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1925.



ST. JIM'S TO THE RESCUE!

Cardew & Co. arrive in the nick of time! (A thrilling incident from the grand long complete school story of Tom Merry & Co. in this issue.)



Your Editor Chats With His Readers.

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.—When one has a bit of good news, it is sheer common-sense to pass it on. That's why I am starting my Chat this week with a word of advice to you all about "Harmsworth's Business Encyclopedia." This is a work every fellow ought to get. The first parts are on sale everywhere, and the whole cost of a record publication only amounts to a penny a day.

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"TRIMBLE THE HERO!"

By Martin Clifford.

You will find this extra-special school story of St. Jim's in the next issue of the "Gem," and I should not be at all surprised if you declare it is the best yet. Baggy Trimble, audacious as ever, figures more prominently than usual. Baggy was always

a fellow for the main chance, and he acts up to the priceless traditions of his greedy little nature by seeking to pose as a gallant rescuer. It falls out this way. Lord Eastwood was waylaid in a lonely part of the country by footpads, and somebody dashed most bravely to his help. Who was it? The hero's laurel wreath finds no owner until Baggy steps forward. Well, wonders will never cease! There is lots more you will learn when you read this splendid yarn next week.

A MOTOR-CYCLING ISSUE!

This is the ever-welcome "St. Jim's News" for our next number of the "Gem." Look out for it on Wednesday morning. Speed merchants, forward! The "St. Jim's News" is, unluckily, not invariably there when wanted. It always is wanted, so far as that goes. But it makes for occasional absence by excellence of contents when it does turn up. The new issue is the toppingest and smartest imaginable. All the experts have been busy as anything in its compilation, and the result is gorgeous.

THE TUCK HAMPER!

Out of sight, out of mind, would not be a true thing to say of the Tuck Hamper. Therefore I shall not say it. There will be rejoicings ad. lib. at the reappearance of this captivating adjunct of the good old "Gem." Though temporarily lost to sight, it was to memory dear. I had a lot of grumbles about the temporary withdrawal of the popular feature. Anyhow, back it comes, better than ever. Read this week's winning attempts, and circulate the welcome intelligence. You will much oblige me by doing so. The Readers' Page for screaming yarnlets and rib-ticklers generally has always been high in favour. Jolly good reason for that! Send along your smartest jokes, and write these on postcards. That method saves postage, and you can get the best storyette on a p.c. just as well as in a regular letter.

"FOOTBALL CHUMS!"

By Arthur S. Hardy.

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YOUR EDITOR.



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It was just like Arthur Augustus D'Arcy to act the role of good Samaritan, but little did he expect that his kindly act would plunge him into the thick of a drama!



THE KNIGHT " OF THE " PUMP!

A Thrilling and Exciting
Long, Complete School Story
of Tom Merry & Co., at St.
Jim's.



By
Martin Clifford.

CHAPTER 1. D'Arcy Does Things!

"ALLOW me, ma'am! I am afraid that bucket is too heavy for you!"

It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, who spoke, and his words were addressed to a very ancient and shabby woman.

Mrs. Robbins might well have been ninety, to judge by her looks, and she might well have worn the same clothes for the last generation or so, by the look of them. She had a face of the nutcracker type, nose and chin all but meeting in the absence of teeth, and it was excessively dirty.

All that did not matter to Arthur Augustus. His heart was full of chivalrous pity, and he wanted to help the old lady.

But the ancient dame did not respond genially.

"Tain't, then," she snapped. "I could swing it round me 'ead! The dratted pump's locked up!"

The pump in question stood in the garden of an unoccupied and tumbledown house. Well as D'Arcy knew Rylcombe village, it is hardly likely that, if asked to make a map of it, he would have included that pump. Yet he must have been aware of it, as he realised now. He had often seen folks from the cottages near fetching water from it.

And now it was rendered unavailable. That seemed like tyranny; and the eager spirit of Arthur Augustus rebelled at once against tyranny—over himself or over another.

Somehow—as one is conscious of things without being able to recall having been told of them—he knew that the tumbledown house was the property of Mr. Erasmus Pepper, the village miser, who was too mean to have it repaired and made habitable.

It might not have let if he had done that. There was no acute housing problem at Rylcombe. And Mr. Pepper was not the man to take chances.

"Oh, weally!" said the swell of the Fourth. "Who's done that?"

"Who should it be but that old skinfint of a Pepper?" snarled the ancient dame.

She was really not at all an agreeable old woman. But Gussy made allowances for her.

"Bai Jove!" he ejaculated. "Too bad of him! Now, I suppose, you will have to go without watah?"

Naturally, the old dame drank tea; all old ladies did.

And one cannot make tea without water. Also one cannot boil vegetables without it; and D'Arcy knew that in many of the cottages vegetables formed the staple diet.

"I shall 'ave to go a dratted long way to fetch it, any'ow!" replied the old woman, somewhat less crustily.

She was resentful and suspicious of the whole world. But she could not suspect D'Arcy of trying to make fun of her, and it may be that she scented possible profit from him.

"I will go with you an' cawwy the pail back," said Gussy kindly.

"You can do that if you like. I ain't 'inderin' you. But I guess your pals will laugh at you if they see you."

"I should take no notice whatevah of their laughtah!" replied Gussy loftily.

He took the pail from the old woman's dirty hand, and together they paced the sleepy High Street of Rylcombe.

It was not often that Gussy found himself in the village alone; but it so chanced to-day. He had wanted some photographic films in a hurry; and Blake, Herries, and Digby, his three special chums, had all refused to come with him. Mr. Lathom, the master of the Fourth, had dropped on the chums of Study No. 6 heavily that day, and they had impositions to write. Gussy had escaped punishment.

He had not, in fact, done anything to deserve punishment, though that made little difference to his feelings in the matter. He would have been quite resigned to sharing their fate, and he had offered to help all three to clear off their lines.

Digby had said "No, thanks!" civilly enough, Herries had growled something about being able to do his own lines, whilst Blake had spoken rude words as to the impossibility of old Lathom's mistaking Gussy's scrawl for his calligraphy.

So Arthur Augustus had cycled into the village alone. His bike stood now in front of the shop of the chemist, who sold photographic material, and the house of the pump was next door but one to the chemist's.

As he passed the shop by the old woman's side a loutish lad of about his own age, but bigger and stronger, rang the bell of the bike, and grinned.

"You had bettah leave that jiggah alone, my good fellow!" said Arthur Augustus sternly.

"That's my grandson," remarked the old woman, nodding towards the grinning lad. "He's the plague of my life, drat him!"

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"I am vewy sowwy to heah that!" said D'Arcy. "It is his dutay to be helpfule to you in your old age."

"Ah, the young 'uns ain't all like you, not by long odds! He's a bad lad, Charles is. Elpful, did you say, young gen'lman? Not a stroke would he do for me. But he'll come round an' bone my vittles, so he will!"

D'Arcy conceived a large dislike of Charles. Let him catch him meddling with his bike again, and he would show the fellow!

Ting-a-ling-a-ling!

The bad lad Charles was playing a kind of fantasia on the bell.

Arthur Augustus looked round in wrath, and the lad put out his tongue.

But for the fact that he was carrying the old woman's empty pail and had undertaken to carry it back full Gussy would have gone for Charles on the instant. As it was, all he could do was to look round again and shout:

"If you do not leave that jiggah alone I shall be obliged to administah to you a fwightful thwashin'!"

The bad lad Charles cackled derisively, and—

Ting-a-ling-a-ling! Ting-a-ling came the sound of the bell.

"Don't you take no notice, young gen'lman," the old woman said. "I don't count as you're no match like for Charles; he's a rare one to fight!"

"I wathah weckon that he will be sowwy for himself if he gets fightin' with me!" replied Arthur Augustus, with dignity.

He looked round again. The bad lad Charles had mounted the machine, and was riding it in a wobbly fashion that suggested he was something short of being an expert cyclist.

All the chivalry of Arthur Augustus was needed to keep him from dropping the pail and rushing back to do battle with Charles on the instant.

The chemist helped him to resist the temptation. That worthy tradesman came out of his shop, and spoke sharply to the bad lad Charles.

Charles got off sulkily, stood the bicycle back against the kerb, and slunk away.

The public pump of the village, which, of course, Gussy knew well, was not very far away. He would not let the old woman—Mrs. Robbins was her name—do anything. He put the bucket under the spout, pumped with vigour, and lifted it when full.

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Too full, in fact. It slopped water over his nicely-polished shoes. He contemplated them ruefully, but said nothing.

"What you want, to carry it easy," said the old woman, as Arthur Augustus bent over sideways under the weight of the pail, "is two of 'em—one on each side, to balance like. It would be 'andy for me, too. I dessay I shall have to fetch some more water—to-morrer, if I ain't careful with this ere' an' it's sore 'ard work for old bones, so it is. But I ain't got but the one."

Economy of water would hardly be difficult to her. Gussy thought. But it struck him that it must be very inconvenient to possess only one pail. What did one do about scrubbing a floor, for instance, while one's drinking and cooking water were in the solitary receptacle? But perhaps she did not scrub her floors.

It was rough on her, though, that she should be forced to go short even of water because Mr. Pepper had arbitrarily padlocked that pump.

Gussy felt his anger rising against Mr. Pepper. He had never liked the man, anyway. None of the St. Jim's juniors liked Erasmus. They had had dealings with him in the past, and he had almost always got the best of them. He was not much cleaner than Mrs. Robbins; but he was all there, in spite of his eccentricities, and it was not easy to take him aback.

"Hoo, hoo, hoo! Look at 'im a-carryin' water fer old Mother Robbins!"

That was young Barson. Gussy knew him—one of the cheekiest of the village kids. He was not alone, for he had behind him some ten or twelve of the juvenile population, boys and girls, all grinning like monkeys. And their number was being added to every second.

Older people came to their cottage doors to look on, and tradesmen gazed from door or window.

Gussy grew nervous, and slopped more and more water over the edge of the pail as he walked.

He did not repent of doing this good deed. But he did feel annoyed with the silly asses who thought it funny, especially with the elder ones, who ought to have known better. Their sniggering was worse than young Barson's open derision.

It was a short way, but it seemed long. By the time the humble abode of Granny Robbins was reached the pail was little more than half full, and Arthur Augustus was scarlet with indignation.

The first glance of the interior of the cottage confirmed Gussy in his belief that Granny Robbins was not—to say the least of it—an enthusiast for floor-washing.

The second glance made him forget all about that, and realise that the old woman had some justification for calling her grandson Charles a bad lad, and for impugning his honesty.

The bad lad Charles was at the larder. It would not have struck Gussy as likely to furnish temptation even to Charles, for it must have been at most times very like Mother Hubbard's.

But it chanced that some charitable person with no appetite for stale cake had donated to Mrs. Robbins the remnant of a carraway seed cake, rather the worse for wear, but not beneath the attention of the bad lad Charles.

Charles was behaving wolfishly in his haste to put himself around that chunk of cake before his grandmother and "the young mug"—which was his mental description of Gussy—came back.

Arthur Augustus dropped the pail, and the floor received more water than it had had for some weeks past, if one could judge by appearances. The swell of the Fourth then went for Charles.

His blood was up. He was quite honestly indignant with Charles. Perhaps he would not have been so fierce, but for the jeers of young Barson and his followers and the sniggering of their elders.

"Dwop that!" he shouted.

Charles dropped the sorry remnant. He had to drop it, for he needed both hands to attend to his assailant.

The old woman made a frantic grab at the cake, but Charles, thinking that she meant to grab him by the legs, thrust up a knee, and her ancient nose struck it forcibly.

She reeled back, with a hand to her face.

"You bwute!" cried Arthur Augustus, striking out at Charles.

"I never went for to do it!" howled Charles. "Lemme alone, can't yer?"

But Arthur Augustus could not. Had the venerable Head of St. Jim's been looking on he would still have done what he did.

And what he did hurt Charles considerably.

But the damage was not all on one side. The young village rascal did something to justify his grandmother's description of him as "a rare one to fight."

He had no science; but there was force in his windmill blows. And, once started, he showed no sign of wanting to back out.



"Allow me, ma'am," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I am afraid that bucket is too heavy for you." The very ancient and shabby woman looked at the swell of St. Jim's and frowned. "'Tain't, then!" she snapped. "I could swing it round me 'ead! The dratted pump's looked up!" (See page 3.)

"Hurrah!" shrieked Master Barson. "Give him a wunner, D'Arcy!"

The bad lad Charles was not popular, it seemed. Every punch Gussy got in on him was cheered enthusiastically by the juvenile crowd which watched from the door.

Gussy went down once. It was a dreadful moment for him. Even in the heat of battle the thought of contact between his immaculate clothing and that dirty floor was disgusting; and the situation was not improved when the bad lad Charles dropped flat upon him and tried to rub his face in the grime.

But that was more than Barson and his followers could stand. They were all against Charles, who was doubtless a bully. They had derided Gussy when he carried the pail; but now they had forgotten all about that, and looked upon him as their champion.

Arthur Augustus had a vision of dirty knees, flying short skirts, and stockings with holes in them, as the whole crowd, boys and girls, flung themselves upon Charles. They collared him wherever they could. They dragged him to his feet, in spite of his struggling and kicking. One small girl howled with pain, for the heavy boot of Charles had caught her on the knee, and Master Barson took a black eye, which he cherished proudly as long as it lasted.

They dragged Charles off, and Arthur Augustus, almost squashed, got up.

"Thank you all vewy much!" he said. "Now come on again, you!"

Charles came on again, and for the next half-minute or two the fight went rather against Gussy, whom the fall had shaken.

Charles was heavier than D'Arcy, with a longer reach and far greater strength. But the lout had little skill, and, though he was not a coward, he lacked Gussy's high heart. Moreover, he was weighed down by a feeling that everyone who watched—even his own grandmother—wanted to see him licked. He deserved no better, for he had tyrannised

over those youngsters and robbed the old woman; but he was not too thick-skinned to feel it.

So it happened that when at length Gussy got one home on him that made him stagger, he did not try to keep up, but slid to the floor, acknowledging defeat.

"Do you want any more, you young wuffian?" demanded Arthur Augustus, standing over Charles with clenched hands, and panting breath.

"No!" gasped Charles. "I give you best!"

"Jump on him!" yelled young Barson; and his following chorused their approval of the notion.

"Now, kids," said Arthur Augustus, turning to them, "that's all w'ong—uttably w'ong, y'know! You wouldn't let him do such things, an' you ought not to want me to do them. I wegard you all as good little sports, an' I am vewy gwateful indeed to you; but I wish you to undahstand that no gentleman hits a man when he is down."

"That's right enough!" roared Bill Barson. "Three cheers for the young toff!"

The shrill cheering brought people round the corner from the High Street to find out what was going on.

"Weally, this is vewy embawwassin'!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "My deah kids, will you kindly cleah out? That's wight, Barson; get them away. Charles, you had bettah go. I gathah that your gwandmothah has no use whatevah for you, an' I wecommend you to stay away f'rom heah in future."

Barson led his following off, and they cheered as they went. Gussy had endeared himself to the juvenile population of Rylcombe by thrashing Charles Robbins.

Charles slunk off, with muttered threats of vengeance.

"You'd better come into my place, sir, and clean yourself up a bit," said the chemist. "You're in a terrible mess. Oh, I'm not blaming you. That young dog will be the better for what you've given him. But you can't go back to the school like that."

"Thank you vewy much!" replied Gussy. "I accept your

kind offah in the spiwit in which it is made. But I must first fetch a pail of watah for the good lady heah, as I have spilt this one."

Master Barson popped a bullet head round the door. "Don't you worry," he said. "I'll fetch it for her. You can trust me not to steal your pail, can't you, Craunty Robbins?"

CHAPTER 2.

An Interview with Mr. Pepper!

"THAT'S better," said the chemist, after Arthur Augustus had had a wash and brush down. "You don't look quite your usual style, Master D'Arcy—not quite 'the glass of fashion and the mould of form,' as Shakespeare or someone says. But you'll do, I think."

"It is exceedingly kind of you, Mr. Bwown," replied Gussy. "I shall now pwoceed to intahvieu Mr. Peppah."

"What about, if I'm not rude in inquiring, sir?"

"Not at all wude, Mr. Bwown. I have no objection what-evah to tellin' you. I considah that, in padlockin' the pump next door but one Mr. Peppah is playin' the part of a tywant, an' I could nevah beah tywanny!"

The chemist shook his head.

"Pepper's a tough old nut," he said. "It doesn't usually pay to meddle with him. We've found that out on the Rural District Council. He knows a bit about the law, and he can make you feel rather foolish at times. Now, this is a case where I'd say he was within his rights. The pump's on his property. He's let people use it for a while. Now he's made up his mind that they sha'n't use it any more. Well, then! What else is there to be said about it?"

"A gweat deal, Mr. Bwown—a vevy gweat deal, I assuah you."

Gussy's chums would have agreed with that. They knew that when there was nothing useful to be said Gussy could still say a very great deal.

"Have it your own way, Master D'Arcy—with me, that is. I doubt if there's any chance of your having it with Pepper. But I wish you luck."

Arthur Augustus thanked him and went. He was in a combative mood. His fight with the bad lad Charles had not worked off all the lust for battle, he felt. He had no notion, of course, of punching the head of Mr. Pepper; but he did see the coming interview as in some sort a fight—and a fight for the right. Arthur Augustus would have disdained to strike a blow in another cause than that.

Mr. Pepper himself answered the door. He was lean and sallow and none too cleanly. His grizzled moustache was stained with tobacco, and his grey hair, closely cropped, seemed to stand on end. He wore a very old pair of plus fours—his clothes were always bought second-hand—a velvet jacket with a frayed collar, a tie that had seen better days quite a long time ago, one elastic-sided boot with a light sole, and one boot of the clodhopper style, thickly studded with nails. His stockings were not a pair, and his cardigan was short of buttons.

"Ah!" he said, sucking in his lean cheeks. "And what might you want, Master D'Arcy?"

"I am anxious to have a little friently talk with you, Mr. Peppah. That is, I hope it will be friently. But weally—"

"You mean that it will be if you can come round me, but if you can't it won't—eh? But you aren't thinking of treating me as you treated that Robbins fellow, I hope?"

"I should not dweam of takin' such a libahty with a man old enough to be my gwandfathah, Mr. Peppah!"

"Ah, I don't know about being so old as all that comes to! I'm in my prime, I am. Still, you're only a kid—fifteen—sixteen at the p'uside. Sixty-two—sixteen. Yes, I might be your gwandfather, though I'm glad I'm not, and I dare say you don't regret it, either."

Arthur Augustus considered it diplomatic not to answer that. But he was quite sure that he would not have liked Mr. Pepper as a gwandfather.

"You can come inside if you want to," said Mr. Pepper grudgingly. "But you mustn't take up too much of my time. Time's money, you know, and I'm in the middle of my wash."

Gussy was rather surprised that Mr. Pepper should bother about anything so unessential as a wash. But when he entered the house he saw that the Rycombe miser's laundry operations were on quite a big scale.

Probably the wash did not come round often. Certainly it could not have been a weekly or a fortnightly event. Clothes-lines were strung up throughout all the lower part of the Pepper domicile. They might be strung upstairs, too, for all Gussy knew. From them depended the most weird assortment of garments and household linen imaginable. The towels were chiefly holes, the pants and vests were unusually well ventilated, and the shirts were patched with stuff that made no pretence of matching the original material.

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Pepper was reputed by village gossip to have thousands a year coming in. Actually he had fifteen hundred or so, and lived on less than a tenth of it.

"I twust not to detain you long, Mr. Peppah," said Arthur Augustus, speaking out of the folds of a blue shirt patched with the remnant of a red and yellow duster, which had flapped round his face. "It is about"—he thrust the shirt aside—"the pump, you know."

"I don't know. How should I know? Nobody's paid me to know anything, and I don't believe in working without pay. What pump, young sir?"

"The pump over theah. The pump you have padlocked."

"Ah! Oh! Ah! The pump—eh? Well, what about it?"

"I do not desiah, Mr. Peppah, to intahfeah unjustifiably. Still less would I desiah to be abusive. But I do weally feel that, in padlockin' that pump, you are actin' in a most abbitwawy an' tywannical mannah."

It was out now, with no delay in coming to the point. Gussy drew a deep breath, and looked Mr. Pepper full in the face.

The red-rimmed, mean little eyes under the bushy eyebrows met his squarely enough. There was even a touch of humour in them, though Arthur Augustus was in much too deadly earnest to perceive it.

"Oh, you do, do you? But what business is it of yours, my lad?"

"I considah that it is ewerybody's business to wesist oppression, Mr. Peppah!"

"Can't be. If everybody was doing that there wouldn't be any oppression to resist, would there? Talk sense, Master D'Arcy!"

Gussy was nettled. He counted himself a most logical individual, and to have it suggested that he was not talking sense was annoying.

"You know vevy well what I mean. Mr. Peppah, will you be good enough to take the padlock off that pump?"

"What for?" snapped Pepper.

