"THE PLUNDERED SCHOOL!" A Powerful Story of Thrilling School Adventure By Martin Clifford.

EVERY WEDNESDAY.

The GEM 2D LIBRARY OF SCHOOL AND SPORTING STORIES

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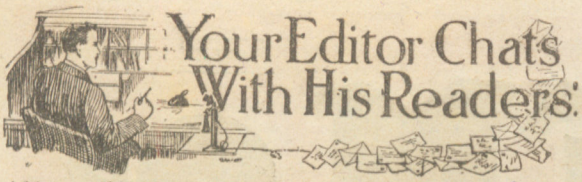
1925.

OFF TO CAMP!

Like a human island in a sea of hat-boxes Arthur Augustus D'Arcy staggered down the School House steps to join his waiting chums!

(An amusing incident from the grand school yarn of St. Jim's inside.)



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,—There is no question about it that the present series of Talbot yarns have made a big score. In the whole chequered history of the fellow with a past there has been nothing to equal these stories for power and dramatic effect. Next week we shall have "The Hour of Atonement!" This tale throws more light on the underground doings of the Angel Alley gang, including the insidious Harper. Look out for a real treat. Also for next Wednesday there will be a ripping edition of the "St. Jim's News" devoted to fishing which will cause anglers and others to feel pleased. Two other topping features comprise a rattling fine boxing yarn called "The Battling Midget!" with a grand fistic display, and an instalment of our serial, "Dave the Pit Boy!"

"THE CRIMSON CLAW!"
By Lester Bidston.

You see above the title of the new serial of Chinese mystery and super-detective work which will shortly start in the GEM. This will prove to be a perfect out-and-out thriller. Mr. Bidston's work is well known to all of us. His fresh plunge into the strange secret world of Celestial craft and cunning goes one better. The new serial is just the sort of palpitating and sensational narrative you have been waiting for. Just mention the new story to your chums.

TWO BIKING CHUMS!

I have been favoured with a few jottings from two Gemites who have been spending their holidays on their jiggers. They visited the old castle at Guildford, and enjoyed the grand view from the top. Here the parapet is wired in to prevent mishaps. These two wheeling comrades pushed on through the finest part of Surrey to Dorking. There they took the risk of some rough going, and went by the grass track which is part of the old Pilgrims' Way to Canterbury. They found the rough going all right enough, and they reached Canterbury in due course, where a "snap" was taken of some of the wonders of the cathedral city, including the picturesque West Gate.

A GREAT AUTHOR!

Douglas Harvey writes to me from Port Elizabeth to ask a few questions about the late Sir Rider Haggard, the author of "King Solomon's Mines" and other splendid books dealing with Africa. He is more than justified in all he says concerning these remarkable stories. Rider Haggard was a many-sided man. He understood all about farming, as those who have seen his fine old house at Ditchingham, Norfolk, well know. He was in South Africa in his early life, and was with Sir Theophilus Shepstone in the days when the Transvaal was annexed.

A RAILWAY QUESTION!

W. M. writes from Wakefield to inquire about some of the railways in the country which do not seem to be of any use. He has come upon several such mysterious tracks in the course of his wanderings, and he wants to know what about them. The sleepers are rotten, the grass grows thick, and the rails are rusty. These abandoned routes would be light railways which have outlived their usefulness, and lines laid down for special purposes—say, for the transit of material to factories. I might add that there is nothing uncommon in the sight of a neglected railway. There are many such. They get no mention in the railway guide-books, and the metals never know any other rolling-stock than trucks for timber.

HE CAN'T HELP WORRYING!

A complaint reaches me from an ardent GEM reader who is fast making his way up the ladder. His employer is thoroughly well pleased with the work done by my chum, but my correspondent tells me that he gets so interested in the work, which is mainly secretarial, that he carries the thought of it away with him when he leaves the office. In other words, he is exhausting his brain by doing the work twice over. That won't do. He must put a stop to this, or he will be fagged out. It is a grand thing to be a keen worker, but it is sheer folly to let enthusiasm for a job interfere with a well-earned night's rest. I advise my correspondent to get a hobby, and force himself to take a keen interest in the new pursuit. He will not find that difficult once he makes a start. After all, it is change of occupation that brings the real rest. I was reading a highbrow argument the other day about the danger of lounging, otherwise mere idling, but at times that sort of thing is quite permissible.

A SCOUTS' BIVOUAC!

It was my good fortune the other day to visit a Scout camp, and I was impressed by a good many things, above all by the neatness of it all. The Scouts never leave a place looking untidy when they fold their tents and march away. The camp was a model of smartness and organisation, and the example set was one to be copied with advantage by everybody. It is rather the fashion among some people to strew the countryside with rubbish. They just "chuck" what they do not happen to want about the lanes and woodland paths. Such thoughtless individuals should be urged to take a leaf from the book of the handy Scout.

A MAP OF ST. JIM'S!

My chum, Jack Draper, 548, Rocky Point Road, Sydney, Australia, sends along a first-rate map of the neighbourhood of St. Jim's. He has worked out his chart with great skill, I will say that. If space permitted I should like to publish his outline of the district. He gives most of the special features of the far-famed countryside, including the old mill, the monks' cell in Rylcombe Wood, the ruins of Wayland Castle, and the Abbotsford Highway. This correspondent has a tilt at a certain critic of the GEM who displayed a very disgruntled nature. He was answered with a couplet adapted from Byron, which ran:

> "When 'Falkirk' his dashed nonsense sent,
> Nor man nor gods knew what he meant."

After that "Falkirk" wisely shut himself up.

A LARGE ORDER!

From a chum living at Bilston, Staffs, comes rather a large order. He asks me to send him by return a complete list of the boys of St. Jim's. This can't be did! He can easily get the names of the popular favourites from any story of the famous school. Of course, in the case of a big school like St. Jim's, fellows come and go. In our topping GEM series we have met characters who have rendered good service, and then dropped out. I have forwarded the names of all the prominent fellows to my enthusiastic reader in Staffordshire, and that is all I could do.

YOUR EDITOR.

Tuck Hampers and Money Prizes Awarded for Interesting Paragraphs.

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

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

SHEFFIELD SCORES!
TO KEEP HIM WARM!

One bitter cold night Pat, tramping the country, came to a farm and lay under a cart to have a rest. In the morning the farmer, hearing snoring, prodded the sleeper with a stick. "What are you doing under there?" he asked. "Just sleeping," said Pat. "Aren't you cold?" asked the farmer. "Shure, I am!" was the prompt reply. "Just throw on another cart, will ye?"—A Tuck Hamper, filled with delicious Tuck, has been awarded to W. H. Hobson, 21, Harrington Road, Heeley, Sheffield.

SHE KNEW!

Old Lady (who sleeps badly): "Now, Mary, if I should want to light my candle, are the matches here?" Mary: "Yes, ma'am; there's wan." Old Lady: "One! Why, what if it misses fire or won't light——" Mary: "Oh, divil a fear of it, ma'am, sure I've thried it!"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to Herbert James Wise, Clacton College, Clacton-on-Sea, Essex.

DIFFERENT AT HOME!

Mother (in tramcar): "Tom, get up and let your father sit down! Doesn't it pain you to see him reaching for the strap?" Tom (cheerily): "No, mother, not in a tram; but it does at home!"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to Stanley Roberts, "Bidston," Llandudno Junction, N. Wales.

MEASURED OFF!

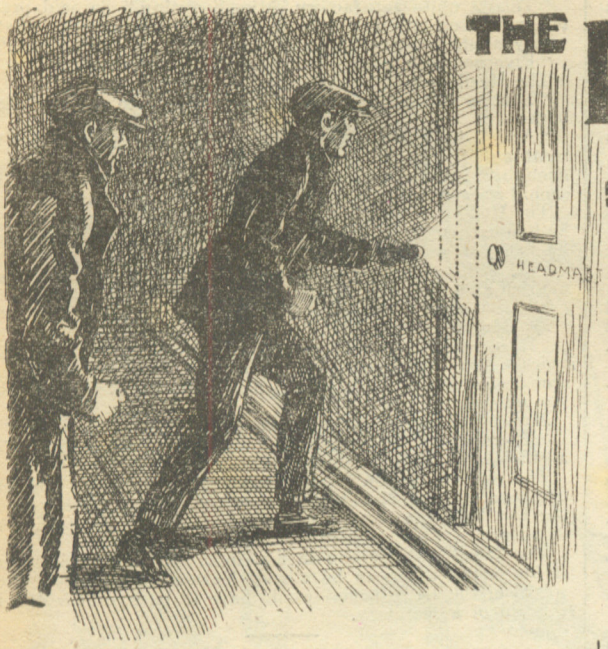
Pat went into a music-shop to buy a mouth-organ, but none of those in stock suited him. They were all too small. "I'm afraid," said the assistant, "we'll have to make one specially for you. Just try your mouth along that piano, will you?"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to M. Jones, 38, Lilymead Avenue, Knowle, Bristol.

TUCK HAMPER COUPON.

The GEM LIBRARY.

No attempt will be considered unless accompanied by one of these Coupons.

THE SHADOW OF THE PAST! Reginald Talbot and Marie Rivers, one-time members of the notorious Angel Alley Gang, are again reminded of that unpleasant chapter in their lives which they wish to forget!



THE PLUNDERED SCHOOL!

A Thrilling and Dramatic Story of the Chums of St. Jim's.

By Martin Clifford.

CHAPTER 1.
Situation Vacant!

"LITTLE boy!"

Tom Merry gave a jump. He was standing in the school gateway, talking cricket with Manners and Lowther and Talbot, when he received a sharp tap on the shoulder with an umbrella. The sharp tap was accompanied by an equally sharp admonition.

"Little boy!"

Tom Merry spun round, with a gasp.

A very grim and aggressive-looking female, of uncertain years, confronted the captain of the Shell. She was garbed in sober black, and she brandished an umbrella. It was a glorious summer afternoon, with no prospect of rain; but perhaps the aggressive-looking female carried the umbrella as an instrument of defence—or attack.

"Little boy!" she repeated. "I wish to see your headmaster, Dr. Holmes, immediately. Go to him at once, and tell him Miss Tapper is here!"

Tom Merry hesitated. He resented being given orders by a total stranger. He also resented being addressed as "little boy," as if he was still in the knickerbocker stage. Moreover, he resented the intrusion of this angular lady, when he was discussing the forthcoming cricket fixture with Greyfriars.

But Tom's hesitation was as the twinkling of an eye. Miss Tapper carried with her an air of aggressive authority. When she gave an order, she expected it to be carried out on the instant. If it wasn't, she enforced her orders with whatever weapon happened to be handy—her umbrella, or parasol, as the case might be.

Tom Merry didn't like the look of the umbrella, which was poised ready for action. He glanced helplessly at his chums, and then hurried away to the Head's study.

He was back within a couple of minutes.

"Well, little boy?" said Miss Tapper sharply.

"Dr. Holmes will see you, ma'am. I'm to show you to his study in a quarter of an hour. He happens to be engaged at the moment——"

Miss Tapper gave vent to an unladylike snort.

"I will not be kept waiting!" she snapped. "I must see Dr. Holmes at once!"

"I'm afraid that's quite impossible, ma'am——"

"Lead me to his study!" commanded Miss Tapper imperiously.

"Oh crumbs!"

Tom Merry was between two fires, so to speak. He had been ordered by the Head to escort Miss Tapper to the study in a quarter of an hour; and he was ordered by Miss Tapper to do so at once. If he obeyed Miss Tapper, he would incur the Head's displeasure; if he obeyed the Head, he would upset Miss Tapper. Tom decided that he would rather risk the Head's wrath than the fury of this warrior woman.

"This way, then, ma'am," he said.

Miss Tapper, taking long, mannish strides, followed Tom Merry towards the building. And Manners and Lowther and Talbot brought up the rear of the procession. They were grinning.

"Who is with Dr. Holmes at the moment?" demanded Miss Tapper.

"A young lady, ma'am—a Miss Sweeting, of Wayland. The Head has advertised for a temporary secretary—he's going to write a book, I believe, and Miss Sweeting has applied for the job. She's having a typewriting test at the moment."

"Huh!" said Miss Tapper. "Then I have a rival in the field!"

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Monty Lowther. "Surely this awful she-dragon isn't going to apply for the job?"

Miss Tapper suddenly stopped short in her stride, and spun round upon Lowther. Her sense of hearing was particularly acute, and she had overheard Monty's remark.

"How dare you?" she flashed. "How dare you speak so rudely and disrespectfully of a lady? You referred to me as a—a she-dragon! I will endeavour to teach you better manners, sir!"

So saying, Miss Tapper brought her umbrella into play, and Monty Lowther danced and roared under an avalanche of blows. He tried to hop out of range, but the incensed Miss Tapper followed him up, raining blows upon his back and shoulders.

"There, sir!" panted the irate lady, at length. "Do not dare to allude to me in those terms again!"

"Ow-wow-wow!" groaned Lowther.

Miss Tapper, her face grim and set, proceeded on her way to the Head's study, Tom Merry taking her in tow.

The clicking of a typewriter was audible, and, the door of the study being ajar, the typist could be seen. She was a young lady—at least thirty years the junior of Miss Tapper. Her hair was shingled in modern style, and her complexion was liberally adorned with powder and paint. The Head had given her a newspaper article to type, and she was thus engaged when Miss Tapper swooped down, like a she-wolf, on the fold.

Dr. Holmes was at his desk. He rose to his feet in astonishment as Miss Tapper swept in, without the formality of knocking.

"Madam——" began the Head reproachfully.

"I came here at once, sir, because I have a strong objection to being kept waiting," said Miss Tapper. "You advertised for a temporary secretary, in the 'Wayland Gazette.' I hereby present myself for the post!"

And Miss Tapper flounced towards the armchair, and flung herself into it, and bestowed a hostile glare upon her rival, Miss Sweeting.

The Head looked quite bewildered. He was almost at a loss for words. The cyclonic invasion of Miss Tapper had almost taken the worthy gentleman's breath away.

"My—my dear madam——" stuttered the Head at last.

"Well?"

"I—I shall be pleased to grant you an interview as soon as I am disengaged. As you will see, I have another applicant to attend to."

Miss Tapper bestowed a further glare upon her rival.

"Bah! One of these ultra-modern girls," she said.

"Powder and paint, and shingled hair, and crass incompetency, judging by the way she fingers those keys. What you need, Dr. Holmes, is a business woman—not a painted doll!"

"Bless my soul!"

"I am eminently a business woman," went on Miss Tapper. "I was with my last firm—a firm of Wayland solicitors—for nearly twenty years, during which time I gave complete satisfaction."

"Hem! May I inquire, Miss Tapper, why you are no longer with them?"

"Certainly you may inquire, sir, and you shall have a ready explanation," said Miss Tapper, with asperity. "I quitted the firm because the junior partner would not carry out my instructions. Further, he was very insolent towards me, and I do not stand insolence from anyone, least of all a mere male!"

"Good gracious!"

"I gave the rude young jackanapes a thrashing," said Miss Tapper, her eyes gleaming at the recollection, "and handed in my notice. The senior partner begged me to stay, but I was firm. Before I left, I made them give me a suitable testimonial, which I have brought here for your inspection."

So saying, Miss Tapper produced a letter from her bag, and thrust it upon the Head. Dr. Holmes blinked at it through his glasses. It described Miss Theodora Tapper as a thoroughly capable and efficient woman, well suited for a secretarial post. It also stated that she possessed a dominant personality. The Head did not doubt this for one moment. Miss Tapper's personality seemed to overshadow everything and everybody else. She was a Triton among the minnows. The Head could picture this aggressive lady standing over the senior partner of her late firm, and dictating her own testimonial.

"Well, sir, what about it?" said Miss Tapper. "You have seen my testimonial—you have seen me in person. Do I strike you as being suitable for the post which you advertised?"

The Head looked uneasy. He shuffled from one foot to the other before replying.

"Ahem! I—I am afraid——" he began.

"Go on!" said Miss Tapper grimly. "Let me hear the worst."

"I am afraid you are—hem!—not quite suitable for my purpose, Miss Tapper," he murmured. "I have no doubt you are a very efficient woman, but your personality is a little too—er—disturbing."

"What!"

"I desire somebody of a more modest and retiring disposition," said the Head, trying to pick his words tactfully, but failing in the attempt. "I want somebody to whom I can dictate—not a person who gives instructions to her employer. To be candid, I want a subordinate—not an overseer."

Miss Tapper was on her feet. She was very flushed and excited, and her umbrella was poised threateningly. The Head jumped back in some trepidation.

"You are insolent, sir!" stormed Miss Tapper, bringing down her umbrella with a crash on the Head's desk.

"My—my good woman——"

"I am not your good woman!" cried Miss Tapper, in shrill tones. "You have spoken to me in a most impertinent manner, and only your grey hairs protect you from personal violence!"

"Bub-b-bless my soul!"

Miss Tapper snatched her testimonial from the Head's hand.

"I refuse to accept this appointment! I shall not accept it, even if you go on bended knees and implore me to do so!"

There seemed little likelihood of the Head going on his knees to the warlike Miss Tapper. The mere thought of having her as a secretary made him shudder. He rang the bell, in considerable agitation, and Toby the page appeared.

"Kindly show this lady out," he murmured.

"Yes, sir," answered Toby.

With a backward sweep of her umbrella Miss Tapper brushed Toby back into the corridor.

"I do not need to be shown out!" she fumed. "I go! Gladly do I shake the dust of this place from my feet!"

And Miss Tapper stamped out of the study. She was not so glad to shake its dust from her feet as the Head was to see her do so.

When his unwelcome visitor had gone, Dr. Holmes sank limply into his chair.

"Dear me! What—what an obstreperous female!" he muttered.

Miss Sweeting, still seated at the typewriter, smiled.

"She would have led you a dreadful dance, sir, if you had engaged her," she said. "You wouldn't have been able to call your soul your own. I've finished typing this article, sir."

And she handed a page of typescript to the Head, who examined it carefully.

"This is quite satisfactory, Miss Sweeting," he said presently. "You are certainly a capable typist. Now, what salary would you require, in the event of my engaging you?"

"Five pounds a week," said Miss Sweeting promptly.

The Head started.

"That is rather more than I am prepared to pay——" he began.

"And I don't wish to work more than four hours a day," went on Miss Sweeting. "Four hours is quite exhausting enough, after one has been to an all-night dance. And I should want two days off a week, apart from Sundays."

The Head gasped. When he had advertised for a secretary, he had expected to get one without much trouble. Certainly he had not anticipated all these complications. He wondered, as he stared in surprise at Miss Sweeting, what the modern girls were coming to.

"Is that a go, sir?" asked Miss Sweeting brightly.

Dr. Holmes frowned.

"It is not a 'go,' as you term it," he said stiffly. "I require a secretary who will work at least seven hours a day, and be satisfied with a salary half as large as that which you quoted."

Miss Sweeting shrugged her shoulders.

"There's nothing doing, then," she said. "What I want is a soft job. I don't like being slave-driven."

The girl rose to her feet, and calmly proceeded to powder her face in front of the Head's mirror. Then she adjusted her hat, bade the Head a curt good-afternoon, and took her departure.

The Head sat frowning in his chair. It began to look as if his book—it was to be a very learned exposition of the works of the Latin poets—would have to be written without the aid of a secretary.

CHAPTER 2.

A Face from the Past:

"THE Head's having a happy afternoon," said Tom Merry. "I wouldn't be in his shoes for a pension."

"No jolly fear!" agreed Manners. "His advertisement has brought him a swarm of giddy applicants, but they all seem to be duds."

"They've all been women and girls, so far," said Monty Lowther. "There was that awful she-dragon, Miss Tapper. Goodness knows how the Head managed to get rid of her. Then there was Miss Sweeting. She didn't get the job. I could tell that, because she was pouting when she came out of the Head's study. Since then half a dozen 'fieldmales,' as Taggles calls them, have interviewed the Head, but he's not fixed on anybody yet."

"I expect they all want a soft job and a princely salary," said Tom Merry. "That's the spirit of the age."

Talbot looked thoughtful.

"You can hardly blame them for wanting tall salaries," he said. "Look how the cost of living has gone up since the War. In the old days you could get a secretary who would work like a galley-slave at a small pittance. They want less work and more money to-day, and, personally, I don't blame them."

"All right, old chap, we won't have an argument on social and economic conditions," said Tom Merry with a laugh. "Hallo! Here comes another giddy applicant. It's a man this time, for a change."

A plump, middle-aged person, in a check suit, rolled in at the school gates. He grinned affably at the juniors.

"Is the 'eadmaster at 'ome?" he inquired.

Tom Merry nodded.

"My name's Bulger—Jim Bulger," vouchsafed the plump gentleman. "I 'ear as 'ow the 'eadmaster wants a sekkertary."

"My hat!"

"I'm 'is man," said Mr. Bulger. "That is, if 'e ain't fixed up with anybody yet?"

"Not yet," said Manners. "But I'm afraid you won't stand much chance of getting the job, Mr. Bulger."

"Eh? Why not?"

"Ahem! I don't want to hurt your feelings, but you don't seem quite—er—the sort of person to be a secretary."

Mr. Bulger frowned.

"Look 'ere," he said. "I've 'ad a fust-class heddication, an' I'm jest the man for the job."

"Great pip!"

"Can't say as I've 'ad any previous hexperience of a sekkertary's job," confessed Mr. Bulger. "I worked in a brewery afore I was thrown out of hemployment. But I got me wits about me, an' it don't take me long to get the 'ang of things."

"Well, I wish you luck," said Tom Merry, "but I'm afraid you'll find there's nothing doing."

