

EVERY WEDNESDAY.

The GEM 2^D

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No. 834.
Vol. XXVII.
January 17th,
1925.



THE BULLY OF ST. JIM'S TO THE RESCUE!

Gerald Knox, the bully of St. Jim's, shows up well in a plucky attempt to rescue the victims of the ice accident! (A thrilling incident from the grand long complete school story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's).



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.

MY DEAR CHUMS,—This week I want to speak of a really great opportunity. It is a chance which only has to be known. Then there will be a rush, and very naturally so! To come to the point: Look out for Part 1 of this new work.

"Harmsworth's Business Encyclopedia."

The first part, price 1/3, will be on sale on Thursday, January 15th, and the succeeding numbers will be issued every fortnight. Now, the value of the new "Encyclopedia" lies in the fact that it tells you just the things you want to know. It will be of immense help to young fellows just starting in business, and the articles it contains are written by statesmen and the leading people in commerce and industry. It will help the fellow in the office who is expected to know a host of facts about the business in hand. He cannot know all this unless provided with the means of mastering the details. It is here that the new "Business Encyclopedia" comes in. It is written in the most interesting way, and, to name only a few of its features, I would like to point out that its advice on how to succeed in a commercial career will be studied keenly by every chum of mine who is starting in life. Hard facts are shown in crystal-clear language. Things you did not worry to understand become fascinating, and the increase of knowledge hereby gained gives you a grip of the work of the world and what it all means. So get

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"THE KNIGHT OF THE PUMP!"
By Martin Clifford.

There is striking novelty in next week's magnificent yarn of St. Jim's. In this story we find Gussy, courtly as is his custom, rushing to the aid of a poor old woman who falls down when she is going, like Jill in the old rhyme, to fetch a pail of water. The reason why the venerable dame had to go so far to get a common necessity of life is peculiar, as you will see when next Wednesday's GEM is in your hands. The yarn brings on to the scene a character who will be well remembered by readers of the GEM. Tell your chums about this splendid yarn, and tell them to order the GEM.

THE TUCK HAMPER!

Next week this ever-welcome prize is again to the fore. In response to numerous friendly inquiries about when the Tuck

ANSWERS
EVERY MONDAY...PRICE 2:

Hamper was coming back, I decided to reintroduce the popular competition. To compete for this splendid prize all you have to do is to send in the brightest, cheeriest, sparkliest yarnlet you know.

"THE GOLDEN POPPYHEAD!"
By Lester Bidston.

That's the title of another rare and thrilling adventure of the Aero Chums. It is a marvellous business. I know you will admit that much. Mr. Lester Bidston shows Live-Wire Lindsay and Jerry O'Gorman hard at work tackling the sinister plottings of the evasive Ultima, and there is more brilliant writing and a bigger number of breathless situations than ever yet. One dramatic scene shows a gathering of Society people and such a display of jewels as would dazzle the eyes. Moving in the background is the disguised master-crook. He is intent on making a record haul! His plans, it has to be admitted, are amazingly well laid, no apparent kink at all. Whether the well-laid scheme of the super-criminal goes agley or prospers I will leave untouched. Suffice it to say that this story is a really great achievement on the part of this writer. Not a dull line in it!

"FOOTBALL CHUMS!"
By A. S. Hardy.

A football serial is always welcome to "Gemites." In the case of this dashing new story by ever-popular A. S. Hardy there is additional reason for the enthusiasm it has created. Next week's instalment will add a good deal to the author's reputation as a first-class writer on the winter game. The incidents follow fast and furious, and the uphill fight for success of the young hero rivets attention. Young Harold Chester has no easy game to play, on or off the football-ground. Ever since he was cut adrift by his unnatural guardian and stepfather it has been adversity all the way. But even the toughest days of misfortune and the powers of ill-luck have a way of ceding before grit and a game front.

Your Editor

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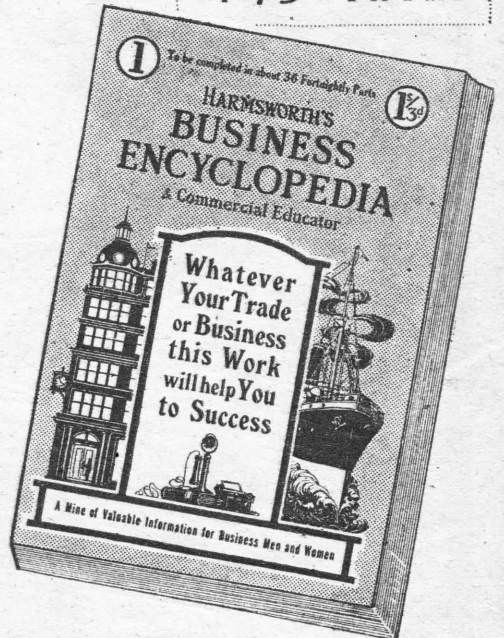
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HARMSWORTH'S

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PART 1. Thurs. Jan. 15th.

ORDER A COPY TO-DAY.

Gerald Knox, of the Sixth Form, is never happy unless he is making mischief. But in this splendid school story he gets himself into a rare mix-up, and only just escapes deep disgrace by the smart work of Tom Merry and his chums, who are past-masters in scoutcraft!



CHAPTER 1.
Ambushed!

HALLO! Look out, you fellows!" As he hissed the warning, Tom Merry, of the School House at St. Jim's, halted, his eyes fixed keenly on the white-capped hedgerows bordering the quiet Rylcombe Lane.

Manners and Lowther, and Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy likewise halted. They looked at Tom Merry, and then they scanned their surroundings in surprise. Around them the fields lay silent under a glimmering white mantle. Snow lay thick on trees and hedges, and snow was deep in the lane. In the wintry dusk of the early evening Tom's chums glanced about them, but they could see no cause for the warning.

"What's biting you, ass?" inquired Blake.

Tom Merry grinned slightly, his eyes still on the alert.

"I fancied I spotted a cap above the hedge yonder," he muttered. "Better keep our peepers skinned, chaps!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy stared hard through his monocle at the hedge.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy," he exclaimed, "I quite fail to see any cause for alarm, deah boy!"

"You're seeing things, Tommy," said Manners.

"The snow's dazzling your giddy optics!" said Herries.

"Snow doubt about that!" added Monty Lowther.

"Getting nervy in your old age!" commented Blake.

Tom Merry laughed.

"Rats!" he said. "I tell you I spotted a cap. We don't want to be ambushed, ass! It may be the giddy lads of the village—"

"Blow them!"

"But I fancy it's those dashed Grammarians," went on Tom, unheeding. "You remember how they sneaked out of Mother Murphy's tuckshop when we came in? I bet they've hurried on ahead to ambush us!"

"Well, what if they have?" sniffed Blake, glaring pug-naciously ahead. "We can pelt them with snowballs, can't we? Come on, and blow 'em!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Oh, all right!" grinned Tom.

The juniors tramped on along the snow-clad lane, Tom Merry watchful and alert, his chums grinning carelessly. Despite the fact that they had already made a call at the village tuckshop, they were still hungry and anxious for tea, and the warmth of the cosy study fireside, and they heeded not Tom's warning.

They believed Tom's eyes had deceived him—at least, they believed that until they had advanced some yards down the lane, and then they had good reason to believe otherwise.

THE PREFECT'S DILEMMA!

A Thrilling 25,000 - word Story
of the Popular Chums of St.
Jim's—Tom Merry & Co.

By

Martin Clifford.

Once again it was Tom Merry who gave the warning—in a wild yell this time.

"Look out!"

"Bai Jove! What—"

Whizz! Flop!

"Bai Jove! My toppah— Yow-ow! Grough!"

A beautifully-aimed snowball sent D'Arcy's shining silk hat sailing into the air, and D'Arcy's wild wail of horror ended in a choking gurgle as a second snowball took him under the chin, and he sat down in the snow with a bump.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Sock into 'em!"

From the hedgerows came a yell of laughter, followed by the cheery, well-known voice of Gordon Gay, the leader of the Grammar School. And following the voice came a perfect fusillade of snowballs that rattled mercilessly about the bewildered heads of the St. Jim's juniors.

Whiz, whiz, whiz!

Biff! Flop! Biff!

"Grough! Ow! Oh, my hat! Back up, you— Yow! Gug-gug-groogh!"

Tom Merry's rallying yell ended in a smothered gurgling as a snowball caught him in the face, filling mouth, nose and eyes with feathery flakes.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Just for an instant there came a lull, and the cheerful, grinning faces of Gordon Gay & Co. showed above the hedgetops. Then again came Gordon Gay's voice:

"How d'you like 'em done, you sleepy Saints?"

Tom Merry & Co. did not reply. They were too busy gasping, and spluttering, and clawing snow from their eyes and down their necks. And the next moment the air was fairly humming with whizzing snowballs again.

The St. Jim's juniors reeled and staggered under the hurricane, and then Tom Merry recovered himself, and his voice rang out defiantly.

"Back up, St. Jim's! Steady! Give 'em socks!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"St. Jim's for ever!"

"Down with the Grammarians!"

"Huwwah!"

Once over the surprise and shock of the ambush, the St. Jim's juniors ranged themselves back to back and fought gallantly to stem the tide.

The quiet wintry countryside rang with shouts and yells, and there was a continuous sound of the soft bursting of snowballs.

St. Jim's were "up against it," however. Outnumbered, and with the enemy occupying the advantageous position of the higher ground, sheltered by the hedge, Tom Merry & Co. stood little chance.

Again and again Tom led his men in a charge up the steep bank, but each time they went tumbling back fairly "snowed under" with whizzing, bursting snowballs.

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"It's no good, you chaps!" panted Tom, dodging one flying snowball, and sending another to answer it. "The rotters are too many for us! When I give the word, run for it!"

"Right!" gasped Jack Blake. "It's no good! We'll have our own back some other time!"

"Yes, rather!"

It went against the grain to retreat; but there was no help for it. It could only be a matter of minutes before the Grammarians overcame their resistance, and they knew what to expect from the cheery Grammarians, when captured. To be rolled and bumped in the snow was the least they could expect at their hands.

The next moment Tom Merry gave the word, and, followed by the triumphant jeers of Gordon Gay & Co., the St. Jim's juniors broke off the battle abruptly, and bolted along the lane—all, that is, with the single exception of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

When about to follow, that aristocratic youth had suddenly sighted his precious topper lying neglected in the snowy ditch.

"Oh, bai Jove!" gasped Gussy.

Heedless of his own danger, Arthur Augustus made a dive to recover his silk hat. He snatched it up, and was turning to bolt after his chums when he found the grinning Gordon Gay and Frank Monk blocking his way. As he wheeled, hoping to escape the other way, Harry Wootton sprang from the hedge some yards away to cut him off.

"Oh, bai Jove!" gasped the swell of the Fourth again.

There was only one way left, and in sheer desperation, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy took it.

Scrambling up the bank, he dived through a gap in an unprotected part of the opposite hedge, and went plunging away across the field beyond.

In a flash Harry Wootton and Lane started after him, but in that instant Gordon Gay's voice rang out in a yell of alarm.

"Come back, you asses! Back up, for goodness' sake! Oh, my hat!"

Wonderingly, Wootton and Lane dashed back, and as they reached the lane they understood.

Charging down upon the group of Grammarians in the lane were Tom Merry & Co., and with them were five other St. Jim's juniors—Figgins & Co., and Redfern and Owen, of the New House.

It was fairly clear what had happened. Tom Merry and his chums had had the luck to meet Figgins and his chums in the lane lower down, and they had brought them along.

It was clear enough to Gordon Gay & Co.—clear also that they were now in the minority, and that flight was the wisest course for them.

"Run for it!" yelled Gay.

But most of Gay's followers had already "run for it," and Gay, Monk, and Carboy found they had left it too late.

As they turned to bolt the St. Jim's juniors were upon them with a rush. It was no case of snowballing snow, and there followed a wild and whirling hand-to-hand scrimmage in the lane.

It did not last long, for at the end of ten seconds the three Grammarian leaders were on their backs in the snow, with St. Jim's juniors piling over them.

"Good old New House!" chortled Tom Merry. "You've come in useful this time, Figgy, old chap. Cheers! This is where we smile on the Grammar School rotters!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The St. Jim's juniors did smile—loudly—and at a word from Tom Merry they rolled their squirming and yelling captives into the snow-filled ditch.

"What price the Saints now?" asked Tom Merry. "You gave us snow, Gay, old man, and now we're going to give you plenty in return."

With the aid of his chums, Tom Merry did give the howling Grammarians plenty. After rolling them over and over, they stuffed handfuls of snow down their backs, filled each of their pockets, and rubbed handfuls into their hair.

After doing this, Tom Merry decided they had had enough, and leaving the Grammarians sprawling in the snow, choking and gasping frantically, and almost hysterical with helpless wrath, the St. Jim's juniors tramped away, yelling with laughter.

They had turned the tables over their enemies. They had won a victory, and they felt entitled to laugh.

Blake stopped laughing suddenly, however, as he remembered Arthur Augustus.

"My hat!" he ejaculated. "What about Gussy? I didn't see—"

"The ass will be at St. Jim's by now," chuckled Lowther. "I spotted him racing across the field like a blessed snow-plough."

"Oh, good!" breathed Blake. "I wondered what on earth had happened to the silly dummy!"

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"So did I," grinned Tom Merry. "It's all serene, then. We've put the kybosh over those giddy Grammarians, and now we'll make for home, sweet home, and tea!"

"What-ho!"

And with bright and cheery faces, Tom Merry & Co., and Figgins & Co., tramped away towards St. Jim's—little dreaming that at that moment Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was heading for an adventure that was to have queer results to one or two people besides himself.

CHAPTER 2.

Out of the Frying-pan!

"BAI JOVE!"

Panting, gasping, and exhausted, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy halted at last, and glanced behind him apprehensively. He had plunged wildly across two fields, his eyeglass streaming behind him, and not once had he glanced to his rear. But now he did, and he was quite surprised to see nothing but a broad expanse of gleaming white, marked only by a double line of footprints—his own.

"Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus in great relief and no little surprise. "The wottahs have not pursued me aftah all, bai Jove!"

From a personal point of view, Arthur Augustus had not funk'd a scrap with the Grammarians: he had few superiors in the fighting line among the Lower School at St. Jim's.

But he funk'd the results of such a scrap upon his attire. He knew from past experience that the cheery Gordon Gay & Co. had no respect whatever for a fellow's "clobber." He shuddered at the thought of what might have happened to it. As it was, reflected Gussy, as he looked himself over dismally, things were bad enough. The plush of his "topper" was badly ruffled, and there was a dent in the crown. His hitherto natty coat was rumpled and smothered with snow, and his trousers were soaked up to the knees, whilst his neatly-shod feet had almost lost their usual lustre. Altogether, the swell of the Fourth looked far from his usual elegant self.

"Howevah," murmured Arthur Augustus consolingly, "I have escaped those fearful wuffians' weckless hands, and I shall soon be home now, bai Jove!"

Musing thus, the swell of the Fourth squeezed through the near-by hedge, and dropped down into a narrow lane beyond. It was little more than a cart-track, and it joined the Rylcombe Lane farther along.

A moment later he was trudging through the deep snow. He had not gone very far, however, when a sudden commotion greeted his ears.

It came from round a bend in the lane ahead, and it consisted chiefly of loud bursts of raucous laughter, and the angry shouting of a man.

"Haw, haw, haw!"

"Give the old 'un beans, lads! Yah!"

"That was a good 'un! Haw, haw!"

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus halted. He guessed what was taking place round the bend ahead. Apparently some young village hooligans were snowballing someone. To venture into their midst would be walking into a hornets' nest indeed. More than once had the noble Gussy been the target for the disrespectful village urchins.

But even as Arthur Augustus turned to retrace his steps he heard the man's voice again.

"You—you young fiends! Will you lemme be? If I catches you—Ow!"

The words ended in a cry of pain, and were followed instantly by the dull sound of a heavy fall.

"Bai Jove!"

For an instant Arthur Augustus stood motionless, and then, his alarm gone now, he went round the bend with a rush.

The sight he saw was what he almost expected and feared to see.

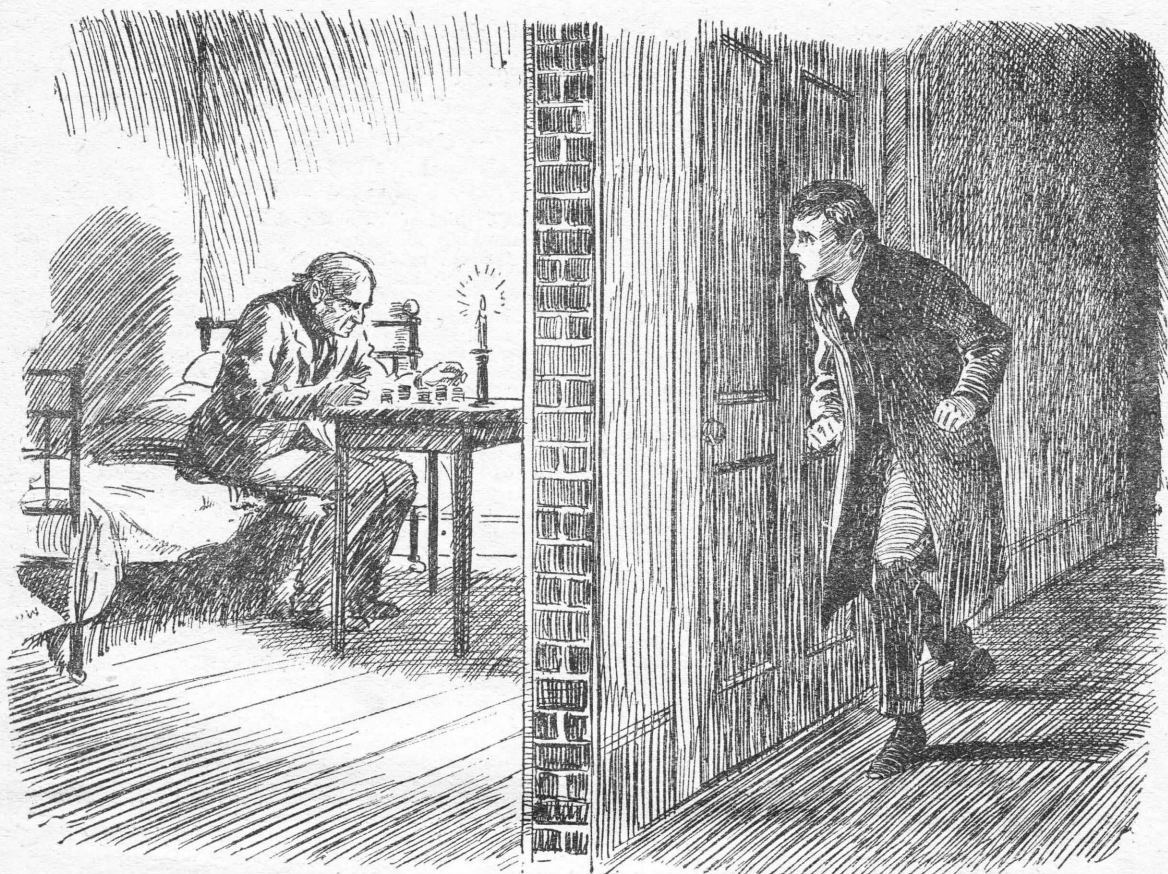
Lying in the snow was an old man whose rugged and work-lined face was twisted with pain. Gussy recognised him as a local character in Rylcombe—a queer, crusty old chap whom he had seen more than once being baited and tormented by village urchins.

And, dancing round him now were a dozen youths. Arthur Augustus recognised them as some of the worst characters among the juvenile population of Rylcombe. They had obviously been snowballing the old chap, but they had stopped on seeing the old man fall.

"You cowardly young wuffians!" cried Arthur Augustus indignantly.

Heedless of the odds against him, the swell of the Fourth charged through the gang of young hooligans, hitting out right and left. Yelling with alarm, the young ruffians scattered before the unexpected attack, and a moment later Arthur Augustus was kneeling at the old man's side.

To his relief, he found him apparently not severely hurt, and a moment later Arthur Augustus was helping the old fellow to stagger to his feet.



Peering through the crack in the door Gerald Knox watched fascinated. He saw the old man hovering over the table handling the money, a gloating expression on his lined features. "The beastly old miser!" breathed Knox. Even as he watched the strange scene Knox saw the old man put the money into a leather bag on the table. (See page 12.)

"All wight now?" said Arthur Augustus, taking the old fellow's arm gracefully. "Pway allow me to escort you to your home."

"I—I'll be all right now, young sir," gasped the old man, evidently overcome by the kindness of Arthur Augustus. "I jest twisted my foot a bit—it slipped under me as I was dodgin' them young villains' snowballs. If—if I catches 'em—"

He paused and shook a gnarled fist at the gang of young ruffians a few yards away. By now these had realised that their attacker was a mere schoolboy, and a raucous chorus of "Yahs!" and threatening howls rang out.

Then a snowball whizzed through the air, and once again D'Arcy's silk hat spun from his head and rolled in the snow.

"Haw, haw, haw!"

With a gasp of dismay, Arthur Augustus jumped to retrieve it. He was too late to save it, however, but was just in time to punch the nose of a tow-headed young rascal who had shoved his boot through the crown.

