

SPARKLING WITH SPLENDID SCHOOL STORIES!

The GEM 2^D



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THE GREAT STAMP



CHAPTER 1.

Gussy Gets Going!

TOM MERRY whistled a few bars from the "Peanut Vendor" cheerily as he came along the passage in the School House at St. Jim's.

Tom Merry always looked cheerful, but at the present moment, judging by the expression of his sunny face, he seemed unusually satisfied with himself and things generally.

"Hallo, Merry!" said Jack Blake, looking out of Study No. 6 as Tom came by. "Have you lost twopence and found a threepenny-bit?"

"No," said Tom, stopping.

"Then what are you looking so pleased about?"

"I've got a very good idea."

"Whose?"

"Mine," said Tom, laughing. "I say, Blake, it's a really fine, first-rate, ripping idea, and I was coming to speak to you about it."

Blake looked at Tom Merry suspiciously.

"I know your ideas," he remarked. "They make me tired. I've told you before, Tom Merry, that we're getting rather fed-up with your ideas."

"But this is a ripper."

"Is it anything up against the New House?" said Blake, who had at least one feeling in common with Tom Merry—a keen desire to take a rise out of the New House.

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"Well, yes, in a way. The Merry Hobby Club would take the shine out of Figgins & Co. a bit, I should think!" exclaimed Tom.

"The what?"

"The Merry Hobby Club."

"Didn't know there was such a thing."

"Well, there isn't, fathead; but there's going to be."

"Oh, I see! Now, let it be understood, first of all, that I'm not going to have a hand in any more alliances with Figgins & Co. Your triple alliance idea nearly turned my hair grey. And no more amateur theatricals for me, either."

"This is a different sort of thing altogether," said Tom Merry. "If you don't want to take a hand, Blake—"

"Oh, you can come in and explain, anyway!" said Blake.

Tom Merry walked into Study No. 6.

Blake pushed a chair towards him, and Herries looked up from his prep. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was too busy to look up. He had a velvet pad in his hand, and was polishing his latest silk topper; and, of course, an occupation like that banished all minor matters from the mind of Arthur Augustus.

"Hallo!" said Herries hospitably.

"He's got an idea," said Blake. "We're going to give him a hearing. We don't promise anything, mind you, Tom Merry. We've learned to be awfully careful about your ideas."

"Well, just listen," said Tom good-humouredly.

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MERRY & Co.

By
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"Pway excuse me for a few minutes," said Arthur Augustus. "I am extwemely busy just now, and I am afwaid that I cannot give you my attention, deah boy!"

"What are you busy about, Gussy?"

"There was a showah of wain," said D'Arcy, "and my hat was quite wetted, and I am afwaid that it will suff. considewably, and——"

"Oh, blow your hat!"

"You are wude, Tom Mewwy. Pway take a seat and keep quiet till I have finished with my toppah, and then I shall be extwemely pleased to hear what you have to say, deah boy. I'm afwaid it's not poss to give you any attention just now."

"Oh, don't worry about your topper!" said Blake. He picked up a cricket stump and skilfully twitched the hat out of D'Arcy's hands with the sharp end of it. "I'll look after your topper, Gussy!"

"Blake, don't be such a wuff bwute—you will damage my hat!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, rushing to the rescue of his beloved tile.

"Now sit down, Gussy, and be quiet."

"Give me my toppah!"

"Rats!"

"Blake, I shall become weally angwy, and pwobably punch your nose, if you do not instantly return me my toppah!"

"More rats!"

D'Arcy made an attempt to reach the hat, but Blake had it on the end of the stump, and as he held the stump high in the air, the topper was quite out of D'Arcy's reach. With his left hand Blake pushed back the excited Arthur Augustus.

"Now, Gussy, sit down and behave yourself, or very likely the topper will get damaged."

"I wefuse! I distinctly wefuse to sit down till you have westored to me my toppah," said D'Arcy. "I insist upon the immediate westowation of my toppah!"

And he tried to drag down Blake's hand that held the cricket stump. He succeeded. Down came the stump, and the hat slid off the end of it to the floor, and Blake and D'Arcy made a simultaneous jump to recover it. Naturally enough, they collided, and Blake staggered against the table and Arthur Augustus sat down on the hat. The swell of the School House gave a wail of anguish as he felt it crumple beneath his weight.

"Oh, my hat—my hat! My new toppah!"

He jumped up.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake. "It looks more like a concertina now, Gussy! Now you see what comes of being obstinate!"

"Blake, I no longah wegard you as a fwieud!"

"Oh, Gussy, don't be so cwuel! I'll buy you a new topper. I've got three-and-ninepence to spare, and——"

"Thwee-and-ninepence!" howled Gussy. "You are insultin'! I nevah pay less than a guinea and a half for a toppah!"

"Is that so?" asked Blake, with an air of astonishment. "I thought it was one of Gunn's hats—all one price, three-and-ninepence!"

This was too much for Gussy. He was usually the most patient of mortals, and, as a rule, nothing disturbed his aristocratic calm, his manner having that repose which stamps the caste of Vere de Vere. But to have it brutally hinted that he paid only three-and-nine

for his silk topper was enough to make the blood of all the Vere de Veres boil in his veins.

"Blake, I have wegarded you as a fwieud!" he exclaimed. "Now I have no choice but to inflict a thwashing upon you!"

"Oh, don't, don't, Gussy! Spare my tender years!" gasped Blake.

D'Arcy was brandishing his fists in an extremely war-like way and rushing upon his erstwhile chum, bent upon summary vengeance. The crushed and mangled silk topper seemed to cry aloud for vengeance, as a novelist would say, and D'Arcy was not one to let such a cry pass unheeded. Blake dodged behind Herries, with Arthur Augustus after him, and he gave Herries an accidental shove as he went by which sent the ink splattering from his pen all over his paper.

"You silly ass!" roared Herries. "See what you've done!"

"Can't be helped," panted Blake. "It's Gussy's fault; he's going to give me a thwashing, and I must get out of his way."

But Herries' exercise was spoiled, and Herries, who was a slow worker, was annoyed. He picked up the inkpot and jerked the contents towards Blake. But

Blake was gone in a flash, and D'Arcy, hot on his tracks, received the stream of ink in his left ear. He gave a fearful yell.

"Ha, ha, ha!" shouted Tom Merry.

Blake dodged behind the hero of the Shell.

"Keep him off!" he gasped, shoving Tom towards D'Arcy. "Keep him off!

He's dangerous!"

"Hewwies, you have dwenched me! You have wuined my collah!"

"Serve you right!" said Herries.

"You wude boundah!"

"Give him that thwashing instead of me, Gussy," said Blake from behind Tom Merry. "You don't know how nervous you're making me."

D'Arcy made a frantic rush at Blake. His aristocratic countenance was smeared over with ink, and his manners had less than ever of the Vere de Vere repose. Blake skilfully twisted Tom Merry in the way, and the hero of the Shell received a terrific thump on the chest which was intended for Blake.

"There!" said D'Arcy, blindly hitting out again and again. "You howwid boundah! Tom Mewwy, get out of the way! I am hittin' you all the time! I insist upon you immediately getting out of the way!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake.

Tom Merry seized the belligerent Augustus and twisted him to the floor, and sat upon his chest.

"Now, Gussy," he said, "are you going to be quiet?"

"No," exclaimed D'Arcy—"no, certainly not, Tom Mewwy! I wefuse to be quiet until I have given Blake a thwashing!"

"You silly bounder——"

"Pway do not use those extwemely offensive expwessions. I am not accustomed to being addressed as a silly boundah!"

"Make it pax, Gussy."

"I wefuse."

"Ruffle his hair," said Blake. "It takes him ten minutes to brush it nicely, and he'll agree to anything if you ruffle it!"

"Let my hair alone!" yelled D'Arcy. "I refuse to have my hair wuffed!"

"Will you make it pax, then?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

So Arthur Augustus was allowed to rise. Having made it "pax," honour prevented D'Arcy renewing the conflict, but he gave Blake a withering glance.

"Oh, don't look so killing, Gussy!" implored Blake. "There's a sponge there. Clean your countenance, kid, and listen to what Tom Merry has got to say. He's got an idea—a pretty rotten one, I think, as he says it's his own—and we've promised to give him a hearing."

"Thank you," said Tom. "Hallo, kid, what do you want?"

A curly-headed youngster belonging to the Third Form at St. Jim's was looking in at the door with considerable interest. His name was Curly Gibson. He nodded coolly to Tom Merry.

"I was only looking in to see the fun," he remarked.

"Well, now you've seen it, bunk!"

"What's the idea?"

"What idea?"

"The one you were talking about."

"Something that doesn't concern youngsters in the infants' Form," said Tom Merry severely. "Cut off with you, before I box your ears!"

And he shut the door on the inquisitive Curly.

"And now," said Blake, "expound the idea."

CHAPTER 2.

The Merry Hobby Club.

TOM MERRY cleared his throat with a little cough. There was nothing in his throat that wanted clearing, as a matter of fact, but he had observed that the Head always gave that little cough before making a speech, and he had always considered it effective.

"Ah—h'm——"

Blake gave him a look of friendly solicitude.

"Anything the matter with your throat, Merry?" he asked.

"No," said Tom, blushing a little. "I——"

"I've got some cough lozenges if you like——"

"My throat's all right," said Tom. "I——"

"What were you grunting about, then?"

"I wasn't," said Tom. "Do let me get on. Now, kids——"

"Who are you calling kids?"

I mean chaps. I've got a really striking idea. I meant that the alliance with Figgins & Co. didn't work out as well as I expected, and the amateur theatricals were a bit of a fizzle. But this is a better thing altogether. You'll admit that every boy ought to have a hobby."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Gussy's hobby is fancy waistcoats and silk hats," said Blake.

"Oh, weally, Blake——"

"My idea is to start a hobby club," said Tom Merry. "I've talked it over with Manners. If you three came into it, we shall be five, quite enough to start a club with. We can let the other kids into it afterwards."

Blake looked thoughtful.

"It's not a bad idea," he remarked. "We'll call it the School House Hobby Club——"

"That won't do, as there won't be any seniors in it."

"The Study No. 6 Hobby Club, then."

"But we're not going to meet here. I've asked Mr. Railton to let us have the empty study for a club-room, and he's agreed."

"What the dickens do you want to call it, then?"

"Well, I think the name of the founder ought to be perpetuated in the title of the club," Tom remarked modestly. "The Merry Hobby Club is what I was thinking of."

"Well, perhaps that's only fair," admitted Blake. "You want me to be president?"

"No, not exactly. I was thinking of being president myself."

"Yes, I might have expected that. The cheek of some chaps is simply astounding. They call you and Manners the Terrible Two, but I can't see anything terrible about you except your nerve. I admit that's terrible."

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"Well, hang it, surely a chap is entitled to be president of his own club."

"Not if he named it after himself as well. You can be president if you'll call it the Blake Hobby Club."

"Now, you must admit that's sheer nonsense, Blake."

"Nothing of the kind."

"We've got to come in somewhere," said Herries emphatically.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We can settle that afterwards," said Tom Merry pacifically. "The question is, are you all agreeable to coming into the club?"

"Oh, yes, we think it's a good idea, and I wonder how you came by it!" Blake replied. "We'll all back up the hobby club."

"Then come along to the meeting."

"Where's the meeting?"

"In Study B, the empty study. Railton told me we could have it till it was wanted, which won't be till a new fellow comes to St. Jim's, I expect."

"Right-ho, we'll come."

Tom Merry went to the door.

"Then we'll expect you in ten minutes," he said.

"Right you are."

Study No. 6 made haste to get ready for the meeting. D'Arcy washed the ink from his face and donned a clean collar, and Herries finished his preparation, and Blake kindly finished writing out an imposition for him. As he said, the master of the Fourth was too short-sighted to notice the difference in the handwriting, and time had to be saved. Then the three went along to the empty study.

"Hallo! They're getting to business already," said Blake.

Upon the door was painted, in large white letters:

"CLUB-ROOM."

Blake opened the door. The Terrible Two had certainly got to business already. A desk had been brought into the study, and was standing in one corner, and four chairs were arranged in a row. Facing them was an easy-chair, evidently intended for the seat of the president of the Merry Hobby Club. Tom Merry was sitting in it, looking extremely important, but he rose and made a graceful bow as Blake and his chums appeared in the doorway.

"Come in, gentlemen!" he said, with dignity.

The gentlemen came in, grinning.

"Hallo!" said Blake. "Here we are again! This makes a nobby club-room."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We can be quite comfy here. But you're sitting in my chair, Tom Merry."

"This is the president's chair."

"Yes, I thought so."

"Well, I'm the president."

"Rats!"

"If you're going to start by raising a lot of frivolous objections, Blake——"

"I'm not! I've no objection to being president. It's you who are raising objections. Let us put it to the vote."

"Not much! You're three to two. Look here, I'm president and Manners is vice-president. That's settled."

"Then," said Blake, "I'm managing director, and Herries is chairman, and D'Arcy is superintendent."

"Well, I don't see any objection to that," said Tom Merry, after a moment's thought. "We'll consider it settled, and I'll put the names down. Just sign your names on the roll, kids."

"Who are you calling kids?"

"I mean chaps. Sign your names here."

Five names were inscribed in the books of the Merry Hobby Club, with the respective rank and office attached to each. The list certainly looked a little unique:

"THE MERRY HOBBY CLUB,

Tom Merry, President.
Henry Manners, Vice-President.
Jack Blake, Managing Director,
George Herries, Chairman.
A. A. D'Arcy, Superintendent."

"The only thing is," said Blake thoughtfully, "that some of these authorities might clash."

"Oh, we shall have to give and take, of course!" said Tom Merry. "Now that we've settled this satisfactorily, the next question to be considered is, what is the special hobby under the patronage of the club to be?"

"Oh, of course, that's simple enough!" said Blake. "The managing director decides——"

"What rot!" said Tom. "If anybody decides, it's the president."

"Stuff!" said Herries. "If you knew anything about clubs, you'd know that it was for the chairman to give the casting vote."

"Weally, you are w'ong," said D'Arcy. "What's the good of being supewintendent if you don't supewintend anythin', deah boys? Now, my idea is that the hobby club should take up stamp-collectin'—philately, you know, deah boys. My stamp-album——"

"Philately be blowed!" said Manners hotly. "Who

"But I have been welflectin'——"

"Don't tell us the result of your reflections!"

"You are wude, Mannahs. I have an idea——"

"Rats!"

"I've been thinking that——"

"Ring off, Gussy!"

"That it would be a good idea—a weally and twuly good idea——"

"Shut up!"

"For each membah of the club to follow his own particulah hobby, iwvespective of the othahs," said Arthur Augustus. "There is no weason why we should all have the same hobby, deah boys."

"Bravo, Aubrey!" exclaimed Blake, slapping him on the back. "That's a good idea, and I never thought of it."

"With your bwains, Blake, you natuwally would not think of it."

"Of course, it's a good idea," said Tom Merry. "We'll



Herries picked up the Inkpot and jerked the contents at Blake. D'Arcy, chasing Blake, gave a fearful yell as he received the stream of ink in his left ear!

wants to collect rotten old stamps? Photography is the thing, of course. My camera——"

"I don't agree with either of you," said Blake. "Carpentry is the thing. My tool-chest——"

"Rats to you and your tool-chest!" exclaimed Herries. "Egg-collecting is the thing, of course. My collection——"

"You don't agree—that's pretty plain," said the president. "So you'd better adopt my idea, which is music. My concertina——"

"Rats!" said the managing director.

"Stuff!" said the vice-president.

"Rot!" said the chairman and the superintendent together.

Tom Merry scratched his curly head.

"We'd better put it to the vote, then," he exclaimed.

It was put to the vote accordingly.

But as each enthusiast voted for his own hobby that did not solve the difficulty.

"Weally," exclaimed D'Arcy, struck by a bright idea—"weally, deah boys——"

"Oh, dry up, Gussy! We don't want to hear any more about your stamp-album."

all help each other, and meet in the club-room, and keep our things here, you see, and compare notes. I don't see why the hobby club should not be a howling success."

"I don't know," said Blake thoughtfully. "If you start playing your concertina in the club-room it may lead to ructions."

"Oh, play the game!" said Manners. "If Tom Merry puts up with your carpentry, you'll have to stand his concertina. That's only fair."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I can give you some jolly good selections on the concertina," said Tom Merry modestly. "Since I started practising I've attracted a lot of attention in the House."

"I know you have," said Blake. "I've heard fellows say they want to imbrue their hands in your gore when you're playing it!"

"Some chaps have no ear for music. If you heard me play the 'Peanut Vendor'—— Why, you did hear it! I was playing it when you looked into my study yesterday."

"Was that the 'Peanut Vendor'?" asked Blake, in astonishment.

"Yes, of course it was."

"My hat! I thought it was the 'Dead March in Saul.'"

"Look here, Blake, listen to me—"

"Not if you start the concertina! It's asking too much!"

"I shall play the giddy concertina when I like! Still, that isn't everything. I'm going in for poetry as well."

"I say, you won't want to recite any of it, will you?" asked Herries nervously.

"I'll recite what I like!" exclaimed the president of the hobby club excitedly. "I say, Manners, just strike up the accompaniment on the comb, and I'll sing them my last parody."

"Right-ho!" said Manners.

He produced comb and paper, and began to buzz the tune of the well-known chorus of the "Peanut Vendor."

Jack Blake skilfully twitched the comb and paper from his hands.

"Oh, shut up!" he said. "Life isn't worth living while we have that fearful row, Manners!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Look here, Blake, don't you interfere with the vice-president of the hobby club!"

"The managing director has the right to interfere with everything!"

"Well, as president, I order you to shut up!" said Tom Merry.

"As managing director, I decline to shut up."

"And as chairman," said Herries, "I uphold the objection of Blake!"

"And as supewintendent," said D'Arcy, "I wish to remark—"

"Oh, rats!"

"Let's put it to the vote!" exclaimed Blake. "Is life worth living if we have to hear Tom Merry and Manners make a row?"

"No!" shouted Herries and D'Arcy.

"The majority are against you, Merry," said Blake. "This is where you shut up!"

"This is where I punch your head if you are not more civil!"

"Well, I should really like to see you do that, Merry!"

"I'll jolly soon—"

The door of the club-room opened, and Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, put his head in.

"What are you kids rowing about?"

"We're not rowing," said Tom Merry. "We're holding a friendly meeting."

Kildare laughed.

"Well, you're making plenty of noise about it. What are you doing in this study at all, by the way?"

"We've got Mr. Railton's permission to use it as a club-room."

"A what?"

"A club-room. Can't you see the name on the door?"

Kildare looked at the inscription in white paint on the oak panels.

"Ah! I see. And what kind of a club are you? A savage club, I should think, to judge by the way you are behaving!"

"We're the Merry Hobby Club."

"Well, you'll have to be a little less merry, or you'll get fired out of your club-room," said the captain of St. Jim's; and he withdrew and closed the door.

The members of the hobby club looked at one another.

"We don't want to get turned out of the club-room," said Tom Merry. "Come, let's see if we can't pull together without such a lot of chipping. I'll set the example. It's time you Fourth Form bounders learned how to behave yourselves!"

"What about you kids of the Shell? I—"

"Peace," said the president of the hobby club, with a wave of the hand. "The first meeting of the club is now at an end, and this is where we break up. Good-night! Bunk!"

And the hobbyists went their respective ways.

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CHAPTER 3.

Going Strong!

THE Merry Hobby Club, in spite of the somewhat stormy nature of the first meeting, proved to be a success. The hobbyists, dissimilar as their pursuits were, found that they had many tastes in common, and they found it very convenient to have the club-room in which to meet and compare notes.

And it was surprising how great an impulse the formation of the club gave to the various hobbies. Manners turned up in all sorts of unexpected places with his camera taking snapshots of everybody and everything. He took Kildare kicking a goal, and Montieth pulling the ear of Fatty Wynn. He took the German master having a nap with a handkerchief over his face in the sun, and Sefton smoking a forbidden cigarette in the toolshed.

