

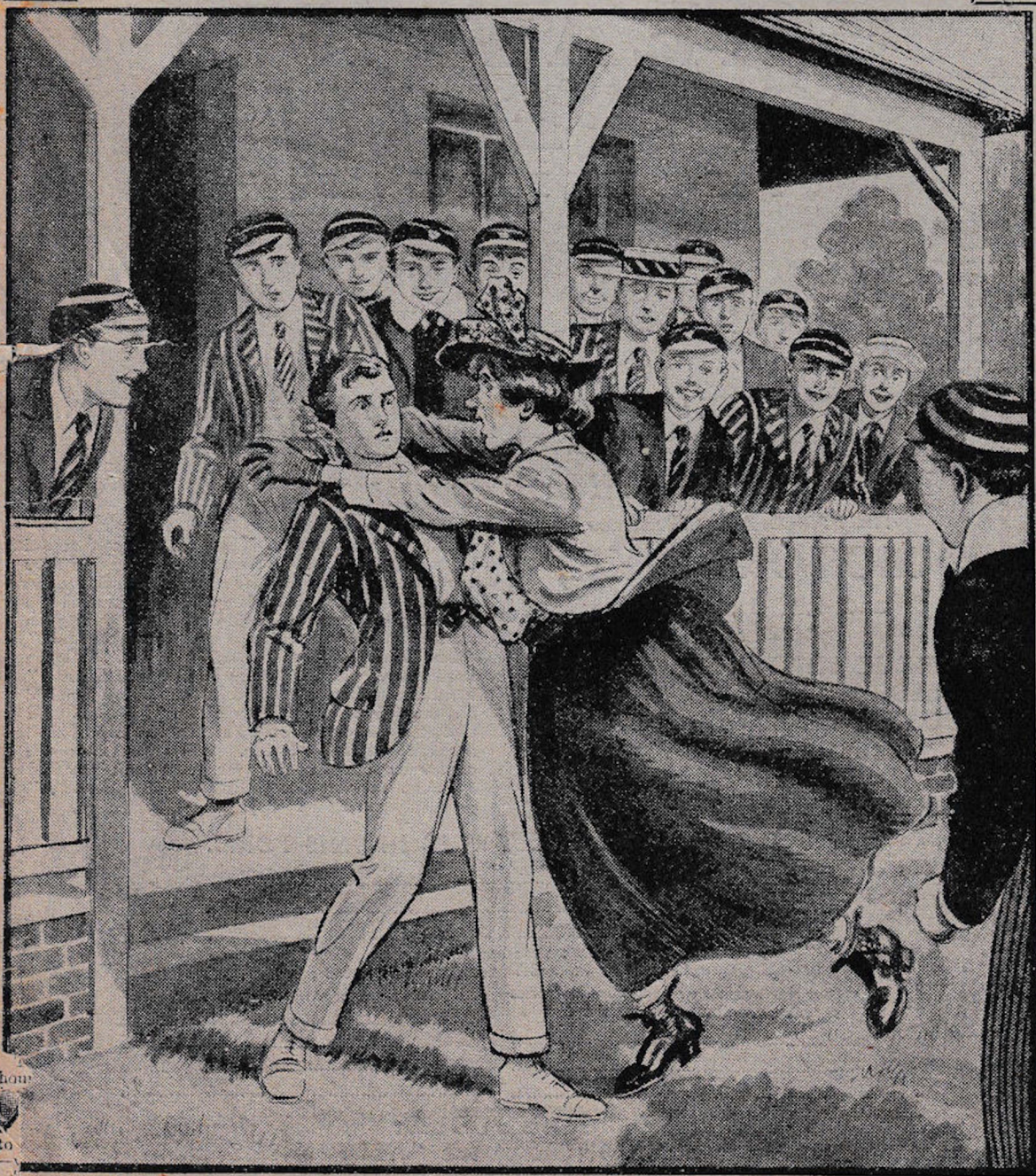
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Long Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co.

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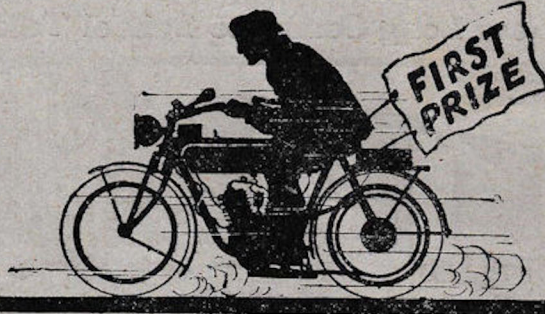
No. 386
Vol. 9.



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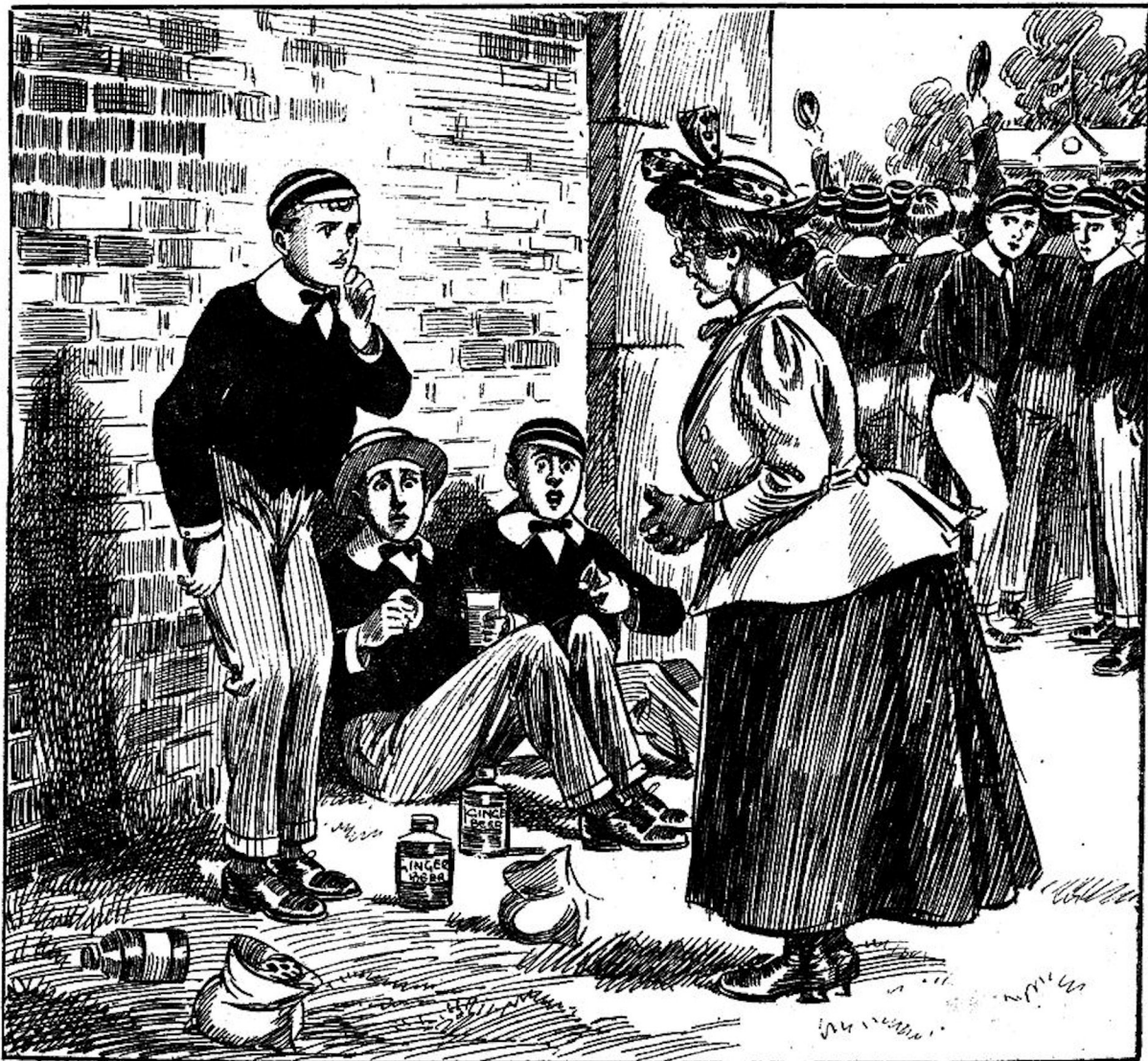


COMPLETE STORIES
FOR ALL, AND EVERY
STORY A GEM!

FINDING HIS LEVEL!

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Story of Tom Merry & Co.

By **MARTIN CLIFFORD.**



"Little boys," said the apparition, "can you tell me where I can find a young feller by the name of Mayne?"
"There are no little boys here, ma'am," said Wally D'Arcy stiffly. "St. Jim's is not an infants' school!"
(See Chapter 12.)

CHAPTER 1. A Hero's Son.

"A BEASTLY bounder like that! The son of a rotten private soldier!" growled Crooke of the Shell.
"A sergeant isn't exactly a private soldier, you know, Crooke," answered Levison.
The two sat together in Crooke's study.

"Rats! If he isn't, he has been, so it's all the same thing. A chap doesn't get promoted from captain to sergeant, does he? He has to be in the ranks first."

"No end of well-educated fellows—chaps of good family, too—have been in the ranks lately," Levison replied.

It was an unusual thing to find Levison, the cad of the Fourth, taking the decent side in an argument.

Next Wednesday:

"TOM MERRY & CO.'S ALLY!" AND "THE CITY OF FLAME!"

But when anyone argued with Crooke, the rank outsider of the Shell, it was necessary to take the decent side. Otherwise there could have been no argument in which decency had any concern, for Crooke was very sure not to take that side.

And Levison had been in hot water so very often of late that he had made up his mind to go slow. Only recently he had fallen foul of a moneylender, and another row would probably mean expulsion; and the thought of that frightened him.

He had experimented in seeming straight and being the opposite; but, though he had any amount of cunning, the experiment had not proved a success.

Now he meant to try if he really could go straight.

He would have had help in that, if only the other fellows could have believed in his sincerity.

Some of them had tried to give him a helping hand before. It had never been of any use.

He might seem to be improving, but before long he would slide back into the slough of lying and treachery that had more than once come near to engulfing him.

So in these days he was forced to consort with Crooke and Mellish, because other fellows were fed-up with him. And to struggle uphill with two such dead weights as Crooke and Mellish hanging to him was altogether too hard a task for Levison.

There really was not very much to choose among the three. Crooke, a big, burly fellow for his age and place in the school, had more of the bully in him than Levison; and Mellish more of the sneak. Perhaps neither was quite as spiteful as Levison, and quite certainly neither was as clever.

Crooke looked now as if Levison's last argument—that plenty of well-bred men had not thought it beneath them to enlist for the Great War—had made some slight impression upon him.

But he found an argument to combat it.

"That's altogether a different thing," he said. "This last war, I mean. Anybody could do what so many other fellows were doing, and not lose caste by it. But it never used to be so. If a gentleman enlisted in the old days it was because he'd come a beastly mucker some way or another. The chaps who enlisted in a general way were just common cads."

Levison wriggled uneasily.

Somehow he did not like that. Even to his mean mind there had come some faint reflection of the pride and love with which the better part of the nation had learned to regard the British Army.

Because of those men who had endured cheerfully the inferno of the trenches, who had marched and fought and died like heroes—because of the many nameless graves in France and Flanders, Levison, like many another little used to generous thoughts, had come to respect the "common soldier." The men who fought in South Africa, in India during the Mutiny, in the Crimea, and away back through the glorious storied years of Britain's warfare, had been just as brave as these men, must have had in them much of the same spirit as these. And it didn't seem fair—even to Levison, whose notions of fairness were vague—to class them as "common cads."

"Let's have a squint at the letter," said Levison.

"What, the old colonel's letter? Oh, I don't know where I've shoved the thing away to; but I can tell you what's in it. He says he's only just come across this chap Mayne, living with his mother in pretty poor circe, and going to one of those low Council schools. He says Mayne's father, who was a sergeant in his regiment, saved his life in the South African War, and was given the V.C. for it, though he died before he knew that it had been granted to him."

"That was pretty rough on him," remarked Levison.

"Rot! Are you turning soft?" growled Crooke. "What's the odds about common chaps like that? They haven't any real feelings. Well, old Colonel Pawlee, who is a frightful old ass, reckons he never made it up to the Maynes for what the sergeant Johnny did—he couldn't find the mother and kid when he came back—and now he wants to do it."

"That's decent of him, anyway."

"Oh, yes! In a sense it is. But what's he want to go and be so ramheaded about it for? Why didn't he

apprentice this Mayne chap to some trade, or give the mother a pension?"

"Perhaps the mother wouldn't take a pension, and Mayne didn't care about being apprenticed," suggested Levison.

"Rats! People of that sort don't say 'No' to money, you bet. And, anyway, the chap would have been better apprenticed to a chimney-sweep than sent here. But because old Pawlee was at St. Jim's himself a century or so ago, he's made up his mind to send the Mayne-bird here. Says he's no end promising, quick at his books, has learned some Latin and Greek for himself out of school hours, and good all round at games. Sort of Admirable Whatdyecallum, he seems to think."

"Well, where do you come in?" Levison inquired.

"That's what I should like to know, old man. I can't see it at present. Just because my pater and this old ass of a colonel happen to sit on the same bench of magistrates, and dine with each other now and then, the silly old jossler writes to me as 'My dear boy,' and asks me to take Mayne under my wing here, and see that he gets a fair show."

"Is the colonel good for a tip?" asked Levison.

"He never tipped me a bob in my life, that's all I know."

"He might, though, if——"

"Oh, ring off, Levison! I'm not so rotten poor as you are! I don't have to fag myself to death on the off-chance of somebody's doing the liberal."

Not for the first time, it struck Levison that Crooke was hardly the pleasantest person he knew. Crooke had the hide of a hippopotamus. Levison, on the contrary, was more sensitive, and such taunts as these made him wince.

"The chap will find his level here," Levison said.

Crooke snorted contemptuously.

"How can he? St. Jim's isn't the place for him; its lowest level is above his mark."

"Oh, I don't know! That sort of talk hardly goes these days. We're all blessed democrats, more or less. Look at other chaps we've had—Grimes, a rotten grocer's boy, Hammond, and young Frayne! Tom Merry and that gang have backed them up for all they were worth, and found all sorts of good qualities in them. Look at Talbot, if you come to that! A beastly burglar, even if he had been brought up to behave, and so on!"

"Merry & Co. won't back up Mayne," answered Crooke.

"Bet you they will, especially if they know you've got a down on him."

"I'll bet you they won't, then. A quid to two half-crowns! Is it a go?"

"Nun-no," answered Levison doubtfully. "When you say that, I'm jolly sure you've got something up your sleeve."

Crooke grinned as if he had been paid a compliment.

"I have," he admitted. "A jolly good wheeze, too! But I want your help, old man."

Levison had guessed as much already. Crooke would not have been so friendly if he had not wanted something.

"What do you want me to do? I can't promise till I know. I'm not going to risk any sort of a row, you know."

"Oh, it's a dead easy thing! My notion is to seem pally with this boulder Mayne at first—long enough to set him against those rotters. We'll tell him that they're such awful snobs that they'll bar him completely if they know what his father was."

"But they wouldn't. They'd be all the more inclined to give him the glad hand."

"Great jingo! Do you suppose I don't know that? They're asses enough for anything. But he isn't to know, is he? Before ever he sees them he'll get a notion that they'd be down on him if they knew, and that will make him inclined to steer clear of them, I should think."

Crooke must have been using his brains. The scheme was worthy of Levison, and, on the whole, it did not strike that sweet youth at all unpleasantly.

"That seems safe enough," he said. "You'd better leave most of the talking to me, though, Crooke. It doesn't want blurring out all at once. He'd smell a rat!"

Crooke dug Levison in the ribs. "That's the giddy style, old man!" he said. "Just insinuate it artfully. Oh, you're the bird for that! Have a cig?"

"Is it safe?" asked Levison.

"Safe enough, I reckon. A prefect may look in, but I don't take much stock in them."

Levison accepted the cigarette, though he would as soon have been without it.

"Crooke," he said, "I'm stony-broke! Can you rise to a loan?"

"How much do you want, old man?"

"A quid would do me."

"Half that will have to do you. Here you are!"

It was rather more than Levison expected, and the granting of his request was so ready that he felt suspicious. Crooke's was not a generous nature.

But Levison could not see that the loan would run him into any danger. Moreover, as he told himself, Crooke couldn't expect to have his dirty work done for nothing.

If he had carried the chain of thought one link further, he might have realised that the fellow who accepts payment for doing another's dirty work is putting himself in peril. But he didn't.

"Then you mean to be friendly with the cad at first?" he said.

"That's the dodge. Till the other gang's fairly choked off. Then—why, then, Levison, we'll simply make the place too hot to hold the beast!"

It was a pleasant programme. On the face of it, Harry Mayne appeared to have very little chance of finding his level at St. Jim's, thus handicapped in advance by spiteful snobbery.

But the fellow who possesses grit and balance usually finds his level anywhere, though before he finds it he may have to go through rough times!

CHAPTER 2

The Good Samaritan.

THE train rolled into Rylcombe station, and out of it stepped a good-looking, pleasant-faced boy of fifteen or so.

He was well-dressed, without being in any way conspicuous, and he carried himself well.

"Doesn't look such an awful cad," whispered Levison to Crooke.

"Oh, you can't judge chaps by their looks," Crooke answered.

Mellish was with the two. He had been let into the secret; partly as a measure of precaution, since what Mellish wasn't told he generally found out by methods of his own, and partly because the scheme was quite in his line. Though he would have funk'd it, like Levison, had there seemed to him any element of risk in it, for he had taken warning by the result of a recent plot in which those two and Crooke had been concerned.

The three stepped forward, Crooke leading. "You don't want to be gushing with him, you know," said Crooke. "But we'll be civil—at first!"

The newcomer saw the St. Jim's colours, and he flushed just the least little bit as they approached.

He did not funk his ordeal. He had never funk'd anything in his life.

But he realised that his first few weeks at St. Jim's were bound to be an ordeal. So many things would be different from the things he had been used to, and he would naturally feel awkward.

"You're Mayne, aren't you?" said Crooke, holding out his hand. "Colonel Pawlee dropped me a line about you, and I thought it might be as well if I toddled along to meet you. These fellows are friends of mine—Levison and Mellish."

Mayne shook hands with all three, but said nothing. He did not know exactly what to say.

"Those your traps?" asked Levison. "Oh, you needn't bother about them. I'll just tell a porter, and he'll tote them along to St. Jim's."

Mayne thought he had fallen upon his feet. It was

only natural he should think so, for all three appeared to make him at home.

He felt that it was hardly fair that Levison and Mellish both seemed to him a trifle sly-looking, and that Crooke's apparent bluff good-nature did not ring quite true.

But a fellow cannot help these impressions, and Mayne tried to smother them, and on the whole succeeded very well.

Afterwards he might recall them, perhaps, and wonder why he had not taken the warning they conveyed.

The four walked out of the station together, after Levison had spoken to a porter.

"This is Rylcombe," said Crooke. "Rummy little show, ain't it?"

Mayne looked about him, and then spoke for the first time since he landed.

"Oh, I don't know," he answered. "It seems pretty well all right."

His voice had no twang. His choice of words was not quite St. Jim's, but that could not be expected, and there was no real fault to find with it.

Crooke would have preferred that he should have shown his low origin beyond mistake. Crooke, by the way, was not exactly a blue-blooded aristocrat himself.

But Crooke senior had made his pile, and the family had set up as heavy swells in consequence.

"There are some more of the St. James' fellows," remarked Mayne, looking with interest at a group of three who stood in front of a shop.

The trio were Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther—the Terrible Three of St. Jim's.

Now, the Terrible Three were the very last persons Crooke intended Mayne to meet just yet.

He had to be prepared first, to be warned against them!

"St. Jim's, we say," said Mellish.

"Oh, yes! I dare say I shall soon get into the way of it. Who are those boys?" asked Mayne.

He liked the look of the three. A fleeting thought passed through his mind that it would have been more pleasant if they had met him. But he dismissed it quickly.

"Rotters!" answered Crooke, with great emphasis. "By the way, no St. Jim's fellow ever says 'boys.' 'Fellows,' or 'chaps' if you like."

"Thanks! Still, we are all boys, aren't we? It doesn't seem to me to matter so very much. They didn't look like rotters, I thought."

"Do you call a rank snob a rotter?" inquired Levison.

"Yes; I suppose I should, anyway."

"Do you call a swanking idiot a rotter?" asked Crooke.

"I shouldn't say a fellow was a rotter because he was an idiot, and if he swanked I should like to know whether he'd anything to swank about before I called him so."

It was very evident that Mayne had ideas of his own.

"Do you call an overbearing, stack-up-nosed peacock a rotter?" chimed in Mellish, anxious to keep up his end.

Mayne burst into a laugh. "I should call a stack-up-nosed peacock an ornithological curiosity!" he answered merrily.

"A whicher?" Crooke queried, puzzled by the long word.

"He means that peacocks don't have noses," explained Levison. "We don't talk 'dick' at St. Jim's, Mayne. Those fellows—well, they aren't your sort."

"If there's a worse rotter at St. Jim's than Manners, it's Lowther," growled Crooke. "And if there's a bigger outsider than the two of them together would make, it's Tom Merry!"

"Why?" asked Mayne. Merry—Manners—Lowther; he knew the names already, and was sure, somehow, that the fellow whose short hair was crisp and inclined to be curly was Merry, and fancied that the smiling one of the other two was Lowther, though he didn't know why he fancied so.

He seemed very persistent. Crooke began to get impatient, and nudged Levison. Diplomacy was not Crooke's strong point.

"Well, old man," said Levison wheedlingly, "you see, Crooke's told us your story—about your father and

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Colonel Pawlee and all that. You don't mind, I suppose?"

"Mind?" Mayne's face flushed, his eyes glistened, and a ringing note came into his voice. "Mind? I should think not, indeed! I'm proud of my father's name, and I think the colonel is the best and kindest man on earth, and am ever so grateful for the chance he's giving me."

"Do you know what those three would call it?" asked Levison.

"No. Though it wouldn't make any difference what they called it. I couldn't be made ashamed. There's nothing to be ashamed of."

"Of course there isn't! But they'd call it charity."

Mayne's flush deepened, but he spoke out bravely:

"So it is—in a way. What is there in the word that I should mind?"

"Oh, nothing at all; but I should bar being called a charity boy myself," replied Crooke brutally.

Mayne's hands clenched. It was offensive, put that way.

He had never been quarrelsome, but he had often fought. He felt at the moment that, though Crooke was a good bit over his weight, he would like to be facing Crooke with the gloves on.

"Would they call me that?" he asked, with a quick, sharp indrawing of breath.

"They'd think you it if they didn't say so. And I wouldn't trust them not to say so," Levison answered.

"They and all their chums are utter snobs. There's a lord's son among them—the Honourable Arthur Augustus D'Arcy—and of course they all suck up to him."

"Well, I suppose I can keep out of their way?" said Mayne slowly.

Already he was losing the feeling of pleasure that had come over him when he had found himself met at the station and received in friendly fashion.

