

TOM MERRY THE MERRY SCHOOLBOY IN THIS NUMBER!

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A REGULAR RASCAL.

LONG, COMPLETE SCHOOL TALE OF TOM MERRY.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD



IN THE GRIP OF THE INSTALMENT MAN!

NO. 33.

VOL. 2.

"Go!" thundered Mr. Jex. "I'm not going to listen to your snivelling. Get out of my sight!" And as poor Curly went sobbing down the lane, Mr. Jex grinned triumphantly.

G

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Mr. Maxwell leapt to his feet and pushed back his chair with a jerk.

"What tom-fool's game is this?" he growled.
"The tom-fool's game is up, William Renshaw. I arrest you for the murder of Miss Oldham," said Blake grimly.
"Hands up, you fool! Look out, Harrison!"

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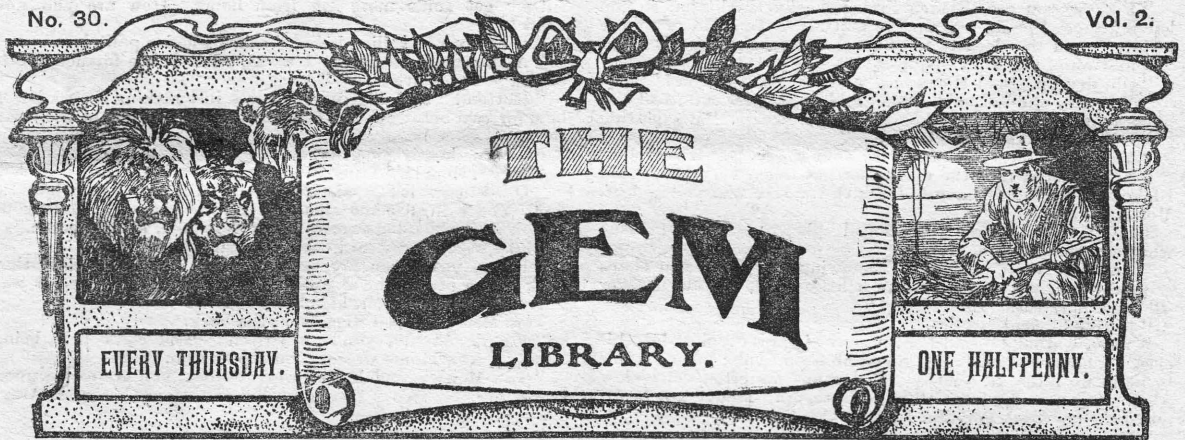
NEXT
THURSDAY.

"THE NINE DETECTIVES."

A COMPLETE SCHOOL
STORY OF TOM MERRY

No. 30.

Vol. 2.



A COMPLETE STORY FOR EVERYONE, AND EVERY STORY A GEM!

A REGULAR RASCAL.

A TALE OF
TOM MERRY'S
SCHOOLDAYS.

BY
MARTIN
CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.

Easy Payments.

TOM MERRY dived his hands deep into his trousers' pockets, and brought them out again—empty!

Monty Lowther did the same, with precisely the same result.

Manners, more methodical, was turning his pockets inside out, in the hope of discovering some coin that had escaped previous searches. The lining was brought into view, but nothing more valuable.

The Terrible Three—the chums of the Shell in the School House at St. Jim's—had to face the fact that they were broke. "Broke to the wide!" as Monty Lowther pathetically put it.

"Stony broke!" said Tom Merry. "It's rotten, kids—specially rotten just now, for I want a new footer, and I want it badly. I was going to borrow the tin of one of you chaps."

"What a coincidence!" said Monty Lowther. "I want to buy a camera, and I was going to make a raise out of you and Manners."

"Curious," said Manners. "I've run out of films for my Reliance, and I thought one of you chaps would be able to help me raise the wind."

Tom Merry laughed—the merry, ringing laugh that most people liked to hear.

"It's a giddy disappointment all round," he said. "That's the worst of the middle of the term. You get into such a beastly stone-broke state. I sha'n't have any more tin till some time next week."



Tom Merry, Monty, and Manners discover they are "Broke to the wide!"

they were generally at war with the Terrible Three.

"Hallo," said Tom Merry, "how do you do?"

"Oh, ripping!" said Jack Blake. "Glad to see you fellows. Warm for October, isn't it?"

"Well, it is, a little," said Tom Merry, with an air of great consideration. "I find it rather warm. Don't you, Manners?"

"Yes, I was just thinking so," said Manners.

Blake looked at the Terrible Three curiously.

"I wanted to speak to you chaps, if you're not busy," he said.

"Not at all," said Tom Merry hastily. "In fact, we were just wishing to see you fellows for a little talk."

"Well, that's lucky."

"Yaas, wathah," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy—"extremely so! The fact is, deah boys—"

"I'm talking, Gussy."

"And I sha'n't have any then," said Monty Lowther.

"I wonder if we could raise some from Study No. 6?" Manners remarked thoughtfully. "They're very often in funds, especially D'Arcy. Here they come—they look as if they want to speak to us. Turn on your sweetest smiles, kids, and speak to 'em gently. Mind you don't call 'em kids, that's all!"

Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy, denizens of the famous Study No. 6 in the School House, were coming towards the chums of the Shell.

The three Fourth-formers were looking very agreeable, extremely agreeable, considering that

Every Thursday.

ONE LONG, COMPLETE SCHOOL STORY.

One Halfpenny.

"I know you are, Blake; but I weally think that if you left it to me, I could explain the mattah to Tom Mewwy more lucidly," said the swell of the School House, shaking his head. "A mattah of this kind requires tact—"

"Oh, dry up," said Herries; "and let Blake get on!"
"You see, chaps," said Blake, addressing the chums of the Shell in the most amicable way in the world, "it's getting towards the middle of the term—"

"Yes, we've noticed that," said Tom Merry, rather ruefully.
"And we find that the exchequer has fallen very low," said Blake. "The funds have fallen into the sere and yellow leaf. Money is tight."

The Terrible Three exchanged glances. They guessed what was coming now.

"And so," went on Blake, "knowing how flush you chaps generally are, we want to make a little raise, to tide us over till something turns up."

"Righto!" said Herries.
"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy, screwing his eyeglass into his eye. "I have written to my govannah for a fivah; but he seems to be in no hurry to send it. Govannahs are often vewy slow when you especially want them to buck up. I have not heard from my govannah yet, and I am bwoke."

"Ha, ha, ha!"
The Terrible Three laughed loud and long—they could not help it.

Jack Blake looked at them suspiciously.
"When you've finished cackling like a lot of giddy geese," he said, "perhaps you'll tell us why the cackle!"

"Excuse us, old fellow," said Tom Merry; "but you see—ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, get on!"
"You see, when you came along, Manners, Lowther, and I had just been trying to borrow off one another, without success, and—ha, ha, ha!—when we spotted you, we decided to make a raise out of you chaps—only you spoke first. Hence these smiles."

Blake made a grimace.
"Then you're broke, too?"
"Stony!"

"I say, this is rotten!" said Blake. "I want some new football boots. I don't like to write to the pater again, but I must have those boots."

"Yaas, and I have been thinkin' of a new jiggah," said D'Arcy. "You can get a weally wippin' jiggah for twelve guineas now, deah boys. I gave sixteen for my last one, and it has never been the same since that waggon went ovah it on Rylcombe Hill. Undah the cires., I have been thinkin' of tweatin' myself to a new jiggah."

"I don't want any football boots or a bike," said Herries; "but I could do with a feed at the tuckshop, and no mistake!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "Suppose we all put our heads togethah, deah boys, and twy to think out a way of waisin' the wind?"

"Certainly!" said the Terrible Three at once, and they made a simultaneous dive at D'Arcy.

The swell of the School House gave a yell as three hard heads bumped upon his.

"Oh, how can you be so wuff? What are you up to?"
"Putting our heads together," said Tom Merry innocently.

"Isn't that the way you meant?"
"No, certainly not!" said Arthur Augustus, rubbing his head.

"I am afraid, Tom Mewwy, that that was a delibewate misunderstanding. I meant—"

"The only thing I can think of," said Blake, "is to pay a visit to the New House and see Figgins & Co. They'll lend us some tin like a shot, if they have any."

"Good idea!" said Tom Merry. "Let's all go!"
"There's Figgy at the gate! This way!"

The six School House boys marched down to the gates of the school.

Figgins & Co. were standing there, looking out into Rylcombe Lane. Figgins, long and lean and athletic; Fatty Wynn, short and plump; Kerr, medium-sized, keen, and canny—these were the chums of the New House at St. Jim's known far and wide as "Figgins & Co."

They looked rather suspiciously at the new-comers. When Study No. 6 chummed up with the Terrible Three it usually meant squalls for Figgins & Co., and the New House juniors were on their guard.

But the School House six soon showed that their intentions were not hostile.

"Figgy, old chap," said Tom Merry, "we—"
"Oh, dwy up!" said Arthur Augustus. "Why don't you leave me to explain the mattah to Figgy, deah boys? This mattah requires tact—"

Blake seized the School House swell by the shoulders, and shook him till his eyeglass dropped.

"Now, don't you interrupt again, Gussy!"
Tom Merry was going on with the explanation.

"You see, Figgy, we're all stony! We want to make a raise

till we get some more tin from home. How are you kids fixed?"

"Who are you calling kids?" asked Figgins politely.

"A thousand pardons! I mean, what is the financial state of you young gentlemen?"

"Rotten!" said Figgins. "I was just making a calculation how far two bob would go towards a feed for three at the tuckshop."

Blake made a tragic gesture.
"Figgy, thou hast failed in the hour of need! Thou hast—"

"Oh, cheese it!" said Figgins. "I'll tell you what I'll do! You can all come along to the tuckshop and take your whack in the two-bobsway as far as it goes, and welcome."

Blake wiped away an imaginary tear.

"Figgy, you touch my heart. Never shall it be said that Jack Blake of St. Jim's refused to accept a treat when it was offered him. Come on, kids!"

Tom Merry slapped Figgins on the back.

"Figgy, old kid, you're a Briton! You can't help being a measly New House waster; but apart from that—"

"Tow Mewwy, undah the pwesent cires., you are called upon to be more courteous to our fwient the enemy," said D'Arcy.

"I weally considah—"
"Cheese it! Come along!"

They walked down to the village together. They found Gaffer Jones in possession of Mother's Murphy's tuckshop. Mrs. Murphy was a good old soul, and she had a cordial sympathy for juniors who found themselves in a state of impecuniosity. But whenever Mother Murphy's rheumatism became very bad, Gaffer Jones minded her shop, and Gaffer Jones had no sympathy with distressed youth.

His wrinkled old face brightened a little as nine juniors marched in. He had a financial interest in the tuckshop, and he thought he saw a prospect of good business. He could be agreeable when he liked.

"What can I do for you, young gentlemen?" he asked.

Figgins winked at his companions.
"We want a blow-out," he replied. "Something really ripping, you know."

"What would you like?"
Figgins turned to his followers with the air of a prince.

"What would you like, kids?"
The "kids" entered into the little joke.

"A dozen or so of those pies to begin with," said Tom Merry.
"Four dozen jam tarts," said Monty Lowther.

"This big currant cake!" exclaimed Manners. "We can manage the lot."

"We could do with all this basket of oranges," Blake remarked thoughtfully. "What's your idea, Herries?"

"I was thinking that we'd better have this big bunch of bananas."

"Good!" exclaimed Kerr. "And six bottles of currant-wine."

Fatty Wynn sighed.
"I should like a dozen or so of those jolly little pork-pies that Mother Murphy makes."

Gaffer Jones was delighted.

"Anything else, gentlemen?"
"You don't mind us having all that?" asked Figgins.

"Not at all—not at all!"
"It will clear out your stock pretty well."

"Never mind—never mind; there's plenty more where that came from," said the Gaffer, rubbing his skinny hands. "Always happy to oblige you young gentlemen."

"Well, that's really jolly good of you, Gaffer. I was a little doubtful about asking you to let us have that lot on tick; but now—"

"What?" roared the Gaffer.

"You see, we're short of cash just at present—"

"You—you—you—then you don't want these things?"
"Yes, we do, we want them badly, but we can't pay for them, that's the difficulty. Of course, we don't mind, if you don't!"

"But I do!" shouted the Gaffer. "You young—"

"Then you won't let us have that feed on tick?"
"No, I won't."

Figgins shook his head sadly.

"Then it will have to stand over. Sorry, you chaps!"
"Oh, don't mention it!" said Tom Merry. "We'll take the will for the deed! I consider Gaffer Jones a very hard-hearted and unsympathetic man!"

"Yaas, wathah! I considah it most ungentlemanly to wufuse to twust—"

"We shall have to put up with ginger-pop and some nuts," said Figgins. "Gaffer, old man, do the best you can for two bob, and don't forget that you're dealing with a chap who has seen better days!"

The Gaffer grunted. Two shillings was not much of a sum after what he had anticipated, but it was better than nothing.

He served the ginger-pop, and the juniors took it out to the little tables in front of the tuckshop, under the big tree that grew at the side of the village street.

"Well, it's rather jolly here," said Tom Merry, "and this is good ginger-pop! We're all very much beholden to you, Figgy!"

"Yaas, wathah! I pwopose a vote of confidence in the foundah of the feast—I mean a vote of thanks, deah boys!"

"Carried unanimously!" said Tom Merry. "Figgins, old son, may your shadow never grow whiskers! Pop! pop!" The ginger-pop went the way of all ginger-pop. While they discussed it the juniors also discussed ways and means. The financial outlook was serious. As Blake said, money was tight.

