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TOM'S TERRIBLE TIME.

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TALE OF
TOM MERRY.

BY
MARTIN
CLIFFORD.

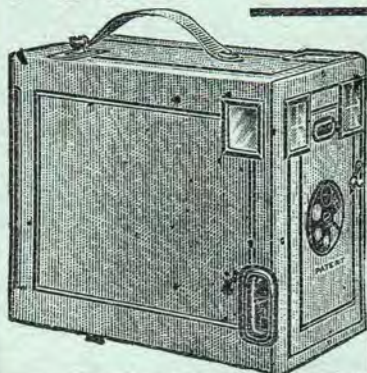


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OF

TOM MERRY & Co.,

By **MARTIN CLIFFORD.**

**TOM'S
TERRIBLE TIME.**

CHAPTER 1.

A Strange Encounter.

"GUESS that's him!"

Tom Merry gave a start as the words fell suddenly upon his ears.

It was a hot July afternoon, and Tom Merry, with a ruddy glow in his cheeks and his straw hat on the back of his head, was sauntering along the leafy lane from St. Jim's to the village of Rylcombe.

It was a half-holiday at St. Jim's, and the chums of the Shell—Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther—had left the school to stroll down to the tuck-shop in the village. Manners and Lowther had dropped behind to look at a bird's nest, so Tom Merry was for the moment alone.

"I guess that's him, Bunker."

Tom Merry looked round quickly. Two men had suddenly

appeared from the hedge, and the junior looked at them distrustfully. One—the man who had spoken—was a tall, thin, loose-jointed fellow, with a hooked nose and a short beard, evidently an American. The other, a short thick-set individual, was more roughly dressed, and rougher in general appearance. Both were strangers to Tom Merry, and he did not like their looks. He had little doubt that he had fallen in with a couple of footpads, and he was on his guard at once.

"Hullo!" he said coolly. "What do you want?"

"I guess we want you," drawled the tall man.

And the other chuckled.

"I guess we do, Silas Shucks."

Tom Merry laughed.

"You had better keep your distance," he remarked. "I am not alone, as you seem to think, so if you are thinking of robbery you had better give up the idea. I say, Monty! Manners! Come here!"

A DOUBLE-LENGTH TALE OF TOM MERRY NEXT THURSDAY.

No. 23 (New Series).

"Collar him, Bunker!"

The two men ran straight at Tom Merry. At the same moment the voice of Monty Lowther was heard up the lane.

"What's wanted? We're busy."

"Come here!"

For a moment the two rascals hesitated. Then Silas Shucks muttered something in a fierce whisper to his companion and they rushed at Tom Merry.

"Collar him!"

The next moment the hero of the Shell was struggling in their powerful grip, and shouting at the top of his voice.

"Help! Help!"

"None of your gammon," came back the voice of Monty Lowther, through the thick trees. "We're coming presently."

"Help! Help!"

Tom Merry struggled desperately. What could be the object of the ruffians he did not know. They did not seem to wish to rob him, but to drag him from the road into the wood.

"The chloroform! Quick, Bunker!"

Tom Merry heard the words, and they nerved him to a desperate effort. He broke loose from the grasp upon him, and started to run. But in a moment he was seized again and borne to the ground.

"Help!"

There was a thud of rapid footsteps in the lane. The ring in Tom's voice told that he was not "rotting," as Monty Lowther had at first suspected, and the chums of the Shell were tearing to the rescue. They saw Tom Merry in the road, with the two ruffians over him, and they did not wait to speak. They hurled themselves upon Tom's assailants without an instant's pause, and sent them flying across the lane. Bunker and Silas Shucks rolled gasping in the grass under the trees, and Manners helped Tom Merry to his feet. Tom was panting for breath.

"What's the row?" asked Lowther, thumping him on the back to assist him in regaining his wind. "Were they going to rob you, Tom?"

"I don't know. They jumped on me all of a sudden; but—"

Silas Shucks sat up in the grass. He was looking rather dizzy, but there was an expression of astonishment on his narrow face.

"Tom!" he repeated. "Tom! What might your name be, young gentleman?"

"Mine? Tom Merry!"

The two men looked at one another curiously. They rose slowly to their feet, but did not offer to renew the attack. The Terrible Three were shoulder to shoulder now, quite ready for them; but the two rascals had evidently had enough.

"I say," said Silas Shucks, "I reckon there has been a mistake here."

Monty Lowther grinned.

"Yes, you tackled rather too large an order," he said. "Why don't you come on? You were full of fight a minute ago."

"If that young chap's name is Tom Merry—"

"What did you think it was?" said Tom Merry curiously.

"Have you taken me for somebody else?"

"That's it," said Silas Shucks, still evidently in doubt.

"That's it; but if your name is Tom Merry—but where do you come from?"

Tom Merry made a gesture towards the tower of St. Jim's rising in the distance over the trees.

"From the school?"

"Yes."

The two men exchanged glances again. They were evidently amazed, but at what the chums of the Shell could not quite see.

"You could tell that by the band on my hat if you looked at it," said Tom Merry. "What are you getting at, anyway? Did you really take me for somebody else, or is that gammon because you've got the worst of it?"

"That's more likely," said Monty Lowther. "Let's run them in. We three could easily handle a couple of weedy rotters like that."

"Right-ho!" said Manners. "Come on!"

"I guess it was a mistake."

"Rot! Collar them!"

The Terrible Three ran forward. As they were not assailed they became the assailants. But the two ruffians had had enough of it. They bolted through the hedge and disappeared among the trees before the chums of the Shell could get within reach of them. Monty Lowther was rushing after them through the gap in the hedge; but Tom Merry pulled him back.

"Hold on, Monty!"

"Better collar the rotters," said Lowther. "It will be fun anyway, taking them to the station, and would mean a lot of éclat for us."

Tom Merry laughed.

"But it wouldn't be easy, Monty, and I don't see how we are to run them down in the wood, anyhow. Let's get on to the village."

"Well, perhaps you're right."

"Of course I am, my son. It's too hot for fighting, anyway, and I feel rather out of breath. Come along!"

And the Terrible Three sauntered on down the lane. Tom Merry had little expectation of ever seeing the two ruffians again, and he little dreamed how soon they were to meet, and what strange results would follow.

CHAPTER 2.

D'Arcy Investigates.

"**B**AI Jove, deah boys, you look wathah dusty! Have you been havin' a wov with the Gwammawians?"

It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of Study No. 6 in the School House at St. Jim's, who asked the question as the Terrible Three came in at the gates.

"No," said Tom Merry. "I haven't seen the Grammarians to-day."

The swell of the School House adjusted his eyeglass and looked him over.

"You look as if you had been in a wov," he remarked.

"So I have," said Tom Merry laughing. "But it was with a couple of footpads. If you had been there, Gussy—"

"You could have scared them away," remarked Lowther.

"With your face, you know."

"Weally, Lowther!"

"I feel a bit dusty," remarked Tom Merry. "I think I'll go and get cleaned. Well, what is it, Gussy?"

"You have been attacked by a couple of footpads?" said D'Arcy, producing a little silver pencil and a gilt-edged notebook from his pocket.

"Yes; at least I suppose they were footpads."

"Vewy good! I should be glad to have the details."

"The what?"

"The details," said Arthur Augustus. "As you know, I have made it a hobby to take up amateur detective work, and I think this will be a wathah good opportunity of twyin' my skill. I didn't have a fair chance before, as I was bothahed by that howlin' aas Skimpole."

"My dear kid, you can't hunt for these two rotters!"

"That is quite a mistake, Tom Merry. If you give me any clue to them I have not the slightest doubt that I shall be able to bring them to justice in a remarkably short space of time."

"But they'd eat you Gussy."

"I am quite willin' to win the wisks of a detective."

"They'd knock you on the head," said Lowther. "We should lose our one and only Gus."

"I should uttaly refuse to be knocked on the head. I have not the slightest doubt of my ability to twack down the wottahs and have them awwested. Pway give me their descwip."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Oh, all right, Gussy! You can have their description if you like. There were two of them—one a tall, thin chap with a thick American accent—got that down?"

"Wait a moment, I've broken the point of my pencil."

"Oh, rats! I can't wait all the—"

"Lend me a beastly pencil then, Tom Merry. Thank you. Now I am quite weady. Now, one was a tall, thick chap, with a thin American accent—"

"No," said Tom Merry, with a laugh. "One was a tall, thin chap—"

"Tall, thin chap; yaas."

"With a thick American accent, a hooky nose, and a beard."

"Hooky nose and beard; yaas?"

"The other was a shorter fellow, something like a walrus in build."

"Walrus in build; yaas?"

"Also spoke with an American accent."

"American accent; yaas?"

"They collared me, and nearly yanked me off into the wood, because Lowther was a silly ass and thought I was only rotting when I called for help."

"Lowther was a silly ass; yaas?"

"Look here," began Monty Lowther warmly.

"Don't interrupt," said Tom Merry; "Gussy's taking down the notes of the case, and he must have all the facts."

"The facts! Why, you—"

"Then Manners and Lowther came up, and their features frightened the rascals away."

"Frightened the wascals away; yaas?"

"And that's all. They pretended they had mistaken me for somebody else, to get out of the row; but that was rot, of course."

"Wot, of course; yaas?"

"That's all."

"There's one thing more," said Lowther. "It's only a detail, but it might have a bearing on the case."

"Pway tell me what it is, Lowther. Any detail seemingly unimportant to an inexperienced mind may have a great importance to the twained intellect of a detective."

"Hark at him!"

"Pway go on, Lowthah, and don't be iwwelevant."

NEXT
THURSDAY:

"TOM MERRY IN CAMP."

A Double-Length Tale of
Tom Merry's Schooldays.



"We must find Tom Merry! Where is he?"

"Well, after we had gone to the tuckshop we came back here—"

"Came back here; yaas?" said D'Arcy, busily taking notes.

"And at the gate of St. Jim's we met a curious object—"

"Curious object; yaas?"

"It had a silk hat on, and an eyeglass—"

"Eyeglass; yaas?"

"And looked something like a human being, but more like a tailor's dummy, and—"

"Lowthah, you wotten ass—"

"And it had a notebook and pencil, and—"

"You uttah ass!" said D'Arcy, turning pink, and commencing to erase the notes in his book dealing with the curious object Lowther was describing. "I ought to have guessed that you were wottin'. You uttah ass!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Can you tell me any further details, Tom Mewwy?"

"No, only that we had ices and marmalade tarts and ginger-pop at Mother Murphy's."

"That is iwwelevant. Did these wottahs leave any foot-pwints in the lane?"

"No," said Lowther. "They took them all away with them—"

"Pway don't be an ass, Lowthah. The question of foot-pwints is an important one. But I cannot expect you fellows

to notice anythin' weally important.. Well, Tom Mewwy, I will do my best with this case, and will weport latah."

And the swell of the School House put away his notebook and pencil, and walked off. The Terrible Three grinned, and went on their way to the School House. A quarter of an hour later, after a refreshing wash in cool water, the chums of the Shell came down to their study. The door was wide open, and a youth, with a large bumpy forehead and a pair of spectacles, was sitting on the table, swinging his thin legs.

"Hallo, Skimpole! You've got into the wrong cage," said Monty Lowther. "This isn't the lunatic asylum, you know."

Skimpole blinked at the Terrible Three.

"I came here to speak to Tom Merry—"

"Speak away, my son," said Tom Merry, "and cut it short."

"I've just seen D'Arcy—"

"Nothing remarkable in that. We've just seen him too."

"Please don't interrupt me, Lowther. I hear that you have been robbed by a gang of ruffians in the lane—"

"Ha, ha, ha! This is the first we've heard of it."

"Well, D'Arcy dropped a hint about it, and I heard the rest from Mellish. I thought I'd drop in here for further details. As you know, I am a demon at amateur detective work, and I thought I might as well recover the stolen property from the thieves for you."

Tom Merry laughed. Skimpole was D'Arcy's rival in the

**NEXT
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amateur detective line, and it was difficult to tell which was the funnier of the two.

"But there isn't any stolen property," said Tom Merry.

"Dear me, that is rather unfortunate. Are you quite sure that they did not succeed in taking your watch.

"It's in my pocket."

"Or your purse?"

"I haven't one."

"Or your money?"

"I haven't any."

"Well, really, Merry, this is rather discouraging. Still, the thieves—"

"But there aren't any thieves."

"Eh? But—"

"I don't know what they were. But they didn't steal anything, and didn't try to. There were two of them, and they might have been footpads, or they might have been off their rockers. Now you know as much about the matter as I do. If you'll kindly find somewhere else to sit, we'll have tea on that table."

"I should like to have their descriptions—"

"D'Arcy's got the descriptions. Ask him for a copy from his giddy notebook."

"He may refuse—"

"Then punch his head. I can't keep on talking all day. The loaf's in the box, Lowther, and the butter's under the jar. I thought it would be cooler there."

"I should like a description from you—"

"I think there's a little jam left."

"No, there isn't; I put the last in D'Arcy's hat-box."

"Well, trot out the marmalade, then. Better light some sticks to boil the kettle; we can't have a coal fire this broiling weather. Hallo, are you still there, Skimmy?"

"Yes, Tom Merry. I want the details of the case—"

"Oh, seat! Why didn't you remain a Socialist instead of taking up this amateur detective rot?" demanded Tom Merry in an aggrieved tone.

"I have rather dropped Socialism of late, as I have been busy with the details of my new flying-machine—"

"Well, go and get on with the flying-machine."

"I am at a momentary standstill in that too," said the brainy man of the Shell. "I have the whole invention mapped out with the exception of one detail—the means of raising the machine into the air. When I have solved that, the thing will be completed, but I am at a temporary standstill in the matter."

"Ha, ha, ha! You had better go and think it out," said Manners, gently taking the youthful inventor by the arm and leading him to the door. "If D'Arcy won't give you that description punch his head, or go back to Socialism, or go and build your airship, or go and eat coke. Good-bye."

Skimpole found himself in the passage, and the study door was shut. The amateur detective blinked at the door, and then opened it and looked in.

"I say, Tom Merry—oooooh!"

A sardine, deftly aimed by Monty Lowther, caught Skimpole in his open mouth. He gasped and jumped back, and the door slammed again; and this time it was not reopened, and the chums of the Shell were left to have their tea in peace.

CHAPTER 3.

The Luck of Arthur Augustus.

"BLAKE!"

"Adsum!"

"Herries!"

"Adsum!"

"Digby!"

"Adsum!"

"D'Arcy!"

No reply.

"D'Arcy!"

Still silence. Mr. Railton, who was taking the roll-call, looked up with a severe brow. Nobody was allowed to be late for evening call-over at St. Jim's; but the swell of the School House was evidently absent from the ranks of the Fourth.

"Young ass!" muttered Jack Blake. "Where can he have got to?"

"He went out after tea," Digby remarked. "He was mighty mysterious about it, but I was just going to cricket practice, so I didn't notice much."

"He had something on his chest, I know," Herries observed. "I asked him if he'd like to come and see me feed my bulldog, and he answered quite shortly."

"D'Arcy!" repeated Mr. Railton for the third time.

"Yaas, sir—I mean, adsum!"

It was a breathless voice at the door, and the eyes of the whole crowded hall were turned upon the new-comer.

It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy!

But the School House swell was in a sorry plight.

His attire, usually the most elegant at St. Jim's, was muddied from head to foot, his collar was loose and his tie

hanging by one end, and his silk hat was a wreck. He was breathless and panting, and had evidently been running hard.

He came quickly to his place in the Fourth Form, and the other fellows drew back from contact with his muddy garments.

"My only hat!" muttered Blake. "Where have you been?"

"Looking for mud, I should say," remarked Digby.

"And finding it," grinned Herries.

"Pway don't wot, deah boys," gasped D'Arcy. "I have had a fearful time."

"D'Arcy!" said Railton's stern voice.

"Yaas, wathah—I mean, yaas, sir."

"What do you mean by being late for calling-over and appearing here in that disgraceful state?"

"If you please, sir, I've had a fearful time—"

"Go and clean yourself instantly, and take fifty lines for being late."

"Weally, sir—"

"Go!"

And D'Arcy went. A suppressed cackle from the juniors followed him. The roll-call went on, and there were no others absent. The school was dismissed, and Tom Merry joined the chums of No. 6 in the passage.

"What on earth has happened to Gussy?" he asked.

Blake laughed.

"Blessed if I know. He went out after tea with a mysterious look, and I thought he had something up his sleeve. Perhaps he's been making a Socialist speech somewhere, and got that in return."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"More likely something in the amateur detective line," chuckled Monty Lowther. "He may have been tracking down those footpads?"

"What footpads?" asked Jack Blake.

Tom Merry explained. Blake chuckled at the idea, and at that moment Skimpole of the Shell came along the passage, and stopped.

"I wanted to speak to you chaps. Do you know where D'Arcy is?"

"In a bath-room at the present moment, I believe," said Blake. "What do you want him for?"

"He has a description of some footpads that I want to borrow of him preparatory to tracking down the villains. I asked him for it before he left St. Jim's, and he refused to give it to me, and refused to accept my co-operation."

"No wonder," grinned Tom Merry, "considering the kind of a muck-up you made last time you started as an amateur detective."

"That was really not my fault. You see, I was incommoded by D'Arcy all the time, and one could hardly expect to make much progress bothered by an ass like that. If you like to give me the description now, Tom Merry—"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"I can't very well place the same case in the hands of two detectives," he replied gravely. "You must get Gussy to let you into it."

"H'm! Perhaps it is as well to observe professional etiquette," assented Skimpole. "I suppose I had better see D'Arcy."

And he hurried upstairs, and a moment later the juniors heard him knocking at the door of a bath-room. Blake chuckled.

"Come up," he said. "There will be some fun here."

Thump! Thump! Thump!

Skimpole was pounding on the door of the bath-room, inside which he could hear the swell of St. Jim's splashing away. The voice of D'Arcy came from within.

"Who is there?"

"It's I, Skimpole."

"Then go away, you ass!"

"I want that description—"

"Wats! Go away!"

"But I want that description—"

"I uttahly wufuse to let you have the descwip. I wufuse to have the case bungled by a silly ass! Now go away. If I have to come out to you I shall give you a fearful thwashin'."

Thump! Thump! Thump!

"Really, D'Arcy, I must insist—"

The door of the bath-room suddenly opened.

"Ah, thank you, D'Arcy. I—I—ow! Oooh!"

A shower of water shot from the open door, and Skimpole staggered back, drenched. The door of the bath-room slammed again, and a chuckle was heard. Skimpole hurried himself forward at the door, but it was fastened within.

"Now pewwaps you will go away and stop wowwysin' me, you wottah!"

"You—you— I am quite wet."

"Then go and dwy yourself."

And Skimpole apparently thought this advice good enough to be taken, for he drifted along the passage and disappeared. Five minutes later D'Arcy came out of the bath-room, grinning. Blake slapped him on the shoulder.

"Where have you been, you ass?"
 "Pway don't be so beastly wuff, Blake."
 "Where have you been to get into that state?"
 "Bai Jove, deah boys, I've had a feahful time! I left the coll. to twack down the footpads who tried to wob Tom Mewwy, and—"
 "And caught them?"
 "Oh, no—"
 "They caught you, then?" chuckled Tom Merry.
 "Not at all, deah boy. I had the howwid misfortune to wun into a lot of fellows fwom the Gwammah School."
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 "It is not a laughin' mattah. They wushed at me, and I wan. There were a lot of them, you know; and, besides, I was too busy twackin' the wascally footpads to have time to thwash them. I wan ovah a wooden bwidge ovah a ditch, and slipped, and—"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 "I wegard this mewwiment as extwemely untimely. I had a most feahful experience. They dwagged me out of the ditch, laughin' like a lot of wotten hyenas, and I felt too exhausted to thwash them. So I came back."
 "Looking like a drowned rat," said Blake.
 "Weally, Blake—"
 "You'd better give up amateur detective work," grinned Tom Merry. "You ought to set up as a funny merchant, Gussy; that's nearer your mark."
 "I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort. I have had a momen-tawwy webuff, that is all, and I feel certain that I shall soon cause the awwest of those wuffians."
 And Arthur Augustus walked away with his nose in the air, leaving the juniors chuckling.

CHAPTER 4.

A Thief in the Night.

"Q UET!"
 "I guess so, Silas Shucks."
 "I'll have the pesky window open in a jiffy."
 It was night at St. Jim's—a hot, sultry July night. Darkness lay upon the school; the hour of midnight had tolled from the tower, and all was again silent. Two dim forms had flitted through the darkness of the quadrangle, and stopped at the porch of the School House.
 A tall man and a short, thick-set one, with caps pulled down over their brows, and cautious sidelong glances. They seemed to breathe more freely when they were out of the open quadrangle in the dusk of the deep porch. The taller of the two closely examined the fastening of the hall window that glimmered beside the stone pillars of the porch. He gave a chuckle.
 "It's easy enough, Bunker. Only the old-fashioned catch, and the winder opens on a hinge. It's dead easy."
 "Good luck, Silas."
 "I'll have it open in a jiffy."
 There was a faint click in the gloom. Then a creak of the wooden window-frame. Bunker drew a quick, deep breath.
 "It's open?"
 "I guess so."
 "Mind, it's your idea, Silas, not mine. That's understood."
 "Oh, stow your croaking!" growled Silas Shucks impatiently.
 "Of course, it's my idea—it was my idea from the first, wasn't it, to make a fortune out of the little lord?"
 "I know it; but this is a new development."
 "It will make everything safe."
 "Well, you're boss, and I follow your lead. Only mind, it was your idea from start to finish. That's understood."
 "Yes, that's understood. And now stow your cackle," said Silas Shucks roughly.

The window swung back into the hall. Silas Shucks put one leg over the sill, and peered intently into the dense darkness before him. Slowly and dimly he made out the form of the objects there.

"All serene, Silas?"
 "I guess so. Stow your cackle."
 The long-limbed, loose-jointed rascal drew himself into the opening, and disappeared into the darkness of the hall. Bunker slowly followed. Then Silas Shucks's thin, wiry hand closed the window noiselessly without fastening it.

"Come on."
 Silently, in rubber-soled shoes, the two ruffians stole up the stairs. Up to the second floor, till Silas Shucks opened a door, and the sound of regular breathing falling upon their ears warned them that it was a dormitory.

"Here we are, Bunker."
 "Sure it's the right room?"
 "No; but we shall soon see."
 "But—"

"Stow your cackle."
 Silas Shucks stepped into the room. He glanced towards the high windows, where there was a faint glimmer of starlight, and then at the row of white beds. He moved slowly and

silently towards the beds, and now there was the glimmer of a tiny electric-lamp in the palm of his hand.