Arthur Augustus punched hard, and the tow-headed miscreant howled and toppled backwards.

"You—you frightful young wuffian!" shrieked the swell of the Fourth.

Arthur Augustus had been blazing with indignation before, but the sight of his ruined headgear added fuel to his righteous wrath. He turned back his cuffs and danced round the grovelling young ruffian.

"Go for 'im, 'Erb!"

"Smash the young nob!"

"It 'im on his winderpane! Yah!"

The tow-headed youth did not seem at all inclined to risk the fist of Arthur Augustus again, but the yells of his companions to "Go for 'im, 'Erb!" brought him to his feet at last.

He jumped up and went for Arthur Augustus with fists waving like the sails of a windmill.

In the snow the two went for each other hammer and tongs amidst the howling of 'Erb's friends.

It was a furious fight while it lasted; but it did not last long. Though lacking D'Arcy's boxing ability, 'Erb was a head and shoulders to the good, and D'Arcy's agility and footwork could be put to little use in the thick snow.

A sudden savage charge sent him staggering backwards, and in a flash 'Erb was sprawling over him in the snow, still hitting out savagely. Moreover, the downfall of Arthur Augustus was the signal for the rest of the gang to close in.

Like a pack of wolves they flung themselves on the gallant St. Jim's junior, and he vanished from sight beneath the mass of struggling forms.

"Oh, bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus, hitting out as best he could. "Faith play, you feahful wascals!"

But the rabble was in no mood for fair play—or did not know what it meant. A score of blows and equally as many kicks landed on the hapless form of D'Arcy, and his plight was beginning to look serious when a startling interruption occurred.

The old man who had been leaning on his stick, undecided how to act, now seemed to make up his mind, and he came hobbling up to the group.

Without warning he started to work with the stick in right good earnest, and the young ruffians on the outskirts of the melee scattered with howls of pain as the hefty stick rattled about their shoulders.

Crack, crack, crack!

"Yarooooh! Ow! Yow! Oh crumbs! Yooop!"

In a couple of moments Arthur Augustus found himself alone on the snow, feeling as though he had been through a threshing machine. He blinked about him dazedly, and then he recognised his rescuer.

"Bai Jove!" he gasped. "Oh deah! Thank you vewy much for wescuin' me, bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus staggered to his feet dizzily. His natty coat was torn and rumpled, his collar had been torn loose, and he was smothered from head to foot with snow. Altogether he looked a perfect wreck.

"Best run off home now, young sir!" advised the old villager, with a glance at 'Erb & Co., who were yelling at them from some distance away. "You'll mebbe get clear—"

"Wathah not!" panted Arthur Augustus. "You are injuahed, and I weally must insist upon escortin' you to your home."

And Arthur Augustus did so.

Blissfully unaware that the young hooligans were far more afraid of the old man than they were of him, the tender-hearted Gussy escorted him to his cottage, which was but a hundred yards farther along the lane.

To his great relief, 'Erb & Co. kept their distance, though they sent a few stray snowballs after the two. But though brave enough at snowballing from a distance, they had no intention of coming within reach of that terrible stick again—indeed, it was a miracle none of them had been brained by the force and fury of the old villager's attack. Even with the aid of Arthur Augustus and the stick, the old fellow could scarcely hobble the remaining few yards, and it was with a deep grunt of relief that he stopped at last before the little gate of a thatched cottage standing a little back from the quiet lane.

It was a miserable-looking hovel—dilapidated and tumble-down, and the savage snarling and growling of a dog from the yard behind did not make it more attractive to the St. Jim's junior.

At first the swell of the Fourth politely declined the old villager's invitation to enter, but on learning that he lived alone, and without help, Arthur Augustus changed his mind suddenly.

Curiously enough, Arthur Augustus had quite forgotten the fact that he himself had rescued the old fellow in the first place. He only remembered that the crusty old man had saved him from the rough handling of the young hooligans, and he intended to show his gratitude for that.

He found the inside of the cottage more wretched, if anything, than the outside; moreover, it was none too clean. But though inwardly the fastidious Gussy shuddered, he set about making himself useful without delay. The thought of the old fellow being alone and uncared for in such surroundings filled the tender-hearted Gussy with pity.

He lit the dingy paraffin lamp, put fresh logs on the dying fire, and, having obtained hot water and a bandage, he attended to the old fellow's injured foot. It proved to be only a slight sprain, and, being a keen Scout, Gussy had soon made the foot comfortable.

Then, after being assured by the old fellow that he would be all right, Arthur Augustus left the cottage with words of humble gratitude ringing in his ears.

It was quite dark by this time, and there was no sign of his late assailants about. But Arthur Augustus had forgotten them now. As he turned his back on the cottage and trudged through the murky gloom and snow, the face of Arthur Augustus was sombre.

"How feahfully wotten, bai Jove!" he murmured, shaking his head seriously. "Fancy that poor old chap livin' in that

howwible place all alone, and without a fwiend in the world! Wotten! However, aftah this I will pwove to the old fellow that he has gained one fwiend, at least. Yaas, watah!"

And the swell of the Fourth meant what he said.

CHAPTER 3.

Knox is Suspicious!

THAT brief visit to the old thatched cottage on the outskirts of Rylcombe was the first of several for Arthur Augustus D'Arcy during the next few days.

D'Arcy had very soon learned that the old man's name was Grant, and that he was known locally as "Old Job." He also learned that the old fellow was generally regarded as being a little "queer" in the head, and as being more than a little "crusty" and unsociable. Lonely and friendless, the old man lived a hermitlike existence in his tumbledown cottage, avoiding all and avoided by all.

But these facts did not trouble Arthur Augustus. To him Old Job was neither crusty nor unsociable. Indeed, it was difficult for anyone to be unfriendly with the good-natured Gussy, with his kindly consideration for others, his innocent but obvious sincerity, and his never-failing and Chesterfieldian politeness. And from humble gratitude Old Job's attitude grew to something strangely approaching a devotion that was touching—and not a little embarrassing to Arthur Augustus.

But Arthur Augustus kept his visits to the cottage secret—even from his own chums. He had no desire to pose as a Good Samaritan, and he fancied Blake and the rest of the chums would scarcely approve at all. There was no actual rule against St. Jim's fellows visiting villagers, but he knew the authorities would not approve, and he guessed Blake and the rest would not, either. He feared they would attempt to stop him going at all.

So for several nights Arthur Augustus went out alone on mysterious excursions, and, naturally, Blake & Co. and Tom Merry & Co. wondered at such a state of affairs. And as Gussy refused flatly to explain, it made Blake & Co. not a little annoyed and exasperated.

On the Wednesday following—a half-holiday—Gussy's chums got on the trail, however, and the mystery became clear to them—or partly clear.

The ground was in a shocking state, and, football being out of the question, the chums of the School House had walked into Rylcombe to pay a visit to Mother Murphy's tuckshop. And on emerging from the shop they had bumped into the swell of the Fourth.

Arthur Augustus had just emerged from the greengrocer's shop next door, and he had several paper bags in his arms. He blinked rather haughtily through his eyeglass at his chums.

Blake eyed him grimly.

"You—you dummy!" he exclaimed warmly. "I thought you were not coming to the village, Gussy."

"Weally, Blake," said Arthur Augustus, a trifle stiffly, "I did not say I was comin' to the village. I meahly said that I did not pwopose to come with you fellows!"

"And why the thump couldn't you come with us?" snorted Jack Blake, eyeing his chum fixedly. "Look here, you ass, this thumping secrecy has got to stop! What idiotic game are you up to, Gussy?"

"I must wefuse to answah that question, Blake!"

"Is it the giddy girl from the greengrocer's?" chuckled Monty Lowther. "My hat! That's it, you fellows—that's the secret! Old Gussy's mashing that red-haired flapper in the greengrocer's shop!"

"Bai Jove! Lowthah, you feahful wottah—you wedic boundah!"

"If it is that, then we don't mind so much—we'll forgive you, Gussy!" grinned Tom Merry. "We feared you might be getting into more serious mischief."

"Wats! I uttably wewudiate such a wedic suggestion, bai Jove!" snorted Arthur Augustus, blushing crimson. "I am not mashin' the girl fwom the gweengwoer's. Wubbish! I must ask you wottahs to allow me to pwocceed on my way, bai Jove!"

"Half a sec, Gussy!" snapped Blake grimly. "If it isn't the red-haired girl, who or what is it? What the dickens have you got there?"

"Weally, Blake, that is hardly any concern of yours. However, eh," proceeded Gussy, with dignity, "as it happens, it is meahly fwuit—gwapes and suchlike."

"Oh!" said Blake. "For tea—eh? Oh, good!"

"It is not for tea—not your tea, at all events, Blake!" said Gussy frigidly. "Now perhaps you will have the goodness to allow me to pass."

And, without waiting for his chums to move, Arthur Augustus walked round them, and proceeded on his way with dignity.

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Blake grinned, and clutched Herries' arm, as that junior started as if to follow D'Arcy.

"Oh, let the fathead go!" he grinned, staring after the dignified Gussy. "He's on his high horse, and it's useless gassing to the dummy. I'll tell you what! I vote we follow the idiot and see where he goes to!"

"Good wheeze!" said Tom Merry, nodding. "It's up to us to look after the ass—find out what his game is!"

"After all, we're his keepers," said Blake, shaking his head. "You know what the silly ass is for getting himself into trouble. Come on!"

"Yes, rather!"

"Better go carefully, though," said Tom. "He'll be suspicious, and watch out, perhaps."

But apparently Arthur Augustus had no suspicion that his chums were on his trail. Not once did he look round as he marched down the village street and came out into the Rylcombe Lane.

Tom Merry and his chums followed cautiously at some distance. It was not the first time by a long way that they had felt it incumbent upon them to "keep an eye" on Arthur Augustus, for his own good, and they were determined to keep an eye upon him now for his own good.

About a hundred yards farther along the lane their quarry branched off down a side lane, and Blake whistled.

"That's rummy!" he grunted. "That lane leads back into Rylcombe Lane farther along. Can't be making for St. Jim's by a roundabout way."

"Calling somewhere on the way, I expect," said Tom thoughtfully. "Though I'm blessed if I can think where. There's only just one cottage about here—Great Scott! Where's old Knoxy sprung from?"

Tom's chums were wondering that also. Like their leader, they had suddenly become aware that another figure was between them and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy—the tall, well-known figure of Gerald Knox, the most unpopular prefect at St. Jim's.

"Must have jumped out of the blessed hedge!" breathed Herries. "What the dickens—"

"It's clear enough," said Tom Merry, frowning. "Knoxy's on Gussy's trail! Look at him! He must have been watching for him!"

"That means—"

"It means he's suspicious that Gussy's up to some game—just as we are!" snapped Tom, his eyes gleaming. "Perhaps the brute knows what it is!"

"My hat! We ought to warn poor old Gussy, then!" growled Blake. "But how on earth—"

"Into the hedge—quick!" said Tom abruptly. "We'll try to get in front of that rotter Knox!"

"Yes, rather!"

The juniors followed Tom Merry through a gap in the hedge, one after the other. A moment later Tom was leading the way swiftly along the inside of the hedge. There was still plenty of snow about, and their feet made no sound. Knox's stealthy actions left no room for doubt that he was on the track of Arthur Augustus, and they meant, at all costs, to warn their stubborn chum.

They had almost arrived at a point opposite to the prefect when Tom suddenly stopped with a warning hiss. Looking over the hedge, they were just in time to see Knox slip swiftly into the cover of the opposite hedge-bottom.

The next moment they saw the reason.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had stopped at the gate of the old thatched cottage. He walked up the short, unkempt garden, and rapped on the rickety front door.

"Phew!" breathed Tom Merry.

Now he knew what D'Arcy's destination was, Tom Merry could scarcely believe his own eyes. For what reason the fastidious and aristocratic Gussy was visiting such a disreputable habitation he could not imagine for the life of him.

"What's it mean?" gasped Manners in a whisper. "What on earth is he doing in that show?"

"Goodness knows!" muttered Tom Merry. "There's only an old fellow lives there alone—a queer, half-witted old chap, I believe—Old Job, or something, the villagers call him. I—I don't like this, you chaps!"

"It fairly beats the band!" breathed Blake, wrinkling his brows. "Oh, the awful dummy! What on earth can he be up to in that show?"

"Hallo, he's gone in!" said Lowther.

The watching juniors saw Arthur Augustus disappear into the cottage, and then the door closed. As it did so Gerald Knox left his hiding place swiftly and started towards the cottage at a sneaking run.

He reached the fence by the front gate, and, diving through a gap, made his way round to the back.

"The sneaking rotter!" hissed Blake savagely. "It's all up with Gussy now—if he is up to anything silly!"

That Arthur Augustus was up to some foolish and mysterious game seemed practically certain to his chums now. The very fact that he had kept his movements secret—even

from his own closest chums—seemed to give clear proof of that.

"We've got to warn the frightful ass!" snapped Tom Merry through his teeth. "I'm going to risk it, and knock at the front door. If you fellows see Knox coming round, go for him!"

"Right-ho!"

Such a course meant serious trouble for the juniors; but desperate ills required desperate remedies. At all costs, they felt it was necessary to warn their foolish chum.

But even as Tom Merry squeezed through the hedge to carry out his intention something happened with startling abruptness.

From the back of the dingy cottage there sounded a sudden commotion—the savage snarling and growling of a ferocious dog, and the terrified yells of Gerald Knox of the Sixth.

The sudden sounds broke on the quiet afternoon with startling shrillness, and, as Knox's terrified yells changed to a shriek, Tom Merry gave an alarmed gasp.

"Come on, you fellows, for goodness' sake!" he cried.

The juniors charged through the hedge and went to the rescue with a rush.

CHAPTER 4.

The Prefect's Predicament!

ACROSS the road the juniors ran, and, diving through the gap, they made their way swiftly round to the back. Here a high fence hid their view of the yard from whence the hubbub proceeded, and they scrambled up this and peered over.

The scene which met their alarmed gaze brought sudden grins to their faces.

In the corner of the dingy yard below was Gerald Knox. He was crouching on the top of a tarred rain-tub, with a look of terror on his somewhat unpleasant features. His cap was gone, and his coat was ripped up the back, and one coat-tail was missing. The lid of the rain-tub had evidently tipped up, for one of Knox's legs dripped with water, having apparently crashed through the ice, and now the hapless prefect was balancing precariously on the extreme edge of the tub with his back against the cottage wall.

And below him, in the yard, snarling ferociously and making frantic leaps up at the prefect, was Old Job's dog—a large bull-terrier with wicked-looking teeth and red-glinting eyes.

"Oh, my hat!" ejaculated Tom Merry.

The juniors stared at the interesting scene with goggling eyes, making manful efforts to restrain their desire to yell with laughter.

It was not the first time Gerald Knox had come to grief whilst spying on the juniors, and they had no sympathy with him—quite the reverse.

Knox caught sight of their faces over the fence quite suddenly, and he gave a wild yell.

"Help! Help, you young rotters! Fetch that old brute to call his dog off! He'll—Yarooogh! Oh, help!"

At that moment the raging bull-terrier made an extraordinary effort to reach his quarry, and there sounded a sharp snap which brought a terrified yelp from Knox.

But, though the chain had undoubtedly given, the resulting leap of the savage dog only took him to the edge of the tub, and he fell back on his haunches, snarling. Before he could try again the back door flew open, and out into the yard rushed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, followed by Old Job himself.

Both stared transfixed at the startling scene for a moment. Then, with a gasp of amazement Arthur Augustus dashed forward and grasped the dog's collar in his hands.

Days ago Arthur Augustus had made friends with the bull-terrier, and he now dragged the brute away, and with the help of Old Job made the chain secure again, and shortened it.

Gerald Knox watched, with a savage, glowering look on his white face.

"You—you're sure the brute's safe?" he hissed through his teeth. "D'Arcy, if that brute gets loose again, I'll—I'll—I'll—"

"The dog's safe enough now, mister," growled Old Job, a black look on his face, as he eyed the senior suspiciously. "And now I wants to know what be you doin' 'ere—what be you trespassing in here for, mister?"

The discomforted and humiliated prefect jumped down from the rain-tub, his features red and blazing with fury. He had dropped down into the yard blissfully unaware that a dog was there, and in his blind panic he had not noticed the fence and jumped for the nearest haven of refuge he saw—the rain-tub. But he was glad enough to drop down from it now.

He pointed a shaking finger at the astonished, bewildered D'Arcy.

"That—that little cad knows why I am here!" he snarled

viciously. "By jingo! You'll pay for this, D'Arcy, you little fiend! You set that confounded dog on me on purpose!"

"Oh, bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus blinked at him in dumbfounded amazement. He had been astounded enough at seeing the faces of his chums lining the fence, and he had been more than astounded at finding Knox in the yard. But to be charged with having set the dog on Knox almost took the junior's breath away.

"Bai Jove, Knox!" he gasped. "That is weally the limit! I did not even know you were heah. It is uttably wedic to make such a charge! And, bai Jove, I undahstand now what you are doin' heah, Knox! You were sneakin' aftah me—spyin', bai Jove!"

Knox went crimson with wrath.

"You—you dare to talk to me like that, D'Arcy!" he shouted. "I was following you—watching you, yes! And I had good cause, too, my fine bird! I saw you leave this beastly hole last night, and I came now determined to catch you in the act."

"But weally, Knox—"

"D'you think I don't know what your game is here?" shouted Knox furiously. "You came here to smoke and play cards—perhaps worse! But I've bowled you out! I'll get you flogged and sacked for this, D'Arcy! I know my duty and I mean to do it."

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus fairly blinked at the angry prefect. Old Job stared from one to the other, only half comprehending what it all meant, but with a nasty, dangerous look growing on his somewhat vacant face.

From the top of the fence Tom Merry & Co. stared down, not a little scared now, and not knowing what to do. They knew that Arthur Augustus was "for it" now in any case—or they believed they knew.

"Bai Jove!" repeated Gussy, getting his breath at last. "You—you say I came heah to smoke and—and play wotten cards—"

"Of course you did!" hissed Knox. "It's plain enough."

"Wot—uttah wot!" snorted Arthur Augustus warmly.

"That is a wotten untruth, Knox, and you know it is! You are a wotten fabwicatah, Knox!"

"What?" shouted Knox, almost beside himself with passion. "You dare to call me a liar, D'Arcy? You little cad, I'll—I'll—"

He grabbed Arthur Augustus by the collar and shook him savagely. But he did not shake for long. A sudden, powerful grasp closed on Knox's coat-collar, and he was dragged away from D'Arcy and sent crashing against the whitewashed wall of the cottage with a force that almost stunned him.

He staggered round and found himself staring dizzily into the distorted, menacing face of Old Job. In the old man's eyes was an ugly look.

"My hat!"

The ease with which the old man had handled the prefect was a revelation. Tom Merry & Co. stared, not a little alarmed, at the look on the old fellow's face.

"Look here, mister!" growled the old man fiercely. "Jest you leave Master D'Arcy alone! Don't you lay no finger on him, or I'll 'andle you! I'll 'arm you if you does!"

Panting for breath, Knox leaned back against the wall and glared at Old Job with a fiendish expression on his face.

"You—you brute!" he almost choked. "You—you dare to lay your beastly hands on me, my man! I'll—I'll make you pay for this! I'll have you arrested for assault! I'll have you put in prison for this, you brute!"

"In—in prison?" echoed the old man, with a sudden start.

"Yes—in prison!" snarled Knox, feeling he had frightened the old fellow. "I'll teach you to lay your dashed fists on me, by gad! As for you, D'Arcy—"

The prefect turned on Arthur Augustus in sudden fury.

"You'll suffer dearly for this, D'Arcy," he said bitterly.

"Whatever you may have been doing in this hole, you've conspired with this brute of a village lout to assault me—me, a prefect of St. Jim's. These precious pals of yours are witnesses. I'll not rest until I've got you sacked—or flogged at least. Now clear out! I order you back to St. Jim's—you other young rotters as well!" added Knox savagely, turning to the startled juniors on the fence.

The prefect started to look round for his cap, and Arthur Augustus hesitated.

"Come on, Gussy, you idiot!" hissed Jack Blake frantically. "Can't you see you're in trouble enough. Come on!"

"Yes, come along, Gussy, old chap!" urged Tom Merry.

Fortunately—or unfortunately—Arthur Augustus seemed to realise the wisdom of not provoking the prefect further, and he nodded frigidly.

"Vewy well, Knox," he said coldly. "I will obey your orders. I uttably wufuse, howevah, to admit that I have done anythin' w'ong, and I shall certainly make that fact quite cleah to Dr. Holmes."

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And with that dignified remark Arthur Augustus whispered a farewell to the staring old man and passed into the cottage to get his hat. Leaving Knox fishing in the rain-tub among the broken ice for his cap, Tom Merry & Co. dropped down from the fence and ran round to the front to wait for Arthur Augustus.

He came out at last, and he eyed the waiting juniors coldly. But they gave him no chance to make any remarks, nor did they make any themselves for some moments. Fearful that Arthur Augustus might want to change his mind and stay, they grasped him with one accord and fairly rushed him, protesting hotly, along the lane towards St. Jim's.

Meanwhile, having fished his cap out from the rain-tub, and squeezed the water from it, Knox turned to find Old Job regarding him with a strange, dull, and fixed expression on his face. It almost frightened Knox.

