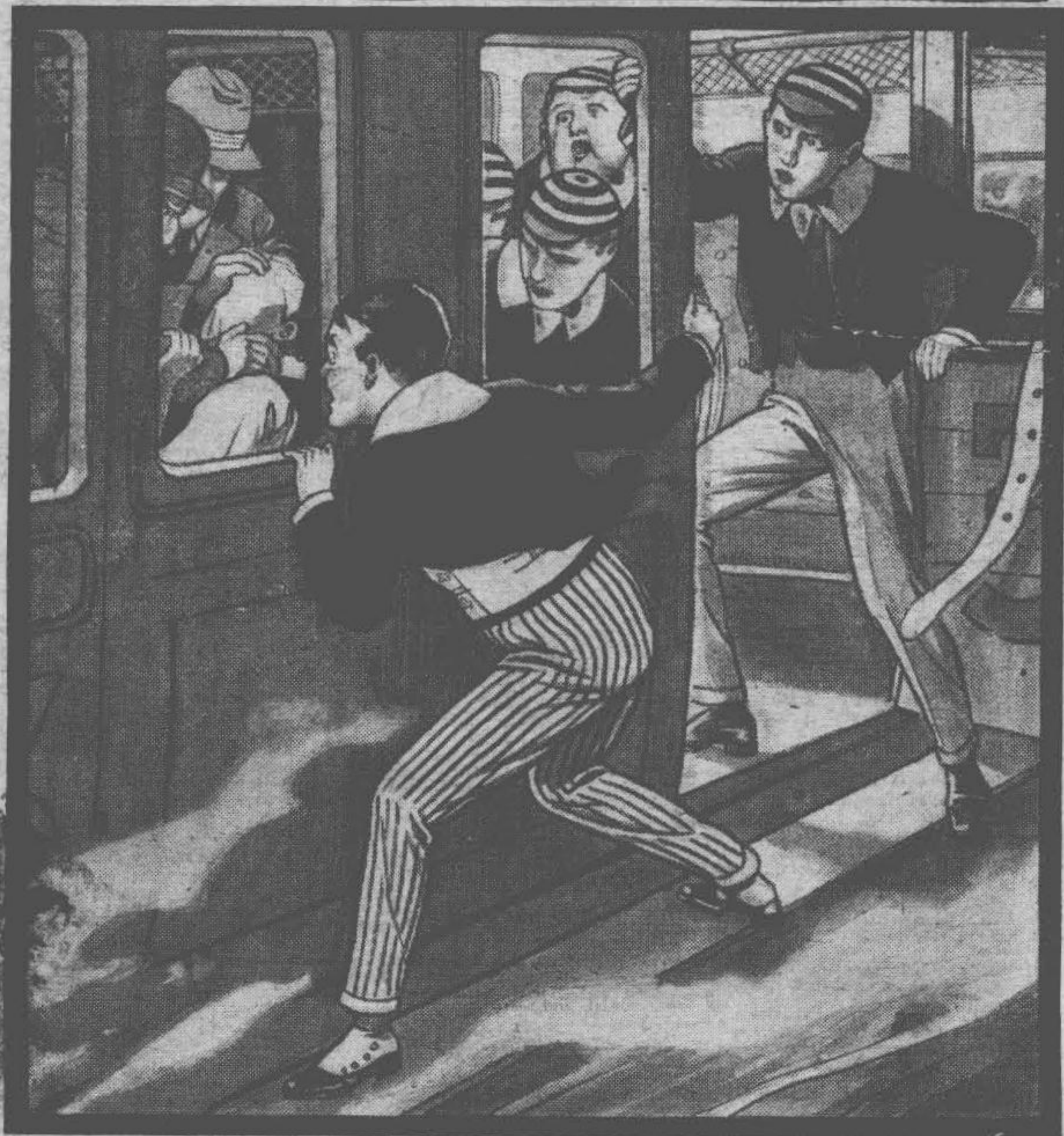


ARTHUR AUGUSTUS' ALLY!

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



ST. JIM'S TO THE RESCUE!

(An Extraordinary Scene in the Grand Long Complete Story in this issue.)

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ARTHUR AUGUSTUS' ALLY!

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

By **MARTIN CLIFFORD.**

CHAPTER 1.

Support for Gussy.

"WHAT'S the joke, Monty?" Tom Merry asked that question, coming into No. 10 Study on the Shell passage, which he shared with his chums, Lowther and Manners, and also, for the time being, with Philip Ignatius Parker, a new fellow to whom a good deal of mystery seemed to attach.

"Ha, ha, ha! Look for yourself, Tommy! There's an invitation for you, and one for old Manners. Jolly queer there isn't one for Parker. Pignacious would be a far more hopeful subject for Gussy's improving schemes than any of us, I should have thought. Will I attend? Won't I, that's all? I wouldn't stay away for anything!"

"So our Gustavus has really called a meeting of his new society at last?" said Tom. "And you've used up all the pepper, Monty!"

Parker and Manners came in together at this moment, and Parker heard Tom's words of reproach and regret.

Manners was the one among the Terrible Three who had most strongly objected at first to the intrusion of Parker upon their brotherhood. Manners still objected. At least, he said he did; and he should have known. But since something that had happened a day or two earlier all three had come to take rather a different view of "the intruder."

Parker might be a queer bird. There might be—indeed, there certainly was—a mystery about him. But beyond all doubt Parker had pluck. And pluck was not the only likeable quality he possessed.

So, on the whole, the Terrible Three, though quite ready to chip Parker, and by no means disposed to adopt his notion that his judgment was of far more importance than theirs, had got reconciled to his presence.

"Really, Lowther, you do not mean to tell me that you bought pepper for any such puerile and unworthy purpose as the hampering of D'Arcy's well-intentioned efforts to improve the tone of the school, do you?" said Parker, in tones of reproof.

"I didn't mean to tell you anything about it," replied Lowther, grinning. "It did not appear necessary. You ought to have been able to guess that."

"Rather!" said Manners. "Think we're going to have old ass Gussy jolly well improving us. Not likely! We've got enough of that kind of thing to stand in our own study, I reckon."

"There are very many ways in which D'Arcy—"

"Makes a giddy ass of himself, Pignacious! We know that!" put in Lowther. "Still, there is a limit. And we rather think he's reached that limit when he tries to start a society for—What's he call it, Tommy?"

Tom Merry glanced down at the neatly typewritten invitation in his hand.

"He don't say 'start,' Monty—nothing so common! It's to 'inaugurate a society for the amelio—'"

"Never mind Amelia, old scout, especially if you can't pronounce her! I haven't looked the lady up in the encyclopædia yet, so I'm not in a position to enlighten your darkness."

"Rats, Monty! I can pronounce it all

serene, and I know what it means, too, so I score over you, you blithering old ignoramus! 'For the Amelioration of Manners.'"

"Here! Is that right?" snapped Manners. "I'm not going to put up with that, you know! I've warned Gussy about it before, the thundering old ass! Hang his silly piffle! What does he suppose I want Amelia-whatever-naming for any more than any other chap does?"

"I am surprised, Manners, that you should not at once recognise the fact that no personal reference to you is, or can possibly be, intended," said Parker, in his most grown-up way—the way that Manners was always more disposed to resent than either of his chums.

"What's he use my name for, then?" demanded Manners hotly.

"He does nothing of the sort!" replied Parker.

"Idiot! Can't I believe my own eyes? Here it is, as plain as a—as a—oh, as your silly fat face! 'M-a-n-n-e-r-s!' If that doesn't spell my name, what does it spell?"

"It indicates something of which, if I may judge by the exceedingly rude and opprobrious terms in which you address me, you know very little—your name thus being a complete misnomer!"

Manners stared in hostile fashion. Monty Lowther gravely drew an inkstand nearer, dipped a pen, and said blandly:

"Would you mind saying that all over again? I should like to put it in writing, you know, Parker!"

"Do not be cheaply funny, Lowther! You have brains superior to those of Manners—that is, if he really misunderstands so completely the meaning of our friend D'Arcy!"

"I know Gussy a heap better than you do, Parker!" growled Manners. "This is a bit of his beastly swanky check! He says he's going to form a giddy society for the Something or Other of Manners! Assassination, is it? No, it's Amelioration, whatever that means. Well, I'm not going to stand it! Parker says he don't mean me. But what do you suppose the rest of the school will think? We ain't all so jolly knowing as old Parker! We don't tumble to it that when a chap says one thing—in typing, too—he means something entirely different, and—"

"Something very different indeed. So far, I am in entire agreement with you, Manners," said Parker. "And yet—not, after all, so wholly different, for beyond all question your manners stand in grave need of improvement, which would, I think have been a better word for D'Arcy to use than amelioration—"

"Same to you, and many of 'em!" snapped Manners. "It may be doubted whether the explanation Parker offered was really necessary to enable Manners to understand. 'Gussy is jolly well welcome to reform the giddy school—if he can! But I'm hanged if I'm jolly well going to have him dragging my name into it like this!'"

And from the point of view of Harry Manners there was some ground for complaint. St. Jim's was not given to missing the chance of a jape because that jape was rather cheap and obvious; and it

was fairly certain that Manners would hear a good deal about his proposed "amelioration" by the great Gussy.

Parker looked from one to the other of the Terrible Three. He saw from the grinning faces of Tom Merry and Lowther that they were pulling his leg more or less. Parker had learned by this time that they did not consider leg-pulling an unfriendly action; and he saw no use in resenting it at the moment.

But what he was disposed to resent was the reception given to D'Arcy's notion.

This was Philip Ignatius Parker's first experience of public school life. As has already been indicated, that experience was being gained under unusual conditions; also, as will appear more plainly a little later on in this story, for a special and somewhat strange purpose.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was the one fellow who had from the outset treated the new boy with unfailing courtesy. The pulling of Parker's leg was far from the thoughts of Gussy. And Parker really liked Gussy very much indeed—which was not at all surprising. Moreover, he believed in this project of Gussy's, which was surprising, even for a fellow with Parker's very limited experience.

"I don't see any invite for Pignacious," remarked Lowther.

"I should be glad if you would refrain from the use of that absurd nickname!" snapped Parker.

"Sorry, Philip dear!" grinned Lowther. "But why aren't you asked to the funeral?"

"To the what?"

"The funeral. Don't I speak plainly?"

"Your speech is plain, but your meaning quite obscure!"

"I can help you out this time, Parker," said Manners. "Monty means that this giddy meeting will be the death and burial of Gussy's fat-headed scheme."

"Really? I should have given St. Jim's credit for more intelligence and greater openness of mind than that!"

"Then why ain't you going, Parker?"

"I am going, Manners."

"Oh, I see! No need for Gussy to send you one of these things because you'd promised in advance to be there. Some sense in Gustavus, after all. He'd made sure of an audience of one."

"Not at all—I cannot be considered as one of the audience. I have promised to support D'Arcy on the platform!"

"My hat!" gasped Tom Merry. "Do you know what you are letting yourself in for?"

"Of course he doesn't!" said Lowther. "See here, Pignacious, old son, you take your uncle's advice, and give that platform a jolly wide berth!"

"Why?"

"Oh, don't explain, Lowther, you chump! Let him back old ass Gussy up! It will make it a heap funnier! What a pity you used up that pepper!"

Parker glared at Manners.

"Do you mean to infer, Manners, that you would use—"

"I don't mean to infer anything, Parker! I don't mind telling you straight out, knowing what a pig-headed-bounder you are, that you'll have the warmest time of your life if you go on that platform with Gussy! You'll simply

be ragged bald-headed, and that's all about it!"

"And as for the pepper—well, it wouldn't be very polite to say we are sorry it's all gone, considering the use it was put to; but it does seem rather a pity there isn't time to lay in a fresh stock before this evening," said Lowther. "Still, there are other ways!"

The reference to the manner in which the pepper had been used made Parker's angry face relax a trifle, for it had been used in his cause. The Terrible Three had come to his aid when he was attacked by a couple of ruffians in Rylcombe Wood, and in the rout of the ruffians the pepper—bought in anticipation of the very meeting now announced by D'Arcy—had played no small part.

"I have no wish to forget or to make light of my obligations to you three," said Parker gravely. "I am quite sure that it would be impossible to find in the whole school three fellows of higher courage. Nevertheless, I do hope that many more than three may be found who have a keener sense of the fitness of things, and who will see in D'Arcy's project something more than a mere matter for ribald merriment!"

"That one's straight for your address, Tommy," said Manners, grinning.

"Or absurd practical joking!" finished Parker, paying no heed to the interruption.

"Don't you believe it, Parker!" said Lowther, shaking his head.

"Keep off it, Parker," Tom advised.

"I shall do nothing of the sort, Merry. I have promised D'Arcy my support, and he shall most certainly have it!"

CHAPTER 2.

A Registered Letter.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY called it a meeting for the purpose of "inaugurating a society for the Amelioration of Manners and the Improvement of Language" at St. Jim's.

The Shell and the Fourth called it "Gussy's Gas-Party."

Not that it was by any means unpopular.

On the contrary, many fellows had told the promoter that they considered it a slap-up wheeze.

As for joining the society—hadn't that better be left until after the meeting?

No doubt there would be a bit of a crush to join, but they did not mind taking their chances about that.

Support D'Arcy on the platform? Well—no! On the whole, and after giving the matter due consideration—no!

It would look too swanky. Oh, it was all right for Gussy, of course. Everybody knew what a high-toned fellow he really was. But it would be swanky for them. Besides, they were not orators, like Gussy.

One fellow had been persuaded to join Gussy and Parker on the platform. One had been nearly persuaded.

Both were Shell fellows.

The first was Skimpole. Skimmy really had not needed much persuasion. The object of the meeting appealed to him. Not so much as some other things might have done, perhaps; but still, it appealed to him. And any chance to show himself on a platform was quite in Skimmy's line, in spite of many discouragements.

So it was in Grundy's. Moreover, Arthur Augustus, with the tact and judgment for which he was famed, very nearly won over Grundy by judicious flattery. In his anxiety to obtain one more supporter, he went so far as to say that the success of the movement was



Mellish came cycling up. "Hallo, old pal!" cried Smiler. "You ain't ever goin' to pass us without a word, are you?" (See chapter 8.)

certain from the very outset, if only Grundy associated himself with it.

Grundy was also sure of this. Grundy believed himself a Beau Brummell as well as an Admirable Crichton, a Charles Burgess Fry, and several other things.

But Grundy kicked when he heard that Parker was to support the movement and appear on the platform.

The great George Alfred gave Gussy his choice. Parker or Grundy? He might have either. Both he could not have. Grundy was not a rancorous person, but he had not yet been able to forgive Parker for what had happened; or, rather, for what had been said, on the footer field.

Grundy did not imagine that D'Arcy could hesitate for a moment. The very idea seemed absurd to Grundy.

D'Arcy didn't.

His choice was made at once.

But he chose Parker.

Grundy had seldom had a bigger shock.

As he confided to Wilkins and Gunn, he did not mind about himself. He did not suppose that any blessed society could Amelia-whatsheername his manners or improve his language, and he would take thumping good care this one didn't get the chance.

But he was greatly worried about D'Arcy. The poor fellow's brain must be softening! Grundy felt sure of that.

Wilkins and Gunn were not quite so sure.

The meeting was to take place in the crypt, after classes were over for the day.

Gussy's arrangements had been made well in advance. During the midday interval other arrangements were being made there. But about these, though there could be no doubt that they were connected with the meeting, Gussy knew nothing, and suspected nothing.

It did not occur to Gussy as suspicious that Blake, Herries, and Digby insisted on his turning out for footer practice before dinner, though he did wonder why so few fellows were present that only nine a side could be raised. And the

eighteen included several who did not usually play with the members of the Junior Eleven.

The Terrible Three were among the absentees, and so were such stalwarts as Kangaroo, Clive, and Clifton Dane.

All of these, and quite a lot of others, were busy getting ready for "Gussy's gas-party" in the crypt.

The crypt hardly seemed an ideal place for a meeting at that season of the year. But no doubt Arthur Augustus had his own reasons for preferring it; and quite certainly the Shell and Fourth had their reasons for raising no objection to it.

Ruddy from footer, Gussy looked in at Study No. 10 on the Shell corridor before changing for dinner.

The Terrible Three were there, and so was Parker, who also wore footer garb. Parker, though not in the best of training, and very apt to get puffed, had already proved that he had in him the makings of quite a decent half-back.

Toby, the School House page, came in behind the swell of the Fourth.

"Registered letter for you, Master Merry, an' a tellergram for Master Parker," he said.

Parker tore open the buff-covered envelope at once. Tom turned the blue-lettered one over in his hands before opening it.

"This is jolly queer, you chaps," he said. "The thing's postmarked Rylcombe, and dated three days ago. Must have been delayed in the post. But what on earth can anyone at Rylcombe be sending me a registered letter for?"

"Open it and see, duffer!" said Manners.

"There really seems, Tommy, a certain amount of horse-sense in the suggestion Manners makes, although it is made by an—"

"Weally, Lowthah, I don't know whethah you or Mannahs is the more gwossly wude!" remarked Arthur Augustus disapprovingly. "He cawactewises Tom Mawwy as a duffah, for no

weason whatever that I can see, and you draw the inference that he is an ass!"

"Don't say for no weason whatever, Gussy, or I shall actually doubt your judgment!" said Lowther. "There are all sorts of reasons for considering Manners—"

"Oh, you dry up, idiot!" snapped Manners. "What in the world have you got there, Tom?"

Tom Merry had opened his letter now. Out of it had dropped three little tubes of rubber.

"Oh, hang it! If their cheek isn't colossal!" he cried.

"Why, what are those things?" Parker asked.

"They look wathah like valve wub-bahs," said Arthur Augustus, peering at them curiously.

"They are valve rubbers," Tom said, grinning. "Don't you see, you chaps? It was some of the Grammarian crowd that messed up our bikes in Rylcombe the other day, and now—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Lowther and Manners together.

Parker stared at them. He understood, but he could not see the thing in the same humorous light as they did.

"Weally, I do not in the vowy least compwehend," said Gussy, who knew nothing about the trick played upon the Terrible Three.

