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THE INTRUDER!

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



A SURPRISE FOR TALBOT!

(An Extraordinary Scene in the Grand Long Complete Story in this issue.)

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THE INTRUDER!

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

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.

The Terrible Three Have a Grievance.

"IT'S beastly!" said Tom Merry.
"Positively putrid!" agreed Monty Lowther.
"Rotten!" growled Harry Manners.

"To have a fat-headed stranger named Parker—Parker, of all names!—stuck into our study!"

"And to be jolly well told that the least we can do is to go and meet the outsider at the station!"

"If it was anybody but Railton—" "Ha, ha, ha! That's pretty good, Manners, because nobody but Railton could shove the merchant on us or order us off to meet him."

"Order us? My hat! I like that! What right has Railton or anyone else to give us orders about a thing of that sort? What earthly bizney of ours is this wretched new chap? A snivelling young ass, I expect, or the rottenest outsider going—"

"Guilty of all sorts of crimes!" chipped in Monty Lowther, grinning. "He may have forged his great-grandfather's name to a cheque for tuppence-farden, put on his heaviest boots to dance on the prostrate form of his Aunt Selina Jane, committed bigamy, trigonometry, Euclid, algebra, and—er—er—simony—whatever that is. Still, he may not. There is just an off-chance that he isn't a criminal, Manners. We've no evidence against him as yet. And as for Parker, Tommy, I've heard worse names. I should like it better than Snooks myself."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Tom Merry, beginning to get back something of his customary good temper.

But Manners still scowled. Manners felt that his grievance was a much bigger one than either Monty Lowther's or Tom's.

The study was already too small. There was never proper room in it for the photographic work in which the soul of Manners delighted.

"Oh, don't be so funny!" he growled.
"Can't help it, old chap. Eorn so," answered Lowther.

"I wasn't referring to the under-done pudding you call a face. It's your childish attempts at wit I mean."

"Do you yearn for a thick ear, Manners?"

"No. Yes, I do, though, if you can give me one! I'd like to punch some one's silly head, and as Parker ain't here yet, yours will do. His can't be much thicker, anyway."

"You can't start in doing that sort of thing to Parker straight away," said Tom.

"Oh, can't I? That's all you know!" snapped Manners.

"It wouldn't be decent. You must find out what the chap's like first."

"We don't want him, whatever he's like!"

"Come along to the gym, and have the gloves on with me," suggested Monty Lowther. "Come along, Manners, do! I know it's rather like 'Dilly, dilly, dilly, come and be killed,' but—"

"Oh, is it, then? I can knock you into a cocked hat any day!"

"Come and do it, old chap! Then I

can go and offer my services as an admiral. If the cocked hat is only imposing enough, they may overlook the Eorn jacket."

Manners snorted in utter contempt. He considered that his chums were resigning themselves much too easily to the prospect of Parker's intrusion.

Tom Merry looked at his watch.
"No time," he said. "We don't want to have to run every blessed yard of the way to the station."

"Let's start, then," said Lowther.

"I'm not coming!" announced Manners.

"My hat! You've simply got to come! You can't fly right in Railton's face like that."

But Manners sat himself down determinedly—rather as if he had taken a lease of his chair, and had no intention of quitting it till the lease expired.

"Look here, I've as much respect for Railton as anybody," he said, "but this is silly rot! Telling us to go and meet this—this—pestilent Parker!"

"Can't remember his saying that, Manners," said Tom Merry.

"Oh, shurrup! What I mean to say is that he didn't mean to say—"

"That they didn't mean to say that we didn't mean to say that she didn't mean to say. Go on, old chap; it's as clear as mud!"

"Ass! I mean that Railton never intended that all three of us need go."

"What is the mattah, deah boys?" inquired a languid voice, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of the Fourth, walked in.

His trousers were beautiful creased, as usual. He had on a new fancy waistcoat of very chaste design, and a new tie of really striking pattern. In his buttonhole was a hothouse flower, in his right eye a monocle, and on his classic features a beaming and friendly smile.

"Oh, bunk, Gussy! Two fat-headed idiots are as much as I can stand at once!"

"Weally, Mannahs, I am afraid that youah name and youah natchah have vewy little in common."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry. "Gussy's made a joke—made it all by himself—out of his own head, by Jove!"

"A chip of the old block," said Lowther blandly.

"I assuah you that I intended no joke whatevah," said Arthur Augustus, regarding them through his monocle with great severity. "The mattah is too serious for joking. I have been thinking—"

"What, again?" asked Lowther. "Be careful, Gustavus! Your massive brain will never stand all that. To my knowledge, that's the third time this term."

"Your vulgah remarks only tend to cowwobowate my considhered opinion, which is, to be brief an' to the point, that the wotten mannahs—"

"You ring off, or I'll bump you, Gussy!" howled Manners, in dire wrath.

"I was not wefewwing to you, Mannahs, but to mannahs in the abstwact sense—"

"No' bizney of yours, Manners, old son," said Tom soothingly. "Something you haven't got, and never have had."

"Something Vere-de-Vereish, first

imported at the Norman Conquest," grinned Lowther.

"I considah that the extremely bad mannahs pwealent at St. Jim's welfect no cweedit upon this old an' histowic institution. Why cannot we behave as gentlemen, being such?"

"Echo answers 'Why?'" said Tom Merry, casting up his eyes to the ceiling soulfully.

"Then echo is a bit off the rails. 'Such' was the right word," said Lowther.

"That one's got grey whiskers," Manners said sourly.

"Why cannot we behave as gentlemen, I wewpeat!"

"Give us a lead, Gustavus, and we'll see what we can do in that line," said Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah, I wewgard that as a most uncalled-for observation. I awwive heah to find you three slingin' abusive expressions at one another. I am gwected with gwoss wudeness—"

"Rot! You weren't greeted at all! You were told to bunk. And you'd better bunk, too, or you won't find it very healthy!" hooted Manners.

"What is the mattah, deah boys? Mannahs is mowose to an extent that I weally cannot undahstand," said Arthur Augustus, looking quite grieved.

"There's a new chap coming into the Shell. He's to be stuck in here. Manners doesn't like it," Tom explained briefly.

"I am weally ashamed of you, Mannahs! Is this St. Jim's hospitality?"

"That's the style, Gustavus! Let him know how his base churlishness appears to a real Vere de Vere!" chuckled Lowther.

Manners forgot all about the lease of his chair, and arose in wrath. He went for Gussy.

But in his haste he forgot that he had left his precious camera lying on the floor, and he stumbled over it.

He picked up himself and the camera in one action. Had the article been anything less dear to him than the camera, it would certainly have been sent flying at the head of Arthur Augustus.

"If you don't bunk, Gussy, you chump, I'll jolly well slay you!" he howled.

"I beg to inform you, as head of this studay, Tom Mewwy, that I decline to answah anyone who addresses me in such violent and abusive language! I should sewiously wewcommend you to send Mannahs to the kennels with Hewwies' dog Towssah, an' adopt the new fellah in his stead. At the vewy worst, he cannot be below Mannahs in the important mattahs of westwaint and dignity."

"My camera's busted!" groaned Manners. "And we've got a beastly intruder coming into this study. And a silly ass who wears a cuff for a collar and a waistcoat that you could hear a mile away blows in and jaws your hind legs off, and—and— Oh, I'm fed up, right up to the neck! I shouldn't mind if I kicked the giddy bucket this very night, and left a world full of Parkers and Gussys and—and things!"

"I guess we'd better leave you to it, old chap," said Tom Merry, "and I hope you'll have cooled down a little before

Parker arrives. Because—I admit it's a wild stretch of the imagination—he may turn out quite decent; and it's hardly worth while to let him start under the impression that he has dropped into a lunatic asylum."

CHAPTER 2.

Meeting Parker.

ARM-IN-ARM the three passed across the quadrangle. Arthur Augustus was coming to the station, of course. Gussy really enjoyed meeting new fellows. He liked to give them at the outset a pleasant impression of the tone of St. Jim's.

Such impressions were likely to be modified later, for not everyone at St. Jim's emulated the polished manners and real kindness of the Hon. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. But, well knowing that, Gussy still thought it worth while.

The only fellow the three saw on the way across the quad was Mellish. They said nothing to him as he passed them, wheeling his bicycle towards the gates. None of them was keen on the sneak of the Fourth, who had seemed of late, since Levison had deserted his company and that of Racke and Crooke, a worse rotter than ever. Black sheep though he had been, Levison had always had more manhood in him than these three; and Mellish, the toady of Crooke and Racke, was a meaner thing than even Mellish, the hanger-on of Ernest Levison, had been.

"Now, have the kindness to tell me all about this new fellow, Tom Mewwy," said D'Arcy. "I can undahstand that you natchuwallly wogwet the necessity of havin' anothah chap domiciled in No. 10 Studay; but I fail to perceive any sufficient justification for the vewy violent language employed by our fwiend Mannahs, not to speak of the tewwible tempah he displayed."

"I say, aren't you rather giving it to us this morning, Gussy?"

The swell of the Fourth, with great deliberation, put his monocle into his eye and surveyed Monty Lowther with immense dignity.

"I weally fail to undahstand you, Lowthah."

"Not my fault, Gussy. I'm not responsible for your imperfect understanding, you know. But it was quite an easy one, as a matter of fact. So many great big dic words like 'domiciled,' and all that sort of hot air."

"It is my firm an' considahed opinion that among the failin's most unhappily wife at St. Jim's—"

"Wouldn't St. James' be more in keeping with your present tone, Adolphus?" asked Tom Merry mildly.

"My name is not Adolphus, Tom Mewwy, as you are vewy well awaah. Nevahtheless, I thank you for the coowection, an' will adopt it with pleasah. Among the failin's most—"

"You said that before, Algernon. In fact, we'd got as far as St. Jameses. Don't make back-tracks."

"Weally, Lowthah, I had hoped bettah things of you. Among the failin's most wifo at St. Jim's—I should say, St. Jameses—no, St. Jameses—you have mixed me up most howwibly, but nevah mind—is that of grossly slangy language. We can, I twust, behave as gentlemen. Why should we not talk as gentlemen, and not indulge in such oppwobvious expressions as 'fathead,' 'ass,' and the like?"

"You see, a chap really can't help



Frank Monk, grinning from ear to ear, worked the pump-handle vigorously. (See Chapter 4.)

slinging those compliments about when he looks at some fellows, Gustavus," replied Lowther, looking very hard at Gussy as he spoke.

"But you were asking me about Parker, Gussy," said Tom.

"Deah me, so I was! Pway excuse me for wandewin' fwom the subject, Tom Mewwy."

"Object, you should say, Adolphus. Parker's more likely to be that, I fancy."

"He's rather a queer merchant, from what Railton tells us, anyhow," said Tom. "Never been to school before—private tuition, or some wheeze of that sort. A bit old-fashioned in his ways, they say. So Railton's asked us to be kind uncles to him till he's a bit used to things. Manners don't cotton to the notion, and I ain't altogether sweet on it myself. As for what Lowther thinks—if he ever does, of which there's no evidence—"

"Oh, ring off, Tommy! That's too cheap for anything. Not that real wit's any good to Algernon Adolphus Percival here; he can't 'undahstand' it. But I'll own I don't mind this bizney as much as I did at first, for there ought to be some fun in it. I only hope that Parker isn't one of those dear, little, delicate, 'kiss-me-mother' sort of images that there's no enjoyment in taking a rise out of."

"I twust—that in any case you will respect Railton's confidence in you, and treat Parkah with pwopah politeness."

"Oh, I twust so, Gussy—I twust so!" replied Lowther, revolving in his mind even as he spoke schemes for making Parker "sit up."

"I say, you chaps, danger!" said Tom Merry suddenly.

The other two glanced back over their shoulders, and then quickened their pace at once.

Behind them they had seen a little band of Grammarians. Gordon Gay was there, and with him were Frank Monk

and Carboy and the two Woottons and several more.

Between the juniors of St. Jim's and those of Rylcombe Grammar School there was undying feud. No malice in it, but plenty of hard knocks. To be caught thus, with odds heavily against them, meant for the St. Jim's fellows being put through it.

"Three into ten goes all right," said Lowther, "but it leaves a fraction. And if we three get in among that crowd I guess we shall come out vulgar fractions. And think how it would hurt the feelings of Adolphus here to be anything at all vulgar! Not to speak of Algernon's lovely waistcoat and tie and those beautiful bags!"

"Weally, Lowthah, you are too widdle for anythin'!" said D'Arcy. "Let us huwway, Tom Mewwy. I am not, I twust, of a cwaven natchah; but the wough-an'-tumble methods of those Gwammah School boundahs are most howwibly destwuctive to decent clobber, an'—"

"All serene for the present, Gussy," said Tom calmly. "I spot one of their masters coming this way. As long as he's in sight they'll be good kids."

Arthur Augustus breathed a great sigh of relief.

They were close to the station now. The train was overdue, but the signal-arm had not yet dropped.

Mellish had outdistanced them on his bike, and he now stood on the platform, diligently perusing one of those entrally interesting notices in which railway companies make it clear to the meanest intelligence that they are not and will not be common carriers.

The signal went down at last. The train rolled in. Out of it stepped half a dozen passengers.

The three had no difficulty in spotting the fellow they had come to meet.

He was of about their own height, but

looked older. Perhaps his peculiar upbringing accounted for a rather unboyish look which his face wore. But a certain chubbiness, both in face and figure, made the unboyishness less apparent at a glance than it might otherwise have been.

His Etons fitted him a trifle too tightly, and he scarcely seemed at home in them—perhaps from not having worn.

But he might have been much worse. Tom and Monty Lowther, meeting one another's eyes, silently agreed upon that.

"Is your name Parker?" asked Tom politely.

"Eh? Oh, yes, my boy—that is, I mean, yes, of course! Very pleased to see you—what! You are from St. James', I take it?"

"My boy!" It was rather a peculiar form of address in the circumstances. Tom Merry and Lowther looked at the new fellow with some resentment, and Arthur Augustus elevated his monocle and regarded him with curiosity.

"Yes," replied Tom somewhat drily.

"My name is Parker—Ignatius Parker—Philip Ignatius Parker, to be precise. And yours?"

The question was a little too off-hand, coming from a new boy. But they had been warned that this was not quite an ordinary new boy.

"I'm Merry. In the Shell; your Form, you know. This is my chum, Monty Lowther. You're to share a study with us and Manners, who isn't here, not being quite well—in the temper," added Tom, under his breath.

"You've forgotten me, dear boy," put in Gussy.

"Oh, yes! Awfully sorry, old chap; but you are so very retiring and modest—I don't think! This, Parker, is the Hon. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy."

"Our glass of fashion and our mould of form," murmured Monty Lowther.

"Wing off, Lowthab!"

"Pleased to meet you, D'Arcy," said Parker, shaking hands. "You must belong to the Eastwood family, I think?"

"Yaas, dear boy," said Gussy.

"The chap's a snob," whispered Lowther to Tom Merry.

"Oh, go easy! He don't know any better, I suppose. We'll soon cure that!"

"I must say that I hardly expected to have to share a study with three boys—three other boys, I should say," remarked Parker. "I naturally anticipated having an apartment, even though small, to myself. But I hope we shall get on well together."

Lowther thought his tone too condescending for anything. It was as though he looked down upon them from some superior height.

"It might be as well if you looked after your traps," said Tom.

"Oh—ah, my luggage—yes, certainly, Wherry!"

Parker hurried off to the guard's van. "Can't say I cotton to him a little bit," said Lowther.

"My hat, give the fellow a chance! But he really does seem a trifle too big for his."

"Trousers!" put in Lowther, with his eyes on Parker's chubby figure.

There was a slight altercation between Philip Ignatius Parker and the guard, and as the train moved away the guard was heard to address the great Philip Ignatius as an "bwdacious young fat-face!"

Lowther was grinning when Parker rejoined them, and the new boy looked at him severely.

"Which is the tuck-box, Parker?" asked Lowther, unheeding that severe look.

"Eh? I fear that I do not quite grasp your meaning, Crowther."

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"My name's Lowther. I said 'tuck-box.' That's English, I think. Do you prefer Russian, or Choctaw, or Esperanto? Any old thing to oblige, you know!"

Mellish, who, unregarded by the three, was still reading railway by-laws with an appearance of great interest, grinned.

"Oh, I apprehend your meaning now, Flower. I have no tuck-box. Have you forgotten that we are in the midst of a great war? I hope that the school generally is more mindful of that fact. In any case I do not care in the least for pastry, and—er—all that sort of thing."

"Then, there really isn't any tremendous virtue in going without it, is there?" countered Lowther. "You don't seem to have got on to my name yet. It's Lowther. Shall I spell it for you?"

