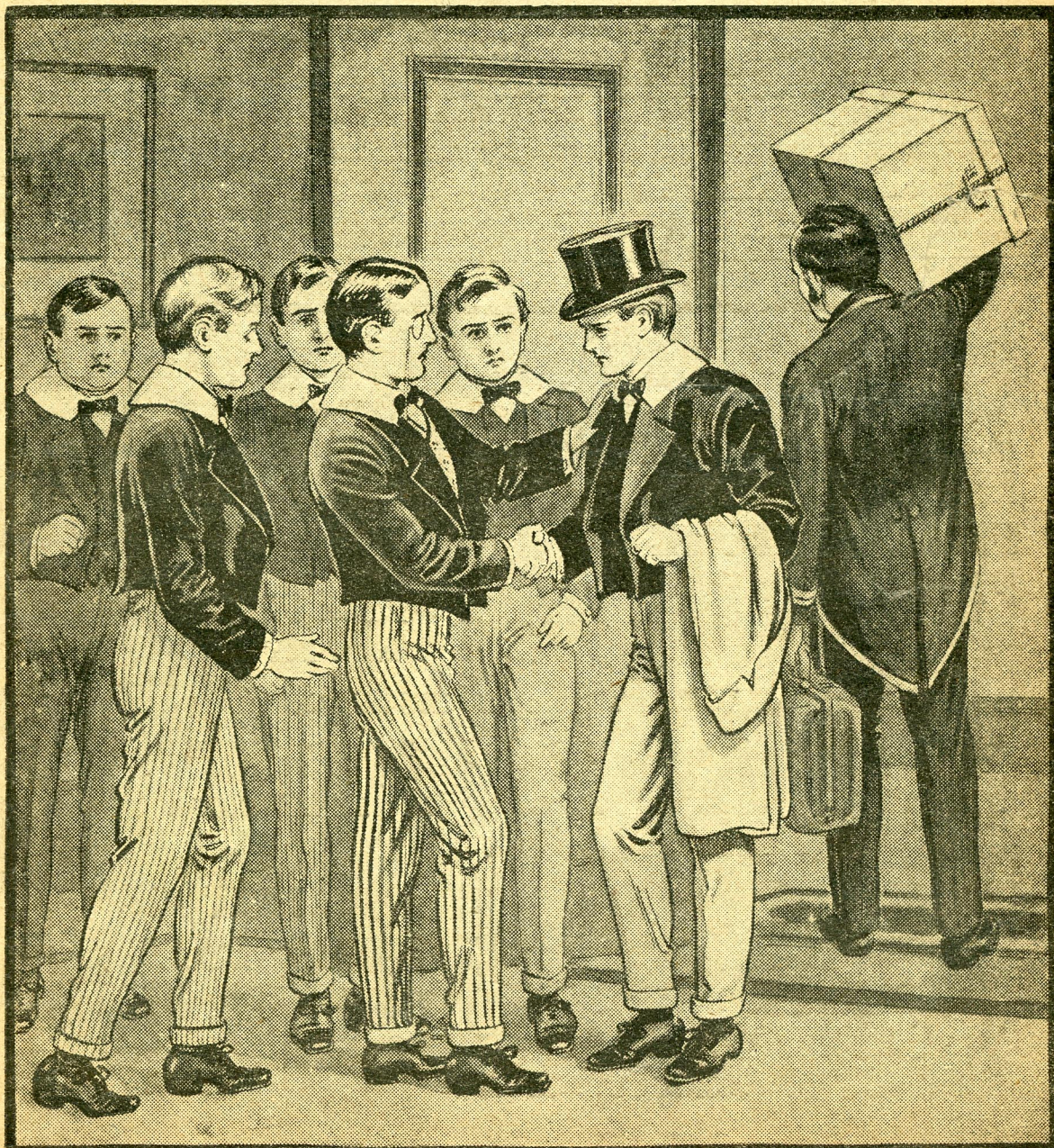
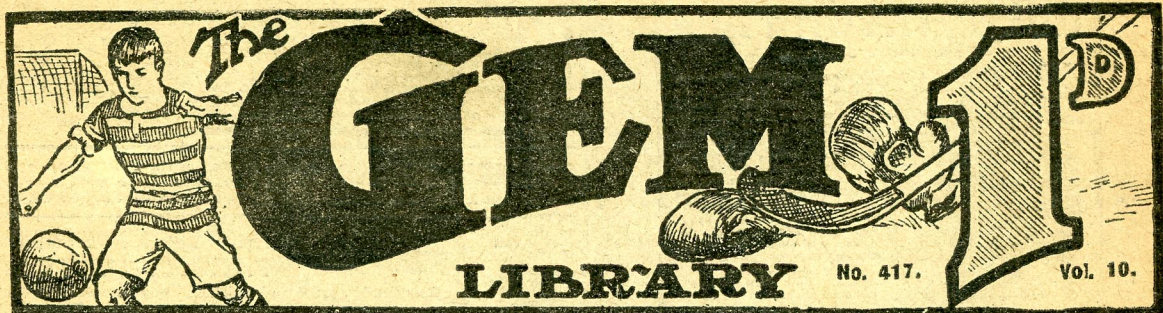


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By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

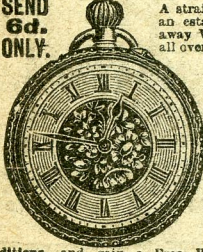
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Tom Merry's face was pale, but it was calm. "Tom!" muttered Lowther, in a choking voice. "It's all up, old chap!" said Tom Merry quietly. "I hope I needn't tell you fellows that it's all rot—that I never touched Cutts' purse—I mean with the idea of keeping it!"

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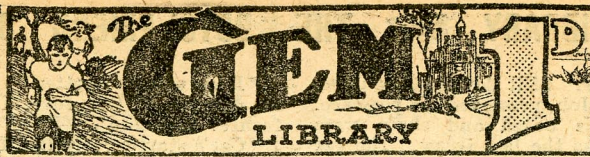
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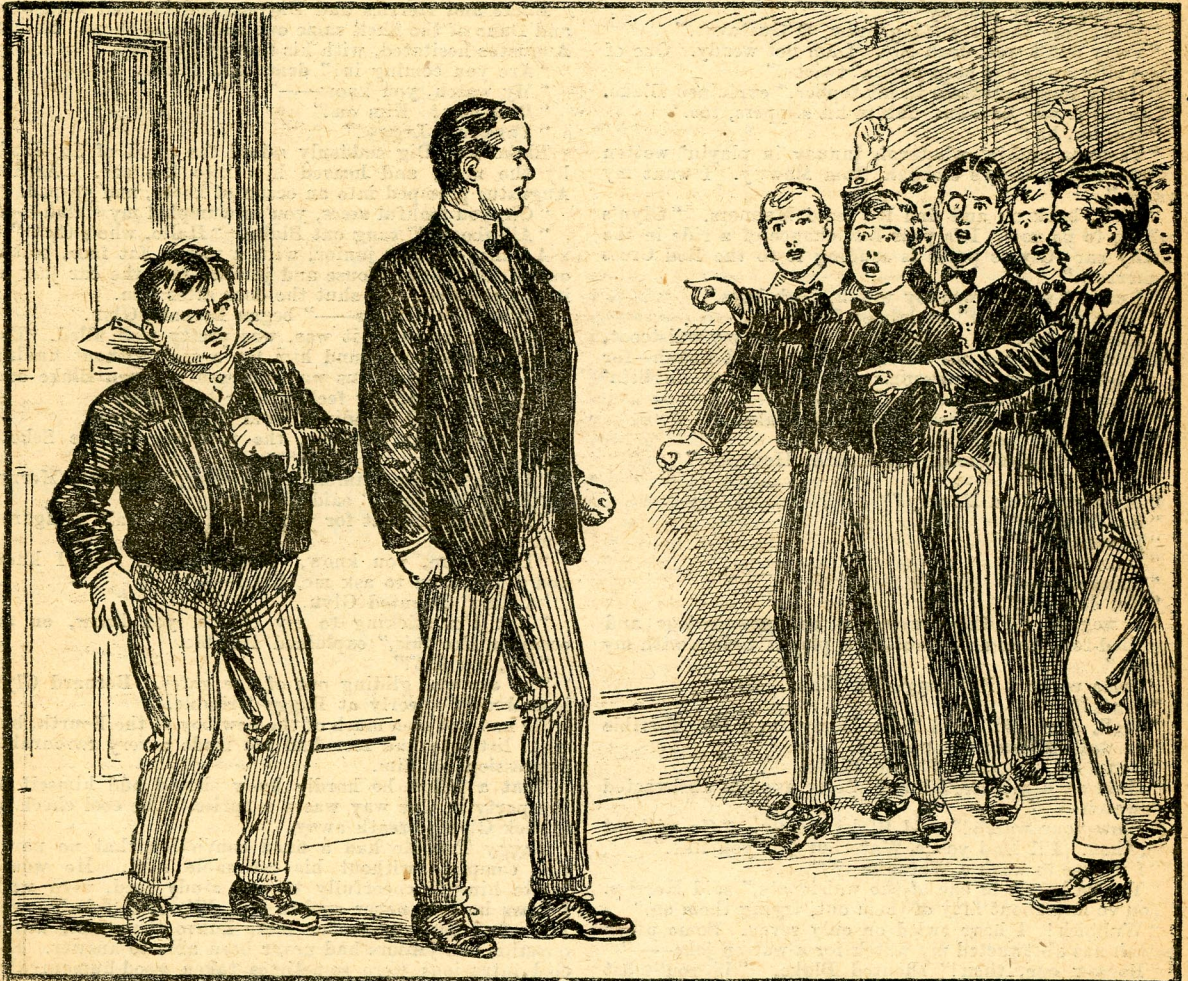


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TROUBLE FOR TRIMBLE!

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.



Kildare stood between Trimble and the threatening crowd, and turned a stern glance on the juniors. "What are you ragging Trimble for?" he demanded. "We're not ragging him yet," said Lowther savagely. "But we're going to, if he don't own up. He's got to tell the truth about Cutts' banknotes." (See Chapter 13.)

CHAPTER 1. The Little Party.

"PWAY give me my watch, deah boys!"

"Eh?"

"My gold watch, you know."

"Which?"

"Weally, Blake, I do not approve of these twicks on a fellah when he is dwessin' for a partay!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy severely. "Pway hand me my watch!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy fixed his eyeglass in his eye and looked with frowning severity at his study-mates--Blake and Herries and Digby. He was annoyed.

But for the fact that Gussy cultivated, under all circumstances, the repose which stamps the caste of Vere de Vere, he would have been ratty.

For an hour and a half Arthur Augustus had been dressing for the party. He was giving his toilet the finishing touches in the study. The result was really admirable. From his carefully-parted hair to his gleaming boots, the swell of St. Jim's looked a thing of beauty and a joy for ever.

Only the frown on his aristocratic brow marred the picture.

It was irritating to discover ink in his evening-shoes. But Gussy had borne that patiently. It was exasperating

Next Wednesday:

"THE GRAMMAR SCHOOL MASCOT!" AND "THE PRIDE OF THE FILM!"

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to find sardines in his topper. Still Arthur Augustus, understudying the celebrated Job, preserved his patience.

But the discovery that his watch and chain were missing from his waistcoat was the last straw. The car was waiting outside the School House, and there was really no time for practical jokes.

Tom Merry and Lowther and Manners of the Shell came along and looked into Study No. 6. The Terrible Three were dressed very nicely. They also belonged to the little party bound for Glyn House.

"Here we are again!" said Monty Lowther. "You fellows ready? Glyn's waiting in the car."

"Ready, ay, ready!" said Blake cheerily. "Where's Talbot?"

"In the car with Glyn," said Tom Merry. "Come on!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Wherefore that frowning brow, O Gustavus?"

"Pway don't wot, deah boy. I am not weady. One of these silly asses has been playin' twicks."

"Gussy found sardines in his topper," explained Blake.

"I fancy it was Levison. Ink in his slippers, too."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There is nothin' whatevah funnay in playin' wotten twicks with a chap's clobbah, Tom Mewwy. I want my watch."

"Well, buck up and find it!" said Manners. "Glyn's yelling to us now. It's your last chance of a ride in the family car—Glyn's pater is sending it to the Red Cross to-morrow."

"I cannot go without my watch, deah boys."

"Have you lost it?" exclaimed Blake.

"I have not lost it. I have been changin' my waistcoat, and some sillay ass has abstwacted my gold tickah—for a fathheaded jape, I pwesume. I insist upon its bein' returned to me at once!"

"Well, I haven't seen it," yawned Blake.

"Same here," said Dig.

"Have you abstwacted my tickah, Hewwies?"

"No, ass!"

"Have you, Tom Mewwy?"

"No, fathhead!"

"Lowthah—"

"No, image!"

"Mannahs—"

"No, dummy!"

"I wegard all those wemarks as oppwobwious and uncalled-for. Some uttah wottah is playin' twicks with my watch."

"Come without it," suggested Blake.

"Wats!"

"Well, I'm off!" said Tom Merry, and the Terrible Three walked down the passage.

"Come on, you chaps!" said Blake.

"Hold on a minute, Blake! Some ass has abstwacted my watch—"

"Blow your watch!" said Blake crossly. "Go without one, then. I'll lend you a Waterbury, if you like."

"I wefuse to weah a Watahbuwy!"

"You've left it in one of the waistcoats," said Herries.

"You've had about fifty of them out, trying them on."

"Wubbish! I have twied on only seven. Some uttah wottah has abstwacted my watch for a wotten joke—"

"Borrow one, then!" shouted Blake. "If you must have a gilt-edged one, ask Cutts of the Fifth. He's got a whacker."

"Cutts would probably wefuse to lend me his watch."

"Ask the Head, then."

"Pway don't be an ass!"

"Well, I'm off!"

"Weally, Blake—"

Jack Blake stalked out of Study No. 6. Herries and Digby followed him, grinning. Arthur Augustus stared after them wrathfully. Apparently it was impossible for the swell of St. Jim's to attend an evening-party without a gold watch.

"How uttally wotten!" murmured Arthur Augustus, in distress. "Bai Jove, I'll give the wotten japah a fearful thwashin'—"

"Car's starting!" yelled Blake from the distance.

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus ran down the passage. He joined his chums outside the School House breathlessly. Evidently the search for the missing watch had to be given up.

A big car—the famous whacking motor-car of Mr. Glyn, the millionaire—was waiting. Bernard Glyn of the Shell was seated in it, with Talbot and the Terrible Three. Glyn of the Shell was taking his chums to his home for an evening, and it was a very special occasion indeed, as the number of spotless collars and well-tied neckties in the party testified.

Blake and Herries and Dig stepped in, and Kangaroo and Dane of the Shell came out and joined them. Arthur Augustus hesitated, with his foot on the step.

"Are you coming in?" demanded Blake.

"My watch, you know—"

"Bow-wow! Kim on!"

"Yawwooh! Leggo!"

Blake and Dig suddenly seized the swell of St. Jim's by the neck, and heaved him into the car. Arthur Augustus plumped into an ocean of knees, and gasped.

"Oh, you fearful asses, you've wumped my collah—"

"All aboard!" sang out Blake. "Hallo, who's that?"

A tubby-looking junior, with a round, fat face, bolted out of the School House and jumped into the car just as it was starting. He shut the door after him.

"What the dickens—" began Bernard Glyn.

The car, large as it was, was pretty well filled. The late-comer looked round him for a seat without finding one. Arthur Augustus was squeezed between Blake and Tom Merry, tenderly feeling over his collar.

"I don't mind standing," said the new-comer.

It was Baggy Trimble, the new boy in the School House.

"I didn't know Trimble was coming," said Tom Merry.

"I didn't, either," said Glyn drily.

"I'll drop him out for you, if you like," said Kangaroo generously.

"Look here, you know," said Trimble. "I—I knew you'd forgotten to ask me, Glyn—"

"I did!" assented Glyn.

"But I'm sticking to my chums, you know, on an occasion like this," explained Trimble.

"Oh, my hat!"

The car was gliding out of the gates. Bernard Glyn looked very queerly at Baggy Trimble.

He had not seen much of the new boy of the Fourth, but what little he had seen had not made a very favourable impression on him.

That a fellow he hardly knew should add himself to the party in this way was a surprise. The cool cheek of it took Glyn's breath away.

Baggy Trimble had a fixed conviction that no party was complete without his estimable self. He would invite himself cheerfully to any study feed, even with fellows he had never spoken to. Whether Trimble was more fool than knave, or more knave than fool, was a question the juniors had never been able to answer. His cool intrusions were sometimes taken good-humouredly, and sometimes he departed "on his neck."

But to "wedge" into the Glyn motor-car, to visit Glyn House, was the "limit," even for Trimble.

Bernard Glyn sat silent, almost overcome.

He was a good-natured fellow, and hated hurting anybody's feelings. But Baggy Trimble was very near at that moment to being dropped bodily in the muddy road.

But Glyn refrained, and remained silent. Trimble, after one uneasy look at the Shell fellow, recovered his cool confidence.

"Can you chaps make room for a fellow?" he asked.

Grim silence.

"Gussy, old man—"

"If you address me as Gussy, Twimbic, I shall punch your nose."

"Ahem! I say, Blake, dear boy—"

"Not so much of your Blake, dear boy, please."

"Ahem!"

And the car glided down the dark road, with Baggy Trimble standing.



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CHAPTER 2.

Borrowed Splendour!

TOM MERRY & Co. were grinning a little. The cool way in which Trimble of the Fourth had planted himself on the little party was amusing as well as exasperating. Trimble was not a fellow who could be taken quite seriously at any time.

If Bernard Glyn accepted the addition to the party without demur, it was not for his guests to make remarks on the subject, and Glyn appeared to have resigned himself to it.

"You might make room for a chap to sit down," said Trimble, after a pause.

Sudden deafness seemed to have descended on the juniors.

"I say, I'll sit on your knees, Tom Merry."

"Oh, do!" said Tom.

"Thanks!"

Trimble plumped down on the knees of the captain of the Shell. Those knees promptly gave way, and Trimble's heavy weight plumped still further, alighting on the floor of the car.

"Yaroo!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Trimble threw out his hands wildly, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's chuckle changed to a wild yell as a fat hand smote him upon his noble nose.

"Oh, cwumps! Gwooh! Oh, my nose! Yoop!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You uttah ass! Twimble——"

"Yow-ow! I'm hurt! Help me up!" roared Trimble.

"That's awfully good of you, dear boy," said Monty Lowther. "Trimble's offering himself for use as a foot-warmer. Shove your feet on!"

"Good egg!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yow-ow-ow!" roared Trimble, as a dozen boots plumped on him. "Lemme gerrup! Oh, you rotters! Glyn, you beast, if this is the way you allow your guests to be treated, you needn't ask me to a party again!"

"Well, I didn't ask you this time!" chuckled Glyn.

"Ahem! Lemme gerrup! Yow-ow!"

Trimble struggled up through the crowd of feet. His overcoat was decidedly dusty when he emerged.

"You rotters!" he gasped. "You've spoiled this overcoat. You'll jolly well get into a row with Cutts, I know that!"

"Cutts!" ejaculated Tom Merry. "Has Cutts lent you that overcoat?"

"Certainly! I'm rather pally with Cutts!"

"Nothin' to be pwoud of in that," said Arthur Augustus. "Cutts of the Fifth is a smoky wottah, and I do not approve of him."

"And it isn't true, either," grinned Monty Lowther. "If Cutts has lent Trimble that coat, Cutts don't know anything about it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Why shouldn't Cutts lend me his coat?" grunted Trimble. "I've lent him money lots of times. Don't tread on my feet, Herries. I can tell you that Reilly will be ratty if you spoil his shoes."

"Reilly's shoes!" gasped Tom Merry. "Oh, my hat!"

"You've torn my necktie!" growled Trimble. "Jolly lucky it wasn't my own, that's all!"

"Ha, ha! Whose was it?"

"I borrowed it of Talbot——"

"Talbot!" yelled Tom. Talbot of the Shell was in the car, but Trimble had evidently not perceived him yet.

"Yes, I'm awfully chummy with Talbot, you know."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You can cackle," said Trimble. "The fact is, I've taken Talbot up. He's asked me to go Sunday walks with him, but I simply can't; I've got so many engagements. I took this necktie really as a favour to him—he likes me to take notice of him—that's how it is."

"Oh, my hat!" ejaculated Talbot.

Trimble looked round quickly as he heard Talbot's voice. For a moment even Trimble was abashed.

"I—I say, I didn't see you there, Talbot, old chap——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"As I was just saying, I hope you don't mind my borrowing your necktie, Talbot. I was going to mention it to you, really, you know!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"No, I don't mind," said Talbot, laughing. "You're welcome to the necktie, but for goodness' sake, don't roll out so many whoppers, Trimble."

"Meantersay that—that—you see, I really meant——"

"Oh, dwy up!" said Arthur Augustus. "You are a fearful fibbah, Twimble. You ought to be a Pwussian. And don't poke your silly hat in my eye," added Arthur Augustus, as the car bumped and Trimble staggered, "or I will knock it off, bai Jove!"

"You'd better not damage that topper, Gussy, or there'll be a row with Gore, I can tell you."

"Goah, bai Jove!"

"Gore's topper!" shrieked Lowther. "Why, you borrowing beast, are you wearing anything of your own?"

"The fact is, I'm short of money—owing to lending fellows cash right and left. I've got a very extensive wardrobe at Trimble Hall, only my pater has forgotten to send the things on——"

"Oh, don't begin on Trimble Hall!" said Blake. "Trimble's Grocery Stores is nearer the mark, I should say."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Do you mind if I sit on your knees, Gussy?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Glyn, old chap——"

"Go and eat coke!"

"If that's the way you talk to your guests, Glyn——"

"It isn't," said Glyn.

The juniors chuckled, and Trimble grunted and was silent. The car turned out of the Rylcombe Road into the lane that led up to the gates of Glyn House. It rolled in through the big park gates.

Trimble looked out of the window in the thick dusk at the wide expanse of park, with the leafless old trees, and the great facade of Glyn House ahead.

"This reminds me of Trimble Hall!" he remarked cheerfully. "Only the Hall is, of course, bigger. It was built by Sir Fulke de Trimble, in the reign of King Arthur——"

"King which?"

"I mean King Edward. Edward the First, you know, the chap who burnt the cakes."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Electric light put in later, I suppose?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Look here, you know——"

"Here we are!" said Glyn, as the car stopped.

Glyn & Co. poured out of the big car. Old Mr. Glyn received them kindly, and Glyn's sister, Edith, welcomed them in her sweet and smiling way. A kind-faced old lady greeted Tom Merry affectionately; it was his old governess and guardian, Miss Priscilla Fawcett, who was on a visit to Glyn House.

"My dearest Tommy!" said Miss Priscilla, kissing the captain of the Shell on both cheeks. "How well you are looking! You are sure you have not got your feet damp?"

"Not in the car," said Tom, laughing.

"And your chest is well protected——"

Tom Merry coloured, and laughed. Monty Lowther chimed in.

"We're all looking after Tommy, ma'am," he said. "The Gem Library."—No. 417.