"I don't know that it's at all necessary you should, Gustavus," said Lowther blandly. "If you did you might find it necessary to extend the scope of your society to Rylcombe Grammar School, and, then, I fancy, you really would have bitten beyond your chewing capacity!"

"Manners, none; customs, nasty," said Tom. "That's the Grammarians, in four words."

"Which of them was it?" asked Manners. "We've got to get even with the bounders, you know, Tommy."

"I should recommend treating them with silent contempt," said Parker.

"Just as you did the other day, when they jumped on you, eh, Pignacious?" put in Lowther.

"My name—"

"Here we are!" cried Tom, drawing a small slip of paper from the envelope. "I didn't notice this. 'We are poor, but honest. It would not be honest to keep these. Done again, St. Jim's!—Carboy & Blanc, Cycle Disrepairers.'"

The Terrible Three roared. So did Arthur Augustus, who saw the joke now. But Parker refused to see it as a joke at all.

"It is in extremely bad taste, to say the least of it," he said.

"It was jolly lucky for you, though, Parker," struck in Manners. "For if our bikes hadn't had to be left behind we should have gone home by road instead of through the wood, and—"

Manners stopped short, and flushed redly. Three fellows were glaring at him—Tom Merry, Lowther, and Parker. He realised then that he had come very near to letting out a dead secret.

Anyone but Arthur Augustus would have asked questions at once.

But Gussy was polite. He never tried to intrude upon a secret. Moreover, at this moment his mind was so full of other matters that it is doubtful whether he really heard Manners, though he certainly saw the looks on the faces of the other three, and must have wondered at them.

All he said was:

"Well, deah boys, I am welying upon you to wally wound me this aftahnoon an' help to make the meetin' a success."

"Right-ho, Gussy! We'll rally round!" said Tom cheerily.

"And as for the meeting's being a

success, there can be no doubt of that:

"No possible, probable shadow of doubt,

No possible doubt whatever!"

said Lowther.

Arthur Augustus departed in high feather.

"I trust," said Parker, looking suspiciously at his study-mates, "you mean to give D'Arcy fair play?"

"We mean," answered Lowther, "to give Gussy what he's asking for!"

Tom Merry and Manners grinned.

"No bad news, I hope, Parker," said Tom, with a glance at the buff envelope still in Parker's hand.

"None at all, thanks, Merry. I expected this. It is merely a call to town."

"I say, I hope it doesn't mean that you are going to miss the gas-party, Parker?" asked Lowther anxiously.

"The—er— Oh, you are referring to the meeting in the crypt! No, I shall certainly not miss that. I have promised D'Arcy my support, and he shall have it. I shall go to town to-morrow by an early train, and be back by the last train, I suppose, since there appear to be difficulties in the way of getting more than a day's leave."

Percy Mellish, the sneak of the Fourth, heard that through the open door, and made a careful mental note of it as he stole away.

Mellish had meant to attend the meeting, but he changed his mind now. He would have something else to do—something more profitable than figuring at Gussy's "gas-party."

"I'm very glad you won't miss it, Parker," said Lowther blandly. "It would be such a pity if you were to miss it. Wouldn't it, you fellows?"

"It would!" said Tom and Manners, as with one voice.

"I trust that no puerile tricks with pepper are included in your programme?" said Parker suspiciously.

"I give you my word that pepper is dead off, Parker," said Tom.

"We used up that in your cause," added Lowther. "So it is really rather bad taste on your part, Pignacious, to return to the subject with such pertinacity. You are rather a pertinacious Pignacious, I am afraid. By the way, Manners—"

"Oh, shurrup!" growled Manners. "Parker knows jolly well that I didn't mean to let anything out. And, anyway, Gussy didn't tumble."

CHAPTER 3.

Gussy's Gas-Party.

THERE was a suspicious bulge under the coat of George Herries when the Terrible Three ran against him on their way to the meeting in the crypt.

"Cornet?" said Tom Merry, poking the bulge.

"Guess again, and you'll guess wrong," replied Herries cheerfully.

"Orchestra?" asked Lowther, with twinkling eyes.

"Well, not an official one. I did offer to get one together, but Gustavus didn't seem to catch on to the idea. Still, there's going to be some music. What's life without music, anyway?"

"Is that a conundrum?" said Lowther.

"No, ass!"

"Shush! Cease that bad language, Herries! In future it will be regarded here as rather strong to say, 'I consider that you are somewhat silly!' Such words as 'ass,' 'duffer,' 'fathead,' and 'chump' will no longer be a part of our vocabulary. The dictionary itself will be revised by Gussy and Parker, and quite a lot of words will disappear."

"And when is all this going to happen?" inquired Jack Blake, coming up behind them.

"When Gussy's Ameliorating and Improving Society gets into full going order, of course, Blake."

"Some of the chaps are calling Gussy 'Amelia' already," said Blake, grinning widely.

"Gussy will not mind that," said Lowther gravely—"at least, he ought not to mind it. There is nothing opprobrious about 'Amelia.'"

"Think not?" said Digby, who was with Blake. "All I jolly well know is I'd given anyone who called me Amelia a thick ear; and not be long about it!"

"Ah, Dig, it is easy to perceive that you are not yet a brand plucked from the burning!"

"Not even a Monkey Brand!" said Blake.

"Got your mouth-organ, Digby?" asked George Figgins, joining the group with Kerr and Fatty Wynn.

"Rather!"

"What's your instrument, Blake?" asked Kerr.

"Big drum. It's concealed at present in my waistcoat-pocket," grinned Blake.

"And we've nothing but penny tin whistles!" said Figgins sadly.

"As a matter of fact, mine's a tin whistle," admitted Blake. "But there'll be lots of other varieties—lots!"

"Trumpets and shawns and harps and dulcimers," said Lowther.

"A dulcimer sounds as if it might be something good to eat," remarked Fatty Wynn. "But I haven't heard of any refreshments. I think Gussy might have done something in that way—if it was only a snack. Don't you agree, you chaps?"

"Can't be done—not in war-time," said Blake solemnly. "It's all we can do, by our shining example, to get Gustavus to eat enough to keep his pecker up."

"My hat! The fags are turning up in full force!" said Tom Merry. "Did Gussy send them all invitations?"

"He did not," answered Herries.

"The old ass wanted us to help him think out some scheme for barring them," said Digby, grinning.

"He was afraid they might try to rot up the show," grinned Blake. "But I pointed out to him that the more reason there was for suspecting that, the more the poor little fellows needed to hearken to his paternal advice."

"And he quite saw it," said Herries.

"He would," Manners said. "That's like Gussy. Of course he's dead certain that we wouldn't start in on anything of the sort."

"The touching faith of Gustavus moves me almost to tears," Lowther said feelingly.

"Are you chaps coming along in?" asked Tom Merry. "All the front seats will be bagged, you know. Where's old Talbot?"

"Here I am," said Talbot.

"I was rather afraid you didn't mean to turn up, old man."

"To tell you the truth, Tom, I had more than half a mind to stay away. All this is just a trifle rough on Gussy, you know. He means well."

"Oh, rats! We can't have Gussy reforming us at his own sweet will. And what about our Pignacious and your ass Skimmy?"

"They mean well, too," said Talbot. "But I wasn't thinking so much about them, I'll own."

Talbot was as ready to see a joke as anyone, but he had not quite the same appetite for practical joking of the rougher kind as the average junior.

He had taken no share in the preparations. But at the last moment he had

felt that he could not afford to miss the fun.

The crypt was filling up apace as they went in, but there were still front seats to be had. The fags, with Wally D'Arcy, Levison minor, Manners minor, Curly Gibson, Joe Frayne, Jameson, and Hobbs as leaders, had modestly contented themselves with places further back. For which, doubtless, they had their own good and sufficient reasons.

One thing was certain—Wally & Co. had not come as mere spectators.

"I say, Tom Merry," said Wally eagerly, "that old ass of a major of mine is going to be made to sit up, you bet! We've got half a dozen concertinas, and Joe's borrowed a cracked bell from a porter at the station; and we've eleven kettles and things. You can make no end of a jolly row with a kettle and a ruler, you know. And—"

"Shocking! Where's your brotherly feeling, Wally?" said Tom, and passed on.

"It strikes me, Monty," he said, "that there's going to be pretty nearly enough row to bring someone along to read the giddy Riot Act."

"No end kind of Gussy to fix up for the crypt," grinned Lowther. "It wouldn't have been half a do anywhere indoors."

"And the big event would have been quite off the cards there," said Manners.

"We mustn't delay the big event too long," Tom said, knitting his brows. "The din will be simply unearthly, and if we hold back, Ratty or Railton or Kildare may be upon us before we get a chance to bring it off."

"Hope it won't be Ratty, anyway," said Figgins, with a wry face at the very thought.

For everyone knew that the House-master of the New House never erred on the side of leniency, and though Figgins & Co. loyally tried to make the best of him, it would have been idle for them to pretend that they preferred being dealt with by their own especial "beak."

Crooke, Racke, and Clampe of the New House were sitting well up in front together. There were nine seats to the right of them, and several vacant ones to the left. Ten fellows had come in together—the Terrible Three, Talbot, Figgins & Co., and Blake, Herries, and Digby.

"You fellows might shift along one seat," said Tom Merry, quite politely. D'Arcy himself could not have objected to the manner in which the request was made.

Clampe moved. Crooke and Racke stuck to their places.

"Didn't hear me, did you, Crooke?" asked Tom.

"I heard, but I don't see why I should shift for you!" snarled Crooke.

Racke said nothing, and tried to look as if he heard nothing.

"It was a civil request," said Tom, looking grim.

"I don't want your rotten civility!" Crooke replied. "I'm here, and I'm going to stay here!"

"Your mistake—you're not!" said Tom, nettled. "Out you go!"

He seized Crooke by the collar.

"Stop that, Merry! You're shoving him on me!" objected Racke.

"Well, you're much more likely to enjoy his company than I am," answered Tom coolly. "Heave-ho!"

"Never mind, Tom. Take this seat, and I'll go behind," said Talbot, who never cared for unnecessary rows.

"Hanged if you shall, old chap! Heave-ho! What a lump you are, Crooke!"

"I tell you I'm not going to shift, Merry!"

"No, Crooke; you're going to be shifted," answered Tom. "And now the thing's done—see?"

Racke and Crooke had both been tumbled over, and Tom had slipped into Crooke's seat.

"Get your powerful brain to work on that, Crooke!" grinned Figgins.

"And pay particular attention to the lecture, Crooke," said Lowther.

"There's no chap at St. Jim's who needs Ameliawhatsername and Improvement more than you do, Crooke," added Manners.

"Anyway, my name ain't put specially on the notice, like somebody's is!" retorted Crooke nastily.

But Manners was beginning to get over that grievance.

"No," he replied. "You probably got one with someone else's on it—boned it, you know!"

"Shush!" whispered Levison, behind them. "Here come the Improvers!"

They came in single file.

The Hon. Arthur Augustus, spotlessly arrayed, led the way. Philip Ignatius Parker, looking quite neat and very serious, followed him. Herbert Skimpole brought up the rear.

Skimmy looked every bit as serious as Gussy or Parker, but by no means as neat.

For Skimmy had been hard at work on one of his many inventions, and would have forgotten to put in an appearance at all but for being fetched.

Skimmy had been doing something with paint and something with glue and something with chemicals. He smelt strongly of glue and paint and chemicals. There were smudges of glue and paint upon his clothes, and even upon his solemn face. But his mighty forehead bulged with thought, and his eyes rolled in a fine frenzy.

"Three cheers for the giddy Improvers!" yelled Wally.

The cheering rolled. But it is to be feared that it was due rather to the anticipation of fun to come than to any genuine admiration of the "Improvers."

Gussy accepted the compliment at face value, however. He turned and bowed gracefully. Then he and Parker and Skimpole disappeared in the dusky rear of the platform. There was none too much light in the crypt, though broad daylight still prevailed outside.

"Weally, Skimmay, you are in wathah a disgwaceful state, dontcherknow? We ought weally to have washed him first, Parkah, I considah."

"A little brushing—in fact, a good deal of brushing—and some application of soap might have had a good effect, certainly, D'Arcy," replied Parker.

"What does it matter? I have come here to speak my thoughts, not to offer myself to the admiration of the assembly," said the genius of the Shell.

All of this could plainly be heard by those in the front seats.

"Lucky for Skimmy!" said Kerr.

"He'd have had to do a bit of tittivating before he'd have made himself a suitable object for the 'admiration of the assembly,' I guess!"

"On the other hand," remarked Lowther, "I scarcely fancy that he will be allowed to do much in the way of speaking his thoughts."

Now the three Improvers appeared upon the platform.

Gussy's gas-party was about to begin.

CHAPTER 4.

A Great Rag!

THE three were greeted with vociferous applause.

That, at least, is the most polite way of putting it. They were greeted with plenty of noise, anyway.

All were very serious indeed. They gazed down upon the serried rows of faces. The crowd was a far bigger one than even Arthur Augustus, in his most sanguine moments, had expected.

With the solitary exception of Melish, who had business elsewhere, the Shell and Fourth were there to a man. Probably the whole fag tribe was also present. Seniors were conspicuous by their absence, it is true; but, then, no senior had been invited.

Arthur Augustus had thought it best to let the principles of his society permeate the Lower School before he asked the mighty men of the Fifth and Sixth to subscribe to them.

There, just behind Tom Merry and his little band, sat a New House contingent, led by Dick Redfern, and including Owen, Lawrence, Pratt, and six or seven others. Close by were Grundy, Wilkins, and Gunn. A little to the left of them were Levison major, Lumley-Lumley, Gore, and Trimble—a quartet thrown together by accident, for quite certainly none of the other three wanted Baggy Trimble. Behind these, again, were Harry Noble, Clifton Dane, Bernard Glyn, Dick Julian, Kerruish, Reilly, and Hammond. Close by them sat another group of New House fellows, and the rest of the two chief Junior Forms were well up towards the front.

In the rear mustered the fag contingent, ripe for any mischief.

Parker stopped forward, having been asked to open the meeting.

"Keep it bwief an' to the point, deah boy!" said Gussy. "I shall have a gweat deal to say myself, you know."

"And don't you wish you may get a chance to say it, Gustavus!" murmured Jack Blake.

Parker opened his mouth, but not the meeting.

"What's the price of pork, Pignacious?" yelled Gore.

If there was one thing Parker found it hard to forgive Monty Lowther, it was the bestowal upon him of that absurd nickname.

The Shell and Fourth had adopted it with enthusiasm. In the two Forms there were only about half a dozen fellows who never used it, and of these only two—Talbot and D'Arcy—came much into contact with Parker.

"That," snapped Parker, "is a most unseemly interruption!"

"How could the chap interrupt you before you'd begun?" howled Crooke.

There was no love lost between Crooke and Gore in these days; but Crooke and Racke were among those who detested Parker, and they were ready to support anyone against him.

"I insist upon that fellow's being put out before I proceed!" said Parker, in his most commanding tones. "And if that other individual does not behave himself better, he also shall be removed!"

He pointed an accusing finger at Crooke.

"Rats!" retorted Gore. "Who's going to put me out? Better come and do it yourself, Pignacious Parker!"

But, to his surprise, Gore found himself being hustled out of his seat and passed by many hands back towards the entrance of the crypt.

Tom Merry had given the word, and those near Gore were quite ready to obey. George Gore was no longer reckoned among the black sheep, and he had gained some measure of public respect by his plucky running in the recent cross-country race. But he could hardly be considered a popular favourite even now, and there were plenty willing to aid in his removal.

"I say, Tom, considering everything,

isn't that just a trifle arbitrary?" said Talbot.

"Not a bit of it, old chap!" replied Tom cheerily. "Gore's in too big a hurry. This meeting is going to be broken up when we think it's time—not when he does."

"He'll slink back," said Manners.

"And see what a beautiful impression it's made on Gustavus!" chirruped Lowther. "See the dear old graven image beam! If anything was needed to convince our Algernon Adolphus that this meeting is going to be the very whoppingest kind of a success, that's done it!"

Lowther was right.

Already the leaven had begun to work, it seemed to Arthur Augustus. Tom Merry & Co., in spite of all their japing beforehand, were supporting him!

"I am vewy much obliged to evewy-body," said Gussy, with a low bow and his sweetest smile, "and especially to my friend, Tom Mewwy!"

"Oh, don't mench, old chap!" replied Tom affably.

"I heabby appoint Tom Mewwy chief steward of this meeting," went on the head Improver.

"Thanks, Gussy; but I'm not taking any!" answered the captain of the Shell promptly. "Fact is, I haven't a basin handy. Besides, your speech hasn't begun yet. Someone might toddle along and fetch a basin or two ready for that, of course."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, I am gwievously disappointed in you! I should chawacterise such wemarks as wotten in the extweme!"

"I thought Parker was supposed to be on his hind-legs as speaker," said Figgins, very loudly, but with a far-away look.

"And Parker had better get a move on him, too, or poor old Skimmy will bust before his turn comes!" remarked Kangaroo.

"I can see him swelling!" said Clive.

"Get on, Gussy! We don't want to listen to Pignacious Parker!" howled Grundy.

"Accept my apologies, Parkah!" said Gussy at once. "It was vewy wemiss of me, deah boy! Pway go on!"

Parker opened his mouth again.

But the fates seemed to have decreed that Parker as orator should remain an unknown quantity to the assembled crowd.

For at this moment stalked three Fifth-Formers—the lordly Cutts and his chums, St. Leger and Gilmore.

"What's all this about?" asked Cutts, with a hasty glance round which showed him none but juniors present.

Naturally, Cutts felt like the monarch of all he surveyed after seeing that.

"Inaugural meeting of the Society for the Amelioration of Manners and Improvement of Language at St. Jim's," rattled off Monty Lowther. "Won't you oblige us by going up on the platform, you three? They would adorn it no end, wouldn't they, you chaps? Everybody knows what sweet and gracious manners they have, and the chaste propriety of the language they use in the Olympic regions of the Fifth—I don't think!"

