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Mr. FIX-IT of the FOURTH

By REGINALD BROWNE

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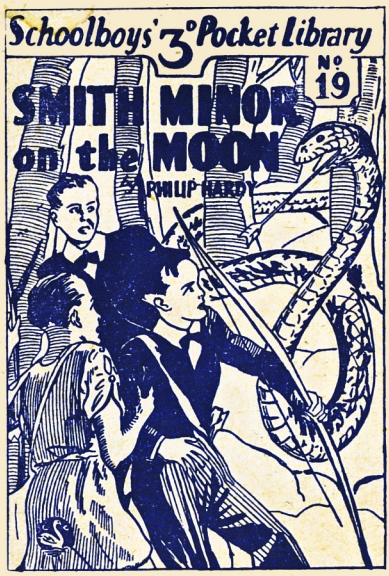

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MR. FIX-IT OF THE FOURTH

By Reginald Browne

CHAPTER I

SOMEWHAT MYSTERIOUS

DICK SYLVESTER, the popular skipper of the Fourth form at Whitelands, wore a puzzled frown as he picked up a neat white card which reposed in the centre of the table in Study Three. He and his chums had only just come down, and Dick was certain that the card had not been there the previous night.

"What on earth's this?" he asked, wonderingly.

Tim Charters and Will Osborne looked at the card, too, and were equally mystified. It was a plain card without any printing; but written in the centre of it, in pencilled capital letters, was the following legend:

"MR. FIX-IT"

"Somebody trying to be funny, I suppose," said Tim Charters, with a shrug. "'Mr. Fix-It'. What does it mean, anyhow? I don't get it."

A sound of clumping feet came from the passage, and the door burst open to admit Stan Goodman, of Study Four. Behind him were his grinning chums, Bob Davis and Charlie Hunt.

"Look what I've found on our study table," said Goodman, aggressively. "Some funny ass——Hullo! Have you chaps found a card, too?"

"Looks like it," said Dick. "What does yours say?"

"Nothing, except 'Mr. Fix-It,' in pencilled capitals," replied Goodman.

"Just the same as ours," said Dick.

"Jumping crackers!" ejaculated Goodman. "What's the idea? I can't see any sense in 'Mr. Fix-It.' If it's a joke, it's a pretty feeble one."

Within about ten minutes the surprised Fourth-formers discovered that every junior study in Mortimer's House had been honoured by the same mysterious card. Of course, there was a good deal of speculation as to what the cards could mean.

"If you'll take my advice, old chaps, you'll await developments," drawled Kenneth Pyne, the elegant aristocratic occupant of Study Eight. "What do you say, Sam?"

Sam Kennedy, his study mate, looked a bit confused.

"Oh, rather!" he said, hastily. "Wait and see what happens. Of course!"

Dick Sylvester gave him a hard look.

"Do you chaps know anything about these cards?" he asked.

"For the love of Jiminy Cricket!" said Kenneth Pyne, in surprise. "What should we know? Do you know anything, Sam? Of course you don't. Why should you? We've only to display a little patience, and our curiosity will be rewarded. Shine your lamp, Sam."

"Ass!" said Sam Kennedy, grinning.

During morning lessons there was more speculation as to the origin of the cards; at break there was a further development as Kenneth Pyne had foreseen. When the Fourth-formers came piling out of the class-room, and went out for a breather into the sunny quad, they found an extra large card on the doorstep of Mortimer's House. It said:

"MR. FIX-IT CAN FIX ANYTHING"

"Well I'm dashed!" said Stan Goodman, as he picked up the card. "How did this get on the doorstep? Who put it here? What does it mean?"

"It begins to look like an advertising stunt," said Dick Sylvester. "They've done the same kind of thing in London, on the hoardings. One day a mysterious word appears on half the hoardings in the suburbs; then, a week later, more mysterious words; and finally you find out that there's a new soup being put on the market—or a new razor blade, or something like that."

"Potty, if you ask me," said Stan Goodman, with a sniff.

"I disagree, old boy," said Kenneth Pyne. "It's a frightfully good way of whetting the public's imagination. What's the result when the soup appears in the shops? Everybody dashes in with handfuls of money, fighting to buy the stuff. We shall hear more about Mr. Fix-It, unless I'm vastly mistaken."

"You don't, by any chance, *know* anything about Mr. Fix-It?" asked Dick pointedly.

"Me? That is to say—I?" Kenneth Pyne laughed. "Old chap, what should I know?"

"I notice you don't give me a direct answer."

Pyne merely shrugged, chuckled and walked away. It was time to resume lessons; and during the rest of the morning the boys continued to wonder about the origin of the mysterious cards. When they were dismissed they crowded out, expecting to find further cards. They were disappointed.

However, within half an hour somebody found a card attached with a drawing pin to a tree in the quad; another card was found on the notice board in Mortimer's House; another on the big table in the common room. All these cards bore the same legend:

"MR. FIX-IT WILL SOON BE HERE."

"Whoever's doing this is one of us," said Stan Goodman, darkly. "Somebody in the Fourth. It *must* be somebody in the Fourth, or the cards couldn't have been distributed here at all. It's some silly jape—but I'm jiggered if I can see the point."

"I say!" said Bob Davis, with a start. "You don't suppose that the Greendale gang is behind this?"

"You mean Roddy Mitchell and his pals?" asked Goodman. "By crackers! It's a Greendale jape. We'd better rally the chaps and get ready for squalls."

When Dick Sylvester heard this theory he promptly threw cold water on it, however. As he pointed out, no boy belonging to Greendale School—the rival establishment on the other side of Greendale St. Mary—could possibly have entered Whitelands without being noticed.

"Yes; but they could have a spy here," argued Stan Goodman. "Perhaps they paid somebody to distribute the cards."

"A Fifth Columnist in Whitelands?" said Dick Sylvester, dubiously. "A dark and murky traitor who takes the enemy's money and does his dirty work? I don't believe it. Nobody in the Whitelands Fourth would sink so low as——"

"Oh, no?" snorted Goodman. "What about that young blighter, Wicks? He doesn't need to sink low. He's there already. He's so low that he could walk under a flat stone without stooping."

"Oh, chuck it, Goodman," protested the thin, weedy Enoch Wicks, who shared Study Two with Oswald Crocker. "That's not a nice thing to say about a chap."

"I didn't mean it to be nice," retorted Goodman, seizing Enoch by one of his bony arms. "I might have known you'd be hanging around, with your ears flapping. Come on—out with it. How much did Mitchell pay you to distribute those cards? You—you dirty little quisling!"

"I'm not a quisling" howled the unfortunate Enoch. "I don't know anything about the silly cards. That rotter, Mitchell, never even thought of me, and I'd have done it cheaper than anybody else—— I—I mean——"

"Oh, leave him alone, Goody," said Dick Sylvester. "Wicks doesn't know anything about the cards. He hasn't enough sense to distribute them as mysteriously as this. He'd have been spotted in two minutes."

They were interrupted by the dandified figure of Hugh Devereux, the cad of Study One, who appeared with his pal, Claude Hepworth. Devereux was holding another of the cards.

"Found this idiotic thing on my study table," he said, glaring round. "If you fatheads think it's funny——"

"What does the card say?" went up a yell.

"MR. FIX-IT WILL SOON BE HERE" RIGHT NOW'," replied Devereux, with a sneer. "Well, if he is, he'd better keep out of my way or I'll punch his nose. Like his nerve to shove one of his phoney cards in my study."

Before the bell rang for dinner, three similar cards had been discovered, and the interest in the Fourth was tremendously increased—particularly as the day was a half-holiday. Obviously, the practical joker, whoever he was, was planning to spring something during the afternoon. The conditions could not have been more ideal, for heavy rain had started, and looked like keeping on for the rest of the day. Any kind of outdoor sport, therefore, was knocked on the head.

Stan Goodman was about the only fellow who lost interest in the mysterious Mr. Fix-It—and that was because of a letter which came for him by the mid-day post. When he first saw it he was puzzled, for the handwriting was unfamiliar, appearing, also, to be that of a lady.

"Well, you never know," he said, hopefully, as he tore it open. "It feels pretty thick—— Oh, rats!"

The thickness was caused by two sheets of heavy notepaper—not by pound notes, as Goodman had hoped. The address at the top was "Ritz-Plaza Hotel, London," and this gave Goodman another surprise. Who the dickens could be writing to him from the Ritz-Plaza Hotel? He glanced at the signature, and blinked. "Aunt Edith."

"This is potty!" he said. "I haven't an Aunt Edith—— Or have I? Wait a minute! I'm just beginning to remember. Yes, of course, she's one of my mother's sisters—the one who married the orange-grower chap in South Africa. Well I'm jiggered. I don't even remember her. I haven't seen her since I was a baby. She went out to South Africa twelve or thirteen years ago."

"What's all the mystery about?" asked Charlie Hunt, impatiently. "It's as clear as daylight that she's visiting England, and naturally she's staying at a hotel. I expect she's coming down to see you—this letter is to give you a word of warning. She wants you to wash your neck——"

"You leave my neck alone!" snorted Goodman. "Aunt Edith, eh? The one who married the orange-grower chap."

"I hope she brings some samples," said Bob Davis.

"Ass!" said Goodman. "Come to think of it, though, it's a bit rummy, isn't it? For all I know, every time I eat a South African orange, it might have been grown on my aunt's plantation! Lemme see." He frowned ferociously, as an assistance to thought. "Aunt Edith has two kids, a little boy and a little girl——— For all I know, there may be three or four by this time."

"Why don't you read the letter?" suggested Charlie Hunt, sarcastically. "Perhaps she'll give you the news."

Stan Goodman started reading the letter, and his chums were soon aware of a strange change in his appearance. First of all he went very red, then he started breathing hard, after which he turned pale. Finally, he clutched at his untidy hair and a hollow groan escaped him.

"Bad news?" asked Hunt, sympathetically.

"The whole family dead, or something?" suggested Davis.

"Bad news," echoed Goodman, frantically. "It's terrible news. She's parking one of her kids on me for the week-end ——— Lemme see." He re-read frantically. "Yes, she has to go to Scotland on business, and can't leave the kid by itself——— It seems she's an old friend of Mrs. Mortimer, and Mrs. Mortimer is going to collect the brat, and she expects me—*me*—to give the kid a good time. Oh, my goodness!"

"I don't see the need for all this fuss," said Davis.

"Oh, don't you?" roared Goodman. "Listen to what she says—'I'm relying on you, Stanley, to give Georgie a good time.' That's what she says, in plain black and white."

"Is there anything wrong with that?"

Goodman went back to the previous page, and read it hurriedly and fearfully.

"Yes, here it is," he panted. "'You've never seen my little boy, have you, Stanley? He is a dear little curly-headed chap of five, with the most fascinating ways———' Oh, crackers! Can you imagine me going about the school, giving a good time to a curly-haired little chap of five with fascinating ways."

"Ha, ha, ha! What a sigh. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Poor old Stan."

"Nursemaid to Auntie's curly-headed Georgie."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's nothing to laugh at, you—you grinning Cheshire cats!" howled the unfortunate Goodman. "What am I going to do about it? I'll have to put her off somehow. I'm not going to go tagging about the school with a kid of five sticking its grubby hand in mine. There's aunts for you," he added, bitterly. "They go off to Scotland, and leave their kids parked on a chap without a word of warning. I haven't seen her since I was a baby in swaddling clothes, and instead of sending me a nice crisp fiver, which I could do with, she sends me her five-year-old Georgie."

"Hard lines, Stan."

"Tough luck, old man."

"It's no good standing there and saying 'hard lines' and 'tough luck,' you cackling fatheads," snorted Goodman, desperately. "Haven't you any suggestions to make? What are we going to do about it?"

"Dash it! There's only one thing you *can* do," said Davis. "Mrs. Mortimer is bringing the kid down; you'll have to put up with it. I say! Where's this Georgie pest going to park for the week-end? Your aunt's not proposing that he should sleep with you, or anything?"

"What!" gasped Charlie Hunt. "I say! That's too thick! We're not going to have any howling kid of five in the dormitory. You can tell your silly aunt——"

At this interesting point in the discussion a head was poked in the doorway of Study Four.

"Get out!" said three aggressive voices.

"Half a minute," said the head, "I'm not even in——"

"Get out, all the same!" roared Goodman. "We're not going to be interrupted by you, Wicks——"

"I—I've come to tell you something interesting," gasped the sneak of the Fourth, as he held himself ready to back out. "It's about Mr. Fix-It."

"Blow Mr. Fix-It," said Goodman. "Dash Mr. Fix-It! I've enough troubles of my own. Scram!"

"Oh, all right, if that's the way you feel," said Enoch Wicks, disappointed, "I thought you'd like to know that Mr. Fix-It is simply a stunt of Pyne's. He's fixed a whacking notice on his study door, and half the Fourth is yelling off its head."

"What?" said Goodman, forgetting his worries.

"It's a fact. I didn't see you about, Goody, and as you're a pal of mine——"

"As I'm a what? A *pal*, did you say?"

"Well—you know—I thought you might like to know—I always like doing good turns," said Enoch, virtuously. "Naturally, I expect chaps to do me good turns, too. I say, Goody, I—I wonder if you could lend me two bob——"

Whizz!

A book, the first thing which Goodman could find, hurtled through the air and missed Wick's head by about two inches. With a yell of disappointment and rage, Enoch fled. The chums of Study Four gazed at one another.

"Let's go along to Study Eight, and see what this is about," said Stan Goodman, firmly. "Some of Pyne's rot, eh? We'll soon settle *his* hash!"

CHAPTER II

SOMETHING LIKE AN IDEA

WHEN THEY REACHED Study Eight they found a crowd of fellows milling round the doorway. There was a good deal of laughter, and many expressions of scorn. The study door was closed, and a large piece of cardboard was attached to it by four drawing-pins. Stanley Horatio Goodman bored his way through the crowd like a human tank.

"What's all this drivel?" he asked, sourly.

"If you want to meet Mr. Fix-It, go inside," grinned Dick Sylvester. "I had an idea, all along, that Pyne was at the bottom of the mystery. Well, that stunt of his—distributing cards all over the place—certainly aroused a good deal of public interest."

"Rats!" said Tim Charters. "If it hadn't been a wet afternoon there wouldn't have been a soul here."

"Something," admitted Dick, "in that."

Stan Goodman was reading the notice, and the expression on his face denoted disappointment, chagrin and envy. The thought which was crossing his mind was—why hadn't *he* thought of a brainy wheeze like this? It was just like that languid chump, Kenneth Pyne, to spring a stunt like this. The notice was very neatly done in bold Indian ink:

"THE FIX-IT HELP-ALL AGENCY, INC.

"ARE YOU IN ANY DIFFICULTY? HAVE YOU ANY TROUBLES WHICH YOU CANNOT SOLVE? DO YOU NEED ADVICE? WE CAN FIX ANYTHING FROM A TOOTHACHE TO A GATING. NO COMMISSION TOO SMALL. NO TASK TOO GREAT. BRING US YOUR TROUBLES AND WE WILL FIX THEM. TERMS TO SUIT ALL POCKETS. APPLY WITHIN.

KENNETH PYNE, PRES."

"If Pyne thinks this is funny, he's off the rails," snorted Stan Goodman. "What the dickens can he fix, anyhow? He's too lazy to write his own lines, even."

"Shall we go in and have a basinful?" suggested Bob Davis.

"Yes, by crackers— Wait a minute, though." Goodman suddenly remembered his own troubles. "Why should we waste our time with this chump? Now, if *I* had thought of this wheeze there might have been something in it. I'm good at fixing things. Pyne, though?"

His chums allowed him to have his delusions. The subject was not worth an argument. As Davis and Hunt knew well enough, Stan Goodman was an expert at breaking things, or mucking up things, and getting things mixed. As a fixer, he was about as useful as a duck.

Much to the disappointment of Davis and Hunt, Goodman took them back to Study Four. Dick Sylvester, meanwhile, tapped on the door of Study Eight and entered, accompanied by Charters and Osborne. Incidentally, they entered very cautiously, in case there was some insidious booby-trap in operation. Kenneth Pyne had a weird sense of humour, and perhaps this whole "Fix-It" business was a cloak for an elaborate jape.

It wasn't, though. The door opened freely and easily. There sat Kenneth Pyne behind his table, with Sam Kennedy looking very businesslike at a side table, in front of a small typewriter.

"Ah!" said Pyne, briskly. "Clients."

"You hope!" grinned Dick Sylvester. "All very impressive, Pyne, my lad, but how do you think you're going to get any customers?"

