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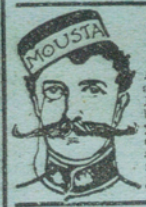


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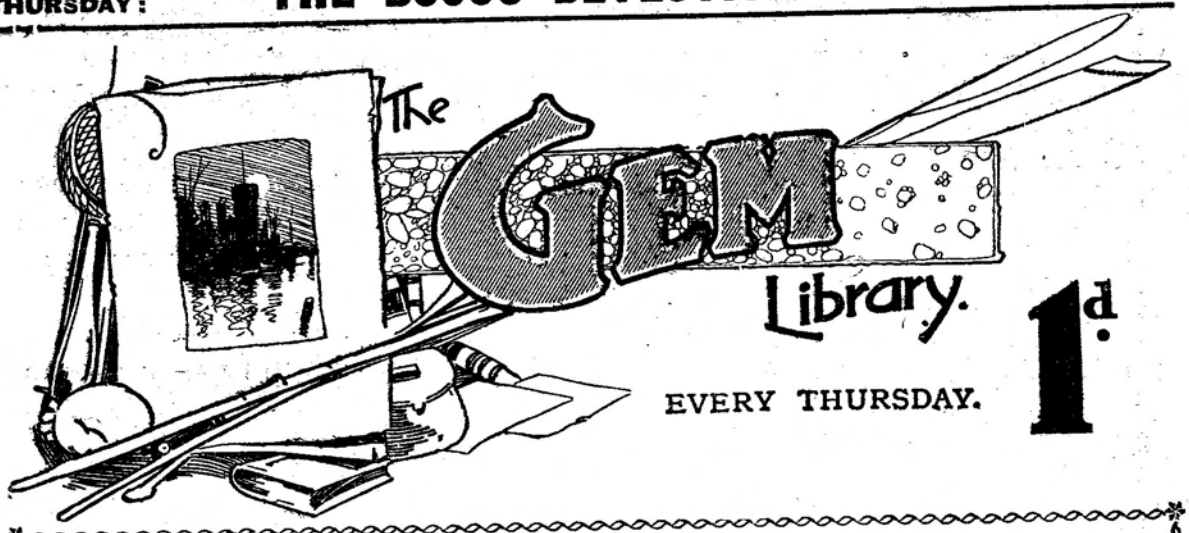




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MARTIN CLIFFORD.



THE TELL-TALE.

CHAPTER 1.

Something the Matter.

THERE was a shade of gloom upon the brow of Tom Merry, of the Shell at St. Jim's. Tom was, as a rule, merry by nature as well as by name, and it was so unusual for him to appear with a clouded brow, that the circumstance attracted general attention. But to inquiries as to what was "up," and what had given him the "hump," Tom Merry returned only short and evasive answers, which did not much enlighten the inquirers.

He was certainly worried about something; it was easy for everyone to see that. Figgins, of the New House, saw it when he met him in the quadrangle, and Figgins at once stopped to inquire the cause. For the moment the great Figgins forgot that School House and New House were deadly rivals, and that he and Tom Merry were rival leaders.

"Hallo, kid, what's the matter?" asked Figgins. "Have you lost a shilling and found a threepenny-bit?"

"No," said Tom Merry.

His manner was so abrupt that Figgins gave a start.

The rivalry between the two Houses at St. Jim's did not prevent the juniors, as a rule, from entertaining a really friendly regard for each other at bottom, and their rows and raids were never attended by any real ill-feeling. And so Figgins looked in surprise at the unrelaxing face of Tom Merry.

"Anything wrong?" he asked.

"Oh, no."

"I see. You're going about looking like a funeral mute for the fun of the thing, I suppose?"

But Tom Merry did not smile.

"I say, you're not bearing malice about any of our little tiffs, surely?" exclaimed Figgins, looking at Tom Merry with a puzzled expression. "That wouldn't be like you."

"Of course not," said Tom Merry hastily.

"I know we busted up your study last week."

"That's nothing."

"It's not that, then?"

"Of course it isn't!"

"Then what is it?" demanded Figgins.

"Nothing."

The chief of the New House juniors gave an expressive grunt. He could see that something was wrong, and he suspected that Tom Merry's resentment was directed against himself. At all events, the School House junior's manner was not friendly.

"Well, if you've got up this cast of countenance because you think it's pretty, you're making a big mistake," he said. "That look of yours would stop a clock. If you've got anything on your chest, why can't you spout it out?"

"It's all right."

"All wrong, I should say. But I suppose that's a polite way of telling me to mind my own business, so I'll be off." And Figgins went off, whistling.

Tom Merry gave himself a sort of shake, as if to dismiss unpleasant thoughts, and walked on towards the School House. Three juniors were coming down the School House steps—Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy, of Study No. 6. They sighted Tom Merry at once, and stopped him. Tom looked a little impatient, but he stopped.

"What's up?" said Blake directly. "I hear you are going around with a frown upon your noble brow. Why, which, and wherefore is this thusness?"

"What are you grousing about, Merry?" asked Herries.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of the School House, flicking a speck of dust from his immaculate boots. "What is the mattah, deah boy? You seem to be weawin' a wowwied look, you know, and that's beastly bad form."

"Oh, rats!" said Tom Merry.

"If that's what you call a polite answer to a friendly inquiry," said Blake, "I can only say that you've got a lot to learn, Tom Merry."

"Yaas, wathah! I wegard the weply of Tom Mewwy as distinctly wude. I am surpwised at you, Mewwy."

"Well, don't bother," said Tom Merry.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy fixed his monocle in his eye, and surveyed Tom Merry with a disdainful glance.

"Don't bothah!" he repeated. "Tom Mewwy, you are extwemely ungentlemanly, I am vewy much surpwised. I have nevah known you to be so wude befoah, though you have nevah weally tweated me with pwopah wespect."

"Oh, rats!"

Tom Merry walked on, but Blake gently insinuated two fingers in the back of his collar and jerked him back again.

"Don't be in a hurry," he exclaimed, "we want an explanation."

"Yaas, wathah! You must give an explanation of your wude and uttahly ungentlemanly conduct, Tom Mewwy, or we shall have no alternative but to administah a feahful thwashin'."

"Right-ho!" grinned Herries. "Let's roll him down the steps for a start."

"Oh, no, deah boy; that would spoil his clothes, and we don't want to be too severe. If we give him a feahful lickin' with a cwicket-stump, I think it will about meet the case, you know."

"Oh, don't rot!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "There's nothing the matter, only I don't feel in the humour for a jaw, that's all."

And he jerked himself away and walked into the House, leaving the chums of Study No. 6 staring after him in astonishment.

"Well, my only Aunt Sempronia!" said Blake emphatically. "I've never seen Tom Merry like that before."

"There's something wrong," said Herries.

"Yaas, wathah! That's as plain as your face, or nearly so."

"I wish I knew what was up," said Blake, looking mystified. "Of course, Tom Merry is a cheeky young bounder, and has the nerve to fancy himself chief of the School House juniors. That's all——"

"Rot!" said Herries.

"Exactly, all rot," agreed Blake. "We're the leaders, as every sensible chap must admit. Still, I rather like Merry, apart from his nerve, and I'm sorry to see him cutting up rough like this."

"Pewwaps he only wants a feahful thwashin'."

"Gussy, you're an ass! Come on, kids, and let's get down to the practice."

And Study No. 6 dismissed the matter from their minds, and went down to the cricket ground—Blake and Herries to practice, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy to watch them. He found cricket fatiguing.

Tom Merry entered the School House, and ran into Lowther and Manners, his chums in the Shell. He would have passed on quickly, but Manners caught him by one shoulder and Lowther by the other.

"Halt!"

"Well, I'm halted," said Tom, with a smile. "What's wanted?"

"You are."

"Well, here I am."

The chums of the Shell solemnly backed him against the staircase, and pinned him there, and Lowther wagged his forefinger warningly at him.

"Now, Tom, what's the row?"

"What's the trouble?" said Manners.

"Nothing," said Tom..

"Won't wash," said Monty Lowther, shaking his head. "Why that frown upon your baby brow? Why that gloom upon a countenance that was wont to shine even as if it had been freshly scrubbed with soap?"

"Oh, don't rot!"

"Explain yourself, then, you bounder. What do you mean by walking around like Hamlet in a fit, and not explaining what's the trouble?" exclaimed Lowther indignantly.

"Well, it's really nothing, you see."

"Then tell us the nothing."

"It was a mere trifle, but I felt rather rotten about it."

"Have you got anything up against us?"

"Oh, no!" said Tom Merry hastily.

"Against Blake and his lot?"

"No, no."

"Has Figgins been ruffling the serene plumage of your noble nibs?"

Tom Merry was silent.

"Oho, so it's Figgins!" said Monty Lowther. "What has he done? I know he's a cheeky kid. It's a great nerve on his part to exist in the same school as our noble selves; but he will do it, you know."

"What has he been and gone and done?" asked Manners solemnly.

"Oh, nothing," said Tom Merry; "it's not worth talking about." And suddenly twisting himself loose, he ran up the stairs, leaving his chums staring after him, and then at one another, in astonishment.

Tom Merry entered his study, and his clouded brow grew darker as he saw Mellish, of the Fourth, sitting on his table, evidently waiting for him to come in.

Mellish was the cad of the Fourth, and as full of ill-natured mischief as an imp, and there was very little in common between him and Tom Merry.

He looked up and nodded coolly to the hero of the Shell. Tom Merry's face remained dark and set.

"Hallo, Merry; I wanted to see you!"

"The desire was all on your side, then."

"Oh, don't be a rotter!"

"The fact is, Mellish, I don't like you, and I wish you'd keep the other side of my door," said Tom Merry abruptly. "That's plain English, isn't it?"

"Well, yes; quite candid, in fact," said Mellish, as he slipped from the table. "I suppose it's the special Merry brand of politeness."

"I don't see why I should be polite to you," said Tom angrily. "You seem to take a pleasure in making trouble everywhere."

"If that's all the thanks I get for——"

"It's all the thanks you'll get from me."

"I came here to say——"

"Say nothing; you've said too much already."

"Oh, just as you like! If you knew that Blake had——"

"Oh, hang it! What about Blake?"

"I won't tell you. If you knew what he had been saying you would wish—— But never mind; I'm mum."

And Mellish quitted the study, and Tom Merry was left alone, with a darker cloud than ever on his face, and his lips set hard.

CHAPTER 2.

The Committee of Investigation.

"I SAY, Blake——"

"Oh, don't worry, Gussy!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy looked indignantly at his chum. The four comrades of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's were in their study, No. 6, in the School House. Blake was looking worried, and Herries and Digby seemed to be doing a great deal of thinking. D'Arcy, too, had been looking reflective, he had suddenly broken the silence, only to be promptly sat upon.

"Weally, Blake——"



Gore twisted Mellish into the doorway, and gave him a powerful kick that sent him sprawling out into the passage. (See page 8.)

"I'm worried. Dry up!"

"I wefuse to dwy up! I have been thinkin'——"

"Well, if it's hurt you, go to the doctor, but don't bother me. I tell you I'm worried!" grunted Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! But, you see, I'm wowwied, too," said D'Arcy. "I'm wowwied about Tom Mewwy, you know. I weally think there's something wrong!"

"That's plain enough," said Digby.

"Vewy twue. Is that what you are thinkin' about, Blake?"

"Yes, ass!"

"I decline to be called an ass. The expwession is oppwobwious——"

"Look here," said Blake, stretching out his hand to the inkpot on the table, "if you have anything to say, Gussy, say it, and then shut up!"

"Certainly, deah boy!" said D'Arcy, keeping a wary eye upon the inkpot. "The fact of the mattah is, that there's something w'ong with Tom Mewwy, and I think we ought to look into it."

"Oh, I see! I was thinking something of the kind myself!"

"Gweat minds always wun in gwooves," said D'Arcy complacently. "You see, as leadahs of the juniahs it's weally our duty to look into anythin' that goes w'ong in the lowah Forms in the School House, and weally Tom Mewwy seems to be quite upset about somethin' or othah, you know!"

"That's a fact!" said Herries, with a nod. "And I can't help thinking that it's something a bit serious, for he isn't the fellow to make a long face about a trifle."

"You're right there," said Blake; "but I don't quite see how we are to look into the matter. After all, it's his own affair."

"Yaas, but as leadahs of the juniahs——"

"Cheese it! Have you got any idea in that empty skull of yours?"

"Yaas, wathah! I think we ought to wesolve ourselves into a committee of inquiwy——"

"Ha, ha! A committee of inquiry to discover why Tom Merry has got the hump!" grinned Blake.

"It isn't the common or garden hump that he's got, deah boy. He has been goin' about all day with a face like a kite, so there must be somethin' the mattah of more importance than the mere hump."

"Well, yes; I agree with that. It looks to me," said Blake, "as if he's got something up against somebody, and doesn't like to say it out. If that's the case, I think he ought to speak out, and clear the air."

"Yaas, wathah! That is the bwilliant ideah that flashed into my bwain while I was thinkin' it ovah," said D'Arcy. "My idea was to question Tom Mewwy——"

"Suppose he won't answer?"

"Then he can be made to. My ideah was to lay for him in the passage, and dwag him into the study here, and make him answer our questions upon this important subject."

"I fancy that wouldn't work, Gussy. We might give him anything, from frog's-march to something with boiling oil in it, but he wouldn't open his mouth if he chose to remain mum."

"Yaas, I know he's wathah an obstinate bwute sometimes, but we might twy, at all events. It's weally for his own good, you know, so it does not mattah if we hurt him a little."

"Still, the committee of inquiry isn't half a bad wheeze," said Blake thoughtfully. "There's nothing going on at present, and with Figgins working up for an exam., things

aren't so lively as usual with the New House bounders. We've got time to attend to the matter, so I vote we look into it."

"Passed unanimously!" said Herries and Digby heartily.

As a matter of fact, the chums of Study No. 6 were really concerned about Tom Merry. Any depression of spirits or ill-temper had seldom been noticed before in the hero of the Shell. A snappish answer from Tom Merry was a sure sign that something was wrong, and although the rivalry between Study No. 6 and the Terrible Three for the leadership of the School House was very keen, the chums of the Fourth could not help liking Tom.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy beamed round upon his comrades.

"Vewy good," he said. "Now, as chairman of the committee——"

"As what?" asked Blake unpleasantly.

"As chairman of the committee of inquiwy——"

"As a howling ass, you mean."

"I wefuse to be chawactewised as a howlin' ass. I wegard the expwession as absolutely diswespectful. As chairman of the committee——"

"The chairman of the committee is elected by universal suffrage," said Blake, "and as leader of this study, I put up for the job."

"Now, Blake, I weally wegard that as——"

"Put it to the vote."

"Wats! It was my ideah——"

"Now, don't be an ass, D'Arcy!"

"Then don't you be a wottah! It was my ideah, and I claim to be chairman of my own beastly committee."

"If you had as much sense as would go on the point of a pin, Gussy, I wouldn't say no; but as the matter stands——"

"I am willin' to put it to the vote," said D'Arcy, with dignity. "I wegard your dewogatowy wemarks with disdain, Blake."

"That's right! Now, then, hands up for Gussy!"

Gussy's hand promptly went up, but it was alone in its glory, so to speak. Herries and Digby only grinned. They had no intention of electing the swell of the School House to the position of chairman of the committee of inquiry.

D'Arcy gave his chums a withering glance.

"Hands up for me," said Blake, with a grin; and he set a good example by elevating his own right hand in the air.

To his surprise, again it was only a solitary hand that went up. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy went off into a series of chuckles. Blake looked at Herries and Digby with the glare of a basilisk.

"What do you mean by standing there like a pair of dummies?" he asked politely. "What are you getting at, you duffers? What's the little game, you silly asses?"

"Well, I think I should make about as good a chairman as the next chap," said Digby, in a casual sort of way. "What do you think Herries?"

"I think I'm the man for the job, to speak quite plainly," said Herries modestly.

Arthur Augustus chuckled audibly. Blake looked at him.

"Is anything the matter with you, D'Arcy?"

"Anythin' the mattah, deah boy? Certainly not!"

"Then what are you making that row for?"

"Wow? What wow?"

"That funny row in your neck, like an old hen with the asthma," said Blake.

"Why, you ass, I was laughin'!" said D'Arcy indignantly.

Blake sniffed.

"Then don't do it any more—at least, without warning. It's not fair. Now, look here, you conceited asses, I'm the proper chairman for this giddy committee——"

"Wats! You must admit that I am the pwopah person——"

"Well, I really think I should fill the bill all right," said Herries. "Of course, I may be mistaken."

"Of course you may," said Digby; "in fact, there's not much doubt on that point, in my mind. I think I'm the chap——"

"Wats! I say wats! Under the circs.——"

"Let's toss up for it," said Blake resignedly. "It's no good arguing with you kids. You're too conceited for anything. Here's a penny!"

Blake spun the coin in the air, and caught it again.

"Guess, Dig!"

"Head," said Digby.

Blake showed the coin, and it was the figure of Britannia that met Dig.'s eye, and he gave a grunt.

D'Arcy took a half-sovereign from his waistcoat pocket, and tossed it up. It was for Herries to call to him, and Herries promptly said tail.

"Head, deah boys!" said D'Arcy, beaming, as he showed the coin.

"Now it's between you and me, Gussy," said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Will you toss, or shall I?"

"Oh, I'll do it, deah boy! Here goes!"

D'Arcy clapped his hands over the coin again. Blake wrinkled his brows thoughtfully, and finally said head.

The coin was disclosed to view, and Blake gave an expressive grunt. He had guessed wrongly, and D'Arcy beamed with satisfaction.

"Bai Jove, I have won, you know!" he exclaimed, tossing the half-sovereign into the air again in his glee. "I am chairman of this beastly committee!"

"Who are you calling a beastly committee?"

"Merely a form of speech, deah boy! When I say beastly I don't mean beastly," said D'Arcy lucidly. "By the way, did anybody see where that beastly half-sovereign went to?"

"I think it went on the floor."

"I know it went on the floor, deah boy; but what I want to know is—where? Get down and look for it, will you, like good chaps."

"Why the dickens can't you get down and look for it yourself?" demanded Blake.

"I am afwaid I should wumple the knees of my twousahs— —"

"What about the knees of my trousers, hang you?"

"Oh, well, weally, that's not of so much importance——"

"Gussy, there are times when you want killing, and want it badly," said Blake darkly. "If you ever find yourself dead in some corner, you'll know the reason. Now we're properly constituted as a committee of investigation, kids, let's get to business. We've got a rotten chairman, of course——"

"I wefuse to be alluded to as a wotten chairman——"

"What's the first step?" asked Herries. "I've done my prep., and I'm ready for anything?"

"I can't see that half-sovereign," said D'Arcy, peering about the floor through his famous monocle, but without bending his knees.

"I can't, neither," said Blake; who was not looking. "The first step, I suppose, will be to go to Tom Merry and demand an explanation, in the name of the committee of the Fourth Form, specially appointed to inquire into the matter."

"He'll tell us to go and eat coke," Digby remarked.

"Well, we're not bound to do it, you know. Come——"

"I haven't found that beastly half-soveweign——"

"Never mind; very likely it will turn up."

"Yaas; but a half-soveweign is a half-soveweign, you know."

"Did you work that out in your own head, Gussy, and without the aid of a net?" asked Blake seripusly.

"Oh, don't wot, Blake. Help me to look for that beastly half-soveweign——"

"No time now. The committee of inquiry isn't going to inquire into a lost half-sovereign," said Blake, disdainfully. "Why couldn't you use a penny to toss with, like any ordinary individual?"

"But I am not an ordinawy individual——"

"No, you're an extraordinary ass! You can get Skimpole, the amateur detective of the Shell, to look for your half-sovereign, if you like. Come on, kids, the chairman's busy, so he can't come. I'll act as chairman pro tem."

"That you won't, you howwid boundah!" exclaimed D'Arcy, following the chums quickly to the door. "I shall certainly wefuse to have my pwovince invaded in that way. I am comin' with you, deah boys, and nevah mind the beastly half-sovereign."

"You may never find it again, Gussy."

"I'll wisk that," said D'Arcy. "I'm chairman of this beastly committee, and I'm goin' to take the lead, I assuah you, deah boy."

"Oh, get along, then," said Blake.

And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with a great deal of

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dignity in his stride, not to term it swagger, led the way to Tom Merry's study.

The door was closed, but the sound of voices could be heard within, showing that the chums of the Shell were at home.

"I'll knock," remarked Blake, as they came up the passage—"I——"

"Excuse me, Blake; I will knock, as chairman of the committee."

"Oh, rats!"

"It is not in order to say wats to the honouwable chairman——"

"More rats!"

"Blake, I must weally wemonstwate—Digby, what are you knockin' at the door for? It is my place to knock at the door, as chairman of the beastly committee——"

"Come in!" sang out the voice of Monty Lowther, within.

Digby put his hand to the door, but Arthur Augustus gently but firmly pulled him back.

"Pway excuse me, Dig, I take the lead—Hewwies, you wottah, what do you mean by puttin' yourself forward before your honouwable chairman in this way?"

But the grinning Herries had already opened the door.

The chums of the Fourth entered the study, to be greeted with looks of surprise by Monty Lowther and Manners.

Tom Merry did not look up.

CHAPTER 3.

The Committee Get to Work.

LOWTHER and Manners fixed an inquiring, and to tell the truth, not particularly welcoming glance upon the chums of Study No. 6. As a matter of fact, they were rather worried at that moment; and besides, when the Fourth-Formers came in force it sometimes meant ructions with the Shell, and the Shell boys were prepared for hostilities. But Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's beaming face was enough to assure anyone of his peaceful intentions.

"What do you kids want?" demanded Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"Wait a minute," said Blake aggressively. "Who are you calling kids, Montague Lowther?"

"You Fourth-Form infants," said Lowther deliberately.

"We didn't come here for a row," said Blake. "But under the circumstances I don't see how I can let Lowther off without punching his head."

"Lowther doesn't want to be let off," Monty remarked. "If you can punch my head, go on with it, and see how it turns out!"

