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THE 'MERRY' HOBBY CLUB.

LONG, COMPLETE
TALE OF
TOM MERRY.

By
MARTIN CLIFFORD



BLAKE'S
CONVINCING
PROOF!

(See page 5.)

NO. 22.

VOL. 1.

"STUFF!"
SAID BLAKE
"I'LL SHOW
YOU THAT
THIS CHAIR ISN'T
ROCKY. WHAT DO
YOU KNOW ABOUT
CARPENTRY, I'LL
LIKE TO KNOW!"
AND BLAKE
PLUMPED HIMSELF
DOWN IN THE CHAIR
DEFIANTLY.

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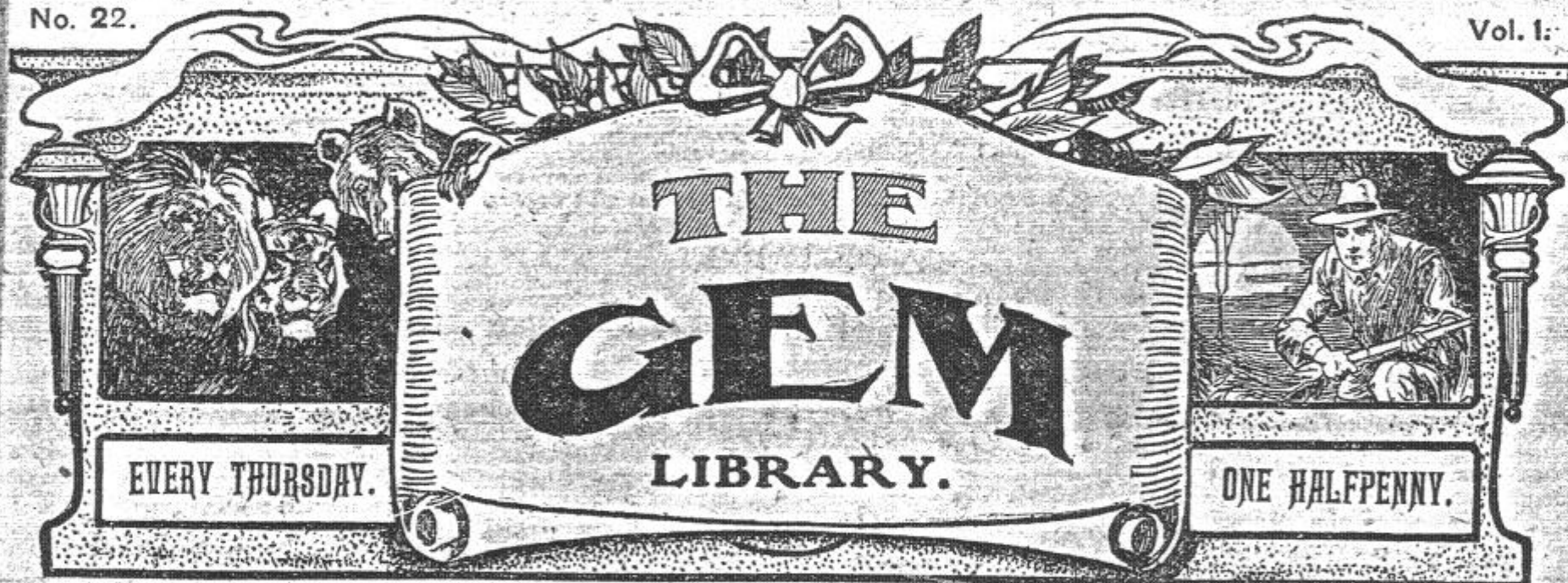
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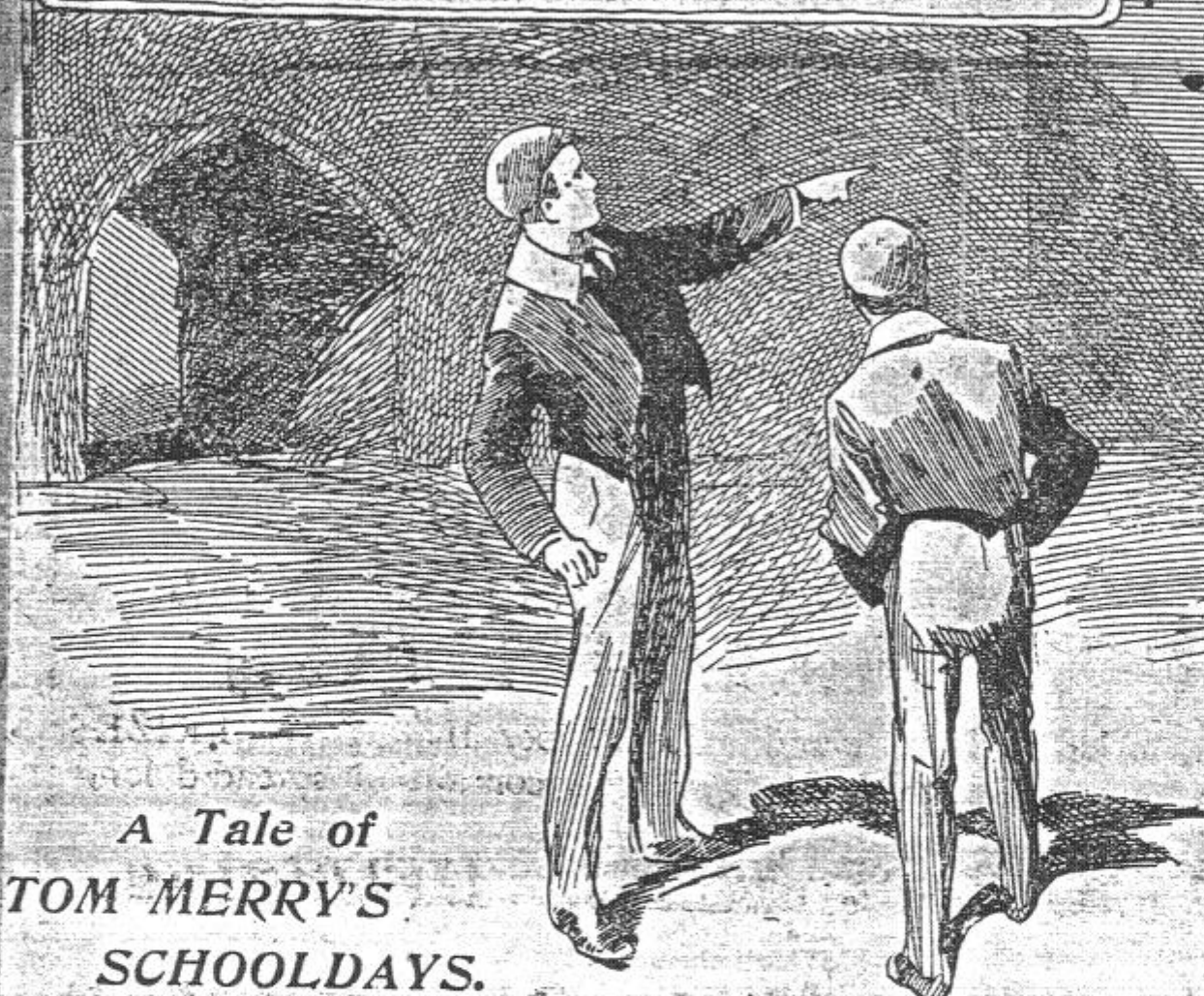
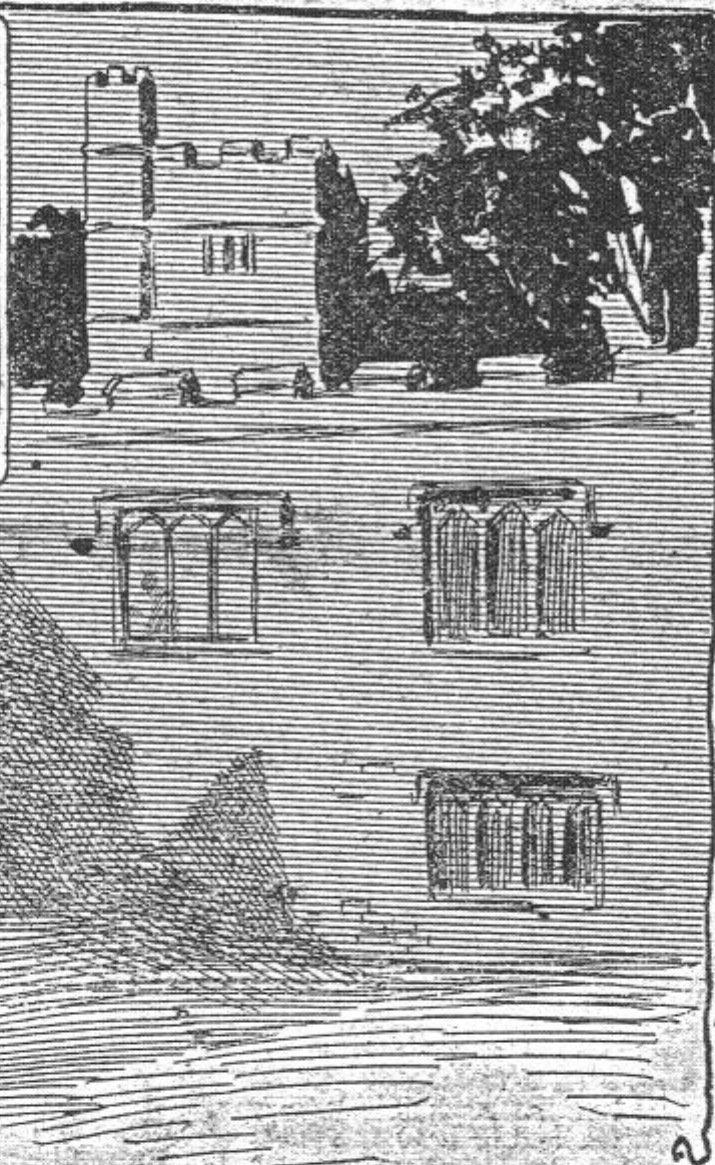
No. 22.

