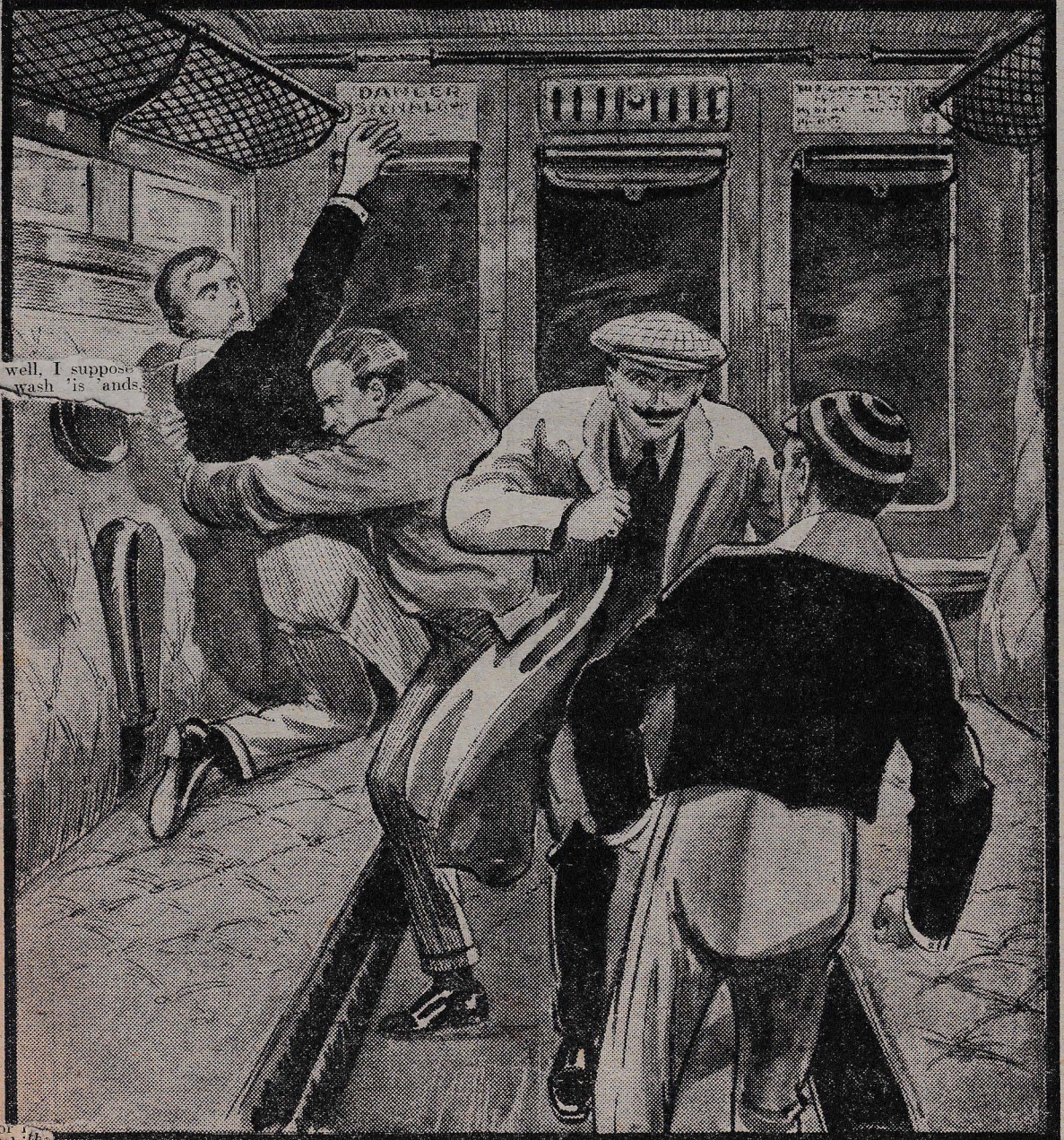


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Oh, well, I suppose wash 'is' and's.

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By **MARTIN CLIFFORD.**



"You have brought the stick?" asked Mr. Hicks eagerly. "Yes!" answered Levison. "My quid, please!" The sovereign was handed over, and Mr. Hicks received in exchange D'Arcy's walking-stick! (See Chapter 11.)

CHAPTER 1.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy Gets the Stick.

"**B**R-R-R-R-R!"
Thus Jack Blake, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's. He had just opened the window of Study No. 6 in the School House, and stood looking out into the quad.
"My hat, it's jolly cold!" he said, with a little shiver. "It's freezing like the dickens!"
"All the better," said Herries. "The road'll be nice and hard. Don't make a fuss about a bit of frost."
Blake shut the window.
"I wasn't making a fuss, you silly ass!" he replied warmly.
"Can't I say it's cold, now? I'm glad it is freezing. It's better than rain and slush, anyhow. Are you chaps ready?"
"I am," said Herries.
"So am I," said Digby, wrapping a muffler round his neck.
"I expect we shall have to wait half the giddy afternoon for Gussy!"
"Gussy again!" exclaimed Blake. "The bounder's always keeping us waiting. Let's shove our overcoats on and rout him out."
The chums of Study No. 6 had arranged to go for a jaunt

to Rylcombe, as there was no football on that afternoon. And, as usual, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of the School House, was the last to be ready.

Blake, Herries and Digby soon had their overcoats on, and then they hurried up to the dormitory. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was in the act of making a necktie into an elaborate bow, an operation which usually required the most careful and strict attention.

"There he is, the giddy slow-coach!" said Herries. "Are you going to keep us waiting about all the afternoon, Gussy?" said Blake. "We've been waiting ages!"

Arthur Augustus turned from the glass.
"Pway don't be widic, deah boy!" he exclaimed. "I believe you are only just weady. I have almost finished. If you care to wait ten minutes—"

"Ten minutes!" roared Blake. "If you're not ready in two minutes, Gussy, you'll be hauled out by your neck!"

"You uttah ass!" said D'Arcy. "Theah! Your intewyupion has caused me to wuin my bow. I shall have to tie it all ovah again!"

"Oh crumbs!" murmured Digby. "That'll mean five minutes more!"

"Will it?" said Blake darkly. "Look here, Gussy—"
"You are puttin' me into quite a fluttah, deah boys!"

Next Wednesday:

"LED ASTRAY!" AND "SECRET SERVICE!"

protested Arthur Augustus. "I shall be all the quickah if you let me dwess alone. Pway wetiah, and wait for mie in the quad."

"Yes, come on," said Herries. "You know what Gussy is. Wild horses won't drag him out until he's got his giddy tie straight!"

"All right!" growled Blake. "But if you're more than five minutes, Gussy, we'll slaughter you when you come down!"

And the trio descended to the quad. There was no particular hurry, but it was certainly exasperating to be kept waiting about in the cold.

The afternoon was beautifully fine, the wintry sunlight streaming through the leafless branches of the old elms. From the football-field came sundry shouts, for the Shell were indulging in a practice match.

"Might as well be punting a footer about while we're waiting," suggested Digby, looking across towards the New House. "There's Redfern and Lawrence over there with one. Suppose we borrow it?"

"Good wheeze," said Blake. "Anything to keep warm?" And the School House trio trotted across the quad in order to borrow—forcibly—the New House footer. But Lawrence and Redfern saw them coming.

"Look out! School House rotters!" yelled Redfern. "It's all right!" shouted Blake. "We're only going to borrow your footer!"

Lawrence grinned. "That's just where you're mistaken, my son," he said. "If you come over here you'll jolly well get scalped. Buzz off!"

In another minute a miniature battle would have been in progress, but an interruption occurred in time to avert it. Blagg, the village postman, appeared at the gates, and started walking across the quad.

"Hallo, old Blaggy!" exclaimed Herries. "Let's see if he's got anything for us. I'm expecting a remittance."

Blake & Co. bore down upon Blagg. "Anything for us, Blaggy?" asked Herries eagerly.

"No, nothing, young gentlemen, except—"

"Except what?" said Herries.

"Except a parcel for Master D'Arcy," answered Blagg. "It's the only thing I've got for the School House, so perhaps you wouldn't mind taking it?"

Blake nodded. "That's all right," he said. "Hand it over. We're waiting for D'Arcy, as a matter of fact. We'll give it to him when he comes out."

"Thank you, Master Blake!" And Blagg handed over a long parcel, well wrapped up. Then the postman trudged off towards the Head's house.

Blake looked at the parcel in his hands. "Well, what the dickens can this be?" he exclaimed.

"Has Gussy been squandering his tin on a new gamp?"

"It looks like a brolley, I must say," agreed Herries. "Where's it from—London? I say, that's Lord Eastwood's handwriting—Gussy's pater."

"So it is," said Jack Blake. "I say, there might be a fiver in here."

"Not likely. If it's a present, Lord Eastwood wouldn't send money as well," said Digby. "Besides, Gussy's got plenty of tin just now."

"Well, it's no good guessing. Go and get the fathead down."

"No need," said Herries. "Here he is."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy walked gracefully down the School House steps. As usual, he was resplendent from the crown of his shiny topper to the tips of his elegant shoes. He had taken a considerable time to dress, but he certainly had something to show for it.

"Weady, deah boys!" he announced.

"Yes, and about time!"

"Whatevah is that cuwious-lookin' parcel?" asked D'Arcy.

"Are you going to take it to Wylcombe with you, Blake?"

"It's for you, fathead!"

"Weally? Bai Jove, I wondah what it can be?" said Arthur Augustus, taking the parcel, and examining it. "It's f'rom the govehnah."

"We know that."

"I wonder—"

"What's the good of wondering, you dotty chump?" de-manded Blake. "Why can't you open it, and see?"

D'Arcy forced the string off.

"Yaas, that's not at all a bad ideah," he said. "Surely the govehnah hasn't sent me an umbwella? I have got threee already."

"Perhaps it's a patent trouser-presser," suggested Herries brilliantly.

"You uttah ass! How could a twousah-pwessah be contained in a nawwow box like this?" said D'Arcy. "Heah we are, deah boys! Bai Jove, it's a walkin'-stick—a wippin' one, too!"

Arthur Augustus lifted from the box an elegant ebony walking-stick, with a great massive solid silver knob, beautifully chased. There was nothing flashy about it, but even the juniors—who were by no means connoisseurs of such things—saw that it was an expensive article.

"Heah's a lettah, deah boys," said D'Arcy. "It's jolly decent of the govehnah to make me a pwesent of this, I must say. It's weally a wippin' thing."

Arthur Augustus read the letter:

"My Dear Boy,—You will find a walking-stick enclosed with this note. I think you will like it, although it is, perhaps, a little thick and heavy. However, it is much better than a foppish cane, and I am sure you will be pleased with it. It is a little present from

YOUR FATHER."

"The patah has shown wonderful taste in choosin' this stick," said the swell of St. Jim's. "He is quite wight, deah boys. It is much bettah than those widiculously flimsy canes."

His chums examined it.

"Yes, it's a jolly decent thing," said Blake. "But we're wasting time, Gussy."

"Shove it in the entrance-hall and come along," added Herries.

"You burblin' duffah, Hewwies!" exclaimed D'Arcy indignantly. "I shall do nothin' of the sort! I don't believe you have examined the stick properly at all."

"That'll do to-night, Gussy," said Blake. "There's plenty of time to look at the old thing. Blessed if I see what your pater sent you a stick for, anyway. A fat hamper would have been heaps better!"

"Rather!" agreed Digby. "There'd have been sense in that. And he could have got a jolly big hamper for the money that silly old stick cost!"

D'Arcy's aristocratic face turned red with indignation.

"You uttah wottahs!" he exclaimed warmly. "You are unable to appreciate a good article when you see one. A hampah is a common, ewevyday thing, but this stick is somethin' to pwize."

Blake breathed hard.

"All right, prize it!" he said patiently. "Do anything you like with it, Gussy. But for goodness' sake chuck it indoors, and come along! It'll be tea-time before we start!"

"You ought to have hidden the parcel till we got back," said Digby.

"I am weally pained, deah boys, that you should show such a deplowable lack of appreciation," said Arthur Augustus.

"I am weady when you are—in fact, I'm waitin' to start!"

"And how about the stick?"

"I'll take that with me, deah boys. I think it will wathah become me, you know. Pway wait a moment, howevah, while I take this box and papah into the School House."

"I'll do that, Gussy," said Digby. "You chaps buzz off! I'll catch you up in two ticks."

And he scrambled up the cardboard box and paper, and ran into the School House. He was out in less than a minute, and caught his chums up just outside the gates.

A feed was waiting for them at Rylecombe, and they didn't want to waste all the afternoon over the new walking-stick. It interested D'Arcy, but his chums didn't care two straws about it. Personally, they had no use for walking-sticks.

CHAPTER 2:

Nothing Doing!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY was very proud of his new possession. It was certainly a beautiful stick, and as he walked he kept up a continuous string of remarks concerning its good points.

"It's made of weal ebony, deah boys," he said, for the tenth time. "Anothah good point—"

"Another good point is the end of the ferrule," interrupted Blake, in exasperation. "And if you don't dry up

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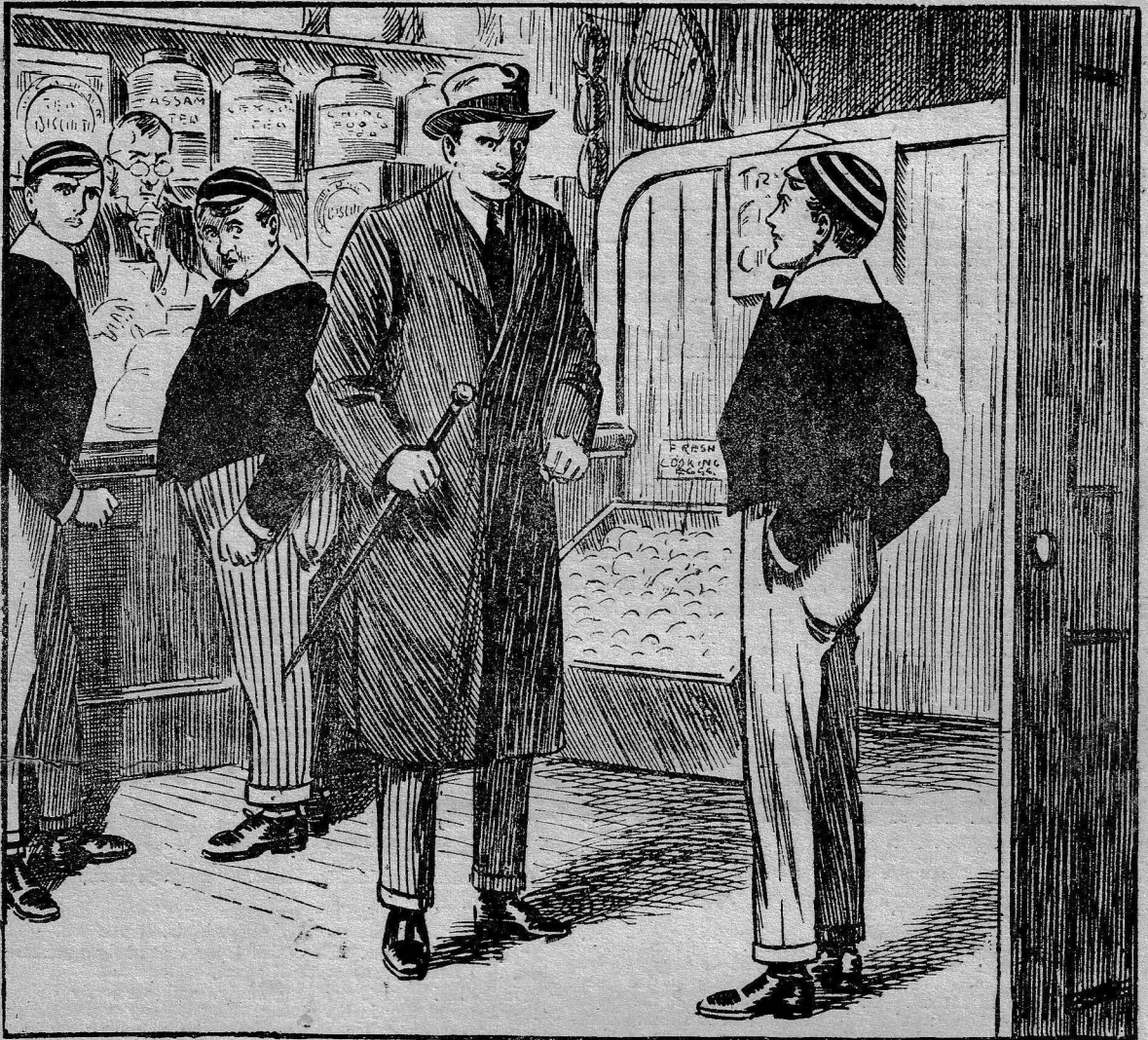
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After having taken D'Arcy's stick, Mr. Hicks moved quickly to the door, but Kerr was standing there. "Pardon me, my boy!" said the man politely. "There's no hurry!" replied Kerr easily. "You've made a slight mistake!" (See Chapter 7.)

about the rotten stick, Gussy, we'll dig you in the ribs with that good point!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Can't you talk about something else?" demanded Blake.

"Grub, for instance. What shall we have at the tuckshop?"

"I suggest something hot," said Herries, slapping his gloved hands together. "How about hot tea and buttered scones to start with?"

"First chop!" said Blake, with relish.

Arthur Augustus gazed at his chums for a moment, and thought it wisest to say nothing further about the stick. He did not want it laid about him.

"The boundahs would be quite capable of it!" he murmured.

"What's that you're muttering about?" said Blake.

"Have you taken to jawing to yourself, Gussy?"

"I was merely thinkin' that you'd be quite wotten enough to do it, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus absently.

"Eh?"

"I say you'd be wotten enough— Bai Jove, it's nothin'!" exclaimed D'Arcy, turning red. "I was thinkin', that's all." Blake stared.

"Yes; and you were thinking about me," he said. "What should I be rotten enough to do?"

"I was thinkin' about the stick, deah boy."

"The stick again!" roared Blake. "Look here, Gussy, we're fed up with the blessed thing! If you mention it again I'll chuck it over the hedge!"

"And bury it," added Herries.

"Weally, you asses," protested Arthur Augustus. "I shouldn't have mentioned it if you hadn't pwessed me. I was thinkin' that you'd be capable of lamming me with it, you know!"

Blake grinned.

"You're quite right. And we'll do it, too, if we hear anything more about it."

And not a word was spoken of the stick for the remainder of the walk to Rylcombe.

The chums of Study No. 6 paused for a few moments to look into a shop window, and Digby noticed that a tall, distinguished-looking man, with a dark moustache, and dressed with faultless care, took quite an interest in the ebony stick.

His eyes were upon it all the time D'Arcy was looking into the shop. Digby thought no more of the matter once they went on their way, and they entered the tuckshop.

"Perform your best bow, Gussy," whispered Blake.

"Miss Bunn's behind the counter!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"And don't start making eyes at her!"

Arthur Augustus turned a beautiful crimson.

"Pway, wemebah, you wottah, that I nevah make eyes!" said D'Arcy indignantly, and in a distinctly audible voice. "I have far too much wespsect for Miss Bunn to make eyes—"

Herries gave his elegant chum a nudge.

"Shut up, you ass!" he murmured.

"I uttahly wufese to shut up, Hewwies. I wish you to thowoughly undahstand—"

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A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

NEXT
WEDNESDAY—

"LED ASTRAY!"

"Good-afternoon, Miss Bunn!" interrupted Blake, turning his back to D'Arcy, and leaning on the counter. "We want tea and hot buttered scones, please!"

Miss Bunn nodded, and smiled.

"Will that be all?" she asked, knowing full well the capacity of the Fourth-Formers.

"Oh, no! That's only to start with."

Arthur Augustus jammed his monocle into his eye, and glared at Blake's back. He had only just got over his indignation.

"Blake, you are frightfully wude!" he said warmly

"That's all right, Gussy!"

"I weally feel inclined to give you a feahful thwashin'—"

Blake held up his hands in horror.

"Oh, Gussy—Gussy!" he exclaimed. "Where are your manners? What has become of the repose which stamps the D'Arcy's? Do you realise that you're behaving like a low, common fellow before a lady? Do you realise that Miss Bunn heard you threaten to give me a 'feahful thwashing'?"

D'Arcy's face turned purple.

"Weally, Blake—"

"It's no good making excuses, Gussy," said Blake severely.

"The only thing to do is to apologise!"

Arthur Augustus looked round blankly.

"If you think I have been wude, deah boys—"

"We know you have been rude, awfully rude!" said Digby gravely.

"Then I am feahfully sowwy, and I ofah you my sincere apologies," said the swell of the School House. "But, weally, I cannot undahstand how I have been wude. It was you, Blake, who—"

D'Arcy suddenly paused as he saw Miss Bunn regarding him with a grave face, but merry laughing eyes. He removed his topper with a flourish, and bowed low.

"Good-afahnoon, Miss Bunn!" he said gracefully.

"Pway excuse these boundahs! I always have a feahful amount of twouble-with them, you know. I twust you are not annoyed with them?"

Miss Bunn laughed outright.

"No, not a bit," she replied. Then, being unable to restrain another laugh, she turned, and tripped away to execute the order.

"Well, you blessed fraud!" exclaimed Blake, glaring at D'Arcy. "What do you mean by saying that to Miss Bunn?"

"I was onlay speakin' the twuth, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "You chaps are always a bothah to me when I take you out with me. It was you who started this wov, and I wetwaut my apology."

Blake fell into Digby's arms.

"When you take us out!" he said faintly. "Oh, my hat!"

"Yaas, when I take you out," repeated D'Arcy loftily.

"I weally think that I shall have to wufuse to let you accompany me in futuah. You are always makin' the most wotten wemarks concernin' me in fwont of Miss Bunn. You know vewy well that I should nevah make eyes—"

"I know vewy well that I'll make black eyes!" said Blake, pushing his cuffs back. "Two of 'em, and on your face, Gussy!"

"Pway wemembah where you are!" exclaimed D'Arcy, backing away in alarm.

"I don't care where I am," said Blake excitedly. "I'm not going to have you riding the high horse in front of Miss Bunn. You take us out, indeed! Of all the blessed nerve—"

D'Arcy realised that his chum was somewhat incensed, and he had no desire to be rolled on the floor of the tuck-shop. He placed his new stick on one of the marble-topped tables, and held up his hands.

"Pway cease this wottin'!" he said hastily.

D'Arcy did not notice that the stick rolled along the smooth surface of the table, and dropped into the lap of a gentleman who was sitting at it. It was the tall man Digby had noticed a few minutes before. He picked it up, and looked at it interestedly.

"I say, dry up, you asses!" muttered Herries. "There are several people in the shop, and we don't want to be rowing about like a lot of village kids!"

Blake breathed hard.

"All right!" he said. "But when we get Gussy outside we'll bump him for his cheek."

"Hear, hear!" said Digby.

"Weally, you boundahs!" protested D'Arcy.

Blake usually scored when he worked upon the delicate feelings of Arthur Augustus, but in this instance his little dodge had failed.

"Come on; let's find a table near the fire!" said Herries.

"Good egg!"

They moved up the shop, but D'Arcy stayed behind.

"Come on, Gussy!"

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"Pway wait a moment, deah boys," said the swell of St. Jim's. "I have lost my stick! I placed it on this table, and now it has vanished."

He looked at the tall stranger.

"Pewwaps you have seen it, sir?" he asked politely. "Bai Jove, you have it in your hands! Pway allow me to tell you, sir, that that walkin'-stick is my pwperty!"

The man looked up and smiled, but he still held the stick. "I am aware of that, my boy," he said. "You placed it on this table, and it rolled into my lap."

"Bai Jove! I'm sowwy—"

"It's quite all right. I'm glad, for it gave me an opportunity to examine it," said the tall stranger smoothly. "My name is Mr. Hicks, and I am a stranger in Rylcombe. I am staying here for a few days."

"Weally?"

D'Arcy affected to be interested, but he wasn't. He wanted his new possession. But Mr. Hicks still fingered it lovingly.

"Come on, Gussy!" said Blake, as a gentle hint.

"In a moment, deah boy. If this gentleman will hand me my pwperty—"

The tall man smiled.

"There is no hurry," he said. "I have just been examining this stick, and I find it is an extremely beautiful one. In fact, I might say that I have never seen one I like better. It is a splendid article!"

Arthur Augustus felt flattered.

"I am glad you like it, sir," he said.

"I covet it greatly," said Mr. Hicks.

"Weally, sir, I fail to undahstand your meanin'."

Mr. Hicks passed his hand lovingly over the silver knob.

"I am a collector of walking-sticks," he remarked suggestively. "I have fully a score of wonderful sticks, but this is without doubt better than any I possess."

"Exactly, sir; but my fwriends are waitin' for me," said D'Arcy, getting a little tired of the stranger's eloquence.

"Pway hand it ovah."

Mr. Hicks handed the stick across with a sigh, then drew it back, and looked at D'Arcy steadily.