A man was standing leaning against the tree, and his attention seemed to be attracted by the chatting of the juniors. He was a stranger to them, and they took no notice of him. He was a man of medium size, with a little fox-faced face, and very bright, little twinkling eyes of an uncertain colour, and a very shifty expression. He was dressed in a suit of a very pronounced check, and his watch-chain would have been worth a great deal—if it had been real. His complexion was shiny, and he wore several rings, each with a big imitation stone in it.

"You see," said Tom Merry, "we simply must raise the wind somehow. What am I to do for a new footer?"

"That's hardly so important," Blake remarked, "as what I'm to do for my football boots."

"To say nothing of my camera," said Monty Lowther.

"Excuse me, young gentlemen!"

It was a silky, insinuating voice, and the juniors all looked at once towards the speaker. It was the man who had been leaning against the tree and listening to their talk. He came up to the little table with an insinuating air.

"Excuse me, young gentlemen! You are—excuse me—in some little temporary financial difficulty?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Yes," said Tom Merry, "but I really don't see how it need worry you, sir!"

The man in checks made a deprecating gesture.

"Now, don't be offended, young gents! I want to be your friend. I'm remarkably fond of boys, and I always like to help them out of their little difficulties. I should very much like to help you, if you'll let me."

He sat down in a vacant cane chair.

The juniors looked at him and at one another. It was a great deal like impertinence on the stranger's part to intrude himself into their affairs, yet he looked so obliging that it was hard to sit upon him. Tom Merry, especially, hated to hurt anybody's feelings.

"I don't quite follow!" he remarked.

"Yaas, suppose you explain, deah boy!" suggested Arthur Augustus.

"Certainly, with pleasure. My name is Jonas Jex—I dare say you've heard it!"

"Can't say I have."

"Not heard of Jonas Jex, the head of the great Jex World-Wide Emporium?" exclaimed the stranger, looking amazed.

"Well, you surprise me!"

The youngsters looked at him with increased respect. The head of a world-wide emporium was evidently a big gun.

"Now, you young gentlemen are in want of some things, as I judged by what I—er—accidentally heard you say!" said the stranger. "I am down in this district looking for new business, and I should be pleased to grant you the most favourable terms, for a start."

"What are you driving at?" asked Tom Merry politely.

"You may regard me," said Mr. Jex, "somewhat in the light of a fairy prince out of the Arabian Nights, who supplies you with all you want just for the asking. You've only got to say what you want, and I produce it from my World-Wide Emporium."

"My hat!" said Figgins. "That's jolly! I'll have a motor-car!"

"Yaas, wathah, and I'll have a special twain!"

Mr. Jex smiled in a rather sickly way.

"We must draw the line at motor-cars and special trains," he said. "But, for instance, one of you young gents is in want of a camera?"

"Yes," said Monty Lowther.

"Another is looking for a pair of football boots?"

Blake nodded.

"Then another wants a new football?"

"I do," said Tom Merry.

Mr. Jex smiled in a beaming way.

"Well, you can have them for the asking. Just say the word, and I will send the order to my World-Wide Emporium, and the goods will be delivered to you to-morrow morning."

"You are joking, I suppose?"

"Not at all."

"You don't mean to say that you are giving the things away?" exclaimed Tom Merry, in amazement, doubting whether to regard the stranger as a benevolent crank or an amiable lunatic.

"Well, yes," said Mr. Jex, "I might say, with perfect truth,

that we are giving the things away, considering the splendid quality of them, and the ridiculously low price we charge, and the important fact that you pay just when you like."

"Ah!"

"You see, the business of the World-Wide Emporium is run on our New Special Easy Payment System," explained Mr. Jex. "You take what you say, and you pay when you like, and as much as you like. Pretty simple, isn't it?"

"Well, that sounds all right. But where does your profit come in?"

"Profit!" said Mr. Jex, in a tone which hinted that such paltry considerations weighed very little with him. "Oh, profit! My dear young gent, our profit comes from the immense advertisement we receive by practically giving away articles of splendid value. For instance, suppose we supply you with a bicycle—"

"Yaas, I have been thinkin' of investin' in a new jiggah!"

"Well, we supply you with a bicycle—the latest thing, you know, free wheel, back-pedal brake, three-speed gear, got up in splendid style—we charge you say twelve guineas—and considering the quality we give you, that is barely over cost-price. Well, you pay that twelve guineas off at a shilling a week."

"That's not much."

"I say, the giddy payments would last a long time, you know," said Kerr, who had a head for figures. "Twelve guineas at a shilling a week would last about five years."

Mr. Jex nodded complacently.

"That is the great advantage of our New Special Easy Payment System!" he replied. "You take as long as you like to pay the money. We do such an immense and world-wide business that it does not matter to us in the slightest when the money comes in. If you are pressed at any time, you let us know, and we let the payments stand over for a month, or a year, or even longer, if you like."

"That's jolly decent of you!"

"You see, we simply can't afford to be mean or hard," explained Mr. Jex, "even if we wanted to, for we depend for our profit on the immense advertisement we get, and if we displeased or disappointed our customers, where would our advertisement come in?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"If you are satisfied, you recommend others to us, but if we treated you badly, we should suffer by the transaction," said Mr. Jex. "That's the point you must remember. Mind, all goods supplied are of the first quality. Any reasonable fault found with them is attended to at once. In fact, you can send back anything you don't like, and either take other goods or have your money refunded in full."

The juniors looked at one another. The offer of the generous Mr. Jex was certainly a tempting one. In fact, he really seemed like the right man in the right place at the right moment, as Blake remarked. His system of easy payments was about the easiest going, apparently, and, as he had pointed out, he simply could not afford to be hard or harsh.

Mr. Jex produced a little book and a pencil.

"Now, young gents, let me book your orders! Mind, there is no responsibility at all on your part. If you don't like the goods you can send them back."

"That will be giving you a lot of trouble."

"The more trouble we take the better we like it. We want to please the public, and induce them to deal at the World-Wide Emporium," said Mr. Jex. "Now, I think you said a bicycle, young sir!"

"Yaas, wathah! I weally must have a new jiggah."

"Of course, you want a first-rate machine, all the latest improvements, quite up to date throughout?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I know we can suit you. Let me see, your name is—"

"Arthaw Augustus D'Arcy."

"Just write the name down there, will you? Here's a fountain-pen."

"What's all that pwtined on that papah?"

"Simply the agreement. You agree to take the bike, and pay for it when you like, at your own convenience. This agreement is only a matter of form, just to keep a record at our head office."

"That sounds all wight. There you are, my dear fellah!"

And the swell of St. Jim's wrote his name with a flourish at the bottom of the paper.

"Now, young sir, I think you said a new football?"

Tom Merry hesitated.

The stranger was very plausible, and seemed to be kindness and good-nature itself, and if he was a trifle vulgar—well, that might not be anything against him.

"Yet—"

Mr. Jex did not appear to notice his hesitation.

"A fine, first-rate football," he remarked. "The kind you buy at the best shops for fifteen-and-six. Our price, ten-and-six, paid in weekly instalments of sixpence."

"Well, that won't hurt you, Tom!" said Manners.

"All right," said Tom Merry, making up his mind. And he wrote down his name with the fountain-pen.

The paper produced by Mr. Jex was printed in very small type, and worded in legal phraseology, and not easily understood, and it would have looked so rude and suspicious to insist upon reading it all through before signing. And, as a matter of fact, if he had read it all through Tom Merry would probably have been none the wiser, and would have had to depend upon Mr. Jex for an explanation of the legal terms. So it would have come to the same thing in the end.

"And now a camera for this young gent."

"Yes," said Monty Lowther, not thinking of hesitating after his leader had gone into the thing. "I want a pocket Reliance."

"H'm! Our own pocket camera is much superior, and there is a guinea difference in the price," said Mr. Jex. "Suppose you take it, and if you don't care for it we will exchange it without cost to you."

Monty Lowther agreed.

"And what can I do for you other young gents?" asked Mr. Jex.

There was some discussion on that point. The terms of payment being so absurdly easy, it seemed a pity not to take advantage of the generous offers of Mr. Jex.

In the end the pleasant-spoken Mr. Jex secured an order and a signature from each of the juniors of St. Jim's, with one exception.

Figgins purchased a fountain pen, Manners some films for his Reliance, Herries a fishing-rod, Fatty Wynn a punching-ball, Blake a pair of football boots, Mr. Jex carefully noting the size. Kerr, the Scottish partner in the firm of Figgins & Co., was the only one who remained adamant.

"Then I can't persuade you to take anything, young sir?" asked Mr. Jex, after running over a list of desirable things, to each of which the canny Kerr replied with a shake of the head.

"No, thanks," said Kerr.

"I regret it for your sake, young gent. I may not be down in this district for a long time, and your chance will be gone."

"Never mind."

"You are sure you won't give an order?"

"Quite sure, thanks."

So Mr. Jex gave Kerr up as a bad job. He folded up his papers, crammed them into his pocket-book, and rose.

"The goods will be delivered to-morrow, young gents," he said, "and I venture to say that you will never regret dealing with the World-Wide Emporium. Lemme see! What would be the most convenient day for you to make your little payments?"

"Oh, about the end of 1990," said Kerr.

Mr. Jex smiled.

"Ha, ha! Good joke! Shall we say the first instalment on Saturday next, and the rest to follow regularly every Saturday?"

"That's fair enough," said Tom Merry.

"My aim is to be perfectly fair. By treating you well, I hope to supply goods to every boy at your school," said Mr. Jex.

"And make your profit out of them?" asked Kerr.

"Ha, ha! Now, I shall be down here on Saturday—"

"I thought you said you wouldn't be here again for a long time?"

"Not to take orders, I meant," said Mr. Jex hastily. "I shall be here on Saturday to collect various sums of money, and you can make your little payments at the same time. Where will you meet me?"

"Somewhere near the school," said Tom Merry. "Say at the little stile in Rylcombe Lane."

"Very well. I will be there at three o'clock Saturday afternoon."

"Very good, sir!"

"Then good-bye, my dear young gents! Good-bye!"

And the beaming Mr. Jex took himself off.

Figgins rose to his feet.

"Jolly nice chap," he said, "and a jolly good system."

"Ye-es," said Tom Merry.

"Why wouldn't you have anything, Kerr?" asked Figgins. Kerr grinned.

"I'll see how it turns out. I don't trust these easy payment merchants much. You see, suppose there's something in those giddy agreements you don't understand. And I expect there is. Perhaps he comes down on you for all the cash at once."

"Oh, he's such a decent chap!"

"Ahem! Perhaps he is. Perhaps he isn't. I've heard of these merchants. They sell you a piano, and you make a lot of payments, and then they collar it."

"Some of them, perhaps."

"Well, we may have got hold of one of the 'some,'" said Kerr.

"You're a suspicious beast, Kerr!"

"Perhaps I am. Perhaps I shall say 'I told you so,' a little later on."

"Rats!"

"Well, we shall see what we shall see."

"I dare say. Did you work that out in your own head?"

Kerr only smiled. He was in a minority of one now. But he waited for time to show.

"I put it to the vote," said Figgins, looking round, "that Kerr's a suspicious beast!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Seconded," said Fatty Wynn.

"Carried unanimously," said Tom Merry. "Kerr, you're a suspicious beast!"

Kerr grinned again.

"Wait and see," he remarked sententially.

The juniors walked home to St. Jim's discussing their new purchases. They looked eagerly for the morrow when the treasures would arrive.

Sure enough on the morrow they came.

The local carrier brought them in cases from Rylcombe Railway Station to gladden the hearts of the proud purchasers. Kerr felt rather left out of it, but he comforted himself with the wise reflection that they would see what they would see. Which was undeniable.

CHAPTER 2.

Disillusionment!—and a Little Joke.

MR. JEX appeared on the Saturday afternoon and collected his "little payments," and kindly promised to be in the same spot, at the same time, on the following Saturday. The payments being so small, the juniors had been able to raise them without difficulty, in spite of the generally low state of the exchequer. And Mr. Jex departed satisfied.

The juniors were also satisfied—for the time. So far the purchases had not disappointed them, and Mr. Jex's conduct seemed to be eminently fair and above board. He had actually asked them if they would prefer the payments to stand over till next week, which was kindness itself.

Naturally, the story of the purchases spread through the lower Forms at St. Jim's. Mr. Jex had made it known that he could be seen any time in the afternoon at the tuck-shop in Rylcombe, and a considerable number of juniors, in a more or less impecunious condition, went there to see him.

A fresh crop of orders for the World-Wide Emporium was the result.

Youngsters in the Shell, in the Fourth, and even in the Third, went down to see the generous Mr. Jex, and they made their purchases and signed their agreements without the faintest knowledge of what they were signing.

Young Gibson, of the Third, who went in for stamp-collecting, became the proud possessor of a stamp-album, with some wonderful specimens in it, at a ridiculously low figure, Mr. Jex saying that the World-Wide Emporium were only able to do it because of the immense advertisement they got thereby, which satisfied Curly Gibson.

Another week passed by, and Mr. Jex appeared for the next instalments. Some of the juniors accepted his offer of letting the payments stand over for a week this time.

"Coming down to footer practice?" asked Tom Merry, meeting Blake after school one day, as the Saturday was drawing nigh again.

"Just going," said Blake. "That your new footer?"

He glanced at the ball under Tom Merry's arm.

"Yes." Tom coloured a little. "Seems a little sloppy, doesn't it? I can't somehow get it quite hard."

Blake grinned.

"I've got my old football boots on," he said, looking down at his feet.

"Where are the new ones?"

"In my study. We're going to use them for fuel when we have a fire."

"Why?"

"Oh, they're coming to pieces, that's all. Sole come off one. T'other split down the side. Made of brown paper, I think, or something about as good."

