

"D'ARCY'S COMIC OPERA!"

This week's rollicking yarn of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's.

EVERY WEDNESDAY.

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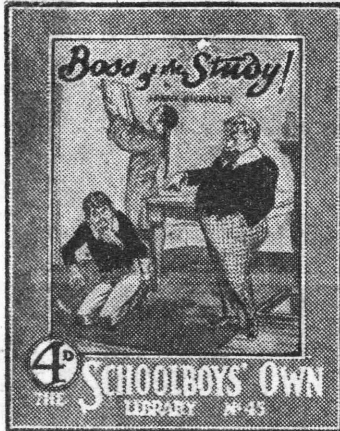
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Vol. XXXI.
February 29th,
1927.



MR. RATCLIFF OBJECTS!

(The unpopular master of the New House fails to see the humour of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's portrayal of the Tyrant of St. Tim's! (Read "D'ARCY'S COMIC OPERA!" inside.)

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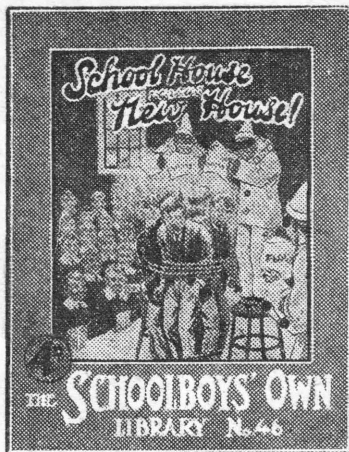
By
FRANK RICHARDS

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ARTHUR S. HARDY.

WHEN that name appears below the title of a story the reader is at once assured that the story is a good one, for Arthur S. Hardy must certainly rank as one of the finest authors of the day. It is some time since this popular writer of fiction contributed a story to the GEM, but he hasn't been forgotten, I'll wager. Gemites, therefore, will be pleased to know that when our present serial, "White Eagle," draws to a close it will be followed up with a grand new adventure story from the pen of Mr. Hardy. How's that? This yarn is entitled:

"BEYOND THE SILVER GLACIER!"

and it deals with the adventures of a boy who sets out to find his father and his sister, who have been missing for years, in the vast, unexplored regions of the tropics. The yarn is well told, and is thrilling to a degree. Look out for it, chums.

TELLING "WHOPPERS!"

A loyal Gemite, who, naturally enough, wants to remain anonymous, tells me that he has developed the bad habit of telling "whoppers." They seem to fall out of his mouth, he says, without effort or "malice aforethought." What should he do to cure himself of this habit? I can only suggest that he does more listening than talking, then perhaps these "whoppers" will die a natural death. It's a habit which ought to be checked, anyway, otherwise my correspondent will lose all his friends. Every time he feels that he is overdoing it in the "whopper" line, he should "ring off" quickly, for a chap must know when he's telling the truth or telling lies. A certain amount of exaggeration sometimes gives colour to a story that would be very drab and uninteresting without it, and is considered by some people pardonable on that account; but that exaggeration should be of a harmless nature. I don't recommend it, however, for there's nothing like truth. Follow the dictates of your conscience in this matter, my chum, then you won't go far wrong.

HE WANTS TO MAKE HIS DOG DO TRICKS!

An Australian reader writes me a lengthy letter in praise of the GEM, and then winds up with a request for advice on the subject of teaching a dog to do tricks. This is hard to answer in some respects, for I don't know the nature of the tricks my correspondent has in mind. But kindness and patience are the essential qualities to employ whatever trick or tricks my Australian chum wants his dog to perform. With these uppermost in his mind, my correspondent may succeed in teaching his dog any number of tricks, providing, of course, that the animal has it in him to do tricks.

NEXT WEDNESDAY'S PROGRAMME :

"INVENTORS ALL!"

By Martin Clifford.

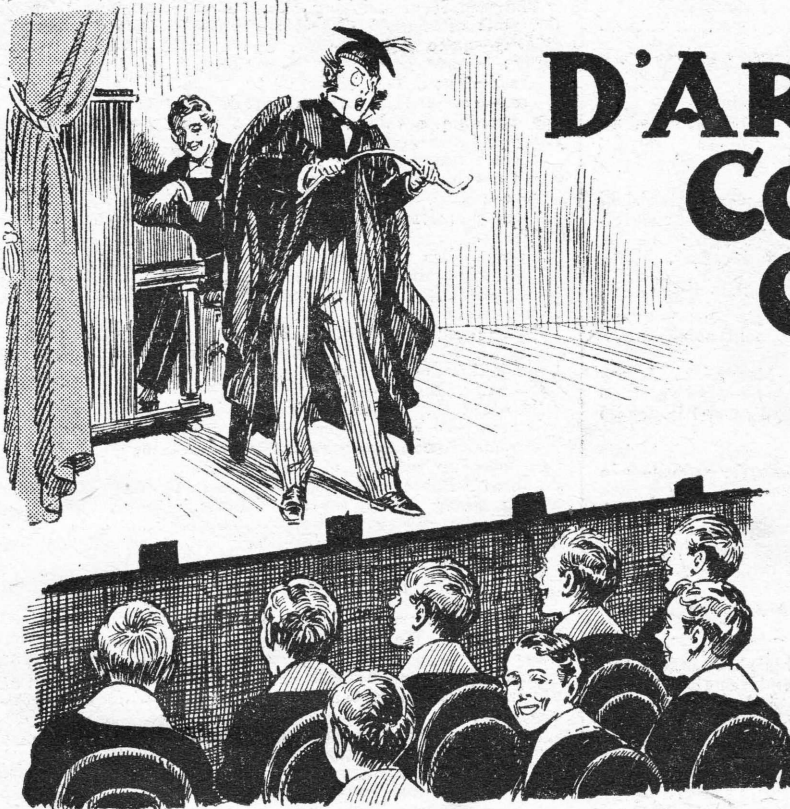
This is a rollicking long complete story of Tom Merry & Co., the title of which speaks eloquently enough of the theme your favourite author has employed. Don't miss this yarn, chums.

"WHITE EAGLE!"

Look out for the concluding chapters of our grand adventure serial, featuring Tom Holt, and another jolly poem from the St. Jim's Rhymester, entitled, "Rugger at St. Jim's." Don't miss these good things—order your GEM early. Chin, chin, chums.

YOUR EDITOR.

GUSSY COMES OUT STRONG! It isn't very often that the mighty intellect of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy is brought to bear on anything other than the "cwease" in his "twousahs" or the set of his tie, but he surprises his schoolfellows with a vengeance in this rollicking story!



D'ARCY'S COMIC OPERA!

A Rousing Extra-Long Story of Tom Merry & Co., the Chery Chums of St. Jim's, describing how they rally to the support of the Wayland Cottage Hospital, which is sorely in need of funds.

By
Martin Clifford.

CHAPTER 1.

Gussy Astonishes the Natives!

"GUSSY not here?"

Tom Merry frowned as he asked the question.

A score of juniors, garbed in footer jerseys and shorts, were waiting in the quad. They were stamping their feet, and swinging their arms across their chests, for an east wind blew biting.

In reply to Tom Merry's query, they shook their heads.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the shining light of the Fourth, was not there.

Tom Merry's frown deepened.

"My hat!" he ejaculated. "Surely the silly chump doesn't intend to cut practice again, after the wiggling I gave him yesterday?"

"Looks like it!" growled Jack Blake.

"Where is he—in the study?" asked Tom Merry, taking a step towards the building.

"Yes; but it's no use going after him."

"Eh?"

"He's locked himself in—as usual. Gussy's been doing this queer sort of stunt every day for the last week. Don't ask me what his little game is. He won't enlighten us. He's hugging some silly secret or other, and even his best pals haven't been asked to share it."

"That's so," said George Herries. "We went along to the study after dinner, and thumped on the door, and kicked up no end of a shindy; but Gussy refused to let us in. Said he was busy, and must on no account be disturbed. You'd have thought, from the way he spoke, that it was the Head's study, and that we had no right to intrude."

"Locked out of our own study, by Jove!" exclaimed Digby excitedly. "Did you ever hear the like?"

Tom Merry looked grim.

"It's certainly the limit," he said. "I'm just about fed-up with the way Gussy's been going on. He's been shutting himself up like a blessed hermit, with his precious secret, whatever it may be."

"Seems to me," said Manners thoughtfully, "that Gussy's swotting for an exam. When a fellow takes to locking himself in his study, and burning midnight oil by the gallon, and cutting footer practice, it can mean only one thing."

"Gussy's turned swot," said Monty Lowther.

"Exactly!"

But Tom Merry was not disposed to agree with his chums.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had never been a particularly studious youth. He was not the sort of fellow to sit up night after night, with a wet towel round his head, cramming for an exam.

And yet, if he had not turned swot, what was the explanation of his strange and mysterious conduct?

Never had his chums known Gussy to behave so queerly. He had been engaged early and late upon his secret enterprise; he had shunned the society of his schoolfellows; he had taken no part in any sports or japes that were going. He had been strangely preoccupied, wandering about like a fellow in a dream.

Only the previous afternoon Tom Merry had warned the swell of St. Jim's that if he "cut" footer practice again there would be ructions.

Apparently this warning had fallen upon deaf ears; for Arthur Augustus had again locked himself in his study directly after dinner, and even his own study-mates—Jack Blake and Herries and Digby—had been denied admittance.

Tom Merry was annoyed. His authority as junior football captain was being flouted; his warning had been ignored. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was carrying on in his own sweet way, as if Tom Merry didn't matter, and junior football didn't matter. Both mattered very much—a fact which Tom Merry was now determined to impress upon the errant Gussy.

"I'm going to fetch the silly chump!" he said grimly.

And he turned on his heel and strode into the building.

The footballers followed him, some looking as grim as Tom himself, and others looking merely amused.

"We were in two minds about bashing the door in," said Jack Blake, falling into step with Tom Merry.

"I'm not in two minds about it," rejoined Tom. "I'm jolly well going to do it! I'm sick and tired of all this foolery! If D'Arcy thinks he can play us up like this, and defy my orders, he's mistaken!"

The procession of footballers, headed by Tom Merry and Jack Blake, marched along the Fourth Form passage.

Outside the door of Study No. 6 they halted, blinking at each other in sheer amazement.

Strange and unusual sounds proceeded from the study.

The voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy—much deeper and

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hoarser than usual—came clearly to the ears of the startled juniors. And Gussy was talking in a manner that was entirely foreign to him.

"You dare! You dare! Get ovah that chair!"

"M-m-my hat!" muttered Tom Merry, in wonder.

"He—he's babbling in rhyme!" gasped Lowther. "Listen!"

Gussy's voice, now strident with anger, went on:

"I'll flog you till you're black and blue,
Both Carr an' Thynne, an' Wiggins, too!
Now, portah! Do your mental dutay!
Pin to the chair this pweicious beautay!"

To say that the fellows in the passage were astonished was to put it mildly—very mildly. There was utter bewilderment and stupefaction in the looks they exchanged.

Monty Lowther tapped his forehead significantly.

"Potty!" he murmured.

"Stark, staring mad!" assented Manners. "That's the only explanation of this. I tell you, Gussy's been swotting for an exam, and he's overdone it, and contracted brain-fever!"

Some of the juniors chuckled, but Tom Merry looked very grave. He had heard of cases where overstudy—a long-continued period of intensive swotting—had turned the brain of the student.

Had something of that sort now happened to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy? It certainly seemed so; for no fellow in his normal senses would have behaved as Arthur Augustus was now behaving.

The footballers paused irresolute, scarcely knowing what line of action to take. And, while they paused, Arthur Augustus repeated the verse he had just rendered; but this time he sang it!

"Oh, help!" groaned Jack Blake. "Carry me home to die, somebody!"

Arthur Augustus had a singing voice that no nightingale would have envied. Time and again, his study-mates had threatened him with the direst pains and penalties, if he dared to burst into song in Study No. 6, or anywhere in their hearing. So Gussy, whenever he wanted to warble, was obliged to do so, not in the study, nor "in quires and places where they sing," but in some remote spot where there was no danger of being gagged and muzzled by an angry audience.

Now, with the door locked and with no fear of interruption—as he thought—Arthur Augustus was exercising his vocal chords to the full. His croaking voice sent a shudder through the juniors in the passage. Some of them would have turned to flee, but a powerful curiosity, coupled with their concern for the sanity of Arthur Augustus, held them to the spot.

Having croaked the verse, in a voice which appeared to be choked with anger, the swell of St. Jim's paused.

Other sounds then came to the ears of his astonished schoolfellows. First there was the sound of a scuffle inside the study, and then a high-pitched voice—but still the voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy—was raised in shrill protest:

"Unhand me, tywant, bwute, and bully,
Or I'll expose your conduct fully!
I'll tell the Head of this affair!
Ah, Newo, stwike me if you dare!"

The crowd of juniors in the passage now looked thoroughly alarmed. Even Monty Lowther, who had been inclined at first to treat this strange business as a joke, now looked owl-like in his solemnity.

"Poor old Gussy!" he muttered. "This proves that he's lost his reason, you fellows! Just now he was mimicking a tyrant like Mr. Ratcliff, and pretending to preside at a flogging. Now he's playing the part of the victim and screeching defiance. What do you deduce from that, Tommy?"

"Delusions!" said Tom Merry gravely.

"Exactly! First of all, Gussy had the delusion that he was some tyrant of a schoolmaster; now he imagines he's a wayward junior about to be flogged! My hat! Just listen!"

From within the study came the steady, rhythmic swishing of a cane.

Whack! Whack! Whack!

"Yawoooooh!" came an anguished yell from Arthur Augustus.

The cane was being laid on with tremendous vim, and the yells—for that first yell was speedily followed by another and another—was almost heartrending.

Tom Merry's face was quite pale.

"I—I can't stand this any longer!" he muttered.

Stooping, he peeped through the keyhole, but could get

no glimpse of the strange drama that was being enacted within the study. Rising, he beat a tattoo on the door with his knuckles, and shouted to Arthur Augustus.

"Gussy!"

The sounds of swishing came to an abrupt halt, so did the yells of anguish. And the voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy—quite normal now, but a little breathless—made reply:

"Is that you, Tom Mewwy?"

Tom drew a quick breath of relief. It seemed that, after the cyclonic events of the past few moments, Arthur Augustus had regained his sanity.

"Yes," answered the captain of the Shell. "What on earth are you up to, Gussy? What's the little game?"

"I am busy, deah boy. I do not wish to be disturbed."

"Are you alone in there, Gussy?" shouted Blake.

"Yaas."

"Then—then who was whacking you a minute ago?"

"That is entiahly my own bizney, Blake! I have already told you that I will not bwook these constant intewwup-tions! Wun away an' pick flowahs!"

"You—you—" snorted Blake. "Do you think we're going to let you go on behaving like a violent lunatic? Unlock this door!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Unlock it!" roared a dozen voices.

It was now evident that Arthur Augustus was sane, but his schoolfellows were intensely curious to know what he had been up to, and why he had been behaving in such an inexplicable manner.

Tom Merry rattled the door-handle.

"I'll give you two minutes, Gussy, to unlock this door! Then, if you still refuse, we'll bash it in!"

"Tom Mewwy, you would not dare—"

"I mean to get to the bottom of this business!" said Tom wrathfully.

There was a pause, during which Tom Merry glanced at his watch. He was fully determined to carry out his threat; and Blake and Herries and Digby, although they didn't relish the prospect of their own door being swept off its hinges, felt that the time had come for drastic measures.

The two minutes expired, and Arthur Augustus made no movement to unlock the door.

Tom Merry was about to give the order to charge when Talbot of the Shell pushed his way forward.

"Hold on, Tom! No need to commit assault and battery on the door! I can force the lock. I've had some experience of 'breaking and entering,'" added Talbot, with a faint smile.

He inserted a piece of bent wire into the keyhole, and it was the work of a moment for him to force the lock. This done, Talbot turned questioningly to Tom Merry, his hand on the door-handle.

"Go ahead!" said Tom.

And Talbot turned the handle and flung the door wide.

CHAPTER 2.

Borrowed Plumes!

"BAI JOVE!"

Arthur Augustus uttered a startled cry as the footballers swarmed into the study. But he was not nearly so startled as the invaders were when they caught sight of him.

The study was in a state of the wildest disorder. The table had been dragged to the window to give Arthur Augustus plenty of elbow-room for his queer operations. In the middle of the room stood a chair, piled high with cushions. The other chairs in the study had been overturned; one of them had landed in the fireplace.

In the middle of the chaos stood Arthur Augustus—a very different Arthur Augustus from usual. For he was garbed in a long master's gown, which flapped about his feet, and on his head, perched at a rakish angle, was a master's mortar-board. In his hand he gripped a cane. There was a full-length mirror in the study; and it was evidently in front of this that Arthur Augustus had been performing his strange antics.

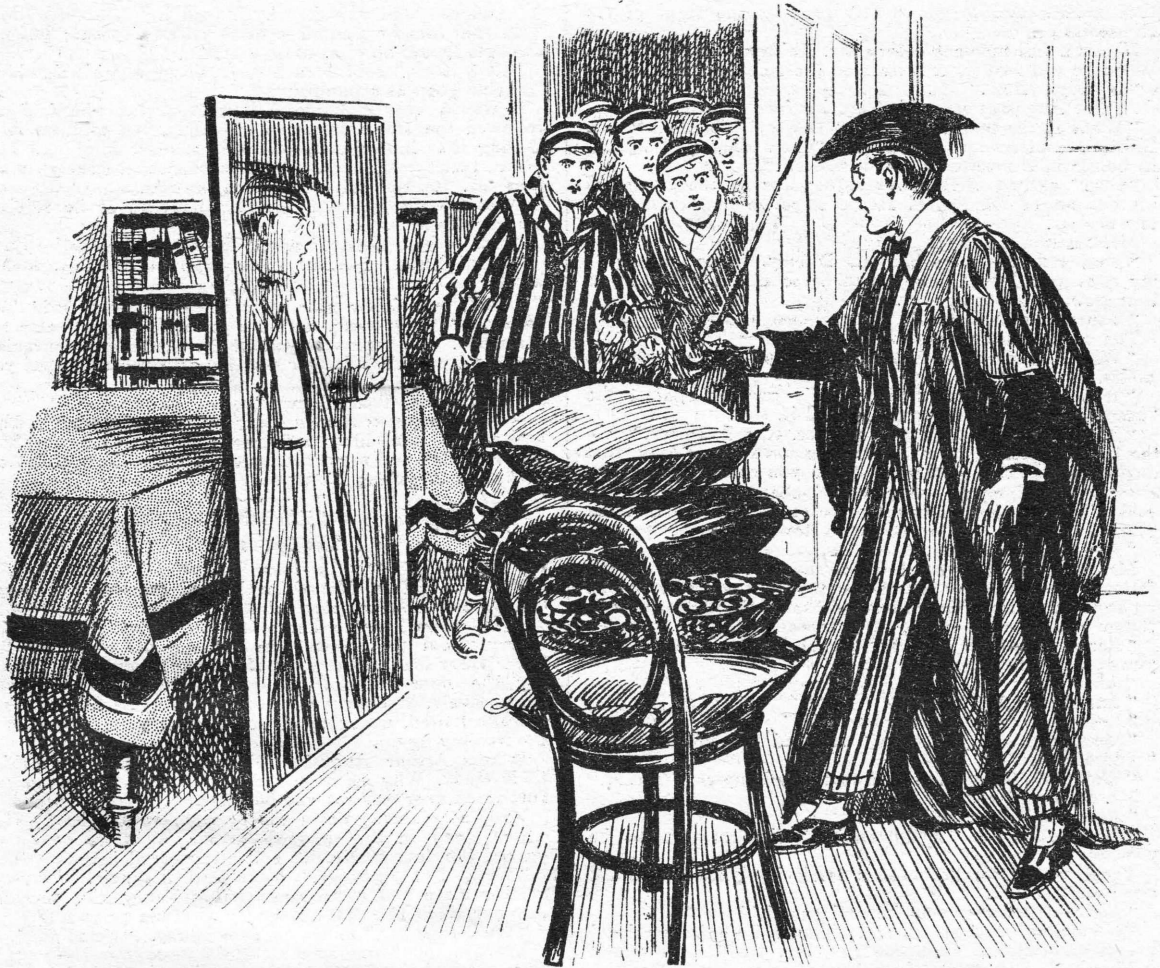
The juniors, pouring into the study, blinked at him in blank amazement. Their fears for Gussy's sanity came back when they saw him so oddly attired. What was he doing in this strange garb? Why the cane in his hand? Why the chair in the middle of the room, piled up with cushions?

It was Arthur Augustus who broke the startled silence.

"You feahful wottahs! How dare you intwude upon my pwivacy!"

The swell of St. Jim's screwed his monocle into his eye as he spoke, and he looked a ludicrous figure indeed—like a very youthful Form master, in a gown that fitted him like a blanket and a mortar-board several sizes too big for his head!

Tom Merry scarcely knew whether to be angry or amused.



In the middle of the study stood Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, garbed in a long master's gown and a mortar-board. In his hand he gripped a cane. The juniors pouring into the study blinked at him in blank amazement. "You feahful wottahs!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "How dare you intwude upon my pivvacy?" (See Chapter 2.)

"Would you mind explaining what this means, Gussy?" he said. "I can't help thinking that you've got bats in your belfry!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, I have no bats in my belfwy—to use a vulgawism of which I stwongly disappwove! I am perfectly sane!"

"Yes, you look it!" growled Jack Blake. "Prancing around in a master's gown and mortar-board is a sure sign of sanity—I don't think!"

Arthur Augustus glowered at Blake through his monocle. "I wegard you as a cheekay ass, Blake! Leave my studdy at once, or I will administrah a feahful thwashin'!"

"Your study!" hooted Blake wrathfully. "Well, I like that! Where do Herries and Dig and myself come in?"

"You don't, deah boy! You stay out!" said Arthur Augustus tersely.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Jack Blake spun round upon the fellows, who were laughing.

