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Tale

A Tale of the Terrible Three.

by
MARTIN
Clifford.

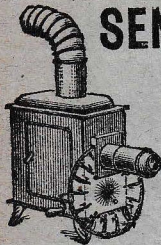


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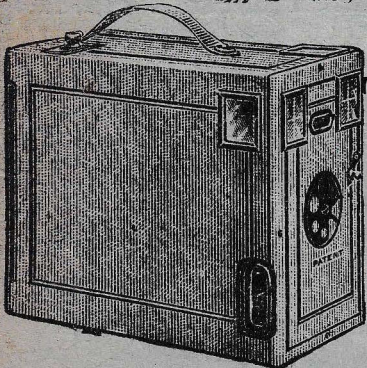
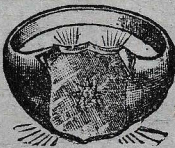
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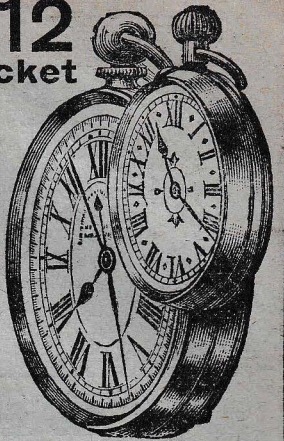
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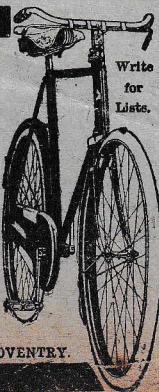
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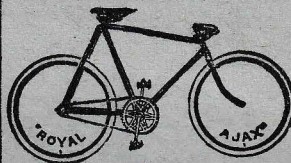


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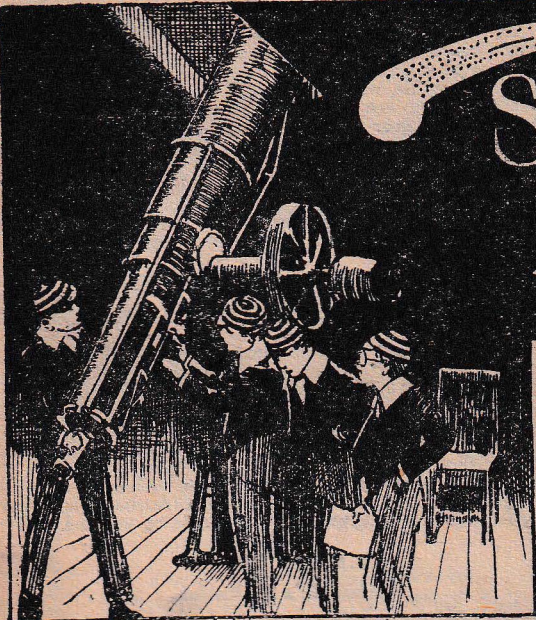
FOR ALL AND EVERY STORY A GEM!

SKIMPOLE'S COMET

A Tale of the
School Chums of St. Jim's,

BY

MARTIN CLIFFORD.



CHAPTER 1. The Winking Wheeze.

TOM MERRY, Monty Lowther, and Manners, the Terrible Three of the School House of St. Jim's, were busily engaged in their study discussing a matter of great importance. They had been talking for some time in whispers, as though remembering that even walls have ears, when suddenly the door opened. The conference was stopped immediately, but neither of the chums moved. With grave faces they regarded the intruder—Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of the school.

"Bai Jove, deah boys, have you heard the news?"

Tom Merry winked at Lowther and Manners.

Manners winked at Merry and Lowther.

Lowther winked at Manners and Merry.

"Bai Jove, have you gone off your beastly wockahs?"

The three chums winked in unison at Arthur Augustus.

"You wottahs, why don't you speak to me? I asked you if you had heard the news?"

Tom Merry & Co., still preserving grave faces, deflected both eyelids alternately at the swell of St. Jim's.

"You beastly wottahs!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, and adjusting his monocle, he stared at the chums in amazement. "It's most wude not to ansah my question. I ask you if you have heard the news, and you stand blinkin' like—"

Arthur Augustus stopped suddenly, for, with frowns upon their faces, the Terrible Three pointed dramatically at the door, indicating as plainly as they could without words that the swell of St. Jim's was to go.

"Am I to undahstand—"

Again the silent hint was given.

"You beastly wottahs! I considah it benoath my dig, to stay heah. I can only chawactewise you as wude boundahs. Tom Mewwy, you are no longah a twind of mine; and you,

Lowthah and Mannahs—I shall have nothin' furthah to do with you! I shake the dust of your beastly study fwom my feet!"

With these words, Arthur Augustus went out, closing the door behind him. The moment he had gone the faces of the Terrible Three relaxed.

"My only hat!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Ha, ha! I knew the wheeze would work!" laughed Lowther.

"Fairly put him on his dig!" said Manners.

"It's a good jape enough," said Tom Merry; "but, like most of your sparklets of humour, old son, it falls short."

"That's in its favour, for brevity is the—"

"Bosh!"

"Brevity is the soul of wit, and if this falls short—"

"Oh, go an' chop chips! What I want to know—"

"What we want to know, ass!" interrupted Manners.

"Is the news Gussy spoke of," completed Tom Merry.

"Then why didn't you ask him?" queried Lowther.

"Because I didn't want to spoil your wheeze."

"It's a good wheeze, Tom Merry."

"For an ass, yes!"

"What do you—"

"Shut up!"

"Let's go and find out what the news is," said Manners.

"You're lacking in the sense of humour, my sons."

"And you're certainly slacking in it! Come on!" retorted Tom Merry, opening the study door.

By way of creating some diversion, Lowther had suggested that whenever anyone entered their study, they should refuse to speak, and reply to all remarks by winking only, and pointing to the door. It now appeared, after the first trial, that it was not quite so funny for them as it had promised to be, for it had prevented them from learning some news at the start.

Lowther having started the wheeze, his two chums blamed him for the result.

Meanwhile, Arthur Augustus had returned to Study 6, occupied by the famous four, consisting of Jack Blake, Digby, Herries, and Augustus himself.

"Blake, deah boy, Tom Mewwy & Co. are beastly boundahs!"

"Dig," said Blake, "Tom Merry & Co. are beastly bounders!"

"Herries," said Digby, "Tom Merry & Co. are beastly bounders!"

D'Arey jammed his eyeglass in his eye, and regarded his chums with a puzzled air.

"Blake and Dig," said Herries, "Tom Merry & Co. are——"

"Weally, Hewwies, I think you're quite off your weekahs. I——"

"Ass!" ejaculated Blake, shutting a book, and hurling it on to a shelf.

"I wefuse——"

"Lunatic!"

"I absolutely decline to be chawactewised as a lunatic, Blake. Weally, your mannahs are dweadful, and I shall have to administah a fealful thwashing if——"

"Oh, ring off, Gussy! What's the matter with Tom Merry now?"

"They're beastly boundahs!"

"You've told us that once!" exclaimed Blake.

"Don't sing it all over again!" said Digby, in a plaintive tone.

"Weally, Dig, I must wepeat it. I went in theah just now to tell them the news about Skimmey, and they wefused to speak to me. They merely stood like statues and winked at me!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Didn't know statues winked."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, I see no cause for this wibald mewwiment. I considah it most fwightfully wude of——"

"I say, kids," interrupted Blake, "here's a wheeze. Let's put it about among all the fellows, and get everybody to treat Tom Merry & Co. in the same way whenever they speak!"

"I wegard that as a wemarkably good ideah!"

"Ripping!"

"Come on, let's spread it about at once!"

"We'll all go in different quarters and cover the ground quickly."

"Yaas, wathah! The New House as well."

"Everybody!"

"Hurrah!"

"You can tell all the fellows that if they wink well, I stand them all a feed affah it is ovah!"

"Good! Gussy'll stand a feed!"

"That'll fetch 'em!"

With these remarks, the chums of Study 6 separated, each taking an agreed section of the fellows among whom to work.

Arthur Augustus began with Wally, his young brother, the ink-fingered troublesome boy of the Third Form.

"Wally, deah boy——"

"Can't stop, Gus. Due in the gym. for a scrap!"

"Weally, Wally, I must speak to you. I want you to wink!"

"Eh? What?" exclaimed D'Arey junior, pulled up by the extraordinary request.

"I want you to wink, Wally, deah boy, whenever Tom Mewwy or Lowthah or Mannahs speaks to you."

"You're mad, Gus!"

"That wemark was quite uncalled for. I ask——"

"But you must be mad, Gus! What have I got to wink for?"

"I'll explain, deah boy."

Wally listened whilst the swell of St. Jim's explained the wheeze, and when he had heard all about it, he not only agreed to wink himself, but undertook that all the juniors in his Form should wink also as required. The promise of a feed was duly communicated to his chums also.

Meanwhile, Jack Blake had begun with Herbert Skimpole, the genius of the Shell, an amateur Socialist, with a large head and a small, weedy body.

"Look here, Skimmey!" exclaimed Blake, bursting into the study. "My hat! what's on here?"

The study was pitch dark, the blind being close drawn, and all crevices stopped up with paper.

"Who is that, please?"

The voice of Skimpole came out of the darkest corner.

"I'm Blake! What on earth are you at, Skimmey?"

"If you will kindly shut the door, Blake, I will proceed to explain."

"You ass! What are you doing? Come out into the light! I want you to do something."

"Really, Blake, at this moment it is most inconvenient. I am just taking observations of Halley's Comet."

"Don't come it, ass! Come out into the light!"

Without even noticing the pun, Skimpole's voice proceeded. THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 113.

"I should be much obliged if you could explain what you want to me where I am, Blake. As a sincere Socialist, I will, of course, give it my earnest consideration. But I am most anxious not to interrupt the observations I am making of Halley's Comet by means of a small pinhole in the blind, through which scintillating rays of light are passing on to a sensitised plate which I hold in my hand, and which you will positively ruin, Blake, if you don't shut that door."

Whilst Skimpole had been speaking, Blake had been gradually feeling his way into the study, until he grabbed Skimpole's collar,

"Come out of it, you ass!"

"Really, Blake—— Oh!—ow!"

"Now then, Skimmey, listen to me!"

"You've caused me to break my sensitised plate!" said Skimpole, now standing in the passage, blinking up at Blake through his huge spectacles.

"Listen to me!"

Skimpole blinked in silence.

"If Tom Merry, or Lowther, or Manners speaks to you, you're not to speak to them in return, but only to wink at them until they go and leave you. Understand?"

"No, Blake, I fear I do not."

"Frabjous idiot! It's plain enough, isn't it?"

"I hear what you say."

"Well, then, ass, what's wrong?"

"It appears to me to be such an unreasonable proceeding. It is what Professor Losetop would call an effect without a cause."

"Hang Professor Losetop! I——"

"He's dead, Blake," responded Skimpole quietly, still blinking.

"Ass! Never mind the reason. All you've got to do is to refuse to answer Tom Merry & Co. if they speak to you. Wink at them, that's all."

"It seems frivolous to me, Blake, and, in my judgment, unworthy——"

"Will you do what I ask, or not?" roared Blake, seizing hold of Skimpole's ear.

"Oh—ow—Blake! This is most unreason——"

"Will you do——"

"Ow—oo—yes! Yes, Blake!"

"Right—ho!"

Blake released Skimpole's ear, and whilst he stood pondering and blinking, rushed off to enlist the services of the fellows at the New House in the latest rag.

So well did the juniors work at the new wheeze, that by the time class bell rang everyone whom the Terrible Three were likely to address had agreed to respond only by winking.

CHAPTER 2.

Skimpole's Invitation.

TOM MERRY & CO. came out of their study just as the other juniors were making their way to the class-room. Just outside their door they met Herries.

"I say, Herries, what's the news Gussy is blowing about?" asked Tom Merry.

Herries stood perfectly still, half closed one eye for a moment, and then walked away.

"My only hat!" ejaculated Tom Merry.

"The duffer!" said Manners.

"What did he say?" asked Lowther, who had been looking in another direction. "What?"

"He didn't say anything. He winked!"

"Winked?"

"Yes, ass—winked!"

Just then Wally passed the chums, arm-in-arm with Curly Gibson.

"I say, kids, what's the news?" asked Tom Merry.

The two Third-Formers stood with their backs to the wall and embedded their left eyes in most amazing wrinkles, then they took to their heels.

"My only Aunt Jane, they're mad!" muttered Monty Lowther.

"This is your wheeze coming out," said Tom Merry.

"Mine?" asked Lowther.

"Yes, ass, yours!"

"But I——"

"Can't see it, I suppose."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Manners.

"I haven't told——"

"You haven't told them—no. But——"

"Then how?"

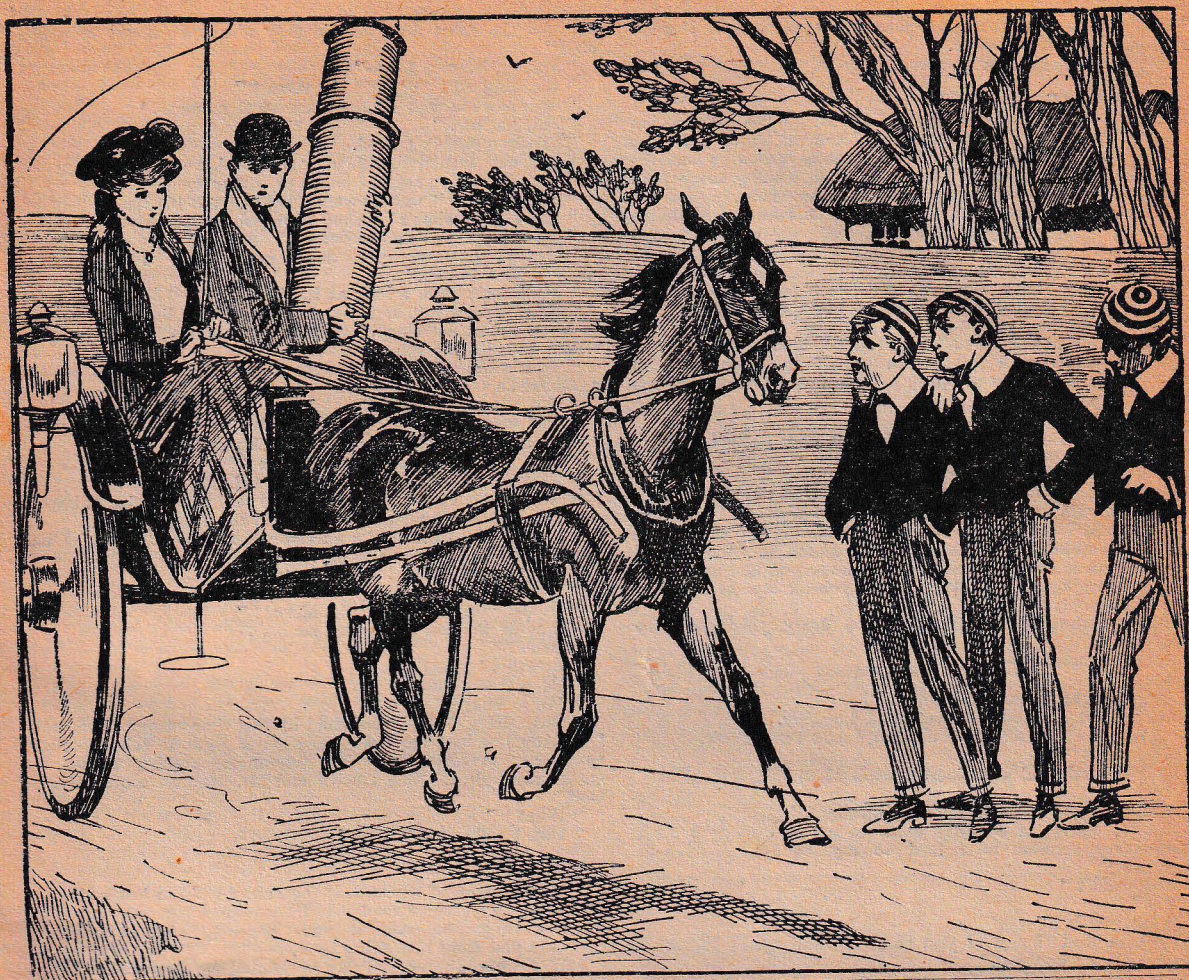
"But Gussy has, you chump!"

Monty grinned, and Manners interrupted a hearty roar to listen while Tom Merry questioned Glyn, the inventor of St. Jim's, who came out of his study as they were passing.

"Hallo, Glyn, what's the news that the only one is gassing about?"

Surely Glyn would tell them, thought Merry.

But he was mistaken.



"My hat!" exclaimed Tom Merry, "What's that? A scaffold pole?" The juniors stared in amazement, for as the trap drew nearer they saw that Glyn held upright between his knees a telescope which stood about six feet in height.

Glyn shut one eye and opened the other, standing perfectly still for the purpose, and then ran off towards the class-room.

"I shall give somebody a thick ear in a minute!" said Tom Merry.

"Better keep it for your own use!" said Lowther.

"Is that another giddy joke?"

"Here comes Fatty Wynn—let me ask him," said Manners.

"No, I'll do it, you ass!"

"Shut up, Monty! You've done about enough for one day."

But Lowther was determined to question Fatty, and he approached him for the purpose, leaving his chums a little way behind.

"Fatty, old son, have a packet of milk chocolate?" he asked, placing his right hand in his pocket.

"It's awfully kind of you, Lowther. I am fearfully hungry as it happens. It's really very decent of you to ask me."

Fatty held out his hand and received the sweetmeat which Lowther by a lucky chance possessed.

"I suppose you've heard the news that Gussy is blowing about, Fatty, haven't you?" he asked, when he had handed over the chocolate.

"New—" began Fatty Wynn.

Then he remembered suddenly that Arthur Augustus had promised a feed that afternoon to all the fellows who winked at the Terrible Three instead of speaking to them.

Tom Merry and Manners had now closed up to Lowther and Fatty, and a crowd of juniors stood grinning a little distance away.

Fatty had already taken the chocolate from the silver paper and placed it in his mouth. He had a suspicion that this unusual gift had been made by Monty to get him to speak. He did not, however, intend to run any further risk of being out of the feed.

With one side of his fat face protruding in a round, hard

lump Fatty twitched his left eyelid several times, and then turning round suddenly, shuffled away.

"The cheek!" exclaimed Lowther.

"Pig!" ejaculated Manners.

"You'd better question the next fellow we meet," said Merry. "You get on so well with it, you know."

"I got him to speak, anyway!" growled Lowther.

"I've heard of the Land of Nod," remarked Manners. "But we're up against the Land of Wink now."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry & Co., attracted by the laugh, looked round.

There, a few yards away, were Wally, Curly Gibson, and a host of Third-Formers grinning at the Terrible Three, and when the latter looked, they ceased grinning and solemnly winked.

"I shall have to think this out," said Tom Merry.

"What?" asked Lowther.

"You wouldn't understand me, ass, but I don't mind telling Manners, here, that through your clever wheeze we have got into a rotten position, and I shall have to think the matter out."

"Oh!" murmured Lowther simply.

They did not attempt to question any other of the fellows now, but made their way into the class-room, and there Tom Merry sat, until half-past four, with a very thoughtful expression on his face.

After lessons were over the juniors trooped out. It was quite amazing to see how, instead of rushing out in all different directions, in search of their different pursuits, they clustered about Tom Merry & Co. as though inviting one of the Terrible Three to speak that the new wheeze might be worked off on them.

But Tom Merry & Co. entered their study and closed the door.

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By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

THE NEXT
THUR

"THE THIRD-FORMERS' RAID!"

"Will it interfere with your thinking apparatus if I make some tea?" asked Lowther.

"If you make the tea as successfully as you make wheezes, it might."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Manners, with a laugh, assisted Lowther in the preparation of tea, whilst Tom Merry sat with a clouded brow. He was much exercised at finding their own wheeze turned so successfully against them, and he was bent upon finding some plan whereby the tables might be turned yet once more.

"Look here, Monty," said Tom Merry eventually, with his mouth full of toast, "you're an ass, and you've got us in a giddy mess!"

"Ring off! Think about something fresh, and——"

Suddenly the study door opened, and the three chums, looking in that direction, beheld the spectacled face of Skimpole.

"Hallo! Having your tea?"

"No, cleaning our boots!" retorted Lowther.

"Really, Lowther, I fail to see either reason or truth in that remark. I came in to speak to you about a matter of the greatest importance."

"Fire away!"

"In fact, I came to speak to you about two matters of——"

"Oh, dear!" groaned Lowther.

"What's the 'ism' now?"

"Really, Merry, I fail to see the application of the termination 'ism.' I should have thought that as, whenever I get the time to speak, I always say something affecting the most vital interests of mankind, that you would have been only too pleased to set aside your frivolous remarks whenever you had an opportunity of listening to me. Victims, as you all are, of heredity and environment, I——"

"Skimmy, shut up!" exclaimed Tom Merry, poisoning a piece of toast.

"Really, I consid——"

"Rats!"

"Spare us the lecture, Skimmy!"

"Let's chuck him out!" exclaimed Lowther.

"No fear! Can't afford to do that," said Tom Merry.

"Why not?"

"He's the only kid who doesn't wink when he's spoken to."

"Ass!"

"What did you come to tell us, Skimmy?"

"Firstly, Merry, that Blake came to me and made a most extraordinary request in regard to my behaviour towards yourselves."

"Blake did?"

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"He said that if any of you came up and spoke to me, I was to reply by winking."

"Blake did, eh?"

"Yes."

"And what did you say?"

"Why, Merry, at first I pointed out how unreasonable and illogical such a proceeding on my part would be, but as Blake had my right ear between his thumb and finger, I, of course, promised."

