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IN HONOUR OF THE HEAD!

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

SKIMMY'S WAY!

IN HONOUR OF THE HEAD!

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

By **MARTIN CLIFFORD.**

CHAPTER 1.
Three in the Plot.

"GOT it, Monty?"

It was Tom Merry, the junior captain of St. Jim's, who spoke.

Monty Lowther had just come into Study No 10 on the Shell passage. There were spots of mud on his trousers, and his face was ruddy, as if from recent sharp exercise.

He had just come back from a ride at top speed to Rylcombe, in fact. The distance was small; but one can get hot in quite a short distance if one only rides hard enough.

"Can't you see he hasn't?" snapped Manners.

And, indeed, Lowther's face was not at all suggestive of a successful errand. The humorist of the Shell looked considerably disgruntled.

"Hang these half-holidays!" he growled.

"My hat! First time I ever heard you object to them, Monty!" said Tom.

"I'm not objecting to our half-holidays, duffer! I wish there were six of them a week, and all whole ones! It's the half-holidays the shop folk in the village take I'm up against!"

"Well, they only get one a week, and I suppose they need that much!" said Tom mildly.

"Brenchley's shut up?" asked Manners.

"Yes, and nobody at home! I rang and knocked and kicked up the merry dickens of a row; but I couldn't get any answer!"

"Never mind," said Tom, "I'll go along early to-morrow morning."

"Then they won't be open!" said Lowther.

"There will be someone at home, anyway. Trust me to make them hear!"

"I sha'n't have time to frame the photograph!" grumbled Manners.

"You'll have to make time. After all, it will only take a few minutes. And if you have to miss brekker it will be in a good cause."

"Everything for the best in the best of all possible worlds—that seems to be your watchword to-day, Tommy," said Lowther, beginning to look more amiable.

"Well, I do feel rather bucked," admitted Tom. "Things are going as smoothly as anyone could ask for, and the good old Head's birthday is going to be the biggest howling success we've ever had at St. Jim's, I fancy!"

"Don't let's count our chickens before they're hatched!" said Manners. "Racke and Crooke may have lain low for the last twenty-four hours; but that's not to say they haven't something up their sleeves!"

"Oh, even these rotters wouldn't do anything at a time like this!" Tom replied.

"I wouldn't trust them!"

"Look here, it's rot to say that even they don't respect the Head; even if they don't—well, love the dear old boy as we do! Haven't you heard what they are giving him?"

"I did hear Crooke bragging that their gift would lay over anything else anyone in the Shell or Fourth would pony up!" said Lowther. "Sounds as if it might be a bedspread—eh? I'm not quite sure what a bedspread is——"

"It's a silver tray, ever so big!" said Tom.

"Oh, rats, Thomas! You wouldn't get a silver tray that would cover a bed——"

"Ass! I'm not answering the silly rot you talk! I'm telling you what Racke and Crooke are giving!"

"I see! Well, it may prove that they respect the old bird no end; but it may mean no more than that they won't be out of the fashion. I know one thing—the Head will really think more of this photo of old Manners' than he would of a hundred silver trays!"

Manners beamed. For once Lowther was obviously speaking seriously.

The framed photograph—an enlargement of a special view of St. Jim's—was to be the Terrible Three's birthday gift to the Head.

It was not to be denied that Manners had had by far the largest share in that gift. But Tom Merry and Lowther were not jealous on that account; there was little jealousy in the close friendship that bound those three.

Tom and Lowther had contributed their shares of the expense of the process necessary, and they had insisted upon paying between them for the handsome oak frame. It was to fetch that that Lowther had ridden over to Rylcombe after tea. But he had come back without it.

"Let's have another look at the photo, Manners," said Tom.

"You fellows never seem tired of looking at it," replied Manners, beaming more graciously than ever. "When the Head's got it hung up in his own den I believe you'll be wangling a caning every now and then so as to get another squint. Here it is! Don't touch. Grubby paws won't improve the mount."

All three took another look at the photo.

"Best thing I've ever done yet," said Manners, wrapping it up again with loving care. "That process was top-hole. It cost a lot, but it was worth every penny it cost!"

"Hear, hear!" said Tom heartily. "And, anyway, the best isn't too good for the Head. There's no school in the country with a Head like him, or a House-master like old Railton!"

"Time for the final rehearsal!" remarked Lowther. "I say, Thomas, old son, isn't Skimmy rather a fly in the ointment? I can't say that his rendering of the part of the Crown Prince exactly appeals to me!"

"Oh, it's funny, and the part's supposed to be funny!" answered Tom.

"He would be much funnier in the part of Othello or Hamlet!"

"But we're not playing 'Othello' or 'Hamlet,' and you'd be the first to squeal if we talked about playing them as burlesque."

"Wrong, Thomas! I'd agree to anything being burlesqued, even the immortal works of my dear old pal, Bill Shakespeare! Come along, or we shall have our dear young friends from Study No. 6 arriving to inquire whether we're dead!"

"I shouldn't leave that on the table, Manners," said Tom.

"Not going to, old man! I'll put it in the cupboard."

A few seconds later the three left No. 10 together. In the passage they ran against Trimble of the Fourth.

"Come along, Bagley de Lovefat!" said the humorous Lowther.

Baggy scowled at him.

"Where to?" he grunted. "'Taiu't a feed, I know; else you rotters wouldn't be so keen on having me!"

"We're not!" said Manners curtly.

"Then where do you want me to come to, rotter?"

"To rehearsal!"

"I've chucked my part!" said Baggy sulkily.

"Then we shall be one down on dead bodies. Oh, Baggy, Baggy! Could you let us down thus?"

"Yes, I jolly well could, and I jolly well would twenty times over if I was treated like that! Do you know what that rotter Digby did last night? He pinned a placard with 'Fine fresh pork' on it on to me in the scene where——"

"Ha, ha, ha! Don't chuck it, Baggy! That's just the sort of thing that would go down jolly well in the revue!"

"It doesn't go down with me, I can tell you! You chaps may be sorry some day before long that you haven't been more civil to a fellow!" said Baggy darkly.

"What fellow?" asked Tom.

"Me, of course!"

"Oh! Come on, you two!"

The three passed on. Baggy looked after them with a cunning smile on his repulsive, podgy face.

Then he hurried off to Study No. 7.

Racke and Crooke were there. Neither had a part in the revue. They had not cared about it.

"The coast's clear!" said Baggy, in a mysterious, hoarse whisper.

"Do you know where the thing is?" asked Racke.

"What do you think? It's in the cupboard! I heard Manners say so!"

"Stir yourself, Crooke, by gad!" snapped Racke.

"Here, dash it all, don't be in too big a hurry! They haven't all gone along to the concert-room yet. I can hear someone passing!"

"That was Noble!" said Baggy. "I know his feet."

"So you ought!" growled Crooke. "He's kicked you often enough!"

"Yah! You needn't brag! Who let a duffer like Gunn lick him?" gibed Baggy.

"Stop that!" snorted Racke. "They're all gone now, I think!"

The three stole out.

"You can sneak in and get it, Baggy!" Racke said.

"If I do——"

"Oh, I know! Yaas, it's worth another bob!"

"A measly bob, be hanged! It's worth another five bob!"

"Right-ho!" said Racke, with a readiness that might have seemed suspicious to anyone less blinded by greed than Trimble.

Racke, mean as he was in most matters, would cheerfully have paid an extra half-sovereign rather than enter No. 10 himself. Baggy was to receive ten shillings for the intelligence he had gained by his eavesdropping activities.

The door of No. 11, which Kangaroo, Dane, and Glyn shared, stood ajar. There was no light in the study. Racke and Crooke stole inside, to await in safety the emergence of Baggy from No. 10.

"Silly idiot! He'll have someone spot that light!" grunted Crooke.

"Well, you can't expect him to find the thing in the dark," replied Racke. "Mind, if he's caught, mum's the word! He didn't see us go in here, an' we'll swear blind we knew nothin' about it if he tries the givin'-away wheeze!"

"He'll do that, safe enough!" said Crooke morosely. "Dashed mistake to let that fat cad into this at all, I reckon!"

The light went out at this moment, and Racke and Crooke were moving forward when they heard footsteps approaching from the direction of the Fourth passage.

They halted, and stood still. Something like a stifled squeal came to their ears.

Baggy had heard those footsteps also. But he was out of No. 10 and into No. 9, the study shared by Talbot, Gore, and Skimpole, before the fellow who was approaching came round the corner.

CHAPTER 2.
Skimmy Takes a Hand.

IT was Lowther who came, in search of something he had forgotten. He whistled cheerily as he went into the study, and he was whistling cheerily when he came out again. From this it was evident that he knew nothing of the disappearance of the photo.

But had it disappeared at all? Racke and Crooke could not be sure of that until the coast was clear again, and they had seen Trimble.

Baggy, in No. 9, stood trembling. He had taken the brown-paper covering off the photo to make sure of its identity; now, as he fidgeted nervously, he tore away the tissue-paper which had been laid over it, and thrust it into his pocket. Then he laid the photo, face downwards, on the table as Lowther passed the door.

He did not want to be caught red-handed.

Scarcely had Lowther turned the corner again when the two black sheep dodged out of No. 11.

"Baggy, you idiot!" hissed Racke.

Baggy appeared, his podgy face showing pale with fear in the dim light.

"Where's the dashed photo, you fat rotter?" demanded Crooke?"

"I—I'll cut back and get it! I—I left it on the table!" burbled Baggy.

"Oh, look out!" gasped Racke.

Footsteps sounded again. Almost by force, Racke got Baggy into No. 11. Crooke needed no hint of force to get him there.

Racke peered out.

"Oh, by gad, it's Gore!" he groaned. "He's going in there. He'll find the thing!"

"You fool, Baggy! Why did you leave it there?" snarled Crooke.

"Shush!" hissed Racke.

Gore passed into his study and closed the door. Next moment a thin streak of light below it showed the three plotters that he had, in all likelihood, come to stay.

"Now what's to be done?" asked Crooke helplessly.

"Baggy will have to make some excuse for goin' in an' gettin' it," said Racke at once.

"Catch me!" said Baggy. "'Tain't my bizney! Look here, Racke, just you give me that fifteen bob you owe me, and I'll say nothing about this to anyone! But if——"

Racke clutched him by his fat throat and shook him fiercely.

"Gurrrrg! Oh, don't!" panted Baggy.

"You're goin' to get that photo, by gad!" said Racke savagely. "You fat fool, you're in this right up to the neck!"

"I ain't! I've nothing to do with it, really. It was you two rotters, and I shall jolly well let everyone know it!"

"By gad, I'll slay you!" snarled Racke.

The sounds which followed almost suggested that he was carrying out his threat. There was a good deal of the bully in Racke, and he could not bear to be thwarted by anyone whom he despised as he did Baggy.

"Gurrrg! Ow-ow! Stoppit!" groaned Baggy.

"I say, Racke, you'll have somebody hear!" protested Crooke nervously. "You don't want to fetch that chap Gore out, do you?"

"I don't care a hang!" snapped Racke. "But I'm going to make this worm do as he's told!"

"I—I'll go in!" faltered Baggy, in dread of his life. "Bub-bub-but what am I to say?"

"Tell Gore you've dropped somethin' in there," said Crooke.

"He won't let me take a thing like the photo out after that!" objected Baggy. "I couldn't have dropped anything that size!"

"Sneak it out when he ain't lookin', dash you!"

Baggy groaned. A job of this sort was not at all in his line.

"Hadn't we better wait a few minutes and see whether he clears out?" he said faintly.

If Only Baggy Dared!
(*See Chapter 2.*)

"He won't clear out," answered Racke. "Gore's under the weather about somethin'—lost a near relative in the war, I fancy. He's mopin'."

There was no sympathy in Racke's tone; and neither Crooke nor Trimble had any feeling of the sort. But all three felt that, with Gore in such a mood, there was a chance that things might be done in No. 9 without his paying any heed.

"Cut off!" said Racke grimly, giving Baggy another shake.

Baggy tapped at the door of No. 9.

"Come in!" shouted Gore. "Some of you can't let a fellow have a minute's peace, it seems!"

Baggy entered.

"We'd better cut," said Crooke. "It will look dashed suspish to Gore if he gets on to Baggy's game an' sees us hangin' about."

"Yaas, we may as well go," drawled Racke, with an assumption of far greater coolness than he felt.

It was all very well for the two black sheep to talk of denying any complicity in the plot if Baggy were caught and gave them away. Baggy was an abominable liar; but his word was counted not much less valuable than theirs by most of the fellows. And this particular dirty trick was likely to be thought much more in their line than in that of Trimble.

They waited anxiously in their own study.

Meanwhile, Baggy showed a pale and podgy face in No. 9.

"What do you want?" growled Gore.

"I—I dropped something here, Gore. Do you mind if I look for it?"

"That's all very well. What were you doing in our study, I'd like to know?"

"I—I came to speak to Skimmy."

"You're lying! Skimmy has cut you dead since that Moat House bizney; and I don't blame him!"

"I—I mean Talbot, Gore."

"Right-ho! I'll ask Talbot what you

wanted with him. I'm jolly sure he didn't want anything with you!"

Gore seemed to Baggy cruelly suspicious. He would not believe anything—which is very saddening to a fellow who seeks belief for lies. Baggy went on another tack. He never minded contradicting himself.

"I—I mean I really wanted to speak to you, Gore. I—I'm ever so sorry about your cousin getting killed, you know."

"It wasn't my cousin; and I don't want any of your pretended sorrow! I know what that's worth!"

"Your—they said it was your cousin, Gore. It's all the worse if it was a brother. I'm sorry, really!"

"It wasn't my brother, either, and if you say another word I'll kick you out of the study!"

Gore was morose in his grief for his uncle. He had valued Talbot's few words of real sympathy, and he had let Skimmy say something to him; but he growled at everyone else who had attempted to condole with him. They were not offended; they knew Gore. It was rough on him, too, that he should be under a black cloud like this at such a time.

But Gore had known that Tom Merry and Arthur Augustus and Kangaroo and the rest really had felt sorry for him; and he knew quite well that Baggy did not. There was more than a little excuse for his sharpness with the fat Fourth-Former.

"I—I—may I look for what I dropped, Gore?"

"Yes. But look sharp about it!"

Gore did not ask what it was. He threw himself back in the armchair, and his hand went to his forehead. He was really feeling awfully down.

Baggy, pretending to be grovelling on the floor, stole a glance every now and then. Once his podgy hand stole up to the table, and touched a corner of the mount of the photo, leaving a slight mark there.

