

HARMSWORTH'S NEW ATLAS.

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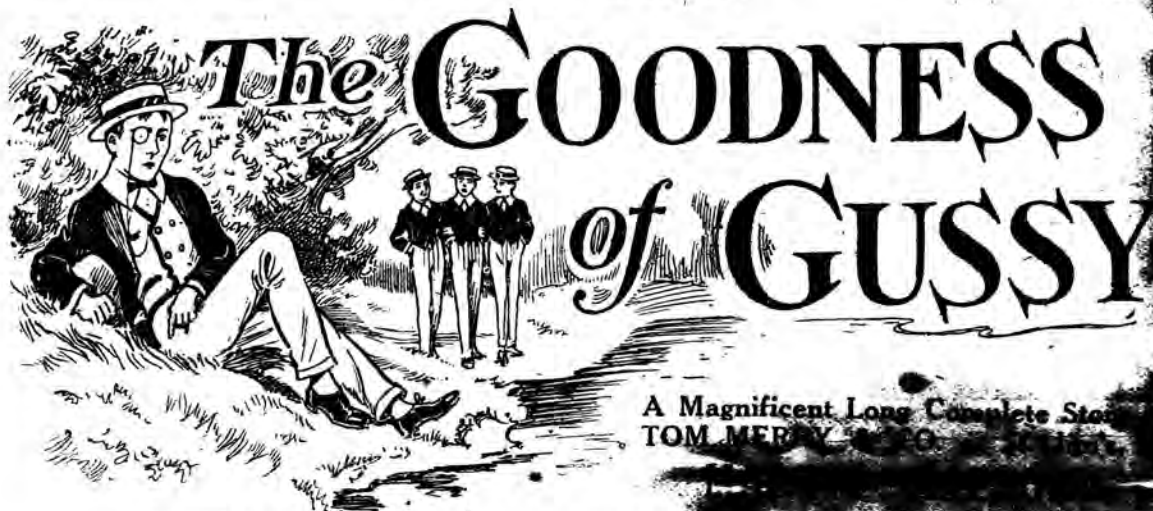


"THE GOODNESS OF GUSSY!"



ON THE TRACK OF THE IMPOSTOR!

(A Thrilling and Dramatic Scene in the Splendid Long Complete School Tale in this Issue.) 28-6-19



A Magnificent Long Complete Story
TOM MERRY & CO. ILLUSTRATED

CHAPTER 1.

Worrying Gussy!

"TAKING it easy?" asked Tom Merry, with a smile. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy certainly looked as if he were taking it easy.

The ornament of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's was reclining at ease on the grassy bank of the Ryll, gazing meditatively at the shining river, when the Terrible Three came sauntering along.

His straw hat was tilted a little over his noble brow to shade his eyes—and eyeglass—from the summer sun. The swell of St. Jim's looked a picture of lazy comfort.

He glanced up benignantly as the chums of the Shell halted and regarded him.

"Yaas, wathah, deah boy!"

"Slacker!" remarked Manners.

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"Loafter!" said Monty Lowther severely.

"I am not exactly loafin', Lowthah!" said Arthur Augustus with dignity. "I have been exertin' myself feahfully at cwicket! Aftah my exertions, I considah that I am entitled to a west. This is a vewy beautiful spot, deah boys! There was nothin' to mar the beauty of the landscape till you fellows came along—"

"What?" ejaculated Tom Merry.

"Gussy is being funny!" said Monty Lowther. "I was going to tell him there was a wasp settlin' on the back of his neck. Now I won't!"

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus' lazy comfort vanished in a twinkling, and he leaped to his feet as if he had been electrified.

He clutched his hat, and waved it round him.

"Bai Jove! I cannot see that wasp, Lowthah! Is it gone?"

"What wasp?" asked Lowther.

"The one that was settlin' on my neck, of course!"

"Was there a wasp settlin' on your neck?"

Arthur Augustus stared at him.

"You said there was, you uttah ass!" he exclaimed.

"Not at all, old scout! I said I was going to tell you there was, and I wouldn't! Naturally I wouldn't, as there wasn't! See?"

Arthur Augustus screwed his eyeglass into his eye, and surveyed the humorist of the Shell.

"Do you call that a joke, Lowthah?" he inquired.

"Certainly! Not one of my best," said

Lowther modestly; "but pretty good to muddling! What do you think, Gussy?"

"I think you are an uttah ass!"

With that crushing reply Arthur Augustus settled down again in the deep grass, Tom Merry & Co. watching him with grinning faces. It was not the work of a moment for Gussy to settle down in the grass. He had to take care that his elegant jacket was not rumpled, and that the beautiful crease in his trousers was not spoiled. This required care.

But he was nicely settled at last.

"I suppose it's no good telling you that there's a bee buzzing just behind your ear, Gussy?" said Monty Lowther.

"I wese to take any furthah notice of your widdleous remarks, Lowthah!" Besides, he's accustomed to having a bee in his bonnet!" remarked Manners.

"I wegard that remark as asinine, Mannahs!"

"Let's get on!" said Tom Merry, laughing. "We shall never get our ginger-pop at Mrs. Murphy's at this rate! Coming along to join us in a ginger, Gussy?"

"Thank you very much, deah boy, but I think I will west a little aftah my exertions!"

The Terrible Three walked along under the trees by the river, leaving Arthur Augustus reclining at ease. But Lowther turned his head.

"Look out for that bee, Gussy!"

"Wats!"

"Well, I've warned you!" said Lowther.

And the Terrible Three disappeared under the trees.

"Wats!" repeated Arthur Augustus to himself. "I wegard that ass Lowthah as a sillay, pwactical-jokin' duffah! Wats!"

The Terrible Three of the Shell were gone; but they were not gone far. As soon as the trees hid them from Arthur Augustus' sight Lowther halted.

"Wait for me!" he said.

"Oh, come on!" yawned Manners.

"It's too warm for japing Gussy!"

"Bow-wow! Wait a minute!"

Monty Lowther jerked off a long switch in the thicket, and stepped back through the trees—behind the spot where the swell of St. Jim's was reclining. He trod on tiptoe, and Arthur Augustus, gazing in a meditative way across the shining river, did not hear him coming. The humorist of the Shell grinned out of the thicket just behind Arthur Augustus' reclining head.

Buzzzzzz!

It was Monty Lowther; but it sounded much more like a bee than like a Shell

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started a little.