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demurely. "Tommy's health is the thing we think about most, next to football. Every fellow in the Shell looks into his bed of a night to see whether his hot-water bottle's still there."

Tom Merry glared at his chum.

"You silly ass——" he began.

"What dear, kind, thoughtful boys!" said Miss Priscilla, beaming. "I am not surprised that they are all fond of dear Tommy!"

Dear Tommy shook his fist at Monty Lowther over Miss Priscilla's shoulder. The dear old lady never could realise that Tom Merry was a big and sturdy fellow, and probably the most thoroughly healthy junior in the Lower School at St. Jim's.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus suddenly.

The juniors had taken their coats off in the hall, Trimble among the rest. Trimble was in evening-clothes—the only fellow present who was. Arthur Augustus, with an inward pang, had resigned the idea of appearing in evening-clothes, because the other fellows were in Etons. But his evening-clothes were there all the same. Trimble was wearing them.

"Hallo, what's biting you, Gussy?" asked Blake, looking round.

"Nothin' is bitin' me, Blake, you ass. Look at that wottah Twimble!" whispered Arthur Augustus excitedly.

"Swanking ass!" growled Blake.

"Looks like burstin' his clobber," grinned Lowther.

"Taint his clobber!" said Arthur Augustus in a suppressed shriek. "It's my clobber!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There is nothing whatever to laugh at, you duffahs. The uttah wottah has had the feahful cheek to bowwow my evenin' clobber!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Trimble came up smiling.

"You fellows in Etons!" he remarked. "My idea was that a chap ought to do Glyn's little party credit, so I took the trouble to change."

"You've changed into my clobber, you uttah wottah."

Trimble did not seem to hear.

"Just about in time for dinner—what?" he remarked, taking out a handsome gold watch and consulting it.

Arthur Augustus almost staggered.

It was the missing watch!

CHAPTER 3.

A Very Pleasant Evening!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY seemed in a dis-trait mood that evening. As a rule, a little party at Glyn's was very enjoyable. Miss Edith knew how to make schoolboys happy and comfortable. But Arthur Augustus, for once, did not enjoy his evening at Glyn's.

His eyes were on Trimble all the time.

Trimble was evidently pleased with himself. Trimble was far from being wealthy, and his own wardrobe was strictly limited; and, as he was careless and slovenly with his clothes, he was never well dressed. But Trimble prided himself, all the same, on being a dressy fellow.

On the present special occasion he was certainly expensively clad, the only drawback being that the clothes did not fit him.

Clothes made to fit Arthur Augustus' slim and elegant figure were not likely to suit exactly the tubby, un-wieldy form of Baggy Trimble.

How Trimble had crammed himself into them was a mystery.

But he had. They fitted him like the skin of a drum. How he could move about in them without a burst was another mystery. Arthur Augustus felt that his beautiful clobber would never survive the evening. Especially after supper, something was sure to go.

The swell of St. Jim's was on tenterhooks.

His state of mind was perceptible to his chums, and, instead of sympathising with him, they seemed to derive heartless amusement from his anguish. Every now and then Blake or Lowther would whisper to him to watch Trimble, averring that the natty dandy dinner-jacket was on the point of parting, or that the handsome waist-coat was about to burst asunder.

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Even when Arthur Augustus was rendering one of his celebrated tenor solos, to Miss Edith's accompaniment, he could not take his eyes off Trimble.

The consequence was that Gussy's solo, like the song of the famous Angus MacClan, was varied and fitful and wild as the breeze, and wandered around into several keys.

When he had finished, Monty Lowther sobbed softly on the shoulder of Manners. Arthur Augustus gave him a glare, and went to sit beside Trimble.

"Twimble!" he whispered.

"Not so bad for you, Gussy," said Trimble cheerily. "If you like, I'll give you some tips on singing one of these days. I'm rather a dab at it!"

Arthur Augustus trembled with suppressed wrath.

"Twimble, you wottah!" he whispered.

"Eh?" said Trimble loudly.

"Don't waise your voice, Twimble, you worm. You are wearing my clobber."

"What did you say?" asked Trimble, speaking quite loudly. "I didn't quite catch that, Gussy."

Arthur Augustus sat silent. He could not draw the attention of the general company to Trimble's iniquities. For the moment, at least, the cheerful Baggy held the upper hand.

"You were saying——" asked Trimble calmly.

"Nothin'!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "Nevah mind!"

At the supper table, Arthur Augustus' anguish increased. Trimble was a great trencherman, quite putting in the shade even Fatty Wynn of the New House. As his podgy face grew redder and shinier, and his breathing more laboured, Arthur Augustus' gaze was fixed on him as if he were fascinated.

Something was bound to go now—that was the dreadful thought in Gussy's tortured mind.

Fortunately, nothing went.

"You're not eating anything, Gussy," remarked Monty Lowther genially.

"All wight, deah boy; I don't feel hungwy."

"What are you counting Trimble's mouthfuls for?" grinned Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"Pass the rabbit-pie," murmured Trimble.

"Won't you try this ginger-beer, Trimble?" asked Lowther blandly.

"Thanks!"

Lowther handed the ginger-beer, and somehow—perhaps by accident—the glass bumped on Trimble's podgy hand instead of going into it, and the ginger-beer swamped out of the glass. There was a howl from Trimble as it swamped over his knees, echoed by a gasp from Arthur Augustus.

"Groooh!"

"Gweat Scott! Oh, deah!"

"What's the matter, Gussy?" asked Talbot.

"My twousahs—oh, deah!" moaned the swell of St. Jim's. "You uttah ass, Lowthah!"

"But it hasn't gone over your bags, Gussy!" exclaimed Glyn.

Arthur Augustus crimsoned.

"I—I was thinkin' of Twimble's twousahs!" he stutted.

Trimble mopped the ginger-beer off his knees with a cambric handkerchief. Monty Lowther was grinning cheerfully, after apologising politely, but he suddenly ceased to grin as he spotted Trimble's handkerchief. The monogram "M. L." was visible in the corner of it.

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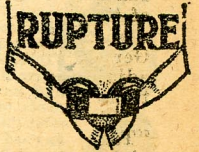
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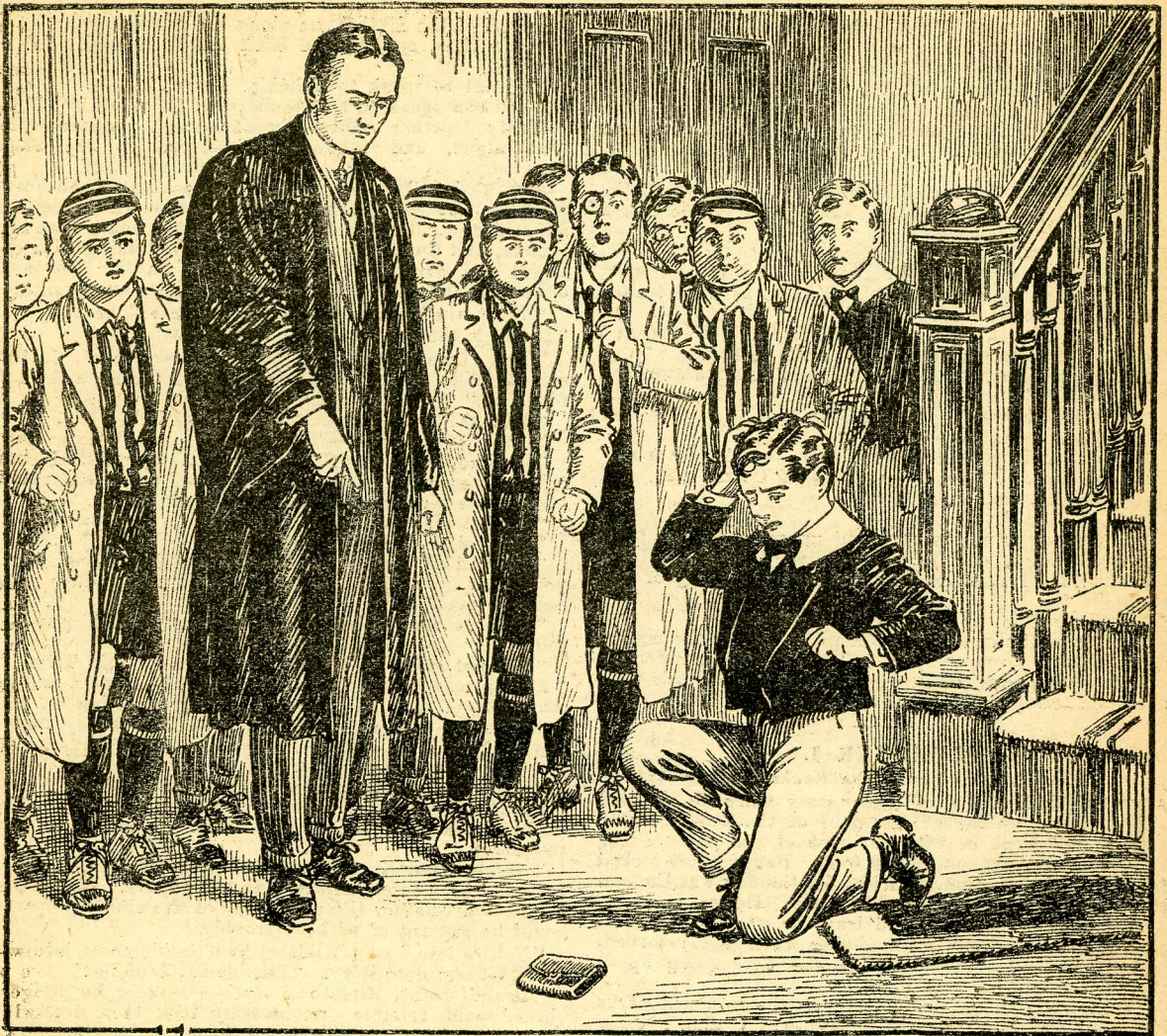
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Mr. Railton gave a sudden start. On the floor, where Tom Merry had sprawled, lay a little russia-leather purse. It certainly had not been there when Mr. Railton came out of his study. "Merry! Did you drop that purse?" (See Chapter 8.)

"Mum-mum-my handkerchief!" stammered Lowther. "My hat! Trimble—"

He broke off, remembering where he was.

Trimble grinned, and went on mopping his knees. The handkerchief was soon reduced to a limp rag, with stains of jam and rabbit-pie on it, as well as ginger-beer. Then Trimble let it fall under the table.

Monty Lowther followed it with his eye. It was one of a set of very handsome handkerchiefs that had been sent him by an affectionate aunt, and he did not want to lose it. But, in its present wet and dirty state, he did not care to touch it—even if he could have scrambled under the supper-table after it. Even Trimble, who was not particular, didn't care to have that ginger-beery, rabbity, greasy, jammy "hanky" about him.

Monty Lowther, no longer regarding the incident as funny, sat tight, mentally promising Trimble quite a lot of things later on.

When the time came to go, Trimble was helped on with Gerald Cutts' coat over D'Arcy's evening clobber, and adjusted George Gore's hat. Whether Baggy had anything of his own on him was a puzzle.

"Good-bye, Tommy darling!" said Miss Priscilla. "Take care of your dear little neck—it is so windy to-night. Where is your muffler?"

"Oh, never mind a muffler!" said Tom.

Miss Fawcett looked alarmed.

"Tommy, dear, have you come out without a muffler—in the winter?" she exclaimed.

"Ye-es. It's all right!"

"My poor, reckless darling, you will catch cold. I am sure Bernard will lend you a muffler!"

"It's all serene!"

"Bernard, my dear child—"

"Right-ho!" grinned the dear child. "I'll slip up to my room for one, Miss Fawcett. Won't keep you a minute, Tom."

"It doesn't matter, I tell you," gasped the unfortunate Tom.

But Glyn scuttled upstairs, grinning. Miss Priscilla's endless concern for her dear Tommy was a matter of never-ending merriment to Tom Merry's chums. Tom bore it with infinite patience; not for worlds would he have uttered an impatient word to wound the kind old lady. But it was a little trying sometimes.

Glyn came down with three thick woollen mufflers over his arm.

"Better have plenty, ma'am!" he remarked.

"Look here, Glyn—"

"A dear, thoughtful boy," said Miss Priscilla gratefully. "It may save you from a bad cold, dear Tommy."

Tom Merry stood with his ears burning while the kind old lady wound the three mufflers, one after another, round his neck, almost suffocating him. But he did not

offer any resistance. He felt that he could stand it till the car started.

Then the juniors took leave of their kind host and hostess, and clambered into the car.

"Feel warm enough, Tommy?" asked Manners, with great solicitude. "There's a rug you can have round your neck if you like?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, cheese it!" growled Tom Merry, dragging off the mufflers. "And, for goodness' sake, don't cackle like a barnyard full of old hens!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Would you mind stoppin' the cah for a few minutes, Glyn?" asked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, as they turned into the Rylcombe road.

"What on earth for?" demanded Glyn. "We haven't too much time to get back to St. Jim's to bed."

"I am goin' to thwash Twimble, and it is too crowded in the cah."

"Trimble can wait," grinned Glyn.

"Weally, you know—"

"You'll spoil your clobber if you thrash him now," chuckled Blake. "To say nothing of Cutts' coat, and Gore's topper, and Talbot's tie."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I hope you're not going to cut up rusty about a trifle like that, Gussy," said Trimble loftily. "If you do, I can tell you that I shall decline to borrow anything of you again."

"Wha-a-at!"

"So far as I'm concerned, I'm willing to let the matter drop, and say no more about it," said Baggy generously.

Arthur Augustus' reply was inarticulate. Words were not equal to expressing what he felt.

CHAPTER 4.

After the Feast, the Reckoning!

TRIMBLE looked a little uneasy when he alighted from the car at the steps of the School House and went in with the rest of the party. The hour of reckoning had come. Baggy never looked far ahead—to his mind, sufficient for the day was the evil thereof. But now the hour had come! He was uneasy.

Tom Merry & Co. had had leave to stay out till bedtime that evening. It was bed-time when they returned, and the juniors of the School House were going up to their dormitories as they came in.

"Hallo, you chaps!" said Gore as the returned party came up the big staircase. "Hallo! I didn't know Trimble was with you."

"We didn't, till he came," said Blake.

"Have any of you chaps been larking with my topper?" asked Gore. "I've got to use it to-morrow, and I've been looking for it to give it a polish. I can't find it anywhere."

"I've found it," said Trimble. "I knew you'd missed it, Gore, and I—I looked for it. Here it is."

Trimble's companions caught their breath. The worthy Baggy's powers as an Ananias or a Prussian had often astonished them. But never had they seen him rise to the occasion with a tremendous whooper like this.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "That chap ought to be the Kaisah's wight-hand man!"

"Thanks!" said Gore, taking the topper, in some surprise. "Where did you find it, Trimble?"

"I—I found it," said Trimble.

"Somebody's been larking with other fellows' things," said Gore. "I've heard Cutts of the Fifth inquiring for a coat. Reilly says that somebody has pinched his shoes, and Kerruish says somebody's been rummaging his collar-box."

Trimble looked slightly sickly. Monty Lowther and Arthur Augustus were both, evidently, waiting till he got up to the dormitory passage, where they would be able to deal with him. Trimble scudded down the stairs.

"Hallo, where are you going?" exclaimed Blake. "It's bed-time."

Trimble did not seem to hear. The rest of the juniors went on to their dormitories. Monty Lowther lingered at the door of the Fourth-Form dorm, however, waiting for Trimble. The question of the handkerchief had to be settled.

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Darrel of the Sixth came along the passage.

"Now then, cut off, you Shell kids!" he said. "Bed-time!"

"I want to speak to Trimble, Darrel."

"You can speak to him to-morrow, then. Cut off!"

Monty Lowther reluctantly abandoned vengeance for that night, and followed his chums to the Shell dormitory.

Meanwhile, Trimble had gone to the Fifth-Form passage. He had Gerald Cutts' handsome overcoat on his arm now. The Fifth Form kept later hours than the juniors, and Cutts was still in his study, talking with St. Leger and Gilmore. Trimble tapped on the door and opened it, and Cutts hastily put a cigarette out of sight.

"What the dickens do you want here?" he snapped. "Hallo, is that my coat?"

"Yes. I heard you were inquiring for a coat, Cutts," said Trimble meekly, "so—so I looked for it, and—and found it."

"Thanks!" said Cutts. "Where was it?"

"Ahem! You see—"

"By gad, it's dusty!" growled Cutts angrily. It was a handsome, new, fashionable coat, and Cutts was ratty.

"Have you been wearing this, you young rascal?"

"Look here, you know—"

"By gad, I'll skin you—"

"I haven't," roared Trimble desperately. "Look here, you know, you might thank a fellow for finding your coat for you."

"Tell me who took it from my room, then!" growled Cutts.

"I'm not going to mention any names," said Trimble. "A chap may have taken it to sew up the sleeves, and he may not. I may have stopped him from doing it, and I may not. I'm not going to give Tom Merry away, anyway."

"So it was that young scoundrel Merry?"

"I'm not going to mention any names, Cutts."

"Oh, get out, you silly young idiot!" said Cutts, pushing him out of the study. "I'll warn Merry for this to-morrow!"

Trimble departed, with a fat chuckle. The hat and the coat had been safely returned to the owners. But it was a question whether the remainder of the stolen property could be got rid of without trouble.

"You're late," said Kildare, as Trimble came into the Fourth-Form dormitory. "Tumble in, Trimble!"

"It's all right, Kildare; I've been looking for Reilly's shoes," said Trimble. "Somebody took them from his study for a lark, and I've found them."

"Sure, it's mighty kind of ye!" said Reilly.

"Not at all, old chap. Here they are. I've found a collar of yours, too, Kerruish." Trimble had taken off the collar and shoes in the passage. "It's got your initials on, so I suppose it's yours. Looks to me as if somebody's been wearing it."

"By gum, somebody has," growled the Manx junior, "and nearly burst the stud-holes, too!"

"I'm glad I've found it for you," said Trimble.

"Tumble in!" said Kildare impatiently. "What the dickens are you doing in evening clothes, Trimble?"

"I've been to a party, Kildare. Gussy lent me his clobber—"

"You wottah, I didn't!" shouted Arthur Augustus from his bed. "You bowwowed it without permish, and I'm going to give you a feahful thwashin'."

"Look here, you know—"

"Get into bed!" exclaimed the captain of St. Jim's.

"Do you want to keep me waiting here all night?"

"Right-ho!" gasped Trimble.

He dragged at the tight-fitting evening clothes. Now that he had done with them, there was no need to be particularly careful—from Trimble's point of view.

Arthur Augustus sat up in bed and watched him with thrilling interest. At every moment he expected to hear a sound of rending. This time he was not disappointed. There was a loud tearing sound as Trimble wrenched at the tight-trousers.

"Oh, you wottah! My twousahs!"

"I think they've shrunk a bit, from that ginger-beer," gasped Trimble. "Tain't my fault, Gussy."

"You feahful beast!"

"I dare say you can get the legs sewn together again," said Trimble. "No harm done!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Kildare could not help grinning. The trousers had come off in instalments, and it was pretty certain that the swell of the Fourth would never be able to wear them again. Trimble rolled into bed. The prefect turned out the light and quitted the dormitory.

"Hallo! Who's that getting up?" asked Jack Blake, about a minute later.

"I'm gettin' up, deah boy. I'm goin' to thwash Twimble for muckin' up my evenin' clobber. Twimble!"

Snore!

"Twimble, you uttah wottah!"

Snore!

"You won't be able to wake him," chuckled Levison of the Fourth.

"Bai Jove! I will jollay well wake him!"

Arthur Augustus groped to Trimble's bed, and laid violent hands upon that cheerful youth. There was a heavy bump as Trimble rolled out on the floor, and a terrific yell woke every echo in the dormitory.

"Get up, you wottah!" shouted Arthur Augustus. "I'm going to thwash you! You have wuined my twousahs. Where is my watch, you wottah? Get up!"

"Yah! Oh! Help! Burglars!" roared Trimble.

"Shut up, you ass!" shouted Lumley-Lumley. "Do you want to bring Kildare back here?"

Perhaps Trimble did, for he roared, unheeding.

The dormitory door flew open, and the light was switched on. Kildare of the Sixth looked in, frowning.

"D'Arcy! Trimble! What does this mean? What are you doing out of bed?"

"I am goin' to thwash that feahful wottah——"

"Ow! Help! Burglars!"

"Silence, Trimble!"

"Burglars! Help!"

"You silly young ass, it isn't burglars, it's D'Arcy!" exclaimed Kildare angrily. "Get into bed at once!"

Trimble rolled into bed.

"You will take two hundred lines, D'Arcy, for disturbing the dormitory!" said Kildare. "Now turn in!"

"Weally, Kildare——"

"Do you hear me?"

"Yaas; I am not deaf. But weally——"

Kildare strode towards the swell of the Fourth, and D'Arcy did not wait to finish. He turned in rather hurriedly.

"If there's any more row here, I shall come back with a cane!" said Kildare warningly, as he turned out the light and retired once more.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy sat up in bed.

"Twimble, you unspeakable boundah——"

Snore!

"Twimble, you spooffin' wottah——"

Snore!

"I shall thwash you to-mowwow, Twimble!"

Snore!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There is nothin' whatevah to cackle at, you duffahs!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus sniffed, and settled down to sleep. It was pretty evident that if any further attempt were made to give Trimble the fearful thrashing he undoubtedly deserved, Trimble would mistake it for "burglars," and would bring Kildare back again to the dormitory. So Arthur Augustus was obliged to let vengeance stand over till the morning, and he went to sleep, and dreamed that he was thumping Trimble, and that every thump was causing the evening clobber to burst in a fresh place.

CHAPTER 5.

Spoofed!

"FOOTER!" said Tom Merry.

It was the following day, and the St. Jim's juniors had come out of the Form-rooms after morning lessons. As a match with the Gram-marians was due on Saturday, Tom Merry was keeping his team well up to the mark in practice.

"Hold on!" said Lowther.

"My dear chap, we've got time for half an hour's practice before dinner——"

"I'm going to look for Trimble——"

Tom Merry laughed.

"Never mind Trimble! Gussy's going to make mince-meat of him. Leave him to Gussy!"

"Blow Gussy! He will get round Gussy!" said Lowther. "Gussy's an ass! He's taken one of my special hankies, and left it at Glyn House—a filthy rag——"

"You'll get it back," said Manners comfortingly. "They'll know it's yours by the monogram, and send it home."

Monty Lowther gave a gasp.

"Oh, my hat! They'll think I had a handkerchief in that awful state——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Don't cackle at me, you silly asses!" roared the enraged Lowther. "'Tain't nice to be thought a dirty pig, is it? Why, I'll smash Trimble up into little pieces!"

"But the footer, old chap——"

"Bless the footer!"

Monty Lowther rushed away in search of Trimble of the Fourth. Tom Merry and Manners kept on their way to the footer-ground, laughing. Trimble was not likely to be found easily when a licking was waiting for him.

