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VOL. 2.

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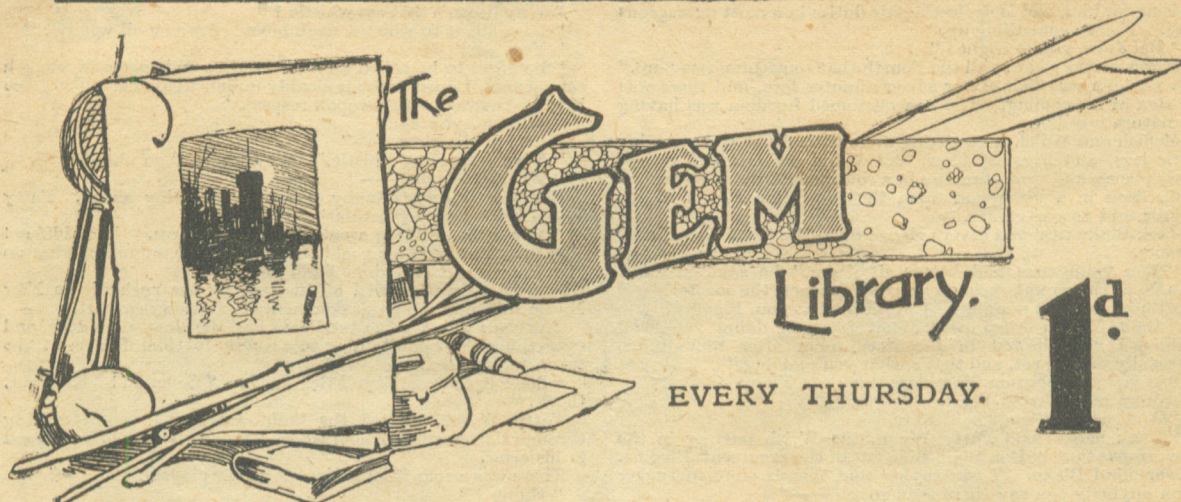
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CHAPTER 1.

The Fourth Form Plays Rugby.

"THERE'S something up!"

It was Jack Blake, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, who made that statement in the Form-room at twenty minutes past nine in the morning.

The room was in a buzz.

The Fourth Form had been all at their desks when the clock indicated a quarter past nine, that being the time at which they commenced the day's work, and Mr. Lathom, the Form-master, should have been there also.

But little Mr. Lathom was conspicuous by his absence. The big hand of the clock had crawled on minute after minute without his putting in an appearance.

It was now twenty minutes past. Mr. Lathom was five minutes late, and still he had not come.

The amazed Fourth-Formers realised that they were left to themselves, to do as they liked instead of settling down to the collar as usual; and a buzz of talk, gradually growing louder, filled the Form-room.

"There's something up!"

Jack Blake made the statement positively, as if challenging contradiction; but no one contradicted him.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I do not wemembah Mr. Lathom bein' as much as five minutes late in the mornin' before, deah boys. There is certainly somethin' up."

"Perhaps he's ill," suggested Digby.

"He wasn't ill at breakfast," replied Blake immediately.

"I remember he was looking very serious, though," said Herries. "So was Railton, too. Something's wrong somewhere."

"That's what I was saying," said Blake, "There's something up. I noticed it when we first came down from the dormitory this morning."

"Bai Jove! What did you notice, deah boy?"

"Railton and Linton were standing in the hall of the School House, talking as seriously as a couple of boiled owls, and they shut up immediately we came by."

"Yaas, I wemembah that now."

"Lathom was looking worried all through breakfast, and our respected captain, Kildare, is in the secret, too, for I recall that he was looking as if he had lost his last tanner and the last bus home."

"That's so."

"And now Lathom has forgotten that the Fourth Form are

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No. 33 (New Series).

waiting for him, and is neglecting his duties in a most outrageous way. There's something up."

"Bai Jove, you're wight!"

It was pretty clear to all the Fourth that something was "up." Mr. Lathom was now six or seven minutes late, and there was no sign of his coming. The unaccustomed freedom was having its natural results.

Mellish and Walsh were sitting upon their desks and swinging their legs, and Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn had strolled out of their places, and were standing in a row against the blue-washed wall, deep in a discussion upon the respective merits of the rugger and soccer games.

Jack Blake turned a severe glance upon the three New House juniors.

"You youngsters had better sit down," he said. "Can't you New House kids behave yourselves when the master's eye is withdrawn for a minute? I'm shocked at you, Figgins!"

"Rats!" said Figgins. "What are you doing yourself? Talking's not allowed in the Form-room after nine-fifteen, especially talking rot, and that's what you're doing."

"If you are yearning for a prize thick ear, Figgy——"

"More rats!" said Figgins cheerfully.

"And many of 'em," said Kerr.

"Look here," said Fatty Wynn, the Welsh partner in the New House Co. "Don't you slide out of the argument, Figgins. Never mind Blake. I was saying that there's more in rugger than anybody can say there is in soccer——"

"Rot!" said Figgins.

"I always play rugger at home in Wales," said Fatty Wynn, "and a jolly good game it is, too. Of course, I'm not saying anything against Association. We've had some jolly good games at St. Jim's; but what I say is——"

"Mostly bosh."

"Look here, Figgins——"

"I agree with Figgins there," said Jack Blake cordially. "Fatty Wynn is an ass, and no mistake, to put rugger before soccer."

"Yaas, wathah! I have never played wuggah," said D'Arcy, "and I weally do not know anythin' about the game; but I am quite sure you are wight, deah boy."

"When Gussy says a thing, it is so," said Figgins gravely. "He tells you he doesn't know anything about the matter, and what more can you want?"

"Weally, Figgins——"

"I'd like to show you chaps a good rugger game," said Fatty Wynn disdainfully. "I'd like to have some of you in Wales for the next vac. We'd show you."

"Show us now!" exclaimed Figgins, grinning. "Lathom doesn't seem to be coming, and we must kill time somehow. Let's game a game of rugger."

"Ripping!" said Jack Blake heartily. "I know how to play the game, though it's not up to soccer——"

"It's far and away better than soccer, look you."

"Rats! Let's have a game, though. Anybody got a ball?"

The idea caught on immediately. The juniors were ripe for fun or mischief, and there is an old saying that somebody finds work for idle hands to do.

The boys were out of their desks in a twinkling, School House and New House ranging themselves into opposite sides. The excitement was intense.

Nobody was likely to have a Rugby ball in his pocket, or an Association ball for that matter. As Digby remarked, it was not usual to come into a class-room prepared to play footer at short notice.

But the inventive genius of the juniors supplied the deficiency. Two or three dusters wrapped round a school cap, and tied with twine made a really serviceable ball, which would not have been passed in a Rugby Union match perhaps, but which was quite good enough for an amateur game in a school class-room.

"How many a side?" asked Figgins. "I don't see why any should be left out."

"Well, fifteen is the number," said Fatty Wynn.

"Thirteen in the Northern Union," said Jack Blake, who hailed from Yorkshire, and knew all about that.

"Oh, blow the Northern Union."

"Well, blow the Rugby Union, if you come to that."

"They used to play rugger with any number a side," said Figgins. "Let us make it the old style, and let every fellow take a hand in the game."

"Good idea."

"Now, line up, then."

"You will wequire a wewefee, deah boys."

"Good! D'Arcy shall be referee."

"I shall weally have gweat pleasuah in performin' the duties of a wewefee, deah boys. Has anybody a whistle?"

"Here you are."

"Thank you. Now if you are weady—don't push me like that, Stevens. I don't like it. Pway don't twead on my toes, Hewwies."

"Go ahead!"

"Kick off!"

"Why doesn't that ass whistle?"

"I am about to whistle, deah boys. Are you all weady?"

"Yes, ass."

"I wewuse to be called an ass. Before this game of wuggah commences, I must make it cleahly undahstood that the wewefee is to be tweated with pwopah respect."

"Whistle, you ass."

"Undah the cires——"

"Never mind the whistle," said Figgins, "go ahead."

"Weally, Figgins——"

But the amateur Rugby players were going ahead. Fatty Wynn was vainly expostulating.

"You asses! There aren't any touch-judges. You duffers! You haven't tossed for goal! You shrieking dummies, what do you know about Rugby? I tell you——"

But Fatty was carried off his feet by the rush of the New House side, and the game commenced in deadly earnest.

The goals were the master's desk and the class-room door, and everything else appertaining to a Rugby football field had to be taken for granted.

"Sock it to 'em!" yelled Figgins. "Come on! Kick out, there!"

Fatty Wynn collared the ball, and dashed on, streaking through the crowd of School House fellows with the prize hugged in his arms.

There was a roar from indignant soccer players.

"Hands!"

The referee's whistle rang shrilly out.

But the game did not stop. Fatty Wynn tore on with the ball, and dragged himself loose from a dozen hands that gripped at him, and triumphantly scored a try by bumping the ball down on Mr. Lathom's desk.

There was a roar from Figgins & Co.

"Try! Try!"

The referee whistled furiously.

"Hold on! I don't allow that goal, deah boys!"

"You shrieking ass, it wasn't a goal. It was a try," said the Welsh junior, in withering tones.

"Vewy well, if you were only twyin', it's all wight; but I could not allow it as a goal," said Arthur Augustus.

"We score three points——"

"You don't score anythin'!"

"Ass! You score three points for a try in Rugby," yelled Fatty Wynn.

"Wats! You handled the ball——"

"Well, you shrieking fathead, what did you suppose I was going to do with it? This is Rugby, not Soccer."

"I wewuse to be called a shwicking fathead. Such expwessions applied to a wewefee on the football field are out of ordah."

"Oh, rats!"

"Any playah sayin' wats to the wewefee is ordahed off the field."

"More rats! That's three to us——"

"I wewuse to allow the thwee. I am wewolved that the authority of the wewefee shall be wewpected. The game will be started afwesh."

"Get going," said Kerr, "Lathom may come in any minute."

"That's so!" exclaimed Blake. "We've got to level up before the game's stopped. It's all right, Gussy, you're allowed to carry the ball in rugger, and Fatty scored that try in proper order."

"I wewuse to admit anythin' of the sort."

"Then go and eat coke. Take your kick, Fatty, and don't waste time."

"Right you are."

And Fatty Wynn carried out the ball for the kick. Figgins took the kick, and landed a goal fairly on the Form-master's desk.

"Hurrah!" yelled Fatty Wynn. "Goal!"

"Five points to us," grinned Kerr.

"I wewuse to allow five beastly points——"

"Oh, go and bury yourself!"

"I uttahly wewuse to go and buwy myself."

"Play up!"

"Get level, you chaps. Play up for the School House!"

The School House juniors played with a vengeance. The game grew more and more excited. Fatty Wynn's run up the field had been made before the School House party had settled down to business, so to speak, and he did not get another chance. There was no doubt that, whatever the respective merits of the two varieties of the national game, this special Rugby match was the most exciting football match that had ever been played at St. Jim's.

The referee's whistle rang out again and again, but nobody took any notice of it. Scrummages were taking place every few seconds, and forwards, three-quarters, backs, and halves all took part in them, so that there were sometimes as many as forty juniors sprawling in a heap over the ball, which was beginning to show signs of wear and tear.

The Fourth Form had completely forgotten everything now—everything except the fact that it was a struggle of School House against New House. That they were in a Form-room, and



Skimpole caught his foot in the mat.

supposed to be at work, and that their Form master might come in at any moment, had completely slipped their memory.

They played up splendidly, with a magnificent disregard for the rules of the game, and with an energy that might have excited the envy of the All Blacks.

"Bai Jove!" gasped D'Arcy, as he was borne along in a School House rush, "you mustn't knock the beastly wefewee about. Keep off my toes. Ow, you 'are wumplin' my collah. Oh, I am gettin' my wibs cwushed."

The New House rallied, and drove back the School House, and D'Arcy disappeared under the feet of Figgins & Co.

The rush passed on, and Arthur Augustus crawled out of the melée a mere wreck, with his jacket split up the back, his collar torn out, his trousers rumbled and dusty, and half the buttons off his beautiful waistcoat.

"Bai Jove!" gasped the swell of the School House, "this is the vewvy last time I shall evah wefewee in a beastly Wughy match."

A grand scrummage was proceeding. Figgins & Co. had completely disappeared under a heap of School House juniors, and gasps and grunts were heard under the pile.

Figgins suddenly broke loose, with the ball under his arm, and dashed away towards the desk; and by a remarkable coincidence Jack Blake broke away at the same moment, also with the ball under his arm, and streaked for the door.

Two tries were run for at the same moment by opposing players, but that amazing circumstance was easily explained. The ball had come to pieces in the struggle, and Figgins had the cap and one duster under his arm, while Blake had a couple of knotted dusters under his.

Which was entitled to consider that he had the real ball was a mystery. Figgins tore on to the desk and touched down,

and Blake rushed on to the door and touched down also, and there was a roar from every throat.

"Try! Try!"

"Three to us!" shouted Kerr.

"Three to us!" roared Herries.

"Why, you ass, what are you talking about?"

"What are you talking about yourself?"

"It's a try to us!" shouted Figgins indignantly. "Haven't I touched down behind the giddy desk?"

"Haven't I touched down at the door?" yelled Blake.

"But I've got the ball."

"I've got the ball."

"Look here——"

"Look here——"

"This is the real ball."

"Rats! This is the real ball, of course."

"I'm going to take the kick——"

"You'll take a thick ear as well if you say I haven't scored a try."

"You School House ass——"

"You New House fathead——"

"It was my try——"

"It was mine——"

"Hand over that rag, and I'll mend the ball to take my kick at goal."

"Hand over that rag, and I'll mend it, to take my kick."

"You utter ass——"

"You shrieking fathead——"

No more breath was wasted in words. The Rugby players closed again in a new scrum, but this time the ball was dropped and forgotten, and School House and New House went at it

hammer-and-tongs. The class-room was in an uproar such as had seldom been heard at St. Jim's during school-time. A wild crowd of excited juniors swayed and roared and struggled, and in the midst of the uproar no one noticed the door open, and a little gentleman in glasses appear on the threshold.

CHAPTER 2. Startling News.

MR. LATHOM, the master of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, stared into the Form-room in blank amazement. For a minute or so he seemed to think that he was dreaming. He adjusted his glasses carefully and looked again.

"Dear me!" he murmured. "There appears to be some sort of a disturbance here. Blake—Figgins—Digby—what does this mean?"

"Sock it to them!"

"Down with the School House!"

"Yah! New House rotters!"

"Dear me! Blake—D'Arcy! Boys! Really——"

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed the referee in that memorable Rugby match, looking up from a vain attempt to smooth out his trousers. "Bai Jove, it's Mr. Lathom!"

"Hold on!" gasped Jack Blake. "Pax, you bounders!"

"I'll pax you——"

"It's Lathom."

"My hat! I'd forgotten him."

"So had I."

"Hold on there! Shut up! Cease fire! Ring off! Cheese it!"

The juniors stopped at last, understanding that a Form master's eye was upon them, and that they were caught in the act. Ruffled and dusty, with many a swollen nose and black eye among them, they scrambled back to their desks, and shamefacedly looked at the amazed Form master.

Mr. Lathom came into the room, and walked slowly up to his desk. He was the best-tempered master at St. Jim's, but the scene he had just witnessed would have ruffled any temper.

"Boys, what does this mean?"

As no one in particular was addressed, no one took upon himself the responsibility of replying. Blake grinned ruefully at Figgins, and Figgins grinned ruefully back at Blake.

"Blake! Figgins! What does this mean?"

"You see, sir——" began Blake.

"You see, sir——" began Figgins.

Then both the juniors stopped. As a matter of fact, it was not easy to explain, and still less easy to make excuses. Mr. Lathom frowned.

"Go on, Blake."

"Well, you see, sir," said Jack Blake haltingly, "we—we found that there wasn't anything to do, and—and we thought you wouldn't like us to be idle, sir——"

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Figgins.

"S-so, sir, as we always want to learn, we thought we'd put in the time studying the—the game of Rugby, sir."

"The what?"

"Rugby footer, sir. You know we play Association at St. Jim's, but Wynn offered to teach us rigger, and we know you like us to—improve our minds by study, so——"

Mr. Lathom gasped.

Blake's look was as innocent as it could be made with the disadvantage of a swollen lip and a discoloured eye, and the Form master, who was not a very keen observer, did not know exactly what to make of him. His speech was evidently dictated by either profound simplicity or colossal cheek, and for the life of him Mr. Lathom could not make up his mind which it was.

"And so you have tried to improve your mind, Blake, by turning the class-room into a pandemonium?" he said.

"Were we making a noise, sir?" asked Blake innocently.

Mr. Lathom gasped again.

"Blake, I—I cannot help thinking that you are attempting to delude me. You were making a terrible noise, and the scene when I opened the door was one of—of absolute hooliganism. I—I am ashamed of you! I—I cannot quite decide what punishment is severe enough for this breach of discipline. I should have thought that I could have trusted you alone for a few minutes without this happening."

Blake looked very repentant.

"We are sorry, sir," he said.

"Awfully sorry, sir," said Figgins.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We were carried away by enthusiasm in the study of new knowledge, sir," ventured Blake.

Mr. Lathom coughed.

"I shall have to reflect on this matter," he said. "I cannot allow it to pass unpunished. You shall know my decision later, when I have consulted with your housemaster."

The juniors looked dismayed. It might be possible to soften Mr. Lathom by a judicious use of "soft soap," but Mr. Railton was certain to take a serious view of the matter.

"It is very much to be regretted, too," went on Mr. Lathom, "that this outrageous breach of discipline should have happened now, in view of what happened last night."

The Fourth Form looked surprised and interested. That something unusual had happened at St. Jim's they knew, but what it was they had no idea.

"That," said Mr. Lathom, "is the reason why I was late this morning, and the cause of this deplorable exhibition of—of ruffianism. I may mention that the Shell have been left alone for a similar time by their Form master, but I am certain that no such scene of riot has greeted Mr. Linton on his going to the Form-room."

The juniors looked duly abashed. They would have assumed any expression possible to human features for the sake of pacifying Mr. Lathom, for they remembered now that it was a Wednesday, and a half-holiday at St. Jim's, and it was extremely likely that the whole Form would be gated. Fortunately, Mr. Lathom appeared to have forgotten that it was a half-holiday that afternoon.

"The Head," said Mr. Lathom, "has asked me and the other masters to acquaint my Form with what has happened, in order that any boy who may have heard anything in the night may give information at the earliest possible moment."

"My hat!" muttered Blake. "What on earth's the row? I told you there was something up."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Looks like something serious, too," murmured Figgins.

"During the night," resumed Mr. Lathom, "the chapel here at St. Jim's was entered by—er—some person or persons unknown, and a sum of money was taken away. In short, the offertory has been stolen."

"Phew!" whistled Blake.

"There seems to be absolutely no clue to the thieves," resumed Mr. Lathom. "They entered the chapel apparently by a window, and besides a broken lock where they took the money, there is no sign of their visit there. Inspector Skeet has come over from Rylcombe to investigate the matter, and he would be glad of any information that any of the boys could give him. Did anyone here wake in the night, or hear any unusual sound?"

Silence followed the Form master's question.

It was clear that the Fourth Form had no information to impart. As a rule, they slept soundly enough, unless something was on—such as a dormitory feed or a pillow fight, or a House raid.

"Any boy who heard any unusual sound during the night will hold up his hand," said Mr. Lathom.

Not a single hand went up.

"Very well. We shall now commence," said the Form master.

And the Fourth Form settled down to morning lessons. But their thoughts were elsewhere. Blake had been right in declaring that something was "up," but the juniors had not suspected that a burglary had taken place at the school while they were safe in the arms of Morpheus. It was startling news, and for the rest of the morning the juniors thought a great deal more of the burglary than of the lessons they had to do. The wrinkle in the brow of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy showed that deep thoughts were working in his brain.

"Bai Jove!" he murmured aloud presently. "Bai Jove!"

"What's the matter with you?" asked Blake. "Got a pain?"

"No, Blake, I have not got a pain, and I regard the question as absurd. I have been thinkin', and I considah that this is a great opportunity."

"What is a great opportunity?"

"This burglawy. As you know, I have once or twice taken up detective work in an amateur way——"

"Ha, ha!"

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"There is nothin' to cackle at in my amateur detective work, Blake."

"Your mistake; there's a lot."

"I regard this as a good opportunity of takin' up the work in earnest. It would be a wippin' thing if I twacked down the burglars and wecovahed the stolen wropahy. It's a beastly mean thing to wob a church, anyway, and the wotten wascals ought to be brought to justice."

"Good," said Blake, with a sparkle in his eyes. "It's not a bad idea. I think I shall turn detective for the afternoon."

"I shall be vevy glad to receive your assistance—"

"Rats! You can assist me if you like—"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Silence there," said Mr. Lathom. "I am sure there is somebody talking. Silence!"

And the subject was not discussed again till the Fourth Form was dismissed.

CHAPTER 3.

The Terrible Three Take Up the Case.

A BELL rang. A door was flung open, and the Shell poured out, and the old oak-panelled passage, silent a moment before, rang with footsteps and merry voices. For it was a fine September afternoon, and work was over for the day, and the heroes of the middle school had the afternoon free for football and frolic.

The Terrible Three—Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther—came down the passage arm in arm, filling it from side to side, and there were audible grumbles as they pushed their way through the throng. But the chums of the Shell went on their way with bland smiles, regardless of grumbles.

"You're treading on my foot, Lowther, you ass."

"Keep your elbow out of my ribs, Manners."

Tom Merry, who was in the middle, grinned genially.

"Come on, my children," he said. "Don't bother about those kids—"

"Who are you shoving?" shouted Gore.

"I may be mistaken," said Tom Merry sweetly. "But I was under the impression that I was shoving you, Gore."

"You—you—"

"You are blocking up the gangway. Now, Skimpole, get out of the way, or we shall have to tread on you."

Skimpole, the genius of the Shell, had planted himself directly in the path of the three chums. He blinked at them through his spectacles.

"Pray stop a few minutes, Tom Merry—"

"Can't be did! Travel."

The Terrible Three marched on without a pause, and Tom Merry came chest to chest with Skimpole, and the latter tried to back away, rather breathless from the impact.

"Tom Merry! Really, Merry—"

"Travel!"

The three chums continued to march on, and Skimpole to back away, while the brainy man of the Shell strove breathlessly to explain.

"Really, Merry—you see—it's most important! It's about the burglary—about what Mr. Linton was telling us before lessons this morning."

Skimpole backed into a mat, caught his foot in it, and sat down. The Terrible Three stepped over him, and walked on. Skimpole blinked after them rather dazedly.

"Bless me," he murmured. "That—that was almost rude of them. I think I shall not allow their now to assist me in the detective work I am about to undertake."

Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther walked on into the quadrangle, and came to a halt under the elm trees. There they looked at one another. The same thought was in all three minds.

"My infants," said Tom Merry impressively, "we're on to this."

"We are," said Manners.

"We is," agreed Monty Lowther.

"There has been a robbery, and cash has been taken from the chapel collection—a particularly mean and skulking sort of a robbery."

"Quite so."

"It is our bounden duty to do something to clear up the mystery and bring that particularly mean and skulking thief to justice."