But Mr. Bulger was an optimist. He had seen the advertisement in the "Wayland Gazette." It was the sole adver-

"How dare you ?" cried Miss Tapper. "How dare you speak so rudely and disrespectfully of a lady ? You referred to me as a—a she-dragon. I will endeavour to teach you better manners, sir !" So saying, she brought her umbrella into play, and Monty Lowther danced and roared under the avalanche of blows. "There, sir !" panted the irate lady at length. "Do not dare to allude to me in those terms again !" (*See page* 3.)

isement under Situations Vacant, and he quite thought that he was just the man for the job. Mr. Bulger was a bit hazy as to the duties required of a secretary, but if those duties included digging the Head's garden, or mowing the lawn, he felt he was quite competent to tackle them.

"Where does the 'eadmaster 'ang out, young gents?" he inquired.

"Step this way," said Tom Merry. "You're the ninth applicant to call this afternoon, so you might be lucky, after all. They say there's luck behind a nine."

The juniors piloted Mr. Bulger to the Head's study, and remained outside to hear the verdict.

Mr. Bulger was not in the study two minutes. When he came out he looked decidedly crestfallen.

"No luck?" asked Lowther.

Mr. Bulger shook his head.

"Doctor 'Olmes was very decent to me," he said. "But 'e said 'e was afraid I wouldn't suit. 'You drops yer aspirates,' 'e says, 'an' I don't want a sekkertary what does that sort of thing.' "

"Rough luck," said Talbot.

And Mr. Bulger went on his way. His exit from the school was far less cheery than his entry had been. Mr. Bulger's aspirations had fallen, as well as his aspirates.

The Head was having a very busy afternoon, interviewing applicants for the post of secretary. But he did not seem to be making much headway. Either the applicants wanted too much money, or they were too incompetent, or too cheeky, or unable to furnish satisfactory references. In every case there was some objection. And the Head was almost in despair of finding a suitable person for the post.

Tom Merry & Co. were just thinking of going in to tea, when a youth in a navy-blue suit strolled in at the school-gates. He was a very handsome fellow of about sixteen. His face was tanned, his hair was curling in front of his cap, and he advanced with the springy step of the athlete. He seemed very sure of himself as he approached the St. Jim's juniors. There was nothing shy or backward about him.

But there was something very remarkable about the newcomer. Even at a distance it was seen that he bore a striking resemblance to Talbot of the Shell. When he drew nearer the resemblance became more strongly marked. But for the fact that he was dressed in navy-blue, and not Etons, and that his hair was of a lighter colour than Talbot's, he would indubitably have been taken for that junior.

"My only aunt!" ejaculated Monty Lowther. "Here comes your double, Talbot."

Talbot nodded without speaking. He was staring in a puzzled sort of way at the visitor, and he looked strangely uneasy, as well as puzzled. Where had he seen that face before?

Talbot was pondering the problem when the youth in the navy-blue suit halted beside the group of juniors. And not once did Talbot take his eyes from the fellow's face. He seemed to be mesmerised by it.

"Good-afternoon!" said the stranger. "I hear your Head is wanting a secretary. Can you tell me if he is suited yet?"

"Not yet," said Tom Merry. "He has interviewed a whole crowd of people, but he isn't satisfied with any of them."

"Do you think he's likely to be satisfied with me?"

"Can't say. You see, I don't know you, or anything about you. You might be a perfect peach of a secretary. On the other hand, you might be a hopeless duffer. But you look intelligent enough."

"Thanks!" said the newcomer with a smile.

"I'm afraid your youth will go against you," said Manners. "You see, you're such a kid."

"Well, you're hardly a Methuselah yourself," said the other. "I'm sixteen, and I know shorthand and typewriting and book-keeping, and I think I can fill the bill."

"What's your name?"

Talbot rapped out the question quite sharply, and he looked the stranger squarely in the eyes. The youth answered him with cool composure.

"I'm Harper—Jack Harper," he said.

The name conveyed nothing to Talbot, yet he felt certain that he had seen Harper before, somewhere, under rather grim circumstances. He taxed his memory to try and recall the place and the circumstances. But they eluded him. He would recollect presently, no doubt.

"Would you mind directing me to the Head's study?" said Harper.

"With pleasure," said Monty Lowther. "Fall in and follow little us."

Harper was escorted to the Head's study, and the weary voice of Dr. Holmes bade him enter.

"I hope he gets the job," said Tom Merry, when the door had closed behind Harper. "He seems a decent sort. A young and energetic fellow will be more use to the Head than an old fossil with a flowing beard."

"Yes, rather!" said Manners. "But what's the matter with old Talbot? He spoke quite sharply to Harper—fairly jumped down his throat, in fact."

"I thought I recognised the fellow," said Talbot. "We've seen him before. I'm certain of that."

"Seen him before?" echoed Tom Merry in wonderment. "Where, and when?"

"That's just what I'm trying to puzzle out. It's worrying me. Harper's my double, and we've met before, not so very long ago."

"You might have more than one double, old man," said Tom Merry. "Some people have dozens."

"Yes, but——"

"You're looking as solemn as a boiled owl, Talbot," said Manners. "Dashed if I can see what you've got to worry about. Harper's all right. He's not a giddy criminal."

"I'm not so sure," said Talbot quietly.

"What! Oh, draw it mild, Talbot! You've no cause to say that."

Talbot suddenly slapped his thigh with his open palm.

"I've placed him!" he exclaimed. "You fellows will remember that we spent the Christmas vac with Gussy, at Eastwood House, and that Jim Dawlish and his gang of crooks tried to burgle the family plate?"

"Yes, I remember perfectly," said Tom Merry. "But——"

"There was a boy member of the gang, a fellow who was very much like me. In fact, he was actually mistaken for me," said Talbot, his voice unusually excited. "That fellow was Jack Harper!"

The Terrible Three stared at Talbot in blank astonishment. They were incredulous.

"Rot!" said Tom Merry, after a pause. "We know you had a double who was concerned in the burglary, Talbot, and we know that Harper is your double, too. But it's drawing the long bow to say that they are one and the same fellow. As I said just now, some people have dozens of doubles. You're just an average type of English schoolboy, and there must be many like you, scattered up and down the country."

"That's so," said Monty Lowther. "Talbot is a type—a type that's duplicated far and wide. It's only the distinguished-looking fellows like me who haven't got doubles."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Talbot, old man," he said, clapping his chum on the shoulder, "you're letting your imagination run away with you. You've got Jim Dawlish & Co. on the brain. Crooks and cracksmen have become a giddy obsession with you. Harper isn't the fellow we saw at Eastwood House, and I can prove it."

"Go ahead, then!"

"Have you forgotten what happened to Dawlish and his gang? They were captured and given stiff sentences of imprisonment. They're behind prison bars now, all of them, including the boy member of the gang, the fellow who looked so much like you."

Talbot was not convinced.

"Surely you don't think they've escaped from prison?" said Tom Merry, rather impatiently.

"I hardly know what to think," said Talbot. "But I'm pretty certain that Harper and the boy cracksman are one and the same. I studied him very closely just now, and I don't think I've made a mistake."

"But—but if Harper is a crook, what is he doing here applying for the job of the Head's secretary?"

"That's just what I should like to know," said Talbot.

Tom Merry gave a snort.

"You're too suspicious by half," he said. "Harper struck me as being quite a decent sort. There's nothing of the criminal about him. He looked you straight in the eyes, and all that sort of thing."

"Appearances are deceptive," said Talbot. "I've lived among criminals, and I knew a good many of them who didn't look the part. You can't go by looks, Tom. There are cracksmen who look like curates and parsons who look like poachers."

"P'r'aps so," said Tom Merry, shrugging his shoulders. "But as far as this fellow Harper is concerned, I'd stake a term's pocket-money that he's thoroughly straight, and that he's not the fellow we saw at Eastwood House. Here he comes! If you still suspect him of being a member of the Dawlish gang, you'd better tax him with it."

"I will," said Talbot grimly.

Jack Harper was smiling as he emerged from the Head's study.

"What luck?" asked Manners.

"I've got the job."

"Bravo!"

"Dr. Holmes was a bit dubious at first. He thought I was too young and inexperienced," said Harper. "But I passed the tests all right, and I start work to-morrow."

"Where are you going to sleep and feed?" inquired Lowther.

"I've got a bed-room in the Head's house, and I'm going to have my meals in his dining-room."

"My hat! He's treating you like a member of the family."

"Well, isn't that how a confidential secretary should be treated?" said Harper, with a smile. "You didn't suppose I was going to sleep in the coal-cellar and have my grub in the scullery, did you?"

"Hardly," said Lowther, with a grin.

Talbot stepped up to Harper.

"I want to ask you a question," he said, looking searchingly at the newly engaged secretary.

"Fire away!" said Harper cheerfully.

"Were you at Eastwood House last Christmas Eve?"

"Eastwood House?" said Harper, in surprise. "Certainly not! Never heard of the place. Where is it?"

If the fellow was lying, then he was lying to perfection. There was not a trace of alarm, either in his tone or his expression. His puzzled answer quite satisfied Tom Merry & Co. that he was not the youthful member of Jim Dawlish's gang. But it did not satisfy Talbot.

"Do you know Dawlish?"

Talbot rapped out the question like a prosecuting counsel.

"Yes," said Harper. "I spent my holidays there once. It's a place in Devonshire, isn't it?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry & Co.

Talbot flushed crimson.

"I don't mean the place. I mean a man of that name," he said. "Do you know him?"

Harper shook his head.

"Why all these questions?" he asked, in wonder. "Is it usual to cross-examine every newcomer to St. Jim's like this?"

Talbot's colour heightened.

"I—I'm sorry," he muttered. "But I thought I'd seen you before, Harper. I could almost have sworn you were at Eastwood House last Christmas."

"I spent my Christmas holidays at Brighton," said Harper. "If you want to confirm that I'll give you the address of the boarding-house. Anything to oblige an amateur Sherlock Holmes."

There was a sarcastic inflexion in Harper's voice. And Talbot stepped back, covered with confusion, and feeling that he had made a complete ass of himself.

The bona fides of Jack Harper seemed beyond suspicion. At all events, Tom Merry & Co. were quite satisfied with them. There was still a strong doubt in Talbot's mind, but he asked no more questions. He realised that nothing could be gained by "pumping" Harper. At the same time, Talbot resolved to keep a watchful eye on the Head's temporary secretary. Coming events would soon show whether his suspicions were justified or groundless.

CHAPTER 3.
Harper Makes Headway!

JACK HARPER quickly adapted himself to his new surroundings. He seemed to fit in quite naturally with St. Jim's.

Tom Merry & Co. invited the boy secretary to tea in Study No. 10, and Harper proved a most entertaining guest. He chatted gaily on all sorts of subjects, and the juniors, with one exception, found him a very likeable fellow.

The exception was Talbot. That junior wore a troubled look, and contributed very little to the conversation. He was still suspicious of Harper; he still believed him to be the boy member of the gang of cracksmen who had raided Eastwood House. Harper had disclaimed all knowledge of Eastwood House, and of Jim Dawlish, the leader of the gang; but

Dawlish gripped Harper by the shoulders and drew him into the ruins, where there was partial shelter. "We must talk this out," he said. "I don't understand this. You seem to me to have suddenly lost your senses." Unseen by Dawlish and Harper, a fat figure stealthily approached the ruins and halted, crouching low, behind a stone pillar only a few yards away. Baggy Trimble was curious to know what the Head's secretary was up to. (*See page* 10.)

Talbot could not accept his disclaimer, though Tom Merry & Co. accepted it readily enough.

Talbot seemed to have fallen into one of his old black humours. He ate little and said less. His chums tried to rally him into a brighter frame of mind, but without success. Talbot was worried, and the cloud did not leave his face. The arrival of Harper at St. Jim's had caused dark misgivings to creep into his mind. Talbot was apprehensive. The more he thought about it, the more certain he became that Jack Harper was a "wrong 'un," and that he had come to St. Jim's for some ulterior purpose. He was the confederate and catspaw of Jim Dawlish. Talbot felt almost sure of it. And he was very uneasy in consequence.

Tom Merry & Co. had laughed at Talbot's suspicions. They had assured him that the Dawlish gang was safe behind prison bars. Talbot wished he could accept that assurance, but he could not.

"Care for a game of cricket, Harper?" asked Tom Merry, when tea was over.

"Rather!"

"What's your form?" asked Manners.

"Only moderate," said Harper modestly; "but I enjoy a game."

The Terrible Three took Harper along to the nets. Talbot asked to be excused. He wasn't feeling in the mood for cricket just then. He retired to his own study, where he remained in the armchair, sunk in a gloomy reverie.

Jack Harper's form at cricket proved a revelation to the St. Jim's fellows. He had styled himself a moderate player; in reality, he was a giant at the game. The way he opened his shoulders and chastised the bowling evoked a buzz of admiration from the group of fellows looking on. He drove with tremendous power, and his mighty hits kept the fieldsmen busy.

When it came to bowling, Harper was again in his element. He bowled slow left hand. Simple-looking stuff it seemed to everybody but the batsmen. As a matter of fact, Harper got a deceptive spin on the ball. He captured wicket after wicket, including Tom Merry's, and Tom was generally acknowledged to be one of the soundest bats in the Shell.

"You're hot stuff, Harper," said Tom admiringly. "Wish we could bag you for the junior eleven."

"I don't see why we shouldn't," said Manners. "Harper's one of us, in a way."

"He's attached to St. Jim's for rations, accommodation, and discipline, as they say in the Army," said Lowther.

Harper smiled.

"I should be quite willing to play for your eleven—if I can get time off from the Head, that is," he said.

"Good! I'll put you down for the Greyfriars match," said Tom Merry.

When the cricket was over Harper did some exploring on his own account. He wandered round the school building, pausing to chat with all and sundry.

Harper had the happy knack of making himself liked, without any fawning or toadying. He seemed a fellow of wide sympathies, with a fund of knowledge on every sort of subject. Thus he was able to talk Socialism and various other "isms" with Skimpole, the brainy youth of the Shell, and he discoursed with Bernard Glyn on the subject of mechanical contrivances, and actually helped Glyn with his latest invention. Then he met Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, and listened with great patience and politeness while the swell of St. Jim's descanted upon male fashions. Arthur Augustus much admired the cut of Harper's navy blue suit, and told him so. Harper returned the compliment by saying that Arthur Augustus was easily the best-dressed fellow he had seen so far at St. Jim's. This pleased Gussy immensely, and he confided to his chums that evening that the Head's secretary was a "weally wippin' sort, an' a fellow of gweat tact an' judgment."

Harper promptly endeared himself to the fag fraternity by treating a whole crowd of them at the school tuckshop, just before closing-time. The ginger-wine flowed freely, and the doughnuts and jam-tarts and maids-of-honour were distributed on a lavish scale. Money was no object with Harper, apparently. The fags were quite awe-stricken when he placed a ten-pound note on the counter without ostentation.

Dame Taggles fairly beamed upon Harper. She foresaw a very good customer in the person of the Head's secretary.

Harper, having had a snack himself, bade the fags goodnight, and strolled out of the tuckshop. As he crossed the darkening quadrangle, the strains of "For he's a jolly good fellow" pursued him. Harper smiled a trifle cynically.

"Popularity seems easy enough to get when your pockets are well-lined," he murmured.

His next visit was to the school sanny. He had heard that a couple of fags were down with mumps, and he decided to go and cheer them up.

Sitting by a sick-bed and holding a patient's hand did not greatly appeal to Jack Harper. But the sanny held a great attraction in the person of Marie Rivers, the charming school nurse. Harper knew she was there; he knew, also, that Marie was a very attractive young lady. It seemed rather remarkable that he should know this already, when he had only been a few hours at St. Jim's. None of the fellows had discussed Miss Marie with him; yet he knew!

Curly Gibson and Jameson, of the Third, were the two mumps victims. When Harper strolled into the sick-bay he found them propped up on their pillows, looking very merry and bright, in the circumstances. For Miss Marie was seated on a chair between the two beds, reading to them from the "Holiday Annual."

"If I'm intruding," said Harper pleasantly, "I'll run away."

Marie Rivers half rose to her feet. At first glance she had mistaken Harper for Talbot. Yet the voice was not Talbot's. Marie looked quite startled for a moment.

"Don't be alarmed, Miss Rivers," said Harper, smiling. "I'm not a ghost; I'm Harper, the Head's secretary. I thought I'd step along and cheer up the sick. But these kids don't seem very ill. And their nurse seems to be doing all the cheering-up that's necessary."

Marie smiled back at Harper, and resumed her seat.

"How very like Talbot you are!" she exclaimed. "I really thought it was Talbot, in a blue suit, until I heard you speak. Won't you sit down, Mr. Harper?"

"May I stay?"

"Certainly—if you're not afraid of infection. I should advise you to sit well away from the patients."

"What about the risk to yourself?" said Harper.

"Oh, I'm germ-proof," answered Marie. "I was on duty here when half the school was laid up with the 'flu, but I escaped it."

Harper nodded cheerily to the two fags, and crossed over to a seat by the window.

Marie was about to close the volume from which she had been reading, but Harper demurred.

"Carry on," he said. "I shall enjoy the story—and the musical voice of the reader."

"Flatterer!" said Marie, blushing.

And she resumed her reading. It was a school story of the light and bright type, abounding in comical situations. That was why Marie had chosen it.

Curly Gibson and Jameson punctuated the reading with chuckles of enjoyment. And Jack Harper chuckled, too. After a time he rose to his feet.

"You must be getting tired, Miss Rivers," he remarked. "Let me take a turn."

"It's quite all right," said Marie.

But Harper insisted. He relieved Marie of the volume, and took it with him to the window-seat. Marie would not permit him to take her place between the two beds.

"It would be too dreadful if Dr. Holmes had his secretary down with mumps on the very first day," she said.

"A bit inconvenient for the Head, perhaps," said Harper, "but I shouldn't mind. I should be in good hands up here. Anyway, there's no fear of my catching any kiddish complaints."

Harper took up the reading at the point where Marie had left off; and he went on until the story was finished. He was a splendid reader, modulating his voice to suit the various phases of the story. Curly Gibson and Jameson raised a muffled cheer when the story was finished; and they asked Harper if he would mind coming again. Harper cheerfully undertook to do so.

"Good-night, you kids!" he said. "Buck up and get fit again. Good-night, Miss Rivers!"

And Jack Harper passed out. Marie was conscious of a distinct void when he had gone. She, as well as the two patients, had been the happier for Harper's company.

CHAPTER 4.

The Meeting in the Wood!

"NOW, Harper," said the Head, with a smile, "we will make a start with this great work—this 'magnum opus' of mine."

"Very good, sir!"

It was the next morning. Jack Harper, fresh and debonair as ever, had presented himself in the Head's study after breakfast.

"The school is going into summer camp next week," explained the Head. "In the meantime, I want to get the opening chapters of my book dictated—and typewritten."

Harper nodded. He seated himself at the desk and drew a reporter's book from his breast-pocket and poised his pencil ready for action.

The Head had prepared copious notes, and he consulted these as he walked to and fro, dictating.

It must have been dry work for Harper. Ovid, and other Latin gentlemen who had dabbled in poetry, had no fascination for him. He would rather have taken down from dictation a thrilling adventure story of the "Treasure Island" type.

But Harper gave no sign that he was bored. He scribbled away at his shorthand notes as if for a wager. He seemed to be throwing himself heart and soul into the task; and the Head was very pleased with him.

Dictation continued all the morning. Then came the luncheon interval, and Harper found himself in the seats of the mighty at the Head's dining-table.

One would almost have thought that Harper was the Head's son, judging by the intimate way in which Dr. Holmes chatted to him across the table.

As a matter of fact, the Head had taken a great fancy to his youthful secretary. He liked the boy immensely. Harper's cheery, almost breezy temperament, had a tonic effect upon the old gentleman.

"You are proving a very efficient secretary, Harper," said the Head. "I am indeed glad to secure your services. There were numerous applicants for the post, although it is only a temporary one. But some of the applicants were extremely undesirable persons."

The Head recollected his stormy interview with the warlike Miss Tapper, and he shuddered slightly.

"I had quite an alarming experience with a—a female of advanced years," he said. "She flourished her umbrella in a most disconcerting manner. I feared personal violence."

Harper smiled.

"Good job you didn't engage her, sir," he said. "She'd have proved a stormy petrel of a secretary."

"She would indeed," said Dr. Holmes. "Then there was Miss Sweeting—an amazing young lady who flatly refused to work more than four hours a day, and required three days off a week."

"Great Scott!" gasped Harper.

"There was also a gentleman named Bulger, whose education had been sadly neglected. He dropped his aspirates with distressing frequency. And his notions of a secretary's duties were most vague. He thought he would be required to dig my garden and mow my lawn."

Harper laughed outright.

"It is a great relief to me to find a secretary so zealous and efficient as yourself, Harper," the Head went on. "I feel sure that, by the time we go to camp, we shall have made considerable headway with my book."

Harper nodded.

"What day does the school go to camp, sir?" he inquired.

"On Thursday—a week to-day."

"Is it usual, sir, for the school to go into summer camp every year?"

"No, it is not usual. But an opportunity has arisen this year which I ought not to miss. A headmaster friend of mine has placed a holiday camp at my disposal He is at present staying there with his own boys; and he has made arrangements to leave all the tents and marquees standing, in readiness for occupation. I consider that a change of air and environment will greatly benefit all my boys. The camp is on the coast at Stormpoint."

"A glorious spot, sir," said Harper. "I know it well. The fellows will have the time of their lives."

"It is not going to be a holiday entirely," said the Head. "Lessons will proceed as usual in camp."

"Oh! That rather takes the gilt off the gingerbread, sir," said Harper, with a laugh. "By the way, sir, am I going to be paid off when the school goes to camp?"

"I shall not be wanting you during that fortnight," said the Head. "You will proceed to your home. When we return from camp, I will send for you, and you will resume your duties here."

At this point, the maid came in with the coffee. The Head, after partaking of his, took "forty winks" in the armchair, in accordance with a time-honoured custom.

Harper stood for a moment, looking down at the kindly old face; and a queer expression came over his own.