"Blest if I can see anything to cackle at!" he said irritably. "Here's Gussy carrying on like a fellow who has just escaped from Bedlam or Broadmoor, wearing a master's glad-rags, and ordering me to leave his study. His study, mark you! He's only got a fourth share in it by rights. If he wants pivvacy, let him screen off a quarter of the study and leave us the rest!"

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort, Blake!" said Arthur Augustus. "I wesent your intwusion, an' the intwusion of all these fellows! Wun away an' play footah!"

"Not without you!" said Tom Merry. "We came along specially to fetch you. But before we frogs'-march you down to the ground, we want a full explanation of this business!"

"Yes, rather!"

"What does it all mean, Gussy?"

"Explain!"

Arthur Augustus squared his shoulders obstinately.

"My actions may seem queeah to you," he said, "but I see no weason why I should explain them."

"Then we'll jolly well bump you until you do!" said Tom Merry. "Collar him!"

The swell of St. Jim's was in a tight corner. He stood at bay, his eyes gleaming angrily, as the footballers closed upon him. Then he noticed that the door had been left unguarded, and he decided to make a dash for it.

Gussy's plan of escape had to be executed at the moment of its conception, for his schoolfellows were fairly upon him now.

Suddenly he sprang forward, cleaving a way through the press with his cane.

The juniors fell back on either side, leaving Arthur Augustus the avenue of escape that he wanted. He was through that avenue in a twinkling. Hurling himself through the doorway, he sped away down the passage at top speed.

"After him!" roared Tom Merry.

And a horde of furious and baffled juniors pelted in pursuit of the swell of St. Jim's.

In his long, trailing gown, over which he all but tripped once or twice, Arthur Augustus cut a comical figure. He fairly flew down the passage, with his pursuers hard at his heels.

Blindly he raced on, with his monocle trailing at the end of its cord. He darted through the hall, making for the quadrangle. But calamity, swift and sudden, befell him when he reached the top of the School House steps. His foot became entangled in the long gown, and he pitched forward, clutching at the empty air. Then he rolled down the steps with a succession of bumps, landed at the base of them with a sickening concussion, and rolled to a halt under the astonished eyes of Mr. Railton, the Housemaster.

Mr. Railton was in plus fours, with a golfing-bag slung over his shoulder. He stared in stupefied amazement at the recumbent figure at his feet.

Gussy's pursuers had reached the top of the steps, where

they halted, and began to fall back at the sight of the Housemaster.

It was a full moment before Mr. Railton found his voice. When he did find it, it resembled the rumble of thunder.

"D'Arcy! Boy!"

Arthur Augustus scrambled up, his face crimson.

"What is the meaning of this, D'Arcy?" demanded Mr. Railton, contracting his brows. "How dare you appear in public in the vestments of a master?"

"Ow!" gasped Arthur Augustus: for in the course of his descent of the School House steps he had collected a few bruises.

Mr. Railton frowned.

"That ridiculous ejaculation, D'Arcy, is no answer to my question! How came you to be so attired? Whose is that gown and mortar-board?"

"Yours, Mr. Waitton!"

The Housemaster jumped.

"What! You have dared to appropriate my personal attire, D'Arcy?"

"Weally, sir! I must respectfully pwtotest against the 'appropwiate.' I merely bowwowed it, sir."

"A distinction with little difference, that I can see," said the Housemaster dryly. "Am I to understand, D'Arcy, that during my absence on the golf-links, you paid a visit to my study, and took my gown and mortar-board—and my cane?" added Mr. Railton, indicating the cane, which had fallen from Gussy's grasp when he rolled down the steps.

"Y—yaas, sir," said Arthur Augustus slowly.

Mr. Railton's brow was black as thunder. Gussy's school-fellows, crowded together at the top of the steps, looked on apprehensively. They surmised that their elegant school-fellow was about to collect some more bruises!

"For what purpose, D'Arcy," demanded Mr. Railton, "did you appropriate these things?"

"Ahem!"

"Answer me, D'Arcy!"

"I—er—must I weally explain, sir?"

"Most certainly you must!" snapped the Housemaster. "And at once!"

"Well, sir, I—I wanted to dwess myself up as a tywant."

Mr. Railton gasped.

"A—a what, D'Arcy?"

"A tywant, sir. A tywannical schoolmastah, to be pwticse."

The Housemaster bestowed a terrifying glance upon the swell of St. Jim's.

"Are you being grossly impertinent, D'Arcy?"

"Nunno, sir—not at all, sir! You quite misappwehend me. I have always regarded you, Mr. Waitton, as one of the best. But there are such beings as tywannical school-mastahs; an' it was one of these that I wished to impersonate."

"But why?" asked Mr. Railton, amazement and anger blending in his tone.

"Ah! That, sir, if you will pardon my sayin' so, is a scewet, the nature of which I cannot divulge, even to you."

The Housemaster regarded Arthur Augustus sternly, from beneath lowering brows.

"I shall soon begin to suspect that you are not sane, D'Arcy! Your conduct is quite inexplicable to me. I will not attempt to force an explanation from you; but I shall punish you severely for appropriating my attire. Remove that gown and mortar-board at once! Then hand me that cane, and follow me to my study!"

"Poor old Gussy!" murmured Monty Lowther, at the top of the steps. "He's escaped a bumping, only to run into a licking. It's a case of out of the frying-pan into the fire!"

"He had an awful nerve to borrow Railton's things," said Tom Merry.

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"And he won't explain why he did it," muttered Blake. "He said that he wanted to dress up as a tyrant; but why on earth should he want to do that?"

"Give it up," said Tom Merry, shrugging his shoulders. "I'm no good at conundrums."

It was a very subdued Arthur Augustus who forlornly followed the Housemaster to his study, ten minutes later. During that interval, sounds of steady swishing had been heard, punctuated by yelps of anguish, which clearly showed that Mr. Railton had not spared the rod.

"Ow-ow-ow!" groaned Arthur Augustus, as he rejoined his schoolfellows.

"Had it bad, Gussy?" asked Herries sympathetically.

"Yow! Yaas. I never knew Waitton could be such a bwute."

"Well, you fairly asked for it, you know," said Tom Merry. "In the circus, we'll let you off playing footer this afternoon. We'll also let you off the bumping we promised you; and we won't badger you for an explanation of your asinine conduct."

"Thank you, Tom Mewwy."

Arthur Augustus limped away to his study, sore in body and mind. And his chums hurried down to Little Side, still mystified and perplexed by the extraordinary behaviour of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

CHAPTER 3.

The Secret Out!

"SHUSH!"

At Tom Merry's whispered command, Manners and Lowther stopped short.

The Terrible Three had just come in, muddy but cheery, from the footer. On entering the Shell passage, Tom Merry had caught sight of a stealthy figure, approaching the door of No. 10—the Terrible Three's study. Instinctively, he caught each of his chums by the arm, and the trio halted, watching in wonderment the movements of the stealthy figure.

It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy who was approaching their study. Why he should do so in such a stealthy and furtive manner was yet another mystery to his chums.

Without glancing down the passage, where the Terrible Three stood in the shadow, Arthur Augustus cautiously opened the door of No. 10, and disappeared into the study.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" ejaculated Manners. "Gussy's getting more and more mysterious. Fancy him sneaking into our study like that! Wonder what his game is?"

"We'll soon see," muttered Tom Merry. "Come on!"

The Terrible Three sped along the passage to their study. They reached the door—which was ajar—just in time to see Arthur Augustus deposit a bulky envelope on the table. He chuckled softly as he did so. Then he was about to dart out of the study, when he saw the Terrible Three framed in the doorway, regarding him sternly.

"Oh, cwumbs!" gasped Arthur Augustus, in dismay.

Tom Merry & Co. came into the study, and closed the door, and set their backs against it. It was clear that they meant to have this out.

"What are you doing in this study, Gussy?" demanded Tom Merry.

It was a point-blank question, demanding a prompt and satisfactory answer.

Arthur Augustus coloured up, and looked very embarrassed; but he did not try to fence.

"I've brougnt you a lettah, Tom Mewwy," he replied. "An anonymous lettah."

"My hat! Is this it?" asked Tom, stepping towards the table, and picking up the bulky packet.

"Yaas, deah boy."

Tom Merry glanced at the envelope curiously. It was addressed—in the unmistakable handwriting of Arthur Augustus—to "TOM MERRY, President, Junior Dramatic Society."

"Who is this from, Gussy?" asked Tom, as he tore open the envelope.

"I have already told you, Tom Mewwy, that it is an anonymous lettah."

"But it's addressed to me in your fist—"

"I neithah admit nor deny that assertion, Mewwy. I wepeat, it is an anonymous lettah."

Monty Lowther gave a chuckle.

"Gussy, you'll be the death of me!" he said. "The letter's addressed in your own hand, and yet you try to tell us it's anonymous!"

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"What's inside it, Tommy?" asked Manners curiously.

Tom Merry drew out from the envelope a very bulky manuscript. It looked like a story, at first glance, but a glance at the title and sub-title showed that it was not so.

"THE TYRANT OF ST. TIM'S!"
A Comic Opera, in Three Acts.

"Great pip!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

Revelation came to him in a flash.

Here was the explanation of Gussy's amazing conduct of the past week or two. Here was the key to the mystery that had completely baffled the Fourth and the Shell.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had been secretly engaged in composing an opera!

Manners and Lowther, unable to contain their curiosity, came and looked over their chum's shoulder. They were astonished at what they saw.

"Well, this beats the band!" gasped Lowther. "Gussy's broken out in a new place. He's written an opera!"

"I have not said, Lowthah, that I've written an opewah," interposed Arthur Augustus. "I have told you that it is anonymous."

The Terrible Three stared at the manuscript, and then they stared at D'Arcy. The former was clearly in the handwriting of the latter.

"Anonymous—when it's in your own handwriting!" cried Tom Merry.

"Anonymous—when it's quite plain that this is what you've been working on night and day!" shouted Manners.

"Anonymous—when you brought it here yourself!" hooted Lowther.

Arthur Augustus frowned.

"Pway, do not wear at me in this mannah," he protested. "I have a stwong objection to bein' woreed at. I have delivahed the anonymous lettah, an' twust you will now permit me to depart."

"Not so fast!" said Tom Merry. "Look here, Gussy, what's the use of trying to keep this business dark any longer? We caught you in the act of dumping this manuscript on our table; and even if we hadn't, we should have known it came from you."

"Bai Jove! How, deah boy?"

"By the handwriting, of course! We should recognise your scrawl anywhere."

"It is not a sewawl, Tom Mewwy! I have a newy neat an' distinguished hand."

"Then you admit this is your writing?" chuckled Lowther.

"Yaas—I suppose I must," said the swell of St. Jim's, after some hesitation. "It is my handw'itin'. But I want you cleahly to understand, deah boys, that this opewah is the work of an anonymous authah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Terrible Three roared.

"You might as well own up, Gussy," said Tom Merry, laughing. "You wrote this opera, didn't you?"

"I did," confessed Arthur Augustus at last. "But I w'ote it anonymously."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The swell of St. Jim's quite failed to see any reason for merriment. But the Terrible Three laughed loud and long. And they were still roaring when Jack Blake and Herries and Digby came along to discover what the joke might be.

"What's all the merry rumpus about?" asked Blake, looking puzzled.

"The secret's out at last," explained Tom Merry. "Now we know why Gussy has been shutting himself up in his study and burning the midnight oil by the bucketful. Now we know why he borrowed Railton's gown and mortar-board this afternoon, and carried on like a madman. He was rehearsing."

"Rehearsing?" gasped Blake and Herries and Digby in wonder.

"Yes. The fact is, Gussy's written a comic opera. It's called 'THE TYRANT OF ST. TIM'S!' There's a flogging scene in it, and that was what he was rehearsing this afternoon. He took both parts—the part of the flogger and the floggee, so to speak. He was the tyrant one minute; the next, he was the squalling victim."

"Oh, my hat!"

Gussy's chums stared at him blankly. He had indeed broken out in a new place, as Monty Lowther aptly expressed it. They had had experience of Arthur Augustus in numerous roles, from that of hotel proprietor down to that of grocer's boy. But his versatility did not end there. He had now launched forth as a sort of W. S. Gilbert—a writer of comic operas.

"Gussy insists that this opera was written anonymously," said Tom Merry, with a grin. "But, of course, that's merely his modesty."

"Or else his diplomacy, in case we all vote the opera a dud!" chuckled Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus frowned.

"It is not a dud, Lowthah! It is a weally funny musical comedy—a perfect seweam from start to finish. I took vewy great pains with it."

"When you wrote it anonymously?" queried Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It seems to have a strong St. Jim's flavour about it,"

said Tom Merry, turning over the pages of the manuscript. "The names of the characters are very familiar. The Tyrant of St. Tim's is Mr. Horace Scatcliff. That's old Ratcliff, of course."

"No wonder Gussy wants to remain anonymous!" laughed Digby. "If Ratty knew he had been burlesqued in an opera, there would be ructions!"

"Then the other names," Tom Merry went on. "Another master in the opera is Mr. Victor Aylton. That's Railton, or I'm a Dutchman. Then there are three juniors in the Fourth Form—Wiggins and Carr and Thynne."

"Figgins and Kerr and Wynn of the New House!" said Herries.

"Exactly! Then there is Straggles, the porter—a jolly good name, incidentally, for that old slowcoach Taggles! The funny man of the piece is P.-c. Puddlefoot, a fat policeman with a big idea of his own importance. That name doesn't connect up with anybody we know; but no doubt Gussy took P.-c. Crump as his model."

"Yaas, I did," said Arthur Augustus, quite forgetting that his opera was supposed to be an anonymous work.

"And all the other characters are drawn from life?" queried Tom Merry.

"Yaas, deah boy!"

Tom Merry studied the manuscript intently for a few moments. Presently he looked up.

"It seems quite good," he said, in surprise. "In fact, it gets better as it goes on. So perhaps Gussy didn't write it, after all!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus flushed to the roots of his hair.

"You are insultin' me, Tom Mewwy! Withdaway your wemark at once, or I will ask you to take off your coat!"

"Too cold to start undressing here," said Tom Merry. "I withdraw unreservedly, as they say in the House of Commons."

There was quite a craning of necks, and crowding of heads, to peruse the manuscript of the opera. Some of the songs were really funny, and the juniors' appreciative chuckles sounded like music in the ears of Arthur Augustus, and compensated him for much that he had suffered.

"This is jolly good!" announced Jack Blake. "Is it your idea to have it performed, Gussy?"

"Of course! I did not w'ite it merely for the benefit of my health, Blake. I w'ote it with the notion of havin' it performed at St. Jim's, an' the pwoceeds devoted to chawity."

"Which charity?" asked Tom Merry.

"The Wayland Cottage Hospital, deah boy. They are badly in need of funds—in fact, the hospital is stwugglin' for its vewy existence. Seweval wards have had to be closed down already, an' it is feahed that the hospital will have to be closed unless financial help comes wollin' in."

"So you hit upon this wheeze for helping the hospital?" said Blake. "Well, you're a brick, Gussy, and we'll back you up with the opera."

"Yes, rather!" chimed in the others.

Arthur Augustus flushed with pleasure. He had intended to do good by stealth, and to keep his name in the background. He had not desired any sort of publicity in the matter; but now that he stood revealed as the author of the opera, he simply had to explain why he had written it. And he was glad to find his schoolfellows supporting the project so whole-heartedly.

"There's just one drawback," said Tom Merry thoughtfully. "Gussy has written all the lyrics, and they seem first-rate to me. But what about the music? We haven't any genius at St. Jim's who can compose opera music."

"Set your mind at rest, Tom Mewwy," said Arthur Augustus. "I have written the lywics so that they all fit populah tunes."

"Oh, good!"

"An' now, deah boys, I think we ought to call a meelin', and choose the cast, an' make all awwagements for the performance. There is no time to be lost, if we are to save the cottage hospital f'rom goin' west. I have swotted up my own part already, an' I am word-perfect."

"And which is your part, Gussy?" asked Tom Merry.

"I w'oppose to take the title-wole," explained Arthur Augustus. "I shall be Mr. Scatcliff, the Tywant of St. Tim's."

"Oh!"

"I notice," said Monty Lowther, glancing through the manuscript, "that Mr. Scatcliff is the Big Noise in this opera. He has the stage to himself for three-parts of the performance."

"Pwecisely!" said Arthur Augustus. "I gave myself a fat part because it will give me a chance to shine. I have nevah yet been given a fair chance behind the footlights. When we play 'Hamlet,' I'm usually the Fifth Gwawe-diggah, or somethin' of that sort. When we played 'Tempest' last

wintah, I was a Slight Bweeze 'off.' And in 'H.M.S. Pinafore' I was a beastly cabin-boy, bai Jove! But at last I've got a chance to come into the full blaze of the limelight, an' I mean to make the most of it. Without wishin' to appeal conceited, I am a weally talented actah, an' my light has been hidden undah a bushel too long."

The juniors stared at Arthur Augustus at the conclusion of this little speech.

However modest Gussy might have been about the authorship of the play, he was not at all modest about his histrionic abilities. He cherished the delusion—for delusion it surely was—that he was a sort of Henry Ainley and Owen Nares rolled into one. His schoolfellows had no such delusions.

"I say, Gussy!" said Tom Merry. "I'm not trying to be horrid; but there are one or two reasons why it will be impossible for you to play the title-role."

Arthur Augustus drew himself up stiffly. "I beg your pardon, Tom Mewwy! If you know any valid reasons why I should not be the Tywant of St. Tim's, I shall be glad to heah them!"

"Well," said Tom, "the chap who takes the tyrant's part will have to do a lot of singing, won't he?"

"Of course!"

"Then that puts you out of court at once. You see, old fellow, you haven't a voice."

Arthur Augustus gave the speaker a deadly look. "Tom Mewwy, I quite fail to gwasp your meanin'. You had an opportunity, this afternoon, of heavin' my voice—"

"That's not a voice," said Monty Lowther. "It's a vice!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus pushed back his cuffs in a warlike manner, and advanced upon the humorous Lowther. That cheery youth promptly dodged behind Tom Merry, using Tom as his shield and buckler.

"Pax, old chap!" said Jack Blake, laying a restraining hand on his chum's arm.

"Welease me, Blake! I have been affwonted! I wposue to administah a feahful thwashin'—"

"Hold on, Gussy!" said Tom Merry. "Let me finish giving you my reasons why it won't be possible for you to take the tyrant's part. Firstly, as I have said, you haven't a voice. Secondly, you can't act. Thirdly, your aristocratic accent would be a bar. Fourthly, you haven't the height and build for the part. Fifthly—"

But Tom Merry got no further. Purple with wrath, Arthur Augustus wrenched himself free of Blake's grasp, and rushed at Tom Merry.

"Put up your hands, you wude wottah!" he fairly shrieked.

Tom Merry, simulating mortal terror, dodged wildly round the study, with the incensed Gussy after him.

"When I catch you, Tom Mewwy," panted the swell of St. Jim's, "I will soundly box your yahs for your wudeness!"

"Order, order!" cried Jack Blake. "We shall never get any forrader with the opera, if we're going to start by squabbling, like a parcel of fags! If the cottage hospital is to be saved, we'd better call that meeting and get busy."

Arthur Augustus was sobered at once by Blake's words. He contented himself by bestowing a wilting look upon Tom Merry. Then the meeting was convened, and a messenger despatched to the New House to fetch Figgins and Kerr and Wynn, who were to take part in the opera.

Other fellows summoned to the meeting were Talbot and Levison, and Cardew and Clive, and Bernard Glyn and Clifton Dane. And great was their astonishment when they learned what was afoot, and what was the explanation of the recent curious behaviour of Arthur Augustus.

CHAPTER 4. Getting Busy!

THE Junior Common-room was the venue of the meeting, which was marked by a certain liveliness, and at times looked like developing into a free fight.

This was regrettable; but, as Monty Lowther observed, such things did happen, even at the best regulated junior meetings.

It was scarcely to be expected that Tom Merry & Co. would see eye to eye with Jack Blake & Co. on every point; or that Jack Blake & Co. would see eye to eye with Tom Merry & Co.; or that Figgins & Co. of the New House would see eye to eye with either.

Everybody hailed with delight the idea of a comic opera at St. Jim's. Everybody agreed that the opera was well written, and ought to go with a swing. And everybody was in favour of a charge being levied for admission, the proceeds to be given to the Wayland Cottage Hospital.

On these points there was a concordant unanimity of opinion. On other points, however, there was a sharp divergence of views.

"Gentlemen," exclaimed Jack Blake, to whom had been

allotted the part of Straggles, the porter. "I wish to say a few words—"

"Dwy up, Blake!" said Arthur Augustus sharply. "I am the chairman of this meetin', an' you must ask my permish befoah you get up on your hind legs an' start speechifyin'."

"Look here, Gussy—"

"Will you sit down?" almost yelled the swell of St. Jim's. "I am the chair!"

"Where are your wooden legs, then, Gussy?" asked Monty Lowther. "The only wooden part of you, that I can see, is your noddle!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus bestowed the glare of a basilisk upon the humorist of the Shell.

"I am the chairman of this meetin'!" he repeated impressively.

"That's just the point," said Jack Blake. "You've appointed yourself chairman of the meeting without putting it to the vote. You've appointed yourself producer of the opera, without so much as 'By your leave.' You've calmly helped yourself to the fattest part in the play—the only part worth havin'. You've proclaimed yourself head cook and bottlewasher of the whole concern. You've told us that you are all these things. Is there anything that you're not, by any chance?"

Arthur Augustus frowned.

"Weally, Blake! You are so exaspewatin' that I could box your yahs! There ought to be no need for me to have to justify myself, but I will tell you this. It was I who conceived the ideah of a comic opewah; it was I who actually composed the opewah—"

"Anonymously!" chuckled Lowther.

"An' it was I who had the bwright ideah of savin' the cottage hospital. In these circes, it is only wight an' propah that I should be the pwoducah of the opewah, an' that I should have the biggest part in it."