But he fancied that Gore's eyes were upon him, and as he counted the chances of rising to his feet with the photo under his arm—even if he could get it off the table unseen—and walking out of the room with it his heart sank. Gore would challenge him, he knew, and then all would be up.

Gore was not at all the sort of fellow to let him off on the ground that he had been misled. He was just the sort to make the biggest kind of a row about it.

At last Baggy made up his mind. He could stand no more of this suspense. Another minute or two, and his legs would refuse to support him when he did get up!

"I've found it, Gore!" he said. "My penknife. I shouldn't have liked to lose that—it's valuable!"

"Good! Now lose yourself!" snapped Gore.

Baggy skipped. He felt as if a load had been taken off his mind. On the whole he considered it inadvisable to report at once to Racke and Crooke. The marks of Racke's fingers were still upon his throat.

There was another way down, avoiding the passing of No. 7, and Baggy took it, on tiptoe.

He made his way to the concert-room. He was even prepared to be a dead body again, if it would save him from his fellow-plotters.

As he entered the concert-room Skimmy came out.

The sketch in which Skimpole played the part of the Crown Prince of Prussia had been rehearsed for the last time, and as Skimi had no part in the rest of the revue he did not care to waste more of his valuable time.

He passed Baggy without even glancing at him. It is quite possible that, wrapped in meditation, he failed to see him, though certainly Baggy was big enough to be seen.

But Baggy remembered what Gore had said, and his heart was hot against Skimmy.

"Beast!" he muttered. "Thinks he knows everything! I wish I could get him into trouble for bagging that photo. I should think I could work it if I tried hard. But there's Racke and Crooke. Oh dear, I wish I'd never touched the beastly thing!"

Skimmy went on his way to No. 9. He had a great project in his head, which he had confided to no one but Talbot and Gore.

His face took on a look of delight as he came into his study and saw the back of the mounted photo. It was just the very thing he wanted.

"Gore, my dear fellow, this is exceedingly good of you!" he said gratefully.

"What?" growled Gore.

"The provision of this excellent piece of cardboard for my birthday message to the Head, of course!"

"I didn't provide it! What are you talking about, fathead?"

"You did not place this sheet of cardboard here?"

"No, I didn't. I didn't know it was there. I was thinking!"

"I know, my dear Gore, that you are oppressed by sad thoughts just now. I will not entreat you to call to your aid the consolations of philosophy, for I am well aware that your mind is not of a philosophic cast. But I should think it should comfort you to feel that your uncle died doing his duty in a great cause."

"Oh, shut up!" growled Gore. But the tone was hardly as rough as the words.

"As you did not obtain this for me, Gore, it must have been Talbot. It was exceedingly thoughtful of him," said Skimmy.

"I dare say it was Talbot," returned Gore. "He spoils you, you old ass! Well, you can get on now, and leave me alone. I don't mind you here as long as you ain't chin-wagging, but I can't stand much of that."

Skimmy got on. With three different inks, rulers, and compasses, he worked upon his message, without a thought as to what might be on the other side of the fine, thick sheet of cardboard he was using, or, indeed, that there could be anything on the other side.

Herbert Skimpole was not endowed with artistic ability; but as it never occurred to him that there were any bounds to his ability to do what he wanted to do, it was just as well that time was short for what he had in hand. He could not attempt a floral border for his message; it seemed a pity, as he had both red and green ink, and would have seen no difficulty in doing red roses and green leaves all round—which, as he could draw neither a rose nor a leaf, would scarcely have been any considerable improvement.

He had to content himself with straight lines—with the aid of a ruler Skimmy was capable of them—and fairly neat lettering. When the work was completed the back of the photo-mount looked something like this:

MANY HAPPY RETURNS
OF THIS
AUSPICIOUS ANNIVERSARY.

Skimmy glanced at Gore. But he saw at once that Gore did not want to be talked to. So he put the greeting away in the cupboard to dry, and opened a volume of Professor Balmycrumpet. Prep was off that night; it had not been officially announced yet that the morrow would be a holiday, but everyone felt pretty sure of it.

Either Professor Balmycrumpet or absence of mind prevented Skimmy's thanking Talbot, as he had fully intended to do. He did not forget the greeting; but he forgot that he had someone else to thank for the medium of its conveyance.

Talbot must have been surprised had he been thanked. He had forgotten all about Skimmy's project. And Gore quite forgot it, too.

CHAPTER 3.
Getting Up Early.

"GRRRH! Uggggh!"

It was Baggy Trimble who made those uncouth noises, waking fully an hour before the rising-bell went next morning.

A sense of depression was upon Baggy. He felt it even before he was sufficiently awake to realise what it was he had to feel depressed about.

Then he remembered.

He had lost fifteen shillings!

It was true that he had never had the fifteen shillings; but he had lost them nevertheless.

Racke would quite certainly refuse to cash-up under the present circumstances.

That was not all. The hapless Baggy had to look forward to more rough handling from Racke.

He could appeal for protection, of course. Even Baggy was not to be bullied with impunity, if Tom Merry or Kangaroo or Grundy knew of it. Kangaroo and Grundy were often rough with Baggy, but never without reason—they, at least, were sure of that.

The Fourth did not look with favour on the bullying of any of their weaklings by a Shell fellow. Blake or any of the other leaders of the Form would stand between Baggy and Racke.

But they would want to know what the row was about, and Baggy's shrinking delicacy made him loth to tell anyone that.

If only he could have told the story so that his part in the affair should show free from guilt he would not have minded.

It was hardly likely, however, that any inquiry would reveal him as an injured innocent.

What could he do?

He lay thinking that over for a time. Then he made up his mind to a desperate deed. He would get out of bed, sneak downstairs to the study floor, get back the photo from No. 9, and hide it in No. 7. Then Racke and Crooke could do as they liked with it, and he would get his fifteen shillings!

It was a desperate deed in Baggy's eyes, not so much because of the risk involved as because of the dreadful necessity of getting out of bed before rising-bell. Getting out as long after that as was consistent with the irreducible minimum of attention to his toilet was Baggy's usual practice.

He groaned as he crawled out now. But no one heard him groan. Everyone else in the Fourth dormitory was still fast asleep.

Not in the Shell dormitory, however. Someone there was awake, out of bed, and ahead of Baggy in his toilet, though he had more to do. For all Skimmy's absent-mindedness, no one ever accused him of omitting to wash his neck.

Skimmy was downstairs before Baggy.

He went to No. 9, and took out his card of greeting. It was still hardly light, and he could only just distinguish the words upon it. But he liked them. Skimmy thought the phrase "of this auspicious anniversary" ever so far ahead of the trite "of the day." And it was not likely Dr. Holmes would mind. He would think only of the good feeling that had prompted the greeting.

It did not even occur to Skimmy to look at the other side of the cardboard. The thought that he still had Talbot to thank for providing it did flash across his mind, but it was there and gone.

He looked round for a hammer and nails. He could not remember when he had last seen a hammer used in No. 9; neither Talbot nor Gore had much taste for amateur carpentering.

But there was sure to be one in No. 10. Skimmy, carrying the card, popped into the study next door.

He came out with a hammer and some tintacks just as Baggy reached the passage.

Baggy saw him, but he did not see Baggy. Baggy followed him downstairs and to the hall, through which Dr. Holmes must pass on his way to school prayers in Big Hall.

Skimpole placed the card against the notice-board, otherwise vacant for once, and began laboriously to hammer in tintacks at each corner.

Baggy, peering round a door, watched him.

The fat Fourth-Former had not a quick mind; but, somehow, he had tumbled speedily to the fact that the greeting-card and Manners' enlarged photo were one and the same.

They must be—there could hardly be any doubt as to that. The size corresponded, and Baggy could discern the smudge his own dirty thumb had made in one corner. Besides, the photo was not in No. 9. Baggy had made a very careful search there.

He was not quite sure how to take this new turn of affairs, however. The one thing that seemed beyond doubt to him was that saying anything to Skimmy was useless.

Before Skimmy had finished his task Baggy bolted. It took Skimmy some time; he was not clever with a hammer. He gave his left thumb one or two painful knocks; but in such a good cause he could endure pain with fortitude without specially reminding himself that he was a philosopher.

When the job was done it looked to him a little askew. But by gazing at it with his head somewhat on one side he managed to make it seem straight; and, after all, was it not likely enough that Dr. Holmes' head might be a little on one side when he looked at it?

So Skimmy went off feeling quite happy.

Up in the Shell dormitory three or four more fellows had anticipated the rising-bell. Tom Merry was getting up. So were Racke and Crooke. Talbot sat up in bed.

"Where are you off to, Tom?" he asked.

"Rylcombe. Lowther didn't get that frame last night, and I promised I'd fetch it this morning."

"Good old Tommy!" said Lowther drowsily.

Then he turned over and dozed off again.

Lowther very much preferred that Tom should take on that mission.

"I'll come along," said Talbot; and he got out of bed.

Racke and Crooke looked at one another. They grinned; but neither grinned like one with his mind at ease.

Tom and Talbot took no notice of them. It was unusual for the black sheep to be up early; but their rising was no business of the other two.

Crooke was ready, but Racke was still brushing his well-oiled hair when the skipper of the Shell and his chum passed out.

"Take a squint into the Fourth dorm, and see if Baggy's in bed, old top," said Racke.

"Sure to be!" growled Crooke. "Who ever heard of that fat slacker gettin' up till he had to? I'm not goin' to wake the lout. It would be too dashed suspish, by gad! We shall have to put this through without Baggy, if it's to be managed at all. Not sure we'd better not chuck it, though."

"I'm not goin' to chuck it, confound you!" snarled Racke.

"Well, that doesn't tie me down, y'know," replied Crooke unpleasantly.

He peeped into the Fourth dormitory, and saw at once that something like a miracle had happened.

Baggy's bed was empty.

"The fat beast's up to somethin'," he told Racke. "I only hope he won't make a mull of it all."

Trimble was in their study when they entered. In fact, half of him was in the cupboard. When Baggy found himself alone in a study he always felt an overpowering interest in the commissariat question as connected with that study's occupants—and with himself.

"Come out of that!" snapped Racke.

Baggy came out of it, with a mouth smeared with jam.

"Oh, it's all right, you fellows!" he said airily.

"I'm dashed if it is!" snorted Crooke. "You've been at our jam, you fat thief!"

"Oh, well, I only wanted to see what kind it was, you know! Strawberry!" Baggy smacked his lips. "Not plum and apple. You chaps know too much for that. Not blackberry. Blackberry ain't bad, but a fellow gets a bit tired of it. If you don't mind, I think I'll take this pot!"

"Wha-a-at?" roared Crooke.

"Don't make such a row. I say, Racke, shut that door. When you've heard what I've got to tell you I'll bet you won't make any fuss about a mere trifle like a pot of jam!"

"You'd better look sharp an' tell us, then, or I shall dashed well start makin' a fuss about it!" said Crooke hotly. "I don't buy strawberry jam to have filthy fingers stuck into it!"

"Oh, I thought it was Racke's! Racke wouldn't make a fuss about a pot of jam. He's a pal of mine—ain't you, Racke?"

Racke had shut the door. He looked at Baggy searchingly.

Something in the fat junior's manner gave Racke hope. If Baggy had no success to report he would not have come to report at all; he would have kept out of the way, as he had done the night before.

Racke had thought of sending Baggy into No. 9 to look for the photo. Now, unless he was greatly mistaken, there was no longer any need for that.

It was not for nothing that Baggy had got up so long before his accustomed time.

Crooke stared as Baggy held out a podgy and jam-smeared hand, and said:

"I'll trouble you for fifteen bob, Racke!"

"Don't give it to him, chump!" said Crooke. "It will be beastly sticky when you have to force him to shell it out again."

But Racke took out his pocket-book, and extracted therefrom a pound note.

Baggy's mean little eyes glistened, and his fingers curved to clutch the slip of paper.

"Wait a moment," said Racke. "It's no good fancyin' you can get this by false pretences, because you wouldn't be allowed to keep it. But if you really have got hold of that dashed photo I sha'n't mind makin' it a quid. So you needn't be in a hurry to handle it—it's all serene—if only——"

"It's all right, Racke—really, it is! You might have known you could trust me, I should think!"

"You're a dashed trustworthy chap, an' a dashed brainy chap, ain't you, Baggy?" sneered Crooke.

"Yes, I am, then! You'll say so when you've heard all about it!"

"I sha'n't say it till I've got more proof than your word, an' I shan't say it then, by gad!" replied Crooke obstinately.

"Well, I ain't really talkin' to you. Racke's my pal—ain't you, Racke? It's Racke who wants to take down that rotter Manners a peg or two, and——"

"Shush! Best not talk about that, Baggy," said Racke. "What have you done? An' why didn't you come along to us last night?"

"Because I'd other fish to fry," said Baggy mysteriously. "Craft was wanted for our job, I can tell you that, Racke!"

"Go on, you fat swanker! What did you do? That's the question. Don't stand there braggin' about how deep you are, but hand over the dashed photo! You've got it, of course?"

"No; I——"

"You haven't got it? Oh, counfound you!"

There was an ugly gleam in Racke's eyes. Baggy had raised his hopes so high that to disappoint him now would be dangerous for Baggy.

"I can take you to where it is this minute," said Baggy hastily.

"What on earth do you mean?"

"You just come along with me!"

"Look here, you fat, silly idiot——"

"Ah, you won't say that when you've heard! Just you come along!"

Greatly wondering, the black sheep went. They stared in puzzled amazement when he halted below in front of Skimmy's greeting, and said:

"There you are!"

"Why, you silly ass——" began Crooke wrathfully.

"That's the photo!" said Baggy triumphantly.

"But——"

"It is, I tell you! If you don't believe me you can look at it."

"I really think the fat idiot means it, Racke!" said Crooke.

"Sure he does! But he may have made a mistake, y'know."

"You don't catch me making mistakes!" said Baggy conceitedly. "I tell you I worked this a treat. Look here, old Skimmy's nailed it up all askew, and the tacks are all loose, too. You can pull two of them out and have a look at the thing if you can't believe me without."

"Pull the thing down an' tear it up!" snarled Crooke.

"No!" snapped Racke. "It's safe enough here, an' we're safe, too. You say Skimpole put it up, Baggy?"

"Yes. That was my doing, you know. He was clean done. He, he, he! He thought it was ever so kind of me to find him a nice piece of cardboard to write his piffling greeting on, and he never thought of looking at the other side."

"So that was the way of it, was it?" said Racke thoughtfully.