"No, I thank you! It is a matter of no real importance."

"Oh, isn't it?" muttered the owner of the name. We'll see about that, Pip, my boy!"

"Can you tell me—er—Cherry, how I am to get my luggage up to the school?" Parker inquired.

"One of the porters will bring it. I hope it won't break his poor ancient back; but that's his look-out. By the way, my name's Merry."

"Oh, yes! I dare say I shall remember all your names, if you will only give me time. It is not easy at first. Let me see. This is the Honourable Arthur Augustus D'Arcy."

"He can remember that," muttered Lowther. "But not because he knows our tame ass is a lord's son—oh, dear, no, not at all!"

"And this—let me see—Pontifex Flower, is it not?"

"See here, Mr. Pignacious Porker," said Lowther hotly, "you have not been here quite long enough to begin japing in that style, you know!"

"What did you call me?" demanded Parker, with no less heat than Lowther had shown.

His chubby face was quite red, and his eyes glinted angrily.

"Pignacious Porker!" repeated Lowther. "That's near enough. Pugnacious Porker, if you prefer it. But if you'll have the gracious goodness to make a note of my name, which is L-o-w-t-h-e-r, I'll do my little best to remember yours."

"Weally, Lowthab! Pway do not be so wude! I am suah Parkah intended no wudeness to you."

"That's more than I am, Gustavus. But I don't want to be uncivil. We'll call it a draw, shall we, Parker?"

"Certainly, Lowther—I trust I am correct this time," replied the new boy, extending his hand. "But my memory, while in most respects up to the average, is rather weak on names, and at the present moment I am naturally in some slight confusion amidst unfamiliar surroundings."

The anger faded out of both faces as they gripped hands. Lowther noticed what a strong, manlike grip Parker had.

Tom Merry was thinking how like a man—or a book—the fellow talked.

But his queer upbringing accounted for that, no doubt.

CHAPTER 3.

Mellish Hears Things.

MELLISH had studied the light literature so kindly provided by the railway company to no purpose.

He felt a bit disgusted. He had got wind of the new boy's coming as he got wind of many things in the School House—by eavesdropping. He was hard up—as

usual. The new boy was pretty certain to have tin. The Terrible Three were putting off their departure to the station rather late. It struck Mellish that to be before them, and make a favourable impression on the new-comer, might prove a paying game.

But the train had been late, and Tom Merry and Lowther and D'Arcy had cut out Mellish. He had simply had his ride for nothing.

He had waited to see what Parker was like, and had come to the conclusion that on the whole he was not a very hopeful subject for sponging operations. A meeker and milder fellow would have suited Percy Mellish's book better.

Not that it mattered much, as things had turned out. Parker was scarcely likely to come into close touch with him now.

Just as Mellish was about to go he happened to notice two rough-looking strangers emerge from the waiting-room.

He had seen them get off the train, and he remembered now that they had made at once for cover, as though anxious not to be spotted by someone.

The stationmaster, who was collecting tickets, approached them, and asked for theirs. Then he cut across the line, and Mellish and the two roughs were left in possession of the platform, for the elderly porter was already across with Parker's luggage.

One of the roughs nudged the other, and nodded towards Mellish.

Mellish, with the corner of an eye upon them, pretended to be studying the architecture of the station buildings. He scented a mystery here.

Percy Mellish hated risk of any kind. But he liked mysteries—they sometimes paid!

"This is Rylecombe, ain't it, cocky?" said one of the men.

"Yes, unless that board's a bad joke," answered Mellish.

"Ah, you're a smart one, ain't you, kid? No flies on you, I ace! Big school here, ain't there?"

"Two. There's the Grammar School; that's a fair size. But St. Jim's is bigger."

"Ah! Now, you'd be a Grammar School boy, I reckon?"

"Then you reckoning's out," said Mellish. "I'm St. Jim's."

"Same school as the young gent we travelled with said he was goin' to, Rusty," said the talkative man to the silent one.

The silent man nodded.

Mellish knew that the fellow was telling lies. They had not travelled with Parker. They had got out of a third-class compartment near the rear of the train, and he out of a first-class one near the front. But it was not Mellish's business to tell them he knew.

There was a mystery here, he was more certain than ever. And if—without too much risk—he could get fully on the track of it, he meant to do so.

"Name of Roberts, weren't it, Rusty?"

"Don't rightly 'member," growled Rusty, who evidently preferred chewing a quid to talking.

"You wouldn't know, young sir, I s'pose?"

"Me? Know what?" returned Mellish.

"The name of the nice, fattish, affable young gent as got out of the train, an' was met by three other young gents, with caps same as yours?"

"Oh, that chap! He's a new boy. His name is Parker, I believe."

"There, if I didn't feel sure as it was either Roberts or Parker! Nosey Parker, I should say—eh, Rusty?"

Some joke must have been hidden in

this, for Rusty showed his ugly, yellow fangs in a broad grin. Then he spat, looked serious again, and shook his head, as if reproving his comrade's levity.

They were very much interested in Parker—of that much Mellish was sure. Perhaps they meant to kidnap him! Mellish did not mind greatly. But there might be profit in helping to foil their plans.

Mellish's mind had not yet grasped at the possibility of profit by standing in with them.

"I s'pose you ain't got the price of a quart as you'd care to pass on to two 'ard-workin' chaps sufferin' with a norrible thirst, 'ave you, young sir?"

Mellish had that, and very little more. Percy Mellish was not at all a generous fellow, and he could hardly have explained why he did not refuse that cheeky request. It was not fear that moved him. The two roughs would not have dared to attack him on the platform.

He handed over the price of a quart—or rather more, for Mellish did not know much about the price of beer. He had drunk it on more than one occasion, when he would very much have preferred ginger-beer; but it had always been someone else who had paid.

He watched the two slouch off, and saw that they made for the Green Man. He followed them, skirting with great care the edge of a disturbance which was going on in the village street. No one saw him go. The fellows who were engaged there were far too busy to pay heed.

Mellish dodged into the Green Man yard, and crouched under the window of the tap-room. It was quite a warm day for the season, but that window must have been left open by accident. The Green Man did not greatly favour fresh air.

"It's him right enough, Smiler," said Rusty, in a harsh, creaking voice.

No doubt that voice had earned him his nickname.

"Oh, yuss, it's 'im!" said Smiler. "I never 'adn't no real doubt about that!"

"Strike me lucky, but I had! 'Wot's he doin', rigged up in boys' clobber, an' comin' here to school as innerecent as kiss-me-'and, like any kid o' thirteen?"

"Him wot's been to the Front, too—not to mention funnier places nor that—ah, an' riskier ones! But you never know what Mr. Blessed Parker-Roberts will be up to next—except as it's middlin' sure to be somethink you'd never think of yourself!"

Mellish pricked up his ears. His head was almost in a whirl; but he understood two things at least.

The name of the new boy was Parker-Roberts, not Parker. There must be something fishy about him, Mellish charitably concluded.

And the new boy wasn't a boy at all, but a man! He had been to the Front, Smiler said. He must be a man, for if he had been a boy, with his chubby face and figure, he could never have passed as a man!

"Somethink gone wrong at the school, an' the 'Messenger' gang sent him down ere to investigate, I sh'd say!" creaked Rusty.

There was nothing wrong at St. Jim's—more than usual. Mellish knew that. He was in a position to know; for in what was wrong there Percy Mellish usually played a part—if not a part of the first importance.

"Mobbe. But, arter all, Rusty, old cock, the 'Messenger' ain't runnin' a 'tec business, are they?"

The "Messenger"—that could surely mean nothing but the famous daily paper! Mellish had read it at times.

He remembered now that it had lately earned fame by the way in which its "special crime investigator" had helped the police to get to the bottom of one or two very puzzling cases. A murder—Mellish recalled that—and a big jewel robbery, and he fancied there had been something else.

"I ain't worryin' myself," creaked Rusty. "Ere we are, Smiler, you an' me, booked for a nice 'oldidy out of the smoke—plenty of the lush. Wot more does a cove want?"

Smiler made an impatient answer. It was evident that he had a far more active mind than his companion, and did not care for so slow a place as Rylcombe.

"W'y, if that there silly, blessed winder ain't open!" said Rusty. "I thought I felt a norrid draught! Enough to give a chap his death!"

"That's one of the drawbacks of the blessed country!" remarked Smiler. "Too much fresh air, an' not enough—"

That was the last word Mellish got the chance to hear. But it did not matter much what it was that Smiler failed to find enough of in the country.

Mellish had heard quite enough to be going on with—enough to set his mind in a ferment.

"I shall have to tell Crooke," he muttered, as he stole away. "But Crooke bungles things so! What a pity Levison is running straight now! He'd be the very chap to see his profit in this game, and I could stand in while he did the hard work and took the risk. But it's no go!"

Which, though not so intended, was a big compliment to the former black sheep of the Fourth. Mellish, who knew him as well as anyone, was quite sure that it would be of no use now to ask him to stand in for a share in a dirty game!

CHAPTER 4.

St. Jim's v. the Grammarians!

LEFT to himself, Manners began to wonder whether he might not just as well have gone to the station after all.

"It was all through that idiot Gussy!" he murmured. "If he hadn't blown in, I should have gone. I think I'll take this blessed camera down to the village and see if I can get it mended!"

He trotted off, with the camera under his arm.

It was a beautiful day, and the warm sunshine and gentle breeze helped to soothe the ruffled temper of Manners.

"Hallo, you chaps! Where are you off to?" he asked, catching up three members of the Fourth Form.

The three were Figgins, Kerr, and Fatty Wynn, the famous Co. of the New House.

"Oh, only to Rylcombe!" replied Figgys. "What's the matter with the old firm, Manners, that you are on your lonesome? Has it dissolved partnership?"

"Dissolved your Aunt Jemima Jane!" retorted Manners. "It's to be extended, as it happens. Tom and Lowther have gone to the station to meet a new merchant who's to be bunged into our study!"

"Oh, snakes! Another School House rotter!" groaned Kerr.

"Cheese that, fathead! I suppose he wouldn't be a rotter if he was coming to your dog-kennel?"

"He might arrive at the New House a rotter, but a very short time there would make a new man of him," said Figgins, with great gravity. "As it is—"

"There ain't a fat lot of hope for the

poor beast, is there, Figgys?" said Fatty Wynn.

"Rats to you!" snapped Manners. "It's a pity, in a way, that he isn't booked for our show," went on Fatty peacefully. "Tin's short, and supplies from home are dead off—too much of this war economy about—and a new chap would be sure to bring some tommy along!"

"Some chaps think of nothing but gorging!" said Manners, in disdain.

Fatty Wynn looked at him in mild surprise.

"It's awful rot to pretend you ain't keen on your grub, Manners," he said. "When a chap says he isn't, I know he's either a beastly fibber or else he ain't healthy. Now, I've got a good, healthy appetite, and I don't mind owning it. I think a good deal about my grub—"

"You do!" groaned Figgins.

"You does!" said Kerr solemnly. "Don't we know it?"

"Of course I do. There ain't anything better to think about—nor anything more important, come to that!"

Manners laughed. Fatty's simple creed was expressed so fervently that a fellow could hardly help feeling tickled. And Fatty, for all the solid load of flesh he carried, looked so fit and healthy, too. He had not the pasty, over-gorged look of his unworthy rival, Billy Bunter of Greyfriars.

There was only one shop in Rylcombe where one could take a camera with any chance of getting it mended. It was but a chance there, indeed.

Manners went into this shop just as the train which brought the mysterious Parker to Rylcombe was signalled. They saw the signal drop.

"You chaps might look out for Tom Merry and the rest of them," he said, as he went in.

Kerr followed him in. Kerr took some interest in cameras.

Figgins and Wynn had their faces turned to the station, and they failed to perceive the stealthy approach of the Grammarian band.

"St. Jim's bounders! Go for them!" yelled Gordon Gay.

No chance to flee! Hardly time to look round before the enemy were upon them!

"Collar them! Sock them!" howled Carboy.

Manners and Kerr heard, and came rushing out of the shop.

They were just in time to see Fatty Wynn turned upside down by three Grammarians.

Four more had got Figgys nicely into position for the frogs'-march.

Kerr darted to the aid of his great war-chief. Manners, telling himself that it really was no bizney of his, but not half believing it, also waded in.

"Ow—yow!"

"Yarooooogh!"

One exclamation came from Carboy, the other from Wootton minor.

The heads of those two heroes had met with considerable force.

Next moment they perceived that this force had been exerted by Manners.

They loosed their hold upon Fatty, and went for the new-comer to the fray.

Meanwhile, Kerr had clutched Gordon Gay round the neck, and had dragged him backwards.

This released the right leg of Figgins. That right leg, plunging wildly, took Frank Monk in the lower part of the waistcoat.

Figgins had not meant to kick, of course; but these things will happen in the course of such a scramble. And the result was just as painful as if the kick had been intentional.

"Ow! You rotter!" gasped Monk. He sprawled backwards upon the prostrate form of Fatty Wynn.

"Yoooop! You're crushing me to death!" howled Fatty.

"Go for 'em! Groooh! You'll strangle me, you sweep! Bump the cads!" yelled Gordon Gay.

Then, with a yell and a rush, three more combatants plunged into the battle.

"St. Jim's to the rescue!" roared Tom Merry.

"We're coming!" shouted Arthur Augustus.

"We're coming!" sang out Monty Lowther, and he seized Carboy and slung him on top of Monk.

Parker said nothing. Parker did nothing, except to stand gazing in evident disapproval. He had not been used to this sort of thing, and it appeared to take him by surprise.

"Take a hand, Parker!" shouted Tom Merry.

"I decline to do anything of the kind!" replied Parker, quite decidedly.

"Now St. Jim's cad! Let's christen him!" howled Gordon Gay.

He wrenched himself free from the grasp of Kerr, and rushed across the road.

Parker turned. For a moment it looked as though Parker meant to disgrace himself and St. Jim's in flight.

But he did not. He faced round again.

"Boy," he said sternly, "I forbid you to touch me! Do you hear? I forbid it! If you persist—Yaroooogh!"

Parker was down in the dusty road, with Gordon Gay on top of him.

"Honk-touk! Honk-touk!"

The warning hoot of a motor-car sounded. The driver clapped on his brakes hard; but even so, Gay and his captive only just rolled out of the way in time.

The car sped on again. Gay gripped Parker more tightly. The nearness of danger had not affected Gordon Gay's determination. But—and this seemed stranger—neither had it affected Parker's nerves. He seemed to think of nothing but the wanton nature of the attack upon him.

"Stop this at once!" he spluttered. "I will not endure it!"

"Looks as if you'd got to!" panted Gordon Gay.

"I tell you I will not! Is there no policeman in this wretched village? Police! Police! Ow! Yow! Confound your impertinence! Stop it, I say!"

Some passing greengrocer's boy, unmindful of war-time economy, had carelessly dropped a potato from his basket.

Gordon Gay saw it where it lay. He seized it, and stuffed it into Parker's open mouth.

Parker was roused to fury now. He spluttered out vows of vengeance and fragments of potato together.

A mighty heave he gave, with far more strength in it than one could have expected from him, and Gordon Gay went flying.

But as Parker struggled up, the Grammar School junior caught him by a leg, and pulled him down again. And as he went down the foot belonging to the other leg smote Gay hard in the ribs.

"You rotter! Kicking's dead off!" roared the Australian junior.

"I did not kick with intent—Keep off! I refuse to be—Oh, keep off, I tell you! Stop it, or I shall handle you severely!"

The odds were too heavy for St. Jim's. Fatty Wynn was winded, and of little use at this stage of the conflict.

Arthur Augustus, after a valiant struggle, such as became a D'Arcy, now

sat on the pavement, his collar up beside his right ear, his new tie in rags, and red drops pouring from his classic nose down his chaste, light waistcoat.

An elbow had done that. Fists were against the customs of these encounters. But an elbow can hurt as much as a fist.

Manners was down, too, and two Grammarians were sitting on him to keep him down.

Tom Merry, Figgins, Lowther, and Kerr still upheld the battle; but they were too busy to come to Parker's aid—even if they wanted to, and that is by no means certain.

That left Wootton major and Lane free to come to the help of their leader. They came with a rush and a roar.

They snatched up Parker. They gave Parker the frogs' march—an ordeal that never in his life before had he experienced.

His struggles—and he struggled hard—were in vain. His threats were met with ribald merriment.

"Pump on the cad!" yelled Frank Monk.

"That's the wheeze! Let's christen him!" sang out Gordon Gay.

The village pump was near at hand.

They dragged the furious Parker towards it.