Kenneth Pyne carefully unscrewed the cap of his fountain pen, and drew his spotless blotter a trifle nearer. He gave his visitors a hard look, then screwed on the cap of his fountain pen again.

"Am I to understand, gentlemen, that you are *not* seeking the advice of this agency?" he asked.

"Who's he talking to?" asked Bill Osborne, in surprise, as he looked behind him. "I can't see any gentlemen."

"*You* wouldn't," said Pyne. "We'll let it pass, however."

"This rot isn't serious, is it?" asked Dick.

"It grieves me to note the scepticism in your voice, old boy," said Kenneth Pyne, pained. "Please let me point out that this agency is a go-getting, up-to-the-minute concern. No catches. No strings. If you are here on business, kindly take a seat. If you're only here out of curiosity, kindly scram."

"At least, give us an idea of this go-getting concern," said Dick Sylvester, trying to keep his face straight. "The notice outside the door isn't very informative. We've come in for fuller particulars. What, exactly, is the big idea?"

Kenneth Pyne sighed.

"I thought I made the notice clear to the meanest intelligence," he drawled. "This agency, dear chaps, is expressly organised for the benefit of the Fourth. At one time or another, everybody has trouble. We're here to assist you in those troubles. Say, for example, that Ma Biggin, of the tuck-shop, is dunning you for payment of last week's bill, and you have not the wherewithall to silence her. You have, however, a small sum—say, half-a-crown. Pay us the half-crown, and we will undertake to interview Ma Biggin and secure an extension of credit."

"The way you say it, it sounds possible," admitted Dick.

"The Fix-It Agency is ready to take on jobs," continued Kenneth Pyne, waxing enthusiastic. "Don't hesitate to trot out your troubles. Our impositions are particularly good."

"Your what?"

"The fees are quite moderate," continued Pyne smoothly. "Sixpence per hundred lines. If, however, an exact facsimile of the client's own handwriting is required, the price is double. We have experts on our staff——"

"Fathead!" interrupted Will Osborne. "The only staff you employ is that ass, Kennedy."

"In any case, it's an old idea, getting somebody else to write your impots," commented Dick Sylvester. "You might get away with it if the impot was given by a prefect like Lestrange, but old Mickey Mouse is hot stuff."

"If you are referring to Mr. Alexander Mickie, our respected Form master, allow me to point out that Mickey Mouse is pie," said Mr. Fix-It, scornfully. "Goodness knows I've done enough lines for him, the old So-and-So. Ahem. What I mean to say is, gentlemen, Mickie invariably gives the impot one swift and casual once-over, and tosses it into the wastepaper basket. We guarantee to satisfy him with lines at sixpence per hundred."

"Supposing he twigs?" asked Osborne.

"That, of course, is the risk which the client must take," admitted Pyne. "However, it is a very small risk, and need not bother you. Mr. Mortimer is a different proposition. We advise our special facsimile lines in his case. One shilling per hundred and guaranteed to get across. Can we interest you in anything?"

"Sorry, old son, but we haven't any impots to do at the moment," grinned the junior skipper.

"Well, when you have—we're always here," said Pyne. "Surely you have other troubles? Think! Any little thing that's bothering you. Trot it out and let the Fix-It Agency deal with it. Fees payable in advance."

"In other words, Pyne, you're broke to the wide, and this is just a little wheeze to rake in some cash?" suggested Dick. "Well, I wish you luck—but you're not getting any cash out of me. I'm broke to the wide, too."

"In that case, you howling ass, you're simply wasting my time," said Pyne, indignantly. "It's a fact," he added, with a sigh. "I regret to say that the cupboard is bare. For the first time this term I'm clean as the driven snow. There's no earthly prospect of raising the wind this week-end, so I thought this stunt might help."

"Well, give it time," said Dick.

"I shan't meet with much success if curiosity-mongers like you chaps clutter up my office all the afternoon," said Mr. Fix-It, severely. "You come here with empty pockets, wasting my time—to say nothing of the time of my confidential secretary."

"Your what?" asked Will Osborne.

"Sam," explained Pyne, briefly.

"I told him it would be a wash-out," commented the confidential secretary, with a sniff. "Why all this tomfoolery? Far better to go to a chap and say—'can I touch you for a quid until the end of next week?'"

"It's not a bad idea, if it'll work," grinned Will Osborne. "Look here, Dick's broke—but I'm not. If ten bob is any use to you, Pyne——"

"I'm gratified in the extreme," interrupted the Pres. with dignity. "It is, however, a principle of mine never to borrow money—as I have pointed out to Sam on many occasions. If we can't earn any money, we go broke."

Dick Sylvester grinned.

"It really seems to me, Pyne, old son, that it's a case of the physician curing his own ills," he said.

"It's a case of what?" asked Pyne, staring.

"I mean, this Fix-It Agency," explained Dick. "The agency itself seems to be in the worst fix of all. Why can't you apply your methods to your own troubles?"

Kenneth Pyne looked pained.

"If you can't offer any better suggestion than that, kindly disappear," he said. "How the dickens can we offer to pay ourselves for fixing our own troubles when we haven't any money? No, we want some real clients—some chaps who want to be helped out of a fix, and are willing to pay for it. Can't you suggest anybody? Our service is swift and efficient."

By this time the door had opened and the doorway was crowded with other Fourth-formers, all of whom were grinning, and who seemed to think that the affair was some kind of a joke.

"Can't I interest you blokes in the Fix-It Agency?" went on Kenneth Pyne, waving Tim Charters aside so that he had a better view of the doorway. "What about that uncle that hasn't come across with a tip for the last three terms? Give us his name and address, and we'll guarantee to write him a letter that will re-establish amicable relations and renew the flow of tips."

"How much?" asked half a dozen chuckling voices.

"Half a crown for short letters and five bob for long letters," replied Pyne, promptly.

"What's the uncle going to say when he gets a letter written in a completely strange handwriting?" asked Hal Robinson. "There's my Uncle Joshua. He's a hard nut, if you like. Hasn't sent me a bean since I was twelve."

"Kindly stand aside, you blighters, and allow Mr. Robinson to enter," said Mr. Fix-It, crisply. "Mr. Robinson, take a seat. About this Uncle Joshua——"

"Don't be an ass, Pyne—it's a wash-out," said Robinson, grinning. "You couldn't shift Uncle Joshua with a blast of dynamite."

"Our Extra Special Letters—price seven-and-six—are concentrated T.N.T.," interrupted Pyne, smoothly. "All you have to do, Mr. Robinson, is to whack out your money on the nail. I'll tell you what I'll do," added the President, generously. "As this is a new organisation, I'll give you a special cut-rate of five bob."

"You blithering idiot, my Uncle Joshua would know the letter wasn't from me," interrupted Robinson. "He knows my handwriting."

"So what?" said Pyne. "Naturally, the letter will be written by you."

"You just said that you'd write it!"

"My poor simpleton, the Fix-It Agency will *compose* the letter—a humdinging snorter, certified to get results," explained Kenneth Pyne. "You, of course, will make a copy of our composition in your own handwriting, bung it into the post, and await results."

"I hadn't thought of that," admitted Hal Robinson. "Thanks all the same, but I'd rather be excused. It's too much of a gamble. I pay seven-and six and await results? Supposing there aren't any results? Where am I?"

"Seven-and-six shy," said Pat Warren, chuckling.

"Wait a minute!" said Pyne hastily. "The Fix-It Agency has more faith in its service than that! If the letter fails to get results your money is returned."

"Why not work on a commission basis?" suggested Robinson. "You supply the letter for nothing, and if it works the oracle, I whack out ten per cent. of the tip. That sounds reasonable enough, doesn't it?"

Mr. Fix-It breathed hard.

"It may be reasonable enough, but what's the good of that to me?" he demanded, thickly. "Can't you understand, you chump, that I'm trying to raise the wind this afternoon? Ahem! I—I—mean—— Let us not get personal, gentlemen! If there are any other customers, kindly step forward! I would recommend our Nose-Punching Service. Very special. Only half a crown a punch, and satisfaction guaranteed."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"No, really! I'm not kidding!" said Pyne, earnestly. "Some of you chaps are at loggerheads with other chaps. That's natural enough in a big school like Whitelands. For weeks you have been longing to punch the nose of some blighter, and you're afraid that if you do this, the blighter will punch you back. For half a crown we will punch any nose within half an hour of receiving the fee."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Here's my half-crown," said Tom Pettitt, of Study Eleven, as he pushed forward and whacked a coin on the table. "That's a deal, Pyne. I'm your first customer."

"The nose?" asked Pyne, unscrewing his fountain pen, and preparing to make a note.

"Carstairs!"

"You want me to punch Carstairs' nose?" asked Pyne, slowly replacing his fountain pen cap.

"You've just guaranteed to do so."

"The Fix-It Agency cannot accept this commission," said Pyne, reluctantly pushing the half-crown away from him. "Why,

you silly ass," he burst out, "Carstairs is a prefect."

"I know that," said Tom Pettitt. "I've been longing to punch Carstairs' nose for weeks. You didn't say anything about whose noses were eligible or ineligible."

"Obviously, I was talking about Fourth-form noses!" said Pyne, severely. "Dash it, can't I interest you in anything, you crowd of grinning apes?" He swallowed hard. "Our Bicycle Cleaning Service is available," he added, in a sad voice. "Sixpence a bicycle . . ."

He paused and looked round. There were no takers. It had caused him a great effort to come down to this humble and menial branch of the Fix-It Agency's activities, but things were getting desperate. Nobody appeared to be interested in the higher branches of the agency's programme.

"Why should we pay you sixpence a bike?" asked Tim Charters. "We can get any of the fags to clean our bikes for threepence."

"Admitted," said Kenneth Pyne, promptly. "How do the fags clean your bikes, though? In nine cases out of ten they look worse for the cleaning—all smudgy and smeary, with black grease from the chain spread all over the handlebars. We clean bicycles as they should be cleaned—if you want adjustments made to the brakes, wheels or chain, an additional sixpence will be a good investment."

There was a dead silence.

"How about our Study Cleaning Service?" suggested Mr. Fix-It, frantically. "Isn't anybody interested? One shilling for an ordinary cleaning—half a crown for a spring cleaning. Studies like new again!"

He sighed. Apparently, the Fourth-formers were quite content to grub about in their studies, surrounded by masses of litter and dirt. It was scarcely a good advertisement for the Fix-It Agency that Study Eight itself was at the moment in a condition of appalling muddle, with layers of dust everywhere.

The crowd, having had its amusement, lost interest in the proceedings and began drifting away. Apparently, the Fix-It Help-All Agency, Inc. was a complete and ghastly flop.

CHAPTER III

A JOB FOR MR. FIX-IT!

IN STUDY FOUR, Stanley Horatio Goodman was sprawling in his chair, worried and jumpy.

"I tell you, you asses, something has to be done—and quickly," he was saying, almost in panic. "I didn't realise it at first, but its too late for me to write to Aunt Edith, or even 'phone her at the Carlton-Plaza Hotel, or the Ritz-Rex, or whatever the dashed place is called. This blighting kid is coming down to-day! At this very moment little Georgie is on his way. I tell you, it's awful."

"Just like a chap's aunt," commented Bob Davis, with a sniff. "She doesn't give him a chance to have any come back. Why couldn't she have written two or three days ago?"

"Because she jolly well knew that I'd turn the proposition down flat," retorted Goodman. "It seems that Mrs. Mortimer has been in London for a day or two, and she's motoring back to Whitelands to-day. She's bringing my darling little Cousin Georgie with her—and I'm supposed to be *pleased!*"

"Well, you don't know the kid, and the kid doesn't know you," said Charlie Hunt, consolingly. "I don't expect the ordeal will be half as bad as you imagine. Georgie will give you one swift once-over and that'll be that!"

"What do you mean—that'll be that?" asked Goodman.

"Well, one look . . . After all, you can't force the kid to like you," explained Hunt. "It's my guess that it'll take one look at your face and bunk. You won't see it again all the time it's here."

Stan Goodman rose to his feet.

"If you're suggesting, you silly chump, that my face is going to scare a kid of five——"

"Here, hold on!" gasped Hunt. "I was only trying to console you! You don't want the kid messing around you, do you? Well, I thought——"

"H'm! Might be a good idea for me to make faces at it," said Goodman, thoughtfully.

"That won't be necessary," murmured Davis. "Just look natural."

"Eh? What's that you're mumbling about?" said Goodman, frowning. "Yes—make faces at it as soon as ever we meet. Then it won't bother me." He broke off and sighed. "I can't very well do that, though," he added. "The kid won't be alone. He'll be holding Mrs. Mortimer's hand, I expect, and I can't make faces in front of Mrs. Mortimer. Oh, crumbs! She'll expect me to be particularly nice to the brat!"

He paced up and down, more worried than ever.

"Haven't you chaps any good ideas?" he went on, aggressively. "What am I going to do? Can you picture me trailing all round the school with a grubby-fingered

infant of five tagging on to me? The chaps will chip me to death. I can hear 'em now—'Look, here's Goody and his Cousin Georgie.' I shall be the laughing stock of Whitelands for the rest of the term."

"If you ask me, you're making a lot of fuss over nothing," said Charlie Hunt, with a sniff. "Your aunt isn't parking the kid on *you*. It's impossible for a little boy of five to be pushed into the Fourth, even for a week-end visit. The infant will naturally park with Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer."

"I know that."

"Then why all the racket?" asked Hunt. "You'll only see Georgie for a few minutes now and again."

"That's what you think!" said Goodman, picking up his aunt's letter again and hastily scanning it. "Listen to this bit: 'Although you have never seen the child, and you will both be complete strangers, I am relying upon you to be everything a good cousin should be. I am quite sure, my dear Stanley, that you will be very proud of Georgie, and I know you will drop all your other schoolboy occupations during the time of Georgie's visit and devote yourself entirely to giving the child a really good time.' Well, what do you think of that?"

"It's pretty hot," admitted Davis.

"Hot!" echoed Goodman, with a groan. "It's mustard! If I don't 'devote myself entirely' to the kid, as my aunt expects, she'll get to know all about it and zing goes my chance of any fat tip from the old dear. It's blackmail—that's what it is," he added, indignantly. "I just have to footle around with little Georgie—or else!"

"Hard lines, Stan," said Charlie Hunt. "I hadn't realised that it was as bad as all this. If your aunt really expects you to do as she says in her letter, she's probably talked it over with Mrs. Mortimer—and if you don't come across like a 'good cousin,' Mrs. Mortimer will report to your aunt when she takes the kid back, and the fat will be in the fire. No, old son, you're for it. You'll have to spend most of your time with the kid as soon as it arrives."

Stan Goodman groaned.

"I'm no good with kids," he said, unhappily. "I never know what to say to 'em. I can argue with you chaps, and punch you in the face, and everything's all right."

"Is it?" said Davis, rubbing a tender chin.

"*How* can I argue with a kid of five?" went on Goodman. "How can I slosh it if it gets cheeky? My own cousin, too. Thank goodness, I haven't had much to do with infants of that age, but every time I'm left alone with a kid of five, I'm all jittery. Cousin Georgie is going to be here for the whole week-end. Not just an hour or two, for a visit."

He shut his eyes and groaned again. He could just picture himself going about the school with Cousin Georgie trailing along. Goodman was a big, burly youth, and the rest of the Fourth-formers would not fail to seize this opportunity to chip him unmercifully, and take a rise out of him.

"What—what was that?" he gasped, jumping up suddenly. "Oh, my hat! I thought I heard a car!" He looked briefly at his watch. "I say, they might be here any minute, you know."

"Hadn't you better go upstairs and get yourself cleaned up?" suggested Davis. "That collar of yours isn't particularly white, you know. Those ink smudges——"

"Why did my aunt leave things until the last minute like this?" demanded Goodman aggressively. "Not that it would have made any difference," he added, gloomily. "Even if she had given me plenty of time, I couldn't turn the kid down without offending her. It's a mess, which ever way you look at it. I—I say!" An expression of horror overspread his features. "You don't suppose this blinking infant will want to *kiss me*?"

Bob Davis inspected Goodman's face, and shook his head.

"Not unless the kid's half blind," he remarked.

"That's a relief, anyhow," said Goodman, who was far too worried to notice the insult. "Of course, though, you may be wrong. I have to be ready in case such a thing *does* look like happening. Imagine the infant kissing me in front of half the Fourth! Why, I'd never live it down! I tell you, the more I look at this foul situation, the worse it gets. If only you chaps would come across with some sort of suggestion, it might be different, but no—you're washouts; both of you. Not an idea of any kind. You might just as well have cottonwool instead of brains."