"I suppose," he said gently, "you wouldn't be disposed to sell this stick to me? I have fallen in love with it completely."

D'Arcy shook his head firmly.

"I am vewy sowwy, sir, but the stick was a pwsent to me fwom my govahnah," he said. "I could not think of sellin' it."

"Oh, come!" said Mr. Hicks. "Perhaps I can talk you over."

"Nevah!" said Arthur Augustus. "You can nevah talk me ovah. I shall be wreatly obliged, sir, if you will—"

"Wait a moment. This stick is an extremely uncommon one, and I simply must add it to my collection."

He looked at D'Arcy laughingly, and carelessly chinked some loose money in his pocket. But D'Arcy was beginning to get impatient. He had no intention of selling the stick. In his opinion, it would have been bad form to sell a present from his father.

"Weally, sir, I must wrequest you to hand it ovah."

"Surely you have no use for such a magnificent stick as this?" went on Mr. Hicks calmly. "You will only lose it, or break it."

D'Arcy jammed his monocle tighter into his eye.

"I must be allowed to wemark that you are gettin' wathah annoyin', sir," he said coldly.

Mr. Hicks smiled.

"Come, don't let us quarrel," he said genially. He turned to Miss Bunn, who had returned. "Miss, serve these youngsters with anything they care to have. I will settle with you."

"Very good, sir," said Miss Bunn.

"Not such a bad old bird, after all," murmured Herries. "My hat, this is all serene! Pile in, you chaps!"

"Now, young man," went on Mr. Hicks, "about this stick. Of course, I don't want to press you, but I really think that you will be disposed to consider my offer. I have plenty of money, and can afford to pay you a good price."

"Yaas; but—"

"Wait. I have taken a fancy to the stick, and I want it. Now suppose I offer you three pounds for it—three sovereigns?"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy shook his head.

"Nothin' doin', sir," he said firmly. "Pway let us terminate the discuss. It is uttably useless. I shall not sell the stick."

"Five pounds isn't a bad price, you know," said Mr. Hicks thoughtfully.

"It is a vewy good pwice, indeed."

"Then I can have it for five pounds?"

"Wathah not, deah boy. I nevah said so."

Mr. Hicks sighed.

"Look here, my dear boy," he said quietly, "when I set my heart on a thing I generally have my way. I have set my heart on this stick. You are very obstinate, but I will increase my offer still more. I will give you ten pounds for it. There! Ten pounds!"

Blake, Herries, and Digby stared.

"My only Aunt Matilda!" muttered Blake. "Gussy'll be a silly chump if he doesn't accept ten quid for the fat-headed stick!"

"Ten quid!" gasped Herries. "I wouldn't give a bob for it!"

Arthur Augustus shook his head.

"It is useless pwoalongin' the argument, sir," he said firmly. "Ten pounds is a good pwice, but the stick was a pwesent, and I will not sell it!"

For a second a flash of annoyance and anger leapt into Mr. Hicks's eyes; then he controlled himself, and smiled.

"A last offer—fifteen pounds!" he exclaimed.

But still D'Arcy demurred.

"No," he declared, "I will not accept it. As a mattah of fact, I would not accept twice that sum. And I considah you are an extremely wude person to pwess me when you know all the time that I shall not do business."

Mr. Hicks bit his lip, handed the ebony stick over, and rose to his feet. D'Arcy did not see that his eyes were gleaming with anger and disappointment.

"Very well," he said. "I wish you good-day!"

"Good-day, sir!"

And the tall stranger picked up his hat and strode from the shop.

CHAPTER 3. Very Mysterious!

JACK BLAKE stared after Mr. Hicks in great indignation.

"Well, of all the outsiders!" he ejaculated. "The rotter said he'd pay for our feed!"

"And now he's sheered off," said Dig.

"When he said that he thought that Gussy was going to sell the stick," said Herries. "The chap was off his chump—clean gone in the top storey! Fifteen quid for a mouldy old stick!"

The juniors gathered round Arthur Augustus.

"You silly burler!" exclaimed Blake warmly. "Why didn't you let him have it?"

"It was a pwesent, deah boys. That is quite sufficient weason, I should think," replied D'Arcy.

Blake calmed down.

"Well, perhaps so," he agreed. "It's not exactly the thing to sell presents, especially when they're from home. But the idiot must have been off his rocker to offer all that money."

"I considah the stick is worth a gwreat deal, but fifteen pounds is a widge pwice," said D'Arcy. "I don't believe it cost more than a fivah."

"I'll bet I could get one as good for thirty bob," said Digby.

"Which makes it all the more curious," said Blake. "The thing can't be worth more than a pound or two at the outside. Therefore, why should the ass offer fifteen?"

"He says he is a collectah," replied D'Arcy. "And collectahs, you know, deah boy, are wathah cwankay. If I had bought the stick with my own tin I should have sold it without hesitation. But it was a pwesent, and I should have been extremely uncomfortable if I parted with it. The mattah is ended."

"Well, I think the chap's a beastly outsider," said Herries bluntly. "Even if he didn't have his own way he might have kept his word."

"I don't altogether blame him," said Arthur Augustus. "You see, he was wild at bein' fwustated. I wathah think he forgot all about his pwomise. Nevah mind, I have pentay of tin."

Which was certainly consoling. The juniors piled into the hot buttered scones. But they could not forget the incident of Mr. Hicks and the walking-stick.

What could it mean?

D'Arcy, thinking about the matter, decided in his own mind that the man was a rich, cranky collector. There seemed no other explanation.

Tea was finished at last, and Arthur Augustus settled up. Then the juniors sallied out into the dusk—for the shadows were gathering fast now—and paid one or two calls at other shops.

The sky was clear, and several stars were already twinkling. The frost held, and, indeed, seemed to be getting sharper.

The chums of Study No. 6 turned their footsteps in the direction of St. Jim's. They had not proceeded far, however, when two forms were seen disappearing into a little grocer's shop.

"Did you see who they were?" asked Blake interestedly.

"Looked like Gordon Gay and Frank Monk, of the Grammar School," said Herries.

"That's who they were, too," said Blake. "Here's a chance, you chaps! It's jolly cold, and we want warming up. Let's lie in wait, and bump 'em when they come out!"

"Good egg!" said Dig heartily.

St. Jim's and the Grammar School were always at war with one another; but the war was a friendly one, and both schools entered into the rivalry with a spirit which was the reverse of malicious.

"We'll give the bounders a regular dusting!" chuckled Blake.

But Arthur Augustus D'Arcy demurred.

"I uttahly wufuse to take part in it," he declared.

"Afraid, Gussy?" asked Blake, winking at Herries.

D'Arcy glared.

"If you insinuate that I am afraid, Blake—"

"Well, it looks like it!"

"Wats! You know vevy well that I would give Fwank Monk and Gay a feahful thwashin' if necessawy," said Arthur Augustus. "But I weally must decline to take part in any wuff bizney to-night!"

"And why?"

"Well, for one thing, I am dwessed wathah carefully, and a swap with the Gwammah cads would be stwenuous. My twousahs would be wuined, and my coat cwased."

"And what's the other thing?"

"The stick, deah boy," said D'Arcy, grasping it firmly. "It would vevy pwobably get scwatched and soiled in the fway. And the Gwammah wottahs might even waid it fwom me, and cawwy it off with them."

Blake grinned.

"Quite probable!" he agreed. "And in the morning you'd get it back in little pieces, with Gordon Gay's compliments."

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated D'Arcy. "That's settled it! I shall take no part in the affair!"

"I was only joking!" said Blake quickly.

"Nevahtheless, I shall wufuse to assist you," said D'Arcy firmly. "I don't believe Gordon Gay would go as far as you said, but you nevah know!"

"Hallo, here are Lumley-Lumley and Reilly!" said Digby suddenly. "They'll help us to bump the Grammarians. It's all right, Gussy, we sha'n't want you!"

"It would be all the same if you did, deah boy!"

And his chums believed him. When he liked, D'Arcy could fight as well as most juniors, and with a tremendous amount of courage and science. But when he was "toggid up" he absolutely refused to take part in any rough play.

"Hallo, what's the jaw about?" asked Lumley-Lumley, of the Fourth, as he came up with Reilly.

"Two of the Grammarians have just gone into the grocer's shop, and we're waiting for them to come out," said Blake.

"Are you game to join in the fun?"

"Rather!" said Lumley-Lumley.

"Sure, Blake darlint, it's the very thing that will liven me up!" said Reilly.

"Buck up, then!" said Blake. "We'll hide against the hedge, and lie in wait for them."

"I am goin' up to the coll. stwaight away!" said D'Arcy.

"Right-ho!" said Blake. "We sha'n't want you, Gussy. But as you'll be back first, make up the study fire, will you, and have it all cosy when we arrive?"

"Certainly, deah boy!"

And Arthur Augustus walked briskly up the road towards St. Jim's. It was very dusky now, and he did not see two dim forms appear from a gap in the hedge and follow in his wake.

Neither did the two dim forms know that about half-a-mile behind them three sturdy juniors were hastening to St. Jim's. They were Tom Merry, Manners, and Monty Lowther, the Terrible Three of the Shell.

They had rushed down to Rylcombe immediately after the football to purchase provisions for tea. They had passed Blake & Co. a bare two minutes after D'Arcy had left. Gordon Gay and Frank Monk were still in the shop, and the Terrible Three, being loaded up with eatables, didn't feel inclined to stay.

They knew that the five Fourth-Formers would have an easy task before them, and that they would not require assistance.

Arthur Augustus stepped out briskly, his new stick tapping sharply on the hard frozen road.

Soon he was passing through that portion of the lane which was bordered on either side by thick woods. The trees were gaunt and leafless now, but they grew thickly, and that caused the roadway to be almost dark.

Ahead, the lights of St. Jim's gleamed.

D'Arcy walked on without looking round once.

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Had he looked round he would have seen that two dim forms were rapidly closing up; that they were, in fact, hurrying after him almost at a run.

The darkest portion of the wood was reached. D'Arcy thought he heard a sound behind him. He turned his head.

"Bai Jove!" he ejaculated.

The two men were almost upon him. D'Arcy thought quickly. He knew that he would stand no chance if the two men attacked him, so he decided to run for it, if the strangers appeared hostile.

More than once juniors had been robbed by tramps in Rylcombe Lane, and as Arthur Augustus carried two or three sovereigns and a gold watch and chain on him, he had no wish to interview any strangers.

"I shall wun—wun like anythin'—if they appeal to be twamps," thought D'Arcy.

But he couldn't see what they were. He turned his head again, and noticed that the men were almost abreast.

"Now—quick!" ejaculated one of them.

"Bai Jove, you uttah wottahs!" exclaimed the swell of St. Jim's.

He threw his dignity to the winds, and ran. But the strangers were too quick for him. One of them spurred ahead, and grasped D'Arcy's shoulder.

The elegant junior slipped on a piece of frosty road, and nearly fell. He twisted round, angry and alarmed.

"You wuffians!" he shouted. "If you come neah me I will—"

"Hang it, man, silence him!" panted one of the strangers.

D'Arcy backed away towards the hedge.

"Wescue!" he roared lustily. "Wescue, St. Jim's! Wescue!"

He was against the hedge now, and his blood was up. He had no intention of handing over his money and valuables without a struggle. All his scruples about ruffling his clothes had vanished, and he was ready to go for the men pell-mell.

"You wottahs!" he gasped. "I'll give you a feahful thwashin' if you come neah me!"

He threw his walking-stick down in the grass, forgetting in his excitement that it might get scratched and trodden on. Then he pushed his cuffs back.

"Now I'm weady!" he panted. "I'll— Bai Jove, how vevy remarkable! Gweat Scott!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy stood staring before him in amazement. For a very curious thing had happened. The instant he threw his walking-stick down, the whole attitude of the strangers changed. They transferred their attention from D'Arcy to the stick, and one of them made a sudden dive for it.

D'Arcy made no attempt to stop him, because he was transfixed with surprise, for the moment.

The man grabbed the stick, showed it to his companion, and then the pair of them turned their backs to D'Arcy and raced off down the road! Evidently they had no intention of robbing him.

"Well, I'm bothahed!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

CHAPTER 4.

No Explanation.

THE swell of St. Jim's could scarcely realise what had happened for a moment.

The abruptness with which the men had taken themselves off had left him gazing after them into the dimness, his cuffs pushed back, his monocle dangling at the end of its cord.

Then he realised that they had stolen his much-prized stick, and he became active.

"The wottahs!" he murmured. "The uttah wascals!"

Without wasting any more time, he sprinted down the lane at top speed. He could faintly see the forms of the two men hastening towards Rylcombe.

"Stop!" he shouted wildly. "Stop, you wuffians—"

He halted abruptly in the middle of the road. A sudden medley of shouts had reached his ears. Straining his eyes, he could see an indistinct jumble of human forms further down the lane.

"Wescue!" he shrieked excitedly. "Collah the wascals!"

He ran nearer.

"Is that you, Gussy?" yelled a panting voice, which D'Arcy recognised as Tom Merry's.

"Yaas, wathah! Have you collahed the boundahs?"

"Yes."

"Wippin'! They've stolen my walkin'-stick!"

D'Arcy was upon the struggling mass now, and he saw that the two men were making efforts to pass Tom Merry & Co. It was impossible to dodge into the hedge, for at this point it was thick and impenetrable.

"Hang it!" snarled one of the men. "We're not going to be foiled by a trio of schoolboys!"

"Get the stick, chaps!" gasped Tom Merry.

The men made a determined effort to rush past. They succeeded, but Monty Lowther had a momentary glimpse of something shiny, and he grabbed at it. The next moment D'Arcy's stick was in his hand.

"Got it!" roared Monty Lowther.

The man who had had possession uttered a savage oath, and twirled round, evidently meaning to secure it again. But he met Manners' fist, and staggered back.

He seemed to realise, then, that he and his companion were beaten, and he rushed off down the lane.

It was so dark that not one of the juniors had seen the men's features; and they had been too excited to note their clothing and general appearance.

The two strangers melted into the darkness.

The Terrible Three and D'Arcy stood looking after them. They were all puffed and somewhat bruised, for Arthur Augustus had rushed up in time to receive a vicious lunge from one of the men.

"Well, that was sudden!" panted Manners.

"I've got the giddy stick, though," said Monty Lowther. "Here you are, Gussy. Is this your blessed stick?"

D'Arcy took it.

"Yaas, wathah, deah boy," he replied. "Thanks awfully for wegainin' it! I weally thought it was gone."

"Is that all they took?" asked Tom Merry curiously.

"Yaas, that's all!"

"Didn't they demand your giddy watch?"

"No. I thought they were goin' to, but they simply grabbed the stick and bunked. It is weally most wemarkable, you know."

The Terrible Three looked at the elegant *Ex-Ex-Ex* Farmer curiously.

"It was more than remarkable, Gussy," said Monty Lowther. "It was downright queer. Do you mean to tell us that those two ruffians simply pinched your giddy stick, and then scooted?"

"That's wight," said Arthur Augustus, in a puzzled voice. "It is weally most stwange. It is all the more peculiah because of the othah incident which occurred in the tuckshop."

"What incident?" asked Tom Merry.

"The incident of the tall stwangah—Mr. Hicks."

"Tall stranger?" said Manners.

"Mr. Hicks?" added Monty Lowther.

"You going dotty, Gussy?" asked Tom Merry pleasantly.

"Bai Jove, of course, you fellows know nothin' about it!" said Arthur Augustus. "It happened this aftahnoon. Suppose we wun up to the coll., deah boys? It will be warmah in the studay, you know."

The Terrible Three agreed—for it was decidedly cold in the lane—and they walked briskly up to St. Jim's, D'Arcy highly elated at having recovered his precious stick.

He had prized it from the beginning, but its value seemed to have increased during the last hour or so, and D'Arcy would have been extremely reluctant to part with it.

Tom Merry & Co. decided to say nothing of the incident until they had heard what D'Arcy had to say.

It was tea-time, so the passages in the School House were almost deserted. D'Arcy led the way straight to Study No. 6.

"We will go in heah, deah boys," he said, opening the door. "Blake and the othahs will be heah pwesently."

The door was closed, and the gas lit.

"Pway lay your parcels down. They will be all wight heah until you go to your own quartahs," said D'Arcy hospitably.

"They weren't all right ten minutes ago!" growled Monty Lowther. "One of those rotters pushed me slap on to one of these parcels, and I busted up the currant cake and the jam-tarts!"

"That's all right," said Manners. "They'll taste just the same. Poke up the fire, Gussy. It's not exactly like an oven in here, is it?"

In a few moments the fire was replenished, and it blazed cheerfully. Then the juniors sat round it.

"Now, let's have your giddy yarn," said Tom Merry.

"There is weally not much in it, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus. "But it stwuck me as bein' vevy stwange. It wasn't so stwange at the time, but aftahwards it seemed vevy stwange indeed."

"You're getting mixed, Gussy," said Monty Lowther. "There's too much 'stwange' in that bit. First you say it is strange, and then you say it isn't."

"I mean, deah boy, that I did not think the incident was

ANSWERS

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stwange at the time of its occuwence; but it took on an unexpected significance in the light of what happened in the lane."

"It wasn't light," said Monty Lowther. "It was nearly dark, you chump!"

D'Arcy looked at the humorist of the Shell severely.

"This is not a time for your wotten jokes, Lowthah," he said. "The mattah is sewious."

"Well, let's have the incident," said Tom Merry.

"Vewy well," replied D'Arcy.

And he told the Terrible Three of what had occurred in the tuckshop. The three Shell fellows listened interestedly.

But before they could make any remarks concerning the story the door burst open, and Blake, Herries, and Digby piled in.

"We caught 'em rippingly!" chuckled Blake. "My hat, you ought to have seen Gordon Gay and Frank Monk when we'd done with 'em!" He paused abruptly, and looked round. "Well, you do look a set of owls!" he exclaimed. "Have you come in here to discuss a funeral, you Shell chaps?"

"We've just been discussing the adventures of the walking-stick," said Tom Merry, glancing at the article in question.

Blake gasped.

"Gussy's stick again!" he exclaimed. "Look here, Gussy—"

"You don't undahstand, deah boys. Some fwightful wuffians attacked me in the lane soon aftah I had left you, and wan off with my stick. It was wescued by the Tewwible Thwee."

Blake & Co. stared.

"Well," said the leader of Study No. 6, "I can't say that I admire the thieves' judgment. There would have been a lot more sense in collaring your gold ticker, Gussy."

"You uttah ass! I should have uttably declined to give up my gold tickah!" said Arthur Augustus. "As a mattah of fact, I expected them to molest me, but the vewy instant I thwev my stick down, pwepawatowly to pushin' back my cuffs, they pounced upon it, an' wushed off like anythin'!"

"Didn't they demand your money?" asked Digby.

"No, they simply took the stick."

There was silence for a moment.

"And this chap, Mr. Hicks, offered fifteen quid?" asked Tom Merry. "Fifteen quid for that ebony stick?"

"Yaas."

"Oh, the fellow was mad—clean dotty," said Lowther.

"No doubt about that."

"It's the only explanation."

"But is it an explanation?" said Blake thoughtfully. "He didn't seem a bit mad—not even touched. And these other two? Why should they want the stick? There's no value in it."

"It's a vewy expensive stick!" protested D'Arcy.

"I'm not saying it isn't, my son," went on Blake; "but that doesn't make it any different. How much could the chaps get for the stick if they tried to sell it?"

"Not more than ten bob," said Tom Merry, "if that."

"Then wher's the sense in stealing it?"

"There isn't any," said Manners. "And a stick is a jolly hard thing to get rid of. Which only goes to prove that the fellows were dotty."

"And Mr. Hicks is dotty as well?" said Blake.

"Looks like it."

"Oh, that's rot! They wouldn't all be dotty after the stick!" exclaimed Tom Merry, knitting his brows. "There's something about the giddy thing we don't understand. It's quite plain that there's something jolly peculiar in connection with this particular stick. Everything points to it. First, Mr. Hicks offers a perfectly ridiculous price for it, and then a couple of tramps steal it in preference to D'Arcy's gold ticker and all his money, which are worth ten times as much."

"There's no getting over it," said Blake. "I shouldn't have thought anything about it if nothing had happened after the Hicks bizney. But this last affair is simply amazing."

"Yaas, that's the onlay word for it, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "And the funnary part of it is the two wuffians who attacked me must have known that I cawried it, although it onlay awwived this aftahnoon, an' they were both stwanganahs!"

"And Mr. Hicks was a stranger," said Tom Merry. "Well, all I can say is, it's jolly funny. I'm blessed if I can think of any explanation. You might imagine that the stick was studded with diamonds!"

"I suppose it isn't?" said Manners.

"Pway don't be widic, Mannahs. The stick is simply made of ebony, with a solid silvah knob. In fact, it is a vewy plain affaiah."

Tom Merry picked the walking-stick up and examined it. Then he passed it round. Blake tapped the knob against the table. It sounded quite solid.

But Blake's face had suddenly turned red with excitement. "I say," he burst out, "I've just had an idea. If I'm right, it'll explain why those chaps are so jolly anxious to get hold of the thing."

Blake's excitement infected the others.

"Well, what's your giddy idea?" asked Monty Lowther.

Blake pointed to the silver knob.

"This is jolly big," he said, "and it's pretty sure to be hollow. There's an empty space in there, or, rather, you'd think it would be empty. But it looks to me as if there's something inside—diamonds, or some other sort of precious stones."

"Gweat Scott!"

"My only Sunday topper!"

"By George!"

"Diamonds!"

"Yes, diamonds!" repeated Blake excitedly. "It's quite possible, when you come to think of it. It would be a ripping hiding-place."

"That's all vewy well," objected D'Arcy; "but it's perfectly pwepos to suppose that my governah would hide diamonds in it."

"I don't say that pater hid them there, you ass!" said Blake quickly. "He might have bought it, not knowing. But these chaps did know, and were too late. When they found he'd sent it to you, they rushed down here to collar it."

"By jingo!"

"It sounds possible enough."

"I've read of such things," went on Blake. "In fact, diamonds have been hidden in walking-sticks lots of times. I wouldn't mind betting my footer boots I'm right."

Blake was so positive of his explanation of the mystery that he was fairly dancing with excitement. And the others caught the fever. In a few moments they were all talking eagerly, discussing the possibilities.

"Just look at the facts," said Blake. "In one afternoon—an hour after the stick arrived—somebody offers Gussy fifteen quid for it, which is palpably ten times more than it is worth. Why did he offer fifteen quid?"

"He was a collectah," said D'Arcy.

"A collector be blowed! That was just his yarn to make his big offer look all right. He didn't want you to become suspicious. He offered fifteen quid because he knew that the diamonds in the stick were worth a hundred times as much."

"But why did he stop at fifteen?" asked Manners.

"Because Gussy said he wouldn't accept any price for it."

The juniors looked at one another.

"Then there were the two men in the lane," continued Blake quickly. "Why did they pinch the stick in preference to Gussy's cash and gold ticker? Simply because they knew that it was worth its weight in gold—worth it ten times over, perhaps!"

"Bai Jove!"

Tom Merry regarded the famous stick with renewed interest. The massive silver knob was fastened on with four tiny screws, and it would be a simple matter to remove it.

"Shall we take it off and see, Gussy?" asked the Shell captain.

"Of course!" said Blake excitedly.

"Off with it!" chorused the others.

"If Gussy objects, sling him outside!" said Herries, moved for once out of his usually stolid composure.

"Weally, you wottahs," protested D'Arcy, "I think you might ask my permish. It is my stick, you know!"

"Yes, we ought to ask permission," said Manners.

"It's all wight," said D'Arcy. "I have no objection whatevah, pwwided you don't injure the stick. Besides, I'm cwicious to see inside the knob myself!"

"Good for you, Gussy!"

"Who's got a screwdriver?" asked Tom Merry.

"A screwdriver would be too clumsy for those little screws," said Blake, fumbling in his pocket. "Here's my pen-knife!"

Tom Merry took it, and proceeded to remove the screws. The other juniors gathered round in an excited group. Blake's explanation seemed to fit the case everywhere. If there was nothing in the knob, why were the strange men so anxious to gain possession of the stick?

"One!" said Tom Merry.

"Buck up!" muttered Blake.

He watched impatiently. The second screw was soon out, but the third proved to be a little trouble. At last, however, it was loosened and laid upon the table.

"Only one more!"

The juniors were fairly dancing with anticipation now. Tom Merry seemed to be a terrible time over the last screw, although, as a matter of fact, it was the easiest to remove.

"All out!" he announced triumphantly.

"Good!"

"Take the knob off!" panted Blake. "Let's look inside it!"

"Pway be careful, deah boy!" cautioned D'Arcy. "Don't scawatch the polished ebony!"

"Oh, blow the beastly ebony!"

"Off with the topknot!"

Tom Merry was as excited as anybody, and his hand shook a little as he gently screwed the knob round. It was not on tight, and responded to a little persuasion.

Off!

The knob was in Tom Merry's hand.

"Look inside it!" exclaimed Blake huskily.

"I'm trying to," said Tom Merry. "Let's get under the gas!"

