

NEXT
WEDNESDAY:

"THE SCHOOLBOY INFORMER!"

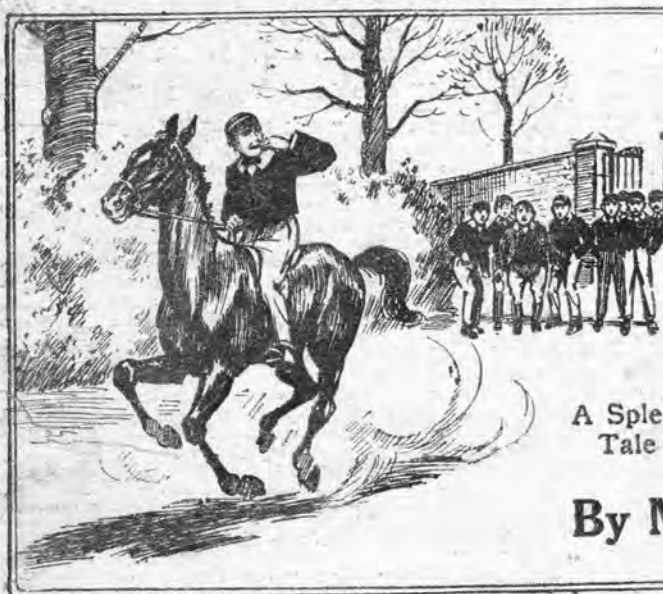
By
MARTIN CLIFFORD.

Every

Wednesday.



Complete Stories for All, and Every Story a Gem.



UNDER A CLOUD!

A Splendid, New, Long, Complete School
Tale of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.

A Little Run for Figgins & Co.

"WHOA!"

"Steady!"

Clatter, clatter, clatter!

"Hold him in!" roared Fatty Wynn.

"Whoa!"

Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther, of the Shell Form at St. Jim's, grinned as they heard the clattering and shouting outside the school gates. They strolled down to the gateway to look on. In the wide, white road outside the gates three juniors were clustered round a horse, and one of them, a particularly plump junior, was trying to mount him. The horse, apparently, was not having any. He backed away every time Fatty Wynn made an effort to heave himself into the saddle, and Fatty Wynn hopped beside him on one leg in a way that made even his chums, Figgins and Kerr, chuckle.

It made Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther roar!

Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther, the Terrible Three of the Shell, were School House fellows, and naturally they were glad of an opportunity of chipping Figgins & Co., the heroes of the New House. And they proceeded to chip!

"That horse knows something," said Monty Lowther. "If Fatty gets on his back he'll break into two, and he objects."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Why don't you get a ladder, Fatty?" asked Tom Merry. "Or you might get a lift in an aeroplane, and drop on him!"

"Whoa!"

"Woe is me!" grinned Manners. "Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins and Kerr chuckled, and then tried to look serious as Fatty Wynn glared at them. The fat Fourth-Former was red with exertion, Fatty Wynn was the best junior goal-keeper at St. Jim's, and the wonderfulst bowler that ever bowled, but he was not born to witch the world with noble

horsemanship, as our old friend William expresses it. The perspiration was streaming down Fatty Wynn's plump cheeks, and his face was a study in scarlet. He had one foot in the stirrup, and one on the ground; one hand on the saddle, and the other buried in the horse's mane, and he pranced round after the restive horse in a way that must have exercised all his muscles at once.

"What are you kik-kik-cackling at, you asses?" panted Fatty Wynn. "Can't you attend to the business in hand, you d-d-dummies? Can't you lend a fuf-fuf-fellow a hand, instead of cackling like giddy gig-gig-geese?"

"Sorry!" murmured Figgins. "I couldn't help it. Hold the beast in, Kerr."

"I'm trying to!" said Kerr. "He's afraid of Fatty. Perhaps he knows that his back won't stand the strain."

"Oh, shurrup!" gasped Wynn. "Hold him tight. Can't one of you get hold of his beastly tail?"

"Hang on to his ears!" suggested Monty Lowther. "Sit on his head, Figgy."

"Oh, go and eat coke!" growled Figgins. "I say, Fatty, you'd better buck up. We shall have the whole giddy school looking on soon!"

The clattering of hoofs on the hard road rang far and wide, and fellows were coming up from all quarters to watch the proceedings. A dozen or more had gathered round the Terrible Three in the old gateway. They chuckled and cackled without restraint, and Fatty Wynn snorted with wrath. Fatty Wynn had hired that horse for a ride that afternoon, and the man who had brought it had said that he was a nice, quiet animal, and that a baby in arms could ride him. Fatty Wynn was not a baby in arms, and perhaps that accounted for it. Certainly he did not seem able even to mount him, let alone to ride him.

"Whoa!"

"Steady the Buffs!" grinned Tom Merry. "Mind you

Next Wednesday:

"THE SCHOOLBOY INFORMER!" AND "SIR BILLY, OF GREYHOUSE!"

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don't push him over, Fatty. If you fell on him and killed him you'd have to pay for him, you know."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Clear out, you silly School House chumps!" roared Fatty Wynn. "What are you hanging round for? Go and practise cricket, so that you can keep up a wicket or two when we play you again!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Make an effort, Fatty, old man," said Kerr. "Now, when we shove him towards you, heave yourself up. Go it!"

"Both of you get on the starboard side and shove," said Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins and Kerr held the horse, and pushed him hard towards Fatty. Fatty, with a grip on the saddle and a grip on the mane, heaved himself up. He expected the horse to back away as before, but Figgins and Kerr were shoving him so hard on the other side that he couldn't, and so it came about that Fatty Wynn overshot the mark. Right over the saddle he went, head first, and he sprawled across the horse and rolled down on the other side, on top of his two devoted chums.

"Oh, crumbs!" gasped Kerr.

"Yaroor!" roared Figgins.

Bump!

Figgins and Kerr rolled in the dusty road, and Fatty Wynn rolled over them, wondering whether an earthquake had happened, or whether the universe had come to a sudden and violent end.

The horse blinked down at the three juniors, and backed away, and began browsing on the grass beside the road, apparently quite unconcerned and unrepentant.

"Oh!" groaned Figgins. "Ow!"

"Grooh!" moaned Kerr. "I'm killed!"

"Oh, scissors!" murmured Fatty Wynn. "You silly asses! Why didn't you hold him?"

The crowd in the gateway shrieked as the three New House juniors sat up in the dust and glared at one another.

"Oh, my hat!" said Tom Merry, almost weeping. "This is as good as a circus! Try again, Fatty! This is worth a guinea a box!"

"Ow!"

"Try, try, try again!" sang Lowther melodiously. "If at first you don't succeed—suck eggs! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Catch that beastly horse, somebody!" roared Fatty Wynn. "He's going!"

Tom Merry ran out of the gateway and caught the horse by the bridle.

"Bring him here," said Fatty Wynn.

Tom Merry chuckled.

"Oh, you can't ride, Fatty," he said. "You had this gee-gee brought here to be ridden, didn't you?"

"Of course I did, you fathead!"

"Well, he won't be ridden, the way you're doing it. Better let me ride him," and then the money won't be wasted."

"Good egg!" exclaimed Manners and Lowther.

"You—you cheeky rotter!" howled Fatty Wynn, scrambling up. "Give me my horse!"

"Rot!" said Tom Merry.

"You can do what you've been doing in the gym., on the parallel bars, you know. No need of a horse for that kind of exercise. Good-bye!"

He vaulted lightly into the saddle.

Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn, realising that the School House junior intended to raid their horse, made a desperate rush at him.

But they were too late.

Tom Merry was in the saddle, and he gave the horse a touch with his heel, and the steed broke into a canter.

The School House junior turned in the saddle to kiss his hand to the New House fellows.

"He—he—he's taken my horse!" roared Fatty Wynn. "After him!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors in the gateway rocked and shrieked with merri-

ment. Figgins & Co. bolted down the road after the horse and its rider. They left the crowd behind them weeping with mirth. Tom Merry looked back, and kissed his hand again to the New House juniors as they panted after him.

"Stop, you beast!" roared Figgins.

"Stop, you rotter!" roared Kerr.

"Gimme my horse!" yelled Fatty Wynn.

"Good-bye, Bluebell!" sang Tom Merry.

The New House juniors put on a desperate spurt. They ran as they had never run on the cinder-path. But Tom Merry was a good rider. He kept his steed just ahead of the panting trio, and they were labouring breathlessly behind when the village of Rylcombe came in sight. As he passed the Green Man, at the entrance of the village, Tom Merry waved his hand to the dusty juniors behind, and urged the horse into a gallop, and disappeared into a winding lane beside the road. Figgins and Kerr panted on to the corner, and saw a cloud of dust in the distance, but the rider and the raided horse were gone.

Fatty Wynn mopped his streaming face with his handkerchief.

"The beast!" he gasped. "He's got my horse—my gee-gee! I'll slaughter him! I'll scalp him! I'll—"

Figgins burst into a laugh.

"Well, he's done us this time!" he said. "Never mind, Fatty—"

"Never mind!" snorted Fatty Wynn. "I tell you I'll scalp him! I'll—I'll—"

"It's all in the game," said Kerr cheerfully. As Figgins and Kerr had not been going to ride the horse, they could naturally take a more impartial view of the matter than Fatty Wynn could. "It's one up for the School House this time. Don't be waxy, Fatty—we raided their pony and trap the other day, and it's all in the day's work."

Fatty Wynn grunted.

"Come and have some ginger-pop," said Figgins. "We're close to Mother Murphy's, and I've got a five-bob postal order to change. We'll look for that boulder as he comes back, and scalp him! Come on, Fatty. We can have some tarts, too!"

Fatty Wynn brightened up.

"Good egg!" he said heartily. "Now you're talking!"

And the New House chums adjourned to the village tuck-shop, where they discussed ginger-pop and jam tarts, till Figgins's five-shilling postal-order had vanished, and happy smiles were once more wreathing the plump countenance of the Falstaff of the New House.

CHAPTER 2.

Friends in Need.

"HIST!" "Hallo!" said Fatty Wynn. "What's the matter?"

"Shurrup! I've sighted him!"

"Oh, good!"

It was deep dusk now, and Figgins & Co., who had looked round the lanes and by-roads for Tom Merry for some time after leaving Mother Murphy's, had almost made up their minds to return to St. Jim's without catching the raider. It was quite possible that Tom Merry had taken the horse back to its owner's stable, and gone back to St. Jim's by a round-about way, if he had guessed that the New House chums were looking for him near Rylcombe. Fatty Wynn and Kerr were sitting on the stile, and Figgins had mounted to the top rail, holding on to a tree, to take a last survey in the gathering gloom. And he suddenly jumped down, with the warning to his chums to "hist!"

"He's coming!" said Figgins.

"Good egg!" said Fatty Wynn. "We'll make him sorry he raided our gee-gee. Of course, I don't bear any malice for a lark, but we can't let the School House wasters have the grin of us. We'll frog's-march him back to St. Jim's, and give him a ducking, and then we'll call it square."

"Hear, hear!" said Kerr.

"Hist!" said Figgins.

"All serene! I'm histing."

Figgins peered through the dusk along the lane. A solitary lamp at the cross-roads shed light in the lane, and into the radius of light from the lamp came a figure. It was that of a boy in Etons, with a silk hat pushed back on his head, and his hands in his pockets. The light fell upon the face of the new-comer. The face was strangely flushed, but Figgins & Co. were not likely to be mistaken in the well-known features of Tom Merry of St. Jim's.

"The boulder's changed his hat," murmured Kerr. "He was wearing a cap when he went off on the gee-gee."

"Bought a new one, perhaps, as he came back through Rylcombe," said Figgins.

"Sure it's Tom Merry?" asked Fatty, who had not left his seat upon the stile.

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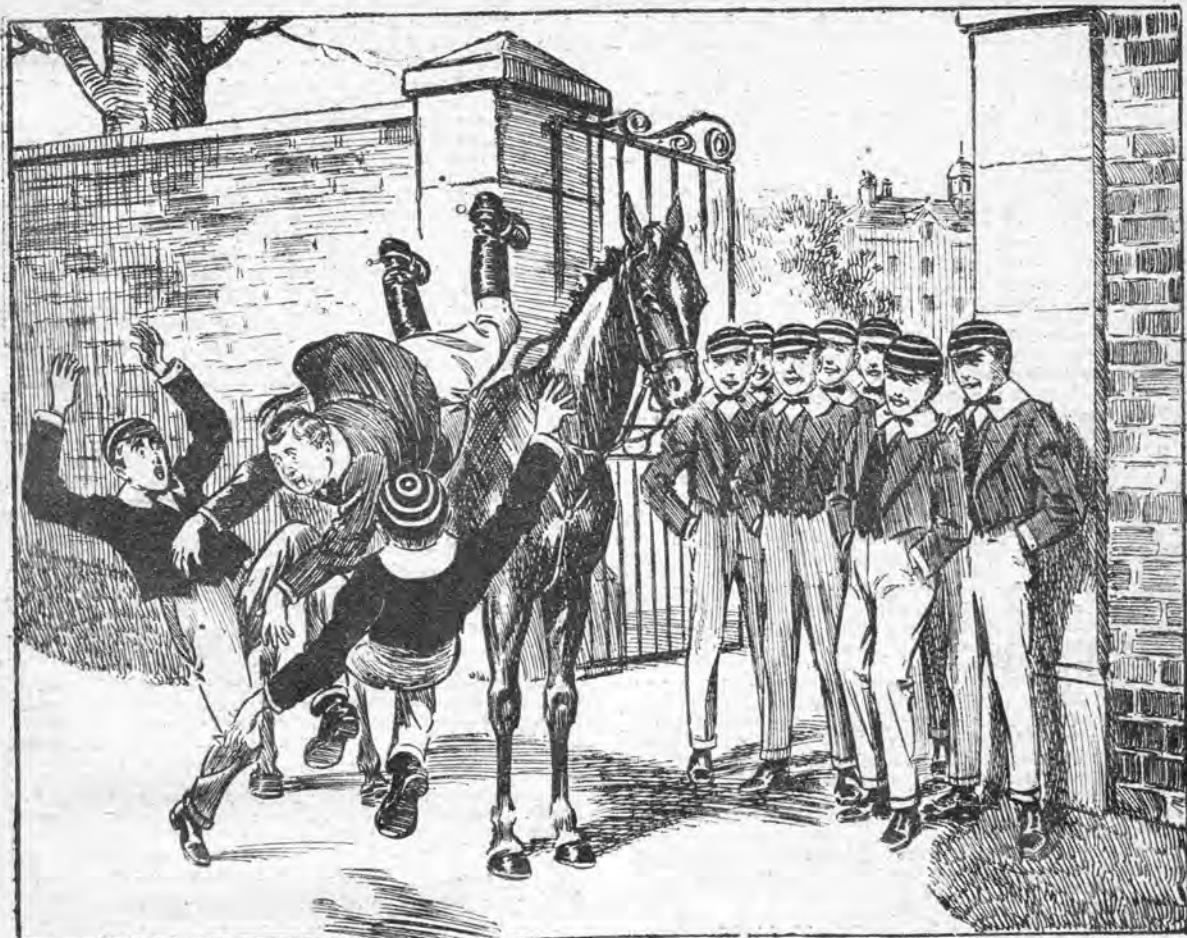
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Our Companion Papers.

"THE PENNY POPULAR"
Every Friday.



Fatty Wynn, with a grip on the saddle and a grip on the mane, heaved himself up; but Figgins and Kerr were shoving the horse so hard that Fatty overshot the saddle, and rolled head first on top of his chums. "Oh, crumbs!" gasped Kerr. "Yaroo!" roared Figgins. (See Chapter 1.)

Figgins grunted.

"I suppose I know Tom Merry!" he said.

"Well, it's getting dark—"

"The light's on his face from the lamp."

"We don't want to make a mistake," said Fatty Wynn.

"It would surprise a stranger if we rushed him, and bumped him over. He might think it rude."

Kerr chuckled.

"It's Tom Merry, right enough," he said. "Looks as if he's been hurrying; his face is very red."

Figgins and Kerr stared hard at the approaching lad.

It struck them both at once, that there was something very peculiar in his aspect.

He had both hands in his pockets, and was swaying queerly from side to side as he came down the lane, as if he was not quite certain of his footing.

Once he seemed to fall, and caught himself just in time; staggered, and came on again with that peculiar swaying gait.

Figgins and Kerr exchanged a quick glance.

"Something's wrong with him!" muttered Kerr.

"He's ill," said Figgins.

Fatty Wynn slid off the stile.

"What's the matter with him?" he asked. The newcomer was quite near now, and they could see his flushed face, and his eyes, which seemed to be glazed. He did not see them, though they were in full view. He came on unsteadily, his gaze fixed strangely ahead of him, as if he saw nothing.

"My hat!" murmured Fatty Wynn. All the fat Fourth-Former's hostility vanished at once, at the thought that the School House fellow was ill.

"May have had a fall from the horse," Figgins muttered.

"Let's speak to him," said Kerr.

Figgins called out:

"Tom Merry!"

The boy did not answer. He tramped on, swaying, and was about to pass the juniors, when Figgins stepped out into the road and caught him by the arm, stopped him.

The lad gazed at him dully.

"Lemme go!" he murmured.

"What's the matter, kid?" asked Figgins, kindly.

"Norrin'!"

"Are you ill?"

"No!"

"Have you had a fall?"

"Fall! Who's had a fall? I can walk all right!" said the lad, and he glared at Figgins with sudden anger. "Got way! I don't know you!"

Figgins & Co. looked at one another in utter horror.

There was no mistaking the junior's condition.

The flushed face, the glazed eyes, the uncertain movements, the swaying gait—all told the same tale!

He was the worse for drink!

And if Figgins & Co. could not believe their eyes, they could have believed their noses. There was a strong odour of spirits about the junior, and his breath, as he spoke, was laden with it.

"Good heavens!" said Figgins, in utter dismay.

They gazed at the junior, spellbound!

If it had been Levison or Mellish of the Fourth, or Crooke of the Shell, or Knox of the Sixth, they could have understood it. Though even the black sheep of St. Jim's would hardly have been reckless enough to appear upon a public road near the school in such a condition. For it was an offence that would have been followed by flogging and instant expulsion from the school, if discovered. And Tom Merry! Tom Merry of the Shell, the junior captain of the School House—the cricketer, the athlete, the good chum they knew so well—it was incredible!

Figgins stared into the flushed face before him.

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Order Early.

If he had not known the handsome features, the curly hair, the blue eyes, so well, he could never have believed that it was Tom Merry.

But there was no doubt possible!

"Good heavens!" echoed Kerr. "He's—he's drunk!"

"Oh, crumbs!" said Fatty Wynn. "Tom Merry—squiffy!" "Somebody must have been larking with him!" said Figgins. "Putting something into his ginger beer, or something—I've heard of tricks like that!"

"Must be something like that," said Kerr.

The junior shook himself free from Figgins.

"Gerraway!" he muttered thickly.

"I say, kid—don't you know me?" said Figgins, anxiously.

"You know me—Figgys?"

"I don't know you!"

"He can't recognise us!" said Kerr.

"I dunno you!"

"We're your old pals," said Figgins. "We'll stick to you, and see you through this, old son. Lean on me! My hat! Suppose anybody should pass and see him!"

"It would mean the sack!" said Kerr.

"Gerraway!" said the junior, angrily. "Wharrer you takin' hold of me for? Gerraway, can't you! Lemme alone!"

"Look here, kid—"

"I'll puncher head!" muttered the other. "Lemme alone! Who says I'm squiffy?"

"No, no, only a bit tired!" said Figgins, coaxingly. "For goodness' sake come out of the road. Somebody might pass and see you, you know!"

"Don't care!"

"But we care for you, old son!" said Figgins. "You're not going to be sacked if I can help it! Take his other arm, Kerr, and we'll get him over the stile, into the footpath. He won't be seen there, if anybody passes."

"Right-ho!" said Kerr.

They led the incapable junior to the stile, and lifted him over. He did not resist. He seemed too far gone for that. Figgins & Co. were almost sick with dismay and horror. There was no thought of House rivalry now. They only remembered that they were St. Jim's fellows, with a St. Jim's fellow to save from disgrace and ruin. For though Figgins suggested—and hoped—that the junior might be the victim of some trick, he could hardly believe so. He was intoxicated; and that was all there was about it. The New House juniors felt relieved when they had the helpless lad on the right side of the stile. He was safe from observation there, at all events. Kerr picked up the silk hat, which had fallen off, and put it on the junior's head.

"Now what are we going to do with him?" muttered Figgins. "He can't go back to St. Jim's in this state!"

"He won't come round for a bit," said Kerr.

"He doesn't look like it, certainly!"

"We shall be late for calling-over, if we don't get in!" Fatty Wynn remarked.

Figgins wrinkled his brows in thought.

To abandon a schoolfellow in such a state was impossible; but it would be the worst thing they could do for Tom Merry, if they took him back to St. Jim's in such a condition. And how was he to be taken? He was too overcome to walk the distance. He was leaning on the stile now, with an angry glare in his eyes, evidently resenting the handling he had received.

"You lemme alone!" he muttered. "I'm goin' home!"

"You can't go back in that state!" said Figgins, with a worried look.

"Mindjer own bizney!"

"Look here—"

"I ain't squiffy, I tell you!"

Figgins gave a short laugh.

"I fancy you are!" he said. "Look here, kid, we'll stick to you. But—"

"You lemme alone!" The junior suddenly detached himself from the stile, and started down the footpath into the dark wood.

Figgins caught hold of his shoulder to stop him.

The next moment he uttered a cry and reeled back, as he received a blow full in the face.

The intoxicated junior staggered on and disappeared into the shadows.

Kerr and Fatty Wynn caught Figgins as he reeled back.

"The rotter!" exclaimed Kerr, wrathfully.

Figgins dabbed his nose. His fingers came away red. The blow had brought a rush of water to the junior's eyes.

"The spiteful beast!" said Fatty Wynn. "It would serve him right to leave him alone, to look after himself!"

"He doesn't know what he's doing!" said Figgins, quietly. "He doesn't even recognise us. We must look after him, you chaps!"

"Oh, all right!"

Figgins, holding his handkerchief to his nose, ran down the

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footpath after the intoxicated junior. The darkness was thick under the trees.

"Tom Merry!" he called out.

There was no reply. The juniors heard a crashing in the bushes further down the path, but when they reached the spot, there was no further sound. And the junior they were looking for had disappeared.

"He's gone into the wood!" said Kerr.

"Tom Merry!" shouted Figgins. "Tom Merry! Speak up, old man! We want to look after you! I don't mind that dab on the nose! Where are you, old fellow?"

Only the echo of his voice replied.

"We've got to find him!" said Figgins, desperately.

"Not much chance of that," said Kerr. "I expect he's curled up in the thickets somewhere, and gone to sleep."

"Let's look for him!"

"Right-ho!"

The New House juniors plunged into the thickets, and searched for the fellow who had vanished from their sight. But the darkness was thick there, under the heavy trees, and there was no sound to guide them. It was like searching for the proverbial needle in a bundle of hay. They might have passed within a couple of feet of the junior without seeing him. They were in danger, indeed, of losing one another in the darkness. Figgins came back to the path at last, and shouted to his chums.

Kerr and Wynn came out of the wood and joined him.

"Seen him?" asked Kerr.

"No! And you—"

"Not a sign of him. I fancy he's gone to sleep. It won't hurt him," said Kerr. "The ground's dry enough; and when he comes to, he'll find his way back to St. Jim's."

"I suppose we can't do any more?" said Figgins miserably.

"Nothing!"

"Let's get back!"

And the chums of the New House, giving up the search, turned their steps in the direction of St. Jim's, with clouded faces. What had happened had cast a gloom over their spirits. Indeed, as they tramped through the dusk towards the school, Figgins wondered whether it was not all a day-dream—whether they had not fancied that they had seen Tom Merry of St. Jim's staggering along the road under the influence of liquor. They wondered what the captain of the Shell would say, and do, when he met them again—and remembered! How would he be able to look them in the face—how would he be able to look anybody in the face, for the matter of that?