"Is that so?" said Bob Davis, nettling. "I haven't noticed a string of good ideas coming from your own piece of ivory! It's your problem, isn't it? Why don't you solve it yourself—or give it to the Fix-It Agency!"

He had meant the latter remark to be deeply sarcastic, but the next moment he was looking excited.

"I say, Stan!" he went on, breathless. "That's it!"

"Eh? What's it?"

"It's the idea—the great brainwave!" said Davis, more excited than ever. "Pyne. Pyne and his fatheaded Fix-It Agency. He

says he'll undertake any job, doesn't he? No fee too small—no task too great. Here's a commission that'll test him beautifully."

"You're crazy," said Goodman, impatiently. "What the dickens can that ass Pyne do? That Fix-It Agency of his is only a fool stunt."

"Very likely; but, after all, Pyne is pretty deep behind his languid rot, and he might be able to make a suggestion," urged Davis. "Anyhow, it wouldn't do any harm to try, would it?"

"Pyne wants paying for his silly ideas, though!"

"All right—*pay*," said Davis. "If the idea's a good one, it's worth money." He regarded Goodman critically. "Dash it! You don't seem very enthusiastic. Here I come out with a marvellous suggestion, and all you can do is to stand there looking like a boiled owl. What's the good of this Fix-It Agency if it can't fix a problem like a five-year-old cousin?"

"Besides, it'll put Pyne on the spot," grinned Charlie Hunt, with relish. "If he doesn't whack out a brainy suggestion, we shall have him where we want him. We shall call his bluff. Why not try it, Stan?"

Stan Goodman grunted.

"Well, it won't do any harm, I suppose," he growled. "I don't mind trying anything once. I'm warning you, though—Pyne will do nothing except make some potty wisecrack."

They went along to Study Eight, and found that the crowd outside the door of the celebrated Fix-It Help-All Agency, Inc., had dwindled to Enoch Wicks of the Fourth, Sammy Holt and Bobby Cole, of the Third. The rest of the Remove had lost interest. However, quite a few fellows who happened to be in the passage and the hall, came drifting towards Study Eight when they heard Goodman's loud voice making sarcastic remarks about the Fix-It Agency.

"Cheese it, Stan," protested Hunt. "Give Pyne a chance. I say, Pyne! Goody has a knotty problem, and he wants you to solve it."

"Step right forward, Mr. Goodman," said Kenneth Pyne, in his most businesslike manner. "A knotty problem, eh? That's right up my street. The Fix-It Agency fixes anything. Kindly take a seat, and state your case."

"I'm not taking any seat," snorted Goodman. "I can tell you the trouble in two minutes, too. I don't believe you can do anything to help me, but I'm willing to give you a trial. Still, if this Fix-It Agency is a spoof . . ."

"My dear sir, it is far from being a spoof," interrupted Kenneth Pyne, urgently. "Kindly trot out the problem."

"Well, isn't somebody going to shut the door?" demanded Goodman. "Do you always do business with a mob of rubbernecks hanging about in the doorway? This affair of mine is private."

"Good!" said Pyne. "Privacy guaranteed. Staff, shut the door."

"What's the good of shutting the door, ass?" demanded the staff—otherwise Sam Kennedy. "Do you suppose that Goodman's voice won't go through the door?"

"Something in that," admitted Pyne.

"Stop this rot, Stan, and tell Pyne what you want him to do," urged Charlie Hunt. "What does it matter if the chaps do hear? Georgie will be here pretty soon, and you haven't much time to waste—everybody will know about the little blighter as soon as he gets here, so why all this rot about privacy? Why don't you get down to brass tacks?"

"H'm! Might as well, I suppose," said Stan Goodman, giving the grinning onlookers a cold stare. "Imagine the curiosity of these snoopers. Well, the fact is, Pyne, I thought you might be able to make a useful suggestion. A pretty forlorn hope, I know, but I'm in a mess."

"Trouble with your Form Master?" inquired Pyne, solicitously.

"Old Mickie? No, of course not," said Goodman. "Mrs. Mortimer is motoring down from London, and she's bringing one of my aunt's brats with her—a foul little worm named Georgie, aged five. I've never seen the kid, even, because my aunt lives in South Africa. She's in England on a visit, and has gone footling off to Scotland on business. She's parked the kid on Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer for the week-end."

"Let me get this straight," said Kenneth Pyne, with interest. "I don't see what you're boiled up about. If Mrs. Mortimer is going to look after the child——"

"You silly ass, my aunt expects me to be nurse to the little horror," roared Goodman. "If I don't do it, I shall be in dutch with her, and lose a nice fat tip. Can you picture me hobnobbing with a sticky infant of five? Listen, Pyne—I'm no good with kids. I don't know how to treat 'em. If you can make a suggestion—— Can't you cackling idiots keep quiet?", he snorted, turning on the eavesdroppers, who seemed to think the thing a huge joke. "Clear off, all of you."

"Not likely!" grinned Hal Robinson. "We want to hear what Mr. Fix-It is going to do!"

"Come on, Mr. Fix-It—here's your chance!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Kenneth Pyne ignored the hilarity, and tried to look businesslike and dignified. He questioned Goodman closely, and obtained

further details. Goodman had brought his aunt's letter with him, and he showed Pyne parts of it.

"This," said Mr. Fix-It, "is beginning to get interesting," as he sat back in his chair and clasped his hands together—rather like a stage detective. "A singular problem, my dear sir. Bring my violin—— No, I mean, we must don our thinking caps," he added hastily. "It ought not to be difficult to help you, Mr. Goodman—for a consideration."

"What do you call a consideration?" asked Goodman suspiciously.

"The facts, as I see them, are these," continued Mr. Fix-It, ignoring the mundane interruption. "Little Georgie, a child of five, is about to descend upon Whitelands. He is your cousin, and he has been lucky enough to miss you in all his short life——"

"What do you mean—lucky enough?"

"He is, in short, a complete stranger to you?"

"Yes."

"You are a complete stranger to him?"

"Naturally, fathead!"

"I mean, you haven't, in a rash moment, sent this aunt of yours in South Africa a snapshot of yourself—a snapshot which this innocent child might have gazed upon in an unwary moment?" continued Kenneth Pyne. "I tremble to think of the effect such a snapshot would have on a pure young mind——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look here, you funny ass, are you going to help me or not?" roared Goodman. "I didn't come here to have you making cracks about my face. No, I haven't sent any snapshots to South Africa. I hardly know anything about Aunt Edith and her children. She married an orange grower umpteen years ago, and she's been out there ever since. This is her first visit to England since the kids arrived. Is that clear?"

"Clear enough," said Pyne briskly. "Allow me to inform you, Mr. Goodman, that your problem is as good as settled. The Fix-It Help-All Agency, Inc., is at your service, and will deal with this matter efficiently and smoothly."

"Oh yeah?" said Goodman sceptically. "It's all very well to talk about settling my problem—but what about a brainy idea? I haven't noticed anything particularly bright yet."

"Then put on your smoked glasses, because you're going to be dazzled," retorted Pyne. "What you want me to do, in a nutshell, is to relieve you of all embarrassment with regard to your cousin Georgie?"

"Yes, that's about it."

"It is your desire to have nothing to do with this infant?"

"Exactly."

"Then the Fix-It Agency will take the infant off your hands," said Pyne smoothly. "It is all perfectly simple. The Agency will undertake to provide a substitute. In a word, the child will be amused by a deputy Cousin Stanley."

"Talk sense, for goodness' sake!" sniffed Goodman. "Are you suggesting that you're going to get somebody to impersonate me?"

"That, of course, would be impossible," replied Pyne promptly. "Hardly fair to the child, either. No, since Georgie has never seen you, and doesn't know what you look like, anybody of approximately the right age can take on the job. I propose to take it on myself. I will be Cousin Stanley for the week-end. We will now discuss terms," continued Pyne crisply. "I propose the sum of one pound, cash down, for this exclusive service—with an additional ten shillings expense money, for laying out on ice creams, toffee apples, chocolate, and similar delights which are dear to the hearts of five-year-old boys."

Stan Goodman was looking dazed.

"Did you say—a quid?" he asked thickly.

"Cheap at the price, Mr. Goodman."

"Cheap, my foot!" roared Goodman. "It's a swindle! Not that the idea's any good, anyhow. In fact, it's potty. How the dickens can you bring off a wheeze like that?"

"How I bring it off is neither here nor there," said Pyne coldly. "I am undertaking to do so. That is the problem of the Fix-It Agency. For the love of Jiminy Cricket, don't you think it's worth a quid to take this kid off your hands—to suffer all the sticky kisses and burbling infantile talk?"

Stan Goodman shivered.

"Perhaps you're right, at that," he muttered. "Sticky kisses, eh? Oh, my goodness! If you're serious, Pyne, it's a go. If you can spoof the kid, it's all right with me. I don't see how you can do it——"

"For my part, I don't see how it can fail," interrupted Pyne. "The child arrives—I go up to him and say I am his cousin Stanley. Why should he question my statement? Naturally, he will accept me without a murmur. In the meantime, you will keep as far out of the way as possible."

"If the kid accepts you as his cousin, there'll be no need for me to keep out of the way," said Goodman, with relief. "It's a deal, Pyne. The kid's yours."

"The fee?" suggested Pyne diffidently.

"Well, I'm afraid there's going to be a bit of trouble about the fee," confessed Goodman. "I'm not too flush at the moment." He fished in his pocket. "I've three-and-fourpence ha'penny as a first instalment. You'll have to wait— What's the matter?"

He did not like the cold look in Mr. Fix-It's eye.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Goodman," said Pyne politely. "Kindly close the door after you have cleared out. I need hardly say that the deal is off."

"Off! What the dickens——"

"This agency is run on a strictly cash principle," continued Mr. Fix-It. "If clients are unable to supply the cash in advance—no can do! Dash it, the whole idea of the thing is to raise the wind—I—I mean— Can't you rake up thirty bob somehow? It's not much——"

"It doesn't sound much if you say it quickly," agreed Goodman. "Supposing I pay you half-a-crown a week——"

"Supposing you stop talking rot?" interrupted Kenneth Pyne tartly. "Listen, Goody. This is an emergency. You're in a mess, and you want to get out of that mess. Haven't you any friends? Can't you borrow a miserable sum like thirty bob? I don't approve of borrowing, but I don't object to other chaps doing it——" He sighed. "No, I'm afraid you haven't many friends."

He had not failed to observe the sudden dwindling of juniors from the doorway. Stan Goodman looked round in a startled fashion, and caught hold of Hal Robinson and Pat Warren as they were tip-toeing away.

"You rotters!" snorted Goodman. "If you've any money, hand it over."

"I've only three bob," said Warren hurriedly. "I want to save that—— I don't know, though," he added, with a grin. "It might be a good investment. It'll be worth three bob to see Pyne getting himself into a tangle."

"You?" demanded Goodman, looking at Robinson.

"I can manage five bob——"

"There you are—that's eight bob already!" said Goodman, turning eagerly to Pyne. "Give me ten minutes, and I'll have your blinking thirty bob."

"Nice work!" said Mr. Fix-It briskly. "Ten minutes, then. We can be making preliminary arrangements——"

"Think again!" interrupted Bob Davis. "Haven't you all forgotten something? You're crazy—all of you. Mr. Fix-It is particularly crazy. What about old Mortimer? This Georgie kid will probably accept Pyne as its cousin, but what about Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer? They know you're not its cousin, Pyne!"

"I knew there'd be a catch!" groaned Goodman.

"You'll pardon me!" said Kenneth Pyne tartly. "There's no catch. As for you, Davis, kindly mind your own affairs! I've taken on this job, and I have considered all the possibilities. I knew, of course, that Mr. Mortimer would have to be fixed—and I am now going to fix him."

"You hope!" murmured Sam Kennedy.

"What's the Fix-It Agency for?" sniffed Pyne. "It's merely a matter of putting the thing to Mr. Mortimer in a diplomatic way. He's a sport, and he'll understand. Now, if we had to deal with old Selby it would be a different matter. He wouldn't agree to anything. Mortimer is a horse of another colour. Leave it all to Uncle Kenneth."

He spoke confidently enough, but he was by no means as assured as he looked by the time he reached the Housemaster's study. Unless Mr. Mortimer was squared, the deception would flop almost before it had begun. The fact that Mr. Mortimer was a kindly, genial, easy going man, appreciative of a harmless joke, gave Pyne the confidence he needed. It was all a matter of putting the thing to Mr. Mortimer the right way.

"Well, Pyne, what can I do for you?" asked the Housemaster, who looked as though he had just awakened from a nap. "Dull afternoon, isn't it? Still raining, eh?"

"Yes, sir. I'm afraid Mrs. Mortimer is having a nasty run from London."

"Mrs. Mortimer? Oh, yes." The Housemaster glanced at the clock. "She ought to be here soon. How did you know——?"

"Goodman told me, sir. Mrs. Mortimer is bringing Goodman's little cousin on a visit, isn't she?"

"Little cousin? Oh, I see." Mr. Mortimer regarded Pyne with greater interest. "No doubt Goodman has received a letter from his aunt. Well, what about it, Pyne?"

"Well, the fact is, sir, we thought it would be rather a good wheeze to let the kid down lightly," explained Pyne. "Cousin Georgie hasn't ever seen Goodman, I understand, and the sudden shock of coming face to face with Goody might blight his young life——"

"Might blight whose young life?" asked Mr. Mortimer, who seemed strangely dense.

"Georgie's, sir." Pyne went on before the Housemaster could get another word in edgeways. "The idea, sir, is for me to pretend to be Cousin Stanley. Just to give the kid a break, and let it down lightly. Get it, sir? I'm going to pretend to be Goodman, and I want you to give Mrs. Mortimer the tip as soon as she arrives. If you do that,

there won't be any mix-up when I appear and say I'm Cousin Stanley."

"I see." Mr. Mortimer mused thoughtfully. "One of your practical jokes, eh, Pyne? Well, I'm not altogether sure that I can be a party to this deception. As long as you keep your practical jokes to yourselves, it's not my affair—unless, of course, you overstep the mark. This is different. You actually want Mrs. Mortimer and I to lend ourselves——"

"I say, sir, though, there's nothing in it, really," urged Pyne, with visions of thirty shillings winging away from his grasp. "I've undertaken to be nurse to the kid during its visit. It seems that Goodman's aunt expects him to make a big fuss of Georgie, and Goody is horribly afraid of kids. He's in a blue funk, so I've offered to take on the job——"

"I see," repeated Mr. Mortimer. "Well, I don't think much of Goodman for shirking his responsibilities. You'll have to give me time to think——" He stopped and looked at Pyne hard. "I don't quite understand your repeated references to a 'kid,' Pyne. If Goodman has told you——"

"Goodman's scared of kids, sir—that's the whole crux of the matter," explained Pyne hurriedly. "But I'm different—I don't mind kids a bit. I know how to treat 'em. You see, sir, Goodman gets this letter from his aunt, saying that Mrs. Mortimer is bringing little Georgie down——"

"Little Georgie?"

"Dash it, sir, a five-year-old boy can't be anything else but little, can he?" said Pyne, who privately came to the conclusion that Mr. Mortimer was still half asleep. "Goodman's never seen this infantile horror—his words, sir, not mine—and he's afraid that Georgie will want to kiss him, and his aunt expects him to make a fuss of Georgie——"

"I think I am beginning to understand," said Mr. Mortimer, with a twinkle. "Yes, Pyne, I haven't the slightest doubt that Georgie will expect Goodman to kiss—— Ahem!" He pulled himself up. "How do you feel about this kissing?"

"It'll be a bit of an ordeal, sir, but for thirty bob—I—I mean, if I'm going to pretend to be Cousin Stanley, I must put up with all the strings that go with the job, mustn't I?"

The Housemaster's sense of humour, always keen, rose to the occasion and he chuckled heartily.

"Somehow, Pyne, I don't think you'll find this kissing much of an ordeal," he said drily. "After all, a five-year-old child is nothing of which to be afraid. Yes, I see. Goodman assumes, quite wrongly, that Georgie is a sticky little infant, and he is afraid that the other boys will make fun of him——" He broke off, chuckling again. "According to what I have heard from Mrs. Mortimer, Georgie is not that kind of child at all. I think Goodman is making a big mistake—— All right, Pyne, you have my permission to practise this innocent little deception."

"You're a brick, sir!" said Kenneth Pyne enthusiastically. "Thanks a lot, sir. You don't know what it means to me."