He moved a little, and held the silver knob exactly under the gas-jet, so that the light shone right into the hollow centre of the knob.

Tom Merry uttered a little gasp of disappointment.

The knob was empty!

CHAPTER 5.

After "Lights Out."

"EMPTY!"

Only Tom Merry had seen inside the knob, but his exclamation of disappointment was very expressive.

"Well," demanded Blake excitedly, "what's the matter with you, ass? Did you see inside?"

"Yes."

"Is there a little packet, or—?"

"It's empty," said Tom Merry.

"Empty!"

"Oh, my hat!"

Blake pushed through the juniors.

"It can't be empty!" he exclaimed. "Here, let me have a squint! I don't believe you looked properly!"

Blake grabbed the knob, and held it under the gas. Yes, it was certainly empty. It was hollow, but contained nothing but air. Blake looked at it blankly, and then at the stick. The ebony which had been hidden by the knob was dull and unpolished, and the top was rather rough, where the wood had been cut.

Jack Blake grunted.

"Roiten!" he ejaculated dismally. "I made sure I was right!"

He had been so sure, in fact, that he had confidently expected to find a little wad of cotton-wool, packed with precious stones. It was disappointing to have his theory shattered so abruptly.

Monty Lowther grinned.

"Drawn blank!" he chuckled. "Gussy, you're not coming into a fortune, after all!"

"I call it a rotten frost!" growled Herries. "Blake, you ass, what the dickens do you mean by having such fat-headed ideas? Diamonds! I knew all the time you were wrong! The stick's only worth about five bob!"

Blake suddenly uttered a shout.

"What an ass I am!" he ejaculated.

"Quite right," said Lowther. "Glad you own to it!"

"There's still a chance," went on Blake, too excited to reply to Lowther's pleasantry. "We've forgotten all about the ferrule!"

"The ferrule!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Yes, the ferrule," said Blake. "It's a big, deep one, and there's sure to be a cavity in it. Hand over that pocket-knife, Tom Merry!"

"Are you goin' to take the fewwule off, deah boy?" asked D'Arcy.

"Rather!"

The spirits of the juniors were raised again. Blake took the screws out which held the ferrule in place; but it was jammed on hard, and it took some little time to force it off.

"Now we'll find the giddy diamonds!" panted Blake.

He gazed into the wide, open mouth of the ferrule, the other juniors craning their necks over his shoulders. Then Monty Lowther uttered a roar of laughter.

"Empty!" he roared. "Ha, ha, ha!"

The ferrule was quite empty, and the ebony stick was just the same this end as at the other.

"Empty!" said Tom Merry.

"Wotten!" exclaimed D'Arcy. "Dwawn blank again!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Monty Lowther.

Blake laid the ferrule down, and glared at the mirthful one.

"Nothing to cackle at, you ass!" he growled.

"Isn't there?" said Lowther. "I think there is! Diamonds in the knob! Diamonds in the ferrule! Oh, my hat!"

"Fathead!"

"I think there's something in your knob, Blakey!" grinned Lowther. "A bee, for instance!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

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Blake grinned himself after a moment. All the juniors saw the humour of the situation. They had confidently expected to find something surprising in either the knob or the ferrule, and both were quite empty!

"It's just an ordinary stick," said Tom Merry. "It's simply a piece of ebony wood, with a silver knob and a brass ferrule. It's not even antique. Its total value can't be above a pound!"

"Pway weplace the knob and fewwule, deah boys!" said D'Arcy.

It was not a lengthy job, and when Tom Merry had finished the stick looked the same as before; not a single scratch had been made. D'Arcy took it, and laid it in a corner.

"I'm bothahed if I know what to make of the bizney!" he said.

"No; it's a complete puzzle," said Tom Merry. "There's no explanation, Gussy."

"I'll bet there's no connection whatever between the chap in the village and the two tramps," said Manners. "Mr. Hicks was simply a collector, as he said, and took a fancy to the stick. And the tramps, seeing that the stick was a jolly good one, collared it while they had the chance. I expect they thought that Gussy wouldn't have more than a few coppers on him and a two-and-sixpenny ticker!"

Tom Merry nodded.

"That's about the size of it," he agreed. "We've been asses to get excited about it. They didn't know that Gussy was simply covered in valuables—they took him for an impecunious fag!"

"Weally, you boundah!" protested D'Arcy.

"That's right, Gussy," went on Tom Merry. "How could they see your gold watchchain and diamond pin in the dark? Blake's the chap who's been the cause of all the excitement!"

"Oh, Blake's a silly chump!" said Lowther.

"Am I?" said Blake warmly. "Look here, Lowther—"

"Oh, dry up!" interrupted Tom Merry. "Don't start a row now over nothing! We've explained the thing, and there's an end of it. Now, how about tea?"

The juniors had forgotten tea, in their excitement; but now that they were calm again they realised that it was past tea-time, and that they were hungry. Even Blake & Co. were feeling peckish, for the tussle with Gordon Gay and Frank Monk had given them a fresh appetite.

"Well, look here, we'd better stop to tea with you chaps now that we're here," said Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah!" exclaimed D'Arcy hospitably. "Pway stay, deah boys. I am afraid we haven't vewy much to offah you in the way of pwovisions. You see, we had our tea—"

"Don't worry, Gussy," interrupted Manners. "We've got a whole load of provisions here!"

"Good!" said Blake.

And Tom Merry & Co. stayed to tea in Study No. 6. For a time the conversation ran on the uppermost thought in the juniors' minds—the ebony walking-stick.

But after a while the subject became exhausted, and the conversation veered round to football and other interesting matters. And by the time the Terrible Three took their departure D'Arcy's famous stick was almost forgotten.

But the subject was renewed after prep. in the common-room, and Blake & Co. related the whole story to a crowd of interested fellows. And everybody agreed that there was no connection between Mr. Hicks and the two tramps. It was simply a coincidence.

"That's all," said Bernard Glyn of the Shell. "Just like Blake to go and suggest diamonds!"

"Well, I've read of such things," said Blake.

"Yes; but only in stories!" exclaimed Kangaroo—otherwise Harry Noble of the Shell. "Diamonds in a walking-stick! You chaps must have been potty to believe it!"

"We didn't believe it. We only thought it possible."

"That's all, deah boys."

"Tell you what, Gussy!" suggested Clifton Dane. "Why don't you wire to your pater, and ask his permission to sell the stick? Then you could get fifteen quid for it."

"Yes; that's a good idea."

"Fifteen quid isn't to be sneezed at."

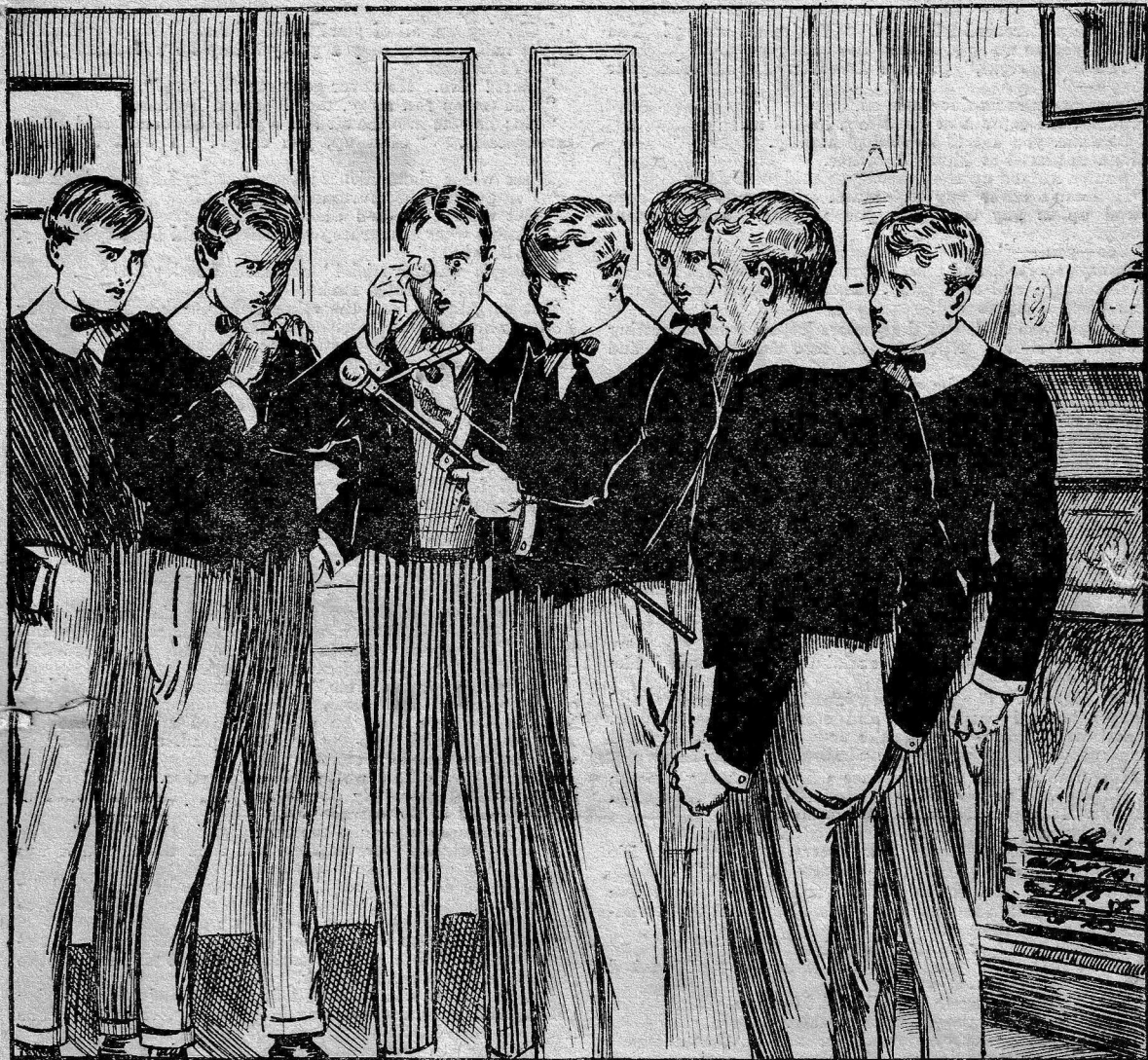
"I have no intention of sneezin' at it, deah boys—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I mean, I have no intention of wiwin' to my governah," said D'Arcy firmly. "The stick was a pwesent, and it would be wotten form to ask permish to sell it. The governah generally turns up twumps when I want a fivah, and he might be offended."

"Well, perhaps so," said Lumley-Lumley of the Fourin. "Do as you like, Gussy, old man."

Just before supper-time Figgins & Co., the famous leaders of the New House juniors, came across to discuss football with Tom Merry. Pax had been declared, so there was no



As Tom Merry took out the screws from the knob on D'Arcy's stick, the juniors gathered round him in an excited group. "Now for the giddy diamonds!" panted Blake. (See Chapter 4.)

ragging. Usually the School House and the New House were at war, for there was a keen rivalry between the two houses. Football, however, was a serious subject, and it had to be discussed quietly.

In the course of conversation D'Arcy's new stick cropped up, and so Figgins & Co. were informed of the facts. They were very interested, and chuckled hugely when they heard of the unsuccessful search for diamonds. But they agreed that the events of the afternoon were decidedly curious.

"Coincidence, that's all," was Figgins's verdict.

"Scruples or no scruples, if that giddy stick had been mine, and I'd been offered fifteen quid for it, I'd have sold it like a bird!" said Fatty Wynn firmly. "Fifteen golden sovereigns for a common old walking-stick, which isn't any use to anyone! My only topper! Gussy must have been dotty to refuse. And in the tuckshop, too!"

Fatty Wynn looked at D'Arcy reproachfully.

"Weally, Wynn, I am surprised at you!" said the swell of the School House. "Your uttah gweed gets the bettah of your good bweedin'! It is imposs to sell a pwesent!"

Fatty Wynn snorted.

"Rats!" he said. "It's a bit rotten when you sell a present for next to nothing; but when you're made a fabulous offer for it, well, you've got a jolly fine excuse. Think—think how much grub you could buy for fifteen quid!"

Fatty Wynn gazed at the ceiling, and his hands unconsciously clasped themselves upon his expansive waistcoat.

For a moment he allowed his thoughts to stray, and visions of piles and piles of pies, tarts, and cakes floated before his eyes. Then they faded away, and he sighed.

"What a giddy ass you were, Gussy!" he murmured.

"Wynn, you are a feahful gourmand!" declared D'Arcy indignantly.

"Yes; shut up, Fatty!" said Figgins. "We all know you're a glutton, but you needn't make things worse. I agree with D'Arcy that he did the right thing. What do you say, Kerr?"

"Oh, yes, of course!" agreed Kerr.

The canny Scottish junior was looking thoughtful. He sat in his chair gazing absently into the fire. And when Figgins rose to leave, Kerr was still somewhat abstracted in manner.

"Well, what's troubling you?" demanded Figgins, giving Kerr a slap on the back.

"Eh?" gasped Kerr. "Oh, nothing, Figgy!"

"Then come on to supper," said the lanky New House chief.

And Figgins & Co. departed.

Supper over, most of the juniors collected in the common-room. Manners and Tom Merry tried their hardest to finish a game of chess before bedtime, but they were greatly handicapped by Monty Lowther, who insisted upon giving advice which wasn't needed.

"Three moves, Manners, and you've got him checkmate," said Lowther. "You've only got to shift your rook—"

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"Shut up!" roared Manners. "You're all wrong! You silly ass, you've made me move the wrong pawn!"

"That's all right," grinned Lowther. "Just take your bishop——"

The common-room door opened. Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, looked in. "Bedtime, you kids!" he said pleasantly. Manners glared at Monty Lowther. "You've messed up the game!" he said wrathfully. "It doesn't make any difference. It would have been messed up in any case with you playing," said Lowther blandly.

"You—you——"

Manners snorted, and rose. Tom Merry chuckled, and put the chessboard and men away. Then the Shell and Fourth Form trooped up to bed.

The night was cold, and the juniors lost no time in getting between the sheets. Kildare came into the dormitory and turned out the light.

"Good-night, kids!" he said.

"Good-night, Kildare!"

A buzz of talk went on for some little time, but one by one the juniors dropped off. Only Manners and Lowther were awake when ten o'clock boomed out from the old clock-tower.

"You're a silly ass, Lowther!" mumbled Manners, half asleep.

"I am? What for?"

"That game of chess——"

Lowther chuckled. Then he sat up in bed abruptly. A shout had suddenly sounded in the dark quad, followed immediately by another, and a scuffle of feet.

"What was that?" said Lowther quickly.

Manners bobbed up.

"Blessed if I know!" he exclaimed. "Sounded like Railton's voice!"

They listened. The noise continued, and Manners and Lowther hopped out of bed and crossed to the window. Several other juniors were awake now, and Tom Merry and Kangaroo joined the pair at the window.

In the dimness they could just see a figure running beneath the old elms. Another followed, and the juniors recognised it as Mr. Railton's, the School Housemaster.

"He's chasing somebody!" exclaimed Kangaroo.

"I'm going down!" said Tom Merry. "Come on! We might be able to help! It's some giddy burglar!"

In a moment the Terrible Three and one or two others were hastening into their clothes. Then they left the dormitory and hurried down the passage.

At the top of the stairs they met Blake & Co.

"Bai Jove! Did you heah the wumpus too?" asked D'Arcy.

"Yes. We're going to help," said Manners.

"So are we!" exclaimed Blake quickly.

They started to hurry downstairs, but at that moment Mr. Railton appeared in the hall below. He was somewhat dishevelled, and panting heavily. He gazed at the crowd of juniors in surprise.

"You all right, sir?" asked Blake.

Mr. Railton frowned.

"What are you boys doing out of bed at this hour?" he asked sternly.

"We were coming to help you, sir," replied Tom Merry lamely. "We—we thought that you might want us, sir."

"Nonsense, Merry!" said the Housemaster sharply. "Go back to bed at once, all of you! I shall not give you lines, as I believe you meant well."

"Thank you, sir!"

"You are very silly!" said Mr. Railton. "There was no necessity whatever for you to dress and come down. Off you go!"

"Yes, sir. But——"

"But what, Blake?"

"What was the row about, sir?" asked Blake. "We saw you chasing somebody, and thought—thought we might be useful."

"Yaas, wathah, sir!"

Mr. Railton smiled a little.

"It was nothing," he said. "Merely a tramp trying to get into the back premises—at least, so I judge. I didn't see him properly, but there is no other explanation. I chased him into the road, and he disappeared. Now, go back to your beds at once, and let me hear no more of you to-night."

The juniors trooped back to their respective dormitories rather disappointed.

In the Fourth Form dormitory, Blake & Co. soon got between the sheets again. They were bombarded with questions.

"You ass!" grunted Blake.

But he grinned, and the other fellows grinned. The only junior who remained serious was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy himself. For, as it happened, he was thinking exactly the same thing as Lumley-Lumley had voiced.

The tramp had come to steal the stick!

And D'Arcy felt puzzled and strangely uneasy.

"Oh, dry up, all of you!" said Blake. "We saw Railton in the hall. It was only a giddy tramp he was chasing."

"Was he hurt?"

"Hurt! No. He never got near the chap."

"The tramp ran away, then?" asked Mellish.

"No; he rose into the air like a giddy balloon!" said Blake sarcastically. "Shut up, you chaps! I want to get to sleep."

There was a short silence; then Lumley-Lumley chuckled. "I've got it!" he murmured.

"Got what?" growled Blake.

"I know what that tramp was after," said Lumley-Lumley.

"Well, what?"

"Gussy's walking-stick!" chuckled Lumley-Lumley.

"You ass!" grunted Blake.

But he grinned, and the other fellows grinned. The only junior who remained serious was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy himself. For, as it happened, he was thinking exactly the same thing as Lumley-Lumley had voiced.

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And D'Arcy felt puzzled and strangely uneasy.

CHAPTER 6.

Figgins's Little Joke.

THE following morning the juniors tried to get more information about the tramp whom Mr. Railton had chased.

But there was nothing more to learn. The Housemaster had simply seen the fellow climbing over the wall, and had immediately given chase. Who the man was, or where he had come from, remained a mystery.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy thought about the matter as he stood in Study No. 6 by himself, just before morning lessons. He had the ebony stick in his hands, and he regarded it thoughtfully through his famous monocle.

"It is vewy remarkable," he murmured. "The stick is quite ordinawy, and theah is no secwet cavity wathah Yaas, the othahs must be wight—it was mere coincidence. And that boundah who got into the quad, afiah lights out was simply a common twamp."

And D'Arcy didn't worry himself further. He left the study, strolled gracefully downstairs, and placed the stick in the big stand in the entrance-hall.

"It looks wippin'—quite the best stick in the stand!"

It was certainly the most elegant stick there, and it was quite worthy of its elegant owner.

And there it remained all day, practically unnoticed by the juniors. They had other and more important things to occupy their attention than D'Arcy's walking-stick.

Afternoon lessons came to an end, and a good many of the juniors hurried out to the football-field to snatch a little practice before it got too dark.

The afternoon was clear and fine, as it had been the day before, and the sun was setting in a halo of vivid colour. The frost was less sharp now, but it still held.

Figgins & Co. were standing in the quad, and the lanky chief turned his gaze upwards.

"Going to be fine to-morrow," he announced oracularly.

"Oh, blow to-morrow!" said Fatty Wynn. "I'm thinking about to-night. You know as well as I do, Figgy, that we've got absolutely nothing for tea—absolutely nothing!" he added pathetically.

"Well, what of it?" asked Kerr.

"What of it?" echoed Fatty. "You silly ass, do you think I can live if I don't have tea? I had nothing for dinner, to speak of; I wasn't feeling exactly well. But now my appetite's returned, and I'm as hungry as a giddy hunter!"

"Nothing for dinner!" chuckled Figgins. "Only two helpings of the first course, and three of the second! But to come down to rock-bottom facts, I'm stony!"

"So am I," said Kerr.

"And I've got exactly sixpence," said Fatty Wynn pitifully. "What's the good of a mouldy tanner? It'll only buy three twopenny tarts!"

"Well, that's one each," said Figgins.

"One each!" howled Wynn. "What's one tart, you ass?"

"Why, one tart, of course!"

"You—you burbler!"

Figgins grinned.

"Well, it's no good arguing," he said. "We've only got sixpence between us, and that's no good at all."

"Not a bit of good," said Wynn. "And it's no good going to Dame Taggles to get things on tick, because she hasn't got anything. She's sold right out, but she's making a big batch of pies and tarts now. But they won't be ready until after tea, and what's the good of that?"

"We shall have to wait," said Kerr.

"Wait!" roared Fatty Wynn. "Wait two hours! I'm going down to the village now to get supplies."

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"How?" inquired Kerr.
 "Why, walk, of course!"
 "I mean, where's your tin?" went on the Scots junior.
 "What's the good of going down the village with sixpence? You'll get a fat lot for sixpence!"
 Fatty Wynn looked round desperately.
 "We'll borrow some," he said. "I believe Gussy's fairly flush just now, and he'll lend us half-a-quad like a bird."
 "That's not a bad idea," agreed Figgins. "Come on; we'll all go and beard him in his den—otherwise, Study No. 6."

"Good egg!"
 And Figgins & Co. hastened across the quad. They hurried into the School House, and met Reilly, Levison, Lumley-Lumley, and several other Fourth-Formers, in the entrance hall.

"Look out! New House rotters!" yelled Mellish.
 "Pax!" exclaimed Figgins hastily. "We've come on a mission of peace. Pax, you know!"
 "Rats!" said Mellish. "Come on, Levison; let's bump the bouncers. Lend a hand, you chaps!"
 "Sure, an' didn't Figgy say it was pax, ye spalpeen?" exclaimed Reilly indignantly. "It's all right, Figgy, darlint!"

And Figgins & Co. passed on, unmolested. They piled into Study No. 6, and Figgins, by way of caution, already had his handkerchief in his hand.

"No larks!" he exclaimed. "This is a flag of truce!"
 "Which is?" asked Blake.
 "This hanky."

"Looks to me more like an office duster!" grinned Blake.
 "Well, what do you New House kids want? A bumping?"

Figgins grinned. He remembered the nature of their mission, and restrained himself from replying as he would have liked.

"We've come to borrow some tin," he explained. "We're stoney, except for a tanner."

"How extremely wotten, deah boy," said D'Arcy. "Pway let's see 'em in the bweach, and come to your assistance. I can lend you half-a-sov. with pleasuah!"

"Gussy, you're a brick!" said Figgins. "Your offer's like a drink of liquid water to the parched traveller in the desert!"

"Wats, deah boy! But I am afwaid you are watah mixed. Personally, I have nevah seen any watah that was not liquid."

"I have, Gussy," chuckled Figgins. "There's some outside now."

"You weally don't say so!" ejaculated D'Arcy, in surprise. "Pway tell me wheah?"

"In Taggles' water-but," said Figgins. "It's ice, you see!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You utah ass!"

"Got you there, Gussy!" chuckled Fatty Wynn. "But how about that tin. Fork out, will you? We want to buzz down to Rylcombe before tea."

D'Arcy handed out the half-sovereign, and with profuse thanks Figgins & Co. took their leave. When they reached the hall, they found that it was deserted, the juniors having dispersed to their studies or to the common-rooms.

Figgins' eyes lit upon the silver-knobbed walking-stick in the stand, and he chuckled.

"That's Gussy's new stick!" he exclaimed. "Suppose we borrow it, and swank down to Rylcombe with it?"

"Oh, rats!" said Fatty Wynn. "Blow the old stick!"

But Figgins walked over and took it out of the stand.

"It'll give Gussy a fright if he finds it's gone," he grinned. "He'll think some giddy robber's been in. Come on!"

Figgins & Co. hastened off to Rylcombe, the lanky New House chief having no idea of the excitement his little joke would cause.

It was dusky by the time they reached the village, and they made straight for the grocer's shop, to obtain sardines, butter, and numerous other provisions.

They were so intent upon their object that they had not noticed that a tall man had followed them for some little distance, had seen them enter the shop, and had then immediately dived into a hotel.

The tall man was Mr. Hicks, and in less than a minute he appeared again, and walked carelessly down the street. In his hand was a walking-stick. At a casual glance it looked very much like Gussy's, for it was of ebony, and had a large

silver knob. But a close examination would have showed that it was not of such splendid quality as D'Arcy's.

He turned into the grocer's shop, and found Figgins & Co. keeping the shopman busy with their orders. So Mr. Hicks leaned carefully against the counter, and made a pretence of examining a rather elaborate box of chocolates.

CHAPTER 7.

The Trick Which Didn't Come Off.

FIGGINS & CO. were not aware of Mr. Hicks's presence for some moments.

Then Kerr happened to turn. He gave Mr. Hicks a casual glance, and then turned back to the shopman.

But the canny Scots junior paid no attention to the articles Figgins was picking out.

