

FOUR FINE STORIES IN YOUR FAVOURITE THIS WEEK!

EVERY WEDNESDAY.

The GEM 2^D

LIBRARY
OF
SCHOOL AND SPORTING STORIES

No. 810.
Vol. XXIV.
Aug. 18th, 1923.



A GALLANT RESCUE!

[A Thrilling and Dramatic Incident showing the part played by Tom Merry & Co., of St. Jim's, in the Great Fire at Stubbs' Circus. Read "FROM SCHOOL TO CIRCUS!" the Magnificent School Story contained in this issue.]



Address all letters: The Editor, The "Gem" Library, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Write me, you can be sure of an answer in return.

OUR COMPANION PAPERS.

"THE BOYS' FRIEND" Every
Monday
"THE MAGNET" Every Monday
"THE POPULAR" Every Tuesday
"CHUCKLES" Every Thursday
"THE HOLIDAY ANNUAL"
Published Yearly

My dear Chums,—First and foremost this week I must draw your attention to the new volume of the "Holiday Annual." It is a real stunner, crammed full of topping attractions. It contains coloured pictures, a host of fascinating puzzles, and plenty concerning hobbies, while, of course, its stories of St. Jim's and the other schools dealt with in the GEM and the other Companion Papers are all of the best.

MARTIN CLIFFORD HIMSELF!

You must make a special point of reading the wonderful story about Martin Clifford, the world-famous author of the St. Jim's stories in the GEM. Some time since I gave Mr. Martin Clifford's portrait in the GEM among all the other notabilities of the old paper. The great writer appears in the splendid tale in the "Holiday Annual" just as he was presented in our Portrait Gallery—smart, well-set-up, a perfect encyclopedia of knowledge, and a delightful companion. You will be charmed with the figure he cuts in the "Annual" yarn. He is just the sort of fellow you would picture him to be, ready for all kinds of sport, as cheery as a cricket, and, what is more, a real man. Make sure of the new issue of the "Holiday Annual." It is far and away the brightest and sprightliest yet, which is saying a lot, but not too much, when one thinks of the record programme of contents in the unique volume.

"Middlesex" Cricket Competition Result.

In this competition one competitor sent in a correct solution of the picture. The First Prize of £5 has therefore been awarded to:

Wm. MAY,
Vaughall,
Llanelli,
S. Wales.

The Second Prize of £2 10s. has been divided between the two following competitors, whose solutions contained one error each:

Leslie Wallis, 14, Egerton Road, Bishopston, Bristol; F. C. Love, 20, Enmore Green, Shaftesbury, Dorset.

The ten prizes of 5s. each have been divided among the following nineteen competitors, whose solutions contained two errors each:

E. G. Boughton, 3, Surrey Road, Peckham Rye, S.E. 15; S. Ogden, 41, Nugget Street, Aldham; E. Nelson, 29, Ley Street, Ilford,

"TRUE CHUMS!"

By Martin Clifford.

Next week's story of St. Jim's is right on the wicket, and will cause tremendous pleasure to all GEM readers, since it brings Ralph Reckness Cardew well into the limelight. Of late I have had heaps of requests for a Cardew yarn. Next Wednesday you will find a splendid tale of that first-rate fellow when you open your copy of the GEM. There is no need for me to set down an outline of the yarn. It is full of excitement, and it shows us once again the strange goings on of Racke and Crooke. Racke gets the idea into what he is pleased to call his mind that he is a sportsman, and he and his close companion arrange for a little sporting excursion in forbidden territory. Perhaps the oddest part of the whole business is to be found in the fact that Cardew decides to accompany the two black sheep. Cardew fancies the experience might break into the monotony of life. He is at a loose end, so he throws in his lot with Racke and Crooke. You will be interested in the extreme in all that follows. There is a strong element of drama here. What might have been a more or less uneventful poaching expedition, comes very near to tragedy. Racke has no spirit for peril. He never had; but as the clouds gather, and danger has to be faced, it is more than worth while to see how Cardew plays up to the necessities of the hour. He is cool enough all through, and his many admirers will like him better than ever.

"THE MAD RAJAH!"

This sensational, complete story of adventure in the tropics will rivet everybody's attention. It tells of the amazing eccentricity of a ruling prince whose word is law in his own country, and there is tremendous grip in the frightful situation in which a dashing young Britisher finds himself. It is all as unexpected as

Essex: James Edwards, 64, Tutnalls, Lydney, Glos; Thomas Williams, 43, Glanmor Road, Llanelli, S. Wales; Norman Delamare, 59, Heidelberg Road, Southsea; F. G. Bissenden, 36, Nightingale Road, Dover; Dorothy Ogden, 41, Nugget Street, Oldham; Alex Shaw, 61, Pontypridd Road, Porth, Glam; F. W. Ballard, 71, Graces Road, Camberwell, S.E. 5; Willie Entwistle, 7, Lord Street, Radcliffe; R. W. Kernick, 62, Ivor Road, Sparkhill, Birmingham; N. Willis, Whelford, Leckhampton, Cheltenham Spa; Miss L. Marshall, Tanyard, Cranbrook; A. Thomas, c/o 2, Douglas Street, Birkenhead; John Macdonald, 118, New City Road, Glasgow; Miss V. E. Love, 20, Enmore Green, Shaftesbury, Dorset; S. A. Love, 20, Enmore Green, Shaftesbury, Dorset; Miss C. E. Love, 20, Enmore Green, Shaftesbury, Dorset.

SOLUTION.

Middlesex play fewer matches than most counties. Their list does not contain some of the weaker sides. P. F. Warner, well known all over the globe as Plum, resigned the captaincy in 1920, and F. T. Mann is leader at the present time. Middlesex secured the County Championship in 1920 and 1921, but were unsuccessful in their endeavours to retain it last year.

it is brilliant. The young Englishman who figures in this wonderful yarn was keen on tiger-shooting, but enthusiast as he might be, the very peculiar circumstances in which he finds himself called upon to carry out his ambition to bag "stripes," might well make him feel there can be too much of a good thing. The tale thrills by its intense actuality, and the deadly peril of the rajah's prisoner is just something to make you gasp. Look out for this story, and its surprising and immensely welcome wind-up.

"MIKE MAKES A MOTOR-CAR!"

Here you will get a laugh in every line. It is a real winner for next Wednesday, and I promise you a genuine treat. Mike, the chief actor in this scene, is a fellow full of enterprise. Moreover, he has command of an interesting scrap heap. Why say more? If the old iron is there, then surely one has all that goes to make a smart motor-car. The only other thing that is needed is a brain. Mike possesses the cerebral accessory, minus which it is unthinkable that any car could ever take the road. The story is full of amazing happenings. Astonishing developments are recorded in the most faithful style, and the result is, beyond a doubt, the most humorous yarn ever written. You will grow quite fond of good old Mike before you have done with him. The fellow is so patient with the odd and obstinate parts of his pet car. When things go awry he is amazed, for he felt sure all would be well. But, of course, accidents are bound to happen to the best car when bits detach themselves from the main body, and you want a net behind to catch the flying nuts. It is to be hoped we shall hear more of Mike in the days to come.

A WIRELESS SUPPLEMENT!

Nobody has ever said the "St. Jim's News" was not up-to-date. The only fault that is found with the merry little supplement is that there is not enough of it. Next week's issue deals in striking fashion with the mighty subject of wireless. Tom Merry's capable staff has tackled the radio business in right-down sparkling fashion, and the contents can be warmly recommended to those who as yet have not grappled with the intricacies of the business.

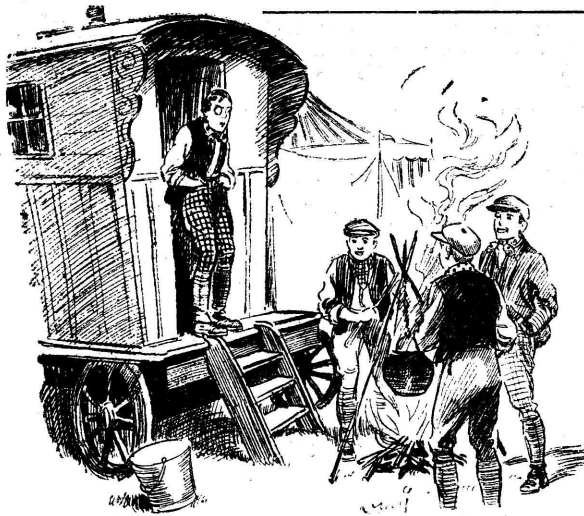
THE TUCK HAMPER!

This outstanding feature of the GEM programme steadily advances in popularity. I am always glad to receive entries. Send in the brightest storyettes you have ever heard, and use postcards. There is plenty of room on a postcard. This reminds me that one of my correspondents has sent me a very cheery acknowledgment of a Tuck Hamper. It is a splendid little tribute from Edward Pearson, 5, Avon House, Offord Road, Barnsbury, and is as follows: "Dear Sir, —Thanks very much for your lovely Tuck Hamper received from Messrs. Selfridge & Co., for which I thank you very much. It came as a great surprise to me, as I had given up all hopes of my effort being successful." I am much obliged to this GEM reader for his note.

COMING SHORTLY!

I have a grand new serial in preparation. This story will eclipse all fore-runners, but I shall have further to say on this subject later.

Your Editor.



FROM SCHOOL TO CIRCUS!

A Dramatic Story of the World-Famous Chums of St. Jim's, telling of the thrilling experiences which befall Tom Merry & Co., who are forced to leave the old school through the false accusations of that rascally Sixth-Former, Knox.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.

Gussy Finds Trouble!

NOT a bad show," remarked Harry Manners. "Not bad at all," agreed Tom Merry. "That 'Dick Turpin's ride to York' stunt was tophole, and the 'Pierce Forest Bred Lions' were really fierce—not like the miserable, mangy brutes you usually see in a circus."

"Tony Tuck, the clown, wasn't bad, either," said Monty Lowther thoughtfully. "His jokes were a bit stale, though; some of 'em fairly overgrown with grey whiskers."

"Yes, I noticed that," grinned Manners, with a sly wink at Tom Merry. "Must have been reading the comic column in the 'Weekly.'"

Monty Lowther, who was responsible for the comic column in "Tom Merry's Weekly," gave a wrathful snort; he usually did get wrathful when anyone questioned the age of his jokes.

"You silly, bubbling chump, Manners!" he said indignantly. "You know jolly well my jokes are all new. I think every one out myself, you rotter!"

"That's why nobody troubles to read 'em, then."

"You silly cuckoo—"

"Oh, don't start squabbling here!" laughed Tom Merry. "Let's get out of this crush first, anyway."

Lowther grunted, but he followed his chums as they joined the throng streaming through the exits, eager—now the show was over—to get out of the big circus tent, where the air was heavy with the mingled odour of tightly-packed humanity, sawdust, wild animals, and trampled grass.

It took no little time to get outside, for, besides most of the inhabitants of Rylcombe village, practically the whole of the Lower School of St. Jim's, and a goodly number of seniors, too, had turned up to see the afternoon performance of Stubbs' World-Renowned Anglo-American Circus and Continental Menagerie, which had arrived the previous evening, and turned Farmer Bland's big meadow into a scene of animated activity.

But they found themselves out in the open air at last, and were soon mingling with the noisy throng scattered round the various side-shows.

"Hallo!" said Manners suddenly. "There's Blake and his lot trying their luck with the merry old coconuts. Let's join 'em."

Lowther's injured look faded, and he grinned on seeing the chums of the Fourth round the coconut-shy.

Blake, Herries, and Digby were busy enough, making a combined attack on the coconuts; but Arthur Augustus, D'Arcy, resplendent in shining topper, spotless Etons, and glimmering monocle, was merely looking on, with a look of easy tolerance and lofty dignity on his aristocratic features.

"Dear old Gussy!" grinned Lowther. "He's afraid of rumping his clobber, and outraging his infra dig. He needs waking up. Watch me wake him up."

And Monty Lowther made for the group with a wild rush. He arrived on the spot with the speed of an express train, and there arose a series of yells as Blake & Co. scattered to right and left, while Arthur Augustus reeled over a sack of coconuts and sat down in the mud.

"Bai Jove! What—"

"You silly ass—"

"Run for it!" yelled Lowther. "There's a lion!"

"What?"

"A lion!" yelled Lowther excitedly. "Run for it, Gussy!"

"Oh, bai Jove!"

Gussy leaped to his feet in great alarm.

"A lion! Oh deah! How tewwible! Wun, deah boys! Wun like anythin'!"

And Arthur Augustus set the example by bolting headlong, with his precious topper gripped in one hand, and his eyeglass streaming behind him at the end of its cord.

He had gone quite fifty yards before he became aware that his chums were not following his example, nor were there any signs of the mad stampede he had expected to see.

He stopped and looked round. His chums were still standing by the coconut-shy. Tom Merry & Co. were yelling with laughter; even Blake, Herries, and Digby were laughing now.

"Oh deah!"

Arthur Augustus retraced his steps, his noble features going pinker with every step he took.

"You—you uttah wottah, Lowthah!" he shouted. "You were pullin' my leg!"

"Go hon!" grinned Lowther.

"There isn't a lion at all," said Arthur Augustus indignantly.

"Of course there is," said Lowther blandly. "You saw four in the big tent there yourself, Gussy—safe in their little cages."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the juniors.

Arthur Augustus went crimson with wrath. He screwed his eyeglass into his eye, and regarded Lowther through it for a brief moment in frigid silence. Then he turned up his cuffs and made a determined rush at the humorous Lowther.

Lowther dodged, and Arthur Augustus tripped over one of the guy-ropes of the big circus tent, and went headlong. His monocle went one way, and his silk hat another.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors roared as the luckless Swell of the Fourth staggered to his feet, gasping, his hitherto spotless clobber covered in mud.

"You—feahful wottah!" gasped D'Arcy. "You have uttally ruined my clobber. Oh deah!"

"Do it again, Gussy," suggested Lowther. "Blessed if you don't lick Tony Tuck into a cocked hat with your antics. Why—"

Lowther got no farther, for at that moment Arthur Augustus made a rush at him, his fists waving like windmills. Lowther turned and ran, leading the incensed Gussy round the back of the big tent, and the others followed, laughing.

Lowther purposely led him over the tent ropes, leaping them as he ran. Gussy followed his example, and once again he came a fearful cropper. But this time it was not a guy-rope which caused his downfall.

As he leaped over one of the taut ropes, a man—a rough, swarthy individual—crawled out from beneath the canvas of the tent, and, unable to stop himself, the unfortunate Gussy went sprawling over him.

The junior went to earth with a thud that made his teeth rattle, and there was a startled exclamation as the man went down on his face in the mud. Then followed the chink of money, and from the fellow's baggy pockets streamed a flood of shining coins. There were half-crowns,

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and florins, and shillings, and sixpences, not to mention a whole heap of coppers.

With his eyes glittering with rage, the swarthy individual lurched to his knees. One scared look about him he gave, and then he began to snatch up the money with frantic haste.

"Well, my hat!" breathed Tom Merry, arriving on the scene. "Blessed if the chap isn't a walking money-box! What— Look out, Gussy!"

The warning was needed, for, having recovered the loss of the coins, the swarthy man lurched to his feet, an ugly look on his unshaven face. With the money once out of sight, his fear seemed to change to a desire for vengeance.

"You little rat!" he hissed, clutching D'Arcy's collar, as that hapless youth sat in the grass and gasped. "You did that 'a'urpose, hang you!"

He wrenched the junior bodily to his feet, and shook him savagely, until D'Arcy's teeth rattled.

"Yoop! Oh deah!" gasped D'Arcy, wriggling frantically. "Wescue, deah boys! Dwag the feahful wuffian off. Yow! Wescue!"

D'Arcy's horrified gasps ended in a series of shrieks as the swarthy ruffian began to cuff him savagely with his free hand. They were not light cuffs, either, and Blake gave a yell.

"Here! Drop that, you rotter! Rescue, you fellows!"

In a moment the six St. Jim's juniors were swarming all over the furious ruffian, and, though he hit out right and left, they closed in again, and, after staggering about for a brief moment, went down in the trampled mud in a struggling heap.

It had been quiet and deserted behind the big tent, but at that moment two of the circus hands, evidently hearing the commotion, came hurrying round.

"Ere, none of them games, Gipsy Joe!" shouted one of them angrily. "You leave them young gents alone—d'yer hear? Grab the bloomin' idjut, Pete! 'Ere's the boss comin'."

And with the help of Pete he grabbed Gipsy Joe, and between them they held him fast. The juniors picked themselves up, breathless and muddy, just as a rather flashily-dressed gentleman, with a florid though genial face, and heavy, waxed moustache, came up.

The juniors recognised him as the ringmaster—though he was not in dress-clothes now—and guessed he was also Mr. Joseph Stubbs, the circus proprietor.

"'Allo!" he snapped, his brow darkening as he took in the scene. "What's all this—hey? Up to your tricks agen, Gipsy Joe?"

Gipsy Joe scowled, though he looked a bit scared now.

"It weren't me as started it, boss," he growled sullenly. "It were the young 'ounds as started on me."

"That isn't the truth!" snapped Tom Merry indignantly. "My chum was just running round the tent when he fell over the brute, and—"

"Fell over 'im?" ejaculated Mr. Stubbs.

"Yes," said Tom quietly. "He came sneaking from under the tent here, and my chum didn't see him until too late."

"Oh!"

Mr. Stubbs started, and he bent a suspicious glance on the shivering ruffian.

"Ho, and what might you 'ave bin doin' in that tent, Gipsy Joe?" he said grimly. "Didn't know there was an entrance, I suppose? And, what's more, your job's at the shootin'-gallery, and you've no right in there."

"It—it's a bloomin' lie!"

"It's the truth; and what's more," said Tom Merry relentlessly, "the brute had a pocketful of money; it dropped out when he rolled over. I fancy you ought to know that, Mr. Stubbs."

"Well, I'm 'anged!" gasped Mr. Stubbs, his eyes gleaming. "So that's the game. 'Ere, hold the feller, Pete. This wants lookin' inter."

At that Gipsy Joe began to struggle frantically; but Mr. Stubbs, a big man himself, lent a hand to the showmen, and while he was held fast Pete plunged a hand into his pockets. He withdrew it grasping a handful of silver and coppers.

"It—it's the money I took at the shootin'-gallery," panted the rascal, his dusky face whitening.

"Ho, a likely yarn that!" snorted Mr. Stubbs, his usually jolly features setting hard. "It's like Texas Bill to let you 'andle any cash—I don't think! No, you rascal, you bin 'elping yourself to the pay-box money; an' it ain't the first time you done it, neither, if I'm not mistook!"

"I—I tells yer—"

"That's enough!" snapped Mr. Stubbs. "I've 'ad me suspicions before, and now I've copped you at it. In here with 'im, lads. I don't want no police-court jobs to delay the show; but he ain't going to get off scot-free."

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And as the angry showman dragged the snarling rascal inside a nearby empty tent Mr. Stubbs followed them in, taking a tighter grip of his riding-whip as he did so.

What happened inside the juniors saw little of, but they heard, and could guess. They heard sounds like the beating of a carpet—sounds which Gipsy Joe accompanied, first with savage oaths, and then with yells and howls. Then the form of Gipsy Joe came hurtling through the doorway, with Mr. Stubbs' boot behind him.

"Now, get out, you rascal!" roared the circus proprietor, appearing in the doorway. "You're sacked; and if ever I catches you about the show agen I'll skin your dirty hide! Got that?"

Gipsy Joe had. The raving rascal picked himself up, and, after shaking his fist, first at the circus proprietor and then at the juniors, he limped painfully away towards the gate of the meadow. Mr. Stubbs watched him go, and then he turned to the juniors.

"I'm much obliged to you young gents," he said, his wrathful face clearing. "An' I'm only sorry any of my men 'as treated you rough. I hopes this won't mean any trouble with the school."

Tom Merry laughingly reassured the anxious circus proprietor on that point; and, after cleaning themselves down as best they could, the juniors left the meadow. They were not in a fit state to enjoy the rest of the "fun of the fair" for that afternoon. With Arthur Augustus bitterly bewailing a lost eyeglass, a squashed topper, and the shocking state of his hitherto elegant "clobber," they started back for St. Jim's.

"Well, it's only what we might have expected," remarked Monty Lowther, as they tramped along Rylcombe Lane. "Next time you Fourth chaps visit a circus, p'raps you'll have the sense to leave that blessed tailor's dummy at home!"

"Bai Jove, Lowthah, you feahful wottah, it was all youah fault!" said Gussy indignantly. "If you hadn't—"

"Oh, don't start again, for goodness' sake!" said Tom Merry crossly.

But, despite Tom Merry's request for peace, Lowther and D'Arcy were still squabbling when the gates of St. Jim's were reached. Perhaps this was why none of the juniors saw the skulking figure and swarthy, scowling face that followed the juniors at a distance right up to the gates, and watched them enter, with glittering eyes.

But the juniors had forgotten all about Gipsy Joe by this time, though that vengeful rascal had by no means forgotten them.

CHAPTER 2.

Black Work!

ST. JIM'S was unusually late in settling down to sleep that night.

Farmer Bland's big meadow was situated quite close to the school, and more than one master had commented upon that fact rather bitterly since Stubbs' World-renowned Circus and Continental Menagerie had pitched its camp there the previous evening.

But if the meadow became suddenly unpleasantly close during the daytime, it became doubly so as the evening wore on.

Until a late hour the brazen blare of the steam-organ, the sharp crack of rifle-shots from the shooting-gallery, the ringing of bells, and the multitudinous shouts and yells of laughter from the fair-ground penetrated to every corner of the quiet old school, and combined to make the late summer night hideous to the inhabitants of St. Jim's.