Tom Merry and the other three, perceiving how gamely the new boy was now resisting, made a valiant attempt at rescue.

But they were beaten back by overwhelming forces. Half-a-dozen more Grammarians, led by Mont Blanc, the French junior, had come up.

There was no getting through the serried horde.

"Charge 'em, you fellows! Soak 'em! Break through! We're coming, Parker!" yelled Tom Merry.

"When they'll let us," added Monty Lowther, tumbling over Mont Blanc, and depositing Carboy neatly on top of him.

Arthur Augustus arose, and, with nose still streaming, plunged anew into the battle. Manners was also in the thick of it again by this time. Fatty Wynn, blowing like a porpoise, lent his weight to the charge.

All was in vain! The Grammarian ranks stood to it as firmly as the Macedonian phalanx of old, or the gallant Canadians in Flanders.

Philip Ignatius Parker had to go through it.

The splash of water sounded. Frank Monk, grinning from ear to ear, worked the pump-handle vigorously. Three more grinning Grammarians held Philip Ignatius under the stream.

"Stop it! I will not—Ow! You are chok—Ow! Yow! Desist!"

"Better keep your mouth shut, unless you've a real big thirst on you!" said Frank Monk cheerfully.

"Cheese it now! He's had enough," said Gordon Gay.

The fierce fury of the St. Jim's charge was suddenly stayed.

Parker's captors stood him right end up.

The serried ranks of the Grammarians split. The fellows on both sides stood and roared with laughter at Parker's plight.

Anything funnier than Parker looked at that moment was almost past the power of imagination to conceive.

His face was red as beetroot. All the dust he had gathered in the road had now become mud. There may have been a dry stitch somewhere upon him, but it would have needed finding.

"Ha, ha, ha! What a ripping lark!" roared Frank Monk.

"A lark? Do you call this wanton and unprovoked assault a lark?" stormed their victim. "You shall learn before

long how it is regarded by a bench of magistrates! Possibly you will change your tune then. I shall most certainly prosecute! Such indignity as this is not to be borne tamely!"

"It wasn't," said Gordon Gay.

And assuredly there had been nothing tame about the struggling Philip Ignatius Parker. He had fought like a wild cat.

CHAPTER 5. A Queer Bird.

"O H, easy does it, Parker!" said Tom Merry. "Don't talk silly rot about prosecuting! This sort of thing often happens, you know!"

"This sort of thing shall not happen to me again! I will take care of that!" snapped Parker.

"I wouldn't be too sure, old scout," said Carboy, grinning.

"I do not like this sort of thing, and I will not have this sort of thing!" went on the new boy. "I do not regard it as a 'ripping lark.' I regard it as sheer hooliganism. Decent British lads reared in civilised surroundings should be ashamed to behave like the veriest Huns!"

He stopped for want of breath. "Huns is a bit thick!" said Wootton minor, breathing hard.

"But, my aunt, he can spout, can't he?" said Carboy, half admiringly.

"Oh, razzler!" agreed Mont Blanc.

"So can the pump," said Frank Monk.

"See here, you chap, all you got was no more than you deserved! You shouldn't have kicked Gay! Kicking's a low game! That's Hunsish, if you like!"

"It is a base calumny! I kicked no one!"

"And 'No One's' ribs are aching above a bit," retorted Gordon Gay. "I suppose I must be 'No One'—I've been called worse names—for you most certainly kicked me!"

"How could I possibly have kicked you, you absurd young idiot? I was no sooner upon my feet than you dragged me down again by the leg. It is a physical impossibility for anyone to kick with his right foot while his left leg is in the air."

There was something in that, as Gordon Gay saw.

And now Figgins spoke up.

"Look here, Monk, I kicked you—at least, my foot barged against you jolly hard."

"It did, old chap," said Frank Monk feelingly.

"Do you reckon it was done purposefully?"

"Of course I don't, ass!"

"I don't know this chap," said Figgins.

"But I should say that there's no more likelihood that he kicked, except by accident, than that I did. Gussy's nose bleeds. Are you going to admit that someone punched it? That would be jolly near as completely off as kicking. This wasn't a free-fight, you know, only a friendly scrap."

Parker gasped. He gasped again when he understood that what seemed to him the very peculiar theory of Figgins—peculiar as regarded the nature of the encounter, that is, for he quite agreed as far as the kicking charge was concerned—found favour with the rest.

"All serene," said Gordon Gay generously. "I forgive you, Barker, or whatever your name is. We won't say any more about it."

"That's the style!" said Tom Merry heartily. "It's all right now—eh, Parker?"

"It certainly is not all right, Derry!"

replied Parker indignantly. "There has not even been anything in the nature of an apology—not that a mere apology could be expected to set straight a matter so grave as this! I must ask the names of all those who took part in this disgraceful assault."

He put up his hand to his chest, as if feeling for some article which should be there.

Then he dropped it, as if suddenly remembering something.

"A notebook!" thought Kerr, the keenest observer of them all. "It's rather a queer thing for a chap to carry, but this is a queer bird. Why doesn't he fetch it out?"

He did not. He stood there, and his face changed its expression.

It was rather as though he was resigning himself with difficulty to a changed order of things, Kerr thought.

Gordon Gay bowed gravely.

"Put me down as the Duke of Hook-emsnivey," he said.

"And me as the Lord Knozo," said Frank Monk.

"Moi-je suis—that is, I am so General Joffre!" chimed in Mont Blanc.

"Oliver Cromwell, at your service," said Wootton major.

"I'm Billy Shakespeare, and don't you forget it, old scout!" Carboy said.

"They've bagged pretty nearly everybody but the Kaiser, and I ain't him, anyway!" grumbled Wootton minor.

"Cease this foolery!" snapped Parker. But something like the faint dawn of a smile appeared on his chubby, though old-looking face.

"Take away that bauble!" ordered Wootton major, pointing, whether by accident or intention, to Parker's head.

"Here's old Crump coming!" Lane warned them. "Time to look down your noses—like Parker!"

P.-c. Crump stalked down the village street, shaking his head solemnly. The stout constable always made a point of looking particularly dignified and majestic, after making a point of arriving upon a scene of turmoil too late. But no one minded that. It was better than his getting there sooner and giving trouble, anyway.

Tom Merry seized Parker's arm. Crump liked an occasional "case," and if Parker laid a report, there might yet be the piper to pay.

"Come along, old chap!" said Tom persuasively.

"Theah's the portals with youah 'wunks," said Arthur Augustus, taking the other arm. "He will be at the school as soon as we are, or vewy neahly, an' you can get into dry clobber. Come along, deah boy!"

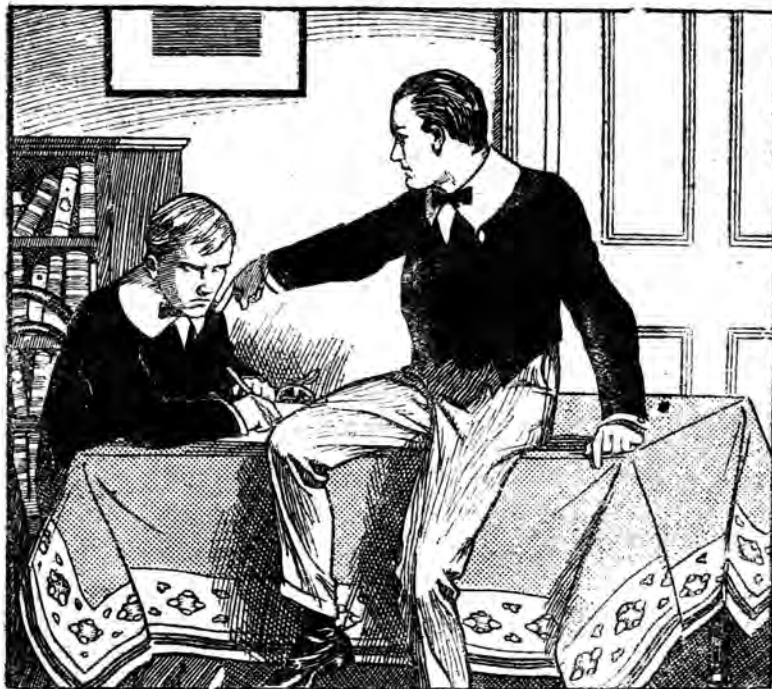
Parker went like a lamb. Monty Lowther was disposed to attribute his docility to the fact of his arm being taken by the son of a real live lord. But it was not that.

"I do not like this sort of thing at all," said Parker. "I shall take strong measures if there is a repetition of it. But as it seems to be part of the strange manners and customs of the school, I will look over it on this occasion."

"Awf'ly good of you, Barker!" chuckled Gordon Gay.

"Oh, Parker's all serene!" said Frank Monk. "Not half such a wash-out as he looks. Three cheers for Parker, you chaps! And may we soon meet him again!"

They cheered. Parker was rather bewildered, but quite sure that he had no wish whatever to meet them again soon!



"Sit down. Take pen and paper. Write as I dictate," ordered Parker, and there was a snap in every word. Mellish did as bidden. (See Chapter 9.)

He had not much to say on the way to St. Jim's. They had anticipated a fuss about his wet clothes, but he made no complaint on that score. Once or twice he was observed to smile, but at what they could only guess.

Tom Merry politely escorted him to the Shell dormitory, and provided him with a change of clothes. Parker thanked him, with some reserve, but also with politeness.

Then Tom went down to the study.

He found it crowded. Figgins & Co. had come along, and Jack Blake, Herries, Digby, and Talbot were all there.

"Rough luck on us! We seem to have missed the funniest thing yet!" said Blake.

"Not at all!" replied Lowther. "The funniest thing yet has only gone up to the dorm. You won't miss it, Blake. Speaking for myself, I could bear to."

"He's a rum 'un, and no error!" said Manners.

"But I don't believe he's a bad sort, really," Tom said.

"Why don't you go and get clean, Gussy, you ruffian?" asked Herries. "You're a perfect disgrace to the school in that state!"

"Worse than Pignacious Porker," said Lowther.

"Parker will get on his ear badly if you don't drop that, Monty," said Tom, laughing.

"It's my 'considered opinion' that Parker will practically live on his ear as long as he stays at St. Jim's," replied Lowther.

"Am I so dreadfully untidy?" asked Arthur Augustus anxiously. "The Gwammahians are such wough beasts; they have no respect whatever for one's clobber."

"You ain't a bit 'wough' yourself, are you, Gustavus?" grinned Figgins.

"Certainly not, Figgins—that is, except when I am constrained to be. I do

not regard all this wough-an'-tumble bizney as at all a never-away featish of public-school life, an' I propose to take steps to atah it!"

"You'll get tired of walking, Gussy," said Lowther. "It will take quite a few steps, I fancy. But never say die—not till you've worried yourself grey-headed over it, anyway."

"D'Arcy will have the moral and material support of the new merchant in his campaign," said Kerr gravely. "I'm jolly sure Parker don't approve of the rough-and-tumble."

"What do you think of him, Kerr?" asked Tom.

"He's a queer bird—no mistake about that! Talks like a grown-up person, you know. A master who'd been ragged might have slanged the ragers very much as he did."

"There's not much in that," remarked Talbot, who had just come from a talk with Mr. Railton, the Housemaster. "He hasn't any experience of boys' ways, and any chap is likely to seem old-fashioned when he has always lived with older people."

"Something in that," said Kerr. "But, making all allowances, he's more—what's the word, Lowther?"

"Pignacious—or pernicious, perhaps."

"No, ass! More mature, I mean. He didn't threaten the Grammarians on his own account, not after they had loosed him. He talked about the law. And then he put up his hand to take out a notebook, it seemed like. And then he remembered that he was a boy—remembered it all of a sudden—and changed his tone a bit."

"Well, what do you make of it, Kerr?" said Tom. "You're about the wisest chap of us all when it comes to deducing things."

"How old is the chap supposed to be?" asked the Scots junior.

"Oh, about the same age as the rest

of us—somewhere nearer sixteen than fifteen," said Tom. "Is that right, Talbot? You seem to know a bit about him."

"That's right, according to Railton," answered Talbot.

"I don't believe it!" said Kerr emphatically. "He's nineteen if he's a day!"

"But—"

"Education neglected," said Kerr. "His folks don't like owning it, so they've lopped four years or so off his age."

"Ass! If his education had been neglected, he wouldn't be in the Shell!" said Manners hotly.

"Just where he would be!" grinned Figgins.

"Perfect asylum for that kind of chap, the Shell!" added Blake.

"Queer thing you idiots can't get into it, then!" snorted Manners.

"That's just why," said Herries.

"Because you're idiots, do you mean?" inquired Tom.

"No. And their education has not merely been neglected," said Lowther cuttingly. "It has been omitted completely. It is as wholly lacking as their manners."

"I'm glad we're lacking him, anyhow," said Fatty Wynn calmly. "It is a good miss, being without Manners."

"I should call it a misfortune," said Lowther.

"Weally, Lowther, I maintain—"

"Don't, Gustavus! Go and get washed! It will do a lot more to improve your appearance."

"You are overlooking one thing, Kerr," said Talbot quietly. "If this chap, Parker, is nineteen—well, then he's dodging conscription!"

"I do not know who you are," spoke an angry voice behind Talbot; "but I must ask you to accept my assurance that I did not wait for conscription! I joined up!"

It was Parker, appearing suddenly among them. But as he saw the looks of wonder that met his startling assertion, he stopped short.

"Go on!" said Lowther encouragingly. "I was always interested in fairy tales!"

"Dry up, Lowther!" snapped Talbot. "Joined up with the Boys' Brigade?" asked Figgins.

"I refuse to discuss my private affairs with any of you!" snapped Parker. "And I beg that you will abstain from canvassing them!"

There was little chance of that. Philip Ignatius Parker had already aroused too much curiosity among the fellows of the Shell and Fourth to be accepted as an ordinary new boy.

But they said no more just then. They cleared off for repairs.

"He's a queer bird, Figgy, and there's more in this binney than appears on the surface," said Kerr, as the New-House trio went to their own quarters.

"You'll have to keep an eye on him, Kerr," said Fatty Wynn.

"I mean to keep two eyes on him!" replied George Kerr.

CHAPTER 6.

Running Against Cutts!

"**A**RE there no classes this afternoon?" asked Parker, after dinner.

"There are no classes this afternoon. It is a halfer, in our vulgar speech. You would call it a half-holiday, or possibly a semi-diurnal vacation," answered Lowther.

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"I certainly shouldn't call it 'semi-diurnal' if it only came twice a week, as I understand half-holidays do here," replied Parker, with more than a touch of acidity.

"Had you there, Monty!" laughed Tom. "Don't be cheaply funny, but give Parker the information he wants. Play footer, Parker?"

"Er—no. I cannot say that I play. But I have some acquaintance with the game, Merry."

"It don't amount to much, if you've never played," said Manners.

"That remains to be seen," answered Parker grimly.

"Right-ho!" said Tom. "Come along, and get into your togs."

"I—I am really not at all sure that I have the necessary costume, though I imagine my trunks contain everything I am likely to need. They should, certainly, as—"

Again Parker pulled himself up, as if afraid he was saying too much.

"Well, let's go and see," said Tom.

They went. Manners and Lowther were already in footer garb. There was no match that afternoon—merely a practice game, in which Tom and Talbot would captain picked sides from the Fourth and Shell.

"Anything you want to know, Parker, ask your Uncle Merry," said Tom, as they made their way to the dormitory.

"He won't try to clip you—not more than he can help, anyway. And don't get on your ear with old Lowther. He was born a funny merchant, and nothing will change him now."

"Awfully good of you, Merry!" said Parker heartily. "The fact of the matter is that I need to know practically everything. It is all strange and new to me here."

But somehow it seemed to Tom that he spoke like a fellow who had had plenty of strange experiences elsewhere, and was better fitted to hold his own than most of the fellows who knew him as yet imagined.

And Tom's guess, though it took him but a very little way towards the full truth, was not wide of the mark—as far as it went.

It appeared that whoever had been responsible for the packing of Parker's trunks had remembered that boys at school played footer. But it seemed to Tom curious that the fellow himself did not know what was in them.

Parker looked with some doubt at the fairly large expanse of bare legs that footer shorts and stockings left visible.

"Do you think these are—er—a good fit, Merry?" he asked.

"My hat, yes! Look at mine."

The contemplation of his companion's nether limbs appeared to afford the modest Parker some comfort. But he was still a trifle uneasy about showing so much leg.

There was nothing the matter with Parker's legs, as legs, Tom noted. They were sturdy limbs. And his chest was wide for his height.

"You ought to make a footballer, Parker," Tom said.

The new fellow looked rather pleased.