"That was it. I waited till Gore went out of the study and Skimmy came in. Then I went in and told him I'd brought him that thing because I knew he

wanted something of the sort, and I wanted to make friends with him again—see? Skimmy wouldn't speak to me after that Moat House affair—not that I wanted the silly ass to, really, but anything does for a tale."

Anything did not, as a rule, do for a tale to beguile Racke and Crooke, who were too cunning to be imposed upon very readily by Baggy. But this did. It sounded plausible enough. There was never much difficulty in pulling the wool over the eyes of Skimmy.

Crooke pulled out two tacks on one side, and bent the mount back far enough to get a glimpse of the photo.

"It's it right enough, Racke!" he said.

Racke nodded.

"Put those tacks back, sharp!" he said. "Someone might come along!"

Someone did come along as Crooke was fumbling with them.

It was Clive of the Fourth. He stopped when he saw the three, and noted what they were doing.

"Shouldn't have thought that kind of thing would have been much in the line of you fellows," he remarked.

"That's all you know!" snarled Crooke.

"It isn't," said Racke. "The thing's Skimmy's—at least, so Trimble says. Trimble saw him putting it up. But it wasn't straight, an' out of the kindness of his heart Crooke——"

"Well, if it's old Skimmy's, just you rotters let it alone!" said Clive, jumping to a conclusion that was by no means wholly unjustified. "If I hear that it's gone, I shall know who meddled with it, and other chaps besides Skimmy may have something to say about it."

Clive passed on, and thought no more of the matter for the time being. Crooke finished his task.

"We'll leave it here for the present," Racke said quietly. "After the Head's seen it no one will care what becomes of it—not even Skimmy. So it will be safe enough to sneak down to-night an' collar it. Meanwhile, we're as safe as if we'd had nothin' to do with it, old top!"

CHAPTER 4.
Lost!

"HERE you are, Manners, old chap!" said Tom Merry, coming into Study No. 10 with Talbot a few minutes before breakfast.

"Oh, good!" answered Manners. "I've got the things ready for doing the work. There's no time to spare."

And he went to the cupboard to get the photo.

Monty Lowther came in at that moment.

"Tommy, you're a brick!" he said. "'Tis the voice of the sluggard, I know well; but really I did bar going over to Rylcombe before the world was properly aired for the day."

"It was jolly out," remarked Talbot. "Going to be a beautiful day, I'm sure. Why, what's the matter, Manners?"

"'Tain't here!" gasped Manners.

"Oh, I say, you've forgotten where you put it, you know," said Tom.

"Chump! As if I should be likely to do that! Besides, the thing ain't so small that it could get mislaid. Come and look for yourself!"

The other three all crowded to the cupboard.

Certainly the photo was not there. If it had been it must have been visible at once.

"My hat!" said Tom.

"Somebody must have taken it for a joke," suggested Talbot.

"You didn't when you came back here last night, did you, Lowther?" snapped Manners.

"My dear man, do you think I would? That's the worst of having a reputation for japing. But this would be beyond a joke, Manners."

"Yes, I know—I didn't think—you wouldn't, of course," replied Manners confusedly. "But it can't have been Blake and that lot, can it?"

"No!" said Tom decidedly. "They wouldn't, any more than Monty."

"There's no harm in asking them, though, I should think."

"Nor much good," said Tom. "Still, ask them if you like. Be civil, though. We don't want to squabble among ourselves."

Manners hurried off to Study No. 6 on the Fourth passage.

Tom and Talbot and Lowther looked at one another with worried faces.

"I'm afraid it's not a joke, Tom," said Talbot.

"I'm sure it's not!" snapped Lowther.

"But would any fellow be cad enough to——"

"There are fellows here who are cads enough for anything, Tom! I don't name any names, but——"

"Best not," said Talbot quietly. "I'll go and speak to Gore. He was in our study most of the evening, and he may know whether anyone came along."

"Right-ho!" said Tom, trying to speak cheerfully.

But neither he nor Lowther looked cheerful when Talbot had gone.

"We're done, Monty!" said Tom. "We shall never see the photo again. And it's too late now to get anything else, even if we had cash enough."

"Never say die!" replied Lowther. "But I'm afraid we are done. We may get it back, but not in time. All the gifts are to be handed in after prayers. A few minutes before brekker and a few after—that's all we've got."

Manners came back. His face told at once that he brought no good news.

"They haven't touched it," he said. "I didn't really think they would, and I don't blame them much for being ratty with me."

"We're not," spoke Blake's voice behind him. "At least, if we were it was only for a minute."

"Yaas, wathah! We can entah into Mannahs' feelin's, I twust."

Manners blinked at them in a friendly way. He could not speak. Herries and Digby were behind Blake and Arthur Augustus, and their faces showed that they were in full agreement with their chums.

"It's rotten!" said Blake. "We came along to see if we could lend a hand. There's no time to waste."

"But there doesn't seem anywhere to make a start," Herries said hopelessly.

Talbot came back just then.

"It's no time for being too particular," he said. "We ought not to pitch on anyone, but Gore says that Baggy was round here last night."

"Why, of course he was!" said Tom. "Didn't we meet him when we left here for the concert-room?"

"It must have been later than that when Gore saw him, for I met Gore after you'd gone in."

"He wasn't about when I came back here," Lowther said.

"I'll go and fetch the fat rotter!" volunteered Herries.

And he went off.

Perhaps Herries was not exactly the messenger the Terrible Three would have chosen. Herries was hardly diplomatic. He might blurt out the whole story of the trouble before anyone. But, after all, it was bound to be known if the photo were not found almost at once. And no one thought much of Baggy's feelings.

Presently a sound as of a pig squealing was heard along the passage, and then Baggy shot into Study No. 10, propelled by the knee of Herries.

"I ain't going to put up with this!" howled Baggy. "I'll report Herries for bullying! I'll——"

"Bullying be hanged!" snapped Herries. "You wouldn't have been touched if you'd come along when you were told. You don't suppose I like taking hold of your ear, do you?"

"It's all right. There's time to wash your hands before brekker!" said Dig, grinning.

"I can't think what you fellows want me for," said Baggy. "I don't want to have anything to do with you, I'm jolly sure! I'd almost made up my mind to cut the lot of you dead in future. Yah!"

"Go on, Baggy! Finish making it up, do!" Lowther urged him. "No use stopping half-way in anything so good as that!"

"Shut up, Monty!" said Tom. "See here, Trimble, a very serious thing has happened here."

"We don't say you've had anything to do with it," Talbot put in. "But you've been mixed up in a lot of dirty tricks; and we know that you were hanging round here last night."

"I wasn't, then! I didn't come through this passage yesterday—not once!"

"That's a lie!" snorted Manners. "We saw you!"

"And you came to our study pretending to look for something you'd dropped there," added Talbot. "I don't believe you dropped anything at all there. You'd no business in there. None of us wants to see you!"

"Well, I couldn't have taken anything out of No. 10 by looking for something that I'd lost in No. 9, could I?" howled Baggy.

"Who said anything was taken out of here?" demanded Tom.

"I—I—— Oh, Herries did!" faltered the podgy junior.

"I didn't!" said Herries sharply. "All I said was that something had been lost, and you were wanted."

"Well, ain't that the same as saying I'd boned it?"

"Seeing that you are you, Baggy, it's not a bad inference!" remarked Lowther.

"Have you boned it?" roared Manners.

"No; I haven't even seen your rotten old photo! Come to that, I didn't know anything about it till you mentioned it. I'm not interested——"

"Nobody has mentioned it!" struck in Talbot.

"Baggay, you scoundwel, you——"

"Oh, you dry up, D'Arcy! You're a jolly sight more likely to have taken the thing than I am! Everybody knows that you've been squabbling with these fellows for the last two or three days, and you're a spiteful beast!"

"Bai Jove! I——"

The clang of the breakfast-bell broke in upon Arthur Augustus' indignant protest.

"Now I suppose I can go?" snarled Baggy. "You can't keep me from brekker, anyway!"

They felt very much inclined to. None of them would have minded much the missing of breakfast if only missing it had been likely to help. But it was difficult to see how it would; and they trooped off.

The Terrible Three were badly upset. Even Lowther showed depression; Tom Merry's sunny countenance was clouded; and Manners looked positively tragic.

During the meal news of the loss spread, and there was a good deal of genuine sympathy for the sufferers.

Grundy, with Wilkins and Gunn behind him, and Kangaroo, with Dane and Glyn, came up to them directly they were out. Then Levison, Clive, Cardew, Durrance, and Roylance joined the group, which already included Talbot, Blake, D'Arcy, Herries, and Digby.

"Merry," said Grundy, loftily, "you had better be ruled by me! I know what a headstrong, self-willed sort of chap you are; but this is a time when cool judgment counts."

"If your cool judgment will help us out of this I shall be grateful, Grundy; but I don't see how it's going to," replied Tom, restraining his natural desire to snap at the great George Alfred.

"My opinion is that we ought to go in a body to Racke's study and overhaul it!" said Grundy, with immense decision.

"Whew! That's pretty drastic, I must say!" remarked Talbot.

"It's sense!" hooted Grundy. "Those two rotters are hard up against you chaps, and there's no limit to what they'd do to score over you."

Racke and Crooke passed at that moment on the other side of the quad, and out of earshot. Both had their hands in their trousers-pockets, and neither looked in any way perturbed.

"Best to show up!" said Racke. "Shouldn't wonder if they're talkin' about us over there!"

"You don't think they can have smelt a rat, by gad?" returned Crooke nervously. "They didn't get anything out of Baggy, and he's mizzled now. He's goin' to keep out of the way till prayers."

"They may have smelt as many rats as they like," said Racke coolly. "The point is that they can't prove anythin'—not a single, solitary thing! We're as safe as if we'd never touched the dashed photo—for the matter of that, I haven't, an' you only handled it out of kindness."

"All the same, I wish Clive hadn't seen us," said Crooke. "He's in that crowd, an' he might say somethin'. There's that foxy beggar Kerr joinin' 'em now, with Figgins an' that fat beast. You never can tell what Kerr will get on to!"

"Nearly all our dear friends are there," replied Racke nonchalantly. "What's the odds? They can't prove anythin'. I don't see how they can even begin to make a move in the matter, an' if they do they'll never find the photo, except by accident, while we're completely innocent even if they find it."

CHAPTER 5.
Drastic Action!

THE crowd was growing. Figgins & Co., perceiving it, had come across from the New House to join it. They were followed by Redfern, Owen, Lawrence, Koumi Rao, Clarke, Thompson, and one or two more.

Then School House fellows began to swell the gathering. Julian and Kerruish came up together. Lumley-Lumley was just behind them. Hammond and Reilly, Gore and Gibbons and Walkley, Smith minor and Contarini, Macdonald and Lorne, and half a dozen more joined the throng. It had become something very like a Shell and Fourth open-air meeting.

Mellish and Scrope were among the crowd, though not in sympathy with it. But Baggy Trimble was elsewhere. Baggy had concealed himself in a box-room, purposing to stay there till the coast was clear.

There was a loud buzz of explanation and comment. The New House fellows now heard of the trouble for the first time, and there was only one opinion among them.

"It's a dirty trick, whoever did it!" said Dick Redfern, voicing that opinion.

"Not much doubt about who did it!" snapped Figgins.

"Don't be in too big a hurry, old top!" Kerr warned him.

"Rats! We all know——"

"That's just what we don't! We may all think, but——"

"I know!" roared Grundy. "It was those two rotters!"

He pointed a finger at Racke and Crooke, near the gates now.

"Any proof?" asked Kerr.

"What proof's needed? They'd do anything——"

"I don't often find myself in agreement with Grundy," drawled Cardew; "but I agree now."

"So do I!" said Kangaroo.

"You do, Kangy?" asked Tom Merry, in some surprise. For Harry Noble was a very level-headed fellow, quite unlike the headlong Grundy or the wayward Cardew.

"Yes, Tom, I do! No good pottering about waiting for proofs to turn up when you're dealing with Huns! And those two rotters are out-and-out Huns! All they've been doing lately, not to mention scores of things they've done before, proves that. I vote we tell them this minute that we're going to search their study!"

"Hear, hear!" cried Figgins.

"That's the dodge!" said Fatty Wynn.

"The only thing for it!" cried Levison.

"I think we ought, Tom!" said Manners.

There was a hum of assent from the crowd. Only a few were doubtful—Tom Merry himself, Talbot, Kerr, Clive, Roylance, Durrance—those who usually kept their heads in times of crisis, and were not easily led away by passion.

And even they were only doubtful.

"Come on!" cried Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! It is the onlay thing to do, deah boys!"

"The whole crowd of us, New House and all!" said Redfern. "If there's trouble about this bizney, we ought all to be in it!"

"Hear, hear!" shouted Figgins.

"Well, it is the best way," admitted Kerr. "It gives some show of justice to it, if only that of Mr. Justice Lynch!"

"We must tell them what we're going to do first," said Tom, still a trifle reluctant.

"Cut off and tell them, Mellish," ordered Kangaroo. "You're a pal of theirs!"

Mellish went, none too willingly, however. It struck Mellish that the position of a pal of Racke and Crooke was not precisely a popular one to occupy at the moment.

"Don't you think they're the chaps who did it, Kerr?" said Figgy.

"I do, old man!"

"But why——"

"I think—I don't know! The only thing I'm sure of is that the photo won't be found in No. 7. No, I'm not sure even of that! Criminals do make the queerest mistakes at times. But I don't fancy it will!"

Racke and Crooke came up to the crowd. Racke looked defiant; but Crooke had rather a hangdog appearance. That proved nothing, however—certainly not his guilt. Anyone thus summoned might have shown uneasiness.

"I hear you want to search our study, Merry, by gad?" drawled Racke.

"You hear right, Racke!"

"May I ask what this kindly attention is due to?"

"Hasn't Mellish told you?" snapped Manners.

"Will you answer me, Merry?" demanded Racke, pointedly ignoring Manners.

"The rotter's carryin' it off well!" remarked Cardew to Levison.

"Photo ain't in the study. They've destroyed it!" replied Levison. "Rough on those chaps—especially old Manners! I only hope we can get hold of some proof or other!"

"Yes, I'll answer you, Racke," said Tom, very gravely. "The present we three were going to give to the Head is missing. It couldn't have gone without foul play. And the general opinion of the fellows is that there's enough suspicion against you two to justify a search of your study!"

"That's the general opinion, is it?" sneered Racke. "You didn't—er—shall we say, do anything to produce that opinion?"

"No, he didn't!" hooted Grundy. "Merry's too slow for a funeral! It was my idea!"