"Yes," said Monty Lowther solemnly. "If Mr. Jex wants to sell me any football boots I shall tell him that football boots are barred."

"Oh, don't!" said Blake, making a wry face. "I see you've started your rotten puns again. I had quite a rest while you were away from St. Jim's."

"Well, you missed a lot, and now you're going to have the rest," said Monty.

"Please don't! I say, Tom Merry, we've been done!"

"Done brown?" said Tom frankly. "I—I didn't like to say so, but I'm afraid that chap Jex is a swindler. This football isn't worth a bob."

"My boots weren't worth the paper they were written on—I mean the paper they were made of!"

"As we're confessing," said Monty Lowther, "I may as well own up that my camera is a ghastly fraud. The photos come out like blotches. Manners says there's something the matter with the lens. I don't know much about it, but I know it's no good."

"But he offered to exchange everything that wasn't up to the mark."

"Suppose we try him."

"Well, we might as well, when we see him on Saturday. Let's go down to the footer now."

The juniors went to the football practice.

There was certainly something very much wrong with Tom Merry's new football, and he received a good many chipping remarks about it.

When it finally ripped open under Blake's foot Tom was rather relieved than otherwise.

They met Manners as they came off the field. He was looking wrathful.

"Hallo!" said Blake, "what's troubling you?"

"That swindler Jex!"

"What's the matter?"

"Those beastly films! I've tried to use them!"

"Ha, ha!"

"It's no laughing matter. I've wasted time making twelve exposures, and I thought I had a jolly good set of negatives," growled Manners. "The rotten things have developed like—like smudges. They're no good. Rotten! Beastly! A regular swindle!"

"That's hard lines!"

"I'm going to talk to Jex on Saturday," said Manners. "I'll ask him some questions. The beast! He told me his films were better than the Reliance, at half the price. I've got ten bob's worth, at a tanner a week. I'll tanner him! They're no good. All my time and trouble wasted. By Jove!"

"It's beastly!" said Tom Merry. "Only—only keep it dark a bit. Jex may keep his word. If it gets out, Kerr will start saying he told us so, and I can't stand that."

"That's what I was thinking," said Blake ruefully. "We don't want to give that boulder the laugh of us, if we can help it."

Ting, ting, ting! Buzz!

A bicycle was shooting towards them, with Arthur Augustus D'Arcy in the saddle.

D'Arcy was ringing the bell frantically.

"Get out of the way, deah boys! Get—oh! Ow! I am weally vewy sowwy."

The bicycle ran right into the juniors, scattering them to the ground. Then it curled up, and D'Arcy went down with a bump. He sat up, rubbing the back of his head.

"I am weally vewy sowwy!" he gasped. "I hope I have not hurt you."

Tom Merry rubbed his shoulder, and Manners his leg. Monty Lowther caressed a shin and hopped on one leg. Blake was sitting down.

"You horrid image!" roared Tom Merry. "What do you mean by running into us like that?"

"I weally could not help it."

"Why didn't you stop?"

"I tried to! I weally tried to."

"Ass! Haven't you got a brake?"

"The bwake has bwoken," said Arthur Augustus. "The wim bwake on the fwont wheel has actually bwoken in two pieces, and the back-pedal bwake won't work."

"Ha, ha, ha!" gasped Blake. "Gussy's bike is about as good as Lowther's camera. Ha, ha, ha!"

"It is no laughin' mattab, Blake! I am payin' twelve guineas for that jiggah. The bwakes have gone now. The lamp never would keep alight, and the pump won't work. And I want the pump a lot, because I keep on gettin' punctuahs. The tyres are weally no good at all. They are more like bwown papah than wubbah."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

D'Arcy picked himself up. He lifted the machine to wheel it away.

"I shall take this back to Mr. Jex on Saturday," he said.

"I shall wemonstwah with him, deah boys, and insist upon weceivin' a new jiggah."

"I hope you'll get it," said Tom Merry.

Arthur Augustus wheeled his bike away, limping a little, and Blake followed him. The Terrible Three went on to the School House. On the way they passed Figgins, and Tom Merry stopped to speak.

"I say, Figgy, how are you getting on with your purchases?"

"Oh, all right," said Figgins. "Fatty Wynn has been complaining about his punching-ball. Seems to be something wrong with it."

"What about your pen?"

"Oh, that's all right. It doesn't work very well," confessed Figgins, "but it looks nice, and it's got a beautiful gold nib."

He produced the pen and handed it round for inspection.

Monty Lowther gave a chuckle.

"Hallo," said Figgins, "what's that cackling about, Lowther?"

"Ha, ha! Nothing! Only the gilt is coming off your beautiful gold nib."

"It can't be! It's——"

Monty Lowther examined the beautiful nib closely, and chuckled again. The flimsy gilt was coming off, and he could read the engraving on the nib, the "Wearwell."

"Ha, ha! These things are sold at twopence the dozen!" he exclaimed. "Figgins, old son, you're a giddy donkey! You've been done, like the rest of us."

Figgins looked at his pen ruefully.

Now that his attention was called to it, he could not help noticing what Monty Lowther pointed out.

"I say, don't you say anything to Kerr about it," he said nervously. "I don't want him to start saying that he told me so."

"Ha, ha, ha! We'll keep mum!"

Figgins shoved the pen discontentedly into his pocket, and strolled off. The chums of the Shell went on towards the School House. The window of Study No. 6 was open, and a fishing-rod projected from it. Herries was trying his new purchase.

The line came dangling down. Tom Merry idly caught the hook, and at that moment Kildare came out of the School House. Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, gave the juniors a pleasant nod as he passed.

"Hallo, Kildare, there's something on your hat!" said Tom Merry.

And he flicked his hand across the straw hat Kildare was wearing, and with the same movement fixed the hook into the band.

"Is there?" said the school captain. "What is it?"

"Oh, just a blue band, that's all," said Tom Merry, dodging out of the captain's reach.

Kildare laughed good-humouredly and walked on.

The line was being paid out from above, and so the captain of St. Jim's never noticed that the hook was fastened to his hat.

The Terrible Three stood watching with considerable interest to see what would happen when Herries wound in his line.

"It will be rather a surprise for Kildare, to find that his straw hat has made up its mind to sail away," murmured Tom Merry.

"Yes, but—my hat! You forgot that Herr Schneider's window is just under Study No. 6, and, by Jove, there's the Herr sitting at it, too!"

"Holy smoke!"

It was too true. Herr Schneider had his window wide open in the autumn evening, to enjoy the sunset and the fresh air of the quadrangle, and he was seated in full view. He had a cushion on the window-frame, and was leaning on it, smoking a pipe and reading a newspaper printed in his beautiful Deutsch.

"Oh dear!" murmured Tom Merry. "When Kildare's hat goes——"

"It's gone!"

Herries was taking in his line.

Kildare's hat suddenly rose from his head and sailed through the air. A more astonished individual than Eric Kildare at that moment had probably never been seen in the old school.

He swung round, and the expression of bewilderment on his face was so ludicrous that the chums of the Shell could not contain a roar.

"Why—what—what——"

Herries, within the study above, was not looking out, and he was in complete unconsciousness of it all. But the weight on his line showed him that he had made a catch.

Kildare stared at his hat. It swung away at the end of the line towards the house, and came with a crash at the window of Herr Schneider.

"Oh, Christopher Columbus!" gasped Tom Merry.

The swinging hat dashed against the paper the German master was reading, and dashed it into his face. Herr Schneider started up with a fearful yell, his pipe dropping from his mouth and smashing on the floor.

"Mein Gott in Himmel!"

The hat swung away again. Herries was looking out now, and he caught Kildare's amazed stare.

"What the dickens are you doing?" roared the captain of St. Jim's. "What do you mean by fishing off my hat?"

"My hat!" gasped Herries.

"No, ass, not your hat, my hat!"

"Mein Gott! Mein pipe! Mein pipe! Mein Gott!"

Herries let out the line again, and Kildare secured his hat and unhooked it. Herr Schneider stared out of the window, in amazement as to what could have happened.

"Vat is all dot pefore? I have been struck after! Mein Gott!"

"Sorry, sir!" said Kildare. "Quite an accident!"

He gave the Terrible Three a wrathful glance.

"This is your work, Tom Merry!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Kildare looked inclined to make reprisals for a moment; but his Irish good-humour prevailed, and he laughed and walked away. But Herr Schneider did not take it so calmly. He glared round in search of a culprit, and caught sight of the fishing-line still hanging from the rod, which Herries was taking in as fast as he could.

"Ach! I see mit meinself! Dis is a drick of te juniors! Ach!"

Herr Schneider plunged half out of the window and caught the line.

"I have it!" he shouted. "Now we will see!"

Herries dragged on the line from the study window above.

"Hallo! It's caught something else now," he muttered. "Hang it!"

Herr Schneider gave a yell. The pull on the line made it drag through his fingers, till the hook came into his hand, and it hooked on and stuck fast.

"Ach! I am pleading mit mein hand! Mein Gott!"

Herries made frantic endeavours to get the line in, and Herr Schneider danced and yelled. He succeeded at last in getting the hook away, and the line whisked up to the window of Study No. 6, and Herries reeled it in.

Herr Schneider adjusted his spectacles and dashed from the room. He knew that the cause of his woes proceeded from Study No. 6, and he was on the trail of vengeance.

CHAPTER 3.

Rough on Herries.

TOM MERRY laughed till the tears ran down his cheeks at Herries's operations as a fisherman. But as Herr Schneider disappeared from the window he became partly serious.

"I say, he's going for Herries!" he exclaimed. "This won't do, as it was our little joke. I'm going to own up."

"So are we," said Manners and Lowther.

And they hurried into the School House. But Herr Schneider had lost no time, and he was much nearer to Study No. 6. He bounced up the stairs and into the study in a twinkling.

Herries was standing there, with the rod in his hands. He was opening and closing it to see how it worked. He had discovered faults in it, owing to the cheapness of the wood, and he was annoyed, but not so annoyed as Herr Schneider.

"Mein Gott! You young rascal, ain't it!"

He started. Herr Schneider, crimson with wrath, burst into the study.

"Anything the matter, sir?" asked Herries innocently.

The German master gasped.

"Anything to matter! I will show you before!"

He rushed at Herries. The youthful fisherman, astonished and alarmed, dodged him round the table. Herr Schneider gave the table a shove which sent it flying, and seized Herries. He gripped the fishing-rod with his right hand, and Herries's collar with his left. Then he brought the rod into use, and the dust rose from Herries's garments.

"Take tat—and tat—and tat!"

"Ow!" roared Herries. "Are you dotty? What are you up to? Help?"

"And tat—and tat!"

"Ow! Oh, crumbs! Help! He's mad!"

"And tat!"

Crack!

The fishing-rod was not built for usage like that. It smashed across, and half of it went to the floor. Herr Schneider, panting, hurled the rest of it on the carpet.

"Dere! Tat will be vum lesson!"

Tom Merry came running into the study.

"I say, sir, don't go for Herries! It was my fault!"

"Vat tat you say, Merry?"

"I fixed the hook in Kildare's strawyard," said Tom Merry. "Herries didn't know."

"Den you will take two hundred lines from te Schiller," said Herr Schneider. "As for Herries, he is punish because he fish out of te study window after."

And Herr Schneider marched off. Herries rubbed his person where the blows had fallen hardest.

"My hat!" he gasped. "This is a nice go! I thought the old chap was off his crumplet! Nice sort of chap you are, Tom Merry, to get a chap into a fix like this!"

"Sorry," said Tom. "Ha, ha, awfully sorry! I owned up, and what more could a fellow do?"

"I wish you had owned up a little sooner, then," growled Herries. "He's bruised me all over. Look at that beastly fishing-rod."

"It does look rather a wreck."

"I've only paid a bob off it."

"Oh, that's all right; I'll stand it," said Tom Merry. "It was my fault."

"Rats! I don't want you to pay for it. That's rot!"

"I shall, all the same. You won't get Jonas Rex to change it for a new one now, old son. It oughtn't to have bust up like that. What was the figure?"

"Fifteen shillings."

"I'll settle it. Come on, kids. I should advise a little Elliman's, Herries. You'll find it grateful and comforting."

And the Terrible Three departed, leaving Herries still rubbing his aching bones.

"Hallo, Tom Merry, have you seen D'Arcy?"

It was Curly Gibson of the Third who asked the question. He was coming along the passage with a stamp album under his arm.

"Yes," said Tom. "He was just busting his bicycle in the quad. That a new album?"

"Yes," said Curly. "A jolly good one, with a good collection in it, too."

Tom Merry looked at him in surprise.

"Have you come into a fortune lately?" he asked.

Gibson grinned.

"No, but I have been lucky. I bought this of a chap named Jex, on the easy payment system."

The Terrible Three exchanged glances.

It was evident that all was grist that came to Mr. Jex's mill, and he was not inclined to spare even youngsters in the Third Form.

"Got a bargain, I suppose?" said Monty Lowther.

"Rather! The chap explained that he couldn't afford to do it at the price, except for the immense advertisement his firm gets by selling good things at a low figure."

The chums of the Shell smiled in a sickly way.

"What are you giving for the album?" asked Tom.

"Two pounds ten."

"Great Scott! A kid in the Third Form spending two pounds ten on a stamp album," exclaimed Tom, rather shocked. "How on earth are you going to pay for it?"

"Oh, it's easy enough! I have eighteen-pence a week pocket-money, and I'm to pay half of that to Mr. Jex every Saturday."

"Well, that's easy enough, if the album's worth the money."

"It's worth five or six times the money," said Curly. "It's only for the sake of the advertisement that they're able to do it. Why, there's a Cape of Good Hope stamp that is worth fifteen shillings alone."