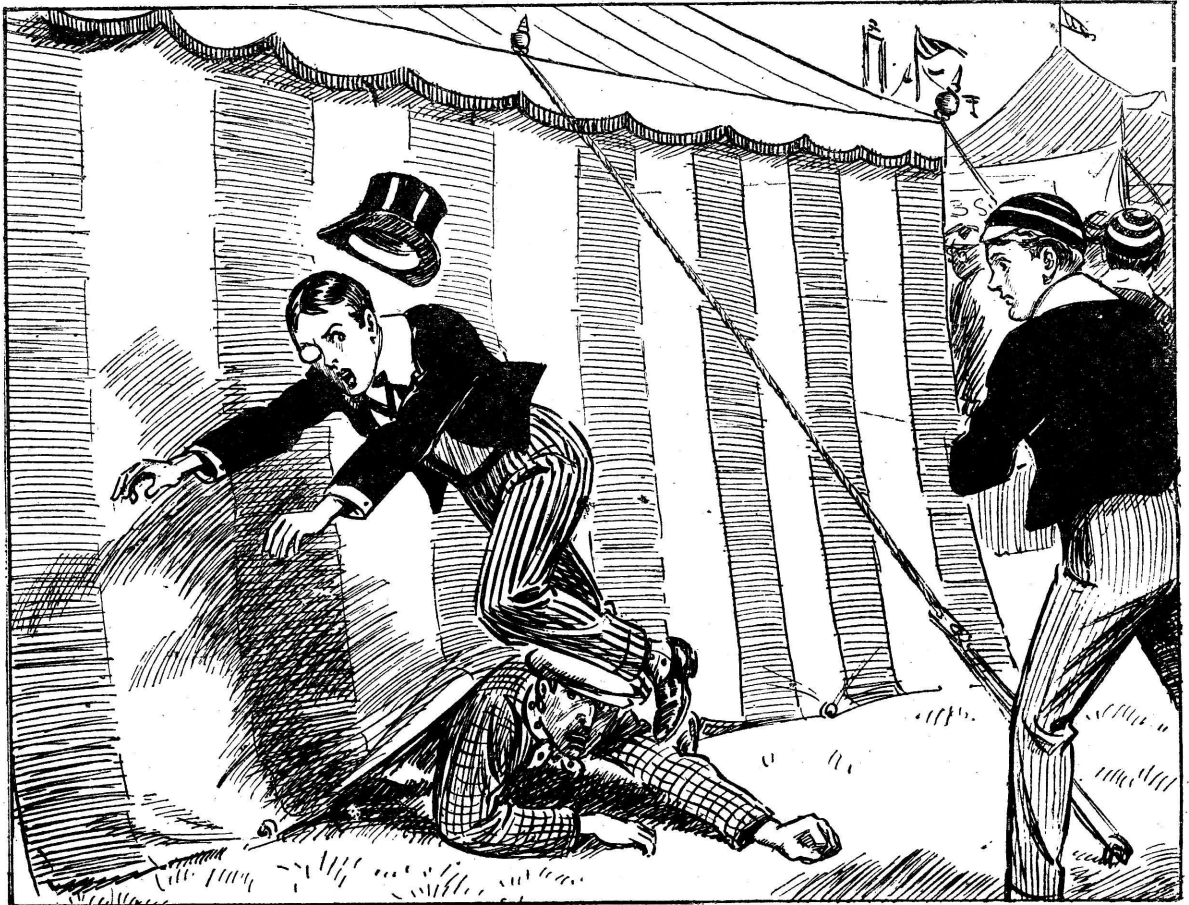
Certainly, the junior element of St. Jim's hadn't been heard to object to the close proximity of the circus. The blare of the steam-organ, which brought shudders to masters and certain lofty seniors, was music to their ears. The galaxy of sound spelt only fun and jollity to them.

But even they began to get "fed-up" with the incessant noise at last. In the various studies work was impossible; in the various dormitories sleep was out of the question. And it was with general relief that St. Jim's heard the rowdy din gradually die down, until at last the old school buildings, like the encampment in the meadow, lay silent under the stars.

But not all St. Jim's slept, even then. In the Fourth Form dormitory one unfortunate junior still lay awake—very much awake. While his more fortunate schoolfellows slumbered away peacefully, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy wooed slumber in vain.

For, though it was many hours since the swell of the Fourth had received that terrific clouting at the hands of Gipsy Joe, his noble head still rang from the brutal blows, and he was still feeling the effects in the form of a combined headache and earache. Under the circumstances, Arthur Augustus found it extremely difficult to get to sleep.

"Oh dear! This is weally too tewwible for words!" groaned the miserable junior, turning over for about the



As Arthur Augustus D'Arcy leaped over the taut tent-rope, a man—a rough, swarthy individual—crawled out from beneath the canvas of the tent, and unable to stop himself, the unfortunate Gussy went sprawling over him. He went to earth with a thud that made his teeth rattle, and there was a startled exclamation as the man went down on his face in the mud. (See page 3.)

hundredth time that night. "Unless I can get to sleep vevy soon, I weally feah I shall go mad!"

As a rule, D'Arcy was not a revengeful youth—quite the reverse, in fact—but as he tossed about on his sleepless couch during the silent watches of that wretched night, he heartily hoped that Gypsy Joe himself was suffering in a similar manner from the terrific thrashing he had received at the hands of Mr. Joseph Stubbs.

Whether Arthur Augustus would eventually have got to sleep, or whether he would have gone mad, are debatable points. At all events, he was saved from the latter awful alternative, at least, by something happening just then.

He had already heard the solemn strokes of midnight chime out from the old clock-tower—hours ago it seemed—and now he listened to the single, booming note of one with feelings of hopeless despair. And it was as the dying note still hung quivering on the still night air that Arthur Augustus heard another sound—a sound that was significant at that hour.

It was the faint crunch of gravel in the quad below the dormitory window—or something remarkably like it. The window was open a jittle, and the sound came clear and distinct above the sighing of the wind in the old elms, and in the rustling ivy. As he heard it, D'Arcy lifted his head from the pillow and listened intently.

The noise was not repeated; but as he listened his ears caught another sound—the quick, loud rustling of disturbed ivy. It went on for two or three seconds, and then stopped. As it did so D'Arcy dropped his head back on the pillow with a grunt.

Of course, what an ass he was! It was only Cornelius, the matron's cat. More than once he had seen it climbing the old, ivy-clad walls. What a nervy ass—

This time D'Arcy's head lifted with a jerk. For even as his tired head touched the pillow, there came a new sound—a sound that could never have been caused by a cat. It was the quiet raising of a window-sash by cautious hands.

"Oh, bai Jove!" breathed Arthur Augustus.

More than wide awake now, the startled junior slipped from his bed, and stepping softly to the window, he looked out.

It was a mild night. Overhead, the stars twinkled like jewels, and a rosy harvest moon shed a golden radiance over the sleeping countryside. But, except for a bright patch of moonlight in the centre, the well of the quadrangle was black as pitch.

D'Arcy peered out, every nerve, every sense on the alert, his heart thumping with excitement, and as he did so, his keen eyes caught a movement below—a dark figure moving on a lower window-sill. Only a brief glimpse he got; then it vanished.

The junior caught his breath.

Was it a burglar? It was quite possible—especially with a circus in the vicinity; the hangers-on of such concerns were often very shady characters. And yet—the window through which the form had vanished, was the window of a junior's study on the Shell landing; D'Arcy knew that. What possible object could a burglar have in breaking into a junior study—what articles of value could he hope to find there?

It seemed absurd, and Arthur Augustus dismissed that possibility from his mind as a new possibility—and a more likely one—occurred to him.

Was it Figgins & Co. of the New House on a raiding expedition? More than once the rival juniors of the New House had crossed the quad at dead of night and raided and ragged the School House studies. Certainly it was rather late for that sort of thing. But then Figgins seldom considered time or place when on the warpath. In D'Arcy's mind there was no doubt now.

"Oh, bai Jove!" breathed D'Arcy. "The weckless wottahs!"

He left the window, and in a moment was rousing his slumbering chums. Blake, Herries, and Digby, objected strongly to being thus rudely awakened; but as they grasped the danger—or imagined they did—they jumped out of bed and hurriedly donned their clothing over their pyjamas.

"Raid us—eh? Rag our dashed studies, will they?" breathed Blake grimly. "We'll show 'em what's what. Buck up, you chaps!"

To such good purpose did they "buck up" that within three minutes of D'Arcy's warning, the juniors were moving stealthily in their slippers, along the dark passage without.

At the door of the Shell dormitory, Blake halted suddenly. "Better get those Shell kids on the job, too," he whispered sagely. "Isn't likely those New House worms will be in force; but we can't afford to take risks."

"Yaas, wathah!"
Blake vanished like a shadow into the Shell dormitory. When he reappeared three minutes later, Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther were behind him, still a trifle drowsy, but obviously keen and excited at the prospect of a scrap with their rivals.

"You're sure it was Figgy?" muttered Tom Merry. "Did you see 'em, Gussy?"

"I only caught a glimpse of someone, deah boy; but, weally, who else could it be, Tom Mewwy?"

Tom Merry said nothing more. He took the lead at once, and looking very determined, the seven juniors moved downstairs in single file. D'Arcy had suggested arming themselves with pillows, but Blake had vetoed that suggestion. Pillows had a way of bursting and shedding their contents; feathers strewn about a junior study might lead to awkward questions.

Silent as ghosts they crept along the Shell passage. Door after door they passed, and then when but a yard or so from No. 10—Tom Merry's own study—Tom Merry halted suddenly, too suddenly for Arthur Augustus who was at his heels. And, with a muffled howl, D'Arcy staggered back clapping his nose which had come into violent contact with the back of Tom's head.

"You—you blithering dummy!" hissed Blake. "Do you want to rouse the house? What the—"

Blake broke off abruptly. Hardly conscious of D'Arcy's accident—or of his howl—Tom Merry still stood still; and he was sniffing suspiciously. Then, with a sudden exclamation, he sprang to the door, wrenched it open and dashed inside.

Only three steps he took into the room, and then he stopped dead with a cry—a cry of alarm, echoed next instant by Blake and the others, as they dashed in after him.

Someone had been there without a doubt—and recently, too, for the window was open to the night, and the room was in disorder. Not only that, it was full of smoke; it was on fire!

The hearthrug was ablaze, as were the cushions, the papers and books, and the miscellaneous collection of articles that had—obviously intentionally—been piled upon it.

For a single instant the juniors stared at the startling scene aghast, and then at a gasping cry from Tom Merry they made a simultaneous, determined assault upon the smoking, blazing heap.

With hands and feet—stamping and pounding, they attacked the burning mass until not a vestige of fire remained, and then as they finished stamping out the last lingering sparks from the smouldering hearthrug, Tom Merry leaped to the window, and shut it, wrenched down the blind and switched on the light.

Then, breathless and panting, with hands and face smoke-grimed, the chums looked at each other in silence.

"What on earth does it mean, you fellows?" breathed Tom Merry, at last. "It—it can't be those New House boudners?"

"Unless they did it by accident!" said Lowther.

"Doesn't look like an accident," said Tom grimly. "If that chump, Gussy, hadn't yelled out we might have caught them."

"Bai Jove, weally Tom Mewwy—"
"No good wasting time gassing, though," said Tom suddenly. "For goodness' sake let's get the place to rights a bit in case someone else has heard the noise and comes down."

There was sense in Tom Merry's advice, and with frantic haste the juniors set about the work of restoring order in the study. As they were doing so, Tom suddenly pounced upon something lying on the floor and held it up with an exclamation. It was a cigarette, and it was still burning.

"That proves that it wasn't any of Figgins' work," snapped the junior. "Figgins doesn't smoke, nor would he allow—"

Tom broke off as a footfall sounded in the passage. Next moment the door swung open, and Knox, of the Sixth, with a dressing-gown thrown over his pyjamas, appeared in the doorway. He fairly blinked in at the scene.

There was a tense silence. Then, suddenly realising the cigarette in his hand, Tom Merry made a swift movement to hide it. Knox laughed harshly.

"Don't trouble to do that, Merry," he said, with an unpleasant grin. "It's a bit too late!"

"Look here, Knox, you—you don't—"

"I'm looking!" grinned the prefect, with a sneer. "It's very nice—very nice! You kids are pretty slippery when it comes to making excuses; but I fancy you'll have a bit of a job to explain this."

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The juniors eyed the prefect blankly. But it was just like Knox to jump to conclusions, and after a moment Blake laughed—a trifle uneasily though.

"You're just a bit off your horse this time, Knox," he was beginning, when once again there sounded footsteps in the passage. This time it was Mr. Railton, with Mr. Lathom, Kildare, and Darrell just behind him.

"What has happened, Knox?" cried the Housemaster, in alarm. "Ah, I thought I smelt burning!" he added, taking in the evidences of the fire. "Bless my soul! How did this come about, Knox?"

"I was just asking Merry that question, sir," said Knox, "though I fancy that explains how it happened."

And the prefect pointed to the cigarette half-hidden in Tom Merry's hand, and from which a thin wisp of smoke still drifted. In the surprise of the master's appearance, Tom had been too flustered to know how to get rid of it.

Mr. Railton gave a start, and his eyes almost started from his head.

"Merry!" he cried angrily. "How dare you? Throw that thing into the grate at once!"

With his face burning under the Housemaster's icy stare, the junior strode to the fireplace. Throwing the half-burnt cigarette into the grate, he pressed it into pulp with the poker. His chums watched him as if struck dumb.

"This is far more serious than I had supposed," said Mr. Railton, his face set and stern. "Did you actually catch these boys smoking, Knox?"

"Bai Jove!" gasped D'Arcy.

"I actually caught Merry with that cigarette in his hand," said Knox gravely. "He tried to hide it when I appeared. They had obviously been smoking, and had accidentally set fire to the place!"

"Utter wot! Weally, Mr. Wailton—"

"That's not true, sir!"

"It's all nonsense, sir!"

As if all had found their voices at the same moment, the astonished juniors began to protest simultaneously; but Mr. Railton held up his hand.

"That's enough!" he said, his voice hard. "The present is no time to go into the matter. There will be a full inquiry to-morrow, and—"

"But—but it's all nonsense to say we've been smoking, sir!" began Tom Merry again desperately. "We came down—"

"You heard what I said, Merry," said the Housemaster quietly. "You shall have every opportunity to defend yourselves in the morning. Kildare, will you kindly see these boys back to their dormitory?"

There was finality in the master's tones, and the juniors obeyed; and as Kildare motioned to them, they filed out of the room.

They went up to their dormitories, and clambered into bed like fellows in a dream. The utter unlooked-for development had staggered them. As yet, none of the seven felt any real fear as to the outcome of the affair. They had not been allowed to explain and defend themselves yet. It was absurd for anyone—unless it was Knox—to seriously believe them responsible. And yet, somehow, they felt vaguely uneasy. And Arthur Augustus was not the only junior who had little sleep for the rest of that night—or, rather, morning.

CHAPTER 3.

Guilt!

TOM MERRY & CO. found it unusually difficult to get up when the rising-bell clanged through St. Jim's the next morning.

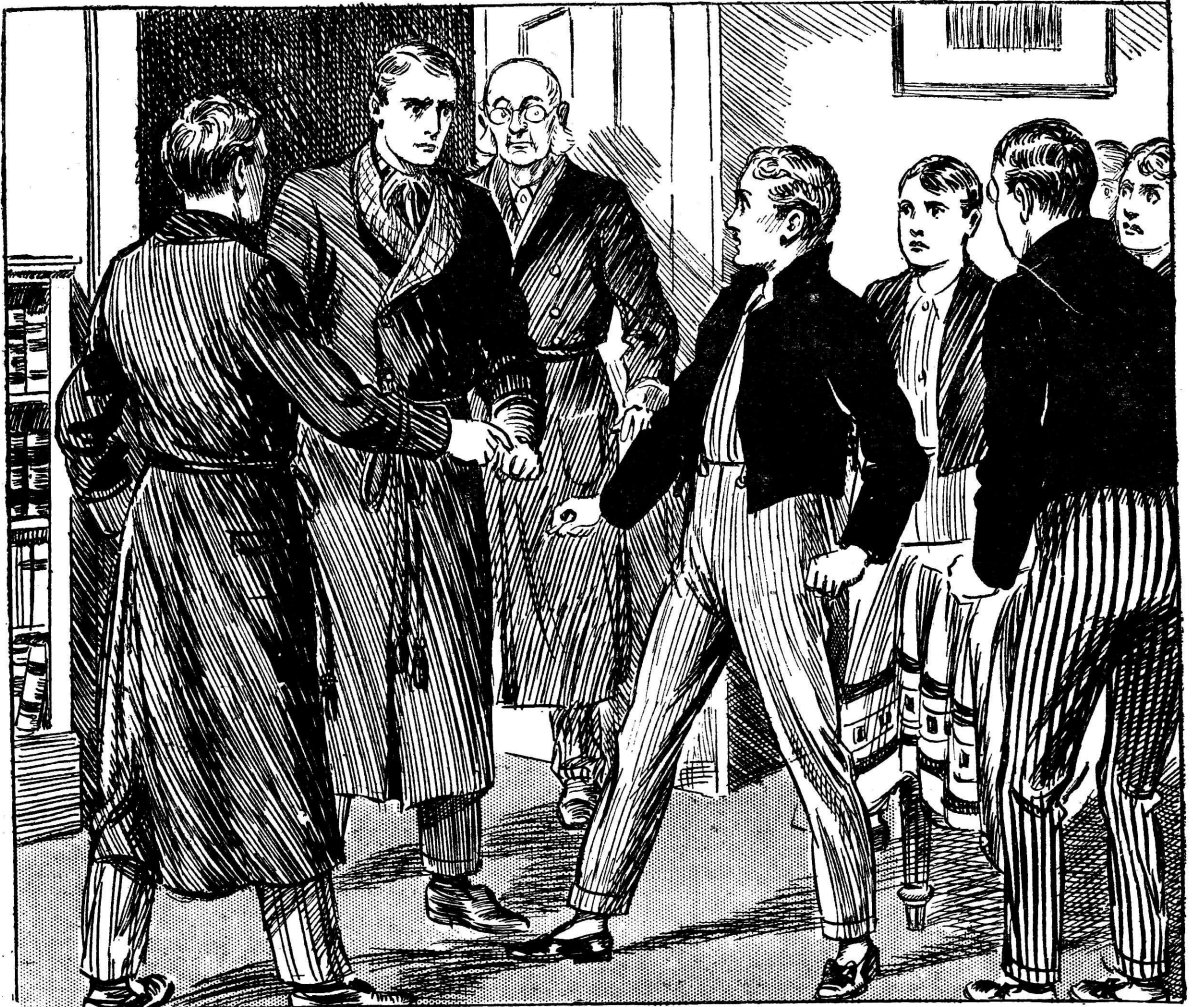
Tired and heavy-eyed, they dressed languidly and in grumpy silence, a fact more than one of their Form-fellows noticed and commented upon.

But Tom Merry had advised his chums to keep silent, for the present, with regard to the happenings of the night, and the seven juniors did not satisfy the curiosity of the questioners.

But the chums soon had clear evidence that the news had leaked out, for all that. Someone—probably Knox—had allowed the story to leak out, and the Lower School was soon buzzing with the astonishing news. At breakfast that morning the seven juniors found curious eyes fixed upon them from every part of the dining-hall.

And it was perhaps no wonder. The news that during the night there had been a fire, and that seven juniors had caused it—had been captured on the scene, smoking—was more than astonishing. But that those juniors were Tom Merry & Co., of the Shell, and Blake & Co., of the Fourth, was amazing. To those who knew the juniors best it seemed incredible.

But even the doubters realised there was truth in the rumour, when, barely a minute after lessons had commenced that morning, the seven suspects were ordered to leave



"How did this burning come about, Knox?" asked Mr. Railton. "I was just asking Merry that question, sir," answered the Sixth-Former. "Though I fancy that explains how it happened." The prefect pointed to a cigarette, half-hidden in Tom Merry's hand, and from which a thin whisp of smoke was curling upwards. (See page 6.)

their respective Form-rooms and proceed to the Head's study.

They went willingly enough, leaving their respective Form-rooms in a buzz of excited conjecture. But none of the seven looked comfortable—though, strangely enough, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy looked the least concerned and worried of them all.

Like the others, he realised that a certain amount of circumstantial evidence was against them, but he had serene and calm confidence in his own ability to explain matters satisfactorily, and with a few well-chosen words to remove all doubts from the minds of the Head and Mr. Railton.

On the way to the dreaded apartment, Arthur Augustus confided this view to his chums cheerily. But they did not accept it cheerfully. They had no faith in Gussy's methods of explaining, nor in his "well-chosen words," either.

And when at last they stood before the Head's desk, and noted the looks on the faces of Dr. Holmes and Mr. Railton, even the confidence of D'Arcy was shaken a little.

The Head's brow was thunderous.

"Boys," he began, when the door was closed, "you are aware of my reason in sending for you, of course. Mr. Railton has told me of the fire in the School House during the night. He has also related to me the circumstances under which you seven juniors were discovered on the scene of the fire."

The Head paused, and fixed a searching glance upon Tom Merry's face. He was about to continue, when Arthur Augustus D'Arcy stepped forward. Apparently, the Swell of the Fourth deemed this the right moment to deliver his explanation.

"Pway allow me to explain, Dr. Holmes," he said gracefully. "There appears to be a wegwettable misundahstanding with wegard to our pwesence—"

"Be silent, D'Arcy!" snapped the Head angrily.

"Oh, bai Jove!" gasped D'Arcy, startled at the unusual sharpness in the usually kindly Head's voice. "But, weally, sir, I must take upon myself the task of explaining the circes. You see, sir—"

"D'Arcy—"

"You see, sir," went on D'Arcy, apparently oblivious of the Head's growing exasperation and his chums' frantic signals, "it was entirely owing to me that these youngstahs were pwesent at the time."

The Head, who had been about to speak again, started, and exchanged glances with Mr. Railton. Then he looked at D'Arcy. That noble youth stood serene and confident, his head held high, his aristocratic face calm and composed.

"Oh, indeed!" said the Head grimly. "Very well, D'Arcy. I will hear what you have to say first. Why did you leave your dormitory last night?"

"I will explain, sir," said D'Arcy calmly.

And he did, relating how he had gone to investigate the sounds he had heard, and how he had seen the dim figure clambering through a lower window.

"But," interposed Dr. Holmes sternly, "why, if as you state you saw someone entering the House at such a late hour, and in such a suspicious manner, did you not rouse the School—did you not give the alarm?"

"Because—well, upon reflection, sir," said Arthur Augustus incautiously, "I came to the conclusion that the intwuder was not likely to be a burglah—"

"Oh, then whom did you suppose it could be?"

"It flashed upon my mind that it must be those weckless— Oh, bai Jove!"

A frantic jab from Blake's elbow brought D'Arcy to a sudden dismayed halt. It had been agreed among the chums

that to bring the names of Figgins & Co. into the matter would do no good—only harm. Obviously it would never do to acquaint the masters with the knowledge that the juniors of the rival Houses were in the habit of raiding each other after lights-out.

The thought of how near he had been to disclosing that knowledge quite flustered Arthur Augustus.

"Well?" demanded the Head, with ominous quietness.

"I—I— Weally, sir," stammered D'Arcy, "I feah I cannot answah that question."

There was a silence. It was obvious from the masters' faces that D'Arcy's unfortunate hesitation, and still more unfortunate reply, had done the juniors' case no good.

"Excuse me, sir," said Tom Merry quickly, "but I think I can answer that. He—he thought that some of the fellows were ragging our study."

"How utterly absurd!" snapped the Head. "At that hour such a supposition would be ridiculous."

"We thought the same as D'Arcy," said Tom Merry doggedly. "He wakened us, and we all went down to investigate, sir."

"Very well," said the Head grimly. "Though I fear I cannot accept that excuse, I will let that pass for the moment. What did you discover on going downstairs, Merry?"

"We found the study full of smoke, and the hearthrug and several other things on fire, sir."

"Was anyone in the room?"

"No, sir. But the window was open, and whoever had been in must have just gone, sir," said Tom Merry. "They must have heard us coming."

"H'm! But why did you not at once give the alarm?"

"We—we thought some of our fellows must have done it, and—and we wanted to save them from trouble," said Tom, flushing as he realised how weak his statements must sound. "We—put the fire out ourselves, sir."

There was a silence. Mr. Railton broke it.

"You state that the window was open, Merry," he said gravely. "It was closed and the blind drawn when I came down."