There was something of a difficulty with the club when Manners wanted to cover up the window of the club-room with a red blind, and turn it into a dark-room for developing his films.

Manners said that a member of the hobby club couldn't be expected to do his developing in a cupboard under the stairs when there was a club-room to be had, but the other members were down on the idea from the start.

"How do you think I can awwange my stamps in the dark?" D'Arcy asked. "I keep my album here, and I want—"

"Blow your stamps! That's all rot, you know!"

"In my opinion, Mannahs, your photogwaphy is all wot!"

"Exactly," said Blake; "and I think you're both asses. If it were carpentering it would be a bit more sensible."

The end of it was that the club-room wasn't turned into a dark-room, but at the same time Manners insisted upon Blake's carpentry work being barred there, and he had his way.

D'Arcy was just as enthusiastic about his stamp album as Manners was about his camera, or Blake about his toolchest.

The swell of the School House was well provided with pocket-money, and so he was able to make a really fine collection. He hunted all over St. Jim's for fellows who had rare specimens to sell.

"If I could only get a twopenny green Ceylon, 1863," said D'Arcy, "I should be happy. I am weally in want of it vewy much."

"There's a kid in the Third got one," said Blake. "That chap Curly."

D'Arcy shook his head.

"My deah boy, the stamp I speak of is worth thirty shillings, and I weally don't think that little Gibson has money enough to own one like that."

"Chaps often get stamps off old letters," said Blake wisely. "I knew a chap who couldn't afford to pay his cricket subscription, and had a stamp worth eight pounds in his album. I'd have a look at Curly's stamp if I were you, Gussy, if that's all you want to make you happy."

Blake was busy making a chair in Study No. 6. The study required an additional chair for visitors, and Blake's hobby was being turned to good account by providing one. Herries said that when the chair was finished it had better be kept for visitors, as he wouldn't care to sit on it. But Herries was always sceptical.

Knock, knock!

"You are makin' a gweat wow, Blake," said D'Arcy. "Do you weally think that young Gibson—"

Knock, knock!

"I say, Blake, do you weally—"

Knock, knock!

"Blake, is it necessary to make all that wow?" asked Arthur Augustus plaintively. "I think that if I were a carpenter I could make a chair without all that wow."

"Must knock the nails in, stupid."

"Why don't you use screws?"

"Because I—because I don't! You know nothing about carpentering, Gussy. A good carpenter always uses a hammer and nails, and knocks nails into everything. If you bother me any more, I'll knock some into you!"

"But, weally—"

Knock, knock!

"You should not weally make this noise in the study, Blake. I don't make any noise with my stamp-collecting. Weally—"

"Scat!"

Little Gibson of the Third put his head in at the door.

"I say, D'Arcy."

The swell of the School House looked at him.

"What do you want, deah boy?"

"I hear you want a green Ceylon, 1863?"

"Yaas, wathah."

"Well, I've got one."

"Have you, weally? I should like to see it. Baker of

the Sixth has one, and I was thinking of twying to buy it off him."

"He would want thirty bob for it," said Curly. "I asked him."

"Well, it is worth thirty bob."

"You can have mine for ten. I got it for eight bob myself, but I'm stony broke, and you can have it cheap. If it's worth thirty, you'll be getting a bargain."

"I'd like to see it first, Curly."

Knock, knock, knock!

"Blake, shut up that extwemely loud knockin'!"

"Oh, you shut up with your silly stamps!"

"Come to the Third Form room," said Curly. "I'll show it you there."

"Very well."

D'Arcy accompanied Curly to the Third Form room, leaving Blake still hammering away industriously in Study No. 6.

At St. Jim's the Third Form did not have separate studies, like the Fourth and the Shell, and the Third Form room was a noisy and crowded place. Little Curly opened his locker and produced a little ragged album, which he opened with much importance.

"There you are," he said, pointing to a stamp. "There's the joker."

Arthur Augustus looked at the stamp.

The swell of St. Jim's was by way of being a connoisseur in philately, and he knew much more about stamps than the youngster of the Third.

He surveyed the stamp through his eyeglass and shook his head.

"Ain't it the one you want?" exclaimed Curly. "What's the matter with it? It's a green Ceylon, 1863, and a twopenny."

"It isn't the cowwect gween," said D'Arcy. "That is the sca-gween vawiety, deah boy, and it is worth only five or six shillings. I have one of those. What I want is the emerald gween stamp of the same issue."

"Oh, rats!" said Curly. "Green is green!"

"Yes, and you are gween, too, if you gave eight bob for that stamp!" said D'Arcy.

And the swell of the School House walked away.

"Rats!" murmured Curly. "I believe it's all rot about his emerald green. I'll see if I can get a look at Baker's stamp."

But Arthur Augustus was already on the track of that stamp.

To his great joy, he found Baker of the Sixth in a mood to sell, and after a visit to the New House, to which Baker belonged, the swell of St. Jim's returned in triumph with the coveted stamp in his possession.

He brought it into Study No. 6 in triumph.

Blake, fortunately, had finished the chair.

"This is all right," Jack Blake observed, with satisfaction. "We shall have something to show at the meeting to-night in the club-room."

The Terrible Two were not unprovided, either.

Manners had been very busy with his camera, as we have said, and Tom Merry, having given up the concertina—under pressure from fellow-members—had taken up fret-work instead, and was progressing very well with it.

The club-room was looking quite comfortable.

Various articles of furniture had been added, and the property of the members filled up a great deal of room.

D'Arcy's stamp album occupied a place of honour on the table.

Nobody except D'Arcy took much interest in philately, but it was known that the album and its contents were worth a great deal of money, and so the hobby club were rather proud of it.

Tom Merry had drawn up a list of rules, with the assistance of his fellow-members, and he had a new one to add to the list.

"I propose, gentlemen of the hobby club," he remarked, "that each member shall be restricted to five minutes in talking about his own hobby. The rest of the club shall listen as patiently as possible for that space of time."

"I second," said Manners promptly.

"I third," said Blake.

"And I fourth!" exclaimed Herries.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus.

So the resolution was passed unanimously, and the five-minute rule became law in the club-room of the Merry Hobby Club.

Tom Merry had provided himself with a president's bell, to ring whenever the club had to be called to order, or whenever the five-minute rule was transgressed. It was a large-sized bicycle bell, and it made a fearful noise when the president of the hobby club rang it.

At the third transgression of the five-minute rule Tom buzzed the bell loudly, and an irate senior came up and kicked open the door of the club-room.

"If you kids don't keep quiet," he said, "we shall come and slaughter you! Take that as a fair warning."

The president's bell was silent for the rest of that meeting.

"Fellow-membahs," said Arthur Augustus, "you will be vewy glad to hear that I have succeeded in purchasin' a gween Ceylon twopenny, 1863—"

"Very glad," said Blake, "and gladder still if you will leave off talking about it!"

"Don't be wude, Blake. My stamp—"

"Oh, I'm off!"

"I think you are—off your wocker!" said D'Arcy indignantly. "I weally cannot compwehend how a fellah can waste his time making an old chair that nobody can sit down on, instead of employing his leisuah in stamp-collecting like a sensible human being."

"Can't anybody sit down on it?" exclaimed Blake. "Why, that chair would bear the weight of Fatty Wynn!"

"It looks a bit rocky, as a matter of fact," said Tom Merry, surveying Blake's handiwork in a thoughtful sort of way.

"Yaas, wathah! It is decidedly wocky!"

"Stuff!" said Blake. "I'll just show you! What do you silly kids know about carpentry, I'd like to know?"

And Blake plumped himself down in the chair defiantly. There was a crash!

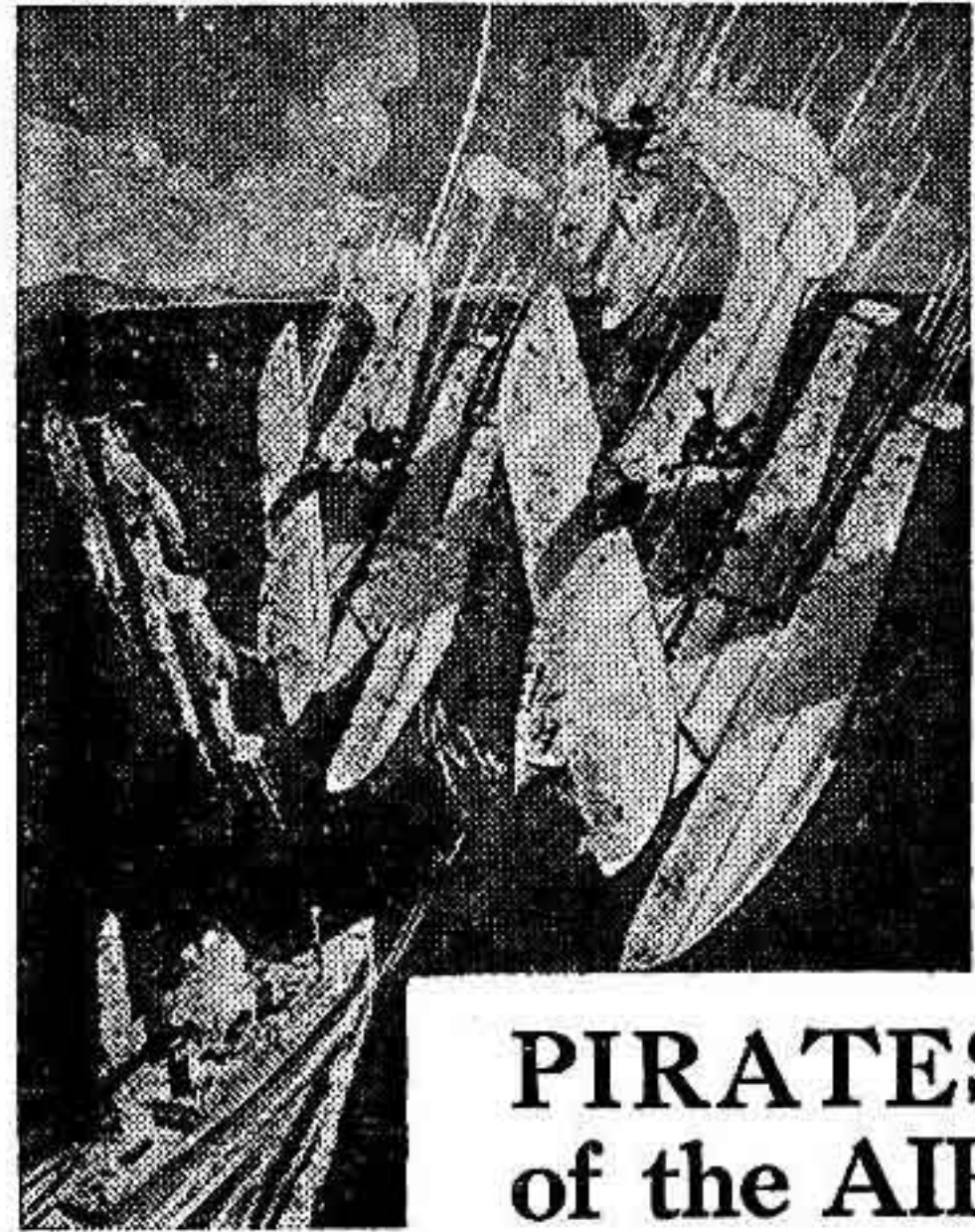
The next moment Blake was sitting on the floor, with the ruins of the chair around and underneath him.

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-what was that?" he gasped blankly.

Tom Merry gave a roar.

"Ha, ha, ha! You are a giddy carpenter, Blake, and no mistake!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Arthur Augustus. "You have



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wrecked ruined that chair, Blake—you have weally! Ha, ha, ha!"

Blake picked himself up.

The chair was certainly in pieces, and Blake picked up the remains rather sheepishly.

"I suppose it wanted a few more nails," he said.

"You have put about a pound of nails in it already, to judge by the number that are sticking out of the fragments!" remarked Tom Merry.

"Oh, what do you know about carpentry?" said Blake.

"That chair was a jolly good one, and it ought not to have busted. I shall have to shove in some more nails, that's all."

And Blake departed from the club-room with the remains of his chair under his arm.

CHAPTER 4.

Curly's Curious Behaviour.

THE meeting of the Merry Hobby Club had broken up, and the club-room was in darkness. It was nearing bed-time for the juniors of St. Jim's. The gas was turned half down in the corridor, and in the gloom of the passage a dark form might have been seen stealing towards the club-room.

As it paused for a moment outside the door the face of Curly Gibson of the Third Form was revealed. The youngster paused and looked up and down the passage. No one was in sight.

Curly was looking extremely nervous. His chubby face was quite pale as he stood there looking and listening. No sound came from the club-room, and no light appeared under the door, so the Third Form junior was soon satisfied that the hobby club had departed. He silently and cautiously tried the door. It was not locked.

There was property in the study to the value of a good round sum, but it had never occurred to any of the club members that there was need to safeguard it. A thief at St. Jim's was unheard of.

Curly opened the door, with a throb of relief at finding it unlocked. The room within was dark save for a few starbeams filtering in at the window.

Curly stepped inside the room and closed the door behind him. Then there was the scratch of a match and the gas was lighted.

Curly's glance swept round the room and lighted upon the stamp album belonging to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy lying on the table. He stepped quickly towards it. In a moment he had it open, and was turning the pages with rapid fingers. The glimmer of a green stamp caught his eye, and his finger was upon it in a moment.

"That must be it."

Curly looked at the stamp. It was one of Ceylon 1863 issue, green in colour, and of the face value of twopence. Upon the shade of green depended its value, and according to that it would fetch either six shillings or thirty in the philatelic market.

Curly looked at the green stamp eagerly. And while he looked at it two pairs of eyes in the quadrangle were looking up at the light in the window.

The Terrible Two had gone for a stroll in the quadrangle. They were chatting about Monty Lowther, who was away from school on leave of absence.

Tom Merry was the first to spot the light in the club-room window.

"Hallo, Manners! Look there!" he exclaimed, stopping his chum. "Did you forget to turn off the gas? You were last out."

"No; I turned it off all right," said Manners.

"You know what Mr. Railton said. We could burn the gas for our meetings if we didn't neglect to turn it off when we left the club-room."

"I know, and I was careful."

"Well, it's burning now."

"Perhaps Blake and those kids have gone back for something."

"I don't see why they should; more likely there's some curious boulder poking his nose into the affairs of the hobby club!" exclaimed Tom.

"By Jove!" said Manners. "We'd better look in and see!"

"Rather!"

They hurried into the School House and up the stairs. As they reached the door of the club-room it opened, and a youthful form came out. Tom grasped him by the shoulder.

"Hallo, Curly, you young rascal! What have you been doing in our club-room?"

Curly Gibson looked startled.

"Nothing!" he said.

"Rats! You didn't go in there for nothing!"

"I—I—I—"

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"Keep him there, Manners, while I look round. If he's been up to any tricks we'll boil him in oil."

"I've got him!"

"I haven't done anything, Tom Merry!"

"We'll see."

Curly had turned the gas out. Tom Merry lit it again and looked about the room. Everything appeared to be in order.

"Well, there's nothing upset," said Tom. "It's all right, Manners; you can let him go. If I find you here again, Curly—"

Curly did not wait to hear what he would do in that case, but fled along the corridor as soon as Manners let him go.

"I think I shall take that chap's photo," Manners remarked, as the chums of the Shell walked away from the club-room. "I'm going to make a collection of specimens of every Form at St. Jim's as a souvenir, and Curly is about the best-looking of that gang of inky-fingered fags in the Third."

It was the bed-time of the Third Form, and Curly Gibson had escaped from Manners just in time to join his Form-fellows who boarded in the School House and march up to the dormitory with them.

Manners was the first up of the Shell the next morning.

"Hallo!" said Tom Merry sleepily. "What are you up to? It isn't rising-bell yet."

"'Nother half-hour yet," said Manners. "I'm going out with my camera."

"Rather you than I!"

"It's the early bird that catches the worm," said Manners.

"Blessed if I can see what you want to photograph worms for!" murmured Tom drowsily.

"I don't, ass!"

And Manners walked out of the Shell dormitory with his camera under his arm. It was a lovely morning, and, though the hour was yet early, the sun was high and bright.

Manners sallied forth from the School House, and spent a very pleasant hour abroad, and came back to the School House some ten minutes before breakfast-bell. As he came in he heard a movement in the Third Form room, and, rather surprised to hear any of the "infants" moving so early, he looked into the room. It had one occupant—Curly Gibson.

Manners looked at the Third Form youngster curiously.

Curly was standing at the sunny open window, carefully examining something he had in his hand. What it was Manners could not see. There was a stamp album lying on a desk close to him, so the Shell lad concluded that the youthful philatelist was examining one of his specimens.

Remembering his intention of snapshotting Curly for his collection, Manners made no sound to warn the preoccupied youngster of his presence. He had one film still unused in his camera, and that one he thought he might as well devote to a snap of the curly-headed Third Form youngster. But just as Manners was ready, Curly moved. He laid down the stamp he had been examining, and turned to the album on his desk to open it.

Snap!

Curly gave a jump. So did Manners.

"You little ass!" roared Manners. "What did you want to move for? You've spoiled my film!"

Curly stared at him, his face very red.

"I—I—I didn't see you, Manners!"

"Why couldn't you stop still for a moment, you young duffer?"

"I didn't know you were snapping me."

"Well, you ought to have known!" growled Manners.

"What the dickens are you down early for, kid? You babies don't generally rise till after someone has come along to rout you out of bed if you can help it."

Curly looked confused.

"I woke up!" he explained.

Manners caught sight of a copy of the "Ranger" lying on the desk, and thought he understood.

"I see; you've come down early for a read!" he said.

"Well, I forgive you, though you oughtn't to have moved, if you'd had any sense!"

"How was I to know—"

"Oh, rats! Get along to your breakfast. There's the giddy bell!"

"All right!" said Curly.

He picked up the copy of the "Ranger" and laid it down again. Then he opened and shut the album. All the time his face was growing redder.

Manners, who was turning away, could not help noticing his confusion, and he stopped and looked at the youngster again.

"What's the matter with you, Curly?"

"Nothing!" stammered Curly.

"Then what are you so red about? You look as if you had been caught stealing something!"

Curly gave a gasp.
 "I—I haven't!"
 "Of course you haven't, ass! I never said you had."
 "I—I wish you wouldn't make jokes like that, Manners. It's not nice."
 But Curly's eyes did not meet Manners' glance.
 "You've been up to something, Curly," said Manners seriously. "If you've been playing any tricks in the club-room, I'm sorry for you!"
 "I haven't been there this morning."
 "All the better for you. Why don't you go to your breakfast?"
 "I—I—I'm just going! Don't wait for me!"
 Curly made a show of collecting up his album and his "Ranger," but he was so evidently trying to fill in the time while Manners departed that the elder lad could not fail to notice it.
 He stared at Curly.
 "You want to get rid of me?" he said.
 "I—I don't! I——"
 "What's the giddy secret? You may as well out with it!"
 "There isn't any! I——"
 "I think you're off your rocker!" exclaimed Manners; and he marched off and put his camera in his study and then went to the dining-hall.

There was a crash as Blake plumped himself down in his home-made chair. The next moment he was sitting on the floor with the ruins of the chair around and underneath him.

day. Have I not often impressed upon you the necessity of punctuality?"
 "Yes, sir."
 "And this is the result. What is that you have in your pocket?" asked Mr. Selby.
 "A—a book, sir."
 "Ah! Give it to me!"
 Curly extracted a folded and crumpled copy of the "Ranger" from his breast-pocket, and handed it to the master.
 "You have been reading this?" said Mr. Selby.
 "I—I——"
 "Very well. I am always very pleased to see a love of reading in my boys. It is a sign of an active and inquiring mind. But there is a time for all things. I shall, therefore, keep this book, and return it to you in a week's time. Go to your place!"
 And Curly, looking very crestfallen, returned to his place.



He was just in time to take his place and escape the wrath of Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell.