They went down together, and were joined by Manners and Lowther, who had been quite prepared to grin at Parker's appearance, but found very little to grin at.

Games had already begun on some of the pitches. They passed a senior pick-up. Among those who had turned out for this were the lordly Cutts, of the Fifth, and his chums, St. Leger and Gilmore.

"There seems to be quite a lot of

footer played here," remarked Parker, glancing at the senior game.

"Oh, quite," said Lowther; "especially on compulsory days, you know, Parker."

"Is the game com— Yarocogh! Who did that?"

Cutts could hardly have meant to do it, for Cutts was not so great a sharp-shooter that, of fell design, he could have propelled the ball straight into Parker's face. And that was where the ball had struck.

But it was not to be wondered at that Parker thought it an intentional assault. Nor was it to be wondered at that he was angry.

"I did," said Cutts, grinning broadly. "First-class shot, eh—what? Sling it back here, an' I'll do it again, if you like!"

Parker did not sling the ball back. He walked on to the sacred senior pitch and straight up to Cutts, who was fully half a head taller than he.

"Here, come back!" said Tom sharply. "You've no right on there. What do you want to rot the chap for, Cutts? You're far too big a duffer to have hit him if you'd really been shooting at him!"

"I'll attend to you presently, Merry!" snapped Cutts. "Now, then, cock-sparrow, what's your funny little game?"

"There is nothing funny about it," said Parker coolly. "If that was an accident, you should say so, I consider. Whether it was an accident or not, you should apologise!"

"New chap, aren't you?" said Cutts, with a sneer.

"I am. I fail to see what difference that makes, however."

"Time you learned then! Get off this pitch!"

"I will go when you have apologised."

"What—to a new kid?"

"That is a matter of no importance. If you are a gentleman—"

"If I'm a gentleman, you cheeky brat!" roared Cutts.

"I amend my phrase. You are obviously not a gentleman. That being the case, an apology from you is not to be expected. But I warn you not to repeat the offence!"

"That chap," said Manners, "has got something in him!"

"Pignacious is certainly going it some," Lowther said. "But you've heard of 'killing Kruger with your mouth,' perhaps?"

"Cutts could eat him up," said Tom Merry anxiously. "And it isn't a bit of use our wading in. The rest would back up that rotter, and Kildare would be waxy about our trespassing on a senior pitch."

"I don't intend to wade in," said Lowther. "This is the private and personal funeral of Pignacious Parker. We're not on the stage."

Cutts stood with arms akimbo, and looked down at Parker for a moment.

"Will you be kicked off, or would you prefer coming to my den later on an' taking a hiding?" he asked truculently.

"On the whole, I think I prefer to be kicked off," replied Parker, facing him defiantly.

"The storm-cone is hoisted," chuckled Lowther.

"Hang it, Parker hasn't an earthly!" said Tom hotly. "Will you chaps back up? I don't see why we should knuckle under to the Fifth!"

But even as he spoke something happened.

Cutts seized Parker by the shoulder, meaning to twist him into position for being kicked off.

But Parker had other views on the

matter, it seemed. For he flung both arms around Cutts, stuck a foot behind him, and sent him sprawling on his back!

It was done with neatness and dispatch, and the other seniors stood staring, while the three Shell fellows cheered.

"I begin to like our Pignacious!" said Lowther.

Parker did not hurry away. Plainly, he had no relish for a cheap victory.

He waited until Cutts had scrambled up, saying things better left unprinted.

"Your language confirms my opinion of you," Parker remarked, in icy tones.

"I do not wish for an apology now. But before I move on I should be glad to know whether the lesson is complete, or whether you would desire its continuance. You are, of course, above my weight. But I do not think that wrestling is among your accomplishments, and, as it chances to be one of the few I possess, I believe that I can put you on your back as many times as may be needed."

"My hat! If that ain't the queerest merchant that ever came to St. Jim's!" gasped Gilmore.

"Talks like a blessed man!" said St. Leger.

"And shapes like one, too," remarked someone who did not love the illustrious Cutts.

"I'll attend to you later on, you cub!" roared Gerald Cutts. "Clear off now!"

Parker went, at his own pace. He did not appear to be at all conscious of the fact that he was hanging up a senior game. But, as to that, the fellows whose game was thus hung up looked, for the most part, as though they found it easy to forgive him.

"You'll be a marked man after that, Parker," said Tom.

"Eh? You do not mean to infer, Merry, that you allow bullies of that type to have their own way?"

"Nunno—not exactly! But I don't mind owning that Cutts is a bit over-weight for any of us. When we buck against him we don't do it in ones."

"Ah! You can doubtless command support, Merry. I must rely upon myself."

"You don't take much harm, Parker," said Manners, in a much more genial tone than he had hitherto employed in addressing the new fellow.

But Parker did not answer; and Manners felt disgruntled again.

Sides for the game had already been chosen; but Tom spoke to Talbot, and Parker was given a place as an extra man on Talbot's side.

CHAPTER 7.

And Against Grundy.

"**A** SUPERNUMERARY," said Tom, smiling.

"He looks hefty enough, too," said Talbot.

"My hat, you'd have said so if you had seen him tumble over Cutts just now!"

"Tumble over Cutts?" repeated Talbot, in surprise. "But—"

"I'll tell you all about it later, old man. Let's get on with the giddy washing now. If you give Parker a hint or two as to what is expected of him, I fancy he will be all right."

Talbot had twelve men against the other side's eleven. It is always rather a problem where to put your extra man in such a case, especially when you have reason to doubt whether he will be of much use anywhere.

On the whole, it seemed to Talbot, Parker could do least harm as an extra man on the left wing.

D'Arcy and Grundy were Talbot's left wing. D'Arcy was really good, though possibly not quite up to the very high standard he considered himself to reach.

Grundy was not good at all, though Grundy outvied Gussy in the opinion he held of his own prowess.

"Slip in between those two, Parker," said Talbot. "When they move down the field, you move, too. See? We are kicking towards the school. Don't get in D'Arcy's way. It doesn't matter so much about Grundy."

The instructions were not very full and definite for a novice, but Talbot really had no time for more. Both sides were eager to begin.

But Parker knew more about footer than Talbot imagined. He had seen a good many games, though he had never played in one, and he understood about the positions.

The ball did not come his way for some time, but he kept his place and waited. At first he felt that he did not mind much if he never got in a kick. Distinction on the footer field had never been one of the ambitions of Philip Ignatius Parker.

But that mood passed. The spirit of the game got hold of him. He began to long for a chance to distinguish himself.

D'Arcy got the ball, ran it swiftly along the touchline, and passed it well into the centre to Talbot.

Neither Grundy nor Parker had been able to keep pace with the agile Gussy. They were fully twenty yards behind. But Grundy, coming up blowing, slanged Gussy for ignoring him, and Parker began to feel mild resentment that the leather had not been sent in his direction. He had had as good a claim to a pass as Grundy, anyway.

He had not seen the great George Alfred before, and that important personage failed to impress Parker. Indeed, so little judgment had this queer new fellow that he had already set down the mighty Grundy as a mere clumsy lout.

Now Gussy had the ball again, and by great efforts both Parker and Grundy kept somewhere near level with him as he ran it down.

"Now then, Parkah!" he called, and sent it across.

Parker felt a thrill course down his backbone. He had never yet kicked a football in his life. Now he was going to—no, scarcely to kick it, but to propel it gently in front of him as he ran, after the manner of Arthur Augustus. It is strange, perhaps, but he felt no doubt of being able to do so. He had learned to do far more difficult things than that.

He trapped it, a trifle clumsily, but quite effectively. He glanced round, and started off.

But just as he started off, a big and weighty body collided with him and he tumbled over.

George Alfred Grundy, as eager for distinction as Parker could possibly be, had barged him over, and now had the ball.

"Oh, don't do that sort of thing, Grundy!" yelled Talbot. "To me, now! They're on you!"

They were on Grundy. He would not have passed to Talbot in any case. He wanted a chance for himself. But he had no opportunity to pass. Digby, the right half on Tom Merry's side, nipped in and whicked the leather from his feet.

The game swept up the field. Parker arose to his feet, and turned a wrathful face to the great Grundy.

"What did you do that for?" he snapped. "I understand that you are on my side. Do you not know enough about

the game to realise the extreme impolicy of thus hampering a colleague?"

Grundy gasped. The language and the cheek combined took the wind out of his sails for a moment. To think that a new fellow, whose very name he did not know, should dare to talk to him—to George Alfred Grundy—in that manner!

It was only for a moment that Grundy was stricken speechless, though. Then he thundered:

"Do you know who I am?"

"I do not. I do not wish to know. But you are evidently a person unacquainted with the merest rudiments of the game you pretend to play. I have not the authority to order you off the field; but I advise you to keep out of my way!"

Words cannot do justice to the tumultuous feelings that surged in the breast of the great Grundy. This was too much to be borne!

Herries, playing back on Talbot's side, relieved the pressure by a long, strong kick, and the ball dropped between Grundy and Parker before Grundy could answer.

Both went for it, as hotly as if they had been on opposing sides. Parker got there first, and kicked. He kicked rather at random; but chance favoured him, and the leather went on fairly and as straight to the toes of Talbot as if that random kick had been the most judicious of passes.

"Oh, good, Parker!" cried Talbot, and was off at once. He did not wait to see Parker sprawl over, with Grundy all in a heap on top of him.

Which was the angrier as they got up it would be hard to say.

"You—you—oh, you—"

So spluttered Grundy. Parker had at least the advantage of him in clearness of speech.

"You are an exceedingly clumsy idiot, and it is plain to me that no amount of practice will ever make you a football player!" said Parker. "But I will overlook the fact that you have again knocked me down. I attribute it to your absurd clumsiness, which is beyond doubt rather your misfortune than your fault. Kindly remove your loutish carcass to a safe distance."

Grundy put a hand to his throbbing brow. The thing seemed too impossible even for a dream.

Here was a new fellow adopting towards him—towards George Alfred Grundy—an attitude of conscious superiority, lecturing him, as a master might lecture a fag! It was too, too much! The hot blood of the Grundys surged and boiled in the veins of George Alfred.

"I—oh, hang you, you can't know who I am!" he roared. "I'm Grundy—Grundy of the—"

The ball was coming their way again. Before Grundy could finish it smote his face with a resounding thwack, and dropped at his feet.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Levison major on Talbot's right. "Pass, Grundy!"

But it was Parker who nipped it before Grundy could move, Parker who passed to Levison. And it was no mere fluke this time. Parker had meant the ball to go where it went.

"I—I—oh, you silly ass, what do you—"

"Do you not consider, Grundy, if that is your name, that it would be better if you turned your attention to the game in which you are supposed to be taking a part?" asked Parker gravely.

Grundy was too flabbergasted for words.

But he did not fail in deed. Up to half-time there was some very lively work indeed going on upon the left wing of Talbot's team.



Parker flung both arms around Cutts, stuck a foot behind him, and sent him sprawling on his back. (See Chapter 6.)

Grundy was continually barging at Parker. Parker barged at Grundy in return, at times. But at other times he simply dodged him, and let him reel to grass from the force of his own charge. Parker twice kicked the ball—in the wrong direction on each occasion. Grundy never even got his foot to it.

Most of the players enjoyed the fun. They laughed till the tears ran down their cheeks. But Arthur Augustus complained, bitterly. He did not blame Parker, he said, but the absurd antics of Grundy were having the effect of keeping him clean out of the game.

And neither Talbot nor Tom Merry was too well pleased. There were important matches still to be played, and they did not want a practice game reduced to a farce.

Just before half-time Digby strained a leg slightly, and went off.

"Let me have Parker now," said Tom to Talbot. "He can take Dig's place, and then this butting bizney will be all more or less in the game."

"Right-ho!" said Talbot. "The only drawback to telling him that his game now is to put the kybosh on Grundy is that Grundy don't need it. His own clumsy feet stop him all right. But Parker may learn something about playing half; and I shouldn't wonder, Tom, if the chap made a good one in time. He's got footer in him."

Parker probably did learn something. Before the game was over he had surprised Arthur Augustus by stopping two of that worthy's runs along the line. But he devoted most of his attention to the great Grundy.

Parker was aching all over at the end of the game, but he was not more sore in body than the great George Alfred, and he was not half so sore in mind.

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For he had scored, and Grundy had been scored off—and that makes no end of difference.

"Did you enjoy your game, Philip?" asked Monty Lowther solemnly, as Parker walked back with the Terrible Three and Talbot.

Parker did not at all like being addressed as "Philip." But he considered it preferable to "Pignacious," and hardly saw how he could resent it. He had noticed that several fellows always addressed Merry as "Tom." Perhaps he himself was gaining popularity!

"Very much, thank you—er—Pontifex," he said sedately.

Lowther looked at him, and then grinned broadly.

CHAPTER 8.

Mellish Tries It On!

TALBOT awoke early next morning. Birds were twittering outside, and the sun shone in brightly through the dormitory windows. There was a feeling of spring in the air. Too early yet to be sure that harsh winter might not return, but this was a real spring-like morning, for all that.

Talbot turned over on his right side, and noticed that the bed next to him that way was empty.

It had been empty since the beginning of term—until last night. But Parker had slept in it then. Where was Parker now?

Talbot sat up and saw the answer to his own unspoken question.

Parker stood in front of a looking-glass, and he was shaving!

And Parker needed it!

The reflection of his chin in the glass showed it quite bristly.

He was working away industriously with a safety razor, taking the most minute care.

There were other fellows at St. Jim's who needed the services of a razor at times.

But they hardly needed those services daily, and this fellow evidently did. Moreover, they did not sleep in the Shell dormitory, as Parker did.

Kerr had already ventured on the guess that Parker was considerably more than fifteen. Talbot felt sure that the truth was beyond that.

The fellow was a man, not a boy at all! But why had he come to St. Jim's in this masquerade?

That was a complete puzzle. He had said something about having been at the Front, but there was nothing in that to help answer this question.

"Well, after all, it's no affair of mine, and I don't believe there's any harm in the chap," Talbot told himself. Yet he could not help feeling vaguely uneasy.

He waited until Parker had finished operations and put the shaving tackle away, and then he stretched himself and gave a loud yawn.

Parker looked round, with something very like a guilty start.

"Hallo!" he said. "It's Talbot, I see. I suppose you are, like me, in the habit of waking early?"

"Yes, I'm often awake before the rest," replied Talbot. "Feeling stiff and sore this morning, eh? Grundy does barge, rather."

"I don't think I was ever stiffer and sorer in my life!" Parker said, with evident feeling.

"Would you care to be shown round? You didn't see all St. Jim's yesterday, you know."

"I should be greatly obliged to you, Talbot—that is, if it's not too much trouble."

"Oh, none at all! I shall like it."

There was no other fellow in the Shell, with the possible exception of the learned Skimpole, who was as mature in his ways and speech as Talbot. His early life, half-forgotten as it was now, had made him so. Parker probably found him a far more congenial companion than he would have found most of his class-fellows.

It was still well short of breakfast-time when they came in together.

"Cheer-ho, Talbot! Up with the giddy lark this morning, weren't you?" said Tom Merry, meeting them.

"Yes, if you call Parker a lark," replied Talbot, smiling.

"I shouldn't think of taking such a liberty with Parker," said Tom.

"Rats! Our dear Philip is the greatest lark of all the ages," said Monty Lowther.

Parker passed on quickly, leaving Talbot with the Terrible Three. A dose of Lowther before breakfast was really more than Parker felt equal to.

Someone stopped him—a fellow he did not know. It was Mellish, whose compulsory footer on the previous afternoon had been put in with a lower grade of players than that in which Parker had been tried.

"I say, I want to speak to you, you know," said Mellish nervously.

Mellish had taken counsel with Crooke. Crooke had agreed with Mellish that it was a great pity that they had not the wily Levison to aid them. Racke was best out of it, Crooke said. He was not likely to help in such a scheme, having plenty of money without practising blackmail. And, on the whole, Crooke thought Mellish had better open the ball himself. He, Crooke, would come in later.

The very mention of blackmail had

made Mellish feel nervous, though he was under no delusion as to what his scheme really meant.

But Percy Mellish was very hard up, and just a little bit vain of having thought out a scheme all on his own. And Parker's appearance was not by any means terrifying.

So Mellish had nerved himself to the playing of a lone hand.

"I haven't the—er—pleasure of knowing you, and I happen to be rather pressed for time just now," said Parker. "If you have any business with me, which would seem rather unlikely, I should suggest that it will not spoil by keeping until later."

That nettled Mellish.

"Oh, you think so, do you—Mr. Parker-Roberts?" he said.