"Right-ho."

"Then let us have a look at the chapel now, and examine the spot, and see if we can find any clues. When Ferrers Locke was down here, he gave us some instruction in the noble art of detective work, and we ought to show that we have profited by it. Let's go and look for clues."

"Just what I was thinking," said Manners.

"But I say," remarked Lowther, "Inspector Skeet has taken up the case, and Inspector Skeet has a silly and unreasonable prejudice against us. I don't know why he doesn't like three such nice chaps as we are, but the fact remains that he doesn't. And he may hoof us out of it."

"Well, I don't think he's likely to be on the spot," said Tom Merry thoughtfully. "You see, Skeety was sent for at breakfast time this morning, so even he must have concluded his investigations on the spot before noon."

"Ha, ha! I suppose so."

"Still, if we find him there, we will talk to him sweetly."

"Well, let's go and try, anyway."

The Terrible Three lost no time in going round to the chapel. The doors were closed, and the old verger was sunning himself in the porch. He held up a warning forefinger to the chums of the Shell.

"We're just going in to have a look round," explained Tom Merry.

Old Benson shook his head.

"It ain't allowed," he replied.

"Oh, come off! We're allowed to go into our own giddy chapel whenever we like, I suppose," exclaimed Monty Lowther indignantly.

Benson shook his old head again.

"I've received special instructions from Inspector Skeet not to admit anybody without the Head's orders, Master Lowther."

"But why?"

"Perhaps he thought a lot of silly, mischievous boys might come fooling around and looking at the scene of the robbery," said Benson solemnly.

"Now look here, old boy—"

"It's no good, Master Merry; you're not going in."

Benson was evidently determined. The Terrible Three were inclined to shift him, as they might easily have done; and but for the sacred character of the building, they would undoubtedly have done so. As it was, they walked away. Tom Merry knitted his brows.

"I've a jolly good mind to get in at a window," he exclaimed.

"But one can't very well treat a religious building like that. Benson is a beast, and Skeets is a beaster. We sha'n't be able to look for clues inside."

"I suppose Skeet thought we might be up to something of the sort," remarked Manners. "Perhaps he's afraid of having his own little efforts put in the shade."

Tom Merry laughed.

"I don't know about that; but anyway, we're not going to be baffled. As a matter of fact, it's too warm for footer this afternoon, and it's a grand opportunity of following up a trail and doing some detective work."

"Oh, we're not going to give in, of course. Skeet can go and skeet."

"Mr. Linton said that the thief or thieves had gained admittance by one of the south windows. There was a shower of rain last night. There ought to be footprints."

"By Jove, yes. Let's go and look."

"If we knew the size of his feet and what kind of boots he wears, it would help us a lot. Sherlock Holmes could tell you his Christian name and what his father did for a living, from clues like that."

The Terrible Three, leaving Benson sitting triumphant in the porch, went round the chapel. They stepped over the low iron railing of the neat grass plot, and approached the windows on the south side. The ancient wall—part of the oldest portion of St. Jim's, grey with the weatherstains of many centuries—was hard and smooth, and offered no facilities for a climber. Tom Merry, with his hands in his trousers pockets, cocked his eye thoughtfully at the wall under the windows.

"A chap couldn't climb into that window—into any of these windows—without a ladder or someone to help him," he remarked.

"That's certain," said Manners. "There were two of them at least. The ground is still quite soft, and it would show the dents if a ladder had been used."

"There's a jolly lot of footprints here," said Lowther.

"Of course there are; there have been a dozen or more people investigating round here this morning. This is the window—and these big hoof-prints belong to Inspector Skeet, I expect. But look here—here's a clue."

Tom Merry knelt on one knee, and scanned the ground carefully.

Just underneath the window were two very deeply-indented footprints, like those of a man who had been bearing a very heavy weight.

"Look! These two are by themselves—Skeet has sense enough not to spread his own hoof-tracks over them," said Tom Merry. "You see how deep they are."

"What does that prove?"

"It proves that the chap who made those marks stood here for the other rotter to climb on his shoulders and get in at the window."

"By Jove, you're right."

"And look here—here are two deep heel-marks; that's where the other rotter dropped from the window again, after robbing the church."

"Looks like it."

"Oh, it's right enough, my son. Now, what we want is to take

the measurement of these tracks, and that's a good start. Anybody got a rule?"

Manners had a folding pocket rule. He produced it, and Tom Merry carefully measured the footprints, and entered the measurements in his pocket-book. He snapped the pocket-book shut with quite a professional air, worthy of Ferrers Locke, the famous detective, himself.

"That's a good clue to start with," he exclaimed. "Judging from the size of the boots, there were a big fellow and a little fellow engaged in the burglary last night. We've got the size of their feet, and we've only got to proceed——"

"Upwards," suggested Monty Lowther, "and we shall get to their features at last."

"Oh, don't be funny. I've got an idea."

"Get it off your chest, then. I'm getting ready for dinner."

"If you'd rather have dinner than go ahead with the investigation of this case, Monty Lowther, you'd better buzz off."

"Oh, rats! What's the idea?"

"Why, the thieves couldn't have got into the chapel without first getting over the wall into the grounds of St. Jim's——"

"Well, no," agreed Lowther gravely. "It would be a long step from the Rylcombe Road to this grass plot—a couple of hundred yards or so."

"And if they got over the wall," went on Tom Merry, unheeding, "they would choose a spot where the ivy makes it easy to climb."

"That's very likely."

"It's not likely, old chap, it's certain. Now, you know the spot by the slanting oak, where some of the fellows have broken bounds before now——"

"Ourselves for example," grinned Lowther.

"Well, yes. Now, before burglars burgle a place they usually watch it a bit to see the easiest way of getting in and out, at least, I've heard so. They always do in newspapers. Now, suppose the villains had been watching St. Jim's, and perhaps saw some disreputable bounder breaking bounds—they'd know then about the easiest way of getting over the wall."

"True."

"So the next place to look in is that shady corner by the slanting oak, and we may find footprints there."

"Good. And if we find them——"

"Well, we shall find them," said Tom Merry. "What's the good of 'iffing.' Let's find them before we start considering what to do after that."

"Oh, right you are."

And the Terrible Three, beginning to get excited with the pursuit, hurried off in search of fresh clues which, if they existed, had undoubtedly escaped the eagle eye of Inspector Skeet.

CHAPTER 4.

Skimpole Sees It All.

"**B**AI Jove, Blake, you know——"

"Don't bother, Gussy, I'm thinking."

"I wufuse to have my remarks chawacterised as bothewin'. What are you going to do this aftahnoon, Blake?"

"I'm going to take up the case of the missing offertory, and investigate it on Ferrers-Locke-Sherlock-Holmes-Sexton-Blake principles."

"Then I shall be vevy pleased to allow you to assist me."

"You can follow my lead, if you like," said Jack Blake.

The swell of the School House gave an expressive sniff.

"I should certainly wufuse to do anythin' of the sort. I should be vevy pleased to have you back me up, but——"

"Then you can go and eat coke."

"Weally, Blake——"

But Jack Blake was lost in thought, and he was not listening to the swell of the School House. D'Arcy, with another indignant sniff, turned to Digby.

"What are you goin' to do this aftahnoon, Dig?"

"Nurse this confounded eye," said Digby.

"Bai Jove! I am weally sowwy that you have a black eye, Dig."

"Yes; I wish you had it instead."

"Oh, weally, Dig!" Digby walked away, rubbing his discoloured optic. "I say, Hewwies, old man, what are you goin' to do this aftahnoon?"

"I've been thinking," said Herries slowly. Herries was always slow and deliberate.

Jack Blake looked up.

"You've been thinking?" he said. "And so has D'Arcy, according to his own account. And yet someone said that the age of miracles was past!"

"Weally, Blake, I weward that remark——"

"I've been thinking," repeated Herries. "You remember, Blake, how splendidly my dog Towser tracked down D'Arcy the other day when he was dodging us?"

"I remember how he went for Mr. Ratcliff and got us into a row," grunted Blake.

"Well, Towser doesn't like thin people," said Herries. "But you remember that we tracked down D'Arcy and Skimpole with him?"

"Well, I had an idea that Towser hit on them by chance," said Blake. "But he may have tracked them down. What about it?"

"Why, I was thinking what a ripping idea it would be to use Towser to track down the burglars of last night," said Herries. "You know, detectives have bloodhounds to track down criminals, so why shouldn't Towser do it?"

Jack Blake looked interested.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "That's a jolly good idea."

"Yaas, wathah! I am quite willin' to accept the assistance of Towser."

"Well, I think it's a good idea," said Herries. "I'll go and fetch Towser if you like, and we'll take him round to the chapel, and make him sniff at the place where the burglars got in at the window."

"Good! Let's have him out."

"But I say, deah boys——"

"No time for talk now, Gussy. Those bounders in the Shell are certain to get up to the same wheeze, and we've got to be first in the field."

Blake and Herries hurried away to fetch the bulldog. Arthur Augustus made a step to follow them, and then paused with a shake of the head.

"Pewwaps I should be bettah able to investigate the mattah alone," he murmured. "Blake and Hewwies always tweek my ideahs with dewision, and——"

The swell of St. Jim's staggered as a junior, hurrying out of the house, ran against him and pushed him against the balustrade of the School House steps. D'Arcy jammed his eyeglass into his eye and gave the delinquent a withering glare. It was Skimpole of the Shell.

"You uttah ass!" said D'Arcy, in measured tones. "What do you mean by wunnin' into a fellah like that? You might have knocked my toppah off and wuined it."

"I'm sorry," gasped Skimpole. "I did not see you, and I was in a hurry. But I wanted to speak to you, D'Arcy. I have already offered Tom Merry to allow him to assist me in investigating the case of the mysterious burglary, and he refused—or rather did not even listen to me. Now I——"

"Are you takin' up the case, Skimpole?"

"Yes; with my great ability as an amateur detective, I shall undoubtedly run the thieves to earth in the course of the afternoon," said Skimpole. "In order to devote my attention to this matter, I am giving up time I should otherwise be devoting to the three hundred and thirty-fourth chapter of my great book on Socialism. But I regard it as a duty I owe to the school. If you care to help me, D'Arcy, I shall be glad to accept you as a colleague."

"I am quite willin' to let you help me."

"Well, as a sincere Socialist," said the brainy man of the Shell, "I must admit that your contention for equal rights is just, though as your superior in intellect, I should naturally take the lead. But let the question of leadership stand over—we will waive——"

"You will waive?" said D'Arcy, puzzled. "You will waive what, your hat?"

"We will waive the question. It is not important. The important thing is to investigate the robbery and discover clues. Shall we proceed to the scene of the crime? We may discover some tell-tale bloodstains that have escaped the observation of the police."

"But it is only a wobbewy, deah boy, not a murdah."

"Dear me, yes, I forgot that. But even if there are no tell-tale bloodstains, there may be some tell-tale fingerprints or some tell-tale finger-marks."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Come along then, and let us be first on the spot."

The juniors hurried off to the chapel. Skimpole was bolting into the porch when old Benson rose from the stone seat and stopped him with a bony finger jabbing at his chest.

"You can't go in, young gents."

"Bai Jove, Benson, deah boy, why not?"

"I've horders to keep all boys out of the chapel."

"That is wathah unweasonable."

"It's horders, sir."

"I cannot allow these absurd prohibitions to weigh with me," said Skimpole, "as a Socialist I demand the right to go anywhere I like."

"Oh, wats!" said D'Arcy. "You can't start wovin' outside a church, deah boy. Come along."

"Really, D'Arcy——"

"Oh, come along. Let's go and look for footprints."

"Oh, very well; but I think——"

"Come on!"

The amateur detectives followed the same way that the Terrible Three had gone five minutes earlier. D'Arcy uttered a sudden exclamation. As they crossed the smooth grass towards the chapel windows, something glimmering on the ground under the nearest window, caught his eye.

Skimpole saw it at the same moment and sprang towards it excitedly. It was a metal-cased pencil. Skimpole grabbed

at it, and D'Arcy grabbed at it the same moment, and their heads came in contact with a sounding biff.

"Oh!"

"Ow!"

"Really, D'Arcy, you stupid duffer!"

"Weally, you uttah ass!"

"You have hurt my head."

"You have nearly bwoken my beastly bwain."

Skimpole rubbed his head ruefully; but he had come out of the collision better than D'Arcy. Skimpole's head was very large and bumpy, and it had the advantage of size and weight in the collision. D'Arcy sat down on the grass and rubbed his head, and Skimpole picked up the pencil-case.

"This is undoubtedly a clue," he exclaimed. "It must have been dropped by the thief when he got out of the window."

"Ow, my head!"

"A little pain is nothing to suffer in the cause of an investigation like this," said Skimpole, "especially considering that we have found a clue which has escaped all other eyes. I thought from the first that this burglary was not committed by any ruffians from outside, as the masters appear to think."

Arthur Augustus stared.

"Bai Jove! Then who did it, you ass?" he asked.

"That is not a very respectful way of putting a question, D'Arcy," said the amateur Socialist of St. Jim's mildly.

"Well, answah it, anyway, you duffah."

"I consider that the crime was probably committed by some one within the walls of St. Jim's," said Skimpole. "Suppose, for instance, that a boy were hard up for money."

"You scweamin' ass! Do you think there is a fellow at St. Jim's mean enough to wob the collection in a church?"

"A detective can afford to be no respecter of persons. There was a thief at St. Jim's once, who scoffed some tin and threw the blame on Blake, and he came near being expelled for it, as you know yourself. You were here at the time."

"Yaas, but—"

"What happened once may happen again. I am sorry to have to suspect Tom Merry of having committed a burglary, but—"

"What?"

"I am sorry to have to suspect Tom Merry of having committed a burglary, but—"

"You uttah idiot!"

"Really, D'Arcy!"

"Are you wight off your silly wockah?"

"I am judging by the clues I have discovered, and the deductions I have made," said Skimpole. "You see this pencil-case dropped here by the thief in the very act of leaving the scene of his crime. It belongs to Tom Merry."

"What?"

"Look at the initials—'T. M.' on the metal. Besides, I have seen it in his hand before; I know that it is his. That proves—"

"That proves that Tom Mewwy has been here before us, and has dropped his pencil here."

Skimpole shook his head wisely.

"I cannot admit any far-fetched theories of that sort, D'Arcy. I take my stand on the evidence. I am sorry to suspect Tom Merry, but consider the facts. Tom Merry is in want of money."

"How do you know?"

"I have heard him saying lately that something will have to be done if the football subscriptions do not come in a little quicker."

"You shwiekin' ass!"

"Then there was the rude and really unaccountable way in which he refused to join me in investigating the crime—unaccountable, except upon the theory of a guilty conscience. He dared not face my searching eye."

"You uttah dummy!"

"Now I have discovered his pencil-case on the scene of the crime, there is no further doubt in my mind. Come along!"

"Where are you going?"

"To search Tom Merry's study for the stolen property. I understand that there was a considerable sum of money and a valuable chalice stolen. If I find them in Tom Merry's study he will undoubtedly confess."

"Bai Jove!"

"Are you coming?"

"No, I am not comin'. I always thought you were an uttah duffah, but weally—"

"Oh, very well. I rely upon your honour not to put the criminal on his guard."

"The cwiminal?"

"Yes, Tom Merry. Don't put him on his guard, as he may

make away with the loot, and baffle me. I shall wind up the case very shortly now."

And Skimpole hurried away. Arthur Augustus stared after him till he was out of sight. The swell of St. Jim's was somewhat comic as an amateur detective, but Skimpole was whole lengths ahead of him in that line.

"The uttah idiot!" muttered D'Arcy. "The shwiekin' ass, to suspect Tom Mewwy! Ha, ha, ha! I shall take up the case alone, and—Gweat Scott!"

The swell of the School House jumped with alarm as a terrific burst of barking rang through the air, and Herries' bulldog came tearing up, with Blake and Herries dragging vainly on the chain behind.

CHAPTER 5.

Towser on the Track.

"LOOK out!" shouted Herries.

"Bai Jove! Just you keep that feahful beast away!"

"Get out of the way then! Hold him in, Blake!"

"I'm trying to."

"He's jolly strong!" exclaimed Herries, gasping for breath. "Hold on, Towser! Good dog—good old doggie! Be quiet, then. Good dog!"

Bow-wow-wow!

"Good doggie—good dog!"

Gr-r-r!

Arthur Augustus backed away from the bulldog, keeping his eyeglass turned towards it, not venturing to turn his back in case the animal should break loose and make a spring. He had before shown a remarkable predilection for the rear portion of Arthur Augustus's beautiful trousers.

"Hold that bwute in, Hewwies—ow! Oh!"

D'Arcy, backing away from the bulldog, had forgotten the railing at the edge of the grass plot by the chapel, and he backed into it, and sat down abruptly in the gravel path beyond with a shock that jarred every bone in his body. His eyeglass went down with a clatter, and his silk hat fell over the back of his head.

"Ow!" gasped D'Arcy. "Bai Jove! Oh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you wottahs! Why didn't you warn me that I was walkin' into the wail? I have a gweat mind to dwoop your fwiefndship."

"Ha, ha, ha! Hold on, Towser!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy picked himself up, adjusted his eyeglass and his hat, and stalked indignantly away.

Blake and Herries, holding fast to the bulldog's chain, dragged him to the trampled grass under the window.

"Let him sniff the footprints," said Herries sagely. "He'll get the scent, and follow it up. Look out, he's going!"

"Hold him! He's going for Gussy!"

D'Arcy heard the words, and broke into a run, and vanished round the chapel.

Herries and Blake with difficulty held in the barking Towser.

"The beast!" panted Blake. "What does he want to go for Gussy for like this?"

Herries broke into a laugh.

"Ha, ha! He's been sniffing at Gussy's footprints—see, those nobby little footmarks are Gussy's. That was the track he was going to follow."

Jack Blake looked considerably impressed.

"By Jupiter, Herries, old man, that looks as if he really can follow a scent, doesn't it?" he said.

Herries gave his chum a withering look.

"Did you think he couldn't then, fathead?"

"Oh, no, not exactly," said Blake hastily. "But that proves it, doesn't it? Hallo, what is he sniffing at now, I wonder?"

"The burglar's footprints, of course."

"I shouldn't wonder. He wants to get off again, and it's not Gussy's track this time," said Blake eagerly. "Give him his head."

Towser had certainly picked up a trail, though whether it was the burglar's trail remained to be seen. He strained at his chain, and the chums of the Fourth gave him "his head," as Blake expressed it, and he tore off, the juniors panting on behind.

He went round the chapel, across a corner of the quadrangle, and whisked under the elms. Then along the wall; and Blake uttered a sharp exclamation.

"He's on the right track, Herries."

"How do you know?" panted Herries.

"Because he's making for the slanting oak. That's the easiest place to climb the wall, and that's where the burglars got into the grounds."

"My hat! I believe you're right."

"See how eager he is—that shows he's on the track."

"Hallo—hold him—he's gone!"

Towser was indeed eager. He had whisked round a tree that stood in his path, and the sudden jerk on the chain had torn it

ANSWERS

NEXT
THURSDAY

"D'ARCY'S SECRET."

A Tale of Tom Merry & Co.
By Martin Clifford.

from the hands of the juniors. Blake and Herries tore on, as they heard a furious barking and a wild yell.

In that shady corner of the old quadrangle three juniors stood with their backs to the wall, confronting the excited dog, as Blake and Herries burst on the scene. Blake uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Tom Merry!"

"Look here, keep that fiendish dog off!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "I'll kick the beast if he comes near me."

"I'd brain him if I had my cricket bat here," growled Monty Lowther. "The beast is simply dangerous."

"He ought to be shot," grunted Manners.

Herries seized the trailing chain and held in the bulldog. Towser had hesitated to tackle the Terrible Three, but was evidently under the impression that it was his duty to do so after tracking them down, for he jumped and snapped and tried to get at them, while Herries held on to the chain.

"What are you three bounders doing here?" demanded Blake suspiciously.

"Minding our own business," said Monty Lowther.

"Well, you can sheer off. We're on the track of the burglars."

"So are we," said Tom Merry, bursting into a laugh. "Do you mean to say that you're trying the Sexton-Blake-blughound method, Blake?"

"Why not?" said Blake. "Towser has tracked the giddy burglars to this spot, anyway."

"Ha, ha, ha! Has he just come from under the chapel window?"

"Yes, he has."

"Then it's a jolly sight more likely that he's tracked us and not the burglars," roared Tom Merry. "The scent was fresher, you know."

"My—my hat! I shouldn't wonder."

"Oh, that's all rot!" said Herries confidently. "Of course Towser is on the track of the burglars. If you fellows have been investigating, have you found any traces of the rotters just here?"

"It's a likely spot for them to get over the wall," said Blake. "Yes, if they knew it," said Tom Merry. "I thought it was a likely spot, and we've been examining; but there's no sign. They didn't cross the wall here."

"You're mistaken there, Merry. My bulldog would not be likely to follow a wrong track. I'm pretty certain that the burglars got over the wall here, and we shall pick up the scent on the other side."

"You're welcome to try, Herries, old man. We're going in to dinner," said Tom Merry. "Come on, kids! Are you coming in, you Fourth Form youngsters?"

"I'm going to follow the track," said Herries obstinately. "You stand here inside the wall, Blake, and I'll call to you from outside, and you can tell me when I'm exactly at the right spot."

"Right-ho!" said Blake. "May as well try it, anyway."

Herries dragged away his bulldog, and went out into the road. Towser still looked as if he would like to sample the calves of the Terrible Three, but he allowed himself to be persuaded by the chain.

Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther waited to see what would happen.

The bulldog was heard barking on the other side of the school wall, and Herries' voice was audible in the attempt to soothe him.

"Are you there, Blake?" came Herries' call from the road.

"What-ho!" replied Blake.

"Is this the spot?"

"So far as I can judge, you're just 't'other side of the wall. How about the trail?"

"Towser is sniffing about—my hat!"

"What now?"

"He's got it!" shouted Herries. "Hurrah, he's off! Come out, you bounders!"

"Good old blughound!" chuckled Blake. "Come on, you Shellfish!"

The four juniors ran quickly out into the road. Herries and the bulldog were going swiftly along in the direction of the village of Rylcombe. Herries turned and waved one hand excitedly to the juniors.

"Come on! Towser's on the track."

Blake and the chums of the Shell ran on. Towser was certainly on the track of somebody or something, and he was tugging at his chain more excitedly than in the quad. It looked as if the bulldog felt himself to be near his quarry, and the juniors' nerves tingled at the thought of actually catching the burglars near the scene of the robbery.

With a sudden bound, Towser dragged the chain from Herries' hand, and disappeared through a gap in the hedge beside the road.

"After him!" shouted Blake.

They dashed through the hedge. There was a terrific uproar of barking, yapping, and snarling on the inner side of the hedge.

A terrible combat was evidently in progress, and the juniors came upon it suddenly.

Towser was engaged in deadly combat with a large and powerful terrier. The juniors knew that terrier. He belonged to the Rylcombe butcher, and frequently followed his master's cart to the school. Towser had a great dislike for him, and on more than one occasion there had been frays.

Herries' face was a picture as he came to the end of the trail.