Figgins & Co. were late for calling-over in the New House; and Mr. Ratcliff, their Housemaster, gave them lines. But they did not mind the lines. As they came out of Mr. Ratcliff's study, they were thinking of Tom Merry; and wondering whether he had returned to the school.

"We ought to let his pals know about it," said Figgins. "I think I'll cut over to the School House and see Lowther and Manners, and warn them. He may come home singing and dancing—I shouldn't wonder—and have to be smuggled into the house and hidden!"

And Figgins crossed over to the School House.

CHAPTER 3. Figgins's Warning!

"MERRY!"

No answer!

"Tom Merry!" repeated Mr. Railton, who was taking call-over in the School House.

But Tom Merry's name was not replied to. Mr. Railton, the Housemaster of the School House, glanced over to the racks of the Shell.

"Is Merry not there?" he asked.

"No, sir," said Monty Lowther. "He went out for a ride after school, sir, and he hasn't come in. I suppose he's been delayed getting back, sir."

"Very well, Lowther!"

Mr. Railton marked down Tom Merry's name as absent, and the calling-over finished.

Monty Lowther and Manners left together after calling-over, and stopped in the passage, looking out into the dusky quadrangle. It was a clear spring night, and the stars were twinkling in deep blue heavens over the old school.

"Where on earth has that bouncer got to?" said Monty Lowther, when they had waited at the door for about half an hour, and there was no sign of their chum. "Has that blessed geegee bolted with him?"

"May as well go and get on with our prep!" said Manners.

"Tommy come in yet?" asked Jack Blake of the Fourth, joining the chums of the Shell at the door.

"Not yet!"

"He's awfully late!" remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, who was with Blake. "We wanted you fellows to come to a little suppah in Study No. 6. Dig, and Herries are gettin'

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it ready. I'm standin' it. Where has Tom Merwy gone?"

Lowther grunted.

"The silly ass raided a horse from Fatty Wynn," he explained. "He went off for a ride, with Figgins & Co. after him. I don't suppose they caught him, though; anyway, they wouldn't prevent him from coming in. Blessed if I know what's become of him!"

"Bai Jove! I twust he has not bwoke'n his neck!" said D'Arcy.

"I trust not!" said Lowther, sarcastically.

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Well, send him up to Study No. 6 when he comes, and come with him," said Blake. "If you're not too late, there will be baked potatoes and ham!"

"Good egg!" said Lowther. "I'm hungry! We'll come up the minute the fathead shows up; and if he's much later, I'll hammer him when he does come in!"

Blake and D'Arcy went upstairs, and the chums of the Shell scanned the shadowed quadrangle again. A figure loomed up in the gloom, and Lowther uttered an exclamation of relief.

"Here he is!"

But it was not Tom Merry.

It was Figgins of the Fourth who came into the light of the doorway. Lowther and Manners looked at the New House junior inquiringly. Figgins was looking pale and worried.

"Hallo!" grunted Lowther. "What do you want on the respectable side of the quad, you New House boulder?"

"Looking for a thick ear!" suggested Manners.

"May as well bump him, to pass away the time while we're waiting for Tommy!" said Monty Lowther, as if struck by a brilliant idea.

"Pax!" said Figgins, quietly. "I haven't come over for a rag, you fellows. Has Tom Merry come in yet?"

"No!"

"He missed call-over, then?"

"Of course he did! Haven't you seen anything of your geegoo?" grinned Lowther. "How far did you follow him?"

But Figgins did not grin.

"I came over to speak to you fellows," he said. "It's serious—and it's about Tom Merry. Better get up to the study!"

Lowther and Manners stared at him.

"Nothing's happened to him—no accident?" asked Lowther, breathlessly.

"Let's get up to the study!" said Figgins, evasively.

Lowther grasped him by the arm.

"Is Tom Merry hurt?" he demanded, sharply.

"No. It isn't that!"

"Oh, all right, then. Come on!"

Manners and Lowther led the way to the study in the Shell. Figgins followed them without a word; and he did not speak when they were in the study, with the door closed. He seemed to be seeking for words.

"What's the matter?" asked Manners. "Why don't you speak?"

"It's horribly serious!" said Figgins. "We—we waited about Rylcombe to catch Tom Merry, if we could, as he came back from the ride. We meant to scrag him for raiding Fatty's horse. Well, we met him in the lane!"

"Then you've seen him!" exclaimed Lowther.

"Yes."

"Well," said Lowther and Manners together, "why don't you get on? Did you have a row?"

"No. He was drunk!" said Figgins, getting it out at last.

The Shell fellows jumped.

"Tom Merry! Drunk! What on earth do you mean?" demanded Lowther, angrily.

"I mean what I say!" said Figgins, quietly. "It was a shock to us, I can tell you. He had been drinking, and he couldn't walk straight!"

"Rot!"

"Why hasn't he come back?" said Figgins, quietly.

"I suppose he's been delayed."

"Look here!" said Figgins. "I'm not telling you this to score over you. Goodness knows I'd give anything if it wasn't true. But it is true. Kerr and Wynn were with me. He was so drunk he could hardly walk. It may have been a trick—he may have had the stuff planted on him somehow. I don't know. I hope so. But he was so far gone that he didn't know me—he said so!"

Lowther and Manners stared at Figgins blankly. The troubled, worried face of the New House junior was proof enough of his sincerity. It was evidently not a "rag."

"You must be dreaming!" said Manners, at last.

"You must have been mistaken!" said Lowther. "Perhaps it wasn't Tom Merry at all—you may have mistaken somebody else for him!"

"I'm not likely to do that!"

"But—but—"

"We got him over the stile into the footpath, to keep him out of sight in case anybody should pass and see him. You know what it would mean if it were known here. He punched my nose and bolted into the wood, and we lost him. We had to come back without him!"

"He must have been fooling you!" said Lowther, incredulously. "He was pulling your leg!"

"He smelt of spirits like a taproom!"

"It's all rot!" said Lowther, uneasily.

Figgins flushed.

"I don't mean I doubt your word, Figgy!" said Lowther.

"But it must be a mistake. It can't have been Tom Merry—squiffy!"

"It was Tom Merry, and he was squiffy!"

"Oh, rot!"

"I thought I'd warn you fellows, so that you can look for him as he comes in," said Figgins, quietly. "Goodness knows what state he will come back in. If he's still squiffy, you must smuggle him into the dorm, quietly—make out he's ill, or something. If the prefects see him it will be all up!"

"I can't believe it!" said Manners. "I—" Manners broke off suddenly, and tore open the study door. Mellish of the Fourth almost fell into the study. Manners kicked the sprawling junior, his face flaming with anger, and Mellish roared.

"You cad!" shouted Manners. "You've been listening!"

"Ow!" roared Mellish. "Ow!"

He squirmed out of the doorway into the passage, and picked himself up and fled. Manners slammed the door.

"It will be all over the House now!" he said hopelessly.

"And it's all rot!" said Lowther, savagely. "I suppose you mean well, Figgins, but you're talking rot, and I know it!"

"Very well," said Figgins. "I've told you, so that you can do your best for Tom Merry. If I were in this House, I'd look after him like a shot. It's up to you fellows to see that he doesn't get into trouble. That's all!"

And Figgins quitted the study.

Manners and Lowther looked at one another grimly.

"It can't be true!" said Manners.

Lowther shook his head.

"It's some rotten mistake, of course!" he said.

"Of course. All the same," said Manners, hesitatingly.

"I—I think we may as well get down to the gate, and wait for him there. Figgy believed what he said. Of course, it's a ghastly mistake; but—"

"Come on!" said Lowther, shortly.

The two Shell fellows went downstairs, and slipped out into the quadrangle. Meanwhile, Mellish of the Fourth had gone to his study—with news!

CHAPTER 4.

Levison is Pleased!

LEIVISON of the Fourth and Jerrold Lumley-Lumley were in their study, doing their preparation, when Mellish came in. The expression upon Percy Mellish's face attracted their attention at once.

"What's up?" asked Levison.

"Something rather thick!" said Mellish, with a chuckle.

"I was just passing Tom Merry's study, when I heard voices—"

"Anywhere near the keyhole?" asked Lumley-Lumley, caustically.

"Mind your own business," said the cad of the Fourth, with a scowl. "I'm not talking to you, Lumley. Figgins of the New House was over there, talking to Manners and Lowther in the study, and I couldn't help hearing!"

Levison grinned. He knew just how much Mellish couldn't help hearing. Indeed, there was something in that, for it certainly seemed that Percy Mellish couldn't help playing the eavesdropper. It was his nature to!

"Well, what did you hear?" said Lumley-Lumley gruffly.

"Blessed if I like listening to this tattle. Get it over!"

"You can get out of the study if you don't like to hear!" suggested Levison.

"I guess I've got my prep. to do, or I wouldn't stay here to enjoy the delights of your company!" growled Lumley-Lumley. "It's sickening being stuck in the same study with you two outsiders!"

"Oh, go and eat coke! Get on with the washing, Mellish!"

"Figgy came to warn Manners and Lowther that he's seen Tom Merry squiffy on the road outside—too tipsy to take care of himself!" said Mellish. "Squiffy! What do you think of that! Tom Merry, too—the giddy model and giddy hero—chap who's always setting himself up as a shining example to us rotters! What?"

Levison drew a deep breath.

"It can't be true!" he said.

"Figgins thought it was; and he was urging Lowther and

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NEXT
WEDNESDAY:

"THE SCHOOLBOY INFORMER!"

By MARTIN CLIFFORD,

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Manners to get Merry in quietly, as soon as he comes back, so that the prefects shan't spot him!"

"I don't believe a word of it!" said Lumley-Lumley. "I guess Figgy's off his rocker, if he thinks anything of the sort!"

"I can't quite swallow it," said Levison. "I shouldn't wonder if Tom Merry is a humbug—those awfully too-good chaps generally are—but he wouldn't be silly ass enough to be found like that: He may be a rotter, but he's not a fool!"

"I suppose Figgins ought to know as he's seen him!"

"Well, it's certainly queer!"

"Let's go down to the gates and wait for him," said Mellish. "Manners and Lowther are going there, I think—and we may as well be on the scene. If Tom Merry comes home squiffy, he may want helping to the House—and I don't mind taking one leg."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Levison rose from the table, leaving his work quite cheerfully. To see Tom Merry in such a state, and to do his best to bring it to the notice of the prefects would be a real pleasure to the cad of the Fourth.

"Coming, Lumley?" he asked.

"I guess not," grunted Lumley-Lumley. "It's not true; and if it is, it's no business of ours. Why can't you keep out of it?"

"Oh, go and chop chips!" said Levison.

He left the study with Mellish. They called in the Shell passage for Crooke, and Crooke of the Shell, when he heard what was on, was as eager as either of the Fourth-Formers.

"My hat! What a show-up for the Terrible Three if it's true!" grinned Crooke, with great enjoyment. "I'm afraid it's too good to be true, you fellows; but anyway, we'll be on the scene. Let's get a crowd there to see him, so that they can't hide it!"

"Good egg!"

And the cads of the School House lost no time in carrying out that amiable scheme. Gore of the Shell and several other fellows joined them immediately they heard the story, scoffing at it for the most part, but very curious to see whether there was anything in it. Quite a little crowd of curious inquirers into Tom Merry's state came down the passage past Study No. 6, and it occurred to Levison to call for Blake & Co. If Tom Merry had disgraced himself, it would be an added triumph to cause him to be seen by his friends at the time.

The chums of Study No. 6 were having their supper, having given up waiting for the Terrible Three. They looked round as the door opened, expecting to see Tom Merry & Co. But it was Levison who looked in.

"Heard the news?" asked Levison.

"What news?" asked Blake, without showing much interest. Levison and Mellish were generally full of news, but it was not news that could be relied upon.

"You know Tom Merry missed call-over?"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Hasn't the boundah come in yet? There will be a wow when he does."

"I fancy there will!" grinned Levison. "It's all over the place now—Figgins saw him on the road worse for drink, and he can't walk home!"

"What?"

"Gweat Scott!"

"We're going to wait for him at the gate, to help him into the House, so that the prefects won't see him," said Levison. "Of course, he ought to be sacked for disgracing St. Jim's in this way, but we're going to look after him, you know."

"You uttah wottah!" said D'Arcy. "I don't believe a word of it. I wegard you as a scandal-mongahing cad, Levison."

"It's Figgins that said so," said Levison, with a shrug of the shoulders. "If it's not true, you can put it down to Figgins."

"Wats!"

"We're not coming," said Blake shortly. "Get out of this study, or I'll come and fire you down the passage."

"Yaas, wathah!—I wufuse to listen to back-bitin' remarks about a fiend," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy severely. "Get out, you wottah!"

"Oh, go to the dickens!" growled Levison. "You know it's true, and—ow!" Levison broke off as a baked potato, deftly hurled by Jack Blake, caught him under the chin and burst into his collar. "Ow, you rotter! Yow!"

"Have another?" asked Blake, raising his hand with a potato in it.

Levison backed quickly out of the study and slammed the door with a slam that rang to the end of the passage. And the chums of the Fourth chuckled and went on with their supper. They did not believe a word of the story. Levison and Mellish always had some unpleasant story to tell about somebody, but this one seemed to Blake & Co. the most absurd the scandal-mongers of the School House had ever invented.

Levison extracted the fragments of the potato from his collar the best he could, and the investigating party proceeded into the quad. They were stopped at the door of the School House by Kildare of the Sixth, the captain of St. Jim's.

"Tim's up for going out of the House," said the St. Jim's captain. "Get in."

"I say, Kildare, we're going down to the gates to meet Tom Merry," said Gore. "He hasn't come in yet, and we're expecting him."

"Oh, all right, then," said Kildare, after a moment's consideration. "You can go."

And they went.

Manners and Lowther were already at the school gates. They looked round in the dusk of the quadrangle as the little crowd of juniors arrived.

"What do you want here?" demanded Lowther angrily.

"We've heard a yarn about Tom Merry," said Gore.

"Well, what's it got to do with you?" growled Lowther.

"Is it true, then?" asked Gore with a stare.

"Of course it isn't, fathead!"

"Mellish said Figgins said—"

"Blow what Mellish said Figgins said!" said Lowther. "You are like a tattling old market-woman! He said that she said that he said that she said—rats!"

"Well, I think there ought to be some witnesses when Tom Merry comes in," remarked Crooke. "If he's sober, we'll bear witness to it, and prove that there's nothing in the yarn. It's for Tom Merry's benefit to have us here."

"Yes, you've come for Tom Merry's benefit, I'm sure of that!" said Monty Lowther sarcastically.

"Well, we're stopping here, anyway," said Crooke. "We've got Kildare's leave to be out of the House, and we're going to see it through."

"Yes, rather!" said Levison.

Manners and Lowther turned their backs upon them. They were looking through the bars of the gate into the road, where the lamps upon the gate-posts shed a dim light. The two Shell fellows did not speak again. They could not get rid of the curious crowd, if the fellows chose to remain. And as the minutes of waiting passed, more fellows came and joined the waiting crowd. It was amazing how soon the rumour had spread that Tom Merry was expected to return to the school "squiffy." His friends came to witness the fact that he wasn't, his foes came to witness the fact that he was, and others who were indifferent came out of sheer curiosity. There were fifteen or twenty fellows on the spot before ten minutes had passed.

"We shall have the whole blessed school here soon," said Lowther savagely, "and then the prefects will want to know what it's about, and they'll come on the scene."

"Well, what does it matter, if Tom Merry's not squiffy?" chuckled Crooke, who overheard the remark. "Blessed if I don't think you believe he is, Lowther!"

"Br-r-r-r!" said Lowther.

There was a step in the road at last, and a ring at the bell. The figure of a junior came into the light outside the gate. It was Tom Merry at last!

CHAPTER 5.

A Very Curious Reception.

TOM MERRY rang the bell, and waited. He did not see the crowd within the gate in the gloom. Taggles the porter came growling out of his lodge, with his keys in his hand. Taggles did not like being disturbed by junior boys who had over-stayed their time. The school porter stared at the crowd of waiting juniors in surprise.

"It's all right, Taggy," said Levison. "We're waiting for Tom Merry. He may want some help back to the house, and we're all going to lend a hand."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Taggles unlocked the gate.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Tom Merry, as he caught sight of the juniors.

"Hallo!" grinned Levison. "Catch him, Manners! Hold him up, Lowther! He'll be over in a minute!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry stared at Levison. The captain of the Shell was looking very red and flushed, and out of breath. He looked as if he had been running, but some of the juniors chose to attribute the flush in his cheeks to another cause.

"Squiffy, right enough," said Crooke.

"Drunk as a giddy lord!" said Mellish.

ANSWERS

"Horrible example to us bad boys!" said Levison. "What shall we do for a shining light now?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What on earth are you silly asses gassing about?" demanded Tom Merry. "Is it a joke?"

"Jolly serious joke for you if the prefects drop on you," said Crooke with a chuckle. "Get him into the house quick, you fellows. I saw Knox in the quad, as we came out, and he'll be down on him like a ton of bricks."

"Yes, rather!"

"Have you all gone dotty?" asked Tom Merry. "What's the matter?"

Manners and Lowther were looking at him queerly. They drew up on either side of him, to walk back to the School House with him. But Levison & Co. did not intend that the captain of the Shell should get into the House quietly. The scandal was too rich to be allowed to die away if they could help it. "Squiffy" or not, they intended that Tom Merry should be shown up, as they called it.

"Help him," exclaimed Levison. "Let's get him into the House. Lend a hand, all of you."

"Come on!" exclaimed Mellish.

There was a rush for Tom Merry.

"Hands off!" shouted the Shell fellow. "What are you up to? I don't want any help."

He shoved Levison back roughly.

"He's quarrelsome drunk," said Levison. "There are several sorts of drunk—talking-drunk, and friendly-drunk, and quarrelsome-drunk. That's Tom Merry's sort. But we're going to stand by him."

"Drunk?" repeated Tom Merry. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"Oh, come, don't play the innocent!" urged Levison. "We know all about it. Figgins saw you on the road, reeling and staggering."

"Figgins!"

"Yes. You were so tight you didn't know him," chuckled Mellish.

Tom Merry took a step towards Mellish, and his right arm shot out. His fist crashed in Mellish's face, and the cad of the Fourth dropped as if he had been shot.

Tom Merry's eyes blazed at the juniors.

"Anybody else want the same?" he demanded. "If that's a joke, I don't like that kind of joke. Jokes of that sort are barred."

"Oh!" groaned Mellish, on the ground. "Ow! Collar him, you chaps! He's fighting drunk—he'll do some damage if he's not collared."

"Hold him!" shouted Crooke.

"Stand back, you rotters!" exclaimed Lowther.

But they did not stand back. Five or six fellows caught hold of Tom Merry, and he hit out angrily. Lowther and Manners backed him up, and in a moment there was a wild and whirling combat going on. The Terrible Three were victorious. They stood shoulder to shoulder, and fought their way through, and marched on to the School House, leaving four or five combatants gasping on the ground.

Levison picked himself up, with his hand to his eye. He blinked out of the other eye, and groaned.

"Ow! Ow! I shall have a black eye in the morning! Ow!"

"Grooh!" groaned Mellish. "My nose is swelling! Yow—I'm hurt!"

"I believe half my teeth are loose!" said Crooke savagely.

"I've got a black eye," said Gore. "The beast was drunk; there's no doubt about that. Drunk as a fiddler!"

"Bosh!" said Reilly of the Fourth. "He was wild at being called squiffy, and it serves you right if you've got hurt, ye spalpeen."

"He was all right," said Kangaroo of the Shell. "And if he hadn't given you a black eye, Gore, I'd have given you a thick ear."

Gore ground his teeth.

"You all saw that he was squiffy, and he came home fighting and quarrelling," he said. "Figgins was telling the truth."

"I don't believe Figgins said anything of the sort," said Kangaroo.

"Mellish heard him."

"We all know Mellish," said the Cornstalk junior, with a curl of the lip. "A fellow who'd listen at a door would tell lies about what he heard."

"It's true," growled Mellish.

"Rats!"

And the juniors followed the Terrible Three to the House, warmly discussing the question as to whether Tom Merry was or was not "squiffy." Whether his outbreak of temper was due to drink, or to a natural anger at an insulting accusation, was a question every fellow had to answer for himself, and the way they answered it depended upon their feelings towards Tom Merry.

Meanwhile, the Terrible Three had reached the School House, and Manners and Lowther hurried Tom Merry upstairs, their arms linked in his. Tom attempted to stop on the stairs.

"I'd better report myself to Mr. Railton," he said. "He won't know I've come in."

"I'll tell him," said Lowther hurriedly. "Come on."

"The dorm," repeated Tom Merry in surprise, giving way as his chums hurried him up the stairs. "Why not the study? I'm hungry."

"I'll get you something in the dorm."

"But what—" Tom Merry attempted to stop on the second flight of stairs, but his chums rushed him on.

"Come on!" said Manners.

And they took him into the Shell dormitory. Manners turned the light on, and then they looked at Tom Merry's flushed and wondering face. They looked at him hard and doubtfully. Tom Merry met their gaze with wonder and rising exasperation.

"What on earth is the matter?" he asked.

"You're all right?" asked Lowther doubtfully.

"All right? Of course I'm all right! What do you mean?"

"There isn't any niff of spirits, anyway," said Manners.

"Figgins was mistaken in that, Lowther."

"What makes you so red?" asked Lowther.

"I've been running. I ran all the way from Rylcombe," said Tom Merry. "I was jolly late!"

"Where have you been?"

Tom Merry's frowning face broke into a smile.

"I had a regular scamper on Fatty Wynn's geesea," he said. "I took him round Wayland Moor, and right over past Abbotsford. Then he fell lame. Of course, I hadn't foreseen that. I had to walk back leading him. I couldn't ride the poor beast when he was lame. I took him back to the stable—I knew where Fatty had hired him—and then I ran back all the way to St. Jim's. I'm pretty fagged, I can tell you, and as hungry as a hunter!"

"You didn't meet Figgins & Co.?"

"No. I lost sight of them near Rylcombe, soon after I started. I gave them a run down the lane after me," said Tom Merry, laughing.

"And you didn't see them afterwards?"

"No. They've come in, surely?" said Tom Merry. "I had an idea that they would wait about to catch me coming back; but they wouldn't wait all this time."

"They came in long ago," said Lowther. "and Figgins came over to see us. He said—" Monty Lowther paused.

Tom Merry started.

"You don't mean to say that Figgins really said what those cads were saying at the gate?" he exclaimed.

"Yes."

"That I was—was—"

"Squiffy!"

"Figgins said so!"

"Yes. He came over to tell us, and Mellish was listening at the door. That's how it got out!" explained Lowther.

"Figgins said so!" repeated Tom Merry, dazedly.

"Figgins! But Figgins isn't a cad—he must have been dreaming! He said he met me?"

"Yes, and that you were so tipsy, you didn't know him!"

"He's dotty!" Tom Merry's face flushed with anger.

"But dotty or not, he's not going to tell a yarn like that about me! I'll go over to the New House—"

"Hold on!" said Lowther, catching Tom Merry by the shoulder, as he swung towards the door. "You can't go over to the New House now, it's too late!"

"But if Figgins said—"

"He believed it," said Lowther. "I told him there must be some mistake, but he believed what he said."

"And you believed it, too?" demanded Tom Merry, indignantly. "Is that what you call sticking to a pal?"

Manners and Lowther flushed uncomfortably.

"We didn't believe it," said Lowther haltingly. "If it had been any fellow but Figgins who said so, we—"

"We shouldn't have taken any notice. But you know Figgins isn't a liar, and he believed it—he came over to warn us to look after you, so that you wouldn't be caught by a prefect. He meant well—"

"And you came down to the gates to carry me in?" said Tom Merry, sarcastically. "Thanks! If I ever come home tipsy, I shall know that I can rely on you, now!"

"You needn't get ratty about it!" said Lowther tartly.

"We simply didn't know what to think, and we came down to meet you in—in case—in case there was anything in it. But of course, we didn't believe it!"