He was thinking hard. He saw that the tall man was a stranger, and he also saw that he exactly fitted the description of Mr. Hicks, the man who had offered D'Arcy fifteen pounds for his stick.

"It's the fellow, sure enough," murmured Kerr, to himself. "My hat! I wonder if he's going to try the same dodge again? He must have seen the stick in Figgy's hand, and—"

Kerr started. Out of the corner of his eyes he could just see Mr. Hicks, and he noticed the stick in the man's hand. For a brief second Kerr thought that it was D'Arcy's; but a look at Figgins assured him that D'Arcy's stick was safe in Figgins's hand.

"By George!" murmured Kerr. "That's jolly queer!"

But he did not show his surprise.

He moved a little, so that Figgins was next to Mr. Hicks. The latter laid down the box of chocolates, and picked up another article.

The shopkeeper glanced at him.

"Sha'n't be a minute, sir," he said.

Mr. Hicks looked up and smiled.

"Please don't hurry on my account," he said pleasantly.

"Let these young gentlemen keep you as long as they like. I am in no hurry whatever."

"Very well, sir."

Figgins and Fatty Wynn just glanced at Mr. Hicks, but they did not pay any attention to him. Figgins was trying to think exactly what they wanted, whilst Fatty Wynn was gloating over some new dainties he had purchased.

Kerr, however, although he appeared to take no notice of the tall stranger, was very much on the alert.

"What's the meaning of it?" he asked himself. "This isn't a coincidence. That fellow's got a stick exactly like D'Arcy's. Why? What's the idea? Hanged if I can catch on!"

Kerr was something of a detective in his way, and his keen wits had solved many a puzzle which had beaten all the efforts of the other juniors.

He had a shrewd idea of what Mr. Hicks had come into the shop for, and he resolved to test it.

His chance came immediately.

Figgins had laid D'Arcy's stick against the counter, so that he could have a free hand to jot down the things he was buying.

Kerr casually lounged beside Figgins, and nearly knocked the stick over. He picked it up, and laid it against the counter again, but much nearer to Mr. Hicks.

He remained there for a few moments, then glanced at Fatty Wynn.

"How about some of that cheese over there, Fatty?" he asked carelessly.

"Which cheese?" asked Fatty Wynn.

"This stuff, in packets," said Kerr, moving across the shop to the far end.

The next minute he was showing the cream-cheese to Fatty Wynn, and he had acted so naturally that nobody could have suspected that he had done it deliberately.

For the stick was a good four feet away from Figgins now, lying against the counter quite on its own.

Figgins himself was still reckoning up, and Fatty Wynn and Kerr were at the other end of the shop.

A momentary gleam came into Mr. Hicks's eyes. He was quite close to the ebony stick, and he edged closer. Some tins of pressed beef were piled on the counter, and the man picked one up, the shopman eyeing him rather anxiously, and wishing that Figgins would hurry up.

Mr. Hicks laid his own walking-stick against the counter quite close to D'Arcy's. Then, waiting until the shopkeeper was looking his way again, he suddenly took out his watch.

"Upon my word, the time is getting on!" he said, in a tone of surprise. "I had no idea it was so late. I am sorry, but I must go."

"Really, sir—" protested the grocer.

"I will come back presently," said Mr. Hicks.

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NEXT WEDNESDAY—

"LED ASTRAY!"

He put his watch away, picked up D'Arcy's stick, and moved towards the door. And he performed the act so naturally that neither Figgins nor Wynn, who were looking at him, realised what he had done. Whether he had done it deliberately or not remained to be seen; for it was easy to make a mistake, seeing that the two sticks had been side by side.

Mr. Hicks moved towards the door quickly, but with no appearance of haste. He found Kerr looking out into the street.

"Pardon me, my boy!" he said politely.

Kerr didn't move.

"If you'll excuse me, sir," he began, "I think——"

"Really, I cannot stop to talk, youngster!"

"But you have made a little mistake, sir," said Kerr calmly.

He glanced at the stick in the stranger's hand.

Mr. Hicks's eyes gleamed with sudden anger, intermixed with a suspicion of alarm.

"Out of the way, boy!" he ordered roughly.

His change of tone caused Figgins and Fatty Wynn to stare.

"There's no hurry!" exclaimed Kerr easily. "I only wish to point out——"

"Confound you, boy, let me pass!" shouted Mr. Hicks.

Kerr remained quite cool, and nodded to himself. He knew that the stranger had taken D'Arcy's stick deliberately, and was now very anxious to get out of the shop. Mr. Hicks's attitude showed that plainly enough.

He strove to remain calm, but his eyes gleamed with fury, and he had difficulty in preventing himself from thrusting Kerr aside forcibly.

"This is ridiculous!" he said, with a forced smile. "I am forced to remain in here by an insolent schoolboy!"

The grocer looked worried.

"Please let the gentleman pass, Master Kerr!" he exclaimed.

"Yes; don't act the giddy ox!" said Figgins, staring.

"Are you dotty, Kerr?" asked Fatty Wynn.

Kerr smiled.

"If this gentleman will only listen to me, I will explain," he said smoothly. "He has made a slight mistake."

Mr. Hicks scowled savagely.

"By thunder, if you don't move——"

"You've got my friend's stick instead of your own," went on Kerr. "They're very much alike, so the mistake was natural."

"Nonsense!" snapped Mr. Hicks.

Figgins grabbed the stick against the counter.

"By Jingo! You're right, Kerr!" he said quickly. "This isn't Gussy's!"

"I know that," said Kerr. "It belongs to this gentleman. He took Gussy's by mistake."

The tall stranger uttered a savage oath beneath his breath. But he affected great surprise, and looked at the stick in his hand. He could do nothing else, for he was cornered. To have forced his way out of the shop now would have been proof positive that he had taken D'Arcy's stick intentionally.

"Really, I think it is you who are mistaken, my boy," he said, forcing himself to be pleasant again. "The stick I have here is my own. I have had it for several years, so I think I ought to know it!"

He looked at it casually, and then started.

"Well, upon my soul!" he exclaimed. "You are right! This stick is not mine, although it resembles it greatly."

Figgins stepped forward.

"This is yours, sir," he said.

"So it is!" exclaimed Mr. Hicks. "Upon my word, this is most astonishing! And I was so positive, too! I'm very, very sorry that the mistake should have occurred."

"Oh, that's all right, sir!" said Figgins. "We can't help mistakes happening, you know."

The sticks were changed, and Mr. Hicks turned to the door again. A smile was upon his face, but Kerr noticed that his eyes were expressing the keenest chagrin and fury.

"Sorry to trouble you, sir," said Kerr politely; "but I thought I'd better point out the mistake before you went."

Mr. Hicks patted Kerr on the back.

"Of course—of course!" he said. "You did quite right; and I was very much to blame for getting cross. I hope you will forgive me?"

"Oh, don't worry, sir!" said Kerr.

"Then we're friends again?" said the tall stranger genially.

"Of course!" replied Kerr.

He stepped aside, and Mr. Hicks, with a wave of his hand, passed out of the shop.

"Well, you were an ass, Kerr!" said Figgins. "You might have told him about the mistake straight out, instead

of standing with your back to the door, like a giddy policeman!"

"Well, the chap was in a hurry, and I thought he might go," said Kerr carelessly.

"I think Kerr did jolly well," said Fatty Wynn. "If it hadn't been for Kerr, we should have lost Gussy's stick, and then there would have been a rumpus, and no giddy mistake!"

The juniors chuckled, and the incident was forgotten—at least, in the minds of Figgins and Fatty Wynn. They thought the whole thing had been a simple mistake, but Kerr knew very differently, and the keen Scottish junior was very thoughtful.

At last the purchases were completed, and Figgins & Co. left the shop. They turned their steps towards St. Jim's. The road was now gloomy, for the shadows were thick.

"Better hand me that stick, Figgy," said Kerr quietly.

"Why?"

"Well, you never know what might happen."

"You chump!" said Figgins. "Do you mean to suggest that those giddy tramps will make another raid on it?"

"Yes," replied Kerr, "I do. And they weren't tramps, Figgy, my boy. There's something jolly queer about that stick!"

"Oh, rats!" said Figgins. "You're getting as bad as those School House fatheads! You know as well as I do that it's just an ordinary old stick. Didn't they take the knob and the ferrule off, thinking there were diamonds inside?"

Figgins chuckled at the thought.

"I admit I'm puzzled," said Kerr. "But, for some reason, Mr. Hicks wants that stick very badly; and, in my opinion, Mr. Hicks and those two chaps who attacked D'Arcy are connected."

Figgins and Fatty Wynn stared.

"Oh, rot!" said Figgins.

"Utter piffle!" added Wynn. "You'll be saying that Hicks was one of 'em next!"

"I believe he was!" said Kerr. "Perhaps you can recognise that chap in the grocer's shop?"

"How should we recognise him? We'd never seen him before. Do you know who he was?" asked Figgins.

"Yes. It was Mr. Hicks," replied Kerr.

His chums started.

"My hat! I believe you're right!" ejaculated the long-legged junior. "Now I come to think of it, he was a tall josser. That's funny, too! He nearly got away with D'Arcy's stick again. But this time it was a pure mistake."

"That's just where you're wrong!" replied the Scottish junior quietly. "He came into that shop simply because we were in there, and he took D'Arcy's stick deliberately!"

Figgins snorted.

"You're talking out of your hat, Kerr!" he exclaimed.

Kerr chuckled.

"Well, I think you two chaps take the cake!" he said. "The blessed thing was done right before your eyes, and you didn't see it! Why, you asses, I took the stick away from you, Figgins, and laid it against the counter near Mr. Hicks, just to see if he would take the bait—for I guessed why he was there. I pretended to be busy with Fatty Wynn, but I was watching the chap all the time. He laid his own stick down and took D'Arcy's up. But he did it so naturally that it might easily have been a mistake."

"Then how do you know it wasn't a mistake?" asked Fatty.

Kerr sighed.

"Oh, what a pair of giddy detectives you are!" he said patiently. "Didn't everything point to it being done deliberately? Didn't Mr. Hicks bring his own stick so that he could make the 'mistake' possible? Didn't he fly into a rage when I prevented him leaving the shop?"

Figgins looked at Kerr admiringly.

"My only topper!" he exclaimed. "You're right, Kerr, old man! What a deep chap you are! I've always said you were jolly deep, you know! Fancy you spotting everything like that!"

"I couldn't help spotting it," said Kerr. "But the fact remains that the fellow made a deliberate attempt to change his own stick for Gussy's."

"But why?" asked Fatty Wynn. "What the dickens for?"

Kerr shook his head.

"That's where you've got me," he replied. "I'm blessed if I know, Fatty. It's a puzzle. If the stick hadn't been examined, I should think that it contained something valuable. But it has been examined, and it's just an ordinary stick."

"Well, it's rum—jolly rum!" said Figgins.

"Just look at the facts," went on Kerr. "Just think what's happened since the stick arrived. First of all Gussy

meets Hicks in the village, and the chap offers him fifteen pounds for it. That fact alone was decidedly queer. Then, an hour afterwards, Gussy is attacked in the lane, and the stick is pinched in preference to his money, diamond pin, and gold tucker. At last, to absolutely clinch matters, Hicks has just made an attempt to steal it—steal it in such a way that it appeared to be a mistake.

"And there was that tramp last night," said Figgins quickly. "You know, Mr. Railton chased him out of the grounds. Perhaps he was after the stick as well!"

"I wouldn't mind betting that he was Hicks in disguise!" said Kerr flatly. "Those School House chaps have decided, in their own minds, that there's nothing in it, but we know better."

"We don't," said Wynn; "there's nothing in the stick so far as we know!"

"I didn't mean that, you ass!" explained Kerr. "I meant that Blake & Co. think it was pure coincidence—that there was nothing in it."

"Well, I can't make head or tail of it!" said Figgins. "I've never heard of such a queer state of affairs. But I know one thing, if the thing's capable of being explained, you'll explain it, Kerr. You're a wonder at this sort of bizney!"

"Well, I admit I'm not quite so dense as you chaps!" said Kerr modestly.

"Dense—who's dense?"

"You are—both of you!" replied Kerr. "I had to explain the whole thing before you realised the truth about that 'mistake'! And yet it happened right before your eyes."

Figgins laughed.

"We weren't cut out to be detectives," he said. "You'll be a giddy Sherlock Holmes when you grow up!"

Kerr smiled absently. He was not thinking of that far-off time; his mind was full of the curious mystery regarding D'Arcy's walking-stick, and for the rest of the walk to St. Jim's he was silent.

CHAPTER 8. Vanished!

MEANWHILE, there was considerable excitement at St. Jim's owing to Figgins's innocent little joke. While Mr. Hicks was doing his hardest to gain possession of the stick, Blake & Co. were having a lively time.

Soon after Figgins & Co. had departed, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy strolled out of Study No. 6, and went downstairs. He met Bernard Glyn of the Shell at the foot of the staircase.

"Afraid to leave it there, Gussy?" asked Glyn, with a chuckle.

"I am afraid I do not compwehend, deah boy."

"I see you've taken it away," said Bernard Glyn. "It was there ten minutes ago, but now it's gone!"

Arthur Augustus stared at the Shell fellow fixedly through his monocle.

"Are you off your wockah, Glyn?" he inquired.

"Not a bit, Gussy. I only asked you why you'd taken it away!"

"I weally think you had bettah see a doctah," said D'Arcy, looking round, and catching sight of Kangaroo. "I say, Kangawoo, deah boy," he went on, "have you noticed anythin' peculiah about Glyn?"

"Yes, often!" replied Kangaroo, with a grin. "His face and his weird and wonderful inventions."

Bernard Glyn glared.

"You silly ass!" he ejaculated.

"I wasn't weferwin' to that, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "I mean his mannah. He has just been askin' me the most incomprehensible questions, an' I weally think he is off his wockah!"

"What's he been saying?" asked Kangaroo.

"I only asked Gussy why he'd taken it away," said Glyn. "It was here ten minutes ago, and now it's gone. The tailor's dummy didn't have sense enough to realise I meant his giddy walking-stick!"

"My walkin'-stick!"

"Yes; it's gone!" said Glyn.

"Wats!"

"I tell you it's gone!"

"An' I wepeat—wats!" said Arthur Augustus. "My walkin'-stick is in the hall-stand, wound the cornah! I put it theah myself!"

"I don't say you didn't, Gussy," replied Glyn. "But I know it's not there now, and I simply asked you why you'd taken it away."

"I haven't taken it away, deah boy!"

"Well, it's not there—somebody's pinched it!"

"A tramp, perhaps!" chuckled Kangaroo.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy sniffed.

"I believe you are wottin' me, you wottahs!" he said. "I will go an' look for myself!"

And D'Arcy strode elegantly across to the large stand, and a glance showed him that his stick was not there. He turned to Bernard Glyn and Kangaroo wrathfully.

"You boundahs! You have taken it away!" he exclaimed.

"I haven't seen it, Gussy. Or, rather, I have seen it, but I haven't touched it. When I spotted it last, it was in the stand there, lordin' it over all the other insignificant sticks!"

"I haven't touched it, either," said Kangaroo.

D'Arcy began to look alarmed.

"Are you weally sewious?" he inquired.

"Deadly, horribly serious!" said Glyn gravely. "No, Gussy, we're not rotting; we haven't touched the thing!"

"Then some fwrightful boundah is havin' a game!" said Arthur Augustus warmly. "I will go wound to the studays and inquiah. And when I find the wottah who has taken it, I will give him a feahful thwashin'!"

The two Shell fellows chuckled, and Arthur Augustus hurried upstairs rather precipitously. He collided with Kerruish in the passage.

"Have you seen my stick, you wottah?" demanded D'Arcy.

"Your stick?"

"Yaas, my walkin'-stick, you know."

"I saw it about half an hour ago in the hall," replied Kerruish, "but I haven't touched the blessed thing."

"Honah bwight?"

"Of course!"

"Thanks, deah boy!"

And D'Arcy burst into Study No. 6, where his chums were already sitting down to tea.

"Just in time, Gussy!" said Blake. "Hallo, you're looking pretty ruffled! What's the matter?"

"My stick has gone, deah boys. Some fwrightful wuffians have pinched it!" said Arthur Augustus excitedly.

"My hat!"

"Who's taken it?" asked Herries characteristically.

"You uttah ass, Hewwies! Do you think I should be heah if I knew who'd taken it? I weally think that some wobbah has walked in and taken it!"

"Rats, Gussy!" said Blake. "Some silly ass is having a joke with you. Monty Lowther, very likely. He's always doing something fatheaded!"

"Bai Jove, pewhaps you're wight. I'll wun along an' see!"

And D'Arcy left the room and hurried to Tom Merry's study in the Shell passage. He found the Terrible Three very busy discussing tea, and they looked up in surprise at their visitor.

"Have you seen my stick, deah boys?" asked D'Arcy breathlessly.

"What sort of a stick—a sugar-stick?" asked Monty Lowther humorously. "I thought you'd got beyond that stage, Gussy! They're such sticky, messy things!"

"You uttah ass, Lowthah! I mean my walkin'-stick," exclaimed D'Arcy. "Have you seen it?"

"Yes," said Monty Lowther, biting into a tart.

Arthur Augustus looked relieved.

"Then I think it is wathah wotten of you," he exclaimed.

"You might have left it in the hall-stand, instead of playin' these wicliculous twicks. Pway hand it ovah!"

Tom Merry chuckled.

"We haven't got it, Gussy," he said.

"Of course not," agreed Manners.

"Why should we want your silly stick?" said Monty Lowther. "It's not here, Adolphus!"

"Weally, Lowthah, you are a fwrightful fibbah!" said D'Arcy indignantly. "You told me just now that you'd got it!"

"I didn't," said Lowther. "I said I'd seen it!"

"Then do you mean to say it is not heah?"

"Of course it isn't, Gussy!" chuckled the humorist of the Shell. "I've seen it, but I don't know where it is. I saw it last night, and I saw it this morning!"

Arthur Augustus glared at Lowther.

"I wegard you as a burblin' duifah, Lowthah!" he said wrathfully. "Then my walkin'-stick isn't heah?"

"Haven't we told you so two or three times?"

And D'Arcy left indignantly. Then he went on a tour of all the studies, asking their occupants the same question. He did not go into the senior quarters, for he knew that the seniors would not play such a trick.

Figgins & Co. never entered his head. He had forgotten that they had visited the School House, and he did not connect them with the disappearance of his stick.

As a matter of fact, he had already decided in his own

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mind that a robber had entered the School House and taken it. But he continued his tour of inquiry, wishing to make absolutely sure before he reported his loss. He thought it just possible that Levison, the cad of the Fourth, might have taken it.

But again he drew blank. Levison and Mellish had not seen it; and although D'Arcy knew better than to take their word, he was convinced that they had not taken it. The common-room was practically deserted when he entered; but the few juniors who were gathered round the fire had the same answer to his question.

Arthur Augustus stood in the middle of the entrance-hall, staring at the umbrella-stand.

"It is weally remarkable," he murmured. "I am convinced that some howwid wobbah—one of those twamps who attacked me last night—has walked in heah an' taken it away with him!"

He considered a moment further, and then started. "Bai Jove!" he murmured. "Pewhaps Wallay has been playin' a joke on me! The young boundah! If he has, I will nevah leave my stick down heah again. I will keep it in the studay!"

He hurried off to the Third Form-room, and opened the door.

"Bai Jove! What a howwid smell!" he exclaimed, starting back.

The smell was certainly rather strong. Wally & Co. were having tea round the Form-room fire, and Wally D'Arcy was frying a kipper under rather difficult circumstances. The kipper was impaled upon a pen, and the smoke from it was rolling into the room in clouds.

"Wally!" called D'Arcy. Wally turned his head, and moved a little. The kipper slipped from its precarious position, and flopped into the fire with a splutter. Wally gave a roar.

"Oh, crumbs!" ejaculated Curly Gibson. "That's done it!"

"It's finished now," said Joe Frayne. "Crikey, it'll be burnt to a cinder in a minute!"

Wally made frantic efforts to rescue the kipper, and at last he succeeded; but it was a sorry spectacle. He wiped it with a piece of exercise-paper.

"It's a bit cindery," he growled, "but I think it'll be all right!"

D'Arcy stepped forward, and gazed at the kipper in horror.

"It was your fault, Gussy," said Wally, turning on him. "What the dickens do you mean by shoving yourself in here and making me do this? You nearly spoilt it!"

His major pointed to the cindery kipper.

"You are not goin' to eat that, you gwubbay little boundah!" he exclaimed.

"Bai Jove, what a frightful-looking object!"

"Look here," said Wally wrathfully, "you clear out with your remarks! This is a jolly good kipper!"

"But it's all burnt up," said D'Arcy; "and it weally smells howwidly squiffay. I twust, Wallay, that I can persuade you to throw it into the fish altogether. If you eat that you'll be feahfully ill!"

Wally sniffed.

"Rats!" he said. "I know what's good for me, if you don't, Gussy. I've eaten kippers a lot more squiffy than this. Why, this one was only just on the turn, and it's browned so much that we shall never taste it!"

"I wathah think you will taste nothing but cinders, Wallay. Hovevah, it is your biznay, and I will not interfere with you!"

"And a jolly sensible decision, too, Gussy!" said the scamp of the Third. "As it

is, you stand a chance of getting slaughtered and chopped into pieces. What are you here for, anyhow?"

"I came to ask you if you had collahed my ebony walkin'-stick, just for a joke. I know you are wathah pwone to jokin', Wallay."

Wally sniffed.

"I haven't touched your mouldy old stick!" he grunted. "You'd better go and look somewhere else, Gus. When I play a joke, I do something better than that!"

"Then who has taken it?"

"We don't know," said Curly Gibson. "Buzz off, Gussy; you're delaying tea!"

"But the stick's gone!" said D'Arcy worriedly.

"Good!"

"Somebody has stolen it!"

"Ripping!" exclaimed Wally.

Arthur Augustus left the Third Form-room indignantly. He had finished his inquiries; not one of the School House juniors had taken his stick. The only conclusion he could come to, therefore, was that it had been stolen by someone outside the school.

"It would be quite easy," thought D'Arcy. "The fellow must have walked into the entrance-hall, seen the stick, and calmly walked out again with it. I— Bai Jove, Kildare, deah boy! May I have a word with you?"

Kildare, who was passing down the passage, stopped, and D'Arcy reported his loss.

"Are you sure that some of the juniors haven't taken it?" asked the captain of St. Jim's.

"Quite suah. I have inquired ewevywheah, an' nobody has seen it. Some wobbah has taken it!"

Kildare looked thoughtful.

"It's possible, of course," he agreed. "But I don't think it's probable. Somebody is pulling your leg, D'Arcy. We'll go round and make inquiries. I'll soon get it for you!"

Arthur Augustus went round with Kildare a little hopefully, but his aristocratic brow wore a worried frown. At last the inquiry was ended, but the walking-stick had not come to light.

"I shall begin to think that you're right, D'Arcy," said Kildare. "I understand that some tramps took it from you in the lane last night?"

"Yaas, deah boy. And the Tewwible Thwee wescued it!"

"Come along; we will see Mr. Railton!" said the captain of St. Jim's.

And they went to the House-

master's study, and reported the loss. Mr. Railton listened gravely.

"I can't help thinking that it is a joke on the part of some of the juniors," he said at last. "If so, I will see that they are punished. If it had been given up when you inquired, Kildare, I should have said nothing. But it is carrying a joke too far to tell falsehoods about it!"

Mr. Railton left the study with Kildare and D'Arcy, and found a little crowd of juniors outside. This grew larger, and the passage became filled with grinning Fourth-Formers and Shell fellows. They were rather amused at the troubles of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"If any of you boys have taken D'Arcy's stick," said Mr. Railton, "I now order you to give it up. The joke has been carried far enough!"

But all the juniors protested that they had not touched the article in question, and Mr. Railton turned to Kildare.

"Did you examine the stand in the entrance-hall carefully?" he asked.

"No, sir," replied Kildare. "I just glanced at it, and saw that the stick was not there."

"Perhaps it has slipped down," said Mr. Railton.

NEXT WEDNESDAY:

LED ASTRAY!