"I'll remember that!" said Racke. "Still, I take it that you accept responsibility in the matter, Merry?"

"We all accept it!" roared Figgins. "You needn't try to put it on to Tom Merry, you sweep! We're all in it!"

"Yaas, wathah! In fact, Tom Mewwy——"

"I'm talkin' to you, Merry! You're captain of the Lower School—unless you've abdicated in Grundy's favour. Do you accept responsibility?"

"Yes, hang it!" snapped Tom. "It isn't my way to shelter behind others! You know that well enough!"

"I don't know anything of the sort! But your acceptance clears the air in one direction. Now, may I ask what it is that is lost?"

There was a howl of wrath from the crowd at that. Even if Racke had not heard of it before—even if he were innocent, which none there believed—Mellish would certainly have told him.

"He's carrying it off with a high hand," said Kerr to Figgy. "I don't say he's innocent—I don't fancy he is—but it's not going to be easy to convict him!"

"When you get on the job, Kerr, old son——"

"Ah! But there isn't a lot of time to spare, is there?"

"There's no use in this," said Levison to Cardew. "But I suppose it must be gone through with now!"

"Must say I rather admire Racke's nerve," admitted the dandy of the Fourth. "Can't say as much for Crooke, though, by gad! He's as dumb as an oyster!"

"No need for him to say anything, is there?"

Tom had delayed his answer, looking Racke hard in the face. He was puzzled, and his heart was not really in the search project.

Could the fellow really be innocent? It was always possible that Baggy had committed the theft on his own, though Lowther and Manners were sure that if he had been in it he had been the tool of the Shell black sheep. It was even possible that someone else might be the guilty party.

But who? The other black sheep might owe the Terrible Three grudges; but Tom could not think any of them likely to try to pay them in this way.

"Will you give me an answer, Merry?" asked Racke, with sardonic politeness.

No one noticed that Mellish had not joined the crowd again. He had slunk off on an errand for Racke.

"The missing article is an enlarged photo of the school," replied Tom.

"Oh, by gad! Do you hear that, Crooke? We're suspected of havin' boned an enlarged photo of St. Jim's! What in thunder would we do with the dashed thing if we had it? I'm sorry it's gone astray, of course; but I shouldn't think the Head will miss it much, should you?"

Cadet Notes.

Out of the thousands of letters received from our readers asking for information, etc., about the Cadet Movement, many of them have displayed a spirit which cannot be too highly commended. In none of them is this more clear than in one received recently from a Yorkshire lad, who wrote as follows:

"Having read your advertisement in the GEM LIBRARY, I should be much obliged if you would send me full particulars of how to join the Cadet Corps. I am very sorry I am not old enough to join the Army, as I should have been in it before now, but I have done my bit in the Merchant Marine, but could not carry on owing to injuries received by being torpedoed, but if the war lasts long enough I hope I am spared to have a smack at them."

Here is the kind of spirit which has made our country a great one in the past, has carried it through the terrible times of the past three or four years, and will make it greater in the future than in the past. Every boy ought to feel that this is the way to look upon his future, and, if possible, of doing his share towards meeting the needs of the country. Not all boys, of course, can either join the Army or go through the fearful experience of being torpedoed at sea, but all can join the Cadet Movement, and in that way do what is possible to assist the country during the present times. Cadet Corps now exist, or are being formed, in almost every town throughout the kingdom, and if our readers will communicate with the Central Association Volunteer Regiments, Judges' Quadrangle, Law Courts, Strand, W.C. 2, they will receive full information about the nearest corps, etc., by return of post.

"I thought it was most likely a photo of the Saintly Three, by gad!" returned Crooke, with an attempt at emulating Racke's tone.

"Well, we might have bagged that—as a keepsake! We love them so, don't we, dear boy?" Racke said bitterly.

Manners clenched his hands, and Lowther made a step or two forward.

"Here, I say, we're wasting time!" shouted Figgins.

"And that's just what those rotters want!" snapped Kangaroo.

There followed a surging of the crowd into the School House, up the wide staircase, and to the Shell passage. On the way Skimpole's birthday greeting was passed, but no one looked at that. The two black sheep, carried along by the crowd in its rapid movement, averted their eyes from it with care. They breathed more easily when it was left behind.

Well for them was it that it had been only Clive who had seen Crooke handling it before breakfast. Clive was no duffer; but he had not the acuteness of Kerr or Ernest Levison. Better Clive than even one of the Terrible Three, or Talbot or Roylance or Cardew!

Racke felt easy about Clive, but Crooke was still vaguely troubled.

"We can't all crowd in," said Tom, as they reached Study No. 7.

"No; four or five ought to be enough," answered Kangaroo. "I'll be one!"

Tom was another, as a matter of course, though there were a score there far keener on the search than he. Grundy insisted upon being in it, and was given his head. Blake and Figgins were chosen to represent the Fourth in the matter.

"Are we allowed inside?" inquired Racke.

No one replied in words, but way was made for the two.

The rest thronged the passage. Some of them strove to get as near the door as possible, but not all. Kerr and Levison and Cardew found themselves together in the rear of the crowd.

"What do you think, Kerr?" asked Levison.

"No go!" said Kerr briefly.

"My notion, too!" said Cardew. "Wherever it is, it is not there!"

"But you were keen on this dodge?" Kerr said.

"My dear man, it annoys those two! Isn't that good enough?"

Inside the study Racke made a last protest.

"You quite understand that you haven't our consent to this, Merry?" he said.

"Yes!" snapped Tom.

The search began. There were few places in the study where anything the size of Manners' photo could have been hidden, and a couple of minutes disposed of them. The drawer in the table revealed a brown-paper package that caused Grundy to give a joyful whoop. But a second glance convinced even Grundy that the photo could not be in that package.

"That's our present to the Head," said Racke. "You can open it if you like!"

"It isn't a measly photo, by gad!" sneered Crooke.

The parcel was not opened. Everyone had heard of the expensive silver tray the two black sheep were giving Dr. Holmes.

There came a pause in the search; and the five looked at each other, while wild suggestions poured in upon them from some of those in the passage.

Then the voice of Kildare, captain of St. Jim's, was heard.

"What's this mean?" it asked sternly. "Make way there!"

The crowd fell back, lining the two walls. Kildare strode down the lane thus left.

Mellish had done his errand!

Kildare stood at the door of No. 7, and frowned upon the searchers.

"What's this game, Racke?" he asked.

"I think you had better ask Merry, Kildare," replied Racke meekly. "I assure you that it's not a game that I'm takin' any hand in. That was why I sent an' asked you to come—as a protest!"

The crowd fairly gasped.

Racke had never done anything more audacious than this.

He had sent for Kildare, and Kildare had come!

That the skipper did not like it was plain. But that would not worry Racke. He did not exactly love Kildare.

It really looked as though the fellow might be innocent. Some of the crowd began to fancy that he must be. But these were only a few. The majority put down this new move to Racke's consummate cheek.

"Now then, Merry!"

Kangaroo spoke, like the good fellow he was.

"As a matter of fact, Kildare, Merry wasn't keen on this. He's no more in it than the rest of us, anyway. Something's been stolen—a birthday present that Merry and Manners and Lowther were going to give the Head."

"What, the photo?" said Kildare at once. "I've heard about that. But when you say it's been stolen——"

"It's gone, anyhow!" struck in Manners desperately.

"And you're searching here for it?" snapped the skipper.

Tom nodded.

"Is there the slightest evidence that either Racke or Crooke had any hand in its going?"

"Oh, if you're going to talk about evidence——" began Grundy, in his most magnificent manner.

"I'm not going to talk to you at all, Grundy! Merry, you must answer me! Is there any evidence?"

"No, Kildare!" answered Tom.

"Then you'll all clear out of here at once! I'm not sure that I can let you go at that, either. This sort of thing is clean off, especially at such a time. The bell will be going in a minute—it's late now! Ah! There it goes!"

Next moment everybody was making for Big Hall.

Racke and Crooke grinned triumphantly, and Mellish sniggered. But the faces of the Terrible Three were very downcast.

CHAPTER 6.
Out of It.

KILDARE marshalled them with care. This was a very special occasion; but it was not an occasion upon which the school could be allowed to let itself go from the outset at discretion.

"Go to your usual places," said the skipper. "Mind, there's to be no cheering—no demonstration of any sort—when the Head comes in. Save that for later on; you can let yourselves go then. Just stand up in the ordinary way—no whispering anywhere. Prayers come first, you know—the Head won't be pleased if you forget that."

They went to their places. In serried ranks they awaited the coming of the Head—the kind old man who could be as stern as a field-marshal when sternness was needed, but at the back of whose sternness there was always mercy. He had ruled over St. Jim's for many years now; but before that he had been a boy there, then a junior master, later a Housemaster. Nearly all his life was bound up with the place.

And most of those present loved him, though that might not have been the way they would have put it, for that is not quite a boy's way.

There were exceptions. In the row of gowned masters one might pick out two whose feeling towards Dr. Holmes fell a good deal short of affection. But then, Messrs. Ratcliff and Selby were quite incapable of any such feeling towards any man placed above them. If the Archangel Gabriel had been Head of St. Jim's they would have picked holes in his rule.

But Mr. Railton had almost a son's affection for the Head, and Messrs. Linton and Lathom esteemed him as perhaps they esteemed no other man on earth.

There stood the prefects, Kildare, handsome and smiling, at the end of the line; next to him Monteith, of the New House, old-time foe of his, a friend now; Darrel, with the fighting look on his keen face; Baker, steady and reliable and quiet; North and Langton, Mulvaney major and Webb, Rushden and MacGregor. Knox was there, too—perhaps the only one of them all who hated the Head.

And there were the Fifth, with Lefevre at their head—a few there, maybe, who lacked loyalty, but not many. And even the few would at least make a display of loyalty to-day.

Tom Merry headed the Shell, with a darkened face, though he was doing his best to look cheerful. In the ranks of the Shell was more than one fellow who had much to thank Dr. Holmes for; one, at least, Reginald Talbot, to whom he had been as a father. Talbot was not the fellow to forget. But there were those who had forgotten benefits conferred, mercy extended, or remembered them only to resent them. They did not show this now, however. No one looked more cheery than Racke and Crooke.

Blake stood first in the row of the Fourth—a long row this—with Figgins next to him. Some of the faces there were rather clouded, for the trouble of the Terrible Three had affected the spirits of their staunch chums. Two fellows looked particularly thoughtful. One of these was Kerr. The other was Sidney Clive.

Kerr had really nothing definite to go upon; but his active brain could not leave the problem alone. And a memory had suddenly come to Clive—a memory of something he had seen that morning—a little thing—nothing at all, it had seemed at the time—and yet—and yet! It made Clive think hard now.

The Third were there, with D'Arcy minor in the post of honour, and Levison minor next to him, for the places were not entirely a matter of seniority in Form. The Sixth and Fifth might rank themselves by such rule, but not the Forms below them.

And the youngsters of the Second were there, too, of course; as eager as any, though to most of them the Head was rather an awesome stranger, to be gazed at from afar, than the fatherly man whom their seniors knew. They also would come to know him in time, as so many generations of St. Jim's fellows had.

The Head entered, a smile on his face, and the whole school stood at attention as he made his way to his rostrum, with that slight rustling of his gown that was so familiar a sound to all.

"Let us pray."

They were the words that invariably opened the brief service; but somehow they sounded differently this morning. And the prayers were much the same as usual; but perhaps there was a difference in the keenness with which some followed them. Nothing but the sound of the Head's mellow, cultured voice, reverent and impressive, could be heard, save for the breathing of the kneeling boys and masters. Through a stained-glass window the bright sunlight came, and threw a coloured shadow before and around the grey-headed figure.

Rough on Skimmy!
(See Chapter 10.)

Prayers were over, and there came a slight buzz as everyone rose.

Kildare stepped forward from the ranks of the boys, Mr. Railton from those of the masters.

They stood there side by side, and the school waited to see who would be the first to speak.

The Housemaster laid a hand in friendly wise on the shoulder of the stalwart skipper, and it was Kildare who spoke.

"Sir," he began formally, and on that one word the clear voice may have shaken. But it rang out strongly and resonantly thereafter. "Sir, I speak for the whole school of to-day, and for hundreds who have trodden this hall before us, and I want to tell you something of what we and they feel for you. I am not an orator; you will have to take the will for the deed. But I know—we all know—that no school anywhere has a better headmaster than St. Jim's—none a finer man to govern it, a riper scholar to instruct it, a more just or more merciful arbiter on the occasions when the Head must put on the mantle of the judge."

Kildare paused for a moment.

"He might have left out that!" whispered Crooke to Racke.

"Kildare is an orator, by gad!" whispered Cardew to Levison.

But the cheering drowned both those remarks. Fellows who but for the Head's long-suffering might have had to leave St. Jim's in black disgrace were among those who cheered most loudly. If Racke and Crooke had no gratitude, Monteith and Levison and others there had it.

Mr. Railton waved his hand, and the cheering died down. Kildare went on:

"I have not the eloquence to express myself fully: but the school speaks through me when I say that you have not only our profound respect, but also our loyal affection. We know that this is your sixtieth birthday; but we believe, as we hope, that for many years longer you may rule over St. Jim's. Some men may be 'too old at sixty,' but not our Head! We recognise this anniversary as a special occasion to be duly honoured, but we do not think of you, sir, in terms of years. In the name of the school I ask your acceptance of the gifts we offer, knowing that to you the spirit behind them means infinitely more than any value they may have, but yet sincerely hoping that in all of them you may find something that makes them worth having for themselves, for I am sure that in the choice of every one of them there has been an attempt to make it worth your taking. May you pass many another birthday in the midst of the school that loves and honours you, sir!"

Once more the clear, manly voice shook as Kildare made an end of speaking. He was visibly moved, but not more so than was the Head. It seemed but fitting that Dr. Holmes should stretch forth his hand to meet that of the stalwart captain. The cheering rolled again as they gripped.

Then Mr. Railton spoke.

"Sir," he began, as formally as Kildare, but, like him, in a tone that made the title one of something more than mere courtesy, "Kildare has spoken so well, in spite of his disclaimer of any pretensions to oratory, that there seems little for me to say. But Kildare could hardly speak for us who stand behind you—supporters of your throne, if I may be allowed the figure of speech. Chief and colleague and friend in one, we, the masters of St. Jim's, wish you all that those who love you best can—many returns of this day in harness, for you are not the man who would quit the field while still capable of bearing the burden and heat of the day, and thereafter the peaceful old age that you, better than any other man we know, deserve. Other

blessings there are which we need not wish you, for them you have—love and loyalty and reverence in abundance. Sir, I have done!"