Curly Gibson was late at the Third Form table. Manners heard him being reprimanded by the master for being late to table. Mr. Selby, the Third Form master, boarded in the School House, and he took the head of the "infants" table. He was a very exact and methodical man, and could forgive anything but unpunctuality.

"Gibson!" he exclaimed, as Curly sneaked into his seat and sat there, hoping against hope to escape detection.

"Yes, sir?"

"Come here!"

Curly rose and approached the master. Mr. Selby gave him a severe glance.

"You are three minutes late!"

"I am sorry, sir!"

"What is the cause of this unpunctuality, Gibson?"

"I—I lost something, sir."

"Indeed! You have lost three minutes. Are you aware that if a day is commenced with unpunctuality it is as good as a day lost. Time once lost can never be regained, Gibson. You will be three minutes late for the rest of the

Mr. Selby put the offending paper in his pocket, and breakfast proceeded.

Manners glanced across at Curly more than once.

The Third Form boy appeared extremely uneasy, and Manners could see that it was not simply the loss of his book that was worrying him.

What was it that Curly Gibson had on his mind?

CHAPTER 5.

A Startling Discovery.

"GENTLEMEN of the hobby club——"

"Here we are again!" said Blake cheerfully, interrupting Tom Merry's eloquence. "Are you going to make a speech, Merry?"

"Don't interrupt!"

"I won't; but remember the rule."

"What rule?"

"The five-minute rule."

And Blake sat down.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus, as he also took his seat.

Herries took out his watch.

"Go on, Tom Merry; I'm timing you!"

The hobby club were meeting once more, and the Terrible Two had been first in the club-room.

Study No. 6 had come in together, fresh from their tea.

"Look here!" said Tom Merry.

"We are looking," said Blake, fixing his eyes in a stony stare upon the president of the hobby club. "Have you got him focused, Herries?"

"Yes."

"And you, Aubrey?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Then you can go ahead, Mr. President. We are looking."

"Don't be an ass, Blake! I want to say—"

"Say anything you like, old chap. I only want you to remember the five-minute rule. That's important. Now let her rip!"

"I've got something important to say."

"Well, you've still nearly four minutes to say it in."

"The vice-president of the club has made a report to me—"

"He ought to have made it to me, as managing director!"

"Rats!" exclaimed Herries. "I'm the chap to receive reports, as chairman!"

"Oh, wats!" said D'Arcy. "What's the good of bein' a supewintendent if—"

"All of you shut up!" said Tom Merry, with a buzz on the bell. "I have received a report from the vice-president. Last evening we discovered a Third Form kid trespassing in the club-room. Now the vice-president reports to me that he has reason to believe that the aforesaid kid has been up to some larks here."

"If he has," said Blake, "we'll slay him!"

"Exactly! But before we proceed to the slaying business we will ascertain if he has done any damage. I can't find anything wrong with my fretwork, and Manners says his photographs are all right."

"I see. We'll have a look round. I've got nothing here but this chair, which I've just brought with me, so that's all right."

"Is it?" said Manners. "Have you shoved another pound of nails in it?"

"My birds' eggs seem to be all serene," said Herries, examining his property. "The kid hasn't been meddling with them, as far as I can see."

"I will look at my album, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus. "Pewhaps the kid was curious to see my stamps, don't you know?"

"Perhaps," agreed Blake. "Mind, Tom Merry, this all comes out of your five minutes. You're not going to start again, saying that you haven't had a fair innings."

"Bai Jove!"

It was a sudden exclamation from Arthur Augustus.

Every eye was turned on the swell of the School House at once. He had opened the album at the Ceylon stamps, and was staring at a vacant place where the stamp purchased of Baker of the Sixth had been mounted. The space was empty! The stamp was gone! The 1863 twopenny green Ceylon had vanished!

"Bai Jove!"

"What's the matter, Gussy?"

"My stamp!"

"Is it damaged?"

"It's gone!"

"Gone?"

"Look for yourself, deah boy!" And Gussy pointed to the empty space where the green Ceylon stamp should have reposed.

The members of the hobby club stared in dismay at it. Tom Merry's face was decidedly solemn.

"Now, Gussy, do you really mean to say that the stamp is gone?"

"My dear fellah, can't you see that it is no longer there?"

"You might have stuck it in the wrong place."

"I saw him put it in," said Blake. "It was there, right enough, yesterday."

"You haven't taken it out again for anything, Gussy?"

"Certainly not, Tom Mewwy."

"Have you opened the album since you were at the last meeting of the hobby club?"

"I haven't touched it."

"You are quite sure upon that point?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Tom Merry looked round upon the serious faces of the hobbyists.

"I say, this is rotten!" he remarked.

"Extwemely wotten!" exclaimed D'Arcy. "I gave Bakah thirty shillings for that stamp, deah boys, and it is weally too awfully wotten for anythin' to—"

"Oh, blow your old stamp!" said Tom Merry. "I'm not thinking of that."

"I gave Bakah—"

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"I'm thinking of more serious things than a stamp."

"But I gave Bakah—"

"It looks as if there has been a theft," said Tom Merry. "It's a beastly thing to say, I know. But the stamp has gone, hasn't it?"

"The stamp is weally and twuly gone, and I gave Bakah—"

"And if it's gone it must have been taken."

"Where do you learn to figure things out like that, Merry?" asked Blake, with interest.

"Don't rot, Blake. This is a serious matter. Young Curly of the Third was here, nosing about, last night."

"It does look suspicious."

"Can he have taken it?"

"I should never have suspected him of stealing."

"Fellows who have hobbies sometimes yield to temptations to get hold of some article," said Tom Merry. "I mean, fellows who wouldn't steal a pin in the ordinary way. It's possible that young Gibson boned the stamp to shove in his collection. It's possible, though, that he's simply taken it away because he was curious."

"What's to be done, then?"

"We must see Curly," said Manners. "It's no good trying to get out of the fact that Curly has taken the stamp. The question is, why he took it and what he has done with it."

Tom Merry nodded.

"Exactly! Now, the stamp was worth thirty shillings, and is too valuable to be lost—"

D'Arcy broke in:

"Oh, nevah mind that, Tom Mewwy. I gave Bakah thirty shillings for it, but I would wathah lose it than have any scandal. I would, weally, deah boys."

"That's decent of you, Gussy," said Tom; "but we can't let it go at that. If there's a thief in the School House he's got to be jumped on as soon and as hard as possible. And what he's taken will have to be given back, anyway."

"Still, there's a lot in what Gussy says about not having a scandal," said Blake. "We don't want to disgrace the School House. Better keep the matter quite dark, if we can."

Tom Merry wrinkled his brows in thought.

"You're right," he said. "We'll say nothing outside the club—at least, for the present. I vote that we form ourselves into a committee of all the House—hem! I mean, of all the club—to investigate the matter."

"Good!"

And the hobby club was solemnly formed into a committee. Herries claimed his rights as chairman, which, after some argument, were admitted by the president.

"We'll keep the matter dark at present," said Tom Merry, "and have Curly in here and ask him questions. If he just took the stamp away to look at it, and gives it up again, well and good. If he meant to stick to it, still we'll let him off with a warning if he hands it back to us."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Now, the next thing is to bring the accused before the committee."

"He won't come if he can help it," said Blake, with a shake of his head.

"Then he'll be brought."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Gussy can go and fetch him," said Manners.

Arthur Augustus shook his head decidedly.

"Pway, excuse me, I would wathah not. He would pwobably stwuggle, and it would not look dig to be dwagging a stwuggling juniah along the passage, deah boy. I think that Tom Mewwy and Mannahs should go to find him and bwing him heah."

"Put it to the vote," said the chairman.

Put to the vote it accordingly was. Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy voted that Tom Merry and Manners should go; and as they were in the minority, the Terrible Two went.

It was not easy quest. Curly Gibson was not to be found. The chums inquired for him in the quadrangle and in the gym, up and down the passages, and on the playing-fields. But nothing could be heard of the whereabouts of Curly Gibson.

"I say, he may be doing some work," suggested Manners at last. "Let's look in the Third Form room."

"Good idea!"

To the Third Form room they accordingly went. There was Curly Gibson. He was not working at a desk, but groping on the floor under the window, his face very red and his clothes very dusty, apparently hunting for something he had lost.

"Hallo, Curly!" said Tom Merry.

The Third Form boy jumped up with a cry. He showed a strong desire to dodge out of the room and avoid the chums of the Shell. But Manners promptly spread himself in the doorway and cut off his escape.

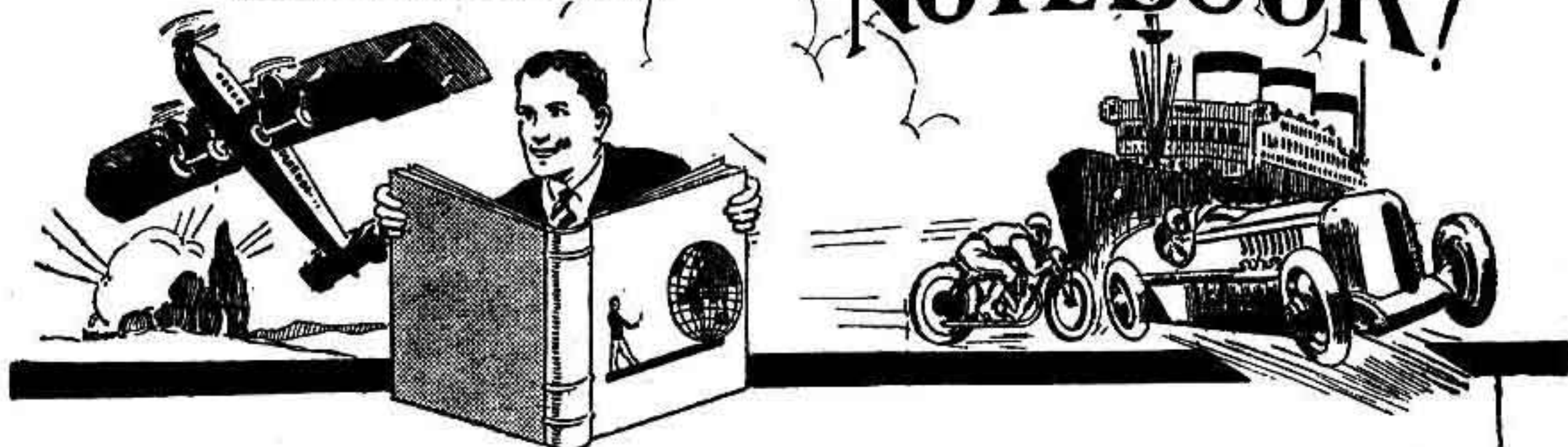
"I haven't done anything!" muttered Curly.

(Continued on page 12.)

ANOTHER FULL-OF-FACTS PAGE IS REACHED IN—

The Editor's

NOTE-BOOK!



Address all letters: *The Editor, The GEM, The Amalgamated Press, Ltd., Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C. 4.*

STAND by for next week's bumper issue, boys, for it is a real smasher—a Gem of Gems. Martin Clifford is in fine fettle with another delightful long, complete story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's entitled:

"UNDER A CONVICT'S THUMB!"

It would spoil a good thing in advance to say much about this story here except to remind all of you that to miss it will be the equivalent to missing the

THE BEST THING OF THE WEEK!

Owen Conquest is not very far behind the standard set by Martin Clifford, for he obliges with another corking complete school yarn of Rookwood, entitled:

"ROUGH ON TUBBY MUFFIN."

Whilst lovers of thrills will find their appetite fully catered for in the next stirring episode of the master crook—

"THE WINGER!"

Potts, the inimitable Office-boy, refuses to be left out in the cold. He'll be in next week's GEM, too. Order your copy early—that's the only certain way of avoiding disappointment. Now let's see what we can glean from my notebook.

THE WOUNDED WHALE!

Whis! The harpoon was poised for a cast and the experienced whaler had every reason to think that he had bagged a mammoth whale, for the wrought iron harpoon, weighing close on a pound, buried itself in the carcass of the leviathan. Then the fun started. The wily old whale pitted his gigantic strength against the cunning of man—twisted violently and broke off the shaft of the harpoon, and succeeded in getting free. He was badly wounded, but he lived to tell the tale. For another twenty-five years after that first desperate tussle this particular whale managed to elude the clutches of man, but he fell a victim at last, this time to a more deadly harpoon. When he was brought to the whaling station they found imbedded in his body the original harpoon head that had nearly done the trick, identified by the name of the whaler which was still discernible on the wrought iron. Thus for twenty-

five years the whale, badly wounded, had carried about the broken-off head of the harpoon and defied capture. Men whose job it is to battle with these monsters in order to earn a livelihood well earn their pay and a bit over!

HOT STUFF BAKING!

"Bread while you wait" is likely to be the prominent announcement of bakers in the near future if the invention of an Italian lives up to its claims. With this new and complicated machine it is possible to produce from corn, which is ground into wheat and then mixed with the necessary ingredients, loaves baked and ready for human consumption all in the almost incredible space of twenty minutes. This is a case of having bread with jam on it with a vengeance!

THE TARGET SHIP!

Bang! Crash! The air resounds to the din of exploding bombs and aerial torpedoes as the lean grey shape of H.M.S. Centurion scuttles hither and thither in a wild effort to escape the hail of destruction showered on it from raiding bombers and low-flying fighting aircraft. People living near the Yorkshire coast have been wondering whether there was "another war on." Their startled eyes see the fugitive ship and the raiding aircraft, but there is no sign of any human being aboard the Centurion. The explanation is simple, for the Centurion, a pre-War type of vessel, has been "condemned," and one of her last jobs is to provide the authorities with first-hand knowledge of the destructive power of the latest aerial bombs and torpedoes. She is controlled by wireless from another destroyer lurking at a safe distance, and prior to the attack by aeroplanes is given a full head of steam. She darts to and fro to starboard, to port, at the will of the wireless control, and does her best to give the airman aloft the exact conditions he may expect in actual warfare—with the exception of course, that none of her guns make reply to his attack of leaden destruction. So passes a gallant defender of Britain's shores, game to the last!

ONE AGAINST 4,000!

Tramp, tramp, tramp! Four thousand African natives simply bursting with fight advanced on each other. Only a river lay between them when

suddenly a white policeman decided that a scrap between four thousand hefty natives would not be good for them or for the local hospital. So he promptly drew his revolver and calmly offered to shoot the first warrior who dared to cross the river and commence hostilities. The offer was seriously considered when the policeman loosed off a round or two of live lead over the heads of the warriors to show that he meant business. Then while the natives chattered away this dauntless custodian of the law lit a cigarette and finally invited the leaders of the rival parties to join him in a pow-wow. That did the trick, for within a short space of time the warriors packed up their fighting kit and hit it back for home. It wanted courage and an outside in tact to handle an ugly situation like this, but Constable Burton proved to be the right man in the right place, and he now holds the distinction of having averted a tribal war all on his lonesome!

THIRD TIME LUCKY!

"Seconds out of the ring. Time!" That's a command both Jack Northey, of Ystrad, and George Jones, of Aberaman, obeyed with alacrity in the days of their youth, for both were professional boxers. Forty years ago these exponents of the noble art had a glorious bare fists set-to which lasted for close on three hours. The verdict went in favour of Jack Northey, but George Jones wasn't satisfied, so the pair shaped up again a few months later and this time Jones claimed to be the winner. Northey didn't admit the claim, and for thirty years roughly a heated controversy has raged over the respective merits of the two champions. There's going to be a third scrap very soon, and although both men are now nearing seventy years of age their keenness is undiminished. The challenge this time carries a proviso that the contestants shall wear gloves, but it will be no less interesting on that account. Good luck to 'em both and may the best man win!

HEARD THIS ONE?

Irate Father: "My boy, I'm thoroughly disappointed in you. Your schoolmaster's opinion of you is that you're no earthly good. What do you think you'll do when you grow up?"
Son: "That's all right, dad, I'm going to be a flying man."

THE GREAT STAMP MYSTERY!

(Continued from page 10.)

"Who said you had?" asked Tom. Curly looked considerably relieved. "Then—then—" he stammered. "Yes, we came here for you," said Tom. "For—for me?" gasped Curly. "Yes." "Wh-wh-what do you want?" "We want you to come to the club-room." "Wh-what for?" "To answer some questions." "I—I won't come!" "Yes, you will, Curly. Come along!" Tom Merry laid his hand upon Curly's shoulder. The youngster shrank from his touch. "I won't come!" "Take his other arm, Manners." "Right-ho!" "Let me alone!" gasped Curly, struggling between the two. "Don't you be a beastly bully, Tom Merry!" Tom Merry released the junior as if he had become suddenly red-hot. If there was anything that Tom detested with his whole heart it was bullying and anything that savoured of tyranny by a big boy over a smaller one. His face went very red. "Look here, Curly—" "Let me alone!" "I'm not going to bully you," said Tom. "You ought to know me better than that, Curly." "Well, let me alone, then!" said Curly obstinately. "We want you to come to the club-room." "I won't come!" "You mean that you're afraid to come?" "I—I mean that I won't come!" "We're not going to hurt you, Curly. We want to get at the truth of a certain matter, that's all," said Tom patiently. "I don't know anything about it." "How can you say so, when you don't know what the matter is yet?" Curly began to whine. "Let me go, Tom Merry. I haven't done anything." "Let him go, Manners." "But I say, Tom—" "Let him go, old fellow." Manners released the Third Form boy. "Now, Curly," said Tom quietly, "I won't have you forced in any way. I'm not a bully. But something's happened in the club-room that must be inquired into. If you don't come there and explain, you will have to explain to Mr. Railton or the Head; and you can take your choice." "I—I don't know anything about the stamp." "The stamp! How do you know I was thinking about a stamp?" Poor Curly realised that he had given himself hopelessly away, and he turned scarlet and remained silent. "Now, Curly, you have shown that you do know something about the stamp. It's a valuable one, and it's been taken by someone from D'Arcy's album. It's got to be

inquired into. We are going to try to keep the matter from the masters."

Curly brightened up a little.

"And we're not going to hurt you," said Tom. "We want you to come and explain, if you can. You'll leave the club-room as safe as you enter it."

"Honour bright?"

"Yes, honour bright!"

"Then I—I'll come."

And so Curly allowed himself to be marched off between the Terrible Two, and they marched him straight to the headquarters of the Merry Hobby Club, where the committee were waiting with all the patience they could muster.

CHAPTER 6.

The Cross-Examination.

BLAKE gave a grunt as the door of the club-room opened and the Terrible Two appeared with the prisoner.

"You've been a jolly long time!" he remarked.

"Had to hunt for him all over the place," said Tom Merry apologetically, "and then we had to persuade the little bounder to come."

"I'd have persuaded him," said Blake, "with the end of a boot!"

"No, you wouldn't," said Tom Merry, with a smile. "However, here we are, ready for business. Shut the door, Manners!"

The door was closed.

Blake had formed the seats in a half-circle for the committee, facing a stool upon which the accused was to be accommodated.

Curly was placed upon the stool, and he sat facing the committee, looking round a good deal, like a frightened hare.

"Now—" began Tom Merry.

"Excuse me!" said Herries. "On an occasion like the present I think it is the thing for the chairman of the committee to do the talking."

"Certainly!" said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Oh, get on, if you want to gas!" said Tom Merry resignedly.

"I don't want to gas. It's best to do things according to the rules."

"Oh, get along, do!"

"Now—" began Herries.

"Excuse me," said Manners. "If the president resigns in favour of the chairman, the vice-president doesn't; so I think—"

"Dry up!" said Blake.

"I won't! I—"

"Yes, dry up, Manners!" said Tom Merry. "Anything for a quiet life."

"All right; I'll dry up, if you like," said Manners. "But I don't think—"

"Of course, you don't!" said Blake. "You never do!"

"I'm not going to—"

"Talk! That's quite right!"

"Silence in court!" said Tom Merry. "For goodness' sake don't nag each other like that, you kids! If you're going to address the prisoner on the stool, Herries, go ahead!"

"I'm waiting for a chance!"