As a matter of fact, it was a quarter of an hour before Lowther found the cheery new boy. He ran him down at last in the deserted Form-room. It was the last place he thought of looking in, but he found him there.

"Oh, here you are, you funky worm!" grunted Lowther.

Trimble groaned deeply.

"Are you coming to the gym, or will you have it here?" asked Monty Lowther, pushing back his cuffs.

Groan!

"What's the matter with you, you fat bounder? Been over-eating yourself just before dinner?" snorted Lowther.

Groan!

The Shell fellow grasped Trimble, and yanked him off the form. Then he started. Trimble's face, as he turned it towards Lowther, was startling. There was a black ring round his left eye, and his nose was brilliant red. From the corner of his mouth was a red streak, over his fat chin.

"Ow!" groaned Trimble. "Ow, ow! Wow!"

"My hat! You look as if you've been through it!" grinned Lowther, his belligerent intentions fading away.

"Have you been scrapping with a motor-car?"

"Ow, ow! Yow! It was Gussy—my old pal, Gussy!" groaned Trimble. "Ow! Wow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Groan!

"Well, serve you jolly well right!" said Lowther unsympathetically. "I came to give you the same; but you look as if you've had enough. Perhaps that'll be a lesson to you about pinching other fellows' things!"

Groan!

Lowther grinned, and quitted the Form-room. When he was gone, Trimble grinned, too, and winked at the ceiling.

He waited in the Form-room about five minutes, till from the window he could see Lowther join his chums on the footer-ground. Then he came out into the passage, looking about him cautiously.

"Bai Jove! There you are!"

Arthur Augustus dashed up.

"You uttah wottah! You've been skulkin' in the Form-room—what? You have uttahly wuined my evenin' clobber! I am goin' to give you a feahful thwashin'!"

Groan!

"What's the mattah with you, you gwoanin' beast? Put up your paws, so that I can thwash you, you wottah!"

Groan!

"Bai Jove! What's the matter with your eye?"

"Lowther!" groaned Trimble.

"And—and your silly nose?"

"Ow-wow! Lowther! Yow-ow!"

"Bai Jove! You've been through it!" said Arthur

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Augustus, relenting. "On second thoughts, Twimble, I will not thwash you! Pewwaps you have had enough!"

"Help me to my study!" groaned Trimble. "I—I can't walk!"

"Oh, wats!"

Groan!

Arthur Augustus' tender heart smote him, and he gave Trimble his arm. He piloted the podgy youth up the big staircase and into the Fourth-Form passage. Trimble leaned heavily on his arm, moaning at intervals.

He tottered into his study, still leaning on D'Arcy's arm, and sank into a chair with a groan. Levison, who was in the study, stared at him.

"My hat! What a chivvy!" he ejaculated.

"Don't be bwutal, Levison!" said D'Arcy reprovingly. "Twimble has had a feahful thwashin'. He was askin' for it; but, weally, I think that Lowthah might have gone a little casiah, considewin that the sillay ass is more fathead than wogue! Can I do anythin' for youah eye, Twimble?"

Groan!

"I should wecommend a beefsteak, Twimble."

"I'm stony!" said Trimble faintly. "I—I could get one by tipping Toby a bob; but I'm short of money!"

Arthur Augustus had been looking for Trimble, to bestow upon him a terrific licking. Instead of which, he extracted a shilling from his pocket and pressed it into the podgy hand.

"There you are, deah boy! I am sowwy you are so awfly ewoked! Pway don't wowwy about my clobbah any moah! The mattah is dwopped!"

Groan!

Arthur Augustus quitted the study. As the door closed behind him, Trimble sat up in the chair and grinned. Levison of the Fourth regarded him with astonishment.

"Hallo! You seem pretty chippy for a fellow with a black eye and a swollen nose!" he exclaimed.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What are you cackling at?" asked Levison. "The best thing you can do is to get that beefsteak for your eye—oh, my only hat!"

Levison almost staggered as Trimble wetted his handkerchief and proceeded to rub away the black eye.

"Wha-at was it?" gasped Levison.

"Soot!" said Trimble cheerfully.

"And—and your nose?"

"Red ink!"

"Oh, crumbs!"

Trimble cheerfully wiped the supposed signs of conflict from his face. Levison of the Fourth looked at him curiously. Levison prided himself upon being a deep fellow. But the cunning of Baggy Trimble left Levison far behind.

"Well, my only chapeau!" said Levison. "Blessed if it didn't take me in as well as Gussy! You spoofing beast!"

Trimble chuckled. When he appeared in the Form-room that afternoon there were no signs of combat about his face. Arthur Augustus regarded him in astonishment. Never had he known a black eye to disappear with such marvellous celerity.

"Bai Jove, that beefsteak's done you good, Twimble!" he said.

"It still pains fearfully," said Trimble pathetically. "I owe you a bob, Gussy."

"Nevah mind that."

"But I'd rather settle up."

"Oh, very well!"

"When I get in some money I've lent Levison, I mean. Perhaps you can lend me another bob till then?" suggested Trimble.

A suggestion to which Arthur Augustus D'Arcy replied briefly:

"Wats!"

CHAPTER 6.

The Limit!

TOM MERRY came along the passage, whistling cheerily.

It was Saturday, and a fine, cold afternoon. Saturday afternoon was always a half-holiday at St. Jim's, and that particular half-holiday was to be devoted to a football match with Rylcombe Grammar School, the old rivals of St. Jim's.

Tom Merry's team was at the top of its form. Talbot on the wing, Kangaroo and Redfern in the half-way line, Reilly at back, and Fatty Wynn in goal, were towers of strength, and the rest of the team were fully up to the mark.

Tom was looking forward to wiping Gordon Gay & Co. off the face of the earth, on the Grammarian ground, that afternoon. So he had cause to feel cheerful, and his face was very bright.

"I say, Merry——"

Trimble's study door was open, and he called out as the captain of the Shell passed. Tom Merry generally treated Trimble with good-natured tolerance, and this afternoon he was particularly good-tempered. Moreover, he was in funds, owing to a "tip" from Miss Priscilla, who was still staying at Glyn House, and had visited him at the school.

Tom had no doubt that Baggy was about to make one of his usual demands for cash, accompanied by a promise to repay it when he had gathered in some of the loans he had made other fellows—Baggy's usual excuse for being short of money. As a matter of fact, Trimble's allowance was small, and he generally spent it in the tuckshop the day it arrived, so he was in an almost perpetual state of hard-up. But Tom was good-naturedly prepared to "shell out."

"Hallo! What is it?" he asked, stepping into the study.

He looked rather curiously at Trimble. The podgy junior was evidently going out that afternoon. He had a clean collar on, and a necktie that was probably not his own, neatly tied. A handsome overcoat that certainly did not belong to Trimble lay over a chair-back. Trimble was alone in the study, Lumley-Lumley being with the footballers, and Levison and Mellish gone to some secluded corner for one of their little smoking-parties.

"Hallo!" said Tom, looking at the coat. "Isn't that mine?"

"Ahem!"

"Look here, you fat bounder——"

"I thought you'd like to lend it to me as I'm going out to a special visit, you know," said Trimble.

"You cheeky ass!" said Tom wrathfully. "That's my best coat, and you'll most likely treat it as you did Gussy's bags."

"If I damage it I can pay for it," said Trimble loftily. Tom Merry sniffed.

"Have you paid for Gussy's bags yet?" he asked sarcastically.

"Ahem! Look here, Merry, I really want that coat——"

"You may want it, but you're not going to have it," said Tom, picking it up. "What's the matter with your own coat?"

"Well, it's got pickles spilt on it."

"You won't have a chance to spill pickles on this!" said Tom grimly, putting the coat over his arm. "Anything else to say?"

"The fact is, I'm going home with Brooke this afternoon," said Trimble. "I'm going there to tea, and to see his mater and sister. You might lend me that coat and—a few bob."

Tom Merry whistled. Brooke, the day-boy in the Fourth, was about the last fellow in the school to chum up with Trimble.

"Has Brooke asked you?" grinned Tom.

"Ahem! A—a sort of general invitation, you know."

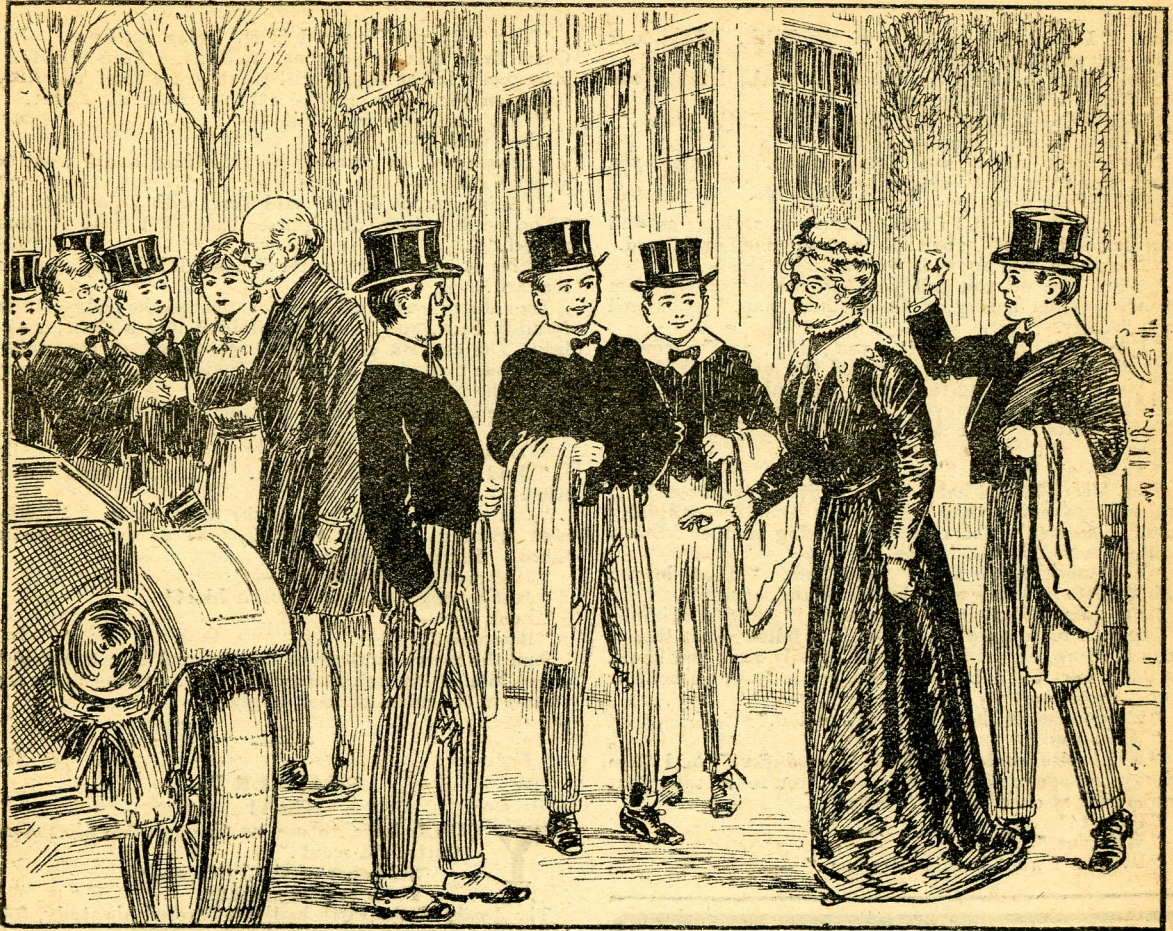
"You cheeky bounder!" said Tom, in disgust. "You're going to plant yourself on Brooke for the afternoon, the same as you did on Glyn the other evening. Suppose Brooke boots you out?"

"He'll be jolly glad to have me, I should think," said Trimble, with a sniff—"a fellow who works for his living."

ANSWERS

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BEAUTIFUL TUCK HAMPERS ARE GIVEN AWAY TO READERS OF THE "GREYFRIARS HERALD," 1^d. OUT TO-DAY!



"What dear, kind, thoughtful boys!" said Miss Priscilla, beaming. "I am not surprised that they are all fond of dear Tommy." Dear Tommy shook his fist at Monty Lowther over Miss Priscilla's shoulder. (See Chapter 2.)

"Well, that's a thing you'll never do, anyway," said Tom, with a curl of the lip.

"Not likely! At Trimble Hall—"

"Oh, ring off Trimble Hall, for goodness' sake!" said Tom, turning to the door.

"Hold on! I haven't told you yet what I called you for!"

"Oh! It wasn't about the coat, then? You weren't going to ask me about that?" said the captain of the Shell warmly.

"Ahem! There was something else, too!" stammered Trimble. "I—I'm rather hard up, you know. Not exactly hard up—I mean, for small change, that's all."

"But you've got a pocketful of banknotes, of course?" said Tom, laughing. "You merely don't want the trouble of changing them?"

"Exactly!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look here, I've got lots of banknotes, you cackling rotter!" exclaimed Trimble angrily. "My pater's rich—awfully rich! We simply roll in money at Trimble Hall! I've got fivers—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'll jolly well show them to you!" howled Trimble.

"Do, and I'll lend you five bob!" said Tom, chuckling.

"Done!"

Trimble extracted a russia-leather purse from his pocket. Tom Merry regarded him with amazement. If Trimble really had any banknotes, it showed that there was something in what the School House fellows had always regarded as "gas." Tom Merry was prepared to believe in the banknotes when he saw them.

His eyes opened wide as the purse was opened.

Inside, under an elastic band, was a wedge of banknotes.

"My only hat!" ejaculated Tom Merry.

"Fivers," said Trimble carelessly. "Might be a tenner or two. I don't really count my money, you know. I've so much of it."

"Well, if you've got all that tin you don't want my five bob."

"Yes, I do. I mean, I—I don't want to change these banknotes," said Trimble eagerly.

"Oh, spoof notes—Bank of Elegance! I understand. Swank!" said Tom Merry severely.

"Tain't spoof! Look at them yourself!"

Tom Merry took the banknotes from under the elastic band and looked at them. There were four, of five pounds each. And they certainly were not "Bank of Elegance" notes carried for "swank." They were real, genuine fivers. The captain of the Shell whistled expressively.

"Well?" grinned Trimble.

"I give you best," said Tom. "They're all right. There must be something in your gas, after all."

"You owe me five bob!" grinned Trimble.

Tom Merry counted out five shillings.

"I'll keep my word," he said. "Blessed if I can see what you want my bobs for when you've got twenty pounds in your pocket!"

Trimble grinned, and slipped the five shillings into his pocket. Tom Merry turned to the door, and then turned back again. His handsome face had suddenly become very grave.

"Let me see that purse again, Trimble," he said quietly.

"Look at it, then. Rather an expensive purse—russia leather," said Trimble. "My pater always gives me expensive presents."

"I've seen a purse something like that before," said

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Tom. "It belonged to Cutts of the Fifth. Why, look here, you spoofing idiot!"

Tom Merry held up the purse. On the leather was engraved a silver monogram, "G. C."

"Gerald Cutts!" exclaimed Tom. "It's Cutts' purse!"

"Give it to me!" shouted Trimble.

"You utter idiot!" said Tom, aghast. "Have you taken this from Cutts' study?"

"Gimme my purse!"

"It isn't yours; it's Cutts'! Are you a thief, as well as a liar and a fool?" the captain of the Shell exclaimed.

"Look here, you know, if you call me a thief——"

"What else do you call yourself, when you've taken twenty pounds belonging to another chap?" exclaimed Tom fiercely.

"I've only borrowed it, you silly ass!" growled Trimble. "I'm not going to spend the money. Didn't I tell you I wasn't going to change the banknotes?"

"Oh! That's why you don't change them—because they're Cutts'! But what are you doing with them, anyway?"

"That's my business!"

Tom Merry looked hard at the duffer of the Fourth. It seemed astounding that even Baggy Trimble's stupidity could be carried to this extent—of taking another fellow's banknotes to "swank" with.

"You unspeakable idiot!" said Tom. "What do you think Cutts will say when he misses the money?"

"I'm going to put it back presently!" growled Trimble.

"I happen to be hard up, but—but a fellow don't like to look hard up, especially when he's really rich, you know. It don't hurt Cutts if I carry his purse about an hour or two."

"If he misses it, he'll think it's stolen."

"What rot!"

"What else could he think, you duffer?" said Tom Merry, exasperated. "Look here, you're to take that purse back at once to Cutts' study."

"I can't!"

"Why not?"

"Because I want it this afternoon."

"You silly ass!" roared Tom, losing patience. "If Cutts finds this purse gone, he'll raise Cain about it. Everybody in the House will think you a thief when it's found on you. You may be expelled from the school."

"That's all very well, but——"

"But what?"

"Brooke will be starting by this time, and I want to go with him——"

"I think you're dotty," said Tom, with a deep breath. "You needn't take the purse back—I'll take it back myself."

"Give it to me, you rotter!" howled Trimble, starting forward.

Tom Merry, out of all patience, pushed the podgy junior forcibly back, and Trimble collapsed into a chair, gasping. The captain of the Shell strode out of the study. He strode right into a crowd of juniors who were coming along the passage.

"Here he is!" exclaimed Lowther. "Keeping us waiting, you ass——"

"Collar him!"

"Hold on!" exclaimed Tom. "I can't come for a minute——"

"Can't you?" exclaimed Blake wrathfully. "We've been waiting, and we're nearly due at the Grammar School. Bring him along!"

"Just a couple of minutes——"

"Just a couple of rats! Collar him!"

"Look here——"

"Bow-wow!"

And the merry footballers closed round Tom Merry and swept him off his feet, and rushed him headlong down the stairs, in the midst of loud laughter.

CHAPTER 7.

Theft!

"YOU'LL have to see us through this afternoon, Cutts, old scout!"

St. Leger of the Fifth spoke.

Cutts nodded genially.

The dandy of the Fifth had just entered his study, followed by his two cronies, St. Leger and Gilmore.

The "blades" of the Fifth were bound upon a merry excursion that afternoon. A car to a distant race-ground, and an exceedingly merry time there, had been planned by the Fifth-Form "sports." Needless to say, not a word was uttered on the subject outside their own select circle. That would have been asking for the "sack." But Cutts & Co. were in great spirits.

"You've had all the luck lately, Cutts!" said Gilmore enviously.

Cutts shrugged his shoulders.

His speculations on "geegees" generally had the result of disposing of his supplies of ready cash. But—miraculously—after a succession of dead certs that had turned out extremely uncertain, a win had come along; and Cutts, instead of being stony, as he generally was after his sporting ventures, was in funds. St. Leger and Gilmore, between them, had lost more than their chum had won, but that did not worry Cutts. In racing and betting and blackguardism generally, it was every man for himself.

"That's all right," said Cutts. "I'm standing the exes to-day, and I've got a bit of the ready for both of you if you want it."

"Good egg!"

"With what I've won, and what I didn't lose," grinned Cutts. "I've got twenty of the best. We'll have a good time this afternoon, my infants."

"What-ho! Let's get off!"

Cutts opened the table-drawer, and put his hand into it. Then he looked into it. Then he uttered an exclamation.

"Hallo! Where's that purse?"

"In your pocket, perhaps," said St. Leger.

"It isn't! I put it here, when I went up to change my things," said Cutts, with a worried look. "I've been half an hour at footer practice, and I couldn't take it on the field with me, and I didn't want to leave it in my pocket in the dorm. What the dickens has happened to it?"

"May have got among the other things——"

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Gerald Cutts turned the drawer out hastily.

He pitched its contents on the study-table, and fumbled over them. But it was soon clear that the russia-leather purse was not there.

Cutts' brows came together in a grim frown.

"That rather mucks up our little run, begad!" said St. Leger.

"Somebody's taken it," said Cutts. "I know I left it there. It's been stolen!"

"Phew!"

"I'll make the thief smart for it. I'm not going to lose twenty quid, if I know it," said Cutts, between his teeth.

"I—I say, that's a bit thick," said Gilmore uneasily.

"I—I can't believe there's a thief in the School House, Cutts."

"It's not so jolly new!" snapped Cutts. "Tresham was kicked out for stealing last term, wasn't he? He's left an imitator behind. Who could it have been? Anybody might have got into the study while I was down at the footer." He turned his keen, glittering eyes sharply round the study, in search of some sign that might be a clue to the unknown purloiner of the purse. Cutts was less anxious for the discovery of the thief than for the prompt recovery of the money in time for the little excursion planned for the afternoon.

"Hallo! What's that?" he exclaimed sharply.

He stopped and picked up a handkerchief under the table. It was a clean, nice handkerchief, but not of the extremely expensive kind that the dandy of the Fifth favoured.

"That's not yours, St. Leger?"

"No fear!"

"And it's not mine."

"My hat!" exclaimed Gilmore excitedly. "The thief may have dropped it here. See if there's any initials on it."

"There's bound to be," said St. Leger. "It's a rule of the school for all linen to be marked with initials."

Cutts examined attentively the corners of the handkerchief. He uttered a gasping ejaculation, and held it up.

"T. M."

There it was—a monogram worked carefully, evidently by a skilled hand, for it was done exceedingly well.

"T. M.," said St. Leger. "What's that stand for? Myers—no, his front name's James. Manners, perhaps."

"Manners' other name is Henry," said Gilmore.

"Merry!" said Cutts, between his teeth. "Tom Merry!"

"Tom Merry! Oh, great James!"

"It can't be!" said St. Leger, with a shake of the head.

"Tom Merry isn't a thief. I don't like the young cub, but—dash it all, I can't swallow that."

"I can't, either, all at once!" grinned Cutts. "More likely, to my mind, that the thief pinched this hanky, and dropped it here on purpose. A dirty trick to turn suspicion in another direction, very likely. That points to its being a Shell chap, though, as he was able to get at Tom Merry's handkerchief. I'll take this to Mr. Railton at once. You fellows had better come with me. It looks as if we may get the money back in time for our little run after all."

The three Fifth-Formers hurried out of the study and descended the stairs. Gerald Cutts tapped at the Housemaster's door.

"Come in!" said the deep, pleasant voice of Mr. Railton.

Cutts entered, followed by Gilmore and St. Leger. Mr. Railton was chatting with Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell. He looked slightly surprised at the sight of Cutts' disturbed face, and the handkerchief in his hand.

"What is the matter, Cutts?"

"A very serious matter, sir," said Cutts. "My purse, containing banknotes for twenty pounds, has been stolen from my study."

"Bless my soul!"

"I have the numbers of the notes, sir—four fivers—and if the thief hasn't parted with them yet, they can easily be identified."

"You are sure of what you say, Cutts?" said Mr. Railton very gravely. "This is a terribly serious accusation to make."

"I am quite sure, sir. But I have something else to tell you. This handkerchief was lying under my table."

He passed the handkerchief to the Housemaster.

"Whose property is this? Do you know, Cutts?"

"Tom Merry's, sir, by the initials."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Mr. Linton.

The Housemaster and the Form-master exchanged quick glances. Mr. Linton flushed a little. The honour of his Form was a very great deal in his eyes.

"I should require much stronger proof than that before I believed Tom Merry capable of a dishonourable act!" he exclaimed. "He is one of the very best boys in the Shell, Mr. Railton—a lad with a very high sense of honour."