Again the kind old hand stretched out, while the masters cheered now, and the boys cheered, too, as if afraid that there might not be enough noise without them; and even Mr. Ratcliff and Mr. Selby relaxed a little.

Then Kildare opened the door nearest him, and Taggles made an unexpected appearance, at the head of the whole school domestic staff.

Taggles held something in his arms, and his face was red and hot. He could hardly be considered as the first of the domestic staff, as Kildare was of the school, and Mr. Railton of the tutorial staff. But he had evidently been elected spokesman, or had elected himself to the place. And he had just as evidently prepared a set speech, which he now utterly failed to deliver.

He gasped and stammered. But the Head's kindly smile reassured him somewhat, and he stammered a few words, which served as well as much greater eloquence might have done.

"Which what I mean to say, sir, is best respecks an' many 'appy returns. An' what we all say, every blessed one of us, is that no one never 'ad, nor no one needn't never want, a kinder nor a better master than what you be! 'Eaven bless you, sir, as it always 'ave an' did ought! An' 'ere's a little present what we've all subscribed to, an' trustin' no offence!"

"Good old Taggles!" roared a voice that sounded like Jack Blake's.

And as the Head extended his hand to this humble friend, too, and the horny palm of the lodge-keeper met it, the cheering that rolled was for crusty old Taggles, with all his faults, as well as for the Head.

Then Taggles and his followers made exit, the parcel, of which Kildare had relieved the old man when he began to speak, having first been deposited on the table which stood to the right of the Head's rostrum.

The presentations, thus started, went on for quite a time. The masters were first, of course. Each of them had his gift ready, even Mr. Ratcliff and Mr. Selby, and cross-grained Herr Schneider.

After the masters came the Sixth, and in each case the gift was an individual one. But with the Fifth began a pooling system which was pretty general in the Lower School. Lefevre made his offering alone; but when Gutts stepped up it was on behalf of St. Leger and Gilmore as well as himself.

As the turn of the Shell drew near the Terrible Three waxed more and more despondent.

What would the Head think?

The School might know the dire mischance that had befallen them, but it was quite impossible to explain it to the Head. If, later, the photo were recovered—even if it were not—some explanation might be made—but not now. And meanwhile he might believe them the only fellows there who did not care enough for him to want to give him anything!

It hit them hard. They could not have felt it more had they been mere fags instead of the personages of light and leading they were accustomed to think themselves at ordinary times.

Tom Merry's brow had a frown like a horseshoe. Lowther kept his eyes on the ground, and his lips twitched. Manners did not know what to do with the vile lump in his throat. Perhaps poor old Manners was the hardest hit of the three.

They were out of it!

And now the time had come. In the natural order of things Tom would have gone up first of the Shell. But he had to stand back—to yield place to Talbot, who carried the gift for which he and Gore and Skimpole had subscribed.

Kangaroo was next; then Thompson of the New House; then Grundy. And after Grundy there marched up, brazen and cool, Racke, bearing with pride the silver tray of price.

Tom bit his lip hard. The Head never looked at him; but, of course, he would not do that. Kildare knew; but most of the others outside of the Shell and Fourth must have been wondering.

The Shell was done with at last. But it was little better when the turn of the Fourth came. These fellows were the friends of the three—Blake, Figgins, Levison, Julian, Koumi Rao—he alone of the Fourth presenting a gift on his own—Roylance, Redfern, Lumley-Lumley. They all had their gifts ready; but Tom and Lowther and Manners stood there empty-handed!

Once the Fourth had finished the end soon came. There were three presents from the Third, Wally & Co. making one, and the rest of the Form having split up into two for the others. And the Second had lumped all their subscriptions together, and had got the biggest article they could for their cash, with the result that Willoughby, who bore it up to the table, staggered under its weight, and fairly scuttled back to his place when he had put it down.

If any of them had anticipated a long speech from the Head they were disappointed. He could not have made one.

"I thank you all," he said, and there was no doubt about his voice's shaking. "Masters and boys alike, I thank you from the very bottom of my heart! As long as I live I shall never forget this day. It would be folly to pretend that all this came as a surprise to me. I think it would have overwhelmed me completely had it done so. Even as it is, I cannot speak to you as I would. To-day will be a holiday, of course. I ask you all to be my guests at tea, and for any deficiencies in the entertainment you will know that you have only war-time difficulties to blame, not the good will of the man to whom your words and deeds of affection are alike unspeakably welcome. In the evening, I understand, we are to have the pleasure of a special performance in the concert-room by members of the Lower School, and I am looking forward to this with great relish. I thank you all!"

He glanced straight at Tom as he mentioned the performance—a kind glance, with nothing searching in it—a reassuring and comforting glance, it seemed to Tom. The Head did not know; and yet, somehow, the Head understood. It was like him.

But, of course, it could not wholly comfort the three who had been so very conspicuously out of it.

CHAPTER 7.

Skimmy Gets Annoyed.

"TOM MEWWY!"

"Yes, Gussy?"

Tom spoke in rather a dispirited way. For him and Manners and Lowther the glory of the day was badly dimmed.

"Somethin's wowwyin' me, Tom Mewwy!"

"Something's worrying me, too, Gussy," said Tom, with a wry smile.

"Oh, the photo! I have thought of a plan for puttin' that wight, deah boy!"

"Have you? That's more than I can say."

"Oh, yaas! Mannahs has only to make anothah. Of course, there will be some slight delay, but that can be explained to Doctah Holmes. He is a most weasonable man in mattahs of that sort, an' he will undahstand."

Tom made a weary gesture. Naturally, he and his chums had thought of that. They might have to do it. But it would take quite a long time; and it seemed tame and unsatisfactory at best.

It was no good railing at Arthur Augustus, however. He meant well.

"What's worrying you, Gussy?" Tom asked, with an effort to detach his thoughts from his own trouble.

"Skimmay, deah boy! He weally is a most hopeless duffah!"

"You've been a long time finding that out, I must say."

"I do not mean in genewal, deah boy, but in particulah. In that part of the Cwown Pwince, I mean."

"Oh! What you really mean is that you want to take the part back?"

"Nothin' of the sort, Tom Mewwy! I should scorn the action, and I loathe the part. But I wish you would twy to induce Skimmay to give up a few houahs to a pwopah studay of it undah my coachin'."

"You really think that would be of any use?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Lowther and Manners came up just then. It was outside the School House that Arthur Augustus had buttonholed Tom Merry, and fellows were passing in and out of the quad. Kildare had arranged a School House v. New House footer match for the afternoon, to include the pick of the juniors as well as the best senior players. Most of the Shell and Fourth were devoting the morning to preparations of one sort or another for the evening's entertainment.

"What's that ass want?" asked Manners, who was in a distinctly morose mood.

"Weally, Mannahs——"

Mellish of the Fourth stopped to listen, grinning. He had come as far as the door with Racke and Crooke; but they had passed on into the quad.

"Oh, don't 'pwotest', Gussy! We've heard that so many times, and we're tired of it!" put in Lowther. "In fact, we are tired of everything. This world, as the elder Mr. Weller said, is a 'wale.'"

"Gussy wants to coach Skimmy in his part," said Tom.

"Oh!"

Manners did not appear to find that announcement interesting. He had rather lost interest in the revue.

"Hi, Skimmy!" called Tom.

The philosopher of the Shell had just walked sedately out of the School House, blinking about him in his usual short-sighted way.

"Yes, my dear Merry? Oh, by the way, can you explain this? The Head was so extremely kind as to thank me personally for my birthday greeting. Now, how could he possibly have known that it was mine?"

"Didn't it say something about 'auspicious anniversary'?" inquired Lowther.

"Yes, that was the phrase."

"Well, doesn't that give it away as yours?"

"I really do not see how, my dear fellow! In what other words would one convey the intended greeting without descending to the bald triteness of 'Many happy returns of the day'?"

"That's just it," replied Lowther.

But Manners did not want to discuss anything, and Tom Merry had no wish to criticise Skimmy's greeting. Neither guessed how closely concerned that was with the subject that was filling their minds.

Lowther, though also badly hipped, was ready to chaff Skimpole as usual.

But Arthur Augustus had matters of more weight and moment to attend to.

"Skimmay," he began, "I do not considah that your wendahwin' of the part of the Cwown Pwince is at all cweditable!"

Skimmy fondly imagined himself to be above vanity. But it scarcely seemed that he was, for he frowned blackly at that speech.

"That, D'Arcy, as I conceive, is hardly a matter for your judgment," he replied, with perceptible stiffness. "You had something to say to me, I believe, Merry?"

"It was about that, Skimmy," said Tom. "I'm not saying Gussy's right, mind you, but——"

"The fact of the matter is, Skimmy," struck in Lowther, winking at Tom, "that unless you buck up Gussy's going to take the part back."

"Weally, Lowthah——"

Gussy stopped dead. He had intercepted one of Lowther's winks, and he fondly imagined that Lowther was playing his game—which was by no means the case. Lowther did not even know what the swell of the Fourth really wanted; he was merely seeking a little relief from the heaviness under which he laboured by setting Gussy and Skimmy in antagonism.

"D'Arcy cannot do that!" said Skimpole solemnly. "I should not think of allowing it. I may say that I have given considerable study to the part—more than so essentially trivial a thing deserves from a brain of the calibre of mine, indeed—and if after that I am not superior in it to D'Arcy, then all I have to say is——"

"That you'll resign it?" asked Lowther quickly.

"Nothing of the sort! I should not dream of resigning it!"

The philosopher spoke with most unphilosophical heat. Skimmy was quite satisfied with his own performance at the last rehearsal, and was anticipating the applause of the crowd that evening with relish. It was up to him, he considered, to show that he could act better than anyone else at St. Jim's. What was the use of having such a wonderful brain if one could not employ it in small things as well as in great—that is, when one condescended to small things?

"But you will allow me to give you some weally valuable tips as to the mannah in which the part should be played, I am suah, Skimmay?"

It is hardly likely that Skimmy would have assented to that proposal in any case. But there was no chance of it now. His back was up; he had swallowed the whole of Lowther's suggestion that Gussy wanted to take the part back.

"I really have no time to waste upon you, D'Arcy," he said, with most unusual severity. "And I must express my resentment at the very poor spirit you have shown in endeavouring to recover what you had so emphatically stated you desired to resign!"

"Bai Jove! Skimmay——"

But Skimmy walked on, refusing to listen. Perhaps he knew that if he turned an attentive ear Arthur Augustus would mollify him, which he did not wish. Having given his opinion with proper firmness, he preferred to go.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, you might——"

"What could I say, Gussy? Wasn't Monty right?"

"Of course Lowthah was not wight! No considahwation on earth would induce me to weassume that loathsome part! But——"

"You really mean it, old top?" asked Lowther blandly.

"Yaas, wathah! I——"

"What were you driving at, then?"

"That is vewy like you, Lowthah!" said Gussy bitterly. "You come an' butt in where you are not wanted, an' spoil evewythin'! I am afwaid that Skimmay will not let me coach him now, an' I considah it a vewy gweat pitay!"

"So do I, old chap—an awful pity!" replied Lowther soothingly. "But never mind! You will have the comfort of knowing how much better you could have done it yourself."

"Gussy ought to do it," Manners said, showing a spark of interest for the first time. "He wasn't half bad in it. Skimmy's a giddy frost!"

Mellish detached himself from the wall unnoticed, and wandered away. He had stopped at Racke's suggestion to learn what was being discussed; but it did not seem to him that this was of any possible interest to Racke.

He discovered that he was mistaken, however, upon reporting it.

"Skimmy an' D'Arcy squabblin'?" said Racke thoughtfully. "That's somethin' new. You don't mean to say that old Stick-in-the-Mud really had his rag out?"

"He had, though," replied Mellish. "I thought he was going to hit Gussy. He thought the ass wanted to bag his part—he, he, he!"

"That was about the size of it, too!" growled Crooke.

"Not likely!" said Mellish. "Gussy says nothing would induce him to take it, and I fancy he means it. Why, he'd get called 'Crown Prince' all the rest of the term! I know I jolly well wouldn't take it on!"

"Come for a toddle, Gerry!" said Racke abruptly

Crooke stared. So did Mellish. But Crooke went off with Racke, and from the gates Mellish saw them talking earnestly together as they went down the road.

"Now, I wonder what Racke's got up his sleeve now?" muttered Mellish to himself.

Racke had something. What Mellish had told him had revived in his mind a half-conceived and half-forgotten plot; and he thought he could see how to use it in order to score over the enemy!

CHAPTER 8.

Kerr Takes Up the Case.

"THAT'S the only thing for it, old chap," said George Figgins.

"Well, your opinion is highly flattering, Figgy——"

"It's nothing of the sort!" snapped Figgins. "I never flatter anybody. I say what I think. And I think—no, I jolly well know—that if that photo's to be found you're the chap to find it!"

"I'd like to," Kerr said. "But——"

"It would be a jolly score for the New House!" urged Figgy.

"It would be a good turn to three of the best chaps at St. Jim's, too!" said Fatty Wynn warmly. "That matters more, Figgy!"

"Well, p'r'aps it does," admitted the great war-chief of the New House juniors.

"I think it does," said Kerr simply.

"Well, then, it does!" agreed Figgy.

"Besides, Cousin Ethel said you were the fellow to solve the mystery, Kerr!"

"What, have you seen her and told her about it?"

Figgy blushed.

"I did see her for a few minutes," he said. "And I told her, because it seemed to me she was just the right person to explain it to the Head—so as to let those three down easy, you know!"

"Not half a bad idea! She'd do that, and, of course, he must have thought it a bit queer. I hated to see poor old Tommy's face, but I couldn't help looking at him."

"Same here!" said Figgy.

"I felt nearly as bad as if it was us," Fatty said. "I say, though, Figgy, you didn't tell her everything, did you?"

"Ass! As if I should think of telling her who was suspected or——"

"Well, I didn't know. If she wanted to, she could get anything out of you, Figgy. But Cousin Ethel ain't like that, I must say."

"That makes it a bit easier for Tommy & Co.," said Kerr. "I could tell them the Head knows that the photo's missing. No need to say——"

"Of course not!" said Figgy hastily. "They'd think I was butting in."

"They may think I am," Kerr remarked, grinning. "They haven't asked me to play Sherlock, you know!"