"Ahem!"

"Then there's a set of Jahalbad stamps that would sell for two pounds anywhere."

"Eh?"

"And a lot of the others are worth a shilling or one-and-six each."

"And you've got all that lot for two pounds ten?"

"Yes."

"And Jex is going to live on the loss, I suppose?"

"You don't understand business, Tom Merry," said Curly, smiling superiorly. "It's the advertisement they get—"

"Oh, I know all about the advertisement. If the advertisement brings them customers like you, who pay two pounds ten in easy instalments for five pounds' worth of stamps, they will have solved the difficulty of getting rich quick."

Curly scratched his head.

"Perhaps they'll put the price up to future customers," he said. "Anyhow, I know big firms do lots of things for advertisement. Anyway, here's the stamps."

"Yes, there's the stamps," said Tom Merry. "What do you want D'Arcy for? Do you think he is going to buy some of you?"

"Yes, he wants two more for his Cape set," said Curly.

"I am going to let him have some at a bargain."

"On the easy payment system?"

"Not much," said Curly promptly. "Spot cash. I shall let him have the two for ten shillings, which will be cheap to him, a good deal below catalogue price, and at the same time leave a decent profit for me."

"You young Shylock! If D'Arcy buys your stamps he's a bigger mug than I take him for."

"Why shouldn't he?"

"Oh, ask him!"

"I'm going to," said Curly; and he marched on with his stamp album towards Study No. 6. The Terrible Three went on to their own quarters.

"That chap Jex is a regular swindler," exclaimed Tom Merry. "Fancy Curly Gibson swallowing such a yarn. Of course, the stamps are forgeries!"

"Rather!" said Monty Lowther. "I'm afraid Curly won't get much out of D'Arcy. We'll do some plain talking when we see that bounder on Saturday."

Tom Merry nodded, and his eyes flashed.

To his frank and honourable nature there was something extremely repellent in the cunning of Mr. Jonas Jex, and he intended to utter some unpleasant truths when he met that gentleman again.

He was curious to know how Curly had fared in his philatelic venture, and when he met D'Arcy again he inquired. Arthur Augustus smiled.

"No, I didn't buy any stamps of young Gibson," he said. "He offered me some at a very low figure. Yaas, wathah! But, you see, they were no good."

"What was the matter with them?"

"Forgeries, my dear boy."

"I guessed as much! And the rest of the stamps in his album—are they any good?"

"Not much. The album is worth about three shillin's," said D'Arcy, "and the stamps are worth somethin' like five. The cheapest and commonest of them are genuine enough. The othahs are wotten forgeries. That man Jex is a wank swindlah."

"I'll see to it," said Tom, with gleaming eyes. "Curly is not going to pay two pounds ten for that rubbish to the brute."
"Yaas, wathah! I am beginnin' to feel quite angry myself, don't you know. I am weally annoyed about that jiggah. It isn't only the money, you know, but it makes a fellah feel such an awful beastly ass, you know."

There were a good many of the juniors who had made up their minds to return their purchases to Mr. Jex on the following Saturday. It remained to be seen how the representative of the World-Wide Emporium would receive them.

CHAPTER 4.

Tom Merry Settles Up.

"H, here you are again, young gents!" said Mr. Jex, with an oily smile.

It was Saturday afternoon.

Mr. Jex was seated on the stile under the trees in Rylcombe Lane, when the Terrible Three came along and halted in front of him.

They did not come empty-handed.

Tom Merry carried the wreck of a football, Manners a handful of films, and Monty Lowther a pocket camera.

Mr. Jex noticed the articles, and a glitter came into his little bright eyes, but he kept on the oily, agreeable smile.

"Let me see," he said, consulting his little book, "I have a shilling to collect from Master Lowther, sixpence from Master Manners, and sixpence from Master Merry. I could give you time on the payments if you are not ready."

"Excuse me, Mr. Jex," said Tom Merry politely, "I think you said that in case of satisfaction not being given the articles could be returned."

"And the cash would be handed back," said Manners.

"Without deductions," chimed in Monty Lowther.

Mr. Jex nodded.

"Certainly. Any article returned unused will be allowed for to the full value."

"Unused? You never said anything about that before."

"It is in the agreement."

"What agreement?"

"The one you signed. I have a copy of it here." Mr. Jex drew a copy of the valuable agreement from his pocket. "Here you are: It is agreed between Master Thomas Merry on the one part, hereinafter referred to as the purchaser, and the World-Wide Emporium on the other part, hereinafter referred to as the vendor, that—"

"Oh, ring off, please. We're not going to stay here all the afternoon," said Monty Lowther. "Where's the bit that concerns us?"

"I am coming to that. Let me see—Section 15. Any article not giving satisfaction will be taken back by the company and full value allowed for same, provided it be returned within twenty-four hours in the same condition as when it was received."

"That's all very well. But this footer, for instance. How was I to know it wasn't any good till I had tried it?"

"And these beastly films. They looked all right. How was I to know they were rotten bosh till they were used?" demanded Manners rather excitedly.

"And this horrid camera," said Monty Lowther. "You have to use a camera, I suppose, to discover whether you can use it or not?"

Mr. Jex shrugged his thin shoulders.

"That is no business of mine. There's the agreement. You've signed it, and you've got to abide by it."

"Look at this football," said Tom Merry. "Do you really think it was worth ten-and-six, or a bob, for that matter?"

"I'm not giving an opinion. I am here to collect the money due to the firm."

"And this camera," said Monty Lowther. "Look at it."

"I've no time to examine cameras, and I'm not interested."

"And these films," said Manners. "Look at this negative I've brought to show you. Only look at it."

"I'm waiting for the cash," remarked Mr. Jex.

Tom Merry drew a deep breath.

He looked the rascal full in the eyes.

"You will get nothing from us," he said. "I won't ask you to return what we have paid; you can keep that. But you'll get nothing more."

"You have signed—"

"I don't care what we have signed. Here are your goods, such as they are. You are a thief and a swindler to sell such things."

"Yes, and a dirty dishonest rotter," said Monty Lowther.

"And a beastly cad," said Manners.

Mr. Jex's face assumed a brick-red hue.

"You young rascals! You'll try to back out of your own agreement, will you? You'll try to swindle an honest man—"

Biff!

The wreck of the football smote Mr. Jex full in the face. He reeled back, and fell off the stile, just in time to escape the camera and the films which were hurled at him.

He scrambled up crimson with fury.

"You young thieves—"

Tom Merry clenched his fists.

"Hold your tongue," he exclaimed fiercely. "You have swindled us. You are a rogue and a swindler, and you ought to be sent to prison. You won't get another penny out of us. And, by George, if you speak like that again, you'll get a hiding!"

The rascal was spluttering with rage.

But, though he could have settled one or two of the juniors, the three of these were too big an order for Mr. Jex, and he consulted prudence.

"I'll—I'll—I'll—"

"You'll take your rubbish back, and clear out," said Tom Merry.

"I'll come up to the school and speak to the Headmaster about it. I'll see if I'm not to have the money you owe me."

Manners and Lowther looked rather uneasy. But Tom Merry was as firm as a rock.

"You can go up to the school," he said calmly. "As for the agreements, they are not worth the paper they are written on, as we are under age."

"You—you young—"

"Take care!"

"So you think you know the law, do you? I'll show you!"

"I know enough not to be afraid of a scheming blackguard like you, Mr. Jex," said Tom Merry contemptuously. "You cannot frighten me. You are a swindler, and you know perfectly well that you dare not go up to the school and speak to Dr. Holmes."

"I'll show you!"

"You would get kicked out, if not given into custody. I might get called over the coals, but you know the doctor wouldn't allow anything to be paid you. But come up to St. Jim's if you like. I promise you a warm reception."

Jonas Jex ground his teeth. He fairly cowed back from the flashing glance of the leader of the Shell.

Like all of his character, he could bully when he found himself dealing with the weak and irresolute, but when he met with firmness and courage, his natural cowardice asserted itself.

He realised that bullying would not serve his turn, and as soon, as he could master his rage he changed his tactics.

"I'll take back the things if you like, young gents," he said with a whine in his voice. "It's plain enough in the agreement but if you're not satisfied I'll take them back at my own risk. That's fair."

"Well, there are the things. Good-bye!"

"Wait a minute, young gents. You ought to pay something for the damage done to the goods—now you can't deny that."

Tom Merry hesitated. The rascal's surrender was so complete that Tom, always generous, did not like to use his victory harshly.

"How much do you want?" he asked abruptly.

The rascal measured him with his eyes.

"Say ten shillings," he replied, naming the largest sum he thought he could possibly extract from the chums.

"Don't pay him," said Manners.

"I've got to lose on these things," said Mr. Jex. "Don't be 'ard on an honest man! I took you for young gents, and—"

"Oh, shut up," said Tom Merry; "here's your ten bob!"

He took a postal order for ten shillings from his pocket. He had received it from his old governess, Miss Priscilla Fawcett, only that morning. He handed it to Mr. Jex.

That gentleman's dirty fingers closed on it greedily.

"Come along, chaps," said Tom Merry.

The Terrible Three walked away.

"He oughtn't to have had anything," Tom said, with knitted brows. "But I couldn't argue with a chap like that. I'm glad we've got rid of him. He makes me feel ill."

Mr. Jex, left alone, scowled savagely after the chums of the Shell.

He picked up the returned articles, and put them out of sight; he had some more interviews coming off on that spot, and did not want his future visitors to know what had happened. All of them were not of the same calibre as the Terrible Three, and he did not expect to have so much trouble with them.

CHAPTER 5.

Mr. Jex Has a Pleasant Time!

GEORGE GORE came along the lane ten minutes later and stopped at the stile. Gore was one of the later purchasers of the goods of the World-Wide Emporium. He had bought a cigarette case—Gore being one of the "smart set" at St. Jim's, and given to secret smoking.

The case was very nice to look at—at first. But the supposed silver was only nickel, and the imitation leather was already giving. Gore took it out of his pocket as he came up to the stile.

"Good-afternoon," said Mr. Jex, "Let me see! You didn't pay me last Saturday, did you?"

"You offered to let it stand over," said Gore.

"Quite so, but——"

"I don't like this case. It's a sham."

"It's a good one for the price. What do you expect for fifteen shillings?"

"Something better than that," said Gore. "You led me to believe that it was silver and real Russia leather. It's a swindle."

"That's your business. I gave you no guarantee, and you knew what you were buying. I'll trouble you for fifteen shillings, Master Gore."

"What do you mean? There's only a bob due, and a bob last Saturday."

"You read the agreement."

"No, I didn't."

"That's all very well. Here it is—'Section fourteen. If any payment lapses, for any reason whatever, the whole amount becomes due at once.'"

Gore looked alarmed.

"You didn't say anything about that before," he exclaimed.

"There it was, in black and white, for you to read if you had a mind to," said Mr. Jex. "You owe me fifteen shillings, please."

"But—but you yourself offered to let the payment stand over," said Gore in dismay. "I didn't even ask you. You offered."

"Naturally. I thought you had read the agreement, and knew what you were doing."

"Look here, I can pay you a bob——"

"I want fifteen shillings."

"I can't pay it! I won't! It's a swindle."

Mr. Jex scowled. Gore's passionate utterance, and the evident alarm in the boy's face, showed that he was not of the stuff that Tom Merry was made of. Mr. Jex saw that he would be able to handle him.

"Won't you? You want to cheat me, do you?" he thundered. "You think you are going to swindle me. I'll show you? Going, are you? All right. I'll come up to the school with you."

"For Heaven's sake——"

"Pay up, then, or I'll have you arrested. I'll have you expelled from the school as a thief. Hand over the fifteen shillings. Sharp now!"

"I—I haven't got it," stammered Gore, pale as death. "I—I——"

"Don't tell me any lies. Hand it over."

"I—I can't! I haven't more than six shillings in the world. I——"

"Give me that, then, and I'll have the rest next week. By George, I'll show you if you can swindle me!" shouted Mr. Jex. "I'll show you! The Headmaster would like to know that you had bought a cigarette case, wouldn't he? I'll show you up."

"Shut up, for goodness' sake," whimpered Gore. "I'll pay it; I'll pay every penny, only shut up! Suppose someone were to hear you?"

"I don't care who hears me. I don't——"

"Here's the six bob. You shall have the rest next week. Honour bright."

"Mind that I do," said Mr. Jex, pocketing the six shillings discontentedly. "Get along with you. You're not an honest boy. Get along, and mind I have the other nine next Saturday, with a shilling for interest——"

"A—a what?"

"A shilling for interest. That will be ten bob in all. Get along."

"But——"

"Mind, I'll have no mercy on you if you fail."

"But, Mr. Jex——"

"Oh, get along, do! I've no patience with yer."

Gore walked away unsteadily. Mr. Jonas Jex was showing the cloven hoof with a vengeance now! His oily manners had dropped from him like a cloak.

When Gore was out of sight, Mr. Jex grinned to himself.

"That's an easier sort of cove to deal with," he murmured.

"I'll twist him round! I'll make him sit up! Hallo, here's the young shaver with the stamp album. I wonder if he's going to cut up rusty. I'll give him a lesson."

Curly Gibson, of the Third Form at St. Jim's was approaching. He had the precious stamp album under his arm. He was looking very nervous.

"If you please, Mr. Jex," he began, "I want you to take this album back."

"But I don't please, sir," said Mr. Jex grimly.

"But you said——"

"Any article to be returned must be returned within twenty-four hours. Here it is in the agreement."

"But you said——"

"Never mind what I said. That album's yours, and you can do what you like with it, stick stamps in it, or shove it into the fire. You owe me two pounds ten for it."

"But some of the stamps are forgeries."

"Are they? Which ones?"

