

"THE HIDDEN HAND!"

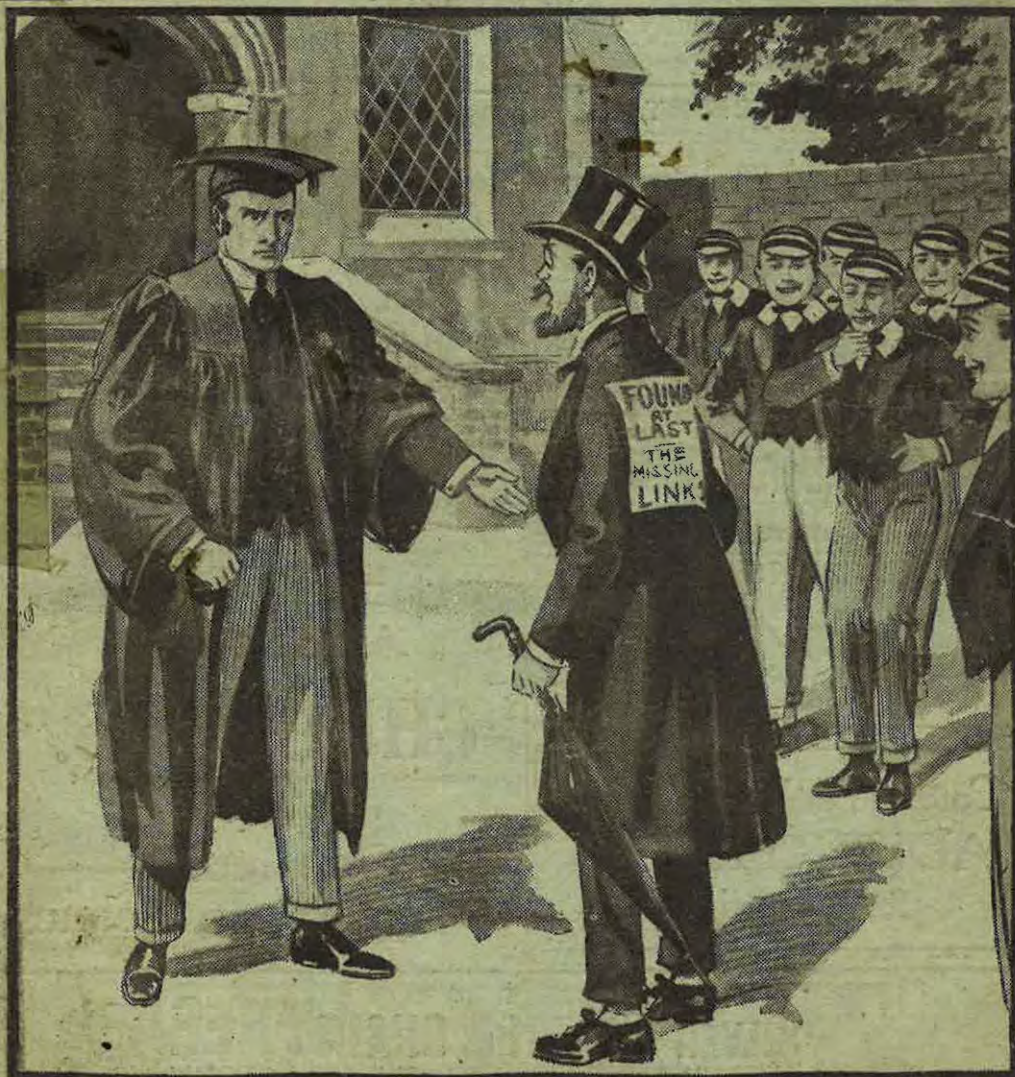
A Splendid Complete Tale of Tom Merry & Co. and the Schoolboy Cracksman.

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No.
336,
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Mr. Railton caught the swell of St. Jim's and swung him round. "Who are you?" he demanded. "Pway don't be so wuff, Wailton!" said Gussy. "I am Doctah Monk!" (An amusing incident in the grand long, complete school tale contained in this issue.)

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THE HIDDEN HAND

Another Grand Long, Complete Story of Tom Merry & Co. and their Chum
Talbot, the Schoolboy Cracksmen.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.



Talbot muttered to himself as he sat in the armchair, and Levison, hidden behind the screen, heard every word. "Two thousand pounds—what a haul!" muttered Talbot. "But if they only knew—if only they wouldn't be so decent to me!" And Levison's heart beat hard, for he felt he was on the verge of discovering the solution of the mysterious behaviour of the new junior. (See Chapter 12.)

CHAPTER 1. Called Away.

"TELEGRAM for Master Talbot!"

Tom Merry & Co., in spotless flannels, were chatting cheerfully outside the School House at St. Jim's, when Toby, the page, came up with the buff envelope in his hand.

Tom Merry was in great spirits that Saturday afternoon.

Gordon Gay & Co. of the Grammar School were coming over to play cricket. That was always a very interesting occasion. But this time it was specially interesting, from the fact that Tom Merry had a surprise in store for the Grammarians. The Grammar School junior team always gave St. Jim's juniors a hard tussle, either at football or at

cricket, and the last match had been won hands down by the Grammarians on their own ground. They were coming over in the confident expectation of repeating the performance on Little Side at St. Jim's.

Tom Merry & Co. knew that, and the knowledge made them grin. For they had a surprise—a tremendous surprise—for Gordon Gay & Co. There was a new fellow in the Shell at St. Jim's who had displayed powers as a cricketer, that made the oldest hands open their eyes wide. Gordon Gay knew nothing of him, but he would learn something of him that afternoon. And Tom Merry & Co. gleefully anticipated the effect upon their old rivals when Talbot of the Shell went on to bowl.

Talbot of the Shell had not been long at St. Jim's, but he was admittedly the best player in the junior team. With the

next Wednesday:

"THE PARTING OF THE WAYS!" AND "A BID FOR A THRONE!"

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willow he was fully the equal of Tom Merry of the School House. With the ball he was every bit as good as Fatty Wynu of the New House, hitherto the champion junior bowler of the school. And in the field Talbot had astonished the natives, so to speak, with his wonderful catches. With a surprise-packet like that to spring on the unsuspecting Grammarians, it was no wonder that Tom Merry & Co. were looking forward to the match with keen delight.

"Hallo, this is for you, Talbot!" said Tom, as the House p.p. brought up the telegram. "Don't say it's anything to call you away this afternoon, because you can't go."

"No fear!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth, with great emphasis. "We couldn't possibly spare you, Talbot, dear boy!"

"Perhaps you'd better not open it," suggested Monty Lowther brilliantly, "then you can't possibly be called away."

"Good idea!" chimed in Manners. "Don't open it, Talbot."

Talbot smiled.

"I think I'll open it," he said. "It may be something important. Excuse me, you fellows!"

Talbot slit the envelope with his penknife and took out the telegram. The junior cricketers eyed him grimly as he read it. Telegrams did not often come for juniors, and the inference was that it meant something unusual. But whatever it was, they were determined that Talbot shouldn't miss the match that afternoon. Talbot was wanted—badly wanted—to play the Grammarians, and there was an end of it.

A dark shade came over Talbot's handsome face as he read the telegram. He thrust it into his pocket, crumpling it in his hand as he did so.

"I'm sorry—" he began.

"Bad news?"

"Oh, no!"

"Then there's nothing to be sorry about," said Tom Merry cheerfully. "If it's a kind uncle or an aunt that wants to see you this afternoon, you can wire back to him or her—Please go and eat coke!" That will be definite enough, and will come inside sixpennyworth."

"Hear, hear!"

"It isn't that—"

"Good! Then it's all right?"

"Not quite all right," said Talbot. "I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to excuse me this afternoon after all. I've got to go out."

"Rats!"

"Bosh!"

"Wats!"

"Piffle!"

"Come off!"

"Cheese it!"

Those emphatic exclamations from the cricketers showed their views on the subject. The new Shall fellow coloured uncomfortably.

"I shall really have to go," he said. "It's a—friend. He's come down from London to see me, and he's waiting for me in Wayland."

"Let him wait!" said Monty Lowther. "Everything comes to him who waits, you know, so he will be all right."

"Betah send him a wiah, dear boy, and say you can't come."

"Let him come here," said Tom Merry. "I don't see why he should bother you to go to Wayland. He can come here and see the match, and you can jaw to him between the innings. Toby can take the wire."

"It's impossible."

"Go after the match, then," suggested Figgins of the New House.

Talbot shook his head.

"He's fixed the time for me to see him."

"Like his cheek!" said Jack Blake indignantly. "Look

here, Talbot, you can't go! You can't leave us in the lurch like that!"

"It would be wotten, Talbot, dear boy!"

"You can't go!"

"You sha'n't go!"

"The Grammarians may be here any minute now!"

"You're wanted, Talbot!"

"I say, Talbot," said Tom Merry remonstratingly, "it is rather thick, you know, cutting the match at the last moment like this. If it were a relation ill, or anything of that kind, it would be different; but just a friend coming down to Wayland—dash it all, I think you ought to stand by us!"

"Yaas, watah! It's up to you, Talbot."

"Telephone to him," suggested Kerr.

Talbot's handsome face had a troubled look. He was very keen to play in the match, and he wanted very much to oblige Tom Merry & Co. The telegram was evidently very unwelcome to him. Some of the juniors wondered why he did not show it to them. He had thrust it hastily into his pocket, as if in fear that other eyes than his own might fall upon the message.

Talbot, in the short time he had been at St. Jim's had become one of the most popular fellows in his House. But the other fellows all looked at him grimly now. If he deserted them that afternoon they would not find it easy to forgive him.

"Why can't the man come here?" asked Herries.

"Yaas, let him come and see the match," urged Arthur Augustus. "It's no more twouble for him to come to you than for you to go to him. Tell him you're playin' ewicket and can't possibly be spared, and he'll come wight enough."

Talbot shook his head.

"Well, why not?" demanded Tom Merry.

Talbot did not reply.

Some of the fellows exchanged rather queer looks. Talbot, handsome, popular, apparently well-to-do, had made his mark in the School House. But carping, ill-natured fellows like Levison of the Fourth had observed that nothing whatever was known about his people; that he hardly ever received a letter, and never a visitor. His antecedents were unknown, his connections never mentioned, and Levison had not been slow to hint that they were therefore shady. And, it came into the minds of some of the fellows gathered round Talbot now that perhaps his "friend" at Wayland was someone whom he would not care to have seen at the school—some connection he did not want the St. Jim's fellows to see on any account.

The thought made them feel decidedly uncomfortable. If that was the case, it was pretty rotten for Talbot, as he could not explain very well.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, who never suspected anything, did not suspect what was passing in the minds of most of the juniors present, and he broke the silence.

"I'll tell you what, dear boy. Hawwies isn't playin', so he can wide oval to Wayland on his bike and take a message to your friend and bring him heah."

"I'll do it like a bird if Talbot likes!" said Herries.

"Hallo! Here are the Grammarians!"

A big brake stopped at the gates of St. Jim's. Gordon Gay & Co. had arrived.

Tom Merry gave Talbot a quick look.

"Well, what do you say, Talbot? Here they are. Are you going to leave us in the lurch? It's for you to say."

"I—I must go!" said Talbot, colouring. "I'm much obliged to you, Herries, but the chap will expect to see me. I must go! Look here, I'll cut over on my bike, and get back as quick as I can. I may be back in time—if you're set on my playing."

Tom Merry's clouded face brightened up.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "If we bat second, you'll have lots of time; if we bat first, I'll put you down for last man in, and we'll keep the innings open by hook or crook until you get back."

"I'll lend you my motor-bike, Talbot!" exclaimed Bernard Glyn. "You know how to handle it."

"Hear, hear!" said Blake. "That's a ripping idea! You can do it there and back in an hour, and have time to tell your friend to go and eat coke."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Right-ho!" said Talbot. "I—I say, I'm awfully sorry for this—"

"It's all right," said Tom Merry, his good spirits quite returned now. "Buzz off and get out your stink-bike, Glyn. You other chaps come along."

Glyn and Talbot hurried away to the bike-shed, and Tom Merry & Co. went to greet the Grammarians.

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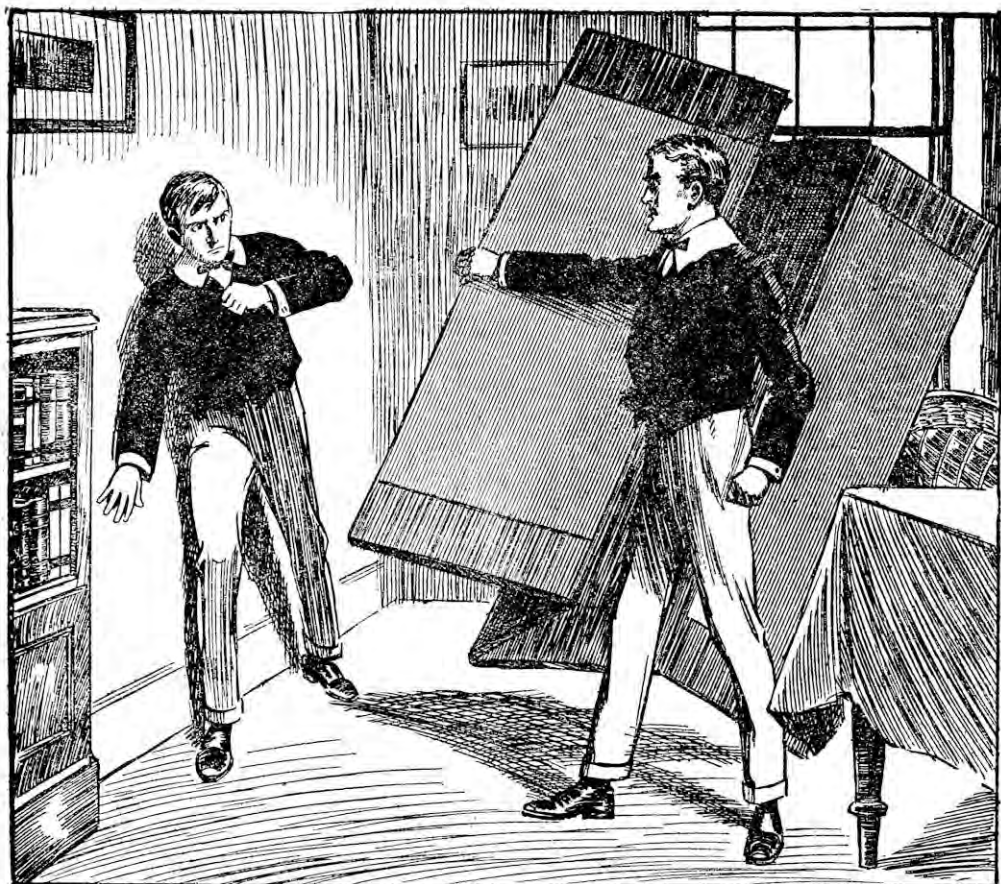
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Click! Click! The desk was locked again, and Talbot, with gleaming eyes, stepped towards the screen, and pulled it aside. Levison was revealed! For a moment there was a dead silence, as the two juniors stood face to face. "You!" said Talbot at last. "Spying!" (See Chapter 12.)

CHAPTER 2. Left in the Lurch.

GORDON GAY & CO. were looking decidedly "chippy" that afternoon. They had scored such a sweeping victory over St. Jim's juniors in their last match that they had come over this time with the most confident anticipations. There were some splendid players in the Grammar School team—Gordon Gay himself, and Wootton major and minor, and Frank Monk and Lane and Carboy, and Gustave Blanc, the French junior—more usually called Mont Blong.

"Here we are again!" said Gordon Gay cheerfully, as he shook hands with Tom Merry outside the pavilion on Little Side. "Prepare to meet your giddy doom."

"Yes, razzor!" chimed in Mont Blong. "And we have something to say to you after ze cricket."

The Grammarian chums all chuckled together. Tom Merry regarded them with a look of inquiry.

"What's the little joke?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing!" said Gordon Gay airily. "We've got something on next Wednesday at the Grammar School, and we're going to send you invitations, that's all. Hope you'll come."

"Good! What is it?"

"Ahem! Sort of entertainment. Not giving away the particulars at present," said Gay. "There are such things happen, you know, as really ripping ideas being scoffed by envious rivals. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yes, razzor!" chuckled Mont Blong. "I zink zat you have here vat you call a Dramatic Society, isn't it? But I zink zat you never zink—"

"Shurrup!" said Gay. "I was not going to tell Monsieur Merry nozing, my shum."

"So you're getting up some dramatic entertainment, are you?" said Tom Merry suspiciously. "Well, that's nothing new!"

"But ze vay ve do him is somezing new—ha, ha, ha!"

"Quite a new idea," said Wootton major. "You St. Jim's fellows wouldn't think of it in a month of Sundays."

"What-ho!" said Frank Monk. "You give your blessed plays in the lecture-hall or the Form-room, but you've never thought of—"

"Shut up!" roared Gordon Gay. "Do you want to give the show away? Cheese it, and let's get on to the cricket. We didn't come here to jaw, Monkey!"

"Blessed if I know what you're driving at!" said Tom Merry.

"You'll know on Wednesday, and then you'll be ready to kick yourselves," chuckled Gordon Gay. "Now toss us, and let's get to bizney."

They tossed, and Gordon Gay had the best of it, and decided to bat. Tom Merry & Co. were glad of it. It gave Talbot time to get back for the St. Jim's innings. They would miss him as a bowler, but that could not be helped. Fatty Wynn of the New House could be relied upon to show his usual form, and Redfern and Blako were good chance bowlers.

As a matter of fact, Tom Merry & Co. were thinking a good deal just then about Gordon Gay's mysterious communication. The rivalry between the juniors of the two schools was very keen in other matters besides games.

Some time ago the Grammarians had started an Amateur

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NEXT WEDNESDAY— "THE PARTING OF THE WAYS!" A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

Dramatic Society on the lines of Tom Merry's Dramatic Society, which the St. Jim's fellows considered was like their cheek. And Gordon Gay was a wonderful actor, and he had made a success of it. Now he had apparently thought of something new in the amateur dramatic line, and the St. Jim's chums were to be invited over to see their rivals' triumph—not a very enjoyable prospect. Tom Merry had already made up his mind that he would discover somehow what was "on," and steal a march on his old rivals.

But the game soon drove all other thoughts out of the minds of the St. Jim's cricketers. Gordon Gay had opened the Grammarian innings with Wootton major, and they were soon going very strong.

A good many juniors of both Houses gathered round the field to watch the game, and there was a still larger crowd over on the Big Side, where Kildare and the great men of the First Eleven were playing a visiting team from Abbotsford.

Fatty Wynn bowled the first over, and then Blake went on. Blake was a good bowler, but he could not touch Gordon Gay's wicket. The Australian junior knocked his bowling all over the field, and piled up runs with his partner. Blake made a comical grimace to Tom Merry as the field crossed over.

"Best I can do," he said. "I wish Talbot were here. I fancy Talbot would stop him."

Tom Merry nodded. He was playing a substitute in the field for Talbot, Gordon Gay having assented cheerily to that arrangement. But what the St. Jim's fellows wanted just then was Talbot on the bowling-craze.

"Buck up, Fatty!" said Figgins, as the fat Fourth-Former took the ball for the next over. "It's simply sickening Talbot clearing off like this! And we depend on you. Let 'em see what New House bowling is like, anyway, even if School House bouncers leave us in the lurch."

"You bet!" said Fatty Wynn.

Fatty, fortunately, was in great form. He accounted for Wootton major's wicket in that over. One down for 30.

But even Fatty Wynn could not touch Gordon Gay, who was well set when Frank Monk joined him at the wickets. The score had jumped to 46 when Monk was caught out by Tom Merry, and Wootton minor came in. Gay was still going strong. When the innings had lasted an hour the Grammarians were five down for 90, and the St. Jim's field cast anxious glances in the direction of the distant school gates.

Gordon Gay observed it, and he chuckled. He called to Tom Merry as he stopped at point after the field had crossed once more.

"Waiting for your man?" he asked.

"Yes," said Tom.

"A surprise-packet—what?"

"You'll jolly well see when he bats for us!" said Tom.

"Who is it, then—somebody I know?" asked Gay curiously.

"No; a new chap—Talbot."

"Talbot? He played for you in a match at Glyn House last week," asked Gay, "when Glyn's pater had a cricket week there? I heard of it."

"That's the chap!"

"Well, I hope he'll come. I dare say we shall be able to handle him," smiled Gay. "What do you let your men wander away like this for?"

"He's been called away by a telegram, worse luck!" growled Tom Merry. "But he'll be back in time to bat."

"Play!"

Gordon Gay received the bowling from Redfern. The New House junior put all he knew into it, and he was very good. But Gay dealt easily with the bowling, and the over added a dozen runs to the Grammarian score.

It was a single-innings match. There was no time for a full match in an afternoon. Indeed, at the rate matters were going, it looked as if St. Jim's would not have time to bat at all, unless the Grammarians declared. Gordon Gay was at the top of his form, and he was making things hum.

Fatty Wynn was doing his best, but without result so far as the Grammarian skipper was concerned.

And the other bowlers were simply contributing to Gay's score.

Two hours had passed, and Tom Merry gave up hope that Talbot would be back in time to bowl against the Grammarian side. The Grammarian score was 140 for eight wickets. Gordon Gay had accounted for 80 runs on his own, and he was still batting.

"Pile in, Fatty!" said Figgins imploringly, as the fat Fourth-Former took the ball once more. "Send that brute packing, and I'll stand you as many tarts as you can eat!"

Fatty Wynn grinned.

"I'll remind you," he said.

And Wynn of the Fourth went on with the air of a fellow determined to do or die. Gordon Gay stopped the first ball, and snicked away the second for 2. The third gave him a

boundary. But the fourth slid under his bat, and there was a gasp of relief from the St. Jim's field.

"How's that?"

"Out!" said the umpire at the batting end, Lefevre of the Fifth; and he grinned.

And Gordon Gay carried out his bat at last. Nine down for 146. It was a big score for a junior innings.

"Last man in!" said Tom Merry, in great relief. "Finish him off, Fatty!"

And Fatty did. Last man in was rewarded with a duck's-egg, and the Grammarian innings finished for 146.

The field came off, considerably fagged by the excessive leather-hunting the Grammarians had given them. There was a pause for rest and refreshment in the shape of ginger-beer and lemonade. Talbot had not come.