He moved from bed to bed, allowing the light to fall for a moment upon the face of each sleeper, while he carefully scanned the features. It was the Fourth Form dormitory in the School House that the ruffians had entered. The end bed was occupied by Jack Blake, and the next ones by his chums. Silas Shucks glanced at Blake, and then at Herries and then at Digby. He shook his head each time. Then he paused for a moment at the bed of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

The swell of the School House was sleeping soundly. His experiences as an amateur detective had doubtless exhausted him. He lay with his head on one side, and his aristocratic profile showing in the glow of the electric-lamp. His lips moved, and he was murmuring something in his sleep.

Silas Shucks bent his head to listen.

"I wefuse to shut up."

That was what Arthur Augustus was unconsciously murmuring, and the rascal bending over him grinned.

"I guess he's not the chap. He would do, but the other would do better—the pesky young rip who calls himself Tom Merry."

The next bed was occupied by Walsh, and the next by Mellish. Over the latter Silas Shucks gave an expressive sniff, as if of contempt, which would not have been flattering to Mellish if he could have heard it. Then he passed on till he had reached the end of the dormitory, and scanned the face of every sleeper. Bunker was waiting, with repressed nervousness, at the door. Silas Shucks finally shut off the electric glow and joined him.

"Have you found him?"

"No."

"Then he's not here."

"Let's get out. One of them might wake, I guess."

They left the dormitory, and closed the door. Bunker tapped his companion's arm.

"What are you going to do?"

"Find Tom Merry."

"He's not there."

"There must be more than one dormitory in a house this size. I know he is in this building, and I'm going to find him."

"How do you know?"

"There are two houses—the School House and the New House—and Merry is a School House boy. I learned that much in Kyleombe from Mrs. Murphy. I suppose the Forms have separate dormitories, and Merry belongs to another Form Come on."

"Well, it's your idea, not mine."

"Stow the cackle!"

A couple of minutes later Silas Shucks was opening the door of the Shell dormitory. It was an apartment similar to the Fourth Form room, only barely as large. The long-limbed ruffian entered, and again proceeded from bed to bed, allowing the glimmer of light to rest for a moment upon the face of each youthful sleeper.

He scanned the faces of Gore and Skimpole and Lowther and Manners. Then he uttered a low exclamation of satisfaction as his glance rested upon the face of Tom Merry. Bunker stepped quickly to his side.

"Is that him?"

"I guess so."

They scanned the face of Tom Merry. Very handsome and frank that face looked, with the eyelashes sweeping the healthy pink cheeks.

"He's wonderfully like," said Bunker, in a whisper.

"Didn't we mistake him for the other to-day?"

"I guess so; but if you saw them together—"

"That would show up a difference, of course; but they won't be seen together. This is your quarry at present."

"Well, it's your idea."

"Stow your cackle! Have you got the chloroform-pad?"

"Here it is."

"Hold the light, then."

Bunker held the glow-lamp, and Silas Shucks bent over the sleeping boy with the pad drenched in chloroform in his hand. The pad was slowly approached to the face of Tom Merry, and he breathed in the fumes unconsciously, and his sleep took on a sounder, deeper heaviness. Then the pad was pressed gently on his face. One start he gave, and that was all. Unconsciously he glided from sleep to insensibility.

Bunker drew a breath of relief. Silas Shucks grinned.

"I guess it was easy."

"We haven't got him away yet."

"That won't take long."

"What about his clothes?"

"We don't want his clothes. We've got clothes for him, haven't we?"

Bunker chuckled silently.

"I guess you're right, Silas."

"He can come as he is. It won't hurt him to be carried out in his pyjamas on a hot July night, I suppose. If we took his clothes we shouldn't be able to get rid of them without trouble."

"I reckon so."

"Lend me a hand with him."

The bedclothes were rolled back, and Tom Merry was lifted from the bed. The hero of the Shell was quite unconscious, and he did not make a single movement. He lay as limp as a dead body in the grasp of the kidnappers.

He was lifted into Silas Shucks's powerful arms, and carried silently away. The ruffians emerged from the dormitory, and Bunker closed the door. Then they stole down the stairs, Tom Merry's weight apparently being very little to the big American. They halted at the unfastened window.

"Get out first, Bunker."

"I guess so, Silas Shucks."

"And don't jaw."

Bunker climbed through the window, and received the invisible junior into his arms. Then Silas Shucks followed, and the window was closed. The two ruffians quickly crossed the quadrangle, and Bunker climbed the wall, and drew Tom Merry up after him. Shucks followed. In a couple of minutes the kidnappers stood in the lane. Still Tom Merry had not shown a sign of returning consciousness.

Silas Shucks bent over him and peered into his face, upon which a ray of starlight fell. It was deathly white and the eyes were closed.

"He's all right for hours."

"I hope he's not—not—" Bunker stammered. Silas Shucks interrupted him savagely.

"Do you think I'm a fool? Stow the cackle and bring him along."

In the black shadow of thick trees, at the first corner of the road, a small Panhard car was waiting. Tom Merry was lifted into it, and Silas Shucks started the engine.

Zip! zip!

The car whizzed away through the silence of the night. And still Tom Merry lay white and quiet, deep in insensibility, while the rapidly revolving wheels bore him further and further away from St. Jim's. And the school slept on.

CHAPTER 5.

The Disappearance of Tom Merry.

MONTY LOWTHER sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes, as the clang of the rising-bell rang upon the morning air. Then he yawned portentously.

"Hei-i-i-i-ho! I wish Taggles would get drowned some morning before he had a chance at that bell! I say, Manners, you lazy waster, wake up!"

"Gr-r-r-r-ooooo!"

"Wake up! Tom Merry, wake up!" said Lowther, slipping out of bed and yawning again. "Get up, you lazy rotter! What do you mean by idling in bed when your uncle is up and doing? Get up—why—what—how—"

Monty Lowther broke off, staring in amazement at Tom Merry's untenanted bed.

Manners sat up sleepily and yawned.

"Is that the rising-bell? You up, Monty?"

"Yes, I say, do you know when Tom Merry got up?"

"No; is he up?" asked Manners, looking round.

"His bed's empty, anyway."

"Well, that's presumptive evidence that he's up, at all events," yawned Manners. "I suppose he's gone out for a spin in the early morning—ugh!"

"Then he's gone out without his clothes," said Lowther, pointing to Tom Merry's garments, neatly folded up beside his bed as usual.

Manners stared.

"My hat! Yes. Perhaps he brought his cycling things into the dormitory last night, and put them on when he got up."

"He wouldn't dress without his underclothing, I suppose."

"No, I suppose he wouldn't. And there it is."

"He's gone off in his pyjamas," said Lowther. "Has our friend Thomas taken to sleepwalking, or has he gone for an early morning dip in the Ryl?"

Manners laughed.

"An early morning dip, I expect," he replied.

"Like his cheek to go without waking us up, then!" growled Lowther. "I should have liked a dip in the river this morning, if I had thought of it. I'll punch his head when he comes in."

The chums of the Shell dressed, expecting every moment to see Tom Merry enter the dormitory, glowing from a morning swim. But the hero of the Shell did not come in. His absence puzzled the chums. They went downstairs, and near the door of the dining-hall they encountered the chums of Study No. 6 who were looking in to see if breakfast were ready.

"Have you seen Tom Merry?" asked Lowther.

"I saw him last evenin', dear boy."

"Ass!"

"I refuse to be called an ass, Lowthah. I—"

"Have you seen Tom Merry this morning, any of you? He came down before any of us, and the curious thing is that he came down in his pyjamas," said Lowther. "I suppose he had a bathing-cloak round him to cross the quad in. But if he's gone for a morning dip he ought to be in by now."

"Ynas, wathah. Pewwaps he is drowned," suggested Arthur Augustus.

Lowther gave the swell of the School House a dig in the ribs that sent him staggering against the wall. He brought up against the wall, and then slid down into a sitting position close to the wainscot. There he sat for some moments, staring in amazed bewilderment at Monty Lowther.

"What did you do that for?" he gasped at last.

"That's in acknowledgment of your cheerful suggestion," explained Monty Lowther.

"You uttah wottah!"

"Tom Merry's not the sort to get drowned," said Jack Blake. "It's rather curious his not coming in, though. Are you sure he went to the river?"

"Where else could he have gone in his pyjamas?"

"True."

"Lowthah, you have tweated me with gwoos diswespect!"

"Oh, ring off, ass!"

"I wefuse to wing off. I absolutely wefuse to be called an ass. You have tweated me with such gwoos diswespect that I have no alternative but to administah to you a feahful thwashin'!"

"I can't make out where Tom is—"

"Pway put up your beastly fists, Lowthah. I am goin' to thwash you!"

"Oh, get off, Gussy. I haven't any time for rotting now!"

"I am not wottin', Lowthah. You have tweated me with gwoos diswespect, and I am goin' to chastise you severely. Pway put up your wotten fists, you wottah!"

"Look here, Gussy—"

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

"Hold on," said Blake. "Something may have happened to Tom Merry, and if so, this isn't a time to get ragging. Shut up, Gussy!"

"That's all vewy well, Blake. I should be weally sowwy if anythin' had happened to Tom Mewwy, but I cannot allow any boundah to treat me with diswespect."

"Gussy, old man, here's a chance for you to show your skill as a blughound!" exclaimed Digby. "Tom Merry has mysteriously disappeared. Find him."

"I don't weally believe he has disappeahed at all."

"Well, he can't be found."

"Which really amounts to the same thing," said Herries.

D'Arcy looked thoughtful.

"Vewy well, Blake, undah the cires. I will postpone thwashin' Lowthah, and will find Tom Mewwy. Pewwaps he has been cawwed away by the ewwwent, or pewwaps he has the ewwamp or somethin'. The pwopah place to look for him is by the wivah."

"Hallo! what's that?" exclaimed Skimpole, who had come by in time to catch something of what was being said. "Haven't you found Merry yet, Lowther?"

"No," growled Lowther.

"That is very singular. If you can furnish me with a clue, I shall be happy to look for him and—"

"I'll furnish you with a thick ear if you talk your silly rot while I'm worried," growled Monty Lowther.

"I regard that as almost rude, Lowther!"

"I will go and look by the wivah," said D'Arcy. "You can come along if you like, Skimpole, and I will put you up to a winkle in detective methods."

"A winkle! What do you mean by a winkle? There are no winks in the river. I believe they are a kind of shellfish found only at the seaside."

"He means a wrinkle!" grinned Jack Blake.

"Oh, I see. As a matter of fact, D'Arcy, it is I who am more fitted to give you instruction—"

"Oh, don't talk wot, Skimpole, old chap!"

"I am talking sense. With your defective intellect—"

"My what?"

"Your defective intellect, you naturally require the assistance of a more powerful brain. I am willing to help you—"

"Of all the uttah asses!"

"Of all the silly dummies!"

The voices of the rival detectives died away. But the group of juniors in the passage were looking serious. Lowther and Manners were worried.

"Nothing can have happened to him," said Blake.

"Then where is he?"

"Blessed if I can guess. It can't be a trick of Figgins & Co., can it?" exclaimed Blake suddenly, as a new idea struck him.

The chums of the Shell brightened up. Figgins & Co., the chiefs of the juniors of the New House, were at perpetual warfare with the School House juniors, and there was no end to their raids against the rival house. True, they had never gone so far as to carry off one of the School House leaders in the night; but there was really no telling to what lengths Figgy's audacity might go.

"My hat!" exclaimed Manners. "I never thought of that. Of course, it is a jape of Figgins & Co. They've collared Tom Merry!"

"Caught him as he came back from the river, of course,"



"You can come along if you like, Skimpole," said D'Arcy, "and I will put you up to a wrinkle in detective methods."

said Lowther: "and they're chuckling over us now, I suppose. Perhaps they're going to hold him to ransom, as we did one of the New House rotters once."

"I shouldn't wonder," said Digby thoughtfully. "But it's rather curious about Merry having gone down to the river in nothing but his pyjamas, isn't it?"

"I suppose he had a cloak."

"H'm! that's all very well at the seaside."

"Well, it's the only thing I can think of," said Lowther. "Unless Figgins & Co. raided the School House in the night and collared him out of bed."

"That's what I was thinking of," said Blake.

"I don't see how they could get him away without a row."

"It's a puzzle, certainly. But—hallo! what's that?"

Blake had glanced round, and seen two figures standing by the hall window, talking seriously with very grave faces. They were Mr. Railton, the housemaster of the School House, and Kildare of the Sixth, the captain of the school.

"Something's up," said Manners.

"Looks like it."

The captain of St. Jim's left the housemaster, who went into his study. Kildare came along towards the juniors, and stopped, scanning their surprised faces with his blue, Irish eyes.

"Did any of you young rascals break bounds last night?" he asked.

"No, Kildare."

"H'm! Well, someone did. The hall window was found

unfastened on the inside this morning. Somebody left it open last night."

"Perhaps it was a burglar," suggested Herries.

"Nothing has been stolen that can be discovered, and there was no alarm. It looks as if somebody has been breaking bounds. The matter is going to be inquired into, and there will be a row."

And Kildare passed on, a grim expression on his handsome face, leaving the juniors looking at one another significantly.

"That makes it pretty clear, I think," said Blake. "If any School House fellow had broken bounds, he wouldn't have been ass enough to leave the window unfastened to show what he'd been doing. But if Figgins & Co. got the window open from the outside, they couldn't fasten it before leaving."

"It's quite clear," said Monty Lowther. "Figgins & Co. worked the little trick; though how they managed it I don't exactly understand. They took Tom Merry out before any of us were awake, and had to leave the window unfastened. What surprises me is that we haven't heard from them. They must release Tom in time for morning calling-over."

"Well, they shall hear from us," said Blake. "Come on, and let's look for them."

"Right you are."

The juniors hurried out into the quadrangle. Three youths were strolling down the path by the New House, chatting together, and it did not need a second glance to show that they were Figgins, Ferr, and Wynn—famous in St. Jim's as Figgins & Co.

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"There they are!"

"Go for 'em!" muttered Lowther.

The School House juniors made a sudden rush. Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn heard the hurried steps on the gravel walk, and turned quickly—but not quickly enough. The School House juniors were upon them, and in a twinkling the New House trio were sprawling in the gravel, and the assailants were sprawling victoriously over them.

CHAPTER 6

A Strange Mystery.

"**W**HERE is Tom Merry?"

Monty Lowther, sitting on Figgins's chest, pounded that question, while at the same time he industriously rubbed Figgins's head in the gravel, taking a handy grip of his hair to enable him to do so.

Figgins gave a howl.

"Lemme gerrup!"

"Where's Tom Merry?"

"Blow Tom Merry!"

"Let me gerrup," gasped Fatty Wynn, breathless under the combined weight of Blake and Digby. "I'm out of breath, you rotters. Let me get up."

"Where's Tom Merry?" demanded Blake.

"Hang Tom Merry!"

"Ow, you mongrels," gasped Kerr, making a desperate effort to tear himself loose from the grip of Manners and Herries.

"Ow, you rotters! Ow, you beasts!"

"Where's Tom Merry?"

"Confound Tom Merry."

"They won't tell us," grinned Blake. "Very well, we'll rub their heads in the gravel till they do. Say when you've had enough, Figgy."

"You—you—you—gr-r-r-r-r."

"Say when."

"Nuff," gasped Figgins. "Stop it! What's the matter? Are you all off your silly rockers? Pax, you confounded asses. What's the row about?"

"Where's Tom Merry?"

"Tom Merry! How should I know!"

"Well, you ought to know," chuckled Blake, "as you sneaked into the School House last night and whisked him off."

"Off your onion?"

"Do you mean to say that you didn't?"

"Of course I didn't."

"Look here, Figgy, that won't wash. Tom Merry disappeared from his bed before we got up this morning," said Monty Lowther. "Either he went down to the river for a bathe, and was collared as he came back, or he was taken out of the dormitory."

"Well, we didn't take him," said Figgins. "Do you think we've got nothing better to do than to go around collecting up your old rubbish—ow!"

"Is that honour bright, Figgy?" asked Blake.

"Yes, honour bright."

"I daresay we've been a little hasty, come to think of it," said Lowther, getting off Figgins's chest.

"I daresay you have," howled Figgins, "and I daresay I'm going to give you the hiding of your life for it."

"Oh, draw it mild, Figgy," said Blake. "We naturally jumped to the conclusion that you had done it, you know. We didn't think any of the other fellows in the New House would have the confounded nerve, you know."

"Well, they didn't," said Figgins. "If Tom Merry has lost himself you'd better put an advert. in the paper for him. I don't know anything about him."

"Look here, some of you chaps have got him somewhere," exclaimed Lowther, "and we're going to have him. Understand that."

"I tell you you're on the wrong track," said Figgins. "Do you think any fellow in my house would try on a jape like that without my knowing? Why I'd snatch him bald-headed for his cheek if he did! I'm boss of the New House juniors, I can tell you. There's not two parties in my house always ragging one another, as there are in that old casual ward you call a house."

"Rather," said Kerr. "It's honour bright, you chaps. Tom Merry hasn't been raided away by any of us."

"You're quite on the wrong track," said Fatty Wynn. "You've taken all my breath away, too, by jumping on me like that. Under the circumstances, I don't see how you can do less than stand a feed in compensation."

Monty Lowther was looking worried.

"Look here," he exclaimed. "A window was found unfashioned in the School House this morning. Tom Merry was gone before we woke up, and he had gone without his clothes. If it wasn't a New House raid, what has become of him?"

Figgins gave a whistle.

"Surely nothing can have happened—"

"Let's get down to the river," said Blake abruptly.

The School House juniors left the gates of St. Jim's. Figgins & Co. accompanied them. There might be endless warfare

between the two houses at St. Jim's, but at a moment when matters seemed to assume a serious aspect, the juniors could be trusted to stand by one another, shoulder to shoulder. Figgins & Co. were as concerned at the thought that something might have happened to Tom Merry as his own chums were.

"Hallo, Taggles," exclaimed Figgins, catching sight of the school porter. "Has Tom Merry been out this morning?"

"Which I hain't seen him," said Taggles.

"Let's get down to the river," said Monty Lowther, in a low voice.

They hurried on to the green, sloping bank of the silvery Ryll. The river danced and glimmered in the morning sun. There was no one near the school boathouse, which was locked up, but further down the river Arthur Augustus and Skimpole could be seen, apparently engaged in an excited argument. The juniors hurried towards them.

"Have you seen anything of Tom Merry?" asked Lowther quickly.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"No, certainly not."

"Well, you don't agree, that's certain," said Blake. "What do you mean by saying that you have seen him, Gussy?"

"I haven't precisely seen him, deah boy, but I have found his footpint," said the swell of St. Jim's.

"Nothing of the sort," said Skimpole. "It's too large for Tom Merry's footprint, and I have not the slightest doubt that it is the footprint of a tall man, about five feet nine in height, with grey side-whiskers and—"

"Oh, cheese that! Where is the footprint?" exclaimed Jack Blake.

"It is here, deah boy."

"Yes, that is it, Blake. The deep indentation shows that the person who made the mark possessed considerable weight, and I therefore deduce that he was a tall man. From the circumstance that—"

"You unutterable idiots," said Blake, looking at the indentation in the grassy bank; the amateur detectives pointed out to him. "Is that it?"

"That is it, deah boy, and I refuse to be chawacterised as an unutterable idiot. That expression applies vewy well to Skimpole, but—"

"Can't you see that it is the hoof-mark from a cow or a bullock?" howled Blake. "It's not a human footprint at all."

"I refuse to admit anythin' of the sort. It is Mewwy's footpint—"

"It is the footprint of a tall man with grey—"

"There's no sign of him here," said Blake, turning away.

"That mark was made by some animal that strayed on the river bank. There are dozens of the marks here. If Tom Merry came down to the river, where is he?"

The juniors did not answer, but a mist came over the eyes of some of them. Where was Tom Merry? Could the shining, gurgling river have told a tale of a tragedy?

"But we have no proof that he came down to the river," went on Blake hastily. "That was just a surmise, that's all. Let's get back to the school—he may have turned up."

"But if he hasn't—"

"If he hasn't we had better speak to Mr. Railton. There must be something wrong."

The juniors re-entered the gates of St. Jim's. Monteith, the head prefect of the New House, was crossing the quad, and he called to Figgins & Co.

"You will be late for breakfast! What is the matter? Has anything happened?" the prefect added, as he saw the lugubrious looks of the juniors.

Blake explained. The prefect's brow grew very grave.

"That is strange," he said. "If Tom Merry is not in the School House when you go in, I should advise you to speak at once to Mr. Railton."

Tom Merry was not in the School House. His singular

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absence was now being commented upon by all the Fourth and the Shell who boarded in the house.

Where was Tom Merry?

"That was the question that was exercising every mind.

"Better speak to Railton," said Lowther.

"Nothing else to be done," assented Blake.

Mr. Railton was talking to Kildare in the hall. Blake crossed over to him, and the housemaster looked down curiously at the pale and anxious face of the junior.

"What is the matter, Blake?"

"Tom Merry has disappeared, sir!"

"What?"

Lowther explained how Tom Merry had been missed from the dormitory. The housemaster listened with surprise that was soon tinged with alarm.

"You have done quite right to tell me, my lads," he said, after a pause. "The matter must be looked into at once."

The juniors went into the dining-room. But Tom Merry's accustomed place at the Shell table was empty, and Mr. Railton, too, was absent from the senior table.

Where was Tom Merry?

The question haunted every mind, and it was a miserable meal that Tom Merry's chums made that morning.

CHAPTER 7.

Awake or Dreaming?

TOM MERRY awoke.

He came to with a sudden start out of a tangled dream.

There was a blaze of light in his opening eyes, and his head was aching dully. He lay in the thick, rich grass and blinked at the sunny sky.

For some moments he lay without thinking, simply gazing at the sunny heavens, feeling the scorch of the July sun on his cheeks, and hearing the buzz of insects in the long grass.

Then, with a flash, memory returned.

He started, and struggled up into a sitting posture, a cry of amazement breaking from his lips.

Where was he?

What had happened?

Round him stretched the grassy moor—mile on mile of rough grassland, glowing in the morning sunlight. Away on the skyline a belt of trees broke the level, but there was no sign of a human being, no trace of a human habitation.

Tom Merry passed his hand over his brow.

Was he dreaming still? In his vision strange forms and fancies had been mingled together—Figgins & Co. and the Grammar School boys, strange, foreign faces he had seen at the Franco-British Exhibition, and the cunning, low-browed faces of the two ruffians who had assailed him in Rylcombe Lane. Strange faces and forms jumbled together, with a sense of oppression, of suffocation! He had come out of it all with a start—but was he awake?