"Bai Jove! There is weally a Lowther heard him murmur. "I twist the howwid insect will not settle me!"

Monty Lowther reached cautiously through the twigs, the long switch extended in his hand.

The tip of the switch touched the ear of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, and tickled it gently.

"Yawwooooh!"

Arthur Augustus was electrified again.

Not having the remotest suspicion there was a humorist in the bush behind him, he naturally supposed that a bee was settling on his ear.

He leaped to his feet with a howl.

Lowther's arm vanished before he was up, and the Shell fellow lay very close to the thicket.

Arthur Augustus gazed round him, waved his straw hat excitedly.

"Yoooh! Yooooof! Gewwaway, you howwid beast! Wooooooof!"

The buzz was silent, and there was no bee to be seen.

"Bai Jove! It is weally hard lines, a fellow cannot take a west aftah exertin' himself on the cwicket-field!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "I should be vewy sowwy to hurt a bee, or anythin' else, but if that howwid insect remained near I should be stongly tempted to give it a feahful cosh! However, it appears to be gone."

Once more, with great care for his elegant clobber, Arthur Augustus settled down in the grass.

As soon as he was comfortably settled his grinning face looked out of the bush behind him, and a hand and arm appeared, and a switch tickled the back of his noble neck.

"Yoooop!"

Arthur Augustus clapped his hand to the spot so quickly that Lowther had time to withdraw the switch. Arthur Augustus clutched it, and it was jerked out of Lowther's hand.

The swell of the Fourth sat up, switch in his hand, regarding it in amazement.

"Bai Jove! It isn't a bee at all, a beastlay twig! How on earth—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Lowthah, you feahful wottah—"

There was a rustling in the thicket, the humorist of the Shell retreated.

Arthur Augustus jumped up and shouted.

"You uttah ass, Lowthah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I have a vewy gweat mind to aftah you and give you a feahful thr—"

in, you uttah duffah!" roared Arthur Augustus in great wrath.

Lowther's chuckle died away in the trees. With a sniff of wrath Arthur Augustus settled down again, this time with his back to a tree. And at last he was able to take his well-earned repose undisturbed.

CHAPTER 2.

Straight from the Shoulder!

TOM MERRY & CO. sauntered on along the path by the river after Lowther had rejoined his chums.

The Terrible Three were feeling very merry and bright that sunny afternoon. It was a half-holiday at St. Jim's, and they had enjoyed their hours of leisure on the cricket-field. Their House had beaten the New House, which was a great satisfaction. The weather was perfect; the sky was cloudless, and just then it seemed to Tom Merry and his chums, as to Pangloss of old, that everything was for the best in the best of all possible worlds.

"Hallo! That's a cheery-looking merchant!" remarked Manners, as a stranger came in sight on the river-path.

Manners' remark was in a sarcastic vein; the "merchant" did not look very cheery.

He was a dusty, dilapidated gentleman of uncertain age, with a face almost coppery in hue, evidently the effect of liquid refreshment indulged in not wisely but too well.

He had a knobby stick under his arm, as he tramped along the path, and his unwashed face wore a scowling expression.

He glanced up as the three school-boys came by, and his scowl deepened.

Apparently the sight of three bright, cheery fellows had an irritating effect upon the dusty, frowzy "merchant."

The Terrible Three would have passed him without notice; but the dusty merchant stopped in their path.

"Skuse me!" he said.

"Hallo! What do you want?"

The dusty gentleman eyed them with shifty eyes.

"Could you 'elp a pore bloke on his way?" he inquired.

The question was accompanied by a rich exhalation of tobacco and rum, which seemed to hint that the dusty traveller's last stopping-place had been at the Green Man at Rylcombe, or some similar place. Tom Merry and his chums stepped back a little. Stale rum and tobacco, at close quarters, did not quite agree with them.

"Nothing to give away, my man!" said Manners shortly.

Manners would have helped any poor "bloke" on his way cheerfully enough; but he did not see handing out money to be spent in drink.

"'Arf-a-crown would 'elp!" suggested the dusty merchant.

"Well, my hat!" ejaculated Tom Merry.

He had slid his hand into his pocket in search of twopenny; but he drew it out again. He certainly had no half-crowns for boozey tramps.

"I'm lookin' for work," said the dusty gentleman.

"You haven't found any?" asked Lowther sympathetically.

"No, I ain't!"

"I thought not," said Lowther blandly.

"You've been looking for it a long time, I suppose? Years and years—what? And never finding any! Too bad!"

"Come on!" said Manners.

The dusty man did not move out of the path, however. He stood there grimly, and he had let his stick slide down into his hand. It was rather a

lonely spot in the wood by the river, and it occurred to the Terrible Three that the "merchant" was looking for trouble. That did not alarm them, however. The tramp's sour scowl and his stick had no terrors for the chums of the Shell.

"Can't you 'elp a pore bloke?" demanded the tramp.

"Nothing doing!" said Manners.

"Twopenny any good?" asked Tom Merry, relenting.

"Keep your tuppence in your trousers-pocket, Tom Merry, you ass!" said Manners. "That chap's had enough to drink, by the look of him. Stand aside, my man!"

The dusty man started a little, and looked rather curiously at the captain of the Shell.

"Your name Merry, sir?" he asked.

"Yes."

"So's mine!"

"Is it?" said Tom.

"George Herbert Merry, sir, that's my name," said the dusty gentleman. "Same as yours, sir."

"My hat! Here's one of your merry relations turned up, Tommy!" exclaimed Lowther, with a chuckle.

Tom Merry laughed.

"It's not an uncommon name," he said. "Well, my man, if your name's Merry, the same as mine, I'll make it threepence."

"I asked you for 'arf-a-crown!" said Mr. George Herbert Merry, in an emphatic and significant tone.

"You won't get it! Stand aside!"

The man gripped his stick harder, and measured the Terrible Three with his shifty eyes.

"You'd better 'and out that 'arf-crown!" he said, in a bullying tone.

Tom eyed him steadily.

"I won't hand out a penny!" he said. "And you'll get aside, my man, or you'll be shifted. That's a straight tip!"

"You'll 'and out that 'arf-crown, or somebody will be 'urt!" said the tramp, raising his voice.

"That somebody will be George Herbert Merry, then!" remarked Monty Lowther. "Come on, you fellows! Shift him, if he won't move!"

