors waited with beating hearts. They could hear a sound of heavy breathing now. The darkness in the trees was so intense that Harry could not see his hand before his face. He could only wait—and listen.

A thrill ran through him as he felt a hot breath on his face.

Something ran against him in the darkness, and he grasped at it desperately with both hands.

"Here he is!" he shrieked. "Give in, you scoundrel! Ah! Oh, my hat!"

"Got him?" shrieked Bob Cherry.

"Yes, but— Ha, ha, ha!"

"Eh? What?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It seemed to the astounded chums that

Wharton had suddenly gone into hysterics.

He was shrieking with breathless laughter.

"What's the matter?" roared Bob.

"Who is it? What—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bob groped in the darkness, and his hands trailed through a horse's mane. In a moment the truth burst upon him.

"My hat! The Dodger!"

"What?" roared Nugent.

"The Artful Dodger! Ha, ha, ha!"

It was the horse!

The utter absurdity of the situation made the juniors shriek. The wandering steed had come back to drink at the stream, and perhaps the light of the camp-fire had attracted him.

He had blundered into the juniors. But Harry, surprised and startled as he was, and gasping with merriment, did not let go his mane. The Artful Dodger had been caught, and was not to be allowed to go again.

But to do the Dodger justice, he didn't seem to want to go. Harry led him through the thickets into the camp, and he went as quietly as a lamb. His look was as innocent as a babe's.

He seemed quite unconscious of the fact that he had given anybody any trouble; in fact, he gave a pleasant little whinny, which was possibly by way of joining in the general merriment.

"You bouncer!" said Harry, as he slipped the collar over the horse's head. "You won't get loose again in a hurry! Now we've got the boss, kids, we'd better break camp—and we shall be at Greyfriars by morning. We can take it in turns to drive and to sleep in the caravan."

"Good wheeze!"

"The wheeziness is terrific."

The Artful Dodger was harnessed to the caravan. He submitted with exemplary meekness, and rubbed his muzzle on Harry's shoulder.

Then Harry taking the first turn at leading the horse, the caravan moved off through the shadowy woods. The juniors remained behind for a few moments to stamp out every remnant of the camp-fire.

There was a sudden yell from within the caravan.

"Hallo! Ow! Stop! What—who— you!"

Bunter's head came out of the window. He was minus his glasses, and, anyway, it was too dark for him to see anything. He was yelling to the juniors.

"Stop! I say, you fellows— Oh! Ow! The van's going over! They're carrying me off! Rescue!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Bob Cherry. "I can see anybody carrying Bunter off! It's all right. Billy. We're going home, that's all. The boss has come back."

Bunter gasped.

"Oh, that's all right, then! I woke up suddenly, and—and—"

"And being so brave, you—"

"Oh, really, Cherry! It's all right—I'll go to sleep again."

"Open the door first."

"I'd rather keep it fastened."

"If you don't open that door instanter, we'll make you walk all the way!" roared Bob. "Nuff said—open the door!"

And Bunter thought he had better open it. Bob Cherry and Nugent got into the van, and Hazeldene and the nabob sat in the front and snoozed here, while Wharton led the horse.

Harry remained in charge of the Dodger until they were out of the wood, and then he slept in the van while Nugent drove along the lanes.

Taking it in turns to look after the horse, the caravanners slowly but surely covered the ground, but the dawn was reeping up the sky when they rumbled into the village of Friardale.

They were early risers at Mr. Milson's, and the gates were open when the Nancy Susan arrived. Mr. Milson looked relieved to see them.

"Blessed if I didn't think something had happened to you!" he said. "You'll get into a row up at the school! I sent a message to the doctor about where you'd gone!"

The juniors were thinking so, too, as they pedalled back to Greyfriars on the bicycles. Dr. Locke was already up, and his look was very serious when the juniors reported themselves to him.

"I suppose you were not to blame, in a way," he said at last. "I received Mr. Milson's message, or I should have been very anxious indeed. I was anxious—but I suppose that, under the circumstances, you were not to blame. All the same, I really think that this expedition had better be the last. I shall not punish you, but I cannot allow you to take the caravan out again unless you have a senior with you in charge of the party."

And with that, and without the expected caning, the Head dismissed the Greyfriars Caravanners.

THE END.

Next Friday's Grand Long Complete Tale of Harry Wharton & Co. is entitled:

THE TENANTS OF STUDY No. 13!

Please order your copy of the "PENNY POPULAR" in advance, and hand this number when finished with to a non-reader.



KEPT IN THE DARK!

Magnificent Long Complete Tale, Dealing with the Early Adventures of **TOM MERRY & CO.** at St. Jim's.

BY MARTIN CLIFFORD.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Levison Catches It.

LEVISON and Mellish, the cads of the Fourth, were standing at the gates of St. Jim's, looking towards Rylcombe. Suddenly Mellish pointed to a boy in the distance, who was approaching the school.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed. "Who's this?"

"It's a villager," said Levison, "but it's not Grimes."

"Grimes!" sneered Percy Mellish. "My hat, it's a good thing that chap didn't stop at St. Jim's lounge! My people would have taken me away—"

"Of course!" grinned Levison. "They're so beastly classy, don't you know!"

"Look here——"

"Dry up! This village cad will hear you!"

The youth came up to the gates, and looked at the two Fourth-Formers. Levison and Mellish returned his gaze with interest.

"Well, what do you want?" demanded Levison.

"I've got a letter 'ere," said the village boy stolidly. "I don't know who you young gentlemen are, but it's for Master Merry."

Levison shot a glance at Mellish.

"Oh, that's all right," he said carelessly. "Hand it over!"

"Be you Master Merry?" asked the village lad doubtfully.

"No," said Levison. "But I can take it to him."

The messenger hesitated.

"Well, I ain't sure. I was told to give the letter to Master Merry himself."

"Well, you can't give it to Master Merry himself!" exclaimed Levison.

"Master Merry himself isn't in at present. If you give it to me it'll be all right."

"Right you are, young gentlemen."

And the village youth handed over the letter, and departed. Levison turned over the missive curiously. It was addressed to Tom Merry in a sprawling hand, and Mellish looked over Levison's shoulder with interest.

"What are you going to do with it?" he asked.

"Open it!" said Levison coolly.

Mellish looked startled.

"I—I say," he muttered, "that's a bit thick, isn't it?"

"Thick be blowed!" exclaimed Levison. "Why, the giddy flap's nearly open now!"

Levison calmly inserted his thumb into the flap of the envelope, and tore it open.

Next moment he uttered an exclamation. He had taken the letter out of the envelope, and had glanced through it. He looked at Mellish with glittering eyes.

"What is it?" asked Mellish quickly.

"Read it!" said Levison significantly. The sneak of the School House did so.

"M-my hat!" he gasped, handing the letter back. "What's it mean?"

"It means," replied Levison, with relish, "that the manly and heroic Tom Merry is having dealings with some shady characters at the Green Man! My hat, this'll be an eye-opener for the fellows! I always had an idea that Merry was playing a double game."

"What are you going to do?" asked Mellish excitedly.

"Take this letter, and show it to the chaps in the common-room," replied the cad of the Fourth coolly. "It won't be sneaking, anyhow! When it comes to a thing like this, it's our duty to bring it to light."

"Rather!" agreed Mellish.

And he hastened across the quad to the School House. Most of the fellows were indoors, for lessons would start before long, and the quad was muddy and wet. Levison and Mellish went straight to the common-room. A good crowd of juniors were there, including Blake & Co.

"Listen, you fellows!" shouted Mellish.

"Listen to you?" asked Blake. "Isn't it too much to ask of us, Mellish?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hold on," said Levison. "Mellish hasn't got everything to say!"

"Then what do you mean by bursting in like a couple of lunatics?" demanded Digby of the Fourth. "If you've got anything to say, Levison, you can go and say it in the middle of the quad!"

"That's a sensible idea!" grinned Kangaroo of the Shell.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Levison looked round coolly.

"I'm going to give you chaps an eye-opener!" he said.

"Good!" exclaimed Monty Lowther. "We'll give you an eye-shutter in return! There are plenty of fists here ready to do the trick!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's to do with Merry!" said Levison.

"This letter I've got here, gentle-

men, is headed 'The Green Man Inn,' and it begins like this——"

"Let's have a squint at it!" exclaimed Gore, pushing forward.

"All right, I'll pin it on the wall," said the cad of the Fourth, and he proceeded to pin the letter to the bottom edge of a map-frame over the fireplace. The fellows crowded round eagerly, Blake & Co. to the fore. Levison stood by grinning sardonically. About a dozen juniors read the letter aloud at the same moment, but before many minutes had passed they all knew what it contained. It was quite short, and the writing was clear:

"I want to see you again about the matter in hand. You know the place, so don't fail to be there. If you can't give me a definite promise about the payment of the money I sha'n't waste any more time. Personally, I believe you are fooling me, and if you can't promise an early date for payment you know what will happen.

"Yours faithfully,
"SIMON TUTT."

For a moment after reading the letter the juniors were silent. They could not quite grasp the evident meaning of it. Then, practically at the same moment, all the boys commenced talking together.

"My only hat!" gasped Herries.

"What on earth is Tom Merry up to?" said Kangaroo, in amazement.

"Bai Jove, it is weally wemarkable!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, jamming his monocle into his eye and surveying the letter once again.

"Do you weally think, deah boys, that Tom Mewwy has been up to some wotten twicks? I uttalyly wofuse to believe it! Tom Mewwy is as wight as wain, and it would be quite against his principles to act in such a disgwaceful mannah!"

"But it's there, in black and white!" yelled Digby.

"Wats, deah boy!" said D'Arcy.

"That lettah pwoves nothin'!"

"Oh, doesn't it?" said Levison unpleasantly. "It proves that Tom Merry is in trouble with some disgraceful bookie at the Green Man!"

"Of course," agreed Mellish. "There's nothing else to make of it!"

"Nothing else at all!" said Levison.

"Why, the letter's addressed from the Green Man, and this chap Tutt is writing to Tom Merry asking for tin! The proof is absolutely self-evident!"

THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 251.

"Nothin' of the sort, deah boy—I mean, you wottah!" shouted D'Arcy. "I don't believe that lettah is for Tom Mewwy at all! His name isn't on it, and that cad Levison b'wrought it in to show us! Bai Jove, I believe it's another of his wotten forgeries!"

"You ass!" yelled Levison. "I've got the envelope addressed in the same hand-writing."

"Course he has!" said Mellish. "The chap in the village gave it to us!"

here, Levison, do you mean to say that you took that letter from some chap and opened it?"

"Certainly!" said Levison coolly. "And was it addressed to Tom Merry himself?"

"Yes."

"Then I think you're a rotten, beastly, nosy-Parker!" exclaimed Blake indignantly. "My hat, I've never heard of such a thing! A letter comes for Tom Merry, and you deliberately open it and bring it here to show us! We don't want to know anything about Tom Merry's business!"

"Of course not!" said Kangaroo. "Levison ought to be ashamed of himself!"

There was a roar.

"Bump him!"

"Yaas, wathah! Bump the wottah jolly hard!"

"Collar him!"

"You—you—"

But Levison was not given time to expostulate. The angry juniors grasped him firmly, and he rose in the air, his legs and arms waving wildly.

"Down with him!" roared Blake.

Bump!

Levison descended to the floor with a crash that made the whole room shake.

"Ow!" he howled. "Ow-yow! Yarropoop!"

"Give him another!" roared Digby.

"Yaas, wathah, deah boys!"

Levison was bumped again, and again after that. His yells made no difference, and when the juniors released him he staggered away, dusty, dishevelled, and sore. His collar was torn out, his tie missing, and his coat burst from top to bottom.

"You—you rotten bullies!" he panted.

"Clear out!" said Blake sulphurously.