Vol. 1.



A COMPLETE STORY FOR EVERYONE, AND EVERY STORY A GEM!

THE MERRY HOBBY CLUB



A Tale of
TOM MERRY'S
SCHOOLDAYS.

By
MARTIN
CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.

Tom Merry has a New Idea.

TOM MERRY whistled a few bars from the "Zuyder Zee" 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?"

"Hallo, Manners, look at that shadow!" exclaimed Tom Merry, stopping his chum. "Did you forget to turn off the gas? You were last out of the room?" (See page 6.)

"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."

"No," said Tom, stopping. "Then what are you looking so pleased about?"

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NEXT
THURSDAY.

TOM MERRY'S RUSE.

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"But this is a ripper."

"Is it anything up against the New House?" asked Blake, who had at least one feeling in common with Tom Merry, a keen desire to take a rise out of the rival house at St. Jim's.

"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 D'Arcy.

"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.

"Pway excuse me for a few minutes," said Arthur Augustus. "I am extremely busy just now, and I am afraid 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 afraid that it will suff considerably, 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 extremely pleased to hear what you have to say, deah boy. I'm afraid it's not poss to give you my 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 weturn 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 up 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 longer wegard you as a fwied."

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

"Three-and-ninepence," howled Arthur Augustus. "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-nine!"