"I will not say to oblige me, for the mattah does not affect me personally. Moreovah, I do not imagine that you would care particularly to oblige me."

"You're right there. Why on earth should I care to? You St. Jim's youngsters have never been anything but a nuisance to me."

"But in the intewests of justice an' chawity, Mr. Peppah, I—"

"Fudge!" interjected Erasmus rudely.

"Weally, Mr. Peppah—"

"Rubbish! Fiddlesticks! What's justice and charity got to do with that old pump of mine?"

"There is Mrs. Wobbins, Mr. Peppah. She is old and feeble, an' the pump is a convenience to her. Now she must fetch watah—"

"All the water old woman Robbins has any use for won't want a lot of fetching. She's a dirty old crone!"

At heart Gussy could not help agreeing with that criticism. But he would not own that he agreed.

"If she has to fetch watah fwom the village pump she will be dirtiah," he replied.

"She couldn't be," returned Mr. Pepper flatly.

"I suppose, then, it will be a mattah for the law," said Arthur Augustus, with dignity.

"Don't you talk rot, my boy. What's the law got to do with it? And, see here, you can't come mouthing this sort of stuff to me. Anyone might think, to hear you, that you were a Socialist. Ha, ha! Pretty well, that is. Why, don't you reckon that I know you for the son of the Earl of Eastwood? Socialists aren't reared in the stable you come from, Master D'Arcy."

If Arthur Augustus was nettled before—and he was—that made him furious. He could conceive of nothing more grossly unfair than having the fact that he was a scion of a great house flung at him when he was honestly trying to do his best for the poor and oppressed.

"You are vevy wude, indeed, Mr. Peppah!" he said hoily.

"It's the truth. That's why you think it rude. Now, I'm no Socialist. I believe that what a man has is his own. But I've no use for lords and dukes and belted earls, and I'm going to treat you just the same as I should do if your father was a pawnbroker or a publican. That pump's no affair of yours, and I'm not willing to waste any more time discussing it with you. Do you understand that? Clear out, and let me get on with my washing!"

"But, Mr. Peppah—"

"Clear out, I tell you, or I'll put you out!"

"Bai Jove! Upon my word! Just you twy it, that's all!"

And Arthur Augustus, folding his arms upon his chest, stood like a statue of disdain.

But it was a tactical error. He realised that the moment Pepper advanced upon him.

He regarded Mr. Pepper as an old man, though he was surprised to find how strong in the arms the old man was. He could not, in common decency, hit Pepper, and to struggle without hitting was futile.

"Hands off, Mr. Peppah!" he cried. "I will clear out. But you have not done with me, I promise you!"

"You clear out now, and we won't worry about the future," said Mr. Pepper, better humouredly than might have been expected. "I don't want to have to chuck you out, you know. I don't mind saying that I think the better of you for what you did to Charles Robbins. He's been asking for something like that this long time. But—"

"But what, Mr. Peppah?" Arthur Augustus was on the doorstep now, rather ruffled and angry, but a trifle mollified by the miser's last few words.

"But don't you think it's quite a good notion for a person to mind his own business?"

Arthur Augustus went off in a huff. It was the weak spot in his armour, and his chums did not omit to attack him there. One could hardly hurt Gussy more surely than by telling him to mind his own business.

Mr. Erasmus Pepper chuckled, closed the door, and went back to his washing.

CHAPTER 3.

Doubtful Adherents!

"W"HO'S been rolling you in the road, Gussy?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Blake! Nobody has been wollin' me in the road, an' I should not think of allowin' anybody to do so."

"But one can't always help these little accidents," said Jack Blake, head of Study No. 6 on the Fourth Form passage, and leader of the Form.

"Gussy can't, anyway!" Herries chipped in. "Gussy's one of those chaps who go about asking for it and getting it."

"Weally, Hewwies, that is a most unfaiah an' oppwobwious thing to say!" replied D'Arcy warmly. "Anyone might imagine, to heah you, that you considah me a quawwesome individual."

"Not exactly quarrelsome," explained Herries gravely. "What's wrong with you is the little habit of butting in that you've got. It isn't everybody that will stand for it, you know."

"Gustavus has been serapping," announced Digby. "I can distinctly see a bruise on his left temple, and I rather fancy his right eye will be showing a discoloration by this time to-morrow."

"Oh, wats!" said Arthur Augustus weakly. "Have you fellows done your impots?"

"He wants to change the conversation," remarked Blake, grinning. "That shows he's not specially proud of his victory. Go on, Herlock Sholmes—as you can tell so much you ought to be able to work out who the other bounder was."

"Let me try," Digby said. "Turn to the light, if you please, Gussy. Thank you! Now keep your aristocratic features still. You can blow your nose later."

"I was not goin' to blow my nose, Dig! My nose does not wequiah blowin'!"

"No? Well, it wouldn't be a crime if it did, old chap! Hallo, Lowther, what do you want?"

Monty Lowther had just stuck his head inside the door of Study No. 6. Behind him were Tom Merry and Manners.

Lowther paid no heed to Digby's query, but replied after his own fashion to the words which had preceded it.

"Everyone who knows anything at all knows noses—"



HARRY HAMMOND.

A member of Study No. 5 in the School House Fourth, with Patrick Reilly and Dick Julian. Son of a man who has made his fortune in the hat trade. A typical little cockney, and an alert, cheery, and plucky one at that. Commonly known as 'Arry Ammond, because of his difficulty with the letter "h." Will ever be devoted to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the junior who championed his cause when he first came to St. Jim's.

"Oh, sit on him, some one!" groaned Blake. "He thinks he's funny, but he gives me pains inside."

"Consider yourself sat on, Monty!" said Manners. "What has Gussy been doing?"

"Gussy has been fighting," said Dig.

"Who's Gussy been fighting with?" asked Tom Merry.

"With whom has Gussy been fighting?" would be more grammatically correct, Thomas," corrected Lowther.

"Oh, hang grammar! Who was it, Gussy, old chap? I hope you licked him."

"Thank you, Tom Mewwy. Yaas, I licked him. But I would pwefer to say nothin' more about it, if you don't mind."

"The modest hero!" mocked Lowther.

"But we do mind," answered Tom. "We naturally want to know."

"If I am to tell you I must welahe the whole stowy fwom the vewy beginnin'."

"Oh, draw it mild, Gussy! Start somewhere about Noah's flood."

"You considah yourself funnay, Lowther, when you are meahly widic. I do not pwopose to begin with the Flood. I shall begin with old Peppah."

"Whew!" Blake gave a sharp whistle. "Surely you've never been scrapping with Pepper, Gussy?"

"Weally, Blake, you are singularly obtuse! Should I scwap with Peppah, or, even if I had, would the stowy start with him?"

"The combatant enters in Chap. X-L-V-I-I," said Lowther solemnly. "Pepper is Chap I. There are forty-five chapters between them, Blake."

"Old Peppah has padlocked the pump," continued Arthur Augustus, treating Lowther's efforts at humour with contempt.

"Padlocked the what?"

"Done what to the pump?"

"What pump—a bike pump?"

"No," said Lowther. "No. A dancing-pump, Gussy means. Get another pair, old fellow. Or give up the dance. Yes, that's the best way. For you would have to sneak out to go to it, and if you were nabbed there would be ructions."

"I am not talkin' about any dance whatevah, Lowthah, or about any dancin'-pumps. This is a weal pump, with a well—"

"Ah, now we're going to get facts!" said the irrepressible one. "Truth is said to live at the bottom of a well."

"An' the old people in the cottages near have been dwawin' watah fwom it—"

"Strange, strange!" murmured Digby. "Who would have thought to hear of a poor, harmless pump being treated thus?"

"An' now they can't, because it is padlocked."

"So they have to drink lemonade, I suppose?" said Lowther. "Poor old souls, it's no end rough on them! But you could ease the affliction by dishing out money to buy the lemonade with, Gussy."

"Wubbish! I—"

"You haven't explained yet how you came to scrap with Pepper," said Blake, with an air of pathetic patience.

"Yes, tell us about that, Gussy," Tom Merry said.

"Oh, bai Jove! Haven't I already said that I did not scwap with Peppah? It is twue that he laid his dirty hands upon me when I did not clear out at once at his ordah. But I did not hit him; he is old enough to be my gwandfathah."

"But what were you doing in old Pepper's house?" queried Manners.

"Don't I tell you that he had padlocked the pump, an' the poor old folks could not get watah?"

"I see!" growled Herries. "Butting in again!"

"But that doesn't put us wise as to who you—er—with whom you fought. Is that right, Monty?"

"If you weally must know, Tom Mewwy, I had a slight encoutah—it was scarcely a fight—with a lout named Wobbins—Charles Wobbins."

"What had Wobbins—?"

"I said 'Wobbins,' Lowthah!"

"So did I, Gussy. What had Wobbins done? Had he helped Pepper to padlock the pump?"

"He was stealin' his gwandmothah's cake, the wascal!"

"It does sound a wascally trick. Who is his grandmother? Friend of yours?"

"She is one of the poor old folks whom Peppah's tywanny compels to go to—"

"The beerhouse, eh?"

"Nothin' of the kind, Lowthah! To the village pump!"

"Shakespeare—or Bacon, or someone—once wrote a play called 'Much Ado about Nothing,' remarked Digby.

"This sounds like that. As long as there's the village pump for them to go to I can't see that it matters much about Pepper's keeping them off his. And he's just the sort of man who can afford to padlock a pump. He's got precious little use for water."

"You don't undahstand, Digbay! This is not his own pump—"

"Then it was like his blessed cheek to padlock it!" said Manners.

"But it's his pump, and he maintains that he has the law behind him in doin' what he did."

"We're getting it straight now," Lowther said. "It isn't Pepper's pump, and it is Pepper's pump; he is a base tyrant in padlocking it, but he has a perfect right to padlock it. Clear as mud! Go on, Gustavus—we're listening."

"Oh, dry up, Monty!" said Tom Merry. "Gussy means that the pump isn't the one at the house Pepper lives in. It must be that at the old tumbledown house near Brown's, the chemist's."

"That's wight, Tom Mewwy," Arthur Augustus said.

"Well, there isn't much in it, is there? May be a bit of a drag for one or two of the old people to go to the village pump; but it's not so very far off, after all. I can't see that you can do anything about it."

"But I am wresolved to do somethin' about it," replied Gussy doggedly, "an' I welied upon you fellows to help me."

"I'm on!" cried Lowther. "I enrol myself under the banner of the Knight of the Pump. Said banner bearing a pump handle rampant, argent on gules, trimmed passementerie, jewelled in two holes, and warranted wind and water proof."

"You are wottin', Lowthah! But weally, if you fellows would come along with me to old Peppah we might make him see reason!"

With his monocle to his eye, Gussy gave Lowther a withering glance and so missed the exchange of glances and grins among the rest.

"We'll go," said Digby. "I will, anyyay. What do you say, Blake?"

"I'm on. The Knight of the Pump has three trusty men-at-arms—that is, if he regards Lowther as trusty."

"We'll go, too," said Tom Merry. "Won't we, Manners? See here. That hamper I expected from Huckleberry Heath has turned up, and we looked in to ask you fellows to tea. Let's all go down to Rylcombe first, vanquish the dragon Pepper, and then come back to a jolly good spread!"

"Hear, hear!" cried Herries. "With that to come back to I don't mind going along to hear Gussy lecture old Pepper, though I'll bet he won't get any change out of the old hunks, and I can't see that he's got a leg to stand on about the pump."

"The new Crusade has begun! We march under the banner of the Pump, led by the Knight of the Pump, the valiant D'Arcy!" chanted Lowther. "Let Pepper beware—let Wobbins slink to his lair—let all base miscreants be warned of our coming!"

"You do wot, Lowthah!" said Gussy.

But he was pleased that they had promised to go. He felt sure that when they had given the matter more thought they must perceive the iniquity of Pepper.

CHAPTER 4.

Gussy Takes a Dare!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS was the last to reach the table for dinner. He was, in fact, three or four minutes late, though Mr. Railton, the Housemaster, who presided, said nothing, contenting himself with a reproving glance.

Gussy was late because he had had to change his clothes.

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He would not have dreamed of going in to a meal in garments which showed signs of conflict.

He ate his dinner in silence, seeming rather absent-minded, for he took mustard to mutton, and looked with horror upon what he had done when it was pointed out to him. But the second course saw him blunder worse, for he tumbled a big spoonful of salt over his apple-pie.

He was thinking of the Pepper affair, and the more he thought of it the more resolute he became to see that the old people had what he considered their rights. The mind of Arthur Augustus was imaginative as well as sympathetic. He knew of Granny Robbins; but, in fancy, he saw a long procession of aged and infirm men and women toiling slowly to the village pump instead of just going round the corner to that which the abominable Pepper had padlocked.

In actual fact, not more than the inhabitants of half a dozen cottages had used the pump now, put out of action; and Mrs. Robbins was the only old person affected, which, seeing that she could manage with very little water, made the whole business of little account. But Arthur Augustus would have said, had he known all this, that, in any case, there was "the pwinciple of the thing to be considahed."

His own special chums of Study No. 6, and the Terrible Three, who were only less his chums than they because of the slight barrier of the different Forms, did not go back on their promise to accompany him.

They anticipated some fun. They had no objection to badgering old Pepper. And even if, as seemed likely, he got the better of the argument they would not worry. The pump meant little to them.

So directly afternoon classes were over the seven proceeded to the bike-shed. As they wheeled out their machines Cardew, Levison, and Clive came up.

"Whither away?" asked Clive.

"Sha'n't," replied Lowther.

"Sha'n't what?" returned Clive, in surprise.

"Wither away, of course. Why should we? And why should you want us to? It's not kind of you, Clive! You get these nasty ideas from the native witch-doctors that you consort with when you're at home in South Africa, I suppose."

"Oh, I see! You are an ass, Lowther! I meant, where are you going?"

"Sidney," said Cardew, "is one of those troublesome individuals who must for ever be doin' somethin'. He wants to come with you, wherever it is, an' he proposes to drag me an' the worthy Ernest along."

"I sha'n't need dragging," Levison said, smiling. "But, very likely, we're not wanted. A hint to that effect would be enough."

"Not for Sidney," drawled Ralph Reckness Cardew, shaking his head. "Upon Sidney, with his mind made up, hints are wasted."

"You bounder! As if I'd shove myself in where I wasn't wanted! But—"

"Come along if you care to," Tom Merry said. "We're only going down to Rylcombe. Gussy wants to talk seriously to old Pepper before witnesses. We're the witnesses. You can be three more—the more the merrier, you know!"

Arthur Augustus did not look altogether happy. He did not mind Clive's coming; he did not much mind Levison, who could be sarcastic enough, but usually kept his sarcasm in reserve for times when he was personally concerned. But Cardew knew no such limitation; he was a born mocker, and now and then Gussy quite hated him.

Worse than Lowther, Cardew was; and, goodness knows, Lowther was bad enough! He started in again now, making the swell of the Fourth writhe.

"Wait!" Lowther said, with portentous solemnity. "Before you join with us in this high enterprise you must all swear fidelity to the Knight of the Pump!"

"Who's the Knight of the Pump?" inquired Levison, grinning.

Lowther pointed to D'Arcy.

"Behold him! Our leader and our pride!" he said.

"Oh, by gad! Hum! Knight of the Pump—eh? Not so bad. Fits very well," said Cardew. "But what's it all about? Goin' into the dashed milk bizney, D'Arcy? Of course, the aristocracy are takin' to trade these days—motors an' wines an' hats an' all that. But I'm not sure about milk. Will the noble earl, your father, be pleased? I hardly think he'd like you to go on the rounds yourself, shoutin' 'Milk-oh—milk-oh!'"

"Weally, Cardew, I wish you wouldn't wot so much! This is a sewious mattah!"

"It is, dear boy, it is! Trade has its pitfalls, an' I understand that the number of milk-dealers in the bankruptcy lists is really appallin'! Still, with the pump as your watchword, so to speak, you should hardly get there."

"I am not goin' into the milk business, an' you are perfectly well awah that I am not, Cardew! As a mattah of fact, the pump is old Peppah's. He has padlocked it, an'—"



Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had a vision of dirty knees, flying short skirts, and stockings with holes in them, as the crowd of boys and girls flung themselves upon Charles. They collared the villager wherever they could and dragged him off the swell of St. Jim's. (See page 5.)

"Why worry? If you are thirsty at Rylcombe, an' haven't the price of a bottle of pop upon you, there's always the village pump. I have no personal experience of it; but I understand that it's very good water indeed."

"Gussy's worrying about other people, not about himself," said Tom Mertly.

"Butting in, as per usual!" growled Herries.

"Come, if you care to—don't if you don't want to. Anyway, come along to tea in Study No. 10 in about an hour and a half, the three of you. I've had a hamper."

"Thomas, it is you who should be knighted, not my noble kinsman! I submit an amendment. Let's go an' have tea now, an' leave Pepper till to-morrow," said Cardew.

"Oh, rot! Come along!" said Levison. "Listening to Gussy treating old Pepper to what Samson gave the Philistines will give us an appetite!"

"Samson smote the Philistines with—ah, now I remember! You're rude, Ernest, rude! But let us ride out, loyal followers of the Knight of the Pump. I'm glad it isn't the milk trade, Gussy; I doubt very much whether your noble pater would like it, an' as a humble an' distant connection I do feel that it's my duty to keep an eye on you for his sake."

Arthur Augustus was fuming. They would not take this affair seriously. But the more they mocked, the more in earnest he grew. He owed it to his dignity to talk with the tyrant Pepper as man to man, and he meant to do it.

The silence that had fallen upon him at dinner still endured. He had said but little in reply to the gibes of his friends; he said nothing on the way to Rylcombe. He rode a few yards ahead of the rest, without realising that he was ahead of them. His mind was busy with what he would say to Pepper.

Mr. Pepper's greeting was not genial.

Even in the manner in which he opened the door there was something of hostility. But that was Mr. Pepper's way. He had no friends, and he looked upon any visitor as a probable nuisance.

The St. Jim's juniors had a glimpse of a table covered with a doubtfully white cloth, and got the hot scent of an iron before the door slammed to, with Mr. Pepper outside.

He glowered at them individually and collectively.

"What do you want?" he snapped. "I've had one of you inside my house to-day, and he hadn't manners enough to get out when he was told, so I had to put him out. I'm not going to have a whole horde of you coming in, so that's flat! I'm busy, too; I've just finished drying my wash and got on to the ironing. So what do you want? And sharp about it!"

"When you accuse me of lackin' mannahs, Mr. Peppah, you wound me," said Arthur Augustus, with dignity. "Even to you I should desiah to be polite, though you make it vevy difficult. An' when you say you put me out of your house you ought in justice to add that, owin' to your venerable age—"

"My which? I'm in the prime of life, I tell you, you saucy young dog! Venerable age, indeed!"

"Nevah mind all that, Mr. Peppah. You say that I am a wude person, an' you have no wight to gumble if I wotret that you are a vevy old person—so old that I should have fancied you would have had more sympathy for the aged folks who must toil to the village pump because—"

"Oh, it's the pump again, is it?" snarled Mr. Pepper. "See here, young D'Arcy, I knew you were potty, but I didn't think that St. James' School was an asylum for young lunatics of the nobility and gentry class. You mean to tell me that you've got as many as eight—no, nine—of your friends to back you up in your confounded meddling? Why, you must all have water on the brain, I should think!"

Not one of all the nine juniors denied backing D'Arcy up, though of all the nine not one was a genuine supporter. They had the choice between the folly of Arthur Augustus and the sour abuse of Erasmus Pepper, and they chose to appear as sharing their chum's folly rather than let the village miser see that at heart they rather agreed with him.

They did not answer. They waited for Gussy to speak.

"Let me appeal to your bettah natchah, Mr. Peppah!" said Arthur Augustus earnestly. "If you would but twy to see this thing as I see it—"

"I should be sorry to see anything as you see it, you young idiot!" snarled Pepper. "Talk, talk, talk—you'd talk the leg off a table! But you can't talk me over! I shall do

as I choose with my own; and if all St. James' School comes to my door to back you up I shall still do as I like! Got that?"

"You make yourself quite plain, Mr. Peppah—"

"No, no!" murmured Lowther. "Nature did that for him, and even more than that."

"Dwy up, Lowthah! Mr. Peppah—"

"That's enough!" Pepper flung open his door. The noise he lived in was of the cottage type, and the door opened into the principal room. "There's the work I'm at, and that I mean to be getting on with inside half a minute. And there's the key of the padlock that fastens the pump you're so anxious about. See it?"

The key hung upon a nail by the door. Gussy stared at it, wondering what Pepper meant.

"There's the key, and there it's going to hang. Touch it if you dare! I'll have the law on you if I catch you trying it on, though your father is an earl! And if you can get it without my catching you—well, you're welcome to use it, and drink all the water you like from that pump! Don't blame me, though, if it poisons you!"

"Do you mean, Mr. Peppah, that if I can obtain possession of that key you will admit myself beaten, an' allow the poor old folk to use the pump again?"

