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issue.

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NEW SERIES

NO. 57 VOL. 2.



“Who is it?” exclaimed Tom Merry in a startled voice. “I need not tell you who it is,” said the new boy. “His name is written all over him!”

A REAL LEVER SIMULATION

Gold Watch



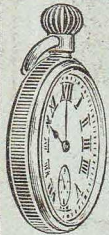
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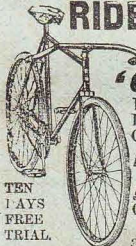
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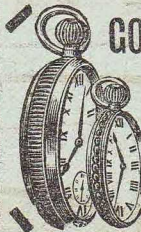
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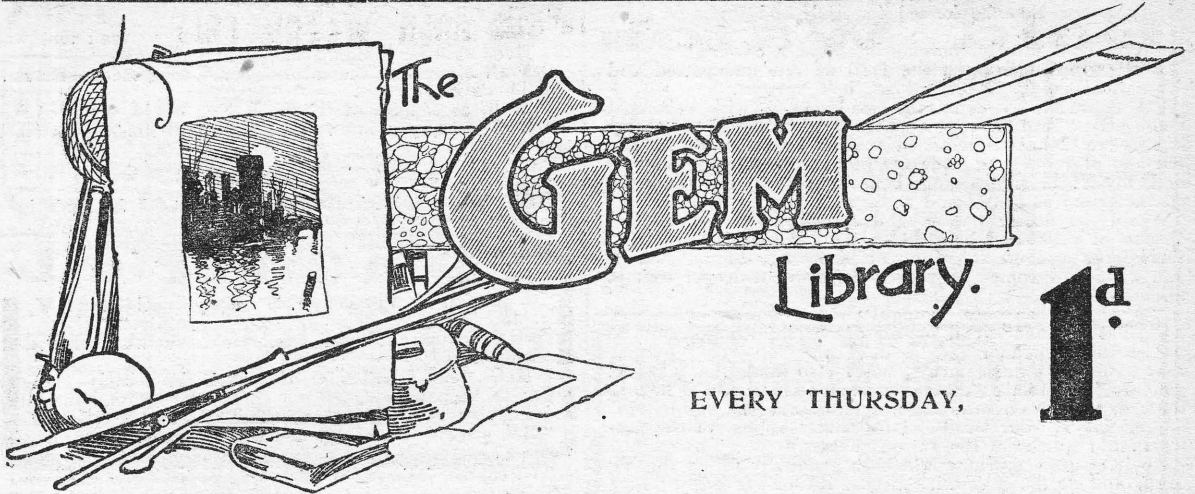
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NEXT
THURSDAY:

"SKIMPOLE'S SCHOLARSHIP."

A Tale of Tom Merry & Co.
By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

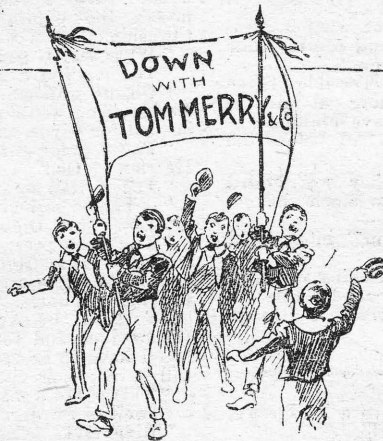


Complete Stories for Everyone, and Every Story a Gem!

The Feud of the Fourth

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

A Grand
Long, Complete
School Tale



of the
Boys of
St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 1. The Head-master's Speech.

"W!"

"Silence!"

Dr. Holmes, head-master of St. Jim's, glanced over the close, serried ranks of the boys seated before him in the big hall.

The Terrible Three occupied the first rank, and for a fraction of a second the doctor's eyes rested on the frank, open face of Tom Merry; but the clear eyes raised to his did not waver, and the Head's glance swept over the second, third, fourth, and fifth rows of motionless figures, and scanned each intent face.

There was not a sound now. Every boy sat as still as a frightened mouse; but the doctor's frown did not relax. Possibly his sharp command would not have rung with such incisiveness had he been made aware that the peculiar sound had been caused by the application of a pin to Wally D'Arcy's calf; but the Head's sight, sharp as it was, could not pierce through six rows of solid boys.

Tom Merry, Manners, and Monty Lowther badly wanted to turn round in their seats in order to try and discover the culprit. Their quick eyes had noted the unusually stern expression of the Head's face when he had stepped on the raised dais, and their lively intelligence was roused to con-

tempt for the one who could possibly have failed to note the signs of a coming storm, showing so plainly on the doctor's usually placid and kindly countenance. But, then, Curly Gibson was very young, and not at all observant, and the sight of D'Arcy minor's plump leg beneath the form, a handy pin and opportunity, had proved too strong for his spirit of mischief. But retribution followed swiftly, for Wally's pain of body did not by any means equal Gibson's uneasiness of mind, as the Head's severe look had momentarily been directed in his direction.

An involuntary shiver had crept down Curly Gibson's back as he waited for the dread summons to come forth. When the danger had passed, he was not much better off, for he was left to the unpleasant contemplation of the promised drubbing in store for him that Wally's eyes had flashed into his own.

"Wonder what's up?" whispered Manners cautiously.

Tom Merry shrugged his shoulders expressively.

Summons to Hall was always of some import, and his memory called to mind that the previous occasions had usually marked some unpleasant occurrence.

"Shut up!" he murmured, as Manners leaned sideways again. "You'll get gated if you are spotted."

For a full minute Dr. Holmes surveyed the assembly in

A DOUBLE-LENGTH TALE OF TOM MERRY NEXT THURSDAY.

No. 57 (New Series.)

grim silence; then he leaned forward, and spoke in cold, measured accents.

"A bully is utterly contemptible, and a coward!"

A stir rippled through the Hall at this unexpected and dramatic opening. Everyone sat bolt upright.

"A coward!" repeated the head-master, with vehement emphasis. "And in consequence of what has reached my knowledge, I have summoned you all here for the express purpose of requesting your co-operation with your masters and myself in suppressing behaviour that can only be characterised as brutal and a disgrace to your college."

Again the doctor paused and contemplated the startled throng of boys, and he read in the expression of most of their faces a silent repetition of his own indignant words, and when he resumed his speech there was a deeper tone in his voice.

"A matter has been brought to my notice in such a way that I cannot avail myself of the information and so punish the ringleader and his despicable followers. I know that some of you are unruly, but I also know that most of you are incapable of the practices I abhor; and I believe that, under the circumstances, I can leave the suppression of bullying in your hands. I especially appeal to the prefects and captains of the various Forms."

An irresistible murmur had been gradually filling the big Hall, and at the conclusion of the doctor's words a cheer burst forth.

The head-master let it go for a moment, and then held up his hand. There was instant silence.

"I am glad!" he said simply.

These three words had all the effect of a most impassioned appeal, and the previous applause was but a whisper to the roar that now rang out.

Even the masters, who stood grouped at the side of the raised platform, were carried away by the direct confidence expressed in Dr. Holmes's words, and Mr. Linton could be heard echoing in a mild tone Mr. Railton's deep bass "Hear, hear!"

"Now," said the doctor, with a return of his accustomed kindly air, "I have to inform you that a new boy is expected here to-day; and if I tell you that he is not only a stranger to this college, but has never lived in England before, I am sure that to the prevention of what I mentioned just now you will add the welcome and courtesy due to a stranger in a strange land. You may go."

"My eye!" exclaimed Lowther, as the Terrible Three pushed their way through the crowd streaming out into the quad. "Another new kid! We seem to have nothing but new chaps. They come and they go like chaff before the wind."

"Oh, ah, and some get chaffed before they go," added Manners. "That rotter Clyne didn't get so much change, after all. What a beast he was! I hope to—"

"Goodness the new kid won't be like him," interrupted Tom Merry.

"Well, there's one thing," said Lowther, kicking viciously at a pebble, "he can't possibly be worse. I wonder what he is. The doc. said something about a stranger in a strange land, didn't he?"

"Yes; p'r'aps he's a—a—"

"A Chinese."

"Or a Frenchy."

"Or a hustling Yank," cried Tom Merry in a loud voice, as Buck Finn strolled by. "Hallo, Arizona!"

"We'll get a hustle on you kids if he is," snapped the wiry little native from the plains. "I guess—"

"You guess again, old chap," retorted Monty Lowther. "I kinder reckon you're a bit out in your calkerlations," he mimicked. "What?"

"That don't cut no ice with me," grunted the Westerner. "I'm busy."

"Oh, yes," said Manners, cudgelling his mind for a funny retort, "I—I see, he finished lamely."

A minute later something did come into his mind, but as Buck Finn was the other end of the quad busily employed in punting an old football about with Wally and Jameson, Manners had to bottle up his brilliant inspiration.

"I know!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Let's find out when the new kid is to come along, and go down to the station and meet him."

"Ugh!" snorted Lowther. "Suppose he's a rotter like —"

"Oh, you've got Clyne on the brain-box!" said Tom Merry. "Give the poor beggar a chance!"

"How do you know he's poor?" snapped Lowther irritably, and smarting under the suggestion that he was unjust. "We've been chin-wagging a lot about this new Johnnie, what about the bullying business?"

"Jingo!"

"I'd forgotten all about it," admitted Tom Merry. "Funny thing the Head didn't pull his head off."

"Who's?"

"How should I know, any more than you can tell, why the Head said he couldn't take—what was it?"

"Avail himself of the information," suggested Manners.

"That's it!"

"Well, as captain of the Shell, you ought to be on the track of—well, you know what I mean," finished Lowther mysteriously.

"Gore?"

"Of course!"

"Oh, he's not likely to start just yet. I bet he's in a fine state of funk. I suppose somebody sneaked, and that's why the Head wouldn't take official cog—cognition of the matter."

"The what?" gasped Lowther.

"Cognition," repeated Tom Merry placidly. "You'll have to carry a dicker about with you, old son. Fancy not knowing the meaning of a simple little word like that. Hallo, worms!"

"Hallo, Shell-fish!" retorted Jack Blake politely. "We're going to keep an eye on you three. Fancy bullying little kids! Why, you ought to be ashamed of yourselves!"

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed D'Arcy seriously. "Oh, you're wotting!"

"Of course, fathead! You're wool-gathering, aren't you?"

The swell of St. Jim's glared at Jack Blake frigidly. "You made a distinct statement, Blake, and I absolutely refuse to be chawactewised as a wool-gatherer. I—"

"Gussy, Gussy! Oh, when will you learn to restrain that wicked temper of yours? I'm sure you're getting worse every day. Isn't he, Merry?"

"Rather!" replied Tom Merry. "Can't make out how you can put up with such a terrible chap. Does he often go mad?"

"N-no," said Blake, "not very often. When he does of course he's absolutely dangerous. Don't you remember when he lost his beastly temper, and went for that cad Clyne, and banged his head on the floor?"

"Blake," exclaimed Arthur Augustus, "your remarks are absolutely untwue. I should nevah think of being so bwutal. Unless you offah an instant apology, I shall be undah the painful necessity of giving you a feahful thwashin'. I am waitin'!"

"What for, Gussy?" said Jack Blake innocently.

"To give you a thwashin'!"

"Oh, do wait a little longer, Gussy; I am not ready yet. Besides, you wouldn't hurt an old pal, and you went bald-headed for Clyne, didn't you?"

"Fancy going for a chap smaller than yourself!" sniffed Herries. "Oh!"

"The wottah was biggan'!"

"A bigger rotter?"

"Don't wot, Digby, or I shall give you a thwashin'."

"You'll be pretty well booked up in a minute, Gussy," remarked Tom Merry, making an imaginary entry on his cuff. "Lemme see! Jack Blake on the tapis at 8.30.

Fearful encounter. Blake put up a plucky fight, but was knocked out by Augustus in 1 sec. 3-5ths. Herries next. Disposed of and sent to hospital by 8.31. I say, Gussy, you'll have to be careful, you know, or Linton and Railton will have to join the unemployed. Do accept an apology!"

"This is not a mattah for wibald remarks, Mewwy," said the swell of St. Jim's. "Surely I—"

"Ring off!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Here's Gore and Mellish coming along. What a pair of beauties they are!

I suppose they're concocting some pretty little bullying rag on the quiet."

The cad of St. Jim's favoured the chums with a scowl as he slouched past with his crony and toady Mellish.

"I say," shouted Herries, "don't go near Towser this morning; he's not very well. Your face might upset him, you know. He's rather particular about what he sees before breakfast."

The frown deepened on Gore's face, and he turned savagely on Mellish, who had given a feeble chuckle.

"What do you see to grin and cackle at?" he demanded.

"N-nothing, Gore," said Mellish hastily. "I was thinking of what you said just now, that's all."

"What?"

"Why, about the jape on the new cha—"

"Shut up, you idiot!" snapped the bully. "You adde-headed idiot! Do you want to let those rotters hear?"

As it happened, the precious two were beyond the hearing of the Terrible Three, and Mellish's little indiscretion did not bring any awkward inquiries.

Breakfast-bell followed with its insistent summons soon after the appearance of Gore and Mellish, and in the rush for the coll. D'Arcy forgot for the time his injured "dig."

The keen morning air had given the juniors a sharp edge to their appetites, and they discussed something more substantial than words, their conversation being limited to



At the sacrifice of a couple of waistcoat buttons, Fatty Wynn succeeded in reaching the middle of the gate.

urgent requests for the bread-and-butter, enlivened by occasional brief squabbles among the Third-Formers over the ownership of pots of jam and shrimp-paste.

Tea in Hall was a thing not to be thought of by the Fourth-Formers—when they were in funds—but somehow all the other meals were done full justice to.

Fatty Wynn was the only one that was not satisfied when prayers were said, after a Gargantuan breakfast; but then the Falstaff of St. Jim's was always in a condition of semi-starvation, notwithstanding the fact that his meals for the day would have satisfied three ordinary chaps; so it was nothing unusual for Fatty to bear a weebegone expression when all the bacon and eggs had disappeared.

The Fourth filed out of the hall.

"I suppose we've got to beastly well graft and swat now, instead of enjoying ourselves!" grumbled Manners. "I wish to goodness the Head would start some what-do-you-call-'em idea, and let us improve the shining hour beneath the effulgent rays of the solar orb."

"And what is a 'what-do-you-call-'em' idea?" demanded Merry.

"Oh, you know. A sort of al fresco dig-worms-and-study-daisies idea."

"M'yes; quite brilliant! Suggest it, I should say, and the Head would welcome you—with a big stick!"

"Merry!"

"Yes, Kildare?"

The stalwart captain of St. Jim's tapped the leader of the Shell on the shoulder.

"I want you a minute. The doctor wants someone to go

to the station after tea to meet the new chap. Care to go?"

"Rather! But I say, Kildare, I suppose Manners and Monty can come along? It's hardly safe for me to leave them alone, you know!"

"Oh, all right!" replied the captain, with a laugh. "I dare say that in any event there'll be mischief, so you may as well all stick together."

"Right-ho! Thanks, Kildare!"

"What did he want?" whispered Monty Lowther, when a moment later, Tom Merry slipped into his seat. "You're looking jolly pleased with yourself! Mind the ink, fathead! Here, that's mine!"

Tom Merry calmly ignored his chum's indignation, and mopped up the ink with Lowther's clean handkerchief.

"Ta, Monty!"

Lowther looked unutterable things, but bottled up his rage and pocketed the handkerchief at one and the same time when he caught the Form-master's eye fixed upon him.

"Lowther!" snapped Mr. Lathom. "Give me that at once!"

"But——"

"Don't keep me waiting, sir! Bring that to me at once—at once, I say!"

"But it is only——"

"Take fifty lines!"

"But——"

"A hundred!"

Lowther rose quickly. There was a dangerous glitter in

the shortsighted master's eyes, and the lines were mounting up a little too freely.

"Buck up!" muttered Tom Merry unsympathetically.

"Beast!" grunted Lowther, as he passed round the desk.

"Hand over what you placed in your pocket just now!" exclaimed Mr. Lathom, when the junior stood before him.

"But—"
"At once!"

"Well, if you will have it!" muttered Monty Lowther, with a secret feeling of joy as he put his hand in his pocket and his fingers encountered the soaked handkerchief.

"What is it? Why—Ugh!"

The master dropped his prize hurriedly, and jumped back with dismay.

"How—how dare you?" he cried, surveying the inky rag and his stained fingers. "Take—Hum! Go to your seat at once! Why didn't you tell me that you had upset the ink?"

A suppressed chuckle came from the front bench.

"Stop that noise instantly! You, Blake and Herries, take fifty lines apiece. Well—Lowther, what are you waiting for? Go to your seat at once! Here, take your handkerchief with you. Don't argue with me, sir!"

Mr. Lathom was angry, but before Monty Lowther had gone half-way to his seat the little master's voice called him to a halt:

"Under the circumstances, I will take back the imposition. Ahem! Now!"

A sharp rap on the desk, and class proceeded.

CHAPTER 2.

The Arrival of Clifton Dane.

YOU don't think—
The Terrible Three were preparing to go across to Rylcombe Station, and Tom Merry stared at Manners in amazement.

"What in the world are you talking about? 'I don't think!' What d'you mean? Why don't you finish what you were saying?"

"Well, I was wondering," said Manners, getting rather red. "I've been thinking, you see. I—"

"Oh, get on with it!" exclaimed Lowther. "You'll have a fit in a minute. Chuck it off your chest. You've been thinking! Well, and what of it?"

Manners opened his mouth and shut it again without making a sound.

"Oh, rot!" he exclaimed. "You can't be serious for a moment!"

Tom Merry and Lowther gave a simultaneous whistle.

"Off your rocker, aren't you?" inquired Lowther, at last.

"No, I'm not!" cried Manners hotly. "I—"

"Here, chuck it, old son!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"We're not going to start ragging one another, are we?"

Manners grinned on the instant.

"No fear!" he said. "Sorry I got ratty, but I really was serious."

"What was it, then?"

"It's struck me that the Head received an anonymous letter."

"What!"

"An anonymous letter!"

"Don't you see, that's what he meant when he said he could not avail himself of the information?" cried Manners.

"Jingo!" ejaculated Tom Merry. "I believe you've hit it! I wonder who the mean, sneaking cad could have been?"

Indignation rang in Tom's voice, and his hands clenched as if the culprit stood before him.

"Well, it's no good getting excited over it," said Lowther sententiously. "The best thing we can do is to ferret the bouncer out."

"And we will, too!" assented Tom Merry grimly. "The old coll. is not going to be disgraced like that!"

"No fear!" agreed Manners. "I suppose we'd better be off now, or the new chap'll go and lose his little self."

"Right you are! When we get back we'll tell Blake and Figgy about it. This is a game where we shall all want our eyes skinned, and it might be some New House cad, for all they know."

"There's—" started Lowther, and stopped abruptly.

"We don't want to mention names," continued Tom Merry. "It's too serious to make a 'try' at. We must score a goal first shot! Come on!"

A keen March wind swept the quad as the three came out.

"What about tea?" said Tom Merry, as he turned up his coat-collar. "I suppose we'd better get some stuff in, and ask the new chap to a feed?"

"Better see what he's like first," said Lowther.

"You're getting quite cautious in your old age. My

eye! I think we can chance it for once, anyway! We're not obliged to ask him again."

"Yes, rather!" said Manners. "May as well give the chap a first chance, anyway."

"Oh, yes!" cried Monty Lowther. "I didn't quite mean that exactly. Here, I'll go and order some things to be packed up, and we can fetch them as we come back."

Before the others could stop him Lowther dashed off.

"Poor old Monty!" said Tom Merry. "He's sorry he was so suspicious. I suppose the beggar will want to pay for the grub now."

"He may want," replied Manners, "but he's not coming any of that old game with us."

There was a bright glow on Lowther's cheeks when he came back, and his eyes sparkled. All his bad-humour had vanished, and the three set out at a quick pace for the station.

"We shall have to buck up!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "It's the 5.10 he's supposed to come by. Let's do a run."

At a jog-trot the ground was soon covered, and they rapidly drew near to the village.

"Sha'n't quite do it, after all!" grunted Tom Merry, looking at his watch. "Hallo! Who's that in front? Why, there's a crowd of them!"

Blake and Figgins & Co." cried Manners. "Wonder what they're doing? Didn't know they were out! They seem to be in a hurry, too!"

A wild whoop brought the St. Jim's contingent in front to a standstill.

"What are you doing out here?" demanded Tom Merry. "Time you New House kids were in bed, Figgins!"

"You don't say!" retorted the long-legged member of the New House. "And who let you out?"

"Yes, indeed!" chimed in Jack Blake. "You'd better come along with us, kids. We're not used to babies, but I dare say you can manage to trot as far as the station."

"The station! What—"

"The station!" mocked Blake. "And why not? If you think you Shell-fish are the only ones who are allowed to welcome the stranger to St. Jim's you—"

"I certainly considah that your pwesence is not required, Tom Mewwy. Pway do not twouble. You can return to the coll."

"Awfully kind of you, Gussy," retorted Tom Merry, "but we are coming, all the same! What! You here, too, Skimmy?"

The brainy member's bumpy forehead came into view from behind the corpulent form of Fatty Wynn, and he blinked in the growing dusk at the leader of the Shell.

"As a Socialist, Tom Merry, I consider it my duty to greet the stranger," said Herbert Skimpole, waving his notebook. "You see, I feel the great difference there is between the rough-and-ready methods adopted by—"

"Ourselves, ass!" interrupted Jack Blake. "Come on; gas as you go!"

Skimpole obeyed, and as he walked he talked.

"You see," he went on, "you don't know how to treat a thing of this kind in the delicate way in which it should be treated. For instance—"

"Ow! Wow!"

"I am truly sorry, Wynn!" exclaimed Skimpole. "But did I cause you any feeling of pain?"

"Yes, you did!" retorted Fatty Wynn. "Keep that beastly book of yours in your pocket! Wagging it about like that you nearly poked my eye out. I am sure I—"

"Shut up!" cried Figgins. "Listen!"

A confused murmur of voices reached the juniors as they halted to listen.

"Sounds like a blessed riot going on," commented Herries.

"It's from the village, too!"