"Figgins must have been dreaming," said Manners. "He was in such deadly earnest, too. And he couldn't have imagined that he met you, could he?"

"I don't see how he could," said Tom Merry. "We've had lots of rows with Figgins, but I shouldn't like to believe"

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By MARTIN CLIFFORD,
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that he was taking this kind of way to get even. It wouldn't be like him—as we've known him."

"It's some ghastly mistake," said Lowther. "I don't see how it came about—but it's a mistake, somehow. Better come down now and let the fellows see you're all right."

"So that's why you brought me up here!" said Tom Merry, angrily. "You thought I was tipsy, and wanted to hide me!"

"We thought it best——"

"I suppose it would have been best, if I'd been that kind of chap," said Tom. "But I think you might wait a bit before you treat me as a disgraceful blackguard."

"Well, you see——" stammered Lowther. "If there'd been anything in it——"

"Oh, rot! You ought to have known there was nothing in it. Do you think I'd believe a tale like that about you?" demanded Tom Merry.

"If it had been anybody but Figgins——"

"Oh, blow Figgins! I'll jolly well talk to him in the morning about this!" said Tom Merry, wrathfully. "I understand now what that crowd was there for—and they'll say that the yarn was true, as I knocked Mellish down. Figgins must be dotty. He was always a silly ass but he seems to be quite dotty now."

"But he said he'd met you on the road——"

"I was miles away from the Rylcombe road, until half an hour ago," said Tom Merry.

"Then it's impossible!"

"Of course it's impossible, fathead!"

"But—but—he said Kerr and Wynn were with him—and they helped you over the stile, and—and you bolted into the wood——"

"Are they all gone mad?" exclaimed Tom Merry, in utter amazement. "Do you mean to say that Kerr and Wynn tell the same tale?"

"We haven't seen them—but Figgins says so——"

"They can't all be mistaken," said Tom Merry, setting his lips. "Figgins may have dreamed it—but three of them couldn't dream it. If the three of them tell the same story, there's only one explanation—and that is that it's a plot, and we've been mistaken in them. It's a rotten plot that Levison or Mellish might have thought of; but we'd never have believed it of Figgins and Kerr and Wynn! But it's all lies from beginning to end—I didn't meet Figgins—I didn't meet Kerr—and I didn't meet Wynn! They didn't help me into the wood—and I haven't been in the wood to-day at all! That's plain enough, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's plain enough," said Lowther, with a short laugh. "I don't understand it, that's all!"

"You believe me, I suppose?" snapped Tom Merry. The usually sunny temper of the Shell fellow seemed to be failing him now.

"Of course, I believe you!" said Lowther, also sharply.

"But what I mean is, I can't believe that Figgins and Kerr and Wynn would make up a scandal about a fellow. It's altogether too thick!"

"It seems a bit too steep," said Manners, with a shake of the head.

"Either Figgins or I must be speaking falsely," said Tom Merry, after a pause. "There's no two ways about it. He says something happened—and I say it didn't happen!"

"I give it up," said Lowther. "Come down and have some supper. Blake asked us to supper in No. 6—there may be something left."

"I'll see Figgins first thing in the morning," said Tom Merry, between his teeth. "There's got to be an explanation of this!"

"Let it rest till then."

Tom Merry nodded, and the chums of the Shell quitted the dormitory. Tom Merry's face was pale now with anger; and Manners and Lowther were lost in amazement. They could not but believe Tom Merry's categorical denial. It was impossible to doubt their chum's word. But—to believe that three fellows like Figgins & Co. had deliberately made up a wretched tale about their chum—that was too staggering. Figgins and Kerr and Wynn were the deadly rivals of the School House fellows; but they were open and honest as the day—the very last fellows in the world to invent or to repeat anything in the shape of scandal. Lowther and Manners simply did not know what to think. It was a dilemma from which there seemed to be no escape.

CHAPTER 6.

A Puzzling Problem.

"BAI Jove! Here they are!"
Supper was very nearly finished in Study No. 6—and the supplies were very nearly finished too. But the four chums of the Fourth greeted the Terrible Three hospitably. Tom Merry had run downstairs to report his return to Mr. Railton, and to explain how he had been

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delayed, and he had been let off with a light imposition. Then he had rejoined his chums and they had come to Study No. 6. The Terrible Three were not looking as genial as usual. They had something on their minds, and it was impossible to show their usual good-humour when they did not feel it.

"Something left," said Blake, cheerily, with a survey of the table. "Three baked potatoes—that will be one each. Two saveloys—divide two saveloys among three Shell fellows—how does that go? Work it out in decimals, Dig!"

"Never mind; there's a steak-pudding in the cupboard," said Digby, getting up and hospitably producing the pudding.

"And I've got Towser's biscuits here, if we run short of tommy!" said Herries, blandly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But the Terrible Three did not grin. They took the chairs offered them, and began to eat their supper—Tom Merry disposing of the baked potato, and a saveloy, in very quick time, and then making a deep inroad upon the steak-pudding. He had evidently returned with a good appetite, whatever his experiences had been during his long absence.

Blake looked at him curiously.

"You've been jolly late," he remarked.

"Horse fell lame, the other side of Abbotsford!" Tom Merry explained, briefly.

"Gweat Scott! Did you have to walk back, deah boy?" asked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, sympathetically.

"Well, I couldn't fly, you know," said Tom Merry. "I forgot to take an aeroplane."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"It's a jolly long way," said Digby. "Abbotsford—that's where Lowther was caught, when he buzzed off and went on the stage, and the Head fetched him back. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yaas, wathah, that was vewy funny!"

"Oh, rats, that's ancient history," said Lowther. "This is a jolly good pudding. It reminds me of a stage story—chap got a job——"

"Did he run away from school to get it?" asked D'Arcy.

"No, ass—this is a story. He said it was a good job—jolly good job considering the present state of the stage," said Lowther. "There weren't any wages—but there was a real pudding in the third act!"

"Chestnuts!" groaned Blake.

Monty Lowther sniffed.

"By the way, Levison's been in here with a yarn about you, Tommy," said Blake. "He was getting up a party to wait for you at the gates and help you in, because Mellish had a story that you were squiffy. There would have been another potato for supper but for that—Levison got one in his neck!"

Tom Merry laughed.

"Good for you!" he said. "They met me at the gates—and Lowther and Manners got me up to the dorm. jolly quickly, so that I could sleep it off before the prefects spotted me. Nothing like having good chums to stand by you when you go on the razzle, is there?"

"Oh, cheese it!" growled Lowther. "We acted for the best, anyway!"

"You don't mean to say you took any stock in Mellish's yarn?" said Blake, with a grin. "Or Levison either? You must be green. You remember the yarns they made up about Brooks——"

"It was Figgins told us!" said Lowther, shortly.

Blake jumped.

"Figgins!"

"Yes."

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Are you quite sure, Lowthah, deah boy?"

"Sure!" howled Lowther. "I suppose I know which fellow is talking to me when he's talking to me, don't I?"

"I twust so," said D'Arcy, calmly. "But you have made a most amazin' statement, you know. I cannot undahstand Figgy sayin' a scandalous thing like that about our friend Tom Mewwy."

"Extraordinary!" said Herries.

"Well, he did!" snapped Lowther.

"It's vewy wemakable, then!"

"He's going to explain to-morrow, or there will be trouble!" said Tom Merry. "They've got the whole yarn complete—they found me tipsy in the lane, and I got away from them in the wood—all lies from beginning to end!"

Blake shifted uncomfortably.

"Oh, draw it mild!" he said. "Figgins may be mistaken, but he wouldn't tell lies!"

Tom Merry laid down his fork.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked. "Figgins told Lowther that he met me in Rylcombe Lane—too tipsy to know him! That's either true or untrue, isn't it?"

"I—I suppose so!" admitted Blake.

"I say it's untrue," said Tom Merry, with gleaming eyes,

"I say it's a lie from start to finish! I hear that Figgins got in soon after calling-over, and so it must have been before then that he met me, if he met me at all. At that time I was walking a lame horse home from Abbotsford—miles away."

"Must have made a mistake, then," said Blake.

Tom Merry grunted.

"I suppose Figgins knows me by sight," he said. "And Kerr and Wynn were with him, he told Lowther."

Blake rubbed his nose thoughtfully. He was greatly perplexed.

"It's jolly queer," he said. "Extraordinary that the three of them should make a mistake like that. They must have met somebody, and mistaken him for you."

"Have they forgotten what I look like, then?" said Tom Merry sarcastically.

"It's certainly queer."

"Yaas, wathah—vewy queeah indeed!"

"It's too queer to be true," said Tom Merry. "They couldn't mistake another chap for me. That's all rot. They've made up this yarn; there's no two ways about it. For some reason or other they've made it up. I suppose it's the New House idea of a rag. Perhaps they'll admit to-morrow that it was all rot."

Blake shook his head.

"You don't think so?" demanded Tom Merry.

"No, I don't. Figgins isn't the kind of idiot to make up a rotten scandal about a fellow for a joke. If he said it, he believed it."

"He believed it, right enough," said Lowther. "I told him it was rot, and he said he'd come over for Tom Merry's sake, or words to that effect, so that he wouldn't be caught by the prefects. He meant well."

"He was taking you in," said Tom Merry.

Lowther made no rejoinder to that. Tom Merry was evidently in a touchy mood—not at all surprising, under the circumstances. If he was innocent, it was certainly hard to be doubted by his own chums, and suspected of disgraceful conduct that he was utterly incapable of.

"A mistake is out of the question," said Tom Merry. "There was no mistake. Figgins says he met me in the lane, and that Kerr and Wynn will back him up in saying so, and that I was tipsy. I say it's not true. If it's not true, Figgins must have lied. And that's the end of it."

Blake was silent.

"It's between Figgins and me," said Tom Merry savagely. "and any fellow who can't take my word had better say so."

"I don't see that your word is any better than Figgins's, if you come to that," said Jack Blake rather tartly.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy made an imploring gesture to his study-mate.

"Blake, deah boy," he murmured, "wemembah Tom Mewwy is a guest in the studay."

Tom Merry rose to his feet, and pushed his chair back.

"I won't worry you with being a guest in the study any longer," he said. "I'm not going to eat with a fellow who can't take my word."

"Tom Mewwy—"

"I—I—" began Blake.

Tom Merry walked out of the study without turning his head, and closed the door after him. The juniors looked at one another in a very uncomfortable way.

"Don't mind him," said Lowther in a low voice. "This has got on his nerves. It's a rotten thing, altogether."

And Manners and Lowther followed their chum. There was silence in Study No. 6 when they were gone. The chums of the Fourth felt decidedly ill at ease.

"You have committed a faux pas, Blake, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, breaking the silence at last. "Honah the guest that is within your walls, you know."

Jack Blake grunted.

"All the same, I don't see that his word is any better than Figgins's," he declared. "There may be a mistake somewhere, but Figgins isn't the kind of chap to make up a rotten lie. I stick to that."

"Yaas, wathah! But—"

"But Tom Merry isn't the kind of fellow to get squiffy, either," said Digby.

Blake nodded.

"It's a giddy puzzle," he said. "I give it up!"

And D'Arcy and Digby and Herries gave it up, too.

CHAPTER 7.

Under a Cloud.

TOM MERRY went angrily into his study.

It was close upon bedtime now, and there was very little time for doing his preparation, neither did he feel in a humour for work.

He was very tired from his long walk, and worried and exasperated by the reception his chums had given him at the school on his return.

He threw himself into a chair, with his hands in his pockets, and a frown upon his handsome, boyish face.

The fire was out in the study, and it was cold and comfortless. Manners and Lowther came in, with hesitating looks.

"Going to do your preparation?" asked Manners.

Tom Merry grunted.

"No."

"We haven't done ours."

"Why not?"

"Well, we were waiting at the gate, and—"

"More ass you!"

"Thanks!"

Tom Merry gave another grunt. It was evident that he was very much out of temper. His chums looked at him in silence for some minutes, and Tom avoided their eyes.

"Look here," said Monty Lowther at last. "It's no good going about like a bear with a sore head, Tom. It was a rotten thing to happen, but it can't be helped. Anyway, I'm not going to quarrel with you."

"Same here," said Manners. "If you want to sulk, we'll leave you to it."

Tom Merry flushed. Sulking was the last thing he was likely to do. He rose to his feet restlessly.

"I'm worried about that," he said. "I'm anxious to see Figgins, and see what he's got to say. If he sticks to his story, I suppose you fellows will believe my account, rather than his?"

"Yes," said Lowther.

"Certainly," said Manners. "All I say is that I can't believe that Figgins was lying. It's some sort of a mistake, though I can't explain it. But we'll see what Figgins has to say to-morrow."

The study door opened, and D'Arcy minor—Wally of the Third—looked in. Jameson and Curly Gibson and Joe Frayne of the Third Form, were with him. They stared curiously at Tom Merry, who reddened with annoyance.

"Well, what do you want, you ragamuffins?" he demanded.

"Come to see you," said Wally calmly. "The fellows are saying up and down the House that you came in tipsy, doing a song and dance across the quad. Anything in it?"

"You young ass—"

"Well, I'm only looking for information," said Wally.

"I've told the fellows it's rot, but I came to ask you; best to get information straight from the stable, you know. I know Lumley-Lumley of the Fourth came home with vine-leaves in his hair once, before he turned over a giddy new leaf. It isn't true about you, is it?"

"No!" roared Tom Merry.

"All right; keep your wool on," said Wally. "I'll tell the fellows you say so. Mellish says that Figgins told the yarn in the first place."

"Blow Mellish!"

"But Figgins—"

"Blow Figgins!"

"Oh, certainly; blow everything, if you like," said Wally cheerfully. "Come away, you fellows, and let him sleep it off."

"What!" shouted Tom Merry.

He made a rush towards the fags. But Wally & Co. scuttled down the passage, laughing. Tom Merry turned back into the study with a crimson face.

"I suppose I've got a lot of that sort of thing to go through now," he said savagely. "And I owe it all to Figgins."

Manners and Lowther were silent. Tom Merry quitted the study, and made his way to the junior common-room. Most of the Fourth and the Shell were there, chatting before going to bed. There was a general movement as Tom Merry came in. The captain of the Shell was the cynosure of all eyes at once. He felt the general attention on him, but he affected not to notice it, and walked over to the fire.

"Feeling better?" asked Gore.

Tom Merry did not answer.

"He's walking pretty straight now," Levison remarked.

Tom Merry swung round towards the cad of the Fourth.

"Look here, Levison," he said, "I'm fed up on that subject. Do you understand?"

Levison yawned.

"If there's any more of it, I'll give you another black eye, to match the one you've got already—see?"

"My dear chap, it isn't my fault if you come home squiffy—"

Biff!

Tom Merry's fist, in Levison's eye, cut short his remarks suddenly, and the cad of the Fourth sat down violently on the floor.

Tom Merry stood over him with clenched fists and blazing eyes.

"If you want any more, get up and have it," he exclaimed.

"Ow!" groaned Levison. "My eye! Oh!"

"You cad—"

"Hallo!" It was Kildare's voice at the door. "Bedtime, THE GEM LIBRARY—No. 272.

you kids. What's the row about, then? Who knocked Levison down?"

"I did," said Tom Merry.

"What for?" asked Kildare sharply.

"Because he's an insulting cad."

"Ow!" groaned Levison, staggering to his feet. "Ow! It was true, and he knows it! Ow!"

Tom Merry rushed at him.

Kildare caught the Shell fellow by the shoulder, and swung him back.

"Stop that, Merry," he said.

"Let him hold his tongue, then," said Tom between his teeth.

"We'll have this out," said Kildare quietly. "What was it you said to Tom Merry, Levison?"

Levison hesitated.

He would have been very glad to get the story to the captain's ears, but he did not care to take it upon himself to sneak.

"Do you hear me?" demanded Kildare sharply. "Whatever you said to Tom Merry before I came in you can say over again before me."

"I don't want to give him away," said Levison.

Tom Merry laughed scoffingly.

"He said I was drunk," he said. "I don't want to hide it."

Kildare stared.

"Levison said that?"

"Yes."

"How dare you say such a thing, Levison?"

"It's true," said Levison sullenly. "Figgins saw him tipsy, reeling about the road, and he was violent when he got in—started punching fellows' heads—"

"That's a whopper," said Kangaroo. "He didn't punch any heads till you accused him of being squiffy, and I'd punch your head fast enough if you said it to me."

"Of course, you stand by him," sneered Levison.

"Of course I do," said the Cornstalk junior. "I'm certainly not going to hear you lying without putting my oar in."

"Faith, and ye're right," said Reilly of the Fourth. "Tom Merry was all right when he came in. I was there, too."

"It was a disgraceful thing to say, Levison," said Kildare.

"I don't believe anything of the kind for a single instant. If any fellow here were blackguard enough to take strong drink, it's more likely to be you than Tom Merry."

"Hear, hear!" said Kangaroo.

"I'm not surprised that Merry punched your head for saying such a thing," added the captain of St. Jim's. "You'd better be a bit more careful. If I hear of your saying it again I shall come you. Now clear off to bed, and hold your tongue."

"You can ask Figgins—"

"Enough said; get out!"

And the juniors went off to bed. It was evident that Kildare of the Sixth had no intention of listening to a whispered scandal. Tom Merry's face was clouded when he came into the Shell dormitory with the rest. Crooke and Gore were whispering together, and he knew the subject of their whispers. The scandal was not likely to die down if they could help it.

It was a tit-bit for Tom Merry's enemies in the House. And they were certain to make the most of it.

Tom Merry went to bed in grim silence, and he did not join in the usual chatter before the juniors went to sleep. He was the last asleep in the dormitory; he lay long awake, thinking of what Figgins had said. He would have an explanation with Figgins in the morning; and he was very anxious for that explanation to come!

CHAPTER 8.

Face to Face!

"Figgins!"

Figgins halted, and flushed.

It was nearly time for morning lessons; and Figgins & Co. were coming into the wide, flagged form-room passage, with some more of the Fourth. Tom Merry stepped in his way as he came in, and Figgins stopped. The look on the Shell fellow's face showed that there was trouble to come.

Lowther and Manners were near Tom Merry; and Kerr and Wynn drew closer to their leader at once.

"Hallo!" said Figgins.

"I want you to explain what you told Lowther and Manners about me last night!" said Tom Merry, with a glow of suppressed anger in his eyes.

Figgins's flush deepened.

"I don't want to talk about it!" he said.

"I daresay you don't!" said Tom Merry, his lip curling.

"A fellow who's told a yarn like that about another chap isn't likely to want to hear of it again!"

"I don't understand you!" said Figgins. "I didn't tell that to Manners and Lowther as a yarn about you. I wanted

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them to look after you when you came in. I'd have done it myself, only I couldn't, being in the New House."

"Why should you want them to look after me when I came in?"

"You know why, surely!"

"I know the reason you gave!" said Tom Merry.

"Well, then—"

"But it wasn't true!"

Figgins looked at him steadily.

"I don't know what made you do it, Tom Merry," he said.

"But it's true, and you know it. You didn't know me when I met you, but you must remember it now. Kerr and Wynn were both there!"

"That's so!" said Kerr. "We don't want to talk about it, Tom Merry. We only interfered to help you!"

"That's all!" said Fatty Wynn. "Suppose a prefect had come along the lane before we got you over the stile—and Darrel was out in Rycombe at the time, too, as I've heard since."

"Are you mad?" said Tom Merry, between his teeth.

"You never got me over any stile. What time was it?"

"Between seven and half-past eight," said Figgins.

"I didn't get back to Rycombe from Abbotsford, till half-past eight," said Tom Merry, "and then I ran all the way from the village to St. Jim's, after I had taken the horse back."

Figgins & Co. stared at him blankly.

"What do you mean?" Figgins almost stuttered.

"I mean what I say!"

"You—you deny that you met us in the lane?"

"Yes, totally!"

There was a long pause.

"Very well!" said Figgins, at last, with a deep breath.

"Let it go at that! It was a—a mistake!"

The bell rang for classes, and there was no time for more. Several fellows who had gathered round to hear what was said, exchanged significant glances as they went into the Form-rooms.

Blake nudged Figgins as they took their places in the Fourth.

"Did you say it was a mistake, Figgys?" he asked.

"No. I said it could go at that!" said Figgins, shortly.

"You mean you don't want to say anything more about it?" asked Blake.

"Exactly!"

"Tom Merry won't let it rest there!"

"He'll have to!" said Figgins, curtly.

And the matter dropped.

But while Mr. Lathom was busy with the blackboard a little later, Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn exchanged whispers. Figgins & Co. had said nothing about the matter in the New House; and the New House juniors only learned of it from the talk among the School House fellows.

"He can't have forgotten about it, Kerr, can he?" Figgins whispered to his Scottish chum.

Kerr shook his head.

"Impossible, Figgys!"

"He might have forgotten meeting us!" Fatty Wynn said.

"He didn't know us when he met us, you know, he was so deep in it. But he must remember having taken the drink; and as for his story of having been miles away when we met him in the lane, that's all my eye. It's a whopper, as a matter of fact!"

"Can the whole bizney have gone clean out of his mind?" asked Figgins.

"What rot!"

"But—but he isn't the kind of chap to tell a lie."

"I don't know. We thought he wasn't the kind of chap to get drunk; but he did it, didn't he?" said Kerr.

"Well, yes."

"His denying it is a piece of pure cheek, in my opinion," said Kerr. "It's impossible that he can have forgotten. However tight he was, he can't fancy that he was at Abbotsford when we were helping him over the stile in the lane."

"I—I suppose not!"

Little Mr. Lathom looked round.

"Someone is talking in class," he said, mildly.

And the talk ceased.

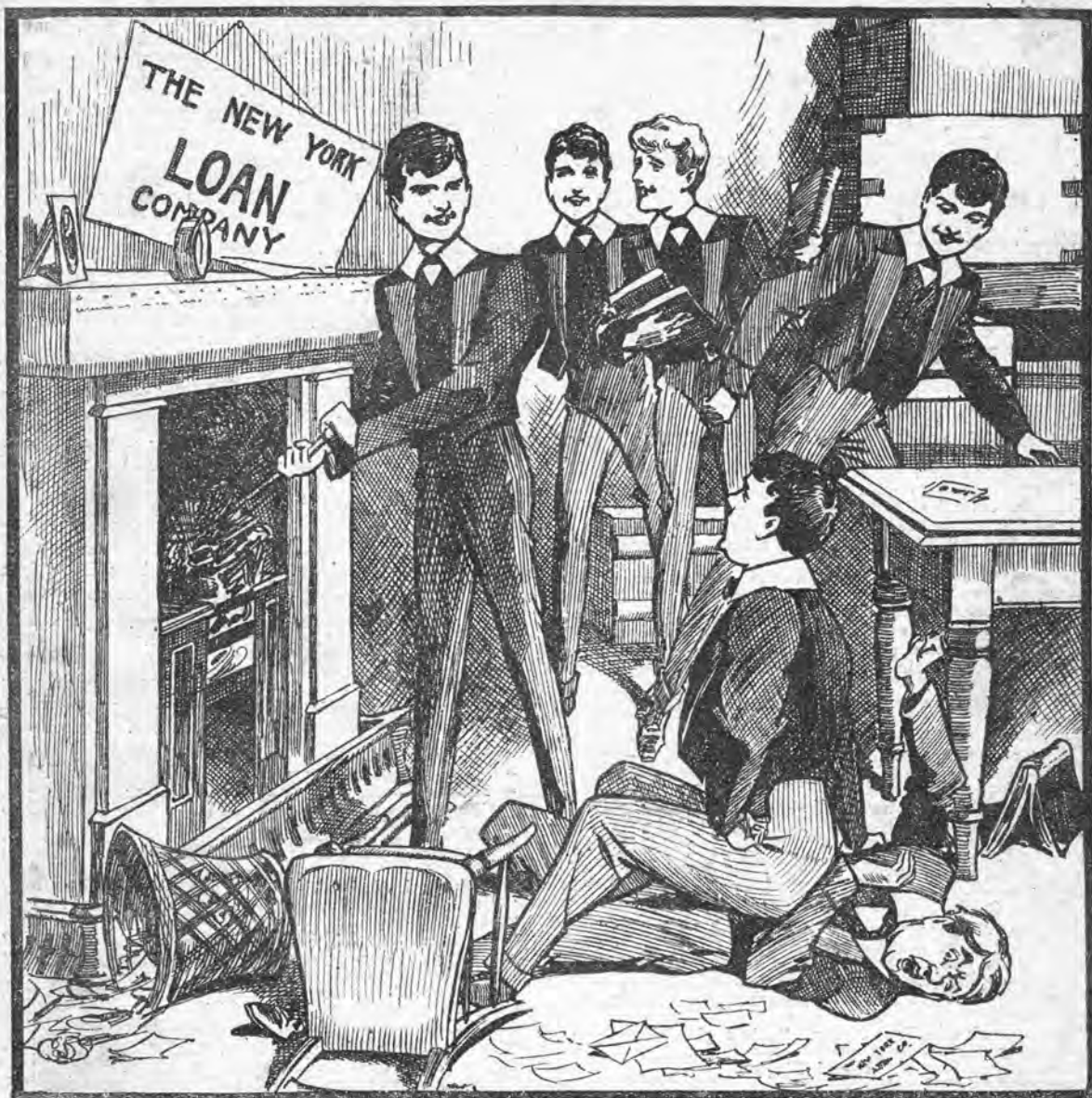
Figgins wore a worried look during morning lessons.