"He's a good old sort—one of the best breathing," muttered Harper. "He treats me as if I was his own son. And he trusts me. He thinks I'm honest and decent. He doesn't know that my references were faked; he doesn't know that I'm in a conspiracy against him—that I'm plotting to repay his kindness by helping to plunder the school. Good heavens! What a worm I am!"

Gone from Harper's face was the cheery look; the bright sparkle had faded from his eyes. He looked almost haggard as he stood there, scanning the kindly face of his employer, Dr. Holmes.

"I—I can't do it!" he muttered. "I won't be a party to this ghastly business. I'll tell Jim Dawlish he must find somebody else to do his dirty work—somebody with no

conscience, and no feeling. I didn't know I had a conscience myself, until now. But I have, and it's become jolly active all of a sudden.

The Head was dozing peacefully. And Harper, his hands plunged into his pockets, paced to and fro in the dining-room.

"I must break with Dawlish," he muttered. "I must finish with the gang; once and for all. Fool that I was ever to have joined it! But I wasn't in my right senses at the time. I was furious when they sacked me from St. Clive's, for an offence of which I was quite innocent. I felt bitter against everything and everybody—at war with the world. And when Dawlish came across me in London, and begged me in that plausible way of his to join the gang, I promptly fell into his net. I thought a cracksman's life would be quite an adventure. So it is—but it's the sort of adventure that leaves a bad taste in the mouth. Oh, I hate it! Looting and plundering, doing the thief-in-the-night business—worming your way into people's confidence, and then robbing them. Heavens! It's awful! I didn't see things in this light before. The scales seem to have suddenly fallen from my eyes."

Harper continued his pacing to and fro.

"Everybody at this place, from the Head downwards, has been thoroughly decent," he soliloquised. "I've been made welcome everywhere; in the fellows' studies, in the sanny, and on the cricket-field. And all the time I've been taking notes in secret, for Dawlish's benefit. I've found out where all the school valuables are stored—the cups, and medals, and so forth. I've taken a photograph of the Head's safe, so that Dawlish will know exactly how to work on it when he comes. I've been a snake in the grass—a rotten, low-down impostor! It must finish. I must make an end of it. I'll sever with Dawlish at the first opportunity."

Harper uttered the words resolutely enough, but he did not realise how hard it would be to carry out his decision. In the hands of that unscrupulous rascal, Jim Dawlish, he was as clay in the hands of the potter. Dawlish could mould him to his will.

Jack Harper had sunk very low, and it would be no easy matter to climb out of the abyss of guilt and shame into which he had fallen. It was easy to go downhill; to climb up again, to win back honour and self-respect was vastly more difficult.

By the time the Head had opened his eyes, Harper had pulled himself together. He showed no trace of the mental conflict through which he had just passed.

"Come, my boy," said the Head kindly. "We must return to our task."

They worked solidly until tea-time; and Dr. Holmes then dismissed his assistant.

"To-morrow, Harper," he said. "you may type out all that you have taken down from dictation to-day. I shall not be here to-morrow; I shall be taking the Sixth Form. You may now run along and enjoy yourself."

"Thank you, sir," said Harper.

But he was not anticipating much enjoyment that evening. As he strolled out into the quad, he took from his pocket a note which had come for him by the afternoon post.

The note was tersely written, and to the point.

"Harper,—Meet me in Rylcombe Woods, near the ruined Priory, at seven o'clock without fail.—J. D."

RICHARD JULIAN.

A member of the Fourth Form, sharing Study No. 5 with Harry Hammond and Patrick Reilly. A loyal and true Jew. Cheery and light-hearted, yet withal a deep thinker. Holds his own alike in the Form-room and on the playing fields. Always addressed as "Dick" by his army of school chums. Julian is a splendid all-round fellow and a credit to his race.

Harper frowned as he read the note, and restored it to his pocket. He was to meet his chief, Jim Dawlish, that evening, to report what progress he had made at St. Jim's. It would not be a pleasant meeting. Dawlish would not take kindly to the idea of Harper breaking with the gang. That he would be furious—perhaps even violent—Harper felt certain. It called for a deal of courage to tell Dawlish of his intentions; but he must make a firm stand, he reflected, and sever with the gang once and for all.

Harper had been invited to tea in Study No. 6, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy did the honours.

The Head's secretary chatted away cheerfully enough; but his thoughts, like those of Eugene Aram in the poem, were "otherwhere." He was thinking of the forthcoming meeting with Dawlish, and wondering what the upshot would be.

"I was thinkin', deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, "that we might twot along to the Wayland Cinema this evenin'. Tom Mewwy & Co. will come along, an' Miss Mawie."

Harper sighed. There was nothing he would have liked better, than to accompany Miss Marie to the "pictures." But he had an appointment of a less pleasant kind to keep; and he excused himself to Arthur Augustus.

"Some other evening, old man," he said. "I'm booked up for this evening."

"That's all wight, deah boy; only we should have been glad of your company."

Shortly before seven, Jack Harper set out to keep his appointment with Jim Dawlish. He had donned his raincoat, for there was a storm brewing. Black clouds were scurrying across the sky; dead leaves were being driven across the quadrangle, as if fleeing from an enchanter. The branches of the old elms swayed and groaned in the gathering gale.

Harper walked quickly. He was not aware that he was being followed; yet such was the case.

Baggy Trimble of the Fourth was on the track of the Head's secretary. Baggy had visions of a feed. He surmised that Harper was going over to Wayland to dine at the Cafe Royal, in which event, Baggy meant to be on the spot.

Greatly to the fat junior's chagrin, however, Harper struck off into the woods, and Baggy was in two minds whether to follow. His curiosity mastered him, and he hurried after Harper, his fat legs going like clock-work.

Dusk fell with almost startling suddenness. A deafening peal of thunder struck terror into the heart of Trimble; and a jagged flash of lightning, darting across the sky, made him shiver like a fat table-jelly.

Jack Harper strode on. The elements had no terrors for him. Rather, they fitted in with his turbulent frame of mind. He braced himself up for a big effort. He mentally rehearsed what he was going to say to Jim Dawlish. But when he actually saw the man waiting for him in the ruins of the old Priory, his courage wavered a little.

Dawlish was in disguise. He was dressed like a tourist, in a rather loud knickerbocker suit, and an Alpine hat. A heavy moustache, and a pair of bushy false eyebrows, completed his disguise. He looked up quickly as Harper came into view.

"You are alone?" he rapped out.

"Of course!"

"You have not been followed?"

"Who would want to follow me?" said Harper. "Nobody knows—not a soul suspects."

"Good! You have played your part all right at St. Jim's?"

"I've played it to perfection. But look here, Dawlish"—Harper came close, and looked his chief fearlessly in the eyes—"I'm not going to play it any longer. I'm finished with this sort of life. I'm through with it. I must ask you to release me from the gang!"

"What!" Dawlish gave an incredulous shout. "What fool's game is this, Harper? Are you jokin'?"

"I'm in sober earnest," said Harper steadily.

Dawlish gripped the boy by the shoulder as the first drops of a thunder-shower came pelting down, and drew him into the ruins, where there was partial shelter.

"We must talk this out," he said. "I don't understand this. You seem to me to have suddenly lost your senses."

Unseen by Dawlish and Harper, a fat figure stealthily approached the ruins and halted, crouching low, behind a stone pillar, only a few yards away.

Baggy Trimble was torn between his terror of the storm and his curiosity to know what the Head's secretary was up to. And his curiosity had gained the mastery.

CHAPTER 5.
Harper's Evil Genius!

"NOW," said Dawlish, "p'r'aps you will explain yourself. You say you have finished with this sort of life. What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I say," said Harper.

Dawlish frowned through the gloom at his companion.

"What nonsense is this?" he demanded sharply. "You don't seriously mean to tell me that you've decided to turn honest?"

Harper nodded.

"You young fool!" said Dawlish angrily. "What has happened to make you take up this tom-fool attitude? Who has been putting these ridiculous notions of honesty into your head, stuffing you with copy-book maxims? Come, answer me!"

"It's my own choice, to break away from the gang," said Harper. "I made up my mind this afternoon. Something came over me; it—it's hard to explain. Call it conscience, if you like, or a good impulse. Anyway, I'm sick and tired of playing a part. I'm utterly fed-up with this two-faced business. Everybody at St. Jim's has been awfully decent to me. The Head treats me as if I was his own son."

Dawlish gave a contemptuous snort.

"They've taken me at a false valuation," Harper went on. "They don't know what I am—a rotter, a criminal, a thief among thieves. They think I'm straight and honest. And—and I want to live up to their opinion of me. I've done with the past; I want to throw it all behind me, and forget it."

"And what of the future?"

"I shall play with a straight bat."

"And starve?"

Harper gave a start.

"There's no need to talk of starving," he said. "I'm not dependent on you for my livelihood. I can get an honest living, I suppose."

"You've some hopes," sneered Dawlish, "when there are thousands and thousands of unemployed. Why, the country is teemin' with men who want to get an honest livin', but can't. There aren't the jobs to give them. The demand exceeds the supply. So they have to struggle along as best they can, ekein' out a bare existence on the dole. An' you wouldn't be entitled to the dole. You'd be thrown on your beam-ends, an' you'd go under. That's what your precious honesty would do for you—bring you right down to starvation!"

Harper was silent.

"Where's your common-sense? Where's your reason?" demanded Dawlish. "Aren't you satisfied with your present job with the gang—a well-paid job, even if it's not honest. An' how many jobs are honest nowadays? Do you call our modern business methods honest? Honesty is dead in this country, Harper—dead as the dodo! It's all a game of grab these days—makin' money by any means, fair or foul—an' the weakest goes to the wall. My lad, we've got to take the world as we find it—with rogues in high places, an' with bribery an' corruption rampant. Don't babble to me of honesty! It's played out—defunct, an' stone dead."

"I don't believe it!" flashed Harper. "I know there are plenty of dishonest rotters in the world, but for every swindling profiteer there are a hundred straight-dealing men. Anyway, I've decided to turn honest."

Dawlish shrugged his shoulders.

"If you care to commit suicide by givin' up a good job, an' throwin' yourself on the world, it's of your own choosin'," he said. "But I'm dashed if I can understand what's come over you, Harper. You talk like a sentimental fool. Have we ever treated you badly, in the gang? You have had money—your fair share of the spoils. Hundreds have passed through your hands. An' now you talk of givin' up the substance for the shadow—leavin' a very profitable job, an' goin' on the streets."

"I sha'n't starve," said Harper. "I've got a temporary job at St. Jim's. I shall carry on with that, and it will tide me over until I can get another."

Dawlish looked grim.

"Your job at St. Jim's will finish to-morrow, if you desert the gang," he said. "Dr. Holmes will be notified that his charmin' young secretary is a common thief——"

"Oh, you cad!" panted Harper.

"An' you will be sent packin'," went on Dawlish relentlessly. "You'll be lucky if they don't hand you over to the police."

Harper gave a violent start. He had not foreseen this; yet he might have known that Dawlish would have the whip-hand of him. He was in the rascal's power. The moment he tried to turn honest—to play with a straight bat, as he called it—Dawlish would by some subtle means expose his past; and that would mean ruin.

"Come, Harper!" said Dawlish, his voice softening a little. "You can see which side your bread's buttered. You can see the crass folly of turnin' honest. What will it profit you? Either you will starve on the streets, or find yourself arrested in connection with one of our past exploits. Mind, I'm not forcin' you to remain with the gang. You're a free agent. If you prefer starvation an' exposure, so be it!"

Harper sighed heavily. He saw the position with crystal clearness. It would not be in any way to his advantage to break with the gang. If he did so, he would automatically make an enemy of Jim Dawlish, who would ruthlessly expose him. And even if Dawlish stayed his hand, and spared him, what prospects awaited him in the outside world? He would become one of the great army of unemployed, who drifted like derelicts in the city streets. Clever and capable though he was, he would not be able to find work. Life was hard and cruel; as Jack Harper would quickly find out, if he threw himself on the mercy of the world.

Dawlish held the advantage now, and with his crude eloquence he beat down what remained of resistance in the boy's attitude. It was a case of conflicting wills; and Dawlish's will was the stronger. Within a few moments he had talked Harper round, and won him over.

"Thank goodness, I've brought you back to your right senses!" exclaimed the leader of the cracksmen, at length. "Now we'll talk business. When does the school go away to camp?"

"A week to-day."

"That's good. I'm eager to get busy. As you know, we have made two attempts, in the past, to plunder the school, an' both of 'em proved failures. There's a sayin' that the third time buckles the cod. We shall have nothin' to prevent us this time; we shall be able to go straight ahead. The school will be at our mercy, everybody bein' in camp."

"That's so," said Harper dully.

He was not waxing very enthusiastic about the proposed burglary. As a matter of fact, he had never felt more wretched and unhappy in his life. He was forced by circumstances to remain in his present profession, but he had lost all liking for it.

"You have made notes, I take it?" said Dawlish. "You have taken photographs, an' drawn diagrams?"

"Yes."

"Hand them over!"

Harper produced a bundle of papers from his breast-pocket and handed them to Dawlish.

"Thanks," said the cracksman. "I'll study these when I get back to my hotel in Wayland. There won't be any bunglin' or blunderin' this time. I shall know the geography of St. Jim's inside-out. Hark! What was that?"

There was a crackling of undergrowth not far away. Dawlish looked quite alarmed.

"We've not been spied upon, I hope?" he said.

"No fear of that," replied Harper.

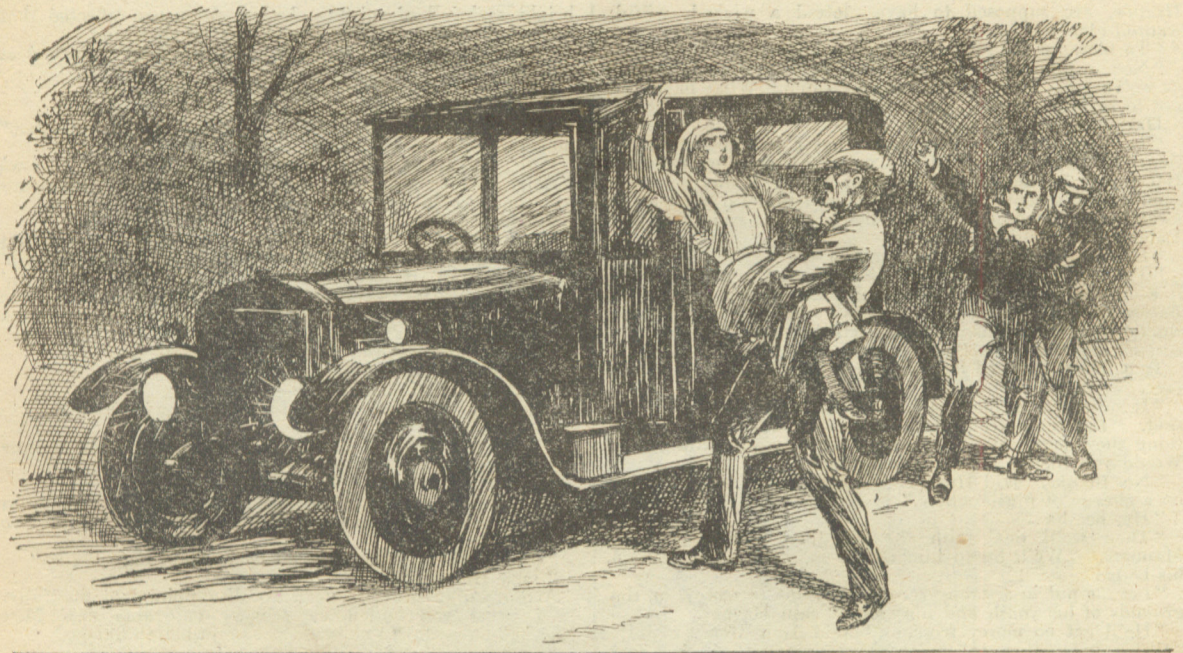
"You're certain you were not followed here?"

"I didn't see a soul."

Dawlish stepped out from the ruins, and peered around him into the cavernous gloom of the woods. But he saw no one. The darkness covered the retreating figure of Baggy Trimble like a cloak.

"Well, there's nothin' more to arrange," said Dawlish. "Give me the tip as soon as the school has broken up, an' the coast is clear. Then we'll get busy. We've had two failures, an' I shall never forgive myself if we fail three times runnin'. But that's not likely to happen. Good-night, Harper! An' don't go gettin' any more sentimental notions about honesty into your noddle!"

"Good-night!" muttered Harper. And he turned slowly on his heel, and plunged into the darkness of the wood. It seemed to engulf him, like the shades of an inferno. And



Before Marie Rivers could divine what was happening she was seized in no gentle manner and bundled into the car. "Help!" she cried. Talbot was within call as that cry rang out. But he was powerless to go to his girl chum's assistance, for another man was upon him with the agility of a panther the next moment. (*See page* 18.)

there was darkness within him, as well as without—the darkness of remorse and despair.

Jack Harper had not been responsive to the call of his better self. He had yielded to the wiles of his evil genius, Jim Dawlish. He had planned to play the part of a traitor, and to betray the school into the cracksman's hands. He felt unspeakably mean and base as he groped his way among the trees. And had one of those shafts of lightning struck him lifeless to the earth, he felt that such a fate would be no more than he deserved.

CHAPTER 6.
The Unbelievers.

THERE was little sleep that night for Jack Harper. Through the long hours he lay awake, listening to the storm which raged without, and feeling acutely miserable. He was a prey to tormenting thoughts. His bold resolution to break with the gang had failed him. He had made his choice, and he must stick to it. He had elected to keep to the path of dishonour, rather than renounce the old life, and thereby court exposure and ruin.

Dawn came and Harper sank into a fitful doze. He felt better on waking. He succeeded in stifling the voice of conscience, and steeled himself to play the part he had undertaken to play. What would be the use of going straight, if there was no chance for him in the world? He was getting too soft and sentimental, he told himself. He must pull himself together, and not allow that haunting voice of conscience to make him miserable. He must be his old cheery self again, or the St. Jim's fellows would wonder what was wrong.

A strange story was going the rounds that morning. Baggy Trimble had started to broadcast it overnight.

Tom Merry & Co. heard the story while they were dressing, and they were frankly incredulous.

"Did you ever hear such a cock-and-bull yarn?" said Manners. "Trimble is saying that Jack Harper is a member of a gang of cracksmen—the Dawlish gang. He declares that Harper and Dawlish met last night by appointment, in Rylcombe Woods, and plotted a deep dark plot to plunder the school while we were away in camp."

Monty Lowther chuckled.

"Trimble's got a wonderful imagination," he said. "He can weave the most hair-raising stories around anybody. And when it comes to fibbing, why, Baggy's got Baron Munchausen and Ananias licked into a cocked hat!"

"All the same," said Tom Merry, frowning, "it's jolly unpleasant to have such rotten rumours going the rounds. There are fools who might believe them. Anyway, it's a beastly slander on old Harper. Don't you agree, Talbot?"

Talbot was looking very grave.

"I know what a romancer Trimble is," he said, "but I can't help thinking there may be a grain of truth in his latest yarn—perhaps a solid basis of truth, in fact."

"What rot!" said Tom Merry, quite warmly. "Haven't you shaken off your silly suspicion of Harper yet?"

"No, Tom."

"You still think he's the same fellow who had a hand in the burgling of Eastwood House?"

"I do."

"Then all I can say is, you're doing Harper a big injustice," said Tom Merry. "I'm surprised at you, Talbot. You've had an opportunity of sizing Harper up; and so have we. And it's my opinion that the fellow is as straight as you are yourself. Is there anything sly or furtive about him? Does he go creeping around at night like a blessed burglar? Of course not! Harper's as straight as a die."

"Hear, hear!" said Manners and Lowther, in chorus.

"You fellows can think what you like," said Talbot, "but I wouldn't trust Harper farther than I could see him."

And he turned away.

The Terrible Three went down into the summer sunshine.

Jack Harper was already up. He was strolling beneath the old elms, humming a merry tune. Certainly he looked very far removed from a criminal as he sauntered along. Tom Merry & Co. scoffed at the bare suggestion.

"Top of the morning, Harper!" sang out Monty Lowther. "How's the great book progressing, Mr. Secretary?"

"We've made a start," said Harper, with a smile. "I took down the opening chapters yesterday. To-day I've got to get busy at the typewriter. I mean to make the sparks fly!"

"You're as brimful of energy as a racehorse, Harper," said Tom Merry. "By the way, there's an absurd yarn going the rounds about you. I thought you ought to know about it."

Harper looked puzzled.

"Somebody been chucking mud at my snow-white reputation?" he asked.

"Yes. Do you know Trimble?"

"That human barrel in the Fourth? Yes; we met on one occasion. He asked me if I could advance him a pound."

"Did you oblige?" asked Lowther.

"Yes. I gave him a pound—in the chest, with my fist!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What has the dear old fat man been saying?" asked Harper.

"He says he followed you into the wood last night——" began Tom Merry.

Harper gave an almost imperceptible start.

"Go on," he said. "This is mighty interesting."

"He says he saw you meet Jim Dawlish—the chief of a gang of cracksmen. You're supposed to have put your heads together, and hatched a deep-laid, dastardly, diabolical plot——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Manners and Lowther.

"Don't interrupt," said Tom Merry. "You and Dawlish,

Harper, are supposed to have plotted a wicked, wilful, wanton plot——"

"To blow up the school?" suggested Harper.

"No; to plunder the place from roof to basement, as soon as we've gone away to the summer camp. What have you got to say for yourself, you double-dyed villain?"

Harper burst out laughing.

"The corpulent one," he said, "has a priceless imagination. He ought to do well as a writer of sensational fiction. But surely he didn't stop short at saying I was going to plunder the school? Didn't he tell you that I'd planned to kidnap the Head, and poison the prefects, and have Mr. Ratcliff painlessly put away?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the Terrible Three.

"The story will grow," said Harper, with a grin. "Give it a chance. It's only in the long-clothes stages at present. Before the day's out it will have reached fearful and wonderful proportions. Trimble will be describing me as a sort of boy Bluebeard!"