He had gone to bed as usual in the Shell dormitory, in the School House at St. Jim's. He had awakened—where?

He gazed at the rolling grassy expanse in utter bewilderment. He pinched his arm to make sure that he was not dreaming.

He was awake! Then what did it mean?

He staggered to his feet, and gazed round him. Grass and sky—sky and grass! Nothing else met his view! A feeling of weakness overcame him, and he sank down into the grass again.

Why was he feeling so exhausted? He usually awoke in the morning as fresh as a lark. What was that strange, throbbing heaviness in his head? Above all, how came he out here on the grass under the sky, instead of awakening in the bed in the School House dormitory?

He sat up again. He had not the faintest recollection of having risen from bed, or having dressed himself. Yet he must have done so, for he was fully dressed, even to necktie and gloves.

What did it all mean?

A terrible thought flashed through his mind for a moment, that his mind was wandering—that the blue sky, the green grass, were the disordered visions of a sick brain. But that did not last long. He was sane enough—he was himself—but there was a mystery in it that he could not solve.

He had never, that he knew of, been given to sleep-walking. Yet that was the only reasonable explanation that occurred to him.

In a fit of somnambulism, he had left his bed and dressed himself, and wandered away from the school. Yet where had he arrived? This scenery was strange to him. There was a moor within a few miles of St. Jim's, certainly, but he knew it well, and it was not this moor. He was in a strange land.

"Good heavens!" murmured Tom Merry, "what has happened? If I am not mad, what has happened? I cannot have wandered here; this is nowhere near St. Jim's. If I was brought here—how—by whom? How was it I did not awake?"

He staggered up again, and stood unsteadily. He passed his hand across his brow, and as he did so the glitter of his sleeve-link caught his eye. He looked at it again in wonder.

A diamond flashed in the link of his shirt-cuff, and Tom Merry had never worn diamond sleeve-links in his life.

He examined them again. They were handsome and valuable links, but they did not belong to him, and he had never seen them before. Then he looked further—he glanced at his clothes, his gloves, his boots. They were of the best quality and a good cut, but they were not his own.

Tom Merry gasped. It seemed to him as if the sky was turning round and round. It was mystery on mystery, bewilderment on bewilderment. How came he here, wearing clothes that belonged to someone else, in a place he had never seen before?

"If I'm not off my rocker," murmured Tom Merry, "somebody else must have been, to play this mad trick on me."

In the hope of discovering something that might elucidate the mystery, he ran his fingers through his pockets. He was wearing a gold chain, and he pulled a gold watch from his pocket. It was a valuable one, and there was a monogram on the back in brilliants—"R. G."

"R. G." The letters seemed to dance before the eyes of Tom Merry. He usually wore a silver watch himself, with his monogram plainly cut on the back of the case; but his monogram was "T. M."

Who was "R. G."? How came his watch in Tom Merry's pocket? It was pretty plain that he was wearing "R. G.'s" clothes, as well as his watch. But how—why?

He searched further. There was money in one of the pockets of the trousers—a handful of silver. In the sovereign purse attached to the watch-chain were two sovereigns. He had not been robbed—or, rather, the person whose clothes he was wearing had not been robbed. What could it mean?

There was a silver pencil-case, bearing the same monogram, in another pocket, and a folded letter. The letter commenced, "My dear Reggie."

"Reggie!" Reginald was evidently the Christian name of the unknown "R. G."

Tom Merry did not read the letter. It was in a feminine hand. He thrust it into the pocket again. It belonged to the unknown Reggie, and he had no right to read it.

"Well, of all the idiotic happenings that ever happened, this takes the biscuit," murmured Tom Merry, in amazement.

The situation was so strange, so startling, that he could not even attempt to grasp it. The mystery was too deep for him. He gave it up. He became conscious of the fact that he was hungry, and again his eyes swept the wide horizon for a sign of a human habitation.

Here he was, far—he did not know how far—from St. Jim's, dressed in another fellow's clothes, and with another fellow's money in his pockets.

He was alarmed and amazed, and yet inclined to laugh. It seemed all too absurd to be true; and yet there was no doubt about it. He looked at the watch, and found that it was going. The hand indicated nine o'clock.

"By Jove! they're done breakfast at St. Jim's now," he muttered. "I wish I had had some, too. I'm jolly hungry. Morning chapel now—and without me there along with the Shell! I wonder what they think of my being away! I suppose I am Tom Merry—and not Reggie! I suppose I'm not off my rocker!"

There really seemed room for doubt.

"Reggie or Tom Merry, I know I'm jolly hungry," muttered the junior, with a touch of his old humour. "I've got money in my pockets, so there's no need to starve. It's not my money, but I can refund it to Reggie, whoever he may be, when I meet him. And I'll make the bouncer explain how it is I happen to be in his clothes instead of in my own, confound him! It's a lark, I suppose, of some kind, though I'm blessed if I can make out how it was worked."

He scanned the horizon. Over the belt of trees he saw a dim patch of grey on the sky, and he guessed that it was caused by the smoke from a farmhouse. He set out towards it. The keen breeze of morning was invigorating, and the junior's strength returned to him as he tramped across the grassy moor.

In a quarter of an hour he came in sight of the farm buildings through openings in the scrubby trees. The smoke proceeded from a heap of rubbish that was being burned in the yard, and a man in corduroy trousers and big boots was poking it with a pitchfork to make it flare up.

"Good-morning," said Tom Merry.

The man looked round.

"Marnin', zur."

Then he resumed poking the fire.

"Can I get some breakfast here?" asked Tom Merry, with a smile. "I have money to pay for it."

The man jerked his head towards the farmhouse.

"Ask t'measter."

Tom Merry walked on. A stout woman in an apron was at the door, and she answered his greeting cheerfully. She looked at him curiously when he asked for breakfast, evidently wondering what he was doing in that lonely quarter at such an early hour, in clothes so unsuitable for the moors. But breakfast

was soon forthcoming, and Tom Merry ate heartily of the plain and wholesome fare, and felt more like himself as it went down.

"Can you tell me the road to the nearest town?" he asked.

The farmer's wife was still watching him curiously.

"You follow the cart-track, and turn to the left at the end," she said; "then along the lane till you come to the finger-post."

"Is it far?"

"About four mile."

"I have lost my way," explained Tom Merry; "I don't know exactly where I am. What is the name of the town?"

"Westlake."

Tom Merry had never heard of it before. He reflected that it was probably some small country place, dignified with the name of town by the farmer folk who had never seen a city.

"And what is the name of this moor?" he asked.

"West Moor."

"And—and what county is it in?" asked Tom Merry, almost desperately. He felt that he must have some clue to his surroundings.

The woman stared, as well she might.

"You don't know what county you are in?" she exclaimed.

"I have lost my way."

"Well, Hampshire."

Tom Merry jumped.

"Hampshire!"

"Yes, for sure."

Tom Merry drank his tea meditatively. Wonders were piling on wonders. He had gone to bed in Sussex, and he awoke in Hampshire. What did it all mean?

He did not stay long at the farmhouse. The good woman evidently regarded him as rather wrong in the head. She refused any payment for the breakfast, however, and Tom Merry went on his way with the money of the unknown "Reggie" still intact in his pockets.

CHAPTER 8.

Police-Constable Wright Makes a Great Discovery!

THE sun was high in the heavens, beating down upon the open track with scorching heat. Tom Merry was wearing a silk hat, which he had found close to his head when he awoke in the grass on the moor. It was little protection from the sun. He pushed it to the back of his head, and took off his gloves and put them in his pocket. It was hot and dusty on the farm cart-track, and when he reached the lane it was not much better.

The lane ran between high hawthorn hedges, a ribbon of white through the green country. The hedges afforded no shelter from the sun. Tom Merry was tempted to throw himself down under one of them and rest—but he did not. The desire to find out where he was, and what it all meant, was growing upon him intensely.

He tramped doggedly on, his face burnt by the blaze of the sun, the perspiration clotting on his brow. He glanced at his watch. Morning lessons were in full swing at St. Jim's now; what did the fellows think of his absence? He tried to picture to himself what Manners and Lowther would be thinking—and Blake and Figgins! But he could not. He felt that his vanishing in so inexplicable a way must have taken his friends completely off their balance. He could not imagine what they might surmise upon the subject.

"Ah, that's the finger-post."

The finger-post cast a bar of shade across the lane like a letter T. Tom Merry paused and looked up at it.

"Westlake, 3 Miles."

Three more miles in that blazing sun! Tom Merry threw himself into the thick grass that grew round the foot of the post, and leaned back against the wood wearily.

He was thirsty now, and the dull ache in his head seemed to be returning. The sun beat and beat down upon him till he wondered whether his brain was swimming. In that savage glare of sunlight he seemed unable to think or reflect.

There was a footstep in the dusty lane. Tom Merry looked up. It was a country policeman, with a ruddy, somewhat jolly face, perspiring now in the heat of the July morning.

He glanced at the boy sitting in the grass, leaning against the rough wooden post, and stopped with a cheery nod.

"Hot, sir!" he remarked.

"Jolly hot!" said Tom Merry.

The policeman looked at him curiously. Doubtless, like the farmer's wife, he thought Tom Merry's attire uncommon for a lad tramping the country lanes in the morning.

"Got far to go?" he asked curiously.

"I don't know," said Tom Merry frankly. "Have you ever heard of St. Jim's—St. James's Collegiate School, near Rylcombe, in Sussex?"

The policeman shook his head.

"I belong there," said Tom Merry. "I—I've lost my way. If you could show me a way of getting back there—"

"Never heard of the place," said the policeman, looking at

him more and more scrutinisingly. "If you belong to a school in Sussex, how do you come here?"

Tom Merry was silent. He was greatly inclined to tell the man the whole story—he seemed an intelligent fellow—but he hesitated. It was so strange, so unheard-of, that the man was almost certain not to believe him.

"How did you come here?" repeated the constable.

"I've lost my way."

"But you must have come a good many miles."

Tom Merry did not answer.

"Better tell the truth, young man. You've run away from school, I suppose, and want to get back again?"

Tom Merry flushed.

"Nothing of the sort."

The policeman laughed.

"Then how did you get here?"

"I don't know."

"Come, come, that's a little too thick. What's your name?"

"Tom Merry."

"Tom Merry! H'm! And you don't know how you got here!" The policeman laughed. But suddenly he broke off, as he scanned Tom Merry's face more closely, and uttered a sharp exclamation.

"By Jupiter!"

Tom Merry stared at him. A new and inexplicable excitement had come into the man's manner. He was staring blankly and amazedly at Tom Merry, and fumbling in his pocket. He drew out a crumpled blue paper, and looked over it, and then looked at Tom Merry, and then at the paper again.

"About fifteen—good; dark eyes—good; curly hair—good; wearing a gold watch with the monogram 'R. G.'—by Jupiter."

"What's that?" exclaimed Tom Merry sharply.

The policeman came closer to him.

"Will you let me see your watch, sir?"

"I—I haven't my watch—"

"You are wearing a chain—"

"Yes, but—"

The man stooped and suddenly jerked the chain, and the gold watch glistened in the sunlight. Tom Merry turned crimson as he saw the mocking look of unbelief in the policeman's face.

"I didn't mean that I hadn't a watch," he exclaimed hotly.

"I meant that I hadn't my watch. This watch isn't mine."

"Whose is it, then?"

"I—I don't know."

The policeman smiled. The reply indeed seemed absurd enough. He turned the watch over and glanced at the monogram on the case.

"R. G."

"It's not my watch," said Tom Merry. "These are not my clothes. I was wearing them when I woke up, you see—"

"Not your watch—and not your clothes! How did you come to be wearing them, then?" said the policeman, with a grin.

"I don't know."

"I'm afraid that won't wash, young man. The game's up, you know."

"What!"

"I tell you the game's up. I know you."

Tom Merry's face became crimson again. His situation was so inexplicable that it was certainly open to suspicion, but—

"If you think I stole this watch—" he broke out angrily.

The policeman laughed.

"I don't think anything of the kind. You couldn't steal what's your own, I suppose."

"It's not my own. I don't know whom it belongs to. I don't know whom these clothes belong to. I tell you—"

"Come, come, you can't expect me to swallow a yarn like that," said the man, with a touch of impatience. "It's too ridiculous on the face of it, you know."

"I know it sounds strange."

"I should say so. I have told you the game is up, and it's no good your sticking it out any longer."

"But I don't understand. What game is up?"

"The little game you have been playing, young master."

Tom Merry looked utterly bewildered.

"But I haven't been playing any game. I don't understand."

"Come, come. Now you're found out you may as well own up. You were not kidnapped at all, I know that now."

"Kidnapped!" said Tom Merry, with a start.

"Yes, that's what all the country has supposed."

"All the country!" said Tom Merry, dazedly.

"Perhaps you don't know that your disappearance from home has made a row all over the shop," said the policeman, "and that your description is in the hands of the police in all the southern counties."

"My—my description."

"Of course. Do you think your mother wouldn't have you looked for?"

"My mother! Are you mad? My mother died when I was a baby."

"Oh, stop that," exclaimed the policeman, testily. "You



"Who is there?" demanded D'Arcy. "I heard you, you wascal!"

mother has offered a reward of £200 for your recovery—and I've recovered you."

"Either you are mad or I am," cried Tom Merry. "In the name of all that's idiotic, whom do you take me for?"

"You know your own name well enough."

"My name is Tom Merry."

"Gammon."

"I belong to the Shell Form at St. Jim's."

"Oh, chuck it. You can't impose on me. I'm not a stupid country yokel—I'm from London," said the policeman. "I know a thing or two, my lad, and you can't take me in with yarns about schools and Shells, or whatever you're talking about. You must come along with me."

"I don't mind coming with you, but——"

"Well, come along, then."

Tom Merry rose to his feet. He was more amazed than ever. The policeman evidently took him for someone he was not—and that someone was undoubtedly the person whose clothes he was wearing. But how had he come into that person's clothes—and what did it all mean? Was it all a mad dream, and was he really asleep in his bed in the Shell dormitory at St. Jim's?

"You wasn't kidnapped after all," grinned the policeman. "You left home of your own accord—I can see that now. Though why you should do it is a mystery to me. The description only reached us this morning, and it was fresh in my mind, or I mightn't have noticed! But I've found you!"

"I tell you——"

There was a rattle of wheels in the lane. A farmer's cart was approaching at a trot. The policeman held up his hand.

The cart clattered to a halt, and the driver looked inquiringly at the policeman. The latter caught Tom Merry by the shoulder.

"I want you to give me a lift to Westlake, Giles."

"Aye, aye, Measter Wright," said Giles.

"Let go my shoulder," said Tom Merry.

"You've got to come with me."

"I will come with you, but I will not be taken like a criminal," said Tom Merry, with a flash in his eyes.

The policeman looked at him for a moment, then released him.

"Well, come," he said.

Tom Merry clambered into the cart, and the policeman followed. Giles looked at the boy with a slow grin.

"Poaching?" he asked.

"Oh, no. Run away from home."

"T' young roog," said Giles.

And he drove on. Tom Merry was a prisoner—but he was glad of the lift to the town. The cart drove at last into the streets of Westlake—a little old-fashioned country town, alive only on market days. It stopped before the police-station, and there Tom Merry and his captor alighted.

The constable nodded to Giles, who drove on. Then he entered the station with Tom Merry. A little fat inspector with an important manner met him, and looked at him inquiringly.

"I've found him, sir," said Constable Wright, eagerly.

"Eh?"

"I've found him."

"Found who?"

"Lord Reginald Graham."

Tom Merry gave a jump. The little fat inspector jumped too. "Nonsense, Wright! The description was only sent down here on the off chance. The kidnapped boy has been taken to London—at least, the police in the district believe so—and the famous detective, Ferrers Locke, is looking for him there. What do you mean by saying you have found him. Don't talk nonsense, Wright."

"Look at him, sir—and look at the description—especially of the clothes. Look at this, sir."

Police-constable Wright jerked out the gold watch, and showed the glittering monogram to the startled gaze of the inspector.

"By George, you're right—you've found him!"

**NEXT
THURSDAY:**

"TOM MERRY IN CAMP."

**A Double-Length Tale of
Tom Merry's Schooldays.**

CHAPTER 9.

Still Missing!

"BAI Jove, you know, I am feelin' completely wotten." It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy who made that observation, in an exceedingly lugubrious tone. Morning school was over at St. Jim's, and the classes had been dismissed. But the chums of Study No. 6 had not gone down to the river or the cricket-field. They stood in a serious group in the quadrangle, with sad and thoughtful faces. D'Arcy's remark endorsed the general feeling. The juniors were all feeling decidedly "rotten."

"You're right, Gussy, it's rotten," said Jack Blake, with a sigh. "What on earth has become of Tom Merry?"

"I simply can't imagine," said Digby. "We must give up the idea that he went down to the river and had an accident there. The place has been thoroughly searched."

"Then where is he?" said Herries.

"That's a mystery."

"The only explanation is, that he wandered off somewhere in his sleep," said Digby. "But he never walked in his sleep before."

"But he'd have woke up by now, deah boy, and we should have heard ffrom him."

"Yes, that's so, too."

"My ideah is that he has been cawwied off," said Arthur Augustus, with a wrinkle of thoughtfulness on his brow. "You know the hall window was found unfastened. He has been cawwied off by some wotten boundah."

"Why?"

"That's a mystewy. You wemembah the two wuffians who attacked him in the lane—they didn't try to wob him, you know, but just to dwag him into the wood—and that looks as if they wanted to cawwy him off."

"How do you know that?"

"Lowther says so, and Tom Mewwy told me so himself last evenin'."

"I say, Lowther."

Manners and Lowther were walking by, their hands deep in their pockets, their faces dark and restless. They came towards the chums of the Fourth as Blake called.

"Haven't heard anything, have you?" exclaimed Lowther eagerly.

"No," said Blake. "But an idea has occurred to us—"

"To me, deah boy."

"Well, to Gussy. What about those chaps who went for Tom Merry in the lane yesterday soon after midday—a couple of footpads, weren't they?"

Lowther started.

"Yes. I had forgotten them."

"Did they try to rob Tom Merry, or to yank him off somewhere?"

"Well, they didn't seem to want to rob him," said Lowther, reflectively. "They were trying to get him into the wood, I think. I suppose they thought it was safer to go through his pockets there."

"That's it," said Manners.

"But they told a yarn about having mistaken him for somebody else," went on Lowther. "They made out that it wasn't Tom Merry they wanted at all."

"They may have lied—in fact, most likely they did. They may have been going to kidnap him, for some reason we don't know—and as you chaps came up and stopped them, they did it last night instead," exclaimed Blake excitedly.

"My hat!" said Lowther. "I shouldn't wonder! It looks like it!"

"Fortunately, I have their descriptions," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I obtained them ffrom Tom Mewwy when I took up the case—"

"That wouldn't matter," said Lowther. "Manners and I could give their descriptions if that were wanted."

"Bai Jove, yaas! I nevah thought of that, you know!"

"Hallo, here's Figgins, and he looks as if he had news!" exclaimed Digby, as the long-limbed chief of the New House juniors came scudding across the quadrangle.

Figgins stopped, panting for breath.

"Any news?" demanded Manners and Lowther together.

"Yes, rather!"

"About Tom Merry?"

"No. But I dare say it has a bearing on the case."

Lowther and his chum looked disappointed. But the Fourth-Formers plied Figgins with eager questions.

"Shut up!" gasped Figgins. "Give a chap a chance to talk! There has been a case of kidnapping a few miles from St. Jim's. A chap has been taken away from his home—it happened yesterday afternoon, early—"

"Who was it?"

"Lord Reginald Graham, the youngest son of the Marquis of Northwood. He's been kidnapped and is going to be held to ransom—at least so people are saying in the village. Rylcombe is full of it. They say that the boy was seen in a motor-car with two men yesterday afternoon about three o'clock—"

"Kidnapped, then?"

"So the papers say. I've got a copy of the 'Daily Mail' here, and there's a long account of it. Here's a description of the two men in the motor, so far as the police have been able to gather it from some yokels who saw the car pass—one was tall and thin, and had a short beard, the other was short and thick-set."

Manners gave a cry.

"The same two!"

"What?"

"I'll bet my hat it was the same two Yankees who went for Tom Merry in the lane yesterday—there's not the slightest doubt about that in my mind. And the time was less than an hour after we met the rascals."

"H'm!" said Lowther thoughtfully. "It's possible they were lying in wait for the Marquis's son, and mistook Tom Merry for him. Then they found the right chap afterwards."

"But why should they take Tom Merry, too?"

"Blessed if I can guess!"

"I think the Head ought to know about this," said Blake. "It looks to me as if we have the description of the kidnappers, and, anyway, the information ought to be given to the police. It can't do any harm. If Ferrers Locke would take up the case I think we should soon know what had become of Tom Merry."

"Ferrers Locke! I wonder the Head hasn't thought of him! He is Tom Merry's friend, and he's certain to take the case!"

"Bettah suggest it to the Head," said D'Arcy, "although if I had time, I have no doubt that I could follow up the case quite as well as Fewwals Locke."

"I'll mention it, anyway," said Blake.

"Pewwaps I had bettah be the one to interview the Head, though. I could explain the mattah to him much more clearly and concisely, deah boy!"

"You can go and eat coke!"

"I refuse to do anythin' of the sort."

Blake walked away towards the house. The juniors stood in an eager group, discussing the news Figgins had brought. The mystery was still unsolved, but the news seemed to let some light into the matter. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy strolled away, his brows wrinkled in thought, and nearly ran into Skimpole.

"Sowwy," said D'Arcy, "I didn't see you. I weally wish you wouldn't blundah into my way like that, Skimpole. It throws me into a flutah."

"I wanted to see you, D'Arcy. I have been thinking that it would be a good idea for us to take this case out of the hands of the police, and search for Tom Merry and find him."

"Bai Jove, it's wathah a good ideah!"

"Do you agree, then? Tom Merry was a decent chap, and if he's in danger we ought to do something."

"Vewy true, but the last time we twied the amateur detective business togethah, it ended in a wotten muck-up."

"Oh, yes," said Skimpole. "That was because you were allowed an equal voice in the arrangements, you know. If you come with me this time I shall be leader, and that must be understood from the first."

D'Arcy screwed his eyeglass into his eye, and bestowed a withering look upon the brainy man of the Shell.

"You uttah ass!"

"Really. D'Arcy—"

"The pwevious expedition was mucked up because I allowed an ass like you to have a voice in the mattah—"

"Oh, no, that is quite a mistake. It was due to your stupidity—"

"It was due to your wotten idiocy—"

"I must insist, D'Arcy, that it was due—"

"Oh, wing off!" exclaimed the swell of St. Jim's. "I should absolutely wufese to entah upon any awwangement with you unless I was leadah ffrom the vewy beginnin'!"