This was too much for D'Arcy. He was usually the most patient of mortals, and, as a rule, nothing disturbed his aristocratic calm, his manners having that repose which stamps the caste of Vere de Vere. But to have it brutally hinted that he paid only three-and-ninepence for a silk topper was enough to make the blood of all the Vere de Veres boil in his veins.

"Blake, I have wegard you as a fwied!" 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 warlike way, and rushing upon his erewhile 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 spattering 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's 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 track, 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, be quiet, and 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 extremely offensive expwessions. I am not accustomed to being addwessed 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 wefuse 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 from 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—but 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 Gibson, but he was usually called Curly. 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."

ANSWERS

HAVE YOU SENT ME THAT POSTCARD YET?

CHAPTER 2.

The First Meeting of 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 doctor 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 admit 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 was 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. 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 that's terrible."

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

"Not if he names 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."

"Righto, 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 shortsighted to notice the difference in the handwriting, and time had to be saved. Then the three went along to the empty study.

"Hullo, 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 all w'ong," said D'Arcy. "What's the good of being a 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 wants to collect up 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."

"But I have been wreflectin'—"

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

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

"Rats."

"I've been thinkin' 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's 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 naturally would not think of it."

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

"Yass, 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 'Zuyder Zee'—why, you did hear it, I was playing it when you looked into my study yesterday."

"Was that the 'Zuyder Zee'?" 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 give them my last parody."

"Righto," said Manners.

He produced paper and comb, and begun to buzz the tune of the well-known chorus of the "Zuyder Zee."

And Tom Merry sang at the top of his voice:

"In Study Six there are asses three, asses three, asses three,

And the biggest of all the three, is Blake, you see.

Gus and Herries are awfully soft, awfully soft, awfully soft,

But Blake, I opine, is the most asinine, of the asses three."

Jack Blake jumped up.

"Look here, Tom Merry—"

Manners was starting again, buzzing on the comb,

"Look here, you silly bounders, if that's some of your poetry, poetry is barred in the Hobby Club," exclaimed Blake.

"Yass, wathah."

"Cheek," said Herries. "It's true enough about Gussy, but as for the rest—"

"I pwotest against that statement, Hewwies. You have no right to agwee with Tom Mewwy in chawactewising me as an ass."

"Well, you are one, you know. But I—"

"Weally—"

Manners started again.

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 a 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 wemark—"

"Oh, rats."

"Let's put it to the vote," exclaimed Blake. "Is life worth living if we have to hear Tom Merry sing?"

"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 ain't 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.

CHAPTER 3.

The Progress of the Merry Hobby Club.

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 to meet and compare notes in.

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 snap-shots of everybody and everything. He took Kildare at the wicket, and Monteith pulling the ear of Fatty Wynn. He took the German master having a nap with a handkerchief over his fat face in the sun, and Sefton smoking a forbidden cigarette in the tool-shed.

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 plates.

Manners said that a member of the Merry 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 old stamps! That's all rot, you know."

"In my opinion, Manners, your photography 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 tool-chest.

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

"If I could only get a twopenny gween Ceylon 1863," said D'Arcy, "I should be happy. I am weally in want of that 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 know 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 wholly for visitors, as he wouldn't care to risk 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 carpentah 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—"

HAVE YOU SENT ME THAT POSTCARD YET?

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 in his head 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 thinkin' of twying to buy it of 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 myself, but I want to buy a cricket bat, 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 with that extwemely loud knocking."

"Oh, you shut up with your silly old stamps."

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

"Vewy 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 crowded and noisy 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 sea-gween vewiety, deah boy, and it is worth only six or six shillings. I have one of those. What I want is the emewald 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, and met Herries at the door, laden with birds' eggs, that being Herries's particular hobby.

Blake, fortunately, had finished his 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 fretwork 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 makin' an old chair that nobody can sit down on, instead of employin' his leisuah in stamp-collectin' 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 wecky!"

"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!" giggled Arthur Augustus. "You have weally wuined 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 the chair under his arms.

CHAPTER 4.

Curly Gibson is Mysterious.

THE meeting of the Merry Hobby Club had broken up, and the club-room was in darkness. It was nearing bedtime 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 star-beams filtering in at the window.

Curly quickly 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 the 1863 issue of Ceylon, green in colour, and of the face value of twopence. Upon the shade of the 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 out for a stroll in the quadrangle in the fine summer evening.

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—"

"Keep him there, Manners, while I look round. If he's been up to any tricks here 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 bedtime 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, Manners? 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 summer 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 held 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 plate 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 the 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 plate!"

Curly stared at him his face very red.

"I—I—I didn't see you, Manners!"

"Why couldn't you keep still for a moment, you little monkey?"

"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 rouse you out of bed, if you can help it."

Curly looked confused.

"I woke up!" he explained.

Manners caught sight of a copy of "Pluck" 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 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 "Pluck" and laid it down again. Then he opened and shut the album. All the time his face grew 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's 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 "Pluck," 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.

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

Curly Gibson was later at the Third Form table. Manners heard him reprimanded by the master for being late to table. Mr. Quince, 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 gentleman, and could forgive anything rather than 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. Quince 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 not 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 behind for the rest of the 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 breast-pocket?" asked Mr. Quince.

"A—a book, sir."

"Ah, give it to me!"

Curly extracted a folded and crumpled copy of "Pluck" from his breast-pocket and handed it to the master.

"You have been reading this?" said Mr. Quince.

"I—I—"

"Very well. I am always very pleased to see a love of reading in my boys. It is a sign of an inquiring and active

HAVE YOU SENT ME THAT POSTCARD YET?

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.

Mr. Quince put the offending paper into 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 focussed, 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 got 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 being 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 night 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 eggs seem to be all sereno," 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 cunwious to see my stamps, don't you know?"

"Perwaps," 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 his 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 longah there?"

"You might have stuek 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 shillin's 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——"

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

"But I gave Bakah——"

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

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

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

"Where did 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 sense. It's possible that young Gibson has 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 shillin's 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 the head.