It was clear that Towser had been following the scent of his old enemy the terrier along the road, and was thinking of anything but burglars.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry.

"Ha, ha, ha!" gasped Blake.

The terrier, who was getting the worst of the combat, tore himself loose and raced off across the field, with Towser in hot pursuit. It was useless to attempt to recapture the bulldog, but Herries dashed off across the field in a wild chase. Blake and the chums of the Shell turned back towards the school, almost weeping with merriment.

CHAPTER 6.

Skimpole Searches the Study.

MR. LINTON, the master of the Shell, glanced along the dinner-table, and frowned as he saw a vacant place.

"Where is Skimpole?"

No one knew. Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther had just come in, breathless, and they were the last to arrive. Skimpole had not put in an appearance at all.

"Very well," said Mr. Linton, with a compression of the lips that boded ill for the absent Socialist. "Very well."

And the Shell proceeded with their dinner.

At the earliest possible moment the Terrible Three quitted the dining-hall. The idea of taking up the case of the robbery and tracking down the thieves, had taken firm possession of their minds. Cricket was over now, but the weather was very warm for "footer," and a better way of spending the half-holiday was not to be thought of. The chums of the Shell had played the amateur detective before, with a certain degree of success.

"I wonder where Skimpole is?" Lowther chuckled, as they left the hall. "I suppose he's got the same idea, and is off on a false scent."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Most likely. A good many of the fellows are taking up the idea—you know, Blake and his gang are on the track, and I hear that Figgins & Co. of the New House are going in for amateur detective work. Gibbons says he saw Figgins nosing round the chapel just before dinner."

"There will be enough detectives—something ought to come of it," grinned Lowther. "There won't be enough thieves to go round if we all get on the track."

"Well, without bragging, I think we're more likely to get on the track than the others," said Tom Merry. "You chaps are keen enough—"

"Thanks."

"And you've got a jolly good leader—"

"Blessed is he that bloweth his own trumpet."

"Well, facts are facts, you know. But let's get to business. You fellows are always wasting time in jaw when there's work to be done."

"Why, you've been doing all the jawing!" exclaimed Manners.

"Oh, don't begin to argue, Manners, old chap. Now, we've got to get on the track of the thieves. They didn't cross over the wall by the slanting oak; but they must have crossed it somewhere, and we ought to be able to find the spot."

"I say, it wouldn't be a bad idea to get hold of a weapon of some sort. Although Tom Merry is our leader, we may come upon the thieves—"

"began Lowther.

"Good!" said Manners. "Take a knuckle-duster. By the way, I think I'll take my camera."

"Oh, rats!" said Tom Merry. "We can't fag round with a camera-stand on a warm afternoon like this; and besides—"

"Ass!" said Manners. "I mean my hand-camera. I've got two."

"Oh, I see! No objection to that if you carry it yourself. I don't see what use you are going to put it to."

"I can take snapshots of suspicious characters and foot-prints, and so on. Sexton Blake often discovers unsuspected clues from photographs."

"H'm! I don't suppose he'd discover many from your photographs. Still, there's no harm in taking the camera. You can bash a chap's head with it if we get into a scrap. Let's get to the study."

The Terrible Three hurried upstairs. Their study door was closed, but a noise within showed that there was somebody in the room. Tom Merry, somewhat surprised, opened the door quickly. Then three distinct gasps of amazement were heard. They knew now why Skimpole had missed his dinner.

The amateur detective was at work in the study, searching



"Dear me!" murmured Mr. Lathom. "There appears to be some sort of disturbance here! Blake—Figgins—Digby! What does this mean?"

it for stolen loot. He was searching it thoroughly. Boxes and lockers and drawers had been turned out, and their contents were scattered to and fro. The table and the chairs were piled with the various properties of the Terrible Three, unearthed from their tidy receptacles. Skimpole at the present moment was engaged in tugging at the drawer of the bookcase, which was locked and would not come open. His powerful tugs were making the bookcase totter, and it looked every moment as if it would fall forward upon the determined investigator.

"He's mad!" gasped Tom Merry.

Lowther gave a howl of wrath.

"Let that bookcase alone, idiot!"

Skimpole had given an extra hard tug. The bookcase lurched forward, and there was a yelp from Skimpole as it toppled over on him. A crash of breaking glass, a thudding of showering books, and Skimpole disappeared under broken glass, books, and bookcase.

"Ow! Help! Ow!"

The chums of the Shell were petrified for a moment. Then they dashed forward. They dragged the bookcase aside, and then they dragged Skimpole out of the wreck. They dragged him to his feet, and glared at him speechlessly. If looks could have slain, there would have been a dead amateur Socialist in the study the next moment. Skimpole blinked and gasped, and gasped and blinked, and put his spectacles straight.

"Th-th-thank you! I—I—dear me, the bookcase appears to have fallen over! Bless me, it seems to have broken, too."

"Yes, it seems so," said Lowther, fixing his grip in the collar of the cheerful investigator. "And it seems to me that you are going to get broken, too."

"The villain!" said Manners. "The horrible, burglarious

rotter! Will you explain what you were doing in our study, maniac, before we suffocate you, lunatic."

"Really, Manners—"

"What were you up to?" roared Tom Merry, shaking the captive furiously. "What were you up to, you dangerous maniac?"

"Really, Merry, I—I am quite out of breath! Pray release me, and I will certainly explain with pleasure."

"Don't let him get away, kids."

"Not much," said Lowther significantly.

The chums of the Shell released Skimpole, and stood round him, with fixed glares of wrath, which the amateur Socialist found somewhat disconcerting.

"Now, then," said Tom Merry, "explain yourself! What do you mean by wrecking our study like this?"

"Really, Merry, I had no intention of wrecking the study. I have simply been pursuing my investigations."

The chums stared.

"Investigations! In our study?"

"Certainly."

"And what have you been investigating?" asked Lowther sarcastically. "Looking for the place where we keep our tin?"

"Really, Lowther, I should think you know me better than that. As a sincere Socialist it is impossible for me to be dishonest, even if there were no other reasons."

"Well, what have you been busting everything in the study for? Quick—before we massacre you!"

"I am sorry if anything is disordered—"

"If!" gasped Tom Merry. "Listen to the rotter! If!"

"But I was bound to pursue my investigations without any

"Weak regard for the right of private individuals." Skimpole threw himself up. "Tom Merry, where is the key of the bookcase-drawer?"

"In my pocket, ass!"

"Hand it over to me."

"Hand it over to you," said Tom Merry dazedly. "Hand it over to you? Are you right off your chump, you shrieking ass?"

Skimpole smiled a disdainful smile.

"It is useless to attempt to conceal your guilt by this assumption of ignorance," he said. "Effrontery will not save you, Tom Merry."

"Eh?"

"Effrontery will not save you. Hand over the key of the bookcase-drawer immediately, and when the stolen plunder is restored, I will see what can be done to save you from the consequences of your crime."

"Crime! I! Me! Crime! Oh, he's dotty!"

Lowther tapped his forehead.

"Clean off," he remarked.

"Nothing of the sort," said Skimpole. "So far from being dotty, it is my wonderful ability and extraordinary brain power that has enabled me to so soon run down the perpetrator of last night's robbery."

The chums of the Shell jumped.

"The—the what?"

"The perpetrator of last night's robbery. I have succeeded in tracking down the thief, and am on the verge of discovering the loot. Tom Merry, I demand the key of that bookcase-drawer."

"Absolutely raving!"

"I am not raving. Where is that key, Tom Merry?"

"What do you expect to find in that drawer, Skimmy?" asked Tom Merry, his indignation subsiding as the ludicrous side of the matter struck him.

"The chalice and the cash abstracted from the chapel, of course."

"You think I am a thief?"

Skimpole shifted uncomfortably.

"Well, I don't like putting it like that, Merry. You see, a detective cannot afford to be a respecter of persons. He must follow wherever his clues lead him."

"I expect yours will lead you into a lunatic asylum before long."

"Really, Merry——"

"Look here, you shrieking idiot——"

"Abuse of the investigator who has run you down will not serve you. You are unmasked," said Skimpole, wagging a bony forefinger at Tom Merry.

Lowther and Manners burst into a roar.

"Oh, this is too funny!" murmured Tom Merry. "Hold me, somebody. Upon the whole, I don't think Skimpole ought to be killed. He ought to be stuffed and put under a glass case in a museum."

"Where is the key of that drawer?"

"In my pocket—where it's going to stop."

"I am sorry, Merry, but I must insist upon the immediate production of the key. A refusal to reveal the contents of that drawer will be, to my mind, equivalent to a confession of guilt."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"This ribald laughter cannot turn me from my purpose. You see, it is impossible for me to have made a mistake. I have followed up my clues too carefully."

"What clues?"

"I do not mind revealing them to you now that the case is finished. I have observed that Sherlock Holmes always relates the workings of a case at the finish," said Skimpole. "It may broaden your mind and improve your intelligence, my dear Watson—I mean, Merry. You have been in want of money lately——"

"Why specially lately?" grinned Tom Merry. "I generally am in want of money. And I don't think the case is a rare one at school, either."

"You refused to discuss the matter with me."

"I didn't want to be bored to a slow and painful death."

"I found your pencil-case on the scene of the crime."

Tom Merry felt in his pockets.

"By Jove, my pencil's gone! I must have dropped it there when I made the notes about the footprints."

"Upon the whole the evidence is quite clear. The loot is undoubtedly concealed in this study. I have searched every place but this drawer. I have had the trouble of forcing several locks, but in the cause of investigating crime I do not regret it."

"You will regret it before you leave this study," said Lowther.

"I demand the key of this drawer."

Tom Merry lifted the bookcase up, took the key from his pocket, and quietly opened the drawer. It contained pectops,

papers, sealing-wax, pens, and other odds-and-ends, but there was no sign of cash or of the missing chalice.

"Look, ass!" he said.

Skimpole looked through the drawer, and seemed disappointed. He blinked round at the Terrible Three.

"Are you satisfied now?" asked Tom Merry.

"Yes, I am satisfied that the loot is not concealed in the study. I should be glad if you would point out the real hiding-place, Tom Merry."

Tom Merry gave him a slap on the back.

"That's it," he said.

"I—I don't understand——"

"That's the hiding-place—at all events, it's the place where you're going to receive a hiding," said Tom Merry, taking Lowther's walking cane out of a corner. "Are you ready?"

Skimpole blinked round in alarm.

"Really, Merry, I—I——"

"You've got to have it for your own sake," explained Tom Merry. "I think about two hundred well laid on will meet the case. What do you chaps think?"

"Make it three hundred," said Monty Lowther. "Better be thorough while you're about it."

"Perhaps you're right. What do you think, Manners?"

"Four hundred," said Manners. "We'll take it in turns."

"Good! Bend over the table, Skimpole."

"I—I—I shall certainly not bend over the table. I—I am willing to admit that perhaps I was mistaken—I may have judged too hastily."

"Too late! Collar him!"

Skimpole dodged to the door, but Lowther and Manners promptly collared him. Tom Merry brought the cane down upon the table with a terrifying crack.

"Lay him over the table!" he exclaimed.

"Merry—I—Lowther—I—Manners—oh I—I—I——"

"Are you sorry for being such a fearful chump?" demanded Tom Merry.

"I—I—oh—no—yes!"

"Are you awfully sorry?"

"Y-e-e-es! Yes."

"And you won't never no more do nothing of the kind?" demanded Tom Merry. "You won't never or ever, in or under no or any circumstances, do nothing or anything of the kind or any other kind?"

"N-n-n-no!"

"Well, that's sweeping enough," said Tom Merry, laughing. "Under the circumstances we will let you off the licking, on condition that you immediately restore the study to proper order, and pay for all the damage you have done."

"Really, Tom Merry——"

"Buck up, we've no time to waste."

The Terrible Three stood back against the door. There was no escape for Skimpole, and he set to work. Replacing the articles he had scattered was slower work than the scattering had been, and more troublesome, and the Terrible Three insisted upon having everything put into apple-pie order. Except for a couple of broken locks and the smashed glass of the bookcase, the study was more tidy when Skimpole finished than it had been since the beginning of the term.

The amateur Socialist was gasping and perspiring when he ended his labours. He mopped his brow and rubbed his spectacles.

"Now for the damage," said Tom Merry sweetly. "I suppose ten shillings will cover it; and if there's any charge after repairs, you shall have it back."

"I am sorry, Merry, but I have no money. As a sincere Socialist I cannot refuse help to any who asks it, and consequently my pocket-money seldom lasts longer than the day I receive it. I am truly sorry——"

"Which means that we've got to pay for the damage," said Monty Lowther. "My hat! that licking will be wanted, after all."

"Really, Lowther——"

"Oh, kick him out!" said Tom Merry, laughing. "It isn't the first time the bookcase glass has been broken, and I dare say it won't be the last. Skimmy, you are let off with a caution; but the next time you come into this study you will be slain without the option of a fine."

"Before I go, Merry, I should be glad if you would——"

"If I would what?"

"Point out the real hiding-place of the plunder."

"You—you image! Have you still got that idea in your head? Oh, kick him out!"

The Terrible Three opened the door, and Skimpole was jerked into the passage. He was whirled round, and three feet were planted behind him at the same moment. He went along the passage like an arrow from a bow, and staggered right into the arms of Mr. Lathom, who was just turning the corner.

CHAPTER 7.

A Fresh Clue for Skimpole.

MR. LATHOM staggered back with a startled gasp against the wall, and Skimpole fell at his feet, blindly embracing his knees. The little Form master adjusted his glasses and stared down at him in blank amazement. The passage was dusky, and the master of the Fourth was short-sighted, and for the moment he could not make out what had happened.

"Dear me! wh-what is that? I— Dear me! it is a boy. Yes, it is certainly a boy! Boy, get up at once!"

Skimpole staggered dazedly to his feet.

"Ah, it is you, Skimpole—you, who have played this rough and foolish trick upon a Form master!"

"I—I—sir—if you please, sir——"

"Follow me!" said Mr. Lathom, in a voice of thunder. "I shall report this to your Form master, Skimpole, and I think that Mr. Linton will deal adequately with it."

"Oh, sir, I—if you please—you see——"

"Follow me!"

The short-sighted master of the Fourth had not perceived the chums of the Shell at the door of their study. Tom Merry ran quickly forward.

"Excuse me, sir—Skimpole was not to blame."

The Fourth Form master turned his glasses upon Tom Merry.

"Ah, it is you, Merry! What did you say?"

"Skimpole is not to blame, sir. He couldn't help biffing—I mean, he couldn't help running into you, sir."

"Nonsense, Merry! Why could he not help it?"

"It was quite an accident, sir."

"How could it be an accident, Merry?"

"Well, sir, as a—as a matter of fact, we kicked him along the passage, sir," said Tom Merry demurely, "and he couldn't stop."

"You—you kicked Skimpole along the passage with such terrible velocity!" exclaimed Mr. Lathom. "Really, Merry, I hardly know what to make of this. Why did you—ah—act in such a rough and—ah—brutal way?"

"Skimmy had been—er——"

"Skimming," murmured Monty Lowther.

"The fact is, sir, Skimpole is tracking down the burglar of the chapel," said Tom Merry, "and—and it led to a misunderstanding."

Mr. Lathom started.

"Dear me! Skimpole, is it possible that you know anything about the burglary?" said the Fourth Form master. "Tell me at once if you do, Skimpole."

"Out of regard for Merry, sir, I am compelled to keep my knowledge a secret."

"Wh-what?"

"But I intend to recover the stolen property, sir, and restore it. That is all I can promise to do under the circumstances."

"Skimpole——"

Tom Merry's face was crimson.

"If you please, sir," he said hastily, "Skimmy is off his chump, sir."

"Wh-wh-what?"

"The ass thinks he has found a clue, and——"

"You are betraying yourself, Merry," said Skimpole warningly.

"You utter ass!"

"That is not a proper expression to use, Merry," said Mr. Lathom. "This is a very strange matter, and I must know more. Is it possible, Skimpole, that you suspect Merry of knowing something about the robbery of the chapel?"

"I do not wish to betray him, sir."

"You fathead!" said Tom Merry. "If there were anything to betray, you've done it already. Tell Mr. Lathom all about it."

"If you are really desirous of making a clean breast of it, Merry——"

"Ass! Go on, I tell you."

"Tell me all, Skimpole."

"Very well, sir. I was desirous of shielding Merry, but since he wishes a clean breast to be made of the matter, I will speak out. I have discovered clues which unfailingly point to Tom Merry as the culprit."

"What?"

"His footprints are in the grass outside the chapel window."

"Is that correct, Merry?"

"Very likely, sir. I have been there this morning, looking for clues myself."

"I picked up his pencil-case where he dropped it getting out of the window."

"Is that correct, Merry?"

"Very probably, sir. I have dropped my pencil-case somewhere, and the last time I remember using it was when I was making notes under the chapel window."

"Then the excitement displayed by Tom Merry when he found that I was searching his study proves——"

Tom Merry laughed.

"I think any fellow would get excited at having his study turned inside out, and his bookcase busted!" he exclaimed.

"I should think so, too," said Mr. Lathom. "Is it possible, Skimpole, that upon the evidence of utter nonsense like this, you have dared to accuse your schoolfellow of stealing?"

"Not stealing, sir——"

"Not stealing! You say that he robbed the chapel——"

"A detective cannot afford to be a respecter of persons, sir."

Mr. Lathom's severe face relaxed.

"This is too utterly absurd," he said. "You accuse Merry of robbing the chapel, and at the same time shrink from applying the word stealing to the action. As a matter of fact, you know perfectly well that Merry is incapable of such dishonesty, but with wilful obstinacy and crass stupidity you refuse to see the truth."

"Really, sir——"

"If I hear anything more of this, Skimpole, I shall report your folly to your Form master, and you will be severely caned. Your absurdity might cause unpleasantness for Merry, but that I imagine your Form fellows know how to take it as it merits. You are the most stupid boy in the School House."

The genius of the Shell simply gasped. With his mighty brain power and wonderful abilities in various directions, it was rather a shock to hear himself characterised as the most stupid boy in the School House. He could only stare at Mr. Lathom.

"Let there be no more of this," said the Fourth Form master.

"Under the circumstances, I am not surprised at Merry ejecting you from his study with—er—with some violence. Let there be no more of this nonsense, Skimpole."

And the Fourth Form master wagged his head warningly at Skimpole, and walked away. He left the amateur detective looking extremely discomfited, and the Terrible Three grinning joyously.

"Wilful obstinacy," remarked Manners. "That's about right."

"Crass stupidity," observed Lowther. "That hits the mark, too."

"Most stupid boy in the School House," said Tom Merry. "He knows our Skimmy like a book, doesn't he?"

"Really, you fellows——"

"You'd better take Lathom's advice, and chuck this rot," said Monty Lowther warningly. "You will have a rough old time if you keep on."

"From a sense of duty, Lowther, I shall keep on until I have discovered the missing will—I mean the stolen cash—and denounced the thief. Merry's explanation of the suspicious circumstances lets in new light on the subject, and Mr. Lathom's evident desire that I should drop the case points the finger of suspicion in a new direction."

"Eh? Have you got another clue already?"

"I have," said Skimpole calmly. "Why is Mr. Lathom annoyed at my having undertaken this case? Why does he call me the most stupid boy in the School House, when the exact contrary is the case? Why does he wish me to cease my investigations?"

"Because you are making a silly ass of yourself."

"Nothing of the sort. It is the natural effect of a guilty conscience."

"A-a-a-a what?"

"A guilty conscience. Upon the whole, it is clear that the robbery of the chapel was too difficult a job for a boy to have undertaken. A man was engaged upon the task, and Mr. Lathom's anxiety that I should drop the case is pretty clear evidence that he——"

Tom Merry shrieked.

"Oh, my hat! He's on Lathom's track now."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Manners and Lowther.

"This ribald laughter——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Skimpole blinked indignantly at the chums of the Shell, and went down the passage. The Terrible Three gasped as they staggered into the study, and collapsed, laughing themselves almost into hysterics.

"Lathom! He's on Lathom's track!" sobbed Tom Merry. "Oh, this is too good. I wonder what Lathom will say when he finds that he is being shadowed! Oh, my only Aunt Jemima!"

And the chums of the Shell roared again.

CHAPTER 8.

Figgins & Co., Detectives!

FIGGINS, of the New House, rubbed his nose in a thoughtful way. His nose was a little swollen, an effect of the impromptu Rugby match in the Form room that morning. But Figgins was not thinking of that. His brow was corrugated with the lines of deep and serious thought.

"If you're coming down to the footer this afternoon," Kerr remarked, "there's no time to lose. What are you screwing up your chivvy about?"

"It would be no joke if it got fixed like that," Fatty Wynn remarked.

"Look here, you chaps, we can cut the footer for once. It's jolly hot for footer, anyway, in September."

"The League matches have begun—"

"Blow the League matches. The fact is, we've got something else to do."

"If you're thinking of a feed, Figgy, I think it's a good idea," said Fatty Wynn. "I get jolly hungry in this September weather."

"Is there any kind of weather you don't get hungry in?" asked Kerr sarcastically.

"Well, I had a very small dinner to-day—only a couple of rabbit-pies beside the ordinary school grub, and a few tarts," said Fatty Wynn. "I've got a healthy appetite, you know. I'm not a skinny Scotchman."

"No, you're a fat Welsh rabbit," retorted Kerr, who came from the land of the mountain and the flood. "I'd like to have you up on the mountains for a vac., and I'd jolly soon bring down some of your fat."

"I'm getting thin already," said Fatty Wynn pathetically. "That voyage on the steamer thinned me down. I haven't been able to get enough to eat since we came back. And I always get so hungry in September. If Figgy is thinking of a picnic—"

"I'm not," said Figgy.

"Oh, well, a feed at the school shop would be all right. Dame Taggles has some new cream puffs, made this morning, and they look ripping. I noticed some steak pies when I was in there, too; and you know what lovely steak pies she makes. Come on!"

"Eh?" said Figgy absently.

"Come on!"

"Where?"

"To the tuckshop!"

"Rats! I'm not going to Dame Taggles's."

"Oh, if you prefer the village shop, I don't mind, though it's a bit of a walk," said Fatty Wynn. "Let's get going, anyway."

"I'm not going to the village shop!"

"Then where are you going?" exclaimed Fatty Wynn crossly. "I suppose you're not going to stand here all day, scowling like a demon in a pantomime?"

"Who's scowling?"

"You are."

"I'm thinking—"

"You ought to lock yourself up somewhere when you think, if it makes you look like that," said the Welsh partner in the Co.

"I say, I'm hungry."

Figgy laughed.

"Look here, you kids; we've got work to do this afternoon," he said. "Tom Merry is taking up that robbery business, and is looking for the giddy burglar. Blake and his gang are trying to track him down with a bulldog. Skimpole and D'Arcy are both on the track, and I saw Gore and Mellish nosing round the chapel window when I was there investigating."

"Enough detectives for one case, anyway," grinned Kerr.

"Yes; but they all belong to the School House. If the New House is to keep its end up in the matter, we shall have to chip in in earnest."

"Well, it's not a bad idea."

