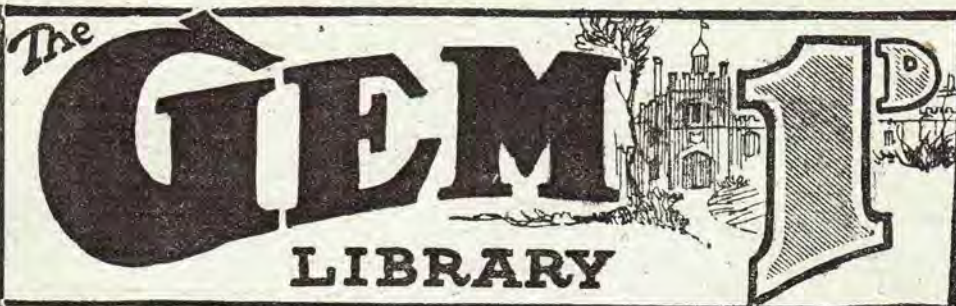


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calmly. "This idea of mine—" He was drumming on the table again as he spoke—tap-TAP-tap—tap—tap—"is simply ripping. It will take the shine out of the New House, for one thing—and it will give study No. 6 the giddy kybosh. Listen to me—"

"It's simply syncopation," said Manners, looking up from the fire and the toast. Manners was really musical, and what he didn't know about minims and demi-semi-quavers wasn't worth knowing. "You see—"

"My idea is this—" resumed Monty Lowther. Tap-TAP-tap—tap—tap!

"And my idea is this!" said Tom Merry sulphurously. "If you don't shut up, I'll lam you with a cricket-stump!"

"I've been thinking it out for quite a long time," said Lowther, with undiminished calmness. "Ragtime is the thing nowadays. Everybody's doing it! I rag, thou raggest, he rags—nous raggons, vous raggez—"

"Shurrup!"

"Therefore," pursued Lowther, keeping a wary eye, however, upon his exasperated study-leader. "Therefore, I've thought of a ripping scheme—"

Biff!

There was a cushion on Tom Merry's chair behind him. To grasp it, and hurl it at Monty Lowther, was, as the novelists say, the work of a moment. It caught Monty Lowther fairly on the chin, violently interrupting his explanation of his ripping scheme.

Bump!

Lowther sat down on the study carpet. A cloud of dust rose from the study carpet, and a wild howl from Monty Lowther.

"Yaroooh! Oh, you ass!"

"Now shurrup!" said Tom Merry.

Whiz!

The cushion came back unexpectedly. It did not hit Tom Merry, but it caught the inkpot, and hurled it over the sheet of impot, paper stretched before the labouring junior, and there was a yell of wrath from Tom Merry. His repetition of the adventures of the pious Aeneas had disappeared under a flood of ink. Those lines would never be seen by Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell—indeed, they would never again be seen by mortal eye.

"You frabjous ass!" roared Tom Merry. "Look what you've done!"

"Ha, ha! Sorry! I meant it for you! Ha, ha!"

"You ass—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry jumped up. He grasped the inky sheet in his hand and rushed at his study-mate. The inky imposition would not do for Mr. Linton, but it did very well for Monty Lowther. Tom Merry laid a violent grasp upon his study-mate, and dabbed the inky sheet upon his features, and Monty Lowther was transformed with startling suddenness into a Christy minstrel.

"Ow!" gasped Lowther. "Stoppit! Yah! Oh! Groo!"

But Tom Merry did not stop it. He had his chum's head in chancery, and he rubbed the inky sheet over his face till it was rubbed into pieces. Monty Lowther roared and struggled.

"There!" gasped Tom Merry, as he released his chum. "Now you can go and wash, and give us a rest from your blessed ragtime for a bit."

"Groooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry, in his turn. Monty Lowther's face was crimson with rage, where it wasn't black with ink, and the mixture was very striking.

"You—you—you dummy!" grasped Lowther. "You—you—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Peace, my infants, peace!" said Manners soothingly, interposing as Lowther rushed at his leader. "Peace, my children!"

"I'll—I'll slaughter him!" roared Lowther.

"You can do anything you like excepting buzz ragtime!" said Tom Merry affably.

"I'll—I'll—"

"Go, and get a wash!" suggested Manners. "Tea's ready!"

And Monty Lowther stamped out of the study, and slammed the door.

"My blessed impot's spoiled!" growled Tom Merry. "And I had thirty done. I sha'n't be able to take it in before tea now, and Linton will make it a hundred. I'm fed up to the chin with ragtime!"

"Never mind—tea's ready! If you're not going to do lines, lay the table," said the practical Manners.

Tom Merry grunted, and laid the table. Tea was made, and there was a fragrant pile of toast ready when Lowther came back, washed and white again. He kicked the door open, and even then he could not help kicking in ragtime. Kick-KICK-kick—kick-kick!

Then he came in.

"Tea's ready!" said Tom Merry cheerfully. "You can help me do my lines after tea!"

"Rats!" said Lowther.

But under the combined influence of tea and toast his good-humour returned.

"I'll tell you my ripping idea, if you like," he said amiably.

Tom Merry held up a warning finger.

"Is it anything to do with ragtime?"

"Of course it is, fathead!"

"Then you can keep it a dead secret. We're fed up—fed up to the neck. After tea you can go and tell Blake and D'Arcy in Study No. 6."

"Look here! You know there's a regatta at Abbotsford on Saturday—"

"Or you can take it over to the New House, and spring it on Figgins & Co."

"I tell you—"

"Don't!"

Monty Lowther glared and consumed tea and toast. When tea was finished, he tapped idly on his cup with his spoon.

Tap-TAP-tap! Tap-tap!

"Cheese it!" shouted Tom Merry. "There you go again!"

"Rats!" said Lowther. "Look here, my idea is simply stunning. Now that ragtime is all the rage—"

"There'll be a rage here, if you don't shut up!"

"I was thinking—"

"Rats!"

"What price a ragtime band, performing to the crowd at Abbotsford Regatta—"

"Bosh!"

"We three could do it—and we might let Blake in—and Herries—"

"Piffle!"

"It would be a regular scream!" said Lowther earnestly.

"It would put the lid on. Figgins & Co. have never—"

thought of anything of the sort—

"Too much sense!" said Tom Merry.

"Look here," roared Lowther. "Are you going to listen to me, you silly chumps, or are you not?"

"NOT!" said Tom Merry and Manners simultaneously.

Monty Lowther rose and snorted, and departed in disgust from the study, with a gesture that indicated that he was shaking the dust of that famous apartment from his feet. This time he did not return.

"Thank goodness!" said Tom Merry. "Now I can get my lines done! Wire in, Manners, old man, and make your fist as like mine as you can!"

And the chums of the Shell wired in. In the meantime Monty Lowther was going to and fro in the School House of St. Jim's, not seeking whom he might devour, but seeking some kindred spirit in whom to confide his ripping, stunning idea!

CHAPTER 2. Whose Idea?

"WELL pulled, Figgins!"

Figgins, of the Fourth, drew his skiff up to the landing-raft, and stepped out, his rugged face flushed and ruddy with exercise. Raft and towing-path along the shining Ryll were crowded with St. Jim's fellows. Kerr and Fatty Wynn, Figg's chums in the New House, met him with slaps on the shoulder, and Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, called out a word of commendation. Figgins was as good an carsman as he was a batsman, or a forward on the Soccer field. There were few things that George Figgins could not do, and do well, out of doors, though in the Form-room Mr. Lathom, the master of the Fourth at St. Jim's, confessed that Figgins was not one of his brightest pupils.

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(See column 2, page 26 of this issue.)

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"THE MAGNET" LIBRARY. — Our Companion Papers.

"THE PENNY POPULAR,"
Every Friday.

Figgins's honest face wore a look of pleasure as he walked up from the boathouse with his chums towards the school. Figgins had enjoyed his pull up the river, and he had pulled well. He knew that, and had easily beaten Cutts of the Fifth, who had been pulling back to the raft, and had put his beef into it simply to show Figgins that the Fourth were hopelessly outclassed by the Fifth. But Figgins had put his beef into it, too, and had simply walked away from Cutts, and the Fifth-Former was still on the river, frowning.

"Cutts is looking cross!" grinned Kerr. "Why, you simply left him standing, Figgy! One up for the New House—what?"

"Let's drop it at the tuckshop!" said Fatty Wynn. "Figgy must be thirsty after that pull."

"One for Figgy, and two for Fatty!" said Figgins cheerily.

"Well, I could do with a ginger-pop. But I've got something to say to you chaps," he added, as they turned into the school shop, and Fatty Wynn sang out to Dame Taggles for three gingers.

excepting the cake and the doughnuts and some sandwiches I had in my pockets, and the cocoanut and the apples. Still, if you're pressed for time, I won't stay for the tarts!"

"Good! Come on!"

"I'll take them with me," added Fatty Wynn. "Put a dozen tarts in a bag for me, Mrs. Taggles, please—twopenny ones."

"Yes, Master Wynn."

And the chums of the New House turned to go, Fatty Wynn with the bag of tarts under his arm.

"Lowther's looking for you chaps," said Kangaroo, of the Shell, coming into the tuckshop, as the New House trio were going out.

"Let him look!" said Figgins cheerfully.

Figgins & Co. went into the New House. The brow of the great Figgins was wrinkled in thought, and the Co. could see that some idea was working in the brain of their leader. But Figgins did not speak till they were in the study. Fatty Wynn



"Sock into 'em!" roared Figgins. The invaders were all aboard before they could be resisted, and in the rush two of the School House fellows were knocked over the side. Arthur Augustus, with his hat on the back of his head, was collared by Kerr and forced to the bottom of the launch, where Fatty Wynn sat on him.

(See Chapter 11.)

"Say on, O king!" said Kerr, who, as chief member and stage-manager of the New House Junior Dramatic Society, sometimes dropped into Shakespearean language on everyday occasions.

"Can't jaw here," said Figgins. "Don't want the School House chaps to get on to it; and there's Levison listening already with all his ears. Curious how that chap can't mind his own business."

"Oh, go and eat coke!" said Levison, of the Fourth.

"Buck up, Fatty!"

"I was thinking of having some tarts," said Fatty Wynn. "I'm hungry. I didn't have much for dinner. Old Ratty keeps his eye on me so much that I don't like to ask for more than three helpings of anything."

"Must be famished," said Figgins sympathetically.

"Well, not famished, but jolly peckish," said Fatty Wynn.

"You see, as we've been out, I've had nothing since dinner,

sat down with the bag of tarts on his knees, and the Co. prepared to listen.

"Well," said Kerr, "what is it? Raid on the School House? It's some time since we woke those fellows up over the way."

"Jolly good idea to raid 'em," said Fatty Wynn. "D'Arcy had a fiver yesterday, and he's standing Royal feeds in Study No. 6. Might get some plunder—what?"

"Oh, you pile into the tarts, and shut up!" said Figgins. "I've got an idea, and I think it will be a score over the School House. But we shall have to keep it dark. It came into my head while I was pulling against Cutts of the Fifth. I beat him, didn't I?"

"Hands down!" said Kerr.

"And you two fellows pull jolly well!"

"True, O king!"

"And Redfern pulls a good oar, and so do Lawrence and

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 293.

A Magnificent, New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD,

NEXT
WEDNESDAY:

"GUSSY'S GUEST!"

Owen. That's six. And we could find a couple in the Shell for the eight."

"Eh?"
"It would be only fair to give the Shell a look in. Say Thompson and Murphy major," said Figgins thoughtfully.

"Got any idea of what you're talking about, Figgy?" asked Kerr pleasantly. "If you have you might explain to me."

"I want eight, of course."
"Eh?" said Fatty Wynn, looking up from the tarts.

"I want eight," said Figgins.
Fatty Wynn looked distressed.

"Sorry, Figgy, old man; you should have spoken before. Will seven do?"

"What?"
"There's only seven left," said Fatty Wynn. "I didn't know you wanted eight. You never did care much for tarts, you know. And I've done in five already."

"You ass!" said Figgins witheringly. "Do you think I want your silly tarts?"

"Well, if you don't so much the better," said Fatty Wynn, much relieved. "You're welcome to them if you want them, though. But there's only seven. You said you wanted eight. Didn't he, Kerr?"

"Certainly he did!" grinned Kerr.

"Eight oarsmen, fathead!" roared Figgins.

"Oh!"

"That's the idea," said Figgins. "You chaps know that next Saturday the Abbotsford Regatta takes place. It's a regular kick-up, you know. Houseboats, launches, sports, rowing matches—quite a shine! There's an event for junior eights, and I heard to-day that Abbotsford School have had the cheek to enter an eight."

"But what on earth—"

"Well, it's up to St. Jim's to lick Abbotsford, I suppose," said Figgins, rather warmly. "We've never bothered our heads about the regatta before; but that's no reason why we shouldn't now. Abbotsford have never bothered about it before. You see, it's getting to be a bigger thing than it used to be. D'Arcy's governor—Lord Eastwood—is having a houseboat there. D'Arcy's Cousin Ethel is going to be there—"

Figgins paused, and coloured a little, perhaps conscious of the fact that a slight grin passed simultaneously over the faces of Kerr and Wynn. Both of them thought they knew why Figgins had so suddenly thought of entering a St. Jim's junior eight at the Abbotsford Regatta.

"I don't see anything to grin at, myself," said Figgins, rather crossly. "I'm thinking of upholding the honour of St. Jim's, while you chaps seem to be thinking of nothing but munching jam-tarts."

Kerr was not munching jam-tarts, but he let it pass.

"Well, what's the idea exactly, Figgy?" he asked soothingly.

"Why not a New House eight?" said Figgins boldly. "We can keep it a dead secret from the School House chaps, and slog in at rowing practice. We're getting ripping fine weather now, and we can spend every minute possible on the river. If we beat Abbotsford, it will be a lot of kudos for St. Jim's, and the New House will have done the trick. The School House chaps will tear their hair when they see us at the regatta in our eight-oar—what?"

"By Jove!" said Kerr, duly impressed.

"Jolly good idea!" said Fatty Wynn heartily. "Isn't there a cup or something for the winners of the junior eights?"

"Yes; a silver cup."

"We could sell it, and stand a stunning feed—"

"You—you blessed porpoise!" howled Figgins. "Let me catch you selling a cup! You fat dunder! We'll hang it up in the House, and ask the School House fellows round to stare at it. That's what we'll do."

"If we get it," murmured Kerr.

"I suppose we can beat Abbotsford, can't we?" demanded Figgins. "Rylcombe Rowing Club and Wayland Dolphins have entered, too, but they're outsiders."

"Good scheme!" said Kerr heartily. "We'll enter, and we'll lick all comers! We'll hang the cup high in the high hall, and—"

"And gloat!" said Fatty Wynn.

There was a tap at the door, and Monty Lowther of the Shell came into the study. The New House trio did not look over-pleased at the sight of the School House fellow. They were busy in the discussion of Figgins's new scheme. How-

ever, they were nothing if not polite, so Figgins asked Monty Lowther what the dickens he wanted.

"Just looked in to see you chaps," said Lowther cheerfully. "How are you getting on?"

"All serene!" growled Figgins.

"Not dead of indigestion yet?" asked Lowther, with a glance of affectionate solicitude at Fatty Wynn, who was at his tenth tart.

Fatty Wynn glared.

"If you've come over here to be funny—" he began.

"I haven't," said Lowther hastily, as the New House Co. showed signs of hostility. "You've just been on the river, Figgy—eh?"

"Yes, and he beat a School House chap rowing," Kerr remarked casually.

"Rats!" said Monty Lowther promptly. "School House chap must have been funning, and pulling your leg, Figgins."

"It was Cutts of the Fifth, and I beat him hollow!" roared Figgins.

"Oh, Cutts of the Fifth," said Lowther disparagingly. "I thought you meant it was one of us. We don't own Cutts of the Fifth—he's an outsider. My dear chap, you're welcome to beat him to the wide. But I didn't come over here to talk about Cutts of the Fifth. Blow Cutts of the Fifth!"

"And blow every other silly ass in the School House," said Figgins.

"I came over here to tell you my new idea," said Lowther unheeding.

The New House Co. started. They were suspicious at once. Figgins had just propounded a new idea, and they suspected immediately that the same idea had occurred to Monty Lowther. Indeed, it was not improbable that it might occur to a good many fellows that it would be a good idea to enter an eight for the junior match at the regatta. But Figgins & Co. were "wrathy" at once. It was their idea—their very own—and they were prepared to sack the School House, and massacre all the inhabitants thereof before they would allow it to be bagged by their old rivals.

"Oh, you're dealing in new ideas, are you?" said Figgins.

Lowther nodded, with a bland smile.

"Exactly. It's a new, ripping, Al, copper-bottomed, non-skidding, back-pedal, first-chop idea!" he said enthusiastically. "A regular double-back-action, gilt-edged, top-notch wheeze!"

Figgins sniffed.

"And you came over to tell us?"

"Right first time," agreed Lowther.

"It didn't occur to you that perhaps we'd thought of it already, and were first in the field, and wouldn't allow any outsiders in?" demanded Figgins wrathfully.

"Well, no. One naturally doesn't expect to hear of any new ideas in this House, you know," said Monty Lowther, innocently.

"Hold on," said Kerr, as Figgins glanced round for a cricket stump. "Is it anything to do with a certain event next Saturday, Lowther?"

"Right again!" said Lowther. "I must say you chaps are getting brighter. I suppose you've heard of the Abbotsford Regatta?"

"The Regatta!" howled Figgins & Co. with one voice.

"Exactly."

"That's your idea—eh?"

"That's it! You see, the Abbotsford Regatta is a bigger thing than ever this year, and there will be a big crowd there. D'Arcy's governor will be there, and Cousin Ethel, and us! Quite a crowd of toffs, in fact," said Lowther.

"You cheeky bouncer!" said Figgins. "You're a day late. Your idea isn't a new idea, and we were already arranging it when you came in."

"Oh, rats!"

"I tell you it's so. You're going to keep your blessed School House paws off the Abbotsford Regatta!" howled Figgins. "We won't have it, so there!"

"More rats!" said Lowther. "I was going to let you chaps into the scheme on equal terms. You see, the idea is simply ripping, and it's never been thought of before at St. Jim's—"

"I know it hasn't, and I was jolly well the first chap to think of it—"

"Bosh! I told it to Tom Merry an hour ago, and then to Blake—"

"I thought of it more than an hour ago."

"My dear Figgy, you're dreaming! You can't think of things. You must have heard some School House chap speaking about it, and then you dreamed you thought of it. Don't you think that's likely?" suggested Lowther.

Figgins & Co. made a movement towards Monty Lowther. The Shell fellow backed towards the door.

"You're not going to bag our wheeze!" said Figgins. "Before you get out of the New House you're going to swear—"

ANSWERS

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"Couldn't! I've been too well brought up, and besides I don't know any words," said Lowther pleasantly.

"Swear that you won't try to work that idea—"

"Why, it's my own idea!" said Lowther indignantly.

"It's mine!" roared Figgins.

"Rats! It's mine!"

"Collar him!" shouted the exasperated Figgins. "We'll jolly soon show him whether it's his idea or not."

Monty Lowther whipped out of the study, but the three were upon him in a twinkling. There was a wild and whirling struggle in the passage. From that wild struggle Monty Lowther emerged with his collar torn out, his hair ruffled, and his jacket spit up the back, and covered with dust. He fled headlong down the passage, and descended the stairs three at a time, with Figgins & Co. whooping on his track. He dashed at top speed out of the New House, and the indignant juniors chased him two-thirds of the way to the School House, and only desisted at the sight of a crowd of School House fellows rushing to the rescue.

CHAPTER 3.

Quite a Difference.

"GWEAT Scott! What's happened, Lowthah, dear boy?"

"Been in the wars?" asked Blake of the Fourth.

"Or in an earthquake?" asked Tom Merry.

"Or a cyclone!" suggested Manners.

Monty Lowther grunted. He could not speak for the moment; he was breathless. He leaned against the passage wall in the School House, and breathed hard. The Shell fellows and Fourth Formers stared at him inquiringly. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth extracted an eyeglass from his waistcoat pocket, and jammed it into his right eye, and fixed it upon the dusty and dishevelled junior as if he wanted to bore a hole in him by sheer fixity of gaze.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus, at length. "You do look a weck, Lowthah."

"The New House kids have been chasing him," said Kangaroo of the Shell, coming in. "He's been over there, telling them some of his funny stories, perhaps, and naturally they got waxy."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ass!" gasped Monty Lowther. "I went over to tell Figgins & Co. my new ripping idea, as you silly asses won't take it up."

"Yaas, upon the whole, Lowthah, as a musician, I cannot approve of wagtime," said Arthur Augustus, with a shake of the head.

"And I'm fed-up with it," said Jack Blake.

"Up to the chin!" said Tom Merry feelingly.

"Besides, it's a rotten idea," said Manners.

"Figgins & Co. don't think so!" snapped Lowther.

"Taking it up, eh?" grinned Herries.

"They're taking it up, and taking it off me!" howled Lowther. "As soon as I started telling Figgins, he started telling me that he had thought of the same idea; and that was how we came to have a row. Figgins & Co. have got the same wheeze, and they're going to work it, and say they're going to keep us out of it."

"My hat!"

"Bai Jove!"

"And there goes the last chance of the School House getting the kudos, owing to you silly chumps not backing me up," said Monty Lowther wrathfully. "Instead of the School House Ragtime Band it will be the New House Ragtime Band that will play at Abbotsford Regatta—"

"All the worse for the Regatta," said Digby. "We shall be there, and if the ragtimers get ragged we'll lend a hand."

"Yaas, wathah!"

But Tom Merry was wrinkling his brows thoughtfully. The news that Figgins & Co. had taken up the same idea, and were going to work it, and keep the School House out of it, of course put quite a new complexion on the matter. If Figgins & Co. intended to start a ragtime band, there was no reason why a School House ragtime band shouldn't start, too, and put Figgins & Co. into the shade. It was "up" to the School House to keep their old rivals from scoring, of course.

"That alters the case!" said Tom Merry, at last.

"You mean you're ready to back me up now it's too late," said Lowther, with a sniff.