Tom Merry stopped laughing, and a frown came over his face.

"It suits you to make a jest of the matter, Harper," he said. "But there are some frantic idiots who believe everything they hear. We must stop Trimble's tongue-wagging. Would you like to give him a hiding?"

"No, thanks," said Harper. "I don't want to be had up on a charge of pigslaughter."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Then we'll deal with the fat toad ourselves," said Manners. "We'll bump him till he hasn't got a breath in his body!"

"Let me put in a strong recommendation to mercy, on the grounds of his youth and innocence," said Harper.

"He'll get no mercy from us!" said Tom Merry grimly. "We're not going to have rotten rumours of this sort circulated through the school. Let's go and find Trimble, you chaps."

And the Terrible Three nodded to Harper, and set off in quest of the fat junior.

Baggy Trimble was run to earth in his study.

"I say, you fellows," he began, as Tom Merry & Co. burst in. "Have you heard the latest?"

"We have!" said Tom Merry, glaring at Baggy. "And we're going to give you the bumping of your life, for spreading this cock-and-bull yarn about Jack Harper!"

Trimble backed away in alarm.

"Oh, really——" he protested. "It isn't a cock-and-bull yarn, Merry. It's the solemn truth—as sure as I stand here! I followed that bounder Harper into the woods, and saw him meet Dawlish——"

"That's a lie, to start with!" growled Tom Merry. "How could he possibly have met Dawlish, when Dawlish is behind prison bars, serving a term of penal servitude?"

"I tell you——"

"Don't argue with the fat worm, Tommy," said Manners. "Bump him!"

The Terrible Three closed upon Trimble.

"Hands off!" roared that youth. "If you lay so much as a finger on me I—I'll tell Railton! I'll tell the Head! Why can't you believe a fellow when he's telling you the solemn, sober truth? Yarooop!"

Baggy Trimble broke off with a wild yell of anguish as he descended to the floor with a terrific concussion. Three times in succession he went crashing to the carpet; and three separate and distinct yells of anguish rang out on the morning air.

Tom Merry & Co. strode out of the study, and slammed the door, leaving a dazed and bewildered Baggy sitting upon the floor, and wondering if an earthquake had hit him.

CHAPTER 7.
Talbot's Rival!

"IT'S a weally wippin' mornin', deah gal!"

Thus Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Certainly it was a ripping morning—sunny and summery. And Miss Marie, the "deah gal" whom Arthur Augustus addressed, heartily agreed.

Marie had been on night duty in the sanny. The mumps patients, Curly Gibson and Jameson, were running high temperatures, and causing a little anxiety. Marie had been in attendance on them for the greater part of the night, and now she was taking a turn in the quadrangle, inhaling the fresh morning air as if it held some healthful anodyne.

Arthur Augustus was in his flannels. It was Saturday, and St. Jim's had a day of immunity from lessons.

The swell of St. Jim's fell into step with Miss Marie as she walked beneath the elms. Occasionally he stole a sidelong glance of admiration at his companion. Marie was off duty for the day, and she had discarded her rather prim nurse's uniform in favour of a dainty summer dress. She did not look a bit tired after her vigil. On the contrary, she was bright and full of spirits. Arthur Augustus reflected that he had seldom seen Miss Marie look so charming.

"I have a pwoposal to make, deah gal," he remarked at length.

"A proposal?" echoed Marie, looking startled.

"Yaas. To-day is Satahday."

"I noticed something to that effect on the calendar," murmured Marie.

"An' instead of bein' a wotten, wainy Satahday, like we usually get, it's a perfect peach of a day," Arthur Augustus went on. "Ideal for a day's outin', you know."

Marie nodded.

"It happens to be the last day of the Horsham Cwicket Week," said the swell of St. Jim's. "Sussex are playin' Loamshire, an' it looks like bein' an excitin' finish. An' that is where my pwoposal comes in. It would give me gweat pleasuah, Miss Mawie, to take you ovah to Horsham to see the cwicket."

"That is very kind of you, D'Arcy. But——"

"You are off dutay?"

"Yes, I am off duty. But——"

"Pewwaps you do not care for County cwicket?"

"I love it!"

"Then you will fall in with my pwoposal?" said Arthur Augustus eagerly.

Marie shook her head.

"I'm ever so sorry," she said, "but I've already been invited to go to Horsham with somebody else. And I've accepted."

"Oh cwumbs! Who is the lucky beggah, may I ask?"

"Jack Harper."

Arthur Augustus swallowed his disappointment manfully.

"I twust you will have a vewy enjoyable day, Miss Mawie," he said. "You could not be in bettah hands."

"Thank you!" said Miss Marie, with a smile.

Arthur Augustus saluted the girl and strolled away. He could have kicked himself for not having made his proposal sooner. But how did he know it was going to turn out such a lovely day?

Jack Harper had taken time by the forelock. He had made his proposal the day before.

Arthur Augustus had been forestalled, and he was naturally disappointed. But he bore Harper no ill-will. It was a case of "first come, first served," and the Head's secretary had been quick to seize his opportunity.

Scarcely had Arthur Augustus left Miss Marie when Talbot joined her.

Marie greeted the handsome Shell fellow cordially enough, but it struck Talbot that she was just a shade less friendly than usual. It might have been his imagination, and yet——

Talbot was not seeing so much of his girl chum these days as he would have liked. Her duties in the sanny had been keeping her fully occupied. And on those occasions when Talbot had called at the sick-bay, in the hope of having a chat with Marie, he had found Harper there.

Talbot was not a jealous sort, as a rule. He was no prey to the green-eyed monster. But he could hardly help feeling a trifle jealous of Harper. The Head's secretary seemed to be cutting him out—queering his pitch, as it were, so far as Marie Rivers was concerned. Harper had a great regard for the charming school nurse, and Marie, on her part, thought Harper a splendid fellow. The friendship between them was ripening rapidly. Talbot observed that Marie had been much brighter and happier since Harper came to St. Jim's. And she seemed to be cooling off, to some extent, in her friendship towards Talbot. This rather upset the "Toff," as Talbot used to be called. He had the prior claim to her friendship. They had grown up together, almost like brother and sister. They had shared all the ups and downs, all the joys and sorrows, of an adventurous life. In those unhappy, far-off days—the days when they had belonged to the Thieves' Club, in Angel Alley—they had been linked together by the bonds of mutual affection and regard. Together they had taken part in many thrilling and perilous exploits; together they had been banded against their common enemy, the police. And later, when the chance had come to escape from that life of lawlessness—when they had reformed and "made good"—their friendship remained secure, founded upon a rock.

And now along came this fellow Jack Harper, a temporary secretary, who would only be at St. Jim's a week or two; and Talbot found himself taking a back seat. Small wonder that he was slightly jealous of Harper. The marvel was that he was not extremely jealous.

"You are not looking wildly happy this morning," said Marie, with a smile.

"No?" said Talbot. "Well, that's not altogether surprising, Marie. I take life more seriously than most."

"Then you shouldn't."

"A fellow can't help his temperament."

"You should cultivate a cheery outlook, Toff." The old name still clung when Marie and Talbot were together. "You live too much in the past, instead of looking forward

Having roped up Taggles securely, Harper whipped out the porter's handkerchief and made it into a gag, which he thrust into the helpless man's mouth. Having done this, he went through the porter's pockets and relieved him of two large bunches of keys. (*See page* 19.)

hopefully to the future. I suggest that you take lessons in optimism from the Mark Tapley of St. Jim's—Monty Lowther."

"Lowther treats life as if it were a huge joke."

"That's better than treating it as if it were a tragedy. I don't like to see you in these humours, Toff."

There was a pause.

"I was wondering, Marie," said Talbot presently, "if you'd care to come over to Horsham with me to-day. Would you find my company too depressing?"

"Not at all," said Marie. "But——"

"You can't get away? Have you got to minister to the mumps victims?"

"No. Miss Pinch, the under-nurse, is on duty to-day."

"Then it will be all serene?"

Marie looked troubled.

"You're the second person I've had to disappoint this morning, Toff," she said. "D'Arcy invited me to Horsham, and I had to decline. And now I must decline your invitation."

Talbot's jaw dropped. He had almost taken it for granted that Marie would jump at his proposal. Overnight he had lain awake thinking about it. He had pictured the pretty little ground at Horsham, with its streams of bunting and festoons, for it was Festival Week. In his mind's eye he had conjured up visions of Marie and himself reclining in deck-chairs, lazily watching the bowling of Maurice Tate and the batting of Bowley. But these mind-pictures faded away now in the morning light. Marie could not go with him to Horsham. Why?

Talbot asked her. She explained that Jack Harper had been first in the field.

The girl put it as kindly as possible, but she could see that Talbot was hurt.

There was reproach as well as dismay in Talbot's tone as he said:

"Is it quite fair, Marie, that Harper should come before me?"

"He asked me first, Toff. Had you asked me first I should have gone with you."

That was cold consolation to the disappointed Talbot.

"You seem to be quite wrapped up in this fellow Harper," he said.

"I like him awfully," said Marie. "Don't you?"

"No."

Marie looked at her companion wide-eyed.

"My goodness, Toff! Why don't you like Jack Harper? Surely you—you're not jealous of him?"

"I believe I am a bit," answered Talbot grimly. "But it's not that."

"Then why do you dislike him?"

"I distrust him. I don't think he's straight."

Marie halted abruptly. Her eyes were flashing.

"You have no right to say that!" she exclaimed. "It's unworthy of you, Toff. Jack Harper not straight? Why, it's a slander!"

"Don't let's quarrel, Marie, for goodness' sake! I've already had trouble with Tom Merry and the others over the same thing. They seem to think that Harper is like Cæsar's wife—beyond reproach. I think otherwise. Time will show who is right and who is wrong. And if I turn out to be wrong I'll make Harper a public apology. But I feel sure I'm right."

"You are wrong—utterly, absolutely wrong!" said Marie. "Do you think I should be friendly with Harper if he was anything but what he is—a real good sort?"

"He may be all right on the surface——" began Talbot.

Marie turned abruptly away.

"Stop! I will not hear another word against him. You are behaving like a cad!"

Talbot bit his lip. He wanted to tell Marie all that he

(*Continued on page* 16.)

EDITORIAL!

By Tom Merry.

WE had our annual school sports last week, so I am devoting this issue of the "St. Jim's News" to a more or less serious account of the function.

As usual, the proceedings went off in a highly satisfactory manner, and everybody present enjoyed themselves most thoroughly—at least, if there was anybody who didn't it was entirely their own fault. We had plenty of visitors in the shape of maters and paters, and sisters and brothers, and uncles and aunts, and the ladies took advantage of the glorious weather with which we were favoured to turn up in the summeriest of summer attire, so that the sports-field recalled the photographs of Ascot that I saw in the pages of the daily newspapers a short time ago.

My guardian, Miss Priscilla Fawcett, arrived early in the afternoon, and when she saw me in running-togs she almost fainted. However, I managed to persuade her that I had sufficient strength to enable me to run a hundred yards or so without taxing my strength to the point of exhaustion, and she consented to my taking part in the sports so long as I was careful, and sat down as soon as I felt the least bit tired.

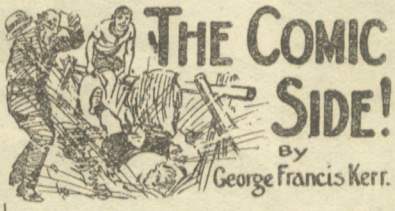
Cousin Ethel was there, of course, and Doris Levison and Phyllis Macdonald, and Edith Digby and—oh, crowds more of the fellows' relations. I haven't space to enumerate them.

Music was provided by the Wayland Prize Band—at least, that's what they call themselves, though I'm blowed if I know what they've ever got a prize for. It certainly couldn't have been for playing, unless it was for playing dominoes or darts or shove-ha'penny. Not for playing music, anyway; or if they did, the bands who competed against them, and didn't get the prize, must have been about on a par with the band that Grundy once got together.

When Kildare went up to get his Senior Victor Ludorum Prize they astonished everybody by playing "The Death of Nelson." None of us could see much connection between the school skipper taking a prize and a tune like that, although Herries, who rather fancies himself as a musical critic, said it wasn't "The Death of Nelson" at all, but "A Farmer's Boy," which didn't seem to be any more appropriate even if it was so.

Anyway, we asked the conductor of the band to explain his idea, and he was rather upset about it. It seemed that the band had been under the impression that they were playing "See the Conquering Hero Comes." He offered to play it again so that we could have a better chance of getting used to it. He said it was a tune that needed a lot of getting used to. I don't know about that, but if he'd said it about the band I shouldn't have doubted his being right.

Tom Merry



IT cannot be denied that the comic events, although they can hardly be classed as part of the sports proper, are among the most popular items on the programme.

We had several such events last sports day. There was the inevitable three-legged race, a sack race, egg-and-spoon race, pillow-fight, wheelbarrow race, boot-and-doughnut race, and a band race.

The pillow-fighting was a great success. You know the kind of thing I mean. Two chaps sit on a pole supported on trestles, and swipe away at each other with sacks full of hay until one of them loses his balance and flops off. To add to the excitement a trifle, a pit full of water had been arranged just under the pole.

Fatty Wynn was matched against Dick Brooke, and Fatty's build isn't exactly of the kind that is suited to balancing on a pole. Dick Brooke got in a couple of hefty swipes, and Fatty rolled off and plumped into the pit. There wasn't room for both Fatty and the water, so the water came out in a sort of geyser that came down a moment later like a shower-bath, and drenched Mr. Lathom, who was judging the event, and who had carelessly got too near the combatants. However, he is a good sport, and he laughed as much as we did before handing over the judge's score-card to Railton, and going off into the House for a change of togs.

The three-legged race was for the fags, and it was won in a canter by Wally D'Arcy and Curly Gibson, who had been practising for weeks, and seemed as much at home with three legs between them as if they had been the Siamese Twins. Levison minor pulled off the sack race, coming down the field in a series of long hops like a young kangaroo.

The boot-and-doughnut race was quite a novelty. A pile of old boots of all sizes and descriptions had been piled in a heap at one end of the course, and a plateful of doughnuts were on a table a hundred yards or so away. Entrants had to run to the boot pile first, pick out a pair from the assorted heap, take off their running-shoes, and put the boots on; then run to the table, eat two doughnuts, and then race across to the winning-post. There was a pretty mix-up at the boot pile, the first chap to get away being young Digges, of the New House, in a pair of old elastic-sided boots about four sizes too big for him. He shuffled across to the table and started to wolf his first doughnut. I dare say he would have won the event hands down if it hadn't been for the fact that some unknown joker had removed the official pile of doughnuts and substituted another lot, into each of which a spoonful of mustard had been carefully inserted.

Young Digges had no sooner bitten a piece out of his first doughnut than he dropped the rest of it as though it had been red-hot—and I'll bet it tasted as though it was—and set out for the nearest water-tap. He had to pass the winning-post on his way, so he got the first prize, after all, when it was discovered what had happened to the doughnuts.

ALL THE WINNERS!

By Robert Arthur Digby.

TOM MERRY has asked me to write up a short account of the sports, giving a few details of each event and the names of the winners, and, to the best of my ability, I will endeavour to comply with the request. I shall not give the results of the heats, but of finals only, and I have only space for junior events.

JUNIOR 100 YARDS.

This had been generally considered as being Blake's race, as he won it last year, and it was known that during his training this year he had succeeded in reducing his time by a second and two-fifths. Unfortunately, however, he suffered a mishap in his heat, and so did not reach the final.

Result: 1. Digby. 2. Lumley-Lumley. 3. Clive.

JUNIOR 200 YARDS.

This was a hotly-contested race, and the winner and runner-up breasted the tape almost together.

Result: 1. Dane. 2. Levison. 3. Julian.

JUNIOR 440 YARDS.

This was rather a disappointing race from one point of view, as it had been hoped that Tom Merry would better his last year's time, but he failed to do so, being three seconds and a fifth over.

Result: 1. Tom Merry. 2. Jack Blake. 3. Wildrake.

JUNIOR HALF-MILE.

Result: 1. Levison. 2. Figgins. 3. D'Arcy.

JUNIOR MILE.

This race promised to be anybody's until the last lap, during which Tom Merry and Talbot fought a desperate duel right up to the tape.

Result: 1. Tom Merry. 2. Talbot. 3. Kerr.

MILE BICYCLE RACE (Junior).

Result: 1. Redfern. 2. Noble. 3. Blake.

JUNIOR HURDLES.

Result: 1. A. A. D'Arcy. 2. Owen. 3. Wilkins.

HIGH JUMP.

Monty Lowther, who won this event last year with a jump of 4 feet 9 ins., was taken to 4 ft. 9½ ins. by Lawrence on this occasion, but managed to retain his title by clearing the bar at 4 ft. 10 ins.

JUNIOR LONG JUMP.

The long legs of Figgins, of the New House, served him in good stead in this event.

Result: 1. Figgins. 2. Tom Merry. 3. Blake.

THROWING THE CRICKET BALL.

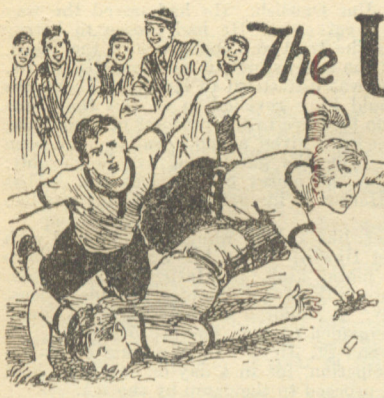
Result: 1. Wynn. 2. R. R. Cardew (the only event for which he deigned to enter).

RELAY RACE.

Four teams competed—two School House teams and two New House.

1. Tom Merry, Talbot, Lowther, Julian.
2. Blake, Digby, D'Arcy, Levison.
3. Figgins, Kerr, Thompson, Pratt.
4. Redfern, Lawrence, Owen Koumi Rao.

Result: 1. Tom Merry's team. 2. Redfern's team. 3. Blake's team. 4. Figgins' team.



The UNOFFICIAL CLOWN!

By George Wilkins.

I'VE got a cousin at a school in the North of England, and last week I had a letter from him, in which he informed me that he'd won two first prizes and one second at their school sports. He was no end bucked about it, and he went on to say that he would probably have won the half-mile in addition if he hadn't ricked his ankle at the long jump. In fact, he covered several sheets of notepaper with a full and detailed account of the affair, and, among other things, he mentioned that they had engaged a clown to provide a bit of comic relief between the events. He said that that part of the programme had been a great success, and suggested that it wouldn't be a bad idea if we tried the same stunt at St. Jim's when our sports came off. But, good as the notion was, it was like sending coals to Newcastle.

Fancy our going to the trouble and expense of engaging a professional clown to liven up the proceedings by making a fool of himself when we've already got George Alfred Grundy amongst us! I'll back Grundy against a professional clown any old day in the week. The very best of clowns are no more than funny, while George Alfred is an absolute scream.

Not that he intends to be, of course. In fact, he doesn't even know that he is, and it would be about as safe to inform him of the fact as it would be to go up and try to pet a mad bull.

And whereas a professional clown would have to limit his anties to the intervals between the events, Grundy is on show practically all the while; for he enters for every event that is open to him—which means everything barring a few items limited to members of the Third Form and a few for the seniors.

But whatever you say about Grundy, you've got to give him credit for one thing. He may be the biggest ass that was ever allowed to walk about on two legs, but he's no slacker. The amount of training he put in during the few weeks before the sports ought to have made him fit enough to romp away with every prize on the board, and if he'd had the slightest ability as a jumper or a runner to start off with, there's not much doubt that he would have done. He made his relay team practise hard, too, in spite of their protests, lugging them out of bed at a quarter to five in the morning, and taking them on to Little Side to run and run and run till they were fit to drop down, and when they crawled in to breakfast they looked as if they were just about ready to go to bed again.

On two occasions Tompkins fell asleep in class, and both Skimmy and Alan Lorne were being continually pulled up for "dreaminess" during lessons. Poor old Skimmy wanted to train by reading books on running, but Grundy would have none of that. He kept them well down to it, and I'm bound to confess that he really did make a marvellous improvement in them; but, considering what they were to start with, that isn't saying much. Even Grundy realised that, and more than once he grumbled about myself and Gunn not being in the team.

"It's all very well saying that you can't run again directly after the hurdles!" he said one evening during tea. "I'm in the hurdles, too, and yet I've got to run in the relay!"

Gunn winked across at me.

"That's so, Grundy," he agreed. "But then, you see, you're an exception. You can do these things; but we're only ordinary chaps, and we can't expect to be up to your standard. I mean to say, after all, you're Grundy, aren't you?"

"There's a lot in that," nodded Grundy, quite seriously. "I can't expect others to do the same as I can do. But I'm not satisfied with Skimpole and Lorne and Tompkins. They're duds—absolute duds! I'm disappointed in them! I've taught them all I know, and yet the silly asses are none the better for it. You might almost say they still know nothing."

"Well, that's only what you could expect, isn't it?" put in Gunn. "I mean to say," he added, rather hastily, in case there was any possibility of the inference becoming plain to even Grundy's slow intelligence, "they're such hopeless asses, aren't they?"

"Asses isn't the word for them!" growled Grundy disgustedly. "But if I don't make something of 'em in the end, I'll—I'll—I'll jolly well bust 'em! As it is, I'm none too sure about pulling that relay race off."

Gunn and I stared at him in amazement. We're pretty well used to Grundy, but this was a trifle too much.

"P-p-pup-pull it off!" I stuttered. "Great pip, you surely don't think you stand an earthly chance of coming in anywhere near the finish, do you?"

"Eh?" snapped Grundy. "What do you think I'm training my team for? Of course we're going to pull it off!"

Well, there's no arguing with Grundy when he gets in that mood—not that there is much use at the best of times—so Gunn and I very wisely said no more.