"I didn't say so, but have it that way if you like. After all, what's the odds to me if they— But never mind that! Yes, dat you, if you can beat me you can have your own way about it—and much good may it do you, and them! But I keep a gun loaded in the house"—he pointed to a very ancient firearm that hung upon the wall—"and I'd as soon pepper your sparrow legs with small shot as not—ah, and sooner! And if I catch you I warn you that I shall hand you over to the constable. He's a fool, but that don't matter much—there will be two of a sort together when he gets you!"

"You have dared me, Mr. Peppah! I take you at your word," replied Arthur Augustus, in all seriousness.

Pepper's reply was to disappear into the house and slam the door.

CHAPTER 5.

One of Cardew's Tricks!

"So that finishes that!" said Herries.

"Bai Jove! Do you fancy, then, that I am goin' to allow myself to be beaten by an old wogue like Peppah?" answered Arthur Augustus, with considerable heat.

"What can you do?" asked Blake, sensibly enough.

"That's right, Gussy! There's nothing to be done, you know," said Manners.

"Peppah has dared me, an' I have taken the dare," Arthur Augustus replied doggedly.

"You'll risk getting handed over to the police out of silly pride, then?" growled Herries.

"I will take that or any othah wisk I choose to take, Hewwies. It is no biznay of yours, anyway!"

"It certainly is not. I wouldn't have a hand in such rot! I'm sorry we came along now. It wasn't really funny."

"Did you expect it to be funny, Hewwies?"

"Of course I did! What do you think I came for?"

"An' the west of you came for the same weason, I apprehend?"

The broad grins on the faces of the rest showed that the apprehension of Arthur Augustus had arrived, though rather late, at the truth.

Gussy was hurt and indignant.

"You are a set of unfeelin' boundahs!" he said. "I have a vewy gweat mind to sveah that I will nevah speak to any of you again!"

Lowther put his hands together in an attitude of supplication and pretended to be about to kneel.

"Be not hard upon us, O valorous Knight of the Pump!" he entreated. "Pardon your faithful followers for that their spirits were less high and unselfish than yours!"

"You are the worst boundah of the lot, Lowthah!" snapped Gussy.

"Hear, hear!" said Cardew.

"Unless it's Cardew," added the valorous Knight of the Pump.

"Oh, by gad, y'know, what have I done, my noble kinsman?"

"You have done nothin' whatevah. Not one of you has done anythin' whatevah. You did not back me up in the vewy least. You simply stood an' gwinned!"

Just then the bad lad Charles passed. His face, which looked none the better for D'Arcy's dealings with it, wore a scowl, and he kicked the loose stones in his way.

"That's the chap you scrapped with, isn't it, Gussy?" inquired Levison.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 885.

"I have nothin' whatevah to say to you, Levison! I have nothin' whatevah to say to any of you! I considah you unmitigated wottahs, who have no ideah of frienship!"

"Oh, come off it, Gussy!" said Tom Merry soothingly. "You aren't going to make all that fuss because we poked a little fun at you, surely?"

"I hoped bettah things of you, Tom Mewwy!"

Cardew had dropped into the rear, signalling to Clive and Levison.

"Catch you up in a few minutes!" he called to the rest, as they mounted their bikes. "We're goin' into Brown's."

The three chums of Study No. 9 stood talking.

"I've got a scheme," said Cardew. "If I can work it Gussy will be saved from makin' a giddy ass of himself, an' be taken down a peg into the bargain!"

He whistled, and young Robbins turned. The other seven St. Jim's juniors were now off and away, and the bad lad Charles took it that the whistle was intended to draw his attention, since no one else was in sight at the moment.

"If that lout's in it I don't think much of it!" said Clive frankly.

Levison suspended judgment. Cardew's schemes always interested him.

Charles Robbins slouched back, hands in trousers pockets, face lowering worse than ever.

"Didjer whistle me?" he asked.

"I did!" answered Cardew.

"Well, it was like your cheek, that's all!"

"Don't take too high a tone, my young friend! We come from St. Jim's—an' St. Jim's is the show that hands out hidin's free, gratis, an' for nothin' to your sort when they get impertinent!"

"If that's all you gotter say—"

"It's not! Would you like to earn five bob?"

Charles Robbins' heavy face brightened.

"I reckon!" he said.

"Well," said Cardew, "do you think you could creep into old Pepper's shanty when he's not lookin' an' sneak a key that hangs just by the door, on the side away from the fire-place? It's the only key there, so you can't make any mistake about it."

"I say, Cardew!" protested Clive. "You're putting the chap up to things that he'd never think of doing himself."

"That's right, that is," said Charles, shaking his head. "I couldn't nohow do it. I'm honest, I am, an' I don't want to be tempted-like."

"Oh, very well!" said Cardew, preparing to mount his cycle. "Sorry I spoke! But I was not actually askin' you to steal anythin'. When I go in for theft I sha'n't choose one of your sort as an accomplice."

"Ere, wait a moment!" said Charles hastily. "You don't want to be in such a blazin' hurry. Runnin' of a chap down, too, when you want him to do a bit of a job for you. I couldn't nohow do it—my conscience wouldn't let me do it—"

"Right-ho! It's of no consequence, really."

Cardew was flinging a leg over the saddle, when Charles clutched him by the arm.

"Net for five bob I couldn't," he said, in a hoarse whisper. "But make it ten, an' it's a go!"

"Don't you be such an utter idiot, Cardew!" said Clive.

Levison said nothing, but looked his most sardonic. There were times when Ernest Levison took no end of trouble to help the wayward Cardew out of scrapes; and there were times when he seemed to find an impish pleasure in seeing him get into them.

Which is only to say that the leaven of old still worked in him who had once been the black sheep of the Fourth.

"Done with you!" said Cardew. "Here's half-a-dollar on account. You shall have the rest when you bring me the key. Come to the school with it, and ask for me at the gates. You needn't say what you want me for, of course."

Charles took the half-crown grudgingly. Perhaps he had expected the whole sum in advance.

"I mayn't be able to get along before your lockin'-up time," he said.

"Never mind," said Cardew. "Tell old Taggles you want to see me, an' he'll get word to me somehow."

Ephraim Taggles, the St. Jim's porter and lodgekeeper, was not absolutely above bribery and corruption, as Cardew had long since found out.

"What name am I to say?" asked Charles.

"Clive," replied Cardew coolly.

"Here, I say, Cardew!" chimed in Clive. "That's too thick, you know!"

Charles grinned from ear to ear. It seemed that he was not too dense to understand that.

"I'll ask for Mr. Cardew," he said. "It don't matter about no Christian name, does it?"

The three chums of Study No. 9 smiled and rode off.

"Well, I don't care much," said Clive. "The bounder

won't try it on. 'He's half-a-dollar to the good for nothing at all, and he'll be satisfied with that.'

"What do you think about it, Ernest?" queried Cardew.

"I think you're an ass. All the same, there's something in the notion. If Gussy went after that key he'd be jolly sure to bungle things and get caught. But if he gets it without going after it—well, he won't like it, and I hardly think he'll be able to make up his mind to pretend to Pepper that he collared it himself. Old Gussy's so blessed honest all through. He may let the matter drop, though, and that would be the best thing that could happen."

"I mean, what do you think about the lout's goin' for it?"

"Oh, he'll go for it all right! He may not get it. Pepper's an old weasel. But that chap won't let seven-and-six go begging, you bet."

"An' the moral aspect of the case?"

"I leave that to Clive. It's more in his line than in yours or mine."

Cardew grinned. Clive looked rather sad. He was as dead straight as Gussy or Tom Merry or Blake, and sometimes both his special pals troubled him by their way of looking at things.

"You didn't call at Brown's," he said, just before they caught up the rest.

"True, Sidney—true! If your conscience is worried on that score we'll ride back—an' be late for tea. But, personally, I could tell a hundred white lies of that sort per diem without troublin' about them."

"We shouldn't be late. There's plenty of time. But if you've nothing to go there for it's all humbug to go back, and I hate humbug."

"Now, I rather like that—some sorts of it," said Cardew.

"Don't I know that?" returned Clive.

Arthur Augustus said at first that he was not going to tea in No. 10. He had expected nothing from Lowther, and not much more from Manners, but he was disappointed in Tom Merry, and Tom was the giver of the feast.

Blake and Herries and Digby went along without him. But when Tom came to fetch him he could no longer hold back.

"I—weally, Tom Mewwy, I don't feel like a spweed," he said lamely. "I am vewy worried about those old people, an' I feel that it's up to me to take Peppah down a notch or two."

"You won't have any the worse chance of doing that with a good tea inside you, old tulip," said Tom. "Come along! We sha'n't enjoy the feast without your beaming smile."

"I will come, since you make such a point of it, Tom Mewwy. But I feah that I shall not enjoy myself, an' that I shall be a wet blanket at the table."

But the sight of the spread cheered Gussy wonderfully, and he began to beam before he had eaten a mouthful. For the time being he put his cares aside.

He managed to find a seat away from Lowther and Cardew, the two whose chaff he most dreaded. Unfortunately, Lowther was right opposite him.

The spread was a bounteous one. Miss Fawcett's hampers were all that hampers should be.

There was a huge beefsteak-and-kidney pie, balanced by a raised pork-pie as big and as succulent. There were tarts of three kinds—raspberry, strawberry, and apricot. There were three cakes, one of them iced. There were buns. There were two large pineapples and lots of nuts and oranges. And everything but the fruit was home-made.

Gussy had beefsteak-pie to start with. He helped himself to mustard, having first politely made sure that Manners and Clive, on his right and left, had helped themselves. Then he lifted the pepper castor.

"Gussy!"

Lowther leaned across the table and lifted a warning finger.

"Well, Lowthah?"

"Don't do it! Abstain altogether from pepper."

"You silly wottah! Atish-hoo-hoo-hoo!" Atish-hoo!"

In his agitation Gussy had shaken off the top of the castor, and had got more pepper than he wanted.

"Atish-hoo-hoo! You are the outside edge, Monty!" sneezed and snapped Manners. "Why don't you leave Gussy alone?"

"Yes, why don't you leave him alone, Lowther?" echoed Clive, wiping eyes that streamed from his burst of sneezing.

Lowther got up and marched to the door.

"Come on, Thomas!" he said. "Stir your stumps, Levison! Look lively, Manners! Proceed, Cardew! Come on, all of you!"

"What on earth do you mean, you footling chump?" asked Tom Merry.

"Clive demands that Gussy should be left alone. Clive is our guest, and it is but right that we should meet the wishes of our guests. I count it fortunate that Gussy is the sort of person who can be trusted alone with the grub. Now, if he were Baggy Trimble—"

Lowther pulled open the door as he spoke, and Baggy fell into the room on his hands and knees.

"Ouch! Yaroooooh! Whadjer do that for, Lowther?" the fat fellow spluttered.

"Didn't you want to come in, then?" asked Lowther sweetly.

"No—I mean yes! I—I wasn't looking through the keyhole, though I dare say you think I was."

"Nothing doing, Baggy!" said Tom Merry resolutely.

"Oh, I say, Tom Merry, be decent to a chap! I haven't had a bite since dinner, and we've got nothing in our study—at least, nothing worth eating!"

"Clear out!"

"Scat!"

"Buzz off!"

Baggy still hung on.

"I say, Cardew," he said, "there's a chap at the gates asking for you. Don't you think you'd better go along and see him? I don't mind taking your place while you're away—that is, if it's agreeable to everybody, of course."

"But it's not," said Tom Merry, with decision.

Cardew got up. Baggy licked his lips, and the gleam of greed in his eyes changed to one of hope.

"You're not going, are you, Cardew?" asked Tom. "I don't suppose there's really anything in it. It's only a dodge of this fat fraud's to squeeze in."

"No, I fancy it's true," answered Cardew. "I was expectin' someone. I must go, Merry. But I'll be back in a few minutes, an' if I find that Baggy has occupied my place, I shall slay Baggy out of hand."

"Oh, I say, Cardew! And after I'd brought you the message, too!" wailed Baggy.

"Come along with me!" Cardew took Baggy by the ear and led him squirming out of the study. "Here's a tanner," he said, when they were in the passage. "It's more than the job's worth. But I won't have you sayin' that you did anythin' for me as a favour."

Baggy took the sixpence. He had no sense of dignity; he would have accepted three-halfpence if no more was to be had. But tears were very near his little piggy eyes. Sixpence would not buy much, and his heart yearned for a share of the spread in No. 10.

Cardew went on his way to the gates. He had not expected Robbins as soon as this; but it seemed likely that the fellow had seen an early chance of annexing the key, and had taken it.

CHAPTER 6.

Cardew Loses His Temper!

TAGGLES was at the door of his lodge, and he looked rather curiously at Cardew. It still wanted some minutes before lock-up; but Cardew's visitor was rather an unusual type to come asking for a St. Jim's fellow, and the porter was curious.

So was Baggy, who, fingering the sixpence in his pocket, had stolen up the quad in the wake of the other Fourth-Former.

To dispose of Taggles was easy.

"Thanks, Taggles, old bean!" said Cardew, and slipped half-a-crown into the ready palm.

The porter retired into his lodge. His curiosity was bought off.

Cardew did not know that Baggy was hovering near, a fat shape in the gloom. He would not, in any case, have bought off Baggy. He would have used his boot to him.

"Got it, noble lad?" asked Cardew hopefully.

"What, that darn key? No, I ain't, then! But I tell you what I have got, an' that's a thumpin' good hidin'!"

"You are clumsy, my good Robbins. You deserve what you have received."

"That's all very well, that is. What are you goin' to do about it?"

"What should I do? You have failed in your enterprise. I am down to the amount of two shillings an' sixpence. I don't ask you for the return of that sum. But you certainly have no claim on me for more."

"Plucky lot of chance you'd have to git it back, if you did ask for it! But you ain't goin' to be mean, Mr. Cardew, I know. You're a sport, you are!"

"The value of praise, my good Robbins, is estimated roughly accordin' to the character of the individual offerin' it. Get that? No? Well, I mean that I'm not sure that I should care to be what you call a good sport. But if you will relate to me precisely what happened—or as near to it as your natural predilection for lyin' will let you—I will fork out another half-dollar."

Baggy pricked up his ears. He was going to find out something now, he felt sure.

"I ain't no bigger liar nor no one else," said the bad lad Charles, in injured tones. "I'll tell you a straight tale. Old Pepper, 'e went out. I was 'agin' round the place. I didn't

reckon he spotted me; but I think now most like he did. Oh, he's a cunning old cove, Pepper is, bust him!"

"Let us consider Mr. Pepper busted, an' get on with the washin'," said Cardew, as the boy paused in his story.

"Washin'? Yes; he'd got that about. Oh, I see what you mean! Well, I crept in. There was the key all right, an' a pile of his old duds on the table. I got the key in my 'and, an' then it come to me that I might git a bit of my own back on him while I was there. He's bin a bit rough to me, old Rasty Pepper has, more'n once. So I chuckled his old duds down on the floor, an' kicked 'em about with my muddy boots."

"In order to make quite sure he shouldn't suspect that anyone had looked in—eh?" said Cardew sarcastically. "I didn't take you for quite such a fool as that, Robbins! I was aware that your intelligence was of a low type, but I thought it equal to the task set you."

"Well, he wasn't to know who done it, was he?" snarled the lout. "But he come back sudden, an', my word, he didn't arf give it to me!"

"What did he use? I trust it was somethin' that stung well, for if ever a fellow deserved ticklin' up, you're that fellow, Robbins!"

The bad lad Charles writhed. It was not merely the memory of pain suffered that made him writhe; his back and thighs still smarted.

"He used a cane, he did. Lawks, 'ow it did curl round my legs and back! It fair made me 'owl. You'd oughter make it seventeen-an'-six, 'stead of seven-an'-six, Mr. Cardew, after all I bin through."

"I shall make it half-a-crown—no more an' no less," replied Cardew contemptuously. "You idiot, you're not really worth that! But I said you should have it if you told me the truth, an' what you've told me must surely be that, for no one would invent a yarn that showed himself up so badly. Here you are!"

"I ain't a-goin' to be put off like that there, so don't you think it!" blustered Robbins. "If I was to tell—"

That was too much for Cardew's patience, which was never one of his strongest points.

He had gone into this thing after his whimsical fashion. But Cardew's whims were apt to grow into something far stronger. It ought not to have mattered much to him whether he got that key or not. At best, it would have been a cheap score over D'Arcy, considered merely as a score, and Cardew would not have thought of dwelling upon his desire to prevent Gussy's getting into trouble, would probably have denied that he minded at all about Gussy's doing so.

But it angered him to think that this lout had had the key in his hand and had lost it because he could not restrain himself from behaving like a chimpanzee. Cardew, in his place, if it had been possible for him to do as Robbins had done, would have hung on to the key through the consequent flogging. Pepper would never have suspected that Robbins was after that key.

The lout had dropped it, and now he was attempting blackmail. A spasm of fury seized Ralph Reckness Cardew.

He broke in upon the threat Robbins had begun with a clout that made the ears of the bad lad Charles ring. He followed up that assault by a seizure of his collar.

"Here's your half-crown, you sweep!" he hissed. "Better take it while you've the chance, for in another second or two I'm goin' to boot you down the road! Thought you could scare me, did you. You shall see whether I'm the sort of fellow to be scared!"

Robbins clutched at the half-crown, but dropped it in his haste. As he bent down to pick it up he offered a tempting mark for Cardew.

"Ow! You do that again, hang you! Ow—ow! Yooop!" Cardew had done it again. He was not the fellow to neglect such an invitation.

The bad lad Charles bolted down the road, one hand clutching the half-crown, the other the seat of his trousers. Cardew had kicked hard.

He did not feel, however, that he had got much satisfaction out of it. He was really more than half-ashamed, though he would not have owned it, that he had employed so base a tool as this lout.

He strode past Baggy, who trembled in his shoes lest he might be spotted, and went back to Study No. 10, though with small appetite for the feast.

Baggy hugged himself one moment with the thought that he had a secret of Cardew's, and broke out into a cold sweat the next as he reflected upon the dealings of Cardew with the would-be blackmailer from Rylcombe. It struck Baggy that Ralph Reckness Cardew was not exactly the easiest fellow at St. Jim's to blackmail. But the secret must be worth something.

It did not matter much about Baggy. It mattered more about Robbins.

The lout was a bad fellow, utterly undisciplined, vindictive, bold by starts, cowardly when he felt that anyone had the

whip-hand of him. He had made the village almost too hot to hold him, and had thought of doing a bolt. Now he had made up his mind.

Thrice that day he had been maltreated. The young swell with the eyeglass, whom he had thought himself capable of eating, if necessary, had fairly and squarely licked him. Mr. Pepper had given him a most conscientious hiding. Cardew had kicked him.

He would show them! If he could not get even at once—or ever—with the two St. Jim's boys, he knew how to get even with old Pepper, and he would do it!

CHAPTER 7.

Gussy's Luck is Out!

IF Cardew did not get much out of the spread, everyone else did—even Arthur Augustus, who had not expected to enjoy himself.

But the comfortable sensation of being well filled with the very best of provender did not weaken the resolution of the swell of the Fourth.

He meant to have that key, at any risk. That there was risk, he saw clearly enough. Pepper's threat of handing him over to the village constable was no empty one. The old shark would do it if he got the chance, and would revel in his sour way at getting it.

But Gussy had no intention of giving him the chance. He felt that he was more than a match for Pepper.

Baggy Trimble hailed him in the passage between tea and prep. Somehow—best, perhaps, not to inquire too closely into the methods of the egregious Baggy—the fat rascal had got hold of the pump and key story. It seemed to Baggy that, while approaching Cardew might be dangerous, it was safe enough to try Gussy.

"I say, Gussy, old pal—"
"Wing off, Twimble! I am no pal of yours, an' I have told you a hundred times that I object to bein' called 'Gussy' by you!"

"Oh, really, D'Arcy! When I wanted to do you a good turn, too!"

"I have no desiah to be undah any obligation to you, Twimble."

"Well, you needn't, you know. You can pay me for it, if you think it's worth it!"

Arthur Augustus contemplated the bloated junior with high disdain. He could never understand how anyone could be as mean as Trimble was.

But there was that about the manner of the podgy youth which suggested that he really might have something to tell. So Gussy did not pass on at once, shouldering Trimble aside, but waited for him to say more.

"It's about old Pepper," whispered Baggy, "and that key, you know."

"Bai Jove! What do you know about that, Twimble, and how do you come to know anythin' whatevah?"

Trimble winked a fat wink.

"Never you mind how I came to know," he said. "I'm not a chap that goes about with his eyes and ears shut. As for what I know—that's what I expect to be paid for!"

D'Arcy would never admit that he was inquisitive; but it was easy to arouse his curiosity, and when once aroused it was insatiable.

"What do you considah your news worth, Twimble?" he asked.

Baggy countered with another question.

"Are you flush?" he inquired.

"I am not. I am dashed hard up—not that it's any biznay of yours, Twimble!"