"Is the bouncer going to fail us after all?" growled Monty Lowther. "I think it's pretty rotten of him clearing off like this!"

"Yass, wathah!"

"Can't be helped!" said Tom Merry. "I'll put him down for last man, anyway. And I'll leave Kangaroo last but one to keep him company."

Tom Merry opened the innings for St. Jim's with Blake. Gordon Gay bowled the first over; he was very nearly as good with the ball as with the willow. And Blake, with a lugubrious face, found himself dismissed for 2. Luck was on the Grammarian side, and the faces of the Saints were growing long. They had had such gorgeous anticipations for that match owing to their reliance on Talbot of the Shell. And Talbot had failed them in the hour of need. He had not come back from his mysterious appointment. He might not come back in time to bat at all; and they all knew that without him the visitors' score would never be equalled.

Perhaps that troublesome thought put Tom Merry off his game a little, for in the third over, with Gay bowling again, the St. Jim's skipper was clean bowled. Tom Merry, the best bat in the side, had been bowled for 4. It was all up with St. Jim's. The Grammarian fieldmen grinned at one another, regarding the match as all over bar shouting. It looked like it.

St. Jim's luck was out. Monty Lowther scored a duck's-egg, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was dismissed for a few runs, and Kerr did little better. Five down for 20 showed on the board, and it was no wonder that the Grammarians grinned. This was even a more sweeping success than their last match with Tom Merry's team.

Fortune smiled again, however, with Figgins and Redfern at the wickets. The two New House juniors played a splendid game, and they were in topping form. The Grammarians were given some leather-hunting for the first time. A very handsome forty from Figgins made the St. Jim's score look more healthy. Redfern having added twenty in the same time. Then ill-luck swooped down on both of them, Figgins being caught out at point, and Redfern clean bowled in the next over. Seven down for eighty.

Fatty Wynn and Digby were at the wickets now, and neither was expected to hold out long against Gay's bowling. The last two on the list were Kangaroo—Harry Noble of the Shell—and Talbot! And Talbot had not come back. If he did not come in time, Herries was to bat, and Herries, though a good bat, was not up to Gay's bowling. Fatty Wynn had run two successfully, when he was caught in the slips.

"Man in, Kangy!" said Tom Merry glumly.

Kangaroo joined Digby at the wickets. Kangaroo could be relied upon to hold the fort; but Dig was not quite up to dealing with Gordon Gay. He lived through an over or two, but was caught out by Frank Monk! Digby looked very glum as he came out. He knew what was wanted, and he had done his best to keep the innings open till Talbot should turn up. But Fortune had not favoured him.

"Last man in," said Blake gloomily, "and Talbot's not here!"

Zip-zip! Gug-gug!

Bernard Glyn gave a yell.

"That's my stink-bike!"

"Murray!"

CHAPTER 3.

Schoolboy and Cracksmen.

TALBOT had reached Wayland quickly enough on Bernard Glyn's motor-bike. He jumped off the machine outside Wayland station, and put it up there, and, turning from the station, proceeded on foot to his destination. Glyn had lent him the bike gladly enough to enable him to reach his destination as quickly as possible; but a motor-bike would have attracted rather too much attention in the purlieus into which the Shell fellow now plunged.

From the station, he crossed the High Street and the market-place, and River Street, and turned into a lane that led down towards the river. At the end of that narrow and

dirty lane were wharves and moored barges, and an ill-looking inn facing the river, with a dirty wooden verandah almost overhanging the water. Rough-looking men were hanging about the Blackbird Inn, smoking pipes, and they stared curiously at the well-dressed St. Jim's fellow. Talbot passed into the inn quickly, desirous of attracting as little attention as possible.

"Is Mr. Walker here?" he asked a red-faced barkeeper in shirt-sleeves.

The man shook his head.

"You Master Smith?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then Mr. Walker left word he'd be here at 'arf-past four, as per telegram, and if you come early you was to wait in this room."

"Thank you. Will you show me the room?"

"This 'ere way."

Talbot followed the man up the rickety stairs, glad to escape the curious looks of the loafers about the place.

He was shown into a dirty, dusty room overlooking the river. He did not sit down, but paced impatiently to and fro in the room, occasionally staring out of the dirty windows over the wide, shining Ryll. When he looked at his surroundings, there was disgust in his handsome face. After St. Jim's the place seemed intolerably squalid to his eyes; and yet Talbot had been in many a worse place before he became a junior at St. Jim's. But his recent surroundings were fresh in his mind now; and old associations jarred upon his nerves.

The appointment in the telegram had been for half-past four; but Talbot had hoped to find his "friend" and get away sooner. There was nothing for it, however, but to wait for Mr. Walker to come in. Mr. Walker had probably other business in the market-town as well as his appointment with the new junior of St. Jim's.

He looked at his watch again and again with growing impatience. But it was a quarter-past four before the door opened, and a thick-set man, with a bulldog face and stubby chin, came into the room.

"You've come at last, Hookey."

Mr. Hookey Walker nodded.

"You're early, Toff," he said.

"I wanted to get back to the school."

"Didn't you tell me as Saturday afternoon was always a 'arf-holiday, and so you could always meet me—?"

"Yes, yes, that's right; but there's a cricket match on, and I was to play," said Talbot. "It couldn't be helped; but I want to get back for the finish if I can."

Mr. Walker sat down and lit a cigar. He offered his case to Talbot, but the Shell fellow refused it with a gesture.

"No?" said Hookey Walker, in surprise.

"I've chucked that."

"I'll order up something to drink—"

"Not for me," said Talbot.

Mr. Hookey Walker looked at him very curiously.

"You ain't at the school now, Toff; you're with an old pal?"

"I don't care for it, thanks. I've got to keep myself fit for cricket."

"Getting on all right at St. Jim's—what?"

"Excellently."

"That's good. Not a suspish?"

"No, no."

"Blessed if you don't take the cake, Toff," said Mr. Walker, in great admiration. "I wonder what that reverend old toff, the headmaster, would say, if he knew that Master Talbot was really the Toff, the son of old Captain Crow the crackman, and himself the finest crackman that ever cracked a crib?"

"He will never know," said Talbot.

"No fear," said Hookey Walker at once. "That wouldn't suit our book. I must say, Toff, the wheeze has gone better than I ever expected. Bagging a collection of coins in the school—worth several hundred quid—in the first week you was there, and then that big job at Glyn House, it was splendid. I own up that you was right from the start, and that this was the best game we have ever planned. And you look the part, too—you do your school credit, you do."

"I think I pass pretty well!"

"You do, you do," said Walker. "And are you still thinking of keeping it up—after we've done our work there, you know?"

"Certainly!"

"Staying at the school and going on to the University?"

"Yes."

Mr. Walker blew out a big cloud of smoke.

"Blowed if it don't take the cake," he said. "But it's a splendid scheme. Fixed up like that, you get the inside information we want—and after the school, and the places you get asked to, why, there's Oxford later—when you're there. But now about St. Jim's—there's a big job to be done there, and you ought to have it all cut and dried by this time."

Talbot shook his head.

"No?" said Mr. Walker, in surprise.

"Not yet," said Talbot decidedly.

"Why not? It will be a splendid haul—an old pal of mine is in chocky now for trying after it," said Mr. Walker. "The school plate is worth 'caps of money. And with you inside the 'ouse, it ought to be as easy as rollin' off a log. Wot?"

A troubled look came over Talbot's handsome face.

"It can wait," he said.

Mr. Walker fixed his eyes somewhat oddly upon Talbot.

"Look 'ere, Toff, you ain't fooling me—wot? I've noticed a bit of a change in you since you was at the school. You ain't forgetting who you are, and wot you are at the school for? It won't do, Toff!"

"I've got to be careful," said Talbot. "I didn't tell you; but I've been in danger of being spotted already. There was a fellow there, a kid in the Third Form, who knew me."

"You don't say!" ejaculated Mr. Walker.

"Did you ever see a ragged kid named Frayne—Joe Frayne—who used to hang about Angel Alley?" said Talbot.

"I think I remember—he disappeared—"

"Well, he was at St. Jim's."

"Joe Frayne, the cadger and pickpocket, at St. Jim's!" exclaimed Mr. Walker, in astonishment. "Wot are you giving me, Toff?"

"It's true. A fellow there, Tom Merry, took pity on him, and got his uncle to send him to the school to give him a chance in life. He knew me at once."

"Well, strike me!" murmured Mr. Walker.

"I had done the kid some good turns when he was a starving little waster in the slums, and he kept my secret," went on Talbot, "and he believed that I was at St. Jim's on the straight. But when Mr. Selby's numismatic collection disappeared, he suspected me."

"No wonder!" commented Mr. Walker. "But he didn't blow the gaff?"

"No. I kept him quiet. But after the job at Glyn House—Frayne was in the house at the time—he knew that was my work, and he came down on me. But my luck was in, as it happened. I had saved his pal, young D'Arcy, from being killed, and he felt that he couldn't give me away. He's a decent little chap. But he is as straight as a die, and he wanted me to hand the loot back—"

Mr. Walker chuckled.

"That's a good one!" he remarked. "Werry moderate, I must say! But you could have offered to let him stand in, Toff."

"No good; I tell you he was straight. And the end was that, knowing what I had done, and expecting more of the same kind to follow, he felt that he would be practically an accomplice if he held his tongue, so he's run away from the school to get out of it. He hasn't been found since."

"Pshaw!"

"But I believe he will hold his tongue. But if there were a burglary at St. Jim's, of course he would hear of it, and—very likely he would give me away. Of course, if the police knew that Captain Crow's son was at the school, it wouldn't take them long to find the crackman."

"Right!" said Mr. Walker. "That kid will ave to be found, and his mouth stopped, afore we bring off that job; I see that. You ain't any idea where he's gone?"

"I suppose he's gone back to London, that's all. But he's not to be hurt, Hookey."

"His mouth will ave to be stopped," said Mr. Walker.

"Mind, I mean what I say," exclaimed Talbot. "I won't have that kid hurt. He's a decent little chap, and he's kept my secret. St. Jim's can wait."

Mr. Walker looked sullen.

"That's all very well," he said; "but if you are growing soft, Toff—"

"Whether I am growing soft or not, I'm going to be obeyed, or I cut my connection with the gang!" said Talbot. "You know you can't do without me. I've taken my father's place as your leader, because I'm suited to the place, and all the gang were willing, and you can't say it hasn't been a success so far."

"True enough," admitted Mr. Walker.

"Well, St. Jim's can wait."

"Just as you say, Toff," assented Mr. Walker, though he gave the boy a very curious sidelong glance. "But wot else is going? What about the other school near Ryleomb—the Grammar School? Anything doing there?"

"I've got that on my list," said Talbot coolly. "I was to make the acquaintance of the Grammar School fellows to-day, if you hadn't called me away. I think that will be worth while. I've marked that down as the next job."

"Good," said Mr. Walker, evidently relieved. "That's more like your old self, Toff. Blessed if I didn't begin to think you was weakening."

Talbot smiled bitterly.

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"I'm not likely to forget who I am, or what I am at St. Jim's for," he said. "I may have felt pretty sick about it lately, as the fellows are all so decent to me; but that's neither here nor there. Business first."

"Exactly."

"I can't come here again," said Talbot. "It's too risky. I'll let you know where we are to meet when I'm a bit better posted about the Grammar School, and make the arrangements. Now I'll get off; the fellows are wanting me."

"You're right in the swim there, ain't you?" asked Mr. Walker, apparently very much surprised and impressed.

"Right in."

"Well, I don't wonder. With your looks and brains, you ought to get on; only, don't forget, Toff, it won't do for you to get thinking that you are simply a schoolboy, like the rest, and getting ideas into your head, and so on. You've got to remember that you are the Toff, and the leader of Captain Crow's old gang."

"I'm not likely to forget," said Talbot bitterly. "Good-bye, Hookey!"

They shook hands, and Talbot quitted the room. Mr. Hookey Walker was left with a very thoughtful expression upon his face, and he shook his head several times after Talbot had gone. Perhaps he read the boy's thoughts and feelings more clearly than Talbot had supposed.

Talbot threaded his way through the riverside lanes, and breathed more freely when he came out into the High Street again. His expression was moody and thoughtful, and his lips had a bitter curve. What Mr. Walker had surmised was quite correct, and Talbot realised it very clearly. At St. Jim's the force of association was telling upon him; the boy crackman, a daring criminal in a dangerous gang, was beginning to "weaken." His father had been a crackman; he had been brought up among thieves; until lately he had never dreamed of any other life.

But St. Jim's had let a new light into his mind, and he was no longer satisfied. The trust and good-fellowship he found among Tom Merry & Co. at the old school had made him shudder inwardly many a time as he reflected what he was, and what they would think of him if they knew the truth. But he, as well as Hookey Walker, regarded such thoughts as a sign of "weakening," and he drove them from his mind as fast as they arose.

But his face was very moody as he remounted Glyn's motor-cycle and sped away towards St. Jim's.

It cleared as the old school came in sight. By an effort he banished Mr. Hookey Walker and all his black associations from his mind. Once more he was a St. Jim's fellow, and he thought and felt like one. For the time being, the "Toff" was dead, and it was Talbot of the Shell who was speeding back to St. Jim's to lend his aid to his comrades in the cricket match.

CHAPTER 4. "Bravo, Talbot!"

ZIP-ZIP-ZIP-ZIP!

"Here he is!"

"Here's Talbot!"

"Just in time, Talbot!"

Talbot jumped off the motor-bike, and ran towards the playing-fields. Tom Merry greeted him with great relief.

"Last man in, Talbot!"

"Waiting for you!" exclaimed Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I'm sorry I'm so late," panted Talbot. "I got back as quickly as I could. It won't take me a couple of minutes to change."

He ran into the pavilion.

"That your man?" called out Gordon Gay.

"That's the pippin!" said Tom Merry. "You don't mind giving us a minute or two more?"

"Not a bit!" said Gay cheerily.

"Just a chance," said Tom Merry.

The field was waiting, but Talbot did not keep them waiting long. In an incredibly short time he came dashing out of the pavilion in flannels, with his bat in his hand. He ran on to the pitch. Kangaroo waved his hand in greeting.

"Nine down for eighty-two," Jack Blake remarked. "Thank goodness Talbot's come back! There's a chance yet."

"Just a chance," said Tom Merry.

"If he's fit afaah buzzin' about on a motor-bike—" remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, turning his eyeglass upon last man in.

"Fit as a fiddle, from his looks!" said Figgins.

"Yaas, that's so."

Talbot had to receive the last ball of the over that had The Gen Library.—No. 336.

been fatal to Digby. He knocked the ball away, and three were run, which brought Talbot to the batting end again as the field crossed. But that hit showed that Talbot was quite in his old form, and the St. Jim's crowd gave him an encouraging cheer.

"That chap's up to snuff!" Gordon Gay remarked to Wootton major. "Go on, and squelch him!"

Wootton major grinned, and went on to squelch Talbot as ordered by his skipper. But it did not come off.

The St. Jim's crowd watched eagerly as Talbot dealt with the bowling. The first ball was snicked away for two, the second driven for four, and then came another two, and then a three. Tom Merry clapped his hands joyfully. The innings was looking up once more. Talbot had returned in time to pull the game out of the fire.

If Mr. Hookey Walker had been able to see the Toff now, he would probably have been very much surprised.

No one at that moment would have taken the Shell fellow for anything but what he appeared to be—a schoolboy cricketer, playing up for his side in first-class style, without a thought in his mind for anything but the grand old game.

"Bravo, Talbot!"

"Hurrah, hurrah!"

Clap, clap, clap!

"Bai Jove, we're lookin' up!" Arthur Augustus exclaimed, with great satisfaction. "I wathah think we shall wallop the Grammah boundahs afaah all!"

"I rather think Talbot will!" grinned Blake.

"Bravo, Kangy!" shouted Tom Merry, as the Cornstalk drove away the ball, and the batsmen crossed the pitch like lightning.

It was a single; and Talbot drove away the last ball of the over for three.

"One hundred!" chuckled Fatty Wynn. "Climbing up. I must go and have a ginger-beer for this."

"Forty-six to tie, forty-seven to win!" said Monty Lowther. "If Kangy can keep the innings open, Talbot will get all we want."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Gordon Gay looked very determined as he went on to bowl to Talbot. He tried all his skill on the Shell fellow, and the field were looking out for catches; but there was no touching the "sticks," and there were no catches for the eager hands in the field. Talbot did not give the enemy a chance. And he did not seem to be playing a cautious game, either.

The ball was knocked away almost every time, and the over gave him eleven, finishing with the odd run, and keeping him batting. And the next over added six. St. Jim's score stood at 117; the figures were climbing up. It was clear that Talbot was too strong for the bowling, and it depended upon Kangaroo to keep the innings open for him. And Kangaroo piled in to do his best. He was an excellent bat, but he was willing to leave most of the hitting to Talbot, for the sake of his side. Kangaroo ran no risks, and gave Talbot all the batting he could. The score was going up in jumps now.

The cheering was incessant. Talbot's hitting was tremendous, and once the ball sped over the roof of the pavilion. Another ball whizzed far from the eager field, and knocked off the hat of Herr Schneider, who was taking a little promenade at what he had supposed to be a safe distance from the playing-field. The German master jumped as his hat sailed away, and ejaculated "Mein Gott!"

There was a shout from Big Side, as a tremendous drive from Talbot lifted the ball among the senior players, and the breathless fieldsmen came panting over to recover it. Kildare picked up the ball to toss it back.

"This yours?" he called out, as Gordon Gay came speeding up.

"Yes, thanks."

"Who on earth did that drive?" demanded the captain of St. Jim's.

Gay laughed breathlessly.

"Talbot of the Shell! I believe he's Jessop or Hayward in disguise. Chuck us that ball!"

And Kildare looked very curiously towards Little Side, where Talbot and Kangaroo were crossing the pitch at a terrific rate.

After that, Tom Merry & Co. joyfully concluded that it was all over bar shouting—and certainly the shouting was not over. The roar of cheering rang round Little Side with a din like thunder. There was an incessant ripple of hand-clapping round the field. The Grammarians tried Talbot with every kind of ball; but "paid" was put to every one, so to speak, and the leather-hunting was beginning to fag the field, fit as they were. Talbot showed no signs of fatigue. His hitting was terrific, but it did not seem to tell on him in the least. Towards the finish the game was fast and furious.

Fours were quite common now, and the score went up in leaps and bounds. Jack Blake gave a yell when the figures reached 144. Kangaroo was batting now, and he stole a single and brought Talbot to the batting end to finish.

Gordon Gay sent down his best ball, with a vague hope of settling his dangerous adversary yet. But it was in vain; there was a light smack as the willow met the leather and the ball glanced away beyond the eager fingers of mid-off, and the batsmen ran once—twice—and then there was a roar.

"Hurrah! Hurrah!"

"St. Jim's wins!"

"Bravo, Talbot!"

"Bwavo, deah boy!"

"Hip-hip!"

And Talbot was seized by the crowd that swarmed on the pitch, hoisted on the shoulders of Tom Merry and Figgins, and carried in triumph to the pavilion.

Gordon Gay, taking that unexpected defeat in perfect good temper, slapped Talbot on the shoulder as he was set down by his gleeful chums.

"Ripping innings!" he exclaimed. "Where did you learn to bat like that, Talbot?"

"Where do you think?" chuckled Kangaroo. "In Australia, of course."

"Hallo! You come from my part?" exclaimed Gay cordially, holding out his hand to Talbot. "Shake! What part of Australia do you hail from?"

"West!" said Talbot briefly.

"Oh! That's a good step from where I belong," said Gay. "Still, I'm glad it's a fellow-Cornstalk who's done us in like this. You've got a prize-packet there, Tom Merry."

"Don't we jolly well know it!" chuckled Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"You fellows are staying to tea," said Tom Merry. "You can tell us about your giddy entertainment over the feed."

The Grammarians were entertained to tea quite royally by Tom Merry & Co.; but they did not say much about that mysterious entertainment planned for the following Wednesday. But they pressed the chums of St. Jim's to come over and see it.

"But it's wathah like buyin' a pig in a poke, you know," Arthur Augustus remarked. "Hadh't you bettah tell us all about it?"

Gordon Gay chuckled.

"No fear; you'd bone the wheeze if we did."

"Weally, Gay—"

"I dare say it's one of our old wheezes you've borrowed," said Monty Lowther.

"Rats!"

"And many of zem!" grinned Mont Blong.

And the Grammarians departed in their brake, leaving Tom Merry & Co. considerably puzzled about that scheme which was to "come off" on Wednesday; but otherwise in a state of complete satisfaction over their victory on the cricket-field.

CHAPTER 5.

The Mystery of Joe Frayne.

THE TERRIBLE THREE were in their study at work with their preparation. Tom Merry had finished, and was leaning back in his chair, with a thoughtful frown upon his face, while Lowther and Manners were still working. The captain of the Shell seemed to be plunged into deep and not very pleasant thought.

Monty Lowther finished at last, and hurled a heavy volume with a crash across the study to testify his satisfaction.

"That's done!" he said. "Hallo, Tommy, wherefore that worried look? Has Miss Fawcett been sending you some more medicine, and have you been taking it?"

Tom Merry smiled.

"No, ass."

"Thinking out Gay's giddy wheeze for Wednesday? Have you cottoned on to it yet?"

"No, I wasn't thinking of that."

"Then what troubles my lord this evening, that his baby brow wrinkles thus with the wrinkle of unaccustomed thought?" asked Lowther humorously.

"I was thinking about young Frayne," said Tom; and Lowther became grave, too. "What can have become of the kid? It's nearly a week now since he bolted from St. Jim's, and he seems to have disappeared completely."

"It's queer," said Lowther. "Why on earth did he bolt? He was getting on toppling in the school, and he was chummy with young Wally, and couldn't have wanted to leave him. You remembered when Talbot rescued that young ass, the time he wanted to break his neck in the tree at Glyn House—Frayne was cut up tremendously. He was awfully attached to young Wally. Yet he's buzzed off like this and left him. Wally's been looking as sick as a dog ever since he bolted. He misses him. What can the young ass have done it for?"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"I've tried to think it out," he said; "but it's no good. Frayne was utterly miserable the night before he went—he had something on his mind, but he wouldn't explain what it was. I know he hasn't gone back to his old rotten life—there never was a straighter kid than Frayne since he came to St. Jim's."

"I'm sure of that!"