"Now, my man," snapped the senior, eyeing him curiously. "If you'll hold that beastly snarling dog of yours I can get out of this hole. D'you hear me?"

The old man said nothing for a moment. He stared at Knox, stark fear and dread in his eyes. To tell the truth, Old Job was scared—badly scared. Knox's blind threats had appeared to him much worse than they really were. It was scarcely likely that Knox would even attempt to get Old Job arrested in any case, and it was scarcely likely D'Arcy would be flogged without something stronger than Knox's bare word to back up his accusations.

But Old Job did not know that. He believed Knox was speaking the truth. To his poor, dull wits it seemed that Knox was the person who was going to get him imprisoned, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, his kindly benefactor, the only fellow whom he remembered having shown him real kindness, flogged and sacked—though Old Job scarcely knew what that last meant.

The thought filled him with dread. It would be bad enough to be imprisoned—to be arrested. And for the boy who had befriended him to suffer filled the old man's mind with hopeless dismay. At all costs he must prevent that happening; and to the old fellow's queer, twisted mentality there seemed only one way.

He spoke hoarsely at last—eagerly almost.

"Yes, young master, I 'ear you," he mumbled, a curious gleam in his usually dull eyes. "Jest a minute, though. Does you mean what you said jest now—as you would have me arrested, and that other young gentleman flogged? You—you means that?"

Knox laughed—a brutal, cruel laugh. He saw that the old man was in a mortal funk, and he gloated at the thought.

"Yes, you brute—I mean it!" he snapped. "I'll teach you to set your dashed dog on to me! I'll teach you to lay your beastly hands on me, too! I mean every word that I said."

"You—you do?" The question came again tensely.

"Yes," grinned Knox; "I'll show you— Here—what— You scoundrel—"

Knox's gloating words ended abruptly in a yell of fear as the grasp of the old man fell upon him like a vice. He was lifted up like a child and carried, struggling madly but helplessly, in the old man's powerful grasp into the gloomy cottage.

Across the kitchen, and without a word, Old Job carried the terrified senior, and a moment later he was stumping up the carpetless stairs with him.

Reaching the tiny landing at the top of the narrow staircase, the old man hobbled across to a door and staggered in with his still struggling burden. On a small, broken iron bedstead, bare save for a mattress, he flung the alarmed senior down and stepped back to the door.

Knox struggled up in a fury. He was about to fling himself desperately at Old Job when he caught a gleam—almost of madness—in the old man's eyes, and he paused, terrified.

"You—you scoundrel!" he panted hoarsely. "What—what does this outrage mean? What—?"

"It means as you've got to stay here," was the fierce menacing answer.

The next moment Old Job had passed through the door and closed it after him. As if in a dream Knox heard the shooting of a bolt, and then he heard the heavy tread of the grim old man on the uncarpeted stairs.

"By gad!" ejaculated Knox.

In the wretched garret Gerald Knox stared at the closed door in a state of fury and amazement, and with a growing feeling of fear clutching at his heart.

CHAPTER 5.

Gussy Explains!

"YOU—you burbling dummy!"

"You raving ass, Gussy!"

"Now you've got to explain, you prize idiot," snorted Jack Blake.

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus gasped breathlessly as his irate chums



As Gerald Knox placed the leather bag underneath the tub, a head showed for a brief instant above the yard fence, and an amazed, curious face was visible. Little did Knox know that his every movement was being watched by a pair of cunning, crafty eyes. (See page 14).

brought him to a halt at last some distance from Old Job's cottage, and surrounded him wrathfully.

Arthur Augustus was also wrathful. His aristocratic features were crimson with mingled wrath and exertion. His chums had propelled him along at a reckless pace, and as Gussy had protested and struggled all the way, he was now in a state of breathless exhaustion and seething wrath.

"You—you feahful wottahs!" he panted. "Aftah this, bai Jove, I shall no longah wegard you wottahs as fwiends. I have a vevy good mind to thwash you wottahs all wound."

"Ass!" said Blake impatiently. "Now do listen to me, Gussy. We want to know—"

"I uttably wefuse to listen to you, Jack Blake," said Arthur Augustus in a tone trembling with indignation. "You have tweeked me with gwoss diswepct. You have not only intahfearad gwossly in my pwivate affaihs, but you have tweeked me woughly and wudely. My clobbah is wumped, and you have put me in quite a fluttah, bai Jove!"

"Do listen, ass!"

"I uttably wefuse to listen, and I uttably wefuse to be chawactwised as an ass, Blake."

"But, my dear man—"

"I am not your deah man, Jack Blake. Pway allow me to continue on my way."

"Oh, blow you!"

Blake gave it up in disgust then, but Tom Merry winked at him. When once Arthur Augustus got on his high horse it needed great tact to get him off it again.

"Now look here, Gussy, old man," pleaded Tom Merry with great earnestness, "don't be so fearfully hard-hearted. It isn't like you to turn your back on your old chums when they're worried and in deep trouble, you know."

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus regarded Tom Merry through his eye-glass with a new expression on his face. Tom's ingenious

way of putting it had touched the right chord in Gussy's tender heart at last.

"Bai Jove!" he ejaculated in some distress. "I was not aware that you were wowwied and in deep twouble, you fellows."

"Well, we are," said Tom solemnly. "And you happen to be the only fellow we can go to for help and advice in the matter."

"Oh!" murmured Arthur Augustus, softening visibly. "Then in that case I will heah what you have to say, Tom Mewwy. Pway, what is the mattah?"

"It's like this, Gussy," said Tom. "We're worried and in deep trouble concerning a pal of ours, a chap who's been acting the goat, and looks like getting it in the neck."

"How feahfully wotten!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus innocently. "But who—?"

"The chap," went on Tom hastily, "doesn't seem to care a hang what happens to him. He doesn't realise he's got himself into a hole. We do, though, and we're worried and troubled about him. It's not fair, Gussy, you'll admit. Even if this chap is careless about himself he ought to consider the feelings of his pals. Don't you think so, Gussy?"

"Yaas, wathah!" agreed Arthur Augustus unsuspectingly. "That is quite wight, Tom Mewwy. But who—?"

"That's just how we look at it," went on Tom hastily.

"We think he ought to play the game—to confide in his chums who have his interests at heart, and to enlist their aid in order to clear himself. You fully agree with us there, don't you, Gussy?"

"Yaas, wathah! I certainly do, Tom Mewwy. But weally, who is the fellow? Is it Figgins?"

"No, it isn't Figgins."

"Then who—?"

"Yourself, of course, Gussy!"

"Eh?"

"Yourself, Gussy!"

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus gave a jump. He jammed his monocle deeper into his eye and regarded Tom Merry fixedly, and with growing suspicion. He began to suspect, rather late, that his noble leg had been pulled.

"Bai Jove, you wottah! I believe you are pullin' my leg, Tom Mewwy!"

"Not at all," said Tom with deep gravity. "We are worried about you—deeply worried and troubled, Gussy."

"But—but why?" shrieked Arthur Augustus. "I am not in any twouble. I don't look like getting it in the neck. If you are weferwin' to this wedic affair of Knox—"

"Of course we're referring to that, Gussy. Don't you see what's going to happen, you ass? Knox will go to the Head with a yarn that you were visiting that dingy place to smoke and play cards, and generally act the goat. He'll also swear you set the dashed dog on him. You'll not find it easy to get out of it, Gussy."

"Wubbish!" said Arthur Augustus. "Uttah wubbish, bai Jove!"

"There you go," said Tom Merry. "Just as I said. You don't realise you're in a hole. It's not fair, as you admitted just now yourself, Gussy. You ought to consider your worried pals."

"Bai Jove! Weally—"

"Even if you are careless about yourself," went on Tom relentlessly, "you ought to play the game and confide in us. You admitted that, yourself, Gussy. You agreed that you ought. If you are a fellow of principle you will do it without delay."

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus blinked rather uncertainly at his chums. But there was no getting out of it now. In a dim sort of way he felt he had been tricked, but after a little reflection he decided not to press for satisfaction on that point.

"Vewy well, Tom Mewwy," he gasped rather faintly. "I will do as you wequest; though, weally, the whole affair is wedic. I pwesume you wish to know why I entahed that cottage?"

"You've hit it," assented Blake grimly.

"That is vewy easy to explain, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus calmly. "I meahly went theah to call upon Mr. Gwant, who is a gweat fwient of mine."

"Oh!"

"A—a friend of yours?" gasped Blake.

"Yaas. I am vewy, vewy sowwy for the poor old gentleman," said Gussy quietly. "I am also vewy indebted to him. You will wemembah the feahful state I was in when I returned home the othah night. I told you some of the facts—that I had been attacked by village wuffians. I did not, howevah, explain that I was wescued, pwobably fwom weally sewious injuwy, by Mr. Gwant."

And Arthur Augustus went on to explain more fully what had happened that evening, and how he had made friends with the old man.

"Well, my hat!" gasped Blake faintly, when he had finished. "So—so that's it? And those bags of fruit—you were taking them for Old Job?"

"Yaas."

"And it isn't the girl at the greengrocer's, after all?" murmured Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Dear old Gussy," went on Lowther affectionately. "Always trying to help lame dogs over stiles, and always getting himself into trouble!"

"I uttahly wefuse to wegard myself as bein' in twouble, Lowthah!" said Gussy warmly. "Wot! Uttah wot!"

The juniors looked at Arthur Augustus. They were astonished at the truth, and they were deeply relieved. So it wasn't so very serious, after all, and Gussy had not been up to anything. The mystery of his secret excursions was explained. Indeed, they felt they might have guessed something of the sort, knowing Arthur Augustus as they did. It was nothing new to find Gussy in the role of a Good Samaritan.

"Great pip!" said Tom Merry, taking a deep breath. "So that's all there is to it! But—but that doesn't alter the fact that Knox will try to make things hot for you, Gussy."

"Yes, rather!"

"If you'll take my tip, you'll go straight to Railton and tell him the whole yarn, Gussy," said Manners soberly. "Get your yarn in before Knox does."

"That's rather a good idea," said Tom Merry. "But I hardly think it's necessary. Knox hasn't any proof—he hasn't a leg to stand on! Gussy's got a straightforward yarn, and we can vouch for what happened at the cottage just now."

"That's so," nodded Blake, grinning. "If old Knoxy

wants to make a fool of himself, let him. Just sit tight, Gussy, and don't worry."

"Bai Jove!" said Gussy indignantly. "I have nevah had any intention of doin' anythin' else, Blake. I am not wowwyin', bai Jove!"

"That's right, Gussy—that's right!" agreed Tom Merry soothingly. "We'll let the matter drop, then, old chap. Now let's get home to tea. We're in funds in Study No. 10, and you Fourth Form chaps can join us."

"What-ho!" said Blake.

And with that the juniors started for St. Jim's, Blake and Tom Merry linking arms affectionately with Arthur Augustus. And by the time school was reached the swell of the Fourth had quite recovered his wonted good-humour.

But though Arthur Augustus obviously was not worrying in regard to Gerald Knox, his chums were. They knew that the unpopular prefect would move heaven and earth to make Arthur Augustus "sit up" for that humiliating experience at the cottage of old Job Grant. And all through tea they expected the threatened summons to Mr. Railton's room.

But their fears did not materialise. Tea passed, and prep passed without signs of trouble. Nor when bed-time had come had they heard or seen anything of Knox, which was not surprising had they only known.

But they did not dream of the truth, and in the Shell dormitory that evening the Terrible Three got rather a surprise when Kildare, just before putting out the light, asked a question of the dormitory in general.

"Any of you fellows happen to have seen Knox anywhere this evening?" he asked as if as an afterthought.

There was a shaking of heads. Monty Lowther and Manners looked at Tom Merry abruptly. Tom Merry looked a trifle startled.

"Why, isn't he in the school, Kildare?" he asked, staring at the captain of St. Jim's.

"No. He hasn't come in yet," said Kildare briefly. "Railton's getting his ears up about him. Right-ho!"

Evidently taking it for granted that the juniors knew nothing, Kildare left the dormitory.

The Shell fellows passed no remarks. The fact that Knox of the Sixth was not in yet was of no interest to them. Knox was a senior and a prefect. It was not as if he had been a junior. Only the Terrible Three felt rather disturbed.

"That's queer, Tommy," whispered Manners. "You—you don't think Knox's being late has anything to do with that business at the cottage?"

"Can't see how it can," said Tom slowly. "I expect he's out with his beastly pals somewhere."

With that the junior captain climbed into his bed. But he was not convinced in his own mind for all that, and went to sleep at last feeling very uneasy in his mind as to what had happened to Gerald Knox.

CHAPTER 6.

A Bad Night for Knox!

"OH gad! This is awful!"

Gerald Knox sank back on the rickety bedstead with a groan.

It was an hour since Old Job had left him alone in the gloomy garret—an hour of furious rage and despair for the senior. He had tried the window, only to find it securely barred, and in any case, it was too small for him to climb through. And below him, in the yard, was the ferocious bull-terrier. He had also tried the door, to find it locked.

As he realised the fact, the prefect raged about the tiny bed-room like a madman, banging and crashing on the door and shouting until he was hoarse. He had also smashed the glass in the tiny-paned window, and had yelled for help without avail. It was hopeless. He knew it was hopeless for anyone to hear him in that lonely spot. His shouts only roused the dog to fury, and the barking easily drowned his yells for aid.

Exhausted and panting, he flung himself to rest on the bed at last. He was furious, but he was also afraid and bewildered. Why had the old fellow kidnapped him? For what reason? It never occurred to him that his own blind threats were responsible. He never dreamed that to the dull-witted old fellow his threats would be accepted as a real danger, and that he had been kidnapped to prevent him carrying them out.

The uncertainty and mystery of it all made the prefect shiver with fear. He knew Old Job was scarcely responsible, and the knowledge made him afraid and apprehensive.

Scarcely had Knox dropped on the bed when he was on his feet again in a flash. On the stairs he heard the heavy tread of feet. There sounded a shuffling at the door, and then the drawing of a bolt.

Knox waited, trembling with excitement. If there was

(Continued on page 12)

GRAND "ERRORS" COMPETITION!

£25 IN PRIZE MONEY
1st Prize £10. 2nd Prize £5. 5 Prizes of £1 Each,
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WHAT a splendid offer, chums! £10 First Prize; £5 Second Prize; 5 Prizes of £1 each, and consolation prizes of Six Footballs!

This easy competition is only open to readers of the GEM, and you should not miss this last opportunity.

This is the Sixth and Last Picture in our easy contest, and all readers who have not yet obtained the First Five Pictures should get them through their newsagent.

ALL YOU HAVE TO DO

is to study carefully the picture below—an illustration in which the artist has purposely made mistakes—and see how many "Errors" you can find in the incident.

For instance, one mistake is pretty obvious; a canoe has no rudder.

There are several "Errors" like this that the keen observer will soon discover.

Don't be satisfied with the most obvious mistakes, but look into the drawing until you are satisfied that no "Error" has escaped your attention.

Remember there are other readers competing against you, and it is up to YOU to beat them, if possible.

As you find the mistakes, jot them down neatly upon a piece of paper, then, when you have satisfied yourself that you have discovered all the "Errors," count them, put the total—that is, the exact number of all the "Errors" found in each picture—in the space provided on the Entrance Form numbered correspondingly.

Having followed these simple instructions, sign your name and address in

the space provided on the Entrance Form. Then pin the Entrance Form to your neatly written list of "Errors."

In the same way see that your signed coupons and lists of "Errors" for all the previous five pictures are in order. Then fasten them all together, with the Sixth Coupon and list on top; add the Grand Total of all the "Errors" you have found in the whole competition, in the square indicated on the Sixth Form—and enclose the complete entry in an envelope addressed to:

"Errors" Competition,
 C/o GEM,
 Gough House, Gough Square,
 London, E.C. 4.

The closing date is Friday, January 23rd, 1925. No entries arriving after that date will be considered.

Remember, all the above prizes **MUST BE WON**—the First Prize of £10 being awarded to the sender who has found the largest number of "Errors" throughout the whole competition. The other prizes will be awarded in order of merit. In the case of ties the prizes or their value will be divided.

Every attempt must be complete in itself—that is, your six lists of "Errors" and the six coupons all properly arranged and filled in as directed. Coupons must not be mutilated or bear alterations of any kind.

The decision of the Editor of the GEM will be absolutely final.

No one connected with the staff or proprietors of the GEM may compete.

Remember, that if you have only found a fair number of "Errors" in one picture you may bring yourself on level terms with others in the other pictures.

"ERRORS" COMPETITION—ENTRANCE FORM.

SIXTH PICTURE.

I accept the Editor's decision as final.

Number of "Errors" in No. 6 Picture. →

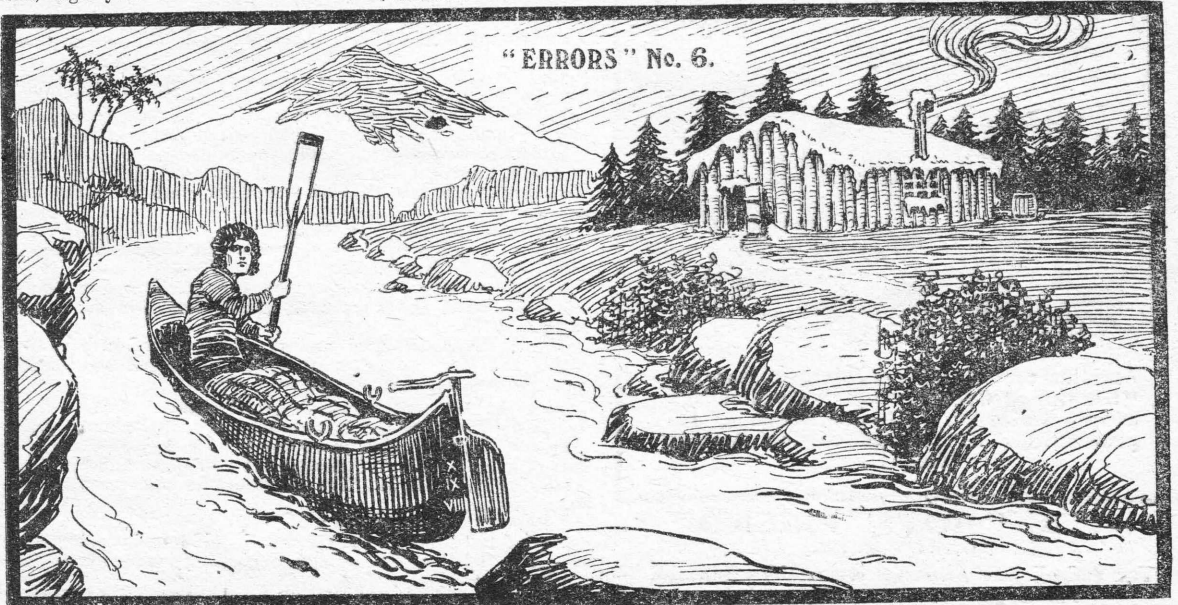
GRAND TOTAL OF ALL "ERRORS" IN ENTRY.

Name

Address

Closing date, Jan. 23rd. GEM.

"ERRORS" No. 6.



the slightest chance of escape he meant to make the most of it.

The door opened, and Old Job appeared in the doorway. In one hand was a plate of bread-and-butter and in the other a steaming mug of tea.

Knox's heart leaped, and he remained where he was. He hoped desperately that the old fellow would walk into the room and thus give him the chance to make a wild bid for liberty.

But Old Job Grant gave him no chance to do that. He remained framed in the doorway, and held out the plate and the mug.

"Here's your tea, mister!" he said gruffly. "Better take it, young sir!"

Knox glared at him, fury and fear striving for the mastery in his breast.

"You—you scoundrel!" he panted huskily. "What does this outrage mean? You—you'll suffer for this, my man!"

"Talkin' like that won't help you!" said Old Job menacingly. "You've got to stay 'ere, and it ain't no good thinkin' of escape! I ain't goin' to no prison, and I ain't lettin' young Master D'Arcy suffer through me. He's bin good to me, and I ain't goin' to allow it! You stays here. You can't get outer that winder, and you better not try to get outer this door, or you'll be sorry for it! I warns you now!"

"You—you fool! You villain!"

"I'll bring you food, mister, and there's a bed there. You'll find blankets in that cupboard," said the old man, unheeding. "If you behaves yourself' no 'arm will come to you. If you tries any tricks—"

He made a grim gesture, and after placing the mug and plate on the floor he left the room, closing the door behind him. Knox heard him fumbling with the bolt, and in an agony of desperation he shouted to the old fellow to come back—shouted pleadingly this time.

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But there was no response. Heavy footsteps died away on the stairs, and the next moment Knox heard Old Job moving about below, still unheeding his cries.

With feelings too deep for words, the prefect dropped on the shaky bed again. He was beginning to understand now why the old man had done such an extraordinary thing. The thought that he had brought it on himself made Knox grind his teeth.

For what seemed an age the hapless prefect sat, gloomy and hopeless, thinking the situation out, and then he got up again and started to shout. The hope came to him that if he could only make the man believe he would not carry out his threats, then perhaps he would release him.

It was a forlorn hope, as Knox knew, and it proved to be of no avail. The man utterly ignored his shouts.

Utterly done up, Knox gave it up at last, and took up his position on the bed again.

