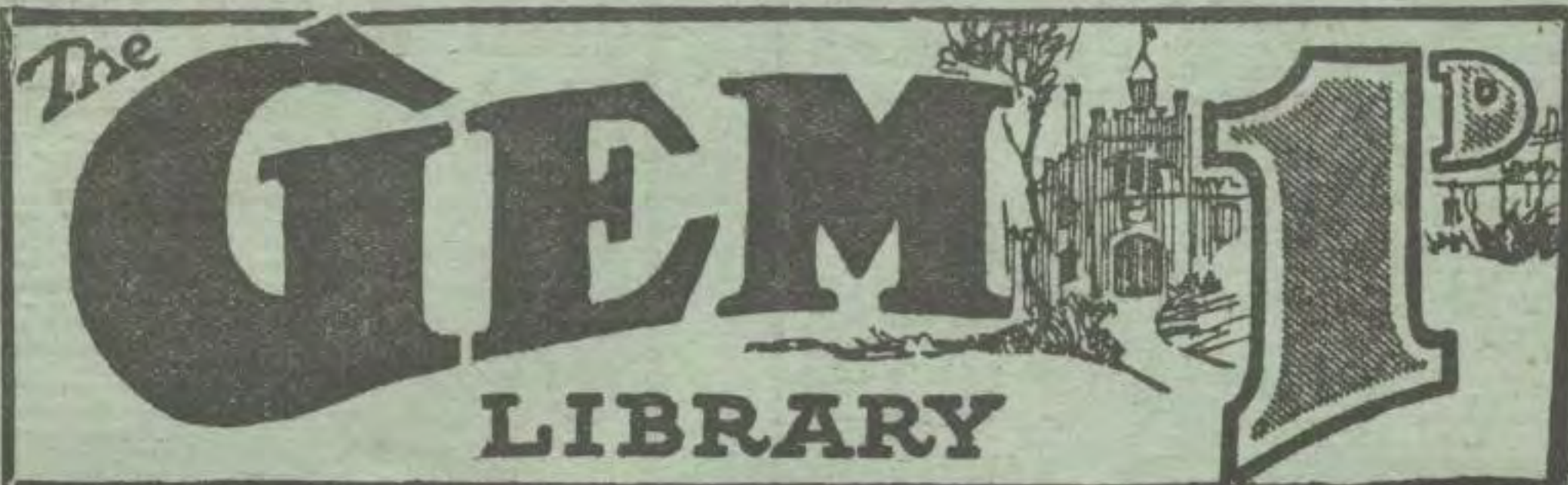


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"My hat!" exclaimed Figgins, in a suppressed voice. "There's Lowther—in a box with Mr. Curl!" All eyes turned on the box, and at that moment Lowther caught sight of the juniors, and laughed. "By gum, let's go round and scalp him before the show begins!" said Blake sulphurously. (See the grand long, complete school story contained in this issue.)

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PLAYING A PART!

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There was a junior in the passage and Manners rushed right at him, and in a second had his head in chancery. "There, you ass—you rotter—I'll teach you to thump me on the nose!" roared Manners. "Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Tom Merry. "It's not Lowther—it's D'Arcy!" (See Chapter 1.)

CHAPTER 1.

Monty Lowther has a Secret.

NEVER!" Tom Merry and Manners, of the Shell Form of St. Jim's, halted in sheer astonishment.

They were coming along the Shell passage to their study, to look for their chum Monty Lowther, when that loud exclamation struck upon their ears. It was uttered in a thrilling tone. The voice was familiar to them, for it was the voice of Monty Lowther; but that thrilling tone was something new.

They stopped dead.

"Never! Once more—never!"

Tom Merry looked at Manners, and Manners looked at Tom Merry. Their faces expressed the blankest astonishment.

"What the deuce—" Tom Merry murmured.

"I thought Monty was alone there," said Manners. "Whom can he be talking to like that?"

"There must be something up."

And the chums of the Shell hesitated. If some sort of a quarrel was going on in the study between Monty Lowther and another fellow, they did not want to intrude upon it. But why was Monty speaking in that curious, dramatic manner? True, Lowther was the most enthusiastic member of the Junior Dramatic Club, extremely keen about amateur theatricals, and at one time had a feverish desire to go upon the stage. But it was not like him to introduce dramatic matters into daily life. And that thrilling "Never!" might have been uttered by an indignant hero, and addressed to a heavy villain. No wonder Monty Lowther's chums were astonished to hear it.

As they stood there hesitating in the passage, Lowther's voice went on:

"Give her up—and to you? Bah!"

The thrilling scorn Lowther imparted to the "Bah!" made his chums simply jump.

"My only hat!" whispered Manners. "He's quarrelling with somebody about a her—I mean a she—a girl!"

Next Wednesday:

"ORDERED OFF!" AND "PLAYING THE GAME!"

Tom Merry shook his head positively.
"Rubbish! Lowther isn't such a silly ass as that! He's gone off his dot, or else he's doing this for a joke. Perhaps he's heard us coming. Come on!"

Tom Merry strode on to the study, and Manners followed him. They threw open the door.

Monty Lowther was standing in the middle of the study. He had a crumpled roll of paper in his left hand. His right was raised in a threatening gesture. The juniors looked to see whom he was threatening, but there was no one else in the study. Lowther's gesture seemed to be addressed to the study window.

His arm dropped, and he swung round, his face flushing crimson, as his chums came in.

It was not often that Lowther of the Shell was taken aback; he was generally blessed with the proverbial coolness of the cucumber. But he was certainly taken aback now. His face was crimson, and his mouth was open like that of a fish out of water, as he stared at Tom Merry and Manners.

"What the dickens are you up to?" Tom Merry demanded.

"Potty?" asked Manners.

Lowther did not reply. He slipped the paper he held in his hand quickly and, as it were, surreptitiously into the inside pocket of his jacket. Evidently he did not wish his chums to see it.

They gazed at him questioningly. Lowther's behaviour was so extraordinary that it required some explaining.

"You were talking to somebody?" Tom exclaimed.

"Yes—no!" muttered Lowther.

"Talking to him," said Manners.

"There's nobody else here. What's the matter with you, Lowther?"

"I— Nothing!"

"What was that paper you shoved in your pocket?"

"N-n-nothing!"

Tom Merry burst into a laugh.

"Ha, ha, ha! I understand, you duffer! You were rehearsing!"

"Rehearsing!" said Manners.

"We're not doing a play now. You don't mean to say you're composing a new play for the Dramatic Society, Monty, without telling us anything about it?"

"N-n-no!" stammered Lowther.

"Then what were you talking that piffle for?"

"I was—was—was going over some lines," stammered Lowther; "that's all. I didn't hear you fellows coming."

"But what were you doing it for?" asked Tom.

Lowther did not reply.

"Is it a new play you're getting up?"

No answer.

The amazement of the Shell fellows increased. It was not like Monty Lowther to be secretive. Since the famous occasion when he had run away from school to go on the stage, he had not kept any secrets from his devoted chums. But it was evident now that he did not choose to explain to them.

Tom Merry and Manners could not help feeling a little huffed. Mutual confidence always reigned in the Terrible Three's study, and they disliked anything in the nature of secretiveness or mystery.

"I don't see why you can't tell us, if you're scheming some new play," said Tom Merry, a little tartly. "I suppose it's for the Dramatic Society, isn't it? You're not thinking of doing a play all on your lonesome?"

"It isn't that."

"Then what is it?"

"I—I can't very well tell you."

"Why not?"

No reply.

Manners wagged an admonitory forefinger at Lowther, and shook his head.

"Don't you begin to keep secrets from your kind uncles, Monty," he said. "That's the way to get into trouble. You had better make a clean breast of it. Now, what are you playing the giddy goat for?"

Lowther broke out irritably.

"Oh, rats! Don't ask questions."

"What!"

"You heard what I said."

"Don't ask questions!" repeated Manners wrathfully.

"Well, I like that! We come along, and hear you babbling like a tame lunatic in an asylum, and you tell us not to ask questions. I like your cheek!"

"We're not only going to ask questions, but you're going to answer them!" said Tom Merry determinedly.

"You—"

"Oh, let's drop the subject!" said Lowther irritably.

"Not yet. Are you going to explain?"

"No, I'm not."

"You won't tell us what you're up to?"

"No, I won't!"

"Then the rule of this study is that you are bumped until you do. Collar him, Manners, and we'll see whether the silly fathead won't explain!" exclaimed Tom Merry indignantly.

Lowther backed away as his chums advanced upon him.

They were his old pals; but they were indignant now, and a little angry.

"Look here," began Lowther, "I can't tell you! You see—well, in fact— Hands off, you silly asses! I shall hit out, I warn you!"

Tom Merry and Manners grasped him before he finished speaking.

Lowther struggled angrily, but two to one were too many for him. He was swept off his feet, and Tom Merry grasped his shoulders, and Manners his ankles. They swung him in the air.

"Now then, are you going to explain?"

"No!" yelled Lowther, struggling.

Bump!

Monty Lowther descended upon the study floor with a sharp concussion. The dust rose from the study carpet, and there was a wild yell from Monty Lowther.

"Yow! Leggo! You silly asses!"

"Will you tell us what you are up to?"

"No!" roared Lowther.

Bump! Bump!

"Yow! Ow! Oh!"

"What's the row?" demanded Reilly of the Shell, looking into the study.

Lowther made a terrific effort, and tore himself away from his indignant chums. They grasped at him again, and Lowther kept his word, and hit out. Manners received a sharp rap on the nose, and staggered back on Tom Merry.

Monty Lowther darted out of the study, and slammed the door after him.

Manners dabbed his hand to his nose. His fingers came away red.

"Grooh!" gasped Manners. "Why, the silly ass—the fathead—I'll—I'll—"

He rushed to the door and tore it open. The tap on the nose had brought the water to his eyes, and he did not see clearly; and, besides, he was in a frantic hurry. There was a junior in the passage, and Manners rushed right at him, and in a second had his head in chancery, and was hammering at him.

"There, you ass, you rotter, I'll teach you to thump me on the nose! Take that—and that—and that!"

"Yawwooh!" came a wild yell from Manners's victim.

"Let go, you wottah! Ow, ow! Have you gone pottay? Bai Jove! Dwaggimoff!"

"Why, what—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry, from the doorway of the study. "You fathead! It's D'Arcy! Ha, ha, ha!"

His aristocratic face was very flushed, and his noble nose

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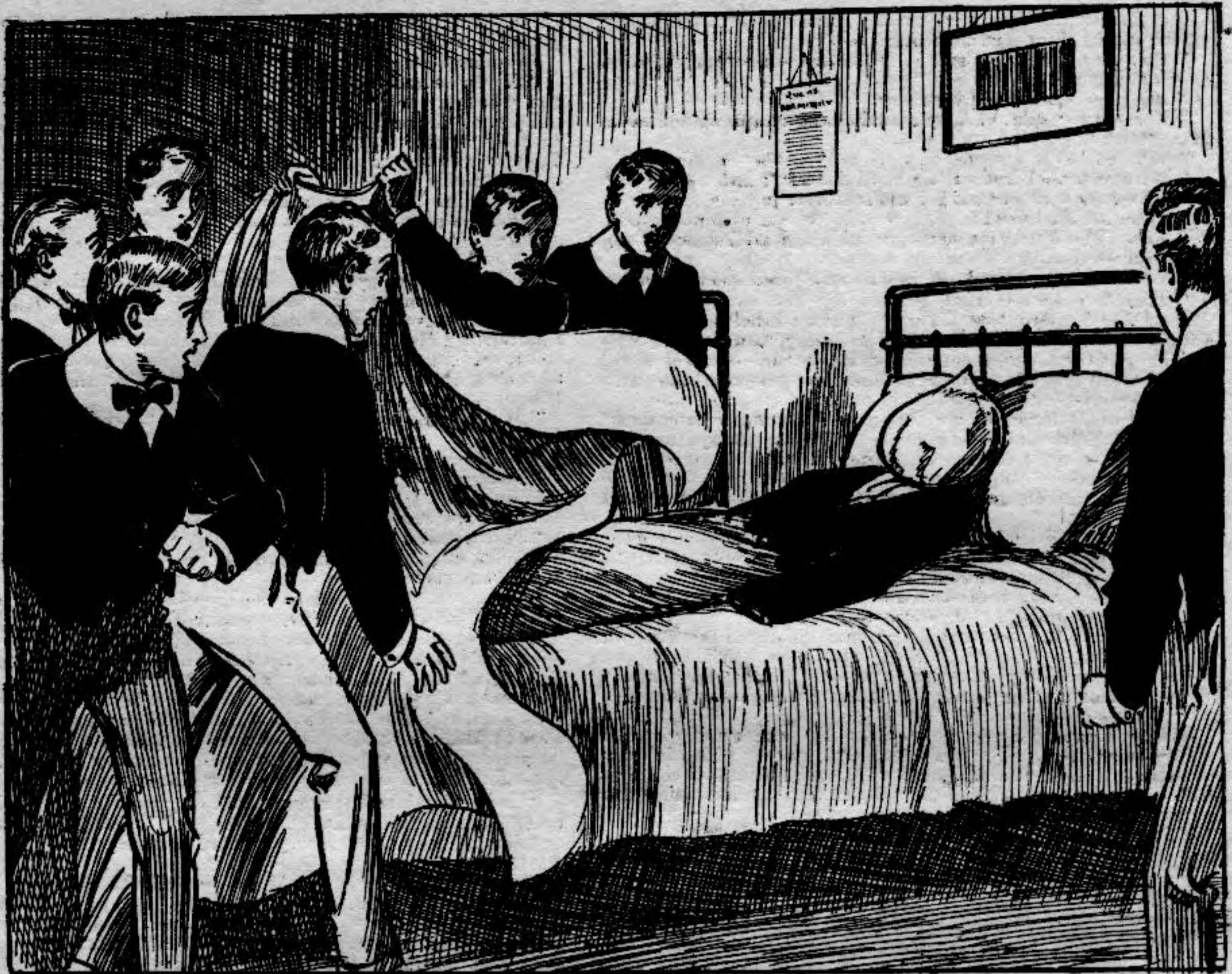
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CHAPTER 2.
Arthur Augustus's Little Party.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's staggered against the wall as Manners released him, gasping for breath.

His aristocratic face was very flushed, and his noble nose



Gore grasped the bedclothes and tore them off, and there was a roar from the juniors. "Why—why—why," stammered Gore, "Lowther's not there—it's a dummy!" (See Chapter 15.)

seemed a size larger than usual. He was sputtering with wrath.

"You uttah ass! You feahful wottah! You——"

"Sorry!" gasped Manners. "I ran out after Lowther, and—and——"

"Lowthah just passed me. He seemed in wathah a huwvy. I was comin' to ask you fellahs if you were weady to start for Bunchestah, and you wushed on me like a dangewous maniac——"

"I thought it was Lowthah. Sorry!"

Arthur Augustus's face cleared.

"Oh, all wight! Fwom one gentleman to anothah an apology is quite suffish," he said, rubbing his nose ruefully. "But you have thwown me into quite a fluttah. You have also considewably hurt my nose. What are you silly youngstahs wowin' with one anothah for?"

"It's Lowther," explained Tom Merry. "He's rehearsing a play, or something, and he won't tell us about it. So we bumped him, and he punched Manners's nose——"

Manners dabbed his nose with a handkerchief.

"And I'm jolly well going to punch his nose!" he exclaimed ferociously.

And he made a movement to pass D'Arcy in pursuit of the vanished Lowther. But the swell of the Fourth Form put out a detaining hand.

"Hold on, deah boy!"

"Rats! I'm going to——"

"But we've arranged to go to Bunchestah to see the matinee this aftahnoon, and if we're goin' on our bikes there's no time to lose," said Arthur Augustus.

"I'm not going to have my nose punched for nothing——"

"I twust you youngstahs are not goin' to muck up the aftahnoon's excursion wowin' with one anothah!" said Arthur Augustus severely. "It is wathah a good show at Bunchestah, and I don't want to miss it. Blake and Hewwies and Dig are getting out the bikes."

"Yes, cheese it, Manners," said Tom Merry. "After all,

Monty had a good bumping, and we'll bump him again later if he doesn't explain himself. Let's get off."

"Lowther's coming, I suppose?" asked D'Arcy.

"I suppose so. We haven't told him yet. We were coming here to tell him, when we heard him spouting some silly rot. Come on, Manners, let's look for him. There's no time to waste."

Manners grunted a somewhat surly assent.

His nose was painful, and he dabbed at it with his handkerchief as he accompanied Tom Merry down the passage.

It was certainly an unfortunate beginning to an afternoon's excursion.

It was a half-holiday at St. Jim's, and it had been Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's idea to go to the matinee at Bunchester. Bunchester was a considerable distance from St. Jim's, but the juniors were good cyclists, and accustomed to long spins.

Arthur Augustus was in funds, and he wanted to stand treat for the matinee, but the funds would hardly have run to railway fares for so large a party.

It was necessary to start early on the ride, and so there was no time to waste. Tom Merry and Manners had received the kind invitation from the swell of the School House, and they had hurried up to the study to tell Lowther—and then that unfortunate incident had occurred.

"Huwvy up, you fellahs!" Arthur Augustus called after them. "We'll wait for you at the gates!"

"Right-ho!"

Tom Merry and Manners looked for Lowther. It did not take long to find him. Monty Lowther was spotted in the quad, walking to and fro under the trees. As they hurried towards him they saw him take out his watch and consult it, and then look at a time-table he drew from his pocket. He hurriedly thrust the time-table out of sight as his chums came sprinting up. Both Tom Merry and Manners observed the action, and it had a further exasperating effect upon them. What was Lowther developing secretiveness in this way for?

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

NEXT WEDNESDAY—

"ORDERED OFF!"

Lowther looked very wary as they came up, but Tom Merry waved his hand in sign of peace.

"Pax, my son!" he said. "No time for ragging now. Come and get your bike out!"

"My bike!" repeated Lowther. "What for?"

"For a long spin. Gussy's invited us to go with him to Bunchester."

"Where?"

"Bunchester. I know it's a good distance; but we can ride it, and we shall be in time for the matinee."

"The—the matinee!"

"Yes. You'd like to come, wouldn't you?" asked Tom, surprised by Lowther's curious manner.

"What—what matinee do you mean?" muttered Lowther.

"There's only one that I know of—the matinee at the Bunchester Empire," said Tom. "They have matinee performances every Wednesday and Saturday, you know. It's a jolly good entertainment, and quite decent—kind of thing a chap could take his uncle to. Come and get your bike out."

"But—but—"

"You don't mean to say that you don't want to come?" exclaimed Tom, in astonishment. "You're always so jolly keen to go to any kind of a theatrical show."

"Ye-es; but—"

"Besides, there's an old friend of yours in the show," said Tom.

"An—an old friend!"

"Yes. Don't you remember Mr. Curll?"

"Mr. Curll!" stammered Lowther. "But—"

"You remember him—the actor chap who went on the halls. You haven't forgotten that you ran away from St. Jim's once to go on the stage, and the Head fetched you back?" grinned Tom. "Well, that man Curll that you cleared off with that time, he's at the Bunchester Empire now. I should think you'd like to see him again. Wouldn't you?"

Monty Lowther made no reply. He was staring at his chums open-mouthed. His expression was so extraordinary that Tom Merry and Manners were quite alarmed. There was blank dismay in his face. There was no mistaking the expression. It was utter dismay.

"Don't you want to come?" asked Tom.

"No!"

"Why not?"

"I can't—I mean, I don't want to."

"If you don't feel up to the long spin, we can go by train," said Tom. "There's an express from Wayland does it in half an hour. We can raise the tin."

"I know. But it isn't that. You're not going?"

"Of course we are!" said Manners impatiently. "Gussy's asked us, and we've accepted—for you too. We thought you'd like to come."

"You—you won't go, will you?" stammered Lowther.

"Yes, of course!" said Tom.

"What about the cricket?"

"That's all right. It's only a match with the Third. Kangaroo is going to skipper the team, and they will lick the Third easily enough."

"But—but it's a long way to Bunchester."

"That doesn't matter."

"Suppose the—the Head mightn't like you to go there?"

"He lets us go to the Wayland Empire!" said Tom, in surprise. "Why shouldn't we go to the Bunchester Empire?"

"But—but—but—"

"If you don't want to go, say so?" said Manners testily. "I'm blessed if I can understand you at all this afternoon, Lowther. First we find you spouting some silly rot, and you won't tell us what it's about. And now you raise difficulties about going on a jolly excursion. What's the matter with you?"

"I—I don't want you to go!"

"Oh, come!" said Tom uneasily. "That's a bit selfish, Monty. Still, if you're set on staying at home, and you want us to stay with you—why—"

Tom paused, and looked doubtfully at Manners.

"Oh, we'll stay!" said Manners, not very graciously.

Lowther uttered a quick exclamation.

"No, no! That isn't it! I—I'm going out!"

"You're going out! Do you mean you want us to come with you?" asked Tom. "That's different, of course. If you've got something on, and want us, we'll tell Gussy we can't join his party. What is it?"

"No, that's not it. I—I've got an engagement—I mean, I—I'm going alone."

"Then you don't want us to come with you or to stay in?"

"N-no; but—"

"Well, I must say you're a blessed dog-in-the-manger!" burst out Manners angrily. "You've got something on for yourself, and won't ask us to join you; and you don't want

us to go to Bunchester on our own. I call that beastly mean!"

Lowther flushed painfully.

"If you're going out by yourself, Monty, it can't matter to you whether we go to Bunchester or not," said Tom Merry quietly. "I won't ask you where you're going, as you seem so jolly secretive about it. Ta-ta! Come on, Manners! They're waiting for us at the gates already."

"Hold on!" exclaimed Lowther. "You're going, then?"

"Of course!" said Tom tartly.

"And—and if you don't those Fourth Form chaps are going?"

"Yes."

Monty Lowther paused. Some inward struggle seemed to be going on in his breast, and his chums were more and more amazed. It was impossible to understand Lowther that afternoon. He was evidently deeply disturbed about something, but what it was they could not make out in the least, excepting that it was connected with their excursion to Bunchester.

"Well," said Manners impatiently, "have you decided to come?"