"It isn't too late. If we're going to take a band to the regatta, we've got a week to practise in nearly, and in that time I suppose we can learn to chuck off such things as 'Hallo, My Tulip,' and 'Kiss Me, Louisa.' If Figgins & Co. are going to do it, it's up to us to cut them them out. That makes a horse of quite another colour; besides, it was a School House wheeze."

"Of course it was," said Lowther. "I told Figgy he must

have heard one of our chaps speaking of it, and dreamed that he thought of it himself. Then there was trouble."

"Ha, ha, ha! Gentlemen," said Tom Merry, looking round, "musicians wanted. All the fellows who possess musical instruments, and can make a row on them, are requested to step into my study this evening, and put their names down for the Lowther Ragtime Band."

"Hear, hear!"

"We'll jolly soon show Figgins & Co that they can't get ahead of us," said Tom Merry, "and if they turn up with a mouldy old band at the regatta, we'll play them off the giddy earth."

"Yaas, wathah! Pewwaps it would be a good ideah, Tom Mewwy, to vawvy our performance with some classic solos. I should be willin' to contibute some tenah solos—"

"We sha'n't need a tenor," said Monty Lowther affably. "But we shall need a fiver for the expenses. That's where you come in."

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Or, if you like, we'll have two fivers instead of a tener," said Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And the first thing we'll do, when we get the band going, is to compose something in ragtime, and play it under the window of the New House," said Lowther. "You chaps know I'm musical."

"Go hon!"

"I can compose standing on my head," said Lowther. "I'll turn out something catchy, with comic words about Figgins & Co. in it, and we'll soon have the whole school howling it."

"Bai Jove, that's not weally a bad ideah! But pewwaps you had bettah leave the music to me."

"And now I'll go and change my clobber, I think. I feel dusty."

"I was speakin', Lowthah—"

"Well, you can go on speaking while I go and change my clobber, can't you?" said Monty. And he walked away to the Shell dormitory. Levison of the Fourth came up the passage.

"There's something going on over in the New House," he remarked. "Figgins & Co. were jawing about it in the tuck-shop, and cleared out because I was there. I've just been over there now with a message from Knox to Sefton, and I saw a regular meeting going on in Figgins's study. The juniors grinned."

"They're getting to business already," chuckled Blake. "Never mind; they won't have much the start of us."

"Did you notice any musical instruments in the study, Levison?" asked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Levison shook his head.

"No; they were talking about rowing, as far as I could make out."

"Rowing!" echoed the juniors.

"Yes. They're going to get a boat out early in the morning, before rising bell, for practice on the river," said Levison. "I heard Figgins say that it was to be kept a strict secret, even from the other fellows in the House, so that we couldn't get a hint of it over on this side. They're going to do the practice unknown to us."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You must have been listenin' at the door, Levison, to hear all that," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, after some reflection.

"Go hon!" said Levison.

"I considah that—"

"Oh, all's fair in war," said Blake. "Levison was a scout in the enemy's country. He was entitled to get information."

"I had to clear out, because that canny Scotch boulder, Kerr, heard me in the passage," said Levison; "so I don't know what they're going to do rowing practice for so secretly."

"Rowing practice!" said Tom Merry.

"Yes; practise on the river—unknown to us, was what Figgins said."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Levison looked puzzled.

"I don't see what practice they could do on the river excepting rowing practice," he said, "unless they're going swimming."

"Ha, ha! They might be going to rehearse an orchestra, far from the madding crowd," grinned Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"An orchestra," said Levison, with a stare. "Figgins didn't say anything about any old orchestra."

"That's the little game, all the same," said Tom Merry. "I'm jolly glad we've got on to this. Figgins & Co. are going to take to early rising, to take a rise out of us. And they're not going to be the only early risers in the school to-morrow morning. I think some chaps about our size are going to

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A Magnificent, New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

NEXT
WEDNESDAY:

"GUSSY'S GUEST!"

rise early as well, and get on the track of those cheeky bounders, and—

"My hat!" said Blake. "We'll catch them napping, and make them swear a solemn swear not to start a band at all."

"Hear, hear!"

"Good egg! We'll take a big party—you can come, if you like, Levison."

"Thanks! I'm not an early riser," grinned Levison.

"My deah Levison," said Arthur Augustus, "early to bed, and early to wize—"

"Br-r-r-r!" said Levison.

But there were plenty of volunteers for the expedition without Levison. Tom Merry had only asked him out of civility; he was not on good terms with the black sheep of the Fourth.

The School House juniors chuckled gleefully over the surprise they were preparing for Figgins & Co. on the following morning.

CHAPTER 4.

Lowther's Ragtime Band.

PREPARATION being finished, the Terrible Three were ready for the meeting of the amateur musicians of the School House. There was no time to be lost, of course, considering that their rivals were already "on the go," as they supposed, at least. If Figgins & Co., with deep duplicity, were going out on the river to practise secretly early in the morning, the School House fellows were bound to steal a march on them by starting over-night. Exactly what the other Shell fellows would say when a ragtime band started operations in Tom Merry's study was not known yet. It would be known as soon as the ragtime band started.

Monty Lowther had hurried through his prep., and was busy upon a sheet of music-paper. Lowther had brought in a sheaf of paper ruled for music, obtaining the same from Mr. Flatt, the music master of St. Jim's. Music was not in the regular curriculum of St. Jim's, but both Manners and Lowther were pupils of Mr. Flatt. Manners' taste ran in the direction of classical sonatas. Lowther had a strongly-developed taste for coon songs, ragtime dances, and bunny-hug music generally. They regarded each other's tastes with lofty scorn. Lowther would ask Manners scornfully whether Beethoven or Mozart could have composed a tango, a rabbit crawl, or a Boston buster. Manners would close his ears when Lowther began whistling or humming his favourite airs. It was agreed that Monty should conduct the new band, as it was his idea; but Manners appointed himself adviser-in-chief, and hoped to be able to introduce a little classic refinement.

Herries of the Fourth was the first to arrive. He brought his cornet. Herries' cornet was almost as much dreaded in the School House as Herries' bull-dog, Towser. Herries was looking quite pleased. He would rather have performed the Toreador Song from "Carmen" as a cornet solo, than lent the aid of his cornet in a ragtime band. But then, when Herries kindly offered that cornet solo, there was always an immediate rush to escape on the part of his auditors. Herries was not one of those musicians whose fingers wander idly the ivory keys when no one is present. He did not want any of his chords to be lost. He liked an audience when he played—and Lowther's Ragtime Band was his first chance of getting one. So Herries put away the music of his famous cornet solo, and brought down his great soul to ragtime. It was a case of stooping to conquer.

"Here I am," said Herries, "and here's my cornet."

"Good egg!" said Tom Merry. "The others will be here soon."

"I'll give you a bit before they come, if you like; just to show you how beautifully I've got it in tune," said Herries, preparing for business.

"Ahem! Better all start together—"

"Would you like the Toreador Song? I can do it from memory, excepting a bit here and there."

Without waiting for an answer, Herries started. The Terrible Three gazed at him. Manners drew behind Herries, out of politeness, before he put his fingers to his ears. Monty Lowther ceased to scribble upon his music-paper. Tom Merry tried to smile.

Bang!

It was a terrific concussion on the other side of the study wall. Gore's study was next door, and apparently Gore was not fond of cornet solos.

Herries played on cheerfully. Like the famous Macpherson Clongoketty Angus MacClan, his music was wayward and wild as the breeze, and wandered around into several keys. As Lowther said, it reminded him of Wagner, and Richard Strauss, and a steam crane out of order.

Bang! Bang!

Gore was growing emphatic. So was Herries.

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The study door was suddenly flung open, and George Gore appeared upon the threshold, his face aflame with wrath. He shook a furious fist at Herries and the Terrible Three.

"Are you going to stop that row?" he roared.

Herries could not speak. His face was crimson with exertion, and he looked as if he were trying to burst a boiler. But he glared at Gore. Gore raved.

"How is a chap to work with that frightful row going on?" he shrieked. "And if you must play something, what do you want to play a dead march for?"

Herries stopped at that. It was too much. Gore was not musical, but there was no excuse for even Gore mistaking the Toreador Song for a dead march. It was an insult to the way Herries played it.

"You silly ass!" said Herries, in measured disdain. "That's the Toreador Song from 'Carmen.'"

"With variations by Herries," murmured Lowther.

"If you don't stop it, there will be a row!" yelled Gore.

"Right on the wicket," said Lowther, sotto voce. "So there will."

"I'm not going to stand it," said Gore furiously. "Go and play that horrible thing in the wood-shed, or on top of a mountain somewhere. You ought to learn to play in tune, too. Why don't you play in tune?"

Herries did not answer that question. As a musician he disdained to do so. But he laid down the cornet, and rushed at Gore, and smote him hip and thigh, and hurled him forth into the passage. That was the only possible reply to make to George Gore's criticism of his playing.

"Serve him right," said Manners, encouragingly. "If we can stand it, he can."

It was an unfortunate way of putting it. Herries glared at Manners.

"You silly ass—"

"Ordah, deah boys!" said a calm voice at the door. And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy came in with Blake. "Ordah! I've brought some music, Tom Mewwy"

"I've been thinkin' that we'd bettah intwoduce a few classic solos," said D'Arcy. "I shall be willin' to wendah half a dozen Italian avias—"

"But nobody else would be willing," said Monty Lowther. "Vocal gymnastics not required. Got any instrument?"

"Of course, I can play the violin."

"Good! Fiddles are the things. Fetch it, and you can chuck all this music away."

"Lowthah, you ass—"

"D'Arcy and Manners, violins," said Lowther, jotting it down on a scrap of paper; "Herries, cornet, Tom Merry, also violin. What have you got, Blake?"

"Flute," said Blake. "I'm willing to perform a series of flute obligatos—"

"We'll take the will for the deed," said Lowther blandly. "Blake, flautist. Good! Kangy can play the banjo, and I can chime in with the bones. Of course, the banjo and bones are the instruments chiefly needed."

"Wats!"

"Bandsmen are not allowed to say 'Rats' to their conductor!" said Monty Lowther severely. "Good! Here comes Kangy. Now, when you're ready, I've got a little bit of music here for you to rehearse. I'm just finishing writing out the parts."

"Your own composition?" asked Manners suspiciously.

"In a way, yes. You see," said Lowther, "being such a ripping musician—"

"Bow-wow!" was Blake's remark.

"Shut up, Blake! Being such a ripping musician," proceeded Lowther firmly, "I can see the possibilities of ragtime in any composition. If I had time, I could turn the Kreutzer Sonata or Beethoven's Symphonies into ragtime, and make them really popular—"

"You—your horrible Philistine!" gasped Manners.

"But I've taken something easier. Have you chaps ever heard of Verdi's opera, 'Il Trovatore'? Of course you have. It's ground out by every blessed orchestra in the kingdom, and done to giddy death! You know the Anvil Chorus?"

"Yes, ass!"

"Well, I've taken a bit out of the Anvil Chorus in 'Il Trovatore,' and turned it into ragtime," explained Lowther. "Verdi wouldn't know it now—"

"I'll bet he wouldn't!"

"It's so much improved," said Lowther. "If Verdi heard it—"

"Poor chap!"

"It would make him—"

"Ill!" suggested Manners.

"It would make him wish he'd lived in the days of ragtime!" roared Lowther. "It's improved marvellously! Now, I've made up some words to suit it—a sort of serenade for Figgins & Co. We're going to rehearse the thing now, and as soon as we've got it in order we're going to serenade Figgins & Co. under the windows of the New House,

and show 'em that the Lowther Ragtime Band is really going strong, and that they've got no chance. See?"

That suggestion met with approval. The idea of serenading Figgins & Co. under the windows of the New House caught on at once. It would undoubtedly be "one in the eye" for the New House juniors, who were supposed to be working on the very same scheme of a ragtime band.

"Yaas, it's not a bad ideah, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "Pway hand out the music, and let's get to pwactice!"

Monty Lowther scribbled out the parts fast enough. While he was doing it, the other fellows tuned up their instruments. Lowther looked up rather worriedly.

"I say, you chaps, I like Debussy's music as much as anybody, but don't play it while I'm writing out the parts!" he said.

"Ass! We're tuning up!" shrieked Manners.

"Oh, my mistake!" said Lowther.

The parts were finished at last. Lowther handed them out to the instrumentalists, and they hummed them over. Operatic music put into ragtime was something a little new, but it certainly sounded catchy enough. Manners sniffed, but the other fellows seemed satisfied. Arthur Augustus was a little puzzled. Lowther had picked up the true professional manner of writing the old notation—that is, to make it appear as if a number of flies had stepped into the ink, and then crawled over the paper. However, Lowther explained patiently what the mysterious hieroglyphics were supposed to mean, and then the rehearsal started. Lowther thoughtfully locked the door. He had a suspicion that there would soon be a crowd of Shell fellows round the study with homicidal intentions. He was right!

As soon as the grunt of the cornet, the shriek of the flute, and the wail of the violins mingled with the pink-pong of the banjo and the clatter of the bones there came a terrific bang on the wall from Gore's side.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The musicians played on, unheeding.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Then at the door came thump, thump, thump! Crash!

And voices yelled:

"Shut up!"

"Chuck it!"

"Go home!"

"Ring off!"

"Mercy!"

But Lowther's Ragtime Band played on ruthlessly.

CHAPTER 5.

A Ragtime Serenade!

THUMP! Thump! Thump! Bang!

Crash!

"Are you going to chuck it?"

"Go home! Go home!"

"Go back to Colney Hatch!"

But the Lowther Ragtime Band, having got into full swing by this time, ground on at that variation of Verdi—which would have pleased Verdi very much—perhaps!

Lowther had taken a few catchy bars from the "Anvil Chorus," and put them into the "Tempo di Rag," as he called it, with words of his own composition which the instrumentalists who were not using their mouths for other purposes, sang as they played. The words, of course, were specially to impress upon Figgins & Co. the fact that the School House Ragtime Band was "the" ragtime band, and all others spurious imitations.

But the crashing at the door and the study walls was growing terrific. The conductor of the ragtime band paused at last, and shouted through the door:

"Go away, you silly asses!"

"Stop that row!" came back a formidable roar.

"We're getting ready for a jape on the New House!"

"Sounds more like a frontal attack on the School House!" yelled Reilly outside. "Be jabbers, it's worse than Donnybrook Fair intirely."

"Only a bit more," said Lowther. "Do shut up, or you'll have the prefects down on us."

"If you don't shut up, you'll have the roof down on us!" roared Gore.

"Oh, go and eat coke," said Lowther. "Now, gentlemen, all together. Keep in time as much as you can. If you could make that cornet keep along with the rest, Herries, it would be an advantage."

"What!"

"Don't slack!" said Lowther. "It would sound much better if you didn't finish two bars after the others."

"Look here—"

"Kangy is doing the banjo a treat. Tommy, my son, would you mind going a bit slower with the fiddle—it's not a race, you know."

"Why, you ass!"

"And please, remember, Blake, that a flute is not supposed to be performing variations on the music while—"

"Why, you chump—"

"Only giving you a hint—"

"I wasn't performing variations!" roared Blake.

"Oh! I thought you were! Well, pile in again!"

And Monty Lowther raised the cricket-stump with which he was conducting.

The Lowther Ragtime Band burst forth again, and the voices of the instrumentalists accompanied the instruments with great effect. There was a good deal of noise, and the orchestra, like Mr. Gilbert's celebrated piper, elicited something resembling a tune.

"That's all right," said the conductor, as the attack on the door recommenced. "Better get over to the New House now, before those idiots bring the masters down on us."

"Yaas, wathah."

And the orchestra rose. Lowther unlocked the door and opened it, and beheld a hostile array in the passage. There was very nearly a rush, but Tom Merry waved back the excited juniors.

"Pax! Don't play the giddy ox! We're just going."

"Sure, but are ye coming back?" demanded Reilly.

"Yes, of course, fathead."

"We'll be waitin' for you in the quad," said Reilly darkly. "We'll scalp you, and smash up the instruments of torture."

"Good egg!" chorussed the juniors.

"Look here," shouted Lowther. "This is the School House Ragtime Band, and it's going to knock spots off the New House, you silly duffers."

"Might knock the chimney-pots off with that row!" snorted Gore.

"You'll promise not to practise indoors any more, or we'll rush you in the quad, and smash up the things!" said Reilly. Lowther sniffed.

"Unmusical set of duffers! Still, we'll agree to that. The prefects would stop it sooner or later, anyway. We'll practise in the woodshed after this."

And then the amateur musicians were allowed to pass.

They marched out into the quadrangle, and as the news spread that Figgins & Co. were going to be serenaded quite a crowd gathered to follow them. The information that Figgins & Co. intended to borrow the wheeze of a ragtime band made the School House juniors, of course, highly indignant, and Reilly confessed that Figgins & Co. deserved to have Lowther's band play to them, or worse, if there was anything worse.

Quite an army marched across the quad in the dusk of the evening. There was a light gleaming from the window of Figgins's study, and the shadows of the New House trio could be seen, at work at their preparation probably.

The orchestra halted under Figgins's window.

Round them—those with more delicate ears keeping at a safe distance—the School House juniors gathered in a crowd.

"Bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus remarked. "How are we goin' to see the music in the dark, Lowthah, deah boy."

"My hat! Don't you know it by heart yet?" growled Lowther.

"I know the 'Anvil Chorus' by heart, of course; but your wotten variations are a diffewent mattah," said D'Arcy, with dignity.

"Get a bike lantern, somebody."

Kerruish of the Fourth rushed off for a bike lantern. He offered to hold the light for the orchestra, announcing that he had tough ears, and could stand it.

Then the orchestra prepared for business. Preliminary wails from the violins, and snorts from the cornet, and squeaks from the flute, announced the presence of the Lowther Ragtime Band, and Figgins opened his window in wonder. Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn looked down on the crowd of School House fellows in amazement, and at the light gleaming upon the varied instruments of the orchestra.

"My only hat!" ejaculated Figgins, "what's the game?"

"It's a serenade!" said Tom Merry.

"A which?"

"Serenade," said Monty Lowther. "This is where we make you understand that the wheeze is ours—ours only—and that the New House don't know anything about it."

"School House musicians!" said Kerr, with a shudder. "Friends, Romans, and countrymen; if you have ears, prepare to shut them now."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Go!" said Lowther!

The cricket-stump waved, and the ragtime band burst forth into melody. And a crowd of voices took up the ragtime refrain:

"Hip-pip-pip! Hip-pip-pip! We Take the Cake! The Latest Ragtime Band, oh!"

CHAPTER 6.

Both Satisfied!

FIGGINS & CO. gazed down from the window. The reader knows—although the School House fellows did not know—that there had been a slight misunderstanding in Monty Lowther's interview with Figgins & Co.

Figgins & Co. had never heard of the ragtime band before, and never dreamed of it; all their thoughts being given to their great secret scheme of rowing an eight in the race at the Abbotsford Regatta.

They stared blankly at the performers.

Loud and louder from the quadrangle came the blare and roar and shriek of the varied instruments, and the roar of voices more or less in tune:

"Hip-pip-pip! Hip-pip-pip! We Take the Cake! The Latest Ragtime Band! Oh!"

Over and over again the orchestra played it, and the crowd roared it, with variations not intended by the composer.

"Well, my Aunt Jemima!" said Figgins.

"What a ghastly row!" said Fatty Wynn.

Kerr burst into a chuckle.

"So that's it!"

"That's what?" asked Figgins.

"Ha, ha, ha! That's the wheeze Lowther came over to tell us about—and they're not on to the eight idea, after all!" grinned Kerr. "They think we're going to borrow their silly ragtime band scheme. See?"

Figgins gasped.

"Oh, crims! Then they don't know after all——"

"Not a word! Ha, ha!"

"Oh, good egg!" said Figgins. "Blessed if I didn't nearly give it away myself when I was jawing Lowther. So this was his scheme."

"Yes, rather; ha, ha, ha."

"Ragtime band—eh? Raggedest ragtime I've ever heard," chuckled Figgins, "let 'em rip—they can rag all the ragtime they like, so long as they don't get on to the eight."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

On the steps of the New House a crowd gathered, of fellows belonging to that House. The wild sounds of revelry by night had drawn them to the spot.

"Clear off from here!" Redfern shouted, "no strolling musicians allowed here."

"Call the police!"

"Turn the hose on them!"

"Charge, Chester, charge!" shouted Thompson, of the Shell.

A crowd of New House fellows came rushing out.

But they found the School House crowd quite ready for them.

While the orchestra played on, and the voices shouted out the taunting refrain, the other fellows stood round to keep off the enemy.

The rush of the New House juniors was stopped, and they were hurled and bundled back amid wild yells.

But more and more New House fellows came dashing on the scene, and there was soon a wild and whirling fight raging round the ragtime band. And from the midst of the scrambling and struggling juniors the ragtime band blared away, the time growing raggeder and raggeder as the excitement rose.

Figgins & Co. had rushed down from the study now, and they led the enemy in their attack. A terrific rush broke up the orchestra at last, and the instrumentalists were scattered.

Then the music died away.

It was time!

Monteith and two or three other New House prefects had arrived on the scene, with canes in their hands.

They did not waste time talking. They rushed into the fray, and smote right and left, and the combatants parted with wild howls.

"Wetweat, deah boys!" called out Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

The tussle was over; the School House fellows retreated towards their own House. And then Lowther got the band together again, and as they marched off they played the air over and over again in triumph, and yelled in chorus:

"Hip-pip-pip! Hip-pip-pip! We Take the Cake! The Latest Ragtime Band! Oh!"

Mr. Railton, the Housemaster of the School House, came striding out, and he met the retreating band and their escort—the latter mostly dabbling their noses or rubbing their eyes.

"What ever does this mean?" exclaimed Mr. Railton.

"Boys! Cease that noise at once!"

"Noise!" howled Lowther. "It's music, sir."

"Ahem! I mean that music!" said Mr. Railton; "you

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must not make a disturbance in the quadrangle. It is very creditable of you to form a junior orchestra, but— but—"

"It's a wathah wippin' ideab, sir."

"We've been giving the New House a treat, sir," explained Tom Merry.

"A little serenade, sir."

Mr. Railton smiled.

"We've been playing ragtime variations on an air by Verdi," said Monty Lowther. "I composed it. Would you like to hear it, sir?"

"Ahem!"