"I've been on the ground, and examined the footprints. Old Benson won't let us into the chapel. Now, I don't suppose Blake and Co. will do much with their bulldog, and Skimpole will only discover mare's nests. But Tom Merry might rope in the enterprising burglar, and reap a lot of kudos over it. My idea is that we should take up the case in earnest, and track down the thief."

"You can't track down a thief without a clue."

"A detective has to find his clues. You remember when Ferrers Locks was here once, we had a detective competition, and I tracked down Fatty, who had boned a pie?"

"A pudding," said Fatty Wynn.

"Well, never mind whether it was a pie or a pudding. I tracked you down. That shows that I've got some gift as a detective. It would mean a lot of credit for the New House if we discovered the burglars. They are awfully mean rotters to rob the collection in a church, and they ought to be made an example of."

"Right-ho! But what about a clue?"

"You are such a practical beast, Kerr, old chap."

"Well, I don't see how we can start hunting down a gang of burglars without a clue."

"We've got their footprints. But I've been reasoning the matter out," said Figgy, with a sage look—"reasoning it out on the true Sherlock-Holmes-Sexton-Blake-Nelson-Lee-Stanley-Dare system, you know. The problem is, given a giddy burglary, to find the giddy burglars. Now, in the first place, it wasn't a professional gang of cracksmen who cracked that crib."

"Who—who whatted that what?"

"Cracked that crib," said Figgy, rather jottily; "that's the true professional expression. They weren't a gang from London, for instance, for a professional gang would have broken into the school as well and robbed the desks. There's always

a lot of money here, if it were totted up together, and then, there's the school plate. A gang of professionals would have scooped in all the swag."

"The what?"

"The swag!" said Figgy, who was deeply read in detective lore. "That's the plunder—the loot, you know. They call it swag. Now, my idea is that some rotters who belong to the neighbourhood watched their opportunity, and got over the school wall and entered the chapel and collared the swag."

"Well, it does look like it."

"Therefore," said Figgy, rather proud of his deductions, "therefore, we shan't have to look far for the rotters. There are a good many rough characters round Rylcombe, and it might have been any of them."

"That's rather a big order, though."

"Still, that simplifies matters. Now, a chalice was taken, as well as the cash. They wouldn't be in a hurry to dispose of that chalice—"

"Why not?"

"Because it might be traced to them. They would be much more likely to hide it and wait for a safe opportunity of either selling it, or melting it down."

"Well that's likely enough," admitted Kerr.

"Well, if they've hidden it—buried it somewhere, perhaps—we've got to find it, and then we've got them."

"Rats! I suppose they won't have buried themselves along with the chalice."

"Ass! Don't you see, if we found the spot where the loot—I mean the swag was buried, a watch could be kept there—"

"What on earth do you want to keep a watch there for?" demanded Fatty Wynn, in amazement. "Suppose they came to take away the chalice, they might take away the watch, too."

Figgy bestowed a withering look upon his chum.

"You utter duffer; I mean a watch could be kept on the spot—I mean it would be watched—watched by the police—"

"Oh, I see! I don't see why you couldn't say that at first."

"Oh, you're an ass! A watch could be kept on the spot, and then, when the rotters came to remove the chalice—I mean the swag—they could be arrested."

"That's a ripping idea!" said Kerr, rubbing his hands.

"We've only got to run down the rotters as far as the hiding-place of the swag—I mean the lag—"

"The swag, you mean."

"I mean the loot. If we can find the loot, we can trust the rest into the hands of the common or garden police."

Figgy gave a quick look at his chum, but Kerr's face was perfectly serious. Figgy had had a suspicion for a moment that the Scottish partner in the Co. was rotting, but he dismissed it.

"That's it!" he agreed. "Let's get out into the road, and have a look round. My idea is that the thieves would cut into the wood for safety, and very likely hide the chalice there; perhaps in a hollow tree. Let's walk down to the wood."

The sagacious Kerr could not help having a feeling that Figgy's scheme was a good deal like hunting for a needle in a stack of hay; but he was too loyal to say so. Besides, a walk in the wood on a warm afternoon was pleasant enough, and time had to be killed somehow. Figgy & Co. strolled down the road. There was a slightly worried look on Fatty Wynn's face. He did not mind the walk, but he would have preferred it to be in the direction of the tuckshop.

"I say, Figgy, old man," he remarked, as they drew near the stile which gave access to the footpath in the wood, "I've thought of something. We might pick up a clue in Rylcombe."

"How?" said Figgy suspiciously.

"Why, it stands to reason that the burglars must have been hungry after being out for a great part of the night. It's quite possible they dropped in somewhere to have some grub. Suppose they knocked up Mother Murphy for something to eat—"

"Oh, rats!" said Figgy, as he stepped over the stile. "Come on!"

"But I say, Figgy, it's no good neglecting a chance, you know. It's worth while paying a flying visit to the tuckshop—I mean to Mother Murphy—just to ascertain—"

"Oh, come on, you young grampus."

"We could have a mouthful while we were there, and—"

"You can go and investigate in the tuckshop, if you like," said Figgy. "I'm going into the wood."

"Well, Figgy, since you ask me, I don't mind if I do," said Fatty Wynn. "I don't want to leave you, but as you point out that it would be better, I'll do anything I can to back you up. Ta-ta!"

And Fatty Wynn scuttled down the road to the village.

"That's all right," grinned Figgy. "He'd make me hungry if he kept on with us. Let's have a look round the wood, Kerr."

"Right you are," said Kerr.

The juniors plunged into the wood. They had not gone a dozen yards from the path when there was a rustle in the thickets, and a fur cap and a battered bowler hat came into view amid the twigs. The next moment two faces were visible—two

rough, stubby, liquor-reddened faces—and there was a yelp from a dog in the bushes.

"Hold on, young gents," said a rough and threatening voice. "Hold on, by yer leave."

Figgins and Kerr started back in alarm. There was cause for alarm, for the two roughs closed up quickly on either side of them, and a couple of thick cudgels came very prominently into view. A shaggy dog was yelping at their heels.

"Don't be afeared, young gents," said the larger of the two roughs, he in the bowler hat. "We ain't going to 'urt yer—if yer 'ands over yer tin peaceable. Eh, Snipey?"

"That's 'ow it stands, Dodger," said Snipey. Figgins and Kerr clenched their fists. Two cudgels rose threateningly into the air.

"None o' that!" said Mr. Dodger savagely, "unless yer want to be brained. 'And over yer tin and watches, and be quick about it."

"That's 'ow it stands," said Snipey. And Figgins realised that there was no help for it!

CHAPTER 9.

Towser to the Rescue!

BOW-WOW-WOW!

"Can't you keep that brute quiet, Herries?"

"What's the matter with his barking," said Herries. "I don't see why Towser shouldn't bark if he wants to. It's not a row like some dogs' barking!"

"Blessed if I can see any difference," said Blake. "It's a fearful row, anyway."

"I don't see it—"

"I don't expect you to see it, but you ought to be able to hear it. Suppose you give him a kick in the ribs?"

"I'd rather you did," grinned Herries.

Blake looked at Towser, and decided not to. The bulldog continued to drag at the chain and growl. Herries had taken a turn of the chain round his wrist, determined that his favourite should not slip away again. He had had a chase of half an hour after Towser, following on the battle with the terrier, and had missed his dinner in consequence, and received twenty lines from Mr. Lathom. He had come in breathless and dusty with the unwilling Towser, to find Blake and Digby waiting for him impatiently. Blake had thoughtfully brought out a bundle of sandwiches for Herries, and the hungry hunter was eating them in the shadow of the old wall.

"Bow—wow—gr—r—r—r!"

"Nice voice, isn't it?" said Digby. "You could sharpen a saw on it. How far did the brute lead you, Herries, old man?"

"Up over the hill, and round the old castle."

"My hat! I'd have boiled him in oil!"

"He's a jolly good dog," said Herries. "It isn't every dog that's cunning enough to dodge you as long as that!"

"Ha, ha! Whatever Towser does is right, I can see that. Good old Towser!"

Gr—r—r—r! said Towser.

"Buck up with those sandwiches, Herries," said Blake. "We ought to be off. Figgins & Co. have gone out, and though they haven't said anything, I know jolly well that they're looking for our burglars. A lot of the fellows are on the track, too. French and Jimson of the New House went out soon after Figgins, and they both looked so jolly mysterious that I guessed at once they were off to follow up a clue somewhere."

"Young Curly of the Third was trying to get into the chapel just now," said Digby. "Old Benson was cuffing him."

"Serve him jolly well right!" said Blake indignant'y. "Fancy a kid in the Third Form having the cheek to think of taking up a case like this. Hallo, here are those Shell bounders! Have you given it up as a bad job, Tom Merry?"

The Terrible Three laughed in chorus.

"Not half!" said Tom Merry. "I was just thinking that you fellows are wasting your time over it. It's all very well for a fellow in the Shell to take up a matter of this kind, but for you Fourth Form kids—well—"

"To put it mildly," said Monty Lowther, "it's check."

"Nerve!" said Manners.

"You—you rotten Shellfish," said Blake. "It was our idea from the start, and they're our burglars you're looking for."

"They'll be ours when we capture them," laughed Tom Merry. "Come on, you chaps!"

The Terrible Three walked on, grinning. Jack Blake turned to Herries, who was steadily masticating sandwiches.

"Are you ever going to be ready, Herries? There's those rotters gone off to track down our burglars."

"Sha'n't be a few minutes," said Herries.

"Here's Gussy," said Digby. "He's decided to join us after all. Hallo, Gus!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was coming down towards the gates. The swell of St. Jim's looked elegant. His trousers were nicely creased, his waistcoat startling in pattern, his silk hat gleamed in the September sunshine. He had evidently changed his clothes since the morning. There was no sign

of the Rugby match about him excepting a bruise on his cheek, which was carefully powdered over.

He stopped, and put up his eyeglass to survey his three chums.

"Did you address me, Dig?" he asked.

"Yes, I did," said Digby. "Have you decided to come with us?"

"I should be vewy pleased to do so, deah boys, if Hewwies will chain up that wotten bulldog first."

Gr—r—r—r! remarked Towser.

Arthur Augustus edged away from the bulldog. He feared, not for himself, but for his trousers. Herries gave a sniff.

"Catch me chaining him up!" he said. "He's going to track down the burglars!"

"Wats! I weward that howwid dog as an unmitigated nuisance!"

"We can't part with our blughound," said Jack Blake, shaking his head. "We're working this case on the Sexton Blake system, and Towser is our blughound."

"I know he is a wotten beast, and has torn my twousahs more than once. Undah the cires, I shall not be able to join you, deah boys! I will, howevah, call upon you if poss. to help me in makin' the awwest when I have twacked down the burghlah."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There is nothin' to cackle at. I have vewy little doubt of my ability to twack down the wotten yascal. You will see. I wepeat that if you chain up that wotten bulldog, I am willin' to take you along and show you how the case ought to be worked."

"Not good enough, Gussy!"

"Vewy well; you will be sowwy pwesently."

And the swell of St. Jim's walked out of the gates, and strolled away in the direction of Rylcombe. Skimpole came bolting across the quad, and stopped and looked breathlessly at the chums of the Fourth.

"Have you seen D'Arcy?" he gasped.

"Yes. He's gone out."

"Dear me! How unfortunate! I wanted his assistance vewy badly. But one of you fellows would do equally well, if you wish to have a hand in capturing the burglar."

"Ha, ha! You're on the track, I suppose?"

"Yes, I have a vewy clear case, and shall shortly possess convincing proofs. Will you throw up some stones at Mr. Lathom's study window, Blake, and make some disturbance so that he will come down to the quad?"

Jack Blake stared.

"Oh, with all my heart—I don't think!" he replied.

"I wish to get him out of his study. My first clues pointed to the guilt of Tom Merry—"

"The—the—the what—of whom?"

"The guilt of Tom Merry. The case was vewy black against him, but upon further investigation I decided that Tom Merry was innocent—"

"You shrieking idiot!"

"I have now ascertained practically for certain who was the burglar. I suspected all along that it was an occupant of St. Jim's. You will be surprised to learn that your Form master—"

"Our Form master!"

"Yes, the case is vewy clear against Mr. Lathom," said Skimpole seriously. "Of course, I do not wish to be hard on him. When the stolen property is restored, I shall give him an opportunity of making his escape before calling in the police."

The chums of Study No. 6 looked dazed.

"Lathom—escape—no," murmured Jack Blake.

"Yes. I suppose this is rather a shock to you—you would never have thought of it yourselves," said Skimpole, with a patronising smile. "You see, I have taken up detective work seriously, and a true detective cannot afford to be a respecter of persons. The proofs against Mr. Lathom are pretty black, but, of course, I shall possess no actual evidence until I have searched his study and discovered the stolen goods. That is why I want him enticed out into the quadrangle. Will one of you fellows help me, and share in the glory of running down the burglar?"

"Herries, old man, let go that chain, will you?"

"What for?" asked Herries.

"So that Towser can have the glory of running down a howling idiot."

"Certainly," grinned Herries.

"Oh, really!" exclaimed Skimpole. "I—Blake—Herries, pray hold that chain fast—I—I—you see—oh, dear!"

The amateur Socialist ran for his life. Herries did not let the chain go, but Towser growled and yapped furiously, and Skimpole was fully convinced that there was a ferocious animal upon his track. He ran as he had seldom run before, and disappeared round the gym in a twinkling. Blake roared with laughter.

"Skimmy gets richer every day, I think," he gasped. "Fancy suspecting Tom Merry and poor old Lathom! He'll find

some fearfully black evidence against the Head himself next."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you're ready, Herries, we'll start."

"Right-ho!" said Herries. "I'm ready!"

"Get Towser out into the road, and give him his head. If there are no other dogs within sniffing distance he may pick up the trail."

"That was an accident, his following the terrier——"

"I expect it will be an accident if he follows the burglars. But, come on; no good wasting time, if you're really ready at last!"

The chums of the Fourth went out of the gateway. There were several fellows belonging to St. Jim's to be seen in the road and the meadows. Curly Gibson and a party of Third Form "infants" were exploring the old barn in the hope of picking up a trail. French and Jimson of the Shell, New House fellows, were searching in the ditch, and Blake stopped to inquire if they had lost anything.

"No," said French, turning a face red with exertion for a moment towards the School House chums.

"Then what are you routing in that dry ditch for?" demanded the amazed Blake.

"Never mind," said French, "we may be looking for a clue, or we may not. Don't ask any questions, and we'll tell you no lies."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, don't waste time talking to those Fourth Form kids!" said Jimson. "We'll make you School House wasters sing small over this, Blake."

The Fourth Form detectives walked on, Towser leading the way. There was a sound of a rustle on the other side of the hedge, and Towser growled.

"Hallo," said Blake, stopping, "there's somebody hiding there—perhaps——"

"Our burglars, perhaps," said Digby excitedly. "You never know. They——"

"Fetch 'em out, Towser!"

"Hould on!" roared a voice from the edge. "Kape that baste of the world away, you blithering gossoons. Faith, and I'll brain him else!"

Blake uttered an exclamation of disgust.

"It's that ass Reilly!"

It was Reilly of the Fourth. Herries dragged back the bulldog as the red face of the Irish junior was seen looking from the thick hedge.

"What on earth are you doing there?" demanded Digby.

"Faith, and it's looking for a clue I am."

"I suppose there's a lot of 'em lying about behind that hedge," said Blake, with heavy sarcasm. "Picking 'em up in dozens, I suppose?"

"Sure, you know, I thought that the bastes would very likely walk along on the inside of the hedge, when they came up to the school, to escape notice," explained Reilly. "I'm looking for footprints on the inner side."

"Found any?"

"Faith, and I have, but I'm not sure whether it's a man's footprint or a baste's. It's a footprint right enough."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Sure and I——"

But the Fourth Form detectives did not wait for Reilly to finish. Towser was tugging at his chain, and they proceeded. An athletic figure came into sight on the road, and Towser barked. But it was only Mr. Railton, the housemaster of the School House, returning from a stroll. The juniors raised their caps respectfully, and Mr. Railton glanced at them curiously as he nodded.

"Taking the dog for a little run?" he said good-humouredly.

"Yes, sir," said Blake. "I suppose you haven't seen any suspicious characters knocking about, have you, sir?"

"Suspicious characters! I don't quite understand, Blake."

"We're looking for the burglars, sir," explained Blake. "The Head said that every boy at St. Jim's should do anything he could to help——"

"I think Dr. Holmes meant in the way of giving information," said the School House master, with a smile.

"Well, sir, we're looking for information. Towser is a terror at following a track, isn't he, Herries?"

"Yes, rather," said Herries, much gratified at this tribute to his favourite's abilities. "He'll follow a track all day, sir, if another dog doesn't come in sight."

Mr. Railton laughed.

"We've picked up the scent under the chapel window, sir," said Blake. "Towser is following it now. His only fault is that he wants to fly at everything he meets, and won't stick to the matter in hand. Of course, one can't expect a dog to understand."

"Of course not," agreed Mr. Railton. "I sincerely hope that you will have a pleasant run, and succeed in tracking down the burglars."

And he walked on. Blake glanced after him rather suspiciously.

"Looks to me as if he's laughing at us," he said. "I don't

see why he should, though. Sexton Blake tracks down criminals with bloughounds, and why shouldn't we? Anyway, come on! They won't laugh when we bring in the burglar in handcuffs."

"Have you brought any handcuffs with you?" asked Herries.

"No, I haven't any."

"Then how are we to take the burglar back in handcuffs?" "Oh, don't be such a literal beast. I was speaking figuratively. If we take him back tied up with a whipcord, with Towser hanging on to his trucks, I suppose that's as good as having him in handcuffs."

"Yes, but——"

"Oh, don't start butting. Let's get on."

"Towser's sniffing something again," said Dig excitedly. "Look at him!"

The juniors were near the stile now. Towser was certainly excited about something. He had ceased to bark, and that fact made Herries excited, too. Towser dragged on the chain.

"That means that he knows the enemy is close at hand," whispered Herries. "He's stopped making a row so as not to put him on his guard."

"Has he?" said Blake, rather dubiously.

"Yes, he has. You don't know what a clever dog he is. There's jolly few things that Towser isn't up to."

"Well, I don't see how it can be another dog this time," said Blake. "Not likely to be a dog here in the wood. It might be a rabbit, though."

"Towser doesn't go for rabbits."

"H'm! Well, there's certainly something the matter with him, so we may as well see what it leads to. Get him through the stile."

The juniors climbed over the stile, and Towser crawled through it. Herries was careful not to let the chain go. The dog was very excited. He plunged at once into the wood, and dragged his master on. The chain caught in a bush, and Herries fell over, but Towser was still straining, and the junior slipped the chain from his wrist as he rose. The bulldog, with a ferocious growl, bounded away. The next moment there was a wild yelp, a furious exclamation of voices, and then a yell in a voice the chums of the Fourth knew well!

"Rescue, St. Jim's!"

"Figgins!" gasped Blake. "Come on."

And Blake, Herries, and Digby dashed on at top speed.

CHAPTER 10.

The Good Samaritan.

"RESCUE, St. Jim's!"

Figgins yelled out the words as Towser came bounding through the thickets. Well he knew that bulldog, his savage face and his unmusical voice. And he knew that wherever Towser was, Herries and his chums were not likely to be far away.

"Brain 'im," muttered Snipey, turning pale as the bulldog bounded into view. "Brain 'im with yer stick, Dodger."

Mr. Dodger hesitated.

The two New House juniors, feeling that they were helpless in the hands of the footpads, had been about to unwillingly hand over their watches, when the interruption came. But no such thought was in their minds now. Towser came on with a rush, and Mr. Snipey dodged quickly behind Mr. Dodger. Dodger showed a strong inclination to whip round behind Snipey. It was fortunate, perhaps, for both of them that Towser had no eyes for them. It was not the two tramps who had attracted the bulldog to the spot. It was the mongrel cur at the heels of Dodger. Straight for that unhappy cur went Towser, and in a flash he had him pinned.

Gr-r-r-r-r!

Yelp-yelp-yelp.

"Rescue, St. Jim's!" bawled Figgins.

With a rush Blake, Digby, and Herries came upon the scene. The bulldog and the mongrel were rolling over and over in the grass, and fighting furiously, amid a terrific din of growling and yelping.

"This way," cried Figgins; "line up."

"Here we are," gasped Blake. "What's the row?"

"Footpads!"

"Right you are. Go for them!"

With the number of the juniors increased to five, the two ruffians, armed as they were, would probably have hesitated to tackle them. The presence of Towser settled any doubts they might have had. Herries was already calling his bulldog, and the sight of his fangs was quite enough for Messrs. Snipey and Dodger, without closer acquaintance.

"I'm off," gasped Snipey.

"My 'at!" panted Mr. Dodger.

And heartlessly leaving the unhappy mongrel to its fate, the two footpads dashed away into the wood, and disappeared in a moment.

"After them!" roared Herries.



"Look here! Keep that fiendish dog off!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"It's all right," gasped Figgins. "They hadn't time to rob us when you came up. They haven't taken anything."

"After them! They're the burglars."

"Eh?"

"They're the burglars!"

"Rats! How do you know?"

"Towser's tracked them down."

"More rats," said Figgins, sceptically. "Towser's come n very handy, I admit, but he was after that mongrel, not after his master."

"Nothing of the sort. He was tracking down the burglars, and—"

"Oh, draw it mild, Herries," said Blake, laughing. "It's pretty plain that Towser was on the scent of this giddy mongrel all the time."

"I don't think so," said Herries, obstinately.

"Well, I do. Those two tramps may have been the burglars, for all I know. But Towser was tracking down that mongrel, not the tramps."

"I don't agree with you."

"I say, call Towser off," said Digby. "He'll tear that poor little rotter into ribbons. Call him off, Herries, old man. He won't take any notice of me."

"Of course he won't," said Herries. "He won't obey anybody but me. Towser! Towser! He obeys me instantly. Towser! Towser! Towser!"

"Gr-r-r-r-r!"

"Towser! Towser! Good dog! Towser!"

"Gr-r-r-r-r!"

"Towser! Doggie! Towsy-Towsy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake. "Is that how he obeys you instantly, Herries?"

"Well, he's excited," said Herries. "He's full of pluck. There's precious few dogs as full of pluck as Towser. He's not one of those quiet, rotten brutes that will leave off in the middle of a fight just at a word."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Herries seized the chain and dragged at it. Towser relinquished his victim at last. It was time, for the wretched little mongrel was exhausted, and was torn in several places. Figgins, whose heart was as tender as a girl's, bent over him.

"Poor little beggar," he said. "He's had a rough time. Look how skinny he is. He hasn't had much to eat for a long time, I imagine."

"He's pretty well cut up too, isn't he?" said Herries. "My dog Towser is a terror for maulin' 'em."

"Blow your dog Towser! What's to be done with this little rotter?"

"I don't see that anything can be done," said Blake. "He ought to be put out of his misery. It's a shame that people should be allowed to keep dogs when they don't feed 'em properly. He looks as if he's had more kicks than biscuits."

"Poor little beggar," said Figgins again.

"But what about those burglars," said Herries, impatiently. "Towser has tracked them down, and now—"

"Oh, rats! He was tracking down this wretched little mongrel."