"Ye-es—I'll come."

"And what about your engagement?" asked Manners sarcastically. "That blessed engagement you don't care to tell us anything about."

"Never mind that."

"Well, if you're coming, buck up—we're keeping Study No. 6 waiting."

Lowther followed them to the bicycle-shed without another word. The Terrible Three got out their machines and wheeled them down to the gates. Blake and Herries, and Digby and D'Arcy were waiting for them there, with Figgins & Co. of the New House, who had also joined the party. Figgins & Co.—Figgy, Kerr, and Fatty Wynn—were members of the junior eleven; but they did not feel that they were needed that afternoon for a match with the Third Form. And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had generously extended his invitation to the chums of the New House.

"Here they are!" exclaimed Blake, as the Shell fellows came down to the gates. "We've been waiting for you."

"Sorry," said Tom Merry. "We're ready now."

"Come on, then!"

They wheeled their machines out of the gateway, and mounted in the road. Down the leafy lane went the whole party at a good rate, ten of them, and most of the party in the highest spirits. But the Terrible Three were not in such high spirits as usual. There was a cloud upon Monty Lowther's brow—a cloud of uneasy care. What was worrying him his chums could not guess, but they could not help noticing it, and feeling a little resentful of his secrecy. For Lowther did not utter a word; whatever might be on his mind, he evidently had no intention of confiding it to his friends. And the Terrible Three were always so frank and open to one another, that Tom Merry and Manners could not help feeling the change, and feeling it keenly.

CHAPTER 3.

On the Road.

MONTY LOWTHER'S brow grew darker and darker as the miles flew under the rapid wheels.

Whatever was the secret worry that preyed upon his mind, it grew more and more pressing as the party drew nearer to Bunchester.

The Terrible Three were riding together, the other fellows being in advance, and so Lowther's clouded face was not noticed by the rest.

But Tom Merry and Manners could not help seeing it, and marking how the cloud on Lowther's brow grew darker all the time.

Once or twice Lowther cast a quick, almost hunted, look about him.

Tom Merry was puzzled, anxious—almost alarmed. There was evidently something wrong with his chum, and he forgot his annoyance in his anxiety, and broke the silence.

"Monty, old man." He drew his machine a little closer to Lowther's as they rode. "Monty, what's the matter with you?"

Lowther seemed to start out of the depths of a gloomy reverie.

"Matter with me? Nothing!"

"You're worrying over something."

"Oh, nonsense!"

"Then what are you looking so glum about?"

"Am I looking glum?"

"Yes, you are," said Tom, a little nettled.

"I'm all right!"

"If you've got something on your mind Monty, you might as well tell your old pals," said Tom reproachfully. "I suppose you can trust us?"

Lowther did not reply.

"Now I'm speaking of it I might as well tell you that you've been acting in a rather queer way lately," said Tom, determined to have the matter out. "You've cut the cricket for the last two half-holidays. You've got into the habit of mooching off by yourself, and going out for spins on your bike all alone. You can't expect a fellow not to notice it. It's queer."

"It is," muttered Lowther restlessly.

"I can't forget," said Tom quietly, "that you once very nearly got mixed up with Cutts of the Fifth and Levison in their rotten games; and if it's anything of that kind again, any kind of playing the giddy goat—"

Lowther laughed.

"Cutts! Levison! It's nothing to do with them! Do you think I've taken to backing dead certs. and putting my pocket-money on cards, ass?"

"It's nothing of that kind, then—no trouble?"

"Of course it isn't."

"Honour bright, Monty?"

"Yes, of course," growled Lowther. "What do you take me for?"

Tom Merry drew a sigh of relief. He knew what a narrow escape Lowther had once had of being drawn into the vicious circle of which Cutts of the Fifth was the chief. But he knew that Lowther's word was not to be doubted. Whatever the trouble was, it was not in that line.

"But there's something," persisted Tom.

No reply.

"You're in trouble of some kind, Monty, or you wouldn't be pulling a face a yard long."

"I'm not in trouble."

"On your word?"

"Yes."

"Then, what is the deuce the matter with you?" demanded Tom Merry impatiently. "What are you looking glum for? You've got a secret of some kind that you won't tell your pals—who never have secrets from you."

"Don't ask questions and I won't tell you any whoppers," said Lowther. "I'm not in any kind of trouble, and that ought to satisfy you. As a matter of fact, I'm in luck."

"In luck! You don't look it!"

"Blessed if you do!" said Manners, on the other side of Lowther. "What kind of luck, Monty? Must be jolly queer kind, if it makes you look like that."

Monty Lowther grunted impatiently.

"Why can't you tell us, Monty?"

"Because it might lead to trouble, and I don't want you fellows to be landed in it, that's why," said Lowther desperately. "Now, don't ask me any more questions, because I won't answer them!"

And he pushed his bike a little ahead, and joined D'Arcy and Blake, who were riding abreast, to escape further questioning.

Tom Merry and Manners exchanged a frowning glance. Lowther had admitted that there was something "on"—something in which they were not to share, and of which they were to have no knowledge. They could not help resenting it. As for the danger of "trouble" following, they were willing to risk that. The Terrible Three always stood shoulder to shoulder. Besides, if Lowther was in no trouble, as he said, how could trouble follow his admitting them to his secret, whatever it was? The chums of the Shell felt uneasy, anxious, and decidedly irritated.

But they did not ask Lowther any more questions. It was pretty clear that he would not answer them. He was speaking to Arthur Augustus now.

"So it was your idea to go to the matinee at Bunchester, Gussy?"

"Yaas, wathah, deah boy," said D'Arcy. "I saw the notice of the matinee in the papah, you know, and I was wathah stwuck with the pwogwamme. If our fwiend Mr. Curll is in the company there now, singin' somethin' or othah. You wemembah Mr. Curll—the tenah chap who was always gettin' squiffay?"

"Bet you Lowther remembers him," chuckled Blake. "Didn't the howling ass run away from school once to go on the stage, and the Head brought him back with a flea in his ear? It was Curll he went with."

"Yaas, so it was. You'll be wathah glad to see your old pal again, Lowthah. I suppose you haven't seen him lately?"

Lowther did not seem to hear the question; at all events he did not reply to it. He went on rather hastily:

"Good programme, eh?"

"Yaas. One of the items is a sketch of a wathah tragic

chawaetah, I think called: 'His Love Against the Earth,' or somethin—"

"'His Love Against the World,' you mean."

"You know about it, then, Lowthah?"

"I—I've heard—"

"I think you are w'ong about the title, though," said D'Arcy. "I think it is 'His Love Against the Earth,' or else, 'The Earth Against His Love,' I forget which."

"Ass!" muttered Monty Lowther impatiently. "I tell you—" He broke off abruptly.

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Not much good spending a summer afternoon in a stuffy theatre," said Lowther. "Why not make an outing of it instead?"

"You are quite welcome to make an outin' of it, deah boy. We are goin' to the Bunchestah Empiah!" said D'Arcy, rather stiffly.

"It will be a good outing riding there and back," remarked Jack Blake. "It's a good fifteen miles from St. Jim's, I believe."

Monty Lowther fell into silence. Tom Merry and Manners had heard the talk, and they felt a curious impression. Lowther did not want the party to go to the Bunchester Empire for the matinee. It was inexplicable; but there could be very little doubt about it. How it could possibly matter to Lowther whether they went or not was a mystery, and they were growing exasperated with that mystery.

They knew Lowther's love of the stage, which had once led him into the reckless step of clearing off from St. Jim's to join a travelling company. They knew his old connection with Mr. Curll, the thirsty tenor. Had he renewed some dealings with Mr. Curll, which he was afraid the visit to Bunchester would bring to light? Even so, why should he be afraid of his chums knowing? Mr. Curll was not exactly a choice acquaintance, but there was no harm in him, and all the juniors were friendly with him.

"I say, I'm tired," said Lowther abruptly. "We've got plenty of time, haven't we, Gussy?"

"Yaas, deah boy."

"What do you say to a bit of a rest?"

Arthur Augustus nodded, and called to the others:

"You fellows like a west? Lowthah's fagged!"

The party came to a halt. They were about eight miles from St. Jim's now, and were crossing a very lonely tract of country. It was a long, rolling "down," crossed by a well-worn bridle-path, with wide pasture-lands sweeping away on all sides.

There was not a building in sight, and vehicles never came by that path. Sheep could be seen browsing in the distance in large flocks. Here and there a tree grew by the path, casting a radius of shade from the hot sun. The cyclists halted under one of the trees, and jumped off their machines. A lonelier spot could hardly have been imagined.

Figgins & Co. were grinning a little derisively. They were fit for any distance yet, and they were inclined to be amused at the idea of the School House fellow being "tired."

"Did you bring a pillow with you, Lowther?" Kerr asked.

Lowther grunted.

"Oh, we may as well have a rest!" said Tom Merry. "No need to scorch all the blessed way; and the sun's very warm, too!"

"Yaas, wathah! I weally think I made a mistake in not puttin' on a Panamah hat," said Arthur Augustus thoughtfully. "I am afwaid my face will get wathah wed. On the othah hand, it would be wathah odd to go into a theatah in a Panamah hat. There were difficulties either way—wathah an awkward posish!"

"You might have brought an umbrella!" Figgins suggested solemnly.

"It would be wathah difficult to wide with an umbwellah up! Oh, you are wottin', you wottah!" said Arthur Augustus, as the juniors burst into a roar of laughter. "I wegard you as an ass, Figgins!"

"Sit down and let Lowther rest his head on your shoulder, Tommy," said Fatty Wynn. "I will fan him with my cap!"

Lowther reddened.

"Look here, you New House chumps—"

Figgins made a soothing gesture.

"Don't excite yourself when you are tired," he murmured. "Dear boy, you must take care of yourself. You've done nearly eight miles—that's a lot for a School House chap!"

"Weally, Figgins—"

"Hush! Let Lowther go to sleep."

The juniors grinned at the gentle chaff of Figgins & Co.; but Lowther did not grin. His brow was darker than ever. He seemed to be taking the chipping in very bad part. Tom Merry regarded him rather anxiously. He had never known the cheery, good-natured Lowther in this peculiar and uncer-

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tain temper before. He was more puzzled than ever to know what was the matter with him.

"You silly asses!" said Lowther sharply. "I'm tired of cycling for a bit, but I'm not so fagged as you are!"

"Br-r-r-r!"

"Rats!"

"Draw it mild!"

"Let's stretch our legs a bit," said Lowther. "I'll race you all round that knoll yonder and back here!"

"Done!" said Figgins at once. "I'd race any School House fellow off his legs any time!"

"You could not wace me off my legs, Figgins," said Arthur Augustus. "I should wun like anythin', and leave you simply stwanded!"

"Bow-wow!" said Figgins.

"Weally, you New House ass——"

"Come on, the lot of you!" said Lowther. "Line up and start!"

The juniors were not averse to stretching their legs with a little run. They lined up, and Tom Merry gave the word, and they all started at the same moment.

The knoll was a dozen yards away—a sharp rising in the ground, with a clump of bushes on the summit. It was, perhaps, three hundred yards round it and back to the tree where the bicycles stood packed round the trunk. The juniors started off in fine style, Lowther putting on a spurt and going ahead. Figgins soon passed him, grinning, his long legs simply flying over the ground.

And the School House fellows bucked up for all they were worth, determined that a New House bounder should not win the race. Monty Lowther dropped further and further behind—which made it all the more necessary for the other School House fellows to put on steam, if the New House were not to win.

They reached the knoll, and went round it racing. But Lowther only waited till the rest were hidden from view by the knoll. Then he stopped, and ran back to where the bicycles stood under the tree. Five minutes at least must elapse before the juniors, racing round the bushy knoll, came in sight of the tree again, and in that five minutes Lowther was very busy.

CHAPTER 4.

Left in the Lurch!

TOM MERRY and Figgins were abreast as they came sweeping round the knoll, and came in sight of the tree by the path again. The rest of the juniors were close behind.

They were all running hard.

"Lowther's down and out!" Figgins chuckled, with a backward glance. "He's not half round yet!"

But Tom Merry uttered a breathless shout:

"Lowther! My hat! What the dickens——"

They were in full view of the path again now, and a most surprising sight met their gaze. Monty Lowther was there, mounted upon his machine, and starting off.

Figgins gave a yell.

"The spoofer! He was pulling our leg! He hasn't been round at all!"

"Oh, the bounder!"

"Bai Jove! What a wotten joke!"

The juniors did not like it. They had pelted round the knoll in a race, and Lowther had evidently let them get out of sight, and then coolly walked back to the starting-point. Tom Merry shouted after him:

"Monty, wait for us!"

Lowther was on his machine, riding onward—so fast that he certainly did not look tired. He was a good distance already, and if he heard Tom's voice he did not heed it. He pedalled on, without looking back, in the direction of distant Bunchester.

The juniors, breathing hard from the foot-race, came back under the shadow of the tree where the bicycles stood. Tom Merry and Figgins were in first—a dead-heat—but the others were very close behind.

"The ass!" sniffed Figgins. "He knew he couldn't do the run, so he turned it into a rotten joke! Don't see the joke myself!"

"Neithah do I. I wegard it as a beastly spoofer!"

"What the deuce has he started off for without us?" exclaimed Blake. "Does the silly ass want to race us to Bunchester, and steal a start to begin with?"

"Seems to me to be off his silly rocker!" growled Herries.

Figgins snorted.

"We'll jolly soon catch him up! Get on!"

They were dragging their bicycles away from the tree into the path. Then there was a chorus of yells and angry exclamations.

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OUR COMPANION PAPERS: "THE MAGNET" LIBRARY, Every Monday.

"THE PENNY POPULAR," Every Friday.

"CHUCKLES," ID. Every Saturday, 2

"Punctured!"

"Flat as a pancake!"

"Punctured, bai Jove!"

"My valve's cut!"

"Look at my tyres!"

"Great Scott!"

"What's the matter with the blessed jiggers?"

"What the dickens——"

The juniors held their machines, and gazed at them in enraged astonishment. Not one of them was fit for riding. On every machine the tyres were quite flat. On examination, it proved that they were not punctured. The valves had been jerked out, and taken away.

Each wheel on each machine had been treated in the same way. It was worse than punctures, for there was no possibility of repair. The machines were simply unrideable.

The juniors looked at the "jiggers," and looked at one another, and looked after the vanishing form of Monty Lowther. That youth was half a mile away now, a mere dusty spot on the distant path, and still going at scorching speed.

"Lowther's done this!" said Figgins at last.

There was no doubt about that. Lowther had deliberately disabled their machines, and left them stranded in that lonely place, miles from everywhere.

"If this is Lowther's idea of a joke," said Blake, with forced calmness, "I admit that I don't see the humour of it."

"Same here," said Digby, between his teeth. "My word! We'll make the rotter sit up for this!"

"The utter beast!"

"The rotter!"

"The cad!" snorted Blake. "That's what he is, a cad, to muck up our excursion like this for nothing! We can't go to Bunchester now!"

Tom Merry and Manners were silent. They had not a word to say in defence of their chum. What could be said?

Monty Lowther was a humorist, with a strong turn for practical joking. But this kind of a practical joke was quite beyond the limit. There was no fun in a trick of that sort. It was a cruel and ill-natured thing to do—more in the line of Levison of the Fourth than of Lowther of the Shell.

Tom Merry and Manners, in fact, could hardly believe the evidence of their eyes. They were astounded, almost overcome.

The figure of Monty Lowther, riding hard, vanished in the distance. He was gone, and his companions were left—very much left!

"He was fooling us all the time!" said Figgins, gritting his teeth. "That was why he pretended to be tired, and fooled us into racing round the knoll to get us out of sight while he crippled the jiggers!"

"Bai Jove!"

There could be no doubt about it. The two Shell fellows felt themselves growing crimson with shame for their chum.

"But what's he done it for?" howled Blake. "If it was only you New House bounders, it would be a rotten thing to do, but a fellow could understand it. But it's us, too—and his own pals!"

"It's a beastly twick!"

"A dirty trick!"

"Caddish!"

"Mean!"

"I—I say, I'm sorry for this, you fellows!" said Tom Merry, almost with tears of vexation in his eyes. "I can't understand why Lowther should do a rotten thing like that. We'll talk to him pretty plainly about it."

"I'll do more than talk to him!" roared Blake, in exasperation. "What are we going to do now? Walk to Bunchester—seven or eight miles—and drag the machines?"

"No good walking to Bunchester!" growled Figgins.

"We should be too late for the matinee!"

"No good going there for nothing!" snorted Kerr.

"It's a three-mile walk back to the first place where we can get the jiggers put in order," said Digby. "No chance of getting it done and riding on to Bunchester in time for the show. We're dished."

"Dished by that rotter!"

"Oh, I wish I was in hitting distance of him!" said Blake, brandishing his fists. "I'd show him how we like his little jokes!"

"Yaas, wathah! I would give him a feahful thwashin'——"

"We'll rag him bald-headed when we get him home," said Kerr. "Oh, it's disgusting! There isn't any fun in this kind of a trick!"

Tom Merry and Manners did not join in the chorus of denunciation. But they were feeling angry too—all the angrier because it was impossible to defend Lowther's conduct, and he was their chum. They felt that his cruel and

inconsiderate action reflected upon them. They had brought him into the party, and he had stranded the party on the lonely down, spoiled the excursion, and left them with a weary tramp before them.

"I believe he's done it simply to keep us away from the matinee," said Blake. "He seemed to want us not to go for some reason. He proposed to Gussie to chuck it."

"Yaas, so he did!"
Tom Merry knew that. Lowther's desire to keep the juniors away from Bunchester must have been very strong to drive him to such a desperate resource. And he had gone on himself! Was that the engagement he had spoken of—at Bunchester? Had he intended to go by train, and joined the cycling party with the secret intention of somehow baulking their journey?

Tom Merry's cheeks grew red again, as he realised that his chum must have been guilty of that duplicity.

"Well, he's not going to have his way," said Figgins, setting his teeth. "We'll go on to Bunchester. We may be in time for the finish of the show. Wait a bit. I've got a cycling map in my pocket. I'll figure it out."

Figgins spread out his map on the turf, and the juniors bent over it eagerly. Figgins pointed out the route with his finger.

"Look here! It's two miles to a place with a railway-station; and goodness knows when a train starts for Bunchester in this forsaken place! But it's a chance. We can walk on to that place—Gunford—and leave the bikes there, to be sent home by train, and take the first train to Bunchester—if there is one. Anybody got a time-table?"

"I have!" said Kerr. Kerr could always be depended upon to have useful things of that sort about him.

"Out with it!" said Blake eagerly.

Kerr ran over the time-table.

"Train from Gunford to Bunchester at three," he said.

"And the matinee begins at three exactly!" growled Fatty Wynn.

"Arrives Bunchester three-forty," said Kerr.

"And the show's half over then!"

"But we sha'n't miss it all," said Kerr. "We've got time to wheel the bikes into Gunford by three and take the train. The question is, is it worth while to spend the railway fares and pay for admission to see about a third-part of the matinee?"

There was no doubt in the juniors' minds on that point. They were determined not to be "done."

Arthur Augustus, who had the honour of standing treat, so far as the tickets for the matinee were concerned, chipped in at once:

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Hear, hear!" said all the rest.

"Come on, then," said Figgins, folding up his map.

"We'll see as much as we can of the show, and deal with Lowther afterwards. We may run across him in Bunchester. He's gone there."

And the juniors, with a considerable lowering of their high spirits, wheeled the bikes away across the sunny down towards the distant village of Gunford, tramping on, wearily and angrily, in the hot sun.

CHAPTER 5.

At the Empire.

NINE dusty and angry cyclists came tramping into the quiet village of Gunford, wheeling their machines, as the quarter to three struck.

"Good time!" said Kerr.

They wheeled the machines on to the railway-station, and consigned them there, to be sent back to St. Jim's. Then they took their tickets, with a few minutes still to spare.

They were tired and dusty and ratty. While they were waiting on the platform at Gunford the matinee would be starting at Bunchester. It was too bad, and their feelings towards Monty Lowther grew very bitter. He had arrived in Bunchester long ago, and if he had gone to the theatre, he was securely ensconced there, seated comfortably to see the show, while they had a forty minutes' run before them still, and then had to make their way to the Empire.

The trick he had played them was so inexplicable that it added to their angry annoyance. It would not have been so bad if they had been able to imagine a reason for it. But they could imagine no reason. It seemed to be nothing but a practical joke of the most heartless description.

They refreshed themselves with lemonade and buns while they waited for the train. It was a few minutes late, but it came in at last.

They crowded into the train and started for Bunchester. The train was a slow local, stopping at every station while slow country passengers got in and out. The juniors' impatience was almost at fever-heat. But they arrived in

Bunchester at last, five minutes later than the scheduled time. It was a quarter to four when they stepped from the train.

"Here's the place," said Blake, as they came out of the station in Bunchester.

The local Empire, fortunately, was not far from the station. It was, in fact, almost opposite.

The juniors hurried across the road, and presented themselves at the box-office. There was a little delay there in taking so many tickets, especially as Arthur Augustus had to change a five-pound note. But that process was gone through at last, and they were shown into their seats.

The orchestra was playing the "Soldiers' Chorus" from "Faust." It was the interval. The first half of the programme was ended.

Arthur Augustus jammed his eyeglass into his eye, and looked over a programme.

"Wotten!" he said. "The sketch was in the first half. We sha'n't see that. 'His Love Against the World,' you know. Lowthah was wight about the title, aftah all. It seems to have been wathah excitin'. Old Curll was in it. Look at the dwamatis personæ."

The juniors glanced at the caste of the sketch they had missed. The name of Mr. Curll was there, and they were annoyed at having missed seeing their old acquaintance. It was one more item to the account of Monty Lowther.

HIS LOVE AGAINST THE WORLD.

Scene: The Library of De Vere Castle.

Lord de Vere Mr. Snooke Mooker.
Baron Bellerby..... Mr. Horatio Curll.
Gerald Fitzroy..... Mr. Montague.
Cicely..... Miss Gloriana Gilhooly."

"I was wathah cuwious to see how Lord de Vere would play up," said Arthur Augustus regretfully. "And there was a wicked bawon, you know, and pistols and poison and things. Quite excitin'. And we've missed it owin' to that boundah Lowthah!"