"I closed it and drew the blind after we put the fire out," said Merry. "Then I switched on the light."

"Very well," said the Head. "There remains now one other point—a point of the gravest significance, Merry. Knox states that he found you smoking, Merry. And when Mr. Railton came down he found you with a cigarette, still lit, in your hand. Can you explain that, my boy?"

"Yes, sir," said Tom Merry stoutly. "I had just found it on the carpet, and was showing it to these fellows."

"Mr. Railton also found a cigarette-end trodden into the carpet after you had gone to bed, Merry," added the Head.

"I don't care, sir," said Tom, raising his voice defiantly; "Mr. Railton knows we don't smoke. You—you can't believe we caused the fire, sir," he added appealingly.

"The weakness of your own story, and the evidence as it stands, leaves us nothing else to believe, Merry," said Dr. Holmes tartly. "You surely cannot expect us to believe that you came down expecting to find that some of your school-fellows had been playing jokes upon you at such an hour. I am not at all satisfied with your explanation—far from it. I cannot but think that you are holding something back—either to save yourselves, or others."

"I must admit that that is my view," added Mr. Railton, with some hesitation.

"I am willing, therefore," went on the Head, "to give you every chance to defend yourselves. Have any of you anything further to add?"

"Nothing, sir," said Blake indignantly. "Except to say that what Merry has said is quite true, and that we swear we were none of us smoking."

"Wathah not, sir," exclaimed Arthur Augustus, with dignity. "And I twust, Dr. Holmes, that you will accept our word, as gentlemen, on that point. I must wemark, sir, that I wergard this charge as unjust and wicidulous in the extreme."

"What?"

"I twust I make my meaning clear, sir," went on D'Arcy firmly. "It is perfectly wicidulous to charge us—"

"D'Arcy, how dare you?" thundered Dr. Holmes. "Do you realise that you are speaking to your headmaster?"

"But, weally, sir—"

"Be silent," cried the Head, his voice trembling with wrath. "It is, now perfectly clear to me that you have no reasonable explanation to offer. For the last time, Merry! Have you any reason to believe—and reason to suspect any person other than yourselves of having been the cause of the fire last night?"

"No, sir," stammered Tom Merry, after a pause.

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"Then the whole affair is perfectly clear to me," snapped Dr. Holmes. "I have no alternative but to believe that you caused the fire—a fire which might have had terrible results. To leave your dormitories at such an hour, is, in itself, a serious offence; but to leave for the purpose of congregating in your study—to smoke—is an offence which richly merits expulsion, especially when one considers the grave consequences which might easily have resulted from the fire."

"But—but, sir—" gasped Tom Merry, aghast.

"That is enough, Merry," said the Head, his voice like steel. "You have had every opportunity to give a satisfactory explanation, and you have failed to do so. There is no more to be said. Only your hitherto stainless reputations deter me from pronouncing the extreme penalty—which is expulsion. A public flogging, will I think, meet the case, and will serve as a lasting lesson to others. Mr. Railton—"

"Sir?"

"You will kindly order an immediate general assembly. These boys had better proceed to their studies, and remain there until sent for. That will do."

Mr. Railton, his face clouded, opened the door wide, and motioned to the seven. Tom Merry hesitated; but as he glanced at the Head's face and saw the hard, unrelenting look on it, he turned slowly to the door. Only Arthur Augustus D'Arcy attempted to make a last desperate appeal.

"Dr. Holmes," he began frantically. "P'way listen to me—"

"Go to your room, D'Arcy."

"But—but, weally, sir—"

"Go!"

And D'Arcy went. He turned dazedly towards the door, and followed his chums out. They filed from the study, their faces showing their dumbfounder astonishment and utter dismay. The door closed upon them.

CHAPTER 4.

Following Gussy's Lead!

"**B**EASTLY!"

"Simply awful!"

"A public flogging—oh, my hat!"

There was a chorus of dismayed ejaculations as the seven sentenced juniors stood outside the Head's door and eyed each other with scared looks.

A public flogging was a serious matter; it was a terrible ordeal, and at the thought of it, the unfortunate juniors felt sick. It was a painful ordeal, too; but the juniors at the moment were not thinking of that. They were thinking of the humiliation, the bitter shame and injustice of it.

"If only that silly dummy, Gussy, had kept his trap closed," grunted Herries. "He mucked the thing up!"

"Bai Jove, Hewwies, you wottah, that is uttally—"

"Gussy certainly made the Head more waxy than he would have been," said Tom Merry quietly. "But—but I don't think that would have made any difference. By not giving a satisfactory reason for going down last night—by refusing to bring Figgins and his lot into it—we've left ourselves without a leg to stand on. If anybody's mucked our case up, we all have."

"Blessed if I can see what more we could have said than we did say," muttered Blake.

"Nor can I," said Tom slowly. "But—but it can't be helped; we've got to go through it, I suppose. Though—"

"Bai Jove, weally, Tom Mewwy—"

D'Arcy gasped, and jamming his monocle more firmly into his noble eye, he regarded the Shell captain through it with calm and lofty intentness.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy," he repeated, in astonishment.

"You astound me. You actually mean to suggest that we should lie down under this tywanny—that we should submit to such a wank injustice?"

"What else can we do, ass?"

"If you have a spark of self-respect, and have courage of your pwinciples," said Arthur Augustus with icy dignity, "you would know what to do. For my part I have quite made up my mind not to submit to such a howwid humiliation, and ignoble punishment, as a public flogging."

"You—you burbling chump—" began Blake.

"That is enough, Jack Blake," said D'Arcy frigidly. "At any othah time I would insist upon an apology for your wudeness. As ewevy moment is pwecious I will wettiah—I will leave you to take your floggin' like down-twodden worms."

With that crushing remark, Arthur Augustus marched away, his aristocratic head held high.

"What the thump does the silly ass mean?" said Blake, in alarm.

"Oh, blow him!" snapped Tom Merry crossly. "No good making matters worse by hanging about here. Come on!" In moody silence they trooped after D'Arcy. They all

had like Tom Merry, an uncomfortable feeling that they might have put up a better defence than they had. And though D'Arcy's words had puzzled them, they were too busy with their own dismal thoughts to bother about him. It was not until Blake kicked open the door of Study No. 6 that Gussy's intention was grasped.

The Terrible Three, who were about to pass on to their own study, halted and looked in as Blake gave a startled exclamation.

Then they stared. Arthur Augustus was within. He was standing by the table buttoning on a pair of lavender gloves. On his head was a shining silk hat; over his arm a raincoat was slung. A light walking-cane lay on the table. Apparently D'Arcy was about to go out of doors.

"Gussy," gasped Blake, "where are you going?"

"I am leaving St. Jim's, deah boy."

"What!"

"As I have remarked befoah," said D'Arcy calmly, "I have no intention of submitting to a flogging. By staying heah, I shall be forced to submit to that howwid indignity. I am theahfoah going to wetiah!"

"You—you're going to run away?"

"I do not wegard it as wunnin' away, Blake. I meahly pwopose to wetire from the school until Dr. Holmes will see weason. My conscience is cleah, and that bein' the case, I feel justified in adopting such a course. I have no desiah to influence you youngstahs, and will not request you to join me. If, howevah, you wefuse to submit to this wank injustice, I shall be glad—vewy glad—to have you with me."

"But—but—" breathed Blake. "You'll be sacked! Gussy, old fellow—"

"I am quite weady to take the wisk of bein' sacked, Blake," replied Arthur Augustus. "But I absolutely wefuse to be flogged."

"You—you mad hatter—"

"Just a minute, Blake!"

The voice was Tom Merry's, though they hardly recognised the tones. The juniors took their eyes off D'Arcy and looked quickly at him. His face was pale; his eyes glinted strangely, and there was a bitter, reckless look about his usually cheery features that they had rarely seen before.

"Just a minute, Blake," he repeated, in a hard tone. "D'Arcy is quite right; I see it now."

"What?"

"He's quite right in refusing to submit to an unjust punishment without a fight," snapped Tom Merry, his eyes gleaming. "We certainly would be crawling worms if we did."

"I—I suppose we would," said Blake, nodding.

"We're innocent, and we know it," said Tom, in a hard voice. "After all, we are the injured party—it's our stuff that was damaged. The Head may think he's given us a fair trial; but he hasn't. He's never known any of us seven to smoke, or to tell lies. He ought to have believed us—to have accepted our word."

"Yaas, wathah, Tom Mewwy!"

"I—I hardly realised it at the time—I was fairly stunned when he sentenced us," went on Tom grimly. "But I do now. You fellows know what a public flogging means—we'd never be able to hold our heads up again."

"That—that's so," said Blake, taking a deep breath. "Then—then you think—"

"I think as Gussy does," said Tom, through his teeth. "It's up to us to make a fight for it—any self-respecting chap would. We've done nothing wrong. We've got right on our side."

There was a silence; it did not last long. Tom read the answer in his chums' excited, determined faces. Neither Tom Merry & Co., nor Blake & Co. were the sort of fellows to bow their heads meekly under injustice—or what they believed to be injustice.

"We'll do it, Tommy!" snapped Blake, his eyes blazing. "I'm with you for one, anyway."

"And I!"

"Count me in, too!"

"We're not going to be flogged. Good for you, Tommy!"

There was a chorus of excited agreement, and as he looked round on his chums' resolute faces, he saw that they meant it. "Right," he said crisply. "There's no time to be lost, then; they may come for us any minute. Grab any belongings you think you'll want, and let's get clear. We can discuss plans when we're safely out of the way. Sharp now."

With Lowther and Manners at his heels, Tom made for Study No. 10 with a rush. They had made their decision, and they did not stop to ponder over the wisdom of the step they were taking. The Head's blunt refusal to accept their word—the harsh injustice of it all—had aroused the deepest resentment in them. They were in a black, bitter mood—ready for any reckless act.

Tom Merry & Co. were ready first, and as Blake and his chums joined them in the Shell passage, their pockets bulging, Tom gave the word, and the seven rebels hastened cautiously along the passages.

Luckily these were deserted—morning lessons being in full swing now—and it was only as they were about to creep past the Sixth Form room that danger threatened. Then to their utter dismay, the door ahead of them opened, and Mr. Railton stepped out.

"Oh, gweat Scott!" ejaculated D'Arcy.

As he caught sight of the seven juniors, fully dressed for out of doors, with coats over their arms, Mr. Railton jumped.

"What—what— Merry, Blake!" he cried sternly. "What does this mean? How dare you leave—"

"Run for it!" hissed Tom Merry.

Before the astonished Housemaster had recovered from his surprise, the seven rebels were past him in one wild stampede. They heard his voice calling angrily after them; but they did not heed, and a couple of seconds later were out in the quad.

"Phew!" panted Tom Merry. "We've fairly burnt our boats now! The sooner we put as big a distance between ourselves and St. Jim's now, the better. Come on, I expect Railton was busy even then arranging for the general assembly. What a sell for 'em all!"

At top speed the chums raced across the quad and through the open gates, heedless of the gesticulating figure of Taggles, who ambled from his lodge as they rushed past. Not until they had crossed the stile leading from the dusty lane on to the shady path through Rylcombe woods did they stop running. Then, as they dived into the shelter of the thick trees, they paused for a breather.

"We're safe enough in the woods for a bit!" panted Tom Merry. "Though we'd better get deeper in as soon as we've had a breather."

"What's the programme, Tommy?" asked Manners, a trifle uneasily.

"I haven't had time to think yet," said Tom, frowning. "We'd better find a quiet spot and talk things over. I vote we go through the woods and make for the quarries on Wayland Moor—or, better still, the old mill. If you're ready we'll be moving."

They started off along the shady woodland path—all of them in a thoughtful mood now. They had taken a serious—a very serious step hastily enough, and now they had had time to think things over a little the difficulties confronting them were making themselves seen.

But not for one moment did they regret their action for all that. And they discussed the problem of their uncertain future with no fear or misgivings as they tramped the woodland path towards Wayland. Quite suddenly, however, that problem was banished abruptly from their minds as a sharp cry rang through the trees.

"Help!"

It was a man's voice, and so close at hand that it made the juniors jump.

"Hallo! What's that?" breathed Tom Merry.

For a second he stood stock still, and then as the cry rang out again he was dashing through the undergrowth with his chums at his heels. They arrived on the scene with a rush.

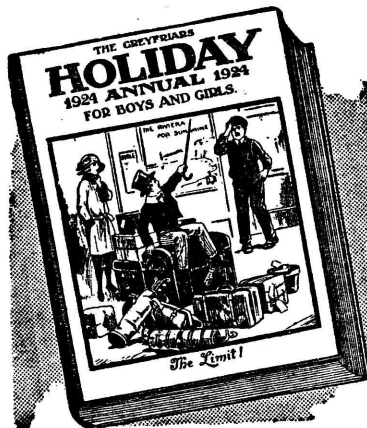
In a little grassy glade a man was lying—a short, tubby man in rather loud check riding-breeches, and with a ruddy face and long, waxed moustache. It was Mr. Joseph Stubbs, the circus proprietor. And the man who crouched above him—a burly, swarthy-faced ruffian—was Gipsy Joe. In his raised hand was a thick cudgel.

Obviously he had already struck one blow, and was about to strike another. But the second blow never fell.

Tom Merry sped across the glade like a flash of light. His clenched fist shot out, and the ruffian staggered back with a startled grunt.

"On him, chaps!" yelled Tom Merry. "Don't let the brute—"

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Tom's utterance was cut short by a savage blow from Gipsy Joe's huge fist which sent the junior hurtling across the glade. As the rest of the juniors rushed on the scene, he turned swiftly and leaped into the thickets with the agility of a cat.

Blake and the rest were after him in a flash. But they soon realised the chase was hopeless. The man soon showed that he was at home in the woods, and as the crashing of his retreat died away, they returned to the glade.

Tom Merry had clambered to his feet by now, and was raising the half-dazed showman to his feet.

"The brute took me unawares!" gasped Mr. Stubbs, as they gathered round him in concern. "I'd jst been to see Farmer Bland about the clearing up of his field, and the hound must 'a' knowed I was going back this way. He rushed out and bashed me from behind—the reptile!"

"To get his own back, I suppose?" said Blake.

"Just that. These darned gipsies always banker after revenge. And— Why, blow me if you ain't the same young gents as did me a good turn yesterday afternoon!" gasped Mr. Stubbs, staring at Blake and D'Arcy.

"Little us!" grinned Blake.

"I'm deeply indebted to you, young gentlemen," said the showman heartily. "Joe Stubbs ain't the man as ever forgets a good turn. If you young gents wants to see my show at any time, or ever wants help—not as that's likely—just you come to Joe Stubbs."

"We'll remember that, Mr. Stubbs," said Tom, smiling. "But we're only too glad to have been of service, so don't worry about that. Anyway, we'll see you safely out of the wood, in case that merchant is still hanging round."

The showman had recovered himself fully now; the blow had been, fortunately, a glancing blow, and it had only dazed him for the time. And the juniors accompanied him to the stile on the Rylcombe side of the woods, and there they left him, and started once more on the trail for Wayland Moor.

They hurried now, fearing that the delay had jeopardised their chance of escape, and it was just as they emerged from the woods on to the moor that Tom Merry gave a sudden whoop.

"I've got it, you fellows," he said excitedly. "Just the very wheeze we want!"

"Eh? You've got what?" demanded Blake.

"Just this," snapped Tom, his eyes gleaming. "What about joining the circus for a day or two—getting jobs as unpaid hands? Old Stubbs will take us on, I'm certain, after this."

"M-my hat!"

"Bai Jove!"

"They're showing at Wayland to-night," said Tom eagerly. "And they'll be in the district for some days yet. It'll be great! We can keep in touch with the Head by letter, and he'll never find us."

"But—but—"

"We can stain our hands and faces," said Tom. "And we can easily get old clothes. What do you think of the idea?"

The juniors fairly blinked at him. But from their shining eyes it was easy to see that the suggestion, wild as it seemed, had taken them by storm.

"Think?" yelled Blake. "Why, it's simply great!"

"Yaas, wathah. Bai Jove, Tom Mewwy—"

"Then come on!" said Tom grimly. "We'll see old Stubbs. He'll be going back by train, and we'll find him there, I expect. My hat! This will be better than grubbing in a dusty mill!"

And as they followed Tom at a brisk trot across the moor towards Wayland, his chums agreed that it was.

CHAPTER 5.

Chums of the Circus!

"PWAY, how do I look, deah boys?"

Thus Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

It was a couple of hours later, and the Swell of the Fourth at St. Jim's—looking anything but a swell now—asked the question rather anxiously as he stood in the doorway of a dingy caravan which stood among others on the fringe of Wayland Moor.

At the bottom of the caravan steps the Terrible Three and Blake, Herries, and Digby were busy round a pot that hung, gipsy fashion, over a camp-fire. Blake was tending the pot, from whence proceeded an appetising smell of simmering stew. The others were busy with various pots and pans and other cooking utensils, apparently preparing a meal.

But that was not all. Instead of the orthodox and more or less spotless Etons and clean white collars, all seven juniors sported shabby, ill-fitting clothes, with mufflers in place of collars.

A strange scene—especially so when one considers that these were the same juniors who had stood their trial in

the august presence and still more august study of the Headmaster of St. Jim's only a couple of hours ago.

But quite a lot had taken place in that couple of hours. For, as Tom Merry had opined, Mr. Joseph Stubbs had agreed—though with many misgivings—to take them on the staff of his circus as unpaid hands.

The jovial circus proprietor had been naturally amazed at such a request from the juniors of St. Jim's, and, concluding at once that they had run away, he had shown obvious reluctance.

But when Arthur Augustus had explained that they had not "run away," but merely "wetiahed" for a few days, he had appeared to drop that conclusion, and had asked no more awkward questions. But whether he believed that to retire from the school meant to take a holiday, or whether he only pretended to believe that, the juniors did not know, or care. At all events, he had agreed to take them forthwith.

And not only that, he had also placed an empty caravan at their disposal, and once having made his decision, he had done all he could to make the wanderers feel at home. And, following the "boss'" example, the rest of the friendly showmen had done likewise.

Since then the juniors had been busy. Luckily, the juniors were in funds. Gussy had had a "fiver" from home that morning, and most of this went to purchase suitable clothing, fetched for them by a friendly showman from a second-hand shop in Wayland. True, the shabby suits were neither elegant nor well-fitting; but they were clean, and the juniors were thankful for that. They had changed into them, and, after staining hands and faces with a secret preparation given them by Tony Tuck, the clown, they had set about getting dinner ready.

At least, all but D'Arcy had. It took that junior much longer to make his toilet, and apparently he had only just finished when he appeared in the doorway of the caravan and asked that question.

Blake and the others ceased their labours, and glanced up at him.

"Pway, how do I look, deah boys?" repeated Arthur Augustus, gazing down at the juniors through his monocle. "I'm afraid this heastly suit doesn't quite fit me."

The juniors stared at him; then they howled.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

For Arthur Augustus looked a picture. His trousers, a pair of loud checks several sizes too large, had been turned up; but they were still big and baggy. His jacket was also much too big, and it hung on his shoulders like a sack. But what put the finishing touch to D'Arcy's appearance was the fact that he still retained his glittering monocle.

"Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus, blinking at the hilarious juniors in great astonishment. "Pway, what is there about me to cause this hilawity? Is my clobber weally so vewy bad, deah boys?"

"You—you burbling chump!" choked Blake. "It isn't your blessed clobber—though, goodness knows, that's funny enough—it's your blessed eyeglass, dummy!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Take it out!" howled Blake. "You can't wear an eyeglass with those togs, you frabjous dummy! Anyone from St. Jim's would spot you at once. Chuck the dashed thing away!"

"I uttably wefuse to chuck my eyeglass away, Jack Blake," said Arthur Augustus coldly. "The vewy idea! It would be absolutely impos for me to discard my monocle."

"You—you mean to say you're going to wear that thing here?"

"Yaas. Why not, bai Jove?"

"Why not?" yelled Blake. "Oh, you—you—I'll show you if you'll jolly well wear it, you idiot!"

And, with a sudden rush, Blake leaped up the van steps, and, making a grab, he wrenched the glittering monocle from D'Arcy's eye, and also bodily from its mooring, so to speak. Then it slipped out of his hand, and swung, cord and all, towards the fire.

There was a shriek from Gussy as the precious eyeglass spun through the air and dropped with a dismal plop into the steaming stew.

"You—you awful wuffian, Blake!" shrieked D'Arcy.

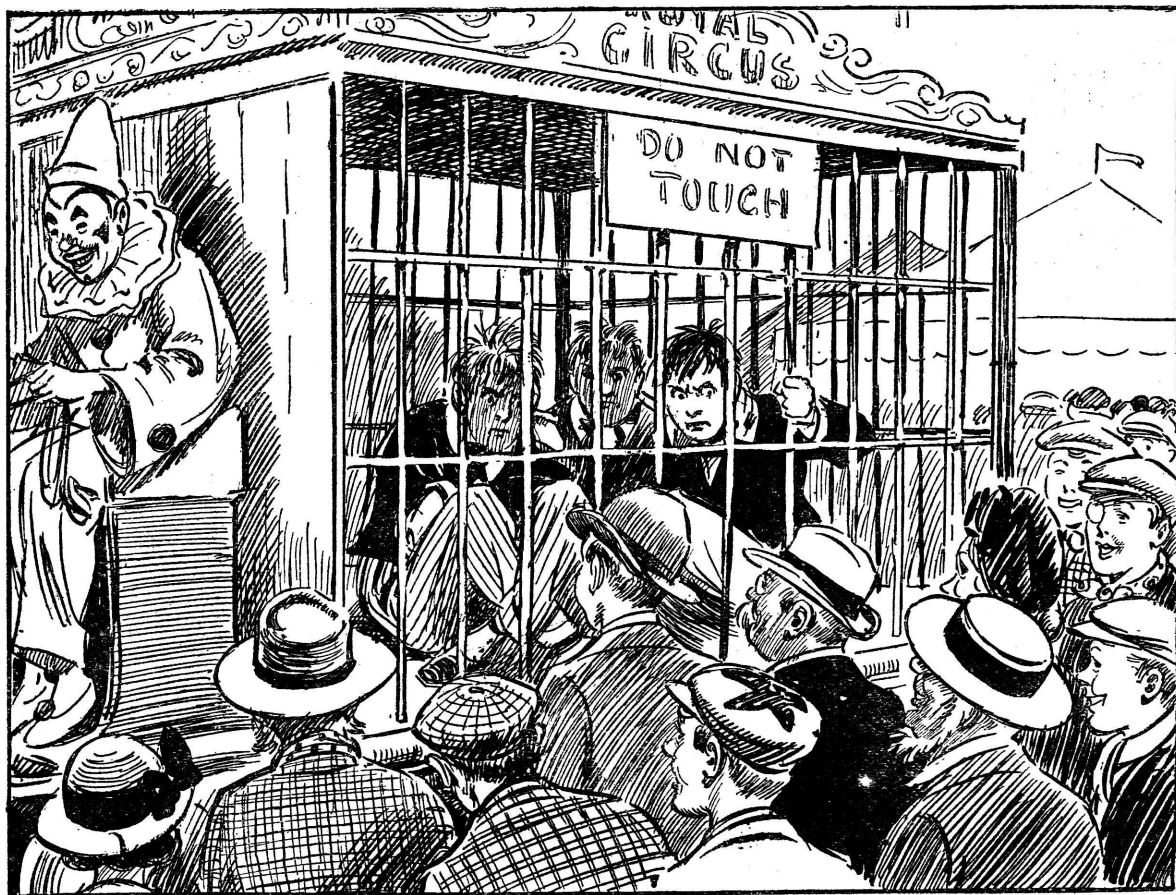
Terrible in his wrath, Arthur Augustus grasped Blake, and, after swaying for a moment in the doorway, the two rolled down the steps, struggling fiercely. They were still rolling about the ground in a deadly embrace, when a deep voice sounded:

"What's the trouble here, eh?"