"If you don't want another bumping, Levison, you'd better make yourself scarce! We're fed up with you! Where's Mellish?"

But Mellish had conveniently disappeared. The enraged juniors looked at one another breathlessly. They had bumped Levison for his caddishness, but there was no denying that the letter had had an effect on them.

"Well," said Blake, "I wonder what it means?"

"Blessed if I know!" said Monty Lowther, looking worried. "It can't possibly mean that Tommy is really in league with a giddy bookmaker! Yet—"

The door opened suddenly, and Tom Merry himself came into the common-room. The juniors were silent immediately, and gazed at the captain of the Shell with curious looks. Tom Merry approached the centre of the room.

"Well," he demanded, "what are you all looking at me like Cheshire cats for?"

There was dead silence in the common-room.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

D'Arcy Wants to Fight.

"OFF your rockers?" asked Tom Merry pleasantly.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Oh, you're not all dumb!"

said Tom Merry, looking round.

"Blessed if I can understand what's the matter! The bell will go for lessons in a minute or two, and I wanted to speak to you about that match with the Grammar School."

"That will do another time!" said Blake bluntly.

"Why, anything more important on hand?"

"Well, you see," said Blake awkwardly, "there was a letter came for you."

"And Mellish and Levison got hold of it," proceeded Blake. "Like the blessed cads they are, they opened it, brought it in here, and stuck it up on the wall before we knew what they were up to!"

Tom Merry turned pale.

"You've—you've seen a letter that came for me?" he asked quickly.

"Where is it? You're a set of beastly rotters if you've read it!"

"But my dear chap," put in Manners, "we'd no idea what Levison was up to until it was too late! We've given him a fearful bumping, and chucked him out! Still, that doesn't alter the fact that we've seen your giddy letter! It's from a chap named Tutt!"

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Tom Merry, aghast.

The juniors looked at him with a curious expression. Tom Merry was certainly acting in a very peculiar manner. He didn't look exactly frightened, but he certainly appeared to be startled and annoyed. He looked round angrily.

"Where's the letter?" he demanded.

"Heah it is, deah boy!" said D'Arcy, handing it to Tom Merry.

The Shell fellow took it, and read through its contents. Then he looked up with a peculiar smile on his face.

"Well," he said "what of it?"

"That's just it," said Blake. "What of it? We didn't want to see your letter, Tommy; but now that we have seen it we expect you to explain it! You must admit it looks jolly funny!"

"I don't admit anything of the sort!" said Tom Merry. "After all, it's my letter, and nothing to do with you whatever! I feel like finding Levison, and giving him a thrashing! Of course, I don't blame you fellows in the least; but Levison's a cad!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Of course!"

"But that isn't what we want to know!" said Manners, pushing forward.

"Look here, Tommy; it says in that letter that this chap Tutt wants some money off you. What for? Why are you in his debt?"

"I'm not!" said Tom Merry calmly.

"I don't owe him a farthing!"

The juniors looked incredulous.

"But it says—"

"Blow what it says! I tell you I don't owe the man a farthing!" exclaimed Tom Merry flatly. "If you don't like to believe, you can disbelieve it! This letter is private, and it deals with a matter that has nothing to do with any of you chaps; so I shall be obliged if you'll dry up!"

"You're not going to tell us what it's about, then?" said Lumley-Lumley.

"No, I'm not!"

"Look here, Tom Merry, don't be so beastly obstinate!" said Blake. "To say the least, it looks jolly suspicious! This man Tutt's living at the Green Man, and he's writing to you for money. If you say you don't owe him any, I believe you; but—"

Blake paused significantly.

"But what?" demanded Tom Merry.

"Oh, nothing!"

"You're a nice chap!" sneered

Crooke, of the Shell. "Why, the very fact of your refusing to explain this shows that there's something fishy about it! I don't like to call you a liar, Tom Merry—"

"You won't like it if you do!" said the captain of the Shell ominously. "This matter is a private one, and I'm not going to discuss it among all you chaps. You can think what you jolly well like, and go and eat coke!"

And Tom Merry, with flushed face, walked out of the room. Crooke looked after him with a sneering smile.

"Hasn't got a word to say!" he said unpleasantly. "Merry was simply flabbergasted! It's as plain as anything that he's doing something underhand! If not he would have spoken up immediately to save his own name!"

Which seemed undoubtedly feasible. The juniors could hardly think anything else under the circumstances, and they gathered together in groups, talking animatedly.

During lessons lines fell thickly, for the juniors could not refrain from talking about the strange occurrence. They had ample time to think it over, however, and when dismissal came they crowded out into the quad, more firmly convinced than ever that Levison's construction of the case was correct.

A crowd gathered under the old elms, where the quad was wet and muddy. But the juniors were too excited to think of such a trifle as mud.

"If you ask me—" began Crooke.

"Well, we don't ask you!" said Herries. "Shut up!"

"If you ask me," repeated Crooke, "Tom Merry ought to be shown up before the Head! I call it a bit too thick when chaps who try to swank everybody, they're models of manliness go backing horses and visiting low-down pubs!"

"Bai Jove! You wouldn't say that if Tom Mewwy was here himself! I considah it is up to us, deah boys, to give Mellish and Cwooke a thorough bumpin'!"

And Arthur Augustus looked round excitedly.

But the juniors were strangely unresponsive to his appeal. They did not exactly believe that Tom Merry had been up to tricks, as Levison had described it, but there was no denying that there was something suspicious about the letter from Mr. Tutt.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated D'Arcy.

"Bump the wottahs!"

"Yah!" shouted Mellish. "They know we're right! Tom Merry's a liar!"

"Rather!" agreed Crooke. "A two-faced swanker!"

"He ought to be kicked out!" growled Gore.

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus was attired in his usual elegant style, but he was too excited to think about such a trivial matter as clothes. He flung off his shiny topper, and it went sailing across the quad. His coat followed, and he pushed back his cuffs in a warlike attitude.

"Now, then, you wottahs!" he shouted defiantly. "I'll fight the first chap who calls Tom Mewwy a liar! Cwooke, come here, you f'wightful boundah; I'm going to give you a fearful thwashin'!"

"No, thanks!" grinned Crooke.

"Bai Jove, you're af'waid!" yelled D'Arcy, dancing up and down excitedly.

"I considah that Tom Mewwy is a bwick! If you fellows are all down on him just because of that lettah, then you are a set of wotten-cads! I uttably w'fuse to have anything more to do with you!"

"Good!" exclaimed Mellish.

"I shall wefire fwom St. Jim's!" said Arthur Augustus hotly. "I uttably wefuse to have anythin' more to do with such a set of beastly boundahs. I shall wiah to my governah to take me home!"

"Oh, shut up, Gussy, you're off your rocker!" said Blake uneasily.

"I uttably wefuse to shut up, Blake, and I'm not off my wockah!" exclaimed D'Arcy defiantly. "If you chaps wefuse to back me up, then I shall immediately dwaw our friendship to a conclusion!"

"Don't do anything so fatheaded," said Blake. "It's jolly decent of you to stand up for Tom Merry like this, but you must admit, Gussy, that he isn't playing the game."

"Nothin' of the kind, deah boy!" exclaimed D'Arcy. "Tom Mewwy has a perfect wight to keep his own secrets. It's only because of Levison that you know about the mattah at all. I do not believe for an instant that Tom Mewwy has done anythin' disgwaceful, and I considah you are takin' a wotten, mean advantage of him just because you have seen that lettah!"

Blake looked thoughtful.

"There's something in that," he admitted. "Of course, Gussy, we don't believe anything against Tom Merry—we only say it looks suspicious. When he proves that the thing's all right, we will rally round him. What are we to think, though, if he still persists in keeping us in the giddy dark?"

"I am uttably ashamed of you, Blake!" said D'Arcy disdainfully. "You admit that you have nothin' whatevah against Tom Mewwy in the way of pwoof, yet you wefuse to bump Mellish and Cwooke for their beastly accusations. In futuah, deah boys—I mean, you wottahs—I shall esteem it a favah if you wefwain fwom addressin' me!"

And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with his monocle jammed tightly into his eye, and his nose in the air, marched off towards the School House, utterly oblivious of the fact that his shirt-sleeves were pushed up, and that his coat and hat were lying somewhere in the muddy quad.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

On the Track.

TEA in Tom Merry's study was rather strained that afternoon, for the Terrible Three refrained from making any reference whatever to the matter which filled their minds. In consequence, hardly a word was spoken, and Manners and Monty Lowther took their departure as soon as they conveniently could.

"It's rotten!" said Manners miserably, as they walked along the passage. "I think Tommy might confide in us, Monty. He's given us his word that he's doing nothing dishonourable, so, of course, we believe him. But it's jolly queer, all the same."

"The silly ass ought to tell us all about it," said Monty Lowther. "I'm not curious, but I'm blessed if I like to see Tommy with such a beastly long chivvy! We've got to find it out, Manners, old man—we've got to find out what Tom Merry's up to."

"That's all very well!" growled Manners. "It's easy enough to talk, but it's not so easy to do the finding-out bizny! Suppose we see if Gussy's still on his dig?"

And Manners and Lowther made their way to Study No. 6. They opened the door and looked in. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was there, taking tea in solitary state. He looked up as the door opened.

"Bai Jove, come in, deah boys!"

"Thought you were dining out to-night?" said Manners.

"It was arrwanged that I should be a guest of Bernard Glyn's, deah boy," said D'Arcy. "But, owin' to the widiculous suspicions against Tom Mewwy, I wefused to attend. Theahfore, I am havin' tea by myself."

"Bravo, Gussy!" chuckled Monty Lowther.

"There's nothin' whatevah to cackle about, Lowthah. In my opinion Tom Mewwy is bein' vewy gwossly tweated."

"Well, the silly ass is bringing it all on himself!" growled Manners. "We've just left him in the study, and— My hat, there's his step!"

The juniors glanced at one another as a brisk step sounded in the passage.

"Bai Jove! I wondah if he's goin' out?"

Manners stepped to the door quickly,

Arthur Augustus grabbed his hat, and the three left the study. They hurried down the passage, and emerged into the dusky quad. A dim form could be seen near the gates.

"There he is!"

"By Jove, yes!"

"You asses!" said Manners. "That's Taggy. He's closing the gates, too, by all that's rotten! Buck up!"

They raced across the quad.

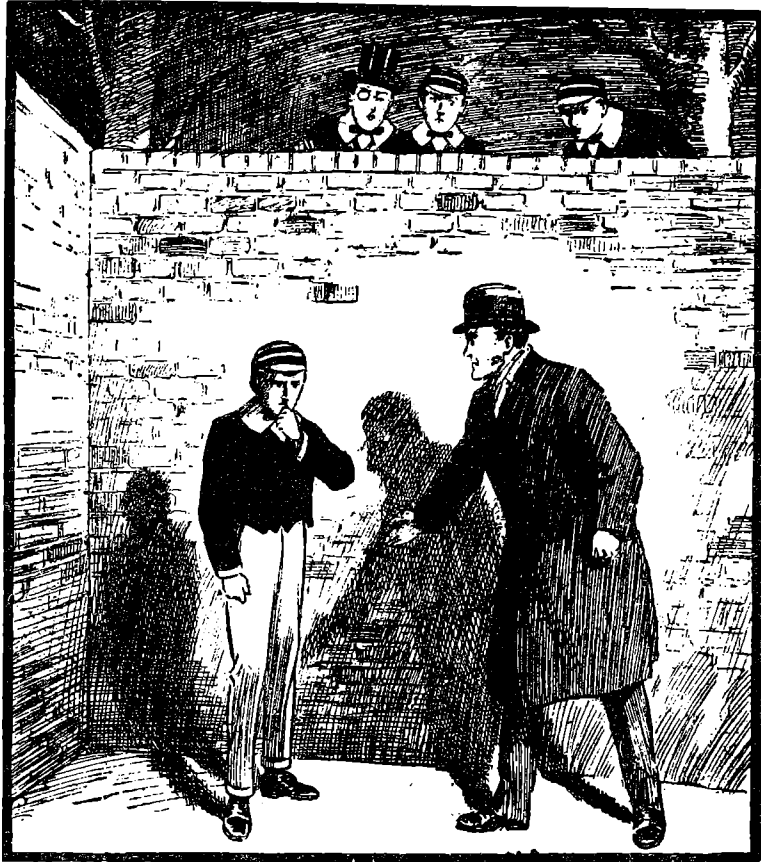
"I say, Taggy," panted Manners, "has Tom Merry just gone out here?"