"Blake, I insist upon your keepin' quiet. You are spoilin' the whole thing by puttin' yourself forward in this way!"

"Have you come out to-day specially to search for a thick ear, Gussy?"

"I wefuse to weply to such a perfectly widiculous question. Lowthah, I weally wish you would extend to us a less wude gweetin', as we have come to do you a service."

"Oh!" said Lowther, not very gratefully. "What's that?"

"We have been appointed as a committee of inquiwy——"

"As a what?" asked Monty Lowther and Manners together; and Tom Merry looked up from the paper he had taken up when the Fourth-Formers entered the study.

"A committee of inquiwy——"

"What are you going to inquire into?"

"Into the cause of the mystewious mannahs and customs of Tom Mewwy!"

"Well, you cheeky young donkey! And who appointed you?"

"The leadahs of the Fourth Form—that is to say, ourselves," replied D'Arcy, with dignity. "As a committee of inquiwy——"

"As a committee of inquiry, you had better travel," said Lowther; "otherwise you will probably leave this study as a committee of wrecks!"

"We wefuse to twavel until we have inquired into the cause of the late stwange conduct of Tom Merry. Tom Mewwy, pway stand up and answer my questions!" said the swell of the School House firmly.

"Oh, go and eat coke!" said Tom Merry.

"I wefuse to go and do anythin' of the sort!"

"Now, look here, Merry," said Blake——"

"Pway dwy up, Blake, and leave the talkin' to your chairman!"

"Sorry we can't let you talk here," said Manners. "There's the door and the window—take your choice!"

"I wefuse to take my choice. Tom Mewwy, I call upon you to stand up and weply to my questions——"

Lowther glanced at his leader.

"Shall we kick them out, Tom?" he asked.

D'Arcy screwed his eyeglass into his eye, and gave Lowther a disdainful glare. Blake, Herries, and Digby drew closer together, shoulder to shoulder, evidently in readiness for the commencement of the kicking-out process.

Tom Merry laughed, something like his old pleasant laugh, and rose from the armchair. He ran his fingers through his curly hair, as he always did when he was nonplussed or perplexed, and looked at Arthur Augustus.

"My dear kid," he exclaimed, "there's nothing to be inquired into. Never mind the kicking-out now, Lowther. Go quietly, you kids!"

"Who are you calling——"

"Pway shut up, Blake! I weally wish you would bear in mind that I am chairman of this beastly committee. Tom Mewwy, we wefuse to leave this woom until you have satisfied us. If you want to wow, we are weady for a wow."

The hero of the Shell laughed rather impatiently.

"Gussy, you're a good little ass. But really——"

"At any othah time, Tom Mewwy, I should feel called upon to administah a feahful thwashin' to you for applyin' that oppwobious expwession to me, but as chairman of the honouwable committee, I can afford to pass it ovah. Tom Mewwy, pway shut up and answer my questions——"

"How on earth is he to shut up and answer your questions too?" demanded Blake.

"Pway, don't intewwupt, Blake!"

"No; but really——"

"Weally, Blake, I must insist upon your eithah shuttin' up or wesignin' your seat on this committee," said D'Arcy firmly.

"But I haven't a seat; I'm standing!"

"I was usin' a figah of speech, deah boy. You must shut up or clear out. I hope that this warning will be sufficient. Now, Mewwy, have you or have you not been goin' about the whole day lookin' as if you had somethin' on your mind?"

"Really, I don't know."

"Well, I can answer that question for you—you have. I don't suppose for a moment that you have committed a cwime——"

"Thank you!"

"But you have somethin' on your mind, and it gives your fwiends the cweeps to see you goin' about like an amateur funewal mute, deah boy."

"I'm sorry," said Tom Merry, laughing in spite of himself. "I'll try to look a little more cheerful, that's all!"

"You had bettah confide the twouble to us. We will do our best to wemove it. Have you fallen in love, Tom Mewwy?"

"Ha, ha—no! I'm not troubled with your complaint, Gussy!"

"I wegard that wemark as a weflection upon myself. I have only been in love twice since I have been at this school, as you know perfectly well. But let that pass. Pway wefrain fwom makin' personal weflections. It is not good form. If you have not fallen in love, what is the mattah?"

"Nothing."

"You wefuse to answer questions?"

"Yes."

D'Arcy stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"Now the question for us to decide, deah boys," he said, turning to the grinning committee, "is this—shall we wag him——"

"Shall we what?" demanded Digby.

"Wag him, and make him answer——"

"Oh, rag him! That's not a bad idea."

"Better try it," said Lowther, with a look that hinted, however, that he really meant that the chums of the Fourth had better not try it.

"Shall we wag him," said D'Arcy, "or shall we pursue our inquiwies in othah quartahs?"

Tom Merry gave a start.

"I say, do shut up with this rot!" he exclaimed. "You don't mean to say that you're going over all the school chattering about me, do you?"

"Yaas, wathah! As a self-wespectin' and conscientious committee of inquiwy, we are bound to pursue our inquiwies in all quartahs till the twuth is discovered——"

"Rather!" said Blake, Herries, and Digby, in unison.

"Look here; I'd much rather you chaps minded your own business——"

"Pewwaps you would, Tom Merry; but that is weally not the point. Though as a mattah of fact, it is our business to look into this stwange mystewy, as leadahs of the juniahs of the School House——"

"Oh, cheese it! There's really nothing the matter. I don't want you to go gassing all over the school!" said Tom Merry restlessly.

"Well," said Monty Lowther, "as a matter of fact, I

rather agree with Gussy. If you don't speak out and explain, Tom, I shall be rather inclined to join the committee of investigation."

"Oh, don't be an ass, Lowther!"

"Thank you! You're growing marvellously polite in your old age, I must say."

"What I mean is——"

"Let us go, deah boys. Upon the whole, as chairman of the committee, I decide that for the pwesent we will pursue our inquiwies in othah quartahs, and not wag Tom Mewwy except as a last wesource."

"Stop a minute!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "If you're curious about the matter——"

"We are not at all cuwious, deah boy. We are actin' in the way fwom a sense of duty, and fwom wegard for you."

"Oh, rats! The fact of the matter is, that—that——"

Tom Merry paused and coloured deeply. The chums of the Fourth looked at him in amazement.

"Yaas, deah boy," said D'Arcy, with a very judicial air. "Go on. The fact of the mattah is—what?"

"Well, somebody has been saying something unpleasant, that's all—I heard that a certain chap had been running me down——"

"Who was the chap?"

"Never mind that. It was a chap I have had plenty of rows with, but I always liked him all the same, and I never thought he was the kind of fellow to run a chap down behind his back!"

"I see. That would natuwally wowwy you a bit, I suppose. It would wowwy me undah similar circs.," said D'Arcy. "But as a committee of investigation, we cannot stop here at this point of the case. We want to know who the chap was?"

"I know," said Lowther. "You as good as told us before, Tom."

"Well, it was Figgins," said Tom Merry. "But I don't want it jawed all over the house. I am saying this in confidence, and I expect you to treat it as such."

"I weally think it would be bettah to ask Figgins for an explanation."

"Nothing of the sort," said Tom Merry hastily. "I have spoken to you in confidence, and I expect you to keep mum as to what I've told you."

"Oh, vewy well!" said D'Arcy, with a nod. "You have a wight to ask that, though it places us in wathah a difficult position as a committee of investigation."

"Oh, blow your committee of investigation!"

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort——"

"You're done with investigation, anyway, now you know the facts."

"Not at all, deah boy! You haven't told us what Figgins said."

"Never mind what he said."

"Or how you came to know that he said it."

"Never mind that either."

"Pewwaps he nevah said it at all——"

Tom Merry turned red.

"Do you think I am cramming, then?"

"Certainly not, deah boy! But you may have weceived incowwect information."

Tom Merry shook his head.

"It was correct enough; the way I heard it showed that Figgins had really said something, anyway. Never mind; it's nothing to worry about. I couldn't help feeling rather rotten about it——"

"Yaas, wathah! I should have felt wotten myself. But I am not quite satisfied yet. If you wefuse to tell us what Figgins said——"

"Oh, hang it!"

"And who told you he had said it——"

"I've answered all the questions I'm going to answer, Gussy. So you can travel," said Tom Merry, sitting down in his chair again.

"Vewy well. Undah the circs. the committee of investigation cannot wegard its work as completed," said D'Arcy. "We shall wespect your confidence, Tom Mewwy; but we have no alternative but to seek furthah information. Come on, deah boys, and we will pursue our inquiwies in othah quartahs."

"Oh, rats!" said Tom Merry; and Lowther and Manners repeated that ancient and expressive word as the committee of the Fourth Form turned to the door.

"Don't worry," said Blake kindly, as he went out. "We'll look into the matter, Tom Merry, and find out all the facts for you."

"Oh, get along!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

And Arthur Augustus closed the door, and the Terrible Three were left alone. The Fourth Formers were chuckling. The committee promised to be a great success; at all events, they had been successful so far. And upon the whole the members of the honourable committee had to admit that they had no reason so far to be dissatisfied with their chairman.

CHAPTER 4.

The Tell-Tale.

MELLISH came along the passage towards Gore's study, just as the committee of inquiry came out of Tom Merry's doorway, and he stopped and looked at them.

"Hallo! What's going on?" he asked casually

"We are," said Blake, walking past him down the passage. Blake had little liking for the cad of the Fourth Form, and was not disposed to stand upon ceremony with him. And Herries and Digby promptly followed their leader.

Mellish's eyes glinted as he glanced after them. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy delayed for a moment. He disliked the cad and tale-bearer of the Fourth as much as his chums did, but personal likes and dislikes were never allowed to stand in the way of politeness by the swell of the School House.

"Nothin' in particulah, Mellish," said D'Arcy politely. "We have just been payin' a visit to Tom Mewwy to inquire what's the mattah, that's all, deah boy."

"Oh, you've been paying a visit to Tom Merry, have you?" said Mellish.

D'Arcy had moved on, but he stopped again as Mellish spoke in a very peculiar tone.

"Yaas, wathah!" he said, looking curiously at the cad of the Fourth. "There's nothin' stwange in that, is there, Mellish?"

"Oh, no! Nothing that I know of. Only if you knew ——"

"If I knew what?"

"What I know," said Mellish.

"I weally do not compwehend you, deah boy. What do you know?"

"Oh, never mind!" said Mellish, with the air of one who could disclose great secrets if he wished. "It's nothing."

"But weally, Mellish, you have awoused my cuwiosity."

"It was a mere nothing that he said about you, after all——"

"Who said?"

"Why, Tom Merry, of course."

"Tom Mewwy said somethin' about me?" said D'Arcy. "Weally, it's not like Tom Mewwy to talk about a fellow behind his back, bai Jove!"

"That's all you know."

"Well, of course you nevah know a fellow till he's put to the pwoof, I know," said D'Arcy thoughtfully. "But I should nevah have believed anythin' of the kind of Tom Mewwy."

Mellish grinned.

"If you knew what he had said——"

"Well, what did he say, deah boy?"

"Catch me telling you! Of course, you'd blurt it all out to Tom Merry, and then I should have the three of them down upon me——"

"I weally twust you know me bettah than that, Mellish," said Arthur Augustus, with great dignity. "Of course, I should wegard anythin' you told me as stwictly in confidence."

"Well, that alters the case, of course. I don't mind telling you if you really want to know. He said—but perhaps I'd better not say. It would only make bad feeling."

"You had better tell me, Mellish."

"No, upon second thoughts I won't."

"Then upon third thoughts you will, Mellish, unless you want me to give you a feahful thwashin'," said D'Arcy, screwing his eyeglass into his eye, and regarding the cad of the Fourth with a really ferocious look.

"Oh, if you're going to take it like that——"

"I am going to take you by the scwuff of the neck, and wub your featchahs on the floor, if you don't immediately tell me what Tom Mewwy said."

"Well," he said, "you're sure you want to know——"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Well," said Mellish, with an appearance of great reluctance, "he said you were a—— I hardly like to say it. I know you won't like it."

"Tell me at once, or I shall lose my tempah and stwike you."

"Well, he called you a silly popinjay, and said you ought to be kicked out of the School House, and shoved into the menagerie along with the pets," said Mellish.

D'Arcy turned red with wrath.

"He called me—me a popinjay, Mellish."

"Certainly."

"He said I ought to be put in the menagewie."



Blake turned his head as he stood in the dusky quadrangle, and saw the head and shoulders of Arthur Augustus silhouetted against the light of the study window, and he kissed his hand.

"His very words."

"Bai Jove; I will instwuct him about chawactewisin' me as a popinjay! I will give him a feahful thwashin'——"

The swell of the School House rushed back towards the door of Tom Merry's study. But the alarmed Mellish caught him by the arm and stopped him.

"I say, look here, Gussy——"

"Welease me immediately!"

"You mustn't——"

"I am goin' to thwash Tom Mewwy!"

"But your promise! Remember——"

"Bai Jove, I had forgotten that; it had weally slipped my memowy for the moment," said D'Arcy, recollecting himself. "I beg your pardon, Mellish!"

"Yes, I should say so."

"I will not say anythin' to Tom Mewwy. But I weally wish you hadn't told me," said D'Arcy, looking greatly distressed. "I don't see how I can wegard him in the same light as before, now that I know he talks about me behind my back. I weally wish you hadn't told me, Mellish."

"Well, you forced me to."

"Yaas, that's twue enough. I should have thwashed you if you hadn't; and I weally feel wathah inclined to thwash you anyway, dear boy."

Mellish retreated in alarm.

"Here, don't be an ass——"

"I weally feel most uncomfy about it. I cannot wegard Tom Mewwy as a fwiend, and I cannot wespect him when I wegard him as a backbitah."

"Well, you see——"

"Oh, don't talk to me! I wathah despise you."

And Arthur Augustus walked away rather disconsolately. Mellish grinned, and went on to Gore's study, and looked in.

"Hallo, Gore! Why—what——"

George Gore was the leader of the "smart set" among the juniors of St. Jim's. That set had been sat upon so heavily by Tom Merry & Co. that it had been really crushed out of existence, but Gore still kept up some of its worthy customs in the privacy of his own study. He was smoking a cigarette when Mellish suddenly opened the door, and he gave a guilty start, and slipped it into his sleeve, in mortal terror lest it should be a master or a prefect who had discovered him.

"I——Oh, Mellish, is it you! Ow!" Gore jumped up, shaking his sleeve frantically. He had meant to conceal the cigarette there, but it had slipped further than he had intended, and was burning his skin. "Ow! Oh!"

Mellish grinned.

"Ow! You silly ass, to startle me like that! It's burning me! Ow! I can't get the beastly thing out!"

"He, he, he!" cackled Mellish.

Gore shook his sleeve frantically, and the cigarette dropped out at last. The bully of the Shell rubbed his scorched arm, and grunted expressively.

"Sorry!" grinned Mellish. "But it was funny! He, he, he!"

"What do you want here, you confounded ass?"

"Oh, I only dropped in to speak to you. I hear you've got a holiday. There's a lot of favouritism in this school."

"Nothing of the kind!" growled Gore. "I've got to go home for a week or two because my uncle's ill, that's all. Blessed if I want to go."

"H'm! Of course, it's true if you say so. Wish I had a chance of getting away for a week!" said Mellish. "Mighty convenient to have an uncle ill sometimes——"

"Don't you believe me?"

"Oh, yes, of course."

"Ass! Do you think the Head would give me permission to go if it wasn't true?" growled Gore, still rubbing his arm.

"He might be taken in. Or there might be favouritism. I know once Tom Merry had a whole holiday when the rest of the fellows had to go on as usual. Still, it's no business of mine. I hope you'll have a good time."

"You confounded monkey!" shouted Gore. "I tell you I'm going home to a wretched place full of doctors and medicines and sickness, and I don't want to go. I've got to."

"Keep it up if you like, Gore. Tom Merry thinks——"

"What has Tom Merry been saying?"

"Oh, nothing! There was Skimpole, too. He thought——"

"Hang Skimpole, and you, too! You've made me burn my arm. Get out of my study!"

"Skimpole said—well, never mind, as he's your study-mate I suppose I had better not say anything," said Mellish, turning to the door.

"You had better, if you don't want me to jam your head against the wall," said Gore, rushing at the cad of the Fourth and seizing him by the collar. "Now then, what did Skimpole say?"

"Well, he said he thought it was all rot about your uncle being ill, and that you were rotting——"

"Oh, he did, did he? I'll talk to Skimpole about that," said Gore. "As for you, I'll teach you to pop into my study like a jack-in-a-box and make me burn my arm——"

"Let me go——"

"I'm going to! There you go!"

And Gore twisted Mellish into the doorway, and gave him a powerful kick that sent him sprawling out into the passage.

Mellish gave a yell, and fell on his hands and knees, and rolled over; and then sat up rather dazedly and stared at Gore. The bully of the Shell was standing in his doorway, roaring with laughter.

"You—you rotter!" gasped Mellish.

"Dear me! Why have you treated Mellish so violently, Gore?" exclaimed a weedy youth with a very large head, who came along the passage in time to see Mellish ejected from the study. "You must know that——"

"Hallo, Skimpole! I want to speak to you."

"Certainly, Gore," said Skimpole unsuspiciously. Skimpole was always unsuspicious. He was rather a curious youth in some respects, and had amazed the Lower Forms at St. Jim's by taking up Socialism, and later on by starting as an amateur Sherlock Holmes. "I am quite at your service, Gore."

"Well, come here then, fathead!"

Skimpole came there, and Gore grasped him by the shoulders. With a twist he sent the unprepared junior staggering over Mellish. Mellish was just rising when Skimpole fell upon him, and the two went to the floor together with a bump.

"Ha, ha, ha!" shouted Gore. "There, that will teach you to talk about me, Skimpole!"

The amateur Socialist sat up in bewilderment and groped for his spectacles.

"But—but I haven't talked about you, Gore!" he gasped.

"You can settle that with Mellish. If you come into this study now I'll chuck you out on your neck, so you know what to expect," said Gore. And he went into the study and slammed the door.

CHAPTER 5.

D'Arcy Resigns.

"WHERE'S our giddy chairman?"

"Here I am, deah boys!" said D'Arcy, coming into Study No. 6 as Blake asked the question. "Do you want me?"

"No, of course not," said Blake blandly; "I was only wondering where you were. What has happened now? You look as if you had lost a shilling and found a threepenny-bit. Is it that confounded half-sovereign?"

"No."

"What's the matter, then?"

"Nothin'."

"Blessed if you're not getting as mysterious as Tom Merry, going about scowling like a demon in a pantomime, and refusing to explain what's the matter," exclaimed Blake.

"I wefuse to be compared to a demon in a beastly pantomime."

"Well, what's the trouble, then, ass?"

"I decline to be called an ass. Weally, Blake——"

"The question is, what's the next step for the committee of investigation to take? If you're the chairman, tell us what's to be done next."

"Weally, I think we're takin' too much notice of that Shell boundah," said D'Arcy. "I think the committee had bettah be dissolved."

"What?" exclaimed three voices, in amazement.

"I weally considah that the committee had bettah be dissolved. I don't care a wap what's the mattah with Tom Mewwy."

"What's made you change your mind all of a sudden?"

"Oh, I've got my weasons."

"But the committee's not going to bust up because you've got your weasons," said Blake. "We're going to pursue our inquiries in other quarters."

"Then I wesign."

"You don't want to be on the committee any more?" asked Blake, staring in amazement at the swell of the School House.

Arthur Augustus shook his head decidedly.

"Wathah not."

"Very well, we'll leave you on the beach. I'm chairman now, deah boys."

"Rats!" said Digby. "Of course, we have to toss up again."

"If you're such an obstinate bounder, Dig, I'm afraid there will be rows in this study," said Blake, with a shake of the head. "I suppose you learned to be so obstinate while you were away from St. Jim's. I used to keep you in order."

"Well, as a matter of fact, Blake, you grew a fearful bump of bumptiousness while I was away," said Dig solemnly. "I really think that I ought to take you in hand now I've come back, and pull you off your perch."

"With or without gloves?" asked Blake, in a casual sort of way.

"Whichever you like."

"Pway don't quawwel, deah boys. Why not toss up for the beastly chairmanship?" said D'Arcy, in a tone of remonstrance.

"Right-ho!" said Herries. "Lend me a half-sovereign to toss, Gussy, will you?"

"Yaas, wathah, if you can find the one that's on the floor."

"Never mind, I'll make this penny do. Call to me, Blake."

"Oh, all right!" grunted Blake. "Head!"

"Tail," said Herries. "Now I'll call to you, Dig. Head!"

"Tail," grinned Digby. "I'm chairman. I can tell you what to do."

"Upon second thoughts," said D'Arcy, who had been reflecting deeply—"upon second thoughts, deah boys, I will not wesign fwom the chair of the committee."

"Won't you?" said Digby grimly.

"No. As the committee of inquiwy is still to go on, it will be bettah for me to wemain at the head of it, you know. You fellows will be bound to get yourselves into some twouble or othah if you go on without a guidin' hand."

"We won't bother you for a guiding hand, Gussy."

"Not at all, deah boy; quite a pleasure."

"To you, perhaps," said Digby, "not to us. The fact is, kid, that you've resigned, and I'm chairman, and that's the end of it."

"Not in the least, Digby. I have alweady told you that I have changed my mind about wesignin'."

"You've changed it too late; I appeal to the committee."

"The committee, of course, will uphold me."

"The committee, of course, will do nothing of the kind," said Blake promptly. "Dig's chairman, and you're off the board."

"Weally, Blake——"

"'Nuff said. What's the programme, Dig?"

"We'll go over to the New House——"

"Blake, I must wefuse——"

"Shut up!"

"I wefuse to shut up. I am compelled to make my voice heard in this mattah. I have changed my mind——"

"I'll change your features for you if you don't dry up."

"As chairman of this committee——"

"You've resigned."

"I withdraw my wesignation."

"You'd better withdraw yourself."

"I wefuse to withdraw myself. As chairman of this com——"

"Ring off!"

"I uttahly and absolutely wefuse to wing off. As chairman of——"

"Get outside!"