It was Mr. Stubbs. At sight of him D'Arcy and Blake leaped to their feet, looking very sheepish.

"Only larking, Mr. Stubbs," explained Tom Merry.

"Glad to hear it," said Mr. Stubbs, his slightly uneasy face breaking into a grin. "Looked to me as if you was killin' each other, though. 'Owver, I thought as I'd come an' tell you as there's bin some young gents to see me from your school."



The band struck up, and as Tony, the clown, cracked his whip the little procession wended its way out of the living-van area on to the crowded fair-ground. Almost hysterical with rage, Racks & Co. crouched on the floor of the cage, gripping the bars and glaring at the shrieking crowd in helpless fury. Tom Merry & Co., laughing uproariously, followed behind. (See page 12.)

"Oh!"
 "They were older lads than you," said Mr. Stubbs, "an' they came to ask if I'd seen anything of seven young rips as 'ad run away from school."

"Oh, bai Jove!"
 "Of course!" observed Mr. Stubbs, with heavy sarcasm. "I knowed it couldn't be you they was after, seeing as you hadn't run away—only retired like. So I told 'em I 'adn't seen none, and they cleared off."

"Oh, good!"
 "Thought it'd interest you young gents," said Mr. Stubbs. Then changing the subject diplomatically, he said: "Well, I see you're settling down nicely."

"We're having the time of our lives, Mr. Stubbs!" grinned Tom Merry. "But when can we start earning our grub?"

"There ain't much to be done now," said Mr. Stubbs, looking round the busy fair-ground. "But if you'll take my tip, you young gents'll take it easy till we're on the move, else someone'll see you hanging round and think you're them runaways."

And with that grim but kindly-meant warning, Mr. Stubbs strolled away, chewing his cigar and chuckling grimly.

"Decent old bird," remarked Tom Merry soberly. "But, my hat! I never expected they'd get on our track so soon!"
 "Better take his tip and lie low," grunted Blake. "It isn't likely anyone will recognise us, but — Hallo, this stew's about done!"

It was in a rather sober mood that the St. Jim's runaways started dinner. The news that prefects were already making inquiries was rather disturbing. Tom Merry especially was looking thoughtful. He was not worrying much about the prefects, however. Though no more prone to look ahead than his chums, he saw that they could not stay with the circus for ever. And he wondered rather dismally how they were going to discuss terms with the Head without disclosing their whereabouts.

But as the steaming plates of stew were handed round, even Tom began to recover his spirits, and altogether dinner was a jolly meal. And Tom dismissed the problem from his mind, determined, like his chums, to enjoy the present to the full,

leaving the future, uncertain as it seemed, to take care of itself.

CHAPTER 6. Old Enemies!

AS Mr. Joseph Stubbs had stated, there was little work left to be done by dinner-time on the fair-ground. At an early hour that morning the circus folk had been up and about, and in an amazingly short space of time the whole show, lock, stock, and barrel, had been wafted as if by a magician's wand from Farmer Bland's meadow, on to the pitch over at Wayland.

Since then every hand had been hard at work, and by noon the big tent was up, the living vans arranged in their usual order, the canvas stables erected, and the swing-boats and other attractions—most of these also owned by Mr. Stubbs—in addition to the numerous side shows, were ready for business.

And so, there being no afternoon performance of the circus itself, most of the show folk settled down after dinner to take a well-earned rest.

But though there was no work for them to do, the juniors found plenty to interest them in and about the circus, and keeping a sharp look-out for possible unwelcome visitors, they wandered round inspecting the wild animals, the horses, and anything that interested them.

Altogether the afternoon passed pleasantly enough; but with tea once over, things began to liven up as the Wayland folk thronged on to the fair-ground. Soon the steam-organ started its noisy blare, and in no time the whole galaxy of amusements was in full swing.

From their caravan on the outskirts of the encampment, Tom Merry and his chums listened to the sounds of jollity and fun going on outside rather enviously. Certainly with their dusky faces and rough clothes, there was little chance of anyone recognising them in that crowd. But knowing it was likely that fellows from St. Jim's would be on the ground, Tom Merry had deemed it wiser to lie low—until dark, at all events.

But fate ordained otherwise.

As he stood by the caravan window gazing out at the rather rowdy scene, Tom Merry suddenly gave an exclamation that brought his chums to his side.

"What's the matter, Tommy?" asked Blake. "Any—"

"Racke and his pals," said Tom briefly. "Over by that show there. Looks as if they're up to mischief, too!"

It certainly did look like it.

At the back of a little fancy bazaar three St. Jim's juniors were crouching. They were Aubrey Racke, Crooke, and Mellish—three of the shadiest juniors at St. Jim's, and from their stealthy actions it was plain they were up to no good.

"Playing some dirty trick or other, I'll bet!" grunted Herries. "We ought to— Oh, crumbs! I thought so!"

As Herries was speaking, Racke, Crooke, and Mellish moved hastily away from the back of the little canvas shanty, and even as they did so, the whole structure collapsed, burying its luckless owner among the ruins.

Tom Merry's brow darkened as there sounded the crash of breaking crockery and a mad bellowing from the heaving mass of canvas.

"Well, the cads!" breathed Tom Merry, angry at such wanton destruction. "Fancy playing a low-down trick like that!"

"Just the sort of trick Racke would play!" growled Blake. "I'd like to punch his blessed nose!"

For a moment Tom stared through the window, breathing hard through his nose. The unfortunate showman had now crawled from beneath the ruins of his show, and was angrily demanding of the onlookers who had "busted" his show.

But Tom hardly glanced at him; he was watching the progress of Racke & Co., as those ill-natured jokers pushed their way through the crush, obviously on the look-out for further mischief. He turned away abruptly, his eyes glinting.

"Look here, you chaps," he snapped, "we're not letting those cads play their dirty games here! These showmen have been decent to us, and, after all, we're members of the circus now. It's up to us to keep an eye on Racke, and stop them doing further damage."

"But—but—"

"We'll have to risk being spotted," said Tom grimly. "Come on; and if we do catch 'em up to anything rotten, we'll put them through it."

And without waiting for a reply, Tom wrenched open the door and ran down the caravan steps. His chums followed quickly enough. They were as fond as anyone of a harmless joke; but they saw little humour in the wanton damage to poor people's property.

Only too glad, also, to get out of the stuffy van, they threaded their way on the heels of Tom Merry through the rowdy throng.

Tom had carefully noted the direction which Racke and his chums had taken, and he very quickly ran them down by the swing-boats. Racke was standing by an empty coconut barrel watching the energetic efforts of two youths from Rylcombe who were in one of the swing-boats.

The two village youths were Grimes, the grocer's boy, and Pilcher, the butcher's boy—two old friends of Tom Merry & Co. From the sneering grin on Racke's face, Tom saw that he was meditating mischief.

But he scarcely expected what followed.

Racke suddenly whispered something to his chums, and as they melted into the crowd, he grasped the empty barrel and rolled it under the swinging boat. Then he fled.

Crash!

There was a resounding crash of splintering wood, and a combined yell from Grimes and Pilcher as the swing-boat struck the obstacle, smashing it into splinters, and sending the village youths flying through the air.

Grimes struck the ground and rolled over and over little the worse; but the luckless Pilcher turned a complete double somersault and landed with a crash in the middle of a peep-show, almost wrecking it!

"Oh, my sainted aunt!" breathed Tom Merry.

He rushed up just in time to prevent the unfortunate Pilcher from being roughly handled by the furious peep-show proprietor.

"It wasn't his fault," said Tom hurriedly. "Leave him alone."

"It were one of them school kids!" yelled the swing-boat man furiously. "If I catches the young himp I'll smash 'im! I seed 'im shove a barrel—"

A crowd was gathering quickly, and, leaving the swing-boat man to explain matters, Tom slipped away and rejoined his chums. At a word from him the seven juniors went on the track of Racke & Co. They found them at last, sneaking round the back of a tent, and with a rush they surrounded the three practical jokers.

"Here, I say—" stammered Racke, staring in alarm at

the rough-looking seven. "What— Here, let go, you cads!"

But the cads did not let them go. Evidently they believed in deeds and not words, for without speaking once, they grabbed the frightened Racke & Co., and having tied their hands behind them with rope, they dragged them over to the canvas stables.

What happened next the three jokers hardly knew. With bewildering rapidity they were grabbed one by one and shoved, head foremost, despite their frantic struggles, into a barrel half-filled with bran-mash. And when Racke & Co. stood on their feet again, they looked shocking sights.

But their captors hadn't finished even then.

With the sticky bran-mash dripping from their heads and clothes, the three jokers were hustled and dragged over to an empty cage standing just outside the caravan pitch.

It was an old lion cage, smelly and dirty, and it had been dragged out of the way to be cleaned before repainting. But it suited the avengers purpose quite well.

Running up the steps, Tom Merry opened the door, and held it open. As they realised their captors' intention Racke & Co. gave yells of alarm.

"Look here, you beastly cads!" hissed Racke frantically. "You—you can't put us there. Oh—oh, you brutes!"

The three began to struggle frantically as Tom Merry & Co. hustled them up the steps. But the avengers were merciless. They realised full well that the dangerous trick the thoughtless jokers had played with the swing-boats might have had serious results; and they intended to teach the shady trio a severe lesson.

Despite their yells of protest they were bundled inside the cage and the door fastened upon them.

"Now get out of the way, and I'll see to the rest," hissed Tom Merry; to his grinning chums.

"Yaas, wathah!" grinned D'Arcy incautiously. "Weally, Tom Mewwy, I considah— Oh, bai Jove!"

D'Arcy gasped as Blake and Herries grabbed him and ran him protesting blankly across to the caravan. There they dumped him down and sat upon him.

"You burbling ass!" breathed Blake, in sulphurous tones. "Weren't you told to keep your trap shut! If they've heard your blessed accent, the game's up! You—hallo, here's Tommy!"

Tom Merry came running up, a huge grin on his face. "All serene," he said. "I've seen Tony Tuck, and he'll do it. Now sit tight, and watch."

They had not to wait long. Three or four minutes later Tony Tuck, dressed in his clown's outfit, hove into view. He was leading a piebald circus pony, and under his free arm he carried a large square of cardboard. Behind him were two grinning circus musicians. One carried a big drum; the other carried a cornet.

"Oh, crumbs!" choked Monty Lowther.

The newcomers leisurely approached the cage, apparently unconscious of its almost frantic inmates. Tony, the clown, gravely harnessed the pony into the shafts of the cage. Then, picking up the square of cardboard, he solemnly fixed it up in a prominent position on the front of the cage.

There was an inscription on the cardboard—hand-printed in big black letters—and it read as follows:

THE MISSING LINKS! THE ONLY EXISTING SPECIMENS!

Satisfied with its position, Tony clambered into the driving-seat, and as he gathered up the reins, the musicians seated themselves on either side of him.

Then the band struck up, and as Tony cracked his whip the little procession wended its way out of the living-van area, on to the crowded fair-ground.

Bang, bang, bang—rah-tar—rah-tee—tec-tar!

The cornet and the big drum were going at full blast now, and as the crowd opened out to make way for them there arose a shout of laughter.

"Ho, ho, ho!" yelled one yokel. "Missin' Links, be they? They looks to me more like 'ungry tigers!"

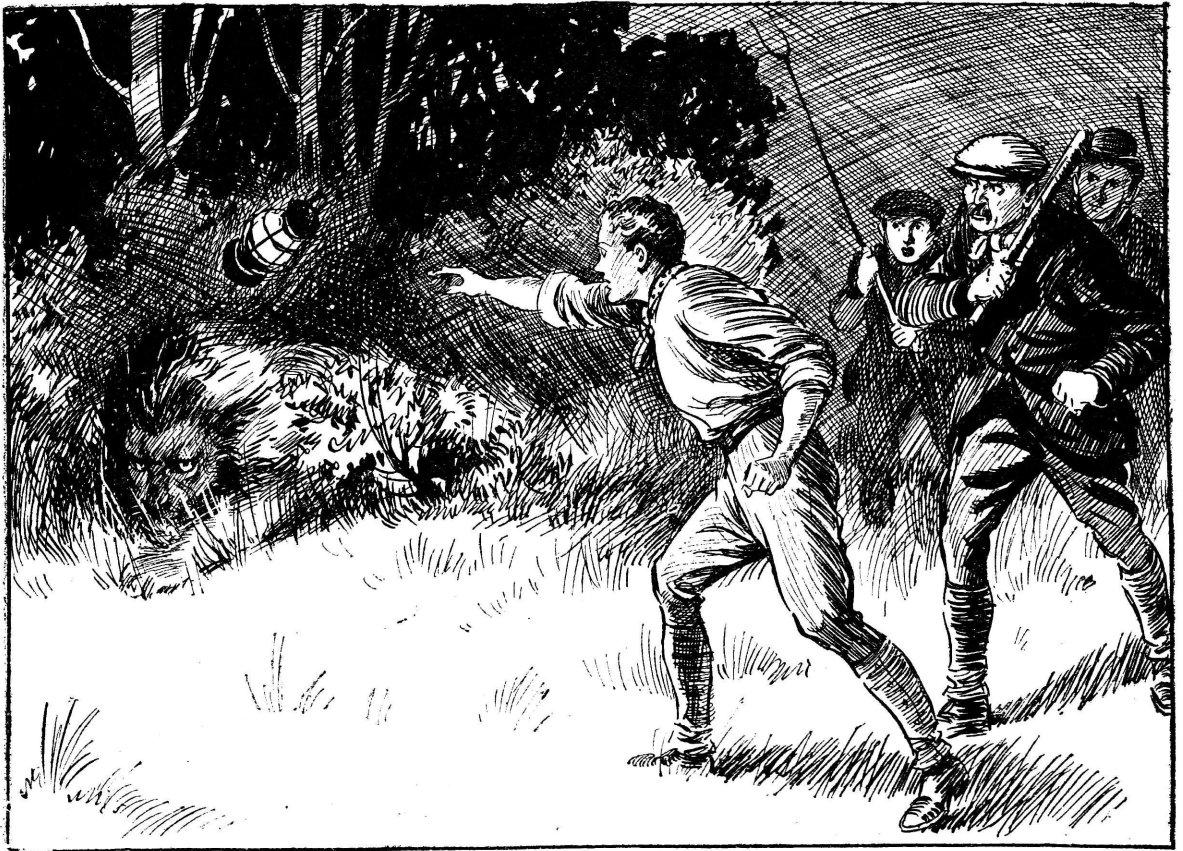
And certainly Racke & Co. did look like wild beasts just then. They had given up trying to open the cage from inside by now. Almost hysterical with rage they crouched on the floor of the cage, gripping the bars and glaring at the shrieking crowd in helpless fury.

Bang, bang! Pom-pom—tar-rah-rah! Bing, bang!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Almost helpless with laughter Tom Merry followed discreetly as the procession wended its hilarious way round the fair-ground. Mr. Stubbs came to the doorway of his gorgeous van and grinned as the procession came along. But, apparently, Tony Tuck had explained matters, for he vanished inside his van again chuckling explosively.

Three times the procession wended its triumphant way round the fair-ground and, then, on reaching the entrance to the pitch the third time, Tony Tuck brought his pony to a stop. Jumping down, he opened the cage-door.



Tom Merry caught a swift glimpse of the fierce-looking lion as it crouched over a dark object in the grass, then, snatching up a lantern from the hand of the man nearest him, he flung it with all his force full at the brute's body. (See page 17.)

With a fiendish glare at the grinning clown, Racke led the rush pell-mell down the steps. Then, with heads bowed, the three practical jokers dived through the laughing throng and fled.

Not until they reached the little cottage where they had left their bikes did Racke & Co. stop running. Then, breathless and panting, they began to remove the messy bran-mash from their faces and necks.

"Oh, great Scott!" wailed Crooke, clawing frantically at his neck. "We'll never hear the last of this, you chaps. It's all your fault, Racke; I told you it wasn't safe—"

"Shut up!" hissed Racke, nearly weeping with rage and bitter humiliation. "It wasn't my fault, hang you! You fools, didn't you see who those cads were who collared us? They were Merry and his beastly pals!"

"Wha-a-at?"

"I spotted them!" panted Racke viciously. "Only when that fool D'Arcy opened his mouth, though! So—so this is where the sneaking runaways are hiding! Well, by jingo! we'll make 'em pay for this. Before the night's out we'll get the cads nabbed, and before to-morrow's out they'll be on their way home—sacked. Come on!"

And with a black, vengeful scowl on his still sticky features, Aubrey Racke grabbed his bike and leaped into the saddle.

Certainly Tom Merry & Co. had amply avenged the showman and Grimes & Co., but by the look of things they were destined to pay dearly for it.

CHAPTER 7

Fire!

LOOK out! Oh, my hat!"

As he uttered the warning Tom Merry dodged behind the canvas of one of the stables; and his six chums, though they had not seen the danger, followed him just as quickly.

Over Wayland Moor the dusk was thick as the late-summer evening closed in. But on the circus pitch on the edge of the moor the big arc-lamps and paraffin flares made the scene as light as day.

The crowd on the fair-ground had thinned considerably now for the evening performance was in full swing. The

noisy steam-organ was silent; but from within the big, packed circus tent there came the blare of the circus band.

Though they would have been only too glad to see the performance once again, the juniors had decided not to take the risk. To expose themselves for a lengthy time in the well-lighted tent to the gaze of hundreds of pairs of eyes, was as Tom pointed out, simply asking for trouble.

But the knowledge that calling-over would be ended at St. Jim's and that their schoolfellows were behind the locked school gates brought a sense of safety to the runaways, and they spent the time strolling about the fair-ground carelessly enough.

And then had come that sudden warning from Tom Merry. "What's the matter, Tommy?" asked Blake, as they crouched in the gloom of the canvas stable. "Danger?"

"Railton," whispered Tom, peering out cautiously. "I just spotted him coming along; and Kildare and Knox are with him. I—I don't like the look of this, you fellows."

"There they go," said Monty Lowther. "Over by the coconut-shy."

There was no doubt about it. All the juniors recognised the tall, broad-shouldered figure of Mr. Railton now, in addition to Kildare and Knox. The three had stopped to speak to the attendant, and in the light from the paraffin flare their faces were clearly visible.

The Housemaster's voice reached them clearly.

"I wish to see the circus proprietor," said Mr. Railton. "Will you kindly tell me where I can find him?"

The coconut-shy attendant took his pipe from his mouth and pointed with it towards the big tent.

"E's inside there," he said reflectively. "Though he ain't likely to see you gents now, sir!"

"But my business is most important!" said Mr. Railton quietly. "I am a master from St. Jim's School, at Rylcombe, and I am in search of seven pupils who have absented themselves from school, and whom I have good reason to believe are being sheltered here. They have been seen here this evening. I must see him, my man!"

"Well, yer can pay your money and go inside if you likes," grunted the man. "But I bet 'e won't see you till after the show. 'E's the ringmaster, yer see."

The Housemaster seemed about to speak again, when he

(Continued on page 16.)

A Short Detective Yarn With a Snap in Every Line!



THE BRONZE STATUETTE!

BY EDMUND BURTON.

Another of the Amazing Exploits of ANTHONY SHARPE—Investigator.

CHAPTER 1.

A Strange Bequest!

ANTHONY SHARPE looked at his visitor and then at the rain-lashed window-panes, smiling as he did so. Tim O'Carroll who was busy with something at a desk in the corner of the cosy sitting-room, also glanced up with interest and, shrewdly interpreting his master's thoughts, grinned in his turn.

"You did not get that bronze in this country, sir," Sharpe laughed. "Our summer, so far, has not been equal to such a task, I regret to say!"

The newcomer, catching the infection, smiled broadly, but almost instantly became grave again. He was a tall, well-built fellow of thirty-three or thereabouts, whose face was burnt a deep brown by a considerable sojourn in some tropical region. According to the card which had announced his call upon the famous investigator, this young man's name was Geoffrey Temple; but as that did not tell Sharpe very much, he prepared to listen carefully to whatever tale his latest client had to unfold.

"No," Temple nodded, "I did not get my colour in England, sir, for I haven't set eyes upon the home country for fully sixteen years. When I was only a lad I cleared out, bitten like many another with the wanderlust, and have knocked about the globe ever since. However, I want to settle down here now—that is, if you will make it possible for me to do so?"

Sharpe leaned forward.

"How can I make it possible, Mr. Temple?" he asked. "Evidently you are in something of a pickle, or you wouldn't have come to me, so perhaps we'd best have it straightened out at the start. Tell me everything, and I shall let you know my opinion."

The newcomer cleared his throat.

"Right, sir!" he said. "I'll begin at the beginning. My parents died when I was quite a nipper, and I was adopted by my uncle, dad's only brother—a man named Silas Barlow. He was reputed to be eccentric—as I confess he was—also something of a miser; yet he seems to have taken a fancy to me, possibly because I was his only brother's only child. At any rate, he took me under his wing, and treated me pretty decently until—well, you know what boys of sixteen or seventeen are, sir. I grew discontented with the humdrum life. I never saw anyone but Uncle Silas and his solitary servant, Jasper Ward, whom I instinctively did not like, and I yearned to

break away to do something for myself, even though I suspected that I should be provided for when my relative died.

"But when I suggested leaving Uncle Silas' anger knew no bounds. He was a strange man at times—hard to understand—and I could only keep him affable by pretending I was quite content to stay in the gloomy house—the Black Grange it's called—indefinitely.

"The consequence was that at length I could stick it no longer. I bolted, running away to sea, and afterwards sent Uncle Silas an affectionate letter from a foreign port, asking him to believe that it wasn't ingratitude on my part which had made me leave him, but that I felt I should go mad if I remained cooped up at home when the world seemed calling me, as it did at that time. You'll probably understand the feeling, Mr. Sharpe."

"Of course I do!" the detective smiled. "Anyone with a spice of adventure in their composition must understand it."

"Quite so!" Temple resumed. "Well, to cut a long story short, I had a reply to my letter, though I scarcely expected one. It was couched in friendly enough terms, and said that the Black Grange would always be open to me at any time I should care to visit it. This rather caused me to feel sore, as it showed that the old chap bore me no ill-will for running off like that. But I had fallen into a promising crib with

good prospects, and didn't desire to come home just then.