These fellows did not ring true. They didn't ring true a bit. There might be something in their warning. It might even be kindly meant, but it would have been better if they had left him to find out these things for himself, Mayne thought.

"Best thing you can do," answered Crooke.

"And if I were you I wouldn't talk about my father, or about the old colonel's kindness," added Levison.

"If you mean brag about my father, I don't believe in bragging, anyhow. But I shouldn't think of hiding from anyone who he was. And if I were ashamed of the colonel's being so kind to me, I shouldn't be fit to be here, that's all about it."

"Better not say any more," whispered Levison to Crooke. "I think the bizney's about done. And if we say much more he'll begin to dislike us, and I don't suppose you want that—just yet."

"There are some more," remarked Mayne.

Jack Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy this time. From Crooke's point of view these four were as dangerous as the Terrible Three.

So Levison had to say more after all.

"That's the worst gang of the lot," he said. "Twig that merchant with the eyeglass and the flower in his buttonhole, dressed up to kill? That's D'Arcy, Lord Eastwood's son. If you like to bow down and worship, he's about your mark. But he's not ours. We bar him."

It seemed to Mayne that the quartet barred Crooke & Co. too. They gave them the curtest of nods in passing, and did not speak at all.

"Who are the other three?" Mayne asked.

"Blake, Herries, and Digby," answered Mellish.

"Put them in your black books, old chap."

That was overdoing it, and Levison gave Mellish a sly kick on the ankle to warn him.

"Ow! What's that for?"

"Sorry, Mellish! I kicked a stone," answered Levison.

"That's another! It was my ankle you kicked!"

"I'll flay you alive!" whispered Levison in his ear.

"You piffing ass!"

Had Mayne heard? His face took on a very curious look. Levison wondered whether it was going to be just as easy to keep the new fellow in leading-strings as

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they had fancied. But it would not be for long, anyway. If the scheme worked well, Mayne would soon be asking Colonel Pawlee to take him away from St. Jim's, no doubt.

Near the gates they passed Figgins, Kerr, and Fatty Wynn.

"You won't see much of those fellows," said Levison. "They belong to the other House—the New House, you know. But they're tarred with the same brush as the rest."

"Look here!" said Mayne, halting. "Do you want me to believe that St. James's—St. Jim's, I mean—is full of snobs and rotters?"

"I don't suppose it's much worse than other big schools," said Levison. "Fellows at a show like this have their own way of looking at things, and it isn't quite like—like what you've been used to. We're a bit broader minded, and of course it counts that the colonel has asked old Crooke to give you a leg-up."

Mayne could not help wishing that the colonel hadn't. Dimly he perceived already that there were flies in the ointment of Crooke's friendliness.

Perhaps it would have been better if he had landed there without credentials to anybody, and had been allowed to find his level without aid or hindrance.

CHAPTER 3.

In the Gym.

"WHO'S the new fellow?" asked Tom Merry.

The Terrible Three and Jack Blake & Co. had met on the Rylcombe road.

"Chap with Crooke and that gang, you mean?" returned Blake. "I don't know anything about him, and if the old saying about 'birds of a feather'—well, 'ruff said!'"

"Weally, Blake, that's scarcely fair!" protested Arthur Augustus. "He can't know anything much about Crooke when he has only just awwived, can he? He looks all wight, too."

"I thought so," said Lowther. "Quite too decent to be in such company as that."

"As a matter of fact," put in Herries, "Mellish tells me he knows Crooke at home. That don't say much for him, does it?"

"It may not be his fault," remarked Tom Merry thoughtfully. "After all, we know Crooke here, and we can't help that."

"My hat, yes! We know him well enough to steer clear of him," said Manners, with a sniff.

"There's something queer about this merchant—Mayne's his name—though, unless Mellish is lying," went on Herries, the only one who had heard anything.

"Most likely is lying," said Blake.

"Mostly is," added Digby.

"What is it, deah boy?" asked D'Arcy.

"Well, Mellish told me in a mysterious kind of way, but he didn't say anything about keeping it dark, so there can't be much harm in telling you chaps," Herries replied. "The fellow's a low cad of sorts, I gather. Crooke says so, and he knows all about him."

"If Crooke only said so," remarked Lowther, "I'd believe just as much as I liked—and that would be nothing at all. But Crooke goes to meet him at the station, and takes Levison and Mellish with him. Which looks as if Crooke was telling the truth for once. Because if he wasn't that sort of merchant, Crooke wouldn't have much use for him—see?"

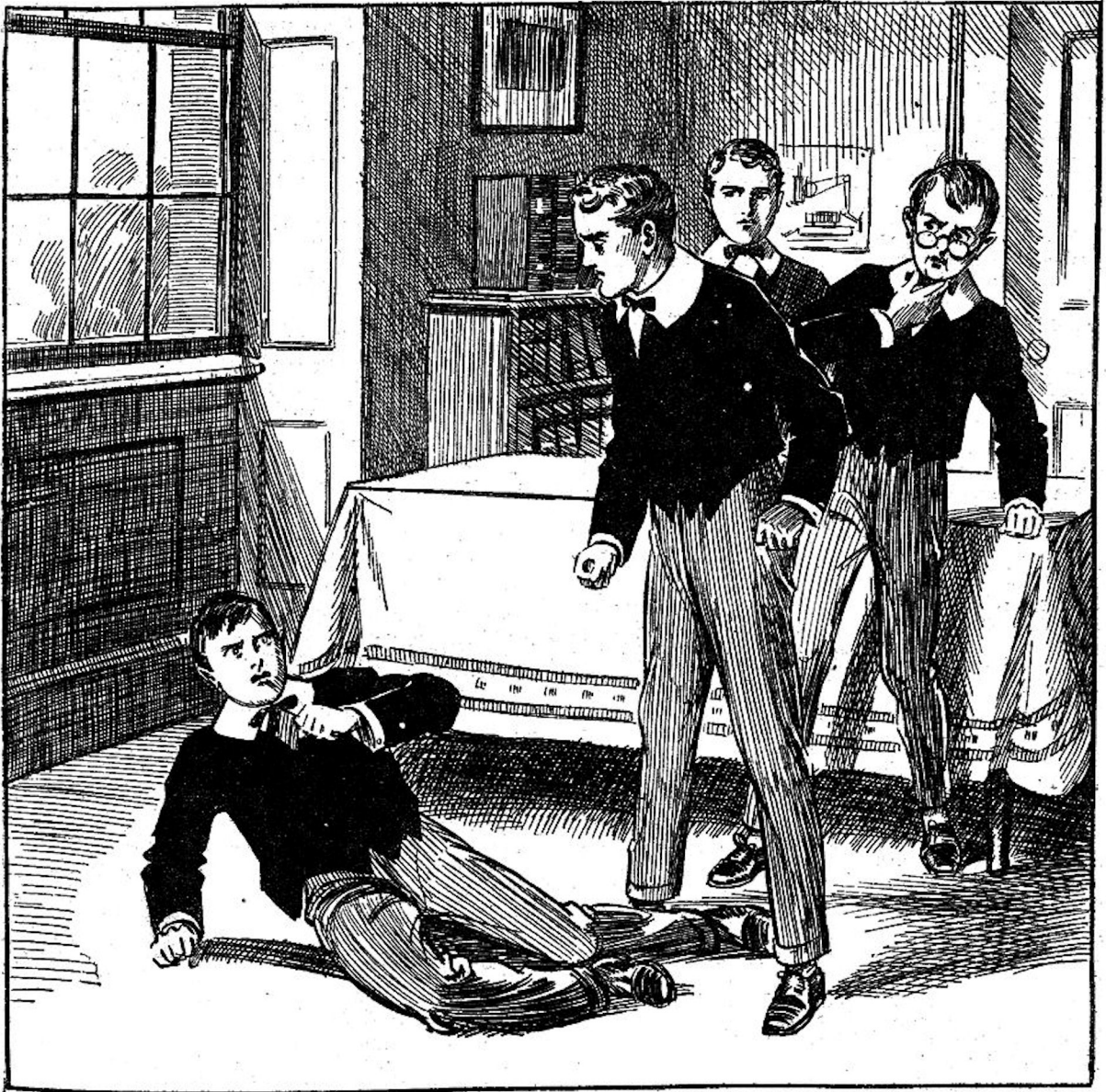
"I shouldn't take anything for granted," said Tom Merry. "What Form's the chap to be in?"

"The Shell, Mellish says. And he's to share Crooke's den. There's no one else there, you know, since those other bounders went home ill."

"H'm! 'Tisn't a very healthy start for Mayne. But we'll see how the fellow shapes," Tom Merry said.

And then they fell to discussing other matters, and forgot all about Mayne, until Figgins & Co. strolled up, when the topic had a fresh start. But nothing new came out.

Mayne had been taken to see Mr. Carrington meanwhile.



George Gore found himself on the floor the next moment, with Mayne standing over him. "I am really very much obliged to you, Mayne!" said Skimpole gratefully. (See Chapter 6.)

The Housemaster told Crooke he might go after he had shown the new boy in. Crooke would rather have stayed, but, of course, had no choice in the matter.

Mr. Carrington, a good judge of character, and free from any particle of snobbery, liked Mayne at once.

"You may have difficulties to encounter," he told him. "Rather, I should say, you will have. Every boy has. And yours will not be lessened by the fact that your previous experience has been of a school differing in type from this."

He would say no more on that subject. It might have been better if he had said a little more, but he had no desire to hurt Mayne's feelings. His saying so little confirmed the impression made upon Mayne by the three conspirators that some fellows at St. Jim's would be ready to hold the council school against him.

"Don't be too easy of belief, Mayne. I am not exhorting you to be suspicious, of course. But it is possible that your presumed greenness will lead to attempts to impose upon you."

That was a veiled warning against Crooke. To caution the boy in so many words against the fellow

to whose care Mr. Carrington knew he had been commended was naturally out of the question.

But the Housemaster had wondered more than once whether Colonel Pawlee knew Crooke at all well, and whether, if such was the case, the colonel could be a very judicious person.

Crooke was very nearly the last fellow in the School House whom Mr. Carrington would have chosen as a mentor for any boy in whom he had a kindly interest.

"Your father was a soldier, I think, Mayne?"

"Yes, sir. Sergeant in Colonel Pawlee's regiment."

"And he saved the colonel's life, I have heard. That's a thing to be proud of, my boy! And not only that, for the colonel tells me that in all his life he never met a better or a straighter man than his rescuer. He tells me that the hardest case in the regiment sobbed like a child on your father's grave, that the men loved him, one and all, and would have followed him anywhere. That's a fine thing to remember, Mayne, because a non-commissioned officer's task is a hard one to carry through; and a man who can do his duty in it and yet win the men's affections must be a really fine fellow."

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Mayne left the study, and found Crooke waiting for him in the corridor.

"Mr. Carrington's a good sort," he said.

"Oh, he's not so bad as he might be!" Crooke answered. "But it's no good judging fellows by their talk. Wait till he's caned you!"

"If he caned me twenty times in a week, I should still believe him a good sort!" answered Mayne quickly.

It occurred to Crooke that anyone who had such a strong power of belief as that should have it tested without delay.

He suggested as much to Levison.

"I'll think out a dodge before dinner's over," said that sweet youth.

It was a half-holiday, as Mayne was glad to hear, for he was inclined to dread the first hour or two in Form. Ever since he had known he was coming to St. Jim's he had worked with redoubled zest at Latin and Greek—not that he loved them any better than most boys of his age do, but because he was anxious not to fall behind other fellows. But, as he thought wistfully now and then, they had had a very long start of him in such matters.

"What would you like to do, Mayne?" asked Crooke.

"Is there any cricket on?" asked the new fellow eagerly.

"Well, yes, there's cricket, of course, but we rather bar that. You see, the sidey gang run the junior cricket, and they won't give us a fair show."

Mayne looked disappointed.

"Are you great on cricket?" asked Levison.

"I don't know about great. I'm pretty fair, I think, and very keen on it. I was supposed to be the best all-round player at—"

"I shouldn't mention that show if I were you," put in Crooke.

"Great Scott, no!" said Mellish. "You'll have to remember to keep that dark, old chap—really you will!"

"Box at all?" inquired Levison.

Mayne's face brightened. He hated loafing about. If there was to be no cricket for him that afternoon, a set-to with the gloves would be far better than strolling about aimlessly. And somehow Crooke & Co. struck him as of the loafing sort.

They carried themselves a trifle slackey, for one thing, not like Tom Merry and the rest.

The new fellow did not mean to accept exclusion from cricket tamely. He could find out later whether he would be so very unwelcome when the others discovered that he really could bat and bowl pretty well. But he feared it would be hardly civil to break away from his three "godfathers" so soon.

"Yes, I box a bit," he answered.

"Good egg! There'll be nobody in the gym on an afternoon like this. We can have it all to ourselves, and you'll be able to show us what you can do."

"All right," answered Mayne.

He would have liked better the green playing-fields and the bright sunshine out of doors. But a sight of the gymnasium helped to make him feel more contented.

It was a far more roomy and every way better fitted up place than anything of the sort he had seen before. He was hardly inside the door before his jacket came off, and he was swarming up the ladder hand over hand at a pace that amazed all three of the watchers.

"The boulder's got muscles," said Mellish.

"Rats! It's only practice," answered Crooke. "I'll bet ten to one I've more muscle than he has."

Crooke had certainly more beef. Mayne was wiry, and looked slim.

"What's the downy dodge, Levison?" asked Crooke.

"You'll see presently—when we get the outsider going," replied Levison.

He did not want to show his hand too soon. More considerations than one went to the scheme he had half thought out.

Mayne came swinging down, and landed without the least loss of breath. It was evident he was in good training.

"This is an awfully fine place," he said, looking round him.

"We say 'no end ripping,' or something of that sort," Mellish corrected him.

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"What's it matter? One's just as good grammar as another, I suppose?"

"It isn't grammar we care about at St. Jim's."

For once Mellish spoke truth. It certainly wasn't!

"Do anything in that line?" asked Mayne of Crooke, nodding towards the ladder.

Crooke checked himself in the act of glaring. It was like a new fellow's cheek to ask him questions.

But the time for glaring had not come yet.

"Oh, a bit!" Crooke answered. "Rather too much of a fag to be continually at it, you know. But I'll show you a dodge that I'll bet you can't do."

He took a cigarette-case from his pocket. He extracted a cigarette, offered the rest to Mayne, who refused, and to the other two, who each took one, and then lighted his own.

Having got it well alight, he put it between his teeth with the burning end inwards.

"If that's the trick," said Mayne, "I've seen it done before, and I don't think a great deal of it."

"But it isn't. Don't you be so beastly sharp. I'm going up the ladder and coming down again with the thing like that."

"You'll only burn your tongue," said Mayne; and Mellish sniggered.

Crooke was bound to make the attempt now, of course. It was a long time since he had practised going hand over hand up the ladder, and he had almost forgotten what it felt like.

But he started off. Easy enough at first; but when he had gone up a dozen rungs or so his unused muscles began to ache, and the smoke from the cigarette got into his throat. He coughed, and his pace slackened perceptibly.

Half a dozen more rungs, and he began to wonder whether he could do it. He was getting out of breath, and the desire to open his mouth widely grew stronger as he grew weaker.

But he struggled on, vowing internally to have vengeance on Mellish for that stupid sniggering.

Then he gasped; he couldn't help it. The cigarette fell upon his tongue.

"Yaroo!" he howled. "Groo-oo!" And then he dropped.

Mayne rushed in and broke his fall.

Neither Levison nor Mellish would have dreamed for a moment of doing anything so risky; but if either had tried it he would have bungled it, for certain.

Mayne didn't. He caught Crooke—no light weight, either—in his arms, and, though he staggered and fell, taking the other fellow with him to ground, Crooke was not hurt, and if Mayne was he said nothing about it.

"Thanks!" said Crooke, in rather a snarling tone.

Mayne picked up the fallen cigarette. It was in his mind to say that sort of thing was hardly worth while, but he thought it early times yet to be setting up his own standard against Crooke's.

While the new boy stood there with the cigarette in his hand Tom Merry looked in. Mayne noticed that he was in flannels.

"Seen anything of Manners?" he asked.

"No!" snorted Crooke. "He don't live in our pockets, you know."

"He wouldn't care to," Tom Merry answered. "All the same, you seem to carry worse things than old Manners there!"

All four knew what he meant, and Mayne coloured up under the keen glance of the Shell captain. But he did not feel that he could explain the truth, which was, of course, that he had refused to smoke, and that the cigarette was Crooke's.

Tom Merry went.

"Hang that fellow!" said Crooke ill-temperedly. "I didn't expect anyone would come in here. Though, of course, he can't do anything about it."

"He thought Mayne was smoking. He, he, he!" tittered Mellish.

"Mayne don't care a toss what he thinks," replied Crooke. But Mayne himself did not feel so sure about that.

Tom Merry ran against Manners outside.

"Crooke & Co. have got that new chap in the gym, and they're all smoking," he said.

"New merchant's a rotter, sure enough!" answered Manners.

"Dunno! They may have told him it was the thing." "Then he's a silly ass to believe it! Anyway, he's not our sort, Tommy."

They went off to the cricket-field together.

Levison encouraged Mayne to show what he could do in the gymnastic line. He seemed well up in everything, or practically everything. Some of the apparatus was new to him, but he had only to be shown how to use it to outstrip his tutors at once.

By-and-by boxing was suggested.

Mayne was quite ready for that.

"Mellish can try you first," said Levison. "He's the weakest of us three."

"All right," answered Mayne cheerfully.

"We generally say 'Right-ho'!" amended Mellish, who seemed to have taken upon himself the special task of teaching the new boy of St. Jim's.

"Well, say 'Right-ho!' then, and come along," replied Mayne good-temperedly.

Mellish would rather have said "No, thanks!" There was not a fellow at St. Jim's who dreaded being hurt more than did Mellish.

But he fancied somehow that Mayne would not hurt him much, and he was right.

The two were so unequally matched that the set-to was a sheer farce.

Mellish could not begin to hit Mayne, while Mayne could tap Mellish when and where he chose.

"That chap's hot stuff!" whispered Levison to Croke.

"Rats!" He may be smart, but there's no power in his punches," replied the Shell fellow.

Levison put his tongue in his cheek—on the side away from Croke. He knew better. There might be no power in those punches, but that was only because Mayne was letting Mellish down lightly.

In Levison's crafty mind the embryo scheme was fast taking definite shape. At the same time something else had developed in that mind—a determination that he would not put on the gloves with Mayne.

Levison could lick Mellish, no doubt. There were kids in the Third who might have done that. But it was a far cry from licking Mellish to being Mayne's equal.

"That's enough!" said Mellish, puffing hard. "I say, you fellows, this chap's nailing good. He's a heap too clever for me."

And for once Mellish spoke with real enthusiasm. Mayne's cleverness would only have made him feel bitter had Mayne punched him. But Mayne had only patted and tapped, and for the moment Mellish really felt grateful.

"Piffle!" sneered Croke. "I don't say Mayne's a duffer, but you're just nothing at all to go by, Mellish. You can't box for nuts!"

"Never said I could, did I?" whined Mellish.

"Now, then, let's see you put old Levison through it, Mayne!" ordered Croke.

"I'm sorry," said Levison. "I'd like no end to spar with Mayne a bit. I dare say he might give me a wrinkle or two. But I've strained my shoulder, haven't I, Mellish?"

"I don't remember you doing it," replied Mellish.

"Rats! Not when I had the scuffle with that silly ass Blenkinsop?"

"Oh, yes! You did say something then about hurting your shoulder. But I thought that was just because you reckoned he might—"

"Ring off! You're doing too much thinking!" said Levison hastily.

Mellish obeyed, feeling small and mean, and hoping Mayne would not guess how small and mean he felt. There were times when Mellish would have liked to rebel against Levison's sway, but he seldom asserted himself to any effect.

"I don't believe the yarn," said Croke.

"And I don't care a rap whether you believe it or not!" snapped Levison.

His eyes, lifted boldly for once, met Croke's, and though Croke was far from being brainy, he read quite easily the message in that glance of defiance.

"If you can't accept my false coin as sterling, then I'll spoil your game!"

That, or something like that, Croke read in Levison's eyes.

"Oh, all serene!" he said. "Another day will do for you. I suppose your shoulder isn't put out of action for good and all? I'm a bit shaken by that fall, but I don't mind taking Mayne on."

Mayne might have said that he had suffered more in the fall than Croke had. But he didn't.

Rather slowly Croke took off his coat and waistcoat, and donned the gloves.

"Look here," he said suddenly, just as Levison was beginning to tie the right glove. "You haven't had a look round the place yet. What do you say if we postpone this, and do a trot out?"

Levison laughed jeeringly, and Mellish could not keep back a nervous giggle.

"Just as you like," Mayne replied.

But Croke had seen the new fellow's upper lip curl ever so little, and he knew that Mayne suspected a yellow streak in him.

The thought made him furious.

"No!" he yelled. "If you're keen on being hammered just be hammered, that's all!"

But it appeared that Mayne was so far from being keen on it that he hadn't the slightest intention of suffering it, and it appeared further that Croke was hopelessly incapable of even beginning to hammer him.

Croke was bigger every way, taller, with longer reach, and more muscle, though his muscle was flabby, whereas Mayne's was iron-hard.

But, compared with the new fellow, Croke seemed as clumsy as a bull-calf might seem by the side of an antelope.

When he punched at Mayne's face somehow Mayne's face wasn't there.

When Mayne punched at his face it really seemed as though Croke's obliging nature had led him to put that face exactly where Mayne wanted it.

But Levison and Mellish knew too much about Croke's obliging nature to be taken in.

It was not only on the face that Croke got it.

Hard body-blows, painful, despite the fairly well-stuffed gloves, soon gave him bellows to mend. He kept on, hoping to get in a knock-down blow. He punched so viciously that Mayne got a little surprised, though not at all flabbergasted.

"We'd better knock off," the new fellow said at length. "It's never worth while to go on when a fellow gets his paddy up."

"We never say 'gets his paddy up' here," amended Mellish. "We say—"

"Who says I've got my hair off?" roared Croke, with a bull-like bellow. "He's a liar, whoever he is!"

"I didn't say so," replied Mayne, quite mildly, but quite firmly. "I might have meant myself. But if you ask my opinion I should say that you aren't quite as cool as you might be."

Croke demonstrated what an excellent temper he was in by flicking Mellish viciously across the face in reward for a snigger. Then he held out his gloves to Levison.

"Undo these things!" he said. "And look sharp about it! That fall rattled me. I've been giddy ever since. We'll chuck this, Mayne!"

"Oh, all right!" replied Mayne.

"Right-ho!" Mellish corrected him.

"Croke, old man," whispered Levison, "I believe that bouncer could lick Tom Merry or Talbot, and I'm going to see if I can't shove him in the way of doing it!"

"It would suit me just as well if one of them jolly well licks him!" growled Croke, with an angry scowl at the back of Mayne, who was showing Mellish a trick on the parallel-bars.



CHAPTER 4.
A Cool Card.

TEA had just been cleared away in Study No. 1 in the Shell corridor, which was tenanted by the Terrible Three, when Arthur Augustus D'Arcy looked in.

"Hallo, Gustavus, old ass!" was Manners' greeting. "How are you coming along?"