"Ha, ha, ha! Pour me out some more tea, Monty!"

"And you've broken your promise, like a true Socialist?"

"Not at all, Lowther."

"How so, my son?"

"Really, Lowther, I should have thought the meanest intellect would have perceived—ow!"

A piece of sugar skilfully aimed by Lowther, hit Skimpole on the extreme tip of his nose.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the Terrible Three.

"If we lived under a Socialist régime," resumed Skimpole, rubbing the tip of his nose, "you would be——"

"Cut that, Skimmy!"

And as another piece of sugar was poised between Lowther's thumb and finger Skimmy reflected a moment, and then obeyed.

"What about your promise?"

"Well, you see, Merry, had you addressed me in the first place, I should have winked, and——"

"And got a thick ear!"

"I fail to see the connection, or logical sequence of that. But, however, as I say, in that event I should have winked. But, as things are, you will observe that I came to you and addressed you, and there being no clause in the agreement dealing with that contingency I did not wink."

"Good, Skimmy!"

"Beautifully worked out!"

"Thank you very much!"

"Anything else?"

"Yes. The other matter is of greater importance—infinite greater. I asked D'Arcy to take the news round, and I am going round myself now, so that if he has not already informed any of the fellows I can make good the breach."

"Gussy came in here to tell us some news, but owing to one of Lowther's gems of wit, went away again without telling

us. So the news after all, is only about some rot of yours eh?"

"Really, Merry, I——"

"Oh, ring off! What's the news?"

"The news is that I have discovered a comet."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The three chums roared.

Skimpole, with serious face, stood blinking at them.

"I really fail to see the cause of this mer——"

"Show us it?" said Lowther, holding out his hand.

"Show you what?" asked Skimpole innocently.

"The comet you've discovered."

"Really, Lowther, you don't understand. I said I had discovered a comet."

"Well, let's have a look at it, then!"

"Really, Lowther, it is extraordinary how little you appear to know about astrology. Comets are massive heavenly bodies which travel at an almost incalculable velocity. The one——"

"That's the way you'll travel if you don't shut up, so call again when you've got it with you."

"Got what with me?"

"The comet."

"And don't come it any more until you have!"

"Out of the way, we're going out!"

"Travel, Skimmy, at incalculable velocity!"

The Terrible Three, having finished tea, brushed by Skimpole and left him standing and blinking in the study.

After a few moments he suddenly remembered that he had not said all he had come to say.

"I say, Tom Merry!" he shouted.

"Rats!"

"Really you must hear me, Merry!"

Skimpole hurried along the passage.

"Bosh!"

"Lowther! Manners!"

"Go and eat coke!"

"We're busy!"

"But, Merry——" Skimpole had by this time caught them up——

"D'Arcy has lent me the money for a gigantic telescope, and to-morrow evening the whole school are coming to see the comet through it. The Doctor and Mr. Railton are coming as well."

"What?"

"Yes, I tell you it's true."

"My only hat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You'll know all about it if the comet isn't at home!"

Well, as a sincere Socialist, I have done my duty in giving you an invitation, and if your heredity and environment prevents you from benefiting by it——"

But Skimpole muttered the remaining words to himself, for Tom Merry had gone into the school grounds.

CHAPTER 3.

Skimpole in Trouble.

IT so happened that the Famous Four from Study 6 were coming out just when Skimpole was addressing his last words to Tom Merry. The result to him was both sudden and surprising.

"I'm dashed if Skimmy isn't spoiling our jape!" exclaimed Blake.

"Bai Jove, the beastly wottah! Skimmy!"

"Did you call me, D'Arcy?"

"I've a mind to set Towser on you!" said Herries.

"You ought to be boiled in oil!"

"Really, I——"

"Ass! What were you opening your head to Tom Merry for?" asked Blake, seizing hold of Skimpole's collar.

"Yaas, wathah! What for, Skimmy? I considah your conduct most wepwehensible."

"Really, Blake, I c-c-c-can't explain while you're h-h-holding my col-col-collar so tightly. Ugh!"

"I won't let go until you answer me."

"I c-c-c-can't answer y-y-you till you let g-g-go."

"Weally, deah boys, I considah that most funnay. Blake can't let go until Skimmy tells, and Skimmy can't tell until Blake lets go. Bai Jove, it's wippin'!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Leggo, Blake! I—I—I'm—cho——"

"Stand there, then!"

Blake thrust Skimpole against the wall, but with such suddenness and force that, the moment he released the collar of the genius of the Shell of St. Jim's, the latter got one leg twisted round the other and rolled on the ground.

"Ow—ooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the chums of Study 6.

"Really, Blake, I quite fail to see——" began Skimpole, as he got to his feet and stood blinking.

"What were you talking to Tom Merry for?"

"Yaas, wathah, Skimmy! Ansah the question."

"Hurry up, kid!" said Herries.
 "He's working the answer out," added Digby.
 Blake made at Skimpole's collar again.
 But the latter preferred answering the question.
 "I invited Tom Merry, Monty Lowther, and Manners to see the comet."
 "Don't come it, Skimmy!" said Blake.
 "Really, Blake, I am under the impression that that remark has been made to me on some previous occasion."
 "Bai Jove, Skimmy! You have committed a most ungentlemanly act. You promised Blake that you would wink. You have broken your promise, deah boy, and you are a wottah, Skimmy, and a boundah!"
 "I have not broken my promise, D'Arcy! I agreed with Blake that—"
 "That you would wink."
 "Really, Blake—"
 "Ass!"
 "Chump!"
 "Frabjous ass!"
 "Wottah!"
 "Really, if you fellows would listen to me I would—"
 "We are listening, ass!"
 "But really, with interrup—"
 "Weally, Skimmy, surely you don't considah we are interruptin' you?"

"Of course not, Skimmy!"
 "Shut up, Herries! Let him explain."
 "What's the matter with you, Dig?"
 "If you'd keep quiet he'd explain."
 "Really, I don't think it fair that an opportunity—"
 "He really wants to explain," broke in Blake, with a solemn face. "That's what he wants to do—to explain in return for our kindness in subscribing the money for his telescope."
 "Bai Jove, Blake, deah boy, I considah that remark absolutely wepwehensible! You did not subscwibe a penny, and I weally think that—"
 "Shut up, ass!"
 "Weally, Blake, I absolutely decline to be chawactewised as an ass! I shall have no alternative but to administrah a feahful thwashin' if you don't withdwaw that expression at once!"

The swell of the School House turned back his cuffs.
 "Ring off, Gussy!" said Blake.
 "Skimmy wants to explain," put in Dig.
 "You really ought to let Skimmy explain, you know," added Herries.
 "Yes, Herries wants to hear the explanation before he goes to feed his dog Towser," replied Blake.
 "I uttably wefuse to wing off! You are uttah wottahs! Blake, are you goin' to put your fists up, or are you going to put them down? Bai Jove, I shall thwash you like anythin'!"
 "Wait till Skimmy has explained."
 "Skimmy's explanation has nothin' whatever to do with your misstatement, Blake, about the telescope. You know vewy well that I supplied the whole of the beastly money, and therefore you had no wight—"

"Oh, of course, if you feel at all sore about it, Gussy, I'm sure Herries and Dig will help me—"
 "You beastly wottah! I—"
 "Will help me to—"
 "Stop wottin', you uttah—"
 "Will help me to return you the whole of the—"
 "Blake, I insist that you stop this wottin'—"
 "The whole of the money spent on—"
 "I weally shall stwike you in a—"
 "Money spent on Skimmy's telescope."
 "Blake, you're a beastly wottah! I didn't mean—"
 "You'll both help, won't you?"
 "Of course," said Herries.
 "Rather than have Gussy feeling sore," added Dig.

Digby, Hewwies, I shall—"
 "You see," said Blake to Skimpole, who stood blinking at the chums of Study 6, waiting until he could make the explanation for which he had been asked, "the trouble, Skimmy, is all over your telescope. Gussy is sore because he paid the whole of the money, and—"

"You uttah wottah, Blake! Oh, do stop this wottin'! You know—"

"If we had Socialism," said Skimpole, blinking hard, as though a safe way out of the difficulty were about to strike him. "If we had Socialism telescopes would be nationalised, and then—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Quite right, Skimmy!"
 "Digby, Hewwies, Blake! You are uttah wottahs, and I shall have to administrah a feahful thwash—"
 "Don't be cross, Gussy! Rest assured that Herries, Dig, and I will refund the money you have expended on Skimmy's telescope."

With his monocle jammed in his eye, and an expression of exasperation on his face, Gussy glared at Blake.

"You know vewwy well, you wottahs, the telescope was a pwsent from me to Skimmy!"

"Then what have you been making all this fuss about?"

"Yes, Gussy, what have you for?"

"How could you, Gussy?"

"You beastly wottahs! I have made no fuss at all. It's you—"

"Well, shut up then, ass!" said Blake coolly.

"I wefuse to shut up, and I decline to be chawactewised as an ass! I nevah made any—"

"Ring off, Gussy!"

"I wefuse to wing—"

"Yes, Skimmy's comet will escape if we keep him any longer."

"You uttah—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What's the explanation, Skimmy?"

"About Merry?"

"Yes."

"Really, Blake, you are mistaken—"

"What about?"

"Why, Blake, about Merry."

"What about Merry?"

"Really, Blake," said Skimpole, blinking, "have you forgotten what we were talking about?"

"About Merry."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Even Arthur Augustus joined in the laugh at Skimpole's treatment at the hands of Jack Blake.

"Yes, Blake, I was saying that I did not break my promise. You see, I was to wink at Tom Merry & Co. if they came up and spoke to me. Now, they did not come up and speak to me, but I went and spoke to them."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove, that's wippin'!"

"You ass!" said Herries.

"Chump!" added Dig.

"Really, I—"

"Let's frogs' march the frabjous idiot!" said Blake.

He made a grasp at Skimpole as he spoke, but the latter was too quick, and slipping his little weed-like body aside, he darted along the passage, down the stairs, and into the grounds at full speed with the chums of Study 6 in full cry.

Out into the quadrangle flew Skimpole, a good six yards ahead of his pursuers.

"Look at Skimmy!" exclaimed Tom Merry, who was standing near talking to Monty Lowther and Manners.

"He's lost his comet," said Monty.

"Why, he's being chased by—"

"Go it, Skimmy!"

"My only hat!"

"Blake looks as if he wants to eat him!"

Skimpole, seeing the Terrible Three standing there, decided on the spur of the moment to appeal to them for aid.

Puffing and blinking, he pulled up in the centre of the triangle formed by Tom Merry & Co.

"What's the matter, Skimmy?"

"They—puff—because I didn't—didn't—puff—wink—!"

"Oh! So they're going to rag you, eh?"

"Look out!" exclaimed Lowther.

The three leapt into line with Skimpole behind them.

"Charge!" yelled Blake.

"Bai Jove, you ass, Blake!"

Blake had bumped into Arthur Augustus, who stumbled in the way of Digby and Herries.

With a crash D'Arcy went down, his silk hat rolling off his head.

"Bai Jove! Digby—Hewwies—mind my clothes! You'll wuin them you—oo!—ugh!—beastly wottahs! Ugh! Oo—ow!"

Digby had fallen with a bump on the swell of St. Jim's, and Herries, unable to pull up, had come down on the top of both of them. Blake, not heeding the misfortunes of his friends, had sprung forward to break the line which shielded the breathless genius of the Shell.

Tom Merry closed with him, and whilst Skimpole took to his heels again, Blake's head went into chancery, and his eyes winked several times, although now from a different cause.

"Rescue—ugh!—oo!—ow!" he yelled.

Monty and Manners seized Digby and Herries, and rolled them over Arthur Augustus again and again.

Skimpole, in his flight, had put his right foot into Gussy's silk hat, and, fearing to stay to get free of it, went scrambling away like a deformed youth with a new kind of boot.

"You wottahs!" gasped Arthur Augustus, "you're wumping me fwightfully—ugh!"

Tom Merry and Blake went over suddenly, just as the latter was getting his head out of chancery, and Monty, suddenly

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By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

finding his feet, hit out at Herries, catching him right on the point of the nose.

Manners now found an opportunity of rising whilst still hugging Digby fiercely round the neck.

Arthur Augustus scrambled to his feet.

"Bai Jove, you uttah wottahs! My twousahs are wuined! My waistcoat and my collah are cwumpled like anything! And where's my beastly hat? You wottahs—where's my—"

Arthur Augustus paused, and looked beyond his own chums who were still fighting the Terrible Three, to a group of other fellows, prominent among whom were Figgins & Co. of the New House.

"Go it, School House rotters!"

"Yah!"

"Booh!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Look at his hat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's Gussy's topper!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Fatty Wynn, Kerr, and Figgins in chorus.

Figgins & Co. had been first amused at the fight.

Then their eyes had fallen upon Skimpole, who, tripped up in his mad flight by Gussy's silk hat, now sat on the ground some distance away blinking at the hat, which, the top having given way, was now up round his knee.

"My only Aunt Jane!" roared Figgins.

"My hat!" chimed Kerr.

"Look at his hat!" shrieked Fatty, his ponderous sides shaking.

To their exclamations were added the frantic cries of fifty other boys from both houses, who revelled in the combined discomfiture of the topper and Skimpole. And, indeed, so great and voluminous were the cries that Tom Merry & Co. temporarily ceased hostilities with Jack Blake & Co., whilst they ascertained the cause of the uproar around them.

"My hat!" chorussed Tom Merry & Co.

D'Arcy, his monocle jammed in his eye, his clothes dirty and crumpled, and his deep white collar torn from the stud in front, glared at Skimpole, at his hat, at Figgins & Co., and the School House fellows alternately.

"I considah this no mattah for wibald laughtah!" he said in his most dignified manner. "Skimmay, you are a wank outsidah! Give me my toppah! Give it to me this instant, or I shall administah a most feahful thwashin'! Do you heah me, Skimmay? Will you give me—"

Arthur Augustus, walking as he spoke, had by this time reached the unhappy Skimpole, who was trying his best to get his leg out of the hat.

"Really, D'Arcy, I can't get it off—"

"His head's swelled!" yelled Figgins.

"Skimmay, you have heard my warnin'! If that toppah is not returned to me instantly, I shall administah the most feahful thwash—"

"But, D'Arcy, don't you observe that the circumference of my knee is so much greater than—"

"Skimmay, you're an uttah outsidah! Give me—"

"Really, I fear I shall damage it, D'Arcy, if I use force."

"Oh, my hat!" yelled Tom Merry.

"He fears he shall damage it!" shrieked Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I fail to see any cause for this wibald mewwiment! My toppah is absolutely wuined, and it is about the third toppah that I have wuined wecently—"

"Not to speak of a dozen before!" yelled Figgins.

"I agree with you, D'Arcy, that there is no cause for laughter. I assure you that I am extremely sorry. I—"

"Then, Skimmay, my deah boy, I entirely ovahlook the occuwnence. A gentleman can do no more than apologise to anothah gentleman. Skimmay, allow me to assist you off with that toppah."

"Really, I'm very much obliged, D'Arcy. I—"

"Bravo, Gussy!" yelled Tom Merry.

"Hip, pip—"

"Hurrah!" chimed in the School House chums.

"Booh! Rotters!" shrieked Figgins.

"Ring off, New House chumps!"

"Who are you calling chumps, Tom Merry?" cried Figgins, glaring.

"You, ass!"

"I'll jolly well—"

"No, you won't!"

"Ring off!" said Blake.

"Give 'em a roasting!" shouted Figgins.

And then, whilst D'Arcy was still endeavouring to get Skimpole's leg out of the hat, the rival houses fell to, Tom Merry & Co. and Blake & Co. forgetting their own rivalry in the new circumstances.

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Tom Merry hit Figgins in the chest, and the leader of the juniors in the New House went down flat upon his back, and Tom Merry sat upon his chest. Fatty Wynn, being driven hard by Manners, backed on to Tom Merry.

"Fathead! Take that!"

And Merry gave Fatty a push

"You rotter!" squealed Fatty, and he went down like a skittle.

The fight waxed fast and furious in every direction, for it was like a heavy storm after a period of peace between the two houses. Lowther and Manners were rolling Kerr and Wynn in the gravel, as though their one object was to wear the clothes from their backs. Reilly, Wally D'Arcy and Glyn, with a host of others, were all equally busy with New House fellows; in fact the whole quad was a writhing mass.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, suddenly sitting on the ground, as his hat came at last off Skimpole's leg. "Look at Mellish standin' there when he ought to be fightin'! I'll administah the most feahful thwashin' if he doesn't help the School House!"

Forgetting, in his indignation, that his hat was mangled beyond recognition, he jammed it on his head, and rushed after Mellish.

"Fight, fight, like anythin', you wottah!"

"Yah! It isn't my qua—"

"You uttah wottah! I'll administah a most feahful thwashin'—"

But Mellish, the toady and sneak of the Shell, took refuge in flight.

"They've had enough!" yelled Tom Merry at length, when the New House fellows were at last seen to be in flight.

"Lemme get up!" cried Figgins, upon whose chest Tom was sitting.

"Going home like a good boy, if I do?"

"Yah! You rotter! Leggo!"

"Shall I let him go, Monty?"

But while Tom Merry was asking the question, Figgins managed to wrench himself free.

"We'll rag you for this!" he yelled, as he took to his heels after his supporters, who were already in full retreat.

"Any time you like, Figgy!"

"I reckon my lead has secured you fellows a splendid victory," said Blake, trying in vain to replace his collar, which had become twisted hind part before.

"My hat!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "You ass!"

"Do you mean I haven't beaten them?" asked Blake.

"You? Why, I led you to victory. Didn't—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Digby and Herries.

"Look at it!"

"Who are you calling 'it,' Herries?"

"You, Tom Merry, old son! If you could only see your face!"

"The sight would injure him for life," said Blake.

This last remark reminded Tom Merry that he had had his face rubbed on the ground in the early part of the fray.

"Your eye's puffed enough to stop you winking, anyway, Blake."

This, from Lowther, reminded them of the winking wheeze, and loud laughter broke the stillness that had fallen after the storm.

"Bai Jove, deah boys, I'm most feahfully wumped."

"Oh, my hat!" exclaimed Merry.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Monty.

"Look at his hat!" shrieked Manners.

"Weally, deah boys, I see no cause for this—"

"Ring off, Gussy!"

"I should absolutely wefuse to wing off if it were not for the fact that I must immediately change my clothes. They are absolutely wuined! What are you laughing at, deah boys?"

Arthur Augustus, through his monocle, regarded the crowd of School House juniors who were now grinning at him, in between spasmodic and futile efforts at readjusting their own attire.

"The latest thing in hats," laughed Monty.

Arthur Augustus took the battered hat from his head.

"Skimmay has apologised as one gentleman to anothah, and I therefore wefuse to wfefer to my wuined hat any furthah."

"Under a Socialist system," said Skimpole, blinking, "all—"

"Hats would be nationalised," put in Lowther.

"Really, Lowther, I was not going to say anything of the kind. I was about to observe that all gentlemen would be—er—gentlemen!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Come on, I'm for the bath-room!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Hear, hear!"

"Yaas, wathah, deah boys!"

And the School House juniors, after as busy a half hour as they had known for a long time, went in to wash and change.

CHAPTER 4.

A New Wheeze.

"I'VE thought out a wheeze——" began Tom Merry, pouring out the tea.

"Pass me the toast, Manners," interrupted Monty.

"A wheeze for——"

"The butter, please."

"A wheeze for japing——"

"Give me a spoon, Manners."

"The idea is to jape Blake & Co. in ret——"

"Did you put any sugar in my tea, Tom Merry?"

"Yes. To jape them in return for that winking business."

"You haven't half buttered this toast, Manners."

"Make the next lot yourself."

"Certainly. Have some toast, Thomas, my son?"

"Thanks, ass! Did you hear what I said?"

"What about?"

"A wheeze for japing——"

"Well, do you think the toast is——" persisted Lowther, keeping a serious face all the time, although Manners was nearly choking.

"Shut up, you ass! Look here——" said Tom Merry.

"Where?"

"You don't want Blake & Co. to score off us without lifting a finger to——"

"They can't do it!"

"They have done it!"

"What, without lifting a finger?"

"I shall give you a thick ear in a——"

"Not without lifting a finger. Have some more toast?"

Tom Merry was silent for a few moments.

"What's the wheeze, anyway?" asked Manners.

"It's a grand wheeze. It's——"

"Where did you find it?"

"You're asking for it, Monty."

"What, the wheeze?"

"No, a thick ear!"

"I never mentioned——"

"Shut up! It's like this, Manners. Monty has put us one back by inventing that stupid winking business. It's up to us to get in on them. Now——"

"I shall have to think of something," interrupted Monty.

"You?" said Tom Merry scornfully.

"Yes. There's no one else to do it here."

"Not when I'm out," retorted Tom Merry. "Perhaps. But my idea is this. Skimmy has got a big telescope coming, and there's going to be a crowd come to his study to look through it at a comet, or something of the sort the chump says he has discovered."

"That sounds more like a bit of history than a wheeze——"

"Shut your head, Monty! Now what I propose is that we get Glyn to make us a sort of telescope with an electric light in the end, so that all the fellows will look down it, and think the light is the comet. You see, we'll smuggle the genuine telescope away, and put the fake in its place."

"Of course, it's Glyn's wheeze, really," observed Monty drily.

"It's mine. Glyn doesn't know anything about it yet. What do you think of it?"

"Do as well as nothing," said Monty, with a sniff.

"It's all right if Glyn——"

"Oh, Glyn can do anything. We'll go and see him when we've finished tea."

And so the Terrible Three, tea over, visited Glyn, the boy inventor, a son of a Liverpool millionaire, who now lived near St. Jim's.

Glyn, who could, as Tom Merry had said, "do anything," fell in readily enough with the suggestion, and agreed to do his best in the way of producing a huge telescope, in the end of which should be a small electric light.