Grundy kept his high-speed training up to the very last minute, and when the day of the sports arrived he and his team were more fagged than fit. But Grundy was supremely confident.

He turned up arrayed in silk vest and shorts, and there was no gainsaying that, in the matter of appearance, he was absolutely IT. Unfortunately, that was the only direction in which there was any likelihood of his achieving distinction—in any fashion other than a distinctly unpleasant one, that is. That he did succeed in distinguishing himself, in his own way, goes without saying.

For instance, in the first event, the hundred yards, he flung himself forward just as the starter gave the warning and prepared to fire the pistol, and was half-way along the course before he could be recalled. Then when the runners did really get away, he tripped over the laces of one of his shoes, which had come unfastened, and rolled across the tapes directly in the path of Blake and Julian, who couldn't pull up in time, and went sprawling over him, spoiling their chances altogether. What they said about him would have caused a less thick-skinned chap to go off and hide himself for the rest of the afternoon, but it didn't have the slightest impression on Grundy. He said that the accident was worse for him than for them, because it had prevented his winning the heat in a canter, whereas they hadn't stood the ghost of a chance, anyway, so they'd lost nothing by being put out of the race—which was pretty cool, considering that Blake won the hundred yards last year, and had since improved on his time by more than a second, so that he'd practically been a certainty for it again this year.

In the two-twenty and quarter-mile Grundy was just beginning to get into his stride by the time the winners were fighting out the last few yards; and in the half-mile, which was two laps of the ground, he arrived at the winning-post—which was also the starting-point—just as the runners were lining up for the second heat.

In the cricket-ball event he was permitted one throw, and one only. I had thought that perhaps there might be a possibility of Grundy's pulling this event off, or, at any rate, putting up a creditable performance, because he's a hefty sort of chap, and can throw a ball as far as most chaps in the Junior School. The trouble with him is that, though you can be certain that when a cricket-ball leaves his hand it's going a long way, you can never be certain in what direction it's going.

Selby afterwards maintained that Grundy had deliberately aimed at him; but that, of course, is rot, as anybody with the slightest knowledge of Grundy could have told him. If Grundy had aimed at Selby, then Selby would have been in the safest position of anybody on the field. It was a pure accident, of course, but it was unfortunate for Selby that he'd put on a new topper in honour of the occasion. The cricket-ball biffed that topper fairly and squarely, and you can take it from me that it wasn't the cricket-ball that got the worst of the encounter. Grundy was most indignant. He said that Selby had purposely put his silly napper there out of spite to spoil his shot. Anyway, neither Selby nor anybody else spoilt Grundy's next shot, because the judges took jolly good care he didn't get one.

In the obstacle race he got lost under the tarpaulin for nearly five minutes, and finished up by getting wedged in a barrel, and a couple of fellows had the merry dickens of a job to get him out in one piece.

But the relay race! I wish I'd got space to give a full description of it, though I know I couldn't do justice to it. There were four teams represented—four teams, and Grundy's collection of misfits. The course was a mile, with each runner taking a quarter-mile, then passing on the stick to the next in his team—four laps of the ground altogether.

Unfortunately for Grundy, the cricket ball biffed Selby's new topper fairly and squarely.

In each case the captains of the various teams started off as first runners, Grundy amongst them, and naturally the other four had passed over the sticks to their next men before Grundy was much more than half-way to his relay, who happened to be Skimpole. Poor old Skimmy hadn't got more than a vague idea of what he was supposed to do, and when Grundy dashed up, pushed the stick into his hand, and shouted with all the breath he'd got left, "Run!" Skimmy stood looking about him in a bewildered fashion. The fellows who were standing near entered into the spirit of the thing, and yelled "Run, Skimmy—run!"—with most unexpected results.

For Skimmy, realising at long last that the time had arrived for him to run, but being absolutely ignorant of the direction in which he was to run, suddenly set off at his best pace in the direction from which Grundy had just come, and, not knowing when he was supposed to stop, he simply kept right on until he reached the School House, whereupon he decided that he must have done all that had been expected of him, and went into Study No. 9 on the Shell corridor, where he made himself comfortable with a volume of the renowned Professor Balmycrumpet's interminable treatise on "Evolution," and promptly forgot all about the sports in general and the relay race in particular.

THE PLUNDERED SCHOOL!

(Continued from page 13.)

suspected. He wanted to tell her that Jack Harper was a member of the Dawlish gang, the selfsame fellow who had bound and gagged her own father, John Rivers, at Eastwood House, on the occasion of the Christmas burglary. But what would be the use? Marie would not hear a word against Harper. She was strongly biased in the fellow's favour. She would sooner have believed that the Head of St. Jim's was a wolf in sheep's clothing than that Harper was anything but straight.

The girl had turned her back on Talbot. She was very angry with him. That was obvious.

With a clouded brow Talbot turned back into the building. The radiant summer sunshine, in which he had revelled when he first came down, now seemed to mock him. He had looked forward, with boyish ardour, to a red-letter day—a perfect day in the company of his girl chum. And now a breach had arisen between them—a breach which threatened to widen.

If Talbot had never known the full meaning of misery he knew it that morning.

CHAPTER 8.
Talbot's Resolve !

"WELL, and how are the patients progressing?" Miss Marie asked the question rather anxiously as she came into the sick-bay that evening.

Curly Gibson and Jameson wriggled into sitting postures, and grinned.

"We're as fit as fiddles, Miss Marie!" said Curly.

"There's been a big drop in our temperaments," explained Jameson.

Marie laughed.

"You mean temperatures, surely? I'm very glad to hear it. You were far from fit when I left you this morning. I've been rather worried. It was the only thing that clouded an otherwise perfect day."

"Have you had a good time, Miss Marie?" inquired Curly Gibson.

"A splendid time!"

Marie sighed happily at the recollection. She insisted on the fags lying down again, and being tucked in. Then she seated herself in a chair by the window, and gazed out over the dusky quadrangle, reviewing her day out with Jack Harper.

It had been a wonderful day. Harper had set himself out to give Marie a good time, and he had succeeded completely. They had taxied to Wayland, and taken the train to Horsham. They had arrived at the quaint old Sussex town in time to see an hour's cricket before lunch. The green playing-pitch, the fashionable crowd, the immense queue of motor-cars, the changing fortunes of the game—all had fascinated Marie beyond measure. Then there had been lunch in the refreshment marquee, and tea at a delightful cafe in the Carfax.

Above all, there had been the cheery companionship of Jack Harper.

The Head's secretary had excelled himself. His gay chatter, his ready wit, and his fund of amusing anecdotes, had kept Marie in the highest spirits. If Harper was a rogue, as Talbot suggested, then he was the most cheerful rogue Marie had ever met. He had spent money lavishly, laughing away Marie's protests. He had taken her here, there, and everywhere. He had been consideration itself.

As a matter of fact, Harper had determined to enjoy himself that day and to give Miss Marie a day to remember. He had plunged whole-heartedly into the whirl of healthy pleasures, so that he might forget for a time other and more sinister things. For that one day Harper forced himself to forget who and what he was—a member of a gang of cracksmen, who were plotting to plunder the school. And he had managed to suppress those uneasy stirrings of conscience which had caused him a sleepless night not long before.

Harper had deliberately chosen the crooked path. There could be no retracting now. He had handed over the plans and photographs to Jim Dawlish. He had paved the way for the cracksman's great coup. He had chosen to betray the school—to betray the trust and confidence of the Head, and the masters, and the fellows, not to mention Miss Marie.

The whole business was distasteful to Harper. There was a time when he would have revelled in it, but that time was past. He took no pleasure in the prospect of plundering St. Jim's. He would have given a good deal to have been able to break away from the gang, and live honourably. But he was utterly at the mercy of Jim Dawlish. That precious rascal had Harper in his grip—a grip that was like a strangle-hold.

A stronger character, like Talbot, would have severed with the gang, and defied Dawlish to do his worst. But there was a weakness, a moral kink, in Harper's composition. He had not enough strength of will; he took the line of least resistance too readily. A hundred excuses might be found for him; but they remained excuses, not justifications.

During that week-end St. Jim's was in a buzz of excitement and eager anticipation, for in a day or two the school would break up, and proceed to the camp by the sea.

Tom Merry & Co. were in great spirits at the prospect. So were Jack Blake & Co., and Figgins & Co. In fact, all the Co.'s.

The St. Jim's fellows anticipated having their fill of fun and adventure, in spite of the fact that lessons were to proceed as usual in camp.

But there were a few glum faces in the school that week-end. Certain individuals, through force of circumstances, would have to stay behind.

Curly Gibson and Jameson pleaded with the doctor to pronounce them fit and well by Thursday. But the medico shook his head. He insisted that they must remain in the sanny another week before being allowed to join their schoolfellows in camp.

This meant that Miss Pinch and Marie Rivers would have to stay behind, also, to nurse the patients.

Taggles, the porter, was to remain on duty at the lodge. The school valuables were not being taken to camp. They were being left, and the Head naturally deemed it wise that Taggles should remain at his post, to act as the school's guardian and custodian. Taggles didn't mind a great deal. He was no lover of sleeping under canvas. It touched up his rheumatics "somethin' crool," as he expressed it.

There were two other persons who had decided to stay behind, though neither had any right to do so. Jack Harper was one, Talbot of the Shell the other.

The Head instructed Harper, the day before the school broke up, to proceed to his home.

"I shall not want you for a fortnight, my boy," he said. "We have made excellent progress with the book, and your work has given me the greatest satisfaction. I will pay you your salary to date, and will ask you to return to the school at the end of the fortnight and resume your duties."

Harper assented to this arrangement, but he had no intention of going home. He had, in fact, no home to go to. His unjust expulsion from St. Clive's had alienated him from his people. He intended to stay on at St. Jim's, and admit the cracksmen when they came, and help them with their nefarious work.

As for Talbot, his suspicion of Harper had ripened into a certainty that the fellow was brewing mischief.

Talbot had been doing a little amateur detective work. He had kept watch on Harper without the latter's knowledge, and he had discovered that Harper was in constant communication with someone outside the school. Talbot feared that Jim Dawlish and his confederates were lurking in the neighbourhood, waiting for the school to go to camp, so that they might break into the building and pillage it.

Talbot said nothing of his fears to Tom Merry & Co. He knew that they would only be angry with him. They had become stout champions of Jack Harper, and, like Miss Marie, they refused to hear anything to his discredit. As for the notion that Jim Dawlish & Co. were in the district, Tom Merry & Co. would have scouted it as wildly improbable.

But if Talbot's fears were well-founded—and he believed them to be—then the school was in danger, and somebody must be on the spot to checkmate the cracksmen. Taggles would be powerless to cope with a raid on the school; he would probably be snoring in his parlour when the plunderers arrived on the scene. And Miss Pinch and Miss Marie could hardly be expected to hold a desperate gang of cracksmen at bay.

If it came to that, Talbot himself could not do very much. But he would at least be on his guard, and by promptly phoning for the police when the raiders came, he might be able to compass their arrest.

He could not warn the police in advance, because he had no definite proof that a raid was being contemplated. He only suspected, and the police would not act on a mere surmise. They would require something more tangible to go upon.

Now came the question. Under what pretext could Talbot stay behind at St. Jim's?

There seemed only one way. On the eve of going to camp he must feign illness.

Talbot hated having to play a part, but he could think of no other way of achieving his object. Stay behind he must. He would never have forgiven himself had he gone off to camp and left the school to the mercy of the plunderers.

When Thursday came there were scenes of great bustle and animation at St. Jim's.

The fellows had packed such belongings as they would require, and a fleet of charabancs arrived at the school to convey the happy throng to the camp on the coast.

Wonderful scenes were witnessed in the old quadrangle.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy came staggering down the School House steps with some of his baggage. He was a human island in a sea of hat-boxes. And he was as heavily laden as a beast of burden. A roar of laughter greeted Gussy's appearance.

"Oh deah!" panted Arthur Augustus. "I quite fail to see the weason for this wibald laughtah. Instead of cacklin' like a lot of bwoody hens, I wish you fellows would give me a hand with my belongin's."

Jack Blake and Herries and Digby ran to the rescue of their chum.

Gussy had several more instalments of luggage to come, but even he was ready at last, and clambered into a charabanc with a crowd of Fourth-Formers and Shell fellows.

"Where's old Talbot?" asked Manners, with a puzzled look. "I've been looking for him everywhere, but I can't spot him."

"Haven't you heard?" said Jack Blake. "The poor beggar's on the sick list. He was taken queer first thing this morning."

"What awf'ly wotten luck!" said Arthur Augustus, genuinely distressed. "Poor old Talbot!"

"What's the matter with him?" asked Tom Merry. "He seemed quite all right last night."

"He collapsed this morning when he was dressing," said Blake. "Weren't you there?"

"We left the dorm before Talbot came down."

"That explains why you knew nothing about it. Anyway, the poor old bean went down wallop. Fainted clean away."

"Funny for Talbot to do that," said Tom Merry, wrinkling his brows. "Talbot's not the swoony sort."

"Of course, they took him to the sanny," said Blake. "He ought to be fit again in a day or so. Then he'll come straight on to camp."

"We ought to pop up and see him before we go," said Manners.

"No time," said Tom Merry. "We're off now."

The leading charabanc started off as Tom spoke. And then, amid scenes of the wildest enthusiasm, the entire fleet moved off with its cargo of happy passengers.

There was cheering and shouting and singing, and tin-whistles and mouth-organs set up a discordant din in the fags' charabanc. Herries of the Fourth had his cornet with him, and he puffed at it, purple-cheeked, while the fellows sitting near him stopped their ears.

Handkerchiefs were fluttered gaily towards the window of the sanny, at which the smiling face of Marie Rivers appeared. And Tom Merry & Co. thundered a hearty "Au revoir!" to Jack Harper, who was standing in the doorway of Taggles' lodge, watching the exodus.

The St. Jim's fellows were off and away at last, and the boy cracksman's grim duty lay immediately ahead of him.

CHAPTER 9.
Betrayed!

ST. JIM'S lay still and silent under the early stars. The sounds of schoolboy shouts and laughter no longer echoed down the long corridors. The studies and Common-rooms were deserted. Nothing stirred in the shadowy quadrangle save the branches of the elms.

Taggles, the porter, was asleep in his parlour, after a strenuous day. His hands were clasped in the region of his waist, his eyes were closed, and his mouth was open. An unmusical snore reverberated through the little parlour.

Only in the school sanny was there any sign of activity.

Marie Rivers went about her duties as usual. She had three patients on her hands now, for Talbot was on the sick-list. He had been in bed all day, in the next room to Curly Gibson and Jameson. The doctor had been sent for, and he was a little puzzled as to what was wrong with Talbot. Certainly the junior had every appearance of being ill. He was white-faced and listless. The doctor said he must remain in bed until his complaint could be definitely diagnosed.

It did not cross the medico's mind that Talbot was shamming. He rather suspected that the junior had caught a chill.

Marie was sorry for her old chum, of course, but she did not fuss over him. Her quarrel with Talbot, on the subject of Jack Harper, was still fresh in the girl's memory. She avoided Talbot as much as possible, and induced Miss Pinch to take in his meals. But now, at eight o'clock in the evening, she felt bound to visit him, and see that he was comfortably settled for the night.

Marie tapped on the door of Talbot's room and entered. She was astonished to find that the new patient was up and dressed. He was sitting on the bed putting on his shoes.

"Why, Toff," ejaculated Marie, "what does this mean?"

"I'm getting up!" said Talbot. His voice was rather grim.

"Yes, I see you are; but you've no business to be. The doctor said——"

"The doctor's a shortsighted old fossil," said Talbot disrespectfully. "He might have known that I was shamming."

"What! You—you mean to say you are not ill?"

"I'm as fit as you are, Marie. I simply hated to have to sham illness. I didn't do it for a silly joke, I can assure you. But it was the only way I could dodge going to camp with the others."

Marie stared at Talbot in blank perplexity.

"I—I don't understand," she said. "Why have you stayed behind?"

"To keep Harper under observation. I suspect him, as you know. I suspect that there's going to be a raid on the school."

Marie gave a gasp.

"What nonsense!" she exclaimed. "Toff, you make me very angry, with your ridiculous notions. You have deceived me, you have deceived the doctor, you have deceived everybody by feigning illness. And now you calmly tell me that you have stayed behind in order to spy on Jack Harper! The whole thing is preposterous."

Talbot shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm convinced that Harper is crooked," he said.

"And I am equally convinced that he is thoroughly straight," said Marie, her eyes flashing. "I think you are acting very meanly and basely, Toff. I should not have thought you capable of it."

Talbot rose to his feet. He was about to lay his hand on Marie's shoulder, but the girl stepped quickly back. She eyed him coldly, contemptuously.

"Look here, Marie," said Talbot earnestly, "Harper's up to no good. Why is he still here? The Head has paid him off—he's not wanted again until the school comes back from camp. Why is he hanging around here? Why hasn't he gone home?"

"He has not been paid off," said Marie. "He told me so himself. He is staying here to carry on with his work—typing the Head's book."

"If Harper told you that he was lying."

"Enough! I won't hear another word against him," cried Marie. "And I'll never forgive you, Toff, for thinking such horrid things of him, and for staying behind to spy on him!"

Marie's voice trembled. She was on the borderland of tears.

Talbot looked—and felt—utterly miserable. He would have given anything to have avoided a breach with his old girl chum. But whilst they were in such sharp disagreement about Harper a rupture in their friendship was inevitable. Marie believed Harper to be one of the best fellows breathing; Talbot believed him to be a cracksman and a crook.

Harper's true character was shortly to be revealed with dramatic suddenness.

Marie was about to turn her back on Talbot, and quit the room, when there was a clatter on the stairs, as if someone was ascending them in hot haste.

The next instant the door was flung open and Harper burst into the room. He was flushed and excited.

"Quick!" he panted. "There's been a motor accident outside the school gates. Didn't you hear that awful crash just now?"

Marie shook her head. Talbot looked at Harper suspiciously.

"There's no time to lose," said Harper. "First aid is wanted at once!"

"Look here, Harper," began Talbot, "what's the game?"

But Harper was gone. And Marie was gone too, in a flash, to fetch bandages and lint and restoratives. The girl had a mental vision of an appalling calamity on the road—a collision between two cars—men, and perhaps women, lying injured and helpless in the roadway.

Talbot had no such vision. There came to him an uneasy conviction that Harper's story of a motor smash was a myth. He ran out into the corridor, and tried to intercept Marie as she came out of the adjoining room with her bag.

"Marie, stop!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "I want you not to go! That bounder was lying——"

Marie did not seem to hear. At all events, she did not

heed. She darted down the stairs, intent only upon her mission of first aid.

Talbot clenched his hands, and stood helplesssly at the head of the stairs. But only for an instant. He rushed after Marie, fully intending to restrain her by force, if necessary.

But Marie Rivers was an athletic girl, fleet-footed in an emergency. She was across the dark quadrangle and through the school gateway before Talbot caught up with her. And then it was too late.

Out in the roadway Marie stopped short, panting, and looked about her.

Certainly there was a car in the road, but it was not overturned, nor did it appear to have come to grief in any way. The only strange thing about it was that both headlights and rearlight were very low and subdued.

Greatly puzzled, Marie stepped up to the car, and as she did so a couple of men sprang out from behind it.

Before the girl could divine what was happening she was seized in no gentle manner and bundled into the car.

"Help!"

Talbot was well within call, as that cry rang out. But he was powerless to go to Marie's assistance. The men were upon him with the agility of panthers, and the next moment he found himself floundering in the car with Marie.

The whole business had occupied only a few seconds. The kidnappers had uttered no word, and it had been impossible to recognise them in the darkness.

One of the men jumped into the driver's seat, and pressed the self-starter, and the car leapt forward like a live thing. As it did so the other man sprang inside, to mount guard over the prisoners.

The car fairly flashed down the lonely lane, and St. Jim's was soon left far behind.

"Sit down an' behave yourselves!" said a gruff voice. "It's rather dark in here, but not too dark for you to see what I'm holdin'!"

And Marie and Talbot saw the glitter of a revolver. They sat back in the seat, stunned and stupefied.

Talbot thought he recognised the voice of the man who had spoken. It was the voice of Pat Donovan, a burly scoundrel who was the right-hand man of Jim Dawlish.

For some time neither of the prisoners stirred or spoke. Talbot was the first to find his voice.

"Well, Marie," he said grimly, "what is your opinion of Jack Harper now?"

"He—he has betrayed us!" muttered Marie, speaking like one in a dream.

"Exactly! His story of the motor accident was a fake to lure us down to the gates. We're in the hands of the gang now, and Jim Dawlish has the school at his mercy."

Marie made no answer. She sat stunned, as if in a stupor.

With painful suddenness the truth had been revealed to her—that Jack Harper, the fellow she had idolised, was a traitor. Bitter was her disillusionment now; bitter her thoughts as she sat there beside Talbot, a helpless prisoner. Her whole world seemed to be tumbling in ruins about her. White-faced, she stared ahead of her with unseeing eyes.

Talbot had been right, after all, with regard to Harper. Marie owed him an apology. But she could not bring herself to utter it just then. Later, perhaps, when she was mistress of her emotions, she would ask Talbot's forgiveness.

Meanwhile, the car rushed onwards through the night.

CHAPTER 10.

The Plunderers!

"WELL, Harper, we manœuvred that little job all right," said Jim Dawlish, in tones of great satisfaction. "Now that we've got rid of that precious pair we can get busy."

"Where are they being taken to?" asked Harper.

"To our new headquarters—a lonely house on the coast," was the reply.

"You are going to keep them prisoners?"

"Of course."

"But why? I don't quite tumble to the game."

Dawlish laughed gaily.

"There's method in everythin' I do," he said. "I didn't kidnap them just for the fun of the thing. To-morrow mornin' the school will be found plundered, an' Talbot an' that minx will be found missin'. It will, therefore, be assumed that they had a hand in the plunderin'."

"Great Scott!"