"That, of course, would be impossible. Your defective intellect—"

"You uttah duffah—"

"You see—"

"Wats!"

And the swell of St. Jim's walked away indignantly.

"Dear me," murmured Skimpole, "that is almost rude of D'Arcy! It is very unreasonable of him, too, not to see that that failure was entirely his fault, when I have explained it to him so patiently."

Meanwhile, Jack Blake had found the Head of St. Jim's in his study, deep in an anxious discussion with Mr. Railton. The two masters listened with much attention to what the junior had to say, and their faces seemed lightened when he had finished.

"It looks like a clue, sir," said Mr. Railton.

"I was thinking so. I wish we had known this before."

"If you please, sir—" began Blake.

"Go on, Blake," said Dr. Holmes kindly. "Have you anything more to tell us?"

"No, sir—but might I suggest—"

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"You may speak."

"Well, sir, Ferrers Locke would be glad to take the case, I should think, if he knew that Tom Merry had disappeared. He was very fond of Tom Merry."

The Head smiled.

"I had already thought of that, Blake, you may be sure. I wired to Ferrers Locke some hours ago, asking him to come here, and received a reply that he was engaged upon a most important case, and could not possibly come yet. He asked me, however, to send on any information I could gather, and I shall certainly let him know what you have told me. He will do all he can for poor Merry, you may be sure."

And Blake left the study. A boy brought in a telegram as he went. The Head opened it with a slightly worried look.

"It is from Miss Fawcett, Tom Merry's old governess," he explained, in reply to Mr. Railton's inquiring look. "I had to inform her of what had happened. She is coming down to St. Jim's, as I expected. I must send a trap to the station for her."

And the Head sighed. The thought crossed Mr. Railton's mind that the impending visit of Miss Priscilla Fawcett worried him almost as much as the strange disappearance of Tom Merry.

CHAPTER 10.

In the Hands of the Law.

"FOUND, by George!"

Inspector Snigg and Police-constable Wright looked at Tom Merry over with great satisfaction, a good deal as if he had been some rare animal at the Zoo.

The boy was too amazed to speak.

In fact, for one dizzy moment his brain seemed to reel under the weight of evidence in support of the policeman's belief, and he wondered whether he really was Lord Reginald Graham, and not Tom Merry of St. Jim's at all.

"Found, by Jove!" repeated the fat inspector. "We've found him!"

"I've found him, sir," said Police-constable Wright, with significance in his tone.

The inspector shifted uncomfortably.

"Well, of course, Wright," he said, in a condescending tone, "you actually brought him to the station."

"Yes, sir, and you'll bear me out when it comes to claiming the reward, sir."

"Well—er—yes—of course, Wright."

"I found him in Westmoor Lane," said the constable. "He tried to palm off a yarn on me about having lost his way, and belonging to a school—"

"Ha, ha! He couldn't take us in like that, Wright, my boy! I happen to know that Lord Reginald didn't go to school, but had a private tutor at Northwood Grange."

"Yes, I told him as much, sir."

"Then it's pretty plain that he wasn't kidnapped, either," said the inspector thoughtfully. "Do you know, Wright, I had my doubts of that theory all along."

"So did I, sir."

"That story about his being seen driven off in a motor-car by two men—it was a little too thick, Wright."

"Just so, sir."

"As a matter of fact, he wandered away from home in a fit of waywardness—a sort of boyish freak—"

"So I should say, sir."

"And now, I've no doubt, he will be very glad to be restored to the arms of his loving parents," said Inspector Snigg.

"I should think so, sir," said his faithful echo.

"Lady Northwood will be happy when she hears that we have found him, Wright."

"That I have found him, you mean, sir."

"Yes—er—exactly, that is what I mean. You will be glad to go back to her ladyship now, young man, eh?"

"Eh?" said Tom Merry.

"I say you will now be glad to go back to her ladyship, and, doubtless, be forgiven for this freak," said the inspector.

"It will have cost your mother two hundred pounds."

"I am not Lord Reginald Graham."

"What?"

"I have never heard of him before."

"Come, come, that won't do, you know!"

"Where did you get that watch from, then?" asked Wright, with a grin.

"And that handkerchief?" said the inspector, jerking one out of Tom Merry's pocket, and showing a monogram and a crest in the corner.

"And this letter?" said Wright, jerking it out.

Tom Merry caught his hand.

"You've no right to read that letter."

"Quite right," said the fat inspector, with an approving nod. "Hand it to me, Wright. I will read it."

"Nor you either!" flashed out Tom Merry. "That letter belongs to the chap these clothes belong to, and—"

"Ha, ha! To yourself."

"I am Tom Merry."

"Ha, ha!"

"I belong to the Shell Form at St. Jim's."

"Dear me! Doesn't he keep it up well?"

"If you would send a wire to the school—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You would hear from Dr. Holmes that Tom Merry of the Shell was missing."

"Go on! Keep it up!"

"I tell you I am Tom Merry, and I never heard of Lord Reginald Graham in my life before!" shouted the bewildered lad excitedly.

"Come, come, you must surely see that this is useless now!" said Inspector Snigg, in a soothing tone. "I suppose you had some motive for wandering away from home like this, though it's a mystery to me. But you've got to go back now!"

"I should say so, sir."

"I tell you—"

"Can't imagine what makes him so obstinate, sir!" said the constable. "He's been telling the same yarn all the time. Perhaps he expects her ladyship to be severe with him."

The inspector smiled significantly.

"It's all right!" he said. "I know what the trouble is!"

"Do you really, sir?" said the constable, with great admiration.

"Yes; I wonder I didn't guess it at first," said the inspector, drawing the constable aside and lowering his voice. "Of course, it's a case of mental aberration!"

"Is it really, sir?" said Wright, who had only a very dim idea as to what the word "aberration" might possibly mean.

"Yes; a case of hallucination, you know."

"Oh, I see!" said the constable, who was about as wise as before.

"Off his chump, you know," explained the inspector, descending to language which was more easily comprehended by Mr. Wright.

"Oh! that's it, is it?"

"That's it. A wandering mind, you know—doesn't remember who he is, or where he lives—clearly a case of delusion."

"Of course," said Wright. "It takes a man like you to think of these things, inspector!"

"Well, I may say it does," agreed the inspector. "It's a case of mental aberration, and the unfortunate lad does not remember his name or rank. He has a strange fancy that his name is Merry, and that he belongs to a school. It's marvellous what the imagination will do in a case of this kind!"

"Marvellous, sir!"

"The police theory that he has been kidnapped will be knocked on the head now—we have elucidated the truth."

"Yes, sir."

"It's a case of mental aberration, not of kidnapping. This will mean a lot of kudos for us, Wright."

"Will it, sir?" said Wright, who didn't know what kudos was. "Will you get it sir, if I have the reward?"

The inspector sniffed.

"You don't understand me, Wright. I mean it will be a lot of eclat for us—honour and glory, you know."

"Oh, I see, sir!"

"The first thing is to communicate with her ladyship, and let her know that we have found the boy—"

"That I have found him, sir."

"Yes, exactly. Then—"

"If you are going to communicate with Lady Northwood, you needn't tell her you have found her son," broke in Tom Merry, "because you haven't, you know. Why can't you wire to the Head of St. Jim's instead?"

The fat inspector smiled.

"Curious how these delusions creep into a brain, and stick there," he murmured to the constable. "Of course, there is no such school as St. Jim's in existence."

"Of course not, sir."

"Lord Reginald may have known a lad named Tom Merry, and so have got the name into his mind, or it may be merely a figment of his fancy."

"You're quite right, sir."

"I tell you I'm Tom Merry—"

"Yes, yes; but don't get excited!" said the inspector soothingly. "You shall go home in good time, my little man!"

"You utter ass—"

The fat little inspector turned purple.

"Wh—wh—what?"

"You utter ass; you ought to—"

"My dear little lad," said the inspector, recovering his urbanity, as he remembered that it was a case of mental aberration. "You must not speak to your elders like that, though, really, a lad in your unfortunate position—"

"Are you going to send a wire to St. Jim's?"

"My dear child, that is only your fancy—there is no such school as St. Jim's in existence," explained the inspector.

"You shrieking idiot!"

"Now, look here; I can't stand that. You must—"

"If you don't send the wire, I will."

"Yes, yes; you shall send as many wires as you like presently," said the inspector, with the idea of humouring the deluded lad. "Lots and lots, if you like."

"Well, I'm jolly well going to do it," said Tom Merry, and he made a rush for the street.

"Stop him!" yelled the inspector.

The policeman on duty seized Tom Merry before he could escape. The boy struggled furiously, but Wright came to the other constable's aid, and the junior was dragged back into the inspector's office. Inspector Snigg smiled indulgently.

"You must not be violent, my boy," he said, smiling urbanely at the panting lad. "You will be detained here till I have communicated with her ladyship—"

Tom Merry controlled himself with an effort.

"Will you let me tell you my story?" he said. "When I explain it all, you will see that you have made a mistake."

"Certainly. Tell me the whole story, my lad. Give him a chair, Wright."

Tom Merry knew that the fat inspector was only humouring him, and had a perfect disbelief in his story before he had told a word of it. But in the hope of convincing his captors, he told his grim experience. The inspector winked slyly at Constable Wright, who grinned behind his hand. The policeman on duty at the door listened with suppressed chuckles. And, indeed, Tom Merry, as he told his story, realised how hopelessly absurd it must sound.

"H'm!" said the inspector. "You went to sleep in a bed in a school dormitory—"

"Yes."

"And woke up in the middle of a moor in another county—"

"Ye-es," said Tom Merry, with a sinking heart.

"Dressed in another lad's clothes, and wearing his watch, and with a letter addressed to him in your pocket."

"Ye-es-es."

The inspector coughed significantly.

"I know it's a strange story, sir," said Tom Merry. "I know it must sound almost impossible to you."

"Almost!" murmured the inspector.

"But it's true every word of it. I can't explain how it happened—"

"I should rather think not," Inspector Snigg murmured.

"It's a mystery to me. But it's true."

"Now, my lad, I know you believe this yarn," said the inspector soothingly. "But it's all nonsense. You have dreamed it all, you know; and you are not quite yourself."

"I tell you—"

"Well, well, it shall be inquired into," said the inspector. "You must remain here for a time, while we inquire into the whole circumstances."

"What worries me most is that my friends at St. Jim's will be alarmed about me," said Tom Merry, his face showing the distress he felt.

"Yes, yes, of course. Very right and proper," assented the inspector. "We must do our best to relieve their fears at once."

He spoke gravely, but Tom Merry knew what he meant. He was humouring one whom he regarded as the victim of a mental delusion. The boy's heart sank. He cast a look towards the door, but the policeman was on the watch.

"Come!" said Inspector Snigg. "It will not hurt you to remain here for a time, while we communicate with—your friends at St. Jim's. I have a nice little room where you can stay—my own house adjoins this building, and my wife will look after you—while I wire to St. Jim's."

"Very well," said Tom Merry wearily. "I can see that you don't believe me, but I've told you the truth."

"Yes, yes, of course. All will be set right soon."

"I suppose so; for as soon as Lady Northwood sees me she will know that I am not her son."

"Ye-es-es, of course," assented the inspector, with a wink to Police-constable Wright. "Now, come with me, my little man. But mind, no bolting, you know!"

"I won't bolt," said Tom Merry quietly.

But in case of accidents Police-constable Wright followed close behind as the inspector left the station with the junior.

CHAPTER 11.

Ferrers Locke Takes the Case in Hand.

"WHERE is my darling Tommy?"

An anxious-faced old lady, in a bonnet of Mid-Victorian date and fashion, hopped excitedly out of the station hack at St. Jim's. She addressed the question incoherently to a group of juniors standing on the steps of the School House.

"Where is my dearest child?"

"Hullo!" said Gore of the Shell. "It's the old lady from Huckleberry Heath! How do you do, ma'am? Tom Merry must have known you were coming, for he isn't here."

"He, he, he!" cackled Mellish.

A hand grasped Gore's shoulder, and a hand grasped Mellish's. There was a loud crack as their heads were brought forcibly together. Gore gave a yell, and Mellish a shriek.

"Who did that?" roared Gore, turning round furiously.

He found himself looking at Monty Lowther and Manners. Instead of answering his question, Lowther hit out from the shoulder, and Gore went rolling down the steps. Jack Blake put out his foot and gave him a shove as he passed, and he rolled out on the gravel. Miss Priscilla, in her anxiety and alarm, hardly noticed it at all.

"Where is my dearest boy?"

"We are extremely sorry, dear Miss Pwiscillah," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, "but we cannot produce him at the present moment. He is not here."

Miss Fawcett gave a wail.

"Oh, my poor, lost boy!"

"Don't be alarmed, ma'am," said Lowther. "We don't know for certain that anything has happened. Tom Merry has disappeared—"

"Ah! I feel that I shall never see him again."

"Pway don't be downhearted, ma'am!"

Miss Fawcett entered the house with bowed head, and a look on her face that touched every heart. Her affection for her ward, and her boundless pride in him, might have a somewhat comical aspect at times, but now there was no fellow there who could not feel for her. Even Gore, as he picked himself up from the gravel, looked somewhat ashamed.

"I have come to see the Head," said Miss Priscilla faintly. "Take me to him."

Monty Lowther gave her his arm, and led her to the Head's quarters. Dr. Holmes was expecting her, and he handed her to a seat. Lowther retired, with a dark shade upon his usually reckless face. There was something like a lump in his throat.

"My dear Miss Fawcett," said the doctor helplessly. "You must have courage."

"You have heard nothing of him yet?"

"Nothing."

"The police are at work?"

"Yes; the telegraph has been busy for hours."

"There is no clue?"

"None, except that a window was found unfastened. Tom Merry was spirited away in the night, unless he was a victim of somnambulism. Have you ever known him to be subject to sleep-walking?"

Miss Fawcett shook her head.

"Never, sir. Never."

"Neither do the circumstances seem to point to anything of the sort," said Dr. Holmes. "A sleep-walker leaving the house would be more likely, I should think, to use a door than a window; and, in any case, would hardly close the window carefully behind him. Besides, the neighbourhood has been searched, and no trace of him has been discovered. A somnambulist could not have gone far."

"My darling has been taken away."

"I am afraid that that is the only possible hypothesis, unless he has left the school of his own accord."

"Impossible."

"I had a faint hope that you might have heard something of him—that it might turn out to be a boyish freak. It would not be like Merry, but it seemed more likely than a case of kidnapping. Yet he seems to have gone without his clothes. It appears that he was removed from his bed in the night, and taken away. Why he did not give the alarm is a mystery."

"My poor, murdered darling."

The Head started.

"Nonsense, Miss Fawcett. There is not the slightest reason to suppose that he has been injured," he said sharply.

"Why has he been taken away?"

"That it is impossible to say at present. I have every hope that Ferrers Locke may be able to take the case, and unravel the mystery for us."

"Let no expense be spared, Doctor. I am rich—I will spend every shilling for dear Tommy's sake. Let a reward be offered at once."

"I have instructed the police to offer £50."

"It is not enough. You are perhaps aware that there has been a case of kidnapping a few miles from here. Lord Reginald Graham has been stolen from his mother. Her ladyship has offered £200 reward for his recovery. £500 at least must be offered for the finding of Tom Merry—"

"My dear madam—"

"Pray gratify me in this, sir—"

"But £500 will not spur on the police to do more than they can do," said the Head of St. Jim's. "If you make it £200, I shall raise no objection. But that will be ample, and will make the searchers put forth their best efforts."

"Very well, Dr. Holmes, I yield to your judgment. But let it be done at once."

ANSWERS



"Pray don't wot, dear boys," gasped D'Arcy. "I have had a fearful time!"

"Certainly; I will send instructions without delay."

Miss Priscilla Fawcett rocked herself to and fro while the Head telephoned to the police-station in Rylcombe. Then Dr. Holmes turned to her.

"You must be fatigued, Miss Fawcett, with this sudden journey—"

"I hardly feel it."

"If you will retire to your room and rest, I will let you know directly there is news of any kind."

And Miss Priscilla was prevailed upon to take some repose. The Head sighed when he was left alone. His anxiety as to Tom Merry's fate was his chief feeling just now, but the trouble of the whole affair was great.

The long July afternoon was wearing away, and the shadows of the old elms were growing longer in the quadrangle when Mr. Ferrers Locke was announced. The doctor sprang to his feet with a cry of relief. In this hour of trouble he felt that he could lean upon the iron strength of Ferrers Locke.

"I am glad to see you, Locke." He grasped the detective's hand warmly. "Then you were able to come after all."

The detective nodded.

"As you see."

There was a grim shade on the detective's handsome, clear-cut face. It was plain that he felt keenly this mysterious misadventure of the boy who had been his comrade in peril once, and to whom he was strongly attached. He sank into a chair.

"I would gladly have come before," he said, "but I had already been engaged by Lady Northwood. I daresay you have heard of the loss of her son."

"Yes, he has been kidnapped, I hear."

"It appears not, now. I received a communication from her ladyship yesterday afternoon, informing me that the boy had been kidnapped, and that he had been seen driving away in a motor-car with two strangers. The recent case of a kidnapping

and holding to ransom affair, in which two American criminals were concerned, had alarmed her, I suppose, for it now turns out that the boy was not kidnapped at all. I have lately had a wire from Northwood Grange to tell me that her son has been found wandering on a moor some forty miles from his home, and apparently labouring under some mental disorder. I have been wasting my time on the case, you see—time which might have been better spent in searching for Tom Merry. I did not get her ladyship's wire immediately, either, as I was away pursuing my investigations. It was very annoying. However, I am now free to look for my young friend."

"I am glad of that, at all events."

"The latest information you sent me, which you learned from Tom Merry's chums, interests me very much," went on the detective. "The description of the two men who attempted to seize him in Rylcombe Lane, so far as I have it, tallies with that of the two American criminals whom I suspected to be at the bottom of the kidnapping of Lord Reginald Graham. If they should turn out to be the same men, it would be very curious. These two scoundrels have made their own country too hot to hold them, and have recently come over here, and some time ago they made their first attempt in the same line. They failed, but they escaped. I had little doubt that this was their second attempt, and that Lord Reginald was in their hands, but as it at present appears, they have chosen Tom Merry for their victim instead, unless they have made a mistake."

"How—a mistake?"

The detective drew a miniature from his pocket, and handed it to the doctor. It was that of a sunny-faced, curly-haired lad of about fifteen.

"Whom would you take that for, sir?"

"Tom Merry," said the Head. Then, after a closer look at the miniature, he added, "If it is not Tom Merry, it is remarkably like him."

"That is so. It is the portrait of Lord Reginald Graham."

"Ah!"

"There is a striking resemblance between him and Tom Merry. This may have led to a mistake on the part of the kidnappers, or—perhaps—" The detective paused, and did not pursue the train of thought aloud. "Has any letter been received by Miss Fawcett or yourself, hinting at ransom?"

"Certainly not by me—nor by Miss Fawcett, I imagine, as she is here, and has not mentioned anything of the kind to me."

"H'm." Ferrers Locke rose. "Well, we shall see. It is a strange case. I should like to see Manners and Lowther now, and question them as to this affair of yesterday afternoon. Don't send for them, I shall find them."

And Ferrers Locke quitted the study with a thoughtful frown upon his face, leaving the doctor looking a great deal more hopeful.

CHAPTER 12.

Her Ladyship.

TOM MERRY paced to and fro—to and fro—restlessly. Evening had set in—the long, sultry July day had drawn to its close. Tom Merry was in a comfortable little sitting-room, in Inspector Snigg's house in the little town of Westlake—a prisoner.

The inspector did not tell him that he was a prisoner, but he knew that he was all the same. He knew that Mrs. Snigg was keeping an eye open so that he could not leave the sitting-room without her knowledge, and that Police-constable Wright was in the garden looking out for an attempt on his part to escape by the window.

Tom Merry was half-amused and half-angered by the blunder of the police, but he was wholly anxious as to what was passing at St. Jim's. What did they think of his absence there?

They might surmise that he had run away from school—that he had met with a fatal accident—they might surmise anything. And he could not even send a wire to reassure his friends as to his safety.

He paced to and fro in the little room, his brow wrinkled in thought. The inspector was treating him well, in the belief that he was the missing Lord Reginald, excepting that he was not allowed his liberty. Tom Merry had given his word not to "bolt," but the inspector was having him watched all the same, convinced that the boy was the victim of a delusion and not responsible for what he did. Tom Merry could not restrain a grim laugh at the thought of the inspector's feelings when he discovered that he had caught the wrong person. Police-constable Wright had found the wanderer, and was dreaming dreams about the expenditure of the £200 when it came into his hands. But the inspector was taking the lead in the affair, and the management of it was in his hands. He was swelling with more importance than ever now, with the belief that he had the missing son of the Marquis of Northwood in his hands.

Tom Merry realised that the quickest way out of the dilemma, now, was to allow the police to bring him face to face with "Reggie's" mother.

Lady Northwood would know that he was not her son—though she would then want an explanation as to how he had come to be dressed in her boy's clothes.

That explanation, of course, Tom Merry could not give.

He was utterly in the dark himself as to how it had come about. He had thought over the matter all day, without being able to hit upon anything like a solution of the mystery.

But once he had proved to the inspector's satisfaction that he was not Reginald Graham, he would be allowed to communicate with St. Jim's, and at all events would be restored to his friends. "Ahem!"

Tom Merry stopped his restless pacing, and turned round, as the door opened and the little inspector came in. Inspector Snigg laid his official cap on a chair, and inserted his thumbs in his belt and looked at Tom Merry with a bland grin.

"And how do you find yourself now, Lord Reginald?" he asked, rolling the title on his tongue as if it had a peculiar relish for him, as doubtless it had.

Tom Merry laughed.

"I am not Lord Reginald. You are making a mistake."

"Ah, yes, of course, of course. I have wired to her ladyship, explaining that you have been found, and are not in—well, not in an exactly reliable condition mentally," said the inspector. "I have no doubt that the sight of your lordship's mother will dispel these—er—illusions your lordship is suffering under."

"Bosh!"

The little inspector turned red.

"Well, we shall see. Her ladyship has wired back that she is coming immediately, and she may be here any moment now."

Tom Merry looked relieved.

"Then you will see that you have made a ridiculous mistake," he said.

The inspector grinned.

"I will risk that, Lord Reginald. The curious thing is that you speak quite sensibly, and if I wasn't sure about you—"

"You will know the truth soon."