"The Cape of Good Hope, the Jahalbad, and the——"

"Who says so?"

"D'Arcy told me so. He knows all about stamps."

"Perhaps he has taken the real ones out and put the others in," suggested Mr. Jex callously. "Anyway, the stamps were all right when you had the album."

"Oh, D'Arcy wouldn't do a thing like that! It would be stealing."

"I don't care what he would or wouldn't do. You've got the album, and I want the money. Where is it?"

"I—I don't want the album. Tom Merry says it's a swindle, and that I'm not to pay you any more, and you're to take the album back." And Curly Gibson held it out.

Mr. Jex kept his hands in his pockets, and made no motion to take the proffered article.

"I don't want your album. It's yours, not mine. I want my money. You paid me only eightpence instead of ninepence last Saturday——"

"You said I needn't——"

"Never mind what I said. You paid me a penny short, and so the whole of the money becomes due at once, according to the agreement."

"Oh dear, oh dear!"

"Have you got two pounds ten for me to-day——?"

"I—I haven't more than a shilling," stammered poor Curly.

"You young swindler! I'll have a writ served on you."

The absurdity of the threat was not apparent to a boy of twelve. Curly Gibson, thoroughly frightened, burst into tears. Mr. Jex smiled with satisfaction.

"Yes, I'll have you sent to a reformatory, I will," he said. "I'll teach you to try to swindle me, you young rip."

"I—I don't want to swindle you, Mr. Jex, I don't really; but—but I haven't the money, or I'd pay you at once—boo-hoo!"

"I don't see why I should let you off. You say I've sold you rubbish——"

"I—I take that back," stammered the wretched Curly.

"You admit the stamps were all right when I sold them to you?"

"Ye—es, I suppose so."

"Good! You owe me two pounds ten. When can you pay up?"

"I—I can't pay. I have only eightpence a week. I'll give you all that if you like."

"Can't you borrow any?"

"Only—only a few shillings, perhaps."

"Rot! Some of the boys at your school have lots of money. There's young D'Arcy, for instance, he's the son of a lord, and he has heaps of cash."

"He wouldn't lend to a boy in the Third Form. I couldn't ask him."

"You could find out where he keeps his money and borrow some without asking him."

"How could I—oh—do—do you mean I could steal his money?" gasped Curly, horror stricken at the suggestion.

"You can do as you like!" thundered Mr. Jex; "only mind, if I don't have at least ten shillings off your debt next Saturday, I'll have no mercy on you."

Curly sobbed.

"Oh, don't be a little fool," snapped Mr. Jex. "Shut up that snivelling. Mind, not a word about this to Tom Merry or any of his friends. If you say a word on the subject to anyone, I'll get to know of it, and I'll have you arrested."

"Oh, Mr. Jex! I won't say anything—I won't!"

"Mind you don't! Especially to Tom Merry."

"He—he'll ask me how I have settled with you, and if he sees the album——"

"Ah!" Mr. Jex looked thoughtful—"that won't do! Look here, my lad, I'll take the album back if you like, and knock a pound off the debt for it. Then you'll owe me thirty shillings."

"Oh, thank you!" gasped Curly.

He handed the worthless album to Mr. Jex with a great deal of pleasure. The rascal tossed it behind a tree.

"Now, thirty bob, remember," he said threateningly. "And ten bob off it next Saturday at the latest! If you fail——"

"I—I'll try. But——"

"And if Tom Merry asks you about it, you're to say that I've taken the album back, and not a word more about our arrangements, my lad. If you tell him anything more I'll show you no mercy. I'll make you sorry for yourself."

"I won't tell him anything!" gasped Curly.

"Mind you don't! Now you can go."

"Oh, please, Mr. Jex——"



"Sit on his chest, Fatty," commanded Figgins, as he reached across the table for the coffee-pot.

"Go!" thundered Mr. Jex. "I'm not going to listen to your snivelling. Get along, you little brute! Get out of my sight!"

Poor Curly went sobbing down the lane. Mr. Jex grinned triumphantly. This was somewhat of a solace for his unsatisfactory interview with Tom Merry.

During the next half-hour he had interviews with a good many more juniors from St. Jim's, and he showed himself in his true colours to most of them. Few had the firmness Tom Merry had shown. Most were terrified by his threats, and gave way utterly. Ignorance of the law, and fear of what might happen if the matter came to the headmaster's ears, made them like wax in the hands of the cunning scoundrel.

At length came Study No. 6. They had been detained on the football field for practice, and Mr. Jex was getting rather impatient by the time they arrived. After them he had only Figgins & Co. to deal with that day.

Study No. 6 came along together, D'Arcy wheeling the bicycle, Blake carrying the football boots, and Herries with his hands in his pockets.

"Hallo," said Mr. Jex, "here you are at last!"

"Couldn't come sooner," said Blake. "Here's your boots."

"My boots! What do you mean?"

"I mean that they're made only of brown paper, and I'm not going to have them."

"What do you mean? You've got to have them!"

"Have I?" said Blake, setting his teeth. "We'll see! You are a swindler! I'm not going to pay you anything more."

"Neither am I," said Arthur Augustus. "This jiggah is a beastly wotten swindle! The bwakes are bwoken, the tyres are punctured all ovah, the—"

"I don't care! You should take proper care of your machine."

"I have taken pwopah care of it. But it is a wotten swindle. It's no good."

"That's your look-out. I'm not taking it back. I have no use for a damaged bicycle. You can't crawl out of your agreement like that. I suppose this young gent will be wanting me to take his fishing-rod back again next."

"No, I don't!" said Herries. "It was a rotten swindle, and not worth half what you charged; but it's got broken, so I am going to pay for it."

"If the article is broken the money becomes due all at once, according to Section 7 in the agreement," said Mr. Jex.

"Oh, keep your wool on! We've raised the tin, and here it is. We don't want any more of your precious easy payments. Just write out a receipt, please."

Mr. Jex counted the money and put it into his pocket.

"I've forgotten my fountain-pen," he said. "I'll give you the receipt next week."

"Here's a pencil."

"I'm not going to give you a pencil receipt. It's not binding."

"Then you'll give me back the tin."

"Nonsense! That is mine, of course. I—"

"Buck up with that receipt, Mr. Jex!" said Jack Blake, with a gleam in his eyes. "I give you one minute before we jump on you!"

"Yaas, watah!"

Mr. Jex looked at the juniors dubiously for a moment. Then he discovered a fountain-pen in his pocket, and wrote out a receipt, which he handed to Herries.

"Thanks," said Herries. "Glad to have done with you."

"You young gents haven't paid me—"

"We're not going to," said Blake. "You ought to return the payments we've made. I suppose it's no good asking for them. There's your goods. You'll get no more money."

"I'll have the law of you."

"Rats!"

"Yes, wats!" said Arthur Augustus. "You are a beastly

vogue, you know. You weally ought to be awwested. Undah the circus, you ought to be glad to get your wubbish back."

"You—you tailor's dummy!" spluttered Mr. Jex. "I'll teach you to talk to me, you——"

"What did you address me as?" asked Arthur Augustus, with great politeness.

"A tailor's dummy—a silly tailor's dummy!"

D'Arcy looked at Blake and Herries.

"My friends, do you cotsidah that that person has a wight to address me in that extemely objectionable mannah?"

"Certainly not," said Blake.

"Rather not," said Herries. "He owes you an apology."

"You hear that, Mr. Jex. You owe me an apology."

"I'll—I'll——"

"Are you going to apologise?"

"No!" yelled Mr. Jex.

D'Arcy took off his jacket, and carefully rolled up his immaculate white shirt-sleeves. Blake and Herries giggled. But the swell of St. Jim's was looking in deadly earnest. When it was a question of dignity, D'Arcy never took a back seat. Mr. Jex eyed the warlike swell of the school curiously.

"What do you think you are going to do?" he asked.

"I am goin' to thwash you!"

"Ha, ha! Take him home and fasten him up," said Mr. Jex.

"Are you goin' to tendah that apology which I wequire?"

"Ha, ha! No."

"Then pwepare for a lickin'," said Arthur Augustus.

He danced up to the rascal, and gave him a rather unexpected tap on the nose. Mr. Jex uttered a yell, and went for D'Arcy. But the swell of the School House showed unexpected form. He let out with his right and left in quick succession, and Mr. Jex sat down in the lane without quite knowing how he got there.

"Bravo!" shouted Blake and Herries together.

They had been ready to interfere, for of course a man against a boy wasn't fair fighting; but they soon saw that, though Mr. Jex had the advantage of age and size, he hadn't an ounce of pluck, and that he didn't care to face D'Arcy again.

Arthur Augustus, a little surprised himself at his success, danced round the rascal as he sat in the dusty lane, rubbing his nose.

"Get up!" he exclaimed. "I insist upon your wisin' immediately, so that I can thwash you. Get up at once, you wascal!"

"Look here, you let me alone!" growled Mr. Jex.

"I am sowwy, but it is quite imposs. for me to let you alone until I have received the apology due to me," said Arthur Augustus.

"I'm not goin' to apologise to a bit of a kid!"

"Then get up and take your thwashin'."

"Look here——"

D'Arcy gave him a gentle dig in the ribs with his boot.

"Get up!"

"Lemme alone!" howled Mr. Jex. "I—I apologise."

"Then I am satisfied," said D'Arcy, beaming. "I wegard that as quite satisfactory. Now you may get up and take your wubbish away. Come on, dear boys."

Study No. 6 went on, leaving Mr. Jex alone with his rubbish, and in about the vilest temper imaginable. He got up slowly, rubbing his damaged nose.

"I'll make some of 'em pay for this!" he mumbled. "Hallo, here are the other young rips!"

Figgy and Fatty were approaching. Their looks showed that they had seen the little dispute. Mr. Jex scowled at them. He saw that Figgins carried the gold pen in his hand, and Fatty Wynn the punching-ball.

"Here's your property!" said Figgins. "You're a swindler! We're not going to pay you anything! Good-evening!"

He pitched the pen at Mr. Jex, and Fatty Wynn followed suit with the punching-ball. Mr. Jex felt too dispirited to argue the point. Figgins and Fatty Wynn marched off.

The representative of the World-Wide Emporium looked ruefully at his valuable collection of returned articles.

"Never mind," he muttered. "They ain't all got the nerve of them young varmint, and I'll make some of 'em pay dear for all this."

Which was a very comforting reflection to Mr. Jex.

CHAPTER 6.

Kerr is Triumphant.

KERR, the Scottish partner in the famous firm of Figgins & Co., met Figgy and Fatty Wynn as they came in after their brief interview with Mr. Jex in Rylcombe Lane.

Figgins exchanged a quick glance with Fatty.

It was tacitly agreed that nothing was to be said to Kerr about returning the articles to Mr. Jex. Kerr's "I told you so!" would have been intolerable.

Kerr looked at them curiously.

"Where have you two been?" he asked.

"Been to see Jex, same old place," said Figgins carefully.

"Ha, ha! Been making those easy payments?"

Figgins turned red.

"Well, I went to see Jex," he replied. "I'm ready for some tea. Come on, kids!"

They went into their study in the New House. Kerr was grinning. Perhaps he had a suspicion in his breast of the true state of affairs.

"I think I want a little exercise before tea," he remarked.

"I'll have a go at that punching-ball of yours, Fatty."

Fatty Wynn looked uncomfortable.

"Why, where is it?" said Kerr, looking round. "You've taken it off the hooks. Has it busted?"

"No, not exactly."

"Have you put it away?"

"N-no."

"Then where is it?"

"There was nothing for it but to confess."

"I've returned it to Jex because it was no good."

"Ha, ha! Got your first payments back?"

"N-no."

"Ha, ha! I say, Figgy, lend me your fountain pen, will you, for a minute?"

Figgins flushed.

"I haven't got it about me."

"I don't mind looking for it," said Kerr obligingly. "Where did you leave it?"

"Oh, hang it, Kerr! I left it with Jex. It was a swindle."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I can't see what you want to cackle about."

"I told you so. I——"

"Yes, I know you did!" growled Figgins. "Now, cheese it, and let's have some tea!"

They had tea, but Kerr did not "cheese it." He made incessant allusions to Mr. Jex, and the junior bargain-hunters, till Figgy and Fatty Wynn were quite wild. Finally, they made a frontal attack, and Kerr was driven out of the study.

He walked away chuckling to himself. He went towards the School House, and became as grave as a judge as he encountered the Terrible Three.

"I say, Tom Merry, would you mind lending a chap your new footer for a bit?"

"I—I haven't got it with me," said Tom Merry.

"Shall I run up to your study for it?"

"Well, you see, it isn't there."

"Oh! if you don't want to lend it——"

Tom Merry coloured.

"Well, the fact is, I've given it back to Jex. It was no good."

"Ha, ha, ha! Where's your camera, Monty Lowther?"

"Given it back to Jex," growled Monty.

"And those splendid films, better than the Reliance at half the price, Manners?"

"I—I've left them with Jex."

"Ha, ha, ha! I told you so."

The Terrible Three looked at one another sheepishly. They guessed that Kerr had seen them leave St. Jim's with the articles in question, and drawn his own conclusions when they returned empty-handed.

"Ha, ha, ha! Hear me smile," said Kerr. "Oh, you giddy bargain-hunters! I told you so. I told you the man was a humbug! Ha, ha—oh!"

The patience of the Terrible Three was not inexhaustible.

They suddenly charged at Kerr simultaneously, and the triumphant Scotsman sat upon the gravel path with a concussion that jarred every tooth in his head.

"This is where we laugh," said Tom Merry—"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the Terrible Three walked away laughing.

Kerr picked himself up. It was his day out, and he was not finished yet. A little later he looked into Study No. 6, where Blake, Herries and D'Arcy were at tea.