"The only thing is, kids, I can't make it here," he said.

"Why?"

"No material, and no tools of the kind necessary."

The faces of the Terrible Three became clouded.

"When's Skimmy's demonstration?"

"Wednesday night—to-morrow."

"Right-ho! I'll run home to my place to-morrow afternoon."

"Good!"

"Mum's the word, Glyn."

"Right-ho!"

"Are you theah, Glyn, deah boy?" inquired Arthur Augustus, coming in at that moment.

"No, he's here," replied Monty.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wegard that wemark, Lowthah, as extwemely——"

"Ring off, Gussy! I'm busy!"

"Weally, Glyn, that is vewy wude. I consid——"

"Shut up, ass!"

"But p'ec'ly, I wefuse to be chawac——"

"Go and eat coke!"

"I wefuse to—ow—grooh—ugh! Tom Mewwy, you beastly wottah! Welease me! You are wumpling my collah! I shall administah a most feah——"

"Chuck him out, Tom Merry!"

Tom Merry, having secured a firm hold on the collar of the swell of St. Jim's, sent him flying through the door.

As ill-luck would have it, Mellish was passing along the passage at the time, carrying a bottle of red ink, which he had just borrowed—without asking permission—from a neighbouring study.

With a crash Arthur Augustus collided with him.

"Ugh, you rotter!" yelled Mellish, as he rolled over, Arthur Augustus on the top of him.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry & Co.

Mellish had smashed the ink-bottle, and his hand was covered with red ink.

He was the first on his feet, and, foaming with rage, he wiped his hand on the face of Arthur Augustus, who was sitting on the floor.

"Oh, you beastly wottah! I'll administah the most feahful thwashin'!"

He scrambled to his feet, but Mellish had taken to his heels before he could reach them.

"I considah Mellish is a wank wottah! I have only just changed my clothes, and now they are uttably wuined!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"This is weally no mattah for laughter. Tom Mewwy, I wegard you as pwimarily wesponsible for——"

"What's the matter, Gussy?" asked Harry Noble, the Australian chum, who came up at that moment.

"These wottahs——"

"Ha, ha, ha! Look at your face!"

"Weally, Kangaroo, I——"

"Ha, ha, ha! Go an' wash, you ass!"

"Weally, Glyn, I came heah to speak to you, and——"

"Go and eat coke! You're talking now."

Gussy wiped his face with his pocket-handkerchief, and then, jamming his monocle in his eye, glared at the juniors.

"I was goin' to ask Glyn to make somethin' weally wippin' for me; but now——"

"Then why didn't you say so? Of course, I'll do anything I can for you, Gussy."

"Then I shall wefer no further to the tweatment I have——"

"Cut that! What's the wheeze, Gussy?"

"I was wonderin', Glyn, deah boy, whethah you could make me an electrically heated iron for me to shine my toppahs with?"

"My hat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Glyn remained quiet and thoughtful for a few moments.

"Will you twy, Glyn, deah boy?"

"I will."

"Thanks, deah boy!"

"What about the feed, Gussy?" asked Glyn.

"What feed, deah boy?"

"The one you promised the whole school if we winked at——"

"Bai Jove! Yaas, wathah! Of course, there was to be a feed."

"When is it to be?"

"Weally, deah boys, I consider it would be a wippin' idea to have it at the same time as the celebration over Skimmy's comet."

"When's that, Gussy?"

"As soon as the gov'nah sends me a fivah."

"I hear you've been buying Skimmy a telescope," said Tom Merry, who wanted to get a description of it for Glyn's benefit.

"Yaas, wathah! You see, deah boys, it wants a person with tact and judgment to deal with Skimmy. I——"

"Either that or money."

"Weally, Monty, your wemark is not worth considewation. I have sent for a telescope for Skimmy, because he said he could discovah a beastly comet if I did, and, being a person of tact, I did, because I thought it would keep him from talking Socialism for a while."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"How big is it, Gussy?"

"I weally don't know, Mewwy; but Skimmy has got a pwice-list, with a picture of the thing in it."

"Hallo! What's happened to your face, Gussy?" asked Dane, who came up at that moment.

"Bai Jove! I must go and wash that beastly wed ink off and change my clothes. They have got most fwightfully cwumpled."

And Gussy went.

Tom Merry & Co., after whispering to Glyn, also left Study No. 6, their object being to interview Skimpole, and have a look

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at the illustration of the expected telescope, so that they could instruct the boy inventor in the measurements and other details necessary for the preparation of the fake they had in view.

"When's the telescope coming, Skimpy?" asked Tom Merry, as they burst into the study.

"Really, Tom Merry, I am very pleased and gratified to find that you are all so anxious to view the Skimpole Comet. I

"I'm asking about the telescope, ass!"

"Of course, through which you will be able——"

"How big is it?" asked Lowther.

"Ten million miles in circ——"

"My hat!"

"You ass!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I mean the telescope?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon! I thought you were referring to the comet, as to which I have made very thorough calculations, so that I shall—ow—wo—garoo! Leggo my ear!"

"Then tell me about the telescope," said Tom Merry.

"Ow—oo! Leggo!"

"The telescope—how big is it?"

"I don't rem—Ow! Leggo!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Here!" exclaimed Lowther.

"What?"

"My ear, Merry! Really—ow! Leggo!"

"This looks like the price-list," went on Lowther.

"Is that the price-list, Skimpy?"

"Yes. Ow—oo!"

"Then sit down!"

And Skimpole sat down—on the floor.

"Really, Merry, I consider this violence——"

"Ring off!"

"Here's a picture of it," said Lowther.

Manners and Tom Merry looked over the price-list

Skimpole got up from the floor blinking.

"Is this it, Skimpy?"

"The picture of the telescope, Merry, will not give you the slightest conception of the character of the Skimpole Comet. I fear that your knowledge of astronomy is weak in the ex——"

"Shut up, ass! Is this it?"

As Tom Merry advanced a step nearer Skimpole suddenly awoke to the necessity of giving a reply.

"Yes, Merry; but the telescope itself will be here to-morrow by the four o'clock post, so that——"

"We'll take this page out, Skimpy."

"Really, Lowther, there is not a word about the com——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You've got comet on the brain."

"Really, Manners——"

"Listen, Skimpy! We're going to help you make a huge success of your meeting here to view the comet to-morrow night."

"That is very kind of you, Merry. I am gratified to see that my teachings on Socialism have fallen upon good ground——ground fertile——"

"But you've got to instruct us about the comet so that we can go about inducing the fellows to come."

"My hat!" gasped Lowther.

Manners looked at Tom Merry in amazement.

For him to ask Skimpole to begin one of his long-winded harangues was something surprising indeed. Skimpole beamed and blinked alternately through his huge glasses. It was the golden moment of his life to be asked by Tom Merry to explain about the Skimpole Comet.

"You've reached the limit, Tom Merry," murmured Lowther, as Skimpole began: "The celestial visitant, which I have named the Skimpole Comet, I saw first with the naked eye immediately after German, yesterday. It was very conspicuous, and showed a coma, or tail, which extended more than a lunar diameter in a direction away from the sun. It had a prominent nucleus, and was of magnificent appearance. There was a very continuous spectrum, whose brightness indicated that the Skimpole Comet was passing towards the sun. The——"

"Horaw! Horaw! Horaw!"

Skimpole stopped suddenly. He had been blinking intently into Tom Merry's face while speaking. But now, attracted by the sounds of snoring, he looked towards Lowther and Manners, from whom the sound emanated. They were leaning against the wall, and their eyes were closed as though in slumber.

"Really, Lowther——"

"Stime to gerrup!" murmured Manners.

"Take your feet off my pillow!"

"You've got all the clothes!"

"No, I haven't! It's you!"

"Ha, ha, ha, you asses!" roared Tom Merry.

"I've had a fearful dream!"

"What was it, Monty?"

"I dreamt I had a constable instant, and——"

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"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Really, Lowther——"

"Which I named Up-the-Pole Go It! I was——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Really, Low——"

"I was naked as to the eye——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry and Manners.

And Monty, imitating the expression of one who has just awakened from a deep sleep, proceeded with his burlesque on Skimpole's oration.

"It was very conspicuous, and had a full stop on its tail——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Lowther, really——"

But Skimpole's protests were in vain.

"The Up-the-Pole Go It had a prominent nose, which it turned towards its son, who was of magnificent appearance and a lunatic in diameter. Hallo, where am I?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He, he, he!"

"I really cannot understand, Lowther, how you can make such extraordinary mistakes. I thought I spoke quite clearly, but I will willingly repeat——"

"Ring off!"

"Cut that!"

"We'll do as we are, Skimpy. Good-bye; we'll go around and persuade everybody to turn up to-morrow night."

"Thank you, Merry——"

But the Terrible Three did not wait to hear Skimpole's thanks.

Instead, they hurried back to Glyn's study and handed him the illustration and full particulars of the telescope which was to arrive at St. Jim's on the following evening at six o'clock.

"Think you'll be able to manage it, Glyn?" asked Tom Merry.

"Yes, I think so. I shall have nearly three hours at home, and as it happens I have got some tubing which will exactly meet the case."

"Good!"

"But how about bringing it here?"

"Well, Skimpy expects his by the four post," replied Tom Merry thoughtfully. "So we had better have it handy; and while Taggles' attention is taken up by Monty giving him a bob——"

"Here, I'm not going to pay a——"

"We must place your telescope in the place of the old one."

"But I'm not going to pay a bob!"

"All right, Monty. If you won't, Manners——"

"No, I'm hanged if I do! I——"

"Well, Glyn, then——"

"What, make the——"

"Very well, then. I'd pay it myself—if I could. But as I can't we'll borrow it off Gussy."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hear, hear!"

"We'll meet you at the gates on your return, Glyn, old son, and fix it all right with Taggles."

"Right-oh!"

"Now for a canvassing campaign!" said Tom Merry.

"A what sort of pain?" said Lowther, following the hero of the Shell out of Glyn's study.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Manners, bringing up the rear.

"Ass! A canvassing campaign!"

"Oh, you're referring to one of your wheezes, I sup——"

"Chump! I'm referring to a canvass of——"

"Oh, it's a picture!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Monty, having put us one back by your winking wheeze, the least you can do for the honour of the Shell is to make this wheeze of mine a ripping success."

"Hear, hear!" agreed Manners.

Monty sniffed.

"What we've got to do now," went on Tom Merry, "is to see all the kids, both here and in the New House, and get them to turn up at Skimpole's study to see the comet through the telescope. When we've had 'em all on, we'll let 'em know the jape, and then——"

"You'll consist of one big, thick ear!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You two kids, take the fellows here, and I'll run over to Figgins & Co."

"There's one thing about your wheeze——" began Monty.

"Well?"

"It isn't quite clear how the whole school is going to get into Skimpole's study."

"No," agreed Manners.

"You see, unfortunately for your idea, Skimpole's study won't stretch."

"Well, ass, we can have it in the gym. There's a window there looking out in the same direction, from which we can see the comet."



"I'm expecting a parcel addressed to Master Skimpole," said Tom Merry. "When it comes, you might forget to take it upstairs until the morning." "Which I will, Master Merry," replied Taggles, his eyes on the shilling in the junior's palm.

"See where you would be without me."

"Yes—I don't think!"

The three had now reached the quad.

"Hallo! I see Figgins & Co. I'll go and tackle them."

Tom Merry darted off.

"Hallo, Shell-fish!" greeted Figgins.

"Pax!"

"What for?"

"I come to say something."

"Can't you sing to us for a change?"

"Go and eat coke! It's pax."

"I thought it was coke."

"Rats!"

"Talking of eating coke——" began Fatty Wynn.

"I want to arrange about Skim——"

"I get so fearfully hungry this weather, and I——"

"Skimpole's comet. To-morrow——"

"Before you go on, Tom Merry, have you got a bit of tffee? I didn't eat much breakfast to-day. Only a couple of fashers and half a doz——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Shut up, Fatty! Skimpole is really most serious about this comet of his, and we're going to turn up in the gym to-morrow night to have a look at it through his new telescope. We thought, perhaps, you New House kids would like to come. We half expect the Head and Mr. Railton. It's at seven o'clock. Coming? And there's to be a big feed the next day to all those who——"

"What time did you say?" asked Fatty.

"Half-past seven?"

"Is that the time of the feed?"

"No, ass. That's the time to see the comet."

"And when's the feed?"

"The next day. If you don't come to see the comet, you can't come to the feed."

"I'm very keen about comets—I never lose an opportunity of looking at them," said Fatty.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Almost as keen as you are about feeds, eh?"

"Well, I do get hungry this wea——"

"I tell you what," said Figgins. "If we've nothing better to do, we'll come."

"Yes; just to help the thing along," added Kerr.

"We shouldn't like you to make a failure of it if——"

"Rats, you rotters! You'll turn up—eh?"

"If there's nothing better to do."

CHAPTER 5.

No Admittance.

"GLYN!"

Mr. Linton spoke clearly enough.

"Glyn!"

Bernard Glyn did not appear to hear him.

"Wake up, dunamy!" whispered Dane, kicking the Liverpool lad on the shin beneath the desk.

"Eh?"

"Did you hear me speak, Glyn?" pursued the Shell master.

"Yes, sir—no, sir."

"Take twenty lines, and keep your attention fixed on the lessons!"

"Yes sir."

NEXT
THURSDAY:

"THE THIRD-FORMERS' RAID!"

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By
MARTIN CLIFFORD.

The lessons proceeded, but it was not long before the boy inventor had gone wandering again.

Harry Noble, otherwise Kangaroo, who sat on the other side of him, was the first to see it, and, wishing to keep his chum out of trouble, he whispered to him:

"Linton's watching you!"

Glyn did not appear to hear.

"Dummy!"

Still Glyn kept his eyes fixed in dreamy fashion straight in front of him.

"You'll be writing lines for the rest of your life if you don't look out. Wake up!"

"Noble, did you speak?" asked Mr. Linton suddenly.

"Yes, sir."

"Take fifty lines."

"Yes, sir."

And Kangaroo resolved that it was worse than useless to try and bring Glyn to his senses.

All the morning—it was Wednesday morning—he sat through the different lessons in this preoccupied state, and when at last class was dismissed, he got up from his seat and rushed headlong out of the room.

"Glyn!"

"Glyn, you bounder!"

"Glyn!"

"You lock that door, that's all!"

But the boy inventor took no notice of his study chums.

With all possible haste he reached the end study, and, diving into it, shut the door.

Kangaroo and Dane came up, just as it closed.

"He's locked it!"

"The ass!"

"Hi! Glyn, unlock this door!"

"Glyn, you ass, unlock this——"

Whir-r-r buzzzzz—whir!

"What on earth is the juggins doing?"

Kangaroo banged on the door.

Whir-r-r buzzzzz—whir-r-r!

"Guess he won't hear you, while he's making that shine!" said Buck Finn, the chum from America, who had stopped in passing to learn the cause of the commotion.

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus surveyed the ever increasing group of juniors through his monocle.

"Are you locked out, deah boys?"

"No, ass—we're locked in!"

"Should have thought you could have seen that, Gussy!"

"Kangawoo, I wufuse to be chawactewised as an ass, and I considah the west of your obsahvation beneath my notice! Will you——"

"Oh, ring off!"

"Go and eat coke, Gussy!"

"I wufuse to wing off and I decline to eat coke! Pway let me weach the door, deah boys, I want to speak to Glyn!"

"We'll smash this lock, so that he can't lock us out again!" said Kangaroo.

"A good wheeze," answered Dane. "This is not the first time."

Tap, tap, tap.

Arthur Augustus knocked gently on the door with his knuckles.

"Are you theah, deah boy?"

Whir-r-r buzzzzz—whir-r-r!

"Glyn, deah boy! Are you theah?"

"Ha, ha, ha—he'll hear that sure enough!" laughed Tom Merry, who being interested in Glyn until the delivery of the telescope that night, felt he must stay and watch the proceedings.

"Glyn, deah boy!"

"Glyn, Glyn!"

"You bounder, open this door!"

Bang, bang!

Crash! crash!

Bang, crash, bang!

Whir-r-r buzzzzz—whir-r-r!

Tap, tap, tap!

"Glyn, I want to ask you whethah you have finished my toppah ironah?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"Have you finished Gussy's toppeh ironer?" yelled the juniors in chorus.

Bang, crash, bang!

But although they hammered at the door again and again, both singly and in battalions, the only response was the whirring and buzzing of Glyn's small lathe within.

"I considah Glyn's conduct vewy wude. He most certainly should open the doah when I knock! I shall walk away, and take no futhrah notice of him. I wegard him as a wank wottah!"

And indeed, unless the juniors wished to spend the whole of their spare time before dinner in the passage, it seemed to them that they would be wise if they followed in the footsteps of Arthur Augustus.

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NEW STORY BOOK

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NOW ON SALE.

"I wonder what he's at in there, Monty?" said Tom Merry, as the Terrible Three moved across the quad.

"Making your telescope, I suppose!"

"No fear. He's going to do that at home, this afternoon."

"I hope he hasn't gone off to some new wheeze that will make him forget all about it," observed Manners.

"My hat, no."

"That would be where your wheeze would fail."

"Shut your head, Monty. The wheeze isn't going to fail."

"Don't worry, I'll help you through!"

Tom Merry sniffed.

They had worked everybody up to a pitch of excitement about Skimpole's Comet, the fellows of both houses catching on to it because it was supported and upheld by Tom Merry & Co., who were known usually to regard Skimpole as a bore, and his discoveries as bosh. Tom Merry & Co. had, however, openly advocated a meeting in the gym. to inspect the comet through the new telescope, and the juniors throughout the school began seriously to believe that Skimpole must have really discovered a comet.

The whole of the school were to be japed in return for the winking wheeze. It was a scheme that must be successful, unless—and the thought that caused Tom Merry's brow to become clouded—unless Glyn failed them over the fake telescope.

And Tom Merry knew what Glyn was, if by chance, he had got on to a new invention since the previous day.

"I think I'll go back and hammer away at his door!" said Tom Merry. "He must open it, if I knock long enough!"

But when Tom Merry, having re-entered the School House, was within a few yards of the end study door something happened which caused him some uneasiness.

Standing outside the door were Blake & Co.

Then the door opened and Blake & Co. filed in.

"My hat!" ejaculated Tom Merry.

Hurrying along the passage, he tried the door.

It was locked.

Loud laughter came from within.

"Unlock the door, please!" he cried.

"Yah! Go and eat coke!"

With knitted brow Tom Merry turned away.

"What's the giddy game, I wonder? Surely Glyn is not going over to their side—and with my wheeze too?"

He could not believe it. Yet the thought was disquieting.

CHAPTER 6.

Glyn's Mistake.

TOM MERRY'S alarm was by no means reduced when the juniors were seated around the dinner table and Mr. Linton called their attention to an absentee.

"Where's Glyn?" he asked.

All eyes were directed to the vacant chair.

Tom Merry looked at Blake & Co., and was startled, although he did not show it, at the pleased expression on their faces.

"Where is Glyn?" reiterated Mr. Linton testily, and he carefully scanned all the faces before him, with the peculiar gaze of a shortsighted person.

"Of course nobody answered. Nobody was expected to answer. It was a moment for everyone to hang upon the next word of the Shell-master.

Mr. Linton suddenly got up from his seat and left the table. Glyn's unusual inattention had annoyed him during the morning—probably nothing annoyed Mr. Linton more than listlessness on the part of a clever scholar. He, therefore, decided to go in search of Glyn, himself, and discover what was at the bottom of his extraordinary conduct.

"If Glyn upsets Linton and gets gated for this afternoon, our wheeze is all U. P.!" whispered Tom Merry to Lowther, when the master had left the room.

"Your wheeze," corrected Monty.

Tom Merry sniffed.

"He'll be just about in the middle of it, Herries," said Blake in a stage whisper that was obviously intended to carry as far as Tom Merry's ear.

"Yes. I wonder if he'll open the door to Linton."

"Yaas, wathah! Bai Jove, Hewwies, fancy thinking of refusing to open the doah to a mastah! It would be tewwibly wude, deah boy! I wondah why he hasn't come to dinnah?"

"Glyn doesn't remember such trifles when he is working on such an important thing," said Blake with an air of combined knowledge and importance.

The table was buzzing with subdued talk.

Where was Glyn?

That was the question.

Meanwhile Mr. Linton had reached the end study.

He turned the handle of the door—it was locked.

Mr. Linton frowned angrily and knocked with his knuckles.

"Buzz off, I'm busy!"

Glyn's voice rang out clearly on the Form-master's ear.

"What? Open this door at once, boy?"

Whir-r-r buzzzzz—whir-r-r!

"Do you hear me, Glyn? Open this door instantly!"
 "Go and eat coke! You imitate the voice very well, Tom Merry, but you can't jape me!"
 "Eat coke? Imitate—voice—Merry!" gasped Mr. Linton, "can't jape? Have you gone mad—?"

Whir-r-r buzzzzz—whir-r-r-r! sang the lathe.
 Mr. Linton's anger passed into fear for the Liverpools lad's sanity. He knew Glyn too well to suppose for a moment that he would go on in this way if he were in his right mind.

Suddenly the whirring ceased. There was a terrific clatter behind the locked door, a clatter which might have meant that a hundredweight of scrap iron were being tipped out of a sack into a box.

Mr. Linton listened in amazement.

"Glyn! Glyn!" he called.

"All right, ass! I'm finished now!"

"Eh? What!"

"Oh, kid, don't try to imitate—you can't—!"

"Kid? Imitate! Glyn, I'm Mr. Linton!"

"All right, Tom Merry—now then—"

The key turned in the lock; the door opened

"Now then, dum—"

Glyn, in place of Tom Merry, as he had expected, saw Mr. Linton.