The face of Parker went red, and the eyes of Parker had a glint in them which made Mellish feel decidedly uncomfortable. What a rotter Crouche had been to shirk his share! That was Mellish's first thought.

He had never been used to putting through things on his own, and it is not easy for the jackal to play a lion-like part.

But it seemed to Mellish that he had the whip-hand, for if Parker "turned nasty" he could tell what he knew. He would not tell how he had come to know it, of course.

"That's your right name, I believe?" he said, with all the boldness he could muster.

Now, Parker had a mission at St. Jim's, and he did not intend to allow it to be cut short by a rat like this. He saw that he would need to parley with the rat—to buy him off, probably. Parker did not like the notion; but, whatever his age might be, he was at least old enough to know that one cannot always do as one likes.

"You seem to be labouring under some absurd delusion," he said. "It had better be discussed in private, if there is any necessity to discuss it at all."

Mellish felt that the first hit was his, and waxed bolder.

"Come along to my study," he said. "We can talk all right there."

It was Parker who closed the door, and looked it carefully; and Mellish did not greatly fancy that. It seemed like taking the direction of affairs to much out of his hands.

Nor was he made to feel easier in mind when Parker took a seat upon the table, and swung one leg in a careless way.

Mellish felt younger than usual, and more innocent than he had any right to be feeling, considering that blackmail was his game.

"Now, in the first place, I may as well know to whom I'm talking," said Parker coolly.

"My name's Mellish. I'm in the Fourth."

"Oh! Not the Shell?"

"No. Everybody ain't in the Shell."

"I am inclined to regard that as rather a good thing on the whole," said Parker. "I really don't think you would improve the tone of the Shell."

"Look here, you needn't come that sort of superior talk with me!" snarled Mellish. "I suppose that you think, because you're a man and I'm only a boy, you can bounce me. But you can't."

"Think not, Mellish?" said Parker very coolly, very quietly, but in a way that made Mellish very uneasy. "That's one of your little mistakes!"

"Oh, I dare say you can lick me, if it comes to that," said Mellish unpleasantly. "But that will hardly suit your book. You're twice my age, and you ought to be able to lick me. But that ain't the point, you know."

"You are a very well-grown eight, I

must say," said Parker coolly. He did not—as Mellish noted—say that he was no more than sixteen. He only implied it. "Eight—and the rest!" sneered Mellish.

"And what precisely is the point?" asked the queer new fellow.

"What's the silly use of pretending you're a boy? You don't talk like a boy or behave like one."

"My objectionable young idiot, do you not realise that there is more than one type of boy?" rapped out Parker.

"I dare say there may be," said Mellish sullenly. "But you ain't any of them!"

And Parker may have realised that these words were true, though spoken by one who did not deal in truth as a staple commodity.

Mellish grew bolder.

"You can wangle your explanations to take in chaps like Tom Merry and that donkey of a D'Arcy, I dare say," he went on. "But I'm not their sort."

"Most certainly you are not! Anything more widely different I should find it hard to imagine."

"That's meant for an insult, Mr. Parker-Roberts of the 'Daily Messenger'; and I'm not going to be insulted by you!"

Mellish had shown his full hand now, and felt rather afraid when he thought of his own boldness.

But it was plain to him that the shaft had gone home.

CHAPTER 9.

Blackmail!

JUST for a moment Parker's jaw dropped, and his face paled.

He was not quite sure what he had expected; but he knew that it had not been exactly this. The rat knew more than he had imagined.

"And where, may I ask, did you find this particular mare's-nest?" he said.

"Never mind where I found it!" cried Mellish exultingly. "I know it's the straight griffin—direct from the horse's mouth. You can't take me in, not if you lie till you are black in the face!"

"I have no taste for your favourite amusements," replied Parker drily. "The gentleman to whom you refer is a member of the staff of the 'Daily Messenger.' That fact I do not seek to contradict. But the further fact of his having a younger brother—"

"Oh, you can't bluff me like that! I know better," said Mellish.

But he did not feel quite as sure as he had felt. Suppose those two roughs had made a mistake?

No, it wasn't good enough. This fellow was no boy, and no one to whom he had talked as he had talked to Mellish would believe him one.

"Rats!" said Mellish boldly, before the other had had time to speak again.

"The precise meaning of 'rats,' being—"

"Walker about your younger brother! You're yourself, and nobody else!"

"A position I share with the rest of humanity," replied Parker, looking older and speaking more drily than ever. "You are an exception at this moment, Mellish, I think. For you aren't naturally bold, and in tackling me thus you are scarcely your real self. But that is of little consequence. You are not a subject of sufficient interest to be worth prolonged discussion, are you?"

"I'm not a swindler, anyway!" snarled Mellish. "I'm not here under a beastly false name! Everybody knows all about me."

"Which makes me wonder why you are still here. But I do not think that the school in general knows quite all about you. Even as much as it knows



Parker whipped round just as the burlier of the two roughs struck at him with a heavy club. (See Chapter 11.)

probably does not conduce towards your personal popularity."

The sarcasm went home. Mellish withered. He was not scoring. Crooke would laugh at him, and tell him that he was an ass to attempt playing a hand that would have required all Ernest Levison's skill.

Parker was to have been taken in and fleeced. Well, Levison might perhaps have been able to fleece him. Mellish felt that he was not getting on very fast with that delicate operation.

"Well, Mellish, what are you going to do about it?"

Mellish took heart from something he thought he read upon Parker's face.

"I don't know that I want to show you up," he said. "That wouldn't do me any particular good. Of course, you haven't come here for any real harm."

"How do you know that, Mellish?"

"Oh, it stands to reason! Why should you?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Well, I shouldn't say you're that sort of chap."

"I don't think I am that sort of chap, Mellish. On the whole, I have always regarded myself as tolerably decent. But as far as my coming here is concerned, you really seem to afford a certain amount of justification for it. I hadn't expected to meet anything quite as low as you at a public school. Bullying I was prepared for, and I understand that there is some of what is, I believe, called 'pub-hunting.'"

He paused. Mellish felt his flesh creep. This was an uncanny chap. How came he to know anything about the Green Man?

Levison's more acute brain might have deduced the true object of Parker's coming to St. Jim's, from that speech. Mellish never even guessed at it.

"But I really had not anticipated finding a blackmailer at St. Jim's!"

"Who's a blackmailer?" spluttered Mellish, in weak wrath. "Did I say anything about making you pay blackmail?"

"Not in so many words—admitted."

"Well, then?"

"But that isn't the blackmailer's usual way. I have seen something of the brood, and I know."

"That's no concern of mine. It

doesn't matter to me what beastly rotters you've got mixed up with!"

"Softly, softly, Mellish! You go too fast. Now I should incline to label you as rather a promising specimen of the blackmailing genus. What but blackmail could you have meant by saying that it would be of no benefit to you to expose me?"

"I only meant—"

"That you would refrain from exposing me if I made it worth your while? But what is the inevitable inference from that, my young criminal, eh?"

Parker caught Mellish by the shoulder, and scanned his face with keen, hard eyes.

"I—I— Look here, you know, it would be much better for both of us to be friendly," bleated Mellish. "I'm beastly hard up, and—and that makes a chap do things he's not very keen on. I don't ask you to pay me anything, really. Lend me a quid for a few weeks; that will do me. And I give you my word of honour that I won't let out a thing about you."

"I like not the security," said Parker. "But I don't want this absurd story of yours to get wind, for reasons that are no concern of yours. You shall have a sovereign, though not as a loan, and only on conditions."

Mellish felt immensely relieved, and began to imagine himself a born diplomatist.

"Sit down. Take pen and paper. Write as I dictate," ordered Parker; and there was a snap in every word.

Mellish did as bidden.

"What is your Christian name?"

"Percy."

"Ah! A good old name of the brave old days descended to base uses! This is what you are to write: 'I, Percy Mellish, do hereby acknowledge the receipt from Philip Ignatius Parker of the sum of £1 sterling, paid me in order that I shall not disclose his supposed identity—'

"With Mr. Parker-Roberts, of the 'Daily Messenger,' shall I put?" asked Mellish, putting his tongue in the cheek farthest from Parker.

Mellish was feeling much bolder now.

"With nobody. Put a full stop, you young sweep!"

"After 'nobody'?" Mellish inquired. He was under the gross delusion that he could afford to trifle with Parker.

Ernest Levison would have known better than that, for he would have discerned the pitfall in that paper.

But Mellish was soon to understand.

"I shall not put up with another word of your impudence!" rapped out Parker. "Sign, date, and blot. Here is your sovereign."

A pound-note passed from hand to hand. The feel of it was very grateful and comforting to Mellish. But not so were the words from Parker which followed.

The queer new fellow put the paper carefully in his pocket.

"Now, Mellish," he said deliberately, "I suppose you realise the fact that you are quite at my mercy?"

"By gum, though, I don't see that!" said Mellish, in dismay. "I—I— It seems to me that you are at mine, come to that."

"Does it? That shows only the limitations of your intelligence. I am doing nothing illegal here. Discovery for me could mean no more than some slight unpleasantness, of no real moment."

"Well, what have I done? Borrowed a quid from you, that's all!"

Parker tapped his breast-pocket.

"I have only to show this paper to Mr. Railton or the Head, and your hours at the school would be numbered," he said. "It is a confession that you have practised blackmail!"

"I—I— Here, you give me that paper back, and take your beastly money!" burbled Mellish, licking lips gone suddenly dry.

"Certainly not! Until my mission here is completed this will hang over your head, so it behoves you to be on your best behaviour. And, by the way, I can see no reason why we should know each other. In future you will be good enough not to address me unless I speak to you first!"

Parker of the Shell—who was also P. I. Parker-Roberts, of the "Daily Messenger"—unlocked the door, and went out, just as the bell for breakfast clanged along the passages.

Mellish groaned. He had intended to

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do a stroke of work before breakfast, and he had done it; but he did not feel too well satisfied with it now that it was done.

CHAPTER 10.

Parker's Peril!

"THERE 'e is!" hissed Smiler, in the ear of Rusty.

"All right, cocky! I s'pose I ain't so far gone but what I know Parker-Roberts when I see 'im, without you blowin' a blessed 'urricane down my ear!" growled the amiable Rusty.

"Wot are you goin' to do, that's the question?"

"I'm goin' to 'ave another pint," answered Rusty, with the air of having disposed of the question in a manner that could not fail to prove satisfactory to the questioner.

These two worthies had taken up their quarters in the village, at the cottage of an aged and dirty widow whom Rylcombe knew as Mother Gamm.

They did not trouble Mother Gamm much at such times as the Green Man was open. And when that respectable establishment had closed its doors, they still hung about on the watch.

But up till now their watching had been in vain.

"Rusty, old pal, you're takin' too much beer," said Smiler.

"You're a liar! A bloke can't take too much beer," replied Rusty.

"E may take more nor wot 'e can carry, Rusty."

"It'd have to be a lot," Rusty said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Oshuns of it!"

These two were above military age. They were safe on that score. Having seen P.-c. Crump, who had failed to in-

spire them with awe, they considered themselves safe on other scores also. At the Green Man they had represented themselves as having lately come into money. Their appearance scarcely bore out their tale; but they paid for all they drank, and frequently treated the landlord and his sporting friends, so the story was allowed to pass.

Parker had come down to the village to get a pair of footer boots. Those he had found in his trunk—packed with the rest of the things by a firm of outfitters, to whom a general order had been given—did not fit him comfortably. And Parker, though he was surprised at himself that such should be the case, had taken quite keenly to footer.

"Look 'ere, we can't afford to let this chanst slip," said Smiler in Rusty's ear. "He's muddin' sure to go back through the wood—it's a sort cut to the school, you know. Wot we've got to do is to lay wait for 'im. I've got the black masks in my pocket."

"I'm a-goin' to 'ave another pint of beer," said Rusty obstinately. "You're in too big a 'urry, Smiler—that's wot's the matter with you. 'Ang this job out, I says."

"An wot will the Big Boss say if 'e 'ears that we let a chanst like this slip?" asked Smiler meaningly.

"It ain't a thing to do in broad daylight," protested Rusty. "I ain't minded to run my 'ead into a noose—no, not even to please the Big Boss!"

"Don't you know as them schoolboys ain't allowed out after dark?" snapped Smiler, looking vicious.

"Parker-Roberts ain't no schoolboy! Don't you tell me!"

"Oh, snakes! Will 'e ever get any blessed sense into 'is wooden noddle?" groaned Smiler. He took Rusty by the shoulders and shook him hard. It would

have been a dangerous thing for anyone else to do with Rusty; but Smiler and he were used to working together. "E is a schoolboy, you prize specimen of a turnip-headed loonatic! Oh, I know 'e's Parker-Roberts, all the same, an' there's a blessed mystery about why 'e's 'ere. But as long as 'e stays 'ere 'e's a schoolboy—everybody takes 'im for one, an' 'e wears their clobber, an' 'e 'as to obey rules same as the rest, an' I 'ope he blessed well likes it, but I shouldn't mind takin' my alfred-david as 'e don't!"

"Wot a chap you are to sling the gab!" croaked Rusty. "You could lick any sky-pilot clean outer sight!"

"It takes so blessed much to make you understand anything, you old timber-skull," replied Smiler. "Will you come now?"

"Anythink you like, if you'll on'y chuck mouthin' it so much!" Rusty growled. "But I'm 'avin' that there pint first!"

"All right, cocky! I sha'n't report you to the Big Boss for that. I'll 'ave one longer you. But if you 'adn't seen sense I'd 'ave 'ad to ask 'is nibs for another loo-tenant next time 'e wanted a job like this put through!"

Parker was still in the boot-shop when the two, after a hasty drink, hurried out of the Green Man, and took the road to the wood.

Outside a grocer's-shop stood three bicycles. Inside could be seen three juniors—the Terrible Three.

"Some more of 'em," said Smiler doubtfully. In times of action Rusty became the senior partner of this firm, for Smiler was not so bold, as cunning. "But they'll be goin' back by road, as they've got their bikes."

"Come on!" growled Rusty. "I never didn't see such a slow chap as you

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in all my puff. Don't 'ang back now, or it's me wot will 'ave a tale to tell to the Big Boss!"

They hurried off in the direction of Rylcombe Wood.

The Terrible Three were buying pepper.

Their order rather surprised the grocer. Never before had he seen three boys with such a big appetite for pepper. They were buying enough for all St. Jim's.

But it was not for all St. Jim's that they bought it.

It was for the benefit of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and those who were supporting him in a certain project—which cannot be explained here and now, but will be told of later.

Two Grammar School boys came strolling up the street—Carboy and Gustave Blanc, more generally known as Mont Blanc.

They saw Parker at the boot-maker's. Carboy's eyes glistened.

"That's the bouncer we pumped on!" he said. "The chap that kicked Gordon Gay in the ribs!"

"Zat was an accident," replied Mont Blanc.

"Yes; but what we're going to do to him won't be, poodle. I vote we wait an interview him. He seems to be all on his lonesome."

"Non, I zink not. I zink he is not all by heemself alone. Zee, zee are bikes by ze door of ze—ze epicier's—how you call eet?—ze grocnaire's, ees eet not?"

"Half a jiff! Let's scout!" said Carboy.

He peeped in at the door of the grocer's shop. The next second he was busy with the machines left outside.

He did not use a pin. That would have been a low trick, as he told the grinning Mont Blanc.

He whipped off the cap of an inflating valve, pulled out the plunger, and removed from it the little sheath of rubber. Three times he did this, and three back wheels were rendered as flat as pancakes, and, moreover, quite incapable of being pumped up until the loss of the rubbers was discovered.

Then he and Mont Blanc hurried across the street into the safe shelter of the post-office.

There Carboy opened his hand. The French boy grinned, but Carboy looked quite serious.

"We're poor but honest," he said. "I can't keep these, of course. Get a registered envelope, Mont Blanc."

"Zat ees zo great jape on Tom Merry & Co.!" grinned the French junior. "But a regis—how you say heem?—non, I have not ze occasion for heem."

"Do what I tell you, fathead! I'll ask for it, if you like. But you must pay. I'm stony. Hand over the chink, and keep your weather-eye open for those St. Jim's rotters."

"Here zey come! Now zo fun begins. Tom Merry is vair' mooch surprise; an' Lowthair, he ees not at all please; an' Mannars, he ees zo most agranoyed of zem all! Zey look oop ze street, an' zey look down ze street."

"Duck your napper, you silly clump, or they'll be looking across the street

and spotting us! No; they're going into the repairer's!"

Mont Blanc rubbed his hands gleefully.

"Now, you bear witness, poodle!" said Carboy impressively. "These things don't belong to me, do they?"

He showed the three little pieces of rubber tubing in his hand.