"My own opinion of him is very high, Mr. Linton," said the Housemaster quietly. "I hope that investigation will clear Merry of every suspicion."

"May I speak, sir?" said Cutts.

"Speak of what you know, and not of what you surmise, Cutts. I have not failed to observe that you are on the worst of terms with Tom Merry!" Mr. Linton exclaimed, with warmth.

Cutts flushed a little.

"You mistake me, sir. I was going to suggest that Merry's handkerchief had been deliberately placed in the study to throw suspicion upon him, and screen the real thief. I do not believe Tom Merry guilty."

"Oh!" said Mr. Linton, somewhat taken aback.

"It is possible—quite possible," said Mr. Railton. "Merry must be sent for at once, if he is in the school. I understand that the juniors are playing a football-match away this afternoon. Bless my soul, what is that?"

Bump! Bump! Crash! Trample! Yell!

The Housemaster started to his feet.

Bump! Crash!

"Leggo, you asses!"

"Bwing the duffah along, deah boys!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Railton strode to the study door and threw it open, and strode out into the passage. The junior footballers were bringing their captain downstairs—not quietly.

CHAPTER 8. Stolen Goods!

"LEGGO!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You silly asses! Yaroooooh! I tell you, I'll come in a minute——"

"So you will—this giddy minute! Yank away!"

"Yaas, wathah! Ha, ha, ha!"

Down the stairs came the St. Jim's footballers with a rush and a roar of laughter, Tom Merry's arms and legs wildly flying in the midst of them.

Tom clutched at the banisters half-way down, and there was a tussle. He was jerked away from the banisters, and rolled down, wildly clutching at the yelling juniors.

"Bai Jove! Look out!"

"Boys!" thundered a well-known voice.

"Cave!"

"Look out!"

It was rather too late to look out. Tom Merry rolled down, clasping Blake round the neck and Lowther round the waist. They rolled together, in a gasping heap, fairly to the Housemaster's feet.

"Grooh!" gasped Blake.

"Ow-wow!" mumbled Lowther.

They rolled away, and Tom Merry sat up, breathless and panting. His jacket was over his ears, and his waistcoat had lost most of its buttons. His trousers were jerked up over his knees. He looked a wreck—and felt one!

Mr. Linton and the three seniors were looking out of the study; the latter grinning, and the Form-master frowning. Mr. Linton did not approve of horseplay.

Mr. Railton stared down at Tom Merry. The crowd was melting away.

"What does this mean?" exclaimed the Housemaster. "Stay, all of you, and explain yourselves! What is the meaning of this riot?"

"Gerrooogh!" came from Tom Merry.

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"Ahem! You see, sir——" stammered Blake.

"Just so!" murmured Lowther. "You—you see——"

"Pway leave it to me, deah boys. You see, Mr. Wailton——"

The juniors were rather nonplussed. As a matter of fact, they had not expected Tom Merry to resist so warmly, and in the excitement of the moment they had forgotten all about Housemasters and other masters. Their spirits were high, and they had been a little thoughtless.

"Merry, why are you being carried about in this absurd manner?" exclaimed the Housemaster.

Tom Merry strove to recover his breath.

"It—it's all right, sir. The—the fellows were ready to start for the Grammar School, and I kept them waiting. Grooh!"

"Only fun, sir," ventured Blake. "Tommy wasn't in a hurry, and—and we were. So—so we yanked him, sir."

"Only a little joke," stammered Lowther.

Mr. Railton's stern brow relaxed a little.

"You should not indulge in such horseplay within the House," he said severely. "You will take a hundred lines each!"

"Oh, sir! Yes, sir!"

"We are vewy sowwy to have disturbed you, sir," said Arthur Augustus. "It was weally vewy thoughtless. I wecognise that now."

"I am glad you recognise it, D'Arcy. Merry, kindly rise to your feet. I have a very serious matter to speak to you about."

He gave the gasping junior a helping hand, and Tom Merry staggered up. He was still considerably winded.

Mr. Railton gave a sudden start. On the floor, where Tom Merry had sprawled, lay a little russia-leather purse. It certainly had not been there when Mr. Railton came out of his study.

Evidently it had dropped from Tom Merry's pocket. Mr. Railton's brows came grimly together.

"Merry, did you drop that purse?"

Tom Merry blinked at the purse, and picked it up. His cheeks flushed a little redder—they were red already. It was distinctly awkward that Cutts' purse should have been seen in his possession. He had intended to return it to Cutts' study without a word being said about Trimble.

"Is it your purse, Merry?"

"No, sir."

"But it was in your pocket?"

"Ye-es, sir! I——"

"Take it into my study," said Mr. Railton.

"Very well, sir, but——"

"Do as I tell you, Merry," rapped out the Housemaster, and the captain of the Shell went into the study.

Mr. Linton gave him a peculiar look as he came in. Cutts and Gilmore and St. Leger stared at him, and exchanged glances.

"By gad!" murmured Cutts. "So it was he!"

Mr. Railton made a gesture of dismissal to the footballers.

"You may go!" he said. "You had better not wait for Tom Merry. He will be occupied for some time."

"But Tom Merry's captaining the side, sir," said Figgins of the New House.

"Then you had better select another captain. Tom Merry cannot come."

Mr. Railton strode into his study without further explanation, and the door closed behind him.

The juniors looked at one another in a very uncertain way. There was evidently something very wrong; Mr. Railton's look was proof enough of that. But what it was they could not fathom.

"There's somethin' up, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus sagely. "Look heah, I could captain the team vewy well——"

"Rats!" said Kerr.

"Weally, Kerr, I wepeat that I could captain the team vewy well——"

"Blow the team!" growled Lowther. "We're not going till we know what's the matter about Tom. I'm not, anyway."

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"The Grammarians will be waiting," remarked Figgins.

"Let 'em wait."

"Yaas, wathah! I was about to wemark that I could captain the team vewy well in Tom Mewwy's absence——"

"Cheese it!" roared Lowther wrathfully. "Don't be in such a hurry to jump into a chap's place—not that you could captain a team of white rabbits!"

"You uttah ass, Lowthah! I wegard you as an insultin' beast! I wepeat that I could captain the team vewy well——"

"Dry up!"

"But that, undah the cires, I wecommend waitin' till Tom Mewwy comes out, even if we have to miss the match——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Monty Lowther's face relaxed into a grin.

"Of course, I might have known you were only talking out of the back of your neck," he remarked. "I say, what the dickens can be the matter, you chaps? Railton was looking as black as thunder."

"Looks like a row," said Fatty Wynn. "Perhaps he's been raiding the larder. I did once, when——"

"Fathead! It's something jolly serious," said Blake. "Linton's there, and that cad Cutts and his pals. We're not going till we know."

"Yaas, wathah!"

In a very uneasy mood, the footballers waited; their bikes, all ready for the journey, standing idle outside. It was clear that Tom Merry was in trouble, though for what cause they could not guess. But Mr. Railton's black brow had been proof enough that the trouble was serious, and they waited anxiously for news.

CHAPTER 9.

A Startling Accusation!

"MERRY!" Tom Merry straightened up, still breathing hard. He was recovering now from the rough-and-tumble on the stairs. The note of sternness in Mr. Railton's usually kindly voice startled him.

"Yes, sir," he said quietly.

"That purse was in your pocket?"

"Yes, sir. I——"

"That is enough. Cutts, kindly examine that purse, and tell me whether it is the one you have missed from your study."

"Certainly, sir. It is mine," said Cutts, taking the purse. "You can see my monogram on the outside, sir."

"It is Cutts', sir," said Tom Merry.

"You admit that, Merry?"

"Of course, sir. I——"

"You may keep your explanation, if you have one, for a few minutes. Give me the purse, Cutts."

Mr. Railton took the purse, and opened it.

"There are four five-pound notes here," he said. "I understand that this is the amount you lost in the purse, Cutts?"

"Precisely, sir."

"You have the numbers of the notes?"

"I always enter numbers in my pocket-book, sir. I have that here."

"Read out the numbers, please."

Cutts quietly read out the numbers. Tom Merry opened his lips again to speak, but a sharp gesture from the Housemaster silenced him.

"00186, 00642, 00086, and 000246," Cutts read out.

Mr. Railton scrutinised the numbers on the notes.

"These are your notes, Cutts. Was there anything else in the purse?"

"A currency note for ten shillings, sir, in the compartment on the other side."

"It is here," said Mr. Railton. "Your property seems to be intact, Cutts."

"It's less than half an hour since the theft was committed, sir," said Cutts, taking the purse. "I'm very glad I found it out before the thief had time to pass or hide the notes."

"Thief!" repeated Tom Merry. "Thief! Are you mad,

Cutts? You're not fool enough to accuse me of stealing that purse, are you?"

Gerald Cutts shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't accus- you," he said. "The facts speak for themselves."

Tom Merry's eyes blazed.

"You hound!" he exclaimed. "You dare to say——"

"Silence, Merry!" rapped out the Housemaster.

"Silence while that villain calls me a thief, sir!" exclaimed Tom Merry hotly.

Cutts bit his lip hard.

"Silence!" said Mr. Railton sternly. "Merry, kindly restrain yourself. I may tell you that Cutts scouted the idea of your taking his purse from his study, and declared his belief that someone else had done so. Your handkerchief was found in his study!"

"My handkerchief!" exclaimed Tom, in amazement.

"Is not this your handkerchief?"

Tom Merry looked at it. In the corner was the well-known monogram worked with such great care by the affectionate fingers of Miss Priscilla.

"Yes, sir, that is mine."

"How did it come in Cutts' study?"

"I—I don't know. Does Cutts say he found it in his study?"

"St. Leger and Gilmore both saw me pick it up," said Cutts with a sneering smile. "Mr. Railton can witness that I suggested that it had been placed there by someone else to screen himself. I did not believe you were the thief till I saw my purse in your hand."

Cutts was speaking sincerely enough. His old dislike of Tom Merry was as keen as ever, and he could scarcely conceal his satisfaction at having him on the hip, as it were, in this way. But he was speaking the truth. It had never even crossed his mind to bring a false accusation. Cutts was a pretty thorough rascal in many ways, but he was not quite a villain.

Tom Merry gazed blankly at the dandy of the Fifth. He realised that Cutts really believed him guilty.

"You—you fool!" he exclaimed.

Another shrug from Cutts.

"Merry"—Mr. Railton's voice was deep and stern—"this purse was taken from Cutts' study."

"I know it, sir."

"Your handkerchief was found there. That in itself was not proof. But now the purse itself is found in your possession. What have you to say?"

"I say that I'm not a thief, and that I can prove it," exclaimed Tom Merry indignantly. "But I shouldn't think it needed proving—that's all, sir."

"I do not understand this, Merry. The purse was stolen——"

"It wasn't stolen, sir."

"Merry!"

"It was taken from Cutts' study, sir, but not to be kept," explained Tom Merry.

"Come, Merry, you cannot be so foolish as to tell me that you took Cutts' banknotes without intending to keep them."

"I did not take them, sir."

"My hat!" murmured Cutts, in astonishment. "Of all the young liars——"

"Silence, please, Cutts! Merry, kindly explain yourself. I am willing to listen to you patiently. If you did not take the purse from Cutts' study, how did it come to be in your pocket? You do not accuse anyone of having placed it there?"

"Certainly not. I put it there myself," said Tom. "I was going to take it back to Cutts' study when those chaps collared me."

"You had changed your mind, you mean."

"You don't understand, sir."

"Certainly I do not. Your statements are simply extraordinary, and I should be glad if you would make yourself a little clearer," said Mr. Railton testily.

"It was another fellow who took the purse," said Tom. "He's a silly ass, and never has any money, but he likes to swank about as a rich fellow. He took the banknotes to pretend that they were his for this afternoon, intending to put them back afterwards."

"Merry, you ask me to believe that there is a boy so incredibly stupid in this House?" Mr. Railton exclaimed.

"There is, sir. He's an utter ass, and I know perfectly well that he never meant to keep the notes."

"That doesn't explain how they came into your pocket," said Cutts maliciously.

"I'm coming to that," said Tom, with a contemptuous look at the dandy of the Fifth, but addressing his words to the Housemaster. "I found the silly idiot—I—I mean the fellow—with the notes, sir, swanking with them, and I told him Cutts would make a fearful row if he missed them, and perhaps think he had stolen them. I told him to take the purse back to Cutts' study immediately, and he wouldn't, so I stuck to it, to take it back myself."

"You told the boy you were taking it back, Merry?"

"Yes, of course, sir."

Mr. Linton stroked his chin. Mr. Railton searched Tom's face with his eyes, and the three Fifth-Formers exchanged derisive glances. Certainly it was a most extraordinary story, the captain of the Shell had told.

"Merry," said Mr. Railton at last, "this is—is—— I can only say that it sounds incredible to me. Neither have you accounted for the fact that your handkerchief was found in Cutts' study."

"I suppose the duffer dropped it there, sir. He's always borrowing fellows' things," said Tom. "I know he had my coat this afternoon, and I dare say he had my handkerchief too."

"What is the name of the boy you allude to, Merry?"

The captain of the Shell hesitated.

"He's a silly ass, sir," he said at last. "He can't help being a born fool, and he didn't mean any harm. I don't want to get him into a row."

Mr. Railton's brow grew sterner.

"Merry, unless you name the boy, and he bears out your statement, you will be expelled from this school as a thief."

"Mr. Railton!"

"The proofs of your guilt are conclusive. I doubt whether I am not wasting time in going into this extraordinary story you have told. I wish, however, to give you every chance, in consideration of the excellent character you have hitherto borne. Name the boy immediately, or I shall take you to the Head, and you will leave St. Jim's in disgrace this very afternoon."

Tom Merry's lip quivered.

The grim faces round him, the gloating gleam in Gerald Cutts' eyes, warned him of the terrible seriousness of the situation. He drew a gasping breath.

"If you put it like that, sir, I must tell you the boy's name. It was Trimble of the Fourth."

"The new boy?" said Mr. Railton.

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know where he is?"

"I left him in his study ten minutes ago."

"Shall I fetch Trimble, sir?" asked Cutts, with a mocking smile at the captain of the Shell.

Mr. Railton shook his head, and crossed to the door and opened it. Round the big doorway the group of footballers still waited.

"Talbot!" called out the Housemaster.

"Yes, sir."

"Kindly find Trimble of the Fourth Form as quickly as possible, and bring him to me. You may find him in the study."

"Yes, sir!" said Talbot.

Mr. Railton stepped back into the room, quiet and grim. There was a tense silence in the study as the actors in that strange scene waited for Trimble.

CHAPTER 10.

Guilty!

BROOKE of the Fourth was crossing the quadrangle to the gates when Baggy Trimble joined him. Trimble was looking somewhat discontented, but he had not given up his idea of going home with Brooke. The day-boy looked a little surprised as he found Trimble trotting by his side. He hardly knew the new boy, and Trimble's company was more flattering than agreeable.

"Hallo!" said Brooke.

"Just spotted you," said Trimble cheerily. "Going home?"

"Yes," said Brooke, pausing.
 "I'm coming with you, old chap."
 "Oh!" said Brooke.
 "The fact is, I've got nothing else on this afternoon," said Trimble confidently. "So I'm coming with you—see?"

Brooke laughed
 "You're too flattering, Trimble," he remarked.
 "Not at all."
 "The fact is, Trimble, I'm going to work this afternoon," said Brooke. "You won't find it very amusing at my place. I shall be hard at it."

Trimble sniffed.
 "Oh, I know all about it. You're the only St. Jim's chap who works for his living, ain't you?"
 "I believe so," said Brooke quietly. "And I work on most half-holidays; and, excuse me, Trimble, you'd be rather in the way. Good-bye!"

He started for the gates again. To his surprise, Trimble trotted on with him. It was not easy to rebuff the cheery Bagg.

"That's all right, old fellow," said Trimble. "You see, I'm coming. I've declined to go over to the Grammar School with the footballers, though Tom Merry pressed me like anything to come in the brake. Gussy begged me almost with tears in his eyes to go, but I told him it couldn't be done. You needn't mind about entertaining me at your place. I don't expect it to be like Trimble Hall, you know. Besides, I'll talk to Amy."

Brooke halted again, his eyes beginning to gleam. He did not like the exceedingly free-and-easy way in which the podgy junior spoke his sister's name.

"My sister is Miss Brooke, excepting to her friends," he said pointedly.

"Well, I'm going to be her friend, ain't I?" said Trimble amiably. "She'll like me, you know—girls always do. I'll take her to a cinema."

"You'll what?"
 "Take her to a cinema," said Trimble cheerfully.
 "That's all right, old chap. I've got lots of money. Look here— Ahem! I mean, I had lots of money, only that beast Merry took my banknotes away—"

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Brooke, in astonishment. "How could Tom Merry take your banknotes away—if you ever had any, which I don't believe."
 "Look here, you know! I can tell you I had twenty quids—"

"Twenty rats!"
 "Four fivers," said Trimble. "That beast Merry borrowed them—still, I don't mind making old Tommy a loan; we're very pally. Don't walk so fast, Brooke; I'm coming with you."

"You're not coming with me," said Brooke bluntly.
 "Sheer off!"

That was plain enough, even for Trimble. He blinked angrily.

"Well, I don't want to come with a fellow who works for his living," he said, with a sniff. "I don't see why I should take the trouble to recognise you at all. My idea is that you oughtn't to be allowed here. I call it rotten—"

Brooke clenched his hand for a moment; but he unclenched it, and walked away, leaving Trimble sniffing. The worthy Bagg's design of planting himself at Brooke's for the afternoon being thus frustrated, he turned back disconsolately into the quadrangle, and headed for the tuckshop, for comfort and consolation. He had Tom Merry's five shillings in his pocket. But that five shillings did not find its way into Mrs. Taggles' till so soon as Bagg intended. Talbot of the Shell bore down on him in the quad.

"You're wanted, Trimble!" he called out.
 "Wanted in the team?" asked Trimble. "Well, if I'm asked civilly, I don't mind playing. But—"

Talbot laughed.
 "No, you ass! You're wanted in Mr. Railton's study."

"What does Railton want?" said Trimble peevishly.
 "Look here, you know, I'm just going to have a snack—"

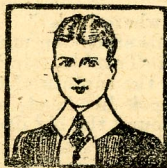
"You'd better come at once," said Talbot.
 "I'm jolly well going to have a snack first! Leggo my shoulder, Talbot! Do you want me to lick you?"
 Talbot smiled, and walked Trimble away to the School

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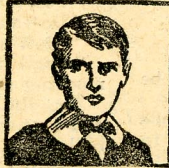
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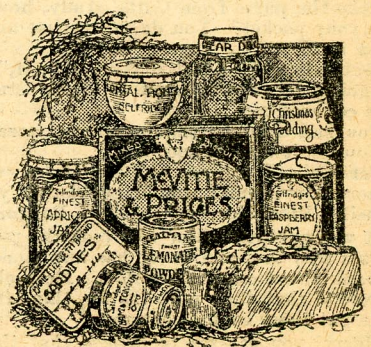
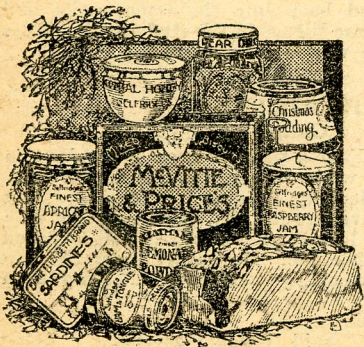
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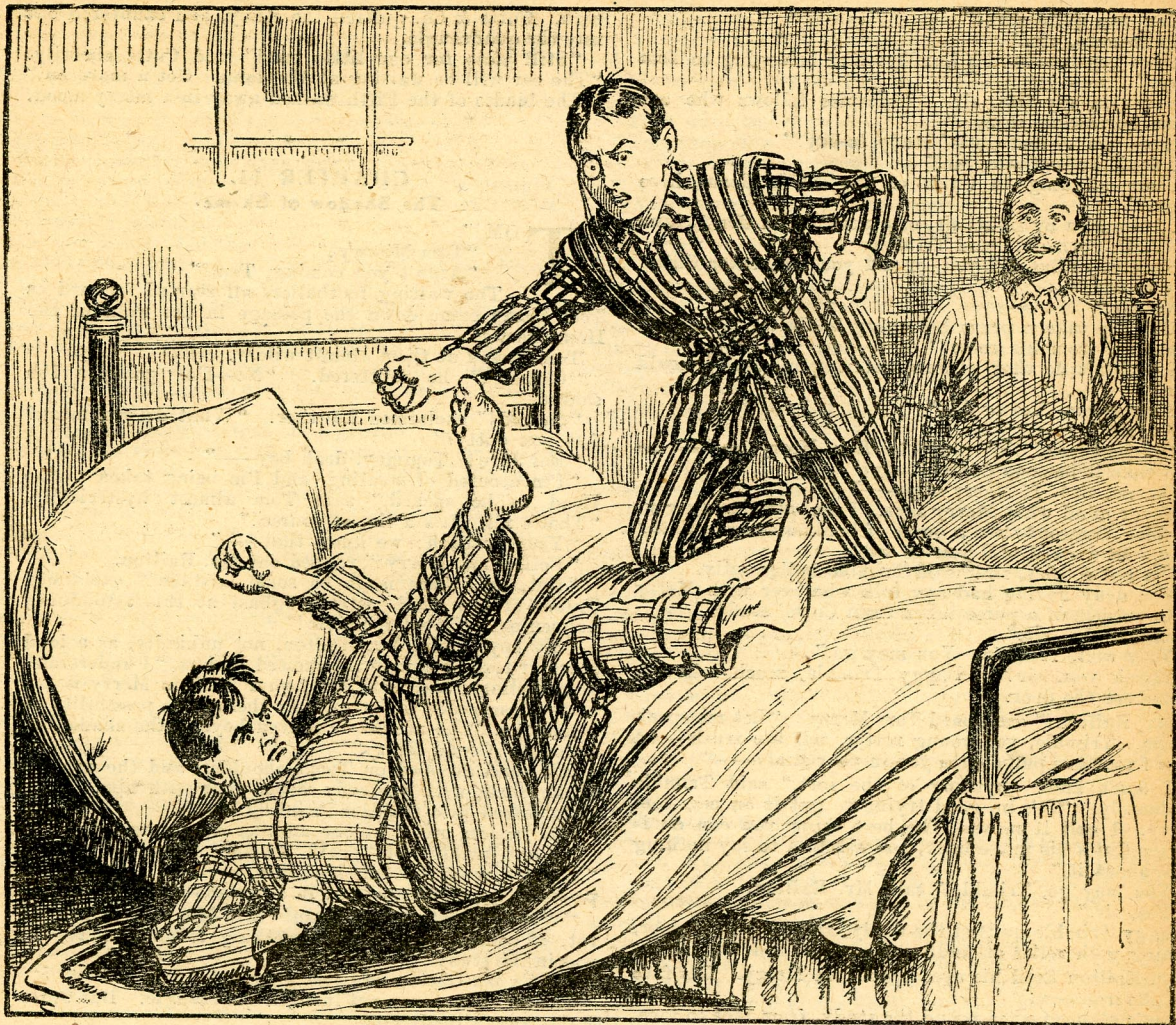
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Arthur Augustus groped to Trimble's bed, and laid violent hands upon that cheerful youth. There was a heavy bump as Trimble rolled out on the floor, and a terrific yell woke every echo in the dormitory. (See Chapter 4.)