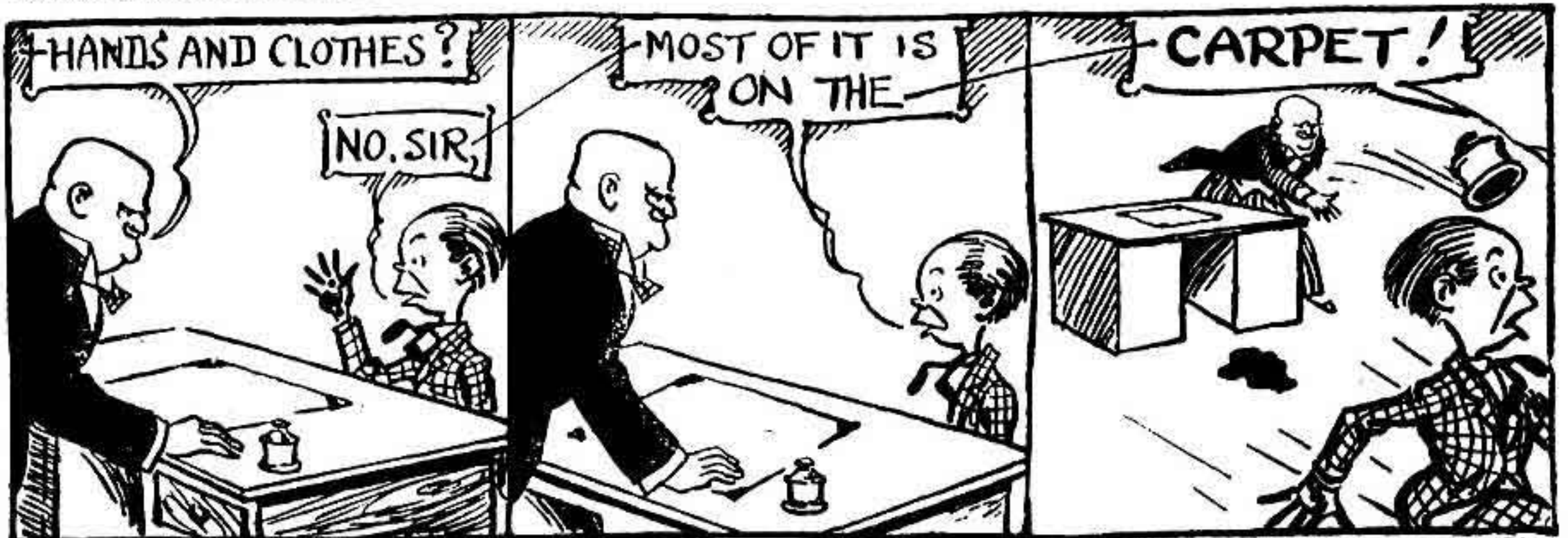
Potts, the Office Boy!



"Well, now's your chance!"
 "Prisoner at the bar——" said Herries.
 "He's not a prisoner," said Manners. "He's come here under a safe conduct. And there isn't any bar."
 "Shut up!"
 "Rats!"
 "Prisoner at the bar, some stupid bounder has boned a stamp out of D'Arcy's album."
 "I haven't," said Curly.
 "The stamp was there all right yesterday," said Herries.
 "After the meeting broke up you came in here and were caught."
 "I—I—I——"
 "Witnesses who saw the kid nosing around here, stand forward!"
 "I saw him," said Tom Merry.
 "And I," said Manners.
 "Do you deny, prisoner on the stool, that you were caught leaving this club-room, the headquarters of the Merry Hobby Club?" said Herries severely.
 "No-no."
 "You came in here last night, then, after we were gone?"
 "Ye-es."
 "What for?"
 "Only just to look around."
 "To look into D'Arcy's album, I suppose you mean?"
 "Ye-e-es."
 "To look at the stamp that Baker of the Sixth sold him?"
 "Ye-es."
 "And to bone it?"
 "N-n-no!"
 "Didn't you take it from the album?"
 Curly began to cry.
 "Oh, I say, you mustn't turn on the waterworks!" said Blake, in alarm. "There's nothing to weep about, you know."
 "I—I—I——"
 "Give him a towel," said Herries.
 "Oh, Hewwies, don't be bwutal!" said Arthur Augustus.
 "The youngstah is cwysin' because he is fwightened, I think, in all pwobability."
 "There's no need to be frightened, Curly," said Tom Merry kindly. "Nobody's going to hurt you. We only want to get at the truth."
 "I didn't steal the stamp!" said Curly.
 "I don't think you did, but——"
 "Who's conducting this cross-examination?" asked Herries.
 "Oh, get on with it!"
 "If you think you'd better cross-examine the kid, Tom Merry——"
 "Well, I do think so. You're frightening him."
 Herries looked indignant.
 "Now, I appeal to the committee!" he exclaimed. "Have I said anything that could reasonably be supposed to frighten anybody?"
 "It isn't what you said," remarked Manners. "It's probably your face. That's calculated to frighten anybody who gets a good look at it."
 "You let my face alone!"
 "I'm going to. I shouldn't like a thing like that, I'd——"
 "Peace!" said Tom Merry, waving his hand. "I think Herries has had his innings, chaps, and ought to take a back seat."

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy.
 "There you are! Even Gussy is getting fed-up with his eloquence."
 "I think I could cwoss-examine the pwisoner bettah," said Arthur Augustus modestly. "Hewwies means well, I know, but——"
 "Oh, get on with it, then!" said Herries. "I don't mind."
 "If you are quite sure that you have no weal objection, Hewwies——"
 "Get on!"
 "Vewy well. By wequest of the chairman of the honahed committee I will now take up the cwoss-examination," said Arthur Augustus. "Look at me, pwisonah!"
 "No, that's out of order," said Manners.
 "Out of order?"
 "Certainly! A prisoner has to be questioned before he is put to the torture, and——"
 "Mannah, that wemark savahs of wudeness!"
 "Go hon!" said Manners.
 "Pwisoner at the bar," resumed Arthur Augustus, "you declare that you did not collah the stamp out of my album?"
 "I—I—I——"
 "I am afwaid that I cannot admit that as a satisfactory answer, pwisonah. A fwrequent wepetition of the personal pwonoun first person singular expwesses nothin' to my mind."
 "I—I——"
 "I must wequest you to be a little more lucid. You admit having come to this club-woom and looked at the stamp in my album?"
 "Ye-es."
 "But you did not wemove it fwom the album?"
 "I—I——"
 "It is weally most singulah that the youngstah should considah a wepetition of that pwonoun a satisfactory said D'Arcy, looking puzzled.
 "I—I—I——"
 "Did you wemove the stamp fwom the album, or did you not wemove the stamp fwom the album?" asked Arthur Augustus severely.
 "Ye-es, I did take it out."
 "And you took it away?"
 "Ye-es."
 "There," said Arthur Augustus triumphantly, "the pwisonah has confessed! How's that?"
 "Out!" said Tom Merry. "You've had your innings. This is where I begin."
 "Oh, vewy well!" said Arthur Augustus. "I have weally no objection. You are at liberty to wesome the cwoss-examination, Mewwy."
 "Thank you, Gussy."
 Curly was weeping copiously.
 Tom's tender heart was touched, but it was necessary to get at the truth. Tom had a feeling, however, that Curly's case was not so black as it appeared.
 "Now, Curly, old chap, let's have the rest of it. You took the stamp out of the album and took it away from the study. You admit that?"
 "Ye-es," said Curly.
 "What did you do it for?"
 "I didn't want to steal it."
 "Then why did you do it?"
 "I wanted to compare it with my stamp."

ON THE CARPET!



"Ah, I see! You have one like it?"
 "Yes. I had a green Ceylon twopenny, and D'Arcy said it was worth only six bob," Curly explained tearfully. "Baker's one was the same issue, but a different shade of green, and was worth thirty bob. I wanted to compare them and see where the difference came in."

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy. "You see, deah boys, the sea-gween stamp was the cheap variety, but Bakah's stamp was of the emewald gween colour, and that was worth thirty shillings. If Curly knew anything about stamps, he ought to know that, you know."

"I know as much about stamps as you do!" said Curly, with spirit.

"Wats!" said D'Arcy.

"So you wanted to compare the stamps?" said Tom Merry. "Why couldn't you do it here?"

"I was afraid some of you would catch me in the club-room."

"So you took D'Arcy's stamp out of his album and carried it off?"

"Ye-es. Then we had to go to bed, and I hadn't the chance to get at my locker in the Third Form room."

"Oh, I see!" exclaimed Manners. "That was why you came down early this morning?"

"Ye-es."

"So you see, kids," said Tom Merry, "Curly didn't steal the stamp. It was like his nerve to take it out of Gussy's album, but that's nothing. Have you got it about you now, Curly?"

"N-n-n-o."

"Why hasn't he brought it back before this?" asked Blake. "It looks suspicious. Look here, Curly. Did you carry it off as you said, and then decide to keep it as it wasn't missed?"

"N-n-no."

"Well, where is it?" asked Tom. "We'll let you off if you bring it back at once. This will be a lesson to you to have a little less cheek in future."

Curly did not speak.

"Where is the stamp?"

The committee, growing more suspicious, asked that question with one voice.

Curly sobbed.

"Come, kid!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Tell us where the stamp is."

"I—I've lost it!"

"You've lost it?"

"Yes."

CHAPTER 7.

A Chance for Curly.

THE committee of the Merry Hobby Club looked at each other very queerly as Curly Gibson made his strange statement.

It was very peculiar, to say the least of it, that Curly should have lost the stamp which he had surreptitiously extracted from D'Arcy's album.

"You've lost it?" repeated Tom Merry. "Are you sure, Curly?"

"Ye-es."

"Where did you lose it?"

"I—I don't know."

"I'm afraid," said Blake quietly, "that you'll have to find out, Curly. This story sounds a little bit too steep for me."

"And for me," said Herries, with a nod.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"It certainly does seem fishy," Manners remarked.

"Let's hear him out," said Tom Merry. "When was the stamp last in your possession, Curly?"

"This morning, Merry. I was looking at it in the Third Form room this morning before breakfast, when Manners came in."

"Yes; and you moved just as I was snapping you with my camera!" growled Manners.

"I laid the stamp down," said Curly. "Then I was afraid Manners would see it, and I was confused. I didn't know just what I was doing. Manners would stay, and he kept on asking questions."

"I knew something was up," said Manners, "but I didn't exactly know what it was."

"Then the breakfast bell rang, and I had to buzz off. I looked for the stamp, but couldn't find it."

"You said you laid it down."

"So I did—on the desk. But it wasn't there. I hunted on the floor, and couldn't see it. Then I had to go into the dining-hall, and old Selby hauled me over the coals for being late."

"Yes, I heard him," said Manners.

"I looked for the stamp afterwards," went on the tearful Curly. "I meant to put it back this morning, when there

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was nobody in the club-room, but I couldn't find it. I've hunted off and on everywhere for the beastly thing ever since, but I can't find it."

"That's a very strange story, Curly."

"I know it is, but I can't help it."

There was silence in the club-room. The members of the Merry Hobby Club hardly knew what to say or think.

It was hard to believe that the white-faced, weeping lad was a thief and had told a string of falsehoods to enable him to retain possession of a valuable stamp.

But it was harder still to swallow the strange tale he told. It was very unfortunate, to say the least, that the stamp should have been lost before he had a chance of restoring it if he had not really meant to steal it.

Curly looked round at their faces, and his tears flowed faster.

Seated round the frightened Curly Gibson in a half-circle, the hobby club committee commenced their cross-examination of the Third-Former who was guilty of taking the missing stamp.



"I suppose this is all true," said Tom Merry at last, glancing round at his fellow-members. "I should hate to think that Curly was telling us a pack of lies."

"I'm not!" said Curly.

"Well, I don't want to be suspicious," said Blake slowly, "but it looks awfully queer."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I didn't steal the stamp," said Curly. "I don't know what's become of it. I'll try to find it again. Don't tell the Head."

"If the masters were let into this affair," said Tom Merry, "there's only one conclusion they would come to, I'm afraid, and that is that Curly stole the stamp."

"Well, one can only judge by the facts of the case," said Manners. "I hate to believe that any chap would tell a string of lies. But there's no doubt that Curly took away the stamp, when he hadn't any right to meddle with it, and that he can't bring it back again—or won't."

"I can't," said Curly. "I'd bring it back if I could."

"I'm blessed if I know what's to be done," said Tom Merry. "When we started the inquiry I expected that we should find out whether Curly had stolen the stamp or not, and get it back again. Now it's all left unsettled. We haven't the stamp, and we can't make up our minds about Curly."

"I didn't steal the stamp," said poor Curly. "I'm not a thief!"

"I hope you're not, Curly. But it looks very queer."

"I'll try to find the stamp."

"H'm! You seem to have tried, without much success," said Tom Merry. "I say, chaps, I can't help thinking that the poor little beggar is innocent."

The rest of the committee were silent.

"Anyway, it wouldn't be fair to jump on him without



absolute proof," said Tom reflectively. "If the matter comes out, Curly will have to leave St. Jim's. There's not much doubt on that point."

Curly sobbed.

"That would be right and proper if he's a thief—"

"I'm not a thief!"

"But if he's innocent it would be horrible."

"Yes, by Jove!" said Blake, with feeling. "I had an experience once. I've never forgotten it. It was before you came here, Merry. I was suspected of pinching some tin out of a study in the New House. Old Figgins proved my innocence in the end. I know what it feels like to have the chaps down on you when you're innocent all the time. We won't say a word of this outside the club-room. The kid ought to have the benefit of the doubt."

"That's my idea," said Tom. "If he stole the stamp, and can put his finger on it if he likes, we'll leave it to his conscience."

"Yaas, wathah! Leave it to his consh," said D'Arcy.

"And if he's innocent, all this trouble will teach him not to put his finger in another party's pie," said Tom. "You hear, Curly? We're going to say nothing. If the stamp's really lost, you've got a chance to find it and bring it back. If it's not lost—if you've been telling lies, we leave it—"

"To your consh," said D'Arcy.

"And I'd rather lose everything I possess than be in your shoes in that case," said Tom Merry. "That's all."

Curly turned towards the door. The tears were still running down his chubby cheeks, and his chest was shaken by suppressed sobs. He opened the door, and then turned back.

"I didn't steal the stamp," he said. "I'll try to find it. I'm not a thief!"

And the door closed behind the unhappy Curly.

The hobbyists looked at each other very uncomfortably.

"This is rotten!" said Tom Merry, voicing the general sentiment.

"Beastly!" agreed Blake.

"Weally wotten!" said D'Arcy. "It is quite wotten to think that there is a thief in the School House, and vewy wotten indeed to lose a stamp for which I gave Bakah thirty—"

"Yes, we'll keep mum and give Curly a chance," said Tom. "That's all we can do."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I hope he's innocent, but it looks very black against him. I vote that this meeting of the hobby club do now break up," said Tom. "I don't feel inclined to discuss hobbies after what's happened."

"Agreed," said Blake. "Let's shift."

And the hobbyists filed out of the club-room with serious faces. It had certainly been a very unpleasant happening, and it marred the cheerful proceedings of the hobby club.

Tom Merry wondered whether the mystery would ever be solved. It was not a case in which the hero of the Shell could bring to bear his instinct for detective work. It all depended on the word of Curly. And if the stamp was really lost, it was useless to hunt for so small an object after such a space of time.

The matter had to be left in a very unsatisfactory state, and the members of the hobby club could only hope that it would be cleared up in time.

CHAPTER 8.

Gully or Innocent?

TOM MERRY started. It was the day after the discovery of the missing stamp and the cross-examination by the hobby club in the club-room.

After morning school Tom Merry was talking a stroll in the quadrangle, and under the shady trees was thinking of the occurrence of the previous day. Tom Merry was very worried about it. He liked Curly, and the mere idea of a thief in the School House, or at St. Jim's at all, was extremely unpleasant.

Even when he caught sight of Figgins & Co., the heroes of the New House, he did not stop to chip them. The mystery of the missing stamp engrossed his thoughts.

He started as he heard the sound of a sob under the trees.

"Hallo! What's that?"

The sound was repeated.

Tom Merry walked quickly forward to discover the cause. His face changed as he caught sight of Curly Gibson sitting on the grass under a big elm. The youngster's face was buried in his hands, and he was sobbing quietly.

Tom Merry tapped his shoulder.

Curly gave a cry and looked up quickly, turning a pale and tear-stained face to the hero of the Shell.

He shrank from Tom Merry, and Tom felt a thrill of commiseration as he looked at the unhappy lad.

"What are you crying about, Curly?"

The Third-Former did not reply, but his tears flowed faster.

"Come, old fellow!" said Tom kindly. "Don't take it like that. Are you thinking over that miserable stamp affair?"

"Ye-es," sobbed Curly. "I didn't take the stamp—I mean, I didn't keep it."

Tom was silent.

"You don't believe me," said Curly bitterly. "None of you believe me. I didn't mean to steal it. I'd give D'Arcy the thirty bob, only I—I—"

"Only what?"

"I haven't it," said Curly. "I only have a shilling a week pocket-money, and I owe three bob at the school shop, and—"

Tom smiled.

"D'Arcy doesn't mind the value of the stamp, Curly. It isn't the loss of the money that he thinks about, or any of us."

"I know. You think I'm a thief."

"Not exactly, but—"

"You think I've brought disgrace on the School House," said Curly. "So I should have if I'd stolen the stamp. But I didn't."

Tom Merry looked keenly distressed.

He would have been glad to say outright that he was certain of Curly's innocence, but he could not say what he did not think. He hoped and trusted that the junior was innocent, but it was useless to deny that the case looked very black against Curly.

If he had been able to say just how he had lost the stamp it would have been different. But he simply said that he had lost it, and offered no explanation. It was possibly true, but it was not possible wholly to credit the story without proof of some sort.

"You think I'm guilty," said Curly. "So does Manners. So does Study No. 6."

"It isn't exactly that, only—"

"Yes, they do. I was going into Study No. 6 to-day to ask Blake to lend me a book, and there was some money on the table, and—and—"

"And what?"

"And Herries laid a paper over it," said Curly, sobbing. "He thought I might take it."

"Nonsense!" said Tom uncomfortably.

"Yes, he did. I don't blame him. He thinks I'm a thief."

And Curly sobbed as if his heart were very nearly breaking—as, indeed, very probably it was.

Tom felt a lump rise in his own throat. He looked at the unhappy junior in silence for some moments, then he patted him on his curly head.

"Dry up, Curly! If you're worrying because you think I believe you stole the stamp, you can turn it off. I don't think so."

Curly looked at him quickly.

"You don't believe I stole it?"

"No," said Tom, making a valiant effort to convince him. "I don't think you took it meaning to keep it, and

I don't believe you've got it now. I—I believe your yarn, Curly."

Tom was determined to believe it.

"You're trying to think so," said Curly, shaking his head despondently, "but you know very well all the time that it looks black against me. The others think I'm a thief. I won't stay in the school!"

"What do you mean?"

"I'll run away," sobbed Curly. "I won't stay here when you think I'm a thief. It will soon get out, and the fellows will send me to Coventry."

"It won't get out, Curly. None of us will say a word."

"These things always get out. It's bound to come."

Tom Merry looked uncomfortable. There was a good deal of truth in what Curly said. The suspicion against the Third-Former was almost certain to come out sooner or later, in the very nature of things.

He was already, by his woebegone looks, informing all who cared to take note of it that there was something wrong. And a philatelist in the School House had already asked D'Arcy to let him see the emerald-green Ceylon twopenny, 1863, and D'Arcy had had to make an excuse.

There was a great probability that, with the best intentions in the world, the members of the hobby club would sooner or later let the secret escape them.

"Look here, Curly," said Tom at last, "you mustn't think of running away. I hope the beastly stamp will turn up. Anyway, you mustn't do anything so silly as that."

Curly only sobbed.

"Promise me you won't," said Tom.

"I can't!"

"Then I shall go to the Head."

Curly gave a gasp of fright.