"The only thing I can think of is that some old acquaintance of his from Angel Alley may have got at him somehow; but I don't see why that should make him bolt. It's a giddy mystery. Of course, if he didn't want to stay here, I wouldn't have wanted to keep him at St. Jim's; but I'm sure he did want to stay. I can't help feeling worried about what's become of him. He had some money; but after that's gone, I don't know what he will do."

There was a tap at the door, and Wally D'Arcy of the Third Form came in. He had a letter in his hand.

"I've heard!" he said.

"From Joe?" asked Tom Merry eagerly.

D'Arcy minor nodded.

"Yes; read the letter."

The Terrible Three read the letter together. It was in Joe Frayne's somewhat crooked handwriting, and in the spelling which had often caused him trouble with Mr. Selby, the master of the Third Form at St. Jim's.

"Dear Wally,—I 'ope you don't think any bad of me because I have 'opped it like this here. I had to leave St. Jim's, and I can't explain why, not even to an old pal like you. But if I had stayed, I should 'ave had to see things going on what I couldn't stop, not without acting in a way that would be wrong and ungrateful. But I couldn't be a party to underhand goings on, after the way you 'ave all been so decent to me. So I had to mizzle. I 'ope you won't forget me, and I 'ope you will believe that I feel it very 'ard to leave you, and Master Tom. But there wasn't nothing else to be dun.

Your old pal,

"JOE FRAYNE."

"P.S.—I'm 'orl right. I've got a job, and I'm earning my living quite well, and I 'ope I needn't 'ave to tell you or Master Tom that it's all straight, and always will be."

"No address!" said Manners.

"What was the postmark on the envelope, Wally?"

"London, E.C.," said Wally.

"Then he is in London!"

"And that's all," said Wally. "No chance of finding him, and he don't want to be found. But what does he mean—what was going on that he speaks about? I can't understand it."

Tom Merry wrinkled his brows in thought.

"It beats me," he said. "He says that something underhand was going on, and he couldn't be a party to it, and he couldn't stop it without acting ungratefully. Whom the dickens had he to be grateful to?"

"Well, you yourself," said Wally. "You fished him out of that slum, and brought him here, and your uncle."

"The poor kid always overdid the gratitude bizney, for a little thing," said Tom; "but he can't be referring to me here. If there was something underhand going on, I should have advised him to show it up, whatever it was—his gratitude to me wouldn't stop it. And my uncle in America can't have anything to do with it. He's referring to somebody else."

"The Head, perhaps!" suggested Manners.

"But that's impossible. Gratitude to the Head wouldn't make him keep silent about some bizney he came to know of. He must mean that some fellow he has reason to be grateful to is doing something rotten, and he can't give him away, and at the same time he feels he can't stay here and keep silent while it's going on."

"Well, it beats me!" said Wally. "If that's what he means, and I suppose it is, it can't apply to you or the Head—or any of us. But whom, then?"

"Nor Talbot?" said Lowther.

"Talbot!"

"Well, he was overflowing with gratitude to Talbot for risking his life on your account, Wally, when you played the giddy goat at Glyn House. But then Talbot is a thoroughly decent chap—there's nothing underhand in connection with him."

"No fear!" said Tom Merry promptly.

"It's a giddy mystery," said Manners; "but it shows the little chap has acted from good motives, anyway. You'd better take that letter to the Head, Wally. He's been worrying a good bit about Frayne, I know."

Wally nodded, and left the study with the letter.

The Shell fellows had been unable to shed any light on the matter. They were utterly puzzled. It was a satisfaction to know that Joe Frayne was safe and sound and doing honest work; that he had not fallen back into the hands of his early evil associates. But as for his reasons for quitting St. Jim's, the letter rather darkened than helped to clear the mystery.

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"I'll speak to Talbot about it," said Tom Merry, rising. "After all, he knew Frayne before he came to St. Jim's—you remember Joe recognised him his first day here, and called him by some queer nickname—"

"The Toff," said Lowther.

"Yes, that was it. It's barely possible Talbot may be able to think out what the kid is driving at."

"Won't do any harm to ask him, anyway," agreed Lowther. And the Terrible Three, having finished their work, left the study and looked into Talbot's, which was the next room in the Shell passage.

Talbot was there, with Gore and Skimpole, his study-mates. He gave the Terrible Three a pleasant nod and smile.

"Busy?" asked Tom.

"No; just finished."

"Good! Wally's just had a letter from young Frayne."

Talbot started a little.

"I'm glad," he said quietly. "Does he explain why he bolted away from the school in that queer way?"

"He does, and he doesn't. He says he knew of something underhand that was going on, and he couldn't stay here to be a party to it—"

"That's queer!" said Talbot calmly. "Why couldn't he show it up, then, whatever it was?"

"He says that he couldn't do that without acting wrongly and ungratefully."

"Towards whom?"

"He doesn't say."

"Then it doesn't let in much light on the matter," said Talbot, with a perplexed look. "It appears to me that he has some silly idea in his head—probably entirely a mistake. The only people he has to be grateful to here are yourself and the Head."

"And you," said Tom.

"? Why me?"

"Because you saved Wally's life."

"Oh, that!" said Talbot, smiling a little. "How did that concern Frayne?"

"Wally's his best chum, you know. I don't suppose he can be referring to you in his letter, of course; but I thought I'd ask you if you could guess what he was driving at. You know more about him than we do, as you knew him before he came to St. Jim's."

Talbot shook his head.

"I can't make head or tail of it," he said. "It beats me! Where is the kid now? Perhaps it may be possible to see him, and—"

"He doesn't give his address," said Tom Merry ruefully.

"He doesn't want to be questioned, I suppose."

"Well, I'm afraid I can't help you," said Talbot. "I'd do so willingly if I could. He was a very decent little chap, especially considering where he came from. I hope he'll think better of it, and come back."

"I wish I could think so; but it doesn't look like it," said Tom. "Still, I'm glad to know that he's all right, and not in want. That's something. Coming down, if you've finished?"

"Right-ho!"

And Talbot and the Terrible Three left the study together, and sauntered down to the common-room on the best of terms.

Little did the chums of the Shell dream of what was passing in Talbot's mind, or that the new fellow could have explained if he had chosen the exact reasons why the waif of the Third had fled from St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 6. D'Arcy's Great Idea!

YOU fellows going over to the Grammar School on Wednesday?"

Talbot asked the question as the Shell came out of the Form-room after lessons on Monday.

There had been much cogitation among Tom Merry & Co. on the subject of the "wheeze" planned by Gordon Gay and the amateur actors of Rylcombe Grammar School, but they were still no wiser. Naturally, the St. Jim's junior dramatists did not want to be beaten in their own line by their old rivals of the Grammar School, and they would have given a great deal to know the intentions of Gordon Gay & Co.

"I don't know," said Tom Merry, as Talbot asked the question. "You see, if we accept the invitation to join the giddy audience we can't very well go for the bounders. And, of course, we're up against them."

"Of course!" said Talbot, with a smile. "I understand that. When it's a question of going for the Grammar School, then School House and New House unite."

"Exactly! And at other times we're at war here," said Tom Merry, laughing. "Of course, we can't let the Grammar

School go one better than us. Their blessed dramatic society is only a second edition of ours, anyway. If they've got some dodge for going one better than us, it's our business to find out what it is, and turn the tables on them somehow; not to go over and swell their audience for them."

Only there doesn't seem any way of doing it," Monty Lowther remarked.

"Have you got some idea, Talbot?" Manners asked. "If you have, get it off your chest. 'Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings,' you know."

Talbot laughed.

"Well, why not go over and scout?" he suggested.

"Scout?" repeated Tom Merry thoughtfully.

"Yes. Whatever it is, from what you've told me, it's plainly something in the dramatic line, and so they're bound to have rehearsals. If we could spot them at it, it would be easy enough to see what the little game is."

"Something in that!" said Manners.

"Only they'd be on their guard at once if they saw us inside their gates," remarked Monty Lowther.

"No need for them to see us. We can get in quietly on our own. I don't know the place, but you fellows have been over there often enough," said Talbot. "We could get out after calling-over, and get back in time for bed. If we had to miss the prep, we could risk it for once."

"By Jove, it's not a bad idea!" said Tom Merry. "The four of us could go. No use letting those Fourth Form kids muck it up. We couldn't take a crowd."

"But there wouldn't be much time for scouting if we had to walk to the Grammar School and back between calling-over and bed-time," said Manners.

"Bike it," said Talbot.

"My dear chap, getting the bikes out over the wall—"

"No need. We'll take the bikes out to-day, and leave them out ready," said Talbot. "We can hide them somewhere close by the school easily enough."

"My hat!"

The Terrible Three looked at their new chum admiringly. Certainly Talbot was a fellow with ideas.

"Jolly good idea!" said Tom Merry heartily. "We'll do it! And if we get on to the Grammar School dodge we'll turn the tables on them somehow."

"Yaas, watah!" chimed in Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"What is the little game, deah boys? Can I help you?"

And the swell of St. Jim's joined the Shell fellows, and turned his famous eyeglass upon them inquiringly.

"Ahem! No," said Tom Merry. "In this case, Gussy, you would be odd man out. But we'll tell you all about it afterwards."

"Wats! You had bettah confide the whole mattah to me, and trust to me to lead you. In a case like this you require a fellow of tact and judgment at the head of affairs. We've got to find out Gordon Gay's wheeze, deah boys; and if you fellows twy it by yourselves you are bound to make a muck of it. I have got an ideah. You fellows know what a wippin' catch I am."

"We do!" grinned Monty Lowther. "We do!"

Arthur Augustus lowered his voice and glanced round cautiously.

"Well, I'll tell you my ideah. I am thinkin' of goin' ova to the Gwammah School in disguise and scoutin'."

"Ha, ha, ha! You did that once before!" chuckled Monty Lowther. "They seem to have spotted you, all the same."

"Yaas. But I should be vewy careful this time. Fwank Monk mentioned on Saturday that his patah, the Head of the Gwammah School, was away for the week-end, and wasn't comin' back till to-night. Now, suppose I made myself up as Doctah Monk, and dropped in, yea know, just as if he had returned a little earlier than was intended—"

"Great Scott!"

"Kerr did it once; and if Kerr can do it, I suppose it stands to reason that I can," said Arthur Augustus, with a great deal of dignity.

"Of course—I don't think!" murmured Monty Lowther.

"I've got all the necessary things, you know. It's only a case of dressin' up, and makin' up my face, and so on," said Arthur Augustus. "I pwoposed it to Blake, and he simply made wude wemarks. Powwaps you fellows would care to help me."

"Rats!"

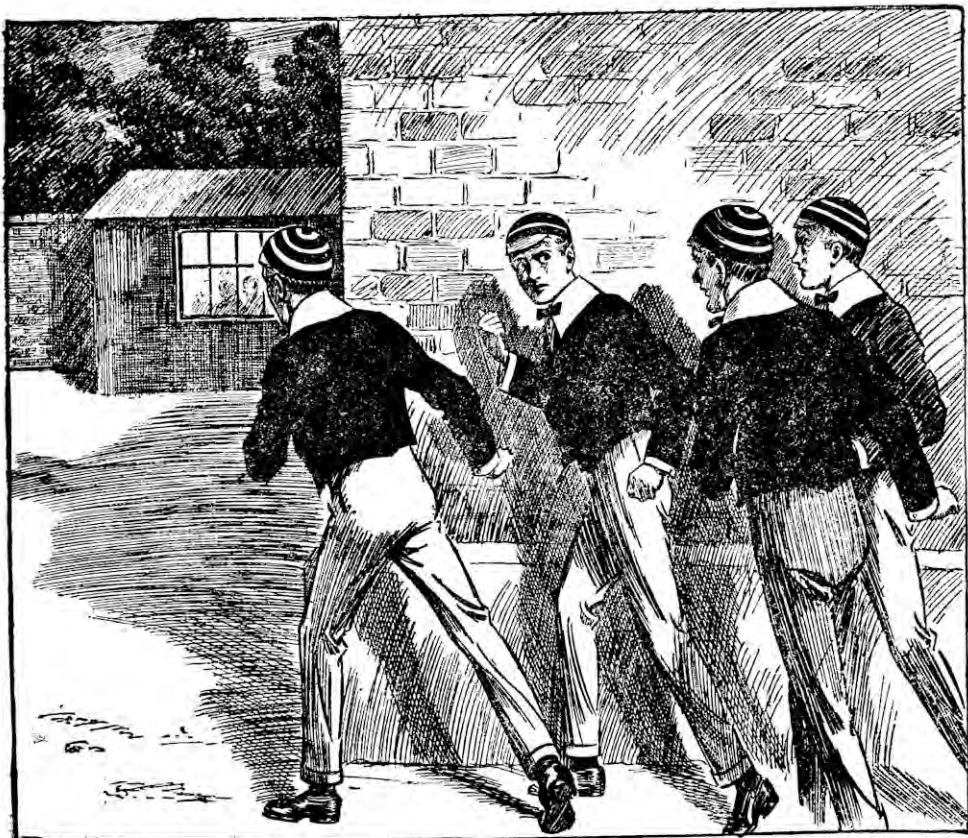
"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Gussy, old man, you're a genius!" said Monty Lowther enthusiastically. "I'll come and help you with pleasure."

"You are vewy good, Lowthah! Pway come on, and I'll start at once."

"You chaps see about the bikes," said Lowther. "I'm going to help Gussy."

And he closed one eye—the eye that was furthest from



The juniors made their way cautiously round the big red-brick schoolhouse and saw that a gleam of light came from the wood-shed. Tom Merry halted. "Hold on," he whispered, "We don't want to be caught by the porter." (See Chapter 8.)

Arthur Augustus. Tom Merry and Manners and Talbot grinned and walked away to take the bicycles out to be hidden ready for the expedition after calling-over. Monty Lowther followed the swell of St. Jim's to the Fourth Form dormitory.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy prided himself upon a good many things—among other things upon his great ability as an actor. He was firmly persuaded that with his marvellous gifts in the making-up line he could impersonate anybody with success; and several failures had not, somehow, diminished his confidence. As Arthur Augustus was generally rolling in money, he had no lack of stage "props."

He opened a large box in the dormitory, and began to select the garments for the part he had assigned to himself.

"Doctah Monk wears a black frock-coat and a toppah," he remarked. "That's quite easy. I have a set of whiskahs just like his, too, and a wig the same colah. I shall have to make up my face vewy carefully, of course, especially with plenty of wrinkles."

"Winkles?" said Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah. Doctah Monk has a lot of wrinkles on his face, you know."

"I should think he would look rather fishy with wrinkles on his face," Monty Lowther remarked gravely.

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Perhaps you mean wrinkles, though," said Lowther, as if the thought had just struck him.

"If you are going to be funny, Lowthah—"

"Not at all. It's you that are going to be funny—"

"Look here—"

"No time to lose," said Lowther briskly. "Get into these black bags, and button boots and spats—Monk's pater always wears button boots and spats. And the frock-coat— By

Jove, you're beginning to look like the headmaster of the Grammar School already!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus, with satisfaction. "I weally think I shall take them in all wight. And when I get oveh there, you know, I shall speak to Gordon Gay, and say I take a gweat interest in his plans for Wednesday, and ask him to explain all about it. Of course, he can't refuse to explain to his headmastah. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" echoed Lowther.

"Then I shall know the whole bizney fwom start to finish," said D'Arcy gleefully. "Wathah a nobbay ideah—what?"

"Nobby!" said Lowther. "Nobby isn't the word! It's ripping—spiffing—topping—tremendous—earthquaky! How do you think of these things, Gussy?"

"Well, I do wathah think of things, you know," said Arthur Augustus modestly. "Some fellows do, you know, and some fellows don't. I'm one of the fellows who do. How do you like this wig?"

"Ripping!"

"And these whiskahs?"

"Topping!"

"And this gwey moustache?"

"Spiffing!"

"And these spectacles?"

"Amazing!"

"Now to make up my face," said Arthur Augustus, dabbing at his aristocratic countenance before the looking-glass. "I wathah think I'm a dab at this, Lowthah!"

"You are!" agreed Lowther, feeling an internal pain from the necessity of choking back his laughter.

Arthur Augustus, in black frock-coat and trousers, and a grey moustache and wig and beard, looked simply extraordinary.

He did not look in the slightest degree like an old gentle-

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man; but he looked very unlike the swell of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's.

When he had added the make-up to his face, his aspect was more extraordinary still.

"That all wight, deah boy?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What are you laughin' at, Lowthah?"

"I—I was thinking of the way you are going to take Gordon Gay in!" gasped Lowther. "Oh, my only aunt! Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus grinned. The effect of the grin, taken in conjunction with the whiskers and the grease-paint, almost doubled Lowther up. He collapsed on a bed, and moaned.

"Yaas, old Gay will be wathah sold," chuckled Arthur Augustus. "Of course, we'll tell him aftahwards that it wasn't Doctah Monk at all!"

"Ha, ha! And he won't know till you tell him!" shrieked Lowther. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yaas, it's funny, isn't it?"

"Funny isn't the word!" moaned Lowther. "It—it's spifficant! Have you nearly finished?"

"Fewwaws," few more artistic touches," said Arthur Augustus, dabbing away with the grease-paint. "Do you think these wrinkles all wight?"

"Oh, they suit you down to the ground!" gasped Lowther. "Vewy good!"

Arthur Augustus jammed a topper on the grey wig, and took a survey of himself in the glass. Lowther really wondered that it did not crack the glass. The mere thought of Arthur Augustus going out in the daylight in that state almost threw Lowther into hysterics.

"I wathah think that will do," said Arthur Augustus, with satisfaction.

"Yes; another touch would spoil it," said Lowther. "Let me smooth out your coat from the back; there are wrinkles in that as well as in your chivy!"

"Thank you, deah boy!"

Monty Lowther smoothed the back of the frock-coat, and as he did so he pinned thereon a card which he had prepared while the Fourth-Former was making up. He had pencilled on the card, in large letters:

"FOUND AT LAST! THE MISSING LINK!"

"Is my back all wight now, Lowthah?"

"Right as rain!"

"You wolly think I shall pass as Doctah Monk?"

"Ahem! I don't think you'll ever make yourself more like him than you are now," said Lowther diplomatically. "Good! I may as well be off now. If the fellows notice me comin' out of the house, they will simply think that Doctah Monk has been payin' a visit to Doctah Holmes—what?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Pway don't laugh and give it away, deah boy!"

"Certainly not," gasped Lowther. "I'll be as grave as a judge. Start!"

And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy quitted the dormitory on his great adventure.

CHAPTER 7.

In Deep Disguise!

JACK BLAKE was looking out of the doorway of Study No. 6, when he was startled by the appearance of a most extraordinary figure coming out of the passage.

Blake rubbed his eyes, and looked at it again. The features of the stranger were the well-known, aristocratic features of his noble chum, the Hon. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

But they were nearly hidden by crude daubs of grease-paint and a weird-looking collection of false whiskers and beard and moustache.

That Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was made up as Dr. Monk, the Head of Rylcombe Grammar School, did not occur to Blake for a moment. Arthur Augustus did not bear even the most distant resemblance to that gentleman. Blake stood and gasped as his disguised chum came down the passage.

Arthur Augustus, thinking that he would test his disguise with a fellow who knew him well, paused to speak to Blake, blinking at him through a large pair of spectacles.

"H'm! Your name is Blake, I believe, little boy?" he said, imitating as well as he could the voice of Dr. Monk—not very successfully.

"What!" ejaculated Blake.

"I trust we shall see you at the Gwammah School on the occasion of our little dwamatic entaertainment next Wednesday, deah boy?"

"Eh?"

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"My son is takin' a part, as you are probably awah!" pursued Arthur Augustus, still in the character of Dr. Monk.

"Your—your what?" said Blake faintly.

"My son I wancis."

Blake gasped; he could not speak. "Dr. Monk" passed on, leaving Blake clinging to the door-post. The disguised junior met Herries and Digby in the passage. They stared at him blankly.

"Hallo!" ejaculated Herries.

"What the dickens—" said Digby.

"Pway allow me to pass, little boys!"

"Who—a-at!"

"Who are you calling little boys, you ass?"

"Weally, Howwies, your headmastah would be vewy angwy with you if he heard you charactewisin' his friend Doctah Monk as an ass!"

"Dr. Monk?" said Herries feebly.

"Yaas. I pwesume you wecognise me?"

"Recognise you?" stuttered Herries. "Of course!"

"Then pway let me pass, little boy!"

"Oh, my hat!"

Herries almost collapsed. Arthur Augustus passed him loftily, and went downstairs. The two juniors stared after him, and read the card on his back, and burst into a shriek of laughter. Monty Lowther came down the passage.

"Shush!" he exclaimed chidingly.

"What on earth's the little game?" gasped Digby.

"Gussy is disguised as Dr. Monk!"

"Who-a-at!"

"He's going over to the Grammar School like that!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus descended the stairs quickly, and passed out into the quadrangle. There were a good many fellows there, and they all stared at the extraordinary figure, and yells of laughter rose on all sides.

"Ha, ha, ha! What is it?"

"The wild man from Borneo!"

"The missing link! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Found at last!" shrieked Levison of the Fourth.

"The missing link! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus uneasily.

"Surely they don't wecognise me? Lowthah seemed to think it was all wight!"

He hurried across the quadrangle, followed by hysterical shrieks of laughter. Tom Merry and Manners and Talbot had just come in, and they met the disguised junior face to face.

They halted, dumbfounded, and stared at him.

"What—what is that?" gasped Tom.

"Gussy!" shrieked Manners. "Gussy, you ass, you'll get into a row if you come out like that! Suppose your Form-mastah saw you!"

"Weally, Mannahs, I—I mean, pway let me pass! I am Dr. Monk!" said Arthur Augustus, with all the dignity he could muster. He was beginning to have some inward misgivings now, however.

"Dr. what?" ejaculated Talbot.

"Monk, pway let me pass! I am returnin' to my school—the Gwammah School, you know—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Pway don't cackle and give the show away, deah boys!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hallo, here comes Railton!" exclaimed Talbot. "You'd better cut off and get out of sight, D'Arcy!"

"Wats! Waiton will not wecognise me!"

"Oh crumb!"

The Housemaster of the School House was crossing the quadrangle with long strides. He had heard the shrieks of merriment, and seen the extraordinary figure from his study window. He had come out to interview the amazing-looking stranger. As he came up behind Arthur Augustus, he read the card on his back, and frowned, to conceal a smile. He caught the swell of St. Jim's by the shoulder and swung him round.