"Never mind. There are some good things in the second half," said Blake. "There's a tango, and trick cyclists, and a conjuring show, and a tenor song by Mr. Curll—'Queen of My Soul.' Good old Curll!"

"My hat!" exclaimed Figgins, in a suppressed voice.

"There's that rotter Lowther—in a box, by gum!"

All eyes were turned on the box.

There, within a dozen feet of the juniors from St. Jim's, Monty Lowther sat talking with their old acquaintance Mr. Curll.

"There's time to go round to the box and scalp him before the show begins again," said Blake, in a hurried whisper.

Arthur Augustus shook his head.

"Can't make a wow heah, deah boy. It will keep till we get back to St. Jim's."

"Yes, rather!" said Manners. "Keep quiet, for goodness' sake!"

"He's spotted us," murmured Digby.

Lowther's glance had fallen upon them as he looked over the house. He gave a violent start, evidently surprised at seeing the juniors there. Then he leant towards Mr. Curll and whispered to him, and they both laughed.

That laugh exasperated the juniors almost beyond bounds. At the least, Lowther might have been sorry for what he had done.

Mr. Curll looked towards the juniors in the stalls, and waved his hand to them in his old airy way. He was the same old Mr. Curll—a little older, a little more "wobbly" all over, as it were, probably owing to his devotion to the cup that cheers and at the same time inebriates; otherwise unchanged.

Evidently Lowther had told him of the trick he had played on the chums of St. Jim's, and Mr. Curll looked upon it in the light of a good joke. It made Tom Merry & Co. feel much less kindly towards that distinguished—and almost extinguished—tenor.

The orchestra gave the "Soldiers' Chorus" a rest, and there was a bustle of people coming back from the bars. The audience settled down for the second half of the programme, and the juniors ceased from making signs to Monty Lowther expressive of deadly vengeance to come.

The performance started with trick cycling, which interested the juniors very much, especially Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, who confided to Blake in a whisper that he weally thought he could do that himself.

"Bai Jove! I'll twy that dodge of widin' on the back wheel when we get home!" Arthur Augustus declared.

"Insure your silly neck first!" growled Blake.

"Weally, Blake—"

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

NEXT WEDNESDAY—

"ORDERED OFF!"

"Lowther's gone," said Figgins, with a glance up at the box. "He's behind the scenes, the cheeky bouncer!"

"He's bound to stay for the end, though," said Blake. "We'll go round to the stage door and call on Mr. Curll, and—"

"And find Lowther!" said Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies, I twust you are not thinkin' of makin' a wov with Lowthah behind the scenes," said Arthur Augustus sternly. "It would be fwightfully bad form to make a wov in somebody else's quartahs."

"I'm going to punch Lowther's head the minute I see him, wherever it is!" said Herries obstinately.

"I shall wefuse to allow anythin' of the sort. I considah—"

"Oh, you can go and eat coke!" said Herries disrespectfully. "Curll was grinning at us, too, as well as that Shell bouncer. Jolly good mind to punch his head, too!"

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"Don't let's have any ragging here, for goodness' sake!" said Tom Merry uncasily. "I know Lowther ought to be ragged for what he's done, but we can leave it till we get home."

"Anyway, the bouncer's going to explain what he did it for," said Blake. "And I want to tell him what we're going to do to him when we get him at St. Jim's!"

"Blake, deah boy, I cannot appwove—"

"Bow-wow!" growled Blake.

"I do not wegard that as an intelligent wemark, Blake. Howevah, I twust Lowthah will have the sense to cleah out befoah we call on Mr. Curll."

"I trust he won't!" grunted Herries. "I want to talk to him, and I want it bad!"

Indeed, the juniors were so keen to interview Monty Lowther that they were not sorry when the performance drew to an end.

Mr. Curll sang the audience out, as it were, with his magnificent tenor solo, "Queen of My Soul." Perhaps the shuffling of feet and murmur of voices during his solo put Mr. Curll out a little, and that may have accounted for the wobble of his top note and the anguished expression upon his face when he was producing it. Then the band played, and the theatre emptied; and Tom Merry & Co. made their way round to the stage door to call upon Mr. Curll, though whether they wanted to see Mr. Curll as much as they wanted to see Monty Lowther was a question.

CHAPTER 6:

A Great Man at Home.

MR. CURLL received the juniors of St. Jim's in his dressing-room with much graciousness of manner.

As his dressing-room was only twelve feet by eight, there was not very much room for nine juniors and Mr. Curll, but they came in somehow.

The apartment was luxuriously furnished with two cane-bottomed chairs, from which most of the cane had disappeared, a dressing-table, which was supported against the wall, being somewhat weak in other means of support, a cracked glass, and a large tin trunk.

But from Mr. Curll's impressive manner, and the noble wave of his hand, he might have been welcoming his guests to the halls of his ancestors.

Mr. Curll's face still showed the make-up of the stage, and looked a little bizarre in the raw glare of an unshaded gas-burner, which flared over the dressing-table. It was still broad daylight out of doors; but Mr. Curll's dressing-room looked out on a big blank wall, only three feet distant from his window, and would have been very dusky at noon. He had sung "Queen of My Soul" in the costume of a Tyrolese mountaineer, for some mysterious reason best known to himself or the management, and he was still clad in the short, green breeches; but he had put on an old and tattered Norfolk jacket for comfort, and the mingling of costumes had a very striking effect.

"Sit down, dear boys!" said Mr. Curll, with noble hospitality. "Make yourselves at home. I rather expected to see you. Quite an honour!"

It was not quite clear where the dear boys were to sit down; the chairs looked decidedly dangerous, and the lid of the tin trunk was wide open. Mr. Curll half-leaned and half-sat on the edge of the dressing-table, which gave an ominous creak every moment or two, as if extremely reluctant to support his weight. His weight was considerable, for Mr. Curll, like many great tenors, inclined to what the French politely call *embonpoint*. Not being inclined to adopt the Eastern custom of sitting on the floor, the visitors decided to stand.

"Vewy glad to see you again, Mr. Curll!" said Arthur Augustus courteously. "Pway allow me to congwatulate you!"

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FERRERS LOCKE, DETECTIVE,

is the principal character in one of the complete stories contained in

CHUCKLES, 1st.

"It was ripping, that last solo," said Kerr solemnly. Kerr felt that this was the solid truth, for at the time he had observed to Figgins that Mr. Curll seemed to be trying to rip off the roof of his head.

Mr. Curll smiled a somewhat melancholy smile.

"You should have seen me in the old days, when I was with the Roser Moser Company," he sighed. "They were the days! You never heard me sing the Prize Song, did you?"

"Never."

"No; it was before your time," said Mr. Curll sadly. "Those days are over. Things are not what they used to be. Music in this country, gentlemen, has fallen into the sere and yellow leaf. We live in the age of the Philistines now. A tenor who has seen crowded houses rise to him—rise to him, gentlemen, like one man—has no resource but to go on the halls—the halls! Ha, ha!"

"Too bad, deah boy!"

"Boy!" called out Mr. Curll sharply.

Arthur Augustus started, thinking for the moment that he was being addressed. But Mr. Curll's ejaculation did not refer to him.

A shock-headed youth looked in at the door, with an expression upon his face which did not seem to imply that he felt the greatest possible respect for a great tenor, once a shining light in the Roser Moser Company.

"You young gentlemen would like some refreshment?" said Mr. Curll hospitably. "Name your poison."

"Ahem! You—you see—"

"Of course, of course!" said Mr. Curll hastily. "I understand. Very wise of you. Avoid strong drink, my dear boys, all your lives; keep out of the way of temptation, and never, never put an enemy in your mouths to steal away your brains. As for myself, I have to take a little spirituous refreshment by doctor's orders, for the sake of my voice. I use it as a kind of gargle; very beneficial to the vocal corde—"

"Did you want anythink, Mr. Curll?" the shock-headed youth interrupted at this point.

"Johnny Walker," replied Mr. Curll mysteriously.

"Is that the name of your thwoat gargle, Mr. Curll?" asked Arthur Augustus, with interest.

"Ahem! Yes."

"Bai Jove, if it's a good one, I'll twy it!" said D'Arcy. "You know, I sing a little myself, and I have been twoubled with huskiness at times."

"I—I should not recommend it for the use of youths," said Mr. Curll. "It is—ahem!—ordered specially for me by my physician."

"Most accomodating physician!" murmured Kerr sotto voce.

"I'm waitin', Mr. Curll," said the shock-headed youth.

Mr. Curll turned upon him a glance of the most lofty dignity.

"And what are you waiting for, Henry?" he demanded.

"The money," replied Henry, unabashed.

Mr. Curll coughed.

He made a process of going through the pockets of his old Norfolk jacket, though it was pretty evident that they contained nothing in the shape of cash. He turned out an old tobacco-pipe, half a cigar, and several documents which looked suspiciously like bills; but no coin of the realm came to light.

Henry showed signs of impatience.

"It's very odd!" said Mr. Curll, looking at the juniors with a curious expression. "I have mislaid my purse somewhere. Very odd indeed! Not that I take much care of these things. I hold with the immortal William, 'Who steals my purse steals trash.'"

"Especially as there's probably nothing in it!" Kerr murmured again, unheard, of course, by Mr. Curll.

"Pway allow me to oblige you, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, who had some remembrance of Mr. Curll's little ways from a previous meeting. "If a half-sovereign would be of any use for the moment—"

"For the moment only," said Mr. Curll, taking the half-sovereign with alacrity and tossing it to Henry. "Disappear! Hurry! Avaunt! Bring ginger-beer for the young gentlemen, and my special for me. You comprehend? Get out!"

The shock-headed youth grinned and got out.

"Pray remind me of this before you go, my young friend," said Mr. Curll to the swell of St. Jim's. "I have a shocking bad memory for these trifles."

That was quite true. Arthur Augustus had a dim recollection of another half-sovereign he had parted with under similar circumstances. But he forbore to mention the fact. He had a great regard for the feelings of a celebrated tenor reduced from his high estate and driven to sing "Queen of



"Monty! Wait for us!" shouted Tom Merry. But Lowther, if he heard, did not stop, and pedalled away in the direction of Bunchester. (See Chapter 4.)

My Soul" and "Flanigan's Sunday Trousers," instead of the Prize Song from the "Meistersinger."

The ginger-beer and Mr. Curll's own special arrived. Mr. Curll disposed of his gargle in a single gulp—which seemed to D'Arcy an extraordinary way of using a throat gargle—and he immediately despatched Henry for another.

The juniors discussed the ginger-beer with much satisfaction. They were thirsty after their journey and the stuffy theatre.

"You had a pal of ours in the box with you," Blake remarked. "Is he still knocking about?"

"Ah! You mean my young friend Monty?" said Mr. Curll. "A rising genius, my young friends. Master Lowther will be a great actor some day."

"I don't think!" murmured Kerr.

"Is he still here?" asked Figgins.

"No. He could not have known that you were calling on me, or he would certainly have waited for you. He left a few minutes before you were shown in."

The juniors exchanged glances; there had been some minutes' delay before they were shown into Mr. Curll's dressing-room, and they guessed that it had been to allow Monty Lowther time to get clear.

"Never mind—we'll see him at St. Jim's," said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Henry returned with the second supply of gargle, which followed the first. Mr. Curll bade him fetch a third, explaining to the juniors that he had to prepare his voice for the evening performance. Whether Mr. Curll's voice was benefiting from the peculiar application of the gargle, which smelt remarkably like whisky, was doubtful, for it was growing quite husky now. His seat on the edge of the dressing-table, too, was somewhat unsteady, and the table creaked more and

more ominously. Arthur Augustus watched him in a sort of fascinated way, wondering how long it would be before Mr. Curll and the dressing-table went to the floor together.

Under the softening influence of the gargle, Mr. Curll became more and more reminiscent and pathetic, and even shed tears over his departed glory, and his sad fate in coming on the halls. When Henry came in with the third dose of gargle, Mr. Curll's hand was so shaking with emotion that he could hardly receive it. Henry looked at him with an unsympathetic grin.

"Don't splash it over them trousis, Mr. Curll!" he said.

"Begone!" said Mr. Curll.

Henry grinned more widely, and departed. Mr. Curll held the glass in his hand, shaking, and blinked solemnly over it at the juniors.

"Here's to you, and me, and all of us!" he said, and the third whisky disappeared down Mr. Curll's thirsty throat, and the glass slipped from his hand, and broke on the floor. Mr. Curll stared at it, as if in great surprise, and then gazed at the juniors with the solemnity of an owl. "My young friends, I—"

Tom Merry and Blake seized him, and jerked him away from the dressing-table just as he was about to collapse on it. They sat him down on one of the chairs, and he smiled at them in a melancholy way.

"Thank you, my young friends!" he said. "I—I am obliged to prepare for the evening show in this way, much against the g-g-grain. My doctor orders it. Master D'Arcy pray introduce me to your brother!"

"My bwother!" said Arthur Augustus, in surprise. "My minah is at St. Jim's, Mr. Curll. The young boundah is playin' cwicket this aftahnoon!"

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

NEXT WEDNESDAY—

"ORDERED OFF!"

"I did not refer to Master Wally," said Mr. Curll. "I refer to your twin-brother!"

"B-b-but I haven't a twin!" said Arthur Augustus, in perplexity.

Mr. Curll blinked at him.

"You have not a twin-brother?"

"Certainly not!"

"Then who is that young gentleman who bears such an extraordinary resemblance to you, standing close by your side?" demanded Mr. Curll.

Arthur Augustus looked round almost in alarm. He had never been aware that he possessed a double. But his double was visible only to Mr. Curll's eyes. The existence of the double was due to Mr. Curll's reckless use of the gargle he took in such large quantities by the orders of his physician.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "He's dwunk!"

And Mr. Curll immediately proved the correctness of this surmise by sliding off the chair and collapsing on the floor.

"Gweat Scott!"

"Poor old Curll!" said Tom Merry.

"Poor chap! It's wathah wuff on him to have to use that stuff for his voice when it has this wotten effect on him!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, deah boys, it is not a laughin' mattah—"

"I think we'd better clear," said Figgins; and the juniors, having put a cushion under Mr. Curll's head, left him comfortably asleep on the floor, and took their departure.

During the train journey home to St. Jim's, the juniors amused themselves chiefly by discussing the punishment that was to be visited upon Monty Lowther for his sins; and when they reached the school—just before locking-up—their first inquiry was for the humorist of the Shell.

CHAPTER 7.

Paying the Piper.

MONTY LOWTHER had returned to St. Jim's. He had caught an earlier train home from Bunchester, and was at the school a good hour before the visitors to the Bunchester Empire.

Tom Merry & Co. came in, tired from their journey. They met Kangaroo of the Shell in the doorway.

"Lowther come in?" asked Blake.

"Yes."

"How did the match go?"

"Wiped the Third off the earth!" said Kangaroo. "I say, what's the matter with Lowther? I thought you fellows all went on your bikes?"

"So we did!" growled Figgins.

"Lowther brought his bike home by train, so he told me," said Kangaroo, "and you fellows have come home without any bikes at all. Had a set of accidents?"

"No; the accident is going to happen to Lowther—now!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Lowther seemed rather queer," the Cornstalk junior remarked. "I asked him where you were, and he said you were probably looking for him in Bunchester."

"So we were!"

"The wottah!"

"The beast!"

"We're going to scalp him!"

"Seems to me he's a bit off his crumpet!" said Kangaroo.

"I passed his study a few minutes ago, and he was shouting out, 'Never; Never, Baron Bellerby!' I looked into the study, and he was quite alone—not a soul there. Has he developed a habit of talking to himself? Or is he balmy?"

"Balmy!" said Blake. "Is he in his study?"

"I think so!"

"Come on, you chaps!"

Nine determined juniors made their way to Tom Merry's study. The voice of Monty Lowther could be heard as they came up the passage.

"Cicely! Cicely de Vere! At last, my heart's own!"

"Bai Jove! He's got a lady visitah!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, in surprise. "We had bettah put off the waggin' till she's gone, deah boys!"

"Rats!" said Blake. "It's only some more of his rot! Come on!"

Blake threw the study door wide open.

Monty Lowther was alone there. He started a little at the sight of the juniors, and backed round behind the table. A cricket-bat lay on the table, probably placed in readiness for an emergency, and Lowther's fingers closed on the cane handle.

"So you've got back?" he said genially.

"Yaas, you wottah!"

"Yes, you beast!"

"Yes, you outsider!"

"What did you play that rotten trick on us for, Monty?" exclaimed Tom Merry indignantly

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"Explain yourself, you rotter!"

"Keep your distance!" said Lowther. "I'll explain as far as I can. I'm sorry if you were put to any inconvenience—"

"If!" howled Figgins. "We had to wheel the bikes two miles, and send 'em home by train. We missed the first half of the show."

"And we saw you in the box cackling at us!" said Fatty Wynn.

Monty Lowther grinned.

"It was too bad," he said. "I own that. But under the circumstances—"

"What circumstances?"

"Ahem! You see—" Lowther hesitated.

"If you've got any explanation or excuse to make, we're willing to hear it," said Manners.

"Yaas, but buck up, you wottah!"

"You—you see, I couldn't let you kids go on to Bunchester!" said Lowther. "I was surprised to see you there at all. I thought you'd have to give it up!"

"We weren't going to give it up for you!" growled Blake. "But we missed half the show!"

"Yaas, and I particularly wanted to see that thwillin' sketch, 'His Love Against the World!'" said Arthur Augustus.

"It was worth seeing!" agreed Lowther.

"You saw it, you boundah?"

Lowther chuckled.

"Yes, rather!"

"And why did you play that rotten trick to keep us away from the theatre?" asked Figgins wrathfully.

"Ahem! I—I thought you'd better not go!" said Lowther.

"Upon the whole, you young chaps ought not to frequent places of amusement in that reckless way, and expend your pocket-money in riotous living!"

"You cheeky ass—"

"You feahfully impertinent wottah—"

"Look here!" said Tom Merry. "You had some motive for playing that rotten trick. There's nothing to be said in defence of it that I can think of. Even Levison or Mellish wouldn't have played a dirty trick like that. If you had any real reason for doing it, tell us what it was."

"I had a good reason."

"Well, what was it?"

Monty Lowther was silent.

"Out with it!" growled Herries.

"I can't really explain," said Lowther. "I might as well have let you go as explain the reason why I kept you away. It was necessary—strictly necessary."

"Necessary for what?"

"For a very important purpose," said Lowther.

"What purpose?"

"I can't tell you."

"'Nuff of this silly rot," said Blake. "I knew you hadn't any excuse to make. It was just a rotten trick—one of your beastly practical jokes—and you're going to be jolly well ragged for it!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Hold on!" said Tom Merry.

"Rats! You two Shell bounders can clear out if you like, and leave him to us," said Blake. "I tell you, he's going through it."

Tom Merry and Manners hesitated. The edge of their resentment had worn off by this time, and they remembered that Monty Lowther was their chum. But they could not interfere on his behalf, against the just indignation of the juniors. If the practical joker in the case had been Levison of the Fourth, or Gore or Mellish, they would have taken a hand in the ragging with the greatest goodwill. To stand by Lowther against his just punishment was out of the question; but they did not care to join in it.

"Well, you've brought it on yourself, Monty," said Tom.

"It's no business of mine. Whatever you get serves you right; I must say that."

"My sentiments exactly," said Manners. "Don't wreck the study, you chaps; you can wreck that silly ass as much as you like."

And Tom Merry and Manners walked out of the room. The other fellows closed round Monty Lowther with grim looks. Lowther gripped the bat.

"Now, keep your distance," he said. "I don't want to hurt you, but— Yaroooh!"

A cushion, deftly aimed and hurled by Blake, caught the Shell fellow on the chest, and he sat down, and the cricket-bat clanged into the grate. Before he could rise, the enraged juniors were upon him. Lowther struggled desperately in seven pairs of hands, all eager to get at him.

"Bump him!"

"Wallop him!"

"Wag the wottah!"

For the next ten minutes the scene in the study was beyond description. For ten minutes it seemed to Monty Lowther that he was in the centre of several earthquakes, hurricanes, and cyclones. The juniors had great wrongs to avenge, and they avenged them in the most thoroughgoing manner. The delinquent was bumped, rolled over, licked, clawed, hustled, and ragged without mercy. When the breathless juniors had finished with him he lay on the floor of the study, gasping for breath, his collar gone, his jacket split, his hair a mop, his face crimson. Ink and ashes and jam and treacle had been swamped over him, till he was scarcely recognisable.

"There! I think that will do!" panted Blake at last. "I think it will be a long time before he gets over that!"

"Grooogh!" gurgled Lowther.
"Yaas, wathah! I twust that you will not play any more wotten pwactical jokes on us, Lowthah."

"Grooogh!"
And the avengers marched out of the study, quite satisfied, leaving Monty Lowther anything but satisfied.

CHAPTER 8.

Arthur Augustus Sees It All!

THE next day Monty Lowther was still feeling the effects of that terrific ragging.

Perhaps that accounted for the thoughtful expression and the subdued manner of the humorist of the Shell.

As a rule, Lowther was full of high spirits, and he frequently annexed the lion's share of the conversation wherever he found himself.

Now all was changed.

The most sociable fellow in the Shell showed a desire for solitude that was quite inexplicable; and when he was with the other fellows he was very quiet, and hardly spoke at all. His thoughts seemed to be always busy, however, and many times he was caught muttering to himself.

Tom Merry and Manners were greatly puzzled.

Lowther did not seem to be any longer the old Lowther they had always known; a strange change had come over him.

He was one of the keenest of the supporters of "Tom Merry's Weekly," and whatever contributions failed to come in, Lowther's comic column had always been a dead cert. But comicality seemed to be no longer a part of his nature. The famous "Weekly" did not appear regularly—as Lowther had remarked, it was "weakly" in its appearance—but Tom Merry had determined that a number should come out that week. He was surprised to find that Lowther had lost all his keenness.

"You can leave out the comic column this week," said Lowther, when Tom Merry mentioned that copy was wanted.

Tom stared. Lowther had often suggested leaving out the contributions of lesser lights; but he had always regarded the comic column as a sine qua non.