"Certainly not! As chair——"

"Outside!"

"I shall wemain where I am. As——"

Three exasperated juniors rushed upon Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and whirled him towards the door. Blake opened it, and D'Arcy was sent flying out into the passage. Then Blake slammed the door upon him.

"There, he's quiet now!" he exclaimed. "Never knew such a chap for keeping on with the chin-wagging. He goes on like a giddy gramophone. Now, then, Dig, what's the game?"

"We'll go over to the New House——"

Digby was interrupted by the opening of the door. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy put his head in. His collar was hanging out by one end, and his eyeglass floating at the end of its cord, and his face was excited.

"Get out!" roared Blake.

"I distinctly wefuse to get out! I say——"

"Are you going?" exclaimed Digby, his hand closing on the inkpot on the table.

"Certainly not! I——"

Swish! A stream of ink flew from the pot as Dig jerked it forward, and it smote Arthur Augustus D'Arcy full in his aristocratic countenance.

He gave a howl, as the stream of black fluid transformed him into a very good imitation of a Hottentot.

"Ow! You wotten wascal! Ow!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Get out!"

Blake slammed the door upon the inky dude of the School House. D'Arcy could be heard grunting and gasping in the passage.

"Now, then, Dig, go on with the washing."

"As I was saying, we'll go over to the New House, and see Figgins & Co. about it," said Digby. "We'll ask Figgins——"

The door was thrown violently open, and Arthur Augustus came in like a stone from a catapult. He rushed straight at Digby, but Blake caught him and slung him back.

"Hallo, hallo! What's the matter?"

"Welease me!"

"Rats! What's the joke?"

"I am goin' to give Digby a feahful thwashin'."

"Ha, ha! Better go and wash your chivvy."

"I wefuse to go and wash my beastly chivvy. I am goin' to administah a feahful thwashin' to that disgustin' wottah."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Welease me at once, Blake, or I shall stwike you!"

"Keep your whiskers on."

"I wefuse to keep my whiskahs on—I mean, don't be a widiculous ass, Blake. Welease me, or I shall lose my tempah and stwike you."

"Ha, ha, ha! Outside!"

D'Arcy went staggering into the passage again. This time Blake locked the door upon him. In a moment the swell of St. Jim's was hammering at it furiously, but the juniors within took no notice.

"My hat," murmured Blake, "Gussy is on the war-path this evening! What are we to ask Figgins when we get to the New House, Dig?"

"Well, you see, we can't break Tom Merry's confidence," said Dig thoughtfully—"can't tell Figgy what Tom Merry said; but we can ask him if he knows anything about the matter, and if there's a mistake we can set it right, perhaps."

"Good wheeze!"

"Right-ho!" said Herries. "Let's get over there at once. We haven't much in the cupboard for tea, and if Figgy has anything decent going, we may get a feed there."

"Something in that," said Blake. "Come on!"

"What about Gussy?"

Hammer, hammer, hammer came the thumps of the School House swell upon the door. The strong oak shook under the efforts of Arthur Augustus. Blake grinned.

"We'll open the door and lock him in," he said, quietly unlocking the door and taking out the key. "Be ready when I open it."

"Ha, ha! We're ready!"

Blake threw the door wide open. Arthur Augustus, who was in the act of thumping it with both fists, staggered into the room, and in a moment Blake had given him a push which sent him across the study.

"Now, then!"

In a twinkling the three juniors were outside, in the passage, and Blake had slammed the door to after them.

But in another moment D'Arcy was tugging at it from inside.

"Let me out, you wottahs!"

"Not this evening," murmured Blake, holding the door shut while he inserted the key in the outside of the lock and turned it.

"Let me out, Blake!"

"Presently, old chap. You're not safe at present."

"I no longah wegard you as fwiends."

"We'll try to survive it, Gussy."

"You are a set of wottahs!" bawled D'Arcy through the keyhole.

"Go hon!"

"I shall wefuse to acknowledge you in future. I have always endeavoured to keep my circle of fwiends quite select, not to say swaggah. But I have admitted you to my fwiendship, and you are not at all gwateful. I no longah——"

But the chums of the Fourth did not wait to hear the rest. They walked away down the passage, leaving D'Arcy addressing the oak door and the empty air, and descended the stairs and went out into the quadrangle. The windows of the great school buildings glimmered with lights in the dusk of the spring evening.

The blind of Study No. 6 was up, and the chums heard the window violently open. The voice of D'Arcy floated down through the gloom.

"Will you come and let me out, you feahful wottahs?"

Blake chuckled.

"Good-bye, Gussy!" called out Digby. "Be good."

"I wefuse to be good! I——"

But the chums of the Fourth did not listen. They went down the steps of the School House grinning. Blake turned his head as he stood in the dusky quadrangle, and saw the head and shoulders of Arthur Augustus silhouetted against the light of the study window, and he kissed his hand.

D'Arcy shook his fist in reply. Then the chums turned away to cross towards the New House, and at the same moment a junior with a strapped bag in his hand came out of the School House. It was Gore, and Blake stopped for a moment, looking at him in surprise.

CHAPTER 6.

The Committee of Inquiry Get a Warm Reception.

"WHITHER bound, Gore?" asked Blake, looking first at the bully of the Shell, and then at the bag he carried.

"Going home," snapped Gore.

"Got a holiday?"

"No. My uncle's ill, and I'm wanted at home."

"Well, that's rather a curious idea," said Blake, in a reflective sort of way. "If I were ill, I am sure the sight of your chivvy would make me worse——"

"Oh, shut up!" said Gore; and he passed down the steps, and crossed towards the gates, with a discontented frown upon his face.

It was evident that George Gore had very little sympathy with his sick uncle, and still less desire to go home on account of him.

The bully of the Shell disappeared in the dusk towards the gates, and the three chums walked away towards the New House.

Four youths were standing on the step there, with their hands in their pockets, looking out into the dusk, and talking.

The great Figgins was leaning against a pillar, with a frown upon his brow, and Kerr, Wynn, and Marmaduke Smythe, the famous Co., were looking rather less amiable than usual, too. Something had apparently happened to disturb the equanimity of the New House quartette.

"Hallo! Here are the rotters!" exclaimed Kerr, the Scottish partner in the Co., as he caught sight of Blake, Digby, and Herries.

Figgins started, and looked towards them.

"Cheek, to come over here now!" exclaimed Marmaduke. "Well, we'll give them a little lesson while they're on the spot."

"Wait a tick!" said Fatty Wynn quickly. "There may be some mistake about it, and if Blake is willing to explain, and, say, stand a feed by way of compensation——"

"Oh, shut up, Fatty!"

"I think that's a good idea. We——"

"If you say the word 'feed' again to-night, I'll jump on your neck!" exclaimed Figgins irritably. "Shut up!"

"That's all very well," said Fatty Wynn, stepping a pace further away from his irate leader; "but I'm hungry."

"Go and eat coke, then!"

"Hallo!" sang out Blake, as he came up with his companions. "We've come over to see you, Figgins."

"Have you?" said Figgins grimly.

"Yes. We have got a bone to pick with you."

"Same here."

"Eh, what's that?" asked Blake, rather surprised by Figgins's grim and uncompromising tone.

There was usually warfare between the two Houses of St. Jim's, but any real ill-feeling seldom entered into the contests.

"We've got a bone to pick with you, too," said Figgins.

"Anything the matter?"

"Hold on, Blake!" said Digby. "You seem to have overlooked the fact that I am chairman of this giddy committee."

"If you want to hear yourself jaw, Dig——"

"Well, I don't want to hear you jaw; that's how it stands."

"So you're a committee, are you?" asked Figgins, in an extremely disparaging tone. "A committee of what?"

"A committee of inquiry?"

"Oh, I thought you might be a committee of backbiters!" said Figgins.

Blake turned red.

"What the dickens do you mean by that, Figgins?"

Figgins shrugged his shoulders.

"Better ask yourself the question," he replied. "You ought to be able to answer it as well as I can."

"What the dickens——"

"Hold on, Blake, and let me question Figgins!"

"Oh, rats!"

"Now, look here, Blake, don't be an ass!"

"Oh, go ahead!"

"Figgins, I should like to know what you mean by that remark," said Digby impressively. "From the information we have already gathered, it seems to me that you are more in the backbiting line than anybody else at St. Jim's!"

Figgins flushed crimson.

"Who says so?" he exclaimed angrily.

"I do. From what we've heard——"

"What have you heard?"

"Never mind that. It was told us in confidence."

"Just a second!" exclaimed Kerr, as if struck by a new idea. "Was it Mellish who told you this, whatever it was?"

"No, it wasn't. It was Tom M—— But I don't think I can tell you."

"You've told us now. It was Tom Merry."

Digby bit his lip with vexation.

"You've let it out now, Dig.," said Blake consolingly. "All your own fault, for being such an obstinate ass! If I had been chairman of this committee——"

"Oh, cheese it, for goodness' sake! You're getting as bad as Gussy!" said Digby crossly. "Blessed if you don't go on like a gramophone!"

"And what was it Tom Merry said?" demanded Figgins.

"Oh, hang! Never mind that. I never meant——"

"I dare say you didn't! It's like you School House bounders to talk about a fellow behind his back, and not tell him what you've got up against him!" exclaimed Figgins scornfully.

"You know perfectly well that you're talking rot, Figgins!" exclaimed Herries hotly.

"Perhaps you mean that I'm telling fibs?" said Figgins aggressively.

"Jolly near it, anyway."

"Are you looking for a black eye, Herries?"

"Oh, shut up!" exclaimed Blake. "Listen to me."

"Excuse me, Blake, I'm chairman of this committee!"

"Look here, Dig., I shall dot you in the eye if you bother me!"

"Will you? I'd like to see you!"

"Oh, get home, you kids!" said Figgins. "It's not worth while to wipe up the quadrangle with you, or——"

"It's jolly lucky for some bounders that it's not worth while!" said Blake darkly. "Somebody would get hurt in the process."

"If you put it like that, Blake, we shall wade in and do it."

"Wade in, then!"

"Come on, kids! Kick these School House rotters home to their own side!" exclaimed Figgins, rushing at Blake.

"Buck up, School House!" cried Blake.

"What-ho!"

In a moment the rival juniors were struggling furiously; and they were hitting hard, too, this time. Even in their roughest encounters they were usually restrained from giving really hard knocks, but this time all restraint seemed to be gone.

A feeling of bitterness had for once crept in on both sides. They fought hard, and with dire results to themselves. In a few moments one of Blake's eyes was closing up, and Figgins's nose was bleeding copiously.

Fatty Wynn was rolling on the ground, and Herries was rolling over him, and as there had lately been some rain, the state of their clothes may be better imagined than described. Digby and Kerr were boxing away like a pair of prizefighters, paying much more attention to attack than to defence, and each of them receiving some extremely severe punishment.

The fight was accompanied by exclamations, gasps, trampling of feet, and was not long in attracting attention from within the New House.

In a few minutes Monteith, the head prefect of the New House, came out with a frown upon his brow, and a cane in his hand.

"What's this row about?"

The juniors were too excited to heed even the voice of a prefect. Monteith looked at them in amazement in the dusk as he recognised them. Fighting between the two parties was common enough, but not in such deadly earnest fashion as this.

"Stop it! Do you hear? Stop it!" shouted Monteith.

But still they did not heed. Monteith wasted no more time in words. He gripped the cane, and took an active part in the proceedings. Blake gave a yell as he felt the cane on his calves, and let go of Figgins. Figgins roared as he got it over the shoulders.

"Ow! What's that? Ow!"

"Go into your house!" said Monteith sternly. "What do you mean by fighting in the quadrangle, like a gang of hooligans?"

"Ow! Is that you, Monteith?"

"Yes, it is. Go into your house at once, Figgins! Blake, return to the School House directly, or I will report you to your housemaster!"

Blake and Figgins glared at one another, with a world of expression in their looks.

"Just you wait till to-morrow!" muttered Figgins.

"I'll remind you," said Blake.

"Are you going, Blake?"

"Certainly. Anything to oblige a nice fellow like you, Monteith!" said Blake, rubbing his damaged eye.

Monteith made a movement towards him, and Blake retreated. Figgins called to his chums to cease the fighting, and Blake did the same. Kerr and Digby separated, glaring at one another aggressively; but Herries and Fatty Wynn were not so amenable to the voice of authority.

Fatty Wynn, the Welsh partner in the Co., was usually a quiet and inoffensive junior; but when his Welsh fighting-blood was aroused it was not easy to quiet him again. He rolled over on the ground with Herries, who was equally excited and aggressive, and neither heeded the calling of Figgins and Blake.

"Let go! Get up!" shouted Monteith angrily.

But the enraged combatants took no notice. Monteith began to lay on the cane, getting in a cut wherever he found a suitable spot, and that had the desired effect. Herries and Fatty Wynn squirmed away from the stinging cane, and separated. They scrambled to their feet, bruised and dishevelled, and smothered in mud.

Monteith burst into a laugh as he looked at them.

"Well, you're a pretty-looking pair of funny objects!" he exclaimed. "You had better go and get yourselves cleaned. No more of this!"

"I'll——"

"I'll——"

"Shut up, both of you! Be off, you School House youngsters! Mind, if there's any more of this, I'll report you to Mr. Railton. Go into the house, Figgins!"

Exchanging glances of mutual defiance, the rival juniors separated, and the New House boys were seen into their house by Monteith. Blake, Herries, and Digby went back slowly and rather disconsolately towards the School House.

"We haven't done much good there," Blake remarked. "I never suspected that Figgins was such a real beast before."

"Nor I," said Herries. "You never know a chap till you find him out."

"I don't quite understand it," Digby remarked thoughtfully.

"What don't you understand?"

"Figgins & Co. seemed to have something up against us. I believe they were talking about us when we came up."

"Very likely. I dare say they've heard of the committee of inquiry, and Figgins knows that we are going to show him up."

"That's possible."

"Oh, I expect that's it! Anyway, one thing's jolly certain, it's war to the knife with those New House bounders now. We're going to give them a warm time, to show the rotters what's what."

To which Blake's chums heartily agreed.

CHAPTER 7.

No Longer Friends.

THE next morning there were very visible traces to be seen in the juniors' faces of the combat of the evening outside the New House. When the Terrible Three came down to breakfast, Tom Merry noticed at once Blake's black eye, Herries' swollen nose, and Digby's cut lip, as well as many other lesser signs of conflict upon all three of them.

"By Jove, they've been in the wars!" Tom Merry remarked. "Have they been fighting with one another, or——"

"Or pursuing their inquiries in other quarters," grinned Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha! Gussy is the only one that doesn't look as if he had been in a mangle," Manners remarked.

"But there's something up with Gussy," Tom Merry said shrewdly. "Look at the way he's holding up his head! Note the scornful calm of his aristocratic brow!"

"He's not speaking to the other rotters."

"Something's up! Let's go and ask him."

The Terrible Three bore down upon the swell of the School House. Monty Lowther tapped him on the shoulder, and he turned round, and screwed his monocle in his eye to survey the Terrible Three.

"Anything wrong, old son?" asked Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"How's the committee of inquiry getting on?"

"I weally do not know, as I have wesigned the chairmanship of the beastly committee, deah boys."

"Why, how will the poor committee get on without you?" exclaimed Manners, in great astonishment. "Don't be hard upon them, Gussy. Remember that a brain like yours is required to steer them through——"

"Yaas, wathah, deah boy; I wemembahed that, and I wished to withdwaw my wesignation, and then—what do you think they did?"

"Can't say."

"They wefused to accept the withdwawal of the wesignation, and said I had given up the chairmanship for good. Wasn't that wathah wotten?"

"Awfully!"

"Fearfully!"

"Yaas, wathah! But that is not all. They locked me up in the study while they went over to interview Figgins & Co."

"Outrageous!"

"Yaas, I wegarded it as extwemely outwageous. Of course, it all happened as I expected—they had a feahful wow with Figgins & Co."

"Ah, that accounts for their lovely appearance this morning!" grinned Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah! What was wequired as a chairman of the committee of inquiwy was a fellow of tact and discwetion—a fellow of my sort—and without me, of course, the whole thing went to w'eck and wuin."

"Naturally," said Manners.

"But, of course, you'll take the lead again now, and get them out of the troubles they have fallen into?" said Lowther solemnly.

"I should be quite willin' to do so, and I made an offah to that effect last night, offewin' at the same time to ovahlook their feahful impertinence in lockin' me in the study. But, instead of bein' pwopahly gwateful, they called me an ass."

"Horrid!"

"So I have dwopped their acquaintance," said D'Arcy. "I am unfortunately compelled to continue to weside in the same study, until I can change into anothah, but I no longah wegard them as fwiends."

"Too bad," said Tom Merry. "I say, Gussy——"

D'Arcy regarded the hero of the Shell with a freezing glare through his monocle.

"Did you addwess me, Tom Mewwy?"

"Yes, of course I did."

"Then I shall be extwemely obliged if you will have the kindness to wefwain fwom doin' so again."

Tom Merry stared at the swell of the School House in blank amazement.

"Eh? What's that, Gussy?" he ejaculated.

"My name is D'Arcy," said Arthur Augustus, with a great assumption of dignity. "I am Gussy only to my fwiends."

"And you don't include me in the list?" asked Tom Merry.

"Certainly not."

"But surely, Gussy—I mean, D'Arcy, you don't want any study rows we have to make us enemies, do you?" demanded Tom Merry.

"I am not alludin' to study wows when I say that I do not wegard you as a fwiend, Tom Mewwy. Study wows and house wows are nothin'. We could be good fwiends in spite of an occasional wow. I am not speakin' of that."

"Well, what are you speaking of, then?"

"Oh, nothin' in particulah!" said D'Arcy evasively.

"Look here, Gussy——"

"I have wemarked before that I wefuse to be addwessed as Gussy by a person whom I despise."

Tom Merry started. He had imagined at first that D'Arcy had some joke in his mind, but now the serious expression of the School House swell's face showed that he was in deadly earnest.

"What did you say, D'Arcy?"

"I wefuse to be at all familiah with a fellow whom I despise," said D'Arcy loftily.

"Does that mean that you despise me?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"And why?"

"Nevah mind."

"What have I done?"

"Oh, nothin'!"

"Then what are you acting the giddy goat for?" demanded Tom Merry, his eyes beginning to sparkle with rising anger. "Look here——"

Gussy waved his hand and turned away.

"I do not desire to speak to you furthah, Tom Mewwy."

"Well, you've got to, whether you like it or not!" exclaimed Tom Merry, seizing the swell of the School House by the shoulder and jerking him back. "Now, then——"

"Pway welease my shouldah, Tom Mewwy!"

"Answer me——"

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort!"

"What have you got up against me, you young ass?" demanded Tom Merry, shaking the swell of the School House till his eyeglass jerked loose and swung at the end of its cord. "Now, then, ass——"

"I wefuse to be chawactewised as an ass! Pway welease me! You are causin' me to feel quite a fluttah, and disawwangin' my tie!"

"I'll disarrange your face if you don't answer!"

"Tom Mewwy, I shall be sowwy to soil my hands by stwikin' one whom I despise so feahfully as I do you——"

"Eh?"

"But if you do not immediately welease me, I shall have no alternative but to administah to you a feahful thwashin'!"

"You young duffer——"

"Welease my beastly shouldah, Tom Mewwy!"

Tom Merry shook him again.

"Are you going to explain yourself?"

"No; certainly not!"

"You silly, confounded young ass——"

"I uttahly wefuse to be chawactewised as a silly, confounded young ass," said D'Arcy. "I am sowwy to stwike you, but you leave me no choice in the mattah."

And the swell of the School House hit out; but Tom Merry knocked his arm up, so the fist shot past the head it was intended for, and Gussy lurched heavily against Tom Merry.

Tom threw his arms round the slim form of the swell of St. Jim's, and closed him in a tight embrace. D'Arcy wriggled.

"Let me go, you wuffian!"

Tom Merry grinned.

"Any hurry?" he inquired.

"Yaas, wathah! You are squeezin' my wibs cwuelly. You are cwumplin' my coat, and disawwangin' my hair. Welease me at once, you feahful wottah!" exclaimed D'Arcy, struggling in vain in the muscular grip of Tom Merry.

"Wait a bit——"

"Cave!" whispered Monty Lowther, as Mr. Lathom came by, on his way to the dining-room. "Chuck it, Tom!"

Tom Merry released D'Arcy, who staggered away, and the Terrible Three walked in to breakfast. D'Arcy, with a crimson countenance, brushed down his rumpled clothes and dusted his gleaming boots. He turned a wrathful eye upon Blake, Herries, and Digby, who were grinning at him.

"A nice set of wottahs you are, not to come to a fellow's help!" he exclaimed.

"Eh?" said Blake. "Did you speak to me?"

"Certainly! I said——"

"Excuse me," said Blake, with a shake of the head. "I don't think I know you, sir. I am afraid I cannot speak to anyone I don't know. My mother always taught me to be modest and retiring."

D'Arcy left off brushing his clothes, and screwed his monocle into his right eye and stared at Blake in amazed inquiry.

"Are you wight off your wockah?" he demanded.

"Certainly not. I don't know you."

"Don't know me—D'Arcy? You must be shockingly off your silly wockah! Don't know the chap you have shared the same study with for months? Are you wottin'?"

"Not at all."

"What do you mean then, you silly duffah?"

"I knew a chap named D'Arcy, but he dropped my acquaintance," grinned Blake. "Of course, I don't know him now."

"Exactly!" said Digby. "I don't know him, either."

"Same here," said Herries solemnly.

"I wegard you as asses!"

"Don't let us stay here and listen to this rude boy," said Blake. "We can't speak to people we haven't been introduced to. Come away!"

"Blake——"

"Pray reserve your remarks for people you know, D'Arcy."

And the three chums walked away.

"Well, of all the wottahs!" muttered D'Arcy.

"Anything wrong, D'Arcy?" said Mellish, coming by as the swell of the School House finished smoothing out his rumpled Eton jacket.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"What's the trouble? If Blake's been telling you I said anything——"

"He hasn't been speakin' of you. And I don't want to speak to you. I wegard you as a wottah—a despicable wottah!"