"Non! Zey belong to Tom Merry & Co.!" grinned the French junior.

"Well, I'm honest, I am. It wouldn't be at all the straight thing for me to keep them, nor yet to chuck them away," said the virtuous Carboy. "I'm going to send them on to their proper owners, circumstances not allowing of their being returned at this moment. And, to make sure that they get them, I shall put them in this registered envelope—see? Got a scrap of paper? We may as well send our compliments with them. Nothing like being really polite!"

"Oui, oui, Carboy! My nation, zo belle France, she ees zo mos' polite on ze earth!"

"Dunno about that. Pretty fat-headed, if you're anything to go by. Still, Joffre's got his points, and so has this chap Nivelle, though he's half English. You'll have them twig you, you ass!"

Mont Blanc ducked his head. The Terrible Three had come out of the repairer's shop rather disgruntled. The repairer had discovered what was wrong, and his knowing smile had not pleased them. Moreover, he could not supply at once the rubber washers. He had none in stock. War-time, they knew. Perhaps to-morrow, perhaps on Monday—some time, anyway.

"Some of the Grammar School crowd, I'll bet," said Tom.

"Let's have a hunt round and see if we can spot the rotters," suggested Lowther.

Manners gave a growling assent.

They passed the boot-shop, and saw Parker, who was still there.

"I say, Tom, do you think it could have been that chap?" said Manners.

"Oh, not likely!" said Tom.

"Can you imagine our Pignacions descending to such puerile tricks?" asked Lowther.

"I wouldn't trust him," said Manners. "The chap's a beastly intruder, anyway."

"Still, even to a beastly intruder there are limits," Lowther said blandly. "Pignacions is quite incapable of such a dreadful deed."

"We don't want the bouncer, anyhow!" growled Manners, who still resented the intrusion of Parker.

"We do not!" agreed Lowther. "But the chap's not an absolute Prussian. He's a deep one. We don't know all about dear Philip yet. But we do know that he would not do this sort of thing."

Tom Merry agreed. Manners, finding himself in a minority of one, shut up. He did not wholly dislike Parker. The fellow would have been bearable in another study, Manners thought.

Carboy got his receipt for the registered letter, and put it into his pocket. Then, forgoing the proposed interview with Parker, he and Mont Blanc made themselves scarce while the Terrible Three were searching for them at the other end of the street.

The Terrible Three drew blank, of course. When they returned Parker had also vanished.

Tom Merry looked at his watch. "No time to spare, children," he said. "Keep up with your Uncle Tommy if you can, and put your best feet foremost if

you mean to be in by the time dinner is served, my lord!"

They hurried off, and naturally took the short cut through the wood.

CHAPTER 11.

Rescue!

PARKER was already some distance ahead. He had no notion that his study-mates were in Rylcombe, and compelled by Grammarian machinations to return on foot, or he would have waited for them.

He had already quite a high opinion of Tom Merry, and was beginning to think better of the humorous Lowther and the somewhat surly Manners. He thought of Manners as surly, for he had seldom yet seen him otherwise.

By the time they entered the wood he was well into it, and out of sight along one of the bends of the winding path.

They rounded the bend.

"There's the dear Pignacions!" said Lowther. "Shall we call to him to wait for his kind uncles?"

"Rats!" said Manners. "We don't want the bouncer's company."

"Oh, look out, Parker!" yelled Tom Merry, with all the strength of his lungs.

Two rough-looking fellows, with black half-masks upon their faces, had stolen out of the undergrowth in rear of the unconscious Parker.

He whipped round just as the bulrier of the two roughs struck at him with a heavy club.

His arm went up to shield his head. The Terrible Three saw the arm drop as if broken, and yet there remained force enough in the blow to send Parker to grass.

"Rescue!" yelled Lowther.

"St. Jim's to the rescue!" shouted Tom Merry.

"We're coming, Parker!" howled Manners, forgetting all his resentment against the intruder.

It was not Tom's fault that the warning was not in time. Even as it was, it had saved Parker something, for the full force of the blow had failed to reach his head.

And their nearness had at least the effect of preventing a second blow.

As they rushed forward the two roughs made a bolt for cover.

But Rusty had looked too long upon the beer, even as Smiler had warned him he might do.

He lurched, and clutched at Smiler, who had very nearly reached cover. Smiler was one of the retiring type.

They went down together with a crash.

They struggled up, using highly improper language to one another, just in time to be too late!

For the Terrible Three piled in upon them as one man.

Smiler went down again, with Manners and Lowther on top of him.

Rusty caught Tom Merry by the collar, and slung him into the bushes.

Tom was up again in a second, but in that second Rusty had kicked Manners viciously on the hip, and Smiler had shot Lowther off his chest, and was scrambling to his feet.

"Ow! You foul brute!" yelled Manners, badly hurt.

But he was not so much hurt as to be put out of the fight.

He grabbed Rusty's leg and pulled the rough over.

Lowther thrust his right hand into his pocket. When he brought it out it had a yellow papered package in it. Using both hands, he broke the package across,

Write to the Editor of

ANSWERS

If you are not getting your right PENSION

and hurled it full into the ugly face of Rusty.

"Yow! Yah! Yow! Yah! You've blinded me—atishoo!"

"A-tish-oo!" echoed Tom Merry, taken with a violent fit of sneezing.

"Oh, hang it all, Monty! I got as much of it as that rotter did—atishoo-hoo-soo!" complained Manners.

"Couldn't—atish-ish-hoo-hoo!—help it, old chap!" said Lowther. "I've—atishoo!—got—some—atishoo!—too!"

"A-tish-oo! Come off it, won't yer? This is—atishoo!" howled and sneezed Smiler. "Oh, lumme—atishoo!"

But Smiler struggled up, and Lowther's attempt to stop him was made in vain.

Sneezing violently, Smiler plunged into the thick undergrowth, and in a moment was lost to sight, though not to sound, for they could hear Smiler sneezing and the boughs cracking as he forced his way through.

"Look out, Tom! Atishoo! Look out!"

Rusty was up and swinging his club. "I'll kill the—atishoo-hoo!—lot of you!" he raved. "I'm blinded for—atishoo!—life! Ah, would yer?"

It did not appear that Rusty was quite blind. He saw the rush Tom made for him, and his club came down heavily. Tom stumbled and fell, and by that lucky fall escaped the full force of the savage blow.

Rusty bolted.

Manners and Lowther were in no condition even to attempt to hold him. With one hand to his eyes—which really must have been smarting a good deal—the burly brute made for cover.

They let him go, for they had no choice in the matter. They could not even pursue. They were in the throes of a very paroxysm of sneezing.

Suddenly Parker sat up.

Even in the midst of their sneezing the three were delighted to see that. The blow he had taken had looked a very heavy one, and they had been by no means certain that it had not killed him.

And the first thing Parker said—or, rather, didn't say, for to sneeze is scarcely to speak, was:

"Atishoo-hoo-hoo!"

It had become a chorus of four—but a chorus woefully out of time and tune.

And they sneezed till the tears ran down their cheeks, and then they sneezed still more, and cried again, and sneezed yet more, till Tom Merry managed to gasp out:

"What a ja—atishoo! Are you—atishoo!—much hurt, Parker, old scout?"

"I am not—atishoo!—seriously—atishoo!—hurt, Merry. But if you mean that this thing is a joke—atishoo!—all I have to say is—atishoo!"

"That, Pignacious, is—atishoo!—about all any of—atishoo!—can say!" gasped Lowther.

"I do not agree with you!" snapped Parker.

He took out his handkerchief, wiped his eyes, and then blow his nose with a sound like unto the sound of a trumpet.

This seemed to have some effect, for he did not sneeze again for quite a quarter of a minute.

The Terrible Three, not at all above taking a hint, took this one. They trumpeted as one man.

"And down go the walls of Jericho!" said Lowther. "Atishoo!"

"It wouldn't be a bad plan to—atishoo!—move and get away from it," suggested Manners.

"You're right, old chap," said Tom. "There's no hurry otherwise, of course, for we're bound to be late for dinner;

and we may as well be hanged for a lamb as a sucking-pig."

"And it's no good even thinking of going after those rotters," said Lowther. "They'll have got clear away before this."

Parker moved forward on hands and knees, and proceeded to inspect carefully a little heap of brownish-yellow, greyish stuff which lay upon the grass.

He even took up a few grains of it and placed them in close proximity to his nose, with the natural result that he was obliged to start sneezing again.

"This is—atishoo!"

"Not at all!" said Lowther blandly.

"It is but that which produces atishooery, so to speak."

"It is pepper!" said Parker, with some indignation.

"Giddy Herlock Sholmes you are, ain't you, Parker?" said Manners, with a grin.

"Shush, Manners! Be not unmannerly. To smell the pepper when it would have been easy to look at the label is quite in the most approved Herlock Sholmes manner. Is it not so, my dear Jotson? There is the label, Parker. Somebody-or-Other's Perfect Pepper—Parker's Perfect Pepper; Parker's Perfect Pepper for Pale Prigs. Warranted to—"

"But what were you doing with pepper in your pocket?" asked Parker, turning upon Lowther in quite his most grown-up manner.

There was a snap in the question, as if he who asked it was a master, with a right undisputed to an answer.

"Jolly lucky for you the pepper was there, I should say!" growled Manners.

"That is true," Parker replied, in rather a different tone. "Yes, that is undoubtedly true. I forgot for the moment that you all came to my rescue with unhesitating gallantry. I hope you will believe that I am deeply and honestly grateful to you!"

He spoke with feeling, and without his customary stiffness; yet his tone was very unboylike.

"Nothing in it," said Tom. "You'd have done the same for us, like a shot. I say, you've had a nasty whack!"

Parker had put up his hand to his head. There was blood on it when he brought it away.

"Oh, I don't think it is serious!" he said. "Merely a slight extravasation of the skin."

"I should call it a clump on the napper, and a jolly painful one!" said Manners.

"That is not what I should call it. And I really fail to perceive how it can be called jolly, Manners," answered Parker, quite in his usual style.

"Can you toddle?" asked Lowther.

"Oh, of course I can!"

Parker got to his feet. But he was very unsteady upon them. His head felt as if it were still whirling, and he was glad to take Tom Merry's offered arm.

CHAPTER 12.

Parker is Mysterious.

"WHO were the rotters?" asked Lowther.

It was a very natural question. But Parker seemed to resent it.

"How should I know?" he asked snappishly. "They did not leave their cards, I believe."

"My dear man, there's no need at all to get your wool off! I only supposed that, as they appeared to be lying in wait to bash you, they might quite possibly be merchants who don't exactly love

you. And a snap generally knows his enemies, even if he may be in doubt about his friends."

"That, Lowther, is a philosophic truth the correctness of which I am not prepared to deny. But I fail to see that there is sufficient evidence that this was an ambush. May the scoundrels not have been mere ordinary footpads?"

But the tone in which the question was asked seemed to suggest that Parker scarcely believed in this theory.

Tom Merry did not believe in it, either, and he said so at once.

"It won't do, Parker!" he said. "For anybody to be lurking in these bushes waiting for somebody to waylay isn't very likely. But if they did, would they choose a schoolboy? And the way that chap whacked at you looked a jolly sight more like murder than robbery, to me."

"They were two to one—two men to a boy," Manners said. "They'd have stopped you and cleared you out, if that had been their game."

"In short, Parker, there's a mystery behind this, and you know more about it than you've let on yet," said Lowther.

Parker put up his hand to his head again, and looked very thoughtfully at the fresh blood on it when he brought it away.

"Let me tie it up for you," said Tom Merry. "I've a clean handkerchief in my pocket."

Parker stood in silence while the bandage was applied. He seemed to be thinking hard—debating how much he might safely tell them, Lowther fancied.

And Lowther fancied, too, that he might have told more had he been dealing with Tom alone.

He did not tell anything at once, however. It was Manners who spoke next.

"What shall you do about it?" asked Manners.

"What can I do?" returned Parker, with a touch of irritation.

"My hat! There are several things that might be done!" said Tom. "Informing the police, for one."

"I should not think of doing that. I absolutely refuse to report it, or allow anyone else to report it to the police! What would be the use? Those scoundrels will clear off at once—there can be no doubt as to that—and of what avail would it be to set a fat lout like that constable I saw the other day to track them down?"

"We agree in one thing at least, Parker," said Monty Lowther. "I am free to confess that Crump, with all his shining merits, modestly hidden, is not precisely my ideal sleuth-hound."

Parker smiled faintly.

"The best plan will be to forget the whole affair as speedily as may be," he said. "I trust that our lateness at the dinner-table will not necessarily involve a full explanation?"

"I don't see why it should," replied Tom, grinning. "We can always take our impots, or our whackings, as the case may be."

"But surely corporal punishment of any kind seems rather drastic for so slight an infringement of rules!"

Parker evidently disliked extremely the notion of being caned.

Monty Lowther could not resist the temptation to play upon his fears.

"It's really a matter of choice," he said blandly. "We prefer a caning, as being the soonest over. And, of course, the vote of the majority decides."

"Not at all! I shall distinctly refuse being caned if the offence can be atoned for by a mere imposition!" snapped Parker.

"Oh, well, I'm not set against the lines! I dare say you will do the lot."

without grousing, as you let us in for this, old scout!"

"If you consider that it is fair I should do so, I will, of course."

"But we don't Parker," said Tom, laughing. "And there isn't really any question of caning. Monty was pulling your leg."

"A process to which I have a decided objection!" Parker said, with emphasis.

"Now you come to mention it, I rather think I've noticed that little trait in your charming character," said Lowther urbanely. "Get rid of it, Parker! Man was born to having his nether limb pulled, even as the sparks fly upward."

"Cheese it, Monty!" said Manners. "What I want to know is whether old Parker really thinks it is safe to have those chaps about on the watch to do him in if they get half a chance?"

"Having failed in this attempt, I think they will make themselves scarce," said Parker. "Yes, I should say I was safe enough—absolute safety is not a thing to be expected."

"Do you know the brutes?" asked Tom bluntly.

"I did not recognise them, Merry."

"But you've got a good notion who they may be?"

"Scarcely even that."

"You've got some notion about it! You aren't half as much surprised as an ordinary chap would be if the thing had happened to him!"

That was true. Parker had a queer way of taking it, as if it were all in the day's work. The three could not help fancying that something very much like this must have happened to him before.

They did not wish to appear unduly curious; but it was only natural that they should want to know more than he had yet told them.

"Will you be good enough to believe me if I tell you that, while I have a tolerably clear notion as to the person behind this attempt, the men who made it are, to the best of my knowledge and belief, complete strangers to me?" said Parker.

He was less than ever like a boy now. There was nothing in his manner to suggest that he addressed them as inferiors; but there was something which made them feel very young beside him.

"Of course we will!" said Tom heartily. "And we really don't want to pry into your secrets, you know. I suppose you will admit that this sort of thing is enough to make any chap feel curious?"

"I admit that. I admit, further, that your aid to me in a very tight corner gives you the right to ask questions. I only regret that I cannot possibly make a full disclosure of all that I know and suspect—and even that would not make plain the whole story."

He evidently did not want to tell more; and Tom was inclined to respect his desire for secrecy.

But neither Manners nor Lowther was at all satisfied.

"It's all very fine!" growled Manners. "But this sort of thing don't happen to ordinary schoolboys, you know. Of course, there was the Jackeymo bizney—twice over, we had that. But that's different. It all came out of the war."

Parker picked up his ears at once.

"Jackeymo? You mean Contarini, do you not? A pleasant little fellow—a typical Italian boy of the best sort. What happened to him?"

The Terrible Three were inclined to think that he was trying to draw a red herring across the trail by this sudden interest in the story of Jackeymo. But

it was not so. Parker was very genuinely interested.

He had, in a highly-developed form, the Press man's insatiable curiosity about anything likely to make good copy; and in coming to St. Jim's he had not by any means sunk P. I. Parker-Roberts, of the "Daily Messenger," entirely in Philip Ignatious Parker, the supposed schoolboy.

Tom told him briefly the stories of the two attempts upon Contarini.

"This is something of the same kind, I should say," said Manners. "Parker's a person of importance in disguise, and someone's on his trail."

"I assure you that my secret, such as it is, bears no resemblance whatever to the Contarini business, and that it is not even remotely connected with the war," said Parker.

"That's telling us what it isn't," answered Lowther.

"While we want to know what it is," growled Manners. "At least no, that seems too beastly inquisitive. But you must own, Parker, that it is enough to make any chap feel curious—isn't it, now?"