"I don't know whether it was Master Merry or no!" growled Taggles, the school porter. "Somebody went out—young rip! He slipped out afore I could find out 'is name. I'll 'ave 'im when he comes back, though!"

Manners shook the gates vigorously.

"They're locked!" he exclaimed.

"They are, Master Manners," said



The harsh voice of Tom Merry's companion floated up to the ears of the juniors crouching on the wall. "You've got till Thursday afternoon. I'm staying at the Green Man, and if you get the money by then you can bring it down to me. If not, it means the sack. That's my last word on the matter!"

opened it, and glanced down the passage. Tom Merry was just turning the corner, and Manners could see that he was attired in his cap and overcoat.

"My only topper!" he said. "Gussy's right!"

"Gweat Scott! Is Tom Mewwy goin' out?"

"Yes, he's got his hat on."

"Bai Jove, it's up to us to fello' him, deah boys," said D'Arcy, jumping up. "Of course, I should not dweam of pwyin' into his affairs, but there is no harm in followin' him, and seein' where he goes to!"

"Come on, then!" said Monty Lowther.

Taggles firmly. "You ain't going out no more to-night. It's past locking-up time now, an' it's agin the rules to open 'em without you've got a pass."

"Now, do be reasonable, Taggy—"

"It ain't no good," grumbled Taggles. "The gates is locked, and you ain't goin' out!"

"Bai Jove, Taggay, pway listen a moment!"

"It's no go!" said Manners, moving away. "We shall have to give it up!"

"Nothin' of the sort!" exclaimed D'Arcy. "I uttably wefuse to give it up! I mean to find out where Tom Mewwy—"

"Come on, you ass!" whispered Manners. "We'll hop over the wall!"

"Bai Jove, that's not a bad ideah!"

The three juniors moved away from the gates, Manners and Monty Lowther grumbling in no light strain. Taggles chuckled to himself, and entered his little lodge. He thought that the juniors were done.

"Taggy's gone in," murmured Lowther.

"Good! Come on!" said Manners softly.

"Bai Jove, we shall get our twosahs in a frightful mess, deah boys!" said D'Arcy.

Monty Lowther chuckled.

"You didn't seem very anxious about your giddy clothes this morning!" he grinned. "But we shall have to buck up, you know. If we're not jolly quick we sha'n't catch up with Tommy before he gets to Rylocombe."

And they hastened to the spot where it was an easy matter to clamber over the wall into Rylocombe Lane. A big tree grew close to the wall, and it was owing to its presence that climbing was an easy matter at this particular spot. The wind whistled mournfully through the leafless branches, and drowned all other sounds in the near vicinity.

"You first!" said Lowther to Manners.

"All serene!" said Manners.

He scrambled up, the other two watching from below. They could just see Manners in the dim light, and suddenly he jerked himself back, and dropped to the ground. Monty Lowther gazed at him in astonishment.

"Well, you fathead, what have you dropped for?" he said wrathfully.

"Yaas, what's the ideah, Mannahs?" asked D'Arcy.

"Shush!" whispered Manners.

"What have we got to shush for?" demanded Monty Lowther.

"Tom Merry's just over the other side of the wall, you ass!" murmured Manners. "I was just going to shush down when I saw him. He's talking to some man—Mr. Tutt, I expect."

"My hat!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Didn't they hear you?" asked Lowther.

"No; the wind was making too much row," said Manners. "I vote we all get up and see what sort of a chap this Tutt is. Now we know they're just on the other side we can climb up without making any row."

"Good egg!" said Lowther. "Up you go!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

With extreme caution this time the three juniors mounted to the top of the wall. They clung there in a row, and cautiously looked over. Manners had been right. Immediately below them could be seen the forms of Tom Merry and a short, stout man.

In the gloom the three juniors could not catch sight of his features, although his voice, harsh and menacing, floated upwards with the wind.

"That's my last word on the matter," he said, in a final tone.

"But can't you give me longer than that, Mr. Tutt?" asked Tom Merry eagerly. "Can't you give me till Saturday?"

"No, I can't!" snapped Mr. Tutt. "To-day's Tuesday. If you can't let me have the money by Thursday afternoon—that's the day after to-morrow—you know what'll happen. As I said in my note, I believe you're foolin' me—"

"I'm not," said Tom Merry quickly. "I'll do my utmost to get the money. I promise you, Mr. Tutt, that I'll pay you every penny by Thursday."

"All right, you've got till Thursday

afternoon," said Mr. Tutt. "I'm stayin' at the Green Man, and if you get the money before the time arranged you can bring it down to me, and we'll settle the transaction then and there. I give you my word, I don't want to hang about this measly little village longer than I can help."

"Suppose I can't raise the money by Thursday?"

"Then it'll mean the sack—"

"I say," whispered Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, "isn't this wathah like caves-dwoppin', deah boys?"

"Yes, it's a bit rotten," said Manners softly. "We'll get down."

And they cautiously lowered themselves to the ground.

Monty Lowther, Manners, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy stood at the foot of the wall, with the wind whistling in the tree above them, and gazed at one another.

"Well?" said Manners in a curious voice.

"Well, deah boy?" repeated D'Arcy.

"What do you think of Tom Merry now?" asked Manners, with a note of dull misery in his voice. "I'd hoped and hoped, and told myself that this bizney he's mixed up in was all nothing. But what we've just heard shows that Levison wasn't far wrong in his first guess. It's simply rotten to have to admit it, but Tommy's been getting into real trouble with a beastly shady character."

"Looks like it," admitted Lowther gloomily.

"Bai Jove, you silly asses!" exclaimed D'Arcy. "You don't mean to say you think that Tom Merry has weally been havin' dealings with a bookmakah? Do you mean to suggest that Mr. Tutt is a bookie?"

"What else are we to think?"

"Anythin' but that, you burblin' duffahs!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus warmly. "Bai Jove, I'm surprisid at you, Mannahs and Lowthah! You are Tom Merry's special chums, and yet you are weady to wun him down at the least opportunity!"

"Least opportunity—eh?" grunted Manners. "Why, you tailor's dummy, you couldn't have heard what that fat little chap said!"

"I heard ewery word."

"Then you're a silly chump for not looking the facts in the face!" declared Manners. "Mr. Tutt said as plain as anything that he'd give Tommy up till Thursday to pay up. What does it look like? Pay up what?"

D'Arcy polished his eyeglass.

"Pewhahs Tom Merry has been buyin' somethin'?" he suggested.

"That would explain Mr. Tutt's demand for money!"

"Quite likely," said Manners sarcastically. "You catch a man writing letters and coming here after locking-up time to speak to Tom Merry about the money for some goods. Besides, it must be a pretty big amount, or Tom Merry would have paid up. That quid that came was evidently not enough by long chalks!"

"Bai Jove, no!"

"And Mr. Tutt's staying at the Green Man, and talked about settling the transaction," went on Manners. "And he said that if Tommy didn't pay up by Thursday it would mean the sack!"

"It's wathah involved, deah boy, I'll admit," said D'Arcy.

"Personally, I think it's jolly plain," said Monty Lowther. "This Mr. Tutt is a bookmaker, and Tom Merry has somehow allowed himself to be drawn into his nets. If it was anything else it couldn't possibly mean the sack. My hat, it's simply rotten! I'd no idea it was anything so bad as this! We can't say anything to him, either, or he'll know we were listening!"

"You frightful assos!" exclaimed D'Arcy excitedly. "You don't mean to say you think Tom Merry is a wottah?"

"Blessed if I know what to think!" said Manners gloomily.

"I wegard you as a couple of cad's!" said Arthur Augustus hotly. "Bai Jove, I should have thought that you would have believed in Tom Merry against all sorts of pwoof!"

"Oh, rats!" said Manners. "I'm blessed if I can see why you should believe in him so much! It's perfectly rotten to think of Tommy getting into such trouble, but we must look the facts in the face!"

"Exactly," agreed Monty Lowther.

"Facts!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus with a sniff. "Bai Jove, we have no facts whatevah to work on! We only heard a few words of the conversation, so we couldn't possibly judge what it was about. Suppose, for instance, Tom Merry is payin' this johny for some othah juniah? Then it would altah mattans vewy considerable!"

"My hat, I should like to think that!" said Manners glumly. "But it's a bit too improbable. No, no, Gussy; if Tommy doesn't tell us all about it now, we shall have to let him go his own way till he comes round! If he doesn't like to confide in his chums, then I don't reckon he deserves any sympathy!"

And Manners and Lowther walked slowly across the dusky quad to the School House. They disappeared inside, and D'Arcy sniffed audibly as he followed in their wake.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

D'Arcy's Discovery.

TOM MERRY went to bed that night with very few words being spoken to him by the fellows.

The hero of the Shell was not sent to Coventry, but the juniors certainly refrained from talking to him as freely as they had been accustomed to do. Until the mystery had been explained they couldn't be so free and easy.

But after all the Shell fellows had dropped off to sleep Tom Merry still lay awake, and when ten-thirty chimed out from the clock-tower he quietly rose, and slipped into his clothes. He dressed completely, and then lifted the counterpane of his bed and looked beneath.

For a second he fumbled about in the dark, then drew out an old cricket-bag. He moved across to the window with a soft tread, the bag, heavily laden, in his hand.

"Now for it!" he murmured. "By Jove, what would the fellows think if they saw me now?"

And Tom Merry chuckled to himself. He had brought a long coil of thick rope with him, and the end of it was tied round the handle of the cricket-bag. Having opened the window, Tom Merry proceeded to lower the bag, hand-over-hand, to the ground beneath. It touched the muddy ground.

"Good!" murmured Tom Merry.

"Now I'll lower myself!"

He securely tied the rope to a strong iron hook, which he had had the forethought to bring with him. The hook he jammed under the woodwork of the window-ledge, and he knew that it would be strong enough to bear his weight.

As silently as possible he clambered on to the window-ledge, and sat on the sill for a moment before descending.

And as he sat there the dormitory door softly opened. A few moments before D'Arcy had quietly slipped out of bed, intending to place a five-pound note into Tom Merry's pocket. He slipped into his clothes rapidly, and then pulled his boots on. They would be liable to make a little noise, but anything was preferable to walking in his stocking feet.

A few moments later he quietly opened the door of the Shell dormitory. He was immediately struck by the unusual draught, and he gave an involuntary glance at the window. Then he started. "Bai Jove!" he murmured in amazement.

He had just caught sight of Tom Merry's head and shoulders disappearing below the sill, and instinctively glanced towards Tom Merry's bed. It was empty; and Arthur Augustus stood there for a moment in sheer astonishment.

"Gweat Scott!" he murmured. "I wondah what Tom Mewwy is up to?"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy stood staring at the window of the Shell dormitory for a moment before he realised what was happening. Then he made up his mind quickly, and swiftly crossed the long room, being fearful lest some of the boys should awake and see him.

They slept peacefully, however, and he arrived at the window without mishap. Then he cautiously projected his head over the sill, and looked down. Tom Merry had just untied the cricket-bag from the end of the rope, and was making his way towards the tree in the quad where it was possible to scale the wall.