"The New House bounders—I mean the New House chaps, wanted to bag the idea, sir, so we serenaded them, to show that we were first in the field. We'll show you how it goes, sir. Now, then—"

Lowther raised the cricket-stump.

"Really, Lowther—"

"All together—voices and instruments."

"Come, come—"

But the melody burst forth again:

"Hip-pip-pip! Hip-pip-pip! We Take the Cake! The Latest Ragtime Band! Oh!"

"There, sir, what do you think of that?" said Lowther proudly. "Right on the wicket, isn't it, sir? We think it's rather stunning, ourselves."

"A little too stunning for performance in the quadrangle," said Mr. Railton, laughing in spite of himself, "pray put your instruments away now."

"Certainly, sir; we're finished."

And the ragtime band marched home, quite contented with themselves.

All St. Jim's had heard their performance—they could hardly help hearing it—and so it was quite clear to all the school that the School House had originated that latest striking wheeze—a junior ragtime band.

And in the New House, Figgins & Co. were chuckling as they wiped off the traces of the combat in the quad.

The serenade had enlightened them, and they had the satisfaction of knowing that their great scheme for scoring at the Abbotsford Regatta was still a secret from their rivals.

"It was that bosh that Lowther came over to tell us!" chuckled Figgins, "and I nearly gave our game away, didn't I?"

"Jolly near!" said Kerr.

"And now they haven't a suspicion after all!"

"Not a suspish!"

"Not a bit of it!" grinned Redfern, "and we'll get in the practice early to-morrow morning, while they're asleep in their little beds—what?"

"Yes, rather! Mum's the word!"

"Not a syllable outside the House!" said Redfern. "They'll be astonished to see a New House Eight at the regatta. When we carry off the cup, they can play a triumphal march for us on their ragtime band, if they like."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And then we can sing—Hip-pip-pip! Hip-pip-pip! We Take the Cake!" shouted Figgins.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the New House chums went to bed extremely satisfied with themselves and things generally.

They would not have been so satisfied, perhaps, if they had seen Tom Merry, in the Shell dormitory in the School House, setting an alarm-clock for five in the morning.

Still convinced that the New House party were going out in the early hours of the morning to practise with a ragtime band, the School House juniors were determined to be up still earlier, and to catch Figgins & Co. in the act.

"It's the early bird that catches the worm, you know," grinned Tom Merry as he set the alarm-clock.

"And the early worm that's caught!" said Monty Lowther, with a chuckle, "Figgins & Co. being the early worm in this case."

"We'll catch 'em napping, and make 'em swear honour bright to chuck up the idea of a ragtime band!" said Manners.

"That's the programme!"

And with that programme mapped out the School House fellows turned in.

CHAPTER 7.

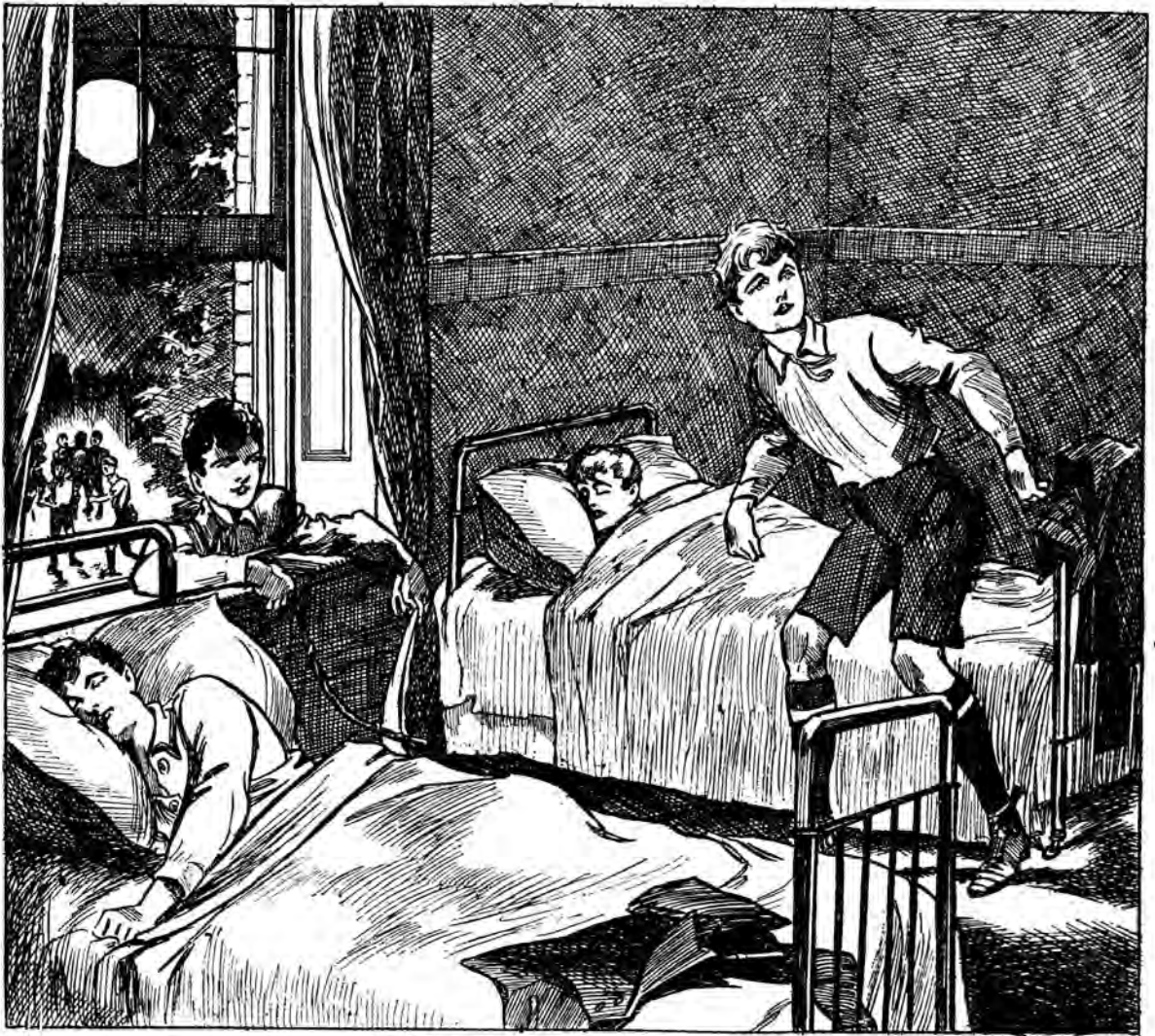
A Capture from the Enemy.

FIGGINS sat up in bed as the early sunlight streamed into the high windows of the dormitory in the New House.

He took his watch from under his pillow, and glanced at it. It was half-past five.

Figgins jumped out of bed.

It was a beautifully clear morning. Figgins looked out of the window, and noted the state of the weather with a chortle of satisfaction. Then he awakened his comrades—Kerr and Wynn and Redfern and Owen and Lawrence.



Harry Wharton was the last to leave the dormitory, and he stopped and spoke to Russell before he left. "The rope is tied to your bed, Russell," said Harry. "Will you keep awake until we come back, just to see that nothing happens to it?" (An incident in "THE MOONLIGHT FOOTBALLERS," the splendid long, complete school tale of Harry Wharton & Co. contained in this week's issue of our companion paper, "THE MAGNET" LIBRARY, which all GEM readers will specially enjoy. Now on sale. Price One Penny.)

"You chaps get into your clobber, while I go and call the Shell chaps," said Figgins.

"Right-ho!" said Redfern cheerily.

Fatty Wynn yawned portentously. Fatty Wynn could always do with any amount of sleep. The idea of a New House eight at the Abbotsford Regatta was a good one. But it did not seem quite so ripping to Fatty Wynn in the chilly hours of the early morning, as it had seemed when they discussed it in the study overnight.

"I—I say, Figgy," said Wynn, very thoughtfully, "on second thoughts I think I'll stay in bed a bit longer—"

Figgins chuckled.

"Then you'd better think some third thoughts, and decide to get out!" he remarked. "Do you want this jug of water down the back of your neck?"

And Fatty Wynn sighed and turned out.

Figgins jumped into his rowing clothes in a twinkling, and hurried out of the dormitory. He ran into the Shell quarters, and called Thompson and Murphy major. The two Shell fellows turned out at once, and then Figgins dropped into the Third-Form dormitory for Jameson. Jameson was wanted to steer. Jameson of the Third had gladly accepted the proffered honour the previous evening. But he seemed to have changed his mind now when Figgins shook him by the shoulder.

"Groogh!" said Jameson. "Gerrouit! 'Tain't rising-bell."

"No; it's Figgins. Up you get!"

"I say, Figgins—"

Bump!

Jameson descended upon the floor with a concussion that fully awakened him, as he showed by emitting a terrific yell.

"Yaroo!"

"Buck up!" said Figgins kindly. "No time to waste, you know. Quite awake?"

"Ow, ow!"

"If you're not quite awake I don't mind squeezing this sponge over you!"

"Yow!" roared Jameson. "I'm quite awake! It's all right!"

"Buck up, then!" said Figgins briskly. And Jameson groaned and dressed himself.

The juniors went downstairs, finding nobody up, not even an early housemaid at that hour. They let themselves out of the house, and crossed the quadrangle in the keen, fresh morning air. Figgins drew in a deep breath of it joyously.

"Silly asses we are to stay in bed till rising-bell," he exclaimed. "Why, it's simply ripping out here."

"Yaw—aw—yes!" said Fatty Wynn. "Spiffing! Yaw—aw—aw!"

"We'll pull down to the island and back!" said Figgins. "Gates not open yet! We shall have to buzz over the wall! Come on!"

"We can stop at the island for a snack!" said Fatty Wynn.

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A Magnificent, New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

NEXT
WEDNESDAY:

"GUSSY'S GUEST!"

"I've got some sandwiches. Lucky I thought of getting them ready overnight, wasn't it?"

"Oh, frightfully lucky!" snorted Figgins. "It's a thing you would think of."

"Well, I don't believe in a chap risking his health by going hungry."

"Bow-wow! Get over that wall!"

The juniors dropped over the wall, and hurried down to the boathouse. Early as it was, the sun was glinting cheerily on the river, and early birds were twittering in the trees, and seeking for early worms.

Figgins had made arrangements the evening before with the boat-keeper, and Tomkins was up already, and had the New House eight-oar ready for them. The New House juniors ran it down into the water. Little did they dream—as a novelist would say—that hostile eyes were watching them from the cover of the trees at the back of the towing-path.

Tom Merry & Co. were on the scene.

"There they go!" chuckled Lowther. "Nine of them!"

"I don't see any musical instruments," remarked Tom Merry.

"May be hidden in the boat!"

"Listen! There's Figgins jawing!"

Figgins's voice came clearly on the fresh morning air from the river as he addressed his comrades in the eight-oar.

"Steady there! Don't pump yourselves out to begin with. Jameson, don't sit there like a sack of coke. If you're not wide awake yet I've got a boat-hook here! Pull easy for the island. We shall have the current against us coming back."

"Right-ho!"

And the eight-oar glided away down the shining Ryll.

"They're going to the island!" said Monty Lowther.

"Ten to one they've shoved the giddy instruments there all ready, so as not to have to carry them in and out of the house!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We'll catch 'em on the island!" said Tom Merry. "By Jove, if they land we'll collar their boat, and leave 'em stranded. Then we can make terms with the bounders."

"Good business!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There were a dozen of the School House fellows, Shell and Fourth. They had the odds on their side in case of a "scrap." Tomkins, the boatkeeper, looked surprised as they marched down on the boathouse.

"You're up early, young gentlemen," said Tomkins.

"Yes; we're going to catch the early worms," said Lowther. "We'll have the Tub, as there is a crowd of us."

The Tub, a large boat, certainly not built for racing, but spacious enough to accommodate the numerous party, was run out into the water. Eight of the School House juniors took the oars, and they glided downstream. Tom Merry, who was steering, kept his eyes open for the New House skiff. "He did not want to be sighted by the enemy. The bend in the wooded bank hid the New House boat from sight now. Figgins & Co., being in their racing skiff, could have "walked" away from their pursuers if they had sighted them. Tom Merry did not want to come in sight until the enemy were landed on the island. The Tub kept in the shadow of the trees along the bank, and Tom kept his eyes keenly open for the boat in advance of them.

Unconscious of the pursuit, Figgins & Co. pulled down the river for the island.

Figgins, who had constituted himself coach of the eight, did not spare himself the privileges of a coach, and slanged his men cheerily and emphatically.

"Put some more beef into it, Lawrence! Don't go to sleep, Owen! I say, Reddy, old man, this isn't a splashing competition. Have you ever heard of a thing called feathering, Thompson? When I want any crabs, Murphy, I'll let you know. Don't trouble to catch any now. There isn't time."

And so on.

Although it was their first practice together, the eight pulled very well in unison, and by the time the island was reached Figgins pronounced that, with some licking into shape, which he was fully prepared to administer, they would do very well.

They ran the skiff into the reeds of the island, and jumped ashore, and Fatty Wynn produced an enormous packet of sandwiches.

The sandwiches were welcome. The keen morning air and the pull on the river had made the eight decidedly hungry.

They discussed the sandwiches, and discussed their prospects at the regatta at the same time. But all of a sudden Kerr gave a shout.

"School House cads!"

There was a steady sweep of oars, and the Tub came shooting up to the island.

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"THE PENNY POPULAR,"
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The New House juniors, clustered on the bank, regarded Tom Merry & Co. with amazed and exasperated looks.

"They're on to it, after all!" gasped Figgins.

"Blessed asses, if they're out for practice!" said Redfern. "They can't be practising for an eight in the Tub, with a dozen fellows, half of 'em passengers."

"Perhaps they're just out for a morning spin, quite by chance," said Fatty Wynn hopefully.

Figgins nodded.

"We'll soon see!" he said.

And, putting his hands to his mouth, the chief of the New House juniors hailed the School House boat in stentorian tones.

"Hallo, there! What do you kids want?"

"Hallo! That you, Figgins?" called out Tom Merry.

"Yes. What are you up early for?"

"Early to bed and early to rise, you know," said Tom Merry, standing up in the boat, as it rocked up to the New House skiff. And Monty Lowther chimed in:

"Early to bed and early to rise is the way to do Figgins & Co. in the eyes!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Here, you keep out of our boat!" roared Figgins, scarcely believing his eyes, as he saw Tom Merry jump aboard the skiff and drag loose the painter.

The intentions of the School House party dawned on Figgins & Co. then. They made a wild rush down to the boat.

But the boat was loose, and a fellow in the Tub held the painter to tow it, and the School House oarsmen were pushing off.

Figgins made a wild spring ahead of the rest, and Lowther gave him a gentle push on the chest with an oar, and he disappeared into a bed of rushes.

Then the skiff rocked away on the water after the Tub.

Redfern leaped but desperately from the shore, and just landed on the skiff. He rolled into it, and Tom Merry collared him the next moment, and rolled him out. Necessarily he rolled into the water.

Splash!

Reddy was a first-class swimmer, and it did not take him many seconds to get back to the island. He dragged himself, puffing, from the water, and shook a furious fist after the raiders. There was a yell of mocking laughter from the School House party. They laid upon their oars at a safe distance from the island, with the captured skiff in tow, and waved hands at the infuriated New House eight on the shore.

And then a chorus started—unaccompanied, but with all the force of a dozen lusty young throats:

"Hip-PIP-pip! Hip-PIP-pip! We TAKE the cake! The latest Ragtime Band! OH!"

CHAPTER 8.

Figgins Agrees!

Figgins brandished a large fist at the School House boat and its crew.

Tom Merry & Co. had caught the New House fellows napping, and had captured their boat, and the fellows on the island were at a loss. They could not get off unless their enemies chose, excepting by swimming, and the arm of the Ryll that separated the island from the shore was broad, and the water ran deep. And not more than half of the New House juniors could swim anything like the distance—indeed, one or two of them could not swim at all.

The enraged juniors held a hurried consultation on the island shore, while their victorious rivals chanted and chortled Lowther's ragtime refrain.

"Let's swim off and scalp 'em!" growled Redfern.

"Seven against a dozen—and the dozen in the boat, with oars to push us off!" said Kerr. "Not good enough!"

"If all you silly asses could swim—"

"Well, I can't swim any more than you can talk sense," said Thompson of the Shell.

"Look here, you Shell duffer—"

"Look here, you cheeky fag—"

"Shut up!" roared Figgins. "There's no time to row here. Cheese it! How are we going to get at that boat?"

"Is that a conundrum?" snorted Thompson. "If it is, I give it up."

"Bedad, and we've got to swim or fly," said Murphy major. "I can't fly!"

Figgins grunted and turned away, and shouted to the fellows in the boat:

"Aho! You rotters!"

Tom Merry shouted back:

"Aho! You duffers!"

"Give us our boat!"

"When will you have it?" asked Monty Lowther politely.

"Now, or when you can get it?"

"We'll make it pax, if you like," said Figgins generously.

"Go hon!"

"Look here, we want our boat!" yelled Redfern.

"This is where we impose conditions," said Tom Merry. "We've got you chaps in the trap, and you're staying there, unless you come to terms."

"You can't keep us here to miss brekker, anyway," exclaimed Fatty Wynn.

"Can't we?" chuckled Tom Merry. "You'll see!"

"Why, you—villain!"

Words failed Fatty Wynn. To Fatty Wynn's mind, making a fellow miss a meal was the very last word in iniquity.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Poor old Fatty!" said Blake. "It will remind you of the time when you went on a hunger strike, won't it? Keep an eye on him, you chaps—when he gets hungry he's dangerous."

"Look here; what terms do you want to make?" demanded Figgins. "We haven't got any too much time to get in before brekker now."

"Good! You've got to promise, honour bright, to chuck up the wheeze."

"What?"

"You've got to get off the grass. You're to chuck up the scheme you've been scheming, and keep off the grass. That's the condition."

"Never!" roared Figgins.

"Then good-bye. We're going home," said Tom Merry. "We'll tow your boat after us, in case it should get lost. You'll find it in the boathouse when you get back—if you ever do get back! Ta-ta!"

"Look here—"

"Can't stop! Good-bye! Give way, you chaps!"

The School House fellows dipped their oars. The Tub began to glide away up the river with the New House eight-oar rocking in tow.

The New House fellows on the island watched it with furious eyes.

Kerr whispered hurriedly to his leader. A sudden grin overspread Figgins's face. He shouted to Tom Merry:

"Hold on! We'll make terms."

"I thought you would! Back water!"

The boat stopped again.

"Name your terms," said Figgins. "We'll hear what they are, and see if we can agree to them. Pile in!"

"Good enough! In the first place, you've got to admit that the scheme for a ragtime band is a School House scheme, and all others spurious imitations."

"Admitted!"

"You've got to agree to let the wheeze alone, and not to start a rival band."

"Agreed!"

"If you go to Abbotsford Regatta, you're not to take any musical instruments with you, and not to give any sort of condition of a ragtime performance."

The New House fellows smiled. It tickled them to see their rivals so utterly on the wrong track. But Figgins, with deep and wonderful artfulness, pretended to hesitate.

"I say, you're rather hard on us, you know!"

"Can't be helped!" said Tom Merry. "We can't have two ragtime bands playing against one another at the regatta. We're the only original ragtime band, and we take the cake, also the biscuit. You'll have to agree!"

"And if we don't?" asked Figgins, hypocritically.

"Then we shall have to leave you stranded. We shall be sorry, but we shall do it."

"Yaas, wathah! We shall be awfully sorry, Figgay, deah boy, but we shall do it wight enough. You will be stwanded."

"And if we promise—" said Figgins hesitatingly.

"Then we'll make it pax and hand over your boat."

"Well, you've got us!" said Figgins, with an appearance of great frankness. "I suppose we shall have to toe the line."

"Looks like it!" said Redfern, with a subdued chuckle.

"Is it agreed?" said Tom Merry. "No orchestra practice, no ragtime band, and the full admission that it's a School House wheeze, and ours only?"

"Yes."

"Honour bright?"

"Yes," said Figgins, with a great show of reluctance.

"Honour bright!"

"You all say the same?"

"We all say the same!" chorussed the New House crowd.

"Honour bright!"

"Good egg! We take your word, Gentlemen, this is where we gloat!"

"Hurray!"

"When you've done gloating, you might give us our boat," suggested Figgins.

"Here you are!"

The Tub pulled a little closer, and Tom Merry released the New House skiff, and sent it whizzing shoreward with a vigorous push. Figgins caught it as it bumped into the reeds.

The New House fellows gladly tumbled into the boat. Tom Merry & Co. watched them, expecting to see the suspected musical instruments brought into view. But none were to be seen when the New House eight pushed off.

"Hallo! Leaving your instruments of torture behind?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Our what?"

"Didn't you have your instruments with you for practice?" Figgins stared for a moment, and then he chuckled.

"Oh, that's all right," he said. "We sha'n't bother about them now."

"No good, as we're barred from starting a ragtime band in opposition to you fellows," said Kerr solemnly.

"But will they be safe left on the island?" said Manners. "Oh, nobody will find 'em!" said Figgins airily. Which was strictly true; anybody would have been very puzzled to find any musical instruments on that island belonging to Figgins & Co.

"Pull, you bounders!" added Figgins. "While we're here, we may as well show these School House duffers how to row."

"Cheeky ass, we could row your heads off!" exclaimed Blake indignantly.

"Try!" suggested Figgins.

In the heat of the moment the School House fellows did try. But the Tub, with so many passengers aboard, had no chance against the eight-oar. Figgins & Co. walked away from the bigger boat, pausing every now and then to kiss their hands to the exasperated School House fellows. The New House crew reached the school boathouse while Tom Merry & Co. were still labouring against the current.

Figgins & Co. chorled joyfully as they jumped on the raft. They had been caught napping by their old rivals, certainly, but it had cost them nothing to escape from their predicament. They did not mind promising not to do what they had never had any intention of doing.

"The silly chumps!" chuckled Figgins. "They think we went out to practise a silly ragtime band! Ha, ha, ha!"

"And they haven't the slightest notion of what we really went out for!" grinned Kerr.

"Not the slightest!"

"They can pile in with their blessed ragtime band," said Redfern. "They can hip-hip and take the cake as much as they want to. Any old thing, so long as they don't get on to the idea of sending an eight to the regatta."