"Leave it out!" repeated Tom Merry.

"Yes; the fellows say that it's all chestnuts, you know, and they've heard 'em all before, so we'll give 'em a rest this time."

"You've never cared what the fellows said about your little jokes before," said Tom.

"Or you wouldn't have made 'em," added Manners thoughtfully.

"Well, I don't care now; but I don't feel up to producing any humorous contributions at present. Got more serious things to think of."

"What things?" asked Tom.

"Oh, things!" said Monty Lowther vaguely.

"Well, there's your serial," said Tom. "We shall want the usual instalment of the 'Adventures of Archibald.'"

"Can't be done! Put in a note—instalment left out owing to the death of the author, or something of that sort."

"If you don't do the instalment I shall ask Blake to do it."

"All right; ask Blake."

That put the lid on, so to speak. At any other time Monty Lowther would have been simply ferocious at the idea of any other fellow doing an instalment of his serial. Now he did not seem to care in the least.

Tom Merry and Manners were astounded. They stared at their chum; but it was evidently useless to ask questions. Lowther's lips were set obstinately.

"Then you'll be right out of this number?" said Tom.

Lowther yawned.

"All right; I don't mind."

"Well, I suppose you're coming down to the cricket?" asked Tom, somewhat nettled. "You're not chucking that up, too, I suppose?"

"Cricket!" said Lowther vaguely.

His thoughts seemed to be absent.

"Yes, cricket," said Manners, with heavy sarcasm. "It's

a game, you know—a summer game. Played with bat and ball. One fellow bowls, you know, and another fellow uses an implement called a bat—"

"Oh, don't be funny!" said Lowther. "Or, rather, pile in and do the comic column, as you're so jolly humorous all of a sudden. I'm afraid I've got no time for cricket now."

"Got lines to do?" asked Tom.

"Yes, of course—I mean no, of course not," said Lowther hastily.

"That's very lucid, at all events. Have you got an impot, you ass?"

"No, I haven't."

"Then why haven't you time for cricket?"

"Because—ahem!—oh, because, you know," said Lowther, with much vagueness.

"It seems to me," said Manners, "that's you're going right off your chump, Monty. First of all you play a rotten practical joke on us, in a particularly beastly way. Now you chuck up the 'Weekly,' and chuck up cricket. You're always sneaking off somewhere by yourself; and when a chap sees you, you've never got a word to say—always muttering to yourself about some silly rot—"

"It's not silly rot!" said Lowther indignantly.

"What is it, then?"

"Ahem! Never mind."

"You're keeping a secret," said Tom Merry sharply; "or else you're putting on all this idiotic mystery for a joke. I don't like that kind of joke."

"Sorry!" said Lowther. "Excuse me now, you fellows. You can go down to the cricket, you know."

And Lowther walked out into the quadrangle, leaving Tom Merry and Manners looking at one another in amazement and annoyance.

They had been talking in the Form-room passage, just after coming out from lessons. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had been looking on, with a most thoughtful expression upon his noble brow.

"Bai Jove!" he murmured. "There's no doubt about it."

"No doubt about what?" asked Manners. "Do you think he's dotty?"

"Yaas, in a way. I weally think I have hit upon the solution of the mystewy," said Arthur Augustus, with a nod. "Howevah, I shall make sure. Poor old Lowthah!"

"What are you saying poor old Lowther for, ass? What bee have you got in your bonnet now?" demanded Tom Merry.

"I commisewate poor old Lowthah, because I've been there myself," explained Arthur Augustus loftily.

"Eh! Been where?"

"I mean, I've been through it."

"Through what?"

"Through what's twoublin' poor old Lowthah," said Arthur Augustus. "I've hit upon it. I think pewwaps I had bettah tell you chaps, as you are his fwriends. Don't tell all the fellows, or he will be laughed at no end. I can see it all!"

"All what?" howled Tom Merry and Manners together.

"You see, in a delicate mattah of this kind, it wequires a fellow of tact and judgment to spot what is the mattah. But I can see it all," said D'Arcy, with a sage shake of the head. "Poor old Lowthah!"

"My only hat! I believe you're as dotty as Lowther," said Tom Merry crossly. "If you know what's come over him, tell us, you silly chump!"

"I wefuse to be called a silly chump, Tom Mewwy. Howevah, as you are his fwriends, you two chaps, I think I ought to tell you, pewwaps."

"Tell us, then!" roared Tom.

"You see"—Arthur Augustus looked round cautiously, and lowered his voice—"I know all about it; I've been there, in my youngah days." Arthur Augustus might have been a centenarian, at least, by the way he said that. "I've been through it, and I know all the signs. Lowthah is—" He paused dramatically.

"Well, he's what?"

"He's in love!" said D'Arcy, in a whisper.

Tom Merry and Manners jumped. They stared blankly at Arthur Augustus for a moment, and then burst into a roar of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus raised his eyeglass, carefully jammed it into his eye, and glanced loftily and disdainfully at the hilarious Shell fellows.

"I fail to see any cause for this wibald laughtah," he said. "It's a sewious mattah to a kid of Lowthah's age when he falls in love."

"In love! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Tom Merry, wiping his eyes. "Oh, my only Aunt Josephine! You ass! Monty is a silly fa' head, but he's not such a silly fathead as all that!"

"I know the signs," said Arthur Augustus calmly.

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"Chuckin' up all one's usual bizney, and goin' about alone, and avoidin' one's fwinds, and muttewin' to oneself. I am quite suah that I have hit the wight nail on the head. Poor old Lowthah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Pway don't cackle, deah boys. It is weally not a cacklin' mattah for poor old Lowthah. It would be bettah to talk to him sewiously."

"Come on!" exclaimed Manners. "Let's talk to him seriously. We'll ask him."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The three juniors followed Monty Lowther into the quad. They caught sight of him under the old elms, walking to and fro. He was evidently deeply buried in thought, for he did not observe their approach, and they could see that he was muttering to himself. As they came up, Lowther was seen to stretch out both his arms in a supplicating manner, and they heard him exclaim:

"Oh, Cicely—Cicely! My own—my own!"

Tom Merry and Manners halted, thunderstruck. Arthur Augustus gave them a triumphant glance. Lowther's sudden exclamation came as a convincing proof of D'Arcy's theory; confirmation strong as proof of Holy Writ, as the great William had put it.

"What did I tell you, deah boys?"

"My hat!"

"Great Scott!"

"The silly youngstan is in love!" said Arthur Augustus. "I told you I could see it all. You can always wely on a fellow of tact and judgment—"

"The silly ass!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "The silly, silly, silly ass!"

"My deah chap, it might happen to anybody. I wemembah once myself—"

"But Lowther never was such an asinine ass as you are," remarked Manners.

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"Lowther!" shouted Tom Merry.

Monty Lowther came to himself with a start, and glared round at the juniors.

"Hallo! What do you want?"

"Who's Cicely?"

"What?"

"Who is it? What are you jabbering about Cicely for?"

Lowther turned crimson.

"Go and eat coke!" he exclaimed.

And he strode away angrily. Arthur Augustus wagged his head sagely at the two Shell fellows. He had not the slightest doubt as to the correctness of his theory; and Tom Merry and Manners were inclined to agree with him now.

"In love!" murmured Tom. "It looks like it! But who's Cicely? I never heard the name that I remember."

"Bai Jove!"

"Well, ass, what is it now?" demanded Tom.

"Don't you wemembah?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus excitedly. "Cicely is the name of the lady in the sketch at the Bunchestah Empiah."

"Great Scott!"

"The mystewy is explained," said Arthur Augustus. "Lowthah has fallen in love with the lady at the Bunchestah Empiah, and that's why he was twyin' to keep us away yesterday. That accounts!"

Tom Merry and Manners staggered against the elms in a helpless state of merriment. If that was the explanation of Monty Lowther's mysterious conduct—and it really seemed as if Arthur Augustus had hit upon it—they could not regard it as a serious matter, in spite of D'Arcy's assurance that it was very serious. They yelled with laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It weally isn't a laughin' mattah—"

"Isn't it?" roared Tom Merry. "If that's what's the matter with Monty, we'll jolly well laugh him out of it—the silly ass! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Manners.

Arthur Augustus's theory, whether correct or not, was soon known to all the School House fellows. Monty Lowther, when he came in a little later, was surprised to find himself greeted with a howl of laughter.

"How's Cicely?" demanded Kangaroo.

"When is it to be?" howled Gore.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Lowther stared at them, and flushed, and, without replying, went to his study and slammed the door.

CHAPTER 9.

Help Required.

TOM MERRY and Manners were smiling when they came into the study to do their preparation. Lowther was there, alone. He had been alone there for a long time. He looked up with a frown at their entrance, and frowned more deeply as he saw their smiling faces.

"Well, what's the joke?" he growled.

"You are!" said Tom Merry cheerfully. "You mustn't mind a fellow smiling if you make such a giddy ass of yourself, Monty."

"How old is Cicely?" asked Manners. "Forty or fifty?"

"Cicely! What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the lady in the sketch at the Empire—'His Love Against the Giddy Earth,'" grinned Manners. "The charming creature you are in love with. Ha, ha, ha!"

"You silly ass!" said Lowther. "Her name isn't Cicely. That's her name in the play. Her name is Gloriana Gilhooly."

"My aunt! What a stunning name! And when is she going to become Gloriana Lowther?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You fathead! She is forty years old, and a respectable married lady with four children, you howling ass! What put that silly idea into your fat head?"

"Isn't it true, then?" demanded Manners. "Ain't you in love?"

Lowther snorted.

"Do I look that kind of idiot?" he demanded.

"Well, you're several sorts of an idiot, so I don't see why you shouldn't be that sort," retorted Manners. "But if you're not in love with Cicely—I mean Gloriana—what are you always muttering her name and calling her sweet things for, eh?"

"Oh, rats!"

"I must say, I'm shocked at you, Lowther," said Tom Merry solemnly. "When Gussy falls in love, he always chooses ladies not more than ten years older than himself, and always unmarried ladies."

"Always!" said Manners.

Lowther jumped up.

"Look here, you silly idiots, I won't have this! If you can't stop talking rot I'll get out of the study."

Tom Merry made a soothing gesture.

"Take it easy," he said. "If you say you're not in love—"

"You—you crass idiot, of course I'm not!" howled Lowther.

"Well, we'll take your word for it. Gussy's on the wrong track. But if it's not that, what is the matter with you?"

"Br-r-r-r!" said Lowther.

"Oh, keep your silly secret!" said Manners impatiently. "Blessed if I'm going to ask you any more! Go and eat coke! If a fellow can't confide in his own pals, I should say there was something jolly shady about his beastly secrets, that's all."

"You don't understand," said Lowther. "And if you were good pals, you'd try to help me instead of chipping and cackling like a pair of silly geese. I want your help, too—only you won't—"

"Of course we'll help you," said Tom, at once. "What can we do?"

"Any old thing!" declared Manners. "Command us! Do you want to hire a motor-car to carry Cicely off? Or an aeroplane?—that's the latest thing in elopements. Once aboard the hydroplane, and the gal is ours, you know."

"I've got to get out to-night," said Lowther, without heeding Manners' humorous suggestion. "I don't know how to manage it. I've got to be somewhere at nine—"

"Bunchester?" asked Tom Merry.

"Well, yes, Bunchester," said Lowther. "This is in confidence."

"You mean to say that you're thinking of going to Bunchester to-night?"

"Yes; I'm going."

"But you can't go!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "If it's the show at the Empire what do you want to see it for? You've seen it once."

"I can't explain, or you'd be up against it at once," said Lowther.

"And yet you want us to help you out?"

"Yes, I do. I'll tell you this much—there's no harm in it. It's nothing shady or fishy—nothing in the line of Cutts of the Fifth—nothing like Levison's little games. I'm doing quite right; only—only the Head wouldn't look at it like that, or Mr. Railton either; and you chaps"—Lowther paused—"you chaps wouldn't understand. But I've got to get out to-night—to get to Bunchester, and—and you've got to help me!"

"It's impossible!"

ANSWERS

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FERRERS LOCKE, DETECTIVE,

is the principal character in one of the complete stories contained in

CHUCKLES, ½d.

"I'm going," said Lowther determinedly.

"But you can't!" exclaimed Tom Merry, quite aghast. "Look here! Bedtime's half-past nine. Kildare sees lights out for us to-night. If you're not in the dorm he will miss you. What would happen then? You'd be waited for, and marched in to the Head the minute you came back! Breaking bounds at night! You'd be flogged!"

"I don't care."

"Or be sacked," said Manners.

"I'm willing to risk it."

"We're not willing to help you risk it," said Tom. "You're jolly well not going. Look here, Monty, have a little sense. You can't do it!"

"I can—and will—and must!" said Lowther. "I've given my word, and if I don't go I shall be leaving a chap in the lurch, and in a jolly difficult position too! I've got to go, and if you fellows help me it will be all serene. I'll pretend to go to bed early, and make up the bed with a bolster and pillows and things. Kildare won't notice any difference when he comes into the dorm, if you're careful. You can keep him from spotting that I'm not in the dorm. After lights are out, you can sneak out of the dorm, and open the catch of the box-room window, so that I can get in. It will be as safe as houses!"

Tom Merry and Manners looked at him blankly. Of all the harebrained schemes they had ever heard, this seemed the wildest.

"It's almost sure to come out," said Tom at last.

"Not if you're careful."

"You can't get to Bunchester," said Manners. "There's no train at this time of night."

"I'm not going by train. I've hired a motor-bike, and it's ready for me outside."

"Great Scott!"

"I've got to be at Bunchester by nine—"

"What for?"

"Lots of things—keeping my word's one of them."

"If you've really promised—"

"I've given my word."

"Well, then— But—but it's impossible!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"If you fellows don't help me, I shall go without," said Lowther quietly. "I'll just walk out of the school, and chance everything."

"You ass, you know what that would mean!"

"Well, help me, then. You call yourselves my pals, don't you? A pal's business is to help a fellow out of a hole!"

"Seems to me we should be helping you into one more likely," said Tom. "What about your preparation?"

"Hang that!"

"It will mean trouble with Linton in the morning."

"Hang Linton!"

There was a silence in the study. Tom Merry and Manners were utterly taken aback. At the same time, it was clear that there was no arguing with Monty Lowther. He was determined; and if his chums did not aid him in getting out of the school secretly, he would go openly.

And, uneasy as they were, and heartily as they disapproved of the whole business, the two Shell fellows felt that they were bound to stand by him. That there was nothing "shady" in the business they felt assured. Lowther's word was good enough for them. But the secret was intensely exasperating. Shady or not, Lowther was getting himself mixed up in something that would lead to no good; they were sure of that.

"Well, are you going to help me?" asked Lowther at last.

"I suppose we must," said Tom. "I suppose this means that you are mixed up in something or other with Mr. Curll?"

Lowther did not reply.

"You say you've given your word?"

"Yes."

"Then I suppose you've got to keep it. But you were a silly ass to make any promise of the kind. We'll do the best we can."

"I don't like it," said Manners; "but I suppose we've got to do it."

Lowther brightened up at once.

"That's all right!" he exclaimed. "I'd do as much for you!"

"You wouldn't find us playing the giddy goat in this way!" snapped Manners.

"I'll go up to the dorm now," said Lowther. "I've got rather a headache, owing to the way those idiots handled me yesterday. You chaps be in the dorm in good time, and keep it up that I'm in bed. Good-night!"

"When will you be back?"

"I don't know—before midnight, anyway."

Monty Lowther quitted the study. Tom Merry and Manners remained in silence, looking at one another. They were in a state of the utmost dismay, and they more than

half regretted their promise to help Lowther in his wild scheme.

And yet there was nothing else to be done. He was determined to carry out his project, and only by their help could he hope to do so without discovery. And discovery would have meant the most unpleasant consequences for him. They could imagine the Head's face if he learned that a junior of the Shell had broken bounds at night to visit a theatre fifteen miles away.

"Well, this beats it!" said Manners at last. "Monty is simply asking for the sack, and if we don't look after him he'll get it!"

"We've got to look after him, then," said Tom glumly.

But they were not cheerful about it.

CHAPTER 10.

The Death of Monty Lowther!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY was in the passage when Monty Lowther came out of the study. The Shell fellow would have passed him, but D'Arcy was not to be passed. He had come out there to see Lowther, and he meant to see him.

"Pway don't huwwy, deah boy," he said. "I want to speak to you."

Lowther paused impatiently.

"What is it?" he snapped.

"Don't be watty, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, his look very sympathetic, and his tone very soft. "I undahstand perfectly. I know exactly what is the mattah, and I sympathise with you vevy much. I have been there myself."

"I know you've been there!" growled Lowther. "I saw you there with the other silly idiots yesterday!"

"I was not alludin' to the Bunchestah Empiah, deah boy. I mean, I have been through what you are goin' through now."

"What on earth are you talking about?" demanded Lowther, in astonishment.

"I am alludin' to your tendah wegard for Cicely—"

"Oh, you ass! Oh, you fathead!"

"Don't be watty!" said Arthur Augustus, with a soothing motion of the hand. "Pway confide in me, deah boy. You may wegard me as an old hand in these mattahs. As I have wemarked, I have been there myself. Indeed, I have actually wroposed once. Fortunately, it went no furbah than that!"

"You—you—you—" Lowther gasped. "Oh, you're too funny to live! Let me pass!"

"Won't you confide in me, deah boy?"

"I've got a headache, and I'm going to bed," said Lowther.

"So bad as that?" asked D'Arcy sympathetically.

"Pewwaps you would like me to come to the dorm with you and talk it ovah?"

"No, I wouldn't."

"It would pewwaps make you easiah in your mind to confide the whole mattah to me," Arthur Augustus urged. "You may wegard me in the light of an eldahly welation. Ow! Lowthah, you wottah!"

Arthur Augustus staggered against the wall, as Lowther lost patience, and gave him a push. The Shell fellow strode away.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus, rubbing his chest. "I wegard that as wathah ungwateful, aftah the kindly intewest I have taken in him. But I suppose I must excuse a chap who is despewately in love. Poor old Lowthah!"

And Arthur Augustus shook his head sadly.

Monty Lowther proceeded to the dormitory. He mentioned to several fellows on the way that he had a headache, and was going to bed early. In order to keep within the truth, he did go to bed. Levison of the Fourth looked curiously into the dormitory, and found Lowther in bed, and grinned at him.

"Heartache?" he inquired.

"Clear out!" growled Lowther. "This isn't your dorm!"

Levison chuckled.

"We're all feeling awfully sympathetic," he explained. "Would you like me to sit beside you and hold your hand while you talk about Cicely? Ow! You beast!"

A boot whizzed through the air, and Levison dodged out of the dormitory just in time, slamming the door after him. When he was gone, Lowther turned out of bed again. He was glad that he had been seen in bed; it made it less likely that suspicion would be roused.

He arranged the bolster and some clothes in the bed, and covered them up, giving the dummy the appearance of a sleeper. Then he turned out the light.

He waited a few moments listening at the dormitory door, and then, satisfied that Levison was gone, he left the dormi-

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tory door, and hurried to the box-room. A few minutes later he was outside St. Jim's.

Meanwhile, Tom Merry and Manners were busy with their preparation, but they were giving it much less careful attention than usual. They could not help thinking about Lowther in those same minutes speeding away from the school on a motor-bicycle for his unknown and mysterious business at Bunchester.

They intended to do their best for him, and yet there was every possible risk that his absence would be discovered. And then— They did not like to think of what would follow.

It was about half an hour after Lowther's departure that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy looked into the Shell dormitory.

All was dark there. Arthur Augustus listened for a few moments, and then turned on the electric light. In Monty Lowther's bed the figure of a sleeper was outlined.

Arthur Augustus tiptoed towards the bed.

"Lowthah, old man!"

No response.

"Lowthah, deah boy, if you are asleep I won't disturb you. I only want to wemark that I don't beah any malice for your havin' been watty. I quite undahstand your feelin's, old fellow. I have been there myself. And I wepeat my offah to listen to you if you care to confide in a kindwed spiwit. I assuah you that you will find me vevy sympathetic. I quite undahstand these mattahs, deah boy."

Still silence.

"Bai Jove, I suppose he's asleep!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "I should have pwesumed that he was lyin' in a state of anguish meditatin' upon the awkward posish. I am afwaid that I shall have to wake him up. Lowthah, deah boy, I twust you will not be offended if I speak to you wathah plainly."

Not a sound or a movement. Arthur Augustus put his hand upon the shoulder of the sleeper, or what would have been a shoulder if the sleeper had been there. He shook the dummy gently. If the dummy had been Monty Lowther certainly the shake would have awakened him.

"Lowther, deah boy, you should not covah your head with the sheet in that way; it's awf'ly unhealthy to sleep undah the bedclothes. Can you heah me?"

Arthur Augustus paused for a reply, but it did not come. The swell of St. Jim's was a little nettled.

"Now, weally, Lowthah, I know you are awake, and can heah evewy word I say. It is weally somethin' important I have to say to you. Pway don't be an obstinate ass, but sit up and listen to me."

The sleeper did not move.

"Vevy well. I will speak to you all the same. Lowthah, I have made a vevy painful discovery."

Arthur Augustus's tone was very serious and solemn, and ought to have had a considerable effect upon the occupant of the bed. But the bolster and the pillows and the folded coat under the bedclothes showed no sign of emotion.

"Lowthah, I have been wead'n' a notice of the sketch, 'His Love Against the World,' in the papah. The lady who plays the part of Cicely de Vere is mentioned—Miss Gloriana Gilhooly. Pwepare yourself for a painful communication, Lowthah!"

No sign from the bed.

"Pwepare yourself, Lowthah! I wepeat that I undahstand your feelin's. I have been there myself. But you must ova come it, Lowthah. Monty, old man, the papah distinctly states that Miss Gloriana Gilhooly is a mawwied lady!"

Arthur Augustus, firmly convinced as he was that Monty Lowther's secret trouble was caused by a romantic devotion to Cicely,

of the Bunchester Empire, expected to see him leap up from the bed in wild agitation at this impressive announcement. But he didn't. Deeply impressive as the announcement was, it had no perceptible effect whatever upon the bolster and the pillows.