The Terrible Three marched straight on, giving the ruffian the choice of getting out of the way if he liked, or taking the consequences. Instead of getting out of the way, George Herbert Merry-raised his stick and struck out savagely at Tom Merry's head.

But Tom was on the look-out.

A quick jump back saved him from the lashing stick, and as the blow swept down Tom sprang forward again, hitting out.

His knuckles crashed on the stubbly chin of the ruffian, and George Herbert Merry—if that was his name—staggered backwards with a wild howl.

Crash!

He landed on his back on the grassy path, roaring.

"Come on!" said Tom.

The chums of the Shell walked on—Lowther stooping to pick up the stick the ruffian had dropped, and to send it whirling out into the river. He considered that it was safer there.

The dusty ruffian sat up in the path, clapping his chin and blinking savagely after the three. He made no attempt to follow them.

"Ow, ow, ow!" he gasped. "Ow, ow!"

A stream of lurid language followed, as the ruffian picked himself up and resumed his way along the river.

Tom Merry & Co. stroled on, and came out into Rylcombe Lane, where they fell in with Blake and Herries and Digby of the Fourth. The juniors headed for the village shop together, and George Herbert Merry, by that time, had quite

disappeared from their minds. But the captain of the Shell was destined to be reminded of the dusty rascal who—according to his own statement—bore the same name as himself.

CHAPTER 3.

A Shock for Gussy!

"BAI JOVE!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy frowned.

He was still taking his ease under the trees, by the shining Ryll, when a dusty figure blotted the landscape in front of him. Mr. George Herbert Merry, passing on his way along the towing-path, had loomed up before him; and at the sight of the elegant figure reposing in the grass George Herbert halted.

He gave the swell of St. Jim's a shifty look. He realised that he was too near the school, which could be seen over the trees, for threats to be of any use to him; there was plenty of help at hand, if he tried that game. So the dusty gentleman adopted a piteous look and a whining tone.

"Will you skuse me, sir, if I sit down a minute 'ere?" he asked, in a tired voice; and, without waiting to be excused, he sat down on the grassy bank near the elegant Fourth-Former of St. Jim's.

"Oh, certainly!" said Arthur Augustus politely.

His frown was only momentary; Arthur Augustus was the pink of politeness, even to a dusty tramp who was redolent of rum and tobacco. He sincerely wished that the dusty gentleman had taken the leeward side, that was all.

"Ot, ain't it?" said the dusty stranger.

"It is wathah warm," assented Arthur Augustus.

"Takin' it heasy, sir?"

"I am takin' it wathah easy at the pwesent moment."

"I 'spose you don't know a man about 'ere who's got work for an honest man to do?" asked the dusty traveller.

"Yaas, wathah! There are scurvey hands wanted on the Quavvy Farm," said Arthur Augustus. "I can give you the direction—"

"Agricultoral work," said the dusty man, "ain't in my line. I mean work at my own trade."

"Pway what is your twade?" asked Arthur Augustus, full of sympathy for a man who could not find employment.

Mr. Merry reflected for a moment or two. He could not very well state that his trade was begging or pilfering, or a mixture of both.

"Glass-cuttin'" he said, at last, feeling pretty certain that there were no glass-works in the district.

"Bai Jove! I weally do not know of anybody who is in want of a man for glass-cuttin'," said Arthur Augustus. "I don't know whethah that is done in this part of Sussex. I am vewy sorry. It might be bettah for you to twy in the Pottewies, or somewhah."

"That's a long way from 'ere."

"Yaas, I wathah feah it is."

"P'raps you could 'elp a man on his way?" suggested Mr. Merry.

Arthur Augustus looked at him. He caught a whiff of the rum with which George Herbert had lately refreshed himself, and coughed.

George Herbert was looking at him, too, attentively. He rubbed his stubbly chin as he looked. There was a mark under the stubble where Tom Merry's knuckles had landed.

"Pewhaps I can be of assistance to you," said Arthur Augustus, after some reflection. "It is weally too bad for a

man not to be able to find work. I regard it as a vewy sewious thing. I will inkuish of my Housemastah wethah he knows anybody who wants a glass-cuttah."

"Oh!" ejaculated George Herbert. "Mr. Wailton is a vewy kind-hearted man, and I am suah he would give you any assistance in his powah in findin' a job," continued Arthur Augustus innocently. "If you will leave me your name and address—"

George Herbert was regarding D'Arcy's straw hat. He observed that the school colours displayed thereon were the same as those sported by the three juniors he had met in the wood—one of whom was named Tom Merry—the one who had marked his stubbly chin. And Mr. Herbert was struck by the unsuspecting innocence in Arthur Augustus' noble countenance—and in his remarks.

"I dessay you belong to the school yonder, sir?" he said, with a nod towards the old tower that showed above the trees.

"Oh, yaas! I am in the Fourth Form at St. Jim's," answered Arthur Augustus politely. "Mr. Wailton is my Housemastah, you know."

"Praps you know Master Merry?" "Tom Mewwy? Yaas, wathah! He is in the Shell."

"The Shell?" repeated George Herbert, with a stare.

Arthur Augustus smiled.

"That is the name of a Form," he explained. "The next Form above the Fourth, you know. They wegard themselves as the Middle School; but, as a mattah of fact, they are juniors, just the same as we are in the Fourth."

"My name's Merry," said the tramp, still regarding Arthur Augustus in the same attentive way.

"Bai Jove! Is it?" "George Herbert Merry, sir. I've got a relation at your school named Tom."

Arthur Augustus sat upright. He jammed in his celebrated monocle a little more tightly, and stared at the dusty wayfarer.

"You are a relation of Tom Mewwy?" he ejaculated.

"Yes, sir. His—his uncle."

"My dear fellow, you are makin' a mistake," said Arthur Augustus. "Tom Mewwy's uncle is Genewal Mewwy, and he is at pwesent in Germany."

"I'm his other uncle, sir."

"His othah uncle, Mr. Poinsett, is in Americah."

"He ain't never spoken of me, I s'pose?" said George Herbert sorrowfully. "I'm a pore relation, sir."

"Yaas, I pwesume so, if you are a welayon at all," said Arthur Augustus. "But—ahem!—but—"

"I 'ope, sir, as 'ow you don't doubt my word?"