"Who are you?" he exclaimed.

"Pway don't be so wuff, Waiton. I am Dr. Monk!"

"What!"

"Surely you wecognise me!" said Arthur Augustus, with loss assurance.

Mr. Railton stared at him blankly.

"Recognise you! Certainly! You are D'Arcy of the Fourth Form!"

"Oh, bai Jove!"

"May I ask what is the meaning of this ridiculous masquerade?" exclaimed the Housemaster sternly. "Why are you parading the quadrangle with paint on your face, and that absurd mass of false hair?"

"Oh, deah!"

"Answer me!" thundered the School House master.

"I—I—I—"

"What does it mean?" exclaimed Mr. Railton. "This is most extraordinary. You should surely know that the quadrangle is no place for such absurd tricks, D'Arcy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And this absurd card on your back!" said Mr. Railton. "If it was your intention to make yourself ridiculous, D'Arcy, you have certainly succeeded!"

"A—a card on my back, sir!" stuttered D'Arcy, reaching round his back. He grabbed the card and pulled it off and read it and gasped.

"Oh, that wottah Lowtah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But what does this idiotic masquerade mean?" exclaimed Mr. Railton.

"I—I—it was a joke on the Gwanmar School chaps, sir," stuttered Arthur Augustus feebly. "I am made up, sir, as—as Dr. Monk. I was goin' to take them in!"

"You are made up as what—who?" gasped the astounded Housemaster.

"Dr. Monk, sir!"

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed Mr. Railton. "I really believe the boy is taking leave of his senses. And you really think, D'Arcy, that you bear now the slightest resemblance to Dr. Monk?"

"I—I twust so, sir!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence! This is really not a laughing matter, absurd as it is. Such a trick would be most disrespectful to Dr. Monk, D'Arcy; but the amazing thing is that you suppose you bear any resemblance to that gentleman."

"L-L-Lowtah thought—"

"I am afraid this is one of Lowther's jokes," said Mr. Railton, trying not to smile. "You will go in at once and take off those ridiculous things, D'Arcy."

"Ya-as, sir."

"And you will take a hundred lines!"

"Bai Jove!"

"And if you do such a ridiculous thing again I shall cane you. Now go in at once!"

"Ya-a-as, sir," said Arthur dismally.

And he trotted away to the School House again. The fellows in the quadrangle shrieked with laughter. Arthur Augustus was glad to reach the shelter of the House. As he stripped off his famous disguise in the Fourth Form dormitory quite an army of juniors came up to watch him, and yell with laughter.

"Didn't it work, Gussy?" Monty Lowther asked, in a tone of great surprise, as he looked into the dormitory. "Haven't you been over to the Grammar School after all?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You uttah wottah! You put this wotten card on my back—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But for that, I am convinced that it would have worked all right—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I am goin' to give you a feahful thwushin', Lowtah. Put up your wotten hands, you wottah!"

But Monty Lowther, laughing like a hyena, fled from the dormitory. Arthur Augustus, in a state of suppressed fury, changed his clothes, but it was a much longer task getting off the grease-paint. When he was finished he came into Study No. 6 looking quite fatigued, and Blake and Herries and Digby greeted him with a howl of laughter.

"The missing link!" sobbed Blake. "Found at last!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You sillay asses, there is nothin' whatevah to laugh at—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Blake and Herries and Digby evidently thought there was something to laugh at, and they yelled, till Arthur Augustus retired from the study in great wrath, and closed the door with a tremendous slam. For once the manners of Arthur Augustus lacked the repose which stamps the caste of Vere de Vere.

CHAPTER 8.

A Scouting Expedition.

CALLING OVER was finished, and the chums of the Shell came out of Big Hall together. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had a glancing eye upon Monty Lowther; but the Shell fellows dodged the wrathful swell of the Fourth, and escaped into the quadrangle. In the cover of the old elms, they dropped from the school wall into the road, leaving Arthur Augustus still seeking for them in the quad.

The bicycles had been concealed in a field near the school, and in a few minutes the four juniors dragged them into the road and were pedalling away for Rylcombe Grammar School, and there dismounted, lifting the machines through a gap in

the hedge and putting them out of sight. Then they went on towards the Grammar School on foot. The big gates were locked, and deep dusk hung over the great red-brick building within.

Tom Merry peered through the bars of the big metal gates. There was no one visible in the dusk within, but he could see the gleam of the lighted windows.

The juniors skirted the school wall, and helped one another over it, and in a few minutes more they were within the precincts of the Grammar School.

"Blessed if I don't feel like a giddy burglar," murmured Monty Lowther, as he dropped from the wall. "Do you, Talbot?"

Talbot laughed softly.

"Very like!" he said.

"Now we've got to get into Gordon Gay's quarters, and see what's going on," said Tom Merry. "It won't be hard—if we're not spotted."

"You know the lie of the land here?" asked Talbot.

"Yes, rather! We've been here lots of times. There's a window at the back, over an outhouse at the end of the passage where Gay has his study. We can easily get to it—past the bike-shed and the wood-shed."

"What is that big window with the light in it?"

"That is Dr. Monk's study; we must keep clear of that."

"The Head of the school?" asked Talbot.

"Yes; Frank Monk's pater is headmaster here, you know. He's a jolly old boy, too—collects pictures and things, and quite harmless." And the juniors chuckled.

"Pictures!" said Talbot.

"Yes, he has a—a—what do you call it? Leonard somebody or other—Italian chap who did a lot of daubing—"

"Leonardo da Vinci?"

"That's it," said Tom. "He has a Leonardo da Vinci which he thinks is as good as that famous Leonardo picture that was stolen—what was the name of it?"

"La Gioconda!"

"I see you know all about it," said Tom. "Are you a giddy painter, among all your other gifts?"

"I know something about pictures, especially valuable ones," said Talbot, with a strange smile in the darkness. "Is Dr. Monk's Leonardo a genuine one?"

"Well, he has artistic johnnies down here to see it, Monkey says. It's supposed to be worth more than Dr. Holmes's Rembrandt. You know that snudgy thing in the Head's study at St. Jim's. Well, I wouldn't have given more than ten bob for it to hang up in our study, but somebody tried to burgle it once, and it came out that it was worth two thousand quid. And Dr. Monk's Leonardo is worth more than that. It's a picture of an Italian woman grinning, I think. When we come over here on a visit, ask him to let you see it, you'll win his heart!" chuckled Tom Merry. "But never mind that now. The bizney just now is with Frank Monk and Gordon Gay, not the Head."

"Come on!" said Lowther.

They made their way cautiously round the big, red-brick School House.

As they came round to the rear of the building, Tom Merry halted.

"Hold on!" he whispered.

There was a gleam of light from the wood-shed.

"We don't want to be spotted by the porter," muttered Manners.

"Tain't the porter there—listen!"

The voice of Frank Monk of the Fourth Form could be heard from the wood-shed, and he was declaiming in deep tones:

"That you have wronged me doth appear in this!"

"That Julius Caesar," by Jove!" whispered Lowther. "That's Cassius's part in the quarrel scene. They're rehearsing Shakespeare."

"Not much to make a secret of in that. Every blessed amateur dramatic society has done 'Julius Caesar' one time or another," said Tom Merry, puzzled.

"Let's have a look at them."

The scouts crept closer to the wood-shed. The door was half open, and they could see into the interior.

Quite a crowd of the Fourth Form were gathered there, and it was evidently a rehearsal, though the juniors were not in costume.

Gordon Gay & Co., without a suspicion that eyes were upon them from outside, proceeded with the rehearsal of "Julius Caesar." Gordon Gay had cast himself for Brutus. As head of the society and stage-manager, naturally he gave himself a "fat" part. His voice came ringing out in great style:

"Let me tell you, Cassius, you yourself
Are much condemned to have an itching palm,
To sell and mart your offices for gold
To undeservers!"

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Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

NEXT
WEDNESDAY—

"THE PARTING OF THE WAYS!"

To which Frank Monk, alias Cassius, replied:

"I! An itching palm!
You know that you are Brutus that say this,
Or, by the go-hods, that speech were also
your last!"

"Not so much of your 'go-hods!'" said Gay reprovingly.
"Make it 'gods.'"

"Rats!" said Cassius. "You want plenty of emphasis there."

"Don't overdo it, my sons. We don't want to give this play like a gang of barn-stormers. We want it in Irving's style; but the way you do it out-Irving Irving."

And Monty Lowther whispered to his chums:

"Rather unassuming, in fact!"

And there was a silent chuckle.

"What's the next?" said Wootton major.

"The next is ginger-beer. I'm getting dry," said Gordon Gay. "Hand over the bottle."

"Here you are, Brutus."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Gordon Gay took a draught of ginger-beer.

"When is that ass Carboy coming?" he growled. "He'll be waiting pretty soon. Silly ass, to get lines when there's a rehearsal. But I think we've got it pretty good."

"It will go all right," remarked Monk.

"Yes—if the weather holds out."

"Well, the weather looks like lasting," remarked Wootton minor. "It's Monday now, and it comes off on Wednesday."

Tom Merry & Co. exchanged glances. What the weather had to do with a performance of Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" they could not quite see, but they felt that they were on the verge of hearing the secret.

Frank Monk looked out of the window of the shed.

"If it's an evening like this, it will do," he said. "If it rains—"

"If it rains we shall have to put it off," said Gay decidedly.

"But if the St. Jim's fellows are coming—"

"We shall have to wire them it's off for the present, if it rains."

"Then don't mention to them it's off because of the rain," grinned Monk. "They'd jolly soon tumble to it that we're giving an al fresco performance."

"Oh!" murmured Tom Merry.

"They wouldn't tumble in a month of Sundays!" said Gordon Gay, with a sniff. "They haven't brains enough to think of a pastoral play."

"I suppose they haven't," agreed Monk. "Tain't so very long since we thought of it ourselves, for that matter."

"But it's simply a ripping idea!" said Gay. "Who wants to be stuck in a stuffy lecture-hall to see a play on a hot summer evening?"

"Nobody!"

"Exactly. But a pastoral play; that's just the thing. Everybody will come. And it's easy enough to stick the chairs out on the lawn. And as for any little drawbacks in staging and scenery, that's allowed for in a pastoral play."

"Of course!"

"After we've done with it the St. Jim's chaps will jump at the idea. But they're welcome to it after we've finished with it."

"Yes, razzler!" grinned Mont Blong.

"Well, get on with the washing," said Gay, setting down his glass. "We shall have to be getting in soon, and there's a lot more to go through."

And the celebrated Quarrel Scene proceeded.

Outside the door of the woodshed Tom Merry and his comrades exchanged triumphant glances. They had succeeded better than they had dared to anticipate. The secret had been revealed to them in its entirety in that few minutes' chat of the Grammarians.

It was decidedly a new idea.

A theatrical performance in the open air on the lines of a pastoral play was something very new for the junior actors.

"The bounders!" murmured Tom Merry. "So that's the wheeze!"

"And they're keeping it dark!" whispered Lowther. "So jolly dark that we know all about it now!"

"And we can put a spoke in their wheel. What price a pastoral play at St. Jim's to-morrow—Tuesday—and invitations to the Grammar bounders to come and see it?"

The St. Jim's juniors suppressed their laughter with difficulty. They could imagine the faces of Gordon Gay & Co. when they received that invitation.

"Better get off now," murmured Lowther. "We've found out what we came for. Hallo! Why—what—who—"

Someone bumped into Lowther from the darkness. He swung round, and immediately there was a yell of alarm.

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It was Carboy of the Fourth, coming late to the rehearsal, and he had run right into the four scouts from St. Jim's outside the door.

"Hallo!" roared Carboy. "St. Jim's bounders! Look out!"

"Cut for it!" shouted Tom Merry.

Carboy had grasped Monty Lowther at once, and they went to the ground together. Tom and Manners and Talbot dragged Carboy off, but he clung to them, and in a second the rehearsers were rushing in an alarmed swarm out of the woodshed.

"Buzz off!" gasped Manners.

"St. Jim's cads!" yelled Gay. "Collar them!"

The St. Jim's fellows dashed off; but Carboy was clinging to Talbot, and held him back. In a moment more two or three pairs of hands were on Talbot. The Terrible Three rushed back at once to the rescue, and the whole crowd of Grammarians piled on them. There was a wild and whirling struggle.

After a couple of minutes the Shell fellows were dragged into the woodshed, still struggling in the grasp of the Grammarians.

"Shut the door!" gasped Gordon Gay. "We've got 'em!"

The door was slammed. Tom Merry & Co. sprawled on the tiled floor, each with a couple of Grammarians seated on his chest, pinning him down. The scouts had succeeded in their object, but their luck was out, and now they were helpless prisoners in the hands of the enemy.

CHAPTER 9.

"Honour Bright!"

"TOM MERRY!"

"Manners! Lowther! Talbot!"

"You bounders!"

"You rotters!"

"But we've got you!"

"Hurrah!"

"Grooh!" gasped Tom Merry. "Gerrooff my chest! Grooh!"

"Sit tight!" said Gordon Gay coolly. "We've got 'em! Any more of the cads about?"

"I think this is the lot," said Monk. "But we'll soon find out. Are there any more of you about the place, Merry?"

"Grooh! Find out!"

"That's what we're going to do. Pull his nose, Tadpole."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Gerrooooooh! Ow!"

"Any more of you here, Tom Merry?"

"Yow-ow! No! Ow!"

"Good! You should always answer questions like a good little boy."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ow, you rotters!"

"So you came over to scout, did you," said Gordon Gay, "and you've spotted us at rehearsal?"

"Was that a rehearsal?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Of course it was! What did you think it was?"

"Oh, I thought it might have been a burlesque! It sounded like it."

"Why, you ass—"

"You cheeky sweep—"

"Bump him for his cheek!"

"Yaroo!" roared Lowther, as his captors bumped him on the floor, hard, in return for his little joke. "Yow-ow! Chuck it! Yah!"

"Now, then, did you think it was a burlesque?" grinned Frank Monk.

"Yow! Yes!" roared Lowther defiantly. "Yah! Yes! Oh!"

"Bump! Bump!"

"What do you think it was now, Lowther?"

"Ow, ow! A rehearsal, if you like!" growled Lowther.

"That's better. I suppose you heard us talking, as well as rehearsing," said Gordon Gay, frowning. "In fact, you've spotted the wheeze."

"Yes, you ass!" said Tom Merry. "Go and eat cake?"

"And perhaps you're thinking of lifting the idea—what?"

"Of course they are!" growled Wootton major. "They can't think of a wheeze for themselves, and they're bound to lift ours, now they know it."

"They won't!" said Gay.

"You jolly well can't stop us!" gasped Tom Merry.

The Australian junior smiled serenely.

"I think we can!" he remarked.

"Rats! We'll jolly well give a pastoral play to-morrow, and chance it! You kids can come and see us if you like, and learn how to do it."

"Why, you cheeky rotter—"

"Bump him!"

"Hold on," said Gay. "They're not going to give a pastoral play either to-morrow or any other day. They're going to give us their solemn word, honour bright, not to give a pastoral play this term at St. Jim's."

"Rats!" yelled the prisoners.

"You won't!"

"No!"

"Then we shall have to talk to you. Get in the tar-pot, Monkey."

"The—the tar-pot!" ejaculated Monk.

"Yes. It's nearly full of tar, lukily—and there's a brush in it. The porter left it under the lean-to to-day. Get it in."

Frank Monk grinned and fetched in the tar-pot. The prisoners eyed it with great apprehension. Gordon Gay took up the brush and stirred the tar a little.

"Look here, you're not going to put that on us, you rotter!" howled Tom Merry.

"That's just what I am going to do," said Gay calmly.

"You're spotted our little secret. You're going to promise to make no use of it. It's really of no use to anybody but the owner, you know—you fellows can't act for toffee. You'll give your word honour bright. Otherwise, I shall tar you."

"You—you beast—"

"You fellows are fond of making a sensation," remarked Gay. "Well, you'll make a sensation enough if you go back to St. Jim's with tarry chivvies."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look here, this ain't playing the game," howled Manners. "right, don't we, chaps?"

"Ha, ha! Yes."

"Yes, razor."

Gay loaded the brush with tar, and approached it to Tom Merry's face, as Tadpole and Wootton minor pinned him down helplessly. Tom wriggled his head back, shuddering. To go home to St. Jim's coated with tar was a little too much. He could imagine the yells of laughter that would greet the unhappy scouts when they turned up as black as negroes.

"Now, then, what do you say?" asked Gay agreeably. "I'm not set on wasting the tar, but if you don't promise—"

"Yow—keep that away!" gasped Tom, as Gay gave him a playful tap on the nose with the brush, leaving a big blot of tar there.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That looks pretty already. You will look a treat when you're painted all over. I'll work some into your hair, too, to make a complete job of it. We shall have to pay for the tar, so we may as well have our money's worth."

"I—I—I—I—"

"Now, then, will you promise—yes or no?"

"I—I—I—"

"Yes or no?" demanded Gay.

Tom Merry gasped helplessly. He certainly could not allow his visage to be tarred. The Grammarians had the whip-hand, and there was nothing for it but to surrender.

"Yes," he panted.

"Good! You promise, honour bright, that you won't have any pastoral play at St. Jim's for the rest of this term—what?"

"Ow! Yes."

"Honour bright?"

"Honour bright!" gasped Tom Merry.

"Good—now the others! Lowther—"

"Honour bright!" gasped Lowther, in a great hurry, as the brush approached his face, and the Grammarians shrieked with laughter.

"Manners, old fellow—"

"Yah! Honour bright!"

"Talbot, my son—"

"Can't be helped," grinned Talbot. "Honour bright!"

"Good egg!" said Gordon Gay, replacing the tar-brush.

"That shows your sense, and saves the tar. Lucky for you I know that you are fellows of your word."

"Tar 'em anyway!" growled Carker.

"Rats! We're fellows of our word too! Shut up, Carker! Now I think we're done with these merchants," said Gay. "You're welcome to come over and see the pastoral play on Wednesday, my infants. It will do you good to see some real acting. Now kick them out."

The unhappy scouts were allowed to rise to their feet. They looked very rumpled and dishevelled. Tom Merry dabbed furiously at the blob of tar on his nose, speedily reducing his handkerchief to a tarry rag. But the tar did not all go.

"Kick them out!"

"Give 'em socks!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Twenty pairs of boots helped the scouts out of the woodshed. They ran for it, and the whooping crowd of Gram-

marians chased them to the school wall. They clambered over the wall in haste, and dropped, breathless and panting, in the road. Within the wall they could hear the Grammarians yelling with laughter.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Tom Merry. "This was worth coming over for, I don't think!"

"Rather a muck-up—what?" growled Manners.

"Sorry—it was my idea to come!" said Talbot.

"Oh, the idea was all right—but we've had bad luck," said Monty Lowther. "We couldn't know that silly ass Carboy was going to blunder on us in the dark. Confound him!"

The chums of St. Jim's limped away for their bicycles.

The expedition could not be called a success. They had discovered the great secret of the Grammarian Dramatic Society, and they had been compelled to give their word not to make use of it.

"We can't turn the tables on the rotters now," growled Lowther, as they dragged the bicycles out into the road.

"That game's up!"

"But—"

"We're dished!"

"Diddled and done!" grunted Manners.

"But—"

"Oh, there ain't any buts in this case," exclaimed the exasperated Lowther. "I tell you we are clean done, and that's an end of it."

"Not quite. We can't bone the idea, and turn the tables on them that way, but it's a pastoral play they're giving—in the open air—"

"We know that, ass!"

"And so!" proceeded Tom Merry calmly, "being in the open air, it will be easy to get at them. What price raiding them in the middle of their play? It's easy enough to get over the wall—"

"My hat!"

"We can bring a swarm of the fellows over—we can get permission to be out of gates to come over here for the pastoral play. We won't explain to the house-master what we mean to do when we get here—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We'll remember that tar-pot," said Tom Merry vengefully: "what price capturing Brutus and Julius Caesar and tarring them—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the Shell fellows, restored to good spirits by that brilliant scheme, rode back to St. Jim's in quite a contented frame of mind.

CHAPTER 10.

Suspicion!

"**H**EAH they are!"

"Where have you chaps been?" exclaimed Blake, as the Shell fellows came into the common-room in the School-house, a few minutes before bed-time.

"You haven't done your prep."

"Blow prep!" said Monty Lowther.

"Jolly lucky you weren't missed," said Gore, of the Shell, with a sniff. "What little game have you been up to, eh? Billiards at the Green Man?"

"No—nothing at all in your line, Gore," said Tom Merry politely.

"Not so jolly sure of that!" said Levison, of the Fourth.

"I'd like to know where you've been!"

Tom Merry turned towards the cad of the Fourth with a gleam in his eyes.

"Isn't my word good enough for you, Levison?" he asked.

"I'm not alluding to you specially," said Levison, backing away a little. "There are some fellows here who hang about low pubs, I know that."

"Yourself, perhaps," said Tom contemptuously.

Levison shrugged his shoulders.

"Look here, what are you driving at?" exclaimed Tom angrily. "If you mean that any of us go to places like your favourite haunts, you're lying."

"Does Talbot say the same?"

"Talbot! Of course he does!"

"Let him speak or himself," grinned Levison.

Tom Merry glanced at Talbot.

"Don't mind what that worm says, Talbot," he exclaimed; "we all know you better than that, and Levison is always lying."

"Yaas, wathah! It's weally quite a disease with Levison!" remarked Arthur Augustus. "I should recommend Talbot to give him a faithful thrashing."

"I certainly don't mind what he says," said Talbot contemptuously.

"Then, if you don't mind, I'll go on," said Levison, with an irritating grin. "Will you have the cheek to say that you weren't in the Blackbird Inn at Wayland on Saturday afternoon?"

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There was an exclamation from all the juniors who heard Levison's words. The Blackbird at Wayland bore a most unenviable reputation. It was, of course, out of bounds; and even black sheep like Levison, or Cutts of the Fifth, drew a line at places like the Blackbird.

The colour crept into Talbot's face.

"Punch his head!" said Monty Lowther.

"He hasn't denied it!" said Levison.

"Well, whether he denies it or not, we all know it isn't true," said Tom Merry, "and if you don't shut up, I'll punch your head myself."

Levison gave another shrug of the shoulders.