The dusk deepened into darkness, and as the hours passed he realised that the astounding affair was no bluff, but sheer reality. The man evidently fully intended to keep him a prisoner.

Up to this time Knox had disdainfully ignored the mug of tea and the bread-and-butter. But he felt hungry now, and he munched the bread-and-butter and sipped the cold tea almost with enjoyment.

This done, he dropped on the bed again, but even as he did so, it came to him that perhaps the old man might bring him supper soon, and that possibly a chance of escape would present itself then. There was hope yet.

At the thought Knox slipped to the floor again, and began to pace the tiny room restlessly, feverishly. He went to the window and looked out, and he went to the door and tried the latch, scarcely knowing he did so.

A sudden crash made his heart leap. After sticking slightly, the door had opened! He remembered hearing the old man fumbling with the rusty bolt, and he realised in a flash that he had unknowingly failed to drive the bolt quite home.

Tremblingly Knox opened the door and listened. He heard the sound of movements downstairs, and he closed it again quickly and quietly.

It would be madness to attempt to escape yet. He must wait—wait until the old man had retired for the night.

Whether Old Job brought him supper or not, Knox knew, would decide his fate now. But to his joy Old Job did not come near him. He heard the old fellow moving about at the bottom of the stairs—heard strange sounds that he could not quite make out. He also heard his mumbling voice, but he believed the old fellow was talking to himself.

"The brute!" hissed Knox. "I'll do the old fool yet!"

There followed the heavy tread of feet on the creaking stairs, and then to his unutterable relief, Knox heard him stumble into the room next door—evidently his bed-room.

"Oh, thank goodness!" breathed Knox.

It was only a matter of time now—Knox felt sure of that. He lay quietly down on the bed to wait, almost trembling with impatience. It was a cold, frosty night, and even in his big coat Knox was shivering, though he scarcely knew it in his excitement.

On the creaking bed he lay motionless, waiting. He had heard a few movements from the bed-room next door, but all was quiet now, and he supposed the old man had gone to bed.

But he would not risk it—yet. How long he lay waiting and listening, Knox never knew. But at last he heard the faint strokes of eleven ringing across the frozen fields from the village church, and he slipped silently from the bed.

His limbs were stiff and aching abominably, but he did not notice it, and in a flash he had his boots off and was carrying them. He felt that it was quite safe to make the attempt now.

A moment later he was at the door, opening it gently, inch by inch. In his socks he made no sound, but as he stepped silently on the little landing he stopped.

The old man was not asleep apparently, for a dim gleam of light showed under the door, and through a crack in the door itself.

Knox's heart thumped madly. He hesitated a brief instant, and then he placed his eye to the crack and peered through breathlessly.

What he saw almost took his breath away. The old man was not in bed—he was seated upon it fully dressed. By the bedside was a small table, and on this was a pile of money—gold and silver coins that glistened in the dim, flickering candle-light. The chink of the coins reached his ears faintly.

"Phew!" breathed Knox. He watched, fascinated. He saw the old man hovering over the table, handling the money, a gloating expression on his lined features.

"The—the beastly old miser!" muttered Knox. Even as he watched the strange scene, Knox saw the old

man replacing the money back into a leather bag on the table. This done, he slipped it under the mattress, and turned the bedclothes back again.

Knox hesitated no longer—the fear suddenly coming to him that Old Job might come out of the room.

Turning abruptly, he stepped forward to reach the top of the stairs, and as he did so his foot pressed on a loose board which moved with a crack—a sharp crack that sounded like a gunshot in the silence of the night.

The next moment Gerald Knox got the fright of his life.

From below there came a sudden movement—the rattle and clank of a chain, and then came a growl—a deep-throated growl that brought Knox's heart into his mouth, and made his hair stand up.

Then as the growl became a snarl, Knox's terrified eyes glimpsed a pair of redly-glinting eyes at the foot of the stairs, and with a yell of sheer fright he leaped back into the room he had left, and crashed the door to.

With heart thumping violently Knox flung his weight against the door, fearing every second to hear the bull-terrier's paws on the stairs, and to feel his weight shaking the door.

But though he heard the animal's menacing growls—now louder and more fierce—nothing worse happened, and he guessed why. He also realised now why Old Job had warned him not to attempt to escape that way.

He knew now what the old man had been doing at the foot of the staircase. He had been chaining the dog there to keep guard, talking to the animal as he did so. What a fool he had been not to guess that!

His last hope was gone now. He heard the old man out on the landing talking to the dog—ordering him to be quiet. Then the door opened before him, and Old Job stood in the doorway, a candle in his hand.

He glowered at the white-faced senior, cowering against the bed.

"So you tried it on, then?" he growled harshly. "You young fool! I warned you, didn't I? You'd best take it quietly, mister. Tiger's chained down there, and he will be every night—and in the day-time when I'm out. Now d'you understand?"

Knox said nothing. He opened his mouth, but his tongue clung to the roof of it. The old man regarded him grimly for a moment, and then he closed the door, leaving him in darkness save for the moonlight gleaming through the window.

As he heard the bolt shoot into place, Knox flung himself on the bed again hopelessly. He heard the old man moving about next door, and then silence fell on the cottage again.

Knox got up again then, and went to the cupboard. He took out the blankets the man had told him were there, and a moment later he had wrapped himself in them and had flung himself on the bed.

He realised now that escape for him was out of the question, and that he would have to make the best of his unenviable position. He composed himself to slumber, but the cold morning sunlight was shining through the uncurtained window before he dropped off at last into a troubled sleep.

CHAPTER 7.

Tom Merry's Theory!

ALL St. Jim's was buzzing with the news that Knox of the Sixth was missing, long before lessons the following morning. And, sad to relate, though the news caused great amazement and much speculation, it did not bring much sorrow and anxiety among the St. Jim's fellows—or, at all events, among the Lower School. Knox was a prefect, and an exceedingly unpopular prefect.

Tom Merry & Co. heard the news as they went in to breakfast, and though it did not come as a great surprise to the Terrible Three, it did to Blake & Co., who had not heard that Knox had been missing the previous evening, as had the chums of the Shell.

They had wondered very much, of course, why Knox had neither shown himself nor reported Arthur Augustus the previous evening. But they understood now, and as in the case of the Terrible Three, the news made them not a little uneasy.

"What the thump do you make of it, Tommy?" demanded Jack Blake, as the chums of the Fourth joined the Terrible Three after breakfast.

Tom Merry shook his head slowly.

"I'm blessed if I know what to think, Blake," he said quietly. "It—it's rummy—jolly rummy! I suppose we ought really to report what we know—we seem to have been the last to see Knoxy yesterday afternoon."

"A lot of fuss about nothing—if you ask me!" grunted George Herries bluntly. "Knox must have gone on a jaunt as usual—perhaps stayed at Abbotsford last night—missed the last train. I bet he turns up this morning like a bad penny."

"Well, that's more than likely," said Tom, nodding. "And yet—my hat! It just strikes me it wouldn't be likely he'd dodge off to Abbotsford or anywhere, considering the state he was in when we saw him last. He was fishing his cap out of the water-butt, remember; and one of his trouser-legs was drenched, and his shoe."

"Great pip! You're right, Tommy!"

The juniors' faces became grave as that side of the problem dawned upon them.

"My hat!" breathed Blake. "You—you don't think the rotter's come to any harm at the hands of that queer old chap?"

"Bai Jove! What uttah wot, Blake!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, staring indignantly at his chum. "The poor old fellow is absolutely harmless, bai Jove! He would nevah hurt a fly!"

"He wouldn't hurt you, Gussy, perhaps," said Tom, smiling grimly; "but I'm not so sure about Knox. Anyway, we're only guessing. He may have done what Herries suggests. He could easily have slipped to St. Jim's and changed without anyone noticing him."

"That's so! I vote we keep our mouths shut," said Blake. "We don't want to find a mare's nest."

Tom Merry nodded.

"We'll give him until noon, then," he said. "Then we'd better report what we know—or, better still, we could trot down to the cottage and investigate—ask that old fellow for one thing. How's that?"

Tom's plan met with the approval of all—all that is, with the exception of D'Arcy, who stoutly maintained his belief that old Job Grant would not harm anyone.

But when the juniors came out from their Form-rooms at the end of morning lessons, even Arthur Augustus began to feel rather uneasy on that account, on learning that there was still no news of the missing prefect.

Tom Merry hurriedly sought out Blake and his chums on leaving the Shell Form room. He had just had a word with Kildare, and his face was serious.

"We'd better buzz off to the cottage at once, you fellows," he said quickly. "With luck we'll be back before dinner—in any case, we can risk it. Kildare tells me there is no news of Knox. The Head's wired to his home, and he's not gone there. He hasn't been seen at Rylcombe or Wayland stations, either. Come on!"

Blake nodded, and a moment later the seven juniors had got their caps, and were hurrying out of doors. Once clear of the gates, Tom led the way at a run along Rylcombe Lane until they reached Saxon Lane, where the cottage was situated. As they neared the old thatched cottage, Tom suddenly pointed ahead of them.

"There he goes!" he panted. "Old Job himself!"

The tall, burly figure of Old Job was just hobbling away from the cottage in the opposite direction.

"Oh, good luck!" breathed Tom Merry. "Let him go. He's going into Rylcombe—shopping, I expect. Let him get well away, and then we'll have a squint round the place."

"Good wheeze!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, who was looking anything but happy, gave a snort.

"This expedition is wot—uttah wot, Tom Mewwy!" he said indignantly. "It is wot to suspect Mr. Gwant of harmin' that feahful wottah Knox!"

"I'm not so sure about that, Gussy," answered Tom quietly. "I'll tell you my theory. I believe Old Job took Knox's threats yesterday too seriously. I can't forget the way he was looking at Knox just afterwards. I'm wondering if the poor old chap has collared Knox—is keeping him a prisoner somewhere, in order to prevent him carrying out his threats."

"Bai Jove!"

"It may sound a mad idea," went on Tom quietly; "but we mustn't forget that Old Job's a bit queer. I believe he'd do it, if only to save Gussy. He seems to worship him. Anyway, I fancy we'll soon know something. Come on!"

The juniors followed Tom in silence. They couldn't help feeling that his theory was sound enough. They entered the front gate of the wretched cottage, and as they did so they became aware of a sudden growling and barking from within the house.

"The dog's inside, then," said Tom Merry.

"That is wathah queer, bai Jove!" muttered Arthur Augustus.

"Let's try round the back," said Tom, scanning the front windows swiftly.

The juniors moved round to the back, knowing they were safe from the dog, at all events. They opened the gate, and passed into the back yard. And as they did so they almost jumped out of their skins as a frantic yell sounded above their heads.

Looking up, startled, they beheld the white face of Gerald Knox at the tiny, uncurtained window.

Though he had almost expected something of the sort, Tom Merry fairly gaped up at him.

"Knox!" gasped Arthur Augustus faintly. "Bai Jove, it is weally Knox!"

There was no doubt about that.

"You fools!" howled Knox through the broken window. "Don't stand there staring like a lot of idiots! Get me out of this, hang you!"

It was just like Knox to ask a favour like that, but they were too startled and dumbfounded to notice the prefect's savage remarks.

"Are you locked in there, Knox?" called up Tom Merry blankly.

"Yes, you fool! Can't you see I am?" raved Knox. "I'm bolted in, and that confounded brute of a dog is chained to the foot of the staircase. If you can't do anything, go and fetch the dashed police, hang you!"

"The—the police!" echoed Arthur Augustus, in great dismay. "Oh, bai Jove!"

Tom Merry set his lips.

"Just a minute, Knox!" he shouted up. "You mean to have the police brought into this. Do you mean that?"

"Mean it! Of course I mean it!" snarled Knox, his face working. "I'll have that brute arrested. I'll charge him with assault and kidnapping, by James! I'll make him pay for this!"

"Very well," said Tom Merry clearly. "Then in that case we'll leave you to it, Knox. Unless you give us your word of honour not to bring the police into this—unless the Head decides to do so—we shall not raise a finger to release you. Got that?"

Knox had. He scowled, and bit his lips savagely.

"All right!" he shouted furiously. "I'll promise—I'll promise anything, only get me out of this, confound you!"

Tom Merry nodded, and turned to Arthur Augustus.

"We've got to get you inside, somehow, Gussy," he said briskly. "This kitchen window looks easy enough. It'll mean serious trouble if we wait for Old Job to come back. He's bound to turn rusty! You've got to get inside and bring the dog out—tie him up again in the yard here. Then we'll get Knox out of this."

"Oh, bai Jove!" groaned Gussy.

"It can't be helped," said Tom Merry grimly. "We can't leave even that howling cad in this plight. Come on!"

The juniors started to work at once, and as Tom expected, he easily forced an entrance to the kitchen by lifting the flimsy catch with the blade of his knife. Luckily that window was not barred, and a moment later Arthur Augustus managed to squeeze his elegant body through.

All this time the bull-terrier had been filling the dingy cottage with an uproar of sound, and as D'Arcy vanished inside, the juniors cleared out of the yard.

Over the gate they saw Gussy emerge into the yard leading the excited dog, and then they hurried round to the front. They had several further minutes to wait, and then abruptly the front door opened, and Arthur Augustus appeared, and behind him was Gerald Knox.

Knox's face was white with suppressed passion.

"So—so here you are, Knox," said Tom Merry, in deep relief. "What—"

"Yes, I'm here, Merry!" hissed Knox, in a tone of concentrated fury. "I'm free now, and, by James, I'm going to make somebody pay for this! I'll make that old brute wish—"

Knox broke off abruptly, and into his eyes came a sudden gleam. Without a word he hurried back into the cottage, and they heard him thumping up the rickety staircase. The juniors looked at each other, and then they waited curiously for Knox's reappearance.

"What's he up to now?" muttered Tom Merry suspiciously.

He was about to step into the cottage, when Knox came rushing downstairs again, and Tom stepped back, fully expecting Knox to come out.

But Knox did not come out—yet. And had Tom Merry & Co. only seen the prefect's queer actions after coming downstairs, they would have been amazed.

For a brief instant Knox stood motionless at the foot of the stairs, his brain working rapidly, his eyes gleaming nastily. And in his hand was a small bag—a dirty leather bag, the contents of which chinked as he moved it.

He glanced about him rapidly—almost feverishly—and then he passed swiftly into the tiny kitchen. Here he also glanced about him swiftly, as if seeking a hiding-place. He went to the fire grate, and looked up the chimney. Then he shook his head and went to the window.

A glance showed him that the dog was on a short chain, and he hesitated, wondering if he dare risk what was in his mind. Then, with a sudden movement he opened the kitchen door, and stepped out into the yard.

The almost frantic dog strained furiously to get to him; but Knox had measured the distance with his eye, and, slipping to the water-butts in the opposite corner along by

the wall, he held the leather bag over it. Then, seeing the water was frozen over, he stooped and crammed the bag swiftly underneath the tub in the space between the bricks that held the tub off the floor.

He crammed the bag under, and kicked it further with his shoe. Then he slipped back into the kitchen. As he went a head showed for a brief instant above the yard fence, and an amazed, curious face was visible. But Knox never saw it. Ignorant that his every movement in the yard had been watched by a pair of cunning, crafty eyes, he rejoined the waiting juniors at the front.

Tom Merry & Co. eyed him strangely and suspiciously. Knox noted this, and grinned—a triumphant, sneering grin.

"I went back for my cap," he explained easily, taking his crumpled cap from his pocket. "Now for St. Jim's, and a bit of my own back, you rascals. You've not heard the last of this, D'Arcy, you little wretch, or the rest of you little brutes, either."

With that, Gerald Knox donned his cap and walked away fast, his eyes glittering vengefully.

Tom Merry watched him go, a curious look on his face. He had noted what the others had failed to note, that Knox's cap had been sticking out of his pocket from the moment he came down first.

Knox had lied! But why? Why had he returned into the cottage, and for what reason?

Tom Merry was suspicious and wondering. But he said nothing to his chums then. And a moment later they were hurrying schoolwards on the heels of the prefect. And as they went, Tom Merry voiced the fears of them all.

"There's going to be a jolly old rumpus about this, you fellows," he said grimly. "You'd better get ready for serious trouble, Gussy!"

"Oh, bai Jove!" groaned D'Arcy.

There seemed no doubt that there was trouble ahead for someone!

CHAPTER 8.

The Head's Verdict!

TOM MERRY & CO. just managed to squeeze into their places in time for dinner. The first thing they did was to look round the dining-hall in search of Knox.

But there was no sign of him, nor did he turn up for dinner at all.

"He's with the Head, you bet!" opined Blake gloomily, as the juniors trooped out. "Get ready for the summons, Gussy. And remember, we're going to back you up; we'll see that cad, Knox, doesn't have it all his own way."

The summons came much sooner than the juniors had expected. As they started along the passage, Kildare came up to them. His face was grave.

"You kids are wanted in the Head's study," he said grimly.

"All of us?" gasped Tom Merry.

"All of you! Cut along now, sharp!"

The seven juniors hastened to obey the summons. They had hardly expected that all would be required by the Head. It was evident that Knox had dragged them all into it.

"All the better," said Tom Merry grimly. "Our combined word ought to weigh as heavily as Knox's, if he is a giddy prefect. Here goes!"

Tom knocked at the Head's door firmly, and a moment later they were standing before the Head's desk. Though innocent of wrong-doing, as they knew themselves to be, none of them felt any too comfortable. Knox was a prefect, and they knew he would do his uttermost to make a case against them.

Knox was with the Head, as was Mr. Railton, the House-master of the School House.

The Head scanned the juniors' faces closely.

"Boys," he began quietly, in his deep voice, "I have just heard an astounding story from Knox. He has made certain grave charges against you, and I have sent for you to answer them. I understand that you were the boys who released him from confinement in a certain cottage in Saxon Lane, where he had been held a prisoner by an individual named Grant."

"That is quite true, sir!" said Tom Merry quietly.

"Very well, Merry. Was it accident that took you to the cottage at noon to-day, or did you expect to find Knox there?"

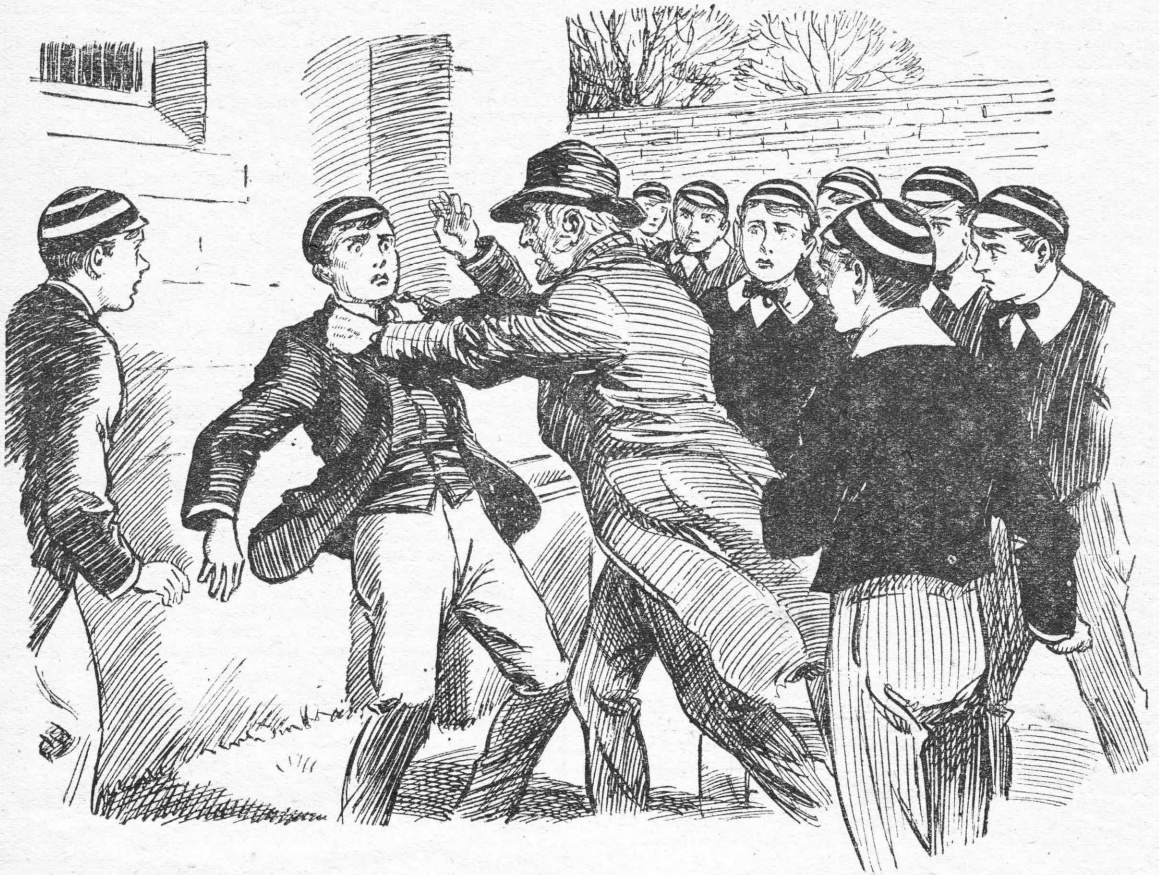
"We suspected that we should find him there, sir," said Tom. "When we heard this morning that Knox was missing, we guessed what had happened to him, and we went to investigate."