Mellish sneered.

"Because I told you what Tom Merry said of you, I suppose——"

"You ought not to have told me."

"Well, he ought not to have said it."

"Yaas, I know that; but——"

"I thought you'd like to know."

"Vewy twue; but you wouldn't have thought so if you hadn't been a wotten cad," D'Arcy explained. "Only a wotten cad would be a tell-tale."

"If that's all the thanks I get——"

"It's all the thanks a tale-beawah can expect, deah boy. Even the people who listen to his tales must necessawily despise the beast. And I am sowwy I listened to you. It makes me feel vewy uncomfy to despise anybody."

"Do you want me to dot you on the nose, D'Arcy?"

"Yaas, wathah! I have sevewal times felt inclined to wipe up the gwound with you for tellin' me tales, and I should like you to start, as I could then thwash you with a clear conscience. Come on, deah boy!"

And Arthur Augustus put up his fists in an extremely warlike way.

Mellish retreated a step. D'Arcy was no match for a fellow like Tom Merry, but the cad of the Fourth could not have stood up to him for five minutes. And he wasn't inclined to try.

"I don't want to quarrel with you, D'Arcy. What are you getting so snappish about? Besides, I've got something to tell you."

"I don't want to hear it, deah boy. What is it?" asked D'Arcy, rather inconsistently.

Mellish grinned.

"Why, it's about Gore, you know!"

"Oh, I know, he's gone away—gone home to see a sick uncle or aunt, or somethin' or othah, I weally forget exactly what."

"That's all you know," said Mellish mysteriously.

"Well, I weally don't care a wap what he's gone home for," said D'Arcy. "It's no business of mine, or of yours either."

"Suppose he hasn't gone home at all?" said Mellish.

Arthur Augustus stared at him.

"But he has gone, Mellish. What are you dwivin' at?"

"I know what I know," said Mellish, shrugging his shoulders. "I could tell you something if I liked. Suppose——"

"Bai Jove, it's bweakfast-time, and I'm feahfully hungwy," said D'Arcy. "Upon the whole, you can keep your news to yourself, Mellish. I dare say it's all lies."

And the swell of the School House walked into the dining-room. The tale-bearer gritted his teeth as he followed.

CHAPTER 8.

A Startling Rumour.

TOM MERRY had a worried look in the Shell classroom that morning. There was a trouble on his mind, and a fellow of Tom's frank, open nature found it hard to conceal the fact when he was worried.

D'Arcy's conduct was inexplicable to him. The swell of the School House had many curious manners and customs, which furnished merriment to the School House at St. Jim's, and the New House as well, for that matter. But he had a heart of gold, and there was nobody at the school who did not like him at bottom. In spite of study rows between the Terrible Three and the chums of Study No. 6, the feeling between the two parties had always been really friendly, and certainly there had never been a trace of bitterness in their relations. Now a change had come.

D'Arcy had evidently been in earnest; he had refused to speak to Tom Merry, for reasons which evidently seemed to him to be good. What did it all mean? Tom Merry felt that there was something altogether unpleasant in the air at St. Jim's. First there was his own disagreement with Figgins; now there was this unpleasant affair with D'Arcy. Tom Merry was decidedly worried.

"I say, are you thinking about that young ass D'Arcy?" asked Lowther, who was sitting beside Tom, taking advantage of Mr. Linton, the Form master, being occupied for the moment. "You look as if you were going to a funeral."

Tom Merry nodded gloomily.

"I am feeling rather rotten about it, and that's a fact, Monty."

"It's nothing—only some more of Gussy's rot," said Lowther. "He's always got some piffle or other going on."

Tom shook his head.

"He was serious in what he said."

"But I supose he can't have anything real up against you, can he? You haven't trod on his toes in any way?"

"Not that I know of, unless he has taken some of our little jokes too seriously."

"I should think he was too accustomed to them by this time to do that, Tom."

"So should I; but what——"

"He had something in his mind," said Manners. "He may have been told something by somebody—some tell-tale, perhaps! It seems to me as if there's something of that kind going on in the school."

"Quite possible."

The master of the Shell turned his head.

"Take fifty lines for talking in class, Merry."

"Yes, sir," said Tom, as cheerfully as he could.

And the discussion ceased till morning school was over. The day happened to be a Wednesday—a half-holiday at St. Jim's—and after morning school the boys were free for the rest of the day, with the exception of evening preparation. After dinner, Tom Merry stayed in to write his lines, and Lowther and Manners strolled out into the quadrangle, to wait for him there.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy came out of the School House, looking rather forlorn. He had dropped the acquaintance, as he expressed it, of the chums of Study No. 6, but his severity was rather recoiling upon himself. He felt rather lonely that afternoon. The three juniors were keeping up the game, and the first advances towards a reconciliation had to come from Arthur Augustus, and the swell of the School House was determined not to make them. So the acquaintance remained dropped. When D'Arcy spotted Lowther and Manners chatting under the elms, he strolled towards them with an agreeable smile upon his face.

"Nice afternoon, isn't it?" he said pleasantly.

"Haven't noticed it," said Lowther. "Yes, I dare say it is. Nice afternoon to go for a walk in the country."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Well, then, why don't you go for one?"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"Oh, ring off, and travel!"

"I wegard that wemark as uttahly wude and disagweeable——"

"What about your remarks to Tom Merry, you young ass?" growled Lowther. "It's all through you that he's got an impot this afternoon."

"I am weally sowwy, but I don't see——"

"Well, it was through talking about you in class."

"Tom Mewwy is wathah too fond of talkin' about me, I think," said the swell of the School House disdainfully.

Monty Lowther turned red. He sometimes had little tiffs with his leader himself, but at a hint of an attack upon Tom Merry, he was up in arms at once.

"What do you mean, you cheeky young rotter?"

"Nevah mind."

"But I do mind!" exclaimed Lowther, seizing D'Arcy by his left arm, while Manners laid hold of his right. "Now, just explain yourself!"

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the kind."

"Then we'll give you the giddy frog's-march, and bump you down in every puddle we can find in the quadrangle!" exclaimed Lowther.

"I wefuse to be fwog's-marched!"

"Yank him along, Manners!"

"Pway don't be such wuff bwutes! Help! Wescue!"

"Hallo, what's the matter here?"

Kildare of the Sixth, the captain of St. Jim's, came out of the gym, and turned his glance upon the three juniors as he heard Arthur Augustus shout. Lowther and Manners released the swell of the School House, looking rather sheepish. Kildare's frank brow grew stern.

"Is it possible that you are going in for bullying, Lowther and Manners?" he exclaimed. "I should never have expected anything of the kind from you."

The chums of the Shell became crimson.

"Not at all!" exclaimed Lowther, hastily. "We were going to give D'Arcy the frog's-march, because he's an obstinate young brute——"

"I wefuse to——"

"Well, let him go!"

"Thank you, Kildare, for wescuin' me from those wuffians," said D'Arcy. "I shall certainly dwop their acquaintance aftah this."

And he walked away. Kildare gave Manners and Lowther a rather peculiar look, and strode on his way. The chums of the Shell glowered after Arthur Augustus.

"Everything's going wrong, I believe," growled Lowther. "There's Kildare takes us for a pair of bullies now!"

"Well, it did look like it!"

"Well, that obstinate young brute ought to be ragged! I don't know what to make of him! He's got something up against Tom Merry, and to do Gussy justice, he's not the fellow to take offence at a joke. It's something more serious."

Manners looked worried.

"But Tom can't have done anything mean."

"I wouldn't believe that for a moment. There must be a mistake somewhere. Hallo, here's Mellish! He knows pretty nearly everything that ever goes on in this place, and gets most of his knowledge by listening at keyholes, I believe. Let's ask him if he knows anything."

"Hallo, Mellish!" said Manners.

Mellish was going down to the gates. He stopped and nodded as the chums of the Shell came up to him.

"Have you noticed anything wrong with Gussy lately?" asked Lowther. "He's got something up against Tom Merry, and he won't explain what it is."

"No good asking me," said Mellish. "How should I know?"

"Well, you generally pry into everything, and have a finger in every pie, and your nose in everybody's business, you know."

"Thank you, Lowther. Perhaps I could tell you something that would make you open your eyes, if I chose. If you knew what Tom Merry said—but never mind."

Lowther stared at him.

"What Tom Merry said about me, do you mean?"

"Oh, never mind! Of course, I oughtn't to have spoken!"

"Tell me what you mean!"

"It's nothing!"

"I don't believe a word of it!" shouted Lowther angrily. "I'll go straight to Tom Merry, and tell him your exact words, you cad!"

Mellish looked alarmed.

"Oh, don't make a row about nothing! It was Gore told me, and I don't answer for it! You can go and settle it with Gore!"

"Gore's gone away!"

Mellish winked.

"That's all you know."

"What on earth do you mean?" exclaimed Manners and Lowther together. "Do you mean to say that Gore isn't gone away?"

"I know what I know."

"That isn't much, I expect," said Lowther. "Look here, is there really anything in this, or are you only gassing?"

"I can only say what I've heard," said Mellish, with a shrug. "I don't know whether there's any truth in it. If Gore had the smallpox——"

"The smallpox!" ejaculated Manners and Lowther in a breath.

"I don't say he has it. I don't say the Head is keeping him in the school, and giving out that he's gone home——"

"Why, you utter ass, it would be illegal to keep him here——"

"The Head might risk that rather than allow it to get about that there was an epidemic starting in the school."

"Impossible! There's been no doctor here!"

"Suppose it's all being kept a secret? Mr. Linton is qualified as a medical man, as I happen to know, though he's never practised. Perhaps he——"

"Perhaps you are an ass!"

"Perhaps I am!" sneered Mellish. "Well, we shall see how things turn out, anyway, and perhaps you'll believe me then."

And he went out of the gates, leaving Manners and Lowther looking very curious and uneasily at one another.

"Of course, there can't be anything in it," Manners remarked.

Lowther shook his head.

"Of course not, but——"

"But it's queer, Mellish getting hold of a yarn like that."

"That's it! Still, he's always got some sort of a yarn to tell. Better take no notice of what the confounded fellow says. That reminds me; we never made him tell us what he was going to say about Tom."

"Too late, now. Let's go in and see if Tom's finished."

"Right you are!"

The chums of the Shell walked into the School House. There was a cloud upon Monty Lowther's brow. In spite of his determination to pay no attention to the words of the cad of the Fourth Form, he could not wholly dismiss Mellish's innuendoes from his mind.

CHAPTER 9.

Strangers.

"HERE comes Gussy!"

Blake grinned as he came quickly into Study No. 6 in the School House. Herries and Digby returned his grin, and the three Fourth Formers at once became very busy. D'Arcy had dropped their acquaintance, so it was quite natural that they should be absorbed in their occupations, and should not glance up when the swell of the School House came into the study.

Arthur Augustus walked in, and glanced round through his eyeglass.

Blake was oiling a cricket-bat in the most industrious way in the world, and Digby was writing an impot. at express speed. Herries was deeply interested in a Latin grammar.

"I say, Blake——"

Blake did not look up.

"Blake, are you vewy busy over that wotten bat?"

The chief of Study No. 6 did not reply.

"Digby, would you like me to help you w'ite out that beastly impot.?"

Digby did not answer.

"I say, Hewwies, old man!"

Herries kept his eyes fixed upon the book.

"Hewwies, old fellow, do you usually wead a Latin gwammah on a half-holiday? And is it a habit of yours to hold it upside down?" asked Arthur Augustus sarcastically.

Herries turned red, and threw aside the grammar.

"Were you speaking to me?" he asked

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Who are you?"

"Eh?"

"Who are you?"

"You know vewy well who I am, Hewwies."

"I don't know you at all!"

"Hallo, Herries, who's that chap you're talking to?" called out Blake.

"Don't know," said Herries. "He's some stranger who will persist in talking to me without being introduced."

"Ah, some rotter who hasn't been properly brought up!" Blake remarked severely. "Little boy, don't you know that you shouldn't address a gentleman without an introduction?"

"Who are you callin' a little boy, Blake?"

"Pray do not use my name in that familiar way. I allow only my friends to call me Blake. To strangers I am Mr. Blake."

"I am not a stwangah!"

"My dear chap, I don't know you!"

"Look here——"

"No, I never look at people I don't know."

"You silly wottah——"

"Don't be rude, little boy. What are you doing in this study?"

"I pwesume I can be in my own study if I like without askin' anybody's permish.?" said D'Arcy with withering sarcasm.

"Your own study? Not at all. Are you a new boy here?"

"You know I'm not," roared D'Arcy, losing his temper. "You are a set of silly wottahs, and I have a gweat mind to give you all a feahful thwashin'!"

"Pray go away, little boy!"

"I uttahly wefuse to go away."

Blake looked with solemn inquiry at his comrades. Digby and Herries were trying not to giggle, without very much success, however.

"Shall we allow this stranger to remain in the study, chaps?" he asked.

Herries looked reflective.

"Well, it's like his cheek, poking himself in here where he doesn't belong," he said.

"That's what I think," agreed Digby. "I can't say that I like strangers about the place, making themselves at home, as if they belonged to it."

"You uttah wottahs——"

"He's rude, too," said Blake, rising to his feet. "Upon the whole, I think we had better throw him out."

"I should like to see you thwow me out!"

"You shall feel it, too, my son," said Blake, laying down the cricket-bat, and pushing back his cuffs.

"Pway don't be an ass, Blake! I am willin' to withdwaw my words, which were uttahed undah gweat pwovocation——"

"What are you talking about, little boy?"

"I am weferrin' to the circumstance that I dwopped your acquaintance yesterday."

"And you want to renew it?"

"Certainly not! But out of wegard for you wottahs I am willin'——"

ANSWERS

"That won't wash!"

"Hardly," said Digby. "If D'Arcy chose to apologise——"

"I should certainly wefuse to do anything of the sort."

"If he chose to apologise," went on Dig., unheeding, "we might think over it, and admit him to our friendship on the old terms."

Blake shook his head in a doubtful sort of way."

"Even then I don't see how we could know him without being properly introduced," he remarked. "You see, he's a stranger to us, now, and my grandmother always particularly instructed me never to have much to say to strangers When first I left home to go to school she kissed me on my baby brow, and said——"

"Wats!"

"Nothing of the kind! She said——"

"Pway don't wot, Blake! I am willin' to wenew the fwiendship——"

"But we're not, without a sincere apology and a proper introduction by some mutual friend," said Blake. "That settles it!"

"Oh, wats! I think——"

"Please don't trouble to tell me what you think! I am not at all interested in the thoughts of a fellow I don't know."

D'Arcy screwed his monocle savagely into his eye.

"I wegard you as wottahs!" he exclaimed, with a withering glare round the study. "I wefuse to speak to you!"

"Thank you very much!"

"Oh, wats!"

And the indignant swell of the School House walked out of the study, and shut the door behind him with unnecessary violence.

Blake roared.

"We'll keep it up till he comes round!" he grinned. "I'm not going to speak to him again without being properly introduced, for one. When a chap drops my acquaintance he's not going to pick it up again when he chooses, as if it were a marble or a pegtop he had dropped."

"Ha, ha! Rather not!"

Arthur Augustus wandered disconsolately down the passage. He was in need of a companion, and he missed his chums very much. He would have chummed up with the Terrible Three for the afternoon, but he was now on bad terms with Tom Merry, and consequently with Manners and Lowther.

Mellish would have chummed with him at any time, on account of his liberal supply of pocket-money, but even Mellish could not be found now. He had gone out. D'Arcy walked into the quadrangle, and sighted Skimpole under the trees. Skimpole was in the Shell, Tom Merry's Form. He chummed with nobody in particular, his study-mate being Gore, with whom he was generally on bickering terms. D'Arcy and Skimpole never hit it off, D'Arcy's aristocratic tendencies being greatly at variance with Skimpole's Socialistic ideas. But anything was better than nothing, and so Arthur Augustus bore down upon Skimpole with a friendly smile.

"Coming for a walk, Skimpole?"

Skimpole shook his head.

"I'm afraid I cannot spare the time, D'Arcy. I have a very difficult problem to solve," he said seriously.

"Oh, dear! Is it Euclid?"

"Oh, no, nothing so easy as geometry. You know, of course, that I am a Socialist, and have carried on a great deal of propaganda work at St. Jim's?"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "I know you have acted the giddy ox, old fellow!"

"But lately," went on Skimpole, passing D'Arcy's remark over unheeded, "I have thought very often that my proper vocation was not that of a Socialist agitator, and I have taken up amateur detective work."

"Yaas, I know the latest kind of an ass you are."

"But I cannot quite decide in my own mind between the two," said Skimpole. "Unfortunately there are never any crimes committed in this school, so I really have no chance of making myself prominent as a detective. Perhaps it would be wiser to take up the Socialist work again. What do you advise?"

"I advise you not to be a silly ass, but to come along to the tuckshop in the village, and have some jam tarts."

"Well, that is really a good idea," said Skimpole thoughtfully. "It does not solve the knotty problem, but I am fond of jam-tarts, so I think I will come with you, D'Arcy."

"Yaas, wathah! Come along!"

And they walked down to the village tuckshop, whither, ten minutes later, the chums of the Shell followed, Tom Merry's imposition having been at last concluded.

CHAPTER 10.

Tom Merry Loses His Temper.

MELLISH was in the tuckshop when Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and Skimpole entered, and he gave the swell of St. Jim's a friendly nod. His mouth watered as he saw the jam-tarts selected by Skimpole, and he joined the two juniors.

"I'll have some of those tarts, if you like, Gussy," he remarked.

"I don't like!" said Gussy.

"Now, don't be mean, old fellow!"

"I wathah despise you, Mellish," said D'Arcy; "but I don't want to be mean. You can have some of the tarts if you like."

"Thanks, I will!"

D'Arcy's way of putting it was not particularly hospitable, but the tarts were nice enough, so Mellish was satisfied. He did not trouble his head about trifles. Three youths were standing at the counter, and their caps showed that they belonged to Rylcombe Grammar School. They were Monk, Lane, and Carboy, the leaders of the Grammarian juniors, with whom our friends had had many a tussle; but just at present they seemed to be more interested in some topic they were discussing among themselves than in seeking a row with the Saints.

"It's all rot, of course!" said Monk.

"Must be," assented Carboy.

"Oh, I don't know!" said Lane, with a shake of the head. "Such things have happened, you know; and you never can tell."

"Oh, I think it's rot!" declared Monk. "Another three bottles of ginger-pop here, please, Gaffer Jones."

"Ready, young gentlemen!"

Gaffer Jones was behind the counter of the little shop. He always took Mother Murphy's place there when the old lady suffered from one of her periodical attacks of rheumatism. He handed out the ginger-pop, and the three Grammarians discussed that and the topic that was exercising their minds at the same time.

"It can't be true!" said Frank Monk, with a decided nod of the head. "Dr. Holmes would have more sense!"

"I should think so."

"Well, he wouldn't want it to get out, you see, or people might start taking their boys away from the school, and then they might never come back again."

"H'm! I think it's all rot! Let's ask D'Arcy."

"I don't suppose he'd know anything about it."

"Let's ask him, anyway."

The three Grammarians walked towards the St. Jim's juniors. D'Arcy adjusted his eyeglass, and looked at them inquiringly.

"If you are looking for a wow, Fwank Monk——"

"Not at all," said Monk genially. "Rows are off. We only want to speak to you, Gussy."

"Well, as a wule, I only speak to people whom I wegard as select, not to say swaggah," said D'Arcy; "but I am quite at your service, deah boys. Go on!"

"Thanks awfully, Gussy! You don't know how grateful we are for your condescension!"

"Yaas, wathah; I suppose you must be. But pway go on! Will you have some jam-tarts? They are vewy nice."

"Certainly! Chaps, take as many tarts as you like; it's Gussy's treat! I say, D'Arcy, Mellish has been telling us——"

"No, I haven't!" broke in Mellish quickly. "I said that I had heard it, Monk. Don't put the yarn down to me."

"Oh, all right! Mellish has been saying that he's heard that there's a chap with the smallpox up at St. Jim's, being kept secret, so that it won't get out that there's an epidemic in the school."

"Oh, wats!" said D'Arcy. "What wot!"

"That's what I said," said Frank Monk. "But Mellish seems to think there's something in it, so I thought——"

"It's all wot, of course! Who told you, Mellish?"

"One of the fellows in the Fourth said he'd heard it," said Mellish. "Of course, it's well known that Gore hasn't really gone home."

"Bai Jove! I thought he had, you know!"