"See if he will follow the trail any further, anyway," said Digby.

"Of course he will," said Herries. "Come on, Towser! Fetch 'em, Towser."

Towser made a spring at the mongrel, but his master dragged him back.

"This way, Towser! Fetch 'em, Towser."

Towser showed a strong disinclination to leave the spot. Blake and Digby grinned: they had not the slightest doubt that Towser had simply scented a strange dog from the road, and had led them into the wood for the sole and simple purpose of having a fight with that strange dog. But it was no use telling Herries so.

"Come on," said Herries, dragging at the chain, so that the bulldog had no choice about proceeding. "Come on. He's on the scent again!"

"Why, you're pulling him," said Digby.

"Well, I'm helping him a bit over the rough parts," said Herries, colouring. "Come on, he'll be tearing ahead in a minute."

"He doesn't look much like it now. You'll choke him if you help him over the rough parts as hard as that."

"Look here, are you coming?" exclaimed Herries, crossly.

"Oh, yes, certainly. Coming along, Figgy?"

"I'd like to," said Figgins. "I'm going to look after this little beggar, though. Can't leave him here, hurt as he is."

"Good chap! So-long."

The chums of Study No. 6 disappeared into the wood with the bulldog. Kerr looked at his leader curiously. Figgins was picking up the wretched specimen of the canine tribe.

"What are you going to do with that little rotter, Figgy?" asked Kerr.

"Take him to the vet's in Rylcombe."

"You're—you're going to walk through Rylcombe High Street with that mangy little mongrel in your arms?"

Figgins coloured.

"Well, why not? The poor little beggar can't walk. He's had a bite in the leg, and another in the neck."

"Oh, all right: I don't mind. People will stare."

"Let 'em stare."

"Oh, certainly. Let's get off."

The New House chums left the spot where they had so nearly been robbed, Figgins carrying the dog in his arms. The little animal seemed to understand, for it was licking its benefactor's hand, and its eyes were turned up towards Figgy's face with a curious expression that went right to the junior's heart.

"But I say!" remarked Kerr. "He belongs to the rotters who tried to rob us—"

"They're not likely to come forward to claim him."

"N-no, but he belongs to them."

"What right have they to keep a dog at all?" exclaimed Figgins, indignantly. "Look how he's been starved. You can see where he's been licked, too."

"All the same—"

"Well, you're right. If I can find the beasts I'll buy him of them; but they shan't have him back, at any price," said Figgins, obstinately.

"What are you going to do with him?"

"Why shouldn't I keep him?"

"Rather a rotten mongrel for a pet!"

"Well, I don't suppose anybody would take him for a thoroughbred," said Figgins, with a glance at his shaggy, dirty protégé. "Not even on a dark night. But he'll fatten up. And the little beggar is fond of me already!"

"He'll make your waistcoat in a fearful state."

"Blow the waistcoat."

Figgins had evidently made up his mind. Kerr said no more, but he gave his leader a slap on the shoulder that expressed his feelings, and nearly knocked Figgins over. They went on towards the village, and Kerr's prediction that Figgins would be stared at was amply fulfilled. Half the village seemed to turn out to look at the long-legged junior carrying a shaggy mongrel in his arms. Figgins's face was crimson, but he marched straight on, like the Pilgrim in his immortal Progress, without looking to the right or to the left. Fatty Wynn was standing in the doorway of the tuckshop, and he stared as much as anybody.

"Hallo, Figgy, where did you find that?" he asked.

"Oh, go and eat cokenuts," said Figgins. And he strode on, leaving Fatty staring. A little further on, an elegant figure came into view.

"Bai Jove, Figgins, where did you pick up that bwute?"

"Rats," said Figgins.

"Weally, Figgins," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, "I did not mean to pwovoke you by that question, and there is no need to be wude about it. The poor little beggar seems to have been hurt."

"Towser's been at him," explained Figgins, more amiably as he saw that the swell of St. Jim's was not poking fun at him. "He's hurt. I'm taking him to the vet's."

"Bai Jove, that's weally wippin' of you, Figgy. It isn't every fellow who would spoil his waistcoat for the sake of a

stway dog," said D'Arcy, admiringly. "Have you plenty of tin, old boy? The vetewinary surgeon will want to be paid."

"Yes, I've enough, thanks, Gussy."

"Vewy good. I wogard you as a decent chap. Of course, that waistcoat of yours is a feafuhl cut, and awfully wumpled, but still, you've spoiled it in the cause of kindness to animals, and I weally considah—"

Figgins did not wait to hear what D'Arcy really considered. He strode on, with most of the tag-rag of the village at his heels by this time. A youth with a round, cheerful face was coming down the street, and he stopped to look at Figgins. It was Frank Monk, the leader of the juniors of Rylcombe Grammar School in their frays with the boys of St. Jim's.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Monk. "Nice pretty little pet you've got, Figgins."

"Oh, take your face away," responded Figgins.

"He's been hurt," said Monk. "What are you doing with him?"

"Taking him to the vet's."

"By Jove, a good Samaritan! I was going to lick you two fellows," said Monk. "Now I won't."

"You needn't won't," said Figgins promptly. "I can give him to Kerr to hold while you lick me, if you feel inclined to take on the job."

"If it's all the same to you, Figgy," said Kerr, "I'll tackle Monk while you go on holding the mongrel."

Frank Monk laughed.

"It's all right, kids. I'm not on the warpath this afternoon, and I wouldn't chip you now for worlds. Figgins, you're a long-legged cherub."

And Frank Monk strolled away.

Figgins strode on. The crowd round him was thickening now, and some of the comments passed upon him and his pet were unpleasant.

"'Orrid-looking beast, ain't it," said one villager.

"Still, he oughtn't to treat it like that," said an old woman indignantly. "The poor dumb brute can't 'elp being what he is, and he's no right to use it like that. See the cuts on his pore body, and see how's he's been starved. Shame!"

"Shame!" chirruped the village boys in chorus.

"Shame! Shame!"

"Why don't yer feed yer dorg?"

"The Society for the Prevention oughter 'ear of this!"

"Shame!"

"Who starves 'is dog?"

"Shame!"

Figgins marched on with a beautifully crimson face. It was useless to attempt to explain to the indignant crowd. They followed him to the garden gate of Mr. Bones, the local veterinary surgeon, and watched him with anxious interest as he knocked at the door and waited for it to be opened.

"E's going to have it killed now," said the old woman. "Best thing he could do, after the way he's treated it."

"Yah! Why don't yer feed yer dorg?"

Figgins was glad when he was ushered into the house by a maidservant, with Kerr and his shaggy protege, and the door closed. The crowd gave a final groan, and dispersed.

CHAPTER 11.

"On the Scent."

"Gussy, by Jove!"

Frank Monk stopped as he caught sight of the swell of St. Jim's.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was standing under the big tree outside the Green Man Inn in the old High Street of Rylcombe.

There was a shade of thought upon his brow, and he did not perceive the Grammar School junior.

The Grammarian grinned.

D'Arcy was evidently lost in thought, and Frank Monk moved up quietly behind him with the intention of startling him out of his reverie by knocking his hat over his eyes.

But D'Arcy's profound reflections were interrupted before Monk could get near him.

A gentleman with a shiny face and raucous voice came along the street pushing a barrow and announcing his wares in a monotone to the inhabitants of Rylcombe.

"Kippers! 'Addicks! Kippers! 'Addicks!"

Arthur Augustus looked round him with an expression of disgust. In the strong sunshine and warmth of the September afternoon, the smell from the fish-merchant's barrow could not be said to be inviting; and, as a matter of fact, some of the haddocks had seen their best days, and if they remained upon the barrow much longer would probably require killing a second time, to judge by the scent.

"Bai Jove!" muttered D'Arcy. "What is that howwid smell? Is there somethin' w'ong with the dwains in this stweet, I wondah?"

Then he saw the barrow, with its flat board and its enticing arrays of haddocks thereon, and he turned quite pale as he caught the full scent.

"Kippers! 'Addicks!"

"My good man," said D'Arcy faintly, "I—oh——"

"Yes, sir. Fine kippers, sir," said the fish-merchant, thinking he had found a customer. "Excellent fine kippers, sir. Three for twopence, sir. 'Ow many can I give you, sir?"

D'Arcy nearly fainted at the idea of being supposed a possible purchaser of those extremely ripe kippers. He waved his hand at the fish-merchant.

"Take it away," he murmured.

"Eh?"

"Take it away."

"Take what away?"

"That bawwow. It distwesses me!"

"If you've got anything to say agin my 'addicks," said the fish-merchant, letting go the barrow and pushing back his shirt-sleeves, "if you've got anything to say agin my 'addicks, young gent, you'd better say it."

D'Arcy retreated in alarm. He had heaps of pluck, but not quite sufficient to enable him to face the fish-merchant. He felt that he would faint if that extremely greasy and fishy individual came near him.

"Pway do not get excited," he said. "Pew'aps I was w'ong to pass wemarks upon your—your fish. Yaas, wathah, upon weflection, I admit that I was w'ong, and I apologise."

"Which I hain't looking for trouble," said the fish-merchant. "If you apologise I overlooks it, as one gentleman to another. Kippers! 'Addicks!"

Arthur Augustus turned away, his scented handkerchief to his nose.

Frank Monk was feeling in his pockets, and his hand came out with a piece of string and a couple of fish-hooks. He stepped quickly towards the fish-merchant.

"I'll have one," he said, placing twopence on the board. "I only want one, but a very, very ripe and nifty one—savvy?"

He jerked his head towards D'Arcy's back, which was turned towards the barrow, and showed the fish-hooks.

The fish-merchant grinned.

"Which I've got one 'ere that's powerful strong, sir," he murmured. "It's really a little too too, and I put a newspaper over it. You can have that."

The "too too" kipper was dragged from its shy retirement. Frank Monk turned pale as it was uncovered. The scent was really palpable. He turned pale, but he grinned.

"Will that do, sir?"

"Will it do?" said Monk. "well, rather! Here's another twopence. It's worth it. Why, you can almost hear it talk."

To fasten the hook on the kipper was the work of a moment. It remained only to fasten the other hook to Arthur Augustus, and that was not difficult.

Frank Monk hurried past him, and ran against him, apparently by accident, and jammed the second fish-hook into the back of his jacket.

"Sorry!" he exclaimed. "I'm in a hurry!"

"Weally, Fwank Monk——"

"I wanted to get away from that smell," said Monk. "Ripe, isn't it? Rich, not to say gaudy."

"Weally, it is howwid," said D'Arcy, "and it seems to lingah close to a chap, too. I feel as if I shall nevah get it fwom my nostwils."

Frank Monk hurried on, almost choking with laughter. The fish-merchant was going on, and Arthur Augustus walked in the opposite direction. Strangely enough the scent of the kipper seemed to follow and cling to him.

"Bai Jove, this is feahful!" murmured D'Arcy, quickening his pace. "I have noticed before that when you get a stwong smell fairly in the nose, it's very difficult to quite get wid of it. It seems to haunt one."

The scent of that kipper certainly haunted Arthur Augustus.

He hurried on for some little distance, but the smell was still about him, and, what was stranger still, several dogs had commenced to follow him, sniffing anticipatively.

"Bai Jove! What's the mattah with those beastly animals?" muttered D'Arcy. "Scat, you wotten mongwels! Get away at once, you beastly dogs!"

He waved his hand angrily at the curs, and they scattered back; but as soon as he turned again they closed up once more.

One brute, bolder than the rest, made a rush straight at D'Arcy, and the swell of St. Jim's jumped out of the way only just in time.

He gave the dog a shove with his boot—not without qualms, for the boot was shiny and immaculate, and the dog was a mangy cur. The animal yelped and retreated and barked furiously, and from five or six other brutes came sympathetic barking.

The yapping and snarling increased, and D'Arcy began to get excited. Several people had come to their doors, and were looking on, and they were all laughing.

The complexion of the swell of St. Jim's grew more and more crimson, with mingled anger and mortification, as the crew of street curs gathered round him again.

"Be off!" he exclaimed, shaking his fist at them. "Be off! Wun away, you wotten dogs! Wun away immediately!"

But the dogs did not run away.

Arthur Augustus walked on, while yells of laughter came from every spectator. The School House swell cast a glance of indignation round him. It was inexplicable that all the stray dogs in Rylcombe should take a sudden fancy for following him about, but it was rude and heartless of the people to regard it as a matter of merriment. It was really most annoying.

"Weally, this is absolutely exaspewatin'!" murmured the distressed swell of St. Jim's. "And the smell of those wotten kippahs seems to be clingin' to me all the beastly time. I suppose I caught a whiff of it, and it won't come off, and that's why those beastly dogs are followin' me. It is weally exaspewatin'! Gerrooff-f, you brute."

Another cur had made a snap at the jacket behind.

D'Arcy was growing alarmed.

The village policeman came round a corner, attracted by the uproar of snapping and yapping and snarling. Mr. Flump had a most important look upon his face. Nothing had ever happened at Rylcombe, and Mr. Flump's office was a sinecure; but at the same time he had a very great idea of the majesty of the law. A dog fight in the village street was an occasion when Mr. Flump came out really strong.

"'Ere, wot's all this 'ere?" he exclaimed. "Wot's—ow—my word!"

He had caught the scent of the kipper.

He staggered back, and dragged out a huge handkerchief and clapped it to his nose.

"My—my word!" he gasped.

Arthur Augustus breathed a sigh of relief as he saw the policeman. The representative of the law ought to be able to rescue him from his distressing predicament.

"Pway, my good man——"

"Keep off!" exclaimed Mr. Flump in alarm. "Don't you come near me, young man!"

"Weally, Mr. Flump——"

"Keep off! You 'ear me?"

Arthur Augustus stopped, and stared at the policeman in blank amazement. The dogs gathered round, sniffing and yapping.

"Mr. Flump, I am bein' most extwemely annoyed by these stway curs, and I call upon you to disperse them——"

"Don't you come near me!"

"I am afwaid you are dwunk, Mr. Flump."

Mr. Flump turned scarlet.

As a matter of fact he had just turned the corner from the lane behind the Golden Pig, and his moustache was still wet.

"You—you keep off!"

"I insist upon your dispersin' these howwid animals," said D'Arcy, coming nearer to the policeman. "It is your beastly duty, and——"

"Go away!" gurgled Mr. Flump wildly from behind the handkerchief. "Go away!"

"I wefuse to go away."

And D'Arcy came on.

Mr. Flump gasped, and turned tail himself. There was no standing the conversation of that kipper.

"Come back!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus indignantly. "Mr. Flump, you're dwunk, sir. I insist upon your immediately dispersin' these beastly dogs."

But Mr. Flump only dispersed himself.

Arthur Augustus stared after him in amazement. He was quite pale now. The strong scent of the kipper was worrying him very much, and he was astounded that it should cling about him so long.

Bow-wow—y-a-a-a-ap!

"Oh, wun away, you wotten mongwels!" exclaimed D'Arcy, "I shall weally kick you severely if you do not wun away."

The dogs retreated from his brandished foot, but did not go far. They were watching their opportunity.

The sight of Frank Monk sitting upon a rail, and doubled up with laughter, gave D'Arcy another hope of aid. He hurried towards the Grammar School junior.

"I say, Fwank Monk——"

"Here, you keep off! Keep your distance!"

"Weally, Fwank Monk, I——"

"Keep away, I tell you!"

"I want you to help me disperse these wotten mongwels——"

"Keep off! Oh, my Aunt Jemima! Ow!"

Frank Monk slipped backwards off the rail, picked himself up, and dodged away. Arthur Augustus stared at him. The Grammarian kept his distance. One sniff of the kipper was more than enough for him.

"Weally, ewevybody seems to be mad or intoxicated this aftahnoon," murmured D'Arcy. "Ah, here is Figgins! Figgins has nevah weally tweated me with wupwah respect, but I am sure he will lend me a helpin' hand undah the cires."

Figgins and Kerr were coming down the street from the veterinary surgeon's cottage. They had left the injured dog there to be cared for. Arthur Augustus hurried towards them, and the New House juniors put their hands to their noses.

"I say, Figgins, deah boy——"

"Keep off!"

"What do you mean?"

"Keep off! 'Ow! Keep away!"

CHAPTER 12.

The Terrible Three on the Track.

"Kerr! I say, Kerr——"

"Travel!" yelled Kerr. "What do you mean by coming near us with that scent? Get away! Go and boil yourself! Travel! Bunk! Scoot! Ow!"

"Weally, Kerr——"

But Figgins and Kerr did not stay to listen. They scudded off, and Arthur Augustus was left in a greater state of astonishment than ever. The number of the curs following him had increased. It seemed as if not only Rylcombe, but half Sussex, had produced all its available stray dogs for the occasion. And there were some cats now joining in the procession and eyeing the dangling kipper hungrily. D'Arcy swept round his foot and cleared the animals back. He was beginning to lose his head now, between the terrible smell of the kipper and the worry of the persecution. But still he had not the slightest suspicion of the facts. The kipper weighed little, and was well out of sight behind his back.

"Bai Jove! This is weally howwid and intolewable," muttered D'Arcy. "I—I think I had bettah wun for it."

He quickened his pace. There was a general yapping from the dogs, and they started in pursuit. Fatty Wynn was standing in the doorway of the tuckshop, and he stared out at the swell of St. Jim's in amazement.

"Hallo, Gussy! What's the row? Are you stealing those dogs?"

"Weally, Wynn, I don't know what the wow is. I—I—— What's the mattah with you, deah boy? Wynn—Fatty Wynn!"

But Fatty Wynn did not answer. He had suddenly caught a whiff of that kipper on the breeze, and it did not agree with the pork pies, sausage rolls, ham sandwiches, jam pudding, currant cake, buns, tarts, and cream puffs he had been eating. He bolted into the tuckshop, slammed the door, and set his foot against it. D'Arcy looked in at him through the glass.

"Pway open the door, Wynn, deah boy."

"Can't! Sha'n't! Go away!"

"But I want to come in, to get away fwom these feahful beasts."

"Go away!"

"I want to come in, deah boy."

"Go away!"

Fatty Wynn kept his foot jammed against the door, and there was no opening it. A dog made a spring at D'Arcy's back, and retreated with a mouthful of the kipper. There was a more terrible yapping and snapping than ever. Arthur Augustus felt that his head was turning round. Heartlessly refused refuge by Fatty, he turned from the tuckshop, and broke into a run. The dogs set up a furious chorus and broke into a run too. A yell of laughter followed D'Arcy from the village street. But he was past caring for that now. He dashed on, quickening his pace as he ran, and left the village, and scudded along the country road towards St. Jim's. With bark on bark, yap on yap, the stray dogs of Rylcombe swarmed in pursuit. D'Arcy's alarm increased at every step.

"Bai Jove! Suppose some of them have hydrowphobia," he murmured. "I—I think they must be mad. Eweybody in Wylcombe seems to be mad this aftahnoon. And—and how stwange it is that the smell of that howwid fish should be still hangin' about me! I didn't touch any of that dweadful man's dweadful kippers, and yet I seem to smell of them as stwongly as his bawwow did, or stwongah."

Yap, yap, yap! Bow-wow-wow!

D'Arcy dashed on. There was a sharper and louder growl from the hedge beside the road, and a big bulldog, with three juniors dragging on his chain, came bolting out. The juniors were trying to stop him, but there was no stopping the bulldog now. He had scented the kipper.

"It's Gussy! Hold on——"

"Blake, deah boy——"

"Herries, hold in that beast!"

"I—I can't!"

Gr-r-r-r!

Towser leaped straight at D'Arcy. But he did not seize the swell of St. Jim's. He spied the kipper, and tore it away, and retreated, growling over it, to the other side of the road. D'Arcy reeled against a tree breathless. He hardly understood what had happened, but he realised that he was saved from the dogs now. They had transferred their kind attentions to Towser, and were snapping and yapping and barking and howling round him. But Towser showed a terrible set of teeth over the kipper, and the stray dogs of Rylcombe showed those teeth great respect. They yapped in a circle round the bulldog, looking for fragments from his repast.

"Bai Jove!" gasped D'Arcy.

Blake burst in to a roar.

"Ha, ha, ha! The end of the trail again, Herries!"

"Oh, rats!" growled Herries.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"GREAT Scott!"

Tom Merry uttered an exclamation.

His eyes were blazing with excitement as he bent down on the grassy bank of the Ryll, and Manners and Lowther were at his side in a moment.

The Terrible Three had been strolling quietly along the river, discussing the case they had taken up, when Tom Merry had suddenly halted with that exclamation.

"Look here!"

It was a lonely part of the river-bank. Far away behind the chums of the Shell was the school boathouse. Round them were thick old trees, all along on the left extending the wood which, on its other side, bordered the Rylcombe Road. The river ran under overhanging branches, and here the ground was soft and grassy, and easily held tracks. And in the soft turf by the river Tom Merry was scanning the prints of two pairs of boots.

"Someone's been here," remarked Manners.

"The burglars of the chapel," said Tom Merry quietly.

"H'm!" said Monty Lowther.

"It's a fact, Monty. I'd know those tracks again anywhere. See! Here are those made by the smaller man—the chap who dropped out of the chapel window. You notice how the right heel goes deeper than the left, the same as in the tracks we found under the chapel window."

"My hat! You're right, Tom," said Lowther, getting a little excited. "I suppose that shows that the chap's got a club-foot or something, and we can trace him——"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"More likely he's got an old pair of boots, and one is worn more than the other," he said. "If he's a tramp, that's very likely. He's got a good heel on the right boot, and a worn-down one on the other—nearly on his uppers. Perhaps an odd pair of boots! Look at the larger track, too. The measurements are exact."

Tom Merry brought out the pocket-rule and measured the footprints, and compared the result with the notes in his pocket-book.

The tally was exact!

The chums of the Shell were excited now. There was no doubt that they had hit on the tracks of the burglars of the previous night, and the fact that the tracks were there was a proof of many things.

"It shows that they are still in the neighbourhood," Manners remarked.

"Very likely a couple of rough characters belonging to Rylcombe," suggested Lowther.

"More likely a couple of tramps in the vicinity for a time," Tom Merry said quietly. "These are pretty fresh tracks. Notice how the grass is bent here. You see, some of the crushed stalks are already straightening up again."

"Talk about Sherlock Holmes!"

"Well, it's a fact, isn't it? Ferrers Locke showed me how to use my eyes," said Tom Merry modestly. "The rascals didn't come along here after the robbery. They have been along here lately—perhaps only half an hour ago, perhaps less than that."

"By Jove!"

Manners and Lowther looked round quickly. Lowther took a grip on his stick, and Manners on his camera. But there was nothing to be seen of the enemy. Manners, the amateur photographer of the Merry Hobby Club, opened the leather case in which he carried his hand camera slung over his shoulder, and took out the folding camera.

"I'd better take a snap of these footprints," he said.

Tom Merry grinned.

"Certainly! It will serve as a souvenir, anyway."

"Lots of things are discovered from photographs in the detective line," said Manners warmly. "This snapshot may come in awfully useful in identifying the rascals. I'll take a couple of snaps, one of each pair of hoofs."