"The years passed by, and I had no further word from Uncle Silas, which puzzled me not a little, for I had sent him a longish letter now and then, to which I had no reply; yet he seemed so friendly in his answer to my first. I therefore concluded that they had not reached him by some chance, or that his replies had not been accurately addressed to me; and finally I dropped corresponding, as I got no encouragement to continue. Then, one day, came a communication from a firm of solicitors in London—it had been forwarded on to me from the place I was last stationed at—acquainting me of my uncle's death, and of the fact that I was his sole heir."

"To what property?" Sharpe asked. "To the house and contents, I presume. But was there anything else? You mentioned that the late Mr. Barlow was somewhat eccentric and reputed to be a miser—"

"Wait, sir," Temple cut in. "I'm coming to that. The solicitor's letter was a queer one, I thought. It made me the sole owner of the Black Grange, what little furniture it contained, and a bronze statuette!"

"A bronze statuette?" Sharpe repeated, in some perplexity.

"Yes; a small ornament representing a knight on horseback, which used to stand on the mantelpiece in Uncle Silas' bed-room," Geoffrey Temple



Anthony Sharpe, peered round the bend in the passage and saw an old man digging as if his very life depended on it.

explained. "I remembered having seen it there—being a warlike figure, it rather attracted my boyish taste—and this was mentioned specially in the will."

"How extraordinary!" Anthony Sharpe commented. "Was there anything particular about this statuette? Had it any great historical value or interest?"

Temple shook his head. "Not that I ever heard," he answered. "It was well made, but commonplace enough. You might see the like anywhere. However, I'll get along. I came home, saw the lawyer folk, and established my identity to their satisfaction. Then I took over the Grange, but couldn't find the statuette. I searched high and low without result; and that's why I've come to you, sir. Will you help me to recover the thing, if only to ascertain why such an everyday object should be specially included in my inheritance?"

Anthony Sharpe's keen eyes gleamed. "You may be sure I will!" he smiled. "This case is just the kind of one I fancy most—a small matter which promises to lead us to bigger things—for I feel convinced that ornament is the key to something as yet undiscovered. Also, I do not believe that it has been accidentally mislaid, or you would certainly have found it during your careful search. Now, you mentioned another character in your story—one Jasper Ward, the servant. Where is he now—still alive?"

"I suppose so, though I can't tell you where he is," Temple said. "I heard from the solicitors that Ward was still at the Grange when my uncle died, but that he left immediately afterwards, there being no further call for his services. I learned, however, that he had a married sister living in Bristol—not very far away from my new property—and I rooted her out; but she had neither seen nor heard from her brother for some weeks before his employer's death. I was disappointed, because, though I never cared for the man, I thought he might help me in unearthing this blessed statuette, since he must have been about the last individual who had set eyes upon it. Then it struck me to come along to you, which, as you see, I have."

The famous investigator laughed. "Quite so!" he said. "And I feel just as anxious to locate Ward as you do, for the very same reasons. Mr. Barlow, being so very eccentric, may have hidden the statuette somewhere, and his servant is the only person who could possibly have seen him do so. Should a further close search on our part fail, we must advertise widely for this missing servant of your uncle, Mr. Temple. Tim"—he turned to O'Carroll—"a Bradshaw, please."

Anthony Sharpe flicked the leaves of the railway-guide rapidly. Then he paused and looked up at his caller.

"I see there's an excellent train from Paddington at four-twenty," Mr. Temple," he said. "If that will suit you, the three of us may as well travel together."

To which proposal Geoffrey Temple heartily agreed.

CHAPTER 2.

An Eerie House—Footsteps in the Night!

THE Black Grange was well named. Seeing it in the dusk for the first time, Anthony Sharpe could scarcely repress a feeling of sudden gloom which came over him; whilst Tim O'Carroll actually shuddered.



As the old man handed the bronze statuette to Anthony Sharpe, it divided into two halves, disclosing a folded paper. "There's your legacy, Temple," said Sharpe.

The house was a fairly large one, standing in its own neglected grounds, since the late Mr. Barlow was seemingly anything but a gardening enthusiast. The outer walls looked dark and damp where the riot of ivy growth left them bare in patches; whilst the tall poplars which surrounded the building, silhouetted against the evening sky, suggested so many ghostly fingers pointing heavenwards.

"B-r-r-rh! What a settin' for a crime!" Tim muttered to himself. "I can just imagine a shriek ringin' out, and— B-r-r-rh!"

He shivered again as he followed his master and Geoffrey Temple up the neglected, weed-grown path that led to the main door.

"The outside's the worst," Temple explained half apologetically, as he noticed the damping effect his property seemed to have cast over his guests. "Inside it's not half bad—at least, not since I've made things snug and comfy. Come along!"

The young man's statement was certainly borne out by personal experience, Sharpe and O'Carroll were presently forced to admit, for they soon found themselves in a comfortably furnished room, where a big oil-stove radiated a welcome glow, and where Temple had already been improving matters to the extent of adding several other important things which the apartment previously lacked.

"Must have everything ship-shape, y'know, or I'm unhappy," he said. "Now, we can do with a snack, I fancy. After which I'll show you over the whole outfit."

The Black Grange, as Sharpe later realised, was a very old building—exactly how old he could scarcely make a guess. The corridors and rooms, several of which were still empty of furniture, contained some wonderfully carved panelling, in some cases extending completely from floor to ceiling; whilst the rafters beneath the roof were also of that genuinely solid, age-blackened description which one never sees in a modern house.

The bed-room allotted to Tim and his master was on the floor beneath Temple's, and they retired early that night, with the intention of probing the whole matter carefully first thing in the morning.

But, tired though they were after

their long journey, neither the detective nor his young assistant succeeded in dropping asleep. Whether it was the eeriness of the house in which they found themselves, or whether their thoughts were too full of the latest problem in hand, cannot be said. Whatever the reason, they found slumber an utter impossibility.

It must have been some three hours after retiring that Sharpe gave it up as a bad job, and, slipping into a dressing-gown, he stretched himself in a comfortable chair near the open window. Here, producing his pipe, he was soon puffing out clouds of smoke, in hopes that the soothing weed might lull him into the arms of Morpheus.

All at once he sat erect, his body becoming rigid. From the lower part of the house had sounded the muffled thud of a closing door, yet Geoffrey Temple, the only other occupant the place contained, had already retired to roost on the floor above. Of this Sharpe was positive, since their host had accompanied them both upstairs, and continued up the next flight when he had showed them their bed-chamber.

They had afterwards heard him moving about overhead, then the creak of the spring-mattress as he tumbled into bed; but not a sound since that moment—till now.

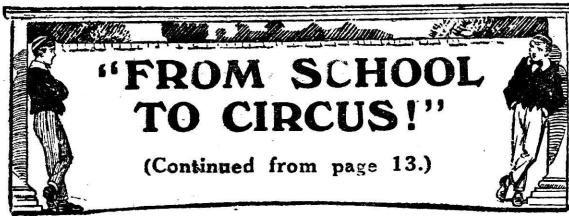
Up to this Sharpe had imagined Tim O'Carroll to be fast asleep in the second bed alongside the far wall, for Tim was usually a sound sleeper. Consequently, he was much surprised to hear his young assistant's voice, through the intervening darkness, as he uttered the same question as had already formed in Sharpe's own mind:

"What was that noise, guv'nor? Did you hear it?"

"Ah, you're awake, then!" the detective replied in a low tone. "Yes, I heard it—and I want to know the cause. It came from below, and there's no wind to-night—Hist! Listen!"

He broke off, and both strained their ears to locate a fresh sound, the direction of which it was impossible to tell accurately. It was like the shuffle of footsteps—very faint, but distinctly audible at intervals. And once or twice it appeared to be in that very room, incredible though such a happening seemed.

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turned abruptly away with an impatient exclamation. For a few moments he stood talking in low tones to the two prefects, and then all three moved towards the big tent. The hidden juniors watched them breathlessly as they paid at the pay-box, and then master and prefects vanished within.

"Well, my hat!" breathed Tom Merry in alarm. "So—so that cad Racke must have spotted us and sneaked. It's all up, you fellows!"

The startled juniors eyed each other in grim silence. From the fact that Racke & Co. had showed no signs of recognition they had believed themselves safe. They knew differently now.

"Well, it can't be helped!" muttered Tom, at last. "We'll have to bolt, and p'r'aps we'll be able to join the circus again somewhere else."

"Perhaps Mr. Stubbs will see us through," suggested Manners hopefully. "Why not wait and see what happens, Tommy? We can easily—"

"Wait a sec," said Tom. "I'll see how the land lies. I expect they have taken seats hoping to spot us inside; but I'll ask them at the pay-box."

And Tom was just about to make a dive for the circus tent when he pulled himself up.

Though the canvas stables were situated at the back of the big tent on the extreme edge of the moor, Tom had a good view of the entrance as well of the back. But though the entrance was brilliantly lit up, the deserted ground at the back was lit only by the light of the moon.

Yet by its feeble light, the junior's sharp eyes had seen something that filled him with uneasy suspicion. It was the figure of a man skulking in the shadows. Even as he glimpsed him, the man left the shadows of the big tent, and, speeding across the moonlit ground, he vanished amid the dense shadows of a bunch of trees.

"Gipsy Joe!" breathed Tom. "Now, what the mischief is that brute up to, you fellows? I'd better warn them at the pay-box that he's about, I think."

But even as Tom spoke, something happened which banished Gipsy Joe and their own predicament from their minds with startling abruptness.

Within the tent the band had just ceased its din, and in the silence which followed there sounded from the tent a sudden, terrified cry—a cry which brought a chill of fear into the hearts of all who heard it.

"Fire!"

For a brief moment the juniors looked at each other, and then, as if by common consent, they pelted across to the lighted entrance. Reaching it, they glanced through the curtained aperture. It was only a glimpse they got—a swift glimpse of the sawdust ring and of the startled people starting from their plush-covered seats, and next instant an evil tongue of flame shot across the ring, followed by a blinding cloud of pungent smoke.

It was only too true; the circus tent was on fire!

What followed seemed like a hideous nightmare to the juniors—and, indeed, everyone there.

In an instant pandemonium reigned, and wild panic seized that tightly-packed tent of humanity.

High above the shouts and screams of the terrified crowd as it fought desperately to get out of the burning tent, the juniors heard Mr. Stubbs bellowing out orders, and then they found themselves struggling amidst a sea of humanity that poured, yelling, through the entrance.

To make matters worse, and to add to the general uproar, the wild beasts, penned in their cages within the tent, began to give tongue, and their howls and roars gave fresh terror to the scene.

Luckily the curtains of the blazing tent had been lifted at the first call of fire, and as the out-rushing crowd thinned down and stopped, Tom Merry and his chums rushed round to help the show-hands who were dragging the menagerie vans out of the blazing tent.

When all was done that could be done, Tom Merry found himself standing with Blake and Lowther outside the burning tent, watching the lurid spectacle. Their hands and faces were blackened and their hair singed.

In the confusion they had become separated from the others, and where D'Arcy, Herries, Manners, and Digby were

they had no idea. But they very soon learned where Arthur Augustus was.

Scarcely had they taken up their stand when a sudden commotion quite close to them made them look round, and at the same moment they heard a well-known voice raised in protest.

"Weally, Kildare, p'way take your hands off me, bai Jove!"

"Not much, my lad!" came Kildare's grim tones. "I thought I recognised that beautiful voice of yours. You're coming back with me to St. Jim's, D'Arcy!"

"Gussy!" groaned Blake. "Kildare's got him! Oh, my hat!"

And with some wild idea in their minds of rescuing the luckless D'Arcy, the juniors dashed up to the group.

It was D'Arcy right enough, and he was struggling in the strong grip of the captain of St. Jim's. But before the juniors could reach the two, someone else had pushed his way through the gaping onlookers, and clutched Kildare by the arm.

It was Gerald Knox, and his face was white.

"Kildare," he panted hoarsely, "where—where is Mr. Railton?"

"Mr. Railton?" echoed Kildare, with a start. "I don't know. He was with me helping the stragglers out a couple of minutes ago; but I've lost sight of him since. Why, you don't—"

He broke off startled by the look on Knox's face.

"He—he went in again," stammered Knox. "Someone said that a kiddie had been left behind. He—he went back again, and—and I don't think he came out."

For an instant Kildare stared blankly at Knox's shaking features. Then, releasing D'Arcy, he went dashing through the performers' entrance, and vanished in the blinding smoke.

"Oh, bai Jove!"

Like the white-faced senior, the juniors stared aghast at the spot where Kildare had disappeared. But they were not content with staring; unlike the shivering Knox, they were built of sterner stuff.

The next moment, as if moved by the same spring, Tom Merry, Blake, D'Arcy, and Lowther, were racing after Kildare. They went through the entrance with a rush; but once inside they halted, coughing and panting, and aghast at the raging inferno inside.

For the fraction of a second they stood, striving to penetrate the suffocating smoke, flecked with whirling sparks that enveloped them; and then, with a cry, Tom Merry darted forward, his head bent low.

His chums did the same, for a gust of wind had revealed to them the centre of the ring where a solitary paraffin flare still gleamed like a beacon through the fog of smoke. It also revealed the figure of Kildare stooping over something on the sawdust floor.

How they reached the spot they never knew. The loud reports as the poles supporting the structure snapped, the roar of the flames as they leaped through the canvas roof, deafened and dazed them. The intense heat scorched their faces, and their eyes burned and felt like bursting.

But they did reach the spot, and they acted like lightning.

Stretched out on the sawdust lay Mr. Railton, and in his arms was the little girl he had gone in to save. Only a glimpse they got as they lurched up, for even as Kildare took the child from the unconscious master's clasp, and staggered blindly away, the juniors were grasping the unconscious master, and were staggering, half-carrying, half-dragging their burden in his wake.

The whole operation had taken scarcely ten seconds, but it had seemed like a long, ghastly nightmare to the juniors, and as they reached the entrance, where willing hands took their burden from them, they reeled, gasping for breath, into the open.

But the fresh air soon roused them, and some moments later, they were in time to see Mr. Railton open his eyes as a showman splashed water into his white face.

"Feel better now, sir?" asked Kildare anxiously, as he knelt by his master's side.

Mr. Railton sat up, clasping his head dazedly.

"Yes, Kildare. It was my head. Something—a flying splinter of wood, I suppose—felled me as I was rushing out with the child. But—the child, Kildare? Is she—"

"Right as rain, sir," said Kildare. "They've just taken her home, and the taxi is coming back for us. I—I say, sir," added Kildare grimly, "do you know who saved you—who brought you out of that?"

Tom Merry and his chums heard the question; but they did not hear the answer. They did not wait to hear it.

"This is where we mizzle, my pippins," whispered Tom Merry, clutching Blake's arm. "Let's hop it while the going's good."

It was good advice, and next moment Tom, followed by his chums, was slipping quietly through the gaping crowd. Nor did they show themselves again until the taxi bearing

Mr. Railton, Kildare, and Knox had buzzed off towards St. Jim's.

By that time they had succeeded in running Herries, Manners, and Digby down in the stables, where the missing trio had been helping the grooms to quieten the frightened horses. By that time, also, the fire brigade had put in a belated arrival, and together the seven chums watched the finish of the fire.

It was soon over. To save the big tent was hopeless, and the firemen concentrated all their efforts on preventing the fire from spreading. Luckily the show hands, by frantic efforts, had succeeded in removing all the livestock and movable articles, so that only the tent itself suffered.

The firemen stayed until all that was left of the big tent was nothing but a heap of smoking ruins, and then they departed, and with them went the last few straggling spectators who had stopped to see the end.

"Well," said Tom Merry, as the flickering lamps began to go out on the fair-ground, "I think it's about time we turned in. We've got to be up early in the morning, remember, and get out of this. There'll be a swarm of prefects here after us to-morrow. I don't like the idea—Hallo, here's poor old Stubbs!"

The circus proprietor came down the steps of his van just then, and as he sighted the boys he came across to them.

"You kids all right?" he asked, his smoke-grimed face grave for once. "I 'ear you've been distinguishing yourselves."

The juniors had been hoping for a chance to explain matters to the kindly showman, but up to now they had not dared to worry him with their troubles.

"We're all right, Mr. Stubbs," said Tom. "But—but, I say, we're awfully sorry about this. It's awful for you."

"Not as bad as it might 'ave been, lads," said Mr. Stubbs. "Only the tent's gone; and luckily that's well covered with insurance. I'm only thankful as there was no tragedy—which I reckon there would have been but for you lads. I 'ear as—"

He broke off abruptly. At that moment a man came running across the pitch, shouting as he ran. It was Samson, the burly giant who had charge of the wild animals. His face was white and scared.

"Quick, boss!" he yelled. "Nero's loose—gone!"

"Wha-at?"

"Nero; that big Nubian; the worst-tempered lion in the bunch," yelled the man. "Is cage's empty. The brute's escaped, boss!"

CHAPTER 8.

The Hunt!

NERO, the biggest and most dangerous wild beast in the circus, had escaped!

Mr. Stubbs staggered back, his face white under the grime. For the moment he seemed utterly stunned by this new catastrophe.

The next moment, however, he had recovered himself, and his powerful voice was rousing the camp again.

Men answered the call at once, and came tumbling out of tent and van, and soon Mr. Stubbs was rapping orders out right and left. Men's faces blanched as they grasped the news, and, though all were tired out by their strenuous exertions that evening, they jumped to the call without murmuring.

In a very few moments lanterns, firearms, weapons of every description were hunted out, and parties of men organised and sent out in various directions.

The lion-tamer had already made certain that the escaped animal was nowhere about the camp before reporting the terrible news to Mr. Stubbs, and, as it could scarcely have crossed the camp without being seen, it was fairly obvious that the brute had made for the open moor.

The fact that the wild animals' cages had been dragged out on to the moor, out of danger from the fire, added colour to this view.

Accordingly, most of the search-parties were sent across the moor, whilst others went to scour Rylcombe Woods.

In the meantime, Tom Merry & Co. had been by no means out of it. As Mr. Stubbs rushed away, forgetful of the juniors now, they looked at each other, their eyes gleaming with excitement.

"My only hat!" breathed Tom Merry, his eyes dancing. "We're going to be in this, chaps. Fancy taking part in a lion hunt, eh!"

"Bai Jove!"

"After all," said Tom Merry grimly, "we're members of the circus now, and it's our duty to help—nothing less! Come on!"

And, as his chums fully agreed with this view, they were soon hunting round for weapons. Tom managed to get hold of a crowbar, whilst his chums armed themselves with stout sticks; though of what use those seven juniors, armed

with a crowbar and stout sticks would be against a savage and full-grown lion none of the reckless juniors stopped to think.

Scarcely noticed in the scurry and haste, the juniors attached themselves to the party under the leadership of the burly tamer himself, and soon they were hurrying across the moorland, eyes and ears open for sight or sound of the escaped brute.

It was a bright, moonlight night, ideal for such a hunt, and for an hour the party scoured the rough ground, all of them becoming more and more worried and anxious as the minutes passed without sight or sound of their quarry.

But at last, as they were skirting the black mass of the woods at the edge of the moor, they heard a crashing in the woods, and a party of men bearing swinging lanterns emerged.

"Any luck?" shouted Samson, as they came running up. It was Mr. Stubbs himself who answered.

"Didn't you see the brute, Samson?" he shouted. "He was skulking in the woods, an' he bolted when he saw our lights. He came out somewhere hereabouts, and—By hokey! There he is!"

He pointed across the dark moorland. Along a ridge some hundred yards away, and clearly outlined against the sky, a dim, skulking figure was creeping. Only for a moment they saw it, and then it vanished beyond the ridge.

"Come on—sharp, lads!" cried Mr. Stubbs. "You, Samson, take your lot an' try to cut 'im off."

They surged forward, and, almost without realising it, Tom Merry and his chums found themselves running alongside the big tamer, their hearts thumping, and almost breathless with excitement.

They soon reached and passed the ridge, and then, as they were running down the far side, they were brought to a sudden halt.

From the shadows of a dark spinney to the right of them there sounded a sudden, terrifying roar that almost froze the blood in their veins. It was followed almost instantly by a scream—a human scream, shrill and terrible to hear.

"By hokey!" ejaculated the lion tamer.

He bounded forward, his jaw set hard, and fingering his rifle as he ran. They had hoped to capture the brute without harming it, if they could; but that significant and terrible cry had settled the matter.

Some of the weaker spirits among the showmen hung back, but Tom Merry and his chums went forward on the tamer's heels without faltering, though that cry had brought their hearts to their mouths.

And then, without warning, Samson tripped suddenly, and as he sprawled headlong his rifle flew from his grasp. And it was Tom Merry who saved the situation.

He had already caught a swift glimpse of the brute as it crouched over a dark object in the grass, and, snatching a lantern from the hand of the man nearest to him, he flung it with all his force.

The lantern flew through the air, bursting into a blaze as it went, and struck the lion full in the body. With a scream of mingled rage and terror that seemed almost human, the brute bounded away, flames licking its body as the burning paraffin spread.

Then another startling thing happened.

There sounded a sudden crash of splintering wood, a terrified roar, and in the short silence which followed a distant splash reached their ears.

"Look out! Keep back!" yelled Tom Merry, realising at once what had happened.

Only just in time did Samson pull himself up as he ran forward to investigate. And then, as he stopped by the railing through which the lion had smashed, he understood.

Thirty feet below him, placid and shining in the moonlight, was the old quarry pool. On the surface a dark object was swimming. It reached a ledge in the rocky wall of the quarry even as he looked, and, clambering out with difficulty, it crouched there, and the rocky walls echoed to its savage growls and roars.

"Well, I'm blowed!" ejaculated Samson. "Old Nero don't like that, I'll bet! Anyway, 'e's safe enough there for a bit. Old Nero don't like water, and I guess we'll soon 'ave 'im out o' that in the morning."

He returned with Tom Merry to where a dark group of figures surrounded a still form on the grass.

"It's Gipsy Joe!" said a man in an awed voice. "No, he ain't dead, but 'e's bin badly mauled. Must 'a' bin wandering about the moor, an' the brute collared 'im."

"Looks in a bad way," said Mr. Stubbs who had joined the group. "Where's the nearest place—anybody know?"

"St. Jim's is the nearest," said Tom Merry. "There's a sanny there and a trained nurse. The Head will be only too glad to help."

In silence the injured man was lifted on to a fence hastily torn down for the purpose, and, leaving a few men to guard the captive down in the quarry, the party bearing the

stretcher started across the moor for St. Jim's. The juniors accompanied them to the gates of the school; but there they left them, and started on the long tramp back across the moor to their caravan. They had said nothing to the showmen of their suspicions. In their own minds they had little doubt that Gipsy Joe had caused the fire—had set fire to the tent to satisfy his cravings for revenge. For in his hour of triumph swift justice had overtaken the wretch. And the juniors left it at that.

Despite the happenings of that eventful night, Tom Merry & Co. were astir early the next morning. The noise of the showmen returning with the recaptured lion, hauled at dawn from the quarry pool by means of nets, ropes, and pulleys, and docile enough now, had wakened them, and they had dressed quickly enough. Before many hours passed they knew that the authorities from St. Jim's would be on their track, and they were determined to be miles away by then.