"No?" murmured the Housemaster. "I have a vague suspicion, Pyne, that it means thirty shillings."

CHAPTER IV

ENTER GEORGIE

"WELL?" ASKED Stan Goodman eagerly.

"Well?" asked Mr. Fix-It, holding out a hand.

"You mean—the money?" said Goodman.

"I mean the money. Business is business."

"If you want the money, it means that you've obtained Mortimer's consent!" gasped Goodman. "I don't believe it! I was sure you'd come back saying that old Mortimer wouldn't play ball."

"Which only proves, dear fellow, how little you know me!" drawled Kenneth Pyne. "When Mr. Fix-It fixes a thing, it stays fixed. All I had to do was to hypnotise Mr. Mortimer with my dazzling personality and wait for the results. Without any exaggeration, the bloke seemed half dazed. It took him some time to grasp the idea."

"It's all right then?" asked Goodman anxiously.

"Right as rain, old thing. By the time I left him he understood the position thoroughly and he has agreed to be a party to the little deception," said Mr. Fix-It. "So kindly come across with the fee. Thirty bob, please."

"It's worth it!" said Goodman, with a sigh of untold relief. "You don't mind five bob in coppers, mostly ha'pennies?"

"Money," said Pyne, "is money."

"You can spend most of the ha'pennies in the tuck shop, treating the little blighter to toffee apples and ice creams and things like that," said Goodman, as he handed over the fee. "I say, what about Mrs. Mortimer?"

"That's all arranged. Mr. Mortimer is going to give her the tip as soon as she arrives."

"Well, it beats me!" said Dick Sylvester, scratching his head. "You *must* have dazzled him with your personality, Pyne! You're not spoofing, are you?" he added suspiciously. "I can't imagine old Mortimer agreeing to this stunt."

"Kindly realise, Sylvester, old horse, that what *you* are suggesting is a swindle," sniffed Kenneth Pyne coldly. "I've taken Goodman's money, haven't I? If it was a spoof, I should be swindling him."

"That's what I meant," said Dick.

"Then you're slandering a perfectly honourable chap," said Pyne with dignity. "The Fix-It Agency only accepts fees when it can deliver the goods. You'll have to excuse me now, because I want to go upstairs to make myself presentable. We must do all we can to make little Georgie's visit a big success."

He coolly strolled away, and Dick Sylvester was more puzzled than ever. However, he soon allayed Goodman's fears—for Goodman had begun to wonder if it wasn't a spoof, after all.

"No," said Dick. "When Pyne talks like that, you can be sure he's on the level. He made Mr. Mortimer agree to the substitution. Don't ask me how! It beats me hollow. Pyne must be even deeper than we suspect."

"It's that persuasive tongue of his," grinned Tim Charters. "He can talk the hind leg off a donkey. I'll bet he had old Mortimer so confused that the poor bloke gave his consent before he realised what he was saying."

Some little time later, when Kenneth Pyne reappeared, he was looking very neat with well brushed clothes, a spotlessly clean collar, and neatly parted hair.

"It's just as well to be neat and tidy," said Goodman approvingly as he inspected his proxy. "I'll bet it won't take little Georgie long to change that. Perhaps you'd better go outside, so as to be ready when the car comes."

"Complete with mackintosh and umbrella?" asked Pyne tartly. "Thanks all the same——"

"Ass! The rain has completely stopped," interrupted Goodman. "Hadn't you noticed? The sun's even trying to appear. The afternoon's getting on, and Mrs. Mortimer will be here any minute."

"That's right, too," said Enoch Wicks eagerly. "Old Mortimer went out a quarter-of-an-hour ago, and I happened to pass him in the quad——"

"Mortimer's gone out?" interrupted Pyne, with a jump. "He promised me that he'd explain things to Mrs. Mortimer as soon as she arrived! If he's gone out——"

"I expect that's why he went out," grinned Wicks. "I asked him where he was going, and he said he was going into Greendale St. Mary, and that he would see Mrs. Mortimer as she drove through."

"You asked Mortimer where he was going?" repeated Dick Sylvester. "You cheeky young blighter—— I don't believe it."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I didn't have to ask him," admitted Wicks with a squirm. "He told me where he was going."

"I get it," said Pyne, nodding. "He knew you'd spread it all over the place. I say, jolly sporting of Mortimer, what? He's actually gone to meet the car, so there can't be any mix-up."

"That's about the size of it," said Sam Kennedy. "Well, hadn't you better be strolling about the quad, Pyne? You'll be ready to greet the kid as soon as it arrives."

"Good idea," said Goodman. "This is going to be good, you chaps! By crackers! To think I should have had to go through this ordeal myself! Let's all go out——"

"And give the whole show away," interrupted Pyne sarcastically. "Georgie may be a kid of five, but he'll soon smell a rat if there's a gang of grinning fatheads crowding round me when I say 'how do you do?' You can be out in the quad if you like, but steer clear of me. Gather in groups all over the place, and pretend that you're not interested. If you don't, the whole thing will be a fizzle."

Sammy Holt of the Third came tearing in.

"There's a car coming up the road!" he gasped excitedly. "That'll be threepence, Pyne!"

"Nice work, stooge," said Kenneth Pyne, as he handed over the fee. "The Fix-It Agency has its spies everywhere!"

He strolled out into the quad while the others grinned with appreciation at his forethought. They went outside, too, and were glad that the rain had stopped. They were just in time to see Mr. Mortimer's sports saloon car turn through the gateway, with Mrs. Mortimer at the wheel. Kenneth Pyne was in full sight; he even paused and looked up with a show of interest.

Now that the great moment had arrived much of Pyne's satisfaction had waned. It was all very nice to have thirty of the best in his pocket, but there was a long and arduous week-end in front of him. He was coming to the conclusion that he had taken on this job too lightly. Certainly, he had taken it on too cheaply. However, it was too late to back out——

"Oh, is that you, my boy?" came Mr. Mortimer's cheery voice, as the car slowed.

"This is very fortunate. You can meet your cousin right away. Pull up, dear."

Mrs. Mortimer stopped the car and the Housemaster stepped out—followed by a slim, dark girl of about fifteen—one of the prettiest girls Kenneth Pyne had ever seen. She was laughing merrily as she faced him, with the wind blowing her soft wavy hair away from her attractive face.

"I—er— Where's Georgie?" asked Pyne awkwardly.

"I'm Georgie, of course," said the girl. "You're Cousin Stanley? You're not a bit like mother described, but that doesn't make any difference, does it? Hi-ya, Cousin Stanley"

To Kenneth Pyne's stupefaction she came right up to him and delivered an affectionate cousinly kiss.

Round the quad the other Fourth-formers watched this charming scene with goggling eyes. Indeed, Stanley Horatio Goodman's eyes nearly came out of his head. What was all this? Who was this ripping girl who called Pyne "Cousin Stanley" and kissed him? Where was that little blighter, Georgie? Goodman shook himself, closed his eyes, and looked again. He was just in time to see Pyne making a swift recovery.

Pyne was just as startled as anybody. In fact, he was dizzy. Very seldom, indeed, had he been kissed by such a pretty girl as this—and so unexpectedly. This was a good thing which needed to be pushed along.

"Georgie, of course," he said enthusiastically. "Well, I must say you're a bit of all right!" He improved the shining hour by returning the kiss—with interest. "I never dreamed, from Aunt Edith's letter—— I say, you know, I had a silly idea that——"

"Yes?" said Georgie, who was looking a little flushed.

"Oh, nothing," said Pyne hastily. "It doesn't matter now. We're going to have a ripping time this week-end, Georgie. I can't understand how Goody could have made such an idiotic mistake—— Er, that is to say——"

"Isn't Whitelands a marvellous place?" asked the girl, as she looked round.

Pyne was glad that she had not noticed his slip.

"Oh, rather," he said hurriedly. "I say, you'll have to let me show you round, you know. There's lots to see—— Oh, I'm frightfully sorry, Mrs. Mortimer." He raised his cap to the Housemaster's wife with unusual confusion. "Thanks a lot for getting Georgie here safely."

"It was a nice trip, except for the rain," said Mrs. Mortimer.

"Oh, the rain," said Pyne, glancing at the sky. "The sun's coming out now. In fact, I've never seen Whitelands looking so ripping. Come along, Georgie."

He securely tucked the girl's arm into his own and prepared to march away. This situation was far too good to last, and he wanted to make the most of it.

"Where are we going?" asked the girl.

"Oh, anywhere—— Too many chaps spying," explained Pyne. "I say, why the dickens didn't my aunt send me photographs of you? I'd no idea I had such a pretty cousin! As for that ass Goody—— I—I mean—— Well, come on."

"Not so fast, young man," said Mr. Mortimer, with a chuckle. "I can't allow you to take your cousin away like this. She needs to tidy up after her journey, then it'll be time for tea. Would you like to have tea with us?"

"That's frightfully sporting of you, sir," said Pyne eagerly. "Yes, rather."

"Come along, Georgie—I'll take you indoors," said Mrs. Mortimer. "It'll be nice to have your cousin to tea, won't it?" She looked at Pyne with a twinkle. "We'll expect you in about twenty minutes, then."

"Fine!" said Pyne. "Thanks awfully, Mrs. Mortimer."

He reeled slightly after they had gone—particularly as Georgie had given him a roguish smile as she turned to go. She even threw him a kiss, and gave him as saucy a wink as he had ever seen.

"For the love of Jiminy Cricket!" murmured Pyne faintly.

He pulled himself together quickly as Sam Kennedy came tearing up to him. Sam was nearer than any of the others, and he arrived there first.

"Here, what's the idea—kissing that girl?" asked Kennedy breathlessly.

"A dashed good idea!" replied Pyne.

"Yes, but she—— I mean, what about the kid?"

"She," explained Pyne, "is the kid."

"What!"

"Yes. Goody, as usual, made a fat-headed mistake. How he made it I can't understand." Pyne shivered slightly. "I was so startled that I nearly gave the whole show away, but luckily she didn't notice." He grinned. "You know, Sam, old dear, I think this is going to be a very sweet thirty bob. Money, in fact, for jam."

"You're crackers!" gasped Kennedy. "Goody paid you thirty bob to take over his five-year-old cousin——"

"If she's only five years old, she's amazingly well developed," said Pyne coolly. "I say, did you notice her eyes? I never knew they had such ripping girls in South Africa."

"What are you babbling about?" de-

manded Kennedy. "Where's that kid, Georgie?"

"Yes, where's Georgie?" burst out Stan Goodman, as he arrived on the scene with a crowd of others behind him. "What's the game, Pyne? You twister. You rotter. You double-crossing——"

"Take it easy, Goody—take it easy," said Pyne warningly. "Unless you're jolly careful you'll burst a blood vessel. What's the matter with you, anyhow?"

"What's the matter with me?" roared Goodman. "Who was that girl?"

"You mean your Cousin Georgie?"

"No, fathead, I mean that jolly pretty girl——"

"You seem to have made a mistake, Goody——"

"You've been making some mistakes, too, haven't you?" snorted Goodman. "I like your cheek, kissing that girl——"

"You'll pardon me," said Pyne stiffly. "She kissed me."

"What's the difference?" almost shrieked Goodman. "You kissed her, too! Why? Who is she?"

"I keep on telling you—she's your cousin Georgie."

"My—my cousin Georgie?"

"That's what she says—and she ought to know," grinned Pyne. "Naturally she kissed me. As far as she's concerned, I'm her cousin Stanley. It's your own arrangement——"

"My own arrangement, my foot!" hooted Goodman. "I never arranged that you should pretend to be the cousin of a ripping girl like that. I don't understand it. Georgie is a boy's name——"

"Georgie is also short for Georgiana," explained Pyne. "Or Georgina. My dear chap, there's no mystery. You couldn't have read your aunt's letter properly. You told me that your Aunt Edith has two or three children."

"Two," panted Goodman.

"All right, two. Did she say anything in her letter about a girl?"

"I don't remember—— Yes, by crackers, she did, now I come to think of it," said Goodman, with a start. "When she said that Mrs. Mortimer is bringing Georgie down here—— Well, dash it, I naturally assumed that she meant the kid of five." He fumbled in his pocket and produced a crumpled letter. "Wouldn't anybody think so? Listen to this! 'Although you have never seen the child—bla-bla-bla—I am quite sure, my dear Stanley, that you will be very proud of Georgie—bla-bla-bla—devote yourself entirely to giving the child a really good time.' What the dickens does she mean by calling her a child like that? Naturally I made a bloomer."

Pyne grinned in an exasperating way.

"Well, you know what mothers are," he said indulgently. "They always refer to a son or daughter as a 'child' until they're about thirty. You must have read that letter badly, or you would have——"

"Never mind the letter now," interrupted Goodman. "Forget the letter. I made a mistake. So what? So you're not going to be Cousin Stanley any longer! She's my cousin, and I'm jolly well going to entertain her while she stays at Whitelands."

"Isn't it a bit late to think of that?" asked Pyne. "You paid me thirty bob to look after your cousin——"

"My hat, so I did!" interrupted Goodman, with a start. "Look here, Pyne, I want that money back. You can't stick to it now."

"I can," said Kenneth Pyne, "and I will."

"Why, you—you swindling rotter——"

"When the Fix-It Agency undertakes a commission, it carries that commission through faithfully and honourably," said Pyne sternly. "I have no intention of relinquishing my responsibilities, old son. I always keep faith with my clients. Our agreement distinctly provides——"

"Blow the agreement—and blow you!" roared Goodman. "She's my cousin, and I'm going to tell her so."

"I keep on telling you, it's too late," retorted Pyne. "What about Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer? They've jolly decently agreed to keep up the fun. In fact, they've invited me to tea, so that I can be with Cousin Georgie."

"They've done what!" gurgled Stan Goodman.

"Yes, nice of them, isn't it?" beamed Kenneth Pyne. "You can't possibly muck up the whole game now, Goody——"

"Watch me!" said Goodman thickly. "Do you think I'm going to let you sit opposite my cousin in Mrs. Mortimer's drawing room, and goggle at her all through tea?"

"I never goggle at Mrs. Mortimer," said Pyne stiffly.

"I don't mean Mrs. Mortimer, you howling ass!" shouted Goodman. "I mean my cousin. You can keep the blinking thirty bob. From this minute onwards, though I'm Cousin Stanley, and I'm going to have tea with Georgie."

"You haven't been invited to tea," Pyne observed. "What are Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer going to think if you barge in uninvited? In any case, you're talking out of the back of your neck. It was you who started this thing, and you'll have to let it continue. What kind of a twister do you

call yourself, backing out at the last minute just because you find that your cousin is a girl instead of a boy?"

Stan Goodman breathed hard.

"If she had turned out to be a girl of five—well, you could have had her!" he said thickly. "This is altogether different. You know it's different!" he added fiercely.

"Well, perhaps I do," admitted Pyne. "But that's a lucky break for me, isn't it? I took on this job under the firm impression that I had to be nurse to a sticky kid of five for the week-end. Now that Georgie has turned out to be a ripping girl of my own age—well, that's just my luck."

"He's right, Stan," said Charlie Hunt.

"You'll have to put up with it now," agreed Bob Davis.

"Stand looking on all this evening, and to-morrow, while Pyne trots Georgie all over the school, arm-in-arm with her?" asked Goodman fiercely. "My only hat! He'll kiss her good night—and kiss her good morning, to-morrow! No, by crackers, I'm going to tell her the truth—now!"

Kenneth Pyne sighed.

"I was afraid it would be too good to last," he said sadly. "If you've made up your mind to tell her, Goody, there's nothing I can do about it. If you're expecting to take her round the school, arm-in-arm, and kiss her good night—well, you're a bigger mug than ever I suspected!"

"What do you mean—a bigger mug?" asked Goodman, with a start.

"My dear old boy, think!" urged Pyne. "Get the grey matter moving for just a minute. You surely don't believe that Georgie will kiss you as she kissed me?"

"Why shouldn't she? I'm her real cousin."

"You now propose to tell her that you paid somebody else thirty bob to take her off your hands," sniffed Pyne. "How do you think she'll like that? You can't just go up to her and say—'There's been a mistake, I'm your real cousin.' She's a bright kid, and she'll expect a reasonable explanation."

"Well, I have one, haven't I?" retorted Goodman, staring.

"You mean, you'll tell her that you were expecting a little boy of five?"

"Of course."