"I should be vewy sowwy to doubt anybody's word," said Arthur Augustus. "But I weally cannot cwedit that you are a welayon of Tom Mewwy's. I t'wist I do not hurt your feelin's by makin' the remark?"

"I'm used to 'ard words, sir," said George Herbert sadly. "But I'll prove it to you."

"Ahem! If you can pprove it—"

"Ere's my registration-card," said Mr. Merry.

Arthur Augustus glanced at the card produced by the dusty tramp. There was the name, "George Herbert Merry," right enough. Arthur Augustus looked grave.

"Bai Jove!" he murmured.

"And I'm goin' to call on my nephew now," continued Mr. Merry, watching Arthur Augustus' speaking countenance like a cat watching a mouse. "I s'pose

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he won't mind his uncle calling in at the big school?"

"I—I— Oh deah! I—I think I should not call in just at pwesent," said Arthur Augustus hastily.

"Why not?"

"Tom Mewwy is out of gates, for one weason. He passed me beah a quartah of an hour ago, goin' to the village."

"I s'pose a man can wait for him. Praps he's too 'igh and 'aughty to speak to his uncle, 'cause I've 'ad bad luck," said Mr. Merry. "That don't matter to me. I'm goin' to call on 'im, and if he don't give me a 'elping 'and I'll show 'im up before all the place!"

Arthur Augustus shuddered.

It seemed incredible that this dusty rascal was an uncle of Tom Merry, and a brother of old General Merry. But if he had the nerve to present himself at St. Jim's in that character—

Certainly he would not do so unless his claim was well founded.

That much was certain.

"Does—does—does Tom Mewwy know anythin' about you?" asked Arthur Augustus at last.

"I dunno. I dessay the general never told him he had a brother in quod," said Mr. Merry.

"The genewal! You—you know that Tom Mewwy's uncle is a genewal?"

"Course I does, as he's my brother," said Mr. Merry; "and his other uncle is in Americah, too—Mr. Poinsett."

"Bai Jove!"

It did not occur to Arthur Augustus, for the moment, that he had furnished that information to the dusty tramp himself.

"I'm 'ard up," continued Mr. Merry—"awful 'ard up. Young Tom's goin' to lend me a 'elping 'and, or I'll know the reason why. If he don't, I'll kick up a shindy. I know that!"

"That would be in vewy bad taste," faltered Arthur Augustus.

"That there's my intention, if I don't get some 'elp," said Mr. Merry. "And I'm goin' at once."

He rose from the grassy bank, and started along the towing-path towards the school. Arthur Augustus gazed after him helplessly. Still, he did not quite credit the man's extraordinary story. Yet, it was possible, of course, that Tom Merry had some shady relation whose existence had not been mentioned to him by his elders. Such things did happen. If the man went to St. Jim's, that was proof of it. Unfortunately, it would also "show up" Tom Merry before the whole school.

Talbot of the Shell came along the towing-path. The dusty man called out to him, with the corner of his eye, as it were, on Arthur Augustus.

"This 'ere right for St. Jim's, sir?"

Talbot glanced at him.

"Keep right on, and turn by the boat-house," he answered.

"Thanky!"

Talbot, somewhat surprised, went on his way, quite unable to make out what such a character wanted at St. Jim's, but not giving the matter much thought.

Mr. Merry tramped on.

Arthur Augustus detached himself from the grass.

"Hold on!" he called out.

Mr. Merry held on. Arthur Augustus hastened after him, and overtook him. The tramp gave him a surly look.

"Undah the cires, it would be wathah—wathah injudicious to pwesent yourself at the school just now," faltered Arthur Augustus. "I—I suggest, deah boy, that you should try to get a change of attire, and—and—if you will excuse me—a wash!"

Mr. Merry granted.

"Ow's a man to get toggery without money?" he demanded.

"Bai Jove! That is vewy true!"

"If you could lend me 'arf-a-quid to get my duds out of pawn—" suggested Mr. Merry, eyeing Arthur Augustus hungrily.

Arthur Augustus hesitated.

Even his simple and unsuspicious mind could not help giving lodgment to the suspicion that the dusty gentleman had "spun him a yarn" in order to extract half-a-sovereign from him.

"Well, I'm goin' on, then," said Mr. Merry surlily, as the swell of St. Jim's did not speak.

"Pway stop a minute—"

"I ain't stoppin'!"

And Mr. Merry did not stop. He tramped on without turning his head. Arthur Augustus' doubt vanished, and he ran after the tramp, and caught him by the shoulder.

"Pway stop!" he exclaimed breathlessly. "I will find you half-a-sovereign, my deah man. You must certainly look a little more respectable befoah you pwesent yourself at St. Jim's, if you are wresolved to call on Tom Mewwy."

George Herbert's fishy eyes glinted.

"Mind, I ain't asking you for money," he said, as the swell of St. Jim's fumbled for his purse. "I can get what I want from my nephew."

"I will make you the loan with pleasuah," said Arthur Augustus. "Tom Mewwy is a friend of mine, and I should not like him to be disgwaced befoah all St. Jim's."

"What might your name be, sir?" asked Mr. Merry, eyeing him shiftilly.

"D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form."

"I'll remember that, sir."

There was no doubt that George Herbert would remember it—so long as he honoured that neighbourhood with his presence, at all events. Such an exceedingly unsuspicious young gentleman was a "find" to George Herbert. His life would have been an easier one if he could have met such another every day.

"Heah is a ten-shillin' note—"

"Thank you kindly, sir!"

"I—I will speak to Tom Mewwy, and pwepare him for this," said Arthur Augustus. "It will be much bettah for him not to be taken by surpris. You will not be comin' to the school to-day?"

Mr. Merry suppressed a grin. He was not likely to present himself at St. Jim's as Tom Merry's uncle, either that day or any other day. He had studied Arthur Augustus' simple face very carefully before spinning his egregious yarn, but he was pretty certain that it would not do for anybody else at Tom Merry's school.

"Not to-day, sir! I've got to get my clothes out," he said. "To-morrow!"

"Vewy well! You do not mind if I speak to Tom Mewwy, and mention to him that his uncle is comin'?"

"Not at all, sir."

"Vewy good!"

Mr. George Herbert Merry touched his ragged hat, and started down the towing-path—the way he had come. The Green Man at Rylcombe was the nearest place of refreshment.

Arthur Augustus gazed after him till he was out of sight with a serious, troubled face.