"That's fair enough, Blake," said Tom Merry. "Strictly speaking, I ought to be in the chair now, as I happen to be president of the Junior Amateur Dramatic Society. But as Gussy has done all the spade work, it's only right that he should reap all the glory. So I'm willing to stand aside in his favour, and to take the part which he has seen fit to give me—the part of Mr. Aylton, the Housemaster at St. Tim's."

Arthur Augustus nodded his head approvingly.

"Yes, that's all very well," grumbled Blake. "But the part of Mr. Aylton is quite a decent one. Whereas the part of Straggles the porter—that I'm taking—is nothing more than a walking-on part. It offers no scope for a clever actor and a brilliant singer."

"No; but then you're neither one nor the other, are you?" said Figgins innocently.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You're certainly a better singer than Gussy," said Kerr. "But that's saying very little. A fellow whose voice had broken, and who sang with a plum in his mouth, would be a better singer than Gussy!"

At this Arthur Augustus grew very wrathful and excited; and it needed all Tom Merry's powers as a pacifist to prevent him committing assault and battery upon George Francis Kerr.

"Dry up, you cheeky New House bounders!" growled Jack Blake. "Look here, Gussy, I'm quite willing for you to be the producer, and the promoter, and the Lord-High-Everything on one condition."

"Indeed!" said Arthur Augustus freezingly. "I shall be intewested to heah the condition, Blake."

"That you swop parts with me," said Blake coolly. "You be Straggles the porter, and I'll be Mr. Scatcliff, the Tyrant of St. Tim's. Is that a go?"

"No, Blake, it is not a go!" roared Arthur Augustus. "I should not dweam of swoppin' parts with you. I specially selected you for the part of Stwaggles the portah, because it does not call for a high degree of intelligencé. Any ass could play it. Be perfectly natuwal, Blake, and you will make a big success of the part."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

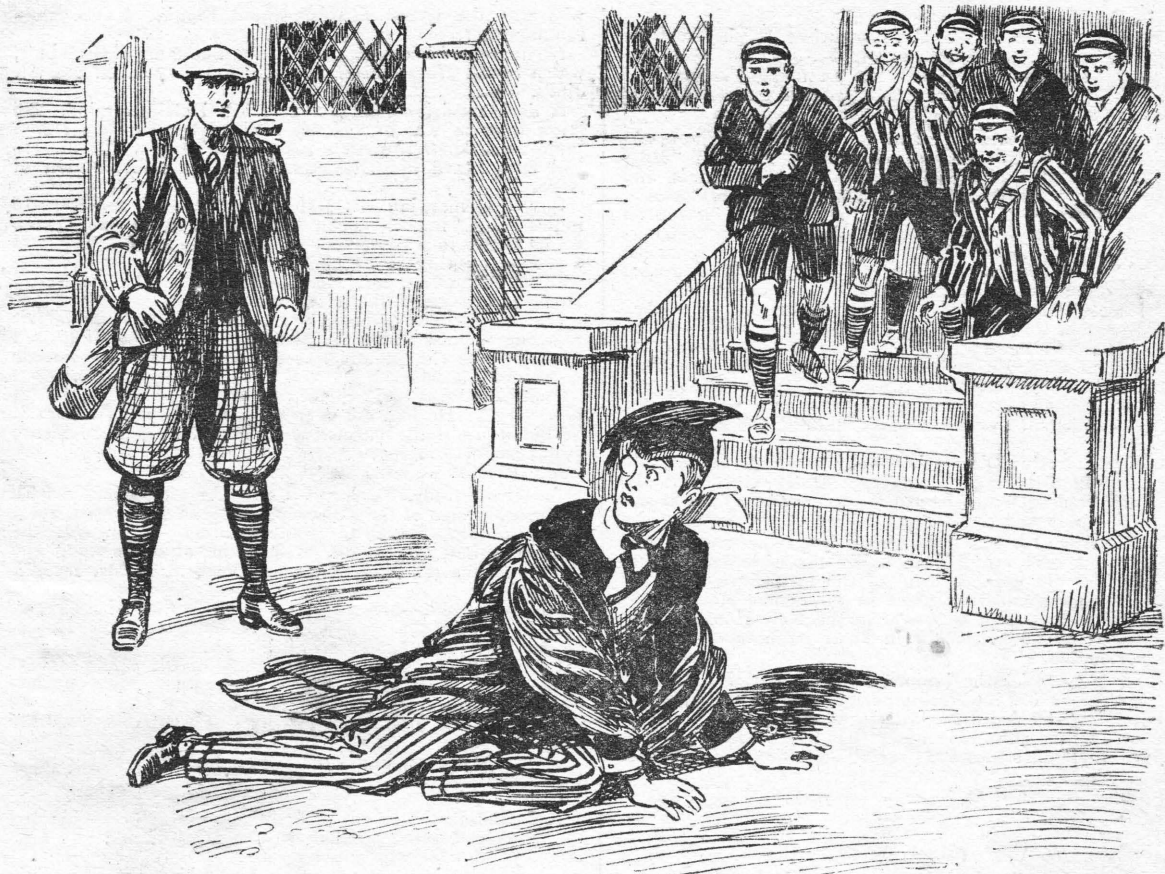
Jack Blake almost foamed at the mouth. Arthur Augustus had not meant to be funny; he had told what he conceived to be the simple truth. And the truth can, at times, be very painful!

"You—you—" spluttered Blake. "For two pins, you blessed tailor's dummy, I'd wipe up the floor with you!"

"Order, there!" called out Tom Merry. "We shall get no forrader at this rate. Now, let's go over what we've arranged. With your permission, Mr. Chairman, I'll read out the cast."

"Go ahead, deah boy!"

And Tom Merry recited the following, which was to appear on the programmes:



Gussy's foot became entangled in the long gown and he pitched forward. Then he rolled down the steps with a succession of bumps—and landed at the feet of Mr. Railton. "D'Arcy!" thundered Mr. Railton. "Boy! What is the meaning of this?" "Ow!" gasped Arthur Augustus. (See Chapter 2.)

"THE TYRANT OF ST. TIM'S!"
A Comic Opera, in Three Acts.

CHARACTERS:

MR. HORACE SCATCLIFF - - The Tyrant of St. Tim's
A. A. D'ARCY.

MR. VICTOR AYLTON - - - A Sporting Housemaster
TOM MERRY.

WIGGINS Pupils of the Fourth Form, and victims of
CARR Mr. Scatcliff's tyranny.
THYNNE

FIGGINS, KERR, WYNN.

STRAGGLES - - - - - The School Porter
JACK BLAKE.

P.-C. PUDDLEFOOT - - - - The Village Constable
MONTAGUE LOWTHER.

Pianoforte Accompanist—GEORGE HERRIES.

Producer, Author, Stage-Manager, and General Supervisor,
ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY.

Rag-tag and Bobtail, Odd Men Out, Miscellaneous Menials,
and Noises 'Off':

Manners, Cardew, Clive, Talbot, Glyn, Dane, and Digby."

Tom Merry finished his recital with a grin. It was, perhaps, unwise to read out the names of the performers; for the meeting showed signs of becoming stormy again.

"I say, Gussy!" shouted Levison major. "I want to be a big noise in this opera!"

"Well, you are, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus soothingly. "You're a big noise 'off.' You've got to clash a pair of cymbals togethah, behind the scenes, to give the effect of a shindy in the St. Tim's quadwangle."

Levison gave a snort. "Any fool can make a commotion behind the scenes!" he growled.

"Yaas; that's pweicely why I selected you for the job, Levison."

"Ha, ha, ha!" "Look here," roared Levison, "I want to play the bobby's part—the part you've given to Lowther. I'd make a better bobby than Lowther, any day!"

"On what grounds do you assert that?" asked Arthur Augustus. "You can't possibly have biggah feet than Lowthah!"

At this a positive howl of merriment went up, in which Monty Lowther did not join. For once in a way the funny man of the Shell quite failed to see the point of the joke!

Levison then asked if it would not be possible to have two policemen in the play, so that he could take the part of one and Lowther the other. But Arthur Augustus firmly declined. He knew that if he yielded on this matter he would have to make still further concessions. Manners would want to be a policeman, and so would Cardew, and Clive, and Talbot, and Glyn, and the others, until a miniature police force would have to be included in the opera. And this was neither necessary nor desirable.

Cardew was the next complainant.

"Dear man," he drawled, addressing the chairman of the meeting, "you do not flatter me, exactly, by makin' me a 'miscellaneous menial.' It seems that my job is to walk on to the stage at intervals, an' potter around with a dustpan an' brush. An' I've got to be as mute as a mummy all the time. Can't you find me a part that's a little more excitin'—somethin' with a kick in it? You're playin' the Tyrant of St. Tim's, Gussy. Why not invent an arch-tyrant—a sort of Emperor Nero headmaster—an' let me take the part?"

Arthur Augustus frowned.

"Weally, deah boy, that's impossible!" he said.

"Oh, well," said Cardew, with a sigh of resignation. "I shall have to rest content with the role of a miscellaneous menial. An' when I feel sufficiently energetic to produce an opera myself, I'll make you a charwoman in it, Gussy."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Cardew, I should flatly refuse to play such an undignified part!" said the swell of St. Jim's.

"Yet you don't mind foistin' off an undignified part on me!" said Cardew. "Never mind; we won't come to blows about it, dear man."

After this the meeting became less turbulent. There was a good deal of good-humoured banter, but the "Rag-tag and Bobtail, Odd Men Out, Miscellaneous Menials, and Noises 'Off," resigned themselves to their humble roles.

It was arranged that copies of the opera should be run off on a duplicating machine and distributed to the members of the cast. It was arranged further that the first rehearsal should take place on Saturday evening in the Junior Common-room, behind locked doors.

The locked doors were a necessary precaution. They would prevent the intrusion of the curious and the critical; and, what was more important, they would prevent the intrusion of a certain gentleman who would certainly have "squashed" the whole thing if he got to know that he was being burlesqued in a junior opera.

That gentleman was Mr. Horace Ratcliff, the New House master.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had not written the opera with the object of attacking or annoying Mr. Ratcliff. But Mr. Ratcliff would certainly have been annoyed had he known that his double and counterpart figured in the opera.

Arthur Augustus was treading on dangerous ground, and the greatest care would have to be taken to ensure that Mr. Ratcliff did not get wind of the proceedings. As all the rehearsals would take place in the School House, however, and Mr. Ratcliff was over in the New House, it was hoped that he would remain in blissful ignorance of what was portending.

Unfortunately for the juniors, however, Mr. Ratcliff was a very officious and interfering person, who seldom remained in blissful ignorance of anything that was going on around him, and it was more than likely that he would make it his business to inquire into the present activities of the Junior Dramatic Society.

But that remained to be seen.

CHAPTER 5.

Mr. Ratcliff Investigates!

"CONFUSION to all tyrants!"

Figgins of the New House uttered that malediction in ringing tones.

"Hear, hear!" roared Kerr and Fatty Wynn in unison. "A plague on the pests!"

"May they be cut off in their prime!" said Figgins melodramatically.

"And flayed alive!" said Kerr in a bloodthirsty voice.

"And then boiled in oil!" hissed Fatty Wynn.

Mr. Ratcliff, who chanced to be passing the door of Figgins' study, looked amazed and alarmed, as well he might.

It was Saturday afternoon, and the New House was practically deserted, the majority of the fellows being on the football-ground.

But the famous firm of Figgins, Kerr, & Wynn was at home—very much at home. They were giving football the go-by on this sunny spring afternoon, and were holding a rehearsal in their study, in preparation for the rehearsal proper, which was to take place that evening.

Each of them was armed with his "book of words," and at the moment that Mr. Ratcliff passed by they happened to be declaiming some fiery passages of prose from Gussy's opera.

The Housemaster stopped short in the passage. He looked quite thunderstruck.

"Comrades of St. Tim's," roared George Figgins, "are we worms that we should wriggle and squirm under the heel of the tyrant?"

"No, no!"

"Never!"

"Are we puny infants, too weak and feeble to offer resistance?"

"No, no, comrade!"

"Schoolboys never shall be slaves!" shouted Figgins. "Brothers, arise! Let us hurl defiance into the teeth of the oppressor! Let us resist him to the bitter end, so long as there is breath in our bodies! Down with the tyrant of St. Tim's!"

"Confound his politics!" roared Kerr.

"Frustrate his bullying tricks!" boomed Fatty Wynn.

There was a pause.

Out in the passage, Mr. Ratcliff stood as if turned to stone. His steely eyes were gleaming with anger and suspicion.

Could it be possible that it was he—Mr. Horace Ratcliff—

who was the tyrant against whom Figgins & Co. were fulminating?

No name had been mentioned, save the name of St. Tim's, which to the Housemaster had sounded very much like St. Jim's.

A dark suspicion took shape in Mr. Ratcliff's mind. He knew that he was universally disliked by the New House juniors—he knew that they regarded him as a tyrant. He had once heard himself described as the reincarnation of Nero.

Only that morning Mr. Ratcliff had found it necessary to inflict hefty "impots" upon Figgins and Kerr and Wynn. So he began to wonder—not unnaturally—whether this was a protest meeting in Figgins' study, convened for the purpose of denouncing Mr. Horace Ratcliff and all his works. It certainly seemed like it!

The Housemaster's brow was black as thunder. He felt a strong impulse to throw open the door of the study and descend upon the juniors like a wolf on the fold. But he restrained himself.

There was no actual evidence as yet that he was the tyrant referred to. He had not been mentioned by name. But if he bided his time, reflected the Housemaster, the evidence might be forthcoming.

Mr. Ratcliff waited.

Inside the study, Figgins & Co. broke afresh into a fiery dialogue. Some of the expressions they used were positively bloodcurdling, and their amiable intentions towards the tyrant—to boil him in oil, to flay him alive, to hang and draw and quarter him—might well have made Mr. Ratcliff tremble.

He did tremble—not with fear, however, but with anger.

If Figgins & Co. were indeed referring to their Housemaster they were exceeding all bounds.

From time to time, in the course of his career at St. Jim's, Mr. Ratcliff had overheard some very uncomplimentary remarks about himself, but never had he listened to such a fierce diatribe of invective as Figgins & Co. were now uttering.

Then, at a command from Figgins, they suddenly burst into song:

"Before the tyrant of St. Tim's
We've often quailed with quaking limbs;
But we will quake no longer!
We've squirmed beneath his lashing cane,
We've yelped and yelped with pangs of pain;
But now, my lads, we're stronger!"

The last line was thundered forth with such vehemence that Mr. Ratcliff instinctively started back.

"But now, my lads, we're stronger!" repeated the singers, their voices rising crescendo.

"B-b-bless my soul!" stuttered Mr. Ratcliff.

And then the singers were "off" again, embarking upon the second verse:

"Fear no more the tyrant's frown;
We'll scrap his mortar-board and gown;
We'll rise up like a mountain!
The firm of Wiggins, Carr, & Thynne
Will seize the tyrant, with a grin,
And duck him in the fountain!"

"Yes, duck him in the fountain!" thundered the refrain.

Mr. Ratcliff's imagination was unleashed for a moment, and in his mind's eye he saw himself being hurled into the school fountain. He felt the icy waters closing around him; he heard the mocking laugh of his schoolboy assailants. He shuddered.

But the Housemaster quickly pulled himself together. Surely the singers could not be referring to him? They would not dare to voice such threats, either in song or speech. It would amount almost to treason.

And yet—Mr. Ratcliff's suspicions were not wholly allayed. Suspicions bred easily in the mind of the New House master. He was always suspecting somebody of something, and more often than not his suspicions were entirely baseless.

He was still suspicious now, and it only needed the mention of his name to clinch his suspicions, so that he could take swift and drastic action.

But, although Mr. Ratcliff lingered outside the study door, and more verses of the song were sung, his name was not mentioned.

Presently Mr. Ratcliff decided that the time was ripe to check the activities of this little glee-party. He strode to the study door and hurled it open, and broke in upon the singers. Figgins & Co. stopped short in the middle of a verse. Luckily for them, they had stowed away their copies of the opera into their pockets, for they knew all the songs by heart. It was only the prose parts in which they were not yet word-perfect.

Mr. Ratcliff stood glowering at them from the doorway. Like the Ancient Mariner, he held them with his glittering eye.

"Figgins! Kerr! Wynn!" The names were rapped out like a succession of pistol-shots. "What is the meaning of this unseemly disturbance?"

"Ahem!"
"Ahum!"

The famous trio exchanged sheepish glances. Each waited for one of the others to be spokesman. And, as usual in such cases, nobody spoke!

"Answer me!" thundered Mr. Ratcliff.

His eyes were now fastened upon Figgins.

"We—we were singing, sir," stammered the leader of the Co.

"Singing?" said Mr. Ratcliff incredulously.

"Yes, sir. We didn't think there was any harm in having a little sing-song in our study on a Saturday afternoon."

"There's no law against fellows singing in their study when everybody else is out of doors, sir," said Kerr boldly. Mr. Ratcliff frowned.

"You are quite right, Kerr. There is no regulation to prohibit singing at such a time. But there is a very direct law against howling——"

"Howling, sir?"

"And caterwauling——"

"C-c-aterwauling, sir?"

"And the wild, eldritch screeching in which you have been indulging!" said Mr. Ratcliff sternly. "It is disgraceful! It is intolerable!"

Figgins and Kerr and Wynn no longer looked sheepish. They looked ruffled and indignant. They rather prided themselves on their vocal abilities. Fatty Wynn, in fact, was a soloist in the school choir. They had been in fine form just now, and to have their singing described as howling and caterwauling was too thick!

But, then, Mr. Ratcliff was no judge of singing. Even the mellow notes of a Melba would have left the Housemaster cold. In Mr. Ratcliff's view, singing ought to be abolished.

There was nothing attractive about it; it was mere sound and fury, signifying nothing. Those blithe and joyous souls who were in the habit of singing in their bath every morning did not include Mr. Ratcliff, who never sang anywhere nor at any time.

The Housemaster glared at Figgins & Co.

"You were each given an imposition this morning," he reminded them. "Have you written it?"

"No, sir," said Figgins.

"Then, why are you not engaged upon it now?"

"Too busy, sir!" said Kerr briefly.

"What!"

Mr. Ratcliff wondered if he had heard aright.

"You—you are too busy to carry out my express commands, Kerr?" he thundered.

"Ahem! You see, our first rehearsal comes off to-night, sir."

"Ah!" Mr. Ratcliff's suspicions came thronging back into his mind. "A rehearsal of what, Kerr?"

"A comic opera, sir."

"Indeed! I knew nothing of this," said the Housemaster.

Evidently Mr. Ratcliff was under the impression that no enterprise such as a comic opera ought to be launched without his permission being obtained beforehand.

"So you are taking part in an opera?" he demanded, after a pause.

"Yes, sir," said Fatty Wynn. "The Cottage Hospital is badly in need of funds——"

Mr. Ratcliff raised his hand.

"I am not interested in the Cottage Hospital, Wynn. Its needs are no concern of mine. I wish to know more about

this opera in which you are participating. What is the theme of it?"

"It's an opera dealing with school life, sir," explained Figgins.

"With life at this school?"

"Oh, no, sir!"

"Not at all, sir!" said Kerr and Fatty Wynn.

Mr. Ratcliff's suspicions were somewhat lessened by this assurance. But they were not entirely set at rest. He wanted to know more of this comic opera which dealt with school life.

"I hope you can assure me, Figgins," he said, "that the characters in this opera are not drawn from life. They are entirely fictitious, I presume? They are not caricatures of actual living people at this school?"

Figgins felt himself cornered; and his chums eyed him rather anxiously.

If Figgy informed Mr. Ratcliff that the Housemaster was being burlesqued in the opera, the fat would be in the fire with a vengeance. There would be no rehearsal that evening, nor any other evening. The opera would be banned forthwith.

Figgins shifted from one foot to the other, and looked mightily uncomfortable. Back came Mr. Ratcliff's suspicions in a flood.

"I asked you a question, Figgins!" he rapped out. "Is there any resemblance between the characters in this opera and the actual living persons at this school?"

"That's not for me to say, sir," replied Figgins. "You see, I didn't write the opera."

"Then, who did?" flashed Mr. Ratcliff.

"It was written anonymously, sir."

"Bless my soul!"

Mr. Ratcliff gave Figgins a long and searching look, and he decided that the junior was telling the truth. Not for anything would George Figgins have implicated Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. And as Gussy had insisted that the opera was written anonymously, Figgy felt quite justified in taking the same line.

Mr. Ratcliff asked further questions. In fact, he put the New House trio through quite a lengthy catechism concerning the opera. Their answers were polite, but guarded; and at the end of a searching cross-examination, Mr. Ratcliff was little wiser than he had been at the beginning.

A comic opera was shortly to be performed at St. Jim's, and the proceeds devoted to the Wayland Cottage Hospital. The first rehearsal was to take place that evening, in the Junior Common-room of the School House. That was the sum of the information that Mr. Ratcliff was able to extort from the juniors. He could learn little or nothing about the opera itself, though he strongly suspected that it featured a tyrannical schoolmaster who was modelled on himself.

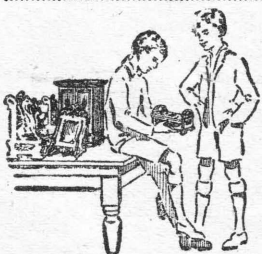
"Very well!" snapped the Housemaster, at length. "I am convinced that you boys have not answered my questions frankly and fully—that you are keeping something back. But I will not pursue the matter now. I shall, however, keep a close watch on your activities, and if I should find, as I now suspect—that I am being lampooned in this opera, I shall take a very serious view of the matter!"

Figgins & Co. were silent.

"And if I hear any more discordant noises in this study I shall double your impositions!" said Mr. Ratcliff. "You will set to work on those impositions immediately!"

So saying, the Housemaster swept out of the study with rustling gown. He left consternation behind him.

No further strains of singing—discordant or otherwise—emanated from Figgins' study that afternoon. The only audible sound was the busy scratching of pens, and an occasional snort of exasperation.



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The snorts were directed against two gentlemen named Horace. One was Q. Horatius Flaccus, the great Roman poet; the other was Mr. Horace Ratcliff!