The Shell-master looked anxiously into Glyn's face—it was grimy, and his hands were black.

"Glyn—what is the meaning of this outrageous conduct?"

"I—I—I'm extremely sorry, sir, but—!"

"Sorry—but what does it mean. What were those extraordinary exclamations you were making to me?"

"To you, sir? I thought Tom Merry was here jo-joking me, sir, just to get me to open the door! I apologise, sir! Had I known it was you, the door would have been opened instantly!"

"But why are you not at dinner?"

"Dinner, sir—has the bell—?"

"Dear me, Glyn! I shall have to think this over! Go and wash yourself, and come instantly to the table."

"Yes, sir."

Glyn hurried away.

"By Jove—and he didn't think to ask me what I was doing! Luck—luck isn't the word for it!" he muttered as he entered the bath-room.

When Mr. Linton returned to the table it was quite obvious that he was angry.

"The ass has upset him," whispered Tom Merry.

"Yes—no fake—!" began Manners.

"Sh—mum's the word!"

Anxiously Tom Merry & Co. watched the door for Glyn to enter.

What was to become of their telescope wheeze if Glyn could not go home to make the fake?

The hearts of the Terrible Three sank as they thought of it, and Monty Lowther, in spite of his banter felt the prospect as keenly as Tom Merry himself.

What would happen was cruelly plain.

The real telescope would be used—nothing would be seen, for it might be taken that Skimpole's comet was a mere chimera of the imagination—and the fellows would all turn round and rag Tom Merry & Co. for persuading them to come to the meeting.

The thought was unbearable.

Suddenly Glyn entered, and noiselessly he took his seat, with the air, at least so Tom Merry & Co. thought, of guilt plainly hanging about him.

Tom Merry observed that Mr. Linton kept his eye upon Glyn throughout the whole of the mealtime.

Something was wrong.

What was it?

At last the dinner was over.

"Glyn, I wish to speak to you in my study."

"We're done!" muttered Tom Merry.

"But no—Linton doesn't look so mad!"

In vain Tom Merry endeavoured to catch Glyn's eye.

Glyn seemed to be living in a dream.

"Well, what do you make of the giddy business?"

"Don't know, old son!" answered Monty when they were outside.

"Bai Jove! I wonder what Glyn has done? I hope he has not got in a row through makin' my toppah ironah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Blake.

"Your toppers do cause a lot of trouble!" said Herries.

"Toppahs are not so twoublesome as twowsahs, anyway, deah boy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ass!"

"I absolutely wufuse to be—!"

"Ring off, Gussy!"

"I wufuse to wing off! I considah that Hewwies is a wottah, and I am of a mind to administah a most feafshul thwashin' to him!"

Tom Merry & Co. followed Noble and Dane into the end study, to await the return of Glyn.

"Ah! You are there!" said Skimpole, entering suddenly.

"I have just come to remind you that my lecture accompanied by telescopic effects will begin at seven o'clock sharp, in the gym."

"Go and eat coke!"

"Really Noble—oh, here's D'Arcy. D'Arcy, I want to speak to you!"

"Yaas, deah boy?"

"As you have been the first in the school to put into practice the principles of Socialism which I have so long—"

"Wing off, deah boy!"

"So long advocated by presenting me, for the benefit of the community, with the funds wherewith to purchase a telescope by means of which the Skimpole Comet may become an accomplished fact, I—"

"Go and eat coke!"

"Travel!"

Biff!

A book missed Skimpole's head by an inch and struck the wall.

"I wanted to ask you, D'Arcy, whether you would take the chair at our gathering to-night?"

"Hear, hear!" shouted Tom Merry & Co.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old Gussy!"

"Bai Jove, deah boys, I wogard that as a vewy wippin' suggestion. It requires a person of tact and judgment to pweside ovah a meetin' of this desceiption, Skimmay, deah boy, and I shall be vewy pleased to fall in with your suggestion."

"I am much obliged to you, D'Arcy; and as I wish to get another chapter of my great work on Socialism completed by the evening, I will not waste further time here. I have already finished six hundred and thirty-three pages, so that—"

"Travel, Skimmay!"

"Really, Dane, I—"

"Travel!"

"Noble, I do not consid—"

But Skimpole, as he blinked at Noble and Dane, saw two books held threateningly above their heads. Without further demur he turned and hurried his little thin legs along the passage.

"Here comes Glyn."

"Yaas, wathah! I say, Glyn, deah boy, do you know that—?"

"What's up, Glyn?"

"Gated? Why didn't you turn up to din—"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, Kangawoo and—"

"What is it—impot?"

"Don't intewwupt me. I want to tell Glyn, deah boy, that I am taking the chair—"

"Take your hook!" said Glyn cheerily. "Linton's a—"

"Weally, Glyn, I decline—"

"Not gated, this afternoon?" asked Tom Merry anxiously.

"How could he be, with a grin like that?" asked Monty.

"No, I'm not gated, and I've got no impot!"

"Hurrah!"

"How did you manage it?"

"I didn't—"

"Tell us all!"

"Weally, deah boys, I wanted to tell—"

"Ring off, Gussy!"

"I wefuse to wing—"

"Linton's a brick. I just told him that I was hard at work on a model, and added my apologies, and he lectured me a little and let me off."

"I considah Linton is a bwick. And if—"

"Good old Linton!" cried Blake. "Now you'll be able to finish—eh?"

Tom Merry & Co. saw Blake's wink.

"Yes, kids. If you'll just travel out of here and leave me to myself, I shall—"

"I say, Glyn," said Tom Merry, in an undertone, "you won't forget that—"

"Rats! Get out of it! I'm busy!"

"I say, Glyn!"

"Didn't you hear him say he was busy?"

"I'll give you a thick ear, Blake!"

"You'll do what?"

"Give you a—"

"No, you won't!"

"I jolly well will!"

"Yah! Rotter! Shell—"

"Rush'em, Monty—Manners, on the ball!"

Tom Merry rushed at Blake and hugged him. Manners and Herries wrestled for the first advantage, and Monty rolled on the floor with Digby.

"Clear 'em out of here!" cried Glyn.

And the fellows of the end study set to work.

"Bai Jove, I considah this weally funnay, deah boys! It's a thwee-cornered fight!" exclaimed Gussy, surveying the melée through his monocle.

Scarcely had he finished speaking than Kangaroo yanked

Tom Merry and Blake out of the study while they were still struggling, as though they had been a bale of dry goods.

"Ow—grooh—you beastly wottahs!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, receiving them in the region of the waistcoat.

"Get out of the way, dummy!" gurgled Tom Merry, in muffled sounds that seemed to come from the right-hand pocket of Blake's jacket.

"I considah——"

But D'Arcy could get no further.

Noble, Dane, and Glyn sent Monty and Herries and Digby and Manners flying through the door, and then shut and locked it upon the struggling throng.

"Now, then, you kids!"

It was the voice of Kildare, the skipper of St. Jim's. Rushing up he seized the nearest ear between his thumb and finger. That ear belonged, as luck would have it, to the School House swell.

"Bai—ow—ooo—Kildare—ugh! Leggo!"

The next moment Gussy was sitting on the linoleum a few yards away, and the rest of the juniors had made it "pax" and scooted studywards.

"Weally, Kildare, I considah the tweat——"

"Ring off—get up—travel!"

"I weally must decline, Kildare!"

"Then I shall have to——"

"Ow—no—yaas—I'll get up!"

"Come on, then!"

"My clothes are all uttably wuined, and I considah——"

"Travel!"

"It is quite infwa dig, for the chairman of a——"

But Kildare, having seen to it that Arthur Augustus had got upon his feet, was hurrying away.

Much on his dignity, Arthur Augustus, after glaring at Kildare's retreating figure through his monocle, walked off to attend to his attire.

Meanwhile, Tom Merry sat on the corner of his study table, looking very ruffled and very disconsolate.

"He's shut himself in there again, Monty; and if what he's doing is important enough to make him forget his dinner, you may be certain it's heavy enough to make him forget his fake telescope!"

"It's rotten!" agreed Manners.

"I think it's a pity Skimpy discovered his comet."

"Why?"

"Because then you couldn't have thought of having a fake telescope. Would it relieve your feelings, old son, if I were to, say for instance, tar and feather Skimpole!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ass!"

"Asses carry people and things over rough roads."

"Oh, ring off, Monty! Look here!"

"Where, my son?"

"I'm going to write a note to Glyn, and shove it under his door. That'll remind him."

"Dear me! What a brilliant——"

"Shut up!"

Tom Merry was busy with paper and pen for a few minutes.

"Listen to this," he said presently.

"We are listening, Thomas."

"Dear Glyn,—Please don't forget that you promised to meet us at the lodge before the half-past six post comes in.—Yours, Tom Merry & Co."

"A wonderful piece of compo," said Monty.

"Give me an envelope, ass!"

"Now we'll shove this under his door, and watch for him to start off to his governor's place."

"Hear, hear!"

This plan was carried out, and Tom Merry & Co. returned to their study, where, with door ajar, they waited for some sign of Glyn, the boy inventor of St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 7.

The Comet Disappear

"WHAT is the boulder doing?" grumbled Tom Merry. "Making something, I should say," answered Manners.

"Likely as not—making something," agreed Lowther, speaking very slowly, and also very seriously.

"He must have read my note by now."

"Of course."

"If I had written it, he probably would."

"Ass! Shut up!"

The Terrible Three, filled with anxiety, waited during the next few minutes in silence.

"If we don't get that fake telescope——" began Manners.

"You'll have got us in a mess."

Tom Merry sniffed.

"Cave—here comes Railton!"

They dodged into the study.

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But Mr. Railton had seen them, and, wondering why they were hanging about the door of their study on a half holiday when the weather was fine, he stopped to inquire.

Manners was poking the fire—which had gone out—when he looked in. Tom Merry was standing with his hands in his pockets as though he was waiting for Manners. Monty Lowther was looking out of the window.

"What is keeping you boys in?" inquired Mr. Railton kindly.

"We're waiting—er——"

"Yes, sir, waiting——"

The Terrible Three spoke as nearly together as could be, and as their words were different, Mr. Railton thought there must be something wrong.

"What is it, Merry?"

"Just waiting for Glyn, sir."

"Glyn? Ah! Glyn must not work so hard over his mechanical figures and other contrivances. He must get out into the air more. Ah!"

Mr. Railton suddenly stopped speaking, and looked along the passage. The end study door opened.

Harry Noble was the first to come out, and he was holding his nose firmly between his thumb and finger.

Following close upon his heels came Dane. He also was holding his nose.

Then came Glyn's loud laugh, echoing along the passage.

"I do feel awfud!" said Noble, pinching his nose tight.

"Shocked!" agreed Dane.

"I'll have hib oud of the study."

"Yes; he isn't fid to be thered!"

"Id's the worst sting I ever smeld!"

"Noble! Dane! What's the matter?" inquired Mr. Railton, whom they had not seen as yet.

Noble's hand left his nose.

"Oh, I beg—ah, tissue!"

"It's GI—tissue! Ah-ah-ah-tissue!"

The sneezes of Noble and Dane were heard by Tom Merry & Co., who tried to see what was happening without bumping against Mr. Railton.

"Dear me! You have caught colds—ah-ah-tissue!"

A weird, gaseous odour was now floating freely along from the end study.

"Ah-ah-tissue!" sneezed Tom Merry.

"What—what—ah-tissue!" went Lowther.

"Tissue, tissue, tissue!" added Manners.

"Ha, ha, ha!" came Glyn's laughter.

"What is the mean—ah-ah-tissue!—of this?" asked Mr. Railton. "What—ah-tissue!"

Suddenly Glyn, black and grimy, appeared at the door of the end study.

"Ah, ah, ah! Oh, I beg your pardon, sir! I'll open the window! I didn't know you were there, sir!"

Glyn dived into the study again, and the clatter of the window being opened was plainly heard.

"Ah-tis-tis-ah-tissue!" sneezed Tom Merry & Co.

"A-tis-a-tis-ah-ah-tissue!" went the House-master.

"It's only the fumes from an acid I've been using on some metal, sir. I'm very sorry if it has caused you inconvenience," said Glyn, running out again.

"Glyn, you must get out into the air. You'll poi-poi-ah-tissue-poison yourself if you—ah-tissue!"

"Yes, sir, I will."

Mr. Railton went away towards the door leading to the quad, and his sneezing could be heard as he made his way.

"You giddy ass!" said Tom Merry. "What have you been doing?"

"Working."

"What about our fake?"

"I've just got your note," answered the inventor. "I'm going up to my place now, and I'll be back just after six."

"Will you?" said Tom Merry anxiously.

"Yes."

"What have you been doing in there?"

"Working."

"What at?"

"As the particular work does not concern you I shall not say what I have been doing."

Tom Merry sniffed.

"He's had a bright idea, and it's set fire to his brains," said Lowther. "Pooh—what a smell!"

Meanwhile, Noble and Dane had rushed out into the fresh air.

"You'll have our wheeze all right then?" asked Tom Merry, still anxious.

"Yes. Ta-ta!"

And so Glyn went.

"He's got something on as well, though," said Lowther thoughtfully, as the Terrible Three made their way out.

"Yes. It's a winking wheeze, I expect."

Tom Merry's retort was given in a more cheerful tone than he had spoken in for some time.

Glyn was not going to fail them, after all. Still this fact notwithstanding, Tom Merry was feeling anxious. Everything seemed to point to the suggestion that Glyn had been working for Blake & Co.

What had Blake & Co. in store for them?

"Merry, Merry, may I speak to you for a moment?"

Tom Merry looked round, as he walked across the quad with Lowther and Manners, and beheld Skimpole hurrying with short, jerky steps towards them, blinking as he came.

"You may; but whether I shall listen or not is another—"

"Really, Merry, it is most important. I shall not detain you a minute."

"He's found another comet."

"Really I wish I had, Lowther, but—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I see no reason for mirth, Manners! A disorganisation in the celestial regions is—"

"My hat!"

"A what in the which?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I was about to say that a disorganisation in the celestial regions is a very serious thing, and from observations which I have just carefully recorded upon a sensitised plate, it would appear that the Skimpole Comet, which I recently discovered, has deviated from its accustomed path, and, for the time being, remains hidden from—"

"Save all that for the meeting to-night, Skimmy."

"But that is just the point, Merry, you see—"

"Go and eat coke!"

"Really, Lowther, what I wish to say, if you would be so kind as to listen, is that it will be quite useless to have the meeting as arranged—"

"What?"

"What's that, Skimmy?"

"You ass!"

"Really, I am afraid it will be quite useless, because under the new conditions which have arisen in the firmaments, I fear that the Skimpole Comet will not be visible for another century or so. But, of course—"

"My only Aunt Jane!"

"A what?"

"A century?"

"You will realise that, inasmuch as I am not in supreme control of the celestial regions, I am quite blameless in the matter. The Skimpole Comet, having come within the range of my vision for upwards of forty-eight hours, has suddenly—"

"Travelled at an enormous velocity," concluded Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Look here, Skimmy, you've got to find that comet before the meeting to-night!"

"Really, Merry, I—"

"Which way did it go?" asked Lowther, shading his brows with his hands and looking skywards.

"Towards the south-west. I was—"

"Then get on a 'bus and go after it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Lowther, I do not think you quite realise the—"

"Try a flying ship then, or hold a bit of toasted cheese on a fork. Don't let your comet go without ever making an effort to keep it. I wouldn't—would you, Manners?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look here, Skimmy, if you say another word about that comet having gone away before the meeting to-night in the gym. I'll jolly well—"

"But really, Merry, if the comet has gone, don't you see that I can't help it. My suggestion is—"

"Ass! The comet has not gone," said Lowther.

"No, we've pledged our giddy word there's going to be a comet, and the fellows are jolly well going to look through the telescope and see the comet. Understand?"

"But, Merry, it's quite useless for me to try and persuade a youth of your intelligence—ow—leggo!"

"Don't talk rot, then," said Tom Merry, releasing Skimpole's ear. "The comet's got to be at the meeting to-night."

"Of course, Merry, if you persist, well it must. But after D'Arcy has taken the chair I propose to apologise for the unexpected disappearance of the comet and take the opportunity of reading a few chapters to the meeting from my book on Socialism. That seems to me the best—"

"Bosh!"

"Rats!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You're tempting providence!" said Tom Merry seriously, holding a forefinger in close proximity to Skimpole's nose.

"You're going to do nothing of the kind! You're going to explain the comet, and the fellows are going to look through the telescope and see it!"

"But—"

"No good butting!"

"How would it be if you advertised in the 'Wayland Times,' Anyone bringing Skimpole's Comet to St. Jim's will be rewarded?" suggested Lowther.

23-29, Bouverie Street,
LONDON,
E.C.

My Dear Reader,

I am under considerable obligation to you for many little acts of kindness, such as personal recommendations of this story book to your friends and letters of criticism and congratulation.

I am now going to trespass still further on your good nature, and I hope that when you have carried out my desire that you will feel in some measure compensated for your time and trouble.

To be brief I want you to get a copy of my new paper the Empire Library.

When you have read the tale of Gordon Gay, drop me a postcard, and let me know exactly what you think of the story, and also do me the further favour of handing your copy of the Empire Library to a friend, or if you do not want to part with it just mention my new book with a word of appreciation.

Yours sincerely,

THE EDITOR.

P.S.--You will understand why I say you will be compensated for your time and trouble when you have read the tale of Gordon Gay.

"You ought to have put its name and address on its collar before you let it go," said Manners.

"Really, I fail to see—"

"Your comet? Very well," said Tom Merry, "whether you can see it or not, you've got to get it into your fat head that it's still there. And when the telescope comes—it's sure to be a powerful one—you'll see it all right enough."

"But, you see, Merry, my calculations show—"

"You to be a fatheaded duffer!"

"Really, Merry—"

"Go and eat coke! I'm certain your comet is still in range! Anyway, if you dare breathe a word to the contrary, I'll make pie of you!"

Skimpole blinked.

He could not understand the keenness of Tom Merry & Co. He knew nothing of the jape they had in mind, and if he had known of it, he would not have understood why it was imperative that the meeting must take place.

"Very well, Merry," he said, after blinking for a few moments, "we'll hold the meeting, and erect the telescope as suggested, and then, if the Skimpole Comet has disap—"

"You'll get a thick ear!"

"From each of us!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'll read some chapters of my—"

"Ring off, you ass!"

"Go and dress for the meeting!"

"Bye-bye, Skimmy! I'll give the comet a leg up if I meet it. Ta-ta!"

And the Terrible Three walked away, leaving Skimpole talking volubly to the air.

CHAPTER 8.

Arranging the Meeting.

"AS Gussy is taking the chair to-night," said Herries, "I think we in this study ought to support him to our utmost."

"Yaas wathah, deah boy!"

"And so you're thinking of taking Towser, eh?" asked Blake.

"Eh?" murmured Digby.

"No. But I thought—"

"Bai Jove, Hewwies, I can't have a beastly bulldog at a meetin' where I'm in the chair! It would be extremely pweb. that an upwoar would weseult, and I—"

"Especially if a mongrel—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look here, Blake, Towser is a thoro—"

"Yes, we know that. But all the same, Herries, if you really wouldn't mind, we should much rather Towser were left behind."

"It would weally put me in a most awkward posish, you see, deah boy, Towsah comin' from this study."

"I wasn't thinking about Towser—"

"Then you're a very unkind sort of person to own a dog."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Rats—"

"Look here, I'm not Towser!"

"Oh, shut up. What I thought was, that as our study is supplying the chairman, we might also supply the orchestra."

"Bai Jove, Hewwies, I considah that a weally wippin' ideah! I could sing—"

"Ass!" said Blake. "You're the chairman, not a beastly street singer."

"Weally, Blake—"

"You see," persisted Herries, "there's my cornet, and—"

"And you let it remain there!"

"And there's your mouth-organ, Blake."

"Ye-s. There is, certainly," said Blake, mollified.

"And if Figgy brought his 'cello over—"

"Yaas, wathah! A little music would certainly help. Of course, Hewwies, deah boy, you wouldn't want to play the cornet all the time—"

"No, just an overture—"

"Oh! That all?" asked Digby

"And then there would be no music while the chairman makes his remarks—"

"Speech, deah boy! It's a speech—not wemarks."

"But, of course, we should play our hardest while Skimmy is giving his lecture!" suggested Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Not while I'm in the chair, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus, with dignity.

"You'll be yanked out of it long before that, if you have any luck!" laughed Blake.

"Weally, Blake—"

"And then, of course, I could play a cornet solo while the fellows are looking at the comet."

"Oh, could you?"

"And you, Blake, could follow with a selection on the mouth-organ."

"Ye-s; I could, of course. It would help."

"Figgy could follow with his 'cello, and then, after the chairman—"

"Comes to!"

"Weally!"

"After the chairman has made his closing observations—"

"Speech, deah boy—not obsahvations!"

"What, another speech, Gussy?"

"The meeting won't stand it."

"Weally, deah boys—"

"And then we could wind up with 'God Save the King.'"

"It might go all right if there was no audience," said Digby quietly. "But there's a risk when you've got a crowd of kids, without one ear for music between them."

"It seems a wippin' ideah to me."

"Right-ho!" agreed Blake at last—"so long as Herries doesn't forget to stop playing—"

"I'll get over and see Figgy about it," interrupted Herries.

"It looks to me as though the meeting to-night will be a memorable occasion," said Digby.

"Are you there, D'Arcy?"

It was Skimpole, who, his eyes blinking more quickly than usual, entered the study at that moment.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Well, I am afraid, D'Arcy, that the character of the meeting for to-night will have to be entirely altered. And I should be much obliged if you would in your opening announcement—"

"Speech, deah boy. It's a speech, not a beastly announcement."