"What ho!"

And Figgins & Co. went in to breakfast in great spirits.

The School House fellows came in a little later, but they were also in high spirits. They had warned off their supposed rivals, they had obtained a clear field for the School House Ragtime Band, and they were satisfied. And not one of them suspected, so far, that they had been on the wrong tack altogether, and that Figgins & Co.'s early morning expedition had nothing whatever to do with a ragtime band.

CHAPTER 9.

All Scratched!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY stood before the glass in Study No. 6, tying a necktie. Nine or ten neckties lay on the table, six or seven hung over the backs of chairs, and there were a few on the floor. The swell of St. Jim's was clad in white ducks, and looked a perfect and spotless picture. Monty Lowther looked in at the study door, and pretended to faint, as if overcome by the spectacle. Arthur Augustus saw his reflection in the glass, and looked round.

"Pwaw don't play the giddy ox. Lowthah," he said. "What do you think of this tie? Do you pwefier it to this wed one?"

"Gorgeous," said Lowther. "A thing of beauty and a joy for ever. Are you putting on your best clobber for the rehearsal?"

"The what?"

"I suppose you know it's Wednesday afternoon, a half-holiday, and a rehearsal of the ragtime band?" said Lowther.

"Bai Jove! I'd forgotten all about the wagtime band, deah boy!"

"Then it's lucky I dropped in to jog your memory," said Lowther. "Come on; we're meeting in the woodshed. Any old tie will do for a rehearsal."

"I'm afraid I can't come."

"Rats!"

"I'm goin' up the wivah," explained Arthur Augustus.

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Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

NEXT
WEDNESDAY:

"GUSSY'S GUEST!"

finishing his necktie at last. "My patah has his houseboat at Abbotsford now, you know, and I'm takin' advantage of the half-holiday to pay him a visit."

"Bandsmen can't take holidays without the permission of the conductor," said Lowther.

"Wats!"

"All members of the orchestra who don't turn up at rehearsals get the order of the boot."

"I should wefuse to have the ordah of the boot, Lowthah; but I am bound to go up the wivah to-day. My Cousin Ethel will be expectin' me."

"Now, look here—"

Blake and Herries and Digby came into the study, looking for Arthur Augustus. Monty Lowther turned to them with an exasperated air.

"Lend me a hand to carry that image to the woodshed!" he exclaimed. "He says he's not coming to the rehearsal. We've got to rehearse three new pieces to-day—the Boston Bunny-Hug, the Lobster Glide, and the Crabs' Crawl."

"Come on, Gussy," said Blake. "We don't want to have to carry you on a warm afternoon."

"I should wefuse to be cawwied. I'm goin' up the wivah—"

"Your mistake; you're coming to the woodshed."

"I've ordahed a launch from Wayland—"

"Then you can disorder it," said Lowther.

"I'll telephone for you to say that you won't want it," Herries offered.

"Wats! I'm going up the wivah in the petwol launch."

"You're not!" roared Blake.

"I'm goin' to have tea on my patah's houseboat with Cousin Ethel."

"Look here—"

"And I'm goin' to take you fellows with me—"

"Oh!"

"So the sooner you get weady the bettah, as the launch will be weady at the waft in half an hour," said D'Arcy, consulting his watch.

Blake and Herries and Digby exchanged glances.

"Well, now you're talking," said Blake cautiously. "When I come to think of it, I don't believe in over-doing this rehearsal business. Orchestras that are always rehearsing are liable to get stale, I should think, like footballers who over-do practice."

"Just what I was thinking," said Herries heartily. "It's possible to have too much of a good thing."

Lowther exploded.

"You frabjous chumps! You silly asses! You can't even play in tune yet. You keep time like a rhinoceros dancing. You'd need ten years' rehearsing before you could play 'Home, Sweet Home' so that people would recognise it. Come on!"

"I don't believe in over-doing these things," said Blake obstinately. "'Nuff's as good as a giddy feast."

Monty Lowther almost danced with rage. He was beginning to experience some of the worries of a professional conductor, with unreliable members in his band.

"All players who don't turn up for orchestral practice are scratched!" he shouted. "I shall take your names off."

"Take your own off, and come in the launch with us!" said D'Arcy.

"Yah!"

With that monosyllabic but emphatic reply, Lowther dramatically drew a pencil through three names on his orchestra list, and stamped out of the study.

"Seems wathah waxy," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Wats! Bwitons nevah shall be slaves! Blow the wagtime band."

And Blake and Herries and Digby were quite willing to "blow" it.

Monty Lowther tramped off to the woodshed, where the other members of the orchestra were already assembled. Tom Merry and Manners and Kangaroo had turned up at the call of duty.

"Where are the other duffers?" asked the Cornstalk, as Lowther came in.

Lowther snorted.

"They're scratched. Refuse to attend rehearsal."

"Oh, the rotters!"

"This band is reduced to a quartette," said Lowther.

"After all, we shall work it better without those Fourth Form kids. Now, let's get on. We're practising the Crabs' Crawl first."

And sounds of music, more or less in tune and time, proceeded from the woodshed. But the crabs had not finished crawling, so to speak, when the door of the woodshed opened, and the four Fourth Formers looked in. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy surveyed the labouring orchestra through his eyeglass with great benignity.

"Gentlemen—" he began.

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"THE PENNY POPULAR,"
Every Friday.

Lowther brandished his baton—originally a cricket-stump—at the elegant swell of St. Jim's.

"Buzz off!" he roared. "Outsiders are not allowed to interrupt rehearsals."

"I wefuse to be wegarded as an outsiders. Pway stop that wovw a minute while I speak."

"Shurrup!"

"I decline to shut up. Tom Mewwy, we're goin' to visit my patah's houseboat, and we've got a petwol launch and a man. We want you fellows to come."

"The more the merrier," said Blake.

"Can't be did—we're busy!" said Tom Merry hesitating.

"Unless our conductor wishes to put the practice off."

"Might save it up for a rainy day," suggested Manners.

"Look here!" roared Lowther.

"We shall have a wippin' tea on the houseboat," said Arthur Augustus, "and Cousin Ethel will be delighted to see you."

Tom Merry put his violin into its case.

"What are you up to?" roared Lowther.

"Place aux dames," said Tom Merry. "Must think of politeness, Monty. If there's a ripping feed on the houseboat—I mean, if Cousin Ethel would like us to come—"

"If you leave the orchestra without permission, I scratch your name off the list," said Lowther ferociously.

"Then trot out the permission."

"Sha'n't."

"Then I'll chance it," said Tom Merry. "Come on, Manners. We'll chance it together. Considering the splendid progress we've made, we're entitled to a holiday. This is where the orchestra goes on strike."

"Hear, hear!" said Manners; and he locked up his violin in its case.

"Oh, you wasters!" said Lowther. "Never mind; we shall have a duo left—Kangy and I. You're sticking to the old flag, Kangy?"

"Certainly," said Noble. "I've not been asked to the houseboat."

"Weally, Kangawooh, of course you undahstand that the invitation applies to you," said Arthur Augustus. "I twust you do not think I could be guilty of the wotten bad form of issuin' an invitation in the pwesence of a person whom I did not intend to invite as well. It would be impos—"

"Wait a tick while I put away my banjo," said Kangaroo.

"So you're going!" yelled Lowther.

"Considering the splendid progress I've made—"

"You come, too, Lowthah, deah boy."

"I shall scratch you off the list, Kangaroo."

"Go it!" said the Cornstalk. "There won't be any list left if you scratch us all off. I suppose you're not thinking of appearing solo as a ragtime band, with a cricket-stump to play on."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Come on, Lowthah, deah boy," urged Arthur Augustus.

"We shall all wehearse much bettah atah a little outin', you know. We shall return to our labahs like giants wewashed with wine."

"Well, I've got an idea," said Lowther, after a pause. "We'll take the ragtime band in the launch, and give your pater and Cousin Ethel a treat."

"Oh, cwumbs!"

"What do you fellows say?" asked Lowther, looking round. And the fellows all replied at once, and they all said the same thing:

"Rats!"

There was evidently no doubt as to the opinion of the ragtime band on the subject.

"Come on," said Arthur Augustus. "I twust you will come, too, Lowthah. But pway don't spwing any more wotten ideahs on us!"

And the band marched off for the river. Monty Lowther snorted, and followed them. It was certain that he could not conduct a rehearsal minus an orchestra, and so he made the best of a bad job. But, as occurred to him upon reflection, a run up the river in a launch on a bright summer's day, and tea on a houseboat, was not a very bad job after all.

The launch, with a man in charge, was rocking by the raft when the School House juniors came down to the bank of the Ryll. Wally, Arthur Augustus's young brother, was already in the launch, with a straw hat on the back of his head, and a straw in his mouth. He greeted the juniors with a shrill yell.

"Buck up, lazybones! We're all ready!"

"Pway wun in and get a clean collah, Wally," said his major.

"Go in and get one for me," said Wally. "we'll start while you're gone, and you can run along the towing-path."

"You young duffah—"

"Tumble in!" said Tom Merry.

"Put your hat on straight, at all events," said the distressed swell of St. Jim's. "I weally wish you would try to look respectable while you are out with me, Wally."

"Oh, don't you begin, Gussy!" implored the minor. "Jump in!"

CHAPTER 10.

A Rag on the River.

FIGGINS & Co. were going for a trial spin.

Not a trial spin in the ordinary sense. Figgins had heard that D'Arcy's pater and mater had arrived at Abbotsford, and that D'Arcy's cousin Ethel was with them. And so it occurred to Figgins that it would be a ripping idea to take a spin with the eight as far as Abbotsford. By rail Abbotsford was a good distance from St. Jim's, but by river it was still more distant; but as Figgins said, an eight that was worth its salt ought to be up to a good long row. It would be the most splendid kind of practice, Figgins declared, and they wouldn't need to pump themselves; they could take it quite easy, and have a rest at Abbotsford before returning in the cool of the evening. In short, Figgins was full of reasons for going.

As a matter of fact, he had made up his mind to go, and as he could not possibly cut practice with the eight that afternoon, the only resource was to take the eight with him.

Fatty Wynn expended a small fortune at the tuck-shop in case of accidents—Fatty Wynn counting it as an accident if he was without anything to eat for an hour and a half, and a very serious accident if it ran to two hours. The New House eight, looking very fit and business-like in their rowing shorts, ran their skiff down to the water as the motor-launch began to snort.

Immediately the eyes of the School House party on the launch were fixed on them. Busy with their new ragtime wheeze, Tom Merry & Co. had paid no attention to the New House fellows since the adventure on the island. They were as far as ever from knowing the true inwardness of Figgins & Co.'s intentions.

"Hallo! Going out in the puff-puff?" called out Figgins, glancing up at the row of School House faces along the little launch.

"Yaas, wathah, Figgins. I'm takin' these fellows to see my people at Abbotsford," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Why, that's our way!" said Figgins.

"Bai Jove, is it?" said D'Arcy, suspiciously. He turned his eyeglass upon Figgins, and Figgins turned red. D'Arcy had complained more than once that Figgins seemed to look upon cousin Ethel as his cousin, and not D'Arcy's at all.

"Shouldn't wonder if you run across us," said Figgins affably.

"Rough on you if we do—in this snorter!" said Jack Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"This is the second time we've seen you at practice, Figgy," said Tom Merry, "what's the little game?"

Figgins chuckled. It was the second time the Shell fellow had seen the eight at practice, but it was the sixth time the eight had been out.

"Oh, we're going for a little run!" he said. "Want to see the arrangements at Abbotsford, you know. We're going to give the regatta a look in on Saturday, if all goes well."

"Not with a ragtime band?" said Lowther quickly.

"No—that's agreed."

"Honour bright!" said Kerr solemnly.

And for some reason or other all the New House fellows laughed.

"We'll race you to Abbotsford, Figgy," said Blake, cheerily, "we'll just keep behind you and cheer you with friendly words."

"Yaas, wathah! Ha, ha, ha!"

"You keep your distance, you School House bounders!" growled Figgins, a little alarmed. The motor-launch could, of course, make rings round the eight, and Figgins was a little uneasy at the prospect.

There was a chuckling and whispering among the School House fellows as Figgins & Co. pulled out into the river. The eight kept time very well, and the boat went fast against the current of the Ryll. Arthur Augustus spoke in a low voice to the man in charge of the launch, and the man grinned. He was sure of a magnificent tip from the Honourable Arthur Augustus, and he was quite willing to oblige.

The launch throbbed away from the raft, out upon the shining expanse of the river.

Figgins glared back at the launch as he tugged at his oar. It was gliding exactly in his track, sending a warning snort-snort as it came.

"Pull a bit, kids," said Figgins. "Those School House boats are on our track."

The New House crew laboured at the oars.

But the launch came up like an arrow, and there was a gasp of alarm from some of the boat's crew as it swooped down. But it did not run into the boat. It circled round, and kept alongside, throbbing. The School House fellows lined the side and looked at the labouring New House juniors.

"Row, brothers, row!" sang Manners sweetly.

"Pull devil, pull baker!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Can I have that crab when you've caught it, Thompson?"

"Reddy, old man, you're looking quite pink. Are you tired Reddy? Or are you getting bad-tempered. Do you think Reddy is getting bad-tempered, you chaps?"

"Let us cheer him up! Let us ask him riddles. Where did you get that face, Reddy? You call it a face?"

"Are you hungry, Wynn?"

"Would you like a biscuit, Fatty?"

"Give Fatty a biscuit!"

Three or four biscuits whizzed from the launch, and they peppered Fatty Wynn all over his red, plump face.

"Ow!" gasped Fatty.

Figgins glared furiously at the grinning faces along the launch.

"Keep off, you School House rotters!" he roared.

"Shut up, you dummies!" howled Kerr.

"Do you want all the river?" demanded Tom Merry. "I suppose you do, the way you row. But we're safe on the launch. Is that the fifth or the sixth crab you've caught, Thompson?"

"The seventh, I think," said Digby thoughtfully.

"Lawrence thinks there's a buried treasure at the bottom of the river," said Manners. "He's dredging for it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins made his men a sign to back water. It was hopeless to think of outdistancing the motor launch, and the only thing was to fall behind. The oarsmen felt that they could not endure that fire of chaff all the way to Abbotsford. And Blake had taken out a pea-shooter now.

Whiz! Ping!

"Ow!" roared Fatty Wynn, as the missile caught him on the side of the nose. "Gerroh! Oh, you rotter! Yah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The boat dropped behind, but the launch swung round in pursuit, and circled round the eight mockingly. The School House fellows were enjoying themselves. The remarks they passed on the New House rowing exasperated Figgins & Co. beyond measure.

"Look 'ere, are you going to clear off?" roared Figgins, in a fury.

"No fear! We want to see you row!"

"We've never been at a crab-catching competition before."

"It's funny, Figgy, you know."

Figgins & Co. pulled away back towards St. Jim's in despair. But the victorious enemy were not done with them yet. The launch pursued them. As Blake remarked, it was worth while being a little bit late at Abbotsford to give Figgins & Co. the ragging of their lives.

But Figgins was whispering to his men now; a desperate and brilliant idea had come into his head.

"Listen to me, you chaps! Would you rather go to Abbotsford in a motor-launch than row up there in this boat?"

"What ho!" said the crew.

"Our practice spin is spoiled, anyway. Those rotters will stick to us till we get off the river."

"Looks like it!" growled Kerr.

"They are out for fun," muttered Figgins. "We'll give them all the fun they want, and a bit over. There are eight of them, and nine of us, counting Jameson."

"I suppose you can count me," growled Jameson indignantly. "I'm as good in a scrap as any other idiot here—I mean, as any idiot here."

"Good!" said Figgins. "Now, you follow my lead, you chaps. We're going to take the launch by storm. All those rotters can swim, so it doesn't matter if we chuck 'em into the river, and we're pretty near the raft now, and there are a good many boats out that can pick 'em up."

"Oh, crumbs!"

"My hat!"

"Let 'em run alongside, and then let the oars go, and follow me, and rush 'em out of their own-blessed boat!" whispered Figgins.

The New House juniors suppressed their chuckles. They slacked down, and nerved themselves for the attack, as the launch swooped down on them. The grinning faces of the School House Co. looked over the side.

"You fags tired yet?"

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A Magnificent, New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

NEXT
WEDNESDAY:

"GUSSY'S GUEST!"

"Why don't you give it up, Figgins? You can't row, you know."

"Why don't you play marbles instead, Figgy?"

Bump!

"Hallo! Look out!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

But it was a little late to look out. The boat had bumped into the launch, and with a spring like a tiger Figgins was on board, and his comrades followed him fast. Figgins threw his arms round Tom Merry and Blake as he leaped in, and all three of them went rolling in the bottom of the launch.

"Yarcoh!"

"Oh!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Pirvey, by Jove! Line up!" roared Lowther.

The eight-oar rocked abandoned on the river. In the launch there was a wild and whirling combat, and the launch rocked till the gunwale almost touched the water.

CHAPTER 11.

Rank Piracy.

"SOCK in to 'em!" roared Figgins.

The boarding-party had the advantage.

The surprise had been almost complete, and the invaders were all aboard before they could be resisted, and in the rush two of the School House fellows were knocked over the side. This left the odds on Figgins's side. Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther were in the bottom of the launch, with three fellows sitting on them. Blake and Herries were swimming a dozen feet from the side as the launch glided on. The other fellows were putting up a fierce fight, but the odds were against them. Kangaroo splashed into the river, where he swam like a duck, but he had no chance of getting aboard again. Digby followed him in, and hung on to the gunwale. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with his hat on the back of his head, and his eyeglass fluttering at the end of its cord, was fighting like a Trojan. But Kerr collared him, and brought him down, and Fatty Wynn sat on him, and that finished Arthur Augustus. He gasped and collapsed.

Four fellows were in the water, and four were down in the bottom of the launch, with victorious foes sitting on them—the Terrible Three and D'Arcy major and minor.

Figgins & Co. had captured the launch.

The motor-man was blinking in astonishment at the scene. He did not feel called upon to take part in a schoolboy row, of course, and he had the motor to attend to. So he looked on calmly.

Figgins ran to him.

"Get alongside that boat again," he said. "We want to take it in tow."

"But I say—"

"Don't say anything," said Figgins cheerfully. "You do as you're told. I'm captain of this launch now, see?"

"But Master D'Arcy—"

"We shall be sorry to chuck you into the river," said Figgins politely.

"But Kerr could manage the launch quite easily, so we don't really need you. Are you going to get alongside that boat?"

And the man grinned, and said he would. The river pirates were evidently not to be trifled with.

The launch ran back to the rocking eight-oar. That left the four swimmers far behind, Digby having been pushed off the gunwale. They had to strike out for the landing-raft, where they pulled themselves out of the water, drenched.

Figgins glanced at his prisoners. They were struggling violently, but they had no chance of getting up. Only Wally was taking that sudden reverse of fortune cheerfully.

Figgy jumped into the eight-oar. He handed up the belongings of his comrades—their coats and mufflers, and Fatty Wynn's bag of provisions. Then he stepped on the launch again.

"Will you take that boat back, Tom Merry?" he asked.

"No!" roared Tom Merry.

"Would you rather go into the river?"

"You—you rotter!"

"Chuck him into the boat!" said Figgins. "He can please himself about staying there or dropping overboard."

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the New House juniors.

Tom Merry was tossed into the boat, Manners and Lowther, struggling furiously, were tossed in after him.

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The Terrible Three seized the oars, with a desperate intention of rushing back to the attack. But the launch glided away from the boat, and they had no chance.

They stood in the rocking boat, and yelled after the launch direful threats, to which their foes responded with mocking laughter.

Of the School House party, only Arthur Augustus D'Arcy remained in the launch, with Fatty Wynn seated on his chest, and Wally held fast by Thompson of the Shell.

Figgins came along, and looked down at him with a smile. D'Arcy's face was very red, and his manners had completely lost the repose which stamps the caste of Vere de Vere.

"You uttah wottahs!" he said sulphurously. "Lemme get up at once!"

"In a hurry?" asked Figgins kindly.

"Yaas, you boundah! You are spoilin' my clobber!"

"Chuck him overboard!" said Figgins.

There was a yell from Arthur Augustus.

"You awful wuffians! Pway don't do anythin' of the sort."

"Can't you swim?"

"I can swim bettah than any wottah in the New House."

"Then what are you afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid, you beast!" shrieked D'Arcy. "But it would ruin my clothes."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you will dwag this fat wottah off me, I will wise and give you a feabful thwashin'!"

"Not good enough," said Figgins, with a shake of the head.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'll tell you what I will do," said Figgins generously.

"We're going to spend the afternoon on the river in this launch, and I'll invite you to make one of the party."

D'Arcy's face was a study. To be invited to make one of a party on his own launch by the fellows who had seized it forcibly was a little too much. The New House juniors yelled at the expression upon his aristocratic face.

"We should like you to come along, especially as we may meet your cousin," went on Figgins blandly.

"You fearful wottah!" gasped D'Arcy.

"I think I'm making you a good offer. However, if you prefer to go overboard—"

"I wefuse—"

"Take his legs, Kerr. You take his head, Reddy! Chuck him right out!"

"What-ho!"

"I wefuse to be chucked into the wivah!" roared D'Arcy.

"I am willin' to make it pax, and I will not thwash you."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, if you make it pax you can get up," said Figgins, grinning. "Roll off, Fatty!"

Fatty Wynn rolled off.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy rose to his feet. He smoothed down his rumpled clothes, and knocked into shape his rumpled and very crumpled hat. Then he jammed his monocle into his eye and regarded the hilarious New House fellows with a withering glare.

"I have given my pawole, so I cannot thwash you," he began.

"Might find it rather hard, anyway!" murmured Kerr.

"I weward you as wottahs!"

"Go hon!"

"I considah you a set of piwatical beasts!"

"Hear, hear!"

"And I ordah you to leave my launch at once!" said Arthur Augustus.

"Certainly!" said Figgins, with crushing sarcasm. "Of course, we shall go immediately. Would you like us to jump into the river, or fly off into the air?"

"Gaskins, kindly head this launch for the waft," said Arthur Augustus, taking no notice of the juniors, addressing himself to the motorman.