CHAPTER 6. The Rehearsal!

"LOOK the door, constable!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Monty Lowther grinned.

The humorist of the Shell was garbed in the uniform of a police-constable. It was a very roomy uniform. The tunic was baggy and bulging; and the trousers were so long that they overlapped the hefty hobnailed boots that Monty wore. The helmet, moreover, fitted him about as gracefully as a coal-scuttle. But the equipment was the best that could be found among the "props" of the Junior Amateur Dramatic Society; and, anyway, Lowther seemed quite satisfied. He clumped his way to the door of the Junior Common-room, and turned the key in the lock.

The first rehearsal—a full-dress affair—was about to commence. And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the producer, stage manager, and general supervisor, was buzzing restlessly about the room like a bluebottle.

The swell of St. Jim's was attired in gown and mortar-board. They had not been borrowed from Mr. Railton's study on this occasion. It was an old gown and a somewhat battered mortar-board, which Monsieur Morny, the French master, had good-naturedly provided.

The other members of the cast were dressed for their parts.

Tom Merry, in the role of Mr. Victor Aylton, the sporting Housemaster, was wearing a suit of plus fours.

Figgins and Kerr and Wynn, as the schoolboy heroes of the opera, were garbed in very tight-fitting Etons, with enormous collars. They looked as if they were fags of the Third once more.

Jack Blake, as Straggles, the porter, had borrowed an ancient uniform from Taggles. It was far from being a perfect fit. Indeed, if a genuine school porter had dared to show himself in public, garbed so grotesquely, he would have been promptly arrested for conduct calculated to cause a breach of the peace!

Perhaps the most startling transformation was that of Ralph Reckness Cardew. That cheery youth was to take the part of a maid of all work. He was attired in cap and apron, and his face had been deliberately smeared with soot. The oddest thing about Cardew's appearance was that a pair of schoolboy trousers peeped out from beneath the apron. Cardew was pottering about the Common-room with a dustpan and brush, evoking roars of merriment.

Arthur Augustus beckoned to him.

"Pway wotiah behind the scenes, Mawy Jane, until your eall comes!" he said sternly.

Cardew grinned, and disappeared behind a large screen which had been rigged up for the rehearsal.

"Are we all weady?" inquired Arthur Augustus, glancing round.

There was a general nodding of heads. George Herries seated himself at the piano, which a dozen sturdy juniors had brought along from the concert hall.

"The wehearsal will now commence!" said the swell of St. Jim's. "I will sing my openin' scng."

"Can't you cut it out, Gussy?" suggested Tom Merry hastily. "We'll take it for granted that you know it."

The producer frowned.

"Nothin' must be taken for gwanted at a wehearsal, Tom Mewwy. We are goin' to play the whole thing through, fwom beginnin' to end."

Tom Merry groaned, and his groans were echoed by the rest of the performers.

There were about thirty songs in the opera, and as the Tyrant of St. Tim's had to sing about twenty-five of them the prospect was far from cheering to the Tyrant's school-fellows. They could have endured one song from Arthur Augustus. At a pinch, and with the exercise of rigorous self-control, they could have endured a couple. But they shrank from the prospect of having to "face the music" no less than twenty-five times!

"Pr'aps his voice might break!" suggested Monty Lowther in a hopeful whisper.

"Impossible!" said Jack Blake, shaking his head. "It broke long ago!"

"Then we shall have to gag him if he insists on going through all his songs. There are some things 'hat flesh and blood simply can't endure—and Gussy's voice is one of them!"

Arthur Augustus had mounted the platform. He glared at Monty Lowther through his monocle.

"Constable Puddlefoot! Be silent!" he commanded sternly.

Then he turned to Herries, at the piano.

"Stwike up, Hewwies!"

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Monty Lowther feverishly crammed two pieces of cotton-wool into his ears as the Tyrant of St. Tim's started his opening song.

"I am the Tywant of St. Tim's—
Twemble!
Shivah an' shake in all your limbs—
Twemble!
Tightly I gwasp my twusty cane,
My victims squeak an' shwiek with pain—
I'm on the war-path once again!
Twemble!"

The audience trembled all right. They trembled for the fate of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, should he persist in giving them twenty-five separate doses of this sort of thing.

"I wear a fierce, forbiddin' fwown—
Twemble!
I stwut awound in cap an' gown—
Twemble!
Lickin's an' lines are my delight,
I scattah impots left an' wight,
I flog webellious fags on sight!
Twemble!"

"That's enough to be going on with, Gussy!" said Tom Merry. "Cut out the remaining fifteen verses!"

"Yes, be a sport!" pleaded Blake. "We're not all lucky enough to be provided with cotton-wool, like Lowther!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus wagged his cane reprovingly at the interrupters.

"I wefuse to cut anythin' out!" he exclaimed heatedly. "As for your wude weemarks about cotton-wool, Blake, I will deal with you aftah the wehearsal! Stwike up the third verse, Hewwies!"

And George Herries thumped at the ivories. Herries was a pianist, but not of the light-fingered variety. He believed in sledgehammer tactics.

Arthur Augustus embarked on the third verse; but he had barely croaked a couple of lines when there was a sudden commotion "off"—a commotion for which no provision had been made in the manuscript of the opera.

Bang! Crash! Thump!

Somebody was hurling himself against the locked door of the junior Common-room, and a voice was heard demanding admittance.

"Saved!" cried Monty Lowther dramatically. "Somebody's heard Gussy sing, and he's coming in to demand me, in my role of P.-c. Puddlefoot, to place Gussy under arrest!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Lowthah, you wottah—"

There was a renewed banging and crashing without. Again the voice demanded admission, and everybody recognised it this time as the voice of Knox of the Sixth.

"Unlock this door!" shouted Knox.

"Rats!"

"I want to know what's going on in there!" roared Knox. "Sounds as if you're iltreating a fag, or something! I distinctly heard him yelling with pain!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry. "That was Gussy singing!"

Arthur Augustus stepped down from the platform and made his way to the door. He addressed the School House prefect through the keyhole.

"You are intewwuptin' our wehearsal, Knox! Pway go away! We are wehearsin' our comic opewah, an' I was singin' my openin' song."

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Knox. "I could have sworn it was somebody being slaughtered!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Will you wun away?" said Arthur Augustus in tones of exasperation.

Knox gave a growl.

"I'm likely to obey the orders of a fag in the Fourth!" he said. "Look here, I'm interested in this opera, and I'm coming in to hear what it's all about."

"You're jolly well not!" said Tom Merry warmly.

"Keep off the grass, Knox!"

For answer Knox hurled himself bodily against the door. But it was a stout door, which had weathered many generations of such usage. It quivered under the impact of Knox's charge, but it gave no sign of yielding.

"Will you let me in, you young rascals?" panted Knox.

"Not this evening," said Monty Lowther. "Some other evening!"

Knox breathed hard.

"Unlock this door, or it will be the worse for you!"

"Go and eat coke!"

"You've no right in here, Knox—and you know it!" said Tom Merry. "You can't force us to admit you. You can see the opera in a week's time, when we're giving a public

performance. But nobody, outside the cast, is allowed to attend rehearsals."

"If we had a part in the opera for a bold, bad blade, we'd hand it to you, Knox," said Jack Blake, amid laughter.

"You cheeky young cub!" roared Knox, baffled and furious. "Wait till you come out, and I'll lay my ashplant across your shoulders!"

"Bow-wow!"

"Let's get on with the show, deah boys!" said Arthur Augustus. "We're not goin' to parley with Knox all the evenin'!"

"No jolly fear!"

The members of the cast went back to their places, and the rehearsal proceeded.

For some moments Knox continued to bang and crash on the door. But he soon grew tired of this form of amusement and gave it up. He remained at the door, however, in the hope of hearing what was being sung and said inside.

But Knox was unlucky. For Herries of the Fourth put

Monty Lowther. "Why, you ass, Tommy sings as sweetly as a siren, compared with you!"

"If I had a voice like Gussy's," said Tom Merry, with feeling, "I'd go and drown it!"

"Herries has already done that!" said Figgins, with a grin. "We'll give him a special vote of thanks after the rehearsal."

"Yes, rather!" said Kerr. "Loud pedal again, Herries! Gussy's going to sing!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus had taken the stage again, and he frowned indignantly at his critics. He had just started to sing the most impressive song in his repertoire—"Fall In For the Flogging Parade!"—when the banging on the door was suddenly renewed, and a stern voice became audible. But it was not the voice of Knox of the Sixth this time. It was the strident, rasping voice of Mr. Ratcliff.

"Ratty!" muttered Figgins. "I had an idea the old buffer would interfere with our rehearsal."

CAMEOS OF SCHOOL LIFE!

FIRE-DRILL!



St. Jim's can boast a bold brigade
Of firemen, all dressed neatly;
It puts all others in the shade,
Eclipsing them completely!
When called upon to fight the flames,
Jove, you should see them hustle!
Not even in their sports and games
Do they display such bustle!

The "fire," as everyone's aware,
Is merely an invention;
No flames are leaping up the stair,
Needing our prompt attention.
No junior study is alight,
No sparks ascend to heaven;
You see, it's simply fire-drill night—
They roused us at eleven!

Tom Merry, with a length of hose,
Is sprightly, swift and nimble;
What matter if the water flows
In streams o'er Baggy Trimble?
What matter if a drenching jet
Goes swamping over Herries?
There never was a fire-drill yet
Without some prank of Merry's!

Manners and Lowther, armed with pails,
Both mean to be distinguished;
But they retreat, with anguished wails—
By Merry they're extinguished!
Around the dusky quad he goes
With joyful animation,
Giving free baths to friends and foes,
Much to their indignation!

Flitting like phantoms in the mirk,
Our fire-brigade works busily;
In fact, so zealously they work
That heads are throbbing dizzily!
There's "water, water everywhere,"
Puddles and lakes are forming;
And happy firemen, free from care,
Up ladders are a-swarming!

All honour to our fire-brigade
So capable and zealous!
They make their rivals feel dismayed,
And not a trifle jealous.
If e'er a genuine fire appears,
Then you shall hear the story
Of how our fire-brigade (loud cheers!)
Covered themselves with glory!

on the loud pedal and played fortissimo, instead of pianissimo. The music—if such it could be called—was so uproarious that it practically drowned the voice of Arthur Augustus. For which Gussy's schoolfellows were duly thankful.

The rehearsal went along with a swing, and the fellows played their parts very well, considering how little time they had had to learn their "numbers."

The producer and stage-manager was not wholly satisfied with their efforts, though he was smugly satisfied with his own performance.

"There is woom for improvement, deah boys," he announced, when the rehearsal was half-way through. "I have no fault to find with the actin', but some of you want your voices twained."

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Tom Merry.

"You are the worst offendah in that respect, Tom Mewwy," said Arthur Augustus. "You look the part of a sportin' Housemastah, an' you act the part vevy well. But when you open your mouth to sing you spoil evewythin'!"

"Talk about the pot calling the kettle black!" chuckled

"Like his cheek!" growled Jack Blake. "This is a School House affair, and Ratty's got no right to butt in!"

"Open this door at once!" came Mr. Ratcliff's commanding voice.

The amateur actors exchanged glances. They had kept Knox out; but they could not ignore the demands of a Housemaster, even though he was an alien Housemaster. Strictly speaking, Mr. Ratcliff had no right to interfere in any School House enterprise, but it was not for the juniors of the Fourth and Shell to point out to a Housemaster that he was exceeding his rights.

"I am waiting!" roared Mr. Ratcliff, drumming on the door. "Do not dare to disobey my command! Unlock this door immediately!"

Arthur Augustus motioned to Monty Lowther, who crossed to the door and unlocked it. And Mr. Ratcliff had the shock of his life on finding himself confronted by a very youthful police-constable in a bulging tunic, baggy trousers, and a cumbersome bucket of a helmet.

"This way, sir!" said Monty Lowther politely.

And Mr. Ratcliff stalked into the junior common-room.

CHAPTER 7.
Knox Plays Policeman!

MR. RATCLIFF glared at the oddly assorted group of characters which met his gaze.

He glared at Police-constable Puddlefoot, who had admitted him; he glared at the grubby-faced maid-of-all-work whom Cardew was impersonating; he glared at Straggles, the porter, whom he recognised beneath the disguise as Jack Blake; and his glare finally came to rest upon Figgins and Kerr and Wynn in their ridiculously tight-fitting Etons.

"What is the meaning of all this buffoonery?" demanded Mr. Ratcliff.

"It's the rehearsal we told you about, sir!" said Figgins cheerfully.

"Indeed! I sincerely trust, Figgins, for your own sake, that you have completed the imposition I gave you? The same remark applies to Kerr and Wynn."

"We finished the lines before we came over here, sir," said Figgins. "We left them on your study table."

Mr. Ratcliff looked disappointed. He had not been to his study recently, and was therefore unaware until now that the completed impots awaited his inspection. He had hoped to find that they had not been written, in which event he would have had great pleasure in marching the delinquents back to the New House and caning them. A pleasant and a genial soul was Mr. Horace Ratcliff.

"Ah, I am glad to learn that my instructions have been carried out!" he said.

The Housemaster's keen, ferrety glance then travelled round the room. Among that motley throng of amateur actors he had more than half expected to find a junior in gown and mortar-board—a junior who had been engaged in personating himself.

When the Housemaster had ordered the door to be unlocked, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with commendable presence of mind, had dodged behind the screen. Here he had discarded the gown which he wore over his Etons and also the mortar-board.

Again Mr. Ratcliff looked disappointed. He had not found what he sought to find.

"May I inquire," he asked coldly, "who is the organiser of this clownish entertainment?"

Arthur Augustus flushed hotly. "I am the pwoducuh an' pwomotah of this opewah, Mr. Watcliff," he said haughtily, "an' I pwotest—I pwotest most strongly—against it bein' called a clownish entabtainment!"

"Good for you, Gussy!" murmured Jack Blake.

Mr. Ratcliff smiled—a smile of the mirthless kind in which he specialised.

"Possibly my judgment is too hasty, D'Arcy!" he said. "Proceed with your rehearsal, and I will stay and look on! Then, if there is any sort of merit whatsoever in this opera, I will amend my opinion!"

The juniors exchanged glances of dismay. They had not bargained for this.

If Mr. Ratcliff remained, and heard some of the songs which Arthur Augustus sang in the role of the Tyrant of St Tim's, he would no longer be in any doubt as to whether he was being burlesqued. He would see at once that the tyrant had been drawn from life, modelled upon Mr. Ratcliff himself, and he would step in and squash the whole thing. Probably he would report the matter to the Head.

Mr. Ratcliff noted the juniors' looks of dismay, and he smiled grimly. He concluded that they had something to hide.

Seating himself in a chair facing the platform, the Housemaster signed to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Kindly proceed, D'Arcy!"

Once again Arthur Augustus saved the situation by his presence of mind. He darted a quick but expressive glance at Monty Lowther and Ralph Reckness Cardew, and they "tumbled" to his meaning at once.

In the last act of the opera there was a love scene between P.-c. Puddlefoot and Mary Jane, the maid-of-all-work. It was Gussy's intention to bring that scene forward and have it presented now to Mr. Ratcliff.

Instantly Lowther and Cardew clambered on to the platform, and Herries, who had also taken the hint, struck up the prelude to P.-c. Puddlefoot's love-song.

Monty Lowther cleared his throat and began:

"Pacing my beat in Lovers' Lane
I dream of you, my Mary Jane!
I see your fairy form divine,
I see your glorious black eyes shine.
I seem to hear your voice so sweet
In every frisky lambkin's bleat!
Oh, may the time soon come again
When I shall clasp my Mary Jane,
And press upon her sooty cheeks
The finest kiss I've had for weeks!"

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The juniors grinned as Monty Lowther warbled this tender and touching love-ditty. But the face of Mr. Horace Ratcliff was woodenly impassive. Not by so much as the flicker of an eyelash did the Housemaster show any sign of amusement.

Mr. Ratcliff's reception of Lowther's song was on a par with the reception given by a famous queen to a certain comedian who performed in the royal presence. After listening to the comedian's frantic and desperate efforts to entertain her, her Majesty said freezingly, "We are not amused!"—which was precisely what Mr. Ratcliff's expression seemed to say on this occasion.

Monty Lowther and Cardew had to enact their little love-scene without any encouragement from Mr. Ratcliff. The Housemaster did not clap his hands or shout "Jolly good!" or demand an encore. He watched in stony silence the antics of P.-c. Puddlefoot and Mary Jane.

And now it was Cardew's turn to sing to the gallant policeman who had laid siege to the heart of the servant-girl.



The stout man sat up and blinked as he caught sight of a policeman towards his late opponent. "Arrest that man! He's drunk an' d' stared. "What the merry dickens

Cardew made a really heroic effort to amuse Mr. Ratcliff, though he might as well have tried to amuse the Sphinx. In a shrill and squeaky treble he began:

"Busy among the showers of soot,
I dream of you, my Puddlefoot!
No braver bobby could be found
In all the countryside around.
The bane of every Burglar Bill,
And speed-hogs scorching down the hill,
My brave and beefy boy in blue,
Gladly I yield my cheeks to you!
So one fond kiss, and then we sever,
Perhaps for days—perhaps for ever!"

Mary Jane then lifted her soot-begrimed face to be kissed, and her "brave and beefy boy in blue" performed his part nobly. Flinging out his arms, he drew the maid-of-all-work into his fond embrace.

So ludicrous was the scene that the juniors roared with laughter. Then they looked at Mr. Ratcliff to see how that gentleman was taking it.

Mr. Ratcliff took it very badly. He sprang to his feet, and his eyes glinted at the two figures on the platform.

"Enough!" he cried. "Enough of this maudlin nonsense! Lowther! Cardew! Cease those absurd antics at once!"

Monty Lowther, for his part, was not sorry to desist. Sooty kisses were not to his taste. He put Mary Jane from him with a shove that was not at all lover-like.

Mr. Ratcliff snorted, and spun round upon Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"You say that you are the producer of this—this alleged entertainment, D'Arcy?"

"Yaas, Mr. Watcliff!"



in uniform. "Ossifer!" he exclaimed, waving a podgy hand "dishord'ly!" Knox, forgetting that he wore a policeman's uniform, "he began. (See Chapter 11.)

"The whole thing is clownish and disgusting!" roared the Housemaster.

"Weally, Mr. Watcliff, I thought that was a vevy pwetty little love-scene!" said the swell of St. Jim's. "I am much pained by your seathin' cwiticism, sir! Howevah, if you will kindly wesume your seat an' wemain—"

"Remain!" hooted Mr. Ratcliff. "Remain, to listen to this dreadful balderdash—this disgusting drivell? Do you imagine that I can find any amusement in this sort of thing, D'Arcy?"

"I hoped, Mr. Watcliff, that you would have seen some humah in it!" said Arthur Augustus. Mr. Ratcliff frowned.

"I should need a super-sense of humour, D'Arcy, to appreciate such farcical fal-de-rall!" he snapped. "You are indeed optimistic if you think to make a success of this miscalled opera! I understand it is your intention to assist the cottage hospital with funds. If that is so, I advise you not to persevere with this method of raising money. Your opera is foredoomed to failure!"

With this cheerful prophecy, Mr Ratcliff strode out of the Common-room.

The Housemaster was annoyed and disappointed. He had paid a surprise visit to the rehearsal in the hope of catching some unfortunate junior in the act of impersonating him. He had made no capture; he had collected no evidence to strengthen his suspicion that he was being burlesqued. He had not even seen any junior wearing a gown and mortar-board. It had not occurred to Mr. Ratcliff to look behind the screen. Had he done so, he would have found the evidence he wanted.

Suspicion still lingered in the Housemaster's mind. It was quite possible, he reflected, that the love-scene between the policeman and the servant had been staged in order to throw dust in his eyes.

How could he find out for certain that there was a tyrannical schoolmaster in the opera—a "double" of himself? That was the problem which confronted Mr. Ratcliff.

It would be no use paying surprise visits to future rehearsals, for it dawned upon his mind that no junior would have the "nerve" to impersonate him to his face.

If only he could get hold of a copy of the manuscript of the opera! There must be many copies in existence; and yet, although Mr. Ratcliff had kept his eyes open for a sight of one, he had been unlucky. He suspected that those copies were being jealously guarded under lock and key, and studied in secret by their owners.

"Of course, I could go to the Head and lay my suspicions before him," mused Mr. Ratcliff, as he paced to and fro outside the door of the Common-room. "But supposing they should prove to be baseless? Supposing Dr. Holmes insisted upon seeing a copy of the opera, and found that it contained nothing detrimental or disrespectful to myself? I should look extremely foolish!"

Mr. Ratcliff had a strong aversion to looking foolish, especially in the eyes of the Head. So he promptly abandoned all thought of laying the matter before Dr. Holmes.

Glancing up, he noticed that Knox of the Sixth was lounging in the passage.

Instantly an idea occurred to him.

Why not take Knox into his confidence, and tell him what he suspected, and induce the prefect to play the part of detective? Knox would find ways and means of ascertaining whether the opera contained anything objectionable. And he could find out, if necessary, by methods which a Housemaster, by virtue of his position, could not stoop to employ.

Mr. Ratcliff beckoned to Knox, and the prefect lounged forward.

"I wish to speak to you, Knox," said Mr. Ratcliff, with as much geniality as he could muster. "You are aware that D'Arcy of the Fourth is producing an opera?"

Knox nodded.

"The young rascals have refused me admittance to their rehearsal, sir," he said indignantly. "I felt it my duty to go in and see what they were up to. It occurred to me that they might be impersonating certain persons of authority at this school."

Mr. Ratcliff's eyes gleamed. So Knox was already at loggerheads with the juniors in the matter of the opera? In that case, he would be a very useful ally.

"The same thought has occurred to me, Knox," said the Housemaster. "I have just witnessed a part of the rehearsal, but I suspect that the objectionable scenes were deliberately withheld. To be quite frank with you, I have reason to believe that I personally am being burlesqued in this absurd play. Could I trouble you to find out for me, Knox, whether this is the case?"