"I own that readily, Manners," said Parker gravely. "And I am sorry that I cannot gratify your very natural curiosity at the present time. I assure you that I do not resent it; and I promise you that you shall have a full explanation before I leave—that is to say, in a few weeks' time. And now, may I ask you all to promise me that you will not tell this story at St. Jim's?"

They promised that. But they were not satisfied. The most curious thing of all was that Tom Merry found himself dwelling upon that uncompleted sentence of Parker's—"before I leave." What could he have meant by "before I leave St. Jim's"? It was not long since Tom had regarded Parker as a mere intruder; Lowther and Manners had not yet ceased to look upon him as such. But Tom realised now that he would be sorry to see Parker go.

For all his unboylike ways, for all the mystery attaching to him, Parker was one of the right sort, and most certainly he had any amount of pluck.

It was not at all difficult for Tom Merry to picture Parker at the Front!

CHAPTER 13.

Mellish in the Toils.

PERCY MELLISH was not satisfied. The sovereign he had screwed out of Parker had only whetted his appetite.

Two or three days had passed, and the memory of how Parker had dealt with him had grown dimmer.

He had not scored to the extent he had hoped that time. But just give him another chance! Hang that blessed paper! Parker wouldn't dare to use it. It suited his purpose to be at St. Jim's, and to use that paper in order to show up Mellish must mean his going.

"You ought to tackle the sweep again," said Crooke, who was all in favour of bold measures—for Mellish.

"Why don't you tackle him yourself?" asked Mellish.

"It wouldn't wash. Didn't you give him your word of honour that you wouldn't let on to a single, solitary chap?"

"Oh, he didn't take any notice of that!" said Mellish.

Mellish knew how very little his word of honour meant, and he was quite right in his guess that Parker valued it no higher than he did.

"You ought to have found out more about those roughs, you know," Crooke said.

"It's all what I ought to do," snarled Mellish. "Why don't you chip in and do something, instead of alinging a lot of rotten advice at my head?"

"Because I don't choose, for one thing," Crooke replied roughly. "I'm not going to have you landing me in a ghastly mess by your bungling—don't you think it! But there ought to be a heap more in this than you've got out of it yet; and when I see any sign that you are handling the bizney as if you meant bizney—well, then I'll stand in with you."

"I wonder whether those two chaps are hanging around Rylecombe still?" said Mellish.

"I can tell you that. They are," replied Crooke.

"How do you know?"

"My hat, what's that matter? Lodgery told me. I had a talk with him yesterday. They're at the Green Man a goodish bit, you know."

"Is Lodgery on to their being after Parker?"

"No. And I didn't tell him. He'd have been trying to make his own profit out of it if he knew. And he wouldn't leave many pickings for us, you bet!"

"See here, Crooke, what do you think I'd better do?"

"Find out more about why this chump Parker is here. Pump those two roughs. You're crafty enough, Mellish; you could do it."

Mellish had not so much confidence in his own craft. Again he wished that Levison—the Levison of old—had been with him in this affair instead of Crooke, who had very little more pluck and rather less brains than he himself had.

"I might toddle along to Rylecombe and see if I can come across them," he said doubtfully. "Of course, it would be useful to know a bit more. But as for pumping them, that won't be so easy, I guess."

"Two louts like that!" sneered Crooke.

"Why don't you have a shot at them yourself, as you know they're such louts?" asked Mellish hotly.

But Crooke only shrugged his shoulders. He was not on.

Mellish wandered out, uncertain what to do. In the quad he happened to pass Talbot and Parker.

They were talking. Perhaps Mellish could not have helped catching some of the words spoken, but it is a fairly certain thing that he did not try to avoid hearing. He passed very slowly, and Parker did not observe him. If Talbot did, he paid no heed. He knew nothing of Mellish's interest in the new fellow.

"Leave for the week-end?" Talbot said. "Well, I don't know. It is given at times, if there's urgent need; not unless, these days. The Head's pretty keen on doing all he can in the war economy way, and he agrees with the notion that unnecessary travelling is not in the national interest."

"I shall have to do my best to conquer his opposition," Parker replied. "My errand is really an urgent one."

"Get your people to wire to him," suggested Talbot.

That was all Mellish heard, and at the moment he did not look upon it as of much importance.

He noticed that Parker's hair was cut short in one place, and that his head just there was adorned with sticking-plaster, and he vaguely wondered how and by whom he had been hurt.

But the Terrible Three had kept Parker's secret well. All four had been late for dinner on the day of the attack,

of course—very late, for Parker had needed repairs before he could go in. But this had only entailed two hundred lines of Virgil each. Only six people knew as yet of that assault in Rylcombe Wood.

Mellish wandered out of the gates and along the road to Rylcombe.

Just before he reached the village he encountered Messrs. Smiler and Rusty.

He would have turned back had he seen them in time, for his heart failed him at the pinch. But they were too close upon him.

He thought of walking past without speaking, but Smiler would not allow that.

"Hallo, young gent!" he said cheerfully. "How's everythink?"

"Oh, pretty well, all serene," answered Mellish, smiling weakly.

"Master Roberts—goin' on all right—ho, is he?"

"Oh, yes, I think so. He seems to have found his feet."

"I said Roberts, didn't I? Oughter been Parker, so it 'ad. Queer thing, one young gent 'avin' two monikers like that! But I dessey you can explain it, sir, bein' a scholler?"

"No, I can't," said Mellish, realising that he must go warily, for it would not do to have these two ruffians suspect that he had spied upon them.

"Ah! But mebbe 'e ain't no per-wikler friend of yours?"

Mellish forgot his caution in a rush of rancour against the fellow who had made him feel so young and so cheap.

"I hate the beast!" he said viciously.

He did not see the nudge that Smiler gave Rusty.

"Now that's a middlin' queer thing, too," said Smiler thoughtfully. "A nice, affable-spoken young gent like him!"

Rusty said nothing. He chewed on. But Mellish saw something in his face that would have told him Rusty did not love Parker, even had he been ignorant that these men had shadowed the new boy to Rylcombe.

"He's a rotten outsider!" said Mellish, summoning up all his boldness. "And I don't believe you're any friend of his, whatever you may say!"

Smiler grinned. A very ugly grin it was, too.

"We're interested in 'im," he said. "That's enough to be goin' on with, I reckon. If you was to get more friendly like with me an' my pal Rusty, 'ere, we might tell you more. 'Cos it would suit us very well, on the 'ole, to 'ave someone up at the school—well, lookin' after our interests, as I might say."

"That would depend on whether you could make it worth my while," said Mellish, walking open-eyed into the trap set for him.

Smiler knew a good deal of human nature in its worst aspects. He had already sized-up Mellish as a greedy, unscrupulous young rascal, without pluck or conscience. He might have preferred a bolder aide. But an indifferent tool was better than none.

"It might be," he said cautiously. "I don't mind tellin' you this much, there's oof in the game we're playin', me an' my pal, Rusty."

"Shouldn't be in it else."

Rusty creaked out those few words, and spat. Mellish felt rather afraid of Rusty, but not at all of Smiler. Had he only guessed it, Smiler was by far the more dangerous villain of the two.

"And I should want to know a bit more," said Mellish.

"Naturally you would, a sharp young blade like you! But there's no reason as you shouldn't know it all, s'long as we feel sure we can depend on you. Like to 'ear it now?"

Mellish glanced up and down the road. He did not want anyone from St. Jim's to see him talking to these two.

Smiler noted that glance, and read its meaning.

"Another time would be best, I des-say," he said. "An' not quite so public a place. Look 'ere, it won't 'urt you to tell me this: is Parker or Roberts, or wotever you ought to call the feller stayin' long at St. Jim's?"

Mellish opened his eyes widely.

"Years, for all I know. Why shouldn't he?" he returned.

He had not forgotten that he was not supposed to be aware of Parker's real identity.

"Oh! That's a rum 'un, eh, Rusty? 'Ow'll they get along without 'im up in town?"

"He's going to run up to town," said Mellish. "I heard him talking about it."

"Oh, an' when might 'e be goin'?" asked Smiler, eager for the answer, but speaking in quite a casual tone.

"This week-end, if he can get leave. Saturday, I suppose."

"Look 'ere, if you can find out for us wot train 'e goes by, an' wot train 'e'll be comin' back by—"

"Well?" asked Mellish, as Smiler paused.

"A couple of quid, cocky! Does that meet your voo?"

"Yes," said Mellish. "Of course, it isn't a fat lot. But, then, it's nothing much to do. Anybody might know a thing like that."

"Right you are, young-feller-me-lad! Bring the information, an' the dubs is yours. Also I'll tell you all about Parker-Roberts, an' why 'e's 'ere. There's a bet 'angin' on to it; that's all I need say now."

"Right-ho! Depend upon me," said Mellish. Then he saw St. Jim's caps in the distance.

"I must hook it!" he said.

And stepped out briskly towards Rylcombe.

"'Ooked 'im fair, Rusty!" said Smiler, with a grin of exultation.

"Mind 'e don't do yer down, cocky," growled Rusty, and spat again.

Rusty had also some knowledge of human nature, and he did not trust Mellish.

But Smiler knew himself too cunning for that young rascal.

Mellish was in the toils! Greed and rancour had caused him to play the traitor—whereof were to come danger to Parker and no little discomfort to Mellish himself—as will be told in a later story.

THE END.

(Don't miss next Wednesday's Great Story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's—**"ARTHUR AUGUSTUS'S ALLY!"** by MARTIN CLIFFORD.)

THE EDITOR'S CHAT.

For Next Wednesday:

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS'S ALLY!

By Martin Clifford.

Parker, the queer new boy, who is not really a boy at all, but a grown man of boyish appearance, plays the principal part in next week's fine story. He backs up Gussy in the scheme for forming a society for improving manners and language at St. Jim's. Skimpole is their only other supporter. The account of the meeting held with these three on the platform, and the riotous proceedings which characterised that meeting, will, I am sure, please all readers with a taste for fun. But there is more serious matter in the story. In his life before he came to St. Jim's on a special mission Parker has incurred the enmity of a criminal organisation, and another attempt upon him is made. This furnishes quite exciting reading.

OUR NEW DRESS.

It will be seen that this week's "Gem" differs in several respects from the last issue. We have three columns on each page instead of two; the footlines have

been cut out altogether to give space for more reading matter, and the Storyette page is discontinued. Will readers please note that it is of no use sending in further jokes, as the competition has ended? I have in mind something to replace it; but an attack of influenza, the absence of part of my staff, from the same cause, and the extra work consequent upon these changes, have compelled me to hold it back for a bit. I hope to announce it in a fortnight or so.

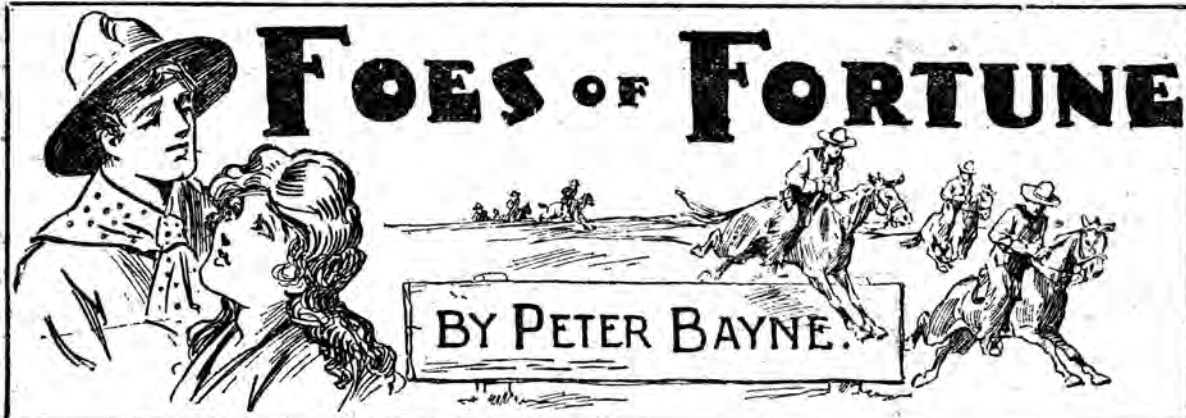
The cause of the changes is this. Again we are faced with a Government order to economise by using less paper. These orders are not things to argue about; they simply must be obeyed. Our paper was costing us considerably more during the last few months, since the size of the journal was last changed, for paper, like most things, has gone up in price. That we did not so much mind. But the only way to obey the fiat of the Government was to reduce the number of pages. All the changes made—the three-column setting, the cutting out of the footlines, the reduction in the size of the illustrations, the elimination of the joke page—have been made in order that we may give you as nearly as pos-

sible as much story matter as before. We had thought of smaller type, but really it is already small enough. In any case, I promise you that the complete story, which is the great feature of the paper, shall not be shortened if by any means I can avoid it. And with this assurance, my loyal readers will, I know, rally to the support of the good old "Gem," and keep the flag flying!

The notices have also had to be cut out. Those accepted for insertion will appear, and these will fill every spare corner we have for some weeks to come. It would not be fair play to scrap them. But I cannot see my way to continue them after that. With space so limited, it will be more in accordance with the views of the majority, I feel sure, to cut them out until we get back to something more like our old proportions.

Your Editor

OUR GREAT ADVENTURE SERIAL.



THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

CARTON ROSS, a lonely and friendless youth, sole heir to a great fortune, though unaware of it, is hunted by a party of outlaws led by DIRK RALWIN. He is befriended by HARVEY MILBURNE and his daughter LORNA, who lose their home and are separated in an attempt to defend him from his pursuers.

Ross is captured by the brigands, but, with Lorna's help, recovers his wallet—containing papers which prove his identity—and escapes. Later they fall in with RODDY GARRIN, an Englishman, and his companion AH CHING, a Chinaman. The outlaws continue the chase, together with HUXTON FENNER, a Yankee, who had previously been a companion of Garrin and Ah Ching, but had deserted them.

They pass through many thrilling adventures, and, later, Harvey Milburne succumbs as a result of the privations he has suffered whilst a prisoner under Dirk Ralwin.

One night, while the four companions are asleep, Lorna and Ross are carried away by Huxton Fenner and a band of Dirk Ralwin's outlaws. Fenner has no intention of taking them to Ralwin, as he hopes to obtain Ross' papers and claim the fortune for himself. Ralwin is warned of the American's treachery by one of his spies, JAQUNY, an Indian. The outlaw, with a band of his men, hurries to San Ramo, where it is expected Fenner and his captives will board a steamer. The ruffians have just reached the deck of a big vessel in the harbour, when a powerful steam-launch appears, and flashes past the steamer and down the river. Ralwin, by covering the captain of the vessel he is on with a revolver, forces him to pursue the smaller boat, which contains Fenner and his prisoners. Lorna and Ross speculate on who has caused the vessel to follow them. "Suppose the individual is no friend, but an enemy—Dirk Ralwin?" says Lorna.

(Now read on.)

The response that Carton Ross gave to this remark was an amused laugh.

"Dirk Ralwin!" he exclaimed. "Why, it would have been impossible for him to have heard that Fenner had carried us off in such a short time! He is scores of miles away! No, Lorna; I fancy you will soon discover that we have been tracked down by friends determined to set us at liberty."

Further conversation was rendered difficult by the threatening attitude of the gigantic black, who, recovering from the fit of terror into which the flash of the searchlight had plunged him, observed the animated bearing of his two charges with angry rage and suspicion.

Shambling across the saloon like some huge bear reared upon its hind paws, he squatted on the floor close to Ross and Lorna, at the same time twirling in the air a heavy bamboo cane that, wielded by one of his massive build and great strength, would have felled a buffalo.

At this juncture the swing-doors of the saloon were pushed open, and Huxton Fenner stepped inside. He was outwardly cool and collected, but there was a feverish glitter in his dark eyes that told its own tale of mental strain and excitement.

"Sorry to inconvenience you," he said, with his habitual drawl, "but you must come up on deck at once. There is a grave reason for it that I will explain later on. Pedro," he added, turning to the black, "you will come with them, and see to it that they remain as surely in your care as before."

The swarthy individual addressed bent his head, showed his

white teeth in an expansively ugly smile, and significantly tapped his big cane with a long, bony finger.

"You mustn't mind him," said Fenner, laughing and shrugging his shoulders. "So long as you do not attempt to cause any trouble, Pedro will be as docile and harmless as a dove. But"—and a steely glint flashed in his eye—"do otherwise, and he will kill you without pity or remorse."

Followed by his prisoners, he ascended a short flight of steps to the deck, the negro bringing up the rear. A single, quick glance told Ross that the steam-launch was following a course that must soon bring her close inshore. She was travelling at top speed.

Smoke and fire belched from her thick funnel, and she shook violently from stem to stern. Never before had the launch done the eighteen knots she was making now.