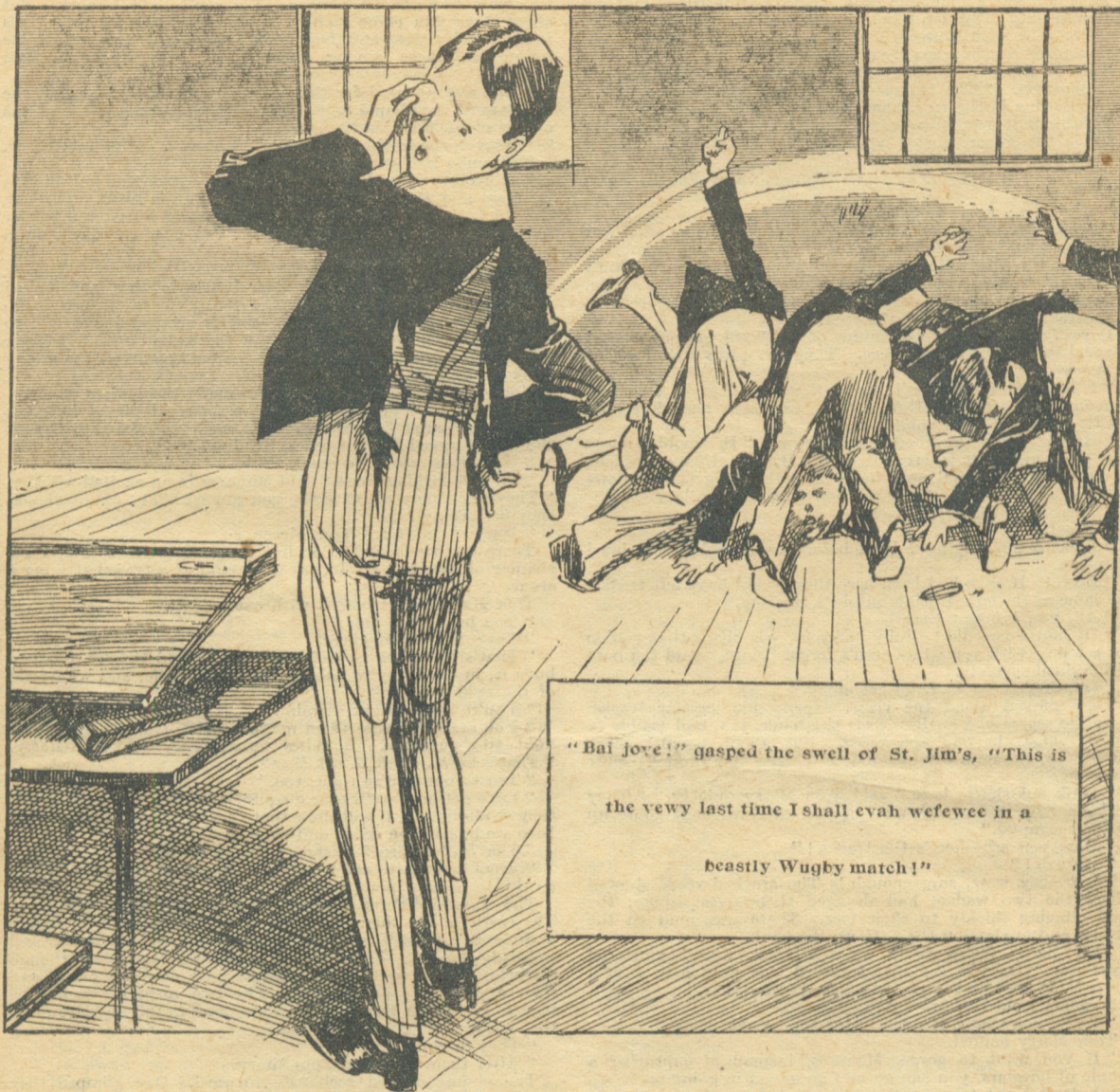
"You'll jolly soon get your camera full up," remarked Lowther, "and you won't have any room left for the burglars when we collar them."

"That's all right. I've got twelve films in, and I've only used two so far, to snap the footprints outside the chapel. This will leave eight."

And Manners snapshotted the footprints. Meanwhile, Tom Merry was making a further examination. It was only in the soft, damp turf near the river that the footprints were distinct. But there were fainter traces further back from the bank. The toes were pointed towards the water, and it was pretty clear that the two unknown men had come out of the wood, and gained the river bank, and it looked, from the traces they had left, as if they had been running at the time. But the trail ended up on the bank, and Tom Merry was somewhat puzzled.

"Can't make it out?" asked Lowther, noticing the thoughtful wrinkle upon his leader's brow. "What's worrying you?"

"These tracks. You see that they come out of the wood?"



"Bai jove!" gasped the swell of St. Jim's, "This is the vewy last time I shall evah wefewce in a beasty Wugby match!"

"No doubt about that."
 "They keep on right down to the water. You can see here that the fellows went into the rushes. The rushes are snapped down here, just where the footprints end on the bank."
 "That's so," admitted Lowther. "Looks queer, though. I suppose they didn't come down here for a swim with their clothes on."
 "It's curious, though. The footsteps come right down to the water, and there's no trace of them having turned back."
 It was amazing, but it was true. Manners closed his camera and joined in the scanning of the rushes. It was plain enough to all three that the unknown men had come through the wood to the river, gone straight down the bank through the rushes, and had not turned back. Tom Merry cast a glance out over the shining, rippling river. Those quietly flowing waters could have told a tale.
 "Curious," said Lowther again. "What could they want to go into the water for? They must have gone into it."
 "It's pretty clear they did."
 "I say," said Manners, turning rather pale. "Is it possible that—that—"
 He paused, and his chums looked at him inquiringly.
 "Is what possible?" asked Tom Merry. "What are you driving at?"
 "Well, is it possible—that they found we were on the track, and—and — I say, that would be horrible."
 Tom Merry shook his head decidedly.
 "My dear kid, we are A 1, first-class, non-skidding successes

in the detective line, but I really don't think we're terrifying enough to make a couple of burglars go and commit suicide all of a sudden," he said.
 "Well, it crossed my mind. What did they go into the water for?"
 "Blessed if I know," said Tom Merry, utterly mystified. "They can't have wanted to wash themselves, and besides, if they had bathed we should see some trace of their having taken their clothes off. They didn't even stop to remove their boots. They would have sat down to do it, and there would be traces where the grass was crushed. They went into the water with their boots on."
 "I don't get on to it at all," said Lowther. "If they were runaway niggers in a story, escaping from a bloodhound, they would naturally take to the water; but tramps in this country never get near clean water if they can help it!"
 Tom Merry gave a jump.
 "My only pyjama hat! You've hit it."
 "I've hit what?"
 "What they went into the river for!" exclaimed Tom Merry excitedly.
 "Eh? You don't mean to say that someone was stalking them with a giddy blghound," grinned Lowther.
 "What price Blake & Co. with Towser?"
 Manners and Lowther jumped, too.
 "My hat!" said Monty, after a pause. "There may be something in it. I won't admit for the decimal fraction of a second that that fat-headed dog Towser could get on the track

of anything but a hambone or a bloater. But Blake and his gang went into the wood, I know—Reilly said he saw them going over the stile with Towser, some time back. They may have happened on our burglars by accident."

"That's the only way Towser would ever get on the track," said Manners. "The tramps—if they are tramps—may have been snoozing in the wood, and Towser woke them up."

"But in that case, where's Blake now?" said Lowther, looking towards the green, dusky depths of the wood. "He ought to be here with Towser."

"Oh, they'd lose the track, of course, those Fourth Form kids."

"Well, yes; come to think of it, they would."

"All the same, the two tramps, or cracksmen, or whatever they are, would be awfully alarmed at finding themselves being hunted down with a dog," said Tom Merry. "They wouldn't know that Towser couldn't track a bunny rabbit for toffee. They'd think he was on the trail, and they'd naturally take to the water to throw him off the scent."

It really looked as if the chums of the Shell had discovered the real solution of the mystery. They felt quite certain about it, anyway.

"I suppose they didn't swim the river," said Lowther, glancing out over the Ryll, which was wide and deep and swiftly-flowing at this point.

"Rather not!" grinned Tom Merry. "It would take a jolly good swimmer to cross it here. Besides, there would be no need. They would only have to wade along the shallows for a little distance to throw the dog off the track."

"Then if we follow the bank—"

"Exactly."

"Blake & Co. may have been before us, though," exclaimed Manners.

"Bosh! If they had been here they would have left tracks, the same as the enterprising burglars, my boy."

"Ah, yes, I forgot that."

"Of course you did! Jolly lucky for you chaps that you've got a fellow with you who doesn't forget things," said the hero of the Shell severely.

"Oh, don't crow! Let's get along."

They moved along the river, eagerly looking for tracks. Here the water was shallow near the bank, the mud visible in yellow ridges beyond the reeds. But about twenty yards further up, the mud disappeared, and the water ran deep over a hollow.

"Look out sharp, here," said Tom Merry quickly. "They couldn't have gone further on in the water without going up to their armpits."

"Here you are—here's the tracks!"

"Hurrah!"

There they were, sure enough! The crushed reeds showed where the two waders had dragged themselves ashore, the mud clinging thickly to their feet. There was mud on the rushes, and in clots on the path up the bank.

"My hat! We're fairly on the track now," muttered Lowther. "Do you see that some of this mud here is still moist? It isn't long since they were in the water."

Manners looked at his watch.

"I say, you chaps, it's nearly tea-time at St. Jim's."

Tom Merry sniffed.

"If you want to gorge, Manners, instead of capturing a couple of burglars, you can go and gorge. I'm going on."

"I don't want to go and gorge. I just mentioned that it was tea-time."

"Well, don't mention it again, old chap. Come on!"

"I've got some toffee in my pocket," said Lowther. "If you're perishing, Manners, you can have some of that."

"I'm not perishing," growled Manners. "Can't a chap open his mouth without having a couple of silly asses jump down his throat?"

"If you're going to keep on grumbling, you'd better have the toffee."

"Who's grumbling?"

"You are!"

"Look here, Monty Lowther—"

"Peace, my children," said Tom Merry. "Is this a time for dogs to bark and bite, and the angry passions to rise, when we are close on the track of two burglars? Peace! Let there be peace, you asses!"

"Oh, all right; only if Manners is so fearfully hungry—"

"I'm not fearfully hungry."

"Why don't you have the toffee?"

"Blow the toffee!"

"Well, I'm getting peckish myself," said Lowther blandly.

"I'll have some, I think."

And he took a packet of toffee from his pocket, and commenced on a chunk. Manners eyed it rather hungrily, and Lowther held out the packet.

"Have some, old chap? It's good!"

And Manners grinned, and took a chunk.

"Have some toffee, Tom?"

"Well, I don't mind if I do. If we're going to have a scrap,

we don't want to be hungry. We can't fight hungry. But chew it as you come along; there's no time to lose. This mud is quite wet, and I shouldn't wonder if the rotters are hiding anywhere among those trees. Keep your peepers open!"

There was no need for that warning. The thought that the burglars of the chapel might be within a dozen paces kept the chums of the Shell on the alert.

"There's the bridge," remarked Manners a few minutes later. Rylcombe Bridge rose before their view.

The bridge was high above the sloping banks, and half hidden by trees and thickets from the chums of the Shell. Through the thickets Tom Merry caught a glimpse of a battered bowler hat, and the next moment of a fur cap near it. He drew a quick breath.

"There they are!"

The Terrible Three halted, their hearts beating, and looked at one another. In the thickets, close by the brickwork of the bridge, two men were lurking—and it seemed impossible to doubt that they were the two whose tracks had been left under the chapel window of St. Jim's, and found again on the grassy bank of the Ryll.

Yet—the possibility of a mistake made the juniors pause. "It would be no joke to pounce on a couple of innocent chaps," muttered Tom Merry. "It would make a row, and we should get gayed if it got out at St. Jim's."

"But—there can't be much doubt."

"They're lurking there," said Manners in an excited whisper. "They're keeping out of sight, you can see that! Why should they be lurking?"

"Hark!" muttered Tom Merry.

There was the sound of a clink from the thickets under the shadow of the bridge. It was the sound of a trowel striking a stone.

Tom Merry's eyes blazed with excitement.

"You hear that, kids?"

"Yes; they're digging."

"That's it. They've stolen something and they're going to bury it, in case they're nabbed, to keep it safe, and to get rid of the evidence."

"You're right—right as rain!"

"You see, it's made them nervous being tracked by a bulldog, and they want to get rid of the evidence," said Tom Merry.

"That's how I work it out."

"Ten to one you're right, too."

"Let's get on; we'll take a squint at their boots first, and if they're all muddy, it will show that they're the two men who've been wading in the river, and that—"

"That will be proof enough, I should think."

"Proof enough to collar them on, I should imagine. Come on, kids. Follow your uncle!"

The Terrible Three grasped their sticks and hurried on. The rustle of the thickets as they pushed through was plainly audible in the still afternoon, and the sound of the trowel suddenly ceased. There was a stamping sound, as though disturbed earth were being crushed back into its place, and then a crash of the thickets. The two men, of whom the trailers had so far seen only the hats, were in full flight towards the wood.

"They're running!"

"After them!" yelled Tom Merry.

The chums dashed recklessly forward. One glimpse they caught of their quarry, and they saw a burly man in a bowler hat, and a slighter one in a fur cap. Both had boots that squelched as they ran, and left a track of wet mud on the grass.

"Run for it, Snipey!"

"Come on, Dodger!"

Tom Merry heard the panting words from the trees. He dashed on, but the thick wood had swallowed up the fugitives, and the rustle of the thickets died away in silence.

CHAPTER 13.

Skimpole Knows!

"BAI Jove, deah boys, I feel absolutely exhausted, you know!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gasped out the words. Blake, Herries, and Digby were yelling with laughter, and Towser was finishing the kipper. The stray dogs from Rylcombe watched, like Lazarus, for the crumbs from the rich man's table, but Towser did not leave a crumb. He seemed to like his kippers ripe.

Gr-r-r-r! was the only remark Towser made when the stray dogs came too near. He finished, and the others, with yelps and snarls enough, trotted away disappointed. Towser sat in the grass and licked his chops. A fine flavour of kipper seemed to hang about the bulldog, but apparently he did not mind it.

"Simply exhausted, bai Jove!" said D'Arcy, jamming his monocle into his eye and surveying the chums of Study No. 6 with a disdainful glance. "And I weally wegard it as wathah

had form for you wottahs to be cacklin' away like a lot of geese when I have been tweated with uttah diswespect."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wegard you as a set of beastly boundahs."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus turned away with a sniff. He looked for a soft spot on the grassy bank beside the road to sit down upon. Blake and his chums yelled again and again. The adventure of the kipper seemed too funny for anything.

"Oh, my only hat!" gasped Blake. "Fancy Gussy buying a kipper in such a really ripe and tasty state——"

"I didn't buy it——"

"And carrying it home tied to his jacket so that it couldn't get away——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Herries and Dig.

"I wasn't carrying it home——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I have been the victim of a practical joke," said Arthur Augustus with dignity. "It must have been Fwank Monk who fastened that wotten kippah to me. The wottah was near me when the beast came by with his bawwow, and he pushed against me vevy wuffly fwom behind. He must have fastened on that feahful kippah then, though I weally don't know how he fixed it on. My jacket must be stained with the howwid thing. I shall give Fwank Monk a feahful thwashin' when I see him again."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus sank down on the grassy bank, and reposed there gracefully for about a millionth part of a second—and then he leaped to his feet with a fendish yell.

"Hallo! What's the matter?"

"Ow! Oh! Oh! Ow!"

"Mad!" said Digby, shaking his head solemnly. "The scent of the kipper has done it!"

"Or else it is grief at the loss of the kipper," said Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha! Naughty Towser."

"Ow! wow! wowowow!"

D'Arcy certainly did look as if he had taken leave of his senses. He was dancing in the road, with both hands clasped behind him just under the end of his Eton jacket. His face expressed terrific anguish.

"Ow! Ow! Ow! Bai Jove, you know! Ow! Ow!"

"What's the matter?"

"Ow! I—I've sat upon somethin'—ow-owow!—somethin' sharp!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ow! ow! It's still stickin' into me," wailed D'Arcy.

"Pway see if you can find it, deah boys, I am suffewin' untold howwid anguish."

"Shift round, then. Ha, ha, ha! It's a fish-hook."

"Ow! ow! ow!"

Blake drew the hook away, and D'Arcy yelled again, and wriggled with great discomfort. The chums of the Fourth were yelling, too, but with merriment.

"That wottah must have fastened the beastly kippah to me with a beastly fish-hook!" gasped D'Arcy. "I will give him a feahful thwashin' for this astoundin' impertinence."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, pway dwy up, you cacklin' asses!"

"My hat," said Blake, almost weeping. "I've got an ache in my inwards, and a pain in the ribs. Gussy will be the death of me some day, I feel that."

"There is nothin' watevah to laugh at."

"Ha, ha! Gussy hasn't got on the scent, but the scent has got on Gussy. Ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus did not sit down again. He did not feel at all inclined to sit down again yet. He took off his jacket, and looked mournfully at the stains the kipper had made on the cloth.

"I shall nevah, nevah get this cleaned," he said. "Bai Jove, I shall give Fwank Monk a thwashin'! The thing still smells feahfully."

"You might take it a little farther away, if you don't mind, Gussy."

"Weally, Blake——"

"Better bury it," said Digby. "Bury it before it walks away."

"Weally, Dig——"

"You must do something with it," said Herries. "Towser will never pick up the track of the burglars so long as that riff is hanging round. It's an awful nuisance that D'Arcy had to come this way with his kipper."

"It wasn't my kippah——"

"We should probably have had the burglars by this time. I rather think they made towards the river," said Herries thoughtfully. "You remember that Towser turned quite suddenly and made for the road. We thought he was close upon them, but as a matter of fact, it must have been this beastly kipper he scented."

"You ought to have wrapped it up, Gussy," said Blake.

"You oughtn't to carry a kipper like that along a public road."

"I have already explained to you that——"

"Still, it's lucky Towser killed it again before you got it to the school. We should have had to bar it in Study No. 8."

"I wepeat that I have already——"

"If Towser is strong enough to move, after the kipper, Herries, we may as well get on the track again," said Blake.

"Unless you fellows would rather get home to tea."

"I'm not going home to tea," said Herries. "It isn't often I get a chance to show what Towser can really do, and I'm not going to miss this one. Besides, Tom Merry is on the trail, too, and we're not going to be done by those Shell bounders."

"Not much," said Digby. "I'm surprised at you, Blake."

"Oh, rats!" said Blake. "I'm willing to keep on if you are."

I only hope we sha'n't track down any more terriers or mongrels or kippers, that's all. Are you coming, Gussy?"

"I should be very pleased to do so, deah boy, but I must return to St. Jim's first to change my jacket. If you like to wait half an hour for me——"

"Make it half a minute."

"I am afraid that would be wathah imposs. Blake."

"Then we won't wait, thanks. Cut off."

Arthur Augustus went up the road to the school. A youth with a bumpy forehead and an enormous pair of spectacles passed him. It was Skimpole. The brainy man of the Shell had his eyes fixed on the ground, and did not see D'Arcy. He came straight on towards Blake & Co., and did not see them either, being buried deep in reflection. He did not see Towser till he ran into him, and a terrific growl made him jump clear of the ground.

"Oh! Dear me! Oh! Wh-wha-what was that?" gasped Skimpole.

"What are you running into my bulldog for?" demanded Herries. "Are you looking for a bite?"

"Certainly not, Herries. Please hold that bulldog securely. I do not like his looks."

"He doesn't seem to like yours," grinned Blake. Towser was eyeing Skimpole very suspiciously, and growling in a low tone. But for Herries' grip on the chain he would probably have sampled the amateur Socialist's skinny calves.

"I am rather glad to have met you, Blake," said Skimpole, keeping a nervous eye on the bulldog. "I should be glad of your assistance in arresting the burglar."

"Have you found him again?"

"Yes. Upon further investigation I decided that my theory was not wholly correct, and that Mr. Lathom was innocent."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It is no laughing matter, Blake, the clearing of a respectable Form master's name from a serious charge," said Skimpole reprovingly. "It might have meant penal servitude for Mr. Lathom if——"

"Oh, choke him, somebody!"

"I wish you would listen to me. I found an opportunity of searching Mr. Lathom's room, but there was no trace of the chalice or the stolen will—I mean, the cash. But while I was engaged in the search Kildare came in."

"My hat! Where did you get it?"

"Get what?"

"The licking."

"Oh! Kildare came in to see Mr. Lathom, and he seemed surprised to see me there. He asked me, quite rudely, to explain how it was I was turning Mr. Lathom's desk out."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"So I had to explain my suspicions. Instead of listening to me patiently he caught hold of me by the collar, boxed my ears, and ejected me from the room with what I cannot but characterize as unnecessary violence."

"No wonder. Still, I'm glad to hear that Lathom's name is cleared," said Blake. "I suppose you're on the track of somebody else now, aren't you? Taggles, the porter; or the Head, or our housemaster?"

"I should not hesitate to suspect either the housemaster or the Head if necessary," said Skimpole. "A detective cannot afford to be a respecter of persons. But as a matter of fact, I have fixed upon a different person, or, rather, persons."

"Oh, you've got your eagle eye on two of them, then?"

"Yes, upon further consideration I think that there were two concerned in the robbery. The extreme violence shown by Kildare pointed indubitably to a guilty conscience——"

"A—a what! Kildare!"

"Yes, certainly. I really wonder that I did not see the truth before, with my vast abilities as a detective. You see, Kildare, as captain of St. Jim's, can go out when he likes, and can leave the house at any time in the night if he chooses, without anyone noticing. He is negotiating for the purchase of a new set of goalposts for the senior football club, and they cost money; and I've heard that he's going to make a present of them to the club. Just after he licked me I heard him talking to Monteith in the quad, and he mentioned my name. They both looked towards me and laughed."

"Nothing surprising in that, surely?"

"It was evidently effrontery, a bold attempt to cover up

their uneasiness. It did not take me long to conclude that they were partners in guilt. You know Monteith never has borne a very good character."

"Oh, rats! He wasn't a nice individual once, I know," said Blake; "but he's all right now. He's turned over a new leaf, and he chums up with Kildare."

"They are evidently confederates——"

"You howling idiot!"

"Now, as Kildare knows I am on the track," went on Skimpole, unheeding, "I guessed that he would try to get the plunder away from St. Jim's as soon as possible. That is what has actually happened. They left the school, and I shadowed them——"

"Lucky they didn't see you!"

"I think they must have seen me, for they disappeared all of a sudden when I had turned a corner. I suppose they went into the wood, and, of course, that was to bury the plunder or hide it in a hollow tree."

"You shrieking dummy."

"Now, I want you fellows to back me up. We can rush upon them in possession of the loot, and that will be good enough. We shall be four against two, and though they are seniors I think we might——"

"You want us to help you?"

"Yes. You see——"

"Well, we'll do the best we can for you," said Blake, with a wink at his chums. "Let's do our best for Skimmy, you chaps."

"Certainly," said Herries and Dig together.