"Well, I say he was seen going in there," he declared. "I know a chap in Wayland—"

"Yes, and I know his name!" growled Lumley-Lumley of the Fourth. "He's a billiard-marker at the Red Lion."

"Well, the Red Lion's a better place than the Blackbird any day," said Levison. "I don't set up to be a perfect character—no Eric about me. And I don't like humbugs!"

"You didn't go to the Blackbird surely, Talbot?" said Kangaroo. "Saturday afternoon—that was when you were called away by that telegram, you know. Why, Levison, you rotter, we know you're lying—Talbot went to Wayland on Saturday afternoon to meet a friend."

"Exactly!" said Levison; "and I know where he met him. It's no business of mine; but as I said, I don't like humbugs."

"You didn't go there, Talbot?"

"He was seen to go there," said Levison.

"Rats!"

"Besh!"

"Tell him he's lying, Talbot, and punch his head," said Blake.

Talbot breathed hard.

"As a matter of fact, I did go there," he said calmly. "It's no business of Levison's, or anybody else's that I know of. But as it happens I did go there—not to play billiards, though, or for any of Levison's kind of amusements. My friend was a stranger to Wayland, and he chose that inn to meet in, not knowing what kind of place it was. He took it for a country inn by the name. That's all about it!"

"Quite natural, too," said Tom Merry. "It was a country inn once upon a time, and a stranger couldn't know what it was like."

"Yaas, watah!"

Levison smiled in a sneer-way, and several of the fellows looked rather queerly at Talbot. His explanation was plausible enough, but somehow it did not quite convince some of his hearers. Kildare looked in just then, to march the Shell off to their dormitory, and the matter dropped. The Fourth-Formers went to their dormitory, and when they were there Arthur Augustus gave Levison a severe look.

"I don't want to say anythin' impolite," he remarked. "But I must say that you are a spyin' wottah, Levison."

"I don't believe in humbugs," said Levison coolly. "Talbot sets up like Tom Merry and the rest, to be a little better than common mortals. Well, then, if he goes in for pub-haunting, and tells lies about it, he ought to be shown up!"

"He told the truth at once, you wottah!"

"He told it at once, but it wasn't the truth," chuckled Levison.

"You are an uttah wase!" said Arthur Augustus indignantly. "How dare you say that what he said wasn't true!"

"Because it was a lie, and I can prove it—eh, Mellish?"

"Yes, rather!" chuckled Mellish.

"Well, we won't take your The Gem Library.—No. 356.

word for that!" said Jack Blake. "But I'll tell you what we will do. Unless you prove what you say at once, we'll bump you hard for slandering a decent chap. Now, buck up with your proofs!"

"I've seen his telegram," said Levison. "If what he says was true, his friend must have fixed the Blackbird as a place of meeting in that telegram, which Talbot got on Saturday."

"Yes, that's so. What then?"

"Well, he doesn't mention the place. The telegram simply said 'Half-past four.—H.W.'"

"How do you know?"

"I tell you I've seen it."

"And how did you see it?"

"I was rather interested in the matter," drawled Levison. "You know I've always looked on Talbot as rather shady. The way he got to this school, and the fact that he hasn't any connections, and—"

"Shut up that!" said Blake roughly. "He's worth a thousand of you, connections or not."

"Perhaps! But he lied all the same!"

"Do you think we're going to take your word for what was in the telegram?" exclaimed Blake contemptuously. "How do we know you've ever seen it?"

"It was in his jacket-pocket when he came back from Wayland, and he left his jacket in the pavilion when he changed."

"And you spied on it?"

"Well, I looked at it."

"And you want us to take the word of a spy?" growled Herries.

"You can see the telegram if you like. I took it," said Levison calmly. "My idea is that Talbot is shady, and I think the fellows ought to know it, especially as he puts on airs of being so jolly particular. He won't play a game of nap with a fellow—"

"You mean that you've tried to get him to play, to get hold of his cash!" growled Blake.

"Put it how you like. You can see the telegram. I've got it. It's worded just as I told you. Would you like to see it?"

"No, I wouldn't," said Blake; "I'm not a spy!"

"You've doubted my word about it, and you ought to look at the telegram, and see that I've told the truth, and that Talbot has lied."

"It is quite impossible to look at another fellow's correspondence, you uttah cad!" said Arthur Augustus. "I refuse to do anything of the sort!"

"But you believe me now!" sneered Levison. "You know you do."

Arthur Augustus made no reply to that. Levison's offer to show the telegram was certainly a pretty convincing proof that he was telling the truth about it. And if the matter was as he stated, it was hard to believe that Talbot had told the exact facts. The chums of the Fourth felt exceedingly uncomfortable. Levison disliked the new junior, and distrusted him—and it was his object to make the other fellows distrust him, too. The worst of it was that in spite of themselves he had succeeded.

"Well," jeered Levison, "what do you say now, Blake?"

"What I say is this—that you're a spying cad to look at Talbot telegram, and a thief to take it out of his pocket!" said Blake. "Collar the cad, and show him that we don't want spies and thieves here!"

"Yaas, collah the wottah!" Half a dozen exasperated juniors seized the cad of the Fourth. They had reason to be exasperated, for Levison had forced them to feel a sense of distrust towards a fellow they liked. Whether there was anything "shady" about

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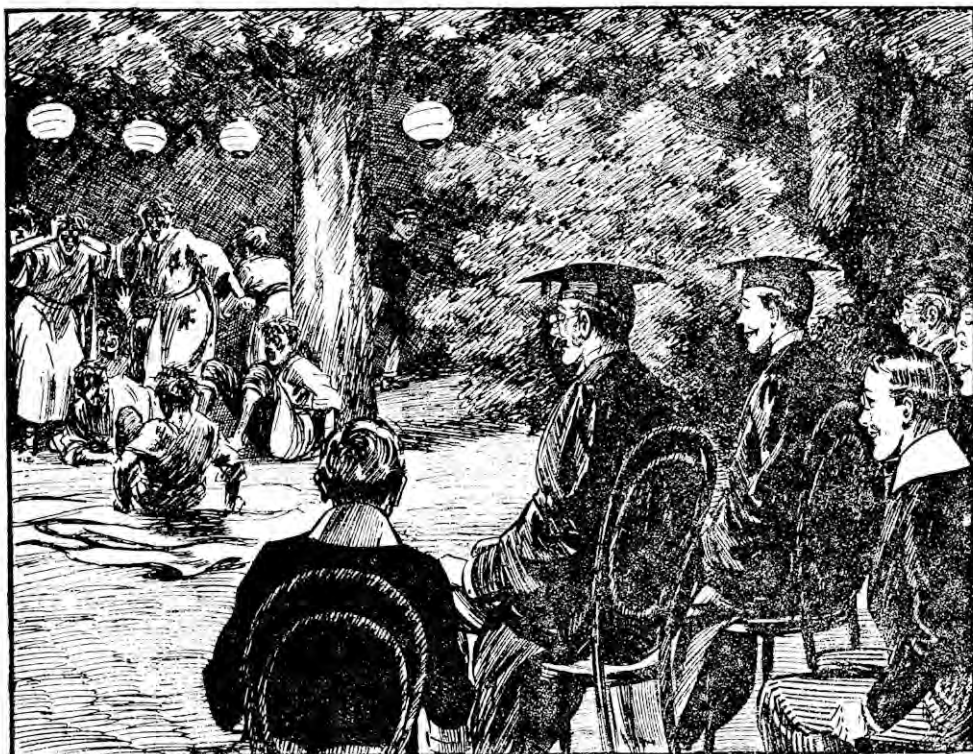
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Almost in a twinkling, the tragedians were tarred with reckless slashes of the brush. "St. Jim's rotters!" yelled Gordon Gay. "Go for 'em! Growl!" (See Chapter 14.)

Talbot or not, it was not from a point of view of morality that Levison interested himself in the matter; it was for Talbot's good qualities that he disliked the new fellow, not for his bad ones.

Bump, bump, bump!

"Leggo!" yelled Levison. "You rotters—ow—ow—yow!"

"Give him another!"

"Give the spyin' wottah a dozen——"

"Hallo, what's this row?" exclaimed Darrel of the Sixth, coming into the dormitory. "Now, then, it's time for lights out. Turn in!"

Levison crawled into bed, feeling considerably hurt. The Fourth-Formers turned in, and Darrel put out the light and left the dormitory. Then Levison's voice was heard again:

"I tell you——"

"Shut up!" roared Blake. "Whether you're telling the truth for once, or lying as usual, I don't care a rap; but if you say another word about Talbot, I'll come over and give you the licking of your life!"

And after that Levison was discreetly silent.

CHAPTER 11.

A Licking for Levison.

WHEN the juniors came out of the Form-rooms the next day after morning lessons, Talbot of the Shell joined Levison in the passage. His hand fell upon Levison's shoulder with a grip that was like iron. Levison looked round, knitting his brows.

"I think you have something that belongs to me," said Talbot.

Levison smiled sneeringly.

"What's that?" he asked.

"A telegram!"

"Not worded as you told the chaps!" said Levison.

"That is not your business. Please give it to me."

"I'm going to pin it up in the common-room for everybody to see," said Levison insolently. "Then the chaps will know exactly how it tallies with what you told them."

"Will you hand it to me?"

"No, I won't!"

"Then I shall make you," said Talbot quietly, and his open hand smote Levison across the cheek. "Now, will you give it up?"

"Hallo! What's the row here?" exclaimed Kildare of the Sixth, coming down the passage. "No fighting here, you young rascals!"

Levison gave Talbot a bitter look. He did not think the new junior would venture to mention the telegram in the presence of a prefect. But he was mistaken.

"Levison has a telegram of mine, and I want it, Kildare," said Talbot at once.

"What's that, Levison?" said the captain of St. Jim's, frowning.

"It's no value," said Levison, taking the crumpled telegram from his pocket. "Only it proves that Talbot has been lying, and——"

"Is that telegram Talbot's?" rapped out Kildare.

"Yes."

"How did it come into your hands, then?"

"I—I thought it ought to be seen, because——"

"How did you get it?"

"I—I took it, because——"

"Where did you take it? From Talbot's study?"

"N—n—n!" stammered Levison.

"Where, then?"

"From—the cricket pavilion. You—you see, Talbot has been taking us in, and—and I thought it ought to be shown up, and—and——"

"You thought you wanted to try into matters that don't concern you, you mean?" said the St. Jim's captain contemptuously. "Give it to Talbot at once. That's right. And now take a hundred lines, you young rotter!"

"You don't know what's in it——"

"And I don't want to know. Hold your tongue, and bring those lines to me by tea-time, or I'll cane you!" And Kildare swung round on his heel and walked away.

Levison gave Talbot a savage look, as the handsome Shell fellow crumpled the telegram into his pocket.

"You rotten cad——"

"You've called me a good many names," said Talbot quietly. "Will you step over to the gym and put the gloves on with me?"

"No, I won't," said Levison, between his teeth. "But—"

"Then you'll hold your tongue about me," said Talbot grimly. "I don't allow fellows to call me names. You're always slandering somebody. I've never heard you utter a good word for anybody yet!"

"Quite wight!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. A good many fellows were gathering round the two by this time. "He is an uttah wottah, deah boy! He was neashly sacked once for slandewin' old Byooke."

"I'll say what I like," said Levison savagely. "When a fellow goes to a pub like the Blackbird, and tells lies afterwards—"

"Enough said!" rapped out Talbot. "You've refused to come into the gym. I warn you that if I find you talking about me again I shall lick you. Understand that!"

"How would you like me to talk to the Housemaster about it?" sneered Levison.

"Rotten sneak!" growled Blake.

"You can please yourself about that!" said Talbot. "Remember what I've said, that's all!"

He turned on his heel.

"You don't dare to show the fellows that telegram!" shouted Levison.

"We don't want to see it!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"No feah!" said Arthur Augustus.

"It would prove that he was lying to you last night!" sneered Levison.

Talbot turned back quickly. His eyes were gleaming. He strode right up to Levison and hit out, and the cad of the Fourth crashed on the floor.

"I warned you," said Talbot quietly. "Now get up, and put up your hands. I didn't want a quarrel with you or anybody else; you've forced it on me!"

nose furiously, and Mellish helped him on with his jacket. "You didn't put up much of a fight," Mellish remarked, with a grin.

Levison scowled.

"I'll make him sorry for this!" he snarled. "You saw that telegram, Mellish, and you know that he was lying!"

"Ahem!"

"There's something fishy about him!" Levison continued.

"I don't know what it is, but there is something. Who is he? Nobody knows him, or where he came from. The Head let him into the school without knowing anything about his people, because Talbot chipped in and helped him when some footpads set on him. Just like the old donkey. I shouldn't wonder if it was a put-up job all through!"

"Phew! That's rather thick!" said Mellish, with a whistle.

"Where does he come from?" snarled Levison. "He talks about Australia; but he doesn't know anything about the place. I've heard Noble talking to him, and Talbot shifts off the subject as quickly as he can. I don't believe he's ever been in Australia at all!"

"Oh, draw it mild!"

"That kid Frayne knew him, you remember that, in some slum."

Talbot explained that he came across Frayne when he was slumming in London, once when he visited England with his uncle," said Mellish.

"I know he said so. And he said last night that his friend arranged to meet him at the Blackbird in that telegram, and we know that was a lie. Young Frayne called him by a queer nickname, and so did those footpads who tried to rob D'Arcy one day; they knew him, too. The same gang, very likely, who went for the Head the time Talbot distinguished himself!" sneered Levison. "The whole thing is fishy. Now Frayne's disappeared from the school, and he's written to young Wally—all the Third are talking about it—that there's something underhand going on, and he won't stay here to be a party to it. My belief is that Talbot has

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"Ow, ow!" Levison sat up and rubbed his mouth. "You—you rotter! I'll come into the gym with you, and lick you, you cad!"

"Come on, then!"

"Yes, come on; I'd like to see you lick anybody, Levison!" grinned Blake.

Quite a crowd of fellows followed them into the gymnasium. Levison, as a rule, contrived to avoid fisticuffs; but he could hardly allow himself to be knocked down without resenting it. The juniors gathered round eagerly to see the unaccustomed sight of the cad of the Fourth with the gloves on. His face was very savage as he stood up to Talbot. The juniors were curious to see how Talbot "shaped," too, with the gloves on.

They were soon satisfied.

A single round was enough for Levison of the Fourth. He could box pretty well, but he had no chance against the new Shell fellow.

Talbot knocked him right and left, and finished with a drive that carried him fairly off his feet, and flung him down with a crash.

Levison lay gasping on the floor, completely beaten, within three minutes.

"Up with you!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "You're not licked yet!"

"Yes, pile in, Levison; use your fists instead of your wotten tongue for once, you know!"

But Levison had had enough. He staggered to his feet and sulkily peeled off the gloves.

"Finished?" asked Talbot, with a quiet smile.

"Yes, hang you!"

"Very well. I don't want to go on if you don't. Only leave my pockets alone in the future, and hold your tongue. That's all I ask."

Talbot threw off the gloves and walked away. There was not a mark upon his handsome face. Levison remained dabbling his nose with his handkerchief, which was richly coloured before he had finished.

"My word, what a rotten show!" said Digby. "I don't call that a fight! Yah!"

And Levison was left alone with Mellish. He dabbed his

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something to do with it. Queer that Frayne should bolt like that only a few days after Talbot comes to the school, anyway. As for Talbot having seen him when he was slumming, Talbot says so, but Frayne never did. He never would speak on the subject at all. Something was being kept dark."

"Blessed if I know what to make of it!" said Mellish.

"What I make of it is, that there's something jolly fishy about Talbot, and Frayne knew it all," said Levison. "I shouldn't wonder if Talbot was the cause of his bolting—may have got him out of the school somehow."

"Phew!"

"I'm jolly well going to find out the truth, anyway, and show him up!" said Levison, between his teeth. "He's got too many secrets. It's fishy. The fellow may be some criminal for all we know, or all the Head knows, either—some member of the swell mob. I don't say that his appearance and get-up aren't all right. But everything we know about him rests on his bare word. And I know he's a liar."

Mellish shook his head.

"The fellows like him," he said. "Better not let them hear you talking like that, Levison. It will only get you into trouble."

"Not if we find out—"

"You leave me out of it!" said Mellish promptly. "I'm not taking a hand in anything of the sort. I'm not up against a chap who hits out from the shoulder as Talbot does!"

And Mellish walked away. Levison ground his teeth.

"The rotter!" he muttered. "All the same, I'll jolly well find out about Talbot, and show him up. It's fishy—deuced fishy—and if I get on to the secret, I'll make him sorry for what's just happened."

CHAPTER 12.

Caught in the Act.

TOM MERRY looked into Talbot's study at tea-time. Gore and Skimpole were there, but the new junior was not to be seen.

"Seen Talbot?" asked Tom.

"Gone out!" said Gore. "Gone to the Grammar School."

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I think. Gordon Gay asked him to tea when he was over here."

"Right-ho!" said Tom. "I was going to ask him, that's all!"

"I will come to tea with you, with pleasure, my dear Merry," said Skimpole, rising. "I suppose it is all the same to you!"

"Well, not quite the same," said Tom, laughing. "But come along, Skimpole!"

Skimpole followed Tom Merry from the study. Gore grunted, and went on with his tea. A few minutes later Levinson came in.

He glanced round the study, and then closed the door.

"I've just finished tea," said George Gore significantly.

"I haven't come to tea!" growled Levinson. "I want to speak to you now that blinking ass Skimpole isn't here. Talbot's out, isn't he?"

"Yes; gone to jaw about Australia with Gordon Gay, I suppose," rawned Gore.

Levinson sneered.

"Gay won't get much about Australia out of him," he said. "I don't believe he knows any more about Australia than I do. I'm pretty certain he's never been there."

"I've heard you say all that before. I'm getting fed up with your yarns about Talbot," said Gore politely. "He makes himself civil enough here."

"I dare say he does—it's his game to be popular," said Levinson viciously. "Have you ever see that desk of his open?"

"He always keeps it locked."

"What does he keep in it?"

"Blessed if I know. I've never seen it open."

"Neither has Skimpole," said Levinson. "I've asked him. I should like to see the inside of that desk."

Gore chuckled.

"Well, you can't; there's a patent lock on it."

"What does a schoolboy want with a patent lock on his desk?" said Levinson. "I fancy if anybody could see into that desk it would let in a good deal of light on the subject. I should like to see his papers."

"Well, so should I," said Gore; "but it can't be done. He's rather a secretive chap, I must say. I asked him to show me the desk once—the inside, I mean—and he said he wouldn't. That wasn't very civil, was it?"

"What about having a look when he opens it?" said Levinson.

"He never does when anybody's here."

"That's what I want to speak to you about," said Levinson, sinking his voice. "You've found the study door locked more than once, when Talbot's been alone here—you've told me so, I bet you that that is when he's opening that desk. I've had my eye on it a long time, and wondered what was in it. Well, when he comes back, and comes up here, if you'll keep out of the study and keep Skimpole out, I'll undertake to see—"

"How?"

Levinson made a gesture towards the screen in the corner of the study.

"He wouldn't suspect a chap of being hidden there," he remarked.

Gore laughed.

"If he found you spying on him," he remarked, "he might give you another taste of what you got in the gym to-day."

"I'll chance that!" said Levinson, with a scowl. "What do you say? More than once I've heard him unlocking that desk, and each time the door was locked."

"I'll do what you want," said Gore. "If there's anything queer about it, you'll tell me afterwards. That's understood?"

"Of course!"

"Right you are, then."

It was an hour later that Talbot came back to St. Jim's. He came directly up to his study, and after lighting the gas, glanced round the room. Then he locked the door. He did not hear a silent, deep-drawn breath behind the screen that stood across a corner of the room; and he did not see a gleaming eye that peered through a slit in the screen. Levinson of the Fourth was on the watch.

That big, solid, mahogany desk, with its patent lock, had attracted attention from others beside Levinson of the Fourth. But Levinson was intensely curious about it. In pursuance of his fixed belief that Talbot had some "shady" secret, he was convinced that the sight of that desk's contents might let in light upon the secret. Why should Talbot have taken so much trouble to secure it from spying eyes if there was no secret concealed there?

Letters, perhaps, from shady associates—that was Levinson's suspicion. As he watched the Shell fellow through the slit in the screen, he wondered whether he was about to open the mysterious desk. Talbot did not approach it. He threw himself into the armchair, and Levinson saw a careworn, almost haggard look upon the handsome face. The sunny carelessness

was gone, as if Talbot was tired of acting a part now that he was, as he believed, safe from observation.

He muttered to himself as he sat there, gnawing his lip, and Levinson caught the words:

"Two thousand pounds! What a haul! But—but—if they only knew! What is it that's coming over me? I seem to be changing—changing—everything seems different now! If only they wouldn't be so decent to me."

Levinson's heart beat hard.

The muttered words came from a breast overcharged, from a heart heavy with some secret black care. What was the burden that the Shell fellow had on his mind?

Talbot rose abruptly from the armchair—so suddenly that Levinson trembled, fearing that his presence had been discovered. But Talbot did not come towards the screen. He went to the desk. There was a key in his hand now.

"I shall need them to-morrow!" Levinson heard him mutter. "To-morrow! It's no good thinking—no good looking back! I am what I am—there is no help for it! I must see that they are in order for to-morrow night."

Click!

The desk opened. But from the slit in the screen Levinson could not possibly see into it. He heard a rustle of papers under Talbot's hand, and then—click! He knew that a secret lid inside the desk had been opened. A secret receptacle had been opened—what was in it? Levinson would have given worlds to know; but he could not see.

Click!

It was a sound of metal knocking against metal under Talbot's hand! Levinson's heart thumped against his ribs. Metal! What was it? Talbot's hand came out of the desk now, and it held something that glimmered in the light. But it glimmered only for an instant, as a movement of Talbot concealed it from sight before Levinson had fairly seen it. It was some steel instrument, that was all he knew. What was Talbot doing with steel instruments hidden in a secret place in his desk? That was the secret. But what did it mean?

In his eagerness to see, Levinson knocked the screen a little. It made but the slightest sound; but Talbot's ears were keen. There was a clink as the instrument in his hand dropped back into the desk—then click, click! Before Levinson knew what was happening, the desk was looked again, and Talbot, with gleaming eyes, faced round towards the screen.

For a moment there was a dead silence, as the two juniors stood face to face.

Talbot's voice was quiet and hard. He stepped towards the screen and pulled it aside. Levinson was revealed.