"Lowthah," said Arthur Augustus, after a dramatic pause, "I twust you fully wealise the sewiousness of this. The papah states that Miss Gloriana Gilhooly acts undah her unmawwied name, but is the wife of Mr. Gilhooly, the conductah of the orchestwah at the Bunchestah Empiah. You will see, deah boy, that you are bound as an honouvable chap to dwive this attachment entiahly out of your mind."

Still no answer. Arthur Augustus began to lose patience. Certainly Monty Lowther ought to have shown some sign of emotion by this time.

"Lowthah, will you speak?"

Silence

"Bai Jove, there must be somethin' the mattah with him!" murmured Arthur Augustus uneasily. "I twust he has not fainted. I—I twust he is not ill!"

He bent over the bed, but could hear no sound of breathing. He was quite alarmed by this time. He listened for a full minute, but there was no breathing in the figure under his anxious face. Monty Lowther could not be holding his breath all that time. D'Arcy's face became quite pale.

He passed a somewhat trembling hand over the sleeper, and felt for his breast to ascertain whether the heart was still beating.

There was not the slightest pulsation to be discerned beneath the bedclothes.

Arthur Augustus jumped back from the bed as if he had touched something red-hot. There was horror in his face now. He would have turned back the sheet to see whether there was a sign of life in Lowther's face, but his nerve failed him. He felt that he could not bear to look upon the lifeless face of that victim of an unfortunate attachment.

"G-g-good gwacious!" groaned Arthur Augustus, in utter horror. "The poor chap! Poor old Lowthah! It was my fault for bweakin' it to him so suddenly. But he must have had heart disease, or somethin'. Poor old Lowthah!"

He backed away from the bed. So overcome was he by the horror of the situation that he dared not remove his eyes

from the bed, and he reached the door backwards. Then he dashed out of the dormitory; and flew downstairs to the Shell passage, and burst into Tom Merry's study.

Tom Merry and Manners were working dimly at their preparation. They jumped up in alarm as Arthur Augustus burst in upon them. The horror in his agitated face startled the chums of the Shell.

"What on earth's the matter?" exclaimed Tom Merry.

D'Arcy clung to the table, hardly able to articulate.

"Lowthah!" he gasped.

"Lowther! What's the matter? Has he been nailed?"

"He—he—he—" stuttered D'Arcy.

"He—he—he!" repeated Manners. "What are you he-he-heeing about?"

"He—he—he's dead!"

"What!"

"It's true!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, sinking into a chair. "He's dead, and it's my fault for bweakin' it to him so suddenly. He's died of a bwoken heart!"

CHAPTER 11.

Levison Knows!

TOM MERRY and Manners stared blankly at the swell of St. Jim's.

Their first thought was that Arthur Augustus had gone out of his senses.

But the Fourth-Former, though evidently very much

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Gran



"Sit down, dear boys!" said Mr. Curll, with noble hospitality. "I rather expected you—quite an honour!"
 "You had a pal of ours in the box with you!" said Jack Blake, "Where is he?" (See Chapter 6.)

agitated, was quite in his right mind. He was a prey to the deepest emotion, that was all.

"Poor old Lowthah!" he groaned. "Poor old Lowthah! And only yestahday we were waggin' him. Pewwaps that had somethin' to do with it. I will nevah wag him again—I mean I will nevah wag anybody again. A bwoke heart! Poor old Lowthah! It's howwible, deah boys!"

Tom Merry grasped him by the shoulder and shook him. "Tell us what's the matter, you silly owl!" he said. "What are you talking about? Is anything the matter with Lowther?"

"He's dead in his bed—not a bweath, and his heart isn't beatin'!"

Then the two Shell fellows understood. It was not surprising that the dummy in Lowther's bed was not breathing, and it would have been very surprising indeed if its heart had been beating.

"Oh, you fathead!" said Manners, in relief. "You silly josser!" said Tom Merry, equally relieved. "It's all right."

"It isn't all wight!" said Arthur Augustus. "It's all w'ong. And it's partly my fault. I bwoke the dweful news to him so suddenly!"

"What dreadful news?"

"About his inamowatah!"

"His what?" gasped Tom Merry. "Oh, his inamorata! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Pway don't laugh, Tom Mewwy; it sounds howwible at a moment like this. I had just discovahed that Miss Gilhooly

was a mawwied lady, and I felt it my dutay to acquaint Lowthah with the fact. So I went and told him. I expected him to be vevy much cut up, of course, but he nevah moved or spoke."

"Go hon!" said Manners. "Then—then I touched him," said D'Arcy, with a shudder, "and—and his heart wasn't beatin'. So I wan down at once to you fellows."

"Ha, ha, ha!" Arthur Augustus sprang up, inexpressibly shocked by the burst of laughter from the two Shell fellows.

"You heartless wottahs!" he exclaimed. "I did not think you would take it like this. I wegard your laughter as howwible. Poor old Lowthah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry. "Did you look at him?"

"I did not! I was too howwah-stwicken!"

"Well, Lowther's all right," said Tom, wiping away his tears. "Lowther isn't in bed at all; it's only a dummy, you duffer!"

"What!"

"And he isn't in love with Cicely after all, and there's no need for Mr. Gilhooly, of the Empire, to be jealous!" moaned Manners. "Oh, Gussy, you'll be the death of me some day. I know you will!"

"Then where is Lowthah? Is he not in bed?" demanded D'Arcy.

"The silly ass has gone out; keep it dark," said Tom. "He won't be back when Kildare sees lights out; that's

why the dummy's there. I hope you haven't told this silly rot to anybody else!"

"I passed Levison as I came down," said D'Arcy. "He asked me what was the mattah."

"Did you tell him?" yelled Tom.

"Yaas, of course!"

"Oh, you ass! You fathead!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

The Shell fellows did not stay to listen for more. They rushed out of the study and up to the Shell dormitory. Arthur Augustus, much relieved in his mind, followed them. Tom Merry expected to find Levison prying in the dormitory, and he was not mistaken. The cad of the Fourth was there.

He was standing beside Monty Lowther's bed, with a grin on his face. He had turned back the bedclothes, and the dummy was revealed to view. Arthur Augustus turned pink as he saw it, and realised that it was to that bundle of pillows and bolsters and old coats that he had been making his tragic communication respecting Miss Gilhooly.

"Hallo! What's the little game?" said Levison, with a laugh. "What's Lowther up to now?"

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "I've been taken in!"

"I wasn't taken in, though," chuckled Levison. "I came to see! Where's Lowther, you fellows? What's the little game?"

The Shell fellows did not reply. They were stricken with dismay. Levison was the special enemy of the Terrible Three, and he was a sneak and a tell-tale. Lowther's secret was in his keeping now, and they realised that it might as well have been shouted from the housetops.

Levison evidently realised that he held the whip-hand now. He grinned with glee at the idea. He had caught Monty Lowther out!

"Out of bounds, I suppose?" he went on. "This is a little game to take old Kildare in, is it? Where's he gone? To see Cicely? Ha, ha, ha!"

"Never mind where he's gone," said Tom Merry at last. "This has got to be kept dark, Levison."

Levison chuckled.

"Kept dark! You bet! I'm jolly well going to tell all the fellows now!" And he made a movement towards the door.

Tom Merry closed the dormitory door, and put his back to it. Levison's chuckle died away, and he looked a little alarmed. He was shut up in the dormitory with three fellows with whom he was on the worst of terms, any one of whom could have licked him quite easily. His satisfaction diminished considerably.

"Here, no larks!" he exclaimed uneasily.

Manners rearranged the bed, and concealed the dummy from view. Levison looked at him with a sneer. He did not intend to keep his discovery dark—not he! Not that he intended to go directly to the Housemaster or a prefect with the information that Monty Lowther was out of bounds. But he knew that as soon as Lowther's device became the talk of the House it would not be long in reaching a prefect's ears. Then Kildare would be very careful to ascertain whether Lowther was in the dormitory or not when he saw lights out for the Shell.

Tom Merry fully understood what was in Levison's mind, and his expression became very grim. The secret had to be kept; and it was useless to appeal to Levison's good-nature, he hadn't any. It was still more useless to appeal to his sense of honour, for that quality was still more conspicuous by its absence.

"Look here, Levison," said Tom quietly, "this has got to be kept a secret. Do you understand? Not a word outside this dormitory."

Levison shrugged his shoulders.

"You can get Lowther into a row if you like," continued Tom Merry. "But if you do, we'll make you pay for it! If you say a single word—" He paused.

"Well?" sneered Levison.

"If you say a word about this you'll get a hiding to start with—the hiding of your life!" said Tom Merry. "And besides that, have you heard that people who live in glass-houses shouldn't throw stones? Do you want me to tell Mr. Railton that you smoke cigarettes in your study, and that you went last Saturday afternoon to play billiards with that rotter Lasker in Rylcombe?"

Levison started.

"So you're going to start as a sneak?" he asked sneeringly.

"If you do, I will!" said Tom determinedly. "If you had a rag of decency it wouldn't be necessary to threaten you. As it is, that's the only way to keep your beastly mouth shut! Mind, I mean what I say. If you utter one word I'll go straight to Mr. Railton and give you away, and you'll be had up before the Head. I mean it!"

Levison bit his lip hard.

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WEDNESDAY—NEXT ORDERED OFF!

"Yaas, wathah! Undah the circs, I quite approve," said Arthur Augustus. "Don't be a beastly sneak, Levison."

"I wasn't going to tell Railton," said Levison sullenly.

"I know exactly what you were going to do," said Tom, with a curl of the lip. "And you're jolly well not going to do it. Understand? If Lowther is bowled out I shall put it down to you—"

"Somebody else may spot this—"

"Not unless you give them the tip. Anyway, I'll chance that! If it comes out, your little goings-on will come out, too. I give you my word about that!"

Levison clenched his hands. Levison had more to fear from being given away than Monty Lowther had, wherever he was at the present moment. Levison's nails dug into his palms, and his thin, hard face was pale with rage. He realised that he did not hold the whip-hand, after all, if Tom Merry chose to turn his own methods upon him. That was a thing Levison had never anticipated, and it enraged him so much that for a few moments he could hardly speak. He prided himself upon his cunning, and it was extremely exasperating to be caught so easily.

"Well, what do you say?" asked Tom Merry grimly.

"I'm not going to say anything," muttered Levison.

"Mind you don't! If this gets out, I shall put it down to you, and you'll suffer for it. You know you've done enough to be sacked for a dozen times if the Housemaster were once put on the track! And he will be, if this comes out."

"I tell you somebody else may spot it, and—"

"If that happens, all the worse for you. I shall put it down to you."

"Look here—"

"Enough said!"

Tom Merry turned out the light and walked out of the dormitory, followed by Manners and D'Arcy. Levison followed slowly, gritting his teeth. Tom Merry did not even look at him again, and the contempt of his manner stung Levison to the quick. But he did not dare to provoke the captain of the Shell.

Levison's discovery remained a secret within his own breast, anxious as he was to publish it. He could keep a secret when he liked. But though he said nothing, he thought the more, and he consoled himself with the reflection that he was only biding his time.

CHAPTER 12.

Keeping it Dark.

HALF-PAST nine was bedtime for the juniors of St. Jim's, but at twenty past Tom Merry made his way to the Shell dormitory with Manners. They wanted to be on the scene before the rest of the juniors came up, in order to keep watch and ward, as it were, over Monty Lowther's bed. To keep the dummy in Lowther's bed from being discovered by the other fellows—and, above all, by Kildare—was not an easy task, and the closer it came the more it worried them. But there was no help for it now. Monty Lowther was miles from St. Jim's, and his escapade had to be hidden.

The two juniors had to act a part—and acting a part was extremely repugnant to them. They would have made the matter easier by confiding in chums they could rely upon—such as Kangaroo and Glyn and Clifton Dane—but they shrank from bringing other fellows into what might prove a serious scrape. For if Lowther's absence were discovered, all the fellows who were helping to conceal it would certainly have found themselves in trouble, as well as the absentee himself.

When the rest of the Shell came into the dormitory Manners was seated on the side of Lowther's bed, taking his boots off, and apparently had been chatting with the junior, who had gone to bed early. So far appearances were kept up. But Lowther's having a headache and going to bed early was such an unusual circumstance that the other fellows could hardly help remarking on it.

"Poor old Lowther!" Kangaroo remarked, coming towards the bed. "Is he asleep—dreaming of the beautiful Mary Jane? Did you say her name was Mary Jane, or Mary Anne?"

And the Shell fellows chuckled.

"That was only Gussy's rot," said Tom Merry. "It's nothing of the sort really; Lowther told us so."

"Let him answer for himself," grinned George Gore. "Lowther, speak up! Art thou in love?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence gives consent," said Crooke, as no answer came from the bed. "Lowther is smitten! Lowther has succumbed to the antiquated charms of Gertie Gilhooly. Did you say her name was Gertie, Lowther?"

"Sulky—eh?" remarked Gore. "Why don't you speak, Lowther?"

"He's shy!" chuckled Bernard Glyn. "He doesn't like to own up! Lowther, old man, confide the whole bizney to your bosom chums! I claim to be best man!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Rats!" said Kangaroo warmly. "I'm jolly well going to be best man! Lowther, ain't I going to be best man?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Now, tumble in, you kids!" said Kildare of the Sixth, looking in at the door. "What's all this catkling about? Turn in!"

"We're only sympathising with Lowther," explained Gore. "Lowther's fallen in love with Miss Gilhooly, of the Bunchester Empire, and—"

"Don't talk rot!" said Kildare. "Turn in!"

"Well, ask him," said Gore. "He's only pretending to be asleep. He's covered up his face so that we sha'n't see his blushes. Haven't you, Lowther?"

"Do shut up!" said Tom Merry angrily. "Why can't you ring off, Gore?"

"If Lowther wants me to ring off he can say so," said Gore. "I don't like sulky beasts. What is he sulking for?"

"Come, come! I'm waiting!" said Kildare.

The Shell fellows turned in. Tom Merry and Manners were in a state of uneasiness, as the prefect's attention was thus directed towards Lowther's bed. But there was nothing in the appearance of the bed to excite suspicion, and Kildare did not give it a second glance.

The two chums breathed more freely when Kildare turned out the light and quitted the dormitory.

Lowther was safe from discovery by the head prefect of the School House, at all events, now. But there was still danger from other quarters. The Shell fellows did not drop the subject; they continued to make remarks to Lowther and to talk "at" him, little dreaming that the object of their chipping was not in the dormitory at all.

"What a blessed sulky beast he is!" said Gore at last. "Not a word! I say, Lowther, have you gone deaf, or dumb, or both?"

"Do shut up, and let's go to sleep!" said Manners.

"I've a jolly good mind to get up and chuck something at him!" growled Gore. "What does he mean by keeping mum like this?"

"Do be quiet!"

"Rats! I'm going to make him speak."

Gore sat up in bed, and a clothes-brush whizzed through the air, and dropped upon the still form in Lowther's bed. Thud!

But no remark came from Monthy Lowther.

"Won't that make him speak?" growled Gore. "By Jove! I'll chuck a boot next."

"No you won't," said Tom Merry, sitting up in bed. "If you start chucking boots about, I'll swamp a jug of water over you, so look out!"

"Well, why can't the sulky brute speak?"

"Oh, shut up!"

Gore grunted, but he did not throw the boot. He did not want a jug of water in return.

The Shell fellows settled down to sleep at last, getting tired of chipping Lowther, as there came no reply to their remarks.

Glad enough were Tom Merry and Manners when the voices died away, and there was silence in the dormitory.

Discovery had been staved off, though they had been kept on tenterhooks until the other fellows were asleep.

Neither Tom nor his chum thought of slumber. They were too worried and anxious for that. Lowther was at Bunchester, and they could not help wondering what he was doing there. D'Arcy's ridiculous theory was mistaken; and Lowther had assured them that there was nothing "shady" in his mysterious excursion. Then what was he doing—what had he gone to Bunchester for? Something that would exasperate the Head, if the Head knew of it; that they knew from Lowther himself. But the mere fact that he had gone out at night would be enough to earn him a flogging, if the Head or Housemaster discovered that nocturnal visit to Bunchester. And there was still danger that he might be "spotted" coming in.

The missing junior's chums had thoughts quite troublesome enough to keep them awake, as the minutes crawled by, and the hours struck slowly from the clock-tower.

Half-past eleven had rung out, and still Lowther had not appeared. Manners dozed off now, but Tom Merry remained wide awake.

A slight sound at the door of the dormitory caught his anxious ear at last.

He started up in bed.

"Is that you, Monty?" he asked, in a whisper.

"Yes."

"Thank goodness you've got back!"

"It's all right."

Monty Lowther undressed quickly in the dark.

"Not spotted coming in?" asked Tom.

"No."

"Good luck!" The captain of the Shell drew a deep breath of relief. "I've been on tenterhooks all the time."

"You don't mean to say you've kept awake?"

"Yes, I have."

"No need to," said Lowther. "Besides, you can't keep awake every night."

Tom Merry peered at him in the darkness.

"Every night!" he repeated. "What do you mean? You don't mean to say that you are thinking of playing this fool trick again?"

"I must!"

"Monty!"

"I tell you it's a success!" said Monty Lowther.

"I—"

"What's a success?"

"Never mind. My hat! I'm jolly tired." Lowther sank down in bed with a sigh of relief. "I shall sleep like a top; I know that."

"You haven't asked whether anybody's spotted your trick here," said Tom.

"No; has anybody?"

"Gussy and Levison—nobody else, luckily."

"Levison!" Lowther sat up. "Levison! That spying cad! Then he's given me away."

"I found a way of shutting him up. But you can't do anything of the kind again, Monthy. It's out of the question."

"We'll talk about that to-morrow," yawned Lowther.

"Good-night!"

"Good-night!" said Tom shortly.

Lowther was asleep in two or three minutes. He must have been very tired. Tom fell asleep himself at last, but his sleep was troubled by dreams, in which he saw Monty Lowther scouring off on a motor-bike, with the Head pursuing him, and Mr. Curll waving a glass at him. The clang of the rising-bell in the morning awoke Tom from a troubled sleep, and he sat up, yawning, feeling very much the effects of the loss of rest overnight.

Monty Lowther was still fast asleep; the rising-bell had failed to wake him. The Shell fellows all glanced towards Lowther as they turned out.

"Still asleep, by Jove!" said Gore. "He's a hog for sleep! Wake up, Lowther!" And he jerked away Lowther's pillow, and the Shell fellow awoke with a start, and rubbed his eyes.

"My cue?" he exclaimed confusedly. "All right; I'm ready! Dastard, I will never—" He broke off as he realised where he was.

"Hallo! What are you calling me?" exclaimed Gore.

"Eh? I wasn't calling you anything. I suppose I was dreaming," said Lowther. "Still, I'll call you something if you like. Fathead!"

"Well, you've found your voice, at any rate," said Kangaroo. "Why couldn't you speak a word when we were talking to you last night, Lowther?"

Lowther coloured.

"My dear chap, a bed's a place to go to sleep, not to hold a conversazione," he said. "Grooh! I feel sleepy!"

"You've had more sleep than we've had."

Lowther stared, and then remembered that he had been supposed to go to bed early. He grinned.

"Chap can't sleep when silly asses are jawing to him," he said calmly. "If I go to bed early to-night, I'll be glad if you'll shut up and let me sleep."

"You're not going to bed early to-night," said Tom Merry, in a very decided tone.

Monty Lowther gave him a curious look.

"I think I am," he said. "It's good for me. I find I require quite a lot of rest." And he plunged his face into refreshing cold water, and said no more on the subject.

Tom Merry and Manners said no more then, but they looked very determined.

CHAPTER 13.

On the Track.

THERE was trouble for Monty Lowther in the Form-room that morning.

In the first place, he had wholly neglected his preparation the evening before, and was not prepared to face Mr. Linton, his Form-master. In the evening he had cheerfully said, "Hang Mr. Linton!" but in the morning he had to deal with that severe gentleman face to face, and it was as impossible to elude him as to hang him. Lowther made a very poor show, and the master of the Shell was decidedly angry. Two hundred lines were Monty Lowther's

reward, as well as several sharp remarks from his Form-master.

In the second place, Lowther had missed a third part of his night's rest, and it showed its effect upon him. He was yawning and half asleep all the morning, much increasing Mr. Linton's irritation with him.

It was a great relief to Lowther when the Shell were dismissed after morning lessons. He came down the Form-room passage with his chums, yawning portentously.

"Sleepy, I suppose?" growled Manners.

"Yes, a little bit," said Lowther.

"No wonder, after staying out till midnight, and scorching about the country on a motor-bike half the night," said Manners. "What have you done with the bike?"

"I leave it in Rylcombe."

"You leave it—Do you mean to say you're going to use it again?"

"To-night," said Lowther calmly.

Tom Merry exchanged a glance with Manners. They had been expecting this, and they were ready for it.

"Now, look here, Monty," said Tom, in a low, resolute voice. "You've got to chuck up this silly rot. We've stood by you once, and it was trouble enough. Levison's bowled you out, and I could only keep his mouth shut by threatening to give him away to Railton if he talked. That's not pleasant for me. We didn't get to sleep till you came in, either. It was a bare chance that Kildare didn't spot the dummy in your bed. It can't be done again—it's too risky. You're not going to do it."

"I must!"

"Why must you?"

"I can't tell you now. I'll tell you next week, if you like, when it's all over," said Lowther. "It's the chance of a lifetime for me, and I'd rather be sacked than lose it. But you fellows wouldn't understand—you'd only think of the risk. If you don't choose to help me, you must do as you like, but I'm going."

"You'll take the risk yourself if you do," said Tom abruptly.

"All right."

"You'll be bowled out."

"I'll chance it."

"Oh, you ass—"

Lowther yawned again.

"I think I'll get a snooze," he remarked. "I feel quite tired. So-long!"

He walked away, leaving his chums feeling dismayed, angry, and helpless. There was evidently no overcoming Lowther's determination, but the risk the obstinate fellow was running quite scared his chums. It had been almost a miracle that discovery had been evaded the previous night. The wild escapade could hardly succeed a second time.