He knew that there was more trouble to come. Tom Merry had taken the line of denying the whole story; and Figgins had either to let the denial pass, thus admitting that he had not spoken the truth, or else to take up the position of an accuser. Neither course was a pleasant one.

Morning lessons were over at last, and the Fourth Form crowded out. When Figgins went out into the quadrangle, a good many fellows kept their eyes on him. They knew that his meeting with Tom Merry would not be long delayed.

When the Shell came out of the Form-room, Tom Merry looked for Figgins at once.

He spotted him in the quadrangle.



"We're going to stop all this moneylending business," said Nugent. "Shove those ledgers in the fire. Somebody sit on Fish!" Fisher T. Fish was dragged down, and Johnny Bull sat on his chest, and he could only wriggle and struggle, and glare at the raiders. (An incident taken from the long, complete school tale of Harry Wharton & Co., entitled *"THE SCHOOLBOY MONEYLENDER,"* by Frank Richards. This grand story is contained in the issue of our popular companion paper, *"The Magnet"* Library, and is one that all "Gem" readers will enjoy. Ask for this week's *"Magnet"* Library. On sale everywhere. (Price One Penny.)

"Here comes the giddy toper!" murmured Fatty Wynn, as Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther bore down upon the New House Co.

"Let him come!" said Figgins.

Tom Merry halted directly in front of the trio.

"I suppose you know that that matter can't rest where it is, Figgins!" he said abruptly.

"It's just as you like," said Figgins. "I don't want to say anything more about it. Not a word would have been known if Mellish hadn't spied on us and listened. I hadn't any intention of accusing you. I was acting like a friend!"

"Ripping kind of friend, to make an accusation like that!" said Tom Merry. "I don't want it kept a secret. If it was true, I should deserve to be kicked out of the school!"

Figgins's lip curled.

"Do you want to jaw it over before all these fellows!" he exclaimed.

"The more the better!" said Tom Merry. "It's being jawed all over the School House; and I want the fellows to know the facts!"

"They know the facts already!" said Figgins.

Tom Merry compressed his lips.

"You say that you met me in the lane yesterday evening, before eight o'clock, and that I had been drinking?" he demanded.

"Yes."

"Now, I tell you that the horse fell lame near Abbotsford, and that I had to walk him home," said Tom Merry. "It was half an hour later than that time, when I came through the lane, half an hour at least; and I was running all the way, and didn't stop till I got to St. Jim's."

Figgins was silent.

"Do you admit that that's true?" asked Tom Merry.

"How can I?" said Figgins. "I know I met you, and that settles it. Kerr and Wynn were with me at the same time."

"You two fellows say the same?" asked Tom Merry, fixing his eyes upon the Co.

"Yes!" said Kerr and Wynn together.

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NEXT WEDNESDAY: **"THE SCHOOLBOY INFORMER!"** By MARTIN CLIFFORD. Order Early.

"You say you met me in the lane, and I was the worse for drink?"

"We don't want to say anything about that!"

"Why not let the matter drop?" urged Figgins.

"I'm not likely to let a slander drop!"

Figgins turned crimson.

"A what?" he exclaimed.

"Slander!" said Tom Merry. "Don't you like the word?"

Figgins clenched his hands.

"You dare to call me a slanderer?" he said, between his teeth.

"I can't call you anything else. It may be possible that you met somebody who looked like me, and made a mistake in the dusk. But that it was me you met, I deny; and I expect you to take my word!"

"If it was somebody else, he was your twin!" said Figgins.

"That's all rot! I suppose I know your face by this time!"

"Then," said Tom Merry, raising his voice. "Then you say that it was I, and that I have told a lie in saying that I was at Abbotsford?"

Figgins was silent.

"Do you say so or not, Figgins?"

"I don't want to say anything about it!"

"You've got to say something about it!" said Tom Merry, sharply. "You've got to back up your accusation, or admit that you were lying!"

"I'm not likely to admit that I was lying, when I was telling the truth," said Figgins, his anger rising now. "If you want it out before all the school, you can have it. We met you in the lane, and you were reeling and staggering, and couldn't walk straight, and you smelt of spirits like a gin-palace. We got you over the stile to keep you out of sight, and then you dodged us in the wood, so we had to come back without you. I came over to tell Manners and Lowther so that they could take care of you. That's all!"

There was a pause, and all eyes were upon Tom Merry. Figgins had spoken directly enough now; he had not minced his words this time.

And Tom Merry's answer came just as directly.

"It is a lie!"

Figgins caught his breath.

"You call me a liar, then?"

"Yes."

"And Kerr and Wynn too—all three of us?"

"If you all tell the same yarn—yes!"

"We all tell the same yarn!" said Kerr, quietly.

"Then you are three liars!"

Tom Merry's hand was clenched—and Figgins was pushing back his cuffs. Monty Lowther and Manners caught hold of their chum; and Redfern of the Fourth grasped Figgins by the shoulder.

"Hold on!" said Redfern. "You can't fight here!"

"He's not going to call me a liar!" said Figgins. "I've tried to shield him, though he was in a disgusting state like any tap-room loafer. Now he calls me a liar, because I tried to get his pals to look after him, when he couldn't look after himself!"

"It's a lie!" said Tom Merry. "It's a plot among you three, and you know it!"

"Let me go, Reddy!" roared Figgins.

Redfern tightened his grip.

"You're not going to fight here, under the giddy windows!" he said. "If you want a mill, you can come round by the old chapel."

"I'm ready!" said Tom Merry. "No fellow shall say that I was tipsy, without standing up to me afterwards!"

"I'm ready to stand up to you, you squiffy cad!" said Figgins, disdainfully.

"Then come along!" said Tom Merry.

And the whole crowd moved off in the direction of the old chapel of St. Jim's. On the secluded grass plot behind the chapel, little troubles were often thrashed out by the juniors, secure from the interference of prefects. Levison and Mellish and Crooke were in the crowd, and they were grinning with glee. However the matter ended, deadly trouble had been sown between two fellows who had always been on good terms, and had always liked and respected one another. And that was quite enough to delight the amiable hearts of Levison & Co.

CHAPTER 9.

A Battle Royal!

TOM MERRY strode away towards the old chapel, looking straight before him, careless whether the crowd followed or not, and careless of what they thought. Looking at him, at his angry face and gleaming blue eyes, it was impossible to think that he had lied—that he was about to fight in a wrong cause. And yet Figgins's face was equally angry—equally sincere and earnest. Was there some strange

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mistake—some mystery which none of the juniors could fathom? How could Figgins & Co. have mistaken a stranger for the fellow they knew so well? It was incredible; and yet, if Figgins & Co.'s story was true, Tom Merry was far from being the kind of fellow his friends had always supposed him. It was a problem that seemed to be without a solution; and most of the fellows did not know what to think. Most of the School House fellows were inclined to back up Tom Merry; while Figgins, of course, had the following of his own House. In the absence of certain proof on either side, the fellows could only decide according to how they felt on the matter—Figgins's friends for Figgy, and Tom Merry's friends for Tom Merry.

Monty Lowther and Manners had made up their minds by this time. They could not believe for a moment that Tom Merry could stand up before a crowd of St. Jim's fellows, and tell a deliberate lie. It only remained to believe that it was a plot of the New House Co.; a move in the rivalry between the Houses which they would never have deemed Figgins & Co. capable of.

And Study No. 6 had to take the same view, though less decidedly. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was looking very distressed.

"I'm afraid we've been wathah deceived in Figgins, deah boys," he remarked, as they walked with the crowd round the School House. "I've always regarded him as vewy decent. My Cousin Ethel wegards him as a friend, you know, and Ethel is awfully keen in some things. But I suppose it's pwetly clear that this story isn't true!"

Blake nodded.

"It can't be true!" he said. "But I hope it's only a mistake!"

"But how could Figgins be mistaken?" said Digby.

Blake gave a hopeless shrug of the shoulders.

"Oh, don't ask me!" he said. "It beats me!"

"Yaas, I feah we have no wesource but to wegard Figgay as a wottah!" said D'Arcy, with a mournful shake of the head.

Kerr caught the words, and he swung round towards the swell of the School House with flashing eyes.

"What's that?" he demanded.

"Nothin', deah boy."

"I heard what you said!"

"Did you weally?" said D'Arcy, jamming his eyeglass into his eye with a haughty gesture. "Vewy well, what then?"

"You're a cad, that's what then!" said Kerr, hotly.

"Figgins has told the truth, and Wynn and I are witnesses of it!"

D'Arcy shook his head.

"I am afraid you have not told the twuth, deah boy!"

"Liar!"

"You uttah wottah! I shall give you a feahful thwashin' if you have the awful cheek to chawactewise me as a liah!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, indignantly.

"I'm ready!" said Kerr.

"Bai Jove! Hold my jacket, Blake—"

Jack Blake pushed the excited swell of St. Jim's aside.

"You can leave this to me, Gussy!" he said. "I'll tackle Kerr, as he's got such a deuced lot to say for himself!"

"I don't care which it is!" said Kerr, scornfully. "I could lick anybody in Study No. 6; and I'll take you all in turn if you like!"

"You can leave one of them to me!" said Fatty Wynn, whose Welsh blood was at boiling point now. "I'll wallop one of the cads!"

"I'm your man!" said Herries, promptly.

"Here, hold on!" exclaimed Kangaroo of the Shell. "It's not going to be a battle royal, you know. Can't you leave it to Figgy and Tom Merry?"

"He has chawactewise me as a liah—"

"So you are one!" said Kerr.

"Bai Jove! I—I—"

"Nuff talk!" said Blake. "Get your jacket off, Kerr!"

The crowd had stopped now on the grass plot behind the chapel. Trees and buildings screened them from the view of the house. Wally & Co., of the Third Form, had already taken possession of the chapel rails, and were sitting in a row on the top rail to see the fun—as they considered it. The crowd of juniors formed a ring for the combatants. Cutts and Gilmore of the Fifth, and several other Fifth-Form fellows, had come to see the fight. Cutts of the Fifth was of a sporting turn, and much interested in pugilistic encounters, and he was already making a bet with Gilmore on the result. Cutts was offering two to one on Tom Merry, in quids, as he put it.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy carefully took off his elegant Eton jacket, and folded it as carefully, and then removed his eyeglass. Blake tapped him on the chest.

"Get out, Gussy!" he said.

"Weally, Blake—"

"You're going to leave this to me!"

"I refuse to do anythin' of the sort. I have already licked Kerr once the first week I came to St. Jim's!" said D'Arcy, indignantly. "I can lick him again as easily as anythin'!"

Kerr snorted.

"Look here, Gussy——"

"Look here, Blake——"

"Clear off, both of you!" said Kangaroo. "One fight at a time!"

"Rats!" said Kerr. "I'm going to lick one of them. I don't care which!"

"So am I!" said Fatty Wynn. "Nobody's going to call Figgy names while I'm around, I can tell you that!"

"Weally, Wynn——"

"Shut up!" said Fatty Wynn. "I'm sick of you School House gas-bags. You're all jaw and nothing else. Why don't you come on, some of you?"

"I'm coming on, you rotter!" roared Herries.

"Well, I'm ready!"

And Herries and Fatty Wynn were hammering one another in a moment more. Kerr and Jack Blake faced one another, and started, and Digby dragged the indignant Arthur Augustus D'Arcy back.

"Leave it to Blake, Gussy," he said. "Blake will lick him. You'll get your clothes rumpled, you know!"

"Yass, there's somethin' in that," said D'Arcy. "But——"

"You don't want to have a black eye to show Cousin Ethel when she comes!" said Digby, with a grin.

"Bah Jove! I never thought of that! Pewwaps I had better leave it to Blake," Arthur Augustus assented, thoughtfully. "Howevah, I will second him, and give him some tips from my experience."

"Hear, hear!" grinned Digby.

Meanwhile, Tom Merry and Figgins had removed their jackets, and rolled up their sleeves. Both of them were bitterly angry, and it was evident that the fight would be a hard and merciless one.

"Are you going to have rounds?" asked Kangaroo of the Shell. "I'll keep time, if you like."

"Oh, bother rounds!" said Tom Merry.

"I don't care either way!" growled Figgins. "I know I'm going to lick that tipsy loafer, and that's all!"

"Come on!" said Tom Merry, between his teeth.

And they started.

The crowd round looked on with eager interest. Three fights at once was a decidedly unusual sight—and very interesting to the spectators. And there really was not much choice between the combatants—they were all athletic, and in the pink of condition. Fatty Wynn was certainly very plump but he was active enough, and unusually strong for his age. Figgins and Tom Merry were very evenly matched, and both were so exasperated that they would certainly fight as long as they could stand.

Tom Merry had the advantage at first. He attacked fiercely and heavily, and drove Figgins back, and the New House junior was floored by a terrific right-hander.

"Time!" called out Redfern.

Tom Merry stepped back.

Figgins staggered to his feet.

"You can take a rest, if you want one, rounds or not!" said Tom Merry.

"I don't want a rest, hang you!"

"Then come on!"

And they were at it again in a second.

"Go it, ye cripples!" sang out Wally, from the railing of the chapel green.

"Buck up, Blake, deah boy! Twy the uppah cut!"

"Pile in, Kerr!"

"Put your beef into it, Fatty!"

"Buck up, New House!"

"Go it, School House!"

"Sure, and I'm not going to look on at an illigant fight, without having a hand in it!" exclaimed Reilly of the Fourth. "Redfern, you howling ass, you're a bounder—you're a worm—you're a New House spalpeen! Come on!"

"You silly ass!" roared Redfern. "What do you want to fight me for?"

Reilly squared up to him.

"Faith, and I'm not going to stand by and let other chaps do all the fighting!" he exclaimed, indignantly. "Come on, ye gossoon!"

"You dangerous clump——"

"Sure, it's a spalpeen ye are—a New House worm—the School House is cock-house of St. Jim's, and if ye say it's not, ye're a liar!"

"Come on, then, you fathead!" said Redfern. "The New House is cock-house of St. Jim's, and the School House is a home for inebriates!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the New House fellows.

"Inebriates, is it!" yelled Reilly. "I'll inebriate ye intirely!"

And he rushed at Redfern, and clasped him round the neck; and the next moment Redfern had his head in chancery, and they fought with terrific vim.

"Go it!"

"Pile in, New House!"

"Buck up, School House!"

"Yah! School House is no good!" roared Thompson of the Shell. "Tom Merry's getting licked already! Down with the School House!"

"Shut up, you fathead!" said Digby. "Go and eat coke!"

"Yah! School-House cad!"

"New House rotter!"

"Take that——"

"Take that——"

And Digby and Thompson started. By this time the fighting was furious, and blood was flowing freely from noses and lips. And the feeling of combativeness spread among the juniors, and they exchanged jeers and catcalls and derisive yells, and more and more of them proceeded from words to blows, till the scene behind the old chapel resembled a battle royal. It was School House against New House, and very few of the juniors were averse to settling the old feud once more. Levison and Mellish and Crooke moved quietly away; they didn't want to be on in a scene of that kind. But Gore joined in heartily, picking out Lawrence of the Fourth for his opponent, and prancing round with him in a deadly embrace.

The shouting and yelling and trampling of the free fight made a terrific din; and it was not likely that it would pass unnoticed for long, even in that secluded spot.

There was a sudden yell from Wally.

"Cave! Here comes Linton!"

Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell, came hurrying round the School House, and dashed towards the scene of the combat, his gown flying behind him in the wind.

"Cave!"

"Hook it!"

Most of the combatants separated at once, and fled in various directions, scattering among the trees, or scurrying round the chapel, hoping to escape unrecognised—though most of them carried signs by which they might have been recognised afterwards as participators in the combat.

But Tom Merry and Figgins did not separate. They did not even see the master of the Shell; and they were hammering each other furiously when Mr. Linton arrived, almost breathless, upon the scene.

"Merry! Figgins! Stop this disgraceful scene at once!" almost shouted the Form-master.

Bump!

Tom Merry's fist crashed into Figgins's face even as Mr. Linton spoke, and Figgins fell, rolling with a gasp at the feet of the Form-master.

CHAPTER 10.

Rough on Figgins.

"MERRY, how dare you!"

Tom Merry panted.

"I—I beg your pardon, sir. I didn't see you."

Figgins sat up dazedly.

It was difficult to tell which of the juniors had had the worst of the unfinished combat. Both of them looked decidedly the worse for wear.

"Ow!" mumbled Figgins. "Ow!"

"Get up, Figgins!" said Mr. Linton sternly.

Figgins staggered to his feet.

He gave Tom Merry a glance of animosity which was returned with interest. And but for the presence of the Form-master, the two angry juniors would have been fighting again in a second.

But exasperated as they were, they could hardly hammer one another in the presence of the shocked and indignant master of the Shell.

"This is perfectly disgraceful!" said Mr. Linton.

The juniors were silent, save for their hard breathing. They had nothing to say.

"A fight with gloves on would not be so—so reprehensible," said the Form-master. "But this is simply disgraceful! You are battered and bruised like a pair of prize-fighters! Figgins, as you are not in my Form, I shall report you to your Housemaster. Merry, you will follow me to my study!"

"Yes, sir," said Tom Merry.

Tom Merry put on his jacket, and followed Mr. Linton.

When they were gone, Kerr and Fatty Wynn came round from behind the chapel wall, and rejoined Figgins.

"Unfinished match, after all," said Fatty Wynn, with doleful humour. "What did Linton say to you, Figgy?"

"He's going to report me to Ratty!"

"Oh, crumbs!"

"My hat, I feel rotten!" said Figgins, dabbing his nose with his handkerchief. "The rotter hit hard, and no mistake!"

"So did you," said Kerr, with a grin. "I don't suppose Tom Merry feels much better."

"No; that's one comfort. Let's get in; I want to bathe my eye."

"This is what comes of trying to do that School House rotter a good turn," said Kerr, as they walked away towards the New House. "If we'd left him to get caught by a prefect we shouldn't have had all this trouble."

"He can look after himself the next time he gets squiffy!" grunted Fatty Wynn.

"I'd never have believed it of him," said Figgins slowly. "The awful nerve to stand up before all the fellows and tell a whopper like that—a deliberate whopper! I was willing to let the matter drop, and say nothing more about it; but he was satisfied with that. He wanted me to tell a lie, and eat my words. The awful cheek!"

"Oh, I'm done with him!" said Kerr.

The three juniors went up to their dormitory in the New House, and bathed their injuries. In spite of all his care, Figgins was looking very battered when he came down. One of his eyes was discoloured, his nose was swollen and red, and his lip was cut, and he was feeling, as he expressed it, thoroughly rotten. Monteith of the Sixth, the head prefect of the New House, met the juniors as they came downstairs. He looked queerly at the marked countenances of the trio.

"Mr. Ratcliff wants to see you in his study, Figgins," he said. "Mr. Linton has been over here from the School House with a complaint about you."

"All right," said Figgins.

"You seem to have been going it strong, by the look of you," said Monteith. "What is it—some more of your blessed House rows?"

"Something of the sort," said Figgins.

Figgins made his way to Mr. Ratcliff's study.

Mr. Ratcliff, the Housemaster of the New House, was waiting for him with a cane on the table, and smile on his face. Mr. Ratcliff was never in danger of spoiling the pupil by sparing the rod. He had taken out his stoutest cane for the benefit of Figgins, and his looks showed the junior that he was "in for it."

Mr. Ratcliff stared hard at Figgins's disfigured face.

"You have been fighting with Merry of the School House, Figgins?" he said.

"Yes, sir."

"A most disgraceful scene, Mr. Linton tells me."

Figgins was silent.

"Mr. Linton informs me that he has severely caned Merry," said Mr. Ratcliff. "It is my duty to do the same to you, Figgins."

"Yes, sir."

"I must say that you seem to have carried ruffianism to an unusual extent, even for the most unruly junior in the House," said Mr. Ratcliff. "You look like a prize-fighter, Figgins; or like a hooligan, perhaps I should say."

Figgins did not reply.

"You will hold out your hand, Figgins."

Figgins obeyed in silence.

Mr. Ratcliff gave him four on each hand with scientific accuracy; and Figgins set his teeth tight to keep back the cry of pain that rose to his lips.

"You may go, Figgins," said Mr. Ratcliff. "If there is any renewal of this ruffianism, I shall punish you more severely."

Figgins left the study without a word.

Kerr and Wynn were waiting for him in the passage, and they took him up to his own study, where Figgins sat down for some minutes in silence, waiting for the stinging pain in his palms to pass off. He was very white now.

"Better?" asked Kerr sympathetically, as Figgins made a movement at last.

"Yes," said Figgins, with a deep breath. "Ratty laid it on hard. I don't think Tom Merry's had it quite so bad from Linton. Never mind, it's all in the day's work."

"It's beastly hard lines!" said Kerr. "We'll take it out of the School House rotters, somehow! I must say I never thought we should get on terms like this with Tom Merry, though. Shows how you can be mistaken in a fellow."

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Figgins nodded.

"It's rotten!" he said. "All his House will be backing him up, of course!"

"Of course!"

"You've been fighting with Study No. 6 yourself?"

Kerr grinned.

"Yes. Blake had a round or two with me."

"It's rotten!" said Figgins.

Kerr looked at him quickly. He could see that there was something else in Figgins's mind, besides the fighting with the School House fellows.

"What's the matter now, Figgy?" he asked.

"I was thinking—" Figgins paused, and coloured.

"Well?" said Kerr.

"It's specially rotten for all this to happen now," said Figgins, with an effort. "You know D'Arcy's cousin is coming on a visit here."

"Cousin Ethel," said Kerr, with a nod.

"Yes. It's rotten that we should be on fighting terms with Study No. 6 when Cousin Ethel is here."

"Very rotten," agreed Kerr. "I suppose they won't tell her anything about it?"

"No. But—but we can't go over to the School House. I suppose we shan't see her this time?" said Figgins.

"I suppose not," agreed Kerr.

Figgins was looking very thoughtful and glum when he went down to dinner. Figgins took a very great interest in D'Arcy's Cousin Ethel. Indeed, Arthur Augustus had often declared that Figgins seemed to regard Ethel as his cousin, and not D'Arcy's at all. But it was clear that what had happened would not be without effect upon Figgins's friendship with Ethel-Cleveland. The pleasant little tea-parties in Study No. 6 were evidently over.

When the New House trio turned up in the Form-room for afternoon lessons, they met Blake and Herries and Digby and D'Arcy there. The chums of Study No. 6 elaborately took no notice of them. Arthur Augustus turned his eye-glass upon them for a moment with an indifferent stare; but that was all. Figgins hesitated for a moment, and then he came over to them as they were going to their Forms.