"What led you to suppose that you would find him there, Merry?"

"We left him there yesterday afternoon, sir, after he had had a row with D'Arcy and with Grant. And—and Old Job—I mean, Grant—is a bit queer, sir. We—we suspected all sorts of things."

"Ah!"

"That's all rot, sir!" broke in Knox, his brow dark with



Big fellow as Knox was he was like a child in the old man's savage grip. White with fear, he was shaken like a rat until his teeth rattled in his head. "My money—my fifty pounds!" shouted Old Job frantically. "Where is it? You've took it! You villain! You've took my savings—you've stolen 'em!" Knox struggled helplessly in the strong grasp.

(See page 16.)

fury. "They knew, because they had a hand in my kid-napping. It's clear enough! They released me to-day because they got frightened. I tell you—"

"Wubbish, Knox—uttah wubbish!" interrupted Arthur Augustus. "Pway allow me to explain, sir—"

"Be silent, D'Arcy!" snapped Dr. Holmes, raising his hand. "I will hear what you have to say presently. Now, Merry, I have already heard Knox's version of this amazing affair. I wish you to tell me all you know concerning the matter."

"Certainly, sir!" said Tom calmly.

In quiet tones the Shell captain related how they had wondered at D'Arcy's strange movements of late, and how they had seen him emerge from the greengrocer's in Rylcombe, and had followed him to the cottage. Then he went on to relate the events at the cottage as he had witnessed them. Once or twice Knox interrupted him, but Dr. Holmes bade him be silent. At the end, Tom appealed to his chums, and Blake & Co. eagerly collaborated his statements.

When he finished, at length, the Head's face relaxed a little, and he fixed a steely look on Knox, whose face was livid.

"This puts a different complexion on matters, Knox," he said coldly. "However, I will now hear you, D'Arcy. In the first place, why did you ever visit that cottage at all? How did you become acquainted with this man Grant?"

Arthur Augustus smiled, though he was blushing a little.

"That is vevy easily explained, sir," he said serenely. "It is weally vevy simple, bai Jove!"

And as Gussy explained it the next moment, it all did sound very simple. He told of the incident with the village ruffians in the snow, and he told of his subsequent visits to Old Job. He told it all very modestly, but the Head and Mr. Railton knew the character of Arthur Augustus—his innocence and generous good nature. Their grave features gradually relaxed, and Dr. Holmes looked across at Mr. Railton almost with a smile.

"Very well, D'Arcy," said Dr. Holmes at last, with a cough. "Your good nature seems to have placed you in an awkward position. I can scarcely blame you under the

circumstances; though you should have asked permission before visiting the man. However—"

The Head changed his position and looked at Knox, who was biting his lip savagely.

"You have heard D'Arcy's explanation, Knox," he said icily. "You have also heard the explanation of the other six boys. What—"

"Lies!" muttered the prefect tensely. "It—it's obviously a put-up yarn, sir. You surely see that, sir?"

"On the contrary, Knox," exclaimed the Head sharply. "I am convinced that I have heard the true explanation at last. I am not, however, at all satisfied with your conduct in this matter, Knox."

"Sus-sir!" gasped Knox.

"You have made very grave charges against D'Arcy and his companions, without, it seems to me, any justification whatever. In the first place you have charged D'Arcy with visiting that cottage in order to smoke and gamble. What proof had you that such was the case, Knox?"

"I—I was certain he was up to that game, sir!"

"You brought the charge forward without the slightest evidence, Knox!"

"I—I thought—" stammered Knox.

"That will do, Knox," said the Head quietly. "I think we can safely dismiss that charge, at all events. There is now the matter of the dog. You have charged D'Arcy with having set the dog at you—or with having persuaded that man Grant to do so. Yet the evidence of these six boys seems to prove that to be impossible. D'Arcy did not appear on the scene until you had escaped the attentions of the animal. Was not that the case, Knox?"

"I—I suppose so, sir!" muttered Knox thickly.

"Very good! I do not think we need waste further time on that charge, either," said the Head cuttingly. "There now remains the very grave matter of your kidnaping, Knox. Have you any proof to offer that these boys connived in that?"

"I—I'm sure they did, sir!" vowed Knox hoarsely. "They—they must have done!"

"You were present all the time in the yard, Knox. The man attacked you, I understand, after these boys had gone. If these boys encouraged the man to act as he did, you must have heard what passed between them. Can you offer any such evidence, Knox?"

Knox was silent. He was inwardly seething with helpless fury. His discomfiture was complete.

The Head eyed him grimly for a moment, and then he spoke.

"It is clear from your silence, Knox, that you have not an atom of evidence to offer me," he said quietly. "It is clear, also, that there is no justification whatever in the charges you have made. The matter will end here in so far as these boys are concerned."

"You—you aren't going to punish them, sir?" stammered Knox.

"No."
"And—and that brute Grant—does that mean you won't punish him either?" gasped the prefect. "Aren't you going to have him arrested, sir?"

"To avoid any scandal I do not propose to bring the police into the matter at all," was the Head's retort. "The man has certainly placed himself within reach of the law. I cannot help but pity him. He was obviously terrified by your reckless threats, and acted as he did in order to save himself and the boy who had befriended him."

"But—but look how I've suffered, sir!" almost raved the prefect. "I've been imprisoned in that beastly garret, starved, and half-frozen. I've been treated—"

"Pray compose yourself, Knox," said the Head sharply. "What you have suffered has been brought about by your own actions. The manner in which you followed and spied upon D'Arcy was unmanly and undignified, and certainly unbecoming in a prefect of St. Jim's. The matter ends here. You may go!"

"But—but, sir—"

"Go!"
And the discomfited prefect went. His case had fallen about his head like a house of cards. He went out of the room fuming with fury, and with a black, scowling face.

Mr. Railton nodded to the juniors, and they filed out silently.

"Well, my only hat!"

Out in the passage the juniors looked at each other. They were almost exploding with suppressed excitement and glee.

"Well, my only hat!" repeated Tom Merry. "And that's that!"

"And Knox's knocked!" gurgled Monty Lowther. "Did you ever see such a slaughter?"

"Let's get out of doors!" gasped Blake hysterically. "I shall bust if we don't. Oh, great pip! Poor old Knox!"

The juniors got their caps and went into the quad, where they felt they could celebrate the victory more satisfactorily. Arthur Augustus was looking rather blank, and as they went down the steps Blake thumped him on the back.

"Dear old Gussy! Dismissed without a stain on your giddy character!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Let this be a warning to you, anyway," said Blake solemnly, "not to keep any dashed secrets from your pals again!"

"Bai Jove! Weally, Blake, you ass—"

"Oh, don't squabble now, for goodness' sake!" grinned Tom Merry. "Let it drop! The matter's ended now, and all is merry and bright. Let's go and celebrate at the tuck—Hallo, what's happening at the gates?"

Something was obviously happening at the gates. They could hear Taggles' protesting voice, and they could hear the savage shouting of another man. They could also see old Taggles apparently trying to eject the owner of the second voice—a man in rough clothes—out of the quad.

"My only hat!" gasped Lowther. "What's up? Who's that Taggles is chucking out?"

"Looks like a villager," grinned Blake. "Come on, let's go and see! It looks—Why, great pip! It's Old Job!"

"So it is!" breathed Tom Merry, staring blankly. "It's old Job Grant!"

And it was. The man Taggles, the porter, was trying to evict—or to prevent entering the quad—was undoubtedly Old Job!

Tom Merry had spoken too soon. The matter was not yet ended by any means!

CHAPTER 9.

An Astonishing Scene!

"OLD JOB GRANT!"
Tom Merry stared thunderstruck at the struggling figures in the gateway.

What was the old man doing at St. Jim's? Was he really mad? After what had taken place, St. Jim's was the last place Tom would have expected him to visit. He had evidently discovered that his prisoner had escaped. But

why he should come rushing to St. Jim's like a madman was a mystery.

At that hour plenty of fellows were strolling in the quad, and the commotion at the gates soon attracted notice. Tom Merry and his chums joined in the rush to the spot.

As they ran up to the scene they heard Taggles' voice raised wrathfully.

"You can't come in 'ere I keeps telling you!" he was shouting. "Hout you go, me man!"

"I'm goin' in! You get outer the way!" was the savage answer in a shrill shout that ended almost in a yell. "I tell ye I've bin robbed—robbed! Fifty pounds odd! Robbed! My savings! I'm goin' in! I'm goin' to get my 'ands on the villain as took it! Outer my way!"

"Mum-my hat!" panted Tom Merry.

He pushed his way through the startled, staring crowd until he could see Old Job clearly. He was amazed and alarmed at the look on the old fellow's gnarled face.

Old Job's usually vacant features were ablaze with excitement, and his eyes glittered fiercely. His face worked terribly, and he trembled violently with the rage that seemed to grip him.

"What—what on earth is biting him?" gasped Blake, at Tom's elbow. "Robbed!—What on earth is he gassing about?"

"This is weally awful, bai Jove!" groaned Arthur Augustus in great distress. "Findin' Knox gone must have—Oh, bai Jove!"

Suddenly catching sight of Arthur Augustus, the excited old man sent Taggles reeling, and his hand gripped D'Arcy's arm fiercely.

"Master D'Arcy!" he cried tremulously. "Where be he? Where be the villain 'as robbed me? Quick, young sir! I know as you won't stand by and see an old man robbed of 'is life's savin's! Where be he, sir? Let me get my 'ands on the villain!"

"Oh, bai Jove!"

The amazed Arthur Augustus wriggled in the fierce, painful grasp of the old man. He was utterly bewildered. He could only suppose that the shock of finding Knox escaped had turned the poor old chap's brain.

"Weally, you know—Oh, bai Jove! This is weally tewwible!" he gasped helplessly. "What—what—who—oh, you mean Knox, bai Jove?"

"That's 'im—the feller as I fastened up so as to stop 'im harmin' you, young sir! He's got away! He's gone, and he's took my money—my savings! Fifty pounds!" cried Old Job, his voice rising again almost hysterically. "Knox, that's 'im! Has he come 'ere, young sir? He knowed I 'ad the money—he must have seen me countin' it last night through the door! He's took it! Where is the villain?"

There was a buzz of astonishment. Still holding the astounded Arthur Augustus by the arm, Old Job glared round him. His roving, gleaming eyes fixed suddenly on a figure striding with others from the School House doorway, a tall, lanky figure.

It was Gerald Knox. He came striding across the quad, but he stopped suddenly as he saw Old Job towering above the mob of scared juniors.

At the same moment Old Job seemed to recognise him, and with an animal-like cry he made a mad rush towards him, sending the crowd reeling to right and left.

Buzzing with excitement, the crowd streamed after him, curious and amazed.

Too late Knox realised his danger and turned to run, for as he did so Old Job reached him and gripped him.

Big fellow as Knox was, he was as a child in the old man's savage grip. White with fear, he was shaken like a rat until his teeth rattled in his head.

"My money! My fifty pounds!" shouted Old Job frantically. "Where is it? You've took it! You villain! You've took my savings! You've stolen 'em! You—"

The old man's shrill shouting became incoherent. White as death with fear, Knox struggled helplessly, yelling at the top of his voice for help.

"Great Scott! What—"

Kildare came running up to the scene with Darrell. He stared thunderstruck. Then he called over his shoulder:

"Lend a hand, you fellows! The man's mad!"

Darrell and North and Monteith ran to Kildare's aid, as did Taggles, the porter, and together they succeeded in dragging the infuriated man off the hapless Knox. Even then he struggled, and for some moments a wild and whirling melee took place.

Never had such a scene been witnessed in the old quad-range at St. Jim's.

But numbers told at last—in the grip of the seniors, and of the wrathful Taggles, the old man was held firm and helpless.

There was the rustle of a gown, and from the School House doorway the Head came hurrying upon the scene. The august old gentleman was looking alarmed—and no wonder!

"What—what— Bless my soul!" he gasped, staring at the dishevelled Old Job and his equally dishevelled guards. "Kildare, what is the matter? Who is that—that person?"

"I do not know, sir—though I've seen him about the village often," panted Kildare, with a glance almost of pity at his prisoner. "He appears to have rushed in here and attacked Knox for no reason at all."

"Good gracious!"

The Head adjusted his pince-nez. He looked the man over rather haughtily, his brow thunderous. Dr. Holmes was a kindly old gentleman by nature; but there was a limit.

"Who are you, my man?" he demanded sharply. "And what is your business here?"

Old Job, trembling and panting, strained forward, his burning eyes fixed on the white face of Knox.

"Ask him!" he articulated huskily. "Ask him who I am! That young villain knows what I want here! He's robbed me—he's robbed me of a life's savings. Fifty pounds odd—money it's taken me years to scrape together. He's robbed—"

"Nonsense!" interrupted the Head angrily. "This—this is monstrous—absurd! Knox, do you know this man?"

Knox trembled inwardly, and it was only by a mighty effort that he forced himself to be outwardly calm. He knew what Old Job wanted at St. Jim's, if nobody else did. He bitterly regretted his folly now—the savage desire for revenge that had made him play such a mean and dastardly trick on a poor villager. For Knox knew it was mean and dastardly. The temptation had occurred to him in a flash as he stood in the doorway of the cottage with Tom Merry & Co. The memory of the strange scene he had witnessed by candlelight the night before—the old man counting his humble savings—had come to him suddenly, and he had succumbed to the temptation to play the spiteful trick.

He had not stolen the money, of course—he had never dreamed of stealing it. He had slipped up to the man's bed-room while the juniors waited all unsuspectingly below, and he had taken the leather bag into the yard and had hidden it under the water-butt.

It was there even now—or should be. But he knew he dare not tell that. He knew how such a mean and spiteful trick would be regarded by Dr. Holmes—he knew that the Head would look upon the act as being almost as bad as actually stealing the money. And he shuddered to think what his schoolfellows would think of such caddish behaviour.

All he could do was to deny it—deny it utterly. After all, nobody knew—nobody would dream of taking notice of the old fool's babbling. He was safe—quite safe!

He assumed a look of indignant amazement.

"Yes, sir," he answered grimly. "I have very good reason to know the scoundrel! His name is Grant—the rascal who attacked me yesterday and kept me a prisoner in his cottage."

"Wha-at?"

The Head gazed at Old Job in amazement and growing anger.

"So—so this is the miscreant?" he stuttered.

"That is the scoundrel, sir!" said Knox steadily. "Though why he has dared to come here now, and why he is making such an extraordinary charge is utterly beyond



GEORGE DARRELL.

George Bruce Richard Darrell, to give him his full name, is a member of the high and all-important Sixth Form. He is a prefect, and ranks second favourite with the juniors to Eric Kildare, the captain of the school and head prefect. A nice fellow in every way is Darrell, and one who can be relied upon to play his part well. He tries hard to stamp out the bullying methods of Gerald Knox, a fellow prefect. Darrell is a valued member of the Sixth Form footer and cricket elevens. He is liked by the masters and the Head and is well-worthy of the responsible position he holds.

me. He must be mad, sir! I would suggest, sir, that you call in the police and have the fellow removed."

Old Job strained to free himself, his face working.

"You—you lyin' villain!" he choked. "If—if—"

"Enough!" The Head raised his hand—he was almost trembling with indignant anger. Not for one moment did it occur to him that there might be a spark of truth in the man's claim. "How—how dare you come here making such absurd, ridiculous charges! I am amazed—amazed that you should dare—that you should have the audacity to come to St. Jim's after what you have done!"

"I—I've been robbed, I tell you—"

"Silence!" thundered the Head. "Control yourself! You have assaulted one of my pupils, and you have actually imprisoned—kidnapped him! You are liable to imprisonment. Only my desire to avoid publicity and my pity for you has restrained me from placing the matter in the hands of the police!"

"I tell you—"

"Nonsense—rubbish! Leave these premises at once! Unless you do so I shall be obliged to telephone for the police. Go!"

"I won't go! I ain't goin' without my money!" raved the old fellow, his voice cracking with emotion. "I tell you—"

He broke off and started to struggle in a desperate, furious effort to reach the snug-featured Knox.

"G-good gracious!" gasped the Head. "The man is really dangerous! I beg you to control yourself, my man! Kildare—North—Darrell—Taggles—see the poor fellow off the premises. Lock the gates upon him. Really—Pray be careful, though; do not handle him roughly!"

None of the seniors concerned were likely to do that—nor was Taggles. They felt a certain amount of commiseration for the old man, and they handled him as gently as was possible in the circumstances.

Still struggling and protesting at the top of his cracked voice, Old Job was hustled and edged towards the gates. He was tiring now—his violent emotion and exertions had sapped his strength, and between them the seniors handled him easily enough.

Before the staring eyes of the crowd he was placed out in the roadway, and the gates were closed upon him and locked.

"Now take my tip, an' clear hoff!" called Taggles.

Old Job did not reply. He clung for a moment to the bars of the gate, glaring through, and then he turned away, a look of hopeless misery on his rugged, gnarled face. With shoulders hunched, his attitude one of hopeless despair and dejection, he hobbled away, and vanished down the lane.

"Thank heaven!" breathed the Head. "Really—what a truly distressing incident! Boys, disperse! Kildare, will you kindly see that no boy approaches the gates!"

"Yes, sir," said Kildare.

But there was no need for such precautions, for at that moment the bell rang for classes, and the St. Jim's fellows streamed indoors in a scared and excited crowd, buzzing with the queer affair.

Tom Merry & Co. went in with the others, their faces grave and concerned. Arthur Augustus looked almost on the verge of tears.

The chums of the School House had watched the scene

amazed—too scared even to think of interfering—had that course been possible.

"Poor old fellow!" groaned Arthur Augustus. "How feebly wotten!"

And Gussy's chums agreed that it was rotten! The incident had saddened and astonished them. They could not make head or tail of the business—all, that is, with the exception, perhaps, of Tom Merry.

As he went in to afternoon classes, Tom Merry's face was thoughtful—and more than a trifle grim. All through lessons he was thinking deeply over the affair, and at the end of afternoon class he had reached a conclusion. And that was, that, despite what everyone believed, Old Job's claims had not been the wild statements of a madman, but that he had, indeed, been robbed of his savings—and that Gerald Knox knew something about it.

CHAPTER 10.

Interviewing Knox!

WHEN Tom Merry emerged from the Form-room that afternoon, he immediately sought out Blake & Co., and invited them to Study No. 10. His face was set hard and his eyes gleaming.

With the door closed, Tom faced his chums, and they looked at him curiously.

"It's about this business of Knox, of course," said Tom, without waiting to be questioned. "To begin with, I'd like to know what you fellows make of it—I mean, what you think about what Old Job came about this dinner-time?"

Blake shook his head.

"I'm blest if I know what to think," he said slowly. "If the old chap wasn't completely potty, then it's thundering queer."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I think that, too," said Tom quietly. "I think it's more than queer. The old fellow's rage and despair seemed to me to be genuine. In fact, you fellows, I don't mind telling you that I honestly believe the old fellow has been robbed—and that that cad Knox knows something about it."

"Bai Jove!"

Tom's chums looked at him aghast.

"You—you mean—"

"I mean what I say; and I'll tell you why," said Tom grimly. "In the first place, I noticed Knox's face particularly when Old Job turned up and charged him. He was frightened—badly frightened. He looked guilty—until he managed to pull himself together."

"That's so!" said Blake, nodding in a scared way.

"Well, you remember also what Old Job said—he said that Knox had seen him counting the money through the door. That may be true, or it may not. That isn't all, though. I don't think you fellows noticed what I noticed at noon. You remember when we got outside the cottage—when Knox went upstairs again? He said he had been back to get his cap."

"Yes, yes!"

"That was a lie," said Tom quietly. "He had his cap in his pocket when he first came down—I saw it sticking out. I knew from his face that he was telling lies. I wondered what he had really gone back for—what dirty trick he had been playing."

"Oh, bai Jove!"

Tom's remark created a sensation.

"You—you think Knox went back and stole the money?" ejaculated Blake.

"I won't go so far as to say that," said Tom. "But you must admit it looks jolly fishy! He may have done something with it if he didn't actually take it. I can't forget his glittering eyes and his gloating expression when he came downstairs and out of the cottage the second time."

"I remember that, too, Tommy!" breathed Manners. "My-hat! I believe you are right!"

"Now you've mentioned this," said Blake grimly, "I do, too. But what's to be done about it?"

"We must do something—in justice to that poor old fellow," said Tom. "We can't stand by and see him shamefully robbed—if he has been robbed. I vote we tackle Knox ourselves—make him explain why he returned at noon, and what he went for. I'd like to know first what Gussy thinks—if he knows whether the old man had money or not."

"I—I wathah fancy he had," said Arthur Augustus. "He would nevah allow me to give him money or food—excepting a little fwuit. I wemebah now he was wummy about it—said he wasn't starvin' or likely to starve. He wathah chuckled when he said it, you know."

Tom nodded.

"That's significant, anyway!" he exclaimed. "We'll risk it, you fellows. We'll go and see Knox without delay. Better all go, as there's bound to be a row."

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"Blow the row!" snapped Blake. "We're with you Tommy."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Tom Merry marched out of the study, and his chums filed after him as he led the way to Knox's study. They knew they were taking a lot for granted, but they were determined to see the thing through.