"Poor old Tom Mewwy!" he murmured. "This will be wathah a shock to him! Poor old Tom Mewwy!"

And Arthur Augustus sadly took his way to St. Jim's.

George Herbert Merry was taking his way to the Green Man, not at all sadly—in fact, jocosely.

"Of all the thumpin' idiots—" So ran his grateful thoughts. "Of all the



As soon as Gussy was comfortably settled a grinning face looked out of the bush behind him, and a hand and arm appeared, and a switch tickled the back of Gussy's noble neck. "Yooooop!" (See chapter 1.)

blithering, born idiots, I reckon the feller with the glass takes the 'ole cake. I spotted 'im for a soft hass, cert'nly; but as for thinkin' he would swaller that yarn—well, strike me pink!"

Arthur Augustus was feeling very distressed on poor old Tom Merry's account as he walked home to St. Jim's. He would have felt much less distressed if he could have guessed George Herbert's thoughts. But, naturally, he couldn't.

CHAPTER 4.

Tea in Study No. 6.

"TEA ready?"

Three voices asked that question at once, as Blake and Herries and Digby came into Study No. 6 in the School House.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was there.

As D'Arcy was in first, the chums naturally expected him to have tea ready, especially as they were late and hungry; but there was no sign of tea in the study.

Arthur Augustus was seated in the armchair, with an expression of deep thought upon his noble brow. But he did not seem to be thinking about tea.

"Slacker!" exclaimed Jack Blake indignantly. "Table not even laid! I'm surprised at you, Gussy!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Kettle not even on!" exclaimed Herries.

"Not a blink of a fire!" said Digby. "Dash it all, Gussy, this is too thick! Don't you know it's past tea-time?"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy regarded his chums with the same deeply-thoughtful expression on his brow.

"I had forgotten tea, deah boys," he answered.

"Oh, rats!"

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"Well, remember it now, and lend a hand!" grunted Blake. "Get some wood from somewhere and start a fire. Use your head if you like!"

Arthur Augustus did not rise from the

armchair. Matters much more serious than tea occupied his mind.

"Neval mind tea now, deah boys," he said.

"What?"

"I want to consult you fellows!"

"About what we're going to have for tea, do you mean?"

"No, I do not mean anything of the sort, Blake!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, with asperity. "About a very much more important mattah!"

"Nothing more important than tea at tea-time," answered Blake. "Leave the consultation till afterwards. We'll advise you about your new necktie when we've fed."

"I was not goin' to consult you about a new necktie, Blake."

"Well, your new topper, then, if that's it."

"That is not it."

"Well, never mind what it is—let's have tea!" said Digby.

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"Weally, Dig—"
 "Seems nothing here to start a fire with. I suppose it won't matter if we use Gussy's hatbox—"

"Bai Jove! Leave that hatbox alone, you ass!"

"There's enough of it to boil the kettle with," said Digby, holding up the hatbox to general inspection. "Don't be a pig, Gussy!"

"You uttah ass!"
 Arthur Augustus rushed to the rescue of his hatbox.

"If you're going to be selfish, Gussy, in—," said Dig.

"Wats!"
 The hatbox was perched in safety on top of the bookcase. There was a brilliant topper inside that box, and in his concern for it Arthur Augustus had forgotten, for the moment, even his concern for poor old Tom Merry.

"Here you are," said Herries. "This will do. Here's Gussy's spats—"

"Hewwies, you ass, if you burn my spats—"

"Well, what are we to burn, then? The kettle's got to be boiled, to make the coffee, hasn't it?"

"Wats! Pway do not bothah about tea at pweent," said Arthur Augustus. "I have had a vewy painful shock, deah boys."

Arthur Augustus made that announcement impressively, almost tragically. But his chums were not impressed. They were hungry, and wanted their tea. Tragic communications could wait, and tea couldn't.

"You'll have another, still more painful, if you don't lend a hand at getting tea," was all Blake said.

"Weally, Blake—"

"Here's your fretwork, Blake," said Digby. "I suppose that's no use?"

"Fathead!"

"Well, I don't see the use—"

"You wouldn't!" answered Blake witheringly. "You let that fretwork alone, and don't be a silly chump, Dig. Get the sardines opened, while I cut along to Julian's study and borrow some sticks."

"Blake, deah boy—"

But Blake was gone.

He came back with an armful of sticks, lent by the obliging Julian, and started the fire. Herries had filled the kettle at the tap at the end of the passage, while Dig was busy with a tin and a tin-opener. It was the duty of Arthur Augustus to slice bread-and-butter. But Arthur Augustus wasn't doing his duty.

He was standing unoccupied, his thoughtful expression deepening into a frown.

"Cut the loaf, Gussy!" hooted Blake, as he set a match to the fire.

"Weally, Blake—"

"There's butter in the cupboard," said Herries. "Can't you get it out, Gussy? What's the matter with you? Are you going to sleep standing up, like a horse?"

"I am not goin' to sleep, Hewwies."

"Get a move on, then!"

"I wish to consult you fellows—"

"Give your chin a rest, old fellow, and cut the bread-and-butter!"

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"Blessed if I know what's the matter with him," said Herries. "Slacking round like Baggy Trimble while other fellows are working!"

"If you compare me to Baggy Trimble, Hewwies—" began Arthur Augustus wrathfully.

"Well, get a move on, then!"

"I have received a shock, Hewwies. I have discovahed—"

"Discovered the bread-and-butter?"

"No!" howled Arthur Augustus in

great exasperation. "I have not dis-covahed the bread-and-buttah!"

"I'm hungry!" remarked Herries.

"If you don't want any, I can manage your lot!"

"I want to consult—"

"Bow-wow!"

"I wegard you—"

"Nearly on the boil," said Blake.

"Shove the coffee in the teapot, Dig.

Give me a pinch of salt for the coffee, Gussy."

"Bothah the coffee!"

"Lazybones!"

"I wefuzee to be chawactewised—"

"Here's the salt," said Herries. "Go ahead! I'll cut the bread-and-butter, as D'Arcy's too lazy!"

"I am not too lazy, Hewwies!" roared Arthur Augustus.

"Then, why don't you do it?"

"I am thinkin' of a much more important mattah—"

"What with?"

"I wegard that question as uttably asinine, Hewwies!"

"We might have had eggs for tea, if Gussy had thought of bringing them in," remarked Blake.

"If Gussy takes to slacking in this way, we shall have to wake him up! No slacking in this study!"