"Weally, Mannahs, I considah that you have the most inappropwiate name of any fellow at St. Jim's!" replied the swell of the Fourth. "You are so wegulawly and habitually offensive that I am dwiven to the conclusion that you litewally do not know when you are misbehaving yourself."

"Gussy's chawed up another dick," said Lowther sleepily. For Lowther had made a very good tea indeed after a hard afternoon's cricket, and he felt delightfully fatigued, while prep was still in the future, though but a short way off now.

"I shall be weluctantly compelled to give you two a feahful thwashing," answered D'Arcy with the utmost solemnity.

"Chuck Tom Merry in, and give us it all at once—save time that way," returned Lowther, while Manners grinned.

"If they can't help it, old chap, and I don't believe they can—I can't myself sometimes—you might be generous, and let 'em off," said Tom Merry.

"Since you interceded to save them ffrom punishment, I will do so, Tom Mewwy, for I have a high wegard for you, and I have noticed an impvovement in your mannahs of late," answered D'Arcy, taking a seat on the table.

"Thanks, awfully, Gustavus! I'm delighted to hear it."

"I have been chatting with the new fellow, Mayne," said D'Arcy. "On the whole, I am disposed to considah it quite poss. that he may be a weally decent sort."

"You always are," returned Lowther. "I never set eyes on a chap like you for seeing swans where other people can only see geese—especially when you look in the glass!"

"On weflection, Lowthah—"

"Yes, old ass, that's sure to be the case when you do that!"

"When I do what, Lowthah?"

"Look in the glass, of course, chump! The glass reflects—"

"I am not talking about glasses. I said that on weflection—"

"Oh, ring off! Go and chase bluebottles! Go and eat coke! Go and—paint your eyebrows sky-blue and twine a dishcloth in your bonnie brown hair."

"What's this about Mayne, Gussy?" asked Tom Merry, and the swell of the Fourth noticed that he frowned a little.

"I have been talking to him. He seems a vewy decent sort indeed. Aftah all, he cannot help coming ffrom the same town as Cwooke. That might happen to anybody."

"But it doesn't happen to anybody to be smoking cigarettes with that measley crowd in the gym on his first day here," said Tom Merry sharply.

"Bai Jove, I am surprised! I should not have thought he was at all the kind of chap for that sort of thing!"

"Well, he is, then. You can take my word for that. There's a story going the rounds that he comes here from a Council school. I shouldn't care a hang about that; he might be no end of a detent sort in spite of it. But if he's going to bring his street-corner tricks to St. Jim's—"

"There's no need," said Manners, breaking in. "They're what you call—"

"Acclimatised," suggested Lowther.

"That's it! Already with Cwooke and that crowd. But it's pretty cool cheek for a new fellow to be at it almost before he's got fairly inside the place, I must say."

Wally D'Arcy, Gussy's younger brother, a Third Form youngster, put his head into the room, nodded affably to Gussy, and threw a note on the table in front of Tom Merry.

"Here, hold hard, kid!" cried Tom, as Wally was disappearing. "What's this?"

"Can't you look at it and see?"

"Gussy dropped off the table, and caught his minox by the collar."

"I will not have you behave with diswespect to Tom Mewwy!" he said.

"Who's Tom Merry that I shouldn't?" retorted the wriggling and unabashed Wally. "He's not a prefect, is he? Or a master, is he? I like Tom Merry all serene, but I am not going to bow down and worship him as if he was the golden idol that Nebuchadnezzar the king set up!"

Gussy gasped.

"What do you know about Nebuchadnezzah the king?" he demanded weakly.

"Had him in Divinity lesson this morning. Rare old ass he was; nearly as big as— Yarook! Ring off, Gussy, or I'll kick your shins!"

"Cut, kid!" ordered Tom Merry.

Gussy released his hold, and Wally made a hasty departure.

"Cool cheek you were saying, Manners? Well, look here!" said the captain of the Shell, a moment later.

Manners looked at the envelope first.

"Yes," he said, "it was pretty cool cheek of you to open it when it's addressed to all three of us!"

"Oh, I don't mean that! What's the odds, anyway?"

It really did not matter, but Manners was always prone to needless argument.

Manners and Lowther read the communication together.

"My hat!" gasped Manners. "The whacking cheek of the merchant! Look here, Gussy!"

But D'Arcy was already "looking here."

"Weally," he said, "I'm wathah sowwy about this, don'tcherknow! It's such a thing as no new fellow has evah twied at St. Jim's before, and I can't help thinking that somebody else must have put it into Mayne's head!"

"Ring off, Gussy! Who'd be likely to? The chap's given himself away for what he is—a bragging, conceited upstart, who, because he may have been cock of the walk in some back-street school, thinks he's going to make a name for himself at St. Jim's at once!"

Tom Merry spoke with quite unusual bitterness. He did not like that challenge a bit. He was not disposed to take it as funny—which was Lowther's attitude from the first—or as sheer cheek—which was the view of Manners—nor was he inclined to make excuses, as was D'Arcy.

"That sort of a bounder always wants to show off," said Manners. "Got no breeding—that explains it!"

For the communication which had caused them all to gasp intimated that H. Mayne was prepared to box, race, jump, or swim any fellow in the Shell or the Fourth, and would be glad to receive challenges from all who desired to test his capabilities in any of these directions!

D'Arcy was often mistaken. His heart was very soft, and maybe his head was—well, not hard! But sometimes the fellow who takes the charitable view is nearer right than the rest.

Gussy was absolutely right here, though within five minutes he was talked out of his opinion.

Mayne would never have dreamed of issuing such a challenge. He had been led into it by Levison.

Crooke and Mellish had backed up Levison. They had assured the new fellow—"Honour bright!"—that the course proposed was quite the usual and correct one.

It seemed strange to Mayne. But, then, so many things at St. Jim's seemed strange to him. And Levison's assurances won him round.

After all, it was but natural that the other fellows should want to know what a new boy had in him, and this method was not entirely an unreasonable one.

It seemed just a little—well, then, a good deal—cocksure and cheeky. But if it was the custom here, others would not think it so.

And Mayne, without being conceited, knew that he could box, run, jump, and swim better than most fellows of his age—better than any of those he had been thrown amongst yet.

Mellish alone of the three felt any companction. All knew very well what a storm of contempt would break

upon Mayne's unhappy head in consequence of the challenge; but Crooke and Levison would enjoy all that, if only he did not give them away. And, even if he did, they could vow the thing was a joke—that they had simply been pulling Mayne's leg.

But Mellish had begun to like Mayne, even to look up to him; and, though Mellish was a liar by nature, he was not used to saying "Honour bright" when he lied. He had done it before, but not often, and never without an unpleasant twinge.

"There goes your minor across the quad to the New House, Gussy," said Manners. "Wonder how Figgins & Co. and Redfern and the rest of them will cotton to Mayne's masterful cheek?"

Within five minutes Figgins & Co. had come across to say what they thought.

Figgy himself was wrathful, Kerr smiled, and Fatty Wynn looked round-eyed wonder.

"His cheek's simply colossal!" said Figgins.

"But, after all, old man, if he can bear up under it, I guess we can," returned Kerr. "It may be only a joke."

"That wouldn't lessen the cheek of it!" snapped Tom Merry.

Now Blake, Herries, and Digby arrived. Then Talbot dropped in.

The Fourth-Form fellows were with the majority. Talbot joined the minority. It was rather a way of Talbot's to take the weaker side.

Indignant: Tom Merry, Manners, Blake, Figgins, Herries, Digby.

Taking it coolly: Kerr, Talbot.

Doubtful: Lowther, D'Arcy, Wynn.

Thus they might be divided at first. But after a little while D'Arcy and Wynn went over to the indignant crowd, and Lowther definitely cast in his lot with the cool members. Neither Gussy nor Fatty could summon up the mighty wrath that agitated the breasts of Figgins, Blake, Manners, and Herries, but they did their best.

"Set of asses, you are!" said Lowther at length. "You're making the new merchant as important as he jolly well thinks himself! Now, I've a dodge to show him his place."

"Your dodges are such frightful piffle!" answered Manners.

"Absolute wot, as a wule!" said Gussy.

"Putrid!" chimed in Blake.

"But this is really top-hole! None of the rest of you have the brains to think of it! I'm not sure any of you will understand it, except Talbot and Kerr."

"Thanks awfully, Lowther!" said Kerr.

And Talbot smiled.

"Well, pile in, old man," Tom Merry said.

"I should let Mayne box Skimmy."

"Rats! Skimmy's not a scrap of use."

"That's all serene! I should let him run Fatty."

"I don't care about running," objected Wynn. "It doesn't suit me. Before meals it spoils my appetite, and after meals it makes me feel ill. Besides, I can't run after meals."

"You can't run at any time!" said Figgins. "You can only waddle!"

"That's the notion!" put in Lowther. "Mayne can box with Skimmy, who's no earthly good; race Fatty, who can't run; jump—well, I dunno but what I shall have to put Fatty down for a double event; and swim—"

But they fairly howled him down. Talbot and Kerr applauded, for to them it seemed that the surest way to check the new fellow's conceit would be some such scheme as Lowther suggested. The rest would not hear of it.

"Why, the bounder would take it seriously, and think he really had whacked our best men!" said Herries scornfully.

"If he's such a complete idiot as that he'd be very welcome," answered Lowther.

"Everybody else would twig; that's the point," added Kerr.

"What do you think, old man?" asked Tom Merry of Talbot.

"There's something in Lowther's notion, but I know a much better one."

"What is it?"

"Take no notice of the thing at all," said Talbot. "I haven't seen Mayne near enough to even guess what he's like yet, but he must be a pretty thick-skinned specimen if that doesn't snub him. Now, I'll grant he deserves a snub, but I think that's all."

They looked at one another. Talbot's words always carried weight, and Kerr, who evidently agreed with Talbot, was known to have a long head, like most Scots.

"We can't make the other fellows do it," said Tom Merry rather weakly.

"I think your influence in the Shell, and that of Figgins and Blake in the Fourth, would go a long way towards it—anyway, with the decent sort," answered Talbot.

That was true, too.

It was a very unexciting way of dealing with the problem, but it had its merits—from their point of view.

They agreed to it at length.

And it would have been the best possible solution—if only Mayne had been the conceited ass that the scheming of Levison and Crooke had made him appear to be.

But Mayne was not.

CHAPTER 5.

The Cold Shoulder.

MAYNE waited with some anxiety for answers to his challenge.

None came.

A day passed, and he began to have his doubts. He had not got so far yet as believing that Crooke and Levison and Mellish had lied to him wilfully, but he could not help suspecting that there was something wrong.

It was not the attitude of the other fellows which suggested this to him, though that was very distant.

For all he knew, it might be the St. Jim's way to treat a fellow as a stranger at first. It was better than the bullying and horseplay which some of his reading had led him to expect at a big public school.

Was it better, though?

He was not quite sure.

Mayne could stand hard knocks better than most fellows. He would not have minded being ragged if only taking the ragging cheerfully would have made him one of the rest—as it always did the heroes of those stories.

The cold shoulder was far worse than ragging. And it was the cold shoulder Mayne got—at every meal, and between meals, too.

He had Crooke & Co. to fall back upon, of course. But somehow Crooke & Co. were not much comfort to him. Of the three he disliked Mellish least; he did not and could not heartily like any of them, though he saw that Mellish was mean and cunning, and held no very high place in anybody's estimation.

Was there anything behind the attitude of the rest besides the fact of his being a new fellow?

That was what he began to wonder.

And as soon as he had begun to wonder that he naturally started in to look for proofs.

Four people in the School House knew his story—Mr. Carrington, Crooke, Levison, and Mellish. Crooke had told the latter two.

They were Crooke's chums, it seemed, so that he could hardly be blamed for giving the story away to them. And, in any case, Mayne did not want friendship under false pretences.

Mr. Carrington would not tell anyone, Mayne felt sure; or, if he did, it would be because he believed it right to do so, and that would make all the difference in the eyes of the boy concerned.

Mayne did not feel confident about any one of the three who had met him and taken him under their wings.

There had been plenty of fellows in his old school, though it was but a poor place compared to St. Jim's, who were every way more decent, more honourable, than

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Crooke & Co. There were Crookes and Levisons and Mellishes among the rest, doubtless; but it could be said for them that they had not had the chances that these St. Jim's fellows had.

Sharing Crooke's study was no catch.

Mayne was as generous as most, and Colonel Pawlee had tipped him well. The sum seemed a big one to him, but he realised that it would not last very long if Crooke was allowed to have the spending of it, and Levison and Mellish dropped in so regularly to share the results of that spending.

Then Mayne was keen on doing his work well, and Crooke was by no means keen on that kind of thing—never had been—never would be.

Crooke believed in what political economists call "the irreducible minimum," and was continually having friction with Mr. Linton, the Form-master, because their views on the subject differed so strongly.

Thus far Mr. Linton was distinctly pleased with Mayne, but the new fellow had earned credit in the class-room only by dint of opposing Crooke's views.

Nobody could object to Mayne's manners. He did not put his knife in his mouth, or mop up gravy with bread, or drink with his mouth full, or anything of that kind.

It would not have failed to be noticed if he had. Many curious eyes were upon him.

Levison was bitterly disappointed by the failure of any result from his plot—at first. He felt it the more because Crooke nagged him about it.

But Levison tumbled before Crooke did to the fact that there had been a result, though not precisely the one plotted for.

"A rotten scheme!" snarled Crooke. "Every fellow in the two Forms has been jolly well told Mayne wants to wipe the floor with him, and no one steps forward. Are they all funks?"

"I guess not," answered Levison.

"Why don't some of 'em jump on the boulder, then?"

"If you ask me, it's because they think he's too big a boulder to be worth it. They're cutting him dead!"

Crooke stared.

"Whew!" he whistled, after a moment's pause. "I shouldn't wonder if you were right, for once."

"Do you think my dodge was rotten now?"

"Great jingo! It's only by a fluke that it's done anything. It has worked quite differently from what you expected—that is, if it really has worked at all. I don't see how you can take any credit for it."

"Don't you? Well, look here. Suppose it had been generally known that Mayne was a Council School boy—and a V.C.'s son, don't forget that!—what would have happened?"

"They'd have sucked up to him," answered Crooke.

"Wanted to make him feel at home. Cracked up his boxing. Put him into the junior cricket-team at once; that is, if he's as good at the game as he is with the gloves. Made him one of the Merry brigade, and warned him that Crooke and Levison were black sheep, and he'd better fight shy of 'em."

Levison nodded.

"But they're not doing that," he answered slowly. "They're giving him the stony glare. And who takes the credit for that?"

"I suppose you reckon you're entitled to it."

"All I know is, you're jolly well not, Crooke! Yes, I fancy I am, partly. But there's something else. Mellish has been blabbing. I knew he would."

"I'll slay him!" growled Crooke.

"No need for that. It's working quite nicely, though that may be another fluke. A Council School boy who comes here and challenges everybody in that cheeky way; that's dead off—don't you twig? And Mellish hasn't let on about the V.C. business. He only seems to have told the worst part."

"How do you know anything about it?"

"Three or four fellows have asked me whether it's true. Lawrence and Reilly and Kerruish, I remember. Oh, and Skimmy!"

"Skimmy don't count."

"No. At least, not much. But it does happen that Mayne's in Skimmy's den now. You know what that, ass

is! He doesn't care where a chap comes from—any old slum would do—if he happened to be nuts on inventions. And it turns out Mayne's a bit that way."

Crooke scratched his bullet head thoughtfully.

Gore and Talbot shared Skimpole's den. Talbot was one of the enemy, of course. Gore was not to be counted upon. He had broken with Crooke more than once, and had come back to him again, but last time the split had been more than usually complete.

"We don't want them to get hold of him," Crooke said. "They might let on—"

"Only Skimmy's there now. We can fetch the boulder out before the others come. Skimmy won't talk about anything but his piffing inventions."

"Come along, then!"

"Oh, he might smell a rat if we both went. You'd better go."

Crooke departed on his errand.

—Mayne had been rather surprised when a lean youth with a bumpy forehead and glasses accosted him in the corridor.

"You are the new fellow, I believe," said the lean youth. "Mayne, if I do not mistake? By the way, are you at all interested in inventions?"

"What kind of inventions?" asked Mayne, glad to be spoken to, even by one whom he could not help regarding as rather a queer specimen.

"All kinds," replied Skimpole loftily. "I do not limit the scope of my horizon. I have experimented in many directions. One invention of mine would infallibly have brought the great war to a speedy end if only—well, one necessity lacking—was capital. Another was a proper appreciation of inventive genius on the part of the authorities here. I am discouraged in every way. A ridiculous fuss was made because of a slight accident with the gas—"

"Then it wasn't a new kind of bomb?" inquired Mayne, beginning to feel interested. "But, of course, they wouldn't allow that sort of thing here; too dangerous."

"Not in my hands, Mayne! The scientific individual naturally takes precautions. Of course, things will go wrong at times; it happened so with the gas, though it really was not in the least my fault. No, this was not a bomb. It was an airship!"

"That's very interesting," said Mayne. "I've helped to make model aeroplanes."

"Have they flown?" asked Skimmy eagerly.

It was one of the small drawbacks of Skimmy's inventions that they never would fly—if flyers—or float—if floaters—or, in short, do the things they were intended to. Hardly ever, anyway.

That was where Bernard Glyn scored over Skimmy. Glyn, though he was an earnest experimenter of some talent in Skimmy's eyes, was, of course, quite an inferior scientist. But somehow Glyn's inventions, otherwise in every way inferior to his rival's, worked.

"Oh, yes, they've flown all right!" Mayne answered.

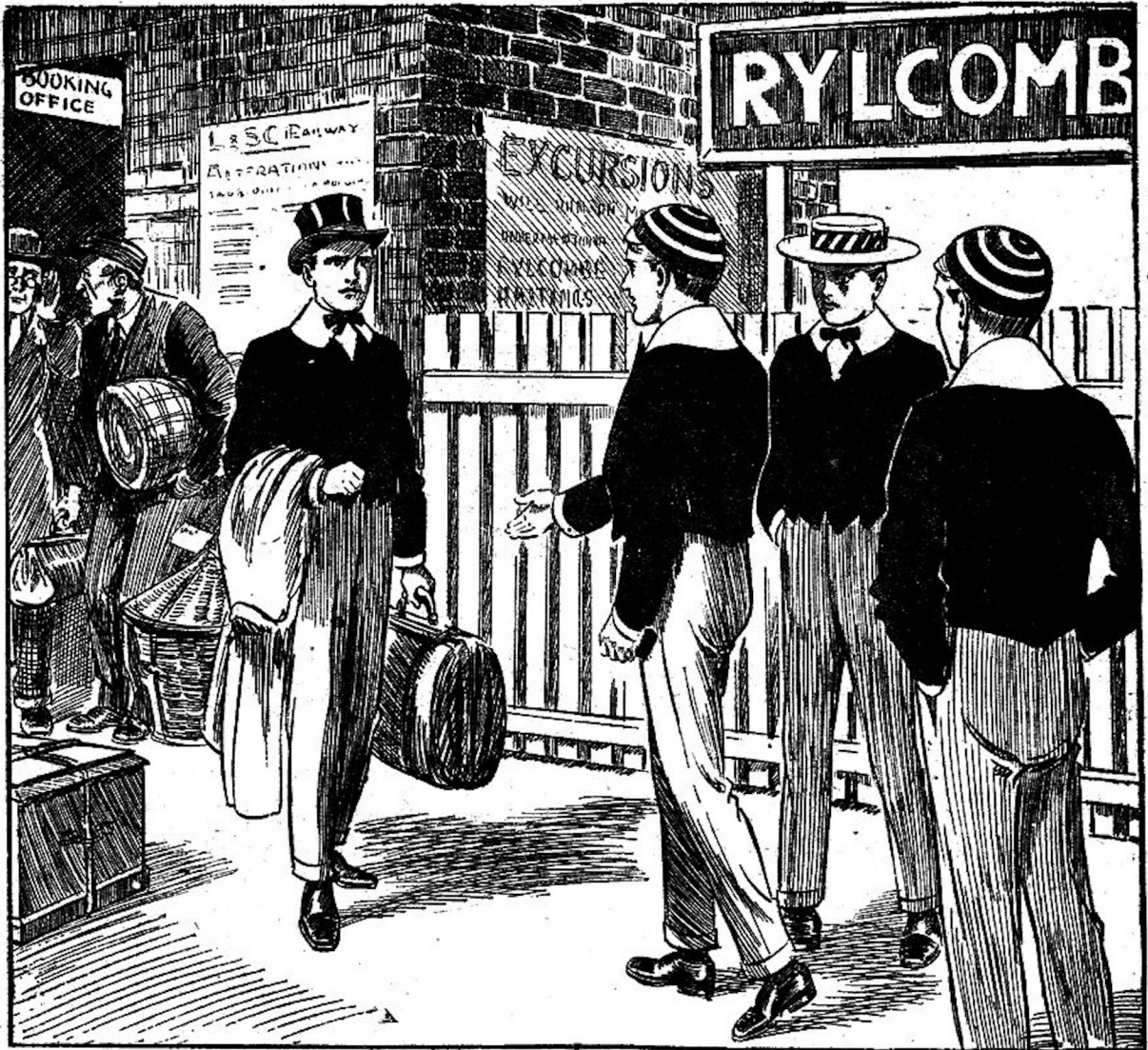
"My dear fellow, you are the very assistant I have been looking for. It is a regrettable fact that among all the fellows at St. Jim's, I cannot find one who possesses enough of the true scientific spirit to aid me in my researches. They even grumble when I borrow their belongings to help the great cause. I have had trouble more than once with fellows—quite nice fellows in the ordinary way—who grudged being of the slightest assistance. Come along with me at once, Mayne, please!"

"Wait a moment," said Mayne, willing enough to respond, but troubled by a doubt. "Who shares your study?"

"Talbot, a very right-minded sort of person, who has more interest in scientific subjects than most, but I am afraid is not sufficiently earnest in his pursuit of them. And Gore, a boy who—well, I do not wish to say harsh things about Gore, but I cannot aver that I am much in sympathy with him."

"Talbot—that's the good-looking fellow who sits next to Merry in Form, isn't it?"

"Ah, you consider him good-looking, do you? Yes, I suppose he may be said to be so, especially as he shows some signs of intellect in his countenance." Skimpole tapped his own bumpy forehead as though to imply that



"You're Mayne, aren't you?" said Crooke, holding out his hand. "Colonel Pawlee dropped me a line about you, and I thought it might be as well if I toddled along to meet you." (See Chapter 2.)

that sort of thing was the only truly handsome. Then he continued coolly: "Talbot was once a burglar, you know."

"A burglar?" gasped Mayne. "You can't mean that!"

"Oh, but I do mean it! Dear me, yes! Why not? Talbot came here as a burglar. What does that matter? He has reformed completely, and I for one am quite willing to acknowledge that I consider him a friend."

"But—but—"

Mayne could not understand it. A whisper or two had reached his ears that day, "Cheeky outsider from a slum school," or something of that sort. He no longer felt able to believe that they were merely treating him as a stranger. They were giving him the cold shoulder deliberately.

And yet this amazing assertion of Skimpole's! It fairly made his brain whirl.