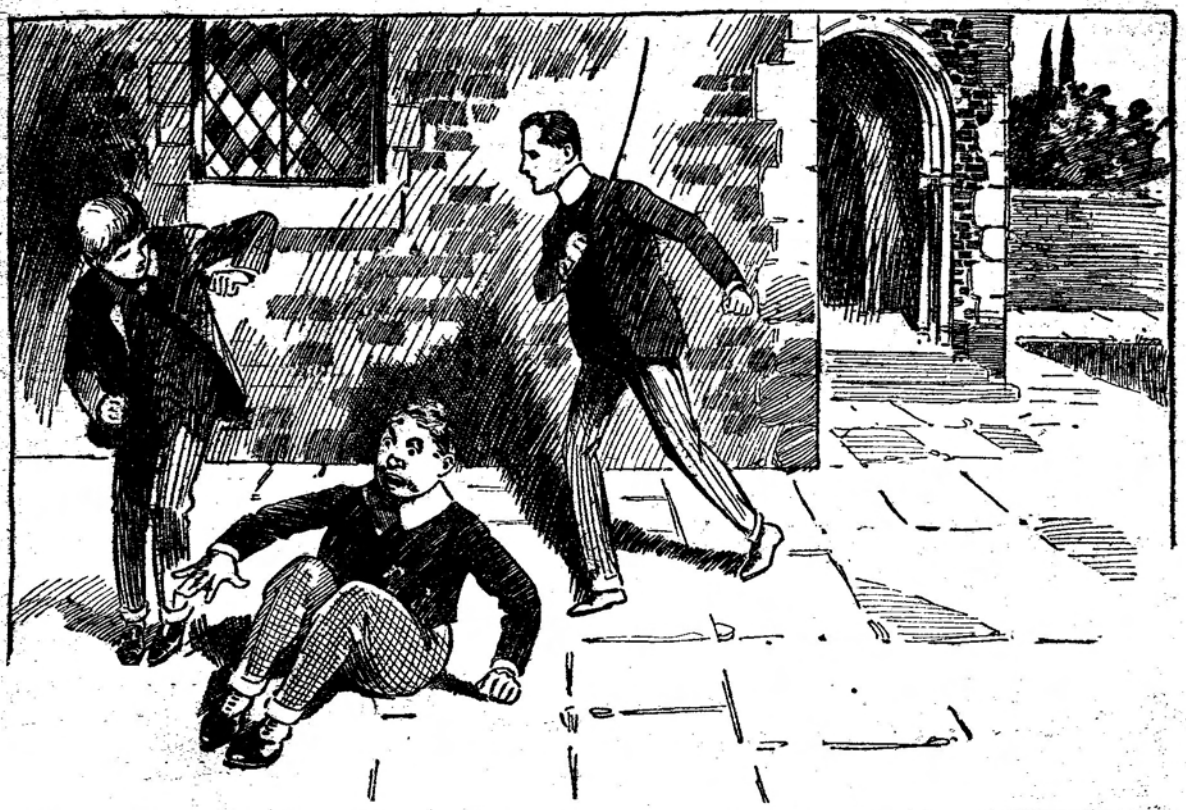
"It was a yarn about his uncle being sick."

"But why should they pwetend he had gone home if he hasn't gone home?"

"Oh, I say nothing! It's no business of mine. I know a great many of the fellows think Gore hasn't really left the school. Take that, along with the rumour that there's a fellow with the smallpox being kept secretly at the school, without a doctor being called in——"

"Bai Jove, it does look stwange!"

"I should say that it does," said Mellish. "Of course, there may be nothing in it. I only repeat what I have heard. Thanks for the tarts, Gussy! They were ripping!"



Herries and Fatty Wynn squirmed away from the stinging cane, and separated.

And the cad of the Fourth strolled out of the tuckshop, leaving the juniors there with serious faces. Gaffer Jones, behind the counter, had listened curiously to the talk, and his wizened old face showed how keenly it interested him. The Gaffer was one of the worst gossips in Rylcombe, and it was pretty certain that before the day was out the rumour would be all over the village that smallpox had broken out up at the school.

"It really looks queer," said Frank Monk. "I hope nothing of the sort has happened. These tales often get about with nothing to found them upon. Possibly it was just the affair at our school that gave rise to this rumour."

"Shouldn't wonder," said Lane. "Still, it's queer. I really think we ought to bar these kids, you know. They may be carrying infection with them."

"Yes, by Jove!" exclaimed Carboy. "Smallpox is awfully catching, and we might get it just by standing near D'Arcy."

The swell of St. Jim's gave an indignant sniff.

"I tell you, it's all wot!" he exclaimed. "Have some more jam-tarts, deah boys, and don't talk silly piffle!"

"Good advice!" grinned Frank Monk. "I dare say you're an infectious rotter, but I'll risk it for the tarts!"

"Same here," said Carboy. "Hallo, here come the Terrible Triplets! Let's ask them if they're aware of the outbreak at the school."

"Ha, ha! Good idea."

Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther came into the shop, and walked up to the counter. The Grammarian trio turned towards them, grinning.

"Hallo, Merry!" said Frank Monk. "I hear that you've got smallpox up at the school."

Tom Merry stared at the Grammarian.

"This is the first I've heard of it," he said.

"Isn't it a fact, then?"

"Of course it isn't, fathead?"

"Who are you calling a fathead?"

"You," said Tom Merry. "Only a silly ass would take stock in a yarn like that! Besides, we've had the school disinfected since you chaps were there."

The Grammarians turned red.

"Ha, ha, ha!" cackled D'Arcy. "I wegard that wemark as weally funnay."

"Do you?" said Tom Merry. "I regard you as a rather funny animal, too."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"Oh, don't speak to me!" said Tom crossly. "That is, unless you are ready to explain what you said this morning, and to take back your words."

"I am not pwepared to do anythin' of the sort."

"Then, shut up!"

"I wefuse to shut up!"

"Oh, go on cackling, then; I don't care!"

And Tom Merry gave an order to Gaffer Jones. The Grammarians looked at one another in surprise. There was evidently a rift in the lute at St. Jim's.

"Hallo! What's the matter with you kids?" asked Monk. "What has Gussy been doing to ruffle the lordly serenity of your royal nibs, Tom Merry?"

"Find out!"

"That's what I'm trying to do, by the easy and harmless process of asking questions. What is the trouble, Gussy? Confide it to your uncle."

"I have no objection to doin' so, Fwank Monk. I wegard Tom Merry as a wottah, you know, because I considah that he has acted in a wotten mannah!"

"Well, that's a jolly good reason, anyway."

"I despise him feahfully, and he doesn't like me to tell him so. But what I say is, deah boys, that a chap shouldn't be a wottah if he doesn't like bein' wegarded as a wottah, you know!"

"Hear, hear!"

Tom Merry set down his glass of ginger-beer untasted. His brow was contracted, and a glint was in his usually pleasant eyes.

"Look here, D'Arcy——"

"I have befoah wequested you not to addwess me, Tom Mewwy."

"You confounded ass!"

"Pway keep your memarks for those who do not despise you," said Arthur Augustus, with a wave of the hand. "As far as I am concerned, I despise you feahfully!"

Tom Merry's face was crimson. He made a rapid step towards D'Arcy, but Manners and Lowther caught him and pulled him back.

Tom looked at them angrily.

"What are you up to?" he exclaimed. "Let me go!"

"Hang it, Tom——"

"Let me go, I tell you!"

"Don't row with Gussy before the Grammarians, Tom. We don't want to give them a show to cackle at."

"Oh, very well," said Tom Merry shortly; and he turned back to the counter again. His brow was darkly clouded.

"I weally wondah that you fellows keep up the acquaintance of that feahful wottah!" said D'Arcy. "I have been greatly deceived in Tom Mewwy. I used to wegard him as a decent chap, and I would willingly have admitted him to my circle of fwiends, though I usually endeavour to keep that select, not to say swaggah. But since I have found him out in his twue colours—— Ow, you howwid wottah!"

Tom Merry's patience was exhausted. With a jerk of his wrist, he sent the contents of his glass of ginger-beer streaming into the face of Arthur Augustus.

D'Arcy gave a yell as the fluid splashed over his face and chest, and then he rubbed his eyes, and glared at the hero of the Shell.

"Tom Mewwy, you uttah wottah——"

"Well, shut up, then!"

"Bai Jove, I will give you a feahful thwashin'!"

And Arthur Augustus, burning with wrath, dashed at the hero of the Shell with his fists waving in the air like Indian clubs, and his eyeglass dangling behind at the end of its cord.

CHAPTER 11.

Rough on the Grammarians.

TOM MERRY was angry—more angry than his chums had ever seen him before—but he did not hit out at D'Arcy. He knew perfectly well that one of his right-handers would have sent the swell of St. Jim's rolling along the floor of the tuckshop, and he was sorely tempted to deliver it, but he restrained himself. D'Arcy had wounded him deeply, but he could not help having a feeling that the School House dude had been deceived in some way. It was certainly not like Arthur Augustus to wantonly insult anybody.

Tom put up his hands, and warded off the terrific drives of the swell of St. Jim's, and gave him a gentle tap on the chest that made him sit down upon a box of dog biscuits. D'Arcy jumped up again like a Jack-in-the-box, and rushed on; but Monty Lowther, who feared that Tom might really lose his temper and hurt him, caught him by the shoulder and slung him round.

And when he was slung round, the temptation was too strong for Manners to resist, and, without stopping to think, Manners let out with his foot, and the swell of St. Jim's was propelled along the floor by a powerful kick.

"Here, fair play!" exclaimed Skimpole. "As a Socialist, I am bound to take the weaker side in a quarrel; and as a——"

"And as a silly duffer, what are you bound to do?" exclaimed Lowther, nettled at the suggestion that there had been a want of fair play in the matter. The chums of the Shell had acted by way of a joke, but Skimpole was too dense to see it. "It seems to me that you are bound to get a thick ear!"

"Back me up, deah boy!" gasped D'Arcy. "Let us administah a feahful thwashin' to those wottahs!"

"We'll back you up," chuckled Frank Monk; "won't we, kids? He's stood us tarts nobly, like a little man, and we're bound to back him up."

"Rather!" exclaimed Lane and Carboy.

"Come on, then!"

D'Arcy was rushing to the attack again. Skimpole followed him, feeling that he could do no less, though, as a Socialist, he was bound not to enter into conflict with anybody, according to his theories. And the three Grammarians, eager for fun, backed them up for all they were worth.

"Shoulder to shoulder!" exclaimed Monty Lowther.

And the Terrible Three lined up to receive the attack, and met it gallantly. But the Grammarians were equal to them as fighting-men, and D'Arcy and Skimpole were thrown in, as it were, and made the odds heavy. The chums of the Shell were grasped by strong hands, and yanked towards the doorway.

"Kick the wottahs out!" cried D'Arcy. "I insist upon the wottahs bein' immediately kicked out, deah boys!"

"Out with them!" gasped Skimpole.

The three Grammarians were too hard at work to have any breath left for talking. But with five to three the chums of the Shell would certainly have been hurled forth; but at that moment three St. Jim's juniors entered the tuckshop. They were Blake, Herries, and Digby.

The three did not stop to ask questions; they saw Grammarians and Saints mingled in combat, and they rushed into the fray at once.

"Sock it to 'em!" yelled Blake.

And the Fourth-Formers of St. Jim's "socked" it to the Grammarians in fine style. D'Arcy and Skimpole were hurled aside; the Fourth-Formers not even noticing that they were on the side of the Grammarians. Frank Monk, Lane, and Carboy were dragged to the doorway by the combined efforts of six Saints, and hurled into the street.

They went rolling and sprawling in a heap under the great tree that stood before the tuckshop, and crashed into one of the little tables set there for refreshments, and brought it over with a crash and a smashing of empty glasses.

"Good!" panted Tom Merry. "Thanks for your help, Blake!"

"Oh, don't mention it," said Blake politely; "always pleased to see you kids out of a scrape! Warm work, though, isn't it? Are you thirsty, Dig?"

"Yes, rather!"

"So am I!" said Herries.

Tom Merry laughed his old, pleasant laugh.

"It's my treat!" he exclaimed. "Ginger-pop, or lemonade; or both?"

"That's all right, old chap; I was only joking!"

"But I insist!"

"Oh, if you insist, have your way—both!" said Blake, grinning.

Arthur Augustus was picking himself up from an overturned sack of dog-biscuits. He was looking rumpled and indignant. Blake noticed him for the first time.

"Hallo, who's that chap?" he said. "Was he ragging the Grammarians, too?"

"No, he was fighting us," grunted Lowther. "Tom Merry washed his face for him with some ginger-beer, and, instead of thanking him prettily, he started making a row, and the Grammarians backed him up."

"My word!" said Digby. "So he was on the Grammar side, was he?"

"Yaas, wathah, you wottahs!" howled Arthur Augustus. "They backed me up like decent fellows against those wotten wuffians!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Tom Mewwy thwew a glass of gingah-beer in my face——"

Blake looked rather warlike.

"Hallo, what's that? Have you been chucking ginger-beer at a chap belonging to our study, Tom Merry?"

"That's all right," said Digby; "we don't know the fellow!"

"Quite a stranger to us," said Herries. "Anybody who likes can chuck ginger-beer, or any other kind of beer, at him."

Blake recollected, and he laughed.

"Of course, I had forgotten that," he remarked. "I don't know the chap, so it doesn't matter to me."

"You howwid wottah!"

The Terrible Three were looking at Blake in amazement. They did not know what on earth the chums of Study No. 6 were driving at.

"What's the game?" asked Lowther. "Is this some wheeze we haven't heard of? What do you mean by saying that you don't know Gussy?"

"He dropped our acquaintance," said Blake; "dropped it yesterday, you see. Since then we've used no other—I mean, since then we don't know the fellow. We can't possibly know him again till he's been properly introduced by a mutual friend."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wefuse to be intwoduced—I wefuse to wenew my acquaintance with such a set of wotten boundahs!" said the swell of the School House. "I wash my hands of you!"

"Better wash your face," suggested Blake; "it needs it."

To this suggestion the swell of St. Jim's made no reply. He stalked out of the tuckshop with a great deal of dignity. Skimpole followed him. Blake looked rather curiously at Tom Merry.

"But what was the row about?" he asked. "What did you go for old Gus for? Surely he's a harmless lunatic?"

"He's got something up against me, and won't explain what it is," said Tom Merry abruptly. "Do you know what it is, Blake?"

"Blessed if I do! I wonder if that was why he resigned from the committee of inquiry?" said Blake thoughtfully. "He seemed to have something on his mind, and refused to explain. I don't see what it can be."

"There's something in the air at St. Jim's lately, I think," said Tom Merry restlessly. "Fellows seem to be getting on bad terms, and saying nasty things about one another; and now there's this yarn about smallpox breaking out at the school."

"Smallpox at the school!" said Blake in amazement. "What on earth are you talking about? There's no smallpox at the school!"

"I know there isn't; but somebody has started a yarn that there is, and the Grammar fellows have got hold of it."

"Why, what utter rot!"

"Of course it is, but it will be all over the village soon, anyway. I wish I knew the ass who started it. Hallo!"

Three faces were looking in at the doorway. Monk, Lane, and Carboy seemed inclined to rush in and renew the fight. But the odds of two to one were too great; they contented themselves with words.

"Rats!"

"Rotters!"

"Yah!"

"Oh, clear off!" said Tom Merry. "If we come to you, we shall really hurt you this time; we've only played with you so far!"

"Yah! Don't come near us!"

"You'll infect us if you do!"

"Go and get yourselves fumigated!"

The juniors of St. Jim's turned red. Tom Merry made a step towards the Grammarians. Frank Monk made a great show of haste to escape.

"Here, come along, kids," he exclaimed; "it's catching, you know!"

And the three Grammarians bolted—and ran into a short, stout gentleman, in a frock-coat and silk hat, who was coming into the shop. It was Dr. Short, the local medical man, well-known in Rylcombe, and at St. Jim's, too.

"Hallo, hallo! What is this?" exclaimed the doctor. "What is catching, my boys?"

"Oh, nothing, sir," said Monk, turning red.

And the Grammarians escaped before the little doctor could question them. Dr. Short, looking rather puzzled, entered the shop, and nodded to Gaffer Jones.

"I've come to see Mrs. Murphy again!" he exclaimed. "How's the rheumatism, Mr. Jones—better, I hope?"

"She's still very porely, sir," said Gaffer Jones.

"Ah, sorry to hear it! How do you do, Tom Merry? All well up at the school?"

"Ripping, sir!" said Tom Merry.

"What was it that those Grammar lads were saying?"

"Oh, only some nonsense, sir!"

And the St. Jim's juniors left the shop. Dr. Short glanced after them, and then turned to Gaffer Jones, whose face showed plainly that he had information to give, if the medical gentleman chose to ask for it.

"Do you know anything about this, Mr. Jones?"

"'Deed and I do, sir. The young gentlemen have been talking it over in the shop the last hour, sir."

"Then what is it?" asked the little doctor sharply.

"They do say smallpox has broken out up at the school, sir."

"Smallpox? Gracious me!"

"So they was a-saying, sir."

"Impossible! I have not been sent for!"

"They do say as the headmaster he is a-keeping of it secret, sir; so as not to let people know there's a epidermis——"

"A what?"

"A epidermis, sir—one of them things that catches——"

"Oh, an epidemic!"

"Epidermis is good enough for me, sir, with all respect," said Gaffer Jones. "As I was a-saying, they do say as the headmaster is keeping the boy hidden at the school, so as to keep the epidermis a secret."

"Bless my soul!"

"I dessay there's nothing in it, sir; but it do look queer."

"Mere nonsense!"

"Of course, sir; but it do look queer, all the same."

"Stuff! Don't talk this nonsense up and down the village, Jones. I shall run down to the school this afternoon, and ascertain that all is well."

"Of course, I sha'n't say a word, sir; not to a soul."

"Of course you will, you mean," growled the unceremonious little doctor; "you'll chatter it right and left. Come, let me go in and see Mrs. Murphy; it's my last call, and I can drive on to the school."



POLLIE GREEN
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This Week's
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PRICE ONE PENNY.

CHAPTER 12.
Something Like a Fight!

"HAVE you heard?"

It was Figgins who asked the question, and he addressed Lowther, whom he had just met in the quadrangle at St. Jim's. Lowther looked at him.

"Heard what?"

"That yarn about the smallpox."

"Oh, yes!" said Lowther. "They're saying that there's a fellow got it, and being kept secretly somewhere about the school."

"That's it," said Figgins. "I have just had the yarn from Skimpole, and it seems to be all over the school. Of course, there's nothing in it?"

"Of course not," said Lowther; "but it's queer!"

"But who could it be? I've totted up all the fellows in our House, and they're all well and kicking, and all to be seen!"

"So are all on our side, excepting Gore. He's gone home to his people, as his uncle is ill. But they're saying——"

"They're saying that he hasn't really gone home," said Blake, joining them. "Some of the fellows think he's got it, and is being hidden away."

"Some silly busybody has started the yarn, I suppose," said Figgins, with such an extremely significant look at Blake that the School House lad could not help noticing it.

"What are you looking at me like that for, Figgins?" he demanded at once. "Do you mean that I started the yarn?"

Figgins gave a shrug of the shoulders.

"Oh, I don't say so!"

"But you implied it," exclaimed Blake wrathfully, "and I want to know what you mean by it, Figgins!"

"I'd prefer not to say."

"If you're afraid to speak out——"

"Oh, if you put it like that, I'll speak out fast enough!" exclaimed Figgins, with a flash in his eyes. "What I mean is this, then; that a chap who goes about backbiting people is quite capable of spreading a yarn like this."

Blake's eyes fairly blazed.

"And do you mean to say that I go about backbiting people?" he shouted.

"Yes, I do."

"Here, draw it mild, Figgins!" exclaimed Lowther, in astonishment. "That's not the way to talk to Blake! We all know——"

"I know what I'm talking about!" said Figgins obstinately.

Blake pushed back his cuffs.

"You say that I'm a backbiter, Figgins?"

"Yes; I've said it."

"Then you'll have to back up your words!"

"I'm ready. Come into the gym."

"Hang the gym.! Put up your fists!"

"Right you are!"

No more time was wasted in words. The two juniors were at it hammer and tongs in a second, with blazing eyes and set teeth. Lowther looked on in helpless amazement, and a crowd quickly gathered round the spot.

"What's the row?"

"Here, hold on!"

"Draw it mild!"

Figgins reeled back with blood streaming from his mouth. Blake followed him up with clenched fists.

"Are you going to take your words back?"

"No!" yelled Figgins, tearing off his jacket. "Here, hold my coat, Fatty! Take this confounded waistcoat, Kerr! Now, let me get at him!"

Blake had also torn off coat and waistcoat. The two foes rushed at one another fiercely, and the fight was renewed with savage determination such as was seldom witnessed even in the worst of House rows at St. Jim's.

"What's it all about?" exclaimed Tom Merry, coming on the scene.

"Blessed if I know!" said Lowther. "Figgins called Blake a backbiter, for some reason, and, of course, Blake wasn't going to stand that!"

"Figgins did!" exclaimed Tom Merry indignantly. "Well, of all the cheek! That's a word more suitable to Figgins himself than to Blake!"

"What's that?" exclaimed Kerr, firing up instantly at this aspersion upon his chief. "Do you mean to call Figgins a backbiter, Tom Merry?"

"Well, I——"

"Yes or no, unless you are afraid to speak out plainly!"

"Yes, then," said Tom Merry between his teeth. "I don't want to quarrel with you, Kerr, but that word is a jolly good description of Figgins, as I know."

Kerr struck the School House lad full in the face with his open hand, with a smack that sounded like a pistol-shot.

"Now, come on!" he said savagely.

Tom Merry did not need asking twice. He came on with

blazing eyes, and he and Kerr were soon fighting like tigers. The crowd thickened round the spot in the growing dusk of the April afternoon, looking on with eagerness and amazement. Two fights at the same moment were rather exciting; and the end was not reached yet.

"Go it, Figgins!"

"Give him beans, Blake!"

"Go it, Tom Merry!"

"Buck up, Scotty!"

"Knock out the New House rotter!"

"Give the School House cad what-ho!"

"Yaas, wathah!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Although a patwiotic School House fellow, I must weally wemark that I think Tom Mewwy deserves to get a feahful thwashin'. He certainly has no wight to call Figgins names considewin' his own wascally and backbitin' conduct!"

Monty Lowther reached out and seized the swell of the School House by the nose between his finger and thumb.

"What's that about Tom Merry?" he demanded.

"Welease my nose, you howwid wottah!" wailed D'Arcy.

"Take back what you said!"

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the kind! Welease my beastly nose, and I will give you a feahful lickin'!"

"You'll have the chance!" exclaimed Lowther. "I've had enough of your rotting, D'Arcy! Take off your jacket!"

And he dragged off his own. D'Arcy was not slow to obey. He rushed at Lowther with brandished fists, and the next moment was lying on his back, staring up at the stars that were beginning to come out in the dark blue sky.

Digby rushed forward and faced Lowther.

"Here, come on, you Shell rotter, you'll find me a bit harder to tackle!" he shouted. "Come on, do you hear?"

"I hear, and I'm coming!" grunted Lowther.

Digby was indeed a more formidable opponent than D'Arcy. Lowther had his hands full when he tackled the Fourth-Former. Arthur Augustus sat up, rubbing his nose. He groped about for his missing eyeglass.

"Thank you vewy much, Digby! Give him a feahful thwashin'!" he exclaimed. "Go it, deah boy! Knock him wight out!"