"Yes," said Fenner, with a slow, sarcastic smile. "I think that Dirk Ralwin is in for another humiliating disappointment to-night. He won't overtake us now."

A cry of mingled regret and surprise, that he could not restrain, burst from Carton Ross's lips.

"Ralwin!" he said. "Is he on board that steamer there?"

"He is, my young friend," Fenner replied. "And with him he has a large party of his best men. He meant to catch me at San Ramo, but I was too wary to tumble into the trap he had set for me. Then, discovering that I was on the launch, he must have bribed, or, more possibly, bullied, the skipper of the ship to chase us. But he will have wasted his time and energy for nothing. As I have beaten him before, so shall I beat him again."

"You were right, then," whispered Ross to the girl at his side. "It is not so much Fenner whom Dirk Ralwin wants as ourselves."

The words were overheard by the American.

"So you suspected the identity of our friend yonder, did you?" he remarked. "Yes; Ralwin is extremely anxious to meet you and your companion again. It was a bitter day for him when he lost you before."

Laughing softly, he moved away and went down into the engine-room, where three or four native firemen under a white engineer worked with frantic energy.

The steamer was slowing down, for she could approach no nearer the shore without incurring dangerous risk to her safety. But a couple of steam-pinnaces had already been launched from the davits, and, each filled with armed men, were continuing the pursuit.

They cut through the water at tremendous speed. It could be but a few more minutes before they were alongside their quarry, and then the stern chase would be at an end, and Dirk Ralwin the winner.

But Fenner was not the man to think for a moment of throwing up the game, however much it was going against him. He had hoped to run close inshore and find some creek where he could give his foes the slip.

But the riverside showed no such convenient opening in its interminable length of steep, jungle-clad bank. There was but one chance of escape, and that was in running the launch ashore at full speed and trusting blindly to luck to avert disastrous consequences.

This plan was no sooner thought of by Huxton Fenner than it was acted on. Swerving from her course with the sudden movement of a terrified horse, the launch, still the focused objective of the steamer's searchlight, dashed for the shore.

Immediately a shout came from Ralwin, who was in the

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leading pinnacle, and a volley of rifle-shots whistled through the air.

"Quick!" cried Fenner, hurrying his captives to the bows, above the little deck-house. "They mean business in deadly earnest. We are safe here," he added, as the bullets pinged harmlessly against the iron-plating of the barrier protecting them, or sped onward overhead, "and in less than another three minutes we shall be on dry land again."

Nearer and more distinct became the bush-tangled banks of the mighty stream. Realising that his intended prey was slipping from his grasp, Dirk Ralwin, maddened by angry alarm and chagrin, ordered a ceaseless fire to be kept up on the escaping craft.

The launch was struck in a hundred places. Bullets chipped the woodwork and dented the metal plates, but none on board was injured. The deck-house was an effective barricade against the hail of lead flying in every direction.

"Sheer waste of ammunition!" said Fenner, tranquilly lighting a fresh cigarette. "I'm surprised that so slow-witted a man as Dirk Ralwin should allow his anger to get the better of him!"

Detesting the American though he did, Carton Ross could not help feeling an admiration for the other's pluck and coolness. He himself showed no trace of fear, while Lorna, standing close at his side, was equally brave.

Onward raced the launch. Now the high banks ahead seemed to rush inwards, as if to crush the small vessel that dared to meet them. A terrible fatality looked to be a certainty. Even Lorna's cheeks paled, and she caught hold of her companion's arm with a sudden, tight grip.

"Courage, Lorna!" Ross murmured. "You may be sure that Fenner isn't going to hurl us all to destruction just in order to escape falling into Ralwin's hands. The stake he is playing for is too high for him to do anything of that sort."

"But look!" answered the girl, her gaze fixed in a fascinated stare on the tree-mantled shore before them. "When we strike ground we shall be smashed to pieces. Nothing can save us."

The answer that Carton Ross opened his lips to make was never given, for at that moment the launch swung round, almost within her own length, with such velocity that the two comrades and their swartly custodian were hurled to the deck.

Fenner alone remained on his feet, for, expecting some such manoeuvre, he had clutched at a rail directly the vessel began to turn.

"That was cleverly done!" he remarked approvingly. "The engineer chap down below knows how to manage his machinery!"

The launch was now steaming so close inshore that her gunwale brushed against the outstanding branches of trees and undergrowth. The engines were reversed, clouds of steam hissed from the exhausts, and in an incredibly short space of time the vessel was almost stationary in the deep, searchlight-illuminated water.

"Now!" cried Huxton Fenner. "Jump for your lives!"

Amidst a storm of rifle-bullets, the comrades sprang out from the deck of the launch, landing with a crash amongst the high growth of the jungle. They were followed by Huxton Fenner, the big black, and two of the native firemen. The other men in the engine-room were shot down as they attempted to leave.

Pushing through the bushes, the refugees did not pause until the sound of the rifle-firing from the two steam-pinnaces had ceased. Then Huxton Fenner called a short halt. Standing with bent head, he listened in strained attention for a few moments. The forest was strangely silent after the din and uproar of a minute or two before.

Alarmed and terrified by the noise of the rifle-fire, the prowling creatures of the wild had crept back to their haunts. The night-birds were silent. It was as if the shadow of death had fallen over the earth and chilled everything by its sinister presence.

"So far, so good!" Fenner remarked in a guarded tone of voice. "That ruse of mine evidently took Ralwin and his party by surprise. They weren't prepared for it, and so we were given a little time in which to make our landing secure. But it won't be long before they land, too, and find our trail, so onward we must go."

A thrilling sense of hope and expectation had come to Carton Ross directly he and Lorna found themselves on land again. As they had escaped from Dirk Ralwin, so now, he reasoned, they might escape from the man who held them in his power. There was every justification for him to think in this way.

The confinement and strict surveillance they had been subjected to was now removed.

It appeared to the lad that all that was required on the part of himself and Lorna to regain their freedom was to make a bold dash for it at an opportune moment. The forest depths were as strange and unfamiliar to Fenner and his three followers as to themselves. It was there, Ross exultantly told himself, that freedom was waiting for them.

As they all moved forward, one after another, he contrived to let Lorna know of his designs. By the look in her dark, limpid eyes, and the flush of excited emotion mantling her cheeks, the lad knew that now, as ever before, he could depend upon his companion whatever emergency might arise to confront them.

"Keep a close watch on my movements," he told her, "so that you'll be able to act immediately I give you the sign to do so."

The way was led by Fenner, whose knowledge of forest lore and wood craft was an extensive one. Behind him walked one of the native firemen from the abandoned launch. Then came Carton Ross and Lorna, with the black and the second native close at their heels.

For some time no one uttered a word. It required every effort of strength and thought to grapple with the spreading growth of bush and grass and reed, which extended to every point of the compass in amazing profusion.

Ropey, sinuously-twining branches wound across the trackless wastes of jungle and crossed overhead, rising tier above tier until they reached the topmost canopy of many-tufted foliage. Flowers of huge size, whose blossoms were faintly discernible in the darkened moonlight filtering between the trees, were crushed under the advancing feet of the travellers.

Even by night, and veiled by mist and darkness, it was a rare and entrancing panorama that unrolled itself to the eye at every forward step. But Carton Ross observed these natural beauties with a carelessly indifferent glance, for his mind was set on something of far higher importance to himself and his companion.

He was watching, waiting, keenly on the alert to seize that opportunity of escape that he was sure would present itself to him. His heart beat fast with excitement. The daring of his projected venture appealed to every instinct of boldness and daring that he possessed in so large a measure.

At last the chance came his way in a startlingly unexpected manner. A large, yellow-striped wildcat suddenly bounded in between the captives and the black, who, taken completely by surprise, leapt back a step or two.

Instantly Lorna's hand was grasped by her comrade.

"Come!" whispered Ross. "Now's the time!"

The two sped away into the welcoming shelter of the jungle. As the dense foliage closed in about them they heard a raucous, growling cry from the negro. It was answered by an angry shout from Fenner and the excited chattering of the two natives.

"They'll be after us in a jiffy," said Ross. "Hold tight to me, Lorna, and you'll be all right."

Side by side they plunged forward through the great, dark-green sea of the forest that surrounded them on every hand for countless leagues of space.

The Trackers—Above Crown!—Fenner Wins A'gain.

Huxton Fenner, parting the leaves before him with a quick hand, peered through the opening across the moonlit glade at the black, shadowy wall of the forest rising beyond.

His eyes had in them something of the look of a famishing hyena, and, as a matter of fact, his temper at the moment was exceedingly like that of the animal in question. All the worst passions of his nature were working at boiling-point within him.

For over an hour he and his three followers had been vainly but unceasingly endeavouring to track down the two prisoners who had escaped from them. The trail left by Lorna and her companion was not in itself very difficult to follow, but no sight of those who made it could be caught by their pursuing enemies.

On the big black Fenner showered threats and savage imprecations for allowing the comrades to escape, but inwardly he reproached himself still more for permitting them to move about with every freedom of limb. Fears beset him lest Ross should fall once more into Ralwin's hands, or meet with a tragic fate in the depths of the forest, where wild beasts had their homes.

To lose Carton Ross was to lose the precious papers that proved the sure title of the lad to the greatest fortune in the world, and without those papers the American could never attain the position that he had mapped out for himself. Once more he would be only a notorious, penniless adventurer, bereft of all the golden hopes that he had been inspired with by the vision of such boundless wealth.

The thought maddened him almost beyond endurance. He raved at his men until they cowered before him in abject

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(Continued from page 19.)

terror. Taunts and brutal blows drove them on to the hunt for the missing captives, against whom they vowed cruel vengeance for causing them such trouble and humiliation.

It was when nearing the little glade that Fenner believed he caught a fleeting glimpse of a tall, slender figure running between the trees. Who else could it be but Carton Ross? No one, he was certain, in such a place.

Pouncing upon the track with fierce eagerness, he followed it to the edge of the glade. There he paused, with ears alert as those of any pointer, and he was rewarded in a few moments by the faint crash and rustle of leaves and grass on the far side of the jungle defile.

"They're not far off," he said to his sable retainer. "Do you hear them?"

The black nodded, and parted his lips in a fiendishly vindictive smile.

"Yes," he replied. "And soon they shall be at your mercy again!"

Next moment he was gone, gliding into the undergrowth like some monstrous black snake, while Fenner and the two natives ran straight across the glade with the object of pouncing unexpectedly upon the comrades.

The flattened grass pointed the direction taken by the fugitives, but about fifty yards farther on it was lost at the edge of some broken, bare ground that irregularly covered a patch of considerable size.

Muttering a curse under his breath, Fenner crossed this open space, and hunted high and low for the resumption of the broken trail. Nowhere could he discover it. Fuming with rage and impatience, he sent his followers to right and left of him, and walked slowly forward in a straight line, his gaze searching the ground for the elusive track that he had lost.

There was no track, however, to find. Hotly pursued, as they were, Lorna and her companion, directly they came to the bare stretch of ground, realised what an invaluable advantage it offered to them.

"This is where we lose them and they lose us," said Ross, glancing quickly round. "Quick, Lorna, and climb this tree. I will follow you. Amongst all that wealth of foliage we shall be perfectly hidden from observation."

Lithe and active as a deer, the fearless girl climbed the tree, a mimosa of huge growth, and was quickly lost to sight amongst the densely-spreading leaves of the lowest branches. Ross was soon at her side.

Scarcely had the foliage ceased to shake and rustle when Huxton Fenner and his men passed within a yard or two of the comrades' lofty hiding-place.

The loud, angry voice of the American could be heard for several minutes afterwards. Then it ceased, but the crashing of branches and the rustling of the grass warned Lorna and her companion that their foes were near at hand, and that the slightest movement they made might well lead to their recapture.

It was a novel situation to be in. The branch supporting them, itself thicker round than the trunk of an ordinary tree, was no more than twenty feet from the ground. Down through the innumerable tiny gaps in the foliage silver threads of moonlight fell, and shone upon the comrades with a dim but clear light that enabled them to distinctly see one another.

"They'll soon move off to another spot," Ross whispered, "and then we shall be able to descend and get away in another direction."

Lorna flashed a smile at him with her dark eyes.

"It will be safer for us to stay where we are for some time, even if they do go away," she said. "Besides, we couldn't have chosen a better resting-place."

"It's snug enough," Ross answered, "but I'm anxious for us to push back to the riverside as soon as possible. The steam-launch may be where we abandoned it, alone and unguarded, for Dirk Ralwin wouldn't deem it necessary to put any of his men in possession. He'd think it would be there whenever he might choose to return and seize it."

"But how could we work it?" Lorna inquired. "I know next to nothing about machinery, and you're not an engineer, are you?"

Ross gave vent to a soft, little laugh.

"I'm not," he answered. "All the same, I fancy that I should know how to run a steam-launch. All the help I should need would be that of a stoker, and you might manage to take the place of one for a few hours."

"Of course," said the girl. "You can rely upon me to

act as your stoker for as long as you like. I promise you that you'll find me equal to the task."

No more was said by either for some time. Busy with their thoughts, they stared up at the tiny spaces of sky that were visible, or peered down at the ground below.

It was while doing this that Lorna suddenly perceived a shadowy figure glide noiselessly to the foot of the tree and look upwards.

To her horrified surprise, she saw that the individual was none other than the huge black who had kept guard over her and Carton Ross in the saloon of the deserted steam-launch. The man's eyes, by a curious phenomenon, reflected the moonlight, and seemed to emit rays of yellow fire. His face, illuminated as it was, showed vivid and distinct in every line and feature.

It was a brutal, repulsive face, but it was the gleaming eyes that held Lorna's terrified gaze from the moment she looked into them. They appeared to be drawing her down towards them. There was a dreadful fascination in staring at these moonlit orbs of the black that held the girl in an unnerving trance that she could not shake off.

In vain she tried to open her lips, to whisper some word that would warn Ross of the queer dilemma she was in. An inability to use her will, that grew more and more pronounced every minute, had taken possession of all her faculties.

All at once she found herself slipping and falling from the branch she was on. Then her lost power of speech returned to her, and she uttered a loud cry. Too late, Carton Ross perceived her danger, and attempted to save her from losing her balance.

She was gone even as he threw himself forward to grasp her with both hands, only narrowly escaping a fall himself, and, crashing through the leaves, descended headlong towards the earth.

But Lorna's cry had been heard by the black. He saw the girl falling, and, opening his great arms, he caught her as lightly as if she had been a feather. He knew who she was, and a guttural laugh of gleeful joy burst from his thick lips. Holding her under one arm, he turned and plunged in amongst the bushes.

Quick as lightning, Ross slipped off his perch and descended to the ground. Anger and fear for his companion were upon him. He had been so sure that they had shaken off Huxton Fenner's pursuit that this disagreeable surprise was almost more than he could endure.

Shaking off the emotion that had gripped him, however, he gave his mind and energy to the task of assisting Lorna in her plight. Following the newly-made trail, he soon had the big negro in sight again.

A fresh shock was in store for him. Scarcely had he decided that he must close in and spring upon his dusky antagonist from behind, when the other stopped, and, holding back his head, gave vent to a shrill whistle.

Instantly three men ran up to him from amongst the jungle-growth. One was Huxton Fenner, and the other two were the native firemen, who had safely left the steam-launch after she had been run inshore.

A feeling closely akin to that of helpless despair took possession of Ross as he saw how fortune had turned against him. Then a rush of anger followed, and, imprudently daring, he pushed aside the branches of a bush that concealed him in order to secure a better view of what was going on.

The rustle of the leaves betrayed his whereabouts at once to his foes. Seeing him, they gave utterance to a fierce shout, and, with the exception of Huxton Fenner, turned round to pursue him.

"Come back!" cried the American, a derisively laughing note in the tone of his voice. "I fancy I know of a trick that will bring our young friend to us of his own accord."

Craning over to his black retainer, he said something to him, at the same time pointing to a black, reedy pool, into which a creek of the river emptied its waters. The negro grinned and chuckled hideously, nodding his woolly head, and prouetting to and fro on his toes.

Then, lifting Lorna above his head, he strode to the edge of the pool. It was clear to all what his intention was, and Carton Ross, watching the performance with sickening fear and impotent rage, knew that the girl's life was in danger of coming to a dreadful and untimely end.

Clenching his fists, his face pale and drawn, his eyes feverishly bright, he stepped forward into full view of his enemies.

"Ha!" cried Fenner mockingly. "The bird has fallen to the lure. Come here, young fellow!"

(There will be another grand instalment of this exciting story in next Wednesday's issue of THE GEM LIBRARY. Order your copy in advance.)