"Who is there?"

"You!" said Talbot, at last. "Spying!"

The look upon his face sent a chill to Levinson's heart. It was no longer the handsome, careless face of Talbot of the Shell—it was hard, grim, threatening, savage. Levinson cast an almost wild glance towards the locked door.

"So you are spying on me," said Talbot again. "I found you once hanging about my study, looking at my desk. You are curious to see what is in it. I will give you a lesson that will keep you from spying on me again, Levinson. My private affairs are no concern of yours. I'll try to make you understand that."

He picked up a cricket-stump, and grasped the Fourth-Former by the collar. Levinson struggled in his grasp; but Talbot handled him as if he had been an infant. He dragged the spy of the Fourth across the study table, and then the cricket stump rose and fell. Levinson squirmed and howled and yelled, but the blows descended like rain. It was a more terrible thrashing than Levinson had ever experienced before, even when he had been flogged by the Head. In a few minutes he was howling for mercy.

But the blows still descended.

"Help! Help!" shrieked Levinson. "Help!"

There was a loud thump at the door, and Tom Merry's voice outside. The yells of the Fourth-Former were audible all along the passage.

"Hallo! What's the row here?"

"Help!" shrieked Levinson.

The door-handle was tried from outside. Talbot flung the cricket stump into a corner of the study, and released Levinson. He crossed to the door and unlocked it, and threw it open. Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther looked in, and Skimpole blinked after them through his big spectacles. Gore and several other fellows were behind. Levinson rolled off the table, almost sobbing with pain and rage.

"What on earth's the row?" Tom Merry exclaimed.

Talbot's face was quite composed and quiet now.

"Levinson was hidden here behind the screen, spying," he said. "I've tried to give him a lesson."

"My hat! You've done it, too, I should think," said Tom, with a compassionate look at the wriggling, squirming Fourth-Former. "It sounds as if you were hammering nails. But what was he spying at?"

Talbot shrugged his shoulders.

"I have some old letters in my desk," he said. "I had

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Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

opened it to look at them. Levison seems to be as curious about my letters as about my telegrams. He was hidden in the study when I came in here, spying through a hole in that screen."

"The rotter!"

"They're not letters in the desk," howled Levison. "He's got something there he doesn't dare to let you see—I saw something—it's steel—he don't dare to let anybody see into that desk."

"Nobody wants to, excepting you," said Merry contemptuously. "Why can't you mind your own business?"

Levison staggered from the study. He was badly hurt, but he received little sympathy. His spying methods were not popular in the School House. But spy or not, his thrashing had been too severe, and Tom Merry & Co., much as they liked Talbot, could not help showing their feelings in their faces. Talbot understood what they were thinking of, and he coloured.

"You think I was a bit too rough on him," he exclaimed.

"Well," said Tom Merry hesitatingly, "I—I really think you did go a bit too far. We could hear the whacks in the next study."

"I'm afraid I lost my temper—I'm sorry I hit him so hard," said Talbot. "But—but I was in a temper. It took me by surprise to find him spying on me when I was looking at Private papers."

"Oh, it serves him right," said Monty Lowther. "Anyway, he won't try the same game again in a hurry!"

The Terrible Three returned to their study. The incident had made an uncomfortable impression upon them. Talbot had always seemed kindness and good-nature itself; his temper was always sunny. The sudden discovery that he had a savage temper, and that he had thrashed Levison as even the worst bully in the upper Forms would hardly have done, had a most disagreeable effect upon the juniors.

"After all, he deserved it," Monty Lowther said, after a pause.

Tom Merry nodded.

"Yes, he did; but—but I wish Talbot hadn't licked him like that, all the same. If Levison went to the Housemaster about it, there would be trouble."

"He could hardly go to Ralston and confess that he had hidden himself behind a screen in Talbot's study to spy on him," said Manners.

"No; I suppose he couldn't. I—I wish it hadn't happened, though. I suppose what the rotter did was annoying; but I don't see why Talbot should handle him quite so badly as that for it. It's liable to make fellows think that he's really got some shady sort of a secret, and that he was afraid of being found out!"

But that was a most discomfiting thought, and Tom Merry tried to drive it from his mind.

He knew that some of the fellows, owing to Levison's insinuations, were beginning to look upon Talbot of the Shell with distrustful eyes, and he was determined that he would not be among the number.

As for Levison, he did not soon forget that terrible licking, and he was very careful indeed after that to give Talbot's study a wide berth.

But Levison never forgot nor forgave an injury, and from that hour Talbot knew that there was one fellow at least in the School House who was watching him, and who suspected him—vaguely, it is true, but whose suspicions might yet be dangerous to the schoolboy who had so dark and terrible a secret to keep.

CHAPTER 13.

A Kind Invitation.

THE Grammar School Pastoral Players request the pleasure of Mr. THOMAS MERRY'S company, at the representation of "Julius Cæsar" (William Shakespeare), in the Grammar School grounds, at precisely eight o'clock.

"Bring your pals."

Thus ran the handsome invitation Tom Merry received by post on Wednesday morning.

The familiar style of the last sentence was hardly in keeping with the grandiloquent manner of the beginning. But there it was—a generous invitation to Tom Merry & Co. of St. Jim's to go over to the Grammar School and witness the triumph of their rivals in the amateur dramatic line.

Tom Merry read out the note in the quad after morning lessons to all the juniors immediately concerned.

The Terrible Three's discovery of the nature of Gordon Gay's entertainment had been made known to the chums of St. Jim's, and the Shell fellows had been chipped excessively for the utter failure of their scouting expedition.

Had the discovery been made without the Grammarians THE GEN LIBRARY—No. 336.

being aware of the fact, it would have been easy to "dish" the pastoral players by getting up a pastoral play at St. Jim's in advance, and inviting Gordon Gay & Co. over to St. Jim's to see it. But, as the matter stood now, the Grammarians were left to rejoice in their successes.

"Well, are we going?" asked Figgins.

"It's a rotten state of affairs," said Arthur Augustus. "I must say those Shell chaps mucked up the match frightfully—especially Lowthah. But for Lowthah's rotten trick on me, I should have gone over disguised as Dociah Monk, and should have learned the whole bizney from start to finish, and—"

"Oh, chouse it!" said Tom Merry. "You wouldn't have got as far as the Grammar School. The first policeman you met would have arrested you as an escaped lunatic!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"The question is now, what's to be done?" said Blake.

"The Grammarians!" said Tom promptly.

"Eh?"

"The Grammarians are to be done. They raided one of our shows once, and mucked it up. This is where we return the compliment."

"But we can't go over on their invitation, and then wag the entainment, Tom Mewwy. That would be bad form!"

"Fathead!"

"I wufuse to be called a fathead!"

"Some of the fellows can go over and join the audience," said Tom Merry; "but some of us—say, six or seven—won't go. We decline the invitation, having another engagement. The other engagement will be, to go over quietly, and get into the grounds, and collar Julius Cæsar and Brutus and Cassius, and tar them!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Of course, we sha'n't explain that to Gordon Gay!" said Tom, laughing. "We'll reply to this letter, and accept the invitation for a dozen chaps. May as well have some there in the audience, in case there's a row. It's quite possible that Julius Cæsar and Brutus will get ratty!"

"Extremely likely, I should considah!"

And the programme was quickly mapped out. The Terrible Three and Talbot, with Blake and Herries and Kangaroo and Figgins & Co., were to form the raiding party. A dozen others were to go over and join the audience at the Grammar School.

"Powwaps I had better be with the waidin' party," Arthur Augustus remarked. "You will require a fellow with some bwains as a loadah—"

"You must be in the audience, old son," said Tom Merry. "You won't do any damage there."

"Weally, you as—"

"Besides, you might get some of the tar on your clothes!" said Tom solemnly.

"Bai Jove! So I might! Powwaps, aftah all, I had better be in the audience," agreed Arthur Augustus. And so it was arranged.

That afternoon the juniors were playing cricket with a junior team from Abbotsoford School. Talbot, of course, played for St. Jim's, and his cricket was as brilliant as usual.

Loud cheers rang out for Talbot when he contributed fifty to the home score. St. Jim's juniors won by a wide margin, and Tom Merry was more satisfied than ever with the latest recruit to the home eleven.

After the match, Talbot left the school on his bicycle for a spin. Tom Merry saw him wheeling out his machine, and called to him.

"Going out, Talbot?"

"Yes; just for a spin."

"Wait a tick, and we'll come along."

Talbot paused.

"I—I'm only going down to the shop in Rylcombe about my new bat," he said awkwardly. "I'm going to scorch; don't you fellows bother to come!"

"Oh, all right!"

And Talbot wheeled his machine away, leaving Tom Merry with a queer expression on his face. It had not occurred to the captain of the Shell that Talbot might want to go on his spin alone, and he could not help feeling a little hurt. Levison of the Fourth was standing near him, with his eyes on Talbot, and he grinned at Tom Merry as Talbot walked away.

Tom flushed, and turned on his heel. Levison ran off to the bike-shed, and ran his own machine down to the gates. Talbot was riding down the road, and Levison rode in the same direction.

The Shell fellow looked round as he heard Levison's bicycle behind him, and frowned darkly at the sight of the spy of the Fourth.

He slackened speed, and Levison slackened too. He did

net intend to overtake Talbot. The Shell fellow jumped off, and waited in the road.

Levison came by slowly, and Talbot seized his handlebars and stopped him. The Fourth-Former had to dismount.

"What are you up to?" he exclaimed savagely. "Let my machine alone, confound you!"

"You are following me!" said Talbot.

"I suppose I can ride in Rylcombe Lane if I want to?"

"Ride on, then!"

"I'll ride when I choose!"

"You'll ride on now, or I'll lick you," said Talbot. "I don't choose to be followed about by a spying cad!"

His eyes gleamed dangerously. Levison gritted his teeth, and remounted his machine and rode on. Talbot did not remount till the Fourth-Former was out of sight.

Levison rode slowly, hoping that Talbot would pass him again. But Talbot did not. He had evidently taken some turning, and Levison did not see him again. The Fourth-Former stopped in the High Street of Rylcombe, and leaned his bike outside Mrs. Murphy's tuckshop, and spent an hour or more there over a glass of ginger-beer and a bun.

On the other side of the road was the outfitter's shop which Talbot had said he was going to visit. If he came there Levison would see him; but Levison did not believe that he would come. A past-master himself in lying, he had guessed that that was simply an excuse Talbot had given to escape the company of the Shell fellows, and to account for his going out.

Levison suspected that Talbot was intending to meet someone—perhaps the mysterious friend he had met the previous Saturday at the Blackbird, and he was curious to know.

It was not till nearly time for locking-up that Levison remounted his bicycle and rode back to St. Jim's.

It was too late then for Talbot to visit the outfitter's, unless he came in late for locking-up.

Levison entered the School House, and looked round for Talbot. The Terrible Three were chatting in the hall.

"Talbot come in yet?" Levison asked.

"Yes; half an hour ago," said Tom Merry shortly.

"Did he have his new bat?" asked Levison sarcastically.

"I don't see that it's any business of yours, but he did," said Tom.

Levison started.

"He brought it in?"

"Yes."

"Well, he never went near the shop in Rylcombe—I know that," said Levison. "I've been there all the time."

"Quite so; we know that. He changed his mind, and got it at Wayland. They're cheaper at Wayland," said Tom Merry. "He happened to mention it to us. Perhaps he knew that you were spying on him, Levison?"

Levison bit his under lip.

"I know jolly well he didn't go out to get a bat at all!" he said. "You fellows will find out some day that I'm right about Talbot. Why wouldn't he have you with him?"

Tom Merry looked steadily at the cad of the Fourth.

"I don't know what you suspect Talbot of," he said. "You're always suspecting somebody of something. I suppose it's your nature to. I thought yesterday Talbot licked you a little too much with that cricket-stump; now it seems you haven't had enough. If you say another word to me about Talbot I'll give you some more, Savvy?"

Levison swung away angrily. His spying had certainly not prospered, and yet he was more convinced than ever that Talbot was deceiving his schoolfellows in some way.

"Pah!" growled Lowther. "That fellow makes me sick! Now about Railton—"

"That's all right!" said Tom Merry, with a smile. "I've asked for leave for the whole party to go over to the Grammar School for the pastoral play. We've got a pass; and Figgins & Co. have got leave, too. It's quite an innocent and harmless occupation, you know, a pastoral play."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We leave here at half-past seven. And I fancy there is going to be a surprise for our friends the enemy this evening."

And the Terrible Three chuckled gleefully at the prospect.

CHAPTER 14.

A Sudden Surprise.

PROMPTLY at half-past seven Tom Merry & Co. started for the Grammar School.

There were more than twenty fellows in the party; but all the twenty did not arrive at the big gates of Rylcombe Grammar School.

The intended raiders separated from the rest before they reached their destination.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and half the party kept on to the Grammar School, and walked in cheerfully. They found all the preparations already made for the pastoral play. Seats

in great numbers were arranged in a semi-circle on the lawn, where the Grammar School amateur actors were to give that representation of Shakespeare's masterpiece.

The dusk was thickening over the school. Chinese lanterns already gleamed in the trees in rows and shed a glimmering light upon the scene.

The stage was marked off by a row of electric lamps with great effect, which served as the footlights. The greensward stage was backed up by canvas hangings, supported by ropes passed from the branches of the trees.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus, turning his eyeglass round upon the scene. "I must say that this is wathah nobbay."

"Well got up, and no mistake!" agreed Digby. "Looks as if they're going to have a good audience, too, by the number of the seats."

The juniors grinned as they took their seats. Somewhere in the darkness at the back, they knew, Tom Merry & Co. were already in concealment, ready to "chip in" when the right moment arrived.

As eight o'clock drew nearer the seats began to fill.

It was a soft, warm, and pleasant summer evening, and undoubtedly Gordon Gay's idea of a pastoral play was a good one. It would have been difficult to get an audience in a hot and crowded room that evening, but everybody was willing to stroll out on the lawn and see the play.

Dr. Monk and most of the masters occupied seats in the front, special armchairs having been carried out for those honoured members of the audience. Several prefects of the Sixth Form were there, and almost all the Grammar School behind. The seats were filled to the last one, and a crowd of fags had to stand. The School House was deserted, and hardly a window gleamed with a light.

"Bai Jove, it's a wippin' audience!" Arthur Augustus remarked.

"And it's going to be a ripping show, especially when Tom Merry gets to work on the actors!" grinned Redfern.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Eight o'clock rang out.

There was no curtain to raise; the actors were to walk on the scene from behind the canvas screen. The pastoral players dispensed with scenery, that much being left to the imaginative powers of the audience.

At ten minutes past eight the stage was still empty, and the younger part of the audience showed signs of impatience. There were calls to Gordon Gay & Co. to begin:

"Buck up!"

"Play!"

"On the ball!"

"Go it, Julius!"

"Play up, Brutus!"

Scene I. commenced at last. It went very well; and when at last Julius Cæsar and the conspirators appeared there was a ripple of applause. Gordon Gay had made considerable "cuts" in the play to shorten it—after the approved style of modern managers, who all know so much better than Shakespeare how a play ought to be written. The actors were not long in getting to the "fat."

"What hath chanced to-day, that Cæsar looks so sad?"

Redfern chuckled softly.

"What's going to chance to-night, that Cæsar will look sadder?" he murmured.

And the St. Jim's fellows grinned.

Arthur Augustus and his companions looked about them every now and then, but they saw no sign of the raiders. And the Grammarians had not the slightest suspicion that there were any St. Jim's fellows on the spot, save those visible to the eye in the ranks of the audience.

But Tom Merry & Co. were close at hand.

They had clambered over the school wall, and they were watching the scene from a safe distance, among the trees near the playing-ground.

Outside the circle of light from the pastoral theatre all was dark, and the raiders were quite safe from observation.

"They're going it!" murmured Blake, as the voices of the pastoral players came clearly through the still, summer air.

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"And we're just going to go it!" said Tom Merry, with a chuckle. "We've got to get the tar first, though."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Shush! You can come and help me carry the tarpot, Lowther."

"Right-ho!"

Tom Merry and Lowther disappeared into the darkness. After a moment Talbot left the rest of the party and followed them. The darkness outside the radius of the lights was intense, and Talbot's departure was hardly noticed.

Tom and Lowther reached the deserted wood-shed, where the tarpot was kept—as they knew only too well. They found it easily enough in the dark, and Tom Merry struck a match and looked into it.

"Plenty of stuff here!" he said cheerfully. "I brought some tubes of paint in my pocket, in case there was no tar, but there's heaps. The brush is here, too."

"Good egg!"

"Lend me a hand. Mind you don't spill it."

The tarpot was heavy, and the two juniors raised it between them and carried it away. They set it down in the shadow of the nearest tree to the pastoral theatre. The other fellows gathered round them, chuckling softly.

It was the end of a scene, and the Julius Caesar company were all behind the screen. They were chatting cheerfully, thinking of anything but danger; and there was still a ripple of applause from the audience "in front."

Tom Merry lifted the tarpot.

"Now!" he said.

"Hurry!"

There was a sudden rush from the darkness.

A dozen fellows appeared suddenly from nowhere, as it seemed, and burst upon the startled tragedians like a thunderclap.

Gordon Gay and Monk and the rest were collared in a twinkling, and before they knew what was happening Tom Merry was at work with the tar-brush.

Dab, dab, dab! Splash! Splish!

"Groooogh!"

"Ow, ow!"

"What the—Yaroooh! Groooogh!"

"Yow! Help! Ugh!"

The surprise was so sudden that the Grammarian actors had no chance at all. Almost in a twinkling the tragedians were tarred with reckless slashes of the brush, dipped again and again into the pail and loaded with tar.

Never had any theatrical company undergone so sudden a change.

Julius Caesar, Brutus, Mark Antony & Co. were turned with startling suddenness into Othellos.

Gordon Gay, reeking with tar, and wriggling in the grasp of Manners and Blake, was the first to recover his presence of mind.

"St. Jim's rotters! Go for 'em!" he yelled. "Groooogh! Ooogh!" he concluded, as the tar-brush was playfully dabbed upon his open mouth.

"Yah! Rotters! Go for them!"

"Kick them out!"

"Give them socks!"

Tom Merry dropped the tar-brush, and kicked over the tar-pot.

"Buzz!" he said tersely.

And the raiders fled.

CHAPTER 15.

The Raiders—and a Raider.

"GROOOOGH!"

"Yow-ow!"

"Great Scott! Ugh!"

"Oh, the rotters!"

"Yah! The beasts! Ow!"

A babel of voices rose from the unhappy actors. As a matter of fact, the company, including the suppers, was far more numerous than the raiders, and if they had not been taken by surprise could have handled them easily.

But they had been utterly taken by surprise, and the harm was done.

Lowther, before he fled, dragged at the canvas screen suspended on the rope between the trees, and yanked it down in a heap.

The actors were exposed to the view of the audience now. The sight of Julius Caesar & Company, with their faces as black as midnight, made the audience gasp. They stared, and burst into a yell of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Dr. Monk himself, grave and reverend gentleman as he was, could not help joining in the peal of laughter. He laughed till the tears ran down his cheeks. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and his comrades were doubled up with

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mirth. But Gordon Gay & Co. were not laughing. They were furious.

"Oh, the rotters! I never expected this!" gasped Gay, dabbing furiously at the tar on his face.

"Groogh! This is what comes of giving a giddy play in the open air!" groaned Frank Monk. "We never thought how easily the beasts could get at us!"

"Mon Dieu! I am tarry all over viz myself!" gasped Mont Blong.

"After them!" howled Wootton major.

Gordon Gay hesitated. But the play was evidently "done." Julius Caesar could not go on to be assassinated with a face the hue of coal. Neither would the assassins look at all like Roman conspirators with faces reeking with tar. And the audience, yelling with laughter, were hardly in the mood now for tragedy. Shakespeare's great tragedy had been turned unexpectedly into a comedy, and it was evidently useless to attempt to get back to the tragic pitch again.

"The beasts!"

"Tain't playing the game!"

"Oh, I don't know!" said Gay. "We've done them just as badly sometimes. But we'll scalp them for it, all the same. Hunt for the rotters!"

And the yelling audience were treated to the further funny sight of Julius Caesar, and Mark Antony, and Brutus, and Cassius, and a crowd of Roman conspirators and citizens chasing away into the darkness in pursuit of the raiders.

"Dear me!" murmured Dr. Monk. "This is—is—is very—ahem!—extraordinary! I really do not see any use in remaining here longer. Mr. Adams—ahem!—I suppose the play will not be continued?"

"I imagine not," said Mr. Adams, laughing. "However, it has been an unexpectedly amusing entertainment."

And the two masters walked away to the house. The audience was already breaking up. The St. Jim's portion had beaten a retreat already, and some of the Grammarians were joining the actors in hunting for the raiders.

But the raiders were not likely to be found.

Tom Merry & Co. did not linger within the precincts of the Grammar School.

They had fled at once, and they clambered over the school wall into the road in hot haste, and started for St. Jim's.

They ran a hundred yards down the road without a pause, and there they halted to take breath, and to expend it in yells of laughter.

"I rather fancy we score this time!" panted Tom Merry. "It was a bit rough on Brutus and Cassius, but no worse than they've given us sometimes."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"All here?" asked Tom Merry, looking round. "If the Grammarians could get hold of any of us after that, I fancy there would be slaughtering done."

"All here, I think," said Blake.

"Talbot! Where's Talbot?"

"My hat! They can't have caught him! He'd have called out!" exclaimed Tom Merry uneasily. "If they've got him, he'll be tarred at least!"

"Talbot! Talbot!"

But the Shell fellow did not answer to his name.

"Oh, rotten!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "I had no idea he'd been collared. They'll simply scalp him! Why on earth didn't he call out?"

"More likely he's taken cover, if he couldn't get away," said Kangaroo. "He'd have called out to us if they had him."

"We're going back for him," said Tom Merry.

"Yes, rather."

The juniors started back at once towards the Grammar School. If Talbot had fallen into the hands of the enraged Grammarians, there was no doubt that he would suffer a most terrific ragging. But halfway to the Grammar School there was a sound of pattering feet in the dark, and Talbot came up, panting.

"Talbot! Good luck!" exclaimed Tom Merry, in great relief. "I was afraid they'd collared you, old chap!"

Talbot breathed hard.

"I was very nearly collared," he panted. "I caught my foot in one of the ropes and went down; but I crawled behind a tree, and they didn't spot me. I had to lie low for a bit before I could get away, though. They're hunting for us."