"Yes, D'Arcy. In your opening speech, would inform the meeting that, owing to an unexpected disturbance in the celestial regions, the Skimpole Comet, travelling at a stupendous velocity, has disappeared."

"What?"

"Eh?"

"Weally, Skimmy, deah boy, I can't—"

"Really, D'Arcy, as a matter of scientific fact, the comet has travelled out of its customary orbit, and is no longer visible. A sensitised plate which I—"

"Skimmy, you're an ass!"

"A chump!"

"If you mean to tell me, aftah announcin' me as chairman of your meetin', that the beastly Skimpole Comet has vanished, I considah you a wank outsidah!"

"Hear, hear! After getting the support of Study 6 too!"

"Rotten!"

"But, you see, it will really make no dif—"

"Oh!"

"That's all right, then."

"No, it will really make no difference, because instead of showing them the comet, you will announce, D'Arcy, that 'Mr. Skimpole will read a few chapters from his great work on Socialism, of which he has already completed—'"

"And at the same time, Herries can play his solo on the cornet, and he must be careful to select one long enough to last the meeting out while Mr. Skimpole reads," added Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Really, Blake—"

"Skimmy," said Arthur Augustus, adjusting his monocle, and bestowing a withering glance upon the genius of the Shell, "you are an uttah ass! I—"

"Really, D'Arcy—"

"I considah that you have placed me in a most awkward posish. I have pwomised to take the chair to-night, and take the beastly chair I must! The meetin' will be fwightfully upset at your conduct in losing sight of your comet. It is fortunate, Skimmy, for you that you have a chairman of tact and judgment. You will certainly not have my permish, to read fwom your beastly book. The only thing for you to do, Skimmy, is to pweserve uttah silence, and leave everything to me. I shall endeavah to make my speech last the whole of the evening."

"Eh?"

"What?"

"Really, D'Arcy, I—"

Another 26-page Tale of

Tom Merry & Co.

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Next
Week.



Arthur Augustus knocked gently on the locked door of Glyn's study. "Are you theah, Glyn?" he cried. "Glyn, deah boy, are you theah?" But the only sound that came from the study was the whirr and buzz of the St. Jim's inventor's lathe.

"That, deah boys, is the only way in which this situation can be handled with tact and judgment. But, Skimmay, if, even with that, the meetin' should take unbwege at the beastly deception you have pwactised, my advice to you is that you wun like anythin'! Your conduct, Skimmay, is most wepwehensible, and I considah——"

"Ring off, Gussy!" said Blake. "This is not the meet- ing."

"Really, D'Arcy—Blake——"

"Travel, Skimmay! You've got to obey the chairman's ruling. Study No. 6 is not going to be made look silly by you. Hook it!"

"Really, I——"

"Travel!"

For a moment Skimpole stood blinking. Then, seeing that Blake reached his right hand out towards a pot of ink, he acted in accordance with the dictates of discretion, and hurriedly retired. Skimpole stood blinking again outside the door; but coming at length to the conclusion that perhaps, after all, he was running the risk of considerable personal inconvenience by going around telling the fellows of the loss of his comet, he decided to shut himself up in his study until the time for the opening of the meeting. Judging from the way in which Tom Merry and D'Arcy had taken the news, he considered that he would be more likely to succeed in inflicting his great work on Socialism upon the audience if he said nothing further about it until he was on the platform.

Meanwhile, the coming meeting was being discussed by Figgins & Co. of the New House.

"What they want is a good chairman," said Figgy, stretching his long, lanky figure to its full height.

"Of course," said Kerr.

"And there ought to be refreshments handed round during the lecture," added Fatty Wynn.

"Trust you for thinking of the grub."

"Well, Figgy, I do get so hungry at these affairs, and especially in this weather."

"Or any other kind of affairs or weather! But it's the chairman that's really got to be arranged. Of course, as we're going over just to help them through——"

"They really ought to provide some refresh——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"As I was going to say, the chairman ought to be selected from this study, so that the dignity of the New House is properly maintained. Of course, I don't see how they can raise any objection; but if they do, Kerr, you might just get up and propose me."

Just then—they were walking across the quad.—Herries came up.

"Hallo, School House kid! What do you want?"

"It's pax," said Herries.

"Towser ill?" asked Figgy.

"No. I haven't come to lark about Towser, but——"

"For the first time in your life."

"Look here, don't rag," answered Herries. "Towser's all right; you may leave him alone."

"I thought you hadn't come to talk about him."

"Look here, I want to ask you whether you would like to make one of our orchestra for the meeting to-night?"

"Which?"

"Your what?"

"Can't we talk it over in the tuckshop?" asked Fatty.

"Our orchestra. You see, I'm going to give a cornet solo to help the meeting through, and Blake's going to play his mouth-organ, so we thought——"

"We're very sorry, but we can't come."

"Important engagement."

"Figgy will give us a feed instead."

"Oh, well, of course we can do very well without you, but we thought you might like to give us a selection on the 'cello."
 "Well—er—of course, that would help the meeting," said Figgy, in an altered tone.

"I'd much rather have a feed."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You see," went on Figgins slowly, "I had decided to take the chair if I came, and, knowing how these things should be done, I can't very well be both in the orchestra and in the chair. The meeting wants a good chairman, and yet, at the same time, I don't see how you can do without the 'cello in the orchestra."

"There's no need for you to worry about the chairman," said Herries. "That's been arranged already."

"What do you mean?"

"D'Arcy is taking the chair."

"What?"

"Eh? D'Arcy?"

"He's standing the feed."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Of course, that's absurd," said Figgins.

"Rot!" agreed Kerr.

"Anyway, it's all settled; and of course, if you feel sore about it, Figgy, you needn't come. I can give an extra solo on the cornet."

"Look here, Herries, you're taking rot! I'll tell you what we'll do. I'll lead the orchestra, and Kerr here can act as chairman—can't you, Kerr?"

"Yes."

"Couldn't we talk this over in the tuckshop?" asked Wynn again. "I'm most awfully hungry."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You're always hungry."

"As far as the chairman goes," said Herries, "I don't mind much, although it really should be a School House fellow."

"Rats!"

"Bosh!"

"I am hang——"

"But when you talk about a 'cello leading the orchestra, why, it's simply rot! A cornet is the——"

"Bosh!"

"You'd better both play what you like, and play together, so as to get it over quick," said Kerr.

"Could you lend me half a crown?" asked Fatty. "I'm most awfully hungry."

"No, I can't. Anyway, Figgy, we'll settle it all to-night; and if there's going to be any trouble, we'll do without a leader."

"That's it," said Kerr, with a grin. "Toe the line altogether, and on the word 'Go,' make a dash for it. The first one to finish takes the biscuit."

"Oh, are there going to be any biscuits?" asked Fatty.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Right-ho! We'll arrange it all to-night when we're ready to start."

And Herries hurried back to the School House.

CHAPTER 9.

The Telescope.

"ALL that is necessary to make a wheeze a success is someone to manage it properly," said Tom Merry, when the Terrible Three were preparing tea in the study.

"Precisely," said Lowther; "and for that very reason, the winking business was a good wheeze spoiled."

"What do you mean?" asked Tom Merry, putting four heaped-up spoonfuls of tea into the pot.

"Well, you see, I had to depend on you and Manners here for assistance in carrying out the wheeze."

"Of course, that's one of your little jokes," said Manners.

"This wheeze for to-night is going to be a great success."

"If, of course, Glyn turns up all serene with the fake telescope."

"He'll do that right enough. Glyn can do anything in that line. But all the same, kids, I wish we knew what he's got on with Blake & Co."

"You'll find out all about it—when it's too late!"

"You'll get a thick ear! Where's the jam?"

"I put it in that cricket bag yesterday."

"Ass! It'll be—— Ugh! Look here!"

Tom Merry had opened the bag and found that the jam had run all over the stumps.

"Is this another of your beastly jokes, Monty?"

"Oh, go and eat coke! There's still plenty in the jar."

"What, coke in the jar?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"No; jam."

"There's only one thing to be settled about that meeting to-night," went on Tom Merry, when he had rescued the jam-pot, "and, of course, that will settle itself automatically."

"And what's that?"

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"The chairman."

"What, an automatic chairman?"

"Ha, ha, ha! Good for you, Monty," laughed Manners. "Isn't Gussy in the chair?"

"No, ass. I shall be the chairman, of course."

"Of course," agreed Monty, in a humorous tone.

"Of course," added Manners.

"As I'm looking after the arrangements, there won't be any difficulty about that. It's quite absurd to think of having a No. 6 Study chap in the chair, but, of course, I didn't want to hurt Gussy's feelings when Skimpole suggested him."

"Wouldn't it be better to have a humorous chairman?" asked Lowther.

"What, like yourself?"

"Well, of course, I shouldn't mind, just to oblige."

"We don't want this select and scientific meeting turned into a riot, my son."

"There's nothing like a humorous chairman, say what you like. I remember a jolly funny story of a——"

"Pass me the butter," interrupted Tom Merry, seating himself at the table.

"A jolly funny story of a man. He was a tremendously stout man, who wore most wonderful——"

"Pass that knife, old son."

"Wore the most wonderful check trousers," went on Lowther, passing the knife, and taking the interruption in good part.

"One day he went to a meeting——"

"In his check trousers?"

"Well, I don't know. But that isn't part of the story. He went to the meeting, and when he got there——"

"He took the chair," interrupted Tom Merry.

"So the audience had none," added Manners.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Don't rot! How can I tell a yarn while you're rotting."

"We don't know how you can, or why you should. Let's have the bread over here."

"Anyway," went on Monty, "he went to the meeting, and when he got there there wasn't any meeting. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" chorussed Tom Merry and Manners.

"How could he go to the meeting if there wasn't one?" asked Tom Merry, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes.

"Ass! That's the joke—see!"

"But you said he went to a meeting."

"Yes."

"In check trousers."

"Hang his trousers! That's nothing beyond an item of information about the man."

"Anyway, he went to the meeting?"

"Yes."

"And yet there wasn't any meeting!"

"Exactly! That's the point of the joke."

"Manners," said Tom Merry gravely, "Monty's gone off his chump."

"That's obvious."

"It's you asses who've gone off. You can't see the joke."

"No, we can't. That joke's like the meeting—there wasn't any."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

When they had finished tea the Terrible Three repaired to the gym. to get things arranged for the meeting. A platform was improvised with boxes from the box-room, arranged beneath the window through which the telescope was to be focussed, and a chair for the chairman, a table with water-bottle and glass upon it, and a second chair for Skimpole completed the arrangements.

Wally D'Arcy, the inky-fingered fag of the Third, with his chums, Jameson and Curly Gibson, looked in and made the air rattle with questions and remarks, until Tom Merry & Co. yanked them out into the passage. But the majority of the fellows were out in the fields, so that the Terrible Three were permitted to finish their work without much hindrance.

"Now we'll get down to Taggles," said Tom Merry, "and intercept the post."

"What, the lamp-post?" asked Lowther, with well-affected innocence.

"Ass! The letter-post!"

"Oh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hallo, you youngsters! What's the game?"

The Terrible Three looked towards the door, and saw Kildare, captain of St. Jim's, regarding them and their work with unquestionable suspicion.

"We're just getting ready for the meeting to-night," answered Tom Merry.

"Yes," put in Manners. "The meeting, you know, about Skimpole's Comet."

"Yes, Kildare. He's got a new telescope, and the kids are coming to see it——"

"To see the comet."

Now, for the Terrible Three to be arranging a meeting for the purpose of discussing so dry a subject as a comet struck the

skipper of St. Jim's as being most curious, and that there must be something behind it became in his mind a conviction at once.

"No disturbances, you know," he said. "I shall look in and see what you're up to."

"We sha'n't make a disturbance, Kildare," said Tom Merry, apparently appalled at the idea.

"Of course not," said Manners.

"Nothing farther from our minds," added Monty Lowther.

"I suppose not," smiled Kildare. "But look out if you do, that's all!"

"Good old Kildare!" muttered Tom Merry, as the captain disappeared. "He's a splendid chap!"

Everything in the gym, being now ready, Tom Merry & Co. made their way to Taggles's lodge.

"Hallo, Taggy! The post come in yet?"

"No, Master Merry," growled Taggles.

"You've been drinking again—it's written all over your nose," said Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you don't give it up, Taggy, you'll be a danger to St. Jim's. Your nose will set fire to something."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Taggles was in an exceedingly grumpy humour, and Monty's jests made him worse. As Tom Merry wanted to make some use of him, he asked Manners a question which past experience had proved would mollify him.

"Lend me a shilling, Manners, will you?"

"Certainly, Tom Merry! Coming over!"

The coin spun through the air, followed by Taggles's glance, his face brightening up considerably.

Tom Merry caught the shilling, and held it in the palm of his hand. Taggles's eyes travelled from the useful coin to Tom Merry's face and back again, with feverish anxiety, before another word was spoken.

"You're sure the post hasn't come in yet, Taggles?"

"Which I'm quite sure, Master Merry."

"Right-ho!" said Tom Merry, suddenly putting the shilling in his pocket.

Taggles's face darkened.

"What time do you expect the post, Taggles?"

"Which I don't know," answered the porter grumpily.

"Oh, I forgot!" said Tom Merry, pulling the shilling out again and holding it in the palm of his hand as before.

The expression on Taggles's face changed immediately.

Monty Lowther and Manners grinned.

"When did you say you expected the post, Taggles?"

"Which it might come at any moment, Master Merry." The voice was cheery again now. "It can't be long now."

"Very well. I'm expecting a parcel, a sort of long roll like a telescope, addressed to Master Skimpole. When it comes you might forget to take it upstairs until to-morrow morning, will you?"

With his eyes on the shilling, Taggles replied:

"Which I will, Master Merry."

"There you are, then. There's a shilling! To-morrow morning when you deliver the parcel I'll give you another. But, mind, you're not to deliver it before the morning."

"Which I'll see to, Master Merry, thanking you very much."

With that the Terrible Three strolled out into the road, looking out anxiously for some sign of Glyn, who was now about due.

"Hallo!" suddenly exclaimed Tom Merry. "That looks like Mr. Glyn's trap, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"It is."

Eagerly they watched the trap.

"Miss Glyn is driving Bernard back."

"My hat! What's that thing like a scaffold pole standing up in the trap?"

"My only hat! It's the——"

"It's the fake. But look at the size of it!"

The juniors stared in amazement, for as the trap drew nearer they saw that Glyn held upright between his knees a telescope which stood about six feet in height.

Tom Merry & Co. raised their caps as the trap drew up, and exchanged greetings with Miss Glyn.

"Thanks awfully for driving me over, sis," said the boy inventor. And then, turning to Tom Merry & Co., he cried:

"Catch hold of this, kids!"

Three pairs of ready hands, directed by eager minds, seized hold of the enormous "fake," whilst Glyn sprang into the road.

"Good-bye!" said Miss Glyn. "I have to hurry back."

"Good-bye!" chorussed the juniors, raising their caps.

"It's awfully kind of you, Miss Glyn," said Tom Merry, "to have driven over with this."

The young lady waved her whip, and smiled in acknowledgment of the thanks, and the next moment the smart trap was clattering back towards the beautiful mansion occupied by the Liverpool millionaire.

"My hat, Glyn, this is stunning!" said Tom Merry.

"Ripping!"

"Splendid!"

"I thought it would please you."

"Please us! My hat, it's beautifully done! I should have taken it for real."

"You haven't done all that this afternoon, have you?" asked Manners.

"No. When I got home I remembered that I once made a property telescope for some theatricals, so I dug it out, and converted it to this."

"And how does it work—the light in the end, I mean?"

"Oh, there's a small battery inside, and when you've rigged it up on this stand"—Glyn indicated a parcel he carried and which, in their excitement, they had overlooked—"you pull out the top end, and that presses home the switch that sets the light going—see?"

"It's ripping! But what do you say that is?"

"A stand—a folding stand. I converted it from a camera stand."

"Well, all I can say is, Glyn my son, that you're a brick, and the whole thing is stunning!"

"Hallo—and look here! He's even gone to the trouble of putting a label on, addressed to Skimmy!" said Monty.

"Yes. You wanted him to think it was coming by carrier or post, didn't you?"

"Yes—that's a splendid wheeze."

"Well, I must get upstairs; time's getting on. I'll come into the gym, presently, and rig up this stand for you."

"Right-ho!"

Shouldering the huge "fake," Tom Merry marched into the quad.

"Hallo?" cried Wally of the Third, "What's that?"

Juniors rushed from all quarters to see the telescope.

"Don't let 'em come too close, Monty, in case they spot anything wrong with it."

"Hop off you kids—you'll see all in good time."

"Bai jove, what is that?"

Arthur Augustus, coming up at that moment, jammed his monocle into his eye, and surveyed Tom Merry's burden.

"Your present to Skimmy, my son; it's just come!"

"Bai jove, what a tremendous telescope. But I can't make it out, deah boys."

"Can't make what out?"

"Why that, Tom Mewvy. They surely can't make a gweat thing like that for fifteen shillings!"

"More like fifteen guineas, I should say," said Blake. "It's a beauty."

"Perhaps they'll send you the bill for the balance!" said Monty.

"Bai jove, I shall have to write to my governah for funds if they do."

The procession passed on, gathering to a crowd of fifty or sixty by the time Tom Merry reached the gym.

"Keep these kids outside until we've fixed it up, Monty," said Tom Merry, and, acting quickly, Monty Lowther and Manners shut and locked the gym door in the faces of the eager crowd of juniors.

"Hi, open this door!"

Bang, crash, bang!

"Open the door, you Shellfish!"

"Let's come in!"

Bang, bang, crash!

"Yah, wait till the meeting starts, my sons!" cried Tom Merry.

For a few moments there was a terrible uproar, then, finding it to no purpose, the juniors gradually dispersed, fearing that if they did not do so they would bring Kildare down upon them, and that the meeting about which they were now so eager, would be prevented in the cause of law and order.

Presently Glyn came to the door, and was carefully smuggled in.

No sooner had they got to work on erecting the stand, than there was a short, sharp rap at the door.

"Tom Merry!"

"It's Skimmy," whispered Tom Merry.

"You can't come in, Skimmy!"

"Really, Tom Merry. I think this proceeding is most unusual."

"What proceeding, Skimmy?"

"I hear that you have secured my telescope. Surely it should have come to me in the usual manner!"

"Go and eat coke!"

"Really, Lowther, you are very rude. Besides, without my assistance it is impossible to focus the telescope right! Moreover, it is perfectly useless to focus it at all because the Skimpole Comet has dis——"

"Shut up, Skimmy! Don't you dare say a word about that, my son, or I'll——"

"Really I——"

"Let him in," whispered Tom Merry to Manners, "he'll only yell out about the comet having disappeared."

Manners opened the door gently, and Skimpole ran into the

gym. with his peculiar little short step, whilst Manners skilfully closed the door after him, before any of the fellows still remaining in the passage could enter.

Skimpole had expected to see a telescope about a foot in length, and his amazement at what he did see, caused him to blink through his huge spectacles as he had never blinked before.

"You see, ass," said Tom Merry, "with an instrument like this your comet is bound to be brought within range of our vision."

"Really, it is a splendid telescope. Even under Socialism one would not get a much better one——"

"Without buying it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You had better let me adjust it, Tom Merry. It's awfully good of you and Glyn, but of course you do not understand what are the essential factors in a case like this."

As Skimpole said this, he advanced towards the platform, blinking in a perfectly indescribable way.

Just as he was raising one of his short weedy legs to step up, Tom Merry seized him by the collar, and dragged him backwards.

"Ow—oo—oh—garooch!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Lemme go! Leggo, Merry!"

"Look here, my son," said Tom Merry, still holding Skimpole firmly by the collar, "we don't want this meeting messed up after we've taken all the trouble we possibly could. So you just go and stand over there in that corner."

"Really, Merry, it is quite impossible for you to adjust a scientific instrument without my assistance. I—ow—oo!"

"Shut up then! Go and stand in that corner, or get outside altogether."

"But, Merry, this is my telescope, and I am the lecturer——"

"Can't help that, old son. Your turn's coming this evening, and just now, as you can see for yourself, Bernard Glyn is getting on splendidly without your interference!"

"Yes, you needn't worry," said Glyn, pausing a moment in the work of fitting up the stand, "I'll get it all set for you, and as the telescope is fitted with an adjuster and a swivel, you'll be able to turn it round and about until you get it focussed on the Skimpole Comet."

Bernard Glyn knew quite well that there was a danger, if Skimpole was allowed to come too near while it was still daylight, of his discovering that this was only a fake instrument, and so, to meet the case, he had made the above observation.

"Now you understand," said Tom Merry.

"But really I should be of such great use to you——"

"Rats!"

"Really, Merry——"

"Oh, travel!"

"I want to arrange——"

"Go and eat coke!"

"Ow—ugh—gorooch!"

Skimpole catching one foot behind the other, after Tom Merry had suddenly released his collar, stumbled on a few steps, bumped into a post, and then sat down upon the floor.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Now, perhaps, you'll travel!"

"Really I——"

"Get over there, where you can see all that's going on without interfering with our work!"

And Skimpole, his collar rumped, and his clothes dusty, at last, finding nothing else open to him, obeyed, and from the corner blinked at the gigantic telescope which he believed Arthur Augustus had sent him.

Glyn, his heart and soul in the work, at which indeed he was a genius, worked away with a will.

"Now, if you chaps will open the window a bit," he said at length, "we'll rest the end of the 'scope on the sash, so that it's about four inches outside. Then, you see, the centre being on the pivot, Professor Skimpole will be able to adjust it when the meeting arrives. You said towards the south-west, didn't you, Skimmy?"

"I'll come——"

"No, you won't, ass. Was it the south-west?"

"Yes."

"Right—ho! Shove it a few inches to the left, Tom!"