"Exactly. When her ladyship arrives, it will all be cleared up. It is a great blow for her ladyship, and I am very happy to be the means of restoring her lost son to her maternal bosom," said the inspector, rubbing his fat hands.

"I tell you—"

There was the snort of a motor-car in the street. A tap came at the door, and Police-constable Wright looked in. There was an eager and awed expression upon his ruddy face.

"I think it's 'er ladyship, sir."

The inspector assumed an expression of majestic calm.

"If it's her ladyship, show her in, Wright."

"Certainly, sir."

"Your lordship's mother is coming now—"

"I'm sorry she is going to suffer from a disappointment when she sees me," said Tom Merry quietly. "I suppose it cannot be helped. The evidence you have is enough, I suppose, to convince you that I am her son and out of my mind. But you will soon see."

"Yes," grinned the inspector. "We shall soon see."

He stepped out into the little hall.

Wright opened the door. There was a glare in the dusky street from the lamps of a motor-car.

Inspector Snigg rushed out to open the door as the car stopped.

"Two hundred pounds!" murmured Constable Wright, rubbing his hands. "Two hundred pounds! It will start Mary and me in that little public-house at the corner of Westlake Lane, and a little over. Two hundred pounds! Wright, my boy, you're in luck. This is what you owe to your superior intelligence. A common country policeman would have passed that boy over without noticing him, though he had the description in his pocket. Nothing like that with me. I spotted him at once. George Wright, my boy, you ought to be at Scotland Yard. That's where you ought to be. Two hundred pounds! My eye!"

"Her ladyship!"

Wright bobbed his head as a stately dame in black entered the little doorway, with the fussy little inspector bobbing nervously round her.

"Where is my son?"

"This way, your ladyship. If you will honour my little sitting-room by stepping into it, your ladyship, your ladyship will find your ladyship's son waiting for your ladyship."

"Thank you!"

Tom Merry heard the words, and changed colour a little. He felt that he had to go through a painful ordeal now.

The stately form of the Marchioness of Northwood loomed up in the doorway. Her ladyship put up her glasses to survey the flushed face of the boy standing there uneasily in the dim lamplight.

"Reginald!"

"If you please, ma'am—"

"Reginald! My son!"

And Tom Merry was clasped the next moment to the maternal breast of the marchioness.

Inspector Snigg, in his enthusiasm poked Constable Wright in the ribs, with a poke that made him gasp.

"Affecting scene, ain't it?" murmured the inspector. "Marvellous how these nobles have the same feelings as you or me, Wright."

"Marvellous, sir."

"There she is hugging him just as if she was a washer-woman instead of a marchioness, Wright."

"Extraordinary, sir."

"Please," said Tom Merry.

"My son! Why did you leave your home?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am," said Tom Merry politely, "but I am not your son."

The marchioness started back.

"Dear me! What did you say, Reginald?"

BRITAIN INVADED

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NEXT
THURSDAY:

"TOM MERRY IN CAMP."

A Double-Length Tale of
Tom Merry's School-days.

"There has been a mistake. I am not Reginald Graham. My name is Tom Merry, and I belong to the Shell at St. Jim's."

Lady Northwood put up her glasses again. The momentary emotion flickered out of her severe face.

"Dear me! What absurdity is this?"

The marchioness turned to the startled inspector.

"What does this mean? This is not my son!"

Inspector Snigg and Police-constable Wright looked at one another with a simultaneous gasp.

"What!"

"What does this mean? This is not my son!"

CHAPTER 13.

Arthur Augustus on the Track.

"I've got a wathah wippin' ideah, Skimpole!"

"Ah! You have decided to accept my suggestion, and to follow me in searching for Tom Merry," said Skimpole. "Very good!"

"Wats!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I have decided to do nothin' of the sort. I was goin' to say that I have a wippin' ideah. It's perfectly plain to me that Tom Mewwy has been kidnapped."

"I am rather inclined to favour the theory of sleep-walkin'."

"Yaas, but that's wot, you know."

"I cannot admit that my theories are ref. With my trained intellect I am far more likely to hit upon the truth than you are, you see."

"Bosh! My ideah is that Tom Mewwy has been kidnapped. I was kidnapped once myself, and the wascal held me to wansom, though he nevah got the cash. What happened to me may have happened to Tom Mewwy. He has been kidnapped to be held to wansom."

"I think it is more likely that he walked in his sleep, and—"

"Wats! Now when I was kidnapped by a wascally gipsy I was kept a pwisonah in the wuined castle on the hill. I had a wotten time, you know, and I am glad to say that the wottah is in pwison now. Now it has occurred to my bwain that if Tom Mewwy has been kidnapped to be held to wansom they may have shoved him into the old castle to keep him safe."

"My dear fellow," said Skimpole, with a superior smile, "if you had studied the matter as I have done you wouldn't suppose anything of the kind. The obvious is never true. That is one of a detective's maxims. If the castle had been once used by kidnappers, it stands to reason that it wouldn't be used again for the same purpose. They would know better."

"Yaas, wathah, if it was the same wascal. But these chaps who have collahed our unfortunate fwienid are foweigners, you know, and they wouldn't know anythin' about that old stowy."

"H'm! But they wouldn't know anything about the old castle, either."

D'Arcy thought it out.

"Well," he said at length, "you see, if they were goin' to go in for kidnappin' about here, they would natuwall look wout for a safe place to hide the chap in. The old castle is lonely, and supposed to be haunted, and so it would serve their purpose vewy well. I wegard it as extremely pwob."

"I don't."

"Yaas, but you are an ass, you know. You must admit that, Skimpole, especially as you mucked up the last affair."

"Nothing of the sort. You mucked it up."

"It's no good arguin' with a chap who won't see weason," said Arthur Augustus loftily. "To be bwief, will you follow my lead to search the ruins of the old castle for our unfortunate fwienid Tom Mewwy?"

"It's gettin' dark."

"We can take a lantern."

"It's a jolly long walk."

"What is that for the sake of our unfortunate fwienid?"

"Well, I'll come, D'Arcy, only, of course, it's understood that I'm leader, and that you obey orders."

Arthur Augustus sniffed expressively.

"Of course, nothin' of the kind is understood," he said. "I should wefuse to follow anybody's lead, and that's why I am not consultin' Blake or Dig or Hewwies in the mattah. You will have to be a followah, of course."

"With my superior intellect and mental training I could not possibly agree to anything of the kind."

"I wegard you as an ass!"

"I consider you a fool!"

"Oh, wats! I would give you a feahful thwashin' if I had time, but undah the circs. I think I ought to be lookin' for Tom Mewwy."

And Arthur Augustus walked away.

The swell of the School House was in deadly earnest, and, though he would have preferred a faithful follower to his expedition, the obstinacy of Skimpole made no difference to his intentions. He put on his cap, and left the School House, and met Figgins in the quad.

"No news yet?" asked Figgins.

"Not that I am aware of, deah boy."

"Ferrers Locke is here, isn't he? Kerr says he saw him drive in this afternoon, an hour or more ago."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I suppose he's come to look for Tom Merry. I expect we shall soon have news now," remarked Figgins.

"Yaas, wathah, though I don't suppose it will come fwom Fewwals Locke!"

"What do you mean?"

"You will know in time, deah boy."

"I say, Gussy, where are you going? It's near lockin' up."

"Yaas, I know it is."

And without replying to Figgins's question, Arthur Augustus walked out of the gates of St. Jim's, leaving the New House junior staring after him in astonishment.

When Taggles came out to fasten the gates of the school, Arthur Augustus had not returned, and once more he was missed at calling over. But little did the swell of the School House care for that. When D'Arcy had a fixed idea in his mind he usually went ahead regardless of consequences. He had a fixed idea now that Tom Merry was hidden in the ruined castle on Rylcombe Hill, and that he was on the track.

The woods were dark and lonely, but Arthur Augustus pressed on undauntedly to the slope of the hill.

Once or twice he had heard a rustle in the wood, and looked round, but he set it down to a rabbit or a disturbed bird.

He came in sight of the ruins.

The sun had set, and the stars were glimmering on the masses of ancient and shattered masonry.

A shadow loomed up behind D'Arcy as he strode on towards the ancient castle entrance.

The swell of the School House turned his head as he heard a clinking stone on the path.

The shadow disappeared behind a tree, and the junior went on unsuspectingly.

Inside the old castle, amid the scattered fragments of shattered stone, D'Arcy paused and looked about him.

There was no sound, no sign of a human being. He moved on to the yawning gap which gave admittance to the vaults below the castle.

"Bai Jove! That looks wottenly dark!" murmured the swell of St. Jim's aloud. "I weally do not feel much inclined to venchah there. But I suppose I had bettah."

He lighted his lantern, and descended the shaly stone steps. It did not occur to him for a moment that if kidnappers were there his light would put them on their guard.

The tracking shadow loomed up over the gap in the flagstones. A cautious, silent footstep followed D'Arcy in his descent.

Quite unsuspecting of the fact, the swell of St. Jim's cast the rays of his lantern to and fro in the darkness of the vaults, and advanced into the subterranean depths of the old castle.

No sound came from the gloomy depths of the vaults.

The darkness and silence discouraged the swell of St. Jim's. He paused and looked about him undecidedly. As he did so, a stone clinked under a footstep behind.

Arthur Augustus swung round.

"Who is there?"

He flashed the light of the lantern in the direction of the sound. With his other hand he jammed his eyeglass into his eye, and peered right and left.

"Who is there? I heard you, you wascal!"

Dead silence.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed D'Arcy. "I am quite aware that you are skulkin' there in the dark, you wottah, and I shall wefuse to leave this place until you have shown yourself. Pwray come out, and—ow!"

A sudden grip on the back of his neck made the swell of St. Jim's break off, and in the shock of the surprise the lantern fell from his hand, and went to the ground with a crash that shattered it to pieces.

"Bai Jove!"

He realised that while he was speaking the unseen man had crept round behind him.

He struggled, but he was in a powerful grip.

"I guess I've got you, you young fool!"

It was a voice with a nasal twang.

"Yaas, wathah!" gasped D'Arcy. "Pwray welease me. You are suffocat' me, and wumplin' my beasty collah! I insist upon bein' immediately weleased."

There was a low chuckle in the darkness.

"Come with me."

"I wefuse to come with you. I absolutely wefuse to do anythin' of the sort."

The unseen man chuckled again, and lifted D'Arcy off the ground as if he had been a baby, and carried him away into the darkness.

The swell of St. Jim's ceased to struggle. Against the overpowering strength of his assailant he was powerless.

For the length of a dozen vaults the unseen man carried him

forcibly, and then stopped at a blank stone wall, and pushed on one of the great blocks of stone.

It swung round, and a smell of strong tobacco at once became perceptible to Arthur Augustus.

"Are you here, Bunker?"

"I guess so."

"Where's the glim?"

"Burnt out."

"And the kid?"

"Asleep."

Silas Shucks muttered something unintelligible. D'Arcy's heart had given a sudden leap. Who was the "kid" referred to, if not Tom Merry?

"What have you got there, Silas?"

The darkness was intense, save for the red glow from the bowl of the pipe Bunker was smoking. But the ruffian had evidently discerned D'Arcy.

"A kid. He was looking in the vaults. I followed him from the lane to the castle. He must know something!"

"Thunder!"

"This place won't be safe for us now," said Silas Shucks, with a savage oath. "It's lucky I happened on this young fool, too."

"You wascals—"

"Hold your tongue!" said Silas Shucks savagely. "We shall have to get out of this to-night, Bunker."

"And that brat—"

"He can be left here till they find him."

"And then—he will tell them that—"

"We shall be far away by then. We must find a new hiding-place, that is all. I can't imagine how the brat came fooling round here. Do you belong to the school, you pesky young varmint?"

"I belong to the Fourth Form at St. Jim's," said D'Arcy, with dignity. He was now standing upon his feet, with the tall ruffian's hand fastened in a hard grip on his shoulder.

"Why did you come here?"

"To look for Tom Mewwy."

"Tom Merry! Why should you think he was here, you utter fool?"

"I refuse to be called an utter fool."

The ruffian shook the junior savagely.

"Why did you think the boy Merry was here? Answer me!"

"I was kidnapped once myself by a wotten wascal, and he shut me up here, so I deduced that Tom Mewwy might be here. I am an amateur detective, you know."

"You—you—you—"

"I guess I told you no good would come of it, Silas Shucks. It was your idea from start to finish. That was understood."

"Oh, stow the cackle! We have thrown the police off the scent, and Fergus Locke will lose time—ain't that something? How was I to foresee that this utter idiot would blunder upon us like this?"

"I refuse—"

"Hold your confounded tongue! I suppose your school-mates know that you have come here, don't they?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"The cuss would say that, anyway, Silas Shucks, guessin' that we might knock him on the head otherwise."

"I should certainly not tell an untwuth undah any cires—"

"We can't be sure either way," growled Silas Shucks. "Tom Merry isn't here, but something more valuable than Tom Merry is here, and we must clear out."

"We can't go without the car."

"I guess I'll have it here soon. There's no time to be lost, if this brat's friends really know that he came here. Keep him safe here, Bunker, while I get the car round. It will take an hour to fetch it from Wayland garage."

"They're not likely to search here for the brat under that, I reckon."

"Probably not till morning, but we had better not waste time."

"Where are we goin' to take the other?"

"We can settle that later. The present question is to keep out of chokey," said Silas Shucks savagely.

"I reckon so. Fasten that silly young fool up with your belt, then, and leave him here. If he starves after we're gone, serve him right for meddling. Mind, it was your idea to take that kid from the school—I was against it—"

"It was a pesky good idea."

"You see how it's turned out."

"Oh, stow the cackle!"

And Silas Shucks quitted the secret vault and closed the moving stone, leaving D'Arcy a bound prisoner, and Bunker smoking his pipe. Arthur Augustus addressed one or two remarks to the kidnapper, but received only grunts or curses by way of reply, and at last gave it up. It dawned upon the mind of the amateur detective that the profession he had taken under his patronage was not wholly in the nature of a sinecure. Unless Skimpole remembered where he had gone, and thought of acquainting the others at St. Jim's with his whereabouts, it was likely to go very hard with the swell of the School House.

CHAPTER 14.

Back to St. Jim's.

"THIS is not my son!"

The marchioness rapped out the words, and her cold grey eyes scanned the inspector with a glance that, as he afterwards told his wife, made him feel hot and cold all over.

"N-n-n-not your s-s-s-son!" gasped the inspector.

"No."

"I told you so," said Tom Merry, taking pity on the unfortunate inspector, whose airy castles had thus been dissipated at a blow. "It was a natural mistake for the inspector to fall into, madam, as the evidence—"

"Where is my son?"

"But—but he must be," exclaimed the bewildered inspector.

"He's wearing Lord Reginald's clothes—"

The marchioness put up her glasses and scanned Tom Merry again.

"Yes, these are certainly my son's clothes," she said.

"He's wearing Lord Reginald's watch—"

"That is certainly my boy's watch."

"And Lord Reginald's handkerchief, with his lordship's initials and his lordship's crest—"

"That is true."

"Therefore, he must be his lordship. The description—"

"He is something like my son, but he is not my son," said the marchioness coldly. "It is very singular that he should be wearing my son's clothes. Has he not given any explanation?"

"N-n-n-no—"

"I cannot give one, madam," said Tom Merry, his steady eyes meeting the severe glance of the marchioness quietly.

"I do not know how I came to be wearing these clothes. I went to sleep last night in my dormitory at St. Jim's—I awoke this morning on a moor a few miles from here, in these clothes—and I cannot understand in the least how it came about?"

The stern old lady looked at him searchingly, and then seemed at a loss what to say. Tom Merry was evidently speaking the truth.

"Not her son!" murmured Police-constable Wright. "There goes my two hundred quid!"

"Not Lord Reginald!" groaned the inspector. "Then his lordship was kidnapped after all, and we haven't found him."

"Then he must be in the game, sir," exclaimed Wright excitedly. "He couldn't come by the clothes unless he was one of the gang."

"That's so," said the inspector, brightening up. "He was an accomplice, of course."

"We've got one of them, then."

"And we may screw out of him where to find his lordship."

Tom Merry could not help laughing.

"You have not got one of them," he said. "Until to-day I never even heard of the existence of Lord Reginald Graham, and certainly I know nothing about the kidnapping, if he has been kidnapped."

"That's a likely story," sneered the inspector. "Madam, I'm sorry there has been this mistake. It is due to the utter stupidity of this constable."

Constable Wright gasped.

"He announced that he had found your ladyship's lordship—I mean your ladyship's son—on mere superficial evidence, and knowing your ladyship's anxiety, I naturally communicated with your ladyship at once—"

"The man is not to blame," said the marchioness. "But this boy should surely be able to tell us something of importance. What is your name?"

"Tom Merry, madam."

"And you say that you have no knowledge or recollection of how you came to be in my son's clothes, and in possession of his property?" said the marchioness, with a searching look.

"None, madam."

"He is lying, of course," said the inspector.

"On the contrary," said the marchioness coldly, "he is evidently telling the truth. Where do you come from, my boy?"

"I belong to St. Jim's—I am in the Shell there."

"You mean the public school near Rycombe?"

"Yes, madam."

"Then it is a real place," gasped the inspector.

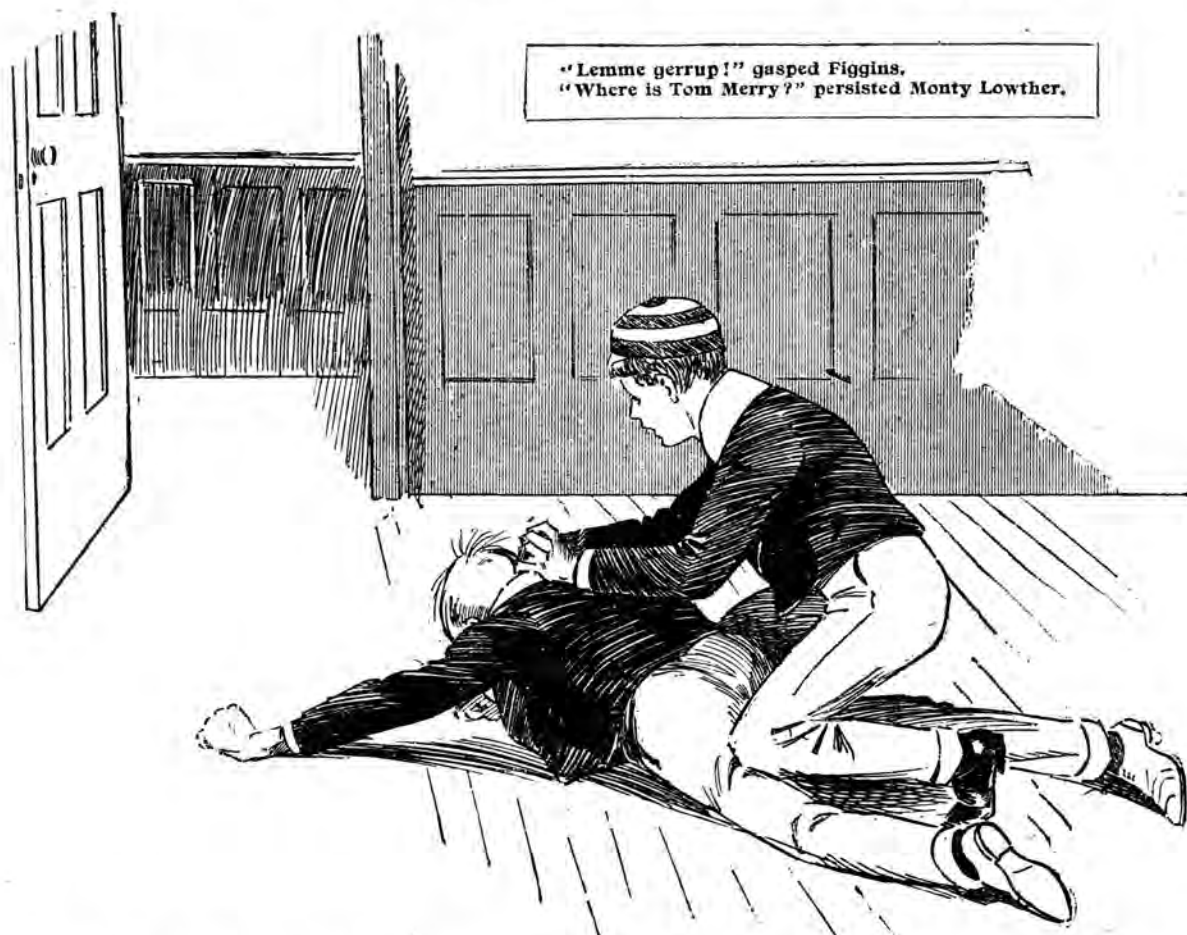
"It is a place a few miles from my house," said the marchioness. "I do not doubt the boy's word for a moment. It is very strange that you cannot see that he is telling the truth. It is quite possible that the headmaster of the school may be able to give some information. This boy ought to be returned there at once."

"As a probable accomplice of the kidnappers—"

"Nonsense!"

The inspector gasped again.

Nobody had ever ventured to characterize his observations as nonsense, to his face, before, but it was evident that the old marchioness allowed herself considerable freedom of speech.



"But your ladyship, he is wearing your ladyship's lordship's clothes—"

"He is plainly innocent in the matter. It is probable that the kidnappers of my son have taken this boy too, and dressed him in Lord Reginald's clothes, and transported him to a distance, in order to throw the police off the scent for a time—and you have fallen into the trap."

"I—I—I—"

"I received your telegram, and had not the slightest doubt that the information it gave was correct," said the marchioness. "I therefore sent a telegram myself to Mr. Ferrers Locke, in London, informing him that my son had been found, and that he need trouble no further with the case. This was undoubtedly what the kidnappers wanted—to gain time in order to cover up their tracks."

The inspector was red with confusion. It appeared only too probable now, but he had not thought of it in time.

"With your permission, Mr. Snigg, I will take this lad to St. James' Collegiate School in my car at once."

"Certainly, your ladyship. Under the circumstances, I am not sure whether we should be justified in detaining him—but anything your ladyship wishes—"

"Then we will go."

"Whenever your ladyship pleases."

"Are you ready to return to school, Master Merry?"

"Quite ready, madam," said Tom Merry eagerly.

"Then come."

In five minutes Tom Merry was whizzing through the dusk of the July evening, in the car with the stately marchioness; and Inspector Snigg and Constable Wright were left looking almost as blue as their uniforms.

CHAPTER 15.

The Return of Tom Merry and the Triumph of Arthur Augustus,

"D'ARCY!"

Silence.