"Oh, well, really hard up, or only a bit short?" When Study No. 6 was "really hard up" no one of the four inmates had more than a copper or two. As long as the exchequer of any one of them ran to silver there was something to be drawn upon.

"I am not penniless; Twimble."

"Well, I won't be hard on an old pal. I reckon my news is worth ten bob, but I'll let you have it for five."

"Twy again, Twimble, an' twy lowah this time! An' do, please, abstain fwom wefewwin' to me as an old pal! I do not like it!"

"I've a jolly good mind not to tell you anything!" replied Baggy sulkily.

"If you have a jolly good mind—which must be a wawity for you, Twimble—you had bettah stick to it! Quite a long time might elapse before you got such a thing again."

"Don't you be funny! Look here—done with you for— for tenpence!"

"I will give you a bob, Twimble, though I do not suppose what you have to tell is weally worth it."

"You aren't half a bad sort, Gussy, if you weren't such a stuck-up peacock. I'll tell you. That key you wanted from old Pepper—Cardew put a villagé cad on to getting it. He didn't get it, though; the old hunks caught him and



Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was hardly in the room when a pair of strong arms gripped him, and a big hand was clapped over his mouth. "Oo is 'e, Bill?" asked the owner of the big hand. "Blowed if I know, Bert," came the answer. "Feels like a boy—'e ain't no copper, any old 'ow! But we can't let him go off to rouse the bloomin' village! We'll tie him up and gag 'im!" (See page 14.)

gave him a jolly good hiding. And Cardew kicked him—at least, I reckon he kicked him; I mean, that he didn't actually tell me he kicked him, but—"

"I wathah fancy you have been eavesdwoppin' again. Twimble, you wottah!"

"If a chap happens to be about when another chap is talking to another chap, you don't call that eavesdropping, do you, D'Arcy? Anyway, I think it's worth more than a bob to you to know."

"What was the name of the village—er—cad, Twimble?"

"Sixpence extra!"

"Weally, that is a queeah name! You must suahly be jokin'."

"I mean, it will cost you sixpence extra to know."

"Oh, I thought maybe his name was Tannah!"

Gussy thought that rather a good joke. But it was wasted on Baggy, who was intent only on getting eighteenpence, instead of a shilling.

"Is it a go?" he asked.

"Yaas. You shall have an extwa sixpence for tellin' me."

"Name of Robbins."

Gussy started.

"Wasn't that what you expected?"

"Nevah mind, Twimble! Heah is your eighteenpence. I do not gwudge it; but I do think it would be far bettah if you were not such a vevy confirmed spy an' eaves-dwoppah."

The money once in the itching palm of Baggy, that youth did after his kind.

"Rats to you, you swanker!" he said, putting a grubby thumb to a snubby nose. "That's what I think of you!"

Then he fled, with his eighteenpence.

Gussy went in a very thoughtful mood to Study No. 6. He said nothing to Blake, Herries, or Digby. This was a matter he meant to put through alone.

But Blake had it in mind.

"I say, Gussy, you aren't going to make a giddy ass of yourself to-night, are you?" he asked.

"I twust, Blake, that I am nevah guiltay of makin' a giddy ass of myself," replied Arthur Augustus, with his monocle to his eye and a reproving look upon his face.

"What a lot of trust you have!" said Blake.

Herries and Digby grinned. No more was said. The three were all willing to let the matter drop if Gussy would do likewise. To argue with him was dangerous, if his mood was an obstinate one.

He had never been more obstinate than he was about this. He meant to get that key. Cardew's attempt to get it by deputy merely puzzled him. It did not in any way deter him.

When he went up to bed he undressed as quickly as anyone, and he pretended to go to sleep at once. But he stayed awake, meaning to get up and go out as soon as he could feel sure that the rest of the Fourth Form dormitory was locked in the arms of Morpheus.

Two others stayed awake. Cardew was curious as to what Gussy would do. Baggy Trimble had purchased a large indigestion at a small price. It had been too late for the tuckshop when he received his eighteenpence, and he could not wait till the next day. Wally D'Arcy had bought somewhere in the village a large meat-pie, which had been

condemned by the verdict of his chums of the Third. It was a very bad pie; the crust was soggy and unappetising, the meat seemed chiefly gristle.

Curly Gibson said it was horse and Joe Frayne that it was more likely donkey. They could not get on with it at all. So Wally had offered the remnant—a considerable one—to Baggy for ninepence, and had finally done a deal with him at half that price.

Baggy had wolfed the pie. Baggy was a glutton, not a gourmand. He liked good food, but he would fill himself up with bad if good was not obtainable. Now he suffered, making weird noises from time to time. But Baggy often made weird noises in his sleep, and Gussy attached no importance to the sounds that came from his bed.

Arthur Augustus arose. It was past ten o'clock. Probably old Pepper, like the rest of Rylcombe, went to bed early.

Pride and the courage that was always his sustained D'Arcy now. He knew, though he would not have admitted it, that his enterprise was a foolish one. He had no notion how he was going to get into Pepper's house, no plan of campaign at all. But he meant to have that key, and the strength of his determination seemed to him an augury of success.

A lonely quest of this sort was not much in his line. He had often broken bounds after "Lights out," but it had been in company. It was a chilly, cheerless business to make his way out alone.

But he went.

So quiet was he that Cardew did not realise that he was going till he was fully dressed. The impatient sounds that Gussy made in the course of tying his tie in the dark put him on the qui vive, however. Even on such an errand as this Arthur Augustus did not feel it possible to go with a tie imperfectly tied.

Cardew waited till he was out of the dormitory, and then he himself slipped out of bed. He thrust his feet into his slippers, pulled on his dressing-gown, and went to Levison's bedside.

A gentle snore awoke Levison.

"D'Arcy's gone out," Cardew whispered. "The silly ass is after that key! I'm goin' after him. Would you care to come?"

"I'm on!" replied Levison; at once. "I don't know that he's a much sillier ass than you are, and I'm not going to trust you out alone!"

"What about Clive?" asked Cardew.

"I don't know. Let him be. And yet I'm not sure. He won't like being left out of it, though he won't be really keen on being in it. Better wake him, I think, and ask him."

Clive was awakened, and said that he was certainly going, though he saw no sense in it.

They talked in whispers. But Baggy had developed his sense of hearing by much listening to what should not have concerned him, and he got most of what they said.

Some ten minutes after the going of Arthur Augustus they went, and Baggy lay for a quarter of an hour or so after that, pondering what best to do.

At first he rather favoured doing nothing at all, for he could not perceive any advantage to himself in action. But after a while it struck him that he might acquire merit with Blake, Herries, and Digby by waking them and letting them know that D'Arcy had gone out and that the three chums of Study No. 9 had followed him.

He lumbered out of bed, and awakened Digby, whom he considered the least likely of the three to throw a slipper at his head.

Digby was alert on the instant. He had been dreaming about D'Arcy, a dream in which his chum was in grievous trouble, though, on waking, he could not remember what this trouble was. He only knew that Trimble's story seemed somehow to link up with his dream.

"Then you can do the rest, Dig," said Baggy. "If there's anything in it I'd like Blake and Herries to know that I told you. But if it's a fizzle you needn't say anything to them. I'll get back to bed. It's parky."

Digby wasted no time on Trimble. Baggy was suffered to scramble back into bed and luxuriate between the warm sheets. But Blake and Herries were aroused from slumber and were told what was happening.

"Think we ought to let Tom Merry know?" asked Digby.

"Why should we?" was Blake's rather gruff reply. "Can't we look after our own silly ass ourselves?"

"Oh, I don't know! Just as you like. But they always reckon that Gussy is their silly ass as well as ours, and heaps of times they've been jolly decent about helping us with him."

"That's true enough, Dig. Go along and tell them, if you like; but don't press them to come."

The Terrible Three needed no pressing. They took a rather grave view of the situation, for they believed that if

Pepper caught Arthur Augustus he would assuredly carry out his threat to hand him over to P.-c. Crump, and that would entail heavy trouble at St. Jim's for the swell of the Fourth, though it was hardly probable that the local magistrates would take his escapade seriously.

Thus, within half an hour or less of the departure of Cardew and his pals, six more juniors made their way towards Rylcombe.

Meanwhile, Gussy, imagining his luck was in, found it very badly out.

It did seem like a stroke of good fortune that he should find a window unlatched in the house of Pepper. He tried it with small hope; he did not think Erasmus the sort of person to be careless about locking up.

But it gave to his pressure. The lower sash slid up. Arthur Augustus climbed in.

But he was hardly inside before he wished himself out. For a pair of strong arms gripped him, and a big hand was clapped over his mouth.

"Oo is 'e, Bill?"

"Blowed if I know, Bert. Feels like a boy. 'E ain't no copper, any old 'ow. But we can't let 'im go off to rouse the bloomin' village. We shall have to tie 'im up and gag 'im, same as we did to the old blighter upstairs."

"Sure thing, Bill! 'E deserves all 'e gits for buttin' in where 'e wasn't wanted. I'll 'old 'im; you find a bit of rope an' somethin' to gag 'im with!"

Butting in! That was what Herries had accused him of. Arthur Augustus actually went so far as to think for one fleeting minute that perhaps Herries might be right.

But he dismissed the notion. His was a mind conscious of rectitude. What he had done he had done for the best. He had emphatically not butted in.

He did not get the chance to let out the least little yelp. The big hand was kept over his mouth till one of Mr. Pepper's very disgraceful dishcloths—this one had certainly not been in the wash—was thrust into it. And all his struggles against the strength that held him were of no more avail than those of a baby might have been.

He was gagged and bound and laid aside like a parcel that did not matter until to-morrow.

"Well, Bert, we gotter 'ave another look around," said Bill. "The old perisher must keep 'is bloomin' 'oof somewhere!"

Burglars! D'Arcy had suspected it from the first; now he was sure of it. That was how the window had come to be unlatched.

Burglars! It was rough on old Pepper, miser though he was. But D'Arcy rather doubted whether they would get much. Pepper was not the sort of miser who kept hoards of gold and notes in the house.

CHAPTER 8.

Gussy to the Rescue!

BERT and Bill came back from their search in a very morose frame of mind. They obviously thought that the Rylcombe miser was not all he had been cracked up to be.

The genuine miser hides gold and notes and things all over the place. Mr. Erasmus Pepper, with all his meanness, was not so old-fashioned as to do that kind of thing. He had a bank account, and paid in regularly all he received; and in making his withdrawals he would calculate his week's expenses almost to a shilling. It was rare for him to have more than a pound or so in the house.

The two rascals who, questing round the Rylcombe neighbourhood, had heard of Mr. Pepper, were horribly disappointed. They had collected just about enough to pay their train fare back to town.

Burglars are seldom nice-minded people. Bert and Bill had pommelled Mr. Pepper cruelly. They were annoyed with him for not living up to their notion of a miser. Now they came to D'Arcy again.

"Might 'ave somethink worth liftin' on 'im," said Bert.

Bill searched D'Arcy. He did not collect much in cash; but the gold watch and chain were good value, anyway.

Arthur Augustus made queer sounds of protest from behind his gag. Upstairs Mr. Pepper was still producing somewhat similar noises.

"Shut yer noise, carn't yer?" snarled Bert.

He kicked D'Arcy in the ribs.

At that Gussy was seized by a fury that lent him treble strength. The bonds that bound his hands burst. Bill and Bert, who were conducting their nefarious operations by a very dim light, did not observe that; and Gussy had just sense enough, even in his rage, to abstain from calling their attention to it by any attempt to get at them.

He would have had no chance, even with his legs free, against those two. Recognising that fact, he lay low, hoping to make matters awkward for Messrs. Bert and Bill by so doing.

They departed, confirmed in their belief that the country



Puffing and blowing Arthur Augustus D'Arcy got his burden as far as the top of the staircase when disaster befell him. The head of Pepper and the shoulder of D'Arcy struck the chest of drawers together, and the swell of St. Jim's lost his balance, and went crashing down the stairs. (See page 16.)

was a silly place, anyway. It would be some time before they would leave town again for a venture among the yokels.

Directly they had gone Gussy tried to get rid of his gag. That was the first thing to do, it seemed; the release of his legs would come later.

So he thought at the outset. But Messrs. Bert and Bill seemed to be rather good on knots. They had so gagged Arthur Augustus that, unable to see the knot, he could not undo it.

He turned his attention to the cord which bound his legs. Hope there was still in him; but there was no such certainty as he had had at first. The dream of laying Messrs. Bert and Bill by the heels began to fade. Each minute took them farther away, no doubt. They would make for Wayland, and might catch the mail train from there to town. Their speech betokened the fact that they were from London.

"Bai Jove!" muttered Arthur Augustus behind his gag. "Of all the wotten knots—"

It was far from being a rotten knot. It was, indeed, an extremely good knot. Bill had served his Majesty in the Royal Navy at one time. He had left without any papers he would have cared to show. But in the Navy he had learned to tie knots.

D'Arcy wrestled with the lower knot without the slightest success. He went back to the one behind his neck, and had another shot at that.

By this time he had become so hopelessly flustered that he failed completely to realise that it was unnecessary for him to untie either knot. All he had to do was to find Mr. Pepper's household cutlery.

He did get as far as thinking that it was a pity he had lent his pocket-knife to Gore and had not yet had it back.

That should have led him to the notion of something to replace it; but it failed to do so.

He continued to struggle with first one knot and then another, growing each moment less capable of coherent thinking. Weird noises came from above; Mr. Pepper had partially displaced his gag, and was groaning in wrath and anguish. Those noises got on D'Arcy's nerves in the darkness. It needed all his pluck to carry on.

And, meanwhile, that young scoundrel, Charles Robbins, was at work.

He had made up his mind now to cut Rylcombe for good and all. His mother was dead, and his father had no use for him. He would run away; but before he went he would have his revenge on Pepper!

The house which the miser inhabited was an old one, with a good deal of timber in its structure. The weather lately had been dry. Charles Robbins had conceived the pleasant notion of burning Pepper's house above the head of its owner.

He knew nothing about the burglary, and was unaware of the presence of Arthur Augustus in the house of Pepper. Young rascal though he was, he had no murderous intentions. He did not doubt that the owner of the house would get out safely; and the notion that Mr. Pepper would be covered by a fire insurance policy, and—being Mr. Pepper—would in all likelihood make some profit out of the fire never occurred to him.

He had heard or read of the methods of incendiaries, and he had spent part of the money obtained from Cardew in petrol. For the rest he had no need to dissipate his cash. He could steal paper and shavings and things of that sort.

The spot he chose was at the rear of the dwelling, which was not overlooked from any of the houses near by. He built his fire carefully at a place where it had a good chance of

catching wood, and he chuckled as he built it, picturing Mr. Erasmus Pepper fleeing from the house in his night attire.

The burglars were in the house before he came upon the scene. They went without his suspecting their presence. While Arthur Augustus was wrestling with the knots, the bad lad Charles was building his fire.

The moment when he set a match to it was one of triumph for him.

"There's somethin' for you as you never expected, old Salt-an'-Mustard!" he murmured.

The petrol-soaked paper and shavings flared up at once. The glow of the fire rather scared Robbins. He did not want anyone to see him, but he did want to stay long enough to be sure that the timber of the house had caught.

"That's got it!" he muttered. "No, it ain't. Darn it all, the old place oughter burn! It's rotten enough. Ah, that's better!"

The fire licked at the wood, crept up it, slowly at first, then more quickly, seized upon it, crackled—music to the ears of the bad lad Charles—and then roared.

Robbins faded out. One moment he was there, and the next he had gone. He took without regret his farewell of Rylcombe. But that did not necessarily mean that his programme was to work out just as he had hoped.

Had Cardew, Levison, and Clive been able to get to Rylcombe without hindering by the way he would probably have run into their arms.

But they were twice delayed. They narrowly escaped running into Mr. Raitton, their Housemaster. They stood back close against the hedge, holding their breaths, while he passed them, talking to someone he had encountered on the road.

Then two motor-cars had a slight collision, and the three found themselves appealed to by the driver of one as being able to bear witness that the driver of the other was solely at fault.

Levison and Clive left Cardew to do the talking.

"Can't say," said Cardew. "I haven't eyes in the back of my head, y'know, an' so I couldn't swear to the pace that the chap behind me was goin'. Seemed to me that you were both in the middle of the road, an' carryin' on rather regardless. I couldn't, in honesty, decide between you, especially as it wouldn't suit me a bit to be dragged into court to give evidence. You see, I an' my pals are St. Jim's fellows, an' we're out without permission of the beaks."

It was like Cardew's cool audacity. Clive held his breath. Levison grinned sardonically. He rather thought that plea would carry weight.

Neither driver was of the chauffeur type. Both were young men, not more than five or six years past their own schooldays probably.

"You young dog!" said one. "I'm a St. Jim's fellow myself, an' was a prefect before I left. Can't agree with these here goings-on, not nohow. But I don't want to land you into trouble."

"I'm not St. Jim's, but I'm Greyfriars. I rather fancy I've met you before," said the other. "Aren't you Boulter?"

"I am. An' you— Oh, by Jove, it's Fitzurse, who scored a century in the last match I played in against Greyfriars. This won't get into court, kid, so we shan't be wantin' you as a witness. But straight now, I do hope you an' your pals aren't playin' the fool to-night."

"We are, an' we're not," replied Cardew. "We aren't playin' the fool on our own account, but we're silly asses enough to be out to look after a chap who is doin' that in a way you never could imagine. So if you don't much mind we'll be movin' on."

"Oh, move on!" said Boulter. "I suppose if the damages are too bad for immediate repairs we can find beds somewhere? Not the Green Man, y'know, but the decent show."

"I should think so," replied Cardew. "Glad to know that you bar the Green Man, Boulter."

"You cheeky young dog! Didn't I tell you I was a prefect before I left the old show? There's somethin' wrong with the St. Jim's prefect who doesn't bar the Green Man. I should say."

"True for you! Well, so-long! Kiss an' make friends. You're both the sort of drivers who never ought to be allowed on the road. But I won't tell the magistrates so, because it wouldn't suit me to tell them anythin'."

"My word, you've some nerve, Cardew!" said Clive, a minute or so later, when they were out of earshot of the three—Boulter, Fitzurse, and Boulter's passenger, who had said nothing, but had only shivered with fright at what he apparently reckoned a narrow escape from sudden death.

"Think so, Sidney? Nothin' in it, dear boy. But it was lucky for us that we came upon the right sort of a collision, if we had to come upon one. If anyone had been done in now, an' there had been a giddy coroner's inquest—well, it would have been rather a nuisance, wouldn't it?"

"Look!" cried Clive suddenly. "There's a fire in the village somewhere!"

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Once the timberwork of Pepper's house had caught the fire gained ground rapidly. But at the moment when Clive noticed it no one in the village had yet seen it. Most of the Rylcombe people went to bed pretty early, and the house of Pepper stood back in a retired nook outside the High Street.

By this time, however, Gussy had become aware of the fact that the place was on fire. The flames licked up past a window. He smelled the smoke. It might well have sent him frantic, for already he was almost at his wits' end with the trouble of his bonds.

But it did not do that. More than once before had Arthur Augustus, who had pluck enough for anything, risen to the occasion. He rose to it now.

The house was on fire, and Mr. Pepper was bound and gagged upstairs.

Gussy had scant liking for old Pepper. But that was a matter of no consequence at such a time as this. All that he would have done for his best chum Gussy would do for the old curmudgeon.

But if he was to do anything effective it must be done at once. He could not get upstairs with his legs tied thus, or, even if he laboured up, help Pepper. He must first get rid of his bonds.

A knife! Of course, why hadn't he thought of it before? He had not even thought of striking a match, though his hands were free. In his confusion he had laboured on in the darkness.

But suddenly now his brain had become cooler and clearer. He struck a match. He found Pepper's knife-box before the light had burned his fingers.

In haste he slashed at the rope that bound his legs. The strands parted, and he was able to move freely. Then, without waiting to take out the gag, he dashed upstairs.

In the darkness at the top of the staircase he collided with something that sent him reeling back to the bottom. Mr. Pepper had placed a large chest of drawers, picked up cheaply at some recent auction sale, on a small landing. It was all very well for him, but it made navigation intricate for a stranger to the house. Mr. Pepper had never contemplated the likelihood of any stranger finding his way upstairs, however.

Bruised and half dazed, but indomitable still, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy scrambled up again. He lighted a match this time, and avoided the obstacle.

Mr. Pepper lay on his bed, not in it. A nightcap was on his head.

Arthur Augustus had at once lighted a candle. He tried to speak to Mr. Pepper, to tell him that everything was all right, except for the comparatively unimportant circumstance that his house had been burgled and was now on fire. He could not understand for the moment why he was unable to utter articulate words. But then he realised that it was because the gag was still in his mouth.

And with that came the knowledge of a new difficulty. In his fall he had dropped the knife which he had been carrying upstairs. He must fetch it.

He hurried downstairs, found the knife, relieved himself of the gag, and returned to Mr. Pepper, who was making such agonised noises behind his gag that Gussy, in sheer desperation, collared him, and tried to carry him downstairs.