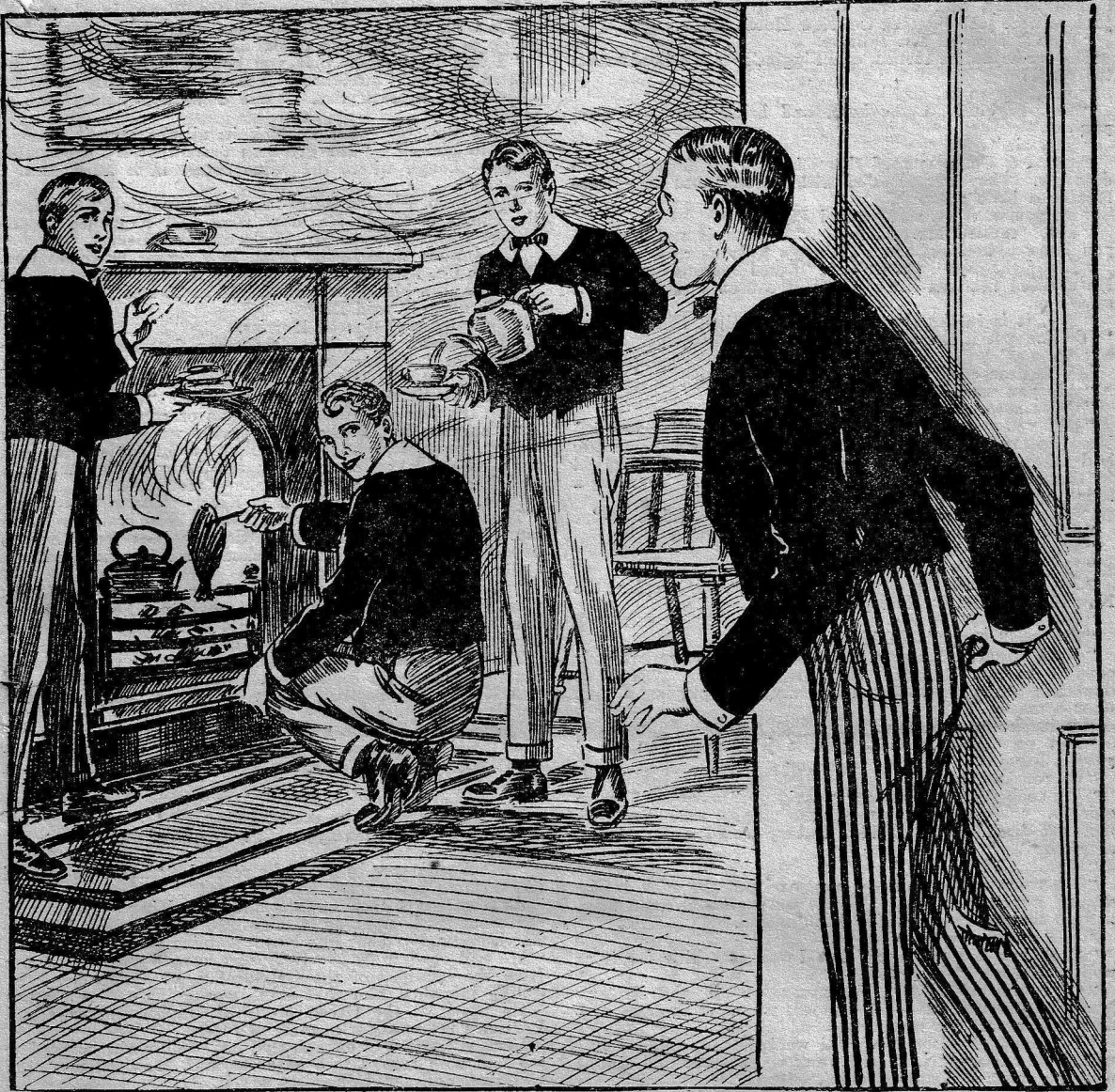
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Gran



Wally D'Arcy was cooking a kipper impa'ed on the end of a pen when Arthur Augustus arrived in the Form room. "Bai Jove!" exclaimed the swell of St. Jim's. "What a howwid smell!" (See Chapter 8.)

"Before we inquire further we had better make sure that it is not there all the time."

"Weally, sir, I looked most carefully," said D'Arcy.

"We will make sure, nevertheless," said Mr. Railton.

And he led the way down the passage, the crowd of juniors following.

The Housemaster and D'Arcy headed the procession down the stairs. Arthur Augustus was nearest the banisters, and he looked over them carelessly as he descended.

Then he suddenly came to an abrupt stop.

"Gweat Scott!" he ejaculated. "I—I— Bai Jove!"

D'Arcy's face turned the colour of a beetroot, and he looked round them blankly; for he had glanced at the hall-stand, and there, distinct and separate from the umbrellas, canes, and others, reposed the famous, silver-knobbed, ebony walking-stick!

"It was there all the time!" gasped Monty Lowther, craning over the banisters. "Oh, my only Sunday tile!"

In a second the whole crowd of juniors were hanging over the banisters, and a great shout of laughter rang out:

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's there, as large as life!" cackled Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

CHAPTER 9.

Figgins & Co. Explain—And Levison Meets a Stranger.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY gazed at Mr. Railton as though in a dream.

"It's theah, sir!" he gasped.

Mr. Railton's brow was stern.

"So I see, D'Arcy," he replied. "This is a joke—and a joke that will be severely punished. I do not object to a little fun amongst yourselves, but this affair has involved both Kildare and myself, and we have no time to waste in this fashion."

D'Arcy walked across the entrance-hall with the Housemaster. In his own words, he was "all in a fluttah," and wondered who had played the joke.

The juniors on the stairs were still chuckling and cackling.

But Mr. Railton turned to them severely.

"Silence!" he ordered sharply.

The chuckles died down, but the grins remained. The joke was, in a way, directed against Mr. Railton, and that was a serious offence.

The Housemaster glanced out into the quad. Then he

looked keenly, and walked quickly to the door. Three juniors were just entering the New House porch.

"Boys!" shouted Mr. Railton.

The three juniors turned, and Figgins's voice echoed across the quad:

"Speaking to us, sir?"

"Yes, Figgins. Come here, and bring your two companions."

"Yes, sir."

Figgins & Co. presented themselves in the School House doorway. They were loaded with parcels, and they were looking a little sheepish.

"Do you want us, sir?" asked Figgins.

"Yes," replied Mr. Railton. "I think it possible that you know something about D'Arcy's walking-stick."

"It's in the stand, sir, isn't it?" asked Figgins innocently. He realised that his little joke had caused something of a sensation.

"Yes, it is in the stand, Figgins," replied Mr. Railton.

"Did you put it there?"

"No, sir."

Mr. Railton eyed Figgins keenly.

"Are you sure, Figgins?"

"Quite sure, sir!"

"Did you put the stick in the stand, Kerr?" proceeded Mr. Railton. "Somebody has played a joke—somebody had taken the stick away, waited until I became involved in the search, and then replaced it—obviously to raise a laugh against myself."

"Oh, no, sir!" said Figgins quickly. "We didn't—"

"Then you did play this joke, Figgins?"

"We took it, sir," said Figgins.

"But you told me you didn't!"

"No, sir; I said I didn't put it in the stand," replied the New House chief. "Kerr put it there."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence!" rapped out Kildare.

"Well, Figgins, I regret that I shall have to report your conduct to Mr. Ratchiff," said Mr. Railton. "He will doubtless teach you that you did wrong in playing a joke upon a master."

Figgins & Co. protested.

"But we didn't mean to play a joke upon you, sir!" gasped Figgins.

"Of course not, sir!"

"We took the stick just for a lark, sir," went on Figgins quickly. "We've been down in the village, and have only just got back. We'd no idea D'Arcy would make all this silly fuss."

"Weally, Figgay—"

"We came in five minutes ago, and put the stick in the stand," went on Figgins. "There wasn't a soul down here, and we thought that it hadn't been missed."

Mr. Railton's frown relaxed.

"Then you did not know that I was searching for it as well as Kildare?" he asked.

"Of course not, sir! We never thought that D'Arcy would be such an ass—I—I mean, we never thought that he would report the matter to you!"

"I thought that some howwid wobbah had collahed it," said Arthur Augustus. "I am vewy wellieved to find that it was only your wudiculous jokin', Figgay."

"We're very sorry, sir," said Kerr. "We'd no idea at all that you would be bothered about it."

"No idea at all, sir," said Figgins.

"And we hope you're not cross, sir," concluded Fatty Wynn.

Mr. Railton smiled.

"Well, boys, as I find that the joke was an innocent one, with no intentional impertinence to me, I will overlook it," he said. "But you certainly ought to have asked D'Arcy's permission before you took the stick."

"Thank you, sir!" chorused Figgins & Co.

"I think D'Arcy was to blame for reporting the loss so quickly," said Kildare, with a twinkle in his eyes. "Perhaps it would be as well, sir, to give him a hundred lines."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gasped.

"Weally, Kildare!" he protested. "That is comin' it a bit thick, you know, deah boy!"

Mr. Railton laughed.

"No, Kildare; that would be hardly fair," he said. "Now, off you go, all of you; and I should advise you, D'Arcy, to make more certain of your losses before you report them!"

"Yaas, wathah, sir!"

Mr. Railton and Kildare departed, and the juniors chuckled hugely over the joke. They gathered round the New House trio.

"If you hadn't been called in here by Mr. Railton, Figgay," said Tom Merry, "we should now proceed to pile on you, and raid those provisions you're carrying."

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"You—you rotters!" gasped Fatty Wynn, in alarm. "It's all right!" chuckled Tom Merry. "We're not going to do it. We won't take advantage of you."

"I had no suspicion that your boundahs were up to your wotten twicks!" exclaimed D'Arcy. "I weally must be allowed to weimark that it was a wathah dottay sort of jape."

"But I'm jolly glad we took it, all the same," thought Kerr to himself. "It's given us proof that it's a valuable article—though where the value comes in is more than I can see."

After prep, Figgins & Co. found an opportunity to inform the chums of Study No. 6 of what had happened in the village with regard to Mr. Hicks and the stick.

The juniors were in the gym., in a corner by themselves. Blake & Co. listened in astonishment as Kerr told the story.

"Well, I'm blest!" ejaculated Blake at last.

"It's queer!" said Digby.

"Jolly queer!" agreed Herries.

"It pwoves, deah boys, that our first suspicions were wight," said Arthur Augustus. "But I'm bothahed if I can make out why Mr. Hicks wants the stick."

"Yes, that's the puzzle," said Blake. "There's nothing in it. It's just an ordinary, common or garden stick."

"I suppose Mr. Hicks isn't a twifle wocky in the uppah stowey," suggested D'Arcy. "That would explain it, deah boys. Bein' a collectah, he particularly wants the stick, and does not hesitate to adopt shady measuhs."

"No, that's not it," said Kerr, shaking his head. "There's more in it than that. Mr. Hicks is as sane as I am. When he found that his little game was spoilt, he was as wild as anything, and he looked absolutely dangerous."

Blake scratched his head.

"Well, it's more than I can make out," he said. "And, what's more, I'm not going to trouble my head about it. The best thing you can do, Gussy, is to keep the stick at St. Jim's. There'll be no chance of its getting stolen then."

The juniors were all puzzled, and most of them decided not to worry about the matter. The only one who differed was Kerr. The Scottish junior loved a mystery, and this one interested him greatly.

Blake & Co. left the gym. It was very dark in the quad. The frost had almost gone now, and the night was comparatively mild. A dark form loomed up from the direction of the wood-shed.

It was Levison, of the Fourth.

Blake & Co. eyed him disdainfully.

"Been having a manly smoke?" inquired Blake.

Levison scowled.

"Mind your own bizney!" he replied. "I can do what I like without being questioned by you!"

As a matter of fact, Levison had been doing two things in the wood-shed—smoking a cigarette and reading a note which had arrived for him by the evening post.

He had read it by the light of a candle-end, and it was from the landlord of the Green Man, at Rylcombe. Mr. Joliffe informed him that there was going to be a select little party at the Green Man that night, and requested Levison's presence for a game of cards.

Levison knew well enough that Mr. Joliffe also wanted to see him with regard to a little account. Levison was flush just now, and could afford to pay it.

"I'll go," he told himself. "I haven't had any excitement for a long time, and it'll be a nice change."

A visit to the Green Man was nothing new to Levison. The black sheep of the Fourth was in good spirits at supper-time. He decided to say nothing to Percy Mellish, his study mate, for Mellish was a junior who could not be trusted. And Levison did not want his affairs discussed in the common-rooms.

He went to bed with the rest, and joined in the conversation concerning the adventures of D'Arcy's stick. But he was one of the first to snuggle down in bed and compose himself for sleep.

But Levison didn't even doze. He lay in bed affecting sleep, listening to the murmur of the other juniors' voices.

At last the Fourth Formers were all asleep.

Ten o'clock boomed out.

"Too early yet," thought Levison. "The prefects and the masters'll be about. I'd better wait till half-past before I make a move."

It seemed a long while before the half-hour chimed, and then Levison quietly got out of bed and commenced to slip into his clothes.

It was a long operation, and then, with his boots in his hand, he crept to the door, gently opened it, and passed through.

Levison had broken bounds after lights out on a very great many occasions, and he felt his way along the dark passage knowing exactly where to go.

For a few moments he stood listening.

But all was quiet and still in the great bulk of the old School House. One or two masters were probably in their studies below, but there was not much danger from that quarter.

Levison reached the little window at the end of the passage, and in three minutes he was gliding swiftly across the quad.

It was pitch-dark—so dark that Levison had to feel his way to the tree which had enabled him to clamber over the wall on more than one occasion. It was the tree which was universally used when breaking bounds.

"Jolly glad it's dark!" murmured Levison, as he paused on the other side of the wall to lace his boots. "If I pass anybody they won't spot me. I'm as safe as eggs."

It did not take him long to reach the Green Man, and Mr. Joliffe welcomed him heartily, when he found that he was prepared to pay up. The black sheep of the Fourth remained at the inn for a full hour and a half. It was already past midnight when he rose to leave.

But Levison was feeling very elated. He had succeeded in winning at cards, and his winnings exceeded the money he had paid over to Mr. Joliffe.

"Jolly good biz," he murmured, as he slipped out of the side door. "One of the best games I've had!"

Bordering the roadway was a brightly-lighted window, and Levison was forced to pass this.

And, unknown to the junior, the tall stranger, Mr. Hicks, was passing the inn at the moment. Mr. Hicks paused as he heard a door close. The next moment Levison passed the lighted window. He was gone in a flash, and was swallowed up in the darkness. But in that brief glimpse Mr. Hicks had caught sight of the St. Jim's cap.

"A boy from the school!" he muttered quickly. "A junior, too! By gad, the very opportunity!"

Mr. Hicks made up his mind immediately. His seeing Levison had been a pure piece of luck, and he resolved to make capital out of it. He stepped along the road briskly, knowing that Levison was only a few yards ahead of him. He wore boots with rubber-heels, and as he walked on the smooth grass bordering the road, Levison had no idea of his approach.

Mr. Hicks could just see a dim view of Levison a yard or two ahead, and he suddenly ran forward and laid a hand on the junior's shoulder. At the same second he pressed the button of an electric torch, shining it full upon Levison's face.

The cad of the Fourth started violently.

"Oh!" he gasped.

He blinked at the bright light, dazed for a moment. Then, with a sudden twist, he endeavoured to get away. He had no idea who his companion was, for everything beyond the light was pitchy black.

All he could see was Mr. Hicks's arm.

Levison wriggled convulsively.

"Stop that!" ordered the tall man sharply.

"Who—who are you?" panted Levison.

"My name would be nothing to you," returned Mr. Hicks.

"But I see that you belong to St. Jim's."

"Y-e-e-es!"

"What Form do you belong to?"

"Hang you!" muttered Levison. "What do you want to question me like this for?"

"I have a reason!" replied Mr. Hicks sternly. "What Form do you belong to?"

"The—the Fourth!"

"Ah, that is a junior Form?"

"Yes!"

Mr. Hicks uttered a short, unpleasant laugh.

"I do not think it is usual for junior boys to be leaving disreputable public-houses after midnight!" he said smoothly.

Levison trembled in his shoes. He was not a coward, as he had proved on more than one occasion, but he knew very well that he was now in a very precarious position. It was hopeless for him to try and struggle in the grasp of this man, for a struggle would be utterly useless.

If the Head got to know of his visit to the Green Man there could be only one result—expulsion! A sudden surge of anger swept over him.

"What's it got to do with you whether I visit the Green Man or not?" he demanded. "You've no business to stop me like this, you rotter!"

Levison tried to catch a glimpse of his captor's features, but could not do so, only in a dim, indistinct fashion. A mere blurry outline of a face was all that Levison saw.

"Do you know what I'm going to do?" asked Mr. Hicks.

"No!"

"I am going to take you with me to the school, and I'm going straight to the headmaster with you. I have no doubt that he will be very glad to see you."

Levison's face turned chalky, and Mr. Hicks chuckled.

"Do—do you m-mean it?" gasped the junior.

"I'm going to take you to the Head.

"G-good heavens!" muttered Levison. "It will mean the sack! I shall be expelled in the morning!"

"A pleasant prospect!"

Levison struggled again.

"You sha'n't take me!" he panted furiously. "I'll get away!"

"On the contrary, my young friend, you will remain where you are!" snapped Mr. Hicks. "Quiet, you little fool!"

Levison realised it was no good.

"Take me up, then!" he muttered savagely. "I'm not going to blubber! I'm ready to face the Head!"

"Perhaps, perhaps, I say, it will not be necessary for me to take you to the headmaster," said the stranger, highly elated at the success of his plan.

Levison started.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that there is a chance for you, young 'un!"

"You're—you're not going to take me to the Head?" asked the Fourth-Former eagerly.

"Not if you do as I wish!" replied Mr. Hicks easily.

"You want me to do something for you?"

"Exactly!"

"Tell what you want," asked Levison, his spirits revived.

He was not over-scrupulous, and he would go to considerable lengths to secure his own safety.

"It is not much—very little, in fact," said the tall man. "There is a boy named D'Arcy in the Fourth Form?"

"Yes."

"He has got a walking-stick—ebony, with a silver knob."

"That's right," said Levison, in a puzzled tone. "What the dickens has that got to do with this affair?"

"Everything, young 'un—everything. Now, this is what I want you to do. If you refuse, I shall take you straight up—"

"Oh, cut the cackle!" growled Levison.

Mr. Hicks chuckled.

"I rather like you!" he said. "Well, to-morrow evening, at half-past six, I shall be in this lane against the stile. All you have to do is to manage to get that stick of D'Arcy's and bring it to me."

"Do you mean steal it?"

"No, no!" said the other quickly. "Only borrow it. All I want you to do is to bring me the stick—you can get it without being noticed—and wait for ten minutes. At the end of that time I will give you the stick back again."

Levison stared into the darkness.

"Well, I'm hanged!" he exclaimed.

"It sounds rather peculiar, I will admit," said Mr. Hicks. "But that is what I want!"

"But what's the idea?" asked the junior. "What do you want D'Arcy's stick for—and for only ten minutes?"

"That, my young friend, is my business. Bring me the stick at half-past six to-morrow evening, and I will give you a sovereign just to remember me by!"

Levison was silent—not because he had any scruples, but because he was filled with wonder at the strangeness of the request. He could hardly believe his ears. Why, the thing would be as easy as possible to accomplish.

"Well?" asked the stranger. "I am waiting for your answer. Either you do as I say, and earn a sovereign, or you get taken straight to your headmaster."

Levison laughed easily.

"Oh, I'll do it!" he said. "It'll be as simple as pie!"

"You mean it?" asked Hicks eagerly.

"Of course!"

"Good! I am glad I met you!" said the man pleasantly. Then his tone suddenly changed. "But I warn you; if you fail me I shall not let the matter rest. I know your face, and—"

"Oh, dry up!" interrupted Levison. "I'll do it, and willingly. I'll be at the stile at half-past six."

"Do not say a word of this to a soul!" cautioned Mr. Hicks. "Not a word, mind!"

"I sha'n't be such an ass as that!" returned Levison calmly. "Now, let go of my shoulder, for goodness' sake. It's aching like the dickens!"

The grip was released.

"To-morrow evening, then," said Mr. Hicks.

"At six-thirty exactly!" agreed Levison, staring after him, puzzled and curious.

"My hat!" he muttered. "I thought it was all up that time! Now, what on earth can that chap want with D'Arcy's stick? I'm blessed if I know—and I'm blessed if I care!"

And Levison turned his face towards St. Jim's and hurried onwards. He succeeded in getting into the School House without making a sound or rousing a soul.

And when the school clock struck one Ernest Levison was in bed sound asleep.

CHAPTER 10.

Kerr Gets to Work.

KERR of the New House stood looking out of the study window into the quad.

The Fourth Form had just been released after morning lessons, and Figgins & Co. had hurried into their study to put their footer boots on for half an hour's practice before dinner.

"Buck up, Kerr, old man!" said Figgins. "Don't stand mooning there!"

Kerr didn't answer. He was thinking deeply. The sun was shining brightly in the quad, for the fine weather still held. And as Kerr looked out he saw a group of juniors leave the School House, attired in football things, and hurry off towards the playing-fields.

They were Blake & Co. and two or three other Fourth-Formers, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy included.

"Good!" murmured Kerr.

"What's good?" asked Figgins.

Kerr turned.

"Look here!" he said. "There's no need for us to practise footer this morning. There's only half an hour, anyway, and it's hardly worth while."

"Rot!" said Figgins. "Come along, you ass!"

"No; I sha'n't go!" said Kerr. "And I don't want you chaps to go, either!"

"Don't want us to go!"

"No."

"Why not?" asked Fatty Wynn.

"Because I'm going to do something else," said the Scots junior.

"I'm blessed if I'm going to stick indoors on a fine day like this!" began Figgins. "And—"

"Don't be in such a hurry," put in Kerr. "Let me explain. This business about Gussy's walking-stick has been worrying me, and I want to ferret out the truth."

Figgins and Fatty Wynn were duly impressed.

"Well, you can ferret," said Figgins obligingly.

"It's my belief that there's something about that stick that no ordinary stick possesses," said Kerr.

"But there isn't, you cuckoo!" exclaimed Fatty Wynn. "Didn't those School House chaps take it to pieces, as it were, and thoroughly examine it?"

"They said they did," replied Kerr; "but you can't trust those School House chaps to do anything thoroughly. I want to examine it myself, and now's just the opportunity. Gussy's on the football field, and most of the other chaps as well. They'll stay there till the dinner-bell rings."

"Well?" said Figgins.

"It's a good opportunity to borrow Gussy's stick, bring it over here, and look at it. I'm going to take that knob off again, and I thought you chaps might like to be in the bizney."

"Do you think it'll come to anything?" asked Figgins dubiously.

Kerr nodded.

"Yes," he replied quietly, "I do."

"Well, that's enough for us," said Figgins firmly. "No footer for us this morning, Fatty. When Kerr speaks like that you know he's got something in his mind. He's an awfully deep chap, you know."

Fatty Wynn nodded.

"All right," he said. "Perhaps it's as well we're not going to the footer. You chaps buzz off and fetch the stick. I'll be having a snack while you're gone."

Fatty's snack was a hearty meal to anybody else. But it never seemed to affect his mealtime appetite, so to speak.

Kerr went across to the School House himself, and, as he expected, found the entrance hall quite deserted.

The ebony walking-stick was in the stand. Kerr took it out and calmly slipped it under his overcoat, which he wore for the express purpose of hiding it. It wasn't that Kerr was afraid of his action being discovered, but he did not want the others to know that he was examining the stick. If his scrutiny came to nothing he would only be laughed at for his pains.

He hurried up to the study in the New House, flung his overcoat in a corner, and laid the stick on the table.

"Your pocket-knife, Figgy!" he said. "Buck up! There's no time to lose!"

Figgins handed out his pocket-knife, and Kerr removed the ferrule. Figgins and Fatty Wynn watched interestedly, although they were both convinced that nothing would come of the examination.

"See anything?" asked Fatty Wynn.

"Give me a chance!" exclaimed Kerr. "No, there's nothing in the ferrule. And the stick seems solid enough, too."

He looked at the bottom of the stick critically, and tapped

it with the handle of the pocket-knife. But it was quite solid. Kerr gazed at the rough end thoughtfully.

"Where's my magnifying lens?" he asked suddenly.

"Oh, chucking about in the cupboard somewhere," answered Figgins. "What do you want to do with it? The regular Sherlock Holmes bizney?"

Kerr grinned.

"Yes," he replied. "Hand it out!"

The lens was a small one, but it was very powerful. Kerr slowly and carefully looked at the bottom of the stick through it. Then he shook his head.

"Nothing here," he announced. "I didn't expect to find anything, but I thought it best to make sure."

He proceeded to replace the ferrule, and in a few moments it was screwed in place again.

"Now for the knob!" he said briskly.

It was soon off, and the rough end, plainly showing the grain-marks of the ebony, was exposed to view.

"Well, it's just the same as the bottom end, isn't it?" asked Fatty Wynn. "Blessed if I can see the sense of all this rigmarole!"

"Yes; I must say that you're an ass, Kerr," said the lank New House chief politely. "You've kept us away from the football just to see you look at a piece of fatheaded ebony!"

"Wait until I've finished," said Kerr quietly.

He gave a single glance into the silver knob, and then transferred his attention to the black wood. Through the magnifying glass the grain-marks showed with wonderful distinctness, revealing cracks and holes which had been invisible previously.

But although Kerr strained his eyes for five minutes, he could see nothing that resembled a secret button—for Kerr was convinced that the stick contained a secret cavity.

"Well?" demanded Figgins.

"It's not well! It's jolly rotten!" said Kerr, looking worried. "I can't see anything. And yet I'll bet a quid that—"

He paused abruptly, and stared at the top of the stick. For half an inch down the wood was not polished, for this portion was hidden inside the knob. Kerr gazed at it with sudden interest.