No one was more popular than Talbot; not even Tom Merry. Everyone seemed to admire and like him.

They could forgive his past sins, and yet be down upon a fellow for what was no fault of his own!

Mayne felt bitter—he couldn't help it.

"Come along," said Skimmy, thrusting a very bony arm through one of his. "Never mind about Talbot now! Being convinced that in the near future warlike arts will be at a discount, I have turned my attention to the ways of peace. I am busy upon a scheme for the automatic—"

Automatic something-or-other! Mayne didn't know what. Skimmy's words were a mere buzzing in his ears, and he went with Skimmy like one in a dream.

Levison saw them go, and went off to seek Crooke.

It turned out to be a combined threshing-machine and steam-plough. What the precise advantage of threshing and ploughing at the same time might be, Skimpole could not have told, perhaps; and the superior advantages in some respects of a thresher that didn't go promenading up and down a field while it threshed, would have been apparent to Mayne at another time.

They were not now. The thing was a weird collection of wheels and reels and sawn bits of boxes and scrap-iron to him, though he tried hard to follow Skimmy's enthusiastic explanation of its merits, and at least listened with a sufficient show of attention to please the great inventor.

"The agricultural interest," said Skimpole, waving a rather dirty hand, "complains of a lack of labour. That set me thinking. Time saved is money gained—or money gained—no, time gained—but I apprehend that you follow my reasoning, Mayne? This machine will—"

"Hallo!" said Gore, popping in. "At it again, Skimmy?"

Skimpole sighed.

"Without any offence, Gore, I really do wish that you could be transferred to some other study. You are con-

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tinually breaking the thread of my thoughts or of my conversation—

"Rats! You can't think! If you could you wouldn't blither so much. Where's Talbot?"

"I really do not know."

"What do you know? What use are you, anyway, old Skim-milk? And what's the fight-anybody, race-anybody, jump-anybody, swim-anybody cockatoo doing here?"

This was offensive, and not without intent, Mayne was sure.

He forgot his surprise at Skimmy's disclosure, and turned upon Gore with flashing eyes and a face grown suddenly pale.

"If you mean me—"

"Well, if that's not rich! Who should I mean if not you?"

"Then I have only to say that I shall be very pleased to fight you, when and where you like! I have never spoken to you before, and I don't think you need have taken that tone with me for a start!"

Gore stuck his hands in his trousers-pockets, and stared rudely at Mayne.

"Fight me, will you?" he said. "Yes, I think not!"

"Do you mean you're afraid?" flashed Mayne.

"Really, really! Dear me—dear me!" protested Skimpole. "I wish you wouldn't, Gore. You are most unpleasant. I did not ask Mayne in here for you to force a quarrel upon him."

"That's what licks me—what you did ask the charity-boy in for! Don't you know we've agreed to bar him?"

Harry Mayne had never in his life had a much harder task than he had in restraining himself then. But he managed it.

He would not fight in Skimpole's study. They might think him a cad, but he had gentlemanly feeling enough for that. But if this fellow would only face him elsewhere!

"I never take any notice of the opinion of the mob," replied Skimpole loftily. "The pursuit of science lifts one above that sort of thing, Gore."

"Call Tom Merry the mob?" demanded Gore.

"No. I should not be guilty of the absurdity of calling any single fellow a mob."

"Oh, I see! Only a married one—eh, Skimmy-ass? Call Talbot the mob?"

"I have already said. But, in any case, Talbot can answer for himself, for here he comes."

Talbot entered the study. He looked rather hard at Mayne, as if surprised to see him there, and then nodded, like anyone making the best of a bad job. So thought Mayne. But, at least, it was better than Gore's attitude.

CHAPTER 6.

Something Like a Row!

"WHAT'S the row?" asked Talbot.

There was something in the wind, he could see. Mayne's pallor and tight-lipped mouth, Gore's flushed face, even Skimmy a little moved out of his scientific calm—all told their tale.

No one answered for a moment. Then Gore said:

"I'm objecting to charity cads in this den, that's all. It was more than Mayne could stand."

"If you say that again," he cried, "I'll knock you down!"

"I don't think you'd better repeat it, Gore," said Talbot quietly. "It's in rotten taste. And, if you care for my feelings in the matter, I don't want a row here."

Gore did care, to some extent. If there was a fellow at St. Jim's whose influence for good worked upon Gore, that fellow was Talbot.

But Gore was in a nasty temper just now.

"Order him out, then!" he said. "That ass Skimmy brought him in. If both you and I say he's to go, that makes a majority, I reckon."

Mayne looked Talbot straight in the face.

"I'll go, of course," he said. "I don't want to intrude anywhere."

"Wait!" said Talbot imperatively. "I'm not going to order you out. Don't be so childish, Gore! Mayne has

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done nothing that makes it fair for anybody to insult him in the way you did just now."

Could Skimpole's story be true? This fellow, with the ring of mastery in his voice, who seemed born to be a leader anywhere, fair-minded, courteous—could it be that he had once been a criminal?

It did not matter much now, anyway, Mayne thought; and in that thought unconsciously adopted the standard of St. Jim's concerning Talbot.

"Thank you!" said Mayne. He really felt grateful.

"But, of course, I can't stay."

"I beg that you will," put in Skimpole shortly. "You are my visitor, and I do not wish my visitors to be insulted or ordered out by an ill-bred person like Gore!"

Talbot sighed. Skimmy, with the best intentions in the world, was only making matters worse. But he liked Skimmy all the better for it, too.

And, gazing at Mayne, he saw an eager flush light up his face, and knew that crack-brained, good-hearted Skimmy had made a new friend.

Gore turned upon the inventive genius. He was in too big a rage not to go for someone.

Talbot had called him childish. It was out of the question to fight Talbot, for no end of reasons, the chief of which may have been that with Talbot he would not have had the shadow of a chance.

Mayne had challenged him. But Gore was not sure that he could lick Mayne. And, moreover, Tom Merry & Co. had decided that Mayne's challenges were to be regarded as null and void, and Gore was anxious to keep in with Tom Merry & Co. just then.

There remained Skimpole.

"What did you call me?" Gore shouted.

"Really, Gore, I am not deaf. I called you an ill-bred person. I am quite prepared to repeat the criticism as many times as you desire, and—"

Gore caught him by the collar, pressing his knuckles cruelly into Skimpole's lean throat.

"Repeat it once, and I'll jolly well choke you!" he roared.

Skimpole would have repeated it directly, but couldn't. He was too near choking for that.

"No, you won't!" cried Mayne.

He seized Gore by the back of his collar, and forced him to yield his hold of Skimmy at once. George Gore found himself on the floor next moment, with Mayne standing over him.

"I—I am really very much obliged to you, Mayne!" said Skimpole.

"That's enough!" rapped out Talbot. "It would be just as well if you went now, Mayne; but please don't take it that I am turning you out, for I don't mean it in that way."

There was more in this fellow than they had imagined. So Talbot thought. It was not fury with Gore for his insults that had moved him to attack. He had restrained himself, though with difficulty, till Gore assaulted Skimmy. Then he had acted before Talbot had time to, being nearer.

Talbot would have acted less roughly. He knew both Gore and Skimpole too well to fear that anything very dreadful would be the result of their quarrel. Skimmy was not a combatant, and Gore, in a general way, only needed a word or two from Talbot to hold him in.

But Gore's temper had grown ugly.

"He's not going till I've had a word or two to say with him!" he panted, getting up.

"As many words as you like, so long as they're decent," answered Talbot. "But don't be offensive, and don't make threats."

"Ring off!" snorted Gore. "This isn't your bizney!"

Skimpole stared. Coming from Gore to Talbot, that was surprise.

"Now, you cad, what do you mean by it?" Gore demanded, with clenched fist and furious face.

"How many times am I to tell you that I am quite willing to fight you, if that's what you want?" asked Mayne quietly.

It was at this moment that Crooke looked in.

Had affairs seemed less interesting, Crooke would have retreated at sight of Talbot. But when he saw the new

follow and Gore facing each other in hostile guise, he put the best countenance he could upon it, and walked in.

Talbot only looked at him, saying nothing.

"See here, Crooke, why can't you keep your gutter-bred chums in your own show?" asked Gore hastily.

"Oh, I'm not Mayne's keeper!" Crooke replied.

"Thought you were. Somebody told me that some old idiot of a general or colonel, or something of that sort, had paid you a fee to back this cad up at St. Jim's."

That taunt nettled Crooke intensely.

Colonel Pawlee had not tipped him. Had he done so it is quite possible that Crooke would never have plotted against Mayne's peace. The omission of the tip had rankled in his mind, though he had plenty of pocket-money.

"Drop that, Gore!" he snarled. "If you don't, I'll—"

"Not here, you won't, Crooke!" said Talbot quickly. "I'm fed up with this. I won't have rows in this den."

"You'd better come along with me, Gore, and settle it in our show, since your proprietor says you mustn't fight here!" sneered Crooke.

"I'll come," answered Gore unexpectedly.

"I shouldn't," said Talbot. "You've no real ground of quarrel with Mayne, and I thought you meant to cut Crooke in future. I should advise you to."

"My hat! I don't want your rotten advice, and I'm not going to take it!"

Talbot turned his back on Gore. He had put up with a good deal from this ill-conditioned fellow, believing that he discerned a spark of better things in him. But this was about the limit.

Let him go back to wallow in the mire with Crooke and Levison.

Mayne marched out, making straight for the study he shared with Crooke.

Gore and Crooke followed.

Gore saw that he had settled himself with Talbot, and was more than half inclined to make up his quarrel with Crooke. If he had had time to think, he might have decided against doing that.

But Crooke seized his chance.

"Give the cad a good hiding, old man!" he whispered in Gore's ear. "He's been asking for it."

"Then you're not—"

"No, I'm not. Things aren't always what they seem. But Levison can explain better than I can."

Levison was still in the study when they reached it.

"Now then, Mayne, what's this all about?" asked Crooke.

He spoke like one who had a right to an answer, and Mayne resented his tone, but he replied:

"This fellow called me a charity boy!"

"Well, aren't you?" returned Crooke coolly.

It was like a blow in the face to Mayne. He flushed scarlet.

"No," he cried, "I'm not! You can twist it so that it seems like that, but the thing's a lie for all you say!"

"Tell me I'm a liar!" roared Crooke.

"If you say that—yes, I do!"

"Then I'll thrash you within an inch of your life, you low cad!"

"If you can! I don't think it's likely."

Gore felt a little uneasy. Talbot's example had not been wholly wasted on him.

This right-about-face on Crooke's part was not quite the thing, he thought. It was not fair to Mayne. Gore did not so very much mind that; but it was also putting him—George Gore—in a position that wasn't quite creditable. And Gore minded that.

"Hold hard, Crooke!" he said. "I want to get to the bottom of this first. That chap's pretty free with his challenges to fight. He seems to think he can lick any of us. He wants the stuffing jolly well knocked out of him. But I should like to understand a bit more first."

He turned to Mayne.

"Even a charity boy ought to know better than to issue a challenge like you did on his first day here," he said.

Mayne's eyes opened wide. He looked at Crooke; he looked at Levison. A full tide of suspicion broke over his mind.

"Isn't it the usual thing?" he asked.

Neither Crooke nor Levison would meet his eyes. Already he saw that he could count on no support from them.

"My hat! The usual thing! Of course it's not the usual thing! Do you think St. Jim's will stand a new bouncer strutting round like a bantam cock and crowing defiance to everybody?"

"Levison," said Mayne quietly, "you told me it was." Levison did not answer, but turned his head away.

"Crooke, you told me so, too."

"That's a lie!" snarled Crooke, with reddened face and blinking eyes.

Gore didn't believe it was. But he waited. He had not enough pluck or generosity to back up Mayne.

"I ought not to have believed you," said Mayne slowly. "Mr.—I mean, someone warned me against believing too easily. But I never thought you'd play a low trick like that on me—and you said 'Honour bright,' too."

"I didn't," struck in Levison. He thought it time to deny something.

"And suppose I did—what did it mean?" Crooke growled. "We had an Irish slavey named Honor Bright once. I expect I was thinking about her."

"We were only pulling your leg," said Levison feebly. "You cads!" said Mayne.

It did not burst from him. He said it quietly, deliberately, like a fellow who had quite made up his mind.

"Do you include me?" snapped Gore.

"Yes, I do!"

Gore and Crooke advanced upon him threateningly. Levison sidled out of the way, and got nearer to the door as if by chance.

"Oh, come on!" said Mayne. "I'm not sure that I can lick the two of you together. But I'm jolly sure that neither of you alone can lick me!"

"More brag!" sneered Gore.

"Call it that if you like. Come on, though. I mean it. I'm willing to fight the two of you together, and I won't say afterwards that it wasn't fair. I'm not a liar and a cad!"

They rushed at him.

He avoided Crooke's assault by a deft sidestep, and brought a hard fist to bear upon Gore's jaw.

Gore staggered. Crooke made in again, and took one on the nose.

"I say, stop it—stop it, you fellows!" burred Levison. "There'll be no end of a row about this. Stop it, do!"

But they paid no heed to Levison. Their blood was up, and they went at it hammer and tongs.

In a wider space Mayne might have licked the two. He was infinitely the superior of either in skill, and he took hard knocks as though he did not feel them.

Even as it was, hampered by the furniture, pressed into corners by sheer weight, he held his own.

Crooke's nose was bleeding. Gore's face was cut and bruised. There was blood on Mayne's lips, and on his knuckles, too.

He dodged, sent Gore reeling against the corner of the table, and punched at Crooke, catching him on the nose once more.

Then, just as Gore plunged forward again, Crooke kicked savagely.

He was mad with rage and pain, or, cad as he was, he would never have done that. Only Levison saw.

Gore gave a howl of pain and dropped to the floor. Crooke's boot had caught him full on the shin.

"You rotter!" he roared. "Kicking—"

"I didn't kick!" cried Mayne indignantly.

He had dropped his hands. Crooke was just on the point of delivering a vicious punch at him, thus unprotected, when he realised that it wouldn't do. It would be better to stop there.

"You did—I saw you!"

Levison stared in amazement. He knew the truth. He had seen Crooke kick at Mayne, and alone there he could have explained how Gore's lunge forward had caused him to receive the boot instead.

Mayne stared too. He had been too much occupied with Gore for the moment to see clearly what Crooke was doing. That he had not kicked he knew; but he did not know that Crooke had.

Gore sat on the floor, pulled up his trousers-leg, and

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exposed to view a very nasty hack indeed. The skin was broken, and blood had begun to flow.

"There!" he said. "That's what you have to expect, I suppose, if you're idiot enough to fight with Council school cads!"

"I didn't do it," said Mayne firmly. "I've never in my life done such a rotten trick as that. How it happened I can't say, but I swear it was no doing of mine!"

"Hark at him!" snarled Crooke. "As if we didn't know that such scum as he is think nothing of kicking them!"

Levison still kept silence. Crooke looked at him hard. A struggle was going on in Levison's mind.

Not for the first time, he had come to where the ways forked, and was in danger of choosing the wrong road.

The little that was good in him pleaded for Mayne. The fellow had been deceived and wronged. He had been treated cruelly, and in that treatment Levison had borne his share.

Levison could wipe that out now just by telling the truth.

Gore would believe him, he felt sure. For Gore knew that Crooke was no more the soul of truth and honour than was Levison, and Mayne's denial would weigh down the balance if those two were in conflict.

But Mayne was unpopular at St. Jim's, and Levison could not see his profit in speaking up for him.

Crooke's direct question settled it.

"Now, then, Levison, you saw! Didn't he kick?"

White to the lips, with dry mouth and downcast eyes, Levison told the lie that he hated, liar as he was.

"Yes, he did," he said.

He expected an outburst from Mayne. But it did not come.

The new fellow looked at him wonderingly, almost stupidly, but said nothing.

It would have been easier to bear if he had spoken out, had lashed the bearer of false witness with contempt.

And perhaps then Gore might have had his belief shaken, for Gore knew both Crooke and Levison.

But to Mayne it seemed hopeless—hopeless!

With head held high, but aching heart, he went out of the room.

CHAPTER 7.

Talbot Takes a Hand.

"MY hat, this new merchant seems to be a pretty beauty!" said Manners.

"What's the row now?" Tom Merry inquired.

"You may well ask that, Tommy. But you wouldn't if you'd seen Gore's shin."

"What's the matter with Gore's shin? Did he fall down and bite it," asked Lowther, "or was it Mayne who bit it?"

"Kicked—not bit!"

"I say, though, that's pretty thick—if it wasn't an accident, of course!"

"It wasn't an accident, Tommy. Bet your life on that! Anyway, he and the Great Gore were scrapping at the time, and when a chap kicks another chap under such ciras most fellows won't take the accident yarn as O.K. will they?"

"No. Sounds like a nasty back-street trick," Tom Merry agreed. And yet he wondered how a fellow with such an open, likeable face as Mayne's could have come down to such cowardice.

It did not seem to fit, somehow.

"Here's old Talbot! Perhaps he knows more about it."

"About what, Manners?" asked Talbot, entering Study No. 1 just then. He spent a good deal of time there.

"The new outsider's dust-up with Gore."

"With Gore and Crooke, you mean, don't you? That's my information, anyway."

The Terrible Three looked at one another.

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"Mean to say he took both those chaps on together?" asked Tom Merry.

"I gather he did. The row began in our den. I didn't want Crooke there, and I ordered him out."

"Did you want Mayne there, old man?" asked Tom Merry.

"I didn't ask him in, if that's what you mean. But I really hadn't any objection. Skimmy invited him."

"Skimmy always was an ass," remarked Lowther thoughtfully.

"Crumbs, old man, I thought you'd soon come round to our view!" said Manners.

"Well, I can't stand a kicker," was Lowther's reply.

"It doesn't sound like the straight griffin to me," said Tom Merry. "The sort of fellow who takes on two of his own size—but Crooke's bigger—at once doesn't usually kick."

"Got desperate. Got his silly wool off. Didn't more than half know what he was doing," suggested Manners.

"What do you think, Talbot?" Tom Merry asked.

"I don't know what to think, Tom. Either Mayne's as queer a mixture as I ever struck—"

"Thought it was Gore and Crooke who did that," put in Lowther.

"Oh, ring off! I don't feel up to the funny cackle just now. Either he's that, Tom, or else—"

"Or else what, old man?"

"Well, you know I hate suggesting nasty things about other fellows. But if Crooke and Levison and Gore—though I don't even care with the other two—were in the thing, and some fellow you believed in—say Herries or Kerr—was in it, and the three swore blind to one yarn, and the other chap said it was a lie, which should you believe?"

"The other chap," answered Lowther promptly.

And Tom Merry nodded assent.

"But it isn't quite the same, old man," said the leader of the Shell. "For we know Herries and Kerr. That makes a heap of difference."

"I believe Mayne to be as straight as either of them," Talbot replied—"as straight as any one of you three. Straighter than myself—if you lump the past in!"

"We don't," answered Tom Merry quietly. "There's nobody straighter than you, Talbot. And I must say that you've been right about other chaps when we've been wrong. There was Rivers—and Hookey Walker, too!"

"But does Mayne say he didn't?" inquired Manners.

"I haven't asked him yet, and I don't think there's any need to."

"My only aunt! You've the strongest believery I ever ran up against, Talbot!" said Lowther.

Talbot only smiled by way of reply.

"Where's the merchant now?" Manners asked.

"Finishing his prep in our den, with Skimmy."

"Skimmy doesn't bar him, then?"

"Skimmy cottons to him no end."

"How's that?" asked Tom Merry.

"Well, Skimmy fancies—I don't know whether he's right—that Mayne is nuts on inventions."

"I say, though, where's Gore?"

"With Crooke, I believe, Manners. Do you want him?"

"Not jolly well likely! I've no gory tastes! Now I think of it, he did come from Crooke's den when he paraded his wounded leg in the corridor for everybody to see. Have they made it up?"

"I guess so. I'm sorry, for I thought Gore had cut Crooke for good."

Manners shook his head.

"Birds of a feather," he said wisely.

"Do you mean to exchange Gore for Mayne?"

"If Carrington will let me, Tom."

That fairly took them aback.

"Are you going to back up this new fellow against us?" demanded Manners.

"No, I'm not! There's no need. You won't be unfair to him, I'm sure."

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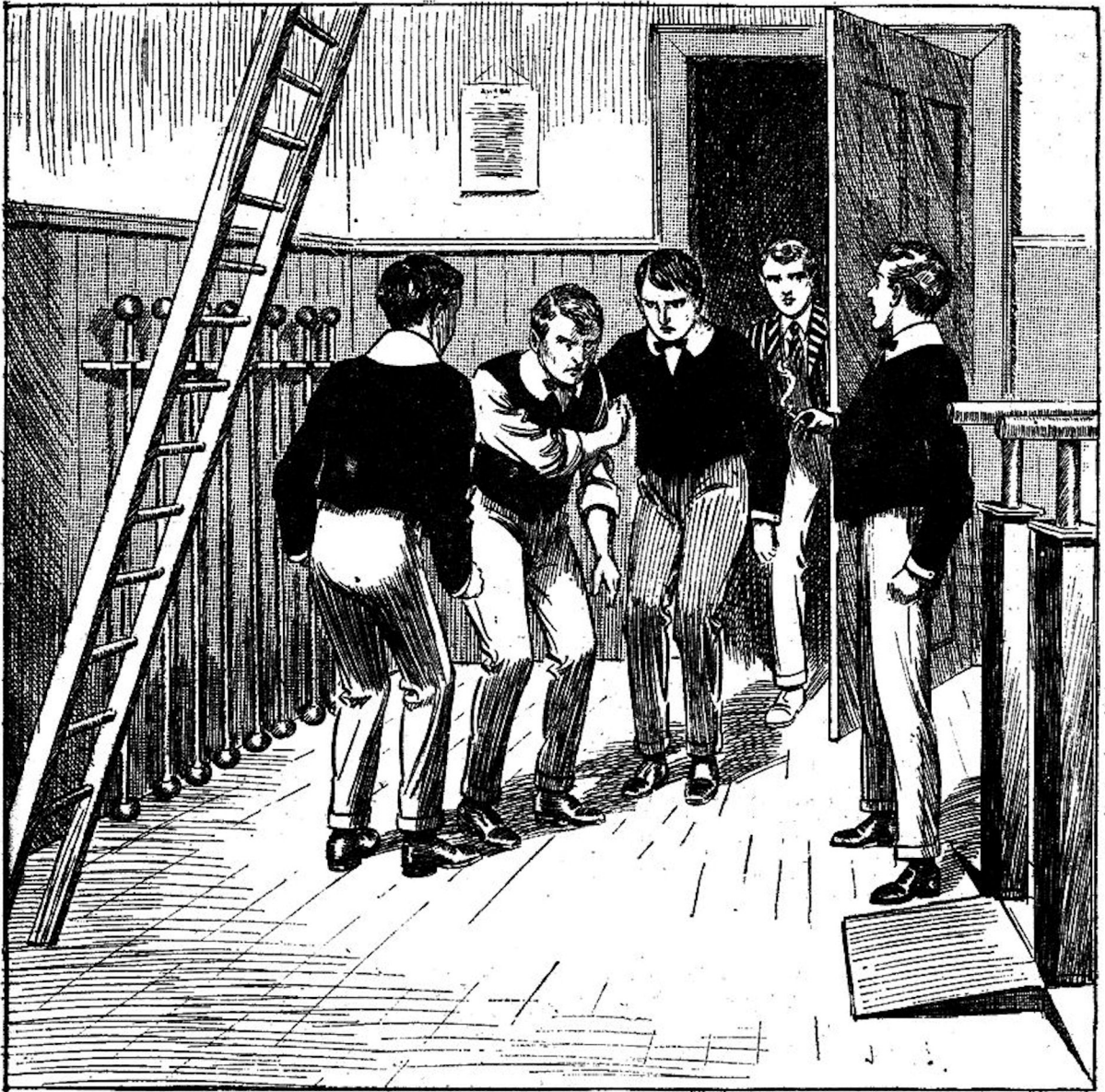
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Order in Advance.