"Bai Jove!" murmured D'Arcy. "This is weally remarkable! I wathah think I had better follow Tom Mewwy and see where he is goin'. I wathah fancy myself in the Fewwahs Locke line of bizna. It won't be spyin', but weal detective work!"

D'Arcy's heart was beating fast as he crouched behind one of the big elms, and watched Tom Merry scramble up the tree with the bag.

It was a difficult task to climb the tree and carry the bag at the same time. But Tom Merry was on the top of the wall at last, and as he dropped down the other side D'Arcy crept from his place of concealment and sped across the quad.

The elegant junior was hot on the scent now, and he meant to follow Tom Merry to his destination, wherever that might be. If Tom Merry wouldn't tell him what game he was up to, then it only remained for D'Arcy to find out for himself.

"Bai Jove!" he murmured. "I considah I have got on the twack with extreme neatness!"

When he had clambered to the top of the wall, he looked down the lane, and saw Tom Merry striding along towards Rylcombe, with never a suspicion that he was being followed.

D'Arcy dropped to the ground.

He set off in pursuit of Tom Merry, keeping as close to the hedge as possible, for, of course, it was quite likely that Tom Merry would glance round to see if he were alone.

The captain of the Shell, however, did not trouble himself. He walked straight on until he came within a quarter of a mile from Rylcombe.

Then he turned abruptly from the road, and mounted a stile.

"Bai Jove, he's not goin' to Rylcombe!" said D'Arcy to himself. "He has taken the footpath leadin' woud to the Wayland Woad. I wondah wheah he is goin'?"

D'Arcy followed the captain of the Shell with his heart beating fast.

Tom Merry kept straight on.

When he had reached a spot nearly half-way to the Wayland Road, he left the main footpath, and followed the course of another path.

"Bai Jove, that leads to the old gamekeeper's cottage!" muttered D'Arcy.

He followed Tom Merry with a feeling of growing surprise. D'Arcy had often followed the main footpath during junior paperchases, and he knew that this smaller path led only to a small cottage occupied by a gamekeeper.

It was on the edge of Rylcombe Woods, almost at the back of the wood which faced the gates of St. Jim's. The cottage stood on a narrow, little-frequented lane, and the footpath led to a little gate at the back, at the bottom of the garden.

"I wondah what Tom Mewwy is goin' theah for?" D'Arcy murmured.

He walked on quickly, for Tom Merry had disappeared into the little garden.

D'Arcy arrived at the gate, and crouched down behind a hedge. A bright light glowed in the lower window of the cottage, and D'Arcy saw Tom Merry's shadow as he passed the window. A sound of tapping reached the watching junior's ears, and almost immediately the door was opened.

Tom Merry walked in, carrying his bag.

"Gweat Scott!" ejaculated D'Arcy. "How vevy stwange!"

For a moment he stood at the gates, too surprised to make a move. He had been imagining all sorts of dreadful things in connection with Tom Merry, and to find him calmly walking into the old gamekeeper's cottage came something like a shock to D'Arcy.

Then he recovered his wits, and he determined to investigate matters more thoroughly. He opened the gate, crept into the little garden, and made his way down the path to the cottage.

He could see that the window was curtained, but that it possessed no blind. Therefore, he would be able to see into the room without those inside knowing of his presence.

D'Arcy was very full of his scheme, and he moved silently up to the window.

He looked in.

Then he uttered a low ejaculation of amazement—for what he saw was so totally unexpected that for a time he could only stand there in open-eyed astonishment.

"Good gwacious!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy murmured the ejaculation before he could control himself.

The scene within the little cottage had taken him quite by surprise. It was a well-furnished room, and looked extremely cosy, with a bright fire burning in the grate. The furniture was very different from that usually seen in a small cottage.

It was modern and up-to-date, and looked quite new. Tom Merry was standing beside the table, and his occupation, more than anything else, had caused D'Arcy to utter his exclamation of surprise.

For Tom Merry was bending over the cricket-bag which he had brought with him. It was on the floor, and from it he was producing all sorts of provisions.

Already the table was piled up with pots of jam, tins of condensed milk, tinned meats, and other articles of a like nature. The light from a lamp on the table shed a ruddy glow over the good things.

Sitting beside the fire, in an easy-chair, was a kindly-looking old woman, and D'Arcy could see that her eyes were dimmed with tears. A shawl was about her shoulders, and she held in her hand a handkerchief, with which she had evidently been wiping her eyes.

Standing by her side, with one hand on her shoulder, stood her husband, old Griggs, the gamekeeper. He was looking at Tom Merry with a very serious expression.

"Bai Jove!" murmured D'Arcy. "Well, I nevah!"

So this was the deadly secret which Tom Merry had refused to reveal to his chums—or, at least, something in connection with it. Tom Merry was evidently befriending this old couple, who were plainly in need of food. Otherwise,

why should Tom Merry bring it for them?

"I'm bothahed if I can make it out!" muttered Arthur Augustus, very much puzzled. "I wondah why Tom Mewwy has brougth all that gwub? I fail to see how old Gwiggs is in need of it. Appawently he is in flouwishing circs, for all this furnituaal seems to be quite new!"

D'Arcy was plainly at a loss. As he stood there he could see Tom Merry's lips moving, and he knew that he was talking. But, owing to the wind in the surrounding trees, D'Arcy could hear nothing but a slight murmur. Not that he wanted to; Arthur Augustus was by no means an eavesdropper, and already he had made up his mind what to do.

"I will wait for Tom Mewwy up the path," he decided, "and then weveal myself to him. Undah the circs, he can do nothin' but tell me the plain twuth. I think it is wotten of him not to allow me to be of assistance!"

And D'Arcy remained looking on at the scene with growing curiosity.

It was not until a quarter of an hour later that Tom Merry came along the path towards where Arthur Augustus was standing.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed the swell of St. Jim's. "Tom Mewwy, is that you, deah boy?"

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Tom Merry Explains.

A DARK form loomed up in the darkness.

Tom Merry started back with an exclamation.

"Gussy!" he ejaculated blankly.

"Yaas, wathah! It's me, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus, coming forward.

"I've been waitin' for you, you know!" Tom Merry recovered his breath.

"You—you silly ass!" he ejaculated.

"Have you been watching me?"

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy, with a fatherly air. "I considahed that it was necessary for somebody to investigate your stwange behavioah. I came to the Shell dorm, deah boy, to place a fivah in your— Or, wathah," he added, in confusion, "I should say— Bai Jove!"

Tom Merry looked at the swell of St. Jim's in surprise.

"I may as well tell you, deah boy," went on D'Arcy, "that I have fewweted out your scwet. I was watchin' at the window while you put that collection of gwub on the table. Weeally, Tom Mewwy, I fail to undahstand the reason for this."

"Did you hear anything that was said?"

"I twust you do not take me for an eavesdwoopah?" said D'Arcy indignantly. "I heard nothin' owin' to the wind, though if your voice had been audible I should certainly have wetchahed from the window."

"Good old Gussy!" chuckled Tom Merry. "Well, as you know so much, I'll tell you the lot, provided you treat it in a confidential manner?"

"That remark is totally unnecessary. Anythin' you say to me, deah boy, will be tweated as confidential. Pway, proceed!"

"Right-ho!"

Tom Merry and D'Arcy advanced along the footpath, and as they walked Tom Merry told D'Arcy what the whole business meant.

"You see, Gussy, I found out a day or two ago that old Griggs was in a dickens of a hole," explained Tom Merry. "Griggs is a jolly decent chap, and has often done us a good turn, as you know."

"Yaas, wathah! Gwiggs is a sport, deah boy!"

"Well, it seems that about eighteen months ago the old chump purchased a lot of furniture from a shady furnishing firm in London. You see, he wanted some furniture badly, because about two years ago most of his old furniture was burnt up in a fire."

"Bai Jove! I wemembah the occurwence!"

"He didn't like to get any locally on the giddy instalment plan, so he went to London for it," went on Tom Merry. "Well, the furniture's all right; but, of course, Griggs is paying about twice its worth for the stuff. But that alone wouldn't matter. The rub is this. About two months ago there was a poacher collared in Wayland, and he gave evidence that Griggs had been in league with him. It ended in Griggs getting the sack, though I consider that he was innocent. He couldn't get another job, and since then he's been out of work. And what do you think the silly ass has been doing?"

"I have no ideah."

"He's been paying almost every penny he's earned—by doing odd jobs—to the rotten furnishing firm. He and his wife have been practically starving themselves for the sake of keeping up the giddy payments for the furniture. Well, that couldn't go on for ever, and just lately he's been getting behind with his payments, so the firm sent their representative down."

"Bai Jove! Mr. Tutt?"

"Exactly!" Mr. Tutt, said Tom Merry. "You can guess what sort of a chap he is—an ill-mannered, bluffing sort of beast! According to the agreement that Griggs signed, if he got behind in his payments, and couldn't pay up, the firm were at liberty to claim all the goods. Well, Mr. Tutt came down, and threatened to clear everything out within a week."

"Gweat Scott!"

"Of course, it was genuine enough. Mr. Tutt, as the representative of the firm, has the law on his side, and can do as he threatens if the money isn't forthcoming. It's perfectly rotten, of course, but Griggs shouldn't have let himself into it. When I saw him the other day he was nearly off his head with worry, for to have lost the furniture after nearly paying double the amount would just about have finished his wife. I bucked him up, and told him I'd see Mr. Tutt and make some arrangement. I did so, and arranged that I'd pay up all that was owing. I'd been to see him, as a matter of fact, that night I was out in the rain."

"Bai Jove! I undahstand now!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "But, you silly ass, why couldn't you have told us about it? We would have wallied wound you, and made up the amount in no time."

"I don't doubt that for a minute, Gussy, but you know what these old country people are," said Tom Merry. "Both Griggs and his wife were simply horrified at the thought of everybody knowing that they were getting their furniture on instalments. I can't see anything in it myself, but there you are. I promised them that I'd keep the thing absolutely to myself, and that I wouldn't borrow any money from a St. Jim's chap to pay up with. That's why I've been in such a hole. If I'd been able to explain, matters would have been different. I was a bit startled when I found that Levison had read that giddy letter out; but as Mr. Tutt had said nothing definite in it I didn't mind much."

"Bai Jove! And the fellows think that you have dealin's with a bookmakah!"

THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 251.

"Yes, the silly asses!" grinned Tom Merry. "I can hardly blame them, though, for everything looks very much against me. You're a brick, you know, Gussy, for standing up for me. I saw Mr. Tutt last night outside the gates, and I've arranged to pay him the money by to-morrow afternoon—seven pounds five! You see, I've written to my old governess—"

"Miss Pwiscilla Fawcett, deah boy?"

"Yes. At first I thought about raising the tin myself, but old Tutt was in too much of a hurry. So I've written to Miss Pwiscilla, and I expect the money'll turn up by the afternoon post to-morrow."

"Bai Jove! That's wippin'!"

"Tutt says that if he doesn't get the money on Thursday afternoon he'll either have to clear the goods out or get the sack. He told me that last night."

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus uttered the exclamation involuntarily.

Manners, Lowther, and himself had heard Mr. Tutt mention something about the sack to Tom Merry, and they had taken it that Tom Merry himself would be expelled if he didn't pay up. Yet the words had been said in such a manner that misunderstanding had been very simple.

Tom Merry didn't note the peculiar tone of D'Arcy's ejaculation, and they walked on in silence for a few moments.

They emerged into Rykcombe Lane.

"It's weally gweat of you, Tom Mewwy," said D'Arcy thoughtfully. "Pway let me shake your flippah, deah boy! The mannah in which you have cawwied this biznah wellecets vewy gweat cweat upon yourself."