"Now, that looks jolly queer!" he said. "Look at that half-inch of rough stick, you chaps. Doesn't it strike you as being very peculiar?"

"Can't say that it does," said Figgins. "It's only rough; but as that's hidden by the knob, it doesn't matter. So how is it queer?"

"I'll tell you," replied Kerr. "Now, it's quite natural that the stick would be unpolished at the top; but it's jolly unnatural for it to be so rough. It's all scored and full of little holes. Why?"

"Yes, why?" asked Fatty Wynn.

"Simply to hide something," Kerr explained, getting a little excited. "I'll bet my boots we shall find the secret there!"

He took up the lens again, and for a few moments carefully examined the score-marks. Then he started, and uttered a low cry of satisfaction.

"I've got it!" he said tensely.

"My hat!"

"Not really, Kerr?"

"Yes, really," answered Kerr, in a suppressed voice. "You can't see anything strange until you look through the glass, and even then it's practically invisible. The top of this stick—about a quarter of an inch—is simply a plug, probably screwed in. Of course, it fits absolutely tight, so that all these score-marks come exactly even when it's fixed. If the stick was smooth, you'd see the line running round it, but the roughness hides it completely."

"My only topper!"

"By jingo!"

"It's jolly ingenious," went on Kerr, "because nearly everybody who looked at it would never dream of that top part being a plug. But it is, and what's more, I'm going to take it out."

Figgins and Fatty Wynn were now thoroughly excited. They had expected Kerr's quest to end in nothing, and were considerably impressed now that they found that their clever chum had not drawn blank.

Kerr grasped the top of the stick firmly in the crook of his right forefinger and thumb. Then he added additional force to it with his left hand.

"Now then, you chaps, turn the stick gently," he said.

Figgins grasped it, and did so. But Kerr held so tight that the smooth ebony slipped in Figgins's hand.

"It's no good," he gasped. "I can't grip the blessed thing!"

"I'll tell you what!" said Kerr quickly. "There's a piece of patching-rubber on the mantelpiece, which I bought for my tyres. Wrap that round, and it'll grip like the dickens."

"Good old Kerr!" murmured Figgins. "You're always the chap for ideas!"

In a moment the large piece of thin patching-rubber was wrapped round the smooth ebony, and Figgins was enabled to get a firm and secure grasp of it.

He exerted his strength, and Kerr did likewise. But nothing happened. To all intents and purposes the stick was one solid piece.

"Try the other way!" panted Kerr.

They did so, Fatty Wynn looking on interestedly while his chums grew red in the face. Then, suddenly, there was a little crack.

"My hat!" gasped Figgins. "We've busted it! Old Gussy'll be in tears over this."

Kerr removed his hand.

"Busted it!" he said excitedly. "Why, you silly ass, we've done the trick! We've loosened it."

The other two looked at the Scottish junior, and saw that he was unscrewing the top portion of the stick.

"It's a left-handed thread, you see," said Kerr tensely. "That's another trick to put anyone off the scent. We tried to unscrew it in the ordinary way, but we were doing it up tighter instead."

"So there's really a secret cavity in it?" exclaimed Figgins. "My hat, I wonder what's inside?"

"We'll soon see," said Kerr.

The top part of the stick came off in his hand. It had a long, fine thread upon it, and was beautifully made—made so carefully, in fact, that under ordinary circumstances no one could possibly have suspected the stick of being a faked one.

Kerr took it, and tipped it upside-down. He shook it, and then a roll of paper appeared. In a moment it was in Kerr's hand.

"What's that?" asked Figgins.

It proved to be a thin, foolscap envelope, carefully sealed down, and with a few words written upon it in a foreign language. The contents must have been very thin, for the envelope had been rolled up into a small compass.

Kerr looked into the stick. The inside of it was hollow for about nine inches. But the loss of weight occasioned by the drilling out of the wood was compensated for by a thick, heavy steel tube, which also had the advantage of making the stick sound solid. The inside diameter of the steel tube was not more than three-eighths of an inch, but it was quite large enough to accommodate the thin, carefully-rolled envelope.

"There you are!" said Kerr triumphantly. "I knew I was right. Those School House chaps can't be trusted!"

Figgins and Kerr stared at the flimsy envelope.

"And—and—and is that all there is in it?" asked Figgins.

"That's all," said Kerr. "What did you expect—white mice, or a guinea-pig?"

"Ain't—ain't there any diamonds?" asked Fatty Wynn blankly.

"Of course not, you ass! That's all there is," said Kerr, pointing to the coiled-up enclosure.

"Well, I'm blessed!" ejaculated Figgins. "And do you mean to say that that silly ass of a Hicks was willing to give fifteen quid for that?"

"For all we know, it may be worth five thousand quid!" replied Kerr sagely. "Pieces of paper are jolly valuable, sometimes. What this is, or why it should be in the stick, is a puzzle. But I know one thing—I'm not going to shove it back again!"

"Why not?"

"Because we know now that that chap Hicks is really after it, and he might get it. Now, if he does, I think it'll be rather neat if he finds a blank piece of paper inside instead of the genuine article."

Figgins chuckled.

"Jolly good idea," he said. "But we shall have to tell D'Arcy about this, you know."

"Of course," said Kerr. "But not to-day. It's my opinion that Hicks will make a determined effort to pinch the thing to-night, and it would be ripping if we caught him in the act!"

Kerr carefully rolled up a blank piece of paper, and thrust it into the cavity. Then he screwed the plug in again, with a chuckle. It fitted perfectly, going back into place without a sign of the join.

"Now for the knob," he said.

He busied himself with putting in the screws. And as the last one was driven home Kerr suddenly looked up.

Clang—clang!

"My hat, the dinner-bell!" exclaimed Kerr. "Only just in time, you see. Hand me my overcoat!"

He slipped it on, took the stick, and rushed out.

A few minutes later he returned.

"It's all right," he said. "I wasn't spotted."

"Good!"

Kerr picked up the thin foolscap envelope from the table, and put it away in a cricket-bag which reposed at the bottom of the cupboard.

"It'll be as safe as eggs there," he said. "And on second thoughts it'll be best if we tell D'Arcy after prep, to-night. That'll give him a chance to write to his pater, if he wants to, by to-night's post."

So it was agreed. But Kerr knew nothing about Levison's arrangement with Mr. Hicks. And, as it happened, everybody's arrangements were destined to be upset that night, and there was to be huge excitement generally.

CHAPTER 11.

At Six-Thr'y!

MONTY LOWTHER poured himself out another cup of tea. The Terrible Three were sitting round a cosy fire in their study, and had almost finished the meal.

"Yes, we'll come with you, Manners," said Monty Lowther. "There's nothing else to do, so far as I know."

"Yes, we'll come, old man," said Tom Merry.

"Good!" said Manners.

A minute before he had suggested running down to the village after tea, in order to go to the chemist's for some photographic films.

"It's just six o'clock now," went on Manners. "If we buzz off straight away we can easily get back before locking up."

They finished up their tea quickly, donned their overcoats and caps, and left the study. At the top of the stairs they met Levison.

"Going out?" he asked casually.

"Yes," replied Tom Merry. "We're going down to the village."

"We're very sorry," said Monty Lowther regretfully. "But we can't possibly buy any cigarettes for you, Levison. It's against our principles, you know. You'll have to ask Crooke, or Cutts of the Fifth."

Levison scowled. And the Terrible Three went their way, chuckling. Levison watched them pass out into the quad.

"Just five-past six!" he murmured. "That chap's going to be in the lane at half-past. So he won't meet those asses. And they can't possibly get back to the stile by half-past, and see me handing over the stick. It'll be all right."

Levison satisfied himself on that point, for he had no wish to be seen giving the stick to the tall stranger.

At twenty minutes past six Levison slipped out of his study in overcoat and cap, and descended to the entrance-hall. To his chagrin, Lefevre and another Fifth-Former were standing there, talking.

Levison lounged across to the notice-board, and pretended to read several notices. At last, when he was beginning to get rather alarmed, Lefevre glanced towards the open doorway and shivered.

"It's beastly cold here!" he exclaimed. "Let's be moving, that's what I say!"

And the two Fifth-Formers went upstairs. Levison glanced quickly round, and then transferred his attention to the hall-stand. Two hours before he had, for a reason of his own, placed D'Arcy's stick near the back of the pile so that it was only just visible. He had seen D'Arcy come in and satisfy himself with regard to the stick's safety, but the swell of the School House had let it remain in its obscure position.

Levison lifted it from its place, and hastily tucked it under his overcoat. Its absence was not very noticeable.

Whistling carelessly, Levison strolled out into the quad, and then passed through the school gates.

"O. K.!" he murmured. "Not a soul saw me, and I shall be a quid the richer in a few minutes!"

He swung off down Rylcombe Lane, using the stick as it was made to be used. It was so dark that he had no fear of anyone seeing him from a distance.

"I wonder why the chap wants it?" he couldn't help thinking. "As far as I can see, it's only just a common thing. It's not worth more than a quid at most—yet he's willing to give me a quid for letting him handle it for ten minutes."

Levison didn't trouble his head much. He had no scruples about handing the stick over to the stranger, for he did not exactly love Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. The swell of St. Jim's was too upright and manly for Levison's liking.

He walked on quickly, for it was already past the half-hour. He reached the stile, and peered round into the dark, leafless trees. For a second he thought that he was the first to arrive; then a rustle sounded, and two men appeared.

Again the electric torch flashed upon Levison's features.

"Ah, you have come!" exclaimed Mr. Hicks eagerly. "You have brought the stick?"

"Yes," said Levison, trying to see past the light. "But who's with you?"

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A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

NEXT WEDNESDAY—

"LED ASTRAY!"

"A friend. Give me the stick, boy!"
Mr. Hicks held out his hand, and Levison noticed that it shook a little. The junior handed over the stick.
"My quid, please," he said coolly.
"Ah, yes; of course!"
And Mr. Hicks placed a sovereign into Levison's open palm.

"Wait here ten minutes, and I will then give you the stick back again."

Levison nodded.
"Right-ho!" he said. "I'll be here."
The two men hurried down the road for twenty yards or so, and Hicks looked at his watch.
"A quarter to seven," he said quickly. "We have got it, my friend—we have got it at last!"

The other man uttered an oath.
"Yes, but the train?" he said anxiously. "It leaves Rylcombe at seven o'clock—no, at three minutes before seven. We cannot catch it if you persist in opening the stick."
"By thunder, you're right!"
"There is no other train until nine in this wretched place," went on the other man. "We must go by the seven train. Come, we will take the stick with us."

Mr. Hicks didn't hesitate.
"You are right, Wells—we must go now," he said. "We can open the stick in the train."
"Of course."

They hastened off, Levison listening to their receding footsteps in surprise. Mr. Hicks's companion carried a stick too—the one which had nearly been changed for D'Arcy's in the grocer's shop.

The two men walked through the High Street quickly, and the rumble of the approaching train could plainly be heard.

"We must hasten!" panted Wells.
"If we miss the train it will be serious."
The station was not far off now, and they almost ran the rest of the way. As they passed the chemist's shop three juniors came out, and stared after them curiously.
"Those chaps are in a hurry," said Monty Lowther.

"Going to catch the seven train, and there's not much time," said Manners. "They'll— By George!"

He pointed excitedly.
"Look!" he ejaculated. "Look at their sticks!"
Hicks and Wells were passing a shop, and the lights shone on the ebony sticks with their silver knobs. The Terrible Three exchanged glances quickly.

"Great Scott, they're just like D'Arcy's!" said Tom Merry.
"You ass, don't you understand?" exclaimed Manners excitedly. "Don't you remember what Figgins & Co. said? That chap Hicks had a stick very much like Gussy's."

"By Jove, yes!"
"They must have been up to St. Jim's, and collared D'Arcy's stick," went on Manners, "and now they're hurrying for the train so as to get away before the theft's discovered."

"But what the dickens do they want with D'Arcy's—"
"How do we know? But what we do know is that they're jolly determined about it, so determined that they've got it at last!" exclaimed Manners. "What shall we do? Quick!"

Tom Merry considered rapidly.
"Well, it's up to us," he said. "If we can get a good sight of that stick we shall know whether it's Gussy's or not. The only thing to do is to rush for the train and get into the same compartment as those two!"

"My hat!"
"It's the only thing!" said Tom Merry grimly. "Look here, you hurry back to St. Jim's, Lowther, and see if the theft's been discovered. We'll rush after these chaps."

For a second Lowther's face showed disappointment, but his captain's word was law. He nodded.

"Right-ho!" he said. "If it has been stolen, I'll go straight to the Head, and then he can telephone to the police at Wayland."

"Good!"
Monty Lowther rushed off, and Tom Merry and Manners turned their faces towards the station.

"My only aunt!" panted Manners. "Train's in!"

"Come on!" muttered Tom Merry.

And they pressed their elbows to their sides, and raced to the station at top speed.

CHAPTER 12.

Between Rylcombe and Wayland!

ALTHOUGH Tom Merry's mind was in a haze concerning the mystery of the ebony walking-stick, there was quite enough evidence to show that the stick, insignificant as it seemed, was really a thing of great importance.

Had it been otherwise, these two strangers would never

have shown such eager anxiety to get hold of it. Tom Merry's puzzlement was increased by the knowledge, as he thought, that the stick contained no secret cavity.

But he was firmly resolved to rescue it from these men's clutches if he possibly could. It obviously possessed a mysterious value, and if it was valuable to the strangers, it must surely be of value to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy or Lord Eastwood. For Tom Merry suspected that his lordship had sent the stick to D'Arcy without knowing its hidden value, whatever that might be.

When Tom Merry and Manners rushed into the station the train was standing against the platform, and the guard was already blowing his whistle.

"Can't stop for tickets!" gasped Manners.
"No fear!"

Not a soul was on the platform except the guard and a solitary porter. Tom Merry and Manners hurried along the train, looking for the two men.

"Now, then, young gents, look sharp!" called the guard.
Tom Merry stopped abruptly.

"Here we are!" he panted, wrenching open a door. "This one'll do us!"

Hicks started to his feet.
"This is a first-class compartment," he said sharply.

"Can't help that!" gasped Tom Merry. "No time to change now."

"It is reserved!" rapped out Hicks furiously.
But he realised that it was too late for the intruding boys to get out, for the train was already in motion. So Mr. Hicks sat down with a scowl, and glared across at his companion.

Wells, a thick-set, muscular-looking man, muttered several oaths beneath his breath, for they had hoped to have a chance to open the walking-stick.

"Only just in time!" exclaimed Tom Merry, pretending to look at Lowther, but searching, with the corner of his eye, the two men at the other end of the compartment.
Lowther bent forward.

"It's Gussy's right enough!" he said hoarsely. "I'd know it in a hundred, Tommy. The tall chap's got Gussy's. You look!"

"I have looked," muttered Tom Merry. "It's the stick, sure enough. I can tell that by the chasing. And he's just shoved it out of sight behind him. Another proof. He wouldn't have done that if everything had been all right."

Tom Merry's face was serious. He decided, then and there, to demand the stick. Had he known the true worth of the contents—the original contents, that is—he would have hesitated. For he would then have known that the men would stop at nothing short of murder to gain their ends.

He stood up.
"You've got a walking-stick there!" he said bluntly, addressing Hicks. "It belongs to a chap named D'Arcy, of St. Jim's, and we know that you've stolen it. We spotted you in the street."

"That's right," said Manners excitedly, and reaching up for the communication-cord. "If you don't hand it over immediately, I'll stop the train!"

Mr. Hicks uttered a furious oath.

"What is all this nonsense?" he shouted. "I know nothing of any stick. The one I have here is my own."

"It's a lie!"
"And if you don't hand it over," roared Manners, "I'll pull the cord!"

Hicks and Wells exchanged alarmed, savage glances. They had sense enough to realise that attempts at bluster would be futile. Tom Merry's very determined manner was enough to tell them that.

"These boys are dangerous, Wells!" hissed Hicks. "We must silence them—now!"

"By thunder, yes!" muttered Wells.

The two men advanced across the compartment.

"Stand back!" shouted Tom Merry. "Pull the cord, Manners—pull it!"

"Yes, rather!" panted Manners.

He laid his hand upon the cord, but Wells was just a shade too quick for him. The man literally flung himself across the compartment, and dragged Manners downwards.

"Great Scott!" gasped Manners.

At the same moment Hicks grasped Tom Merry. The man had already proved that he was desperate, and he lunged out at Tom Merry viciously. The junior caught the blow on the chest, and fell backwards on to the cushions. Then, before he could recover himself, Hicks was upon him.

Tom Merry and Manners struggled frantically and pluckily. But, determined as they were, they were only juniors, and a fight with two grown-up, muscular men was absolutely hopeless. Tom Merry had had no idea that matters would go to these lengths when he had demanded the stick.

"You have some cord, Wells?" gasped Hicks. "Tie that boy up, and then come and help me."

Wells produced some stout cord from his pocket, and in spite of the junior's struggles, they were rapidly, but roughly tied. Finally, their handkerchiefs were bound across their mouths.

"They'll do!" panted Hicks. "By thunder, I never dreamed that we should be followed like this! Confound them for their interference!"

He glared furiously at Tom Merry and Manners. The juniors could move about a good deal, for they were only very hurriedly bound. But they had good sense enough to lie quiet and still, for struggling would only have ended in painful results.

"The stick, Wells!" said Hicks huskily. "We must take out the contents immediately—before the train reaches the next station. Hang them!"

"Yes, it's the only thing!" snarled Wells. "It will be dangerous to take the stick with us. Once we have the paper we're all right!"

Tom Merry and Manners listened in wonder, and looked on with surprised eyes. Their hearts were beating furiously, and they were aching all over from their rough handling.

Hicks, knowing that Wayland was now very near, spent no time in careful handling. He placed the silver knob of D'Arcy's famous stick beneath his boot and wrenched it fiercely. The soft little silver screws snapped under the strain, and the knob came off.

"Now, Wells, help me!"

The two men grasped the stick, very much as Figgins & Co. had done. But they turned it the correct way at the first essay, and the plug unscrewed. In a second Hicks was hastily removing it.

Tom Merry and Manners exchanged a look of amazement, for they had had no suspicion of the secret cavity.

Lights began to flash past the windows, and the brakes of the train were suddenly applied.

"Wayland!"

CHAPTER 13.

The Return to St. Jim's.

HICKS looked out of the window hastily. "We're there!" he ejaculated. "Only just in time. We shall do it, Wells—we shall do it!"

The plug came out, and he flung it to the floor. A gleam of triumph came into his eyes as he saw the rolled-up paper inside.

"Ah, good!" he exclaimed.

He jerked it out, and, without looking at it, stuffed it into his pocket, and threw the stick on to the cushions.

"At last!" he murmured triumphantly. "At last!"

Perhaps Mr. Hicks would not have been so exultant had he known that the paper in his pocket was merely the sheet of an exercise book! The real packet was safe in Figgins's study in the New House.

"Are you ready?" asked Wells.

"Yes!"

"Then we must jump for it! There is no danger, for the train is running dead slow."

The door swung open, and Wells leapt out, followed a moment later by Hicks. They both landed squarely on their feet, and were unhurt. Then they scrambled hurriedly away into the darkness.

Tom Merry and Manners wore looks of utter consternation. Before their eyes they had seen the stick opened, and they now knew its secret.

With an effort Tom Merry managed to drag his gag off.

"Well," he gasped, "this about takes the cake!"

Manners gurgled. It was the only thing he could do. Then, before Tom Merry could say anything further, the train pulled up with a jerk in Wayland Station.

They heard shouts on the platform.

"There's a door open there," called the stationmaster. "It was open as the train came in!"

The guard hurried forward, as well as a few passengers. Then, as they looked into the compartment, a cry arose, which rapidly spread into an excited hubbub.

"Good heavens!" shouted the guard. "What's this?"

He sprang into the compartment.

"I say, get these rotten cords off!" said Tom Merry breathlessly.

"Are you hurt?" asked the guard, in amazement. "What is it—robbery?"

"Yes; but we're both all right," said Tom Merry, feeling exceedingly uncomfortable under the gaze of the staring throng. "Untie these cords, there's a good chap!"

The stationmaster bustled up, and the crowd parted for him to pass through. He looked into the compartment and uttered a sharp exclamation.

"Upon my soul!" he ejaculated. "What has happened? Two boys—St. Jim's boys, too! This is extraordinary!"

Tom Merry and Manners were upon their feet now, and they smoothed their ruffled clothes, and put their collars and ties straight.

"It's all right, sir," said Tom Merry. "We'll explain in your office. We don't want to keep the train waiting—and, besides, we're causing a commotion!"

"Yes; let's get out!" said Manners, a little dazedly. He had not got over his astonishment yet.

Tom Merry picked up the ebony stick, the plug, and the silver knob. The latter was uninjured except for a few scratches. But the screws were all broken.

"Come on!" he said.

The captain of the Shell was greatly amazed at the events of the last half-hour, but he remained perfectly calm. Manners, too, strove to remain cool.

The crowd of people on the platform stared at the juniors as though they were some new variety of zoology. And Manners and Tom Merry didn't feel exactly comfortable.

"Blessed if I can see anything to make a fuss about!" growled Manners. "We're all right. There hasn't been a gory murder. Let's get into the giddy office."

"We will go there at once!" said the stationmaster.

"But we're not going to stay there long," exclaimed Tom Merry. "When's the next train to Rylcombe, sir?"

"In fifteen minutes' time!"

"Good! That'll just do us!"

As the two juniors were entering the stationmaster's office, followed by the stares of the crowd, a police-sergeant walked briskly on to the platform.

He advanced to the office.

"There are two men on this train——" he began.

"Do you mean the two men from Rylcombe?" put in Manners.

"Yes," said the sergeant. "The headmaster of St. Jim's School 'phoned to the inspector five minutes ago."

Tom Merry shook his head.

"Too late!" he said. "The bounders have escaped."

"Escaped!"

"Yes," said Tom Merry, looking at the stationmaster and sergeant as they entered the office, and the door was closed.

Manners and I rushed after the train, knowing the men had got D'Arcy's stick, and got into the same compartment."

"So you are the two boys, eh?"

"Well, we look like it, don't we?" said Manners. "We demanded the stick, and I'm blessed if the rotters didn't pile on us and nearly spifficate us!"

"They bound us up, and gagged us," added Tom Merry.

"Then they took the knob of the stick off and opened a secret cavity. There was a thin roll of paper inside, and one of 'em jammed it into his pocket just before the train entered Wayland. Then the pair of 'em opened the door and jumped out."

"Bless my soul!" ejaculated the sergeant blankly.

"So you'd better buzz off!" said Manners. "They'll be miles away by this time—and if you want my opinion, I reckon you won't catch the rotters!"

The stationmaster looked bewildered.

"I do not understand, my boys," he said. "Did these men steal a walking-stick?"

"Yes."

"Dear me!"

"We thought it was just an ordinary stick at first," went on Tom Merry. "But these chaps made several attempts to get the stick, and we knew that there was something jolly queer about it."

And the captain of the Shell exposed the stick to view, showing the stationmaster and the sergeant the empty cavity.

"What the giddy paper was I don't know," said Tom Merry. "But it must be something important. Anyhow, the scoundrels have got it."

"It's rotten!" said Manners.

The sergeant jotted notes down in his pocket-book, and looked very wise. He questioned the juniors closely, but they could tell him no more than they had already related.

"You don't know who the men were?"

"Haven't the faintest suspicion," replied Tom Merry. "One of 'em called himself Mr. Hicks—the tall one—but I forget the other fellow's name."

"Wells," said Manners. "I heard it distinctly."

"Oh, yes, Wells," agreed Tom. "That's right! I've seen Hicks several times in Rylcombe, but he is a stranger. There's no doubt that the pair were the chaps who attacked D'Arcy in the lane the other night—and one of 'em tried to get into the school, too!"

"Dear me!" exclaimed the stationmaster.

"It's more than I can make out!" said the sergeant.

"Then we're all in the same boat," said Tom Merry.

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"We're all puzzled. My hat," he added, as a rumble sounded, "is that the Rylcombe train?"

"Yes," said the stationmaster.

"Then we're off! We've told you all we know, so there's no object in staying here. We want to get back to St. Jim's."

"How about our tickets?" asked Manners. "We didn't take any at Rylcombe, and we came first-class?"

"Don't worry about that, young gentlemen," replied the stationmaster. "It's not as if you wanted to come here. I think you are to be highly commended for your conduct, and there's no need to talk about such things as fares."

The stationmaster led the way out of the office, and in a few minutes Tom Merry and Manners were in the train for Rylcombe.

"Well, we're having a birthday, and no giddy mistake!" said Manners, as the train started. "What do you make of it, Tommy?"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"I'm blessed if I know what to make of it!" he replied thoughtfully. "Fancy this secret cavity being in the stick all the time, and we didn't find it!"

"Who the dickens would have thought of the blessed thing being hollow?" said Manners. "And, anyhow, there was only a piece of paper in it! Great Scott! All this fuss over a piece of silly paper!"