"They won't think that; they'll be too jolly glad to have you take up the case," replied Figgins, who had the most profound faith in his chum's detective ability. "Cut along and tell them you're doing it! We'll go and help in the concert-room. There's a lot to get ready. Cousin Ethel's going to give a hand with the decorations."

"Then you bunk, my son!" said Kerr. "Leave me to do a bit of thinking. I don't quite know where to make a start yet!"

"Why, that's plain enough. The photo was put in the cupboard," said Fatty, opening widely his china-blue eyes. "Manners put it there—he's sure about that. Then it wasn't there—somebody had boned it. You've only to find out who and what they did with it."

"Plain as a pikestaff!" said Kerr sarcastically. "What a 'tec you'd make, old Fatty, with ability like that to see right through a case! I'll come with you and have a word with Thomas, I think."

They found Tom Merry in the concert-room, and Kerr drew him apart.

"The Head knows?" said Tom, when Kerr gave him that piece of information. "Oh, I say, that's better! Who told him? Must have been old Kildare, though! Ripping of him!"

And Tom fairly beamed. This was a heavy weight off his mind.

Lowther and Manners were summoned at once. Tom said Kildare had given the Head a hint; and Kerr did not contradict him. It did not occur to Tom, in his joy, to wonder why Kerr should know what the skipper was supposed to have done.

"There's another little thing," said Kerr modestly. "This case interests me. Would you fellows mind if I went into it a bit?"

"Mind? We'd be ever so glad!" said Tom heartily. And Manners and Lowther echoed him.

"Right-ho! I don't say I can do anything, but——"

"If you can't, no one here can, Kerr!"

"Thanks, Tommy, old son! That's what Figgy says; but it's nice to have a testimonial from this side of the way for once!"

"I say, Kerr!"

"Yes, Manners?"

The Terrible Three had been moving away. It was their busy day. But

Manners halted. He gave a look round, and then said, in a lower voice:

"Clive told me something just now. I couldn't make anything much of it, and he didn't seem to see himself what it pointed to; but——"

"Right-ho! I'll see Clive!"

It did not take a minute to find the South African junior, busy with carpenter's tools, for Sidney Clive was quite a handy man.

He left his job readily enough, though, and went with Kerr into the sunlit quad.

"Nothing much, perhaps," he said. "I don't see how it can be, for that matter. It was just remembering seeing Baggy with those two rotters, and thinking that all three were suspected of a hand in the dirty trick. They were down early, too—that's queer for them."

"Where were they, and what were they doing?" asked Kerr.

Clive told him. Kerr listened with close attention.

"It was Skimmy's greeting-card, you know," said Clive. "The old ass means well, if he is soft. My notion is that they were going to tear it down. They don't like Skimmy. But that seems a petty thing even for chaps like that to do. And it hasn't really anything to do with the photo, except that perhaps it shows that those three were putting their heads together, and—— Oh, I don't know! But it is said that Baggy was hanging round No. 10 last night."

"Thanks, Clive!" was all that Kerr said.

Clive went off. Kerr signalled to Fatty Wynn.

Fatty was no end surprised when he found himself posted in the hall, near the notice-board, with instructions to keep his eye on Skimmy's greeting-card, which was still in its place.

Kerr vanished, but returned in a few minutes with a tape measure. Fatty stared when his chum proceeded to take careful measurements of the card.

"What's that for?" he asked.

"Wait and see!" replied Kerr.

A wild idea had flashed into his mind directly he had heard Clive's story—an idea none the less wild because it chanced to be correct. He recalled a yarn read long before of a long search made for an incriminating letter which was not hidden—which all the time was stuck in front of the mirror in the room being searched. No one meddled with it, because the very fact of its being openly displayed turned aside suspicion. It was not likely that Racke or Crooke had read that story; it was not even likely that they had thought of a similar dodge. If once they had got hold of the photo their spite would surely have led them to destroy it. And yet——

It was impossible that Skimmy should have been their accomplice; and everyone knew that Skimmy had been responsible for that greeting. And yet——

The story stuck in Kerr's mind, as the slight incident of the morning had stuck in Clive's. He did not feel sure enough to take the card down; and to do that might spoil the chance there was of finding out who the thieves were.

But there were other steps that might be taken, and he took them at once.

He reappeared in the concert-room, to ask Manners a single question.

"Twelve by nine," replied Manners. "Why?"

But Kerr vanished without answering.

His next visit was to Skimpole. He found the genius of the Shell in an unusually bad temper.

Skimmy had not yet got over his wrath at Gussy's impudence. Kerr listened to his account of what had happened very patiently. Then he turned the course of the conversation to the greeting, and Skimmy grew better tempered.

"The Head was really extremely gratified," he said.

"He would be, naturally," answered Kerr. "I say, old top, where did you get the card? I want one something like it."

"I should be most happy to oblige you, Kerr, if I had a replica. Possibly the other side might serve when it is taken down, and I see no reason why it should not be taken down, now that it has served its purpose."

"Then there is nothing on the other side?"

"Oh, no, Kerr! That is to say, I presume there is nothing. Now that I recall to mind the circumstances I remember that I did not look. But doubtless Talbot would know."

"How's that?"

"Eh? Did I not tell you, my dear fellow, that Talbot, knowing I was in need of such an article, kindly provided it? It was most delicately done, too—he left it here upon the table for me. And I have omitted to thank him! Gore knows that I meant to, however."

Kerr went after that. He saw Talbot, who had to deny any such kindness to Skimmy.

"Though I'd have done it if I'd thought of it," Talbot said. "Fellows call Skimmy an ass—perhaps he is—but I always find him a decent sort."

Then Kerr sought out Gore, whom he found mooning disconsolately about the quad.

From him Kerr learned quite a lot—so much, indeed, that his eyes were gleaming with satisfaction as he went to relieve Fatty at his post—or, rather, to tell him that he could not be relieved for a little longer.

"I haven't got it quite all yet," murmured Kerr to himself as he went. "But I can see Baggy slinking in and boning the photo—taking the alarm at hearing someone coming—didn't Lowther go back?—and hiding it in No. 9—Gore comes in before he can retrieve it—missing link there!—why did Baggy come out without it?—he tries to sneak it under Gore's eyes—n.g.—chucks it, for the night, anyway—Skimmy comes along—jumps to wrong conclusion—uses the card—then—no—yes!—Baggy after it again in morning—sees Skimmy nail it up—Racke and Crooke in that—lucky Clive saw them!—must have been in the game the night before, too, though no one spotted them then—my hat, though, there aren't many missing links that matter a heap! Unless the card turns out not to be the mounted photo, after all—that would be a slump! No; it won't do to lead Tommy & Co. up to it, and take it down before their eyes—dramatic, but too risky! Besides, the thing's got to stay there till those rotters collar it—that's their game, I'll bet! They wouldn't be satisfied till they've made hash of it. But they daren't take it yet, unless they get a chance when no one's looking. H'm! I've got it! It must be taken down and yet stay there! That's the game!"

And with this contradictory conclusion Kerr seemed quite satisfied.

Fatty remarked plaintively that he had been a long time, but did not object to staying on guard. He was instructed to avoid the appearance of being on guard; and it was just as well that he had this warning, for five minutes after Kerr had left him again Racke and Crooke came through the hall. But Fatty was sitting in a window-seat then, looking half asleep.

Crooke nudged Racke as they passed the greeting-card, and Fatty heard them both snigger. He told Kerr that when Kerr came back.

Kerr sent him for Redfern. Someone must watch, and perhaps it would be better to have a fellow sharper than Fatty, who had got tired of the job, anyway.

Owen and Lawrence came with Redfern. Kerr did not tell them much, but he told them enough to make them willing to stay chatting in the hall for a while, which was quite sufficient safeguard for his purpose.

"You'll work the oracle if anyone can, Kerr," said Reddy. "But I'm blessed if I see how we're helping by just staying here when we ought to be at work in the concert-room. Why not Figgy?"

"Figgy couldn't be dragged here by wild horses just now," said Owen, with a knowing grin.

"And there ain't very much left to do there," added Lawrence.

Kerr's proceedings after that were strange. He actually went to Study No. 10 on the Shell passage, and brought thence concealed the frame Tom Merry had fetched from Rylcombe that morning. Then, having taken this across to the New House, he rode over to Rylcombe on his own account, and came back with a stout piece of cardboard which would have made quite a good photo-mount, and which measured about twelve inches by nine.

Thereafter he was busy in his own study with black, red, and green ink for a time. He capped all this by being nearly ten minutes late at the dinner-table, and Kerr rather prided himself on his punctuality.

When dinner was over the "auspicious anniversary" greeting might still be seen in the hall, though no one looked at it very particularly as they passed through. But up in a certain study of the New House a keen-faced junior was framing a photo, with the door fastened against even his dearest chums!

CHAPTER 9.
Racke's New Wheeze.

"MY hat! The frame's gone now!" gasped Manners.

"Sure, old chap?" asked Tom.

"Of course I'm sure, chump! I left it on the table here, but it's most certainly not here now!"

"Looks as if it ain't safe to leave anything about," Tom said. "I don't like this a little bit. It's nasty having a thief in the place."

"Well, the frame wasn't much use without the photo," remarked Lowther.

Manners sniffed contemptuously.

"And suppose we get the photo back, and then haven't a blessed frame to put it in?" he demanded witheringly.

"Suppose we don't get either of them back?" returned Lowther.

At this moment there came a tap at the door.

It was after dinner on the great day, and Tom Merry was already in his footer togs for the match between Kildare's School House team and Monteith's New House team.

Lowther and Manners were not playing; but Tom Merry, Talbot, Noble, Blake, and Glyn, the last-named as goalkeeper, all had places on the School House side, while Figgins, Kerr, Wynn, and Redfern were among the New House players.

"Come in!" sang out Tom, and Frank Levison entered.

"I was to give you this," he said, holding out a parcel.

Manners gave a wild cry as he snatched at it.

"It can't be—— I say—— Oh, by jingo, it is—it is!" he roared, tearing open the covering.

"What, the photo?" howled Lowther.

"My hat!" said Tom Merry, in amazement. "Franky——"

"Can't tell you anything—not a word. Promised not to," said Frank, shaking his head.

"But——"

"It wasn't the rotter who bagged it that sent it back!" said Frank. "I s'pose I may say that much."

"How do you know?" snapped Manners.

"Because he wouldn't have done such a trick," replied the fag gravely. "I mean, the chap who sent it wouldn't have bagged it."

"But he got hold of it somehow," said Tom.

"Yes, he must have done that, but I don't know a bit how."

"It wasn't your brother, young Levison, was it?" asked Manners sharply.

He was sorry next moment that he had spoken, for Frank flushed to the roots of his hair, and there was anger and resentment in his voice as he said:

"No, it wasn't, Manners, and you've no right to think——"

"Don't be a young ass, Frank! I never thought he boned it. I was a silly chump not to make that plain, but he's so jolly cute——"

"It's all right, Manners," said Frank, smiling again. "I say, Tom Merry, Ernie's to play for the School House today. Kildare's just told him. One of the seniors can't turn out; I don't know who. But it doesn't matter much. I know Ernie will be just as good. Isn't it jolly?"

"Rather, kid!" said Tom heartily.

But his eyes were on the photo, and Frank, seeing that that was naturally what interested the Terrible Three most at the moment, retired, quite satisfied with the way in which he had carried out Kerr's commission.

"Well, this beats the band!" said Lowther. "All ready framed, too! The chap who bagged the frame was an unknown benefactor, not a sneak-thief, it seems."

"Done well, too," said Manners generously—"as well as I could have done it myself."

"What shall we do now?" asked Tom.

"Send it along to the Head at once," said Lowther.

"Or take it?" suggested Manners.

"No, just send it, with a word or two of apology for the delay. To take it ourselves will look rather as if we wanted thanking specially. We know it's going to please the old chap, but we're not out after that sort of thing," Tom said.

"Right-ho!" chortled Manners. "Tommy, I feel as if nothing could go wrong after this!"

But things are not going quite so smoothly as all that came to if Racke and Crooke had their way.

At that very moment they were talking over a scheme which Racke had suggested a day or two earlier, and had almost forgotten about until Mellish's report of the conversation in which the Terrible Three, D'Arcy, and Skimpole had shared had reminded him of it.

"Sounds all right, by gad!" said Crooke. "It's a dashed good wheeze to work it so that the blame for it falls on those rotters, too. But I ain't so sure you can talk in Gussy's silly-ass lingo, Aubrey."

"Oh, can't I? Listen to this, old top! Bai Jove, don't you think so, deah boy? Now, I considah that I can, wathah!"

It was only a moderate attempt. Racke's voice lacked completely some tone that D'Arcy's had. Perhaps it was that Gussy, even in his affectations, was a gentleman, and that Racke would never be anything of the sort.

"Middlin'," said Crooke judicially. "You wouldn't fool me, by gad! But Skimmy's an ass. It ought to be good enough for him."

"See if you can do Herries better," said Racke, rather sulkily.

Crooke tried.

"Not a bit like it—not a dashed bit! Try Digby. It doesn't matter which of those two outsiders is supposed to be with D'Arcy in the bizney."

But the Digby imitation was somewhat worse than the Herries one.

"Oh, hang it all, you must only growl! Herries does that as well as that beastly dog of his. You'll give the whole dashed show away if you say six words!"

"What about Blake?" asked Crooke.

"Can't make it Blake. He's joint stage-manager with Merry, an' he'll be in evidence from first to last—sure to be. No one's goin' to be able to prove that D'Arcy an' Herries weren't away for ten minutes or so."

"You're countin' on Skimmy laggin' behind everyone else," said Crooke.

"Don't I know the ass? He's sure to, unless Talbot or Gore takes him in charge, an' they won't think of it, most likely. He'll stay in Study No. 9 readin' Balmycrumpet until he's called out, an' then—dark passage, you an' me as Herries an' the noble booby, an' Skimmy trussed-up an' gagged before he knows whether he's on his head or his heels!"

"An' then D'Arcy will chip in an' take the part," objected Crooke. "I believe he wants it, really."

"He won't. Don't you know what a pig-headed ass he is? He's sworn he won't take it on, an' he will consider himself in honour bound to stick to what he has sworn."

And Racke grinned sneeringly. Crooke cackled. Neither Racke nor Crooke was ever likely to be restrained by any feeling of being in honour bound.

"Well, it sounds all right, an' it's worth tryin'," said Crooke. "What about the other bizney? I ain't easy in my mind about that fat rotter Baggy. If a sharp cad like Kerr or Levison got hold of him he'd be turned inside-out, and give away the whole dashed game in about two twos."