"Thank you very much," said Skimpole. "I am quite willing to share with you the glory of having seized the robbers and compelled them to disgorge the—ow—what are you doing—really—ow! Dear me!"

Skimpole suddenly found himself sitting in the grass, with his hat over his eyes. He gasped in amazement, and pulled it off, and blinked round again. The chums of Study No. 6 had disappeared in the wood, and Towser's bark was dying away among the trees.

"Dear me," murmured Skimpole, "that was—really—well. I cannot but consider it as rude. I feel quite upset! Dear me!"

CHAPTER 14. A Trifling Mistake.

"G R-R-R-R-R!"

"Hold on," muttered Blake, "Towser can hear somebody! Hold on, Herries."

Herries dragged on the chain. Towser was growling in a low tone, and the chums knew by this time that it was a sign that he was on the track of something or somebody. It might be a terrier or a mongrel or a kipper, as Blake remarked, but it was certainly something or other.

The low growl died away, and Towser pushed on through the wood with open jaws. The chums of the Fourth followed him eagerly.

"He's got the scent again," muttered Herries. "I was pretty certain that he wouldn't lose it for long, you know. Towser is too keen for that."

Jack Blake grunted. He had a strong suspicion that Towser had not been on the track of the burglars at all, that the terrier, the mongrel, and the kipper had in turn attracted him, and that he was quite innocent of having followed any scent from the footprints under the chapel window. But he had not the heart to say so, in the face of Herries' touching faith in his favourite.

"I can hear somebody," muttered Digby. "Hark!"

There was a crash in the thicket.

"There they are!"

"Collar them!"

"Hold that beast in, Herries," yelled Blake; "it's Tom Merry!"

Three forms came charging through the wood with brandished sticks, and stopped suddenly at the sight of Blake & Co. and Towser.

"Hold on, kids!"

"It's not them!"

"It's us," said Blake. "Keep that beast quiet, Herries."

"I don't see why he shouldn't growl if he wants to," said Herries. "It does dogs good to growl. You can't say it's unpleasant to listen to."

"It sets my teeth on edge."

"Oh, blow your teeth!"

"What are the kids doing here?" demanded Tom Merry. "We thought——"

"Who are you calling kids?" demanded Blake aggressively.

"That won't do, Blake," said Manners, with a shake of the head. "You should say 'whom are you calling——'"

"Oh, ring off! What are you Shell-fish doing here, getting in the way of fellows who are tracking down burglars?"

"Have you seen them?" exclaimed Tom Merry excitedly.

"Seen who—whom?"

"The two rascals we're looking for—a fellow in a bowler hat and one in a fur cap, with muddy boots, and chivvies like Bill Sikes."

"What do you know about them?" asked Blake.

"Have you seen them?"

"Yes, more than an hour ago, in the wood—two rotters answering to that description."

"My bulldog tracked them from the school," said Herries. "He followed their scent from St. Jim's to the wood."

"Rats!" said Blake. "Towser smelled out a little mongrel beast they had with them, and went for him, and ever since then Herries maintains that they were the burglars. Of course, they might have been. It would be two rotters about their sort."

"I don't know about Towser following the trail," remarked Tom Merry; "but——"

"I do," interjected Herries.

"You do what?"

"Know about Towser following the trail. My dog could follow a trail with his eyes shut. He's a terror at following a——"

"Kipper!" said Digby.

"Oh, if you're going to be funny——"

"Well," said Tom Merry, "whether Towser trailed them or didn't trail them, they're the enterprising burglars."

"What on earth do you know about it?" demanded Blake.

"We've tracked them down."

"Tracked down your giddy grandmother!"

"Fact, my boy. We've worked it out, and they dodged us in the wood, or we should have had them. When we heard you we thought we had them again."

Blake chuckled.

"And when we heard you we thought we had them," he remarked.

"Ha, ha! Look here, suppose we join forces over this? The two rotters are in the wood somewhere, and they're a dangerous pair of beasts to judge by their looks."

"Well, you see, there's only two of them," said Blake doubtfully; "that would be only a third of a burglar each for the six of us."

"I don't see why we should give our burglars away," said Digby.

"Oh, suit yourself! We'll go on our lonesome. I dare say we shall manage better without you Fourth Form kids!"

"Not much doubt about that," Monty Lowther remarked.

"Look here, you Shell-fish ought to clear off, and leave us a clear field. Those burglars belong to us by rights."

"Rats! We've tracked them down."

"We spotted them first," said Blake hotly.

"Yes; but you didn't know they were burglars, you said so yourself."

"Oh, I did," said Herries; "I knew it. I knew that my dog Towser——"

"Oh, fry your dog Towser!" said Blake crossly. "Fact is, we don't know that they're the burglars now, and we're not going to take the word of a Shell-fish for it."

"Oh, don't be an ass!" said Tom Merry, with unflinching good humour. "I'll tell you how we've worked it out if you like."

"Well, go ahead."

Tom Merry explained how the tracking had been done on the river-bank. The Fourth Form chums listened with great interest, especially Herries. The fact that the two rascals had taken to the water was a tribute to the tracking powers of his dog Towser, and disposed him to agree with Tom Merry in every point of the story.

"Well, that sounds pretty plausible," said Jack Blake, with a nod. "If I had been in your place I should have crept up quietly and pounced on them."

"If you had been in our place you'd have mucked up the whole business," remarked Monty Lowther, with a sniff.

"As you've done," grinned Digby.

"Oh, don't argue!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "I never met such kids for arguing."

"Who—whom are you calling kids?"

"Never mind that. Shall we join—allies or rivals? More chance of catching the thieves if we go Co."

"There's something in that, but——"

There was a rustle in the thickets, and Towser started and showed his teeth. The juniors looked eager and alert. Blake nudged Tom Merry.

"It's all right—we'll go Co. Stand together."

"Right you are. I expect that's the burglars."

"That's what I was thinking."

"Come on, then."

The six juniors plunged through the thickets, Herries leading the way with Towser. There was a sudden shout from the thick foliage.

"Keep that rotten beast off!"

"Figgins!" ejaculated Tom Merry.

Figgins it was—and the Co. with him. The six hunters

burst into an open glade, and stopped as they found themselves face to face with the New House trio.

Jack Blake gave a grunt of disappointment.

"Hang it all, Figgins, this is the second time!"

"What's the second time?" asked Figgins, in astonishment.

"The second time we've found a silly ass when we were looking for a burglar. The first time we ran into Tom Merry."

Figgins chuckled.

"Still looking for the giddy burglar?"

"Yes; and we're on the track. Have you seen anything of the bowler hat and the fur cap?" asked Blake.

Figgins shook his head.

"Not since they tried to rob us. I say, I've taken that little mongrel to the vet. in Rylcombe, and he says it will be all right in a day or two. He's going to cure it and send it up to the school."

"Good. I'm more concerned for its master now, though. We're really on the track—no gammon."

"Honest Injun?" asked Figgins suspiciously.

"Yes; honest Injun. Tom Merry has tracked the rotters, and proved beyond a doubt that they are the fellows who robbed the chapel."

"That was pretty clear from the start," said Herries. "My dog Towser was not likely to run down the wrong persons."

"How do you make it out, though?" asked Figgins, who had lingering doubts—not of Blake's assurance, but of the accuracy of his information.

"Tell the giddy Doubting Thomas about it, Merry."

Tom Merry detailed his proofs. Figgins & Co. were convinced; and, indeed, it was hardly possible to entertain any doubt upon the matter. The difficulty was to find the two rascals in the tangled depths of the wood.

"It's all right," said Figgins. "It's pretty clear—if we can find them."

"We shall be able to do all that. My dog Towser——"

"Give the beastie a chance," said Kerr. "We may as well stick together over this. If there's a crowd of us, the rotters are not so likely to show fight, and it would be no joke to get a crack on the head from a jemmy, you know."

"Right enough; come on."

"Come on, Fatty; what are you looking so thoughtful about—any idea of getting hold of the burglars?" asked Kerr.

"The burglars! Oh, no; I wasn't thinking of them. Do you know, Kerr——"

"What is it? Buck up!" said Kerr, impatiently. Tom Merry & Co. were already starting.

"Why, I was just thinking that—do you know what the time is?"

"No, I don't."

"It's half an hour past tea-time."

"Oh, rats!" said Kerr, turning to follow his leader, who was hurrying on with the School House juniors. Fatty Wynn ran after him.

"But I say, Kerr, I'm jolly hungry. I didn't have much in the tuckshop at Rylcombe, only a few pies and puddings and things. And I get so jolly hungry in this September weather."

"Go and eat coke, then!" said Kerr heartlessly.

"Oh, really, you know, old chap——"

But Kerr was not listening. He caught up with Figgins, and Fatty Wynn, with a grunt of discontent, quickened his pace and caught up with him, too. Herries was going ahead with Towser, and it looked as if the dog had scented something again, as he was running on without having to be dragged along.

"I say, Figgins," panted Fatty Wynn. "I suppose you don't happen to have any toffee about you, do you?"

"No," said Figgins.

"Or—or any milk-chocolate, or caramels?"

"Not one—not the ghost of an aniseed-ball," said Figgins cheerfully.

"I—I'm afraid I can't keep up unless I have some refreshment."

"Sit down, then."

"Really, Figgins——"

But Figgins was cutting on, and he did not reply. Fatty Wynn grumbled and kept on. Towser suddenly stopped, and Herries nearly fell over him. Tom Merry threw up his hand to his followers as a signal to halt.

"At last!" he gasped, in a whisper.

"Where are they? Keep that dog quiet, Herries."

"He's quiet enough. My dog never makes a row when it's time to be quiet. In a case like that, you can always depend upon my dog Towser!"

"Cheese it!" muttered Blake. "Did you see something, Merry?"

"Yes, rather!" Tom Merry's eyes were blazing with excitement. "Look there!" He pointed through the trees.

The juniors followed the direction of his finger, and there was a general quick indrawing of breath.

Through the openings of the trees could be seen, partly visible through the bushes, the backs of two individuals sitting on the turf.

They were leaning back against the bushes to rest, and only glimpses could be caught of their backs, and of the rest of them nothing whatever could be seen.

"Jove!" muttered Blake. "We've got 'em. Two of 'em—you see!"

"Not much doubt they're our game!"

"Quiet, there! If we alarm them they may scoot off again."

"Quiet yourself, then."

"Come on!" muttered Tom Merry. "We mustn't give them a chance to bolt this time. Creep up as quietly as you can, and suddenly pounce on them when I give the word."

"When I give the word," said Blake.

"Oh, rats! Come on, and quiet does it."

The juniors of St. Jim's crept forward. They approached as close to the bush against which the two backs were leaning as they could without giving the alarm. Then a bough sagged and creaked as Manners pushed it, and there was a movement visible. Further concealment was useless. With a yell the juniors rushed forward, trampling recklessly through the thicket.

"Collar them!" yelled Tom Merry.

And collar them the juniors did. In a twinkling the two unseen individuals, overwhelmed by a fierce rush, were sprawling on the turf, pinned down by a sprawling heap of juniors.

CHAPTER 15.

Honours Divided.

"WHAT—how—who——"

"Why—who—what!"

"My only hat!" gasped Tom Merry.

He had reason to gasp.

For, as soon as that frantic charge was over, and the juniors had time to look at the two individuals they had rolled on the grass and swarmed over, they discovered that they were not the two ruffians of whom the party were in search.

"Get up!" panted Blake, making the same discovery at the same moment. "It's Monteith!"

"Get up!" gurgled Figgins. "It's Kildare!"

If their prisoners had suddenly turned red-hot, the juniors could not have jumped up more quickly.

Kildare and Monteith, looking startled, breathless, and ruffled, scrambled up.

"You young rascals!" roared the captain of St. Jim's. "Is this one of your little jokes?"

"You young villains!" gasped Monteith, the head prefect of the New House. "I'll teach you to——"

"We're awfully sorry," said Tom Merry, penitently.

"I'll make you sorrier——"

"It was a mistake——"

"That's all very well," said Kildare grimly, "but if a couple of chaps can't take a stroll in a wood, and sit down for a rest and a chat, without having a dozen young monkeys scrambling over them by mistake, it's time somebody was licked. Don't you think so, Monteith?"

The New House prefect nodded.

"Exactly. You take Merry, and I'll take Figgins——"

"Hold on," exclaimed Tom Merry breathlessly. "We're sorry, you know. Besides—you don't know what we took you for."

"I don't care much——"

"We're tracking the burglars."

"You young asses!" said Kildare, laughing. "Did you take us for the burglars?"

"Yes. You see, we could only see your backs, and we knew there were two of them, and——"

"We're on the track, you see," said Blake. "We've got proofs, and we know they're in the woods, and so we——"

Kildare and Monteith exchanged glances.

"Now look here, youngsters. I suppose this is all gas? Do you really know anything about the burglars or not?"

"We do—rather."

"Then explain what it is—you explain, Merry."

In a few minutes Kildare was in possession of all the important discoveries made by the juniors. He looked startled at first, and then satisfied. It was evident that he saw matters with the eyes of the eager burglar-hunters.

"What do you think, Monteith?"

"I think we can let them off their licking," laughed the prefect.

"I think so too. There is something in this. Now answer me carefully, Tom Merry. You say you heard the rascals digging near the bridge?"

"Yes, rather. I guessed at once that they had some loot, and were hiding it in case they should be arrested."

"That's clear enough," assented Blake.

"Clear as daylight," said Figgins.

Kildare smiled.

"Suppose, instead of burying some fresh plunder, my lads, they went there to remove some previously concealed?" he suggested.

"Ah! I—I never thought of that."

"After attempting to rob Figgins and Kerr, and being scared by that hunting with the bulldog, it is more than probable that they made up their minds to cut," said the captain of St. Jim's. "While they were hanging about in the vicinity, they would naturally have hidden the stolen chalice and the cash, in case of arrest. If they had been taken with nothing upon them nothing could have been proved. But if they made up their minds to cut and run, they would naturally return to the hiding-place of the loot, and get it out to take away with them."

Tom Merry's face was a study.

"Well, I suppose you're right, Kildare," he said slowly. "I—I didn't think of that at the time. If we had looked in the place where I heard them digging, I daresay we should have discovered the stuff."

"The swag," said Figgins.

"Well, then, the best thing we can do is to make a straight run for the bank at the bridge, and see if they are there."

"Good! I say, we hadn't thought of all that, and it's jolly lucky we went for you, Kildare, or the rotters would have got away with the loot after all."

"Very likely. Let's get off. You had better tie that dog up, Herries, in case he gives the alarm."


"In—in case he what?" ejaculated Herries.

"In case he gives the alarm to the rotters when we get near them."

"My dog Towser wouldn't give the alarm. He's too jolly keen for that. Why, he——"

"Well, if you can answer for him——"

"Of course I can. Why, it was he who first scented out the burglars, following their track clean from the chapel at St. Jim's to Rylcombe Wood, and——"

THERE IS MONEY FOR YOU ON THE NEXT PAGE 

GRAND FOOTBALL PUZZLE-PICTURE COMPETITION.

 FIFTY POUNDS IN CASH PRIZES.

SPECIMEN PICTURE



APPLEBY.

First Prize—

£13 0 0 ONE POUND A WEEK FOR THIRTEEN WEEKS

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£6 10 0 TEN SHILLINGS A WEEK FOR THIRTEEN WEEKS.

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122 Cash Prizes of 5s. each.

The First Prize will be awarded to the person who gets all or, failing this, most of the pictures right. The Second Prize will go to the reader nearest to the First Prize Winner, and so on. In the event of ties, the Prizes will be divided.

What Competitors have to do.—The Competition is very simple. We are publishing thirteen sets of Puzzle Pictures, each set consisting of six pictures. This is the First Set. Keep this set until you have all the others. Each of these pictures represents the name of a well-known Association Football Player.

All you have to do is to write carefully under each picture the name of the Player you think it represents. Then place the set away until the others have appeared, when the latest day for sending in competitions will be announced. The first prize will be awarded to the person who gets all or, failing this, most of the pictures right. The second prize will go to the reader nearest to the first prize-winner, and so on. In the event of ties, the prizes will be divided—that is to say, if two competitors tie for the first place, the first and second prizes will be divided between them, and so forth. The Editor of the GEM LIBRARY will not be responsible for any loss or delay in transmission or delivery of the lists by post, nor for any accidental loss of a list after delivery. There will be attached to the final list a form to be signed by each competitor, whereby he agrees to these conditions, and no list will be considered unless this form shall have been duly signed by the competitor. No questions will be answered. Read the rules. The Editor's decision is final.

The easiest way to solve the Pictures is to get the issue of THE BOYS' REALM now on sale, price 1d. During the next thirteen weeks THE BOYS' REALM will publish a column of brief biographies of notable footballers, in which will be included all the names of the Players illustrated. Girls may compete. All competitors may get anyone to help them.

"I've very little doubt of it too," said Kildare, smiling. "But don't be downhearted—you've done very well, all of you. If the stolen property is recovered, and the burglars arrested, it will be due to the juniors of St. Jim's—though I think a couple of Sixth-Formers will have a hand in the finish."

"Good," said Tom Merry. "We'll follow your lead if you like to hunt for the rotters——"

"I don't know that it will be necessary to hunt for them," Kildare remarked. "Their encounter with you will probably only make them all the more eager to leave this neighbourhood. Don't you think that, after dodging you in the wood, they probably returned to that lonely spot by the bridge, to recover their plunder and bolt with it?"

Tom Merry jumped.

"Why, of course!" he exclaimed.

"Well, come along," said Kildare. "There's no time to lose now."

They hurried off through the wood. Kildare, who knew every inch of the wood, led the way by the easiest and shortest cut to the bank of the Ryll.

They came in sight of the gleaming waters of the river, bright in the rays of the setting sun, and turned up the bank towards the bridge.

"Quiet now," whispered Kildare.

The spot was very quiet and lonely. The banks here were so rugged and well-wooded that few feet ever trod them. The old stone bridge rose high above, and the branches of the trees completely concealed the bank from the view of anyone looking over the parapet.

(Continued on page 26.)

NEXT THURSDAY:

"D'ARCY'S SECRET."

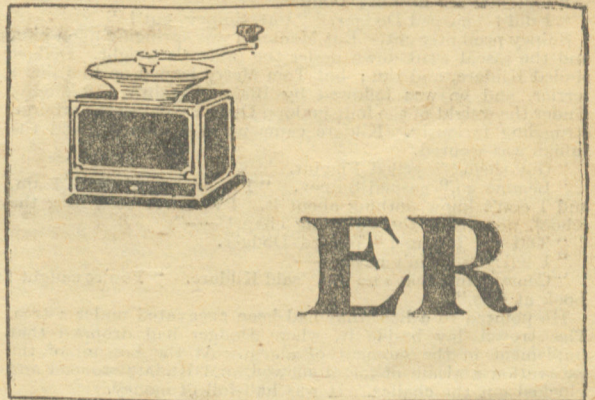
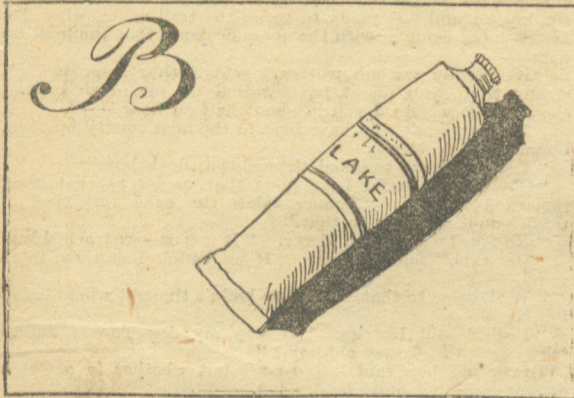
A Tale of Tom Merry & Co
By Martin Clifford.

Pictures Nos. 1 to 12 are Reproduced on Page iii. of the Cover of this Number.

£50 CASH PRIZES FOR READERS OF 'THE GEM' LIBRARY.

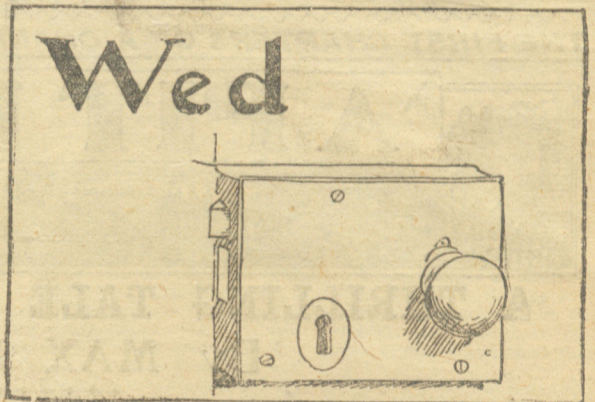
No. 3 Set.

You can start ^{THIS} COMPETITION now.



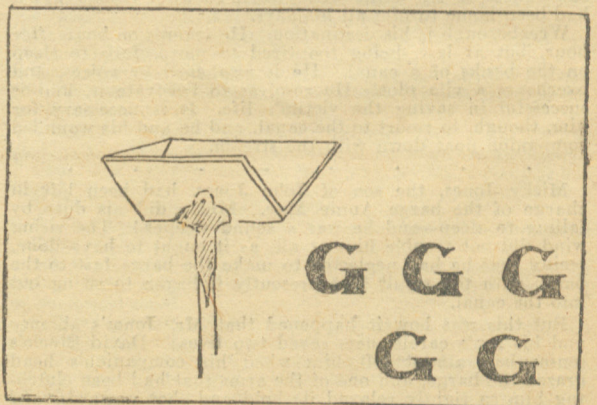
No. 13

No. 14



No. 15

No. 16



No. 17

No. 18

Keep this List by you until you see the notice to send them all in.—Ed.

Towser showed signs of restiveness, but he did not bark. Clink! Clink!
Tom Merry turned to Kildare with a blaze in his eyes. "You heard that?" he whispered. "A trowel on a stone."
The captain of St. Jim's nodded.
"I heard it. They're there."
"We've got 'em," muttered Blake. "My only Aunt Mary Matilda! We've got 'em!"
"Quiet," muttered Kildare. "Separate, so as to surround the spot, and if they cut, jump on them and hold on! There are enough of us to eat them, if it comes to that."
The juniors scattered, creeping through the thickets in a way that recalled to their minds the time when they played Red Indian in Rylcombe Wood. Kildare and Monteith went straight on. There was a sudden husky exclamation under the trees.

"Wot was that, Snipey?"
"I didn't 'ear nothin', Dodger."
"I did!" gasped Dodger. "Cut, Snipey, cut!"
Snipey promptly cut. But Monteith was springing upon him, and the rascal went down under the prefect's weight. Dodger eluded Kildare, and ran; but Tom Merry leaped on him like a terrier, and he was followed by Blake, Figgins, and Digby. Under the weight of the four juniors, Dodger went to the ground, struggling furiously. Kildare came up in a moment, and the ruffian was secured.

"Got them!" yelled Figgins.
"Lemme go," gasped Snipey. "I'm an honest man, I am, and I don't know nothing about it. I've never been near the school, nor inside the blooming chapel—"
"Old yer tongue!" panted Dodger.
"I tell you I ain't never—"
"Come, come, that's no use," said Kildare. "You're caught! Look at this."