"Oh, rot!" laughed Tom Merry.

But D'Arcy shook his head.

"It's all vewy well for you to scoff at it, deah boy," he said. "If I had been in your place I should nevah have stood the wacket. The mannah in which the fellows have been wunning you down is disgweatful! They thought you were tellin' fwightful whoppahs when you told them that you didn't owe Tutt a farthing. I admit I was puzzled myself, but of course, it was quite wight."

"It is quite right, Gussy. I don't owe Tutt a farthing. Griggs owes it to him, but I'm going to pay it. You see, there's a difference. From Tutty's letter it seemed proved that I owed him a pile of money, and that I was in the habit of visiting the Green Man. My hat! If the matter wasn't serious it would be a first-class jape!"

"Yaas, wathah! The chaps have been taken in completely. They are beginning to think that you are a feahful boundah!" said Arthur Augustus. "An' instead of the most decent fellow at the coll! Heah we are at the gates!"

And D'Arcy and Tom Merry assisted one another to the top of the wall.

In two minutes they were within the school grounds, and they lost no time in regaining the Shell dormitory, and hauling up the rope. Then, with a whispered good-night, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy departed to his own dormitory.

Ten minutes later the pair of them were sound asleep in their respective beds.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER. Mr. Tutt Takes Action.

THE next morning, as soon as breakfast was over, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy walked across to Tom Merry, who was strolling under the old elms in the quad.

The juniors still retained the same attitude against him, and Tom Merry, far from feeling resentful, was almost

amused. He intended to get permission from Mr. Griggs to take his own intimate chums into the secret.

With that permission given, he would be able to tell Manners and Lowther and Blake & Co., whom he knew he could trust. The others would still have to let their curiosity go unsatisfied.

"Hallo, Gussy! What's the trouble?" asked Tom Merry.

"No twouble at all that I know of, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, coming up. "An ideah has just stwuck me, howevah, and I thought I'd ask your opinion."

"Quite wight. My opinion's vewy valuable!"

"Pway don't wot, Tom Mewwy!" said D'Arcy severely. "I weally think it is a good ideah. You wemembah that I told you I had a fivah?"

"Yes," said Tom Merry. "You said you were going to throw it away on your tailor."

"I said nothing of the sort. The money is in no way thrown away, you ass. Howevah, that is beside the point. How much have you requested Miss Pwiscilla to send?"

"Twelve pounds, Gussy."

"I thought so," said Arthur Augustus triumphantly. "That will leave no margin for old Gwiggs' immediate expenses. I pwopose we wun three immediately afrah mornin' lessons, and

"But, my dear kid, he mustn't know you're in the secret."

"You can tell him that," said D'Arcy complacently. "When he knows what a tactful chap I am he will be quite agweeable. Besides, it is my intention to advance him a fivah."

"You ass, Gussy!"

"I uttally wefuse to be called an ass for offewin' Gwiggay a fivah!" said D'Arcy indignantly. "The poor chap is weally in need of tin, and I weally couldn't send it to my tailah under the cires. If you wefuse to accompany me, Tom Mewwy, I shall go to the old game-keepah myself."

"Then I'll come," said Tom promptly. "But you really shouldn't do it, Gussy. You'll leave yourself without a penny."

"Wats! I shall get a wemittance befoah long fwom my govannah. This fivah was a pwesent fwom my bywothah, Lord Conway, and is, awtictly speakin', extwa. Therefoah, I shall not miss it much."

So, immediately after morning lessons, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and Tom Merry set off down the road. Much against D'Arcy's will, Tom Merry forced him to trot, for there was not very much time before the dinner-bell would ring. If possible, they wanted to get back before then.

They hastened along the footpath without speaking, and at last came within sight of the cottage. From the footpath, of course, they had a back view of it. Nevertheless, Tom Merry caught sight of a horse's head as he and D'Arcy entered the little garden.

"There's a blessed cart or something round the front," he said. "Suppose we buzz round and see what it is?"

"Wight-ho, deah boy!"

And, instead of going to the back door, they went to the front. They hastened round the cottage, and came in sight of the front strip of garden which bordered the weed-covered lane, and as they did so they both stopped abruptly.

"My hat!" gasped Tom Merry.

"Gweat Scott!"

There was certainly cause for the exclamations of astonishment. Instead of the quiet scene which they had expected, there was quite a busy one before their eyes. Out in the lane a large vau

stood, and it was piled up with the old gamekeeper's furniture!

Two men were walking down the path with a heavy bedstead, and at the gate stood the stout, truculent-looking figure of Mr. Simon Tutt. Near the cottage door, side by side, stood the old gamekeeper and his wife, the latter crying bitterly.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated D'Arcy. "The—the beastly rotter!" shouted Tom Merry furiously. "He told me he'd wait until this afternoon for me to get the money. Instead of that, he's having all the stuff carted out hours before the time arranged."

Tom Merry raced round to the old couple, D'Arcy behind him, his monocle fluttering in the breeze.

"You see, Master Merry, it was no good," said Griggs gloomily. "They've got 'em! After all I've paid and worked for, too! It's hard lines, young sir, but—"

"But they're not going to take 'em!" roared Tom Merry wrathfully. "Why, I've never heard of such rotten sharp practice!"

"It's fearful!" said D'Arcy indignantly. "You oughtn't to have let them take the furniture, Mr. Gwiggs."

"I couldn't help it, Master D'Arcy," said Griggs miserably. "I see as you've been let into the secret, but it don't matter now. That feller Tutt has got men from the village to take my goods away, and the news that I've got 'em on instalments is all over Rylcombe already."

"Bai Jove, deah boy, that's nothin'!" said D'Arcy. "What does it matten if they do know? There is nothin' criminal in gettin' things by instalments. If you go to the right people, I considah it a wippin' ideal. But didn't you expostulate with Tutt?"

"He said as he'd had orders to clear the things out," said the old gamekeeper.

"Well, he's jolly well going to have orders to shove 'em all back!" roared Tom Merry indignantly. "If the chap's got too much to say we'll bump him!"

"Yaas, wathah! I considah that if Mr. Tutt is bumped it will teach him a lesson!"

"There's enough of him to bump, anyhow!" said Tom Merry.

The hero of the Shell hurried to the gate. Mr. Tutt regarded him with a scowl.

"Well, what do you want here, young shaver?" he demanded.

"I want to know what you mean by clearing these goods out, you rotter?" shouted Tom Merry. "You told me distinctly that you'd wait until this afternoon for the money. I wrote for it last night, and it'll be here by the afternoon post."

Mr. Tutt puffed at his cigar.

"Yes, I don't think!" he sneered. "I got orders this morning from the firm to clear the goods out and take no notice of you. I'd wrote 'em sayin' that I was waiting for you to get the money, but they told me to take no notice of a junior schoolboy. They said that if the bird couldn't pay up I was to claim the goods immediately."

"You're a contemptible humbug!" said Tom Merry disgustedly. "Just because your rotten firm said that, there was no need for you to carry it out to the letter. You might have waited till this afternoon, and seen what I should do. You'll just have all that furniture put back into the house!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Oh, shall I?" said Mr. Tutt furiously. "All that furniture's goin' away in half an hour, and don't you make any mistake!"

"You sha'n't take it!" roared Tom Merry helplessly. "I—I—"

"I don't want nothin' to do with you youngsters," said Mr. Tutt truculently. "You can sling off as soon as you like. Understand?"

"Bai Jove! You uttah wottah!" gasped D'Arcy.

And before Tom Merry could prevent him the swell of St. Jim's, regardless of the consequences, had rushed at the furnishing firm's representative. Mr. Tutt, taken completely by surprise, was bowled over like a ninepin, and he lay on the ground with every ounce of breath knocked out of him.

Tom Merry glanced at his watch. "I say, Gussy," he said quickly, "would you mind doing me a favour?" "Anythin' you like, deah boy," said D'Arcy readily.

"Good egg! Rush off to Rylcombe Lane, and hurry towards the village. It's just about time for Blagg, the postman, to be coming up. He'll have a registered letter for me, I expect. If he has, bring it here as quickly as you can."

"Wight-ho, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus without hesitation. "I'll wun like anythin'!"

And, without waiting to see Mr. Tutt

It is impewative that I should have it at once! Tom Mewwy has requested me to fetch it for him."

Blagg handed over the registered letter.

"Thanks!" exclaimed D'Arcy. And he rushed off without another word.

"Here, you've got to sign, Master D'Arcy!" shouted Blagg.

"Latah, deah boy!" yelled Arthur Augustus without stopping.

"But I shall get into a row!" bawled Blagg, in alarm.

"Wats!"

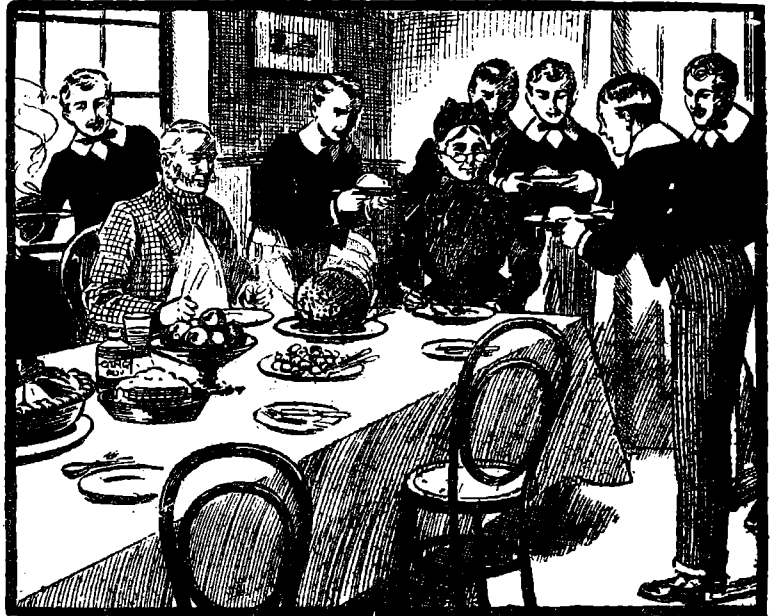
And Arthur Augustus dashed on without pausing. He had got the letter, and that was the main thing.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

The Settlement.

TOM MERRY looked up quickly as he heard a patter of footsteps from behind the house. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy rushed up with the registered letter.

"I've got it, Tom Mewwy!" he shouted in triumph. "I've got the lettah!"



"Oh, but, my dear boy—or, I mean dear girl," said Arthur Augustus gallantly, "you must finish up these doughnuts, you know!"

rise from his undignified position, the swell of St. Jim's rushed off. He realised the seriousness of the situation, and he put on an extra spurt, careless of the consequences to his elegant nether garments.

He was within sight of the first houses of Rylcombe before he met Blagg, and the old postman looked up at him in surprise.

"Bai Jove, heah you are, deah boy!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

"Why, what do you want, Master D'Arcy?"

"Bai Jove, Blaggay, I'm puffed!" panted the swell of St. Jim's. "I've been vunnin' like anythin'! Have you got a lettah there for Tom Mewwy?"

Blagg was exasperatingly slow.

"Yes, Master D'Arcy, there is one—a registered letter," he said. "I'm now goin' up to the school, and I'll take it—"

"You won't, deah boy!" said D'Arcy quickly. "Pway hand it ovah, Blagg!"

"Oh, good!" said Tom Mewwy. "You've been jolly quick, Gussy!"

"I wan like anythin'!" exclaimed D'Arcy pantingly. "I didn't sign the wotten receipt, but you can do that latah! I twust it is the lettah you expected."

Tom Merry tore open the registered letter.

"Yes, this is the one!" said Tom Merry with sparkling eyes. "Here we are! Two fivers and a couple of postal orders for a quid each!"