But the last three words were spoken under his breath.

Gussy and his aides did not look pleased. Cutts & Co. were about the last supporters they desired.

There were murmurs from a section of the crowd, too. But they came from those present who were not fully in the secret of the preparations made. Those who were simply yearned to see the three

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detested seniors—the black sheep of their own Form—mount that platform.

"I think I will, anyway," said Cutts.

"It ought to be rather a jape."

"Hear, hear!" said Tom Merry heartily.

"The enemy are delivered into our hands!" murmured Monty Lowther.

"Come along, you men!" said Cutts.

And Gilmore and St. Leger followed him up.

Again Parker opened his mouth. Parker was a good deal disgruntled by this intrusion, but evidently meant to treat it as a matter of no real importance.

But before he could get out a word Cutts said:

"I think that, on the whole, it's up to me, as a senior, to take the chair!"

"Weally, Cutts, I feel myself compelled to wemonstwate!" protested Arthur Augustus. "In the cires, it is uttably imposs that you should take the chaiah! You are totally unacquainted with the object of the meeting!"

"Oh, no, I'm not!" retorted Cutts.

"I can see the object of the meeting all serene. I must say, however, without wanting to be at all personal, that I don't think the object of the meeting ought to sport a camelia in war-time!"

Gilmore and St. Leger found this very funny.

"Ha, ha, ha!" they roared.

But the audience stolidly refused to see any joke in it. Not even from the fag ranks came so much as a titter.

They were all there to rag D'Arcy and Parker and Skimpole. But as between those three and the three who had just come in, their sympathies were with D'Arcy and his two supporters.

"Cutts little knows," whispered Monty Lowther, deeply mysterious.

"The Nemesis of Cutts awaits him!" replied Talbot, laughing. "But I rather wish we could get our own silly asses off the platform and let those three swanking idiots have the full benefit of the preparations you chaps have made!"

But Talbot was in a minority of one in wishing that. The rest of the conspirators were determined that the Improvers should go through it.

"I move that D'Arcy do take the chair!" said Parker, despairing of getting a hearing on his own account.

"You'll have to move me first!" said Cutts, coolly annexing the only chair on the platform.

"Nevah mind him, Parkah!" whispered Arthur Augustus. "No use getting your wag out, deah boy! Pewwaps the pwesence of a seniah may help to keep them quiet, though I am weally afwaid that they do not gwreatly wespsect Cutts."

"I second the proposition!" piped out Skimpole.

Skimmy was not actually bursting, but he was in a desperate hurry to deliver his own speech, and these continual interruptions annoyed him.

"Hear, hear!"

"Good old Gussy!"

"Get on with the washing!"

"Improve the shining hour—and little us if you can!"

Amid such shouts as these from the audience D'Arcy stepped forward, and bowed gracefully.

CHAPTER 5.

The End of the Rag.

"GENTLEMEN—" "I thought we weren't," chipped in Lowther. "That was the trouble, as I understood it."

"You are quite wight, Lowthah, an' I am glad to have some evidence that your

bwains are impwovin' even if your mannahs wemain stationawy!"

"Bravo, Gustavus!" howled Jack Blake. "Had you there, Lowther, old scout!"

"Go it, Gussy! You haven't any too much time, you know," shouted Herries.

"No, deah boy! Tea is of no importance; but pwep will not wait. Yet, if the authorities only undahstood the gwreat entahpwise to which I have set my hand, I am quite suah that they would gwant me the whole evening."

But it was neither tea nor prep that Herries meant.

"Gentlemen—because if you are not gentlemen you ought to be, you know, an' in anticipation of an early impwovement I pwefer to address you as such—I am met—that is to say, we are met togethah heah—"

With a solemn face, Digby pulled his mouth-organ out of his pocket, and began a solo.

"Weally, Digbay! Wing off at once, or I shall be compelled to come down an' administah a feahful thwashin' to you! Wing off, I say!"

Digby went on playing "Tipperary."

"Mr. Chairman," said Tom Merry gravely. "I point to a rise of order—I mean I rise to order a point—"

"Can't be did!" yelled Gore from somewhere behind. "Pubs closed till half-past six. Defence of the—"

"That's probably correct," said Lowther. "It is correct, isn't it, Cutts?"

"What do I know about it, you young idiot?" snapped Cutts.

"You seemed to me the likeliest person present to have the latest information upon a matter of that kind," replied Lowther blandly. "But perhaps, if you are coy, Croke or Racke will oblige?"

"I rise to a point of order," said Tom Merry. "Are such expressions as 'Ring off!' and such threats as our worthy chairman has used in harmony with the objects of the proposed society?"

"Most decidedly not!" said Talbot, shaking his head solemnly.

Digby went on playing "Tipperary," very badly, but that was of no importance, Dig considered.

"Not jolly well likely—that is to say, not in the very least likely," said Kerr, with enormous gravity.

"They are slang—mere slang and vulgar abuse," said Figgins.

"Gussy, I'm surprised at you," said Herries mournfully.

Arthur Augustus flushed to the very roots of his hair.

"Weally, you fellows," he said candidly, "I wecognise a certain amount of justice in your—ah—stwictures! I feah that my language may have suffewed fwom the company I have impwudently kept!"

"One in the eye for Study No. 6!" chuckled Levison major.

"You're right, Levison," said Lumley-Lumley.

"It's no good calling us vulgar beasts, when you are a vulgar beast yourself!" squeaked Trimble.

"Gentlemen, I am at least fwee fwom the slightest imputation of havin' knowingly or willingly picked up anythin' whatevah thwough keepin' the society of the last speakah!" said Gussy in wrath. "I considah that the onlay pwopah place for Twimble is a pig-sty!"

"Order, order!" shouted Tom Merry. "Even though a fellow is a pig—as unhappily cannot be denied in this particular case—it is scarcely consistent with your expressed views to— Oh, shurrup, do, Dig! A chap can't hear himself speak!"

"Well, if you want to hear yourself, you're the only chap who does, I should think," answered Digby. And he went

back to "Tipperary," or as near it as he could get.

"Oh, deah! I shall nevah get goin' at this wate! Parkah, deah boy, will you address them?"

Parker apparently did not think much of his chances of getting a hearing. Parker, indeed, had perceived by now, being no fool, that the sole object of the crowd was to rag. He shook his head.

From the back of the crypt two or three concertinas had joined in with Dig's mouth-organ. The shrill piping of a penny whistle, upon which someone was attempting, "Keep the Home Fires Burning," came from nearer the front. There was dusk in the crypt by this time, and those on the platform could only see a glimmering of faces before them.

The kettles and that terrible instrument, Herries' cornet, were being held in reserve, so far.

"Perhaps Cutts would like to address the meeting," said Parker sarcastically.

"No, thanks, kid! I'm quite comfortable as I am," replied Cutts, with a superior smile. He and the other two Fifth-Formers, who sat on the edge of the platform, swinging their legs, were quite enjoying themselves—for the present.

The patience of Herbert Skimpole was by this time exhausted. D'Arcy seemed to have forgotten all about him.

He pushed to the front.

"As there appears to be some reluctance on the part of my colleagues to endeavour to make themselves heard," he began, passing a hand across his massive brow, and thereby adorning it with a streak of glue and two streaks of paint. "I will myself—Yarooogh! Wharrer doing, Cutts?"

Cutts had lifted his foot. It is not an offensive action in itself to lift one's foot. But Cutts had lifted his with some considerable vigour, and as Skimpole had chanced to plant himself right in the line of fire, so to speak, there had been an impact which the genius of the Shell found a trifle painful.

"That may teach you not to stick yourself in front of me, you fat-headed young monkey!" growled Cutts.

Arthur Augustus felt more than ever sure that Cutts was not the senior he would have chosen to adorn the platform.

"As my colleagues—"

"We've got that!" shouted Lowther.

"No time for chewing the cud, Skimmy!"

"I will myself do so," went on Skimpole, making an attempt to carry on from where he had broken off.

"Not here!" sang out Clive.

"Take it out and chew it!" yelled Levison.

"Gentlemen, I appeal to you as fellow-Britons, citizens of a mighty empire, at once the true aristocracy and the truest democracy in the world—"

"Question!" roared someone.

"You're getting mixed, Skimmy!"

"Pardon me, but the confusion is in your own minds, not in mine. There is no real discrepancy between true aristocracy and true democracy. Pray allow me to continue without debating that point, however. Scholars of St. Jim's—I should say, St. James'—"

"Hear, hear! Much more proper!" said Lumley-Lumley approvingly.

"Stop that silly cuckoo! He's wound up to go on all night!" roared Grundy.

"What I was going to say when so rudely interrupted was that—"

Skimpole paused, and again adorned his brow by passing his hand across it. He had forgotten what he had been going to say.

"Invention is the great-aunt of necessity," suggested Lowther.

"Ah, invention—that is the word!" said Skimmy, with relief.

Skimpole had joined in D'Arcy's scheme with some vague idea that there must be funds for carrying on the society, and that those funds might conceivably be utilised for a purpose far more important than the improvement of manners and language at St. Jim's—to wit, the financing of some of his tremendous inventions. "Invention!" he continued. "Do you—do any of you—realise what invention has meant to the world?"

"I wish I'd got the chap who invented Euclid here! I'd bump him!" spoke the voice of Kangaroo.

Skimpole waved a gluey and painty hand.

"Someone is betraying his gross ignorance," he said. "He appears to labour under the delusion that Euclid is a cognate word to algebra or arithmetic. Nothing of the sort! Euclid was a man—"

"Euclid was a man, you know,

But Skimmy is a monkey!"

Sang a high, clear voice from somewhere near the back of the crypt.

Arthur Augustus recognised that voice.

"Weally, Wally," he cried, "I am ashamed of you! You had bettah wetiah—"

But the voice of Gussy was drowned in the rapturous singing of the fags; and poor Skimmy had lost all chance of making himself heard further.

That impromptu caught the Third Form fancy. To the accompaniment of concertinas, mouth-organs, and tin whistles, they sang over and over again:

"Euclid was a man, you know,

But Skimmy is a monkey!"

"Stop!" howled Curly Gibson, getting to his feet on a form. "I've got a better one than that!"

"Euclid was a sly old man,

And knew the way to floor 'em.

Where Skimmy comes into the plan

It's called 'Pons Asinorum!'"

But they would not have Curly's "better one." They went on chanting the two doggerel lines Wally had given them.

"You chaps don't understand!" howled Curly Gibson. "You're such silly asses yourselves. 'Pons Asinorum'—the Asses' Bridge—that just fits silly old Skimmy!"

But still the fags continued to chant:

"Euclid was a man, you know,

But Skimmy is a monkey!"

And Curly Gibson gave up the attempt and joined his fresh young voice to theirs.

Skimpole was seen to be speaking—yelling, rather. But not a word could be distinguished above the din.

Someone—said afterwards to have been Crooke, but the evidence was not conclusive—thrust out a hooked stick, and got the hook nicely round Skimmy's left leg.

One tug, and Skimmy left the platform.

"Yarooogh! Oh, you silly idiot! What did you want to go and pull him right on top of me for?" howled Fatty Wynn.

Skimpole hit out wildly, and his knucky fist caught Fatty a nasty one in the eye. That was more than Fatty could stand. He gave a wrathful and mighty heave, tumbled the inventor over, and then, aided by a push in the rear from Kerr, subsided on top of him.

Unobserved by anyone on the platform, Figgins and Manners had left their seats during the tumult.

They were now at the back of the platform. Each held a rope, and they only awaited Tom Merry's signal.

Those who did not know what was about to happen could guess that something was. Of all in the crypt only the five left on the platform were quite unsuspecting.

A sudden lull ensued. The fags ceased to chant. Whistles, mouth-organs, and concertinas were silent.

Parker had his first real chance to speak. He stepped forward.

"It really seems to me," he said, "that the proceedings to which we have just been witnesses afford the most full and complete justification possible of D'Arcy's—"

"Let her go, Gallagher!" cried Tom Merry, through a megaphone he had borrowed from Glyn.

Figgins pulled his rope. Manners pulled his.

There was a second or two of almost agonising suspense.

Would it work? Or would it hang fire long enough to give the victims a chance of escape?

It worked!

A canvas rigged up over the platform, unnoticed by any of those beneath it owing to the dim light of the crypt, tilted.

From it there descended upon Gussy, Parker, Cutts, St. Leger, and Gilmore an avalanche of horrible, black, sticky, smeary stuff.

"You young fiends! I'll slay some of you for this!" howled Cutts.

"Is that how you like it done, Cutts?" chortled Tom Merry.

"Grooh! Ouch! Ow-yow!" spluttered Arthur Augustus.

"This is the most utterly shameful trick I have ever known!" shouted Parker.

The voices of St. Leger and Gilmore, saying things not at all in accordance with the objects of the society, were uplifted. But louder than all arose the bull-bellowing of Cutts and the reproaches of Philip Ignatius Parker, who talked as a master caught in such a trap might have talked. They may not have noticed that at the time, but they remembered it afterwards. Parker was as angry as Cutts, but with something much more manly in his wrath.

But now all the voices were drowned.

The band struck up. Herries blew a mighty blast on his cornet. Kettles were beaten with rulers. Mouth-organs and concertinas and whistles were going full blast. Bones clattered. Curly Gibson rang his bell. Bernard Glyn snatched his megaphone from Tom Merry, and roared through it.

Not many attempted a tune, but of those who did no two attempted the same one. The din was unearthly. And through it all Cutts and St. Leger and Gilmore stamped and raved, and D'Arcy spluttered and groaned, and Parker protested angrily but unheard, and Skimpole howled under the weight of Fatty Wynn.

Then a sudden silence fell.

"Cave!" someone had hissed, and the warning word was passed up the crypt.

A sudden silence, broken by the stern voice of Mr. Railton.

"What does this disgraceful scene mean?" thundered that voice.

CHAPTER 6.

After the Party.

THE terrible din ceased at once. The victims on the platform left off their loud lamenting.

They had suffered, but doom was at hand for the plotters who had made them suffer.

"Cutts!" said the Housemaster, in tones of great surprise. "Really, Cutts, I should have given you credit for a little more sense than to indulge in such puerile frolics as this! Gilmore, too, and St. Leger! I imagined that I had to deal with a mere junior outbreak, and I am

astonished to find members of the Fifth Form mixed up in it."

Cutts had also been surprised. As for "frolic," that was certainly not the word he and his chums would have chosen.

"I—I was trying to keep order, sir," spluttered Cutts.

"The attempt does not seem to have been even partially successful, Cutts," replied Mr. Railton drily. "I suppose I must understand that St. Leger and Gilmore were engaged in the same laudable but unavailing task?"

"Sarcastic beast!" muttered Gilmore.

"I did not catch your reply, Gilmore."

"I only said 'Oh, certainly, sir!'" mumbled the Fifth-Former.

"You three may go. I will see you later," said Mr. Railton.

The three seniors went. A way was made for them through the crowd. It was quite a wide one. It could hardly have been wider had they been walking in triumphal procession. But there was nothing triumphant about the progress of Cutts & Co., and the way was wide simply because no one in the crowd had the least desire to come into close contact with them.

Perhaps no one could have given a complete analysis of the horrid stuff which streamed down the faces and covered the clothes of the five unfortunates. For each of the conspirators had added to it anything he thought fit, with reckless and most improper disregard of the principles of war-time economy.

There was soot in it—plenty of soot, for that was cheap. There was oil in it, and jam, and treacle, and vinegar, and ink, and tar. And the three Fifth-Formers had not deprived Gussy and Parker of anything. So liberal had been the allowance made that there was quite enough for five. It is true that there should have been three to share it, anyway. No one had meant to let Skimmy off, and Crooke regretted now that he had been the means of depriving the genius of the Shell of his share.

Mr. Railton looked round. His eyes spotted Wally D'Arcy, and went from him to the rest of the fags.

"You boys belonging to Forms below the Fourth may go," he said. "Each of you will do one hundred lines. D'Arcy minor, you will supply me with a full list of those present. Probably you youngsters are not among those really responsible for this disgraceful business. In any case, I will give you the benefit of what doubt there may be, for there is a limit to my capacity for doing the only sort of justice which befits the crime."

The fags filed out, very cheery indeed. The entertainment they had had was simply dirt cheap at the expense of a mere hundred lines.

"The rest of you will attend me in my study," said Mr. Railton grimly. "I observe that the New House is well represented here. But as it has fallen to my lot to be drawn here by the pandemonium of noise, I will not trouble Mr. Ratcliffe in the matter, but will deal with you also."

"Bully for Railton!" whispered Figgins in the ear of Kerr.

"Oh, rather! He knows it wouldn't be fair play to hand us over to Ratty."

"If Ratty didn't give it us hotter than Railton gives it to the School House bounders, it would only be because he hasn't the giddy muscle to do it," said Redfern, with conviction.

"All the same, I'd rather have a rabbit-pie than what Railton will hand us out," remarked Fatty Wynn.

The Housemaster was marching off. The crowd of culprits followed him ruefully.

Cutts & Co. had served as heralds in THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 471.

advance of the procession, and a dozen grinning seniors, who appeared to think the whole affair a huge joke, watched it pass. Comments were frequent and free.

"Hallo, D'Arcy!" said Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, strolling past them arm-in-arm with Darrel of the Sixth. "Is this the very latest in fashions? It is a bit conspicuous, you know. Rather a trifle too much in the Christy way, too, don't you think?"

"I regard you as a sarcastic beast, Kildare!" said Gussy hotly.

"Why, Parker," said Darrel, "you are about the last fellow in the Shell I should have expected to find taking a hand in a game of this sort!"

Parker's feelings were too deep for words.

The crowd lined up in the corridor outside Mr. Railton's study.

Tom Merry, with a wry face, tapped at the door.

"You can come in five at a time," said the Housemaster.

"Come along, Talbot!" said Tom. "We'll go in the with the first batch, and get it over—what!"

"I'm on!" said Talbot quietly. He had not been one of the conspirators, but he had been there.

"Gore, if you'd had the sense to stay out when you were put, you'd have missed this little treat. Come along! Who else? Fatty, will you give us the honour of your company? Clive, are you on?"