"Let 'em hunt!" grinned Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"This is where we gloat!" chuckled Figgins.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Here come Gussy and the rest!" said Kangaroo.

The St. Jim's members of the audience were coming down the lane, laughing. They joined Tom Merry & Co., and there were fresh roars of laughter.

"We thought it bettah to cleah, deah boys," Arthur

Augustus remarked. "Of course, as we were guests, the Grammar School couldn't have gone for us, but it was gross that they might have forgotten the consideration due to guests, undah the cires."

"Very poss indeed!" chuckled Lewther. "I fancy if you'd stayed they'd have mopped up the ground with you, when they couldn't find us."

"They seem to be frightfully wild and watty."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, let's get off," said Manners. "The whole blessed army of them may come after us if we keep here."

And the victorious raiders marched off towards St. Jim's in great triumph.

There was no pursuit by the Grammarians, however. Having failed to find the raiders within the walls, Gordon Gay & Co. had had to postpone vengeance for a future occasion. But when Tom Merry & Co. had nearly reached St. Jim's, they heard the sound of a bicycle rapidly driven on the road behind them. They stopped and looked round.

"Is that one of them?"

"Bai Jove! One of them wouldn't come alone—"

"It's Gordon Gay!"

"Collar the bounder!"

The cyclist jammed on his brake as he came up with the St. Jim's crowd, and jumped off his machine.

"I came after you chaps," he panted. "Pax, pax! No time for rowing now. Something serious has happened!"

"Phew! Tar spilt, or anything like that?" asked Monty Lewther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Gordon Gay panted.

"Burglars!" he said laconically.

"What?"

"You see, the house was quite empty while we were giving that blessed pastoral play," said Gay ruefully. "Some awful rascals must have spotted it all, and taken advantage of it to sneak in and burgle the house."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Tom Merry, serious at once. "That is rotten!"

"I should say so!" gasped Gay. "But it might have been worse, as it happens, if you fellows hadn't interrupted the play. Dr. Monk was going to stay to the finish. As it was, he went back to the house much earlier than he had intended. The thieves had been in his study, where he keeps that blessed picture, you know. Regular old daub, I call it; but it's worth no end of money. Well, it was gone—cut out of the frame and taken away. And his desk had been opened—the lock picked somehow—and about fifty quid in money taken."

"Phew!"

"The poor old chap was quite knocked over. He valued that blessed picture more than anything else in the world," said Gay. "It's worth two thousand quid, and he can't afford to lose it, really. It was the giddy apple of his eye. He was so knocked over, he just stood staring at the empty frame—I heard him tell Adams—and then he heard somebody skipping out of the next study—that's Adams's. Adams has some valuables, but they were safe; the Head coming back so suddenly interrupted the villain, and he cleared. He was actually in the next room when the Head came into his study, and Adams would have been there in a couple of minutes; but the scoundrel heard Dr. Monk, I suppose, and cleared just in time."

"Didn't Dr. Monk see him?" asked Talbot.

"No; he was too late. The rotter had cleared. I came after you chaps to ask you if you'd seen anybody about the place. Any suspicious character, I mean."

Tom Merry shook his head.

"I'm afraid we only thought of tarring Julius Caesar," he said. "Blessed if we thought of anything else!"

"But it must have been pretty hard for the thief to get clear, with the whole place in an uproar," said Blake.

"Hasn't anybody seen him?"

"No. Fellows were seen running, of course; but that was only some of you chaps. The thief doesn't seem to have been seen by anybody. They telephoned for the police—they'll be there by the time I get back, and I hoped I might be able to take some information."

There was a general shaking of heads. None of the St. Jim's fellows had any information to give.

"It's wotten!" said D'Arcy. "I twist the picture will be recovered. I weally wish we could help you, deah boy."

And Gordon Gay rode back towards the Grammar School, and the St. Jim's party continued on their way. The news they had received had sobered them.

"It's a rotten thing to happen!" said Tom Merry. "Imagine the dirty thief being at work at the very time that we were there, thinking only of rotting the Grammarians. If we'd had the least idea of it—"

"Still, we've done some good," said Blake. "If we hadn't interrupted the show and caused Old Monk to go in early, the thief might have made a clean sweep of the place."

"Yaas, wathah! It was a jollay good thing we vailed the boundahs, aftah all."

And that was a comforting reflection to Tom Merry & Co. The raid had had an unexpected result in preventing the thief from further robbery. If the pastoral play had proceeded to its intended length, the burglar would have had a free run of the place.

"Very lucky we went over, after all," said Talbot.

"Vewy luckay indeed! Wathah a pity I wasn't in the waidin' party, though!" said Arthur Augustus reflectively. "I think it vewy probable that I might have spotted that somethin' was goin' on—"

To which the rest of the party replied unanimously:

"Rats!"

CHAPTER 16.

Levison's Suspicious!

TOM MERRY & Co. were anxious for news from the Grammar School the next day.

The local paper was published that day, and it contained a lengthy account of the burglary. Fifty pounds in money and the doctor's famous picture by Leonardo da Vinci had been taken. The picture was not a large one. It had been ripped from its frame with a few cuts of a knife, and probably rolled up and slipped under a coat. The description of the picture was given, and if it had been offered for sale in England, undoubtedly it would have led to the discovery of the thief. But in Amsterdam or New York there was an easy market for such a treasure, and Dr. Monk had little hope of seeing it again.

Gordon Gay came over in the evening to tell what news there was. It was not much. The police had no clue. The lock on Dr. Monk's desk had been opened so neatly that it was evidently the work of an experienced cracksmen. And Inspector Skoot suspected that it was done by the same hand as the recent "job" at Glyn House. But the cracksmen had vanished without leaving a trace behind.

Levison turned to Gordon Gay.

"How was the lock picked?" he asked.

"Blessed if I know! Those scoundrels have some sort of an instrument for picking locks," said Gay.

"A steel instrument, I suppose?"

"Very likely. I don't know anything about their tools."

Levison's eyes gleamed strangely. A terrible suspicion had come into his mind. He hardly knew how. Perhaps it was the remembrance of those strange words Talbot had muttered in his study: "Two thousand pounds." The stolen picture was worth two thousand pounds. "To-morrow night." And it was on the morning night that this had happened. And before Levison's eyes there seemed to dance that gleam of steel as Talbot had taken something—he did not know what—from the secret receptacle in the desk that was fastened by a patent lock. It was impossible—impossible. But—Levison fixed his eyes upon Talbot, and he saw that the handsome face of the Shell fellow had grown paler.

"What have you got in your head now?" asked Tom Merry, who was watching the changes in Levison's face with curiosity and a vague feeling of uneasiness that he could not account for. "I know you're a deep beast. If you've thought of anything that could help in this matter, get it off your chest. Your spying might come in useful, if you've seen anybody about who might be that thieving rotter."

Levison smiled.

"Perhaps I have!" he said.

"Where—and when?"

"That's what I'm going to make sure of," said Levison coolly; and he walked away.

The police remained without a clue to the robbery at the Grammar School. In a few days the St. Jim's fellows had almost forgotten the matter. But there was one who did not forget—one in whose mind black suspicions were working. But without proof—and the clearest proof—he dared not speak. His dark suspicion was unknown and unshared, and still Talbot of the Shell was the most popular fellow in the School House at St. Jim's.

THE END

(Another splendid tale of Tom Merry & Co., and Talbot of the Shell next week, entitled, "THE PARTING OF THE WAYS!" by Martin Clifford. Order your "Gem" Library in Advance. Price One Penny.)

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"There was determination in the girl's whole attitude. "That man is not Count Satorys!" she cried, "but a man who is impersonating him! Are you going to allow yourself to be tricked by an adventurer!" (See page 25.)

READ THIS FIRST.

Jern Stanton, a clever criminal, is sentenced to a long term of imprisonment on the strength of the evidence given against him by Paul Satorys, formerly a nobleman in the State of Istan. Stanton is the exact double of Satorys, and, escaping from prison, meets and strikes down his enemy. He exchanges clothes, and leaves Satorys lying in convict's garb, to be found by the warders. Stanton is aware that Satorys is the rightful heir to the throne of Istan, and determines to impersonate him, and make a bid for the throne himself. So exact is his impersonation that even Satorys' fiancée, Grace Lang, is deceived. She urges Stanton to go to London and push his claim to the Crown, and Stanton, in response to a wire, presents himself at the Cosmopolitan Club to meet a man named Duvigny to discuss the subject. (Now go on with the story.)

The Conspiracy.

Duvigny awaited him at the club, and hurried him to a room where several others were seated.

"You have no right to refuse, my dear Satorys," said Duvigny. "I have everything arranged, a consignment of stores and ammunition ready at Liverpool, and it is your duty to do as your country wishes. All this hanging back will only be accounted as so much cowardice, and, although we know that your doubts have been based

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on the noblest motives, yet there are others who would put another construction on your action, if you declined to come forward now."

"I do not decline," said the false Satorys. "I am ready."

He knew enough to be astutely silent, to acquiesce, to listen. He was to discover during the two days he passed in town, how detailed were the preparations which had been made.

He found everything made easy for him, and when he entered the house at Kensington, which he had entered before as a thief, it was with a feeling that nothing could hurl him back to his former miserable existence. Satorys had been a friend indeed, he reflected, with a grim smile, as he strove to adopt his double's habits, learning more every hour, and rendering the chance of eventual detection remote indeed.

The imitating of Satorys' signature presented no difficulties to him, and the letters he wrote to Grace were guarded, and left nothing to chance.

He had shrunk from the final step, but prudence dictated to him that it was necessary. Moreover, the girl wrote and told him she was prepared to marry him, and come with him on the expedition which would end in the Throne of Istan being established.

"Our marriage shall be arranged," wrote Grace Lang,

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"unless you think that in your new position I shall be no fit wife for you."

Stanton was carried along the strong tide of circumstance, and the brief reference in the London papers to the finding of an escaped convict in a dying condition at Westpool-on-sea did not disturb him. Dying? Then Satorys was not dead, but he could scarcely recover from his hurts!

And then there was so much to hold his attention now. Duvigny put him in touch with the secret movements of the Istan Party in Britain. A ship had been chartered, and was ostensibly going on a pleasure cruise, although its hold was filled with rifles. It was Duvigny's opinion that once the rightful heir to the Throne of Istan showed himself to the country over which his ancestors had ruled so long, he would have a mere walk-over for the crown, but in any case there were adherents enough to drive aside all opposition once the landing on the Istan was effected.

It was with the knowledge that in a few hours he would be on board that Stanton hurried back to Westpool to meet the girl who was so soon to be his wife.

As the days had passed since his deception he had felt a growing fear. Suppose Satorys lived! Suppose from the prison cell where he would be lying the truth would make itself felt!

But no, it was not possible! Nobody would believe his story! He would have to submit to his fate. It was compound interest indeed!

Stanton stood in the church by the side of Duvigny and one or two others of those who were accompanying him to the South. The little country church was almost filled, for the wedding was regarded as an interesting one. Satorys had made himself popular wherever he went; and Grace Lang, who had been staying down at the pretty seaside town for many weeks with her companion, Miss Anstruther, was loved by all.

The Broken Wedding.

Stanton saw his bride come slowly up the church, and his heart leaped as he thought of the prize he had won. There was no pity in his heart, no remorse for the ignoble part he was about to play; only a curious, insidious doubt that something would intervene.



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BOYS FRIEND

ONE PENNY

But no! How could it? And then, in any event, it would not be safe to leave the girl alone in England, ready to think, ready to listen to any rumour which might reach her ears—rumours as to the mystery of the cliffs. So far, all had been plain sailing. But as he saw Grace walk up the aisle on the arm of Miss Anstruther the scoundrel quailed.

He had scrupled to dine at the bungalow, held aloof a good deal during those few days since the perpetration of the vile crime, anxious as he had been to study the situation more thoroughly before he placed himself unreservedly in her hands. But now, as he saw her approaching through the sunlight, violet tinted from the windows, a dread seized him—a nameless dread—for he saw truth in her limpid eyes, and it came to him that by some subtle means she would detect the horrible fraud.

There were whispers of admiration.

"How pretty she is!"

"They are going away on a cruise."

Then somebody said something about the real position of Satorys, and all eyes were turned on the bridegroom, who shifted uneasily as Grace came up to the chancel steps.

The clergyman advanced, and the service was about to begin as the strains of the Wedding March died softly away.

Suddenly the girl raised her eyes, and it seemed to Stanton as though there were something which he could not hope to hide from her. There was fear in her look—fear and anger—and her lips parted, but for a moment no word came.

"Grace, what is wrong?"

Again she looked.

Then she drew herself up and shook her head, striving to control her agitation.

"You—you are not—"

And then she tottered. And as Stanton caught her in his arms he saw that she had fainted dead away.

"It will be nothing!" he said.

It was in the vestry. Grace was lying back on the seat where Stanton had placed her, while Miss Anstruther stood looking the picture of distress.

Duvigny could not have known the truth, could not have guessed; but he did know that delay meant ruin to the cause, and he whispered something in Stanton's ear.

"You must start to-night, you know. She will recover directly. Bring her along, have the wedding on board—anything! But let us be going!"

Stanton appreciated his own danger. Grace knew the truth. She would reveal her suspicions, and then would come the end.

"You are right," he said, in a feverish way. "She will forgive me. I will get her to the car."

He raised the girl and carried her out of the building; and Duvigny remained behind a moment to speak to the clergyman and to Miss Anstruther, who was hurriedly following.

"What was it she said?" asked Miss Anstruther. "Did you hear? I suppose it was the heat."

The good woman had no suspicions. How should she? Grace loved Paul Satorys.

But when she reached the door of the vestry and hastened across the grass to the gate it was to see a motor-car gliding rapidly away. She turned to speak to Duvigny; but he and those with him had jumped into another car, which raced down the lane, following the first motor, in which Stanton was bending over the girl who was to have been his wife.

Miles out of the village the cars were stopped. Duvigny joined his chief. Grace was still lying in a trance.

Stanton took out his pocket-book and hastily wrote out a telegram, which he handed to Duvigny.

"You will have that despatched at the first town we go through. There is something which I have to tell you later on; but the success of our enterprise depends upon Miss Lang coming with us. You understand?"

Duvigny nodded.

Half an hour later he sent off the message from a post-office in a country town twenty miles south of Liverpool.

The message ran:

"Anstruther, the Bungalow, Westpool. All right. We were married en route.—Grace and Paul."

It was enough to stop any inquiries as to the fate of the girl.

Coming Back to Life.

There was something Satorys could not understand, and that was, why he was lying in a room with whitewashed walls, and why his head was bandaged. It seemed to him that he must have been there for weeks, and that he had come from a long distance. It was out of the

question to speak. He knew it would hurt him to do so, but after another long spell of darkness things began to get clear.

A man in a strange uniform came and looked down at the injured prisoner.

"Reckon you won't be trying to get away again in a hurry, No. 98," he said. "You did yourself a fat lot of good altogether, brought back with your head bashed in."

Satorms struggled up.

"No. 98?" he murmured. "What does it all mean?"

"Oh, so that's the lay, is it? You don't know anything at all, I suppose? You have forgotten that you made a bolt for it, and gave them the slip, and then went and tumbled down the cliff at Westpool. You wouldn't remember, of course not, but that's just what did happen, and a pretty mess you made of things."

Out of the darkness of his brain the truth was getting plain to the unfortunate man, and he panted out something which made the prisoner attendant smile.

"You don't want to see nobody. You will see plenty of the chief-warder when you are well enough for punishment. Better say nothing. They won't forget you."

Satorms was thinking hard. He saw the mistake, and he recalled the sudden attack which had been made on him while he was walking back to his hotel. But who made it? And how was it? He gave a nervous start, for he reflected on the man against whom he had given evidence long before at the Central Criminal Court. People had remarked on the wonderful likeness between the two men. But it was dark and confused still. If that man Stanton had taken his clothes, yet he could scarcely pass himself off as the other.

"There is a mistake!" he said excitedly. "I am Paul Satorms. I was attacked, and the convict who got away stole my clothes."

A dull feeling of despair came to him as he heard the derisive laugh his words evoked. He was not to be believed. He was a prisoner, submitting to a fate which was not his, and he groaned at the thought of the horror of it all. It would have been done by this man Stanton, this man who was so like him. He began thinking of Grace, and of what she would say when she knew, and the idea maddened him. The attendant was alarmed, and fetched one of the officials, who listened to what he took to be the ravings of a demented man.

Satorms fought to be calm.

"It is true!" he cried feverishly. "I am not Stanton, the man you were looking for. I am Paul Satorms—Count Satorms, and you keep me here at your peril!"

The officer shrugged his shoulders.

"You are bad," he said. "It is because you are bad that I will tell you something. You call yourself Satorms. Well, you cannot be him, because I just now read in the paper that that gentleman has left Liverpool with the lady who married him just before he started. I saw it myself, and it seems he is going to Istan, where his family used to be big pots. The people here don't half like it, either, and there's a warship after them, or going to be sent to bring them back, so there you are. You had better forget all this nonsense, my man. You will have plenty to think about later on when they sentence you to your punishment."

Satorms fell back exhausted. He was too weak to protest further, but the agony of his mind was terrible. He saw it all now. Stanton had personated him. He saw the fellow in imagination that night when he was caught at the safe, his look of amazement at seeing his double standing over him.

The warder had left the hospital ward. He was thinking of what he had heard. It sounded like a very good story, and he told one of his mates, and the latter passed it on to the chief warder, who merely laughed.

It was a fine yarn that of having a man in the position of Satorms in Parkmoor Prison. What tales some of these fellows did fake up, thought the chief-warder.

It was so good that at evening report to the governor, Major Dallas, he mentioned the matter. The governor was interested, for he had met Count Paul Satorms, and this report as to his having at last relented and adopted the suggestion of his advisers as to trying for the throne of Istan had warmed the heart of the major, for hitherto he had thought Satorms had been ill-counselled.

"The poor wretch has got hold of some story," said the governor. He gave a laugh. "I happen to know Count Satorms. Never heard he had— Yes, by the living jingo, I did!" The chief-warder stared at his superior. The governor had jumped out of his chair. "Count Satorms has a double, and it was this man Stanton. I remember the case now. Satorms was one of the witnesses against him, and the papers published their portraits. I saw them in the 'Mirror.' I will come and see this man, just to satisfy my curiosity, though I understood from Captain Rand that he was our man."

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Satorms turned his head and saw Major Dallas enter the sick-ward. The governor came up to the couch, and gazed thoughtfully down at its occupant, and in the worn face he saw once more the man he had met in London months before.

"You say you are Count Satorms, sir," he said. "Can you prove it?"

Satorms raised himself on his elbow.

"Yes," he said, "I met you, Major Dallas, at Sir Frederick Challoner's house in town last summer."

The governor nodded. Satorms held himself in.

"I want to speak calmly," he said. "I am in a worse position, I should say, than any man ever found himself placed in. I was attacked, and I know now it must have been Stanton who fell upon me."

"As I am sure, too, sir," said the governor gravely, "I shall forward my report to London at once."

The matter took time. The governor had rendered Satorms' position vastly different, but he could not release him on his own responsibility.

But the Home Office acted promptly, and the order for the release of the wrongly imprisoned man reached Parkmoor.

Satorms was able to leave. He hastened to Westpool, to find Miss Anstruther still at the bungalow. She looked at her visitor as though he were a ghost, and then, when she realised the truth, she burst into tears.

"Grace knew at the last," she said. She related how the poor girl had fainted away in the church, and had then been carried to the car.

Satorms hurried to London. At his bank the manager heard his story.

"Your standing account, sir, was drawn to the last few pounds, but, of course, we shall make that right. May I ask what you are going to do?"

"I am off to Liverpool," said Satorms excitedly. "The police tell me that the ship the Bella has sailed, but there may be a chance of overtaking her."

He was standing at the door frantically eager to be off, but the manager of the bank held him in conversation for another minute. He was deeply interested, for the Bella was bound on what really amounted to a filibustering expedition, and the whole country was excited by the news.

Satorms got away at last, and in the train North he tried to think out a plan. It would be Duvigny and his following who had done all this, and found the man they supposed to be the heir to the throne of Istan far more pliant than he had shown himself before.

At Liverpool bad news awaited him. The Bella had cleared hours before, and it was rumoured that the Admiralty had despatched a cruiser to intercept her, now that it was known she was destined to carry war into the territories of a friendly power, for Istan as a Republic was at peace with Britain.

Satorms made inquiries, and an hour later he had booked his passage for Istan on a steamer which was due to leave the port that same night. He was a prey to feelings which can scarcely be described, but apart from the thought of the fate of the girl he loved was the idea of vengeance on the miscreant who was posing as himself.

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The Pursuit.

Boom! Boom!

The Bella was racing through a scudding sea into the approaching night, and Stanton on deck watched the western coast of Ireland now fading away in the twilight.

Duvigny dashed up to him to tell him the news.

"We may dodge her in the night, sir," he said; "but the news has stirred the British authorities to try to stop us. That is a signal to lay to, and we are in British waters."

"But we cannot obey!"

Stanton caught the other's arm. Duvigny looked at him in surprise, for, as a rule, Satorys had shown himself lethargic, arrogantly indifferent to the chances of the world, as is usual with the two extremes of the social castes—those who are very high up, and those who are very low down.

But, of course, there was no question of laying to, no idea of humbly submitting to the proud message which came with a dull roar across the darkening waves. There was far too much at stake for that, and the captain of the Bella, the ship loaded with arms for the attempt to re-establish the Throne of Istan, received his orders, and right gallantly did he obey them, those orders being to cram on more steam and elude the British cruiser in the darkness of the night.

As Duvigny hurried off, Stanton stood by the rail, gazing at the dimly-seen war vessel, which was coming up fast. In his trembling anxiety, he was ready almost to forget the girl who was below, a prisoner in her cabin, wild with grief now, and pleading to be set free.

Grace had come to as she was being hurried on board ship, but her resistance was useless, and she had been hurried below. Stanton had informed her of his will, and the poor girl began to realise that there was no chance of freedom now. And the thought of Satorys, and of what had become of him, caused her to weep anew.

But Grace Lang was only one of the pawns in the game of the man who held her in his power. He watched through the glass the flash of the firing. It seemed to him as though the shots were now more angry, as if the irritation of those on board the ship of war found expression in the fierce signals to the quarry to bring up and let a boat's crew come aboard.