"On the ball!" yelled Tom Merry, breaking into a sprint.

The Terrible Three rounded the corner of the lane abutting on the station road, and burst into exclamations of astonishment.

"My only aunt!" panted Lowther.

"Buck up, St. Jim's!" roared Tom Merry. "It's the village kids having a dust-up!"

"Collar them!" cried a voice from the rear.

"All right, Fatty; don't hurry! You'll be in time to sit on a few!" gasped Kerr, as Wynn pounded and laboured along after the main body of juniors.

"The beasts are up to their old games!" cried Tom, as they charged into the melee of whirling arms and legs.

"They're piling on to one chap!"

"Where is he?" panted Manners, striking out right and left.

"Saw someone go down!" growled Tom, as he thrust and shoved his way through. "That's one for you, sonny! Out of the way, Skimmy!"

"As a sincere Socialist," broke out Skimpole, "I object

— O-o-oh! Ow!"

A punch from the village butcher-boy sent the amateur Socialist reeling, and he sat down with a bump in a puddle of water.

"You shrieking ass!" roared Herries, who received most of the spray caused by the sudden flop. "Why can't you sit down somewhere else? Hallo! Who's this?"

By this time the slow-witted villagers had realised that they were up against more than they cared to tackle, and they fled.

Tom Merry held out his hand to a dusty-looking creature.

A sinewy hand grasped Tom Merry's, and the object of the village boys' attack scrambled to his feet. The chums beheld a youngster of about fourteen, and he stood for a moment regarding the ring of curious faces with dark, flashing eyes and clenched fists.

"Where—where have those wretches gone to?" he demanded fiercely. "They got me down! I—I hadn't a chance!"

The appearance of the stranger caused some surprise. "Looks more like a gipsy than anything else," murmured Digby.

"Can't be!" declared Herries. "Look at his clothes. Seems a decent sort of kid. Got a dickens of a temper, though, judging by his looks!"

"Don't you worry about them now," said Tom Merry; "they've skedaddled!"

The boy was trying to straighten his disordered attire, and he stopped and stared at Tom Merry.

"I don't quite apprehend your meaning," he said; "but I am exceedingly indebted to you and your friends for your timely assistance!"

"That's all right!" declared Tom. "Jolly glad we came along! Are you all right?"

"Yes. I'm not much hurt. A bit bruised. Nothing to speak of."

"Well, we can't stop now, we have to—" Tom Merry stopped abruptly. "Jingo!" he muttered. "I wonder

—You'll excuse me, but have you come from the station?"

"Yes."

"Then you're—"

"I was on my way to St. James's College."

"My hat! It's the new kid!" gasped Blake.

"We're from St. Jim's!" cried Tom Merry. "We came to meet you!"

The juniors swarmed round the new boy, and all tried to shake hands with him at once.

"What's your name?" demanded Jack Blake bluntly.

"Clifton Dane."

"Well, Dane, it's a lucky job we found you in time, or there would only have been a few little bits of you left!" said Tom Merry. "There, let's give you a brush down! I'm awfully sorry we were late! I'll introduce you to these kids. You may as well know them by name; you'll get used to their funny faces soon enough. This is—"

"Pway excuse me, Tom Mewwy," exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "but I considah that—"

"Oh, this is D'Arcy, our authority on etiquette, dress, and so on! Hold out your flipper, Gussy!"

Clifton Dane looked at Arthur rather strangely, and in his own mind he put him down as a fop. But he held out a sun-tanned hand, and a slight expression of surprise came over his face as the swell of St. Jim's gripped it.

"Delighted to welcome you, deah boy!" declared Arthur Augustus in his best style. "Pway honah me with your pwesence at tea!"

"Ring off, Gussy!" said Tom Merry. "Dane's coming to have tea with us—aren't you?"

"Glad to, I'm sure!" said Dane, with a frank smile.

"It's—"

"Oh, never mind about that! I'll go on with the introducing biz. as we go along. We're the Terrible Three!"

"The—"

"They reckon they lead the Shell Form!" exclaimed Jack Blake.

"You shut up, Blake! You haven't been properly presented yet!"

"You go and eat coke!" retorted Blake politely. "If it wasn't for—"

"The gramophone now cackling," interrupted Tom Merry, "is known as Blake! That chap with the snub nose is Digby, and that's Her— Pax!"

"Will you stop making rude remarks?" growled Digby, who rather prided himself on his nose; "or there'll be someone I know without the need for a pocket-handkerchief at all!"

"Oh, all right! Keep your wool on, then!" cried Tom, with a laugh. "That's Monty Lowther! That's Manners, not a bad sort of chap! This is Figgins and Wynn and Kerr!" he rattled on. "The fat one is Wynn! You'll be able to remember him all right, though I don't know about

the others, they're so much alike. Oh, there's Skimpole! Mustn't forget Skimmy; he's a Socialist or a Radical. I don't know which, but that don't matter. You'll know him by his notebook. I think that's all."

"Oh, yes, I see! Thanks very much!" replied the new boy, in a bewildered tone of voice.

"Have you come far?" inquired Blake.

"Well, yes," replied Dane, with a smile; "a few thousand miles! My father used to be at St. Jim's, you know."

"That's good!" said Tom Merry, scanning the dark, handsome face of the new boy, and wondering where he had come from, but too polite to ask.

Tom Merry was not the only one that was curious, and on the way to the college every word uttered by Clifton Dane was listened to with bated breath. At last the desired information came.

"I have lived all my life in North America, you know, so I shall want you chaps to put me on to the hang of things."

"But you speak jolly good English, anyhow!" blurted Digby.

"Why, 'course! Why not?"

Digby flushed.

"Oh, I don't know—I mean, I—"

A strange glitter came into the new boy's eyes, but none noticed it.

Tom Merry came to Digby's rescue.

"You forget, Dig, that Dane's father was at St. Jim's. He's a Britisher!"

"No, I'm not!"

There was indignation in the prompt denial of the new boy that caused a strained silence.

"We sha'n't be long now; we're just near the old coll.," said Blake, anxious to steer clear of any more awkward questions. "Feel peckish?"

"Not very," replied Dane briefly.

After this conversation flagged, and the new boy walked along rather apart from the others.

CHAPTER 3.

Dane's First Meeting with Gore.

"HERE we are!" cried Tom Merry. "St. Jim's! Good old coll.!"

Clifton Dane raised his head and gazed at the old pile with a strange expression in his eyes.

"And this is where my father—"

The new boy broke off abruptly, and Tom Merry saw something glitter in his eye.

"I hope you'll have a jolly time!" he said quietly.

Dane thrust out his hand impulsively.

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"I like you!" he said simply. "But," he added, in a low tone and with a look of pride and defiance, "I'm not quite English, you know!"

Tom Merry saw the look, but did not understand why there should have been that hint of defiance.

"I don't see that it matters, anyhow!" he said. "Here, let's come on; I'll show you the way to the Head's room!"

The new boy glanced round the deserted quad, and save for the plump figure of Fatty, the last to follow the others into the School House, no one was visible. Dane then looked at Tom Merry for a moment as if about to speak, but changed his intentions, and followed Tom's directions in silence.

"After you leave the doc., mind," said Tom Merry, "you come straight up to our study to tea! Any kid you meet will show you the way to Study No. 1. Half a mo'; let's have a look at you! Oh, you don't look so bad now! Those kids did rag you a bit! I don't expect the Head will notice anything. So-long!"

Clifton Dane marched up to the door of the head-master's room, and tapped smartly.

In inaction the new boy struck Tom Merry as being rather indolent, but there were no signs of failing energy once he got a move on.

"Come in!"

Tom Merry saw the new boy disappear, then he made his way to the study, his mind filled with the memory of the queer look he had seen on Dane's face.

"Rummy sort of beggar!" he concluded. "But thank goodness he's no waster!"

"And so you're Dane's son?" mused the doctor to himself, after he had asked the new-comer the customary questions. "Well," he went on aloud, "I am glad to see you here, and I hope you will be happy, and turn out as fine a man as your father! I will see Mr. Railton about allotting you a study. What is it?"

A look of eagerness had come into Dane's face.

"Could I share Tom Merry's study, sir?"

"I'm afraid not, my boy. There are already three installed there."

Dane's face clouded with disappointment.

"But," said the doctor kindly, "I will see what can be done. You have taken a fancy to Tom Merry, then?"

"Yes, sir!" replied the new boy quickly.

"You couldn't have chosen better," said the Head. "You will find Tom a good friend, and I expect you will be in the same Form. Now you may go."

A feeling of loneliness came over Dane as he closed the study door behind him and walked down the corridor to the big entrance-hall, which he had to cross to get to Study No. 1.

He was a plucky youngster, but he felt that he would have given anything at that moment for the sound of his father's deep voice and the gentle touch of his mother's hand.

At the thought of his mother, the boy's dark eyes glowed. His beautiful Indian mother!

Clifton Dane was proud of the noble blood that flowed in his veins, and his attachment to his mother was almost wild in its fierce intensity.

A half-breed he had been once called, and he had avenged the insult in such a way that the offence had never been repeated.

Clifton Dane was half-English and half-Indian. His mother was a Huron, the daughter of a chief, although her features, like those of Clifton's, were more Spanish than Indian.

A cackle of laughter interrupted the boy's thoughts of his far-away home, as he crossed the hall, and he stopped abruptly.

He did not know that, hidden in the shadow of the porter's lodge, Gore and Mellish, the cads of St. Jim's, had heard and witnessed the scene when he had spoken to Tom in the quad, and for a moment he did not realise the significance of the strange performance going on.

He saw an awkwardly-built lad, a little heavier than himself, with a handkerchief to his face, and holding the hand of another.

Gore and Mellish were enjoying themselves in their own particularly mean way.

"O-o-oh!" sobbed Gore. "I—I like you! O-oh! But—but I'm not quite English, you know. I—I am a nig-nig!"

Mellish gave a warning yelp of abject terror, but he was too late. While his sluggish mind had but half taken in the fleeting expression on the Huron boy's face, Dane had leaped.

Crash! He was upon him like a cat, and, seizing Mellish by the coat-collar, he flung him, kicking and struggling, across the hall. Gore went the other way, and struck the wall with a force that made him blink.

For a moment he cowered there, awed by the fierce

expression on the enraged boy's face. But his arrogance speedily returned.

"What d'you mean by it?" he demanded. "I'll pound you for this, you see if I don't! I'll— Let—leggo!"

"You—you rat! You pound me? You insult me, would you!" cried Dane. "I'll shake you till you can't stand, you beast!"

Rage, amazement, fright, then terror, and abject fear passed over the cad of St. Jim's, and his cries for help came stutteringly from his chattering teeth, then dwindled away jerkily. There was no chance to fight.

Keep his head still, he could not, for the new boy shook him back and fro like the piston-rod of an engine.

Mellish took one look at Gore's distorted face, and fled, with a whimper.

Gore gave up all attempt to resist. All he could think about was to get free, and he opened his mouth to yell for help.

The cry never came, for, with a final cuff to right and left that sounded like pistol-shots, Dane released his grip, and the bully of St. Jim's sank to the floor in a heap.

He was not really much hurt, but he was livid with fright. He covered on the stone floor in a huddled heap, and his gaze shifted from the fierce look of Dane.

The latter gave the bully a touch with the toe of his boot, and, with an expression of disgust, turned scornfully away.

Dane looked round for Mellish, and it was lucky for the admirer and toady of Gore that he had made himself scarce, for the wild, passionate nature of Clifton Dane was stirred to a dangerous depth, and Mellish would have wagged his mean little head faster than his oily tongue had ever formed its words of mischief and deceit, had the new boy laid hands on him.

Clifton Dane felt in no mood for tea now, and he was debating with himself what he should do, when Lowther came in laden with parcels.

"Here, hang on to some of these!" he cried. "My hat! What's the matter with Gore? Had a fall, or been playing football with yourself?"

"Mind your own business!" growled the bully shakily, as he got to his feet, and, with a stealthy scowl, slouched away.

Monty Lowther looked inquiringly at Dane, but said nothing.

"Do you call that thing a St. Jim's chap?" demanded Dane.

"Well, he certainly has the honour of being so," said Lowther, puzzled at the fierce scorn in the new boy's voice. "Why? Has he been getting at you? You mustn't take any notice of his little ways. He's a bad egg. Come on, help me to carry some of this stuff. It's no good losing your temper over Gore."

"Is he a friend of yours?"

"Oh, chuck your cross-examination, for goodness' sake!" retorted Lowther, rather irritated by the tone of authority. "No, he's not, so there! Are you going to hang on to these parcels, or not?"

"You don't know what he did!" said Dane hotly. "I'm not going to stand it, if you care to!"

"Nobody wants you to, old son!" exclaimed Lowther. "Are you going— Ah, that's better! Mind how you go, fathead!"

The genial admonition in Monty Lowther's tone did more to restore Dane to a state of good-humour than all the soothing phrases put together, and he smiled as Lowther loaded him with paper bags containing some of the tuck-shop's freshest cakes and tarts.

CHAPTER 4.

Strange Pets.

"PUT your tie straight, Gussy!" exclaimed Blake suddenly.

"Bai Jove!"

A roar of laughter greeted the involuntary movement of D'Arcy's hand at Jack Blake's request.

"You wottah, Blake! I absolutely refuse to put my tie stwaight. It is stwaight!"

"Oh, all right, Gussy!" said the leader of Stury No. 6. "Of course, if you like to be untidy, that's your own funeral, not mine."

The Terrible Three and the chums of Study No. 6 were all anxiously awaiting the return of Monty Lowther.

Without the provender there could be no feed, and as they were all pretty hungry after their exciting walk to the village, there was some impatience.

The swell of St. Jim's assured himself that his tie was in the correct position, and then glanced frigidly at his tormentor.



A howl of warning came from Lowther, but it was too late. There was a crackling of china, and a yelp and a jump from Wynn. "You've put your foot in it now, Fatty!" cried Tom Merry, "You can't deny that!"

"Clifton Dane's coming along, too," said Tom Merry, seizing the poker and stirring the fire to a cheerful blaze. "He's a long time. Seems a decent sort of chap."

"Yes," replied Blake. "Not so bad. Wonder why he turned rusty over Dig's remark?"

"Oh, I don't know! Bit sensitive, p'r'aps. Put your tie straight, Gussy."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Again the sudden remark was successful, and D'Arcy flushed.

"Blake," he exclaimed, "you are a wottah! I shall administrah a feahful thwashin', if you don't stop your wicidilous wemarks!"

Jack Blake held both hands up in appeal.

"Oh, Gussy!"

Bang!

"Here's the gent!" cried Tom Merry.

Monty Lowther and the new boy came in.

"That's right!" said Manners. "I like to see a new kid make himself useful."

Dane laughed as he placed his parcels on the table.

"Always glad to oblige, you know."

"That's the ticket! You keep that up, and you'll find plenty to do," said Tom Merry, with a grin. "What a long time you've been! You chaps haven't been scoffing the tarts on the stairs? Let's have a look at your mouth, Monty."

"You go and boil yourself!" retorted Lowther. "What the—"

Monty Lowther had been standing close to Dane, and he jumped back suddenly.

"Ow! You silly ass!" shouted Digby. "That's my beastly toe, when you've done with it!"

"Hold him!" cried Manners.

"He's gone off his chump!"

Everyone stared at Lowther in astonishment, but the latter kept his eyes fixed on Clifton Dane.

"What's the matter?" demanded the new boy in a puzzled tone of voice. "Anything strange about me?"

"Yes, there is!" muttered Monty Lowther. "What have you got in your pocket?"

"Here, that's a bit strong, Monty!" cried Tom Merry indignantly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

To the amazement of the others, Dane went into a fit of laughter.

"Have they beastly well gone potty?" grunted Manners.

"What the dickens is Lowther pointing at?"

"Ow!"

Jack Blake suddenly retreated from his proximity with the new boy, with a startled exclamation.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What the policeman's the matter?" demanded Tom Merry.

Jack Blake cocked his head on one side and stared fixedly at Dane's coat-pocket.

Everyone followed his glance, and all noticed a strange thing.

A series of buttons were set close together along the top of the pocket.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed D'Arcy, interested at once. "Is that the latest, deah boy?"

In his anxiety to assure himself of the exact position and number of the buttons, the swell of St. Jim's bent down to examine.

"Wathah a good id— Bai Jove, it's alive!"

"What?" said Tom Merry.

In his astonishment, the swell of St. Jim's dropped his monocle.

"Bai Jove!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Dane's pocket was alive! His jacket was fairly jumping from his side.

"Would you like to see what I've got here?"

"Yes, rather!"

"I bet it's a white rat!"

"Or some mice!"

"Guess again!" exclaimed the new boy, as he unbuttoned his pocket. "There you are!"

"Ow!"

"Good— Snakes!" gasped Herries.

"Will they—will they bite?" asked Manners, surveying the little wriggling bodies doubtfully.

Snakes in Study No. 6 were not by any means an every-day occurrence.

"No. Look here, they're as tame as anything. You're not afraid of a harmless little snake, are you? Catch hold."

Arthur Augustus promptly withdrew as the new boy thrust a sinuous, twisting reptile towards him.

"Thanks, deah boy," he gasped. "I—I don't care for weptiles! Bai Jove!"

"They won't hurt you!" exclaimed Dane. "Fancy not liking snakes! They're fine!"

No one seemed particularly anxious to handle the new boy's pets, so he returned them to his pocket, and busied himself in helping to arrange the table.

Jack Blake occupied the adjacent seat to Dane's, and every now and again he cast suspicious and sidelong glances at the buttoned pocket.

"It's all right!" exclaimed the new boy. "Don't be alarmed. They have gone to sleep by now."

"Oh, I'm not alarmed!" said Blake airily. "I dare say," he added, "they're all right when one gets used to them. Something like Tom's face—wants getting accustomed to."

"All right, old son!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "We'll have a look at your interesting counting-house—when the lights are low. How are you getting on, Dane? Help yourself. Don't wait on ceremony, you know."

During the rest of the meal the juniors chatted merrily, and the new boy contributed his share in recounting some of the hunting adventures of his father.

"It must be jolly to live out in North America always!" said Tom Merry. "We had a taste of it, you know, but not for long. We didn't see much big game, though."

"No," replied Dane; "most of it has been shot, and the land stolen," he added bitterly. "By the way, you chaps, I rather— Well, you remember Herries said something about my being English—"

"It wasn't Herries," put in Jack Blake. "It was Digby."

"Sorry!" said Dane, with a smile. "But look here"—the same strange haughtiness came over his manner—"I'm half-and-half; my mother is a pure Indian—a Huron!"

"A Huron?" exclaimed Tom Merry. "By Jove, that's jolly!"

The new boy gave Tom a smile that was almost sad.

"You mean that?"

"Why, of course! What do you suppose?"

"Oh, I don't know! I—I thought perhaps you chaps would not be keen on a fellow who—"

"Rubbish!" retorted Tom Merry sharply. "Why, you're not ashamed, are you?"

Dane's eyes flashed, and he seemed about to flare up.

"It's all my fault!" he said, after a pause. "I—"

"You shouldn't make up your mind that we're a set of rotters before you know," said Jack Blake quietly. "What the dickens does it matter what a chap is, so long as he's decent? Look at Gussy, for instance. Why, he's blue-blooded, and all that kind of thing, yet quite passable when you get used to his little ways. Of course, he can't help being the son of a beastly earl, any more than you can help being the daughter of a ch— I mean the son of a chi— The son of a daughter of a chief. That's it!"

"Getting a bit mixed, Blake!" said Tom Merry. "You had better take a rest. Who are you going to dig with, Dane? You're in the Fourth, aren't you?"

"I asked Dr. Holmes to let me come into your study; but he said it couldn't be managed."

The Terrible Three exchanged glances. Much as they liked the new boy, he was more or less an unknown quantity, and then there was always the risk that the introduction of a new-comer might split up the old comradeship.

"No," observed Tom Merry. "We're a bit cramped, as it is. I wonder where he'll put you? You're welcome to share our study till you're settled—eh?"

"Rather!" agreed Manners and Lowther heartily.

"Tap, tap, tap!"

"Come in, fa—" cried Manners. "Oh, I beg your pardon!"

Mr. Railton, the School House master, came in, and Lowther sat bolt upright and removed his feet from the mantelpiece.

"Ah, I see you're here, Dane! Dr. Holmes has decided that you share the study with Gore and Skimpole."

A dead silence greeted this announcement.

Dane set his jaw, and the others looked anywhere but at the new boy.

"For a time," concluded Mr. Railton. "Later on perhaps some other arrangement can be made. You will be rather crowded as it is, but all the other studies have their full complement."

There was a tone of regret in the master's voice, although he was unaware that Dane had already made the acquaintance of the cad of St. Jim's.

"Good-night, boys! Don't forget your prep."

"Oh, no, sir!" exclaimed Tom Merry, springing to his feet, and opening the door.

"I won't!" exclaimed Dane, in an angry voice, as the door closed. "I won't share a study with that beast! And who's the other chap?"

"Skimpole. He's quite harmless."

"No, no! I don't mean him. I mean the chap I—"

The new boy stopped and stared moodily into the fire.

"I suppose you're thinking of Mellish?" said Tom Merry.

"Well, he is a bit of a toad, I must admit."

"I don't know what his name is," muttered Dane. "All I know is, he's a mean, crawling skunk."

"Hallo, you've met him, then!" exclaimed Jack Blake.

"Yes, I have!" Dane gave a grim smile at the recollection of Mellish's yell of fright. "Oh, yes, I've seen him, right enough!"

"Well, old chap," said Lowther, "the best thing you can do is to make the best of a bad job. It's no good bucking against the Head. Besides, I should say you can take care of yourself. Clump their heads if they try any tricks. Gore looked as if he'd run against something jolly hard when I came in."

"Shove one of your snakes down his throat," suggested Digby.

"Rather rough on the snake," said Tom Merry, with a laugh. "Hallo, you chaps, look at the time!"

"By-bye!" exclaimed Lowther. "Jove, we shall have to do our prep. before breakfast! That's a thing you escape for once, Dane. Make the most of your giddy holiday."

"What are you going to do with your snakes?" inquired Manners. "You're not going to take them to bed with you, are you?"