"We'd better look him up," Racke said. "You're not inclined to show up at the mouldy match, I take it—what?"

"No dashed fear! Let's find Baggy."

Baggy was easily found. He was loafing about outside the School House.

"It's all serene," he said, with a fat grin. "The thing's still there—safe as houses. That proves no one's found out anything. They'd have had it down if they'd twigged. I think you chaps must own it was a jolly smart dodge of mine—eh?"

"A dashed long way round!" growled Crooke. "Even now the thing ain't torn up."

Racke nudged Crooke. It was safer to keep on good terms with Baggy for the present.

"Jolly smart!" he said. "It will be smarter still if you can get it down when no one's lookin', an' tear it into about a hundred pieces!"

"He, he, he! That might be done now," replied Baggy. "I shouldn't think anyone would miss it. I'll have a shot. What's it worth?"

"You're a dashed shark, Baggy!" said Racke pleasantly. But he put his hand in his pocket.

"He, he, he! Shall we call it ten bob, Racke, old pal? Mind, I can't be sure of doing it. I've looked in three times since dinner, and there's always been someone about. And before dinner that fat beast Wynn was there ever so long. I say, Racke, I'll take the ten bob now, I think."

But Racke seemed to think otherwise.

CHAPTER 10.

The Working of the Wheeze.

THE match that afternoon was a capital one.

There was a big crowd to watch it, and conditions were ideal—turf just right, bright sunshine and very little wind.

Kildare's School House side included six juniors, while Monteith had only four juniors in his New House Eleven. But there were seniors in the New House ranks who were not as good value as the juniors on either side.

The game was never quite even. All through the School House did more pressing. Kildare was in the centre, with Talbot and Blake on one wing, Tom Merry and Levison on the other; and the four juniors played to the skipper as if they had always been used to doing it, while Kangaroo at centre-half was in fine fettle.

But the other side's defence was very strong. Fatty Wynn was at his best; at back Monteith and Figgins played a great game together; and Kerr at centre-half was quite a handful for Kildare.

At half-time the score was two all, Redfern having accounted for both goals for the New House, while Kildare and Talbot had scored for the School House.

With only ten minutes wanted to time no more goals had been scored. But then Tom Merry got away, threaded his way through the New House ranks, and gave Kildare a lovely pass at exactly the right moment. And a minute before time Levison middled from the touch-line right across the goal-mouth, and Tom got his head to the ball and put it just under the cross-bar clean out of Fatty's reach.

The Head and Mrs. Holmes watched the game all through, and Cousin Ethel watched it with them. As the players came off Kildare and Monteith passed close to where the girl stood, and she caught a fragment of what they were saying.

"What do you think of our new forward line, old man?" asked Kildare. "By Jove, those kids did play up! At a pinch I'd play that same line for the School, and not be afraid of being let down!"

"You wouldn't be making any mistake, either," replied the head-prefect of the New House. "All the same, I think young Redfern's pretty much as good as any one of your four. And, if you ask me who was the best man on the field this afternoon I should say——"

"Your partner," chipped in Kildare. "Yes, Figgins was great value. I didn't know he had it in him."

Those expressions of opinion lost nothing for Figgy because they reached him through Cousin Ethel. He blushed as red as a peony when she told him, and he did not know how to answer her softly-spoken "I'm so glad!"

Directly Kerr had changed he slipped across to the School House. In the hall there he found Dick Roylance, ensconced in the window-seat with a book. Roylance had not shown up at the match.

"Come to relieve guard, Kerr?" said the New Zealand junior, with a smile.

"Well, it's safe enough to go off duty now," answered Kerr. "There will be fellows in and out of here every minute between now and tea. Anything to report?"

"Nothing much. Baggy wandered in three—no, four times. He seemed very anxious that I should go and have a squint at the match. Never knew before he was so unselfish. He had a look at that thing"—Roylance nodded towards the greeting-card—"every time; but he didn't touch it. I say, Kerr, I

don't quite make out why it matters so much about it now that the Head's got the photo safely, as I suppose he has. Anyway, that's only a fake, and it wouldn't be of much consequence if it were done in, would it?"

"Only that it's a trap to catch the villains—see? I thought Baggy might try for it. But it isn't Baggy I want to catch so much; it's those other rotters. He'll leave it alone now, I fancy. But between this and to-morrow morning someone else will have a go at it."

"Now I see."

"Jolly good of you to take on this job for me, Roylance! I know you wanted to see the game."

"I'm glad to do anything for you, Kerr, and I'd miss more than watching a match for those fellows," replied Roylance quietly.

He did not say "especially for Manners," but Kerr knew he meant that.

Tom Merry and his chums were too busy with the many things to be done in order that the revue should go with a swing to be able to give much time to thinking about the mystery of the reappearance of the photo, framed all ready for presentation. But when the New House fellows came across to tea, in response to the Head's invitation, Manners ran against Kerr.

"Done anything about the missing present yet, Kerr?" he asked, with twinkling eyes. "Because, if you haven't, you——"

"Didn't you get it?" said Kerr quietly. "I thought I could depend on young Levison."

"Wha-a-at? Do you mean to say——"

"Best not say too much," Kerr warned him. "There may be someone listening."

"What's it matter now?"

"Don't you want to find out who took it?"

"Of course we do; but surely you've——"

"I know. But at present I've no proof. But I'm going to get that."

"How? This is all jolly mysterious, Kerr! And the frame——"

"Nothing mysterious about the frame, old son! I bagged that—borrowed it, you might say. Ta-ta! I'm going to sit over there with Fatty. I see Figgy's managed a place next to Cousin Ethel. For a bashful chap old Figgy ain't half bad, is he?"

War-time difficulties had not prevented the Head and Mrs. Holmes from giving their crowd of guests a good and bountiful tea. Some things were not so abundant as they would have been in other days, but others made up for them.

Everybody was satisfied except Baggy—who never was satisfied—and a few of the black sheep, who grumbled out of sheer awkwardness.

Racke and Crooke were among the grumblers, of course. They had given the Head a silver tray, and if the Head had given them a banquet they would still have considered him in their debt. But that was not the way others fellows looked at it.

Baggy's failure to secure the photo had not greatly troubled the two plotters. They had got an immense amount of malicious pleasure out of the trouble of the Terrible Three that morning; and they fancied that the photo still awaited their destruction of it.

Everything was ready for their wheeze against Skimmy. Not very much preparation was needed, indeed. The chief desideratum was that the intended victim of their plot should do as they counted on his doing—stay alone in No. 9 after the rest of the Shell fellows had cleared out.

And in that they had not miscalculated. Lurking about the passage, they had doubts for a time. Gore did not seem inclined to follow the rest to the concert-room. But Talbot came and fetched him, and they heard Talbot tell Skimmy that he would be wanted very soon, and Skimmy say that he would come in a few minutes.

A hush fell upon that part of the House after that. The revue was starting, Racke and Crooke caught now and then the strains of the piano, played by Dick Brooke, the day-boy. A snatch of song reached their ears from time to time, too.

"Hope no one will miss us, by gad!" whispered Crooke, in the darkness of the Shell passage.

"Not likely, in a crowd like that, an' with everyone who matters at the back of the stage," replied Racke.

"Here he comes!" hissed Crooke.

The light in No. 9 was put out, and Skimmy opened the door. They could see him, for one light had been left far down the passage, near the corner of the Fourth Form passage. But he, fresh from the better light in the study, saw nothing.

He stood blinking for a moment. Then they were upon him.

"Got the wascal, bai Jove, Hewwies!" chuckled Racke.

Crooke growled something indistinguishable.

Skimmy was pinned to the floor beneath them.

He opened his mouth to shout, but a gag was thrust into it at once.

Then his arms and legs were tied.

The two knelt beside him. They had not finished yet.

Skimmy had no doubt that his assailants were D'Arcy and Herries, and he was in a frantic rage. All his Pacifist principles were totally forgotten. If he could have gone for the supposed D'Arcy then he would have gone for him like a wild cat.

There was no doubt in his mind at all as to the cause of this outrage upon him.

D'Arcy was jealous! That was it. At the last moment D'Arcy had made up his mind that the credit of making the hit of the evening in the part of the Crown Prince should be his, not Skimpole's!

But Skimmy ought really to have suspected that Arthur Augustus was not one of his assailants when Racke and Crooke went on with their fell work.

To have a fellow who had done him no harm bound and gagged, and, so having him, to plaster his face with a nauseous mixture of soot and treacle was not the least in the world like Gussy. He might have shared in the wreaking of such a revenge upon a common enemy of the clan; but he would never have done such a thing of personal spite.

"How d'ye like that, deah boy?" gibed Racke, and still Skimmy took the voice to be the voice of Gussy, and the helper of that voice's owner to be George Herries.

Skimmy naturally did not like it at all. He was suffering both in body and mind.

But he could not say so.

"Bwing him along to our studay, Hewwies, old chap," said Racke.

They lifted Skimmy between them. Crooke was thoughtlessly turning into No. 7 as they reached it. But Racke gave a tug that was very painful to the much-enduring Skimmy, and hissed:

"You silly ass!"

That did not sound like Gussy, and the movement it stopped might have told Skimpole something had he been sufficiently calm and collected to notice it. But by this time Skimmy was boiling, seething, and raving inwardly. Never in his life before had he been in such a passion, not even on the memorable occasion when Racke and Crooke, having presumed too far upon his supposed Pacifist principles, had been obliged to flee before him in positive terror of their lives.

He was dumped down on the floor of Study No. 6 in the Fourth passage, and Racke and Crooke hurried off, chortling at their success.

They made their way to the concert-room, in the hope that they might be in time to see the success of the evening spoiled by the absence of Skimmy and the fondly anticipated obduracy of Arthur Augustus.

And Crooke, who had taken the upper and nobler end of Skimmy in the lifting, never noticed that his hands were marked by the soot. He had been very careful to leave to Racke the application of it; but he had not escaped its marks when he had seized Skimmy's head.

They passed through the hall on their way to the concert-room. Only one dim light burned there, and the place seemed deserted.

"Collar that thing!" said Racke. "We shall never get a better chance than this, by gad!"

Crooke snatched down the greeting-card, and, without a glance at the back, slit it across savagely. He slit it again, and yet again, until it was torn into a score or more pieces.

"Hang it all, though, what am I goin' to do with it?" he asked, standing there with the fragments in his hands.

"Oh, chuck the bits down in the quad," replied Racke. "Even if they don't blow away no one can prove anythin' from them. That dashed thing's settled an' done with now!"

"Well, if the Head's ever to have the photo, Manners will have to do another first, anyway!" agreed Crooke, with a grating laugh.

They passed out.

Then from behind the heavy curtain that screened the big window stepped Gore.

"Not quite over and done with, I guess!" said Gore grimly. "Oh, you beauties! My hat! I'm glad I didn't say 'No' to Kerr!"

It had not been exactly easy to find anyone for that watch in the hall, nearly everyone having parts in the revue. But there were others in the secret now; and Talbot had suggested Gore for this task.

Gore had not been keen. He might have said "No" to Kerr alone, indeed; but he could not say it to Kerr backed by Talbot and the Terrible Three. And now, as he cautiously followed the two from the hall, and groped in the gloomy quad for the torn fragments of the greeting-card, he was quite exultant.

CHAPTER 11.
Fairly Caught!

THE revue was going with a swing. Lowther had made it as topical as possible. There were songs about food-rations and air-raids and flag-days; there were all sorts of sly hits at D.O.R.A. and politicians and Controllers and profiteers; and, mixed up with it all, was plenty of St. Jim's fun.

Greatly daring, Lowther appeared upon the stage as the Head himself, while Tom Merry represented Mr. Railton, and Blake and Kerr Messrs. Linton and Lathom. But the scene was a very brief one, and care was taken that nothing should be said or done in it that could possibly bring the masters into contempt. That was why Messrs. Ratcliff and Selby had been left out; as Lowther said, no

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fellow could be expected to play either of those gentlemen respectfully.

But, although brief, the scene was funny, if only for Lowther's close imitations of the Head's little mannerisms and Kerr's lifelike rendering of Mr. Lathom—a part in which Kerr had had previous practice. And no one laughed more heartily than the Head, who was in the gayest holiday humour, though Mrs. Holmes and Cousin Ethel, sitting by her side, were quite as much amused as he.

The sketch contributed to the revue by Harry Wharton of Greyfriars was approaching; and to nearly everyone except Lowther this was quite the gem of the whole thing.

There was anxiety behind the scenes. Jimmy had not yet put in an appearance, and Skimmy had the principal part in the sketch.

"I told him he must come along soon," said Talbot, with knitted brow.

"Better have dragged him here," returned Blake. "Skimmy ain't to be depended upon. Go and fetch him, will you, Dig? You aren't wanted in front for some time yet."

Digby cut off. Within five minutes he was back.

"The old ass ain't in his study!" he announced breathlessly. "And I can't find him anywhere!"

"Oh, my hat! What are we to do, Tommy? He ought to be making-up for the part now. Dig, I say——"

But Dig had rushed off again, to make another search for the missing star.

"There's only one thing to be done," said Tom. "Gussy must take——"

"Bai Jove, Tom Mewwy, I will do nothin' of the sort! I have said a gweat many times, an' I wepeat now, that nothin' shall induce me——"

"Would you wreck the whole bizney rather than——"

"Yaas, bai Jove! I—weally, I believe this is a plot? You fellows know what a howwible duffah old Skimmay is, an' you are purposely keepin' him out the way to make me——"

"Honour bright, Gussy, there's nothing of the kind on foot!" said Tom earnestly. "We'd rather you took it; you can do it better. But——"

"I cannot take it, Tom Mewwy! I have sworn that I will not, an'——"

"But what is a swear—a little swear—in such an emergency?" said Lowther pleadingly. "Gussy, beloved of my youth, prop of my old age, must I go on my knees to you that you may be persuaded to act your rightful part in a scene that is none of mine? Then so be it! I will put aside all thought of self, and kneel! Gussy, my noble Gussy, magnanimous Gussy, play the Crown Prince in Wharton's sketch, save all our lives, and be happy ever after!"

And Lowther dropped to his knees, and raised his clasped hands dramatically.

"Oh, you howwid ass, Lowthah!" gasped Gussy.

"Get up, you chump, or I'll kick you up!" snapped Manners. "This is no time for your fooling! Gussy, you've got to—you've simply got to!"

"Of course he has—and he's going to!" put in Blake.

"Rather!" said Herries. "Come along, Gustavus! I'll help you to dress!"

Arthur Augustus was weakening. But he was not yet ready to give way.