He got his groaning burden as far as the top of the staircase. Then there was another impact with that misplaced chest of drawers. The head of Pepper and the shoulder of Gussy struck it together. Gussy lost his balance, and a second time crashed down.

And this time he had the weight of Pepper upon him. The miser was no Falstaff, but it was enough, and more than enough.

Arthur Augustus knew nothing about it, however. His senses were knocked clean out of him by this second fall.

CHAPTER 9.

To Gussy's Rescue!

CARDEW, Clive, and Levison, running their hardest, arrived at the door of Pepper's house together, or within a few yards of being together.

Actually, Cardew won the race by a few feet, for, though he was not in as good training as either of his chums, he had a rare turn of speed when put to it.

By this time the village had become aware of the fire, and people were crowding to it. The house of Pepper blazed merrily, and the lower room, in which its owner and Arthur Augustus lay, was full of smoke.

Cardew put his fist in his cap, smashed a pane, and then found that he might have pushed up the lower sash without that breakage. Not that it mattered, though the thought crossed his mind that Pepper would think it did if the house escaped being burned to the ground.

He dropped into the room. Without a moment's delay, Clive and Levison followed him, but no one else did so. The

villagers stood agape. They knew that the fire brigade would be turning out soon, and they had no notion of doing anything till that came.

By now the flames, licking up past the window, cast a lurid light into the room, and by that light the three saw the prostrate form of Pepper, but not for a moment Gussy, because Pepper was right on top of him.

"Look for the key of the door, Ernest," said Cardew. "Great Scott, the old blighter's gagged! What on earth can Gussy have been— Why, here is Gussy, knocked right out an' underneath him!"

"Gagged an' tied up! Gussy never did that, Ralph!" exclaimed Clive.

"No odds whether he did or not. We've to get them out, an' jolly sharp, too! It's gettin' dashed hot in here. Where's that key, Ernest?"

"Can't find it. Very likely old Pepper takes it up to bed with him. I'll run up and see if I can find it there."

Up the stairs went Levison, striding first over Pepper and then over Gussy. The village miser had been lifted from off Arthur Augustus.

The fire gained ground rapidly. Cardew and Clive coughed and spluttered as they freed Pepper.

Levison's voice came down the stairs. "Can't find it. We shall have to get them out through the window!"

"You outside there!" yelled Cardew. "Give a hand, can't you?"

His plea for help was answered in a manner most unexpected. The face of Tom Merry appeared at the window.

Tom and his crowd had been delayed but a few seconds by Boulter and Fitzurse. Those two cheerful young men had realised that something was up, and they also had seen the flames, and, instead of attempting to detain the half-dozen, made haste to get one of the cars into something like going order, that they might cut along and give help.

Behind Tom Merry was Jack Blake, and behind Blake was George Herries. Then came Manners, Lowther, Digby. Not Digby's fault that he was last. He chanced to be the smallest of the six, and was elbowed aside in the rush to get through.

"It's all right!" gasped Cardew. "Gussy's here. But he seems to have fallen downstairs an' knocked himself silly— sillier than usual, even. An' here's old Pepper, an' we've got to get him out through the window, for the key of the door is nowhere to be found. So cut back, two or three of you. You can help better outside."

They took their orders from Cardew without hesitation or reluctance. He was keeping his head, and he knew more about the situation than they did.

Back scrambled Blake, Digby, and Lowther. Manners and Herries helped to lift Pepper towards the window, Cardew taking his head. Tom Merry and Clive lifted Gussy. Levison came rushing downstairs.

The gag had been taken from the mouth of Mr. Pepper now, and he was raving about burglars and the damage he had sustained at their hands. He groaned with pain when he was lifted, and shrieked when put through the window. Later it was found that he had a couple of broken ribs and a knee so badly hurt that he would never have had a chance of escape on his own.

A roar of applause came from the crowd. And now there were volunteers enough to help.

"Don't let any of them come in, Blake!" shouted Cardew. "There are plenty of us here for the job. Let me give you a hand, Merry."

D'Arcy, still insensible, was thrust through the window and taken in charge by willing hands.

"Out with you, Manners!" commanded Cardew. "Your turn next, Herries, then Clive. That's right, don't waste time! Will you go next, Ernest? Now Merry!"

One by one the juniors scrambled out of the burning building.

"I'll say this for young D'Arcy—he saved my life!" sounded the voice of Erasmus, Pepper. "But he needn't have fallen downstairs with me. Clumsy, I call that!"

"My hat! He's a grateful old bounder, isn't he, Cardew?" said Tom Merry, turning back to the window at which he expected to see Cardew. "Why, where are you? Cardew! Cardew!"

The junior captain of St. Jim's started to scramble back, fearing that the fumes had overcome the fellow who would not let anyone but himself be last out.

"It's all serene. I only went back for somethin'," said Cardew, reappearing suddenly. "Clear out of the way, Merry! It's a trifle warm in here."

Cardew climbed out, his face almost black, his throat choky, and the key of the padlock in his pocket.

Up came Boulter and Fitzurse, chagrined that they had missed the chance to take a share in the rescue, but ready to be of any help they could.

"Burglars?" said Boulter, catching a word or two from Mr. Pepper. "Set fire to the place, did they? Hardly

sounds like a burglar's trick, if you ask me. But we'll go after them, won't we, Fitzurse?"

"Oh, rather! Though I don't quite see how we're to know which way they've gone, old man."

"Ten to one they've taken the Wayland road. Eh, sir? What's that?"

"They knocked me about because I wouldn't tell them where my money was," said Mr. Pepper plaintively.

"An' they—one of them—kicked me in the wibs because they didn't find any cash on me. They took my watch, though."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had suddenly come back to consciousness, and it was his voice that now added its plaint to the plaint of Pepper.

"By Jove! They want roundin' up, those burglars, eh. Boulter?" said Fitzurse, with enthusiasm. "Any of you fellows like to come along with us in chase of them?"

Tom Merry, Manners, Lowther, Herries, and Levison dashed for the car. Digby and Blake started, but drew back. Arthur Augustus had come to himself; but they did not know what damages he had sustained, and they could not leave without knowing.

Off went the car, making queer noises. There was something wrong with it still, but it could be driven, and either Boulter or Fitzurse was driving it for all he was worth.

But Herries came back.

"I forgot about Gussy for the minute," he said shamefacedly. "All right, are you, old fraud? Well, never mind about the burglars, then, though it would have been fun rounding them up."

"I don't believe it was the burglars who set the house on fire," said Digby suddenly. "See here, Blake! What made that cad Robbins take to his heels when he saw us? He'd got something on his conscience, you bet. Though why he should have played such a game here—I say, though, is it true, Cardew, that you put him on to getting that key Gussy wanted, and that old Pep—that Mr. Pepper gave him a jolly good hiding for trying to sneak it?"

"Where did you get that tale, Digby?" asked Cardew.

"Wherever he got it, Master Cardew, it's true," chimed in Mr. Pepper. "And I don't thank you for it, I can tell you that. D'Arcy saved my life, but you—"

"D'Arcy did his best, and it was a jolly good best; but he wouldn't have saved you if it hadn't been for Cardew," broke in Clive.

"Shut up, Sidney!" said Cardew sharply. "I did no more than the rest of you."

"Ah, well! Seems I owe you both a reward," said Mr. Pepper rather sourly. "I'm fully insured, so the house don't matter a whole lot."

"Weally, Cardew, I am accused of buttin' in at times, but I consider that you have buttin' in to a much greater extent than evah I did," said Arthur Augustus, getting to his feet.

He was shaky and in pain, but he had sustained smaller damage than Mr. Pepper. There was nothing the matter with him that a few days would not put right.

"Sorry, old bean! I did rather butt in," Cardew said contritely. "An' on the whole I seem to have mucked things up pretty well. But"—his voice sank to a whisper—"I've got the key for you, anyway."

He put it into D'Arcy's hand.

"Oh, bai Jove! Oh, weally, Cardew! Mr. Peppah, you said—"

"What I said I stick to. You will have your reward, young D'Arcy."

"Weeward be jiggahed! I have the key, Mr. Peppah, an' now you must let the old folks dwaw watah fwom your pump again."

"They can do that if they like. But if they poison themselves it's not my affair. You see, Master D'Arcy, I padlocked that pump because the sanitary inspector had condemned the water."

"Oh!" Arthur Augustus was badly taken aback. "Weally, you might have told me that, Mr. Peppah, I think!"

"Was it any business of yours?" growled Mr. Pepper.

Blake and Digby were laughing. But Herries kept a grave face, and neither Cardew nor Clive sniggered.

And the laughter of those two died down when Herries collared them each by an arm, and said:

"Oh, chuck it, you idiots! Old Gussy meant well—he always does. And whoever may get at him for being the Knight of the Pump, I'm not going to, for he's done what ought to make us feel proud of him!"

Not often was it that George Herries was quicker than Blake or Digby to weigh up a matter. But he was right here, and his chums saw it at once.

"What's that you say, Hewvies?" inquired D'Arcy.

"Only that you're a silly ass, old chap; but there's no real harm in you," replied Herries.

"Here's the bobby!" said a member of the crowd. "Just like him to be coming along after it's all over!"

"An' here's the fire-engine!" shouted someone else. "Oh, bai Jove, an' here's Kildare—an' Waitton!" gasped Gussy. "Now we are in for it!"

But the chums of St. Jim's were not so badly in for it as they might have been. No one in authority got the full story of that night's doings, and the causes which had led up to them. The Shell and Fourth Form fellows were punished for breaking bounds; but as far as they could gather the notion seemed to be that it was the sight of the fire which had caused them to be guilty of that misdemeanour.

Tom Merry and those who had gone with him on the burglar hunt had a story to tell later; but when Boulter and Fitzurse turned up with Bill and Bert, the Terrible Three and Levison were not in the car. They had been dropped a hundred yards or so back.

"By this time," Boulter had said, "St. Jim's is bound to be aware that there's a fire in the village, an' you don't want to run into the arms of the beaks, do you?"

A very irregular and wholly illegal arrest had been effected. Bert and Bill had taken the Wayland road, and they were run down. Challenged, they had shown fight, but had been no match for the two young men and the four boys. Bert had D'Arcy's watch, easily identified, upon him; and that settled the business. They would have been taken off at once to the Wayland police-station, but that Boulter saw the necessity for getting the juniors back as soon as possible.

The two adventurers from town were handed over to the local arm of the law. Boulter and Fitzurse had a word or two with Cardew, and then, chancing everything, Cardew accompanied them in chase of the bad lad Charles.

He said no word to anyone else before he went. He would not drag any of his chums into deeper trouble, though, with characteristic recklessness, he risked it on his own account. He felt it up to him to aid in the capture of Charles, whom neither of the two young men could have identified of course.

Luck was with them. Not only did they catch Charles, but they did so very soon. After fleeing from Tom Merry and his companions he seemed to have begun to repent of his boldness in cutting loose from Rylcombe. The dark night, with no prospect of a bed, got on his nerves, and he hung about irresolutely. They caught him not exactly re-handed, but—what came to much the same thing—black-handed and smelling of petrol. He made confession sulkily, and he also was sent along to Wayland.

Eventually Charles went to Borstal, which was about the best thing that could have happened to him. Something may be done with him, there; nothing could have been done with him at Rylcombe or anywhere else where stern restraint was lacking.

Bert and Bill were committed to the assizes, and when their trial took place got a stiff sentence, their brutality counting heavily against them.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and Cardew got their rewards. Mr. Pepper sent them from the cottage hospital, where he had to spend a few weeks before he could go back to the lonely existence that suited him.

Cardew looked in at Study No. 6 some time later.

"Has the generosity of Pepper extended to you as well as to me, my noble kinsman?" he drawled.

"Yaas," answered D'Arcy. "The old hunks has sent me—half-a-crown!"

"You surprise me! I had thought that you would have had at least five bob, for I have had half-a-crown. Do you know, Gussy, it occurs to me that Mr. Pepper overvalues himself. If he were put up to auction I'm dashed if I'd bid five bob for him!"

But the two juniors did not really mind. They had no wish to be rewarded for saving Mr. Pepper's life. Cardew, if he thought about it at all—but no one knew whether he did—may have realised that it was his itch for intrigue that had jeopardised the Rylcombe miser. D'Arcy may have seen that he had once more butted in on matters which did not really concern him; but he never admitted it.

And even that inveterate tease, Monty Lowther, abstained from calling the swell of St. Jim's "the Knight of the Pump." For, with all his meddling and his blundering, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had played a knightly part in the affair, and did not deserve more chaff.

THE END.

(There will be another exciting story of the famous Tom Merry & Co. next week, entitled: "TRIMBLE THE HERO!" By Martin Clifford. Make sure you read it.)

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**TUCK FOR YORKSHIRE!
THE RIGHT WEAPON!**

In the main street of a big Midland town there were many grand shops. Each had a wonderful glittering window, with the contents displayed in tempting array. But they were all beaten by the window of Messrs. Glitter & Gold, the jewellers. Quite a crowd had collected, amongst which were two navvies. "All right, Bill, ain't they?" remarked one to his companion. "Not 'arf!" was the appreciative reply. "I say, mate," was the next remark, "don't you wish yer 'ad yer pick?" "No," said the other. "I'd sooner 'ave me bloomin' shovel!"—A Tuck Hamper, filled with delicious Tuck, has been awarded to Mast. C. Smith, 8, Hallgate, Cottingham, East Yorks.

WASTE OF TALENT!

Two famous actors were playing golf, and every stroke they made proclaimed the fact that they were novices at the game. Several fair-sized bits of turf had been dislodged, and when one unusually large piece had parted from its native soil one of the accompanying caddies turned to the other and said: "Did you tell me they were actors, Jack?" "Yes, Tom," admitted the other, with a faint apology. "Well," went on Tom, "all I can say is they ought to have been scene-shifters!"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to Robert Rothwell, 24, Tyne Street, Kirkdale, Liverpool.

TIT FOR TAT!

An artist possessed a dog, to which he was much attached. One day his pet contracted an affection of the throat, whereupon the artist sent for a specialist, a famous Harley Street doctor. The doctor, when he found that he had been called in to treat a dog, was far from pleased. However, he examined the animal's throat, prescribed for it, and, after pocketing a substantial fee, departed. A day or two later he sent for the artist. The man of paints was busy, but he left his work and rushed off to Harley Street. "Oh, how do you do, sir?" said the eminent specialist gravely. "I only wanted to see you about having my front door painted!"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to F. Munslow, 7, Lynton Street, Derby.

DRAFTY!

Little Willie had played a game one night with his father and was rather anxious to play it again, but could not think of the name of the game. "Father," he said, "will you play that game we played the other night?" "What game, Willie?" asked the father. "I've forgotten what it's called," answered the youngster, "but it's something like wind." "I don't remember a game with a name like wind," said the father, with a puzzled frown. Little Willie was quiet for about five minutes, then his eyes lighted up suddenly. "I remember now, dad," he cried delightedly. "It's called 'Draughts'!"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to Herbert R. Johnson, Fairfield Cottage, Churchfield, Barnsley, Yorks.

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BY

LESTER
BIDSTON.

CHAPTER 1.

The "Tea Hour" Burglaries!

LINDSAY smiled, O'Gorman grinned, and Assistant-Commissioner Sir William Mann looked distinctly peeved.

"It's a ridiculous story," he said irritably. "I quite fail to see any connection— They've worked hard against this Ultima, Sir William," Inspector Dixon interposed daringly. "He only escaped them last time by a most unfortunate fluke."

"Quite so, Dixon, and the Yard admits the debt," the chief agreed. "But to come here, suggesting that our confounded wireless crook and Lord Basingbrook are the same person, and to say that he is responsible for London's epidemic of what are known as the 'tea-hour burglaries,' is preposterous!" He leaned forward and tapped Lyle confidentially on the arm. "Youngster, the Basingbrooks trace away back to William himself, and you'll admit our old aristocracy doesn't make a habit of robbing banks and cultivating homicide. No, give me proof—proof, not guesswork—and I'll order the arrest of prince or peasant. But I demand the proof first."

Lyle glanced whimsically across at Dixon. But the friendly inspector was not taking sides against his chief, and appeared to find an absorbing interest in Sir William's wallpaper.

"That's just what we can't do—give you proof," Lyle sighed. "I can only remind you that, of the four times we've blundered into Ultima's schemes, three have originated near Greystones, Basingbrook's country house."

"Two of the three whilst he was in India, I understand!" Sir William snapped.

"Whilst he was supposed to be," Lyle admitted. "However, let it go, sir. What we chiefly came for was to ask permission to visit the scenes of the 'tea-hour' burglaries."

The C.I.D. chief frowned. "Because you think Ultima worked them?" he asked.

"That's our only reason," Lyle answered.

"Shure, it is an' all," Jerry supplemented. "We've a load o' little argyments to settle wid that broth av a boy, so we have."

The frown lingered on Sir William's face, and the chums feared a flat refusal.

"H'm! I've no time for amateur sleuths; they jump to a conclusion and bunny-hug it to death," he said at last, smiling. "Still, you've a claim on the Yard, so I'll not deny you this once." His glance turned on the silent inspector. "Anything urgent at the moment, Dixon?" he demanded.

"Only a message from F Division due in, about the Allington forgery," Dixon answered.

"Leave word that I'll take it," the chief said amiably. "Run these stubborn friends of yours along to the 'exhibits,' and report to me if anything fresh turns up." He rose to his feet, a signal of dismissal. "Good-bye, gentlemen—and remember, we're as anxious as you to slip the bracelets on Ultima, but don't become obsessed with the

fantasy that his finger is in every criminal stew."

A moment later the radio partners were crossing Whitehall in Dixon's company.

"Many a 'civvy's left the chief's office with a fly in his eye for making a request similar to yours," the inspector chuckled. "You've been exceptionally favoured, and I must say you deserve it—coming all the way from Liverpool to make it."

"Shure, we didn't," Jerry grinned. "We're in London orderin' parts for a two-seater speed plane I'm making—in place of the one Uity bruk."

Dixon's eyes opened. "Rather an expensive toy," he hazarded. "I hardly thought you fellows owned pockets deep enough for such luxuries."

Lyle laughed. "Oh, we haven't been robbing a bank. The 'Lindman' alarm is getting known, and a snug little 'royalty' cheque came along last week," he explained. "Now, Dixon, we've read all the newspaper stuff about these 'tea-hour' mysteries, but is there anything more you feel at liberty to tell us?"

"Nothing—because we know nothing," Dixon replied. "The papers have broadcast all that is known—which simply amounts to the fact that in less than a week three well-known people have been found unconscious over their tea-tables, and that they have lost valuables totalling fifteen thousand pounds. They each tell the same tale. They remember feeling drowsy, they awaken to find themselves minus a small fortune, and, on examination, they show symptoms of poisoning by gas—chlorine, or some such abomination."

"No trace of anything in the tea?" Lyle asked.

Dixon shook his head impatiently. "No trace of anything, anywhere," he sighed. "But here we are at Exhibit 1. Nothing has been touched, so you can see for yourselves."

A tour of those three "exhibits" would prove wearisome, and only the bare facts need to be recorded. In Marrinden Mansions Lady Irene Ashwell had been despoiled of her jewel casket; in St. John's Mr. Moses Levenstein beysailed the loss of the famous Rosedawn necklace; and in Croydon Professor Wilmslow was minus a collection of ancient gold ornaments.

Before the chums parted from Dixon the worthy inspector summed up the situation in a few words.

"You fellows look upon Ultima as the Napoleon of these jobs," he said. "The chief doesn't, and I'll tell you why. In the Yard we apply a test to all crimes—we call it the modus operandi—or, in other words, we reckon to see the hand of any well-known criminal by the style of crime committed. Well, now, Ultima's style is famous enough—

he invariably works via wireless—and you'll have noticed that there's never a sign of wireless in any one of the places we've visited."

"Shure, it's meself noticed that," Jerry agreed despondently.

"An', shure," Lyle mimicked, "it's meself doesn't flink the time's been wasted."

"Mine has," Dixon said bluntly. "What do you mean, Lindsay?"

"I'll tell you—when I've tried my theory out," Lyle countered; adding, quizzically: "Y'know, inspector, the C.I.D.'s a great institution, but it's a day behind the times in wireless science!"

Whatever the expert man-hunter thought was evidently beyond printable expression. He just stared—open-eyed and wide-mouthed—whilst Lyle linked arms with Jerry and strolled jauntily away.

CHAPTER 2.

The "K.K.K.!"

BACK in their humble room out Brixton way, Lyle began scribbling down figures as hard as he could go. Jerry looked on in mystified silence for a time, then roughly demanded the "raison av it."

Lyle grinned. "I'm reckoning out how long we can live at the rate of ten thousand a year," he answered casually.

"About three minutes, I'd say," Jerry grunted.

"About three days, I estimate," Lyle answered calmly. "The Lindman cheque and the Shanty balance will just about see us through three days of gorgeous splendour."

Jerry glared. "For why?? he demanded. "You'd bust th' owld firm's capital in three days! Bedad, what's bitin' ye, Lylesey?"