"I say, you chaps," said Figgins awkwardly, "I hope you're not going to mix yourselves up in my row with Tom Merry! It really doesn't concern you fellows, you know!"

Blake looked at him straight in the face.

"We back up our House," he said.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"This isn't a House affair," said Figgins. "It's just a bit of trouble between Tom Merry and me. No need for other fellows to take it up."

Blake laughed shortly.

"Kerr and Wynn have taken it up, and most of the New House chaps," he said. "It's no good, Figgins. If you make an accusation like that against a School House chap, and a friend of ours, it's up against us, too."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I didn't make an accusation," said Figgins. "I was chipping in for Tom Merry's sake. I wanted to do him a good turn."

"You mean that you still stick to your yarn?" asked Herries.

Figgins flushed.

"Of course I do! It's true!"

Blake shook his head.

"I nearly had a row with Tom Merry last night, because I told him that your word was as good as his, Figgins," he said.

"And isn't it?" demanded Figgins angrily.

"I've thought it out since then. You tell one tale and Tom Merry tells another. We stand by Tom Merry. You can't both be telling the truth, that's certain!"

"Impossi, deah boy!"

"I was telling the truth, and Tom Merry was telling lies!" said Figgins hotly.

"Well, that isn't how we look at it, that's all."

Mr. Lathom came into the Form-room, and the Fourth-Formers took their places, and the talk ceased. One thing was clear to Figgins—he had Study No. 6 against him as well as Tom Merry & Co.

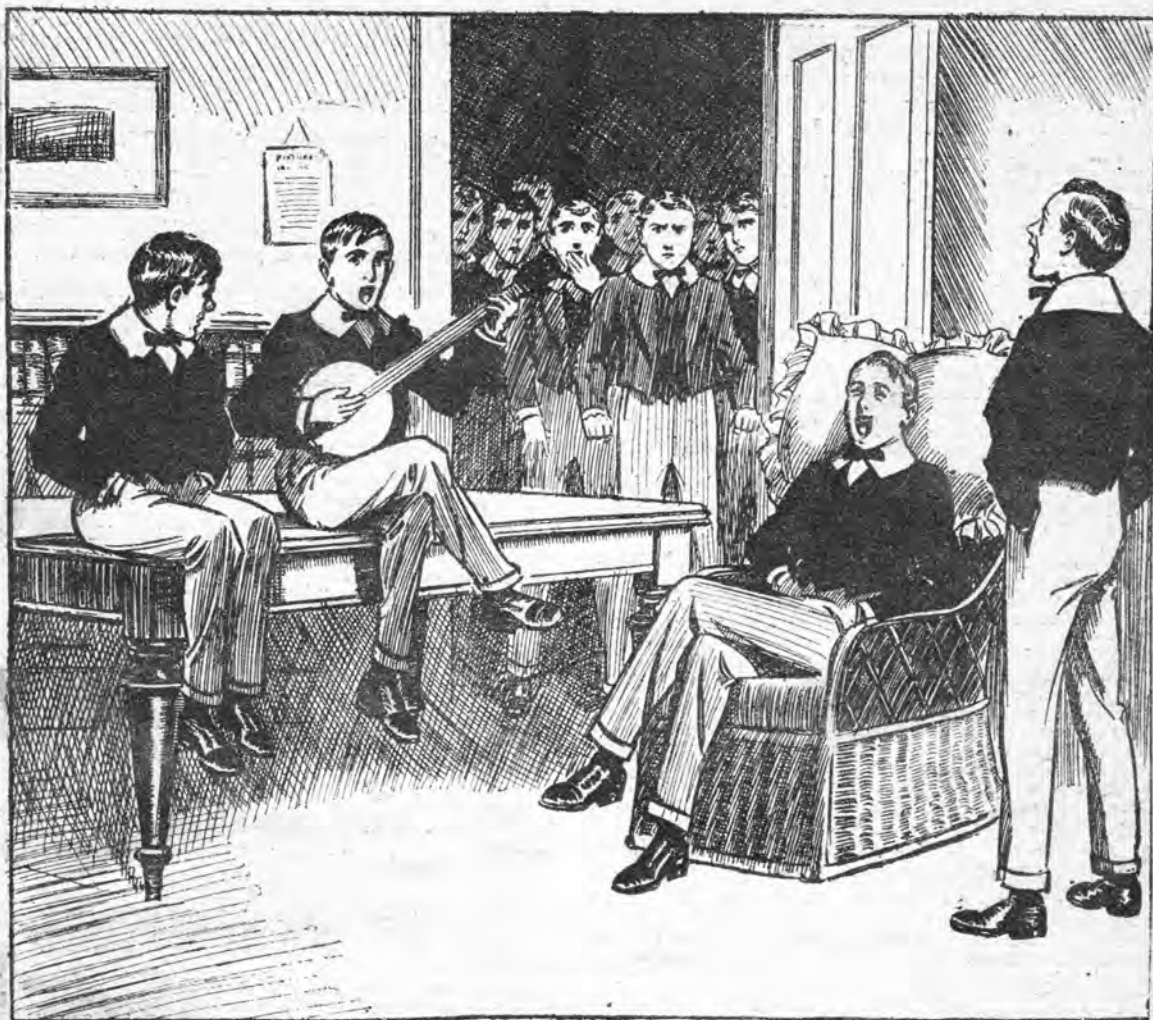
They had taken sides in the dispute,

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Tom Merry pushed his way through the crowd of juniors towards Gore's study. "There is a tavern in the town, in the town. That's where Tom Merry pours it down, pours it—" sang the four juniors in the study. "Hold on, you fellows," interrupted Tom Merry quietly. "It appears that you're making free use of my name. I'll trouble you to stop!" (See Chapter 13.)

and it was natural enough that they should back up the School House fellow. Figgins sat through the lessons that afternoon with a glum face, and an unusual bitterness in his breast. It was very rarely that bitter thoughts rose in Figgins's frank, and healthy mind; but they were there now, and his smouldering anger against Tom Merry did not leave him for a moment.

CHAPTER 11.

Crooke Eats His Words.

TOM MERRY was feeling as "rotten" as Figgins as he went in to lessons in the Shell Form-room that afternoon.

He was feeling the reaction after the excitement of the fight; and he was troubled, too, by the shadow of the charge against him—the shadow of disgrace.

Figgins was backed up heartily by all the New House fellows; but the same was not the case with Tom Merry in the School House.

Levison and Mellish and Crooke and Gore and their set had taken the view that Figgins's statement was true, and they declared that they were entitled to their opinion. Many other fellows were doubtful on the subject. Blake & Co., of Study No. 6, were backing up Tom Merry; but there had been considerable hesitation even with them before they decided finally. Kangaroo and Clifton Dane and Bernard Glyn were on Tom Merry's side, and yet there was a perceptible hesitation about them. Even Monty Lowther and Manners were in a puzzled, and perplexed frame of mind, though they did not hesitate in their loyalty to their chum.

The worst of it was, that there was no prospect of clearing the matter up.

Tom Merry could call no witnesses to prove his story of having had to walk home with the lame horse from Abbotsford, and, naturally enough, many fellows said that Figgins's word was as good as Tom Merry's. There were many circumstances, too, on Figgins's side. He had not accused the Shell fellow. He had told Manners and Lowther quietly, and the story would never have got out but for Mellish's listening at the door. If Figgins was slandering the School House fellows, that was not the way he would have set about it. That was a strong point in Figgins's favour.

Tom Merry was puzzled and worried. He felt that the faith of his chums in him was not complete, and he felt very bitter against Figgins.

As he took his place in the form, his eyes fell upon a paper pinned out his desk.

He started, and his face flamed.

There was one word written on the paper, in large letters daubed with a brush:

"PUB-HAUNTER!"

Tom Merry's eyes blazed.

He looked quickly round the Form, and caught a grin upon the face of Crooke of the Shell. He did not need further evidence of the authorship of the insult.

He rose to his feet, with the intention of taking vengeance upon Crooke there and then; but Lowther dragged him down again.

"What's the matter, Tom?" he whispered.

"Look at that!" said Tom Merry, his voice trembling with rage.

Lowther nodded.

"I saw it!" he said.

"It was Crooke put it there!" said Tom Merry.

"I dare say it was; but you can't punch his head here!" urged Lowther. "You'll have old Linton down on you in a second. Cheese it!"

Mr. Linton looked round sharply.

"You were talking, Lowther," he said. "Take fifty lines!"

"Oh!" murmured Lowther.

Tom Merry kept his place; it was hardly feasible to go for Crooke there and then. He waited until lessons were over. When the Shell were dismissed, Tom Merry left the Form-room with the slip of paper in his hand, crumpled in his palm, and he looked out for Crooke. Crooke was moving away very quickly, but Tom Merry overtook him in the passage.

"Hold on a minute, Crooke!" he said quietly.

"Sorry!" said Crooke. "I'm in a hurry!"

Tom Merry caught him by the shoulder.

"Stop!" he said.

"Hands off, you tipsy rotter!" said Crooke, facing round.

"Hallo! Have you been drinking again, Tom Merry?" called out Gore.

Tom Merry's teeth came hard together. Some of the Shell fellows chuckled—especially the New House members of the Form.

"You wrote this paper and put it on my desk, Crooke!" said Tom Merry, quietly.

"Suppose I did!" said Crooke, defiantly.

"Did you or didn't you?" demanded Tom Merry.

"Yes, I did!" growled Crooke. "You're a pub-haunter, and I've called you one. That's all there is about it!"

"That isn't quite all!" said Tom Merry, grimly. "You are a liar, Crooke, and you're going to eat your words. See?"

"I—"

Tom Merry held out the paper.

"You're going to eat that!" he said.

Crooke backed away.

"I—I jolly well won't!" he exclaimed. "Look here, Tom Merry, I'm not going to fight you, and I'm not going to be bullied. If you lay a finger on me, I'll yell for a prefect!"

"You can yell as much as you like," said Tom Merry. "If you don't want to be handled, you can let me alone. That isn't asking much. But if you call me names, Crooke, I'm going to make you eat your words!"

"Look here—"

"Enough said!"

Tom Merry grasped the cad of the Shell. Crooke struggled and yelled; but he had no chance in the iron grip of the young athlete. Crooke was bigger than Tom Merry; but he never troubled to keep himself in condition, and he was not blessed with courage. Tom Merry passed his left arm round Crooke's neck, and forced his head back, and as the cad of the Shell opened his mouth to roar for help, Tom jammed the inky paper into it.

"Grooh!" spluttered Crooke.

"Get it down!" said Tom Merry.

"Grooh! Ow! Ow! Help! Rescue!"

George Gore made a movement forward; and so did Monty Lowther; and Gore changed his mind and backed away again.

Tom Merry jammed the inky paper fairly into Crooke's mouth, and caught his chin in an iron grip, and closed his mouth upon it.

Crooke glared at him helplessly.

"Lemme go!" he mumbled. "You beast! Ow!"

"I'll let you go when you've eaten it!" said Tom Merry.

"Grooh!"

"Pile in, Crooke!" grinned Monty Lowther. "Take it like a pill!"

"Groooooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Lemme go—ow—ow—grooh!"

But Tom Merry did not let him go; and Crooke writhed in anguish in the hard grasp of the Shell captain. There was no escape for him; and he made an effort, and masticated the inky paper, and swallowed it.

"Grrrrrooh!" he gasped. "Now let me go, you beast!"

"Got it down?"

"Grooh! Yes!"

Tom Merry released him.

"That's going to happen every time I find anything of the sort on my desk," he said. "I tell you that as a warning!"

"Ow! Ow!" gasped Crooke.

And immediately he was released, he rushed out in the quad., where a few minutes later he was seen under the trees, apparently under-studying a passenger on a Channel boat on a stormy day.

"I don't think you'll find any more papers on your desk, Tom," grinned Monty Lowther, as the Terrible Three strolled out into the quadrangle.

Tom Merry laughed.

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"Not from Crooke, at all events," he said.

The Fourth-Formers were coming out, and Figgins & Co. passed near the chums of the Shell. Tom Merry and Figgins exchanged grim looks; and then walked on without speaking. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy tapped Tom Merry on the shoulder, and gave him a benevolent glance through his famous eyeglass.

"It's all wight, Tom Mewwy, deah boy," he remarked.

"What's all right?" asked Tom.

"I'm takin' the mattah up, you know!" D'Arcy explained.

"Oh, you're taking it up, are you?" said Tom Merry, apparently not very much impressed by the statement.

"Yaas, wathah! I'm goin' to look into it, and find out a pwoof of the cowwectness of your statement, to satisfy all the chaps."

"It's very good of you, Gussy; but I don't see exactly how you're going to do it."

D'Arcy nodded his head sagely.

"You leave that to me, deah boy," he said. "What is required in a case like this is a fellow of tact and judgment. I'm going to look into it, and it will be all wight. I can assure you on that point!"

"Thanks awfully!" said Tom Merry, gravely.

"Not at all, deah boy. I wegard it as a duty!"

Arthur Augustus walked away, leaving the Terrible Three grinning. They had not very much faith in the result of Arthur Augustus's investigations. Blake put his arm through D'Arcy's as he came out of the house.

"Come down to the cricket, my son," he said.

Arthur Augustus shook his head.

"Imposs, deah boy!"

"Rats!" said Blake. "Lacy, the Australian chap, is going to show us some left-handed bowling. Come on!"

"I'm afraid I've got another engagement, deah boy!"

Blake stared.

"Engaged again!" he exclaimed.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Who is it this time?" asked Blake. "I believe you were engaged to Glyn's sister once. Is it the girl at the bun-shop this time?"

"Weally, Blake—"

"It can't be Mary the housemaid," said Blake, cocking his head thoughtfully on one side, and appearing to reflect deeply.

"You uttah ass!"

"Well, it can't be!" argued Blake. "The under-gardener is engaged to her, and she can't be engaged to two chaps at once—and you wouldn't have a look in against the gardener."

"I wefuse to discuss such a widdleous thing, Blake. You know vewy well that it was not that sort of engagement I was alludin' to. I have an engagement in Rylcombe."

"Then it is the girl at the bun-shop?"

"You fwabjous ass! I am goin' to Rylcombe to make some investigations!"

"Oh!" said Blake. "Going to see her father first?"

"Pway don't wot, you wottah. I am goin' to investigate this affair of Tom Mewwy. You know he told us he walked that gee-gee back to Abbotsford, because the beast fell lame."

"What about that?"

"That's it, my boy," said D'Arcy, with a smile of superior wisdom. "I'm goin' to the livery-stable where Fatty Wynn hired that horse, and I'm goin' to ask the man—I know him, you know. I've often had horses there—I'm goin' to ask him to substantiate Tom Mewwy's statement."

"Well, that's a good word," said Blake, with a nod. "Did you get that word from Skimpole of the Shell?"

"Pway don't be an ass. The man will beah out Tom Mewwy's statement that the hoss was lame, you see, and he may have some pwoof that Tom Mewwy weally went as fah as Abbotsford. See? I shall weport when I come in!"

And Arthur Augustus nodded and walked away towards the gates. Blake grinned, and went down to the cricket-ground.

CHAPTER 12.

D'Arcy's Discovery.

"TOM MEWWY, bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy uttered that exclamation. It was getting dusk in the streets of Rylcombe, and Arthur Augustus was on his way back to the school.

The swell of St. Jim's had made his investigations, with eminent success. D'Arcy was well known at the local livery stables, for he was a great horseman, and he frequently had a riding-steed out. The livery-stable keeper had given him all the information he could. Tom Merry had brought the horse in about half-past eight the previous night, and the horse was dead lame, and had evidently been a long way.

That was all the man could tell D'Arcy; excepting that Master Merry had mentioned to him that he had had to walk back from Abbotsford. All this most decidedly bore out Tom Merry's statement, and D'Arcy could not doubt that it would

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have effect upon the fellows at St. Jim's. If Figgins & Co. had met the Shell fellow the worse for drink before eight o'clock, Tom Merry must have recovered himself in time to take the horse in at half-past eight or thereabouts. That was an exceedingly unlikely supposition; and D'Arcy's investigations had certainly thrown the gravest doubt upon Figgins's version.

The swell of St. Jim's was just leaving the village, feeling extremely satisfied and elated, when he caught sight of a lad in Etons and a silk hat, lounging outside the gate of the side entrance of the Green Man Inn. D'Arcy frowned at the sight of him; the thought immediately occurring to him that it was a St. Jim's junior in forbidden precincts. The Green Man had a bad reputation, and was very strictly out of bounds for the St. Jim's boys; but it was an open secret among the juniors that Levison and Crooke sometimes went there. He came up, expecting to recognise Levison or one of his set. And then an amazed exclamation dropped from his lips.

"Tom Mewwy!"

The swell of St. Jim's halted.

The boy leaning on the gate had a cigarette between his lips, and was in the act of lighting it.

The flame of the match glimmered on his face.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy could not mistake the well-known features.

Those handsome, clear-cut features, the blue eyes with dark lashes, the curly hair over the wide forehead—he was not likely to mistake that face!

"Tom Mewwy!" he repeated, dazedly.

The match went out.

The junior at the gate blew out a stream of white smoke, and then pushed the gate back and moved up the path beside the inn. He walked along like one perfectly familiar with the place, and quite at home there. He disappeared in the shrubbery, as he went round to the back of the house, leaving Arthur Augustus D'Arcy standing in the road rooted to the ground with astonishment and dismay.

"Tom Mewwy!" he repeated dazedly. "Tom Mewwy, bai Jove!"

Tom Merry!

Tom Merry's smoking a cigarette in the open road, and then strolling round to the back of that ill-favoured public-house, like one well used to it.

D'Arcy felt all his ideas scattered and shattered. He could hardly believe the evidence of his eyes.

From the public entrance of the inn and the latticed windows came a glow of light, and a sound of hoarse voices in a chorus. The habitués of the Green Man were "keeping it up." And that public-house, the resort of the roughest element in the countryside, the headquarters of the book-makers, who came down for the races—that was where Tom Merry had gone!

"Bai Jove," said D'Arcy again, "If I hadn't seen him, I couldn't have believed it! Then—then what Figgins said was true!"

That was another staggering thought.

D'Arcy had come down to the village to investigate the matter, and prove that Tom Merry had told the truth. And the result of his visit was the clearest possible proof against—not Figgins, but Tom Merry.

What he had learned at the livery-stable had certainly seemed to tell in favour of the Shell fellow.

But what he had seen at the Green Man was a crushing proof that Tom Merry had been deceiving his schoolfellows. There could be no doubt of what he had seen with his own eyes.

There could be no reason for doubting Figgins's story now. The fellow who smoked, and hung about that public-house as if he lived there, was quite capable of getting into the state Figgins & Co. had found the junior in.

"Figg was right," said D'Arcy to himself. "And I've called him a liar, bai Jove! I shall have to apologise to Figgay!"

D'Arcy hesitated as to what he should do. He was inclined to follow the junior into the inn, and fetch him out by force. But that evidently was not practicable. If he inquired for Tom Merry there, Mr. Joliffe would certainly deny that there was a St. Jim's fellow on the premises at all, and D'Arcy could scarcely insist upon searching the house for him.

But Arthur Augustus wanted very much to see Tom Merry at that moment. He wanted to tell the Shell fellow what he thought of him. He resolved to wait until Tom Merry came out, and, with that idea in his mind, he sat on a rail under the trees beside the road. But half an hour passed, and the junior did not appear.

"Bai Jove, the awful wotah was makin' an evenin' of it!" muttered Arthur Augustus. "I'm late for callin' ovah as it is!"

And the swell of St. Jim's reluctantly turned his steps in the direction of the school. The gates were closed when he

arrived there, and he had to ring for Taggles to open them. And Taggles came, grunting, out of his lodge.

D'Arcy hurried across the quadrangle to the School House.

"Hallo, here you are!" exclaimed Jack Blake, as he entered. "Do you know you're late for calling-over, you ass?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"You've got to go in and tell Railton."

"All sewene!"

And Arthur Augustus reported himself to the Housemaster, and was given lines. But he was not thinking of lines as he came out of the study. Blake had noticed the suppressed excitement in his elegant chum's face, and he was waiting for D'Arcy outside Mr. Railton's study, with Herries and Digby.

"Well, what is it?" asked Blake.

"I've made a discovery, deah boys!"

"About Tom Merry?"

"Yaas."

"Good!" said Blake. "What is it?"

"Let's get up to the study. I don't want to talk about it here," said Arthur Augustus.

"But why—"

"Pway come up to the study!"

"Oh, all right!" said Blake resignedly. "I suppose there's nothing in it. And you've only discovered a mare's nest; but we'll come."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Lead on, Macduff!" said Digby.

Arthur Augustus led the way to Study No. 6 with his aristocratic nose very high in the air. He consoled himself with the reflection that the news he had to communicate would astonish the chums of the Fourth. Blake and Herries and Digby were grinning—a proof that they were far from realising what a discovery D'Arcy had made. They followed him into the study, and Blake closed the door, and set his back against it dramatically.

"Now unfold the dread tale," he said.

And Herries and Digby chuckled.

"Pway don't wot, deah boy!" said D'Arcy. "This is a sewious mattah! I have discovahed pwoof—conclusive pwoof—"

"Hear, hear!" said Digby. "Where did you get the proofs? At the printers?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You uttah ass, Dig—"

"Well, the printer's is the place to go for proofs," said Digby. "We always get the proofs of Tom Merry's 'Weekly' from the printer's. So—"

"This is a sewious mattah, you ass! I have found pwoofs—conclusive pwoofs—about Tom Mewwy, and it settles the question between him and Figgins!"

Blake looked serious at last, as he saw the deadly earnestness in Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's face.

"You've really found something out?" he asked.

"Yaas."

"And it proves that Figgins was telling whoppers?"

"No, deah boy," said D'Arcy gravely.

Blake started.

"You don't mean to say—" he began.

"Yaas, I do! What I've found pwoves that Tom Mewwy was tellin' whoppahs, and that Figgins was in the wight!"

And a dead silence in Study No. 6 followed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's startling statement.

CHAPTER 13.

Gore's Concert-Party.

JACK BLAKE was the first to speak.

"That's jolly serious, Gussy! Are you sure?"

"Yaas."

"Tell us what you've found out?"

"I had been to the livery stable," D'Arcy explained.

"As I came back I saw Tom Mewwy—"

"I didn't know he had gone out," said Blake.

"He must have, for I met him, and he's there still."

Blake shook his head.

"He was at calling-over, Gussy."

D'Arcy jumped.

"He was at calling-ovah!" he exclaimed.

"Yes; I saw him with the Shell fellows."

"Bai Jove, then he must have got in before me aftah all!" the swell of St. Jim's exclaimed excitedly. "I thought he hadn't seen me; but, as a mattah of fact, he must have known that I was waitin' for him outside the Gween Man, and he must have slipped out another way and bunked home."

"The Green Man!" exclaimed Blake and Herries and Digby, with one voice.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Do you mean that you saw Tom Merry there?" Blake demanded, in amazement.

"Yaas."

"Sure you're not mistaken?" said Herries doubtfully. "I know Levison and Mellish go there quietly sometimes, but Tom Merry—I'd never have thought of him."

"Neithah would I, deah boy," said D'Arcy. "But he was outside the gate lightin' a cigawette, and I saw the light on his face, so I couldn't possibly be mistaken. It was gettin' dark; but the match shone wight on his face."

"Lighting a cigarette?" said Blake.

"Yaas; and he was smokin' it as he went up the path, wound to the back of the public-house. I waited half an hour for him to catch him comin' out, so that I could tell him what I thought of his wascally conduct; but he must have gone wound anothah way—most likely by the garden, and the towin'-path."

"He had seen you then?"

"Yaas, I suppose so, though he didn't let on. I dare say he will deny the whole stow, same as he did with Figgins."

Blake wrinkled his brows.

"This is jolly queer!" he exclaimed. "If you're not made a mistake—"

"How could I make a mistake, deah boy? I suppose I know Tom Mewwy's face?"