"What on earth's to be done, Tom?" said Manners, in a helpless sort of way. "It's no good talking to him."

Tom Merry's jaw set grimly.

"No good talking to him," he agreed. "What's wanted is action—not words. We'll prevent him from going out to-night, if we have to collar him and hold him down."

"Good egg!" said Manners heartily. "I'm getting fed up!"

"I'm quite fed up!" growled Tom.

Monty Lowther did not mention the matter again that day. He seemed more thoughtful and absent-minded than ever. It was only too clear that his mind was not at St. Jim's; that all his thoughts were dwelling upon his mysterious business at Bunchester. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy sought him out after lessons, still determined to be sympathetic. He repeated the tragic communication he had made to Lowther's dummy in the Shell dormitory the previous evening. To his surprise, Lowther burst into a roar of laughter.

Arthur Augustus gazed at him in astonishment and indignation.

"Weally, Lowthah, undah the cires, as Miss Gilhooly turus out to be a mawwied lady, it is up to you to dwive this thing wight out of your mind—you undahstand that—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Lowther.

"Bai Jove! It's hystewics!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "Calm yourself, Lowthah, deah boy! Pway calm yourself!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Poor old Lowthah! I wealise that this is a dweadful shock for you—but pway calm yourself! Shall I get some watah?" asked D'Arcy anxiously.

"No; you've got enough on your brain, Gussy," gurgled Lowther. And he walked away, chuckling explosively.

"Bai Jove, you wottah, if you insinuate that I suffah fwom watah on the bwain—"

But Lowther was gone. "I've told Lowthah!" Arthur Augustus announced to Tom Merry and Manners, when he encountered them in the quad-range.

"Told him what?" asked Tom, puzzled.

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"The feahful twuth!" said D'Arcy impressively. The Shell fellows grinned.

"And how did he take it?" murmured Manners.

"He went into hystewics."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Howevah, I am suah that upon weflection he will wealise that there is only one thing to be done, as an honouwable chap. I think he will chuck it up now. I fail to see any weason whatevah for cacklin', Tom Mewwy."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It really looked as if Tom Merry and Manners were suffering from hysterics also.

Arthur Augustus walked away with his noble nose in the air. He felt that he had done his duty, a painful duty, and he did not see any reason whatever for merriment upon such a painful, and, indeed, tragic subject. But the Shell fellows evidently did.

There was another fellow in the School House who was very thoughtful that day, as well as Monty Lowther. It was Levison of the Fourth. Levison was thinking the matter over very carefully. He had heard all about Lowther's peculiar conduct on the half-holiday, when he had stranded the cyclists on their way to Bunchester—the ragging that had followed had made that affair the talk of the house for a time. Why had Lowther wanted to go to Bunchester alone—and why had he taken such extraordinary precautions to keep the other fellows away? That was a very interesting question for Levison, smarting from the treatment he had received from Tom Merry, and anxious to turn his knowledge to the disadvantage of the chums of the Shell. There was something going on at Bunchester, in connection with Lowther's visit to the theatre, and his friendship with Mr. Curll; and Levison—judging others by himself, as he always did—was convinced that it was something very shady indeed, or why the secrecy? It was pretty clear that Bunchester had been Lowther's destination the previous night, when he had secretly absented himself from the school. What had he been doing there, and was he going again? Levison asked himself. He did not care to take the risk of revealing the fact that Lowther was breaking bounds at night, much as he desired to do so. But he realised that if he could discover Lowther's mysterious business at Bunchester, it might be easy to arrange for the discovery to come about of itself. Added to his desire to get even, as he called it, with the Terrible Three, Levison was curious—very curious. And, after thinking the matter out carefully, he determined to ascertain whether Lowther cleared off that night in the same manner, and act accordingly.

With that intention in his mind, he kept an eye on Monty Lowther after lessons. He noted that Lowther did his preparation very early, and probably left it unfinished; for at quite an early hour he appeared in the common-room, and remarked that he was going to bed early. Levison grinned as he heard that remark; he knew what it meant, especially as he saw the expression of Manners and Tom Merry as they heard it.

Lowther strolled out of the common-room, and went to the Shell dormitory. A quarter of an hour later, Levison took his way thither. It was dusk in the dormitory, and in the dusk he made out the form of a sleeper in Lowther's bed. In one minute he had ascertained that it was a dummy—Lowther was not there. Levison left the dormitory quietly, with a glitter in his greenish eyes.

"He's gone again!" he murmured. "Gone to Bunchester, of course, to the theatre there! What's his little game? He doesn't miss a single performance—why?"

It was a puzzling question, but Levison was determined to get to the bottom of it. For the next ten minutes Levison was busy in his study with time-tables. But he shook his head savagely over them. There was no train for Bunchester.

"How the dickens does he do it?" Levison muttered. "He can't bike it—and he can't get his bike out at this hour without being spotted. I suppose he can't afford to hire a motor-car, and he can't walk it. A motor-bike, perhaps. I remember he had one out last week from the garage in Wayland—on Saturday afternoon. Yes, that's it, he hires a motor-bike; perhaps has it brought for him near the school, ready to mount when he sneaks out. My hat! What a risk to run! He must be simply off his rocker! But what is he doing at Bunchester? That's the question. Something awfully shady—something he would be sacked for if it was known, you bet! And if I knew what it was, and where it was, and could arrange for a prefect to be there some time and spot him!" Levison grinned at the idea. "What a dot in the eye for Mr. Magnificent Merry if his best chum got the sack from the school!"

Levison thought it over.

"I can't get over there to-night—there's no train—or I'd jolly well go over to Bunchester and spot him. What's his little game? I know he ran away from school once to go

on the stage, the silly ass, and the Head pardoned him, on his promising never to play the giddy goat like that again! It was with that chap Curll that he went—Curll who's in the company at the Bunchester Empire. My hat! Is it possible—"

Levison jumped to his feet in sudden excitement as a thought flashed into his mind.

His eyes glittered more greenishly than ever.

"Is it possible? He wouldn't dare—he wouldn't—only he dares break bounds like this of a night, with all the chances against him, so why wouldn't he dare the rest? My only gainted aunt, if it's that—and if he could be spotted in the very act—"

Levison looked round the study for the Bunchester paper, in which he had read a review of the performance at the Empire. It was open at the paragraph dealing with the Empire performance. Levison remembered a name he had seen there—remembered it now with a new meaning. Yes, there it was—in the cast of "His Love Against the World!"

Lord de Vere.....Mr. Mooker.
Baron Bellerby.....Mr. Horatio Curll.
Gerald Fitzroy.....Mr. Montague
Cicely.....Miss Gloriana Gilhooly.

"Mr. Montague!" said Levison, in almost an awed voice. "Mr. Montague! MISTER MONTAGUE!—as Gerald Fitzroy! Oh, my only hat! And now, what does it say?" He read down the paragraph. "Mr. Mumper, who played the part of Gerald Fitzroy in the brilliant sketch entitled 'His Love Against the World,' is the unfortunate victim of a severe attack of influenza, and his part is now played, with scarcely less merit, by Mr. Montague, who, in spite of his very youthful appearance, is certainly quite equal to a very trying role."

"His very youthful appearance!" murmured Levison. "Mr. Montague! If those silly asses saw this, I wonder if they'd guess?"

And Levison sat for a long while with the paper in his hand, his brows wrinkled in deep thought, and his eyes glittering.

He had made a discovery—at all events, he was satisfied that he had; and he felt that he held Monty Lowther—and through Monty Lowther his chum Tom Merry—in the hollow of his hand! Which was a very satisfactory feeling for the cad of the School House.

CHAPTER 14.

A Surprise for the Shell.

TOM MERRY wore a worried look that evening.

He knew that Monty Lowther had announced his going to bed early, and had gone to the dormitory, with the intention of leaving a dummy there, and clearing off, as he had done the night before.

Tom Merry and Manners had talked it over, and they had determined that Lowther should not be allowed to go. And they quietly stationed themselves in the box-room, by the window of which they expected Lowther to leave, with the determination of stopping him, and keeping him indoors. The box-room was a quiet, secluded spot, suitable for an argument which might prove to be a very warm one.

But Lowther did not come there.

Perhaps he had a suspicion of the kindly intentions of his chums. At all events, after waiting half an hour in the box-room, the Shell fellows were driven to the conclusion that Lowther did not intend to get out that way.

They accordingly left their hiding-place, and repaired to the Shell dormitory. There they found Lowther's bed prepared for inspection, with a dummy in it, but no Lowther.

They looked about the house for their chum, but without finding him. It was only too clear that Lowther had gone out, and that he had selected another way out. As that knowledge forced itself upon them, the two Shell fellows looked at one another with feelings almost too deep for words.

"He's gone!" said Tom, at last.

"No doubt about that!" Manners agreed. "He knew we were going to stop him, and he's dodged us—the deep beast!"

"And—and I suppose we've got to keep it dark, if we can," said Tom Merry uneasily. "It's up to us, I suppose."

Manners grunted discontentedly.

"How long is it going on?" he demanded.

Tom Merry shrugged his shoulders.

They were very anxious when bedtime came. Arthur Augustus, of course, had kept the secret, and so far Levison appeared to have said nothing. But it was scarcely likely that the dummy in Lowther's bed would pass muster with the Shell a second time. The fellows were sure to speak to Lowther again, and his peculiar silence would make them

suspicious at last. They felt that it would happen—and it did happen.

When the Shell fellows came into the dormitory, all eyes turned on Lowther's bed, and the usual chipping began.

"Sulky again!" said Gore, as no reply came from Lowther's bed. "Look here, you chaps, why not make him answer?"

Kangaroo grinned, and took a sponge from his washstand, and dipped it into the jug. Then he approached Lowther's bed cautiously. The other fellows watched him, grinning. Tom Merry ran into the way.

"Chuck it, Kangy!"

"Shush!" said Kangaroo. "I'm going to wake him up. Too much sleep is bad for him. He was nodding off all day in the Form-room. Get out of the way, you duffer!"

"Look here, Kangy," said Tom, desperately. "Let him alone! I tell you—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" burst in a sudden roar from the Shell fellows. Gore had gone to the other side of Lowther's bed, grasped the bedclothes, and jerked them off.

A roar of laughter died away suddenly in a gasp of stupefaction.

The juniors gazed at the bolster, pillows, and folded coats arranged in the bed, as if they could scarcely believe their eyes.

"Why—why—why—" stammered Gore. "He—he—he's not there!"

"My hat!"

"It's a dummy!"

"Where's Lowther?"

Kildare's step was heard in the passage. Tom Merry caught the bedclothes hastily and covered the dummy up again.

"Hush!" he exclaimed. "Not a word! Keep it dark, for goodness' sake!"

The astounded junior began to undress, and Tom Merry made a pretence of saying good-night to Lowther, his cheeks burning.

"Hallo, not in bed yet?" said Kildare. "Come, buck up!"

Kildare glanced at the juniors cautiously; he could see that there was some unwonted cause of excitement in the dormitory.

"No rags here to-night," he said warningly. "If I have to come up, I shall bring a cane with me."

"All right, Kildare!" stammered Tom Merry.

The juniors turned in. A word was enough to betray Lowther's absence; but the word was not uttered. Kildare put out the light and left. The moment the door closed behind him, however, every voice was heard at once.

"What's the little game, Tom Merry?"

"Where's Lowther?"

"Where has he gone?"

"Was he out last night, too?"

"Breaking bounds at night, by gum!" said Crooke. "Oh, you bounders! That's the little game, is it? After all your saintly ways! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Gone pub-haunting!" said Gore. "That's it! That's the way you fellows amuse yourselves on the sly, is it? Well, I'm not surprised. There's always something behind it when chaps keep up such jolly good appearances."

"Oh, rats!" said Kangaroo. "Lowther's not your sort, Gore!"

"Well, where is he, then?" demanded Gore. "I don't see why we should keep it dark. Lowther's said nasty things to me about a game of billiards with Lasker. What's he gone out for himself, I should like to know?"

"It's nothing of that kind," said Tom Merry.

"Then what is it?"

"I—I don't know."

"Kildare ought to be told," said Crooke virtuously. "Lowther's up to something, and it's no business of ours to keep his beastly secrets."

"Gone to see Cicely, perhaps," grinned Kangaroo.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's no business of ours to sneak, either, Crooke," remarked Clifton Dane. "It's Lowther's own affair, not ours. We don't want any sneaking in the Shell."

"That's all very well," said Gore. "But Lowther has been jolly uppish towards other fellows who slip out now and then. It's pretty certain that he was out last night, too. Making a regular habit of it, of course. Rotten, I call it."

Tom Merry and Manners said nothing more, while the talk ran on. The secret was out now—all the Shell—the School House portion of the Form, that is—knew it. Nobody was likely to "sneak," perhaps, but it would be talked all over the House on the morrow, that was certain. It could only be a question of time before it came to older ears now.

Then Lowther would have to explain himself—not to his chums, but to his Housemaster. No wonder it was a long time before the chums of the Shell slept. But they were

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both asleep when Lowther came in, and they did not wake until the rising-bell clanged out on Saturday morning. They looked at once towards Lowther's bed; he was there, sitting up and yawning and rubbing his eyes. And a chorus of inquiry broke from the Shell fellows.

"Where have you been, Lowther?"

"What time did you get back?"

Lowther glanced reproachfully towards his chums.

"It's all out now, Monty," said Tom Merry sharply. "We couldn't help it. It's your own fault."

"Tell us where you've been, anyway," said Gore.

"Mind your own business!" said Lowther.

"Somebody ought to tell the Housemaster," said Crooke.

"Tell him, then, and be hanged!"

"Anyway, it's bound to come out," said Crooke spitefully, "and the sooner the better, I think. I call it disgraceful."

Lowther did not reply, and he was still silent when the Shell fellows went downstairs. But he did not look alarmed. His thoughts were elsewhere; and, thoughtful as he looked, it was not his danger that he was thinking about.

CHAPTER 15.

The Secret Out.

MONTY LOWTHER was the object of general curiosity in the School House that morning.

He did not seem to notice it.

Levison was one of the first to hear the talk of the Shell fellows on the subject of Lowther's escapade; and he came to Tom Merry in alarm, before the juniors went in to morning lessons.

"It's out!" he said.

"I know it," said Tom curtly.

"I haven't said a word!"

"I understand—and mind you don't!" said Tom Merry.

"The Shell fellows found it out last night. I know you haven't sneaked—luckily for you. And if you do, I shall spot you, and then look out."

"I don't intend to say anything," said Levison; and he meant that, as it happened. He had a cleverer game to play than sneaking to the Housemaster, who certainly would not have given a tell-tale a pleasant reception.

"Better not!" said Tom drily. And he went into the Form-room.

Levison looked after him with a spiteful expression.

"Better not!" repeated the cad of the Fourth to himself.

"Quite so! More ways than one of killing a cat."

After dinner that day, Levison knocked at Kildare's door. There was no First Eleven match on that day, and Kildare and Darrel of the Sixth were discussing a pull up the river. The captain of the Fourth looked round at Levison as the latter entered, and noted that he had a letter in his hand.

"For me?" he asked.

"Yes; I thought I'd bring it up, Kildare," said Levison.

"Thank you!" said Kildare, rather surprised. It was not like Levison to take any trouble for anybody, unless he had to. Most of the School House juniors liked to fag for Kildare, but Levison had never shown any desire that way before. The Fourth-Former left the study, and pulled the door shut after him, but left it an inch ajar, and did not walk away.

Kildare turned the letter over in his hand.

"Bunchester!" he said, looking at the postmark. "I don't know anybody in Bunchester. Excuse me, old man." He opened the letter. "My only hat!"

Darrel looked at him inquiringly. Kildare held up two bluish printed slips, numbered.

"Two stalls for the Bunchester Empire," he said. "There's no letter. Somebody's sent me two seats for the matinee this afternoon."

"Well, that's odd," said Darrel, with a whistle.

"Jolly odd!" said Kildare, in great surprise. "No letter, either—just as if I had written for the tickets myself—but I didn't! I've thought of going over there, only it's a jolly long way. Some Good Samaritan has planted the seats on me. I suppose there can't be any mistake?" He looked at the address on the envelope again. "No, there it is, right enough—Eric Kildare, Esq., School House, St. James's School. They're for me!"

"You're in luck," said Darrel, laughing, "and you don't know who's sent 'em?"

"No; they've come straight from the theatre, I imagine; somebody must have ordered them for me," said Kildare, puzzled. "Somebody wants to stand me a theatre, and is jolly modest about it. It's queer. I don't see why I shouldn't use them, though. Would you care to come? Plenty of time to get over there, and I've heard that it's a good show. We'll make it the Bunchester Empire this afternoon instead of the river—what?"

"Thanks; good idea!" said Darrel.

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Levison walked quietly away down the passage, grinning. "Six bob!" he murmured. "Six bob of my own money! It's lucky I'm in funds just now, for I'm going to be there, too, and watch Kildare's face when he sees Mr. Montague on the stage. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hallo!" exclaimed the voice of Blake of the Fourth. "What rotten trick have you been playing now, Levison? You seem awfully tickled about something."

Levison started and looked round.

"Oh, nothing!" he said. "You're playing the New House this afternoon, Blake?"

"We are," said Blake. "Would you like to score?"

"No fear! I'm going out. Is Lowther playing?"

Blake shook his head.

"No; he's standing out, the ass! What are you cackling at now?"

"Oh, nothing!" chuckled Levison; and he walked away, leaving Blake perplexed. Blake did not see any cause for amusement in the fact that Monty Lowther was standing out of the House match that afternoon.

Lowther was, indeed, out of the School House junior team, and Tom Merry found it very exasperating. He had a reserve to put in in Lowther's place—that was all right. But he guessed where Lowther was going.

"Bunchester, I suppose?" he asked.

"Well, yes," said Lowther.

"I'm getting fed up with Bunchester," said Tom Merry. "You know very well that you ought to play in the House match."

"Play next Saturday," said Lowther lazily.

"That won't be a House match. I must say I think it's pretty rotten of you to desert your pals this way."

"Sorry!" said Lowther, looking at his watch. "Hallo! I must be off! I'm going by train this afternoon, and it goes in a quarter of an hour."

And Lowther hurried away, leaving Tom Merry with a dark shade on his brow.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, who was on the School House steps, put up his eyeglass and glanced after Lowther, with a sad shake of the head.

"Weally, I wegard this as wotten of Lowthah!" he murmured. "Aftah my bweakin' the dweadful twuth to him, it's his duty as an honouwable chap to keep away fwom the Bunchestah Empiah. Don't you think so, Tom Mewwy?"

"Oh, rats!" was Tom Merry's reply.

Kildare and Darrel came out of the School House a little later. Tom Merry hailed them.

"Going to umpire for us?"

"No," said Kildare, laughing. "If you kids want to make yourselves useful you can fetch our bikes round."

"Like a bird!" said Blake at once. And Blake and Herries hurried away for the bicycles of the two great men of the Sixth.

Kildare and Darrel had trouser-clips on their ankles, but were in their ordinary clothes.

"You kids have seen the show at the Empire at Bunchester?" Kildare remarked.

"Part of it," said Tom. "We went last Wednesday, but missed the first half."

"There is a wathah good sketch in the half we didn't see," Arthur Augustus remarked. "It is called 'His Love Against the Earth'—I mean, the 'World'—and is vewy excitin', I believe. I was vewy sowwy to miss it—owin' to that wottah Lowthah—"

Tom Merry felt a little uneasy.

"You're going to the Empire, Kildare?" he asked.

The captain of St. Jim's nodded.

"Yes; somebody's sent me two tickets—some Good Samaritan I don't know. So we shall have a good spin, and a matinee at the end of it. I suppose it wasn't any of you kids sent the tickets?"

Tom Merry looked astonished.

"You don't know who sent them?" he asked.

"Not in the least."

"Bai Jove! That's vewy odd."

Blake and Herries came back with the bicycles, and the two Sixth-Formers wheeled them away to the gates. A dark and thoughtful frown was on Tom Merry's face. Manners gave him an uneasy and inquiring look.

"What are you thinking of?" he asked, in a low voice.

"Lowther!" said Tom abruptly. "He's at Bunchester—I mean, he's gone there. He's at the Empire—doing I don't know what. If Kildare runs into him—"

"No harm in being there on a half-holiday," said Blake. "If Kildare had run into him last night it would have been different. What's the harm to-day?"

"I don't know," confessed Tom Merry. "Lowther hasn't let us into the secret. But it's queer about Kildare getting tickets for the matinee without knowing where they came from. Who could have sent them?"

"Blessed if I know!" said Blake, with a yawn. "Never mind Lowther now; I'm fed up with Lowther. Let's go and have a look at the pitch."

The Fourth-Formers strolled away. Manners made a move to follow them, but Tom Merry signed to him to stop.

"What's up?" asked Manners.

"Nothing, perhaps," said Tom uneasily. "But—but what is Lowther up to at Bunchester?"

"He hasn't deigned to take us into his confidence about that," said Manners, with a shrug of the shoulders. "I don't know, and I don't much care."

"Who sent Kildare those tickets?" said Tom. "Somebody who wanted him to go over to Bunchester this afternoon. Levison, perhaps! It would be just one of his tricks!"

"But Levison can't have been there—"

"Fathead! He could write for the tickets. He would only have to send them a postal-order, with instructions to post the tickets to Kildare here."

"Catch Levison treating anybody to anything!" said Manners, laughing. "And he doesn't like Kildare! You're off your chump, Tommy!"

"He would spend his last bob to get Lowther caught by Kildare, if Lowther's up to anything he could get into trouble over," said Tom, with a very worried look. "I think I'll go and speak to Levison."

"You won't get any truth out of him."

"I'll thump it out, if necessary. Come with me."

The two Shell fellows looked for Levison. He was not in the quadrangle or in his study. But as they came down the passage to look into the common-room they heard a sound of chuckling, and recognised Levison's ill-natured chuckle among the others. They looked in, frowning. Levison and Mellish and Gore and Crooke were standing in a group by the window, and Levison was holding a newspaper. They did not see the two Shell fellows at the door.

"Mr. Montague!" chuckled Levison. "His own Christian name, you know!"

"He wouldn't have the nerve, surely!" said Mellish.