"No trouble at all, sir!" said Knox cheerfully. Any job which necessitated playing the spy appealed to his crafty nature. "I'll keep a watchful eye on those young rascals, and if I find that one of them is impersonating you, I will at once let you know."

"Thank you, Knox!" said Mr. Ratcliff. "I shall await your report with some anxiety. Of course, if it should happen that my suspicions are confirmed, the opera will be banned forthwith, and the performers punished."

"Quite so, sir," said Knox. And his eyes gleamed vindictively at the prospect of being able to pay off old scores on Tom Merry & Co. "Rely on me to find out all I can, and report to you in due course."

Mr. Ratcliff nodded shortly, and went back to his own House. He was confident that Knox would speedily get to the bottom of the matter.

Knox himself was no less confident. He strolled thoughtfully away to his study, pondering in his mind which would be the best line of action to take.

It would be no use resorting to force and bullying in order to get the information he wanted. Crafty and serpentine methods would have to be employed. And presently Knox had a brain-wave. He chuckled softly as he closed his study door behind him.

"It's the very wheeze!" he muttered. "I'll make those young rotters sit up!"

And for the rest of the evening the countenance of Gerald Knox was unusually merry and bright.

CHAPTER 8. Working the Oracle!

HOW goes the merry opera, D'Arcy?" Knox of the Sixth asked the question in affable, almost in honeyed, tones.

Arthur Augustus glanced up in surprise. It was very unusual for Knox, the prefect, to stroll into a junior study, except as an instrument of Nemesis. But there was no ashlant under the bullying Sixth-Former's arm now, and he was smiling quite good humouredly.

Arthur Augustus looked his surprise. The last time he had seen Knox of the Sixth—or, rather, heard him—the prefect had uttered savage threats through the keyhole of the Common-room door. But there was nothing threatening or hostile in Knox's manner, now. He looked as if butter would not melt in his mouth.

"My opewah, Knox, is goin' swimmin'ly," said the swell of St. Jim's.

"Your opera? Did you write it, then?"

"Yaas."

Arthur Augustus had at last abandoned his tale of the opera having been written anonymously.

"Then I congratulate you, D'Arcy," said Knox. "I'm a pretty good musical critic, and from the snatches that I heard when you were rehearsing, I was able to form a very high opinion of the opera. There was some fellow singing in a tenor voice—"

"That was I, Knox."

"Was it, by Jove?" The prefect looked mildly surprised. "Well, I must congratulate you again, D'Arcy. You have a unique voice. I think I may fairly say that there's no other fellow at St. Jim's with a voice like yours."

That was a remark which could be taken in two ways—either as a compliment or the reverse. Arthur Augustus promptly took it as a compliment—as Knox intended he should.

The swell of St. Jim's flushed with pleasure. So many unkind things had been said lately on the subject of his vocal efforts that it was quite refreshing to hear a word of praise. Knox of the Sixth was evidently a very competent critic. As for the other fellows—well, either they were jealous of Gussy's voice, or they had no music in their souls; and were therefore quite unfitted to criticise.

Knox lounged against the mantelpiece, regarding Arthur Augustus quite benignly.

"I'm awfully interested in junior theatricals," he said.

This was another eye-opener to Arthur Augustus. He had never known Knox to take an interest in any of the junior activities, unless, indeed, it was a malicious interest.

"Are you weally, Knox?" asked Gussy, in wonder. "You surprise me! If I had known you were so keen on such mattahs, I should not have pvevented you fwom attendin' the wehearsal."

Knox frowned for a fleeting moment, at the recollection of having been locked out of the junior Common-room. But his expression quickly became affable again.

"Yes, I'm as keen as mustard," he said. "I've often tried to persuade Kildare to run a comic opera in the Sixth, but he won't hear of it. Says it would be too undignified. He prefers to stick to 'Hamlet,' and all the classical twaddle. So I've never had a chance to show what I can do in the comic line. I could take the part of a funny man, and fill it with great credit. Like yourself, I've a good singing voice."

"Weally!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. He quite forgot, during that pleasant chat, that Gerald Knox was the common enemy of the Lower School. He quite forgot, also, Knox's reputation for cunning and guile. Slowly, but none the less surely, he was being drawn into the net which the prefect had spread for him.

"I find life jolly monotonous these days," went on Knox, with a sigh. "I'd give a great deal to get a part in an opera. In fact, I would be prepared to sink my dignity to the extent of joining a junior show—if a part could be found for me."

And he glanced wistfully at Arthur Augustus. That youth stared at him open-eyed.

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"Of course," said Knox, "the presence of a prefect in a junior show—although almost unheard-of—would stiffen the cast no end, and give greater weight to the whole thing. I should be laughed at by the Sixth, no doubt; but my love of amateur theatricals is stronger than my fear of ridicule. I suppose you've definitely chosen your cast, D'Arcy?"

"Yaas," said the swell of St. Jim's, looking very thoughtful. "Bai Jove! I wish you had made this offah of your services in the first place, Knox. You see, it's wathah awkward, now, to fit you in. I would not insult you by givin' you a walkin'-on part."

Knox said nothing. He had launched his suggestion as delicately as possible, and he was now giving Arthur Augustus a chance to think the matter over.

After some reflection, the youthful opera-producer spoke again.

"I was not awah, until now, that you were an enthusiast for amateur theatricals, Knox, an' a good actah an' singah into the bargain. But now that you have opened my eyes to these facts, it would be a gweat pity if I failed to accommodate you."

Knox's eyes gleamed hopefully.

"To give you a small part," went on Arthur Augustus, "is out of the question. It would be uttahly widie for a pwefect to have a walkin'-on part."

"Oh, quite!" agreed Knox.

"It would have to be a big part, or none at all. Now, there is one membah of the cast who has failed to come up to my expectations. I wufer to Lowthah. He is quite a good actah; but when it comes to singin', he is hopeless—quite hopeless!"

Knox smiled.

"Was it Lowther I heard singing a policeman's song?" he asked.

"Yaas!"

"Then you can write him down a wash-out. I never heard such an atrocious voice in my life. It was horrible—horrible! If you keep Lowther in your cast he will let the whole show down. His voice would empty any concert-hall inside two minutes. Don't think I'm prejudiced against him, or that I'm trying to influence you in any way. But that voice—"

Knox broke off with a shudder.

"You think I ought to dwop Lowthah?" queried Arthur Augustus.

"Undoubtedly, if you want the show to be a success. With Lowther in it, it would certainly be a 'howling' success; but you don't want that."

"No, wathah not! On due weflection, I think I will dwop Lowthah, an' bwing you in as P.-c. Puddlefoot."

"A step which you won't regret," said Knox, nodding his approval. "When is the next rehearsal coming off?"

"To-morrow evenin'."

"Right! I shall be there," said the prefect, detaching himself from the mantelpiece and moving to the door.

And then a doubt crept into the mind of Arthur Augustus—a doubt as to whether he had acted wisely in dropping Lowther and bringing in Knox. He knew that Knox was disliked and detested by all the juniors, and it suddenly occurred to him that they would not tolerate the presence of the black sheep of the Sixth in their opera.

Arthur Augustus communicated his fears to Knox.

"I am awfraid Tom Mewwy & Co. will not take kindly to my decision," he said.

Knox scowled.

"Didn't you tell me you were the promoter of this opera, D'Arcy?"

"Yaas."

"In that case you are entitled to make any changes in the cast that you may think fit. It isn't Tom Merry's place to criticise or condemn your actions."

"But I am vewy much awfraid he will. You see, Lowthah is his pal, an' he will be fwivious to think I have dwopped him."

Knox shrugged his shoulders.

"Not afraid of Merry's fury, are you? If Lowther wanted to stay in the show, he should have taken singing lessons. He's got a voice like somebody sawing wood! You couldn't possibly keep him in the show and retain your self-respect. Now, could you?"

"I—I suppose not," said Arthur Augustus slowly.

"You've done the right thing," said Knox. "You're the producer, and it's for you to say who shall be in the cast and who shall not. Why, if you wanted to, you could sack the lot and form an entirely new cast!"

"Yaas. Of course, the whole thing is in my hands."

"Exactly!"

"An' if the fellows don't like my decisions, they will have to lump them!"

"That's the spirit!" said Knox. "The matter is quite settled now. I take it? I'm to play P.-c. Puddlefoot?"

"Yaas. But one moment, Knox!"

The prefect paused, with his hand on the door-handle.

"I want you cleahly to undahstand, Knox," said Arthur Augustus, "that you are comin' into my opewah in a subordinate capacity. Like the west of the fellows, you will be undah my ordahs. The mere fact that you happen to be a pwefect will make no difference. Is that cleah?"

"Oh, quite!" muttered Knox, gulping hard.

"I don't want you to start bein' bossy," went on Arthur Augustus, with more frankness than tact. "Besides, the fellows wouldn't stand for it. They would only be pwepared to tolewate your pwesence in the opewah so long as you behaved yourself. I am speakin' plainly, Knox, because you have a weputation for bein' bossy an' hectowin'. It is as well that we should undahstand each othah at the outset, don't you think?"

Knox clenched his hands hard. Had the circumstances been otherwise, he would promptly have boxed D'Arcy's ears for venturing to speak to him in that manner. It needed all his self-control to refrain from doing so. With a great effort he forced a smile.

"Set your mind at rest, kid: I shall not attempt to boss the show. I'll place myself under your command and carry out all your instructions like a lamb."

"Wippin'!" said Arthur Augustus, rubbing his hands. "That's settled, then. I'll see you at eight o'clock to-morrow evenin' at the wehearsal."

Knox nodded and strode out into the passage, where he was able to give vent to his feelings.

Had Arthur Augustus seen the Hunnish look on the pwefect's face at that moment he would have felt far from easy in his mind.

But Knox's spasm of annoyance soon passed. He grinned maliciously as he went on his way.

After all, he had achieved his object, and wormed his way into Gussy's good graces and into the opera. In the role of Mr. Ratcliff's spy, he would presently be taking part in rehearsals; and then, if he found that the Housemaster was being burlesqued, he would make his report, and deal a deathblow to the hopes and prospects of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

And so Gerald Knox went on his way, feeling very pleased with himself.

CHAPTER 9.

Tribulations of an Opera Producer!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY strolled along to Study No. 10 in the Shell passage.

He was going to break the news to Monty Lowther. He would break it gently, he decided, and spare Lowther's feelings as much as possible.

Doubtless it would come as a shock to the funny man of the Shell to be told that he had been dropped from the cast of the opera. Certainly it would come as a shock to him to learn that Knox of the Sixth was to step into his shoes and play the part of P.-c. Puddlefoot.

But Arthur Augustus prided himself on his tact and judgment, and he hoped to get through the forthcoming interview without any unpleasantness. His hopes were not likely to be realised.

The swell of St. Jim's halted outside the door of Study No. 10 and tapped gently.

"Come in, fathead!" called Monty Lowther's cheery voice.

Arthur Augustus entered. He was surprised to find the study crowded. His own chums—Jack Blake and Herries and Digby—were there, and so were Cardew and Clive, and Levison and Talbot; while Figgins and Kerr and Wynn had come over from the New House.

It seemed to Arthur Augustus as he glanced round the crowded study that the entire cast of his opera was present.

"Trot right in, Gussy!" said Tom Merry genially. "We were just jawing about the opera."

"It's going to be the biggest theatrical hit that ever was!" said Manners, with enthusiasm.

"Yes, rather!"

"And with all due respect to our giddy promoter, who is playing the lead, I venture to predict that the star turn of the opera will be little me!" said Monty Lowther modestly. "The part of P.-c. Puddlefoot couldn't suit me better if it had been made for me! I shall fill it with such distinction that I shall be asked to perform before crowned heads!"

There was a laugh, in which Arthur Augustus did not join.

The swell of St. Jim's tried hard to recall the tactful little speech he had mapped out in advance, but the sight of such a big crowd in Study No. 10 had banished it from his mind. However, he resolved to do his best.

"Sowwy to dash your hopes, Lowthah, deah boy," he said. "I am afraid you will not have an opportunity of performin' befoah crowned heads—or even uncrowned ones!"

"Eh?" gasped Lowther, looking startled.

"Ahem! The—the fact is, deah boy, I have decided, aftah due reflection, to make a slight alteration in the cast."

"The dickens you have!" cried Lowther, in surprise. "And the alteration affects me, Gussy?"

Arthur Augustus nodded.

"It affects you vewy divectly, deah boy. You see, I have decided to dwop you!"

"To—to drop me!" stammered Lowther incredulously.

And all eyes were turned in wonder upon the swell of St. Jim's.

"Of course, you will want an explanation of my action, Lowthah, an' you are entitled to have it. Well, without wishin' to hurt your feelin's in any way, I must tell you that I was not at all satisfied with you at the last wehearsal!"

"Not satisfied with Monty?" interjected Tom Merry. "Why, he's the best actor in the cast!"

Arthur Augustus smiled patiently.

"I have no fault to find with Lowthah's actin'," he said. "It is his singin' voice that I take exception to! Bwiliant actah he may be, but he can't sing for toffee! His voice is a howwid cwoak, in my opinion, an' Knox of the Sixth agrees with me!"

Monty Lowther was on his feet, wrathful and indignant.

"Why, you frabjous dummy——" he began.

"Hold on, Monty!" said Tom Merry. "What has Knox of the Sixth to do with it, Gussy?"

"I have just been havin' a chat with him, deah boy. He opened my eyes to one or two things, an' quite surprised me. He said he was feahfully keen on amatuah theatricals, an' he offahed me his services. He assuahed me that he could play the part of P.-c. Puddlefoot to perfection. An' so, aftah discussin' the mattah at some length, I decided to give Knox the policeman's part an' make Lowthah his undahstudy. I twust you will approve of my decision, deah boys?"

At this a positive howl went up from Gussy's school-fellows. It was not a howl of approval; quite the reverse, in fact.

All the fellows were on their feet now, gazing at Arthur Augustus D'Arcy with expressions of wrath and horror and dismay.

"Gussy, you ass——"

"Gussy, you chump——"

"Gussy, you frantic idiot——"

"You—you've gone and given Lowther's part in the opera to that cad Knox?" shouted Tom Merry, bestowing a Hunnish glare upon the swell of St. Jim's.

"Pway do not wear at me, Tom Mewwy!" said Arthur Augustus, backing away from that battery of wrathful glances. "I did what I considahed wight an' pwopah in the cires. Lowthah is dwopped, an' Knox comes in. As pwoducah of the opewah, I am at liberty to make any changes I think necessary."

"But—but Knox!" almost shrieked Jack Blake.

"I have satisfied myself that Knox is the wight man for the part. Besides, the pwesence of a pwefect in the cast will give tone to my opewah."

Tom Merry wrung his hands despairingly.

"You wooden-headed chump!" he groaned. "Are you too dense to see what Knox's little game is? He has twisted you round his little finger! He has wheedled you into giving him a part in the show, not because he cares a fig for junior theatricals, but because he's got cunning ends to serve!"

"Bai Jove! That is a wathah wotten accusation to make, Tom Mewwy——"

"It's true!" shouted Tom. "We all know what Knox is. He's got his knife into us, and he's out to ruin the opera, if he can. And you've gone and played into his hands like the burbling duffer you are!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"It's more than likely," went on the captain of the Shell, "that Knox is playing the spy for Ratcliff. You can bet your sweet life that Ratty has put him up to this. And what will happen now? Knox will soon find out that Ratty is being impersonated in the opera. He'll lay information, and the show will be banned!"

"That's so," said Talbot. "You've fairly done it now, Gussy! Your wits must have been wool-gathering to allow Knox to get round you like that!"

"It's the spider and the fly over again!" growled Lowther. "Knox played the spider, and Gussy walked straight into his parlour. This has fairly put the kybosh on everything! I vote that we give our addle-brained producer the bumping of his life, you fellows!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Collar the silly chump!"

"Bump him!"

And then, before Arthur Augustus could grasp what was happening, he was grasped himself. A whirlwind seemed

suddenly to spring up in Study No. 10. There was a stampede towards the swell of St. Jim's, and everybody seemed to be trying to lay hands on him at once. His exasperated schoolfellows were upon him like a pack of wolves; and the opera-producer was swung off his feet and whirled aloft, and then deposited on to the study carpet with a terrific concussion.

Bump!

"Yawwooh!"

"And again!" panted Jack Blake. "P'r'aps, if we keep it up long enough, we shall succeed in bumping some of the crass stupidity out of him!"

"Welaese me, you wuff wottahs!" shrieked Arthur Augustus, as he was whirled into the air for the second time. "I wufuse to take this sort of twreatment lyin' down!"

Bump!

Arthur Augustus had no option but to take it lying down. He sprawled on the carpet, his collar and tie streaming loose, and his monocle dangling from the end of its silk cord.

It was a very severe bumping, for the rise and fall of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy occurred no less than six times. But it was over at last, and the swell of St. Jim's lay in a state of collapse on the floor, making a noise like a punctured tyre.

"That's that!" said Tom Merry grimly. "It's given us a little consolation to bump Gussy, but it won't undo all the mischief he's done, unfortunately. Now that Knox has been definitely given a part in the opera, we are helpless. We can do nothing. But if Gussy had asked our advice in the first place, we'd have put him on his guard against the wiles of Knox!"

"Exactly!" said Blake. "It's jolly rough luck on Lowther having to give place to a rank outsider like Knox."

Monty Lowther looked thoughtful. A curious smile played at the corners of his mouth.

"Never mind," he said. "I'm to be understudy to Knox; so p'r'aps my services will be required, after all."

"But nothing will happen to Knox," said Manners. "He won't be taken ill, or anything, before the actual performance comes off."

"No; but he might disappear," said Lowther significantly.

"What!"

"Supposing Knox were to vanish mysteriously on the night of the performance? Then he wouldn't be able to play P.-c. Puddlefoot, and I should come back into the cast."

"But Knox is not likely to vanish," said Tom Merry, looking puzzled.

"Tommy, you're getting as dense as Gussy in your old age!" said Lowther reprovingly. "Can't you see what I'm driving at? The mysterious disappearance of Knox would be engineered by our noble selves."

"Oh!"

"It can be done—it must be done—and it will be done!" said Lowther. "There are ways and means of spiriting a prefect away; and we must put our heads together and find one. We can't stop Knox from taking part in all the rehearsals; but we can jolly well stop him from appearing in the actual performance."

The juniors brightened up considerably at Monty Lowther's suggestion. Vague though the suggestion was, it had promising possibilities.

"It's a good wheeze, Monty," said Tom Merry thoughtfully. "But there's just one point you've overlooked. Long before the night of the actual performance comes, Knox will have made his report to Ratty, and the opera will be banned."

"I don't agree," said Lowther, shaking his head. "From what I know of Knox, he won't think of betraying us to Ratty just yet. He'll stay his hand. He knows it will hit us much harder, and be a more bitter disappointment to us, if he lets us carry on right up to the night of the performance, and then gets the opera banned at the last moment."

"Something in that," agreed Tom Merry. "And just as Knox is on the point of giving us away to Ratty, we cause him to be spirited away. Is that the bright idea?"

Lowther nodded.

"You leave it to little me!" he said. "I've got a wheeze!"

During this conversation, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had staggered to his feet, and tottered towards a chair. He realised, at last, that he had been led by the nose by Gerald Knox, and that the prefect's object in joining the cast of the opera was to play the spy for Mr. Ratcliff.

Arthur Augustus could have kicked himself for his obtuseness. Bitterly he regretted his decision to drop Monty Lowther and bring in Knox. But it was too late to alter that decision now. The matter had been finally settled.

There was a sporting chance that the knavish tricks of Gerald Knox would be frustrated if Monty Lowther's "wheeze" came to anything; that no report would be

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taken to Mr. Ratcliff; and that the opera would proceed on its merry way, to a successful and triumphant conclusion.

CHAPTER 10.

Decoyed!

AT the next rehearsal of D'Arcy's opera there was an important change in the cast.

Knox of the Sixth played the part of P.-c. Puddlefoot in place of Monty Lowther. He scorned to wear the absurd and ill-fitting uniform which Lowther had worn. Instead, he hired a very smart police uniform from a firm in Wayland which catered for amateur theatricals.

Knox's fellow-seniors in the Sixth were astonished at his action.

It was almost unheard-of for a mighty man of the Sixth to sink his dignity to the extent of taking part in a junior show. Besides, it was well-known that Knox and the School House juniors were at daggers drawn, which made the prefect's behaviour all the more inexplicable.

Knox had expected some sort of opposition, particularly from Monty Lowther, whom he was displacing.

But Lowther took it like a lamb. He cheerfully stood down, and allowed Knox to take his place.

As for Tom Merry and the others, they suffered Knox gladly. However much they might have resented in their hearts the prefect's presence in the opera, they showed no outward and visible sign of their resentment. On the contrary, they appeared to welcome Gerald Knox with open arms.

The next few days were very anxious ones for the juniors.

Now that Knox knew all the inner secrets of the opera, now that he knew the chief character was Mr. Horace Sealcliff, a tyrannical schoolmaster, it was quite on the cards that he would go and make his report to Mr. Ratcliff and get the opera banned.

But Knox stayed his hand, as Monty Lowther had prophesied he would. He did not intend to take action until the night of the actual performance. He would wait until the show was actually about to start, and the concert hall crowded, before he dropped his thunderbolt. Not until the very last moment would he betray the juniors into the hands of Mr. Ratcliff. Their chagrin and disappointment would then be greater than if he took action at an earlier stage.

There were three more rehearsals before the performance proper. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy worked with untiring energy to bring the show to a state of perfection. He criticised freely and frankly at the rehearsals, and even Knox did not escape his criticism. He was made to sing a song three or four times over before Arthur Augustus pronounced himself satisfied. Inwardly Knox writhed and squirmed; outwardly he wore a mask of forced geniality, and he carried out the producer's instructions without a murmur.

Meanwhile, posters had been printed in Wayland, and displayed in prominent places at St. Jim's. One of them appeared on the notice-board in the hall, and it took up so much space that all other announcements were blotted out from view. Such unimportant and trivial things as a forthcoming lantern lecture by the Head, and the names of the First Eleven to play Greyfriars on Saturday, were completely concealed by D'Arcy's enormous poster.