PRICE ONE PENNY.



Mayne, with cigarette in hand, saw Tom Merry looking in at the door. "Seen anything of Manners?" asked Tom. "No," snorted Crooke. "He don't live in our pockets, you know." (See Chapter 3.)

"That isn't it at all. The fairest thing may be to cut the bounder dead."

"If you think so—do it! But I sha'n't. See here. If Carrington will consent, Mayne comes into our den. He takes Gore's place. I didn't put Gore on the same footing as you fellows, did I? I know you and him too well for that. But he and I hit it off tolerably, and I see no reason why Mayne and I shouldn't, without being specially chummy. Skimpole likes him, so that's all serene. The fellow ought to have a chance—every fellow ought. He'll get none if he stays with Crooke, now that they've once fallen out."

That was quite plainly true. Crooke could be very nasty as an enemy, though perhaps he was less dangerous so than a friend.

"I shall go and speak to Carrington directly prep.'s over," said Talbot. "But first I'd better see Gore and Crooke."

"Wish you joy, old chap!" replied Lowther. "The less I see of those two the better it suits this infant!"

Talbot did not relish his task. But he had carried

through more unpleasant ones, and he went at this with characteristic resolution.

He tapped politely at the door of Crooke's den.

"Come in!" growled Crooke.

Talbot entered. Quite a crowd of Shell fellows had assembled, and Gore was showing them his damaged leg.

"Do you want anything, Talbot?" asked Crooke offensively.

"Yes. I want to speak to Gore—and to you."

"Well, you can!"

"Thanks! Gore, do you care whether you come back to our den or not?"

"I'm not keen on coming back," Gore answered, keeping his eyes lowered.

"That's all right, then. Do you want to stay here? Crooke, do you care to have him here?"

"Instead of that cad Mayne? Oh, rather! I'd take in the public hangman rather than a specimen like that!"

Crooke's virtuous indignation only made Talbot feel suspicious.

"Very well," he said. "If Mr. Carrington doesn't object we'll make the exchange."

"Are you going to ask him?" growled Crooke, who steered clear of the Housemaster as far as possible.

"Yes, I'll do it."

"I say, though, Talbot," struck in Noble, "you can't pal up with a rank outsider like that!"

Kangaroo in Crooke's den was rather an unusual sight. But several fellows were there who held Crooke in no high esteem.

"Can't I?" asked Talbot. "And did I say I was going to? Though stranger things than that do happen."

Kangaroo flushed under his glance, understanding what he meant. But Talbot did not wait to make the point clearer. He was now free to visit Mr. Carrington's study, and he went thither.

"I hope you won't think it cheeky of me, sir," he began.

"I don't think I'm likely to, Talbot."

"Thank you, sir! It's just this. The new fellow Mayne is not too happy with Crooke. Skimpole has rather taken to him, and Gore is willing to exchange. I just wanted to ask if you would mind."

"Not in the least, Talbot. I am sure it will be a good thing—for Mayne."

Not for Gore he meant. Talbot knew that, and felt a little bit sorry to think of his lost influence over Gore. But Mayne had more in him worth considering than Gore, he was certain.

"Has Mayne told you his story?"

"No, sir. I've barely spoken a score of words with him."

"I will tell you it, for I think you should know. But it must go no further. I rely upon you for that."

Talbot merely bent his head. That was enough for Mr. Carrington. He did not need an oath of secrecy from this fellow.

He told so much of the story as he knew, which was not all. For the story of the poverty-stricken days through which Harry Mayne and his mother had kept up brave hearts and refused to sink to the level of those among whom their lot was cast had not been told fully even to Colonel Pawlee, and the colonel had not told Mr. Carrington all he knew.

"Colonel Pawlee may not be a good judge of character, Talbot. I am not sure that he is."

Talbot understood. The colonel had consigned Mayne to Crooke. That was what Mr. Carrington meant, but would not say.

"But I flatter myself that I am not a bad one, and I shall be disappointed if Mayne does not turn out well. With you and Skimpole he will have every chance."

Now Talbot had to keep back something. He would not tell Mr. Carrington that his implied promise to the Terrible Three would make him no more than a well-wishing neutral in Mayne's case, and, of course, he could not mention the trouble that had caused him to suggest the exchange.

But the Housemaster did not expect to be told anything that Talbot felt it necessary to withhold, for where he trusted he trusted thoroughly.

Talbot went back, very thoughtful. He was more sure now than he had been that he had done right, but he realised that what he had heard would make even a benevolent neutrality difficult for him.

He beckoned Skimpole out into the corridor.

"Skimmy, old man," he said, "could you do with Mayne instead of Gore in our den?"

"My dear Talbot, I should be delighted. Mayne has the true scientific spirit, while Gore is an utter barbarian in such things."

"Right-ho! I've fixed it up with Carrington, also with Gore and Crooke. There's only Mayne left to question. It may seem a bit like going behind his back to do him good, but I think he'll take it all serene."

But Talbot had not anticipated the way in which he did take it.

"Mayne," he said, "will you come in here, and let Gore join Crooke? They seem to think they would rather be together."

Mayne looked at him in the queerest way.

"Do you mean you're willing?" he faltered.

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"We both are—Skimpole and I."

Mayne's arms went down on the table, and his head went down on his arms, and he sobbed like a child.

Skimmy, with a lump the size of a duck's egg in his throat, patted him on the shoulder soothingly.

Talbot stood by, feeling awkward.

Neutrality was already growing difficult.

Some fellows might have thought Mayne's tears a shame to him.

Talbot did not. He knew better.

They were from one overwrought, and it was kindness, not harsh treatment, that had caused them. Mayne would have suffered a good deal of harshness before he could have been broken down like that, Talbot was sure.

The new boy lifted a tear-flushed face. He dashed the tears from it with the back of his hand impatiently.

"It's all right," said Talbot. "I understand."

"There, there! We understand," amended Skimmy, still patting Mayne's shoulder. "It's—it's quite all right. We'll back you up, Mayne—Talbot and I!"

The pledge was more than Talbot had meant to give, but he could not well say so.

Mayne got up.

"I'll fetch my things now," he said.

"I wouldn't go this moment," answered Talbot. "There's a crowd of fellows in Crooke's den."

"Do you fancy I'm afraid of them?" asked Mayne hotly. And he went.

"Hallo, charity boy!" was Gore's greeting.

"What do you want here?" snarled Crooke.

"I've only come to clear my things out," Mayne answered.

He spoke quietly, and one or two there rather admired his self-control. Whatever the fellow might be he had at least nothing of the funk about him.

Gore stretched out his leg, still bared for inspection.

"Look what you did, you rotter!" he said.

"I didn't do it," Mayne answered. "I'm sorry it should have happened, but I'm not to blame."

"What are you sorry for, then?" Crooked growled.

"That I should have mistaken you for a decent fellow!" Mayne flashed back.

And, as Kangaroo told Tom Merry & Co. afterwards, "the bouncer really spoke out like a white man!"

"Thanks," said Crooke. "I don't care for the good opinion of hackers and stabbers, though."

"It lies between us two, Crooke," answered Mayne coolly. "Either you kicked Gore or I did. I can see that now, though I didn't at first. And I know that I didn't kick him. I don't suppose you meant to. It was me you meant to kick. But two to one, with kicking in, is scarcely fair-play, I reckon!"

"There's a sweet specimen for you!" roared Crooke. "Wants to shove it on to me now he's had time to cook up a yarn. But it won't wash. I didn't do it, and Gore knows that, and Levison saw this rotter do it."

Gore did not know it, but he failed to say so. Levison was not there.

Mayne had bundled together his belongings. As he went out with them under his arm someone hissed.

Most of the others took it up, and the room sounded like a pen of ganders.

But two or three did not join the hissing. Noble didn't, for one.

Mayne turned at the door.

"If there's a shred of decency in this place," he said, "I think one day some of you will beg my pardon for that!"

CHAPTER 8.

Levison's Dodge.

"I SUPPOSE the rotter's mother is a charwoman, or something of that sort, isn't she?" asked Levison of Crooke.

A day or two had passed. Mayne remained under a cloud, but he showed no sign of feeling his position too acutely, though that was not because he did not feel it.

"Oh, you're always supposing something!" growled Crooke, like a bear with a sore head. "Bing off!"

"But, really? I've a reason for asking."

"I've only seen her once. What did she look like? Oh, anybody's mater—yours or mine or the next man's—except that she wasn't stylishly dressed."

"Do you mean she was shabby?"

"Oh, crumbs, no! Not shabby; decent enough, but out of the fashion."

"Ah!" said Levison thoughtfully. "But it doesn't matter much, for, of course, none of the other fellows have seen her."

"What on earth are you getting at, you chump? What's that Mayne's mother to do with us?"

"It would be a rare lark if she came to see him, wouldn't it, Crooke?"

"Don't see how. He wouldn't be ashamed of her. He hasn't decency enough to be ashamed of worse things."

"Like kicking a chap's shins—eh, Crooke?" asked Levison cunningly.

"I'll slay you if you give me any of that talk!" roared the cad of the Shell. "Now, see here, Levison, you know that it was Mayne who hacked Gore, don't you?"

"Oh, yes—that is, yes, of course! I mean, we're agreed to say so."

Crooke caught Levison by the throat.

"You saw him do it. You said so at the time. You daren't go back on your word now, and, by jingo, I'd have your life if you did!"

He shook Levison fiercely—shook him till his teeth rattled together.

Then he relaxed his hold, and the two stood glaring at one another, with as little love lost between them as partners in guilt generally have.

"You—you're dangerous, Crooke! If you do that again—"

"Not half so dangerous as you are, you crawling, sneaking, slimy snake! Just you be warned in time, and don't try my temper too far!"

Gore came in. He had already begun to wish himself back with Talbot and Skimmy, by the way.

He looked at them curiously. Crooke was flaming red and Levison sea-green. Something of a stormy nature had passed, Gore felt certain.

"Well, what are you two argufying about?" he asked, as if he failed to notice anything suggesting more than argument.

"Levison's just telling me about a new scheme he's cooked up," answered Crooke.

"What is it?" inquired Gore.

Levison choked down his resentment against Crooke. He and Mayne had met that day, and Mayne had told Levison plainly that he had lied—that he must have known it was Crooke who kicked Gore. And because of that Levison's resentment against Crooke was far less strong than against Mayne.

Mayne had called him a liar, and there is nothing the average liar resents more bitterly than even a less frank hint than that the truth is not in him.

"It's like this," said Levison. "We want to take Mayne down a peg or two, and I reckon I've hit on a way to do it."

"Don't you think we'd better leave the chap alone?" asked Gore, who sometimes had a fleeting spasm of generosity. "After all, I owe him more than anybody else, and I'm not dead sure that I want to do him any harm."

"This is only a notion to show him up for the low cad he is. Suppose his mother came to see him, and she was just about the absolute limit—a horrible washer-woman person, with a red face, smelling of gin, and dressed in all the colours of the rainbow?"

"But she's not, I tell you," said Crooke impatiently. "Besides, it's not a bit likely she will come to see him. He hasn't been here five minutes yet."

Mayne had actually been there about five days, and they had seemed like as many months to him.

"My word, how thick-headed you are, Crooke! Do you want a broader hint? Suppose somebody rigged himself up as that sort of she-animal, and came here as Mayne's mother—how then?"

"Who's going to do it?" demanded Crooke.

"I will!"

Crooke and Gore both looked hard at Levison. He seemed to mean it.

"By jingo, that's something like a dodge, isn't it, Gore?" said Crooke.

"It sounds promising, anyway. Rather a lark, too," replied Gore, touching his damaged shin with tender hand.

He would not have shared in any plan to do Mayne bodily harm, but his feelings were not fine enough to show him that this scheme was in reality a far more cruel one.

"But can you carry it off, old man?" asked Crooke, growing suddenly very friendly to Levison.

"Rath-er! Why, it's as easy as falling off a horse!"

"Yes; and it will be just about as painful if the boulder catches you out," said Gore. "Not that I mind. You're welcome to go on, and you can have my moral support, but I wouldn't play Mayne's mother myself for a giddy pension!"

"You aren't asked to!" snarled Crooke, to whom the scheme appealed strongly. "How shall you work it, Levison?"

"Oh, I guess we can get everything we need for the make-up in Wayland! It had better be an unexpected visit, I think."

"Here, ring off! You're not going to drag me as deep into it as that! A pretty kettle of fish there'd be if it came out!"

"I said it wouldn't do. The visit must be unexpected, and we must time it so that we catch the cad where there are plenty of fellows to see him."

"That's the style! Don't let's waste any time. I say, though, Levison, it will need some nerve. We can't show up to stand by you, because that would give the game away."

"I've nerve enough," answered Levison. "I hate that cad Mayne!"

CHAPTER 9.

Batsman and Bowler Too!

NO; neutrality wasn't possible.

Talbot was finding that out. The more he saw of Mayne the less he could help liking the fellow. While, as for Skimmy, that inventive genius fairly cherished the new boy.

Mayne explained nothing to either of them. But Talbot heard from Noble of his direct accusation to Crooke, and had very little doubt that it was justified. Others heard, too, of course. Opinions were divided.

That unlucky challenge told heavily against Mayne. A lot of fellows considered that anyone who would do that sort of thing might be held capable of anything.

Talbot suspected how the challenge had originated; but he would not ask Mayne, and the true story was not volunteered.

"He means to live it all down," said Talbot to himself, "and, by Jove, I believe he'll do it! And, whatever the other chaps may think, it's up to me to give him a little help."

Talbot asked Arthur Augustus in to tea.

Gussy accepted, came, was a little stiff with Mayne at first, but soon unfroze, and went back with a good report to No. 6.

"Rats!" said Jack Blake.

"Anybody can take you in, Gustavus," added Herries.

"I'm not going to pal up with a bragging ass like that, if you are!" announced Digby.

But no one referred to the episode of the kick. That crime was, at worst, "not proven," as the Scots' law phrase goes.

Next day Lowther dropped in, at Talbot's invitation.

He announced in Study No. 1 that he reckoned there wasn't much the matter with Mayne, and that his opinion was that Crooke & Co. were behind the silly challenge.

"Does he say so?" asked Tom Merry.

"No. Didn't ask him."

"Then all you've got to go on is your own piffing notion. That's not good enough for us," said Manners decidedly.

But Tom Merry looked thoughtful.

Then Kerr came along to tea, and brought Fatty Wynn

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with him. Figgins, who had not been asked, took tea with Redfern and his study-mates.

"Look here, Wynn," said Talbot in the corridor. "Mayne's standing this spread, and I thought you ought to know that."

"What for?" asked Fatty. "He wondered why he should be treated differently from Kerr."

"Because you were agreed that the chap was dead off." "Well, I dunno! If you think he's all right, Talbot."

"I do!" "And the spread's a good one—"

"It's a ripping one." "I'll come. Because, you see, there isn't much grub over the way to-day, and I'm jolly hungry. And, besides, I've no end of faith in you, Talbot!"

Which was true, and probably worked more strongly upon honest Fatty than the other motive indicated. Though Fatty did like his grub, too.

Mayne wouldn't do the honours of the table. He insisted that Talbot should.

That did not look much like a braggart and a bounder, anyway!

Wynn did himself very well indeed, as did Kerr. But Kerr was keeping a narrow watch on Mayne meanwhile. The Scot had great powers of observation, and little passed unnoticed by him.

"Talbot," he said, in the quadrangle after tea, "I rather like your man Mayne."

"Oh, don't call him that!" said Talbot. "I'll admit I like him too. But I'm only a neutral, you know."

"Ah!" replied Kerr thoughtfully. "Your sort of neutrality strikes me as heaps better than some chaps' backing-up!"

Figgins elevated a scornful proboscis when Kerr and Fatty told him what they thought.

"You'd sell your soul for grub, porpoise!" he said. "Not unless I was very hungry, Figgy," replied Fatty simply. "And Kerr wouldn't sell his even then."

"You're getting to have queer tastes, Kerr," was Figgins's attack on his other chum.

"I dunno! Let's see. There was pie—steak-and-kidney pie, and Swiss roll, and raspers—heaps of them! And three kinds of cake. No, I don't know that there was anything that a fellow couldn't get down without another chap's saying his taste was queer. You ought to have seen our Fatty! And Skimmy put in some good work too."

Figgins snorted. "I'm not talking about Mayne's grub. I dare say that was all right. I'm talking about the chap himself."

"Well, he's all right, too," answered Kerr coolly. More fellows began to speak to Mayne—Noble and Dane and Lumley-Lumley among them.

But Tom Merry and Manners, Blake and Herries and Digby and Figgins still held aloof, as did others.

Well over a week passed before St. Jim's saw Mayne on the cricket-fields. Then Talbot brought him along one afternoon.

His flannels were of good cut and style—Colonel Pawlee had seen to it that his outfit should be all right—and he had his own bat and pads. He looked a cricketer all over.

There chanced to be a vacant net. Talbot beckoned Kerr and Lowther, and they came along.

"Get your pads on and take first turn, Mayne," he said.

Mayne obeyed without a word. He took his stand at the wicket in an upright, commanding fashion that told of the real cricketer.

Many curious eyes were upon him. Many a ball went wide at the other nets because the bowlers were too much interested in Mayne to be careful what they were doing.

"My hat! The chap's no duffer!" said Tom Merry. "Looks to me like a first-rater," was the frank admission of Manners. "See that drive! There was some power behind that, and yet he didn't look to be exerting himself. He can cut too, and he does it in the right way. Throws his foot well across, and comes down on the ball. By Jove, that was a pretty glide to leg! And he can't be in practice, either."

Herries and Manners were very sick at being out of it.

"Well, he's only been here a week," said Manners. "That's not long enough to get a chap's eye badly out."

"There isn't a junior in either house who's equal to him," remarked Figgins. "Pity he's an outsider! But plenty of good cricketers are rotters, for all folks say. It isn't because of cricket, but in spite of it."

"I don't think he's a rotter," spoke up Fatty Wynn. "And Kerr don't either."

"And Lowther don't either," added Tom Merry. "Nor our Gustavus—though that old idiot's opinion doesn't amount to a row of pins," remarked Blake, well knowing that D'Arcy was at his elbow.

"Bai Jove, though, I wish I could bat like that fellow!" said Arthur Augustus, disregarding the insult.

Hitherto Gussy had never openly admitted his inferiority to any cricketer among the St. Jim's juniors, so that the compliment from him was a high one.

Now Mayne left the wicket, and Talbot took his place there.

"Wonder if he can bowl?" said Tom Merry.

By this time practice at three or four nets had entirely ceased, and the fellows from them stood in groups watching Mayne and discussing his form.

He could bowl, it seemed. A high action—like Trumble's, Kangaroo said—beautifully easy, too, and more than a fair amount of pace, and a distant whip in from the off.

"We can't keep him out of the team," said Tom Merry suddenly.

Talbot's middle stump had just somersaulted. And Talbot could bat!

"We can't put him in," answered Manners. "The thing's dead off!"

"After all, he never challenged anybody at cricket," said Figgins, with a thoughtful brow. "And he can play cricket, that's a cert. They say he can box, too. He looks as if he can run and jump. I don't doubt he can swim. The challenge—"

"You're rotting, Figgy!" cried Jack Blake. "He kicks," said Herries, shaking his head solemnly. "Don't believe it myself," ventured Kangaroo.

"If Figgy goes over—"

"Don't say 'if,' Merry. I've gone over! Kerr and Fatty are dead sure he's all right. Talbot, Lowther—two more. You can't count Skimmy and D'Arcy, because—"

"Weally, Figgins, I shall be weluctantly compelled to administah to you—"

"Dose of castor-oil, old ass? Don't need it, thanks!"

"No! A feaful thwashing!" howled Gussy. "Same old yarn," replied Figgins wearily. "Thought perhaps you'd make a change in it."

After a while practice was resumed. But Tom Merry kept his eye on Mayne, and noted that he was all right in the field, picking up cleanly, throwing well, and catching with rare certainty.

Talbot came over to speak to his chums. "I say, old man, who coached that chap?" asked Tom Merry.

"Mayne? Oh, a very big man indeed has had him in hand. They thought at one time he'd better go in for being a professional cricketer, and, though he is only a kid, he might get on the staff at the Oval next season if he cared about it."

"He told you so, of course?"

"If you mean he volunteered the information, he didn't, then! I had to screw it out of him. It grieves Skimmy no end. He thinks a promising scientific sharp is being wrecked on the rock of cricket!"

Tom Merry grinned. "Is he any good at mechanics?"

"Pretty hefty. He's actually made one of Skimmy's wim-wangs go!"

"Must be, then; no mistake about that! What can't the fellow do, Talbot?"

"Get fair-play from other fellows," answered Talbot, with a note of bitterness in his voice, and turned away.

Tom Merry was very thoughtful after that. The same evening he called a meeting of the junior eleven.

Present: Tom Merry, Talbot, Lowther, Figgins, Kerr, Wynn, Blake, Digby, D'Arcy, Redfern, and Noble.

Herries and Manners were very sick at being out of it.

But, of course, everyone could not be in the team, and these two had had to stand down.

"I've called you together, you chaps," said Tom Merry, "because we've a man in the house who can knock spots out of any of us except perhaps Talbot—"

"Rot! You're as good as I am—better," broke in Talbot.

"I'm not better, anyway. And I don't know whether either of us is up to Mayne's mark."

"You can't play Mayne," said Digby hotly.

"Why not?" asked Talbot, turning sharply on him.

"Because he's a cad—and a kicker."

"That he's no cad I'll answer for, and we haven't an atom of proof of the other thing."

They hadn't. Levison and Crooke had said so; but the evidence of Levison and Crooke did not go far at St. Jim's.

"Do you think he did?" asked Blake.

"I feel sure he didn't," replied Talbot.

"I'll take your word, old man."

"I say!" cried Digby, in disgust. "Blake's turned his coat now. I wish old Herries and Manners were here. They ought to be here—before Gussy, anyhow. Gussy can't play for nuts! He's—"

"You'd like a packed jury, wouldn't you, Dig?" inquired Figgins.

"You're another rotter! My word, I don't know what St. Jim's is coming to!"

"We'll put it to the vote," said Tom Merry. "Hands up whoever considers that there is no just and lawful impediment to Mayne's playing for the St. Jim's junior team!"

He put up his own hand as he spoke. Up went Talbot's, Lowther's, Kerr's, Wynn's, D'Arcy's on the instant. Figgins and Blake and Noble hesitated only a moment. Redfern looked at the little forest of hands, and then put up his own.