"Why not? Didn't he run away to go on the stage once?"

"But the Head came down on him. He overlooked it that time; but if it happened again Lowther would get it in the neck."

"And I fancy he will get it in the neck if he's seen playing Gerald Fitzroy on the stage at the Bunchester Empire!" grinned Levison.

Tom Merry and Manners stood rooted, as it were, in the doorway.

A thunderclap in the common-room could hardly have astonished them more.

Levison's words let in a flood of light upon their perplexed thoughts. They did not need any proof; they only wondered now that they had not thought of it before. So that was the secret Lowther was keeping!

No wonder he had kept it a secret! For if his chums had known that he was running that risk they would have tied him down to his bed, if necessary, to keep him within the walls of St. Jim's in safety! If the Head knew—

"But you can't be sure," Crooke remarked.

"I'm sure enough!" said Levison. "Why doesn't he miss a single performance at the Empire? He's not running the risk of being sacked for nothing, I suppose. And he's always mumbling over something or other about Cicely, or Baron Bellerby, or something—the lines of the play, of course! And see what it says here in the paper about a very youthful actor taking the place of Mumper, who played the part last week! Lowther's got it—through the influence of his valuable friend Mr. Curll, of course. I'll bet he hasn't told Curll he's doing it unknown, and without permission. That's why he played that trick on those duffers last Wednesday. If they'd got to the matinee they'd have seen him on the stage—or else he'd have had to keep off it. It's as clear as daylight."

"But he's not likely to be spotted there," said Gore.

"Bunchester is a long way from here."

"I think he's jolly certain to be spotted," said Levison coolly.

"Why?"

"Because Kildare and Darrel have gone to the matinee to-day."

Gore whistled expressively.

"Then it's all up with Lowther! My hat! I'd tip him a warning if—"

"Too late for that!" said Levison coolly. "Let him be spotted! I—"

"You cad!" shouted Tom Merry, finding his voice at last. "You—you knew all that; and you sent Kildare the tickets!"

Levison & Co. looked round.

"Hallo!" said Levison coolly. "I didn't know you were listening! Has anybody sent Kildare tickets? If so, it wasn't

I. I'm too jolly hard up to stand anybody theatre tickets, I can assure you. As much as I can do to raise the tin to pay for my own. Which reminds me that it's time I was off."

And Levison walked out of the room, leaving his comrades laughing, and Tom Merry and Manners a picture of dismay. Their first impulse was to "pitch into" Levison; but that would have done no good, and would have taken time. And there was, after all, no proof that he had sent those tickets to Kildare.

Tom dragged his chum away.

"Where now?" asked Manners.

"The bikes!" said Tom briefly. "Bunchester."

"But the House match—"

"Kangaroo can look after that. Don't you see, we've got to keep Lowther from making a fool of himself. Suppose he comes on the stage, with two prefects in the audience!"

A few hasty words to Kangaroo, and the chums of the Shell mounted their bicycles at the gates and rode away. Tom Merry and Manners were riding hard—riding as if for their lives. They had need to ride hard, if they were to save their chum from the consequences of his own wild recklessness. But could they save him?

CHAPTER 16.

Exit Mr. Montague.

M R. CURLL uttered an ejaculation of amazement.

"My esteemed young friends! What—"

Mr. Curll was "making" up in his palatial dressing-room at the Bunchester Empire before the cracked glass, when two dusty and perspiring juniors came in, after a hasty knock. Mr. Curll was not alone in the room. Another glass was on the wall now, and before it stood a youthful figure—also engaged in making-up. Monty Lowther looked round, with a stick of grease-paint in his hand, as he heard Mr. Curll's ejaculation.

"You!" he exclaimed.

Tom Merry panted.

"Thank goodness we're in time!"

Lowther frowned darkly, with a queer effect upon his half-finished visage.

"So you've bowled me out!" he said coolly. "Well, I tried to keep it from you. It's no good your saying anything; it won't make any difference. If it comes out, and it comes out, too, that you knew it, you'll get into trouble as well as me, but you've only got yourselves to thank for it. But I can't talk now; it will be our cue soon."

"Ahem!" said Mr. Curll. "Do I understand that Master Lowther has engaged in this—ahem!—this debut upon the histrionic boards without the sanction of his pastors and masters?"

"Oh, that's all right!" said Lowther hastily. "Don't you bother, Curll. The overture's gone already, and the sketch comes in the first half, remember."

"But, my dear young friend," protested Mr. Curll, "when I made you this offer I certainly understood that you would obtain the permission of your masters."

"I said they wouldn't object," said Lowther.

"Yes, that is the same thing."

"You can't go on the stage, Lowther, so you may as well chuck that up at once," said Tom Merry grimly.

"Rats!"

"Kildare and Darrel are in the audience to-day!"

Monty paused.

"My hat! Are you sure?"

"Yes. Somebody's sent them tickets—Levison, very likely—so that they could come here and spot you. Levison knew somehow; the prying cad knows everything, I think. We've chucked the House match to come over and warn you."

"Very good of you," said Lowther, deliberately turning back to the glass again. "But I can't leave Mr. Curll in the lurch. I've studied the part, and taken it on during the illness of Mr. Mumper. It was the chance of a lifetime for me. If I don't go on this afternoon the sketch can't be played; they can't get a substitute at a moment's notice. I can't do a thing like that."

"I tell you Kildare will know you at once!" shouted Tom.

"I can't help it."

"They'll take you straight to the Head."

"Can't be helped."

"B-b-but," stammered the bewildered Mr. Curll, "if the headmaster doesn't object—"

"He doesn't object because he doesn't know," said Manners. "That's what that silly ass means!"

"My esteemed young friend, Montague," said Mr. Curll, with dignity, "you have—I will not say deceived me—but you have been pulling my leg. The slight fee of two quids shall be returned to you—ahem!—when—when I can

(Continued on page 25.)

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INTRODUCTION.

Geoffrey Foster, one of the most popular members of Grovehouse School, is elected to fill a vacant place in the school cricket team. His victory earns him the enmity of Bangley Jeffcock, who tried means fair and foul to secure the coveted position for his chum Weames. Together they plot to ruin Foster. The latter's father, who controls a company with Jeffcock senior, is made responsible for the failure of the company, and a warrant is issued for his arrest. The charge preferred is that Major Foster made use of the company's money for his own purposes. After saying good-bye to his son, Major Foster flees the country. A trumped-up charge of robbery is brought against Geoffrey, and he is expelled from the school. After seeing his mother at his uncle's house, Geoffrey sets out for fame and fortune.

Geoffrey is offered a place in the Surrey County Cricket Club, and in his first match—Surrey versus Notts—he does some good work for his team.

Later, Geoffrey once more meets Patrick Mulready, who informs him that trouble is coming in South Africa, and that a man named Joe Gost, who has raised a troop of men to fight the insurgents, is none other than Major Foster, Geoffrey's father! Mulready forms a band of men, and sails to help Joe Gost, and Geoffrey returns to play for Surrey.

Later, Geoffrey is compelled to leave the Surrey Club, and, on the advice of his old friend Haines, he joins the 29th Hussars, which, a day or two later, sail for South Africa, where there is a lot of trouble with the natives. With his regiment are Hewitt, Jellotson, and Jeffcock, who are lieutenants, and, as the time hangs heavily on their hands, Haines suggests a three-cornered race. This is at once adopted. A meeting is called. While this is in progress, Jeffcock approaches Hewitt and Jellotson.

(Now go on with the story.)

Jeffcock is Eager!

"I passed one of your troopers just now," said Jeffcock, "a man, I believe, of the name of Foster." He spoke as if he had never heard of the name before. "He was wearing a piece of crape round his arm. It's a breach of the Service rules. I suppose you know that?"

"Will you have the goodness to concern yourself with the affairs of your own regiment," said Jellotson icily; "or haven't you enough to do there?"

"Has he permission to wear mourning?" asked Jeffcock angrily, as he twirled his moustache between finger and thumb.

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"He has permission given him by every decent thought," said Hewitt, "and his action has been unremarked by all save you. His own lieutenant could see in it no offence. His father perished in the engagement at Unzingwani, when Joe Gost and his men attempted to stay the retreat of the enemy."

Jeffcock started.

"Major Foster in Africa!" he cried. "How did you know that?"

"Major Foster and Gost, the famous scout and leader of Irregulars, were one and the same," said Hewitt. And then, a moment later, he could have bitten his tongue off for having spoken. It had been indiscreet, to say the least, with Jeffcock, the sort of man who would send the information flying one end of the Colony to the other.

But then Hewitt's reflections were sobered by the thought that Major Foster was dead. The native runner who had come into camp a week ago bearing the news, and saying that he had seen the famous white leader lying cold and still with a dozen assegai wounds in his body, was not likely to have been mistaken.

"So," sneered Jeffcock, "Major Foster was not only a coward and a poltroon, a swindler and a thief, but he was a rebel to his Majesty the King, who, if he had been caught, would have been shot without trial. I am glad to know that. And his son is permitted to wear mourning for such a scoundrel! It is a disgrace to the Service. I shall take care to report the breach of discipline to headquarters."

"Be careful what you do," said Hewitt, smiling grimly. "His comrades love him. If they hear you speaking as you are speaking now, you might get a bullet in the back next time we come under fire. Such things have been known to happen, and upon my word you wouldn't be missed!"

"That's getting away from the subject," said Jellotson genially, eager to pour oil on troubled waters, much as he disliked Jeffcock. "Look here, Jeffcock, what do you say to a three-cornered match? Hewitt's Betsy, your Hyacinth, and my Jimcrack? Let's make it £50 a-side; and as I can't ride, owing to the fall I had the other day, we won't have owners up. You can ride, of course, Jeffcock, if you like, but I shall have to get somebody to ride mine; or Hewitt can, and somebody can ride Hewitt's. What do you say?"

"I've got the best horse in camp," said Jeffcock, his eyes lighting up at the thought of £100 easily won. "Let the conditions be—anybody to ride."

"Very well, then," said Hewitt carelessly, "that's settled. Now let us join the others, and settle the rest of the details."

The Regimental Races—Trooper Foster on Fireball is an Easy First—Lieutenant Jeffcock Raises an Objection—The Three-cornered Match—An Alarm—The Coming of a Stranger.

Like magic the racecourse in camp was prepared, and the next day bunting had been got from somewhere, mostly composed of pennons taken from the lances of a regiment of mounted infantry—his weapon having been found to be particularly serviceable at this stage of the campaign, and against the natives, through whose serried ranks the mounted men had ridden again and again—and there was a grand stand, a tent grand-stand, certainly, but, anyway, a post of honour rigged up as to the very life.

With the distant Rackensberg frowning over the course, it reminded Jellotson of nothing so much as an Easter Monday meeting on the neutral ground at Gibraltar, when the pony and Galloway racing was in full swing.

During the afternoon of the day before the troopers had had preliminary races on their own account at five furlongs, by which the slowest of the regimental horses had been weeded out, and the heats being continued all through the morning, by the time fixed for the first race, which approximated to our 1.30 race—English time—of the 29th Hussars, only a dozen horses remained. It was the same with each regiment of the mounted infantry.

Two fine races were run between these latter, and in each case the finish was a close thing. The betting was keen, each comrade riding having a host of supporters, and the fun waxed fast and furious.

It was an hour later when the twelve belonging to the 29th went to the post.

Lieutenant Jellotson, in the stand, smiled and nodded to a trooper who went by, doing the best to restrain the spirits of his steed. It was Haines.

"Who's going to win, Haines?" he asked.

"Foster!" shouted the trooper in reply; "and I don't suppose I shall be far away at the finish. But you put a little bit on him, sir, and Fireball. It will pay."

Then along came Geoffrey, clad in breeches, puttees, and his shirt, with his sleeves rolled up above his elbows, his chest bare, and his hair blowing in the breeze. He looked a handsome figure of a lad, burnt brown as he was by the African sun, and Jeffcock felt a thrill of envy run through his veins at the sight of him. The horse he rode was as quiet as a lamb.

Foster, seemingly unconscious of the cheering of his comrades, quietly urged his horse into a canter and went onwards towards the starting-post.

"That was Madman Haines, who used to be at Grovehouse, was it not?" said Jeffcock, addressing his remark to Jellotson. "I would have known him anywhere. A trooper's life would just about suit him. He and Foster are well paired. Haines fancied Fireball, did he," he went on, looking at his pencilled card. "Well, I'm killing to wager against him."

"Take you!" said Jellotson, with a languid drawl.

"What for? Shall we say £25?"

"Certainly."

"Have it again, Jeffcock?" asked Lieutenant Hewitt.

"I'd back my regiment against anything that Foster rode," said Lieutenant Jeffcock, with a disdainful curl of the lips.

"Done!"

The horses were ready now. They didn't pirouette about after the fashion of some of our fiery thoroughbreds at home. The hard campaign had taken most of that out of them, and at the word, as the red flag was dropped, the twelve got away in line. They came along at a fast pace, for them, and it was early seen that two were tailed off. Haines and Foster could be seen riding right in the front as soon as it was possible to make out anything, and Jeffcock became reflectively silent as he realised that the issue lay between one of the two.

Haines was riding a strong race; but his coolness was perhaps a mistake, for nearing the winning-post Geoffrey just got his riding-whip up, caught Fireball one fierce blow with it, and the beautiful brown mare, striding out, beat Haines by a clear half length, the imperturbable Grovehouse trooper just starting to ride a moment too late.

"Sold!" cried Jeffcock angrily. "Haines lost the race on purpose!"

"Never mind," said Hewitt, "we'll take your I O U's, Jeffcock, being the best thing we can get out of you."

It was now time to prepare for the big three-cornered match, and Jellotson, Hewitt, and Jeffcock got up to see after their steeds.

Trooper Foster, riding his victorious Fireball near, sprang from the saddle.

"That's right, Foster," said Hewitt, "you're the man we want. You will ride Betsy for me, being used to her ways; and as Lieutenant Jellotson will not be able to manage, I will mount Jimcrack for him; and Lieutenant Jeffcock will ride his own."

Jeffcock swung round.

"I didn't bargain for this!" he said hotly. "Owners not up, certainly, but I reckoned that gentlemen only would ride!"

"You made no objection at the time the race was arranged," said Lieutenant Hewitt quietly. "You have just been disparaging Trooper Foster's powers as a rider, and your objection will certainly not hold good. Trooper Foster shall ride. If you like to forfeit your entrance-money, and leave the race to Jimcrack and Betsy, so much the better. You're bound to be beaten, in any case; but I think I should have a run for my money if I were you, Jeffcock."

The lieutenant scowled. He was about to make some further remark when Lieut.-Colonel Travers, of the 29th, turned to him.

"I see no reason why Trooper Foster should not ride," he said. "You seem all pretty well matched in ability. It will be a good race, Jeffcock, and I must say I fancy Hyacinth myself."

This praise of his horse smoothed Jeffcock's ruffled feelings. Besides, he had reckoned that nothing could touch the horse. The idea of Hewitt's mare, just recovered from lameness, finishing in front of it, to him seemed absurd. Besides, to beat Foster would be sweet indeed. Jeffcock had had to put up with too many defeats at Foster's hands since the Grovehouse days not to wish to get one back. He withdrew his objection, and after an unconscionable time being wasted in overhauling the horses—removing shoes, and all the rest of it—some colours were distributed, and the three were ready.

Astonishing though it may seem to relate, the riders of the three-cornered race went to the starting-post wearing colours. What a tribute to the inherent British love of "sporting life"! Here were men engaged in the serious business of war, never knowing when they might be killed, travelling over scores of hundreds of miles with as little kit and baggage as they could possibly carry; and yet there on the field, beneath the shadow of the great and gaunt Rackensberg, were to be found owners' colours! It was amazing!

The Tommies cheered as they saw them. It seemed to them like home.

Geoffrey Foster wore a lilac jacket and black cap, with proper riding-breeches and boots; Lieutenant Hewitt wore a crimson jacket, with white sleeves and white cap; and Jeffcock had on a yellow jacket and black cap, the colours of the Duke of Westminster.

The wagering was brisk. Lieutenant Jeffcock's regiment wagered solidly on Hyacinth. They had heard so much of the beast through his talking that they would not have been surprised had he won the Derby. Certainly he was a good-looking beast. But there were many good judges who preferred the quiet and sober Betsy; and there were not a few who put their money on the stylish Jimcrack, who was always a goer over five furlongs.

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But the race was a mile, gentlemen, though some of you forgot it.

After the parade, the three went to the starting-post; and Hyacinth took umbrage at the sight of the flag the starter held. Not so the other two, though Jimcrack did a waltz for joy at the thought of the run ahead.

A minute or so passed by, and then Hyacinth was quieted. The three were in line, and the flag dropped.

"They're off!"

Again the field-glasses were levelled, and the excitement grew to straining point as the three were seen to be coming on side by side.

For half a mile they raced neck and neck, and then Hyacinth drew a little ahead.

"Don't win your race too soon, Jeffcock," muttered Lieutenant-Colonel Travers. "Foster isn't done with yet."

Indeed, Geoffrey was lying close to Hyacinth's quarters, and presently, just before the distance was reached, he challenged strongly; while Jimcrack was seen to be coming again.

Jeffcock, seeing his old enemy draw near, deliberately swerved his horse across; and the pair bumped, Geoffrey being nearly hurled from the saddle.

A cry of fury went up from the 29th.

"Ride fair, thickhead!" said someone.

But Geoffrey was equal to the emergency, and, drawing the mare out, he came away with her; and Jimcrack, getting up on the inside, with a clever rush of Hewitt's, landed second place right on the post; and Jeffcock and his much-fancied horse was last.

His chagrin at his defeat was intense. He would have complained of foul riding on the part of Trooper Foster if he had dared; but none knew better than he that he had bumped on purpose, and so he swallowed his licking with a bad grace, and made out his I O U's.

The horses had scarcely been groomed, when, of a sudden, there came a rifle shot from near by, then another, then another, and the next moment the whole hillside was ablaze with sharp points of lurid red.

And through the midst of the fire, with the smoke lying in thin clouds where the half-hidden marksmen were, a figure came riding—a crouching, ill-kempt figure, seated astride a bony Basuto pony.

Once, as he looked through a pair of glasses that he had snatched up, Geoffrey thought that they had him. The next he wondered why men like these should be firing at a solitary horseman.

Suddenly the figure on the horse held up a white sheet of paper—a flag of truce; and like magic the firing ceased.

Onward from the direction of the pass came the stranger. And when he got near enough there was a loud "Hurrah!" from the Tommies, whose hearts thrilled at the thought of the courage of this man, who had just braved a hundred deaths without flinching. They crowded round him. They escorted him right up to the spot where Lieutenant-Colonel Travers and the officers stood.

Geoffrey Foster was near them, and still wearing the racing colours in which he had ridden Betsy to victory. He noticed, with astonishment, that the messenger, fugitive, or be he what he might, was clad in a suit of filthy rags. His face was begrimed with dirt and smoke. His hair was matted and greasy. He was thin to emaciation, and yet his lips were curled in a smile.

"Ah, begorra!" he cried, as he came to a halt, "have any of yez a drop of whisky? I'm almost dying of thirst!"

The words fell on Geoffrey's ears with the music of recollection. He knew who the man was now. It was Patrick Mulready, of Joe Gost's Irregulars, the force that had been reported cut to pieces; and here, under the shadow of the Rackensberg, near the Crocodile River, Geoffrey and the Irishman, whose destiny ruled his own, met once again.

Then Geoffrey's heart sank like lead. His father had been reported killed. What news had Patrick Mulready to bring?

A Man from Gost's Command—What Mulready Had to Say—Lieutenant-Colonel Travers Decides to Advance—The Pass of the Rackensberg.

Patrick Mulready, ragged, dirty, devoid of arms, with face, chest and hands burnt dull-brown by the sun, his frame a mass of bone and sinew, swayed as he stood, and it became evident that the poor fellow had reached the end of his tether. A spirit-flask was soon forthcoming, and applied to his lips by Geoffrey, who took it from Lieutenant Jellotson's hands; and as the warming liquid ran down the throat of the parched and weary traveller he gradually recovered.

"Now, my man," said Lieutenant-Colonel Travers, as soon as he saw the man was in a condition to speak, "who are you, and where do you come from?"

"My name is Patrick Mulready," answered the Irishman, bringing himself to the salute, "late trooper in the 29th Regiment of Hussars."

Lieutenant Jeffcock uttered a startled exclamation, and stepping nearer, regarded the speaker closely. Yes, there could be no shadow of doubt about it! It was Patrick Mulready, but so changed by his life of hardship, that Jellotson, not having Geoffrey Foster's quick intuition, had failed to recognise him.

"A trooper of my regiment!" cried the Lieutenant-Colonel of the 29th. "Not the Patrick Mulready, surely, who distinguished himself at the affair of Botha's Bluff, when Lieutenant Jeffcock's father won his famous Victoria Cross?"

"Yes, that's me," said the wayward good-for-naught.

"And where do you come from?"

"Matabeleland," said Mulready—"to beg of you, sir, to send troops to the assistance of my commander, who is surrounded by the enemy and in deadly peril."

"Your commander?" said the lieutenant-colonel, with suspicion. "Who is he, and by what right does he command?"

"The name of Joe Gost, sir, will shine in the history of this rising," said Patrick Mulready, "with a glory that nothing shall tarnish. After what he has done for the sake of the Empire, you surely won't neglect to send him the succour he needs? When I broke from camp under cover of the night the last rations had been shared out, sir. Half the command—or rather, what remains of it—for there aren't two hundred of 'em able to hold a rifle now—are badly wounded. Some are so weak by malaria that they are praying for death, and they have been surrounded by the entire force of retreating enemy, driven back by the forward movement of your troops after the battle of Rettesberg. He tried to cut off their retreat with a handful of men, fought 'em during the whole of an entire day, holding his position near Umzingwani until nightfall, and in the morning he found himself surrounded. There's not a better soldier breathing than Joe Gost, though I say it, and if he's sacrificed, it will be a crime for which England will never be forgiven."

"A traitor and a thief!" said Lieutenant Jeffcock. "I have reason to believe that he is an ex-major in the Army, who fled from England to escape the punishment that would have followed the frauds he had committed. If he falls into our hands he will be tried by court-martial, and instantly shot!"