"Is that what you call a reasonable explanation?" asked Pyne. "What kind of a heel is she going to think you are? You're so jolly snooty that you pay somebody thirty bob to pretend to be her cousin—or his cousin. You'll have to admit that it was your own idea from the start. Now, as soon as you find out that your cousin is a ripping girl, you ditch the whole arrangement and come out in your true colours. My poor fathead, when she hears all that, she'll give you a look that'll freeze the marrow in your bones. You'll feel just like something that the cat has dragged in out of the dustbin."

"Oh, my goodness!" said Goodman blankly.

"So you'd better think twice before you dash up to her with your explanations," continued Pyne coolly. "Surely it would be a lot better for her to leave the school under the impression that her cousin Stanley is a decent type?"

"Are you suggesting that I'm not a decent type?" roared Goodman.

"Old boy, you're one of the best," admitted Pyne handsomely. "But we must consider what *she'll* think. Honestly, the best thing you can do is to leave things as they are. There's no reason why she should ever know the truth about this heartless deception——"

"I say, draw it mild!"

"Well, what else do you call it? A poor little kid of five, scorned by its own cousin!" continued Pyne, laying it on thick. "I'm still suggesting what Georgie will think. You know what girls are. Well, I shall have to be getting into Mrs. Mortimer's for tea," he added casually.

"What a mess!" moaned Goodman. "You're right—I daren't tell her the truth now. She'd cut me dead. You're going to show her all over the school, and pretend to be her cousin—and—and she'll kiss you good night!" He glared. "I bet you'll let her kiss you good night!"

"Not a chance," said Pyne. "I shall kiss her first!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Everybody laughed as Pyne strolled away. Stan Goodman's discomfiture was complete. He was far too dazed to realise that the astute Kenneth Pyne had been pulling his leg—and not many of the other fellows realised it, either. Pyne had an idea that if Goodman went straight to Georgie and told her the whole truth she would have a good laugh at the joke and accept him more or less with open arms. Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer, of course, would verify that he was her genuine cousin.

This was the very thing which Pyne wanted to avoid. Hence his earnest leg-pulling. It was great fun, pretending to be Georgie's cousin—accepting her cousinly affection—and being charmingly matey generally. As soon as she found out the truth she would give him the frozen eye. On the other hand, it would be fatal for Stan Goodman to postpone his explanation. Tell her at once—okay, delay telling her, and the explanation would get more and more difficult. In fact, Goodman's

only real chance was to dash straight across and unburden himself immediately. Like a chump he had fallen for Pyne's glib line of talk.

Not that Pyne himself was going to find his path a bed of roses.

CHAPTER V

RATHER AWKWARD

"POOR OLD Goody!" murmured Tim Charters.

"Yes, it's rough luck on him," agreed Dick Sylvester.

"Any chap would fall over himself to own as pretty a cousin as Georgie," said Will Osborne enviously. "I hope that ass, Pyne, will introduce us soon. I say, what luck. Being escort to Georgie for the whole week-end!"

"What a footling fathead Goodman is to be bluffed by Pyne's rot," added Dick Sylvester, with a grin. "Pyne undertook to look after a little boy of five, and that's why Goodman whacked out thirty bob. As soon as Goodman found out that he'd made a mistake, he ought to have gone straight to the girl and explained. My sons, it's going to be interesting to see how this thing works out."

Meanwhile, Kenneth Pyne, full of beans, was entering Mortimer's House. It was not quite time for him to present himself for tea, so he was going to spruce himself up a bit—in spite of the fact that he was as neat and tidy as a new pin already. In the doorway he met Sam Kennedy, who was looking worried and excited.

"I've just thought of something, Ken," said Kennedy.

"Then forget it," drawled Pyne. "Everything, old lad, in the garden is lovely. Georgie is *my* cousin, and don't you forget it. After tea I'm going to take her round the school—and if you promise to wash your neck I'll introduce you to her."

"Ass!" said Kennedy impatiently. "Have you forgotten the preparations you told me to make in Study Eight?"

"Preparations?"

"Oh, my hat. You see a pretty girl, and forget everything." Kennedy was exasperated. "But you weren't expecting a pretty girl, were you? You were expecting a grubby little infant of five, and you told me to make certain preparations in the study. What about it?"

Pyne was not listening.

"By Jiminy Cricket, you're about right, at that," he admitted. "I see a pretty girl, and forget everything. Why not, I say? As a rule, I'm not much of a lad with the girls, but when a perfect stranger comes up to you—the nicest looking stranger in the whole County of Devon—and gives you a whacking great kiss, what do you expect? I thought this job was going to be a horrid ordeal, and it's turning out to be a gorgeous picnic. I'm on velvet, old son."

"That's what you think!" snorted Kennedy. "Very soon you'll find some nasty spikes in that velvet! What about the preparations I've made in the study?" he repeated deliberately. "Something must be done——"

"Why do you keep gassing about preparations?" interrupted Pyne, frowning. "What preparations? What *is* all this rot? Go away! You bother me!"

"All right—you can't say I didn't do my best," snapped Kennedy. "You're smitten—that's what's the matter with you! Your brain's paralysed, or something. I keep on telling you that you were expecting a grubby infant of five——"

"I say." Kenneth Pyne looked startled. "You didn't shove those idiotic things in the study, did you?"

Kennedy raised clenched hands.

"Give me strength!" he pleaded. "Oh, my goodness! Don't I keep on telling you," he roared. "I fixed everything just as you wanted. I buzzed over to the Vicarage and borrowed some of the Vicar's little boy's stuff. Box of alphabet bricks—teddy bear—toy soldiers. I obtained some other stuff—a box of paints and some crayons—from somebody else. Study Eight looks like nothing on earth."

"You silly ass," said Pyne in alarm. "You'd better clear it all out——"

"It's all very well to stand there and call me a silly ass, but I only did what you told me to do," interrupted Kennedy hotly. "You can jolly well clear out the study yourself now!"

"I can't! I'm due at Mortimer's for tea. I haven't time——" Pyne pulled himself together. "Sorry, Sam old thing. Didn't mean to go off the deep end, but this thing has shaken me. If Georgie comes here and finds that stuff in her supposed cousin's study—— Wow!"

"Exactly—wow!" agreed Kennedy.

Pyne thought quickly. Convinced that he would have a five-year-old boy on his hands for the week-end, he had made certain plans, and taken certain precautions. Goodman's aunt was expecting Goodman to "entertain" the brat—and as Pyne had undertaken to be Goodman "for the duration" it was he who would have to do the entertaining. So the wily Kenneth, very thoughtfully, had filled up Study Eight with

toys and other trifles that were likely to delight the heart of a five-year-old kid. In its way, it was a masterpiece of forethought. Pyne's idea was to earn his money as easily as possible.

Now that the five-year-old boy had turned out to be a devastatingly pretty fifteen-year-old girl—well, of course, the whole thing was different. Pyne had an idea that he could entertain Georgie without the aid of teddy bears and boxes of bricks.

"Listen, Sam," he said urgently. "You're my partner in this Fix-It business, aren't you?"

"So what?" asked Kennedy suspiciously.

"Then be a pal, and shift all that stuff out of the study," urged Pyne. "I'll give you an extra five bob out of the profits—— I say, see if you can get hold of some nice flowers——"

"Flowers?" said Kennedy, aghast.

"Yes."

"Flowers in the study?" roared Kennedy, scandalised.

"There's no need to roar like that——"

"No need to roar!" panted the outraged Kennedy. "Do you think I'm going to have a lot of beastly flowers in the study? I never heard of such a thing!"

"Girls like flowers——"

"Well, I *don't*. It's my study just as much as it's yours," said Kennedy, standing up for his rights. "I'll clear the toys out, but I draw the line at flowers. My hat! You'll be asking me to shove up cretonne curtains next, and cover the table with a lace cloth."

"It's not a bad idea," said Pyne thoughtfully.

It was a pity they were wasting their words in this useless fashion; for at that very moment developments were taking place which would catch them fairly on the hop—and mainly because they were wasting time in arguing. If they had sprung into action at once, and had cleared the things out of Study Eight, all might have been well. . . .

* * *

Mr. Horace Mortimer's sense of humour was considerably tickled by the situation—for, of course, he had known all along that his wife was bringing to Whitelands a fifteen-year-old Georgie of the feminine gender. When Pyne had first made the suggestion for substituting himself for Goodman, the Housemaster had been astonished and dubious. Indeed, he had been inclined to forbid the enterprise. When he had discovered, through Pyne's conversation, that Goodman was expecting to see a five-year-old boy, he had given his consent—rightly believing that Goodman deserved a sharp lesson.

Now, Mr. Mortimer was chuckling heartily. He imagined that Goodman was already gnashing his teeth with helpless rage—for Goodman could not have failed to see the affectionate meeting of the supposed cousins. Mr. Mortimer was expecting Goodman to come barging in at any moment, excitedly proclaiming himself the real Cousin Stanley.

"You know, Horace, we mustn't let this joke go too far," said Mrs. Mortimer, while Georgie was upstairs tidying herself. "Pyne is a nice boy, but he's rather bold, isn't he? Did you notice how he kissed Georgie? It didn't take him long to recover from his surprise, did it?"

Mr. Mortimer roared with laughter.

"Did I notice?" he chuckled. "Well, Pyne would have been a chump if he hadn't taken advantage of such an opportunity."

"Horace!" said Mrs. Mortimer.

"I remember once, when I was at school —— Ahem!" The Housemaster paused. "Well, it doesn't matter now. We were all young once, my dear. Not that Pyne will have much further chance of enjoying the situation. Unless Goodman is an absolute ass he'll tell his cousin the truth at once."

They heard Georgie coming downstairs at that moment, and when the girl entered the room, looking fresh and smiling, Mr. Mortimer made a suggestion.

"We're not quite ready for tea, Georgie, and it might be a good idea for you to have a look at your cousin in his own quarters. You can bring him back with you."

"Fine," said Georgie. "How do I get there? Are girls allowed to wander about a boys' school, wherever they please?"

"You are our guest, my dear, and guests are privileged," explained Mr. Mortimer. "There's no reason why you shouldn't go to the boys' part of the House. Anybody will tell you where to find Study Eight in the junior passage. I have no doubt that you will find plenty of willing escorts."

Georgie sallied out, looking very charming in her dainty frock—now minus her hat and travelling coat. She crossed the quad from Mr. Mortimer's private door, and there was an epidemic of cap raising before she reached the main doorway.

"Study Eight, Miss—Miss—?" began Tim Charters, to whom her first inquiry had been made.

"Miss Hylton," supplied Georgie.

"Oh, rather," said Charters. "Right this way, Miss Hylton. I suppose you're looking for Pyne—— Er, I mean, your cousin, Stan Goodman?"

"Yes, he's in Study Eight, isn't he?"

Kenneth Pyne was in Study Eight. He had, in fact, just arrived with Sam Kennedy. They were both taken completely by surprise when the door opened, after a thunderous bang on the panel, to admit Georgie—with a whole crowd of fellows, who had insisted on escorting her, in the rear.

"So here you are, Cousin Stanley!" said Georgie.

"Eh? I mean——" Kennth Pyne spun round in utter confusion—a most surprising state of affairs for him. "Oh, hullo, Georgie! I—I didn't expect—— I mean ——" He looked helplessly at his hands. "Just clearing up a bit," he added lamely.

In one hand he held a child's box of bricks, and in the other an automatic toy known as "Fireman Bill"—which, in some fiendish way suddenly started operating on its own accord, to the accompaniment of a loud whirring noise, and causing Fireman Bill jerkily to mount his tin ladder.

"Well," said Georgie politely.

She raised her eyebrows as she glanced round the room and saw several other childish playthings. Sam Kennedy was looking flabbergasted—he was, in fact, speechless. Kenneth Pyne, however, was making a rapid recovery.

"Don't mind me!" said Georgie, with a sweet smile. "Go right on with your playing."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Loud chuckles came from the crowded doorway.

"It's the first time I knew that such big boys played with such small toys," continued the girl. "I thought you played cricket, football and fives——"

"We do—we do," interrupted Pyne, with the utmost coolness. "You will have your joke, Cousin Georgie, eh? No, these toys aren't for us to use. As a matter of fact, Sam—this is Sam—is expecting the Vicar's little boy to tea."

"Am I?" gurgled Sam Kennedy dazedly.

"My dear chap, you know you are," continued Pyne. "Didn't you say to me after dinner—'Goody,' you said, 'I think I'll invite young Pieface to have tea with me.' Sam is expecting young Pieface any minute."

He did it so well that he almost believed it himself.

"Weren't you going to be here, too?" asked Georgie. "You didn't know—then—that Mrs. Mortimer was going to invite you to tea."

"Eh? Oh, as a matter of fact, I was going to have tea somewhere else," replied Pyne promptly. "I think we can leave Sam to look after Pieface—— By the way, the kid's real name is Tim, but we call him Pieface for short. Nice little blighter. Full of taking ways. Sam gets on with him wonderfully." He waved an eloquent hand. "Well, you can see for yourself. All these toys and things——"

He tried to edge her out of the study, but for some reason Georgie was intent upon staying—and a fellow cannot very well shove a girl out of the room by force.

"I think we'll wait until Pieface comes," said Georgie sweetly. "I'd simply love to meet him, and we've at least ten minutes before we need go along to tea. As for you, Sam."—she turned to the startled Sam Kennedy—"I think it's wonderful of you to take such an interest in a mere child. I never knew that schoolboys were so unselfish."

Sam Kennedy turned very red; he clutched at the table for support, then he turned pale.

"I—I didn't know it either," he babbled. "That is to say—— It was Pyne's idea, really—— I—I mean——"

"Who," asked Georgie, "is Pyne?"

"Oh, just one of the chaps," said Pyne hastily. "I really think we'd better go. The poor kid might be frightened if he gets here and finds this crowd."

"Frightened? How old is he, then?"

"How old? Oh, not very old—— Only four—or five. Quite an infant, anyhow. Sam loves infants."

Georgie nodded.

"About the same age as my little brother," she said calmly. "I simply must see him. I'll wait."

Kenneth Pyne looked at her blankly.

"I see. You'll wait?" he asked.

Over her shoulder he could see Sam Kennedy, and Sam was making frantic and desperate signs. What these signs meant could only be guessed at, although one thing was certain. Sam was livid with fury. Unfortunately, he had forgotten the mirror in the room, and Georgie was fully aware of his activities.

"Is your friend ill?" she asked, with concern. "Perhaps this little boy ought not to come to tea to-day——"

"That's it, I'm ill!" gasped Kennedy, clutching at the straw. "I feel awful! I say, somebody dash off and do something."

"Yes, of course," agreed Pyne, turning to the doorway. "Some of you chaps see if you can find Pieface. He ought to have been here long ago. My cousin wants to see him, and we can't stick around all the afternoon."

He made a grimace at the nearest juniors—meaning to imply that they were to make

a pretence of searching for the mythical infant. Obviously, Georgie had made up her mind not to leave Study Eight until she had seen the wretched child, and if the fellows pretended to make a search she might be satisfied. All Pyne wanted to do now was to get her away from this spot.

Dick Sylvester, Charters, Osborne and Hal Robinson made a show of understanding, and went off briskly. They did not go far—only to the end of the passage.

"What now?" asked Charters.

"Goodness knows!" said Osborne. "Pyne's getting himself in a deeper tangle every minute. He never expected that Goody's cousin would come over here so quickly; she caught him on the hop—with all those giddy toys!"

Dick Sylvester chuckled.

"You really have to admire the way old Pyne rose to the occasion," he said. "Nine chaps out of ten would have been floored, but Pyne promptly invents young Pieface. Well, there's nothing like lending a helping hand. He wants us to come back with a kid of five, and we shall have to see what we can do."

"Don't be an ass!" protested Robinson. "Where can we find a kid of five?"

"There must be plenty about," argued Dick. "Any kid will do. Listen, my sons. Pyne's in a fix, and we must help him. This time Mr. Fix-It can't fix it."

"It's all very well to say that any kid will do," argued Tim Charters. "How are we going to get the kid into the school, even if we find one? Kidnap him?"

"Ass! An ice-cream at the school shop will do the trick, and it'll be easy enough to bring the infant indoors for a few minutes," replied Dick. "The best thing we can do is to spread out and search. It won't take long."

"I don't get it," objected Osborne, scratching his head. "What does Pyne want a kid of five for, anyway?"

"He doesn't want one, idiot!" retorted Dick. "He's forced to have one! Goody's cousin breezes into the study and sees all those toys, and Pyne has to invent some explanation. So he wishes a kid of five on Sam Kennedy. He thought Georgie would be satisfied and clear out. She hasn't cleared out. There's girls for you!"