And Digby surprised everybody by following suit.

"What's the good of being one against ten?" he growled. "You'd only make it an excuse for chucking me out of the team!"

"Is that to my address, Dig?" asked Tom Merry.

"No. I don't say you're not fair. But somebody's got to stand down if this bounder plays, that's a cert."

"I will!" said Talbot quickly.

"That I'm hanged if you shall!" cried Tom Merry, just as quickly. "Anybody else first."

He looked rather hard at Gussy.

Then did the Honourable Arthur Augustus D'Arcy rise to the heights of a great self-sacrifice.

He did not fancy himself one of the team's weaker members. He honestly believed that he was as good as any but two or three of them.

But he knew that other fellows cherished what was to him—an unaccountable delusion that he was no great shakes. And he thought of Mayne, and the injustice that had been done him.

He rose, adjusted his monocle, and spoke out. And he did it manfully. He did not talk of a dead-set against him or anything of that kind. All he said was:

"I am quite prepared to relinquish my place to my friend Mayne, if you desist it, Tom Mewwy."

Talbot clapped him on the back.

Then up spake Fatty Wynn.

"I was going to say the same thing, Merry, only I thought you'd want my bowling, you know."

"We do, old chap. We couldn't spare you. It won't be easy to spare D'Arcy, of course, but room must be found for a player of Mayne's class."

"A player of Mayne's class!" echoed Digby, with an emphatic stress on the "player," as though he meant them to understand that in other respects Mayne was, in his opinion, no class.

"Shurrup, ass!" growled Blake.

"Oh, you're a giddy convert! Well, never mind—they haven't sacked me. Wonder what old Herries and Manners will say, though?"

It must have been surprising to Digby that Manners said nothing at all, and Herries refused to be roused to indignation.

As for Mayne, he was taken aback at first. But when he learned that he had been voted into the team, nem. con., he was plainly delighted, though he said little.

"Dear me, what a pity!" said Skimmy. "Now I shall lose you, Mayne."

But, as usual, Skimpole was in a minority of one.

CHAPTER 10.

Mellish's Conscience Works.

"SAY, Mayne, can I speak to you?"

It was Mellish who asked this, putting his head warily into the study, and taking care not to raise his voice.

"Of course you can. Come in!"

Mellish sidled in. He had a way of screwing himself round the edge of doors.

"I—I rather wanted to speak to you alone, Mayne," he said.

Talbot and Skimpole were there. It was the hour of prep., and Percy Mellish ought to have been in his study on the Fourth Form corridor.

"I don't think I care about that," answered Mayne gravely. "You can say what you want to say before these fellows, I suppose?"

"Ye-es—oh, yes!" said Mellish.

But he didn't seem inclined to say it, nevertheless.

"Don't waste time, Mellish!" said Talbot sharply. "We're busy."

Still Mellish hesitated. It was difficult for him to make a start, and, while he wanted to tell a good deal, he also wanted to keep back a good deal. Talbot's eyes made him feel uneasy.

"I—really, I'm beastly sorry I helped to pull your leg about that challenge affair, Mayne!" he blurted out at length.

"All right. We'll say no more about that. I don't mind having my leg pulled, as far as that goes, but when a chap gives his word of honour—"

"Crooke and Levison did that, too, Mayne," whined Mellish.

"But you wouldn't follow Crooke and Levison if they stuck their hands in the fire, I reckon. It doesn't matter now, though I was an ass to believe you, anyway."

"That isn't all, Mayne. There's—there's something else."

"Well, out with it, and go!"

Mellish looked tearful. This was scarcely treating him in a friendly spirit, he thought.

And he really did like Mayne. He had liked him from the first; and now that he seemed to be making rapid headway against the tide of unpopularity, it wasn't dangerous to show that liking.

"I—they—I mean—"

"Do you know what you do mean, Mellish?" asked Talbot. "A fellow who's got a straight yarn to tell don't beat about the bush in that fashion."

"It's all very well for you, Talbot; but fellows are down on me. I don't know why."

"I do," said Talbot; and bent his head over his work again.

"They—"

Mellish tried another start.

"Who are they?" asked Mayne.

"Crooke and Levison."

"Oh! Your chums—eh?"

"They're not my chums now. I—I—I've chucked them!"

"Or they've chucked you. Which is it?"

"That don't matter much. I'm not friendly with them, anyway. And I don't like them scheming to play nasty tricks on you, Mayne."

"Don't worry. I guess I can keep my end up against Crooke and Levison."

"But—but I've heard about something they mean to do—something against you—"

"How did you hear?"

Talbot looked up. Mayne was evidently something of a judge of character. If he had known Mellish for a year he could not have been more doubtful than he evidently was whether the Fourth-Former had heard by fair means.

"I—I—I say, Mayne, does that really matter much?"

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"To me—yes. I'm not going to listen to anything that wasn't—well, heard fairly."
 "But this was—really, it was. I'd dropped a—pencil-case under the table in our den. And I'd got under to look for it, and Crooke and Levison came in."
 "And, of course, you came out?" struck in Mayne.
 "Can't see what the pencil-case and the table have to do with the yarn myself."
 Skimpole caught Talbot's eyes, and actually winked. Yes, it was a real wink, not an involuntary movement of the eyelid.
 Talbot wondered. He had never before seen Skimmy wink.

"Nun-no; I didn't come out straight away. You see, I'm not on very good terms with Crooke."
 "So you stay under the table when he shows up?" said Mayne. "That's prudent, but not very plucky!"
 "You don't know what a rotter Crooke is, Mayne!"
 "Don't I? Perhaps not. But I reckoned I did."
 "So they began to talk—"

Mayne stood up.
 "Better clear out, Mellish!" he said.
 "But—but it was about you. And you ought to know—really, you ought."
 "Maybe. But not from you. I don't care to listen to stories got hold of in that low way."
 "You must listen, Mayne—really, you must! Make him, Talbot! He ought to know about this."
 "I quite agree with Mayne," said Talbot gravely.
 "But I can't keep it in. I must tell it. Look here, Mayne, I know I joined in the plot against you at first—"

"So there was a plot from the first?" put in Talbot.
 "That's something to know."
 "But I didn't feel comfortable about it after I'd seen you. You—you seemed such a real decent sort; and you let me down so easy when we boxed, and—and—"

"Cut all that! I believe you mean well now, Mellish, but you're going the wrong way to work."
 "I want to be friendly with you, Mayne—honestly, I do!"

Mayne paused a moment before replying. Talbot and Skimmy wondered what he would say. Both fancied that Mellish was in earnest for once.

"If you mean that, Mellish, I'm not going to say 'No.' But you may as well make up your mind once for all that I haven't any use for fellows who spy and sneak! You'll have to drop that if you care about being chummy with me."

There was not the least smugness about the speech. It was not the Pharisee proclaiming himself righteous above others, but a fellow who had always been straight speaking out what he felt. Talbot and Skimmy were both sure of that.

"So I will, Mayne. Honour bright—I mean, truly I will. But I must tell you this."

"I won't listen to it."
 "But I must tell—really, I must. It—it—it lies too beastly heavy on my conscience."

"If you've nothing more on that than not giving away what you only heard by accident, and haven't the right to repeat, you aren't in such a bad way, Mellish."

Mellish seemed to interpret that as permission to tell. His woebegone face brightened, and he started off.

"Levison said—"

"That's enough! Didn't I tell you I wouldn't listen?" Mellish looked hard at him, winked both eyes at once, as though trying to keep back tears, and then slunk out.

Mayne sat down again, and went on quietly with his work.

A grubby hand was extended across the table. Mayne looked up.

"What's that for, Skimmy?"
 He had fallen into the familiar abbreviation, and Skimmy liked him to use it.

"I wish to shake hands with you, Mayne. It is my opinion that your conduct deserves credit."

"I'm much obliged, I'm sure," answered Mayne, taking the hand. "But I don't see why."

"Talbot does, though," said Skimpole. "That is right, I think, Talbot?"

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Talbot said nothing, but he stretched out his hand, too.

"I wonder, now, what Mellish will do?" remarked Skimmy, a few minutes later.

"Go back to the husks," replied Talbot. Skimmy stared.

"I really do not understand you, Talbot," he said.

"Did you ever read the parable of the Prodigal Son?" "Ah!" said Skimmy. "Well, I think it possible that you are right. In some degree it is a pity, for I believe that Mellish's conscience really did trouble him."

"It ought to," Talbot answered. "There's enough of that sort of thing on it. But I don't much believe it."

Talbot was wrong, however. Mellish's conscience refused to be doped, and he had taken it elsewhere, whereof came further developments.

CHAPTER 11.

The Grammar School Match.

A MATCH between the St. Jim's juniors and Rylcombe Grammar School always meant a hard tug-of-war.

The Grammarians had among them some very good players, and so had St. Jim's, and both sides were out for victory every time.

This match was to be played on the Grammar School ground, which was naturally in favour of the Grams; but Tom Merry felt sure that the inclusion of Mayne in the St. Jim's eleven would be more than sufficient to counterbalance this fact.

Some of the St. Jim's fellows were already opening their shoulders at the nets. Now Monk and Carboy, and the rest of the Grammar School team appeared, and Tom Merry and Gordon Gay tossed for choice of innings.

Gay won.

"Of course, you'll put us in?" said Tom Merry.
 "You bet—not! 'Tisn't such a dead cert you'll get an innings at all this afternoon, old man, unless in the kindness of my heart I declare ours closed."

"We'll see you don't do that," answered the Shell captain.

Gay took Wootton major in first with him, and Tom Merry put on Mayne and Fatty Wynn to bowl.

Mayne's first ball, breaking in from the off, beat the Grammar School skipper completely, and sent his middle stump somersaulting.

He looked at it with a comic expression of dismay, then walked out.

"Look out, old man!" he said to Monk, whom he met at the pavilion gate. "That chap's some bowler!"

Monk strode up to the crease, took guard, and faced the new fellow. The break beat him, too. He touched the ball, but sent it up in the air, and it was deftly caught by Tom Merry at first slip.

Two wickets down without a run!
 Grammar School faces grew long, and St. Jim's fellows chortled quietly, hoping for the hat trick.

Wootton minor joined his brother. He met the first ball he had with the full face of his bat, and sent it back to the bowler. With the second he was in difficulties, but managed to keep it out of his wicket. The third he hit hard towards cover-point, but Blake dashed in, threw at the wicket, and very nearly ran him out. Wootton major's lusty "No!" alone saved him, for he scuttled back just in time. The narrow escape did not upset his nerves, but the last ball of the over was too good to do anything with but just stop it.

Wootton major scored a 4 off Fatty's first ball, and a 2 off the second. The third he cut hard, and it travelled swiftly in the direction of Mayne at third man.

A difficult catch, for it was barely a foot above the ground. But Mayne grabbed for it with his left hand, and caught it cleverly.

Three for six!

In Mayne's second over Wootton minor got his quietus, clean-bowled, and Carboy also saw his middle stump lowered.

Five for seven!

Then Fatty took a turn, and had a couple of wickets with successive balls.

Seven for nine!

The Grammarians had their tails down now. There seemed no hope for them. This was bad beyond the worst that had ever happened to them before.

Eight for nine!

Mont Blong brought up the rear. He was not an accomplished batsman, and when he did score it was by wild and indiscriminate swiping.

He went down on his knees to a ball from Mayne, and got it to the boundary with a stroke more like a man wielding a scythe than anything else.

It was atrocious, considered as cricket, but it counted 4, and a feeble cheer came from the Grams.

Then, trying to drive, the French boy got the ball on the edge of the bat, and it sped through the slips for 3.

That brought him face to face with Fatty, who sent him a slow. Mont Blong lunged at the ball, and put it up into the air over the bowler's head. It was an easy catch for Digby, but he fumbled it somehow, and threw in so wildly that an overthrow resulted.

Mont Blong was half delirious with joy. Off his own bat he had scored as many as all his comrades together.

If the fellow at the other end could only stay long enough he was confident he could make a century.

Alas for Mont Blong!

Fatty bowled another slow. The French boy got right in front of his wicket in a wild attempt to lam it to leg. He missed it altogether, but it did not miss him. It caught him a stinging whack on the right calf.

"Howzatt!" roared the St. Jim's team in unison.

"Out!" said the umpire, and Mont Blong had to go, though he protested that it was "a leetle error," and that he "ought to 'ave zat ball ova'ir again."

All out for 18!

"Well, old man," said Tom Merry to Gordon Gay, "why didn't you declare at the fall of the ninth wicket? You'd made plenty then, surely, without being greedy enough to want the mighty whack doubled!"

The only possible answer to that had to be made in the field, and Gay did not really see much hope that he and his men could make it.

Eighteen! It was horrible—no less. A couple of overs might well see the number wiped off. Visions of defeat in an innings loomed up before Gordon Gay.

"Where do you usually go in, Mayne?" asked Tom Merry.

"Second wicket down. But don't mind about that, if it's some other fellow's favourite place. Anywhere will do me?"

"Number eleven, for instance?"

"If you like. I don't mind, really."

Mayne appeared at No. 4 on the list. Blake and Tom Merry were first men in.

They got to work quickly, encouraged by the state of affairs. Twenty went up inside ten minutes, and the score was 50 when Blake fell to a good one from Gordon Gay.

Talbot took his place. Mayne sat with pads on ready for when he was wanted.

But Talbot shaped so well that it hardly looked as if he would be wanted just yet, for Tom Merry was well set, and scoring fast by strokes in every direction.

Some of the fags had ridden over to watch the match, and half a dozen of them, including Wally D'Arcy, Curly Gibson, and Joe Frayne, had established themselves in the corner nearest the gate, with a supply of ginger-beer, almond hardbake, and chocolate.

"I say, Wally, look here!" said Curly Gibson, nudging his chum.

"Oh, crumbs!" answered Wally. "Did you ever see such a guy? What a waist! You couldn't get round it in less than two and a half times if you wanted to hug her!"

"But nobody except a chap off his rocker would want to hug her," answered Curly, grinning.

"She's coming in here," said Joe Frayne. "Wonder what she wants?"

"I guess she's mother to one of the Grams, and works out his bills by taking in the school washing!" gurgled Wally.

CHAPTER 12.

The Absolute Limit.

THE female who now approached the gate of the Grammar School was indeed terrible!

Her hat was very gaudily-trimmed, but it looked as if it had been rescued from a dustbin after having been sat upon. The rest of her attire was quite in keeping with the hat.

Her face was red and not overclean, and if she didn't actually smell of gin she looked as if she might do.

It was a very hot day indeed, and so much of "her" as was not Levison was padding.

Levison had begun to think by this time that less padding might have served, and that the heated state induced by over liberality in this respect would have produced a quite ruddy enough complexion without the generous dabs of rouge which Gore had laid on.

"Little boys," said the apparition, "can you tell me where I can find a young feller by the name of Mayne?"

Wally D'Arcy got up.

"There are no little boys here, ma'am!" he said stiffly. "St. Jim's is not an infants' school!"

"Ho, I beg yours! Sir, if it pleases of you better, young gent, as long as you tell me where young 'Enery Mayne is. I've bin to the other school hequirin' for 'im, and they told me there as I should find 'im over 'ere!"

Wally now sighted Crooke and Gore strolling along together on the opposite side of the road. Next moment he saw Herries, Manners, and half a dozen other fellows walking rapidly after Crooke and Gore. He began to wonder what it meant.

Mayne's bowling had made him quite a popular hero. Without any suspicion of the true state of affairs, Wally felt somehow that he didn't want this alarming personage to get through to Mayne. But he did not quite see how to prevent it.

"What do you want Mayne for, ma'am?" he asked.

"Now, ain't that a questing! What do I want 'Enery Mayne for, hindeed? Why, for to fold 'im in me motherly arms—what helse do you think?"

Herries and the rest had caught up Crooke and Gore. They had surrounded them. Some sort of argument seemed to be going on.

Wally and the other fags could not make it out a bit. Perhaps D'Arcy minor's distracted attention was responsible for the very undiplomatic form into which he threw his reply.

"I say, haven't you made a mistake?" he asked. "You aren't off your—I mean, you haven't been drinking or anything like that, I suppose?"

"None of your blessed sauce, young feller-me-lad! I'll box your ears if you ain't middlin' careful—ah, an' tell your 'Ead about you, too!"

"If you box his ears, you know, his head will know, you know, without any more telling," put in Curly Gibson.

Herries and his band had surrounded Crooke and Gore now. The pair wanted to go on, but Herries & Co. wouldn't have that. This began to look interesting! But as to what it meant Wally was still completely in the dark.

He did not even think about Levison, much less tumble to the fact that Levison was inside all the padding and tawdry finery which made up that unspeakable female.

"Hanother of you, hay? Don't you be so impertent, me lad, or you'll smart for it, so I tell yer! I'm 'Enery Mayne's mother, I ham, and we'll see if me own bright boy denies of 'is loving parient!"

"I don't believe it!" whispered Joe Frayne, in Curly's ear.

"If I was Mayne," whispered Curly back, "I jolly well should deny her, and chance it!"

Then Wally was seized by a heroic impulse.

"Look here, ma'am!" he said. "I don't know exactly where Mayne is this minute, but I believe he's in the Grammar School somewhere. Will you come along with me and see if we can find him?"

Wally had a wild notion of losing the terrible female somewhere on the way—dropping her down a drain, if he could find one wide enough—locking her up in a classroom, anything to prevent her making poor old Mayne

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look an awful ass before the other fellows, with the Grams thrown in, too, to make it worse!

Levison turned half round, and saw the crowd which had made prisoners of Crooke and Gore.

He was seized with a funk on the instant.

The game was up!

What should he do?

He caught at Wally's suggestion, and, pitching his voice in the right tone to maintain his part, though he did so with difficulty, answered:

"Well, my lad, you don't seem to be all impudence, arter all, and I'll accept of your offer. And 'ere's 'opin as they'll offer me a drop of somethink short over there, for at the hother place they never so much as asked me if I'd got a mouth on me. An' it's a 'ot walk from the station to St. Jameses and back again from St. Jameses 'ere!"

"Come along, then!" said Wally, and led the way.

"Young idiot!" hissed the voice of Herries in his ear. "You're spoiling the biggest lark of all the ages!"

Still Wally didn't understand. If he had a definite idea at all, it was that Herries wanted Mayne shown up before everybody. There were fellows in the Shell and the Fourth who were still down on Mayne, he knew. But the Third had unanimously voted Mayne "all right!"

"You dry up, Herries!" he answered, trying to wriggle from under the hand of the Fourth-Former. "I'm jolly well not going to let you, so there!"

"What is the matter?" asked a deep voice, and they looked up, to see Dr. Monk, the Grammar School head-master.

Levison gazed round wildly for a chance of escape. Wally would have bolted, too, had he been able. Herries stood his ground with a sturdy pretence of ignorance.

"That's just what I was asking, sir!" he said respectfully.

"This—this lady says—says she's Mayne's mother—one of our fellows. Mayne is, sir!" blurted out Wally.

Dr. Monk looked puzzled.

He knew nothing about Mayne. The terrible blowsy female was not at all the sort of person he would have liked to see appearing at the Grammar School as the mother of one of his boys.

But in matters of this sort one never knew where one stood.

It struck him that the woman seemed under the influence of drink.

To have her marching on to the field before the boys of both schools in such a state was out of the question, putting aside the damage done to Mayne's credit among his schoolfellows.

He lifted his mortar-board and bowed, like the gentleman he was.

"It is a very hot day, ma'am!" he said. "Will you not rest before you see your son? He can be sent for, you know!"

Dr. Monk led his troublesome charge into a cool dining-room. He could not take her into the drawing-room, of course, and somebody might come into his study; into this room no one was likely to stray at that hour of the day.

"Will you sit down?" he said. "I am quite sure the heat must have been too much for you. If you will—ah—excuse me a moment!"

In spite of all his fear, Levison could not help grinning as the doctor went out. The grave and reverend head-master of the Grammar School was plainly afraid of that terrible female.

But the grin did not last long.

Levison was in a tight place, and he knew it.

His only chance was to escape, rid himself of this abominable disguise, and cut back to St. Jim's. How much Herries & Co. knew he could only guess; but at least there was a possibility of his getting out of it by dint of hard lying; and hard lying came easy to Levison.

He went to the window. If he could get out of that and through the school grounds to the open fields—yes, that was his best chance.

For a moment he thought of tearing off the disguise and leaving it in Dr. Monk's dining-room.

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But that would not do. It would inevitably lead to inquiries.

His absence when the doctor returned might do so, of course. But Levison made a pretty shrewd guess that the Grammar School Head would be only too pleased to find his unwelcome visitor gone, as long as she had left the spoons and forks behind her.

Out of the window he scrambled, hampered by padding and skirts, in a cold sweat of fear lest he should be caught in the act of escape.

He stumbled as he lowered himself, fell, and lay a moment panting, his heart in his mouth, for he thought he heard the sound of a door opening.

But it was neck or nothing. He got up, seized his skirt in both hands, heedless whether any eyes might be upon him from the windows of the school, and ran for his life.

Meanwhile, the match had gone on its way—a way not at all to the liking of the Grammarians.

Tom Merry and Talbot were still together, with the hundred long since passed. A record score for these games seemed likely to be set up.

To the fellows in the pavilion came Wally D'Arcy, breathless with haste, the bearer of a message he did not understand.

He passed by Mayne, still sitting with his pads on and his bat across his knees, and Kerr, who sat by Mayne's side, and made for a little group composed of his brother, Figgins, Lowther, and Digby.

"You fellows are wanted this minute!" he told them.

"Who wants us? Where?" asked Figgins.

"Herries and Manners. They said you'd tumble. I don't. But there's the rummiest sort of a go on. Come along!"

Off they went pell-mell. Kerr looked after them, but did not move. He thought it best to stay by Mayne, though Mayne was tied down by the fact that he might be wanted at any minute—if only the Grammarians could get one of those two determined hitters at the wickets out.

But Fatty Wynn waddled in their wake, and Blake and Redfern and Noble saw from the other side of the ground, and also followed.

Herries and Manners hailed their arrival with relief.

"Can't stop to explain," said Herries. "Take these two rotters in charge—take 'em on to the ground, if you like—sit on their heads—tie their legs together—do anything but let 'em slink off! We've got a job on hand."

Manners meanwhile was sending the rest to various posts about the Grammar School, thus drawing a cordon around it in approved military style.

The measures were taken only just in time. A minute later, and Levison would have got clear away.

As it was, he ran into the arms of his study-mate, Lumley-Lumley, and that hero, to the intense amazement of Wally and Curly and the rest of the juniors, who had followed to see the fun, actually attempted the desperate feat of hugging the terrible female!

Levison writhed and struggled like a madman.

"Come and help, you kids!" cried Lumley-Lumley. "I can't hold him by myself!"

Him!

That was clue enough for the juniors. They gave the Third Form war-cry and piled in.

When Manners and Herries came up, as many fags as could find accommodation were sitting on the terrible female, while Lumley-Lumley stood by, grinning widely.

CHAPTER 13.

Running the Gauntlet!

"H, really—really!" said Herries. "Come off it, you little bounders! That's no sort of way to treat a lady."

"Rats, Herries! It ain't a lady at all!" cried D'Arcy minor.