"Jay, th' owld firm's been living a hectic life, and it's time it had a holiday," Lyle replied soberly. "We're going to see life, fling the gilded bits about, hit the high-road to hilarity—and blow the cost. In short, we're booking a private suite at the ultra-exclusive Hotel Splendide to-morrow morning, and praifin' they won't grab the gold fillings out of our back teeth in addition to the gold filling out of our banking account."

"Are we, bedad," Jerry growled. "And for why?"

"D'you know what K.K.K. stands for?" Lyle countered, calmly ignoring his partner's protest.

"A silly ass society callin' itself Ku-Klux-Klan," Jerry grunted.

"No, it doesn't," Lyle chuckled; "not in this instance, anyway. It stands for Kanned Korn King—and his canned majesty, one Hilary K. Hyslip, duly registers at the Splendide to-morrow a.m."

Jerry shook his head in sad dismay. "Ochone! The kinge av his hid's bruk

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away," he sighed—then made a lightning grab at Lyle's front fringe. "Bedad, I'm through wid ye! Expound, or I'll shake the scalp av ye clane off!"

"Ouch! Loose up, you jabberwock!" Lyle yelled. "Chuck it, you ass—I'll explain." He stroked his head ruefully as Jerry stepped back. "I'm pining for a heart-to-heart talk with Basingbrook, and he's lordin' it at the Splendide. But he's not chatin' to Lindsay or O'Gorman—he'd sooner use a brick. So Hilary K. and his bosom pal appear."

"Faith, he's spot us a mile away," Jerry protested.

"No! after Willie Clarkson has toned us down," Lyle replied. "Mr. Clarkson, old dear, transforms bruisers into bottle babes and green cheese into grape-nuts. Nummo, there's nothing too tall for the great William."

"But you don't expect Basingbrook to open up to the first stranger he meets," Jerry demanded. "Bedad, if he's any connection with Ultima, he's sittin' tight on the fact."

"Your face isn't your fortune, Jerry, but it tells too much sometimes," Lyle smiled. "Don't ask me what I expect—then you can't give the show away if my 'expects' prove facts."

Mr. Clarkson was hardly capable of doing the things Lyle credited him with, but he'd certainly worked an astounding change in the appearance of the radio partners when they stepped into the Splendide's garish hall the following noon.

Still clean-shaven—for Clarkson has a real horror of false face fungus—they had aged to men in the late thirties. Gone were their fresh complexions; they had acquired the yellow, sallow skins so characteristic of our transatlantic cousins. The hard, firm lines

of their features had merged to a plump rotundity, with the help of additional gums, nose-plugs, and cheek-sheaths. They wore horn-rimmed spectacles, of course—so screening tell-tale eyes—and clothes, hats, and shoes held the little original touches that only New York can produce.

There was no mistaking their self-confidence as they bustled across to the booking-desk.

"Say, Popcorn, kin we locate in this lil' caravanserie?" Lyle demanded, his high-pitched nasal focusing attention on him right away.

The austere lady beyond the desk looked distinctly ruffled—probably the "Popcorn" galled a bit.

"We have a room—on the eighth floor," she murmured icily.

"And there's a nice vacant lot on St. Paul's dome, I opine," the nasal person sarcastically suggested. He leaned confidentially forward across the polished mahogany.

"Your mistake, missy. We don't pine to herd on the skyline; we want a lil' suite on the first landing. Get me, Popsy?"

"Enter names and nationality here, please," "Popsy" sighed wearily.

"Nation-ality?" Hilary K. chuckled, as he scrawled his signature with a flourish. "Say, Pop, if I inscribed my spot of origin as Bagdad, you'd fret some?"

"No; I'd cross it out and inscribe Bowery instead," the lady sweetly murmured.

Hilary K. jumped back as if he'd been shot.

"Stung—an' by a gel clurk!" he shrilled. "Here, Applejohn, freeze on the quill."

Thrusting the pen into Jerry's hand, he whirled round on the grinning attendants and fixed the stately major domo with a basilisk glare. "Say, dook, you'll spot our grips in the limousine without; trail 'em along,

He shook the attendant by the hand effusively, dashed across to what he called the "sticky store," dumped an enormous box of sweetmeats on the protesting "clurk," and hustled into the elevator after his silent companion—all as though life was a matter of seconds.

Only when they had gained the privacy of their own rooms did he relax.

"Say, bo, me for the white-haired dinkum—what?" he chuckled.

"You for a crackbrained jackass!" Jerry grumbled. "Arrah now, Lylesey, ye've made us th' laughin'-stock av th' place—shure, I can hear 'em givin' at us still."

"Exactly the result I aimed for," Lyle replied calmly. "You can be very certain that the fame of H. K. Hyslip is spreading all over the hotel—guests and servants alike'll weigh him up as the prize guy of the universe—and that's the groundbait I hope to land a big fish with."

"An' d'ye expect me t' play up to your burblin' idiocy?" Jerry gasped.

"Nunno," Lyle grinned. "I expect you to be the strong, silent one, to grunt when I brag—to keep your 'rale Orish' right out of the picture."

Lunch was a nightmare to Jerry. Lyle refused to enter the huge room until it was crowded—he strolled its full length making caustic comments on the management, and completely spoilt the efforts of its famous orchestra.

He bragged interminably of America's Kanned Korn King, "the one original Hilary K. Hyslip." He bragged of his dollars, he bragged of his brains—most of all, he bragged of the load of uncut diamonds he was "portering back to Gard's own country" for the "honey gel—Sis Sadie!"

For the most part, the thousand or more guests accepted him as a scream, though raised eyebrows and supercilious glances were not wanting. But nothing daunted H. K. He literally bragged to beat the band—and, in the midst of it, morsed a message under the little table that nearly jolted Jerry clean out of his assumed guise of sphinx.

Tap, thud, tap—that was Lyle's hoof on Jerry's toes. "Third table right Ultima or double!" came the warning, painfully spelt out letter by letter until Jerry had the sense of it.

Beyond that, neither Lyle nor his sparring partner took the least notice of the suspect—or he of they, for that matter. Only, Lyle's boasts grew ever more loaded with dollars and diamonds and constant reference to the "cute deal I put over that dago diamond mutt!"

And the fruits of his shameless exhibition became noticeable midway through dinner that same evening. The place was packed to excess, hardly a seat was vacant, and Lyle was beginning to fear that his money was being wasted—when Ultima's double strolled into the gorgeous banquet-hall.

Toying with a tape-tied monocle, brushed and burnished to perfection, he strolled past the crowded tables with quiet assurance—confident of finding a corner, but appearing in no particular hurry to do so.

Then Hilary K.'s flagging spirits revived, and his tongue clacked louder than ever.

"I gorter hunch we're due t' skim the cream offen ole N' Yark, Applejohn," he nasaled. "Kanned korn—it's outerdate! Flapjacks, cute lil' flaky flapjacks—all America'll be chewin' me a month on! Say, Jod, it's th' big dope now, and—" He stopped abruptly, stared at a shining shirt-front a moment, then lifted his eyes to the resplendent person who hesitated at the table. "Say, Sam, you gotten sleepin' sick'ness?"

"I trust not," the gentleman smiled. "The place is somewhat crowded. If I am not intruding—"

"Nope, mister. You grab a stall and do a nosebag," Hilary interrupted affably. "An' say, stranger, the beans are with me—Hilary K. Hyslip, outer N' Yark, an' varry soon in again."

The stranger protested, gave way when Hilary became boisterously insistent, and finally listened to his host's patter with tolerant amusement.

"My partner, J. O. D. Applejohn," he waved, indicating the silent Jerry. "You wouldn't notice it any, but he's gorter tongue, Mr.—" he paused suggestively.

"Er—Basingbrook," the intruder murmured, mildly surprised at the abrupt introduction.

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Then Hilary "Mister"-ed Basingbrook for all the room to hear—until a waiter pointedly addressed the guest as "my lord."

Hilary whistled. "Jod, he's a lud!" he stage-whispered. "He's a real, live, spot-cash sample of British aristocracy." He turned glad eyes on Basingbrook. "Say, lord, I gotter hunch yer name'd scan on the prospectus of 'Fanny's Flaky Flapjacks'—a noo company we're permotin'."

Basingbrook refused. He listened unmoved to the wonderful profits the Flapperjack Co. were going to make. He showed signs of interest. He wavered—and, finally, he suggested a move to his private room to discuss the matter.

"Jay, he's nibbling," Lyle whispered, as Basingbrook preceded them down the hall. "He's been fishing to get us in his room this hour past—and in two minutes I'll know whether the tea-hour burglaries are Ultima's work, or not."

From the moment of entering his room, Basingbrook's interest in the Flapperjack business began to wane. It can at once be stated that he finally turned the offer

down with great show of regret—as Lyle had been very certain he would do.

Lyle, still, of course, masquerading as Hyslip, talked incessantly, but ever again his eyes turned to a remarkable piece of furniture that stood prominently noticeable in the room.

On a head-high column of black marble rested a shallow bowl of smoked green jade. Nestling within the bowl, a crinkled poppy-head fashioned in dull gold was most curiously topped by twin stems of silver—they, in turn, giving way to poppies, flame-tinted and beautiful.

Never once did Lord Basingbrook glance or refer to this wondrously attractive decoration. He left that to his guests, and Lyle saw that Jerry's eyes were dancing behind his spectacles, and that he was labouring under almost unbearable excitement.

In fact, it was Jerry who first voiced curiosity—in a carefully chosen sentence that held no suspicion of brogue.

"Say, lord," he hazarded, "if you're shy on dollars, I'm the feller to trade a wad—for this yar gladd peach."

"Gink!" Lyle sniped, before Basingbrook could reply. "Peach nuthin', you bone-head!" He turned quietly to Basingbrook.

"Pard, I'm a buyer. Name your price—I could worship your golden poppyhead!"

"Me to raise yer!" Jerry cried. "Smine, lord! I'll rear a temple to set it in!"

Basingbrook smiled, and shook his head.

"Sorry, gentlemen, it is not for sale—at any price." He stared fondly at the poppy-head, then looked musingly at the chums.

"Strange that one of you should say he'd worship it, and the other that he'd house it in a temple. It's only a copy, but in distant Assam the original is named the Golden Goddess, and has been worshipped for generations by the tribe of Akas."

"You'll trade—" Jerry began appealingly.

"I'll not; but I'll do better," Basingbrook smiled. "The Goddess was seen and photographed by Gaston Leroy, a French explorer, and he's found it more profitable to make copies for those who can foot his bill than to return to his exploring."

"He'll erect us copies?" Lyle hazarded.

"He might," Basingbrook corrected. "He picks his customers according to some unknown fancy of his own, and I admit he very nearly turned me down. But he lodges at Delldale Mansions—No. 5. I suggest you do the best you can for yourself." He smiled wryly. "Sorry I cannot give you an introduction; he doesn't like Basil Basingbrook the least bit."



"Say, Popcorn, kin we locate in this li' caravanerie?" asked Lyle Lindsay, in a high-pitched voice. The austere lady beyond the desk looked distinctly ruffled. "We have a room on the eighth floor," she murmured icily.

"It's us f' th' broad highway," Lyle said, striding swiftly downwards.

"Better wait until morning, hadn't you?" Basingbrook suggested mildly.

"Nope!" Lyle snapped. "The mutt might rustle up liver or gall, or some other peev by then. Hump to it, Jod! See ye again, lord!"

A minute later the chums were speeding towards Delldale Mansions in a taxi.

"Crown jewels to a toothbrush, Basingbrook's mighty busy on the land line!" Lyle chuckled.

"Priming Leroy, y'mean?" Jerry asked.

Lyle nodded. "Did you notice how careful he was to disclaim any friendship with this supposed explorer?" he demanded.

"I wondered why," Jerry admitted.

"It's his old game of planning a coup and getting assistants to do the spade work!" Lyle grinned. "He really is a lad, Jay. You'd have thought money was just mud, the all-round contempt he showed for it."

"But that golden poppyhead must ha' cost a sight of money," Jerry objected. "He couldn't have staged it for us just on the off-chance of getting us into his room."

"Oh, there's no fake about the Goddess, and it was in his room before we even thought of descending on the Splendide," Lyle answered. "Can't you see it all, Jay?"

The whole thing's a carefully staged business; the poppyhead's the decoy, and the hunter is Ultima!"

"Bedad, I remember seeing poppyheads in the houses where the tea-hour burglaries had taken place!" Jerry said. "An' as soon as I spotted the one in Ulty's show I knew we'd chanced on a clue."

"Chanced!" Lyle yelled. "You ass! I'd ha' wept pink tears if a poppyhead hadn't appeared in Ultima's room! Dear old under-head, Lord Basingbrook has looked for a vacant seat many times in the Hotel Splendide, and several times he's invited a chance table acquaintance to a chinwag in his room. Remember, only the very rich can afford the Splendide, and even the very rich have a way of wagging their tails when a real live lord strokes 'em; and, once in the room, old dear, none but the blind could miss the golden poppyhead, and none but the dead could fail to long for one!"

Jerry whistled.

"Shure, I begin to see—" he cried. "You can begin to ring off!" Lyle interrupted tartly. "I want to think ahead, an' there's nothing doing until you subside!"

CHAPTER 3.

The Golden Goddess!

THE actual buying of the poppyheads proved a tawdry affair, its only point of interest being the magnitude of the bill they were asked to foot. Strange chance, it so happened that Leroy had a couple of models almost ready. He asked a few hours in which to complete his work, and actually delivered the goods late the following afternoon.

"Bedad, I'd ha' thowt one—at this price—would ha' been sufficient!" Jerry grumbled, staring at the beautiful ornaments.

"One for show, one for experimental purposes!" Lyle grinned. "Now, Jay, as a safeguard against intruders, I want you to do 'sentry go' in this room, whilst I carry one of these poppyhead outfits to my bedroom to vivisect the beggar."

In the privacy of his own room, Lyle's actions would have driven an art collector wild with rage. First, he carefully fitted a rubber helmet over his head—an affair strikingly similar to the gas-masks of war; then, lifting the golden bulb from its nest, he deliberately hacked it with his penknife.

In a minute or two he had opened the thing out exactly as the skin of an orange is torn from the fruit, only in this case a strange and delicate piece of machinery was revealed.

"As I thought! A dinky little wireless receiver!" Lyle chuckled, behind his mask. "But of all the cool check! He's actually using one of our Lindman hammers to work the thing!"

For a time Lyle studied the apparatus with absorbed interest, unconsciously voicing his discoveries and piecing together a tale of crime as cunningly crooked as man has yet fashioned.

"H'm! A wee tuner limited to one wave, length unknown!" he murmured. "A condenser, dwarf size; a spring connecting to the Lindman hammer! Good! The hammer fixed to hit the head of this probe, and— His eyes suddenly widened. "Ye gods! The thing's working!"

Amazed and fascinated, he watched the hammer slowly rise, then swiftly drop to drive the probe hard into a fragile shell of glass. On the instant of contact the glass shattered to powder. A puff of yellow smoke dissipated to invisibility!

"So that's the secret! More clever by far than I thought!" he mused, behind his mask. "Chlorine, or some infernal poison—a drug to send Ultima's victims to sleep whilst he pouches their goods!"

Pondering the problem, he opened wide his bed-room window, and turned again to a close inspection of the sinister machine.

"I suppose the opening of the poppyhead started the thing working!" he mumbled. "Now, the question is—"

He stopped. A dread thought had suddenly flashed into his mind. He stood for a moment rigid, then gave a little gasp.

"My hat!" he groaned, in dismay. "I'm forgetting that Ultima has the secret of the beam—that he can set the bombs off at his chosen moment; that Jerry is innocently sitting beside one now!"

With furious haste he tore the helmet from his head and sprang for the intervening door. Jerry, he saw at a glance, was lying face forward and motionless on the carpet, and, because the corridor door was directly in line with his sight, he saw something else.

The handle was turning, the door opening by fractional degrees. Swiftly realising what was coming, Lyle darted back a pace, quickly closing his own door until only a hint of space remained as spyhole.

Through this narrow aperture he watched the outer door open inch by inch, remain ominously motionless for a time, then saw a face slowly angling round the opening. Soon the whole head and shoulders of the intruder were in view, and, without a sound, Lord Basingbrook sidled into the room.

So far Basingbrook's eyes had been fixed on the figure of Jerry; but now his glance lifted, and darted uneasily about the place, searching for the second drugged victim, his mind swiftly weighing and considering the meaning of Lyle's absence.

"Um! Must have gone out, confound him!" he muttered. "Never mind. A single minute is all I want!"

He listened, with head cocked, his lids half closed, like the sneaking fox he was. His crafty eyes stabbed every corner of the room with quick glances that strove to detect the slightest sign of danger. Satisfied at last that he had the place to himself, except for the unconscious Jerry, he whipped curiously twisted skeleton keys from his hip-pocket, and stepped noiselessly towards the worn travelling-trunk that formed part of the chums' equipment.

Obviously, he was out to lift the mythical packet of uncut diamonds, of which Hilary K. Hyslip had made loud-mouthed show. And, just as obviously, Lyle had to defeat his purpose—and do it in such a way as to avoid rousing Ultima's suspicion.

In a second the horn-rimmed glasses were replaced on his nose. He stepped back to his bed, yawned, pressed the mattress until it creaked protest, then lifted and replaced a foot heavily on the floor.

"Hallo, lord!" he murmured, opening the door. "You sure missed seeing the 'Keep off the ger-ass' board we thought of adorning the gateway with."

It was said casually, smilingly—yet very, very pointedly. And Ultima? Well, Ultima's keys had vanished, he stood yards from the trunk; he was already dropping on a knee beside Jerry.

"My dear Hyslip, I'm delighted to see you!" he mouthed. "Your friend's in trouble—a seizure, I'm afraid." Tenderly he turned Jerry over, talking all the time, and explaining his intrusion. "I was actually coming to leave your company over a cup of tea in my room. I knocked, no answer, took the liberty to look in—and found this poor fellow in danger of suffocation."

Lyle casually pressed the bell-push. "He's liable to troubles of this sort," he said, swiftly bending over his pal in such a way as to throw his face into shadow.

"Nothing alarming—a gift of swamp ague from Florida—sound as canned corn in a day or so." He glanced up as a startled attendant appeared in the doorway. "You've a resident doc? Hustle him along, Trixy!"

Then he turned to Basingbrook.

"He'll blink his peepers in a minute, lord, but his family doc warned me that a strange face'd jag his nerves to scrap: I'm a heap weepy the invite's off, but I'll bring a bulletin along later."

The hint was unmistakable, and Basingbrook smiled wryly. But he rose to his feet with every show of apology, murmured something about "anxiously wait news—favourable, I hope, Hyslip," and sauntered from the room.

Then Lyle's unconcern vanished. He loosened Jerry's collar and tie, assured himself that his pal was breathing, and heaved a sigh of relief when Dr. Silton bustled into the room.

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"I'll tell you at once that he's been drugged by some beastly gas poison," Lyle said, cutting short the medico's many questions.

"How d'you know that?" the doctor snapped. "A serious statement—case for the police—better have them here."

"I'll explain later," Lyle answered. "We'll make my friend comfy on his bed first, and when Basingbrook pumps you—as he'll attempt to do—you'll oblige by saying he's better, weak, but taking nourishment."

The worthy man did what he could for Jerry, then turned angrily on Lyle.

"You ask—practically order me to wilfully deceive Lord Basingbrook!" he snapped. "I have the honour to call him friend—"

"You'll hide the fact in a day or two," Lyle interrupted grimly. "Basingbrook's due to vacate the British aristocracy—just as soon as we can carry a little more proof to Scotland Yard."

"You belong to the Yard," the doctor gasped.

"Distant cousins, in a manner of speaking," Lyle grinned; and, under promise of secrecy, told the story of Basingbrook's sinister activities in the guise of Ultima.

"Amazing!" Dr. Silton gasped, when the tale was told. "You'll have him arrested right away, of course?"

"On what charge?" Lyle demanded. "The poppyheads act once only; they bury their own guilty secret when the poison-bulb bursts. Again, though Basingbrook has a poppyhead in his own room, it is most certainly innocent and empty."

"But it is almost incredible that a fellow having the entry to the innermost circles of society should be the notorious Ultima," Silton mused. "Why, only last night he passed me an invitation to to-night's great reception at Dollminster House, saying in front of a dozen people that he was unable to accept, and that he'd put matters right with the duchess if I cared to go."

Lyle's eyes narrowed. "In front of a dozen people, you say?" he demanded.

"Yes; and rather inconsiderate I thought it," Silton answered. "I accepted the card, but I'd sooner it had been offered in private."

Ignoring the worthy man's complaint, Lyle frowned in thoughtful silence for a time.

"What is the affair—a fancy-dress ball?" he asked, later.

"No," Silton snapped. "My dear fellow, it's the event of the season—a gathering of the elite to meet the Maharajah of Rajputana, India's wealthiest nabob."