"Yes, I suppose so," said Blake. "Well, if this is correct, it's pretty clear that Figgins & Co. were telling the facts. If Tom Merry's in the habit of going to that den, there would be nothing surprising in his being seen squiffy near the place."

"Nothin' at all."

"We've taken Tom Merry's side in the matter," said Digby.

"If it turns out that he was in the wrong, we'll jolly soon stop that!" said Blake. "We're not going to back up a blackguard against a decent chap like Figgins, simply because he's in our House."

"Wathah not!"

"Blessed if I know what to make of Tom Merry breaking out like this," said Blake. "There was a suspicion of the sort against him once before, but he explained it away to everybody's satisfaction. And he always seemed to be awfully down on Lumley-Lumley, when the Outsider used to play those games; he was straight enough then, I'll swear! But I suppose you never can tell what a fellow's coming to."

"He's coming to the order of the sack, if he keeps on

like this," said Digby. "Are you going to speak to him about it, Gussy?"

"Yaas, wathah!" said the swell of St. Jim's promptly. "I warged it as bein' up to me to explain to him what I think of his conduct. Also, if we're not going to back him up, we owe him an explanation why."

"That's so!" said Herries.

"Hallo, what's that row?" asked Blake, looking out of the study.

A roar of voices raised in a chorus came sounding along the passage from the direction of the Shell studies. The door of George Gore's study, which was next to Tom Merry's in the Shell passage, was open, and four voices were raised at once, bawling out the chorus of a music-hall song. And as the Fourth-Formers caught the burden of it, they realised what Gore & Co. meant by it. The words ran:

"You have a drink,

And you have a drink!

Come, all have a drink with me!"

Blake could not help chuckling.

"It's a giddy concert-party in Gore's study," he remarked. "Gore and Levison and Crooke and Mellish. They're getting at Tom Merry next door."

A banjo was heard from Gore's study, and then a fresh song followed. Tom Merry's door remained closed. The ragers knew that he was in his study; but as yet he had given no sign. He must have heard the bawling voices through the wall, and the strumming and ping-ponging of Gore's banjo.

Fellows were coming along the passage, attracted by the noise, and most of them grinning. Levison & Co. had adopted a really cunning method of chipping the hero of the Shell. Gore had a right to have fellows singing in his study if he wanted to, and Tom Merry had no right to object to their songs. The chums of Study No. 5 joined the crowd of fellows going along to Gore's study. Blake looked in at the door. Gore was strumming on a banjo, and Levison and Mellish and Crooke were singing. It was an old song with variations:

"There is a tavern in the town, in the town,

That's where Tom Merry pours it down, pours it down,

And he takes a drink, or two or three,

And comes home squiffy as can be!"

The chorus rang along the passage. The crowd of juniors there chuckled loudly. Blake looked towards Tom Merry's door. The first song had failed to "draw" the captain of the Shell; and the ragers had gone further, and mentioned him by name. Blake wondered whether the ragged junior would appear.

He was not long left in doubt.

The door of Tom Merry's study opened, and the Terrible Three came out, and pushed through the crowd of juniors towards George Gore's door.

The four singers were just bursting into song again:

"There is a tavern in the town, in the town,

That's where Tom Merry—"

"Hold on, you fellows," said Tom Merry quietly. "It appears to me that you're making free with my name. I'll trouble you to stop."

"That's where Tom Merry pours it down!" roared Gore defiantly, with another strum on the banjo.

Tom Merry made a swift stride towards Gore. He grasped the banjo, and jerked it out of his hand of the bully of the Shell. Gore struck at his face, and, as he did so, Tom Merry caught him by the collar and swung him round, and brought the banjo down across his shoulders.

There was a shivering crash as the banjo went into fragments.

"Ow!" roared Gore.

Tom Merry flung him scornfully away, and he crashed into the fender. Levison and Mellish and Crooke drew together, looking alarmed. They began to regret their temerity a little now.

"You are jolly funny fellows!" said Monty Lowther blandly. "We're going to make you look a little funnier, if possible. Will you have it on the nose, or under the chin, Mellish?"

Mellish made a spring towards the door. Monty Lowther's boot caught him as he ran, and he pitched forward with a terrific yell, and sprawled among the juniors in the passage. He threw his arms round Kangaroo's neck to save himself, and the Cornstalk junior promptly shook him off, and he rolled on the floor among countless feet, roaring.

"That's one," said Lowther. "You next, Levison."

"Get out of my study!" roared Gore, scrambling furiously to his feet. "You've no right in my study!"



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"Never mind about that," said Manners. "You've no right to sing, with a voice like yours, Gore, but you do it. We're going to chuck you out of this study!"

"Chuck me out of my own study!" yelled Gore.

"Yes."

"Why, you—you— Hands off! Yow!"

Gore had no time for more. Tom Merry's grasp was upon him, and, at the same time, Manners seized Crooke, and Monty Lowther gripped hold of Levison. There was a fierce but brief struggle in the study, during which the furniture was knocked right and left. Then George Gore went whirling out of the doorway, the juniors in the passage crowding away to give him room. After him Levison went spinning, and he crashed down upon Gore, eliciting a wild yell from that unhappy junior.

"Leggo!" gasped Crooke. "I—I—I'll go! Ow!"

"Yes, you'll go—you're going!" grinned Manners.

And Crooke went.

He sprawled over Gore and Levison, and they yelled again under the concussion. The three gasping juniors rolled on the linoleum, and sat up in a dazed state. The juniors crowded round roaring with laughter.

"Get on with the concert, Gore!" yelled Kangaroo.

"Sure, and we're waiting for the next item, Crooke darling," said Reilly.

"File in, you giddy musicians!" said Vavasour.

"Go it, Gore!"

"Ow! Ow! Ow!" groaned Gore & Co.

"That's a new chorus, I suppose," chuckled Cedric Lacy.

"Try to put a bit more tune in it! Go it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And Lorne of the Fourth, with a happy inspiration, struck up to the tune of a "Tavern in the Town."

"There are three chaps looking dusty wrecks, dusty wrecks."

They've been chucked out upon their necks, on their necks!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Gore and Levison and Crooke staggered up. The Terrible Three looked at them grimly from the doorway of the study.

"We're coming into that study!" roared Gore.

"Come on then!" said Lowther.

Crooke and Levison moved down the passage. Gore hesitated, and then followed them. The Terrible Three came out. Gore & Co. had evidently given up the rag for the time being. Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther went back into their own study, and the crowd dispersed, laughing heartily; and Blake & Co. followed the Terrible Three in.

CHAPTER 14.

No Alibi.

"HALLO!" said Monty Lowther hospitably. "You fellows come to supper? We've got baked potatoes this time—lots of them, and rolls!"

"Ahem!" said Blake. "We haven't exactly come to supper!"

"Wathah not!"

"Did you come to hear the concert?" asked Tom Merry, rather sarcastically.

"Well, yes," admitted Blake. "I must say you made short work of the concert-party. Serve them right; they've no reason to rub it in like that. It's no business of theirs, anyway."

Tom Merry looked at him quickly.

"You speak as if something's happened to make you change your mind about it, Blake," he said. "You said last night that Figgins's word was as good as mine. Are you going to take up that line again?"

"Oh, don't row!" said Monty Lowther. "Don't be touchy, Tommy!"

"Let him run on," said Blake. "We've come to tell him that we think Figgy's word is ever so much better than his."

Tom Merry's eyes blazed.

"What's that?" he exclaimed.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, you undahstand perfectly well!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy severely. "You need not pretend to misundahstand!"

"What do you mean?"

"You know very well what I mean," said the swell of St. Jim's coldly.

Tom Merry breathed hard.

"I haven't the faintest idea what you are driving at," he said. "Will you explain, or will you go and babble somewhere else?"

D'Arcy flushed.

"Weally, you wottah!—" he began indignantly.

"D'Arcy saw you this evening," said Herries, in his direct way. "Do you understand now?"

"I suppose that makes it clear," said Digby.

The captain of the Shell looked astounded.

"I don't see what D'Arcy seeing me has to do with it," he said. "Anybody might have seen me, I suppose. Are you dotty? I haven't been hiding myself."

"You know where D'Arcy saw you?" said Blake curtly.

"I don't. I thought D'Arcy had gone out."

"You know he'd gone out, and you know he saw you outside the Green Man, and saw you go into the place," said Blake crisply. "Or, if you didn't know it, you know it now, and that settles it."

Tom Merry panted.

"Does D'Arcy say he saw me do that?" he asked.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"It's not true!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"I suppose you know it's no good telling us that Gussy has been telling whoppers?" said Blake. "We're not likely to doubt Gussy's word."

"Bai Jove, I should wathah think not!"

"I don't doubt his word," said Tom Merry, "but I doubt his eyesight, if he thinks he saw me near the Green Man this evening, for I certainly was not there. It looks to me as if there is some fellow like me hanging about in this neighbourhood, if Gussy thinks he saw me there."

Blake's lip curled incredulously.

"The fact is, you may as well own up," said Herries. "We took your side against Figgins, but now D'Arcy has the same story to tell. If you want to do these things without being found out, you should be more careful."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Tom Merry caught his breath.

"I don't want to hit you," he said. "This matter won't be improved by our hammering one another; but I tell you there's some mistake. D'Arcy didn't see me go into the Green Man, because I haven't been outside the walls of the school since afternoon lessons."

The chums of Study No. 6 looked at one another. Tom Merry spoke so quietly and steadily that they could not help being impressed by his words. Even Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was taken aback.

"But I saw you, deah boy!" he exclaimed.

"You didn't," said Tom Merry. "You must have mistaken somebody else for me."

"Imposs.!"

"Look here," said Blake abruptly, "it isn't a question of taking your word now, Tom Merry! I'd have taken it yesterday; but I'd have taken Figgins's, too. It comes to a question of proof. You say you haven't been outside the school walls since lessons?"

"Yes."

"Then it ought to be easy to prove it. If you can prove that you've been inside the school ever since lessons, we shall have to believe that there's a chap in Rylcombe so exactly like you that fellows who know you well can't see any difference. Gussy, what was the time exactly when you saw him there?"

"I'm afraid I didn't notice the exact time, deah boy," said D'Arcy; "but I got in at half-past seven, and I had been waitin' there about half an hour—waitin' for the boundah to come out of the pub, you know, and it took about a quarter of an hour to walk home."

"Then it was a quarter to seven," said Blake. "Can you produce somebody who was with you here at that time, Tom Merry?"

Tom Merry reflected.

"I was here at calling-over," he said. "You saw me come in out of the quad, Blake. I remember passing you in the passage."

Blake nodded.

"That's quite right; I remember it! I told Gussy you hadn't missed call-over when he told us this queer yarn. Calling-over was at seven. If you went into the Green Man when Gussy saw you, and out again the back way, and ran home by way of the towing-path, you could get here by seven, and you'd come in out of the quad, to go to call-over," added Blake.

"Where were you a quarter of an hour before that?" asked Digby.

"I'd been taking a stroll round the quad," said Tom Merry. "There were some other fellows out there, too. It was dusky, but not quite dark. I went out there to look for Manners and Lowther. I'd been doing my impot. in the Form-room—the lines I got last night for being late, you know."

"Manners and Lowther weren't with you, then?"

"No; I did the lines in the Form-room, and Manners and Lowther were going to the tuckshop. I looked in at the tuckshop for them, but the place was empty. Then I walked round the quad, and came in to calling-over."

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NEXT
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"THE SCHOOLBOY INFORMER!"

"Nobody in the Form-room with you while you were doing your lines?" asked Blake.

Tom Merry made an irritable gesture.

"How should anyone be there?" he exclaimed. "Fellows don't stay in the Form-room after lessons, unless they've got lines to do."

"Well, that's so," said Blake. "But how it works out is—that you can't prove by any witness that you were inside the school at the time D'Arcy says he saw you smoking a cigarette outside the Green Man."

"It doesn't need proving," said Tom Merry fiercely. "My word's good enough for my friends, and I don't care two-pence for others!"

"We are among the others then," said Blake, his own temper rising. "You seem to want fellows to take your word, and condemn other fellows as liars. Why should anybody believe you rather than Figgins? Figgins is as straight as a die! Now D'Arcy has seen the same kind of thing that Figgins saw. And you can't yourself say that D'Arcy would lie—you know he wouldn't."

"He's an ass!" said Lowther. "He never makes anything excepting mistakes!"

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"The alibi is pretty well proved," said Manners. "We left Tom in the Form-room doing his lines at a quarter past six—I remember that. He couldn't have got them done in much less than half an hour. At seven he turned up for calling-over. It's no good saying that he dodged out of school unknown to anybody, and went down to the Green Man, and dodged back in time for calling-over—that's too thick!"

"But I saw him, deah boy. I know it sounds wathah impwob; but I saw him."

"Oh, you fancied it!" said Manners.

"Weally, Manners—"

"D'Arcy didn't fancy it," said Blake drily. "It's pretty clear to me."

Tom Merry fixed his eyes upon Blake.

"You mean that you believe Figgins's story now?"

"Yes."

"It follows that you look on me as a liar then?"

"I've got nothing to say about that," said Blake. "I want you to understand that we're not up against Figgins any more, that's all. I felt I ought to tell you so. I don't want to quarrel with you. No need for us to talk about it any more. Come on, you chaps!"

"Yes, you can go!" said Tom Merry, bitterly. "And don't speak to me again until you are prepared to apologise for what you've said!"

"That won't happen soon!" said Blake, with a curl of the lip.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, it's up to you to apologise, for havin' been such an awful wothah, and taken us all in as you've done!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy exclaimed indignantly.

Tom Merry clenched his hand; but it fell to his side again.

"You'd better go!" he said, very quietly.

Blake & Co. quitted the study. Tom Merry sank into a chair when they had gone, his face pale and almost haggard.

"This is getting rather thick, and no mistake!" said Monty Lowther, restlessly. "It's jolly queer that D'Arcy should fancy he saw you, Tom!"

"Say out plainly that you believe that he did see me!" said Tom Merry, bitterly.

"I don't!" said Lowther.

"But it's horribly queer," said Manners. "I can't make it out at all. Gussy is an ass, but he wouldn't lie—that's impossible. We might think he was mistaken in the dusk—but he says the chap he saw lighted a cigarette, and he saw the light on his face. How could he be mistaken?"

"You know I wasn't out of doors!" said Tom Merry.

"I don't see how you very well could be," said Manners. "But you've given us your word that you were at home, and that's enough. There's only one possible explanation; and that is, that there's a chap in Rylcombe like you to look at—and the fellows have taken him for you. Pretty sort of rotter he must be, too; by the way he's been seen—the worse for drink, and smoking, and going into a pub. That's the only explanation I can think of—but—"

"But it sounds too awfully steep!" said Lowther.

Manners nodded.

"It does!" he said. "It's good enough for us, but I'm afraid the other fellows won't put much faith in it. What do you think, Tom?"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"I don't know what to think!" he said miserably. "I came to believe that it was a plot of Figgins and Kerr and Wynn, but I can't think anything of that sort about Gussy. He's too big an ass to plot against a fellow, even if he was bad enough—and we know he isn't! I simply don't know."

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what to think! But if this goes on, I sha'n't have a pal left in the school—I can see that!"

"You'll have two, whatever happens!" said Monty Lowther, quietly.

And Manners chimed in, "What-ho!"

Tom Merry felt a lump rise in his throat.

"It's jolly good of you two fellows to stick to me like this!" he said. "After all, all the evidence is against me—you've got nothing but my word!"

"And that's quite enough!" said Manners, quietly.

CHAPTER 15.

Kildare is Puzzled!

THE next day was a half-holiday at St. Jim's, and it was a fine clear spring day. The juniors of both Houses turned out to cricket practice with keenness. The junior House match between the rival Houses was nearly due, and the juniors were very keen about it. The senior House match, between senior elevens captained respectively by Kildare and Monteith of the Sixth, was not half so important—from a junior point of view.

But the late unpleasant happenings had taken Tom Merry's thoughts, at least, away from the House match. Tom Merry was captain of the School House junior eleven, and as keen a player as any in the school, but his keenness seemed to be gone now. His usually sunny face was gloomily clouded. The scandal in the school, on the subject of Tom Merry and his delinquencies, real or supposed, was growing. When it became known in the School House that Study No. 6 had turned against Tom Merry, it caused a large desertion of his cause. Blake & Co. certainly said nothing on the subject; but it was easily to be seen that they avoided the Terribles Three, and did not speak or nod if they chanced to meet. And when someone had passed a criticism on Figgins, Blake had declared sharply that Figgins was all right, and that he for one would take Figg's word against anybody's. The School House fellows were very curious to know the reason for Study No. 6's change of front, but their curiosity was not gratified. But they felt that Blake & Co. would not have acted without reason; and so the example of Study No. 6 was widely followed. And Levison & Co. were very careful not to let the scandal rest. It was talked of up and down both Houses; and Kildare, the head prefect of the School House, who had treated the matter with contempt at first, felt bound to take notice of it. Prefects and masters had heard the story in some shape or form by this time; it could not be discussed in study and common-room, in the Form-rooms and the passages, without reaching all ears sooner or later. And that afternoon, after dinner, Kildare stopped Tom Merry as they came out of the dining-room, and signed to the junior to follow him to the prefects' room. The room was empty just then, and Kildare and Tom Merry had it to themselves. Tom Merry waited quietly for the Captain of St. Jim's to speak. He could guess easily enough from Kildare's expression what was coming.

"What is this story that's going round about you, Merry?" Kildare asked abruptly. "Is it true?"

Tom Merry eyes met Kildare's fearlessly.

"No!" he said, quietly.

"Figgins seems to be accusing you of something, from what I have heard," said Kildare.

"Yes."

"What is it precisely?"

"He says he saw me on Monday evening in Rylcombe Lane under the influence of drink," said Tom Merry, a flush of shame coming into his cheeks involuntarily as he spoke.

"I heard that before," said Kildare. "I looked on it as utter nonsense. But why should Figgins say such a thing if it isn't true?"

"I don't know!"

"Of course, there's no truth at all in it?"

"None at all!"

"You were not gammoning him—pulling his leg?"

"I was not there at all. I was at Abbotsford at the time!"

"It's very queer," said Kildare, puzzled. "I must take your word for it; I think I had better see Figgins."

And the School House prefect crossed over to the New House, and found Figgins in his study—bathing his eye, which was beginning to assume a paler shade of purple now.

Figgins looked up with a dripping face as Kildare came into his study. Kerr rose to his feet, but Fatty Wynn went on munching the tarts with which he was supplementing his dinner.

"Hallo, Kildare," said Figgins, cheerfully. "Have you come over to inquire how my eye's getting on? It's cooling down a bit. Thanks!"

Kildare laughed.

"I've come to ask you what is this story you've been spreading about Tom Merry," he said.

CHAPTER 16.

Arthur Augustus is Sorry.

Figgins became grave at once.
 "Has Tom Merry spoken to you about it?" he asked.
 "I questioned him."
 "Well, he can tell you more than I can," said Figgins.
 "I want your account. You accuse him—"
 "I don't!" said Figgins, quickly. "It's not fair to put it that I accuse him. I went over to tell Lowther and Manners on Monday night, so that they could look after him."
 "You didn't tell anybody else, then?"
 "No. Mellish listened at the door; otherwise it would never have got out."

"You declare that you saw Tom Merry under the influence of drink?" Kildare exclaimed, in amazement.
 "I'm not giving information against him!" said Figgins, sturdily.

"No sneaking here!" said Kerr.
 Kildare smiled.
 "I'm not asking as a prefect, for Merry to be punished," he said. "I only want to see if there is anything in the matter."

"Oh, in that case, I don't mind speaking out," said Figgins.
 "Of course, it's understood that I don't bear witness against Tom Merry in case of trouble with the Head."

Kildare nodded.
 "Well, then, I did see him squiffy, and so did Kerr and Wynn," said Figgins.
 "You are sure of that?"
 "He couldn't walk straight!"
 "You are sure it was Tom Merry?"
 "Quite sure!"

"He denies the whole story," said Kildare.
 Figgins's lip curled.
 "He would!" he said.
 "I gather that you are not on friendly terms now?" said the captain of St. Jim's.

"No fear!" said Figgins, promptly. "I'm not likely to be on friendly terms with a chap who gets tipsy, and tells lies about it afterwards."

"Not likely!" said Kerr, emphatically.
 "It's a very queer business," said Kildare. "The worst of it is, that if there's much more jaw on the subject, it will get to the Head, and then there will be a regular investigation, and a regular scandal!"

"Well, we don't talk about it," said Figgins. "I'm bound to stick to what I've said, that's all; and after all, it's Tom Merry's fault, he shouldn't have done it."

Kildare gave Figgins a searching glance, and then, with a nod, he turned and left the study. The captain of St. Jim's did not know what to think. Figgins went on bathing his eye.

"How do you think that looks, Kerr, old man?" Figgins asked, turning his wet face towards his chum anxiously.

Kerr grinned. He knew that Ethel Cleveland was coming to the school that afternoon; hence Figgins's deadly anxiety about the state of his eye.

"Much improved!" said Kerr.
 "You think so?" asked Figgins, in great relief.
 "Oh, yes; hardly noticeable, in fact!" said Kerr, blandly.

"What do you think, Fatty?"
 "Prime!" said Fatty Wynn.

"Eh! My eye's prime!" demanded Figgins. "What do you mean?"

"What?" said Fatty Wynn. "Oh, your old eye! Who's talking about your eye! I was speaking of these jam tarts!"

Figgins surveyed his face in the study mirror, and shook his head solemnly. He had been very careful with that eye; but the purple patch was as purple as ever, in spite of Kerr's kindly assurance. Figgins looked very serious.

"Beastly awkward that this should have happened now!" he said.

"Horrible!" said Kerr.
 "I-I mean—" stammered Figgins.

"Black eyes are always awkward," said Kerr. "Never knew a fellow who enjoyed having one. But that one is really getting better."

"It's getting to be quite an art shade," said Fatty Wynn.
 "Do you think—" Figgins paused.

"Think what?" asked Kerr.
 "Do you think Cousin Ethel will notice it?"

Kerr manfully suppressed a chuckle. Unless Cousin Ethel became suddenly afflicted with blindness, she could not very well help noticing that black eye, if she met Figgins at all. But Kerr comforted his chum as well as he could.

"Well, you never can tell," he said. "Keep it on the starboard side while you're speaking to her—look at her out of your other eye, you know—"

Figgins sighed.
 "It's rotten!" he said. "And it all comes of trying to do Tom Merry a friendly turn. Blessed if I'll make a mistake like that again!"

And Figgins went on bathing his eye.

"Figgins, deah boy!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy approached the great Figgins, in the quadrangle of St. Jim's; and Figgins stared. He could hardly believe his ears. Cousin Ethel was coming that afternoon, and his dispute with Study No. 6 was weighing like lead upon Figgins's mind. How could he see Cousin Ethel, when he was on fighting terms with her cousin? Desperate sorts of schemes for making it up somehow with D'Arcy had been flitting through Figgins's mind, but none of them seemed practicable. And now here was the swell of St. Jim's approaching him with a friendly and deprecating air in the quadrangle, evidently bent on making it up without being asked. Figgins simply grinned with joy.

"How do you do, Gussy, old man?" said Figgins, affectionately.

"Figgay, deah boy, I owe you an apology."

"Do you?" said Figgins, in surprise.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Well, pay up then," said Figgins. "I'll give you a receipt."

But Arthur Augustus did not smile.

"It's simply wotten!" he said. "I nevah thought that I should evah be backin' up a New House chap against Tom Mewwy; but a chap is bound to stand by the wight side. Since I've learned that you were in the wight, Figgay, I'm bound to own up that I'm sowwy I was against you, and wufused to take your word against Tom Mewwy's."

Figgins started.

"You've found out that I was in the right?" he asked.

"Yaas."

"Well, I'm jolly glad of that!" said Figgins. "I'm blessed if I know how you found it out; but I'm glad you've done it! It wasn't pleasant for me to be supposed to have made up a yarn like that about a fellow."

D'Arcy nodded.