"Soveweign each, deah boy!"

"Quid's good enough for me!" grinned Tom Merry elatedly. "My hat, my old governness is a brick!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Tom Merry turned to the sullen Mr. Tutt.

"You'd better come inside, old Tutty-frutty," he said genially. "We're going to pay you up every penny, and then you're going to get the kick out."

Mr. Tutt blustered.

"How was I to know that you meant what you said?" he exclaimed in a wheedling tone. "As you've got the money, of course that alters matters. I shall 'ave to accept it, and leave the furniture here."

"You'll jolly well shove it all back in place before you go," said Tom Merry firmly. "But come on in."

They entered the cottage. Griggs and his wife were in the front room, and they looked up gloomily as the two laughing juniors entered.

"It's all wight, Gwiggay, deah boy!" shouted D'Arcy. "We've got the tin, and Tom Mewwy is goin' to pay this beastly boundah up!"

"Is it true?" said Griggs eagerly. "Every word of it," smiled Tom Merry. "I promised you I'd see you through this business, Mr. Griggs, and I meant it! If this silly fathead hadn't gone back on his word it would have been all right!"

"Thank Heaven!" exclaimed the old gamekeeper fervently. "I don't know how I can ever thank you, Master Merry! Mary, it's all right! It's turned out fair surprisin'! After we'd given up hope, too!"

"He's a dear, kind young gentleman!" said Mrs. Griggs, with a smile of happiness.

Tom Merry handed over the money to Griggs, and in less than five minutes Mr. Simon Tutt had handed the gamekeeper a full receipt, and had received the balance-money in exchange.

"Of course," said Mr. Tutt, "I didn't know as things would turn out pleasant like this! If I've caused you any trouble—"

"Get out!" roared Tom Merry fiercely. "And order your men to put all the furniture back in their right places!"

"They're doin' that already!"

"Then you can buzz off!" said Tom Merry sternly.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Pway wethah, you uttah worm!"

And Mr. Tutt retired, realising that the juniors wouldn't stand any nonsense. Tom Merry looked at the happy old couple with a smile.

"Well, now the whole thing's out," said the hero of the Shell genially, "there's no reason why I shouldn't tell the chaps of St. Jim's what I've been up to! They've been thinking all sorts of things about me, Mr. Griggs, and I'd like to set their minds at rest!"

"You can do just what you like, young master," said Griggs readily. "I expect the news is all through the village by now, and, anyhow, that man Tutt is sure to say as you paid 'im off. So you might as well tell your schoolmates as anyone else!"

"Good!" said Tom Merry. "The fellows'll get a bit of a surprise—"

There came a knock at the door, and Blagg, the postman, stood there. He handed a letter in for the old gamekeeper, and departed, not noticing that Tom Merry and D'Arcy were there. Griggs tore the letter open, then uttered an exclamation of joy.

"I can't believe it, Mary!" he gasped excitedly.

"What is it, John?" asked Mrs. Griggs quickly.

"Why, the old master has taken me back!" said the gamekeeper, with shining eyes. "He says as the poacher has confessed that I never had anything to do with him, and only spoke against me for spite. I'm to go back to work on Monday!"

"Heaven be praised!" murmured Mrs. Griggs, bursting into tears.

THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 251.

"Bai Jove, I wegard that as wippin'!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Gwiggay, I congatulate you, deah boy! This weally has been a day of sowwov and joy for you—with joy triumphin' in the end!"

"It has, Master D'Arcy—it has!" said Griggs, in a shaking voice. "I don't seem to be able to realise it! It don't seem to be true!"

Tom Merry laughed. "It's true enough," he said. "Look here, Mr. and Mrs. Griggs, I've got an idea! As things have turned out so rosy, suppose you both come to a feed in my study at St. Jim's this evening. I can promise you a high old time!"

"By gum, Master Merry, I—"

"That's all right! You're not going to refuse, I know!" said Tom Merry. "There'll be plenty to eat—we'll blue Gussy's fiver for the occasion!"

"Bai Jove!" said D'Arcy. "I wegard that as a good ideah! You are perfectly at liberty, Tom Mewwy, to blue my fivah for such an auspicious occasion!"

"All serene!" said Tom Merry. "We'll get back to the school now, Mr. Griggs. We'll expect you to be on hand at exactly half-past six!"

"We'll be at the gates waitin' for you, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus.

And, without giving the old couple time to think it over, the two juniors took their departure.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

Re-united.

"HERE they are!" exclaimed Levison. "Here's the giddy pair of 'em! Been making more bets, Tom Merry?"

Tom Merry and D'Arcy had just entered the common-room in the School House. It was drizzling a trifle, and the juniors had all collected in the common-room to wait for afternoon lessons to begin.

"Where the dickens have you been?" demanded Jack Blake, pushing forward. "You've missed dinner, and—"

"Bai Jove, I'd forgotten all about dimmah!" said Arthur Augustus. "I'm goin' to tell you what a wippin' chap Tom Mewwy is! You are a set of uttah asses for havin' doubted him for a moment! Tom Mewwy is one of the best chaps at St. Jim's, and I think we ought to give him three wousin' cheers for havin' come up to the scwatch like a hewo!"

"Look here, Gussy—" began Tom Merry.

"I uttably wefuse to look heah, Tom Mewwy—I mean I wefuse to take any notice of you whatevah! I am goin' to tell the fellows what I think, so you can wan off!"

The common-room was in a roar.

"Get to the bisney!" roared Blake.

"Vewy well, deah boys!"

And Arthur Augustus related, with a wealth of detail, how Tom Merry had acted like a hero while the juniors were shunning him and thinking that he had been mixing with bad companions at the Green Man.

Mellish and Levison looked extremely small, and when D'Arcy had finished they disappeared from the common-room.

Next Friday's Grand Long Complete Tale of Tom Merry & Co. is entitled:

"THE THIRD FORM MYSTERY!"

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

Please order your copy of the PENNY POPULAR in advance!

But the other fellows were wildly enthusiastic.

They were all thoroughly ashamed of themselves, and tried to make it up to Tom Merry by giving him three hearty cheers, and making his back sore by heavy slappings. All of them realised how hasty they had been in their conclusions, and they resolved to make it hot for Levison for starting the suspicions.

"Cheer him!" roared Blake. "Tom Merry's a giddy hero!"

"Rather!" shouted Manners and Lowther together. "We've treated Tommy in a rotten style, and we all apologise."

"Shoulder high!" roared Kangaroo.

And, while Tom Merry laughingly protested, Manners and Lowther grasped him, and slung him upon their shoulders. Then, laughing and cheering, they bore him round the common-room. And when they had finished with him, Tom Merry felt amply repaid for all the doubts which had been cast upon his character.

"There's one thing more!" he gasped, as they set him down. "I call for three cheers for Gussy! He's been a brick over this bisney, and he deserves a putty medal!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

But D'Arcy's voice was drowned in the cheer that rose to the ceiling. When the bell rang for afternoon lessons, the juniors were very excited, and those who were invited to the grand banquet considered themselves very lucky indeed.

"Ladies and gentlemen—" began Tom Merry.

"Hear, hear!"

"Ladies and gentlemen, I now beg to declare the banquet open," went on Tom Merry. "Everybody is now requested to tuck in for all they are worth—"

"Hear, hear!" mumbled Fatty Wynn, who was tucking in already.

"For this auspicious occasion we have the honour of entertaining the worthy Mr. Griggs and Mrs. Griggs!" said Tom Merry, shouting to make his voice heard, and I trust that they will thoroughly enjoy themselves, and— and make the grub look silly!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The table was packed to overflowing with good things, but as the feast proceeded they disappeared at a surprising rate.

The old gamekeeper and his wife ate sparingly of the good fare, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy became quite indignant.

"Have one of these, Mrs. Gwigg!" said D'Arcy temptingly.

"Thank you, Master D'Arcy, I couldn't!" smiled the old lady.

"But, my deah boy—I mean gal—you weally must finish up those doughnuts!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus firmly.

"You weally must eat a lot more!"

But all his persuasions were useless. Much as he tried, he could not get Mrs. Griggs to finish up the doughnuts. Nevertheless, the guests were thoroughly satisfied, and basking over with happiness at the turn of their fortune.

And when they took their departure at last, they shook hands all round, and declared that they had never enjoyed themselves so much in their lives before. And the juniors, too, were light-hearted and merry.

Manners and Monty Lowther, especially, were feeling as gay as sandboys. They were extremely proud of their leader—proud of the manner in which he had kept his promise, in spite of the dark suspicions which were harboured against him by every junior except one!

THE END

THE ROOKWOOD MUSICAL SOCIETIES!

A Grand Long Complete Tale, dealing with the Early Adventures of
Jimmy Silver & Co. at Rookwood School.

By OWEN CONQUEST.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

A "Facer" for the Moderns.

"MY hat!" said Tommy Dodd. It was all he could say.

"Hear, hear!" said his chums, Tommy Cook and Tommy Doyle.

"A junior musical society!"

"Of all the nerve!"

"And we never thought of it!"

Tommy Dodd & Co. drew back into the deep shadows of the stone stair in the old tower, and looked at one another.

For a fortnight the Modern chums had been suspicious of the movements of the Fistical Four, and had noticed that the Classical chums appeared to be very weary during the daytime.

Suspecting that they had been carrying on some nefarious schemes at night, the Modern chums had decided to lie in wait after lights out that night at the end of the passage in which the Classical dormitories were situated.

Sure enough, as soon as everything had settled down for the night, the Fistical Four had stealthily emerged from their dormitory, and had made their way to the old tower, followed by Tommy Dodd & Co.

There, Jimmy Silver & Co. were joined by other Classics, and musical instruments were speedily produced, and the sweet strains of 'cello, violin, cornet, flute, and clarinet echoed through the rooms.

Tommy Dodd & Co. had heard every word of the conversation which had taken place in the room of the tower from which the music was proceeding.

They gathered that they had been listening to the "Classical Musical Society," and that practices had been taking place every night for the past fortnight.

Also, that on the following evening a concert was to take place, an announcement of which would be sprung on the school the next day.

Talboys of the Fifth, they learned, was going to officiate at the piano, but he was not present at the final rehearsal, as, of course, a piano could not be taken to the old tower.

"What a row they're making in there!" said Tommy Dodd.

The Modern chums had drawn back from the door, quite out of hearing, so far as their voices were concerned; but, of course, the strains of music were audible all over the old tower. Cook, who had rather a good ear for music, listened rather appreciatively to the youthful orchestra.

"I say, Doddy, old man, that's not bad!"

"Doddy old man" snorted.

"But it isn't," said Cook. "They're playing an adaptation of a march from 'Carmen,' and it's jolly lively—the opening of the last act, you know. They must have got somebody to score it for them for such a giddy, small orchestra, and it's jolly well to their credit to play up like that under such difficulties. They've only got five instruments there, and not



even a double-bass to give the thing a background. Yes, you can snort if you like, Doddy; but you can't teach me anything about music, anyway."

"I know I can't, Cooky," said Tommy Dodd, in a more subdued tone. "I wasn't snorting at you. Don't mind my ragging you just now. I feel this very much."

"Of course, I don't mind," said Cook instantly. "You can rag me as much as you like, old chap, and I won't say a word, if it relieves your feelings."

Tommy Dodd grinned a little. "It's so jolly rotten, kids!" he said. "You see, if the idea had only struck us, we could have worked it easily; and, without bragging, I think I can say that we could work it better than the Fistical Four."

"Rather!" said Tommy Cook. "You are an awfully musical chap, and you can play half the instruments in an orchestra," said Tommy Dodd gloomily. "And I can play the cornet better than that goat Raby, anyway."