"Talbot's past is well known," Dawlish went on. "Everybody knows he was a cracksman before he came to St. Jim's. It will be supposed that he's gone back to the old life. They'll think that he stayed behind at the school for the express purpose of carryin' out the burglary, an' that the Rivers girl was in co. with him. Their sudden disappearance will at once bring them under suspicion. Nobody will imagine they've been kidnapped an' decoyed to a lonely house. Come, Harper! You don't seem to be bubblin' over with enthusiasm exactly. You must admit it was a very cute dodge of mine."

"I—I betrayed them," he muttered. "You don't suppose I can feel very jubilant about it, do you? They trusted me—at least, Marie did—and I lured her into your hands by a trick."

"You played your part jolly well," said Dawlish. "But for goodness' sake don't start bein' remorseful about it! You were simply doin' your duty to me, your employer."

"But in doing my duty to you I betrayed Marie——"

"Bah! You're getting too thin-skinned for words, Harper! Anyway, you've nothin' to worry about. The girl will be looked after all right. We sha'n't starve her."

Harper was silent.

"Why, I believe you're spoony on the minx!" declared Dawlish, peering at his companion through the gloom.

Harper flushed.

"Marie's a good sort," he said. "I don't like the idea of her being kidnapped. Still less do I like the idea of her being suspected of having had a hand in this affair. I'm not spoony on her, as you call it; but I don't want to see her suffer."

Dawlish frowned.

"Enough of this sentimental rot!" he growled. "We can't afford to study the feelin's of other people in our profession. Our job is to feather our own nests, an' let everybody else go hang. It's no use bein' soft an' sentimental. Why, if we stopped to consider other people we should never carry off a single coup!"

They were standing in the lane, under the shadow of the school wall. The car, with Marie and Talbot on board, had disappeared some time before.

Black darkness had set in, and the conditions were ideal for the job in hand.

Jim Dawlish was itching to lay hands on the plunder. Hundreds of pounds worth of valuables were at his mercy. And now that Talbot and Marie had been got out of the way there was nothing to fear. Taggles, the porter, was still sound asleep in his parlour. Even Marie's shrill cry for help had not aroused him.

In the vast building of St. Jim's only one light glimmered. That was from the window of the sanny, where Miss Pinch was in attendance upon the two fags, and doubtless wondering what had become of Marie. But Dawlish had nothing to fear in that quarter, either. A woman and two helpless fags would be powerless to prevent the school being plundered. Probably the job could be done without their knowing anything about it.

Jack Harper did not share the keenness and eagerness of his chief. He, at that moment, felt unspeakably wretched. Judas-like, he had betrayed Marie and Talbot into the hands of the cracksmen; and the thought haunted him. But he had now gone too far to retract. He had paved the way for the raid on St. Jim's; he must now go through with it.

"Are you ready?" muttered Dawlish.

The boy nodded.

"Then we'll get to business. The porter is fast asleep in his chair—I peeped at him through the window just now. But in case he should wake up an' disturb us he had better be bound an' gagged. You can do that part of the bizney. Turn out the light in his parlour before you tackle him. He won't be able to see you clearly in the dark, an' it's ten to one he'll take you to be Talbot. Carry on with the good work, Harper!"

Harper roused himself with an effort, and proceeded to do his chief's bidding.

The whole thing was distasteful to him; but there could be no question of backing out now. The stronger will of his evil genius, Jim Dawlish, dominated his own. Like a disciplined soldier, Harper was ready to obey any order that Dawlish chose to give.

Without troubling to exercise much caution he opened the door of the porter's lodge and stepped into the little parlour and promptly lowered the gas.

Taggles was still snoring blissfully. He did not stir as Harper, in the subdued light, moved about the room and rummaged in the cupboard for some rope.

He discovered a coil in the bottom of the cupboard and began to unravel it. Then he approached the slumbering Taggles and proceeded to bind him to his chair, firmly and dexterously.

It was not to be expected that Taggles would remain asleep during this operation. He opened his eyes with a start as the rope was drawn taut, pinning him to his seat.

"Hellup!" shouted Taggles. "Wot's 'appenin'? I'm bein' hassaulted, as ever was!"

The rope was again drawn taut—about Taggles' legs this time. The porter struggled and roared, but his efforts to free himself were unavailing. He was a helpless prisoner.

Peering with wrathful gaze into the gloom of his parlour Taggles strove to discover the identity of his assailant.

"Why, it's Master Talbot!" ejaculated Taggles, in astonishment. "Lemme loose! Lemme loose at once, you young

rip, or I'll report yer! I don't 'old with these 'ere practical jokes. This 'ere rope is a-crampin' an' a-chafin' of my legs. Lemme loose—that's wot I'm a-tellin' yer!"

Harper made no reply. He was looking around him for a suitable gag. A coloured handkerchief protruded from the porter's pocket. Harper whipped it out and made it into a gag, which he thrust lightly into Taggles' mouth. But it was fixed securely enough to prevent Taggles from disgorging it.

Harper then went through the porter's pockets and relieved him of two large bunches of keys. Then, completely turning out the light, which had merely been lowered before, the boy cracksman stepped out into the quadrangle, where Dawlish awaited him.

"You've trussed him up so that he can't possibly break loose?" asked Dawlish.

Harper nodded.

"An' you've got the keys?"

"Yes."

"Come along, then!"

Together they approached the school building—Dawlish chuckling with satisfaction, Harper silent and morose

The time was now ripe for ransacking the school. The plunderers would not need to hurry. They would be able to take their time about it and do the job thoroughly.

Whilst Harper had been dealing with Taggles, Dawlish had gone to the woodshed and fetched a couple of large sacks, which he now carried under his arm. They were for the accommodation of the plunder.

Dawlish took the keys from his companion and unlocked the main door of the school building. Together they passed through into the hall.

Dawlish paused for a moment, reflecting.

"I think the Head's study had better be our first port of call," he muttered. "Lead the way, Harper!"

Harper, who had made himself thoroughly familiar with the geography of St. Jim's, walked ahead, flashing his electric torch into the shadows.

In silence they proceeded to the Head's study, and Dawlish at once commenced operations on the door of the safe.

The plunderers met with little success here. Dawlish had hoped to find a rich haul of paper-money in the Head's safe; but Dr. Holmes had very wisely deposited his money and valuables with the bank before going to camp. Even Harper had not known this, though he had kept the Head under observation.

Dawlish gave a grunt of disappointment.

"Nothin' doin' here," he muttered, exploring the interior of the safe. "Nothin' but a lot of old papers, an' worthless books."

Harper was secretly relieved. He did not want the Head to be victimised. Dr. Holmes had been kindness itself to him; and to repay the Head by robbing him seemed the very depth and limit of baseness.

"We'll try the strong-room next," said Dawlish. "An' if we don't meet with better luck there, I shall begin to think that all our preparations an' precautions have been in vain."

Entrance to the strong-room was not easily effected. But Dawlish was a master-hand at that pursuit which was known to the police as "breaking and entering." The door yielded at length under the cracksman's persuasions, and he and Harper stepped inside.

There was plunder in plenty—sufficient to satisfy the most fastidious burglar.

There were gold cups and silver cups and numerous other trophies of great intrinsic value.

Dawlish fingered the various trophies almost lovingly as he transferred them to his sack, which Harper held open.

"How are you going to dispose of all this stuff?" asked Harper.

Dawlish grinned.

"I've already made arrangements with the receivers," he said. "But we can't get rid of it yet. It will have to be stored at our headquarters until we can dispose of it in safety."

"I didn't know you had this house on the coast," said Harper. "How did you manage to get it? I thought it was next-door to impossible to get a house these days."

"So it is—except in the case of haunted houses. An' The Retreat—that's the name of it— is supposed to have been haunted for centuries. It's stood empty for years. The agents practically made me a present of it. An' they vowed I wouldn't stick it for a fortnight. But I don't believe in ghosts, an' tommy-rot of that sort. Do you?"

"I don't know," said Harper. "Queer things happen sometimes in these old houses."

"But there's always a pretty simple explanation of them. Moonlight can play strange tricks, you know. Rats an' mice can kick up the dooce of an unearthly clatter. The hootin' of an owl in a near-by tree is often mistaken for somethin' supernatural. But as for ghosts actually existin', it's all bosh, my dear boy—bosh, bunkum, an' balderdash!"

And Dawlish went on piling plunder into the sack.

"How long are you going to keep Marie and Talbot in the house?" inquired Harper.

"That depends on circumstances."

"They'll try to escape, most likely."

"They'll be unlucky," said Dawlish, with a grin. "I've ordered Donovan to bundle them into the basement. It's right under the ground—as safe as a dungeon. Shouts for help can't be heard—not that there will be anybody to hear 'em, for a more lonely, desolate place I never struck. An' there can't be no escapin' through windows. You see, there aren't any. An' if the prisoners should attempt to find their way upstairs there will always be somebody on guard. We must take it in turns."

The sack was full now, and the strong-room had been stripped of all its valuables.

Dawlish, like Alexander of old, sought fresh worlds to conquer—and he found them.

Study after study was visited, and the desks ransacked.

In Study No. 6 in the Fourth Form passage, the cracksmen made an unexpected haul. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, in the hurry of packing, had left his gold watch and chain, his diamond tiepin, and his wallet on the study table. Doubtless, by this time, Gussy had discovered what he had done. But it was too late to save his property. Dawlish slipped the bulging wallet into his pocket, and the watch and chain and the tiepin followed.

"Of all the crass idiots!" said Dawlish. "Fancy leavin' all this stuff behind!"

"D'Arcy was hustled away into the charabanc before he had time to collect his wits, let alone his property," said Harper. "He had been togging himself up in the dormitory. He takes an age over his toilet, and it looked as if he would get left. So his pals fetched him out of it, and hustled him downstairs, and he hadn't a chance to return to his study to make sure he had got everything."

"Lucky for us!" chortled Dawlish.

Steadily and methodically, the work of plundering went on.

The cracksmen worked undisturbed. The only occupants of the school—Miss Pinch and the two fags in the sanny—had no suspicion of what was afoot.

Boom!

It was the solemn stroke of one sounding from the old clock-tower.

The cracksmen's task was finished now, and Dawlish went to the front door and stood there in the darkness, listening intently. Presently he heard the faint purr of an approaching car, and he turned and beckoned to Harper.

"Donovan is back," he said. "Now we must make our get-away."

The car which had conveyed Marie Rivers and Talbot to the lonely house had now returned for the plunder.

The weighty sacks were carried across the dark quadrangle and heaved into the car.

Donovan was at the wheel. His accomplice had stayed behind at the house to guard the prisoners.

"Did they give you any trouble?" asked Dawlish.

"I should think they did!" growled Donovan. "When we got them to the house, an' we thought they were tame an' submissive, they suddenly rushed at us, an' fought like wild cats—the girl especially. I didn't think she had it in her. I had to loose off my revolver before they'd simmer down."

"You—you haven't injured either of them?" asked Harper anxiously.

"Of course not! I simply fired to scare them. But we had all our work cut out to get them into the house, I can tell you. They're safe now, though. There's no escapin' from the basement. An' Peters is on guard."

"Good!" said Dawlish.

He glanced up and down the dark lane, but there was not a soul in sight

Dawlish and Harper clambered into the car.

"Right away!" rapped out the leader of the cracksmen.

And the car, with the proceeds of the plundered school on board, glided off through the gloom.

CHAPTER 11.

In Durance Vile!

MARIE and Talbot found themselves in a spacious and gloomy basement. A more cheerless prison could scarcely have been imagined. The place might actually have been a dungeon, with its dampness and darkness. The only source of ventilation was an iron grating high above the prisoners' heads.

Whether the Retreat was haunted or not, it was a house of forbidding aspect, standing in lonely isolation on a bleak stretch of seashore.

There were traces of other houses having stood there years before. The foundations could still be seen, but the dwellings themselves had been washed away by coast erosion.

(*Continued on page 27.*)

"FEX" IN A FIX! In the absence of his beloved "guv'nor," Fex finds his lot by no means a happy one!

The SIDDONS RING

A Thrilling Story of "Behind the Scenes" in a London Theatre.

By

PHILIP HARDY.

CHAPTER 1.

The New Manager!

"GRUMBS, guv'nor, you ain't 'alf looking bad! You oughter be in bed, not 'ere!"

Geoffrey Dexter forced a laugh and patted the speaker on the shoulder.

"I'm all serene, kid. Got a bit of a head, that's all. Just buzz over and tell Mr. Shaw to change that blue lime for a green one, will you?"

Fex obediently "buzzed over" and climbed the ladder to the switch-board. His grave face attracted the chief electrician's attention, for the lad was usually merriment personified, and he asked what was wrong.

"It's Mr. Dexter, sir. 'E ain't bin well for weeks, and to-night 'e looks ready to drop. I wish 'e'd go 'ome and rest. I 'eard Mr. Dane telling 'im 'e wanted a 'oliday."

John Shaw looked at him kindly.

He knew, as all the company and staff knew, of Fex's devotion to the handsome young stage-manager.

Scarcely a year before Fex had been a waif in the streets. Now he was assistant electrician at the Shakespeare Repertory Theatre, Soho, and the wonderful change had been accomplished by Geoffrey Dexter.

Dexter had found the waif hanging round near the thunder-sheet, and, liking his intelligent, freckled face, had allowed him to try his hand at a peal. So astonishing was his success that he was engaged to fill the vacant post of "effects man," from which he had risen to his present position.

He did not seem to possess a name, and he had been known for some time as "the boy who does the effects," which lengthy title had been changed to "Fex," and so he had been known ever since.

The happy lad had never forgotten to whom he owed his change of fortunes, and now Dexter's evident illness worried him seriously.

"You must persuade him to take that holiday, Fex," said John Shaw kindly. "He takes a lot of notice of you, you know."

The downcast face brightened.

"I'll have a shot, sir."

And during the interval, when he left the switchboard to stretch his legs, Fex went in search of his beloved "Guv'nor."

He found him in a shadowy corner, stretched face-downwards on the stage, one arm outflung; and the boy's heart seemed turned to ice as he shouted for help.

Richard Gervase and Ernest Dane, the young partners who owned the theatre and company, came hurrying across the stage.

"What's up, kid?"

"It's Mr. Dexter—he's very ill."

A brief glance told them that Fex was right, and Ernest Dane rushed away to telephone for a doctor and the ambulance, while his colleague knelt by the unconscious man and raised his head.

Fex stood by, his face white and strained with fear. The few moments before the arrival of the medical man were the longest the lad had ever experienced in his life.

"He must have at least six months complete rest," was the verdict. "He has collapsed through sheer overwork."

And so Geoffrey Dexter was removed to hospital, and from thence to a nursing home in Devonshire.

His place had to be filled, and an experienced stage-manager was engaged to fill it.

Fex met him the morning of his arrival, and took an instinctive dislike to him. He had not Dexter's clear, honest eyes, and he was unnecessarily autocratic.

During the rehearsal he gave a wrong order, and then swore because it was obeyed.

Fex faced him with burning cheeks.

"I ain't used to being sworn at, Mr. Knapp," he said. "And I ain't going to take it from nobody. Mr. Dane or Mr. Gervase wouldn't talk to me like that—and you ain't going to, neither!"

Alfred Knapp glared furiously at the flushed face and turned away. He knew better than to bring his employers upon the scene, but he made up his mind to have his own back, nevertheless.

"I can't get on with the new stage-manager, Mr. Shaw," said Fex, when he was perched up in the switchboard again. "'E swore at me just now."

"Tell him you wouldn't have it?" asked the electrician.

"You bet! Mr. Dane and Mr. Gervase wouldn't do it, an' why should 'e?"

Alfred Knapp was civil enough when next he had to give the lad instructions, but he did not forget.

They were both in the wings when Marcia Clair, who in private life was Mrs. Gervase, came down from her dressing-room, wearing the elaborate costume of Cleopatra.

Her jewels were, of course, stage ones, but on her hand blazed and burned a great square-cut ruby.

Fex looked at it with great interest, and Marcia, with whom he was a great favourite, smiled indulgently at him and extended her hand.

"Are you admiring my ring, Fex? It was my birthday present."

"Ain't it just fine!" cried Fex, touching the great stone with the tip of his finger. "It's antique, ain't it?"

"Yes. It actually belonged to the famous actress, Sarah Siddons. I ought to be able to act wonderfully with it on, oughtn't I?"

"You don't need no rings to make you do that, Mrs. Gervase," answered Fex—for next to Geoffrey Dexter, Marcia was his idol.

"Flatterer!" laughed Mrs. Gervase, sweeping into the wings to await her cue.

Alfred Knapp looked at Fex from the corner of his eyes.

"Beautiful ring, that!" he said carelessly.

"Rather!"

"Worth a mint of money."

"You bet," agreed Fex, his eyes upon the glittering figure of "Cleopatra."

Knapp was silent for a moment. Then he spoke again.

"I think it's wicked to keep a thing like that, when there are so many people in want of money."

Fex swung round to face him.

"'Ere, what're you gitting at?" he demanded. "You shut up about Mrs. Gervase and her ring!"

And Fex walked away, leaving Alfred Knapp smiling into the darkness of the wings.

CHAPTER 2.

Unjustly Accused!

"FEX, go and ask Mr. Dane which colour-screen we are using for the sleep-walking scene."

Shaw turned to his assistant as he was preparing his lights, and Fex obediently slid down the ladder and ran off.

He tapped at the door of the room which Ernest Dane shared with his

partner, and the voice of Richard Gervase answered him.

"Where can I find Mr. Dane, sir? Mr. Shaw wants to know about the colour-screens."

"I believe he's quarrelling with my wife," laughed Richard Gervase. "Give me a hand with this blessed armour, will you, Fex? My dresser's gone to get us some sandwiches."

Fex fastened the troublesome armour and departed upon his search. He went to Marcia's room and tapped on the door. There was no answer, so he peeped in. The room was empty.

He closed the door carefully and went back to the stage, where he ran his quarry to earth in the wings.

Obtaining the required information he hurried back to the switchboard, where John Shaw was growing impatient.

"Hang it all, Fex, you've been a deuce of a long time!" he said rather irritably. "Where on earth have you been?"

"Sorry, sir. Mr. Dane says use green number six. He wasn't in his room, and I had to search him out."

"All right, kid. I know you couldn't help it, only I was wondering what on earth had become of you. Get the spot ready—there goes the curtain."

Fex put the required green in position and awaited his cue, his eyes fixed upon the archway through which "Lady Macbeth" would make her entrance.

The "gentlewoman" gave the cue, and instantly the green spot-light was ready to fall upon Marcia as she came slowly down the steps.

It followed her about the stage with unerring precision, Fex's eyes glued to the slender figure, and his hands to the lime.

A breathless silence reigned among the audience, and Marcia's voice came weirdly up to the lad's ears.

"What! Will these hands ne'er be clean? No more of that, my lord, no more of that! You mar all with this starting——"

He listened, fascinated despite the fact that he knew the scene by heart; and when she had made her final exit and the spot gave place to the fixed blue-grey flood, he turned to Mr. Shaw.

"She's a wonder, ain't she?" he remarked.

Shaw nodded.

"You're right there, Fex. Could make her fortune as lead in one of the big productions, if she liked."

"Catch 'er leaving the company," grinned Fex. "Why, she runs the show as much as Mr. Gervase! We'd be lost without 'er!"

"So would he," added Shaw quietly.

"Rather! 'Ave you seen that ring wot 'e gived 'er?"

"You're very interested in that ring, Fex!" laughed the electrician. "We shall have to appoint you keeper-in-chief of the ring."

The scene came to an end, and Fex followed Shaw down the ladder to the stage.

As they reached the wings there came a sudden commotion among the company, and Marcia burst through them, her face white beneath her make-up, and her eyes wide with horror.

"My dear, what ever has happened?" cried Gervase, starting forward.

Marcia swayed, and he caught her in his arms. Fex ran to get a glass of water, and when she had sipped some she gasped brokenly:

"My ring—it is gone!"

"Gone!" The horrified cry broke from every lip.

"Are you sure, Marcia? Perhaps you have put something over it."

Marcia shook her head in reply to her husband's question, and broke into helpless weeping.

It was time to ring up the curtain, and Richard Gervase turned to his partner.

"See what you can do, Dane," he said, hurrying on to the stage.

"I cannot think what can have happened to it!" sobbed Marcia. "I only left it for the one scene."

"Perhaps it has been stolen, Mrs. Gervase," said a suave voice at her elbow, and she turned to find Alfred Knapp standing beside her.

"What nonsense! Who could have taken it? No one is allowed behind the stage!"

"The thief might be much nearer than a mere outsider," answered the stage-manager dryly.

Ernest Dane looked at him sharply.

"Are you suggesting that we have a dishonest person in this theatre, Mr. Knapp?" he asked with ominous quietness.

Alfred Knapp made an eloquent gesture with his hands.

"You no doubt have infinite trust in your staff, Mr. Dane," he replied. "It is not for me to upset that trust."

"Dash it all, man, don't be so confoundedly vague! What do you mean?"

Knapp turned to Fex, his eyes glittering.

"What were you doing in Mrs. Gervase's room while she was on the stage?"

Fex, utterly taken aback by the sudden question, flushed red, and then grew very white.

"Whatter you gettin' at, Mr. Knapp?" he asked angrily.

Marcia stepped forward quickly.

"Surely you do not mean to insinuate that Fex had anything to do with this?" she demanded.

Alfred Knapp shrugged his shoulders.

"I saw him closing the door of your room after you had gone on the stage for the last scene, Mrs. Gervase. I simply wondered what he wanted there."

The suave words were more deadly than any direct accusation would have been. A direct accusation would have been denied immediately; the veiled one sowed seeds of doubt which would not be stifled.

Ernest Dane turned to the lad kindly enough; but Fex knew that he was puzzled, and his heart was very sore.

"Were you in Mrs. Gervase's room?"

"No, sir."

Alfred Knapp started forward.