"Right-ho, Merry!" said the South African junior cheerily.

"I'll come," said Fatty. "It's tea-time, and the sooner we get it over, the sooner we can have tea."

So the five passed in. Mr. Railton asked for no explanations, and delivered no lecture.

Those outside could hear.

"Three across each hand," said Figgins, "and well laid on, too!"

"Railton will be jolly well fagged by the time he's finished," Kerr rejoined.

Strategic movements towards the rear, already begun, were markedly quickened by this suggestion. Racke, Crooke, and a few others did not even try to disguise their anxiety to keep out of the early batches.

The five came out. Tom and Talbot looked much as usual. Clive was smiling; it was his way to take things smiling. Fatty's plump face wore a look of pained surprise. Gore alone pressed his hands under his armpits. As he passed Parker he gave that innocent victim a glare like a basilisk, and said spitefully:

"Your turn soon, Piggy Porker!"

Lowther, Manners, Figgins, Kerr, and Levison major passed in.

A few weeks earlier, and Levison, brazen and unashamed, would have made for the rear, like his former cronies. That sort of thing was not in his line now. And at last the rest understood the change. No one was surprised to find him going to doom among the first.

Now Parker was awake to the fact that he was about to be caned!

He, P. I. Parker-Roberts, of the "Daily Messenger," known to all Fleet Street as one of the foremost of the younger men in his profession—he, Parker-Roberts, who had joined up in the early days of the war, and had passed from the Artists' Rifles to a commission in a crack line regiment, and had fought not without distinction, and had been honourably gazetted as resigning his commission through injuries incapacitating him from further service—he was to be caned like any schoolboy!

It was absurd, from Parker's point of view.

But not from Mr. Railton's—not from

that of any fellow in the crowd. To them he was a schoolboy.

The one junior who knew his secret was not there. Of that, at least, Parker was glad.

Suppose it leaked out? What a stupendous joke Fleet Street would make of it!

And it was not just. Railton ought to make some distinction between the plotters and their victims, surely.

But there was no evidence as yet that he intended to make any. He was punishing without inquiry.

It was unnecessary, anyway, to appear before the Housemaster in this disgusting state. Parker and Gussy were at the far end of the line. Everyone was steering clear of them.

"D'Arcy," said Parker, "do you not think that we might with advantage effect some improvement in our personal appearance before our turn comes? It would be—er—more respectful to Mr. Railton."

"Bai Jove, wippin' good ideah of yours, Parkah, deah boy! Theah are quite a cwowd of fellows to be polished off yet, so we ought to have time, if we huvw up. Come along!"

A new notion occurred to Parker. Suppose they had not time? Suppose they returned to the corridor to find it deserted?

Mr. Railton would hardly miss them among so many. And quite certainly justice would not suffer by their escape. It was not to them that punishment was due.

Gussy went off in a very much bigger hurry than Parker.

The second five had come out. Redfern, Owen, and Lawrence of the New House, and Lumley-Lumley and Grundy of the School House made up the third contingent.

Not one of them looked particularly doleful when they came out, but they were all pretty tough.

"Is he still laying it on as hard as ever, Reddy?" asked Clampe, who had moved to the rear with Crooke and Racke.

Dick Redfern regarded Clampe with no very loving eye.

"No," he answered; "I fancy he's going a bit easy now, so as to have something left for the finish!"

"Anyway, I hope you skulkers will catch it hot!" added Lawrence.

"Oh, they will, you bet!" said Owen.

Baggy Trimble was trying to sneak off. It seemed to Baggy that he could hardly be missed.

But Grundy hauled him back.

"No, you don't, you worm!" growled Grundy.

He did not intend that Baggy should be missed.

Blake, Herries, and Digby had been waiting for D'Arcy, but they knew now that he had gone to clean up. And they went in next, accompanied by Wilkins and Gunn.

These two found Grundy waiting at the end of the queue when they came out, with tingling palms, but not uncheery.

"So that's over!" said Wilkins. "Come along and have tea, old chap!"

"Tea!" rapped out Grundy. "What are you talking about, George Wilkins?"

"Tea," replied Wilkins.

"Oh, rats! I'm going to stay here, and you two had better make up your minds that you've got to stay, too!"

"Whaffor?" snapped Gunn, almost mutinously.

"To see that these rotters don't slink off!" answered Grundy, indicating the strategists.

Wilkins and Gunn stayed.

Now Dick Julian, Kernish, Harry Hammond, and Reilly took their turn, with Pratt of the New House.

"Sure, an' it's the power Railton has in him entirely!" said Reilly, as they came out.

Harry Noble, Clifton Dane, Bernard Glyn, and two New House fellows were the next five. They reported Railton still going strong.

There were still some left before "the dregs," as Grundy call the strategists, were reached. But their time drew nigh now, and Baggy Trimble was already piping his eye in anticipation.

CHAPTER 7.

The Justice of Mr. Railton.

D'ARCY was anything but a quick dresser, as a rule.

But on this occasion he had finished long before his comrade.

And Parker really had no more of that abominable mixture to get off than Gussy had. They were both smothered in it, and the clothes they had worn were irretrievably ruined.

Arthur Augustus came into the Shell dormitory in quest of Parker, and found him still at the washstand.

Now, Gussy, though a trifle in the piebald line still, had got very fairly clean—as clean as one could expect to get without a hot bath, for which there was not time—and he was surprised to find Parker still in the scrubbing state of operations.

"Huwwy up, deah boy!" he said. "It would nevah do to keep Wailton waitin' you know!"

"It has occurred to me," said Parker, though with some reluctance, "that he really might not miss us."

Arthur Augustus shook his head.

"That's quite poss," he said, "but the othah fellows would."

"But, really, D'Arcy, I must ask you to examine this thing in the light of reason. Is it reasonable that we should go meekly to take a punishment which we have in no way deserved because the others are getting their deserts? Do you mean to maintain for a moment that any decent fellow among them would grudge our getting off?"

"No, deah boy; they wouldn't gwudge it. But it is a dead cert that they would considah us funkay if we twied to w'iggle out."

"Do you care what they think?" snapped Parker.

"Yaas, Parkah. On the whole, I wathah think I do," answered Gussy, very gravely indeed. "An' I caah still moah what I feel myself. I should feel that I was w'igglin' out."

"It isn't justice that we should be punished," argued Parker.

But he was beginning to weaken. He told himself that it was absurd of him to take seriously this mere boy's fantastic conceptions of what honour required of them; and yet at heart he could not help taking them seriously—could not help sharing them to an extent that surprised himself.

He knew that he would not like Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther and Talbot to think him funky, and he would simply loathe having D'Arcy think him so.

"We must weally leave that to Wailton. It's his bizney, not ours, Parkah," said Gussy firmly.

"I give in, D'Arcy! I only hope Railton will have more discrimination than I expect him to have."

"Good man, Parkah! I fweely admit that your arguments were weasonable enough; but, you see, deah boy, it isn't pwecisely a mattah for weasoning. It's—well, it's weally 'noblesse oblige,' you know. You are the wight sort, Parkah,

I am vewy suah, an' I hope an' twust I am, too. Let me help you on with your jacket, deah boy!"

So, with a feeling as if he were going to execution, and with his arm fast locked in one of Gussy's, Philip Ignatius Parker went down to face the munc.

The crowd in the corridor had thinned very much now, but it had not wholly faded away. They were in time.

"Next lot!" roared Grundy, who was rather enjoying his self-appointed job as master of the ceremonies. "Crooke, Racke, Trimble—you're all in this!"

Racke darted him a furious look; Trimble whined, Crooke protested.

"Here's D'Arcy and that silly ass Parker!" he said. "I don't see why they should be allowed to hang back! After all, they were at the bottom of the whole rotten affair!"

"Rats! They are quite right to go in last," retorted Grundy. "That is why I've let Skimmy stay back. They may be all sorts of silly asses—they're, come to that—but they've had their share, and I'm hoping Railton will see it. I haven't the highest opinion of his judgment, but I think the man means to be fair."

Parker had another glimpse, and a more unexpected one, of what decency meant in schoolboy phrase.

He had thought of Grundy as a mere lout, without any finer feelings; but the fellow was not quite that, it seemed. He, too, with all his brag and bombast, had a notion of playing the game.

"Thanks, Gwundy, though I considah you might have spoken with more politeness!" said Gussy.

Parker looked Grundy straight in the eyes, and put out his hand. He knew that Grundy understood, as he did, that there had been feud between them, and he wanted to see whether Grundy felt, as he did, that it was hardly worth while keeping it up.

It is by no means certain that Grundy did. Grundy had no great objection to feuds. But Grundy always respected a fellow who stood up to him, and Parker had done that. And the great George Alfred was not really a churl. He had his own notions of "noblesse oblige," if those notions were not quite the same as Gussy's.

He took Parker's hand as though he were conferring distinction upon him. But he took it; that was all that mattered. And he went so far as to tell Wilkins and Gunn over the tea-table a little later that that fellow Parker had his points, though he did think too much of himself—a fault which he—George Alfred Grundy—always found it somewhat hard to overlook.

There were cries of pain from the Housemaster's study now.

Racke could summon up enough fortitude to take his medicine without howling. But Crooke never stood it well, and Clampe was of Crooke's kind, and Baggy Trimble was worse than either. Crooke and Clampe yelped, but Baggy Trimble fairly roared.

"Do you think it likely that we may escape the punishment which we have assuredly done nothing to deserve, Parker?" asked Skimpole timidly. "Personally, I consider corporal punishment low and degrading. It would be far better to appeal to the moral sense of the individual. Do you not agree?"

"I would rather have my moral sense appealed to, Skimpole, I admit; but the specimens now within there almost reconcile me to corporal punishment," replied Parker drily.

And it struck Gussy that it was curiously like hearing two men talk. Skimpole always did talk like a grown-up person, but Parker seemed even older than Skimmy.

"A fellow ought to take his gwuel without whimpewin'," said Gussy, as the black sheep came out, with contorted faces.

Gussy found Baggy's tearful face disgusting.

"Ah, D'Arcy!" said Mr. Railton, as the three entered. "You were one of those on the platform, I perceive."

Gussy put up a hand to his face.

"I thought I had got it all off, sir," he answered, holding out the hand now.

"Not quite. I dare say it will come off in time, however. What's the hand for, D'Arcy?"

"I natchuwally supposed, sir—"

"That I should confound the innocent with the guilty—eh?—the victims with the plotters? That is no great compliment to my perspicacity, surely, D'Arcy?"

Parker began to have a growing respect for Mr. Railton. It was plain that he did not intend to use the cane upon Parker. Moreover, he must have taken in at a single glance the true state of affairs, or something very like it, which spoke volumes for his judgment.

D'Arcy looked a trifle confused.

"I think, Mr. Wailton," he said, "that you must know that I chowish the highest wespect for you; we all do, sir. But—"

"Humanum est errare, and all the rest of it—eh, D'Arcy? Come, now, we will put aside all question of punishment as far as any of you three are concerned. I recognise the fact that, even if you have been at fault, you have suffered sufficiently. What was at the bottom of all this? That is what I want to know."

"If you please, sir—pway don't considah me wude—I would wathah be caned—much wathah, weally!"

And Arthur Augustus held out his hand again. The Housemaster would not see it. He turned to Parker. He knew better than to open the floodgates of Skimmy's verbosity.

"Will you condescend to explain, Parker?"

"I think, sir, that as D'Arcy does not feel himself justified in explaining, I cannot well do so—that is, of course, unless you insist," replied the new boy, surprised at himself for following so meekly Gussy's lead, for personally he saw no good reason against explaining.

"You are two young idiots!" said Mr. Railton sharply.

Parker's wrath flared high. How dared the fellow talk like that to an equal?

But Parker held himself in by repeating to himself that he was not Mr. Railton's equal in the Housemaster's eyes—merely a recalcitrant junior.

Then Skimmy spoke:

"If you will have the kindness to let me make clear to you the whole circumstances, sir—"

Something like a groan escaped from Mr. Railton. He knew Skimmy—knew him too well to give him his head and chance the consequences.

"As a matter of fact, I scarcely need an explanation, Skimpole," he said, quite kindly, but in haste. "It was rather in order to give you an opportunity of justifying your position—"

"That is exactly what I should wish, sir," said Skimmy.

He loved nothing better than "justifying his position" on any or every subject upon which he held views.

"Never mind, Skimpole! This paper gave away part of the secret—if it was a secret. It was thrust under my door. But I did not happen to see it until I returned just now, so I was unable to attend your meeting until it had developed into something more like a bear-

garden than a meeting. Did you send me this invitation, D'Arcy?"

Arthur Augustus stared in dismay. The paper which the Housemaster held up was one of the typed invitations to the meeting in the crypt.

"Most assuredly I did not, sir," said Gussy. "I should nevah dream of takin' such a gwoos libahty!"

"Ah, then I may take it that you did not include the masters in your generous scheme for the regeneration of the school?"

"Certainly not, sir—at any wate, as far as you are concerned. I could mention— But pewwaps I had bettah let that dwop, sir!"

"I think you had better let it drop, D'Arcy," replied Mr. Railton, with twinkling eyes.

"I can assuah you, sir, that we are all moah than satisfied with you," added Arthur Augustus, in his noblest manner.

Mr. Railton was but human, and he could not resist a smile. He could not feel really displeased, either. He went on, almost jokingly:

"I may take it, then, that our manners and language do not appear to you urgently in need of amendment?"

"No, sir. Ahem! Well, Mr. Wailton, as between man and man, I weally do not considah that 'idiot' is just pweicely the term one gentleman should apply to anohtah!"

"Did I use that term, D'Arcy? Oh, yes, I remember now! I apologise. I see that you are right!"

"You also called Parkah an idiot, sir."

"Then I apologise to Parker," said Mr. Railton cheerfully.

He looked at the new fellow.

"Don't mention it, sir," said Parker.

His head was in a whirl. This sort of thing upset all the notions he had had of public schools. There might be hide-bound pedagogues at such places; but quite certainly this young man, with the twinkling eyes and the strong, determined face, was not one of them.

This was a man capable of shaping boys—ay, and men, too!

"You were D'Arcy's supporter in this well-meant but hare-brained scheme, Parker?"

"I was, sir. I really do not see, however, that it deserves to be called 'hare-brained.' There seemed to me to be room for it!"

"Don't you consider that it is a trifle premature for you to start in upon the reform of St. Jim's? You have been here but a few days. Your knowledge of public schools is practically nil. A standard of comparison is impossible to you. Do you not see, Parker, that you were really taking rather too much upon yourself? D'Arcy and Skimpole I must regard as impervious to argument. They both mean well—as, I am sure, you do—but they do exceedingly foolish things in their efforts to improve their little world. A warning to you may be of use, however!"

Parker could have answered easily—on paper! It was not so easy thus. He had never made any pretensions to oratory. He felt that Mr. Railton was wrong in several ways, but did not find it easy to say how and where.

The eyes of the two men met. A queer, vague feeling that it was not into a boy's eyes he was looking came upon Victor Railton. He dismissed it lightly at the time, but he remembered it later.

"Have you any reply to make, Parker?"

"Not at the moment, sir."

There was something behind that, too, Mr. Railton felt; but he did not inquire further.

"Very well," he said. "Now, mind, D'Arcy, no more meetings of the Society for the Amelioration, and all the rest of it, without my sanction—or, of course, the Head's!"

"Oh, no, sir!" said Arthur Augustus fervently.

They went.

"Wailton's a wegulah bwick!" said Gussy outside.

Parker agreed.

"He is an exceedingly well-disposed man, but I could wish that he showed more inclination to employ his mind upon really serious subjects!" said Skimmy.

"Wats!" retorted Gussy.

CHAPTER 8.

Mellish's Nice Friends.

IT was Mellish who had put that notice under Mr. Railton's door.

Possibly he had only done so as he was not attending the meeting himself, and thought it a pity it should be wasted.

But it is rather more likely, on the whole, since Mellish was Mellish, that he hoped for trouble for someone.

The sneak of the Fourth was giving the gas-party a miss because he had business elsewhere.

He was going to see his friends and patrons, Messrs. Smiler & Rusty.

There was a sovereign to be earned—or, at least, to be obtained—easily, and Percy Mellish meant to have that sovereign.

Messrs. Smiler & Rusty had not cleared out immediately after their assault upon Parker in Rylcombe Wood.

They had thought of doing so at first, but with coolness came other views.

Their victim had not recognised them, they were sure. It was a very off-chance whether he would have done so had he seen their faces. They knew him; but, then, lots of people knew P. I. Parker-Roberts, of the "Daily Messenger," whom that gentleman did not know.

If he had been going to report to the police, he would have gone back to Rylcombe at once, Smiler argued.

And if they went back to "the smoke" without bring off their job, the Big Boss would come down heavily upon them, Rusty opined.

So, taking one consideration with another, they decided to stay and have another shot. Therefore, their suborning of Percy Mellish to play the spy.

Mellish had expected to have to walk past the Green Man in the hope of seeing them at that high-toned hostelry.

But he came upon them before he reached the village, as they sat on a heap of stones, Smiler with a Woodbine between his lips, and Rusty chewing the eternal quid.

He saw at once that they had made changes in their personal appearance since his last meeting with them.

The changes were intended to be for the better. But Rusty, with a bristly beard and in a billycock hat, looked every bit as big a ruffian as he had done stubbly-chinned and capped. His nearly new tweed suit sat ill upon him, too. Smiler, moustached, Homburg-hatted, in broadcloth, spats, and patent leathers,

was a shade more passable, yet looked all over the oily villain he was.

"Hallo, old pal!" cried Smiler. "You ain't never goin' to pass us without a word, are you?"

Mellish jumped off his bike.

"I didn't know you at first," he said.

Smiler grinned, and gave Rusty a nudge.

"We're slap-up toffs now, ain't we?" growled Rusty.

"Congrats!" said Mellish, not quite knowing what to say. "Was it a legacy, or something of that kind?"

"That's the k'rect card. A legacy it was, lef' us by our dear old granddad," answered Smiler.