"I—I can't, you know, deah boys!" he protested feebly. "I should have to bweak my vow——"

"What's your blessed vow to the hole we're in?" growled Blake. "Think about the crowd in front—the Head and Mrs. Holmes, ladies she's asked to the show, Railton, Lathom, Glyn's people——"

"And Cousin Ethel!" put in Talbot.

Gussy groaned in travail of spirit. Blake had moved him; perhaps Talbot's reminder had been still more effective.

"Get into the clobber," said Levison. "That won't tie you to anything except playing the part if Skimmy doesn't turn up in time. If he does you can shin out of it, and we'll chuck him into it."

"I—I'll do that, deah boys," said Gussy, gulping down something in his throat. It still seemed to him that his honour was concerned in the point of sticking it out. But he could not resist longer; and Levison's suggestion seemed to offer a loophole.

"I suppose you're aware, Levison, old bean, that there isn't time, anyway—that it's just about as much as my noble kinsman will be able to do to scramble into his Hun raiment before his call comes?" drawled Cardew, as Blake and Herries dragged their chum into the dressing-room.

"I'm aware of it—that's just why!" said Levison drily.

Cardew was right. Gussy's preparations had to be hurried, and were hardly finished when he was rushed on to the stage, dressed in a military uniform of the gaudiest type, at the head of a dozen fellows made up as Hun soldiery.

The scene was supposed to represent the quad of St. Jim's by moonlight, with the tuckshop showing up prominently.

The Crown Prince looked around him. Then he said:

"Is this a tuckshop that I see before me? Hermann, my housebreaking outfit! Hans, give me a back! Donner and blitzen! Who could resist this?"

Next moment the Crown Prince, mounted on the back of Hans, who was Dick Redfern, was making a hole in the roof of the tuckshop. Then the curtain fell, amid vociferous applause.

But it rose again very quickly. Now the scene was the interior of the tuckshop, and the Crown Prince was going it strongly, what time his followers stood around with mouths obviously watering.

That scene was never played as Wharton had written it, however.

From behind the scenes came a roar of rage. Someone shouted:

"Stop him!"

Stamping of feet sounded, and a weird figure with spectacles and a blackened face rushed on, clutched the Crown Prince round the neck, and bore him with a thump to the boards!

It was Skimmy, seeking vengeance for his wrongs.

"Yawoooogh! Yow! You sillay duffah!"

"Down with the curtain!" came a voice that sounded like Tom Merry's.

The curtain was rung down instantly.

The audience clapped and yelled and roared. Hardly anyone in front guessed that Skimmy's appearance was no proper part of the sketch. It was absurd, of course; but then, the whole thing was absurd, and the sooty-faced Skimmy seemed only part of the general absurdity.

Up went the curtain again on the same scene—minus Skimmy! Behind the stage three or four fellows were sitting on Skimmy. It was the only thing to do.

Digby had found him, hearing a muffled groan from his own study. Dig had released him, and Skimmy, without a word of explanation or of thanks, had bolted for the concert-room. Chasing him, Dig had come a cropper, and had thus failed to stop him; and Skimmy, seeming to know by instinct that his great part was even then being played by another, had rushed on to the stage to attack Arthur Augustus.

"It's all right, Skimmy!" said Lowther. "You were generally supposed to be the deuce himself, come to fetch the Crown Prince. But it was plainly before your time. If you're very good we'll let you go on again in the last scene of the sketch, and fix up some fire and brimstone effects to make a really good job of it!"

"I refuse to entertain any such project!" gasped Skimmy. "I have been treated in the most unfair and treacherous manner! D'Arcy and Herries seized me in the darkness——"

"Wha-a-at?" roared Herries, who had come off the stage just in time to hear this. "You silly fatheaded chump. I've never seen you since tea—neither Gussy nor I have been away from here! Oh, you burbling ass!"

"There's a mistake somewhere," said Tom Merry, dressed as an inspector of police, and waiting his cue. "Gussy and Herries wouldn't do a thing like that. And they couldn't have done it, as Herries says, for——"

Tom had to bolt. His cue had arrived. But at this moment George Gore appeared.

"You can let the old ass get up, you chaps!" he said. "I know who did it!"

"D'Arcy and Herries did it!" persisted Skimmy angrily. "I distinctly heard D'Arcy's voice. It is quite impossible that I should have been mistaken about that! And he addressed the other miscreant as Herries!"

"Then it wasn't Gussy. He says 'Howwies,'" remarked Digby, rubbing his right knee. "I say, Skimmy, you did get a move on you! I never dreamed you could run like that!"

"Herries was Crooke, and D'Arcy was Racke," said Gore positively. "I'm as sure of that as if I'd seen them at it. I did see them as they came away; and I know this—Crooke's got marks of soot on his hands at this moment! And I've asked two chaps to keep an eye on the rotters so that they sha'n't slink off till we're ready to deal with them—for another dirty trick besides this!"

"You are quite sure, Gore?" asked Skimpole doubtfully.

"Quite, ass!"

"Then I apologise, Herries! Really, I do not know what I can say to D'Arcy, though. And I fear that, instead of making the pronounced success I had intended of this dramatic trifle, I have irretrievably ruined it. Dear me!"

"That's all right!" said Talbot consolingly. "You could hardly have made a bigger hit as the Crown Prince than you made appearing as you did. Nobody in front knows that it wasn't all in the book."

"Dear me! That is exceedingly fortunate! But I greatly fear that the success of the piece will be lessened by D'Arcy's inferiority to myself in the chief role. That, however, cannot be helped now."

Most of those who heard thought that it was well it could not, for undoubtedly Arthur Augustus as the Crown Prince was the hit of the evening. He had been a little fluttered in the interrupted scene, but this was taken to be part of his "business," so that it did no harm.

Not until the revue was over and the Head had made a short speech, praising the acting and asking that everyone should now adjourn to Big Hall, where refreshments would be found for all, did Racke and Crooke realise that they were under observation.

There was something more in Big Hall besides refreshments liquid and solid.

One one of the long dining-tables were set out all the presents the Head had received. And prominent among them was the gift of the Terrible Three—Manners' fine enlargement of the photo of the school in its handsome oak frame.

The two black sheep had found themselves surrounded by the enemy. Crooke had no chance to go and wash his incriminating hands.

They were fairly forced into Big Hall.

They were shepherded up to the table that bore the presents.

And there they saw the photo—the photo that Crooke believed he had ripped into fragments!

But those fragments were only what was left of the card with which Kerr had replaced Skimmy's greeting; and they were now—most of them, anyway—reposing in one of Gore's pockets. Moreover, upon them were marks of sooty fingers—Crooke's fingers!

Standing behind Crooke, Gore caught him by the arms just above the elbows, and held him thus in the crowd, while twenty or thirty fellows moved past and saw his blackened hands. Most of them did not half understand yet; but they knew that they would be told the whole story later.

Crooke had to submit without a struggle, and Racke was forced to stand by him and share his ignominy.

There were masters and ladies in the room, and a row was out of the question.

Figgins had learned from Cousin Ethel of the intended show of presents, and had passed on the news to Kerr. Gore had talked to Kerr also, and they had fixed up between them this humiliation of the black sheep.

Worse was in store for Racke and Crooke, and for Trimble also. Nothing they could do short of bolting would avert a dormitory trial that night, and a ragging by the two Forms to follow the trial. The case against them was clear and conclusive as to both offences, thanks mainly to Kerr.

And they dared not bolt. They would have to go through it.

And they duly went through it—with the pleasant anticipation of more to come in a different way, when once Cousin Ethel had gone, and her loyal chums were no longer obliged to keep the peace for her sake.

All their schemes against her and them—all their miserable plots to spoil the birthday celebrations in honour of the Head had come to naught; and their minds were as uncomfortable as their bruised and aching bodies as they turned and tossed in bed that night, wooing sleep in vain!

THE END.

(Don't miss next Wednesday's Great Story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's—"CALLED TO ORDER!" by Martin Clifford.)

The Editor's Chat.

For Next Wednesday:

"CALLED TO ORDER!"

By Martin Clifford.

It is Ralph Reckness Cardew who is called to order in this story.

Cardew is rather a queer fellow, you know. He does not do things quite as other people do them, and he does not think quite as most people think. I do not say that he cannot tell right from wrong as well as another fellow; but there is something in him which gives him at times a strong bias towards the wrong. He gets bored, and wants a change; and he is a spoiled child at best, so that the change is usually for the worse.

In this story he is shown going very far wrong; and the loyalty of Clive and Levison is put to a severe test. But it stands the strain; and in the long run the drastic action Clive takes proves sufficient to bring Cardew to his senses, though there is trouble first.

TO HELP OTHER READERS.

A notice which appeared a few weeks ago, with the name of A. John Cura, seems to have been misunderstood by some readers, who have written to our friend Cura under the belief that he has numbers of the two papers for sale.

The mistake ought not to have arisen, for he certainly did not say that he wanted to sell back numbers. He has tumbled to what some of you have not—that you have a better chance of getting your notices inserted if you give the number of the story you want instead of the name; and he is willing to tell you what is the number of any particular story. If you write to ask him questions of this sort you should enclose a stamped and addressed envelope, of course; you cannot expect him to pay on the reply. A postcard would be best. The offer is a kindly one; but those who preserved the lists given in the two papers a short time ago will not need to take advantage of it, as they can find out the numbers for themselves.

The address is A. John Cura, 124, Leathwaite Road, Battersea Rise, S.W. 11; and I hope you will all understand now just what it is Cura offers, and not go bothering him for back numbers which he does not offer.

YOUR EDITOR.

SKIMPOLE'S GOOD TURN.

By JACK BLAKE.

"My dear Lowther!"

Herbert Skimpole of the Shell poked a bony forefinger in Lowther's ribs.

"Dry up, Skimmy!"

"In these trying times of stress, my dear Lowther, it behoves us one and all to assist——"

Skimmy rambled on till Lowther barked at him again:

"Shut up, idiot!"

"My dear Lowther, as I remarked when you so rudely interrupted me, it behoves us to help one another——"

"Oh, don't start that rot!" implored Manners.

"Yaas, wathah—I mean, no, wathah—that is to say——"

"And don't you start, either!" said Lowther. "One idiot at a time is quite enough."

"Vewy well, deah boy, I wesign in youah favour. You can cawwy on!"

"One for you, Monty!" chuckled Tom Merry.

"Oh, rats!"

"I wegard that as——"

"As I was remarking when you so rudely interrupted me, D'Arcy, with your frivolous and unnecessary remarks, I think that in these times of turmoil, stress, and anxiety it behoves us one and all to be mutually helpful——"

"You've said all that once," objected Manners. "Think of another."

"To be mutually helpful," resumed Skimmy, blinking reproachfully at Manners through his large glasses, "whensoever and wheresoever we can. Under Socialism——"

"Oh, chuck it!"

"Look here, Skimmy," broke in Lowther, "are you really willing to help whomsoever, wheresoever, and whichsoever——"

"Really, Lowther, I cannot comprehend why you should doubt the sincerity of my——"

"Because," resumed Lowther, "if you really are sincere, there's old Grundy struggling with his overcoat. Go and help him put it on. That will be a good turn done."

"I shall naturally be very pleased to help Grundy put his coat on. That is very easy."

"Go it, then!"

Skimpole marched over to Grundy, who was struggling with a heavy overcoat.

"Allow me to assist you, my dear Grundy!"

"Grunt!"

Despite this unfavourable reception, Skimpole started in to help. It was a heavy coat, and Skimmy is much smaller than Grundy; but these two facts hardly seemed to account fully for the difficulty he had in getting the coat on Grundy.

"There!" he gasped, as at last he achieved his aim.

Grundy spluttered angrily.

"My dear Grundy, I hope I have not offended you by my aid? I assure you that it was intended in all kindness."

"You—oh, you——" spluttered Grundy.

"If you like, I will button it up for you, my dear Grundy."

"You utter maniac! I was taking the coat off!"

"Oh!" gasped Skimpole blankly.

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Lowther.

Then Grundy went for him, and he suddenly stopped cackling.

"Funny, ain't it, Lowther?" panted Grundy between blows. "That's funny, too, ain't it? And that! And that!"

He had fairly bowled Lowther off his feet in the rush. We had to butt in. Lowther is a funny chap. He reckons he can see the point of a joke better than any of us. But he didn't seem to see any point at all in this when we lifted Grundy gently—well, fairly gently—off him.

"My hat!" he gasped. "Let me get at the idiot!"

"Come on!" roared Grundy.

But we got between them.

Grundy tugged off his coat. It was lucky it was a good, stout coat, for he would have ripped up some of the war-time stuff, handling it that way.

"Let Skimmy try to do me another good turn, that's all!" said Grundy truculently. "Let him just try! And as for you, Lowther—oh, I dare say you think you're funny, but my opinion is that you're the biggest howling ass in Europe! That's all!"

And Grundy strode out, leaving Skimmy gasping and Lowther seething with rage.

The Lowther Limericks.

FIGGINS & CO.

There's Figgy, I must call him Figgy,
For rhymes [illegible] vous triggez;
He's a chap without fear;
Yet somehow when near—
Never mind whom!—his heart-beats are jiggy!

A canny Scots youth is our Kerr,
Of that trio the brainiest far;
The New House he pleases
By well-thought-out wheezes;
And at acting he's really a star.

The fattest of all fatties is Wynn,
He fills like a sausage his skin.
Still, a ripping good goalie,
And so well does he bowl, he
Gives batsmen small reason to grin.

THE TERRIBLE THREE.

[Naturally, I could not do these myself—it would not have been quite modest, and if I am not modest, what am I? So I let Kerr have a shot. After the really nice things I had said about Kerr, I thought it should be all right; and T. M. was so sanguine that he guaranteed insertion. Well, here's the result! Manners is let off lightly; but the things said about Tommy's face and my verses—well, well, well! Not that it matters so much about Tommy's face; but—well, well, well! By the way, I suppose you chaps know that we ought to call Kerr "Carr"? Why? Because it's the right way, chumps! It's the way it ought to be pronounced. But there are lots of other things I should like to call him!—M. L.]

There's the camera fiend, Harry Manners,
On films and the like go his tanners.
He's topping at chess;
And I freely confess
He makes me and the rest "also-ranners."

There's the junior skipper, Tom Merry,
At games he is excellent, very.
But the thing that's in place
Of what should be his face
He ought to be ordered to bury!

Then there's Lowther, who writes piffling verse;
So bad that it couldn't be worse.
To win fame on the stage
He has likewise a rage.
But neither will e'er fill his purse!

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