The juniors found Knox alone in the study; he was seated in his armchair, biting his finger-nails, a moody frown on his brow. But he jumped wrathfully to his feet as Tom Merry & Co. entered, closing the door after them.

"You—you impudent little sweeps!" he gasped, glowering at the juniors. "What in thunder do you mean by barging in here? Get out—sharp!"

The juniors showed no intention of getting out.

"We want a word or two with you first, Knox," said Tom coolly. "It's about this afternoon's affair."

"Get out!"

"Not yet! We believe that old chap's claim that his money has gone must be true; and we believe that you must know something about it, Knox."

"What?"

Knox stood motionless. His face had gone white, and he stared at the juniors transfixed. Then his eyes glittered with fury.

"You—you dare say that to me?" he hissed.

"Yes. We'd like to know what it was you went back for at noon—while we waited outside the cottage?" said Tom. "It was not your cap, as you said. That was sticking out of your pocket before you went up. You can tell us if you like or you can tell the Head."

"You—you little fiends!" hissed Knox.

He glowered at the juniors, scanning each of their faces, wondering how much they knew. Then he walked to the door. He opened it, and then he stepped up to the bookshelves and picked up a cane from the top shelf, and pointed to the doorway.

"Get out!" he breathed. "Get out, or—I'll flay you, you little pests!"

"If you won't tell us—" began Tom.

He got no farther. Knox lost control of his temper and rushed at the juniors, lashing out with his cane. Tom leaped to get out of the way, stumbled, and went down crashing in the fender.

In a flash Knox was lashing at him with his cane, crimson with fury.

Lash, lash, lash!

It was too much for Tom's chums.

They hesitated a fraction of an instant, and then they piled on the prefect, and he came down crashing on top of Tom Merry.

"You—you little fiends!" yelled Knox. "Are you mad! Let me go!"

But Knox was still lashing out as best he could, and the juniors had no intention of letting him go while he had that. Attacking a prefect was a serious matter, but in their excitement they forgot that—they had also forgotten that the door was open now.

The uproar did not last long, however. Blake got the cane and flung it across the room, and the seven juniors easily mastered the fuming senior, and held him fast.

"Now, my pippin!" gasped Tom Merry, still forgetting that the door was open. "We came to ask you a question, and we want an answer. We believe you know what's happened to old Grant's money. We want to know what you went back into the cottage for. If you won't tell us we shall go to the Head or Railton—"

"Merry!"

Tom Merry wheeled, with a gasp of utter dismay, to see Mr. Railton standing at the open doorway. His face was a picture of amazed wrath.

He eyed the scene for a brief instant, and then he came into the room and closed the door behind him. The juniors released Knox as if he had suddenly become red-hot, and their faces paled. Knox staggered to his feet, breathless and crimson with rage and humiliation.

"What—what does this mean, Knox?" stuttered the Housemaster. "Merry—boys—how dare you attack a prefect in that scandalous manner?"

The juniors remained silent, breathing heavily. Knox bit his lip, but did not speak—he did not know what he could say.

"Very well!" exclaimed Mr. Railton, after a silence and with a very curious look at Knox. "I will ask another question, Merry. When I came in I overheard you make some very extraordinary remarks, Merry. It was in connection with that amazing affair in the quadrangle this afternoon, I presume?"

Silence.

"I do not usually act upon information which I have inadvertently overheard," went on the master, in a grave tone. "But this is far too serious a matter for me to ignore. Merry, what did you mean by suggesting—by



A hollow beneath a root caught Tom Merry's eye suddenly. He thrust his hand in it quickly, and after a moment's fumbling he withdrew it again with a sharp exclamation. "Look!" "Good gad!" gasped Knox. In the Shell captain's hand was a bag—a small leather bag, soiled and worn. Tom Merry shook it, and there sounded a jingle of coins. (See page 23.)

stating that you believed Knox knows what has happened to—old Grant's money? And why do you wish to know why Knox went back to the cottage—if he did go back? I am waiting!"

Tom Merry groaned inwardly. So Mr. Railton had heard—he feared he had heard. Tom looked at Knox. The prefect's face was ghastly.

"I—I—I'm sorry, sir!" stammered Tom. "I can't explain."

"I insist upon you explaining at once, Merry!" thundered the Housemaster. "You have made an exceedingly grave statement—a statement which I am in duty bound to investigate. Unless you explain immediately I will take you before the headmaster!"

"Oh, bai Jove!"

It was all up now—Tom realised that. There was no getting out of it. He glanced again at Knox.

The prefect opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again. Tom decided to speak.

"It—it's like this, sir," stammered Tom. "We—that is, I—believe that man was speaking the truth this afternoon—that he has lost his money. And I—I believe Knox knows something about it. After we had released him at noon from the cottage he left us and went back. He—he said it was to get his cap. We know it wasn't, as his cap was in his pocket all the time. We were just asking him what it was he went back for."

"Ah!" said Mr. Railton.

The Housemaster looked grim. As a matter of fact, he did not, at the moment, attach much importance to Tom's evidence. He looked grim because he felt that the juniors were making a mountain out of a molehill. To him the story seemed trifling.

But Knox, who noticed the master's grim look, did not know that. He thought Mr. Railton was deeply impressed, and he shivered. Knox had a guilty conscience.

"Did you return to the cottage as these juniors state, Knox?" demanded Mr. Railton.

Knox licked his dry lips. He had denied everything before. Dare he do so now? What did the juniors know? Had they actually seen anything? he wondered. In his terrified mood Knox felt certain they knew more than they had said as yet.

If they did it would be bound to come out now. It came into the prefect's bemused mind that it would be far better to own up now—to tell the truth rather than wait for that. In any case, he had been seriously considering owning up as it was. He had dreaded Old Job going to the police. Supposing he did, and supposing he was suspected? Better far to be proved guilty of a trick—mean is it was—rather than be suspected of theft—of having stolen the money. He must own up, and let Old Job get his money back—the sooner the better.

The wretched senior made his mind up in a moment. He licked his lips again and spoke.

"It—it's quite true, sir," he panted huskily. "I—I went back, and—and I took the money."

"Wha-at?"

Mr. Railton almost fell down. He was utterly taken aback. The juniors stared at Knox aghast.

"You—you took the money, Knox?" gasped the master faintly.

Knox nodded, his face crimson with shame.

"Yes; I took it, sir. But—but I didn't steal it, of course. I hid it. It was a mean trick—I know it was a mean, rotten trick. I'm ashamed now. I—I wish I hadn't done it. I took the money and hid it in the yard, under the rain-water butt. I was wild—mad for revenge on the old brute, sir. I—I did it without thinking."

There was a long silence.

"Tell me all about it, Knox," said Mr. Railton quietly.

Knox told the Housemaster. How he had watched the old man counting his gold the night before, and how he had succumbed to the temptation, and hidden it. Mr. Railton's face was dark when he had finished.

"Knox," he said quietly, "your confession has amazed and disgusted me. It was a dastardly trick—a trick utterly unmanly and unworthy of a St. Jim's boy, much less a senior and a prefect. You must come with me to Dr. Holmes at once—Stay, though! The matter cannot wait. The money must be recovered and handed over to that poor fellow without delay. I think Kildare and yourself had better accompany me to the cottage now. D'Arcy, I think you had better come, too, as you appear to have some influence with this man Grant."

"Vewy good, sir!" said Arthur Augustus.

Knox, however, did not answer for a moment. "The suggestion seemed to frighten him—as, indeed, it did. He dreaded meeting the old man face to face again—especially now."

"I—I'd rather not come, sir," he stammered. "If—if you could excuse me? Couldn't a message be sent to Grant, sir?"

There was a silence. Both the master and the juniors quite mistook Knox's attitude. It seemed to them that Knox feared to be present when the search was made. Why? Could it be because he knew the money would not be found there? He had admitted taking the money, but had he really hidden it?

The startling suspicion entered the minds of all, and all eyes turned upon the prefect. Mr. Railton's lips set hard.

"No; I will not excuse you, Knox," he said. "You will come with Kildare, D'Arcy, and myself. Afterwards, when—if—the money is found, you will accompany me to the headmaster. You other boys may go."

And Tom Merry & Co. went—in silence. Outside in the passage they eyed each other blankly.

"Well, I'm hanged!" breathed Tom Merry.

That was all he could say.

CHAPTER 11.

A Shock for Knox!

MR. RAILTON lost no time in getting ready for the visit to the cottage. He had decided not to approach the Head until the matter was fully cleared up, and in a very few minutes the party had started out, all of them wrapped in greatcoats.

Mr. Railton was looking grim. Kildare, who had only been told the brief facts by the master, was looking scared and not a little bewildered. Arthur Augustus was looking anything but happy. The thought that his own actions—well-meaning as they had been—were responsible indirectly for all the trouble was not a pleasant one. Knox himself wore an expression of bitter cynicism, strangely enough. He had not failed to note the significant "if" in Mr. Railton's last remarks. He realised, with a feeling of humiliating fury, that the master doubted that the money would be found beneath the rain-tub. He felt he was almost looking forward to the moment when he could reach the leather bag from its hiding-place and thus remove that doubt.

Scarcely a word was spoken during the walk. All were decidedly uncomfortable, and they tramped on in silence, their feet crunching the ruts of dirty, frozen snow that still lay in the unfrequented lane.

They reached the cottage at last. At the rusty creak of the gate Tiger, the dog, set up a vicious growling. Mr. Railton walked to the front door and knocked loudly. There was no answer, and after a few moments' wait Arthur Augustus tried the door. It opened, and they saw into the gloomy parlour.

Then they started. Old Job was at home after all. He was seated at the dingy table, his head sunk on his arms.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus.

Even the hard-hearted Knox felt a throb of pity, and more than a twinge of conscience and shame as he glimpsed the broken figure of the old man at the table.

Old Job looked up suddenly and saw them. He got to his feet and hobbled to the door. He gazed dully at them.

"Master D'Arcy!" he mumbled. "What—"

Suddenly seeming to catch sight of Knox, the old fellow's face changed abruptly.

"You—you've come 'ere agen!" he growled, his eyes glittering. "Have—have you brought my money back? If you haven't—"

"We haven't brought it, Grant," Mr. Railton hastened to explain quietly. "But Knox says he knows where it is. It was a trick. He has now admitted having hidden the money in the yard at the back—under a water-butt."

The old man's face lit up. He opened the door wide.

"I knowed; he'd taken it—I knowed it!" he said

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tremulously. "But come inside, gentlemen. In the yard, did you say?"

Scarcely able to contain his eagerness, Old Job hobbled through, leaving the party from St. Jim's to follow. At the back door Mr. Railton waited whilst the man put the dog on a short chain. It was done at last.

"Now, Knox!" said Mr. Railton grimly.

Knox flushed, and stepped to the water-butt. His arm went under and he groped for a moment. Then he gasped. Dropping lower, he stretched his arm right underneath, between the bricks, and felt about. After which he peered long and hard underneath.

He raised himself at last, his face white and dumb-founded.

"Well, Knox?" said Mr. Railton.

"It's gone, sir!"

"What?"

"Gone!" gasped Knox. "I shoved it under here—I swear I did, sir! I—I can't understand—"

Knox broke off with a gasp of pain as Old Job gripped his arm and shook him fiercely.

"What d'you mean, lad?" he articulated hoarsely. "You say you put the bag under there?"

"Yes," gasped Knox.

"And it's gone?"

Knox nodded dumbly. He was dumbfounded. Kildare got on his hands and knees and peered between the bricks under the tub.

"There's certainly nothing here, sir," he said.

There was a silence. Knox glanced from face to face. His brain was reeling.

Mr. Railton was watching the working features of Old Job. He stepped towards him quickly, fearing an outbreak of violence against Knox.

"This is disappointing, distressing," he said kindly. "But the money shall be found, Grant. You have no need to fear on that score, my man. You shall not lose the money. I will promise you that."

The man said nothing. He seemed too broken to speak, much less offer violence. If any doubts had entered the master's mind that the old fellow had possibly found the money there already, they vanished at sight of his abject misery.

Mr. Railton turned to Knox, his features set and stern.

"You are absolutely sure, Knox," he asked quietly, "that you placed the bag of money under there?"

"Absolutely certain, sir!" muttered Knox. "I cannot understand it at all, sir."

"Very well. We can do no more now," said the master, turning again to Old Job. "You need not fear concerning the money, as I have assured you. The money will be found—must be found. Dr. Holmes will never allow you to suffer the loss."

He nodded to the two seniors and D'Arcy, and they went indoors again, followed by the silent Grant. A few minutes later they had left the cottage and were tramping back to St. Jim's.

If the outward journey had been an uncomfortable one, the return journey was worse. Nobody spoke until the school was reached, and then Mr. Railton broke the strained silence.

"You will come with me to the Head, Knox," he said coldly. "Kildare and D'Arcy will not be needed."

In the hall they parted, Mr. Railton escorting Knox towards the Head's study. Knox was still looking dazed. But he was beginning to realise his position now—the terrible predicament his folly had placed him in. He could not fail to see Mr. Railton's attitude; He realised what it meant.

Mr. Railton paused outside the Head's study door.

"Knox," he said quietly, "I would like to offer you a word of advice before we go in. I would advise you to think your position over carefully. If there is anything you have failed to divulge regarding this unfortunate affair, I would strongly advise you, for your own sake, to make clear now."

"Mr. Railton," panted Knox fiercely, "I have told all I know—the whole truth. I swear I do not know what has happened to that money. You—you can't think I have stolen it, sir?"

"I will not say what I think, Knox—yet," said Mr. Railton. "However—"

He knocked on the door, and a moment later they were inside the room. Mr. Railton lost no time in acquainting the astounded Head with the facts as he knew them. He said nothing concerning his own view of the matter.

He had no need to do that. As he watched the Head's face—the growing frown and setting of the stern lips—Knox's own face grew grey as the colour ebbed from it.

"This—this is terrible!" exclaimed the Head when Mr. Railton paused at length. "Knox, I—I am amazed, shocked! That—that poor fellow was not the madman I had supposed, then—You—you have admitted taking the money, Knox?"

"I—I have told Mr. Railton the truth, sir," muttered

Knox through trembling lips. "I took the money, but I swear that I did not keep it. I did what I have said—I hid it under that water-butt. It—it was a caddish trick, I know. I must have been mad. I was blind with rage. The man had hurt me—humiliated me. I did it to revenge myself."

"Yet the money is not there now," said the Head ominously. "How do you account for that, Knox?"

"I—I don't know! I can't understand it, sir," stammered Knox. "It should be there. I swear to you that it should. I am not a thief. I never dreamed of keeping the money. I can only think that Grant found it there and won't own up. He's a miserly old man. I—I believe he is trying to get more—to get it again out of the school. Or else he is keeping it quiet to revenge himself on me."

The Head's frown deepened, became thunderous. Mr. Railton's face hardened. Knox could scarcely have said anything more calculated to harm his case.

"Knox," said Mr. Railton quietly, "you saw that poor man to-night. You know full well that he could not possibly have acted as he did if he had done as you suggest. That is nonsense, and despicable."

"I don't care!" cried Knox frantically. "I did not steal the money, I tell you. I swear it! I—I—"

"Enough!" said the Head, raising his hand. "You have admitted taking the money, Knox. Even if you had hidden it, as you claim, it was a dastardly trick, mean and spiteful, utterly unworthy of a St. Jim's scholar. For that alone I should be obliged to consider seriously whether I could allow you to remain at this school."

"Sir!" gasped Knox.

"The other view, however, seems to me to be the only possible one," went on the Head gravely. "Can you offer me any proof that you did as you state—hid the money in that place?"

"I—I—only my word, sir."

"I am sorry that I cannot accept your word, Knox," said the Head very quietly. "In the quadrangle at noon, and in public, you denied emphatically all knowledge of the money. I ask you once more, Knox, do you know where that poor man's money is?"

"On my honour, sir, I do not!" said Knox hoarsely.

"You have nothing further to add to what you have already said, Knox?"

"No, sir! But I swear—I beg of you to believe me when I say that I do not know where the money is."

There was a long silence broken only by the drumming of the Head's fingers on the desk before him. It was obvious that the old gentleman was deeply grieved and agitated.

"Very well, Knox," he exclaimed at last. "For the moment you may go while I consult with Mr. Railton. In the meantime I would advise you to consider your position very carefully. If you have any communication to make to me I shall be here to receive it."

He motioned a dismissal, and Knox left the room, his face ghastly. He went out unsteadily, like a fellow in a dream. His sins had found him out. His spiteful act of revenge had recoiled upon his own head.

CHAPTER 12.

The Trail in the Snow!

TAP, tap!

"Come in!" called Tom Merry. Tea was just over in Study No. 10. The Terrible Three were still sitting at the table, however. They were not alone. With them were their chums of the Fourth. Tea was also over in Study No. 6, and Blake & Co. had come along to discuss the startling new developments. None of them had felt much like tea since Arthur Augustus had returned with the news, and the meal had been very soon over in both studies. Yet, grave as it was, the news that the missing money had not been found where Knox had claimed it would be found, had scarcely surprised them. After Knox's obvious and—to them—significant reluctance to visit the cottage, they had hardly expected it to be found there.

But the news came as an unpleasant shock for all that, and they were discussing the matter in subdued tones when that knock came to the door, and in response to Tom's call the door opened to admit—Gerald Knox.

The juniors stared at him. It was not often Knox of the Sixth visited Study No. 10, but when he did it usually meant trouble for the Terrible Three.

It was obviously not trouble for the juniors this time, however. Knox's face was haggard, his eyes were fixed almost appealingly on the faces of the juniors as he stepped into the room and closed the door after him.

"Look—look here, you fellows," he stammered in a curiously subdued tone. "I—I suppose D'Arcy has told you that the money has not been found—has not been found where I said it would be found?"

The juniors nodded without speaking. Knox bit his lip hard and went on doggedly.

"I suppose you think what the Head and Railton think," he said in a low, bitter tone; "that I never hid the money at all. Well, I have been speaking the truth. I did hide it there. Someone must have taken it since."

Still the juniors remained silent. They were amazed that the usually lofty and supercilious senior should approach them thus. They wondered what he was about to say next.

"I've just been before the Head," muttered Knox. "He refuses to believe me. I'm as good as sacked already, unless I can clear myself. That's why I'm here now. I believe there's a chance you can help me. You were there; you may have seen something—know something that will help me to prove I did hide that money."

"Oh!"

"I know we've been enemies," went on Knox quietly. "I know I've been down on you kids. But—but I know you won't see a chap sacked if you can help to save him. If—if you can, if you do anything to help me, I'll never forget it," he ended earnestly.

Tom Merry eyed the prefect steadily. For the senior to ask for their aid after what had happened almost took his breath away. Yet he could not help being impressed by Knox's manner. Also, it was difficult to see why Knox should speak thus if he did know where the missing money was.

"I can't quite see how we can help you, Knox," he said quietly. "If I could help in any way I would gladly do so."

"You—you know what happened—you were there!" exclaimed Knox eagerly. "I was hoping that there was a chance you fellows saw someone else about the cottage at the time—someone who might have seen me hide the money under that tub."

"Oh, bai Jove!"

The startled exclamation came from Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. Knox's words only brought a general shaking of heads from the other juniors. But the words seemed to have electrified the swell of the Fourth.

"Bai Jove, Knox!" he gasped. "I am vewy glad you have weminded me—"

"You—you saw someone—"

"Yaas, wathah! I wemebah now. It was when I was chainin' the dog up in the yard," explained Gussy. "I did not attach any importance to it at the time. You see—"

"Go on!" snapped Knox impatiently. "Who was it?"

"Weally, Knox, I do not know that. I meahly glimpsed a form in the garden behind the yard, bai Jove! He was hangin' wound the place where Gwant keeps his chickens, y'know. I thought he looked wathah a wough chawcatak myself. But I was too flustahed to bothah to watch him. I just chainned the dog up and wushed into the cottage again. Your remarks have just brought it back to me, Knox."

Knox drew a deep breath.

"But—but—" began Tom Merry.

"Don't you see?" hissed Knox, his voice trembling with excitement. "Don't you see that the Head can't ignore that evidence? If he knows someone else was there who might have seen me hide the money he can't ignore my claim that I did hide it and that someone else took it."

"Well, that is possible," said Tom, considerably startled.

"Possible!" echoed Knox savagely. "It's just what did happen, I tell you! D'Arcy, will you come with me to the Head now?"

"Oh, yaas—weadily, bai Jove!"

Tom Merry jumped to his feet, his eyes gleaming.

"Just a minute, Knox," he said quickly. "If D'Arcy did see someone hanging about then it won't be difficult to find out whether he went from the garden to the yard or not."

"You—you mean—"

"I mean that there's been snow on the ground for days. If anyone approached the fence he's bound to have left footprints. That would be a bit of real evidence, Knox."

"By gad!"

"If you like," said Tom, "we'll trot over there now and hunt round. We're scouts, and supposing we found footprints we might even be able to trace the owner of them."

Knox panted with excitement. He had clutched at the hope that the juniors might have seen someone there, as a drowning man clutches at a straw. He might even yet prove that he was not a thief—that he was innocent of the more serious charge against him.

"I—I sha'n't forget this, you fellows," he stammered. "But—but I'm coming with you—I must! We must be quick—it will be too dark to see soon."

"Right, Knox!"