"Gussy, old chap, will you lend me your new bike for a spin round the quad?"

Blake gave Gussy a warning jab with his foot. He was as unwilling as the rest of Mr. Jex's customers to let Kerr have the laugh on his side.

"Ow!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "What did you do that for, Blake?"

"Eh! What?"

"You broughed down your foot on my toe with howwid force," said D'Arcy; "it was weally vewy wuff and uncalled-for."

"Oh, you're dreaming."

"Then it was Hewwies! Hewwies, did you bwing down your foot on my toe?"

"No, I didn't," said Herries.

"Then it must weally have been——"

"Oh, dry up," growled Blake, as he saw Kerr grinning broadly.

"I wefuse to dwy up. My toe has been sewiously injured by that cruel and unpwvoked assault," said D'Arcy, "I weally think——"

"What about the bike, Gussy?" asked Kerr.

"Oh, I am sowwy, but——"

"You can't ride it after dark in the quad," said Blake hastily.
 "It isn't quite dark," said Kerr, "only just dusk."
 "Too late for a bike, old man. Have some tea?"
 "No, thanks, I've just had some. I'll risk it, if Gussy will lend me the jigger."
 "The fact is, deah boy——"
 "You can trust me with it, Gussy."
 "Oh, I can trust you all wight. But—excuse me a moment. There is something under the table wubbing against my ankle. It was Blake's boot. D'Arcy stooped down to investigate.
 "Blake, what are you stickin' your silly foot against me for? You are soilin' my tuousahs, and causin' me pain in my beasty ankle? It is weally most inconsideraite."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Kerr.
 "I don't see what you are laughin' at, Kerr! Blake's conduct is most wude and unaccountable, and I shall have to sewiously considah whethah I can continue to extend my friendship to him. About the jigger, I am sowwy, but I have returned it to Mr. Jex, as it was a wank swindle. The bwaks bwoke, and the tyahs were simply wotten."

"Ha, ha, ha! I told you so."
 "Yaas, wathah! I wemembah you were vewy wude at the time."

"Ha, ha, ha! Where's your football-boots, Blake?"
 "If I had 'em on, I'd show you," said Blake crossly.
 "How are you getting on with that fishing-rod, Herrics?"
 "Oh, rats!" said Herrics.

"Ha, ha—ooch! You horrid beast!"
 A couple of sardines landed in Kerr's countenance, and a herring followed. He dodged out of the study just in time to escape a loaf that crashed on the door behind him.

He left the School House. A minute later a pebble clinked on the window of Study No. 6, which was open. The voice of Kerr was heard below.

"Hallo, kids! Did you get any of those easy payments back?"

Blake rose silently and gripped his teacup, which he had just filled. He stole towards the open window, taking care not to be observed from without.

"Have you got any——"
 Blake suddenly leaned over the sill and inverted the teacup just over Kerr's upturned, grinning face.
 Swoosh!

Kerr gave a yell as the tea splashed over his features.
 "Have some more?" inquired Blake. "Hand me the teapot, Gussy."

But Kerr did not wait for the teapot. He made a bee-line for the New House, spluttering and gasping, and Blake returned to the tea-table with restored good humour.

"Hallo! what's the matter with you, Kerr?" asked Figgins, as the Scottish partner came in, mopping his face with a soaked handkerchief.

"Oh, nothing," said Kerr.
 "You're looking as if you had run up against something."
 "I'm all right. I'd like to have a go at a punching-ball——"
 "Oh, cheese it," said Fatty Wynn.

"Ha, ha! Have you been making any more bargains while I've been gone? Blessed if I shall let you chaps go out alone in the future," said Kerr. "These easy payments——"

Figgins exchanged a glance with Fatty Wynn, and they suddenly gripped Kerr and plumped him down on his back on the floor.

"Sit on his chest, Fatty," commanded Figgins.
 "Righto!" said Fatty, obeying the order.
 Figgins took the coffee-pot from the table.
 "Here, hold on," gasped Kerr. "Pax! Pax!"
 "That's all very well," said Figgins. "We'll make it pax, if you'll agree to give that subject a rest. Not a word more about it."

"Agreed!" said Kerr, with a nervous eye on the coffee-pot. And so he was allowed to rise undrenched. He had to keep his word, and the topic of the famous bargains made with Mr. Jonas Jex was henceforth tabooed in the study of Figgins & Co.

CHAPTER 7.

Tom Merry Takes a Hand.

"**F**LAG!"
 Knox, the prefect, stood at his study door and called. Curly Gibson of the Third Form came along the passage.

"Here you are, Knox. Do you want me?"
 "Yes. Cut down to the post-office and get me some stamps." Curly hesitated.

It was Wednesday, a half-holiday at St. Jim's. There was plenty of time for Curly Gibson to go to the post-office for Knox, and his hesitation was strange. He was usually one of the most obliging of fags.

Knox stared at him.
 "Take the bob, you young duffer."

Curly did not hold out his hand.
 "I say, Knox—couldn't you—couldn't you get somebody else to go?" he faked.
 "No, I couldn't! Why don't you want to go?"
 "I—I—I——"
 "You lazy young rascal! Take the bob and go at once."
 "I say, Knox, do let me off! I don't want to go to-day. I——"
 Knox seized him by the collar and shook him roughly.
 "Now, what's all this rot?" he demanded. "Why don't you want to go to the village for me? What's the game, you young ass?"

Curly began to whimper.
 "I don't want to go out this afternoon. I——"
 "Then you've got to. Take that bob."
 Curly took it unwillingly.
 "Knox, if you'd let me off——"
 "Cut along!" roared Knox.

And he went into his study again, puzzled and annoyed, but never thinking that there might be a real reason at the back of Curly's strange unwillingness to go upon a very ordinary errand, and one he had performed a dozen times before without demur.
 Curly went disconsolately down the passage, the shilling in his hand. He was looking the most miserable youngster in St. Jim's. Suddenly a thought came into his mind and his face brightened.

"Perhaps I can get the stamps of one of the fellows without going to the post-office," he muttered.

He looked into some of the studies. Most of them were vacant, for the afternoon was fine, and the fellows were out on the football field. But he found one fellow belonging to the Shell in his room. It was Gore.

Gore was seated in his study when Curly looked in. His head was resting on his hands, his elbows on the table, his whole attitude that of dejection and misery.

"I say, Gore, can you——" began Curly timidly.
 Gore started at the sound of his voice, and looked up quickly. A look of passionate anger came over his white face as he saw Curly looking amazedly at him.

"Get out of my study!" he roared.
 "But I say, I want you to——"
 "Get out!"

Gore gripped a book to hurl. Curly, amazed and alarmed, dodged out of the study. The book crashed on the door as he closed it.

The Third-Formers wandered into the quadrangle. Seniors and juniors were busy at football practice. Curly looked on at the junior ground where Tom Merry and his friends were at the good old game, and waited there disconsolately till the practice finished.

"Hallo, kid!" said Tom Merry, as he came off the ground, flushed and rosy, with a rather muddy football under his arm.

"What's the matter with you?"
 "Can you let me have a dozen stamps, Merry, to save me going down to the post-office?"

"Lazy young bounder! A trot would do you good."
 "I don't mind the walk, Merry. It isn't that, only——only——"
 Curly broke off, the colour wavering in his face, and his eyes restless.

Tom Merry scanned him curiously.
 "Come into my study after I've changed," he said crisply, "and we'll see."

The Terrible Three changed their things, and when they went into their study in the School House they found Curly Gibson already there. He was seated in the easy-chair, the shilling belonging to Knox still held in his finger and thumb.

"Now then, kid," said Tom Merry, "what's the trouble?"
 "I want a shillingsworth of stamps for Knox, Merry. I don't want to go down to the village this afternoon."

"Now, look here, kid," said Tom, in his kind way. "There's something more than that in it. You've got something on your mind. Out with it."

Curly's eyes filled with tears.
 "It's nothing, Merry! I—I——"
 "Have you been bothered by that scoundrel Jex again?"
 "N-n-no."

Tom Merry laid a kindly hand on his shoulder.
 "Curly, you can trust me; I'll see you through. You told me that you had given that rotten stamp-album back to the rascal, and that the affair was at an end."

"Ye-es, so I did," said Curly.
 "Have you heard from him again?"

Curly trembled but did not speak. Tom Merry's frank face grew very dark and stern. He had no doubt now that the youngster had been frightened by the rascally representative of the World-Wide Emporium.

"Out with it, Curly."
 The Third-Former began to cry. The Terrible Three looked at one another. The sight of tears was always distressing, and Curly evidently had something very much the matter with him. His tears were not idle ones.

"Out with it, Curly. I tell you I'll see you through. I did

once before, you know, when you were up against it," said Tom Merry.

"You—you won't get wild?"

"Of course not."

"I—I didn't tell you the truth," whimpered Curly; "I—I was afraid to. He told me that if I told you anything about it he would—would have me arrested."

The youngster was crying now in real earnest. He was evidently frightened almost out of his wits, yet he instinctively felt a trust and faith in Tom Merry, instinctively relied upon that strong and generous nature.

Tom Merry knitted his brows.

"The beast! Tell me all about it, Curly."

Curly whimpered out the wretched story.

"He—he wanted to make me steal some of D'Arcy's money to give him," he faltered. "He said I could borrow it without asking. He—he came on me suddenly the other day when I was going to Rylcombe, and I hadn't anything to give him, and he said he would take me to the—the police-station. I—I dare not go out to-day. I know he's near the school—I saw him looking in at the gates once—and—and——"

Curly finished with a storm of sobbing.

The Terrible Three listened in silence, with knitted brows and gleaming eyes. This latest development of Mr. Jex's tactics was a little beyond what they had expected.

"My hat!" said Tom Merry, at last. "You little ass, Curly, to think that he would have dared to carry out his threat! He wouldn't dare to show himself at a police-station. If he's taken the album back you don't owe him anything. The beastly rotter!"

"He'll—he'll pounce on me as soon as I go out, and——"

"Will he?" said Tom Merry. "We'll see. Chaps, that fellow has got to be got rid of. We don't know how many other kids in the school may be under his thumb as well as Curly. We're going to give him a lesson, something strong, that will make him think St. Jim's an unhealthy place for him in the future."

"Jolly good idea," said Monty Lowther and Manners together.

"Now, Curly, listen to me. You're not to see this rascal again, nor to give him any money. You've nothing whatever to be afraid of. We're going to give him a lesson that will put an end to his little games. If you ever see him again you're to tell me at once. Do you understand?"

"Yes," said Curly, brightening up.

"Here's your stamps. Take them to Knox. Keep your pecker up, and don't worry over this business any more. He was only gassing, as you'd have known if you hadn't been a little noodle. Now, cut along."

"You're—you're sure, Tom Merry, that he can't—he can't have me sent to a reformatory, if I don't pay him?"

Tom Merry gave a roar.

"You young ass! Did you swallow a yarn like that? Of course he can't hurt you. There's nothing to be afraid of! Take my word for it."

"Thanks, Merry, thanks awfully!"

And Curly took his departure, looking much happier than when he had entered the study. Tom Merry's brow grew stern again.

"We'll put that chap through something warm," he said. "We'll give him a lesson that will make his hair curl. What do you say to treacle and feathers? Tar and feathers would be proper, but we haven't any tar. Treacle is just as good, and we can get a big jar from the school shop before it closes. As for the feathers, we can rip a bed for them."

"Good idea."

"We'll take Study No. 6 into it," said Tom Merry. "We've got to get the scoundrel in our hands, you know. If he's hanging about St. Jim's we shall manage that. Come along."

And the Terrible Three walked away to Study No. 6, each of them with a determined expression on his face that boded no good to Mr. Jonas Jex.

CHAPTER 8.

Treacle and Feathers!

"BLAKE, I—I want to speak to you." It was George Gore who spoke. He looked hesitatingly into Study No. 6. It was at the same time that Curly was explaining matters to the Terrible Three in their quarters.

"You can come in," said Blake.

None of the chums of Study No. 6 got on well with Gore. There was a good deal of both the bully and the sneak in his disposition. But now he looked so white and wretched that his greatest enemy must have taken pity on him.

He came into the study. The chums looked at him inquiringly. He sank into a chair, and, to their surprise, burst into tears. They had never seen Gore in tears before.

"Here, I say, old chap," exclaimed Blake, "don't do that! What's the matter? We'll do anything we can for you."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Buck up, old man," said Herries. "What's the trouble?" "I know I've no right to ask anything of you," said Gore wretchedly. "But—but I'm in horrible trouble. I must have some money, or I shall be ruined."

"I say, it's not that fellow Jex, is it?" asked Blake quickly. "Yes, it is."

"What has he been doing?"

"I—I bought a cigarette case of him," said the wretched chief of the Smart Set at St. Jim's. "I was a fool. He said the payments will become due at once because I let a payment lapse. It's in the agreement right enough, but I never noticed it, and he himself offered to let the payment stand over. He's a swindler. I owed him fifteen bob, and I paid him six, and he said he wanted a bob for interest on the rest."

"The mongrel!"

"I sold my fishing-rod, and took him six bob on the next Saturday," groaned Gore. "He took it, and then said there was to be a shilling a day interest on the rest till I paid it."

"You must be an ass!" said Blake candidly. "It was your parting with the money under threats that encouraged him to swindle you. If you had paid him the lot, he would still have found some excuse for screwing out more."

Gore gave a groan.

"That's makes eight bob again now," he said. "It will keep on going up, faster than I can pay it. I have only four shillings a week, and the interest is seven on his terms. I haven't sixpence in the world, and—and——"

"And what?"

"I've just met him outside the gates. He says unless I let him have at least five bob this evening he will complain to the doctor."