"Oh!" Lyle breathed—and the single exclamation housed a volume of meaning. "Dr. Silton, I've learned by painful experiences that Ultima has a real genius for misleading people. The very fact that he forced this invite on you publicly means that he wants all the world to know he is not going near Dollminster House to-night."

"But why?" Silton demanded.

"I don't know," Lyle admitted. "I only know that he certainly will go, else he would not have troubled to establish an alibi so carefully. I'd intended to wait until I could catch him tempting his next poppyhead victim—until I could actually get possession of a loaded bulb, before advising the Yard to act; instead, I guess we'll look in at Dollminster to-night, if you will wangle us a way in, via a side door or window."

The doctor looked surprised and just a trifle shocked; but whatever protest hovered on his lips it was never uttered, for at that moment Jerry began to rouse from his drugged sleep, and all Silton's attention was turned on his interesting patient.

CHAPTER 4.

The Nabob's Treasure!

THAT night London was gripped by one of the heaviest fogs on record. Normally, the radio partners had a ten-minutes' walk facing them when they left the Splendide at eleven o'clock; but to-night they endured a full hour of groping blindness amidst a wilderness of brick before they located the great house that formed an oasis of light in the surrounding darkness.

"This alley gives to the servants' quarters," Lyle whispered, diving down the narrow way. "The lower windows are barred, of course. But Doc. Silton promised to drop a rope from an upper floor, if opportunity offered."

A moment later Lyle's hand touched something, and his warning hiss brought Jerry to an abrupt halt.

"Here we are, Jay," he said softly. "Not a sound, old boy. The rope's knotted—we'll do it easily."

True enough, the climb held little difficulty to fellows trained to a fineness that was habitual to these two. Within a minute they stood in a small, plainly-furnished bed-room—a place to which they paid scant attention.

"Now, Jay, off with coat and hat, and dump 'em under the bed," Lyle whispered. "And, remember, any challenge—we are guests who have mistaken our way."

But the warning proved unnecessary. Dressed in sombre evening clothes, they sauntered down a long corridor, skirted a wide gallery, and mingled with the dozens of smart people who were chatting or watching the arrival of belated guests.

"Shure, it's a posh crowd!" Jerry muttered. "The leddies are sportin' enough gee-gaws to flood a diamond mine—that is, if they're real 'uns."

"They're real enough, both ladies and jewels," Lyle answered, with a smile. "So real that if Ultima gets loose amongst 'em he'll pounce enough necklaces and things to retire on."

"Hallo, here's a dorkie chap wid an extra cartload of stones on his carcass!" Jerry whispered. "He'll be the big noise you mentioned, I'm thinkin'."

The scene was animated and gay in the extreme. Dollminster receptions are famous for their lavishness, and to-night's crowd seemed determined to enjoy itself, and to be succeeding brilliantly. The chums, dressed to a pattern like every other man in the gorgeously decorated rooms, found themselves at liberty to move wherever they pleased. But the last thing they desired was publicity, and, after an apparently lazy saunter through the guest-rooms, they took up a very inconspicuous position behind a palm tub in a corner of the ball-room.

To their right, a short, glass-roofed passage led to the Dollminster conservatory; fronting them, a couple of hundred people were dancing to the music of a hidden orchestra; and they, all unnoticed, lounged in the shelter of the palm, waiting and watching for the first sign of trouble.

"Well, Jay, has our walk round shown you anything?" Lyle asked, in a low-pitched voice.

"It's shown me a score of golden poppyheads cosily nestling in wid all these paper flowers," Jerry answered, grimly adding: "After me own little experience, I don't think we need look further than that."

"Exactly my own opinion," Lyle agreed. "You've a mask and gun—keep 'em handy, old dear!"

But even now the radio partners had not allowed for Ultima's cunning. For an hour they waited, breathing an atmosphere heavy with a dozen choice perfumes; then, about one o'clock, a number of footmen appeared, freshening the air with sprays that gave off a refreshing scent of pine.

All unknown to the chums, that wa. Ultima's opening move. The sprayed liquid had been doctored before reaching Dollminster House, and, hidden by the odour of pine, the first discharge of an Oriental poison had been subtly introduced into the lungs of every person present.

Then into this sickly-sweet atmosphere the golden poppyheads silently discharged their deadly gas, the chums' first sensational understanding being the sight of a girl suddenly drooping in her partner's arms and sinking to the floor in a dead faint.

"The game's begun, Jay!" Lyle gasped. "Quick—the masks!"

In a moment the protective masks were adjusted. But the chums had already absorbed enough poison to stupefy and to make them temporarily incapable of movement.

Horried, they sagged heavily against the wall, watching men and women collapse and drop to the polished floor by the score—an amazing sight, a bloodless warfare that held every appearance of the ghastly toll exacted by modern machine-guns.

Then, from a shrubbery that had screened the band, four masked men darted—two to either end of the room. Quickly and silently the sliding doors were forced into place—a signal for the remainder of the musicians, all wearing ugly respirators, to emerge to their ghoulish work.

"Now, men, we've five minutes to spend—no more!" the leader yelled. "Make the most of 'em—sprad!"

It was a "get-rich-quick" scheme with a vengeance. Ultima—for the voice was undoubtedly his—made straight for the marajah, a swarthy, recumbent figure: midway down the room. The gang, hunting with bent backs like the queuing beasts they were, darted from woman to woman, ruthlessly tearing head and neck jewels away and dropping them into wide-mouthed pouches they carried.

Then came an incident that jolted the chums' swimming senses into enraged activity. It is a well-known fact that one human being in every ten thousand is impervious to any and every drug. A girl, standing petrified with fear close to the hidden chums, screamed and fought pluckily when a burly ruffian strove to dispossess her of a heavy pearl necklace.

Brutally the fellow handled her, and Lyle distinctly heard the snap of his gross hand meeting her face. Even then she struggled bravely, but it was the sight of the brute's clenched fist drawing back to strike that sent Lyle staggering to the open.

He took the blow on his left arm, pushing the frightened girl aside with his right, and with the same movement his fist circled with lightning rapidity and thudded decisively on the fellow's jaw.

The sound of contact was that of a spade smacking wet clay. The calculated weight that lay behind the blow jolted the bully's head with brain-jagging force and toppled him, an unconscious heap, to the floor.

"One less, anyway!" Lyle muttered grimly, and sprang at Ultima.

For three days these two had matched their brains. Now, for one crowded minute, they matched their fists.

And truly the swift change from mind to muscle work found the scheming rogue momentarily flustered. On Lyle's dramatic appearance he stood as if petrified for one precious second, then swept a hand ominously to his hip-pocket. But by then Lyle was on him, intent on fists, not bullets.

He hurled himself forward like a battering-ram. Ultima, equally quick, stepped lightly aside; but Lyle, swinging recklessly and furiously, was determined to gain an early knock-out, and to take hazardous risks to do so.

Subconsciously he heard Jerry's voice: "Kape back, ye spalpeens! Ah, would ye!" followed by the snap of a shot, a shrill yelp, and an ominous thud.

But Basingbrook proved himself a crafty, powerful fighter. Realising that his masked enemy meant to allow no opportunity for gun-play, he sprang into the attack, hitting with vicious resolve, battling to gain elbow room for a lightning snapshot.

In a real old-time bashing match both fighters invariably suffered heavy punishment, and the fittest man won. So it proved in this whirlwind melee between masked fighters. Basingbrook fought himself to winded impotency, and Lyle, waiting his opportunity, drove viciously and shrewdly through the other's weakening guard.

It was invisible to Lyle, of course, but Basingbrook soon received a cut over the left eye that partially blinded him. Then blow after blow thudded on his jaw, his nose, and his damaged eye.

Behind the mask his mouth was opening, hanging loose, until Lyle closed it with a swinging upper-cut; his undamaged eye rolled like that of a floundering fish until Lyle's fist smashed in the cellulose guard that covered his face, and sent him staggering backwards in agony.

At that Lyle sprang, his first move since taking up his resolute stand. Basingbrook, rocking drunkenly on uncertain legs, aimed a last puny, futile blow. And Lyle, brushing the broken, bleeding knuckles aside as contemptuously as one brushes a fly from the wall, stepped closer in, and dealt Basingbrook a right-armed hook that ended the fight, and sent the defeated crook to the boards with a thud of which he was blissfully unconscious.

Like a hunting hound, Lyle sprang on the fallen man, tore the purloined jewels from his hand and the deadly gun from his pocket. In the same moment he swept the mask from his face, took in the situation at a glance, and laughed breathless excitement.

Like so many statues, the foiled rogues stood with arms upraised; and Jerry—efficient policeman with a gun of his own and one "won" from goodness knows where—held them to it, with a grim smile.

"Well done, Lylesey!" the Irishman chuckled. "Shure, I'd take ye in me ar-ms an' hug ye—if me hands wasn't loaded wid tokens av friendship!" He broke off sharply,



Lyle Lindsay, brushing the broken, bleeding knuckles aside as contemptuously as one brushes a fly from the wall, stepped closer in and dealt Basingbrook a right-armed hook that ended the fight and sent the defeated crook crashing to the floor.

and sent a bullet ping-pong past one fellow's ear. "Now, then, you! Kape 'em up, or down ye go to join your winged pal!"

Lyle laughed. It was too funny to see the dozen masked rogues rendered so childishly impotent by Jerry and the gleaming automatics he obviously itched to use. But already the drugged guests were beginning to stir, to sit up, dazed and stupid, and he realised that soon the foiled thieves would be lost in the crowd.

"Now, you fellows, drop the swag and crouch yonder—faced to the wall, if you please!" he yelled. "Keep your paws skyward, and, remember, the first who turns pays for the lot!"

So coolly and grimly resolute was his bearing, they sullenly obeyed, converging on the spot he indicated and muttering vile rage at their own helplessness.

"Jay, old dear," he cried gaily, when the tally was complete, "pat their pockets, lift any old iron—that's lying about, and—er—shoot to kill if they try any fancy work!" He looked grimly down at Ultima, now beginning to stir at his feet. "So, my lord, you're recovering—just in time to see the end of the game!"

"You spying fiend!" Ultima snarled. "So again I plunge deeper into your debt—through some cursed mischance!"

"Say, bo, call it kanned korn, not mischance," Lyle drawled nasally.

"You—Hyslip!" Ultima hissed, understanding and rage leaping to his eyes.

He made an attempt to rise, but Lyle calmly trod him down—and grinned admiringly when the rogue called shrilly for help.

But Ultima's agile brain was functioning at high pressure. In all directions the crowd was rising and converging on their position—a crowd still dazed and marvelling, a throng known personally and intimately to Lord Basingbrook.

"Help! Tony—Jim! Pull him down, lads!" And before Lyle could turn, or attempt to explain, a dozen fellows were on him, flinging him aside from Ultima, and ignoring his raging expostulations.

It was about the bitterest moment in all Lyle's eventful life. He raged, he yelled, he almost wept—but he had the mortification of seeing Basingbrook make off under the guise of seeking skilled aid for his injured face.

It was too much—too bad, after all their efforts.

"Oh, you idiots—you dolts!" he howled, fighting like a maniac for freedom.

The uproar was terrific, the confusion appalling. Women screamed, men yelled, and Lyle was in danger of being badly mauled, when a pistol-shot rent the air, and brought every being to a shocked silence.

Then Jerry, tied to his post as guardian of a dozen crooks, spoke viciously and with intent.

"You chicken-headed wor-r-ms!" he said

scathingly. "I fired and missed, an' you—you've let the famous Ultima escape whilst ye manhandle the chap who's saved your bastely jewellery!"

One monocol gentleman laughed derisively. "A fine tale! That was Lord Basingbrook, young man," he said.

"You're right, sir," Lyle interposed swiftly. "But so is my friend—for Basingbrook and Ultima are one and the same, and you crowd are his gang of assistants. Hold me if you wish, but keep him in this house, until the police arrive!"

There followed a moment of stupefied doubt; then Lyle's fair challenge made them sense the truth in his words, and Dr. Siltan struggled through the crowd to win belated hearing.

Then, indeed, a rush was made towards the hall. But as the radio chums feared, Ultima had made good use of the precious interval. A bewildered footman admitted that Lord Basingbrook had left the house a minute earlier, and the impenetrable curtain of fog made any attempt of pursuit futile.

After that, the heroes of the evening had to suffer an amount of lionising from a crowd who were only now beginning to realise what they owed to the intrepid pair. But the radio partners were still too sore over Ultima's escape to appreciate all the nice compliments that came their way, and very gladly did they accompany the police to lay information against the twelve bogus musicians they had captured.

"Faith, I'd srape happy th' night, if only owd Uity himself was headin' that line av wrong 'uns," Jerry groaned, as the disgruntled gang filed into the station.

"Oh, well, it's the luck of the game," Lyle sighed, then quietly smiled. "Anyway, Basingbrook, as a lord, no longer exists, and all his little playmates'll be otherwise engaged for a long time to come."

"Shure, they will an' all," Jerry chuckled. "If Uity carries on, it's a lone hand he'll be playin'."

"And a dangerous one," Lyle answered soberly. "Seems to me we've played Old Harry with anything but an ordinary gang of thieves—and Ultima won't forget, if ever the chance comes his way."

Lyle's words were fated to be prophetic. Far sooner than they expected, or wished, Ultima was to reappear—and to give cause for remembrance as long as breath remained with them!

THE END.

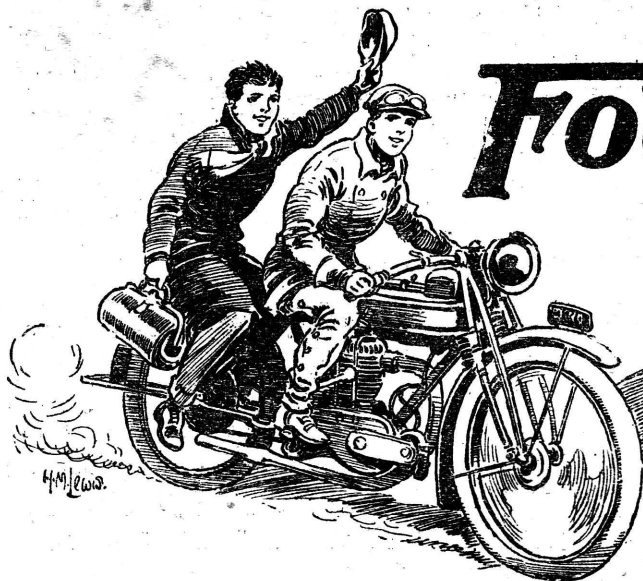
(Sore as they are at the escape of Ultima, the two Aero Chums are fully determined not to give up the chase! Make sure you read: "THE BULLET FROM NOWHERE!" The next thrilling story in this exciting series.)

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SENSATIONAL SOCCER YARN—

Tommy Bell is still working hard in the interests of his chum, Hal Chester!

—START READING NOW!



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'or 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.

He meets an old friend, however, in Tommy Bell, who is well in with the management of the Nettingham Town Football Club. Bell gets Hal a trial with the reserves, but the older players, envious of his play, starve the lad, and he is turned down.

"Nerer mind, Hal," says Tommy Bell. "You leave it to me! I'll get you into professional football as a paid player as sure as eggs!"

(Now read on.)

Tommy Has Ideas!

HAROLD CHESTER was deeply conscious of failure. If he were considered not good enough for the Town's Reserves what chance would he have of ever obtaining a place in the first team?

He had always been looked upon as the bright and particular star of Kingsdown Athletic. He had believed, before he donned the red shirt of the Town, that he would prove himself worthy of being signed on for that club. But the manner in which he had been starved had put the lid on that.

He had awaited the verdict with a certain amount of anxiety, for he knew that he had made a bad impression; but he had hoped that the critical eyes that had watched him play would have noted the fact that he had been given few chances, and therefore that the necessary allowances would be made.

His hopes were dashed to the ground, however, and he returned with Tommy to their lodgings at Park Crescent silent, dejected, and wondering what his next move should be.

"It's no good, Tom!" he cried. "I shall have to hunt round for some other kind of work. And it means that I sha'n't even be able to play for the Athletic again for quite a bit, for I can't afford to play football for the sheer love of it unless I am earning money. Even a boy has to eat and live, and he can't do that by sponging."

Tommy nodded understandingly.

"I suppose your mother would help you if it came to the pinch, Hal," he said.

Hal coloured hotly.

"She could only help me with the money my stepfather allows her, Tom, but I would never allow her to do that."

"But it is her own money, all said and done, and she's a right to give some of it to you if she wants to."

"No, Tom. I'd rather starve than carry on in that way. I've got my pride as well as James Henson. I'll never go

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to him for help. I suppose he expects me to come crawling to the stores so that he can read me a moral lesson, and then drive me away again. Well, he can go on expecting!" Hal's face set in determination. "I'm through with football for a bit. But I'll find something else to do. I'm not going to be a burden on you, Tom. You've been mighty good to me. When the last of my money's gone I'll take the first job that offers, no matter what it is."

Tommy Bell was thinking hard. He knew Hal's worth. He had discovered the sterling merit there was in his chum at school when they had just studied and played, played and studied, never realising that there were worries in the world. Hal was worthy of all the help that anyone could give him.

He would repay a hundredfold when the opportunity came, Tommy knew.

First one scheme, and then another presented itself to him, but Hal said nothing. They ate their lunch, and then went out for a walk, having nothing else to do with their time.

The streets of the town were crowded. They stopped outside a picture theatre.

"Shall we go and have a peep at 'Moon of Israel,' Hal?" asked Tom.

"I don't think so, old man," answered Hal. "I'm not in the mood."

Tommy linked arms with him and led him on.

"Don't take it so much to heart, Hal boy," he advised.

"The directors are fools in my opinion. Here they are howling that we haven't got any goal-scoring forwards, and when I bring them one they can't see it. George Bliss, I know, would sign you on to-morrow if he had his way. But he has to take his orders. The directors are all-powerful. What they say goes, and between you and me that is largely responsible for the fact that the Town doesn't do as well as it ought."

"They're not the only club in Nettingham that's not doing as well as it ought," Hal returned, with a grim smile. "The United are even below them in the table. And they are a purely defensive side from all accounts, Tom."

"You're right there, Hal. Which reminds me, we have

to play them at the Riverside Ground on Saturday. I reckon with a bit of luck we ought to win, and I'd be even more sure of it if you were in our front line."

"I don't know League football—it would be too strenuous for me," returned Hal, with a sigh.

"Nonsense! I know what I'm talking about— By George, look there!"

They were passing the offices of the Nettingham "Daily Gazette" and "Evening News," outside which contents bills were displayed. Tommy was pointing at these.

**"ACCIDENT TO UNITED FOOTBALLER!
WHAT THEY WANT AT RIVERSIDE!"**

A man with a bundle of the early editions of the "Evening News" thrust under his arm was standing on the kerb.

"I wonder what the trouble is with Nettingham United now. I never knew such an unlucky side. They're in the wars this season. Armstrong broke his leg a month ago, and they doubt if he will ever play football again. Simmons is down with the measles, and Mason was ordered off at Boundary Park last Saturday, and will be suspended for a certainty. Dodd broke a collar-bone in the game with the Arsenal a week ago. And there are a lot more crooked with influenza, I believe. It looks as if they will have to field a scratch team against us, Hal. And at that rate we ought to win in spite of their strong defence."

He handed the news-vendor a penny, and, backing out of the way of passers-by, opened out the news-sheet, Hal drawing near and glancing over his shoulder as he read.

"Hallo!" cried Tommy Bell. "Phew! What do you think of that? Law was thrown from his motor-bicycle yesterday and has injured his knee badly! He's the cleverest inside-forward we have in Nettingham, Hal. It looks as if we shall have something like a walk-over, for they will have half a team and the rest reserves when we play them at Riverside—and—"

He stopped and laughed, for sweeping towards them on the near-side rails came a tram that swayed and rocked as it moved swiftly onward.

"Riverside Park and Calshott" a destination board in the front of it announced.

"Hop on, Hal!" cried Tommy excitedly.

With a rush he caught the rail of the tram, swung himself aboard, and Hal moving at top speed, was just able to join him.

"What's the trouble, Tommy?" smiled Hal Chester. "Where are we going to?"

"To paraphrase a distinguished statesman—'Wait and See!'" laughed his chum. "If we get nothing else out of this, Hal, we'll breathe some fresh air, at any rate."

At the Riverside Park stop Tommy got up, and, swinging down the stairs, paid the fares. Then straight across the bridge to the gates of the Riverside Football Ground, the home of Nettingham United, he made his way.

"Are we going in here?" asked Hal, his eyes widened in wonder as Tommy pushed a wicket gate open.

"We are—"

"But it's the home of the enemy!" protested Hal, for, like most Nettingham boys, he took sides where football was concerned with his favourite team—for what reason he had never taken the trouble to analyse, was the Town.

The Riverside Football Ground looked desolate, depressing. The cavernous depths of the empty stand conveyed a bad impression. The playing pitch, which was more plentifully covered with grass, looked waterlogged and bare. There were no players at practice. Two men stood chatting, hands in pockets, near the offices. There was nobody else to be seen.

"Hallo! What do you want?" challenged one of the men as they came up.