"You won't sneak on me, Tom Merry?"

"Yes, I will, unless you promise me not to do anything so silly as that," said Tom Merry firmly. "Why, you little ass, if you ran away from the school the whole story would be bound to come out, and then everybody would think you were guilty, just because you had run away."

Curly groaned. He had not seen it in that light before.

"So promise me you won't run away, Curly," said Tom.

"I—I promise," faltered Curly.

"That's right! Now, buck up, and don't make yourself miserable about it. I tell you I believe you are innocent, and the stamp will turn up perhaps." And Tom Merry went slowly on his way, thinking.

He could not disguise from himself that if the stamp was really lost there was very little probability of its turning up again after so long a time.

Yet that was the only thing that could clear Curly. What was to be done?

As usual in a case of doubt and difficulty, Tom Merry sought his chum to consult with him. He went into the School House and ascended to Study No. 6, the quarters of the Terrible Two when they were at home. The door was locked. Tom tapped upon it.

"Hallo, Manners!"

"Hallo!" came back a muffled voice.

"I want to come in."

"You can't!"

Tom kicked the door.

"Why can't I? Are you off your rocker?"

"I'm developing."

"You're whatting?"

"Developing."

"Oh, those beastly photographs again!"

"Yes! Be quiet and go away."

"Oh rats! Open the door, and I'll help you develop 'em."

"What do you know about developing?"

"Lots, and I'm willing to learn," said Tom, who had a very elementary knowledge of the great art of photography.

"Open the door!"

"Oh rats to you!"

Tom gave the door a kick. Manners growled and came and opened it.

"Come in quickly, then."

Tom stepped in, and Manners closed the door in a twinkling and locked it and hung his cap again over the keyhole, and shoved with his foot at the coat he had laid along the crack at the bottom.

There was a red glimmer in the room, and Tom was unable to see anything for some moments.

Manners had turned the study into a very useful dark-room for the nonce. The windows were blocked up with a red screen, through which came the only light that was admitted to the study, furnishing the required illumination for the developing of the amateur photographer's negatives. Manners always insisted on doing his own developing.

Manners had been at work on the table under the window, and he had covered the dishes with a cloth ere he opened the door to Tom Merry. Now he removed the cloth and returned to his work.

"I wanted to speak to you," Tom observed.

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"Lots of time for talking in class," said Manners cheerfully. "I've got to get these things developed and fixed."

"What are these films in the jam-jar?"

"They're just developed; that's what I put 'em in after washing 'em," said Manners.

"Oh, I see! I thought you had to wash 'em under running water."

"So you do when you can get it. I suppose you wouldn't like me to start running water in this study, would you?"

"Rather not."

"Then I have to be satisfied with a set of jam-jars—and jolly useful they are, too!" said Manners.

"What's this little dish for?"

"That's for developing."

"I see. And you stick the films in the developing fluid—"

"Just so. Don't touch those films; you'll spoil 'em!"

"Well, I don't see that it will hurt just to put a finger on 'em—"

Manners gave a howl.

"Keep your paws off, you ass! You'll ruin them!"

"Oh, don't get excited! I wasn't going to touch the beastly things. Have you nearly finished? The air is getting a bit thick in this study, Manners, old man!"

"That can't be helped. You have to put up with things when you're an amateur photographer, and haven't got a dark-room."

"But I'm not an amateur photographer, old chap, and I don't want a giddy dark-room. How much longer are you going to be?"

"Not long," said Manners. "Just finishing off this roll."

"What is on this last film?" asked Tom Merry, peering at the negatives.

"Blessed if I know! I forget."

"I can't see anything on it."

"How do you expect to before it's properly developed, ass? The ignorance of some fathheads is really surprising!"

"Oh, keep your wool on, and go ahead with the developing!" said Tom cheerfully. "I wonder if Job ever knew an amateur photographer? If he did, he wanted all his patience."

"Dry up and listen! You watch this when I shove it in the developing-dish, and you see the image gradually appear. Of course, you know the darks appear light, and the lights appear dark?"

"Of course I don't!"

"Well, you know now. Now look!"

Manners ran the film through the dish. Tom Merry and the amateur photographer watched it curiously.

"I can't remember what I took on that last film," said Manners. "I took 'em all yesterday. Ah, I remember! It was young Curly."

"Curly of the Third?"

"Yes; I took him at the window of the Third Form room, and the young ass moved; so I expect the result will be a beautiful big smudge."

Something began to appear on the film they were watching; at first it was not easy to tell exactly what.

"That was the time he says he lost the stamp," remarked Tom Merry.

"Yes, it was when I snapped him. But the little ass moved, so we shan't see anything clearly, I expect. May as well see, though."

"Hallo! What's that?"

"That's a beastly smudge, where Curly moved his head."

"And that?"

"That's part of the Third Form window. It comes out dark in this, though."

"Ah, yes! And that?"

"That's the desk under the window, and there's Curly's stamp album on it."

"And that? It looks like a book; I can read some letters on it. 'R-a-n—' What on earth can it be?"

Manners laughed.

"'R-a-n-g-e-r!'" he said. "'Ranger!' It's the paper Curly had there, which Mr. Selby took away from him for being late in to breakfast."

"'Ranger!'" said Tom. "Oh, I see! And that's the desk it's lying on. What's that little oblong dot beside it?"

"Blessed if I know!"

"I say, what are you taking it out for? I was just—"

"It would turn as black as your hat, ass," said Manners, plunging the negative into one of the jam-jars and washing it. "It's quite developed enough. This dish is the fixing solution."

"Are you finished?" asked Tom, after a patient period of waiting.

"Yes. As soon as I've washed these you can lug the blind down."

Manners washed the negatives, and then left them in the last and cleanest jar to repose.

"I shall have to give the jar a shake now and then," he

explained. "That's the best substitute for running water. Now you can let in the light."

And so the labours of the amateur photographer of the Merry Hobby Club terminated for a time.

CHAPTER 9.

Light at Last!

"WHERE'S Manners?"

The managing director asked the question as he came in with the chairman and superintendent. The president was sitting in the club-room, waiting for them.

"He's not here yet," said Tom Merry. "He's stopping to finish off some prints. He's been doing his photographs, and my study window has been blocked with his rotten printing-frames. I'm getting rather fed-up with amateur photography."

Blake nodded.

"Are you having your five minutes?" he asked.

"Am I what?"

"Having your five minutes, under the five-minute rule."

"No, I'm not. I—"

The door was burst suddenly open. The vice-president of the hobby club appeared, looking extremely excited. His face was flushed and his eyes sparkling as he came rushing into the room with a printing-frame in one hand and a photographic print in the other.

"Hallo!" ejaculated Blake. "Off your rocker?"

"I—"

Manners brandished the print.

"Well, what's this all about? We've seen photographic prints before, I believe, and didn't lose our breath over the things," said Blake.

"Yes, but this—"

"That looks a particularly smudgy specimen, Manners, if you want my honest, candid opinion," said Blake.

"I don't! This print—"

"Do you call it a print?"

"I tell you I've got on the track of something."

"What is it, Manners?" said Tom Merry, scenting something unusual in the excitement of his chum; for Manners was usually quiet. "What have you discovered?"

"The stolen stamp!"

"What?" exclaimed three voices at once.

"Weally, deah boy?" ejaculated Arthur Augustus.

"Yes, I have."

"Where is it?"

"Here."

Manners pointed with his forefinger to the print. The hobbyists stared at him in wonder.

"Are you off your giddy rocker?" demanded Blake. "Is it hydrophobia, or what? Tom Merry, have you ever noticed Manners like this before?"

"What's the game, Manners, old chap? What are you driving at?"

"There's the stamp," said Manners, pointing to the print. "The photograph of it, I mean, of course."

"Oh!" exclaimed four voices.

"Look!"

Manners held the print to the window, and the four hobbyists craned their heads to see what he pointed out.

"See? There's the window of the Third Form room, and there's the desk under it. That's Curly's stamp album."

"What's this smudge?"

"That's Curly's head."


"It doesn't look much like Curly's head!"

"Ass! He moved as I was snapping him."

"Oh, he did, did he? Well, go on!"

(Continued on the next page.)

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"Now, do you see that little dark object beside the copy of the 'Ranger'?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's the stamp."

"I think I can make it out," said Tom Merry.

"So can I."

"It's plain enough. That's the missing stamp. Now, it's quite true, you see, what Curly said about laying the stamp down on the desk. He laid it there, and then he laid the copy of the 'Ranger' on top of it," said Manners.

"Ha!"

"That's my idea. That's the only way of accounting for the stamp going. He was so confused at my catching him, as he said, that he hardly knew what he was doing. He picked up the 'Ranger' and laid it down again just to kill time till he could get rid of me. I'll bet anything, kids, that he's got the stamp stuck in the 'Ranger.'"

It was certainly a clever theory. The stamp had very probably adhered to the paper and had been shut up in it, and the fact that the paper had been confiscated accounted for Curly not having come across it since.

"I say, that beats Sexton Blake or Ferrers Locke!" said Herries. "But there may be something in it."

"I'm sure there is," said Manners. "We'll ask Curly, anyway, if—Hallo, Curly! Curly!"

He had caught sight of the youngster in the quad. Curly came rather reluctantly up to the club-room, and he looked very nervously at the hobbyists as he entered. Tom Merry gave him a reassuring look.

"We've made a discovery, Curly," he said. "At least, I think so. Did you put the copy of the 'Ranger' in your pocket yesterday morning before you missed the stamp?"

Curly looked amazed.

"Yes," he replied.

"That's all. I say, Mr. Selby has the 'Ranger,' hasn't he?"

"Yes."

"All right, chaps. You can go, Curly. I may have something to say to you presently. Chaps, I'm going to interview the Selby bird."

"We're all in this," said Blake. "We must all witness the matter. You can stay here, Curly, till we come back."

"But what's the—"

"Wait a bit and you'll see."

And the Merry Hobby Club marched out, leaving the amazed Third-Former alone in the club-room. Straight to the study of Mr. Selby, the master of the Third, they marched.

Tom Merry knocked at the door.

"Come in!"

Mr. Selby looked astonished when, in response to his invitation, five juniors marched into his study.

"What do you want here, my boys? My time is valuable. You explain, Merry."

"Certainly, sir!" And the rest of the hobby club relapsed into silence. "If you please, sir, you took a copy of the 'Ranger' from young Curly Gibson yesterday morning, sir."

"Yes, as a punishment for being late at breakfast. Surely you have not come to ask me to return that book? It is a great liberty—"

"No, sir, not at all."

"Then what do you want, and why do you refer to the matter?"

"We think that a stamp belonging to D'Arcy may have got stuck in it," said Tom Merry diplomatically, for it was by no means the intention of the hobby club to take Mr. Selby into the secret. "That's what we've come for, sir."

"A stamp? Surely a penny stamp—"

"It isn't a penny stamp, sir; it's a twopenny one, worth thirty bob—ahem!—shillings."

"How can a twopenny stamp be worth thirty shillings, Merry? What nonsense are you talking?" said Mr. Selby severely.

"It's a gween Ceylon twopenny, 1863, sir," said Arthur Augustus. "I gave Bakah of the Sixth thirty shillings for it, sir."

"Oh, I see! It's a rare stamp?"

"Yes, sir. D'Arcy is a philatelist, and goes in for that rot—"

"It is certainly not rot," said Mr. Selby. "A very intelligent and thoughtful hobby for a lad, and D'Arcy is to be commended."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"It's a valuable stamp, sir," said Tom Merry, changing the subject. "We think it may have got stuck in that 'Ranger,' sir. Would you mind letting us see?"

"Certainly not."

"Thank you so much, sir!"

Mr. Selby threw open a drawer in his table. The confiscated copy of the 'Ranger' lay inside.

"There it is, Merry," he said. "You may examine it there and leave it, as it will not be returned to Gibson for some time."

"Thank you, sir."

Tom picked up the copy of the 'Ranger' and opened it. Curly had evidently crumpled it up hastily and thrust it into his pocket, to judge by the way it was creased.

The eyes of the whole hobby club were upon Tom Merry as he opened the pages of the well-known paper. Manners remembered that it had been turned inside out when he saw it on the desk, and Curly had evidently closed it hastily without looking at it. For when Tom Merry opened it, a glimmer of green on the white paper caught the eyes of the hobbyists.

"The stamp!" exclaimed Manners.

"Yaas, wathah!"

There was the missing stamp. The adhesive gum had fastened it lightly to the page, and there it was. Undoubtedly Curly had laid the stamp carelessly face downwards, and the copy of the 'Ranger' being placed on it, the gum had caused it to adhere. Then the 'Ranger' had been hastily closed and thrust into Curly's pocket, and it was no wonder that the stamp had been missing.

The faces of the hobbyists expressed keen satisfaction. Manners was most gratified of all. It was through his hobby that Curly's innocence had been proved; for proved it was to a certainty. His story had been evidently true, and he had not known what to make of the disappearance of the stamp, and had no idea what had become of it.

"Is that your stamp?" asked Mr. Selby.

"Yes, sir," said D'Arcy. "That's my gween Ceylon."

"Then I congratulate you upon its recovery. You should be more careful with a stamp worth so much money."

"Yaas, sir, wathah!"

The hobby club thanked the master of the Third and withdrew from the study. They went down the corridor, looking happy and relieved.

"I say, this is jolly!" said Tom Merry. "Somehow I couldn't feel that young Curly was a thief all the time. I'm jolly glad to have him cleared."

"So am I," said Blake.

"Rather!" said Herries.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"All through my camera," said Manners. "Perhaps you'll be a bit more respectful about amateur photography after this, kids!"

Blake looked thoughtful.

"Chaps," he said, "Manners is right. It was all through his giddy camera. Young Curly would have found the stamp when he got his 'Ranger' back, but we should never have known for certain that the story was true. And he might never have found it, either. Manners has done the hobby club proud this time, and I vote that for once we suspend the five-minute rule in his favour and give him ten minutes."

"I second," said Herries.

"Yaas, wathah!"

They reached the club-room. Curly was waiting for them there. The Third-Former looked alarmed when the hobbyists rushed in and seized him and he was hoisted upon the shoulders of the Terrible Two.

"I say—"

"It's all right!"

"But—"

"We've found the stamp!"

"You've found it?" gasped Curly.

"Yes, and we know you're innocent!"

Curly gasped again.

Tom Merry and Manners marched round the club-room, with the Third-Former on their shoulders, in triumph, and Curly did not know whether to laugh or cry.

"I knew it all along, really," Tom Merry remarked, as Curly was allowed to slide down at last.

"So did I," said Manners.

"Curious!" said Blake. "So did I."

"Et moi aussi," said Herries.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Well, I'm jolly glad you've found your old stamp," said Curly. "That's all right. And if you ever find me in your old club-room again, you can use my napper as a cricket ball."

"Rats!" said Tom Merry. "We're going to give a feed in the club-room to celebrate this auspicious occasion, and you're coming, Curly. Curly of the Third will be the honoured guest of the evening, gentlemen of the hobby club!"

And the gentlemen of the hobby club cordially agreed.

THE END.

(What a bit of luck that was. Manners' camera certainly saved the day that time! Tom Merry & Co., are up against an even more serious matter in next week's thrilling yarn, "UNDER A CONVICT'S THUMB!" Don't miss it!)

SPARKLING COMPLETE STORY OF FUN AND FOOTER AT ROOKWOOD!

The REFORM of the FOURTH!

By
OWEN CONQUEST.



CHAPTER 1.

A Fiat for the Fourth.

“WHERE are they?”

Edward Hansom of the Fifth at Rookwood burst into the Junior Common-room and asked that question—more accurately, he bellowed it. Lumsden and Talboys, who followed on the heels of their leader, made the question more explicit with a couple of supplementary ones:

“Where’s Silver?”

“Where are Silver and his gang?”

“Yes—where are they?” roared Hansom. “We want them! Just wait till we lay hands on them!”

There was a stir of interest on the part of the crowd of juniors assembled round the Common-room fire. One or two of the juniors half rose; the Fifth were not exactly on visiting terms with the Fourth.

“Unexpected honour, this, you men,” drawled Mornington. “Silver, I believe you said, Hansom?”

“You know jolly well I said Silver!” snorted Hansom, glaring balefully at the dandy of the Fourth. “The young rotter and his pals have been emptying soot all over my study. We’re going to smash ‘em! Where are they?”

Mornington looked thoughtful.

“Are you sure I’ve got it right? You mean Silver, of the end study—Jimmy Silver?”

“Yes, Jimmy Silver, you hopeless young ass! Where is he?”

“Chap with curly hair and bright complexion?”

“Yes, yes! Where—?”

“Got a mole on his right cheek? Shows his teeth rather when he smiles?”

“Of course, you young idiot!”

“Pals with Newcome and Lovell and Raby—that right?” asked Mornington innocently.

Hansom almost choked.

“You know jolly well it’s right! Where is he? And where are his pals?”

“You want to know where they all are at the present moment?”

“Yes, blow you!” hooted Hansom furiously. “Where are they?”

Mornington shook his head sadly.

“I should very much like to be able to tell you, old chap, but, as a matter of fact, I don’t know.”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

The Fourth roared. Hansom’s face was irresistible.

“You—you—” he stuttered.

He took a step forward, with the evident intention of laying hands on the facetious Valentine Mornington. But before that intention could be put into effect a cheery quartet of juniors marched through the doorway, and a yell from Lumsden and Talboys diverted Hansom’s attention.

“Here they are!”

“Here’s Silver!”

“Good!” said Hansom, swinging round to face the newcomers. He directed a ferocious glare at the Fistical Four. “And now, you reckless young rascals—”

“Hallo, hallo! If it’s not Hansom!” exclaimed Jimmy Silver cheerily. “What’s the matter with your face to-night, Hansom? But, of course, I was forgetting! There always is something the matter with it, isn’t there?”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

Hansom’s face changed from red almost to scarlet, but he controlled himself with an effort and managed to roar:

“What about our study? Answer me that, Silver! What about our study?”

“Nothing, old bean! Is that the right answer?” asked the leader of the Fistical Four brightly.

A sort of strangled cry escaped Hansom of the Fifth.

“You mean you deny putting soot all over the floor and armchair and—?”

“Oh, you’re talking about the soot?” Jimmy Silver said guilelessly. “Why didn’t you say so at first, then? He’s talking about the soot, you chaps!”

“Ha, ha, ha!” yelled the Fourth, tickled once more by the extraordinary expression on Hansom’s face.

“Then you admit it?” hooted Hansom. “You admit mucking up our study with a lot of messy soot—?”

“Well, we didn’t altogether muck it up; say, sprinkled a little round the room in judicious quantities!” said Jimmy Silver modestly. “We believe in tempering justice with mercy, you see, Hansom.”

“Why, you cheeky young cub—?”

“You lammed Newcome with a cricket stump this morning, you see,” explained the leader of the Fistical Four.

“And I considered that justice would be met with just a small amount of soot. Mean to say you’re still not satisfied?”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“That’s done it!” said Hansom between his teeth. “You’ve asked for it; now you’re going to get it! Back up, you men!”

He whipped out a cricket stump which had been

**“Respect the Fifth,” decreed the Head;
“It is my keen desire.”
The Fourth’s “Respect” was such a rag,
It filled the Fifth with ire!**

concealed within his jacket and made a lunge at the junior captain of Rookwood. Simultaneously Lumsden and Talboys darted forward to secure the intended victim.

Hansom & Co. were apparently under the impression that the rest of the Fourth would not dare to interfere with mighty Fifth-Formers like themselves.

But in that impression they were entirely mistaken.

As the Fifth-Formers closed in round him Jimmy Silver uttered a shout:

"Collar 'em!"

And before Hansom could get in a solitary "oner" with the cricket stump he found himself swept off his feet before a rush of indignant Fourth-Formers.

Lumsden and Talboys suffered similarly. In a matter of seconds the three distinguished visitors were rolling over on the floor of the Junior Common-room.

"Bump the cheeky cads!" sang out Arthur Edward Lovell. "Show 'em they can't do what they like with the Fourth!"