Digby had forgotten, in his excitement, that he did not know D'Arcy. Three fights going on at once were certain to attract attention, and an alarm rose that the prefects were coming, but the combatants were too furious to care.

"What is this fearful row about?"

It was Kildare's voice. The captain of St. Jim's pushed his way through the crowd of juniors, with Monteith, of the New House at his heels.

"What is the matter? Stop that fighting instantly!"

Kildare's words were law. The exasperated juniors separated unwillingly, bruised and battered, but by no means satisfied.

The captain's brow was dark and stern.

"How dare you fight like this in the quadrangle?" he exclaimed. "What is it all about? Another of your House rows?"

"No, it isn't!" said Monteith. "Here's Lowther fighting with Digby. What are you up to, you young rascals!"

"What is all this about, Tom Merry?"

"Oh, nothing!"

"Answer me at once!"

"Well, I started it," said Blake, wiping his mouth, from which the red was streaming. "I didn't like something Figgins said——"

"Something that was quite true!" shouted Figgins.

"Do you want some more?"

"Yes, I do, and——"

"Take that young fool, Monteith!" exclaimed Kildare, seizing Blake by the shoulders and forcibly dragging him away from Figgins. And the New House prefect did the same with Figgins.

"Go into your own houses, you young rascals!" went on the captain of St. Jim's. "I think you have all taken leave of your senses the past few days. There has been nothing but quarrelling and ill-feeling."

"He called me a backbiter."

"You had no right to use such a word, Figgins!"

"Well, he is one!"

"Oh, take him away, Monteith! Every fellow who was fighting here will get six with the cane!"

"Right!" said Monteith. "I'll look after Figgins and Kerr!"

And he bundled the New House champions off. There was a rattle of wheels in the gateway, and a neat little trap, with Dr. Short sitting in it, drove in, and stopped before the Head's House.

Well known were Dr. Short and his trap to the boys of St. Jim's, and a buzz went round at the sight of them.

"Then it's true!"

The smallpox story was fresh in every mind. And the sight of the medical man driving up to St. Jim's confirmed what had hitherto been a doubtful rumour.

CHAPTER 13.

Called Before the Head.

DR. HOLMES, the Head of St. Jim's, was in his study. He rose to his feet as Dr. Short was shown in, and looked in some surprise at the serious expression upon the little medico's face.

"No bad news, I hope, Short?" he exclaimed.

"That is what I have come here to learn, my dear sir," replied Dr. Short.

The Head looked puzzled.

"I confess that I don't quite understand——"

"Do you know the rumour that is about in the village?"

"No; I must say I do not. I have heard nothing. What is it?"

"It is to the effect that there has been an outbreak of smallpox at the school here."

The Head looked amazed.

"Smallpox! Here!"

"Yes!"

"What absolute nonsense! There is absolutely no foundation for it! What can possibly have put such an idea into people's heads?" exclaimed Dr. Holmes, in utter bewilderment.

"That is what you must find out. I am glad to learn that there is no truth in it."

"Not a particle, my dear sir."

"I found some boys talking over it, by chance, in a shop in the village," said Dr. Short. "Then I inquired, and found that others had heard the story. They say that a boy here is dangerously ill, and is concealed, the story being given out that he has gone home to see a sick relation."

The Head started.

"One boy has certainly gone home to see a sick relation!" he exclaimed. "A boy named Gore, in the Shell."

"Ah, then no doubt that gave rise to the story!" said Dr. Short, with a nod. "But it is pretty clear that the rumour must have originated at the school here."

"You mean that some foolish lad belonging to St. Jim's must have spread the report in the first place?"

"There is not much doubt about that in my mind."

"What could make a lad act in a way so absurd and malicious?" The Head frowned. "I shall inquire into this. If I knew which boys to question——"

"Question those whom I heard speaking of the matter in Mrs. Murphy's shop," said Dr. Short. "Some of the Grammar School boys were twitting them with it. I remember that Merry was there, and Blake and Lowther, with their friends."

The Head touched the bell.

"I will send for Merry and Blake."

"That is a good idea. I have no doubt that they will tell you all they can; and, at all events, you can depend upon the truth from them."

Tom Merry and Jack Blake were quickly summoned to the Head's study. The Head looked at them very expressively as they came in. The heroes of the School House bore very visible traces of the fight in the quad. They had not had time to put themselves in order, either, and their clothes were dishevelled and dusty. Blake kept a handkerchief to the corner of his mouth to mop up the "claret" that was still oozing away there. Tom Merry was blinking painfully with his left eye. Dr. Short smiled slightly, but the Head's brow was growing very stern.

"Merry, Blake, have you been fighting together?"

"No, sir!" said Tom Merry.

"But you have been fighting somebody?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Well, and whom was it?"

"Kerr, sir, of the New House."

"And you, Blake?"

"I've been scrapping—I mean fighting, sir, with Figgins," mumbled Blake. "It—it was nothing, sir. It doesn't matter!"

"It matters a great deal, I think," said the Head. "I usually take no notice of House disputes, as you know, but in this case the fighting appears to have been carried to a brutal extent."

The two juniors coloured uncomfortably.

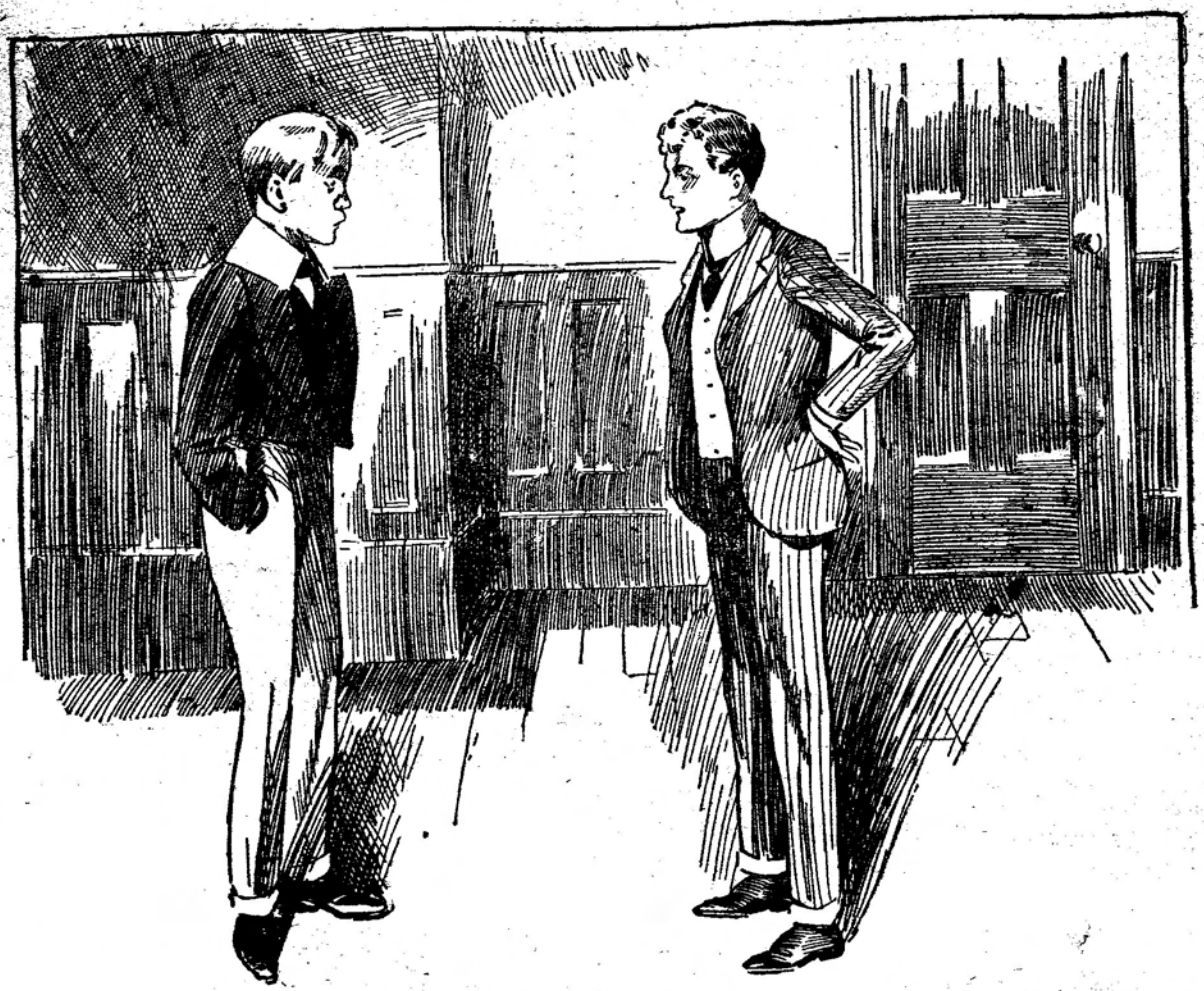
It was quite true that the combat had been, for once, hard and bitter, and the signs of battle they bore showed it.

"But that matter may stand over," said the Head, dismissing the subject. "At present I wish to question you about another matter entirely. There seems to be an absurd rumour abroad that there has been an outbreak of smallpox at the school, and that a boy suffering from that disease is hidden at St. Jim's. Have you heard anything about it, Merry?"

"Yes, sir, I have heard it."

"Have you any idea how the rumour was started?"

"No; I have only heard it talked about among the fellows."



In the passage outside the two juniors looked at one another curiously: 'If you could see yourself, Blake," said Tom Merry, "you wouldn't pass any remarks on me."

"And you, Blake?"

"I don't know who started it, sir. Every fellow I've heard speak of it says that he heard it from somebody else."

The Head wrinkled his brows.

"That is generally the way with rumours," Dr. Short remarked. "Nobody knows exactly how they start, but they gather in size like a snowball rolling down hill. I came over to inform you of what was being said, Dr. Holmes. May I suggest a way to silence the absurd chatter?"

"Certainly. I shall be very grateful."

"The story seems to have centred itself round the departure of the boy Gore. If he could return immediately to the school—if only to remain here a day or so, it would explode the absurd story."

The Head nodded.

"That is true. I will see if it can be done. Unfortunately Gore's uncle is very ill, and his people want him at home. But I dare say it could be managed. Thank you very much for the suggestion. You may go, Merry and Blake."

The juniors left the study. They left the Head and the little medico deep in consultation. In the passage outside the two juniors looked at one another curiously.

"You look a pretty object, Merry," Blake remarked.

Tom Merry grinned.

"If you could see yourself, Blake, you wouldn't pass any remarks on me."

"Very likely. I had about the toughest tussle of my life with Figgins," Blake said, as they walked down the wide-flagged corridor. "And it's not over yet. I'm going to look for him in the gym. this evening."

Tom Merry's brow was clouded.

"Things are getting into a bad state here," he said, with a shake of the head. "I don't quite know how it is, but everything seems to be going wrong lately. Your tame dude has got something up against me, and won't explain what it is. I give you my word that I haven't done anything to put his back up that I know of. Well, so-long, I'm going to get a wash!"

"Same here!"

And the juniors parted.

CHAPTER 14.

Tom Merry Takes Action.

TOM MERRY came into his study half an hour later clean and newly-clothed, and looking a great deal better. But his handsome face was still disfigured by cuts and bruises, and his left eye was quite purple. There was a thoughtful shade upon his brow, as if he were thinking something out.

Manners was making the tea. Lowther, with a clouded brow, was opening a tin of sardines. Lowther had a swollen nose, as his trophy from the fight in the quadrangle. Tom Merry glanced at him inquiringly as he came in.

"Anything wrong, Monty?"

"No," said Lowther, so shortly that Tom Merry stopped and stared at him. He came over to his chum and looked him full in the face.

"Look here, Lowther——"

"Oh, rats!" said Lowther, turning away and emptying the sardines into a dish. "Are you ready for tea?"

Tom Merry flushed red.

"Lowther! What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Yes, something, as I can see from your chivvy! If you've got something up against me, say it out, instead of grumping there like a sulky kid!" exclaimed Tom Merry hotly.

Lowther bit his lip.

"I'll tell you what," said Tom Merry, after a pause. "There's been something altogether wrong at St. Jim's lately, and I've been thinking over it very seriously. It looks to me as if some ill-natured mischief-maker had been at work."

Lowther started.

"We all seem to be at sixes and sevens," went on Tom Merry, with a clouded face. "I've got something up against Figgins, Gussy has something up against me. Figgins complains of Blake, and now you——"

"By Jove, I believe you're right!" exclaimed Lowther. "I was a fool to listen to a word——"

"So somebody has been talking to you?"

"Yes."

"About me?"

"Well, yes," said Lowther, turning red.

"I think you might have spoken out, Monty, before you believed anything, whatever it is, against an old chum!"

"Well, it seemed so rotten to talk about it," said Lowther. "I didn't like to seem to distrust you, Tom, that's a fact; yet I couldn't help the beastly thing weighing on my mind. It made me feel uncomfortable. Yet very likely that was what Mellish said it for—he's a rotten cad——"

Tom Merry gave a jump.

"Mellish?"

"Yes; he told me—what I was speaking of."

"Mellish! It was Mellish who told me—you know, about Figgins. He made me promise not to tell Figgins,"

"He wanted me to promise not to tell you, but I wouldn't."

"Mellish is at the bottom of it," said Tom Merry, with conviction. "I know he's a spy and a tell-tale."

"We've all known that for a long time," said Manners.

"That's the truth. He's at the bottom of this; and, after all, you know how easy it is to set people by the ears, by going about telling them things and making them promise not to tell."

"Yes, rather!"

"Now, I know the young rotter has been yarning to you, I shouldn't wonder if it was all lies he told me about Figgins!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "But let's hear what he said to you, Monty. I give you my word, honour bright, that I'll tell you whether there's any truth in it or not."

"Well, he said——" Lowther hesitated.

"Go on!"

"Oh, it's too rotten to repeat! I know there's nothing in it, and I was a fool to listen to the young rotter for a minute. I didn't really want to."

"Never mind, go on!"

"Well, he said that he heard you say to Manners——"

"Hallo, I'm in it, too, am I?" exclaimed Manners.

"Yes; but mind, I didn't believe a word of it!"

"Let's hear what it was," said Tom Merry.

"Well, he said he heard you say to Manners that you wished I had never come back to St. Jim's, and that the study was much more comfy while I was away," said Lowther, with a scarlet face. "Of course——"

Tom Merry turned quite pale with anger.

"Lowther, there wasn't a word of truth in it!"

"I know there wasn't, old chap; and I was a fool——"

"Manners will bear me out, if necessary."

"It's not necessary——"

"Of course I bear you out," said Manners. "Tom Merry never said anything of the kind to me, Monty. If he had I should have punched his nose. You ought to know Tom better than that!"

"Yes, of course I did——"

"You know how glad we were to have you back again, Monty," said Tom Merry reproachfully. "I think you really might have come straight to me and told me what the cad said."

"I know I ought to have done so, but I felt so rotten and uncomfy about it—though, of course, I knew all the time that you hadn't really said anything of the sort——"

"The young beast!" muttered Tom Merry, between his teeth. "After that, a fellow would be a fool to take the slightest notice of anything he said."

"I should think so," exclaimed Manners; "and that lets in some light on Gussy's queer conduct lately. Perhaps Mellish has been yarning to him."

"Very likely."

"We're going to look into this!" exclaimed Tom Merry abruptly. "I'm beginning to see light, I think. I fancy that we shall find Mellish at the bottom of it all, and very likely at the bottom of that story about the smallpox, too. There's no end to the mischief a tell-tale can do if he sets his mind to it!"

"That's true enough."

"Blake and his lot made up a committee of inquiry," went on Tom Merry, with a faint smile. "That was really a good idea. Suppose we revive the idea, and inquire into the matter ourselves? We'll go into it with Blake, and among us we ought to be able to sift out the truth."

"Good wheeze!" exclaimed Lowther heartily.

And Manners nodded assent.

"Then let's go along to Study No. 6——"

Lowther hesitated.

"After my row with D'Arcy and Dig——"

"After what D'Arcy said about you, Tom!" said Manners.

Tom Merry nodded decidedly.

"Yes, chaps. I mean it. If we're going to get all this cleared up, it's no good standing on our dignity. I believe a tale-bearer is at the bottom of our trouble with Study No. 6, and we ought to see into it."

"What sort of a reception do you think they will give us?"

"We must risk that; anyway, I expect we shall be given a chance to explain."

"Well, have your tea first," said Manners. "It's ready."

"Oh, buck up then!"

The chums of the Shell had tea with record haste. Then they went along to Study No. 6, and as they drew near they heard loud voices proceeding from it.

"Shut up, little boy!"

"I wefuse to shut up!"

"Do you want a dot on the nose? I tell you that I cannot allow a stranger to join in the conversation like this!"

Tom Merry grinned.

He gave a knock at the open door and walked in. Lowther and Manners followed him, and the chums of the Fourth Form jumped up to meet them, looking very warlike.

CHAPTER 15.

D'Arcy is Introduced.

TOM MERRY waved his hand in sign of peace.

"Keep your wool on, kids!"

"Who are you calling kids?"

"Yaas, wathah, Tom Mewwy! Pway whom are you chawactewisin' as kids?"

"Sorry—I mean goats—that is to say, respected and honoured young gentlemen of the Fourth Form!" amended Tom Merry. "We have come——"

"I can see that," said Digby. "Now I want to see you go!"

"We want to explain——"

"Go and do your explaining in your own study, like good fellows," said Blake, with a nod towards the door.

"Yaas, wathah!"

The reception could not be called an encouraging one. Lowther and Manners both looked inclined to commit assault and battery on the chums of the Fourth, but Tom Merry remained calm.

"Look here, Blake, it's an important matter."

"Important rats!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Now then, Gussy, dry up!" said Blake. "You mustn't speak too much in this study. As a stranger here——"

"I wefuse to be wegarded as a stwangah!"

"You see, we don't know you."

"That is a beastly whoppah; you know me vewy well!"

"Not at all, since you dropped our acquaintance."

"You widiculous wottah!"

"I cannot allow a stranger to apply such expressions to me. I think I shall have to kick this person out of the study, chaps."

"Right-ho!" exclaimed Herries. "Like his cheek to speak to us without being introduced."

"You widiculous ass!"

"Look here, Blake," exclaimed Tom Merry, "I wish you'd listen seriously! This is really an important matter."

"Oh, you can go on if you like, I suppose," said Blake, with the sweet and patient resignation of a martyr at the stake. "Fire away!"

"We are a committee of inquiry."

Blake jumped up.

"You're a what?"

"A committee of inquiry."

"Well, of all the nerve, to bone our idea and come here and tell us about it!" Blake exclaimed wrathfully. "Do you hear the rotter, you chaps?"

"Let me explain."

"A committee of inquiry, by Jove! And what are you going to inquire into, I'd like to know?" ejaculated Blake.

"Into the tales that have been going round the school lately, and setting everybody by the ears," said Tom Merry. "But we don't want to bone your idea. We're willing to amalgamate with you, and form a general committee."

"Well, that's more reasonable."

"I wefuse to amalgamate with Tom Mewwy!"

"Nobody's asked you, Gussy! You're a stranger here, and you don't count!"

"I am not a stwangah here, and I do count!" said the swell of the School House firmly. "And I wefuse to amalgamate with Tom Mewwy."

"Oh, shut up!" said Lowther, rather roughly.

"I wefuse to shut up, Lowthah!"

"Shut up yourself, Lowther!" exclaimed Digby. "I think it's like your cheek to come here, anyway, after——"

"Perhaps you can shut me up?" suggested Lowther.

"I fancy I could, and without much trouble, either!"

"Then you'd better try."

"By Jove, and I will, too!" exclaimed Digby.

"Hold on!" shouted Tom Merry, dragging Lowther back. "Blake, keep that ass quiet! We haven't come here to fight, confound you!"

"Let me go, Tom!"

"I won't! I'll punch your silly head if you don't keep quiet!"

"Look here——"

"Oh, dry up! Digby, keep your wool on! I tell you we're on the track of the beast who has made all the trouble, and we want you to help to show him up."

"Oh, that alters the case!" said Blake. "Dig, if you don't keep quiet, I'll mop up the floor with you!"

"I'd like to see you do it!" grunted Dig.

"You'll have a chance, if you don't shut up!" said Blake warningly. "Now, Tom Merry, what have you got to say? We're willing to amalgamate and form a committee of inquiry on a broader base, if it will do any good."

"I am not willin', deah boys!"

"You shut up!"

"Then there's this ass, Gussy——"

"I distinctly wefuse to be alluded to as an ass, or——"

"He has got something up against me, and won't explain what it is."

"I pwomised not to tell you."

"Well, you can tell me this much. Was it Mellish who told you whatever it was?" asked the hero of the Shell.

"Yaas, that is quite wight."

"Ah, it was Mellish!" exclaimed Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"So there's three yarns traced to Mellish," said Tom Merry, with a glint in his eyes. "Now, I understand that Figgins & Co. have lately been getting their tails up over something or other."

"They've got something up against me," said Blake. "Figgins called me a backbiter, and I'm going to make him take it back, or else smash him up, I can tell you!"

"That was what Gussy called me."

"Yaas, wathah; but undah the circs. I am inclined to think that pewwaps I was a little hasty, Tom Mewwy."

"Thank you! I'm glad you've got a glimmering of common-sense, anyway," said Tom Merry cordially.

"That is wathah a diswespectful way of putting it."

"You see, Blake, Figgins may have been taken in like the rest of us, and we ought to look into the matter before we start smashing up anybody," said Tom Merry. "It would really have been wiser to look into the matter some time ago, before these black eyes and swollen noses were distributed."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"But better late than never, you know. If we amalgamate into a general committee, we can take in Figgins & Co."

UNTIL I SAY "STOP!" PLEASE RESERVE ME THIS BOOK EVERY WEEK!

P.T.O.

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort!"

"Ring off, I tell you! Chuck the ink at him if he opens his mouth again, Herries. Now then, Tom Merry, explain yourself."