House with a fast grip on his shoulder. Trimble grumbled, and submitted.

"Look here, you know, what's the matter?" he demanded. "Is anything up?"

"I don't know what's up, only Mr. Railton sent me to find you. I've been looking for you everywhere."

"Is it a licking?" asked Trimble uneasily.

"I don't know. Come on!"

"Is it—is it about Cutts?" stammered Trimble, with a dim recollection of what Tom Merry had told him in his study.

"Cutts is in the study," said Talbot.

"Oh, my hat!"

Trimble entered the School House in a state of dismay. He had no doubt now that Cutts had missed the purse containing the banknotes. Even his obtuse brain realised that the matter might be serious. Tom Merry's warning was still in his mind, and it gave him food for thought.

Talbot led him to the door of the Housemaster's study, tapped, and opened it. He pushed Trimble into the room, and retired, closing the door.

Trimble stood in the study quaking inwardly. The sight of Cutts of the Fifth and Tom Merry in the Housemaster's study showed what the matter was. And the grim expression on the faces of Mr. Railton and Mr. Linton made him feel cold all over.

"You s-s-ent for me, sir?" he stammered.

"Yes, Trimble," said Mr. Railton quietly. "I have been waiting for you. Were you not in your study?"

"No, sir," said Trimble promptly; "I haven't been in my study since dinner, sir."

Mr. Railton started a little.

"Be careful what you say, Trimble. Do you declare seriously that you have not been in your study since dinner? Silence, Merry! I desire to hear what Trimble has to say, without prompting from you."

Tom Merry closed his teeth hard.

He could see that the obtuse junior, anticipating trouble, was beginning to lie in his usual way, without stopping to think.

Gerald Cutts' smile was very mocking now. He had not believed a single word of Tom Merry's explanation. His disbelief was confirmed by Trimble's statement. If he had not been in his study since dinner, certainly the scene Tom Merry had described could not have taken place.

"Think before you speak, Trimble," said the Housemaster.

"Certainly, sir," said Trimble. "I always do, sir."

"Have you been in your study since dinner?"

"Certainly not, sir."

"Bless my soul!" murmured Mr. Linton.

Tom Merry's face was growing pale now. It came into his mind like a flash what terrible consequences Trimble's falsehood might bring upon him.

"Have you spoken to Tom Merry since dinner, Trimble?"

"No, sir."

"You are quite sure?"

"Quite sure, sir."

"Have you borrowed a handkerchief belonging to Tom Merry?"

"Never in my life, sir. I despise fellows who are always borrowing things."

"Have you visited Cutts' study to-day?"

"I don't know Cutts, sir."

"I am alluding to Cutts of the Fifth Form, here present."

"I know him by sight, sir, of course; but I don't chum with Fifth-Formers," said Trimble.

"Naturally; but did you, or did you not, enter Cutts' study to-day?"

"No, sir."

"Did you take a purse belonging to Cutts, containing banknotes, from his room?"

"I couldn't do that without entering his study, could I, sir?"

"Answer me, Yes or No."

"No, sir."

"Did you hand this purse to Tom Merry so that he could take it back to Cutts' study?"

"Oh, no, sir! If Merry says—"

"Never mind what Merry says. I am questioning you, Trimble. Someone stole a purse of banknotes from Cutts' study. In a word, did you do so?"

"I'm not a thief, sir!" said Trimble indignantly.

"You deny having had any talk whatever with Merry on the subject of a purse taken from Cutts' study?"

"Absolutely, sir."

"Very well, Trimble. You may go."

"Thank you, sir!" Baggie Trimble, much relieved, started for the door.

"Mr. Railton!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Let me speak to him. Trimble, you young rotter, tell the truth—you know I took the purse from you in your study—"

"I don't know anything of the sort," said Trimble obstinately. "It's no good trying to put it on me, Tom Merry. I call it mean. The best thing you can do is to give Cutts his purse back, and ask him to say nothing more about it."

"You may go, Trimble," said Mr. Railton.

"Yes, sir."

Baggy Trimble quitted the study, and closed the door, gasping with relief at finding himself outside.

Mr. Railton fixed his eyes upon Tom Merry. His face was like iron now.

Tom's glance moved round the study, from face to face. There was condemnation in every face—mockery, too, in that of Gerald Cutts. The captain of the Shell felt his senses in a whirl. Trimble had lied, as he always lied himself out of a scrape—not realising, probably, what his lying meant for Tom Merry. Trimble's only thought had been to escape himself.

"Well, Merry?" Mr. Railton's voice was hard, un pitying. "What have you to say now? Every word you uttered with respect to Trimble has been proved to be an invention."

"I told you the truth, sir," said Tom Merry huskily. "Trimble was lying. He only wanted to get out of the scrape himself."

Mr. Railton made a gesture of impatience.

"You had one witness to call, Merry, and that witness has contradicted point-blank every statement you have made. The matter is clear—indeed, it was clear enough before Trimble was called, but I wished to give you every chance. You have yielded to a base temptation, and taken money that did not belong to you—"

"I—I—"

"You will now come with me to the Head, Merry. I understand that your guardian is now staying at Glyn House. She shall be communicated with by telephone, and asked to take you away this afternoon."

"Take me away!" stammered Tom Merry.

"Undoubtedly. You do not expect to remain at this school, I presume, after this discovery?" said the House-master drily.

"But, sir, I—I tell you—I repeat—"

"Follow me, Merry!"

Mr. Railton left the study, and Tom Merry, his face white as a sheet, followed him. Mr. Linton gave a deep

sigh. Cutts & Co. quitted the study, and sauntered out into the quadrangle.

"Still time for our little run!" said Cutts cheerily. "The car will be waiting at Wayland. Get a move on!"

The blades of the Fifth walked away in a merry mood.

CHAPTER II.

The Shadow of Shame.

"TOM!"

"Tom Mewwy!"

"Aren't you coming, Tom?"

The waiting footballers all started forward as Tom Merry came down the passage in the wake of the Housemaster.

Tom looked at them almost wildly.

"Coming!" he muttered. "No—I'm going. I'm sacked!"

"Sacked!" exclaimed Lowther. "What do you mean? Are you dotty?"

"Bai Jove! Tommay, deah boy—"

"I'm accused of stealing, and I'm being taken to the Head to be sacked," said Tom almost hysterically.

"That's all. It's a lie, of course!"

"Yaas, wathah; we know that—"

"Follow me, Merry!" rapped out Mr. Railton.

"But, sir, there must be some mistake!" exclaimed Talbot of the Shell, utterly aghast at this astounding happening. "It's impossible!"

"My boys," said Mr. Railton, not unkindly, as a loud murmur rose up among the excited juniors, "I understand your feelings, and I am sorry your faith in Merry is not better deserved. Unfortunately there is no possibility of a mistake. The matter is proved beyond the shadow of a doubt. Come, Merry!"

His hand dropped on Tom's shoulder, and the captain of the Shell, with unsteady steps, went with him. They disappeared into the Head's study.

The juniors gazed at one another dumbfounded.

"What uttah wot!" said Arthur Augustus at last. "Waitton must be off his silly wockah. Sunstwoke, pewwaps, when he was out in Flandahs!"

"What on earth can it mean?" said Manners. "It's all rot, of course. Cutts has something to do with it; he was in the study."

"Let's ask Cutts; he's just gone out," said Talbot.

The footballers ran out into the quadrangle. But Cutts & Co. were already gone.

"What about Trimble?" said Blake. "He was in the study, too. He's mixed up in it, somehow."

"Yaas, wathah—find Twimble!"

But Trimble was not to be found, either. The worthy Baggie was keeping in cover. On most occasions Trimble was fond of keeping in the public eye; but just at present he was very anxious to avoid the limelight.

The footballers, angry and disappointed, returned to the School House. They were anxious to see Tom Merry.

In a very short time the story was all over the House, and it soon spread to the New House. St. Jim's was in a buzz with it.

The facts were not known; only the one stunning fact that Tom Merry had been adjudged guilty of theft, and that he was to leave St. Jim's that afternoon.

Monty Lowther and Manners made their way to the Head's study. They were determined to know what was to be known, at all events. Lowther tapped at the door and opened it.

The Head was alone there, and he was at the telephone. He did not look round, and the juniors paused awkwardly. The Head was speaking into the receiver.

"Is that Miss Fawcett? Very good. Could you possibly come to the school this afternoon—a matter concerning your ward—ahem!—ahem!—bad news, yes! No, he is not ill—ahem!—kindly come if you can—very good! Then I shall expect you in an hour. Thank you, madam!"

Dr. Holmes hung up the receiver.

Monty Lowther and Manners exchanged startled glances. The Head had telephoned to Glyn House for Miss Priscilla Fawcett; they could guess for what.

The Head frowned as he turned and saw the two Shell fellows in the doorway.

"What is it?" he exclaimed sharply.

"About Tom, sir—" began Lowther.

The Head interrupted him with a gesture.

"Tom Merry is leaving the school to-day," he said.

"He has been guilty of an act of dishonesty—"

"He hasn't, sir," said Lowther grimly.

"What! Lowther, how dare you?"

"I dare to say to anybody that Tom Merry is straight as a die," said Monty Lowther steadily. "There's been some horrible mistake!"

"Do you think, Lowther, that I should expel a boy from this school under a mistake?" rapped out the Head.

"You must have done so, sir, because I know—"

"That will do, Lowther. Leave my study. I will not punish your impertinence, as I realise that you are concerned for your friend. I advise you to forget him as soon as possible, and I certainly forbid you to hold any communication whatever with him when he has left St. Jim's. You may go."

Lowther and Manners stood their ground.

"Mayn't we know what Tom is accused of, sir?" said Manners very quietly. "We know that Cutts of the Fifth hates him, and has tried to injure him before."

"You have no right to say anything of the kind, Manners," said the Head sharply. "In this case Cutts spoke up for Merry, as Mr. Railton tells me, until indubitable proof was produced. In order that there may be no misapprehension, I will tell you the facts. Merry abstracted a purse containing banknotes from Cutts' study, and the purse was found on him. He endeavoured to screen himself by incriminating a younger boy, and failed as he deserved to fail. That is all. Now you may go."

Dr. Holmes pointed to the door.

There was nothing more to be said. Almost stunned, Tom Merry's chums quitted the study. Talbot joined them in the passage, his face pale and strained.

"Tom's in the dorm, packing his box," he said. "Come on!"

The Shell fellows hurried upstairs to the dormitory.

Tom Merry was there. Some of his friends were there, too, looking utterly miserable. Arthur Augustus was the picture of woe. He was helping Tom to pack his box, but in his agitation he was not much use. He was cramming socks and ties into a collar-box absently, evidently scarcely conscious of what he was doing.

Tom's face was pale, but it was calm.

"Tom!" muttered Lowther, in a choking voice.

"It's all up, old chap!" said Tom Merry quietly, rising from his box. "I hope I needn't tell you fellows that it's all rot—that I never touched Cutts' purse—I mean with the idea of keeping it."

"You needn't tell us you're not a thief," said Lowther. "But—but how did the purse come to be found on you, Tom? I—I suppose it was that purse we saw in the passage?"

"Yes. It was Cutts', and it had twenty pounds in it."

"Tom!" Lowther faltered. "You—you don't mean to say that Cutts planted it on you for—this—"

Tom Merry smiled faintly.

"No, no! It's nothing of the sort. Cutts believes it; he's a suspicious rotter, but no worse than that. It's a horrible mistake. But I think it will all come out, Monty—I believe it will. I—I only hope I can keep it from Miss Fawcett till the truth comes out. It will break her heart." Tom Merry's voice trembled. "She's old, you know, and—and a thing like this would upset her fearfully. It might make her seriously ill."

The tears started to Tom's eyes as he spoke. Lowther pressed his arm. It was very like Tom to be thinking of his old governess at that moment instead of himself.

"The Head's telephoned for her," said Manners. "She'll be here in an hour."

Tom Merry groaned.

"If it wasn't for her I could stand it better," he muttered, "and—and I feel sure it will come out!"

"Tell us exactly what happened," said Talbot.

"It's a queer story," said Tom, colouring. "I—I'm not surprised that Railton didn't believe it when Trimble denied it all."

"Was Twimble the thief?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus.

The juniors looked dubious. If Cutts had been accused of a plot it would have been "steep." But Trimble—he was a cadger, a liar, a spoofer, a boaster, but—but surely not a thief!

"There wasn't any thief at all," said Tom quietly.

"What!"

"Then what the thunder—" exclaimed Figgins.

"You know how Trimble took Gussy's watch the other day. Well, when Gussy missed it, he never thought of saying it had been stolen."

"Wathah nof," said Arthur Augustus. "I should have been ashamed to let such a wotten ideah entah my bwain, deah boys."

"Cutts isn't exactly like Gussy," said Tom. "He missed his purse, and jumped to the conclusion at once that his banknotes had been stolen, and he went to Mr. Railton about it. Trimble had taken it, simply to swank about with banknotes, and make out that he had plenty of money, intending to take the purse back to Cutts' study afterwards."

"Oh, the silly fathead!"

"He showed the notes off to me in his study, and I recognised Cutts' purse, and told the young idiot to take it back. He wouldn't, so I was taking it when you fellows collared me in the passage."

"Bai Jove!"

"That didn't make any difference, as it happens, for Cutts had already gone to the Housemaster and reported the theft, as he supposed it. He found a handkerchief of mine in his study. Of course, that duffer had borrowed it, and dropped it there. Not on purpose—I don't mean that—for the young idiot never even thought he would be suspected of stealing. He borrowed my coat, too. I found it in his study."

"Then what's the trouble?" asked Blake, mystified. "You've only got to explain that you took the purse from Trimble."

"Don't you see? Trimble got scared, and denied the whole business."

"Oh!"

"The awful wottah!"

"So, as the matter stands, the money was found on me, and my hanky was found in Cutts' study, and my explanation is laughed at. Trimble denies even that he was in his study since dinner. Of course, Railton can't know that Trimble is lying."

There was a grim silence in the dormitory.

But for their firm faith in Tom Merry, the juniors would hardly have known what to think. But they trusted the captain of the Shell, and they knew Trimble. His proceedings on the night of the party at Glyn House showed what the obtuse junior was capable of.

Tom Merry looked round wistfully at the faces about him.

"You believe me?" he faltered. "You—you don't think, like Railton, that—that I've made that up? You can't—"

"Of course not!" said Lowther, almost roughly. "Don't be an ass! Look here, Trimble will have to own up!"

"That's the last hope," said Tom quietly. "Trimble doesn't know yet the harm he's done, and when he does know he may own up; and he's such a fool, too, that he's very likely to blurt out the whole bizney without intending it. Find him, and talk to him."

"The beast has disappeared!" growled Manners.

"He told me he was going home with Brooke—"

"I'll cut off to Brooke's on my bike," said Figgins, anxious to do something. "I'll bring him back by the scruff of the neck, if necessary!"

And Figgins hurried out of the dormitory. Tom Merry, in silence, finished packing his box. Hope was by no means dead in his breast.

Rotter as Trimble was in many ways, Tom Merry could not believe that the new boy would keep silent and allow him to be expelled in disgrace from the school. Trimble was more fool than rascal, and surely he could not be capable of such baseness. The captain of the Shell was under a cloud, but the cloud would pass. More than of himself, he thought of poor Miss Priscilla, and the terrible shock that awaited her when she arrived at St. Jim's. His only hope now was to keep it from her knowledge till his chums had had time to extract the truth from Trimble of the Fourth.

"Where are you going, Tom?"

"I'm going to meet Miss Fawcett on the way here," said Tom quietly. "I'm going to keep this from her as long as I can. I can't believe Trimble will really let me be ruined like this when I was only trying to keep him out of a scrape. If he owns up, Miss Fawcett needn't know anything about it."

"We'll come with you, Tom."

"What about the Grammar School match?"

"The—the Grammar School match? Hang the Grammar School match! I'd forgotten it."

"They'll be waiting," said Tom. "You'd better send some sort of a team over there. Pick out an eleven, anyway, and send it over if you don't feel inclined for the game yourselves. And—and look for Trimble, and get the truth out of him if you can. I'll go and meet Miss Fawcett."

"And go back to my pater's with her," said Bernard Glyn. "Stay there till we've got the truth out of Trimble, Tom."

Tom hesitated.

"But your people——" he said.

"That's all right. I'll explain to the pater. I'll come with you," said Glyn. "Come on! It's all serene!"

Tom Merry quitted the dormitory with Glyn.

CHAPTER 12.

Miss Priscilla is Pleased!

"STOP!"

A trap was bowling along the lane towards St. Jim's, and Tom Merry ran out into the road and lifted his hand. The driver pulled in his horse, and Glyn caught at the animal's head to make sure.

Miss Priscilla Fawcett was seated in the trap. Her kind old face showed the agitation under which she was labouring.

But it lighted up at the sight of Tom Merry.

"My dearest Tommy!" she exclaimed. "You are not ill?"

Tom forced a smile.

"Not a bit of it," he said. "It's all right."

Miss Priscilla leaned down from the trap, and scanned the handsome, healthy face closely and anxiously.

"You are not looking as usual, Tommy," she said. "I have no doubt the Head was alarmed about your health, though, indeed, he told me you were not ill. I have been alarmed very much, my dear. I could not think whatever was the matter. How kind and thoughtful of you to come and meet me, my dear boy! Jump in, and come on to the school with me."

"I was thinking of going home with Glyn, dear," stammered Tom.

"But the Head asked me to call——"

"That—that was only about me," said Tom, flushing.

"The—the fact is, I've come to meet you instead. I—I know what Dr. Holmes was going to say."

"Then you can tell me, Tommy dear. Was it about your health?"

"Oh, no, no! About—about—— I—I——" Tom Merry stammered. He could not tell the kind old lady a falsehood, and yet she must not know the truth. If the worst came to the worst, she would know it soon enough. "The Head thinks I had better leave St. Jim's—for a time, of course—and—perhaps I may be coming home with you, dear."

Miss Priscilla smiled brightly.

"That is very sensible of Dr. Holmes," she said. "He is a very sensible man. I think very probably you have been overworking, Tommy, especially at cricket."

Tom Merry laughed, quite his old laugh. Cricket at that time of the year appealed to his sense of humour.

"So now we're going to Glyn House," he said. "Come on, Glyn, old chap."

"You think that it will not be necessary for me to see the Head?" asked Miss Priscilla doubtfully.

"Not at all."

"But as he telephoned——"

"Dr. Holmes has been very much disturbed this afternoon, ma'am," said Bernard Glyn. "Suppose you—ahem!—telephone from my place?"

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"That will be just as well," said Priscilla, quite satisfied. "Let us go back, then, my dear boys. It is very, very thoughtful of Dr. Holmes to think of giving you an extra holiday, Tommy, and I hope he will decide to do so."

The trap turned back, with the two juniors in it. Miss Priscilla was quite easy in her mind now, and Tom Merry breathed more freely. If only the miserable truth could be kept from that kind old soul until—until he was cleared, or until it became certain, at least, that he could not be cleared. Ill news can never be told too late.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Glyn, as the trap ran on. "Here's Figgy. He's got Brooke with him."

"Brooke? By Jove!"

Two cyclists had turned out of the rutty lane that led to Wayland Moor. They were Figgins of the Fourth and the day-boy. They stopped as Tom Merry waved his hand.

"Hold on!" said Glyn to the driver.

Tom Merry jumped down. Figgins' face was ablaze with excitement, and Dick Brooke was looking excited, too. They had been riding at a terrific rate, and were red and breathless.

Tom Merry's heart beat faster.

"What is it, Figgy? You look as if you'd found something out!"

"I jolly well have!" said Figgins, gasping. "Brooke's a giddy witness——"

"Was Trimble there?"

"No, he didn't go; but when I told Brooke, he knew something about it!" panted Figgins. "Trimble told him about the banknotes."

"My hat!"

"I think it will be all right, Tom," said Brooke, in his quiet way. "I was fairly knocked over when Figgy told me what you were suspected of. Does your guardian know?"

"Not yet."

"Don't let her know, then."

"If—if it turns up trumps, 'phone us at Glyn House," said Tom.

"Right you are!"

"Is anything the matter, Tommy dear?" called out Miss Priscilla.

"No, no!"

Tom hastily returned to the trap. Figgins and Brooke jumped on their machines, and scorched away towards St. Jim's.

The trap dashed on towards Glyn House. Tom Merry chatted cheerily with the old lady, keeping Miss Priscilla's mind occupied. His heart was lighter now. It seemed as if light were breaking through the clouds.

"The pater's in the City," Glyn remarked, as they dismounted from the trap at the house. "Edith's about; but no need to talk yet, Tom, if you like. You've come over with me, because it's a half-holiday. Savvy?"

Tom Merry nodded.

Innocent as he was, innocent as he believed his friends would believe him to be, he shrank from telling the miserable story. Even to those who had complete faith in him, he did not like to say that he was suspected of a base and despicable action.

If only Trimble would confess—and soon!

Tom remained with his old governess, listening, with a smile, to Miss Priscilla's gentle prattle of what should be done at home, if the Head decided upon that idea of giving her dear boy that unexpected holiday.

Little did the kind old lady dream that if Tom Merry went back with her to Huckleberry Heath, it would be in black disgrace, and never again to revisit St. Jim's. She did not know that, and if Tom Merry could help it, she should never know.

But while he chatted, smiling cheerfully, with his old governess, Tom Merry's heart was heavy, and hope and doubt alternated in his breast.

Would that telephone-call come from St. Jim's?

"Dear me! I have not telephoned to the Head, my dear boy!" said Miss Priscilla, presently.

"I—I think the Head's going to ring us up, dear," said Tom. "In—in fact, I'm expecting to hear the bell any minute—hoping, anyway."



Kerr bore down upon the elusive Trimble at once. "Stop, you podgy boulder! Stop, I tell you!" he exclaimed. (See Chapter 13.)

"That is very kind of Dr. Holmes!"

"Ye-es, isn't it?"

"You have a very kind headmaster, Tom. If he decides upon this holiday for you, you must thank him very nicely."

Tom suppressed a groan. If that "holiday" was finally decided upon, he would not feel in a thankful mood. But he nodded and smiled.

How was it to end?

CHAPTER 13. Brought to Book!

"**B**AI JOVE! Here's Figgins!"

"And Brooke!"

"Where's that beast Trimble?"

The chums of St. Jim's gathered round the two breathless juniors as they came in.

"Trimble wasn't with me," said Brooke. "He was coming, but I sheered him off. But it's jolly lucky Figgins came over, all the same!"

"Brooke knows!" chortled Figgins.

"And I'd have spoken up soon enough, as soon as I heard the story," said Brooke. "But I shouldn't have been here again till Monday, if Figgins hadn't come over."