"Then he'll have to 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 and find him and bwing him here."

"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 the Terrible Two were in a minority, they went.

It was not an 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 cricket pitch. 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.

"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."

"Rightho!"

"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 so 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. "Give over! 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," said Herries.

"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 round in 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.

"N-n-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-no-no!"

"Didn't you take it from the album?"

Curly began to cry.

"Oh, I say, you mustn't turn on the waterworks!" exclaimed 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 bwütal!" said Arthur Augustus.

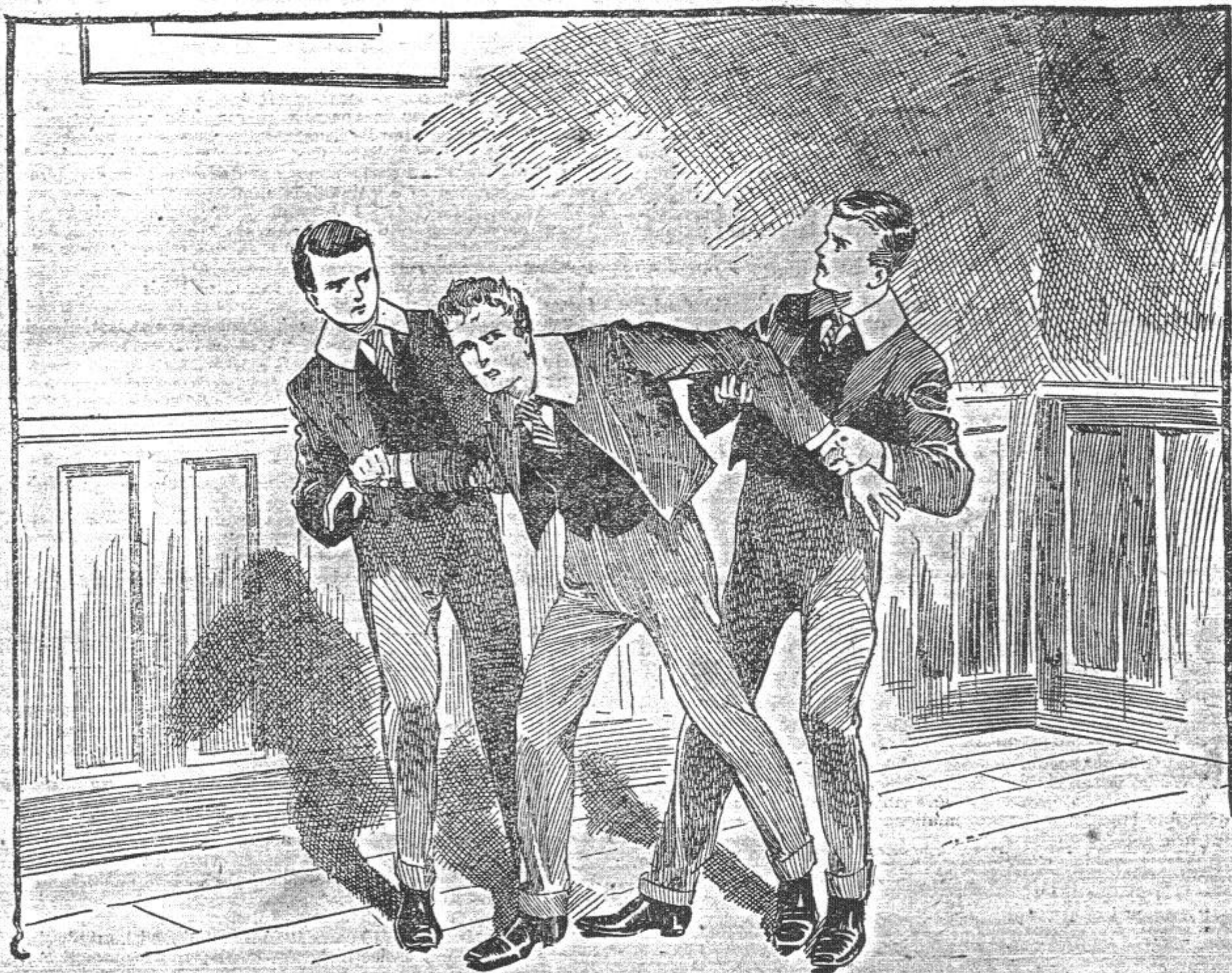
"The youngstah is cwyng because he is fwightened, I think, in all pwobability."

"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.



"Let me alone!" gasped Curly, straggling between the two. "Don't you be a beastly bully, Tom Merry."

(See page 8.)

"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 crosso-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 crosso-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—"

"Mannahs, that wemark savahs of wudeness."

"Go hon!" said Manners.

"Pwisoner at the bah," resumed Arthur Augustus, "you declah that you did not collah the stamp out of my album?"

"I—I—I—"

"I am afwaid I cannot admit that as a satisfactowy answer, pwisonah. A fwequent wepetition of the personal pwonoun first person singulah, expwesses nothin' to my mind."

"I—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—I—"

"It is weally most singulah that the youngstah should considah a wepetition of that pwonoun a satisfactory answah," 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 wesume the crosso-examination, Mewwy."

"Thank you, Gussy."

Curly was weeping copiously.

Tom's tender heart was touched, but it was necessary to get at the truth. But Tom had a feeling 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 what did you do it for?"
"I wanted to compare it with my stamp."
"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 waviety, but Baker's stamp was of the emerald green colah, and that was worth thirty shillin's. If Curly knew anythin' 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 a 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-no."
"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-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 the 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 Curley 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 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 I couldn't find it."
"You said you had 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 Quince 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 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.
"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 I must say that it looks awfully queer, that's all."
"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 and find the stamp."
"H'm! You seem to have tried, without much success. I say, chaps, I can't help thinking the poor little beggar is innocent, you know."
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 upon 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 at 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 conch!" said D'Arcy.
"And if he's innocent, why 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 us lies, we leave it——"
"To your conch," 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 rolling down his chubby cheeks, and his little 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——"
"Well, we'll keep mum, and give Curly a chance," said Tom.
"That's all we can do."
"Yaas, wathah!"