"D'Arcy!"

Mr. Raiton looked up severely.

"Is D'Arcy absent again?"

"Yes, sir," said Kildare, looking along the ranks of the Fourth. The housemaster frowned.

"This is the second time," he exclaimed. "Blake, do you know where D'Arcy is?"

"No, sir," said Jack Blake. "I think he went out. I suppose he has been delayed somewhere, sir—accident, of course."

"I think D'Arcy must learn not to experience these accidents," said Mr. Raiton, compressing his lips, and he went on with the roll-call.

"That young ass is in hot water again," growled Blake, when the Forms were dismissed. "I wonder where he has got to. Just like him to start bothering at a time like this."

"D'Arcy hasn't come in yet, it appears," said Skimpole, joining the Fourth-formers. "I suppose it was really only to be expected."

"What was only to be expected?" rapped out Blake. "Do you know where he is gone?"

"Oh, yes. By the way, can you lend me a screw-driver, Blake? I am making a model of the airship I have recently invented, and I have broken my screw-driver."

"Where has D'Arcy gone?"

"I believe you have carpentry tools, as you took up carpentry for a hobby at the time of the foundation of the Merry Hobby Club."

"Where is—"

"I have been stopped in my work by breaking my screw-driver. It was very annoying, as I was anxious to get the model finished. I expect it to revolutionise the science of aerostatics, as it is built upon an entirely new principle. I shall be very much obliged if you can let me have a screw-driver—"

"I'll let you have a thick ear if you don't answer my question," roared Blake. "Where did D'Arcy go?"

"Oh, he went out to look for Tom Merry."

"Where?" demanded Blake.

"He had an idea that Tom Merry might be hidden in the old castle. I would willingly have gone with him and directed him, with my superior intelligence, but you know what an obstinate chap D'Arcy is. He always thinks he knows best. I say, can you lend me a screw-driver?"

"Gone to the old castle," said Blake thoughtfully. "Well,

NEXT
THURSDAY:

"TOM MERRY IN CAMP."

A Double-Length Tale of
Tom Merry's School-days.

If he doesn't break his neck, I daresay he'll be back presently. But what the dickens could have made him imagine that Tom Merry might be there?"

"He says he was kidnapped once himself and confined in that old castle——"

"So he was; and we fished him out."

"I pointed out to him that his theory was inadmissible, and that Tom Merry had evidently wandered away from the school in a fit of somnambulism——"

"Oh, cheese it."

"Can I have a screw-driver?"

"Yes, if you can find one. I sold mine to Reilly last week."

Skimpole hurried off in search of Reilly. The evening wore away, and the chums began to experience some anxiety as Arthur Augustus did not return. Manners and Lowther came along to Study No. 6. The chums of the Shell were looking anxious and depressed. There was no news of Tom Merry, and their fears were growing. Figgins looked in at the door of the study, and the Co. behind him. Many a time Figgins & Co. had come to that study to raid or to row, but there was no thought of raiding or rowing in their minds now. Their countenances were almost as lugubrious as those of the nearest chums of Tom Merry.

"Thought we'd look in," said Figgins, glumly. "No news, I suppose."

"None," said Lowther.

"Where's Ferrers Locke?"

"He went out some time back, but I think he's returned now. But there's no news," said Blake. "The curious thing is that Gussy hasn't come back. I suppose he can't have been taken away like Tom Merry, can he?"

Figgins whistled.

"He went out to look for Tom Merry," said Blake. "He may by some wonderful chance have got on the track, and——"

"And been kidnapped himself!" said Kerr.

"It's just possible."

"Hallo, what's that!" exclaimed Manners suddenly, going to the window. The zip zip of a motor-car was heard in the quadrangle.

The juniors were all on their feet at once. The arrival of a motor at that hour in the evening was a sufficiently unusual event to awaken their interest, and all felt that it might mean that something had been discovered of Tom Merry.

"Let's get down to the quad," exclaimed Blake.

They hurried downstairs. The door was open and there were fellows on the steps, looking out into the dusky July night. In front of the Principal's house a car had halted, and in the glare of the lamps could be seen the figure of Ferrers Locke, who had just come out. The famous detective assisted a stately dame in black from the car.

"By Jove, it's the Marchioness of Northwood!" muttered Manners. "I saw her driving through Wayland the other day."

"Look!" muttered Blake, gripping his arm.

Ferrers Locke had turned to the car again. A form appeared in the glare of the light from the open door—a form the boys of St. Jim's knew well!

"Tom Merry!"

The shout burst from the juniors simultaneously.

Tom Merry heard them, and looked round. Down the steps of the School House went the juniors in a wild rush, and in a twinkling they were round Tom Merry. Blake gripped him by one hand, and Lowther by the other. Manners hugged him round the neck, and Figgins slapped him on the back. The marchioness had entered the house with the Head, but Ferrers Locke stayed with the juniors. There was a smile upon the famous detective's clear-cut face.

"So you have come back, Tom."

"Lemme go," gasped Tom Merry. "Don't suffocate me! I know you're glad to see me, but don't pulverise me into little pieces."

His exuberant chums released him at last. The breathless hero of the Shell staggered into the supporting arm of Ferrers Locke. There was a shrill cry.

"My darling Tommy!"

The next moment Tom Merry was in the arms of Miss Priscilla. The old lady was sobbing and ejaculating by turns.

"My sweetest child! You have returned, my darling Tommy. At last! My dearest, dearest child, wherever have you been?" The joy of the meeting was too much for Miss Fawcett, and she became quite faint. "Hannah! Hannah! My darling boy! Hannah!"

"It's all right, dear," whispered Tom Merry, kissing his old governess affectionately.

"Hannah! Hannah!" murmured Miss Priscilla. The faithful Hannah was not there, but Mrs. Mimms tenderly led the overcome old lady indoors. Tom Merry glanced round at the welcoming faces of the juniors.

"The whole family here, I see," he said; "excepting Gussy."

"Where's the one and only Gus?"

"He went out to look for you," said Blake, becoming grave.

"He hasn't come in yet."

Ferrers Locke broke in quickly.

"What is that? Is D'Arcy missing?"

"Yes. He went to the old castle to look for Tom Merry, and he wasn't back at calling-over. If he isn't in by bedtime there will be a fearful row, I expect. I only hope that nothing has happened to him."

"The old castle," repeated the detective, with a strange gleam in his eyes. "Ah! It is quite possible that something has happened to him. He ought to have been looked for before—I will go at once. If you are not tired, Merry——"

"I've only been driving in a car."

"Then come with me, and you can tell me what has happened as we go. It is important that D'Arcy should be looked for. I will leave a note explaining to the Head——"

"I say, we're not going to be out of this," exclaimed Blake. "Gussy is our chum, and we're on in this scene."

"Yes, rather," said Lowther promptly. "Where Tom Merry goes, we go. We're not going to let him out of our sight again."

"In that case, I think I'd better come along," said Figgins thoughtfully; "to see that you School House kids don't get into trouble."

Ferrers Locke laughed.

"You may all come," he said. "The Head will excuse you at my request—and you may be useful. But the great point is to lose no time."

"Then let's be off," exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Follow me."

The detective, who for some reason unknown to the juniors was a prey to suppressed excitement, left a hasty note for the Head, and they quitted St. Jim's. As they hurried on the path to the ruined castle, Tom Merry gave a concise account of his strange experiences. His chums listened with wonder and amazement; but Ferrers Locke only nodded his head, with no trace of surprise on his face. It was evident that Tom Merry's story exactly fitted in with some theory the detective had already formed.

"Here we are!" exclaimed Figgins, as they came out on the rugged path up the hill to the castle. "There's the——"

"Hush!"

Ferrers Locke held up his hand. From the road below the hill came the sound of a motor-car. The zip zip plugged eerily through the darkness.

"It's a car on the Wayland road," muttered Tom Merry.

"The kidnapped boy was taken away in a car," said Ferrers Locke; "and you, too, must have been conveyed in a car to that great distance from St. Jim's, my boy."

"Yes, by Jove."

"Silence, and listen."

The sound of the car died away. There was a crash of thickets as a man forced his way up the hillside from the road, and emerged into the path to the ruins. He wore a motor cap and goggles, but the long, thin figure seemed familiar to the chums of the Shell.

There was a quick, panther-like spring by Ferrers Locke, and the man went to the ground under the weight of the detective.

The juniors gasped for a moment, taken by surprise by the suddenness of it; but then they piled on the fallen man, and he was secured almost before he had time to struggle. The handcuffs clinked on his wrists, and Ferrers Locke turned the glimmer of an electric lantern upon a savage and furious face.

"Silas Shucks!" cried Tom Merry.

The prisoner ground out an oath between his teeth.

"Caught—and by Ferrers Locke!"

"Yes," said the detective, tranquilly; "Your scheme was a little too cunning—it has recoiled upon itself. You are my prisoner; where is the son of the marchioness?"

"You will never find him."

"Wrong: he is in the ruined castle, unless I am mistaken——"

The prisoner burst into a savage laugh.

"I guess the game's up," he exclaimed; "You're right—and you've got us. I suppose you're here through that meddling young fool I laid by the heels an hour ago. If I had known you were in the neighbourhood——"

"It was your own cunning that brought me here. Tom Merry was found in your victim's clothes, and was supposed to be the kidnapped boy. I was notified, and gave up the case; the police were put off the track. So much you had planned. But you did not know that Tom Merry was my friend, and that as soon as I was disengaged I should come down here to search for him."

"You have been one too many for me," drawled Silas Shucks, recovering all his Yankee coolness; "but it was a clever game, all the same. But for an accident you would never have got on the right track. We drugged Tom Merry last night, and carried him near fifty miles in the car, and put him out, in Lord Reginald's clothes. If we had been dealing only with the police that device would have deluded them long enough for us to have time to secure ourselves. But you—well, the game's up. Bunker is in the vaults below here, with the boy, and that meddling young fool whose blundering has brought you here. You can take these things off my wrists."

"You are safer with them on."

"Well, light a cigar, then, and put it between my teeth."

Ferrers Locke laughed, and complied. The rascal smoked as coolly as though no manacles clinked on his wrists, no prison waited for him.

"Remain here, some of you, and guard him," said Ferrers Locke. "Merry, Manners, and Figgins, come with me to search the vaults for D'Arcy and the kidnapped boy."

"Right-ho!" said Blake.

The juniors left to watch the prisoner watched him carefully. At the slightest movement they were prepared to jump on him. But Silas Shucks knew that the game was up, and he made no attempt to escape. They waited patiently for the return of the detective; they did not have to wait long.

"Here they are!" exclaimed Blake suddenly.

Ferrers Locke came into sight in the gloom. A slinking figure was by his side, with clinking handcuffs. It was Bunker, and he was a prisoner. A pale-faced lad, remarkably like Tom Merry in form and feature, was leaning on the arm of the hero of the Shell. It was the kidnapped boy, rescued at last after more than twenty-four hours in the hands of the kidnappers.

"Bai Jove, deah boys, I am glad to see you!" said Arthur Augustus, who was walking by the side of Ferrers Locke. "I have had a fearful time, you know, and my clothes are uttaly spoiled. Undah the circs., howevah, my governah cannot fail to come down wathah handsome, as I have wescued this unfortunate youngstah fwom the grasp of the kidnappahs!"

"You have!" ejaculated Tom Merry.

"Yass, wathah! It is true that I had wathah a misfortune in my pwocedins, but you cannot deny that but for me you would nevah have come here; and so I think I can pwopahly wegard myself as the wescueah of our young fwind. Fewwahs Locke will acknowledge as much, I am assured."

"Certainly," said the detective, gravely. "But now let us

get back to the school as quickly as we can. We will borrow the car for the purpose; but some of you will have to walk. When we have restored this unfortunate boy to his mother, these two rascals can be taken to the lock-up. Their kidnapping schemes will be put an end to for several years to come, I think."

"It was all your fault, Silas Shucks," growled Bunker. "I was against it from start to finish. That's understood."

"Oh, stow the cackle!" said Silas Shucks.

There was surprise at St. Jim's when the detective and his companions returned. The kidnapped boy was greeted with amazement and joy by the marchioness, her severe old eyes melting into tears at the sight of his pale, dazed face. She had been about to leave St. Jim's, and now Reggie Graham went with her. The two kidnappers, who had failed so disastrously in their attempt to transplant an American variety of crime to the old country, were soon in the hands of the police, and, as Ferrers Locke had said, their activity in that direction was likely to be curtailed for many years to come.

Tom Merry's strange adventure, and his startling, though temporary change of identity, formed a nine days' wonder at St. Jim's. Arthur Augustus assumed to himself the whole honour of the satisfactory finish to the affair. He regarded himself as the rescuer of the kidnapped boy, and in the height of his enthusiasm he repeated his former offer to Ferrers Locke, of accompanying him to London as his assistant in the detective profession. Needless to say, Ferrers Locke laughingly declined, and when he left St. Jim's, he left Arthur Augustus D'Arcy there—with the opinion firmly fixed in his mind that Ferrers Locke would not afford him an opening in London, for fear of being eclipsed by the fame of a rival.

(Another splendid double-length tale of Tom Merry & Co., next Thursday.)

SPLENDID NEW TALE OF CIRCUS LIFE.



READ THIS FIRST.

Joe throws up office work, and while tramping along a country lane meets Jim, who is running away from Muerte, a bullying circus proprietor. Joe and Jim chum up and join Muerte's rival, Ruabino. From motives of revenge, Muerte bribes Luigi, Ruabino's former lion-tamer, to let loose his one-time charges. Not content with this, Luigi, with Giles, his villainous accomplice, knocks Rubby into the river, from which he is rescued by Joe. Returning home through the town, Rubby and Joe find that Vera, the lady circus-rider, has been selecting a hat for six hours, and is not yet suited. "If you can't get a hat to suit you in six hours, Vera," said Rubby, "you had better get a face to suit the hat!"

(Now go on with the story.)

A Free Ride.

"It's between these three," said Vera.

Rubby picked up the precious three, stuffed them into the box intended for one, flung three sovereigns on the counter, and, stuffing the box under his left arm, caught Vera's left arm, and marched her from the place.

"You are a dear, Rubby!"

"So are you," growled Rubby. "You are the dearest girl I ever met! You have cost me three pounds!"

"I don't mind that, Rubby, but—"

"But I do, bother it."

"I'm afraid you have damaged those hats, stuffing them into the box like that."

"I don't care! You ought to be ashamed of yourself, fooling about like this."

"Oh, well, if you are going to get savage over three paltry hats we had better take them back, and I will have a ten-shilling one."

"Not if I know it!" groaned Rubby, hailing a passing vehicle, and pushing Vera in.

"Do you know Ruabino's Circus, my man?" inquired Rubby.

"Yes, sir. We pass it."

"Well, drive as hard as you can, and I'll stand you five shillings," said Rubby, opening the door, and putting the hat-box on the seat. "Get in, you two. I want you to get there in ten minutes, my man. Do you think you can do it?"

"I'll try, sir. We shan't be much more, if you will jump in. Sorry I was late, but—"

"No matter. Off you go."

Rubby leapt into the carriage, slammed the door, then sat down on Vera's hat-box.

"Woohoo!" he yelled, leaping to his feet, and nearly banging his head through the top of the carriage. "Oh, fury! I have sat down on a six-inch hat-pin!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" howled Joe.

"Oh, you are a perfect beast, Rubby!" shrieked Vera. "You have smashed my hats!"

"Who would be a showman?" groaned Rubby. "Why did you save my life, Joe? You had much better have let me drown, and then I should have been saved the pain of hatpins."

NEXT
THURSDAY:

"TOM MERRY IN CAMP."

A Double-Length Tale of
Tom Merry's Schooldays.

"Ha, ha—" Joe's roar of laughter was suddenly checked, for Vera flung her arms round his neck and kissed him.

"You are a dear, brave boy!" she exclaimed. "I don't mind your having sat on my hats a bit, Rubby."

"But I do!" hooted that worthy, stamping about like a horse with stringhalt. "If ever I sit on a lady's hat again! Oh, dear, oh, dear!"

"Never mind, Rubby, it—"

"But I do mind, girl! I mind very much, and I can't help minding."

"How did Joe save your life, Rubby? Tell me all about it. Look here, I will move the hats. There, now you can sit down."

"We shall be there directly!" groaned Rubby. "It was—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" howled Joe.

"Take a week's notice, Joe, and remind me to let Jupiter flog you when we get back. Oh, who would be a miserable brute of a showman! Tell the coachman to drive me to the nearest lunatic asylum, and order them to put me in a padded room."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you don't stop that laughter, Joe, I'll give you half a week's notice. Oh, dear, oh, dear! Why was I ever born! I'm no use in the world!"

"You can't help that, Rubby," said Vera. "You can only do your best. Now, I tell you what I will do. I'm only half an hour late with my turn, but if you haven't spoilt my hats—"

"I vow they have spoilt me!" groaned Rubby, still remaining standing.

"Well, if you have not completely ruined them, I will ride round the ring in the very nicest one."

"I'm hanged if you shall!" hooted Rubby. "You will ride round the ring in your ordinary attire. You shan't wear one of those devastating hats if I know it. Do you think I want you to look like a raving maniac, and the spectators to howl at you, and pelt you with eggs?"

"Rubby, you are really a perfect beast!" declared Vera. "I always knew it—at least, I sometimes thought it. Don't you like my hats?"

"No, no! I hate them!"

"I declare you said you liked one of them."

"That was before I sat on it, Vera."

"I don't see why you need call me old and ugly just because you sit on my hats," said Vera, producing a handkerchief which, with its lace border, was about the size of a squared pancake, and far thinner. "I can't help being old—and ug—ugly!"

"She's mad!" groaned Rubby, still thinking of that long-sized hatpin. "Absolutely raving mad! I never said she was old or ugly."

"You said the shopgirl was younger and prettier than me."

"I didn't, though I may have thought it."

"No wonder you are a bachelor, Rubby," said Vera, drying her eyes. "I can't think how such a good-hearted man could be such an utter beast!"

"Well, that doesn't matter a bit," growled Rubby. "A showman is merely a showman, and if a man were to ask me whether he ought to become a showman, I should tell him honestly that he ought not. You see, it is just the same with poets and authors, and other fellows like us. The proper advice is, that you should not become them. The advice makes no difference. If a man has a yearning to start as a showman at a cocoa-nut shy, or if he is absolutely certain that he can write better poetry than Byron or Longfellow, he will try. It's no good advising him. He will starve in a garret for all the best years of his life, and die in the workhouse at eighty-six, just as he was getting into the prime of his poetry, but he will die knowing that he was right, and that you were utterly wrong. All the poor brute needed was time. However, here we are. Now, rush on, Vera, and do give them a good turn! You have given me a very bad one, though I am not at all certain it was your fault, and—"

"What's the meaning of this?" howled a very angry voice, and a stout gentleman, whom Rubby and Joe at once recognised as Sir Henry Timkins, strode up. "You dare to ride in my carriage, you ruffianly showman! You dare to take the place of my guests!"

"Dear boy," exclaimed Rubby, getting out of the carriage, and groaning a little, because of Vera's hatpin. "I merely hired a cab, and—"

"Cab be hanged, fellow! This is my private fly, and I'll have you know that it is not to be hired by dirty circus men. John, what is the meaning of this?"

"Beg pardon, Sir Henry. "You ordered me to fetch a gentleman and a lady and a little boy from the station, and you said that we would be rather late, and that I was

to keep a good look-out along the road for the party. Well, Sir Henry, I did, and when this gentleman hailed me I naturally thought it was your party."

"Why, you silly villain!" howled Timkins, "do you call that man a gentleman? Do you call that creature a lady? Do you think that such people ever enter my house as guests? Do you think I would receive that drunken scoundrel as a guest? A hatless reprobate!"

Now this was decidedly hard on Rubby, who was really a most abstemious man. If there was one thing that he hated it was drink. Sometimes he would take a glass of wine, or, say, a glass of beer, but he certainly did not take as much intoxicants in a month as Sir Henry took every day of his life, whether he required them or not.

Like most sensible people who know they are in the right, Rubby did not argue the point concerning inebriety.

As regards having mistaken a private brougham for a fly out on hire, Rubby knew that he was guilty, but it was really a mistake, committed in the hurry and excitement of the moment, and possibly the pain of the hatpin had prevented him discovering that mistake before. Now it occurred to him that the better plan would be to take the upper hand.

First of all, he bundled Vera into the circus, then he came back to discuss the matter.

"Henry, dear boy!" he exclaimed. "Business first, pleasure afterwards. I now have the pleasure of discussing the little error of judgment that has occurred with you."

"Little error of judgment, you low scoundrel, do—"

"This is quite unnecessary, Henry. You have no need to impress your character on me. The fact that you made your money out of candles does not prove that you are not a decent man—say a gentleman; but the fact that you referred to a young lady whom you had never seen before, and to whom you had never spoken, as a creature, convinces me that you are a cad of the lowest type. She had done you no wrong, at least. Women are very sensitive, if they are good ones, as poor Vera is, and such remarks are apt to hurt their feelings. Of course, it is quite a different matter when you abuse me. It pleases you, and I do not mind it at all, but to use an insulting epithet to a lady stamps you immediately. I feel sorry for you."

"You low-down, insolent—"

"Well, that is all right! Keep on at that, dear boy. If it relieves your feelings it is a very good thing."

"Do you know that I am a magistrate, and could put you in prison?"

"I did not know all that, Henry. At the same time, go on. Relieve your feelings all you can. Abuse a man as much as you like, but don't be impertinent to a female who has neither by word, thought, or deed done you wrong."

"Low cad of a circus proprietor, what do I care if—"

"Nothing, Henry. You have got your title, and think it is the guinea stamp, but in your case, dear boy, it never can be. Now, I never have and never shall pretend to be a gentleman. I am not one by birth, and I am not one by my calling; but I do strive to behave myself with decency, and I never would say a word to offend a female who did not know me. It is one thing for me to call Vera a silly baggage. She knows that it is merely a fun; with you it is far different. You never saw her before, and the fact of your having called her a creature will rankle in her heart. You must understand, Henry, that even circus girls have their feelings. Their pleasures are few, and they have many trials—quite unlike your smart set; but, still, we buy a white mouse for twopence, and get to like the little thing. We treat it kindly. Well, surely we should treat our fellow-creatures kindly, and—"

"You insolent scoundrel!" howled Timkins. "Do you dare to dictate to me as to my behaviour? Do you, a common low cad of a showman, dare to tell me, a knight and a magistrate, what my duty is?"

"Dear boy, I only tell you because you do not appear to know."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Joe.

"Joe!" exclaimed Rubby.

"Yes!"