"But surely you aren't brothers?" gasped Mellish, looking from one to the other.

There was certainly no resemblance, except that both were plainly unpleasant characters, but they were that in different ways.

"Yuss!" creaked Rusty.

"No," said Smiler. "That's on'y 'is little joke. We're coublings!"

He pulled out a handful of silver, with the gleam of gold—rare sight in these days of the Great War—among it. Mellish's eyes glistened with greed.

"Sit down alonger us, an' ave a talk," growled Rusty.

Mellish glanced round nervously. The Fourth and Shell were safe, but seniors or fags might happen along the road.

"Ere, this is nigher the ticket!" said Smiler, getting up and opening a gate hard by.

The three passed into the field beyond. Mellish, feeling very nervous, stood his bike out of sight behind the hedge, and they settled down together in the lee of a stack.

"Ave a fag, Miester— Now, it's a rummy thing, but I clean forgot your name," said Smiler.

"Thanks!" said the sneak of the Fourth. "My name's Mellish—Percy Mellish!"

"An' how's Master Parker gettin' said Smiler, in his oiliest tones.

Rusty grunted. There was no excess of oil about Rusty.

Mellish blew smoke down his nose, and coughed a little. The cigarette Smiler had given him seemed of a stronger kind than those he had been in the habit of smoking.

"An' how's Master Perker gettin' on?" asked Smiler.

"Mr. Parker-Roberts of the 'Daily Messenger,' you mean, don't you? Oh, I know a thing or two!" said Mellish boldly.

Smiler looked at him with well-pretended admiration.

"Well, if you ain't a knock-out, Mister Percymellish!" he said.

Mellish was so pleased that he drew smoke the wrong way, and began to cough and splutter.

Smiler, in most friendly fashion, patted him on the back. Rusty only smiled unpleasantly.

"Will 'appen sometimes, even to a seasoned smoker, like wot I can see with 'arf an eye you are," said Smiler sympathetically. "An' 'ow did you find out P.-R.'s iden-ti-fi-cation—ch, Miester Percymellish?"

But Mellish had no intention of giving away that secret.

"I'm not going to tell you that," he replied. "But as we're all on the square, I thought it was only fair you should know it."

"Ah, there's nothin' like bein' all on the square! That's us, ain't it, Rusty, old pal?"

"Not 'arf!" replied Rusty, getting nearer the truth than his friend.

"We're thinkin' about takin' a little

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If you are not getting your right
PENSION

bit of a 'ouse somewheres this way, with a garding for Rusty to dig in," Smiler said.

"Oh!" said Mellish.

It was not for conversation about the plans of Messrs Smiler and Rusty that he had come.

"Ad the police up at your show lately, Mister Percymellish?" asked Smiler.

"Police? My hat, no! Why should we?"

"Dunno! Does 'appen sometimes—even in the most respeckerable establishments. Don't it, Rusty?"

"Don't arsk me!" creaked Rusty. "I don't know nothin' about the perlice, nor more I don't want!"

"I dessey it was on'y a silly bit of talk," said Smiler thoughtfully. "Folks will talk in these peaceful, little, quiet places. Nothin' ain't 'appened to no one there, I don't suppose, then?"

"Not that I've heard of," answered Mellish. "And I should be sure to hear."

"Ah, so you would, bein' that sort!" Smiler said.

Mellish felt reasonably doubtful whether that was exactly a compliment. It was very much the sort of thing fellows in his own Form had said to him at times, and most certainly it had not been meant in a complimentary sense, then.

But he wanted to get to business.

"I've found out when P.-R.'s going to town," he said.

"Good! An' when might it be?" returned Smiler, taking care not to appear too eager.

But Mellish had seen the gleam in Rusty's brutal eyes, and a vague feeling of alarm took hold of him.

"Look here, I want to know first what—that is, why you're so interested in the chap!" he said.

"Qui' ri'!" replied Smiler, slapping him on the knee. "Tell the young gent all about that bloomin' bet, Rusty!"

"Tell 'im yourself!" creaked Rusty. "I ain't got so much wind to spare as you 'ave!"

"Well, this is the size of it. Mind, you're a 'earin' of this in strick confidence, Mister Percymellish!"

"Oh, that's all right, of course!" said Mellish.

"Well, I dessey you've guessed already, bein' so cute, that me an' Rusty ain't down 'ere not 'olly for our 'ealths!"

"Oh, I know that!"

"You would—that's you! Sharp as a razor, you are, Mister Percymellish! Well, there's a bet 'angin' on to it!"

"You said that before!"

"So I did. Snakes, you're a sharp 'un! It's about P.-R. bein' 'ere at school, you know. There 'e is up at the school, jest like the rest of you, ain't 'e? In 'is little Eton jacket an' 'is little turn-down collar, jest like a good little Tommy - make - room - for - your - uncle! Lumme, it don't 'arf make me laugh to think of it! An' 'im wot 'e is—the deepest bloke anywheres this side of Germany!"

"You don't mean that he's done anything? Oh, no, it couldn't be that, of course!"

"Police job? No, that ain't P.-R.'s line. Too fly for that. 'E'd sooner 'elp the bluebottles!"

"Special crime investigator! Bah!" creaked Rusty, spitting.

Again Mellish felt that vague thrill of fear. He did not like Parker at all, but he did not hate him enough to want anything serious to happen to him.

"Our boss—"

"Who is he?" asked Mellish.

"Ah, that's a question as I ain't allowed to answer! But never mind that. 'Im an' P.-R., they been up against one another some time. An' now they've



The canvas descended on the five, and an avalanche of horrible, black, sticky stuff poured over them. (See Chapter 5.)

got a bet on. If P.-R. can stay 'ere at school without bein' twigged as not bein' a boy at all, but a growed man—same as me an' Rusty 'ere—an' a man as 'as been to the Front, too—"

"Where 'e oughter be now!" growled Rusty, and spat again.

"Then P.-R. wins a sum of the right stuff as would fair astonish you. Contrariwise, if 'e's spotted, our boss mops up the whack. See?"

Mellish did not quite see, but he believed.

It was a fairy tale, of course. The only truth in it was what Smiler had said as to the relations between his employer and Parker.

The Big Boss—very few people knew him by any name but that—was one of those spiders of crime who build their webs far and wide. As Special Crime Correspondent of the "Daily Messenger," P. L. Parker-Roberts had found out a great deal more about the Big Boss than that scoundrelly potentate cared for.

This new scheme of Parker-Roberts—the staying as a boy among boys at St. Jim's—appeared to the Big Boss to offer his understrappers a far better chance of putting the too active journalist out of the way for a time—for the plan stopped short of murder—than was likely to present itself while he was in London, where the whole police force knew him as a powerful auxiliary, and watched after his safety as that of a good friend.

So Messrs. Smiler and Rusty had been sent along, and had found the traitorous tool they needed in Percy Mellish.

"How long has he to stay here to win?" asked Mellish.

"That's mor'n I'm exac'ly authorised to tell you, young sir. But 'elp us, an' you're on for a share of the oof! 'E's a free-anded bloke, our boss."

"How much is the bet?"

"A cool thou! One thousand Jimmy-o-goblins!"

Mellish felt almost stunned. To think of Parker—Parker of the Shell—being able to make a bet of £1,000.

"And what do I stand in?" demanded Mellish, greed conquering his astonishment.

"Well— Shall we say a tenner?"

"I think we'd better say twenty-five," answered Mellish, his voice trembling with excitement.

"You're a 'ard bargainer, Mister Percymellish! But done with you—for two tenners!"

"Right-ho!"

That the boss of Messrs. Smiler and Rusty was certainly not playing the game occurred to Mellish. But that was not his affair, he told himself. Of course, the fellow wanted to win all that money. And Mellish really had no special predilection towards playing the game.

It would serve Parker right for coming to St. Jim's under false pretences, and being sarcastic and contemptuous to better fellows than himself!

"Now, about this 'ere little trip to town?" said Smiler oilyly.

"I shall want something on account before I tell you about that."

"Two quid do you, Mister Percymellish?"

"Make it five, can't you?"

"No go! Ain't got so much in 'and of the boss' chink. An', of course, we want our own oof for the little place we're a-thinkin' of takin'—where you'll be a welcome guest any time, Mister Percymellish!"

Not if he knew it, Mellish thought.

He took the two pounds, he gave his information, and he went.

"That's a slimy 'un," said Rusty.

"'E's the sort that suits me!" replied Smiler, looking very ugly. "It's easier to do down the chap wot thinks 'e knows such a perishin' lot—easier every time, Rusty, old pal!"

CHAPTER 9.

Strained Relations.

THERE was quite a crowd to tea in No. 10 Study after the caning. Figgins & Co. had been invited, and so had Talbot and the chums of No. 6. Lowther was in funds—a remittance from his uncle had arrived, and he was standing treat.

But, in spite of the well-spread festive board, the fellows did not settle down to tea at once.

They had first to discuss what had happened. Moreover, D'Arcy and Parker had not yet turned up, and there was some curiosity as to whether they would consent to sit down with those who had so lately ragged them. To begin before they came was scarcely giving the matter a fair chance of settling itself. Both would consider that rude.

"It was a simply lovely jape," said Tom Merry. "I could have cried with laughing when the doom descended."

"And just didn't our Parker look Pignacious?" grinned Lowther.

"What about our Gustavus?" chortled Blake.

"Oh, yes! But, my hat, we've had to pay for it!" said Manners.

"Rats! What's three across each hand?" Herries said.

"A jolly painful process!" answered Manners feelingly.

"What's your verdict, Talbot? Was it worth it?"

"Not sure, Tom. It was funny, of course. But it was really a bit too rough on Gussy and Parker and Skimmy. What made me think better of it was those Fifth bounders getting it in the neck as they did. They fairly asked for it."

"You chaps ought to take down Parker a peg," said Figgins.

"Oh, Pignacious is all serene when you know the beggar," replied Lowther.

Figgy snorted.

"If we had him in the New House—"

"Oh, crumbs, old man, that isn't making the punishment fit the crime! He doesn't deserve anything as bad as all that!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Funny ass, aren't you, Lowther? Over in our show we don't laugh at such rotten jokes as that."

"You haven't enough brains to know a joke when you see one!" said Digby.

"Parker's no joke," said Kerr. "For a new chap, he really takes a heap too much on himself. He wants taming."

"Your mistake, old chap. Pignacious is the joke of all the ages. I laugh whenever I think of him. And as for taming—"

"He's a good little tame Parker now," said Tom, grinning.

"Hadn't we better start tea?" inquired Fatty Wynn.

Arthur Augustus appeared at this moment, his noble nose held high in the air.

"Hallo, Gustavus! Got your war-paint on still, I see!" said Jack Blake.

"What's your tribe? The Ojibways sounds a likely one. You're always jibbing about something."

"Weally, Blake, you might leave such wotten jokes to Lowthah, I considah!"

It was evident that Gussy did not mean to bear malice. Perhaps the fact that tea in No. 6 would have been rather an exiguous meal had its weight, though when Arthur Augustus was really on the high horse he did not allow himself to be influenced by such small matters.

"Where's Pignacious, Gussy?" asked Manners.

"I am not at all suah that Parkah will consent to sit down to tea with you, deah boys?"

"Let him do the other thing, then!" said Figgins warmly.

"The confounded cheek of a new chap, reckoning he can teach us manners!" said Digby.

"He can't do it, though. I should think he has tumbled to that," chimed in Tom.

"I wathah think he has, Tom Mewwy."

"Here's Gussy recanting his heresy!"

"Not in the vevy least, Lowthah! What I mean is that both I an' my fwiend Parkah have come to the conclusion that neithah we nor anyone else can hope to teach you chaps mannahs!"

"There's one for you, Tom!" said Talbot, laughing.

"You, too, old chap!"

"On the whole, Tom Mewwy, I think you are w'ong. Talbot's man—"

"Oh, blow Talbot's manners!" said Blake.

"Let's have a look at the frab-jous weals on your paws, Gustavus!"

D'Arcy showed his palms.

"Why, I can't see a blessed mark!"

"No, Dig, because theah are no marks to be seen, you know."

"Didn't you get it?" asked Herries.

"No, deah boy. Why should we?"

"My hat! Do you mean to say Railton didn't cane Parker?"

"Of course he did not! Mr. Wailton is just. Neithah Parkah nor I caused the wiot."

"Great snakes! Who did, then? Are you putting it all on to Skimmy?"

"Not at all, Blake. Skimmy was also innocent."

"Then who in the wide world were guilty?"

"Don't be so widic, Mannahs! You fellahs were!"

"Oh, rats! Look here, you chaps, I vote that when Parker comes along we bump him."

"I shall no longah considah you as a fwiend, Figgins, if you do anything of the sort—nor shall I wemain on terms of fwiendship with anyone who aids and abets you."

"Pignacious slunk out of it," said Lowther.

"I've nothing against Pignacious on general principles, but I decline to be taught manners by him, and I don't see why he should go scot-free when the rest of us have got it hot."

"If you accuse Parkah of slinkin' out of it, Lowthah, then you accuse me!"

"And who are you, that you shouldn't be accused, Gussy?" snapped Blake.

"Anybody who ventchahs to insinuate that I slunk out of anythin' is in dangah of gettin' a feahful thwashin'!" said Arthur Augustus hotly.

"Then I—"

"Oh, dry up, Dig!" said Talbot good-temperedly.

"We all know that there isn't one of us less likely to slink out of anything than Gussy. He couldn't slink if he tried."

"Thank you, Talbot! I weally believe that you are the onlay fellah pwe-sent who so much as undahstands the feelin's of a gentleman. As for you, Digby—"

"Well, what about me? If you want to adjourn to the gym and get yourself hurt, Gussy, I'm on!"

More tempers than Digby's and D'Arcy's were suffering. The general feeling of the meeting was strongly

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against the attitude taken up by the swell of the Fourth.

But at that moment Parker appeared, and attention was turned to him at once.

"So you got off your caning, Pignacious?" asked Lowther.

"I decline to answer you if you persist in calling me by that absurd and objectionable nickname!" replied Parker stiffly.

"Rats! We're going to call you what we jolly well please!" said Herries.

"Oh, drop it!" said Tom Merry. "After all, the whole bizney is done with now, and it's not worth while chewing the cud on it. Come along and have tea. Now then, Parker, here's a seat! Gussy, old ass, we'll let you sit next to Parker."

"I have no intention of taking tea in this study, Merry!" said Parker. He spoke stiffly, but less so than he had done to Lowther.

"As you like!" answered Tom. "Gussy—"

"Thank you, Tom Mewwy. But as my friend Parkah is not inclined to stay, I shall not stay either. In any case, I should not sit down until I had received a full and ample apology for the injurious aspersions upon me!"

"We should all get jolly hungry if we waited for that, I fancy!" said Figgins sarcastically.

"Oh, cheese it, Figgy!" pleaded Fatty Wynn. "What's the use of all this unpleasantness? I'm sure I don't mind a scrap about the caning now. And I'm glad these chaps weren't put through it. Why should they be, come to that?"

"Hear, hear, Fatty!" said Talbot. "Come along, you two!"

"It's a thumping fine spread!" said Fatty wistfully. "Chuck all this rot, and peg in!"

"Yes, do!" said Lowther, reminded that he had duties as host.

"I beg to decline!" answered Parker icily.

"An' I also decline," said Arthur Augustus, in his loftiest tones. "Talbot, deah boy, I twust that you will understand that I should have no objection to sittin' down with you. Wynn, I should also wish to say that I have no quawwel with you. An', on the whole, Tom Mewwy an' Kerr are not absolute wottahs!"

"Thanks, Gussy!" said Kerr drily. "I won't cut you out of my will."

"Don't be an idiot, old chap!" said Tom.

"But I did not mean to imply that I was pwepared to suffah any familiawity fwom you, Mewwy," went on Arthur Augustus. "An' as for the west of you, I should uttably wefuse to be seen dead in your company! You pwesume to condemn my friend Parkah unheard, when my friend Parkah has played up like a Bwiton, an' the less I see of you in the futchah the bettah pleased I shall be!"

And the swell of the Fourth seized Parker by the arm and swept out of the study with him.

"Afraid you won't find much for tea in our cupboard, Gussy!" sang out Blake. "But if Parker's a wolf for stale sardines—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"They are wottahs!" said Arthur Augustus indignantly.

"But I do not wish you to quarrel with your friends on my account, you know, D'Arcy," said Parker. There was nothing stiff about his tone now.

"You stood by me, Parkah, an' it is up to me, as a gentleman an' a Bwiton, to stand by you. Moahovah, I no longah considah any of them but Talbot as my friends. This is a final wuptchah! I suppose we must go an' have tea in Hall, deah boy, as I am stony—"

"There is no need for that, D'Arcy, if you are not too proud to allow me to lay in supplies, and it is not too late to get them. I am not—er—stony."

"As you like, deah boy. Theah should be no pwide between friends."

So Gussy and Parker, after a visit to the tuckshop, took tea in No. 6 together on the chummiest of footings.

CHAPTER 10.

Parker-Roberts of the "Daily Messenger."

"THERE 'e goes, bless 'im!" said Smiler viciously.

"'Oo?" inquired Rusty out of a mug of beer.

"W'y, P.R., of course! 'Oo else, Timber-head?"

"So 'e's really goin' up to town?"

"Looks like it. He's got a bag with 'im!"

"That's all right, then, though I more'n 'arf fancied your nice young

friend at the school was playin' it off on 'em."

"'E better 'adn't!" snarled Smiler, who seemed in a very bad temper.

"Keep your wool on an' your pecker up, mate!" growled Rusty. "We'll bring it off to-night, you bet—if 'e comes back to-night. But I don't trust that there Mellows, or wotever 'is silly name is—not a yard, I don't!"

The two worthies were in the Green Man. Parker had just passed on his way to the station. He had obtained leave to go up to town, but only on condition that he returned the same night.

In the circumstances, however, that suited Parker very well. He felt that to leave St. Jim's from Saturday to Monday, with matters in their present condition, would be too much like a base desertion of D'Arcy, who, in loyalty to him, had thrown over his older friends.