"It ain't even a woman," added Joe Frayne, making a distinction that everyone felt justified as they looked down upon that terrible female.

"It's Levison!" screamed Curly Gibson, in ecstasy.

"No, no!" said Manners. "Don't be a young ass,

Curly! It can't be Levison. How can it be, when it's Mayne's mother?"

"He said she was—I mean she said he was—I mean—Oh, never mind!" yelled Wally, wild with delight. "So, of course, as she—as she—as it said so itself—"

"Wait till I catch you kids alone—oh, only just wait!" cried Levison furiously. "Drop it, Manners! The game's up, I know. It was only a joke, and I didn't really mean to show up Mayne before the Grammar School crowd."

"Of course you didn't, madam," answered Manners politely. "Mayne wouldn't think it showing him up if his mother came along, whatever she was like, even if she was the absolute limit."

"She is," added Herries emphatically. "Come along, Mrs. Mayne. No, that won't do; I beg Mayne's pardon. Come along, Mayne's mother!"

"You are a crew of turncoats!" snarled Levison. "It isn't three days ago since you thought nothing was too bad for the chap. You barred him completely—"

"So we do now, of course," said Herries coolly.

That was not true, however.

"Of course we do," Manners said. "That's why we've made up our minds that you are going to show him up before the Grams. See, Levison?"

He spoke very clearly, with a pause after every word, and the fags listened with wonder, for they did not understand all at once. But Lumley-Lumley and Herries wore the widest of grins, for they did.

Then the fags tumbled, and Wally D'Arcy led them in a rousing cheer.

"Oh, good egg, Manners!" he cried, when they had finished shouting. "It's just lovely! Everything in the garden's lovely—specially Levison. I see it all now. You chaps were wide to it all along, and Crookius and Goribus are in it, too, and they've got to get their change as well. Oh, I do enjoy this—don't you, Curly?"

"You can't make me!" panted Levison, his face deathly white under the rouge. "I won't do it!"

"I think you're off it there," answered Herries cheerfully.

"I know he's off it," said Manners.

Levison dreaded now the mean thing he had planned to do.

For now the disgrace would be wholly his. Not a shadow of it would fall upon Mayne. It would increase the fellow's fast-growing popularity, for everyone would be indignant at the attempt to play so despicable a trick upon him just because he happened to have a mother who wasn't well off.

"The fellows will tear me to pieces," Levison bumbled.

"Oh, not at all! Not you—only Mayne's mother. Then they'll find you in the middle," answered Herries; "and after that—well, there may be some little thing in the way of an execution, but I dare say you'll survive it. Come along!"

"I won't go! I tell you, I won't!"

"Frogmarch him!" commanded Manners.

The fags were eager to obey. But at that Levison capitulated, and went sullenly.

"Any masters on the ground, Blake?" asked Herries, when the scouting party joined up with the guarding squad.

"No. I believe most of them are away playing in a match of their own."

"Dr. Monk's about, though," Curly warned them.

"Somebody will have to keep watch for him. We don't want this made a beak's job. I guess all three of these rotters will have had enough by the time we've finished."

"Look here," blustered Crooke. "What have I got to do with this?"

"Or me, either?" demanded Gore.

"If Levison chooses to—"

"It isn't our bizney, is it?"

"Who painted the cad's face for him?" demanded Manners.

"Gore!" answered half a dozen voices.

"Sure, and who tied her pretty little waist in?" asked Reilly.

"Crooke!" roared the chorus.

"You sneaking, prying rotters!" howled Crooke.

But Gore dried up. He was repenting already. He set his teeth, made up his mind to go through with what-

ever might chance to him, and hoped he would be able to break finally with Crooke and Levison afterwards.

Crooke had to be hustled along. But Levison, though he went sullenly, no longer resisted. And Gore tried to hold up his head, and pretended that he didn't really much mind having been caught out.

In Levison's mind spite worked still. If this thing had to be done, and the price paid for it, he would do it in such a way as at least to make Mayne squirm, though the squirming might last but a moment.

On to the field waddled a bedizened, stout female of horrifying aspect. After her came a straggling band of fags, grinning and chuckling, and behind them was a solid phalanx of Shell and Four-Form fellows, with Crooke and Gore, held by the arms, in their midst.

Straight to the pavilion went Levison! For all his fear of what might chance afterwards, he had made up his mind to take it out of Mayne as far as he could.

If Manners and the rest had known of the length to which he meant to go they might not have given him rein. Or they might, for, after all, the fun of the moment would have outweighed in their reckoning the hurt to Mayne's feelings.

"Me boy!" cried the terrible female, making straight for Mayne.

He stood up, and looked at her in amazement.

"Me boy! Me own dear, 'andsome lad!" she gurgled; and, falling forward, clasped him around the neck.

"Here, hold off! Who are you aulding? I don't know you, and I'm jolly sure I don't want to!" protested Mayne, struggling in her loving embrace.

"Don't know me! 'E says 'e don't know 'is hown dear, loving mothuah! Ho, 'Energy—'Energy! Hunsay them words—hunsay them, or I shall faint in your harms!"

"I'll take jolly good care you don't!" replied Mayne, wriggling hard. "You're not my mother! This is some low, caddish trick!"

The others had drawn up to the pavilion now, and by mutual consent of the captains the match had been temporarily stopped. The players came hurrying across.

It seemed to Crooke that, since he was already judged and found guilty, he might as well back up Levison's imposture.

He would take it out of Levison later, but a few words now might make Mayne still more uncomfortable.

"Seems to me," he snarled, "that a fellow who'd deny his own mother—whatever sort of creature she was—must be a top-notch rotter!"

"You lying sweep! You know this isn't my mother, for you've seen her!" flashed back Mayne, tearing himself free from that awful clutch.

"'Energy—ho, 'Energy, my son, 'Energy—do not, I beg of you, do not use sich dretful langwidge to 'igh-born young gents like Master Crooke, which you 'ad ought to be proud to hassociate with, bein' no more, so ter speak, than the dirt under their feet. Be 'umble, 'Energy—be 'umble!"

"Go to Hanover!" cried Mayne angrily. "You're a beastly fraud! There! I don't want to be rude to a woman, but you deserve it for letting yourself be bribed to play such a low trick at this!"

"Ho, 'Energy, 'Energy—my son 'Energy!" wailed the terrible female.

Somebody hissed. Not all there knew of the plot. The hiss might have been from one who did, and meant it for Levison; but it might have been from one who didn't, and meant it for Mayne.

Anyway, it convinced Reilly that things had gone far enough. Into his wild Irish mind had come a lovely plan—lovely because it would for the moment absolutely shock the beholders.

He was close behind Levison. He whipped his knife out of his pocket, opened a blade, and, before anyone else could guess what he meant to do, slit the terrible female's skirt off her with one slashing rip!

A howl of indignation was checked in its very outset.

"I say, Reilly!" cried Gordon Gay.

The howl of indignation changed to one of mirth.

For the removal of the skirt exposed to view a pair of grey trousers and the lower parts of the pillows.

Manners whipped that fearful and wonderful hat off the masquerader's head, and Herries snatched away the wig.

Then all knew Levison, in spite of the make-up; and all roared with laughter—all but Mayne.

His face was white with rage, and when they saw it the fellows ceased their cackling.

For now they began to understand. The insult to his mother was a thing not to be borne. When later on his chums came to know Harry Mayne's gentle, yet great-hearted mother, they understood even better.

He could not speak. He tried to, but something choked his utterance. He raised his clenched hand, and Levison shrank before it, wild fear in his eyes.

But Mayne did not strike. He turned quickly, and retreated into the dressing-room.

Talbot alone followed him.

From the rest went up a cry of:

"Lynch the rotter!"

"The rotters, you mean!" roared Herries. "Crooke and Gore were in it! We saw them all three in the barn over there—watched while they rigged Levison up—heard them chortling and bragging about the way they would do Mayne down!"

"You mean you spied and listened, like the mean beasts you are!" said Gore sullenly.

"Put it that way if you like," answered Manners. "But we'd got wind what you were up to, and we reckoned it was all fair-play. What do you fellows say?"

St. Jim's shouted assent. The Grammarians, though naturally puzzled, joined in. They had their own reasons for disliking those three, and were by no means inclined to side with them.

"What's to be done?" asked Tom Merry. "We can't let them simply walk off after trying such a low trick as this."

"My hat, no!" said Jack Blake. "They've got to be put through it somehow. I vote we make them run the gauntlet!"

Kerr produced from his cricket-bag half a dozen or so lengths of rope, each tied securely into two loops.

"D'ye ken these, you fellows?" he asked, holding them

up for the inspection of the Grammarians, his eyes twinkling meantime. "I saved them. Thought they might come in handy some day."

Gordon Gay and the rest knew those wristlets and leglets well enough. The things had played no small part in Tom Merry & Co.'s famous raid on the Grammar School.

But the Grams weren't worrying about that just now. "I twig," said Frank Monk. "Levison in the middle, Crooke and Gore on each side; fasten them together with those contraptions, and make the beggars run the gauntlet!"

"Best set a watch against the Head's turning up, though," Gordon Gay remarked.

"That was done. Then the three were pushed and pulled forward."

"No kicking, Crooke," said Jack Blake.

"What do you mean, you idiot?" snarled Crooke.

"Needn't pretend virtuous indignation, Crooke!" answered Tom Merry. "We know now who hacked Gore."

"Do you mean to say that rotter did it?" roared Gore. "It is said so. We can't prove it, of course; but Levison can."

"Is it true, Levison?" Gore snapped.

"You know it's not, Levison! You know Mayne did it; you saw him!" Crooke growled.

But Levison was quite reckless by this time. He was ready to admit having lied, if only he could make things worse for Crooke. Why had Crooke dragged him into this? He had had no feeling against Mayne—at first. It was all Crooke's fault.

"Mayne didn't. You did! But you made me say it was Mayne," he answered.

"Made you say? My aunt, if you aren't a pretty beauty, Levison!" said Figgins.

"Now we know all about it. Don't let's waste any time," urged Digby. "We don't want Dr. Monk stopping our little game."



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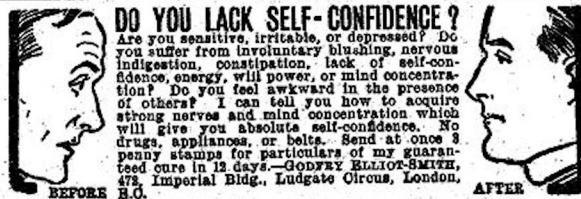
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Crooke did not kick, but he struggled hard. If Gore and Levison had given as much trouble as he did the yoking together of the three would have been a long business.

But both accepted their fate sullenly. Levison's eyes were cast down, but Gore looked the fellows in the face, biting his lips fiercely, and it occurred to the mind of more than one there that this affair would do Gore either a lot of good or a lot of harm. He was not taking it lightly.

By means of the leglets Crooke's right leg was fastened to Levison's left, and Levison's right to Gore's left. Levison still wore above his jacket the tawdry yellow blouse of the terrible female, and the rouge still showed on his deathly pale face. Then their wrists were also fastened.

All formed up into line, St. Jim's fellows and Grammarians alike. Some collared stumps, for blows were a part of the punishment of running the gauntlet.

But no one struck them as they hobbled down the line, straining against one another, hating one another bitterly, even Crooke, as thick-skinned as anyone well could be, fairly desperate with shame and rage.

Even the fags realised that their penalty was heavy enough without bodily pain being added to it. But the fags did not forget to hiss and catcall. No one of the three was exactly loved by the Third Form.

They reached the end of the line.

"Where's Mayne?" asked Herries. "He oughtn't to have missed this. Let's send the rotters back again, and have him here to see it."

"No!" answered Tom Merry slowly. "I don't think Mayne would care to see it, and we won't give them any more. I think they've been shown up enough."

He stooped to take the leglets off.
"Look out, Merry!" cried Frank Monk. "Crooke's going to—"

Tom Merry looked up. Crooke's free fist was within an inch of his head.

"You'd better not, Crooke!" he said quietly. That was all, but it was enough.

The three slunk shamefacedly away, just as Mayne and Talbot came out of the pavilion together.

Five minutes later Dr. Monk arrived on the ground, to find the match in full swing, but his boys in evil case.

He was just in time to see Tom Merry get out, caught in the slips for 103.

Then Mayne joined Talbot, and showed them perhaps the best batting that had ever been seen on the Grammar School ground.

There was no sting left in the bowling, it is true, but he batted in so masterly a style that no one doubted that he could have played it all easily even had Gordon Gay and the rest been fresh and fit. At five o'clock, when tea was served, Mayne had caught up Talbot, never a slow scorer, and each had reached the 80's.

They wanted Tom Merry to declare.

"Not jolly well likely!" he said. "We play on till half-past six, and you fellows have got to make a hundred each before I do that. Then, if you like, we'll see whether we can lick them in an innings."

They hurried back into the field. The Grammarians were too good sportsmen to linger over their tea. Five more overs sent Mayne to 109 and Talbot to exactly 100, and then Tom Merry beckoned them in.

The Grammarians fancied themselves able to play out time. They were beaten, anyway, but they wanted to stall off defeat in an innings. Mayne must be tired, they argued, and they could play all the other bowling, and there would be only an hour left.

But an hour proved long enough. Fatty Wynn and Jack Blake got down five wickets for only 32, and when Gay, still in, and Carboy looked like making a bit of a stand for the sixth, Mayne went on and took the last five wickets in three overs, though he did not get Gay's, the Grammar School leader carrying his bat right through for 27.

"You're the best all-round man we ever ran up against," he said frankly, shaking hands with Mayne

before the St. Jim's fellows left. "But we hope to make a better show when we meet you again."

"I'm sure you will," Mayne answered. "These one-sided games will happen now and then."

"Who do you say coached him?" asked Frank Monk of Talbot.

"Tom Hayward, old man! And Hayward said he'd make an England player if he stuck to the game properly."

"Whew! No wonder he's too good for us!"

Dr. Monk himself had a word or two to say to Mayne. But it was not about the terrible female. He did not mention her, and whether he had discovered the truth about her no one at St. Jim's or the Grammar School ever learned.

There was an extra special tea in No. 1 Study next day. The guests were so many that the den was crowded to its utmost capacity, but Mayne was the guest of honour.

Even now, twenty-four hours later, he did not quite understand all that had happened.

He knew from Talbot that Mellish's uneasy conscience had caused him to go to Tom Merry & Co. when Mayne had refused to listen to his disclosures. The Terrible Three, not being personally concerned, saw no harm in letting him speak, and he had blurted out the plot, and had the rest screwed out of him by degrees. Then Jack Blake and Herries were brought into it, and Manners and Herries agreed to divide the responsibility of looking after the three conspirators. They formed a band of fellows who were not playing to help them, and the rest has been sufficiently indicated.

Mayne's head nearly swam when he came in between Talbot and Skimpole, and all rose to him. He looked round, and saw faces that had been cold and hostile, but were all friendly now.

For it was not because he was a new fellow they had given him the cold shoulder. It was not because he had been to a Council school. It was because the cunning of Levison and the malice of Crooke had made him appear a braggart and a cad.

Now they knew he was neither, but a really good fellow. He had found his level, and that level no low one. Now that the truth was made clear, he no longer needed Talbot's support, and returned to his old study.

He gripped Talbot's muscular arm with his right hand, and Skimmey's bony one with his left. They knew what the grip meant. He would not forget that they had been his first friends at St. Jim's.

"Tea's all poured out, so it's cool enough to drink," said Tom Merry. "And we're not going to leave the toasts till afterwards, because some of us"—he looked hard at Fatty Wynn—"may be too full up then to do justice to them. So before we pile in I'm going to propose two toasts. The first is—"

They expected him to give Mayne's name. He didn't.

"To the memory of Sergeant Edward Henry Mayne, V.C.!"

Mayne looked at Tom Merry hard, but saw him only through a mist. Nothing could have touched him more than that.

"To your patah, deah boy!"

"They drank the toast with enthusiasm.

"And now—"

"No!" said Mayne. "I'd rather you didn't, Merry, if it's me. Because that other—it's all I could want—more than—"

His voice broke. They all sat down—some on the floor.

"Have some pie, Mayne, old man," said Fatty Wynn. "It's a veal and hammer, and no end good!"

THE END.

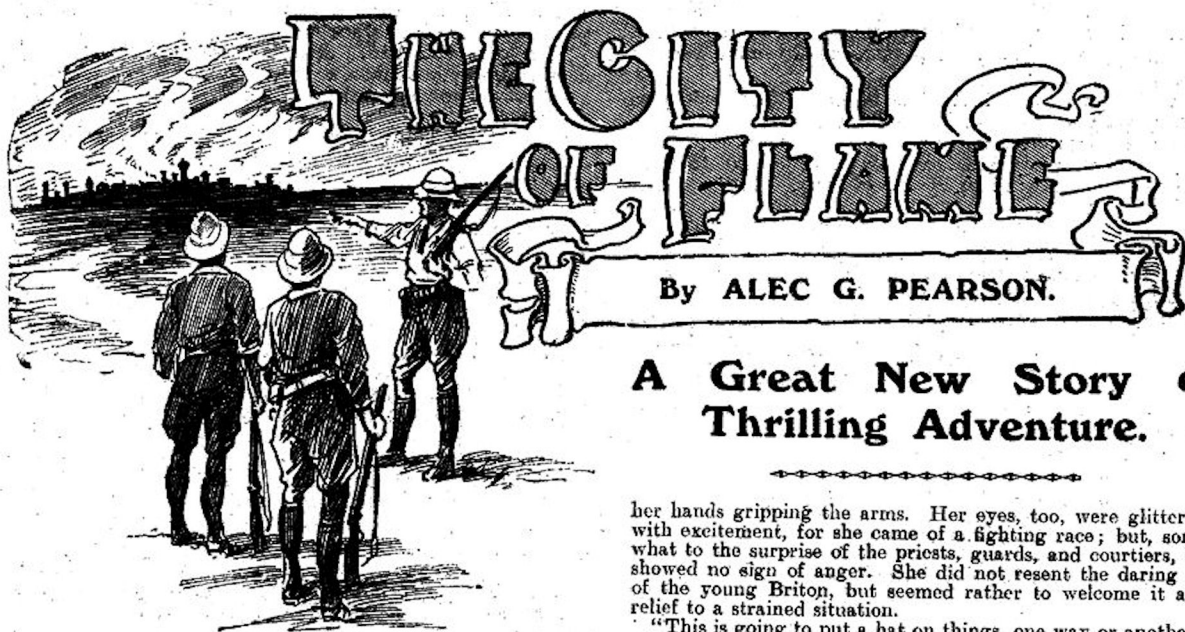
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Hal Mackenzie, Jim Holdsworth, and Bob Sigsbee, while cruising in a yacht, the *Isis*, in the Red Sea, discover information relating to a mysterious City of Flame, and form themselves into an expedition for discovering it.

After many exciting adventures, they at last reach the land of Shoa, and after crossing a great desert, reach the Temple of the Sun. There they meet Patrick O'Hara, a tall, red-headed Irishman, who is being kept prisoner by the natives, and regarded as a saint. The comrades then come into collision with Argolis, the chief priest, who wishes their deaths.

A few days later the temple is visited by Queen Clytemna of Shoa, with an enormous retinue. She takes the three adventurers and the Irishman under her protection, and in due course they return with the queen's retinue to the City of Flame, and are lodged in her palace.

The priests, under Argolis, as well as other powerful enemies, are still working against the comrades, and one night they find that their rifles have mysteriously vanished.

Going in search of the missing firearms, they are led into a trap, but succeed in making their escape. They then accuse Anubis, one of Queen Clytemna's councillors, whom they know to be antagonistic towards them, of plotting their deaths.

Anubis denies this; but Hal Mackenzie, being assured that he is the guilty person, strikes him in the queen's presence, thus challenging him to a duel.

(Now go on with the story.)

The Fight.

The blow, Hal Mackenzie's fierce challenge, and Pat O'Hara's jubilant echo of it, had taken place so swiftly and unexpectedly that the audience for a few moments could only stare in amazement, hardly realising at first the full meaning of the act and the words.

With one man, however, amazement was the feeblest of the sensations which surged through him. This man was Anubis. He had staggered back a little when Hal struck him on the mouth, but now he flashed on his assailant such a look of murderous hate that even some of his fellow-conspirators shrank away from him.

If a look could kill, Hal would surely have been slain at that moment.

"You shall pay for that blow with your life!" snarled Anubis, in a low, venomous tone.

There came the sound of a sharp, indrawn hiss of breath from the lips of the spectators, as, with tense, wordless excitement, they gazed at the two men who were facing each other—the handsome, open-faced, athletic young Briton and the crafty-eyed, scowling Egyptian.

Then slowly all eyes were turned to the queen to see how she had taken the incident.

Clytemna was leaning forward in her gilded chair, with The Gem Library.—No. 386.

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her hands gripping the arms. Her eyes, too, were glittering with excitement, for she came of a fighting race; but, somewhat to the surprise of the priests, guards, and courtiers, she showed no sign of anger. She did not resent the daring act of the young Briton, but seemed rather to welcome it as a relief to a strained situation.

"This is going to put a hat on things, one way or another," whispered Jim to Sigsbee. "But the queen's with us, if I know anything."

"Sure!" replied the American.

It was then that Hal remembered that some apology was due to her, both as a queen and a woman. He turned towards her, and, with a low bow, said:

"I must ask your forgiveness, O Queen, for acting as I have done in your presence."

Clytemna waved her hand and smiled, as though to assure him that he was forgiven. The chief priest, Anubis, and some others present, looked uneasy.

"'Twas a shrewd blow," she said, "and it is the reply of a man to one who calls him foul names. How say you, Anubis? Do you accept the challenge? By a custom of this country it is permitted that men may settle their differences by an appeal to sword or spear. The priests will tell you," she added drily, "that the gods side with those who are in the right."

"I am a man of peace," replied Anubis sullenly, "and know little of the use of weapons. But these strangers—all of them—make a profession of fighting—"

"I'm no professional," Hal interrupted, with a short laugh, "but when I'm insulted I can strike a blow on my own behalf."

"I will not fight with him," muttered Anubis.

"What! You are afraid?" exclaimed the queen. "A more talker!" She shrugged her shoulders with a gesture of contempt.

"By ginger," murmured Sigsbee, in Jim's ear, "I'm beginning to cotton to this queen! She's got grit. And I ain't goin' to believe all I've heard against her unless I see with my own eyes—"

"H'sh! That crocodile's started talking again. Hear what he has to say."

The "crocodile," otherwise Anubis, was going to use all his cunning to get him out of a difficult position. He felt no shame at being practically called a coward by the queen, but it had intensified his hatred of Hal Mackenzie, if that were possible.

"I do not fear, O Queen," he said, "but I am not a fool! This white man who desires to fight is young and strong and active. I am nearing middle life, and I am not active, nor have I great strength. Moreover, I have no skill in the use of weapons. The advantage would be all on his side."

"When you say you're not active you lie," observed Clytemna bluntly. "If you have no skill in the use of weapons, you alone are to blame. All men should learn the use of sword and spear. Well, you have made your excuse, and you will not fight. You are put to shame by this white stranger."

Then the chief priest stepped forward, and craved permission to speak. If anything, he was rather more crafty than Anubis.