"Is the manager in?" asked Tommy Bell. "I want to see him."

The other, a groundsman, Hal Chester supposed, stared hard at Tommy.

"Here, you're Tommy Bell, of the Town, ain't you?" he asked suspiciously.

"Yes."

"We don't encourage Town players here."

"My business is with Mr. Chatsworth," answered Tommy haughtily. "Is he in?"

"He's in. But if you're wise you'll keep away. He won't approve of your worrying him, my lad."

"Come on, Hal!" said Tommy, drawing his chum onward.

"But what are you going to do?" protested Hal. "Surely it's not anything to do with me, is it?"

"You've got it. It is to do with you, Hal. I'm going to get you into football, somehow. If you can't play for one team, is there any reason why you shouldn't play for another?"

Hal Chester stopped at the office doors.

"Here, wait a moment!" he cried. "I'm not going in! I don't want to have anything to do with the United, Tommy. If you'd told me you were bringing me here, I wouldn't have come."

The other laughed a boyish laugh. His eyes were dancing.

"Look here!" he cried. "Am I your pal or not? Yes? Well, then, while you're staying with me you've got to obey orders. Time for you to kick when you're on your own. Hal, just you leave this to me."

Tommy gripped Hal by the shoulder. His jesting tone changed to one of gravity.

"Hal," he pleaded, "promise you'll wait for me. Don't go away while I'm talking to the manager, will you?"

Hal hesitated; then, aware that refusal would smack of base ingratitude, he forced a smile.

"All right," he cried; "I'll wait."

A second later Tommy had vanished through the door of the manager's office.



"Is John Reed in, please?" asked the football manager. "Yes," answered the lanky youth, smiling over the counter. "I'm John Reed, sir." "Well," said the visitor, "my name's Chatsworth, and I'm manager of Nettingham United. I want a word with you about a youngster who plays for your team, Hal Chester."

At the Riverside Ground!

MR. CHATSWORTH was busy writing when the door opened and Tommy Bell swung in. "Hallo!" he exclaimed, glancing up. "Who are you? What do you want? Can't see anybody to-day; I'm busy."

Tommy whipped off his cap with a smile, and advanced towards the desk at which the manager was seated. "I sha'n't keep you very long, sir," he cried. "It's important. I saw in the paper that Law was injured in a motor-bicycle accident."

"Yes. The fool! To risk his neck when we haven't got a forward worth the name outside the first team!" growled the manager angrily. "Well, what about it?"

Tommy, with the utmost coolness, drew a chair up to the desk and flopped on to it.

"I've got a chum of mine outside who is worth a trial, sir," he announced. "He wants to become a professional, and he's really clever."

"Who is he? What clubs has he played for? What's his name? Is he old or young? Can he play up to League requirements? Is he open to transfer? I don't want to waste my time."

The questions came thick and fast, and briefly Bell told about Hal Chester.

Mr. Billy Chatsworth frowned.

"An amateur—plays for the Kingsdown Athletic," he murmured. "How old do you say he is? Still in his teens? He's too young. It's no good!"

"Wait a minute," persisted Tommy, leaning forward eagerly and drawing his long brow a bit. "He's already had a trial with the Town Reserves, and they think a lot of him at the City Ground. I'd see that he got a chance there, but he doesn't want to turn professional unless there is a reasonable chance of his playing for the League team."

"You'd see that he got a chance with the Town?" echoed the manager, sitting back and staring fixedly at Tommy. "A kid like you? Why, you're no age at all yourself! What influence can you have with George Bliss?"

"George would sign him on right away if he could, but Hal isn't over keen. He doesn't think reserves' football good enough. My name's Bell—Tommy Bell. I play centre-half for the Town, and—"

Billy Chatsworth's face broadened in a smile.

"Why, now, of course," he laughed, "I knew I had seen you somewhere! Tommy, you're a mighty good footballer, in spite of your teens. I wish every player knew as much about the game and could play it as well as you can. I wish I'd known that Spennoor wanted to transfer you sooner; then the United would have got you and not the Town. I give you my word."

"Very well, then, sir. If you think so highly of me why not give my pal, Hal Chester, a chance? As I've told you, he was always a mighty sight better footballer than I, and he's a better player to-day than I am, in my opinion. You ask the secretary of Kingsdown Athletic what they think of him."

"He's as clever as paint! If only he had rounded off his play with a goal on Saturday he would be in the Town's League team to a certainty when they come to Riverside!"

"I can't sign the lad on without knowing what he can do," said Billy Chatsworth, frowning thoughtfully.

His eyes searched Tommy Bell's face. It was all very well for Tommy coming here and bringing him this story of Hal Chester's prowess and all that. But if the boy was really as clever as Bell said, would the Town let him go?

Billy Chatsworth had his doubts.

"Nobody wants you to sign him on definitely out of hand, sir," said Tommy; "least of all my chum, Hal. He's heart and soul an amateur. Only, you know what it is these days when a youngster is out of a job. There's so much unemployment about that you don't stand a dog's chance. That's the only reason why my chum wants to turn professional. It seems to me, sir, that whatever happens you'll have to field a pretty poor side against us on Saturday, and the United look like losing the points. So even if you were to give Hal a trial in your first team, it couldn't

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make matters worse. And, at all events, you would be able to test him in the type of football he wants to play and that he thinks he could play. It's early in the week. You can go through with all the formalities, and if you are willing to take Hal on the understanding that he will be given plenty of chances of playing for the League eleven I think he will agree to join your club."

The manager's lips curled. This lad had cheek.

"Mighty condescending of your chum and all that, Bell," he said. "Where is he?"

"Outside the door, sir, waiting for an interview," smiled Tommy.

"All right. Bring him in and I'll have a look at him."

Tommy was on his feet in a moment.

Opening the door, he called to Hal, who was walking gloomily up and down the darkened passage outside.

Hal came to the office, and Tommy shut the door.

"This is Hal Chester, Mr. Chatsworth," announced Tommy. "Hal, Mr. Chatsworth, manager of the United. I've been talking to him about you, and he's willing to give you a trial, and—"

"Here, not so fast, my lad—not so fast!" protested Billy Chatsworth good-humouredly. "I said nothing of the kind. You suggested it, and I don't know that I'm keen on suggestions put forward by a player belonging to our rival club."

Tommy laughed in his usual breezy way.

"There is this about it, Mr. Chatsworth," he returned. "You can soon find out whether Hal is any good or not. If he's good I'm handing you a find. After all, I want Hal to play for the Town, you know. But he's hard-up, and he can't waste too much time looking about for a job. If the Town don't want him, and the United do, why, then, Hal can play for the United!"

Hal stared from manager to chum. It seemed to him that the passing of years had made little difference to the whirlwind-go-aheadness of a very remarkable young man. But, then, Tommy had always been that way. He had used sometimes, when school was over, to argue points with the masters, and had not always got the worst of it.

Hal's cheeks were flaming, and he blinked nervously. And what the manager saw was a chubby-faced boy who seemed young enough to be still attending school. Well-built though Hal Chester was, there did not seem to be a mighty lot of him. But, then, little and good they say.

Billy Chatsworth leant back in his chair considering. He was a judge of character. He liked to hear people speak, and he drew judgment upon them from their voice and manner. His first impression of Hal was one of surprise that the boy was so small, so young, such a "baby." He noted also Hal's nervousness. He could tell, too, that Hal was uncomfortable. Altogether he was not too well pleased with the lad.

But, on the other hand, he was fully aware that Kingsdown Athletic in their own particular class were a team that played effective football.

Three years in succession they had won the championship of the Nettingham Junior League, a competition in which some professional players operated, and after a season's interval they looked like winning it again.

Their recent victory over Staverdale was a notable performance, and they had scored a crop of goals. Bell had stated that Hal Chester was the great scoring force in the Athletic's forward-line. Many a good player had sprung

from the Kingsdown Athletic nursery. And already the Town had thought sufficiently highly of Hal Chester to give the boy a trial, it seemed.

"Your friend Bell has been telling me that you want to play as a professional, Chester," said Billy Chatsworth. "And he suggests that I should give you a trial in the League match between my club and his on Saturday. It's a pretty tall order. Now, what do you think about it?"

The flush on Hal's face deepened.

"I hardly know what to say about that, sir," he replied haltingly.

"Oh, I didn't say you were going to play in the United's team!" rapped out the manager. "And I certainly would not dream of doing so if you were afraid."

Hal's eyes blazed.

"I'm not afraid of playing in any class of football, sir," he answered, with a directness and force that surprised the manager.



TOMMY BELL.

"Then you really believe you could play up to First League requirements?"

Hal smiled.

"I have never played in League football. I have seen very little of it. But if forward play is as poor in the League as all the critics seem to think it is, then I reckon I ought to do as well as most."

"Well answered, my lad! But words are cheap. The proof comes when you have to tackle half-backs like Bell here, and League backs like those Town chaps, Moorhouse and Henshaw, and have to bang the ball past a goalkeeper like Graves, who will be 'keeping' against us here on Saturday."

Hal's smile broadened as he glanced affectionately at his pal.

"I have never had any difficulty in holding my own against Tommy Bell—have I, Tommy?" he answered. "And I reckon I play football much better now than ever I did."

Billy Chatsworth's objections to the experiment began gradually to fade away. Hal Chester might look a baby, with his pink-and-white cheeks, and all that, but he saw there was character in the lad.

And, of course, there was always the possibility that Bell had come here actuated only by the purest of motives—that of getting his chum, said to be a clever player, a chance.

The manager took a new line.

"I am told you were given a trial at the City ground with the Town Reserves last Saturday. Why didn't they sign you on?"

He looked straight at Hal, and did not notice the wink and sign that Tommy Bell gave his chum.

"They didn't think much of me," Hal confessed, with a frankness that disarmed criticism, "and I didn't play very well, either, sir."

"Why was that? Found the class of football too good, eh?"

"Too good? It was not half so good as we very often find in the Junior League, Mr. Chatsworth," Hal answered, with some heat. "I don't know why, but the Town's forwards did not seem to like my being in the team. They starved me. I never had a real chance. If I had, I think I would have scored a goal or two, sir. Besides, I was a bit crooked."

"Goal scoring being one of your strong points, eh?" inquired the manager sarcastically.

"I can put the ball into the net as well as most players, I think," declared Hal.

Again Billy Chatsworth put on his thinking-cap.

"Supposing," he asked, after a pause, "I were to ask you to give the United a show in a reserves' game, and not for the first team—what then, Chester?" he asked.

"I should not mind, sir."

"Will you give me your address, please? Ah, you two boys live together, I see! Well, leave it this way—I'll let you know. But hold yourself in readiness to play on Saturday, will you, Chester? I don't mind admitting that we have been out of luck lately, and have not a deal of talent available in the forward line."

Tommy and Hal wished the United's manager good-day.

"When will we be likely to hear, sir?" asked Tommy, as they left the office.

"Oh, very soon! Perhaps by the morning."

As soon as they had gone Billy Chatsworth got busy with the telephone. After making a few inquiries he discovered that Long John Reed was goalkeeper of the Athletic. He had heard of him. Long John was the son of a Nettingham ironmonger who ran a big shop in the Abbey Road.

Donning coat and hat, the manager of the United went out, cranked up his car, and, telling one of the groundsmen that he might not be back till late, he motored through the town to the ironmonger's shop.

"Can you tell me if John Reed junior is in?" he asked of a lanky, good-natured youth who smiled at him over a laden counter.

"I'm John Reed, sir. What can I have the pleasure of doing for you?" answered the Athletic's goalkeeper.

"My name's Chatsworth. I'm manager of Nettingham United. I'd like to have a word with you about a youngster



"Hi, Hal, lad, half a mo'!" The voice sounded familiar, and Hal Chester turned round to face a grinning, chubby boy, who towered head and shoulders above him. "Why," laughed Hal, "if it isn't Dicky Double! How are you, Dicky?"

who plays for your team. His name is Hal Chester, and—"

Long John's face lit up.

"We can't talk in the shop, Mr. Chatsworth," he cried. "We shall constantly be interrupted. Would you mind coming upstairs?"

Billy Chatsworth followed him through a connecting doorway, mounted the stairs to the sitting-room above the shop, and remained there talking for half an hour.

When the manager of the United left they shook hands cordially.

"I'm much obliged to you, Reed," said the manager. "You've put my mind at rest. The only wonder to me is that this youngster has not been snapped up long ago, if he is as good as you say he is."

"He's all that and better," laughed Long John. "In my opinion, young Hal Chester is the cleverest forward I have ever seen for his age. He does equally well at inside-left, inside-right, or at centre-forward. He can shoot with both feet, isn't afraid of anybody, no matter how big he may be, and is the nicest chap I know."

"I'm going to give him a trial with my League team on that recommendation, mind," warned the football manager.

"And you're wise, and I tell you what—if Hal signs on for the United and leaves the Athletic, nobody will be more sorry than I. He's half our team—"

"And you are the other half, I suppose?" chaffed Billy Chatsworth. "Thank you again. Good-night, Reed!"

Cranking up his car, the football manager set the engine going and sped away.

At the post-office he stopped. There he wrote a letter-card, which he addressed to "Henry Chester, 9, Park Crescent, Nettingham," and dropped it in the letter-box.

Also he pencilled in a telegraph-form. This went to the same address. And it read:

"Please hold yourself in readiness to play for Nettingham United v. Nettingham Town on Saturday." Letter follows.—
WILLIAM CHATSWORTH.

Billy reckoned that he had better get busy before the Town snapped Hal Chester up.

Hal Gets His Chance!

"TOMMY," said Hal, on the way home, "I'm not at all sure that I'm pleased with you."

"Why not?" asked Tommy Bell. "What harm have I done?"

"A lot. I don't want to play for the United. If I join any Nettingham football club as a professional it would have to be the Town. I don't want to play at Riverside, even if they will have me. I want to be with you."

Did Tommy Bell mind his friend's objections? Not a bit of it.

"Look here," he cried, "I want you to play for the Town just as much as you do yourself. The thing is that our directors have made up their minds that you are no good. Hal! That wipes the Town out as a firm business proposition, doesn't it? Very well, then; if you had an offer to sign on for Sheffield United, or Tottenham Hotspur, or Cardiff City, or Liverpool, or Aston Villa, you'd do it, I suppose, even though you do want to stay in Nettingham?"

"I suppose I should," gloomed Hal sarcastically. "And I'm likely to get that chance, aren't I?"

"I can't see that there is such a lot of difference between joining Nettingham United or any of the other clubs I have just mentioned. Billy Chatsworth is not only a fine sport, but a very nice fellow into the bargain. I knew that before I went to him about you."

"He hasn't given me a chance of showing what I can do," returned Hal, "and he's not likely to. I hate being made to look a duffing fool, Tommy."

"And listen to me," Tommy Bell went on, ignoring Hal's testiness. "Supposing that you do get a chance of playing for the United, and you put up such a jolly good show that they want you to sign for them, you needn't do it, even then."

Hal interrupted abruptly.

"Here, I say," he remonstrated, "that wouldn't be fair, would it? It would be a dirty trick, Tommy. I couldn't make use of the United like that."

"As you please. It will be for you to choose, at all events. The moment such a chance offers itself—as I believe it may—I will have done my part. You can do then whatever you please. But I reckon if I work you into one team or the other I shall have done well, Hal. And you would remain in Nettingham in either case. Even if we served rival clubs we could still be the best of pals. And you haven't met old Dicky Double yet. He was always very struck on you. The three of us could have some high old times—"

"And at least James Henson, my father-in-law, would not have the satisfaction of believing that he had driven me out of the town. You don't know how that would please me, Tommy, old man! It would be a never-ending source of irritation to him if I played professional football for the Town or the United. And I would love to score over him!"

"I believe you will, Hal."

They strolled along, talking, and it was late when they reached Mrs. Sandy's. Upon the hall-stand lay a buff envelope.

"Hallo!" cried Tommy Bell. "A telegram! And it's for you, Hal. Open it, old man—open it! By George, I believe it's from Billy Chatsworth—it must be!"

"Or, from my mother," returned Hal nervously. "She is frightfully upset at my leaving home, you know, and may have had a breakdown. No; it's as you said, Tommy—it's from Billy Chatsworth. Listen to what he says: 'Please hold yourself in readiness to play for Nettingham United v. Nettingham Town on Saturday.' Letter follows.—WILLIAM CHATSWORTH."

"Tommy, it's worked out even as you said—I am to have a real, live chance at last. But supposing the United's players are jealous of me, and won't give me the ball? Supposing I fail, as I failed at the City ground last Saturday?"

"You won't fail. They won't starve you. It's a League game, Hal, a local Derby. United are keen on winning. If their chaps boycott you there'll be no end of trouble. But they won't. They'll be out to show that they are all good enough to beat the Town. They want to win. Hal, my lad, you'll be a professional footballer, I believe, before you have time to more than look round."

Hal laughed at that. His spirits began to rise again. He was more like his normal care-free self than he had been since he had left home. And there was a prospect of his being able to play the game he loved after all.

He went to bed that night feeling as if the world was a cheery place to live in. He rose, feeling quite refreshed. He forgot entirely about the shake-up he had received in that junior league game between Kingsdown Athletic and Staverdale, when Bill Stevens, the brutal back, had fouled him so badly. On going downstairs, he found the expected letter from the United's manager awaiting him. He was asked to call at the Riverside ground that morning at eleven o'clock.

The car took him there very rapidly, and he had half an hour's talk to Billy Chatsworth, who informed him of the part long John Reed had played in getting him his chance.

"You seem to have plenty of friends, my lad," remarked the manager, with a laugh, "which is a good sign. Be at the ground three-quarters of an hour before the kick-off on Saturday, there's a good lad. We'll go and see the trailer now, and get him to find some clothes to fit you. You will wear your own football boots, of course?"

"Yes," said Hal.

They went in search of the trailer. Hal was introduced to him by the manager and fitted as required.

Then he went back to his rooms. Here Tommy had another surprise for him.

"Hal," he laughed, "I told George Bliss that Billy Chatsworth was going to give you a show with the United in the local Derby on Saturday, and instead of being offended, he was just tickled to death. I hope he does well," he said to me. "If the Town lose him and the United get him, our directors will only have themselves to blame, for, after his clever display with us—and he was crooked mind—they ought to have seen what a find he really is. And so you see, Hal, there is one real sportsman who will not shed tears if you go to Riverside, however much he may regret it."

Tommy's announcement gave Hal considerable ease of mind.

He felt somehow that he would not be doing such an un-sporting thing, after all, in playing for the United against the Town, as in his sensitive way he had imagined.

"George Bliss isn't going to say one word to the directors about you, Hal," Tommy went on. "He's going to leave you to make whatever impression you can upon their minds, and leave them to find out for themselves who you really are. And as I shall be playing against you and Dicky Double will be in goal—why, I reckon next Saturday's game ought to be one of the great events of the season!"

"What a chap you are, Tommy!" laughed Hal. "But there, I shall enjoy playing against you and shooting at Dicky Double just as much as ever I did in our school days. It will be really like old times all over again."

Hal's name did not appear in the team chosen to represent Nettingham United in the match against Nettingham Town on the Riverside Ground when the papers came out on Saturday morning, Salmon being at inside-right, the position that Hal Chester was going to fill. The others were either first team men, or the regular reserves, so that nobody knew that the United were going to take a risk by playing a lad whose form was unknown in what was a very important match.

On Saturday, an hour before the game was timed to start, Hal left Mrs. Sandy's, and, walking to the nearest tram terminus, boarded a Riverside bound tramcar there.

He hurried to the players' gate, assured the man in charge of it that he had the right of entry, and ran as soon as he was inside the football-ground in the direction of the great stand underneath which was the home team's dressing-room.

He was about to pass the door of it when suddenly a shout pulled him up. He heard his name called:

"Hi, Hal! lad! Half a mo'!"

The voice was familiar. Hal Chester swung round, and there, grinning at him, was a chubby, round-faced, red-checked, blue-eyed boy; a fat boy; a boy who towered head and shoulders above him, who had the chest of a giant, the thighs of a Hercules, and the calves of a heavy-weight Greco-Roman wrestler.

Besides the fat boy—for, in spite of his size he was little more than a boy, stood Tommy Bell, grinning from ear to ear.

"Hallo, Tom!" laughed Hal, in greeting. Then, seizing the hand which the fat boy extended to him, he shouted merrily: "Why, it's Dicky—Dicky Double! How are you, Dicky? I haven't seen you for years! And haven't you grown! We used to call you Fatty, but you're fatter than ever now!"

"Ay, I'm fat enough," grinned Dicky Double happily, as he nearly wrung Hal's hand off his arm. "I'm big enough, and it'll make it all the easier for me to keep those shots out of goal that you're going to send in at me this afternoon, Hal, for, you see, I'm keeping goal for the Town against the United, and—we're out to win!"

(It was undoubtedly a great chance for Hal. If he could beat such a stalwart "keeper" as Dicky Double his place among professionals was assured. Be sure you read next week's thrilling instalment of this powerful serial, chums.)