"I was not slackin', you ass! I—"

"There's some cheese!" said Dig.

"Good! Lucky Trimble didn't know we had any cheese, or there wouldn't be any! Hallo! Talk of angels!" granted Blake, as a fat face looked in at the doorway.

Baggy Trimble of the Fourth bestowed a friendly nod on the chums of Study No. 6.

"Can I do anything for you?" he asked.

"Yes, rather; you can roll away!"

"If you want any help—"

"Shy that loaf at him, Dig!"

The door closed suddenly.

"Now we're all ready," said Blake.

"We haven't taken long, considering that Gussie was slacking all the time instead of lending a hand. I am surprised at this, in you, Gussy!"

"I was not slackin'!" shrieked Arthur Augustus. "I—"

"Well, you can have some tea, though you didn't help to get it. Whack out the sardines in four, Herries!"

"Right-ho!"

"I weally wish you fellows would pay some attention!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "The mattah is vewy important! Poor old Tom Mewwy—"

"Hallo! What's the matter with Tom Merry?"

"The poor chap is undah the shadow of a feahful disgwace!" answered Arthur Augustus impressively.

The door opened as Gussy was speaking, and Baggy Trimble's fat face looked in again. That fat face wore a startled look, as he heard Arthur Augustus' surprising words.

"Oh crumbs!" ejaculated Trimble.

"Bai Jove! Get out, Twimble, you boundah!"

"What's that about Tom Merry?" exclaimed Trimble, in great curiosity.

"I wefuzee to confide the mattah to you, Twimble! Pway wetiah from this study!"

Whiz!

A cushion crossed the study at great speed, and it caught Baggy Trimble on the chin before he could dodge. The fat Fourth-Former spun into the passage with a loud roar.

"Well stopped!" roared Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yaroooh!" came in a howl from the passage. "Yah! Oh! Rotter!"

Blake kicked the door shut.

"Now, I don't think we shall have

Trimble to tea," he remarked, as he sat down. "Give your chin a rest, Gussy, and let's get on. I'm as hungry as a blockaded Hun!"

"I was goin' to say—"

"Pass the bread-and-butter!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Two lumps for me!"

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus gave it up. He was full to bursting with his concern for poor old Tom Merry, and very anxious to take his chums into consultation on the subject; but it was evident that the matter, important as it was, had to wait till after tea.

And it waited!

CHAPTER 5.

Great News For Trimble!

"IF you fellows have finished—" Arthur Augustus spoke at last, in a tone of deep sarcasm.

Blake and Herries and Dig grinned at him genially. Having had their tea, they were willing to give their noble chum his head. They were prepared to bestow their attention upon him while he made his thrilling communication, whatever it was—but their looks did not indicate due seriousness.

Sad to relate, Arthur Augustus' chums did not always take him with the seriousness which was his due.

"Go ahead, old scout!" said Blake.

"You were saying something about Tom Merry, weren't you?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Well, sing it over again to us!" said Dig humorously.

"Weally, Dig—"

"I think I ought to go and see Towser," remarked Herries, rising.

"Old Towser doesn't seem to get on with his muzzle. Lot of silly rot, keeping old Towser muzzled—isn't it?"

"I wequiah your attention, Hewwies!" said Arthur Augustus, with dignity.

"Cut it short, then, old chap!"

"Wats! Of course, what I am goin' to tell you fellows is in strict confidence," said Arthur Augustus. "You will not repeat a word of it outside this study?"

"My dear chap, we shall have forgotten it two minutes after you've told us!" answered Blake cheerfully. "That's all right!"

"Pway be sewious, Blake! Tom Mewwy is undah the shadow of a feahful disgwace! His uncle has turned up!"

Blake and Herries and Dig stared at the swell of the Fourth blankly.

"His uncle!" repeated Jack Blake.

"Yaas!"

"Do you mean General Merry?"

"I mean General Mewwy's bwctah!"

"Never knew he had one!"

"Neithah did I, Blake, and neithah, I believe, does Tom Mewwy! The disgwace has been kept a secwet from him!"

"Eh?"

"Poor old Tom Mewwy does not know of the existence of this feahful uncle," explained Arthur Augustus. "Natuwally, it has been kept from him, as the man is a disgwaceful chawactah, and has been in pwison!"

"Great pip!"

"My only hat!"

"Gammon!"

Arthur Augustus had succeeded in startling his chums at last, if not exactly in impressing them.

"That is how the mattah stands, deah boy!" he said, sadly and seriously.

"Tom Mewwy knows nothin' about this howwid uncle, who has disgwaced the family; and, of course, the school knows nothin' about him. But the awful boundah has found out Tom Mewwy's school,

and is comin' heah to show him up, as he calls it!"

"Weally, Blake——"

"What blessed cinema film story have you got hold of now?" growled Blake crossly. "Who's been pulling your leg with this silly yarn?"

Arthur Augustus jammed his eyeglasses into his eye, and surveyed Jack Blake with lofty scorn.

"If you think it is an easy thing to pull my leg, Blake——"

"Easiest thing in the world, fathead! You see, you were born specially to have your leg pulled!"

"Wubbish! I have met the man!"

"Tom Merry's uncle?"

"Yass—George Herbert Mewwy! He showed me his registation-card with his name on it!"

"His name might be Merry without his being any relation of Tom Merry. There was an Admiral Blake once, but he wasn't my uncle!"

"I inquired into his bona fides vewy carefully. He knows all about the family—about General Mewwy in Germany, and Mr. Poinsett in America!"

"That's curious! What's he like?"

"A howwid, boozay boundah! He said he was a glass-cuttah by pwofession, lookin' for work. But aftahwards he let out that he was Tom Mewwy's uncle, and was comin' to St. Jim's to extort money from him, or else show him up and disgwaco him befoah all the school."

"Did he get any money out of you?" asked Blake suspiciously.

"That's the point!" assented Herries. "I do not see that that is the point, Howwies!"

"You wouldn't—but it is!"

"Did you give him any tin?" demanded Dig.

"Yass; I advanced him ten shillin's to get his clobber out of pawn, so that he would look a little more wespectable when he came heah."

Blake snorted.

"That was his game, then! He's some boozay spoofer, Gussy, and he spotted you for a mug——"

"Bai Jove!"

"And he spun this yarn to squeeze money out of you. See?"