"He wouldn't dare to! The Head might row you, but he'd take jolly good care that Jonas Jex got no more money from you."

"I don't know. According to the agreement——"

"What's the good of an agreement with a kid your age? It doesn't bind you. It's a swindle, and doesn't hold good in law, as Jex knew when he made you sign it."

"I say, are you sure of that, Blake?"

"Of course I am."

"But—but it was a cigarette case he sold me," said Gore, wretchedly. "If the Head knew, he would know about my smoking, and——"

Blake gave an expressive grunt.

"I don't like to rag a fellow who's down on his luck," he said. "But I must say you are a giddy ass, Gore. Still, you ought not to pay him anything. Give him his cigarette case back and have done with him."

"If he gives me away to the Head——"

"The Head wouldn't listen to him, if he dared to come here; which he wouldn't."

"I—I say, I'd rather pay him," said Gore, nervously. "If you chaps would lend me the money, I'd be awfully obliged. I'll pay you over my allowance every week like clockwork, honour bright, if you'll see me through this."

D'Arcy's hand went into his pocket.

"I think you are a great ass, Goah," he said; "but if you'd wathah pay the boundah, I shall be happy to lend you the necessawry cash. Eight shillin's, did you say?"

"Yes."

"Will half-a-sovereign do? I haven't any shillin's."

"Thanks, D'Arcy! I shan't forget this——"

Gore broke off as Tom Merry looked into the study.

"Can we come in?" asked the hero of the Shell, affably.

"Yaas wathah!"

The Terrible Three came in. They glanced rather curiously at Gore, who turned his face from the light. The half-sovereign was in D'Arcy's hand.

"We want you chaps to help us," said Tom Merry. "No reason why Gore shouldn't take a hand, too. That beast Jex has been frightening little Curly, and squeezing money out of him. We're going to put him through it."

Gore gave a start.

"What are you going to do?" he asked hastily.

"Treacle and feathers," said Tom Merry sententially. "The only question is, how are we to get the brute into our study."

"My hat!" ejaculated Blake. "Gore, old man, that's a better idea than paying him. You said you've got to meet him this evening. Look here! You must get him inside the gates somehow, and then we'll collar him."

Gore hesitated.

"You in it too, Gore?" asked Tom Merry. "Have you been paying him money?"

ANSWERS

"He's going to show me up if I don't let him have eight bob to-night," said Gore. "D'Arcy's going to lend it to me. It's safer to pay him."

"Nothing of the sort," said Tom Merry promptly. "D'Arcy's going to do nothing of the sort. That scoundrel has had too much out of us chaps already."

"It was a cigarette case I bought, and if he tells the Head——"

"Do you think the Head would listen to anything a rascal like that said? If he came here to speak to Dr. Holmes he would be chucked out on the spot."

"Of course he would," said Blake. "You've nothing to be afraid of, Gore."

"I'd rather pay——"

"It isn't a question of what you'd rather," said Tom Merry. "You're not going to pay him. We're going to scare him off St. Jim's for good. You chaps are with us?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"If Gore's got to meet him, he can trick him into our clutches, as Blake says. Now, do the sensible thing, Gore. Shove that half-sovereign back into your pocket, D'Arcy. Blake, I call upon you to make Gussy put his filthy lucre away."

"But I've told Goah I will lend——"

"And I've told him you won't. Blake, call that object to order."

"I wefuse to be called an object. I wefuse to be called to ordah. I wefuse——"

"Silence," said Blake, taking up a stick. "Another word, and bang goes your eyeglass."

D'Arcy relapsed into silence. A threat like that always subdued him.

"Now, Gore, what do you say? Are you with us? I give you my word that if Jex troubles you again after we have done with him, we'll raise the money for you to pay him, without asking you to refund any of it. That's fair."

"I'm agreeable to that," said Gore. "And I'd like to give the hound something back for what I've gone through the last week or two. I'm with you."

"Good! Now for the details."

The details of the little plot were discussed earnestly by the juniors. Nothing was left to chance; that was not Tom Merry's way. A huge jar of treacle was purchased in the school shop, and feathers were obtained in any quantity. The scene of the coming punishment was finally settled. It was agreed that it would be difficult to convey the rascal into the School House without detection. Tom Merry suggested the wood-shed, and the suggestion was adopted. So was Blake's proposal that Figgins & Co. should be asked to take a hand.

Gore was cordially in the plot when he went out to meet Mr. Jex. As a matter of choice, of course, he would rather have treacled and feathered Mr. Jex than paid him. His fears having been relieved, he was glad of the chance of a little revenge.

It was near locking-up time, and the dusk was growing. Mr. Jex was waiting in the lane not far from the school-gates.

"Oh, 'ere you are!" he growled, as Gore came up. "Now, 'ow much have you got for me?"

"How much do you want?" asked Gore.

"I told yer. If I don't 'ave five bob now on the spot, look out for squalls," said Mr. Jex. "Now, are you going to 'and it over?"

"No, I'm not."

"You young swindler! I'll show you! I——"

There was a rush of feet in the darkness. Mr. Jex was swept off his legs, and in a twinkling he was down on his back, with a swarm of juniors scrambling over him.

"'Ere, what the—who the——"

"Collar him!" shouted Tom Merry.

They collared him fast enough. Mr. Jex struggled gamely, but he struggled in vain. There were nine juniors scrambling upon him, and he was helpless. He began to yell, but that was soon stopped. A handkerchief was rammed into his mouth, and his yells died away in inarticulate gaspings and splutterings.

"Bring him along!"

He was lifted from the ground. The surprise of the attack, and the fear of what was to come, had dazed Jonas Jex. He hardly struggled as the triumphant juniors bore him along. It would have been useless to struggle. Each of his limbs was gripped by two juniors, and Gore had an arm tightly round his neck, while D'Arcy's hands were fastened in his hair. He was completely helpless.

The juniors carried him on at a rapid run. They went through the gates of St. Jim's in a twinkling, and in the dusk they were unobserved. Taggles came out to close the gates a few minutes later, but by that time the juniors and their prisoner were safe in the wood-shed.

Mr. Jex was plumped upon the brick floor, and Tom Merry closed the door. Figgins lighted a bicycle lantern, and hung it on a nail to shed light upon the proceedings. The rest were holding Mr. Jex captive.

Mr. Jex spluttered and gasped, but the gag choked his utterance. His eyes grew round with alarm as he saw the huge jar of treacle and the heap of feathers.

"Better tie him up, I think," said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy, withdrawing his hands from their affectionate grip on Mr. Jex's hair, and surveying them with a great deal of disgust. "I must positively wefuse to lay hands on that extremely unpleasant wuffian again. The howwid rottah uses nasty hair-oil, and I have made my hands howwidly dirty. Look at them! I think I must wun up to the School House and wash them, if you will wait for me about a quartah of an hour, deah boys."

"Yes, I can see us doing that," said Tom Merry. "You can go if you like, Gussy, but the circus will be over by the time you get back."

"I weally think you might wait. I cannot possibly remain here with my hands dirty—now can I? I am pweared to make sacwifices, but a fellah must dwaw a line somewhere. I——"

"Cheese it! Stick your belt round his wrists, Figgins!"

"Righto! Here you are. Kerr's can go round his ankles."

"Better take his coat off," said Blake, "and his waistcoat. My hat, wath a giddy waistcoat! It beats D'Arcy's for colour. Let them hang at his wrists; don't take the trouble to untie him. Now we're all ready, I think."

Mr. Jex gasped and turned purple. Tom Merry removed the gag from his mouth.

"Have you anything to say why sentence of treacle and feathers should not be passed upon you, according to law?" he demanded severely.

"You young rips!"

"That is an irrelevant personality."

"I'll be the death of you!"

"Anything else?"

"I'll 'ave the law of yer. I'll—I'll——"

"You admit, of course, that you are a beastly rotter," said Tom Merry. "You know that your sentence is just. You have extorted money from boys by frightening them; about the meanest sort of thing a chap could do, next to stealing. You ought really to be hanged, as a matter of fact, but we haven't any rope handy."

"I will wun up to the School House and fetch some wope," said D'Arcy. "I could wash this off my hands while I am there."

"Ha, ha! Upon the whole, we won't hang him. Beheading would be a good thing, though, and there is Taggles's wood-axe handy. Hand over that axe, Blake."

"Here you are."

"You young demons!" yelled Mr. Jex, half believing that Tom Merry was in earnest, so serious and solemn was his face as he took the axe from Blake. "You murderous young varmint, you'll be sent to prison for this!"

"Would you rather be treacled and feathered?"

"No—yes—blow you! I'll—I'll——"

"The prisoner will be treacled and feathered at his own personal request," said Tom Merry. "He's a rotten brute, but I like to be obliging."

"Don't you touch me with that stuff!"

"Sorry, but we must. You see, we've got to give you a lesson. It will do you a lot of good, and we make no charge for the treacle."

"Ow! Keep off! I—ow! Oh!"

Tom Merry ladled the treacle out upon the red countenance of Mr. Jex with a liberal hand. The rascal's features gradually disappeared beneath it.

"Give him some feathers now," said Kerr. "Let him have both on the instalment plan—that will suit him."

"Ha, ha—yes! Chuck over the feathers!"

"Gr-er-r-r! Lemme alone!"

"More!" said Tom Merry. "Come on. Let him have enough. No good being mean about it." He dropped the ladle and seized the jar, and inverted it over the head of Mr. Jex as he sat wriggling.

The unfortunate rascal gave a fearful yell. The treacle clotted over his hair, his face, his neck, and ran down over his clothes. The feathers, liberally piled on him, stuck to him everywhere, until he disappeared under a mass of them.

His aspect was so comical that the juniors roared with laughter. The man was such an utter rascal that he deserved no pity, and he got none.

He squirmed on the floor of the wood-shed, a mass of treacle and feathers, gurgling and gasping and yelling. The grinning juniors surrounded him, piling on the feathers, till the whole of them were sticking somewhere to the treacle.

"There, I think that will about do," said Tom Merry, surveying his handiwork with a great deal of satisfaction. "Do you think that will do, chaps?"

"Ha, ha—yes!"

"Do you think it will do, Mr. Jex?"

"You young 'ounds. I'll be the death of you!"

"This is a lesson. If you show your nose near St. Jim's again, or ever speak to any of our fellows, we shall serve you worse next time," said Tom. "We'll keep an eye open for you, and if you come down this way again, just look out, that's all."

Blake unfastened the rascal's hands and feet.

"There you are," said Tom Merry. "Now you can travel!"

"I'll—I'll half kill——"

"My hat! Who's that?"

The door of the wood-shed was opening. In the excitement of the moment, the juniors had overlooked the fact that a considerable din was proceeding from the wood-shed, which was likely to reach other ears.

They stared towards the door as it opened. Then there was a general gasp of dismay as an awe-inspiring figure in cap and gown appeared in the doorway. It was the Head!

CHAPTER 9.

Exit Mr. Jex.

TOM MERRY was swift to act. Even as the door of the wood-shed opened, his hand was on the bicycle lantern, and it went out the instant the Head appeared.

Dr. Holmes stopped in the doorway. He had seen nothing, but the sudden extinguishing of the light was a sufficient indication that something was going on there.

Mr. Jex, smothered with treacle and feathers, a considerable quantity of which was in his mouth, was staggering and mumbling incoherently. Dr. Holmes stared into the darkness.

"Dear me! Boys!"

There was no reply. The juniors kept as still as mice.

"Boys!"

Still dead silence, save for that mysterious sound of mumbling. The Head advanced into the shed, holding out his hands to feel his way. He gave a sudden start. His hand had come into contact with something—something sticky, and he withdrew it quickly.

"What—what is that?"

Mr. Jex lurched against him in the darkness. The Head gave a loud cry. The sticky Mr. Jex had imparted a considerable quantity of his treacle and feathers to the Head of St. Jim's, and had caught hold of him for a support.

"Dear me!" gasped the Head. "A light! I command you to bring a light!"

There was no help for it. Tom Merry struck a vesta and re-lighted the bicycle lantern.

The Head stared about him. Alarmed as they were, the juniors could hardly help grinning as they saw the treacle and feathers adhering to the face and gown of their respected Head.

"What—what does this mean?"

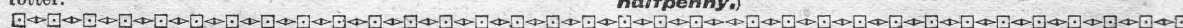
"Gr-r-r!" mumbled Mr. Jex.

"Merry, explain! Explain at once!" thundered the Head.

"What is the meaning of this?"

Tom Merry stepped forward. He did not know how the affair would turn out, but he was not afraid to own up to what he had done.

"If you please, sir, we've been treaceling and feathering that rotter."



Stormpoint

A School Tale. By MAURICE MERRIMAN.

READ THIS FIRST

Rex, "Perkins is a sneak and a simpleton; and as for old Porker—well, he's too disgusting to talk about. I'm sure the man was intended for a pig." (Now go on with the story.)

A Definition of Porker, the Porter.

"Porker looks like an old sow that has been fattened up for Christmas!" declared Bob.

"I don't want none of your insults, and, what's more, I won't have them, you varmint!" growled Porker "I'm porter of this 'ere college, and, as sech, I expect doo respect from masters and boys, and that's what I will have!"

"Poor old empty-headed bouncer!" exclaimed Jim. "He has got about as much sense in his noddle as Perkins. You might put their combined brains into a lady's thimble."

"Who—who is it?"

"Chap named Jex, sir—beastly blackmailing bounder!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Jex!" exclaimed the Head. "Ah, I have heard of the man. I have received information on the subject of his dealings with my boys, and had made up my mind to look into it. How did the man come here?"

"We brought him, sir."

"I'll ave the law on yer!" mumbled Mr. Jex.