"Like my sisters!" grumbled Osborne. "Always causing trouble! The prettiest ones are the worst!"

They wasted no further time in talk, but hurried off in search of the elusive Pieface. Meanwhile, Georgie had calmly settled herself in one of Pyne's chairs, and was looking at Sam Kennedy with a kind of warm admiration. It was a look which caused the unfortunate Sam to squirm. Not only was he undeserving of her admiration, but the very look in her eyes made pins and needles scoot up and down his spine.

"Well, we're always learning something," said the girl, in a surprised voice. "So you boys give parties to little children? I think it's marvellous."

"It's nothing—nothing at all," said Kenneth Pyne, with an airy wave of his hand. "Just one of Sam's ideas. Sam loves little kids, and he's always——"

"I don't love little kids!" burst out Sam Kennedy explosively.

"Now, Sam——" began Pyne.

"It's about time this rot was stopped!" continued Kennedy, who had had enough. "Don't take any notice of him, Miss—Miss Georgie! It was his idea all along. Only he's—he's modest!" Sam spoke with relish. He was getting his own back. "He invited young Puddingface——"

"Pieface!" said Pyne sternly.

"Pieface, then," panted Sam. "He invited this blighting young horror, then, because he receives an invitation to the Mortimers', he shoves the kid on me! I'm not standing for it."

"Oh, Sam!" said Georgie. "I'm disappointed."

"All right—you're disappointed!" said Sam aggressively. "I can't help it. I'm not going to have you thinking that I'm such a sissy that I entertain five-year-old kids in my study!"

"You're not half such a nice boy as I thought," said the girl coldly. "As for you, Cousin Stanley, I think you're wonderful. You're so modest, too. I always believed that boys of your age were contemptuous of little children. It shows that you've a beautifully tender heart."

There were some explosive sounds from the doorway, and Kenneth Pyne clutched at a chair back for support. He gave Georgie a hard look, half suspecting that she was pulling his leg. The girl seemed very serious, however, and her face wore a soft, tender expression—or, as Sam Kennedy afterwards described it, a soppy look.

"I say, forgetting my beautifully tender heart for the moment, what about breezing along for tea?" suggested Pyne, with a look at his watch. "I mean, Mrs. Mortimer will think it funny if we're late——"

He broke off, a feeling of paralysis creeping over him. Outside, in the passage, a childish voice was piping protestingly, and the voices of several Fourth-formers were uttering soothing and persuasive sounds. The next moment a grubby little infant of about four toddled into the room, securely clutching an ice-cream cornet in one hand, and a bar of toffee in the other.

"Please, I've come to tea!" said this

apparition. "Pieface has come to tea with Uncle Sam."

The child looked from one to another of the juniors in a scared, uncertain sort of way, then rushed straight at Kenneth Pyne. Not very surprising, for while Pyne was wearing a forced smile of kindly welcome, Sam Kennedy was scowling like a youthful edition of Sweeney Todd.

CHAPTER VI

TOUGH ON GOODY

"HEY! I'M NOT Uncle Sam!" gasped Pyne.

"Uncle Sam!" piped the child, dropping the bar of toffee on Pyne's knee, and giving Pyne a sticky kiss. Sam Kennedy watched this touching scene with rare enjoyment.

"Fine!" said Pyne, pulling himself together with an effort. "Well, here's the kid, Georgie. Nice little brat—Er, kiddie, eh? Now that you've seen it, we might as well be moving. Sam, I'll leave you to entertain——"

"Like fun, you will!" snorted Sam Kennedy. "It's your Pieface, and you can keep it. I'm through!"

"I don't think your friend is at all nice," said Georgie. "I'm not altogether pleased with you, Cousin Stanley."

"What have I done?" asked Pyne, startled.

"It's becoming rather clear that you invited this child to tea, and now you're trying to get out of it," replied the girl. "I think there's only one thing to be done. I'll go and tell Mrs. Mortimer that you can't come. You'll have to stay here and amuse this dear little boy."

"Here, I say—— "

"You wouldn't disappoint him, would you?"

"No, but these other chaps can——"

"These other chaps can't!" said half a dozen voices.

"Do you mean to say I must stay here and look after this young bli——" Pyne paused, and gulped. "I'd stay like a shot, in ordinary circs—I'd love it—but a chap can't tell his Housemaster's wife that he can't turn up for tea! I mean, that sort of thing isn't done."

He again experienced that paralysing sensation, for another childish voice was sounding in the passage; and the next moment Tim Charters came hurrying in with a little boy of about six—a cheeky youngster who gazed about him with complete composure. He, too, was half way through an ice-cream cornet.

"Here's Pieface!" said Charles triumphantly. "He's a bit late, Kennedy, because —— Hey, who's this kid?"

"Pieface!" said Kennedy, joyously. "That makes two of 'em. The one you've found can't be Pieface."

"Of course not," said Pyne quickly. "He's—he's one of the other kids. I didn't like to tell you, Georgie, but it was to be a—a party. There might be some other kids dropping in at any minute. So, you see, everything's explained. I mean, these toys—— Sam doesn't like to admit it in front of a girl, but he enjoys these parties as much as I do."

"Very touching, Cousin Stanley, but it won't do," said Georgie, shaking her head.

"It won't do?"

"Oh, you—you——" The girl suddenly burst into a ripple of uncontrolled laughter. "Oh, my goodness! This is too funny for words!"

Everybody stared at her in amazement.

"What," asked Pyne, "is the joke?"

"You did your best, but it's too awfully thin!" laughed Georgie, her eyes twinkling. "You surely don't think I'm spoofed? Somebody had better take these children back—and stop any others coming. Your friends are too thorough, Cousin Stanley. At least, they ought to have made certain that they only found one Pieface."

"The silly asses!" began Pyne wrathfully.

"Don't scold them—they were only trying to help you," she continued. "As soon as I saw this room I knew the whole truth. Why didn't you admit it at once?"

"You knew—the truth?" gurgled Pyne. "You mean——"

He broke off. He was horrified. Was it possible that this charming girl—so dainty and pretty—had been leading him up the garden all the time. She knew the truth! She knew that he wasn't her cousin——

"Well, old thing, the fact is——" began Pyne.

Fortunately she stopped him in time.

"You weren't expecting me at all, were you, Cousin Stanley?" she asked. "You were expecting my little brother?"

"Your—your little brother?"

"Of course. It's the only explanation of these toys," continued Georgie. "Besides, it explains why you looked so startled when I stepped out of the car. You must have misread mother's letter—mother's always a bit vague in her letters, I'm afraid. Why didn't you confess at once, instead of pretending like this?"

A surge of relief passed over Kenneth Pyne. So she still had no idea that he was a fraud.

"Oh, well, there's no harm done," he said, with a shrug. "Yes, Georgie, I'll admit it. I wasn't expecting you at all. I was expecting your little brother. It seemed so dashed silly— Well, I mean—I didn't like to admit what a chump I was. Naturally, I'm as pleased as Punch that it's you instead of—of——"

"Don't you know my brother's name?" she asked sweetly.

"Of course. It's slipped my mind though——"

"Little Vic," said Georgie.

"Of course—little Vic!" beamed Kenneth Pyne. "Well, that's that. Might as well be getting across for tea, eh? I'm sorry about all this, Georgie. You must think I'm a silly ass."

* * *

He was under the impression that the incident was over. He had not reckoned with Enoch Wicks. The sneak of the Fourth, hovering near the doorway, had heard something to the effect that Georgie knew the "whole truth." It took Wicks about fifteen seconds to impart this startling information to Stan Goodman, who was pacing up and down in the hall, gnashing his teeth with helpless rage.

"She knows?" gasped Goodman, as he seized Wicks by the shoulder and spun him round.

"Hi, you're hurting me, Goody!" gasped Enoch. "Yes, I—I heard her say so. She said she guessed the truth all along. Didn't you hear her laughing just now?"

"By crackers, I'm glad!" said Goodman, with a sigh of relief. "It's about time this rot was over. She's my cousin, and I'm jolly well going to entertain her!"

"Better go easy," advised Bob Davis.

"What do you mean—go easy?"

"Well, she might not be too pleased with you," explained Bob. "No good rushing up to her and taking anything for granted, Goody. You'll have to be humble."

"Humble? Me?"

"He's right, Goody," said Charlie Hunt. "Humble is the word. Girls are funny. The very first thing you'll have to do will be to ask for her forgiveness."

"What the dickens for?" demanded Goodman staring. "I've done nothing wrong. It's that ass, Pyne——"

"It's what she'll think," interrupted Davis. "You tried to palm off her little brother on Pyne—and, yes, you paid Pyne to do it. She's likely to get shirty over that. So, for goodness' sake, go easy."

"Shut up!" hissed Goodman. "Here they come."

He was rather startled to see his pretty cousin arm-in-arm with Pyne. This was too thick! She knew the truth, and yet she was as intimate as ever! In his usual blundering way, he walked straight up to her and seized her by the arm.

"Look here, Georgie, I'm sorry——"

"Cousin Stanley, who is this boy?" asked Georgie, in a startled voice.

Goodman reeled. She spoke as though she knew nothing. She was looking at him as she might have looked at a complete stranger—then he suddenly understood. Of course, as far as she was concerned, he was a complete stranger. Although she knew the truth about the substitution, she still did not know which of the boys was her real cousin. Well, it was a point which could easily be cleared.

"Sorry!" he gasped. "Didn't mean to startle you, Georgie, but now that you know the truth——"

"What's the matter with you, *Pyne?*" interrupted Kenneth deliberately.

"Pyne?" gasped Goodman.

"That's your name, isn't it?" went on Pyne, with a ferocious wink. "My name's Stan Goodman, and your name's Kenneth Pyne. Surely you know that?"

"But—but I thought—Somebody told me that Georgie—Look here, you rotter——"

"Cousin Stanley, please tell this boy to take his hand off my arm," said Georgie, at this point. "He's hurting me. Also his fingers are dirty."

"Fingers?" panted Goodman, in horror. "Dirty?"

He removed his hand and gazed at it fascinatedly.

"I don't believe you've washed for a week," said the girl scornfully. "Please go away. I don't like you."

"You—you don't like me?" panted the unfortunate Goodman. "I'm your cousin ——"

"Don't be too hard on him, Georgie," interrupted Pyne, giving his head a significant tap. "He can't help it. He gets like this now and again. Why his people ever sent him to Whitelands I can't imagine. Everybody here says that he would be better off in a home."

"Why, you—you silly fatheaded ass——" began Goodman.

"Colney Hatch, for example," murmured Pyne.

"If this is another of your schoolboy jokes, I don't like it," said Georgie, giving Goodman such an icy up-and-downer that he felt frozen from head to foot. "I've never seen this boy in all my life, and I don't like his familiar ways."

"Yes, chuck it, Pyne," urged Pyne. "My

cousin doesn't like your familiar ways. Didn't you just hear her say so?"

"Your cousin," hooted Goodman. "She's my cousin. What's the idea of all this piffle? She knows the truth——"

He broke off, aghast. She didn't know the truth! That was the reason for her strange behaviour. That young rat, Wicks, had doublecrossed him—as usual.

"Well, she's jolly well going to know the truth now!" burst out Goodman. "I'm sick of all this tomfoolery. Listen, Georgie, I'm sorry about all this. I didn't know you were coming down. I thought it was little Victor. I was a chump, of course, but I'm sorry——"

"Will you kindly ask this wretched boy what he's drivelling about?" interrupted Georgie, with flashing eyes. "Please, Cousin Stanley, tell him to leave me alone. It's like his cheek to call me 'Georgie'."

"You bet it's like his cheek!" agreed Pyne angrily. "Listen, you uncouth ass, scram! Miss Hylton doesn't like to be annoyed. She's Georgie to me, because I'm her cousin—but to everybody else she's Miss Hylton. Is that understood?"

"No, it's jolly well not understood!" bawled Goodman, who was making things worse every minute. "For goodness' sake, Georgie, don't take any more notice of this rotter. His name is Pyne, and I paid him—I mean——"

"How can his name be Pyne, if your name is Pyne?" interrupted Georgie.

"That's just one of his delusions," explained Pyne. "He thinks everybody's name is Pyne. Don't be too hard on him, old girl. He's just a bit crackers."

"Crackers!" bawled Goodman. "Me?"

"You see," murmured Pyne, with a sigh. He took hold of Goodman by the arm and shoved him aside.

"Clear off, you fathead!" he whispered. "Can't you see you're mucking up everything?"

"That's what I'm trying to do—muck up everything!" roared Goodman. "I'll soon show you whether I'm Georgie's cousin or not." He whirled round on the girl, fishing something out of his pocket as he did so. "Look here, Georgie, this is my Aunt Edith's letter——"

"I wondered what had become of it," said Pyne coolly, as he deftly took it out of Goodman's hand. "Naughty. Pilfering again, eh?"

"Pilfering?" gurgled Goodman.

"When are you going to break yourself of this habit of pinching other people's letters?" continued Pyne severely. "It's not nice. Now, be a good chap and run away."

"I won't run away!" said Goodman thickly. "Gimme that letter back! It's mine, and you know it's mine! You can go and eat coke, Pyne!" He looked at the girl frantically. "His name *is* Pyne," he continued. "He was taking my place, just for a lark. I'm your real cousin. Don't I keep on telling you? It was like his nerve to kiss you——"

"Indeed?" said Georgie coldly. "Why shouldn't he kiss me? He's my cousin, isn't he? As for you——" She scorched the unhappy Goodman with another glance. "I'm quite sure that my mother's sister couldn't have such an ugly, uncouth boy as you! Why, I wouldn't own you for a cousin!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

This was beginning to get really comic, and the interested crowd yelled with laughter. Stanley Horatio Goodman looked as if he had been struck by lightning.

"Well, now that that's settled, Stan, I'd like you to take me to tea," said Georgie, linking her arm into Pyne's and hugging it. "Please don't let this—this rough boy bother me again."

"Would you like me to punch him, or something?" asked Pyne.

"No, but if he annoys me again, you can punch him," said the girl. "I didn't know they had such boys in a fine school like Whitelands. I know he can't help being ugly. I suppose he was born like that——"

"He was worse when he was born," said Pyne sadly.

"Just look at him!" continued Georgie.

"Eh?" gasped Goodman. "Look at him?" He stared down at himself blankly. "What's—what's the matter with me?"

"Look at his dirty and crumpled collar!" continued the girl scornfully. "Look at his untidy hair! Unless you had told me, I wouldn't have believed that he was a Whitelands scholar at all. You're so different!" she added, turning to Pyne. "I knew you were my cousin as soon as I saw you."

"Well that, I think, settles the whole thing, what?" drawled Pyne, as he looked at Stan Goodman. "I think you heard, rat? She doesn't like you. Amscray!"

"Rat!" said Goodman faintly. "Did you call me a rat?"

"In the presence of a young lady, a chap has to choose his words," explained Pyne. "I couldn't very well call you what I'd like to call you——"

"Oh, let's get indoors for tea," interrupted Georgie. "All this is so silly. Come on, Cousin Stanley."

CHAPTER VII

WORSE AND WORSE

STAN GOODMAN watched through a kind of mist as Kenneth Pyne and Georgie walked away, arm-in-arm—the girl evidently fully satisfied that Pyne was her real cousin. Goodman had a feeling that he would presently wake up out of a horrid nightmare.

"You hopeless ass."

"You blundering idiot."

Two voices, charged with scorn, awoke him with a start. He came out of his trance to find himself firmly gripped by Bob Davis and Charlie Hunt, and they were forcibly marching him away from the hilarious crowd.

"Here, what the——"

"You—you clumsy lunatic!" said Hunt scathingly. "Didn't we warn you to go easy?"

"Hey. What's the idea of——"

"We told you to be humble, and tell your cousin the truth gently," broke in Davis. "What happens? You charge up, like a bull in a china shop and muck up everything with your silly bawling. Naturally, she took a dislike to you at once. Any girl would. She wouldn't own you as a cousin now. She'd rather have something that the cat's left on the mat!"

"Here, I say, chuck it!" protested Goodman, who was feeling wretched. "What do you mean—I mucked up everything? It was Pyne who mucked up everything." He breathed hard. "Pyne. That—that snake in the grass! That crawling, squirming, double-crossing edition of a slimy eel. It was his chance to tell Georgie the truth, and what did he do? He made her think that I'm potty."

"It didn't need any help from Pyne to make her think that," said Hunt scornfully.