"You play the cornet jolly well, Doddy," said the loyal Tommy Doyle. "I won't say you keep perfect time, because you don't; but you're yards nearer the music than Raby is."

"Talboys would have punched the piano and conducted for us, and we could have got Snythe, with his clarinet, just as easily as Jimmy Silver," said Tommy Dodd. "I—I could kick myself! Why didn't I think of it?"

His chums offered no solution to the mystery this time.

"I ought to have thought of it," said Dodd. "But I didn't, and there it ends. We've got to sit down quietly, and let the Fistical Four gloat over us."

"Oh, I say, Doddy—"

"We've got to let them triumph, and sing small ourselves," persisted Tommy Dodd, in a vein of determined pessimism. "I know it's rotten. You can bang my head against the wall, if you like."

"Oh, rot, Tommy! After all, we've done them often enough. Besides, we may be able to get level yet, as we've found it out in time."

"But we haven't found it out in time,"

said Tommy Dodd; "it's too late. My hat! To think that they've been at it a fortnight or more, and we never got on to the wheeze till the last night before the performance! I ask you, kids, isn't it enough to make a fellow swear?"

"Quite so; but—"

"Oh, I'm not going to!" grinned Tommy Dodd. "To-morrow there'll be a notice up on the board, I suppose, announcing a grand concert by the Classical Musical Society. All the Fourth will go, and we shall be grinned at, and chipped to death."

"Couldn't we work something up against them? What about a rival show?"

Tommy Dodd shook his head gloomily.

"No time! That's the worst of it. If we had thought of the idea, we could have worked up a much better orchestra; but we didn't! Now there's no time. It's no good our starting a rival show with a cornet, a clarinet, and a 'cello. You can't play four or five instruments, like a giddy drummer in a cheap orchestra. An orchestra of three would be laughed at, and we've no time to beat up recruits—"

"There's Lacy, with his concertina"

"The chaps would throw things at him."

"Well, I suppose they would. I've felt like doing it myself when I've heard him practising in his study." It's a cheap German concertina he's got," said Cook. "An English concertina you pay a good price for is all right; but a cheap German one is—well, it's like everything else German, rotten to the core!"

"It's no good!" said Tommy Dodd desperately. "We may as well knuckle under. I—"

"Hold on! They're stopping! They'll hear us!"

The strains of music died away. The voices of the Classical Musical Society were audible once more. The Modern chums, with gloomy faces, peeped into the lighted room again.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Tommy Dodd Thinks It Out.

JIMMY SILVER laid down his bow, with a smile of satisfaction.

"I think that went better than the first bit," he remarked. "Of course, you can't judge of the full effect till you play along with the piano."

"I should say not," grinned Lovell.

"But so long as we get our parts perfect, it's all right. We know Talboys is a good pianist, and he can keep time to anything, and he's practising his part on and off."

"Oh, we can rely on Talboys," said Raby; "though, in case of doubt, you know, you can always follow the cornet!"

"Blessed if I know where it would lead us!" said Lovell, with a sniff. "I wish you had a double-bass instead of a 'cello, Jimmy. Even Raby could hardly get out if you were sawing away under his car on a double-bass."

THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 254.

"We ought to have both," said Jimmy Silver. "But it's no joke buying a double-bass, and we've nobody else to play the 'cello. My pater has come up pretty well as it is in standing this instrument. He's stood me the 'cello; and if I had the bass, there's nobody to take this instrument. Of course, later on, when we let the Modern kids into the society, Cook can play the 'cello, and then I'll try to work the dad for a bass."

"Good egg!"

"But at present we shall have to make it do," said the leader of the Fistical Four. "After all, when Talboys gets going on the piano that will give the thing a background. Raby will have to keep his cornet a little quieter."

"I'm playing up so that you can follow the instrument and keep in time," said Raby.

"Then don't! You must regard the 'cello as if it were the leader. Don't you worry about the rest of the orchestra, Raby. Stick to your cornet, and keep in time yourself."

"Well, I—"

"Get on to the next item," said Jimmy Silver. "We're limited to an hour, you know. I had some lines this morning for being sleepy in class. Bootles doesn't make allowances for these rehearsals."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Play up, then!" said Newcome.

"Just what I was going to suggest," said Lovell.

And the orchestra struck up once more. Out on the staircase Tommy Dodd & Co. listened with mingled feelings.

"It's jolly decent!" muttered Cook. "Of course, the piano takes the parts of the second violins and the viola. It will sound different when Talboys is doing his little bit. That's a dish-up of the third overture to 'Leonora'! Fancy that lot having the cheek to tackle Beethoven!"

"Oh, they've cheek enough for anything!" said Tommy Dodd despondently.

The chums were silent for some time. Tommy Dodd made a movement at last.

"Let's get back," he said. "We'll keep this dark. No need to let on that we're up to the game. We'll think it out, and I'll think of some wheeze for dishing them between this and to-morrow, or bust my brain-box!"

"I hope so."

"Come on!"

The Modern chums stole silently away. They entered the house as they had left it, and returned to their dormitory. They went to bed quietly, without awakening anyone, and Tommy Cook and Tommy Doyle were soon asleep.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Modern Musical Society.

JIMMY SILVER and his musical society had an air of suppressed importance the next day, which would have aroused the suspicions of the Modern chums, even if they had known nothing of the nocturnal rehearsals in the old tower.

But the muttered talk of the musical society, their whispered consultations with Talboys of the Fifth, Jimmy Silver's examinations of the No. 8 Room, with an eye to cramming in a large audience, and the yelps of the clarinet from Smythe's study, all passed now without notice from Tommy Dodd & Co.

For Tommy Dodd & Co. were lying low.

They made no sign, and, indeed, appeared outwardly to be thinking of nothing but the next cricket-match. They discussed cricket loud and long whenever they were within hearing of any member of the Fistical Four, and the Fistical Four chuckled gleefully to think how far Tommy Dodd & Co. were from getting on the track.

And the Modern chums smiled. Tommy Dodd had confided his scheme to Cook and Doyle before breakfast that morning. They had listened in astonishment, then with grins; and the grins had expanded into laughs, the laughs

READERS OF THE PENNY POPULAR SHOULD NOTE THAT

We shall in future print only the actual number of copies ordered through newsagents. To make sure, therefore, of obtaining your PENNY POPULAR regularly, fill in this form and hand it to your newsagent:

ORDER FORM.

To Mr. Newsagent.

Please reserve me each week, until further notice, a copy of the PENNY POPULAR.

Name

Address

"I'm getting sleepy. I say, what piano is Talboys going to punch for us to-morrow? The Head's not likely to let us have the grand piano in the Hall."

Jimmy Silver grinned.

"No, I asked for the grand piano and the Hall, through Mr. Bootles, but it can't be did. I don't think the Head regards junior musical societies with a properly serious eye."

"He would if he caught 'em at rehearsal!" said Raby.

"Besides, the Sixth are using the Hall to-morrow evening for a rehearsal of their rotten Latin comedy!" said Lovell.

"We've got No. 8 Room on the ground floor," said Jimmy Silver. "It's quite large enough for our purpose, and by arranging the seats we can make room enough for an audience of sixty or seventy. I don't suppose we shall have more than that."

"If there's more, there's standing room," said Raby, "and we can put up a notice outside, 'Standing room only!' and it will look ripping. We might put up the notice anyway, to keep up appearances."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's a good idea."

"I reckon it's a ripping way to attract an audience!" said Jimmy Silver witheringly. "Now, let's get on."

THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 251.

Not so their chum. Tommy Dodd lay awake, thinking it out. He had a problem to solve. How was he to "dish" the Fistical Four?

Meanwhile, the amateur orchestra progressed with their rehearsal, and finished it, with much satisfaction to themselves.

Jimmy Silver rose at last and returned the violoncello to its case.

"I think we're in pretty good form," he remarked. "We'll wake snakes to-morrow evening, my pippins!"

"Absolutely!"

The instruments were carefully packed away in a chest that had been smuggled into the tower for the purpose. In their nocturnal expeditions it would have been a little too risky to attempt to get a 'cello and a violin-case out of a window, to say nothing of the cornet.

Smythe, however, took his clarinet away with him. The juniors returned to the School House, having extinguished the light in the tower. Smythe went his way, and the Fistical Four climbed in at the box-room window.

All was silent in the dormitory when the chums entered it.

"Asleep, you fellows?" muttered Jimmy Silver.

There was no reply, save a faint snore from one of the beds. The Fistical Four returned to bed without a single misgiving.

into roars. And they roared till their ribs ached.

"Oh, my only hat!" exclaimed Tommy Cook.

"What price that for a jape of the Fistical Four?" demanded Tommy Dodd.

"Oh, it's too rich!" said Tommy Doyle.

"I fancy it will be a dot on the nose for young Silver."

"Ha, ha! Rather rough on the musical society!"

"Can't be helped. If we had got up the musical wheeze, the Fistical Four would be hunting for a chance to bust our concert, wouldn't they?"

"Quite so!"

"Now the boot's on the other foot, and we're going to bust theirs!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"They're giving a concert in No. 8 Room," said Tommy Dodd, grinning. "The partition between No. 8 Room and No. 7 Room is only lath and plaster. You remember, when we were at lessons in No. 7, we could hear the buzz from No. 8?"

"Quite so, rather!"

"If they give a concert in No. 8, why shouldn't we give one in No. 7?"

"Echo answers 'Why?'"

"If they've bagged all the good performers, why shouldn't we make up an

orchestra composed of bad performers?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If the partition's thin, and we make too much row for their performance to be heard, whose fault is it?"

"The chap's who built the partition."

"Exactly!"

"But you'll have to get permission to use No. 7."

"Easy enough. The Fistical Four got permission to use No. 8 from Bootles. I'll ask Manders to let us have No. 7. He doesn't know anything about the musical society, so he can't guess there's anything on. He'll let me have the room."

"Good!"

"I'll ask him immediately after breakfast, to make sure."

And Tommy Dodd did so. Mr. Manders willingly gave the juniors permission to use No. 7 Room, which was not wanted that evening by anybody.

The Modern chums kept it very dark. Sometimes they chuckled irrepressibly; but whenever any of the musical society were near, Tommy Dodd & Co. were gravely talking cricket.

After school that day, the Fistical Four came out of the Fourth Form room in great spirits. Everything was going well for the musical society, and apparently there was no suspicion raised yet.

But as the concert was to take place after tea, it was time for the secret to be let out, and Jimmy Silver, accompanied by his chums, marched up to the notice-board in the hall, and fastened up a notice there.

There was immediately a rush of juniors to read it. Jimmy Silver was cricket captain of the Fourth, and the impression at first was that the notice had something to do with the junior cricket club.

There were blank stares of amazement when the notice was read, from all but Tommy Dodd & Co., who, of course, knew what to expect.

The programme was an ambitious one, including works by Beethoven; there were also several popular items, such as "The Broken Melody" and the "Intermezzo," of Mascagni.

"There will be more than one broken melody. I expect, to say nothing of broken harmony," remarked Leggett.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Lot of cheeky kids!" said Lacy. "I would have put in a concertina solo for them, if they had asked me."

"Perhaps they have carefully calculated how much the roof will stand!" remarked Hooker.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I think Lacy's concertina would have been ripping," said Tommy Dodd.

"Yes; it would have ripped the ceiling!" said Jones minor.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Lacy strolled away. Tommy Dodd & Co. strolled after him, and entered his study.

"Hallo!" said Lacy. "What do you fellows want?"

"You offered to play the concertina for us once—"

"You want a tune?" asked Lacy, who was always looking out for a victim. "Certainly. What shall I play you? The overture to Tannhauser arranged for the concertina, or a little thing of my own?"

"Hold on!" exclaimed Tommy Dodd, for Lacy was already reaching for his instrument of torture. "I don't mean now, I'm thinking of giving a concert

Lacy grinned.