"Yes, sir," said Gaskins, with a doubtful glance at the pirates.

Figgins made a sign to Redfern, who picked up a boathook, and stepped towards Gaskins.

"Where will you have it, Gassy?" asked Redfern.

"Oh, sir—"

"If you don't obey orders, Gaskins, you will be harpooned," Redfern explained. "We are in possession of this craft at present."

NEXT
WEDNESDAY

CUSSY'S
QUEST!

A Grand Story of Tom
Merry & Co. at
St. Jim's.
Don't Miss It!
Order Early.



The chums of the New House looked down from their study window to the crowd of School House fellows, and at the light gleaming on the varied instruments of the orchestra. "My only hat!" ejaculated Figgins. "What's the game?" "It's a serenade," said Tom Merry. The cricket stump waved, and the band commenced.

(See Chapter 5.)

"Master D'Arcy—"

"Now, be a good chap!" said Figgins. "We've asked you to join the party, Gussy, and a fellow can't do more than that."

"We shall be honoured if you accept our kind invitation," said Kerr.

"And you shall have some of the jam tarts," said Fatty Wynn, as a clincher.

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"Will you take the othah fellows aboard again?" asked Arthur Augustus, wavering a little.

"No jolly fear!" said Figgins promptly. "There isn't room for such a crowd on the launch, for one thing. And this is a New House party. No School House wasters admitted. We make an exception in your favour because—ahem!—because—"

"Because we love you so," said Redfern.

"And it will give the party a tone to have you along," said Kerr solemnly.

Arthur Augustus nodded.

"To say nothing of your respected minor's company," said Lawrence.

"Oh, come off!" said Wally. "I'm willing to join the party. Anything for a quiet life. Get it down, Gussy, and say yes."

"Or yaas!" said Kerr.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Wally—" began his major.

"We shall be sorry to chuck you into the river, and spoil your clothes," said Figgins, softly as the cooing dove.

"If you are goin' to be such a feafuhl wuffian, Figgins—"

"I am afraid I am," confessed Figgins.

"Then I shall have no wesource but to join the partay."

"Hear, hear!"

"Same here," said Wally. "Now, will you tell this silly ass to take his beastly knuckles out of my neck?"

"Pax for the whole afternoon!" said Figgins warningly.

"Good enough!" said Wally.

"Yaas, it's all wight."

And so D'Arcy major and minor joined Figgins's little party. Jameson and Wally were pally on the spot. They were chums in the school, though they belonged to rival Houses. Indeed, it is to be feared that Wally preferred the present state of affairs, with Jameson to pal with for the afternoon, and did not regret the disaster that had befallen his House.

The launch glided away swiftly up the river, and Figgins & Co. chortled. Meanwhile, the Terrible Three had pulled the boat back to the landing-raft. The other fellows had already gone up to the school to change their wet clothes. The Terrible Three jumped ashore amid the chuckles of a crowd of fellows who had witnessed the scene of piracy on the high seas. They looked at one another dolefully.

"Done!" said Tom Merry.

"Dished!" said Manners.

"Diddled!" groaned Lowther.

And they went their way disconsolately through the grinning crowd on the raft and the towing-path.

"Never mind," said Monty Lowther brightly, "we'll have the ragtime rehearsal after all!"

CHAPTER 12.

Cousin Ethel Does Not Mind.

FIGGINS & CO. smiled broadly as the petrol launch ran swiftly up the shining Ryll. They had turned the tables most completely upon the School House juniors, and they were contented.

The smiles returned to the noble features of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. Figgins was very polite to him, perhaps with ulterior motives. Arthur Augustus was allowed to assume command of the launch, and he gave Figgins & Co. valuable tips about the management of the same, to which Figgins, at least, listened with great respect. As for Wally, he was in the best of spirits.

But as the launch drew near to Abbotsford, Arthur Augustus turned his eyeglass upon Figgins & Co. in a rather doubtful way.

"I suppose you chaps haven't any othah clothes with you?" he asked.

"Forgot to bring our wardrobes," said Kerr regretfully.

"You see, it won't be quite en wegal to take chaps to tea in a houseboat in wovin' shorts," said D'Arcy.

"I think it would be all right," said Figgins. "We can explain that we were out rowing, when you asked us to come with you, and you were so pressing that we couldn't refuse."

"I am afraid it would not be all wight, Figgay."

"Then, what's to be done?" asked Figgins.

"Pewwaps it would be better for you chaps to go ashore," suggested D'Arcy. "You can wait on the shore, and I will pick you up in the launch again as I go back."

The New House juniors looked at Arthur Augustus as if they would eat him.

"Don't suggest such a thing, Gussy," said Kerr.

"Why not, deah boy?"

"Because it would pain us to have to chuck you into the river after all," Kerr explained.

"Weally, Kerr—"

"Perhaps we'd better not take the launch up to Abbotsford at all," said Figgins, with a sidelong wink at the Co. "We'd better go for a spin on the river instead."

"But my people are expectin' me, Figgins!"

"Sorry!" said Figgins. "It can't be helped."

"Ahem! Pewwaps, after all, I could take you chaps as you are," said D'Arcy, after a pause. "After all, they won't expect New House chaps to look vevy respectable."

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Arthur Augustus came near being bumped in the bottom of the launch for that remark. But Figgins waved back his indignant comrades.

"Only what wowwies me is that if people observe us, they may judge me by the company I keep," added D'Arcy, with a worried look.

"I know I shall biff him!" murmured Redfern. "It's no good making faces at me, Figgins. I shall biff him sooner or later, and I may as well do it now."

"Shurrup!" said Figgins. "Gussy is our guest, and he is allowed to run on and talk any rot he likes."

"Weally, Figgay—"

"Yes, shut up, Gussy, old man," said Wally. "You're making me tired, too."

"You diswespectful young wascal—"

"Now he's started, he'll go on till he's run down," said Wally in despair. "Better drop him over the side. It's the only way."

Arthur Augustus sniffed indignantly.

"Well, put on your coats, you chaps, and look as wespectable as you can," he said at last, as the launch ran into the last reach.

There were several houseboats moored along the bank, and some tents on the shore, gay with bunting. Abbotsford was making the most of its regatta; indeed, some Abbotsford folk were persuaded that it was better than Henley any day. There were boats and punts and dinghies galore to be seen upon the sunny river; a good many of them with crews of fellows from Abbotsford School. Some of the latter hailed the launch with opprobrious epithets, for there was rivalry between the two schools, which had regular fixtures for football and cricket.

The St. Jim's fellows replied with cheery chaff, and Redfern, who was a good shot, caught Parsons of Abbotsford under the chin with a sandwich. Parsons was stroked of the Abbotsford eight that was rowing in the race on Saturday. Parsons stood up in his boat, and shook his fists after the launch, and yelled.

"Cheeky boundah!" said Arthur Augustus, turning his eyeglass upon the exasperated Parsons.

"Yah! You crawl along in a stink-boat because you can't row!" roared the Abbotsford juniors.

"Can't row, eh?" grinned Figgins. "You'll see some day."

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy thoughtfully. "It wouldn't have been a bad ideah to entah an eight for Satahday."

"No," said Figgins; "it wouldn't, would it?"

"Bai Jove! If I'd thought of it soonah, I'd have done it," said Arthur Augustus. "I could have waised a cew in the School House. Of course, you New House chaps wouldn't have been any good."

"I suppose not," agreed Figgins, winking at his comrades.

"In fact, I might do it now, only I'm engaged to play in the wagtine band."

"And an eight wouldn't be much use without you rowing stroke," remarked Kerr.

D'Arcy nodded unsuspiciously.

"That's just it, deah boy."

Figgins was very near at that moment to telling the swell of the School House the great secret. But he restrained himself. Saturday afternoon would be time enough for the School House fellows to learn that the New House at St. Jim's had, in point of fact, entered an eight at the Abbotsford Regatta.

Figgins & Co. could imagine their looks when they learned that fact, and realised that while they were making day hideous with a ragtime band, the New House fellows were winning rowing honours for St. Jim's.

"Bai Jove! There's the houseboat."

"And there's Cousin Ethel!" exclaimed Figgins, as he caught sight of a pretty hat and a bright parasol.

"Yaas, wathah!"

The launch ran alongside the houseboat and ceased to snort. Arthur Augustus swept off his hat, and the New House fellows raised their caps. Cousin Ethel looked down from the houseboat with a bright smile.

There was a slight expression of surprise on the girl's face as she noted her cousin Arthur's companions. Arthur Augustus had said that he was bringing a party of friends with him to tea. Naturally, Ethel Cleveland had expected to see School House fellows. But the kind smile she gave Figgins showed that she was not displeased, at all events, by the change.

"You are late, Arthur," said Ethel, as the swell of St. Jim's came on board.

"Yaas; it was owin' to these wottahs—I—I mean, it was owin' to circs ovah which I had no coutwol," stammered Arthur Augustus. "I've bwought Figgins & Co. along to tea, Ethel, deah gal. I hope you don't mind."

"I'm very pleased to see Figgins & Co." said Ethel cheerfully.

"And pway excuse their lookin' like a lot of twamps," said Arthur Augustus, again unconsciously narrowly escaping massacre. "I picked them up wovin' in a boat, you know."

"Gussy was so pressing we simply couldn't decline," said Kerr.

"You know what Gussy is—there's no refusing him!" said Redfern.

"Bai Jove! I—"

"And tea is ready," said Cousin Ethel. "Your father is ashore, but Lady Eastwood is here. I hope you had a nice run on the river."

"Wippin', deah gal!"

"And Tom Merry and the rest couldn't come?"

"No; they were pwevented by these—"

"Those circumstances," suggested Redfern.

"Yaas, they were vewy sorry they couldn't come."

"They looked vewy sorry indeed!" said Kerr.

Perhaps Cousin Ethel suspected something; but if so, she made no inquiries further. Under the awning on the houseboat the St. Jim's fellows sat down to tea, and D'Arcy's "mater" and Cousin Ethel did the honours. Never had Figgins & Co. enjoyed a feed so heartily as they did that one. Fatty Wynn's face was beaming like a full moon. As he often explained, he wasn't greedy; but he liked a lot, he liked it often, and he liked it good. There was a lot, and it was good, on this occasion; and Fatty Wynn exerted himself to do justice to the feed. He succeeded!

And after tea, when Figgins was having a little talk with Cousin Ethel, he confided to her the great secret of the New House eight—which was to carry off the cup and all the honours on Saturday; and Cousin Ethel undertook that nothing whatever should prevent her from seeing that race. She undertook further to keep it a dead secret; and she did so. And Arthur Augustus wondered why his fair cousin smiled when he told her later that, if he had had time, he would have brought an eight to the regatta to lick all comers and win rowing honours for St. Jim's.

The time passed all too quickly; and in the sunset the visitors took their leave, and the launch snorted away down the river again—the juniors waving their caps back to Cousin Ethel on the houseboat.

Figgins gave a sigh of contentment as they glided down the river in the dusk.

"What a ripping afternoon!" he said.

And the other fellows agreed.

CHAPTER 13.

Arthur Augustus Leads.

"**B**OILING in oil," said Jack Blake reflectively, "would be too good!"

"Much too good!" agreed the juniors who were discussing tea, shrimps, and the wickedness of Figgins & Co. in No. 6 Study in the School House.

"Burning at the stake would meet the case!" growled Monty Lowther. "Only I never did like a burnt steak," he added thoughtfully.

Blake caught Lowther in the ear with a shrimp, and proceeded:

"Something lingering, with boiling oil in it, is what they want—but the question is, what are we going to give 'em?"

"Play to 'em with your ragtime band!" suggested Digby.

"Ass!" said the ragtime bandmen unanimously.

"Well, it would serve 'em right, after what they've done," said Dig.

"Shurrup! I wonder what they've done with Gussy?" said Blake; "they seem to have made him a prisoner on the launch. The awful cheek—our launch!"

"The New House will be chortling and burbling over it!" said Kangaroo.

"We shall have to take them down a peg somehow!" agreed Tom Merry. "I wonder what on earth has become of Gussy—and Wally too—"

"Talk of angels!" said Lowther.

The study door opened, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy walked in. He was looking a little sunburnt, and very merry and bright. He nodded and smiled affably to the tea-party in No. 6.

"Escaped?" asked Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"I don't mean from Colney Hatch—I mean from Figgins & Co.!" explained Herries.

"I have just returned," said Arthur Augustus.

"Where have you been?"

"To Abbotsford, of course."

"What!" howled the juniors together.

"I made it pax with Figgins & Co. It was wathah silly of you chaps to allow yourselves to be chucked out of the launch. I should not have permitted anythin' of the kind."

"Why, you image—"

"I wufuse to be called an image, Tom Mewwy. You will be pleased to heah that we had a vewy wippin' aftahnnoon at Abbotsford, and Ethel sends you her kind wegards."

"You blessed traitor!" said Blake indignantly. "Do you mean to say that you chummed up with the enemy?"

"Certainly not. I was vewy uneasy at the kind of figure they cut, as a mattah of fact. They looked like a lot of twamps," said Arthur Augustus. "Howevah, aftah I made it pax, I had to let them weimin in the launch. Aftah givin' my pawole, I could not vewy well chuck them out!"

"Otherwise you'd have done it, eh?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Yes; I think I can see them lettin' you do it!" said Blake affably. "But what did you make it pax with the rotters for?"

"Because Fatty Wynn was sittin' on my chest!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, that was a weighty reason!" grinned Monty Lowther. "Upon the whole, we will excuse you."

"Yes, and you can have some shrimps," said Blake generously. "There's two left."

"Thank you, deah boy; I have had tea on the houseboat," said Arthur Augustus. "But when we came back I impressed upon Figgins & Co. that the pax was ovah. I pointed out to them that I was bound to make them sowwy for themselves, in wepayment of the twick they played us in collabin' the launch."

"And what did Figgins say?"

"He said that if the pax was ended he might as well bump me—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And the wottahs bumped me on the waft," said Arthur Augustus.

"You should have got to a safe distance before you wound up the truce," grinned Blake.

"We were just discussing ways and means of scalping Figgins & Co. for their cheek."

"Yaas, I wegard it as bein' up to us to put the wottahs in their place. Figgy is a cheeky ass. He was talkin' to my cousin Ethel all the time, and I didn't have a look-in. He seems to wegard my cousin as his cousin."

"Cheek!" said Tom Merry solemnly.

"Yaas, wathah. If you fellows are weady to back me up I will lead you to victowy, and we will make Figgins & Co. pwopably sowwy for themselves."

"Hear, hear!"

"I have thought out a wippin' plan," pursued Arthur Augustus; "Figgins has gone for a walk by himself on the towin'-path."

"What on earth for?"

"I weally do not know. He seemed vewy thoughtfoul on the launch comin' back, as if he was thinkin' of somethin'. I heard him mutter somethin' that sounded like my cousin's name, but I suppose he couldn't have been thinkin' about Ethel. Pewwaps, though, he was wovvied at Ethel havin' seen him in such a wuff wig-out," said D'Arcy thoughtfully.

"Perhaps!" grinned the juniors.

"Pewwaps he was makin' up poetwy, though, as I wemembah he asked Kerr if he knew a whyme for stahwy eyes," said D'Arcy.

"Starry which?" gasped Blake.

"Stahwy eyes," said D'Arcy. "Kerr suggested pigsties as a whyme, and Figgins seemed quite huffed. He may be makin' up poetwy for the next numbah of the 'Weekly,' and he's gone along the towin'-path to think it out. I considah it a good ideah to capchah him, and cawwy him off a pwisonah, and make him own up on his bended knees that the School House is cock-house at St. Jim's. Mannahs can take a photograph of him doin' it."

"Yes—I take most of my photographs after sunset," said Manners, with terrific sarcasm, which was quite lost upon Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, so busy was he with his scheme for making the obnoxious Figgins "sit up."

"That's all wight, then," said D'Arcy. "Get your camewah, and come along."

The juniors grinned at one another, and rose from the table. They had no expectation whatever of catching the wary Figgins napping, and Manners did not intend to try the experiment of taking photographs after dark. But the Co. considered that Arthur Augustus deserved some punishment for palling on with their victorious foes, and they intended to pull gently the aristocratic leg of the swell of the School House.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy led the way, and the Co. followed him with serious faces. They marched out of the School House, and the Co. drew up in order of march, forming threes. Several fellows stared at them and asked them politely whether they were off their dots. Kangaroo signed to Clifton Dane and Bernard Glyn, his study-mates, to join him, and this made three ranks of three; quite an imposing array as they marched after the swell of St. Jim's.

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"What on earth's the game?" demanded Gore of the Shell, as he met them.

"I'm leadin' these chaps," said Arthur Augustus.

"Where to—Bedlam?" asked Gore.

"Weally, Goah—"

"We're following in our father's footsteps," Monty Lowther explained; "we're following the dear old dad!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Order in the ranks!" said Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah; ordah in the wanks, you boundahs, or I shall wefuse to lead you," said Arthur Augustus severely.

And they marched out of the quad in battle array, into the road. Arthur Augustus led them to the towing-path, and looked round through the growing dusk for Figgins. Tom Merry & Co. had a shrewd suspicion that Figgins had strolled along the towing-path to compose a poem on Cousin Ethel's eyes, which he probably regarded as starry. They also suspected that he had probably "balked" at the rhymes, and given it up as a bad job and gone in. But they did not say so to Arthur Augustus. They were gently rotting their aristocratic chum.

Monty Lowther gave a sudden dramatic start as he peered through the dusk on the towing-path, and shouted:

"After him!"

"Can you see him, Lowthah?" exclaimed D'Arcy excitedly.

"Run!" yelled Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah; wun like anything, deah boys."

The whole crowd started off at a terrific burst. D'Arcy ran the race of his life. In his excitement he did not notice that the other fellows stopped after the first few yards. He was ahead of them, and he was in too great a hurry to catch the iniquitous Figgins to think of looking back. He dashed on at top speed, his eyeglass floating wildly at the end of its cord.

Tom Merry & Co. halted on the towing-path, and watched him out of sight, with gentle and affectionate smiles.

"A little exercise will do him good, after feasting with bloated aristocrats on giddy houseboats!" murmured Blake.

"I hope he will catch Figgins," said Monty Lowther thoughtfully. "I don't think it's really likely, because I saw Figgins at his study window as we came out—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Still, the race is to the swift, you know. If Gussy keeps on for twenty-four thousand miles he will get to the New House, going that way."

And the juniors strolled back to the school.

Blake and Herries and Digby were doing their preparation in Study No. 6 about half an hour later, when a ruddy and dusty junior came in, with a frown upon his brow. The three Fourth-Formers looked up with interested inquiry.

"Did you catch Figgins?" asked Blake.

"Slain him?" asked Dig.

"Brought back his scalp, mighty chief?" Herries wanted to know.

Arthur Augustus gave them a frozen stare through his monocle.

"I wogard you as wottahs!" he said deliberately. "I wogard Tom Mewwy as a wottah, and Lowthah as a wottah, and Mannahs as a wottah. Kangawooh is a wottah also, and I considah Dane and Glyn are as wotten as the west of you."

"What a rotten lot of friends you've got," said Blake thoughtfully. "If it's right to judge a chap by his friends, what a rotter you must be!"

To which remark Arthur Augustus replied with a stare into which all the lofty scorn and withering disdain he could muster were concentrated. But as Blake had bent his head over his work again, the effect was unfortunately lost.

CHAPTER 14.

Something Like a Surprise.

THE Lowther Ragtime Band rehearsed their last rehearsal on Friday evening. They rehearsed in the woodshed, at least fifty fellows having promised to slay them without mercy if they attempted any more rehearsals in the House. Monty Lowther declared himself satisfied with the progress of the orchestra. There might be little deficiencies, but, as Lowther sagely observed, if they played out of tune it would only be supposed to be something new in ragtime. He cited the case of the musician who played "Bill Bailey" backwards, and passed it off as a classical composition.

"You'll do!" was Monty Lowther's final verdict. "My opinion is that we shall simply knock 'em at the regatta. If anybody happens to be rolling in money to-morrow, we'll have the launch instead of a boat. It will be easier to escape in if the crowd cuts up rusty."

"That's a wathah good idea," said Arthur Augustus. "I've seen the concert parties in the boats at Henley, and people throw things at them sometimes. It is a wippin' THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 293.

ideah to have the launch. I'll stand the launch, deah boys."

"Good; that's fair," said Lowther. "If we stand you, you stand the launch."

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Perhaps we had better get up very early in the morning, and have a final finisher before brekker," Lowther suggested.

"Perhaps!" said Jack Blake. "But that's a big per-haps!"

"Yaas, wathah! I think we're all wight," said Arthur Augustus. "Figgins & Co. will be pink with wage and gween with envy when they see us to-morrow."

"Good; their complexions will be quite interesting to watch, if they are. About that early morning rehearsal—"

"Oh, don't bother about that!" said Blake kindly. "There isn't going to be any early morning rehearsal. Gussy, cut off and telephone for the launch to-morrow."

"Yaas, wathah."

And the musicians departed from the scene of their labours. They were in great spirits at the prospect of the morrow. It would be a tremendous score over the rival House; especially if their musical efforts were crowned with great rewards. Lowther told entrancing stories of the sums of money he had heard the singers made at Henley—sometimes. He had heard it from somebody who had met a chap who knew a man who had done it—than which, of course, nothing could be better proof.

Arthur Augustus was a little doubtful as to whether it would be beneath the dignity of the School House Band to accept monetary emoluments. Lowther kindly offered to settle that difficulty for him by taking his share of the plunder.

On Saturday morning there were a good many fellows at St. Jim's who found it difficult to give their attention to lessons. It was very hard to be worried by trifles at such a time, as Blake feelingly remarked. Quite a harvest of lines was gathered in in the Fourth Form and the Shell. But the juniors were thinking of other things, and they did not care for lines. Figgins & Co. were thinking of boat-races, and the ragtime band of ragtime and musical honours.

After lessons the ragtime band made preparations for starting. Lowther's suggestion that they should black their faces in order to be more in keeping with their part, was negatived immediately.

"I could not appeal on my patah's houseboat with a black face, Lowthah," Arthur Augustus declared decidedly.

"You could wash it there," said Monty.

"Imposs.!"