"What-ho!"

The Fourth were very willing to demonstrate that fact to Hansom & Co. But before they had the opportunity of doing it there was a most unwelcome interruption. A majestic figure in cap and gown loomed up in the doorway, and a gasp of dismay went up from those who spotted the new arrival.

"Oh crikey!"

"Cave, you chaps!"

"The beak!"

Hansom & Co., suddenly released, staggered to their feet again, to find themselves confronting Dr. Chisholm, the headmaster of Rookwood.

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed the Head, his glance wandering from Hansom & Co. to the Fourth, and then back to Hansom & Co. "What is the meaning of this—this amazing scene, Hansom? What are you doing here?"

"Attempting to punish some juniors who have deliberately made a mess of my study, sir!" panted Hansom, forgetting in his momentary excitement that strict code of etiquette which he, as a decent member of Rookwood society, normally observed. "That is to say—"

He broke off suddenly, realising that he had unwittingly "blown the gaff." But the harm was already done. The Head turned to the Fourth again, his expression severe.

"Boys! I can hardly credit that juniors have treated a Rookwood senior with such disrespect, but if Hansom is speaking the truth—"

Jimmy Silver suppressed a groan.

"It's—it's true in a way, sir," he said. "We—myself and one or two others, that is—had a bit of a difference with Hansom, and—and—"

Dr. Chisholm frowned portentously.

"You admit, Silver, that you and certain other juniors visited Hansom's study for the purpose of ill-using his property?"

"Well, we didn't do any real harm, sir. We—we just sprinkled a little soot round the room—"

"Disgraceful!" boomed the Head. He regarded the juniors grimly for a few seconds, then he went on: "This brings to a head a state of affairs which I have long felt to be in need of reform. I have felt for some time that there exists on the part of the Fourth Form a lack of that respect which should properly be felt for a Senior Form like the Fifth. You agree with me, Hansom?"

"Absolutely, sir!" said Hansom, with feeling. "I'm not complaining about any one individual, and I'd rather you ignored what I just mentioned about my study—"

"Rest assured, Hansom, that I respect the code which is opposed to what is known as sneaking. That, however, makes no difference to what I have said. There is no doubt in my mind that the Fourth have ceased to regard the Fifth with the respect which is due to a Senior Form. That is a state of affairs which I deplore."

"Oh, sir!" came a murmur from the Fourth.

"It is my wish," said the Head, "that this regrettable situation is remedied at once. In regard to the case under consideration, I order you, Silver, and those juniors who assisted you in your unfortunate enterprise, to proceed to Hansom's study without delay and put it straight."

"Oh! Yes, sir."

"And in regard to the general question of the relationship existing between the two Forms, I shall expect, from now on, that the Fourth treat the Fifth with that respect and deference which is due to their senior status."

"Oh!"

"V-v-very well, sir!"

"I make it an order, in fact," said Dr. Chisholm. "Understand, then, boys, that from now on your attitude to the Fifth will be one of respect! That is all!"

"Ye-es, sir!"

"Come, Hansom—and you other Fifth Form boys; you have no right in this room," said the Head, turning to go.

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Hansom & Co. marched out behind him. The Fifth-Formers were beaming now. Unconcealed delight was reflected in the faces of Hansom and Lumsden and Talboys.

But the Fourth were the reverse of delighted. They stared after the four retreating figures with a stare of blank dismay; and when the footsteps had died away down the passage their feelings found expression in a deep, deep groan.

CHAPTER 2. Very Polite!

"AWFUL!"

"Dreadful!"

"Doesn't bear thinking about, does it?" groaned Newcome. And the Fourth had to agree that it didn't. But there was one exception.

Jimmy Silver had not joined in the chorus of lamentation at the awful prospect of treating the Fifth with respect. Indeed, the leader of the Fourth, if anything, seemed, for some strange reason of his own, to be rather pleased at what had happened. His eyes were gleaming brightly, and there was an expansive smile on his face.

"It's all right, you chaps!" he said. "Nothing to worry about!"

"Eh?"

"Nothing to— What the thump are you talking about?" demanded Oswald warmly. "If you think having to be polite to the Fifth is nothing to worry about, then I do!"

"Same here!"

Jimmy Silver sighed.

"When will you chaps learn to see beyond your noses? Seems to me I'm the only chap in the Fourth with anything resembling a brain."

"Why, you silly ass—"

"Look here, Silver—"

"Pax!" laughed Jimmy Silver, as one or two wrathful Fourth men picked up books and other suitable objects for hurling at his head. "Seriously, though, I can see great possibilities in this stunt of treating the Fifth with deference. It's just a matter of doing the thing thoroughly."

"What?"

"Sounds strange to you, perhaps, but I mean it. Hansom & Co. think it's the dawn of a new age or something, now. They've got their dearest wish—we've got to look up to 'em and respect 'em. Well, my idea is that we can do that so much that they'll soon be sorry we ever started."

"My hat!"

"F'rinstance, there's a footer match coming off soon between Fourth and Fifth," explained the leader of the Fourth. "Be rather a lark if we started being deferential to them on the field, wouldn't it? We could always stand aside when they wanted the ball and—"

"But then we'd lose the match!" howled Conroy.

Jimmy Silver nodded coolly.

"Quite so! By a large margin—thirty to nil, or something like that. That would be only treating them with respect."

"Great pip!"

"Hansom wouldn't get any satisfaction out of the win," smiled Jimmy Silver. "If I know anything of him, he'd feel rather sick about it. He'd become a laughing-stock, you see. That's the idea."

"My hat!"

"There are dozens of other ways of making the Fifth sorry we were ever told to respect 'em," went on the leader of the Fourth cheerily. "We can rag them very quietly and respectfully, and be so polite about it that they won't have room to grumble. We can make 'em feel much more uncomfortable than they were under the old system. Of course, it'll be a delicate job."

"I should jolly well think so!"

"But done properly, it ought to be very effective. Now, to begin with, we've got to tidy up Hansom's study. Well, we'll do it—in a way. We must clear up the soot, of course. But in the process, we'll make one or two improvements."

"Oh!"

"Such as putting the books in the tuck-cupboard and the tuck in the bookcase. We're not to know any different, are we?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But that won't be treating 'em with respect!" hooted Oswald.

Jimmy Silver grinned.

"Shows how much you know about it! We shall be awfully apologetic when they tell us about it. We'll go back and do it again, if they like—on similar lines—with deferential politeness!"

"Ye gods!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Fourth saw and roared.

To the laughter of the crowd, Rawson obligingly stood aside and bowed while O'Rourke steadied himself and kicked for goal.



"My hat!" chortled Lovell. "It's certainly some idea, and it might come off!"

"It jolly well will!" promised Jimmy Silver. "Come on, you men!"

Lovell and Newcome and Raby very willingly fell in, and the Fistical Four marched out of the Common-room in high spirits.

They spent a very busy ten minutes in Hansom's study. They certainly tidied up the room—but, as Jimmy Silver had suggested, "in a way." They took down the mirror from the wall and hung it on the back of the door. They transferred the contents of the cupboard to the bookcase and the contents of the bookcase to the cupboard. They placed the contents of the desk in the recess, and filled up the desk with all available ornaments in the room. They performed many similar transfers, while leaving the study still scrupulously tidy.

Then Hansom & Co. came in, with a crowd of Fifth men behind. The news had evidently spread.

At first they smiled. The study looked a model of neatness. Then they looked a little surprised.

"Where's the mirror?" demanded Talboys.

"Just behind you, Talboys!" said Jimmy Silver demurely.

"What the thunder——"

"Where have you put all our ornaments?" asked Hansom, with a glare.

The Fistical Four registered polite astonishment.

"Were they ornaments, Hansom?" asked Lovell. "We thought they were just junk you'd left lying about. We put them out of sight in your desk."

Hansom rushed over to his desk and flung open the roll-top.

"What about my papers?" he yelled. "If you've touched them——"

"Oh dear! Were we doing wrong, then?" asked Jimmy Silver, looking very distressed. "They all looked so untidy, we thought they were just waiting to be put in the recess. Awfully sorry, aren't we, you fellows?"

"Fearfully sorry!" said Lovell, applying a handkerchief to his eye. "'Sorry' doesn't describe what I feel!"

"Same here!"

"Oh, rather!"

"You bungling young idiots——"

"Oh lor'!" interrupted Lumsden. "Look at the grub—in the bookcase!"

"And the books in the cupboard!" roared Talboys. "Why, you howling young fatheads——"

"Dear me! Wrong again, then?" sighed Jimmy Silver. "Only one thing for it, then—we must put things right! Help me with this mirror, Raby!"

"Certainly, old chap! Wouldn't leave anything wrong for worlds!"

Jimmy Silver and Raby, between them, wrenched away

the mirror from the back of the door and piloted it across the room.

In the process, apparently by sheer accident, they brought opposite corners of the mirror into violent contact with Hansom's chin and Lumsden's head. There was a fiendish howl from the Fifth-Formers.

"Yoooooop!"

"Ow-whoop! You careless young fools——"

"Sorry!" said Jimmy Silver, with great humility.

"How can you ever forgive us?" asked Raby, almost weeping. "We really are sorry, Hansom; we respect you so highly!"

"Oh, rather! Let's put the grub back in the cupboard!" suggested Lovell brightly, starting to suit the action to the word.

He grabbed a half-finished pie and hurried across the room with it. Somehow he collided half-way with Talboys, and, by a strange, unexplained mischance, the pie landed in Talboys' face.

Squelch!

"Ug-gug-groooogh!"

"Dear, dear, dear! That would happen, just when I was trying to be respectful!" said Lovell. "Please accept my sincere apologies, Talboys!"

"Ug-gug! You—you——"

"Awfully sorry, you know!"

"We're all frightfully sorry!" said Jimmy Silver, with a shake of his head. "Best way we can do to show it is to put things right for these chaps we respect so highly. Kim on with that mirror, Raby!"

"Stop!" roared Hansom. "Get out of this study at once, you lunatics! We'll put it to rights!"

"But the Head said——"

"Never mind what the Head said!" hooted Hansom. "Get out!"

"Oh, very well, Hansom. Naturally, we wouldn't do anything against your wishes. Good-night, Hansom!"

The Fistical Four tramped out through an avenue of glaring Fifth-Formers, and as they did so, there was a roar from a crowd of Fourth men in the passage beyond.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But the Fistical Four continued to register nothing but owl-like gravity, and Hansom & Co. were forced to see that they had received the politeness they had asked for to the end of the act.

The Fifth were getting what they had asked for. But now that they had got it, they seemed, by their expressions, to find it the very reverse of pleasant!

CHAPTER 3.

Refined Footer!

MANY smiles were cast in the direction of Hansom & Co. and their colleagues in the Fifth during the next twenty-four hours.

All Rookwood heard of the Head's pronouncement on the subject of the respect due from the Fourth to the Fifth. And most fellows got an inkling of Jimmy Silver's ingenious method of meeting the emergency.

They found it rather entertaining.

Jimmy Silver saw to it that they did. He found many ways of showing respect to the Fifth. Like everything else he tackled, Jimmy Silver tackled the problem of being respectful to his superiors with energy and enthusiasm.

At breakfast-time on the following day, the Fourth stood up to a man at their table when the Fifth came in, and hung their heads as a token of deference.

The Fifth reddened. Other Forms tittered. The masters stared, but did not interfere. There was nothing in the school rules to stop one Form making an obeisance to another, if they chose, extraordinary as that proceeding might seem.

After breakfast it was noticed that Fourth men stood at attention and clicked their heels whenever a Fifth-Former appeared on the scene. If a meeting took place out of doors, the Fourth doffed their caps.

The Fifth could hardly complain. For ages they had wailed about the lack of respect for them which existed among the juniors. Now that the Fourth had been forced to acknowledge them as a higher race, they could hardly grumble about receiving too much respect. Nevertheless, that was what they felt like doing.

At first, the Fourth's new departure had been an irritating novelty. By dinner-time, it had become an exasperating nuisance, which threatened to unnerve every member of the Fifth.

The Fifth felt themselves becoming self-conscious. They began to make detours to avoid members of the Fourth whom they happened to notice. Naturally, their self-consciousness and the eagerness they displayed to keep out of the way of the reformed Fourth Form only served to increase the hilarity of the rest of the School.

The reform of the Fourth rapidly threatened to become the joke of the term at Rookwood.

By the time their footer engagement with the Fourth came along, Hansom & Co. were in a state bordering on frenzy.

Hansom had begun to look on the match by this time as his only means of salvation. Jimmy Silver's elaborate jape, he assumed, would necessarily have to be dropped when it came to a game of football.

But Hansom, not for the first time in his lofty career, proved to be wrong. Far from dropping the jape for the purpose of the match, Jimmy Silver had planned to make it the occasion for his biggest coup.

The Fourth v. Fifth match usually produced a stern struggle, for the Fifth, despite their advantage in weight, had little on Jimmy Silver and his merry men. This time, by way of a change, Jimmy Silver intended that there should be no struggle. On the contrary, his team had been instructed to carry politeness to the extent of giving the Fifth the ball whenever they wanted it!

Hansom looked forward to a glorious victory on sheer merit—a victory which would render Jimmy Silver's little jape futile, and cause any further efforts in the same direction to fall completely flat. So far as the Fourth were concerned, however, that victory was to be such a hollow mockery as to make the Fifth regret that they had ever achieved it.

The time of the match arrived, and the two teams turned out.

With Merton of the Sixth in charge of the game, play began.

Hansom kicked off for his side, and within a couple of seconds the Fifth sensed that something was amiss. Hansom passed to Lumsden, and Lumsden "muffed" the ball and sent it spinning to the feet of Tommy Dodd.

In the ordinary way, the leader of the Modern House would have been off with it like a shot. But on this occasion he stood stock still, bowed to Lumsden, and gently tapped the ball back to the senior.

Eleven Fifth Form footballers and a crowd of spectators realised simultaneously that the new respect which the Fourth had developed for the Fifth was to be carried on to the football field. And from the ropes arose a howl of uncontrolled laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

CHAPTER 4.

Hansom Has Enough!

"ON the ball!"

"Play up the Fifth!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The spectators were already hilarious.

Lumsden, after staring at Tommy Dodd in stupefaction for a second, passed it to Jobson, who took it down the field.

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Jobson saw Kit Erroll booming up before him, and squared his shoulders for a charge.

But no charge resulted. Erroll, with a courtly bow, merely stood on one side, and Jobson, unexpectedly meeting with no resistance, tripped over himself and went sprawling to the ground, while the spectators roared still more.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Jimmy Silver took charge of the ball and ambled down the field at a leisurely trot, till O'Rourke of the Fifth appeared before him.

"Want it, O'Rourke?" asked Jimmy Silver.

"Phwat, in the name of all that's wonderful——" gasped O'Rourke, as he took the ball from the unresisting Jimmy Silver.

The rest of his remarks were inaudible. He was speeding towards the Fourth's goal on his own, the ball bobbing at his feet.

Nobody interfered with him. The Fourth players merely stood aside and bowed towards his destination.

Rawson, who was in goal for the Fourth, gave him a shout.

"I say, O'Rourke, do you want to kick the ball into goal? If so I'll get out; it wouldn't be respectful to stop you!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

O'Rourke evidently did want to kick the ball in the direction of the Fourth goal, so Rawson bowed and obligingly stood out of the way. The Irish senior, surprised as he still was, steadied himself, and shot, and the ball lodged into a corner of the net.

"Goal!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Goal! First blood to the Fifth!" chortled Tommy Cook, from a vantage point behind the goalposts. "Jevver see such a goal in your lives?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

On the field of play, the Fourth were respectfully congratulating their opponents.

"Well played, O'Rourke!" remarked Lovell, with great civility. "Didn't know you could shoot so straight!"

"Gratters, Hansom!" called out Jimmy Silver cheerily. "Looks as if you'll win the match if you go on at this rate!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The teams lined up again, and play recommenced. The Fourth forwards advanced for a while. It was not their policy to abandon the game entirely to their opponents. The idea was simply that when a Fifth player evinced an unmistakable desire to possess the ball, the Fourth should gracefully allow him to have it.

Naturally, Jimmy Silver and his advance guard did not get far up the field on those terms. Hansom very quickly had the ball again, and dribbled it off on his own in the direction of the Fourth goal.

Half-backs and full-backs politely made way for him to pass as he swept victoriously down the field, and there was a howl of laughter from the crowd as Rawson once more bowed and stepped away from the goal.

With a clear goal in front of him, Hansom shot with almost venomous force.

Whether he was off colour or whether the tactics of the Fourth had unnerved him is not known. Whatever the explanation, the ball, instead of whizzing into the open citadel, spun into the air and soared right over the posts, yards out. And the spectators, who had hardly yet recovered from their previous laughs, went off into a fresh howl of uncontrolled merriment.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Hansom's face was the colour of a beetroot as he tramped back again for Rawson's goal kick. His feelings were too mixed to be described. But on one thing he was determined—that he would make up for the lapse during the remainder of the ninety minutes' play.

He had plenty of opportunity to do so, and he took generous advantage of his opportunity. So did the rest of the team. When the whistle went for half-time the score stood at the dizzy figure of 22—nil in favour of the Fifth. In the second half goals began to pile up with even greater speed.

While the Fifth spent their time dribbling the ball from the half-way line to the Fourth's goal, the Fourth stood about bowing gracefully as their opponents went by. The crowd on the touchline got nearer and nearer to hysterics. Hoots and howls of laughter went up unceasingly. Hansom and his merry men, infuriated by the treatment they were receiving, were goaded nearly to desperation by the crowd's laughter. On more than one occasion a Fifth Form player failed to score, when shooting into an empty goal. On such occasions the crowd just hugged itself with delight and laughed louder than ever—if possible.

The amazing game ended at last in a victory for the

Fifth by 48-1. Jimmy Silver had netted the odd goal just to show the Fifth what their opponents could do when they felt inclined. But apart from that the game had been an unchallenged march of triumph for the Fifth.

Out of that triumph, however, as Jimmy Silver had shrewdly foreseen, the Fifth derived no satisfaction whatever. Their faces were furious as they tramped back to the pavilion to the accompaniment of hilarious cheering from the large crowd which had watched the closing stages of the game.

They were still looking the reverse of happy when they emerged again some time later, cleaned up and changed into "civvy" garb. And they looked considerably unhappy when they saw the surprise Jimmy Silver had prepared for them.

From the veranda of the pavilion to the gravel path leading back to the school the leader of the Fourth had assembled his players in two lines to form a triumphal avenue for the victors.

It was a polite and thoughtful act on Jimmy Silver's part. Presumably it should have conveyed to Hansom and his men a sense of the respect which the reformed Fourth Form bent on giving them.

But, strangely enough, Hansom & Co. were not a bit gratified. They stared at each other and glared at each other, then stared and glared at Jimmy Silver & Co. Then Hansom found his voice.

"You silly young asses!" he roared.
 "Gentlemen, chaps, and fellows," said Jimmy Silver.
 "Bow!"

And the Fourth bowed.
 It was the last straw. The Fifth made a rush at their tormentors. A whirling battle seemed likely to be in progress in a matter of seconds. But just in the nick of time a voice came that put an end to all thoughts of conflict.

"Boys! Hansom! Silver! Stop!"
 It was the Head.

Dr. Chisholm advanced to the centre of the crowd. His face was stern, but some of the fellows thought they detected a faint twitching round the corners of his mouth.

"Hansom, can I believe my eyes?" asked the Head.
 "By all appearances you and your colleagues of the Fifth

are just about to attack these juniors—the very juniors whom I recently ordered to treat you with more respect! Am I to understand that they have failed to observe my orders?"

Hansom almost groaned aloud.
 "Nunno, sir!" he gasped. "They—they've carried them out faithfully—almost too faithfully. It—it's not that. May I ask a favour, sir?"

"Well, Hansom?"
 "If it's all the same to you, sir," said Hansom, "I'd like you to withdraw that order to the Fourth and revert to the old style again. On—on consideration, the Fourth used not to treat us so disrespectfully, after all."