"NOTICE!

A GRAND COMIC OPERA, IN THREE ACTS,

entitled

"THE TYRANT OF ST. TIM'S!"

will be performed in the Concert Hall on Saturday evening next. Doors open at 6.45 p.m. Curtain rises at 7 sharp.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY,

supported by

Tom Merry, Jack Blake, George Figgins, Fatty Wynn, G. F. Kerr, Ralph Reckness Cardew, Gerald Knox.

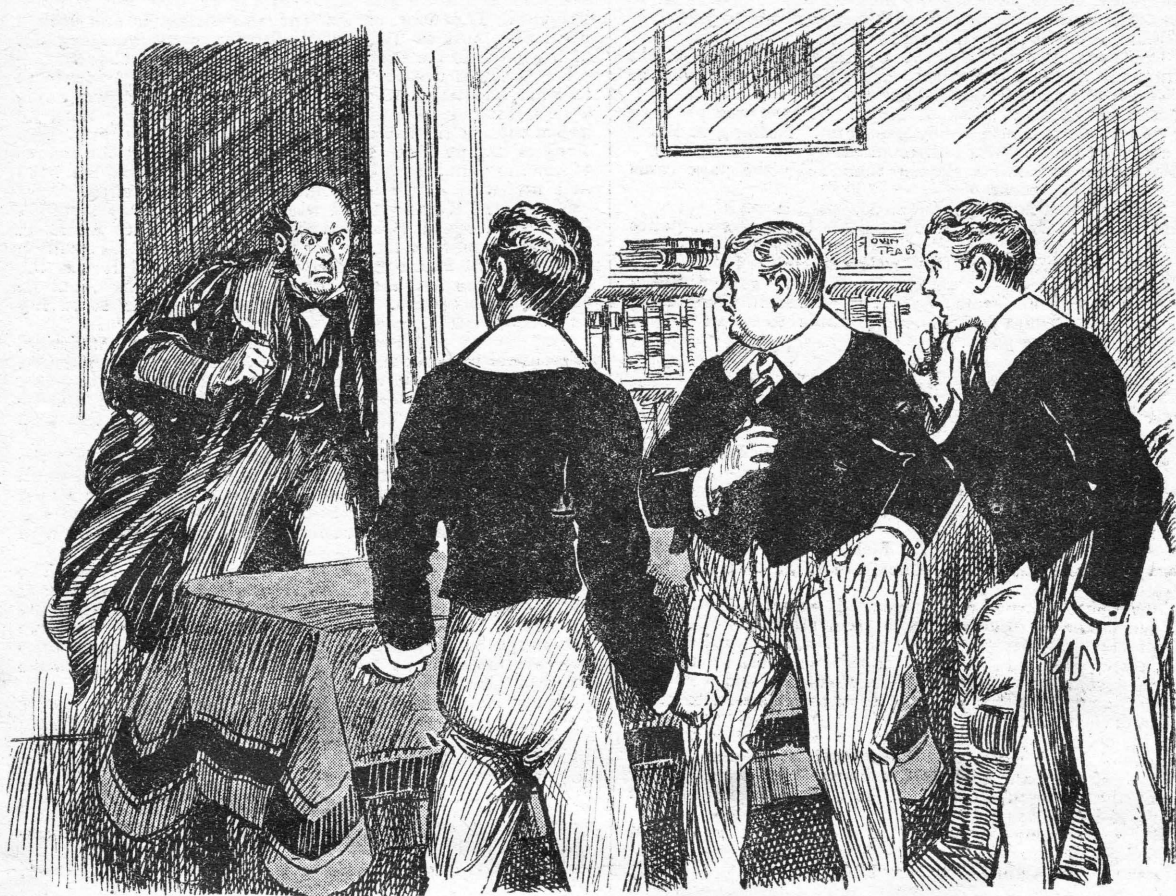
Prices of Admission: Reserved seats in front row, for the nobility and gentry, 2s. 6d. Body of Hall, 1s. 6d. Standing room, at back, 1s. (No free passes granted, not even to reporters on the "St. JIM'S NEWS," calling themselves "The Press.")

The entire proceeds, without any deduction for expenses, to be handed to the WAYLAND COTTAGE HOSPITAL, which is sorely in need of funds.

Rally Round, Boys, and Support this Noble Cause!

ROLL UP IN YOUR THOUSANDS!"

There was no lack of enthusiasm for Gussy's great venture. The prices of admission might be high for a junior opera,



Mr. Ratcliff decided that the time was ripe to check the activities of the little glee party. He strode to the study door and hurried it open. Figgins & Co. stopped short, in the middle of a song. "Figgins! Kerr! Wynn!" The names were rapped out like a succession of pistol shots. "What is the meaning of this unseamly disturbance?" "Ahem!" coughed Figgins. "Ahum!" coughed Kerr. (See Chapter 5.)

but Arthur Augustus was resolved that the cottage hospital should benefit by a good round sum. He figured it out that if the whole school attended the performance the sum of twenty pounds would be raised. To a hospital which was struggling for its very existence twenty pounds would be a godsend.

There was every indication that the St. Jim's fellows would "roll up in their thousands"—or, at all events, in their scores and dozens.

Study No. 6 in the Fourth Form passage was temporarily converted into a booking-office, and Kildare and Darrell and Monteith, and other members of the Sixth, booked the half-crown seats in the front row.

The seniors were keen to assist the cause of charity. They were also consumed with curiosity as to what sort of part Knox was playing, and how he would shape in a junior opera.

But the pleasure of seeing Gerald Knox perform was to be denied the Sixth. In the first place, Knox had no intention of performing; and in the second place, the juniors had no intention of letting Knox perform, even had he wished to do so!

When the fateful evening came events moved rapidly.

At a quarter to seven, when the doors were opened, the concert hall was fairly besieged.

Redfern and Lawrence, of the New House, had been deputed to sit at the receipt of custom. They sat at a small table, ready to cope with the rush; and when the rush did come the human avalanche threatened to sweep table and chairs and Redfern and Lawrence out of its path. But the New House juniors managed to cope with the invasion, and the shillings and sixpences rained on to their table in a silver shower.

In the improvised dressing-room behind the scenes there was considerable activity. The performers were busy changing and applying grease-paint and charcoal to their faces.

Knox of the Sixth was there, changing into police uniform, as if he had every intention of taking part in the show. Really, it was Knox's amiable intention to wait until the curtain went up, and then dodge over to the New House

and make his report to Mr. Ratcliff—a report that would bring dire disaster upon Gussy's opera.

Arthur Augustus, attired in gown and mortar-board, rubbed his hands with great satisfaction.

"The hall is fillin' wapidly, deah boys!" he exclaimed. "Weddy an' Lawrence are havin' all their work cut out to cope with the wush."

"Good!" said Tom Merry. "Seems as if all St. Jim's is swarming to the show. Well, the more the merrier. We won't be satisfied with anything less than a packed house."

"No, watah not!"

"Jolly lucky we've chosen an evening when Ratty will be out of the way," said Jack Blake.

At this Knox looked startled.

"Mr. Ratcliff out of the way!" he ejaculated. "What do you mean, Blake?"

Blake chuckled.

"Ratty's going over to Wayland at seven o'clock to attend a political meeting," he said; "so there's no fear of him turning up to see the show. Railton and the other masters might look in, but they're not likely to take offence at anything in the opera. They're not beastly killjoys like Ratty."

Knox looked really alarmed.

It was ten minutes to seven now, and if Mr. Ratcliff was setting out for Wayland at seven there was very little time left for the prefect to carry out his plans. He had cut things rather fine, he reflected; but then he had not known until now that Mr. Ratcliff would be away from St. Jim's that evening.

The door of the dressing-room opened and Monty Lowther came clumping in. Like Knox, he was attired in a police-constable's uniform.

Knox stared at him.

"What's the meaning of this, Lowther?" he demanded. "I'm to take the part of P.-c. Puddlefoot, not you. That's all cut and dried."

"Oh, quite!" said Lowther cheerfully. "But I'm your

understudy, Knox, and I must hold myself in readiness to jump into your place, in case anything happens to you."

"Eh? What is likely to happen to me?"

"One never knows," was the cryptic reply. "You might be taken ill at the last moment, or you might trip up over the footlights and sprain your ankle."

"You young ass!" growled Knox. "There was no need for you to change into bobby's uniform. Nothing is likely to happen to me at the last moment."

No sooner had Knox spoken than Toby the page came into the dressing-room.

"Master Knox here?" he inquired, looking round.

He failed to recognise the cad of the Sixth in police uniform.

"I'm here," said Knox. "What's wanted?"

"Lumme! Is that you, Master Knox?" gasped Toby, blinking at the uniformed figure. "I should never have knowned you. There's a gen'leman wants to speak to you down at the school gates."

Knox scowled.

"Who is he?" he demanded impatiently.

"Which he never give no name," said Toby. "He said: 'Tell Master Knox that I must see him at once on a werry urgent matter.'"

"Why doesn't he come up here to see me? Why must I go to him?"

"He says you'd prefer it that way, Master Knox—says you wouldn't like it to be known that he'd called at the school for you."

"Sounds like a bookie," said Jack Blake with a chuckle. "Better go and pacify him, Knox, before he comes barging in here."

Knox looked alarmed and uneasy. It occurred to him that the gentleman at the gate, who gave no name, might be one of the sporting gentlemen with whom Knox had had Turf transactions in the past. If this were so, there were several excellent reasons why Knox should go and interview the gentleman, without waiting for the gentleman to come and interview him.

In his mind's eye Knox pictured a corpulent gentleman in a loud check suit, and he almost shuddered at the prospect of such an individual being seen by the Head or one of the masters, who would be certain to inquire the nature of his business.

"I'll come along at once!" said Knox, in tones that sounded almost panicky.

He turned to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"I'm not likely to be kept more than a minute or two," he said. "If I'm not back by seven, don't wait for me. Go right ahead."

"All sewene, deah boy!" said the swell of St. Jim's gaily.

Fuming with annoyance, Knox hurried out of the dressing-room and the back exit of the concert-hall, and made his way down to the gates. Fortunately, dusk had fallen, so that he would not be seen in conversation with the gentleman at the gates—except perhaps by Taggles, the porter. And a silver coin pressed into Taggles' palm would ensure his silence on the subject.

Knox reached the gates, to find a car standing in the roadway, with its headlights on and its engine running. He could not be sure whether it was a private car or a taxi, but the presence of a uniformed chauffeur suggested the former.

"Master Knox?" said the chauffeur, peering through the gloom as the prefect approached.

"Yes," panted Knox, who had been hurrying. "I understand I'm wanted."

"That's right, sir. Gentleman inside wants a quiet word with you."

So saying, the chauffeur opened the door of the car and held it ajar.

Wondering why "the gentleman inside" did not show himself, Knox stepped up to the open door and peered within. The interior of the car was in darkness.

While he stood there, with his foot on the step, wondering what this mysterious business portended, Knox was suddenly pounced upon from behind and bundled neck and crop into the car.

So swift and sudden was the movement that Knox had no time to think of resistance. Before he could realise what had happened he was floundering in the darkened interior of the car. He bumped his head severely against the seat, and he was in a half-dazed state when he felt his arms seized and pinioned behind his back by a length of rope.

Knox gave a yell.

"Let me go, whoever you are! What's the game?"

There was no response.

Knox lashed out savagely with his leg, in the hope of implanting a kick upon his assailant. But he only succeeded in barking his shin against the seat opposite. And then his legs were seized, and another cord was drawn deftly

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around his ankles, and Knox of the Sixth was a helpless prisoner. The door of the car was slammed and locked upon him, just as Taggles, the porter, came hurrying out of his lodge to see what all the commotion was about.

But Taggles was too late to get any material evidence as to what had happened. He saw the car leap forward like a live thing, he heard it go humming down the lane, he gaped after it till it was swallowed up in the darkness. But Taggies had no idea who was on board, or what the sounds of scuffling and shouting had meant. He shook his head in a mystified way, and shuffled back into his lodge.

Meanwhile, Gerald Knox was being borne away from St. Jim's at a speed which approached forty miles an hour. He was trussed up in the car like a fowl, and his position was cramped and uncomfortable. He believed it was the chauffeur who had attacked and overpowered him, but he could not be certain. Everything had happened so swiftly and unexpectedly.

Vaguely at first, and then with a growing conviction, it occurred to Knox that his old enemies, Tom Merry & Co., were at the bottom of this business. Evidently they had suspected that he was a spy of Mr. Ratcliff's, and that he was out to ruin the opera, and they had hit upon this plan of frustrating his designs.

Knox writhed to think how easily he had walked into the trap. The moment Toby had told him he was wanted down at the gates he should have suspected a decoy. But Knox, usually only too ready to suspect ulterior motives, had suspected nothing on this occasion. He had been trapped with consummate ease.

Where was he being taken? Knox had no idea. The car rushed on through the night, and a twinkling cluster of lights seen through the window suggested a village—possibly Rylcombe. The lights were speedily left behind, and the car swept on through the Sussex lanes. The chauffeur's object seemed to be to put as much distance as possible between his prisoner and St. Jim's.

Monty Lowther's wheeze had done the trick!

CHAPTER 11.

Knox's Night Out!

KNOX'S wild and whirling joy-ride ended as unexpectedly as it had begun.

The car slowed down with a screaming of brakes, and jolted to an abrupt standstill, hurling the unfortunate Knox off the seat on to the floor.

Bump!

"Yarooooh!" roared Knox, whose anatomy had already collected quite a big crop of bruises.

There was a crunching of feet in the roadway, and the next moment the door of the car was unlocked and thrown open. Then Knox became aware of a pair of hands fumbling in the darkness—presumably groping for his feet.

The hands presently found what they sought. They closed over the prefect's tethered ankles, and he was dragged bodily out of the car.

A pair of muscular arms were now about him, and he was carried to the roadside and deposited none too gently on to the grass.

Glaring up at the Hercules who had performed this weight-lifting feat, Knox identified the chauffeur.

"You rotter!" snarled Knox. "You shall answer to the law for this!"

The man merely laughed, as with deft fingers he proceeded to unbind the prefect's arms.

Knox struggled into a sitting posture, and blinked around him wildly.

He had not the faintest notion where he was, but it seemed to be miles from civilisation. The immediate stretch of road was deserted. There were no houses within sight. It was a lonely and outlandish spot, and Knox trembled at the prospect of being abandoned here by the roadside.

"You—you're not going to leave me stranded here?" gasped Knox.

The chauffeur nodded. He spoke for the first time.

"There! I've freed your arms," he said. "You can manage the cord round your ankles yourself. Hope you enjoyed your little joy-ride!"

Knox sat up in the grass, fuming.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Sorry, but I'm not making any confidences," was the reply.

"Who put you up to this? Was it Tom Merry and his pals?" interrogated Knox.

The chauffeur, who had been kneeling, rose to his feet and glanced up and down the road. Like Moses of old, he looked this way and that way, and there was no man.

"I've no time to stay here and submit myself to a cross-examination," he said. "I must be off!"

And he sprinted briskly towards the car.

"Hold on!" shouted Knox, struggling with the bonds which tethered his ankles. "If you're going to be cad enough to leave me stranded here, you might at least inform me where I am, and my best way of getting back to St. Jim's."

The chauffeur, however, took no further heed of Knox. He started up the car and drove it about fifty yards along the road, where there was a convenient place to turn. Then he skilfully reversed the car and set off at top speed. He went past Gerald Knox in a flash, and bade him a mocking farewell, which was borne to the prefect's ears on the wind.

By this time Knox had managed to free his legs. He tottered to his feet and ran into the roadway, waving his arms wildly, and shouting after the rapidly retreating car.

"Stop! Stop! Come back, you rotter!" Knox's frantic shouts were futile. It was extremely doubtful whether the driver of the car heard them. Certainly he did not heed. And even as Knox shouted, dancing like a dervish in the roadway, the rearlights of the car disappeared round a bend.

Baffled and furious, Knox desisted from his exertions, and took stock of his surroundings. He knew that he was many miles from St. Jim's, but he could not "place" his present situation. In the murk of a winter night one Sussex lane looked much the same as another. Knox was hopelessly lost and bemazed.

"Oh, the awful rotter!" he exclaimed, clenching his hands. "If only a car came along, so that I could give chase! If I could capture the scoundrel, I wouldn't think twice about giving him into custody. And the young rascals who put him up to this stunt would be made to feel sorry for this night's work!"

And then, on the instant, Knox's hope was realised.

The sudden gleam of powerful headlights lit up the roadway and the hedges on either side. A car was approaching at terrific speed.

Knox jumped to the side of the road—for he valued his skin—and as the car bore down upon him he waved his arms frantically and shouted at the top of his lungs.

"Stop! I say! Stop!"

But, instead of slowing down, the driver of the car accelerated. His headlights, sweeping the stretch of roadway, showed him the uniformed figure of a police officer. He was aware that he was exceeding the speed limit, and he jumped to the conclusion that this was a police-trap.

The prospect of appearing before the magistrates and having his license endorsed was not at all to his liking. He increased his speed, and the car shot past Gerald Knox as if it were participating in a speed trial on the Brooklands track. Knox shouted again, making a megaphone of his hands. His voice echoed clamantly along the dusky road. But the car, with a wicked twinkle of lights, disappeared into the distance.

"The idiot!" panted Knox. "He must have taken me for a real bobby!"

An innocent mistake which many other people were destined to make in the course of that fateful evening.

Knox paced up and down, almost beside himself with impotent rage.

After an interval of a few minutes another car came along, and precisely the same thing happened. Knox waved and shouted; and the driver accelerated and shot past him like lightning.

Obviously, it was no use trying to get a lift. Every motorist who came along would take Knox for a policeman, and promptly fight shy of him. He would have to abandon his idea of giving chase to the car which had decoyed him from St. Jim's.

It occurred to Knox to remove his helmet and tunic, in order to avoid being taken for a police-officer. But the night was intensely cold, and Knox wore no jacket beneath his tunic—merely a shirt and waistcoat. To stand about in his shirt-sleeves, in a biting east wind, was unthinkable.

"No use hanging about here," he growled at length. "I'd better make shift to the nearest town or village."

Savagely, he tramped along the dark road. His thoughts wandered to St. Jim's, and to D'Arcy's Opera, which would now be in full swing. His little plot to nip it in the bud had been frustrated; and as Mr. Ratcliff was also absent from St. Jim's the performance would proceed without let or hindrance. That thought was gall and wormwood to Gerald Knox, as he strode angrily along, with lowering brows.

For three or four miles he tramped, without seeing a single habitation or meeting a soul. And then, gleaming ahead of him, he discerned the lights of a town. He had no idea what town it was, but he was nearing civilisation at last, and he quickened his stride.

The lights were deceptive. They seemed to be only a little way ahead; in reality, they were another two miles distant. And Knox's legs were beginning to ache when at long last he came to the outskirts of the town.

"Wonder where I am?" he murmured, glancing about him.

He passed through one or two deserted streets, and emerged into a main thoroughfare.

Outside a public-house a large crowd was assembled. It seemed as if a street brawl was in progress.

"I'll ask one of these loafers to tell me where I am," mused Knox.

And he strode up to the rabble, and tapped a man on the shoulder.

"Excuse me—" he began.

"Certainly, certainly!" said the man, hurriedly backing away. And Knox was not given a chance to complete the question he had been about to frame.

When the crowd caught sight of him, a loud murmur arose. Respectfully the men fell away on either side, forming a gangway for Knox to pass through. The prefect glared at them in a puzzled sort of way. He forgot, for the moment, that he was in the uniform of a police-officer, and that he was being taken for a representative of the law.

At the end of the avenue which had been formed two men were fighting. At any rate, they had their coats off and their shirt-sleeves rolled up, and were prancing up to each other with clenched fists. Each was hurling a string of invective at the other. It was wordy warfare rather than a fistic one.

One of the pair, a very stout gentleman with a florid face, and a nose which showed that he was a determined opponent of the Pussfoot campaign, was decidedly unsteady on his feet. He lurched and swayed, and just as Knox approached he lost his balance completely, and collapsed in a sprawling heap.

There was a chuckle from the onlookers.

"Now he's done it!" said a man behind Knox. "He'll be run in for bein' drunk an' incapable!"

"Drunk!" roared the stout gentleman, overhearing the remark. "Who saysh I'm drunk?" He sat up, and blinked round defiantly. "I'm shober as a judge—hic!—an' I defy any man to shay otherwise!"

Suddenly he caught sight of Knox. The vision of a policeman's uniform seemed to have a sobering effect upon him, for he scrambled to his feet.

"Ossifer!" he exclaimed, waving a podgy hand towards his opponent. "Arrest that man! He's drunk an' dis-hord'ly!"

Knox stared.

"What the merry dickens—" he began.

"Arrest him!" shouted the stout gentleman excitedly. "Take him along to the—hup!—station. If he shows resistance, I'll len' you a hand with him!"

The opponent of the corpulent gentleman did not wait to be arrested and taken to the station. Snatching up his coat, he promptly took to his heels.

With a roar of rage at being balked of his prey, the stout and bellicose gentleman went pelting in pursuit, with a speed that was remarkable, having regard to his size and condition.

The onlookers glanced at Knox, expecting him to give chase. To their surprise, however, the youthful police-officer—for such he appeared to be—shrugged his shoulders impatiently and turned away.

Now that the excitement was over, and the belligerents had vanished from view, the crowd melted away, in that magical manner peculiar to crowds.

In another moment Knox found himself alone. Glancing back at the inn, he saw that it bore the sign of the George and Dragon. At last he realised where he was.

"My hat!" he muttered. "This must be Abbotsford!"

Walking on a little way, he obtained confirmation of the fact; for in the light of a street-lamp opposite, he saw over a shop the words: "The Abbotsford Stores."

"Best thing I can do," growled Knox, "is to make for the railway-station, and get back to St. Jim's. I've no money on me, worse luck; but this hateful uniform should stand me in good stead for once. If I say I'm travelling on urgent police duty, the ticket-collector will let me pass."