"But surely your pater has soap in the houseboat?" asked Lowther, in astonishment. "Of course, if there are no washing arrangements—"

"You uttah ass! I mean it would be imposs. for me to pwesent myself there with a black face."

"But it would make you better looking, and—"

"I wefuse to discuss the matter, Lowthah. I have some wogard for my personal dig," said Arthur Augustus.

"But we could put on masks," said Tom Merry. "That would be in character."

"Good egg!" said Lowther. "We've got some Guy Fawkes masks left over from last Bonfire Day, and they will do a treat."

"It would be wathah infwa dig—"

"Well, you needn't put one on," said Lowther. "You don't need to."

"What?"

"I mean, you'll look just the same as the others without putting one on," Lowther explained.

Whereupon the discussion was interrupted by Lowther having to dodge round the table.

After dinner the petrol launch arrived, and the musical instruments and the masks were placed on board. There was no hurry to start, as a concert party would not be wanted till the races were over. But Tom Merry & Co. wanted to see the races. Crowds of St. Jim's fellows were already starting off by the towing-path, and a good number of boats were going.

"Don't see anything of Figgins & Co.," said Tom Merry, when the party were on the launch. "They must be going, surely."

"Might give them a wun on the launch," said D'Arcy, in the kindness of his heart. "House vows are off to-day!"

"Good for evil!" agreed Tom Merry. "I'll cut over to the New House, and tell the bounders we'll give them a passage."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Tom Merry jumped off the launch, and ran back to the school. He came into the New House, but did not see Figgins, or any member of the Co. He found Pratt of the

Fourth just about to start, and asked him for news of Figgins.

"Seen Figgy?"

Pratt chuckled, somewhat to Tom Merry's surprise.

"Figgins! Gone, long ago," said Pratt.

"And the others?"

"All gone!"

"They started jolly early," said Tom, in surprise.

"Well, they had to get the boat there," Pratt explained.

"Oh, they've rowed up?"

Pratt chuckled again—that inexplicable chuckle.

"No; they haven't rowed," he said.

"Are you looking for a thick ear, my son?" said Tom Merry, warningly. "Don't be funny. How could they take a boat if they haven't rowed?"

"Might have taken it over in a brake," suggested Pratt.

Tom Merry sniffed, and turned away. Pratt laughed loudly. To Tom Merry it seemed a very feeble joke, and he could not understand at all why Pratt of the Fourth roared with laughter.

He returned to the launch alone.

"Figgins not comin'?" asked Arthur Augustus, as the captain of the Shell jumped into the launch.

"They've gone," said Tom Merry. "I suppose we shall see them there."

"Oh!" said Lowther. "They can't be up to any tricks, I suppose, eh?"

"Not a ragtime band, anyway—Figgy gave his word."

"Yes, I suppose it's all right," agreed Lowther. "I shouldn't wonder if the wasters have got something up their sleeves, though."

Which afterwards proved to be quite correct.

The launch throbbed out upon the sunny river. It was a glorious day, and the juniors enjoyed greatly the swift run up the Ryll to Abbotsford. The river by the old town was crowded with craft when they arrived there, but the course was being cleared for the first heat.

The launch drew up under the lee of the Eastwood houseboat. Cousin Ethel, looking very charming in white, with a lovely hat, smiled and nodded to the juniors.

"Seen anything of Figgins & Co.?" Tom Merry called out.

Cousin Ethel laughed.

"Yes; they are here."

"On the houseboat?" asked D'Arcy.

"Oh, no! But Figgins came to speak to me for a moment. They are coming back afterwards," explained Ethel.

"After what, dear gal?"

"After the race."

"Bai Jove! They ought to have stopped on the houseboat to see the wace," said D'Arcy. "The patah's got the best view of the whole wivah."

Ethel laughed again.

"They couldn't very well stop here," she said.

And she turned away to speak to Lady Eastwood, without explaining that mysterious remark.

"Suppose we give 'em a tune before they start," Monty Lowther suggested. The conductor of the ragtime band was anxious to do to work.

"They'll shift us off the river if we make a row now," said Kangaroo.

"Why, you ass—"

"There goes the signal for the start," said Tom Merry.

And all eyes were turned upon the river.

From the launch, close up to the moored houseboat, the juniors had a splendid view. They looked at the starters in the first heat, and then they rubbed their eyes and looked again. One crew they knew was the Wayland crew; but the other?

They stared. They stared again. They gasped.

There was no doubt about it.

They knew the blue-and-white of St. Jim's—they knew the faces of their old rivals of the New House!

"Bai Jove!"

"Great Scott!"

"The awful bounders!"

"Figgins & Co!"

Words failed them.

CHAPTER 15.

The Winning Eight.

FIGGINS & CO. were in great form.

They had been drawn against Wayland for the first heat, and they knew that they had nothing to fear. Their real rivals were Abbotsford School—Parsons and his men, who would be rowing in the second heat against Rylcombe.

The New House fellows did not even look towards the launch.

But they knew that School House eyes were upon them,

and the knowledge bucked them up. They did not go "all out" for that heat.

They had it all their own way, and they took it easy, finishing with three lengths to the good, amid loud cheers.

The second heat was being rowed before Tom Merry & Co. had quite recovered from their astonishment. As was expected, Abbotsford School beat Rylcombe Rowing Club hollow, and were left to row the final with St. Jim's.

"Well, my only hat!" said Tom Merry. "Of all the cheek—"

"The awful boundahs!" said Arthur Augustus indignantly. "They must have entahed an eight for the wace without tellin' us!"

"We weren't exactly the chaps they'd tell, come to think of it," remarked Blake, with a grin.

"I wemembah tellin' Figgins that if I had time I should entah an eight for the wace, and stwoke it myself. I wondahed what he was gwinnin' at."

"The deceitful dodger!"

"How awfully dark they've kept it!" said Kangaroo. "If we'd got on to the idea, we could have put in an eight that would have wiped up the river with them!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"What puzzles me is where they got in their practice, without our spotting them," said Manners, puzzled. "They must have slogged at it, I should think. See the form the bounders are in!"

Tom Merry smote his brow.

"Oh, what asses we've been!" he yelled.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, I am quite willin' to admit that you were an ass, but—"

"They've been at practice in the mornings before brekker!" roared Tom Merry. "That's what they were up to when we caught them on the island on Monday morning."

"Bai Jove!"

"Don't you see?" exclaimed Tom Merry excitedly. "That's why Figgy promised so cheerfully not to start a rival ragtime band! He never intended to start a ragtime band at all."

"Wha-a-t!"

"They weren't out for music practice—they were out for rowing practice!" yelled Tom Merry, exasperated. "That was their idea all along!"

"Oh, crumbs!"

"And we thought they were taking up a rotten, blithering, mouldy ragtime band!" said Tom, in despair.

"Oh, draw it mild!" said Monty Lowther warmly. "It's a jolly good idea, and when I went over to see Figgins about it—"

"Then he jolly well pulled your leg, and led us on to take ourselves in, so as to leave him a clear field."

"The artful dodger!"

"And they've been practising secretly. And now they've got a winning eight for the regatta races, and we—we're playing a ragtime band!" said Tom Merry tragically.

"Oh, rotten!"

"Sold!"

"Dished!"

"We'll scalp them!"

"Well," said Arthur Augustus thoughtfully, "as they've stolen a march on us, deah boys, and have entahed an eight without our entahing anothah eight to lick them—"

"We'll slaughter them!"

"I am goin' to say—"

"We'll bang, draw, and quarter 'em!"

"I wish to wemahk—"

"We'll massacre 'em!"

"Pway allow me to finish. I was goin' to say that I twust it will pprove to be a winnin' ewew. It will be one up for St. Jim's, anyway."

Tom Merry burst into a laugh.

"Well, there's something in that," he agreed. "Of course, if we'd put in an eight we should have beaten them hollow!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Dead cert!" said Lowther.

"But as it is, as we're out of it, I hope they'll win. After all, the New House belongs to St. Jim's, and it would be ripping to see St. Jim's beat Abbotsford!"

"Hear, hear!"

And the School House Juniors, nobly stifling their wrath against their old rivals in the keen hope of seeing the St. Jim's colours triumph, watched the river with all their eyes.

"They're starting!"

"Hurrah!"

"Go it, St. Jim's!" roared the juniors.

Figgins & Co. heard the thunderous shout of their old rivals. Figgins looked towards the launch and the houseboat as the eights took up their position, and he waved his hand.

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NEXT
WEDNESDAY:

"GUSSY'S GUEST!"

Cousin Ethel's handkerchief fluttered in the air in response, and the School House fellows brandished their caps.

"Off!" said Tom Merry.

Abbotsford got away better at the start. They had the lead of the St. Jim's boat, and the School House juniors watched them with an anxiety that was too deep for words.

All thought of House rivalry was banished now.

It was a St. Jim's boat that was rowing for victory or defeat, and the hearts of Tom Merry & Co. went out to the New House crew.

Crowds of spectators watched from the bank. New House juniors were there to a man, yelling themselves hoarse.

Abbotsford were keeping their lead; but Figgins & Co. were going strong, going like clockwork—in beautiful time.

"Buck up, Figgins!" roared Blake, careless of the fact that Figgins was out of the range of his voice by that time.

"Go it, St. Jim's!"

"Abbotsford are going all out!" said Blake, with the eye of a connoisseur. "They're bursting too early—too fast to last!"

"Figg's men are in top-notch form," said Kangaroo. "Figg will crawl after them when he wants to!"

"Two lengths to Abbotsford, if it's an inch!"

"You watch Figg! My hat! He strokes like an angel!"

"And look at Fatty! You wouldn't think he weighed a ton now, would you?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Pull, you beggars—pull!"

"What did I tell you?" roared Kangaroo. "They're crawling up!"

"Only a length now!"

"Hurrah!"

"Figg will go all out on the home stretch," said Tom Merry. "You watch!"

"Good old Figgins!"

The anxiety was intense. Abbotsford had lost something of their lead—and they were losing more. But Parsons and his men were rowing stoutly and splendidly. They were game, and if they could stick the terrific pace to the finish it looked like their race. Abbotsford fellows were waving their caps along the bank now, as they tore along the towing-path in pursuit. There was a roar:

"Abbotsford wins!"

"Rats!" roared Tom Merry. "Wait and see! Pull, you beggars, pull!"

"Half a length!" yelled Kangaroo. "What did I tell you!"

"Half-length! Half-length! Half-length onward!" chirruped Monty Lowther, but no one listened to Monty's funny remarks now.

"There goes Figgins!"

"Look!"

"Hurrah!"

Figgins had quickened his stroke. The New House boat shot up level with the rival—level—level—and passed! St. Jim's fellows in boats and on the towing-path were growing delirious.

"Oh, well pulled!"

"Stick it out, Figg!"

"Put your beef into it, Fatty!"

"Hurrah!"

Figgins & Co. were going "all out" now with a vengeance. They had won a lead, and they were keeping it. They were nearly home now; and the Abbotsford crew made a final terrific spurt. For a second their bow was ahead of the New House—and a hundred hearts trembled.

But the pace, as Blake had so sapiently remarked, was too fast to last. Abbotsford cracked under their strain.

Right ahead shot the New House boat!

Half a length—a length—Hurrah! The roar from the St. Jim's fellows rang like thunder over the shining river.

"St. Jim's wins! Hurrah! Hip-pip-hurrah!"

Figgins & Co. had won by a length and a quarter!

CHAPTER 16.

Music Hath Charms.

FIGGINS, glowing with exertion and pride, wrapped up in his muffler, was on the Eastwood houseboat, receiving Cousin Ethel's congratulations, when Tom Merry & Co. came aboard. They rushed upon Figgins and surrounded him.

"Figgins, you bounder—"

"Figgins, you Machiavelli—"

"Figgins, you schemer—"

"Here, hold on!" exclaimed Figgins, in alarm. "No rags here, you know!"

"Rags!" said Tom Merry, seizing Figgins's hand and

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shaking it as if he wanted to shake it off. "Rags! When you've just won for St. Jim's!"

"Rags!" said Blake, smacking Figgins on the back so heartily that Figgins roared. "Why, you old ass, we've come to congratulate you!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Figgins grinned.

"It was a good race!" he remarked.

"And you were keeping your scheme dark all the time!"

Figgins chuckled.

"This is where the New House gloats!" he said. "We've left you the ragtime band! Ha, ha, ha!"

"You have!" said Tom Merry ruefully. "If we'd known—"

"But you didn't know!" chuckled Figgins. "We score this time. Of course, it would have been all the same if you had had an eight here."

"Weally, Figgins—"

"Never mind that," said Tom Merry laughing. "You've scored over the School House, but it was a win for St. Jim's, and that's all we really care about!"

"Yaas, that's all, Figgay, deah boy. We congwatulate you. But it was frightfully wisky to wace Abbotsford without a School House chap in the crew. I should have been willin' to stwoke for you—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I fail to see anythin' to cackle at in that wemark, deah boys!"

"Time!" said Monty Lowther. "Members of the Lowther Ragtime Band back to the launch. Time!"

"Bai Jove! I'd forgotten the wagtine band!"

Lowther gave the swell of St. Jim's a withering look.

"Forgotten it, you fathead—"

"I decline to be called a fathead—"

"My mistake—I meant chump!" said Monty Lowther gracefully. "Now then, get a move on you. This is where the ragtime band scores!"

"Tea first!" said Cousin Ethel, with a smile. "You do not want to begin till after dusk, I suppose?"

"Wathah not!"

"Lowther wants to begin in early morning, and keep on till dewy eve," said Blake. "Goodness knows how many casualties there will be when he starts!"

"Look here, Blake—"

"Pway wing off, Lowthah, and let's have tea. I am sure Figgay must be hungwy aftah his wov; and I'll answah for Fatty Wynn!"

Figgins hurried away to change, and returned soon with the rest of the eight, clothed and in their right minds, as Lowther described it. The New House oarsmen were elated, and they were very merry over tea on the boathouse. Dusk was falling now, and innumerable lights were gleaming on the river. The houseboats and the launches and the other moored craft were lighted up, and many of the boats and small skiffs carried Chinese lanterns, slung up, and Chinese lanterns glimmered through the trees on the shore. From the bank floated the sound of a cornet, with a concertina in rivalry further along. The sound of music spurred Monty Lowther on. He succeeded in dragging the bandmen away from tea on the houseboat at last.

D'Arcy's father—Lord Eastwood—knew nothing of the ragtime band. D'Arcy meant the discovery to come as a surprise to his pater and his mater. The bandmen went on the launch, and throbbed away into the middle of the river. There, somewhat to their exasperation, they found that a concert-party was just starting operations.

As the launch glided through the water, a boat lighted with fairy-lamps glided from the opposite bank and stopped. A couple of fiddles and a clarinet started in business, and a tenor followed.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "This is wathah wotten. I did not expect wotten wivals on the scene."

"Let's run the boat down!" suggested Blake.

"Good—that tenor ought to be killed!" said Tom Merry. "It's the only thing to do with a man who's got a voice like that."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The voice was singing more or less in tune, "I Loved and Lost Her." Monty Lowther hailed the boat.

"Why didn't you apply at the Lost Property Office?" he demanded.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Here, you clear off!" exclaimed one of the fiddlers indignantly. "This here is our pitch!"

"Rats!" said Monty Lowther. "You clear off! We're a ragtime band!"

"Look here—"

"No time! Gentlemen, on the ball!"

And with Lowther conducting, the ragtime band struck up. The lively strains of the Crabs' Crawl floated over the river, and the unfortunate tenor in the rowing-boat was completely beaten. He made a great effort to make known the fact that he had Loved and Lost Her audible above the blare of the ragtime band. But it was in vain. His voice was drowned, and he left off singing, and danced with rage in the boat, shaking his fist at the launch.

There were calls of applause from the craft on the river, and from the crowd on shore, as the ragtime band blared away, and the "Crabs' Crawl" was followed by the still livelier strains of the "Bully Bunny-Hug," one of the latest importations from the great country where waves the Star-Spangled Banner.

Sulphurous remarks from the boat rocking beside the launch did not worry the ragtime bandmen. They received renewed applause, especially from the Eastwood houseboat, where Figgins & Co. were drinking lemonade and listening.

"Going strong," said Monty Lowther, at the end of the piece. "Not quite so fast with the flute, Blake. The races are over for to-day."

"Why, you ass—"

"Now we'll give them the 'Giddy Glide.'"

"Pewwaps, now that squeakin' chap down there has shut up, it would be a good idea for me to wendah a tenah solo—"

"Shut up! Ready!"

"I should be quite willin' to give an Italian awia—"

But the ragtime band started again, and Arthur Augustus's kind offer was not heard. The swell of St. Jim's snuffed, and scraped away on his violin.

"Bravo!" came from the houseboats. "Go it!"

"Encore!"

"Play up!"

"Ain't it going rippingly?" said Monty Lowther gleefully. "After the next tune we'll go round and collect up the tin. We'll put on the masks then."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We've driven that blessed boat away," added Lowther, with a glance over the side. "They're gone!"

"I hope we haven't sunk it!" murmured Manners.

"Ass! Pile in!"

The "Lobsters' Wriggle" followed on the ragtime band. The bandmen were in great spirits; the applause from the regatta crowd seemed to promise a goodly shower of coin when they went round to collect their reward.

The boat containing the rival concert party was indeed gone; but it was not gone far. It was gliding among the moored craft, and the tenor was now holding out his hat as the accompanists rowed—collecting money for the ragtime band! That idea had come into his head, and it seemed a good one. While the ragtime band blared away on the launch, the boat made the collection—and they were making a good one.

"Thank you, gentlemen! Thank you, ladies! Thanks! Spare a tanner for the ragtime band!" said the defeated tenor cheerfully. "Chuck out a copper for the ragtime band! Thank you, sir! This way, sir. Pay up for the ragtime band!"

"Hallo!" said Figgins, as the skiff glided by the Eastwood houseboat. "Hullo! Are you collecting for the band?"

"Yes, sir! A shilling, thank you, sir—"

The New House Juniors tossed coppers and small silver into the hat, and Cousin Ethel followed suit. But Kerr kept his cash in his pocket. Kerr was a canny Scotsman, and he never parted with money without seeing good reason. Figgins jogged his arm.

"Shell out for the ragtime band, old man. They cheered us when we beat Abbotsford, you know. Let's help make it a success."

Kerr grinned.

"I don't mind doing that," he replied.

"Then shell out!"

"But before I shell out, I'd rather be sure that Tom Merry & Co. have authorised those fellows to collect the money for them!"

Figgins jumped.

"Oh, my hat! Do you think—"

"Yes, I do—a little bit. That's a rival party that's been blared off the river by the ragtime band, and I fancy they're gathering in Tom Merry's harvest for him."

"Oh, crumbs!"

Figgins ran to the side as the boat glided away.

"Here, you fellows!"

But the boat was gone and the tenor was still collecting. Meanwhile, the ragtime band roared out the "Lobsters' Wriggle" amid applause. Money was showering into the collecting boat as it glided to and fro, and, as the Lobsters ceased to wriggle and the weary were at rest, the triumphant tenor and his party pulled away into the darkness of the river and disappeared.

"Now we'll make the collection, and then give another tane to wind up with!" said Monty Lowther.

And, masking their faces, the ragtime band ran the launch along to collect the money. But there was no more to be collected.

"Here, we've paid once!"

"You can't collect twice!"

"We paid the men in the boat, and that's enough!"

"Don't you be greedy!"

Such were the remarks that greeted the unfortunate ragtime bandmen, as they endeavoured to collect the rewards of their labours.

A few generous individuals threw coppers, but that was all.

The ragtime schoolboys looked at one another in dismay.

"My only hat!" gasped Monty Lowther. "Some frightful bilker has been round making the collection, passing himself off as our man—"

"Oh, crumbs!"

"That's where that giddy tenor disappeared to!" groaned Tom Merry. "We drove him off the pitch, and he's gone—with our collection."

"Oh, crickey!"

It was a sad case. But there was nothing to be done. The spoof collector was gone, and the collection was gone with him. The ragtime bandmen slowly and sadly put their instruments away and removed their masks. They had scored a success; but the harvest of cash had been reaped by another!

"Nevah mind, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus consolingly, "after all, I was wathah doubtful as to whethah it would be infwa dig, to collect money. We have the honah!"

To which his comrades replied all at once:

"Rats!"

"Let's get back to the house-boat, and have some suppah before we go home," said Arthur Augustus.

Figgins & Co. grinned as they met the ragtime bandmen coming aboard.

"Did you collect much?" asked Kerr.

"Some beastly spoofers made the collection for us—"

"Ha, ha, ha."

"It was too bad," said Cousin Ethel sympathetically.

"Yaas, wathah! Still, we have scored a success. I say, father, did you hear the music on the vivah?" asked Arthur Augustus, as his noble pater came along the deck.

Lord Eastwood nodded. He was in blissful ignorance of the fact that the ragtime bandmen stood before him. Arthur Augustus was about to enlighten him; but before doing so, he wanted to get an unprejudiced opinion on the music. He got it!

"Yes, I could hardly help hearing it, Arthur," said his lordship; "one must not complain. To most of the people who come to the regatta there is probably something amusing, and even pleasant, in such terrible noises. And others must be willing to submit cheerfully for the pleasure of the majority."

The ragtime bandmen looked at one another with sickly smiles. Arthur Augustus, having received the unprejudiced opinion he was seeking, did not enlighten his noble pater as to the identity of the ragtime bandmen.

But the ragtime bandmen enjoyed their supper on the houseboat; and it was quite late in the evening when they took leave of Cousin Ethel and D'Arcy's pater and mater, and embarked on the launch to return to St. Jim's. Figgins & Co. went with them on the launch, their boat being towed behind. School House and New House fraternised cheerily, and all were in the greatest of spirits as the launch glided away down the dusky river. Figgins stood looking back at the houseboat, ablaze with lights, till a bend of the river hid it from sight. Figgins was a little pensive. Monty Lowther bestowed a wink upon his comrades.

"Let's have a tune going home!" he said.

The ragtime bandmen were nothing loth. They struck up the "Love-Sick Coon"—and Figgins turned quite red. They followed it up with the "Piccaninny's Wedding-March"; and Figgins glared. But as they drew nearer to St. Jim's the band burst into "See the Conquering Hero Comes"; and Figgins smiled again. And when they landed, and marched up to the school, the ragtime schoolboys announced their return with the now familiar strain:



Hip Pip Pip! Hip pippip! We Take the Case, the Latest Rag-Time Band, Oh!