"Oh they'll be all right," said Dane. "They'll sleep in my pocket, as usual."

"Oh!" said Merry, doubtfully.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed D'Arcy. "The weptiles won't twy to escape, will they? It would be wathah wotten to wake up in the middle of the night, you know, with a beastly weptile crawling ovah your chest!"

"Ugh!" grunted Jack Blake as they trooped out.

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CHAPTER 3. Gore's Olive Branch.

"HAVE you heard?"

"What?" snapped Gore, as he swept some of Skimpole's precious books on social reform to the floor.

"Why, the news, of course! The new chap is coming into our study. I heard Merry and Lowther talking about it as they came down the stairs."

"What," roared Gore savagely, "that nigger in here? We'll make it so hot for him that he won't stay long!"

Contrary to the expectations of the Terrible Three and Blake & Co., the night had passed without any untoward occurrence in the shape of snakes, and Dane's pets had slept as peacefully and a good deal quieter than the juniors.

Since the encounter in the hall the previous evening, Gore and Mellish had discreetly avoided meeting the new boy, but thoughts of revenge had not left their minds, and it was for the express purpose of concocting some scheme, that the two had made their way to their study immediately after dressing.

Neither Gore nor Mellish spent much time over washing, and they relied on a good ten minutes before Skimpole would be likely to come in.

"Not if I know it!" growled Gore, scowling at Mellish. "Why didn't you go for the beast last night, instead of running away?"

"You've got a lot to talk about, haven't you?" sneered Mellish. "You did a mighty lot, didn't you?"

"Who are you talking to?" snorted the bully threateningly. "You mind what you're about, or—"

Mellish shrank back before the cad of St. Jim's gesture.

"I—I didn't mean anything, Gore," he whined. "What are you going to do?"

"Something you haven't the pluck to do, anyway," growled Gore. "Shut up that beastly snivel!"

"I've got a cold," said Mellish sniffing more than ever. "If you had a wretched cold, you'd snivel."

"Go, and take your beastly cold with you!" shouted Gore. "I'm fed up with your complaints! Go and drown yourself!"

"Can't I help you?" suggested Mellish meekly. "I'm sure we could think of a good wheeze between us."

"You think of anything!" retorted Gore, curling his lip. "All you can think about is to save your own skin, and leave me to face the music."

"He, he—"

"You laugh at me!" roared Gore, springing forward. "Ow!"

Just as the bully darted round the table after Mellish, the door opened, and Gore stopped it with his nose.

"You—fatheaded lump of idiocy!" he yelled, glaring at Skimpole over his handkerchief. "You—you—"

"I am exceedingly sorry, Gore," said Skimpole. "But, you see, I was unaware of your proximity, otherwise, of course, I should have waited before entering. Are you much hurt?"

"Shut up!"

"But I am sincerely—"

"Oh, shut up!" repeated Gore. "Go and bury yourself in some of your mouldy, crack-brained books! Don't stand there blinking at me!"

"Dear me!" murmured the scientist of St. Jim's. "I fear you are in a bad temper this morning."

The entry of the brainy one, if it had proved inconvenient to Gore, served one good purpose in preventing the onslaught on Mellish, for Gore dared not attack him while Skimpole was there, for he had knowledge of Mellish's habit of blurring out uncomfortable facts when driven too far, so the cad of St. Jim's held his nose, and kicked the furniture.

He was thus pleasantly engaged when the door opened again, and Dane entered.

"Morning!" he said cheerily.

"Good-morning!" replied Skimpole. "Are you busy just now? I should like to hear your views on the social questions of the day."

Clifton Dane stared at the junior in dumb surprise.

"I—I'm afraid I don't take much interest in social problems," he said, at last. "Besides, I'm rather busy just now. Where can I put my books?"

Skimpole peered over his glasses in the direction of Gore, but that worthy turned his back and kicked the fireirons.

"Oh, never mind, then!" said Dane. "I'll fix them somehow. Don't you trouble!"

The new boy looked round the study, but with the exception of Skimpole's little table, there seemed to be nothing but rubbish occupying every available space.

"Whose rubbish is that?" he inquired, pointing to a mass of books without covers, broken boxes, and dusty litter occupying a shelf by the mantelpiece.

"You leave that alone!" grunted Gore.

"I asked whose it was," said the new-comer calmly.

"It's mine, if you want to know!"

"Well, perhaps you will be good enough to throw the stuff away!"

"Sha'n't!"

"If you won't, I will, then!" retorted Dane, advancing.

The cad of St. Jim's looked unutterable things, but made no move, and his precious accumulation of rubbish was flung piecemeal into a corner.

There was nothing of any possible value whatever, but Dane made sure, by examining each handful. It was more than Gore deserved, but the new boy, if somewhat inclined to take a high hand, had a strict sense of justice.

Skimpole regarded the proceedings with mild surprise, and Mellish sniggered to himself. In his mean, little heart he hated Gore, and while he toadied to him, he took a keen delight in Gore's discomfiture, especially when it did not in any way suggest danger to his own precious skin.

"Phew! What a dust!" exclaimed Dane, as he finished clearing the shelf. "I shall just have time to arrange my stuff before breakfast."

"I'll help—" started Skimpole.

"Get out of the way," said Gore, in a muffled voice, as he shouldered Skimpole aside.

Dane eyed him narrowly. He was prepared for any sly move.

"Look here," said Gore, "you've got to share this study with us, and—and—"

"Yes?"

"Well, we may as well be friends. I don't want to stir up trouble. That affair of last night was only a joke, and you needn't have lost your temper over it."

Mellish stared with open mouth.

Gore offering to be friends! Gore apologising! The thing seemed impossible.

"I don't care for jokes, as you call them, not of that kind," said Dane slowly, and giving a searching glance at the bully's face. "However, if you wish to be"—friends, he was going to say, but somehow the word stuck—"if you wish to be amiable, and leave me alone, I don't bear any malice."

"Shake hands, then," said Gore.

Dane took the proffered hand. It was not over clean, but it was not the dirtiness that made a shiver run down his back.

"It was just like shaking hands with a fish," he told Tom Merry afterwards.

"That's all right, then!" said Gore, with an affectation of blushing good humour. "We shall get on famously now. What's that book?"

"My diary," replied Dane briefly.

"Do you keep a diary? So do I!" exclaimed Skimpole eagerly. "I find it a most useful and entertaining occupation."

"That's more than I do, then," replied Dane, with a laugh. "I don't think I've written anything in it for a month, at least. I started it all right."

The amateur Socialist looked very disappointed at this frank admission, but he brightened up considerably as Dane continued.

"But I shall start again now, I think. There wasn't much to put in on the voyage over."

The diary was placed on the shelf, and then Dane took up an album and tucked it carefully in a corner.

Gore eyed the proceedings with interested eyes.

"What's that?" he inquired.

This loquaciousness was peculiar for Gore, but Dane did not, of course, see anything very unusual.

"You're very inquisitive," he answered. "It's an album—photographs, you know."

"Oh!" said Gore indifferently. "We'd better be getting down to breakfast now."

"Right you are," said Dane. "I must wash my hands, first."

The three left the study together.

"There's the bath-room," said Gore, as they went down the corridor. "Look sharp!"

When Dane found his way to the hall, breakfast had just started, and he stood for a moment wondering where he was going to sit.

A piece of bread struck him in the eye, and he started indignantly; then his eye lighted on the grinning face of Tom Merry, and his face lighted up instantly.

"There you are!" said Tom Merry, in a loud whisper. "We've kept a seat for you. Buck up, or we shall wolf all the grub!"

CHAPTER 6.

Taggles is Terrified.

DURING the meal Gore sat very silent, and he gobbled up his food in such good time that he was the first to reach the door at the conclusion of the meal. There was only about five minutes' interval between breakfast and class, but the cad of St. Jim's made the most of his time.

He was up the stairs and at the door of his study long before the Terrible Three left the hall. It was not for nothing that the cad of St. Jim's had put on the amiable with the new boy, and he rubbed his hands together and grinned evilly as he surveyed Dane's possessions.

"I'll make the cocky beast sit up!" he muttered. "Wonder what he's got in his precious album?"

With scant ceremony Gore dragged the book from the shelf, and casually turned the thick pages.

"Hum!" he murmured. "Suppose that's his pater. What's this? A blessed Indian!"

Gore had turned another page, and he looked with surprise at the picture. He was not blessed with much sense of beauty, but he felt a vague feeling of shame come over him as he examined the dark, handsome face, and the eyes of the photograph seemed to meet his own with an expression of scorn.

"Bah!" he growled. "For two pins I'd fling the thing into the fire. No, that's too risky. I suppose he'd kick up a hullabaloo if he missed the beastly thing. I know!"

Skimpole's pot of paste caught his eye, and he smiled softly.

"Just the thing!" he muttered, grabbing the brush and daubing the sticky stuff all over the pages of the album.

"Close that together, like that," he went on, suiting the action to the word, "and I bet he'll get a bit of a shock when he trots out his album!"

The book was replaced on the shelf, and, well satisfied with his cowardly trick, Gore made for the door.

"Oh, yes, we're getting on famously—I don't think!" he said to himself as he slunk down the corridor.

Without exciting any comment, he joined the last few stragglers going into the class-room, and took his seat.

"Where have you been to?" inquired Mellish, in a whisper.

"Shut up! Mind your own business!" returned Gore fiercely. "I've been to wash my hands."

Mellish gave a sniff, and turned away.

"All right, you beauty!" he muttered to himself. "I'll be even with you. You think you can do just as you like. We'll see about that!"

Gore's apparent industry that morning was exceptional. He kept his nose fixed on his lessons, and carefully avoided catching Dane's glance. There was something too searching for his liking in the new boy's way of looking at him, and although he cast the idea from him with contempt, he could not quite rid himself of the feeling that the brilliant black eyes could read into his scheming brain.

Mr. Latham took the class that morning, and devoted most of his time to putting Dane through his paces.

"You will remain in the Fourth, Dane," he said, as the bell rang "Dismiss!"

Tom Merry thumped the new boy on the back as they went out into the sunlit quad.

"Then you got through that all right," he cried. "Here, Reilly, a new chap!"

Reilly's keen Irish eyes took in the appearance of Dane at a glance, and he held out his hand impulsively.

"Sure, an' it's glad I am to meet you!" he said. "You'll be after taking a walk round wid me, an' Oi'll show you the sights av St. Jim's. Bedad, an' it's toired intirely av Tom's face that you must be!"

"You're very funny this morning!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Half a mo'! Here's Kerr. May as well introduce you to the whole menagerie now we're about it. Here, Kerr!"

The sturdy Scot grinned slowly, and put out a hard fist. He was not so quick to like or dislike as Pat, but his friendship or hatred took some shifting once it was given.

"Who's Master Dane? Ho, are you 'im?" grunted Taggles, the school porter, shuffling up.

"Yes, I'm Dane. What do you want?"

"Ho, there's a big box come hup from Rylcombe."

"Yes?"

"Hi said as there's a box for you!" repeated Taggles, in an injured tone.

"Go hon!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "You don't say! Fancy that, now! He wants you to tip him," he added, in a low voice.

Dane nodded, and put his hand in his pocket. Taggles wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Better have a look at it first," said Tom Merry. "Taggles might forget to take it up for you."

"Hi never forget, Master Merry," said the porter, with a grunt of dignified disapproval as the coin was returned to Dane's pocket. "Hi—"

"Oh, cut your cackle!" exclaimed Tom. "Let's go down to the lodge."

Followed by Taggles, they proceeded to the gates.

"I say," said Tom Merry cautiously, "got your snakes?"

Dane nodded, and gazed at Tom Merry inquiringly.

"I believe old Taggles has been drinking too much tea!" said Tom mysteriously. "If so, your pets will frighten him off for a time. Just listen to him mumbbling and grunting to himself, artful old dodger!"

As they went into the lodge, Tom Merry cast a glance round the quad, and he smiled as he saw Gore and Mellish standing in a remote corner by the tool-shed, talking and gesticulating energetically.

"Nice pair of beauties! How did you get on this morning? Did Gore give you any of his cheek?"

"No, he was quite amiable. Offered to shake hands!"

"Oh, he did, did he?" replied Tom, in surprise. "I wonder what his little game is?" he thought to himself.

Probably Tom Merry would have wondered still more had he overheard the conversation that was taking place at that particular moment between Gore and Mellish. He was to learn the result of that confab later.

"Bedad, an' where's the box?"

"That's it," said Dane, pointing to a small cabin trunk. "The other stuff was in the hold, and, I suppose, will come on later."

"Why, I could carry that up on my little finger!" exclaimed Tom Merry, for the benefit of Taggles, who stood in the doorway. "Let's take it up ourselves. It'll save you the trouble, Taggles."

The three grinned as the school porter shuffled hastily forward.

"You can't do that, Master Merry. It's 'eavier nor wot it looks, an' you might injure your innards with the strain of liftin' a 'eavy box like that 'ere. It ain't the size of it; it's the weight. I never seed such a 'eavy box for its size, that I ain't!"

"Oh, I don't think we shall hurt!" said Tom gravely. "Catch hold of that end, Dane!"

Tom Merry upended the box, but before Dane could raise his end Taggles got in front of him. Whether it was his eagerness, or what it was, will never be known; but somehow he stumbled and lurched against Tom Merry.

The leader of the Shell went staggering, and as his hands lost their hold on the box a blood-curdling yell came from Taggles.

"Ho—ow—wo!"

"I'm awfully sorry—" began Tom Merry.

"Oooh! My foot's broke, I know it is!" howled the porter. "I shall never be able to walk again, I know I sha'n't!" he added, hopping about, first on one leg and then the other.

For a little while the juniors were really sympathetic; but as Taggles moaned and piled up one lamentation on top of another, they grew suspicious. He was a little too expressive and inventive for a man suffering from a broken foot, and it dawned on Tom that the "accident" was nothing more than a ruse to make him drop the box.

There had been no intention in the chums' minds of carrying up the box themselves, and so doing the porter out of a tip, and when Taggles, with many a groan, rubbed first his left foot, and then a minute later his right, Tom Merry grinned and whispered to Dane:

"Will those little snakes of yours go for your pocket?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Well, listen, then!" Tom muttered a few words, and then Kerr heard: "Now, give me one of them. Don't let the old rascal see, though. Sure they won't bite?"

"No fear! Here you are!"

A shiver ran up Tom Merry's arm, and he nearly let go as Dane slipped one of the wriggling little bodies into his hand. But, in the cause of justice, or for a lark, Tom never flinched, and he held the snake firmly as he walked to the table.

Kerr and Reilly saw the transfer, and the Irishman nearly gave the show away when he saw the little reptile in Tom's hand; but a warning glance from Tom and a dig in the ribs from Kerr kept him silent, all but for a muttered "Be jabbers!"

Dane took up his position at the other end of the table, and carelessly rested his coat-pocket on the edge, Kerr and Reilly standing by his side.

All this had not taken a minute, and Taggles was still groaning to himself. The tinkle of a coin brought him upright with a jerk, and he forgot to continue his moans.

"There you are, Taggles!" said Tom, as he flung a shilling down on the deal table. "On second thoughts, we won't take the box up ourselves. Does your foot hurt you very much?"



As the table continued to crack, Arthur Augustus leaped desperately on to the mantelpiece. "Bai Jove!" he gasped. "I shall insist on those w'etched weptiles bein' kept in a cage!"

The porter had already taken a couple of steps towards the table, and he immediately limped the rest of the way.

"Thankee, Master Merry! It do 'urt above a bit; but there, I don't think as 'ow anything's broke."

"I'm glad of that!" replied Tom drily.

Taggles reached the table, and his hand hovered over the coveted shilling. A greeny-brown body flashed from Tom's hand, the porter gave a horrified gurgle of fright, and leaped back from the table.

"Ha, ha, ha! Pretty slick for a chap with an injured foot!" cried Merry. "Why, what's the matter, Taggles?"

The porter was standing with his back flat against the wall, his eyes fixed on the shilling. Dane lounged away from the table. The little experiment had succeeded beyond their expectation, for the snake had vanished before Taggles had recovered from the shock he had received when its cold body had slipped beneath his fingers.

"What's the matter with you?" repeated Tom Merry.

"He's howling up the wall!" suggested Reilly.

"Ye dinna look verra well!" said Kerr, with an air of grave concern.

Taggles shuddered, and passed a hand over his forehead. "I'll sign the pledge, I will!" he muttered. "I'll never touch another—"

"Shall I get you a glass of water?" said Dane.

"Ugh! No—no, thank you kindly!" mumbled the porter, in a great hurry. "I'm feeling a bit better now. The weather an' fog is that tryin'!"

"Ha, ha, ha! It's been a bit wet of late!" chuckled Tom Merry, as they made for the door. "We've left the bob there," he said, as they crossed the quad. "I wonder if the old rascal will summon up his courage to pick it up? By Jingo, I wish we could have stayed!"

"So do I!" said Kerr, as they reached the class-room door. "Queer, him being so scared! It was only a harmless little snake, after all."

When the juniors had gone, Taggles dragged himself from the wall and looked round suspiciously. A piece of coal dropped from the grate, and he jumped with fright.

"Oh, I don't see no more!" he muttered. "Hit must 'ave been a blessed hillusion! I feel that bad!"

A visit to the cupboard by the side of the fireplace, and

the application of a black squat bottle to his lips, brought the porter to his normal state again with surprising quickness, and he snorted contemptuously as he walked boldly to the table and grabbed the coin.

"Bah!" he muttered. "Hit's my heyes! I believe the left 'un is a bit gorn. Hi shall have to wear a heye-glarse." The porter picked up a tumbler and squinted through the bottom of it.

"Hum!" he grunted, focussing the glass on the table. "Looks small, but natcheral en—"

"Taggles!"

"The 'Ead!" grunted Taggles. "Yessir!" he cried, in such a fluster that he put the glass in his pocket, as he hurried to the door. "Comin', sir!"

Dr. Holmes gave Taggles some directions, and then just as he turned away he caught sight of the rim of the tumbler.

"Taggles," he exclaimed, in surprise, "what is that?"

"Wot, sir?"

"What have you in your pocket?"

"Me, sir? Nothink, sir!"

"What's that?" repeated the Head severely.

Taggles stared at the accusing finger pointed at his pocket.

"Oh, that's a glarse, sir. Hi was just tryin' my sight, sir."

For a moment the Head stared at the porter in silence.

"I believe that you are well-accustomed to looking through the bottom of a glass, Taggles," he said, in cutting accents, "but please do not endeavour to impose upon me an untruth."

"Hi—"

"Not another word!" snapped the head-master. "Go about your work at once!"

Before the astounded and indignant porter could utter another word of protest the doctor had stalked away.

Strange to say, Taggles found no comfort in the knowledge that if the implied accusation of the Head was wrong in the letter it was true in the spirit—in fact, he considered himself a very much injured person.

CHAPTER 7.

Did He Fall or Was He Pushed?

"DON'T fidget!"

Mr. Ratcliff, taking the class that afternoon, rapped out the words with unusual acerbity.

"Kerr, I have told you before! This is the sixth time. Can't you sit still?"

The Scottish member of the New House flushed, and with evident effort, buried his nose in his book.

For a time the lesson went on undisturbed. Then Mr. Ratcliff brought his pointer down on the desk with a force that made everybody jump.

"Kerr! The seventh time! Take a hundred lines!"

Kerr took the hundred lines—he couldn't help it. But in the eyes of the master he could help the curious little wriggle that followed the imposition.

"Two hundred! I think you will get tired before I shall!" said Mr. Ratcliff, with sarcasm.

"Ratty's out for trouble!" whispered Tom Merry. "I wonder what's the matter with Kerr? Look!"

Figgins glanced at his chum.

"Merry, you will take one hundred and fifty lines. You can't talk and attend to your work. One hundred and fifty, I said. Figgins, you will find the bench-board of more interest than Kerr. Take the same number of lines, in order to fix your attention. Now we will proceed, and—"

Fatty Wynn was sitting next to Kerr, and he suddenly gave a little yelp.

Mr. Ratcliff glared.

"Are you in pain, Wynn?"

"Yes—no—no, sir!"

"Well, then, perhaps a hundred lines will help you to restrain yourself from repeating that noise."

It was noticeable after his outburst that the Falstaff of St. Jim's had edged away from Kerr, and that the latter's face bore an expression very much akin to that usually expressive of the proximity of some very noxious medicine.

The master ascribed Kerr's expression to the imposition he had inflicted, but the Terrible Three and the others were under no such erroneous impression; but exactly what was the matter they could not divine. They noticed that Kerr still shifted uneasily in his seat, and from time to time glanced nervously at his pocket.

For the next three minutes Mr. Ratcliff was busily engaged at the blackboard, and although he was reputed to have eyes in the back of his head, he did not observe the little note that Kerr wrote and passed along.

Neither did he notice Tom Merry grin when he read the contents of the bit of paper, and glanced at the sender.

As the missive was passed from hand to hand, the grin was repeated, and those who did not have a sight of the note craned their heads forward, eaten up with curiosity.

Kerr watched the progress of his note, or rather message—for such it was—with obvious impatience, and he made an energetic gesture in the direction of Clifton Dane.

"Pass this on to Dane," whispered Reilly, with a nudge of his elbow in the side of Arthur Augustus. "Go on, fathead! Pass it on!"

The swell of St. Jim's glared at the Irishman indignantly. "Keep your howwid elbow to yourself! I absolutely we—"

"One hundred lines for talking in class, D'Arcy!" said Mr. Ratcliff, without turning round.

Reilly whisked the note under the desk, and Arthur Augustus, with the dignity of a Vere de Vere, concentrated all his attention in preserving a calm exterior.

"Wottah!" he muttered.

Reilly was now in a difficulty, and he glowered at the glacial expression of D'Arcy's face. This, however, had no effect, so, with the pugnacity of his race, the Irish boy tried to pass the note over and behind the swell of St. Jim's head.

His sleeve brushed against the carefully parted locks, and Arthur Augustus gave an involuntary jump and a gasp.

Reilly overbalanced, and, in endeavouring to save himself from disaster, clutched D'Arcy affectionately around the neck.