"The truth or falsity of a man's spoken words cannot be decided on the result of a fight, O Queen," he said; "yet a custom of the land may not be lightly set aside. There is, however, another custom which perhaps has slipped your memory."

"What is it?" demanded Clytemna sharply.

"That the man who is challenged," explained the priest, "if he is himself unable to fight, may choose a champion to take his place."

"It is the custom," admitted the queen. "And you," she added to Mackenzie, "must now abide by it."

Anubis grinned with savage triumph. Evidently his champion was a man whom he felt pretty certain would win.

"I wouldn't agree to that, Hal," called out Jim. "You challenged Anubis, and if he backs out, I don't see why you should fight some chap—sort of gladiator, perhaps—that you've never seen, and have no quarrel with."

"I'll stick to my guns, old toff," replied Hal. "I'm not going to back down because that toad won't play the game."

But he had the curiosity to ask what happened to Anubis supposing that his champion was beaten.

"That is for me to decide," replied the queen; and somehow this answer didn't seem to give the Egyptian any degree of pleasure. However, when he was told to name his champion, the evil, confident grin came back to his face.

"It is Sulieman of the Hills," he said. "And the weapons—spears."

The queen cast a glance of concern and pity at Hal Mackenzie.

"I trust that your skill is equal to your courage," she said. "I have heard of this Sulieman. He is a terrible fighter, and the proof that he has never been beaten is that he is still alive."

"That's pleasant hearing," muttered Sigsbee. "Say, cap'n, I allow you could refuse this fight. To blazes with their customs! We ain't bound by them."

"Don't take this Sulieman on, Hal," begged Jim. "If Anubis is too funky to meet you—"

"I will fight him," said Hal, who, when he had made up his mind, could not be turned from his purpose. I challenged, and I should be as big a coward as Anubis if I backed out because there's a chance that my opponent is a better man than I am. Besides I know a bit about bayonet exercise, for I was three years in a cadet corps, and my method of using a spear may come as a surprise to Mister Sulieman."

"I'll second ye!" exclaimed O'Hara, who was in his element. "An', be jabbers, I'll bet me last shirt on ye, ould son!"

It appeared that there was an arena where affairs of this sort—which were not uncommon in Shoa—were settled; and half an hour later the spectators, among whom were a number of sullen-visaged men of the city had gathered in the enclosure to witness the encounter.

Queen Clytemna was not visible, but it is safe to say that from one of the screened balconies of the palace she had a good view of all that took place.

As Hal Mackenzie stepped into the arena a young priest slipped to his side and whispered:

"Guard your eyes well. Sulieman has a trick of thrusting at the body, and then, with a swift-upward stroke, driving the point of his spear into his adversary's eye, and so piercing the brain."

Having whispered this caution, which indeed was a hint of some value, the priest walked quickly away and mingled with the crowd. He was the same young priest that Hal and his comrades had rescued from the lion and afterwards carried to the temple.

Suddenly a trumpet sounded, and then Sulieman of the Hills appeared at the other side of the arena. This was the first sight Hal had of his opponent, and, to put it mildly, he didn't like the look of him.

The man was well over six feet in height, he was thick-set, and had as repulsive a countenance as Hal had ever set eyes on. His lips were thick, his eyes were small and piglike, and his whole expression was cruel, savage, and repellent.

"He's just an animal!" exclaimed Jim. "Precious few brains, but plenty of cunning and brute strength. He's eaten up with conceit too, the way he's swaggering."

That was certain. He surveyed Hal contemptuously, and then in a loud voice called out:

"It seems you are tired of life, white man. Well, I will honour you by killing you."

This raised a laugh from a certain section of the spectators, for like many professional pugilists of England and America, he had always a following of toadies ready to applaud and flatter him.

Hal did not condescend to reply, but having selected a heavy spear, he sprang with the lightness and ease of a trained athlete into the centre of the arena.

The spear was about the weight of a rifle with the bayonet fixed, which was exactly what he wanted. He was going to use the spear as he would a rifle with fixed bayonet, for it occurred to him that attack and defence might bewilder his opponent, who would know nothing about it.

For that reason he didn't accept the shield that was offered to him. It would only hamper him.

"In my country," he said, "we fight without shields." Sulieman laughed loudly. He was a gross brute. "Do the men of your country know how to fight?" he jeered.

He was to find out. They faced each other, and although Hal was five feet ten in height, and of a strong, athletic build, he looked almost small against his bulky antagonist.

For a moment they stood thus, each taking measure of the other from top to toe; and the light from the semi-circle of flames beyond the city walls—the sun being obscured—caught their motionless forms, and clothed them both with fire.

Then suddenly Sulieman leaped forward, and made a number of lightning-like thrusts with his spear. But he was only "playing to the gallery"; in other words, showing off his skill in order to impress the onlookers, before he came to serious business. Hal contented himself with remaining on guard until he saw an opening, then he made a swift lunge and ripped his adversary's right arm up from the wrist to the elbow. The wound was not very deep, but no doubt it was painful, for Sulieman uttered a sort of bellow of rage.

"Hurroo!" shouted O'Hara. "First blood to our side."

"Well done, Hal!" cried Jim. "Keep cool, and you'll have him on toast yet."

Sulieman realised now that he was not going to have matters all his own way, and he fought more warily. For a few minutes, as they circled round each other, there was a succession of thrust and parries, lunges and counters, with no advantage to either side. But it was clear that the big native champion was puzzled by Hal's methods. He guarded himself with his shield, but his adversary was guarding himself equally well without a shield.

All at once he attacked more swiftly, making two vicious stabs at Hal's body. But they were feints. Hal guessed what was coming; that terrible upward thrust through the eye to the brain, against which the young priest had warned him.

It came. Hal parried it skilfully, and before his enemy could recover himself he lunged with electric quickness, driving the point of his spear into the muscles of Sulieman's neck, under the left ear. It was a nasty wound, and a cry of dismay rose from the champion's friends.

Mad with rage and pain, Sulieman attacked with redoubled fury, and Hal had to give way before him. The excitement grew intense. Suddenly Hal felt a sting of pain low down on his right side, and he realised what it meant. He knew that he was wounded. The pain was not great, but loss of blood would weaken him, and it seemed to be bleeding pretty freely. He would have to finish the fight quickly if he was to win.

With all his strength he thrust forward with his heavy spear, but Sulieman caught the stroke on his shield, into which the spear-head penetrated several inches. In endeavouring to twist it out again, Hal snapped the shaft. He was left without a weapon. Sulieman uttered a yell of triumph. His foe was at his mercy now, he thought. He raised his spear to strike, paused for a moment as though gloating over his victim—and that pause was his undoing.

For Hal had gripped the heavy spear-haft in his hand; he swung it round and struck so shrewd a blow on his adversary's wrist that he broke the bone, and Sulieman's weapon went flying from his grasp.

"Fight on!" shouted O'Hara. "Batter him wid yer fists. Howly Saint Patrick! This is the great day."

Hal did better than use his fists. He gripped his huge antagonist in a ju-jitsu hold, and no sooner had he that grip than he knew Sulieman was quite ignorant of wrestling in any shape or form. The champion tried to wrest himself free, but could not.

"My spear!" he roared. "My spear!"

Two men sprang out of the crowd to give it to him, but O'Hara was on the alert and intercepted them.

"I'll clave the head off any man who touches that spear!" he cried.

And he whirled his mighty battle-axe round so close to the two men that they jumped back hastily, and one went sprawling.

Hal knew that he could not continue the struggle another three minutes. He was becoming weaker every moment from loss of blood. So, putting forth all his strength to this final effort, he drove his hand up under Sulieman's chin, forcing his head back until to save his neck from being broken, the Shoa champion had to fall.

He fell heavily, and his head crashed down upon a sharp stone. Then he shivered and lay still.

A great shout burst from the spectators, but it was by no means all in Hal's favour. There was awe and amazement in it, but little of a friendly note; for the champion whose

strength and skill had been a byword was beaten, and apparently killed by this young white man.

"Is he dead?" asked Jim, in a hushed voice.
"No," replied O'Hara, "but he's had enough, an' he'll do no more fighting for a while. He's licked to a whisper! Holies, 'twas a great fight!"

"Hold up, old chap!" cried Jim, as Hal swayed against him and leaned heavily on his shoulder. "Gosh, you're wounded, and I never knew it! The right side of your shirt is soaked with blood."

In the Queen's Service.

Five days had passed since Hal's terrific encounter with Suleiman of the Hills, and they had been days of comparative quiet. There was no more plotting—at least, not in the palace—against the white strangers, for the chief priest and his followers had retired to the great temple in the city, and Anubis had disappeared.

Being rather uncertain about his own fate when his chosen champion was beaten, that crafty schemer had made himself scarce before any order could be issued for his arrest, and no one seemed to know what had become of him.

Hal's wound was not serious, and as both he and Sigsbee had a fair knowledge of surgery, there was no need to ask for the service of any local medicine-man, if there were any in the city.

Each day Queen Clytemna had sent to inquire how Hal Mackenzie was progressing, but she had not paid them a visit herself. However, on the afternoon of the fifth day she sent word that they were to expect her that evening, as she had something of importance to say to them.

"Something of importance!" repeated Hal, when the servant had gone. "Now what will that be, I wonder?"

"No use trying to guess," replied Jim. "We've had all sorts of surprises sprung on us since we've been in this country, and this'll be another one, I suppose."

At eight o'clock that evening Clytemna put in an appearance. She was alone. They rose to receive her, and O'Hara—who constituted himself a sort of Master of the Ceremonies—banded her to a chair. Then after she had inquired whether Hal's wound was nearly healed, and received an assurance that he "would be quite all right" in a couple of days, she came straight to the "matter of importance" she wanted to discuss with them.

There was no "beating about the bush" with Queen Clytemna.

"I know how, and under what circumstances Megara came to Shoa," she began—the name given him by the priests still clung to O'Hara—"but why you other three braved the dangers of a journey into this land, I have yet to learn. Did you come in search of gold? For that seems always the object of white men who seek to explore a strange country."

"We're in no need of gold," replied Jim—"at least, Mackenzie and I are not. We came in search of adventure. That's all, your Maj—eh?—O Queen!"

Clytemna laughed.
"There need be no ceremony between us now," she said. "You are not my subjects. But you will have had your fill of adventure."

"Not yet," replied Jim. "We can do with quite a lot of that before we get tired of it."

"So! Then I can provide you with all you wish for—and more. In addition to which, you will have the opportunity of enriching yourselves, for the treasure of the first Queen of Sheba—or Shoa—lies hidden beneath this city."

"The Queen of Sheba's treasure!" Hal Mackenzie fairly gasped out the words.

For the magnificence of that famous queen of old almost equalled that of King Solomon "in all his glory"; while the treasure which she left behind her had been computed at more even than Solomon ever possessed. But much of it had never been discovered.

"It would seem you have heard of it," observed Clytemna drily. "You may not be in need of gold, but you will not refuse the chance of gaining a little more. Is that so?"

"We won't refuse the chance of another adventure," Jim responded heartily; "though, for my part, I never put much faith in stories of buried treasure. However, if you—eh—O Queen—"

"Forget that I am a queen," interrupted Clytemna, with some impatience, "for I may not be one much longer. In public you must address me as others do, but in private call me by my name."

Her words surprised them, but particularly her statement that she might not be much longer a queen. However, they made no remark on it then, but waited for her explanation.

"You have heard that I am hard and cruel," she continued, "and sometimes I have to be, yet it is not my nature to be so. But I have to rule the men of Shoa with a rod of iron,

for they don't understand kind treatment or mercy to one who has done wrong; they put it down as weakness. They must be ruled by fear. But I weary of them, for they are bloodthirsty, sullen, and cruel. I weary of this city of gloom, where even women rarely laugh. Yes; a city of gloom, for the everlasting flames do not brighten it. In the hours when it should be dark, except for the stars or moon, the flames light it up with a red glare, so that at times it looks to be bathed in blood. I am young, and I want to see the cities of the world, where there is brightness and happiness and the joy of living. But I do not quit Shoa without the treasure which is rightfully mine, but which the high priest and his fellow-plotters would deprive me of."

Silence fell on the group of listeners, after this strange outburst. It was Sigsbee who broke it.

"Do you know where this treasure is hidden?" he asked.
"I know," replied Clytemna; "but only brave and skillful men can hope to reach the place. There are dangers to be encountered such as you have never dreamt of."

"Then you, sure, needn't be afraid that the priests will ever brave them."

"Their arts and their plots are part of the danger," replied Clytemna. "My guards I can trust to fight for me, but in the matter of treasure—" She shrugged her shoulders.
"Oh, I can read the minds and hearts of men, and I know! Then the guards, like most others in the city, fear the priests. The high priest plots against me, and he has a powerful following. He wants a queen who will be a puppet in his hands, and that I will never be. While I am queen, I will rule!"

"Faith now," exclaimed O'Hara, "if your guards were rale men, they'd gather round ye, an' soon put an ind to thim unhowly priests. There'd be a ringin' av steel about the palace or the temple, an' sorra wan av a priest wud throuble ye afterwards!"

O'Hara had rapped out his remark in a rich Irish brogue, which he had to translate, as the queen only spoke Arabic and Shoaan. She laughed with approval.

"But you do not fear the priests?" she said.
"Not a little bit!" declared O'Hara. "Sure, I was a saint long enough in the temple to learn the koin'd av frauds they are! Priests, is it? Scorpions widout tails wud bether describe thim!"

"Yet they are dangerous, because they are evil and cunning."

"Thru for ye, mavourneen!" admitted O'Hara, who, never having set much store on ceremony, now laid it aside completely.

"But enough for the time of plots and plotters," said Clytemna; "I will deal with them later. First, I must secure the treasure. Are you all willing to take the risk of seeking it, on condition that one half of what you recover shall belong to you?"

They were all quite willing, and ready to start the adventure as soon as Hal was fit for roughing it again.

There is no need to set out in detail the conversation which followed, the plans, the instructions from Clytemna, and the score of matters that had to be discussed. Hal, Sigsbee, and Jim were very sore at not having been able to recover their rifles yet; but Pat O'Hara, who had not possessed one, and who was, on his own admission, a bad shot, was more than content with his battle-axe.

It was when Clytemna said that she did not know whether the treasure was mostly gold or mostly jewels that Jim produced the golden armet, set with the great diamond, which he had found in the cave of the Red Sea island. He had kept it undamaged through all the vicissitudes of their perilous journey.

"No doubt this is your property, Clytemna," he said. And he told the story of the finding of the metal tablet, and their first encounter with Anubis.

Hal had made a copy of the inscription on the tablet, which he had kept in a pocket of his belt, and this he handed to Clytemna.

"When the metal tablet was engraved, nearly three thousand years ago," he said, "there was an Anubis the Egyptian, and Clytemna, a queen of the Flame City."

"Every queen has to bear the name of Clytemna," was her reply. "And this"—she held up the armet—"we will take as a good omen. Now I must leave you, for a queen is very jealously watched. In two days' time, when all is prepared, I will come to you again."

"I want to ask a favour of you—now," said Hal abruptly. Clytemna glanced at him curiously.

"Is it anything to do with the girl Zenobia?" she demanded.

Hal was startled. Such mind-reading was uncanny. The queen laughed.

"Have I not told you I can read the hearts of men?" she added. "Well, what do you ask?"



Hal had gripped the heavy spear-shaft in his hand; he swung it round and struck his adversary a blow on the wrist, and Sulteman's weapon went flying from his grasp. "Plit on!" shouted O'Hara. "Batter him wid yer fists." (See page 23.)

"That if she committed any fault—it couldn't have been a crime—she will be pardoned. We rescued her, but she may be dragged from her home again—"

"I have never seen the girl," interrupted Clytemna. "Tell me, is she fair to look upon?"

"She is beautiful," replied Hal simply. "But you, Clytemna, sentenced her to death. And you have never seen her!"

"In that I am to blame. She was accused of a crime, the punishment of which by the law is death. I had no reason to suppose she was unjustly accused, yet it may have been. She shall come to no harm now; that I promise. Do you like the girl?"

"I admire her, because she faced death with such courage."

"Beware of the lure of bright eyes," cried Clytemna, with an amused smile at O'Hara, "for they are dangerous, even in this joyless city."

Her manner changed.

"A doomed city," she added, almost fiercely. "I know what even the high priest, with all his cleverness, does not know. The death vapour which now burns away in flames will be the cause of its destruction."

There was no friendly church clock by which to tell the hour, but Hal's watch was still in going order, and he had just noted the time by it. The glare of the roaring flames gave a good deal more light than the few adventurers wanted, for in their progress through the city they had been obliged to cross wide, open squares—public squares and market-places—where there was no shadow.

There were some noble buildings in the capital, proof that at one time in the far-off past the city was rich and prosperous. But now many of these buildings were falling into ruin and decay. The consequence was that the place was weird,

uncanny, and ghostly, that effect being heightened rather than lessened by the wavering light of the giant flames. Three days had gone by since the evening when Queen Clytemna had paid the quartette that memorable visit, and now they had started fully equipped for the great adventure.

The greatest and strangest of all their adventures. What perils faced them they did not know. How it was to end they had no idea. But they had stout hearts, strong arms, and indomitable spirits, which no dangers, no difficulties, no misfortunes could crush. If anybody could win through to success, that dauntless quartette could do it, and it is safe to say there were not four other men in the land of Shoa who could.

It was in the shadow of an archway of one of the great stone buildings that they were now standing, having implicitly followed the directions given them by Queen Clytemna.

It had been the dwelling-house of a great noble at one time—so Clytemna had told them—but that was very many years ago. Now it was untenanted, and one wing of it was partially in ruins, but the remainder of the house was intact, for it was strongly built.

"Well, here goes," said Hal Mackenzie, breaking a lengthy pause; "this is the real start. So far as I know, we've managed to reach this place unobserved. Our instructions are to follow the lower passage until we come to a staircase on the right. We go up those stairs, and find a large room in front of us. In that room there is a secret door. The queen told me how to find that, too. Beyond the door is the head of another flight of stairs, leading downwards. We go down the stairs—"

He paused abruptly, and glanced at the dimly-seen faces of his companions.

(Another long instalment of this stirring yarn will appear in next Wednesday's GEM. To avoid risk of disappointment, you should order your copy without delay.)

THIS WEEK'S CHAT



Whom to Write to—
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For Next Wednesday—

"TOM MERRY & CO.'S ALLY!"

By Martin Clifford.

For a really rousing story of school life, next Wednesday's great tale of St. Jim's is hard to beat. The arrival of an Italian junior—familarly designated as "Jackeymo"—gives rise to great excitement, especially when it becomes known that German kidnappers are on the track of the new boy. More than one attempt is made to capture the young Italian, and no less a personage than Arthur Augustus D'Arcy is instrumental in frustrating the last desperate effort of the Huns. The kidnappers meet with their just deserts, and

"TOM MERRY & CO.'S ALLY"

comes out of a terrible ordeal with flying colours.

OUR "MINIATURE NUMBER" COMPETITION.

I am now at liberty to announce the result of the above competition, which was recently run in these pages.

My readers will remember that they had to cut out and bind together certain miniature pages of our companion paper, "The Boys' Friend."

I certainly anticipated a good response, but the many thousands of neatly-bound miniature numbers which made their way to Gough House would have baffled the most enterprising adjudicator of competitions.

However, the work has now been successfully accomplished, and the first prize of twenty shillings is awarded to:

HERBERT R. HOLMES,

"Omega," Spencer Avenue,
 Karlsdon, Coventry.

whose miniature number was a truly admirable piece of work.

The second and third prizes, of fifteen shillings and ten shillings, respectively, have been added together and divided between the following competitors:

MISS A. McCULLOCH,

60, Well Road, New City Road,
 Glasgow.

GEORGE STEPHEN PETERS,

45, Ladas Road,
 West Norwood, S.E.

whose efforts ran those of the winner very close.

Consolation prizes of one shilling each are awarded to the following fifty-five readers:

Arthur Adkins, Birmingham; Hilda B. Ford, Birmingham; May Pinchbeck, Lincoln; Edward H. Barnard, Blackfriars; Leslie Ely, Blackpool; John Rae, Harold Wood; Charles W. Tait, Co. Durham; Frank J. Jordan, Canterbury; Philip G. Holmes, Nunhead; John Dawson, Leeds; Alfred S. Dyson, Leeds; Cyril Hiscock, Southampton; William D. Cooper, Staines; Willie A. Cuthbertson, Co. Down; Sydney Jacobs, South Shields; W. Burton, Darlington; A. H. Cooper, Ipswich; Douglas Clarke, Hull; Ray A. Jeffery, Beedes; George Halden, Bangor; Walter Howarth, Colne; Albert Skinner, Brixton; Sidney James, Haverfordwest; Albert E. Brush, Camberwell; Ada Craig, Bowes Park; Henry Anderson, Edinburgh; Ernest Mitchell, Manchester; Cecil G. Rhodes, Newcastle (Staffs); Frank Gladwell, Reading; Miss G. England, Kennington; G. T. Lemon, Lower Edmonton; Nancy Darge, Glasgow; Alfred Hudson, London, S.E.; R. H. Hodson, Plumstead; Leslie M. Crissell, Blandford; William Durham, Manchester; Henry Pent, Fulham; A. Broughton, South Norwood; Frank Wheeler, Newington

Butts; I. Ruisky, Whitechapel; William J. Duce, Battersea; Thomas H. Walcroft, Kennington; Sidney Rhodes, Manchester; Robert Brown, Worcester; Gilbert Nesbit, Manchester; Walter Smith, Canning Town; Grace W. Beale, Chingford; Donald White, Leith; Percy Roberts, Everton; Frank Matthews, London, E.C.; Charles S. Gillespie, Glasgow; Cyril Nunn, West Kensington; Herbert Stock, Hammersmith; Charles V. Welch, Ilford; and Cyril A. Bishop, Southampton.

That the competition was a huge success, goes without saying. It has opened my eyes to the fact that the "Gem" and "Magnet" Libraries possess a really excellent type of reader, with whom neatness, cleanliness, and cleverness are a sort of second nature.

The miniature numbers sent in by my chums were triumphs of art, and in no case was the work done in a slipshod fashion. One could tell almost at a glance that a great deal of time, trouble, and energy had been expended in binding the nidge pages together and suitably inscribing them. The miniature number sent in by Master Holmes was a marvel, and actually contained all the advertisements on the inside cover page. The efforts of Miss McCulloch and Master George S. Peters were also highly praiseworthy, and there was nothing to choose between them, so that the only thing possible was a division of spoil.

I wish to thank my chums most cordially for the enterprise they showed in the competition. To the winners I offer my hearty congratulations, while to the losers I would say, with all sincerity:

"Better luck next time!"

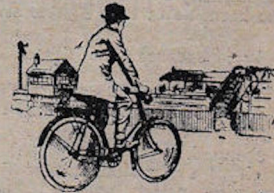
REPLIES IN BRIEF.

"A Loyal Gemite" (North Finchley).—Jokes for the Weekly Prize Page need not be original. Sorry your efforts so far have not met with success. Stick to it!

S. S. S. B. (Broughton).—Tom Merry is a British boy.

THE EDITOR.

HEALTH & ECONOMY.



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