The juniors also realised that. As Knox rushed from the room they began to get ready to go out. Not one of them doubted the prefect's sincerity now. They were all ready when Knox returned in coat and cap, and they hurried from the School House.

Fellows stared at them as they went out together. It was obvious from their curious stares at Knox that the news was out—that the story was already public property. They

must have wondered at the sight of the prefect in the company of Tom Merry & Co.

But they ignored the curious glances—Knox certainly ignored them. They reached the gates and passed out into Rylcombe Lane. Knox walked fast, and the juniors could scarcely keep up with him.

They sighted the thatched cottage at last.

"Look here," said Tom. "We'd better not let Old Job see us if it can be avoided. No good raising his hopes! Gussy, you'd better try to keep the dog quiet while we scout round."

D'Arcy agreed, and a moment later they were outside the cottage. Tom Merry led the way round the back. The dog soon heard them, and Arthur Augustus went to the fence and spoke to him while the rest of the juniors set to work.

The juniors ignored the trampled snow near the fence. They themselves had done that the previous day. And almost at once Lowther gave an exclamation and pointed downwards.

Outside the radius of the trampled snow were clear footprints—a double pair pointing to and from the garden. They seemed to disappear near the fowl-house.

"That's good enough!" snapped Tom Merry. "Knox, here you are. Someone approached the fence from the garden and went back again. That's certain!"

"Good gad!"

Tom Merry examined the fence closely; he looked over it, risking being seen from the cottage window. But Old Job, apparently, was at the front of the house. After a close examination he turned to Knox.

"Where did you climb over the fence yesterday, Knox?" he asked.

Knox pointed immediately to the far end of the fence.

"Right!" said Tom grimly. "If you'll look over you'll see someone else climbed the fence just here. The snow's been knocked off the ledge. The yard's been swept, but that's proof enough."

Knox looked over for himself. He nodded—he could hardly trust himself to speak.

"We've done all we can do here," said Tom, after a sharp glance round. "I vote we now follow those tracks and see where they lead to."

"Good egg!"

All the juniors were excited now, and keen to get on the trail. Knox was almost feverish with excitement and hope.

They started their task at once. It was as simple as anything could be to follow the clear, deep footprints, hard with frost. They had already noted that the footprints were not big—certainly not a man's. To Tom it seemed rather a disturbing fact. He had imagined the prints would be those of a man—a tramp possibly.

Who could it be?

Within a few yards of the fowl-house the out-going footprints branched off and joined the incoming footprints at a gap in the hedge of the garden.

Once through the gap, however, they separated, and Tom Merry nodded as he eyed them.

"Whoever the chap was he came from the direction of the village. But he didn't go back that way," he said. "We'll soon know where he went. Come on."

Ignoring the footprints that led across the fields from the village, the investigators followed the returning ones which branched off alongside the hedge to their right. Through one field and on through the next field—still hugging the hedgerow—went the tracks, and Blake gave a sudden exclamation.

"Looks as if the chap made for the river," he muttered.

Tom nodded; he had already seen that. The river came in sight at last, black and still, with patches of drifted snow here and there on its icebound surface, its banks lined with frozen rushes and willows.

"Rummy!" muttered Manners. "The ice isn't safe yet. Talbot said he tried it this morning. The chap can't have crossed the river."

"Gone along the banks, I expect," said Tom.

Tom proved to be right there. Right up to the end of the hedgerow, where a large willow leaned stark and bare over the frozen water, the footprints went—and then they branched off along the river bank.

Tom stopped, though the others were about to go on along the bank.

"Wait a bit," he said, scanning the spot closely. "Hasn't it struck you as strange that the fellow came right down to the river edge for no reason—at all, it seems?"

"Yes, but—"

"Why didn't he cut straight across the field?" demanded Tom. "Can't you see what I mean? He wasn't gathering blackberries or birdnesting, was he?"

"No, ass!" grinned Blake. "But I don't see—"

"Look for yourselves," said Tom, pointing down to the river edge. "He's stopped there. Look at the trampled snow! That tree seems to have been his objective. Then

he went on along the riverside to get back to the village, I expect."

"That's clear enough," muttered Knox, eyeing Tom Merry questioningly. "By gad! You don't mean, Merry—"

For answer, Tom dropped down among the rushes, and started to hunt eagerly. It was the merest shadow of a suspicion that had occurred to him, and he scarcely hoped for success.

Watched by the staring juniors and Knox, he groped among the frozen rushes, and then he groped among the tangled roots of the willow in the steep, broken bank. A hollow beneath a root caught his eye suddenly. The hard snow in front of it bore marks, as though it had been disturbed. He thrust his hand in quickly, and, after a moment's fumbling he withdrew it again with a sharp exclamation.

"Look!"

"Good gad!" gasped Knox.

"Bai Jove!"

In Tom's hand was a bag—a small leather bag, soiled and worn. Tom shook it, and the contents chinked musically—coins undoubtedly.

"Good gad!" gasped the prefect again.

CHAPTER 13.

The Real Thief!

GERALD KNOX and the juniors on the bank with him stared thunderstruck at the bag in Tom Merry's hand.

Tom Merry laughed a trifle excitedly, and jingled the contents of the leather bag again.

"That the bag, Knox?" he asked.

Knox nodded without speaking. He could not find his voice, so amazed and overjoyed was he. Tom scrambled up on the bank, and handed the heavy bag to the prefect.

"Better see if it is the cash," he said.

Knox untied the string and opened the bag. He poured a stream of mingled gold and silver coins into his other hand.

"Great pip!"

Watched by the staring juniors, the senior took a deep, deep breath and emptied the coins back into the bag and tied it up again.

"It is the bag, Merry," he said, in a shaky voice. "This is Old Job's bag of money—his savings. You—you don't know what this means to me, kids. Since it became known I'd touched the bag I've worried—I've been terrified. I expected Old Job would go to the police; I've had the fear of prison hanging over me. The Head might have mercy; I knew that old chap would not. Oh, thank Heaven!"

"I'm glad, Knox—jolly glad, for your sake!" said Tom Merry quietly. "I'm also glad for that poor old chap's sake. I expect it is a fortune to him."

"Yaas, wathah!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, who was almost beaming. "This is weally wippin', bai Jove!"

"Let's hope it's all there," remarked Lowther, rather grimly.

"I'm afraid that's scarcely likely," answered Tom Merry. "It's pretty clear what's happened now. That fellow—whoever he is—saw you hide the bag, Knox, and he brought it along here and hid it, fearing to have such a sum about him. It's pretty certain he's taken some out, though."

Knox nodded. He handed the bag to Tom Merry.

"I don't want to see the dashed thing again, Merry!" he muttered. "If—if you'll take on the job of handing it over to old Grant—"

Tom took the bag and squeezed it into his overcoat pocket after a struggle.

"I'll see to it. We'd better call with it on our way back. My hat! It was a stroke of real luck that Gussy saw that fellow, and remembered in time!" he exclaimed grimly. "We've not finished yet, though. We've found the money, and now it's up to us to catch the thief."

"That'll be easy now," said Blake. "We've only got to watch for the beggar. He's bound to come along some time."

"That's so. But who's going to be here to collar him," said Tom, looking round. "It's getting dusk now, and we can't stay here all the blessed—"

Tom stopped abruptly. He leaned forward, staring hard across the dusky, misty field, and then he gave a startled gasp.

"Here's a chap coming now—quick! Behind the hedge!"

Fortunately, Tom's thrilling announcement did not cause them to lose their heads. Without even looking for the most part they leaped for the hedge, and scrambled through to the other side. Then they stooped down and peered across the field they had left.

They understood then. At the far end of the field—on the opposite side by which they had come—was a dark figure, slouching alongside the hedge. He reached the end of the

hedgerow, and then came along the river bank, glancing about him furtively.

He stopped a moment, glancing furtively about him, and then he dropped among the rushes as Tom had done. He fumbled among the roots of the willow, and then a savage exclamation escaped him.

"Gone!" he panted aloud. "By crimes!"

Crack!

It was the snapping of a twig under the boot of Arthur Augustus, and next moment the unlucky swell of the Fourth fell sprawling through the hedge full in view of the tow-haired youth.

He stared at Gussy for a brief instant, thunderstruck. Then he leaped on the bank with an alarmed gasp, and in that instant Tom Merry's voice rang out:

"Now, you chaps, at him!"

Knox was the first through the hedge, and he leaped headlong for the youth. But the fellow had realised his danger now, and he acted like lightning.

His foot shot out, and as Knox went headlong over it, the thief raced away along the bank.

"After him!" howled Tom Merry furiously. "Oh, that idiot Gussy! The beggar will get away yet!"

On Tom's heels came Blake, Herries, Digby, Lowther, and Manners, and the six went in pursuit of the slippery youth with a rush.

They did not get far. Quite abruptly and unexpectedly the youth did something that brought a yell of warning from Tom Merry.

"Come back! You fool, come back! It isn't safe!"

The tow-headed youth had suddenly jumped down from the bank and gone racing across the frozen river.

But Tom's frantic warning came too late to be of use.

Even as he gave it, the racing figure seemed to crumple up.

Crash!

With an ominous, terrifying sound of smashing ice, the figure of the youth vanished from sight. Only a black, bubbling gap showed where he had been.

"Elp! Oh, 'elp!"

"Good heavens!"

Tom Merry stared aghast. Above the swelling black water a hand showed and then a head—the hands of the hapless youth clutched madly, desperately, at the broken ice.

They got a grip at last, and hung on. Then Tom Merry gave another yell as Blake and several of his chums moved as if to rush to the rescue.

"Hold on! It's madness—folly! After me—quick!"

Tom's cry sobered his chums. They realised as Tom had already done, the folly of attempting a rescue like that. The river was unsafe—it was worse than folly to attempt it.

Tom started up the field at a run, his chums at his heels. His keen eyes had glimpsed a long ladder leaning against a haystack a hundred yards up the field. As he went, D'Arcy, who had been struggling in the tangled hedge, scrambled free.

He had not heard Tom's warning—though, if he had, he would probably have acted just the same. Stout-hearted as he was, Arthur Augustus often failed to use his head, and he failed now.

As he saw the black gap of swelling water, and the figure hanging on desperately, he gave a gasp of horror, and the next moment he was on the ice, rushing blindly to the rescue.

"Come back, you young idiot!" shouted Knox.

But Arthur Augustus had already reached the crumbling gap. He went in with a resounding splash, and the dark waters closed over his head.

Three or four seconds passed, and then the staring senior saw the junior's face appear above the welling water, a white patch in the gathering dusk.

It appeared close by the ashen face of 'Erb, and Knox saw that Gussy was supporting the youth with one arm. He saw also that the village youth's head was back, and he guessed that he was unconscious.

D'Arcy's voice came across the ice, strangely feeble.

"Help! Oh, bai Jove! I—I can't hold on! Help! Quick!"

"Good gad!"

In a flash it dawned on the senior that D'Arcy was hurt—had probably hurt his head on the ice. He glanced up the field, and saw the other juniors just lowering the ladder from the stack.

They could never be in time! With that heavy ladder—

"Help! Knox! Quick!"

D'Arcy's voice was weaker now. As Knox supposed, he had struck his head when falling, and his brain was reeling, his strength slipping from him. The icy chill struck through to his vitals. He had called to Knox—though he never expected, even in his dazed, chaotic state of mind, that Knox would answer the call.

Yet Knox did! At that moment the black sheep of the Sixth forgot self—the yellow streak in his make-up was wiped out. Something—a spark of decency—stirred within him, and he played the man—for once.

He wrenched off his greatcoat and ran on to the ice. He slowed down close to the gap, and dropped flat. Then he began to worm himself closer, the coat in one hand.

His arm swept round, and the greatcoat, held by the sleeves, went swishing towards the half-conscious D'Arcy and his unconscious burden.

"Catch!" he panted.

Arthur Augustus was clinging desperately to the crumbling ice, but he released his grasp, and by a seeming miracle, his wild clutch closed on the coat. He held on convulsively.

"Help's coming! Hold on, D'Arcy! For Heaven's sake hold on!"

There sounded the rush of feet and a shout—Tom Merry's voice. The next instant the long ladder was sliding over the ice. Propelled by eager hands, it slid over the ice and spanned the gap.

Tom Merry came gliding over it swiftly, and his strong arms reached for D'Arcy.

"Take—take him first!"

It was a whisper through D'Arcy's numbed lips. Without answering, Tom reached and lifted the unconscious 'Erb, and passed him to Blake behind. They worked rapidly, desperately, for the ice was cracking everywhere.

But they managed it. The exhausted and gallant D'Arcy was lifted out, and the rest was comparatively easy. In a couple of minutes all were safe ashore where Arthur Augustus immediately collapsed in Blake's arms.

But they were safe now—the danger was past.

Fifteen minutes later Arthur Augustus and the tow-headed youth he had rescued were seated before a blazing log-fire in Old Job's cottage. It was the nearest habitation, and the juniors and Knox had rushed them there—though with certain misgivings in so far as the village youth was concerned. For the story had been told and the recovered money handed over to Old Job. Nor was that all. 'Erb had owned up—he had confessed to the theft. He had been contemplating robbing the fowl-house when he had heard the juniors round the cottage. Knowing that Old Job was out, and curious to know what they were up to, he had spied through a crack in the fence and had seen Knox hide the bag of money. Fortunately he had not spent much, and Knox had willingly offered to refund what little he had spent.

But they need not have feared in regard to Old Job. He was too overjoyed to show malice to either the wretched 'Erb or Knox. All he wanted was his precious savings, and to let the matter drop.

So now, scarcely able to believe that he was to get off Scot-free, the wretched young rascal sat with Gussy, both of them wrapped in coats and blankets, and both of them waiting for dry clothes.

It was not a long wait in the case of Arthur Augustus. With Knox, Blake and Herries had hurried on to St. Jim's, and D'Arcy's chums were soon back. And a little later, Arthur Augustus, changed and feeling little the worse for his terrible experience, was escorted in the gathering darkness to the old school.

As they tramped into the lighted hall-way of the School House, they met Knox coming from the direction of the Head's study. His face wore an expression of unutterable relief.

"The Head wants you fellows," he said in a curiously shaky voice. "It—it's all right. He's got some nice things to say to you, I fancy."

"And you, Knox?" breathed Tom Merry.

Gerald Knox dropped a hand on Tom Merry's shoulder, and gripped it hard.

"The Head's a brick, Merry!" he whispered huskily. "He's—he's forgiven me—I'm clear, kids. Blake told him what—what happened on the ice. He—he says I have amply made amends for that—that trick I played. I—I know I don't deserve it, and—and I shall never forget what you kids have done for me to-day."

He walked on, and the juniors stared after him rather blankly.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus. "I am vewy, vewy glad to heah Knox say that, you fellows. Perhaps he is not such a weally bad sort aftah all. I wondah if he will forget?"

"I wonder!" echoed Tom Merry, shaking his head.

He felt very doubtful on that score.

THE END.

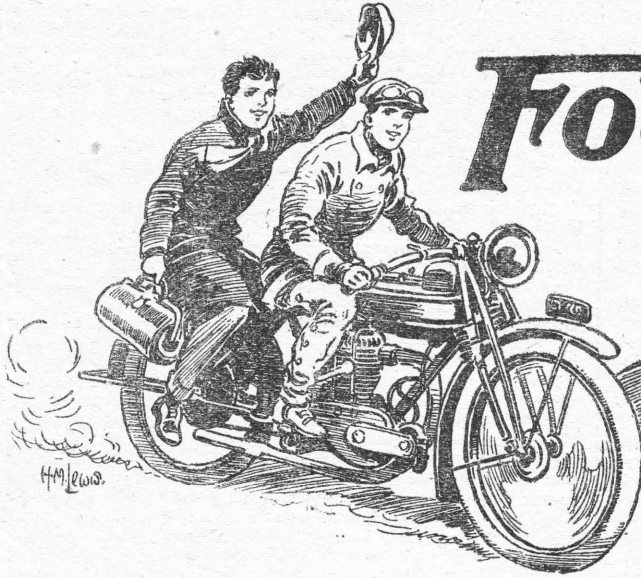
(Another topping yarn by the world-famous MARTIN CLIFFORD next week, chums, entitled: "THE KNIGHT OF THE PUMP!" Don't miss it whatever you do.)

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SENSATIONAL SOCCER YARN—

—START READING NOW!

Drives from home through his love for football, young Hal Chester sets out to face the hard world.



FOOTBALL CHUMS!

By
ARTHUR S. HARDY.

(The Most Popular Football Writer of
the Day.)

A thrilling yarn, telling of the trials and tribulations of young Hal Chester, in his bid for fame on the footer field.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED.

HAROLD CHESTER, a well-knit youngster in his teens, and a member of the Kingsdown Football Club. His love for football earns for him the disapproval of

JAMES HENSON, his stepfather, a Nettingham grocer, in whose employ Hal Chester is. Like the rest of the employees at Henson's, Harold finds his gun nor a very hard taskmaster. First of all, his stepfather dislikes him; secondly, James Henson hates football; and, thirdly, he believes that he—Harold—is an idler.

An important match was down for decision on Saturday for which Hal had already been granted permission to assist his team. But

when the great day comes Mr. Henson cancels his promise. Hal has pledged himself to play for his team. He was considered one of the best players in the club, and could not very well let his side down.

Suffering from a sense of injustice, Hal is determined to turn out for his team, come what may.

But luck is against the lad, for in the match he is badly hurt by one of the opposing backs. It is late when he returns home, weary and in great pain, and he finds the door locked against him.

"You've gone against my wishes!" booms his stepfather's voice. "Now you can put up with the consequences! There is no home for you here!"

(Now read on.)

Hal Meets an Old Chum!

FOR the first time in his young life Hal Chester was plunged into the uttermost depths of despair. He had often suffered the pangs, pains, and disappointments which as well as brightest joys colour the life of every boy.

He had sometimes been reduced to utter despondency and misery by stern, unjust punishment meted out to him by his stepfather for some small, boyish offence perhaps—usually the outcome of forgetfulness—but never had he suffered as he suffered now. Sledgehammer blows seemed to beat upon his brain. Internally he felt sick, broken, ill. And what had become of his courage? Normally, even in such a crisis as this, Hal would have been equal to the emergency. Even though his stepfather had forbidden him the house, he would have climbed up the stack-pipe and gained an entrance at one of the first floor windows somehow. Then he would have gone to his bed, and risked the trouble that would inevitably follow in the morning. Trouble there would have been, of course, in plenty, but Hal would have had his mother to take his part, as far as she dared, and break the back of James Henson's resentment.

Hal would have risked any sort of trouble that must have followed, but now he had not the heart or the strength of mind to force an entrance into the house. He had reached the limit of resistance. Heedless of the rain and the cold breath of the wind that seemed to pierce right through him, he just supported his weight against the iron lamp-post.

The smaller streets of Nettingham were deserted at that hour of the night. It was seldom that a belated pedestrian passed by at such a time. Even the police on night duty seemed to seek the holes and corners, for one seldom met them save in the main arteries of the city. Hal might have stayed there for hours but for a lucky chance which sent a friend his way.

Though he did not hear it, from a distance came the echo of a merry, melodious whistle and the sound of hurrying feet.

The boy who came—for, like Hal, he was just a boy—wore a heavy macintosh, a cap pulled down to protect his face,

gloves upon his hands that were thrust deep into his pockets, and stout-soled boots upon his feet.

"It ain't going to rain no more, no more,
It ain't going to rain no more;
Why in the world do the old folks say,
It ain't going to rain no more?"

Such were the words that hummed through the boy's brain as he came hurrying along the street, and his whistling kept time to them.

The boy was anxious to get home, as he had a long way to go. He was abreast of the lamp-post, upon the other side of the street. He would have passed it save that his sharp eyes caught sight of the drooping figure that huddled there.

The whistling ceased as the lad in the mack studied the drooping figure opposite. The chap must be pretty bad to stay there like that, he thought. Better see what the trouble is.

Crossing the road, the lad of the whistle approached Hal, and as he drew near he realised that he had been entirely wrong in supposing that this was a man who had been taking too much drink. It was no drunken man, but a boy!

"Hallo, chum!" came in a cheery voice to Hal's ears. "What's the trouble?"

Hal raised his head.

What the other saw was a face white, drawn, and lined with agony, out of which stared eyes that were dull and filmed.

With a swelling heart the lad in the mack put a kindly arm around Hal's shoulders.

"I say, mate," he cried, "where do you live? What's the matter? Are you ill? Why don't you go home?"

"I've been turned out!" muttered Hal. "I'm not allowed to go home, and all because I got hurt playing a game of football!" Sighing, he glanced at the other's bright and cheery face, and then from his lips leapt a cry of wonder. "Why, it's Tommy Bell, isn't it? How are you, Tom?"

A cry of astonishment burst from the other's lips. Holding Hal away he studied critically his face, and then, with a shout of "It's Hal Chester!" he caught Hal in his arms and held him close.

"Hal, lad, I knew you lived in Nettingham! Ever since I came here and joined the Town football club I've been hoping to come across you! I thought you'd guess who the Tom Bell was who played centre-half for the Town, and write to me, or come and see me at the City ground, for I didn't know where to find you, Hal."

He would have rambled on, but, realising that he had a sick lad to deal with, he broke off abruptly.

"I say, what's the trouble?" he asked again.

Hal told his story, and whilst he explained the other boy led him into the shelter of a doorway.