Back went Arthur Augustus, his toes crashed against the desk, his knees gave way, and a gasp of horror went up as the whole form went bump to the floor.

The sudden noise, the spectacle of the first row of boys in his class squirming beneath the form on the floor nearly sent Mr. Ratcliff—never at the best of times very amiable into a fit with rage.

"What, what, what—"

"Ow, ow!"

"Gerrof my head, Fatty!"

"Get up at once!" roared Mr. Ratcliff.

"Ow! Get your foot out of my mouth!"

"This—this must stop instantly!" cried the master. "I won't have it! I—"

Mr. Ratcliff made a step towards his desk.

"Look out, chaps!" muttered Tom Merry. "Ratty's after his stick!"

With surprising suddenness six juniors scrambled to their feet.

"Who—who committed this outrage?" exclaimed Mr. Ratcliff. "I demand to know instantly! Answer me!"

No one could quite tell how it had all happened, and consequently the question was answered—with unbroken silence.

"I—I think I fell, sor!" said Reilly at last.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "If you will allow me to explain the posish of affairs, Mr. Watchliff. I—"

"Silence, D'Arcy!" snapped Mr. Ratcliff. "Don't address me in that ridiculous fashion!"

"Weally, Mr. Watchliff, I—"

"Silence, D'Arcy!" snapped Mr. Ratcliff. "Don't hundred lines! Proceed, Reilly. Let me see. You fell. Well, and what made you fall?"

"Did he fall or was he pushed?" muttered Monty Lowther.

A titter rippled along the class.

"What did you say, Lowther?" exclaimed Mr. Ratcliff, who, if he had not eyes in the back of his head, had inconveniently sharp hearing. "What did you say?"

"I—I—" stammered Lowther.

"Go on!"

"I—I said 'Did he fall—'"

"Was that all?"

"Or—or was he pushed?" concluded Monty Lowther desperately.

There was an ominous silence.

"Did—he—fall—or—was—he—pushed?"

Mr. Ratcliff repeated the words slowly and with great deliberation.

Tom Merry was seized with a terrible desire to laugh, but he fixed his eyes on the master's grim face, and it cured him at once.

"Have you any reason for suggesting that Reilly was pushed?"

"Oh, no, sir!" exclaimed Lowther truthfully enough.

"Well, then," snapped Mr. Ratcliff, with an air of having got the best of an argument, "why did you suggest that he might have been?"

Monty Lowther gazed about him helplessly.

"Since you did not see," said the master majestically, "it is only charitable to suppose that Reilly fell. To infer

that he was pushed is to ascribe to one of your fellow-scholars an unkindly action."

Monty Lowther gave a grunt of despair.

Mr. Ratcliff took this as an expression of regret, forced upon Lowther by his lucid analysis, and he felt flattered; and Mr. Ratcliff flattered was like a lamb.

Flattery was certainly not usual to any one of the Terrible Three. They had no conception of what was working in the master's mind, and no one was more astonished than Lowther when Mr. Ratcliff bade him sit down.

"Funny bird, isn't it?" muttered Manners. "I made sure you were in for a wiggling that time."

During the "accident" and the subsequent cross-examination of Monty Lowther, Kerr and his note were completely forgotten, and it was not until all were seated again and Mr. Ratcliff had resumed his interrupted work at the blackboard that Tom Merry noticed the lugubrious expression on Kerr's face, and remembered the written message to Dane. He leaned forward and prodded Reilly in the back of the neck with his penholder.

"Have you got it?" he whispered.

Reilly twisted round cautiously.

"Got what?"

"The note!"

"Sure, an' I'd forgot entoirely it's myself that's dhropped ut!"

With extreme caution, Reilly peered under the desk. The missive was nowhere to be seen.

"There it is!" whispered Tom Merry. "Jingo! I hope Ratty doesn't see it!"

The leader of the Fourth pointed to the raised platform whereupon Mr. Ratcliff was busily engaged.

The little twisted scrap of paper lay just behind him, and the juniors gazed at it with fascinated eyes.

The discovery of the note would be the last drop in Mr. Ratcliff's cup of bitterness, and they knew full well that awful penalties would descend on their heads if his wrath overflowed again.

Arthur Augustus rose to the occasion in both senses, and the juniors fairly gasped at his audacity as they saw him rise from his seat and deliberately walk round to the front, pick up the paper, and place it in his pocket.

There was not a sound as he turned to go back, and although his footsteps rang clearly on the bare boards, it did not seem to strike Mr. Ratcliff that anything strange and out of the way was going on until Arthur Augustus had reached the end of the form. Then it happened to dawn on the master that something unusual was taking place, and he wheeled round sharply.

"D'Arcy!"

The swell of St. Jim's stopped, and looked at Mr. Ratcliff with an unruffled air.

"D'Arcy, what are you doing out of your seat?"

The whole class of boys waited, and held their breath. What could he say?

"I went to pick up a piece of papah!" he replied suavely.

"A piece of paper?"

"Yes, Mr. Watchiff."

Mr. Ratcliff was taken aback by the simplicity of D'Arcy's explanation, and the juniors grinned delightedly.

"Why couldn't you wait until the conclusion of the class? How dare you perambulate about the room? This is not a park or a recreation-ground."

"Weally, Mr. Watchiff!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "I am vewwy sowwy, but the papah was wathah important, and I wespetchfully apo—"

"Silence!" exclaimed Mr. Ratcliff, ruffled, yet unable to find any holes in D'Arcy's reasons for quitting his seat. "You will do me two hundred lines for leaving your seat during class!"

"Thank you, Mr. Watchiff!"

There was sincerity in the tone in which this was said, and, in fact, the swell of St. Jim's was really grateful for getting let off so lightly, but Mr. Ratcliff glared.

"Three hundred!" he snapped. "Not another word, or I shall make it five. Sit down at once!"

For a moment it seemed as if Arthur Augustus was going to expostulate, but he evidently changed his mind in time, and took his seat with dignity.

"You're a broth av a bhoj!" whispered Reilly. "An' it's meself that would never have had the pluck av ye!"

The swell of St. Jim's gave a lordly smile. But just then Mr. Ratcliff faced his class again, and Arthur Augustus had no opportunity of passing the precious bit of paper to Dane.

For the rest of the afternoon, the good behaviour of the juniors was exemplary, and even Kerr ceased to wriggle.

Mr. Ratcliff was sharp, insistent, and on the alert for the chance of continuing his distribution of impositions, but the word "Dismiss!" came without any possible excuse for another line, and the boys crowded out of the class-room.

Kerr was one of the first to get out, and he started to whip off his coat.

"Hallo! Going to have a fight with yourself?" inquired Tom Merry.

"No, I'm not," granted Kerr. "Can't you help a chap, instead of standing there grinning?"

"Why, what's the matter? Oh, I know. Ha, ha, ha!"

Kerr did not reply. He stood with his coat held out at arm's length. "Where's that idiot Dane?" he demanded.

"I dunno!" said Blake. "Ask me!"

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Kerr irritably. "Where's that idiot?"

Reilly came up, and stared at the Scotsman.

"Off your onion?" he inquired. "There's your note!"

"I—I don't want the beastly thing!" roared Kerr.

"Where's— Ah, there he is!"

Followed by a stream of juniors, Kerr darted off.

"Hi, Dane!" he yelled.

"Where's the fire?" yelled Figgins, as the junior, still holding his coat in front of him, whisked by.

"Hi, hi! Dane!"

Clifton Dane turned at last, and stepped back as Kerr thrust his coat at him.

"What?"

"Take it!"

"I don't want it. What—"

"It's in my pocket; that beastly snake of yours!"

Dane felt in his own pocket, and then burst into a roar of laughter. Others came up and joined in.

"Take the beastly thing out!" roared Kerr, crimson with a sense of ridicule.

"All right!" exclaimed Dane. "The little beggar wouldn't hurt you. He must have popped into your pocket when we were in the lodge. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ugh!" grunted Kerr, as he took back his coat. "The horrid creature!"

"I thought you said something about not being afraid," said Tom Merry, with a chuckle.

"I'm not afraid!" snorted Kerr indignantly. "I—I don't like the beastly slimy things, that's all."

"Yah," cried a Third-Former, "who's a—"

Kerr made a plunge forward and sprinted after the rash youngster.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Your precious little reptiles are likely to cause trouble," observed Figgins.

"Bai Jove, yes! They're funny little beggahs, but I considah it was vewwy stupid of Kerr to be so beastly fwightened. I—"

"Put your tie straight!" interrupted Jack Blake sharply.

Up went the hand of Arthur Augustus, and Blake promptly turned his back.

"I am tired of that wotten twick!" said the swell of St. Jim's indignantly. "I shall no longah considah you as a fwind. I—"

Blake, Digby, and Herries walked off, and D'Arcy was left to conclude his awful threat to the empty air.

"Hallo! You look as if you'd like to push a 'bus over!" said a disagreeable voice. "Bai Jove!—er—are—er—you awfully angwy?"

Arthur Augustus turned sharply, and glared into the face of the cad of St. Jim's.

Gore laid his hand on the place where his heart was supposed to be, and bowed with the grace of a hippopotamus. He was in a vile temper, and thought to relieve his feelings by trying to take a rise out of Arthur Augustus.

"Wetire!" exclaimed D'Arcy. "You are a cad and a wottah! Go away!"

"Do we tire?" inquired Gore, turning to Mellish. "Is it here that we vanish—disappear?"

"He, he, he!" cackled Mellish, the toady.

"Go on, croak away!" jeered Gore. "Blessed if I can see anything to laugh at. Can you, D'Arcy?"

"I wefuse to speak to you," said Arthur Augustus frigidly, and with a good deal of contempt in his voice and attitude. "Wetire!"

"Ho, ho, ho! Base varlet, begone! Is that what you mean? Why, for two pins I'd knock your head off!"

Arthur Augustus could scarcely believe his ears.

"You would what?" he demanded.

"Oh, go and eat coke!" said Gore rudely. "You heard what I said, funny face!"

"I absolutely wefuse to eat coke! I shall administah a feafuhl thwashin'."

"Go hon! Not really? Ow!"

Smack! Smack!

The cad of St. Jim's gave a bellow of surprise and rage as D'Arcy's hands swept round right and left and cuffed his ears.

"You—you—" spluttered Gore, making a rush. "I'll —"

D'Arcy's fist came out this time, and Gore sat down with a bump.

"Hallo, Gussy! What in the name of goodness are you up to? I thought you'd get into some mischief. That's why I came back. Fighting again? I'm surprised at you." Jack Blake looked at the scowling face of Gore, with a grin. "Run into something, Gore?"

"Awfully glad you have returned, deah boy," said D'Arcy, pulling down his immaculate cuffs. "I was about to administah a feaful thwashin' to this wotten boundah when you awwived, and now I leave the mattah in your hands!"

"Oh, you do, do you?" said Blake. "Not if I know it. You do your own dirty work."

"It's such a beastly fag, deah boy!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "As a special favah, will you—"

"No, I won't!" said Blake promptly. "You mind the cad doesn't biff you one, when you're not looking!"

Gore had now returned to the perpendicular, and he stood for a moment with clenched fists and underjaw thrust out, glaring at Arthur Augustus.

"Huh!" he muttered. "There's two of you now. I'll wait. I'll settle with you some other time, you see!"

Blake made a step forward, but the swell of St. Jim's laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"P'r'aps you're right, Gussy!" said Jack Blake, as he came to a stop. "The cad's not worth the trouble. We'll let him and his precious pal run their heads into a brick wall. Give them enough rope and—"

Although Blake did not know how soon his words were to come true, there was already a rod in pickle for Gore, and, moreover, a rod that he had himself prepared. Of late, the bully of St. Jim's had overreached himself, and a nice little accumulation of retributive justice was gathering like a storm cloud over his head.

"I say, Gussy," remarked Jack Blake, as they made their way upstairs, "Dane has proposed a feed. He wants to return the compliment, you know, and—"

"I considah it most kind, and—"

"Half a mo!" interrupted Blake. "But you will interrupt. He's in Gore's study, and naturally Gore will expect to join in."

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed D'Arcy.

"Of course, he could stand a feed in our study, or Number 1, so far as that goes."

"And, pway, why not?"

"Well, you see, Gore shook hands this morning. Sort of fell on Dane's neck, you know."

"You're wotting!"

"No, I'm not; at least, not so far as the hand-shaking goes. It's right enough."

"But I should regard that as a most outrageously insult."

"Yes, p'r'aps you might. But, you see, Clifton don't know our friend Gore and his little ways quite as well as we do. Come on, fathead! There's a whole crowd waiting in Tom Merry's study!"

"I absolutely wefuse to be designated as a—"

"Oh, dry up! Put your tie straight, Gussy!"

CHAPTER 8.

Dane's Discovery, and Gore's Punishment.

"CAN'T very well invite you to tea and leave Gore and the others out," Clifton Dane was saying, as Arthur Augustus and Blake entered Study No. 1. "It seems rather rough to go back on a chap once he's—well, once he's offered to be friendly."

There was an awkward pause. Neither the Terrible Three, Blake & Co., nor the chums of the New House felt inclined to stir up trouble, and yet not one of them felt he could budge an inch when it came to sitting down at the same table in a friendly spirit with the cad of St. Jim's.

Dane was doubtful—very doubtful in his own mind—as to the genuineness of Gore's overture of the morning, but he had a strong feeling of justice, and acted on the lines of taking others as he found them, rather than from hearsay.

"If it were only Mellish," said Herries, "it wouldn't be so bad."

"Skimpole's all right!"

"Yes, rather! Skimmy's a little bit off the top, but he's decent enough."

"While you're jawing about it, shall I go and order the grub?" said Fatty Wynn.

"Yes. Whatever we decide, we'll have tea, if we have it on the stairs," said Dane. "There you are!"

Fatty Wynn pocketed the coin, and waddled to the door. He was smiling contentedly. At any rate, the promised feed was bound to come off now, if they had to eat it in the box-room.

"I quite understand how you chaps feel about the matter," said Dane, as the door closed on the fat junior,

"and I'm willing to do just what you like. I'll stand Gore and the other chaps a feed to-morrow."

"That's a good wheeze!" exclaimed Figgins.

"Look here," said Tom Merry, noticing that Dane was rather reluctant to leave out his own study. "We'll take a sporting chance. Heads it's tea in Dane's study, tails here!"

"Why not Study No. 6?" shouted Blake. "What's that done?"

"Oh, just as you like! I don't mind! It's for Dane to say, not me!"

"Don't bother, then!" exclaimed Blake, directly he found Tom Merry offered no opposition. "Here will do as well as anywhere—that is, of course, if it's tails!"

"I'm agreeable!" cried Dane. "You toss!"

Tom Merry spun a coin in the air.

"Mind your head, stupid!" he yelled.

"Wow!"

The coin descended on D'Arcy's head, and tinkled to the floor.

"It's a tail!" shouted Monty Lowther. "Hooray!"

Clifton Dane smiled. He was not sorry that the fates had decided for Study No. 1.

"Mewwy!"

"Hallo, what's the matter with you, Gussy?"

"I demand an—"

"Put your tie straight, Gussy!"

The action following Blake's remark was automatic, and the juniors howled with laughter.

Arthur Augustus flushed, and opened and shut his mouth, but what he said, no one ever knew.

In the middle of it all Fatty Wynn came in loaded to the chin with an array of parcels.

A simultaneous rush was made, and the Falstaff was carefully escorted to the table and relieved of his burden.

"Good old Fatty! Trust you for picking out the best!" exclaimed Tom Merry, as he opened bag after bag of tarts and cakes. "These are prime! Eh?"

"I demand!" Arthur Augustus tapped the leader of the Shell on the shoulder. "I—"

"Oh, all right, Gussy! Take my apology, and shut up! I'm busy! Get out the plates."

"Yes, come on, buck up! Make the tea, Manners!" cried Dane.

The merry crowd scuttled about the study, and long before the kettle was boiling, the table was laid, and the provisions temptingly displayed.

It is true that there was a scarcity of china, and the Terrible Three had to make do with a couple of glasses, and a jam-jar instead of teacups, and one or two other little discrepancies of that kind were noticeable, but no one minded, so it did not matter.

While the tea was being made, a crowd gathered round the fireplace. All but Fatty Wynn, who was hovering about the table, unable to drag himself away. He was debating in his own mind which plate held the most tarts, and which would be the most profitable seat, when Dane turned round suddenly and gave a sharp exclamation.

"By Jove, I thought there were twelve of those cream-tarts!"

Fatty Wynn gave a jump.

"Where are those tarts? There are three missing!" said Dane, fixing his piercing black eyes on the fat junior.

"Where are those—"

"I—I—" Fatty Wynn stuttered in his eagerness to disclaim all knowledge of the tarts, and stepped back hurriedly.

A howl of warning came from Lowther, but it was too late. There was a cracking of china, and a yelp and a jump from Fatty.

"There, you've done it now!" cried Tom Merry. "Who the dickens left that pie on the floor?"

Dane was grinning. He had not for a moment suspected Fatty of wolfing the tarts, and the outcome of his experiment had resulted in the unexpected.

Between the excitement of the tarts and the pie, Fatty Wynn was reduced to a state of incoherent utterance.

"There were only nine. It was on the floor. I didn't touch it—I mean them. It was on the floor. I didn't—"

"You put your foot in it, Fatty!"

"You can't deny that!"

"Yes, I know I did!" spluttered Fatty; "but I didn't have one beastly tart. Not one, even!"

"No, I know you didn't!" cried Dane. "I was only having a game with you! Never mind, old chap!"

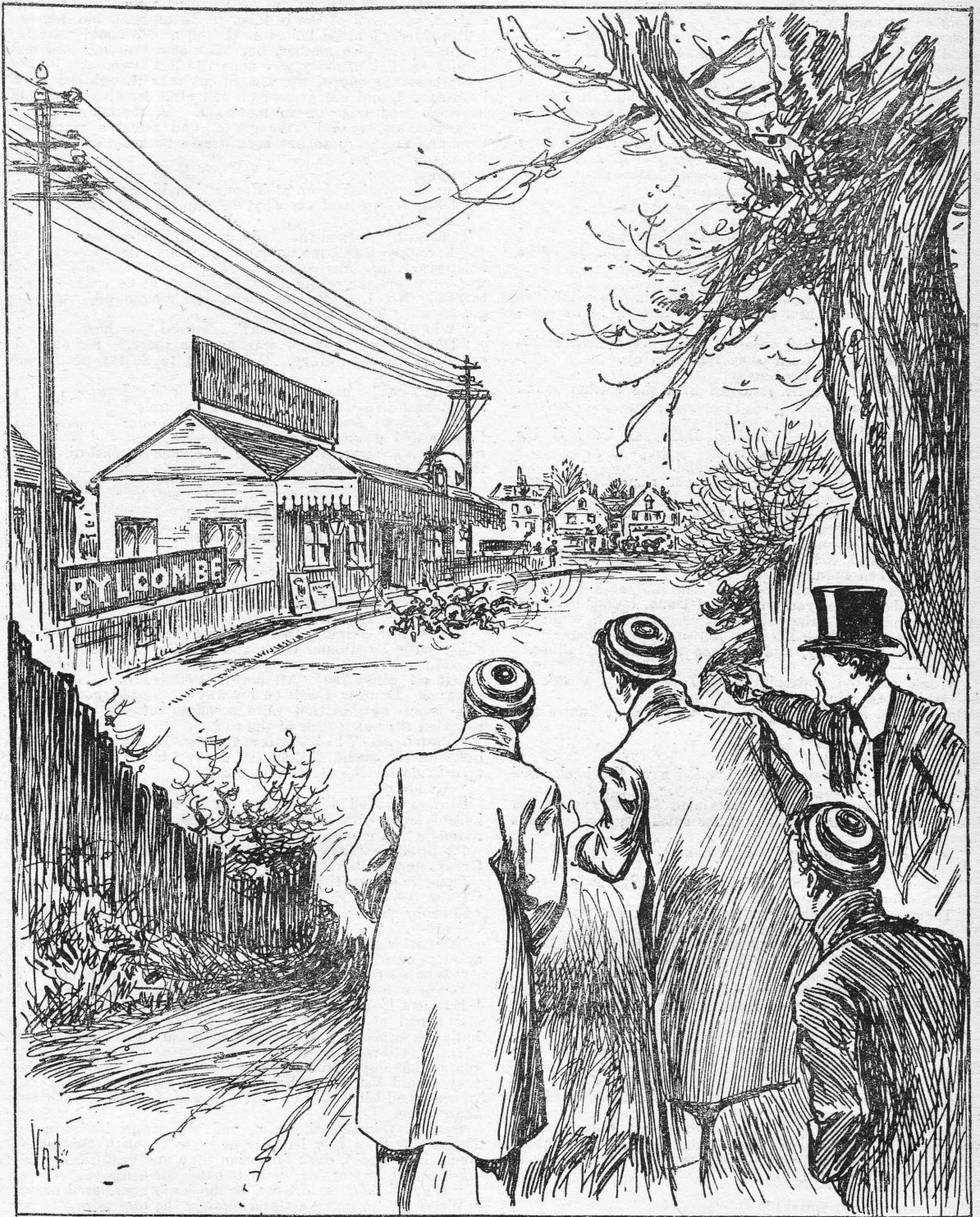
"But the pie! It was such a fine pie!" said Fatty dismally. "Look at it now!"

"Never mind the pie. There's plenty more. Come on."

A start was made, and after the sixth jam-tart, Fatty Wynn's face cleared a little.

"It was a fine pie, though," he muttered, as he stretched out a plump hand towards a pile of sausage-rolls.

"Feeling a little better now, Fatty?" inquired Figgins.



"Buck up St. Jim's!" roared Tom Merry. "It's the village kids having a dust-up!"

Fatty Wynn had his mouth too full to answer. The new boy's feed was voted a great success, and even Fatty Wynn was satisfied, not only from the point of view of quality, but also of quantity, which is saying a great deal.

After the meal was over, the chums of Study No. 6 retired, in company with Figgins & Co.

"Now let's sit down and have a chow!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Make yourself comfy, Dane. Plenty of time to do your prep."

"I'm going to have a go at my camera," said Lowther. "I've got a ripping idea for enlargements."