"That's a lie! I saw you at the door!"

Fex looked at him scornfully.

"I never said I wasn't at the door, Mr. Knapp. I looked in when Mrs. Gervase didn't answer my knock. I was lookin' for Mr. Dane."

John Shaw nodded his head gravely.

"That's true. I sent him to find out about the screen."

"Then someone else must be guilty," said the stage-manager in a tone of voice that left no doubt as to his own opinions in the matter. "I suggest that the staff should be searched."

"Searched! Do you mean to say you accuse one of my company of theft?"

Richard Gervase had just come off the stage, and strode up angrily.

"I accuse nobody, sir. I simply made a suggestion," replied Knapp smoothly.

"I think it is the only thing to be done," added Ernest Dane, a worried wrinkle between his brows. "It is a wretched business altogether, but something must be done. Why, that ring is worth a small fortune!"

"I ought never to have worn it!" cried Marcia, her eyes on the white face of the lad who stood so silently by. "It was foolish and wicked of me!"

Nothing could be done till the play was over, and then the staff were gathered together and searched. Nothing was revealed, but once more Alfred Knapp's smooth tongue awakened doubts which otherwise would never have been born.

"A ring could easily be hidden while everyone was on the stage."

His eyes were upon Fex, and the Cockney lad's blood grew hot with indignation. He came forward and faced his enemy, his hands clenched, his eyes flashing.

"Look 'ere, Mr. Knapp, I've 'ad about enough of this 'ere! If yer thinks I've pinched the ring, say so!"

Knapp looked at him with curling lip.

"You were very interested in it, weren't you?"

A silence fell. Everyone had laughed over the lad's fascination, but they did not feel like laughing now.

Marcia remembered with a cold shock the first time he had seen it. Shaw thought of his own words, spoken not two hours before. And Fex, looking from face to face, knew that for the first time his word was doubted.

"If the guv'nor were 'ere 'e'd stand up against the lot o' you!" he burst out, tears of anger and misery flooding his eyes. "You ain't got no faith in me—and I'm goin'!"

Marcia caught him by the arm.

"Don't be silly, Fex! Of course we trust you!"

The blue eyes looked up squarely at her, piercing her to the very soul.

"D'you mean ter say you really and truly don't think I've took it—not even in the least bit?"

"Of course not!"

Fex shook off her arm.

"You ain't tellin' me the truth, Mrs. Gervase! You only say it ter please me—and I ain't stayin'!"

He broke from her and ran across the stage, through the baize-covered door, and out of sight.

When the others went in search of him he was nowhere to be found.

Marcia upbraided Alfred Knapp for his veiled accusations, and, as she stood in the wings, the actress who was playing the part of "Lady MacDuff" came flying down the stairs with something in her hand—something that glittered and burned!

"It was entangled inside the dress you wore in the sleep-walking scene!" she panted. "You must have done it when you changed!"

Marcia took the Siddons' ring in her hand and looked at the stage-manager.

"It was never stolen, after all, and you have driven Fex away!" she said—and her voice made even Alfred Knapp feel ashamed of himself. "He has gone. Whatever will Mr. Dexter say to us?"

"We will put a notice in the paper," her husband reassured her.

But though it was inserted the next day, and kept in constantly, the weeks slipped by and nothing was heard of the lad who had been so unjustly accused.

Fex had come from the unnumbered masses of London, and he had returned to them.

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CHAPTER 3.

Back to the Fold!

"WHERE'S Fex?"

Geoffrey Dexter put the question upon his return to the company, and his friends, knowing his affection for the lad, could not brace themselves to answer.

Dexter looked from one face to another, and his own grew more and more troubled.

"The kid's not ill?"

"No, Geoff."

It was Marcia who spoke. She stood twisting her hands together with nervous, uncertain movements.

"Then what on earth's happened?"

It had to come, and at last Marcia faltered out the whole miserable story.

There was a moment's silence when she had finished, and then Geoffrey Dexter drew a long breath.

"And he's gone?"

"Yes."

"And you've made no attempt to find him and tell him of the mistake that was made?"

"We've done everything that lay in our power. An advertisement has been in the paper ever since he left us. We've had the help of a private detective, too. I'm afraid Fex does not want us to find him."

Dexter's eyes flashed suddenly.

"I don't wonder at it. You were all so dashed quick to think ill of him. You might have known him better."

He turned away and strode across to the other side of the stage. The loss of his boy chum had hit him very hard, and the injustice which had driven him away hit him even harder.

He met John Shaw at the foot of the switchboard ladder, and the chief electrician had a frown upon his good-looking face.

"Hallo, Dexter! Glad to see you back. Heard the news, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"It's a rotten business altogether. I'd give something to get the kid back, and, hang it all, I was as much to blame as the others were. You see, Fex had shown such dashed interest in that wretched ring, it looked suspicious."

Dexter turned upon him with flaming cheeks and clenched hands.

"Looked suspicious, and you knew Fex as well as I did? I'm sick of the lot of you, and I'm going to find him if I walk from one end of London to the other!"

"Good luck, Dexter! Look here, old fellow, don't be so bitter! I know we were a lot of fools, but we're ready to tell Fex so, and we're ready to do anything to get him back. We—we can't get on without him. Everything seems to go wrong somehow."

Geoffrey Dexter took Shaw's hand and then turned away to seek Richard Gervase and Ernest Dane.

He laid before them his scheme for seeking his boy chum, and they looked at one another with troubled eyes.

"You're leaving us in a fearful hole, Dexter," said Richard Gervase at last. "We were counting upon your return."

Geoffrey Dexter met his eyes without flinching.

"I am going to find Fex," he said doggedly. "If you will give me leave I will bring him back with me. If not, I will never return to this theatre, whether I find him or not."

Ernest Dane extended his hand.

"You're a wiser man than we were, Dexter. Of course, you shall have leave. If we are put to any trouble by your absence it is no more than we deserve for being so confoundedly suspicious of poor old Fex."

And so Geoffrey Dexter left the theatre and commenced his search. He went first to Fex's lodgings, but Mrs. Murphy shook a doleful head.

"'E's bin gone long since, sir. Wouldn't stay 'ere after the row, 'cause 'e said 'e wanted ter get away from heverything wot reminded 'im of the theatre."

"You have no idea where he went?"

"No, sir."

"Thanks!"

And so the search went on. The weeks slipped by, and Dexter, tramping the streets in the forlorn hope of seeing and recognising Fex among the crowd, grew more and more despondent.

It was like searching for the proverbial needle in the haystack, and he could not see how his quest was ever to come to an end.

At last he decided to give up the fruitless hunt, and one day in late autumn returned to the Repertory, dejected and weary.

He was met with eager queries, in answer to which he shook his head hopelessly.

"I can't find him. I've come back to carry on, Mr. Dane, if—if you will have me."

"Have you? Of course we'll have you, Dexter! Jolly glad to get our expert again."

"Everything has been going wrong since you went away, Geoff," sighed Marcia. "No one seemed able to stage-manage. They either sent the curtain up too soon or dropped it too late. The lights have been appalling. The thunder is the limit."

"'When troubles come, they come not single spies, but in battalions,'" quoth Shaw miserably. "If only we hadn't been such fools——"

It was no good bewailing what could not be helped, and with the return of Dexter things brightened a little. But the help of the quick-witted, nimble-fingered Fex was sorely missed.

Shaw, hampered by a careless assistant, could not always watch him as he knew was necessary. He had more than a suspicion that the boy smoked when his back was turned, but he had no evidence and could not accuse the lad openly.

And so it came about that one night, while the crowded house sat spellbound, listening to Ernest Dane's impassioned speeches as Hamlet upon the moonlit battlements, while all eyes were fixed upon the stage, and while everything save the play was forgotten, a thin wisp of smoke crept up from the piled scenery close to the switchboard ladder, to be presently followed by a vicious, crackling flame.

When Marcia, detecting a smell of burning, turned round from the stage, the whole of the piled scenery was smouldering, and even as she gave the alarm it had burst into a blaze.

The safety curtain was rung down and the fire-buckets were hastily fetched, while Shaw rushed away to telephone for the fire brigade. But the scenery was dry as tinder, and the upward-leaping flames caught the flies, spreading with terrible rapidity.

A crowd gathered outside the theatre, watching the smoke which poured from every window, and the engines, as they drove up, clanging their bells.

The company remained in the burning building as long as they dared, saving what valuables they could. And then, as they gathered together on the pavement, there was a sudden exclamation.

"Where's Dexter?"

"Isn't he here?"

A quick glance round revealed his absence, and a cry broke from the lips of Marcia Gervase.

"He went to fetch my ring. He would go. He said there was no danger."

"What!" cried her husband, in horror. "Why, the stairs are ablaze!"

"We must get the escape up, sir," said one of the firemen. "Which is the window?"

"The passage window is far too small, and the rooms all open the other side."

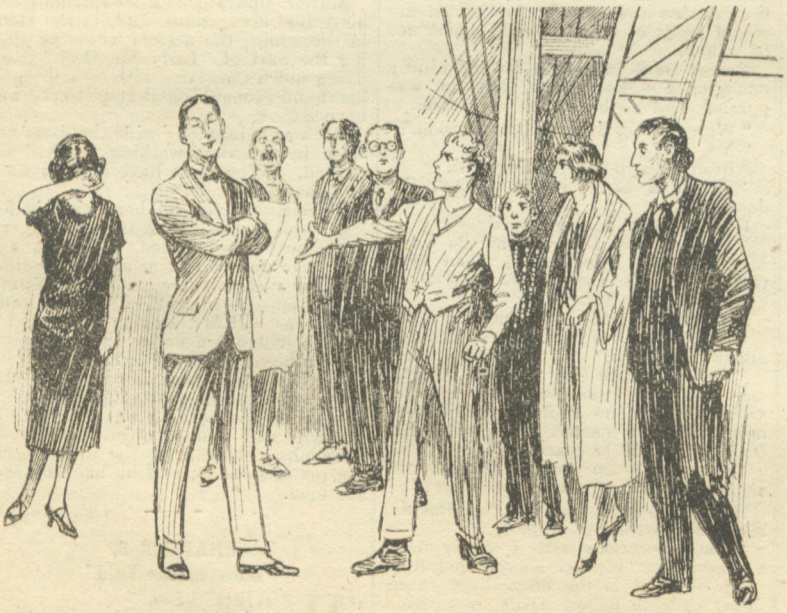
The fireman shook his head.

"Then I'm afraid there ain't much chance for the gentleman. We can't get the escape round there."

There was a sudden movement in the crowd and a slim figure thrust itself forward.

"You ain't going to leave the guv'nor up in that there bonfire. I'll get 'im myself!"

And before anyone could realise his intention, or attempt to stop him, Fex had dashed into the smoke and disappeared from their horrified gaze.



The stage-manager's eyes singled out Fex, and the Cockney lad's blood grew hot with indignation. He came forward and faced his enemy, his hands clenched and his eyes flashing. "Look 'ere, Mr. Knapp," he cried. "I've 'ad about enough of this 'ere! If you thinks I've taken the ring, say so!"

He had returned to the old theatre, and it looked as though he would die in

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CHAPTER 4.
The Hero of the Hour!

WHEN Fex had heard the fire-engines the natural curiosity of his street-arab birth led him to follow the crowd down Shaftesbury Avenue and into Soho.

"Crumbs! If it ain't the theatre!" he muttered as he neared the scene of the conflagration.

There was a large crowd, and it was easy for him to get quite near the stage-door without being seen by the company. He stood watching, with a queer ache in his heart, while Marcia and the others carried their valuables into safety. It was nearly a year since he had seen any of his old friends. The advertisements in the papers had never reached his eyes, since he had avoided papers and anything else which served to remind him of the old happy days he had spent in the Repertory Theatre, and he had taken work down in the docks, hiding himself successfully from Dexter, or anyone else who had searched for him.

Now he looked upon the destruction of the theatre which had been a home to him, looked on the worried faces of those who had been such close friends, and, while looking, heard something which sent the blood to his heart with a sickening rush.

"He went after my ring——"

Dexter—the man who was more than father or brother to him—Dexter was up among the flames, and the escape could not reach him!

Everything else was forgotten. He ran forward with that one exclamation, and dashed into the burning building.

A cloud of smoke set him coughing and choking, the heat turned him faint and sick; but he knew his way, and he rushed blindly up the stairs.

Tongues of flame licked his legs as he ran, and he knew well enough that he had but a few minutes to find Dexter and bring him to safety before the whole staircase collapsed.

He found his beloved guv'nor stretched unconscious outside the door of Marcia's dressing-room, the fatal ring clutched in his hand, and with the strength of despair dragged him to the top of the stairs.

Then he paused. He had grown since he first came to the company, but he was still slight, and Dexter was his elder by five or more years. How could he carry him down that perilous way? He gazed distractedly at it, and even as he gazed there came a shattering crash, and he found himself standing on the brink of a fiery precipice.

The stairs had collapsed!

Fex sank on his knees by his friend.

"It's all up with us now, guv'nor!" he muttered. "Well, I did my best, an' that's somethink!"

And then, when all hope seemed dead, a sudden memory sent a wild thrill through the lad's heart.

At the end of the passage was a trap-door to the roofs! Once out there, and the escapes could reach them. Some iron steps led to the trap. If only he could get Dexter up them.

With fast failing strength he dragged his friend to the foot of the steps, and then leant against them, sick and dizzy.

"This ain't no good!" he muttered, pulling himself resolutely together. "I've got to get the guv'nor out on the roofs somehow!"

Once more he braced himself, and, after many failures, managed to hoist the young stage-manager across his shoulders.

Bracing himself up, Fex managed to hoist the stage-manager across his shoulder. Then, staggering up the stairs, he carried his heavy burden out on to the roof.

When he had accomplished so much he almost collapsed with the strain, but somehow—he could not have told how—he crept up the stairs and out on to the roof.

Laying his burden down, he staggered to the parapet and shouted at the top of his voice. And through the mists that closed in on him he heard an answering shout. Then he staggered back to Dexter and collapsed at his side.

Five minutes later saw them both in safety, with Marcia crying over them.

An ambulance was summoned, and they were taken in all haste to the nearest hospital, where it was found that Fex was practically unhurt, save for minor burns and shock. He was kept in the hospital for a few days, and then discharged.

Regaining consciousness soon after admission, he asked anxiously for Dexter.

Marcia, who sat by his side, shook her head sadly.

"We cannot tell yet, Fex. He was in that awful heat so long, and the smoke."

Fex turned his face to the wall with a sob, and a cool hand was laid on his.

"Fex," timidly came the words, "Fex, can you ever forgive me?"

"Forgive you, Mrs. Gervase? I don't know of nothing to forgive," replied Fex, untruthfully, since at heart he was blaming her for all the troubles which had come since she had owned the Siddons' ring. "I see you found that ring," he added.

"I found it in my dress—just after you had gone, Fex," said Marcia in a low voice. "We advertised and advertised for you, but you were too proud to come." Her voice broke and she began to sob quietly.

Fex endured it for a few seconds, and then turned over to face her.

"I say, don't cry, Mrs. Gervase! It wasn't no fault of yours! It was all that beast, Knapp!"

Then, as the sobs continued, a thin hand was thrust out to rest on hers.

"Please don't cry, Mrs. Gervase! I—I can't stick it!"

And Marcia controlled herself for his sake.

But when he left the hospital, after peeping in at the white, unconscious face of Dexter, he shook his head to all the pleadings that he should return to the company.

"I can't, Mr. Dane!" he exclaimed

miserably. "I feel like the chap in 'Othello'—I've lost my reputation."

"Then stay where we can find you, at any rate, Fex," said Ernest Dane.

"Right-ho! I'll stay at Mrs. Murphy's."

Three days later Marcia entered Fex's little sitting-room, her face very white. Fex rose to meet her, exclaiming anxiously:

"It's the guv'nor!"

She nodded dumbly and sank into a chair, while Fex called to Mrs. Murphy for a glass of water.

When she had revived somewhat Marcia caught Fex's hands in her own.

"It's his eyes, Fex—the heat and the shock——"

She broke off at the cry which escaped the lad's white lips.

"His eyes, Mrs. Gervase? You don't mean to say—— He ain't——"

Fex could not finish the sentence, but stood staring dumbly at his companion, his face lined and old.

Marcia twisted her hands together, while the tears overflowed and ran down her cheeks.

"He—is blind, Fex!"

There was a silence. Then:

"Is there any 'ope, Mrs. Gervase?"

"They can't say. If he can be kept perfectly tranquil and without worry, there may be just a chance. His eyes are not injured." She looked at the boy and smiled wanly. "He wants you, Fex. I—I came to take you to him, if you will come."

Fex needed no second bidding. He raced across the room to get his hat, and within five minutes was seated by Mrs. Gervase in her car, speeding towards the hospital.

CHAPTER 5.

All's Well That Ends Well!

FEX stood by the bed where Dexter lay, his eyes bandaged and his hand clasping that of his boy chum.

"Fex, old fellow, it's good to hear your voice again! I—I wish I could see you——" His voice broke, and Fex gripped his hand.

"Don't, guv'nor! You're going to get better soon! Only you mustn't go frettin', you know."

"That's so. But I want you to do me a favour."

"Anythin' you likes, sir!" answered Fex promptly.

"Go back to the theatre, old fellow. They want you badly."

Fex hesitated. Pride was still battling in his heart, and would not be stifled.

"To please me!" The whispered words swept the last doubts away, and Fex answered firmly:

"Right you are, guv'nor! I'll go back if they'll 'ave me."

So Fex returned to his place on the switchboard, and Marcia no longer trembled lest she should be flooded with the wrong light in her most trying scenes. The assistant stage-manager was taking the place of Dexter, and as he had been in the company some time he was to be relied upon to do his best.

But Fex's heart was very heavy, and every moment of his spare time was spent in the hospital.

"It don't seem possible," he told Mr. Shaw as he sat waiting the rise of the curtain. "The guv'nor was always so active. It'll fair knock 'im up if—if——"

He broke off, and Shaw laid a kindly hand on his shoulder.

"He'll get well, Fex! I feel sure he will!"

Fex turned his attention to the lines, and sighed heavily.

"I wish I could feel sure, sir."

It was "Macbeth" to-night, and Fex listened mechanically to the lines, working his lights with unerring precision, but taking little notice of the well-known scenes until the words of "Malcolm" came up to him in Ernest Dane's ringing voice:

"Put on your instruments. Receive
what cheer you may;
The night is long that never finds a
day."

The words roused Fex from his depression, and he repeated them to himself:

"'The night is long that never finds a day.' Crumbs, Mr. Shaw, I believe you're right now!" he added aloud, and the electrician wondered at the change in his manner.

From that night Fex became almost his old self. Not quite, for the sight of his old friend, lying pale and ill at the hospital, quenched a great deal of his high spirits, and, although hope was strong in his heart, he could not be quite sure. He did all he could to cheer Dexter, and one day the nurse patted him on the shoulder as he left the room after an afternoon spent with the invalid.

"Your visits do more good than a bottle of medicine, Fex!" she said, laughing. "I shall have to get you to visit the wards and cure our other patients."

Fex grinned.

"When the guv'nor's out o' horspital I will—if you likes!"

And he ran down the steps, leaving the nurse with a tender little smile on her lips.

"Poor boy! He's so anxious to be bright!" she sighed, turning back to her duties. "I hope his efforts will be rewarded. Perhaps they may be. Who can say?"

The time drew near when Dexter was to have his bandages removed and to leave the hospital.

Fex was trembling with excitement as he listened to the nurse telling Marcia the day when this was to take place, and gave a little gasp of disappointment as he realised that it was a Thursday.

"We shall be at matinee, Mrs. Gervase! Oh, hang!" he burst out.

Marcia smiled down at him.

"You may have the afternoon off, if you like, Fex," she said.

But the sandy head was shaken resolutely.

"It's 'Cæsar,' an' you knows they allus makes a muck of the lightnin' if I ain't there. We'll have to go to the guv'nor's rooms after the show."

Fex tried to be calm on the fateful Thursday, but his thoughts were away with his chum. He looked at his watch at least a dozen times during the first act. Had the verdict been given? Was Dexter cured or——"

"This 'ere play ain't 'alf goin' slow ter-day," he remarked to Shaw, with a sigh of impatience.

The electrician smiled sympathetically. Fex was not the only member of the company to find the matinee dragging!

Mrs. Gervase paced the wings when her one scene was over, and was tempted to dress and find out what had happened. But she knew she would receive a call at the end of the play, and resolutely waited.

It was with eager hands that Fex set the lights for the final scene, and never had "Mark Antony's" last words rang more sweetly on his ears:

"And say to all the world, 'This was a man!'"

The curtain swung down on the final tableau, the calls were taken, the lights switched off, and the screens put away. Then Fex slid down the ladder and dashed across the stage. He did not see a tall figure which stood in the shadows until a hand was laid on his arm and a well-known voice cried gaily:

"Why, where are you rushing, kid?"

With a gasp of astonishment Fex stopped and looked into a pair of eyes that smiled down at him with such happiness in their depths.

"Guv'nor!"

Fex dragged Dexter into the light to make sure that his own senses had not deceived him.

"You're—all right, sir?"

"Yes, Fex. And the doctor said it was thanks to you!" answered Dexter, gripping the hand he held and putting an arm across the lad's shoulders. "You kept me so cheerful—it worked wonders!"

So the clouds rolled past and the sun shone once more.

Fex remembered his promise, and every week saw him at the hospital, bringing laughter and happiness to the poor sufferers, who came to look upon him as a personal friend and longed for his visits through the weary hours of pain.

Dexter stepped back into his old place, and all was calm and bright, but Fex never ceased to feel a thrill when "Malcolm's" words came to him from the stage, recalling the day when hope had been revived by those inspiring lines:

"Receive what cheer you may.
The night is long that never finds a
day!"

THE END.

(Look out for a splendid boxing yarn next week, entitled: "THE BATTLING MIDGET!" You are bound to enjoy it.)