"I can quite undahstand that, Figgins, deah boy. Of course, when it was between you and Tom Mewwy, ye were bound to stand by a School House chap; but now that I've got pwoof—"

"What proof have you got?" asked Figgins.

Arthur Augustus paused.

"I'd wathah not talk about it," he said. "I've told Blake and Hewwies and Dig, and we've given Tom Mewwy a chance to explain; but he can't do it. The fact of the mattah is, I met Tom Mewwy yestahday undah somewhat similar circes—you undahstand?"

"Squiffy?" grinned Figgins.

"No, not so bad as that; but smokin' and goin' into the Gween Man pub," said D'Arcy. "Of course, you won't mention this. I don't want to talk about him. It's his own wotten bizney, I suppose; but I felt that I had to express my wegwet for havin' doubted your word, as it pwoves that you're in the wight."

"Thank you, Gussy; it's just like you!" said Figgins gratefully. "I was sorry to have you chaps up against me as you were."

"I twust it is all wight now?" said D'Arcy.

"Right as rain!" said Figgins. "I'm sorry Tom Merry has turned out as he has; but, as you say, it's his bizney, and I certainly shan't interfere again. By the way, Gussy, I hear that your cousin is coming down here to-day on a visit to Mrs. Holmes."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy jammed his famous eyeglass into his eye, and looked at Figgins. Figgins coloured somewhat under his gaze.

"Yaas," said D'Arcy.

"I—I—I suppose she will have tea with you chaps?"

"Yaas."

"Under the giddy circumstances, will you have the Shell fellows there?" asked Figgins diffidently.

D'Arcy shook his head.

"No feah! We certainly shan't have Tom Mewwy, and we can't ask Mannahs and Lowthah without him. They will stay out."

Figgins looked relieved.

"Then I'll tell you what," he said. "You don't want to tell Cousin Ethel anything about this, of course. She mustn't know there's been a rotten row!"

"Quite wight," said D'Arcy. "That is vewy thoughtful of you, Figgay."

"Thanks!" said Figgins. "Of course, it's up to all of us to make things quite comfy for Cousin Ethel."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"So you agree with me that we'd better be careful not to let her see that there's any row on?"

"Yaas. I wepeat that it's vewy thoughtful of you. No need for Cousin Ethel to know that there's been any fightin'."

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Order Early.

said Arthur Augustus. "If she asks after you, I will say you have a bad eye, and are keepin' indoors. I won't mention that it's a black eye."

Figgins jumped.

"I—I didn't mean that!" he exclaimed hastily. "Of course, I shall see Miss Cleveland."

Arthur Augustus looked puzzled.

"But weren't you suggestin' keepin' out of sight, so that Ethel shouldn't see your black eye?" he asked.

Figgins's pink face assumed a deeper shade of pink.

"Nunno," he said, "I didn't mean that! Ethel will very likely think I got this by accident, you know. Might have got it rowing, if an oar jammed in my eye, or—or it might have been an accident in the gym., you know, or—or lots of things."

"It might," assented D'Arcy doubtfully. "But the natural assumption about a black eye is that it was the result of another fellow punchin' you."

"What I meant was, that—that Cousin Ethel might come to tea in our study, and you and Blake and Herries and Digby with her," Figgins explained hastily; "then there would be no danger of her meeting Tom Merry."

"Bui Jove!"

"Jolly good idea, don't you think?" asked Figgins heartily; but anxiously watching the swell of St. Jim's out of the corner of his sound eye.

"Weally, Figgins—"

"We'll have the study done up in top-notch style—flowers and things, and—and Japanese fans on the walls," said Figgins, in a burst of luxurious imagining. "And—and the feed shall be the real thing—quite it, you know. Fatty Wynn will look after that. You know he can be relied upon to get a stunning feed, fit for a giddy emperor. I really think that Cousin Ethel would like it, you know, and it would keep her out of the way of Tom Merry."

"You are very kind, Figgay."

"Not at all," said Figgins. "What I'm thinking of is to make things smooth while Miss Cleveland is here, and—and to help you out of a difficulty, Gussy."

"I repeat that you are very kind, but—"

"Then we'll arrange the feed," said Figgins. "Shall I come with you to meet Ethel?"

"I am not goin' to meet Ethel. I don't know whether she will dwive ovah, or whethah she will come by twain, as she is stayin' in the neighbourhood now," said Arthur Augustus. "No good waitin' at the station if she's goin' to dwive wound by Wayland, or walk across the moor."

"Well, no," agreed Figgins. "But, I say, we'll go ahead with the feed. Will you come up and help us decorate the study? You have such artistic tastes," he added hypocritically.

"You are extremely kind, deah boy; but upon the whole—"

"You might sing us a tenor solo after tea, too," said Figgins, with a last effort of heroism.

"I should be vewy pleased to do so, deah boy; but upon the whole—"

"Bring your music with you," said Figgins, apparently determined not to let the refusal be uttered. "Bring your great solo, 'La Donna e Mobile.' I want to hear you sing that in German again."

"It is an Italian aviah, deah boy," said D'Arcy mildly.

"Yes, I—I meant Italian," said Figgins. "The way you sing Italian arias is simply stunning, Gussy—stunning!"

"I'm sorry, Figgay. Undah the eircs, howevah, I think you had better not meet Ethel, as you have a black eye. But aftahwards I'll come ovah to your study, if you like, and I'll bring two or three songs with me."

Figgins barely restrained himself from making some remarks about D'Arcy and his songs, which would certainly have put a sudden end to their renewed friendship.

"So you'll have Ethel to tea in No. 6?" he asked.

"Yaas."

"But Blake's got a black eye," urged Figgins.

"I shall ask Blake to keep out of sight."

"Do you think he will?"

"I shall request him to do so," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy majestically.

Figgins coughed.

"I suppose you'll be having some fellows in to tea to meet the distinguished guest?" he murmured.

"Yaas," said D'Arcy. "Of course, I shall be careful to select fellows who haven't any twaces about them of havin' been in a fight. Well, au wevoir, Figgay, deah boy; Blake's callin' me!"

And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy made Figgins a graceful bow, and walked away.

Figgins stared after him with feelings too deep for words. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was quite unconscious of the fact that, at that moment, he had the narrowest escape in his life of having his silk topper jammed down over his eyes.

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CHAPTER 17.

Called up Before the Head.

TOM MERRY passed the door of Study No. 6 in the Fourth-Form passage a little later in the afternoon, and he saw great preparations going on there. The door was open, and it revealed Blake and Herries and Digby at work, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy superintending operations.

It was some time since Cousin Ethel had visited St. Jim's, and the chums of No. 6 were evidently intending to celebrate the visit. The study was getting into a most unusual state of tidiness; there were flowers in vases on the mantelpiece, and Blake was mending the study chairs. Blake was an amateur carpenter, and very useful at mending furniture—the only drawback to his repairing being that it generally made the article a little more insecure than it was before. Digby was putting up a picture, and a little heap of plaster by the chair he was standing on showed that he was having some difficulty with getting the nail to stay in the wall. There were parcels on the tables that contained groceries—supplies enough for a most extensive feed.

Under other circumstances, Tom Merry would have been called into the study to help. The Terrible Three would have been asked to meet Cousin Ethel at tea as a matter of course. But now all was changed. Blake glanced at him as he passed the open door, and then turned his head away. Tom Merry coloured, and went on down the passage.

Monty Lowther and Manners were waiting for him downstairs.

"Coming down to the cricket?" asked Manners.

"Don't feel up to it," said Tom Merry. "It's not a match, either."

"Well, it's a half-holiday," said Manners. "What are we going to do with our noble selves?"

"I think I'll go out," said Tom Merry. "I suppose you know Cousin Ethel is coming?"

"Yes, I've heard so."

"Well, as we're on bad terms with Study No. 5, it will make it awkward if we meet her. We don't want her to know we're all on fighting terms."

"By George, no!" said Lowther.

"Might go out for a stroll then," said Tom Merry; "that will save all trouble. Let's get a walk over to Wayland—or we might have the bikes out. It's a ripping afternoon!"

"Good egg!" said Lowther.

Kildare came along the passage, and beckoned to Tom Merry.

"Head wants you, Merry," he said.

"Wants me?" said Tom Merry. "Is anything the matter?"

"It's about that yarn about you."

Tom Merry bit his lip.

"So that's got to the Head?" he asked.

"Yes; one of the prefects has reported it to him. As a matter of fact, Merry, the matter ought to be looked into and cleared up," said Kildare. "You're to go to the Head's study."

"All right!" said Tom Merry shortly. "You chaps got the bikes out, and wait for me."

"Right-ho!"

Tom Merry walked away to the Head's study. His heart was beating painfully fast. He had been expecting this sooner or later, and now it had come. The scandal had shown no signs of dying away, and Dr. Holmes was bound to hear of it in the long run. And he was not likely to let such a matter pass uninvestigated.

Tom Merry tapped at the Head's door, and the pleasant voice of the Head of St. Jim's bade him enter.

The captain of the Shell entered the study with a firm step, and with his head proudly erect.

Mr. Railton, the Housemaster of the School House, and Mr. Linton, Tom Merry's Form-master, were in the study, evidently in consultation with the Head. All three of the masters looked at the Shell fellow as he came in.

Dr. Holmes coughed.

"You know why I have sent for you, Merry?" he asked.

"Kildare told me, sir."

"There is a most unpleasant story going about the school concerning you," said Dr. Holmes. "It has come to my knowledge now. It appears that you are accused of having been seen under the influence of drink. I need not say that if such a charge were proved, you would be instantly expelled from the school."

"I should deserve it, sir, if it were true," said Tom Merry quietly.

"That is a very proper answer," said the Head. "I cannot believe that it is true. These gentlemen share my opinion."

"Certainly I should not believe such a thing without the clearest proof," said Mr. Railton, at once.

"I may say the same," said Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell. "Merry has faults; but, so far as I have observed,

they are not of that kind. You must understand, Merry, that it is in your own interests that this matter should be investigated and cleared up."

"I understand that, sir," said Tom Merry.

"Are you aware of how this story was started?" asked the Head.

"Yes, sir. Some New House boys said they had seen me staggering along Rylcombe Lane on Monday evening," said Tom Merry, flushing. "It was not true, I was not there."

The Head pursed his lips.

"You deny the accusation, of course?"

"Certainly, sir!"

"Who were the boys who state that they saw you?"

"Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn."

"Dear me," said the Head, in surprise. "This is extraordinary! Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn are not the kind of boys to bring a false accusation against anyone."

"They have done so in this case, sir."

"It must be a mistake of some sort," said Mr. Railton.

"I cannot believe that those three boys would utter deliberate untruths."

Tom Merry was silent.

"Do you think it is a mistake, Merry?" asked the Head.

"I don't know, sir. I would never have thought that those three chaps would have lied. I always believed them to be straight. But I certainly wasn't where they said they saw me."

"Where were you?"

"Coming home from Abbotsford at the time they mentioned."

And Tom Merry explained the incident of the horse falling lame. The Head and the two masters listened attentively, their keen gaze upon Tom Merry's face. Keen as their gaze was, it could discover nothing but sincerity in the face of the Shell fellow.

"It is extraordinary!" said the Head at last. "So Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn are the only boys who have made any accusation of this sort, Merry?"

Tom Merry coloured and hesitated. The Head's glance grew sharper and sterner.

"I can see that there is something more, Merry," he exclaimed. "Pray keep nothing back! If you are innocent, it is for your benefit to have everything brought out into the light!"

"Very well, sir! Figgins & Co.—I mean Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn—were the only fellows at first, but since then, D'Arcy of the Fourth—"

"Indeed! What does D'Arcy say?"

"He says that he saw me last evening go into the Green Man public-house," said Tom Merry reluctantly. "He says he saw me light a cigarette outside the place, and he saw my face plainly by the light of the match."

"And it is not true?"

"No, sir."

"Do you suggest that D'Arcy has spoken falsely?" asked Mr. Railton, with a stern note in his voice.

"I can't think that old Gussy would tell a lie, sir," said Tom Merry. "He made a mistake, that's all. It must have been somebody like me that he saw."

"Ahem!" said the Head. "Are you aware of any boy resembling you living in this neighbourhood, Merry?"

"I've never heard of one, sir."

"It would be a very curious coincidence."

"I know that, sir. But it's the only way I can account for what D'Arcy says he saw, unless he was dreaming."

The three masters were looking very grave now.

"This is a most unpleasant matter, Merry," said Dr. Holmes. "You are accused of disgraceful conduct, and the evidence against you rests upon the word of four boys—four boys who have the best characters, and whom I firmly believe to be incapable of falsehood."

"I know it looks bad, sir."

"It looks so bad, Merry, that if I did not have the highest opinion of you, I should have no hesitation in condemning you to be expelled on such evidence," said Dr. Holmes.

Tom Merry's face paled.

"I hope you won't do that, sir," he faltered. "I repeat that there isn't a word of truth in it all."

"I can only let the matter stand over for further investigation," said the Head. "I should be very sorry to have to believe that you have been deceiving us, Merry."

"I have not been deceiving you, sir."

"I hope not," said the Head. "I trust not, Merry. You may go now, and I will consider what is to be done."

"Yes, sir."

Tom Merry left the study. The three masters looked at one another with grave faces when the juniors was gone.

"This is worse than I thought," the Head said.

"I cannot understand it," said Mr. Railton. "The evidence is clear enough to condemn anyone, yet I cannot quite believe such a thing of Merry of the Shell."

"There must be an investigation," said Mr. Linton. "And if there is some boy who resembles Merry, and who is in the habit of disgraceful indulgence, I suppose the fact can be ascertained and proved."

"The boys' whole future is at stake, and we cannot be too careful," said the Head.

And Mr. Railton and the master of the Shell assented.

Tom Merry's face was darkly clouded as he rejoined his chums in the quadrangle. Manners and Lowther were waiting for him with the bicycles.

"Well, what has his nibs got to say?" asked Monty Lowther, thus disrespectfully alluding to the reverend Head of St. Jim's.

Tom Merry shrugged his shoulders.

"He's heard the yarn, and he more than half believes it," he replied. "He's giving me a chance because I've got a good character, that's all, otherwise, I should be sacked without further trouble."

Lowther whistled.

"That's jolly serious, Tommy! I wish we could get to the bottom of it!"

Tom Merry did not reply. He mounted his bicycle, and the Terrible Three pedalled away from St. Jim's in the bright spring sunshine. They were silent as they rode on under the green trees, between leafy hedges. It was a glorious spring afternoon, and under any other circumstances the chums of the Shell would have enjoyed their spin immensely. But they were not in a mood for enjoyment now. The scandal in the school was weighing too heavily upon their spirits.

CHAPTER 18.

A Surprise for Cousin Ethel.

COUSIN ETHEL stepped from the train at Rylcombe Station.

The girl's face was very bright and cheerful, and looked very charming under her pretty hat.

If Study No. 6 had known that Ethel was coming by train, and by what train, there would have been an escort waiting for her at the station. But they had not known, and so there were no St. Jim's juniors on the platform. Cousin Ethel left the station, and glanced round the quaint old High Street. The ancient hack was waiting outside the station; but Cousin Ethel was young and strong, and a good walker. She started to walk to the school.

Outside Mother Murphy's tuckshop three youths in mortar-board caps saluted Miss Cleveland with great respect. They were Gordon Gay, and Frank Monk, and Wootton major, of Rylcombe Grammar School. Cousin Ethel gave them a bright smile and a nod and walked on. The girl left the old village High Street, and turned into the leafy lane that led to St. Jim's.

Just outside the village where the lane began stood the Green Man Inn. On the gate of the side entrance, a junior in Etons and a silk hat was sitting. He glanced at Cousin Ethel as she passed, evidently attracted by the bright face and graceful looks of D'Arcy's cousin. Cousin Ethel caught sight of him, and stopped with a smile.

She had recognised Tom Merry.

The girl was a little surprised that he did not raise his hat. Tom Merry of St. Jim's, though he was not so punctilious as D'Arcy of the Fourth was never known to neglect any act of politeness or good manners. The boy on the gate stared at Cousin Ethel as she stopped, with a smile on her face.

"Good-afternoon!" said Cousin Ethel cheerfully.

The junior stared harder.

"Good-afternoon!" he replied.

Ethel looked at him rather quickly. His voice was pleasant enough, but it did not have the tone in it she was accustomed to in Tom Merry's voice.

"Did you know I was coming?" asked Ethel.

The boy shook his head.

"I can't say I did," he replied; "but I'm jolly glad to see you, all the same. Which way are you going?"

"To the school, of course!" said Ethel, in surprise.

"Oh, to the school! May I have the pleasure of walking with you?"

"Why, of course, if you like!"

"Oh, good!"

The junior slipped off the gate, and fell in beside Cousin Ethel as she resumed her way. The girl was a little surprised. There was something very curious about him, as she could not help thinking. Why had he not saluted her, and why had he stared at her as if she was a stranger? It was some time since she had visited Mrs. Holmes at St. Jim's; but it was hardly long enough for so old a friend as Tom Merry to have forgotten her.

"Staying down here?" he asked.

"Why, yes," said Ethel.

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"Mrs. Holmes?"

"The Head's wife," said Ethel.

"Oh, yes, the Head of St. Jim's; I know! If you're staying down here for a few days, I suppose I shall see you again?" said the boy.

"Of course you will!" said Ethel.

"Oh, good!" said the junior, though he looked a little puzzled. "I shall be down here a few days longer myself."

Ethel glanced at him.

"Are you going away then?" she asked.

"Yes, next week."

"You are leaving school?"

"I've left."

"Left!" said Ethel, in surprise.

He nodded.

"Yes. There was trouble with the headmaster, and I was hoofed out," he said, laughing. "I cleared out—order of the boot, you know."

Ethel looked surprised and shocked.

"I am very sorry," she said.

"Oh, it's nothing! I was sick of the place, anyway!" he said. "I'm going to Eton now—at least, I hope so."

"Why don't you go home, if you have left school?" asked Ethel.

He laughed.

"I've been home, and a jolly row I got into over being sacked," he said. "You should have seen them—regular family funeral-party. I couldn't stand it. I cleared out on my own to the Green Man, and I'm not going back till they've come round."

"You are staying at the Green Man?" exclaimed Ethel.

"Yes."

"Isn't it a very disreputable place?"

"I dare say. It suits me."

Ethel walked on in silence. She could not understand; indeed, her brain seemed to be in a whirl. Was this the Tom Merry she had known—this fellow who talked so lightly of having been compelled to leave school, evidently for some disgraceful conduct, and who was staying at the most disreputable place in that part of the county? She could guess the kind of time a boy would have at a place like the Green Man. She was shocked and hurt.

"I am very, very sorry," she said, breaking the silence at last.

He looked at her curiously.

"Nothing to be sorry about, that I can see," he remarked. "I'm having the time of my life, as a matter of fact. But I say, it's awfully jolly meeting you! I was getting rather sick for somebody to talk to. Jolliffe and old Griggs are all right for a game of nap or euchre, but they talk nothing but horses all the time, and a chap gets fed up—you see?"

"I can quite see that," said Ethel.

"Jolly lucky meeting you!" said the junior. "I don't see why we shouldn't be good friends—eh?"

"I hope we shall always be friends," said Ethel; "but I am very sorry that you are in disgrace. Couldn't you tell the Head you're sorry, and ask him to give you another chance? I'm sure he would."

He chuckled.

"Not much chance of that. You see, I was squiffy in school."

"You were—what?"

"Squiffy—tipsy, you know!"

Ethel made an involuntary gesture of disgust.

"So I had to leave," he explained. "But I wasn't sorry—I'm having a good time now. I say, we can have some good times, if you'll come out and meet me. I suppose you'll be able to get out? Do you ride?"

"Yes," said Ethel.

"We can get some horses out from the livery-stables here, then," said the boy. "I've got plenty of money."

"Indeed!"

"And there's a theatre over at Wayland," said the junior. "They've got a musical play there now; and I've been going to see it. Ripping thing, they say—regular scorchers!"

Ethel flushed.

"I should not care to see it!" she said.

"Oh, what rot!" said the junior. "Look here, if they don't allow you to get out in the evening, it could be worked."

"I should be allowed to go out if I wanted to; but I shouldn't want to!" said Ethel.

He grinned.

"Oh, that's all spoof, you know. Look here, you could get out quietly, and I'd meet you at the corner of the place, with a cab, and we could bowl over to Wayland in next to no time. What do you say?"

"I should certainly not do anything of the sort!"

He stared at her.

"Why not?" he demanded.

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"It would not be right, for one thing; and I don't want to, for another!"

"Wouldn't be right!" he repeated. "But you're not so particular as all that, I suppose!"

Ethel's face crimsoned.

"I don't understand you!" she said. "You—you had better not come with me any further!"

"What bosh! I suppose you didn't speak to me simply for a five minutes walk! Look here, you'd better come. I'll fix it for to-night, and get the tickets—I'll telephone from the Green Man. I'll have the cab ready—"

"I shall not come!"

Ethel quickened her pace. She would never have imagined, before that day, that she would have been shocked and disgusted with Tom Merry, and anxious to get away from his society. But it was certainly the case now. She did not understand what had happened to him; but he had evidently changed—and very much for the worse. She had known something of Lumley-Lumley, the outsider of St. Jim's, in his bad old days; but he had never been anything like this! The boy walking beside her was a blackguard of the first water; and she realised it with dismay and disgust. What had come over him to make him like this?

He quickened his pace to keep level, as she hurried on. He had evidently no intention of letting her leave him.

"Don't hurry!" he said.

"I must hurry!"

"Do you want to get away from me?" he demanded.

"Yes!" said the girl, with direct frankness. "I do!"

"Then what did you speak to me for?" he demanded.

"I did not know—what you were like!" Ethel almost gasped. "I—I never thought—you were like this! It is a surprise to me!"

He laughed.

"Oh, don't come the high and mighty!" he said. "I know girls, you know—precious few things I don't know, I can tell you. I'm up to most that's going on. Look here, when shall I see you again?"

"You will not see me again at all!"

"Would you like me to come up to the school?"

"No!"

"Then you'll see me outside?"

"No!"

The smile left his face. He looked angry and puzzled.

"Blessed if I can make you out," he said. "Don't hurry; the school's in sight when you turn the next corner, and I don't want you to leave me yet. You look a jolly girl, and there's no reason I can see why we shouldn't have a good time. And dash it all, you spoke to me first; you can't get out of that!"

Ethel made no reply; she hurried on, almost running now, only anxious to get away from him. She was shocked, puzzled, almost terrified. He scowled angrily, and ran after her, and caught her by the arm, and forced her to stop. Ethel panted.

"Look here, what does this game mean?" he demanded. "You spoke to me, and led me on, and now you're pretending to come the goody-goody bizney! I don't understand it, and I don't like it. See?"

"Let me go!"

"Oh, rats!" he said, coolly. He glanced round; the country lane was quite solitary, save for themselves, and the bunch of trees at the corner of the bend in the lane, hid St. Jim's from sight. "I'm not going to have my walk for nothing, to be thrown over like this at the end of it. You can't expect it!"

"Let me go!" Ethel panted.

He tightened his grasp upon her wrist.

"You needn't meet me again if you don't want to!" he said. "I'm not specially keen on it. But you're not going to play me for a fool like this. I think it's like your cheek, if you want to know my opinion. Now, you're going to drop the goody-goody game, and kiss me for good-bye. See?"

"You—you coward!" gasped Ethel.

"Well, you shouldn't have spoken to me in the first place, if you want to know my opinion. Now, you're going to drop them—"

He tightened his grasp again, and grinned into her startled, frightened face. There was an aroma of spirits and tobacco upon his breath, and the girl made a movement of disgusted repugnance. His eyes glittered with anger.

"Let me go, you coward!" cried Ethel.

"Stuff! Look here—"

There was a ring of bicycle bells round the corner of the road. It was like music to the ears of the frightened girl. She did not know who was coming, but whoever it was, he was coming in the nick of time.

"Help!" cried Ethel.

"Oh, cheese it!" growled the junior. "Look here—"

"Help!"

Three cyclists came whizzing into sight round the bend in the lane.