Inside the caravan, Blake, Herries, Manners, and Lowther were busy packing up. Outside, in the bright sunshine, with the smell of frizzling bacon in their nostrils, Tom Merry, D'Arcy, and Digby were attending to breakfast. They looked up from their various tasks as a shadow fell across them.

Then they jumped. It was Mr. Railton. He stood there with a half-smile on his pale face.

"Oh, bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus, almost dropping the frying-pan in his astonishment.

"Good-morning, boys!" said the Housemaster blandly. "I trust that breakfast will not occupy you long, in order that you will be able to accompany me back to St. Jim's."

Silence! Then Tom Merry found his tongue.

"Mr. Railton," he said through his teeth, "we—we're not coming back to St. Jim's—at least, not until the Head has withdrawn that unjust sentence of flogging. We are innocent—"

"Then in that case," interrupted Mr. Railton quietly, "I will wait for you, and Dr. Holmes' car will take us all back together. For the sentence is already withdrawn."

"My boys," he went on, smiling at the juniors' amazed looks, "last night an injured man—known, I believe, as Gipsy Joe—was admitted to the school sanatorium. In his delirium the wretched man made certain statements that, on being repeated to Dr. Holmes and myself, caused us, on his

recovery, to question him. And, to be brief, it is now clear without possible doubt, that Gipsy Joe was the person who set fire to the study the other night.

"He broke into the school," continued Mr. Railton, "partly from motives of robbery, and partly out of the desire for revenge upon you boys. It was apparently mere chance, however, that took him to your study, Merry; and whether he set fire to the room out of malice, or whether he accidentally set fire to the place by dropping the cigarette he was smoking, we do not know. At all events, his confession—such as it is—clears you boys completely."

"Oh, bai Jove!"

"But," said Mr. Railton quietly, "even had not these facts come to light, the sentence of flogging would never have been carried out. After what took place in the circus tent last night, Dr. Holmes and myself had already decided to forgive and forget. But for your heroism, my boys, I myself would not be standing here now. And you may be sure that neither Dr. Holmes, myself, nor the school will soon forget. Now will you accompany me back, boys?"

Would they? The juniors' shining eyes told him that. "Very well," smiled the master. "I think I can promise you that a welcome awaits you at St. Jim's. And now may I join you at breakfast? That bacon smells good!"

Mr. Railton's promise was fulfilled. Breakfast was just over at St. Jim's as the juniors—rebels no longer—passed through the gates with Mr. Railton, and from every part of the old quad fellows rushed to greet the returned heroes. And when at last the seven juniors were lowered to their feet on the School House steps, they were breathless and panting, but gloriously happy.

"Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus, beaming around him. "I must remark that I told you fellahs that if you followed my lead it would all come wight. And it has, bai Jove!"

And, though they did not remember having heard Gussy tell them so, Tom Merry & Co. were forced to agree it had.

THE END.

(Another splendid yarn by famous Martin Clifford next week, boys, entitled: "TRUE CHUMS!" Be sure and read it. You will be well advised to order next week's GEM early, as there is bound to be a great rush for this splendid bumper number.)



Tuck Hampers and Money Prizes Awarded for Interesting Paragraphs.

(If You Do Not Win a Prize This Week—You May Next!)

All Efforts in this Competition should be Addressed to: The GEM LIBRARY, "My Readers' Own Corner," Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C.4.

THIS WINS OUR TUCK HAMPER.

A SLIGHT MISUNDERSTANDING.

Mrs. Newlyrich was going to the motor-garage to buy a Talbot car. When she arrived there, she discovered she had forgotten the name of the car. "Is it a Ford?" asked the assistant. "No," replied the woman. "Is it a Rolls-Royce?" "No." "An Overstrand?" "No; but I think it begins with 'T.'" "Oh, missus," exclaimed the assistant, "you've come to the wrong shop. All our cars start with petrol!"—A Tuck Hamper filled with delicious tuck has been awarded to E. M. Stott, 63, Syke Road, Rochdale.

VERY PAINFUL.

An early-morning customer, a young woman with a very determined air, addressed a salesman in an optician's shop. "I want to get a pair of eyeglasses with an extra-strong magnifying power, please. While visiting the country I made a very painful blunder which I never want to repeat!" "Indeed, madam!" said the optician. "Did you mistake a stranger for an acquaintance?" "Well, no—er—not exactly

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that. I mistook a bumble-bee for a blackberry!"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to J. B. Sim, c.o., Mrs. G. Hynd, Kingseathill, Dunfermline.

SEEING IS BELIEVING!

Mrs. Brown fancied a bit of turnip for her dinner, so she asked her husband if he would mind calling upon Mr. Jones, who owned an allotment. The husband obliged, and hurried away. Being a little sensitive, he asked Mr. Jones what size turnip he should take back to his wife. "Oh," replied Mr. Jones, "get one as big as your head!" Mr. Brown went to the allotment, but before a quarter of an hour had elapsed, one of Mr. Jones' pals came running up to the allotment-owner, gasping and breathing very hard. "What ever is the matter?" asked Mr. Jones, somewhat startled. "Oh!" exclaimed the friend. "There's a lunatic on your allotment. He's gone and dug up all your turnips, and is now trying his cap on every one of them!"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to Thomas Thorne, 13, Henthorne Street, off New Road, Blackpool.

POINTLESS!

A party of cricketers were travelling from London to Glasgow, and one of them, considering himself smart, was telling funny stories. An old Scotsman, sitting in a corner seat of the compartment, apparently took not the slightest notice, and no matter how loud the laughter, went on quietly reading his paper. This exasperated the storyteller, until he at last said: "I think it would take an inch auger to put a joke into a Scotsman's head." The quiet titter which followed was broken suddenly by a voice from behind the paper, which said: "Ay, mon! But it would need tae hae a finer point than any o' your stories. Ah'm thinking!"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to A. Yelland, 63, Broadfield Road, Sheffield.

TUCK HAMPER COUPON.

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A TALE OF AUSTRALIA—THE LAND OF GOLDEN OPPORTUNITIES!



THE CALL OF FREEDOM

by Cecil Fanshaw.

A London page-boy grasps at the chance offered him with both hands, and leaves behind him the cramped life of the great city, to find new interests and adventures on a Tasmanian farm.

CHAPTER 1.
A New Venture!

“WOULDN'T I just give something to always live out o' doors,” sighed Peter Mansfield, “away from these bloomin' streets! I'm fair sick o' London!”

It was the afternoon of a brilliant July day, and Peter, a well-grown lad of fifteen, was wandering disconsolately up the Strand; not knowing how to spend his “afternoon off,” for he was a page-boy at a third-class Bloomsbury Hotel, and his wages did not admit of much pleasure-seeking. Moreover, he was by nature an outdoor lad, and would have scorned to waste a sun-drenched afternoon in a stuffy cinema, his thoughts always turning to the Surrey hills amongst which he had spent his early youth.

So, jostled by the crowd, Peter continued his aimless wandering up the Strand until, suddenly, the sight of a large stone building brought him to a halt.

“That's Australia House,” muttered the lad, who knew the place well enough, but had never been inside. “I wonder what there is to see? Believe it's a free show. Here's trying, anyway!”

Without more ado Peter crossed the road, dodging the roaring traffic, giving a ready answer to a taxi-man who abused him, and a moment later reached his goal.

He found his surmise was correct—there was nothing to pay to enter Australia House. And as he strolled round the big rooms, gazing now at specimens of Australian produce, now at photographs of wide, boundless ranches, which breathed the very atmosphere of freedom and the outdoor life under cloudless skies, his old yearning to be quit of cities and “dead-end” jobs gripped him harder and harder.

“Gee! How I wish I could go!” exclaimed the lad to himself as he turned away from one of the entrancing pictures, heartsick with longing.

“Well, and why shouldn't you?” said voice at his elbow.

Peter jumped round, to see a middle-aged gentleman, who, unobserved, had been watching the lad and noting his keen interest in the exhibits.

For a moment Peter thought he was having his leg pulled, and jerked out:

“Why shouldn't I? Well, I ain't a bloomin' millionaire, guv'nor!”

Then he saw his mistake, for the gentleman went on:

“You don't need to be wealthy to go out to Australia, my boy. Many a man who went out with nothing has made his pile out there. Why shouldn't you? We're sending boys out regularly for work on the land.”

“What?” cried Peter, thinking of his “dead-end” job and the glorious possibilities held out to him. “Do you mean to say I could really go, sir? What about the passage money, anyway?”

“You could certainly go,” was the reply, “if you're as healthy as you look. As for the passage money, you'd only be liable for twenty-two pounds—twelve of which could be lent you, to be repaid out of your first earnings in Australia. So you'd only have to find ten pounds now, and deposit two pounds for ‘landing money,’ but those two pounds would be refunded to you on your arrival at an Australian port. How's that?”

But Peter shook his head sadly. “That makes twelve pounds I'd have to find now, sir,” he said as his heart sank again. “Why, all I've got in the world is twelve bob! No, sir, I couldn't even find those twelve pounds.”

“Haven't you got any parents—anyone who'd help you?” said the official kindly, anxious to help so keen a youngster.

“No, sir, no one,” replied Peter. “Both my parents are dead—father killed in the War, my mother died two years back. I was brought up in Surrey, but there's no work to be had there now—the farmers are all hard-up, an' don't want more hands than they can help—so I came to London, and had to take any job I could get. I'm a page-boy in a little hotel. Lor', I'd give a heap to get out to Australia!”

Peter ended helplessly, but the official seemed greatly impressed by the boy's keenness.

“Look here, my lad,” he said suddenly, “you seem just the right sort of boy. We send out a lot of lads like you for farm work—with previous experience or without it. It doesn't matter about the

experience, so long as they're keen and strong. Directly they arrive they're found employment with an approved farmer for one or three years, for there's a lot to learn about local conditions, in any case. After that period they should know their jobs thoroughly, and there are heaps of opportunities on the land. By the way, what's your name? And how old are you?”

“Peter Mansfield's my name, sir, an' I'm fifteen.”

“Indeed! You look more. You're a big lad for fifteen. Well, just wait a moment.”

Leaving Peter consumed with anxiety the official hurried away, but was back in a moment with a sheaf of papers.

“Just look at these, my lad,” he said kindly. “Take them home and study them, then fill up the forms and return them here. Look,” he went on, running his finger down a page, “this is the sort of information wanted: Have you got any friends in Australia? Is there any particular part you want to go to?”

“No, sir,” answered Peter, “I've got no friends out there, an' I'd be glad to go to any part.”

“Well, you'd best make up your mind and choose some part. And, as you've got no parents, you must get your guardian's consent.”

“I've got no guardian, either,” replied Peter. “I'm on my own.”

“Dear me! Then you'd be very well-advised to go, for you've got no home ties. For the matter of that, no boy who wants a good life with boundless opportunities could do better than go out to Australia. But you must give two references—responsible people—as to your character. I suppose you could do that?”

“Yes, sir, rather!” cried Peter. “There's a parson, and a gent who used to be a solicitor living at the hotel where I work. They've been there as long as I have—a couple of years. Would they do?”

“Yes, splendid! Just take these papers back with you, fill them up, and send them in with your references. And, later on, we'll want a medical certificate as to your fitness.”

“Oh, I'm fit enough, sir!” cried Peter, almost beside himself with delight. But

he added quickly: "What about the money, sir—that ten or twelve pounds?"

"Don't you worry your head about the money," said the official, laying his hand on Peter's shoulder and guiding him towards the door. "That'll be arranged all right. I can see you're the very type of boy we want. I suppose you could get the outfit required?"

Peter glanced at the list and nodded. It was not formidable—merely the ordinary clothing required for farm work anywhere.

"Yes, sir," he said, "I could manage that. But how soon could I go? I want to go at once. I don't want to have to wait."

The official smiled delightedly. This was certainly an extraordinarily keen lad.

"Well," he said, after considering a moment, "there's a party of about forty going out to Victoria and Tasmania in a fortnight, in charge of a superintendent. The number taken for Tasmania is limited; but one boy, who was approved, has dropped out—fallen ill. You could go in his place, provided you're accepted. Would you like to go to Tasmania? There are dairy and sheep-farms there, and a great many apple-orchards."

"Why, yes, sir!" answered Peter. "Tasmania would suit me O K!"

"Very well. You get your papers in as quickly as possible."

Peter stammered out his thanks as the official turned away. Then, clutching his precious papers, he was out of the door and bounding down the steps in a moment. Having gained the opposite pavement, he paused, and looked back at Australia House. It now seemed to Peter a sort of Aladdin's palace—a place a boy with no prospects could enter and receive a passport to a wider and bigger life.

All the way back to Russell Square and along the dingy side street to Flashman's Hotel the boy was hugging the secret of his wonderful future. He had started out that afternoon not knowing or caring where his footsteps would lead him. Had anyone suggested that he might be embarking on the first stage of a voyage to Tasmania, Peter would have had a retort ready for such ill-advised chaff.

But the unexpected had happened, and not even the gloomy aspect of the dilapidated hotel could damp the boy's spirits. Hardly had he entered the dark, musty-smelling hall when a voice from the back called out:

"Paige! Paige! 'Urry up! 'Ave yer only just got back? Where the mischief 'ave yer been?"

"Right-ho!" cried Peter.

But he was not going to share the story of his afternoon's adventures with anyone. He would not be at the beck and call of twenty different people much longer.

Again the nagging voice cried:

"Paige! Paige!"

"Coming!" answered Peter. "I'm coming!"

CHAPTER 2.

A Gruelling Fight!

"GEE! Only ten more days to Melbourne!" cried Peter enthusiastically. "We mayn't have much money, but we do see life!"

The Beltana had just left Durban for Melbourne, and as she cleaved her way forward, leaving two long furrows of foam in her wake, Peter leaned against a bulwark and gazed at the white houses

of the port of Natal, now falling rapidly astern. As the boy gazed, his mind reverted to the events of the last five weeks.

First there had been his visit to Australia House. Then, ten days later, he had received a letter telling him his application to go to Tasmania had been approved. Within four days—days of considerable excitement for Peter—he had had to join the Beltana, together with forty other lads, bound for Melbourne and Tasmania. Madeira, Cape Town, and now Durban had each been visited and left behind. There remained only the last stage of the journey.

"Wot yer starin' at? Wish yer was back in England? I know I do!"

A harsh voice had broken in on Peter's musing, causing the boy to turn round in wonder. He immediately recognised the speaker—a rather heavy-featured, red-haired fellow called Carey, who, like Peter, was one of those bound for Tasmania. Hitherto Peter had avoided this individual, who throughout the voyage had been conspicuous for his discontent with everything.

But now that Carey had forced himself on Peter, the latter replied:

"What did you come for, then? It wasn't compulsory. I dare say Tasmania could do without you!"

"Nah, then, none o' yer sauce, kid," cried Carey truculently, "or I'll knock yer blinkin' block off!"

"Come an' do it!" invited Peter.

The other's reply was a swinging blow at the head, which Peter, ducking, avoided. Carey rapped his knuckles smartly on an iron pillar, and bellowed with pain. Turning, he jabbed savagely at Peter with his left fist. Peter warded off the blow from his heavy antagonist, and got home an uppercut that jolted Carey severely. But Peter's triumph was short-lived. As he lunged forward the ship gave a roll, and, losing his balance, the boy crashed heavily to the deck, face downwards in the scupper.

Carey saved himself by clutching at the rails. Then he jumped on Peter's back before the latter could rise. Seizing the lighter boy by the back of his neck, Carey proceeded to grind his face in the iron channel of the scupper.

"Now, then, you boys!" cried a voice. "That's not the way to fight!"

Shamefacedly Carey rose to his feet, to confront Mr. Burton, the superintendent in charge of the boys' party.

"This kid sauced me, sir," began Carey, "an' I ain't 'aving none!"

"It doesn't matter what the trouble is," replied Mr. Burton. "If you've got anything to fight about, do it properly—like British boys. We'll make a ring this afternoon, and both you lads can settle your grievances properly—with gloves on."

"Top-hole, sir!" cried Peter, who had also scrambled up, his face skinned in places. The foul attack, when he was already down, rankled in the boy's mind.

But Carey, as usual, raised an objection.

"We don't want no gloves, sir!" he said. "Let's 'ave it out with bare fists!"

But to this suggestion Mr. Burton turned a deaf ear. He could see the red-headed lout wanted to smash the smaller boy, and felt confident of being able to do it.

"It'll be a glove-fight," he said, turning away. "At two o'clock. And see you don't get scrapping again meanwhile."

As Mr. Burton moved off along the deck Carey turned menacingly on Peter.

"I'll spoil yer blinkin' dial altogether, me lad, this afternoon!" he said.

"Right-ho!" answered Peter cheerfully. "But don't jump on my back when you've knocked me out, will you?" he added, in mock terror.

The news of the match spread rapidly over the ship, so that at two o'clock, when ropes were produced and a ring was made on the after-deck, a good many passengers besides the boy emigrants had assembled.

The lads themselves were full of enthusiasm, for Carey was not a little of a bully, and had made himself very unpopular; while the merry ex-page-boy had been the life and soul of the whole party.

The ship was rolling slightly as the two boys, wearing knickers and vests, stepped into the ring. Carey, who wanted to make certain of things, at once raised an objection.

"Better wait till it's steadier," he grumbled.

"It's the same for both of you," said Mr. Burton. "Get on with it before it gets worse!"

He pulled out his watch; the fight was about to commence.

"Time!" he shouted a moment later, and the seconds jumped out of the ring.

The difference between the two boys was at once obvious. Carey had a tremendous advantage in reach and weight, but Peter was a great deal nipper, and possessed some science.

Carey led off with a wild charge that carried Peter back to the ropes, but with short-arm body blows the ex-page-boy forced his opponent back into the centre. A couple of straight lefts stopped two more rushes, and Carey began to realise that he had taken on more than he had bargained for. The end of the first round found the bigger boy puffing and blowing from his strenuous efforts to end the fight quickly and spectacularly.

"Go it, Peter!" shouted the boys, when the second round started. "Give 'Ginger' his gruel!"

But both combatants had learnt caution. Carey realised he would soon wear himself out if he persisted in slogging, while Peter's chief object was to entice the other to exhaust himself and then wade in.

Towards the end of the second round Carey lost his temper, and began to hit wildly again, slamming out with both fists, even dealing one or two with the open glove; but Peter dodged and ducked cleverly, getting home once or twice.

Two more rounds were fought, neither gaining much advantage, and, unperceived, the roll of the ship increased all the while.

For the fourth time the youngsters faced each other, and were quickly hard at it; while the spectators cheered, unheeding the coming storm. But the sky grew rapidly blacker and blacker, and the steamer began to roll heavily in the trough of the waves.

Then the storm burst, with one of those wild shrieks that often herald the hurricane. Driven rain lashed the decks, sending spectators flying for shelter, shouting to the two boys to break off as they ran.

But Peter and Carey, worked up to fighting pitch, hammered on—now sliding, now falling and rolling on the wet deck, then scrambling up and slogging on without rests.

The sea had rapidly lashed itself to a frenzy, white-crested waves shot past in a boiling torrent of spume. Thunder crashed and rolled, while stabs of vivid lightning split the semi-darkness, and the rain hissed down. But the two boys, water streaming off them, their gloves cast aside, battled on, keeping their feet as best they might.

The end came suddenly. A heavy gust of wind caught Carey as he lunged forward, sent him clean across the deck in one bound, and slammed him up against the rails, all the breath knocked out of his body.

Like a flash Peter was after him, just in time he gripped the other’s legs as the deck rose higher and higher behind them, and the sea raged under their very feet. With one hand Peter clung to the senseless Carey, with the other he sought and gripped a stanchion, then shouted for help, his voice lost in the din of the raging elements.

But help was at hand, and Peter felt himself gripped by the arm. It was Mr. Burton. Naturally, in the scurry, when a hundred people were dashing for shelter from the first blast of the storm, the superintendent had lost sight of the two boys. Once in the big saloon, to his horror, he discovered that both Peter and Carey were missing. At the risk of his life, as the ship rolled and pitched her worst, he had forced open the heavy door, slammed home by the wind, and had grappled his way aft, finding the two boys in the nick of time.

The ship’s crew had been so fully occupied that the two boys had not been noticed. Three passengers, who had assisted in the search, had failed in the gathering gloom. It was to the superintendent that the two boys owed their lives.

For a moment the man and the boys crouched by the rails, powerless to move. Then came a lull in the storm. Carrying Carey, dragging Peter, Mr. Burton rushed the two boys into safety. Carey soon regained consciousness, and then Mr. Burton expressed himself freely.

However, if the superintendent had rescued both boys, Carey, in the first instance, had been saved by Peter. But the ill-conditioned fellow showed no gratitude, and for the rest of the voyage was as surly as ever. Indeed, he maintained stoutly that had it not been for the storm he would have whipped Peter with one hand; but he did not seem anxious for another trial.

Ten days after leaving Durban the Beltana made Melbourne, and most of the boys left the ship, bound for farms in Victoria. Only ten remained on board, whose destinies lay in Tasmania, and included in that number were Peter and Carey. And three days later the ship arrived at Hobart, and Peter gazed for the first time on the island’s capital.

“I guess,” he exclaimed, as he drank in the scenery, Mount Wellington towering behind the beautiful town, “life in this country is going to beat life in Bloomsbury—not ‘arf! I reckon I’m not sorry I came!”

CHAPTER 3.

Mr. Caldwell Waxes Wrath!

“WHAT an extraordinary line!” gasped Peter suddenly.

He was on the way from Hobart to Launceston, and as the train swung round and round wooded hills, seeming always to dodge obstructions and never tunnel through them, the boy could not keep back his astonishment. Indeed, such was the corkscrew-like track of the metals, it seemed as if a person in the forepart of the train could lean out and shake hands with someone in a rear carriage, as the tail approached a hairpin bend.

“Yes, my lad,” chuckled the only other passenger in Peter’s carriage, “rum line. Follows the line of least resistance, don’t it?”

The speaker—Peter’s new boss—was a big, middle-aged man, named Caldwell. In appearance he was a typical pioneer

farmer of the old school, with his heavy moustache, broad-brimmed felt hat, and rough suit. The English clothes and smart hats of the younger generation did not appeal to him. Old Caldwell was an out-and-out Conservative, with only one vice—a habit of making feeble jokes.

But Peter had taken to his new boss at once, and quickly realised he was in clover. For Caldwell—to whom Peter had been apprenticed for his first year in Tasmania—having business in Hobart, had met the boy on arrival, and had at once carted him off for lunch at a good hotel. Followed a scramble to catch the afternoon train for the north end of the island, and Peter was very pleased with the commencement of his Colonial life.

After six hours on the train, Launceston was reached, and the last part of the journey to Caldwell’s place at Karoola was to be done by road, Caldwell driving his big, two-wheeled, one-horse trap, which he had left in Launceston, not wishing to be dependent on trains. The distance from the town to the estate was eighteen miles, and the road wound round and round small hills, covered with bush and tall gum trees, but Peter could see little, for night had fallen.