HAVE YOU SENT ME THAT POSTCARD YET?

"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 talk 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 of the missing stamp 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 upon 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 committee of the Hobby Club in the club-room.

After morning school Tom Merry was taking a stroll in the quadrangle, and under the shady trees was thinking out 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.

The sight of the cricket pitch did not tempt him, and 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 him gently on the shoulder.

Curly gave a cry, and looked quickly up, 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 about 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 had stolen the stamp. But I didn't."

Tom Merry looked keenly distressed.

He would have been glad to say right out that he was certain of Curly's innocence, but he could not say what he did not believe. 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 to wholly credit the story without proof of some kind.

"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 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 up at him quickly.

"You don't believe I stole it?"

"No," said Tom, making a valiant effort to convince himself.

"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 am 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 get wind 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 his 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 affright.

"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 at once, 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 again 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 dazzled 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 had been at work on the table under the window, and he had covered up his 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.

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

"What are these plates 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 water running 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 plate in the developing fluid——"

"Just so."

"And stir it up with something, I suppose?"

"No, fathead. Don't touch those plates. 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 got many more to develop? 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 many more of these beastly things are you going to develop?"

"Only this one," said Manners, taking the last plate out of his camera.

"What is it?"

"Blessed if I know. I forget."

"I can't see anything on it."

"How do you expect to before it's developed, ass? The ignorance of some fatheads 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 lights and the lights darks?"

"Of course I don't!"

"Well, you do now. Now look."

Manners placed the plate in the dish. Tom Merry and the amateur photographer watched it curiously.

"I can't remember what I took on the last plate," said Manners. "I took 'em all yesterday, but I haven't had the time to develop them yet. 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 plate; 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 sha'n't see anything clearly, I expect. May as well develop it and 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, of course."

"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—P-l-u—— What on earth can it be?"

Manners laughed.

"P-l-u-c-k!" he said. "Pluck! It's the paper Curly had there, which Mr. Quince took away from him for being late in to breakfast."

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

Manners Makes a Discovery—Light at Last!

"WHERE'S Manners?"

The managing director of the Merry Hobby Club asked the question, as he came in with the chairman and the 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 all that 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 right 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!"

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

"Yes."

"Well, that's the stamp."

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

HAVE YOU SENT ME THAT POSTCARD YET?

"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 'Pluck' 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 'Pluck' and laid it down again, just to kill time till he could get rid of me, and I'll bet anything, kids, that he's got the stamp stuck in 'Pluck.'"

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

"I say, that beats 'Sherlock Holmes' or 'Sexton Blake,'" said Herries. "But there may be something in it."

"I'm sure there is," said Manners. "We'll ask Curly, anyway, if—Hullo, 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 'Pluck' in your pocket yesterday morning before you missed the stamp?"

Curly looked amazed.

"Yes," he replied.

"That's all. I say, Mr. Quince has the 'Pluck,' 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 Quince 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. Quince, the master of the Third, they marched.

Tom Merry knocked at the door.

"Come in."

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

"If you please, sir—" said Tom Merry.

"If you please, sir—" said Blake.

"Weally—" said D'Arcy.

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

"If you please—"

"If you please—"

"Weally—"

"Don't all speak at once. You explain, Merry."

"Certainly, sir." And the rest of the Hobby Club relapsed into silence. "If you please, sir, you took a copy of 'Pluck' 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* book."

"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. Quince 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. Quince severely.

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

"Oh, I see; it is a rare stamp."

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

"It is certainly not rot," said Mr. Quince. "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 'Pluck,' sir. Would you mind letting us see it?"

"Certainly not."

"Thank you so much, sir."

Mr. Quince threw open a drawer in his table. The confiscated copy of "Pluck" 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 "Pluck" 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 "Pluck" being placed on it, the gum had caused it to adhere. Then the "Pluck" 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 was 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. Quince.

"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."

"You may go, boys."

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 'Pluck' 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 to 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 for 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.

(Next Thursday's long, complete tale, dealing with Tom Merry's schooldays, will be entitled "Tom Merry's Ruse." Order your copy of "The Gem" Library in advance.)

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Stormpoint

A School Tale. By MAURICE MERRIMAN

READ
THIS
FIRST

Rex Allingham, Jim Fisher, and Bob Bouncer are three well-known chums at Stormpoint College. Hal Trehearn, the captain of the school, favours them; but they are bullied by Jardon and Symes, two Fifth-Formers, who play many spiteful tricks upon them. Bob mysteriously comes into some money, and, as he is frightened that his stepfather—who is coming down to the school—might like to have the handling of it, Bob draws it from the bank and hides it. His stepfather arrives, but he is unable to obtain the money, and so takes his departure, much to Bob's delight. A new boy named Alburton comes to Stormpoint, and the chums object to his swaggering disposition, so nickname him "Swipes."

(Now go on with the story.)

Alburton Receives a Thrashing.

Rex and Bob adjourned to the close, and were discussing Swipes when Rex received a blow over the side of the head that floored him. Swipes was the striker, and he placed his monocle in his eye and gazed calmly at his fallen foe, while Jardon, the bully, told Rex that it served him right. The fact is that Jardon had gained a little information concerning the new boy. That he was wealthy was quite sufficient for Jardon, who would have made a friend of Bob because that worthy appeared to get as much money as he required.

Rex rose to his feet. He had a bad bruise across his left cheek, but he kept quite calm.

"Do you wish to fight now, Swipes," he inquired, "or after dinner? We generally fight in the afternoon, but as you are new to the rules, why, I give you the choice."