The Head's frown did not relax, but there was a twinkle in his eye as he replied:
 "Really, Hansom, I thought that my order was in your best interests. It was certainly given in response to the very specific allegations you made. However, if you wish it—"

"I do, sir!"
 "Then in the circumstances the order is withdrawn."

And the Head, with a nod, turned on his heel and walked away.

When he was out of earshot there was a cheer. Needless to say, that cheer was from the Fourth.

"Good old Head!" chortled Jimmy Silver. "This is where the Fourth score, I fancy. You did say you didn't want any more respect from us, Hansom?"

"You silly young ass—"
 "Well, we're willing to oblige. Give us your cap, and we'll dribble it back to the House!"

The leader of the Fourth helped himself, and the Fourth, with a yell, joined in the game of dribbling Hansom's cap back to the House with great enthusiasm, while eleven disconsolate Fifth-Formers, owning but ten caps between them, strolled back with as much grace as they could muster.

THE END.

(Did you think that the Rookwood juniors could ever be so respectful? I bet you didn't! Next week a tuck raid takes place at Rookwood—and Tubby isn't the culprit. Read "ROUGH ON TUBBY MUFFIN" next Wednesday.)

The **GEM** 2^d



The **SHADOW!**

TOO GOOD TO MISS!
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The shadow that meant a menace to Monteith, a prefect of St. Jim's! For it is in the dramatic scene depicted on the reproduction of next week's cover shown here that Monteith comes face to face with an escaped convict—who is his own cousin! Don't on any account miss reading this thrilling book-length complete yarn of Tom Merry & Co., entitled:

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"ROUGH ON TUBBY MUFFIN!"

Added to these two splendid stories, there is another all-thrilling duel between Snap Fane, the Cockney boy 'tec, and

"The Winger!"

Potts, the Office-boy, comes on the scene in one of his usual priceless pranks, and lastly, the Editor has more interesting items for you from his notebook.

Make sure of YOUR "GEM" by ordering in advance.



THE WINGER!

CHAPTER 1.

The Bank Murder.

LONDON awakened and gasped. Front pages of newspapers displayed the sensational news in thick black headlines, and flaming posters shrieked it to travellers going to the City:

**"BOYLE & HALLET'S BANK ROBBED!
CARETAKER FOULLY MURDERED!
IS IT THE 'WINGER'?"**

Snap Fane stood in the office of Sergeant Hull, of the Limehouse riverside police.

"That's fixed the 'Winger,' Snap!" growled the police officer. "At last he's put his neck in the noose. Banks, the caretaker of Boyle & Hallet's, was murdered. Thirty thousand pounds in money and a lot of negotiable bonds stolen."

"Garn, that wasn't the Winger!" retorted Snap Fane. "He might be a crook, but he's not a dirty murderer! When he shoots, he shoots to wing a man, not to kill!"

"What do you know about it, Mr. Knowall?" snapped Hull, stamping across his office. "Man alive, don't you see? All the world is laughing at us! This Winger fellow's so dashed cute that he plays his sly games right under our noses and gets away with them!"

"It was rather cheeky of him dining with six hundred cops last week, wasn't it?" mused Snap slyly. "In fact, I feel rather sorry I stopped him getting away with at least some of the swag."

"Bah!" Sergeant Hull exploded, and strode to the radio set standing on his desk, tuning in to Inspector Thomas, at Scotland Yard.

Snap picked up the paper, and grinned at the flaming headlines.

"Hallo, Mr. Thomas! Sergeant Hull speaking!" growled that worthy into the transmitter. "I bet this is the Winger's work. He's for the gallows at last—"

Then he stopped, the scowl freezing on his face:

"I say, old Hull, be charitable!" came the purring voice every police officer in London was getting to know so well, "Really, old bean, I should just hate to murder anyone, most of all a poor old chap like the caretaker of Boyle & Hallet's!"

"The Winger!" roared Hull.

"Right first time!" came the silky chuckle of London's aristocratic master-crook. "Now, do believe me, Hull. I had abso-bally-lutely nothing to do with the murder."

Snap Fane dashed to the radio and stood on tiptoes:

"Hallo, Winger!" he cried excitedly.

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"Ah, how d'you do, Snap?" answered the crook. "Ever so many thanks for sticking up for me just now!"

"You heard me, Winger?" Snap eagerly demanded.

"Sure I did! I was listening to the edifying remarks of our mutual friend Hull."

"Winger, you really didn't do that job?" asked Snap.

"Finger wet, finger dry, and all that bally rot!" came a laughing answer. "By the way, Snap, I'm going to— Is that ass Hull listening, by the way?"

Snap grinned at the speechless policeman.

"Sure!" he answered.

"Then get out of his office and call me up from your boat!" ordered the Winger. "I want you to do me a favour, Snap. You're a smart lad, and, although you're trying to lay me by the heels, I admire you. Call me up at five-thirty this afternoon. Good-bye!"

The voice ceased. Sergeant Hull gripped Snap by the arm.

"We've got him!" he roared.

"Not quite, Hull!" chuckled a silky voice from the radio set.

"Blow and confound it, I forgot to switch off!" snarled Sergeant Hull, savagely shutting off the radio.

"You keep that appointment, Snap!" he growled pompously. "I'll have you shadowed. You'll be the decoy, and we'll have the Winger in clink before tomorrow morning."

"Here, not so fast!" grinned Snap. "How can you snaffle a voice? The Winger

ain't such a fool as to come to see me. He knows I'm out to get him arrested."

Sergeant Hull tugged his military moustache and frowned.

He had not thought of that.

"Well, I'll have a plain-clothes crowd near your boat!" he snapped. "You call him up as he asked you, then paddle across and let us know what he said to you."

"Why not listen-in on your radio?" smiled Snap.

The sergeant's jaw dropped. In his excitement and anger he had seemingly forgotten that simple way of intercepting the crook's message to Snap.

"Anyway, if you think the Winger put poor old Banks out, you're wrong," said Snap. "The Winger's clean of murder."

"Oh, get out and stay out!" howled Hull, beside himself at the cool audacity of the man he would give ten years of his life to arrest.

Snap obeyed, and dropped into his home-made paddle-boat, which floated alongside the riverside police station steps.

London was shocked; London was thrilled. Was this the latest offence of the young aristocrat who always committed his crimes in the simplest way possible?

In tram, bus, train, and Tube the question was asked

**SNAP FANE ASSISTS A CROOK—
To Bring Two Crooks to Book!**

again and again. Some said it was, others shook their heads and doubted it.

Snap was in full agreement with those who doubted, and he was very eager to hear what the Winger had to say on the matter. So sharp at five-thirty Snap was floating down the Thames, just passing under London Bridge. On the thwart of his boat was his radio set, all tuned-in and ready.

He hooked a buttress with his small boathook, and made fast.

"Hallo—hallo, Winger!" he called softly into the transmitter.

"That you, Snap?" came the instant reply. "Listen! This is very important. I promise to do you no harm if you will help me—"

"What, rob another bank?" grinned Snap.

"No. Land the murderer of poor old Banks in gaol," came the startling response. "Go ashore at the Embankment steps and to the Plaza Cinema entrance. You will meet me."

Snap pondered this.

"Yes, I know what you're thinking," came the Winger's voice. "I know Hull, Thomas, and half Scotland Yard will be waiting for me, but that's my business. Will you do as I ask?"

Snap nodded at the radio as if it had been the Winger himself.

"Okay with me, Winger!" he grinned. "I'll be outside the Plaza by half-past six, and if there's a block of traffic with an army of cops around, don't blame me."

"Good boy!" purred the Winger. "Until six-thirty, then."

Paddling his boat towards the Embankment, Snap debated this new audacity of the Winger. Scotland Yard, Limehouse, every police radio station in London would have listened in to that conversation.

The streets leading to the Plaza would be lined with plain-clothes men, all watching for the Winger.

"Gee, he's got a neck!" he muttered, tying his boat up and running up the steps. "They'll get him if he ain't—Hi! What's the game?" he yelled, as the door of a car that had drawn up alongside him opened, and he was jerked inside.

He lunged out and kicked wildly. Something dropped over his head, shutting out the evening twilight. Strong hands gripped his arms. The car went purring along past clanking tramcars.

"All right, Snap," said a pleasant voice. "You didn't think I would be such a fool as to be actually outside the Plaza, did you?"

Snap stiffened. It was the Winger!

CHAPTER 2.

Dining With the Winger.

"WILL you promise not to try to get away or make a scene, Snap?" asked the Winger's aristocratic voice. "Mind, I have said you will come to no harm."

"Did you mean what you said about landing the murderer of old Banks in quod?" asked Snap.

"Every word," the Winger assured him solemnly.

"Okay, Winger; lift the curtain," Snap agreed.

The black cloth was taken off his head and shoulders. Instantly he looked at the two young gentlemen seated in the car with him, hoping at last to get a look at the Winger's real face.

But he was disappointed. Instead of the natural face of the man, all he saw was a sallow, colourless face, with a smart, little toothbrush moustache, arched black eyebrows, and sunken eyes, and the other man was disguised in exactly the same way.

The Winger chuckled at his look of dismay.

"Sorry I had to wear this rubber flesh mask, Snap," he apologised. "But I am sure you realise that, as I move in good society, it would be rather dangerous for me to appear on a game like this showing my usual face. Ha, ha, ha!"

"So you move in decent society, do you, Winger?" grinned Snap. "Who are you, anyway?"

"Much as I regret it, I cannot answer that question—yet, Snap," the Winger assured him. "Some day, when I am rich and have no further need to carry on this game, I will ask you to dine with me in Paris."

"Right-ho! Where're we going now?" asked Snap.

The Winger drew aside a curtain, and jogged Snap to look out. The car was gliding past the Plaza Cinema.

"There's Thomas, Wilks, Parker, and the whole Scotland Yard gang," he chuckled. "My word, wouldn't they be mad if they knew who was passing them!"

Snap chuckled, too. It seemed so funny. Outside, strolling casually along the pavements, were dozens of police

officials, all looking for the Winger; and his car was crawling past them at walking pace.

"But why did you say you would meet me outside the Plaza?" asked Snap when they sped along Piccadilly.

"Think again," said the Winger. "I said if you went from the Embankment steps to the Plaza you would meet me. I didn't say actually where."

"Gee, you're cute, Winger!" grinned Snap admiringly. "Who's this chap on my left?" he asked, eyeing the other man.

The Winger laughed.

"Ask no questions, Snap," he retorted.

By the acceleration of the car Snap knew they had got outside the traffic. About an hour after he had been whisked into the car it swerved violently and ran over gravel.

"Now, I must ask you to let me wrap your head up again, Snap," the Winger said. "We're home, and dinner will be waiting."

Snap's head was covered over, and he was led from the car into a house, the Winger gripping one arm, and his companion the other.

Then the black covering was taken from Snap's head. He stood in a luxurious room. A long table was set in the centre, and he goggled to see seated around it twenty-three men, several of them policemen.

Cut glass and silver glistened under the electric lights. Three vacant chairs stood at the far end.

"Good-evening, gentlemen!" the Winger greeted, as every man rose in his place. "I hope I am not late. This is Snap Fane, a young gentleman whom most of us have met."

"How do!"

Snap nodded at the men, every one of whom wore a rubber flesh mask, making every face look exactly alike.

The Winger led him to a chair on the right, and sat down next to him.

"Dinner first, then business," he said gently. "Ring the gong, please, Number Seven."

A gong boomed somewhere at the back of the room. A few minutes' eerie silence while Snap eyed every masked face keenly. Then dinner began—such a dinner as Snap had never sat down to before.

"Gee! Do you always eat so much, Winger?" he asked half an hour later.

The Winger flung his napkin carelessly on the cloth.

"Do you know Lefter Len, Snap?" he asked, stubbing his cigarette-end.

"What, the crook who's just come out of Dartmoor for robbery with violence at Lord Inchin's Surrey mansion?" gasped Snap.

The Winger nodded.

"Know where he hangs out in the East End?" he asked quietly.

"Sure! He's hand in glove with Sailor Samson at the Port of Call dive off the East India Dock Road," grinned Snap. "I saw him last evening with Trowel Steve, the bricklayer cat-burglar."

"So did I," announced the Winger; and now his voice cut like sharp cold steel.

"You saw him? Where?" gasped Snap, eyeing this wonder man of crooks.

"In Boyle & Hallet's bank," came the bombshell answer.

"In—what the—" Snap grinned and shook his head. "Cut the leg-pull, Winger!" he laughed.

The Winger turned his masked face to Snap. Through the shining rubber slits his green eyes looked out like frozen ice under a winter's sun.

"I went to Boyle & Hallet's to get some money," he said icily. "I had just opened the safe when Lefter Len, the left-hand shot, and Trowel Steve came in and held me up."

"My great fat aunt's hat!" gurgled Snap. "You were cracking that crib? You shot Ba—"

"Lefter Len shot Banks, and he shot me too!" snapped the Winger. "Look at this, Snap!"

He unbuttoned his shirt. Underneath, his chest was swathed in a blood-stained linen bandage.

"Scotland Yard thinks I murdered Banks," he gritted slowly between his flashing teeth. "Lefter got away with thirty thousand pounds. I'm going to get him to-night."

He rose and stood erect, slim, and like a ramrod.

"Snap Fane, I asked you to dine with me this evening because you know where most of these crooks hang out," he said icily. "To-night I want you to work hand in hand with me—"

"To get Lefter and Trowel?" gasped Snap excitedly.

"Exactly!"

The Winger held out his hand. Snap gripped it hard. "I'm on, Winger!" he said snappily. "But what about the swag?"

The Winger smiled. The green eyes softened to mild excitement.

"I will get the swag, too, Snap," he said. "And if you can stop me getting away with it—well, that'll be your

victory. But I warn you—I want that money. First of all, however, I want to clear my name of this foul blot of murder. Are you still with me?"

Snap's eyes sparkled merrily.

"Right up to the back teeth and awash, Winger!" he cried. "But who are the cops, and why?"

He indicated the men in policemen's uniforms.

"Just part of my scheme, that's all," smiled the Winger. "Now it's time we left."

CHAPTER 3.

Down in the Dive.

"EXCUSE me, Snap!"

The Winger beckoned to the man who had accompanied them in the car, and left the room. In vain Snap tried to get into conversation with some of the silent band, but not one would speak.

Half an hour passed. A door opened, and Snap turned round.

"My hat, Mr. Thomas!" he gasped, staring at a figure standing in the doorway.

"Not quite, Snap," answered the Winger's smooth voice. "Still, if my little disguise is good enough for you, I think it will deceive Sailor Samson, Lefty Len, and Trowel Steve. And who is this?"

Another man appeared beside him, burly, bulky, and the exact image of Sergeant Hull, of the Limehouse River Police Station.

"Coo! You're a nut, Winger!" Snap conceded.

The Winger made a sign. Instantly every man trooped from the room.

"Sorry to have to cover your head again, Snap, but I can't have you bringing your friends the police here," snapped the Winger.

"Half a tick, gov'nor!" grinned Snap. "Did you ask me here only to find out where Lefty Len hangs out when he's outer quod?"

"For that reason, and also another very important one, Snap," the Winger explained. "I want you as a witness that Lefty and Trowel have that money and the stolen bonds, or Scotland Yard might still think I planted it on them to shield myself. Now, come on!"

With his head covered, Snap was led out to a car and assisted in.

"What's your game, Winger?" he asked, after they had driven half an hour and his head was uncovered again.

"I've got a vanload of my friends following this car," answered the young crook. "I'm got up like Inspector Thomas. My friend here is impersonating Sergeant Hull. When we get to Sailor Samson's, my friends will surround the place just like ordinary policemen. Sergeant Hull and Inspector Thomas—ha, ha!—will enter Sailor Samson's and arrest Lefty Len and Trowel Steve."

"But—but— Oh, my hat!" gasped Snap.

"My friend, the swiftest way to success in anything is to take the least obvious road, which is always the easiest, for nobody expects you to do it," the Winger quoted. "When we enter Sailor Samson's, keep close to me, in case there's trouble."

It was after eleven o'clock when the car slowed down and stopped.

Alighting, Snap found himself in familiar surroundings. The dull roar of traffic in the East India Dock Road came over the house-tops. He sniffed the scented atmosphere and grinned.

"Fishpiko Lane, ain't it, Winger?" he asked, peering down the murky, smelly street in which the car and a lorry had stopped.

"That's correct. Sailor Samson's lies just around the corner. In three minutes the place will be surrounded. By the way, do you know the signal to get into the place?"

"Leave that to me. And if we get hold of Lefty and Trowel, I'm for you this time, Winger," grinned Snap.

He watched shadowy forms jumping from the ton lorry and disappearing this way and that. Beside him stood the two exact images of Inspector Thomas and Sergeant Hull.

"Now lead the way!" ordered the Winger.

Snap walked to the corner, turned left, and felt his way down an inky-black flight of stone steps which seemed to lead to a cellar under a warehouse. At the bottom was a heavy, nail-studded door.

Snap gave three short raps, banged with the flat of his hand, and then five deliberate bangs with his fist.

"Waal?" a voice challenged from nowhere.

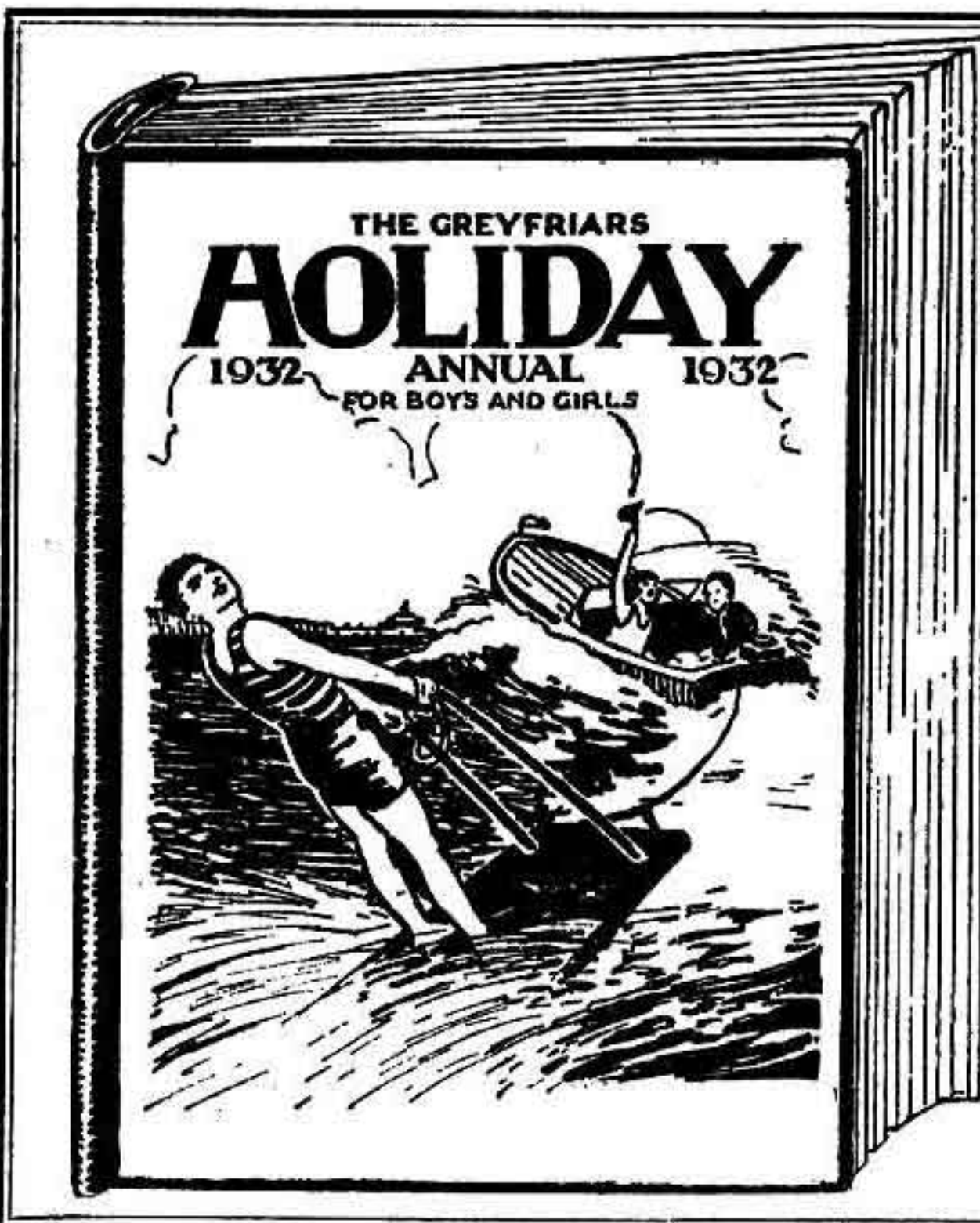
"Okay, Sailor! It's Snap, and he's on a red trail," whispered Snap.