His new boss, Peter found on arrival at Karoola, was a married man, and Mrs. Caldwell soon made the English boy feel at home. He was allotted a room at the back of the wooden bungalow, and was glad to retire early, for the next morning would see him getting down to his new job.

That there would be plenty to do, Peter had already learned, for Caldwell had only one other assistant, his brother, who was also his partner, at present

away on a holiday. In the “picking season” extra help could be obtained from the village.

The next morning Peter was early astir, determined to show that he was going to be of use. But his boss was on the veranda as soon as he was, and told him to “step lively and follow round.”

Peter came in for one surprise after another. A Tasmanian orchard was so totally unlike anything he had ever seen or imagined. To begin with, the month being September, and, therefore, spring, the parallel rows and rows of apple-trees were a mass of blossom; but the ground under the trees was absolutely clean. Not a blade of grass showed. Then, the whole orchard, about a hundred acres, was enclosed by a fence of wire-netting about four feet high, to keep out rabbits, so Peter was informed.

One boundary of the orchard was formed by a river, on another was a paddock, in which grazed Mrs. Caldwell’s solitary cow, on the two remaining boundaries was unclaimed “bush.”

“Two things you’d best be careful of, my lad,” said Caldwell, “when you go shootin’ in the bush. Don’t go settin’ the ‘sags’ alight.”

“Sags, sir!” echoed Peter. “What’s that?”

“Clumps of grass. We call ‘em ‘sags.’ They get mighty dry in summer. T’other thing is, don’t go bathing in the river above that pipe-line. All our drinkin’ water comes from there, pumped up by thet windmill you can see.”

Peter nodded. These orders would not be hard to carry out.

In the days that followed Peter was



Peter and Carey, worked up to fighting pitch, hammered on—now sliding, now falling and rolling on the wet deck—whilst the white-crested waves shot past in a boiling torrent of spume.

fully occupied. The ploughing in the orchard had been finished before he arrived, but the harrowing, to keep the ground entirely clean, had only just commenced. Peter, who had worked on a farm in Surrey when a small boy, soon showed he could handle horses, and was often left by himself with a pair of horses dragging a harrow. These horses knew their job thoroughly, even ducking when passing under an apple-tree, never grazing a blossom.

For nearly a month things were quiet at Karoola, Peter loving his outdoor life more and more every day. In this gorgeous climate, smoke-grimed London was being rapidly forgotten. Then, one evening the boy got a surprise.

Dusty and tired after a long day's work, he had gone down to the river to have a dip, when something in the water caught his eye. The next moment he recognised it—the flaming head of Carey. Peter had forgotten all about Carey, since parting from that youth at Hobart, but probably the fellow was working on the orchard across the river, and had also come down for a dip.

"Hi, Ginger!" shouted Peter. "Get downstream! Our drinkin' water comes from that pool you're swimming in."

Carey glanced round, quickly spotting the boy on the bank.

"Oh, save us!" he shouted. "It's the little sparrer I 'ad to wop on the ship. Wotcher mean, I can't swim 'ere? 'Oo's orders? Yours?"

"No, Mr. Caldwell's," replied Peter, ignoring the other's insults and mistatements.

"Well, our drinkin' water don't come from 'ere!" cried Carey, swimming about. "So I'm jolly well goin' to stay 'ere! Wot yer goin' to do about it?"

Peter didn't see what he could do, for it would only make matters worse if he went into the pool himself. But the next moment the question was decided for him. Carey, not content with shouting insults and remaining where he was, came in close to the bank, then suddenly stood up, grasping two handfuls of mud, and slung them at Peter as hard as he could.

This was too much. In a flash off came Peter's shirt and trousers, and he plunged into the water, striking out after Carey, who made off as quickly as possible.

In midstream Peter caught the other, who was a poor swimmer, grasped him by the shoulders, and sent him under. Up came Carey in a moment, spluttering but full of fight, and he drove his fist at Peter's face.

"I'll teach you something, Red Nob!" cried Peter, as he sent the fellow under again. But this time he kept him under.

When Carey came up the second time he bellowed for mercy, and Peter let him go, treading water as he watched him swim back to the farther bank and make off.

"Guess he won't come in here again!" muttered Peter. "An' I'd best get out myself."

Hardly had Peter come to this decision when he was hailed by a voice from behind him.

"Hi! What the deuce are you doin' there?" it cried. "Come on out at once!"

Peter turned to see Mr. Caldwell standing on the bank, no jolly humour on his face now. He was purple with rage. A few vigorous strokes brought Peter back to the bank and he clambered out.

"Look here, young Peter!" cried the old man. "You've got the whole blessed river to swim in. What do you want to

go up to that pool for? 'Specially after I told you not to, fouling all the drinking water like that!"

Peter was at a loss what to say. He had a great respect for his boss, and, considering how decently he had been treated, wanted to keep on the right side of him. However, to have said that he went in to drive Carey out would have savoured of sneaking and making feeble excuses. So Peter said nothing, reflecting that Ginger was not likely to return.

Presently old Caldwell stamped off, muttering something about "disobedience," and that he wouldn't have it. Peter, slowly getting back into his clothes, hoped he had seen the last of Carey, but he hadn't. That youth was still sore about being hammered on the ship, and now he had been "half-drowned," as he called it.

Carey's malevolence became clear to Peter a few days later. The boy was in the stables, about to harness the horses, when Caldwell stamped in. One glance at his face told Peter he was annoyed.

"Look here, young feller," he cried, "didn't I tell you to keep an eye on the rabbit wire? An' didn't you report to me yesterday that there were no holes in it?"

"Yes, sir," answered Peter, wondering. "I couldn't find a hole anywhere."

"Then you must have been mighty careless," was the reply. "If there wasn't a hole, how the blazes did rabbits get in during the night? They've been damaging the trunks of several apple-trees. Go and find the hole and repair it at once! Your work's all right, but you're disobedient and unreliable. If you're going on like this you'd best go back to England. I'll tell the emigration authorities I don't want you, anyway."

Hot with indignation, Peter proceeded to search for the hole in the wire, and soon found it.

"Phew!" he exclaimed. "It wasn't here last night. I'd swear it wasn't. I came along this bit, I know. What is more, that's a clean-cut hole!"

Whilst he repaired the damage the boy wondered who could have done it. Unless Caldwell had some private enemy, which was most unlikely, there was only Carey who could have played such a trick.

The job done, Peter reported to his boss, declaring that the hole was new, but not mentioning his suspicions. He wanted to catch Carey red-handed.

"Fiddle-sticks, boy!" said the old man. "Who is there round about here who'd cut a fence deliberately? You must be mistaken. And just pull your socks up a bit if you want to stop here. As I said before, you're a first-class worker, but I want a reliable fellow as well, a lad I could leave in charge when I and my brother are away."

Peter, distinctly worried, turned away. He certainly did want to stop at Karoola, for, until Carey reappeared, the lad had hardly been happier in his life. Moreover, when he should leave Karoola, Peter wanted to be recommended for a job as a manager, which was unlikely if there were any more "incidents."

But a greater disaster was imminent, one that threatened more danger than broken fences or fouled drinking water.

CHAPTER 4.

All's Well that Ends Well!

THE weather grew hotter as Christmas approached, and Peter's chief occupation was spraying trees. In this he was helped by Tom Caldwell, old Mr. Caldwell's brother, who had returned to the orchard; but Peter looked on the older man as his real boss.

After nearly three months at Karoola, Peter had learnt quite a lot, and old Caldwell had entirely forgotten the only causes for complaint he had ever had against the boy. Once he had taken Peter into Launceston to see a race-meeting, the last event of which was a trotting match, and the queer action of the "trotters"—who might be racing to-day and drawing a milk-float to-morrow—had astonished the London boy.

"Somethin' to write home about!" Peter had exclaimed; but he had no one to write to—his life was entirely bound up in Tasmania.

"We've to go into Launceston this mornin', Peter, on business," said the old man, one grilling day. "You carry on spraying, with that lad from the village—Jake. If we're back late you can take my gun this evenin' and try for a shot in the bush."

"Very good, sir! Thank you!" cried Peter, very pleased at being left in charge; and for the rest of the day was busy with the spraying.

One of the horses pulled a tank of liquid up and down the rows, and Jake, a tousle-headed, silent youth, worked the pump, Peter directing the hose.

"Come on, Jake!" cried Peter, in the late afternoon. "Get your gun! I'll get Mr. Caldwell's, an' we ought to get somethin'!"

"You didn't git much shootin' where you coom from, did yer?" asked Jake, as the two boys, their work finished, strode out of the orchard.

"No," replied Peter, with a laugh. "I never saw many rabbits or birds in Russell Square—not in large numbers, anyway!"

"Ah, I guessed not!" observed Jake rather pointedly, and relapsed into silence.

But the slur on Peter's skill with a gun was unmerited. Several times old Caldwell had lent the boy his "twelve-bore," and Peter was improving.

Hardly had the two boys entered the bush, when, Peter, sniffing, pulled up with a jerk.

"What's that, Jake?" he cried; then added, in a voice of fear: "Fire! Can't you smell it? The bush is afire!"

"Yep!" cried the other lad. "'Ere, shove our guns agin the fence, an' grab a branch—we must beat it out! But first light these 'sags,' an' burn a fire-break, or t'will reach the wood-pile!"

But there was no time to burn a break. Fanned by a hot breeze, the bush fire quickly got a hold, and rushed towards them. The air was heavy with the scent of burning grass, and a wave of heat beat fiercely at the boys as, with a roar and crackle, a million tongues of flame shot up, licking at the tall gum-trees, devouring the sun-dried grass like tinder. And a greyish-brown cloud of smoke swirled into the sky.

Out bolted rabbits, terror-stricken; birds darted forth in all directions, flying for their very lives; but the two lads had no eyes for them.

Gasping, choking, they seized branches, and beat at the red-and-yellow fire-snakes that raced along the ground towards them. Whatever happened, the course of the bush fire must be stayed. If the wind carried searing pieces to the



Black-grimed, sweating and scorched, the two boys beat and flayed at the advance-guard of the devastating blaze. Running up and down the advancing line they toiled manfully, but in spite of their efforts, the inferno gained.

wood-pile behind them, there would be no hope for the bungalow beyond.

Black-grimed, sweating, scorched, the two boys beat and flayed at the advance-guard of the devastating blaze. Running up and down the advancing line, they toiled manfully. But if they checked the fire in one place for a moment, it crept forward in a dozen other spots meanwhile; and, in spite of all their efforts, the inferno gained.

It seemed that, do what they might, only a miracle could avert utter disaster. Already the nearest rows of apple-trees were scorched, and bushels of fruit ruined. But, just when things were at their worst, when the exhausted boys could do no more, the miracle happened—the wind changed, the fire ceased to gain, and, a moment later, rolled roaring off eastward.

Hard on its track, the two boys rushed forward, beating out the flames that still fluttered and whispered.

Suddenly Peter stopped. From a large brake that still smoked and crackled some distance in front of him, had come a moaning cry.

Shouting to Jake to follow, Peter dashed forward, and groped blindly through the smoke in the direction of the sound, his smarting eyes half closed. Suddenly, dimly seen through the stinging fog, the boy came on an outstretched body.

"Help, Jake!" he cried. "There's a fellow here half dead!"

The other boy stumbled forward, and together the two lads dragged the half-senseless form into the open.

"God!" cried Peter, as he knelt down and examined the fellow they had rescued. "It's Carey! How in thunder did he get in there?"

And Carey it was! But almost

unrecognisable! His clothes, burnt black, hung in shreds; his hair and eyebrows had been singed to ashes!

But there was no time to be lost if Carey's life was to be saved.

"Give us a hand, Jake!" cried Peter. "We must get this chap up to the house!"

Grasping shoulders and ankles, Peter and Jake proceeded to carry their limp burden towards the bungalow.

Meanwhile, their business in town done, the Caldwell's had started to drive home. Within two miles of Karoola, the drifting smoke and smell of burning warned the old man of the bush fire.

Standing up in his trap, urging his horse with voice and whip, old Caldwell drove for home like a man possessed. All the last mile, the fire, which had spread, raged like a furnace along one side of the road, but the old man heeded it not, dreading to find his home in ashes.

"That boy Peter!" he cried. "Untrustworthy young ruffian! I'll bet he was smoking amongst the 'sags.' Well, out he goes!"

Great as was old Caldwell's relief to find his house intact, his wrath was little diminished when he sighted the ruined trees. Flinging the reins to his brother, he sprang from the trap and dashed down to the boundary fence. Two guns, propped up by the wire, at once caught his eye.

"Yes," he cried, "those young blackguards came here to shoot, then went for a stroll and smoked! Even left their guns! What can have become of them? I'll—"

But the words died in his mouth as, from behind some blackened bushes, a strange procession appeared.

It was Peter and Jake, hatless, and

looking like scarecrows, carrying the unconscious Carey.

"What the blazes have you got there?" shouted the old man; then added quickly: "Come on up to the house—explanations will keep!"

An hour later, lying bandaged on a bed, Carey opened his eyes, and saw Peter and old Caldwell standing beside him.

"Come close!" he groaned in a whisper.

"Best keep quiet, lad!" said Caldwell. "I've sent for a doctor."

But Carey insisted, and Peter and his boss moved forward.

"I'm dyin'!" whispered the once red-headed Carey; "an' there's summat I must get off me chest. I started the fire; only meant to raise a scare an' get you blamed, Peter. Then it spread in a moment like, an' I lost me 'ead! Roun' an' roun' I ran, but couldn't get out—never guessed it 'ud go so fast. One thing more," he added, as Peter motioned him to stop. "I came across one night, a month back, an' cut yer rabbit wire. I 'ated yer, Peter, 'cause I couldn't beat yer. I wanted to get yer sacked!"

"That's all right!" said Peter, as the other paused, exhausted. "Say no more!"

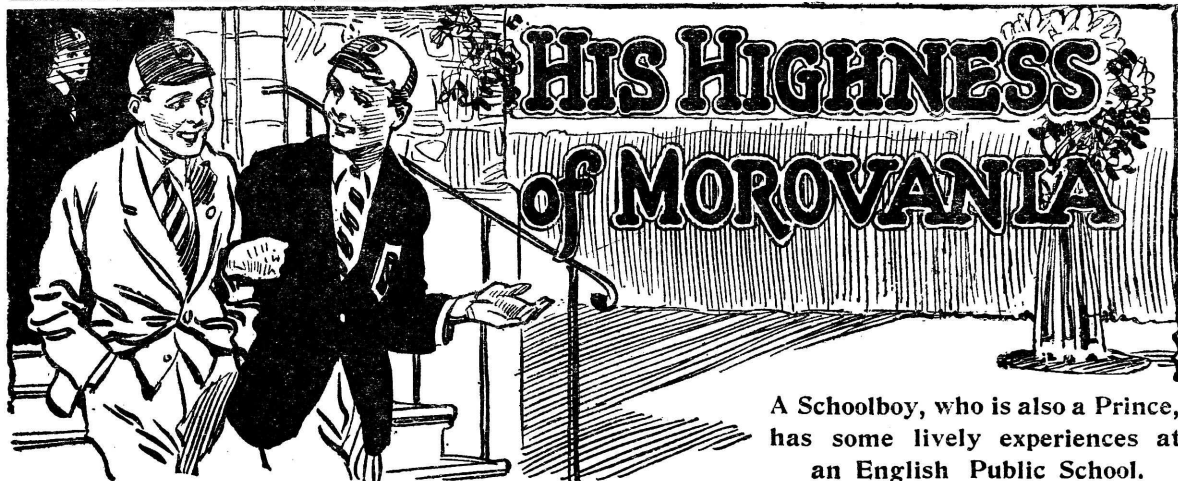
But when they got outside the room, old Caldwell had a good deal to say.

"I owe you a heap of apologies, lad!" he exclaimed, as he grasped Peter's hand and wrung it. "I blundered badly about you. You're as good a lad as I've ever had. Your wages'll be raised at once, and when you leave Karoola, which won't be till you want to, I'll see you get a good berth as a

(Continued on page 27.)

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A TOPPING SCHOOL AND ADVENTURE YARN!



A Schoolboy, who is also a Prince,
has some lively experiences at
an English Public School.

CHAPTER 1.

His Majesty's Decision!

"YES, Harding; I fancy we'd best send the youngster away for a while. He's too high-spirited, and one never knows what kind of trouble he'll get into through sheer carelessness."

King Michael of Morovania's eyes were twinkling, though his tone was grave. Sir Francis Harding, the British attache, nodded in agreement.

"I understand," he said, "and you are doubtless right. A chance word, or even another attempt at mixing with the people, as Prince Boris is so fond of doing, might have nasty results. Morovania is something of a powder-barrel just now, only the fuse, fortunately, is still awaiting the actual match."

"Is it?" queried the other grimly. "I doubt it! Somehow, I seem to smell smouldering! Boris has already been in great danger, as I happen to know, through this idiotic craze of his—this rubbing shoulders with every Tom, Dick, and Harry of the populace. I'm rather democratic myself at heart, and believe in being so, but in Morovania—well—" He finished with an expressive shrug.

Sir Francis nodded again.

"Yes, it's certainly risky," he replied. "Every Anarchist in Europe seems to have strayed here in the course of his wanderings, and such gentry make no distinction between democratic royalties and the other kind. We'd best 'exile' Master Boris for a few months until the storm either bursts or blows over, and I'd say St. Mary's would make an ideal 'St. Helena' for him."

King Michael smiled reminiscently. He had many pleasant memories of St. Mary's College, where he had been educated, and where he and Harding had been the closest of chums in the old days—long before either had sampled the cares of position, and long before Sir Francis had dreamt that, by a strange turn of Fate's wheel, he should one day be appointed British attache to his former school friend when the latter succeeded to the somewhat rocky throne of Morovania.

"It comes at a good time," Harding presently said. "My own boy is just going to St. Mary's to finish up, and I suggest that Boris should accompany him. The prince has already had an excellent English training from his tutor here; but, all the same, he'll feel strange amid new surroundings, and Jack will be just the sort to see him through. If you agree, I'll write home at once."

"Good!" The king heaved a relieved sigh. "I confess I'll be glad, for the youngster is getting a bit out of hand. Would you believe it, that only the other night he went to the carnival dressed as a—as a—monkey? The future ruler of this illustrious state a common or garden chimpanzee, Harding! Did you ever hear of such sacrilege?"

Sir Francis laughed, but instantly became grave.

"Possibly there were some 'wolves' present who would have given much to know the

identity of your 'monkey'!" he remarked meaningly; then added: "All right, I'll see to it now, old man, without a second's delay."

He rose, bowing with a deference that completely belied their recent familiarity of manner; for at that moment his Majesty's private secretary knocked and entered the apartment, and it would have been somewhat infra dig to exhibit such "pallishness" before outsiders.

CHAPTER 2.

A Change of Identity!

"THAT concerns you, Jack." Lady Harding passed the lengthy letter across the breakfast-table. "You should be highly honoured, I'm sure, for you see you are to act as 'chaperon' to a prince of the royal blood."

"Great pip!" The boy—a well-built, fair-haired fellow of some sixteen years—gasped, then devoured the closely-written lines with avidity. "When's the giddy rajah coming? Oh, I see—Saturday morning! By gum, this is some responsibility, mater!"

His mother smiled slightly.

"I'm afraid so," she said; "and I fear the prince's new guardian will need to reform somewhat. Your father says his Highness is somewhat high-spirited, and when his keeper happens to be of the same temperament there's bound to be trouble—"

Jack broke in with a good-humoured laugh.

"There, now, mater, don't lay it on!" he chuckled. "You do labour a point so! Just leave it to me, and I'll do the secret policeman and guardian angel stunt in first-class style. We'll be as docile as lambs at St. Mary's—you'll see!"

On the Saturday morning Prince Boris duly arrived. He was a slimy-built, wiry lad, something about young Harding's age, and not at all unlike Jack in appearance. His eyes twinkled incessantly, betokening good spirits barely bottled up, and he spoke English with scarcely any trace of a foreign accent, thanks to the excellent tutoring he had received in Morovania. Indeed, Prince Boris was altogether a likeable chap, and Jack Harding took to him strongly from the first moment of their meeting.

A week spent at home did much to cement this newly-formed friendship, and then came departure for London, whence, by another line, the final journey to St. Mary's was embarked upon. And it was then that the great jape was proposed by Boris himself—a jape which was destined to have results at the moment undreamt of by either of the plotters.

"Look here," asked his Highness suddenly, as the train gathered speed and whizzed through the outlying suburbs. "Are you democratic?"

"A little," replied Jack absent-mindedly, glancing up from a copy of the "Boys' Friend" he had bought at the bookstall. "I get a twinge of it in the shoulders sometimes. You see, I got a wretched wetting some time ago—"

"Ass!" Boris interrupted. "I said democratic—not rheumatic! I mean, are you opposed to boot-licking and bowing and scraping, and all that sort of thing?"

Harding pondered.

"Oh, I don't know!" he presently answered. "Fact is, I've had no experience of that kind. Nobody ever licked my boots—sometimes our maids don't even clean 'em as well as I'd wish—and nobody ever bowed and scraped to me, so how can I tell what it's like?"

"Well, I can," said the prince sourly, "and I hate it—simply hate it—and so does dad in his heart, though he has to stomach it and smile sweetly. If you were in my position, and lived in Morovania, you'd know what it was to see every ass banging his nose against his knees whenever I moved an eyelash. Awful rot! Why can't a royalty be treated like any other human being, I'd like to know?"

Jack looked a trifle puzzled, yet a glimmer of understanding presently made itself felt. This was evidently a natural boy, unfortunately born a prince—a square peg in a round hole, if you like.

"D'you know what I used to do?" pursued Boris, without giving his companion time for comment. "I used to disguise myself and mix with the people, and have no end of a jolly old time. And if you'd heard some of the things I did you'd have fairly split your sides. I've listened to the illustrious house of Morovania criticised, and even cursed, by the very people who would be first to bow and bob up and down at a royal procession, which shows the mockery of it all."

"Oh, but I say, that was a bit dangerous, wasn't it?" gasped Jack. "Your going about off your chain like that, I mean. Supposing you were recognised?"

"It didn't worry me, though I took precautions, of course," Boris replied. "You see—oh, dash it all, you couldn't understand unless you were actually fixed as I am by what the writing fellows call the irony of Fate! There I was, cooped up in a big palace, with guards at the doors, and doddering old fogies to look after my every want, as if I hadn't been provided with a pair of hands like anyone else!"

"Then I accidentally discovered a way of going in and out which nobody seemed to notice, until, I fancy, the pater must have heard about it somehow. Anyway, he seems to have been aware of what was going on, and he was pretty mad. Indeed, I'll swear that's why I've been marooned over here out of the way, for things in Morovania are not too nice at the moment."

"I see," Harding mused. "Anarchists, revolutions, and that sort of stuff, I expect? Most of these European states have no end of troubles of that kind."

"Perhaps," nodded the prince, non-committally. "But the point is this: I'm not going to St. Mary's to be bowed and scraped to—not likely! I've had enough of it, and I intend to live as a human being—at least, for a while!"