"Why, you—you insulting——"

"Cheese it!" said Hunt impatiently. "It's no good rapping on at us, Goody. You've only yourself to blame for what's happened. You acted like a mug."

"Like a half-wit!" added Davis, with relish.

It was not often that Goodman's chums had the opportunity of coming out with a few home truths about their study chum's manners, facial appearance, and habits. So they were relishing this frank exchange of views.

"Why do I say you acted like a half-wit?" continued Davis. "A half-wit might have been successful! You went to work the wrong way, Stan. Your only chance was to be gentle and apologetic. You seem to forget that your cousin accepted Pyne in the first minute, and she has no reason to believe that she's being spoofed. Then you charge up like an enraged rhino and expect her to accept you without question! Naturally, she turns you down flat."

"Can you wonder?" asked Hunt. "I mean, when she looks at Pyne, then looks at Stan——"

"When she does what?" interrupted Goodman darkly.

"Well, old man, we're your best friends, and even we recognise that you're no oil painting," explained Hunt. "This afternoon you're looking more grubby and untidy than usual. There are ink stains on your trousers, and they haven't been pressed for weeks; there's a smudge on your nose, and your hair looks like a lot of rope's ends——"

"Anything else?" asked Goodman ominously.

"That'll be enough for now," replied Hunt. "Anyhow, when it comes to a choice between you and Pyne—well, naturally, any girl would be potty if she chose you!"

"Why, you insulting——"

"Come off it," snapped Hunt. "You know as well as I do that Pyne is as smart and sleek as a pussy-cat—always wears his clothes well, always has a clean collar, his hair brushed, and everything. Besides, Pyne has a way with him."

"Haven't I got a way with me?" demanded Goodman.

"Yes—a way like a rogue elephant!"

"I've had about enough of this!" snorted Goodman, glaring. "In about two minutes I'm going to wipe up the floor with you funny fatheads!"

"We're only trying to show you that you haven't a dog's chance," explained Davis. "The game was all right at the beginning—for Pyne to amuse your kid cousin. Now that it's gone wrong, it's no good kicking. Don't blame Pyne. He didn't know Georgie was coming instead of the kid. It was a dangerous thing to give the job to Pyne in the first place. Pyne's deep. He's a sticker, too. Naturally, when he finds himself on a good thing he's going to stick to it as long as he can. I wish Georgie had mistaken *me* for her cousin!" he added enviously. "It must be jolly nice to have a ripping girl like that so pally with you."

Stan Goodman writhed. This was simply turning the knife in the wound.

"Shut up!" he growled tensely. "Both of you—shut up. I must think!"

"What with?" asked Hunt interestedly.

"I'm her cousin, and she will have to know I'm her cousin," went on Goodman, scowling fiercely as he concentrated. "I'll

admit I went to work the wrong way just now. I—well—I was excited. That chump, Pyne, made me see red. There must be some other way."

"It's no good going up to her again and telling her that you're her real cousin," said Hunt. "That's a wash-out. If she didn't believe you at first, she won't ever believe you. Particularly as Pyne is doing everything he can to maintain the pretence."

"The murky, double-dealing rat!" muttered Goodman ferociously.

"You mean, he's smart?" asked Hunt.

"If that's what you call being smart—— Why the dickens can't you both shut up?" demanded Goodman. "Can't you see I'm trying to think?"

"What I like about Georgie is her refreshing frankness," said Davis reminiscently. "It was lovely, the way she looked at your face and said that it was ugly. I've often felt like saying the same thing."

"She said he was dirty, too," chuckled Hunt. "She said he hadn't washed for a week."

"She also said he's ill-mannered," remarked Davis. "Can you blame her? The way he acted, it's a wonder she didn't slosh him in the face."

"You chaps call yourselves my friends?" said Goodman bitterly.

"So we are," argued Hunt. "We're just trying to tell you what a mess you made of the whole thing. She turned you down because you deserved to be turned down. I'm afraid there's nothing you can do, Stan. After roaring at her like the Niagara Falls you can't expect her to take any notice of you now. She finds that Pyne is well mannered, polite, and nice-looking, and she naturally sticks to him. I tell you, you haven't an earthly."

"There must be some way," insisted Goodman desperately. "Look here, supposing I get hold of Mortimer? Mortimer's a sport. He's proved that by allowing the thing to go as far as this."

"What do you expect Mortimer to do?"

"Tell her the truth, of course," replied Goodman, his face lighting up with enthusiasm. "Yes, by crackers, that's it. She'll believe him—especially when Mrs. Mortimer verifies it. They'll tell her it was all a joke. Just a lark on my part. I expect Mortimer will be jolly glad to get things straightened out. He never reckoned on the deception going as far as this. Yes, that's it. I'll see Mortimer directly after tea."

"Go ahead!" said Davis—"and kill your last hope."

"Eh?"

"If you do that, you'll have Georgie looking on you as some kind of worm," continued Davis. "She'll know the truth, of course——"

"Well, isn't that what I want?"

"You want her to know the truth, but you don't want her to cut you like a leper, do you?"

"I don't see what you're getting at," said Goodman, frowning. "Why should she cut me like a leper?"

"Even supposing that Mortimer agrees to tell her the truth—which isn't at all certain—what's she going to think of you when she knows?" asked Davis scornfully. "It's a delicate situation, and your only hope is to tell her personally."

"I've tried that!" howled Goodman.

"Made a mess of it, too," nodded Hunt. "So we come back to the same place. You're finished!"

"There's just one chance," said Davis. "No good going to Mortimer, of course. That's out. Mortimer's probably waiting for you to make a move."

"What's this one hope?" asked Goodman.

"Smarten yourself, and behave like—well, like Pyne," explained Davis. "Whenever you see her about, be sure to act like a gentleman. Do polite things—to Charlie and I, for instance. It'll be a strain, I know——"

"What do you mean—do polite things?" asked Goodman, puzzled. "What kind of things?"

"Oh, I don't know—invite us, in a gentle voice, to go into the tuckshop for some ice-creams," said Davis, with inspiration. "Anything like that. The idea is to give a good impression—to pave the way. You must spoof Georgie into believing that you weren't your natural self this afternoon."

"What do you mean—spoof her?" asked Goodman wrathfully. "Anybody might think I always acted like that!"

"Well, don't you?"

"No, I jolly well don't," roared Goodman. "It was Pyne. He made me go off the deep end——"

"You see?" murmured Charlie Hunt, with a shrug. "What's the good? What did Georgie say? Uncouth?"

Stan Goodman started.

"I—I forgot myself," he said hurriedly. "All right—I won't do it again. I'll—I'll ——" He swallowed hard. "From now on I'll be gentlemanly!"

"I hope it won't be too much of a strain," said Davis drily.

While Goodman was in the dormitory, changing, he pondered over the conversation he had had with his two chums, and he came to the conclusion that they were right. They had put it bluntly and unkindly, but they were certainly right. It

wasn't any good being bull-headed with a girl. That was where he had made his mistake. The only thing to do was to show her his gentle side—then, at the right moment, approach her with soft words. As long as he remembered himself, everything would be all right.

He bucked up considerably. What an ass he had been not to think of this before! It was going to be so easy. Once he had Georgie's ear he could tell her all sorts of things about his own family, and her family—things that Pyne could *not* tell her. The more Goodman thought of this, the better he liked it. He would challenge Pyne—yes, he would have a complete show-down. When Pyne failed to tell her all the things he ought to know about the family, and he—Goodman—told her, she would have to admit that he was her real cousin. After that everything would be plain sailing.

Unfortunately, Goodman had no opportunity of getting close enough to Georgie to put this plan into execution. Although he smartened himself—even to the extent of brushing his hair; although he hovered about the quad for the rest of the evening, he hardly saw her at all.

He was told, later, that Kenneth Pyne, dutifully obeying Aunt Edith's instructions, was devoting all his time to entertaining the pretty cousin from South Africa. There was no doubt about it—the Fix-It Agency was doing a thorough job!

The only glimpse Goodman caught of the pair was when they were going off towards the River Tunn. He yelled at them in order to attract their attention—and was mortified to see Georgie give him one glance, then toss her head in disdain. He was so startled by this that by the time he had recovered they were out of sight.

He went off to the river himself, only to learn that Pyne had taken Georgie for a boat ride. He footled about down the river for some time, saw nothing of them, then returned to the school—hardly scraping in for call-over. Then he learned, with fresh exasperation, that Pyne and Georgie had been back for some time—and Pyne had been treating Georgie to ice-creams in the school shop.

Kenneth Pyne, in fact, was having the time of his life. Georgie was becoming more and more intimate, and they were getting on like a breeze. To give Pyne his due, it must be recorded that he was earning his fee diligently and wholeheartedly. The extra ten shillings—expense money—he was dutifully laying out as per schedule, on treating the visitor.

All in all, Pyne was having a high old time. He seemed to have a particularly high old time when he was saying good night to his supposed cousin. Charlie Hunt and Bob Davis, with no thought of spying in their minds, happened to see Pyne and Georgie in Mr. Mortimer's doorway. In fact, anybody could have seen them. Pyne took no pains whatever to conceal his activities. Quite the contrary. He was thoroughly enjoying the open way in which he could be friendly with Georgie.

"Well, Stan, nothing for you to worry about to-night," said Hunt, when he came across the disgruntled Goodman. "She's gone indoors. Pyne has said good night, and everything's all right until to-morrow."

"If you think everything's all right, you're crazy," snorted Goodman. "According to all I can hear, they're thicker than ever. He not only took her round the school, but he took her on the river for a boat-ride, too. Think of it! A boat-ride! It might have been me on the river with her. Confound and blow it! She's my cousin!" he roared. "It's a bit thick, if I have to stand by and see——"

"Easy, old son—easy!" warned Davis.

"Eh? Oh yes—I forgot," muttered Goodman. "But if my hair isn't white by the morning, I shall be surprised! How do you know they've said good night?"

"Well, it looked like it."

"*Looked* like it?"

"I mean, the way they kissed——"

"I knew it!" groaned Goodman. "I've been expecting to hear this all the time, but I was afraid to ask. You'd better not tell me." He looked round wildly. "Where's Pyne now? Just let me get my hands on him—— How many times did they kiss?" he added fiercely.

"Only once or twice."

"Only!" howled Goodman.

"Well, they stood chatting outside Mortimer's door for a bit, then Georgie kissed Pyne," grinned Hunt. "Mind you, there was nothing secretive about this. Half the Fourth was watching them—and Pyne knew it."

"Go on!" said Goodman hoarsely. "What then?"

"Nothing—except that Pyne kissed her back."

"Kissed her back?" asked Goodman, aghast. "That's idiotic! I've never heard of a chap kissing a girl's back——"

"Not her back, fathead!" said Hunt. "I mean, Pyne gave her an answering kiss. He made quite a job of it. Fairly hugged her. Honestly, Stan, if you had an earthly chance this evening, it's gone by now. You're sunk. Georgie is sold on Pyne, and there's nothing you can do about it."

"Oh, no?" fumed Goodman. "We'll see about that! Nothing I can do, eh? Nothing—much! Only batter Pyne's face

into a pulp!" He prepared to make a move. "Where is he? I'll bet she won't like the look of his face in the morning——"

"Do a crackpot thing like that, and she won't forgive you for twenty years," interrupted Davis, in exasperation. "How many more times have we to tell you that violence won't do you any good? Violence was your downfall at the start. You'll only make things worse."

"What am I going to do?" wailed Goodman helplessly. "I can't even punch the chap in the face now! I—I've never felt so horribly stumped in all my life. At least, I can tell Pyne what I think of him. That won't leave any marks!"

He went charging along towards Study Eight, and, sure enough, Kenneth Pyne was sprawling in the easy chair, looking supremely happy. He had just been telling Sam Kennedy how easily the Fix-it Agency's first pound fee was being earned.

"Hi, you!" roared Goodman, barging into the room.

"What's the matter, Goody?" drawled Pyne. "You look excited. There's nothing to get excited about."

"I've just been hearing—— Well, never mind!" said Goodman thickly. "You're a fraud! You're not my cousin's cousin at all——"

"What is this—a riddle?" asked Pyne politely. "Of course I'm not your cousin's cousin. That's understood. I've simply been obeying instructions, as per agreement."

"Blow the agreement!" roared Goodman. "Dash the agreement! Haven't I already told you that the agreement is cancelled?"

"You told Georgie so, too, but she wouldn't believe it," nodded Pyne. "You know, Goody, you made a very bad impression this afternoon. I don't like to tell you what she said about you afterwards—but, anyhow, she's wondering if a part of the school is reserved for Borstal inmates."

"You—you rotter!" gasped Goodman. "You didn't do anything to help, did you?"

"Now, that's not fair!" said Kenneth Pyne, with spirit. "I did everything I possibly could. When she ran you down, I stuck up for you. She even said that you're not fit to live with pigs."

"She said—that?" moaned Goodman.

"Yes, and I said you were!" said Pyne stoutly. "That shows you how I stuck up for you."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"A fine way to stick up for me!" snorted Goodman.

"I tell you, I did everything I could—to make her accept me as her cousin," said Pyne coolly. "After all, isn't that the whole idea of the contract? It's a bit thick for you to grumble at me, Goody, because I'm faithfully carrying out instructions."

"Instructions or no instructions, you needn't have taken her on the river!" argued Goodman. "You needn't have gone all over the place arm-in-arm with her. You needn't have kissed her good night! There's such a thing as being too thorough——"

"Georgie expects her cousin to be nice and friendly," explained Pyne. "And why not? You're making a lot of fuss over nothing. Don't forget that you started this whole racket, and if you're any kind of a sport you'll accept the situation as it stands."

"To-morrow's Sunday," said Goodman pointedly. "Walks in the country, I suppose? What have you arranged for to-morrow? Whatever it is, I'm going to spoil it."

"I don't suppose I shall see Georgie in the morning at all," replied Pyne. "She'll naturally go to church with Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer. What we're doing in the afternoon, I don't know. Something interesting, I expect. It looks like being a fine day, with lots of sunshine. I wonder what you'll be doing to-morrow afternoon, Goody?"

Goodman made strange throaty noises.

"Unless he's jolly careful, he'll be clawing at the sides of a padded cell," said Charlie Hunt, with conviction. "Does anybody know where we can find a straitjacket?"

CHAPTER VIII

THE LAST STRAW

After a restless night, Stan Goodman arrived downstairs the next morning to hear the worst possible news. It was, as Kenneth Pyne had predicted, a gloriously sunny day.

"I say," said Sam Kennedy, "have you heard?"

"Heard what?" growled Goodman.

"About your cousin."

"What about her?" asked Goodman quickly.

"Nothing to look so startled about, ass," replied Kennedy. "She was over here a little while ago—and, by Jingo, did she look stunning in her Sunday frock!"

"Don't!" said Goodman, shutting his eyes.

"It seems that they're going out for a trip to Tunley-on-the-Wash this afternoon," went on Kennedy. "A cruise in a motor-launch—with a whacking great picnic basket. Lucky bounders!"

"Who's going for a cruise?" asked Goodman hoarsely. "As if I didn't know!" he added, with bitterness. "My cousin and that snake, Pyne! I won't stand for it!" he went on excitedly. "This is the last straw. If anybody's going to take her for a picnic——"

"Don't be an ass," interrupted Kennedy. "They're not going alone. Mrs. Mortimer's going, and a friend of the Mortimers—somebody they're going to pick up in Tunley."

"Does it matter who else?" panted Goodman. "All I know is that Pyne is taking my cousin. My cousin!" he added, with a roar. "Yes, and he'll be spending *my* money on her! That's the worst pill of all. My money on my cousin! While I'm supposed to stand by and do nothing."

"My dear chap, there's nothing else you can do," said Kennedy, with a shrug. "What a chap you are for getting all excited. I thought you had resigned yourself to the situation by this time."

Stan Goodman was far from resigned. He spent the morning—apart from the time when he was in church—prowling about the school like an untamed tiger of the jungle. He was trying to think of some way in which he could tell Georgie the truth before the picnic. It was his only hope to enjoy that treat in her company. By this time he had come to the conclusion that it would be no good meeting her face to face. He had caught a glimpse of her that morning, and she had cut him dead. She wouldn't give him a chance to speak, let alone explain.

In desperation, he decided that he would see the Housemaster. Why had he taken any notice of his chums yesterday? Mortimer was the man who could put things right. Yet he continued to hesitate—until, in the early afternoon, he saw the Mortimers' saloon standing ready for departure, with Pyne helping to strap a huge picnic hamper on the back.