"This is how the matter stands. Some rat has been making trouble, telling fellows that other fellows said things about them, which the said fellows probably never did say or thought of saying."

"Very well put," said Blake admiringly. "Somebody said that somebody said that somebody else said that somebody——"

"Oh, give me a chance! I have just found out that a certain rotter in your Form has been telling Lowther a fearful crammer about me——"

"I don't think he could have been in our Form."

"Hang it, let me go on! The chap was Mellish!"

"Mellish?" shrieked Arthur Augustus.

"Yes; Mellish, of the Fourth!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Mellish yarned to Lowther about me, and nearly made us start a row," said Tom Merry. "If I hadn't been a specially calm and reasonable chap——"

"Oh, leave out the piffle!"

"Well, anyway, Lowther and I had a talk, and it came out. Mellish was lying about me behind my back. Then it occurred to me that what he told me about Figgins might be a lie, too."

"Oh! So it was Mellish who set you against Figgins?"

"Yes, and I was fool enough to listen to him; only what he said sounded so—well, as if it had something in it, anyway."

"But you don't think so now?"

"Well, I don't know, of course; but I think I ought to speak to Figgins and have it out," said Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Yaas, certainly; and I no longah have any weal objection to amalgamatin' with Tom Mewwy, deah boys!"

"Oh, you don't count!" said Blake. "You're left out, of course, as we don't know you."

"I shall certainly wefuse to be left out!"

"We can't have a stranger in the committee," said Digby, with a grave shake of the head.

"Quite impossible," said Herries—"at least, unless the person is properly introduced by a mutual friend."

"Oh, pway don't wot!"

"Then let me settle the difficulty," said Tom Merry, laughing. "I am very well acquainted with this gentleman, Arthur Augustus Fitzjackass, whom I respect very highly——"

"Hear, hear!"

"So pray allow me the honour of introducing him into this select circle. Mr. Blake—Arthur Augustus D'Arcy! Algernon Aubrey de Vere—Jack Blake, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's!"

"Pleased to know you, sir!" said Blake, with a bow.

"Oh, weally, Blake!"

"Mr. Digby—Arthur Augustus FitzPercy Montmorency!" said Tom Merry, going on with the introductions, and giving D'Arcy a new patronymic every time. "D'Arcy, this is Arthur Digby, only son and heir of Sir Robert Digby, baronet."

"Happy to meet you, Mr. Montmorency!" said Dig solemnly.

"Oh, weally Dig!"

"Mr. Herries, pray allow me to introduce Aubrey Algernon Plantagenet! Aubrey—Master Herries, of the Fourth Form, a gentleman I know well. I hope you will be friends."

"Pleased to meet you, sir!" said Herries.

"Oh, weally, Hewwies!"

"Now, you all know one another," said Tom Merry, with a wave of the hand, "and Arthur Augustus Algernon Aubrey FitzPercy de Vere Montmorency is a member of the honourable committee of inquiry."

"Yaas, wathah! Of course, I wesume my original place as chairman?"

"Of course you don't!" said Blake promptly.

"Now, Blake, don't be a wottah!"

"I don't intend to be—I intend to be a chairman. You and Dig have had your turns. But I'll tell you what," exclaimed Blake, in a burst of generosity. "Tom Merry has first thought of the idea of looking into this matter in the way suggested, and he has hit on the fact that there's a tale-bearer making mischief all round, so we'll make him chairman."

"I don't know if I can agwee to that!"

"Don't trouble; the rest of us will settle that!" said Blake kindly. "Hands up for Tom Merry, chairman of the committee of inquiry."

Seven hands went up, D'Arcy's last, but he soon followed the rest, and gracefully conceded the point.

Tom Merry was duly elected chairman of the committee of inquiry.

CHAPTER 16.

Figgins & Co. Join the Committee.

FIGGINS & CO. were in their study, finishing their tea. They were looking the reverse of cheerful, and both Figgins and Kerr had black eyes. But the damage to their faces was as nothing compared with the worry on their minds.

"The school is going to pot," said Figgins gloomily. "I don't mind a few hard knocks. I've had harder ones before; but it's a fellow one liked acting meanly that gets over one! I can't stand that!"

"That's it," said Fatty Wynn. "I would never have thought it of Blake."

"Nor I," said Kerr. "Only it looks——"

Tap! came at the door.

"Oh, come in!" said Figgins crossly.

The door opened, and Tom Merry walked in. The New House quartette looked at him in surprise.

"What the dickens do you want?" said Figgins. "We're not in much of a humour for talking to you School House rotters, I can tell you, so the sooner you get out the better it will be for your health!"

"Keep your whiskers on, Figgy!"

"Oh, get out, and don't call me Figgy!"

"Rats! I've got something to say to you. I know you kids don't really want to act like a parcel of silly asses——"

"Eh—what?"

"We're all in this," said Tom Merry. "We're a committee of inquiry, and I'm chairman. We're looking into the tale-bearing and lying that has been going on in the school lately."

"Tale-bearing!" said Figgins thoughtfully.

"Yes. You fellows have got something up against Blake."

"Supposing we have?"

"Well, you ought to speak out plainly."

"Supposing we've promised not to?"

"You shouldn't have made such a promise."

"Perhaps not; but we did."

"I can't quite blame you, for I was caught the same way," said Tom Merry quietly. "Now that we're looking into the affair, we can trace all the trouble to one individual, and one only—a fellow we all know to be a tell-tale. Now, somebody has told you something about Blake, I gather?"

"Perhaps."

"Good! Now, you've promised not to tell, and that's all right. But if I name correctly the chap who told you, and add that we've found him out in spreading yarns in the School House, that will show you that you've judged too hastily, I should think."

Figgins started.

"Do you mean to say that Blake never said——"

"I don't know what he's supposed to have said, but I think it probable he never said it."

"It was a fellow of your own House who told me"

"Yes, and I know whom it was."

"His name, then?"

"Mellish, of the Fourth."

Figgins's expression showed that the hero of the Shell had given the correct name. The Co. exchanged significant glances.

"Am I right?" demanded Tom Merry.

"Well, I must admit that you are."

"As to what he said——"

"He made us promise not to tell," said Figgins uneasily. "I don't see how we can get the matter threshed out at all."

"I am in the same fix with regard to what he told me you said about me."

Figgins uttered an exclamation.

"I? What do you mean? My hat! Was that what you were so uppish about in the quad the other morning?"

Tom Merry coloured.

"Well, yes. I believed it then."

"What was it, ass?"

"I promised not to tell. It was from Mellish I had it, though. But I've hit on a wheeze for getting at the truth. We can't break promises, even to a cad like that."

"No, I don't see how we could."

"But we can have Mellish up for a trial before the lot of us," said Tom Merry. "We'll put it to him straight, and make him own up."

"Good wheeze!" exclaimed Figgins heartily.

"I'm pretty certain that this yarn about the smallpox breaking out in the school is due to Mellish, too," said Tom Merry. "It's worried the Head a lot, and may do harm to the school. I know some fellows have written home about it. We'll have Mellish up, and make him own up. Do you fellows agree to come into the committee of inquiry on the subject?"

"Certainly; though I really think that the chairman of the committee ought to be a New House fellow."

"Of course, that's mere rot!"

"I don't see it."

"Well, we'll put it to the vote of the whole committee, if you like," said Tom Merry blandly.

Figgins grinned. As there were seven School House boys on the committee, and would be only four of the New House, it was easy to predict how the vote would go.

"Never mind," said Figgins magnanimously; "we'll concede the point."

"Thank you for nothing!" said Tom Merry cheerfully. "The meeting is being held in the club-room in the School House, and I expect Mellish is already there."

And Figgins & Co. accompanied Tom Merry to the rival house for the first general sitting of the committee of inquiry.

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The chums of Study No. 6 half carried, half dragged Mellish along the passage.

CHAPTER 17.
Rough Justice.

"I WON'T come!"

"Yes, you will!"

"I won't—I won't!"

"Your mistake, Mellish. You're coming."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Yank him along! It doesn't matter if you hurt him, so don't bother about that. Give him a lift with your boot, Herries!"

"Right-ho!"

"Ow!"

"Better come along, Mellish."

"Yes, wathah!"

The four chums of Study No. 6 were conducting the cad of the Fourth along to the club-room. Mellish had been seized by force, and whisked out of his study before he knew what was happening.

In the passage he began to struggle, and he was not much reassured by the information that he was only being taken to the club-room for an examination before a committee of inquiry.

There was a great deal in Mellish's conduct that would not bear inquiring into, as a matter of fact, so his uneasiness was justified. But he had no choice in the matter.

The chums of Study No. 6 half carried, half dragged him along the passage, and he was bundled headlong into the room. There he rolled over on the floor. He jumped up and made a rush for the door, and was promptly shoved back.

"No go!" said Blake cheerfully. "You're wanted here, Mellish, and here you stay."

"Confound you! What do you want me for?"

"Wait till the committee meet, and then you'll see."

"I won't wait!"

"You may be right, Mellish, and I may be wrong, but I really think you will wait," smiled Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

And Mellish, looking at the four chums standing at the doorway, decided that he would wait. A few minutes later Tom Merry came in with Figgins & Co., and Manners and Lowther, who had been waiting for Tom at the door of the School House, came in along with the new members. Tom Merry glanced round the room.

"I see we're all here," he exclaimed; "and you have the accused rotter also. Good! Gentlemen of the committee, take your seats."

"Well, as there are eleven of us, and only three seats, that will want some doing!" Blake remarked.

"Well, stand, then. It's all the same, so long as there is a seat for the chairman," said Tom Merry, sitting down. "See that that rotter doesn't bolt!"

"What-ho!"

"I think I had bettah sit down," said D'Arcy. "I find standin' up most exhaustin'. Pway pwoceed with the pwoceedings, Mister Chairman!"

"Bring forth the prisoner!"

"Get a move on you, Mellish!"

"Sha'n't!"

"Have you got a pin on you, Figgins?"

"Certainly. Here you are."

"Don't rot, you beast!" growled Mellish, coming forward. "What the dickens do you want me for, Tom Merry?"

"You are to answer questions before the committee of inquiry."

"Well, I won't!"

"Did you bring the strap, Lowther?"

"It's here."

"At the first refusal of the prisoner to answer questions, Blake and Figgins are to hold him across the table, and you are to give him a dozen, anywhere you like, so long as he feels them."

"With pleasure, Mr. Chairman!"

"Now you know what to expect, Mellish. If you have any sense, you'll see that we're in earnest, and you'll mind your p's and q's."

Mellish realised this, and he was beginning to look rather scared. The bluster vanished from his manner.

"Well, what do you want?" he growled.

"Someone has been telling tales about the school, and setting fellows by the ears," said Tom Merry. "We suspect that you are the rotter who has done it."

"Nothing of the sort!"

"Very well, you deny it. We are going to make a fair inquiry, and if you are innocent we'll let you off, and stand you a feed at the tuckshop by way of compensation. If you are guilty—— But never mind that now. Only remember one thing. If you refuse to answer questions, there's

the strap. Now, you told me Figgins said something about me."

"You promised not to tell."

"Exactly. And you told Figgins that Blake said something about him."

"And I promised not to tell," said Figgins.

"And you told D'Arcy that I had said something about him."

"Yes, wathah! And I gave my word of honah not to tell."

"The same with Lowther, and a good many more, I dare say. Now, we're not going to break our promises; but the matter has got to be threshed out."

The cad of the Fourth looked decidedly uneasy. He had not expected his innuendoes and slanders to come home to roost in this manner, and he saw that he was in a difficult position; and he could not escape by refusing to answer questions.

The strap was there, and Lowther looked only too ready to use it; and the cad of the Fourth never could bear pain.

"Now," said Tom Merry, "we cannot break our words, but we are not going about with worries on our minds to please you, Mellish. As you've made your bed, you'll have to lie on it. You are going to tell out plainly to all of us what you have been muttering and whispering to us separately all this time."

"Hear, hear!"

Mellish looked alarmed.

"Now," said Tom Merry relentlessly, "what did you say to Figgins first of all to make him think that Blake had been saying things about him behind his back?"

"Out with it, you rat!" exclaimed Blake.

Mellish hesitated, and looked round with a hunted glare; but the committee were round him, and there was no escape. Lowther took a grip on the strap as if he expected it would be wanted, and Mellish began to speak in a hurry.

"I—I only said—it was really a joke."

"Don't tell lies!" said Figgins, in his direct way. "You never said anything about it's being a joke when you told us. Go on, you cur!"

"Well, I—I said that Blake said——"

"Get on, you stammering cad!"

"Oh, I only said that Blake missed some money from the desk after the time Figgins & Co. raided his study, and—and that he thought Figgins must have taken it," said Mellish, turning pale as he saw the expressions on the faces round him.

"You rotter!" yelled Blake. "You said that, did you?"

"Quiet, Blake!" said the chairman. "Is it a fact that you missed money from your desk after Figgins & Co. raided your study?"

"No, certainly not."

"If you had missed any, would you have suspected Figgins of having taken it?"

"I'd just as soon have suspected Dig, or Gussy, or myself."

Figgins gripped Blake's hand.

"It's—it's all right, old chap. I—I was a fool to think for a moment that you said such a thing about us. I ought to have known better. But he said he had heard you fellows talking it over, and discussing whether to speak to the Head about it."

"I—I was only joking."

"I'll teach you to make jokes like that!" said Blake wrathfully.

"Hold on, Blake; we haven't finished the inquiry yet. Now comes what the beast said to me about Figgins. Tell them that, Mellish."

"It was only a joke."

"You seem to have been going in for a lot of jokes lately, Mellish," said Figgins. "You must be a funnier chap than we ever took you for. What was it you told Tom Merry about me?"

"I—I only said that you made a joke about his old governess, Miss Fawcett."

"You—you beast!" said Figgins. "What did you say, I said?"

"I—I—I said you said she was an old fright, and Tom Merry only put up with her for the sake of her money," stammered Mellish, with a nervous eye on Lowther's strap.

"Is that correct, Merry?"

"That's what he said."

"And you believed I said a caddish thing like that?"

"Well," said Tom, turning red, "I didn't know what to think, but—well, you yourself believed what he told you Blake said."

"Well, that's so. It's no good jawing one another for being taken in, I suppose," said Figgins, with a clouded brow. "I hope you believe now that there was not a word of truth in it?"

"Of course!"

"Well, that lie's settled, then. Any more?"

"Yes. What the beast said to Lowther has been threshed out among ourselves, and there's no need to go into that; but there's a yarn he worked off on Gussy, which has made Gus act like a bigger ass than ever."

"Oh, weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"Gussy was tricked into promising to say nothing, like the rest of us, so Mellish will kindly explain."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I—I only said you said he ought to be kicked out of the School House, Merry, and—and put in the menagerie with the pets," stammered Mellish, "and—and——"

"That's enough! I never said anything of the kind, Gussy."

"I am most happy to weceive your assuwance on that point, deah boy, and I assure you that I cwedit your statement without hesitation."

"Of course, as a matter of fact," said Tom Merry, looking round. "I say, as a matter of absolute fact, Gussy ought to be put in the menagerie."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"Still, I never said it, nor any of the other things Mellish seems to have added. I think we've gone into personal matters enough now to prove that anything that has ever been said by Mellish cannot possibly be true."

And the committee assented unanimously to this somewhat sweeping statement.

"Now, about the story of smallpox breaking out in the school," went on Tom Merry. "There is no doubt in my mind that that was another invention of Mellish."

"I first heard it from Mellish," said Lowther. "He told me Gore was still in the school, hidden away somewhere because he had——"

"I told you I had heard so," snarled Mellish.

"Whom did you hear it from?" asked Tom Merry quickly.

Mellish was silent.

"Name the individual who told you, and we'll have him up here and question him," went on the chairman of the committee of inquiry.

But Mellish did not speak. He knew that it was useless. To lie again and be again found out would serve no purpose. He had reached the end of his tether.

Tom Merry glanced round at the committee.

"Is it clear that Mellish, as well as being a slanderer and a tell-tale, was the originator of a ridiculous rumour which has caused a lot of gossip in the village, and worried our respected headmaster?" he asked.

"Quite clear!" answer nine voices in unison.

And a tenth voice added: "Yaas, wathah!"

"Good! Mellish, you are found guilty!"

Mellish made a desperate rush to the door. Strong hands seized him and hauled him back. The chairman rose to his feet.

"What punishment, gentlemen?"

"He ought to be hanged, drawn, and quartered," said Blake thoughtfully, "but that would make a mess in the club-room."

"Something with boiling oil in it would be nearer the mark," said Figgins.

"Bettah give him a feahful thwashin'," said Arthur Augustus.

"Good idea! A fearful thrashing will meet the occasion," said Tom Merry. "Lay him on the table, face downwards."

The order was obeyed. The culprit struggled frantically, but there was no help for it. Down he went on his chest on the table, and each leg was held by a strong pair of hands, and each arm, and his head, too. He was helpless; and Lowther took hold of the leather strap with a business-like air.

"How many?" he asked.

"Two hundwed," said D'Arcy. "I think that two hundwed lashes, well laid on, would give Mellish a weally valuable lesson."

"Ow! Mercy! Help!"

"Why, we haven't started yet!" said Blake, in disgust. "The fellow's as big a coward as he is a liar, and that's saying a lot."

"Twenty," said Tom Merry. "Begin."

"Right-ho!" said Lowther, swinging up the strap. It came down with a sounding thwack upon Mellish, and he seemed to feel it very much, for he wriggled like an eel, and let out a yell that rang through the whole School House.

"Bai Jove, he'll have the pwefects here soon!" exclaimed D'Arcy. "Bettah buck up with the rest, Lowthah, before we are intewwupted."

Lowther bucked up. The lashes of the strap fell thick and fast, and Mellish howled and roared like a madman. He had been flogged more than once, but this was a new experience to him, and a painful one. The strap did great execution. The din in the club-room was terrific. There was a sound of hasty footsteps in the passage, but the juniors, intent upon doing stern justice, did not observe it.

"Nineteen!" said Tom Merry, counting.

The door was thrown open. Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, came in quickly, his face amazed and angry.

"Merry! Figgins! What is all this? What——"

"Twenty!"

The twentieth stroke fell, and Mellish yelled. Then he was released, and he rolled off the table howling.

"What——"

"It's all right, Kildare," said Tom Merry cheerfully. "This is only a case of the administration of justice. We've found out the tell-tale who's been causing trouble in both Houses; we've discovered the chap who spread the yarn that there was smallpox in the school, and we've punished him."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Kildare understood, and his face cleared.

"You are quite sure about that, Merry?" he asked, without looking at the squirming, writhing cad of the Fourth.

"He confessed," said Tom Merry quietly. "When we compared notes we knew who it must be, but we gave him a fair trial."

"Good! I will mention to the Head that the originator of the report has been found and punished," said the captain of St. Jim's. "The matter will end here. I can only say that he is lucky to have had his punishment at your hands instead of at those of the Head. He deserves to be expelled."

And the captain of St. Jim's nodded and left the room. Mellish scuttled after him; he did not want to be left alone with the committee any more. The chairman smiled a beaming smile upon his loyal supporters.

"Gentlemen of the committee, the matter is now satisfactorily settled," he said. "The tell-tale has been found out, done in, shown up, and put down."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove, that is wathah funnay, you know!"

"And I don't think he'll start his little game again without stopping to think twice about it," said Tom Merry. "The purpose of the committee having been effected, the meeting is now dissolved. We hurried over our tea, and I'm rather peckish. It's up to the biggest ass present to stand a feed to the whole committee."

And with one voice the committee chimed in:

"Come on, D'Arcy!"

"Weally, deah boys——"

"Come on, D'Arcy!"

"Well, since you are so pwessin'," said D'Arcy, "although I can scarcely wegard Tom Mewwy's way of puttin' it as wespectful, I don't mind if I do. Pway follow me!"

And the meeting broke up.

THE END.

(Another long, complete tale of Tom Merry & Co. next Thursday, entitled "The Bogus Detective. Please order your copy of the GEM in advance.)

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TEMPEST HEADLAND

A SPLENDID NEW SCHOOL TALE.

By S. CLARKE HOOK.

READ THIS FIRST!

Billy Barnes, Cyril Conway, and Snowy White Adonis Venus, are three great chums at Tempest Headland School.

Dr. Buchanan, the headmaster, finds them very troublesome pupils; as does also Herr Ludvig, the German master.

Venus is a black boy, and is taken as a fag by Graft, a bully.

The latter is giving a feast to a select party of friends, and for this purpose he has a tent pitched in a neighbouring field. Cyril and Venus, who have a long-standing grudge against Graft, determine to upset his plans.

(Now go on with the story.)

Graft's Tent and a Bull.

Venus procured the largest cabbage he could find in the doctor's garden, and Cyril found a piece of rope; then the two worthies made their way to the field, where a huge, black bull was grazing. In the adjoining field Graft's tent was pitched, and they knew by the shouts of laughter coming from it that his visitors had arrived.

The bull was at the further side of the field, and Venus appeared to be a little disappointed that it would not come towards him when he whistled to it.

"I neber came across such a pig-headed cow in all my life," he growled. "I don't care to get too close to it, 'cos its horns look mighty sharp, and I dunno how fast cows can run."

"I can quite see that we ought to have hired horses, and then we could have had a regular bull-fight," observed Cyril. "But, look here, let us get a bit nearer to the obstinate brute, and then commence to run. If it sees us running, it may think that we are frightened of it."

"I don't know dat it will be so far wrong, eider," observed Venus. "If it wasn't for dose horns, I would not mind it so much, but somehow I don't seem to care for being tossed into de air wid dose. Dey look as if dey would hurt."

The two chums approached the great brute with extreme caution, but it went on grazing with supreme contempt, and allowed them to get much nearer than they considered safe.

"Seems as harmless as a kitten!" observed Cyril.

"M'yes. Dat's so," answered Venus; "but it don't look as harmless, by a long way! Still, we will get a little nearer, and—— Woohooh! Here it comes!"

The bull tossed its shaggy head in the air, uttered a loud, and particularly angry bellow, and then charged down on the two daring intruders into its domain.