"But what do you know about it?" asked Monty Lowther anxiously.

"I know that Trimble had banknotes to-day for twenty pounds," said Brooke. "I know, at least, that he bragged to me of having them, and said Tom Merry had taken them away. Then he put it that he had lent the money to Tom. I took it for his usual silly gas; but when Figgins told me——"

"Huwway!"

"But where's Trimble?" exclaimed Brooke. "The rotter's got to be found, and made to own up!"

"He's keeping out of sight," said Lowther, between his teeth. "I suppose he knows we shall make it warm for him for lying about Tom. Scatter and find him, you fellows! He must be somewhere!"

Quite an army of juniors were going in search for

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Baggy Trimble. A message had been sent to the Grammar School that the match was off, and making excuses. Under the circumstances, none of Tom Merry's chums felt inclined for football. Neither were they inclined to trouble about making up a fresh team. There was only one business in hand now—clearing Tom Merry of the black suspicion that rested upon him.

Trimble was carefully keeping out of sight. But he was "bagged" at last. Baggy Trimble had money in his pocket, and with money in his pocket, he was not likely to keep away from the tuckshop for long. Kerr of the Fourth thought of that, with his keen Scottish head; and while the other fellows searched far and wide for the elusive Baggy, Kerr kept watch on Dame Taggles' little shop. And before very long he had the satisfaction of observing Trimble's podgy figure stealing towards the tuckshop cautiously. Baggy Trimble looked very dusty, and Kerr guessed that he had been hiding in the ruins. He bore down upon the elusive Baggy at once.

"You're wanted, my fat infant!" said Kerr grimly. "I—I say, Railton don't want me again, does he?" exclaimed Trimble, in alarm. "I—I—I've told him all about it, you know."

"You'll have to tell him a little more!" remarked Kerr. "Stop, you podgy bouncer! Stop, I tell you!"

Trimble was running. Kerr started in pursuit, and in a couple of minutes ran him down. He took a firm grip on Trimble's collar, and marched him off to the School House.

"Heah he is!" shouted Arthur Augustus, from the doorway.

"Good egg! Got him!" yelled Blake. The Co. gathered from all quarters. Baggy Trimble, wriggling in Kerr's strong grasp, stared round uneasily at the angry and threatening faces.

"I—I say," he mumbled, "what's the matter, you know?"

"Where have you been all this time, you skulking rotter?" demanded Blake.

"I—I've been exploring the ruins, you know. I—I'm awfully interested in ruins. Leggo my collar, you Scotch beast!"

"Bring him to Mr. Railton!" said Lowther. "I—I'm not going to Mr. Railton," howled Trimble, in alarm. "I've been to him, haven't I? If Tom Merry says—"

"Come on!" "I—I say, if Cutts says—"

"Blow Cutts! You're coming to Railton to own up!" said Lowther. "Yow-ow! Leggo! I won't!" roared Trimble. "I don't know anything about it! I haven't seen Cutts' banknotes! Tom Merry knows I wasn't going to keep them! Yow!"

"Oh, we're getting at it!" said Figgins. "So you admit that you had them?"

"No, I don't!" said Trimble promptly. "I don't even know whether Cutts had any banknotes or not! How should I know?"

"Spying, I suppose, as per usual!" said Figgins. "You jolly well took them out of Cutts' study, we know that!"

"I didn't! I never knew they were in the drawer of Cutts' table!" wailed Trimble. "A chap oughtn't to keep banknotes in a table-drawer, it ain't safe!"

"Not with you about!" grinned Blake. "Yow-ow! Leggo! I tell you I won't go!" roared Trimble.

"Stuff his hanky into his silly mouth!" growled Lowther. "We're going to make him own up before he goes to Railton! He'll alarm the whole blessed country at this rate!"

"Gurrrrg!" gurgled Trimble, as Blake jerked a handkerchief from his pocket, and jammed it, not gently, into his open mouth. "Yurrrrgh!"

"Bring him into the common-room!" "Gurrrrgh!"

"Hallo!" exclaimed Lowther suddenly. "Look at that hanky, by George! It's one of Tom Merry's!"

"Bai Jove! There's Tommy's monogwam on the cornah!"

"What are you doing with Tom Merry's hanky, Trimble?"

"Groooh!" Trimble roared and sputtered. "Gurrrrg!" "What's the row here?" Kildare of the Sixth came up, frowning. "Are you ragging Trimble? Let him go at once!"

"We're going to make him own up!" shouted Lowther. "Let him alone!"

Kildare shoved the angry juniors aside, and reached Trimble. The unfortunate Baggy clung to him, and jerked out the gag.

"I say, Kildare—groooh!—keep 'em off—yoooh!—the beasts! I don't know anything about it! Yow-ow-ow!"

Kildare stood between Trimble and the threatening crowd, and turned a stern glance on the juniors.

"What are you ragging Trimble for?" he demanded. "We're not ragging him yet," said Lowther savagely. "But we're going to, if he don't own up! He's got to tell the truth about Cutts' banknotes."

"He has already told Mr. Railton—"

"Lies!" said Lowther. "Collar the cad!" shouted Manners.

"Stand back!" exclaimed Kildare angrily. "I tell you, he's going to own up!" roared Lowther furiously. "We know he's lied, and we're going to make him tell the truth. Stand aside, Kildare!"

"What!" ejaculated the prefect. "Stand aside! You're not going to interfere here!"

Lowther was furious, and he did not care what he said. "No, and not Railton, either—"

"Lowther!" It was a deep, quiet voice, and the angry words died on Monty Lowther's tongue. The hubbub had reached the Housemaster's ears, and Mr. Railton came on the scene with a grim brow. "Are you aware of what you are saying, Lowther?"

There was a hush. But Monty Lowther faced the Housemaster undauntedly.

"Trimble has told you lies, sir," he said. "Nonsense!"

"We can prove it!" "Nonsense, I say!" said Mr. Railton sharply.

"Speak up, Brooke!" exclaimed Figgins. Brooke of the Fourth was pushed forward by the juniors.

"May I speak, sir?" he said respectfully. "Trimble did not tell you the truth, sir, and I can prove it."

CHAPTER 14.

The Clouds Roll By.

M R. RAILTON paused, looking hard at Brooke. "If any fresh evidence in the matter has come to light, I am more than willing to hear it," he said quietly. "I will listen to what you have to say, Brooke. Kindly be brief."

"Very well, sir. Trimble denies that he had Cutts' banknotes in his possession at all this afternoon. Just before I left for home, he told me that he had twenty pounds in banknotes. He said he had lent them to Tom Merry—after saying first that Tom had taken them away from him. He's always bragging like an ass about having lots of money, so I took no notice of his rot, till Figgins told me what had happened here."

"If this is correct, it certainly puts a new complexion on the matter," said the Housemaster. "Trimble!"

"Yes, sir," mumbled Trimble. "It appears that you told Brooke you had twenty pounds in banknotes. Were you alluding to Cutts' notes, or to some money of your own?"

"My own, sir," said Trimble promptly. "Indeed! Twenty pounds is a very large sum of money for a junior to have, and the coincidence is very singular, too."

"You see, sir, my people are awfully rich," said Trimble. "At Trimble Hall—"

"Never mind that now, Trimble. You have twenty pounds of your own?"

"Oh, yes, sir!" "Kindly show me the money."

Trimble's jaw dropped. "The—the money!" he stammered.

"Yes. If you possess banknotes of your own to the

value of twenty pounds, kindly show them to me at once. That will satisfy me, and your schoolfellows."

Some of the juniors grinned. Trimble was as likely to have twenty thousand pounds as twenty, of his own.

"I am waiting, Trimble," said Mr. Railton, his voice growing ominous.

"I—I—the fact is, sir, I—I haven't the money now," stammered Trimble.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence, boys! This is not a laughing matter. Trimble, it is perfectly clear that you are telling falsehoods."

"I—I never tell falsehoods, sir," groaned Trimble. "I—I'd scorn anything of the sort, sir. Now—now I come to think of it, I was mistaken, sir. I—I didn't have twenty pounds. It—it was a slip of the memory, sir."

"Then the sum you mentioned to Brooke must have been the money belonging to Cutts?"

"I—I didn't mention it to Brooke, sir. Brooke's mistaken."

"But you have admitted it, you utterly ridiculous boy!"

"I—I really didn't mean to," stuttered Trimble. "The—the fact is, I—I should have had twenty pounds, sir, only that beast Merry took it away—"

"What!"

"I—I meantersay—that is, he didn't, sir."

"Trimble!" Mr. Railton's voice resembled thunder now, and Trimble jumped with terror. "It appears clear now that Tom Merry's statement was true, and that he found you in possession of Cutts' banknotes. You purloined them from Cutts' study."

"No, I didn't!" gasped Trimble. "Certainly not, sir. I told Tom Merry plainly that I wasn't going to spend them. Ask him."

"You denied, in my study, having said anything at all about them to Tom Merry!" thundered the Housemaster.

"D-d-did I?" gasped Trimble. "I—I must have forgotten, sir. I—I hope you don't suspect me of—of—of telling a whopper, sir!"

"Bai Jove," murmured Arthur Augustus, quite overcome, "that boundah takes the cake—he does weally!"

The Housemaster looked almost blankly at Trimble. The cheerful Baggy was quite a new thing in his experience.

"Trimble, I begin to suspect that you are too stupid to understand what you are saying. I—"

"I—I'm generally considered rather a clever chap, sir," murmured Trimble.

"You ridiculous boy, tell me the truth. I exonerate you from any intention of stealing Cutts' money, but tell me the precise facts at once. I shall not be hard upon you if you tell me the truth."

"Well, sir," began Trimble cautiously, "just to put a case, sir, I might have borrowed Cutts' purse, and I mightn't. I might have wanted to have some banknotes in my pocket, and I mightn't. Tom Merry may have taken them away to put back in Cutts' study, and then again he mayn't, you know. I may have dropped Tom Merry's handkerchief there, but—but that was all D'Arcy's fault!"

"My fault!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus.

"Yes, yours," growled Trimble. "I'd rather have had your hanky, but you've been keeping your things locked up since I happened to borrow your watch the other night, so what could a fellow do?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Is this boy in the habit of borrowing articles without permission?" asked Mr. Railton.

"Yaas, wathah, sir! My evenin' clobber—my watch—"

"Sure, and my shoes—"

"And my necktie—"

"And my collars—"

Mr. Railton held up his hand and stopped the chorus.

"The matter is quite clear now," he said. "I cannot say how glad I am that Tom Merry is exonerated, yet I can hardly blame myself for failing to plumb the depths of this boy's stupidity. Trimble, are you aware that Merry of the Shell has been ordered to leave St. Jim's, wholly through your false statements with regard to Cutts' banknotes?"

"I—I didn't know," blinked Trimble. "I—I'm sorry, sir! But it was all his own fault. I told him plainly that I was going to take the banknotes back when I'd done with them. I told him as plain as anything."

"You utterly stupid boy, come with me and explain to Dr. Holmes," said Mr. Railton, taking Trimble by the collar. "My boys, Tom Merry's name is cleared. You may tell him at once that there is no stain of suspicion upon him. Come, Trimble!"

The unhappy Baggy was marched off to the Head's study, with the Housemaster's grip on his collar.

"Hooray!" roared Figgins.

"Hip-pip-huwway!"

"Now for the giddy telephone!"

There was a rush of the delighted juniors to the Housemaster's study. They did not wait for permission. Monty Lowther took up the receiver and rang up Glyn House.

"Tom Merry there? St. Jim's speaking. Tell Tom Merry. Hallo, is that you, Tom? It's all right—right as rain! Trimble's owned up. It's all serene. Come back as fast as you can, old chap. Hooray!"

And along the wires came like an echo:

"Hooray!"

"Dear me!" said Miss Priscilla. "Then the Head has decided after all not to give you that extra holiday, Tommy? I am sorry. But really, my dear, you are looking very well—much better than when I met you in the lane. Well, if you must go, good-bye, my darling Tommy, and mind—mind, my dear, do not get your feet wet!"

And Tom Merry and Bernard Glyn started for St. Jim's in great spirits.

At the gates of the school a cheering crowd met them, and Tom Merry, hoisted on the shoulders of his chums, was borne in triumph across the quadrangle to the School House.

Mr. Railton met him there, and he held out his hand:

"I am sorry, Merry," he said quietly. "I am sure you believe that I intended to be quite just, but I was deceived—"

"It's all right, sir," said Tom Merry brightly, as he shook hands with the Housemaster. "But, if you please, sir, if I might ask a favour—"

"You may ask anything you like, my boy."

"I—I'd like to ask you not to go hard on Trimble, sir. He's only a silly ass. I—I mean he's rather fat-headed, sir, and didn't understand the harm he was doing!"

Mr. Railton smiled.

"It is generous of you to think of him, my boy. Trimble has been severely caned, but the matter ends there. No suspicion of theft attaches to him, but I think he will reflect before he touches again property that is not his own."

There was a merry celebration in Tom Merry's study shortly afterwards. The clouds had rolled by, and all Tom Merry's friends—and their name was legion—gathered to do him honour. Even Cutts of the Fifth looked in to say that he was sorry. The feed was going strong, when a podgy figure wedged into the crowded study, rubbing podgy hands that smarted from a recent application of the Head's stoutest cane. There was a howl at once.

"Twimble, bai Jove!"

"Kick him out!"

"Look here, you know," said Trimble indignantly, "I've been caned. After the way I've got you out of a jolly bad scrape, Tom Merry, the least you can do is to ask me to the feed, I think."

"Well, my only hat!" ejaculated Tom Merry.

"You might make room for a chap," went on Trimble. "I'll have half that chair with you, Lowther, if you're short of chairs. Ow-ow-wow-woop-yaroooh!"

The rest of Trimble's remarks were inarticulate, as he went along the passage with a dozen feet helping him from behind. And the celebration finished without his assistance.

THE END.

(Next week's grand, long complete story of the Chums of St. Jim's is entitled, "THE GRAMMAR SCHOOL MASCOT!" by Martin Clifford)

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ANYTHING TO OBLIGE.

The policeman had had his eye on the foreign musician for some time. At last, after the stolid manner of his kind, he marched across the road and accosted the man.

"Have you permission to play here?" he demanded.

"No," replied the noise merchant, "I have not."

"Then," said the policeman decisively, "you will have to move, or accompany me."

The wandering one put his violin up to his chin with alacrity.

"I will accompany you with pleasure," he retorted. "Now, what will you sing?"—Sent in by Oliver Abbott, Attercliffe, Sheffield.

COOL CHEEK.

The tramp was sitting on a seat in a certain park, trying to go to sleep. The closing-time bell had been rung, however, and the gatekeeper, noticing that the tramp was not attempting to leave, went up to him and exclaimed:

"Now then, hurry up, there! I'm going to close the gate."

"Right-ho, old sport!" came the calm and sleepy rejoinder. "Don't slam it."—Sent in by William Scott, Walthamstow.

A MAN OF PEACE.

"No, sir," cried the little man; "I don't believe in war. It means invasion and confiscation, and forcible and brutal alteration of existing boundaries."

The man sitting opposite turned to his companion, and asked in a whisper who the little man was.

"Oh, he's a map-maker," the companion whispered back; "and he's got an immense stock of old maps on hand!"—Sent in by Arthur Raynor, Worksop, Notts.

THE EXCEPTION.

School Teacher: "Give an example of the truth of the well-known motto, 'United we stand; divided we fall.'"

Pupil: "I can't, sir. But I don't believe it's true, anyhow."

Teacher: "Do you know of any case in which it is not true?"

Pupil: "Yes, sir. A pair of steps."—Sent in by R. H. Merriman, Cheltenham.

"HONOURS EVEN!"—A "MAGNET" STORY.

Fishy: "Come down here, and I'll fight you!"

Bunter: "Yah, beast! Sha'n't!"

Fishy: "I guess you're some coward, and afraid to fight me."

Bunter: "Yes; and you know it, or you wouldn't have asked me to!"—Sent in by H. E. Warman, Dunston-on-Tyne.

INSEPARABLE.

The family knot had been badly jumped on by papa, and he was unburdening himself to his mother.

"It's all very well for the guv'nor to say that a man is known by the company he keeps," he said peevishly.

"What do you mean, Archie?" asked his mother.

"Well, if a good man keeps company with a rotter, is the good man a rotter or the rotter good?"—Sent in by Charles Grady, Liscard, Ches.

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THE "PRO-GERMAN."

Effie: "My husband is so unpatriotic. I really think he must have German sympathies."

Elsie: "Dear me! What has he done?"

Effie: "Oh, he made the most awful fuss over the cost of my new military costume!"—Sent in by A. K. Blair, Glasgow.

NEAT!

Apparently Prospective Customer: "Have you any of the Niforoso brand of cigars in stock? How are they?"

Cigar Dealer: "Very good indeed, sir. This last lot is especially fine."

A. P. C.: "Good! You wrote to me last week, giving me to understand that they were very poor; but I'm very glad to find that you were mistaken. I am the manufacturer. Good-morning!"—Sent in by J. C. Slade, Johannesburg, South Africa.

A MASTERLY DEDUCTION.

She had engaged a maid recently from the country, and was now employed in showing her newly-acquired "treasure" over the house and enlightening her in regard to various duties, etc. At last they reached the best room.

"These," said the mistress of the house, pausing before an extensive row of masculine portraits—"these are very valuable, and you must be careful when dusting them. They are old masters."

Mary's jaw dropped, and a look of intense wonder spread over her rubicund face.

"Lor', mum!" she gasped, gazing with bulging eyes on the face of her new employer. "Who'd ever have thought you'd been married all these times!"—Sent in by Miss Avice Corke, S. Ealing.

THE PHILOSOPHER OF BEDLAM.

A visitor wandering through the grounds of an asylum was surprised to see one of the patients hitting himself over the head at regular intervals with a huge mallet which had been left about by a careless workman.

"Good gracious! What are you doing that for, my man?" asked the visitor.

The inmate turned quickly, a crafty grin on his face. "It's so lovely when you leave off," he whispered confidingly.—Sent in by Harry Owsley, Auckland, New Zealand.

A TREAT IN STORE.

"We get everything here that is worth seeing," said a villager to a visitor from town. "Why, last week we had the champion brass band here, the week before the greatest cornet-player in the country, and this week we are going to have a great production of the drama 'Louis Cross-Eye.' That will be tip-top, I am sure."

"What did you say is the name of the play?" asked the visitor.

"Here, have a look for yourself," said the proud villager, as he pulled out a grubby, much-folded handbill announcing a grand production of "Louis XI."—Sent in by Miss Clara Cohen, Dudley.

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CHAPTER 1.

Reggie is Engaged as a Film Actor.

Reggie White walked along Dover Street, Balham, whistling. Suddenly a motor-car came dashing along. There was a word spoken to the chauffeur, and the next moment the car stopped.

The occupant, a man of middle age, jumped out and came right across to Reggie.

"What is that parcel?" he asked. "And who does it belong to?"

"The parcel," said Reggie, "contains groceries. As for question number two, if they are paid for, they belong to the Reverend Mr. Dilwyn. If they ain't, they belong to Fleming's Stores. Any more to ask, sir?"

"Nothing," said the man. "You're my boy. Jump into the car, and we'll take the parcel back to Fleming's Stores, and pay them a week's money in lieu of notice."

"Which is rapid," said Reggie.

"Which is my usual way," replied the other. "You are now in my employ. Understand? Whatever you got at Fleming's, you now get double, and further rises to follow."

"Then you must be my long-lost uncle," remarked Reggie. "Fleming's is round the corner in High Street."

He stepped into the car as if it were quite an ordinary event, and started whistling.

"Stop that din!" cried the gentleman.

"Sha'n't!" replied Reggie. "I'll take your job. But when I'm in the open air I'm my own master. I sell you my toil and my energy, but not my soul."

The owner of the car chuckled, and spoke to the chauffeur.

"I've got the right one this time," he said.

"And if you knew 'em as I knows 'em, sir," said the chauffeur, "you'll wish you hadn't before you are many days older."

They soon arrived at the shop. Reggie's new employer boldly entered, followed by the errand-boy with his parcel. He asked to see the manager.

"This boy is coming with me," he said. "I want to pay the bill that will free him."

The manager had his doubts about this method.

"If the boy is going to better himself," he said, "I'm

sure I don't want to stand in his way. He is free to go at once if he wishes."

So Reggie White rode off in the car with his new employer.

"What kind of job is it?" he asked as they drove along.

"Moving pictures," was the reply.

"My word!" said Reggie. "Do I take the money at the door, or show people their seats?"

"Neither," said his new employer. "You help to make the pictures."

"What?"

"You are to be one of the actors."

Reggie gasped for breath.

"Do you mean I'm to be a sort of Charlie Chaplin?"

"Yes."

This staggered the boy. He remained silent for a moment, then he came out with another question.

"Are you another of the acting folk?" he asked.

"My name is Dell," was the reply. "I am Anthony Dell, and I am just starting to make moving pictures."

"What!" gasped Reggie. "Not Mr. Dell, the millionaire?"

Yet Mr. Dell, the millionaire, he turned out to be. And Mr. Dell had gone in for manufacturing films for moving-picture companies. Beyond this he gave little information to Reggie, and very soon they stopped at a shop in Tooting, and he got out.

Reggie made for the chauffeur at once.

"I always heard that Mr. Dell, the millionaire, was a bit cracked," he said.

"Well, you can take it from me," replied the chauffeur, "that he ain't. A person can't be cracked when he has a lot of money. You can be cracked up to five hundred pounds a year. Then up to three thousand you are eccentric. After that you are only affable."

He took good stock of Reggie.

"I'm one of the actors," he said. "I tell you that so that you don't mistake me for a mere upper servant."

"I'm glad you told me," replied Reggie. "I mistook you for a slacker."

The chauffeur became suddenly fierce.

"Don't you 'slacker' me, my lad," he said. "I've tried

twice to get into the Army. It can't be done when one foot is six inches shorter than the other."

"You wouldn't stand much chance in a charge, would you?" said Reggie kindly.

Mr. Dell came out at that moment and stopped any further trouble.

After that they turned towards Mitcham, and drew up before a large, old-fashioned house near the common.

This was Mr. Dell's moving-picture studio. It was excellently suited for the purpose, as there was a great deal of ground round the house.

Reggie soon discovered that Mr. Dell was a "bit of a character," and he had not been long in the place before he discovered that "bits of character" abounded. Mr. Dell liked odd folk, queer folk, and unusual folk.

But one of them he took to at once. This was a boy of his own age who came up and introduced himself.

"I'm Richard Turney," he said—"commonly called Dick. Who are you?"

Reggie explained.

"Are you in the show this afternoon, or do you come with us?"

"I don't know," said Reggie. "I've only just arrived, and I don't quite know what I have to do, and what the whole affair is about."

"Oh, well, perhaps I can tell you," volunteered Dick Turney. "Tony Dell—we call him 'Tony' out of affection—is busy making pictures for the 'movies' people. He has this place here, with a manager and half a dozen cranks, and he has made some jolly good films. But he has a bee in his bonnet about employing youthful genius."

"Meaning us?" suggested Reggie.