Tired and sorely harassed, the St. Jim's prefect set off in the direction of the railway-station. He had not proceeded very far when he encountered a fresh packet of trouble. Sounds of snapping and snarling betokened that a dog-fight was in progress. A small Pekingese dog was doing battle with a very lean and scraggy mongrel. They rolled over in the roadway, yapping and yelping, and in imminent danger of being run down by a passing car.

An elderly lady, who was apparently the owner of the Pekingese, stood on the pavement wringing her hands.

"Fido!" she screamed. "Here, Fido! Come at once, or that brute will eat you!"

But Fido—owing to circumstances over which he had no control—was unable to obey the command. He had put up

a brave fight, but he was now at the mercy of the mongrel, and he yelped piteously.

Suddenly the elderly lady caught sight of Knox. "Constable," she wailed, "separate them quickly, or my Fido will be killed!"

Knox gritted his teeth with annoyance. His one desire at that moment was to get away from Abbotsford with all speed. He knew that trains to Rylcombe were not plentiful, and that if he missed one he might have to wait hours for the next. Really, he had no time to mess about over dog-fights.

But a crowd had collected by this time, and he could not parade his callousness by walking on and leaving the dogs to settle their differences. All eyes were upon him; everyone was waiting for him to act.

So Knox acted. He sprang into the roadway, and grasped the scraggy mongrel by the collar, and dragged him clear of his diminutive opponent. The Peke promptly scuttled to his mistress, to be caught up fervently in her arms.

The episode should have ended there; but, unfortunately for Knox, it didn't!

"Constable," cried the elderly lady, "kindly take that poor brute to the police-station. He appears to be an unwanted stray, and semi-starvation has made him savage. Take him along, and give him a nice hot meal and a bed."

"I—I can't, madam," he faltered.

At this the elderly lady became quite heated. "You cannot?" she cried, raising her voice. "You cannot take that poor beast under your protection, and tend him with loving care?"

"Nunno," stuttered Knox. "It—it's nothing to do with me."

"What! You are a police-officer, and it is clearly your duty to befriend a stray dog, and look after it until its owner can be traced. Are you so heartless that you would leave the poor brute to its lonely wanderings?"

"Shame!" cried several voices.

Knox groaned, more deeply than before. He reflected that he himself was a lonely wanderer, just as sorely in need of a nice hot meal and a suitable bed as this mongrel.

"You will take that dog to the station, constable," said the old lady grimly, "or I shall not only report you to your superintendent, but I shall place the matter in the hands of the R.S.P.C.A."

The unhappy Knox found himself wishing that there was such an organisation as a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Prefects. He had passed through a terrible time; but it seemed that the end was not yet.

The attitude of the crowd became so menacing that Knox thought he had better do the elderly lady's bidding. So he drew from his pocket a length of rope—which had been used earlier in the evening to bind his ankles—and made one end of it fast to the dog's collar. Then he led the mongrel away to the police-station, with a large and ever-increasing crowd at his heels.

It was like a nightmare to Knox, dragging himself through the streets of Abbotsford, with the mob in his wake hurling all manner of uncomplimentary remarks after him.

Presently, on turning a corner into the main street, Knox came face to face with a genuine policeman.

The officer stopped and stared at him. "What's up, mate? Been havin' a bit of trouble?" he inquired solicitously.

"Some old frump has insisted on my taking this dog to the police-station!" growled Knox, in reply. "It's a stray. Will you take it along for me, constable?"

"Hey?" "It's a policeman's job to deal with stray dogs—not mine."

The police-constable regarded Knox in amazement. "No," said Knox. "You see, I— Let's get away from this rabble, and I'll explain!"

The police-constable's manner changed abruptly. Friendly at first, it now became very grim.

"Ho!" he ejaculated, frowning at Knox. "A himposter, are you? Wearin' a uniform to what you've no right. I might 'ave seen that you 'ad no collar-badges. You come along o' me, my lad!"

"Look here——" began Knox wildly. "If you will only let me explain——"

"The hinspector will 'ear anythin' you've got to say. You come along o' me!"

So saying, the police-constable gripped Knox by the arm, and proceeded to march him off to the station. With his free hand, Knox still dragged the scraggy mongrel.

The crowd followed behind, yelling with delight at the remarkable spectacle of one constable arresting another. There was excitement and to spare in Abbotsford that evening.

Seldom had Gerald Knox been made to suffer such keen humiliation. He was hustled into the police-station with—

out ceremony, as if he were a lawless vagabond. He stuttered and spluttered before the inspector, and at last succeeded in making a coherent explanation.

The inspector took a deal of convincing; but in the end he was satisfied as to Knox's identity, and he good-naturedly lent him the money to pay his fare back to St. Jim's.

To crown the misadventures of that dreadful night, Knox was compelled to wait over half an hour for a train, in the fireless and ill-lighted waiting-room of Abbotsford Station. He looked the picture of misery as he sat huddled before the empty grate. He was limp and exhausted after his many misadventures. But, in view of his caddish plot to wreck D'Arcy's opera, perhaps he had suffered no more than he deserved.

CHAPTER 12.

The Chopper Comes Down!

"I AM the tywant of St. Tim's. Twemble!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" "Shiver an' shake in all your limbs! Twemble!" "Good old Gussy!"

In the crowded concert-hall at St. Jim's, Gussy's opera was going strong.

Arthur Augustus was putting plenty of "pep" into his performance. He had the stage to himself, for the most part, and he strutted to and fro in gown and mortar-board, brandishing his cane. On his noble brow was a Jove-like frown, which was intended to resemble the fierce frown of a tyrant.

Another person who was putting plenty of "pep" into his performance was George Herries. That youthful Paderewski was seated at the piano, drumming away at the keys as if for a wager.

Herries had been specially instructed, before the curtain went up, to play softly, so that Arthur Augustus would not need to break a blood-vessel in order to make himself heard.

Carried away by zeal, Herries had completely forgotten those instructions. With ruffled hair and gleaming eyes, he pounded away at the ivories. His one aim and object seemed to be to make as much noise as possible. In this he succeeded admirably. There was a surfeit of noise, but a deplorable deficiency of music.

So great was the din that Arthur Augustus was obliged to sing some of his "numbers" twice over. There were complaints from the back of the hall that he could not be heard.

"I am the tywant of St. Tim's—softly, Hewwies!— Twemble!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" "Shiver and shake in all your limbs—an' for goodness' sake put on the soft pedal, you duffah!—Twemble!"

The audience rocked with laughter. Arthur Augustus was mixing things somewhat. He had to perform the difficult feat of singing to the audience and reproving Herries at the same time.

At last Herries glanced up from the piano, and caught Gussy's baleful eye, and moderated his transports, so to speak.

Gussy's songs made a great hit. What he lacked in voice production he made up for by really brilliant acting. He had studied some of the methods and mannerisms of Mr. Ratcliff, and he mimicked them so perfectly. The compression of the lips, the impatient, jerky stride, the fearsome frown, the rasping voice—all the little tricks and traits peculiar to Mr. Ratcliff, were faithfully reproduced by Arthur Augustus.

It was impossible not to recognise whom the swell of St. Jim's was impersonating. The audience "tumbled" at once, and the concert-hall rang with laughter.

Even Mr. Railton, who had dropped in for a few moments to see how the opera was progressing, could not refrain from smiling.

The School House master felt that the impersonation was harmless enough, not actuated by malice. Though perhaps he would not have taken so lenient a view had any master other than Mr. Ratcliff been burlesqued. The fact was, Mr. Ratcliff was just as cordially disliked by his colleagues on the staff as by the fellows themselves.

So Mr. Railton sat tight, and did not interfere. He was quite prepared to interfere, however, if Arthur Augustus carried things too far. At present, he was being funny without being offensive—though Mr. Ratcliff himself would undoubtedly have been offended, had he been present to watch Gussy's antics.

Arthur Augustus had now come to "the flogging scene." Three sheepish and shamefaced juniors—Figgins and Kerr and Fatty Wynn—stood before him with downcast eyes, and knees that knocked together. And they remained thus, quaking and quailing, while the Tyrant of St. Tim's sang the following song—adapted from "The Cobbler's Song" in "Chu Chin Chow."



"I am waiting!" roared Mr. Ratcliff. "Unlock this door immediately!" Monty Lowther crossed to the door and unlocked it. "This way, sir!" Mr. Ratcliff strode in, and he had the shock of his life on finding himself confronted by a very youthful policeman, a grubby-faced maid-of-all-work, and a porter. "What is the meaning of all this buffoonery?" demanded the master of the New House. (See Chapter 7.)

"I lash an' I lawp with pointah an' cane,
I flog my pupils with might an' main:
Flog 'em an' flog 'em as best I may,
Flog 'em at night, an' flog 'em all day.
An' I sing, as I flog 'em, this cheerful lay!"

Arthur Augustus paused, and imitated Mr. Ratcliff's favourite trick of bending the pliant cane to and fro in his hands, and gazing at it with almost affectionate relish.

The audience yelled with mirth. And Arthur Augustus was still performing those exercises with the cane, when a sour-faced individual in gown and mortar-board came quietly into the concert-hall by the back door.

It was not the ghost of Mr. Horace Ratcliff. It was Mr. Ratcliff himself!

So engrossed were the fellows in what was taking place on the stage, that Mr. Ratcliff's snake-like entry was only noticed by one person.

Dick Redfern, standing near the door, saw the House-master glide past him. And Reddy's lips opened wide with horror.

In common with the rest of his schoolfellows, Reddy had supposed that Mr. Ratcliff was attending a political meeting at Wayland. Such had indeed been the House-master's intention, but he had cancelled it. Passing through the hall when setting out on his mission, he had seen for the first time the poster announcing the performance of the opera.

No report had reached him from Knox of the Sixth; and Mr. Ratcliff could only conclude that Knox had nothing to report. It seemed that he was not, after all, being burlesqued in D'Arcy's opera.

Once the seeds of suspicion had been sown in Mr. Ratcliff's mind, however, they were not easily eradicated. And it was an evil moment for Arthur Augustus and his fellow performers when Mr. Ratcliff decided to step along to the concert-hall, and assure himself that he was not being impersonated.

As ill-luck would have it, he arrived at the very moment when D'Arcy was mimicking him to the life!

Dick Redfern gave a startled gasp. He wanted desperately to warn D'Arcy; yet how could he possibly do so? It would be futile to shout "Cave!" He prayed that Arthur Augustus might catch sight of Mr. Ratcliff, and desist at once from his antics. But Gussy was so absorbed in those antics that he had no inkling of Mr. Ratcliff's presence.

Redfern ventured a cough—a loud and urgent cough, in the hope of arresting D'Arcy's attention. It was useless. He coughed again, and there was a growl from the fellows in front of him.

"Dry up, there!"

"Muzzle that blessed cough!"

Redfern wrung his hands, and darted an apprehensive glance at the tall figure of Mr. Ratcliff, which had halted in front of him.

And then Arthur Augustus embarked upon the next verse.

"Pwince an' commonah, Hawwy, Tom an' Dick,
Stand in need of old Scatcliff's stick!
The more I flog 'em, the fittah I feel,
Though the scamps may w'iggle an' squirm an' squeal,
An' sink to their knees with a wild appeal!"

Figgins and Kerr and Wynn promptly went down on their knees, and set up such a piteous wail for mercy that the audience was nearly in hysterics.

Arthur Augustus towered over them with his cane, frowning fiercely.

"Mercy?" he echoed scornfully. "Scatcliff the tywant does not know the meanin' of the word!" He swished his cane through the air.

"I'll flog you till you're black an' blue,
Both Carr an' Thynne, an' Wiggins too!"

"STOP!"

A strident voice rang through the concert-hall.

Arthur Augustus gave a jump. His face turned pale

beneath its grease-paint. The cane fell from his nerveless hand; and now it was the tyrant himself who trembled!

"Bai Jove!" he ejaculated, in alarm and dismay. "Watty, deah boys!"

Figgins and Kerr and Wynn groaned in a dismal chorus. "That's done it!" gasped Figgins.

It certainly had!

Mr. Ratcliff came striding down the centre gangway of the hall, his face livid with rage.

"So!" he exclaimed, his eyes glinting at his "double" on the stage. "It is as I suspected all along! I am being lampooned in this absurd opera! You, D'Arcy, have had the effrontery—the unparalleled audacity—to hold a House-master up to ridicule! You shall suffer dearly for this!"

"Weally, Mr. Watcliff——"

"I declare this performance at an end!" stormed Mr. Ratcliff. He turned and looked about him. Fortunately, Mr. Railton had left the concert-hall some moments before, or there would certainly have been a stormy scene between the two masters.

The Housemaster's roving, angry glance lighted upon Kildare of the Sixth.

"You here, Kildare? I am surprised—I am astonished to find the captain of the school present at this performance, openly aiding and abetting these young rascals in their gross disrespect towards a Housemaster!"

A hot reply rose to Kildare's lips, but he checked it.

"I order you to clear this hall at once!" thundered Mr. Ratcliff. "At once! Do you hear?"

The Housemaster was beside himself with rage.

Reluctantly Kildare issued his instructions, and even more reluctantly the members of the audience left their seats and began to file out of the concert-hall.

Mr. Ratcliff spun round and faced the stage.

"D'Arcy, you will accompany me at once to the head-master's study! Come just as you are, so that Dr. Holmes may see for himself to what lengths you have gone in order to impersonate me!"

Arthur Augustus hesitated.

"Weally, Mr. Watcliff, I cannot possibly appeah befoah the Head in this clobber! It would be an offence against the pwoprieties. Pway wait a moment, sir, while I wemove this gown——"

For answer Mr. Ratcliff clambered on to the stage with remarkable agility for an elderly gentleman and caught Arthur Augustus by the collar.

"Do you presume to bandy words with me, D'Arcy?" he snapped. "Come with me this instant!"

Arthur Augustus suffered himself to be marched away to the Head's study.

The spectacle of a real master and a bogus master of smaller stature walking side by side was decidedly comical; but the humour of it was lost upon Tom Merry & Co., who waited apprehensively for further developments.

"Fancy old Ratty turning up like that!" growled Manners. "This has fairly put the kybosh on everything!"

Tom Merry nodded moodily.

"I'm afraid the Head will come down on poor old Gussy like a ton of bricks, and ban the opera," he said. "Ratty's bound to make things as black as possible for him. Did you ever see him in such a wax? He's like a raging lion!"

"It's jolly rough on all the fellows," said Monty Lowther.

"They paid their half-dollars and bobs to see the performance, and they only saw half of it. And it's not likely we shall get a chance to give another."

"Not now that Ratty's on the war-path!" said Tom Merry.

"Wonder what's happening in the Head's study?"

In that sacred apartment a very turbulent scene was in progress.

The Head had been thunderstruck by the apparition of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy in a gown and mortar-board. He glanced at Mr. Ratcliff for enlightenment; and the House-master was now proceeding to enlighten him in fierce and furious tones that fairly rang through the study.

"I have been impersonated, sir!" roared Mr. Ratcliff. "I have been burlesqued and lampooned and made the object of public ridicule!"

"Bless my soul!" murmured the Head.

"This young rascal D'Arcy," boomed Mr. Ratcliff, "has grossly libelled me, sir, in an opera, which has just been performed before the whole school!"

The Head turned to Arthur Augustus.

"What have you to say, D'Arcy?" he demanded, and his voice seemed a whisper after the strident tones of Mr. Ratcliff.

Arthur Augustus drew himself up, looking as dignified as his strange attire would permit.

"Mr. Watcliff, sir, has miswepwesented the mattah——"

"What?" hooted Mr. Ratcliff.

The Head raised a hand to silence the purple-faced House-master.

"I have not libelled Mr. Watcliff in my opewah, sir. I

had no intention whatevah of libellin' Mr. Watcliff. I wanted to intwoduce a tywant into my opewah, an' I realised that if I could dwaw my chawactah fwom life, so much the bettah. Mr. Watcliff bein' the only tywant of whom I have had personal expewience, I took him as my model."

"D'Arcy!" gasped the Head. "Do you realise what you are saying?"

"I am tellin' you the twuth, sir," said Arthur Augustus simply. "Mr. Watcliff has no right to say that he has been libelled. I merely took him as a model for my tywant—an' a vewy excellent model he made!"

The Head's brow grew very stern.

"D'Arcy, if I thought for one moment that you were deliberately insulting Mr. Ratcliff in my presence——"

Arthur Augustus looked quite distressed.

"Weally, Dr. Holmes, such is fah fwom my intentions!" "Yet you have implied that Mr. Ratcliff is a tyrant, D'Arcy. I do not believe you were fully cognisant of what you were saying——"

"He was being wilfully and grossly insolent, sir!" fumed Mr. Ratcliff.

"I do not think his insolence was intentional, Mr. Ratcliff," said the Head quietly. "And now, with regard to this opera which D'Arcy has written and produced. Before I can give judgment on the matter I must see a copy of the production."

"I will go an' fetch you a copy at once, sir," said Arthur Augustus obligingly.

And he hastened from the study, to return in a few moments with a bulky manuscript.

The Head laid it on the desk in front of him and slowly turned over the pages, lingering on some of the lyrics, and skipping all the extraneous matter which did not concern "Mr. Scatcliff."

The Head was frowning deeply over the perusal; but a keen observer would have noticed that once or twice his lips quivered as if he were about to smile, while the merest suspicion of a twinkle gleamed in his eye.

Finally, Dr. Holmes looked up.

"D'Arcy," he said, "I have read sufficient of this opera to form the conclusion that in writing it you overshot the mark of prudence. The numerous references to Mr. Ratcliff are but thinly veiled. I do not wonder that he has taken exception to them, and that they have caused him annoyance and displeasure. I cannot permit this sort of thing—this crude caricature of a Housemaster—although I feel sure that your motives were not malicious."

"I disagree, sir!" cried Mr. Ratcliff.

The Head eyed him coldly.

"The fact that you are in disagreement with me, Mr. Ratcliff, does not alter my carefully-considered view that D'Arcy intended no malice. He is not that kind of boy. But I am afraid, D'Arcy"—the Head turned again to Arthur Augustus—"that I must ban this opera forthwith."

"Oh, sir!"

Gussy's face fell, though he could scarcely have expected any other decision.

"I forbid any future performances, D'Arcy!" said the Head sternly.

"But—but the fellows haven't had their moneysworth, sir——" began the swell of St. Jim's.

"Enough, D'Arcy! I do not propose to argue the matter. I have made my pronouncement. Your opera is banned forthwith. Let that be clearly understood. Now you may go."

"But, sir," gasped Mr. Ratcliff, almost glaring at the Head, "you have not punished this young rascal for his studied insolence——"

The Head frowned.

"I consider that the banning of the opera constitutes an adequate—indeed, an ample—punishment, Mr. Ratcliff. I decline to discuss the matter further. Pray leave my study!"

And Mr. Ratcliff, furious that Arthur Augustus had got off so lightly, flounced out of the Head's study, with rage still seething in his breast.

CHAPTER 13.

The Midnight Performance!

"BANNED!"

The members of the cast of D'Arcy's opera exchanged glances of dismay.

They were assembled in the Junior Common-room after the interrupted performance, and Arthur Augustus had just come in with the news.

It came as no surprise to Tom Merry & Co. to learn that the opera had been officially banned by the Head. But, all the same, they were keenly disappointed, and their feelings towards Mr. Horace Ratcliff were on a par with that gentleman's feelings towards themselves—almost homicidal!

"It's weally wotten luck, deah boys!" said Arthur Augustus, with a face as long as a fiddle. "I twied to entah

a strong protest, but the Head wouldn't give me a chance. I should have made a weally eloquent appeal if he had let me."

"You'd have made matters ten times worse, you mean!" grunted Jack Blake. "We know your little habit of saying the wrong thing, Gussy, and putting your foot in it."

Jack Blake was feeling quite huffy, and looking decidedly glum. So were the rest of the amateur actors—with one exception.

The exception was Ralph Reckness Cardew. That elegant youth was looking thoughtful, rather than dejected.

"Seems a thousand pities, dear men," he drawled, "that the giddy Sword of Damocles has fallen—or, to put it vulgarly, that the chopper has come down. There are no words in our picturesque language to describe our feelin's towards that monster Ratty. He has almost put paid to the whole thing!"

"Almost?" echoed Tom Merry. "You mean quite?"

"No, not quite," said Cardew reflectively. "He has dealt us a crushin' blow; I won't deny that. But we must behave like the old indiarubber men, an' bounce up again!"

"Not thinking of deying the Head's ban, I suppose?" asked Clive.

"That's precisely what I am thinkin' of doin', Sidney."

"But how?" asked Tom Merry helplessly. "Ratty would step in again and squash the whole thing; and we should get into a fearful row with the Head."

Cardew chuckled.

"Ratty," he said, "will be tucked up between the sheets, sleepin' the sleep of the unjust. My suggestion, dear men, is this, that we give a midnight performance, in secret."

"Bai Jove!"

"Great Scott!"

Cardew's amazing proposal almost took the junior's breath away. At first it seemed wild and untenable; but when Cardew proceeded to enlarge upon it, the wheeze was made to appear quite workable.

"We could fix up an improvised stage in the gym," said Cardew. "The gym is isolated from the rest of the buildin', an' it's sufficiently far away from the sleepin' quarters for the noise not to be heard. Of course, Herries will have to put on the soft pedal; an' we must close all the windows. We must also warn the audience not to applaud too noisily; but they will see the wisdom of that for themselves."

"And how are we going to let the fellows know?" asked Tom Merry.

The mere fact of his asking such a question showed that he approved of Cardew's scheme.

"By sendin' round secret notices," was the reply. "At the witchin' hour of midnight the fellows will turn out, an' put on rubber-soled shoes, an' steal silently away in their pyjams an' dressin'-gowns to the gym. There we will entertain them right royally, an' make up to them for their disappointment earlier in the evenin'."

"My hat!" ejaculated Jack Blake, drawing a deep breath. "It's a stunning wheeze! But can we trust everybody to keep it dark—that's the point. What about the prefects?"