THE END.

(Another splendid Long Complete Tale of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's, next Wednesday, entitled "Gussy's Guest," by Martin Clifford. Please order your copy in advance.)

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 293.

A Magnificent, New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

NEXT
WEDNESDAY:

"GUSSY'S GUEST!"

Our Weekly Prize Page.

LOOK OUT FOR YOUR WINNING STORYETTE!

ONE BETTER.

A Yankee was saying that they had a man in New York who can stand and blow the bugle so well that a fortnight later you can buy the "Echo" in Liverpool.

A Britisher who happened to be one of the audience, thought he could beat that.

"Oh, that's nothing!" he cried. "We have a man in the local band who can play the cornet so well that two years after you can go to Plymouth and see the Sound."—Sent in by Sam Hamill, Glasgow.

A BOY'S TRICK.

One day, just as a train was about to leave the station, a boy ran up to a ticket-inspector, saying:

"Sir, there's three men travelling on this train, and not one of them has got tickets."

Off went the inspector and searched all the carriages through, but without avail. All the passengers had proper tickets.

Then, seeing his informer standing near the entrance to the station, he shouted:

"Where are the three men without tickets?"

"Two on the engine and one in the guard's van!" shouted the boy.

Then he ran.—Sent in by E. A. Luck, Strood, Kent.

HE GOT UP.

Man (sitting down in crowded tram-car, while a stout lady is standing): "Pardon me, madam, but you are standing on my feet!"

Stout Lady: "If you were anything of a man you would be standing on them yourself!"—Sent in by W. Langley, Morley.

WHAT HE CALLED IT.

Jack: "Are you troubled with sleeplessness?"

Jim: "I am. Some nights I don't sleep three hours."

Jack: "I pity you, then. I've got it awfully, too. The doctor calls it neuris insomnia paralax."

Jim: "I've had it about eighteen months, but we call it Ethel."—Sent in by H. Price, Sidmouth.

UNSOLICITED ADVICE.

"Mother," said the exasperated young lady. "I wish you would not hang that old parrot up in the parlour!"

"Why not, my dear?" queried the mother.

"Why, I think he must have belonged to a tram-conductor before you bought him. Every two or three minutes, when Edwin is here, he chirps out, 'Sit closer, please!' It's too embarrassing for words!"—Sent in by C. F. Holt, Sunderland.

WISE PAT.

Pat was hard at work digging a post-hole, when the boss strolled up.

"Well, Pat," said he, noting the progress the Irishman had made, "do you think you will be able to get all that dirt back again?"

Pat looked doubtfully at the pile of earth, and then scratched his head, and, after some time deep in thought, he said:

"No, sor; sure I don't think I've dug the hole deep enough!"—Sent in by Fred Ford, Bristol.

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"THE MAGNET" LIBRARY, Every Monday.

THE PACE THAT KILLS.

It was a case of Canada versus the United States, the latter being the home team, and an easy favourite.

"Horsea!" remarked the Yankee. "I guess you can't tell me much about horses. I once had a mare that beat our best express on a thirty-mile run!"

The company looked interested, but the Canadian gentleman was in no way abashed.

"That's nothing!" he said contemptuously. "I was out on my ranch one day twenty miles from home, when a terrific storm came up."

"Waal?" drawled the Yankee.

"So I turned the pony's head for home," continued the Canadian. "And, do you know, he raced the storm for the last ten miles!"

"Yes?" chimed in a listener.

"But my dog, ten yards behind, had to swim home!"—Sent in by A. Wiseman, Luton.

SHAME!

Jim: "I say, Jack, did you know that the Isle of Wight is a fraud?"

Jack: "You don't say so! Why is it?"

Jim: "Because it has Needles which you can't thread, Freshwater which you can't drink, Cows which you can't milk, and Newport which you can't bottle."—Sent in by V. A. Ellis, Manchester.

PIGGISH.

Jones: "Have you heard the latest?"

James: "No. What is it?"

Jones: "Why, Jimson has bought a pig, and keeps it in his garden. He calls the animal 'Ink.'"

James: "What a curious name for a pig! What does he call it that for?"

Jones: "Because it's always running from the pen."—Sent in by W. Foster, Manchester.

BY THE YARD.

Recently, while working down a side-street, an Irishman had his attention arrested by the following notice displayed in a shop window: "Everything Sold by the Yard."

Seeing his way to play a joke on the proprietor, Pat walked into the shop and asked for a yard of milk.

For a moment the shopkeeper looked astonished; then, dipping his finger in a pail of milk, he drew a line a yard long on the counter. Having done this, he looked at Pat with a very pleased air, having, as he thought, scored off his would-be customer.

"How much is that?" asked Pat.

"Sixpence," came the reply.

"Thanks! Roll it up, and I'll take it with me."—Sent in by Miss Hilda Rhodes, Western Australia.

HIS PROOF!

Two Irishmen were working on the roof of a house, when one of them slipped and fell to the ground.

"Are yez dead or alive?" asked the man on the roof.

"O'im alive," gasped Mike, painfully picking himself up.

"Sure, you're such a liar. Oi don't know whether to belave yez or not!" called down Pat from the roof.

"Well, then, Oi must be dead, for yez would never dare to call me a loir if I wor alive!" retorted Mike.—Sent in by G. Perry, Bristol.

MONEY PRIZES OFFERED!

Readers are invited to send ON A POSTCARD Storyettes or Short, Interesting Paragraphs for this page. For every contribution used the senders will receive a Money Prize.

ALL POSTCARDS MUST BE ADDRESSED The Editor, "The Gem" Library, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.

THIS OFFER IS OPEN TO READERS IN ALL PARTS OF THE WORLD.

No correspondence can be entered into with regard to this Competition, and all contributions enclosed in letters, or sent in otherwise than on postcards, will be disregarded.

Our Companion Papers.

"THE PENNY POPULAR," Every Friday.

THE CORINTHIAN.



A Magnificent New Story of the Old-Time Prize-Ring.
By BRIAN KINGSTON.

READ THIS FIRST.

Hilary Bevan, a sturdy young Britisher of gentle birth, who has been living in the country, walks to London

TO SEE HIS FATHER,

Sir Patrick Bevan, whom he has not met for three years. Arriving at his father's house, Hil learns that the latter has been absent for three days at the house of Sir Vincent Brookes, one of the leading bucks of the time. He also learns that Sir Patrick has earned the nickname of

"PLUNGER" BEVAN,

and is heavily in debt, having dissipated his fortune.

Bending his steps to Sir Vincent Brookes' house in Grosvenor Street, Hilary finds two sheriff's men waiting outside to arrest his father when he should come out. The lad enters the house, and

FINDS HIS FATHER AT THE GAMING-TABLES,

where he has been for three days and nights.

Sir Patrick rises from the table an utterly ruined man. Hilary, his heart full of grief, slips out of the house, and, engaging the two waiting sheriff's men in a fight, puts both of them to flight, thus saving his father from immediate danger of arrest. Hilary's next act is to accept a challenge offered in the prize-ring at Moulsey Hurst. His opponent is a Jew pugilist, Barney Isaacs by name, while Hil, fighting under the name of Harley, beats him, and awakens the interest of a young Corinthian named D'Arcy Vavasour.

Hil decides to adopt the prize-ring as a career, and at a supper which is attended by the leading patrons of "The Fancy" Vavasour offers to match him for a thousand guineas against any boxer of his weight that Sir Vincent Brookes may select.

Other wagers are also to be decided between the two bucks by a cock-fight and a shooting match. Sir Vincent accepts Vavasour's challenge, and Hil goes into training at a country cottage belonging to Vavasour, where the Corinthian's famous fighting-cocks are also quartered under the care of Jem Rider. One night Hil is awakened by a noise outside, and discovers a number of men in the act of setting fire to the pens where the champion cocks are confined. Kicking away a blazing truss of straw, Hil rushes at one of the ruffians.

"Put 'is light out!" cries a hoarse voice savagely, from the further side of the gate.

(Now go on with the story.)

A Fierce Fight.

But he was taking on more than he had bargained for; he was faced by an antagonist capable of doing damage, and willing enough to inflict it. Hil's first blow, immediately he reached within striking distance, took the man over his left eye, cutting it badly, and thereafter he battled at a disadvantage. But milling was his game, and he fought with a savage hardihood such as he had never perhaps displayed in the ring.

It was no time for sparring, for the use of the finer points of the art of self-defence. Here was needed downright hard milling. What had to be done was to be done quickly. Hil was unaware how many the attackers numbered, and he went in with the determination to disable them as thoroughly and as speedily as he knew how. To this end he struck his blows at the face. Body blows are painful and weakening, but the effect of them is not immediate, except they fall upon what was known in the olden days of the Fancy as Broughton's mark.

So he went in to attack, hoping to get rid of the man in front of him before those behind should climb the gate. Several blows he took, since a perfect defence was useless under such conditions, but those he gave were hard and many. Thirty seconds of fierce, rapid hammering drove the man upon the paddock hedge, and then he could retreat no further, and this hampered his fighting. He tried chopping blows, but only one reached Hil's face, cutting the lower lip slightly. And then the fellow dropped as though he were a poleaxed bullock, a mighty blow landing full under his ear.

And as Hil dealt the blow he himself went staggering into the hedge. The first who had climbed the yard gate—a tall, sinewy man, with a hatchet face, and a coat held together by bits of string in place of buttons—had dealt him a blow from behind.

His head singing like a tea-kettle, Hil sprang round. The moon had come out from behind a cloud, and the light fell upon his antagonists, three evil-faced brutes, with murder written plainly in their eyes. They were angry, for this was more than had been expected, but they were not going to leave undone the job for which they had been partly paid. Not from any sense of honour, for they did not know the meaning of the word; but except their work were finished each man would lose his promised couple of

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NEXT
WEDNESDAY:

"GUSSY'S GUEST!"

guiness. Muttering vile words, they ran in together with striking fists.

Then began a fight, one man against five—for two more presently came up—and Hil found himself assailed on all sides. Hard and true he hit when occasion offered, though with such odds against him he was forced to act more on the defensive than when a single opponent confronted him. Terrible work it was, with not a second's breathing space for the relief of his gasping lungs. This way and that he turned, continuously upon the move, reeling under blows the striking of which he could not see, his flesh quivering under the impact of hard-knuckled fists, hurting and barking his own hands upon the men he hit. Blood ran from more than one gash, and he drew blood in return.

Of old Jem Rider and what he might be doing, why he had not heard the turmoil of the battle and come to take a hand, Hal had no time to think. He had neither leisure nor breath to shout for the old man's assistance. To go on fighting, fighting to save himself and to disable his adversaries, was the matter on which was concentrated all his strength and all his mind. The idea of trying to escape never crossed his brain.

Thud, thud, thud! went the striking fists, above the dull, heavy sound now and again becoming audible a sharp, gasping "Oh!" of pain or surprise, or a hissing "Ah!" from between clenched teeth as a well-meant blow went safely home.

Hil seemed to be fighting for hours, in reality the conflict lasted only a few minutes. His arms were tiring; even his toughened muscles could not sustain indefinitely the strain of such violent and persistent effort. He felt his breath leaving him; no time to get his second wind. But he fought on doggedly, and into the mind of each man facing him stole the wonder as to the identity of such a terrific fighter.

At length they drove him from the hedge that had protected his back. There came a rush, and Hil found himself in the open. But the success was not easily gained. One fellow went staggering back with a punch in the throat that brought his hand to the smitten place, with a groan of pain, and told him that he could fight no more. And a second, meeting a vicious upper-cut, that snapped back his head and lifted him clean off his feet, sank on the grass, howling that his jaw was broken.

Dazed, half blinded, his knuckles skinned and bleeding, his knees slackening under his weight, Hil fought on; but for every blow he dealt he was receiving two now, and the force of his hits was weakening. Human flesh and bone could stand little more; he felt his powers failing, though his spirit was unconquerable. His body swayed to and fro. Every blow that fell caused him to stagger, but beat him down the three men could not. They were feeling the effects of the terrific encounter, not only physically but mentally. Their own ruffianly spirits were awed by the display of indomitable courage of the lad who opposed them, and who seemed to be made of iron. And when, in the open, a change of position brought them between Hil and the moon, their backs to the silvery disc, so that the light shone fully on his face, one of the three dropped his hands and fell back suddenly, with a husky shout of wonder.

"The cove that licked Scroggins at the Fives Court! It's the milling cove what beat Barney Isaacs!"

At that all drew back a couple of paces in sheer astonishment, gaping stupidly, the reason for their ill success revealed to them, and daunting them. They dropped their hands, irresolute whether to continue. One collided with one of the pens, and the occupant began to crow violently.

It was that breathing space saved Hil. He did not comprehend the why or wherefore of the brief cessation from hostilities, but found the respite welcome. Half a dozen panting breaths he drew, and then, with the intention of one last rally, he summoned all his remaining strength, dashed his hand across his half-blind eyes, and went in again. Half a dozen blows rattled upon mechanically raised but nerveless arms. One fellow received a facer that drove him six feet, and the others slowly retreated.

Suddenly a shattering sound filled the yard, a roar that was deafening. Another followed almost immediately. It was the discharge of firearms, and the three demoralised remaining rascals beheld, climbing across the gate, a little man with a long-barrelled pistol in either hand.

Jem Rider had come at last.

Afterwards, Hil learned that the old man's tardy appearance was due to the fact that an attack of earache had led to him filling his ears with wool soaked in spirit, and thus the noise of the contest had not reached him easily. But the voice of the frightened cock, speedily joined by its fellows, did the trick.

His coming was well timed. The three survivors, already disheartened and wavering, uncertain whether to continue fighting, or to make a bolt, confounded by the alarming

double explosion, no sooner caught sight of the old man than their hearts weakened. The shooting had done them no harm, for old Jem, hurrying through the house, and finding the back door open, unable to see what was going on in the yard, but hearing the racket, had simply fired at random. It was enough for them that help was coming. Alone Hil had been formidable enough; the men had no stomach for further fight against a reinforcement.

They took to their heels. One made a dash for the broken gate giving entrance into the paddock, but was intercepted by the old trainer, who knocked him down by a blow on the head with one of his pistols, used club fashion. The others ran to the yard gate, scrambled over it, and dashed into the garden, and thence along the lane like rabbits with a terrier at their heels.

"An' what's aw th' to-do about?" cried Jem, having satisfied himself that the man he had felled would not get up again readily. "What's aw t' rumpus?"

He stared about him in wonderment. He saw the figures of several men stretched upon the floor of the yard, he caught sight of the trusses of straw; but the meaning of it all was not apparent, though the appearance of Hil, even with the full extent of the damage not visible, was eloquent of the fact that severe fighting had taken place.

"Who's yon rogues?" he asked.

"I don't know," Hil replied faintly.

Cross-questioning was an ordeal for which he felt little fitted at the moment.

Something in his voice must have attracted the old trainer. Even while speaking he had been making examination of the bird-pens, and assuring himself the occupants were secure. He swung round towards Hil as if about to speak, when one of the trusses of straw caught his eye. He stopped, stared, and then ran to the straw. He saw the burnt end, and the truth of the dastardly attempt Hil had frustrated came upon him.

"They tried t' burn t' birds!" he shouted, in a tone of passionate amazement. "And ye saved 'em, lad!" he cried, after a pause. "Ye fought t' villains! But for ye they bonny birds 'd now be cinders, an' mysel' a ruined man. Oh, lad, ye ha' done more for me nor t' saving o' my own life. I'd niver ha' lived if they bonny birds had come to harm. Saved t' maister, an' saved me ye have, an' I stay jangling here like a gowk. Art hurt, lad?"

"A cut or two."

But Hil staggered as he spoke. Now that the fight was over, he felt weak as a child; his head was light, and his legs like lead. The fierce tension of the past minutes was loosed, and his inclination was to succumb. By a strong effort he overcame the desire to lie down and surrender to the weakness that assailed him.

"I'll go—indoors—a bit, and—sit down," he said haltingly.

He stumbled towards the back door, old Jem Rider staring after him. And when he had disappeared, the trainer looked about him, and slowly he realised something of what had taken place in and about the yard until he had wakened. He drew a deep breath.

"By th' heart," he said, in an awestruck whisper, "yon lad must be more nor a man! Eigh, but he's t' champion fighter. Four o' these dogs, an' two who've runned away! 'Tis yon lad, Maister Darcy, ye have to thank for that yere bet's not lost a'ready, an' me that my heart isna broke."

Darcy Vavasour Makes a Resolution.

Old Jem Rider was a hard man, dour of heart as well as tough of body, and with very little feeling for aught in the world saving his beloved gamecocks and his master's interests; but the fight Hil had put up, the lad's gameness and spirit, made an impression upon his rugged nature. So as soon as he was assured the birds had suffered no injury, he hurried into the cottage after Hil. He owed the lad a big debt, and he did his utmost to show himself grateful.

"Hot watter an' raw meat'll do ye more good nor owt else, lad," he said, bustling about the kitchen. "We've got one, luckily, and soon we'll have t'other. Bide ye there, lad; rest. Ye've earned it, surely. We'll have hot watter for a bath in th' shaking of a sheep's tail, an' then to bed. Begow, but ye be a tough 'un to be alive at aw. Maister Darcy'll have summat to say when he hears o' t' neet's work."

"I'm thinking it will be best to say nothing," Hil said.

He had already bathed his head and face with cold water, and Jem had given him a draught of excellent brandy. The dizziness from the blows he had received had passed from him, and although he was feeling spent and weak, his brain was now clear. Sitting in a big wooden arm-chair, watching Jem at work, he had been thinking.

Beyond all doubt, for this night's work one man was responsible, the man who had all to gain by the destruction

of D'Arcy Vavasour's gamecocks. Not without cause had Vavasour warned him against Sir Vincent Brookes, although the dandy Corinthian could have had no foreknowledge of the villainous form that Brookes' enmity to them both would take. But in this attempt, it seemed to Hil, the baronet had overreached himself. The publishing of the dastardly attempt to destroy the birds against whose ability to win he had so heavily wagered would, could it be proved, be the means of accomplishing Brookes' disgrace, but no more. Knowing him for what he was, gentlemen would refuse to speak to him; he would be hounded out of all decent society. The triple wager with D'Arcy Vavasour would be abandoned, and Sir Vincent would suffer no pecuniary loss. He would be seen no more at his clubs; his associates would disdain to know him. He would be forced into a disgraceful retirement. But he would be spared the loss of his money, the ill-gotten gains he had won at the expense of Hil's father and others whose gaming he had fostered, and whose losses he had promoted.

No, better to allow the triple wager to be carried through, confiding in the superior courage, skill, and worth of those who should win Vavasour his wager.

"Did you leave the rascals lying in the yard where they were, Jem?" he asked suddenly.

"Not me, lad," the old man said emphatically. "I've been a fool and worse one t' neet, an' that's more than enough. Would I leave them to come round, and wi' t' birds lying handy for mischief? Nay, young maister. Before I come to ye I lugged t' rogues—ye mun ha' thumped 'em sore; begow, but they did groan—into outhouse, and turned key on 'em. There's nowt for 'em to break, an' they can yell theirselves dry as a limekiln if they've a fancy for it; none can hear 'em. Not fit for dog's meat, ave they, but 'tis a pretty tale they'll have to tell when they're made to talk. When I've got ye safely fettered up, lad, I'll go into Hitchin for a constable and a magistrate, an' we'll ha' t' beauties safe in lock-up."

"No," said Hil; "we'll let them go, Jem."

Rider stared at him as though suspecting him to be light-headed.

"Let them go!" he repeated. "Nay, young maister, there be no sense in that. I'll get a message somehow to t' maister."

"Jem, you'll neither tell your master of this night's work, nor send to Hitchin for a magistrate."

"T' lad's clean daft."

"Sane as you, Jem. But you'll do as I say. I have a good reason for what I'm saying—one to the benefit of your master," said Hil firmly.

"I tak' no orders from none but t' maister," the old man said stubbornly. "And he hears o' this, choose what."

"For once, Jem, you'll do as I say." And Hil smiled. "Why, can't you see, friend, that if this matter gets abroad there'll be no shooting match, no mains fought between your master's and Sir Vincent's birds; no contest between myself and the Birmingham man. Who, think you, is responsible for the coming here of the rascals you have shut up?"

"Eigh?"

Clearly, Jem Rider, shrewd of brain and suspicious as he was, had not fathomed Hil's meaning.

"Weren't you telling me last evening," went on Hil, coming from his chair to the old man's side, "of men who, fearing their birds were not good enough to win, had tried to make sure before the battle the opposing cocks should not win?"

Rider suddenly threw up his grey head, staring wide-eyed. Then he let out a shout.

"Begow, ye mean that Maister Brookes—"

"Just so, Jem. Who else would have done it? Now you see why to carry your idea out will be unwise. Let your master remain ignorant. Let these rascals go. Already I think they have had some punishment. But beforehand we will get the truth out of them—or one of them."

"Art reet, young maister," Rider said, humbly, and muttered to himself something about old heads on young shoulders.

So Hil had his way, and a couple of hours after dawn the prisoners were taken singly by Jem to the cottage gate and kicked into the lane with the threat of being shot if they dared to return. Sorely bruised, sullen and humbled, they made haste to do as they were bidden, only too glad to be let off so lightly.

But behind them they left a statement, laboriously written out by Hil—for his right hand was badly bruised, and much swollen from contact with their skulls—and to which each had added his mark, with Jem Rider handy to administer grim encouragement to any who showed reluctance, setting forth who had employed them for the night before. This statement Hil carefully put away. A use for it might come later.

Early in the forenoon Harry Harmer put in an appearance. He had a tale to account for the delay in his coming, and, although it departed somewhat from actual fact, it was not questioned. Easy of mind that his delinquency was unknown, he promptly took Hil to task.

"Time I did come," he declared, noting the cut lip, discoloured cheek, and swollen eye that Hil had brought away as mementoes of his fight. "What have you been doing to yourself?"

"Oh, a bit of an encounter yesterday," Hil replied carelessly.

"That won't do while you're training, young man, and I'll see that it doesn't happen again," Harmer asserted.