Parker did not know how often Arthur Augustus had had positively final ruptures with Blake, Herries, and Digby before—final ruptures which were healed within a few days. It was not in any one of those four staunch chums to bear malice.

Both Parker and D'Arcy would be missing footer that afternoon. Parker regretted it. He had grown very keen on the game. D'Arcy, though he had always been keen, did not regret it at all.

Gussy was expecting a flying visit from his brother, Lord Conway, home on short leave from the Western Front. And Gussy's one regret was that he would not be able to introduce his new chum to that gallant officer.

Parker did not share that regret. He had reasons of his own for not desiring to meet Lord Conway.

It was to the "Daily Messenger" office that Parker was going. He started as Parker of St. Jim's, a rather old-looking but chubby boy in an Eton jacket. When he reached London he had become P. I. Parker-Roberts, a still chubby but most unschoolboylike individual in a blue serge lounge-suit.

He had been thinking hard on the way.

Among the thoughts that had passed through his mind had been this—the arrangements made for his speedy return to town in the event of his being

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wanted there in a hurry were scarcely satisfactory. He had far more difficulty than he had anticipated in getting permission to go.

And P. I. Parker-Roberts was too valuable an asset by far to the "Daily Messenger" to be tied up, so to speak.

He remembered very clearly why things had been left like this. It had been agreed between him and the great man who ruled the destinies of the "Messenger" that there would be no difficulty in his cutting loose altogether at any moment he chose. His mission was not of such importance that it could not be left incomplete.

But now—well, Parker did not want to cut loose in a hurry.

He had not grown fed-up with St. Jim's yet. He knew that his staying long there was out of the question. But another fortnight or three weeks—that should be possible. He would be willing to let it rank as a holiday. Since he came out of hospital he had had no holiday, and this was doing him good.

Parker-Roberts took a taxi from the terminus to the great building in which the "Messenger" had its home, nodded to the grey-moustached commissionaire, and ran up the wide staircase to the chief's room on the first floor. Few people entered that sanctum, but the man on guard by the door let him in at once.

"Why, boy!" said the man with the strong, clean-shaven face and the grizzled hair, of whom the whole staff stood in awe.

"Here I am, chief!" said Parker.

"And looking uncommonly fit, too! But you've sent no copy along, you young dog! And, in spite of the public concentration on the war, I had really been hoping to make something of a splash with your revelations as to life at a public school."

"But that wasn't the only reason why I went down there, was it, sir?" said Parker quietly.

"Well, no—not the only one; but the chief one."

"The other being to enable both of us to find out how far our views of the public school system were right, and how far wrong."

"That's so. But that was rather a side-issue. Like you, I am not a public school man, and I have always held that the system is, on the whole, unsound."

"We were in complete agreement on that score till I came back from the Front," said Parker-Roberts quietly.

"Yes; you'd ratted a bit then. I'm not surprised. You almost made me rat, too. Those splendid youngsters! But still, I'm not convinced that the system made them, and you were not, either. It might have been in spite of the system. What do you think now?"

"I am not sure, sir. I'm shaken—I don't mind admitting that. I want to go back and make more sure. But I cannot promise you as much as a single par out of it all. Does that get your goat?"

St. Jim's would have been astonished to hear that expressive Americanism from the lips of the precise Parker. He spoke far less stiffly here, in familiar surroundings, than there.

"It does not, boy. In thirty years spent in the wicked newspaper world, you are the most entirely reliable person I have ever struck, and I bank on you every time. Do as you like. You remind me of a Biblical character—the Prophet Balaam, who went out to curse Israel, but stayed to bless."

"And it really is a trifle like that, sir."

The chief looked keenly at his young aide.

"Then why not admit we were wrong, drop the whole affair, and come back here at once?" he asked.

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"But I want to go back there, sir! It's doing me good! The Army took some of the pedantic rubbish out of me. This is going to take the rest, I think. Besides, it's a holiday, and I needed one."

"You deserved one, at least. Well, boy, you're wanted here, but not so badly at the moment that we cannot spare you. The time may come, though—and that soon—when I shall ask you to drop the schoolboy and put on the man again at a moment's notice."

"A request from you is a command to me, chief."

"By Jove, boy, I wish you were the son I never had! And that's a thing I have never said before to anyone, or thought of anyone. Now tell me something of your experiences. You have any amount of good copy, I know, if you aren't going to use it."

Parker-Roberts proceeded to tell of some of the things that had happened to him. He would have kept back the Rylcombe Wood incident, but it was impossible to do justice to the Terrible Three without telling it. The story made the chief look very grave. He knew a good deal about that prince of scoundrels whom his followers called the Big Boss.

But the older man had lots of confidence in the younger one's ability to keep his own head against any dangers that might threaten it. And, in any case, there was no certainty that London was safer for an enemy of the Big Boss than Sussex.

It was curious that Parker-Roberts found himself summing up the fellows with whom he had come most into contact with far greater clearness than he had been able to do when near them. Perhaps distance helped.

"I should like to meet your Terrible Three, and, more even than them, this young Bayard of a D'Arcy," said Mr. Malleston gravely. "Talbot, too—though I can't agree with your headmaster in keeping a young burglar, however thoroughly reformed, among his flock. But this juvenile blackmailer—"

"Such a poor little, mean little, two-penny-halfpenny blackmailer, sir! Don't let him prejudice you against us!"

"You say 'us' as if—"

"And you said 'my headmaster,' sir!" Mr. Malleston laughed.

"Well, he is that, there's no denying. You will rank as an old St. Jim's boy after this, Philip."

"And, on the whole, I shall regard it as a distinction, sir—if the school does not discard me, as it probably will when the truth is known."

"Perhaps the truth need never be known. Been caned yet, boy?"

Parker-Roberts laughed. "Very nearly. It was the escape of my life!"

"Now see here! You have been running with the wrong mob, as they say in Australia. Your experiences have been with anybody but the goats, save for this slimy young Mellish. Why not make yourself agreeable to some of the other type, and learn their little ways?"

"But that won't be much of a holiday, though I grant it should make better copy—if this ever come to copy. I'll do it, of course. Parker the Prodigal shall go on the bill. But I really shall not enjoy the society of Cutts, Crooke, Racke, and the rest of the gay dog gang."

"Is that a son of Racke the contractor, of Racke & Hacke?"

"It is."

"The father is a simply unspeakable outsider."

"The son, sir, can give his sire points in that respect, I think," replied Parker drily.

"H'm! I wish you joy of him, then! Come along and have some lunch. It is

a trifle late; but I have not yet been out, and I have not given up eating entirely, in spite of the war. You have had none yet, I suppose?"

"I have not, and I'm quite ready. By the way, speaking of war-time economy, I have a story of St. Jim's to tell you that ought to amuse you."

It did not fail to amuse Mr. Malleston, for it was the story of D'Arcy's economy campaign, and the great spoof by which he took revenge.

CHAPTER 11.

Four to the Rescue.

"TWIGGEZ-VOUS, Kerr?" said Figgins, nudging the Scot in the region of the fifth rib.

The New House Co. were on the platform at Wayland Junction. They had been over to Wayland to see a relative of Kerr's, and now were at the station ready to catch the last train back to Rylcombe.

"I spot him!" replied Kerr.

"What are you two asses burbling about?" said Fatty Wynn.

"Never mind, old chap!" said Figgins. "Your eyes are so bunged up with fat that I don't suppose you even noticed the London train come in. It isn't to be expected."

"I did, then!" answered Fatty. "And I saw D'Arcy and his brother go to it. I suppose Lord Conway's going on somewhere down the line. But there's nothing in that. We knew he was coming."

"He ain't quite asleep, Figgy," said Kerr. "All the same, he's missed what you meant."

"Never mind, as long as I didn't miss my supper," Fatty said, with a sigh of sweet reminiscence. "I hope it won't be long before your aunt asks us all over here again, Kerr. She does know how to give a chap the right sort of meal, and no mistake!"

"If this war-time economy bizney develops much further she won't be able to ask you next time, old chap. She'd have Devonport asking nasty questions about her purchases of grub, and she wouldn't like that a bit. Wonder what Parker's up to in those trousers, Figgy?"

"Parker? I haven't seen Parker!" said Fatty.

But Kerr and Figgins had. Parker had got out of the train from London, still wearing the blue serge suit he had changed into on his way up. He had not meant to show himself in it at Wayland, but there had been no chance of making a change on the first part of the journey. It would be rather a rush to get it done in the few minutes between Wayland and Rylcombe; but he would have to try, and he naturally wanted a compartment to himself.

So he had tried to avoid D'Arcy, but had not quite succeeded. They passed one another. Arthur Augustus did not see Parker at first, but his brother did, and Lord Conway ejaculated:

"Why, I'm hanged if that isn't old Chubby! Hi, Chubby, old top!"

But Parker paid no heed. He was meant, he knew, but he pushed on. Anywhere else he would have been only too pleased to renew his acquaintance with Lord Conway, but not in the neighbourhood of St. Jim's, and not with Gussy present.

"Who is Chubby, Conway?" asked Gussy.

"Fellah I met out there—no end of a good sort, and as plucky as they make 'em, though a bit queer in some ways. There he is, Gus."

"That? Oh, you are undah a delusion, Conway! That is Parkah, one of our chaps!"

"Must be a relative, then. Chubby's name is Parker-Roberts. I should like to

have a word with Parker, but there isn't time. Friend of yours, Gus?"

"Yaas; an' one of the vewy best!"

Had there been a minute or two to spare, Gussy would have hunted Parker down, without the slightest suspicion that in doing so he would have been annoying Parker extremely. But there really was no time to spare at all.

Gussy had failed to notice the difference in dress. He was not so apt to notice such little things as the acute Kerr, who had real detective instincts.

Parker spotted a compartment in the branch-line train in which the lamp was burning so low that it looked like going out altogether. He got in there, as it seemed to him likely that he might have it to himself. He had not noticed Figgins & Co., and he did not wish to see Gussy till he had changed.

Even before the train moved out he had begun to unpack his bag in readiness. He heard the whistle of the main-line train go, and knew that in another minute or two the branch-line one would be off.

"Hallo, Gussy, old scout! Come along with us!" spoke Figgins, from somewhere close by.

Parker heard, and realised that there were more St. Jim's fellows about besides Gussy. He got as far back as possible, and pulled his overcoat up. It was quite a mild night, and to that fact was due his having had the overcoat unbuttoned, thereby allowing Kerr to spot his unorthodox garb.

"Thanks, Figgay! But my friend Parkah is somewheah about, an' I am looking for him."

"Oh, confound it!" groaned Parker.

"Better slip in here. There's the whistle!" said Kerr.

Parker breathed a sigh of relief. But just as the train began to move, his compartment was invaded by Messrs. Smiler and Rusty.

He did not know them. It was only because he did not want anyone in there that he resented the intrusion. He was not thinking in the least of the Big Boss and his myrmidons.

As if the starting of the train had been too much for it, the lamp flickered out before the journey had fairly begun.

To Parker this seemed rather a bit of luck. He could change in the darkness.

He pulled off his overcoat and coat at once, and had his waistcoat half-way off when he felt himself seized.

And while he struggled, badly handicapped by the waistcoat, a cloth was pressed against his face, and he recognised the sickly scent of chloroform.

He dodged, eluding the cloth. He got his arms free. He struggled hard, trying to reach the communication-cord.

But he knew his chance small, and, much as he hated doing it, he lifted up his voice in a call for help.

"Help! Help!"

"What was that?" said Kerr, in sudden alarm.

"Help!" came the voice again, more muffled now.

"Must have been the wind," said Fatty sleepily.

"Shurrup, Figgy!"

"I heard! It was Parkah, an' he called for help!"

"He must be in the next compartment! We'll have to—"

But Figgins never finished his sentence. Already Kerr had the door open, and Arthur Augustus, pushing past Kerr, was first on the footboard.

"I say, you chaps, that's no end dangerous! You'll—"

But Fatty's warning went unheeded.

And Fatty, though he might see the danger more clearly than they, or dread

it more, was every bit as plucky as the other three.

Fatty followed. Fatty groaned, but he followed.

There was just enough dim light to see two figures holding down a third on the seat.

The third figure must be Parker's—no doubt of that!

Gussy, Kerr, and Figgy fairly hurled themselves on the scoundrels. Fatty would have done likewise, but there was really not room left for Fatty to hurl himself.

The figure on the seat writhed and sat up. It is not so easy to chloroform anyone who knows what is being attempted against him, and, though Parker felt queer, he had not been made insensible.

The train began to slow down, nearing Rylcombe. One of the rascals, with a savage oath, brought up his knees sharply, took Figgins under the chin, and sent him sprawling. He carried over Gussy with him.

"Hang on, Kerr!" yelled the undaunted Figgy.

Gussy could not yell, he could only gasp, for one of Figgy's elbows was trying to get into his mouth.

But Rusty had got his hands to the Scots junior's throat, half-throttling him. Now he flung him away, kicking at him viciously, and made a leap for the door. Figgins clutched at his leg, but in vain.

"Ow-yow!" howled Fatty Wynn, and tumbled out, with Rusty on top of him.

The train had now slackened speed to such an extent that to jump out was not very dangerous. Yet only sheer necessity would have made Smiler do that.

But it was a choice between being made prisoner and jumping. And Smiler, quick to decide, in spite of his fear, chose the lesser evil.

He jumped.

Figgins would have gone after him, but Kerr and D'Arcy both lay on the floor, and Figgy did not know how much injury either they or Parker had sustained.

"Poor old Fatty!" he groaned.

CHAPTER 12.

Very Mysterious Indeed!

THE lights of Rylcombe Station, dim but welcome, showed. The train came to a standstill.

Arthur Augustus got up gasping. Kerr lay on the floor and gasped.

"What's it all about, Parkah?" asked Gussy.

"Never mind that for the moment. Help me to get these things into my bag!" replied Parker sharply.

"Do you chaps know that poor old Fatty's on the line somewherê—shot out?" asked Figgins, with natural indignation.

They had not known it, as their faces showed him at once. There was horror on both.

"Oh, he isn't likely to have been settled! I'll run back and pick him up. Get some clothes on, Parker. And you, Gussy, look after Kerr!"

"I'm all right!" gasped the Scot.

But Figgy was already out and speeding down the platform.

The stationmaster was not in view. A sleepy booking-clerk, of tender years, stood by the booking-hall door, and a sleepier porter, who might have been his grandfather, was toddling to the guard's van. Neither noticed anything amiss.

"I say, I'd be much obliged if you fellows wouldn't tell the stationmaster anything about this!" said Parker.

"But, weally—"

"That's a queer thing to want, Parker!"

"Of course—"

"Hurrah!" yelled Figgins. "Here's

good old Fatty!"

"That makes it poss to keep it dark, but—"

"Please do as I ask you, Kerr! I have my reasons!"

The porter had at last noticed something.

"Allo, young gents!" he said. "That there won't do nohow! You'd no right to go off the platform!"

"All serene, old bird!" said Figgins, pressing a florin into the horny palm of the porter. "I dropped something out of the train, that's all. It wasn't a very valuable article, was it, Fatty? But I thought I'd better go back and fetch it!"

The article meant by Figgy was Fatty Wynn. But the porter, looking at the dusty and red-faced Fatty, saw a gleam of gold in his hand.

"I sh'd call a gold watch a pretty wallible article myself!" he said. "You'd uncommon luck in findin' of it agin!"

Then Figgy saw.

"Where did you get that?" he asked.

"Dunno. Must have been one of the robbers'. It was in my hand, that's all I can tell you, Figgy."

"Rot! It's Parker's, I suppose! Let's have a squint at it!"

Fatty handed over the watch. He was glad to give it up, for he needed both hands to feel himself all over, to make sure how many places he was broken in.

Figgins' eyes were quick. Even in the dim light they could read the inscription on the back of that watch.

"Whew!"

That was what Figgins said as he read it. For the inscription said that the watch had been presented to Mr. P. J. Parker-Roberts by the members of a certain London Police Division, in recognition of his gallantry in going to the aid of a constable of the division, when attacked and got down by several burglars, and effecting a notable rescue.

And Figgins' mind was quick, as were his eyes. Doubt as to the identity of P. J. Parker-Roberts with Parker of the Shell might come later, but in that moment of discovery Figgy felt no doubt whatever.

"What's the row?" asked Fatty. "I can't help it if it ain't Parker's watch, you know! I didn't try to bag it. And, anyway, a scamp like that deserves to lose it!"

"It's Parker's all right!" said Figgins gruffly.

"Are you much hurt, Fatty?" asked Kerr anxiously.

"I ain't dead!" replied Wynn.

"That's as much as a chap can expect!"

But, apart from quite a choice assortment of bruises, Fatty was really not hurt. He had suffered no more than Kerr and D'Arcy.

"Your watch, I think, Parker?" said Figgins. "Fatty grabbed it from one of those rotters as he fell!"

"Thanks very much, Wynn! And thank you all, most sincerely. Nothing could have been pluckier than the way in which you came to my help!"

"The scoundrels meant to rob you, Parker!" said Kerr. "Thundering cheek, I call it!"

"Look sharp there, please!" piped the youthful booking-clerk. "I ain't paid to stand here all night!"

They passed out. The stationmaster was still invisible, and it hardly seemed worth while to have him called out. He could do nothing, it was evident. Fatty had seen both scoundrels get up and run away.

"We shall have to report this to Crump!" said Figgins. "Not that Crump's a ha'p'orth of good, of course. But—"

"Then why report?" asked Parker coolly.

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"Don't you want it reported?" snapped Figgins.

"I do not. I have already said so. But you did not hear that, of course?"

"Bai Jove! Weally, Parkah—"

"See here, D'Arcy, if this is reported it will very probably mean the stoppage of all leave after dark, I take it?"

"Yaas, Parkah, I am afwaid it will. But—"

"None of us can begin to identify those two men. What, then, is the use of saying anything?"

"H'm! There's something in that!" said Kerr.

"There's a good deal in this bizney, I fancy!" said Figgins drily.