"All right, you amuse yourself, old son, only don't make a beastly mess, and for goodness' sake keep the corks in the bottles; we don't want the study turned into a menagerie of wild odours."

Monty Lowther snorted with disdain. His admiration for Tom Merry was an unlimited quantity, but when it came

to photography—well, there was no one capable of holding a candle to Monty.

"Say, have you got any photos you want enlarged?" inquired the amateur camerist, after a short interval.

Dane looked up.

"Don't you let him have any if you have!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "The only one I had he turned into such a mess, that you couldn't tell whether it was a cow or a mouse."

"Rubbish!" retorted Monty Lowther. "You know very well that it was faded and cracked when you gave it to me. Besides, the light went wrong. Got any, Dane?"

"Well, I have," said Dane doubtfully.

"Trot 'em out then!"

"They're in my study."

"Well, go and fetch them," said Lowther eagerly. "I'll do you a ripping enlargement. Go on! I want to try a head."

Cliffon Dane looked at Tom Merry.

"It's all right," whispered Tom. "He knows what he's about, only don't tell him I said so, or there'll be no holding him."

Monty Lowther glanced over his enlarging camera at his chum, but his brow cleared when Dane got up.

"Right-ho! I'll get my album!"

In a minute or two he returned with the leather-bound book under his arm.

"See anything of Gore?"

"No, only Skimpole," replied Dane, as he laid his album carefully on the table.

Lowther stretched out an eager hand.

"Half a minute, old chap. I've got a portrait of my mother here. Care to see it?"

The words were uttered with an air of casualness that ill-concealed the pride in the lad's voice.

"Rather!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"I should think so!" said Manners, lifting his head from the book he had been reading.

"Can I make an enlargement from it?" said Lowther.

"I shall be glad if you will," said Dane, laying his hand on the album. "It's the only one I've got, and it would be fine to have a big one. I'll have it framed and hung—"

His voice died away, and his face went deathly white.

"Why—"

"Whatever's the matter?" cried Tom Merry, struck by the straitened tone in the new boy's voice.

Dane licked his dry lips, and his words came hoarse and jerkily.

"I—I can't open it!" he said.

"Let's have a look!"

Without another word Dane handed over the book, and Manners and Lowther watched eagerly.

"Why, it opens all right!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Oh, I see! It's these two pages that are stuck together. That's funny!"

"Must have got damp," said Manners.

Dane shook his head.

"I opened it this morning," he muttered hoarsely.

"You opened it this morning?"

"Then—" Lowther stopped abruptly, and looked at his chums. The thought that was in his mind was reflected in their faces, and with one accord they all turned to Dane.

The new boy looked at them with unseeing eyes, and his face was set like a mask.

Without a word he held out his hand for the book. Tom Merry handed it over, and Dane walked to the door.

"I say—"

The new boy stopped.

"I say," repeated Tom Merry, "you—you won't do anything—anything rotten—I mean, you won't—"

"No," said Dane dully. "I shall be very careful."

The next moment he was gone, and the three eyed one another with unexpressed dismay.

Gore's name had not been mentioned, yet they knew as well as if it had been mentioned that Dane was thinking of the cad as the only one likely to have played him so mean and paltry a trick.

"What a beast!"

"An out-and-out rotter!"

"Ought to be boiled!"

"Serve him right if the Head got to hear of it!"

Monty Lowther turned mechanically to his camera, but it seemed to have lost its charm, and he put his apparatus away in silence.

Tom Merry and Manners sat down in front of the fire and stared into the glowing embers. Their quick sympathies had been aroused, and they felt that the abominable trick that had been played on the new boy was in part a disgrace to themselves and the college. Fun was all right, but a thing of this kind was past excuse. Friendly rivalry and a jape in good season were everyday occurrences, but the destruction of another's property for no good reason

whatever, and especially such a thing as a portrait of one's mother, savoured of the caddish to an unspeakable degree.

Tom Merry's blood boiled at the idea. He could scarcely remember his own mother, but his memory of her and his loyalty to that memory was none the less keen.

Mothers are one of the few things that thoughtless boys keep sacred, and her presence is felt alike by all—at school, at work, and later on in manhood. A mother's love is unquenchable, even by the grave, and many a wanderer from the narrow path has been drawn back by the unseen, intangible power.

"Bah!"

Tom Merry looked up at Manners' sudden exclamation.

"I'll go along and see what he's up to," he said.

"Dane!"

Tom Merry opened the study door and looked in.

"I suppose he's gone out or something," he muttered, as he peered into the room, which was in darkness. "I wonder where the others are?" he mused, as he walked back to Study No. 1. "No one there," he announced, when he got back. "Place all in darkness."

"Where's Gore and Mellish?" inquired Lowther.

"Don't know. There was no one there. Skimmy, I expect, is in the library. I'm going to do my prep. and imposts."

"Right-ho!" assented Manners and Lowther. "I suppose we had better, or there'll be trouble!"

Thoughts of Dane were still in the juniors' minds, but they settled down to work, and nothing but the sound of pens racing scratchily over their exercise-books disturbed the quiet of the study.

CHAPTER 9.

The Conspirators.

"ALL here?"

The conclave seen by Tom Merry in the quad that morning had developed rapidly, and the meeting now being held in surreptitious secrecy in the box-room was the result.

But a few minutes before Dane had returned to his study with his album, Gore and Mellish had slunk out in accordance with the arrangement agreed upon. And now, as Gore's whispered "All here?" sounded in the crowded box-room, Dane was well on his way to the village.

A brief examination of the edges of the book had revealed the handiwork of the cad.

"Pasted up!" had muttered Dane, as he replaced the book on the shelf. "Well, we'll see what a little pasting up will do for the rotter who did it!"

"All here?"

Gore repeated his inquiry in a hoarse whisper, and looked from one to another of the dim faces standing round in the gloom.

"I think so," was Mellish's reply. "There's Brown, and Green, and—"

"Oh, don't go through the whole list!" muttered Gore.

"I can see they're all here. Now, you chaps, just listen, and after you're enrolled, we'll have a feed to celebrate the event."

"What is it?" inquired Clayton. "Is it a giddy conspiracy, or what?"

"Where's the grub?" asked a voice from the gloom.

"Where you can't get it!" retorted Gore sharply. "Business first—feed afterwards!"

The cad of St. Jim's was no fool, however much of a bully he might be, and he had held out the tempting offer of a gorgeous feed in order to insure the attendance of the juniors, and he had been wise enough to realise that they would listen to what he had to say, with far greater interest and likelihood of agreeing with him before the feed than after.

Such was indeed the case, and the prospect of some of Dame Taggle's best had far more to do with the juniors being in the cold, dark box-room than any oratorical power on the part of Gore or his lieutenant, Mellish.

"It's like this," said Gore, as the juniors gathered nearer.

"We've got to make a stand against the oppressor."

The cad of St. Jim's paused to note the effect of his words.

"Say that again, please," said a voice. "To press the what?"

"To stand against the oppressor," repeated Gore sharply.

"Listen, and don't jaw!"

A shuffling step sounded going towards the door.

"Lock the door, Mellish!" commanded Gore.

"I came here for a feed," expostulated Lawson, of the Fourth, who did not care for anything except his own comfort. "I don't want to listen to your longwinded speeches."

"Now you're here you've got to stop!" muttered Gore.

"You knew what was on, and if you're so beastly greedy

that you can't wait, chew a lump of wood or something. Now shut up! If you don't want to listen, I dare say the others do; anyway, you're delaying the feed."

This last remark brought forth a murmur of assent, and Lawson was silenced.

"Tom Merry and his precious crew have been coming it a bit too strong of late," went on the cad of St. Jim's, "and now they've taken up with that new chap, Dane, things have got to be put a stop to. I believe they got him shoved into our study by some artful move. Don't you, Mellish?"

"Yes," replied Mellish, lying glibly.

"I don't see what that's got to do with us," objected Brown.

"You can't be expected to," said Gore tartly. "But it stands to reason, if they can do as they like with us, that they can and will do just what they please with the whole lot. There's nothing to prevent them. They take jolly good care that none of the new chaps are put into their own studies. Then there's the cricket team. I hear that none of our chaps are to be admitted—"

A subdued murmur arose at this:

"Who told you that?"

"We won't stand it!"

Gore grinned at the success of his entirely unfounded piece of news.

"Never you mind who told me," he said. "You go on as you have been—like a flock of sheep—and you'll soon find out that you'll get left. Now, Merry calls himself the leader of the Shell, and I propose that we pass a vote to chuck him out. All those in favour of the move hold their hands up."

A dozen hands were uplifted. It was dark, so nobody cared much; besides, it was cold in the box-room, and the juniors were hungry. In any case, it did not matter much. They were slackers and unattached to any particular faction, and whether Tom Merry was turned out by them or not could not make any difference whatever. It was just like a host of flies trying to turn a lion out of his den.

"Good!" ejaculated Gore. "Now, we must form a league."

"When's the fee—"

"Shut up, Lawson! You're looking for a black eye!"

"Form a league!" exclaimed Clinton. "What for?"

"In opposition to Merry, of course! What d'you suppose—just for the fun of the thing?"

"But he's chucked out; he's no longer leader."

"Fathead! Idiot!" growled Gore, in exasperation.

"He's been declared turned out, but he's not so in reality until we prove that—until we show that we can run on our own."

"How are you going to do that?"

"Why, by running our own cricket club, and by sending to Coventry all that refuse to join us," declared Gore.

A gasp of astonishment went up as this announcement was made. Gore's sweeping reform was a bit startling, and several of the crowd wished that they had not come.

"There's going to be trouble over this!" said Davies.

"You can bet that they won't take it lying down!"

"Who wants them to?" retorted Gore boldly. "We can stand firm, and when the others see us making a good show, and taking all the runs, they'll come to us, and beg to join the league."

"What are you going to call it?"

"Who's to be the leader?"

Gore pondered for a moment.

"We'll call it the—the—"

"How would the 'Gory League' do?" suggested Lawson.

Gore scowled.

"Who d'you think you're getting at?" he demanded.

"I wasn't getting at you at all!" retorted Lawson.

"Shut up your row!" cried Gore rudely. "I've had enough of your cackling. We'll name it 'The Defenders.'"

"Jolly good title!" said Clinton, a trifle eagerly. "Now, shall we start on the fee—"

"No, we won't just yet, Mr. Greedy-pig!" snapped Gore.

"Get that candle, Mellish!"

Mellish produced a stump of candle an inch long, and after some considerable fumbling, found a box of matches, and applied a light. The feeble rays illumined a blue-nosed, discontented-looking crowd as Gore took the candle and placed it on a box. As he did so he contrived that its light fell on the packing-case he had been sitting on, and the ring of faces brightened perceptibly as he removed the lid, and the box was seen to be filled with tarts and pies.

Gore was not short of cash, and he had laid out a good round sum. He held up his hand as the crowd came forward, and laid a sheet of paper down by the guttering stump of candle.

"You're all to sign your names," he said, scrawling

"The Defenders" at the top of the page. "Here you are," he went on, handing the stump of pencil to Lawson.

Lawson accepted the pencil, and with evident bad grace put down his name; then plunged his hand into the case.

The tarts looked very nice, and so no one stopped to consider that it was rank bribery.

Mellish was the last to sign his name, and the list of slackers filled the paper from top to bottom.

"Now, you chaps, help yourselves," said Gore, carefully folding the paper and placing it in his pocket. "Remember that no one is to speak to Tom Merry and his precious chums, and we meet here again to-morrow evening."

Mumbled replies of assent greeted this remark, for they all had their mouths full, and were eating one against the other. Even Gore felt a contempt for his followers, but he comforted himself with the reflection that he was going into his crusade with his eyes open, and they would serve his purpose for a time.

With the disappearance of the last crumb the Defenders made a move to the door. One by one they passed out, and as they went Gore emphasised his caution:

Tom Merry & Co. were to be banned!

The fiat had gone forth, and the newly-enrolled Defenders went off, thinking of future feuds.

Mellish walked off with Lawson, and Gore, the leader of the Defenders, was left to extinguish the stump of candle and to do what he pleased. He decided in favour of his study, but his footsteps lagged as he drew near to the familiar doorway.

Arrived at the door, he turned the handle gently and peered in. The study was in darkness.

"I suppose the beast has gone to tea with Merry & Co." he muttered. "Like his cheek!"



The cad of St. Jim's advanced into the room, fumbled about for a match, and then turned on the gas. The bright light revealed every corner of the room, and for a moment his gaze rested on Dane's collection of books.

"He's not touched it yet. That's a surprise to come."

Gore chuckled with glee, and then suddenly stopped. Someone was standing just behind him. He felt a breath fan his cheek!

CHAPTER 10.

Gore Gets Very Stuck Up.

© LIFTON DANE passed the porter's lodge unnoticed by Taggles, and headed straight for the village.

His was not a revengeful nature, and his first idea had been to bring the matter home to Gore and give him a good thrashing, but when he had stood in the study examining his album an idea had come to him that seemed to meet the case better than his first thought, and his intended visit to the village was necessary for the carrying out of the punishment that would in some measure fit the crime.

Dane strode along with long gliding paces that covered the ground at a rate that was deceptive of the speed he was going, and when he reached the village he turned into the ironmonger's.

His purchase was a strange one so far as quantity was concerned, and he left the shopman staring after him in surprise.

It was dusk when Dane again reached the college, and he gave a low whistle when he discovered that the gates were closed.

"I suppose this means ringing up the porter," he muttered. "Hallo! Who's that?"

"Me," replied a voice.
 "Oh, it's you, is it?" said Dane, as Fatty Wynn came out of the shadows. "What have you been up to?"
 "Just slipped out to get a snack, that's all. We can't get in."

"Can't we? I don't know so much about that!" replied Dane, gazing up at the iron-wrought gates. "I don't see why we shouldn't get over. No sense in ringing up the porter if we can help it."

Before Fatty Wynn could reply the new boy was half-way up the gate.

Fatty made a brave endeavour to follow, but his portly form was a bit too heavy for his plump arms, and he slid back the foot or so he had raised himself with a disconsolate grunt.

"I can't!" he grunted, in a gaspy whisper. "It's all very well for you!"

"Try again!" replied Dane from the top of the gate. "I'll give you a hand!"

Fatty made a manful effort, and succeeded at the sacrifice of a couple of waistcoat-buttons in reaching the middle bars of the gate.

"Now!" said Dane. "Catch hold of my hand! Twist your legs round the bars, and hang on like grim death!"

Fatty did his best, but his legs were fat, and he had some difficulty in forcing them between the bars. Although when he did do so he found that as Dane hauled he stuck fast, so there was some compensation.

With many grunts and gasps, Fatty Wynn at last got his chin over the gate, and with Dane's help he struggled over, flat on his stomach.

"Now you're all right!" said Dane, as the fat junior floundered over. "All you've got to do now is to slide the rest."

"But," stammered Fatty, "how far is it? I'm sure I shall fall!"

The rest of the sentence was unfinished, for the simple reason that Fatty Wynn did fall.

The distance was only a few feet, but it was quite enough to shake his scanty supply of breath out of his fat body, and the "plunk" with which he reached the ground was not for a good two minutes followed by any attempt to rise.

By the time he did heave himself to his legs, Dane, satisfied that there was no real damage done, had gone.

The new boy did not get into the college unchallenged. Kildare, the school captain, hailed him just as he mounted the steps leading to the main entrance.

"Hallo, youngster! Where have you been to?" Dane stopped and looked at the captain with unflinching eyes.

"I've been down to the village," he said. There was no hint of defiance in the straight reply, and Kildare, though somewhat surprised, met the answer with an equally simple remark.

"Against the rules!" he said laconically.

"Yes; but I forgot!"

"Well," said the captain, "you're a new chap, but just remember that juniors of the Fourth are not supposed to forget!"

"I'm sorry!" said Dane. "I—"

"Oh, all right, then! We'll let it go at that, youngster; only the next time you want to pay a pressing visit, come to me or one of the prefects first."

"Thank you, Kildare; I will!" said Dane.

"Pretty cool for a kid of the Fourth, anyway!" thought Kildare, as the junior went off. "I never thought to ask him what he went to the village for. Nothing much, I expect."

The new boy lost no time in getting upstairs, and he slipped into the study just as Gore was coming out of the box-room.

The plan in his mind was likely to work to perfection, for he could hear no sound of there being anyone with Gore.

He waited behind the door, and stepped back gently as the cad opened it and peered in.

Dane's first idea was to spring upon him at once and force the truth from him, but it was just as well and better that he stood silent and still, for Gore's remark to himself when he lighted the gas was quite sufficient, and gave him away completely.

Dane stole forward, keeping well between Gore and the door. Without a sound, he reached a position just behind the cad, and his face was set with grim resolve as he thought of the mean trick that had been played upon him.

It was then, as his breath came faster with anger, that Gore had felt it fanning the side of his cheek.

The cad of St. Jim's wheeled sharply, and stared with wide open eyes at Dane's face.

For a moment the two eyed one another in silence. Gore was almost hypnotised by the fierce glow in the black eyes of the Indian.

"You—you cad!" hissed Dane, between clenched teeth.

"You miserable cad!"

Gore stepped back mechanically.

"You—you did that, you beast!" went on Dane, pointing to the book on the shelf. "You, who shook hands with me this morning! You, who said we ought to be friends! Pah! Friends with you, you crawling, creeping wretch!"

All the Indian rose in Dane, and the back of his hand struck the trembling boy before him full across the mouth.

Gore shrank back without a word. His tongue strove to moisten his dry lips. He tried to speak, but fear or the magnetic power of Dane's eyes held him speechless.

Dane raised his hand again, and the cad of St. Jim's flinched.

"I'm not going to hit you," said Dane, with contempt. "You are too mean, too cowardly! I did not mean to strike you just now. I'm going to serve you as you served my book—I'm going to paste you up!"

Gore stared at him stupidly. The words conveyed nothing to his mind, and the tubes that Dane took from his pocket and ranged methodically on the mantelpiece only served to render his muddled brain more dazed than ever.

"Now, you cad," said Dane sharply, "I'm going to stick you up! Do you understand? I'm going to cover you with some of this"—he held up one of the tubes—"from top to toe! Are you going to make a fight for it, or are you going to keep quiet?"

"I—I won't have it!" snarled Gore, recovering from the spell of terror that had held him paralysed. "I'll fight you! It was only a joke. I didn't know you cared so much about your book or I wouldn't have done it. I—"

"You fight me!" said Dane scornfully. "I can see you doing it! You only fight with chaps half your size! Now, have I got to tie you up, or—"

Gore looked towards the door.

"It's no good thinking of that!" said Dane, divining his thought. "You don't get out of here till I've finished with you, and until I choose!"

Dane advanced, and Gore retreated. He made a jab at the new boy's face when his back touched the wall, but Dane was too quick for him, and Gore found his wrist locked in a grip that brought a yelp of pain from his trembling lips.

Dane forced him to a chair, and, before Gore could resist, a handkerchief was whipped round one arm, and securely knotted to the back of the chair.

"That'll keep you from any rash move!"

The cad of St. Jim's looked anything but a leader of "Defenders." He sat there limply, and watched Dane with furtive eyes.

The new boy was quite cool now. All his anger seemed to have vanished, and he busied himself with tearing up bits of paper, and scribbling on them.

There was a large number of these pieces of paper, and the floor was soon littered with the one word, "Cad."

Gore tried to be persuasive. But no notice was taken of him—at least no reply was given, but a sheet of paper was thrown at his feet, and he stared for a while at the word "Cad."

The word met his eyes everywhere on the floor, so he stared at the ceiling, and it seemed to grow from the white surface in red till he could have screamed with impotent rage.

"I think that'll do!"

Dane rose as he spoke and took up a tube from the mantelshelf. He unscrewed the little metal cup, and Gore watched a thick substance ooze out under the pressure of Dane's fingers.

"It's nice and sticky!" observed Dane, picking up a piece of paper, and smearing it with the substance. "It's supposed to stick china, so it ought to be good! Now, don't wriggle!"

Gore did wriggle, and threatened and pleaded and cajoled, but all to no purpose, for the new boy took not the slightest notice of him.

Tube after tube was emptied, and the word "Cad" was diligently applied to Gore's person.

Both his feet, legs, and body were covered with paper, and he was "Cad" right up to his chin.

Gore burst into a torrent of words.

"If you don't shut up," said Dane, "I'll jam this over your mouth!"

Dane held a piece of sticky paper to the cad's nose, and Gore shut his mouth tight.

He squirmed a little as the first piece was applied to his cheek, but Dane took no notice, but went on with his task as if he was plastering up a wooden image.

At last the only part visible of the unfortunate cad was one eye and the top of his head.

Dane looked over him critically.

"Hum!" he observed. "I've got one left!"

He took up the last tube, and calmly squeezed it out on the

top of Gore's head, and with a deft twist he twirled the coarse hair to a point.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Gore's one eye glowered at him, but Dane paid not the slightest attention to its import.

"Now, I think we'll see what the others think of you! What?"

"You—you're not going to take me out of here!" mumbled Gore, behind the paper stuck to his chin and nose. "I won't go!"

"We'll see about that!" said Dane. "Perhaps this will teach you a lesson not to be a mean sneak! Up you get!"

The handkerchief was removed, and Gore got to his feet. There was a rustling and crackling of paper as he did so, and he waved his arms wildly.

Dane had thoughtfully applied a large sheet of paper to both of his hands, so that his attempts to pull off the notices only resulted in a series of flaps.

"Come along!"

"I—I—"

"Not so much eye!" said Dane calmly. "Come along!"

Gore had to go, for, what with the paper and the new boy's grip on the back of his jacket, he was pretty well helpless.

"Better hurry!" suggested Dane as he opened the door. "I just want some friends of mine to realise exactly what you are, and then you can go where you like. You can turn yourself into a show if you like, and charge twopence for admission!"

The Terrible Three had finished their prep. and impositions. Manners and Lowther were engaged in a game of chess, and Tom Merry was looking over some contributions for the "Weekly."

"I think I've got you!" exclaimed Manners triumphantly, as he moved his rook and set it down with a bang. "How's that?"