"It's a mystery!" said Tom Merry. "I wonder if Lord Eastwood knows of this secret cavity? Surely he wouldn't have sent the stick to Gussy if he'd known that there'd be all these attempts to steal it?"

"Oh, I don't know!" said Tom. "I give it up. It's no good making all sorts of guesses!"

And they relapsed into silence until the train reached Rylcombe. They half expected to find Lowther and a crowd of other juniors waiting for them on the platform. But they were disappointed.

"It's past locking-up, you know," said Manners. "Besides, the Head might have forbidden anybody to come out, for fear of meeting unknown ruffians in the lane!"

They hurried up to St. Jim's at the double, and when they arrived they found that the gates were closed. A peal at the bell brought Taggles, the school porter.

"Ho, it's you, young gents!" exclaimed Taggles. "I shall 'ave to report ye, y'know!"

"Oh, rats, Taggy! The Head knows we're out!" said Tom Merry.

Taggles swung the gate open.

"Nice goings hon!" he muttered.

"There's been a lot of things going hon to-night, Taggy!" said Tom Merry. "And some of them haven't been very nice, either!"

The two juniors hastened across the quad, and a shout greeted them.

"Here they are!"

"Bai Jove! Yaas!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy hurried forward.

"Have you got it, deah boys?" he asked anxiously. "Did you wescue it f'rom the fwightful wottahs?"

"I suppose you mean the stick?" said Tom Merry. "Yes, Gussy, we've got it, but it's somewhat battered!"

"Battahed! Gweat Scott!"

D'Arcy took the stick in some alarm. Tom Merry had screwed the plug in again, and slipped the knob on, but being unscrewed it was loose and cockley.

"Bai Jove, it's uttahly wuined!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus. "The boundahs! The fwightful, wascally boundahs!"

An excited crowd gathered round Tom Merry and Manners in the entrance-hall. It was quite evident that the juniors had heard nothing of the adventure in the train, for the Head was not likely to announce the news broadcast, even supposing he had been informed by 'phone, which was doubtful. Monty Lowther pushed forward.

"It's a mystery," he said. "When I got here I found that the stick had vanished from the stand, but nobody had seen it go, and nobody had seen any strangers about the place."

Levison, on the outskirts of the crowd, chuckled to himself. For a time he had been somewhat alarmed, but now he knew that it would never be known that his was the hand that had taken the stick.

"What happened, you chaps?" went on Lowther eagerly.

"Was there a struggle?"

"I should wathah imagine there was!" said Arthur Augustus. "Somebody has w'enched this silvah knob how-wibly!"

Tom Merry and Manners, in the centre of the great crowd of School House juniors, related their adventures. At last they had finished, and a chorus of amazed ejaculations arose.

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FERRERS LOCKE, DETECTIVE,

is the principal character in one of the complete stories contained in

CHUCKLES, 1st d.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus blankly. "I weally do not know what to say, deah boys!"

"And there was a secret cavity in the stick all the time!"

"And we didn't find it!"

"My hat!"

"What was the paper?"

"Was there anything beside the paper?"

"Weren't there any diamonds?"

Tom Merry put his fingers to his ears.

"Shut up!" he roared. "How the dickens can I answer all those questions? There was nothing in the stick but a thin piece of paper, and the men escaped with it. That's all I know!"

"But what was the paper?" asked Blake. "And why were these men after it?"

Tom Merry snorted.

"Do you think I'm a giddy oracle?" he exclaimed exasperatedly. "Do you think I can know things I've never heard of?"

"Make way, you chaps," said Manners; "we're going to the Head. And you'd better come, too, Gussy!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"But—but—"

"How—"

"Where—"

"Oh, come on!" shouted Tom Merry. "It's no good stopping here all the evening. I tell you that we don't know any more than we've told you, so what's the good of asking silly questions?"

And the Terrible Three and D'Arcy pushed through the excited crowd and made their way to the Head's study. Dr. Holmes had been expecting them, for the brief facts had been telephoned through to him by the police-sergeant at Wayland.

He looked at the juniors anxiously.

"I trust you are not hurt, my boys?"

"Oh, we're all right, sir!" said Tom Merry. "Just one or two bruises, that's all!"

"And you had a struggle with these men in the train?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Dear me!" ejaculated the Head. "Dear me!"

He adjusted his spectacles, and sat back in his chair.

"Tell me all about it, my boys," he said kindly.

And for the third time Manners and Tom Merry related their adventure. When they had finished Dr. Holmes sat for some moments without speaking.

"It is very, very curious!" he said at last. "I suppose, D'Arcy, you had no idea of the startling nature of this walking-stick?"

"I had no suspish, at first, sir," replied D'Arcy. "But when Mr. Hicks offahed me fifteen soveveigns for it, and when these two wuffians took it f'rom me in the lane, I began to suspect that theah was somethin' wadically wong. The New House wottahs—I mean Figgins & Co., sir, had an expwience, too. Mr. Hicks twied to steal the stick while they were buyin' gwub at the groc'ahs!"

"Dear me!" said the Head. "And Figgins was so engaged with the grub—ahem!—I should say provisions, that they did not notice the man's tactics?"

"Kerr did, sir!" replied D'Arcy. "Kerr's a feahfully clevah chap, you know. Kerr spotted the boundah's game, and wescued the stick just in time!"

"On the face of it," said the Head, "all this appears to be singularly paltry. No man on earth would go to such extremes in order to gain possession of a walking-stick. But, as we now know, they were really after the paper. I am convinced, D'Arcy, that your father must know something about it. It is evident that the paper is of great importance, and for all we know to the contrary, it may be vital. I shall telegraph to Lord Eastwood at once, D'Arcy, and briefly inform him of the facts!"

"A wippin' ideah, sir!"

"If your father does know something of the paper he will immediately set in motion a determined search for it. More than that we cannot do, D'Arcy. But I expect we shall hear from Lord Eastwood in the morning."

After a few more words, complimenting Tom Merry and Manners on their plucky attempt to regain possession of the stick, the Head dismissed the juniors.

Then he drafted out a short telegram and despatched it at once.

CHAPTER 14.

Mysterious Behaviour of Figgins & Co.

THAT night there was nothing else discussed in the School House except D'Arcy's celebrated walking-stick, and the adventure of Tom Merry and Manners.

Even the seniors took an interest in it, and groups of

Fifth and Sixth Formers were to be seen discussing the question.

In the junior common-rooms the excitement was great, and everyone had a theory of his own. Bernard Glyn stated it was his opinion that the paper was the secret plans of a wonderful invention.

Blake was firmly convinced that it was a missing will, while Monty Lowther was just as certain that it was the chart of a hidden treasure.

These were even the mildest of the conjectures, but all the talking in the world did not reveal the truth.

The very quaintness of the affair excited interest. Mr. Hicks became a famous character among the juniors. Nearly every boy claimed to have seen him, and a great many of them calmly asserted that they had suspected Mr. Hicks of being a villain all along!

Herries's one regret was that he had not confronted Mr. Hicks with his bulldog Towser; for Herries was of the firm opinion that the beast would have shown up the man's character instantly.

Herries grew enthusiastic, and in his excitement even went so far as to suggest a cycle ride over to Wayland with Towser, in order to pick up the tracks of the scoundrels!

But the offer was politely but firmly declined. Herries had absolute confidence in the powers of his bulldog—which was perhaps as well, for nobody else had.

The talk went on in the respective dormitories long after lights out, but at last Nature asserted itself, and the School House slept.

So far, the New House juniors had not heard of the affair, for no New House fellows had been across. Therefore, in the morning, the news came as a big surprise to the School House juniors' rivals.

Long before the breakfast-bell rang groups collected in the quad, the fellows in the know eagerly telling the New House juniors of the adventures of the night before.

Figgins and Kerr were amusing themselves with a football close by the gym, when Fatty Wynn came rushing up at express speed.

"My hat! What's up with Fatty?" said Figgins.

"Training for a marathon, perhaps," chuckled Kerr.

Fatty Wynn dashed up, and literally fell into the arms of his chums. Then he uttered a strange gurgle.

"What's up with you, ass?" demanded Figgins.

Fatty Wynn was panting hard, but he was grinning all over his face. Then he let out a yell. It was laughter, but in Fatty Wynn's condition it sounded very different.

Figgins looked alarmed.

"My only topper!" he ejaculated. "He's ill!"

Gurgle, gurgle! from Fatty Wynn.

"What's up with you?" roared Kerr.

Gurgle!

Fatty Wynn let out a huge shout, and dropped heavily into the arms of Figgins and Kerr.

"Great Scott, he's fainted!" gasped Figgins.

"I know what it is," said Kerr quickly. "The giddy porpoise has been stuffing himself up to the neck! He's eaten too much!"

"Yes, that's it," ejaculated Figgins. "Oh, my hat! Talk about elephants! Fatty weighs a ton!"

Fatty Wynn still lay in Figgins's arms, for Kerr had dashed away. The plump junior's face was red with laughter, but Figgins thought quite the opposite.

"Buck up, Fatty!" he panted. "We'll fetch a doctor for you!"

"Oh, my hat!" gurgled Fatty Wynn indistinctly.

Kerr hurried up.

"This'll set him on his feet!" he exclaimed.

Figgins nodded, for Kerr carried a tin full of water from Taggles' butt was not overclean.

Swish!

Fatty Wynn let out a mighty bellow.

"Ow! Yow!" he roared. "Oooooch!"

"That's done the trick!" said Figgins thankfully.

Fatty Wynn danced up and down, his face and hair streaming with water.

"You silly, burbling fathead!" he howled. "What the dickens did you do that for? Ow! I'm soaked!"

"It's all right, Fatty. We were only bringing you to."

"Bringing me to!" howled Wynn. "I didn't want to be brought to, you frabjous chumps! I was all right!"

"Why, you ass, you were half dead!" said Kerr.

"Of course!" agreed Figgins. "You'd been gorging yourself."

"I haven't eaten a thing since last night!" roared the Falstaff of the New House. "I was laughing!"

"Laughing!"

"Yes, you silly cuckoos!"

Figgins and Kerr went off into a roar.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And although Fatty Wynn was considerably wet, he suddenly regained his good-humour, and joined in the laugh.

"Oh, it's too rich!" he gurgled. "Wait till you chaps hear!"

"He's going off again!" exclaimed Figgins, in alarm.

Fatty Wynn started back.

"I'm not!" he roared. "Don't you chuck any more of that rotten water over me, Kerr."

"All right!" grinned Kerr.

"Haven't you heard the news?" went on Wynn. "Haven't you heard what happened last night?"

"No."

"Why," cackled Fatty Wynn, "that chap Hicks and another man pinched Gussy's stick last night!"

And he told his chums of the fight in the train.

"It's killing!" he finished up, with another explosion.

"Those two chaps undid the stick, took out the paper, and didn't know it was the wrong 'un! My only Aunt Mary Jane! I'd have given a fiver to see their faces when they found it was a piece of blank paper!"

Figgins and Kerr howled.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"They had a fearful tussle with Tom Merry and Manners to get a piece of exercise paper!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And they thought they'd got the real thing!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, what a surprise!" gasped Figgins. "What a giddy surprise!"

Figgins & Co. held one another up, and nearly went into hysterics. Their shouts of laughter echoed all over the quad.

"We won't say anything about it till after breakfast," said Figgins, wiping his eyes. "Then we'll hand Gussy the genuine packet."

Figgins & Co. had intended to deliver it up the night before, but, owing to an exceedingly unfortunate occurrence—they had been caught redhanded in a jape by Mr. Ratcliff—they had been detained from prep, until supper-time busily writing lines.

Their yells of mirth were distinctly loud, and the juniors from all quarters of the quad, hurried up to join in the fun.

"What's the lark?" asked Lumley-Lumley.

"Who's the joke against?" inquired Redfern, of the New House.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What's the matter with you, you chumps?" demanded Lawrence.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Can't you do anything but cackle?" said Bernard Glyn crossly. "Look here, Figgins, if you don't stop that horrible noise, we'll duck you in the fountain!"

"That's it!" exclaimed Mellish delightedly. "Duck 'em!"

Figgins & Co. subsided with wonderful alacrity.

"No larks!" panted the long-legged junior.

"Well, tell us what you're cackling at."

"No time now," said Kerr. "You'll know after breakfast. We were only smiling."

"That's all!" chuckled Figgins. "And we're going to smile again, too."

And the New House trio strolled off, arm-in-arm, leaving a crowd of fellows looking after them in wonder.

"Yes, they're smiling right enough," said Redfern. "Just listen to 'em!"

For Figgins & Co.'s smiles were so loud that they echoed all through the quad:

"Ha, ha, ha!"

CHAPTER 15.

Lord Eastwood Explains,

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY lounged down the School House steps immediately after breakfast, accompanied by Blake and Digby.

"The governah will be a little mystified at the Head's wiah, I believe," he said. "Dr. Holmes merely told him that the stick contained a papah, and asked for instructions."

"Didn't he say the paper was stolen?" asked Blake.

"No, deah boy! There was no necessity for that. If the governah knows anythin' about the papah, he will vew probably wun down some time to-day. If he doesn't know anythin' about it, he will simply w'ite."

"What's that noise?" said Digby suddenly.

"Motor-car," replied Blake shortly. "Sounds as if it's coming here, too!"

The chums stared towards the gates, and a moment later the big limousine belonging to Lord Eastwood turned into the quad.

D'Arcy started forward.

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"Bai Jove! The govannah's Daimlah!"

"My hat! So it is!" said Blake.

"Gussy's pater!"

The Daimler drew up against the Head's house, and D'Arcy, Blake, and Digby rushed across the quad.

Lord Eastwood stepped out of the car, and the juniors noticed that he wore a very worried expression. Dark lines round his eyes told their tale of a sleepless night.

"Hallo, dad!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "Jollay glad to see you! You are lookin' feahfully upset!"

Lord Eastwood smiled a little.

"Am I, Arthur?" he said quietly. "It is not surprising, because I am very worried—very worried indeed." He glanced at Blake and Digby. "Ah, boys! How are you?"

The earl merely gave the juniors a look, then he turned to his son: Several other fellows had come up, and they could see that Lord Eastwood was thinking of something very different to casual greetings.

"I have come about the stick, Arthur," he said. "Please come up to the Head immediately with me. The matter is very urgent—very vital."

Arthur Augustus looked concerned.

"Theah you are, deah boys!" he said, turning to Blake and Dig. "I knew that papah was valuable." He turned to his father. "I think I had bettah wun an' fetch Tom Mewwy and Mannahs," he added.

"But why?" asked the earl.

"They were the chief actahs in the dwamah, dad," replied D'Arcy. "Pway wing the Head's bell. I will wun like anythin', an' be back by the time you are in the Head's studay."

And D'Arcy hurried off. He met the Terrible Three in the Shell passage.

"You're in a bit of a hurry, Gussy," said Monty Lowther.

"What's the excitement?"

"The govannah's heah!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus quickly. "You're wanted in the Head's studay," he added to Tom Merry and Manners.

"Right-ho, Gussy!"

"We'll come now."

"How about me?" demanded Lowther. "I'm in this bizney, don't forget, and I'm blessed if I'm going to be left out of it! I'm coming, too!"

"Vewy good, deah boy! But come!"

The Terrible Three and D'Arcy arrived at the Head's study just after Lord Eastwood had shaken hands with Dr. Holmes.

"Heah we are, dad!" announced D'Arcy.

"Dear me!" said the Head. "I did not tell you to rush in here, D'Arcy!"

"I asked him to come," put in Lord Eastwood quickly.

"Now, Dr. Holmes, your wire was very short, and I am in a fever of anxiety to learn the truth. Please tell me about the stick."

The Head picked the article up from the table.

"It is here," he said. "It was stolen last night—"

"Stolen!" exclaimed Lord Eastwood, with a start.

"Yes; and a paper it contained was taken."

"The paper was taken—stolen, do you mean?" asked the earl quickly, and with drawn features.

"Yes," said the Head.

"Good heavens!"

Lord Eastwood sat back in his chair and gazed before him blankly. Arthur Augustus and the Terrible Three felt somewhat uncomfortable, and D'Arcy sprang forward.

"What's the mattah, dad?" he asked concernedly.

"The paper is stolen, Arthur!" exclaimed the earl hoarsely.

"Well, what of it?" asked D'Arcy. "Was it vewy valuable?"

Lord Eastwood gave a short and mirthless laugh.

"Valuable!" he repeated. "It was absolutely vital! Its loss will mean a revolution!"

"Upon my soul!" gasped the Head, staring. "Pray explain, your lordship! I am really in a most unfortunate state of mystification."

Lord Eastwood recovered himself somewhat.

"I will tell you the history of the stick," he said. "It is a most unfortunate affair, but I shall always have the knowledge that the loss was through no fault of my own."

He paused for a moment to think, then proceeded.

"There is no need to mention names," he went on. "You will understand me well enough without my going to any great length. A very important, very urgent paper, relating to the most vital secrets of a small European State, was to be entrusted in my care. All I had to do was to hand it over to one of our most eminent statesmen, who is now on his way to England from America. I undertook to hand it to him when he arrived to-morrow."

"Pray proceed," said the Head.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 314.

"The document was to be sent to me by the Premier of the State in question several days ago, and I was expecting it hourly. Then this stick arrived at my private residence by parcel post. There was not a single word in it to say who it had come from, and I, thinking it would be a nice little present for my son, sent it to him, having no suspicion of its true value."

"I see," murmured the Head—"I see."

"I forgot all about the matter in a few hours, and was worried at the non-arrival of the document. Then I learned from the Premier that it had been sent, and should have arrived. I replied immediately by telegraph that I had not received it, and had no knowledge of it."

"This had the effect of bringing the Premier over to England in person. He came incognito, and nobody but I knew that he was in the country," proceeded Lord Eastwood. "He arrived at my house last night, and informed me of the true facts. He told me that several spies were on the look-out for the document, and that, to ensure its safe transit, he had had a stick specially constructed to accommodate it. He had then entrusted it to one of his most faithful emissaries, who travelled as a tourist and succeeded in getting into England without getting attacked or suspected by the spies."

"Upon his arrival in England he immediately posted the parcel to my private address, being under the impression that I was aware of its secret. Unfortunately, I was not. The man took the next boat back to his own country, and when he arrived he informed the Premier of his movements. The Premier, knowing that I was not informed of the secret of the stick, and having received my message that the document had not arrived, immediately realised that a blunder had occurred—a very innocent blunder, it is true, but one which has led to dire consequences."

"Upon my soul!" ejaculated the Head.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus, light dawning upon him. He and the Terrible Three listened eagerly for Lord Eastwood to proceed.

"By some means, known only to themselves," continued the earl, "the spies learned the secret of the stick when it was too late—when it had been delivered. Then, to the bounded joy, they found that I had sent it to my son Arthur unopened. How they got the information I do not know, but one of my servants was evidently in their pay."

"The result was inevitable. The spies immediately informed their British confreres, and sent two men down to Rylcombe, for foreigners would have caused unwelcome comment. They were determined to gain possession of the document, by fair means or foul."

Lord Eastwood mopped his brow.

"And now," he concluded, "I have learned the worst. The paper has been stolen! They have got it after all!"

Exactly at that moment, Figgins & Co., still chuckling merrily, presented themselves at the School House and inquired for D'Arcy, Kerr having the curled-up packet in his pocket.

The trio were informed that D'Arcy was with the Head and Lord Eastwood.

And Figgins & Co. hurried to the Head's study. They tapped on the door and walked in.

The Head looked at Figgins & Co. severely.

"How dare you come here now, boys?" he said sternly.

"I cannot have you running in and out—"

"Please excuse us, sir," said Figgins. "We've got something important to say—something in connection with D'Arcy's stick."

"Upon my word!" exclaimed the Head in surprise.

Lord Eastwood started.

"What is it?" he asked quickly. "Be quick and tell me what you know."

"It's this way, sir," said Kerr eagerly. "A mystery always interests me, and I was jolly curious about that ebony stick. It struck me that there was some secret about the thing, so yesterday I borrowed it, and made an examination of it."

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated D'Arcy.

"Go on," said Lord Eastwood hoarsely—"go on!"

"Well, sir, there's not much to say," continued Kerr. "After a bit of trouble I found there was a secret cavity in the stick, and in the cavity was a coil of paper—an envelope."

"Did you leave it there?" asked the earl eagerly.

"Well, you see, sir," said Kerr, "we knew there were some rotters after the stick, so I thought it would be as well to give them a bit of a surprise, because it was obvious they were after the paper. So I took it out, and shoved a sheet of exercise paper in its place. Here's the original envelope, sir."

And Kerr handed over the document with a little dramatic flourish.

Lord Eastwood took it from Kerr's hand with a gasp of thankfulness, his eyes gleaming gladly. A second's exami-

nation assured him that it was the genuine article. Dr. Holmes and the other juniors were gazing at Kerr in amazement.

"Thank Heaven!" ejaculated Lord Eastwood fervently. "My boy, I owe you a debt that I can never repay."

"Oh, rot, sir!" said Kerr modestly. "I didn't do anything to speak of."

"You have done more than you can possibly realise, my boy!" exclaimed D'Arcy's father, all his worries vanished, and with a face that was creased in smiles. "You, a mere boy, have foiled some of the cleverest spies in Europe!"

Kerr stared.

"Well, if I did, sir," he said, "I did it without knowing it. But I'm jolly glad if I've been of service to you. I was going to give the paper to D'Arcy last night, but old Fatty—ahem! I mean Mr. Ratcliff, sir—detained me."

"And so you have sprung the surprise upon us like a bomb?" said Lord Eastwood genially. "Well, perhaps it is the best, for now I feel very, very relieved. Dr. Holmes, you have an extremely clever boy in Master Kerr."

"Quite so," agreed the Head heartily. And Figgins looked across at the Terrible Three, and grinned all over his face.

"I've always said it, and I'll say it again," he exclaimed in an audible whisper, "Kerr's as clever as the lot of us put together. He's an awfully deep 'un."

There was a general laugh.

"Yaas, wathah!" agreed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "We examined the stick, you know, but we didn't find anything. Howevah did you manage to find the seewet cavity, Kerr, deah boy?"

"It was there," said Kerr simply, "so I found it."

Lord Eastwood, in a merry mood, stayed at St. Jim's until the morning was well advanced, and D'Arcy and the others were allowed to accompany him for a ride in the car.

And when the earl took his departure, chuckling heartily when he thought of the spies' defeat, he shook hands with Kerr first.

"I can never thank you, my boy," he said quietly, "but I can at least leave you a little something to remember me by. It is for you and your chums."

And when Kerr looked into his palm he saw that it contained a crisp tenner. Fatty Wynn saw it, too, and his mouth watered.

"Ripping!" he murmured. "We'll have a terrific feed with that, you chaps!"

"Rather!" said Kerr heartily.

And they learned that Lord Eastwood, in his generosity, had also tipped Arthur Augustus a tenner, and the Terrible Three a tenner. So the three famous rival studies of St. Jim's were in great funds.

The day was one which was long remembered, for it ended gloriously in a terrific feed in Tom Merry's study—Blake & Co. and Figgins & Co. were the guests of the occasion, and Fatty Wynn distinguished himself as he had never done before.

And when the guests rose to depart, merry and well-satisfied, they did so with the knowledge that they would return the compliment in their turn.

For, as Fatty Wynn remarked, there could be no better way of spending money than buying grub with it; and there were to be three great feasts in honour of Lord Eastwood's visit.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy still had possession of the ebony stick, and he had the knob fitted again and finely polished.

There was only one point which still remained a mystery, but it was so trivial that nobody troubled their heads about it—how the stick had been stolen from the hall-stand?

Levison was the only one who knew that, and he took good care that he kept his secret to himself. The matter was over and done with, and the black sheep of the Fourth considered that he had got very well out of a decidedly difficult position.

Everyone was satisfied, so all was right. But the matter was uppermost in the juniors' minds for several days, and a group in the quad, or common-room were almost always discussing the same topic. Then the interest waned, and very little was heard of the ebony walking-stick.

They mystery surrounding it had vanished, and it was now, in the words of Monty Lowther, "Just a silly old common, or garden, walking-stick!"

But its advent to St. Jim's had brought the juniors adventures and excitement, and, what was vastly more important from Fatty Wynn's point of view—three great and glorious feeds!

THE END.

(Another grand, long, complete tale of Tom Merry & Co. next Wednesday, entitled "LED ASTRAY!" by Martin Clifford. Please order your GEM Library in advance. Price One Penny.)

NEXT
WEDNESDAY—

"LED ASTRAY!"

A NEW FREE CORRESPONDENCE EXCHANGE.

The only names and addresses which can be printed in these columns are those of readers living in any of our Colonies who desire Correspondents in Great Britain and Ireland.

Colonists sending in their names and addresses for insertion in the columns of this popular story-book must state what kind of correspondent is required—boy or girl; English, Scotch, Welsh, or Irish.

Would-be correspondents must send with each notice two coupons, one taken from "The Gem," and one from the same week's issue of its companion paper, "The Magnet" Library. Coupons will always be found on page 2 of both papers, and requests for correspondents not containing these two coupons will be absolutely disregarded.