Cyril and Venus promptly bolted towards the five-barred gate at the greatest speed that they could command, and the thud of the infuriated animal's hoofs drew nearer with alarming rapidity.

Venus hurled his cabbage over his head, partly because he did not require anything to carry, and partly because he fondly imagined that the charging bull would stop and enjoy the succulent vegetable.

It did nothing of the sort, apparently enjoying the chase far more than it would have enjoyed any cabbage; and, judging by the thud of the hoofs upon the sward, the two fugitives felt perfectly certain that they would never get over the five-barred gate before the bull was upon them.

"Hi, steady dere, old hoss!" roared Venus. "Go away; you ain't wanted!"

"Dodge into the ditch!" panted Cyril. "Make straight for the gate, and then dodge aside. You to the right; I to the left."

This sounded all right; the only question was, would they reach the gate before the bull did.

Venus was begining to be hopeful, when a bellow in frightful proximity to his back caused him to utter a yell

and take a leap that did him credit. He cleared the ditch and landed head first in the hedge, which was a prickly one.

Cyril landed in the ditch, which was about two feet full of water and three feet full of mud—which was black, slimy, and odorous.

The bull had no time to turn, even if it had had the inclination. It went straight for the gate, which it smashed to splinters, then it went for the tent.

The effect was curious. There was a sound of rending canvas, and then the tent was carried away; while Graft and his guests, of whom there were five, lay sprawling on the grass, badly mixed up with broken china and smashed provisions. They only lay on the grass for a few moments. Having done all the damage it possibly could to the tent, the bull returned to the charge, while Graft and his guests promptly sought shelter behind the hedge.

"Yah, yah, yah!" roared Venus, thereby giving the show away. "Don't come dis side ob de hedge, old hosses; we don't want dat cow here!"

"Oh, you little demons," yelled Graft; "won't I pay you for this!"

"Golly! Is dat you, Cyril?" gasped Venus, gazing at his chum in blank surprise.

"Er—yes. Am I muddy?"

"Yah, yah, yah! De boy asks me if he is muddy! Golly! Why, dere ain't anyting but mud visible ob you! Yah, yah, yah! I don't believe you'm improved your clothes a little bit. Here comes de cow! I would advise you to stay where you are, Graft. If you start fooling about dis way, dat old cow will gib you beans! Dat's right, moo-cow, you go for dem! It was all deir fault for putting deir tent in your way!"

The bull found it could not conveniently toss Graft and his guests, by reason of the ditch that was between them, but the brute seemed to know they could not escape, so it stood as close to them as it could get, and waited with a patience that did it credit.

"I tell you what it is, Venus," exclaimed Cyril. "We had better make a bolt for it. I believe that bull is going to guard the bully, so we shall be able to escape. Come on! We might get hurt if we remained here."

"Dat's so; and I'm inclined to tink dat we might get hurt if we go across de field. I wish I knew de intentions ob de cow before starting. Still, I 'spect we had better risk it."

"Walk slowly."

"Well, I ain't going to promise dat if de bull comes after me."

"It won't come after you."

"I hope your opinion is correct on dat point, Cyril. Ob course, you may know de exact intentions ob de cow, but seems to me it is rader an impulsive animal. All de same, here goes."

The two chums walked away, keeping close to the ditch in case of need; but the bull seemed to have made up its mind to attack Graft. It merely glanced at the chums, then allowed them to retreat unmolested.

Graft's Story and His Apology.

It was a wet evening, and Herr Ludvig was keeping order in the class-room—at least, he was trying to do so. Billy Barnes was in one of his awkward moods, and when he got like that it was a remarkably difficult thing to keep him in order. At the present time he was saying nasty things to Snigg, and Venus was laughing at those things, while even Cyril Conway, his chum, smiled at what Billy said occasionally, for he could be remarkably cutting when he liked, and he appeared to be liking on this occasion.

"It's not your fault, Snigg," growled Billy. "You can't help your stupidity, any more than you can help the twist to your snout, which always reminds me of the tail of a thoroughbred pug dog. It's your parents' fault for not having drowned you when you were a puppy; or if they wanted to spare your feelings, knowing how you hate the sight of water, they might have smothered you in the dustheap."

"You stupid beast!" snarled Snigg. "I'll punch your head when we get out."

"There's no necessity for you to get angry with me, Snigg. I can't help your parents' faults, any more than they can help your having a face like an underdone doughnut that has been sat on. I'm only telling you what they ought to have done. We invariably kill all the worms in our lawn. Sort of smash 'em or else poison 'em. If you were to get wriggling about near my father, he would squash you straight away. I think I shall invite you home in the holidays. It would be a mercy to the other fellows in this college."

"Barnes, are you talking?" cried Herr Ludvig, bringing his book down on the desk with emphasis."

"I beg your pardon, sir."

"I say, are you talking?"

"Well, of course, I am answering you, sir."

"Vere you talking before I spoke to you?"

"Well, sir, I was speaking; you couldn't exactly call it talking."

"Prut! Vat is te difference between speaking and talking?"

"Well, sir, talking is making stupid remarks like Snigg always does. Speaking is making wise ones, like I always do. Now, if you were a married man, and your old Dutch were to say to you: 'Gussie, old blobkins——'"

Billy shifted after that. Herr Ludvig strode towards him cane in hand, his face rather red with suppressed anger, for a shout of laughter had greeted Billy's words.

That worthy thought it time to go, so he went under the desks, and was crawling to a place of safety, when Snigg seized him by the ankle, and belaboured him with a ruler in a manner that caused him to howl wildly.

Herr Ludvig knew that the chastisement was well deserved, so he waited and watched; then suddenly Snigg disappeared beneath the desks, and he took the floor with a violent bump. Next a hand came up, and an inkpot disappeared. After which there was a gurgling sound.

"You two boys get up at vonce!" cried Herr Ludvig.

Then a face appeared, and shouts of laughter greeted it, for it was smothered in ink, and by the way that boy was spluttering, it was pretty evident that some of the ink had gone into his mouth.

"Ach! Vat boy is tat?" cried the angry master.

"It's me!" howled Snigg. "Look what a jolly mess I'm in. Boohooh! I won't stand it. It's that beast Billy Barnes. He's nearly choked me. I've swallowed pints of ink, but I'll get even with him."

"Yah, yah, yah! De boy is as black as dis child!" exclaimed Venus. "I tink he looks rader better dat way, sah!"

"You be quiet, boy!" cried Herr Ludvig. "Did you hurt him, Snigg?"

"I hope so," growled Snigg. "I hit him as hard as I could with the ruler, but not as hard as I will hit him when I get him outside."

"Vell, seeing tat you have hit him as hard as you could, and tat you are going to hit him harder tan you can later on, vhy, he vill be sufficiently punished mitout my interference; so just you sit up, Barnes, and see if you can behave yourself for te rest of te evening."

"Cortainly, sir!" exclaimed Billy, bobbing up in another place. "If you would like me to be punished a little more, I can follow Snigg out, and let him try to do it."

"You stop vere you are. Go and vash your face, Snigg."

"This ink won't come off, sir. How am I to get it off?"

"How should I know? You must persevere mit soap and water."

"It will do him all the good in the world, sir," declared Billy. "He doesn't often use soap and water to his face, and it's bound to get a good cleaning this time."

"You be quiet, and mind your own business, my lad."

"Yes, sir; but it is partly my business, because I swamped it on. I would advise him to rub his face on the doormat, or else he might take the thing to the sink and give it a good grinding on the stone. He will never damage a face like that, and there is just the possibility that he might improve it."

"You write a hundred lines."

"He ought to have a hundred thousand, sir, the shameful way he has been abusing me. I would not dare to repeat the shocking things he has said. I believe he is worse than a murderer. He said he wished I was dead."

"Did you say such a wicked ting, boy?" demanded Herr Ludvig.

"No, sir—at least, not in those words. I merely mentioned the fact that his parents ought to have drowned or smothered him, the same as we smash the other worms on our lawn, but I didn't say anything as personal as he asserts."

"Prut! I do not se how you could say tings much more personal tan tat."

"He said my nose reminded him of the twist in a pug dog's tail."

"I said a thoroughbred pug dog, and that was a compliment to you, though I admit it was an insult to the pug to liken a half-baked little bounder like you to him."

"Vhy do you take notice of such foolish remarks, Snigg?" exclaimed Herr Ludvig.

"You were going to take notice when he referred to your wife as your old Dutch."

"A boy should not be rude to his master. Still, it vas only his nonsense: I have no vife."

"And a jolly lucky thing for her, too," growled Snigg.

"Vat is tat you say, boy?"

"I said your wife would be a lucky lady, sir."

"You said no such ting. Just you write a hundred lines."

"It isn't fair that I should get a hundred lines for having an inkpot emptied into my mouth and all over my face. I'm quite sure Dr. Buchanan would not allow such a thing, nor would he like his German master to allow it."

Snigg said this in a loud voice, for he had seen the headmaster enter the room. Cyril gazed at Venus, and they both looked rather startled. There was a certain seriousness about the master's gaze as it was fixed on them for a moment, and then it rested on Snigg, who looked about as inky as he well could be.

"It is Barnes again," observed Herr Ludvig. "Tose two boys vere quarrelling. Snigg struck him mit te ruler, and Barnes retaliated mit te inkpot. As tey seem to have punished each oter, I have left it so, and each vill write a hundred lines."

The doctor bowed. He never interfered with a master's punishment, though he certainly felt that the two hopefuls had got off lightly.

"Conway and Venus," exclaimed the doctor, "do either of you know anything concerning Graft? I am informed by the porter that you do. He should have been in by six o'clock. It is now nearly eight, and he has not returned."

"Dat's de cow, sah!" said Venus.

"I don't understand you."

"It was de fault ob de cow, sah. I don't tink de boy could help it. You see, he was habing a picnic, and a cow came along and sort ob hemmed him in."

"The porter tells me that you went into the field with a cabbage."

"For de cow's consumption, sah; but I don't see how Mopps could hab known dat unless Graft came back and told him. He might hab seen de cabbage, but he could not hab known what it was for. Might hab been for silkworms, or anyting like dat."

"Explain what happened, Conway," ordered the doctor, knowing that would be the quickest way to get at facts.

"Graft and five friends were having a picnic in a tent, sir. There was a bull in the next field, with a five-barred gate between. The bull got the other side of the gate, but we hadn't time."

"Do you mean to tell me the bull jumped a five-barred gate?"

"No, sir; he opened it and went through."

"This is no joking matter, boy. How could a bull open a five-barred gate?"

"He went at it, sir, like—like a bull at a gate—smashed that gate to splinters, and—er—we got out of his way. Then he went for the tent, and Graft's party was broken up. They scattered and took refuge in the hedge, and the old bull kept them there. We came away, because I was a bit muddy."

"Yah, yah, yah! Ahum! Dat's so, sah!" said Venus. "Dat boy was most remarkably muddy."

"Do you mean to say that you have left Graft and his friends in the ditch all this time?" gasped the doctor.

"It was the bull who kept them there, sir. He's not a safe beast to go near; and when we were enticing—er—when we were offering it food, it came at us. We had to run away—fast, too. We sought refuge in the ditch, and waited till the bull had finished ripping up the tent, then we bolted—came away."

"Was Graft hurt?"

"I'm afraid—that is, I think not, sir."

"Were you going to say you are afraid he was not hurt?"

"Well, I certainly was, sir. Of course, I wouldn't have liked him to get hurt much, but it would have been a sort of satisfaction to me if he had been hurt a little—tossed into the air, or something like that, or even gently prodded."

"Yah, yah, yah! Dat cow wasn't a gentle prodder," cried Venus. "I dunno much about cows, but, seems to me, if dat one was to start his prodding arrangements, he would hurt de party above a little."

"Silence, Venus!" cried the doctor. "Do you tell me, Conway, that you deliberately enticed a vicious bull to attack Graft?"

"Er—not exactly, sir. In fact, I would not have told you anything about it if you had not asked me. Then, again, we certainly enticed the bull to come to the gate, with a view to keeping Graft and his friends prisoners. The bull did not appear to comprehend our wishes, and it went through the gate like a flash of lightning. I don't think it took three seconds to demolish the tent, and then it went for Graft and his friends, who wisely sought shelter in the ditch. Would you desire me to go and see if they are still there, sir?"

"Certainly not! I shall go myself. This is a very serious matter, and I only trust no harm has come to them."

"That's impossible, sir, so long as they stay in the ditch; and from what I know of Graft, he will stay there as long as the bull remains at the top of it. No, they are in no danger."

"Do you mean to tell me that you were going to leave him in that position all night?"

Cyril looked meek, and made no reply. It was exactly what he intended doing, and being a truthful lad, he could not possibly deny it, so he went on the lines of least said soonest mended. But the meek, innocent expression of his face was too much for Venus. He made a choking noise, then burst into a loud guffaw.

The doctor left the room, and ordered the delinquents to follow him into his study. Here, to their surprise, they found Graft, looking rather muddy. He had just come in, and he looked daggers at the chums.

"I have just learnt what has happened, Graft," said the doctor."

"My life was nearly sacrificed, sir."

"Were you hurt?" inquired the doctor, knowing perfectly well from past experience that Graft would make the worst of it.

"I was badly shaken, sir. I don't suppose those boys have told you the truth—at least, not the whole truth."

"When did you leave the field?"

"We were kept prisoners in the ditch, sir. It was quite impossible for us to escape, because the bull could get round either side of the hedge."

"At what time did you leave the field?"

"I didn't notice the time, sir. I should say about an hour ago; but then I have been in some time, and we had to go round the fields."

"Ring the bell, Conway!"

That worthy obeyed, and Mopps made his appearance.

"Master Graft spoke to you concerning the bull, William?" questioned the doctor.

"He did just mention the animal, sir," answered Mopps.

"Where did you meet him?"

"He met me close to the lodge, sir," answered Graft.

"Quite close to the lodge, sir. I had to go into the village for you, and I met the young gent close to the lodge—quite close. Not a stone's throw."

"What time was this?"

"Now, let me see. I should say—well, sir, now I come to think of it——"

"It was scarcely half an hour ago," prompted Graft.

"No, it wasn't so long as that," said Mopps. "I noticed the college clock chimed half-past seven jest as I met the young gent hurrying in."

"You did not return until a quarter to eight, William," said the doctor sternly. "Did Master Graft come in with you?"

"Before me, sir. He walks quicker than me, sir. I suffer so much from rheumatics, and——"

"How was it, Graft, that you were coming from the village?"

"I walked a short distance with my friends."

"Did you go into the village?"

"Oh, no, sir; I came——"

"I beg your pardon," exclaimed the junior master, Mr. Rolls, entering the study at that moment, "I did not know that you were engaged."

"Don't go. Take a seat, Mr. Rolls. Did you come for any particular purpose?"

"Well, I did. On coming from the station I saw Graft and some friends leaving the Railway Hotel, and I wished to know whether he had permission to go into the village."

"Golly!" murmured Venus.

"I should have stopped to ask him the question, but as he was with some friends, I preferred to find out on my return to the college. I believe you asked him the question, did you not, Mo—er—William?"

"Me, sir!" gasped Mopps.

"Well, I saw you go up to Master Graft, and you certainly spoke to him. I believe he placed something in your hand."

"Well, this 'ere beats me——"

"Leave the room, William!" ordered the doctor.

Mopps was only too glad to get out of it. He was outside the door in no time.

"Of course, Graft did not see you, Mr. Rolls?" inquired the doctor.

"No. I was in the tobacconist's opposite the inn," answered the master. "I certainly stepped to the door, intending to ask whether he had permission to be out in the village as late as a quarter-past seven, but seeing that he was with friends, and that they were speaking to the porter, I decided to ask you whether you had given special permission."

"I gave no such permission," said Dr. Buchanan. "I will explain matters to you later, Mr. Rolls. Graft has led me to believe that these two lads were the cause of his being late. He has led me to believe that he never went into the



(*Continued*).

TEMPEST HEADLAND

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village. Now, these boys have behaved very badly, but they have told me the truth. I must use a very harsh expression, Mr. Rolls, and one that I dislike, but they have not lied to me. They have spoken the truth, as honourable lads always must. They shall be punished for what they have done, but they have not fallen in my estimation. I do not actually know what you have done, Graft, except that you have lied to me."

"Sir!"

"Silence! I say that you have lied to me, and even worse, if possible. You have incited an ignorant man to lie to me. I firmly believe that you have paid him money to screen you from a fault—that is to say, you have bribed him to lie. It grieves me that I should have to speak thus to a monitor of this college, or to any boy in this college. Oh, cannot you see, my poor, misguided lad, apart from its wickedness, how foolish your action is? Had you told me the truth—that you went into the village to see your friends off, I should merely have pointed out that you ought to have obtained my permission first, and made you promise that such a thing should not occur again. After all, it was merely a matter of breaking rules—a grave fault, perhaps, in a monitor. You have turned it into an abominable crime. You have lied to me, and forced a servant to lie. Have you anything to say for yourself before I punish you for your contemptible crime."

"I suppose it is no good my saying anything, sir," snarled Graft, glaring at the comrades as though they had been the informants. "You have called me a liar. I don't know whether my father would approve of such language to one of your paid pupils."

"The reason why you are a pupil here—naturally a paid one—is that you may be educated in every sense of the word. Whether your father approves of the manner in which this college is conducted has nothing to do with my system. That system would not be changed; but I feel quite sure that your father would upbraid me—and with perfect justice—were I not to punish his son for such misconduct as you have been guilty of. You must know by this time, Graft, that falsehood is the one thing I will punish severely. This is not the first occasion on which you have spoken falsely to me. Time after time I have warned you. A monitor in a college should set an example to the younger boys. In this college he shall set such an example. Can't you see, my lad, that I rely on you to set such an example? What if Conway were to say to me: 'I regret that I spoke falsely, sir, but you will kindly bear in mind that your monitor Graft does the same.'"

"De boy is neber going to say dat, sah," exclaimed Venus. "Dat's quite against his nature. He won't tell de lie, in de first place; and if he told it, in de second place, he wouldn't bring in Graft, in de third place."

"I know it, my lad," said Dr. Buchanan. "I was merely giving an example."

"Should be glad, sah, if you would bring in dis child as de example, 'cos I might lie, but Cyril can't. De boy don't know how. You don't know dat boy as well as I do."

"I ought to do so, Venus," said the doctor quietly. "However, I quite agree with you that Conway will not speak falsely, and in that respect I hold him up as an example to Graft. It is my intention to punish him and you for your behaviour this afternoon, but I intend to deal with Graft first. I ask you again, Graft, if you have anything you wish to say before I pass judgment?"

"If I say anything you will not believe me, sir."

"Why?"

"I know, sir, that you take the word of that boy and the nigger before mine."

"Why?"

"They don't get found out."

"I sincerely hope they do," groaned the doctor. "I trust they have no more faults than those that are so frequently brought before me. Well, you are doing no good to yourself. Come, my lad! This is a very serious matter"

"I don't know what you want me to say, sir. I don't see a move."

"I don't want you to take a move. I want you to speak to me. My punishment will be that you are no longer a monitor, and that is a degradation next to expulsion."

"No longer—a monitor! You mean that—that you are going to——"

"Tell de old hoss you'm sorry, Graft, and won't do it again," said Venus.

Now, Graft had a certain amount of pride about him. He knew that such a degradation as the doctor had intimated would go very badly with him in his father's eyes. There was trouble in that direction already, and considerable difficulty in getting supplies, because Graft made it a practice to exceed his allowance; then there were a lot of bills going in shortly, and there would be more trouble over those. Venus's advice seemed good, but it was very bitter to take advice from a negro lad, and for some moments Graft struggled with his pride. The doctor watched him keenly. His system of correction was to improve lads, and not to punish them for past faults, which we all have, more or less, most of us considerably more.

"My present intention is to cane these lads for what they did this afternoon," said Dr. Buchanan. "You know my intentions with respect to yourself, Graft."

"Can I speak to you in private, sir?"

"No; that is quite out of the question. I hope and firmly believe that what you do say before these lads will not be repeated."

"Boys always hate monitors, sir, and would be only too glad to have the power of blackmailing them."

"Jim, the captain of this college, is hated by no one. I have caned him many times, but never for speaking falsely. Now, Graft, do you wish to say anything?"

"Yes, sir. I deeply regret what has occurred. It shall never occur again."

"Thank you, my lad. You have a free pardon. I accept your word of honour. You are still a monitor in this college, and I should consider it dishonourable were these two lads to repeat what has occurred in this room. I wish them to make no promise, but——"

"There's my hand on it, Graft!" cried Cyril, stepping up and offering his hand to the bully, who folded his arms across his breast and glared at Cyril in a manner that really startled the doctor. He felt that his leniency had been entirely misplaced.

"Do you require me any more, sir?" inquired Graft.

"No, my lad," answered the doctor, with a sigh. "Stay, one moment! I also pardon your faults, my lads. The matter will end here. I do not bind you in any way to keep the matter secret as far as what has occurred in this study, except that you have heard my opinion concerning the matter?"

"I have learnt to consider your opinion is always right, sir," said Cyril. "Apart from that, sir, my own opinion is that it would be dishonourable for us to repeat a private conversation in this room—or any other room."

"Thank you, my lad!" exclaimed the doctor. "It is what I expected from you. Good-night!"

(Another long instalment next Thursday.)



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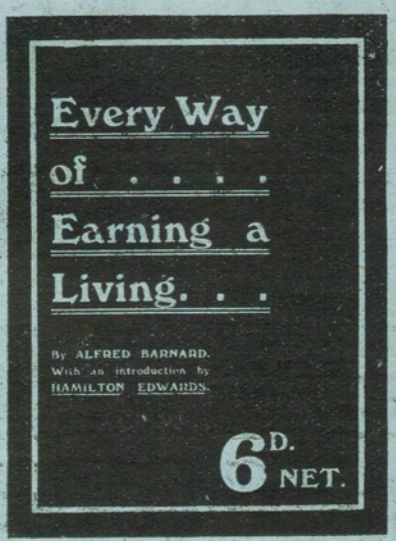
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