"Do you think I am that kind of duffah, Blake, you ass?"

"Yes, rather!" answered Blake promptly.

"If you are not westwained in conversation by the ordinawy wules of politeness, Blake, I can hardly discuss the mattah with you."

"Bow-wow!" answered Blake, quite enrushed by that crushing rebuke. "You're a good little ass, Gussy——"

"I wessus to be described as a good little ass!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus indignantly.

"Well, that's what you are, old chap. This boozay bounder has been pulling your leg. His name may be Merry, or it may not; but I don't believe for a minute that he's a relation of Tom Merry."

"Then how did he know anythin' about Tom Mewwy, or Tom bein' at this school?" demanded Arthur Augustus.

"May have heard him mentioned, or seen him about."

"If he was only spinnin' me a yarn, why should he pick on Tom Mewwy to claim as a relation?"

"Because he happens to have the same name, I suppose. If his name had happened to be Blake he might have selected me as his nephew!" grinned Blake. "He spotted you for a mug, you know——"

"Weally, Blake——"

"And you'll never see your ten bob again, and you'll never see George Her-

bert Merry again, either. So it's all right."

"It is not all wight, Blake. He was comin' up to the school when I wan aftah him and stopped him."

"Bluff, to take you in!" said Blake, after reflection.

"Wats! I do not think I am the kind of fellow to be taken in vewy easily. He is comin' to St. Jim's to-morrow, and I wanted to consult you fellows. Tom Mewwy must be pwepared for the shock."

"My dear man, he won't come!"

"Wats! The question is, how to pwepare Tom Mewwy for the feahful shock of meetin' this disgwaceful wulation whom he has nevah seen befoah."

"Look here——"

Blake paused suddenly.

He rose quickly from his chair, and made a jump towards the door, and dragged it open. A sound at the door-handle had caught his keen ear. There was a startled gasp outside, and a fat figure lurched into the study as the door flew open.

"Trimble!" yelled Dig.

Arthur Augustus leaped to his feet, in dismay and wrath.

"Twimble, bai Jove! That spyin' wottah has heard all about Tom Mewwy's uncle!" he gasped.

"I—I haven't!" yelled Trimble, as Blake grasped him and shook him angrily. "I haven't heard a word! I don't know Tom Merry's got an uncle who's been in prison. Yaroooh! Leggo! I don't know anything about it. Yooop!"

Biff! Bump!

Jack Blake's boot helped Baggy Trimble into the passage.

The fat Baggy departed, roaring.

"Bai Jove! All the fat is in the fiah now!" said Arthur Augustus, in great consternation. "That fat wottah will not keep this dark——"

"Lucky there's nothing in it!" remarked Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies——"

"Br-r-r-r!" said Herries.

And he left the study to visit the kennels and ascertain how Towser was getting on with his muzzle. Blake and Dig strolled out after him, not at all worried, apparently, by the tragic tale they had heard of the disaster that impended over Tom Merry of the Shell.

Arthur Augustus was left alone, in a state of consternation.

"Bai Jove!" he murmured. "What-evah is goin' to be done? That howwid boundah Twimble—— Poor old Tom Mewwy! Those sillay youngstahs don't undahstand the sewiousness of the mattah at all. But when that awful chawactah turns up to-morrow to disgwace Tom Mewwy——"

Arthur Augustus shuddered at the prospect. But there was evidently no help to be obtained in the emergency from Study No. 6. Arthur Augustus had to depend upon himself. Fortunately, he was a fellow of tact and judgment, as he had often told his study-mates, and he felt equal to the emergency.

CHAPTER 6.

Something Up!

"JUST in time!" remarked Monty Lowther.

The Terrible Three had been for a ramble, after parting with Blake & Co. in Rylcombe, and they walked home to St. Jim's in the gathering summer dusk. Taggles had come out of his lodge to lock the gates as they arrived.

"Sorry, old gun!" said Monty Lowther genially. "Another minute, and you could have locked us out! Better luck next time."

And the Terrible Three strolled on towards the School House, leaving Taggles grunting expressively.

The chums of the Shell were in time for call-over. As they joined the rest of the Shell in Hall, they were the recipients of a good many curious glances—especially Tom Merry.

The captain of the Shell noted, after a few minutes, that he was the object of unusual attention, and it puzzled him a little. As the juniors left Hall after the roll had been taken, Tom Merry tapped Gore on the arm. George Gore had been staring at him as if his eyes were glued to Tom's sunny face.

"What's up?" inquired Tom.

"Up!" repeated Gore.

"Yes. Is there anything on my nose?"

"Nunno."

"Then what are you blinking at me for?"

"Blinking!" stammered Gore.

"Yes, you ass!" said Tom, rather warmly. "A dozen fellows have been blinking at me since I came in. What do you mean by it?"

"N-n-nothing!"

"Are you off your rocker?"

"Nunno!"

George Gore hurried away, leaving the captain of the Shell in a state of considerable astonishment. He turned to his chums, who shared his surprise.

"I suppose I haven't imagined it!" said Tom. "Did you fellows notice it?"

Manners and Lowther nodded.

"There's something up!" said Manners.

"Kangy! I say, Kangy!"

Kangaroo of the Shell stopped.

"All serene, Tommy!" he said. "I don't believe a word of it!"

"Eh? Of what?"

"The yarn that's going round, I mean."

"Oh, there's a yarn going round, is there?" said Tom Merry, a glint coming into his blue eyes. "What sort of a yarn, Kangy?"

The Australian junior hesitated.

"It's all rot, of course," he said. "Blessed if I know how it started. Some fellows are saying——"

He paused again.

"Well, what are they saying?"

"About your uncle," said Harry Noble reluctantly. "Of course, I know it's all rot, but I suppose I'd better tell you, Tom, as it seems to be spreading all over the school."

"Of course you'd better tell me!" growled Tom. "If anybody is spinning yarns about my uncle——" He broke off. "Which uncle do you mean? I've got two."

"Only two?" asked Kangaroo, looking at him.

"That's all I know of, anyway," answered Tom, with a stare. "I may have an extra one I've mislaid and forgotten. What on earth do you mean?"

"Well, the yarn is that you've got another uncle——"

"What thumping rot!"

"I knew it was," said Kangaroo. "Don't get waxy, old chap! I don't even know who started the yarn, and I've only told you because you asked me."

The Cornstalk junior walked on, evidently glad to get to the end of the conversation. The Terrible Three looked at one another.