Dick nodded.

"Meaning us and a few others," he said. "Making pictures on a new plan. What do you say to a gipsy caravan?"

"Where is it?" cried Reggie excitedly.

"Come on," replied Dick. "Besides, it isn't one caravan—it is three. You see, we have to take a few things with us, and there are seven of us boys—eight if you come."

Just then the chauffeur joined them.

"I've got to fix you up with py-jimmies and night-gear," he said to Reggie. "So come along into the town. We've got to finish feeding, and get away an hour from now."

That hour passed quickly. Reggie, assisted by Ben Wheeler, the chauffeur, soon had his night-gear ready. Then there was a scramble through lunch—a substantial and toothsome meal—and they were ready for the start.

They went in the motor-car. Anthony Dell and the chauffeur rode in front, and Reggie with his new friend behind.

It seemed to Reggie that they went west; but he could not be sure of this. The car was powerful, and Ben Wheeler appeared to have a scorn for speed-limits, so they were soon far away from the London area.

It must have been nearing four o'clock when the car slackened speed.

"They ought to be about here somewhere," said Mr. Dell.

Just then they turned a bend in the road, and came upon the three caravans, resting upon an open space by the side of the road.

Reggie put up a cry of delight. He darted out of his seat, and was making for the vans, when he heard his name sharply called.

It was Mr. Dell.

"It seems to me I want a nurse," said that worthy. "I've done it this time. I'm not usually quite as big an idiot as I look, but this journey I break records. What will your people think?"

"I haven't any people," said Reggie.

"Eh? An orphan?"

"I think so," said Reggie. "I don't really know."

Mr. Dell breathed a sigh of relief.

"I don't want to say I'm glad," he said; "but I am relieved. I'm too impulsive. When I got the other boys, I gave my poor secretary the time of his life obtaining permissions and squaring matters with parents and guardians. But in your case I clean forgot. Who is your landlady?"

"Mrs. Ripley," said Reggie. "And, oh, dear, she'll think I'm cheating her! I owe her four days."

"We'll send her a wire and the money," replied the millionaire briefly.

Then Reggie got to know the other fellows.

The first of these who took his attention was the eldest of them all. He was the best dressed, too, and spoke in a rather affected voice. He was called Hubert Nixon, and the others called him "Hub."

He seemed to take to Reggie, and drew him on one side. "I hope you won't mix me up with the others," he said.

"I'm far different from any of them. My father owns a picture-palace, and he is a close, personal friend of Mr. Dell.

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Personal influence got me into this, my boy. It wasn't just picked up in the street, anyhow."

"Perhaps you would like me to call you 'sir'?" asked Reggie sarcastically.

"When we are alone," said Hubert. "But the others might scoff if you did it when they were about."

Just then a very tall man of remarkable uprightness of figure appeared.

"Line up, boys," he said. "The boss is waiting."

The boys fell into line, Reggie taking his place next to Dick, and Mr. Dell made a little speech.

He told them that they were down in this part of the country to act a little play that had been specially written for the moving pictures.

"The great point about it," he went on, "is that all the actors are boys. You know the great interest I have in lads just from school. Well, my idea is that a jolly good set of moving pictures could be obtained without the help of any grown-up actors at all."

"Hear, hear!" put in Reggie.

"A little way beyond that field," went on the millionaire, "is a big mansion called Storm Park. At present it is unoccupied, and I have hired it for a month. The film will be called 'Ronald in the Haunted House.'"

"Who is to be Ronald?" put in Reggie White.

"You are!" retorted Mr. Dell. "I saw you as the Ronald I wanted the moment I clapped eyes on you. Now, before planning out the picture, we'll all go across and see the house."

"Hurrah!" shouted Dick Turney.

"But just one moment," cried out the millionaire, stopping them. "I think it only fair to tell you that Storm Park really is haunted. No one will live in it."

This was a cheering bit of news!

The boys set out.

Reggie found that a new companion had fixed on to him. This was about the fattest boy he had ever seen in his life. He started conversation with him.

"You come from Peckham, don't you?"

"No," said the boy; "I come from Hammersmith. My name is William Burr."

Then, after waddling a few dozen steps, he caught Reggie's sleeve.

"Why did you ask if I came from Peckham?" he said. "Peckham isn't the only place where people are stout."

"I'm sorry," said Reggie. "But I thought you had the Peckham style of stoutness."

Burr was good-humoured, and laughed.

"I say," he suddenly volunteered. "I hear some of us are to be ghosts. Don't you think I shall be a queer kind of ghost?"

"Go along!" said Reggie. "You aren't a ghost at all. You are more of a nightmare—something squat and heavy to sit on the chest!"

CHAPTER 2.

The Haunted House.

They came to Storm Park. It was a magnificent old mansion of several kinds of architecture. Some parts went right back to Norman days, but the bulk of it was Elizabethan.

They had crossed a pathfield, led by Mr. Dell. Right in front of the house they found the motor-car awaiting them.

"Now, boys," said Mr. Dell, "there is light enough. We will just have a trial scene in front of the house, dressed as we are. It is only to test the camera, and set us all at ease."

He sketched out the parts they had to play. For this scene they were supposed to be villagers terrified by some apparition at one of the windows of the house. They were to rush on to the lawn, point excitedly, and then run away as if in terror.

It was a simple rough-and-ready kind of scene. The very tall, straight man, whose name appeared to be Silas Shock, but whom everyone called "Pa," operated the camera.

Mr. Dell acted stage-manager, and shouted directions, while Ben Wheeler, the chauffeur, sat in his car, and made sarcastic remarks.

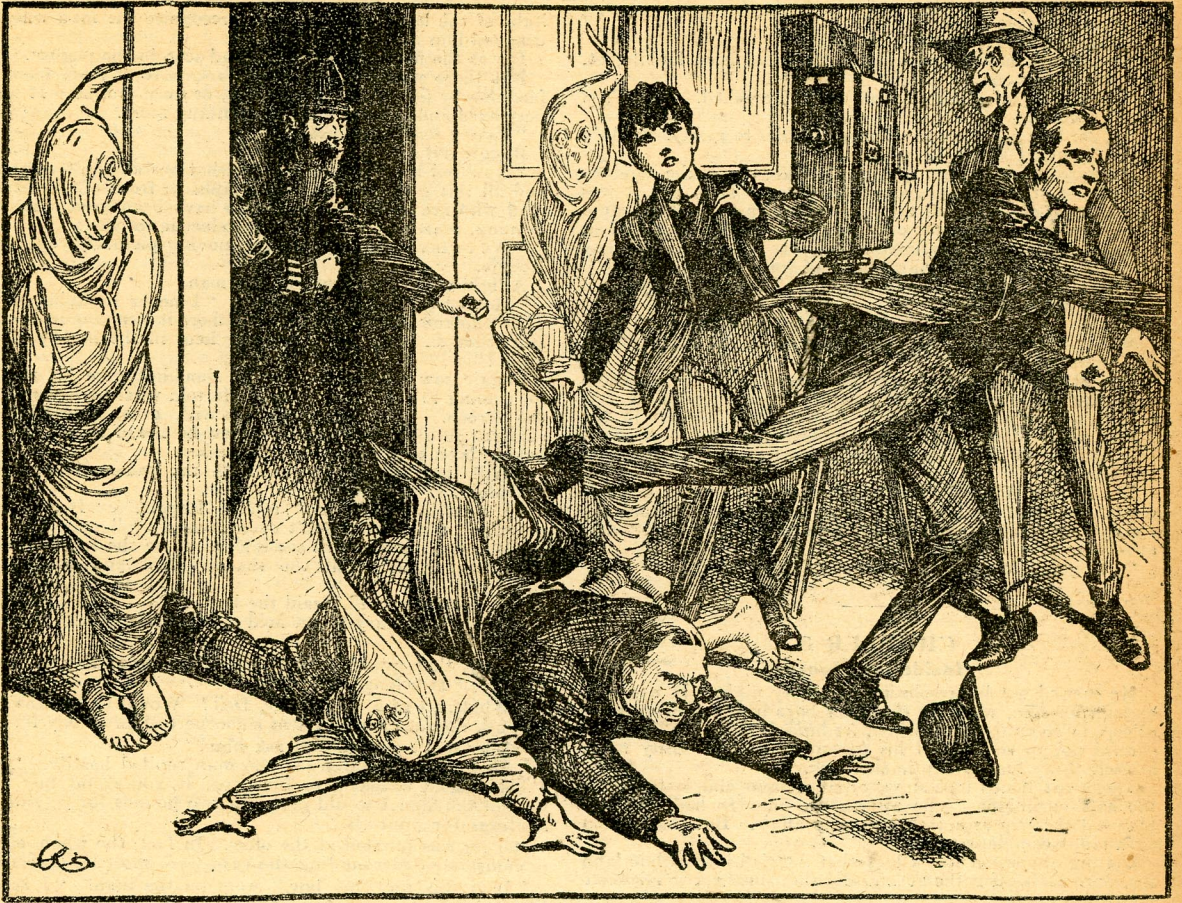
Simple as the scene was, they did it over and over for an hour before Mr. Dell was satisfied.

Then they returned to the camp, where a meal was spread and devoured.

"Where's Pa?" asked Dick Turney.

"He's developing," replied the fat boy.

"Better he had his tea and did that afterwards," put in Mr. Dell; "but there's no keeping Silas Shock from his work."



Suddenly, the most unexpected thing happened. A part of the wall seemed to open, and three men came bounding through. The first was Charles Rickfield, the escaped convict, and one of the other two wore a policeman's uniform.

After tea the boys strolled back to the house. Reggie found that Willie Burr, the fat boy, insisted on waddling by his side.

"I know where he does it," said Billie. "He's got a shed near the house that used to be a stable. I expect he'll give us a show as soon as he has a film ready."

They reached a well-built shed, almost as solidly-built as the house itself.

"In here!" said Billie Burr. As he pushed open the door there was a yell from within. "Shut that door, or I'll screw your neck, whoever you are."

"I thought he was developing," said Burr, "and I guess that's spoilt a foot or two of film."

"Can't we get into the house?" asked Reggie.

"No," said Billie. "It's locked up, and old Dell has the keys. No one can get in there."

A little later Silas Shock was ready to give a show. He had a screen up at one end of his shed, and the boy-actors had the interesting pleasure of seeing themselves on the canvas.

Of course, they made all sorts of critical remarks about each other as they appeared on the screen.

"That's Fatty! You can tell by the waddle!"

"There goes Hub, as if he owned the place!"

"Ere's the 'ero!"

This remark was for Reggie's benefit. The fact that he was to take the name part in the play had not been lost on the boys.

But Reggie did not notice the remark. He had been looking carefully at the screen. The fact was, he had seen some suspicious shadows in a small window quite at the back of the picture.

The shadows or marks were very indistinct, for at that part of the picture the camera was out of focus, but to his quick eyes the changing shadows had a meaning.

Suddenly he spoke.

"Stop a minute," he said. "Can we have that little bit again?"

"What ever for?" asked Silas Shock. "The whole film is only practice, and it's a lot of bother to go back."

"But that window at the corner," replied Reggie. "Something queer is going on inside there."

"Nonsense, my boy! The house is empty," put in Mr. Dell. "I've got the only key that there is, and I am sure that there can be no one in the place."

"Can't we have that part through again?" persisted Reggie.

"Very well," said Mr. Dell; "it's only a practice-film."

The necessary adjustments were made, and the portion of the film that Reggie wanted was once more shown on the screen. He pointed out the window, and presently the blurred shadows appeared.

"What do you make of it?" asked Mr. Dell.

"It seems to me as if someone came forward, and tried to open the window," said Reggie, "and then as if another person had dragged him back."

"What do you think, Silas Shock?" asked Dell.

"I don't think anything about it," said the operator. "I had the wrong lens in, and the edges of the picture are a bit blurred. The edge just happened to cross a window, and you get that effect. It often happens like that. Why, I've seen a regular battle fought at the edge of a badly-focused scene."

"I'm not so sure at all," said Mr. Dell. "I think the boy is right, and that something must have happened in that room. I don't see how it could have done, but the evidences of the picture is enough for me."

"Well, that's for you to say," replied Silas. "You pay the money, I only pull the strings. What shall I do?"

"We'll have the whole picture through again," said the millionaire, "and we'll all watch that window."

"Very good, sir!"

The whole picture from the beginning was shown again. Suddenly Reggie cried:

"Stop! There! Look!" he said.

He pointed, not to the window they had been looking at, but to another one.

"What do you think of that, sir?" he asked. "That's a man's face."

"If so, he's not the sort of man I'd like to meet on a dark night," replied Mr. Dell.

He spoke this of a face that was looking out of the window. It did not strike Reggie as an unpleasant face, but it was unusual and anxious. At the speed at which the pictures were generally shown it would only be on the screen a second or two, but by stopping the implement it was possible to keep any one picture exposed for any length of time.

"Do any of you boys know the face?" asked Mr. Dell.

There was no reply.

"If he lives in these parts someone ought to have seen him," said Mr. Dell. "A face like that ought not easily to be forgotten."

But Mr. Dell was not one for mysteries. He admitted that the circumstance was puzzling, and lingered a few moments over its discussion. Then he lost interest in the whole affair of the mysterious movements at the window. His business at the moment was to perfect his young actors in their parts.

But Reggie White did not forget what he had seen quite so easily. He had an idea that some mystery lay behind the strange appearances, and he determined to make an attempt at solving it.

"I'm going to get into that house," he resolved.

CHAPTER 3. Inside the House.

He carried out his resolution that very night. It was easy enough for him, when all the other boys in the caravan were asleep, to creep to the door and let himself out. He had been careful not to remove all his garments, and he easily made himself ready for his trip in the dark.

The great house looked very picturesque and beautiful in the soft moonlight as he approached it. He had mentally pictured the trip as a rather ghostly affair. But that notion soon faded completely away.

Getting admission was a task that worried him awhile, and the more he faced it the greater did the house get to resemble a fort or a castle.

"I believe it would be easier to get out of prison than into this place," he muttered at last.

And just then a light flashed for a second in one of the windows.

He stood back and watched. Almost immediately he saw the light again, but far brighter. It disappeared, only to show at another window, and later on at yet another.

For the next half-hour Reggie watched that travelling gleam, and marvelled all the time as to what it could mean. The mystery was quite unexpectedly solved.

He was standing by a side door of the house when suddenly he heard a sound within. The next moment the door was opened, and two men came out. He recognised them both.

They were Mr. Dell and the chauffeur, Ben Wheeler.

"There," Mr. Dell was saying, "I think that settles the question. We've searched the place twice this evening, and we find no trace of anyone being in there."

"But that doesn't make the film a liar, sir," replied Ben.

"It is true, it doesn't; and we'll have another look through to-morrow by daylight," was Mr. Dell's answer. "I have no doubt that someone was in there, because the picture proves it; but it is quite clear that no one is in there now."

With this the two men passed on. They had not seen Reggie, who had managed to hide himself behind a bush.

Now, probably that would have ended the boy's night adventure, and he would have gone quietly back to his bed, but that at that moment he heard a sound inside the house. It was a sound as if someone, walking in the dark, had tripped against some unexpected obstacle; and it was followed by a very human expression of anger.

Almost the next moment Reggie noticed that Mr. Dell must have made a blunder in locking the door, for he found that it moved at his touch.

The man inside must have seen it, or the moonlight around the edges must have caused him curiosity as why it was open. At all events, Reggie suddenly saw an arm dart out, and the next moment he felt himself caught by the collar.

He was dragged into the passage. A part of the wall—it didn't seem to him like a door—opened, and he was in a small, windowless apartment, larger than a cupboard, but scarcely big enough to call a room.

There were a couple of chairs, a small table on which was a

lamp, and some other simple articles of furniture. By the light of the lamp he was able to recognise the man who had dragged him in.

It was the man whose face he had seen in the picture.

But there was this significant fact, that at close view the face was by no means disagreeable, or even unkind. It was a perplexed and anxious face, but nothing more.

"Take a seat," said the man

Reggie did so.

"Now tell me," he went on, "what are all these caravans, and all this grouping for photographs in front of the house? And who are those two men who have been here twice this evening, searching the place with electric torches?"

"We're here making films for moving pictures," explained Reggie.

A light seemed to break on the man.

"Moving pictures!" he cried. "I never thought of it! That explains the mystery—or, rather, it explains part of it. But what on earth are you doing here in the middle of the night?"

Reggie saw no reason why he shouldn't give his reasons for coming to the lonely house. He told what he had seen on the screen. The man listened with great interest, that changed into positive anxiety when he heard about his face having been seen at the second window.

"Will that picture be shown in the palaces?" he asked nervously.

"I shouldn't think so," replied Reggie. "It was only practice. Why, we weren't even dressed up."

"But some people will see it?" went on the man. "They will get curious about the shadows that you saw, won't they?"

"Perhaps they will," said the boy.

"Would it be easy to get hold of it to destroy it?" the man asked.

"Why, that wouldn't be honest!" protested Reggie indignantly. "It belongs to Mr. Dell."

"What sort of a man is Mr. Dell? Would he sell the film and ask no questions if I sent someone to him to buy it?"

"Why don't you go and ask him?"

"Me? Why, I daren't!" the man replied hastily. "But I could send someone to him; or, if you could buy that part of the film, I would give you two pounds for it, and ten shillings for yourself."

Reggie was puzzled at the offer. In fact, the whole of the circumstances surrounding the case were most bewildering.

"It is this way, my boy," went on the man. "I rather like your looks, and you strike me as one who could be trusted. Now, there is nothing wrong in my being here at all. I am not a criminal, and have done nothing to be ashamed of, but frankly, I am in hiding, and it would be most disastrous to me if my whereabouts should become known."

Just at that moment there was a most curious sound. It was so near to Reggie that it almost made him jump. As near as it could be described, it sounded like a very feeble and very ancient child's toy trumpet.

"Do you mind waiting here a minute?" inquired the man, who apparently understood this sound as some kind of signal.

He left the little room, and as he did so Reggie was able to confirm his suspicion—that the room had no proper door, and that the opening was a part of the wall itself.

The man was not gone long, and when he returned it was with a companion—a middle-aged gentleman with a slight stoop and a rather scholarly appearance. He might be a professor of a college from his appearance. He certainly was about the last kind of person that one would expect to meet in suspicious circumstances at a lonely, vacant house near midnight. He carried a basket containing what looked like food.

He looked very earnestly at Reggie, and appeared to be pleased with the result of his examination.

"My boy," he said, speaking very slowly, as if picking his words carefully, "my friend here has told me that you have managed to get a picture of him at one of these windows, and that it is a moving-picture film. This is a very serious matter for us. If it were exhibited, it might—"

"It was only a practice picture," said Reggie. "There is no chance of it being exhibited."

"Still," went on the new-comer, "the film may be seen by just the people we don't desire should see it. Now, there is no use beating about the bush; we are to a very large extent in your hands already. It was a mistake for my friend here to have brought you in. He did it on a foolish impulse. Possibly it is a mistake also for me to see you, and to be seen here by you, but we risk that. We want that film destroyed, and we don't want to have to call attention to it by asking someone in authority to do so. I understand that you

have a conscientious objection to destroying other people's property. This is very proper, and does you credit."

He seemed to wait for Reggie to make a suggestion, but as none was forthcoming, he went on:

"It is late, my boy, and it is awkward talking here. I had to come over with some food for my friend, and the quicker I get back home the better. Can I see you somewhere to-morrow?"

Reggie knew that he would have a spare hour between nine and ten o'clock, and said so.

"Very well," said the gentleman. "My name is Professor Carlless, and you will find my house in the village half a mile up the road. It is the house next beyond the church. My name is on the plate outside."

Reggie promised to call.

"You will not breathe a word of this till you have seen me?"

"I promise."

Just as he was leaving, the man whom Reggie had seen first broke in with an explanation.

"You spoke about there being evidence of a struggle on the screen?"

"Yes."

"I can explain that. The professor and I were in a room upstairs. He had just come in, and he told me that a number of people were on the lawn outside. Foolishly I went to the window, and my friend came and dragged me away. Then we went to another room, where we thought we could see out without being seen, and I suppose that was how I got snapped."

It seemed a reasonable explanation.

Five minutes later Reggie was back in his bed in the caravan, greatly pleased to find that his absence had not been discovered.

The next morning everyone was up early. Hubert Nixon had discovered a brook near by with one spot that was deep enough for some most delightful bathing.

Evidently this spot was a rather favourite camping-ground, for they found the remnants of several picnics. One recent party had not been blessed with any love of neatness, for they had left a perfect litter of bones and bottles and waste-paper.

Somehow, quite by accident, Reggie happened to see that a part of a newspaper had fallen picture side up, and there was an illustration in it of a battleship, a thing that always interested him. He took it up, and found that the picture was badly torn. Not so the only other illustration that the paper contained. This was a photograph with the words under:

"The escaped convict!"

Reggie folded the paper away, for he recognised the face. It was that of the man who had admitted him into the lonely house.

CHAPTER 4.

The Escape.

Soon after nine Reggie was at the professor's house. He had very carefully examined the paper that he had picked up, but he had found nothing to help him as to the name of the escaped convict, or as to what his offence had been. The caption under the picture, "The escaped convict," was the only letterpress reference that he could find.

Then, again, he could not guess the date of the paper. It was torn and crumpled, and might have been lying about a long time even before the picnic-party used it. However, as soon as he got to the professor's house he ceased worrying over this.

The professor was not alone. A kind-faced but very sad-looking lady was with him.

"This is my sister," said the professor; "and she wants a word with you."

"My brother has told me what happened last night," said the lady. "The man you saw in Storm Park House yesterday is my husband."

Here was a revelation.

"His name is Rickfield," she went on—"Charles Rickfield. And he escaped from Dartmoor about three weeks ago. He was a convict with a long sentence before him. But he is an innocent man."

She said these last words with indignant emphasis, as if she were feeling deeply the injustice that her husband had suffered.

"Now, it is most important that he should remain in that house," she went on, "as he is positive that somewhere hidden within its walls are the proofs that he requires to establish his innocence. More than that, no one would suspect his living in such a place, and it is easy for us to bring across food to him."

The thing that was striking Reggie pleasantly, it must be admitted, was that all these people seemed to speak to him as if he were quite a grown-up person instead of a boy.

"Now you can see," went on Mrs. Rickfield, "that it would be the end of all his plans if that photograph should be seen and recognised. His picture has been in so many newspapers that it is almost a wonder that no one recognised it as it was."

"He didn't come out over well on the film," replied Reggie. "His face was a good bit blurred."

"I am glad to hear it," she went on. "But we want to lessen the chances as much as possible. Now, my brother has told me, and I can see for myself, that you are a properly conscientious boy, and I like you for it. But do you think it would be doing any great harm if you could get hold of that film and burn it? I understand that films burn quite easily. We would undertake that the owner will lose nothing."

"I think we ought to tell Mr. Dell," persisted Reggie, in answer to this plea. "I dare say I could get hold of that film easily enough and have an accident with it." He laid proper stress on the word accident. "But the thing is his, not mine."