"Getting up a rival concert already?"

"That's it. Will you let me put your name down for a solo on the concertina?"

"Certainly. I'll give you as many as you like."

"Well, if you can manage half a dozen—"

"A dozen, if you like."

"Good! I say, we're getting up an orchestra to rival the Fistical Four's rotten show, and, of course, we rush to secure you first thing."

"Well, I think I may say that you don't often hear a chap play the concertina as I do," said Lacy modestly.

"I quite agree with you."

"Hear, hear!"

"We're giving it to-night, at seven sharp, in No. 7 Room," explained Tommy Dodd.

Lacy stared at the Modern chums.

"Why, they'll hear it in the next room!"

"Do you think so?"

"I'm certain of it. The partition is only lath and plaster. You know, when that ass, Talboys of the Fifth, is playing the piano in No. 8, it's as plain as anything in No. 7."

"Well, that can't be helped," said Tommy Dodd. "I dare say, if we play

orchestra," grinned Tommy Dodd. "I shall have my cornet, and you can have your trombone," he continued, addressing Tommy Doyle. "Tommy Cook can play the cello, and then there's the bugle we use on a paper-chase, and the castanets, too. Every little helps. We want two more instrumentalists. I say, old Towle!"

"Did you call me, Dodd?" said Towle, looking round.

"Yes. Come into my study."

"Right you are!"

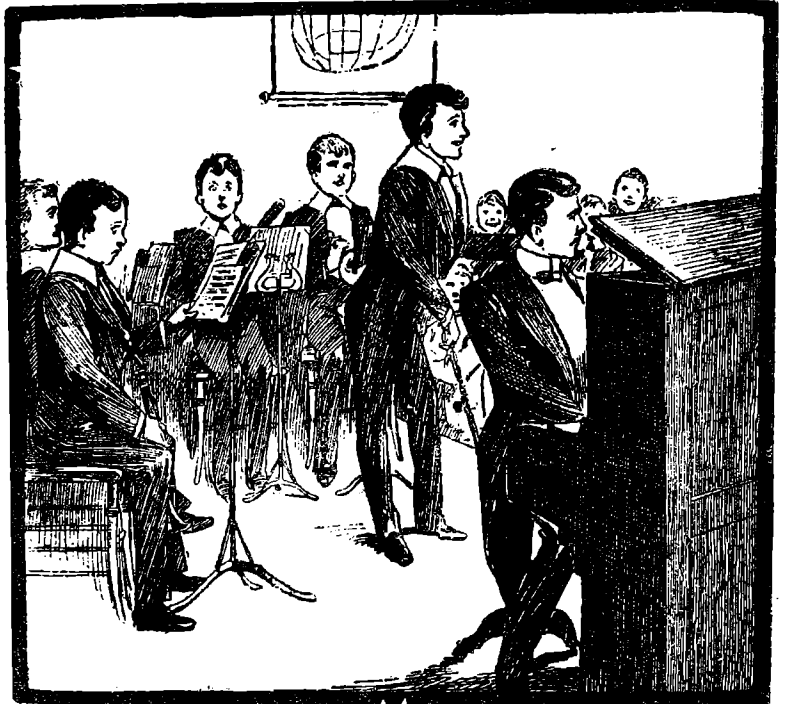
Towle looked at the Modern chums rather wonderingly as he followed them into their study.

Tommy Dodd took the castanets out of the drawer.

"Can you use these, kid?"

"Yes; but—"

"I'm giving an orchestral performance this evening, and I want you to play the castanets," explained Tommy Dodd. "Will you do it?"



"I am glad to see so distinguished a company gathered to listen to our modest efforts," said Jimmy Silver, gazing from the edge of the dais upon the crowded audience. "It is gratifying to me, as president of the 'Classical Musical Society.' The concert will now commence."

loud enough, their noise won't interfere with us."

"We may interfere with them."

"Of course, that's their look-out. We've got plenty to attend to, without attending to their business for them."

"Ha, ha! I suppose so. It's all right: I'll be there. We'd better lock the door before we start, though."

"I'll see to that. I can rely on you, then?"

"Yes, rather. They'll be sorry they left me out of the programme."

"Ha, ha! I think they will!"

And the Modern chums left the study eminently satisfied with themselves. They left Lacy practising on his German concertina; but whether he was playing the overture to Tannhauser arranged for that instrument, or a little thing of his own, it was impossible to tell by listening to it, and Tommy Dodd & Co. did not stay to listen, either.

"We've got to finish making up the

"But—but I've never—"

"That's all right. All you've got to do is to keep them going, and make as much row as possible."

"Oh, I don't mind doing that!"

"Good! Be in No. 7 Room at seven sharp, then. Mind, not a word to a soul—it's a dead secret!"

"Right you are, Duddy!"

"And pass the word to Webb to come here."

Towle nodded, and departed, and a few minutes later Webb came in. Webb had scented a feed, and looked disappointed when he saw the table bare of everything but musical instruments.

"Hallo!" said Webb. "I—I thought you wanted me."

"So we do," said Tommy Dodd blandly.

"What is it, then?" said Webb.

"This is how it is," said Tommy Dodd. THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 251.

"We're giving a concert this evening

"And you want me to take part?"

"Yes."

"Good!" said Webb. "I'm willing to do anything I can. I've never played any instrument, but I'm willing to try."

"Ha, ha! I want you to play this bugle."

"Blessed if I know how to, you know!"

"That's all right! It's going to be a classical concert, so it's not necessary to have any tune. You keep on blowing, that's all."

"But—but will that make any music?"

"It will make music enough for our purpose."

"Good! You can rely on me."

And Webb left the study looking decidedly pleased. The Modern chums grinned at one another.

"Now we'll look in on Leggett, and ask him to bring his mouth-organ!" grinned Tommy Dodd. "Then I fancy the Modern Musical Society will be complete."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Rival Orchestras.

"GENTLEMEN—"

"Hear, hear!"

"I am glad to see so distinguished a company gathered to listen to our modest efforts," said Jimmy Silver, gazing from the edge of the dais upon the crowded audience in Room No. 8. "It is very gratifying to me, as founder and president of the Classical Musical Society. I am glad to see practically the whole of the Fourth Form present."

"Hear, hear!"

"I am also gratified by the presence of many members of our respected Fifth Form," continued Jimmy Silver, with a bow towards the row of seats where sat Hanson of the Fifth and his friends. "I had hoped to see the Sixth, but the Sixth are rehearsing a mouldy old Latin comedy, and so I suppose they cannot come. The loss is theirs."

"Hear, hear!"

"I am glad, however, that our honoured captain has managed to look in on us this evening," said Jimmy. "I propose to commence the proceedings by three cheers for Bulkeley, the best cricketer that ever belonged to Rookwood!"

Bulkeley laughed and coloured. The audience cheered the captain, and cheered themselves into the best of tempers.

Jimmy Silver waited for silence.

"And now, gentlemen, the concert will commence. You have doubtless read the programme in the hall. You are acquainted with the members of the orchestra, and can rely upon them to turn out really good stuff in a first-class manner. The first item will be by the orchestra, the overture 'Up North.'"

And Jimmy Silver bowed, and retired. The room was crowded, and the

audience were quite eager. They were prepared to laugh at a failure, or to cheer a success with equal impartiality. The Fourth Form were almost all there, and many youngsters from the Remove and the Third.

There were a dozen of the Fifth, with condescending smiles; and Bulkeley of the Sixth, the big, good-natured captain of Rookwood. None of the masters had accepted the kind invitation posted up in the hall.

There was a squeak from the violin, a groan from the cornet, and a rattle from the piano. The orchestra was beginning.

Talboys of the Fifth was at the piano, in evening-dress, as befitted the occasion, with a nice rose in his coat, and his hair brushed back from his forehead, and an artistic little curl straying carelessly over his brow—a careless curl that had taken him half an hour to arrange.

"Here goes!" murmured Hooker.

"On the ball!"

"Play up, there!"

The orchestra played up. There was a burst of music, and a minute later there was a terrific roar in the air that drowned the efforts of the orchestra.

The audience started and stared.

The crash of unmusical discordance came through the thin partition from the next room, but it was as plainly audible as if it had been in that room.

The members of the orchestra looked at one another in amazement and dismay. Exclamations of amazement were heard on all sides mingled with laughter.

The instruments stopped one by one. Still, from the adjoining room the crash proceeded. The tones of a trombone, a cello, a cornet, a bass, a terrible concertina, and a mouth-organ were blended with the clacking of castanets and the stamping of feet.

Jimmy Silver jumped to his feet. He guessed now why the Modern chums were absent from the audience.

He strode furiously to the partition, and rapped on it with his knuckles. The audience, beginning to "tumble" to the little game, were going off into yells of laughter. But the members of the Classical Musical Society did not feel like laughing.

The rap of Jimmy Silver's knuckles on the wall was followed by the cessation of the pandemonium.

"Hallo!" called out the voice of Tommy Dodd. "Anything up?"

"Stop that row!"

"What row?"

"That fearful din you're making. We're giving a concert here."

"Rats! We're giving one here."

"You rotters!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"They're trying to bust our concert," said Raby.

"Rats!" called out Tommy Dodd through the partition. "We've got Mr. Manders' permission to give a concert in this room this evening. You can go and ask him. We are the Modern Musical Society, and this is our variety of music."

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

"We may not be quite in time and tune," went on Tommy Dodd. "That's because we haven't had time for rehearsals in the old tower."

The members of the Fistical Four stared at one another blankly.

"Then they knew!" muttered Lovell.

"I—I suppose so."

"Hold your row in there!" yelled Jimmy Silver.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We'll scrag you!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, come and play up!" said Jimmy Silver desperately.

The audience were in convulsions. The orchestra, though with great misgivings, recommenced the overture. Hardly had the music started than a crash of discordance came from the next room.

The noise of all the instruments playing continuously, without any regard to time or tune, of course drowned the sound of an orchestra playing in tune.

The discordance was horrible, and every fellow there who had a musical ear was stopping it.

"My hat!" gasped Hanson of the Fifth. "This is rather more than a joke. I don't want my eardrums busted! Come on, you chaps, somewhere where we can get a laugh in peace!"

And the Fifth-Formers, shrieking with merriment, rushed from the room.

The orchestra, though viewing with dismay the rapid melting of their audience, played on grimly. And still from the next room came groan and crash and grunt and shriek and crash and bang. It was impossible to distinguish anything that Jimmy Silver's band were playing.

Talboys jumped up from the piano before the overture was finished.

"Oh, hang!" he exclaimed. "This is what comes of playing for you kids! I'm off!"

"Hold on, Talboys! I say, old chap. I—"

"Oh, rats!" grunted Talboys. "I'm not staying here to be deafened. I'm off!"

The audience, shrieking with laughter, followed rapidly. Jimmy Silver was desperate. But a rapid examination of the door of No. 7 showed that it was locked, and that there was no way of getting at the rival orchestra.

And the Classical Musical Society, with glum countenances, turned out the light and vacated No. 8. The performance had been a ghastly frost, and the honours remained with the Modern chums. And when the rival orchestra learned, from the silence in No. 8, that they had conquered, they laid down their instruments, and rolled on the floor, and simply yelled.

It was long before Rookwood left off laughing over the story of the rival orchestras, though it was some time before the Fistical Four could join in the laugh. But the Classical Musical Society was reorganised, with the Modern chums as members, and after that Jimmy Silver considered they would go ahead. And they did.

THE END.

Another Magnificent Long Complete Tale of Jimmy Silver & Co. in next Friday's issue of the PENNY POPULAR, entitled

"THE RIVAL ESCORT!"

BY OWEN CONQUEST.

To avoid disappointment YOU must Order your copy of the PENNY POPULAR in advance.