Parker recognised in Figgy's tones a latent hostility that none of the other three showed. But what Parker chiefly wanted at that moment was his own way.

He had it. To three of the four, the affair seemed a plain case of attempted robbery. And even Figgins did not know what else to make of it. But somehow Figgy did not believe that it was mere robbery.

He had seen the inscription on the watch, and he smelt a rat.

If this had happened before Gussy's gas-party, Figgins might have tackled Parker straight out on the subject. But

he would not do that now. He resolved to take counsel with Kerr and Fatty before doing anything.

Figgins talked little on the way back to the school. Parker also had little to say, though he made them all—with the possible exception of Figgy—feel much more friendly disposed to him by what he said. They liked the coolness he had shown, too.

Fatty did not chatter, but only groaned from time to time. And Kerr was not garrulous. But Arthur Augustus talked enough for five.

The New House Co. had a long talk on the next day. They cut footer to talk. And after they had finished their consultation they went across to the School House to see Parker.

But they did not see him. The Terrible Three, coming in ruddy and warm from the footer-field, told them they had very little chance of seeing him for a fortnight or so.

A wire during the morning had fetched Parker out of the Shell class-room to go at once to town. Something Mr. Linton had let fall gave the Shell the impression that a relative of Parker's had been taken ill suddenly. It was Parker who

had told Tom Merry that he might be away a fortnight.

"My belief is that the chap will never come back at all!" growled Figgins.

But he would not explain why he believed so, and the Terrible Three had not heard the story of the night before. Parker had asked the four who had come to his rescue to keep that dark.

"Rats!" said Tom Merry. "We'll see old Pignacious again, you bet! Why, I'd more than half promised the chap that he should play right-half in one of the less important matches, and he's as keen as mustard about it!"

Now P. I. Parker-Roberts had no relative living nearer than a second cousin, whom he had never seen. That wire had come from the "Messenger."

Parker-Roberts was urgently needed. But he meant to come back to St. Jim's. He had still the role of Parker the Prodigal to play there.

And he came back, as will be told in a later story.

THE END.

(Don't miss next Wednesday's Great Story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's—"HARD LINES FOR LEVISON!" by MARTIN CLIFFORD.)

THE EDITOR'S CHAT.

For Next Wednesday:

"HARD LINES FOR LEVISON!"

By Martin Clifford.

It has already been shown that the straight path is not an easy one for Ernest Levison to keep. His feet are planted firmly enough upon it now, and there is every likelihood of his becoming a credit to the school which could only look upon him as a disgrace until quite lately. But the shadow of the past haunts him. There never was a truer proverb than that which refers to the dog with a bad name. What a fellow has done once he may do again. And when the same sort of thing is done, and the question is raised: "Who did it?" the accusing finger is very liable to be pointed at the dog with the bad name. So it is with Levison, and the thing is the harder to bear, because at last he seems like making a real chum. This is Clive, the South African junior. When the accusation comes, Clive is almost the only fellow who doubts Levison's guilt. But there is one besides—staunch little Frank, of course—who does not merely doubt it. Talbot is sure that Levison is not guilty, and it is Talbot who proves his innocence. During the last few months we have had many a fine story about Levison, but I am not sure that any one of them was better than this.

A ST. JIM'S GALLERY.

I have had many letters from readers of both the "Gem" and "Magnet" asking me to start in this paper a series similar to the Greyfriars Gallery, which is immensely popular with readers of our Monday companion journal. What do you think? If you have not seen any article in this series, I advise you to get a copy of the "Magnet" before you make up your minds. Thus far Harry Wharton, Bob Cherry, George Wingate, Percy Bolsover, Mark Linley, Johnny Bull, and Peter Todd have been dealt with in character sketches, with portraits. The next on my list is Billy Bunter, and Frank Nugent, Herbert Vernon-Smith, Inky, Fisher T. Fish, Horace Coker, and

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many others will follow. These names are all familiar to the great majority of you; but still more familiar are the names of Tom Merry, Reginald Talbot, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, Jack Blake, George Figgins, Monty Lowther, and the rest of the St. Jim's crowd, and the question is whether you would like a series on the same lines about them.

A WATER WAGTAIL.

The letter which follows did not annoy me. If it had I should not have printed it. But it amused me, and I think it will amuse my readers.

"Sir,—I read the other day of a man who accused you of swindling. I did not believe it at the time, but now I have a different view of the matter, as I sent in a storyette, and in the next issue you say the competition is discontinued. What more conclusive proof of swindling do you want than that? Perhaps you won't mind paying the penny for the stamp I bought for my last letter and the penny for this one? But, if you like, I will send the twopence on.—From Someone Who is Convinced You Are a Fraud."

Personally, I should want a great deal more conclusive proof of swindling before I convicted—or even accused—anyone!

A competition must either (a) run on for ever, which is unlikely, or (b) stop some time or another.

Our little competition has stopped, for good and sufficient reasons.

The young man who is responsible for the letter given above thinks it stopped in order that he might be robbed of a prize.

But the chances were all against his getting a prize in any case, not merely because only a few of the hundreds who competed could get prizes, but also because it is a trifle difficult to imagine his selecting anything good enough to stand a chance. Judgment hardly seems his strong suit.

And, in any case, the notice by which the competition was stopped had been in print at least a fortnight before his joke was received!

The selection of poetry used in my school ever so long ago contained a poem about a water wagtail. I have never seen that poem since; but across all the years it comes back vividly to me now.

The water wagtail is the vainest bird of all the birds. A peacock is modest compared with him. He thinks, so the poet says, that the sun rises and the night falls and the brook runs and the worm crawls all for him!

He is the centre of the universe, in short!

Our young friend is a little bit in the water wagtail line; he is sure that we stopped our competition just to do him out of a prize.

Need I add that the sun does not rise solely for the water wagtail's benefit?

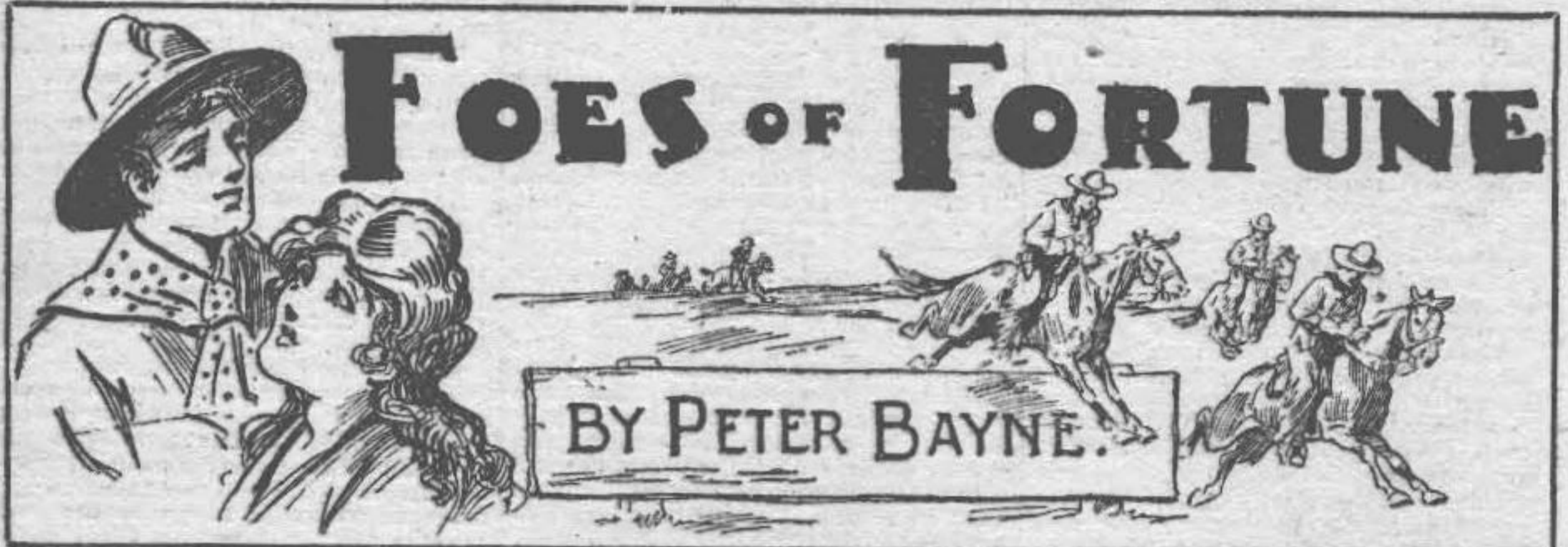
FOOTBALL NOTICES.

MATCHES WANTED BY—

- CRESCENTS F.C. (12-14)—2-mile r.—F. Truman, 17, Massey Rd., Lincoln.
- SOUTHBURY ATH. (15½)—8-mile r.—F. Morrott, 22, Westbury Rd., Barking.
- BEWERLEY ST. F.C. (12-13)—5-mile r.—Robert Broadbent, 25, Galway St., Beeston, Leeds
- WARNER ROVERS (15-16)—5-mile r. A. E. Lewis, 3, Ivy Terrace, Queen St., Tottenham, N.
- ST. PETER'S UNITED (16)—6-mile r.—L. De'Ath, 16, Brewer St., Pimlico, S.W.
- M.A.F.C.—2-mile r.—A. Smith, 26, Bednal St., Queen's Rd., Manchester.
- WHICKHAM SCOUTS (15½)—3-mile r.—T. Heron, James St., Whickham, co. Durham.
- BLACKHEATH ALBION (15-16)—6-mile r.—H. Jobson, 31, Sparta St., Lewisham, S.E.
- 78TH LONDON COY. BOYS' BRIGADE (14-16)—10-mile r.—H. North, 80, Midland Brent Terr., Cricklewood, N.W.

Your Editor

OUR GREAT ADVENTURE SERIAL.

THE PRECEDING CHAPTERS
TOLD HOW

CARTON ROSS, a lonely and friendless youth, sole heir to a great fortune, though unaware of it, is hunted by a party of outlaws led by DIRK RALWIN. He is befriended by HARVEY MILBURNE and his daughter LORNA, who lose their home and are separated in an attempt to defend him from his pursuers.

Ross is captured by the brigands, but, with Lorna's help, recovers his wallet—containing papers which prove his identity—and escapes. Later they fall in with RODDY GARRIN, an Englishman, and his companion, AH CHING, a Chinaman. The outlaws continue the chase, together with HUXTON FENNER, a Yankee, who had previously been a companion of Garrin and Ah Ching, but had deserted them.

They pass through many thrilling adventures, and, later, Harvey Milburne succumbs as a result of the privations he has suffered whilst a prisoner under Dirk Ralwin.

One night, while the four companions are asleep, Lorna and Ross are carried away by Huxton Fenner and a band of Dirk Ralwin's outlaws. Fenner has no intention of taking them to Ralwin, as he hopes to obtain Ross' papers and claim the fortune for himself. Ralwin is warned of the American's treachery by one of his spies, JAQUNY, an Indian. The outlaw, with a band of his men, hurries to San Ramo, where it is expected Fenner and his captives will board a steamer. The ruffians have just reached the deck of a big vessel in the harbour, when a powerful steam-launch appears, and flashes past the steamer and down the river. Ralwin, by covering the captain of the vessel he is on with a revolver, forces him to pursue the smaller boat, which contains Fenner and his prisoners.

The launch runs aground on the bank, and Ross and Lorna contrive to escape from the black who is put in charge of them. But the girl is recaptured, and, in order to force Ross into his hands again, Fenner threatens her.

(Now read on.)

A Crafty Foe—Surprised—Rogues
Together.

The sneeringly uttered words brought a quick, hot flush of resentment to the lad's handsome face.

"You're a coward, Huxton Fenner, to make war on a girl who has never done you an injury," he answered; "and I despise you! Now, what do you want of me?"

"Simply that you will give yourself up to us of your own free will," Fenner declared. "That is all I want of you!"

Ross, his proud, high spirit up in arms at once, laughed contemptuously.

"You must have plenty of cheek to make such a proposal to me!" he said haughtily. "No, Huxton Fenner, it isn't for you to dictate terms to an escaped prisoner who is still at liberty. I fear neither you nor your men!"

Once more the American spoke to the negro, who, with a sudden, outflung motion of his arms, held Lorna far out over the lake.

The action recalled Carton Ross to a true realisation of the position. Forgotten in a moment was his pride and the priceless value of liberty to him. It was of Lorna, his true and faithful comrade, the brave, beautiful girl who had shared so many dangers and hardships with him, that he thought with an intensity that made him actually experience the same cruel emotion that she herself was experiencing.

"Think well what you are going to do!" said Huxton Fenner. "Give yourself up now, and Lorna Milburne shall be spared. Refuse to do so, and she shall be hurled into this lake and drowned before your eyes! And after that, remember, you yourself will be taken prisoner again, for you could not evade us for any length of time."

Carton Ross, biting his lip until the blood came, took a step forward.

"Don't think of me!" cried Lorna, in a clear, silvery voice. "Act as you would if I were not here, Carton."

For a moment the lad hesitated. Then he walked on again until he reached Fenner, who welcomed him with a cruelly amused smile.

"So," said the renegade white, "you have taken me at my word, I am glad to see! Well, it is sensible of you, and has saved us all a good deal of trouble, and the young lady her life."

"You brute!" cried Carton Ross hoarsely. "You cowardly brute!"

For a moment Huxton Fenner looked as if he could spring at the dauntless lad who so fearlessly defied him, but, repressing his anger with a visible effort of will, he gave vent to a mocking laugh.

"You are not very complimentary," he said; "but one can hardly be so in your position. Still, it will pay you to keep a civil tongue in your head. Your good treatment, and also that of your companion here, depends upon it."

The veiled threat made by the American was sufficient to silence Carton Ross. Not that he feared for himself—of personal dread he knew little—but ever present in his mind was the recollection of the promise he had made to Lorna's dying father—that he would do his utmost to guard the brave girl from all harm and danger.

"I must put up with the fellow's in-

solence and brutality for her sake," he told himself; "although the day of reckoning between us must come sooner or later. Then, Huxton Fenner, you will have bitter cause to repent your behaviour towards me!"

Bound wrist to wrist by a strong and flexible rope, made from long leaves of a certain plant that grew abundantly in the jungle, Ross and Lorna Milburne were hurried forward by their captors. They were given no further opportunity of escape.

The big negro, his face a study in evilly malevolent expression, watched over them with tigerlike vigilance. Instant death, they both realised, would be the penalty for arousing the suspicious rage of those who had them in their power.

Through the interminable forest the little procession wended its way. The shafts of moonlight darting down between the gaps in the foliage overhead gave the scene a weird and ghostly aspect.

Now and again, startlingly near, or from afar, would come the roaring cry of the jaguar seeking its prey, and the shivering rustle of the grass frequently proclaimed the quick, sinuous movement of some deadly reptile disturbed in its nocturnal sleep.

There was the glittering sheen cast by thousands of fireflies darting rapidly through the air, and illuminating flowers of gorgeous hue.

Peace and war, terror and beauty were strangely mingled in this wonderful panorama of the night that Lorna and her comrade witnessed as prisoners of the man who had so cleverly and cunningly entrapped them.

The awesome nature of his surroundings seemed to cast a spell over Huxton Fenner. Silent and absorbed in his own thoughts, he kept at the head of his party. Often he gave an uneasy start, and stopped to peer round in the uncertain light, and listen for the sound of any footsteps that might be approaching.

Now that Carton Ross was in his power again he feared lest some sudden turn of fortune should wrest his captured prize from his grasp.

It was something to be near having at his disposal the greatest fortune that one individual had ever bequeathed to another in the history of the world.

Suppose someone else should appear to dispute with him the possession of these vast riches? That was the question that Fenner continually put to himself with an ever-growing consciousness of the undoubted fact that, do what he might to Carton Ross, he himself would have to fight might and main to hold the

illimitable wealth that he fondly imagined was already his own.

Hark! The crash of a rotten twig somewhere near him made the American start and turn pale.

Halting abruptly, he stared in the direction when the sound came. Not a leaf, not a blade of grass stirred in the windless atmosphere.

Yet Fenner was certain that the breaking twig had been trodden on by the foot of a human being.

Not venturing himself, he ordered one of his native followers to make a thorough search of the vicinity.

The man glided away through the jungle with the noiseless stealth of the born woodsman. He was gone for several minutes, when he returned with the report that he had discovered no trace of any living soul.

Uneasy and unconvinced, Huxton Fenner resumed the journey. He carried with him a persistent conviction that someone was moving near him—an unseen presence that marked his every action, an enemy who was biding his time to strike a fateful blow that would dash all his high hopes for ever to the ground.

"Who can it be?" he muttered, frowning darkly. There is no other white man in the locality. Ralwin and his band are in a completely opposite direction. It must be a spy who is tracking my movements, with the intention of sending word to Ralwin at the first opportunity. Well, he shall never return alive!"

Drawing his revolver from his belt he held it raised in readiness to fire at the first sign of a stranger. But, prepared though he was, there was someone more vigilant and alert than himself in the forest that night.

"Halt!" cried a stern voice. "Hands up, Huxton Fenner, or you die!"

The American staggered back a pace, his limbs trembling, his face expressive of the most intense alarm, fear, and angry surprise.

That voice! He would have known it anywhere. It belonged to Ayton Aylman, the man who, next to himself, had enjoyed the largest share of Dirk Ralwin's trust and confidence.

In bitter rage and mortification he ground his teeth and complied with the other's imperious demand.

A more favourable spot for Aylman to act in could not have been chosen. He was on horseback, at the opposite side of a narrow glade, filled with bright moonlight, into which Fenner and his party had already advanced a yard or two.

Surrounding him were nine or ten other mounted men, all armed and obedient to his every command. Resistance, Fenner told himself, would be madness. He was fairly caught.

Dissembling his rage and alarm he feigned an attitude of puzzled amazement.

"Aylman!" he said. "I never knew before that you were a practical joker! What is the meaning of this little piece of play-acting?"

Aylton Aylman gave vent to a grimly amused laugh.