"Good. Now it's all fixed—eh?"

"Yes. I'll attend, if you chaps don't mind, on the platform to pull out the lower tube, and show Skimmy his comet!" whispered Glyn, with a grin.

"Right—ho!"

"It won't do to leave the gym," said Manners.

"Not much, some of those bounders would be getting in and playing japes with Skimmy's telescope."

"We've got to stop here and watch it."

"Perhaps Monty will tell us another funny story about a meeting?" suggested Tom Merry, with a grin.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You didn't hear that story, Glyn, did you?" asked Manners.

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"No. What was it?"

"Tell him, Monty."

"Hold on while I stuff my ears up!" said Tom Merry.

"It's useless to tell a funny story before these kids—they can't see a joke. But——"

"Not unless there is one."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But I'll tell you one day when you're alone, Glyn."

"Can't be did, my boy!"

"Why?"

"Because you can't tell me the story unless you are with me, and in that case I sha'n't be alone."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the juniors.

"Hallo, what's that row?"

Tom Merry sprang up on the platform and rushed to the window, followed by Manners, Lowther and Glyn.

"My hat!"

"My only Aunt Jane, look!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"They're coming to the meeting!"

A crowd of New House juniors was coming across the quad, headed by Figgins & Co., Figgy carrying his 'cello!

"But what's the dummy bringing that instrument of torture for?"

"Looks as if he's going to give us a tune!"

"My hat, this meeting has caught on with a vengeance!"

"We could have done without the music," said Lowther.

"Not at all, my son. The more enthusiastic they are, the greater the jape."

"Shut up—Skimmy's near!"

"Oh! Well, it doesn't matter; he's too clever to know what jape means. But time's going. We'll open the door now. Taggles will be lighting the gas in a few minutes, and then for business!"

CHAPTER 10.

The Meeting.

IF anything had been wanted to make the juniors more keen about the meeting, at which Skimpole's Comet was to be seen, it was the glimpse which many of them had got of the huge telescope, as Tom Merry had carried it to the gym., in the School House.

The moment the door was open the fellows began to troop in. The first to enter was Wally D'Arcy, the ink-fingered fag of the Third, accompanied by Curly Gibson and Jameson, and followed by a host of other Third-Formers. Fond as these youngsters were of a lark, they began on this occasion by expressing their admiration for the huge telescope. The Terrible Three took the precaution to form a barrier round it—a barrier comprised of themselves.

The moments the lights were up, and Taggles had left amidst the jests which he always encountered from the juniors, Tom Merry turned the lights half down, thinking that their fake telescope was safe from all possibility of discovery in a dim light.

"Bai Jove, deah boys, what a splendid meetin'!"

Arthur Augustus, entering the gym with Blake & Co., looked so immaculate that even though it was he, the juniors stared.

He carried his well-polished and brand-new silk hat in his hand, and surveyed the throng through his monocle with a benign smile as he made his way to the platform.

"Take a seat, Gussy," cried Tom Merry. "None of the audience allowed on the platform until after the speech."

"Weally, Mewwy, you are labouring undah a serious misapprehension. I'm in the chair, deah boy!"

"Come out of it, Gussy! Go and sit down!"

"Chuck him out!"

These last words came out of a din that was already considerable from Wally, who was seated on a hobby-horse.

"Wally," cried Arthur Augustus, "I am afwaid you do not tweek me with wopwah wespect——"

"Yah!"

"Booh!"

"Good old Gus!"

"Order, please!" cried Tom Merry.

"Chair——"

"Order!"

"Yah!"

"Order, please; order, gentlemen!" cried Tom Merry again.

"Shall I play a solo?" asked Herries.

"If you're tired of living," replied Lowther.

"Pway allow me to weatch the chair, Tom Mewwy; I have a speech to delivah, and there is no time to waste."

"You can't come up here, Gussy!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, I am the chairman of——"

"I don't think!"

"Go it, Gussy!"

"Go it, Tom Merry!"

"Gussy's in the chair!"

"Shut up, it's Tom Merry!"



Mellish was first on his feet, and with a howl of rage, he wiped his inky hand on the face of the recumbent swell of St. Jim's. Arthur Augustus gave a yell. "Oh, you wottah! I'll administah a feahful thwashin'!"

Thunderous shouts came welling up from the audience.

Just then Figgins & Co. and their supporters entered.

"I say, Figgy, hurry up," said Herries, in his ear; "let us start the overture. There'll be a row about who's in the chair, if we don't."

"Oh, will there! Kerr's in the chair, of course. Go on, Kerr, take the chair!"

And while Gussy was arguing with Tom Merry, Kerr quietly stepped upon the platform, and quickly and unostentatiously seated himself in the armchair by the table.

"You're an uttah wottah, Tom Mewwy! Skimmay asked me to take the chair, and I most certainly am goin' to take it!"

"Of course, he's in the chair!" cried Blake, who was seated on a parallel-bar.

"You shut up, Blake!"

"Rats! Gussy's in the chair. Hands up, kids, all those who say Gussy's in the chair."

The love of fun prompted every junior present to raise his right hand, with the exception of Manners, Lowther, Tom Merry and Kerr.

"Yah, look at that!" cried Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hands up all in favour of Tom Merry taking the chair!" cried Lowther, holding both his hands above his head.

Again all hands went up, this time the only exceptions being Kerr and the famous Four.

"There you are, Blake; see that? I thank you, gentlemen, for your support," said Tom Merry; and he turned to occupy the chair.

"Kerr, you boulder, get out of it!"

"I'm in the chair!"

"No, bai Jove, Kerr—"

"I tell you I'm the chairman, my son! Travel!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the audience.

"Hands up all those in favour of Kerr occupying the chair!" cried Figgins.

Once more, to the huge delight of the meeting, all hands went up, with the exception of those belonging to a few interested parties.

"Declare the meeting open, Kerr!" yelled Figgins, in between spasmodic efforts at tuning his 'cello.

"Open the meeting, Gussy!" roared Blake, holding his mouth-organ a couple of inches away from his lips.

"Go it, Tom Merry," added Lowther; "don't take any notice of those asses! Let's get to—"

But the rest of the remarks from the humorist of the Shell was lost in the roars of laughter that now came from the audience, prompted by the response of the three rival chairmen to their respective supporters.

D'Arcy, Kerr, and Tom Merry all advanced to the extreme edge of the platform to address the meeting.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Gussy! Tom Merry! Kerr!" came the cries.

The three rival chairmen stood with right hands raised and mouths opened, vainly endeavouring to enjoin silence.

"Look here," yelled Herries in Figgins' ear, "let's strike up the overture; that'll interest 'em!"

"I can't hear whether my 'cello's in tune!" Figgins roared back, his lips close to Herries' ear, so that the latter might sort out his words from the uproar.

"Never mind."

"Let's come close to Blake."

"Right."

The two musicians closed up to the parallel-bar on which Blake was seated. Herries stood on the left of his legs and Figgins on the right.

"Let her rip!" cried Blake, beating time with one hand, while he worked the mouth-organ with the other.

"Tom Mewwy and Kerr are uttah wottahs!" cried D'Arcy. "These two kids don't know anything about it. I'm in the chair, and I declare this meeting—" yelled Kerr.

"Unless there is silence, I shall have no alternative—" roared Tom Merry.

But even though all three claimants to the chair were speaking at once, their united voices could not be heard above the din.

Then the orchestra started. The fact that they did not all get off together was entirely overlooked, and it must be said that the musicians played with a will and determination to restore order which did them credit.

"B-r-r-r-r!"

"Tarum-tarum-tarum to——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Gentlemen, you have elected me——" shouted Kerr.

"I am the chairman, my sons, gentlemen——"

"Bai Jove, I considah this twentment——"

But nobody heeded the chair.

Something, however, happened suddenly which the meeting did heed, and, with the sole exception of the orchestra, appreciate.

Kildare, the captain of the school, entered to quell the din. The three rival chairmen saw him first, and grins spread over their faces, as he directed his steps towards the orchestra.

The audience saw him, too, and suddenly relapsed into silence, which was not unmixed with expectation. For the audience, as well as the three rival chairmen, saw that the captain of St. Jim's was approaching the orchestra from behind.

Engrossed with their own efforts their ears entirely closed to everything beyond the strains of their music—sweet or otherwise—Blake, Figgins, and Herries fought their way heroically through the battle march.

Nearer came Kildare. The juniors' faces were fixed in anticipation; they were ready to yell with delight.

On played Blake, Figgins, and Herries, neither more than two bars behind the other two!

Now Kildare was only a couple of steps away.

Had it not been for the orchestra, the heart-beats of the juniors might have been heard; but, as it was, a steam-roller crashing through the roof would have made but little more noise.

Now Kildare reached out his right hand. The next instant he had seized Blake's collar and jerked him backwards off the parallel bars.

As Blake came backwards his feet went up. His right foot caught Herries' cornet with tremendous force, knocking it out of Herries' hands and sending it flying towards Arthur Augustus; who, in moving to avoid it, caught it in his silk hat in a way he never could have done if he had tried.

The suddenness with which the cornet came, however, dragged the hat out of Arthur's hand, and the new, shiny topper fell with a bump on the floor.

"You wottah——" began Arthur Augustus, glaring at Herries.

"Ow-oo-garooch!" yelled Blake. "You've made me swallow my mouth——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You shouldn't make such a frightful din," said Kildare.

"If there's any more of it, you'll all be cleared out."

Blake picked himself up with a doleful expression.

Herries stared round the room, utterly bewildered as to the whereabouts of his cornet.

Figgins stood over his cello like a fond parent defending an only child.

"Understand, kids—any more of this uproar, and you'll be cleared out, with imposts all round!"

Whilst Kildare was speaking, Tom Merry was hoping he would not come too close to the telescope. The audience had not been "japed" yet, and it would be terrible if Kildare were, at this point, to come and examine the telescope, and by some laughter of chance remark give the game away.

But, satisfied that he had restored order, and his whole attention having been centred upon the orchestra, which he had taken to be the beginning and end of the disturbance, Kildare retired without so much as glancing in the direction of the great "fake."

"Don't forget," he said, pausing in the doorway, "any more of it, and you know what to expect."

Then he was gone, and Tom Merry breathed a sigh of relief.

"Hewwies, take your wotten cornet out of my toppah!"

"Eh?" said Herries.

"Do you heah me, Hewwies?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Now look here, kids—gentlemen, I declare this meeting open," said Tom Merry.

"Hear, hear!"

"Kerr's in the chair!" yelled Figgins.

Herries struggled with the cornet.

"You'll wuinia my toppah!"

"I'm chairman of this meeting. Of course, if Kerr and Gussy like to stop on the platform, like silly asses, and——"

"Tom Mewwy I uttahly decline——"

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"All of you take the chair!" yelled Wally.

"Hear, hear!"

"It's a good job your hat happened to be there, Gussy, or my cornet would have got fearfully dented," said Herries, as he dragged the offending instrument from the "topper."

"Bai Jove, I considah that extwemely cool! Heah, you! beasty cornet has wuined my new toppah, and you say it's a good job! Hewwies, I think you are an uttah——"

"I shouldn't have liked it to have been dented."

"Bai Jove——"

"Let's get on with the washing!" cried Blake.

"Hear, hear!"

"Skimpole's Comet!"

"Where is it?"

"Three cheers for Skimmy!"

"Where is Skimmy?"

"Yaas, wathah; what's become of Skimmay?"

"Skimmy!"

"Professor!"

Even the question of who was to fill the chair was now forgotten in the sudden discovery that Skimpole, the genius of the Shell, the discoverer of the comet, the author of innumerable pages of a great work upon Socialism, and the one person they had all come there to hear that night, was missing.

Nobody had noticed the fact until this moment; yet it was a fact beyond question—Skimpole was not there.

"Anybody seen Skimmy?" asked Tom Merry.

Loud cries of "No" answered the hero of the Shell.

"Wally, go and tell him the chairman wants him."

"Yaas, wathah; tell him I can't move my speech until he awwivies on the platform."

"Look here," said Kerr "you tell him I'm the chair——"

"Order, please!"

"Yaas, wathah, ordah!"

"Order, order!"

It was pretty clear now that the meeting would have to tolerate three chairmen, since neither of them was in the least inclined to give way. Tom Merry decided, without announcing his decision, to go on with the business, ignoring the presence of the other two.

Curiously enough, however, the same idea had occurred to the other two.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Wally's clear, ringing laugh was heard approaching.

"What's the giddy joke, Wally?"

"Oh, my hat! Ha, ha, ha!"

Wally pointed along the passage.

A number of juniors rushed at the door, and in their eagerness sent Wally sprawling; but he was so filled with the humour of what he had seen that he quite forgot to object, a strange thing indeed for him.

What the juniors saw was funny enough to cause them all to roar. Down the passage, along which, somebody having left the door open at the end, a strong current of air was blowing, was Skimpole, crawling about on the floor in hot and eager pursuit of some hundreds of sheets of manuscript, which were blowing about in all directions.

He looked up and blinked at the juniors.

"Really, I see no cause for laughter. These are pages of my great work on Socialism, which I was going to read to the meeting. I slipped and fell, and for some while now I have been engaged in pursuing the pages of my great work. I shall be extremely obliged if you, D'Arcy minor, would help me to collect them up. And perhaps you, Gibson, would be so kind as to shut the door at the end of the passage."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But although the juniors roared at Skimpole in his plight, they went immediately to his assistance, and the pages of manuscript being quickly collected, Skimpole was brought in triumph to the meeting.

"Good old Skimmy!"

"Buck up, professor!"

"Brought your comet with you?"

Amid these shouts from the audience, who now began to show every sign of forgetting all about Kildare's warning, Skimpole came towards the platform.

Just before it he paused and blinked at Kerr, Arthur Augustus, and Tom Merry, as though not understanding the position of affairs.

"Come on, Skimmay, deah boy. You are keepin' the chair waitin'!"

"Come on, Skimmy," said Kerr, "I'm waiting!"

"Hurry up, Skimmy, my son!" said Tom Merry. "You've kept me waiting a long while."

As the three chairmen spoke together Skimpole blinked more than ever; but at the same time he climbed on to the platform, and, with his characteristic short, jerky steps, approached the table upon which he placed his manuscript.

Facing the audience, he began:

"Gentlemen, I regret that, owing to an unforeseen accident, I have been delayed in arriving here to—"

"Ordah, deah boy! I have to make my opening speech first."

"Order for the chair, my sons—I mean gentlemen. In introducing to your notice Skimmy—Skimpole—"

"The question before us to-night is—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the audience.

Skimpole blinked in amazement at his three chairmen.

"Really, Merry and Kerr, it is most disorderly to speak while my chairman is speaking. I must really ask—"

"Order!"

"Chair!"

"Go it, Gussy!"

"Good old Skimmy!"

"Speak up, Tom Merry!"

"Ha, ha! Go it, Kerr!"

"Ordah, gentlemen! I weally must wequest these two uttah wottahs to leave the platform while I introduce to your notice Skimmy and his comet. As it is my pwivilege to occupy the chair upon this unpawalleled occasion, I shall—ah—"

"Get on with the washin'!"

Both Tom Merry and Kerr were laughing so heartily now that they were unable to interrupt Arthur Augustus, who replied instantly and with some warmth and dignity to the interruption.

"Weally, I wefuse to get on with—that is, I considah these intewwptions most unedifyin'. There must be wespect for the chair if the meetin' is to pwceed. Alweady I have had my toppah absolutely wuined, and—"

"Let's have the comet!"

"Yes, where's the comet?"

"The fact is, gentlemen," said Tom Merry, recovering himself for a moment, "Gussy is an ass!"

"Tom Mewwy, I uttably wefuse to be called an ass, and if you—"

"Chuck him out!"

"I wefuse to be chucked out! I wefuse to be chawactewised—"

"Anyway, gentlemen, if it's your wish that Gussy should be chucked out, of course I'll manage it for you."

"Yes!"

"Chuck him out!"

"You wottahs! I—"

"But," resumed Tom Merry, "I should like to point out that Gussy would like to see the comet as well as the rest of you, and I have, therefore, for my part, decided to resign the chair in Gussy's favour."

"Hear, hear!"

"Bai Jove, Tom Mewwy, although you are an uttah ass, you are a perfect gentleman, and—"

"What about the comet?"

"If Gussy will only sit down," said Kerr, "I will follow Tom Merry's example."

"Yes, sit down, Gussy."

"We'll put him in the chair, Kerr," said Tom Merry.

Tom Merry and Kerr, to the huge delight of the meeting, seized Arthur Augustus, and forced him into the chair, Kerr sitting on one knee, and Tom Merry on the other.

"You beastly wottahs! You're wumpling my clothes! Get up! I shall administah a most feahful thwashin'—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Go on, Skimmy! Cut it short, and let's have it quick," said Tom Merry.

"Mr. Chairman and gentlemen," began Skimpole, "I really think the conduct of Tom Merry and Kerr is—"

"That'll do, my son."

"Really, Merry, when I'm speaking—"

"Cut the cackle!"

"Hear hear! Where's the comet?"

"Yes, Skimmy, show us the comet."

"Really, gentlemen, you are evidently under a misapprehension regarding the Skimpole Comet, which newly discovered celestial visitant was revealed to me a couple of days ago. After taking the greatest care to follow its movements by the aid of sensitised plates, which I prepared especially for the purpose, I found to my dismay that the Skimpole Comet became, owing to some unforeseen serious celestial disturbances, diverted from its orbit, and consequently—"

"Cut that, Skimmy!" broke in Tom Merry. "Come and focus the telescope. I tell you this is strong enough to bring your comet back into the range of our vision."

"Bai Jove, gentlemen, I considah that Tom Merry is an uttah wottah to interfere with the—"

"Sit down, Gussy!"

"Go and eat coke!"

"I wefuse to sit down, and I call upon you for ordah, and unless I get ordah I shall administah a most feahful thwashin'! I considah that—"

But precisely what it was Arthur Augustus considered the meeting did not seem much to mind, for the hubbub that now occurred

was tremendous. The audience, especially the Third-Formers, saw Skimpole being led blinking by Tom Merry towards the giant telescope, and they would all rather have a peep through that than listen to an oration by Arthur Augustus, or indeed, by anybody else there. There was a fascination about the magnificent instrument that reared its huge lens skywards, as though laying bare the secrets of the blue canopy above.

So, while Skimpole, protesting truly that he had not completely explained his position to the audience, suffered himself to be led to the telescope, the words of Arthur Augustus were lost to the world.

Not that the trifling circumstance, however, dismayed Arthur Augustus. Indeed, that he was persevering with his speech, although on account of their own noise the audience could not hear it, was amply evident from the remarkable and varying expressions of his face, and the sweeping and extremely dignified gestures of his arms.

Bernard Glyn had, some while since, stationed himself at the lower end of the huge telescope, and whilst the hubbub among the audience continued, Skimpole obeyed the instructions of Tom Merry and Glyn.

"Look up here!" said the latter. "It is now pointing south-west."

Skimpole closed one eye, and blinked up the telescope with the other.

"Really, I can't see anything."

"Well, we must focus it to suit your sight, ass! Hold your head away a minute."

Skimpole took his eye from the tube.

Glyn pulled out the thin end.

It came rather more quickly than he had anticipated, and nearly struck Skimpole on the chin.

Skimpole took a short, jerky step backward to avoid it, and, his right foot going into space, he toppled with a crash off the platform.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old professor!"

"Cheer up, Skimmy!"

These and many like cries, whilst Arthur Augustus was still vainly endeavouring to make himself heard, and Monty Lowther, Manners, and Figgins & Co. were rocking with laughter, greeted Skimpole as he climbed once more to the platform.

"Now put your eye to it," said Glyn, who had, by extending the tube, set the electric light burning within.

"Why, really, I—er—"

"Can you see anything?" asked Tom Merry.

"Don't keep it all to yourself," said Lowther.

"Really, I believe it is the Skim—"

"Of course it is, ass!" said Glyn.

"I told you with a powerful glass like this you'd reach it, my boy."

Skimpole turned to the audience and beamed and blinked.

The Terrible Three and Glyn preserved faces which were, although the others did not notice the fact, really more than suitable to the occasion.

Lowther half closed one eye whenever he turned his face in Tom Merry's direction, as though he had got something in it.

It was seen now that Skimpole had an announcement to make, and the hubbub subsided.

Subsided, that is, so far as the audience was concerned.

But the silence of the audience acted like a tonic upon Arthur Augustus, who was still endeavouring to obtain that respect for the chair, which from time immemorial has been considered its due.

"Bai Jove! I'll come down and administah the most feahful thwashin'! I considah that the diswespect which you have all shown to the chair this evenin' is dweadful. Now, if you will endeavah to be quiet for a few moments, I will explain the purpose of this meetin'. We have come here to-night pwimarily for the purpose of cawwyng out a scientific investigation, which purpose has been again and again intewwupted by these wottahs, who considah—"

"Get on, Skimmy!"

"Sit down, Gussy!"

"Rats!"

"Go and eat coke!"

"Get on, Skimmy!"

Thus encouraged from many quarters, Skimpole started, whilst Arthur Augustus was still speaking:

"Gentlemen—chairmen and gentlemen—the celestial visitant which I have named after its discoverer—that is, the Skimpole Comet, has, I am glad to say, recovered from the disturbance which temporarily caused it to change its—"

"Address!" yelled Wally D'Arcy.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove, Skimmy!" said Arthur Augustus, pausing in his oration to reprove the lecturer. "I considah it absolutely impos. to conduct a meetin' if you are goin' to jump up in the middle of my speech and interrupt me in this way. I considah that you are an uttah—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Really, D'Arcy minor," said Skimpole, ignoring the major, "I was not going to say 'address.' I was going to direct the attention of this meeting to the effect that the Skimpole Comet has—"

"Come home again!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Go it, Skimmy!"