"That is not the way to address your master. I give you another week's notice."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Joe. "Your cheek is only excelled by your stomach, Rubby!"

"Now, that's not bad for a youngster," observed Rubby. "There's the point in it."

"Not a bit. It's all rotundity."

"I'll thrash that boy," growled Rubby. "I vow I will! He has just saved my life, but a jolly good thrashing will do him all the good in the world. Oh, who would be a showman! The ups and downs are something frightful, and they are all downs. I wish I had been a moth, or a crawling, creeping caterpillar that turns into one!"

"You miserable, dirty, low vagabond!" howled Timkins.

"Well, I don't pretend to hold the candle to you," observed Rubby, who was rather good at saying nasty things when he liked. "I plead guilty to being fat, and not as tall as you, but you are taller. I won't say anything about the wick, but I really think you are wicked! I tell you what I will do with you, Henry. I will engage you at a pound a week, and let you be the clown, while I hold the whip. If one of my employees annoys me I generally give him a turn as the clown, and then I touch him up with the whip, and it does him all the good in the world. It does not matter how big an idiot the clown may be, and I think you would be all right in that respect. All you have got to do is to lash him, and it is nearly sure to make the people laugh."

"Understand me, fellow!" hooted the irate knight. "I won't allow you to insult me in this manner. How dare you ride in my carriage!"

"I didn't know that it was your carriage, dear boy. I thought it was an ordinary cab—"

"No such thing! You knew better."

"Well, that's what you say. What I say is that I thought it was an ordinary cab, and, being in a hurry, I hired it. Had I known all that was going to occur then, I would never have entered it, because I sat down on a six-inch hatpin and three guinea hats."

"My guests will have to walk the entire distance, and—"

"Dear boy, the exercise will do them good. It's a nice, fine night, you know, and they will arrive at your house so hungry that they will be able to consume candles made from grease out of Bubbly Creek, or some of Jube's sausages, made from doubtful matter."

"I shall prosecute you for this!"

"You can't prosecute me for a mistake, dear boy."

"Don't you dare to call me that, you insolent rascal!"

"Well, I must say you are not very dear, except to those who like you, and I really don't know where you would find them; in fact, if you were to ask me, I should say you were rather cheap. However, if you like to charge me with the carriage-fare, I don't mind paying—say, three shillings an hour; and, I tell you what, old chap, I will hire your carriage each day to go for drives. There, does that satisfy you?"

"No; it does not!"

"Then I don't know how to do it, unless I get Vera to stroke your bald pate."

The coachman, into whose hand Rubby had slipped half-a-sovereign by way of recompense for the row he would be likely to get into, was doing his best to remain serious; and if Timkins had been anything like wise he would have gone away, and not argued the matter with Rubby; but he was so angry that he lost sight of wisdom.

"You are a disgrace to the neighbourhood, you ruffian!" he declared. "I won't be annoyed by you in this manner!"

"My dear fellow," exclaimed Rubby calmly, "you have been well paid for any annoyance caused, and if you were to ask my opinion, I should say that my advent was a blessing in disguise to you. Fancy how many candles you would have had to make before bagging as much profit as all the money I have paid you for damages. It certainly was Muerte's money, but that is the same thing to you. Now, don't you see what an utter idiot you are, standing gassing here, while your guests are frudging along the country lane?"

"What you ought to have done would have been to express your sorrow at the little misunderstanding, and sent the coachman back directly. As it is, you have lost quite a quarter of an hour, and you haven't done yourself the slightest good, nor me the slightest harm. Oh, I don't mind your calling me all those things! They are quite harmless, and if it is a sort of relief to you, why, fire ahead. I expect it acts as a sort of safety-valve. All the same, you are losing time, and when you tell your guests what has happened they won't bless you for your stupidity. Oh, is that you, Jupiter? Well, just hear the rest of what this old chap wants to say."

"What's the good of bothering yourself about what he has got to say?" growled Jupiter. "If Jim doesn't break his neck directly it's a caution!"

"What is he doing? Oh, do shut up, Candles! I can't listen to half a dozen people at the same time. You are making more row than an East End costermonger on a Saturday night. You ought to have been an old washerwoman working by the day, and getting through as little washing as possible and as much talk. You make me tired. Now, then, Jupiter, what is Jim doing?"

"Trying to break his neck on the tight-rope."

"It's only twenty feet from the ground."

"It's nearer fifty. He has slung it across from the top of the building, and he's fooling about like a giddy fly."

"I'll flog the young rascal! Mark my words, I'll mark his back! How dare he disobey my orders! Oh, get away, Candles! I can't listen to you any more. You are like the brook, and flow on for ever. What is Jim playing the fool for like this, Jupiter?"

"Why, the people are expecting Vera's turn, and the silly

baggage is playing the fool with three hats and one glass, and—"

"It's too awful!" groaned Rubby. "I wish she belonged to the hatless brigade!"

"Well, Jim says he's going to keep the pot boiling till Joe turns up, and there's no doubt he will do it if he doesn't break his neck first. Hark! I believe he has fallen now! No; it is only the people cheering some wild-cat trick. I tell you, Rubby, that boy isn't safe. I wouldn't dance about on a six-foot plank like he is on that tight-rope."

Rubby rushed into the ring, regardless of the fact that he was drenched to the skin and minus a hat.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he bawled, fixing his eyes on Jim, who was hanging by his toes over the giddy height, "the next performance will be with the lions. Joe, the youngest trainer in the world, will put them through their performance, and I feel sure that it will please. Jim the acrobat will now descend."

Jim, however, knew that he was pleasing the spectators, and that was all he cared about. He took no heed of Rubby's gentle hint, but, regaining his feet, dodged about on that tight-rope in a manner that seemed to fill the spectators with pure joy, while it filled Rubby with terror.

All he could do was to hurry on the lion's cage; and then, Jim, who had pretended to fall, descended by winding the side rope round his leg and coming down without his hands.

Rubby always felt anxious when Joe was going through his turn in the lions' cage, but after what he had witnessed that night, it seemed to him comparatively safe.

Directly Joe came off Rubby changed his drenched clothes; then he sent for Joe, Jim, and Leo.

"Now, look here, Jim," he exclaimed, "you are not going to play the fool like this!"

"It's perfectly safe!" declared Jim. "The people like it."

"I don't care what the people like! I am not going to have you break your neck to please them! You are the most disobedient young rascal I ever met, and I have a very good mind to flog you, as well as give you the sack. However, as you have promised it shall never occur again—"

"I vow I never promised anything of the sort, Rubby! It was all your fault for keeping Joe so long. There would have been a row if I hadn't kept the people excited. Ordinary tight-rope walking would not work the trick. They kept shouting for the lions, so, seeing that they required something exciting, I gave it to them, and that kept them as quiet as mice. But, look here, Rubby, I hear that Muerte is going to shift to the next town the day after to-morrow."

"He is, is he!" exclaimed Rubby. "Well, I will pay that man in his own coin, lads. He has queered my pitch half a dozen times, now I'll queer his. Perhaps it will be a lesson to him to behave himself like a respectable Spanish tinker in future. Now, let me see, we must arrange—"

"I say, Rubby," exclaimed Vera, entering the caravan with a bent hatpin in her hand, "look how you have bent this pin! You have spoilt it!"

"Go away! It has spoilt me; you mean!"

"I am going to take those hats back, and see if they will change them for the three others. You know the ones I mean—the one with the ribbons, and—"

"Do go away, girl! I'm busy!"

"So am I, Rubby. I believe those other hats—"

"Get from my sight! I shall dream of hats all night!"

"Do you mind if I change them?"

"I don't mind if you throw them in the dusthole. But you won't change them."

"I will!"

"No, you won't! We are going to shift from here before light on Monday morning."

"I'll do no such thing. I'll stay behind. I look horrid in those hats, and—"

"You can't help that. It's your face. You will obey my orders, or—"

"Or what, pray, because I'm quite certain I won't obey your orders."

"Then I will shove you in the lions' cage. Begone. I'm tired of you and your hats. We are going to have supper."

"I have had no tea yet, Rubby."

"Serve you right for fooling about for six hours choosing a hat!" growled Rubby. "Be off with you!"

It was early morning—that is to say, the sun was just rising.

Rubby ought to have been doing the same, for his circus was shifting that morning; but then he had decided to start at break of day overnight, and nothing seems easier than getting up with the sun overnight. It gets more difficult when the time arrives. Rubby found no difficulty yet, because he was snoring peacefully, and there is no doubt he would have gone on snoring for a few more hours had it not been for Joe.

He was a conscientious lad, and had pledged his word that Rubby should be called at break of day. Rubby knew perfectly well that if Joe did not call him no one else

would. They all hated early rising, especially when there was a lot of work attached to it, and there is a frightful lot of work in shifting a circus.

It was not a pleasant morning, for although the sun was rising, it was not visible. On the other hand, the rain was, and it was falling in a melancholy drizzle. Joe did not like the look of things, but, having promised to call Rubby, he went to his caravan for that purpose, swept the curtain of the sleeping apartment on one side, and howled in his ear:

"Fire! Fire! Fire! Oh, do be quick, Rubby!"

"Here, boy! Joe!" yelled Rubby, leaping out of bed.

"Quick! Quick!" yelled Joe, rushing from the caravan.

Rubby was quick. A quick-turn artist could not have got into his clothes with more speed. He dashed down the caravan steps, and then he caught sight of Joe, standing in the rain.

"Where's the fire?" gasped Rubby.

"Well, here's the water," observed Joe. "Plenty of it. Just look at the puddles, and we shan't be long in having the fire. We must have that to cook our breakfast by."

"Come here, Joe," murmured Rubby. "Just come here, my dear lad."

"I haven't got time, Rubby. I am going to wake the others. You told me to wake you."

"I did not tell you to make my heart leap into my mouth, and make me leap out of bed like some raving maniac."

"Well, you can't help being like that, Rubby. You ought to be very thankful that the authorities don't notice it, and put you into a lunatic asylum."

"Oh, you beauty!" growled Rubby. "Won't I have a nice settlement with you when I catch you! The only consolation I have is that you may wake the others in the same brutal fashion."

"Well, I know what you are, Rubby!"

"I don't know what you are yet, but I'm beginning to learn. Well, go and wake the rest. Vera will have something to say to you, too!"

They all had something to say. Jupiter, the strong man, threatened personal violence if Joe did not go away, but he liked to do his work in a thorough manner.

"You must get up, Jupiter," declared Joe. "Don't be such a lazy rascal."

"There is no reason why I need get up at this unearthly hour. Rubby won't be up."

"He is up!"

"Then tell him to go to bed again. I won't get up, and if you don't clear out of it I will stuff you down the lion's throat."

"I can't help that, Jupiter. My orders are to get you up, and I am going to do it, if I have to chuck cold water over you."

"Get out of my tent!" roared Jupiter. "I am not in the humour to stand any nonsense this time of the morning. You play your giddy tricks on Muerte. They are funny enough then, but there's no fun in them when you play them on me. What are you groping about for?"

"Water!" answered Joe.

Jupiter felt that it was a case where words would be quite useless. He sprang up, seized Joe round the body, and bundled him out of the tent; then he reclosed the flap, and once more lay down.

"Well, I must shift him," mused Joe; "and it's quite certain I can't shift the strong man by brute force. I wonder— Oh, I know! I'll shift him! He's one of the principal helpers, because he's so strong. Yes! He must be shifted, and in such a way that he won't go to sleep again! I don't want to hurt him, because he might retaliate and hurt me."

Joe dodged round the little tent, where Jupiter slept alone, and commenced to loosen the tent ropes. He had got them all ready for the final act, and then he let them go, and that wet canvas dropped on the top of Jupiter.

Did Joe wait to see the result? No! He went to wake some of the others, and Little Willie Winkin was not busier getting little girls to sleep than was Joe waking big men. Perhaps it was as well that his stepfather had knocked all sentiment out of him, otherwise his feelings would have assuredly been hurt by the remarks made. But he awoke them all, and that was all he cared for; then he paid a visit to Rubby, and offered to cook his breakfast for him.

"I don't believe I shall be able to touch a mouthful, after the shock you have given me," growled Rubby.

"Well, one of your mouthfuls will be a good lot to go on with, Rubby," observed Joe; "and what you don't eat I can. I'm jolly hungry."

"You deserve to be fed on bread and water for a week. But fire ahead! We have some eggs and bacon. Cook a very little for me."

"About two rashers and four eggs, Rubby?"

"Yes, I think that will be enough. Am I pale?"

"Not about the nose!"

"Oh, you beauty! I vow my nose is the palest part of my face, but then I never give it any encouragement to turn red. Now, get the breakfast, and stop your abominable impertinence. I'm sure I don't know why my employees always treat me as though they were my masters. It must be pure good nature on my part. Don't you think so?"

"Well, it's either that or pure stupidity, Rubby. I'm inclined to think that it is the latter."

"Just you attend to the cooking of that breakfast, my beauty, and don't you try to be clever."

"No, Rubby," murmured Joe. "You wouldn't be able to understand me if I became clever, would you?"

"Oh, get on with the breakfast!"

"Thanks, Rubby. I will directly, but if it is all the same to you I would prefer waiting till it is cooked. Raw eggs may be all right for those who like them, but I prefer bacon cooked—nice and crisply, like this will be done directly, if you will only have a little patience."

"All right. You look after the cooking, and I will go and see if those lazy rascals are getting on with their work."

"That's right, Rubby. You make a capital foreman. I can imagine you with your hands shoved into your trousers pockets, saying, 'Here, get on with that job, you lazy rascal!' That sort of work suits you down to the ground."

"I'll give you a sort of work that won't suit you down to the ground, you young beauty, just directly, if you are not careful."

"Be sure you are back to breakfast, Rubby. If you start work you may get so interested in it that you may forget all about breakfast, and that would be a pity, because I don't believe I shall be able to eat as much as I am going to cook. However, I will have a good try—in case you should forget to come back."

Rubby thought that he had better go, but he turned up in good time for breakfast.

"This coffee smells good," he exclaimed, stirring some condensed milk into his cup; "and I will say that you have cooked the eggs and bacon all right. Now, fire away, and mind what you are saying."

"I shall be too busy for the next quarter of an hour to talk at all, Rubby. Why, here comes Muerte, the rival showman. He must have got wind that we are shifting."

"Leave the Spanish tinker to me, dear boy," murmured Rubby, as Muerte ascended the steps of the caravan. He looked very angry, for he had an idea that Rubby had stolen a march on him.

"Nice morning, isn't it, Muerte?" exclaimed Rubby, helping himself to another rasher of bacon and a couple of eggs. "Wipe your feet and shut the door. You need not take your hat off. I know it would be quite impossible to teach you manners all at once, and I don't want to give you too many orders to remember."

"You can't help being insolent. It is your nature, you ill-bred brute!"

"Well, we can't all be Spanish tinkers. I haven't any pots to mend this morning."

"Your head will require mending if you talk to me like that. I want to know why you are going so suddenly."

"Well, do you see, dear boy, there is not room for two here. You came and queered my pitch, so I am going to pastures new. There will be enough on these pastures for a donkey like you to nibble at."

"Where are you going, fellow?"

"A place called Dawly. Ever heard of it?"

"You dastardly miscreant!" roared Muerte. "You know that I am going there to-morrow."

"What a strange coincidence, dear boy! Our minds evidently run in similar channels, if you will pardon my paying you such a great compliment."

"You sha'n't go!"

"Ha, ha, ha! You are the funniest Spanish tinker I ever came across."

"I say you shall not go!"

"Ha, ha, ha! I'll have another cup of coffee after that, Joe. Ha, ha, ha! He's really too funny! I wonder if it would pay me to engage him at a pound a week to act as my clown!"

"I don't think he is worth it, Rubby," said Joe.

"You think you are going, do you?" sneered Muerte.

"No, dear boy. I am sure I am going; and the amusing part of the affair is that I am going one day sooner than you. See! I shall get the best pitch, and as I open one day ahead of you, I get that advantage thrown in. Now run away. You are awfully amusing, but I want to get on with my breakfast, and if you will pardon a remark that may seem somewhat personal to you, I can't fancy my breakfast with a Spanish tinker in the place."

"You always were an insolent hound, you scum!"

"Another lump of sugar, Joe. What were you saying, Muerte?"

"I say, you are the most insolent scoundrel on the face

of this earth, and that if I have much more of your impertinence I'll knock you down."

"Dear boy, don't give way to temper," said Rubby, smiling at Joe. "It is the worst thing a man with a tendency to softening of the brain could do. Ask any doctor, if you do not believe me. Always try to keep calm. One of these days, when you give way to these stupid bursts of passion, you will go right off your head. There is a sort of insane expression in your eyes at all times. Still, being insane is not so bad as being raving mad. You are amusing like you are now, but if you were really mad you might become dangerous, and it would be my duty to have you put away."

Muerte's passion was too great for words. He flung the door violently open, and then he strode down the caravan steps; but, alas! he forgot that they were very slippery with the rain, and he slipped. His feet shot up in the air, and he sat in the mire, while the back of his head came into violent contact with the lower steps, and his tall hat was badly smashed.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Rubby. "Ha, ha, ha! I'm extremely sorry, dear boy! Ha, ha, ha! I really don't know when I felt so grieved. Ha, ha, ha! Don't you find that ground damp?"

"Viper!" shrieked the fallen man.

"Is there? Well, if I were you I would get up at once, because some of those vipers are venomous. Ha, ha, ha! I can't imagine any ordinary well-bred viper fancying a bite at you! I would knock off some of your drink, if I were you, though, thank goodness, I am not. You understand me, Muerte? When a man begins to see snakes—eh, dear boy? If verb. sap. is a good adage, I should say on the same lines a hint to an utter idiot would also do some good. You have damaged your hat, but although you have knocked your head, you have the consolation of knowing that it would be utterly impossible to damage a head like yours. To my mind, a few heavy blows on it would do the stupid thing good. It is worth the trial, because it could not possibly do it any harm. Suppose you mount the steps again, and try another fall. It would amuse us greatly, and we shall be able to bear the grief it would also cause us. Ha, ha, ha!"

Muerte did not slay the hilarious Rubby, although the manner in which he glared at him ought to have done so.

He remained glaring thus in silence for nearly a minute, and then he strode away, while roars of laughter followed him. Joe, knowing the miscreant so well, was just as pleased as Rubby; and as the pair finished their breakfasts they kept bursting into roars of laughter.

Joe Tries His Hand at Driving a Traction Engine.

Joe had just cleared away the things, when a grimy-looking man entered the caravan.

"Well, Walker," exclaimed Rubby. "Have you got up steam in the traction engine?"

"Yes, sir. Least, I shall have, by the time you are ready to start. The fire is drawing well. I've come to take the liberty of asking whether you could make it convenient to let me have a bit off next week's screw. Twenty-five bob is the full amount, sir, but there's one or two little things as I want to pay. I'm a straight man, and don't like leaving a town if I ain't paid up."

"No; I have noticed that, my man!" exclaimed Rubby. "You come to me as regular as clockwork when we are leaving a place. You ought not to run into debt. I can always tell when you want money."

"You only meet him two or three times a day, Rubby," observed Joe. "He can't want money much oftener than that."

"You shut up!" exclaimed Rubby. "You ought to save out of your screw, Walker, seeing that you seldom have to buy food."

"I'm starting this week, sir. If you could see your way to letting me have a couple of weeks in advance, I'll—"

"I'm hanged if I do!" growled Rubby. "There are your twenty-five shillings, and just you go and pay your debts. I don't want to leave a bad name behind us."

"Right you are, mate!" exclaimed Walker. "I'll see as you don't do that. So long!"

"Funny thing that the fellow will not live within his means!" growled Rubby. "Here, he gets a fixed screw, and all the food he really requires, and he never has a penny to bless himself with. Every man ought to save for a rainy day. What are you grinning at?"

"You. Do you save?"

"How can I, dear boy! I never know what I am going to get. Besides, look at the expenses. No, I live as I go; besides, this show would always sell for enough to keep me out of the workhouse. Then, I'm not saying I do all that is right."

"It's no good being a signpost. You must set the example."

"Rats! Of course, it is good being a signpost. The fellow who said it wasn't was an ass. Take a deplorable drunkard, and they are the silliest creatures on the face of this earth—well, you see one, barefooted and ragged, and you say 'I never will become that.' You may not be right, but you say it. Well, he is a signpost, and he shows you the wrong way to go, just as the signposts at the corners of country lanes show you the right way to go. Don't tell me."

"All right; only I wish you wouldn't use that beastly phrase."

"What phrase, you silly rat?"

"Don't tell me.' The manager at the office where my best of a stepfather put me always used to say it. He said a lot of other things when I accidentally knocked him off his chair, and spilt a bottle of ink over his head; but then he wasn't the gentleman you are, Rubby."

"Ha, ha, ha! You surely don't call a showman a gentleman, boy?"

"Well, perhaps I don't understand it, but I call a duke who wrongs others a cad, bother his birth! And I call a chimney-sweep—or a tinker, if you like—a noble man, who risks his life to save a little child; and there have been plenty who have done it. No, Rubby, it's the man's heart that makes the noble man."

"Why, I believe the boy is a Socialist!" gasped Rubby. "Not I, Rubby; at any rate, not in believing that all men should be equal. They couldn't be, you know, because if they were made equal, and knew they could never get any better, they wouldn't try."

"Go on, my lad; let me hear your views."

"Not I, Rubby; I'm not competent."

"Bother! Go on! I order you to give me your views!"

"I haven't got any—only what seems to me common-sense. Come, Rubby, you are a splendid master, and, what is better, you are a splendid man, but you can't force your servant to say what he does not know. But look here, to climb down from the clouds, I have an idea which I rather fancy is right. Walker got his screw in advance. Muerte said you should not start. You cannot start without the traction-engine. It looks suspicious, especially as Muerte did much the same thing before with your lion-tamer."

"What? You mean to say that Walker has got a week's screw in advance, and left me at a moment's notice; or, rather, without it?"

"You have got my ideas exactly, Rubby!"

"Then I will put him in prison."

"Not you, Rubby; and he knows that perfectly well. Of course, I may be wrong. Suppose we come and see."

They went to the spot where the traction-engine stood, and Rubby gazed at it almost vindictively.

"Steam is not up!" he growled.

"Perhaps that is because the fire is not lighted," suggested Joe.

"Only let me get hold of that villain, Walker!"

"I wouldn't bother about him if I were you," said Joe. "He will be in hiding, and if you make inquiries of Muerte, he will only laugh at you!"

"But, don't you see, we can't start without a driver. It would take me at least two or three days to get one, and that would enable Muerte to get a start of me."

"Well, I'll get up steam, and drive the engine for you."