"TRICKED IN THE TUNNEL!" Under cover of darkness Convict David Steele makes a bold bid for freedom!

DAVE, THE PIT-BOY!

By MAX HAMILTON.

A Thrilling Story of the Coal-Mines, dealing with the Exciting Adventures of the Young Hero of Wrexborough Pit—DAVID STEELE.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED.

LEAVING the little North-country village of Thorpe Western, DAVID STEELE, an ambitious young lad of fifteen, decided to try his fortune in Wrexborough.

With a few shillings in his pocket, and with a tramp of thirty to forty miles to his destination, the sturdy country lad sets off.

Utterly tired out at night, the lad sought a sheltered place, into which he crept. But hardly had he dropped off to slumber when he was aroused by hurried movements near at hand He was alert almost on the instant, and, on making investigations, found, to his horror, the bound figure of a man lying on the permanent-way at the mercy of an express train which was at that moment due. With great presence of mind, the lad dragged the inert form to safety just a fraction of a second before the great train rushed by.

David then learned that he had rescued Mr. Scott, the owner of the Wrexborough coal-mines. David was offered a job in the mine, and gratefully accepted.

Mr. Scott's manner was very strange after that; for not only did he ask Steele to keep the whole affair a secret, but he also found the lad accommodation with a man named Markham, his own assailant!

Markham had recognised Steele, too, and had made many unsuccessful attempts to get the lad out of the way.

Later, by a strange coincidence, Steele gets wise to another plot to capture Scott. But he was unable to warn the mine-owner, for he is caught spying and made prisoner.

He effects an escape, however, and finds that Scott has been chained to a wall in one of the disused pits by his brother George, who has made an unavailing attempt to extort money from the wealthy mine-owner.

David brings a supply of food to the prisoner, and is attempting to get away again when he meets Markham, who, in trying to endanger the lad's life, gets hoist with his own petard.

Meanwhile, George Scott, having so far failed in his rascally mission, usurps his brother's place and brings his dastardly vengeance to bear upon the miners. Wrexborough is soon in a state of uproar, and George Scott's life is in jeopardy, when Dave makes a dramatic appearance in defence of his enemy.

Having escaped the power of the rioters, the crafty Scott turns again upon Dave, and takes from the lad's pocket a written confession he had signed a short time before. Then, leaving Dave a prisoner, he flees. The pitboy gains his freedom, and is fleeing from some of Markham's allies later, when he loses his way on the moor. In the dead of night he hears a cry of pain, and, following the direction from whence it came, he finds himself outside a disused house, from which someone had just made a hurried exit. Pushing open the door, David enters, to find a long, curved knife lying on the stone steps. He picks it up, but too dazed to think clearly, and feeling utterly exhausted, he seeks repose in a heap of hay, the knife still clasped tightly in his hand.

A sound of voices suddenly arouses him, however, and, to his horror, he finds himself surrounded by a posse of police, who, having found the body of George Scott on the premises, accuse Dave of the murder.

Steele is placed in the dock at Wrexborough Gaol, and so black does the prosecuting counsel make the case against him that he is found guilty, and sentenced to death. The jury, however, urge a strong recommendation for mercy.

Two days later Dave is on a train bound for Portland when he notices that the handcuff by which he is secured to the warder is not properly fastened. The lad's brain works swiftly, and in the darkness of the next tunnel he makes a spring for the luggage-rack. A hue and cry is immediately set up, and during the confusion which follows Dave fights his way to the carriage door.

(Now read on.)

The Chase in the Tunnel!

STEELE did not find it an easy thing to fight his way through the crowded carriage to the door. He was nearly knocked off his feet more than once before he was dragged and pushed against the window with a force that nearly sent his head through it.

He seized the handle and turned it, but the door did not give. Then he remembered that he was on the side farthest from the platform, and that the door was locked.

There was no time to lose, for the train, which was nearing the mouth of the tunnel, was already slackening in response to the warder's tugs at the communication-cord. With some difficulty—so jammed was he by the crowd in the carriage—he lowered the glass and thrust one leg through the open window.

At that moment a gentleman at the farther end of the carriage struck a match with the intention of discovering the cause of the tumult, and the light revealed the boy, clad in the unmistakable garb of a convict, in the very act of making his escape through the window.

Instantly a chorus of shouts and screams arose. The two men who had been pommelling each other in the dark stopped their mutual assault simultaneously, and made a grab at the boy. Fortunately for him, the passengers at his end of the compartment were women, whom the unexpected apparition of a convict had rendered too frightened to do anything but scream; and he managed to slip through the fingers outstretched to seize him and clamber on to the footboard of the carriage, whence, as the train drew to a standstill, he leaped off on to the line.

Meanwhile, the warder continued to call to the guard, who was now hastening up to him, lantern in hand, to find out what was the matter.

"Convict escaped!" he exclaimed in astonishment, as he unlocked the door.

The excited passengers in the next compartment explained that David had just scrambled out of their window, and the male portion of them, tumbling out upon the permanent-way, were evidently anxious to join in the chase; but the guard waved them back.

"For Heaven's sake, no, gentlemen!" he shouted. "Leave it to me and the warders to go after him. The Leeds express

is due along here directly. I can't have anyone fooling about on the line!"

At the warning the passengers drew back.

"Come on!" roared the warder, who had rushed a few yards along the tunnel, but found himself utterly nonplussed without a light. "Come on, and bring your lantern! He'll be half-way through the tunnel by now!"

"Look out for the express!" the guard repeated, as side by side the two men rushed along the permanent way, flashing the light of the lantern from side to side. "Keep on this side—she's due now!"

"Confound the express! Where's the boy?" returned his companion furiously. "I shall get a wigging over this if he gets away."

Suddenly the guard gave a shout.

"There he is!" he exclaimed, as the light showed a flying figure only a few yards ahead of them.

In fact, David who had had a considerable start to begin with, had lost it by catching his foot in a sleeper and measuring his length on the ground. He was up again in an instant, but he must have inflicted a strain upon his leg in falling, for a sharp pain shot up it, and, try as he would, he was unable to keep up his former pace. As he heard his pursuers gaining on him, he had meditated trying to conceal himself in the darkness as they passed him by, and then doubling back to the mouth of the tunnel; but that idea had to be put aside when the guard's exclamation showed him that he was discovered. In desperation he strained every nerve to outdistance the two men; but, strive as he might, he could tell even in the dark that they were gaining on him. Even without his strained leg he would not have been in good condition for a sprint after his long spell of confinement in Wrexborough Gaol.

The boy's breath came in sobbing gasps as he rushed along. It was borne in upon him as he heard the clatter of feet behind him that his escape was hopeless—that his mad dash for freedom had failed; and yet, with the instinct of the hunted animal, he kept on, his eyes fixed upon the little round white patch that marked the other entrance of the tunnel.

Suddenly an involuntary groan escaped his lips. A hand—the warder's—had actually brushed his shoulders. With a frantic leap forward, he dodged the man's grip for the moment; but he knew that his strength was spent, and that he could do no more. A few seconds more of the terrible chase, and once again the warder's fingers shot out, and this time held fast.

"Ah, I've got you, have I?" the man panted as he seized the exhausted boy in an iron grip. "You've made a fine bolt for it, but it is all U P with you now! You won't have the chance of another, I can tell you, and you'd better come along quietly."

But, with the frenzy of despair, David writhed and struggled in his grasp, useless as he knew such struggling to be.

"Come along, will you, you young fool!" growled the man angrily. "This sort of thing will only make it worse for you by-and-by. Here, you," he called to the guard, "catch hold of his other arm while I clap the bracelets on!"

But somewhat to his surprise the guard did not move to his assistance. He was peering along the track, and seemed to be listening intently. Then, while David still struggled in his captor's hold, he gave a warning cry.

"Look out!" he said. "The express! Get off the line—quick! You're standing right in her way!"

He spoke truly. With a rush and a roar the Leeds express, travelling at over sixty miles an hour, plunged into the tunnel. Two bright yellow lights were spreading towards them, and the ground shook beneath the onrush of the locomotive. Yet so occupied had David and the warder been in their frantic struggle that, but for the guard's warning, they would probably have been unaware of the approach of the train until they were crushed beneath it.

To the warder, as he looked up at his companion's cry, it seemed that those two fiery eyes were actually upon him. With the instinct of self-preservation, he released his hold of his prisoner and sprang backwards—only just in time! As for David, thus suddenly and unexpectedly set free, he staggered and fell.

The guard gave a cry of horror, and covered his eyes with his hand as the train thundered by.

It was not till the roar and rattle had died away, leaving the tunnel thick with smoke, that any words came from his lips.

"Poor chap!" he whispered. "Poor chap! And he only a boy, too!"

The warder made no reply for a minute. Utterly unnerved by his own narrow escape from death, he was leaning against the wall of the tunnel, the perspiration pouring down his livid face.

"I suppose," he said hoarsely at last, "that we'd better pick up the body—eh? Ugh! It makes me sick to think how nearly I——"

He did not complete the sentence, for a shudder shook him from head to foot.

"There's no chance, eh, that he mightn't be dead?" he went on, as the two moved forward along the track, the light of the lantern turned upon the ground.

"None, I should say," was the reply. "He must have gone right under the wheels. How thick this smoke is! We shall see him as soon as it clears away."

Again the warder shuddered, and a silence followed.

"Queer!" said the guard a minute later hesitatingly. "I thought he was just about here when she passed. Of course, though," he added, "the engine may have flung him some distance farther on."

Again a silence as the two men pursued their gruesome search, expecting each moment to come upon a shattered body.

Suddenly the guard looked up at his companion.

"Surely he couldn't have been carried farther than this! Unless he was pounded into mincemeat, we'd have found some trace of him by now."

"What do you mean?" returned the warder. "You don't think——"

The guard nodded.

"That's just what I do think," he replied. "The boy's not been killed, after all. He must have fallen before the engine struck him and gone between the lines. The train went over him without hurting a hair of his head most likely. Then he just got up and bolted off before the smoke cleared away."

"What!" almost yelled the warder. "Then while we've been hunting for the corpse——"

"The corpse has been putting its best foot foremost," the guard returned grimly.

The Escape!

THE man was right. The supposed corpse had been putting his best foot forward to such good purpose that, while his pursuers were still expecting to find him extended lifeless upon the track, he had reached the mouth of the tunnel and rushed into the open air.

The guard's explanation of his escape was the correct one. To the two bystanders it had seemed that David fell, struck by the locomotive. In reality, as he staggered back when released by the warder, he had overbalanced himself and fallen between the two lines of railway just a second before the engine rushed over him. Thus, save for a shower of hot cinders which singed his clothes, he had escaped absolutely unhurt from his awful peril.

Long before the last carriage had roared and rumbled above his head, David's quick wit had realised his position and the advantage that lay ready to his hand. And while the smoke which the train had left behind it was still thick about him, and the warder and the guard were still dazed with horror at the fate they believed had befallen him, he had sprung to his feet, and with all the speed of which he was capable, began to run down the line in the rear of the express.

Of what to do or where to go when once he had succeeded in outdistancing his pursuers he had as yet no idea. All he thought of at present was the length of start he could obtain before his flight was discovered. Once in the open air the advantage of darkness would be lost to him. He must, therefore, try to be out of sight before the warder issued from the tunnel.

He paused once to listen for any sounds of pursuit. There were none as yet, and the certainty of that gave him fresh courage and lent speed to his feet. He dashed on once more, scarcely heeding the pain in his strained leg, and a minute later reached the mouth of the tunnel.

As he did so he drew a long breath of relief, and his heart bounded with hope.

As has been said, the morning was a frosty one, and the white mist which sometimes accompanies a frost hung over the ground. As yet the sun's rays had not dissipated it; on the contrary, it seemed to the boy that it was denser than it had been earlier in the day.

So dense was it, in fact, that any object at more than a few yards distance was completely enshrouded in it.

Fortune favoured him at least as regarded weather. He turned sharply to his right, scrambled up the slope of the

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grassy cutting which extended for some distance from the mouth of the tunnel, tore his way through a straggling hedge, and again took to his heels. Before he had gone a dozen paces the fog had completely swallowed him up; and when his pursuers arrived panting at the tunnel's mouth, it was only to gaze baffled into a blanket of white mist.

"Well," said the guard decisively, "it ain't no good hangin' about here waiting for the fog to lift. He's gone—that's flat! Best thing we can do is to get back to the train—goodness knows how much behind time she is by now!—get into Roxley as fast as the fog'll let us, and lay information."

The warder acquiesced with a sulky grunt. He realised that there was an unpleasant quarter of an hour ahead for him when David's flight became known to the authorities.

The passengers, with their heads protruding from the windows, were eagerly waiting to hear the result of the chase; but the guard cut short their avalanche of questions by giving the signal for the train to proceed.

But leaving the warder to make his report, and face a stern reprimand from his superiors for his negligence in allowing his prisoner to escape, it is time to return to David Steele.

When the fog swallowed him up as he plunged into it, David's first feeling was one of relief and exultation. He ran on for some little time over rather broken ground, and then, pulling up from sheer need of breath and strength, he sat down and began to think over the situation, and for a while he sat with his head between his hands staring into the fog and nearly giving way to despair.

At last, however, he sprang to his feet.

"What a coward I am!" he said half aloud. "Nothing could have seemed more unlikely an hour ago than that I should escape from the train, and yet here I am, free for the time being, at least! Well, if one unlikely thing can happen, why can't two—or three or four for the matter of that? If I could only manage to get hold of Mr. Scott now—well, who knows? Perhaps I may! And, anyway, I won't give up hope. I've got my freedom, and I sha'n't part with it again without a struggle!"

(How long will David Steele's freedom last? Be sure you read next week's thrilling instalment of this powerful serial, chums.)

"THE PLUNDERED SCHOOL!"

(*Continued from page* 19.)

The Retreat had stood farther back than the rest, and had been spared by the encroaching sea.

The house was in a shocking state of disrepair and neglect. It had not been lived in for years, and it was permeated by a musty odour.

Jim Dawlish could not have chosen a more appropriate spot as his headquarters. The house stood far from the busy haunts of men, and holiday-makers seldom or never penetrated to that part of the shore, which was dreary and unattractive. The nearest town—if town it could be called—was Stormpoint, where St. Jim's was in camp. And Stormpoint was a good six miles away.

Marie and Talbot had made a gallant bid for freedom. They had launched a surprise attack upon their captors, and had fought tenaciously. But what chance had they against two powerfully-built rascals, both of whom were armed? They had been overpowered and carried bodily into the house, and hustled into the basement. And it was here that they found themselves at midnight—helpless prisoners, chafing in their captivity.

Their only means of exit was the door, and this was jealously guarded by the man Peters, who also had the assistance of a ferocious bulldog.

The prisoners were in very low spirits—almost in despair.

The basement was barren of furniture, save for a crude bench. On this the prisoners were seated.

Sometimes they would be startled by the scuttling of a rat across the stone floor.

Marie shuddered. She was no weakling; she could endure much when put to the test, but it was horrible down here in the darkness.

"This—this is awful, Toff!" she muttered.

"It is, indeed, Marie. I don't think we've ever been in a worse plight. And meanwhile, those rotters, Dawlish and Harper, are looting the school! And here are we, like rats in a trap, unable to prevent them—unable to raise an alarm, even."

"Why did they kidnap us?"

"I think I can see Dawlish's motive," answered Talbot grimly. "He hopes that we may be suspected of the burglary. When it is found that the school has been plundered, and that we have disappeared, it will look as if we were the plunderers."

"Good heavens!" gasped Marie.

"But we needn't worry overmuch about that," said Talbot. "All the decent fellows—Tom Merry and the rest—will know that we had no hand in the business."

"But there are some who will think otherwise——"

"Quite so. Cads of the Racke and Mellish type will be only too willing to think the worst of us. But it doesn't matter what they think, or say, so long as the decent chaps don't doubt us."

There was a pause.

"I—I was entirely mistaken about Harper," muttered Marie, at length. "You are a better judge of character than I, Toff. I would have staked a good deal on Harper being straight. I was furious with you when you suggested that he was playing a shady game. Well, we know the truth now, and I can see Harper in his true light. He betrayed us! It—it's difficult to realise it, even now. I owe you an apology, Toff. Will you forgive me for being so horrid to you this past week or so?"

Talbot groped for the girl's hand, and grasped it tightly.

"That's all right, Marie; there's nothing to forgive. You were taken in by Harper; but then, so was the Head. He deceived the whole school, in fact. He's a plausible rogue, if ever there was one. He's got charm, and personality, and a way of making himself generally liked. He'd have taken me in with the rest, only I was certain, from the day he came to St. Jim's, that he was the same fellow who had a hand in the Eastwood House burglary."

"What puzzles me," said Marie, "is how Dawlish & Co. came to be at large. They were supposed to have gone to long terms of penal servitude. Surely they couldn't have escaped from prison?"

There was a chuckle from the man Peters, who had been listening to the conversation.

"I'll satisfy your curiosity," he said. "Fact is, we appealed against our sentences, an' they were reduced to six months in each case. The prosecution had made a technical blunder, that's how we came to get off so lightly."

"You won't escape so lightly next time," said Talbot grimly.

Peters laughed.

"There's not going to be a next time!" he said.

"What about this kidnapping affair? You don't suppose our friends will not make search for us?"

"Oh, they'll search all right!" said Peters. "But they've as much chance of findin' a needle in a haystack as of locatin' you here."

That was true enough, and Talbot's spirits sank still lower.

Even if Tom Merry & Co., on one of their rambles, happened to visit that part of the shore, they would not suspect for one moment that Marie and Talbot were incarcerated in that bleak-looking house.

"How long are we to be kept here?" asked Marie.

"That rests with the chief," said Peters. "He'll be here presently with the loot!"

"I hope he gets stopped on the road and arrested!" said Talbot fiercely.

"Then it's good-bye to your hopes!" came the laughing reply. "I can hear the car comin' now."

The prisoners listened. Mingled with the plashing of the waves was the sound of the car, crunching its way slowly over the shingled foreshore. A door was heard to open and shut, and presently there were sounds overhead.

Dawlish and Harper had returned with the spoils.

After a brief interval, footsteps could be heard descending the stone stairs leading to the basement.

Jim Dawlish was coming to visit the prisoners. He flashed an electric torch into the gloom of the basement and surveyed Marie and Talbot with a mocking grin.

"Good-evenin'—or, to be more precise, good-mornin'!" he said.

The prisoners glared at him.

"Hope you're nice and comfortable?" pursued Dawlish, with mock anxiety. "The place is tastefully furnished—with cobwebs; an' you will find the rats excellent company. If you've any complaints, kindly make 'em to the management."

"You cur!" muttered Talbot.

"I'll send Harper down with some breakfast as soon as we've stored the plunder away," went on Dawlish, paying no heed to Talbot's remark. "Strictly speakin', I ought to put you on a bread-an'-water diet, for givin' my men so much trouble when they brought you here. But I'll be merciful. You shall have eggs and bacon—if Donovan didn't forget to lay in the supplies."

Talbot glared at Dawlish, clenching his hands in impotent rage. He would have hurled himself at the chief of the cracksmen, but for the fact that the man Peters stood behind Dawlish in the doorway, fingering a revolver.

"How long are you going to keep us here?" demanded Marie.

"Until such time as we are able to dispose of the plunder with safety," was the reply.

"You have looted the school?" said Talbot.

"Ransacked it from top to bottom. It's the best haul I've made for many a long day. Peters, my dear fellow, we must have a bottle of champagne on the strength of it."

"What-ho!" chuckled Peters.

"In the meantime, au revoir!" said Dawlish, saluting the prisoners. "You won't be treated badly so long as you behave yourselves," he added, pausing in the doorway. "Harper shall bring you down some blankets. It's a trifle chilly down here."

Dawlish departed, leaving Peters and the bulldog on guard.

It seemed an age to the prisoners before they again received a visitor. This time it was Harper. He did not speak. He did not linger a second longer than necessary. He simply tossed a pile of blankets into the basement, and withdrew. He had not dared to meet the accusing, reproachful gaze of Marie Rivers.

The prisoners wrapped themselves in the blankets, Marie occupying the bench, and Talbot throwing himself on the floor. But there was no sleep for either of them that night. Through the long hours they lay wide-awake, conversing at intervals, but for the most part busy with their thoughts. And their thoughts were far from cheerful.

Daylight came, and a faint ray of light filtered through the bars of the grating.

Harper again appeared, this time with a laden tray, which he dumped on the floor without a word. And again he dared not meet Marie's gaze.

It was a better breakfast than the prisoners could have hoped for. Bacon and eggs, and a pile of bread-and-butter, and two cups of steaming coffee.

Marie refused to eat at first, but presently she yielded to the persuasions of Talbot, who convinced her of the futility of hunger-striking.

Drearily the long day passed, each hour seeming a separate eternity to the prisoners in the basement. It was so difficult to distinguish day from night, so intensely gloomy was their prison.

There was one concession granted them for which they felt indeed grateful. At separate times during the day, each prisoner was permitted half-an hour's exercise in the walled-in yard of the house. There was no possible chance of escape; and even if there had been, Marie would not have escaped without Talbot, nor Talbot without Marie. But the fresh air and the sunshine were powerful tonics after the gloom of the basement.

How long were they to remain in their present plight? When, if ever, would deliverance come?

Marie and Talbot had asked themselves these questions a score of times. But they could only wait, and hope, with what little hope they could muster, in those dark hours.

The irony of their present plight was emphasised by the fact that only a few miles away were their friends—those who would have hastened hot-foot to the rescue, had they but known.

But Tom Merry & Co., settling down happily in their camp by the sea, had no knowledge, as yet, of the dramatic series of events which had been brought about by Jack Harper, the school's betrayer!

THE END.

(Make sure you read the splendid sequel to this story, entitled: "THE HOUR OF ATONEMENT!" By Martin Clifford, which will appear in next week's bumper issue of the GEM.)