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Patrick Mulready swayed a little from weakness. But he had recognised the voice, and as Geoffrey put an arm about him to steady him, he smiled a wan smile of pity.

"Just hold me up a bit, Mr. Foster, will you?" he said, for he had soon recognised Geoffrey, despite his jockey get-up, and was not surprised at seeing him there. "Then I shall be able to speak." He drew a deep breath. "So it's you, Lieutenant Jeffcock!" he went on, after a pause. "I might have known you wouldn't be far away from Mr. Foster. You've tried to injure him enough in the past, goodness knows! Thank Heaven, you're not his superior officer!"

"Sir," cried Jeffcock, flushing, as he turned to Lieutenant-Colonel Travers, "I ask that this man be placed in irons! He is a traitor like the rest!"

"I am able to conduct my own affairs, I thank you!" said the lieutenant-colonel dryly. Then, turning to Mulready, he added. "Now, my man, moderate your language, and use respect towards my officers. What is this Lieutenant Jeffcock hints at about your commandant, Joe Gost? Who is he, and where does he come from? Speak up, man!"

"There's no reason why you all shouldn't know," said Patrick Mulready, again reviving under the application of the whisky. "Lieutenant-Colonel Travers knows him, and honoured him in the old days, I'll swear. There isn't a soldier who served under him but is proud of it. Joe Gost is Major Foster, sir, of the 29th Hussars!"

"Major Foster!" said Travers, aghast. "The man who was wanted for the London and County Building Society frauds?"

"My father," murmured Geoffrey brokenly. "They reported him killed in action, Mulready!"

"A lie!" said the Irishman. "They would have liked him killed, the rebel dogs, for he's worried them ever since he came out here to expose their schemes to the Government. If he had had his way, there would have been no rising. He was well and hearty when I left him, Mr. Foster."

"You have taken part in all his schemes, Mulready," said the lieutenant-colonel, "will you tell me why he raised this unlawful troop of his and interfered with the affairs of the Empire? There are many who say that had it not been for this Joe Gost, or Major Foster, as we shall now call him, there would have been no uprising. It was he who irritated the natives and the malcontents into action."

"Which shows, sir," said Mulready, "how little people know of the real truth. Major Foster doesn't fear to face inquiry. There are dozens of letters of warning written by him to high officials at the Government House in Cape Town, which will exonerate him. A pal of mine wrote home to me in England months ago, telling me that there would be a rising, and that Major Foster was secretly organising a troop to protect the people who were loyal to the Empire, and to try and check the rebellion at the outset, as he saw the Government, in spite of his repeated warnings, were unconcerned. There's not one of his men, sir, who hasn't served his time in the Army, and there's not one of us who wouldn't die for him."

"And he begs us to come to his help, Mulready?" asked Lieutenant-Colonel Travers, visibly concerned.

"Yes, sir."

"Does he send a written appeal?"

"No, sir. He wouldn't risk any message which would betray the dire straits he is in falling into the hands of the enemy."

"How far is he away from here?"

"Three days' journey, sor—move as fast as you can. I've come through without bite or sup till now."

"You're a brave man," said Travers laconically. "Foster, take him to the canteen and see that he has rations served out to him. Sergeant Finlay"—to a Hussar who was standing near—"let him be kept under strict guard."

"One moment, sor!" asked the Irishman. "Will you send the troops to relieve him? Tell me that!"

"Is there any chance of us taking the enemy by surprise?"

"I should say completely so, sor."

"It shall be done. Major Renton"—to his major—"see that orders are issued for the striking of the camp. We will make a start to-night and be beyond the pass by daybreak. We can push on all day, and rest the next night—we must make a forced march of it. The 3rd Regiment of mounted infantry shall stay behind to guard the pass on this side, and still hold the remnant of the enemy's army that has not crossed the Crocodile River yet in check should Du Cros fail to capture them."

"A distinguished honour to a criminal," sneered Lieutenant Jeffcock.

Geoffrey heard the words, and flushed. Patrick Mulready stepped forward from between the two soldiers who had ranged up on either side of him, and faced Jeffcock with flashing eyes.

(Another splendid long instalment of this grand serial next Wednesday.)

PLAYING A PART!

(Continued from page 21.)

conveniently spare them. I will telephone for Mumper at once."

"But Mumper's down with the flu," said Lowther.

Mr. Curll smiled.

"Mr. Mumper's flu has been gone for some time," he remarked. "Mr. Mumper, being naturally sympathetic towards a youthful aspirant for histrionic honours, very generously allowed you to take his role, especially—ahem!—as there was no question raised of the salary being paid to anyone but Mr. Mumper. My esteemed young friend, you will excuse me, while I hasten to telephone for Mr. Mumper, and I sincerely trust that he will be sufficiently sober to answer the telephone."

And Mr. Curll left the dressing-room.

"Good! I'll clean this stuff off, and change, and we'll see the show; that's the next best thing to acting in it," said Lowther. "I can use a box here; they're always half empty. It will be rather a joke for Levison to see me in a box instead of on the stage."

Then Tom Merry and Manners laughed too.

A quarter of an hour later the Terrible Three were in a box, Monty Lowther in his Etons, and looking as unlike Gerald Fitzroy as possible. The theatre was pretty full, and the Shell fellows were not long in spotting Kildare and Darrel in the stalls. They discovered Levison entering just before the sketch was announced; the cad of the Fourth had ridden over, but he did not ride like Tom Merry and Manners, and he was late. They watched him go to his place, with a grin on his thin, keen face, evidently in anticipation of very great pleasure that afternoon.

Another ten minutes, and the curtain rose upon the thrilling sketch, "His Love Against the World." Levison had been looking at his programme, and he found "Mr. Montague's" name in its place there. He was quite satisfied. He gazed eagerly at the stage. Lord de Vere was there, with the Lady Cicely and Baron Bellerby, the villain of the piece, entered, alias Mr. Horatio Curll. And when Baron Bellerby exclaimed "Aha! Who comes? 'Tis he, my rival!" Levison's eyes glittered green. For it was Mr. Gerald Fitzroy who was to enter next, under the eyes of Kildare and Darrel.

The Terrible Three were watching Levison's face.

Gerald Fitzroy came on in the scene, and Levison's jaw dropped.

His greenish eyes seemed almost to start from his head.

He took a hasty look at his programme again, then stared blankly at the hero of the thrilling sketch. Mr. Montague or not, it certainly wasn't Monty Lowther. Any amount of make-up could not have given Lowther, of the Shell, the height and the girth of the hero of the sketch. It was not Monty Lowther, and Levison felt as if his head were swimming. Was his discovery a mare's-nest, after all? Were all the calculations entirely wrong? And, worst thought of all, had he paid for seats for the two prefects, and ridden fifteen miles himself, in order to see a perfectly commonplace actor go through a perfectly commonplace part, in which Levison did not take a particle of interest?

The expression on his face tickled the Terrible Three immensely. They suppressed their merriment with difficulty, taking care to keep well back in the box out of Levison's view. Levison was gazing at the stage with a stony expression. At the end of the sketch the Terrible Three left the box and the theatre. Monty Lowther seemed quite comforted for loss of his part, as he remarked cheerfully the sight of Levison's face in the audience was worth it.

As there were no more mysterious absences on Lowther's part, and as he had certainly not appeared on the stage when expected to do so, Levison was driven to doubting his own cunning for once; and, indeed, excepting Tom Merry and Manners, there was only one fellow in the School House who was quite satisfied that he knew all about the matter. That one was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. And for quite a long time Arthur Augustus persisted in condoling with Lowther on his disappointment in love, at the same time applauding his good resolutions, which were worthy of an honourable chap, being quite convinced that he, and he alone, had hit upon the true solution of the Mystery of Monty Lowther.

THE END.

(Another splendid long complete tale of the Chums of St. Jim's next Wednesday, entitled, "Ordered Off!" by Martin Clifford. Order early.)

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 332.

NEXT WEDNESDAY—

"ORDERED OFF!"

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

ST. JIM'S JINGLES.

No. 2.—ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY.

Hats off to this illustrious spark!
And, trembling from afar, see
The monocle that serves to mark
The calm repose of D'Arcy.
His fearful frown and charming clothes
To nothingness will thrust us;
And we must grovel at the toes
Of him—the great Augustus!

The "nut" so dashing and divine,
Who swanks in Piccadilly,
Compared with Gussy's show and shine
Is rendered more than silly.
And monarchs who in might excel,
Replete with radiant glory,
Must bow their heads before the swell
Of Martin Clifford's story.

Among the foremost of his chums
Are Digby, Blake, and Herries,
And in their "den," when evening comes,
His stately self he buries.
While Towser, most devout of dogs,
Encamps within the study,
And renders Gussy's spotless togs
Extremely soiled and muddy.

With scant regard the bulldog treats
His striped and shapely trousers,
And many a threat of slaughter greets
Each merry trick of Towser's.
From time to time the burly beast
Makes someone come a cropper;
And once he had a splendid feast
Off D'Arcy's Sunday topper!

The swell of all St. Jim's has got
Admirers by the dozen;
For him they do not care a jot—
But, oh, his charming cousin!
A bright and glowing gem is she,
Who merits adoration;
And oft they drink her health at tea
With noisy acclamation.

Although he dotes upon his dress,
Augustus, on occasions,
Has helped his comrades to repress
Some fierce and wild invasions.
And Figgins, Kerr, and Fatty Wynn
Have often met disaster;
For Gussy's blows on cheek and chin
Mean yards of sticking-plaster!
Behind the cold and crushing glance
So frequently imparted,
Are found the feelings which enhance
The truly tender-hearted.
And though the ways of Vere de Vere
On Gus are plainly written,
It would, indeed, be hard, I fear,
To find a nobler Briton.

Next Week:

GEORGE FIGGINS.

"THE GEM" LIBRARY 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."

F. F. Kemp, Statistical Branch, Department of Railways and Canals, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, wishes to correspond with readers, age 16-19.

Arthur Lyell, McKinnons Street, Terang, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with readers, age 15-18.

George Shortland, 5, Harnett Street, East Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader living in England, age 15-16.

F. C. Shearer, Harris Street, Exeter, Adelaide, Australia, wishes to correspond with girl readers, age 16-18.

William Harper, 128, Charles Street, Footscray, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with girl readers, age 15-18.

Walter H. Hardwick, c/o Noble and Shortt, Queen Street, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, wishes to correspond with readers.

Miss Estelle de Clancy, G.P.O., Hawthorn, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with boy readers living in England or America.

V. A. Kew, 10, Lower Castle Terrace, Hong Kong, China, wishes to correspond with girl readers.

Miss A. Gottwald, 19, Maitland Street, Bloemfontein, South Africa, wishes to correspond with readers, age 19-20.

C. Marais, P.O. Box 1014, Johannesburg, Transvaal, South Africa, wishes to correspond with a girl reader living in Australia, age 14-16.

Fred. Albert, P.O. Box 1086, Johannesburg, Transvaal, South Africa, wishes to correspond with a girl reader living in England, age 15-17.

J. Gadsby, c/o The Alexandria Engineering Works, Rue Bab el Karasta, Alexandria, Egypt, wishes to correspond with readers living in England, age 18-19.

Lionell Hall, c/o Louis Brosseau, Lapraire, Lapraire Co., Quebec, Ontario, Canada, wishes to correspond with girl readers living in England, age 17.

Miss E. M. Harris, 13, Chancery Lane, Adelaide, South Australia, wishes to correspond with a boy reader living in Canada, 16-17.

A. J. Williams, Middle Road, Devonshire, Bermuda, British West Indies, wishes to correspond with girl readers living in the British Isles.

Allan Leak, 54, Tynte Street, North Adelaide, South Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader living in England, age 13-14.

L. Otto Deitchmann, Circulation Branch, G.P.O., Johannesburg, Transvaal, South Africa, wishes to correspond with a girl reader, age 17-18.

W. Edwards, Box 590, Johannesburg, Transvaal, South Africa, wishes to correspond with girl readers, age 16.

The Editor specially requests Colonial Readers to kindly bring the Free Correspondence Exchange to the notice of their friends.

A Cash Prize for Every Contributor to this Page.



Our Weekly Prize Page.

LOOK OUT FOR YOUR WINNING STORYETTE

EVIDENCE.

An Irish soldier on sentry duty had orders to allow nobody to smoke near his post. Presently who should appear but an officer with a lighted cigar in his mouth, whereupon Pat boldly challenged him, and ordered him to put it out at once. The officer, with a gesture of disgust, threw away the cigar; but no sooner was his back turned than Pat picked up the fragrant weed, and quietly retreated to his sentry-box. The officer, happening to look round, observed, to his amazement, a cloud of smoke issuing from the box. He at once challenged Pat for smoking on duty.

"Smoking, is it, sorr?" said Pat. "Bedad, I'm only keeping it alight to show the corporal when he comes, as evidence agin you!"—Sent in by James Greenhalgh, West Hartlepool.

MISTAKEN.

The manager of Messrs. Barlow & Briggs' establishment had been buried the day before. His old friend Bright entered the establishment to offer his sympathies to the staff.

"I'm pleased to note," he remarked, glancing round, "how you honour my late friend by hanging crapes up there." "Crape!" replied an astonished clerk. "That's the office-boy's towel!"—Sent in by M. Mackenzie, Scotland.

SAY THIS QUICKLY.

An artist went to sea,
To see what he could see at sea to draw.
The artist saw what all men see—
The sea was all the artist saw.
And when he saw he'd seen the sea,
Proceeded he the sea to draw.
And since I've often seen the scene,
I've seen the sea the artist saw.

—Sent in by Miss L. Sims, Hants.

SMART!

Question: What is the difference between schoolboys and postage-stamps?

Answer: One you lick with a stick, and the other you stick with a lick.

Question: Why have poultry no future state of existence?

Answer: Because they have their necks twirled (next world) in this.

Question: If Neptune was deprived of his dominions, what would he say?

Answer: "I haven't a notion" (an ocean).

—Sent in by Colin Coom, Yorkshire.

SUSPICIOUS WILLIE.

Papa: "Where is my umbrella?"
Willie: "I 'spect Mr. Smith took it."
Mabel (blushing crimson): "Oh, Willie, how can you say such a thing?"

"Well, when he was saying good-night to you last night, I heard him say, 'Mabel dear, I'm—I'm going to steal just one.'"—Sent in by R. Ryland, Birmingham.

HEARD THESE BEFORE?

Question: What did the earwig say when he fell off the tree into a puddle?

Answer: "'Ere we go" (earwigo).

Question: What did the window-pane say when a tree fell across it and smashed it?

Answer: "Tremendous!" (tree, mend us).

Question: Can you say what it is that won't go up the chimney up, but will go up the chimney down or down the chimney down?

Answer: An umbrella.

Question: Why is "D" the saddest letter in the alphabet?

Answer: Because it is always in (D)espair and in (D)ifficulties.

Question: Why is "O" the noisiest vowel?

Answer: Because all the rest of them are inaudible (in audible).

Question: What age is the most deceiving?

Answer: The sausage.

—Sent in by Arthur Jenkins, Glamorgan.

THEY ALWAYS GO TOGETHER.

The teacher was endeavouring to illustrate to her pupils the association of different species of life with common substances.

"For instance," she exclaimed, "you will always find plants where there is soil, birds where there are trees, and so on! Now, can anyone tell me what we associate with fish?"

Suddenly, with the velocity of an aeroplane, a hand shot up from the back row. It was the property of Tommy Jones.

"Please, teacher, I know!" piped the young hopeful.

"Well!" said the teacher expectantly.

"Chips!" was the unexpected reply.—Sent in by Arthur R. Spicer, Barnsbury, N.

PAT AGAIN.

It was Pat's first day in the sawmill, where he had to attend to the working of a circular saw. The foreman directed him as to its use, then left to attend to some pressing matter. Having occasion to pass Pat's way again, he was somewhat annoyed to see him standing idly, surveying his hand.

"Well," he said sharply, "what's wrong?"

"Sure and begorra, I've lost a finger!" replied Pat.

"Sure, I was jist doing like this, when—Bejabbers, there's another one off!"—Sent in by A. Smith, Staffs.

MILES BETWEEN THEM.

Mr. Forchen: "I have called to speak to you about your daughter. You must have noticed there is something between us."

Mr. Goldrox: "No; but I'm sure there will be pretty soon."

Mr. Forchen: "Ah!"

Mr. Goldrox: "It will be the Atlantic Ocean. I'm going to send her abroad till she learns a little sense."—Sent in by Miss Nora Charnley, Lanes.

MONEY PRIZES OFFERED.

Readers are invited to send ON A POSTCARD Storyettes or Short Interesting Paragraphs for this page. For every contribution used the sender will receive a Money Prize.

ALL POSTCARDS MUST BE ADDRESSED—The Editor, "The Gem" Library, Gough House, Gough Square, Fleet Street, London, E.C.

THIS OFFER IS OPEN TO READERS IN ALL PARTS OF THE WORLD.

No correspondence can be entered into with regard to this competition, and all contributions enclosed in letters, or sent in other-wise than on postcards, will be disregarded.

NEXT
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OUR SPECIAL WEEKLY FEATURE



THIS WEEK'S CHAT



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 By Martin Clifford.

In this grand, complete tale of Tom Merry & Co., the old Grange in the neighbourhood of St. Jim's finds a new tenant, who very quickly makes himself unpopular with the fellows.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy attempts to preserve peace for some time, but, after a personal visit to the gentleman in question, he returns quite convinced that the School's new neighbour is, at least, as black as he has been painted! After this, it is an open warfare between the juniors and the mysterious tenant of the Grange. Tom Merry and Monty Lowther, in doing a little scout-work on their own, meet with an alarming reception, and their chum Manners, in going to their rescue, also falls into the enemy's hands. It remains for Kerr, the canny Scot and amateur detective of St. Jim's, to probe the mystery surrounding the sinister man by whom all the juniors had been so peremptorily

"ORDERED OFF!"

REPLIES IN BRIEF.

W. B., H. T., C. B., and W. H.—The Storyettes prizes are awarded to the readers who send in the best storyettes. Names and addresses are not taken into consideration in any way.

John G. Hickman (Warwickshire).—Write to Messrs. A. W. Gamage, of High Holborn, London, W.C., who will supply you with a list of model aeroplanes.

E. J. Saundy (Transvaal).—A goal may be scored by any player on the field; his position makes no difference.

H. D. B. (Johannesburg).—Very many thanks for your letter. I think your idea is great.

A Reader (London, N.).—I am afraid the numbers of the "Gem" Library you are wanting are out of print, and therefore unobtainable from this office.

"A Loyal Reader" (Galashiels).—Our companion papers can be obtained at Port Erin at the following shops:—Messrs. Brown & Sons, Miss E. Taylor, both of Station Road, and also J. J. Kneen, 8, Tower Buildings, Strand Road.

A NEW CRAZE.

As my chums know, all over the country newspapers and business houses are publishing or preparing poster-stamps. This dainty form of advertising has obtained a big hold in England, Scotland and Ireland. Already there are enthusiastic poster-stamp collectors, who eagerly seek new forms of poster-stamps for their albums.

From letters received, I know that stamp-collecting and picture postcard-collecting are extremely popular with my readers, and, if I read the signs aright, there are many thousands of them already just as keen on poster-stamp collecting.

Well, "The Boys' Friend"—the popular Monday story-paper—is not behind in this new craze, and the poster-stamp to be found at the head of the paper will add interest to any collection. Collectors should make a point of retaining a specimen of this week's stamp, for, from time to time, it is intended to change the design.

HOLIDAY MAKING WITH A CAMERA.

By H. Snowden Ward, F.R.P.S.

(Editor of "The Photographic Monthly").

Most versatile, most competent, most unobtrusive of holiday companions, the camera has the great advantage of being at home in all companies, welcome on almost all occasions, a pleasant accessory to every enterprise. It costs nothing to carry, consumes no supplies when not in use, and can be produced as opportunity serves to record whatever is quaint, wonderful, beautiful, or memorable. It acts as a picture-maker and a note-book in one; a memory more faithful and reliable than that of any man who ever lived; and it is equally competent to record the grandeur of the storm amongst the mountains, or the picnic disaster when Alphonso sits down suddenly in the custard.

It is difficult to recommend any one particular make, for camera-building has become so refined in the past few years that marvels of ingenuity and efficiency in great variety are to be obtained for very reasonable prices. The holiday companion should be of the folding kind that closes compactly and is leather-covered, so that no separate carrying-case is needed, and it should have long extension, so that it can be used for more than one kind of lens—giving pictures on various scales from one standpoint. The lens should be of the separable or convertible kind, which can be used whole, or, by screwing out one of its components, can be made to give a larger scale than with the whole lens. It is unnecessary to specify the movements with which the front and the back of the camera should be fitted to enable it to be used under various circumstances—for almost of all modern cameras have all the movements that are useful.

Plates versus Films.

At the outset this is a very important question. The plate and the film both have great advantages. The film is light, and practically unbreakable. The plate is heavier, but only costs about one-third the price of roll-films. On the whole, unless it be necessary to carry a great supply of sensitive material (say, on a holiday trip to the Sahara or the Pole), I prefer to use plates. Supplies can be obtained from the dealers in every town and almost every village where tourists penetrate; dark rooms for changing are available almost everywhere, and exposed plates can be sent home by post or rail so cheaply and safely that it is ridiculous to carry any great weight for any long journey. The beginner's camera, therefore, should be made to take plates, but it should be convertible to take a roll-holder for use on those occasions when one wishes to enjoy the luxury of unlimited exposures with daylight changing and the minimum of weight.

Dealers and dark-rooms are to be found everywhere. And the stocks of plates and films kept by them may be relied upon as being fresh and good. A directory of public dark-rooms is published for threepence, and the dark-rooms listed therein are almost all marked by a standard sign (a blue Maltese cross on a white ground, with the words "photographic dark room" on the cross) hung in the window or projecting from the doorway to catch the eye of the passing cyclist or motorist. At any of these dark-rooms the directory may be consulted, so that one may know where supplies are to be obtained in any district that it is proposed to visit.

(Another "Camera" article
 next Wednesday.)

The Editor



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