"Hallo!"

"Cousin Ethel!"

Three lads leaped down, letting the cycles go spinning where they would. Three pairs of hands grasped the boy who was holding Ethel's wrist; and he was wrenched away from her, and hurled into the ditch beside the road in the twinkling of an eye. Ethel, with a gasp of relief, turned to her rescuers—and then she staggered—astounded! For she recognised them—Monty Lowther, Manners, and—Tom Merry!

CHAPTER 19.

The Clearing-Up of the Mystery.

"TOM MERRY!"

Cousin Ethel cried out the name in amazement.

"Tom Merry!"

The Shell fellow looked at her in surprise.

"Yes, here I am!" he said.

"Tom Merry!"

"Yes. Jolly glad we came along just then," said Tom Merry.

"Was that cad annoying you?"

"Oh!" panted Ethel. "I—I have been mistaken, then! I am so glad! Tom Merry! It—it is really you! It seems like a dream! Tom Merry!"

"You've been scared!" said Tom Merry, wondering at the girl's strange agitation. "By Jove! I'll make that cad suffer for it! You two fellows take Ethel away, while I look after that beast!"

"Right—ho!" said Manners.

"Give him one for me!" said Monty Lowther.

The boy in the ditch was scrambling out, his face dark with rage. Fortunately for him, it had not been full of water. But there was enough water and mud in it to make him a sorry-looking object. His boots were caked with mud, and his trousers thick with it, and he was splashed all over.

"Don't go!" exclaimed Ethel. "Tom Merry! I—I—Look at that boy! Look at him!"

Tom Merry, surprised, fixed his eyes upon the boy. He started as he looked at him. The fellow's face seemed familiar; though Tom Merry did not know where he had seen it before. The clear-cut, handsome features—the blue eyes and curly hair—he knew them well!

"Great Scott!" shouted Monty Lowther, as he looked at the junior's face. "Great Christopher Columbus and Aunt Jemima! Look at him, Manners!"

"Oh, my hat!" said Manners, with a whistle. "That's the giddy mystery, is it?"

"I—I seem to know him!" said Tom Merry. "I've seen his chivvy before, somewhere—"

"In the looking-glass!" chuckled Lowther.

"What!"

"He's your giddy double!"

"My—my double!" gasped Tom Merry.

"Yes. Blessed if I should know one from the other, only your face is healthier to look at," said Manners. "That rotter looks as if he's had a good many late nights!"

"I—I thought it was you, Tom Merry, and spoke to him outside Rylcombe!" panted Cousin Ethel. "I—I never dreamed it was somebody else, though he spoke as you would never have spoken to me. I—I—"

Tom Merry stepped closer to the stranger. He scanned the scowling face with keen eyes. There was no doubt about it; the boy was Tom Merry's living image. No wonder his features had appeared familiar to the Shell fellow. It was in the looking-glass, as Lowther had said, that Tom Merry had seen that face before.

"Might be a giddy twin!" said Lowther. "Blessed if I knew you had any twins lying about loose, Tom Merry."

"I haven't, that I know of," said Tom. "The chap certainly looks like me enough to be my brother, but I haven't any brothers."

"Well, you couldn't have had one and forgotten it, I suppose!" grinned Manners. "But that chap might be your twin!"

"I—I am so glad it wasn't you, Tom!" faltered Ethel. "I was surprised when he spoke as did—I could not understand it—"

Tom Merry's brow darkened.

"The rotter has insulted you!" he said. "Go on with Manners and Lowther—"

"No! No! I spoke to him first!" said Ethel, crimsoning. "Of course, I took him for you; but he did not know that; so—so he misunderstood, I suppose!"

"Still, he was a cad to—"

"Pile it on," said the junior, with a disagreeable grin. "If the young lady spoke to me by mistake, I'm willing to

apologise; but naturally, I thought she wanted me, or she wouldn't have spoken to a stranger. That's all!"

"You are a rotten worm!" said Tom Merry.

"Thanks!"

"What's your name?" demanded Tom Merry. "You've been taken for me before; by several fellows who've seen you playing the rotten blackguard, and I've got into trouble over it. Who are you?"

The junior chuckled.

"Well, I didn't know that!" he said. "My name's Reggie Clavering, if you want to know. And you can go and eat coke!"

The junior swung away. Monty Lowther grasped him by the shoulder and swung him back.

"Hands off!" said Clavering angrily.

"We're not done with you yet!" grinned Lowther.

Ethel made a gesture of appeal.

"Lowther—don't—"

"He ought to be thrashed!" said Manners.

"No! No—"

"Well, let him go, then!" said Tom Merry. "The cad isn't worth licking!"

"Hold on!" said Lowther. "It's explained now about Figgins and Kerr and Wynn and Gussy making that mistake. But when we tell the yarn at St. Jim's, there will be a good many fellows jib at it—Levison & Co., you know, and some more. We're going to prove it!"

"But—how—"

"By taking this fellow to St. Jim's with us, and showing him to the fellows!" said Monty Lowther.

"My hat! That's a jolly good idea!" exclaimed Manners.

"I'm jolly well not coming with you!" growled Clavering.

"Hands off!"

Lowther smiled sweetly.

"You can walk, or you can be carried," he said. "I don't want the trouble of carrying you, and if I have to do it, I shan't handle you gently. Tommy, my son, take Cousin Ethel on to the school, and we'll follow with our giddy friend who has the cheek to go about with the same set of features as a pal of ours. If he doesn't come quietly, I shall alter his features so much that there won't be any chance of a mistake again."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Right—ho!" he said.

And Tom Merry walked on with Cousin Ethel. Manners picked up the bicycles, and wheeled them; and Monty Lowther, with an iron grip on the stranger's arm, forced him to walk towards the school. Clavering resisted fiercely.

"I'm not coming, I tell you!" he shouted.

"Shove those bikes against a tree, Manners; you can fetch them in afterwards!" said Monty Lowther. "Lend me a hand now with this rotter!"

"Certainly!" said Manners.

Clavering struggled savagely; but he was swung off his feet. Manners took his shoulders, and Lowther his legs, and he was carried bodily in the direction of the school. And as he still resisted, he was bumped down once or twice upon the hard road. Then he left off resisting, and resigned himself to his fate.

Tom Merry and Cousin Ethel entered the gateway of St. Jim's.

Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn were waiting there. Figgins, in spite of his black eye, did not mean to miss seeing Cousin Ethel, and Kerr and Wynn kept him company. The New House Co. raised their caps at once; and looked grimly enough at Tom Merry. But Tom Merry's face was bright and friendly now.

"It's all right, Figgy!" he exclaimed.

"What?" said Figgins, as he shook hands with Cousin Ethel. "So glad to see you again, Ethel! What a jolly long time since you've been down here!"

"Hallo!" shouted Kerr. "What's that?"

Lowther and Manners came in with their burden.

Figgins & Co. stared at Clavering blankly.

"Tom Merry's double!" said Lowther, blandly. "The chap you fellows met in the lane the other evening, and took for Tom Merry!"

"Great Scott!"

"Let me go!" howled Clavering.

"Not just yet, my pippin," said Lowther. "You're on view, you know. Every chap at St. Jim's has got to see you before you're allowed to go loose again. Bring him in, Manners."

"What—ho?" said Manners.

Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn stared blankly at the junior who so strangely resembled the captain of the Shell. They understood now. It was only too clear that Tom Merry had a double—and this was the fellow; and the New House chums understood the mistake they had made.

"I—I say, I'm awfully sorry, Tom Merry!" Figgins

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faltered. "I—I suppose that was the fellow we found squiffy in the lane—"

"And helped over the stile," said Kerr.

"We thought it was you, Tom Merry," said Fatty Wynn. "Blessed if I'd have dreamed there could be two fellows so like one another! I'm sorry!"

Tom Merry smiled.

"It's all right," he said. "I'm jolly glad it's cleared up, that's all! My hat! They're getting a crowd round now!"

Manners and Lowther had stopped before the School House with their victim.

Fellows were gathering round from all quarters to look at him, and to demand to know what it all meant.

The chums of Study No. 6 had seen Ethel from their study window, and they were coming out to meet her in the quad, when they spotted Clavering.

They stared at him blankly.

"Bai Jove!" said D'Arcy. "What are you holding Tom Mewwy like that for, you fellows?"

"Tom Merry's over there with Cousin Ethel and Figgins!" said Lowther.

"What!"

"Gweat Scott!"

"My only hat!" yelled Blake. "Then he's got a double, and this is the giddy double! Who'd have thought it!"

"Yaas, wathah," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, his gaze going from Clavering to Tom Merry, and then back again to Clavering, in helpless amazement. "Bai Jove! This must be the fellow I saw outside the Gween Man—and I took him for Tom Mewwy! Tom Mewwy, deah boy, I beg to offer my most sincere apologies!"

"Accepted!" said Tom Merry, laughing.

"I'm fwiughtfully sowwy I made such a mistake, you know. Now I see you togethah, of course I should know you apart," said D'Arcy. "But the wesemblance is weally most surprisin'. It is weally wathah weckless of you to have a double, you know!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Come and look at him, Levison!" shouted Lowther. "And you, Crooke, and Gore and Mellish! Bring those rotters over here; they're not going to have any excuse for pretending they don't believe it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And Levison & Co. were pushed forward by the juniors, and forced to take a close survey of the scowling Clavering, and to admit that he was indeed Tom Merry's double. The news had spread far and wide by this time, and pretty nearly all St. Jim's had collected upon the spot. There were exclamations of amazement on all sides, and of delight and relief from Tom Merry's friends. Kildare of the Sixth came off the cricket-field to see the stranger, and the roar of voices brought the Head of St. Jim's to his study window, and Mr. Ralston and most of the other masters out into the quadrangle.

"Bless my soul! What is the cause of this extraordinary disturbance?" exclaimed Dr. Holmes, as he leaned out of the window and looked over the surging crowd in the quad.

"Show him to the Head!" shouted Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Clavering was dragged forward under the Head's window.

"Bless my soul! Tom Merry—"

"It isn't Tom Merry, sir—here's Tom Merry!" called out Figgins.

"Bless my soul!" repeated the amazed Head.

"It's the chap who's been taken for Tom Merry, sir!" Monty Lowther explained. "Three silly duffers took him for Tom Merry on Monday evening—"

"Look here—" began Kerr.

"And another silly ass took him for Tom Merry yesterday, sir!"

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"So we've brought him here to show all the fellows, sir, to show them what asses they've been!" said Monty Lowther. The Head coughed, and then smiled.

"A very good idea, Lowther. Indeed, the resemblance is most remarkable—and I think I should have been deceived myself. Is this boy a relation of Merry's?"

"Not that we know of, sir. His name's Clavering."

The Head fixed his eyes upon the sullen-looking junior.

"Clavering!" he said. "Your resemblance to a boy belonging to this school has caused a most unhappy mistake to be made. But it would not have mattered, if you had been a decent and properly-behaved lad, like the boy whom you resemble outwardly. But your disgraceful and degraded conduct caused a great amount of trouble to Tom Merry; and, indeed, brought him within danger of being expelled from the school. This terrible injury which you have so nearly inflicted upon a stranger should be a warning to you. I trust you will reflect upon it, and mend your ways! As for you, Merry, you are of course cleared from every shred of suspicion; and I hope your schoolfellows who have misjudged you will express their regret."

"Yaas, wathah, sir!"

"We've done that, sir!" shouted Figgins.

"Bravo, Tom Merry!"

"Let that boy go!" said the Head. "My lads, I am very glad that this matter has been cleared up so satisfactorily."

And Dr. Holmes, looking very reprieved, turned back into his study.

The juniors released Clavering. That unpopular youth made his way out of the school gates, and disappeared. He was not seen in Rylcombe or near St. Jim's again. In spite of the "good time," which according to his own words, he was having at the delectable hostelry of the Green Man, he had apparently had enough of the neighbourhood of St. Jim's. He left—probably going back to his home—but wherever he went, the chums of St. Jim's were glad enough that he had gone.

Tom Merry was surrounded by a cheering crowd after his double had slunk away.

Tom's eyes were very bright, and his face very cheerful, as he walked into the School House with Cousin Ethel, surrounded by his friends.

Arthur Augustus slipped his arm through Figgins's.

"That eye of yours looks awfully wotten, Figgy," he remarked. "But I suppose Cousin Ethel has seen it now, so it doesn't matter if she sees it again—"

"What-ho!" said Figgins, heartily.

And the New House Co. gladly came to tea in Study No. 6—Cousin Ethel being the distinguished guest. And the Terrible Three came too; all the clouds had rolled away now, and they were on the best of terms with Blake & Co.

And when Arthur Augustus rose to propose the health of Cousin Ethel, there was great enthusiasm.

"Ladies, gentlemen, and chaps generally," said D'Arcy. "I trust you will excuse me for alludin' to some late unpleasant happenin' in this coll. I wish to draw attention to the fact that the clearwin' up of the mystewy is due to Cousin Ethel."

"It was the luckiest mistake I ever made, in taking that boy for Tom Merry," said Cousin Ethel, laughing.

"To wesume," said D'Arcy. "I wegard Cousin Ethel as havin' done what the fellows here failed to do, and as havin' established the fact that women are the intellectual equals of men; and therefore that Cousin Ethel is entitled to a vote if she wants' one. I will not twouble you with a long speech—"

"Hear, hear!"

"I therefore pwopose the health of Cousin Ethel, and the health of our esteemed friend Tom Merry, who has been under a cloud, but has now wolved by—I mean the cloud has wolved by—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the toast was drunk with enthusiasm.

THE END.

(Another splendid, extra long, complete tale of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's next Wednesday, entitled "THE SCHOOLBOY INFORMER," By Martin Clifford. Order your copy of "The Gem" Library, in advance. Price One Penny.)



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By R. S. WARREN BELL.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED.

Sir William Percival Travers, Bart.—to give him his full title—is a slight, fair lad of twelve when he is first sent to "Fighting Greyhouse" by his guardian. His Form-fellows in the Lower Fourth are considerably older than "Sir Billy," as the youngster is soon nicknamed, and he has to put up with a good deal of bullying. His great hero is Wardour, the captain of the school.

One day a wealthy Greyhouse fellow named FitzClarence Dewberry finds that his valuable gold watch has been stolen, and some time later notices the identical watch in the window of a Belsart jeweller's shop. Dewberry elicits from the jeweller's assistant the astounding information that the watch was sold to the shop by a "gentleman from Greyhouse, name of Wardour." Wardour, of course, contemptuously denies the charge, but the jeweller's assistant sticks to his story. Thus the matter rests when one day, Sir Billy runs into the changing-room to fetch a sweater for Hallam, a monitor, and a friend of Wardour's and finds Mike, the odd-job boy, calmly rifling the pockets of Hallam's coat!

Read on from here.

The Chase.

Mike was an owl-like person, wiry as a cat, and strengthened by much hard work.

He and Sir Billy eyed one another for a moment, and then Sir Billy sprang forward to clutch him. Mike put out his foot, and Sir Billy stumbled over it. Before he could get up, Mike was out of the room like a flash of lightning, and speeding across the playground. Sir Billy scrambled to his feet and gave chase, shouting for all he was worth, and, as luck had it, who should come bolting through the quad, but Parsnip, sent from the field by Hallam to hurry Sir Billy up.

"Here, where's that sweater, kid?" demanded Parsnip roughly.

"Come on! Catch him!" yelled Billy, pointing wildly at the retreating Mike. "He's the thief—he—"

Parsonip tumbled to the situation with wonderful smartness (for him), and joined in the hunt. Mike dashed through the door leading to the main corridor, down this, out on to the broad stretch of gravel which fronted the school, cut down the drive, and jumped the hedge on the opposite side of the high-road.

This was out of bounds for Billy and Parsnip, but what recked they of such things? A few moments, and they were over the hedge, too, following hard on Mike, who was pelting across country like a hare, evidently heading for Meadowdene Common, a fine open sweep of moorland two miles away.

The chums began to flag long before Mike did, and Parsnip was puffing piteously.

However, they pegged away, and managed to keep the fugitive in view until he reached the common, when he became a speck, and finally disappeared in the distance.

The chums were not to be beaten, however, and kept on his tracks. Suddenly Billy got an idea, and pulled up sharp to give it utterance.

"I'll bet he hides in the ruins?"

He referred to Meadowdene Castle, a decayed collection of walls, turrets, and hollow-tooth-like dungeons. What was left of this battered old place reared its hoary head skywards on the extreme edge of the moor. The two boys laboured on, and reached the spot just as the afternoon was beginning to fade into evening. They walked through the ruins, and peered round the ivy-clothed buttresses, but nothing did they see of Mike.

"Pooh! He's probably miles away from here," said Parsnip impatiently; "and, I say—what'll Hallam do to you for not bringing his sweater?"

They had stopped by what was once the Keep. Near by, a huge, arch-shaped mass of masonry frowned upon them.

"Hush!" exclaimed Billy. "What's that?"

Parsonip pricked up his ears.

"Someone coming up the steps. Here, let's hide among the ivy and watch him."

The two quickly stowed themselves away, and presently, with loud-beating hearts, observed the very object of their pursuit issue from the staircase of the Keep and creep along the arch.

The chums kept perfectly still, hardly venturing, indeed, to breathe. The boot-boy's acute senses told him that some foe was in his vicinity. His ferret-like eyes shot a glance of keen suspicion at the mass of ivy at the foot of the castle wall, and just caught the white glint of Parsnip's collar.

That was enough for the thief. Quick as thought he was skimming for dear life up the pillar again. Directly the two boys observed this change in Mike's tactics, they rushed from their place of concealment, and began to swarm up the arch after him. As chance had it, Billy got off a foot or two in front of his chum, and began the ascent of the pillar first. Without a backward glance he writhed along the arch. Light as he was, the structure trembled beneath his weight.

Parsonip was heavier than either the fugitive or Billy, and not a quarter so active as either of them. Billy climbed on, crossed the summit of the arch—the rottenest and most perilous portion—quite safely, and proceeded to pursue Mike.

He was close on his quarry when he heard a cry and a crash; there was a thunder of masonry meeting the turf, and then a great cloud of dust near ten centuries old.

The fugitive stopped and looked round.

The summit of the crumbling arch had given way, and Parsnip had only saved himself from certain death by desperately clutching a clump of ivy. He was thus suspended in mid air, unable to raise himself or grip any part of the stone-work with his feet. There he hung, the height of a high house from the ground, swaying backwards and forwards, his life depending on the strength of the roots to which he was clinging.

Billy took in all the details at a glance, as people do when placed in such predicaments. Parsnip was hanging on that side of the chasm which adhered to the castle wall. In order to assist him, then, Billy saw that he must reach that side, too, and at once. He must jump the yawning gap which separated them.

"Yah," yelled Mike, who had paused to watch events; "yer daren't!"

(Continued on page iv. of cover, where the Free Correspondence Exchange will also be found this week.)

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NEXT
WEDNESDAY:

"THE SCHOOLBOY INFORMER!" By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

Order Early.

OUR SPECIAL WEEKLY FEATURE



For Next Wednesday.

"THE SCHOOLBOY INFORMER!"

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

Our next splendid, complete tale of Tom Merry & Co., entitled as above, will be an extra-long one again, as well as being of special interest to all keen followers of the fortunes of the famous juniors of St. Jim's. Jack Blake discovers his cousin, Bob Collins, masquerading at the Grammar School under another name, and thus becomes burdened with a secret which causes no little dissension among the junior Cos. Owing to the despicable behaviour of

"THE SCHOOLBOY INFORMER!"

—whose identity will no doubt be guessed immediately by my readers—Bob Collins's secret comes out at last, and the trouble between the chums come to an end.

OUR PRIZE COMPETITION.

There is one little point I want to refer to in connection with the Storyette Competition running in our Weekly Prize Page. A great many excellent jokes have already reached me from readers, and I am having a hard task to pick out the best ones for publication in the Prize Page. Some of the competitors, however, have evidently overlooked the fact that I want storyettes sent in ON POSTCARDS, as is plainly stated in the conditions which appear at the foot of the Prize Page. This is an essential feature of the Competition, and no joke will be considered unless sent in on a postcard, and accompanied, of course, by the sender's full name and address.

THE SENDER OF EVERY JOKE APPEARING ON
 THE PRIZE PAGE WILL RECEIVE A
 CASH PRIZE.

FROM A WINNIPEG READER.

The following letter from one of my numerous Canadian readers, provides genuine and valuable testimony as to the absolute accuracy of the articles which appear in the "Gem" Library. Those of my readers who are themselves familiar—with the familiarity of experience—with the subjects under discussion, are in a position to judge accurately whether the articles are written by someone who knows what he is talking about or not. Unfortunately, as my Canadian correspondent suggests, with the articles that appear in some periodicals, it is a case of "not"; but with the "Gem" Library, it is, and always has been, different, and I admit I am pleased to find that the fact is appreciated in the right quarters. This is my Canadian chum's letter in full:

"Winnipeg.

"Dear Editor,—I am enclosing two coupons cut from this week's companion papers, the "Gem" and the "Magnet." As you will see, I am a regular reader of both papers, and I must say that the stories in them are just O.K. There is an article in No. 263 of the "Gem" with reference to immigration to Canada, and I would like to remark here that it is one of the best articles I have read in any Old Country paper on Canada, because it is true. You know, we out here are often highly amused at the accounts we read in the Old Country papers about the life in Canada, written, no doubt, in a great many cases, by enthusiastic reporters, or correspondents possessed of elastic imaginations. For instance, an article appeared in one of the Old Country papers some time ago about policemen of the world, and in

that article the writer, who was supposed to have visited the places he wrote about, described the Winnipeg police force as wearing straw hats, and going round in their shirt sleeves in the summer, while they wore fur hats and fur coats in the winter. His description of them in winter was correct, but in the summer they dress exactly like the Old Country policemen, except that they wear white helmets. This is only one of the many instances where things are exaggerated in Old Country papers. I think it is a great pity that people who don't know what they are writing about should deceive like that. Now I will close by asking you to enter my name in your correspondence list.

"Yours truly,

"GEORGE M."

Thanks, George M.! I will see that your request for a correspondent is inserted in the Free Exchange in its proper turn.

HOW TO BECOME A LIGHTHOUSE-KEEPER.

Should you wish to become a lighthouse-keeper you must be over 19 and under 23, and must be unmarried. You must also have a good report and character from your employer, and from your former schoolmaster if possible. Should you be a mechanic, carpenter, or a fitter, you will find it much easier to obtain the required position. When you first join you are what is known as a supernumerary, and will receive 2s. 6d. a day for your services. As soon as you have satisfactorily served as a "super" you will be promoted to an assistant lighthouse-keeper, when in addition to your uniform you will be given coat, light, and three shillings a day. In time you will rise to principal keeper, at a wage of 4s. 2d. a day.

Now, just a few words about the life in a lighthouse. It is a common belief that, beyond an occasional piece of work, keepers are at liberty to sit down and idle away the hours by playing chess or cards. This is an entirely mistaken idea, for a constant round of regular work must be faced. The rooms in the lighthouse must be cleaned, the lights "trimmed," and the food cooked; and in many lighthouses the lights have to be constantly superintended during the night.

The life is, on the whole, a very monotonous one, the lighthouseman seldom seeing anyone but the other "lightsman," and only going back to civilisation occasionally. Each man, however, is entitled to a certain number of weeks ashore every year.

Most young fellows would probably prefer to go on a lightship, and not in a lighthouse, for on the ship there are a number of men to talk to, and the life is much more tolerable.

To become a member of a "lighter" crew you must be a holder of an A.B. certificate, and be under 30 years of age.

Pay starts at 4s. 1d. a day, and as master of the vessel you obtain 6s. 1d. a day. All application for posts either on lighthouses or lightships should be made to the Secretary of the Trinity House, Tower Hill, London, E.C.

READER'S NOTE.

Gordon M. Grindlay, Post Office, Box 60, Beaconsfield, South Africa, would like to hear again from his chum, Edward Baynon, who some two or three years ago left Kimberley, S.A., for Swansea, Wales.

THE EDITOR.