Tap, tap, tap!

"Hallo! Come in!" shouted Tom Merry.

The door opened, and a strange rustling caused Manners and Lowther to look up.

"Why the— What the dickens—" shouted Lowther.

"Goodness!"

"What is it?"

Manners sprang to his feet, and the chessboard went to the floor with a crash. The pieces were scattered far and wide, but no one took any notice of them.

"Cad, cad, cad, cad, cad, cad!" muttered Manners mechanically.

"Who is it?" exclaimed Tom Merry, as the strange figure came into the study. "Hallo, Dane!"

The new boy smiled grimly as he shut the door.

"I need not tell you who this is," he said. "His name is written all over him!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He, he, he!"

The mass of paper shambled crackling into a corner by the door, and the one eye glared vindictively at the Terrible Three.

"It's Gore!" shouted Tom Merry. "My eye, but his rig-out is a fair treat!"

"How did you manage it?" said Manners.

"Quite simply!" replied Dane. "It's not at all ferocious when you know how to treat it! Shall I let it go now, or would you like to keep it as a curiosity?"

"No fear!" exclaimed the three, with one accord. "We don't want it!"

"It might go mad, or something!" added Lowther. "Let it come home and peel itself!"

"Four to one!" sneered Gore from his corner.

"It didn't take four to paste you up, anyway!" retorted Dane. "I've half a mind to give you a pasting of another kind, after all! Get out!"

"Ow!"

The new boy's boot helped the cad of St. Jim's through the doorway, and the four watched him down the passage.

"He does rustle a bit!" said Manners. "My word, I'll give someone a fright if they come across him suddenly!"

Gore lost no time in getting to his study, and he was fortunate in escaping any encounters, but his luck was out when he opened his door, for Mellish and Skimpole were in.

"Ow!" cried Mellish, jumping up from the table and retreating to the window.

"Dear—dear me!" exclaimed the shortsighted amateur Socialist, springing to his feet, and backing away. "Dear me!"

"Idiot!" snapped a familiar voice.

"It's—it's Gore!" exclaimed Mellish.

"Dear me!"

"It's Gore, yes; and what about it?" growled the exas-

perated junior. "Pull some of this beastly stuff off, can't you, instead of standing there like a couple of maniacs!"

"Dear me, there's something written all over you, Gore!" exclaimed Skimpole, coming forward. "Wow!"

Gore snarled and jumped, and Skimpole leaped backward.

"You mind your own business!" snapped Gore. "Here, Mellish, pull this off!"

The cad of St. Jim's held out both his hands to his lieutenant, and after some difficulty the paper was torn off, and after some considerable trouble Gore was restored to something like his usual self, but for the rest of the evening he was taciturnly personified, but this condition and the cause of it remained a mystery to Mellish and Skimpole.

Before he went to bed that night Gore burned every scrap of paper bearing the offensive word, and as he viciously poked each piece into the flame he vowed a fresh vengeance against the new boy.

CHAPTER 11.

Another Anonymous Letter.

"BAI Jove!"

The swell of St. Jim's entered Study No. 6 with a frown upon his aristocratic brow. "The little wottah!" he said. "Bai Jove, there's no one here!"

Arthur Augustus sauntered over to the looking-glass, and adjusted his tie.

The "Defenders," as yet unknown to fame, had contrived to carry out their programme of the previous evening as had been arranged, and D'Arcy's nod as he came along the passage had been met by the glassy stare of Lawson.

It was not the first time that day, by any means; but the swell of St. Jim's had not noticed it before, that was all.

Of active hostilities there had been no sign, and, indeed, so far as Tom Merry & Co. were concerned, they were blissfully ignorant of anything unusual taking place.

"Beastly little wottah!" muttered Arthur Augustus again, as he dashed his foot on the fender. "I shall have to— Bai Jove!"

The swell of St. Jim's glanced down, and jumped into the air.

A lithe little body was wriggling close to his foot, or, rather, had been, for D'Arcy's next move had landed him on to the table.

"It's those wotten little bwutes, of Dane's. I shall— Schoo! Scho-o-o!"

The little reptiles squirmed and wriggled on the warm hearthrug, and a faint hiss reached the horrified ears of Arthur Augustus as one of them reared upright, and swayed to and fro in the firelight.

D'Arcy's imagination immediately went to work, and the action of the harmless snake became a threat, and as its tongue shot out, and flickered in the light, pictures of horrible torture inflicted by snake-bite flashed across D'Arcy's mind.

"Scho-o-o! Scho-o-o!"

Another faint hiss, and Arthur Augustus tucked both his legs on to the table.

The table was not made for a platform, and it creaked and groaned under the strain.

Arthur Augustus clung on desperately, and to make matters worse, the irritation to his throat caused by his well-meant efforts to scare away the snakes set him coughing violently, and as he coughed he shook the table till it began to sway unsteadily.

Creak, creak, crack!

Arthur glanced round wildly. Only one of the snakes could be seen, and the prospect of descending from his perch, and perhaps putting his foot on the other one, did not appeal to the swell of St. Jim's at all.

Creak, crack!

It was going! D'Arcy scrambled to his feet, and stood swaying. Then, as the cracking of wood continued he leaped, and landed with a gasp on the mantelpiece.

It was a tidy jump, and offered no great foothold; but it was the only available spot, and Arthur Augustus would have leaped on to a barbed-wire fence rather than put his foot anywhere near the snakes. He had landed in a crouching attitude, but after a while a touch of cramp made him wriggle cautiously to an upright position, and he stood with his face pressed to the wall.

"Bai Jove!" he gasped at last. "I shall insist on those w'etched things being wemoved, an' kept in a cage. I most distinctly object to the pwesence of the howwid bwutes. Scho-o-o!"

Arthur Augustus could not turn his head to look down, so he stared helplessly at the door.

"Help!"

Someone was passing the door.

"Help!" shrieked D'Arcy. "Bai Jove," he added, as the

handle turned and a face peered in. "Take these w'etched—"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Gone off your onion?" inquired Manners. "What in the world are you doing on the mantelpiece. My—"

Manners stopped, and stared at the hearthrug.

"O-oh!" he giggled. "That's it, is it? Ha, ha, ha!"

"Mannahs," implored the swell of St. Jim's—"Mannahs!"

"I'll fetch Dane," said the member of Study No. 1. "I don't understand snakes myself. I might hurt them, you know. Ha, ha, ha!"

Manners finished with an unfeeling cackle of laughter, and shut the door.

D'Arcy groaned as he heard the sound of his footsteps unwind away in the distance.

After a lapse of about ten minutes, that seemed more like ten hours to the unfortunate swell of St. Jim's, the sound of running feet caught his ears, and a moment later Blake, followed by Dane and Lowther, burst in.

"My hat!" gasped Jack Blake. "Have you gone barmy, Gussy? Come down at once!"

"Ow!" cried D'Arcy, as Blake grabbed his ankle. "I absolutely wefuse to come down! Has that wottah scueahed his weptiles?"

Dane was laughing heartily.

"Yes, I've got them; they're in my pocket."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I considah it most inconsiderate of you, Dane!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, as he let himself down on to the hearthrug. "I object to those howwid things being allowed to wun wild all ovah our study."

"Awfully sorry!" said Dane, choking back a laugh. "The poor little beasts were cold, you know, and Blake said they would be all right. They're quite harmless, you know. Affectionate little beggars, when you get to know them."

"I have no desire to incwease my acquaintanceship with them," said D'Arcy, with great dignity. "I—"

"Gussy!"

"Yes, Blake."

"Put your tie straight!"

For once, Jack Blake's oft-repeated remark had some justification, for the swell of St. Jim's necktie was somewhere under his left ear, and D'Arcy's expression of indignation changed to one of dismay as he fumbled about, and discovered the disorder of his dress.

"Thanks, deah boy!" he said.

"P'raps you'll listen to me another time," said Blake severely. "I'm always telling you to put your tie straight."

"But you know, deah boy," exclaimed Arthur Augustus quite seriously, "you're always wotting, and I thought—"

"Don't you do anything of the kind!" exclaimed Manners. "You'll get something serious the matter with you if you overwork your thinking apparatus. You chaps coming along?"

"May as well," said Jack Blake. "Going to the asylum?"

"You're looking for a thick ear," observed Manners, "and I shouldn't be at all surprised if you should happen to find one."

"You don't say!"

"Now, then, you two," said Dane, "what are you trying to do?"

"Oh, you needn't take any notice of him," said Blake. "It's only his playful little way, that's all. Here's the chicken house. Do we knock, or do we walk right in?"

"Get in!" grunted Manners.

"After you," said Blake politely.

"Oh, all right. Ow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Manners opened the door with his nose, and he glared at Blake's smiling face wrathfully.

"You rotter!" he howled. "You stuck your foot out!"

"Did I? Come back," said Blake, pushing his foot back with his hand. "Hallo! What's all this?"

Tom Merry and Monty Lowther looked up as the three entered.

There was a worried look on his usually bright, smiling face, and he held a half-sheet of dirty, crumpled notepaper towards Manners.

The latter deferred his vengeance on Blake for the time, and took the paper.

"My eye!" he exclaimed.

"What is it?" inquired the others curiously. "Anything private, Merry?"

"No," said the leader of the Shell. "It's jolly rotten, that's all—an anonymous letter."

"An anonymous letter!"

"Let's have a look; I've never seen one before."

"Read it out," said Tom Merry. "Shut the door first."

"Shall I clear out?" suggested Dane.

"No fear. You stay where you are!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "You're in this. Get on with it, Manners!"

"What a rotter! I wonder if it's true?" commenced Manners.

"Here, that's not the letter, fathead. Chuck your expressions of surpiseiment, and get on with the washing!"

Manners obeyed.

"The writer of this letter has information that a meeting is to be held at 6.30 in the box-room, this evening. It would be well for the inmates of Study No. 1 to attend.—Well-Wisher.

"P.S.—Be cautious."

"What do you think of it?" cried Lowther. "Isn't it the limit?"

"Bai Jove!"

"Rather!" commented Blake. "What a low-down trick, though."

"Nice sort of thing for a St. Jim's chap!" said Tom Merry contemptuously.

"Shall you go?" inquired Dane.

"Go? What do you think about it, Manners, and you, Lowther?"

"Dunno, I'm sure," said Monty Lowther. "Can't see any harm in it. If there's a jape on, or a bullying rag, we certainly ought to be there."

"I should say so!" chimed in Jack Blake. "You know what the Head said about bullying, and for my part I can despise the cad who is rotter enough to write a beastly cowardly thing like an anonymous letter, and still act on the information."

"Hear, hear!" agreed Dane. "I think you're quite right. Haven't you any idea whose writing this is?"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"Not the slightest," he answered. "I wish to goodness the chap had had pluck enough to come and tell us. It looks to me very like a bit of spite."

"I considah, deah boy, that the end justifies the means!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus.

"Good old Gussy!" shouted Blake, slapping his chum on the back. "Good old Gussy! You're getting quite witty in your old age. We shall have to get you an old age pension soon."

The force of the blow sent Arthur's eyeglass flying to the length of its cord, and its owner pawed the air frantically.

"I've told you about that beastly wuffness befoah, Blake. I absolutely wefuse! I shall give you a feahful thwashin! I—"

"Ring off, Gussy! Put your tie straight!"

"Here, let's get old Figgins and the others over!" cried Tom Merry. "Will you go, D'Arcy, and oblige?"

The swell of St. Jim's looked at Tom Merry suspiciously, but the leader of the Shell's grave expression reassured him, and he bowed.

"Certainly, deah boy! I will go now!"

A few minutes later Figgins, Kerr, and Fatty Wynn came in.

"What's all this yarn about an anonymous letter?" demanded the leader of the New House.

"There it is," said Tom Merry briefly, as he handed over the note. "Mind, it's dirty!"

"Yes, in more senses than one," added Blake.

The matter was eagerly discussed, and the whole thing had to be explained over again when Digby and Herries came in in search of Blake and D'Arcy.

Arthur Augustus recounted the rudeness of Lawson, and Figgins and Blake called to mind similar incidents.

"I believe there's something in this opposition wheeze," said Tom Merry.

"Yes, and I shouldn't be surprised if the one who wrote this letter also sent the same sort of thing to the Head. You remember, when he made a long speech about bullying."

Finally it was agreed to act upon the advice given in the letter, and the juniors were to conceal themselves in the box-room any time before six o'clock.

"Careful, mind!" warned Tom Merry. "No noise. If we go in for this thing we must do it properly. Gussy, if you start sniffing like that you'd better go to bed."

"I wasn't sniffin'," declared the swell of St. Jim's indignantly.

CHAPTER 12.

Surprised!

"S H-S-S-S!"

Three dim forms stole into the box-room. "All's well!" whispered Tom Merry. "We've got plenty of time; it's only ten to six."

"Supposing it's a beastly hoax or whatever you call it?" muttered Manners. "Ugh! What a den! Just the place for a lot of beastly sneaks to congregate, and plot and plan."

Monty Lowther shivered, and commenced to sniff.
 "Pah! The place is like a wretched dusthole! Let's—
 What's the matter?"

"Look!"

Tom Merry had switched on a tiny electric torch, and he pointed to a stump of candle resting on an overturned packing-case.

"Looks as if there'd been somebody here—recently, too," said Manners.

"How do you know?"

"Why, it's quite free from dust, and the box is covered."

"You're a giddy detective!"

"Look at the floor, too. Why, it's covered with foot-marks!"

The "Defenders" had taken no precautions to hide their traces, and the Terrible Three read the signs unhesitatingly.

"Let's fix up some cover," said Tom Merry; "there's plenty of it, if we can arrange it in time. Mustn't pull the place about, though, too much, or the precious meeting will smell a rat."

The box-room was practically filled with old cases and discarded trunks, and the juniors set to work to clear a passage right round the sides of the walls.

Manners turned up his coat-sleeves, and made a great show of activity. He tackled a case about twice as big as himself.

"Mind your eye!" he muttered. "By jingo, but it is heavy! Look out!"

The warning came too late. Manners made a frantic effort to stop the case from sliding from its position, but it proved too heavy for him, and a muffled cry came from beneath it as it slid to the floor.

"My hat!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Where's Monty?"

"He's—he's—"

"Here I am fatheads!" said Lowther's voice. "Here, under the box, of course!"

"Heave-ho!" whispered Tom Merry.

With some difficulty the two juniors raised one end of the box, and Lowther crawled out on hands and knees.

"You're not hurt, are you?" said Manners.

"No, I'm not damaged!" grunted Lowther. "But you are a silly ass, all the same. Anybody would think I was a beastly rabbit!"

"Well, you certainly are a rare bit dusty," observed Manners, as he glared into his chum's face.

"My aunt, you're more like a doormat than anything else! Just look at you!"

"Never mind about that now," said Tom. "Let's get on with the washing. We can have a clean up after we've finished. Lend a hand here, and let's get this beastly-box up into its place again!"

After the first accident the juniors proceeded with greater care in their work of preparing an ambush; but it took them a good ten minutes to clear a narrow passage from the doorway to the right-hand wall.

"Cave!"

Tom Merry's quick ears had caught the sound of approaching footsteps, and in obedience to his warning Manners and Lowther stood as silent as mice.

It was early yet, and a long time before the time mentioned in the anonymous letter for the meeting; but it was not worth while running any risk, and as the door was pushed forcibly open, Tom peered carefully round the edge of a box. The dim light revealed the unmistakable long and lanky figure of Figgins.

"It's all right, chaps," said Tom Merry; "it's only Figgie and his crowd."

"Phew! It's a bit musty in here," said the leader of the New House. "What have you chaps been up to? There's a Dickens of a dust!"

"Can't help that," observed Tom Merry. "We can't have everything as we like now. The idea is to get under cover before those precious little schemers come along. S'pose you make a start, and clear a passage round the other side, while we work round to the window. For goodness' sake make your passage wide enough, or else we shall have Fatty Wynn getting stuck!"

"Right, me lord!" said Figgins.

"Mind how you go!" cautioned Manners. "We nearly did for Monty just now!"

For the next five minutes the work proceeded steadily, and except for the scraping of the various boxes there was no further noise; the juniors were too busy to talk.

Fatty Wynn was deputed to stand at the doorway as sentry, and presently a warning hiss caused a sudden cessation of the work.

"Who is it?" inquired Tom Merry.

"I can't quite make out!" whispered Wynn. "I think—yes, it's Blake and the other chaps!"

"Phew!"

"Chuck that!" whispered Tom Merry, as Blake, Digby, and Herries came in. "We've heard that funny little noise

before, and we know that it's dusty. Now, you chaps, get on with clearing round by the window there. We've got to have a passage right the way round the room. Sharp, now, or we shall have the meeting upon us before we are ready."

All question of rivalry between the Co.'s was squashed, and Blake & Co. set to work with a will. When it came to a question of fighting against a common foe, the juniors never allowed any little thing to interfere with the project in hand, and Tom Merry's leadership was unhesitatingly accepted, and his orders carried out.

"Where's Gussy?" inquired Tom. "Isn't he coming?"

"Yes, he'll be along presently, I expect," said Blake. "We left him busy with his last parcel of ties. Anyhow, I don't expect he'd be much good here. I rather fancy this dust would be too much for his delicate nose."

With the arrival of Blake & Co., the work proceeded merrily, and the passage was soon completed.

"What's the time?" said Tom Merry, as they stood in the centre of the room.

"By Jove, it's twenty past six," said Blake. "We'd better bunk. Here, Figgins, look after that fat porker of yours, and see that there's no little bits of him sticking out."

One by one the eight of the juniors ensconced themselves behind the packing-cases. Tom Merry, as leader of the ambush, took a last look round to see that no great difference had been made in the arrangement of the boxes.

"All serene!" he muttered. "Now we've got to wait. Who's that? Sorry! Is that your foot or your face?"

"It's my hand!" growled Blake. "Get off!"

"S-s-sh! Never mind about your hand now!" whispered Tom Merry. "You must put up with little trifles of that kind."

Dead silence reigned for the next five minutes, and even a cat, had it wandered in, would never have suspected that nine juniors were concealed in that room.

The minutes extended to six, and Tom Merry started counting to himself. He had reached thirty-six, when a faint sound came from the direction of the door, and he nudged Blake warningly.

The faint creaking of the door was followed by stealthy footsteps, and the sounds of something like a parcel being laid on the floor.

Then came the spluttering of a match, and a hoarse whisper, which all the concealed juniors recognised as being Gore's.

The cad of St. Jim's was evidently in a very bad temper, and he growled incessantly at his companion.

"You are a fool, Mellish! Why didn't you bring another piece of candle? This thing's no good. We shall have to wait here in the dark until the others come. I never came across such an idiot as you are!"

"I—I—I'm awfully sorry!" said Mellish, in a whining voice. "You see, I didn't have time—"

"No, you never do have time for anything, except your own beastly affairs!" grunted Gore. "What was that?"

There was a nervous tremor in the bully's voice.

"Who's that?" he whispered cautiously.

The hidden juniors waited eagerly for the reply, and Tom Merry gave a sigh of satisfaction as he heard the answer:

"It's me—Lawson!"

The thought in Tom Merry's mind had been that it was D'Arcy. If the swell of St. Jim's came along now, all would be lost, and their carefully-laid plans utterly frustrated.

After the arrival of Lawson came Clinton and Brown, then the other members of the new league followed in rapid succession.

Each separate arrival was challenged by Gore, and each brought to Tom Merry & Co. the same tremor of anxiety lest the well-known voice of the swell of St. Jim's should reply.

The last of the Defenders came in, and the door was closed without there being any sign of Arthur Augustus.

"All in!" growled Gore. "You've all come in time for your feed, I see," he added sarcastically. "I suppose if it were not for the grub you would be crawling round Tom Merry & Co., or else trying to see what you could get out of some of the other chaps."

A murmur of dissent arose at this remark, and the cad of St. Jim's felt that he had gone a little too far; but Gore was anything but diplomatic, and while he wanted to keep his followers in hand, he made but a very clumsy effort to retrieve his mistake.

"I don't mean that you would exactly sponge for what you could get; but you know very well that the Tom Merry crowd have turned you down long ago."

"Oh, and who told you that?" cried Lawson.

"Never your mind who told me," retorted Gore. "You shut up, or else there will be trouble."

Lawson mumbled something to himself, but did not venture upon any retort that Gore could hear.

"Now, as I was saying," resumed Gore, "this league is for the purpose of asserting our rights."
 "You said that last night," remarked Clinton. "Haven't you got something fresh to tell us? That's getting rather stale."

"So are the cakes," muttered Brown.
 "Shut up!" snapped Gore. "As I was going to say, the purpose of this league is well and aptly—I mean to say—is very well described by its title, and you chaps have got to follow your leader, and keep up the object. Each member is to be known as a Defender, and—"

"I suppose you mean we are to be offenders against the Tom Merry crowd?" said Lawson.

"Yes, that's it. It's the same thing, anyhow!" yelled Gore. "Why can't you shut up? Am I doing the talking, or are you?"

"I should say you are!" exclaimed a voice in the rear. Gore glared at the circle of faces, but was unsuccessful in locating the one responsible for the pertinent remark.

"The first thing the league has to do," repeated Gore, "is to send the whole lot of rotters to Coventry, and anyone found speaking to Dane"—a venomous emphasis came into the bully's voice as he mentioned the new boy's name—"will have his name scratched off the list."

"Rats!" cried a voice.
 "Who was that?" demanded Gore sharply.
 "It—it wasn't me," said Lawson.
 "It wasn't me."

The crowd of Defenders all repudiated having interrupted their leader's discourse, and although Gore did not take their word for granted, somehow or other he began to feel uneasy in his mind. The tone in which the word had been uttered had a strangely familiar sound, and he peered beyond the circle of his followers into the gloom surrounding the pile of packing-cases.

After a while he resumed his harangue, which consisted mainly of uncomplimentary and mostly untrue statements respecting the chums of St. Jim's.

"It's like this," he was saying. "Er—what do you want? What in the world have you got there?"

Brown stepped forward into the dim candle-light, and the assembly noticed that he carried a huge roll of paper under his arm.

"I thought this might be a good idea," he said.
 "But what is it? Let's have a look, then!" snapped Gore. "What have you got there? A blessed map of England, or what?"