"Why, you cheeky child!" exclaimed Swipes. "Do you mean to say that you would fight me?"

"That is what I intend to do," answered Rex.

"Then come on, little cad!"

"We cannot settle the matter here. Come into the gym!"

"Knock the little beast silly after dinner, Alburton!" exclaimed Jardon. "Don't bother yourself about the little beast now! Come into my study and have a chat. There are not many gentlemen at this college, but every one of the kids knows that I am one of them."

"I'm jolly glad that I am not another!" observed Rex. "But you have got to understand this, Swipes, you shall fight me. I don't care where the combat comes off, but you shall either fight me, or tell me that you are sorry for the blow you delivered. Mind, I don't want to fight a new fellow, who is not used to the rules of this college. If you choose to apologise to me, I will accept your apology."

"You little cad, I'll knock you silly! Let the little idiot have his dinner first!" cried Swipes. "And mind, if I kill him, I won't be answerable for it. I have fought with the greatest fighters of the day. When boxing with Jackson, he had to admit that I got the best of it, but he asked me not to say anything about it. Now, I—"

"Quite enough!" laughed Rex. "It is to be a fight, and, as I understand, it is to be in the gym after dinner. Come on, old chaps. Swipes has found his level."

"Here, you come away!" growled Bob, catching hold of Rex's arm, and pulling him away. "If you are going to fight Swipes—why, you are going to do it in proper order, and there isn't nearly time to thrash the great lout before dinner. After dinner in the gymnasium, Swipes!" shouted Bob. "I'll bring my man, Jardon, and you can bring that jackass with the jewellery and the eyeglass."

"I'll punch your head after I have knocked that other little idiot silly!" declared Alburton.

"All right, Swipes! You have got to tackle Rex first. It's no good doing too much at once, you know! There goes the dinner-bell!"

There was the usual rush, and Alburton got a place next to Bob. It was about the worst place he could possibly have got, but as it was the only vacant one he had no choice.

"Do you drink all Burton, or do you prefer 'arf and 'arf, Swipes?" inquired Bob.

"Are you talking, Bouncer?" demanded Mr. Salmon.

"Yes, sir."

"Then cease doing so!"

It was "stew-day," as they called it, and as a plate of

stew was placed before Alburton he eyed it dubiously, then he smelt it, and shuddered. The food at Stormpoint was always excellent, but he considered it the proper thing to grumble at it.

"I will take soup and fish first," observed Swipes.

"You will take Salmon if you are not careful," muttered Bob, and his remark caused laughter.

"You are talking again, Bouncer!" cried Mr. Salmon. "What did you say to make the boys laugh?"

Bob always blurted out the truth, and this is why the masters liked him.

"Swipes said he would take soup and fish first, sir, and I remarked that he would take Salmon if he wasn't careful. It was meant for a joke on your name, sir."

"Well, don't let it affect you at dinner! Go on with your dinner, Alburton, and don't make yourself ridiculous, if you can help it!"

"I can't eat this stuff!"

"Absurd! I am going to eat it!"

"I fail to see how that affects me!"

"You are an extremely insolent lad, and, I fear, have been brought up badly; but you will be taught manners at this college."

"Well, what is in the stuff?"

"How should I know?"

"I don't care to eat stewed-up pieces off other fellows' plates! I like to know what is in the food I am eating!"

"There's a piece of bread in yours!" said Bob, as Perkins, who sat opposite, dexterously hurled a large piece of bread into Swipes's plate, and sent the stew splashing into his face and all down his shirt-front.

"Fury!" yelled Alburton, leaping to his feet and springing at Rex, whose head he commenced to hammer, under the erroneous impression that it was he who had thrown the missile.

He had got Rex by the back of the neck with one hand and hammered at his head with his other fist; consequently Rex could not get free, but he succeeded in picking up the next boy's plate of stew and slopping the contents into Swipes's face. That separated them, and Mr. Salmon came up with his cane, which he used on Swipes with a freedom that not only surprised him, but caused him to howl dismally.

"Sit down!" commanded Mr. Salmon.

"I sha—"

"Sit down!" ordered Mr. Salmon again, emphasising the order with some stinging cuts with the cane.

"I must go and wash my face."

"You must do what I command, my lad! Wipe your face on that serviette! Did you throw the piece of bread, Allingham?"

"No, sir," answered Rex.

"It seemed to come from this side of the table, sir," said Perkins.

"So I thought," answered Mr. Salmon. "Did you see the boy who threw it?"

"Well, sir, it wouldn't be right of me to say for certain; and, besides, I feel sure you would not force a boy to sneak."

Mr. Salmon, who knew Perkins's playful ways, looked rather dubious. However, he let the matter drop, and absolutely refused to allow Swipes to go and wash his face.

"If you choose to behave like a rough at meals, you must put up with the consequences!" said Mr. Salmon.

"I am not supposed to be struck," snarled Swipes. "It's

HAVE YOU SENT ME THAT POSTCARD YET?

the first time in my life that I have ever been struck, and—"

"Then it is a great pity your mother did not beat you when you were a little boy and deserved it, as I am sure was the case. It would have been better for you had she placed you across her knee when you were a child. If you act as a child now, I shall place you across my knee and severely cane you."

This caused a roar of laughter, and it made Swipes look extremely foolish. However, he ate his dinner in silence, and an excellent dinner he made, in spite of his grumbling.

"Look here, old chap," exclaimed Jardon after dinner. The bully had his reasons for being friendly with the fop. "I'll put you up to a dodge or two. It's best not to answer Seaslug, because he always gets the better of it. But I'll tell you about that later on. Now, I want you to give that little demon Rex Allingham the worst thrashing he has ever had in his life. You have got to remember that it was he who got you into that bother. Of course he threw the bread, and I am glad you gave it to him; but you have got to remember that he has so far scored off you, and we will see you give him an awful flogging. You will have to keep your eyes open, because he is a boxer."