A good many people would say that Reggie was conscientious to the point of priggishness here. This was partly his nature, but, in addition, it should be remembered that the whole business of making moving pictures was a kind of wonderland to him yet, and he felt as shy of interfering with any of the properties as a Red Indian would of starting to drive a motor-car.

But just at that moment there was an interruption. A pretty little girl of six or seven came into the room and ran to Mrs. Rickfield.

"Go away, Dora. We're busy now," said the lady.

She said it very kindly, but the words had a most unexpected effect. The poor little child began to sob.

"Oh, mammy!" she cried. "You're always busy and worried now! And daddy never comes back! Where is my daddy? Why will you never tell me that?"

Mrs. Rickfield caught up the child and kissed her tenderly, and led her out of the room, with kind and caressing words. She was back again in a few moments.

"The poor child feels it greatly," she said. "She has an instinct that something is wrong, and whenever I am planning things for her father it always seems to affect her in this way."

The scene had not been lost on Reggie. The sight of that child's tears decided him.

"About that film," he said. "You needn't worry any more. I'll make that film a hopeless wreck, if I get the sack for it!"

"But, my dear boy, we don't want you—"

"Don't say any more!" replied Reggie. "I have made up my mind, and now, if you don't object, I'll clear out, as we are supposed to be there by half-past nine."

Throughout that morning the boys were being coached up in their parts. A big discussion took place between Mr. Dell and Silas Shock as to whether they should try to take some of the inside pictures in the house or leave them till they got to the studio in London.

Mr. Dell wanted to take them actually in the house itself, but Shock said that the studio would be better. However, the millionaire carried his point, and an attempt was made forthwith in one of the big rooms. For this Reggie and some of the others had to dress.

It was rather fun, especially for the boys who acted the parts of ghosts, to go careering around in their fantastic garbs. They really made rather terrible ghosts. In this act Ben Wheeler, the chauffeur, took a hand, dressed as Mephistopheles, and his short foot gave a splendid chance for working in a cloven hoof. His garments had been made by a very skilful designer.

"Now then," cried Silas, "you ghosts crawl in as I showed you!"

They did so, crouching along one side of the room.

But suddenly the most unexpected thing happened. A part of the wall seemed to open, and three men came bounding through.

The first was Charles Rickfield, the escaped convict. Reggie noticed that one of the other two wore a policeman's uniform.

And Rickfield got away. Out through the open door he bolted, while the plain-clothes man fell over a crouching ghost, and the policeman ran foul of the camera, and fell.

Before either was up again, Reggie had accidentally slammed the door.

(Another long instalment of this splendid new serial story next Wednesday. Order your copy early to avoid disappointment, and induce all your chums to read this grand opening instalment.)

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NEXT WEDNESDAY: "THE GRAMMAR SCHOOL MASCOT!" A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale by Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD



THIS WEEK'S CHAT



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For Next Wednesday:

"THE GRAMMAR SCHOOL MASCOT!"

By Martin Clifford.

The reappearance of Gordon Gay & Co., the Grammar School heroes, after rather a long silence, will make next Wednesday's grand, long, complete story of school life most refreshing. A Grammarian named Mumford is the possessor of a most vivacious parrot who is taught to make use of such expressions as "Strafe St. Jim's!" "Rotten Show!" etc. Naturally enough, Tom Merry & Co. are not slow to get on the warpath, and many stirring incidents ensue in connection with

"THE GRAMMAR SCHOOL MASCOT!"

AN INTERESTING CRITICISM.

The following letter from a British public-school boy opens up an interesting controversy. The letter, though extremely critical, is not tinged with the maliciousness of a Malpas or the stupidity of a Stephens. I append the epistle in full:

Rood House, Rothley.

"Dear Mr. Editor,—Having read your paper the 'Gem' a good deal, I have come to the conclusion that you perhaps do not know what modern public-school life is; but I am willing to give you a few hints, as I should not like to see the paper decline.

"As the public-school life you depict is not at all correct, it might mislead many boys who do not go to public schools. For instance, in the best public schools no headmaster would let a boy go gallivanting off to America or Paris, as Tom Merry & Co. frequently do, in the middle of a term.

"No public school—or, at least, no *good* public school—to my knowledge (which is extensive) plays Soccer. Rigger is a gentleman's game. The finest type of man is the International Rigger man or Rigger 'blue.'

"Then, again, no public-school boy of fifteen wears Étons. The average pocket-money a public-school boy brings back is perhaps sixty or seventy shillings a term, and perhaps he gets a sovereign at half-term. I do not think any schoolboy gets fivers and tenners whenever he wants them; also, I think it's a mean, despicable trick to seize a chap's supply of tuck after he has just bought it or had it sent, as Tom Merry & Co. frequently do. As for such chaps as Cutts and Levison, at any *straight* public school they would have been so ragged that they would have left, or stopped their games, long ago. Again, any headmaster hearing of so many complaints would have asked Levison & Co.'s people to remove them from the school. I know *my* headmaster would. Knox, too, would have had his office of prefectship taken away long ago if he was such a rotter. Very little goes on in a public school without the headmaster's knowledge.—I am, yours truly,

"A PUBLIC-SCHOOL BOY."

First of all, my friend seems to make Martin Clifford out to be an ignoramus, and one who is not at all conversant with public-school life as it really is. This is absurd, for the popular "Gem" author attended one of our best-known public schools, where he gained great distinction.

The "Gem" Library is not intended, nor has it ever been intended, to give an accurate picture of modern life at a public school. If it did, then the stories would be tame and absolutely unreadable, save by a few prigs and pedagogues. St. Jim's is *not* to be taken as a typical public school, and I

make the admission freely and frankly. The "Gem" confines itself to fiction rather than facts, and is produced with a view to entertaining and amusing the boys and girls of Britain. At the same time, Mr. Clifford is always most careful to include a sound moral in each of his stories; and the actions of his heroes tend to inspire and uplift the readers, rather than drag them down to the lowest depths of vice, as many ignorant people seem to think.

It is sheer folly for my correspondent to say that Rigger is played to the exclusion of Soccer in all good public schools. Are not Charterhouse, Winchester, Westminster, Malvern, and Repton good public schools? They all play Soccer without exception, so "A Public-School Boy" must admit that he is woefully off-side.

Again, it is snobbish in the extreme to draw odious comparisons between the two forms of football, and to say those who play Rigger are exclusively gentlemen, and that those who incline to Soccer are invariably guttersnipes! Nothing of the kind. I admit that professional Soccer has not improved the game; but so far as public schools are concerned, most players, whether of Rigger or Soccer, are sound sportsmen.

I quite agree with the concluding remarks of my chum concerning the cads of St. Jim's. At most of our public schools they would receive but short shrift. At the same time, these characters are part of Martin Clifford's stock-in-trade, and it is essential, for the sake of the stories, that they should remain.

The whole crux of the matter is this. Tales dealing with public-school life as it actually is are tame and even dry; tales with a spice of exaggeration in them make pleasant reading. The "Gem" Library belongs to the latter category.

I trust that my friend will take this explanation in the spirit in which it is given, and that he will continue to take in the "Gem" Library for many years to come.

REPLIES IN BRIEF.

"Two Loyal Oxonians."—Does not sound much like pitying rather than blaming when you suggest boiling Malpas in oil, does it? Anyway, it's a queer way of pitying him. Will try to let Gordon Gay & Co. have a bigger show, but cannot promise a series dealing with them.

"Two Yorkshire Chums."—I see what you mean about Levison, but to talk of admiring him seems a little too much. You think that if he got with good chums he would run straight. But the Terrible Three and others have done all they could for him, and he is still Levison.

"A Girl Reader" (Melbourne).—The Correspondence Exchange is closed—for the time being, anyway. Neither Rook nor Kit the Gipsy is at St. Jim's now.

"A Loyal South African Reader."—I find I cannot tell you which of the States is the best for cattle-ranching. Probably there is no absolute best. But there is much ranching in Kansas, Nebraska, Texas, Oklahoma, and several others. Not so much, I think, in Ohio or Iowa.

L. C. (Margate).—There must surely be plenty of junior football clubs in your locality. Take a walk round on Saturday afternoons and look out for matches.

"A Staunch Admirer" (Johannesburg).—Your letter was quite all right, spelling, grammar, and all, and certainly did not need rewriting. You are another who would like to see Levison reform. But I fear he has not got it in "him" to make a real fresh start and stick to it.

(Continued on page iii of cover.)

REPLIES IN BRIEF—continued.

M. McM. (Gerriston).—I don't take it as an act of impertinence for any reader to write to me, but as a courtesy. Tom Merry has no near relatives. Mayne was for a short time with Gore, Skimpole, and Talbot, but returned to Crooke's study. He is now in a higher Form. Most of your other questions are answered in the Christmas Supplement. There is no paper dealing with Gordon Gay & Co.

J. F. P. (Sheffield).—I don't think there is a Sheffielder at either St. Jim's or Greyfriars. But Jack Blake is Yorkshire. You will have had a very fair whack of footer yarns by this time. More to come!

E. T. and A. B. (Northfield).—Probably Tom Merry would beat Figgins, but not without a tough tussle. Nothing in it between Kildare and Wingate as all-round sportsmen. No Remove Form at St. Jim's. The Upper Fourth is practically the same. The places are quite imaginary.

H. S. (Sydney).—There are many other schools besides Eton and Harrow where Eton sits are the rule. I always prefer that "Gem" and "Magnet" Leagues should make their own rules. Some are made up of keen readers, who like to talk over the stories together, and feel that the paper is a bond of union; others run footer or cricket teams, and so on. There is no badge at present.

A. L. D. (Finsbury Park).—Of course a boy could spend five pounds in a day! Anyone who argues to the contrary must be potty. We don't propose to conduct an experiment to prove it.

"Never-Never" (Australia).—Thank you for one of the most interesting letters I have ever read. You give a very clear picture of your surroundings. Yes, I have read "Geoffrey Hamlyn" and "The Hillyers and the Burtons" and "Robbery Under Arms," and ever so many more Australian novels, and yours is not the first bit of wattle-bloom that has reached me. They call it mimesa in South Africa, you know. Do you remember Kipling's poem, in which the Australian trooper smells the wattle round some "dorp" or "fontein," "riding in in the rain," and thinks of Sydney and the big brass bands and the Hunter River? We are all proud of the Australians' great deeds in Gallipoli, and it seems hard that after all they should not have won through. But if men could have done it, they would. Please excuse delay in replying. I am very busy indeed.

H. C. A. (London, N.).—There is a good deal in what you say. Personally, I should feel no grief if I never saw Malpas' name again. But he has had a number of imitators, and we must dress some of them down now and then.

W. B. (London, E.C.).—Very pleased to hear from you. You want to make certain people squirm. But see reply above to a reader who thinks they have been handled roughly enough.

A. B. (Auckland).—I suppose you mean that you want me to introduce characters bearing your surname and that of your friend into the "Gem"? But Mr. Clifford does the christening!

Richard L. Cahill (Seven Roads, Temple Michael, Carrick-on-Shuir) would be very pleased to send W. A. Dann (address wanted) a copy of "Through Thick and Thin." Anything to oblige a Gemite, says R. L. C. This is the right spirit!

"Ho."—You will be sure to hear of Dick Julian again.

N. G. (Inverell, New South Wales).—Pleased to hear from you, and to know that you don't think the "Gem" stories have gone off, but consider each better than the one before it. "Amateur Nurse."—We have had quite a number of stories connected with the war, but the "Gem" yarns are of school life, you know, and we can't make war stories of them. The proper age for a boy to begin smoking is when he leaves off being a boy.

"Interested."—Though rather late in the day, I congratulate you on "The Cradle," which is a very creditable production indeed. I hope it will live long.

W. P. (Melbourne).—Do you know the story about "Punch"? Somebody told the editor that the paper was not as good as it used to be. "No," he replied; "and it never was!" But it's rather surprising that at eleven you should be looking back to the "good old times" of the "Gem," while the great majority of our readers say it is better than ever. Yes, Australia is certainly "all right"—and quite as good as it used to be, if not better!

W. D. (Bow).—Good! A whole eleven, each buying the "Gem." That's something like support! Sorry for delay in replying.

J. W. (Southsea).—Get your father to read one or two copies. I don't think he will call them "blood and thunders" after that. You may hear of Buck Finn again some day.

"A Loyal Gemite" (Oxford).—No, I don't edit the "Union Jack." You put Talbot first and Grundy second. So do many others, though D'Arcy seems to be as big a favourite as either.

B. F. H. (Romford).—Glad to hear your football team is called after the "Gem." Correspondence Exchange is closed, and, in fairness, we must not make exceptions.

"Four Girl Chums" (Bury).—Very pleased to hear from you. Don't talk about taking the liberty of writing! Letters

"Sweet Seventeen."—As you will have seen, the "Greyfriars Herald" is now out. "Tom Merry's Weekly" will soon follow, I hope. Wharton and Cherry have no second Christian names.

"Famous Five" (Buckhaven).—Fiction is fiction, you know. Mr. Clifford has quite enough to do in writing a long story every week. Cousin Ethel and Figgins are very good friends. It is a bit too early for them to be more than that. Marjorie Hazeldene is the sister of Peter Hazeldene, and H. W. & Co. came to know her through him.

J. W. (ss. Chloris).—Very glad to hear your comrades appreciate my papers. Hope you will continue to steer clear of the submarines.

J. S. (Toronto).—Would it not be better if you chose your own trade? After all, I don't quite know enough about you to be able to choose for you.

A. W. G. (Newport, Mon).—The story you want is unfortunately out of print. Glad to know you are so keen on the companion papers.

W. S. (Bury).—Tom Merry is the equal of Harry Wharton both as boxer and footballer.

"Two P.'s of the C."—What are they, by the way? I am left guessing. Skimpole is an only child. One could not imagine a family of Skimpoles.

Mrs. T. B. (Nanaimo, B.C.).—Sorry, but pictures were all gone long before your letter arrived. Very good of you to send back numbers to Miss Frodin. They will go where they are sure to be appreciated.

"Adherent" (Merthyr Tydvil).—Thanks for letter. Tom Merry is not everybody's favourite, though he has many friends. D'Arcy, Blake, and Talbot are all keenly supported, as well as Kerr, Lowther, and others.

"Partisan" (Merthyr Tydvil).—See above reply.

W. H. J. (Montreal).—If you look through the Replies in Brief in one or two numbers you will see several soldiers' names with requests for back numbers. Cannot say whether the Canadian P.O. carries them free—if so, not to individual soldiers, I imagine.

J. K. (Beddington, Alia, Canada).—Pictures all gone. You were too late. Joke old. Glad you like the "Gem."

C. W. (West Gorton).—As you will see, we are now publishing readers' photos. Cannot yet give a date for "Tom Merry's Weekly."

J. H. S. (Newcastle).—Kerr has figured pretty prominently in several stories, but may be the leading character in one before long.

F. Merry.—Your friend seems a doubting Thomas. You can tell him that we get hundreds of letters every week, and have no need to invent replies. Sorry for delay in answering.

M. A. L. (Toronto).—The stories are fiction. You will already have seen that Bob Cherry and Tom Merry have met with the gloves on.

C. R. (Montreal).—You have a good memory. But Talbot would have been little better than a passenger with a damaged right wrist, even though he can bowl with his left hand.

"Ruglen Glens."—"Figgy's Folly" is out of print.

G. A. (East Ham).—Blake's cousin got a commission.

A. J. D. (Sale).—Sorry. Correspondence Exchange closed.

A. O., jun. (Sunderland).—Your tongue-twister is a verse of a popular music-hall song, which nearly everybody knows. There does not seem to be any sufficient reason for inserting it.

C. N. (Margate).—Jokes not quite good enough. Try again!

D. B. R. (Tylorstown).—Thanks for your letter, and apologies for not replying before. Perhaps the w.p.b. is the right place for the sort of letters you refer to. Dr. Holmes arranged for Talbot's stay at St. Jim's. I am not sure where Bob Cherry lives.

"Betty" (Cambuslang).—That's the style! Your father objected to the companion papers. You persuaded him to sample them. Now he reads them regularly. My compliments to him on having a judicious daughter, and to you on having a fair-minded father, and good luck to both of you!

G. E. (Wimbledon).—Manuscript stories in the competition had just the same chance as typewritten ones—that is, if I could read them. And there were only a few that I could not.

C. B. W. (Edgware Road).—Another Boy Scout yarn will come along in due course. Yes, Giacomo is still at St. Jim's.

S. G. S. (S. Tottenham).—I think most of our readers would rave and tear their hair if Tom Merry & Co. were promoted to higher Forms, and their places were taken by others.

"Old Scout."—Glad to hear that both you and your sister appreciate the companion papers.

"Some Reader" (Rathmings).—I will consider your suggestion of a competition with boxing-gloves as prizes. Figgins is perhaps the best boxer among the New House juniors. The St. Jim's footer colours are red and white.

REPLIES IN BRIEF—continued.

"Springbok" (Johannesburg).—We get lots of letters from S.A.—and every writer wants a S.A. junior at Greyfriars or St. Jim's! No; the Sidney Drew who writes such fine stories is not a cinema actor.

D. W. (Wolverhampton).—I am afraid the Tom Merry cinema notion would entail too much additional work at a busy time like this. The place you mention is an imaginary one. The letters were also imaginary. These two replies answer the third query also.

Private S. Thompson, 13422, B Coy., 3rd Battalion Worcestershire Regt., B.E.F., France, would be glad to receive back numbers of the companion papers from any readers who have them to spare.

Three Old Readers send a message to all who have friends on active service—forward to the Front every "Gem" or "Magnet" you can spare, for nothing else cheers up the men in the trenches quite so much. They also send from the Front personal messages, which I assure them are most heartily appreciated.

"A Girl Reader" (Brettle, Lanes).—See reply to "D. W.," which will answer your query. Why not send the back numbers to men at the Front? They will be more than welcome. We give names from time to time. See one above this.

L. S. W. (Barrow-in-Furness).—Yes, I think yours is a very good and useful trade. As to night-school, if you don't feel too tired after your work, I should say it would be well to go. There are lots of things you can still learn.

T. W. B. (Cardiff).—I note that you prefer complete stories to serials. But there are many others who like serials, you know. We hope to bring out "Tom Merry's Weekly" before long.

"A Regular Reader" (St. Albans).—Bob Cherry is a better boxer than Nugent. Peter Todd is about fifteen.

"Gemite" (Chorlton-cum-Hardy).—Correspondence Exchange closed. Wun Lung has been in the limelight since your letter reached me. Sorry for delay in replying.

"Corporal T." (Johannesburg).—I hope to be able to publish another story of Koumi Rao before long.

"Hopeful" (S. Africa).—Perhaps I shall be able to persuade Mr. Clifford to introduce a South African junior before long. But the stage is already a bit crowded. Patty Wynn is the best bowler among the St. Jim's juniors.

"A Wellwisher" (Newcastle).—The only way to prevent the illustrations giving away the plot, to some extent, would be to cut them out altogether. But I don't think you would

like this, and I am sure most of our readers would simply howl with rage.

N. M. (Tadmorden).—A 3d. book dealing with Tom Merry & Co. will be published as soon as possible. No badges obtainable during the war. Cannot afford space for Scout matter, I fear.

"A Loyal Reader" (Huddersfield).—You want a story about D'Arcy minor and his chums: We'll see! But Mr. Clifford cannot write every story to command, you know; he actually has ideas of his own!

E. S. (Johannesburg).—See reply to "Hopeful" above.

"O.H.M.S." (Manchester Regt.).—"The Housemaster's Homecoming" seems to have hit the mark. We have had hundreds of appreciative letters.

T. C. (Bournemouth).—"Mystery Island" was a great favourite with most readers. You want school serials in the "Friend," it seems; but that would be difficult to manage with the Rookwood tales now running. Glad you like the Talbot stories. Gussy is sure to fall in love again sooner or later—made that way, you know.

E. R. (Kingston-on-Thames).—Sorry, but our Correspondence Exchange is closed, and we really must not make exceptions in any cases but those of soldiers and sailors. No, you cannot get a letter to the place mentioned by post, because there is no such place actually. It is imaginary.

H. G. Bird, 6953, Wireless Unit, 108th Heavy Battery, R.G.A., B.E.F., France, would welcome letters from any boy or girl "Gem" or "Magnet" reader between seventeen and nineteen.

"A Durham Pirmou."—Many thanks for your letter. I did not find it a line too long. It is especially interesting to know that your mother, at sixty-six, is keen on the companion papers, and your copies are certainly put to good use.

"Two Loyal Readers."—Herr Schneider is still at St. Jim's. Though a German, he is a good sort, and would scorn to betray the country in which he earns his living. Mr. Carrington you will have heard of again before this.

G. H. (Stoke-on-Trent).—What's the matter with red hair? A capital colour. Plenty of great men have had auburn locks (arrrroy, I suppose the funny people say), among them Wolfe, the man to whom we largely owe the fact that Canada is British, not French. Don't do anything to it. Never mind the jokes.

C. H. S.—Even though you are a big chap for your age, you are not called upon to enlist at sixteen, and as your father's condition makes it so difficult for you to leave home, you are fully justified in staying. Sorry I cannot put you on the track of war work. Better make inquiries locally.

Alec L.—See "Gem" Supplement for everything but Gussy's cabbage patch. That is among the things that "used to was," I fear.

J. P. (Polmont).—To get even a small paper printed would cost quite a whack of money. Nearly as much for four copies as for four hundred, because the great item, until the numbers get high enough to make the cost of paper considerable, is the composing (type-setting), which costs just as much even if only one copy is printed.

"Seaforth" (Vancouver).—"Cousin Ethel's Schooldays" ought to fill the bill for you.

"A Loyal Gemite" (Wednesbury).—Why shouldn't a Lord's son be as simple as anybody else? Echo answers "why." It ought to answer "else," but never mind. Merry v. Cherry—always doubtful; Blake v. Wharton—h'm! ditto; Lowther v. Figgins—Figgy, I think; Talbot v. Bull—duuno; Wingate v. Kildare—duuno.

"Ching Lung."—"Tom Merry's Weekly" will be out before long, I hope.

"A Keen Reader."—Neither Mr. Clifford nor Mr. Richards seems able to explain why he considers "Gerald" a specially suitable name for a wrong'un. To put the balance right, Mr. Richards suggests a really, truly angelic Gerald; but Mr. Clifford says you fellows would not take to him if he did blow in.

E. J. (Camden Town).—Shall we advertise the "Gem" as a cure for Zeppelin nerves? I rather fancy, though, that there is not very much the matter with your nerves, anyway.

"A Nottingham Gemite."—"School and Sport" will answer your query as to the best junior footer teams at St. Jim's and Greyfriars, and the Special Supplement will tell you Monteith's age.

"Fred" (Colchester).—Thanks for suggestion. No doubt sooner or later a speech day, with prize-giving, will come into one of the St. Jim's yarns.

"Mac" (Q. P.).—Our Correspondence Exchange is closed, and we cannot make exceptions.

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and containing

- Splendid Stories—
- Huge Fun—Tricks—
- Games—Puzzles—
- Toy Models & Simple
- Prize Competitions.

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Your Editor