He did not know that at her cabin window Grace, too, was watching the cruiser of the Royal Navy, nor did he know that the man who had taken her some refreshment had apprised her of the situation. To Stanton the oncoming ship represented a return for him to the prison he had left, and the end of his dream.

Grace turned away from the porthole as a tap came at the door. She feared it would be the man she loathed, but instead she saw a rough-looking sailor who touched his cap.

"They won't catch us, miss," he said. "No need to be alarmed. The Bella will show them a clean pair of heels long before the morning."

Grace gave a faint cry.

"You do not understand," she said. "I hope that ship will overtake us, for I am a prisoner here, and unless it does make this vessel stop, there will be no hope for me."

The man removed his cap and scratched his grizzled head.

"Is that the way of it, miss?" he said. "Well, of course, I am only a common, ordinary sort of sailor like, by name Peter Mardyke, born at Portsmouth a long time since, where my home is now, miss, kept by my sister, who is a real good 'un, though disposed to be cantankerous when I have had a good night; but I never say much, not to her, nor, for the matter of that, to anyone, for as my brother Bill—a good fellow was Bill—as he always said to me, 'See here, old Clearstarch, you take my tip, and never say nothing to nobody which isn't strictly speaking necessary, for a word now and then is quite enough.' And that's my system, miss. I never say anything except a plain 'yes' or 'no,' which is enough for all purposes. I wish I could help you, miss, but you see I don't command this ship, only look after the victuals for the steward."

He darted to the companion-way, but came back in a moment, a smile illuminating his rugged, mahogany face.

"Thought someone was coming down, miss, and if there was I should catch it for being here; but you rely on me, miss. I don't mind taking service on board a ship like this, for we are not going to make any trouble with the Old Country, only going to give a poor gentleman back his crown. If I get half-a-crown I am satisfied, but some folks wants more, and I am not going to say anything against it."

Grace stood in the centre of the cabin, a look of wonderment in her eyes. Beneath the flow of the old man's talk she detected a strain of honesty and good feeling, and she held out her hand.

Peter rubbed his palm on his coat before taking the girl's hand.

"If you don't want to be on board this here craft, then it's a shame you should be, miss," he said. "There, I am being called. I will keep an eye on you, miss. Dang me if that pepperbox is not at it again!"

As he hurried out of the cabin the silence of the night was

broken by the sound of another signal, and Duvigny, who was on the bridge, saw the captain's look.

"I have done a bit of gun-running in my time, sir," said the captain, "but I never got quite so near to things as this. If we don't lay to they'll be sending something along which will make us, and then where are you, that's what I want to know."

Boom! again, but this time more distant. A haze was creeping up, and as Stanton paced the deck, his eyes ever on the faint blur which represented the hostile warship, he felt that his scheme was at an end.

Boom! came again, but this time the thick mist which was closing the Bella in smothered the sound.

On the Way.

It was dawn. Stanton had not retired to his cabin, but had merely rested on a seat under the lee of the bridge. It was morning, and no more sign of pursuit, and the captain had left his post on the bridge in charge of his second in command, while Duvigny and the others were fast asleep.

Stanton went below, had a hasty breakfast, and changed his clothes; and when, later on in the morning, he saw Grace Lang walk towards him as he stood chatting with Duvigny, he was ready for what must come.

The girl was white of face; but there was determination in her whole attitude. She stopped before Duvigny, and addressed her remarks to him.

"I knew you, sir, before, when you visited me with Paul Satorys. Now, I tell you that you are being duped or else you are very wicked. That man is not Count Satorys, but a man who is personating him. Are you going to allow yourself and the other devoted men who wish to see Istan a kingdom once again to be tricked by an adventurer?"

"Oh, the poor girl is mad!" said Stanton. "Come, Duvigny, we have other matters to attend to."

He made a step along the deck. Grace checked him.

"You know it is the truth that I say," she said. "I was deceived at first, but now I know, and I ask myself however I could have been misled."

Duvigny shook his head. He looked upon it as a quarrel. It must be either that or a delusion on the girl's part. Moreover, Stanton was now in supreme command of the expedition. Duvigny moved away, as though to indicate that the matter did not really concern him. Stanton leaned against the rail, and looked at his fair prisoner.

"You would do well to say nothing," he said. "If you resist, though there is no resistance you could offer, I shall have you made a prisoner in your cabin." He caught her wrist. "You understand. You think that you have discovered something. It is not the truth. I am Count Satorys, and so you must regard me. I command here, and no word of yours can alter that."

He drew himself up and strode away, and the girl stood there looking sadly after his retreating figure. He was right so far, for he was master.

Acting on the advice of Duvigny, the direct route to Istan was abandoned. The Bella took a more southerly course, and this action undoubtedly accounted for the fact that the voyage passed off without further incident.

Despite her dread—dread as to the fate of Satorys, as to which she could learn nothing, Grace could not but gaze with wonderment as the Bella swept into the vast harbour of Brois, the capital of the State of Istan. Far away she saw the mountains rising to the clouds, while the white city was spread out between the hills, a veritable fairyland as it seemed, with its terraced gardens, its luxuriant groves.

They came in under a foreign flag, and no hindrance occurred, no opposition being shown to the landing of Stanton and his friends.

This was due to the circumstance that the most profound secrecy had been observed by the Royalist party, both in the country itself and in London, where the plot to overthrow the Republic, now cordially hated for its tyrannous procedures, had been hatched.

Grace found herself carried along on the stream of events. If she had seriously thought of flight, she soon realised that it was out of the question. She was guarded carefully, and, after leaving the ship, was placed in the charge of some of the native women at the temporary headquarters of the Royalist party.

One thing alone reconciled her to her fate, this being the thought that, placed as she was, there was just a chance she might be able to look after the interests of Satorys himself, the man who still lived—she felt certain of that—and who would reappear some day to claim her, and shatter the hopes of the false and sinister adventurer who was posing as the rightful king.

(Another long and thrilling instalment of this grand new serial next Wednesday. Don't forget to order your "Gem" Library in advance.)

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 336.

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

NEXT
WEDNESDAY—

"THE PARTING OF THE WAYS!"

ST. JIM'S JINGLES.

No. 6.—REDFERN.

St. Jim's can boast a noble host
Of stalwarts strong and steady,
And chief of those who shine the most
Is enterprising "Reddy,"
Who takes a cheerful view of life,
With all its keen attractions,
And never fails to stir up strife
Among the rival factions.

The rotter who can deal in lies
Is Reddy's pet abhorrence;
To crush him out he always strives
With Owen and with Lawrence.
The eads are rendered sore and sick
Who dark devices follow,
And with a stump, or fist, or stick,
Are made to whine and wallow.

When Redfern came to his domain
He formed a great ambition—
To fight with Figgins and obtain
The paramount position.
But Figg's friends devoutly swore
That this assuming new kid
Must swiftly drop his plans of war
And take to learning Euclid.

The rivals fought with fierce delight,
Their thirst for blood assuaging,
And in the House, from morn till night,
A whirling war was raging.
The famous fights of ancient Greece
Compared with such a riot,
Were periods of profoundest peace
And unmolested quiet!

At length the weary warriors thought:
"Unless this conflict ceases,
A scavenger must be besought
To pick up all the pieces!"
For eyes were black, and faces scarred,
Where fists had once collided;
So battles for a time were barred,
And honours were divided.

When rows had reached a timely pause,
The ever-famous Redfern
Received sufficient of applause
To make his youthful head turn.
For on the field of play he proved
Supreme and self-reliant,
And every manly heart was moved
To greet him as a giant.

Then rend the air with rowdy cheers,
And make the rafters rattle,
In praise of Reddy, who appears
So stout and strong in battle!
Ye noble host of "Gem"—ites, rise,
Your voices gaily blending,
And waft his glory to the skies
In volume never-ending!

"THE GEM" LIBRARY 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."

Charles Foundling, care of Amm Bros., P.O. Box 2166, Johannesburg, Transvaal, South Africa, wishes to correspond with a girl reader, age 18-20.

F. H. Burns, Sydney Street, Muswellbrook, New South Wales, Australia, wishes to correspond with readers living in Canada or the United States interested in postcards.

G. L. Duncan, 325, Ligar Street, Ballarat, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with girl readers living in the British Isles, age 17-20.

C. Riley, care of G.P.O., Murray Street, Gawler, South Australia, wishes to correspond with readers living in the British Isles or America, age 13-15.

Reg. A. McArthur, Hardy Street, Goodwood, Adelaide, South Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader living in England, age 16-17.

L. Lewis, 23, St. George's Terrace, Perth, Western Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader living in Great Britain, interested in physical culture, age 16-17.

Keith Douglas Grant, 113, Stanmore Road, Linwood, Christchurch, New Zealand, wishes to correspond with girl readers living in England.

Frank Osborne, care of Fremantle Post Office, Western Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader living in England, age 18-20.

Fred Malone, 16, Franklin Street, Adelaide, South Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader living in England, Scotland, or Canada.

B. J. Hughes, 372, Park Street, South Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader living in America or South Africa, age 14-17.

M. P. Hooper, Simmons Street, Kapunda, South Australia, wishes to correspond with readers interested in stamps, age 16.

Miss T. Anderson, Parr Street, Exeter, South Australia, wishes to correspond with readers living in the British Isles, ages 16-18.

Bert Goodes, 26, Mercer Street, Geelong, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with readers living in Dudley (Wores.), age 18-20.

D. Ansell, 104, St. Paul's Avenue, Brantford, Ontario, Canada, wishes to correspond with readers living in Canada.

H. Jackson, Sproule Street, Lukemba, via Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader living in England or Wales, age 15.

Robert Kinnear, Water Street, Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia, wishes to correspond with readers interested in stamps.

Wm. M. Grundy, 12, Woolcott Street, Coburg, Melbourne, wishes to correspond with readers interested in stamps.

Next Week:

BERNARD GLYN.

The Editor specially requests Colonial Readers to kindly bring the Free Correspondence Exchange to the notice of their friends.

A Cash Prize for Every Contributor to this Page.



Our Weekly Prize Page.

LOOK OUT FOR YOUR WINNING STORYETTE

A BIT TOO CLEVER.

Mr. Binks, who had a rather large family, used to have a roll-call before meals; but one day, while he was calling the names, and the children were answering, "Ere, pa!" little Jimmy—who had just come home for his holidays from the Public Boarding School—thinking he would show his father how he was getting on with his Latin, shouted when his turn came "Adsum!"

"Oh, you've 'ad some, 'ave you?" said his parent, eyeing him severely for a moment. "Well, then, you get out, and make room for them as ain't!"—Sent in by R. Sinclair, Norwich.

ABOVE LIST PRICES.

Mother was dandling baby on her knee, and muttering the usual fond, foolish remarks. Tommy, aged nine, and a football enthusiast, sat on the other side of the hearth, studying the evening paper reports and trying not to listen.

"O-oh, little wee petsy-wetsy!" chanted mother. "Mummy's little darling! Un's precious! Mummy wouldn't sell you for a thousand pounds!"

Tommy felt it was time he had something to say.

"Oh, mother," he said reprovingly, "a thousand pounds! Why, Everton only paid sixteen hundred for Tom Brown!"—Sent in by Fred Tuft, Birmingham.

PLUS ONE.

Teacher: "How many bones have you in your body?"

Freddy: "Two hundred and nine."

Teacher: "Wrong. The human body has only two hundred and eight."

Freddy: "But I swallowed a fish-bone this morning."—Sent in by F. G. Foster, Grimsby.

NO WONDER!

Missess (to new servant): "Why did you leave your last place?"

Mary Anne: "Well, mum, when a bullock died we got beef till it was finished. When a sheep died we got mutton till it was finished. And when the cat died I left."—Sent in by David Whyte, Dundee.

NOT SURPRISING.

Mike had just come out of prison, having served six months' hard labour. As he went along he met an old friend of his named Pat.

"Hallo!" said Pat. "Where have you been all this time?"

"In prison," said Mike, "doing six months, worse luck!"

"Oh!" said Pat, in astonishment. "What have you been doing, then?"

"I stole a piece of rope," answered Mike.

"What," said Pat, "six months for stealin' a piece of rope?"

"Yus," continued Mike. "But, bejabbers, there was a horse at the end of it!"—Sent in by E. Robinson, Canning Town, E.

TIT FOR TAT.

At a county cricket match a very conceited batsman came to the wicket. Although a very good batsman; he was rather inclined to get his legs in front of his wickets at each ball, and the umpire, noticing this, mentioned the fault to him.

"Look here," said the batsman loftily, turning to the umpire, "who's batsman—you or I?"

The umpire at that moment took little notice of his remark; but after another over or two, a ball was bowled which hit the batsman's legs, and everybody in the field appealed:

"How's that?"

"Out!" the umpire emphatically ruled.

The batsman then came up to him, and in angry tones asked him to explain why he gave him "out."

"Look here, who's umpire—you or I?" replied the umpire promptly. And the batsman retired.—Sent in by M. Hill, Droitwich.

A GOOD SHOT.

Fred: "That's a nasty cut you've got over the eye, old man. How did it happen?"

Harry: "The wife and I had a few words this morning, that's all."

Fred: "But she used to be such a shy girl before you were married?"

Harry: "So she is now—she's always shying. And she's a good shot, too!"—Sent in by W. Spink, Limehouse, E.

THE SICKENING PART.

The following dialogue took place in a lift the other day:
Old Lady: "Don't you ever feel sick going up and down in the lift all day?"

Lift-Boy: "Yes'm."

Old Lady: "Is it the motion of going down?"

Lift-Boy: "No'm."

Old Lady: "The motion of going up?"

Lift-Boy: "No'm."

Old Lady: "The starting?"

Lift-Boy: "No'm."

Old Lady: "The stopping?"

Lift-Boy: "No'm."

Old Lady: "What is it?"

Lift-Boy: "The questions."—Sent in by William Farrell, Belfast.

HOW STRANGE!

Algy was back from the war, and he was showing off before the ladies for all he was worth.

"I've had some fearfully narrow escapes," he was saying.

"Once my horse was shot from under me!"

"How awful!" exclaimed a listener.

"Oh," went on Algy, "we are a great fighting family!"

My great-grandfather fell at Waterloo."

"How strange!" said the lady by his side. "Something like that happened in our family. Grandpa fell at St. Pancras once—he slipped on a banana-skin!"—Sent in by M. Denton, Liverpool.

MONEY PRIZES OFFERED.

Readers are invited to send ON A POSTCARD Storyettes or Short Interesting Paragraphs for this page. For every contribution used the sender will receive a Money Prize.

ALL POSTCARDS MUST BE ADDRESSED—The Editor, "The Gem" Library, Gough House, Gough Square, Fleet 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.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 336.

NEXT
WEDNESDAY—

"THE PARTING OF THE WAYS!"

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

OUR SPECIAL WEEKLY FEATURE



THIS WEEK'S CHAT

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For Next Wednesday,

"THE PARTING OF THE WAYS!"

By Martin Clifford.

In this grand, complete story of Tom Merry & Co. and Talbot, their mysterious new chum, the gradual change which has been creeping over the feelings of the boy crackman comes to a head. Talbot has a terrible struggle with himself, and comes to a momentous decision. At this moment Levison, the spy of the Fourth Form, steps in with his denunciation, and Talbot is hard put to it to defend himself. It is only the splendid reputation he has gained for himself with his schoolfellows, against Levison's fame as an Ananias, which saves him.

Then comes Hookey Walker's midnight expedition, and "The Toit's" dramatic meeting with his old pals.

The boy has to make the great choice, one way or the other, and he shows that he is made of the right stuff when it comes to

"THE PARTING OF THE WAYS!"**WHERE BLACK RULES WHITE.**

A land of mystery and terror, of which only the most adventurous travellers have any experience, is the Black Republic of Hayti. In that country the negro is supreme, and the white man is only admitted on sufferance. The burlesque civilisation of the capital gives way, in the dark and mysterious interior, to barbaric savagery; and terrible are the tales of the savage rites and fearful customs of the Ju-Ju worshippers told by the few adventurers who have lived to witness them. The romance and fascination of this mysterious land provide an awe-inspiring background to the magnificent detective story of Sexton Blake's adventures in Hayti, with his faithful companions Tinker and Pedro, which appears in the current issue of our companion paper, "The Penny Popular." The title of it is

"A FORLORN HOPE!"

and it is one of the most thrilling and fascinating of this famous series of complete detective stories.

Additional complete stories in the same issue of "The Penny Pop." are

"ALBERT CLYNE—CAD!"

By Martin Clifford,

a splendid story of school life at St. Jim's; and

"PEACEFUL MEASURES!"

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Three complete stories such as these are unobtainable in any other paper; they deal with all the most famous characters in fiction, and they are all of the best. Can "The Penny Popular" require any further recommendation?

REPLIES IN BRIEF.

Miss E. Roseby (New South Wales).—The characters you mention are purely fictitious.

George Rainey.—St. Jim's will meet Greyfriars on the cricket-field in a week or two's time.

GUARDING THE KING.**At the Big Shoots.**

During the big shoots at Windsor and elsewhere, the most minute precautions are taken to keep any strangers from approaching the King. As a general rule, three of the "guns" are in reality detectives, though they do not, of course, join in the shoot. One keeps in close attendance on the King, whilst the other two act as scouts, and keep any person from approaching the party, whose business is not known to them.

To many the precautions described in this article taken to safeguard the King may seem unnecessary, but without them our monarch's life would certainly be often jeopardised; for the fact that it is known that these precautions are never for an hour relaxed deters certain members of secret foreign societies from attempting to injure the King. When his Majesty visits the country house of a friend he is just as closely guarded. Ere the King becomes the guest of any of his subjects the house where his Majesty is to be received is inspected by a couple of detectives, one of whom occupies a room near that of the King during the visit. Over night the officer in charge of the detective staff is made acquainted with the intended movements of his Majesty the next day, and from the moment the King leaves his room in the morning until he retires at night he is practically never for an instant out of the sight of the lynx-eyed, vigilant men, whose duty it is to guard our monarch.

Yet so unobtrusively do they perform their duties that probably no one except his Majesty and his host is even aware of their presence. These keen watchers are silent and almost unseen, but they are very alert. They know a great deal and they see very far, and the most desperate and resourceful would-be regicides in Europe have as much chance of outwitting these men as they have of making themselves invisible; and until they can do so, his Majesty's person is safe from their attack.

When Travelling.

When travelling, the most elaborate arrangements are made to safeguard the Royal person.

The King usually, but not always, travels in a special train, made up of three coaches, exclusively reserved for the use of the King and Queen; a railway company generally receives notice at least twenty-four hours beforehand of the King's intention to travel on their line, and are informed whether his Majesty will travel by an ordinary or special train.

If the King is to be a passenger by an ordinary passenger train, one or two coaches are reserved in the centre of the train for the Royal party, according to requirements. The whole train is inspected throughout by a couple of detectives in the railway yard before it is despatched to the station, and there carefully watched by a large staff of railway detectives and Scotland Yard officials until its departure.

Each person travelling by the train, though he probably not aware of it, is closely scrutinised by the detectives, and if any suspicious character or any one of the many hundreds of persons under police observation were to attempt to enter the train he would be prevented from doing so.

(Another Article on
"Guarding the King"
 next Wednesday.)



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PLAYING THE GAME!

By A. S. HARDY.

(Concluding Chapter of our Popular Sporting Serial Story.)

Major Jeffcock read the letter through again and again, then rose and looked at himself in the mirror. One look was enough. He could not believe that the face he saw—the haggard, worn, pale face—was the face of Major Jeffcock, the celebrated City financier, and with a groan he crossed to his desk, and, opening the drawer, laid his hand upon the butt end of a revolver that rested there.

He paused, then pressed the button of an electric bell. His manager entered.

"Tell anybody who may call this morning, Wilson," he said, "that I am out of town."

The manager looked at him quickly, bowed and withdrew. He dared not question.

Some minutes later a dull, leaden bang rang in the City office, and the grey-haired man toppled forward to the chair.

The end had come, and as he died his right hand fell upon a letter which he had addressed to the Chief Commissioner of Police.

Summer had come again, and the school grounds at Grove-house looked a perfect picture. Nothing had changed since the days when William Hewitt had reigned as captain of the school. It was the day of the big match with Headingham, two years after the famous game in which Jellotson, Hewitt, and Geoffrey Foster, Haines, and Weames had taken part had been played.

There was the usual distinguished company present, and here were several soldiers, too, for Captain Jellotson and Captain Hewitt of the 29th had come down in full regimentals; and there was also Sergeant Haines, now a young

gentleman of property once more, as he had become reconciled with his father, and Corporal Geoffrey Foster, also of the 29th, distinguished old boys and guests of the school.

Weames had confessed that it was he who had stolen the cricket-club funds on the night before Geoffrey Foster had been sent down, and an explanatory letter from Jellotson and Hewitt to the Head, telling how it was Geoffrey had gone down to the town that night, had removed the last shadow of suspicion under which he rested.

He had been cleared by Ryan, the Surrey professional, of the charge of ruining the wicket in the Surrey v. Yorkshire match, and, with Major Foster exonerated by the suicide of Major Jeffcock of all complicity in the London and County Building Society frauds, and restored to popular favour as a warrior and a hero, there was nothing to dull the happiness of their meeting.

It was just after the school, who had put up a fine score of 342, hard and well hit, at a furious pace, had dismissed three of the Headingham boys for 27, and stumps had been drawn for the day, that Bertha Morgan came to Geoffrey.

"Corporal Foster," she said, "I gave you a rose years ago. What have you done with it?"

"I have the stalk left," he whispered in her ear. "I carried the dried flower with me throughout the South African campaign, and the leaves all rubbed away. But the stalk remains. I could not part with that."

"Here is another," she said, blushing, as she shyly lowered her head, after slipping the stalk through a buttonhole in his

with. "I know it is not right for a soldier to wear a rose; but, surely, it will not matter. I give it to you."

"And you give me yours," he breathed. "Bertha, when will you years. I shall wait." "Hush!" she said. "I loved you throughout all these years. You must wait."

"And hope?" he asked, looking at a corporal yet. You She glanced at him fearlessly.

"Yes," she whispered. "Hope, if you like. Then it was time for them to part, for they noticed, and Captain Jellotson drew near.

He put one hand on his corporal's shoulder. "Foster," he said, "you are a lucky dog!"

THE END.



HULLO!

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