"Sit down, Gussy!"

"Skimmay, did you not heah me speakin' to you?" asked Arthur Augustus, glaring at Skimpole through his monocle.

"The comet has returned to its orbit," pursued Skimpole, blinking back at the audience—"and is to be seen—"

"Skimmay, you are a wank wottah! I shall administah the most faithful—"

"You'll go off the platform, my son, if you don't keep quiet," cried Tom Merry.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, I shall wefuse absolutely to go off the platform, until aftah—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And the Skimpole Comet is now to be seen—" went on Skimpole, determined not to be deterred.

Tom Merry sprang across to Arthur Augustus, and seized hold of his collar.

"Help! Wescue! Wescue!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Get off there!"

"Ow! Wescue! You're wumplin' my collar like anythin'."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Blake sprang to the rescue of Arthur Augustus, and pulled him off the platform out of the enemy's reach.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You uttah wottah, Tom Mewwy, my clothes are uttahly wuined! I shall mount the platform again. I am still the chairman of this meetin', and I wefuse to leave the chair until aftah the meetin'."

And with those words, the swell of St. Jim's broke free, and clambered back on to the platform.

His dishevelled figure, such a contrast to the immaculate appearance he had presented at the start, caused the juniors to roar. But Arthur Augustus did not mind that. Chairman he had been elected, and nothing short of a sudden end to his promising career would have caused him to abandon that dignified position until the meeting was over.

Skimpole continued during the adventure which had befallen Arthur Augustus, and he probably would have continued until bed-time, had it not been for Tom Merry.

"Cut it, Skimmy!"

"Really, Merry—"

"Never mind 'really'—cut it, I say!"

"But—"

"No buts—now!"

"Really, I must exp—"

"Let's have a squint at the comet," yelled Curly Gibson.

"Hear, hear—the comet," echoed Jameson.

Tom Merry took Skimpole by the shoulders and yanked him across the platform.

He bumped into Arthur Augustus, who was endeavouring to refasten his collar, which had burst open.

Then Skimpole sat plump upon the floor.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Now, you kids—that is, gentlemen," said Tom Merry, "you can come up one at a time to see the comet. Here you have the real Skimpole Comet—"

"Stuffed with brains!" added Monty.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That wouldn't be the real one!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Now began the great event of the evening.

Monty Lowther, with a set expression on his face, that might have suggested an execution, headed a long queue, which was quickly formed.

Next came Manners, Blake & Co., Figgins & Co., Reilly, Gore, Mellish, Wally, Gibson, Jameson, and a great crowd of juniors.

Tom Merry and Glyn stood guard over the telescope, and Monty Lowther and Manners, when they had given a start to the queue, stood by whilst the rest of the juniors passed off the platform at the other end.

"I wonder what they have to eat up there?" murmured Fatty Wynn, as he passed on, having inspected the comet.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Looks to me more like a full moon than a comet!" was Blake's remark.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My word, how peaceful!" commented Digby.

"The comet's all right," said Figgins, "but the meeting's been a fair muck-up, like everything else these School House kids touch!"

"You want a solo on the cornet while you're squinting at the comet?"

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this," observed Herries. "I wonder if there are any bull-dogs up there?"

"Looks like a pat of butter," said Wally. "Where's its tail?"

"Sure," remarked Reilly, as he took his eye from the tube, "it's loike a beautiful sunset in Oirland!"

"More like the full moon from the highlands of Scotland!" said Kerr.

"I've seen a bigger comet in Australia," Dane remarked.

Buck Finn, the American chum, who came next, said:

"I guess we could make a telescope in the States that would show the insects crawlin' about on that thyar comet."

And so, with more or less original observations, each of the members of the audience filed by and inspected the Skimpole Comet.

At last all had seen it, and as both Skimpole and the swell of St. Jim's stepped forward to make concluding remarks, Tom Merry came to the edge of the platform, with Manners on one side of him and Lowther on the other, while Glyn was rapidly dismantling the telescope.

"If these wottahs will permit me—" began the chairman.

"The Skimpole Comet which you have seen is one million miles from St. Jim's, and if you were to fire a can—" said Skimpole.

"Mr. Chairman, kids and gentlemen!" yelled Tom Merry at the top of his voice. "You're a lot of utter asses. The comet which you think you have seen is merely a small electric light behind a bit of ground glass in the end of that tube, which is only a fake, and not a real telescope at— Ha, ha, ha!"

"Asses!" yelled Lowther and Manners. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"You're all japed!" chorussed the Terrible Three.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Gussy, glaring through his monocle.

"Really, Merry!" blinked Skimpole.

"Rush 'em!" shrieked Blake.

"Look out, Glyn!" said Tom Merry.

"I'm on it, kids!"

And "rush 'em" the juniors did.

The Terrible Three were taken clean off their feet, and dragged from the platform fighting and struggling.

A detachment went for the telescope, but in their object they were defeated, for Glyn, whose quick brain had foreseen the trouble, and who did not want the property telescope damaged, had quickly closed the stand and thrust the whole concern out of the window, which had been open so that the end of the tube could rest upon the sash.

As Figgins & Co. and the rest reached it, it slipped through their fingers, and dropped gently to the ground outside.

As it did so, a yell went up beneath the window, but the juniors were far too occupied with yelling themselves to notice it at that particular moment, although the fact was to be brought home to them pretty strongly before long.

Glyn—the telescope having vanished through the window—was seized and rolled on the floor, the gallant resistance he made availing him nothing against such odds.

"Ordah, ordah!" cried Arthur Augustus. "I should like to say what I think of these uttah wottahs. They are wank—"

But nobody, excepting perhaps Skimpole, who still stood blinking in amazement—with his MS. under his arm for safety—heard the chairman's words.

At last the Terrible Three, whose assailants confounded themselves by reason of their numbers, managed to fight their way towards the door and, at last, although leaving some portion of their garments in the hands of their foes, they fled along the passages, Glyn, whom fortune also had favoured, close upon their heels.

"Here we are—quick!" gasped Tom Merry, opening the study door.

In they rushed, the door banged.

Tom Merry turned the key.

CHAPTER 11.

Mr. Ratcliff's Adventure.

"HA, ha, ha!"

"That took 'em in splendidly!"

"A ripping jape!"

"Did you see Blake's face when I told 'em?"

"Rather—and Figgys', too!"

"Ha, ha! Glyn, that telescope is your masterpiece!"

"Yes, it's all right, Tom Merry. Don't you think we'd better get it in from the quad?"

"If we don't, somebody else will."

"That's just it. To think of japing the whole crowd of them at once—ha, ha!"

The Terrible Three and Glyn, on the safe side of the locked study door, revelled in the success of the meeting—the success, that is, from their particular point of view.

"What's become of all the fellows, though?" asked Tom Merry, suddenly becoming serious.

"Ah!"

"Can't hear a sound of them," said Manners, listening intently.

"No; it's funny," added Glyn, his ear close to the door.

"They were in full cry after us," went on Tom Merry, "and yet not one of them seems to have got as far as the door."

"Something's happened," said Lowther,

"Looks like it."

"I wonder— Hark!"

"What's that?"

"Listen, ass!"

The Terrible Three listened.

A man's voice, raised in anger, could be heard.

"That's Ratcliff's voice!" said Tom Merry breathlessly.

"It sounds like it, and—"

"I can hear the Doctor, too, or is it—"

"There's Railton as well."

"My hat! Hark at Ratcliff!"

"Something or somebody's upset him with a vengeance!"

Undoubtedly Mr. Ratcliff was upset, for although the Terrible Three and Glyn could not hear his words, the angry tones reached them clearly enough.

Also, they could hear the Doctor and Mr. Railton, whose voices seemed to indicate an effort to comfort the New House master.

The three masters were passing along the passage, and as they went by the Shell study door, Tom Merry & Co. heard words which caused them some misgivings.

"Mellish," Mr. Ratcliff was saying angrily, "has informed me that Tom Merry, Manners, Lowther and Glyn are the prime—"

Then the voice died away in the distance.

"Mellish—the rotter!" said Tom Merry.

"Beast!"

"Cad!"

"Mellish's had too many goes in my electric chair to love me," said Bernard Glyn grimly.

"And he's asking for more!"

"We shall soon hear all about it," said Manners, trying in vain to refasten his collar, which had been torn away from his throat in the scum after the meeting.

"Yes. Now we know why our study wasn't besieged. The kids saw the Doctor and Railton about, and so gave it up."

For the next few moments the juniors were busily engaged in endeavouring to make themselves look presentable.

"It looks to me as though we want reclothing from head to foot," said Tom Merry, vigorously applying a brush to his coat. "Here, Monty, give me a scrub down, old son."

Lowther took the brush and applied it to Tom Merry's shoulders, incidentally tapping him on the head with it.

"Ass!" said Tom Merry, rubbing his head.

"It was an accident."

"Oh! I thought it was one of your jokes."

"I should like to know what it is that's upset Ratcliff," said Bernard Glyn, rubbing some of the floor dust from his face with his handkerchief.

"So should I," agreed Manners.

"We all seem to be in it."

"Yes. That's what puzzles me," said Merry. "I don't remember doing anything to offend Ratcliff."

"Well, we shall know all about it in time. I'm going to open the door now and bring in that telescope," said Glyn.

"Right-ho, old son!"

Still appearing very dishevelled in spite of his efforts, Bernard Glyn went out, leaving the Terrible Three as perplexed as they had ever been in their lives.

"There's no doubt," said Monty Lowther humorously, "that what you want to carry a wheeze through successfully is someone to manage it properly."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Manners, remembering that Tom Merry had used these very words before the meeting.

"Rats!" ejaculated Tom Merry, still busy with his attire.

"The wheeze has been a great success."

"Perhaps you'll know more about that when you've seen the Doctor, and know exactly what is the matter with Ratcliff."

"Ass, what's Ratcliff got to do with it?"

"Oh, I don't know, of course. And, as you say, a wheeze with somebody to carry it through ought to go all right."

"Shut up, you ass!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hallo, who is this?" asked Tom Merry, as footsteps were heard in the passage.

"This" proved to be Binks, the boy in buttons, out of whose pocket was sticking a folded copy of a lurid American "blood and thunder" publication.

"The Doctor wants to see Master Merry in his study, please."

"Oh!"

"Whose study?" asked Monty.

"His!"

"Well, here it is! You'd better bring the Doctor."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I mean the Doctor's study."

"Oh, I see!"

"Right-ho! I'm coming!" said Tom Merry.

Binks stepped a few yards hurriedly along the passage, and then paused whilst he drew his lurid American publication from his pocket. Having buried his face close into its folds, he resumed his way.

Tom Merry, hurrying along a moment later, elbowed him out of the way; and Binks, looking after the hero of the Shell, struck a dramatic attitude, and muttered:

"I will have at thee, knave!"

But Tom Merry was happily ignorant of Binks' threat. That the Doctor was going to "have at him," however, appeared substantially clear, and that for the moment was sufficient to engage his mind.

Having given his clothes a final shake, and tugged once or twice at his collar, Tom Merry knocked at the study door.

"Come in!"

Tom Merry entered.

"You want me, sir?"

"Yes," answered Dr. Holmes gravely.

But Tom Merry did not notice the doctor's seriousness.

There was someone else in the study that took up all his attention for the moment.

There beside Mr. Railton stood Mr. Ratcliff. With his left hand he dabbed his face with a handkerchief, and with his right he held perpendicularly the property telescope which had been the successful feature of the meeting in the gym.

Tom Merry stared in amazement.

"Mr. Ratcliff complains that you have played an unpardonable trick upon him," said the Doctor.

"I, sir?"

"Yes!" exclaimed Mr. Ratcliff, his face red with anger.

"You—"

"Allow me, sir, please," said Dr. Holmes quietly. And then, addressing Tom Merry, he proceeded, the gravity of his manner indicating his view of the enormity of which the hero of the Shell was accused. "Mr. Ratcliff complains that by means of a light exhibited from the window of the gymnasium you and your companions attracted him across the quadrangle, and that when he got beneath the gymnasium window you, or those of your schoolfellows who were assisting in this—er—outrage, dropped that—er—thing out upon his head."

"My only Aunt Ja—" began Tom Merry. "I—er—I am astonished, sir! Why, my only hat—I mean, sir, that I don't know how Mr. Ratcliff could possibly make such a charge against me!"

"Boy, would you lie about it?" exclaimed Mr. Ratcliff, foaming with impotent rage.

Tom Merry addressed Dr. Holmes, pulling himself to his full height.

"I never tell lies, sir."

Dr. Holmes shifted uneasily in his seat.

Mr. Railton coughed.

Mr. Ratcliff looked as though he were on the point of a great explosion, both physically and mentally.

"Merry, you must offer some explanation. Mr. Ratcliff says that he was attracted by a light, and he has a nasty bruise upon his forehead caused by that thing falling upon him. What explanation do you offer?"

"Well, sir, we had a meet—a kind of scientific meeting in the gym"—Mr. Railton gritted his teeth to prevent himself from laughing—"and this telescope was used. It was all my idea, sir. You see, the telescope rested on the window sash, and then after the meeting there was a scum—I mean—well, sir, you know, it was all owing to the excitement, and—er—the telescope went out of the window. Of course, nobody there had the faintest idea that Mr. Ratcliff was anywhere near. How could I know he was there?"

"But this light, Merry—the light that attracted Mr. Ratcliff? Somebody must have deliberately held that at the open window. What have you to say on that point?"

Tom Merry struggled hard against the laughter that threatened to come.

"Do you mean to say there was no light?" blurted out Mr. Ratcliff. "I saw a light distinctly enough!"

"Yes, sir, there was a light. It is in there!"

"What—"

"Allow me," said the doctor quietly. "Explain, Merry."

"The light, sir, is in the end of that tube."

A puzzled expression came over the Doctor's face. He saw that Tom Merry was not so ready with his explanations as was his custom, but Dr. Holmes knew perfectly well that the reason was that others were concerned in this affair, and that Tom Merry feared talking too much lest he should drag his school fellows into it. Dr. Holmes respected and encouraged this code of honour among the boys of St. Jim's, so he was content to arrive at the explanation he required step by step, in easy stages.

The Head of St. Jim's left his seat, and whilst Mr. Ratcliff held the offending instrument slantwise, looked into the huge glass at the thick end.

"If you would allow me to explain, sir," said Tom Merry,

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And, screwing his face into a fixed expression, he took the telescope, and, asking the Head to be kind enough to support one end, he drew out the other end. Immediately a bright, dazzling light shone on the doctor's face.

"Dear me!" he ejaculated.

Both Mr. Ratcliff and Mr. Railton were equally astonished.

Even the New House master had to admit to himself that Tom Merry had given a proper explanation of the occurrence.

But much as the Head was interested in the extraordinary instrument, he had his duty to do by both Mr. Ratcliff and recalcitrant juniors.

"Apart from the question of the light, Merry, I cannot have dangerous things like this falling from the gymnasium windows. You say that you are responsible?"

"Yes, sir."

"Entirely and alone?"

"Yes, sir. I take the entire responsibility."

"Very well. Return to your study now. After a few more words with Mr. Ratcliff, I will arrange with Mr. Railton about your punishment."

"Thank you, sir."

"You may go, Merry."

"May I—er—would you like me to take that, sir?"

Tom Merry pointed to the telescope.

Dr. Holmes looked at Mr. Ratcliff, who frowned, and expressed his view, as plainly as could be without words, that the telescope should be confiscated, if justice were to be done.

But the doctor would not be influenced by the personal feelings of a master. He was capable of keeping the scales of justice evenly balanced in spite of all personal feeling.

"Yes. You will take that away, Merry, and see that it doesn't fall from a window again."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Triumphant so far, Tom Merry shouldered the telescope, and left the study.

"You see, Mr. Ratcliff, there was absolutely no intention on the part of the boys to act in any way unseemly towards you. They did not know you were there," said the doctor.

Mr. Ratcliff grunted, and, seeing that he could not improve the situation for himself, changed the subject to a detail connected with the New House. He wished devoutly that when walking in the quadrangle earlier in the evening, he had not felt curious as to the round light in the gym. window. But it was, he knew, useless to complain further. He had supposed that the light was put there to attract him, because Mellish had put that idea into his mind by the sneaking tale he had told him when he had discovered him coming into the School House with the telescope.

Meanwhile Tom Merry had returned to the study.

"Why, you've got it!" cried Glyn, looking at the telescope.

"Yes, I have."

"What's happened?"

"My hat! You may well ask."

"What is it?"

"This thing, when you pushed it out of the window, hit old Ratcliff on the head."

"My hat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Is he—"

"What did the doctor—"

"Will he recover?" asked Lowther.

"The doctor is reserving my punishment until he has considered the matter and talked it over with Ratcliff."

"My eye! You're in for it, Tom!" said Manners.

"We're all in it," added Glyn.

"Not at all, my son! This was my wheeze—I stand the racket."

"You're a brick!"

"Rats!"

"What will it mean, Thomas?" asked Monty.

"Dunno. Thank goodness it isn't left with Ratcliff! He would have gated me for the rest of the term."

"When will you know?"

"Railton is to see me presently."

"Fancy old Ratcliff! Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Lowther.

"Whatever brought him to that spot? It doesn't lead anywhere."

"Only into trouble," put in Lowther.

"He was attracted by the light," exclaimed Tom Merry. "The ass couldn't make out what the light was, so he came to see, and out went the telescope on his napper."

"I wonder what Mellish told him?"

"The cad!"

"The rotter! Told him we did it on purpose, I suppose," said Tom Merry. "The ass thought we were japing him with the light—leading him to the window, in fact, so that we could bump his head."

"He's a juggins!"

"A chump!"

"We'll have to scrag Mellish for it," said Lowther.

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"Yes, rather; we'll see him at the feed."

"The feed; I thought that was to celebrate the comet?" said Lowther.

"So it is."

"But there isn't any comet."

"No; it's like the meeting your friend went to."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Of course, Gussy will stand the feed. He's an ass, but he's not the sort to back out of standing a promised feed. And think of the risk to Fatty Wynn's life, if he did!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well—"

"Are you there, Tom Merry?"

It was Mr. Railton's voice.

"Yes, sir."

The Form-master's face appeared round the partly-open door.

"The doctor has decided that, as that matter was an accident, he'll refer to it no further."

"He's a brick—er—I mean, thank you, sir," answered Tom Merry.

With a scarcely-concealed smile Mr. Railton vanished.

"Hooray!" cried Tom Merry.

"The doctor is a brick!" added Manners.

"You see, Monty," said Tom Merry, with a humorous expression, "all you want when you've got a good wheeze is a man to carry it out successfully."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Manners and Glyn.

Monty Lowther, pretending that he did not hear, got his books out and commenced prep. that was long deferred.

"By Jove," exclaimed Bernard Glyn, suddenly, "I forgot! I shan't have time to—by-bye, you kids; I'm off!"

And the St. Jim's inventor hurried away to his own study.

"I wonder if he's still on that mystery for Blake & Co.?" said Tom Merry, opening his books and seating himself for work.

"I should like to know what that wheeze is?" said Manners, following the example of his study chums.

"Your leader, Thomas, will tell you, if you ask him—I don't think!" said Monty, with a grin.

CHAPTER 12.

D'Arcy's Presentation.

"WELL, Taggy, what do you want?" asked Tom Merry, the following morning, when the school-porter's red proboscis appeared at the study door. "I've delivered the telescope to Master Skimpole, Master Merry."

"Oh, thank you, Taggies," replied Tom Merry, intently examining the handle of a cricket-bat. "This is a good bat, Monty," he added.

"Yes, it is a good bat."

"Which you told me to do, Master Merry," said Taggies, still standing with his head half in and half out of the door.

"Eh? Oh, it's you, Taggies!"

"Yes, Master Merry."

"I thought you'd gone, Taggy?"

"No, Master Lowther."

"Do you want to speak to me, Taggies?"

"Yes, Master Merry; I've delivered the parcel to Master Skimpole, which you asked me—"

"Oh, much obliged, Taggies. Have you seen this bat, Manners? It's a splendid bat."

"Yes, it is—ripping!"

"A ripping bat!" repeated Lowther, looking at it as though he had never seen it before.

"Which I delivered as though it come by the first post, Master Merry."

"Eh? Oh, I thought you'd gone, Taggies."

"Ask Taggies what he thinks of that bat, Thomas?"

Taggies permitted himself to growl.

"My hat, he's going to have a fit!"

"It's the drink! Why don't you give it up, Taggies?"

"I was talking to Master Merry," grunted Taggies.

"To me?"

"Yes, Master Merry. I del—"

"I thought you were having a fit."

"Gr-r-r! I delivered the pa—"

"So you said, Taggy; but what makes you grunt like that, Taggy—couldn't you sleep it off? Look out, you chaps, he's going to burst! Eh? I told you I'd—oh, how silly of me, of course; I'd forgotten—there you are."

And Tom Merry, having joked Taggies to his heart's content, gave him two shillings in place of the one he had promised him.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Tom Merry & Co., when he had gone.

"Poor old Taggy; he does stick it, doesn't he? Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove, Tom Mewwy, are you theek?"

"Yes, Gussy; what do you want?"

"Why, you wottah, I suppose I must stand that feed, you know. But weally—"

"Stand it or be bumped!" said Tom Merry.

"Weally, I—"

"Or have a thick ear!" suggested Lowther.
 "Tom Mewwy, Lowthah, I——"
 "Or have another topper smashed!" added Manners.
 "You uttah asses; I wefuse——"
 "Very well, then, if you won't stand the feed——"
 "You wottah! I mean, I wefuse——"
 "So you said before; although why you come to tell us you refuse, after the manner in which I showed you the Skimpole Comet, I can't conceive."
 "Tom Mewwy, you're an uttah outsiders! I didn't mean I wefused to——"
 "Then what did you say you did for?"
 "I didn't, you ass!"
 "Didn't he say he refused, Monty?"
 "Of course, you did, Gussy."
 "Weally, I——"
 "Didn't he say he refused, Manners?"
 "Most distinctly."
 "Mannahs, I shall administah a most feahful thwashin' all wound, if you don't stop this wottin'! I was about to wemark that I wefused——"
 "There you go again!"