A pause, then the door began slowly to open. Snap touched the Winger and stepped into a pitch-dark passage.

The door closed with a click. A beam of light shone first into Snap's face, then wandered to the Winger's.

"Blazes! What's up, Mr. Thomas?" rasped a hoarse voice behind the torch.

"I'm after Lefty and Trowel for the murder of Banks, caretaker of Boyle & Hallet's Bank!" snapped the Winger.



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Snap saw Lefty whip out an automatic. Swift as light the young detective sent a stool hurtling at the villain, and it crashed into his chest just as he pulled the trigger.

A gasp; the shuffle of boots. Then:
"Corks! Did 'e do that, Mr. Thomas?" asked the hoarse voice.

"Is he here?"
"No—yus. Lumme, mister, giv' us a chawnce!" gurgled Sailor Sam. "Lefty's inside, an' so's Trowel. I knowed they was flush. But, strewth, mister, I never knowed they put it over last night!"

The Winger coolly took the torch from the man's trembling hand and flashed it down the evil-smelling passage. Snap went on ahead, pushed open a door, and entered a low-ceilinged room full of men, women, smoke, and noise of rough voices.

The bogus Inspector Thomas and Sergeant Hull followed and stood in front of him, coolly surveying the scene. Someone turned; others peered through the smoke clouds. The conversation died down in ripples until only those at the far end of the long room talked.

"Strewth! Cops!" shouted one bleary-eyed man, grabbing a handful of money off the table.

The Winger walked straight into the room, with Blake, his first lieutenant, disguised as Sergeant Hull, close beside him.

"Hallo, Lefty!" growled the Winger gruffly. "Enjoying your liberty?"

Lefty Len rose slowly from the table and leered into the Winger's face.

"What's the gime, Mr. Thomas?" he asked. "Lumme, cawn't a feller come outer quod on ticket-o'-leave without bein' messed abaht wiv by a lot o' cops the second night he's free, huh?"

"That's all according, Lefty," answered the Winger. "Where were you last night?"

"'Ere, wiv Trowel Steve."

"I mean after ten o'clock," went on the Winger.

"What d'yer mean?" stammered Trowel Steve, leaping to his feet with an ugly leer on his face.

The Winger nodded to his companion and whipped out a pair of handcuffs.

"It means that I arrest you for the murder of Banks, of the Boyle & Hallet's—"

Crash! Bang!
Snap saw Lefty whip out an automatic. Swift as light the boy sent a stool hurtling at the villain, crashing it into his chest just as he pulled the trigger.

Women screamed; men shouted and cursed. A stampede of feet.

The lights went out.
"You rat, you led them cops 'ere, Snap Fane!" snarled Lefty's voice in his ear.

Two sets of fingers went around his throat.

Snap jerked up his knee and kicked savagely. His neck was breaking.

A surge of men and women swept both him and his adversary along the floor. Lefty tripped over a fallen table. His fingers slipped from Snap's throat.

The young sleuth fell on top of the man and wound both arms around him.

"Mr. Thomas! Mr. Hull!" he yelled at the pitch of his voice.

CHAPTER 4.

With the Winger's Compliments.

SOMEONE trod on Snap's legs and stumbled. The muttered curse that followed warned Snap it was Trowel Steve.

"Someone on me back, Trowel!" snarled Lefty, twisting and writhing to get free of Snap's arms and legs.

A metallic click, closely followed by another. A soft chuckle mingled with a harsh oath. Then the beam of an electric torch illuminated the evil face of Lefty Len.

"All right, Snap, you may get up, thank you," said the Winger in his natural voice. "They're safe now."

The Winger and his companion jerked the manacled crooks up and held them by the arm. Snap looked around the room. Chairs, benches, and tables lay all over the place among a litter of broken glasses, hats, and shawls.

Not a soul remained in the room, except Sailor Samson, who stood cringing amid the wreckage.

"It weren't my fault, Inspector Thomas!" he whined. "This is a respectable plice, this is. I never knowed they did old Banks in—"

"Shut up!" barked the Winger.

Snap led the way from the place, the Winger and his companion, Blake, dragging the snarling crooks with them.

"Get in, Lefty!" commanded the Winger, pushing his man into the waiting car.

Snap looked at the dashboard clock as they started off. Exactly seventeen hectic minutes had elapsed since they entered the street.

"Well, Lefty, I see you have the swag on your person," said the Winger's voice in the gloom of the car. "I think I'll take it."

Snap watched keenly. The Winger opened Lefty's shirt and undid a broad leather belt which was next to his skin. From the belt hung chamois leather pockets, each one padded with papers.

"Your man got anything, Hull?" the Winger asked quietly.

"Half and half, if you wants to know!" growled Lefty, now quite tame. "But you don't put that murder on us, Mr. Thomas. I kin tell you who did it, though."

"You did it!" snapped the Winger.

Lefty shook his head and winked knowingly.

"It were the Winger," he leered. "Me'n my mate was goin' to crack that crib, but when we got in we found the Winger had already done it. He jumped up and fired at us. Trowel here had the caretaker tight in 'is arms, and pore ole Banks got the lead instead o' me."

Snap grinned. What would happen next? But, all the same, he kept a keen eye on the wads of notes in the Winger's hands.

"Sorry, Lefty, your yarn won't wash," objected the Winger gently.

He whipped off his grey wig and false whiskers, then illuminated the interior of the car.

"Who—who're you?" spluttered the murderer.

"The Winger," smiled the young aristocrat.

"Lumme, I thought I gave you yours last—"

Lefty shut up like a clam, and eyed Snap with a frown. Those words were enough evidence for Snap that the Winger was speaking the truth about the murder.

"Well, Snap, I think this ends our contract," smiled the Winger. "You heard what Lefty said. Here they both are, and I depute you to take them to Scotland Yard and present them with my compliments."

"What about the thirty thousand, Winger? I want that, too," said Snap.

"Take the bonds; they're too much trouble for me to cash," sighed the Winger, placing the wads of Treasury notes into a small black attache-case which lay on the floor.

Snap said nothing, but, drawing out a pin, jabbed it into Lefty's leg.

"Ouch! 'Ere, what yer tryin' to do?" roared the villain, heaving suddenly up and upsetting the Winger and Blake.

Snap acted like lightning. In a split second he had those wads of notes out and thrust up his trousers legs.

"Something bito you, Lefty?" asked the Winger, pushing him down in his seat again. "Or were you trying something clever? Well, Snap, we're on the Embankment now. There's a policeman fifty yards away, so I'll give you the bonds and leave you."

He flung open the door, threw an automatic on to Snap's lap, and slammed the door again. Blake did the same on the other side. The car stopped with a jerk, and the driver sped across to the Embankment wall.

"No, you don't!"

Snap grabbed the automatic and pushed Lefty back.

The Winger and his companion disappeared down the steps to the river, the Winger turning and waving the attache-case at Snap as he finally went from sight.

Snap grinned, then yelled for the policeman. Swiftly he explained, and, jumping from the car, darted across the road and stared out into the blackness of the Thames.

"Jingo, there he goes!" he grinned, watching a small speed-boat zipping away into the night. "Well, I've got the swag— Here, what's this? Great jumping kangaroos! The Winger's done me!"

A single glance at the Treasury notes showed him they were false. The neatly typed note on the top proved it.

"Dear Snap" (said the note),—"I guessed you would try your light-fingered tricks on me, so I came prepared, old boy. The bonds are intact. I have taken only fifteen thousand pounds. The remaining fifteen thousand are inside Trowel Steve's shirt. Ever so many thanks for your able assistance. Tell Scotland Yard that if they want my evidence at the trial I will give it over the radio."

"THE WINGER."

Snap glared, then grinned. After all, the Winger deserved what he had taken. He had rounded up the murderers of the old caretaker of the bank.

He raced back to the car and jumped in, with two policemen.

"Queer the Winger deserted his car, though," he said to Inspector Thomas a few minutes later. "Fine car sho is—"

"Yes; borrowed early this afternoon from Leadenhall Street!" growled Detective-Inspector Thomas sourly.

Snap's eyes rounded; so did his lips, to an audible whistle.

"Coo! Ain't he a oner?" he gurgled.

"Yes; and you let him slip through your fingers!" snapped Thomas.

"Some slip—a kid seated between two hefty men who always go armed, and one of 'em the Winger!" retorted Snap. "What're you grousing about, anyway? Haven't you got these two birds, all the bonds, and half the stolen Treasury notes back?"

He snatched up his cap and raced down to where he had left his paddle-boat tied to the steps. A small attache-case lay on the seat.

Inside it was a thermos flask full of steaming hot coffee, some sausage-rolls, a nice cake, a pound of rashers of bacon, and a dozen eggs.

Scoffing the sausage-rolls and drinking the hot coffee, Snap paddled down to Barking Creek, his radio tuned-in and ready.

Suddenly a voice spoke from the instrument.

"Having a good supper, Snap?" it asked.

Snap picked the thing up.

"Not 'arf, Winger! Thanks!" he answered.

"How did Thomas take it?" asked the Winger smoothly.

Snap grinned at the instrument.

"Coo! He's as mad as a hatter that you got away."

he told his lato ally. "So'm I that you diddle me out of the swag—not me, Winger."

"Well, I'm sleepy. Good-night!"

"Good-night, Winger! But don't forget I'm after you still!" cried Snap.

A sleepy chuckle; then silence, broken only by the churning of Snap's paddles and his munching teeth.

(The wily old Winger beat Snap altogether that time, boys! But that will only make young Snap keener than ever, so don't miss next week's thrilling Winger yarn!)

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"Ah, I see! You have one like it?"

"Yes. I had a green Ceylon twopenny, and D'Arcy said it was worth only six bob," Curly explained tearfully. "Baker's one was the same issue, but a different shade of green, and was worth thirty bob. I wanted to compare them and see where the difference came in."

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy. "You see, deah boys, the sea-green stamp was the cheap variety, but Baker's stamp was of the emerald green colour, and that was worth thirty shillings. If Curly knew anything about stamps, he ought to know that, you know."

"I know as much about stamps as you do!" said Curly, with spirit.

"Wats!" said D'Arcy.

"So you wanted to compare the stamps?" said Tom Merry. "Why couldn't you do it here?"

"I was afraid some of you would catch me in the club-room."

"So you took D'Arcy's stamp out of his album and carried it off?"

"Ye-es. Then we had to go to bed, and I hadn't the chance to get at my locker in the Third Form room."

"Oh, I see!" exclaimed Manners. "That was why you came down early this morning?"

"Ye-es."

"So you see, kids," said Tom Merry, "Curly didn't steal the stamp. It was like his nerve to take it out of Gussy's album, but that's nothing. Have you got it about you now, Curly?"

"N-n-n-o."

"Why hasn't he brought it back before this?" asked Blake. "It looks suspicious. Look here, Curly. Did you carry it off as you said, and then decide to keep it as it wasn't missed?"

"N-n-no."

"Well, where is it?" asked Tom. "We'll let you off if you bring it back at once. This will be a lesson to you to have a little less cheek in future."

Curly did not speak.

"Where is the stamp?"

The committee, growing more suspicious, asked that question with one voice.

Curly sobbed.

"Come, kid!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Tell us where the stamp is."

"I—I've lost it!"

"You've lost it?"

"Yes."

CHAPTER 7. A Chance for Curly.

THE committee of the Merry Hobby Club looked at each other very queerly as Curly Gibson made his strange statement.

It was very peculiar, to say the least of it, that Curly should have lost the stamp which he had surreptitiously extracted from D'Arcy's album.

"You've lost it?" repeated Tom Merry. "Are you sure, Curly?"

"Ye-es."

"Where did you lose it?"

"I—I don't know."

"I'm afraid," said Blake quietly, "that you'll have to find out, Curly. This story sounds a little bit too steep for me."

"And for me," said Herries, with a nod.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"It certainly does seem fishy," Manners remarked.

"Let's hear him out," said Tom Merry. "When was the stamp last in your possession, Curly?"

"This morning, Merry. I was looking at it in the Third Form room this morning before breakfast, when Manners came in."

"Yes; and you moved just as I was snapping you with my camera!" growled Manners.

"I laid the stamp down," said Curly. "Then I was afraid Manners would see it, and I was confused. I didn't know just what I was doing. Manners would stay, and he kept on asking questions."

"I knew something was up," said Manners, "but I didn't exactly know what it was."

"Then the breakfast bell rang, and I had to buzz off. I looked for the stamp, but couldn't find it."

"You said you laid it down."

"So I did—on the desk. But it wasn't there. I hunted on the floor, and couldn't see it. Then I had to go into the dining-hall, and old Selby hauled me over the coals for being late."

"Yes, I heard him," said Manners.

"I looked for the stamp afterwards," went on the tearful Curly. "I meant to put it back this morning, when there

was nobody in the club-room, but I couldn't find it. I've hunted off and on everywhere for the beastly thing ever since, but I can't find it."

"That's a very strange story, Curly."

"I know it is, but I can't help it."

There was silence in the club-room. The members of the Merry Hobby Club hardly knew what to say or think.

It was hard to believe that the white-faced, weeping lad was a thief and had told a string of falsehoods to enable him to retain possession of a valuable stamp.

But it was harder still to swallow the strange tale he told. It was very unfortunate, to say the least, that the stamp should have been lost before he had a chance of restoring it if he had not really meant to steal it.

Curly looked round at their faces, and his tears flowed faster.

Seated round the frightened Curly Gibson in a half-circle, the hobby club committee commenced their cross-examination of the Third-Former who was guilty of taking the missing stamp.



"I suppose this is all true," said Tom Merry at last, glancing round at his fellow-members. "I should hate to think that Curly was telling us a pack of lies."

"I'm not!" said Curly.

"Well, I don't want to be suspicious," said Blake slowly, "but it looks awfully queer."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I didn't steal the stamp," said Curly. "I don't know what's become of it. I'll try to find it again. Don't tell the Head."

"If the masters were let into this affair," said Tom Merry, "there's only one conclusion they would come to, I'm afraid, and that is that Curly stole the stamp."

"Well, one can only judge by the facts of the case," said Manners. "I hate to believe that any chap would tell a string of lies. But there's no doubt that Curly took away the stamp, when he hadn't any right to meddle with it, and that he can't bring it back again—or won't."

"I can't," said Curly. "I'd bring it back if I could."

"I'm blessed if I know what's to be done," said Tom Merry. "When we started the inquiry I expected that we should find out whether Curly had stolen the stamp or not, and get it back again. Now it's all left unsettled. We haven't the stamp, and we can't make up our minds about Curly."

"I didn't steal the stamp," said poor Curly. "I'm not a thief!"

"I hope you're not, Curly. But it looks very queer."

"I'll try to find the stamp."

"H'm! You seem to have tried, without much success," said Tom Merry. "I say, chaps, I can't help thinking that the poor little beggar is innocent."

The rest of the committee were silent.

"Anyway, it wouldn't be fair to jump on him without



absolute proof," said Tom reflectively. "If the matter comes out, Curly will have to leave St. Jim's. There's not much doubt on that point."

Curly sobbed.

"That would be right and proper if he's a thief—"

"I'm not a thief!"

"But if he's innocent it would be horrible."

"Yes, by Jove!" said Blake, with feeling. "I had an experience once. I've never forgotten it. It was before you came here, Merry. I was suspected of pinching some tin out of a study in the New House. Old Figgins proved my innocence in the end. I know what it feels like to have the chaps down on you when you're innocent all the time. We won't say a word of this outside the club-room. The kid ought to have the benefit of the doubt."

"That's my idea," said Tom. "If he stole the stamp, and can put his finger on it if he likes, we'll leave it to his conscience."

"Yaas, wathah! Leave it to his consh," said D'Arcy.

"And if he's innocent, all this trouble will teach him not to put his finger in another party's pie," said Tom. "You hear, Curly? We're going to say nothing. If the stamp's really lost, you've got a chance to find it and bring it back. If it's not lost—if you've been telling lies, we leave it—"

"To your consh," said D'Arcy.

"And I'd rather lose everything I possess than be in your shoes in that case," said Tom Merry. "That's all."

Curly turned towards the door. The tears were still running down his chubby cheeks, and his chest was shaken by suppressed sobs. He opened the door, and then turned back.

"I didn't steal the stamp," he said. "I'll try to find it. I'm not a thief!"

And the door closed behind the unhappy Curly.

The hobbyists looked at each other very uncomfortably.

"This is rotten!" said Tom Merry, voicing the general sentiment.

"Beastly!" agreed Blake.

"Weally wotten!" said D'Arcy. "It is quite wotten to think that there is a thief in the School House, and vewy wotten indeed to lose a stamp for which I gave Baker thirty—"

"Yes, we'll keep mum and give Curly a chance," said Tom. "That's all we can do."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I hope he's innocent, but it looks very black against him. I vote that this meeting of the hobby club do now break up," said Tom. "I don't feel inclined to discuss hobbies after what's happened."

"Agreed," said Blake. "Let's shift."

And the hobbyists filed out of the club-room with serious faces. It had certainly been a very unpleasant happening, and it marred the cheerful proceedings of the hobby club.

Tom Merry wondered whether the mystery would ever be solved. It was not a case in which the hero of the Shell could bring to bear his instinct for detective work. It all depended on the word of Curly. And if the stamp was really lost, it was useless to hunt for so small an object after such a space of time.

The matter had to be left in a very unsatisfactory state, and the members of the hobby club could only hope that it would be cleared up in time.

CHAPTER 8. Guilty or Innocent?

TOM MERRY started. It was the day after the discovery of the missing stamp and the cross-examination by the hobby club in the club-room.

After morning school Tom Merry was talking a stroll in the quadrangle, and under the shady trees was thinking of the occurrence of the previous day. Tom Merry was very worried about it. He liked Curly, and the mere idea of a thief in the School House, or at St. Jim's at all, was extremely unpleasant.

Even when he caught sight of Figgins & Co., the heroes of the New House, he did not stop to chip them. The mystery of the missing stamp engrossed his thoughts.

He started as he heard the sound of a sob under the trees.

"Hallo! What's that?"

The sound was repeated.

Tom Merry walked quickly forward to discover the cause. His face changed as he caught sight of Curly Gibson sitting on the grass under a big elm. The youngster's face was buried in his hands, and he was sobbing quietly.

Tom Merry tapped his shoulder.

Curly gave a cry and looked up quickly, turning a pale and tear-stained face to the hero of the Shell.

He shrank from Tom Merry, and Tom felt a thrill of commiseration as he looked at the unhappy lad.

"What are you crying about, Curly?"

The Third-Former did not reply, but his tears flowed faster.

"Come, old fellow!" said Tom kindly. "Don't take it like that. Are you thinking over that miserable stamp affair?"

"Ye-es," sobbed Curly. "I didn't take the stamp—I mean, I didn't keep it."

Tom was silent.

"You don't believe me," said Curly bitterly. "None of you believe me. I didn't mean to steal it. I'd give D'Arcy the thirty bob, only I—I—"

"Only what?"

"I haven't it," said Curly. "I only have a shilling a week pocket-money, and I owe three bob at the school shop, and—"