"Oh, my hat!" muttered Goodman frantically. "I'm nearly too late. I must act——"

"As long as you don't act the giddy goat, it won't matter," said a voice at his elbow.

Goodman started, and turned to find Davis and Hunt with him.

"Now, Goody, for the love of Mike don't go and repeat your performance of yesterday," said Davis. "I can see that Red Indian look in your eye! You're practically ready to go on the war-path. Forget it. There's nothing you can do now. It'll only make things worse if you create a scene——"

"But I must do something," protested Goodman. "Look at 'em! Pyne's just going off for a picnic with my cousin. What am I supposed to do? Stand here and wish them luck?"

"It's about all you can do."

"Oh, yes?" growled Goodman. "We'll see about that. There's still a chance. If only I can get hold of—— Well, never mind. You chaps wouldn't understand."

He strode off before they could reply. As a matter of fact, he had just caught sight of Mr. Horace Mortimer chatting with Mr. Mickie, over by the steps of Selby's House. Mr. Mortimer was just taking his departure. It was the opportunity for which Goodman had been longing.

He hurried across to Mr. Mortimer and raised his cap.

"Can—can I have a word with you, sir?"

"With pleasure, Goodman—with pleasure," said Mr. Mortimer heartily. "What can I do for you on this delightful afternoon? Like spring, isn't it? I hope you won't be long, because I'm in rather a hurry——"

"It's—it's about my cousin, sir."

"Oh, yes. A delightful girl, Goodman."

"I've hardly had two words with her since she's been here, sir," said Goodman bitterly. "I mean, can't you do something, sir?"

"Do something? In what way?"

"I mean, all this silly rubbish——"

"What silly rubbish?"

"Oh, come off it, sir—you're only doing this to tease me," said Goodman desperately. "You know jolly well what I'm getting at. Georgie is my cousin—not Pyne's. You know that, don't you, sir?'

"Yes, I know it," replied the Housemaster, with a twinkle. "I was under the impression that the arrangement was one of your own making, Goodman. What seems to be the trouble?"

"When I made that arrangement, sir, I didn't know——I mean, it's gone far enough!" said Goodman boldly. "I want you to tell Georgie the truth, sir. Now, I mean—at once—before they start off on this picnic."

"Why should I do that?" asked Mr. Mortimer. "Has Pyne been misleading me? He definitely assured me that it was your own wish that he should take on the task of entertaining your cousin. Is that true, or not?"

"Well, it's quite true, sir, but it's not the cousin I was expecting—— That is to say, there's been a bit of a mix-up," said Goodman hastily. "I want Georgie to know the truth now."

"Then, my dear chap, why don't you tell her yourself?"

"I'd rather you tell her, sir," urged Goodman. "She'd take more notice of you. I mean, she wouldn't doubt your word——"

"Have you any reason to believe that she would doubt yours?" asked the Housemaster with exasperating coolness. "Really, Goodman, you'll have to get yourself out of this tangle by your own efforts. It's nothing to do with me. Georgie seems to be perfectly satisfied that Pyne is her cousin, and if you want her to know anything different, it's up to you to tell her."

"That's just the trouble, sir. I tried to tell her yesterday, but she wouldn't listen. Well, she listened, but she wouldn't believe me."

"That's rather a snag," said Mr. Mortimer gravely. "In other words, Goodman, your original duplicity has landed you in a predicament which now whips back on you? I'm afraid you're not going to get any sympathy from me. You came to an arrangement with Pyne to 'take over' your cousin for the duration of her visit—because you believed, at that time, that the task would be an irksome one. You now find that, far from being irksome, it is highly desirable. In other words, you now want to get out of the consequences of your mistake without paying the penalty."

Goodman squirmed.

"You—you said something about duplicity, sir," he said wretchedly. "Dash it, that's a bit thick, isn't it?"

"I don't think so at all," replied the Housemaster. "Your aunt writes to you and asks you to be nice to your cousin—and you actually pay another boy to pretend to be your cousin. If that's not duplicity, what is it? No, Goodman, you'll have to explain things to Georgie yourself. You're not going to shift your responsibilities on to my shoulders. Georgie is certainly your cousin, and it's up to you to tell her so."

With that Mr. Mortimer walked away. Goodman felt about the size of half-a-pint, and his outlook was bleaker than ever. He made his way back towards the spot where he had left Davis and Hunt. They were still there. The car was no longer outside Mr. Mortimer's front door, however.

"Yes, they've gone,' said Hunt.

"Gone!" groaned Goodman. "While I was talking to Mortimer—— Oh! my hat! It's too late. They've gone on that picnic, and I can't do a thing. I believe Mortimer kept me talking on purpose."

He had frantic ideas of getting out his bicycle and riding to Tunley-on-the-Wash. A very little thought convinced him that this would be a waste of time. By the time he arrived there the motor launch would be out in the estuary. No, he was dished again. All he could do, now, was to wait until the party came back.

On second thoughts, perhaps it was just as well. If he had faced Georgie out there, in front of everybody, he would have made a mess of things. So he spent the whole afternoon walking through the neighbouring woods by himself, trying to think of some way in which he could straighten himself out. It was no consolation to realise, when he came back to Whitelands, that he was as far from a solution as ever. If only Georgie would listen to him—if only she would give him a chance to get close enough to say something! Kenneth Pyne, naturally, was doing nothing to help.

Towards evening he hovered about the quad, waiting for the car to return. The picnickers would not be very long now. Goodman was desperate. He wasn't going to make any scene, and he wasn't going to shout. As soon as the car arrived he was going to tell Georgie in a solemn and earnest voice that he was her real cousin—yes, and he would offer to prove it. The girl could not very well rebuff him in front of Mrs. Mortimer, and it would be his chance.

Thus, after spending all the afternoon on fruitless ideas, each of which was more fantastic in its turn, he decided to do the one sensible thing. So he was feeling more or less bucked when, at last, the car came into sight. It turned through the gateway, and Goodman ran towards it. Mrs. Mortimer was at the wheel, with Georgie beside her—and there was another passenger in the back, enjoying some huge joke with Kenneth Pyne, judging by their laughter. She was a smartly dressed lady of thirty-five or so—young, animated, and good looking. Goodman was so startled by the sight of her that he forgot all about his original intention.

There was something familiar about her —— By crackers, yes, she looked a bit like his own mother! Then he knew. It was Aunt Edith! There were photographs of her at home, but not very recent ones —— Georgie's mother! So she was the other picnicker they had picked up in Tunley-on-the-Wash. Evidently, Mrs. Hylton had finished her business in Scotland earlier than she had expected, and had come to Whitelands to join her daughter.

"Hurrah!" yelled Goodman, with a great surge of relief. "This is going to put everything right. Hey, Aunt Edith. Hallo, Aunt Edith!"

He was running beside the car, and out

of the corner of his eye he saw that Georgie was looking at him with open scorn—and, what was worse, her mother was regarding him in blank astonishment. Mrs. Mortimer thought it advisable to bring the car to a standstill.

"You shouldn't run up like that," she protested. "You might have caused an accident——"

"Sorry, Mrs. Mortimer," gasped Goodman, as he opened one of the rear doors. "Hallo, Aunt Edith. Thank goodness you've come. This is great."

"Who is this rough boy?" asked Aunt Edith, in astonishment. "What on earth does he mean by calling me 'Aunt Edith'? Do you know anything about him, Stanley?"

"His name's Pyne," said Kenneth Pyne blandly. "The poor chap can't help it. He's been acting funny for the last day or two——"

"Stop!" gasped Goodman, his brain reeling. "I can't stand any more of this. Listen, Aunt Edith! Don't say you don't know me or I shall go crackers. I'm your nephew, Stanley!"

Mrs. Hylton gave him a stern look up and down, then turned away.

"Amazing!" she said stiffly. "How can the boy imagine that he is my nephew? My nephew is sitting beside me all the time. Please drive on, Mrs. Mortimer. Boy, go away!"

It was indeed the last straw. Goodman staggered away drunkenly as the car set into motion again and rolled towards Mr. Mortimer's private door. That his own aunt should disown him was not merely idiotic, but fantastic. It was equally fantastic that she could have accepted Kenneth Pyne as her nephew.

For Aunt Edith knew what he looked like——or, at least, she had a general idea, even if she had not seen him since he had been a mere infant. There was something behind all this which baffled Goodman's imagination.

He was confused and muddled. He was almost ready to believe that Georgie was, indeed, Pyne's real cousin! Perhaps he he was going potty. Davis and Hunt were always telling him that he was going potty—— He ran after the car after giving a jump of startled surprise, and overtook it just after it had come to a standstill.

"Dear me, is this boy still here?" asked Aunt Edith. "Stanley, can't you do something about it?"

"I'm Stanley!" gasped Goodman. "Please, Aunt Edith, don't keep this up any longer or I shall go loopy. Don't you recognise me? I'm Stanley."

"The boy seems to think that he is you, Stanley," said Mrs. Hylton, turning to Pyne in astonishment. "I wonder what gave him such an idea?"

"He's not a bad chap really, Aunt Edith," said Kenneth Pyne indulgently. "He has these fits now and again. Personally, I think his people ought to do something about it."

"Pyne, you twister, why can't you tell them the truth?" asked the desperate Goodman. "Honestly, aunt, he's pulling your leg. His name's Pyne, and he's only pretending to be your nephew. I'm Georgie's cousin——"

"Perhaps we were a bit hard on him yesterday," said Georgie kindly. "I didn't realise he was as bad as this. What a shame. His people ought to put him in a home."

They all went indoors, leaving Goodman looking bludgeoned. If somebody had come along and hit him on the head with a crowbar he could not have looked more stunned.

Presently, Kenneth Pyne came strolling out, and he nodded genially to Stan Goodman as he passed.

"Good evening," he said. "Nice day! Any cousins or aunts this evening? No? I'll call again. Nice day!"

"You—you funny idiot!" roared Goodman, exasperated beyond measure. "This isn't a time for your potty jokes! What about my cousin Georgie?'

"You mean my cousin Georgie?"

"I mean *my* cousin!" shouted Goodman. "Look here, Pyne, this has gone far enough. You really must tell Georgie the truth. Honest injun, Pyne, you don't want to see me gibbering and pulling straws out of my hair, do you?"

"I don't know about the straws, but we see you gibbering every day," replied Pyne. "I say, we had a ripping picnic, you know. The sea was lovely."

"Oh! The sea was lovely, was it?"

"Rather! The picnic itself was gorgeous."

"Blow the sea and blow the picnic!" said Goodman, in a strained voice. "I want to know how you tricked my Aunt Edith into accepting you as her nephew. It was easy enough with Georgie, but I'm jiggered if I can see how you put it over Aunt Edith. There's a catch in this somewhere!"

"My dear chap, it didn't need any putting over," explained Kenneth Pyne. "It was all perfectly easy. Georgie introduced me to her mother as her Cousin Stanley, and your aunt didn't seem to know the difference, so I naturally kept quiet. I'll admit I thought the jig was up for a moment, and it gave me a nasty turn, but there's nothing to worry about now."

"Oh, so there's nothing to worry about?" said Goodman thickly. "That's all you know! I don't care if it puts me in dutch with Georgie until I'm ninety—but I'm going to punch your nose. If I don't punch somebody's nose in the next minute I shall scream. Your nose is the nearest!'

"Here, steady——"

"Steady be blowed! I'm going to slaughter you," snorted Goodman. "Wait a minute! I'll give you just one chance. Go right indoors and tell Georgie the truth and I'll forgive you."

"Do you know any more jokes?" asked Pyne. "I understand that your aunt is going to be here for two or three days—and that means that Georgie's going to be here for two or three days. What do you take me for—a mug?"

"All right—you've asked for it!" panted Goodman. "I'm going to wipe up this gravel with you. Put up your fists, and get ready——"

"At least, wait until we get out of sight of the Mortimers' windows," interrupted Pyne. "I'll fight you, if you like, Goody, but it won't do any good. As for scrapping out here, you're crazy. On Sunday evening, too! What kind of a chump are you?"

At last, however, the long-suffering Goodman was at the end of his tether. He would not have cared if the Headmaster himself, flanked by the entire Board of Governors, was standing by. He went for Kenneth Pyne baldheaded. Pyne, in spite of himself, was obliged to back away and defend himself.

It was not much of a scrap, as scraps go. Pyne, for all his languid ways, was an excellent boxer—and although Stan Goodman was the most doughty fighter in the Fourth, he was far too excited at the moment to use any kind of science. Pyne poked jabbing blows here and there, while Goodman's guard was all over the place.

"Better chuck it, Goody!" he murmured. "We shall both have a swishing if Mortimer spots us—— Oh, so you want to play? Well, you've asked for it!"

A terrific swipe had missed him by inches as he dodged neatly. He avoided another wild lunge, side-stepped, and brought home a body punch which fetched Goodman up with a grunt.

"Don't you think you two had better stop it?" asked a laughing voice. "Stanley, don't be an ass. It's a lucky thing that Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer are in the back room."

Georgie came between the two Fourth-formers and separated them.

"I happened to spot you from the front window," she resumed. "It seems that I must bring things to a head myself. I suppose you're fighting about me?"

"All my fault, old thing," apologised Pyne. "I'm afraid I goaded the poor chap a bit too far. I don't wonder he's feeling bad."

"Yes, I think he's had enough by now," said Georgie, turning to Goodman. "What a silly chump you are, Cousin Stanley."

"Cousin Stanley!" panted Goodman.

"Your name's Stanley, isn't it?"

"Yes, but——but——"

"I think you've had enough," said Georgie sweetly.

"Here, let me understand this!" gabbled Goodman. "Do you mean that you've known all the time?"

"Of course, I've known."

"You've known that I'm your real cousin, and that Pyne has been—— Help! And—and Aunt Edith?" Goodman clapped a hand to his head. "You mean you weren't spoofed at all?"

"Not a little bit," laughed Georgie. "I knew Pyne wasn't my cousin as soon as I met him."

"Well, well, well!" murmured Kenneth Pyne. "That's one on me. I thought you were taken in all the time—at least, until this afternoon."

"I wanted to give Stanley a lesson, that's why I accepted you as my cousin in that first minute," explained the girl. "As if I shouldn't know Stanley! He may not have sent any photographs to South Africa, but he forgets that I visited his mother and father in London—and I naturally saw photographs of him there."

"Well I'm jiggered!" gurgled Goodman.

"So, of course, when you introduced yourself to me as Cousin Stanley I wanted to know what was cooking," continued Georgie. "As soon as I saw the study, I knew the truth. A nice thing," she went on, turning to Goodman. "Paying somebody else to act as you because you thought it was little Victor who was coming! You couldn't bear the thought of being nice to a little boy of five, could you?"

"I've been a heel," muttered Goodman wretchedly. "A snake—a rat—anything you like! I don't care what you call me, but I'm jolly glad all this misunderstanding is over. It is over, isn't it?" he asked anxiously. "You're going to accept me as your Cousin Stanley?"

"How can I help it?" laughed Georgie.

"Well, this beats me!" said Kenneth Pyne, scratching his head. "When I think of the way we met—and the way we said good night, last night——"

"Yes, kissing you was rather a heavy price to pay, but it wasn't half so bad as I thought it was going to be," said the girl, with a twinkle. "I suppose I had better kiss you now, Cousin Stanley. If I don't, you'll be jealous."

"I—I say—— Not really——" Goodman was confused. "I don't really deserve——"

"You jolly well don't deserve to be kissed!" agreed Georgie, with spirit. "You haven't yet told me why you worked the deception in the first place."

"I thought you understood?" asked Goodman. "I thought it was that little kid who was coming—— Honestly, Georgie, I'm afraid of kids. I don't know what to do with them. Aunt Edith was so——"

"Is that a fact?" asked the girl, her manner softening. "I didn't quite realise —— You mean, you're really *scared* of little children?"

"Of little cousins, anyway—who expect me to amuse 'em," admitted Goodman with a shiver. "That's why I arranged with Pyne. Pyne was broke, and he didn't seem to mind—and Mr. Mortimer agreed, too. That's what I could never understand—Mr. Mortimer agreeing."

"I think I know why he agreed," chuckled Georgie. "Anyhow, it's all over now. You'd better come indoors and meet Mother properly. She's a sport, you know—she agreed like a shot to keep up the joke—but only on condition that it was for the first few minutes. She thought that final blow would teach you the lesson that you deserve."

"Yes!" said Goodman, in a small voice. "I say, isn't there something you've forgotten? I—I mean, that kiss! You promised me——"

"This," said Kenneth Pyne discreetly, "is where I came in."

THE END

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