"So am I. My tutor was a splendid boxer, and he taught me for years; besides, hang it all, he can't have the slightest chance against me! I'm head and shoulders taller and years older. I don't believe the cheeky kid will dare come up to scratch."

But Jardon knew better. Rex was not the sort of lad to take a blow that he did not deserve; nor was he one to back out of a challenge.

There was a pretty big crowd in the gymnasium, and, of course, the youngsters were on Rex's side. They wanted to show the new boy what the fellows of Stormpoint College were made of, and they knew that they had a good representative in Rex. Jardon and his chum Symes wanted to see Rex knocked out of time; but then, they were abominable bullies, and only made friends with the new boy because they knew he had an unlimited supply of money.

"Go for his dial, Rex!" growled Bob, by way of instructions. "He won't like a smack on the nose. Besides, I want the fop to show he's had a fight. He looks scientific, so look out for squalls."

As the two combatants stepped up to each other it looked a very unfair fight. Rex had his chest deep; while, thanks to his active life, he was in perfect training. But Swipes had a great advantage both in height and length of reach, to say nothing of age.

For some moments they sparred for an opening, then Swipes rushed in and delivered an upper-cut that sent Rex to the ground. He was on his feet in an instant. But Swipes rushed in again, and, flinging himself on Rex, bore him to the ground again, while Swipes dropped on him as heavily as he conveniently could.

"I still advise the nasal organ, Rex," murmured Bob, who knew perfectly well that the disastrous start would never dishearten his man. "Of course, we have a tough job, but the first smack on the nose may cause an alteration. Right?—are. Let him crow."

Swipes was crowing. He strutted about as though he had done something clever, and after all he was only fighting a lad many years his junior.

"Oh, is the cheeky kid coming up again? Well, he will go down again. Come on, poor child, and I will give you a lesson in boxing!"

Rex was on his mettle now. Swipes lashed out, but Rex guarded the blow, then his left shot into Swipes's nose. It caught it on the tip in an upward direction, and there could not be a doubt that it hurt him. Rex followed up his first success, and let out right and left. Swipes received a blow in either eye, a third one on the nose, then he got an upper-cut, and long before he had recovered from those gentle attentions, Rex rushed in, and, closing with him, flung him heavily without going down himself.

"We are getting on in a most satisfactory manner," observed Bob. "You are making him look charming. His nose is bleeding, and his eyes are turning black. Hadn't you better mop your man up, Jardon, before my man mops him up?"

"Don't you crow before you are out of the wood, you stupid kid!" snarled Jardon, who did not at all like the turn affairs had taken. "Burton is going to give him the most frightful thrashing he has ever had in his life."

"He will have to shape up differently to last round, then," laughed Bob. "How long do you want between the rounds?"

Half an hour, or perhaps you would like a few days."

Swipes had lost his temper by this time, and that did not improve matters for him. He it out wildly, and Rex did not experience much difficulty in guarding his blows; while those he got in were delivered right from the shoulder.

Swipes was afraid to try another. He struck out with

all his strength, in the hope of getting in a blow that would knock Rex out of time, but in this he was not successful.

Every now and then Rex would take a forward spring, and Swipes's face looked very lumpy, while he was puffing badly.

"I think I would go for his chest now, Rex!" exclaimed Bob. "A few in the wind, and then a couple of scorchers in the face ought to sew him up. Still, there's no hurry. You are getting on very nicely."

"I am going to try to finish it off this round," said Rex. "I believe he is losing heart. Here he comes!"

Swipes was still furious, and he went in with a rush; but Rex received him with a tremendous blow in the chest, and followed it up with two more. Then he caught him one beneath the jaw, and Swipes went down in a heap.

"What is your opinion concerning the state of the weather now, Jardon?" demanded Bob. "Warm, isn't it? We will call that the first knock-down blow, and if I am not considerably mistaken it will be the last. Get up, Swipes! Don't lie there groaning like a tired camel."

"I slipped, and have seriously sprained my arm!" snarled Swipes.

"Ha, ha, ha! I suppose that means that you are afraid to fight any more."

"I cannot fight with a sprained arm."

"No, and you can't fight without one. You are whacked."

"No such thing. Just as though that kid could whack me."

"I claim the fight for my man, unless you choose to continue it; only if you take my advice you will let it end there, for you haven't the slightest chance. Rex is too good for you. You had better try a smaller boy, though even then I think you will get the worst of it."

Jardon tried to convince Swipes that he would certainly win if he only fought on; but that would have been to meet his master, and he felt as though he had had enough of it. He muttered something about punching hands, then put on his things and strode from the gymnasium, while Bob took his man away looking none the worse for the encounter.

(Continued on next page.)



This is a small reproduction of the picture which appears on the cover of the Grand Special Bank Holiday Double Number of "The Marvel" now on sale. It contains a 40-page tale dealing with the adventures of Jack, Sam and Pete; a detective and a school tale. Buy it to-day.

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TOM MERRY'S RUSE.

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STORMPOINT (continued).

Bob, and a good many other boys in his dormitory, were awoke by the clanging of the college bell, and they all grumbled at it, especially Bob.

"Ridiculous time to ring the bell!" he growled. "Why can't they ring it at nine o'clock?"

"Get up, you lazy rascal!" exclaimed Rex. "Now then, Swipes, it's time you put on your eyeglass and the rest of your clothes!"

"I don't take any notice of that," declared Alburton.

"Funny thing that!" exclaimed Rex. "I consider you take far too much notice of yourself, Swipes. Look here, Bob, if you go to sleep again you will get marked late!"

"Disgusting dull morning to get up at this time!" growled Bob. "I hate getting up early. It's all right for Seaslug, and fellows who have been accustomed to it, but— Good-morning, sir! Nice sort of morning."