"No; it's this!" There was a triumphant ring in Brown's voice as he unrolled his sheet of paper. Inscribed in glaring red and sprawling letters was the legend: "Down With Tom Merry & Co!" "You see," went on Brown, as he gazed from one to the other, "I thought you might get up some sort of procession, and Gore and Mellish could carry this at the head. I should think we should get a lot of chaps to join."

"Ugh!" grunted Gore. "You're welcome to try it if you like; but I should jolly well like to know who's the leader of this league. I should advise you to wait until you're asked for your precious suggestions."

"But I—I—I think it's a jolly good wheeze!" remonstrated Brown.

"Well, anyway, you're quite at liberty to think what you like," retorted Gore; "but for the moment you can just keep your thoughts to yourself."

Brown subsided grumbling, and Lawson then took up the tale.

"What about the grub?" he suggested mildly. "Don't you think we could talk over the future policy of the league a little better if we had something to eat?"

Gore scowled, and opened his mouth to speak; but just then there came an interruption.

Bang, bang, bang!
 There was a rustle of concern, and then silence.

Bang, bang, bang!
 "Tom Mewwy, are you there?"

"It's that dandified ass D'Arcy!" muttered Gore. "Don't make a sound, and he may clear off."

Bang, bang! Thump, thump, thump!
 "Tom Mewwy!"

"Jack Blake!"
 "And that rotter Dane is there, too!" hissed the cad of St. Jim's. "The beasts'll bring old Railton down on us if they kick up that confounded row. We shall have to open the door. Stand by to collar them. Come on! What are you hanging back for?"

The Defenders did not make any great display of alacrity, but at last Lawson, Mellish, and Clinton shuffled forward.

"Tom Mewwy!"
 "I'll give you 'Tom Mewwy!'" muttered Gore, as he laid his hand on the key. "Now, what the—"

The box-room had suddenly been plunged into absolute darkness, and a confused murmur of voices arose.

"Who's the fool that did that?" almost howled Gore, in his rage. "Here," he went on, grabbing hold of an arm—"here, Mellish! Strike a light, can't you? Ow!"

The cad of St. Jim's sprang back as a blinding light was flashed straight into his eyes. For a moment he was dazed by the light, and when he had recovered his fright he found himself standing alone, facing Tom Merry. The rest of the Defenders had backed away, and for a moment Gore was startled to a point of utter stupidity.

"Come on!" yelled Tom Merry. "We'll give 'em 'Down with the old Co.!' Collar 'em!"

Eight juniors swarmed over the boxes and round by their carefully prepared passages, and in less than three minutes they were each one comfortably seated on the prostrate form of one of the valiant Defenders.

Gore himself received Tom Merry's special attention, and was sent reeling back with a blow in the chest from Tom Merry's left.

"Now you can come in, Gussy," said the leader of the Shell, unlocking the door. "You're just in time to see the beauty show. Come on! Come in, Dane! There's an old friend of yours here. There was some talk of a feud of the Fourth, but I rather fancy it has fizzled out."

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed D'Arcy, surveying the floor of the box-room through his monocle. "I should considah this an uttaw wout. What are we goin' to do with them, Tom Mewwy?"

Tom Merry flashed his electric torch round the room. Victor and vanquished alike blinked under the strong rays of light.

"I know!"
 "Out with it, then!" said Blake. "I'm tired of sitting on Lawson. He's squirming like a beastly worm!"

"Let him get up then. The others, too."
 One by one the members of the league were none too gently yanked to their feet.

"Now," said Tom Merry; "you came here for a feed. You shall have it—in the neck. Pass your prize pig along, Blake. Get that parcel of stuff, Dane, will you?"

The new boy picked up Gore's bait for his crew of slackers.

"Jam-tarts and cream-puffs!" he cried, as he tore open one end.

"Good! Let's have them! Bring them along, Blake. That's right!"

Kicking and struggling, the gallant Defenders were dragged to the door.

Tom Merry plunged his hand into the parcel, and drew out a strawberry tart.

"It's waste of good stuff," he cried; "but that can't be helped! Hold him!"

"Ow!"
 The leader of the Shell stuffed the tart down Lawson's neck.

"It's not a bit of good yelping," he observed, ramming the sticky mess home. "That'll teach you not to be a mean, skulking sneak! Next!"

Figgins and Kerr and the others brought over their captives, and the "feed" was carefully and impartially distributed. As each one received his portion he was thrust out of the door, and helped on his way with Dane's boot.

The last one to receive his portion, bar Mellish and Gore, was Brown.

"Humph!" remarked Tom Merry. "You come off best, Brown. There's just two left—a jam and a cream. Never mind, you're lucky. The cream-puff will do for your delightful little effort at banner-writing. Kick off, Dane!"

"What about this rotter?" exclaimed Figgins, jerking his thumb contemptuously at Gore.

"Make him run the gauntlet," suggested Blake.

"Right!"
 "Good idea!"

Handkerchiefs were knotted, and Arthur Augustus, after unsuccessfully trying to borrow Dane's, reluctantly used his own, tying a hard knot in his beautifully hemstitched real Irish.

"It's wotten to use this for such a wottah," he observed, as he stood in line with the others. "But under the cirrs. I cannot resist."

"I reckon he's let off jolly lightly," grinned Blake.

Whack, whack, whack!

From the window to the door was not very far. But the double line of juniors laid on with a right good will, and the cad of St. Jim's floundered out of the door with a yelp, as the hard knot in Herries's handkerchief stung his ear.

"What about Mellish?"

"I think we'll have a talk with him. A nice, comfy, little chat," said Tom Merry. "I suppose you bloodthirsty bouncers have no objection?"

"Not a bit," said Blake.

Figgins & Co. looked at the Terrible Three rather curiously.



This illustration depicts an amusing incident in "The Ventriloquist's Pupils," the grand, long, complete school tale of Harry Wharton & Co., in "THE MAGNET" LIBRARY, now on sale. Price One Halfpenny.

"All right, then," said Blake. "Eh?"
 "Tell you about it later," whispered Tom Merry. "I want to get something out of Mellish."

Jack Blake nodded, and the two parties left the box-room. With the miserable-looking Mellish in their midst, Tom Merry & Co. followed and made for their study.

"What—what are you—"

"Look here!" exclaimed Manners, as Lowther closed the door. "This is the second time you've written an anonymous letter."

Tom Merry and Monty Lowther stared in amazement at their chum's blunt accusation; but their looks of astonishment were nothing compared to their startled surprise at Mellish's reply.

"I never wrote to the Head!" whined Mellish. "I—"

"Who said you did?" snapped Manners, quick as a flash. "That's done it!"

"It has! Bravo, Manners!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "You took him clean off his guard. It's no good you trying to deny anything, Mellish. Nothing has ever been said to you about the doctor receiving an anonymous letter, and you let yourself in properly. Are you going to make a clean breast of it, or shall I go straight to the Head?"

Of course, the leader of the Shell had no idea of doing anything of the kind. But it was just such a mean trick that Mellish would have done himself, so he naturally believed what Tom Merry threatened.

In broken sentences, and many a weak attempt to excuse his cowardly conduct, the wretched junior told his story. At the finish he broke down and snuffed miserably.

For a while the three eyed him in pity and contempt.

At last Tom Merry spoke.

"You're an out-and-out little rotter!" he said roughly.

"Clear out, and see if you can't act a little decently."

There was a hint of pity in the tone of his voice, and Mellish broke down completely and buried his head in his arms.

"We'll leave him for a while," said Tom Merry. "The

little beast has got a spark of decency in him somewhere, I believe," he added softly. "It's no good rubbing it in now."

The Terrible Three left the study, and when they returned a quarter of an hour later, the junior had gone.

"We won't say anything about this to the others," said Tom Merry. "Mellish has owned up, and there's an end of the matter. He's not likely to try his hand at anonymous letter writing again. I suppose the fact of the matter was he was trying to get his own back on Gore. Hallo!"

Dane burst into the study. His face was shining with excitement.

"It's all right!" he cried. "Look! I've managed to get the pages apart with a knife."

The new boy laid his album down on the table, and the juniors bent over it eagerly.

"Is that your mater?" exclaimed Lowther.

"Why, it's not damaged a bit! I shall be able to make a ripping enlargement!" went on the amateur photographer.

"The tissue-paper saved it," observed Manners. "It's a bit of luck for you, Dane!"

"It is," replied the new boy simply. "I'm more than glad."

"And so are we," said Tom Merry heartily. "I reckon things will run a bit smoother for you now. Cad Gore will keep to himself for a while. He's had a pretty good doing."

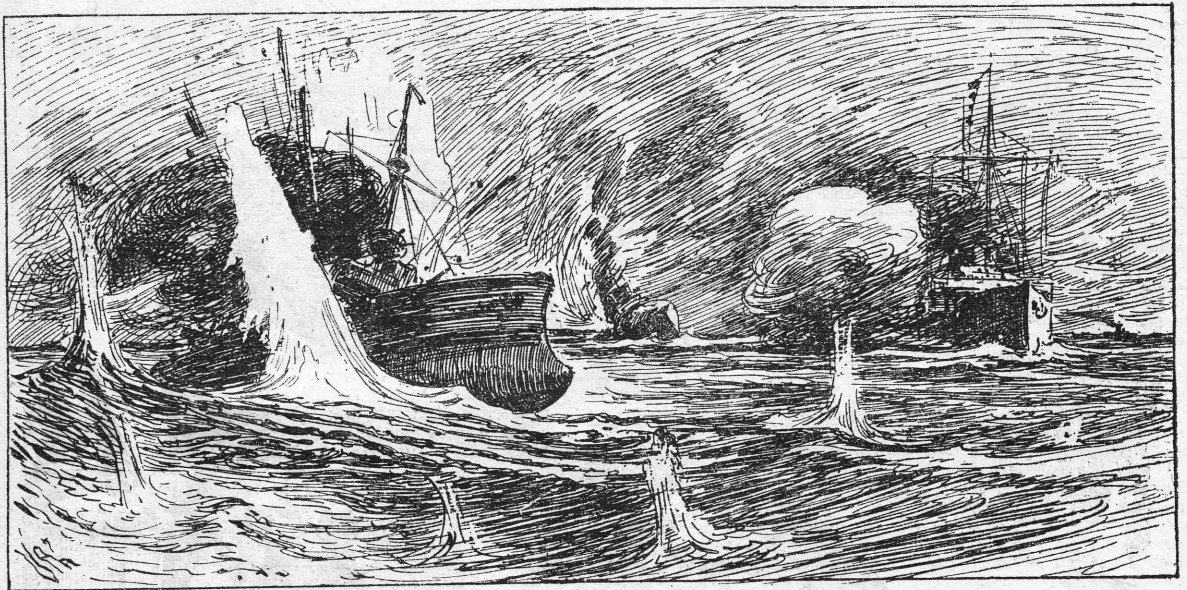
Events proved that Tom was correct in his conjecture, and a decided coolness was observable for the next few days between Gore and Mellish. The feud had fizzled out, and peace reigned in the wigwams of the famous Co.'s.

THE END.

(Another long, complete school tale of Tom Merry and Co. next Thursday, entitled: "Skimpole's Scholarship," by Martin Clifford. Please order your copy of THE GEM LIBRARY in advance. Price One Penny.)

Let Your Friend Read the Opening of this Grand War Story.

BRITAIN AT BAY!



Another Powerful WAR Story.

SPECIAL NOTE.—Although this story forms a sequel to "Britain Invaded," it is really a new story in which all the characters are reintroduced to the reader.

CHAPTER 1.

How the Kaiser Dictated Terms, and How London Answered.

The pale autumn sun, shining down upon the flat roof of one of the tall London warehouses that front upon the south shore of the Thames, lit up the figure of a strong, keen-faced lad of eighteen, dressed in a stained, torn khaki jacket and cord riding-breeches. He was lying flat upon the tiles, carefully scanning the streets and houses on the opposite side of the river, through a pair of battered field-glasses.

With those glasses, and from that height, he was able to scan most of the nearer part of London. An everyday sight, some might think it. But it was not the London that Londoners knew a week earlier. North of the Thames it was a battered, silent wreck.

There were many sights that would have puzzled a visitor returning to the great city after an absence. The dome of St. Paul's would have seemed to him out of shape. One side of it was crushed in, as if it were a gigantic egg that had been struck with a giant spoon. Another landmark was the clock-tower of Big Ben. Right down to the great clock-face itself the top had been shorn away.

The chimneys of the tall Hotel Cecil were, for the most part, mere jagged stumps. And as for the minor buildings, far and wide, the wreckage amongst them was amazing.

One might have thought that some huge American cyclone had come eastwards and swept across London, or that an earthquake from the West Indies had made itself felt in southern England. Yet, here and there, many streets and houses were almost untouched.

In the ordinary course of things, Parliament should have been sitting, for it was the autumn session. But no Union Jack floated from the tower at Westminster, and a closer look through the field-glasses showed that many of the great windows of the House of Commons were smashed in. Hardly a soul was to be seen near it. But in the streets further back from the river, wherever they could be seen from the wharf-house roof, bands and companies and squadrons of

strange-looking soldiers in unfamiliar uniforms were marching to and fro.

What was the cause of this amazing change?

London knew it too well. A fortnight before, while Britain slept, thinking herself secure because those in power scoffed at the idea of war, Germany flung six army corps across the North Sea, and landed them on the east coast of England. They came like a thief in the night, and Britain awoke to find herself faced by an enormous and perfectly-equipped military force, and four of her coast towns in the hands of the enemy.

There is no need to tell again any part of the events that followed. The muddle, hurry, and confusion, the desperate bravery of the small forces that were sent to meet the invaders, and the steady, merciless advance of the great German military machine, led by the Commander-in-Chief, Von Krantz. Though his generals were checked here and there by smaller British forces, and defeated, his main army swept back all resistance.

The first to learn of the coming invasion, a few hours before its arrival, were two cadets of the rifle-corps of Greyfriars School, near the coast of Essex, acknowledged to be the smartest cadet corps in England.

Partly by accident, and partly by natural sharpness, the two cadets intercepted the messages of a German spy. The warnings that they gave were unheeded in London, and the terrible truth came home to the nation too late.

The schoolboy corps, being right in the path of the invading Germans, made a desperate and gallant attempt to defend themselves, but were naturally wiped out by the enormous odds against them. The only survivors were the two brothers who had first learned the news, Aubrey and Stephen Villiers. They escaped, and bore such useful information to the general commanding at Colchester that they were mentioned in the despatches, and given a free hand to scout on behalf of the garrison.

From then onwards, throughout the stress of the campaign, the boys distinguished themselves by their smartness in the field. Knowing every stick and stone in Essex like a book,

NEXT
THURSDAY:

"SKIMPOLE'S SCHOLARSHIP."

A Tale of the Boys of St. Jim's.
By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

they were able to render great services when scouts who did not know the country failed. The elder brother was most skilled as a scout and a handler of small machine-guns. The other excelled as a first-class rifle-shot. Quick to learn, and carrying their lives in their hands day by day, stern necessity taught them more of the grim game of war, till the final disaster.

So, at the time when this account opens, London had been bombarded and carried, Von Krantz had entered the City with his troops, the Lord Mayor was a prisoner at the Mansion House, and from the flagstaff on that famous building the German flag floated, where none but British colours had been seen since London was built. London Bridge was blown up, and across the great river the remainder of the British troops and the half-starved millions of London, waited in grim silence for the next move.

Aubrey Villiers, better known as "Sam Slick," turned his glasses for the last time upon the German standard flying above the Mansion House, and looked long.

Beside him, a little farther away, a smaller khaki-clad figure lay, also on its face. His name was Stephen Villiers. He cuddled the stock of a neat black carbine affectionately against his shoulder, and stared out across the river, in a different direction to Sam.

The black nose of a field-gun, looking not much bigger than a toy at that distance, poked slowly round the corner of the Temple Gardens on the Embankment over the water. With it came a dark-uniformed Prussian artilleryman, abreast the muzzle.

Crack! said the carbine. The Prussian gunner sank to the pavement and lay very still. The gun's muzzle withdrew again round the corner.

"Got him!" said Stephen Villiers complacently, pulling down the breech-bolt of his weapon. "A decent shot, Sam, that! Seven hundred yards if it was an inch!"

"You'd better drop that now, Steve!" said his brother, turning his glasses on the spot. "I believe there's a truce declared. Won't do to break it."

"Truce!" exclaimed Stephen, jerking out the empty cartridge-case. "Then what do they mean by bringing their guns on to the Embankment? They're always tryin' it. Our batteries command that side from this shore. We've a better view up here, an' as long as they try to sneak a gun out to face us, I'll put in a little rifle-practice, truce or not!"

"They'll drop it now for a spell," said Sam, focussing his glasses again. "There goes the white flag!" he added, as a square of white canvas fluttered up the Mansion House staff and flapped in the breeze under the German Standard.

"What for?"

"To cease all fightin' while the Kaiser dictates terms," said Sam grimly. "That flag means the message is sent to our Government. He's waitin' for our surrender. He states the price we've got to pay to Germany, that's all."

"All!" cried Stephen. "What does he think we should surrender for?"

"Because the Army's broken up, the Navy has lost a lot of ships, and can't help us, and Von Krantz's troops hold the Bank of England, the whole country beyond London, an' all the food-supplies, an' the people are starvin'. Because we're beaten!"

"Beaten!" cried Stephen wildly. "By gum, if you say so again, Sam, I'll—I'll—"

"All right, young 'un, don't use your cartridges on me!" said Sam, with a dry laugh. "I didn't say I meant it. Nor that England means it. I was talkin' from German Billy's point of view, who knows he's got us cooked. Wilhelm hasn't learned that the British Lion has a way of surprisin' people who think he's dead."

"Why don't we refuse the truce?" exclaimed Stephen.

"I told you there's a chance that some cowards at the head of affairs may weaken, an' give in. There's plenty of street-corner orators about, too, that think more of their stomachs an' pockets than of England, shoutin' to have the war stopped at any price. Parliament's full of 'em."

"An' I tell you they'll be hauled out an' strung up if they talk like that now!" said Stephen. "What had we better do?"

"Go down an' see what's goin' on," replied Sam, walking to the trapdoor in the roof. "No good stoppin' up here while that white rag's flyin'."

"How long'll it be before we know what German Billy's message is?"

"Pretty soon now. Most likely it was sent in last night,

and has already been decided, for all we know. Parliament's sittin' at Winchester. Look, there's our white flag flying in answer, under the Red Cross one on St. Thomas's Hospital! Shows we're holding the truce, too. You keep that precious carbine of yours quiet till it's down again, or you'll be dropped on an' shot by our own side."

Stephen grunted something as they went down through the house. The sight of the white flag made him ill, he said. They descended into the street, where it was soon obvious that plenty of excitement was going forward.

Grim, hungry faces were everywhere; faces that—though their owners said little—showed the deep-seated hatred of the insolent invaders that hemmed them in across the river. All southern England was almost bare of food, for the Germans held the Channel, and no supplies could come in.

The brothers walked rapidly along till they came to the wider space near the entrance to Southwark Bridge, where a much larger crowd had collected. Two or three excited open-air speakers, clinging to lamp-posts, or standing on doorsteps, were haranguing the crowd, but nobody paid much attention to them. They were all waiting eagerly for news. A good-natured cheer arose as the boys, who were now well-known by sight, appeared on the scene.

"What terms do the Germans offer?" cried several urgent voices. "Terms! We want no terms! Rifles, an' a chance to use 'em, are what we'll have!" shouted many fiercely. "We're starvin'! How can we hold out an' fight?" cried others.

The excitement redoubled as a man in a blue cloth cap came struggling through the mob. They knew who he was. The "Daily Mail"—one of the few newspapers that still came out—was published from its offices on the north side of the river, but German censors had charge of it, and allowed nothing to be printed except what they chose to pass.

In South London, however, the "Daily Mail" had established an office, where it managed to get hold of all the more important news. For lack of machines, it was unable to be published as a paper, but it had a staff of men who posted bulletins about the streets when any urgent news came to hand, to give the starving public the news.

It was all the man in the blue cap could do to get clear of the crowd, who pressed round him clamouring for information. Others, however, cleared a way forcibly for him, and, mounting a flight of doorsteps, he posted up a bulletin where all could see it. A thousand pairs of eyes scanned it eagerly, and the contents were passed on to those too far off to read. The headlines ran as follows:

THE KAISER'S DEMANDS!

BRITAIN TO PAY AN INDEMNITY OF £100,000,000.

CESSION OF NATAL, TRANSVAAL, AND RHODESIA.

EGYPT AND CAPE COLONY TO BE GERMAN PROTECTORATES.

ONE HALF THE NAVY TO BE SURRENDERED TO GERMANY.

A GUARANTEE NOT TO BUILD MORE THAN TWO SHIPS PER YEAR IN FUTURE WITHOUT GERMANY'S CONSENT.

DISARMAMENT, AND SUBMISSION TO GERMAN RULE TILL THE KAISER'S TROOPS RETURN.

A pause of amazed silence fell on the whole crowd as the meaning of these demands sank home. It took some seconds to realise that they meant the wreck of the British Empire. Then, as the truth came home, a mighty shout went up:

"No surrender!"

The fierce, hunger-pinched faces pressed forward on every side, and every man who had a weapon about him clutched it instinctively.

"Fling it back in their faces! We'll die in the last ditch before we give in!"

A mob orator, shrieking to make himself heard, clamoured that the Colonies were worthless, and the money should be raised to buy peace. Amid fierce shouts he was torn down from his place and disappeared. Sam Villiers, carried away by his excitement, scrambled some way up a lamp-post beside him, and stood with his foot on the lower ring.

"Boys," he shouted, in a voice that carried across the mob, "there are no shirkers among you? You'll not give way?"

"No!" cried the crowd, with a great shout; and a voice cried loudly:

ANSWERS

NEXT THURSDAY;

"SKIMPOLE'S SCHOLARSHIP."

A Tale of the Boys of St. Jim's, By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

"Cheer for the kids who fired the first shot!" A chorus of fierce hurrahs arose.