Arthur Augustus jammed his monocle into his eye.
 "I considah you are wank outsiders! I was goin' to wemark that I wefused to have a thick eah, or to be bumped! The feed is to take place, deah boys, at four o'clock, in the wood-shed; and I shall esteem it an honah if you wottahs will come!"
 "We'll be there, Gussy—thanks."
 "Wouldn't miss it for worlds, Gussy, old chap!"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"

And Arthur Augustus hurried away to change his collar, which, although he had had it on only for a short while, had become specked—very slightly, it is true, yet sufficiently to warrant the swell of St. Jim's in changing it before he attended class.

All day long Tom Merry noticed that Blake & Co. were frequently exchanging glances with Bernard Glyn. Tom Merry was convinced that there was some jape afoot; but although he watched very closely, they preserved their secret so well that he had no opportunity of getting an inkling of what it was. However, the secret did not worry Tom Merry so much now, since their own jape at the meeting had passed off so successfully. He felt that the Shell were well ahead, and even though Monty Lowther attempted a few jokes about their leader, he, too, was of the same opinion.

After school in the afternoon there was a general movement on the part of all the juniors towards the wood-shed, both from the School House and the New House.

Although Wally and his chums, Curly Gibson and Jameson, were early, they found Fatty Wynn already there.

"I didn't think you'd be able to come, Fatty," said Tom Merry, when he arrived.

"Me not come," inquired Fatty; "why?"
 "Well, I thought you would be busy, practising bowling or something. Didn't you, Monty?"
 "Yes—I don't think!"

"Really, Merry, even supposing I was behind with my practice, I do get so hungry this weather——"

"Ha, ha! And all other weathers!"

"Well, I didn't eat much dinner; I only had three helpings of ham-and-beef, a couple of helpings of pudding, and a couple of pork-pies, besides——"

"Ring off, Fatty; we know you're hungry!"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors arranged themselves in the wood-shed, where a sumptuous repast had been prepared by Arthur Augustus, who had spared no expense to make the feed a success, and who arrived now, in vision of dignity, attired in the height of fashion.

"Bai Jove, deah boys, are we all heah?"

"Yes," replied Fatty Wynn. "What shall we start on?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Fatty's all here!"

"I do not see Glyn. Glyn, deah boy!"

Arthur Augustus glared though his monocle at the eager juniors.

"Glyn! Where's Glyn?"

"Glyn!"

"Glyn!"

"He'll come presently," said Fatty; "let's start."

"We can't start without Glyn, deah boy!"

"Hallo—coming!"

The voice of the inventor of St. Jim's was heard without, and in a few moments his genial, shrewd face appeared.

He carried a small parcel under his arm.

"He's brought his dinner with him," said Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Pass those tarts over, please," said Fatty.
 "Sorry I'm late, Gus."
 "All right, deah boy; now you have come we can start."
 "Hooray!" exclaimed Fatty; and the next moment a whole tart had gone into his mouth.

But Fatty was, after all, not the only one there who was ready to fall to, and in a few moments the whole of the party were busily engaged in "making short work" of the sumptuous repast which Gussy's good nature, backed up by the necessary funds so freely supplied by his kind-hearted and noble parent, had provided.

"How's the comet to-day, Skimmy?" asked Lowther, speaking with difficulty out of a small hole on one side of his mouth, because the other was full.

"Ha, ha! Skimmy, how's the comet?"
 Roars of laughter went round.

"Weally, I must say that I considah that was a vewy gooo joke on the part of those Shell wottahs!"

"Really, D'Arcy," said Skimpole, blinking round at the assembly, "I fail to see the humour of the situation. It appears to me that Merry made a great mistake. Of course, it was a mistake; it could not have been intentional. He, by some mysterious accident, had not discovered my telescope at all; but some extraordinary tube-like thing which he, in his ignorance, mistook for a telescope. You see, he was plainly a victim of the law of environment, and——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ring off, Skimmy!"

"Pass me the tarts."

"Those pies, please."

"Have a dough-nut, Skimmy?"

"And I am convinced that had he not been a victim in this way, he would have——"

"Fatty, push those jam-puffs this way."

"Certainly, Monty; I should not like it to appear that I wanted them all myself."

"Of course, not," agreed Monty.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Under a system of Socialism——"

"Ring off, Skimmy! Have a bath-bun?"

"Weally, Skimmy, deah boy, you had a full opportunity of welleving yourself of your thoughts last night, and I weally think that, as my guest you should westwain yourself."

"Hear, hear!"

"When you've done with those pies, Fatty," said Blake,

"I should like to inspect them."

"Certainly, Blake!"

Fatty helped himself to a couple of the pies in question and passed them as requested.

"Really, D'Arcy," Skimpole proceeded, "I do not find myself in strict accord with you. My own impression is that I had really very little opportunity of saying anything at all. I should have read a few chapters of my book on Socialism if I had had the opportunity. But it really seems to me that it is a serious mistake to have more than one chairman at any one meeting, and, indeed, under Socialism——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Shut up, Skimmy!"

"Have a bun?"

"Yes, these buns are really very good," said Fatty Wynn.

"Try one, Skimmy!"

Skimpole, however, was not to be put off. He persevered with his remarks with a persistence that would have helped him in the achievement of fame had it been properly directed, and employed in a better cause.

As it was, it was wasted, for, from that moment, a hubbub filled the wood-shed, and his words, perhaps dragged down by the very weight of their wisdom, were lost upon the party.

"It seems to me," observed Blake, when later the meeting was mentioned, "that the only man who really discovered anything was Ratcliff."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yes, and he discovered it, like all great discoverers, with his head."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove, Lowthah, I wegard that as weally vewy funnay, deah boy!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry & Co. cast glances at Mellish, whose sneaking to the New House-master had so nearly resulted in punishment for the hero of the Shell. Mellish paused in the act of biting a pork-pie, and an uncomfortable feeling came over him. He knew, as his eyes met Tom Merry's, that the latter knew who the sneak was. He expected to hear something of it, but had instead to suffer in silence, while Tom Merry turned away with a glance of contempt there was no mistaking. Mellish tolerated his uncomfortable feeling until the pie he was eating seemed as though it would choke him.

"Ow-ooo!"

Then suddenly he got up, and shuffled out of the festive gathering.

"Now I can breathe," muttered Tom Merry.

"I shall be able to presently," replied Lowther.

Whilst this had been happening a fresh box of very special-looking pastries had been opened, and with these new dainties all the juniors were served—or rather had served themselves.

"My word, these look splendid!" said Fatty Wynn, fondling one of the new cakes.

"Ripping!" cried Wally, helping himself.

"What do you call 'em?" asked Herries.

"Lasts, I expect—because we've got them after the others."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Roars of laughter went up from the feasting juniors at Lowther's joke.

Then, suddenly, from Fatty Wynn, the first to taste the new pastry, there came a weird, gurgling sound, as he made the most expressive wry grimaces, and struggled with both hands to drag the enchanting-looking cake from between his teeth.

"Ugh-oo-ur-garooch!"

"Poof-oo-ugh!" spluttered Tom Merry, performing antics not altogether unlike Fatty Wynn's.

"Yah, you rotters!" yelled Lowther.

Then from all the juniors, excepting Blake & Co. and Glyn, came groans and cries, as they all had the greatest difficulty in extracting their teeth from the new cakes.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Blake.

"Bai Jove, deah boys, what's the matter?" asked Arthur Augustus, glaring through his monocle without so much as a smile.

"Ha, ha, ha! Look at the chumps!" laughed Herries.

Glyn doubled himself with laughter.

"What price india-rubber cakes, eh? Ha, ha!"

"Yah, kids! How about the comet now?" shrieked Digby.

"Poof, so this is your little game, eh?" said Tom Merry.

"You've made us some india-rubber cakes—eh, Glyn?"

"Ordered by Blake & Co., eh?" grinned Monty, spluttering.

"At 'em! On the ball!" yelled Tom Merry, and, as he called his chums to arms, he let fly with the india-rubber cake into which he had had his teeth, and which he knew was the work of Glyn at the instigation of Blake & Co.

Glyn received the dummy full on the point of the nose. Lowther, Manne-s, and the rest followed suit with equal success.

And the next moment comestibles, as well as fakes, were flying from side to side, and corner to corner of the shed, which had been the scene of many a notable gathering.

"I say, don't throw that!" shouted Wynn, as Tom Merry seized a real jam-puff. "I can eat that!"

But Tom Merry did not heed, and the next instant the jam-puff, which might, with care, have been stowed inside Fatty Wynn, went into Gussy's eye. It happened to be full of jam—extra full of jam—which ran down his face, on, and inside, his collar.

"Ow—you wottah! You have ruined my—ow!"

He was interrupted by a second pastry which caught him on the chin.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"How's that, umpire?" yelled Tom Merry.

"And that?"

"And that?"

"You beast!" groaned Blake, clawing half a pork-pie from his ear. "Ugh—I'll jolly well—oh!"

Blake, too, was silenced, for Monty had filled it for the time being with a piece of currant cake.

"Goal!" roared Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What a fearful waste!" murmured Fatty, catching a mince-pie aimed at his head in his hands, and starting to eat it. "You uttah wottahs! I shall administah the most tewwible thwashin'!"

"Call it pax, then, Blake; you're beaten!"

And Blake & Co. and Glyn, who were all covered with a mixed coating of jam, mince, and flaky pie-crust, and against whom the hands of all were turned at that moment—with the single exception of the busy hands of Fatty Wynn—were glad to accept Tom Merry's terms.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You've paid for your jape, kids!"

"How do you like india-rubber cakes?" growled Blake.

"I wouldn't give 'em to Towser!" laughed Manners.

"No, I should think not, indeed?" exclaimed Herries, wiping jam off his neck with a pocket-handkerchief.

"You uttah wottahs, you have made me in a most beastly mess! I shall go and change my clothes immediately. This waistcoat is ruined! I considah that you are all wank—"

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"Hold on, Gussy!" said Glyn. "We've got to make you a presentation yet."

And Glyn produced the parcel he had brought with him.

"I weally must go and—"

"Hold him!" cried Blake.

"Get away, you wottahs! Wally, I shall thwash—"

"Stop here, then!"

"Wescue! Help! Wescue!"

Figgins gave a hand, and Arthur Augustus was forced to remain.

"Gentlemen," began Blake, "I am asked by my friend Glyn—"

"I didn't hear the request myself," put in Lowther.

"You shut up, Monty! I am asked on this auspicious—"

"Good word, Blake!"

"Got any more like that!"

"He's been sleeping with a Nuttall's diction—"

"Nut all the night!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look here, you kids," said Blake, trying hard to make himself heard, "I am going—"

"The sooner the better!" yelled Tom Merry.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"On behalf of my friend Glyn, who can't make a speech for nuts, to—"

"Here, draw it mild, Blake!" protested Glyn. "You asked to be allowed—"

"Shut up! I am going to present to our esteemed host a token of the esteem which his esteemed—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"A lot of steam about it!"

"He's letting off his steam!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look here, you asses, how can I make a speech—"

"Dunno!" said Tom Merry.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You'll get a thick ear in a minute, Tom Merry!"

"Rats!"

"What I was going to say was that I am presenting this token of esteem to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of St. Jim's, as a token of—ur—"

"Esteem!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And I hope that this trifling present will be—er—"

"Esteemed!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The brown paper, which had covered the mysterious present from the inquisitive gaze, was now removed, and a splendid steel silk hat-ironer revealed.

"Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus, delighted.

"It's a small warning-pan!" yelled Wally.

"Wally, I shall weally—"

"If you will accept this, Gussy, on behalf of us and Glyn, I shall be—er—be—"

"Esteemed!" concluded Monty.

"Hear, hear!"

"Bai Jove, deah boys, you have made me all of a fluttah! Weally, I do not know how I can do justice to this pwesent occasion, with all this jam on my collah—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hear, hear!"

"And in my eye, and down my beastly neck! But, deah boys, this gives me the vewy utmost pleashah, and I shall always wectef upon this moment as one of the pwoudest in my caweer! I shall now be able to keep my toppahs shiny! It is weally beautifully made, Glyn, deah boy, and I thank you vewy much, and I considah that I am vewy—er—"

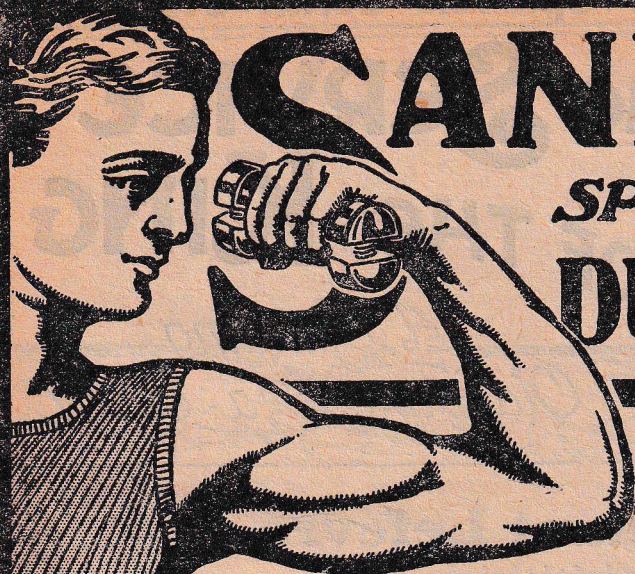
"Esteemed!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Odd as was the appearance of the swell of St. Jim's, there could be no doubt that his happiness was complete, and his thanks just what his thanks must of course be, absolutely sincere.

The laughter that followed his speech resolved itself in some mysterious way into "For he's a jolly good fellow," and it was useless for Arthur Augustus, who had stood the feast as a result of "Skimpole's Comet," to beg of his chums to take care not to rumple his clothes, as they carried him shoulder high across the quad to the School House, which now demanded their attendance for prep.

(Another splendid long complete tale of Tom Merry and Co., in next Thursday's issue of the "Gem" Library, entitled "The Third-Formers' Raid" by Martin Clifford. Order your copy in advance. Price One Penny.)



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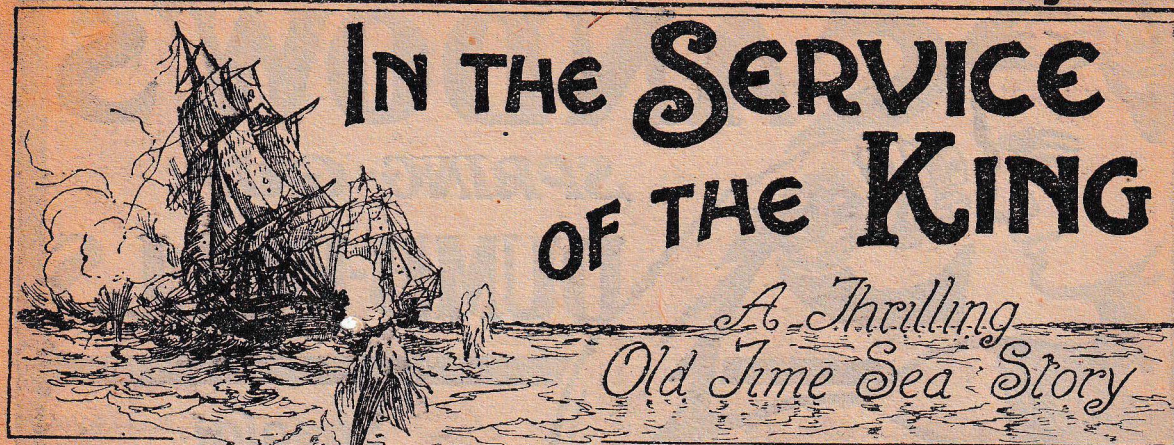
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READ THIS FIRST!

Oswald Yorke, a youth of eighteen, whom peculiar circumstances have forced to become a highwayman, one night holds up the carriage of Admiral Sir Sampson Eastlake. He is overpowered, however; but the good old admiral offers him a chance of serving the King in the Navy instead of handing him over to justice. Oswald, therefore, joins the frigate Catapult as a midshipman, under the name of John Smith. Oswald soon "smells powder," as the Catapult engages the French man-o'-war Amadee, which is consorting a captured Indiaman. Under the direction of Mr. Fryer, the first lieutenant, the Catapult has victory within grasp, when the captain, who is under the influence of drink, takes command, and steers the ship out of the fight. Infuriated by his cowardice, the crew threaten mutiny, and Mr. Fryer is hastily summoned by the now frightened captain to quell the rising storm. "What is wrong?" asks Mr. Fryer of the midshipman who is sent to fetch him.

(Now go on with the story.)

Mutiny!

"There is a good deal wrong, sir; the captain has driven the men to frenzy. It was bad enough losing us the Amadee; but since he has been on deck he has behaved like a mad brute."

"Maxwell!" said Mr. Fryer sternly.

"I can't help it, sir. He fired his pistol at the men, and would have killed one, if Smith had not knocked his arm up in time, and he nearly strangled Smith. I believe he has killed him," said Maxwell breathlessly.

"Good heavens!" cried Mr. Fryer, and he rushed out of the cabin and on to the deck.

His coming was opportune. The men, still stripped for conflict with the Frenchman—now only a speck in the far distance—were talking loudly of the captain's name, which they accompanied with oaths and curses.

"This is your doing—you have been inciting the crew to mutiny!" said the captain, whom fright had now rendered sober.

Mr. Fryer drew himself up: "My doing! I fail to understand."

"Look at them!" cried the captain hoarsely. "Don't you see they are ripe for mutiny?"

Mr. Fryer cast a quick glance round and his eyes fell on the inanimate form of Oswald lying on the quarter-deck.

"He struck me," said the captain hoarsely, following the direction of the lieutenant's eyes.

"He did not!" cried Maxwell boldly, "he prevented you from doing murder."

The captain turned on Maxwell with fury in his eyes, but as he did so, a low growl from the deck beneath banished the anger, which gave place to terror.

"You hear—you hear that—the demons are thirsting for my blood!" he cried.

Mr. Fryer dropped on to one knee beside Oswald.

"He is not dead, but insensible," he said after a pause; then, rising, he called out to two of the men below to come up and carry Oswald down to his cabin.

The men came up obediently, without demur, raising Oswald between them, and carried him gently down.

"You see that?—they obey him," said the captain to Brabazon.

Brabazon looked the picture of fright, and turned his eyes appealingly to Mr. Fryer.

Mr. Fryer folded his arms and looked Captain Burgoyne squarely in the face.

"What do you wish me to do, sir?" he asked.

"Do? To undo the work you have done. Send those men back to their posts, bring back order and obedience. You have put mutiny into their minds. It is your doing; but for you they would obey me."

"I have sailed under many captains, but until now none has dared question my honour and loyalty," said Mr. Fryer sternly. "No word of mine has put opposition into the minds of these men. It is not my tongue, but your actions. You have accused me before this gentleman of mutinous conduct, therefore I am not fit to act as an officer on board this ship, and here I deliver up to you my sword."

He unbuckled his sword as he spoke, and held it out to the captain, at the sight of which a hoarse roar rose from the deck.

"For Heaven's sake put your sword on! You—you understand me!" gasped the captain.

"Then do I understand that you retract your accusation?"

"Yes—yes. For Heaven's sake—"

"You do not consider that I by any word or act have attempted to induce the men to mutiny?"

"No—no," cried the captain hurriedly, for the ominous growl was still rising from the crowded deck below.

Mr. Fryer replaced the sword by his side, then turned to the men.

"Back to your duty," he said sternly. "Captain Burgoyne is in command of this frigate, and it is for him to decide what is best, not for you or for me. It is your duty to obey him, as your captain, implicitly. He now orders you to return to your duties!"

For some moments the men seemed disinclined to obey, then Fid came forward and touched his forehead.

"Aging your pardon, sir, I make bold to inquire, on behalf of my messmates and myself, if a true and proper account of this here Amadee will be given to the Port Admiral at the first port we make. My mates and me think it is our due that the Admiral should know it wasn't by no fault of ourn that the Amadee wasn't taken!"

"The captain will report the affair, I have no doubt," said Mr. Fryer.

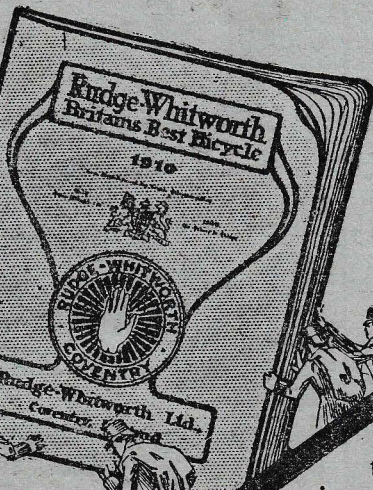
"Begging your pardon, sir, it isn't the captain as we want to report the affair. The captain, he reports in his way, and we want it done ourn!"

"If you feel aggrieved in any way, you have your remedy, as you know as well as I do," said Mr. Fryer; "but your remedy is not mutinous disobedience to your captain's authority. His orders are now that you instantly return to your duties."

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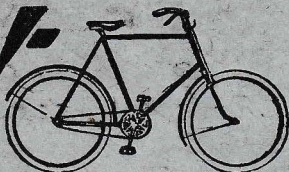


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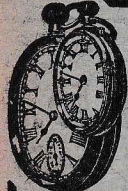
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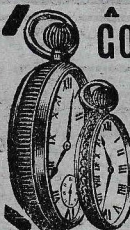
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