Cardew smiled.

"The only prefect we need fear is Knox," he said. "An' I don't think Knox will come rollin' home just yet. He happens to have an urgent appointment at Abbotsford."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"As for Kildare an' the others," said Cardew, "I don't suppose they will attend the midnight performance. Wouldn't do for them to aid an' abet it openly. But they are good sports, an' they'll turn a blind eye to the proceedin's, like Napoleon—or was it Cromwell? I'm a bit shaky on history!"

After further discussion of the matter, after weighing up all the risks—and these were not a few—it was unanimously decided to carry out Cardew's scheme.

There was a sporting chance that the midnight performance would be carried through successfully; and the juniors were prepared to take that chance, and to face the music in the event of discovery and exposure.

The secret notices were drawn up and distributed before bed-time; and the whole school was in a state of suppressed excitement. By its very daring, Cardew's scheme made a universal appeal.

Kildare and his fellow prefects turned up, trumps as Cardew had confidently anticipated. They did not propose to attend the secret performance themselves, but they had a very strong sympathy with the opera performers, whose activities had been balked by Mr. Ratcliff; and they decided to wink an eye at what was afoot.

When bed-time came that air of suppressed excitement still hung over St. Jim's; but the greatest care was exercised to prevent any of the masters getting wind of the arrangements.

It was about bed-time that Knox of the Sixth returned from his wanderings, and he made his way at once to the Head's study.

Knox was quite convinced in his own mind that Tom

Merry & Co. had been responsible for decoying him from St. Jim's. He had no proof, and in his blind rage it did not occur to him that the Head would require proof before accepting his story.

Now, if Knox had been cool and calm and collected—and he was neither of these things—if he had changed his mud-stained police uniform into his ordinary attire; if he had laid his story calmly and coherently before the Head, then he would not only have got a hearing, but the Head would have held an inquiry into the matter, and the culprits would have been discovered.

But Knox went the wrong way to work. He burst into the Head's study in his bedraggled attire, and poured out the tale of his misadventures in such a rambling and incoherent manner that the Head checked him before he had said a quarter of what he wanted to say.

"Really, Knox," protested Dr. Holmes, "you have come to me with a most wild and improbable story of having been kidnapped at the school gates, and decoyed by car to Abbotsford. You say that this amazing happening was the result of a conspiracy on the part of Merry and his friends. Yet you cannot produce a tittle of evidence to show that such is the case. You have brought a serious accusation against these boys—an accusation which you cannot substantiate. Frankly, Knox, I cannot accept your story. Why you have come to me in this extraordinary guise, and told me this melodramatic tale of having been kidnapped, I cannot conceive. But if you value your position as a prefect, Knox, you will leave my study immediately!"

This was the last straw, so far as Gerald Knox was concerned. All the way from Abbotsford he had sustained himself with the comforting reflection that he would make things warm for Tom Merry & Co. And this was the result! The Head had discredited his story, and had dismissed him summarily from his presence.

It seemed to Gerald Knox, as he stamped furiously away from the Head's study, that the world was upside-down—that there was no justice for a sadly ill-used prefect.

Utterly worn out by his exhausting experiences, Knox went straight to bed. He wrenched off the hateful police uniform which had been the cause of so much trouble, and flung it on to the floor, and trampled on it. Then he extinguished the light, and got into bed, and sank into a profound slumber.

The midnight performance of D'Arcy's opera proved an unqualified success.

Even the optimistic Cardew could not have foreseen such a complete triumph.

At eleven o'clock a number of juniors had been despatched to the gymnasium to get everything in readiness. Swiftly and silently they had set to work, and by midnight the gym had been transformed into a theatre.

On the stroke of the hour the St. Jim's fellows arose from their beds, and donned their rubber-soled shoes and their dressing-gowns over their pyjamas, and stole silently away to the appointed place.

Every precaution was taken to ensure absolute secrecy. Had an army of burglars descended by stealth upon St. Jim's in the still watches of the night, their movements could not have been so free from noise.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and his fellow-performers were in brilliant form. They threw themselves heart and soul into the task of entertaining their schoolfellows. They were running a tremendous risk, and so, for that matter, were the fellows who listened to them; but the risk only added spice to the proceedings, and gave it the flavour of a great adventure.

The programme was played through from beginning to end without interruption.

A couple of sentries had been posted outside the door of the gym, and from time to time they popped inside and cheerily reported "All clear!" And it remained "all clear" until the end, when a delighted and well-satisfied audience stole back to their dormitories.

Next morning an epidemic of sleepy sickness seemed to descend upon St. Jim's. Everybody was yawning; everybody seemed to find it an effort to keep awake.

But none of the masters—not even the lynx-eyed Mr. Ratcliff—had the slightest suspicion of what had taken place. They were unable to combine cause with effect. They saw the effect plainly enough, but they were in sublime ignorance of the cause. Which was just as well for the peace of mind of the fellows who had played their parts in D'Arcy's Comic Opera!

THE END.

(Now look out for another extra-long complete story of the chums of St. Jim's in next week's GEM, entitled: "INVENTORS ALL!" A tip-top yarn this, chums—on of Martin Clifford's very best! Don't miss it, whatever you do!)

AT THE MERCY OF THE REDSKINS! Practically alone in the ranch house at Calumet is Sadie Chapin; speeding towards her is a band of Redskins bent on looting and firing the place. Behind them, riding like the wind, is young Tom Holt. But will he arrive in time to save Sadie?



WHITE EAGLE!

A Grand Story of a young Britisher's
Adventures with a Tribe of Apache
Indians in New Mexico.

Told By

ARTHUR PATTERSON.

Where is Hunks?

TOM turned upon Black Hawk. His face was strained, his teeth clenched; but there was a coolness about him which surprised even the Indian, who had seen him under stress so often.

"How many men has Badger Head?"

"Fifty—or more."

"Pick me twenty warriors!"

Black Hawk gave a toneless chuckle.

"Huh! White Cat has twice as many waiting. Come!"

"I shall want fifty horses, colonel—the best!"

"Take every one there is!" the older man cried. He was a leader of men; he had seen many a hard fight. Yet he found this boy was quicker than he. He vaguely wondered why.

In the street outside they ran into a group of cow-punchers. Kit Brent was there, and Sandy Bowker and all the Calumet boys.

"We've heard," Sandy said. "The whole caboodle here will go!"

"No!" Tom snapped, and Sandy almost started at his tone. "Give me twenty-five of your best riders; no more. Colonel, choose the horses. Make it more than fifty if you can; but they must all be the very best. Now, Black Hawk, where are the warriors?"

The Indians White Cat had gathered were in the store-house, which was surrounded by a hundred more, all ready to go.

Tom turned at the top of the steps to thank them all. But he knew what he wanted and what he was going to do. Speed was everything. Ordinary Indian ponies could never catch up Badger Head. The colonel's horses, on the other hand, were the fastest in the country, and Tom had remembered the Rodeo. The boys would have brought their best.

In the end fifty men were selected—the old hunting party and some thirty cowboys. Every man—white and red—was armed with a Winchester, and carried a hundred rounds of cartridges. The cow-punchers carried their pistols as well; the Indians tomahawks and knives. They had nothing else

except a pocketful of food. The leaders had flasks of brandy for emergencies. Every white man was stripped to his shirt; the clothing of the Indians was confined to a pair of buckskin breeches—but every one was in his war-paint. That meant much.

Tom's party was only to be an advance guard. If Sadie was saved and Calumet preserved, it would only be by Badger Head being caught before he reached the ranch.

No one knew, however, exactly how large Badger Head's force might be, and it was certain it would be well armed and would fight desperately. Besides, all were now outlaws, and, by the stern law of the frontier, must be exterminated to a man. For this purpose a larger body was to be assembled at once and follow. This the colonel and Black Hawk would command. The only difficulty was to persuade Chapin to wait. But, stout as his heart might be, Tom knew he could never stand the strain of what the first party had before it, and at last the colonel was prevailed upon to stay.

"I know you will do it better, lad," he said to Tom, with a catch in his breath. "It is the best chance."

"There is no chance!" Tom exclaimed between his teeth. "It will be done!" Then his heart seemed to burst, and he caught the colonel's hand with a grip he felt for long afterwards.

"I love her!" he panted. "You must know that now—in case! How can I fail them? Trust me, father!"

"With my soul, dear lad, and hers!"

After they were off, and there was time to think, Tom wondered at the confidence with which he had spoken to the colonel. It was because, he supposed, of his intense desire to comfort him. Tom had not really any confidence, except in finding Badger Head and killing him. That he knew he should do, and every man in the party, white or red, knew it, and that not one of them, not even White Cat, must come between these men.

But to save Sadie! That Tom believed was impossible, unless by some chance the captor should decide to hold the child to ransom; and this no one expected.

The plans of Badger Head had become known by a curious

WHO'S WHO IN THE STORY.

TOM HOLT, a sturdy young Britisher of seventeen, who has lived for a time amongst a tribe of Apache Indians in New Mexico.

BADGER HEAD, supreme chief of the nation.

BLACK HAWK, a tribal chief.

WHITE CAT, his son.

SOLOMON SLACK, a Government official in charge of the Reservations.

JEREMIAH MUSH, a hotel-keeper.

COLONEL CHAPIN, a wealthy rancher.

SADIE, his daughter.

HUNKS and **MALINKA**, Tom's dog and horse respectively.

After staying for a time with Colonel Chapin and his daughter Sadie, Tom decides to spend the winter with his Indian friends.

Promoted to the rank of chief and known as White Eagle, Tom reaches the Reservations, where he finds Badger Head encouraging

Solomon Slack to starve the Redskins who, in consequence, are on the verge of revolting against the "whites." The time now being ripe for a raid on the storehouse, Badger Head collects his braves and marches upon it. But he is forestalled by Tom, who surrounds the place and claims Slack as his prisoner. Enraged at being thwarted the supreme chief sentences the young Britisher to death. Wise to the truth, however, the Apaches speak out, and Tom is set free. To save his own skin Slack then tries to put the blame of the unrest on to Tom's shoulders, but his efforts meet with little success. Immediately following this Colonel Chapin, together with his cowboys, arrives at the Reservations. While Slack is being cross-questioned Black Hawk steals into the room with the startling news that Badger Head and his Redskin braves are racing for Calumet ranch—where Sadie is practically unguarded—intent on pillage and murder!

(Now Read On.)

chance, or Providence. Soon after the chief had disappeared, and while Tom and Miah Mush were at the railway depot with Lieutenant Groot, Black Hawk had been sent for to see a squaw who was dying. Her only child, a boy, had been sick in the famine, and Tom had taken a fancy to the little fellow and saved his life. This squaw had overheard Badger Head disclose to one of his lieutenants his determination to leave the Reservation, fly to the mountains, and form a band of malcontents, which he intended to recruit from time to time, until he had taken from the nation its wildest bloods, whose whole object would now be war with white men.

The place where Badger Head was to make his headquarters was mentioned, as well as the number of the men who were to form the nucleus of the band. The squaw, in trying to steal away, was discovered, and struck down. Badger Head left her for dead, but she managed to crawl to her tepee, and out of gratitude to Tom sent for Black Hawk. The attack of the soldiers had prevented the chief from telling Tom at the time, and, with Indian caution, he had decided to verify the account from other sources.

In process of doing this the cowboys arrived, and news came that one of them, when within twenty miles of Trantville, had come across one of Badger Head's scouts; and, knowing nothing, of course, of the trouble in the town, and finding the Indian friendly, had unconsciously betrayed the fact that most of the boys in his crowd had come from Calumet. Black Hawk's knowledge of Badger Head's mentality had brought him straight to Tom.

The raiding-party had twenty hours' start, and though Badger Head could not know that Tom would hunt him down at once, he was the last man to allow any delay in carrying out such a plan. It would be a stern chase, under a severe handicap in point of time. Only by a miracle could the girl be saved.

As a last blow Hunks could not be found. He had been at the camp of the cowboys, who had given him an uproarious welcome and much good meat. Later, White Cat said, the dog had been with them when Black Hawk called him out to tell him the trouble near. Since then, no one had seen him, and when Tom, just before he started, gave the long call which had never failed yet to bring the pup to his side, no answer came.

Hunks had disappeared.

On the Trail!

IT was a hundred miles to Calumet from the Reservation as the crow flies. The start was made an hour before midnight. The moon was at its full, and there would be no difficulty in finding the shortest way. Even had it been pitch-dark, Black Hawk's trackers would have done so without fail. The pace at which the rescue-party rode was a swinging lope, which every horse would be able to keep up—apart from steep hills, bad country, and stopping for water now and then—for the whole distance.

The ponies had been very carefully chosen by the colonel, who had an eye for horseflesh second to no man. Sandy Bowker, who had been a jockey in his youth, distributed them according to the weight of their riders, and every one of those riders knew how to get the most out of the beasts without saddle-friction or strain.

Tom rode Malinka. Chapin had offered him his own thoroughbred, and it seemed absurd to choose a rough Mexican broncho of fifteen hands in preference to a creature with a race-horse for a sire, standing nearly seventeen.

But Tom was not without experience, and he knew his mare. They had been together nearly every day all through the hard winter-time. He had found her power of endurance was marvellous. She was well up to his weight, and behind this, and beyond, there was love between them. Hunks had gone from him in his hour of need; killed probably. Sadie he dared not think about consciously, lest he should go mad too soon, though his heart was really full of nothing else, and ever must be while he lived.

Malinka alone was left to him. He had told her about it while saddling up, and believed she knew what he was going to do. She had neighed fiercely, shaken her head with gleaming teeth, and the whites of her eyes shone under the moon. Malinka had loved Sadie more than anyone else; more, perhaps, even than Hunks. It was right and fitting that she should go now.

The cool night air, and the quick motion of his horse reduced the fever in Tom's blood, and brought his brain, whirling and seething with its bitter rage, to something more nearly normal. The quest did not seem so hopeless now that they were away. He glanced round upon his men after a time and felt a glow of pride. There was no separation here between white and red. They mingled freely together. White Cat and Bowker were side by side and spoke to each other several times. Kit Brent and Long-Leg,

too, had struck up an acquaintance. Brotherhood had come at last, if only among a few.

Near Tom, but not too near, though never far away, rode Jeremiah Mush, with a companion whom Tom had not wanted, but could not find it in his heart to deny—Lieutenant Groot.

The officer had appealed to the colonel, and as he was a fine rider and owned one of the best horses there, Tom could not refuse his offer. He was touched, too, by the way it was made.

"I played the fool on you," he had said. "I ask you now to let me be a man."

But no one, not even Miah or White Cat himself, spoke to Tom when they were on the way. Great love and friendship turn the roughest hearts to gold, and teach consideration to those who had never consciously known the meaning of the word. The cowboys, after a glance now and then at the white, drawn face, would turn away; and the Indians never seemed to look at him at all.

The night passed. Dawn came, the sun rose, and Tom called a halt. He wanted no rest himself. He did not feel that he could ever willingly eat or sleep again. There were only two things he wished to do; drive on at the fastest pace it was safe to let Malinka take, and then meet Badger Head. But he thought of the others, and they all rested by a stream at the foot of a range of hills.

Though the halt was only to be a short one, all got to work upon the horses. They were unsaddled, rubbed down, watered, and then picketed and allowed to roll and stretch themselves on the grass, while their riders ate sparingly of the food they had brought in their pockets, and stretched themselves full-length. But there were some who took no rest. White Cat, with several Apaches, sprang away at a quick run, and began casting over the ground for half a mile and more. A shout from one of them told of news, and the rest ran to him. Then they raced back to camp.

The trail of Badger Head and his men had been picked up. It was fairly fresh, and the trackers, after consultation, said they judged it to be not more than ten hours old. The rescue-party were gaining ground very fast.

There was no resting after that. In five minutes horses were resaddled, and everybody had remounted, but one. But a rider was not there—an Indian—and White Cat, in answer to Tom's question, said it was Long-Leg. They were about to look for him when someone caught sight of a figure some way down the bed of the stream. He was standing perfectly still, gazing at something at his feet. White Cat shouted, but he did not move, and Tom saw him kneel and lower his head to the ground. Then, as if he had suddenly come to life, he sprang up and came tearing back at full speed. Not a word did he say to anyone, but after he had mounted he came behind Tom and touched him on the arm.

"Here with me," he said. "Quick! You alone, and see what I have found!"

They raced together to the spot, which was something out of the way, the others going on. Tom was utterly mystified. The man was plainly excited, and though his face was set in hard lines, there was the ghost of a smile on his lips. They reached the place. Long-Leg leaped down and pointed with his finger to a little patch of soft ground near the water. Tom could see nothing for a moment. Then he knew. It was the print of a dog's foot.

"Hunks! See—Hunks!" the Indian cried. "Me look and look and look. No kind of man, me say, can kill our God-Pup."

Tom was as excited as Long-Leg, but desperately puzzled still.

"Hunks it is. But why? He can't have gone with Badger Head!"

"Huh! Go after him! Hunks hear White Cat tell Black Hawk all. Hunks love Yellow Flower. He know. So! He hunt now—and when Hunks hunt—"

Long-Leg gave the loud, toneless Indian chuckle.

"Always Hunks kill—always!"

The news had a tremendous effect upon Tom, but when the cowboys heard it they were inclined to scoff.

"Why, the poor dawg can't never run a hundred mile!" Kit Brent exclaimed. "Sides, how could he know? A great feller, I grant you, is old Hunks, but he ain't a wolf. Them Indians think him a devil—that's how! I believe myself the tracks will be big coyote's—them's just the same as dogs."

Tom did not argue the point. He thought Kit might be right; but it was so great a possibility. As for the Indians, they would not listen to any doubt whatever.

"Me know more of trails," Long-Leg said to Tom, for now the ice had been broken and he dared to talk. "when me a papoose, than Kit in his life. No mistake dog. He has hair between toes. Hunks go two hundred mile if he

want. He not run all the time, but like us take rests. He drinking water there—you see!"

But whether Long-Leg was right or wrong, the thought that Hunks might be long ahead made all the difference. Gradually but steadily Tom quickened his pace. After a time he spoke to Sandy Bowker.

"How far have we come?"

"About fifty miles—half-way. What's in your mind?"

"I see some of the ponies are tiring. I think we'd better split up. Those who are fresh, push on; the others go more slowly."

Sandy scratched his head.

"It's a risk. The Bucks say there's far more than fifty in Badger Head's bunch. No ten of us is equal to a spurt worth a maverick calf. Better hold together, I should say."

But though he said it the little totoman was sure it would not be. He saw the steel glint in Tom's eyes, and knew just what that meant. Tom called a halt.

"Boys," he said, "I am going faster. But I won't have any ptering out among you. I'll take White Cat, Long-Leg, and a few more with me. The rest follow under Sandy. You will understand, I know. Kitten, pick your men."

There were growls at this. All wanted to press on, but it was finally settled as Tom wished. So it came about that Tom and White Cat and a dozen Apaches, the lightest and keenest, chosen by White Cat, went forward at a pace that had not been tried yet. It was grim work. The spring weather had come with a rush. There were showers of heavy rain from time to time, and the ground was often very soft. But Tom felt no weariness. The restlessness to get on was growing upon him.

Long-Leg's discovery had excited him far more than Tom would show before the cowboys. If the old pup had actually gone before, there was hope—real hope. Hunks had been a great deal with White Cat and among the Indians of late. He knew the Apache tongue as well as he knew English. Tom found that Sadie's name had been mentioned several times by both Black Hawk and White Cat during their conference, and that Badger Head's probable design to seize her was discussed in all its details.

White Cat urged these arguments with great force.

"Huh!" he exclaimed, putting his pony to a fast gallop as they went down the slope of a hill, and, boy-like, drawing his tomahawk and brandishing it. "It is so, I tell you. Remember prairie fire! Remember how Hunks save her first of all, and then she beat him!" He gave a wild chuckle. "Dogs and men love those best who beat them. Tom, you beat me at Doggett. My nose feel big still—sometimes. And I beat you there. And we love—ah, we

love each other! Who! Warriors—ough—ough—ough, Whoo-ee-ee-ee-ough!" And he broke into his scout's yell in his excitement, and away they went at double the speed.

But now there came mountainous country, and they had to go carefully. Then their ponies—all except Malinka, who seemed tireless—began to fail, and Tom called a halt once more. He had a struggle to do this. The Apaches, having become excited, were very hard to stop, and would have goaded their animals to death if not restrained.

Tom, however, was adamant, and all rested. It was now late afternoon. The increased speed at which they had travelled since the morning had made a considerable difference. The track of the Badger Head party had grown much fresher. It was a question whether they were more than two hours old. The band would probably be at Calumet by this time, but it was unlikely that they would attack at once. Indians, like all wild creatures, are very cautious when they have to enter enclosed premises. Hope rose high, and now, as they rode, the Indians kept a very sharp look-out. They knew that so experienced a fighter as their late head chief would under no circumstances leave the rear of his party uncovered. Scouts might be met at any time.

The country was prairie again, undulating, not flat. They could not see far ahead. But this scarcely mattered, for every inch of it was familiar to all. They were twenty miles from Servita, not five miles from the old Doggett Ranch.

An idea now came to Tom. The straight way to Calumet was over a range of hills, difficult going in places, but hard ground—a bad track for a number of men on tired horses, but an active pony could do the distance to Calumet in shorter time than over the plains, where, also, it would be necessary to make a considerable detour before long to avoid the raiding party scouts. Malinka was still fairly fresh and could do it; but he would have to go by himself, for the rest were too jaded.

White Cat was dead against the plan, chiefly because it would mean separation from Tom; but he had to agree that it offered the best chance to secure Tom's arrival at Calumet before Badger Head; and, knowing that this must settle it, he said very little. They arranged a code of signals if Tom got in; and then, with tightened cinch and a mouthful of brandy-and-water, Tom was off on the last long stretch to Calumet—alone.

(The young Britisher's anxiety is for Sadie, and he is determined to save her at all costs! There will be another thrilling instalment of this splendid serial next week, chums. Look out for it.)

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