Bell's face lengthened as he listened.

"So," he growled, with a nod in the direction of Henson's grocery stores, "that's where you live, is it, Hal, boy? And your stepfather's turned you out? Didn't he know you were hurt and ill?"

"I told him, but he only thought of my—disobeying him—and—"

"But you say he told you in the week that you could play? What right had he to go back on his word after that?" demanded Tommy Bell indignantly.

"Well, he gave me my home. He paid me my wages. He wants always to be master. He's hard, but he's just, Tommy, and—"

"Hard and just? Did he stop to think how he'd like it if he were in your place, Hal, and you in his? I'll bet he wouldn't! Now, what am I going to do with you, Hal? Shall I go and knock the old chap up, and make him take you in? Reckon I'd better!" You'll catch your death of cold if you stay out here in the rain!"

Tommy Bell was about to move away in the direction of the shop when Hal Chester caught him by the arm. Bell saw that his chum's lips were set in a hard line now, and was startled at the feverish determination of Hal's glowing eyes.

"No, Tommy, don't knock him up—it's useless! I wouldn't go back now—not even for mother's sake, and I love her. Mr. Henson's turned me out. I'd rather be torn to pieces than go back and live in the same house with him after what he's done!"

Bell eyed Hal gloomily. It was a year or two since they went to the same school, played in the same team, and chummed up happily together; but, in spite of the lapse of time and all that had happened to the pair of them since those happy care-free days, Tommy remembered certain mulish qualities that had manifested themselves in Hal's disposition at odd times. When Hal got like this nothing would move him.

"If you don't go home, Hal," growled Tommy, "what am I to do with you? You've got to go somewhere!"

"I don't care where I go, Tommy," smiled Hal, feeling a bit more cheerful now, but still very weak. "I'm all right. It's late! You've got to get home, you know! Leave me alone, there's a good chap!"

The boy in the macintosh did a bit of quick thinking. It was late. He lived in lodgings on the far side of the town, and it was a good two and a half miles' walk home.

He was out very late, thanks to going to a chum's place for a game of whist, but he was glad he had gone now, for if he had not done so he would never have tumbled into Hal Chester, his old schoolmate, so opportunely.

He knew that at his lodgings his landlady, Mrs. Sanders, would have gone to bed. They turned in early there. He could not knock her up and get her to prepare a bed for Hal at that time of night. But, at the same time, he could manage a shake-down for Hal himself. He had his latchkey in his pocket. He would take Hal home, house him to-night, and see what else could be done in the morning.

But if he was to get Hal home he would have to find a cab, for it was obvious the boy could not walk.

Bell's eyes roamed the deserted street in search of a vehicle.

What a hope! All he saw was glistening puddles and the sheen of the soaked pavements; all he heard was the sighing of the wind and the pelting of the rain.

With gentle hands he helped Hal down to the broad step beneath the weather canopy above the door.

"You sit there a bit, old man," he cried cheerily. "I'll soon be back. Promise me you won't move?"

Hal, holding his chin in ice-cold hands, peered up. Just the flicker of a smile curved his lips.

"I sha'n't budge, old man," he murmured. "I don't think I could!"

"Right! Sha'n't be long!"

Tommy Bell was to-day, as he used to be at school, a lad of action.

Starting off at a run he sped along the street, turned a corner, and vanished.

Hal remained, arms on upraised knees, chin in hands, thinking, wondering, fancying for a brief moment that it was all a dream.

A dream it was, just an ugly dream leavened by the coming of Tommy Bell, the boy he had been pals with.

Hal's eyes blinked, and with a shiver he nodded sleepily.

Then from a distance came the purring of a motor-engine, the sound of wheels that came nearer and nearer, and the shrill of a joyous whistle:

"It ain't going to rain no more, no more,
It ain't going to rain no more—"

The noise ceased. Hal heard a step, felt the touch of an arm, and, blinking upwards, saw Tommy Bell beaming at him.

"Come along, old man," sounded surely the kindest voice that Hal had ever heard.

He rose, and leaned upon Tommy's shoulder. Kindly hands helped him into the cab.

"Nine, Park Crescent!" ordered Tommy.

Off sped the taxi, whilst Hal began to babble thanks.

"Just you keep quiet!" said Tommy sternly. "You're not fit to talk!"

Hal was half dreaming when they arrived at Tommy's lodgings. He was conscious of Tommy speaking, of being helped up some steps, of a door opening, and of a move through a lighted passage to stairs, which he climbed with difficulty.

He vaguely remembered going into a room, where, it seemed, Tommy spent an hour in preparing a couch as a bed and in undressing him.



"Well, Bell, what is it?" asked the football club manager. "I've brought an old chum of mine to see you, Mr. Bliss," explained Tommy Bell. "He wants to become a professional, and I thought I'd like the Town to have the first choice."

He recalled afterwards a feeling of glowing warmth that stole from chilled and frozen toes to his head, and, soothing his brain, sent him to sleep.

Tommy, with a cheery "Good-night, Hal boy! Don't worry! We'll talk in the morning!" switched the light out; and at long last Hal knew what it was to find ease and rest.

In Search of a Job!

YOUNG, strong, and healthy boys are hard to kill. At least, they are, if Harold Chester serves as a sample for all the rest.

In the morning he had got up, washed, and dressed himself, and Tommy Bell, with beaming-face, led him down to breakfast.

Save that Hal limped slightly, and was more pale than usual, there was little the matter with him.

Marvellous to relate, he had not even caught cold. As for the breakfast he ate and the coffee he drank—well, even Tommy himself, who boasted no small appetite, could not keep up with him.

And, to add the finishing touch to Hal's comfort and ease, the landlady, Mrs. Sanders, proved to be more than ordinarily sympathetic. Tommy had explained to her, of course, before Hal came down to breakfast, what had happened, and her solicitude for Hal was motherly.

The breakfast over, and the table cleared, the two chums had the room to themselves.

"Now, Hal, just start in and tell me all that's happened to you since we left school. We lost sight of each other owing to your father dying, and your leaving the old town. My folks went to Liverpool, as I dare say you know. We drifted apart, and—"

Harold, starting in, told his story. It was a simple tale enough, the tale of a widow and mother who found the strain of working for a living almost too great to bear; of a meeting between a sweet-natured woman and a stern, hard, business man, that had ended in Hal's mother marrying James Henson, the Nettingham grocer, whom she had known when she was a girl.

Hal made light of the life of drudgery he had experienced since then, or the constant friction that had come between his stepfather and himself, chiefly on the score of football, a game which James Henson loathed.

"And it's because of Mr. Henson's hatred of football, Tommy," Hal explained, "that I was never able to go to the City ground and see you play for Nettingham Town. The most I could ever gain was permission to play a game now and again for Kingsdown Athletic, who are a nice lot of boys, by the way. It would have been as much as my life was worth to have gone to my stepfather and told him I wanted to see Nettingham Town play."

"Did you ever guess that the Bell who played at centre-half was me?" beamed Tommy.

"Sometimes I did, when I read in the papers how young Bell was," Hal returned. "But I never saw your portrait in the papers, and I had never heard of your turning professional footballer, Tom. I was a mug, I suppose, or I would have written and found out."

"I don't see that you were to blame for that," said Tommy. "And here's another surprise I've got for you, Hal. Do you remember Dicky Double—"

"Fatty?" beamed Hal, chuckling. "I should say I do, Tom! Poor old Dicky! How we used to play jokes on him and get his rag out; and he could have licked either of us with one hand! I lost sight of Dick after I left school. I used to like him, Tom."

"Well, he's just the same, big, fat, tall, smiling baby now that he used to be. And he's just signed on to keep goal for the Town team, Hal. He came to us from Spennore City last week, and kept goal for the League team on Saturday, when we licked Chelsea at Stamford Bridge."

"I read the report of that match, Tommy, while I was waiting for breakfast, and you were talking to the landlady," returned Hal. "It says Walker kept goal."

"Walker's name was in the programme," shot back Tommy, smiling. "But he was crooked, and so they called upon Dicky Double to 'keep' for the League side first time out, and a mighty fine job he made of it. I know Chelsea can't score goals, but they might have had half a dozen on Saturday if it hadn't been for Dicky. As it was, he saved brilliantly every time and just before the close I sent Marsh, our centre-forward, off with a neat pass after dribbling through, and he got the only goal of the game."

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"And you always play for the first team, eh, Tommy?" asked Hal enviously.

"I've played for Nettingham Town first team ever since I came here!" returned Tommy Bell, with an air of pride. "And it's not a bad record, you know, Hal, when you consider that I'm only eighteen and a half now. I'm the youngest centre-half the Town's ever had!"

Tommy, setting his arms on the table, eyed Hal Chester thoughtfully across its polished wooden top.

"And now," he said, "we'll get back to you, old man. What are you going to do now that your stepfather's turned you out? You said last night, when I wanted to knock 'em up at home, that you'd never go back. Have you changed your mind?"

"No, Tommy. I meant what I said. I'd rather die than go back. If I went I'd only have a dog's life. James Henson is just but as hard as nails. He would treat me even worse than before, in spite of mother. I shall have to earn my own living somehow."

Tommy frowned, his boyish face lengthening.

"Tell me a bit about the Kingsdown Athletic Football Club, your pal Bert Roberts, Long John Reed, the goal-keeper, and all the rest of 'em," he said.

Harold again began to talk. This time he touched a note of enthusiasm. He loved football. He liked his chums of the Kingsdown club. He told with gusto how they had licked Staverdale, in spite of the fouling Bill Stevens.

"Seems to me your team plays a useful kind of game, Hal," remarked Bell. "How about yourself? Do you still manage the ball as cleverly as you used to do?"

Hal laughed.

"I don't think I'm any worse," he confessed.

"They're all amateurs, the Athletic—eh?" inquired Bell.

"Yes, Tommy!"

Tommy began to strum upon the table. His eyes broadened over Hal's face and body, noting critically the broad shoulders, the deep chest, the sturdy lines of him. In their schooldays Hal had been the cleverest little player he had ever seen. Once a footballer always a footballer, thought Tommy.

"I suppose," he remarked, "you haven't got any line as to what you intend to do when you make a fresh start?"

"No. I shall go along to one of the labour bureaux and see if there is anything going there. I'll go to the free library and study the advertisements in the papers. I can turn my hands to a lot of things. And I mean to make good! Tom, I'll fight my way somehow!"

Tom Bell nodded.

"I know you will, Hal, boy!" he agreed. "But what I want to do is to help you. Now, first off, you'll have to share these rooms with me—at least, until you settle down. And—"

Hal's face flushed.

"I've got hardly any money. I don't intend even to apply to mother for more when this little I've got has gone," he said. "And I won't sponge. I can't stay here, Tom!"

"You've jolly well got to stay here. If I have any more of that talk, Hal, you and I'll quarrel, and I don't want that, seeing that we've met for the first time for years. Now, here's my idea: you can take it or reject it, just as you like. I'm well in with the directors and management of the Nettingham Town Football Club. They like me. And they're badly off for good forwards. They've signed on seven new ones this season, and there isn't a prize among the lot. Hal, how would you like to turn professional footballer and come to us—eh?"

Harold's face lit up.

"Tommy, I should love it. It would mean good, steady money, and I should be able to play the game I love. But it can't be done."

"Well, of course, I'm not manager. If I were, you'd sign forms to-day, old man. But they like me. Supposing you come along with me this morning to the City ground and see our manager, Mr. Bliss? You'd meet the boys. You might even see old Dick again, and he'd be delighted to meet you after all this time. I don't say that I'll get you a job, but I do believe that I'll be able to get you a trial—and you're so clever, Hal, that the rest ought to be easy enough."

"You forget that I'm crooked, Tommy. I showed you how badly bruised my body and legs were this morning before I dressed. I shouldn't be able to kick a ball if they wanted me to show 'em what I could do to-day. I sha'n't be well even by Saturday, though I dare say I'd be able to play football by then. I'd like to meet your manager and Dicky Double, and I'd love to have a chance of playing for the Town, Tommy."

"That's settled, then!" said Tommy enthusiastically.

"Let's strike while the iron's hot. The tram passes the end

of the street. We'll be at the football ground in twenty minutes. Let's make a move, Hal boy!"

Tommy noticed, while he was speaking, that a hot flush began to glow in Hal's cheeks, that his chum's eyes grew brighter and brighter.

"All right, I'll come!" said Hal joyfully. "But, first of all, let me write a letter to mother. She'll be distracted about me. I must let her know I'm all right!"

"Good egg, Hal!"

Harold, taking pen and paper, wrote hurriedly a note to his mother telling her what had happened to him, and how he was staying with Tommy Bell.

"I shall not come back home, mother dear," he said, "but I'll be able to see you whenever you care to see me. I know that Tom won't mind your coming here. I'm going to strike out for myself now, and I want you to tell Mr. Henson so. I don't intend to be a burden upon either you or him any more."

That letter Tommy gave to Mrs. Sanders, asking her to have it sent by hand. Assured by her that her boy would take it at once to Mr. Henson's, the grocer's, Tommy and Hal left the house. Walking, the one with sturdy strides, the other with a somewhat painful and awkward limp, to where the trams ran, they boarded the first car that came along that was bound citywards, and within twenty minutes were at the football ground.

They lost no time, but went straight to the offices of the club, where they found the manager busy.

"Well, Bell, what is it?" asked the manager, a man of forty-five, or thereabouts, keen-eyed, business-like, well dressed, and masterful, "I don't want you to waste my time."

"I've brought an old chum of mine to see you, Mr. Bliss," explained Tommy. "He was always a better footballer than me. He's out of a job. He wants to become a professional, and I thought I'd like the Town to have the first choice."

George Bliss frowned. It struck him that Hal was on the small side, a mere kid. He had also noticed the limp. He knew what professional football required, especially the Second League variety of it in which the Town operated. In order to achieve promotion a team had to be made up of young, robust, fast, and experienced and determined players. Why, Second League halves and backs would swamp this lad!

The Town did not want boys in its team, but men!

"H'm, we've more forwards on our list now than we can find room for," remarked the manager. "What teams have you played for, my boy?"

Whilst the manager listened, Hal Chester haltingly told of his playing for Kingsdown Athletic. George Bliss pricked up his ears then. He had heard this team talked of as a clever side. More than one famous player had come from its ranks of recent years. He looked more kindly on the boy after that. Then Tommy Bell clinched matters by telling how splendidly Hal had played football when at school.

George Bliss was anxious to get on with his work.

"I tell you what it is," he said. "Though we are full up with players I never like to turn a likely lad down. I don't think we'd find out much if your friend were to come down here and practice at the City ground, Tommy. Our reserve team is down to play Northampton Reserves here on Saturday while we are away at Sheffield. Chester can have a trial then. Are you willing to play in a trial, Chester?"

Hal crimsoned up. Never had his cheeks been so red or his eyes so bright.

"I was hurt last Saturday," he said; "but I think I shall be all right by then. I'll play with pleasure, sir."

"All right. Quite a lot of our directors watch the reserve team play at home. There will be a gate of several thousands. Northampton have some useful players in their second team. It won't be a walk over. I can't promise you anything definite, but if you put up a good show we may sign you on, boy. You must be content with that."

Content! Hal was overjoyed, and as he left the office, after being told by the manager to report for play an hour before the kick-off, he felt as if he were treading on air.

"Tommy, what a brick you are!" he exclaimed.

Bell shrugged his broad shoulders.

"It's nothing; not half what I'd like to do for you, Hal."



Racing down the field, Hal Chester snapped up a neat pass and drove in a shot that flew with such power that it nearly knocked the goalkeeper into his own net.

he declared. "And I hope you make a hit—for then you and I will be in the same team!"

Not Wanted!

BETWEEN Monday and Saturday stretched a long period of waiting, and Hal Chester at times thought it would never pass. He had much to do, however. He had to see his mother. He had to see his chums of the Kingsdown Athletic, and explain that he would not be able to play for them next home match, and also to let Long John Reed and his chum, Bert Roberts, know that he thought of becoming a professional.

To his delight they looked sympathetically at his changed views.

Sometimes in the afternoon Hal went to the City ground, donned football boots and things, and put in a spell of training, though he did not try himself very hard, his leg and body being still very sore.

Some of the players watched him carefully, but they all regarded him just as an enthusiastic boy, and nothing more.

Until the happy time arrived when he would find himself signed on for Nettingham Town, there was only one player among the club's professionals whom Hal was anxious to meet—Dicky Double.

But Saturday came and they had not met, for Dicky had gone home to pack up his things and say good-bye to his relations and friends in Spenmoor. He was not coming to live in Nettingham until the middle of next week.

"I wouldn't worry. You'll meet him then, Hal," said Tommy Bell. "Concentrate on the match you're going to play in on Saturday. And remember it means everything to you. Rest yourself, save your strength for the game, and when you play, play as you used to do when we won all our matches at the old school."

"I will, Tom," answered Hal. And he meant it.

Friday afternoon the League team departed for Sheffield where Dicky Double was to join it, so Hal found himself alone at Mrs. Sanders'.

In the evening he went to the pictures for want of something else to do, for he had money in his pocket. His mother had brought him his Post Office Savings' Bank book, and he had drawn out a little to carry on with.

From the picture theatre he went straight home and to bed at once. So came Saturday, a bright, cold day, with a brisk wind blowing.

Hal's spirits rose when he went on to the field with the team and heard the ringing cheers with which the crowd greeted them.

Northampton, for this match, donned white shirts.

Quickly the coin was tossed, the visiting captain winning, and the Town's centre-forward kicked off.

Hal instantly brightened up, and, racing down the field

with the forwards, was lucky enough to snap up a neat pass and to drive in a shot that flew with such power as to nearly knock the Northampton goalkeeper into his own net, the big fellow saving only at the second attempt.

The crowd yelled delightedly, and Hal's form was critically watched after that.

"That's a promising kid," said a critic in the stand. "He knows how to play football!"

But after the game was ten minutes old Hal did little that mattered. He was for ever chasing the ball and never getting it.

Sometimes he would even call out to the centre-forward, a man named Hare, or to the outside-left, a player named Carter, asking for a chance, but they refused to give him one.

It was astonishing, too, to see the way in which the half-backs ignored him. They would give the ball to Carter, to Hare, to Liddell, to the outside-right, Field, but never to Hal.

So Hal determined during the second half that he would fetch it himself, and try a solo effort.

This he did; for, as the centre-half pushed the ball along for Hare to take on the run, Hal outpaced the selfish centre-forward, got in front of him, took the ball, and raced for goal. On he went, dribbling this way and that, beating player after player, until he arrived, breathless, inside the penalty area, a few yards from goal. The Northampton halves and backs closed in on him.

Hare and the others were yelling for the ball.

Hal refused to give it them, and swung a leg to shoot. But he was spent, run out. The effort had taken too much out of him. To his dismay, he trod on the slippery cover and fell, and as he fell the visitors' right-back banged the ball far down the field for one of his own forwards to pounce on it, and, after an individual run, score the second goal for the visitors.

Hare rushed up to Hal, his face crimson with anger. "You bungling idiot!" he roared. "You've done us out of a goal, and given one to the other side! Why couldn't you leave the ball alone?"

What could poor Hal say? Just nothing.

He forced a smile and carried on.

He was glad when the final whistle blew and he could go back to the dressing-room and change into his street things. He found himself isolated then, ignored, and he wondered why, for there was not a nicer lad in the world than good-hearted Tommy Bell, his chum.

Hal had yet to learn how envious and mean some players

could be of a boy who knew more about the game than they were ever likely to know.

Feeling sick at heart and conscious of failure, he made his way home, buying an evening paper on the way.

The Town were leading Sheffield Wednesday by 2 goals to 1 at half-time, he saw. That was good news, at any rate.

Hal was glad when Tommy Bell came home.

"Well, how did you get on, Hal?" asked Tommy, after he had enthusiastically described the manner of the Town's victory at Sheffield.

"Rotten! I made a hopeless mess of it! The boys wouldn't give me a chance!" said Hal ruefully; and he told Tommy all about it.

Tom Bell looked grim at that.

"At all events, the directors know a player when they see him," he said cheerfully. "I expect they'll sign you on on Monday, old man."

But that was exactly what the Town did not do.

It was with a hopeful heart that Tommy Bell went into the manager's office to ask George Bliss what he intended to do about Hal.

Five minutes later he came out, with a face as long as a fiddle.

"Hal, old fellow," he groaned, "it's a downright rotten shame, but they say you aren't good enough. They don't want you, and I've schemed for nothing!"

Hal's heart swelled.

"I'm sorry," he sighed; "I feel that I could have done so well, too. And it looked like a real chance!"

They walked towards the gates of the football ground in gloomy silence. Then suddenly Tommy uttered a cry of satisfaction.

"Hal," he said, "you've lost one chance, but I think I shall be able to find a way of getting you another. If you can't play for Nettingham Town, there are plenty more teams who might be glad of your services. You leave it to me. I'll get you into professional football as a paid player as sure as you are standing there!"

"How?" asked Hal dejectedly.

Tommy linked arm with him and laughed.

"I can't tell you yet," he said. "But you leave it to me—you leave it to me!"

(It was a great blow to Hal Chester to be "turned down," but it was through no fault of his own. Was there no chance for him anywhere? Be sure you read next week's thrilling long instalment of this powerful serial, chums.)

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