"He's an awful rascal, sir," said Tom Merry, encouraged by the view the Head took of the matter. "He's been extorting money from the kids. We thought we would give him a lesson and keep him clear of St. Jim's in the future."

"Ahem! From what I have heard of the man he certainly deserves punishment. Mr. Jex, you will kindly take yourself off at once!"

"I—I've been ill-used. I've been——"

"Your own fault entirely. You have no right on these premises. If you do not instantly go I shall give you into custody."

Mr. Jex stumbled from the wood-shed. Taggles, who was looking in, regarded him with amazement.

"Taggles," said the Head, "you will see that person off the school premises."

"Yes, sir!"

And the porter marched the unfortunate rascal off. Mr. Jex disappeared from St. Jim's, and the lesson Tom Merry had given him was not lost. He gave the school a wide berth after the experience of the treacle and feathers.

The Head looked at the juniors when Mr. Jex was gone.

"You have acted in an—outrageous way," he said. "But I admit that the man is a great rascal and deserved punishment. I must think over this matter. You may go back to your respective houses."

And then the Head turned and stalked away, with as much dignity as was possible to a learned doctor whose features were almost obliterated under a layer of treacle and feathers. The juniors marched cheerfully enough out of the wood-shed.

"The Head won't say another word about it," said Tom Merry confidently. "He's just as pleased as we are to see that scoundrel get his deserts, only he can't say so. We sha'n't see any more of Jonas Jex, and we sha'n't hear anything about this affair from the Head."

And Tom Merry was right upon both points.

THE END.

(Another Long, Complete Tale dealing with Tom Merry's Schooldays next Thursday, entitled "The Nine Detectives." Please do not fail to order your copy of "The Gem" Library in advance. Price one halfpenny.)

"Don't you! Well, I'll jolly soon show you," sneered Perkins. "We shall go fishing, too, and you won't fish in the same place that we do."

"You had better be off before you get your head punched, Measles!" said Bob.

"If you call me that again perhaps you will get your head punched."

"We had better be careful," exclaimed Rex "Measles is getting pugilistic!"

"What you might call malignant Measles," said Jim. "Come on, you chaps. I'm tired of the wretched little sneak. You had better spend the afternoon with Porker, Measles. You are just fit company!"

Then the chums hurried to the boathouse, where the sailing-boat Bob had hired, was waiting for them. They had a pair of oars in case the wind failed them, and in the stern sheets was stowed a quantity of fishing net.

Bob preferred that mode of fishing, because, he said, they would be bound to catch something at every haul; besides, it would be a novelty. He had brought a fine stock of provisions in case their fishing operations proved a failure, and all promised to go well, until they saw Jardon, Symes, and Perkins coming towards the boathouse, then they had an idea that there would be trouble.

"We had better shove off," exclaimed Bob. "They are sure to make some excuse to collar our provisions, and they will upset our boat if we give them half a chance. We must mind how we go, because the water is rather low, and there's a beastly sandbank a bit lower down the estuary."

The tide, which was running out, was very swift, and although there was not much wind, the chums got along at a fair pace; but the bullies, who had hired a pair-oared boat, came along much faster. The worst of it was that Perkins had brought a catapult, and every time his steering operations gave him a chance, he favoured the chums with a dose of shot. Rex received one on his ear that reminded him of a wasp sting, while Bob got another that caused him to utter a yell; then they all got a dose, and the bullies laughed.

"They are overhauling us," exclaimed Bob; "and it won't do for one of us to take the oars. He would get peppered most frightfully, and those shot would hurt if they hit you in the eye."

"I quite believe it," growled Rex. "I've got one on the ear, and that is quite painful enough for my liking."

"All right!" exclaimed Bob. "Let 'em come up, and I'll catch Perkins such a jolly jab with the boathook. Mind you keep off the sandbank, Rex. It's just yonder where you see that calm-looking water."

"I know it, old chap," answered Rex. "Got on it once. Look out for that catapult! It's downright dangerous the way that little villain is aiming!"

"He had much better look after his steering," growled Bob.

"Woo-hoo! I'm of the same opinion!" yelled Jim, as he received a shot on the back of his neck.

"Get the floor-boards up," cried Rex. "They will shelter us a bit."

Jim did so, and they found it a great improvement. The bullies got their boat alongside, then Jardon received a frightful crack over the knuckles as he tried to catch hold. Then Bob gave Perkins a prod that caused him to leap into the air and yell, while he dropped his catapult overboard, and very nearly went after it.

Jardon struck Jim over the head with the blade of his oar, and that worthy retaliated by dipping the mop into the water, and catching Jardon a blow in the face with it.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Rex. "You have nearly knocked his stupid head off his shoulders. That's right, Jim! Drench them!"

Jim was slopping water over them with the mop, and Jardon was only too glad to get away.

The two bullies pulled with all their strength, and the boat shot ahead on the swift tide.

"We shall see some fun directly," murmured Bob. "They are heading straight for the sandbank. Don't you get any nearer, Rex. That little idiot Perkins isn't paying the slightest attention to where he is steering. His one aim appears to be to get away from us as far as he can. There they go! Ha, ha, ha! They are right on it. Let's drop anchor and chaff them a bit. Down with the sail!"

The chums brought the boat to just opposite the bank where the bullies had run aground, and Jardon and Symes were making desperate efforts to push the boat off.

"Don't say anything just yet," murmured Bob. "They have gone on a treat, and that boat will want some getting off against this tide. The silly owls ought to get into the water and shove her off. That's right, Jardon!" bawled Bob.

"Shove her off. Push harder, man! Haven't you got more strength than that? Well, that's better," added Bob, as the blade of the oar smashed off. "You will be able to use it as a punt pole now; and I don't suppose it will cost you much

more than a sovereign for a new oar. Push harder, and you will soon shift it."

"I'll break your silly head when I get you back to the college!" declared Jardon, stopping for a rest, which was the stupidest thing he could do, because the tide was falling fast, and every minute made all the difference.

"You had better get yourself back to the college first," said Jim. "I never came across such an awkward lout in a boat. You might do for a bargee. Your language would be suitable, at any rate. Ha, ha, ha! Shove away and look pleasant. You are not so strong as you ought to be."

"I believe they are going to pull off their shoes and stockings," said Rex.

"It doesn't matter," murmured Bob. "I believe they are too late now. That is a heavy boat, and she will want some shifting. You know, that mud will be jolly soft to stand on. We are bound to see some fun when they make the attempt."

The bullies were wasting valuable time. They made Perkins get out with his boots on, and he uttered a yell as he sank into the soft mud.

"I say!" he yelled. "This is awful! I'm sinking up to my neck! It's sus-soft!"

"So is your head, you pudden-headed little brute!" snarled Jardon. "We must get out, Symes."

Symes knew that it was their only chance. They both stepped over the side, then glanced at each other as they sank into the mud, while the chums howled with laughter. It was bad enough standing on the mud, but when they attempted to lift the boat, they sank into the black mire up to their knees.

"That's the way to do it, Jardon!" cried Bob. "You don't look so tall as you were when you first went over the side. If you were to ask my advice, I would tell you that you won't get that boat off so easily."

"Look here," said Jardon, "you must take us ashore!"

"Thanks; but I would rather not get any nearer that sandbank. It ought to be called a mudbank. Ha, ha, ha! Haven't you made your legs and feet dirty!"

The bullies were scrambling into the boat again, and by that time it lay on its side in the mud. There was not sufficient water even to wash the mire off their legs.



(This is the picture which appears on the cover of number 28 THE BOYS' FRIEND, 3d. Complete Library. Do not fail to buy it, it is now on sale and obtainable from all newsagents. Price threepence.)

STORMPOINT (continued).

"I say, dear boys," exclaimed Rex, "you have made yourselves in a jolly mess, and you haven't done a bit of good. I'm afraid you will not have a very good afternoon's sport; still, you will be able to watch us!"

"I tell you, Allingham, you must take us off!" cried Jardon. "If you bring your boat close to the bank we can wade off."

"Well, that might be possible," said Rex. "But, you see, we don't want you to wade off. What I would advise you to do is to stop there till the tide has run out and up again. You won't have much more than six or eight hours to wait, and during some of the time you will be able to watch us fishing with the net. We are going to have a picnic on the shore. Of course, if you don't like waiting as long as that you can swim to the shore. The only objections to that are that you will lose the boat, and get rather wet. You might, also, get carried out to sea."

"Look here, stop your fooling, Allingham!" said Jardon. "I have a particular engagement this evening. You must take me off. We can leave Perkins in the boat to mind it."

"That would be selfish, Jardon, and I don't want to encourage you in selfishness. No! You must either swim across or stay where you are. We shall certainly not take you off. It will be a lesson to you in future not to try to spoil our sport."

"I feel quite sure that you will not act in such a caddish manner as to leave us here. You see, we cannot possibly get off."

"No, we notice that. All the same, our ideas of caddishness don't agree with yours. We consider that you and Symes are the finest specimens of cads we ever met. I can just fancy your taking us off, were our positions reversed."

"I shouldn't hesitate for a moment to do so."

"Oh, no! Your veracity is charming in its simplicity. We are not going to take you off."

Jardon tried a little more pleading, and then he showed the passion which he felt. He threatened the chums with all sorts of things, and they shouted with laughter at him, and drove him so mad that he clouted Perkins's head for having run them on the bank. At least, that is what he said he had done. Perkins vowed if they dared to touch him again he would send for his father.

"You know what an awful thrashing he gave you before, and he told me to write him if you ever struck me again. Besides, I won't pay for the boat if you do. You hired it, and I said I would pay for two hours, but I'm hanged if I'm going to pay for eight."

"You little viper, you shall pay every penny, or I'll fling you into that mud."

"If you do, I'll tell my father, and I won't pay a penny for the hire of the boat. He will look to you for payment. And if you spoil my clothes, you will have to pay for them as well."

Jardon was not at all likely to forget the thrashing he had received, and as he had no desire to receive another one, he deemed it safer not to execute his threat; so he raved at the chums a little, but they only laughed at him.

"Up anchor, old chaps!" exclaimed Bob. "It is no good listening to that idiot. We will run across the channel, so we shall have to row. The shore here is sandy, and it's just the place for our purpose. I would like to let those abominable bullies see us enjoy a picnic."

Rex and Jim felt the same way inclined. They soon ran the boat across, bringing her in stern first; then Jim took one end of the long net, while his chums rowed out in a semi-circle, paying out the net

as they went. As they came in, Jim drew his end of the net towards them, and they gradually closed up, then hauled in both ends of the net.

The catch was not very large, but it was quite large enough for their purpose. They only got flat fish, and having selected some of the largest, threw the remainder back into the water.

"Here's the axe!" exclaimed Bob, who had forgotten nothing. "We have got to light a fire, but that stump of a tree will give us plenty of fuel. Would you like to clean the fish, Rex?"

"Well, I will clean them," observed Rex. "I can't conscientiously say that I would like to do so. Light your fire. We had better keep the boat afloat, else we shall get sewed up like Jardon. Get out the frying-pan and the provisions, Jim. I hope you have got some grease for frying purposes, Bob?"

"I've got a bladder of lard, and that ought to be enough. You will find the new bread and butter in the bows, Jim."

Then they all set to work, and soon had a camp-fire blazing away. It was jolly work, and they enjoyed it immensely. Occasionally they shouted across to the bullies how much they were enjoying themselves, and Jardon actually condescended to beg some provisions.

"We are not going to give you anything," shouted Bob. "We want this to be a lesson to you, and it will do you all the good in the world. You see, we are not quite big enough to give you the flogging that you deserve, or else we would punish you in that way. As it is we have to do it in this, and we quite hope that it will do you good. At any rate, it can't possibly make you worse than you are."

As may be imagined, this did not tend to improve Jardon's temper, but the chums only laughed at his fury.

"You will get on all right with one oar," shouted Bob. "You see, when the tide turns it is bound to take you up the river. Very likely we will tell the boatman that you will not return till late. He won't mind that at all, seeing that you have to pay so much an hour. Now, stop your silly noise, because we shall be busy for the next hour or so."

They were very busy. The fish was not what could have been called skilfully fried, but they enjoyed it far more than they would have done had it been served up in style by the best cook. The new bread and butter were excellent, and when they could eat no more fish, Bob brought out a large pot of strawberry jam, because he said it was a pity to waste the bread-and-butter.

Then they finished their feast with pastry, and sat round their camp-fire chatting, and occasionally chaffing the prisoners, who by that time were becoming exceedingly hungry.

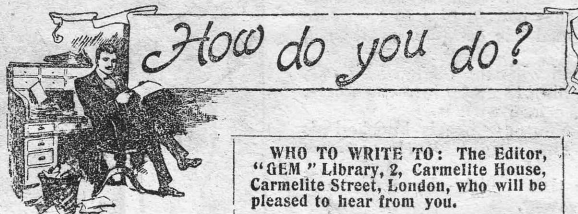
"Well, old chaps," exclaimed Bob at last, "I think it is about time that we were going. The tide has turned, so it will be easy work. We can tack up the estuary, and take our time."

"I suppose those fellows will be all safe?" exclaimed Rex, glancing at the mudbank.

"As safe as if they were in their beds," answered Bob. "All they have got to do is to sit in their boat till the tide carries them off, and then they will gracefully float up the river. We can tell the boatman to look out for them; but in any event they would be able to scull ashore."

The night was beautifully calm, and as the chums knew that there would be no danger, they started off, waving farewells to the prisoners, who did not get back to the college till nine o'clock, and then they arrived in a state of fury that convinced the chums it would be better to keep out of their way for the present.

(Another long instalment next Thursday. Please order your "GEM" Library in advance.)



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