Bob added this as Mr. Salmon entered the dormitory, for he knew his master must have heard himself referred to as Seaslug, and he wanted to propitiate him a little.

"Many happy returns of the day, sir!" exclaimed Rex.

"Thank you, Mr. Salmon," exclaimed the long-suffering master. "I am rather surprised, though, that you should have remembered it was my birthday."

"Three cheers for Seas— for Mr. Salmon!" bawled Bob. "Hurrah!"

"Really, my lad, this is very kind of you, but you must not make so much noise. Now, tumble up, and I'll see if I can make the lessons a little harder for you."

Bob, leaping out of bed in a moment of unusual with him. "Hurrah! I've got a new idea. Watch me, you fellows! I'll bet the first bite of a morning sugar-bake that I am dressed quicker than Swipes is. Don't forget your eyeglass. You had better put it on to make sure that you wash correctly. You will find when I get an idea that there's something in it. I'll show you."

Bob was dressed in a remarkably short time, and he rushed into the doctor's study so precipitately that he made that gentleman start.

"Morning, sir. Nice morning! The dullness is going to clear off, and the amount of heat we shall get would render brain-work positively dangerous."

"I do not think that any heat will affect the amount of your brain-work," observed the doctor. "But what do you want?"

"Holiday, sir."

"Well, you can't have it, Bouncer. You are far too fond of holidays; besides, even when you are working you are not at all attentive to your work."

"Habit, sir. I thought, perhaps, sir, that you would like to give me a holiday, and as it wouldn't be fair to give it to me without the rest of the fellows had one as well, why, I thought you would like to give a holiday to the whole college."

"Indeed, I should like to do nothing of the sort!"

"You see, sir, old Seaslug has— Ahem!"

"Do you suppose that is the way to induce me to grant a favour?"

"No, sir. Slip of the tongue. He heard me call him Seaslug this morning, and I don't think he liked it. Now I am not taking his part. He's a lot too strict for a master, and he has got other faults; all the same, he's a downright good fellow, and I can forgive him his faults—"

"How remarkably lenient! However, you can go. I have no intention of giving a holiday."

"But, sir, it's his birthday, and he naturally wants a holiday."

"Did Mr. Salmon tell you so?"

"Not exactly, sir, but if he's human he must want a holiday on his birthday. I know I want them every day of the year, whether it is my birthday or not. Now, considering what a hard-working master he is—I can vouch for that—it would be a nice thing on your part to give us all a holiday, because then he would be able to get one."

"Well, your request is granted."

"Thank you very much, sir! May I tell our fellows?"

The doctor nodded, and Bob bolted with his news. He kept it until Mr. Salmon was just about to take the class before breakfast, then he started to shout "Hurrah!" at the top of his voice.

The boys, who were accustomed to Bob's playful ways, only laughed; but as he insisted on cheering they joined in, and Mr. Salmon slammed on his desk with his cane in a vain attempt to restore order.

"Robert Bouncer!" he shouted, at last. "Come here!"

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Won't Rex do as well, sir? You look jolly dangerous with that cane. If you could give Swipes what you owe me, I would feel obliged."

"How dare you make this noise in class!"

"No class to-day, sir. Whole holiday. The doctor has given a whole holiday in honour of your birthday."

"Who told you so?"

"He did, sir. We are not to do any work to-day."

"Did you ask for a holiday?"

"I did just mention the matter, sir."

"Nonsense! You must have done more than just mention the matter. I expect that was the idea you referred to. However, if Dr. Andale has given a holiday, there is an end of the matter. You are not playing one of your tricks?"

"No, sir! It's right enough. I'm going to hire a waggonette for the day, and I'm going to have one of the finest outings you ever had in your life. I am going to outdo old Swipes. He can make what arrangements he likes, but I'll back a lollipop I beat him. You leave it to me, you fellows. I'll stand all expenses. Money is no object to me since my dear, delightful stepfather stopped my supplies. He used to allow me twopence a week whether I wanted it or not, and now he has stopped that it has put me on my mettle, and I can get just as much as ever I want."

"You spend a great deal too much money," said Mr. Salmon, "and where you get it from is a mystery to me. Well, the class is dismissed, as I know I can rely on your word, Bouncer. I hope none of you will get into mischief."

Now, Bob selected his party forthwith, and he told them to meet him at the hotel where they let out waggonettes and other sorts of vehicles; then Bob was busy with his arrangements. He sent off a very long-winded telegram to the landlord of a certain inn, and he paid a visit to the pastry cook's, from whom he bought an extraordinary amount of good things. Next he went to the bank, and drew money to pay for them and for any other expenses they might have.

He had scarcely concluded all his arrangements when Rex and a select party, at present remarkably quiet, came on the scene, and they were followed by Swipes, Jardon, Symes, and Perkins. The latter had lately succeeded in getting some money from his father, and so the bullies decided to take him with them. They also took Swipes, because he always had plenty of money. As for Jardon and Symes they were always in state of debt.

"I hope those brute are not going to follow us!" growled Bob. "I wouldn't be a bit surprised if they are. You see, it would be a fine day's amusement for them if they succeeded in spoiling ours, especially if they were able to collect our grub."

(Another long instalment of this splendid school story next Thursday. Order your GEM in advance.)



WHO TO WRITE TO: The Editor, "GEM" Library, 2, Carmelite House, Carmelite Street, London, who will be pleased to hear from you.

TOM MERRY AGAIN!

Martin Clifford has written another excellent tale dealing with Tom Merry's schooldays for next Thursday's issue of "The Gem" Library. It is entitled

"TOM MERRY'S RUSE,"

and I can assure you that it is a story equally thrilling as it is amusing. You will do well by ordering "The Gem" Library in advance.

Have you told me what you think of our stories yet? Will you let me know? A postcard will do.

THE EDITOR.