"Probably it won't. It's all exercise and experience, though."

Yet Hil was pleased that the marks were not serious, and that, two days later, they had practically departed from his healthy skin; for, returning from a training spin to dinner, he found the cottage invaded. Half a dozen finely-dressed gentlemen had taken possession of the kitchen, and, sprawling on table and chairs, were lustily feeding upon great crusts of bread and hunks of cheese, mugs of ale close beside them, listening, while they ate and drank with gusto, to the abundant and very technical account Jem Rider was giving of the gamecocks in his care, their courage, and their individual peculiarities. Now and again one of the gentlemen would interrupt with a question, but it was evident by the attention in every face, how great was the interest felt and how highly was valued the opinion of the little, shrewd-faced old trainer.

Among them were men whom Hil had seen before. There was Lord Alvanley, something less of its usual vacuity in his light-coloured eye; a stout, round-faced young man, Squire Brayne, whose eccentricity it was always to wear a longcoat, sky blue in colour; a sharp-featured, reckless-looking aristocrat, the holder of the Earldom of Camelford, always ready to back his opinion on no matter what subject to the extent of a thousand guineas—never more, never less. And there was one man, very stout and red of face, with very thick legs and rolling eyes, whom Hil did not know. And all were eating and drinking with the appetite of ploughboys fare which in London they would have professed themselves unable to touch.

"Hallo! Who's this?" exclaimed the gentleman with the thick legs, as Hil entered the kitchen, but stopped short by the door on seeing such company. "Who's this, Vavasour?"

D'Arcy Vavasour lifted his broad shoulders from their resting-place against the wall, and went towards Hil, placing one hand on his shoulder.

"Permit me to present to your Highness Master Ned Harley," he said in his drawing voice, bowing slightly to the stout man.

"Ned Harley!" The stout man swung his legs off the table, and turned to face Hil, as did the other gentlemen. "So you're the young man everybody in London is talking about, are you?" he said. "Begad, if all that I hear is true, there hasn't been such an one as you since poor Jem Belcher came up to London in '93 and took us all by storm. I've heard, young man, that no fighter of your weight has a chance against you. Is that so?"

"I shall be glad, sir, of the opportunity of trying to prove as much. Mr. Vavasour is good enough to think what you say," replied Hil, bowing dutifully, but wishing, none the less, his questioner, George Prince of Wales, as he recognised him to be, looked more like the king he surely would be in the fulness of time, and less like an over-fed and hard-drinking country squire; for there was little that was royal in the appearance of the Regent.

"You'll get opportunity enough—that is, unless the true courage of the Englishman is declining," declared the Prince. "But, upon my soul, had not Mr. Vavasour vouched for it, I would not have suspected you to be a fighting man."

"And why not, sir?" asked Mr. Brayne eagerly.

"Why, the young man seems almost a gentleman," said the Prince, who, in spite of his royal birth, was often guilty of ill-bred words and acts.

Brayne and another man smiled, but D'Arcy Vavasour looked disgusted. He was about to speak, but Hil anticipated him.

"And may not a man be both, your Highness?" he asked quickly.

"Why, bless my soul, I don't know what you mean. I—I—"

Staring hard at Hil, very red in the face, the Regent stopped in confusion. Lord Camelford was smiling across at Vavasour, who nodded, both evidently enjoying the effect of Hil's words. With an effort the Regent recovered himself.

"Why, yes, yes; true," he said hurriedly. "A soldier or sailor is a fighting man, and both are gentlemen. But THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 293.



I meant—Vavasour, you know what I mean. Put Ned Farley into the coat of Mr. Brayne or—or—Lord Camelford, and he would look as much a gentleman as either. Young man, I'm told that you have a skill in the ring that is surprising. I must come and see you perform. When did you say, Vavasour, the match with the Birmingham man comes off? Make a note to remind me to be present—that is, if the business of the State will allow me a brief holiday. You know the importance of a good guard, Ned Farley?"

"Yes, sir; that was the first thing my tutor, Harry Lee, impressed upon me."

"Ah, Lee. A good man—I remember him. Well, Farley, remember his warnings. It is as important to avoid being hit as to hit your opponent. I have always told Jackson so, and I am glad he has come to my way of thinking. Well, Farley—Harley, is it?—well, I wish you success. And now, Vavasour, suppose we go and have a look at the birds of which you're so proud?"

Nodding to Hil, the Prince hurried out of the kitchen, the others following him. But Vavasour stayed behind.

"A happy hit, Ned," he said, going to Hil, and placing two fingers on his shoulder. "Our Prince has shocking manners; I fear I must give up his acquaintance. His intentions are of the best, but his actions—" Vavasour made a gesture of despair. "I shall not invite him again to my house. An insult to one of my friends is something I cannot pardon—not even the Prince of Wales. And now, Ned, I want a word with you."

They walked to the front of the cottage in time to see a man on horseback come pounding down the lane at a mad gallop.

"Captain Lidstone's man. What can this mean?" said Vavasour quietly.

Falling from the saddle, the man stumbled forward, holding out a letter. He, as well as the horse, was used up. Breaking the flap, Vavasour glanced through the contents. His lips tightened, and for a few seconds he stared solemnly at the horse. Then he turned to Hil with a peculiar smile.

"Fortune fights for Sir Vincent Brookes," he said evenly. "Captain Lidstone, who shoots for me, has fallen from his horse and broken his left arm."

"And when does the match take place?" asked Hil.

"To-day, within an hour's time. We are on our way to the shooting-ground now, and there is no time to procure a substitute. By the terms of the wager I may not shoot for myself. Ned, I fear Sir Vincent Brookes holds the winning cards."

He was smiling, but under his calmness was bitter disappointment and anger. Never had Hil liked the man so much. Dandy, affected man of fashion as he was, D'Arcy Vavasour was game to the backbone.

"Well, what is there to do, Ned?" he asked. And he laughed. "Nothing, so far as I can see—except lose."

Never had Hil Bevan felt such a liking for D'Arcy Vavasour as at that moment. The petty affectations, the artificiality, the assumed liking for the trivial, that were characteristic of the dandy fell from him in that moment of trouble, and showed plainly to Hil's eyes the real quality of the true man underneath.

Calm and unruffled, no sign of trouble in his pale face or blue eyes, D'Arcy Vavasour was going from the cottage to face certain failure and the loss of an incredible sum of money; and as Hil slowly followed him to the yard where the rest of the party was gathered about the bird-pens, a strong desire to aid him grew in the lad's heart. Could he not do something to help this man in his hour of humiliation and defeat?

"Gentlemen, it is time we were again on the road!" he heard Vavasour address the others. "We have eight miles before we reach Lord Alvanley's little place by Amptill, which, as you know, has been kindly placed at the disposal of Sir Vincent Brookes and myself for the shooting match between our nominees." He drew a tiny jewelled watch from his fob. "And we have barely an hour to get there. I can answer for my own cattle, of course. But—"

He glanced smilingly at the others, and his meaning was plain. They understood. Mr. Brayne flushed crimson.

"Why, confound it all, Vavasour!" he blurted out. "Are you suggesting my horses can't do all yours can?"

"I will wager you a level hundred, Mr. Brayne, that your team is never within a hundred yards of mine ten minutes after their heads are cast loose!" replied Vavasour smilingly.

"Done!"

"And I'll take you also, Vavasour," put in Lord Camelford. "I've ridden behind Brayne's chestnuts!"

"I never could abide funeral horses," replied Vavasour, with calm insolence. "I prefer my horses to move."

(A long instalment of this grand serial next Wednesday.)

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 293.

"THE MAGNET" LIBRARY,
Every Monday.

Our Companion Papers.

"THE PENNY POPULAR,"
Every Friday.

A NEW FREE CORRESPONDENCE EXCHANGE.

The only names and addresses which can be printed in these columns are those of readers living in any of our Colonies who desire Correspondents in Great Britain and Ireland.

Colonists sending in their names and addresses for insertion in the columns of this popular story-book must state what kind of correspondent is required—boy or girl; English, Scotch, Welsh, or Irish.

Would-be correspondents must send with each notice two coupons, one taken from "The Gem," and one from the same week's issue of its companion paper, "The Magnet" Library. Coupons will always be found on page 2 of both papers, and requests for correspondents not containing these two coupons will be absolutely disregarded.

Readers wishing to reply to advertisements appearing in this column must write to the advertisers direct. No correspondence with advertisers can be undertaken through the medium of this office.

All advertisements for insertion in this Free Exchange should be addressed: "The Editor, 'The Gem' Library, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C."

Miss B. Lewis, 54, Lansdowne Crescent, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia, wishes to correspond with boy readers, age 18—20.

J. Gibbons, 30, Napoleon Street, Collingwood, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader in Canada, age 20—21.

Miss M. Brideson, Eulebury, Murphy Street, Bairnsdale, Gippsland, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with a Scotch soldier, age 20.

C. Jackson, 24, Slader Street, Henty, New South Wales, Australia, wishes to correspond with girl readers.

W. Andrews, Worsley Saw Mills, Western Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader in England, age 13.

A. Luz, care of British Post Office, Canton, China, wishes to correspond with reader in London, Paris, or Australia, age 16—17.

Miss M. Daddaw, care of Moore & Co., Kadina, wishes to correspond with college boys, or American boys, age 15—16.

G. F. Rumbol, 9, Lingwell Road, Auburn, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with girl readers of the age of 20 and upwards.

Miss Ella Fisher, Morai, Goulbourn Street, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia, wishes to correspond with a boy reader in England, age 18.

P. T. Batten, c.o. D. B. Scott, R. R. No. 4, Fergus, Ontario, Canada, wishes to correspond with a girl reader living in England, age 17.

C. Markby, Orland Street, Hampton, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with fellow-readers in the British Isles.

C. Payne, Port Road, Hindmarsh, South Australia, wishes to correspond with an English girl living in England, age 17-18.

C. Rowley, Klemzig, South Australia, wishes to correspond with girl readers, age 15-16, interested in postcards.

Miss P. Howard, c.o. P.O. Box, 3,906, Johannesburg, South Africa, wishes to correspond with a boy reader living in Canada, Australia, or England, age 18-19.

Miss B. Collins, of the same address, also wishes to correspond with a boy reader, age 18-19, living in Canada, Australia, or England.

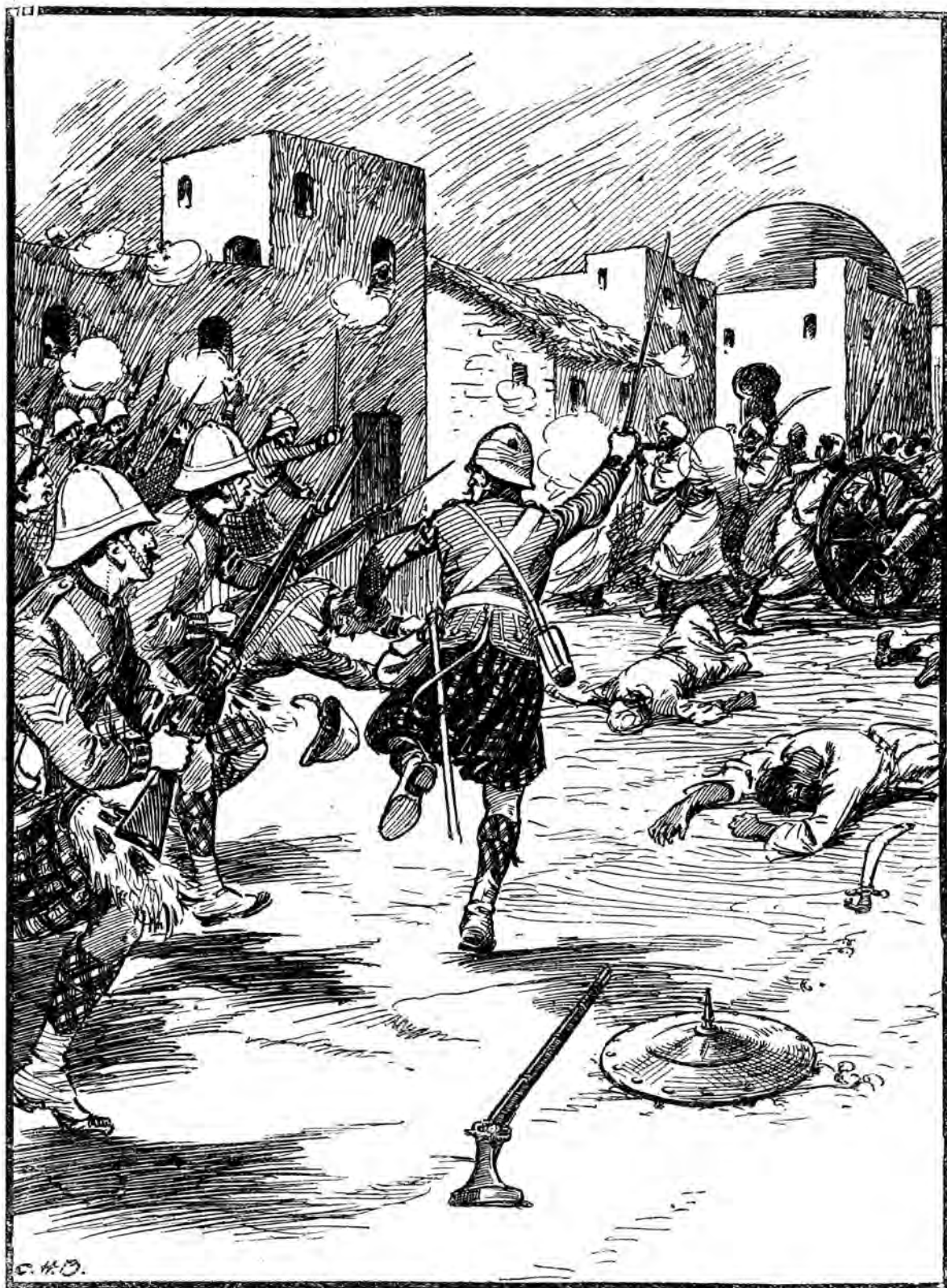
L. K. McNamara, Strand House, 86, Strand Street, Cape Town, South Africa, wishes to correspond with an English girl living in England, age 15-17.

A. Stores, P.O., Henty, New South Wales, Australia, wishes to correspond with an English girl reader, one who is about to emigrate if possible.

I. Newland, 7, Nugget Street, Johannesburg, Transvaal, South Africa, wishes to correspond with readers in England, age 18-19, interested in postcard-collecting.

The Editor specially requests Colonial Readers to kindly bring the Free Correspondence Exchange to the notice of their friends.

FAMOUS FIGHTS FOR THE FLAG. No. 20



Specially drawn for "THE GEM" Library by U. H. Blake.

During the second Afghan War a magnificent example of daring was shown by one of Britain's finest regiments. At the Battle of Candahar, on September 1st, 1880, the 92nd Highlanders, although opposed to a tremendously larger force, carried the village of Sahibdad at the point of the bayonet.

OUR SPECIAL WEEKLY FEATURE



For Next Wednesday,

"GUSSY'S GUEST!"

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

In this grand, complete school-tale of the chums of St. Jim's, a visitor comes for Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form, in the shape of a schoolboy from the Remove Form at Greyfriars. This is none other than Fisher T. Fish, the American junior so well known to all readers of our companion paper, "The Magnet" Library. Fish makes himself thoroughly at home at St. Jim's, and his boasting and general cocksureness have an exasperating effect upon the St. Jim's juniors. Finally, however, a brilliant dodge on the part of Kerr, the clever Scotsman of the New House, has the double effect of getting rid of the visitor, and of taking him down a peg or two at the same time. It is a long time before St. Jim's forgets the visit of

"GUSSY'S GUEST!"**SPLENDID NEWS FOR NEXT WEEK!**

As I have ample evidence of the great interest which the majority of my readers take in football, I am, next week, going to introduce a

GREAT NEW FOOTBALL FEATURE

into "The Gem" Library. This feature will be of extra-special interest to all followers of the great winter game, consisting of a series of straight, common-sense talks, full of valuable advice and interesting anecdote, contributed by a number of first-class football champions selected from the great League teams. Needless to say, these personal contributions from our greatest footballers were not obtained without great expenditure of trouble and expense, but I felt that it was worth it all in order to get the very best "copy" obtainable for my readers. In these days, when so much is written about football and footballers, a new football feature has to be very good indeed if it is to create anything of a sensation—and that is what I expect my latest departure to do.

And I rely on the help of each individual one of my chums to do their utmost for me in this direction.

OUR COMPANION PAPERS.

Extra-good fare in the way of really "first-chop" reading-matter is provided this week by our two splendid companion papers, "The Magnet" Library and "The Penny Popular." In the former,

"THE MOONLIGHT FOOTBALLERS!"

By Frank Richards,

is a rattling good school story of Harry Wharton & Co. at Greyfriars, with a strong football interest in it, but written in such a way that it will appeal equally to those who are footballers and those who are not.

"The Penny Popular," for its part, offers a splendid array of stories to suit all tastes. Lovers of school, detective, and adventure stories are catered for equally successfully.

"The Bogus Eleven" is a grand tale of school life at St. Jim's, by Martin Clifford.

"Hunter, and Hunted Too," is a gripping story of Sexton Blake, the great detective, relating how he first crossed swords with George Marsden Plummer, the terrible detective-criminal; while the splendid tale of "Jack, Sam, and Pete," by S. Clarke Hook, is full of humour and incident from start to finish. All these stories, as is usual in "The Penny Popular," are complete in themselves. That Monday is

"Magnet" day and Friday "Penny Pop." day, and that each of these two splendid companion papers to "The Gem" Library represent the finest possible value in really attractive reading-matter ever offered for one penny, are facts that I would ask all my chums to bear in mind.

HOW TO WRITE A SHORT STORY.—No. 3.

By a Successful Author.

Dialogue.—Further to my remarks anent this last week. I would add that you must master the art of representing your characters by means of their conversation if you wish to write saleable stories. Readers will often give up reading a story in disgust, and say: "It's sickening! All that column is dry prose; no speaking at all!" It is often a good plan to open a story with a remark that arrests the attention at once. Supposing your story began thus: "Once and for all, father, I will not do it!" That attracts the attention at once, and readers say to themselves: "Now, what is it he will not do? And why won't he?" In short, you excite curiosity and interest, and, if you are clever, you hold them until the last paragraph. That neat, opening remark not only grips the reader, it grips the editor—and that is the primary object. You often hear it said that the dialogue in fiction is too polished, too perfect, for real life, and such as ordinary people never use in their every-day conversations. This is quite true, but there is a reason for it. When a person is speaking you are influenced not only by what he is saying, but by the tone it is spoken in—the expression of feature that accompanies it—and often by characteristic gestures which add to the force. In writing conversations all these adjuncts are lost, and a little colouring to make up for the defect is permissible. A good method of perfecting yourself in writing dialogues, is to take two characters—preferably diametrically opposite—and make them argue out a certain question. When you have been through it, then sit down and write it out. The more practice of this kind you get the better. Don't use epigrammatic sayings, and don't make them too dull. Endeavour to strike the happy medium, and make them natural, with a little additional force that grips the reader at once. See to it that every word spoken by a character contains something of interest—something that will carry forward the plot. Anthony Hope's "Dolly Dialogues" form an excellent study for beginners.

Expression.—Two things are paramount in writing fiction. They are conception and expression. For conception you depend solely upon your imagination, and its powers of receiving different impressions and adapting them to present needs. Day-dreaming is not quite the same as conceiving ideas for stories. The former is letting the mind wander loosely; the latter is carefully guiding its course to some useful end. As for expression—this is a thing that requires years of practice. It is the expression that makes the author's style, and you cannot devote too much time to cultivating a natural and effective style of writing. Style is not controlled by mere grammatical rules—these are useful and necessary, and should be carefully studied by the man who would write matter for publication—it is the reflection of your own personality. Style may be likened to speed in bowling—you must get your length and pitch before you try to get your pace. Apply the metaphor to writing, and you have the secret of a good style.

(Another of these splendid "How to Write a Short Story" Articles next Wednesday.)

The Editor



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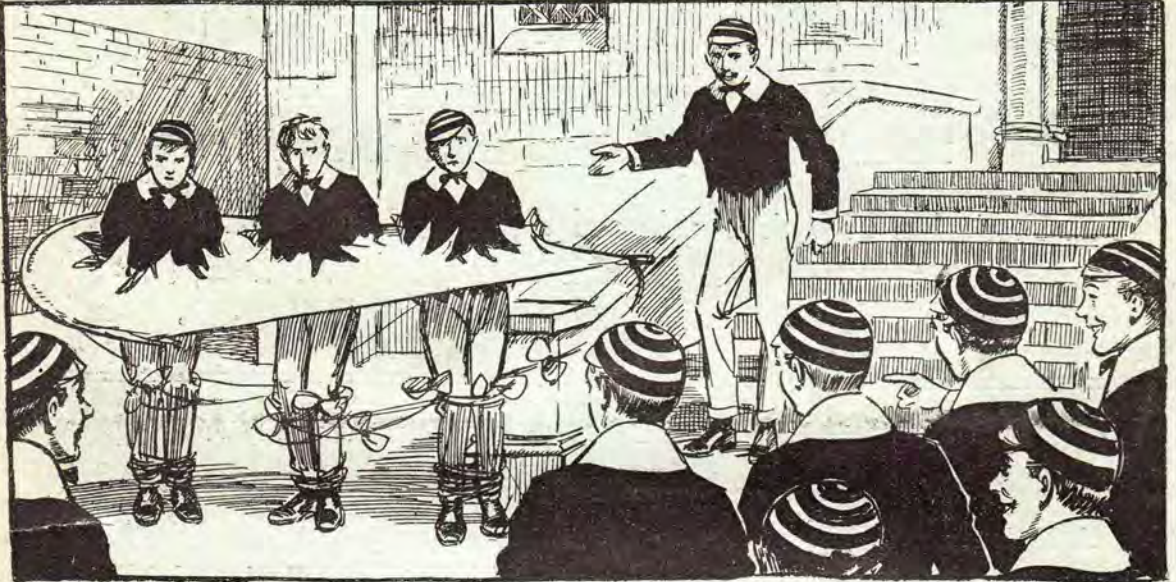
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