He pointed to a hole that had been excavated under a tree. The trowel lay beside it, where Dodger had dropped that implement in the moment of alarm. At the bottom of the excavation a gleam of metal showed, and Kildare stooped and plucked out the chalice. It was half-full of money.

Dodger muttered an oath.
"The game's up!" he said. "Blessed if I know 'ow you did it, though, 'ang yer."
"Simple enough," said Herries genially. "It was my dog

Towser! He's tracked you down! I'm sorry for you, you rotters; you hadn't an earthly when my dog Towser once got on your track!"

It was a surprise for St. Jim's!
When Tom Merry & Co. returned to the school, and announced that the thieves were under lock and key at the village police station, and that the stolen property had been recovered there was incredulity at first—but when Kildare and Monteith endorsed the story, there could be no further doubt.

The nine juniors were the heroes of the hour.
Skinpole reluctantly parted with his belief that Kildare and Monteith had been confederates in committing the crime, but he maintained that all the clues had pointed that way, and that the actual discovery was really in the nature of a fluke. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was a little annoyed, too. He had changed his jacket, and got rid of the last lingering scent of the kipper, and was ready to go on the trail again, when Tom Merry & Co. came in with the announcement that the hunt was over.

"It's weally wathah wotten," said Arthur Augustus. "I weally think you might have waited for me, deah boys. I should have wejoined you in about half an hour—"

"The burglars would have been in the next county by then," remarked Tom Merry.

"I should have twacked them down, deah boy."
"Oh, Towser could have done that, as far as that goes," remarked Herries. "Towser takes the cake this time; I think you'll all agree to that."

"No fear!" said Tom Merry. "It was us—we tracked 'em."
"Oh, rats," said Figgins. "If we hadn't met them in the wood—"

"Well, come to that, if Kildare hadn't thought where to look for them—"

"Bosh," said Herries. "It was my dog Towser did the trick, wasn't it, Towsy old boy?"

Towsy old boy said "Gr-r-r," but whether in assent or dissent could not quite be decided.

THE END.

(Another splendid long, complete tale of Tom Merry & Co. next Thursday, entitled "D'Arcy's Secret." Please order your copy of the GEM in advance.)

THE FIRST CHAPTERS OF A GRAND STORY.



A THRILLING TALE OF THE COAL-MINES.
By MAX HAMILTON.

LAST WEEK'S OPENING CHAPTER.

David Steele, fifteen years of age, is forced through circumstances to leave the little North-country village which had been home to him all his days.

Wrexborough is his destination. He tramps on hour after hour, but at last, being too tired to move, falls to sleep on the banks of a canal. He is awakened by voices, and overhears a vile plot. He resolves to frustrate it, and is successful in saving the victim's life. It is necessary for him, though, to resort to the canal, and he and his wounded companion float down with the stream.

Micky Jones, the son of John Jones, had been left in charge of the barge Annie May. Micky did his duty by falling to sleep—and he was a sound sleeper! The rising wind did not trouble him at all, as it ought to have done, seeing that he had neglected to make the barge fast to the bank, with the result that presently it began to swing out into the canal.

But this was how it happened that Mr. Jones's absence and his son's carelessness saved two lives: David Steele's senses had almost left him when his companion's head grazed the barge, and one of the arms that had been clutching him so tightly relaxed its hold and shot upwards, and then the boy felt himself drawn up to the surface, and his lungs were filled with a blessed draught of air.

(Now go on with the story.)

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Micky's Departure and David's Strange Find.

David Steele was too dazed at first to understand that their struggles had carried them against the barge as she lay across the canal; and, clinging with both hands to the gunwale of the boat, he drew in breath after breath, conscious only of physical relief from the pressure of the water.

So weak was he from his prolonged strain that it was some minutes before he could summon up strength to scramble aboard the barge and lend a hand to his companion, who, even more exhausted, sank heavily upon the deck of the Annie May as soon as he had managed to reach it.

It was at this juncture that Micky appeared upon the scene. The sound of something falling upon the deck exactly above his head had aroused Master Jones from his slumbers, and, hearing David's footsteps, he had leapt out of bed in some trepidation. At first he imagined that the unexpected sounds denoted the return of his father; but Mr. Jones had expressly declared his intention of not returning till the morning; and, remembering this, a sensation of uneasiness began to creep over Micky, whose courage was not his most prominent quality. A awful story which he had once heard—a story which he scornfully disbelieved in the daylight, but which was apt to recur to his memory in the watches of the night with terrifying effects—flashed into his mind now. It related to the unpleasant practice of drowned men who were in the habit of rising out of the water at dead of night and of climbing on to passing barges,

NEXT THURSDAY:

"D'ARCY'S SECRET."

A Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By Martin Clifford.

where they would sit, pale and dripping, a fearsome sight for human eyes!

Micky's teeth began to chatter. He knew that it was all rot; but he also knew that he should never sleep another wink that night until he had convinced himself that a row of drowned men were not sitting with their feet dangling over the gunwale of the Annie May.

Cautiously he protuded his head and then his body from the door.

"Is that you, dad?" he asked in a quavering voice; and then, with a howl of terror, fell flat upon his face.

"The ghosts!" he yelled—"the ghosts!"

Closing his eyes to shut out the sight of the two dripping—and, as he thought, supernatural—figures, and stuffing up his ears with his fingers, Micky emitted a series of hideous yells—yells which redoubled when David tried to bring him to reason by shaking him violently.

When at length the truth was brought home to him—which was not for some minutes—Micky scrambled to his feet, looking both foolish and relieved. Once convinced that his visitors were of flesh and blood, however, he tried to atone for his curious reception of their arrival by stretching the hospitality of the barge to its utmost limits. He had the stove alight in no time; and while the water was boiling for a jorum of hot tea, David and his companion stripped off their wet things and, wrapping themselves in blankets, strove to restore the warmth to their chilled bodies.

To the elder of the two it was still a mystery how he got into the water. Stunned from behind during his lonely walk across the moor, he was absolutely ignorant not only of the motive for such an assault but of the identity of his assailants. He listened with amazement to David's account of the deliberate attempt at murder which he had frustrated—an account in which the boy spoke modestly enough of his share in the adventure—and when David had concluded he stretched out his hand to him gratefully.

"My lad," he said huskily, "I sha'n't forget what you have done for me to-night! I owe you my life twice over—a service I seem to have repaid by nearly drowning you. If ever you want a friend, you have one in William Scott!"

"William Scott!" broke in Micky, who had been listening, open-mouthed, to David's story. "You ain't the Mr. William Scott, surely—the chap what owns the Wrexborough Coalmine?"

Scott nodded.

"Golly!" murmured Micky incredulously; "and to think you should be sittin' there dressed in dad's old blanket!"

Scott laughed at his amazement, but grew grave again directly.

"You say you never caught sight of these men's faces," he said musingly; "and for my part, I have not the faintest idea who they can be. Yesterday I should have said that I had not an enemy in the world. Well, I am absolutely determined that the matter shall be cleared up. I will set the police on their track the first thing in the morning, and they will probably be able to find some clue to the mystery. Meanwhile, my boy," he added, laying his hand on David's shoulder, "you had better turn in and go to sleep."

David was nothing loth—he could hardly keep his eyes open, Micky hospitably insisted that his visitors should occupy the two bed-places, and curled himself up on the floor by the stove.

An appetising smell of frizzling bacon awoke David in the morning. Scott, though still looking pale and weak, was already up and dressed, and David was not long in following his example. He was surprised to find how shaky he still felt; and when Scott announced that Micky was going to walk into Wrexborough after breakfast and send out a carriage to convey himself and David, the latter was relieved to think that he should be spared the tramp of which he would usually have made light. Micky was further instructed to call at the police-station and lay immediate information of the attack, with the request that an inspector would call upon Mr. Scott as soon as he arrived home.

Armed with these commissions, Micky departed, while David, urged by a curiosity to look upon the scene of his adventure by daylight, crossed the railway-bridge, and, walking along the track, reached the spot where Scott had lain in the way of the train.

As he turned away, with a shudder, something bright lying among the heather caught his eye. He stooped and picked it up. It was a red leather pocket-book.

Was it Scott's? If not, it must have been dropped by one of his assailants, and might furnish the desired clue. He hurried back to the barge as fast as his feet would carry him.

"Have you lost a pocket-book, sir?" he inquired eagerly, as soon as he came within speaking distance.

"No," returned Scott. "Why?"

"Hurrah!" cried David; "then it is a clue! One of those brutes must have lost this. I found it just where you were lying! It belonged, most likely, to the man with the lantern. He bent over you when you were on the line."

As he spoke he held out the leather case triumphantly.

To his surprise, a cry—a cry of unmistakable horror—burst from Scott's lips.

"No, no!" he exclaimed, snatching the pocket-book from David's outstretched hand. "It isn't—it can't be true!"

He tore the case open as he spoke, and gave a rapid glance at its contents. Then, white as ashes, he staggered back a pace, covering his face with his hands, while David stared at him in amazement.

Suddenly Scott started as if an idea had struck him.

"Stop that boy!" he cried. "Stop him, for Heaven's sake! Stop him before he gets to Wrexborough—before he sees a living soul! At all costs this must be kept from the police!"

Mr. Scott Alters His Mind, and Micky Objects to the Alteration.

David could scarcely believe his ears. A few minutes before Scott had despatched Micky on his errand to the nearest police-station, with a recommendation to use his utmost speed—had expressed his firm and unalterable determination to spare neither pains nor money in hunting down the authors of the dastardly attempt to murder him—and now, when a clue to the mystery was suddenly and unexpectedly placed in his hands, in the twinkling of an eye his mind was changed.

"Run after him," he repeated impatiently. "For Heaven's sake run!"

An idea that Scott was perhaps becoming light-headed, that the blow he had received might have inflicted some injury to his brain, flashed into David's mind.

"Are you sure, sir," he stammered, "that you mean what you say—that although you know that two men have done their best to murder you, you don't want me to set the police after them?"

"I see what you are thinking," Scott returned; "but I know perfectly well what I am doing—my mind is as clear as ever it was—and I tell you," he continued passionately, "that no inquiries must ever be made into last night's outrage—that, if it be possible, that outrage must remain a secret between you and me and the boy yonder. It is a matter of more than life and death to me. Ay, and to others. Boy, you do not know what it would mean to me if—if this horrible thing were made public. If you could only guess, you would not hesitate to do what I ask you—you would stop that boy and bring him back before it is too late."

There was a despairing appeal in his tones that David could resist no longer.

"All right, sir!" he answered.

And a murmur of relief broke from Scott's lips as the lad started off in pursuit of Micky. Then, resting his chin on his hands, the mine-owner stared before him like one oblivious of his surroundings, his eyes still distended with the horrified expression which had come into them when he snatched the pocket-book from David's hand.

Micky Jones had a quarter of an hour's start, and was hurrying along as fast as his legs could carry him. Mr. Scott's last words had been: "Hurry up, my boy, there's half a sovereign waiting for you if you're quick!" And half a sovereign represented a sum of money greater than any over which Micky's fingers had yet closed. With that glittering bait in view it was no wonder that David had some difficulty in overtaking him, and great was his astonishment on being ordered to return.

Scott started up as he saw the boys approaching, and hurried towards them, thrusting the tell-tale book into his inner pocket as he did so.

"Thank heavens you have brought him back!" he said. And then, turning to Micky, he went on anxiously: "You have not met anyone, have you, my lad, since you left here?"

Micky vouchsafed no direct reply.

"What about that ten bob you promised me?" he demanded sulkily.

Mr. Scott, with a gesture of impatience, extracted from his pocket a shilling coin, which he tossed into Micky's dirty and outstretched hand.

"There you are. Now answer my question. Have you seen or spoken to anyone since you left me?"

"Not to a living soul, gov'nor," cept him," returned Micky, nodding his head in the direction of David, his eyes all the while fixed in fond admiration upon his glistening treasure.

Mr. Scott took two or three hasty steps backwards and forwards. It was evident that he felt himself placed in a dilemma

—that he realised that his secret was, to a certain extent, in the power of these two boys. David, the mine-owner instinctively felt he could trust to hold his tongue, but with regard to the other he had considerable doubts.

There was a moment's silence. Then Scott turned and faced the two lads. His face was even paler than before.

"Look here, my boys," he said. "I want to know if I can trust you both to hold your tongues on this matter—if you will give me your word of honour not to mention, without my permission, the real story of my adventure."

He fixed his eyes first on David as he concluded, waiting for his answer.

"Very well, sir," said the boy slowly. "I'll give you my word. The secret's yours, and I'm bound to keep it if you wish it. Only—"

"Only what?"

David lifted his eyes frankly to the mine-owner's.

"Do you think it's safe, sir? Do you think that when they find they've failed, these rascals won't make a second attempt?"

Mr. Scott was silent.

"I cannot help that," he replied bitterly, at length. "I must trust not—and take every precaution. But I have your word?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good! And yours?"

Micky looked up cunningly. It struck him that here was a favourable opportunity for a bargain.

"What'll you give me if I don't say nothing?" he demanded boldly, his eyes twinkling in anticipation of another half-sovereign. "What'll you give me, eh?" he repeated, a shade less confidently, as Scott fixed his eyes sternly upon him.

"If I ever hear of your talking of me or of my affairs," he said coolly, "I will give you—the soundest thrashing you ever had in your life. Remember that, young man. I always keep my promises."

Scott had not mistaken his man—or his boy, rather. Micky's jaw dropped, and he shuffled uneasily beneath the penetrating gaze fixed upon him.

"Didn't mean no 'arm, gov'nor," he murmured feebly. "I won't say nothing, blowed if I will!"

"You had better not," said Scott significantly. "And now that we have settled that matter, remember you have not carried that half-sovereign yet. You have got your errand to Wrexborough still to do. Go straight to my house, tell the butler I have met with an accident, and ask him to send the carriage for me here. Be quick!"

David Begins His New Life.

Before David fell asleep that night he lay for some time wondering whether he was indeed the same boy who had started from Thorpe Western with only a shilling or two in his pocket.

He had soon learned that Scott had meant what he said when he told him that he had found a friend. As the mine-owner had said to Micky, he was not a man who went back on his promises.

As soon as Micky had departed for the second time, Scott set himself to draw David's history from him; and, having learnt the boy's objects in coming to Wrexborough—his ambition to carve a way for himself in the world, and his desire to make a home for his mother in the future—he had said quietly:

"I think I can be of use to you, my boy. At least I can offer you work in the mine for the present, and if I find—as I believe I shall—that you are as intelligent and hard-working as you are quick-witted and plucky, I shall make it my business to look after your career."

David flushed with pleasure, but Scott cut short the words of thanks that he tried to stammer out.

"You owe me no thanks, David. It is I who shall always owe them to you. Even if I am able to help you up the ladder of life, I shall still be in your debt. I shall do my utmost to do so, you may be sure; but, remember, your future rests in your own hands. If you work hard and make good use of your spare time, I will see that your efforts are not thrown away. There are prizes in every walk of life for those who will put

their shoulders to the wheel, and because you enter my service as a pit-boy, there is no reason why you should not in after years rise to something very much higher."

David nodded eagerly.

"I'll do my best, sir," he said.

"I am sure you will," Scott returned. "I rely upon you to work your own way up; for, if you are to be respected by your comrades, David, there must be no suspicion among them that your getting on is due to favouritism. You understand, my lad? You are to begin at the bottom of the ladder, and earn your own advancement."

So the matter was settled, and David's heart felt lighter at the idea that the much-desired employment had been so speedily secured.

Scott made no further allusion to the boy's promise of silence. He trusted David thoroughly. A keen judge of character, he knew he could rely upon his word.

David, on his part, did not return to the subject which he saw that the mine-owner wished to avoid, evident though it was that it was weighing heavily upon his thoughts.

The house of the rich colliery proprietor, situated outside Wrexborough, was a mine of wonders to David Steele, and he felt shy and awkward as his host led him through the imposing hall, flanked on either side by rooms which seemed absolutely palatial to his unsophisticated eyes.

William Scott, however, was not the man to forget the duties of a host. He soon set the boy at his ease, and before he had been ten minutes in the house David had forgotten to be conscious of his travel-stained clothes and muddy boots.

"You are my guest for the present, David," Scott said, laying a kindly hand upon the lad's shoulder. "When I have made arrangements for your entering upon your work we must see about finding you a comfortable lodging. Till then you must make yourself at home here."

They had scarcely arrived when the manager of the mine came hurrying up to inquire for Mr. Scott.

"There's a rumour among the men that you have been seriously hurt, sir," he said, grasping Scott's hand in evident relief, "and I came off at once to set their minds at rest. If you ever had any doubt of what they thought of you it would have been removed if you had seen their anxiety to have news of 'Left-handed Billy.'"

Scott laughed.

"That's my nickname here," he said, turning to David. "A respectable one, isn't it? I owe it to my left-handed bowling. We're great cricketers in these parts, and Wrexborough is proud of its team. Well, you can tell the men there is nothing much the matter with me. I took a wrong turn last night, and walked into the canal. Fortunately the consequences were not serious; but they would have been if it had not been for this brave lad, to whom I owe my life."

"And that scar on your forehead, sir?" inquired the manager looking at the long, red weal on Scott's temple.

The latter reddened.

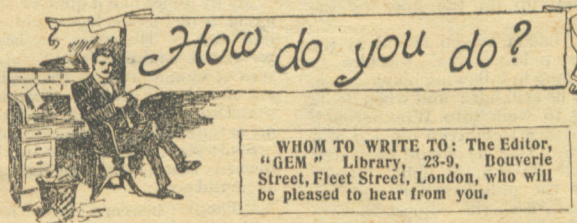
"I must have struck my head in falling," he returned hurriedly. "It is nothing. And now, Grafton, I want to talk

to you about my friend here, David Steele. He wants work. I conclude we can make an opening for him in the pit."

"Certainly, sir," said Grafton, nodding kindly at David. "We want a trammer or two. He can begin on his duties as soon as he likes. He knows what they are, of course."

"I have explained to him what a trammer is," replied Scott, smiling—"the lad whose duty it is to bring the tubs of coal from the face of the seam to the shaft. I want you to keep your eye on the boy, Grafton," he continued, in a lower tone, so that the words did not reach David's ears. "He saved my life last night, and therefore I am bound to help him on in life if I can; but, besides that, I think highly of his pluck and intelligence."

(To be continued next Thursday.)



WHOM TO WRITE TO: The Editor, "GEM" Library, 23-9, Bouverie Street, Fleet Street, London, who will be pleased to hear from you.

"D'ARCY'S SECRET."

Mystery pervades St. Jim's. Tom Merry & Co. are left out in the cold, and the solving of the secret costs them very dear.

Hard knocks are given and taken with great impartiality and, be it also mentioned, good humour.

"D'ARCY'S SECRET"

is a story you'll like.

The EDITOR.

P.S.—How do you like the Competition? Don't forget you can start to-day.

A WATCH FOR SKILL.

BIG BARGAIN!

ALMOST GIVEN AWAY!

4	8	3
4	5	6
7	2	6

In the Central Square of the Diagram we have placed the figure 5. Arrange the figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, and 9 in the remaining squares in such a manner that the columns add 15 up and down, across, and diagonally from corner to corner. If correct, and you carry out our simple conditions in accordance with the generous offer we shall send you, A. MAGNIFICENT WATCH (Lady's or Gent's) will be sent to you entirely free of charge. Write your solution on a plain sheet of notepaper, with your name and address clearly written underneath. Enclose your solution and stamped addressed envelope for reply to THE F. R. IRONMONGER CO. (Dept. P.P.), Station Road, ILKESTON.

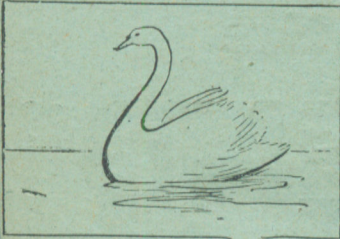
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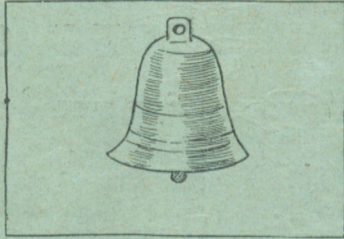
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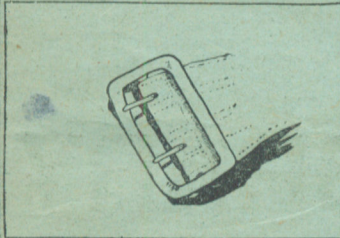
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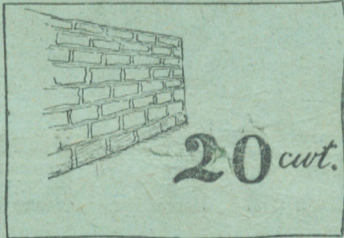
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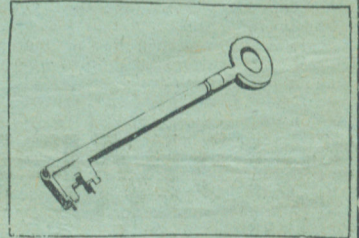
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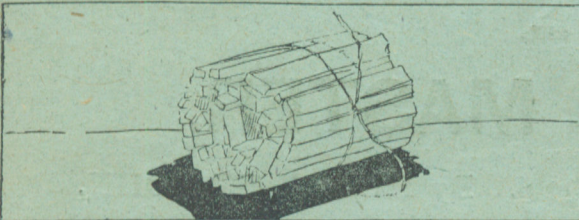
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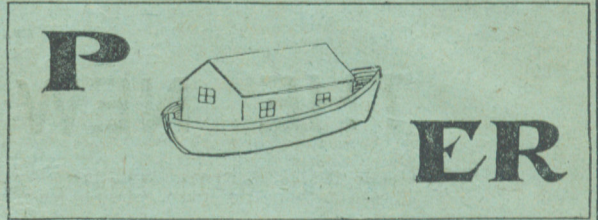
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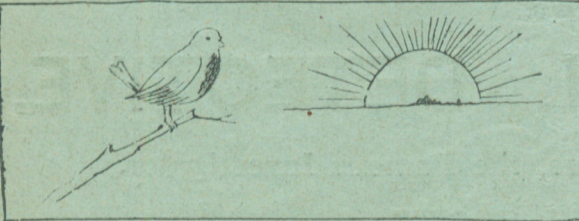
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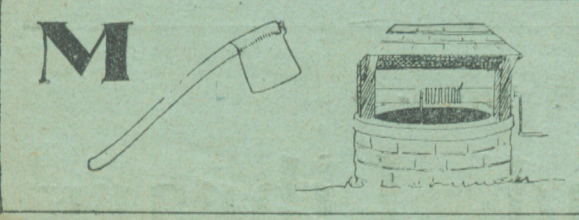
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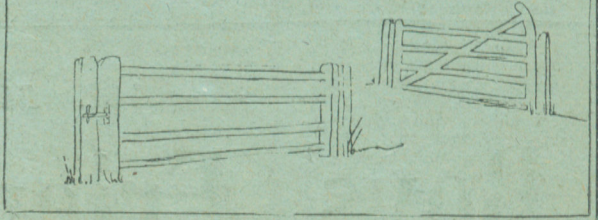
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