"But—"

"Wait a moment, old man! This is what I'm driving at. You've never had experience

of what it is to be an heir to a throne, so why not try it for a bit? Nobody knows either of us at the college, so suppose we change identities? I'll be Jack Harding, and you'll introduce yourself as his Royal Highness, Prince Boris of Morovania. What d'you say to that?"

Jack stared for a full half-minute in utter stupefaction, then the humour of the thing appealing to him, he broke into a delighted chuckle—a chuckle which was repeated at more or less regular intervals until the train drew up at Sandley, the nearest station to St. Mary's. He did not share Boris' fears that there would be much bowing and scraping at the college, for that is not usual in English schools, but the plot promised to provide a good deal of japing possibilities, and japing was almost as necessary to young Harding's existence as his meals were.

CHAPTER 3.

The Fall of Dunster & Co.—And what Followed!

FIVE or six days had gone by, and the deception had worked excellently. Jack, adopting a kind of broken English of his own manufacture, and wearing the prince's button of rank in his coat-lapel—the only mark of identity Boris displayed—had succeeded in deceiving all and sundry, to his companion's complete satisfaction.

There were few who made any distinction at St. Mary's between royal pupils and the ordinary kind, but, nevertheless, there was a certain clique who were quite ready to show their respect in no uncertain way—particularly if profit was to be got out of it!

This coterie was headed by Dunster of the Fifth—a pimply-faced, heavily-built fellow who considered himself a "sport"—and he was not long in attaching himself to the pseudo heir of Morovania.

"Say," he observed one day, with what he considered to be a delightful smile, "we're glad to see your Royal Highness here, you know. It gives tone to a school to have it elevated out of the common rut, and we hope you'll find everything to your Highness' liking. If you want anything done, may I ask that your Highness will allow me, or one of these fellows"—he indicated his half-dozen supporters—"to see that things are put right?"

Jack, though feeling more than a trifle disgusted at the crawling, servile tone Dunster adopted, smiled good-humouredly.

"I thank you," he replied, in the quaint English he had employed since his arrival. "Yes; you seem good friends—but zere is not mooch zat I need. You see, my companion, Shack Harding, looks after my requirements."

"Yes, yes, I know," said Dunster hurriedly; "but what I meant was that we'd like to make things pleasant for your Highness during your stay here. For instance, you'll find things a bit dull sometimes after what you've been accustomed to, so that's where we chaps can help you."

"Vat exac'ly mean you?"

"Why, your Highness, we don't like dullness any more than you do," Dunster pressed his point, "and we take steps to counteract it. If at any time you'd like a hand at cards, or a game of billiards—why, you've only to say the word. We have ways and means, your Highness, and you might do worse than keep us in mind."

"O-oh!" murmured "his Highness" slowly. "O-oh! A-ah! So zat is it, Mistaire Dunstaire, eh? You would like me to have—how you call it—ze good time? An' my frien,—Shack—he might like ze good time also."

"Then by all means bring him along, your Highness!" Dunster's eyes were beginning to sparkle at the favourable impression he had apparently made. "What d'you say to this evening, for instance, at eight? We'll be at the White Churn—you know, the inn down in Sandley High Street—so if you care to come along, I'll guarantee you'll enjoy yourselves."

"His Royal Highness" nodded, evidently delighted.

"Yes; zat is all right! We'll be zere—punctual!"

As Dunster and company strolled away, Boris sauntered up, first glancing at his chum's disgusted face, and then at the backs of the retreating coterie.

"What's the matter?"

"Everything's the matter!" Jack snapped.

"I've accepted an invitation on your behalf to meet yonder crowd at the White Churn this evening. They're anxious to give you—or me—or both of us—what they call 'a good time'!"

"Oh! Well, what about it?"

"A lot! I've overheard some ugly rumours about Dunster & Co. even in the short time we've been here, and they're plainly not very nice people to know. In fact, they're altogether out of place in a respectable school, and I think they should be squashed. I've read a good deal about such customers who stray into decent company, and I fancy I can guess what's on the mat. They're out to make a bit at the expense of his Royal Highness of Morovania, I reckon!"

"Yet you've accepted?"

"Yes; we'll go down—and I'll see that the Dunster bird 'goes down' in another sense, no matter how I manage it! He needs a lesson, and it's up to us to give it. Are you game?"

Boris' broad grin was sufficient answer, and that evening, shortly after eight had tolled from Sandley church-tower, the pair strolled arm-in-arm in the direction of the White Churn. Dunster was standing just within the doorway, and he greeted them effusively.

"Ah! There you are!" he smiled. "Come along! One of our chaps is inside, so that makes four—quite a nice little party!"

He led the way into the bar-parlour, where Sankey, another Fifth-Former, was seated at the table, absent-mindedly shuffling a pack of soiled cards. He rose and bowed as Jack entered, followed by the real prince.

"Now, your Highness, choose a seat," Dunster said, "and we'll cut for partners. Shuffle up, Sankey, old man!"

Harding nodded, and took the hand that was dealt him, and the game proceeded in silence for some twenty minutes. Then, suddenly, Jack sprang to his feet, snatching the cards from Sankey's hand.

"Here, what the—"

"A-ah! Cheats!" "his Highness" gasped, not forgetting the part he was playing. "Vat is zis? See, Shack!"

He made another swift grab which placed him in possession of Dunster's cards also,

and he threw both hands down, backs upwards, on the table.

"Cheats!" he repeated. "You do not play fair! Zose cards are marked!"

He pointed to several of the kings, queens, knaves, and aces, the top corners of which were distinctly indented by the pressure of a thumb-nail.

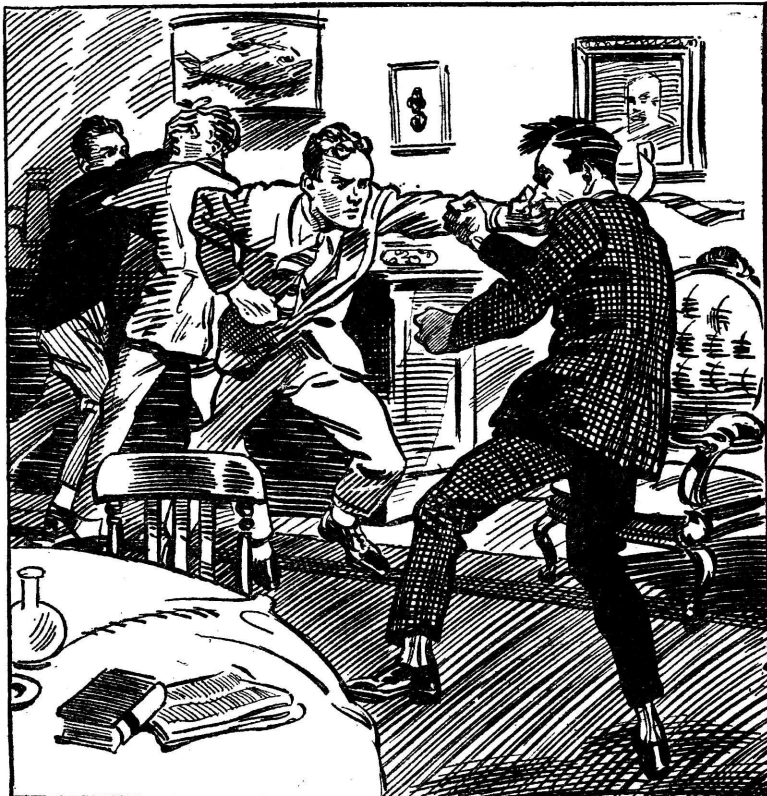
Dunster's face was red with fury as he also rose to his feet, leaning across the table with all the mock servility now absent from his attitude.

"You—you foreign pup!" he muttered thickly. "How dare you make such an accusation against sportsmen? We invited you here."

"Yes; you did—and we came," interrupted Jack quietly. "We came because we had heard vat you do, an' thought we would see for ourselves. And we have seen! You will now move ze table away, an' put up your 'ands, Mistaire Dunstaire! I will attend to you, an' my frien' vill look after Mistaire San-key!"

Young Harding thereupon went for Dunster like a bull at a gate, receiving a nasty tap on the nose from that heavily-built fellow which did much to cool his righteous anger. After that he fought carefully and cleverly, using every ounce of his boxing skill against his caddish opponent; and Dunster, bigger and stronger though he was, had a thoroughly bad time of it. By the end of that time his collar was burst, his right eye closed, and his nose badly swollen; whilst Sankey was in much the same condition. For Boris, though he had never had any boxing lessons to speak of—such sport not being considered of much account in Morovania—nevertheless rendered a good account of himself and mauled Sankey grievously. Having succeeded in knocking him over, Boris flopped on his adversary's chest and pounded his quaking body until the luckless Fifth-Former literally howled for mercy.

How long the engagement would have continued is uncertain, but at that moment the proprietor of the White Churn, called from his busy bar by the commotion in the parlour, dashed in, his red face even more crimson than usual, and his angry eyes taking in the whole scene at a glance.



Young Harding fought carefully and cleverly, using every ounce of his boxing skill against his caddish opponent; and Dunster, bigger and stronger though he was, had a thoroughly bad time of it. Meanwhile, Boris was rendering a good account of himself against Sankey.



Boris recovered his balance frantically, and did the only thing possible in the brief time at his disposal. He launched himself forward, butting the newcomers so forcibly that the fellow tumbled back down the ladder, and crashed upon the other pair who were even then following in his wake.

"So that's it, is it?" he bellowed. "All right, Master Dunster, sir! That finishes your crowd, so far as I'm concerned! I never liked your goin's on; but they paid me well enough, so I put up with 'em. But I won't have this place turned into a boxin'-booth, so don't let me see your face 'ere again—nor any of your lot, or Doctor Bentley will get a perlitte note on the subjec'! That's all now! 'Op it!"

"I fancy we've settled Messrs. Dunster & Co. with regard to the White Churn!" grinned Harding, as they left the village behind, and ascended the long, lonely incline to the college. "Serve 'em jolly well right, the beasts! They're the sort who would lower the tone of any school, and—Hallo! What's this? More trouble?"

He had no time to ask further, for the attack was made with a silent swiftness that took them both completely off their guard. A large covered van was standing by the roadside, and as they passed, three powerfully-built men sprang from its shadow—one seizing Boris in a vice-like grip, whilst the other pair closed in upon Jack, a rough hand pressing a sickly-smelling cloth over the latter's mouth and nostrils, and holding it there until their victim grew limp in their grasp.

Neither boy had opportunity of resisting, and in an incredibly short time young Harding had been bundled into the van, the third man treating his Highness to a hefty push which sent him reeling yards away, gasping and stupefied.

The van moved off, the third ruffian springing up beside the other pair as the horse gathered speed, and Boris, after staring open-mouthed for a moment, suddenly came to his senses with a jolt. This was no school-boys' jape, but something far, far bigger; for, as the light of a solitary gas-lamp chanced to fall upon the face of the man who had attacked him, the lad had glimpsed some inkling of the truth. For the fellow was dark and swarthy—a foreigner, without the slightest shade of doubt.

Next moment Boris had pulled himself to—
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gether, and was tearing after the van, which bumped and rocked over the rough road surface. Running like a deer, he overtook the vehicle before it reached the cross-roads at the crest of the incline, and sprang upon the tailboard, where he crouched, hidden from those in front by the back-flap of the canvas hood.

What was going to happen now? Whatever it was, Boris of Morovania was determined to see it through to a finish!

CHAPTER 4.

Boris Butts In!

THE drive was not a long one, for which mercy Boris felt devoutly thankful, since it was terribly bumpy and uncomfortable. Presently the van turned into a narrow lane, and drew up before a big, ramshackle structure—seemingly, as well as could be judged in the gloom, a deserted grain-store, or very large stable.

The prince slid from his uncomfortable seat, and retreated to the shadow of a neighbouring hedgerow, from which point of vantage he watched Jack's inert form carried into the building. Then a light sprang up within, illuminating a small window near the roof.

"A loft!" Boris muttered, and stole forward stealthily. He reached the door, which had now been closed again, and mechanically noted that a thick, rusty crossbar was fixed on the outside. Then he noticed something else—a rickety flight of wooden stairs running up the side of the wall, and passing within a few feet of the window-ledge above.

He crept up inch by inch, testing each step ere trusting his weight to it, and finally reached the small square casement, which he now perceived lacked more than half its glass. He peered cautiously through, seeing the glare of light that was streaming up through an open trapdoor in the floor, and seeing something else also—a still form lying on the loft-floor just under his nose.

Then he crept back down the stairway, a daring plan having suddenly come to him. Walking like a cat, he reached the big door,

gripped the hanging crossbar, and lowered it gingerly, without a sound, into its socket, after which he once more ascended the stairs and tackled the window with equal caution. The frame was a little stiff, but the murmur of voices below helped to drown what slight noise Boris made as he forced the window open. Next moment he had wriggled across the sill, and was bending over his chum's form.

Jack Harding, the effects of the drug at last beginning to wear off, opened his eyes dazedly, and stared stupidly at the figure stooping above him. Boris gently laid his hand on the other's lips, and whispered something in his ear, which served to check any sound he might have uttered in his surprise.

Up to this all had worked without a hitch; but now, just as Boris was about to put the finishing touch to his daring ruse, the fat metaphorically boiled over into the fire.

For as the prince stepped towards the trap, with the intention of closing it, and thus imprisoning the trio below, his foot caught in some projecting floorboard, and he stumbled badly, almost falling full length.

An abrupt cessation of the conversation; then a scurry of footsteps, and a head appeared through the trapdoor, followed by a pair of heavy shoulders. Boris recovered his balance frantically, and did the only thing possible in the brief time at his disposal—he launched himself forward, butting the newcomer so forcibly that the fellow tumbled back down the ladder, and crashed upon the other pair, who were even then in the act of mounting in his wake. A chorus of maledictions, in a foreign tongue which the prince instantly recognised as his own, floated up; then the trapdoor thudded into position, being quickly secured.

"Pretty lively while it lasted, old man!" Boris chuckled. "And I must apologise for introducing you to such nasty company; but, of course, I never expected trouble of this kind over here. Now, let's get out. Can you walk?"

"Yes, I think so!" Jack answered.

They clambered through the window and down the outer stairs, Boris chuckling delightedly as a heavy pounding and shuffling came from the inside of the main door.

"They'll not shift that!" he grinned. "And, unless there's some third exit, they'll be there when we come back. Now, this way, as quick as you like!"

He hurried towards the van still standing in the lane, and both climbed up in front, whereupon Boris took the reins.

"Three nasty people will shortly be where they should be—barring accidents—in the lock-up!" he laughed, as they clattered down the hill towards Sandley, and eventually halted at the police-station. Here, after a brief explanation, half a dozen constables clambered inside the van, the return journey being made in good time, and the frantic sounds were still to be heard when the group finally halted outside the big stable.

A more amazed trio it could have been difficult to imagine when the crossbar was raised, and the light from within fell upon those who blocked the exit. Boris let his gaze rove over the three, and started slightly as his eyes fell upon the tallest of them.

"Ah, Saravitch!" he said, in his own tongue. "So it's you, is it? And that's how it was done—eh?"

The man stared, first stupidly, from one to the other of the two lads; then he broke into a volley of Morovian epithets, which, perhaps fortunately, Jack Harding could not understand.

"That chap," Boris explained later, "was my esteemed pater's private secretary, which explains how he knew exactly where I had been sent, and I thought it might be easier to get at me over here than at home. I never saw much of the fellow, nor he of me, but from what little I did see I didn't like him. I always object to a face like his!"

The prince was silent for a moment, evidently pondering deeply. Then he resumed:

"I don't know whether your life was actually in danger, old man, or whether it was merely a kidnapping-and-ransom business; but I fancy we'd best chuck this swopped identity stunt; it's not safe. They'd never have made such a blunder by daylight."

THE END.

(Another topping yarn next week, boys—
"THE MAD RAJAH!" Be sure you read it!)

"THE BRONZE STATUETTE!"

(Continued from page 15.)

Then the sound ceased abruptly on the heels of a second muffled thud from below, and Sharpe, after listening intently a little longer, gently knocked out the ashes of his pipe on the window-sill.

"Queer—very queer!" he muttered. "It's small wonder that these old houses get the reputation of being haunted. Surely friend Temple can have heard nothing like this, or he would have mentioned it. I must ask him directly."

But at breakfast next morning their host could only shake his head and look utterly dumbfounded at the investigator's question.

"Sounds?" he said. "No; I've heard nothing—nothing at all."

"Then," Sharpe returned, "there is someone who has access to this place in addition to ourselves. Also, he knows it intimately, for he doesn't come and go by the ordinary methods, but by some means we are ignorant of. We must therefore examine the whole place minutely, inch by inch."

"In fact, my friend," he continued, "the search is now not so much for the missing statuette as for the author of last night's mysterious sounds, for I have a shrewd suspicion that in finding the latter we may discover a clue to the former!"

CHAPTER 3:

The Carved Panel—The Mysterious Light—Revelation!

ALTHOUGH Anthony Sharpe began his examination immediately after breakfast, it was early evening ere he enjoyed his first taste of success. Tim O'Carroll and Geoffrey Temple had accompanied him all along as he passed from room to room and from wall to wall, where the investigator sounded the panelling carefully, and scrutinised many a crude piece of carving through a powerful pocket-lens.

Eventually, as has been said, he found something like what he sought. A complicated pattern near the base of one of the walls in a small apartment to the rear of the house suddenly attracted his attention, and, stooping down, he was presently running his long, sensitive fingers over its knobs and curves.

Then, even as the others bent forward to watch, there came a soft click, and the panel immediately above Sharpe's stooping figure slid sideways in a groove, revealing a dark cavity behind. The detective straightened his back, with a slight satisfaction.

"So far, so good!" he muttered. "Now follow me—but tread as though you were on thin ice."

They passed through the gap, finding themselves on a narrow staircase built in the thickness of the wall. Descending this, they came upon a long passage beneath the ground level, at the end of which stood a massive, iron-studded door. It was not fastened, and swung open easily enough, thudding behind them heavily ere they could prevent it, and Sharpe turned to Tim in mingled triumph and anxiety.

"That's the first sound we heard last

night," he said. "But let's hope it does not scare our bird, whoever and wherever he is! Which way now? The place seems literally honeycombed with passages."

Turning to the left, Anthony Sharpe proceeded for some distance, his electric torch-beam guiding the others in his wake. Then the passage branched again, and there being no occasion for choice in the matter, they still continued by the left-hand boring, hoping eventually to find something which would reward them.

Suddenly, without warning, Sharpe snapped out the torch, gripping Temple's wrist tightly with his free hand.

"That's a pick—yes, a pick and also the scrape of a shovel," Sharpe whispered. "You hear it, Temple?"

The other nodded; then followed the detective as the latter once more resumed his cautious progress.

Soon they had reason to pause afresh, for, round a bend in the narrow passage, a dim light suddenly gleamed, whilst the sound of digging was here perfectly plain and unmistakable as such. Warning his companions to remain where they were, Sharpe stole forward, silent as a cat.

Then he saw—saw what his astute brain, during the past few minutes, had almost pictured mentally—an elderly, but wiry, individual plying a shovel as if his very life depended on it, in a small underground apartment to the right of the passage. The floor had been paved, but several of the big blocks were lying, prised from their bed, on the ground close by, and quite a deep hole now yawned in the loose earth beneath. A flickering lantern stood wedged in a heap of yellowish clay which the delver had thrown up on one side of the pit, and, even as Sharpe watched, the man reached down to lift a bag of something from the depths he had excavated.

Thereupon Sharpe uttered a shrill whistle, and, stepping forward, covered the wielder of the pick and shovel with his revolver.

"Good-evening, Mr. Ward!" he said.

"Enjoying a little exercise—eh?" The man swung round with a gasp.

"Who—who are you?" he muttered thickly.

"No matter. Merely someone who has an interest in the bronze statuette besides yourself. And here is yet another who wanted to find it badly, especially since it happens to belong to him!" Sharpe indicated Geoffrey Temple, who, accompanied by Tim O'Carroll, had approached at that moment. "On the other hand," the detective continued, as he examined what had been unearthed, "the statuette may not be necessary now, though we should much like to examine it. Where is it?"

"Find out!" the fellow snarled.

But the steely look in the investigator's eyes cowed him almost instantly, and he dumbly produced the desired article from one of his roomy pockets. It was a beautifully made equestrian model in bronze, and as he handed it to Sharpe, the pedestal, to Temple's utter amazement, divided into two halves, each hollow, and one containing a folded paper.

"There's your legacy!" Sharpe smiled at his client as he pointed to several bags which Ward had ranged neatly alongside the hole. "And this is the clue to the buried treasure." He indicated the statuette. "Your uncle was certainly eccentric, for he had amassed a big store of money, which he buried here, leaving the paper behind

him in the statuette and bequeathing the latter to you as his sole heir.

"Jasper Ward, his trusted servant, evidently knew of this strange will, and took the statuette with him when he cleared out just after his master's death. He succeeded in finding the secret cavity in the pedestal and in unravelling the directions, for here we find him actually unearthing the treasure for our benefit!"

"However that doesn't matter a whole lot, now that we've caught him in the act. He couldn't prevent your coming to live in the house you'd inherited, Temple, but he was afraid you might stumble upon one of the secret entrances to this maze, and thus upset his little plans before he had discovered the loot. He, therefore, tried to frighten you away by pattering along the passages in the dead of night; but you, sleeping so near the top of the house, and sleeping so particularly soundly into the bargain, never heard him. We did, however, and this is what it led to. Where you made the great mistake, Mr. Ward"—Sharpe turned again to the rascally ex-servant—"was in trying to be too elaborate. If you hadn't bothered about Mr. Temple here, and conducted your search with less noise and theatrical effect, you'd probably have succeeded in getting clear away with the whole deposit, and the bronze statuette might never have been discovered."

"But there, you fellows always over-reach yourselves."

(Another Grand Detective Yarn soon, boys.)

"THE CALL OF FREEDOM!"

(Continued from page 23.)

manager. If all the lads the emigration people are sending out from the Old Country are like you, we can't get too many!"

Peter glowed at the old man's handsome speech and promises—promises that were later carried out. But, for the present, Peter was satisfied to know that he was vindicated in the eyes of his kindly boss, and that his future in Tasmania was assured. Nor did the fact that Peter and Jake had saved the old man's bungalow escape notice.

For two days and nights the fire raged in the unclaimed "bush" before it burnt itself out. But no further damage was done to private property.

And Carey did not die, but, weeks later, recovered—a sadder and wiser youth—to work again for his own boss. No punishment was meted out to him, for it was felt he had suffered enough.

Peter, a bronzed and grown Peter, after a few months of the outdoor life in Tasmania, remained at Karoola until he became a full-fledged manager on a neighbouring orchard.

Never did he regret the chance that led him into Australia House that afternoon, when as a harassed page-boy, he wandered up the Strand wondering what to do. In fact, he has often been heard to remark:

"Why don't more fellows leave their dead-end jobs, quit crowded England, and come out here? There's room for everyone, either here or in Australia!"

THE END.

(Look out for a screamingly funny yarn next week boys: "MIKE MAKES A MOTOR-CAR!" You will roar with laughter from beginning to end.)

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