"If any coward in Parliament counsels surrender," cried Sam, "will you obey?"

"No! We'll hang him! While there's a man left alive we'll hold out!"

Hungry, desperate, nearly all of them ruined men, the bulk of the crowd spoke with one voice. Hopeless though the nation's case might be, they spurned fiercely all thoughts of surrender to the insolent invader. Just then, while some on the outskirts were still shrinking back and looking doubtful, a second man in a blue cap was seen making his way through the mob. There was a sudden pause as he posted up his bulletin beside the other. All eyes travelled towards it.

BRITISH NAVAL VICTORY!

DEFEAT OF THE FIRST GERMAN CRUISER
SQUADRON OFF PENTLAND FIRTH.

FIVE KAISER'S SHIPS SUNK.

TWO CAPTURED.

OUR FLEET STEAMING SOUTH.

NAVAL BATTLE IN PROGRESS IN THE CHANNEL.

The roar of cheers that followed the reading could have been heard at Greenwich. Hats were flung in the air, and men went wild with joy. All knew what it meant. Britain's invincible fleet was on her way to avenge the defeats, and regain command of the ocean highways. And from every part of South London fresh cheers arose as the news spread.

"What answer to the Germans now?" cried a voice.

"Drive them back into the sea!" roared the crowd. "Up with the old colours!"

"Are we subjects of the Kaiser yet?" shouted Sam mockingly. And the answer came back from a thousand throats:

"GOD SAVE THE KING!"

CHAPTER 2,

How Ned of Northey Sailed to London.

"Nothin' could have happened better than that," said Sam enthusiastically, as the boys made their way eastwards from Southwark Bridge. "Not that the country wanted encouragin' to fight, but it's stiffened the few backsliders an' spiked the guns of any politicians who want to give us away. There'll be a rifle in nearly every man's hand to-morrow. Cargoes have been run into Newhaven an' Portsmouth, in spite of the blockade."

"An' we'll have command of the sea in a few days, or less!" exclaimed Stephen. "Who says the British Lion's dead?"

"Not dead, old boy, but at bay. As for the command of the sea, the crowd shouted as if we'd already got it. But it'll be a hard an' bitter struggle first, if we do. We lost too heavily at first, when the North Sea Fleet an' Nore Squadron were surprised an' wiped out, before war was declared. I shouldn't be surprised if the two navies hammer themselves to bits."

"Why's the fleet up North?"

"Most likely it went up round Wales an' Scotland to catch the Germans in the North Sea, where they've got everything their own way, so far. Our other squadron is movin' up Channel, it seems. If it defeats the German battleships there, it'll steam on an' tackle the rest off the East Coast, so we'll get 'em between two fires. But it's no time to brag an' blow, for, privately, the bettin's pretty even."

"I'll back our fleet, anyhow."

"Of course! Only, mind you, the command of the sea isn't a thing gained or lost in a day, as many people think. Remember, too, that when we've got it there are enough German troops now in this country to beat any army we've ever had, an' they hold the supplies an' stores, too. Britain'll have to fight as she's never fought before to win."

"She'll do it," said Stephen. And turning down one of the roads to the wharves, they reached the Thames-side not far west of London Bridge, and stood for a few moments looking pensively across the river at the further side. The southern shore was so well defended by protected British batteries that no German troops or guns were able to show themselves on the opposite front. All attempts had failed, for the British artillery could sweep the whole space up to the houses and the Embankment.

"There goes the flag down!" exclaimed Sam, looking through his glasses, as the white square disappeared from over the Mansion House. "That means the truce is ended.

The flag's goin' down in response to ours. The Government has refused to listen to the demands, they."

"Hurrah!" cried Stephen.

He glanced down the river, ready to dance with delight, when a curious-looking vessel caught his eye. It was a small, weather-beaten Essex fishing-smack, with red sails, and, despite of its humble appearance, it gilded along at a surprising pace, close-hauled to the wind.

It was not a type of craft often seen so high up the Thames, and hence Stephen's surprise. The surprise redoubled when he saw the vessel run close along the German side of the Thames, and coolly headed straight for the great gap which the Prussians had blown in London Bridge, sailed slap through as if it had been a lock-gate, the red sails suddenly appearing above the bridge. A shot or two was fired from one of the houses on the north side, but the smack sailed coolly on, and luffed over to the side held by the British. Stephen, wondering, had quite expected to see her strike on the sunken masonry and sink, but she did not. A cry escaped him.

"Sam! Am I dreaming, or have we seen that craft before?"

His brother turned, and stared at the smack in amazement.

"Seen her before?" he exclaimed. "Why, it's Ned of Northey's cutter, as I live! Can it be—"

Stephen snatched the glasses from his brother's hand, and directed them at the craft.

"You're right, it's Ned," he cried, "an' he's alone! What does it mean, an' why in the world is he here? Let's give him a hail!"

He ran down to the edge of the wharf, and gave a long waterman's cry that echoed across the Thames. Almost immediately the smack headed in towards the wharf.

Both the brothers awaited her eagerly, wondering what was in the wind. "Ned of Northey," the young Essex wildfowler, had long been their companion in times of peace, and later, during the war. He lived in an old houseboat at Northey Island, in the wide Blackwater Estuary, and had for years taken them duck-shooting and fishing with him in his smack and gunning-punts. Not long after the landing of the Germans, he had saved the lives of the boys when the enemy's scouts were in search of them, and they had not seen him since the defence of Cotehall Towers, their old home in Essex.

"I'll bet he's not here for nothing," said Stephen. "By gum, but I'm glad to see him! Hi, Ned, let her come alongside!"

The smack's sails ran down smartly, she glided along the wharf, and her warps were made fast in a moment by the boys. The only being aboard her was the marshman himself, and he sprang ashore a fine, powerfully-built young fellow in a jersey and sea-boots.

"Why, Ned, what on earth has brought you here?" exclaimed Sam, gripping his horny hand. "And how did you get through the defences? It's great to see your brown chivy again, whatever the reason."

"I thought we'd run agin each other, gents," said Ned, grinning as he shook Stephen's hand. "We allers do, don't we? I come up here a-purpose to find you, an' I knew I'd get to hear o' you. An' here ye are, the very first."

"But how on earth did you get here, Ned?" exclaimed Sam.

"Why, in the natural way, sir," said the fowler, jerking his thumb towards his vessel. "How's a chap like me to get about, 'cept by water? I'm like an owd duck ashore. Yes, I was shot at once or twice, an' there was a torpedo-boat on guard in the Lower Hope—a German. I lowered my sails an' drifted up in the dark, so she didn't spot me. Before that? Why, I started from Bradwell Quay on the Blackwater, an' came up by the Burnham River an' behind the islands by Havengore to the Thames. I lay two days in the Havens. There's a sight o' Germans down by Shoeburyness, but they didn't bother me much, secin' I was a fisherman."

"But what did you risk the journey up here for, Sam? Not just to shake hands with us?"

"Well, gents, there's somethin' I thought you ought to know, as you could put it before the proper people, if there's anything in it. I've picked up a notion that there's more sodgers comin'—Germans. An' if so, they'll land somewhere about the Thames mouth, this time."

Sam and Stephen looked at each other in consternation.

"Why d'you think so, Ned?" said the former.

"By the use o' my eyes an' ears. I've been pokin' about down there in the wilds for some time now, an' I've picked up a word or two o' their lingo, too. Three nights ago I lay up in a reed-bed waitin' for ducks, an' there was two Germans sittin' an' smokin' within ten foot o' me for half an hour together. I spotted a word or two o' what they said. An' I've noticed them that's outposts along the shores

there, too. If they ain't makin' preparations to help sodgers disembark, call me a Dutchman!"

"Great guns!" muttered Sam. "Another reinforcement of German troops! That'd be a finishing disaster. Can it be true? Nobody seems to have any inkling of it here."

"Like enough," said Ned drily. "They hadn't no inkling of it last time, an' the Germans hold the telegraph wires now. That's all I've got for ye, sir, barrin' this bit o' paper," he added, drawing a sealed letter from under his jersey and handing it to Sam. "I don't know if it's anything tickler, for I can't read the lingo."

"Where did you get it?" asked Sam, tearing it open.

"There was a despatch-rider chap crossin' Wakering Marsh last night, an' seein' me with a duck-gun, he reckoned I was at him, an' tried to ride me down. I led him across a big old marsh-fleet, where he an' his horse got bogged to the middle, an' I took his weapons off him an' that note out o' his side-pouch."

Sam gave a low whistle as he perused the note, and read it out, turning it into English. It was addressed to "Herr Colonel Kellner," and ran thus:

"On the arrival of the Seventh Flotilla about high-water time to-morrow night, you will detach the 3rd and 4th Saxon Regiments, and add them to your guard. The remainder of the army corps will proceed along the main London Road, as arranged.

"Show this letter to General Loschwitz, as your authority.

"R. VON KRANTZ."

"By glory," exclaimed Stephen, "from the commander-in-chief! Then it's true! Another whole army corps to land!"

"Ned, you've dropped across one of the hottest pieces of news in the campaign," said Sam. He stood for a moment, thinking. "General Ripley must know of this at once, though I don't know what he can do. Will you be here in an hour's time, or less?"

"I'll wait here for you," returned Ned; and the two brothers set off at once.

Saying little to each other on the way, they made all speed to the temporary quarters of Lord Ripley, the famous general then in command of the troops in London. So many important pieces of news had the two young scouts furnished during the campaign, that they were now given an immediate audience, on demand. Sam sent in an urgent message, and Lord Ripley received Sam at once. Without a word, the cadet gave him the letter.

The old war-dog's scarred, handsome face seemed to grow older as he read it.

"You are sure this is genuine?" he said abruptly.

Sam told him how it had been obtained. The general, with knitted brows, paced the room restlessly.

"This is a terrible disaster," he said grimly, "nothing else. You know the facts as well as I do, Villiers. The German troops already in England are overwhelming in force, and our situation is desperate as it is. But if they are reinforced by another whole army corps, hope is dead. There is no use in concealing it. They will be able to sweep the whole country, and the utmost bravery of the nation can avail nothing. It will be a case of the last ditch."

Sam knew it well enough. There was no use in being blind to plain facts.

"Is there no chance of our fleet stopping them, sir?" he said.

"The Admiralty will be informed at once, of course," said the general, turning the lever of a telephone-bell beside him; "but they can't do it in time," he muttered, half to himself. "There are but a few hours, and the Germans still hold the North Sea. There will be a long and desperate struggle before we regain command, and these troops land to-night! Besides, our fleet is at sea, far to the northward, and cannot possibly be informed in time."

"With your leave, sir," said Sam, "I will go down the river to-night, and see if there is anything that could be done."

"You, boy! What can you do?"

"Nothing, sir, probably; but I know the Thames mouth rather well. I might bring you a little information."

"You have the strangest luck, you and that brother of yours, with plenty of skill and nerve to back it," mused the general. "Naturally this is a case where you can do nothing—we are all helpless. No power in the world, short of a strong squadron of warships or torpedo craft, could prevent the landing. However, you have a free hand to go where you like. If you get through alive, you can bring me any news you may gather. But it will matter little, by then, what happens."

Sam said nothing. There was nothing to say.

"Not a word of this to anybody," said Lord Ripley. "It must be kept a dead secret, for, brave as they are, it will not put heart into the nation to know that the odds give us no hope of victory."

"I will say nothing, sir," said Sam. "Perhaps there is just one small chance that this army corps may fail to land."

Lord Ripley glanced at him.

"Then find the chance, and act on it!" he said curtly.

"Good-day, Villiers!"

"Rather sharp on me that time," thought Sam, as he saluted and withdrew quickly. "What a fine old chap he is, and how he'd make hay of the Germans if he had the men an' guns! Well, they'll buy their victory dearly—they haven't got it yet. It'll kill Lord Ripley when the smash comes."

He went straight back to the wharf where he had left his brother and the marshman, who were awaiting him eagerly.

"Are you game to tackle the journey down the river again, Ned?" he said.

"Ready for anything, sir!"

"Then we'll come with you! Jump aboard! Cast off those warps, Steve. I'll explain as we go."

"Hooray!" cried Stephen, throwing the mooring-ropes aboard, and springing on to the smack's deck. "Off at last! Now we're goin' to see life! I've had enough o' the beastly bricks an' mortar."

"Rough on the poor beggars who have to stay behind," said Sam, as the smack glided away from the wharf, and her red sails ran up as they hauled smartly on the halyards. "Have you got any provisions on this hooker, Ned? I was near forgettin' them."

"Ay, plenty of a sort," said the smacksman. "I reckoned this here war'd soon make food scarcer'n money, so I set to work an' caught an' dried enough fish to last two months. They're all below, stacked in crates an' salted. There's a barrel o' flour, too, an' with my nets an' guns, I can allers get fish an' fowl when there's time. There's plenty in the sea an' the marshes for them that knows how to git 'em."

"We shall do well, then," said Stephen. "But what are we after, Sam, an' what's your news?"

Sam told them of his interview with General Ripley, and the result of it.

"Gosh!" said Ned. "Then if this fresh army o' Germans comes, we're done!"

"I should say so. There's no doubt that against such an army, an' so many guns, no amount of untrained men can hope to do any good."

The others nodded silently. It needed no great amount of military knowledge to see the truth of Sam's words.

"What can we do if we go to the mouth of the Thames?" said Stephen.

"Nothing, most likely. You don't expect three chaps in a fishing-smack to get in the way of an army, do you? But there's never any knowing what service you can do, till the chance turns up, an' we might collect some facts worth knowin', if we get through. It's always been our way to be on the spot, eh, Steve?"

"Rather!" said the boy. "Let's go, whatever the risk. There's no place we know of better than the Thames-mouth—Ned, too. Look out for the bridge, Ned!"

"I wonder you dared bring her through with the channel full of sunken masonry," said Sam, as the smack headed back for the gap blown through London Bridge.

"I saw by the swirl o' the water where the deepest part was," said Ned. And once more the vessel, with wind and tide in her favour, shot through the gap and luffed over to the south side again. "There warn't no safe berth below the bridge—too many sharpshooters on the German side. Better look out, sir," he added, as a rifle-shot smacked through the cloth of the mainsail just over their heads. "I'd get below if I were you. You're both a bit too well-known to the Germans, an' if they recognise you, this craft'll be too sharply looked after for us to do anything when a chance comes."

Stephen objected, but Sam, little as he liked leaving the deck, made his brother accompany him into the little cabin while they passed the houses.

"Ned's right, an' it ain't fair to bring trouble down on him an' his craft while we can help it," said Sam. "We might easily be spotted through a pair of binoculars, an' we don't want this cruise spoilt at the beginning of it. As soon as we're past Woolwich, we can take all the chances openly, an' go ahead."

Ned, sitting low in the cockpit outside, with only his eyes showing above the edge, was able to steer without exposing himself, and the mist on the river made it impossible to hit so small a mark. Only a few stray shots from snipers at house-windows greeted the Maid of Essex—for that was the smack's name—and soon she was slipping along fast with the wind and tide, close to the Kentish shore, which was, of course, still in the hands of the British. The boys came out as soon as Woolwich was left behind, and felt the fresh, crisp air of the free reaches on their cheeks.

"I can sniff the sea!" said Stephen. "By gum, it's

great to be off again together, with all the fun before us!"

"So it is," said Sam, "though I don't see there's much fun, while the country's got its back to the wall like it has at present. Where's the spot we shall have most difficulty in passing, Ned?"

"There's a torpedo-boat patrollin' the Lower Hope," said Ned; "the Germans aren't troublin' to guard the upper river much. You see, they've got a strong squadron outside, with its headquarters at Sheerness, an' nothing can get past 'em. We sha'n't have this tide right down, gents—the wind's droppin'."

Night was falling as they passed Gravesend, and as the flood tide came up against them, and the breeze fell light, they were a long time almost stationary. An hour or two later, however, the wind freshened considerably, and they went slipping along at a fair pace in the slack water near the shore.

The gas-buoy on the Ovens shoal was showing its winking light as the smack turned into the Lower Hope, the last reach but one of the river before it reaches the sea. The Hope is a mile wide, salt, and turbulent as the sea itself, and the boys kept a keen look-out for the German torpedo-boat.

"There she is!" said Stephen, pointing to a long, dark shape near the Cliffe shore. At the same moment Ned bore away as far as he could to the other side, along the edge of the Mucking Flats, and the dark vessel faded like a ghost, for the night was black, and there was a haze on the water.

"Think she saw us?" asked Stephen.

"If she does, she'll probably sink us without troublin' to ask who we are," said Sam; "but I don't think she did. We ought to be able to slip by now, unless she cruises over this side."

"Ay," added Ned, "she'll be lookin' out for vessels comin' up rather than craft goin' down. We're makin' good way. There's the Hole Haven openin' up," he added, some time later, as a snug-looking creek came into view at the western end of Canvey Island. Before them stretched the broad bosom of Sea Reach, three miles wide, right down to the Nore Lightship, which marks the point where the great river joins the sea.

"There wasn't no torpedo-boat 'tween the Hope an' Sheppey when I came up," said Ned, as they sailed slowly down against the tide, "an' we're not likely to be troubled any more. Where d'you reckon this German flotilla'll land, sir?"

"Can't say," replied Sam. "If they save their tide, an' get here at high water, as they seem to intend, they can land where they choose, an' they've chosen a spot, of course. If they're late, an' the flats are uncoverin' they'd either have to wait till next high-water, or land at Southend Pier, or Thames Haven, which'd be awkward for 'em. Once the water runs off the ooze-banks, those are the only places they could disembark at. But I reckon they mean to be on dry land before dawn."

"What, it's for to-night, is it?" exclaimed Stephen.

"Of course! I told you! What's that away to windward, Ned?" said Sam, as a great bulky, motionless form loomed up on their right, just out of the deep water channel for shipping.

"Oil-tank steamer," said Ned, "deserted. She was there when I came up. Fired at while out at sea by a German cruiser, I fancy, an' by the time she got in here she was sinkin', so they had to beach her. She's stuck on the Blyth Flats, an' there's only six foot or so of water round her."

"Oil-steamer?" said Sam. "Let's go aboard. Haven't the Germans looted her?"

"Don't think so, sir. She carried no war stores nor cargo o' provisions."

Both the others rather wondered what Sam

wanted to board her for; but he insisted, and the smack ran alongside the stranded vessel. She was a big iron ship, with a heavy list over to starboard as she lay. The boys went all over her, and Sam-entered her hold, which had already been opened.

"Why, her cargo's petrol, not oil," he said, as he came on deck—"tanks of raw petrol, an' some of it in metal drums!"

"Is it, sir?" said Ned indifferently. "Well, it's no odds. I thought it was oil."

Sam went below again, and was there some time. He also searched the steamer's tool-room. Finally, he came out on deck, and sat on the after-hatch, where he remained for a long while, his chin on his hands, staring pensively at the river, and away down to the broad, dark sea beyond. He was there so long that the others became impatient.

"Are we goin' to spend the night aboard here, Sam?" said his brother.

Sam made no reply.

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"He's got a thinkin' fit on," said Stephen to Ned. "He'll sit there till goodness knows when. Let's see if there's a meal in the steward's pantry."

They came on deck half an hour later, and found Sam still sitting as before, his eyes fixed on the dark water. He rose as they approached.

"Ned," he said, "the powder-hulks were still in Hole Haven when we passed, weren't they?"

"The owd dynamite-ships? Ay, they was," replied the smacksman.

"I suppose they're in the hands of the Germans now. Is there any guard on them?"

"Only on the one nearest the river. They keeps an eye on the rest lyin' up above 'em. The caretakers what looked after 'em had to clear out; but I s'pose the Germans couldn't spare a guard for more'n one. They've got the countryside there in their hands, an' nobody's likely to touch the owd hulks."

"How many men on the nearest one?"

"A couple. I lay in there night afore last in this smack. They made me drift farther away, but didn't interfere with me more'n that, 'cept that they bought some fish o' me an' wouldn't pay for it."

"What's up, Sam? What are you goin' to do?" said Stephen, who was listening eagerly. He knew that his brother had schemed a plan of some sort during that long silence on deck.

"Look here, Ned," said Sam, "with this sou'-west wind, the tide'll begin to run down earlier than its proper time. Pr'aps half an hour or three-quarters earlier."

"Ay; it won't be much of a tide."

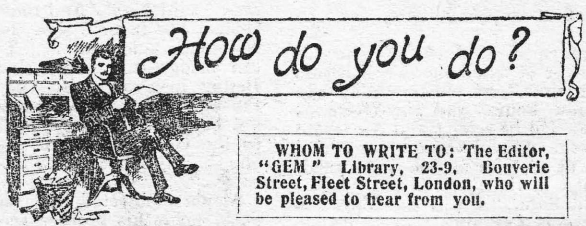
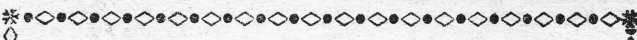
"So that if the Germans reckon to arrivè just before high-water, an' go by the almanack, the tide'll be runnin' down by the time they reach the Nore."

"Ay, sir, unless they can foretell that the tide'll be an early one, which ain't likely. Then they'll have to land at the pier—is that what you mean?"

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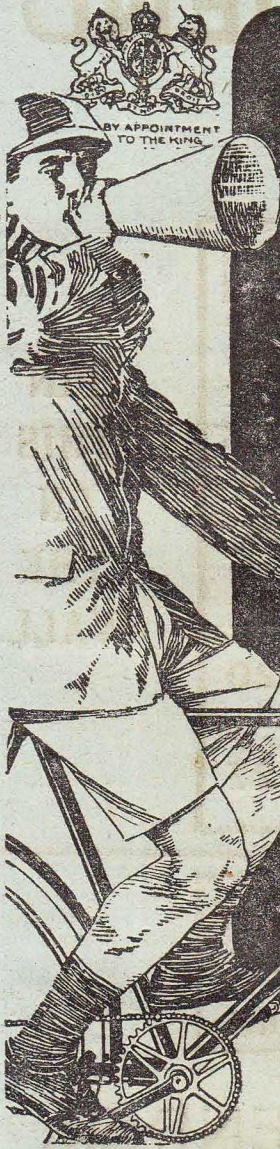
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