"You shall soon know," he replied. "I'll not keep you long in suspense. Cover them all!" he added, looking round at his followers. "And shoot the first one who lifts a hand or stirs a step."

Dismounting from his horse, he flung the reins to a subordinate, and then walked across the strip of open ground to where Fenner was standing with upraised arms.

The two men regarded each other for a minute or two with a mutually-intent

gaze, that strove in vain to read the thoughts that were hidden in the brain of each.

"So you are playing Ralwin false!" said Aylman at last, his glance shifting to Carton Ross and Lorna. "You have kidnapped these young people for a special reason of your own!"

"You lie!" declared Fenner boldly. "It is true that they are my prisoners now. To-morrow they will be handed over to the chief."

Aylman laughed sceptically, and shook his head.

"Come!" he said. "Surely you are too wise a man to think that you can impose upon me! I have suspected your purpose regarding young Ross there for some time. Besides, I myself and these men with me were on board the steamer that you so skilfully eluded, and we are one of Ralwin's search-parties sent out to track you down. Will that information serve to convince you that it is useless for you to try and deceive me? Yes, I am sure it will, Fenner, for you are certainly no fool. I give you that credit without the slightest reserve."

In a moment Huxton Fenner realised that his former friend and associate was completely cognisant of his crafty plot. Denial of the charge that the other had made against him would be merely wasting time. So, with the impudent daring that was characteristic of the man, he became both accusatory and frankly confidential.

"You know more than I expected you to," he said; "but not all. At the same time, let me remind you that, in spite of your apparently zealous activity on behalf of Dirk Ralwin, your interest in my prisoner, Carton Ross, is a purely personal one."

The start that Aylman gave plainly intimated that the verbal shot aimed by the other had gone home.

"Indeed!" he said, with an ugly sneer. "Tell Dirk Ralwin, and he will not believe you. That is the only thing that concerns me."

Fenner, absolutely sure of his ground now, shook his head.

"Look here, Aylman," he said, lowering his voice, and approaching a step nearer to the other, "you and I have seen enough of one another to be certain that each plays for himself alone in the great game of life. We served the cause of Dirk Ralwin because it paid us to. It pays us no longer."

"Speak for yourself," retorted Ayton Aylman, although there was an expression of deepening interest in his face. "If I was not faithful to Dirk Ralwin I should not be here."

Fenner's smiling gaze wandered meaningfully to Carton Ross, who was but a few yards away.

"It's the following out of your own plotting that has brought about this meeting," he remarked. "You care for Ralwin no more and as little as I do. He's a back number so far as we are concerned. Young Ross is the lure that has drawn you here. You wanted to get him under your thumb, the same as I did; but you've come a bit too late. I was first in the field, and I mean to stay there."

Aylman's eyes flashed fire.

"You're in my power," he snapped, "and don't you forget it. As for the lad, Carton Ross, he goes with me. Consider yourself fortunate in being allowed to remain free."

"You'll get nothing from Ross—alone," Fenner answered, with an air of amused composure. "Without the

papers left to him by his father you'll never be able to lay so much as a finger on a shilling of his money."

"Ah!" said Aylman. "Then you have the papers in your own possession?"

"Of course," Fenner rejoined; "but as I've taken the precaution of putting them in a safe place, I'll not be able to let you have a look at them just yet."

This being tantamount to an offer of some kind, Ayton Aylman pricked up his ears. It did not surprise him in the least to hear that the other was not, for the time being, in personal possession of the pricelessly valuable papers relating to the Ross fortune. He would, in fact, have been astonished to learn otherwise.

The papers had been given into the custody of a Mexican in whom Fenner had absolute trust. The man was already speeding on his way to a secluded riverside settlement, where the American had arranged to follow him with the least possible delay. It was an astute move that Fenner had made. Foreseeing the possibility of such an event as had happened, he had transferred the documents to the care of another, so that there should be no risk of his losing them.

"If I shot you," said Aylman savagely, yielding to a sudden feeling of mingled rage and impotence, "they'd be of precious little benefit to you."

Fenner laughed softly in keen enjoyment of the situation. He was perfectly sure of himself now. It had come to a game of thrust and parry between himself and Aylman, and he had small doubt as to the outcome of it.

"You won't shoot me," he said. "You're far too clever a man to satisfy a natural desire for revenge at the expense of a large fortune. To be quite frank, I may as well tell you at once that it was my intention to share Cyrus Ross' money with no one, not even with the nephew who is legally entitled to it. But now that you have appeared on the scene, I've altered my original decision."

"I'm to be paid to keep my mouth shut, I suppose?" questioned Aylman mockingly. "The price I should want in return for doing that would, I dare guarantee, be too high a one for you."

"Not at all," said Huxton Fenner serenely. "You come in with me, and we share equally in the biggest pile of wealth that any man has ever claimed as his own."

The expression that showed itself in Aylman's face was eloquent of a great deal. It suggested surprise, incredulity, avarice—above all, avarice.

"Is that an offer," he inquired "made in good faith?"

"Here's my hand on it," was the answer. "You and I will work this thing out together. Two heads, so the old proverb runs, are better than one. We'll prove its truth, in spite of Dirk Ralwin."

"It'll be an exciting game," said Aylman, as they grasped hands, "and as you say, we shall win!"

The two men eyed each other with a closely scrutinising gaze. They were smiling, as friends and comrades smile, but in their hearts raged hate and mistrust.

Instead of comrades they were enemies. The thought of the vast wealth that was awaiting the one who could claim it by virtue of the papers left to Carton Ross excited their cupidity to fever pitch.

Each intended to have that wealth for himself alone, and each made a secret resolve to sweep the other from his path at the very first opportunity.

(Continued on page 20.)

WONDERFUL NEW HAIR

SECURED BY

2 LADY MUNITION WORKERS!

Special Interview & Valuable Hints on Beautiful Hair Cultivation at Home.

Invitation to every reader to write for an absolutely Free "Harlene Hair-Drill" Gift Outfit.

WHILE Mmunition Workers are especially liable to hair troubles owing to the conditions under which their work is done, thousands of workers in other industries and professions are similarly afflicted, and would do well to give most serious consideration to the matter. Nothing so detracts from one's personal appearance as scanty, ill-coloured, unhealthy hair. It makes a man or woman look years older than he or she really is.

Almost without exception, women munition workers, and other women workers, complain of the way in which their hair is affected. The hair degenerates badly—gets "brittly," begins to "fall out," loses its "tone," is lowered in "vitality," and all this causes many heart-burnings.

Two very typical cases have just come to hand—those of Miss Robins and Miss Lowe, of 6, Nightingale Place, Woolwich, two friends who both experienced hair trouble, but who have found in "Harlene" all their hair requires. These ladies, when interviewed a few days ago, expressed themselves most emphatically as to the wonderful virtues of "Harlene."

A WONDERFUL EXPERIENCE IN HAIR CULTIVATION.

"We are delighted beyond measure," said they, "for we have now been using 'Harlene' for some time. For nearly six months we have been on munition work, and are as keen as ever on doing our 'bit'—just as all the other girls are—but from the start we noticed that our hair became affected. Our machines spray oil and lubricants into the hair, and as you lean over it cannot help but cover you, and then the atmosphere and many other things are against good hair.

"Now both of us are justly proud of our hair, for we have always had long, abundant, and full tresses, so therefore it became a matter of earnest thought to us. 'What to do?' we asked ourselves, and this has been more than answered by 'Harlene.' Our hair now was never in better condition—healthy, glossy, and not a trace of weakness.

"We never tire of recommending 'Harlene,' and are positive that it is the finest preparation for the hair which women can use.

SPLENDID FREE GIFT FOR EVERY READER.

There is no longer the least excuse for anyone to remain a sufferer from hair trouble of any kind, for to every reader to-day is given an opportunity to prove the hair-beautifying qualities of "Harlene Hair-Drill" free of cost. The Inventor-

Discoverer of "Harlene Hair-Drill," Mr. Edwards, will be only too pleased to send you a Free Trial Outfit, comprising Four Gifts, on receipt of your application on the Free Coupon below.

The Free "Hair-Drill" Outfit contains:

1. A bottle of "Harlene," the true liquid food and tonic for the hair.
2. A packet of the marvellous hair and scalp cleansing "Cremex" Shampoo Powder, which prepares the head for "Hair-Drill."
3. A bottle of "Uzon" Brilliantine, which gives a final touch of beauty to the hair, and is especially beneficial to those whose scalp is inclined to be "dry."
4. A copy of the new edition of the secret "Hair-Drill" Manual.



Both of these young ladies—Miss A. Robins and Miss K. Lowe—are munitioners, who tell of their interesting experience in cultivating beautiful hair in the special interview reported to-day.

ALARMING INCREASE OF HAIR TROUBLES.

There is certainly a great increase lately in all kinds of hair troubles.

Thin, Weak, Discoloured, Brittle, Greasy, Splitting or Falling Hair rob a man or woman of even the semblance of youth. Accept, then, the special War Bonus and Four-fold Free Gift.

After a Free Trial you will be always able to obtain future supplies from your local chemist

at 1/., 2/6, or 4/6 per bottle. (In solidified form for Soldiers, Sailors, Travellers, etc., in tins at 2/9, with full directions as to use.) "Uzon" Brilliantine costs 1/ and 2/6 per bottle, and "Cremex" Shampoo Powders 2d. each, or 1/- per box of seven shampoos.

Any or all of the preparations will be sent post free on receipt of price direct from Edwards' Harlene, Ltd., 20, 22, 24, and 26, Lamb's Conduit Street, London, W.C. Carriage extra on foreign orders. Cheques and P.O.'s should be crossed.

FREE GIFT FORM.

Fill in and post to EDWARDS' HARLENE, Ltd., 20-22-24-26, Lamb's Conduit St., London, W.C.

Dear Sirs,—Please send me your free "Harlene" Four-fold Hair-Growing Outfit. I enclose 4d. in stamps for postage to any part of the world. (Foreign stamps accepted.)

NAME

ADDRESS

GEM—February 17th, 1917.



FOES OF FORTUNE.

(Continued from page 18.)

The Faithful Comrades—The Strange Horsemen.

"You can take it from me, my son," said Roddy Garrin, "that we are in a bad way."

Ah Ching, his big head so bent that it almost touched his knees, nodded a mournful assent.

"You speakee velly true," he remarked. "We come all this way, traveling day and night, for nothing. We eat what we can catchee, sleep anywhere, and see our clothes getting more and more ragged every time we get up in the morning. Oh, Mista Garrin, we are more like the wild animals than human beings. Velly often now I wonder if we shall ever see dear-old China again!"

"Well, Ah Ching," answered Garrin, "as for China, I'm not particularly concerned about it, seeing that it's not my native land. It's dear old England I'm anxious to be in some day; but, as you suggest, the prospect of our wishes being ever realised grow less and less at an alarming rate. Still, all the same, I'm glad we acted as we did. At any rate, we've done our best for our comrades."

The little Chinaman's yellow face brightened up with a look of stubborn courage and resolution. Leaning forward, he stretched out his forefinger and tapped Garrin's knee.

"I'm with you," he declared. "Heart and soul I'm with you, Mista Garrin; and, what is more, I'm sure that our search for Mista Ross and Missy Lorna won't be in vain. Before velly long we shall see them again."

Roddy Garrin looked a trifle dubious.

"Let's hope so," he said. "So far it's been frightfully disappointing, and the outlook is as black as it very well could be in the circumstances."

"The velly blackest hour is just before the dawn," replied Ah Ching sententiously. "You markee my words, we shall see them soon, or I'm a Dutchman."

"You don't resemble one," laughed Garrin. "Still, I'll take fresh courage from what you tell me, and try to think the same as you do."

It required both faith and fortitude to do this, for Roddy Garrin had become secretly convinced that the search for Carton Ross and Lorna that he and his Chinese companion had so lightly but bravely embarked upon was doomed to utter failure.

For days they had roamed through the forest, hunting for some sign of their lost comrades, but their untiring zeal had met with no reward. After losing the track they had discovered as a result of finding the belt that Garrin identified as one that belonged to Ross, they had picked up no other trace of the captives.

Trails they had come across, but only those of wild animals, and of the proximity of human beings they had seen no sign nor vestige. Yet one thing had puzzled and excited the keenest curiosity of them both. At night-time the sound of rifle-fire, faint and far away, had come to their ears.

Immediately they set out in the direction whence it came, and after many hours spent in a fruitless quest, abandoned their wasted journey, and slept the deep, untroubled sleep of utter fatigue and exhaustion.

The sun was high in the sky when they awoke. It seemed useless to resume the search of the night before, and they went in a fresh direction that brought them to a part of the forest where the jungle was

less dense than what they had grown accustomed to, so making travel an easier and less fatiguing task.

During all this time the two comrades existed on the food that Nature supplied them with, and they never went short of food. Nuts, fruit, and the flesh of young deer that they cooked over wood fires formed their daily diet. A flint and stone struck the sparks that kindled the fire, and it was Ah Ching who attended to the cooking operations, his companion trapping the deer and collecting the fruit of tree and plant that made delicious eating.

It was a free, untrammelled life, and, in ordinary circumstances, the lads would have revelled in it; but, as it was, all their thoughts were centred on their absent friends.

At night they lay awake wondering what was the fate that had overtaken Carton Ross and Lorna. Yet, though they despaired, they had no intention of resigning themselves to defeat. Forward was their watchword, through sunshine and darkness, and this brave, indomitable spirit was shown equally as well by Ah Ching as by his British comrade.

"Well, Ah Ching," said Garrin, continuing the conversation they had started concerning the apparent hopelessness of their quest, "as we're both of the same opinion, old sport, we'll carry on as if we were only just beginning the hunt, instead of having been engaged in it for the best part of a week. But before we make a fresh start we must tailor up our clothes a bit, or they'll be falling off our backs."

Their garb, in bad order as it was when they set out on their expedition, was now in rags and tatters that looked far beyond repair. But Ah Ching, who was a real handyman, set about the work of restoring the clothes to something a little like their original appearance with cheerful alacrity.

"Velly good!" he remarked. "I'll do what I can to make us look smart, Mista Garrin, although you mustn't expect me to turn you out a dandy. That bird never come to this part of the globe."

Garrin gave vent to a hearty laugh.

"It's such a long time since I saw one," he said, "that I don't believe I should know a dandy now if I met one. I should probably take him for some gorgeous bird."

"And knock him down and steal his fine feathers," Ah Ching rejoined. "That would make him think hard, and do him good."

With a strong, finely-pointed thorn for a needle, and thread that consisted of the cottony fibre of a tall, bushy plant, the little Chinaman patched up his own and his comrade's tattered attire.

By the time this task was finished hunger claimed attention, and Roddy Garrin went off with the object of replenishing the larder, while Ah Ching collected the grass and brushwood for a fire.

The little Chinaman had already kindled the fuel when, to his indignant amazement, Roddy Garrin came rushing up, and, leaping on to the flaming pile, stamped on it, and scattered it in every direction.

"You velly big fool!" exclaimed Ah Ching, staring with wide-open eyes at the other. "What for you do such a silly thing? Me no can savee!"

"It's done for a most excellent reason," Roddy Garrin answered. "There are strange horsemen not far away. I heard them a minute or two ago. They may be friends, but it's far more likely that they are possible foes, and the smoke of our fire would lead them here."

The little Chinaman's face lost its ex-

pression of frowning inquiry, and he gravely nodded his huge head.

"That can do," he remarked. "No use giving a signal to people you know nothing about. 'But'—and he uttered a dismal sigh—"we must go without dinner until it's safe to light a fire again."

"Not a bit of it!" said Garrin cheerily. "We've lived for days on nuts before, and we can do the same again. But we're not going to squat down here. We'll get a move on, Ah Ching, and reconnoitre. By finding out who these people are we shall gain some pretty useful information."

Leaving the spot they had been camping in, the comrades, with Garrin leading the way, set out on their scouting; soon they heard the unmistakable sounds of mounted men passing through the forest.

The stamping hoofs of horses, and the voices of their riders could be plainly heard by them as they crouched in the undergrowth.

"Those fellows," said Ah Ching, "be-long white men. No natives there."

"Yes," Garrin agreed, "and I'm pretty sure that they are some of Dirk Ralwin's chaps. In that case we're nearer to our chums than we've been before. By George, I'd like to shout out his name so that Ross could hear me! He'd understand then that we mean to set him and Lorna free directly we have the chance to."

Ah Ching pointed a warning forefinger at his companion.

"You be careful," he said. "Suppose you shout, they know you by your voice. Then they look for you, and we both velly quick join company with Mista Ross and Missy Lorna as prisoners. More better, we wait and see when and where they halt. You sayee me?"

"Of course!" Garrin answered. "You've the wise head of the little party, my son, and I'm proud to act on your valuable advice."

Creeping forward with vigilant caution they kept track of the unseen strangers for a considerable distance. A sudden increase of noise warned them that those they were following had come to a halt.

"Pitching camp!" whispered Garrin excitedly. "That's what they're doing! Now we sha'n't be long!"

Approaching nearer, they speedily came in sight of the horsemen, whom they immediately recognised as some of the outlaw followers of Dirk Ralwin. The bandits had camped in an open space amongst the trees, whose over-arching foliage afforded them welcome shade from the blazing sun.

Their horses were tethered close by and guarded by armed men. This sign of discipline aroused Roddy Garrin's curiosity. He reasoned that someone of importance must be present with the bandits for them to preserve an order that they were little inclined to observe when by themselves.

"It's because they're afraid of Ross giving them the miss," he said to himself. "They've got him, and they mean to keep him."

Eagerly he and Ah Ching looked around for Ross and Lorna, but neither of the absent pair were to be seen. Suddenly Garrin espied a tall, soldierly-looking individual, at sight of whom he gave a barely-suppressed cry of excited surprise.

"Look!" he murmured to Ah Ching. "It's Dirk Ralwin himself!"

The redoubtable chief of the insurgents stood a few paces away.

(There will be another grand instalment of this exciting story in next Wednesday's issue of THE GEM LIBRARY. Order your copy in advance.)