"Eh? There would be a row."

"Not if we don't have an accident."

"But you don't understand anything about engines."

"How do you know that, Rubby?"

"Well, do you understand anything about them?"

"I don't want to boast. If a fellows begins doing that you can be sure he doesn't know much about the matter."

"Have you ever driven an engine—I mean, a traction-engine?"

"Yes!"

This was perfectly true. Joe had once driven one on his father's farm. He did not mention to Rubby that he had driven it into a duckpond while the men were having dinner.

"But you need to understand how to keep up steam, and water, and all that."

"Quite so, Rubby. You keep up steam by putting on coal. This gauge-glass tells how much water you have got, and if you haven't got enough you pump more in. Quite simple!"

"It wouldn't be if we had an accident. What I want to know is, do you understand all about it?"

"No, and I'll bet Walker didn't either. There's a lot to understand about an engine, the same as there is about lions. I didn't understand anything about them when I came here. Now, I do understand something about engines, having had a small steam one of my own, and having driven a traction-engine into a— Quite so! Those details won't

interest you; besides, we are losing time. I'll soon get up steam."

"I have my doubts about the matter."

"So have I, Rubby. You can't be certain of anything on this earth, except, perhaps, death and taxes. But it is quite possible I may drive satisfactorily, because nothing is really impossible, except, perhaps, gunpowder ashes."

"I don't want your skilful driving to be anything like as impossible as that!" growled Rubby.

"No, and you don't want Muerte to beat you by a day or so, which he certainly will do if you don't have a driver for that engine. I don't know whether Jim and Leo would like to come and help me with this job. It's simple."

"So am I, I expect, to let you drive that engine," observed Rubby. "However, I will give you a trial, and don't you get up to any larks."

"That's not at all likely."

"I don't agree with you, Joe," growled Rubby. "I think nothing is more likely; but I will take a good thick horse-whip with me. Perhaps that will check your larking propensities, my beauty. Now, you look after the engine while I look after the rest of the show."

"Look here, Rubby," exclaimed Joe. "Suppose you lunch at the inn. Muerte always goes there, and if you were to like to ask me to come, we could have a bit of fun with the silly clown. Only don't let him know that I am going to drive, or he might give information to the police, and they would give us trouble."

"Right you are! Very likely I will stand you a crust of bread and cheese, while I have a slap-up dinner. Boys ought not to eat too much. It makes them frisky."

Rubby had a very busy morning, and he was glad when one o'clock arrived.

"We shall start directly after dinner," he observed, as he and Joe entered the inn. They had scarcely seated themselves at the table in the little sitting-room, when Muerte entered, and, strange to say, he seemed rather pleased to see them there.

"What have you got, waiter?" he demanded, with a very lordly air.

"Nice chop, sir?" answered Bob, the waiter, knowing that Muerte always ordered that.

"Surely you have something else than a chop?"

"Yessir! Roast beef, Yorkshire-pudding, sparrergrass, new potatoes, and horseradish-sauce. With—"

"That will do nicely for us, Bob!" exclaimed Rubby. "Let us have two nice cuts, not over-done, and—"

"Fellow," cried Muerte, "I am ordering my dinner!"

"So am I, dear boy!" answered Rubby cheerfully.

"The waiter is attending to me."

"So he is to me. You've got the order, Bob."

"You are a cad!"

"Don't forget the asparagus, Bob! You might bring Muerte a chop, though I should say a chopper, to cut his silly head off, would be a benefit to society."

"Cad! Dastardly cad!" muttered Muerte. "Bring me some soup!"

Now, Muerte did not want soup, nor did he believe for a moment that they would have any; but he did not approve of Rubby ordering his dinner for him, and so he ordered something that he did not want. He was not the sort of man to spend too much money, and he knew they only charged eightpence for a fine loin chop.

But it so happened that they had soup, and Bob was out of the room like a shot, and ordered the cook to warm up the soup as fast as ever she could. Then he carved for Rubby and Joe, and he carved with a liberal hand, for he knew the little showman to be a really good sort, and by no means mean with tips.

Now, to Joe that dinner seemed just as perfect as it could be—a ten-course dinner would not have been so much to his liking. He had got the appetite, and needed no savoury messes to urge him to eat what he did not require. That is where the poor man gets the advantage of the plutocrat. The roast beef of old England may pall a bit, but not so badly as the recherche dinners.

"How does it suit you, Joe?" inquired Rubby.

"Tender as a chicken, and a jolly lot nicer!"

"Bob, we will have two more helps!" ordered Rubby. "Did you carve the last?"

"Yessir!"

"Then please carve the next! You see, we are not aristocratic like Muerte, who is making me rather sick by slopping soup down his moustache, and slobbering like some old sow at a pig-trough; but—"

The waiter bolted, and they heard a strange sound outside, as though he were trying to choke himself. Whenever Rubby and Muerte met at that inn there were certain to be a few "compliments" pass between them; but on this occasion they were rather exceeding the bounds.

"You had better have some roast beef, Muerte," said

Rubby. "It will do you more good than a greasy chop; that is to say, if anything could possibly do you good."

"You miserable cad!"

"Bring him some roast beef, waiter. It will stop him slobbering down his moustache. Don't laugh at him, Joe! If you had been dragged up in the mire you would not be able to help eating like a hog. I only wonder he does not put his hoofs in his plate, the same as they do in their troughs."

"Dog! Low-bred hound!" yelled Muerte. "I will ruin you! I will smash your dirty business, and you shall roam the streets in poverty. You shall not move your circus. Ha, ha! I say you shall not go to-day, and I am going to-morrow. You think to pit your puny brain against mine. Now shall you find out how futile is your aim; and now will I crush you like the viper that you are."

"Pass me the mustard, Joe!" said Rubby. "Help yourself to some more asparagus. Go on, Muerte, you are becoming intensely amusing! I mentioned to you that my circus is removing to Dawly to-day, and you say I shall not go; but, my dear fellow, you do not mention how you are going to stop me, and that is a thing that I would very much like to know. You see, it would be a serious matter to me if I allowed you to get there first, a thing I have no intention of doing."

"You shall not start to-day!"

"So you have already said, dear boy; but I think you are quite as incorrect as when you called me a cad on several occasions. Of course, I do not profess to be a gentleman, but there is a vast difference between that and a cad. Personally I would prefer to be a costermonger than the latter."

"How could a low-bred creature like you understand?" exclaimed Muerte. "My ancestors were nobles in my land."

"Then they haven't done their duty by you, dear boy; they haven't, really. What do you think, Joe?"

"That Muerte had better order roast beef, and try not to make himself more ridiculous than nature intended; and I vow she intended a good lot in that direction with Muerte. You see, Rubby, the man is merely ridiculous, and I don't suppose he can help that, or he would have done so years and years ago. No, the man is absolutely hopeless, and I do not see that he can do anything but take your advice, and go to the nearest lunatic asylum."

"The boy ought to have a good flogging for his impertinence!"

"But what do you think of his noble ancestors, Joe?" inquired Rubby.

"That they ought to have drowned him when he was a puppy."

"Ha, ha, ha! There's something in that! I believe they ought to have done so. But what makes you think we are not going to leave, Muerte? Surely you do not imagine that a man of my mighty ability would rely on any one man? Do you think I mind about Walker?"

"You know that you cannot leave!"

"I really know nothing of the sort. I both know I can and will leave, and if you don't believe it you can come to see me off. We shall start directly we get back."

"Who is going to drive your engine?"

"Why, you funny fellow, I could get a dozen drivers, if I wanted them! But the one who will drive it is the most competent one I know, and so I have given him the job!"

"You think to deceive me, but—"

"Well, of course, I could deceive you if I wanted to do so, because you have no intellect. I should say it would be easier to deceive you than a little child. However, when you come to think of it, what earthly reason could I have for troubling to deceive a nonentity like you? I very seldom think of you, and Joe there will tell you that we never speak of you, except when we want to have a good laugh. No, Muerte, rest assured that I should never do anything so extremely stupid as to try to deceive you. Now, get on with your dinner, my poor fellow, and if you want to learn the correct way to remove a circus, you may come and see mine go. Now, do get on with your dinner, because I feel sure that soup you have slobbered over your moustache has not satisfied you."

"Bah! I will not speak to such an insolent, lying dog! I know perfectly well that you will not leave this afternoon!"

"It will be a great mercy, Joe, if the ill-mannered pup does not speak to me any more," observed Rubby; "but he is one of those men who are never happy unless they are talking, and, as you have noticed, he is an utter idiot, therefore his babble is far from interesting. I wonder what he will be like when he gets into his second childhood?"

"He may improve," observed Joe. "He cannot possibly get worse."

"Apple-tart, sir?" inquired Bob.

"Most decidedly," answered Rubby. "I am fond of apple-tart, so we will certainly have some, and Joe will have to eat it, whether he likes it or not."

NEXT
THURSDAY:

"TOM MERRY IN CAMP."

A Double-Length Tale of
Tom Merry's Schooldays.

"I will do anything to oblige you, Rubby," said Joe. "You can't go through life without troubles, and the trouble of eating apple-tart isn't going to make me unhappy. Do you think we shall do well at Dawly, Rubby?"

"Yes. Muerte will have billed the town that his circus is coming, and when mine lands there the people are certain to come and see what it is like. Having once seen that, it is not likely that they will care for a wretched little concern like Muerte's; besides, they will have spent all their money at my show. Oh, yes; I believe we shall do even better there than we have here; and, mind you, we have no cause for complaint! I am perfectly satisfied with the takings."

"Muerte is a little behind the times," observed Rubby, stopping some cream on his tart. "He's as slow as a maggot and as stupid as an owl. I wonder he is able to make his circus pay at all!"

"You ought to give the owl a few hints on how to run a circus, Rubby. He would not be at all likely to injure you as a rival."

"That's true enough, Joe; but I detest teaching an idiot. If he had any intellect, I might be tempted to give the poor brute a helping hand, but he is such an utter ass that I feel certain he would make me lose my temper, and then I should probably give him the thrashing he deserves."

Had Rubby been alone, it is quite likely that Muerte would have come to blows; but he had already had experience of Joe's fighting powers, and did not want to experience them again, so he let the matter drop and went on with his dinner; and before he had finished, Rubby and Joe left the inn.

"Hark!" exclaimed Rubby, as they neared the circus. "I do believe that I can hear the engine!"

"Yes," answered Joe calmly, "she is blowing off steam."

"Is she likely to burst?" inquired Rubby.

"I really could not tell you," answered Joe. "She never has burst yet, so I should say she would not be likely to do so now. We will hope for the best. If she is going to burst, I would much rather she did so now than when I am on her. You see, I banked up the fire, and probably by this time she is about red-hot."

"I don't like this at all!" growled Rubby, feeling confident that his youthful engineer was far from competent.

"There is nothing for you to dislike, so far, Rubby," observed Joe. "Of course, if her boiler were to burst there might be reason for your not liking it; but I don't think that is likely. Now, all you have to do is to hitch your caravan on to the back of the heavy waggons, and we shall go along like steam!"

"I think I would rather go along by horses."

"Nonsense, Rubby! You want them to draw the inferior cattle; I'll draw you and the other beasts with the traction. I like to keep in your company, because you come in so nice and handy at meal times."

Jim and Leo were only too ready to help Joe with the heavy traction-engine; in fact, they liked the idea far better than did Rubby. The waggons were hitched on, and Rubby's caravan brought up the rear; then Joe grasped the steering-wheel, while Jim started the engine.

How they got out of the gate was really surprising, but Joe took a big swoop up the lane.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Leo. "You are smashing the hoarding down with the waggons!"

"Well, that can't be helped now," answered Joe calmly.

"I don't suppose we are doing much damage."

"You must be jolly sanguine to think so," said Leo.

"Ha, ha, ha! Hark at the smashing of timber! And there goes Rubby; he is howling at something; I rather fancy you must have upset him!"

"His caravan has come in contact with the hoarding," said Jim, looking round. "Do you think I had better stop the engine?"

"Not a bit of it," answered Joe. "We are getting along famously, and it would be a great pity to stop now. I'm getting into the way of steering."

"The hoarding is getting into the way of Rubby's caravan!" cried Jim.

"Let it."

"I am, old chap."

"It will have to get out of the way of it. I say, what a shocking row Rubby is making; he's far worse than the other wild beasts! Jump down and tell him it is all right, Leo."

"I'm not going close enough to him to tell that abominable falsehood," declared Leo. "He would never believe that it was all right, when you are smashing down the hoarding. I say; are you trying to run into the ditch?"

"No; I was looking back to see that we are doing no damage."

"You will never see that, Joe," observed Jim. "If I were you I would look ahead, or we shall certainly be in the ditch,

and the public might kick up a row if we blocked the lane."

Once Rubby's caravan got into the lane, minus a little paint, all went well. Joe was getting more accustomed to the steering, though he did not find it nearly so simple as he had fondly imagined.

They had got some little distance into the country, and had reached a turning in the lane, where it was very narrow, when Jim shut off steam, for a carriage and pair was coming towards them.

"That's Sir Henry Timkins," observed Joe; "I should know his red face anywhere. You can bet he is on his way to the station."

"How is he going to pass us?" inquired Jim.

"I really could not tell you," answered Joe calmly. "I dare say he knows the way."

Now, had the following waggons been in an absolutely straight line, and on the very edge of the lane, a small cart might have passed without going into the ditch; but the waggons were all over the lane, some had run a little to one side, and some to the other. For a carriage and pair to pass them was an utter impossibility, and the knowledge of this made the great man furious.

"You young villains!" he roared. "I am in a hurry to catch the London train! What is the meaning of this?"

"Look here, Timkins," exclaimed Joe; "you will have to go round the other way!"

"You impertinent young scoundrel, there is no other way!" hooted the indignant man. "I must catch my train!"

"Then I would advise you to get out and walk, old chap; you can't pass us. The unfortunate part of the thing is that you have not got room to turn your horses."

"You will have to go back!" hooted Timkins, who really could not have been thinking of what he said; for if it were extremely difficult for him to go back, it was absolutely impossible for Joe to do so.

"We can't go back, old chap," answered Joe. "Rubby would be in the ditch in no time, and the other wild beasts would certainly be upset. No, Timkins, you must go back; there is not a doubt about that. If you can't turn, you will have to back your horses. It can't be much more than two miles to your house, and you will get there by and by. But here comes Rubby, and perhaps he will tell you what to do."

"What are you stopping for?" inquired Rubby, coming up.

"That silly man has blocked the road," answered Joe. "I don't think they ought to allow carriages to come along these narrow lanes."

"Certainly not," answered Rubby, who thought it a case where it would be advisable to take the upper hand. "I shall consider the advisability of consulting my solicitor. Go back at once, fellow!"

"You insolent hound, I won't go back!" howled Timkins. "I must catch the London train, and there is only just time to do so!"

"Then I tell you what it is, Timkins; you are extremely likely to miss that train."

"Thousands of pounds may depend on my catching it!"

"I don't see that makes any difference. You can't do impossibilities, and it would be an absolute impossibility to pass my little lot. I might pass your carriage, but it would be sure to damage it. Now, my dear fellow—"

"Your dear fellow, you insolent hound!"

"Well, Candles, if you like it better, or Sir Henry Timkins—it's all one to me. Be reasonable, and back your horses till you reach a spot where you can turn them, then drive the other way, and I will follow on."

"I won't! I won't miss my train!"

"Don't be unreasonable, dear boy."

"You bound of a showman! You have no right to let that boy drive a traction-engine! It's a scandal, and one that I will make you pay for!"

"It is my one aim to get competent drivers."

"The boy is utterly incompetent, and you know it!"

"My dear fellow, that is a libel on Joe. I am saying nothing as to whether it is correct or not, but we all know that it is a fact that 'the greater the truth the greater the libel,' and therefore Joe has a certain action against you for libel."

"Here, steady, Rubby!" exclaimed Joe, winking at Jim.

"There's a sort of insinuation about that speech. Do you mean to say that you have any doubts as to my competency?"

"Dear lad! How could I have any doubts after the manner in which you came out of the enclosure?"

"All right; then you may consider that I shall not bring an action against you for libel. Henry Timkins, if you don't go back I shall come forward, and then there will be chaos."

In order to show that he meant what he said, Joe blew a fearful blast on the whistle, and Timkins's horses commenced to dance to the sweet strain.

The driver—it was the same one whom Rubby had inadvertently hired—backed his horses, and he backed them

very cleverly. His master did not interfere, because he had an idea that Joe was coming on, in which case it would be inevitable for him to back, unless he wanted to be rolled into the road.

"That boy deserves a good thrashing!" declared Timkins. "It is perfectly scandalous that I should be caused to miss my train by an impertinent brat like that!"

"Don't get vexed, Henry!" exclaimed Joe, starting his engine. "You must go back, you know. You may be a very big man in your own estimation, but you are not big enough to shift traction-engines. Ha, ha, ha! Mind those prancing gee-gees, or you will be in the ditch!"

"Here, just you wait till I've backed to a broader part!" cried the driver.

"We are in a hurry, old chap," answered Joe.

"So am I in a hurry, boy!" snarled Timkins.

"Yes, so you just told us," answered Joe. "But on this occasion it is of no use your being in a hurry. All you can do is to go back and wait till the traction-engine rolls by. Rubby won't charge you anything for the outside view of the show."

"If I get down to you, I will lay this whip across your shoulders!"

"You had better not get down, Henry. You are rather too fat to get down while the carriage is going, and as it is certain that it can't stop while I go on, you must do the same. You will frighten your horses if you make all that row. A chap with a tendency to apoplexy like you ought to keep calm; there's no telling what damage you may be doing yourself."

"You insolent, low-bred little ruffian, you ought to be severely thrashed and sent to prison! Such young miscreants are not fit to be at large!"

"Don't laugh at the poor old fellow, Rubby," said Joe. "I admit he is funny enough to make a cat laugh, but he really can't help it. It is his nature, and I fear he was not sufficiently corrected when he was a chubby little boy. You ought to have been flogged more frequently, Henry—in fact, I fancy it would do you good now, and it could not possibly make you worse than you are."

That was a long journey—at any rate, it took a very long time, and the manner in which the unfortunate Timkins got chaffed by the lads, made him nearly mad with rage.

Joe had to stop his engine on several occasions. Considering the trying work required of them, the horses behaved remarkably well, and at last they reached a gate leading into a field.

Here the coachman got down, and, opening the gate, backed the carriage into the field.

"That's all right!" exclaimed Rubby, who had been walking beside the slowly-moving engine, and trusting that Joe would not make a mistake and run into the carriage. He felt greatly relieved when he saw the carriage in a place of safety. "Thanks, awfully, dear boy! I see you have a competent driver, like myself. Why, when you come to think of it, Henry, we must have had an accident, had not our respective drivers been thoroughly competent. As it is, no harm has been done, except that you have missed your train. However, that does not matter. You can easily catch the next one. We sha'n't be long getting past you now, and you will be able to hear my lions roar."

Timkins began to express his opinion, but Joe blew his whistle, and that effectually drowned his voice.

"Do stop that blatant row!" yelled Rubby. "It is piercing my brain!"

"It won't have much difficulty in doing that, Rubby," observed Joe, shutting off the whistle. "There won't be much resistance. You jump into your caravan, and mind you don't tumble in doing it."

"You do have an easy life of it, Rubby!" exclaimed Leo. "Riding in a comfortable caravan all day while we poor lads have to slave on a traction-engine. The

work is something terrible. You would not believe how hungry stoking makes a chap."

"Here, that will do, you beauty!" exclaimed Rubby, who understood the hint. "You will get nothing to eat till to-night, and then if you behave yourself, very likely I will stand you a crust of bread and cheese and a glass of clear water. Drive carefully, Joe, and, above all things, do not have an accident."

"That isn't at all likely."

"Do you mean it isn't likely that you will not have an accident?"

"You can take it which way you like, Rubby. But even if we do have an accident, you are not at all likely to get smashed up, because you are too far astern. Now, can you get in while it's going?"

"Yes, if you don't go too fast."

"You can't go too fast with this engine. I believe it thinks it's a slug. Look what a fine head of steam we have got."

Rubby groaned a little. He knew that his responsibilities were great, but as he saw no means of avoiding them, he waited till his caravan came up; then, jumping in, he lighted a fresh cigar, and hoped for the best.

"You see," exclaimed Leo, "I wanted to give him a hint that a slap-up tea would be appreciated by his engine-drivers."

"Do you think he will take the hint?" inquired Jim.

"I shouldn't be a bit surprised if he does, especially if we find that we have no steam—or water—or something like that, when we reach a certain inn that I know of."

"But we have got plenty of steam," observed Joe. "You can hear it hissing."

"I know I can; but there's a jolly steep hill just before you come to the inn, and if I do the stoking, we sha'n't have enough steam to get up it—see? It would be a thousand pities to let Rubby go hungry, and it really does not matter whether we reach our destination to-night or to-morrow morning."

"But Rubby is such a good-hearted chap that—"

"Of course he is! That's why I don't want him to go hungry. He is a caution for getting hungry, and I always encourage him to invite me to his meals."

"Well, I do the same," admitted Joe; "but I don't like deceiving him."

"Rats! You can't deceive Rubby. He will know jolly well that we have stopped at the bottom of the hill because there is a comfortable little inn at the top. He knows that I know this road. Well, he can't invite the whole company very well. He may not even invite us; but we will give him every facility. Now, leave the rest to me, and I'll show you how to manage Rubby."

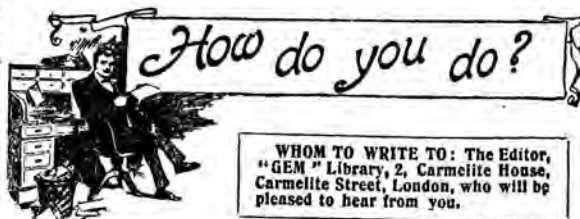
"I'm not at all sure that Joe could not manage him better, Leo," observed Jim.

"You don't know him as well as I do, old chap. There's only one thing Rubby can't stand, and that is a fellow who is frightened of him, and calls him 'sir,' and all that rot."

"Well, you have known him all your life," observed Jim, "so you ought to know how to tackle him; but if it were my case, I would leave it with Joe. He's got a sort of plausible manner about him that—"

"That may be," exclaimed Leo, who rather prided himself on being able to manage his employer; "but I know Rubby so jolly well, that I can do anything I like with him. Of course, he might get dangerous, if you didn't treat him the right way, but then I invariably do. I know all his pet corns, and never by any chance tread on them. He doesn't understand me, but I understand him down to the ground, and about six feet beneath it. All he wants is management, and that's what he's going to get this evening."

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