Readers wishing to reply to advertisements appearing in this column must write to the advertisers direct. No correspondence with advertisers can be undertaken through the medium of this office.

All advertisements for insertion in this Free Exchange should be addressed: "The Editor, 'The Gem' Library, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C."

D. H. Cairns, Day Dawn, West Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader in Scotland, age 16-17.

A. H. Green, Deakin Street, Beulah, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with readers in the British Isles interested in stamps.

C. H. Read, 127, Havannah Street, Bathurst, New South Wales, Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader living in England, Scotland, or Canada, age 18-19.

Miss A. Graydon, care of Mrs. Stringer, 183, Johnson Street, Fitzroy, Melbourne, Australia, wishes to correspond with a boy reader living in England, age 15.

A. R. Worrell, Oxford Terrace, Unley, South Australia, wishes to correspond with readers, age 14-16.

A. Stewart, "Ormidale," Wilmot, Tasmania, Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader, age 18-20, living in Scotland.

E. Buchanan, care of Creers, Firebrace Street, Horsham, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with girl readers, age 15-16.

W. J. Smith, care of W. Whymark, 20, Stafford Street, Stanmore, New South Wales, Australia, wishes to correspond with an English girl reader, age 16-19.

C. Marsden, care of F. Hoppert, Electrical Engineer, Box 3503, Johannesburg, South Africa, wishes to correspond with an English or Scotch girl reader, age 18-20.

F. Cairns, Chakas Kraal, Zululand, South Africa, wishes to correspond with girl readers living in England, age 16-17.

J. R. Rowley, Perdue, Saskatchewan, Canada, wishes to correspond with a girl reader living in England, age 17-18.

W. Valentine, Junction Terrace, off Ipswich Road, St. Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader, age 18-20.

L. V. Dumbleton, care of R. L. Christie, Engineering Works, Gore, New Zealand, wishes to correspond with readers in England, age 15-16.

The Misses P. Lawson and D. Hamilton, P.O., Darlington, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, wish to correspond with college boys, living in the British Isles, interested in sports and reading, age about 16.

D. Chenik, 64, Sivewright Street, Krugersdorp, South Africa, wishes to correspond with girl readers, age 14-17.

J. Siegruhn, 7, Lombard Street, Bloemfontein, O.F.S., South Africa, wishes to correspond with readers in the British Empire, age 14-16.

S. Walker, P.O. Box 191, Germiston, Transvaal, South Africa, wishes to correspond with a girl reader living in England, age 17-18.

J. Jones, G.P.O., Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader in England, age 14-15.

The Editor specially requests Colonial Readers to kindly bring the Free Correspondence Exchange to the notice of their friends.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 314.

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

SECRET SERVICE!



The Opening Chapters of a Grand New Serial Story. By AGENT "No. 55."

NOTE!

The author has, for obvious reasons, to conceal his real identity under the pen-name of Agent "No. 55." Concerning his position, I am allowed to say no more than this: that if his real name were revealed it would cause something like consternation in Diplomatic and Secret Service circles.

THE EDITOR.

THE FIRST INSTALMENTS.

Jerry Osborne, a young Britisher who is employed as a clerk in London by a German named Muller, goes to Berlin on a holiday, and there meets with an adventure which alters the course of his whole life. Chance throws him into the company of Max Elton, a famous British airman and inventor, who has established himself on the German coast in order to keep an eye on the secret preparations for war with Britain, which Germany is carrying on on a huge scale. Osborne joins Elton in his work, and learns that the airman is in danger of his life from German Secret Service agents, of whom Jerry's own employer, Muller, is the chief.

The two become fast friends, and go through many adventures together, finally coming back to England, where Elton becomes one of the advisers of the Cabinet. Various disasters happen to English arsenals and dockyards, but still no suspicion is breathed against Germany.

One night the motor-car of the Foreign Secretary, Sir Edmund Black, with Elton at the wheel, is waylaid on a lonely coast-road by Muller's emissaries, but after a sharp fight, the Germans are beaten off. Meanwhile, Jerry, lurking in the neighbourhood, has seen Muller arrive by aeroplane, which he abandons on the marshes. Jerry disables the 'plane, and then, with Elton, goes in chase of Muller.

They stumble across Muller's discarded airman's outfit, which Elton dons. Then a whistle warns them that someone else is approaching. Elton, impersonating Muller in the darkness, goes to meet the new-comer, who is none other than the German ambassador. He hands Elton a packet.

"Now let us go and see your 'plane," he says gruffly.

(Now go on with the story.)

A Valuable Capture!

The German moved forward, and Elton, his fingers closing upon the little parcel held out to him, after a momentary hesitation, followed.

Thirty seconds later, Jerry rose from the ground and, one hand holding the collar of the dog, went cautiously in the same direction. The sky in the east was becoming lighter as the moon strove to emerge from the thick pall of clouds,

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 514.

OUR COMPANION PAPERS: "THE MAGNET" LIBRARY, Every Monday.

"THE PENNY POPULAR," Every Friday.

"CHUCKLES," 10. Every Saturday, 2

and the upper structure of the flying-machine was dimly visible.

Thanks to his communication with Elton, Jerry's knowledge of the German language was vastly improved upon what it had been when he was in Berlin, and, although he was wholly in the dark as to the identity of Elton's companion, the conversation he had overheard and comprehended well enough to grasp the meaning, together with the stranger's authoritative manner, convinced him that the man was a person of some importance. What was in Elton's mind he could not know; but, anyway, Jerry thought it best he should not be far from his friend.

And he had not moved ten yards before he became aware that there was someone else owning a similar intention. Away to his left sounded the dull, measured tread of a person whom he could not see. But it was a man's step he felt sure.

The situation was interesting, exciting even, but Jerry hated this blind man's buff business. He was very much in the dark in more ways than one, and the feeling wasn't pleasant. His belief was that danger was not far distant, and the fact that the night concealed it caused him to feel the more apprehensive. It also caused him to take the greater care to make his own progress noiseless.

All at once he caught the sound of voices ahead, close by where stood the aeroplane. One was high, and sounded angry, but the wind carried away the sound. And then followed a sharp burst upon a whistle, followed by a second abrupt, commanding call.

The unseen man on Jerry's left started to run forward. So did Jerry.

Acting up to his assumed part of Muller, Elton had obeyed the imperious order of his companion. More than once had the great inventor been in the company of Baron von Frantstein, the German Ambassador, whose voice had betrayed him. That the packet handed to him for conveyance to Berlin contained matter of vital importance Elton felt assured, and as he turned to lead the way towards the 'plane, with brain working quick to think out a means by which he could get away promptly with the papers.

The 'plane reached, the man in the big overcoat unhooked a lamp, and glanced over it casually.

"Get to work; there is no time to be lost!" he said shortly. "You must be reached without delay."

"But I'm not going to Berlin," was the amazing rejoinder.

"Ach, what!"

Elton looked his companion squarely in the face and said: "I'm going to London."

It was then the whistle shrilled in alarm, and the attendant whom the German Ambassador had directed to follow him started to run.

Round swung Elton, and as he did so a strong hand was laid on his shoulder. Baron von Krantstein didn't understand clearly, but he was a man not accustomed to taking chances. The next instant a heel was placed behind his own right heel, he felt a hard push upon the chest, and down he went on his broad back.

Max Elton started to run back to where he thought Jerry was left. The papers were no doubt valuable, but Jerry must be warned. Fifteen feet he covered, and then he came into violent collision with something.

"Ach, wer da, Stehen Sie!" came in a Teutonic growl from that with which he had collided, and a pair of burly arms gripped him about the middle.

The struggle was only momentary. Through the night the whistle was shrilling violently as Jerry barged into the wrestlers. Max he recognised at once. His forearm went across the throat of the other man from behind, forcing the head back, and the German's grip slackened. With a wrench Elton freed himself.

"Jerry, the inn!" cried Elton.

He dashed off to be lost in the darkness, and Jerry, tripping his man heavily, started after him. The dog was left to his own devices. As Jerry vanished, Von Krantstein, sick with apprehension that the precious communication for Berlin had fallen into wrong hands—his first impression was that Krug had turned traitor, and meant selling the vital documents to the English Government—came hurrying along with frantic haste, caught his toes against the man Jerry had overthrown, and for the second time hit the grass with a thud.

Before the exasperated nobleman and his attendant had started themselves out and learned each other's identity, valuable time had been lost.

And then the condition of the Ambassador's mind was beyond all words. Those lost papers meant his disgrace, the

loss of his post, his honour, and, worst of all, if they reached one of the members of the English Cabinet, a revelation of Germany's bold and cunning diplomacy such as would astonish the world.

Almost beside himself with rage and fear, Von Krantstein furiously ordered his attendant to pursue the thief. But it was wholly impossible to suggest in which direction the thief had vanished.

What the Night Brought Forth.

Encumbered by his airman's dress, Max Elton could not run at his best pace, his feet slipped on the soddened grass, more than once he almost came down. But he had spent too many nights between the inn and the sea not to know almost as by instinct the proper direction to take for the former. Somewhere or other behind him was Jerry, and Jerry would take care of himself all right.

And then an accident befell.

Plung into a bush Elton ran, or, rather, fell, his feet finding nothing under them. Spiny twigs tore at him; involuntarily he shot out both hands to break his fall. His slipping foot stabbed desperately for a foothold, found it, and he made a sideways leap, alighted on nothing, and he fell heavily upon his face.

And there he remained for a few seconds half-dazed, for his forehead had come into contact with the base of a wooden post. He gained his feet, staring stupidly about. Suddenly he uttered a sharp cry, which Jerry reached him just in time to hear.

"What's the matter—hurt?" panted Osborne.

"No; the letter for Berlin. It was in my hand. I fell. Now it is lost!" replied Elton.

"Letter—Berlin! Is it important?"

"Von Krantstein gave it me—thought I was Muller. Must be found. If it— Without completing his jerked-out information, Elton went on hands and knees in search for the packet that had dropped from his fingers as he fell.

"They'll get us—not far behind!" exclaimed Jerry, himself going down, fingers groping upon the long grass.

"We must find it!" And Jerry noted an agitation in his comrade's voice that he had never heard before.

And then, lifting his head, he caught sight of moving points of light across the marsh, gleams of yellow that moved jerkily as though several persons carrying lanterns were hurrying forward. He spoke the discovery to Elton.

"Can't help it. Find the packet we must. Confound my butter fingers!" returned Elton from further away. "Only something of extreme importance could have brought the German Ambassador here, with it." And Elton added in a voice of exasperation: "It was just here I fell with it. We must find it, Jerry!"

But although Max believed himself to be searching over the exact spot where he had fallen, he was mistaken. In rising from his fall he had unknowingly turned quite round, and was actually going away from the spot. Anyone who has tried to find in the middle of the night and without a light a small object dropped upon one's bed-room floor will appreciate the difficulty.

Elton and Jerry were raking the long, wet grass with frantic haste, every moment bringing nearer to them the wandering lights Jerry had noticed. But the lost packet still eluded them.

"What is it like?" Jerry asked.

"About six inches square, thin; wrapped in oiled silk by the feel. Oh, what rotten luck!" groaned Max. "Heaven only knows how valuable it may be, and I've been fool enough to drop it!"

It was then Jerry recollected the small electric torch in his pocket. Pressing the bulb, he sent the pale rays across the ground, keeping as low as possible. Within twenty seconds the torch revealed the packet, lying a couple of feet from the post Elton had fallen against.

A cry from Jerry brought Elton to him.

"Got it! Thank Heaven, old man; you're a brick!" he shouted in his relief. "And now we'll—Hallo!"

Rising to his feet, the lights Jerry had noticed at once caught his attention. Half a dozen there were, at irregular distances apart, but more or less in a line, as though the holders were quartering the ground as partridge shooters do a turnip-field.

"Think they're hunting us, Jerry?"

"I do. Shouldn't be surprised if Muller were amongst them—friends he's been to get together. Won't be long before they see us. If they saw my torch, it's all up."

And Jerry felt certain his light had been seen. Those with the lanterns were coming briskly down to where they stood, suspiciously aroused, and eager to investigate.

(This grand serial will be continued in next week's GEM Library. Order early.)

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 314.

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.



INVADED
from the
CLOUDS

A strange, deep, humming note, like the buzzing of bees, quivered on the frosty air. A cluster of dark specks hung in the starry sky. Gradually the specks grew larger, and the humming swelled into a sullen roar. "The Grey Invaders" were getting closer and closer, and Britain's peril was hourly increasing. If you want to read the most amazing invasion story ever written see to-day's "Boys' Friend."

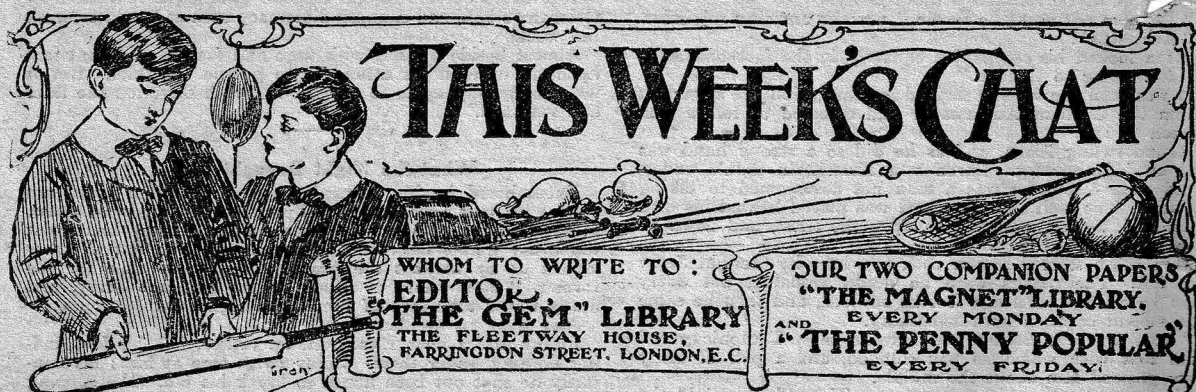
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BOYS' FRIEND

NEXT WEDNESDAY—

"LED ASTRAY!"

OUR SPECIAL WEEKLY FEATURE



For Next Wednesday,

"LED ASTRAY!"
 By Martin Clifford.

Our next splendid long complete tale of the chums of St. Jim's, entitled as above, describes how there is once again a rift in the lute of the famous Co., known as the Terrible Three, and quite a serious one, too! Monty Lowther is once again the offender, and his usual good sense seems to have quite deserted him for a time. Cutts & Co. are at the bottom of the trouble, as usual, but Lowther displays unusual obstinacy, and his chums only succeed in keeping him out of the gravest trouble by adopting the most stringent measures.

As it is, the unfortunate junior is involved quite deeply enough, and finds himself hauled up before the Head in very uncongenial company. He faces the music like a man, however, and sincerely repents of the weakness and folly, which caused him to be

"LED ASTRAY!"

NOTHING QUITE LIKE IT!

"There's nothing quite like 'Chuckles' on the market. Directly I saw it I knew it would make a hit, and, better still, I have found that the more you look into it, the better you find it is. There is no doubt this paper has a great future before it."

So writes a newsagent in a large way of business, in sending a greatly-increased order for "Chuckles" our latest Saturday companion paper. The same tale comes from all over the country. "My regular customers have all plumped for 'Chuckles'; they say it stands in a class by itself among halfpenny papers, and they will have it," is another newsagent's tribute. There is no one able to judge so well of the real merit of a new paper as the newsagent; the newsagent knows. And when his verdict is overwhelmingly favourable, as in the case of "Chuckles!" then it will be realised by all my chums that our latest paper—your latest paper—

"CHUCKLES" IS A WINNER!

ITEMS OF INTEREST.

I have received a letter from the "Three Leaders League," a flourishing organisation which has been referred to before in these columns. The secretary desires me to wish all League members and readers generally a Very Happy and Prosperous New Year, and to draw attention to the change of headquarters of the "Three Leaders League." All correspondence should now be addressed to 31, Ellen's Place, Ellen's Street, Commercial Road, E.

Miss Lillian May Watson, P.O. Box 53, Tamworth, New South Wales, wishes to thank the reader who sent her some postcard views of Blackburn some months ago, and would like him—or her—to send name and address.

Master R. Thompson, of 51, Peshurst Road, South Hackney, wishes to form a "Gem" and "Magnet" Club, and would be glad to hear from interested readers.

Master D. Woolf would like to form a "Gem" Sports Club, open to anyone living in the East End of London. Will any readers interested write to Master Woolf, at 77, Berner Street, Commercial Road, E.

Master W. Kite, of 127, Knight's Hill, West Norwood, S.W., wishes to form a "Gem" Club.

RABBIT KEEPING.—No. 3, By Meredith Fradd.

A very curiously marked variety of rabbit is the Himalayan. With a body of pure white, this little fellow has a jet-black nose, ears, four feet and tail, giving him the appearance of having been dipped in the ink-pot; the fanciers of this breed, and they are not many just now, making the value of a show specimen low, have to keep their pets in darkened hutches, or the density of the black fades.

Rabbits Large and Small.

The Polish is another pretty little beast of snowy whiteness, short coat, and small, erect ears and pink eyes, but he has only a small army of admirers, though his small, snaky body is a picture in the show pen. With the exception of the first three, all those breeds that I have mentioned have to be small in size and in weight. The next one on the list gains its place through its excessive weight, for the Flemish Giant tops the scale many a time at 16lbs, and has done so at 20lbs; in colour it is a very dark grey, its ears are large, but stand erect, its back is broad, and altogether it is a most curious-looking animal, and it is quite certain that many a casual visitor to a show thinks that the class of Flemish Giants are monstrosities! Show specimens fetch many pounds, but the money pounds never agree with the pounds in weight!

There remain three different breeds to mention; but of these the Silvers, as they are called, are divided into three families, namely, Silver Greys, Silver Fawns, and Silver Browns; but it is the first mentioned that are such very great favourites with the present-day fanciers, and the winners in this variety are often changing hands at prices ranging from £5 to £15, or even £20. A most interesting act of Nature takes place in the babyhood of the Silver Grey; when the youngster gets his coat, about the age of ten days, he is jet black, and remains so until he is about six weeks old, then his owner, who has been anxiously watching, sees the appearance of one or two grey hairs on the tip of the nose, and from that day he starts to "silver off," an operation that takes him some three or four months to complete, and it all depends upon the evenness with which the dark hairs intermingle with the light, and the short crispness of the coat, as to whether or no the young rabbit is going to stand a chance in the keen competition that is met in the show-pen.

The English rabbit—another variety—is one of the larger breeds, and it has a white body with the colour spread over in a curious, though definite way. Down the backbone is a chain of colour, then a chain each side, from the head sloping towards the tail; a mark on the nose of the same colour, and shaped like a butterfly, spots on each side of the eye and under each leg. Altogether, it is a really handsome animal, and the prize specimens are worth, and fetch, high prices.

(Another splendid
 "Rabbit - Keeping"
 article next Wednesday.)

The Kite

A Cash Prize for Every Contributor to this Page.



INSULT TO INJURY.

"Well, did he pay?" asked the wife of a dentist, who had been out to collect a bill for a full set of teeth that he had supplied to a man a year before.

"Pay me!" grumbled the dentist. "Not only did he refuse to pay me, but he actually had the effrontery to gnash at me—with my teeth!"—Sent in by Miss Lena Clarke, Barnes.

THE ONLY WAY.

"I want a pair of gloves for my 'Erbert," said the lady from Whitechapel, bustling into the outfitter's shop.

"About what price, madam?"

"About fourpence."

"The cheapest we stock are one shilling, madam."

"Oh, that's too much! 'Erbert's going to a ball, and he'll only wear them once."

"That's the best I can do for you, madam!"

"Aven't you any at fourpence?"

"No, madam."

"Oh, well, I suppose there's no help for it. 'Erbert will have to wash 'is 'ands, that's all."—Sent in by S. Gale, Lorton.

FINDING A PLACE.

A lady, having just had a row with her husband, sent her servant for some fish for dinner.

"Bridget," she said, "go to the village, and get me a plaice."

"I will, ma'am," replied Bridget, "and while I'm there I'll look for a place myself, because I can't stand the master no more than you can!"—Sent in by G. Boniface, Cheshire.

NOT WANTED.

Stranger (to little boy): "Is your father in? Tell him his old friend Bill has come to see him."

Little Boy: "Then papa's out, 'cos I heard him tell mother that if any bill came, he was out!"—Sent in by A. Newton, Yorks.

HE DIDN'T EAT IT!

A man lay groaning and writhing by the wayside, when up dashed a constable and proceeded to investigate; but all he could get out of the sufferer was, "I ate one too—I ate one, too," and he puzzled, but not for long.

"Poison!" was his diagnosis, and, mindful of his training, he at once procured an emetic, which simply electrified the recipient.

Between convulsions he managed to ask the reason for such treatment, and on his being told, and asked what it was he had eaten, he became more abusive.

"What did I eat?" yelled he. "Why, you idiot! 'I 812' is the number of the car that knocked me down!"—Sent in by H. Hare, Grimsby.

HIS LINE!

A little London lad from the slums was invited to a charity dinner given at the house of a lady in society. When dinner was over, the lady asked the little ones to sing or recite. When it came to the little lad's turn, he made no effort to sing or recite until the lady spoke to him.

"Come on, Tommy. Let me hear you sing."

"I can't sing, lidy," said the lad; "but I'll fight any of the other kids in the room!"—Sent in by J. Davidson, Isle of Man.

LUCID!

Smart Young Man: "What do you think of Brown?"
Indignant Old Gentleman: "Brown, sir? He's one of those men who smack you on the back before your eyes, and hit you in the eye behind your back!"—Sent in by W. G. Phenix, Bermondsey.

A GOOD REASON.

An English officer, whose ship was stationed off the coast of Ceylon, went for a day's shooting, accompanied by a native servant. Coming to a particularly inviting river, the officer resolved to have a bathe, and asked the native to show him a place where there were no alligators.

The native took him to a pool close to the estuary. The officer enjoyed his swim, and while drying himself asked the native why there were never any alligators in that pool.

"Because, sah," replied the guide, "they plenty 'fraid of shark!"—Sent in by O. Taylor, Plaistow, E.

FINANCIALLY CRIPPLED.

Tramp (sitting on steps): "Please help a poor cripple!"
Gentleman: "Certainly! Here you are! But how are you crippled?"

Tramp (as he pockets the coin): "Financially, sir."—Sent in by H. McWash, Londonderry.

WHY THEY COULDN'T DO IT!

Teacher of Infants' Class: "Now, children, the bear has a warm coat. So have you. And when you come into a warm room you take off your coats. Can the bear take his off?"

Infants: "No, teacher."

Teacher: "Why not?"

Sally (age four and a half years): "Please, teacher, because goodness only knows where the buttons are!"—Sent in by W. Kadish, Dover.

HARD TO SAY!

"Well," said the farmer to an Irishman who was employed on his farm, "I heard you had an encounter with my cow yesterday."

"No; it was a bull!" answered the Irishman.

"Well, who had the better of the encounter?"

"Sure, yer honour, it was a loss up!"—Sent in by E. Aubrey, Cardiff.

DOGGY!

They were talking about dogs they had been the fortunate possessors of, and Smith, after listening to many stories of intelligent animals, told the following:

"I once had a dog, and its devotion to me was absolutely extraordinary. Why, he heard me say I was rather hard-up, so he went and died the day before the renewal of his licence was due!"

That did it.—Sent in by B. E. King, Birmingham.

NOT QUITE RIGHT.

The vicar was just about to give out the banns of a marriage, when he forgot where he had put the book. However, he began, groping meanwhile for the lost volume.

"I publish the banns of marriage between—between

"Between the cushion and the seat, sir," whispered the verger, in a voice loud enough to be heard throughout the church, suddenly realising what the vicar was looking for.—Sent in by Miss F. Clarke, Birkenhead.

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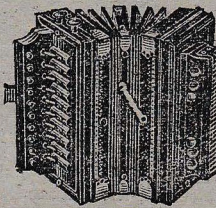
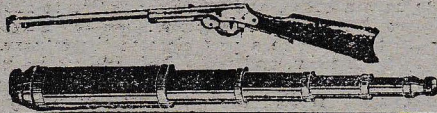
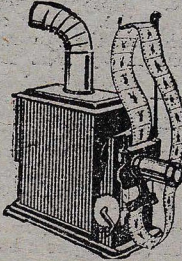
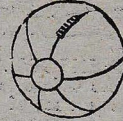
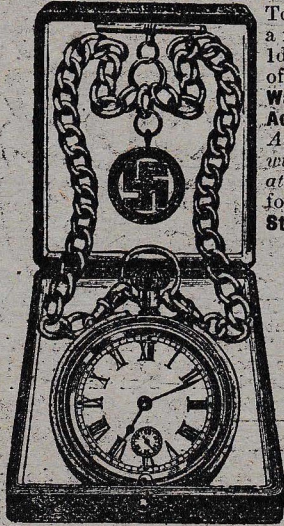


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