"This is jolly queer, Tom!" said Manners. "I suppose you haven't a third uncle by any chance?"

"Of course I haven't!" said Tom testily. "There's Miss Priscilla Fawcett's brother—I call him Uncle Frank, but he's not really a relation. But even

if I had another uncle, what does it matter to anybody? Some fellows have a dozen uncles, without getting stared at like a Punch and Judy show. I don't catch on to this at all."

"Blessed if I do, either!"
"Talbot!"

Talbot of the Shell was coming towards them, his handsome face very grave.

"You've heard, I suppose?" said Tom.

"Yes. I think I'd better tell you, Tom," said Talbot. "I don't know how the yarn started. I heard Trimble telling half a dozen fellows. Of course, it's not true. You haven't an uncle who who—ahem—"

"Who what?" growled Tom.

"Your uncle, General Merry, hasn't a brother, has he?"

"No. My father was his only brother."

"Then it can't be true."

"What can't?" howled Tom. "Tell me what the silly asses are saying, Talbot!"

"It's being said that you've got another uncle, a brother of the general, who's been in prison—"

"What!"

"And who's sunk to being a low tramp and blackguard?" said Talbot. "Of course, nobody with any sense believes a word of it. I don't know how the yarn started."

Tom Merry clenched his hands. There was a blaze in his eyes now.

"There's not a word of truth in it!" he said.

"I know that, old chap."

"Sure of that?" asked the unpleasant voice of Racke of the Shell. And Crooke, who was with Racke, chuckled, and there was a chortle from Mellish, of the Fourth. Tom Merry's old enemies were quite prepared to believe the story, at all events. Indeed, Aubrey Racke would have given one of his many fivers for the story to be true.

Tom spun round on the cad of the Shell.

"Did you start this lying yarn, Racke!" he demanded.

Aubrey backed away a step or two.

"Not at all. I heard Kerraish and Reilly speaking of it," he answered. "But according to what I've heard you can't know whether the yarn's true or not."

"What do you mean?"

"According to the story, as I've heard it, your dear boozey uncle has been kept a secret from you," smiled Racke. "Your relations never let you know that you had an uncle in quod."

"So that's the yarn, is it?"

"That's it."

"You say you heard it from Kerraish and Reilly?"

"Yes."

"I'll ask them. If they deny it, Racke, I'll come back and smash you!"

Racke shrugged his shoulders, as Tom Merry hurried towards the staircase. Lowther and Manners and Talbot hurried after the captain of the Shell. His look boded trouble, serious trouble, for somebody.

CHAPTER 7.

Tracked Out!

"SURE it's not true at all—at all." Patrick Reilly's voice was heard as Tom Merry & Co. came up to Study No. 5 in the Fourth.

Tom Merry threw the door open.

Reilly and Kerraish, Julian and Hammond, were in their study, and they all started and coloured at the sight of the captain of the Shell. Tom Merry fixed

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his glinting eyes on the four Fourth-Formers.

"Trot in, old sport!" said Dick Julian.

Tom stood in the doorway.

"I want to know whether my new uncle was invented in this study!" he said.

"Certainly not!"

"Racke says he heard the yarn from Kerraish and Reilly."

"Sure, he may have heard us speaking of it," said Reilly. "Everybody in the House has been talking about it."

"You heard it from somebody else, then?"

"Sure, it was Levison I heard it from, or, rather, I heard Levison speakin' of it to Clive and Cardew. But they—"

"I'll speak to Levison."

Without waiting for another word, Tom Merry strode away to Study No. 9, his brow growing blacker as he went. He was not surprised to hear Levison's name. Time had been when Ernest Levison had been his bitter enemy; and such a yarn as this seemed very like one of Levison's old, torturous tricks. If Levison of the Fourth was "beginning again," there was going to be bad trouble for him.

Tom rapped sharply on the door of No. 9.

"Keep cool, old chap!" murmured Talbot. "I'm quite certain that Levison is not at the bottom of this."

"I'll soon see," answered Tom.

"Come in!" sang the cool voice of

Ralph Reckness Cardew, from within Study No. 9.

Tom threw the door open. Levison and Clive and Cardew had sat down to prep, but they rose as Tom strode in. They exchanged a rather startled look.

"Anythin' up, old top?" yawned Cardew.

"Yes," said Tom abruptly. "I needn't ask you if you've heard the yarn that's going round. I can see you have."

"We don't believe it," said Clive quietly. "We've heard it, of course."

"Reilly says he heard it from Levison."

"Possibly," assented Levison, standing up, and looking coolly at Tom Merry across the table.

Tom's hands clenched hard.

"Then it was you!" he said, between his teeth. "You're at your old games again, Levison!"

Levison's eyes glinted unpleasantly, but he did not answer.

"Look here—" began Sidney Clive indignantly. But the captain of the Shell interrupted him.

"Let Levison speak for himself."

"I've nothing to say!" answered Levison coolly.

"You admit it?" shouted Tom.

"Not at all."

"Do you deny it, then?"

"I don't take the trouble," answered Levison, unmoved. "You can think what you like, Tom Merry, and be hanged to you!"

Tom Merry started round the table, his eyes glittering. Talbot caught him by the arm.

"Hold on, Tom!"

"Let me go! I'll—I'll—"

"It wasn't Levison, Tom."

"If it wasn't Levison, why can't he say so, then?"

"Keep your wool on, dear man!" yawned Cardew. "I'd have answered you in the same way, you know. You can't march into a fellow's study and terrify him with your wrathful frown, you know. Easy does it!"

Tom Merry controlled his anger.

"I only want a civil answer to a civil question," he said, setting his lips.

"If you'd asked me civilly I'd have answered you," said Levison.

"Well, I do ask you civilly," said Tom, choking down his wrath.

"Then I'll answer. I know nothing at all about the affair, excepting that I heard Tompkins speaking of it among some other fellows."

"Tompkins!"

"Yes."

"That's enough."

Tom Merry left the study, his brows set. It seemed a chase from pillar to post. Every fellow, so far, seemed to have heard it from some other fellow. The captain of the Shell looked into Clarence York Tompkins' study, but only Mulvaney minor was there.

"Where's Tompkins?" snapped Tom.

"Downstairs, I believe."

Tom turned away with angry impatience. As he strode towards the stairs again, followed by his chums, he came on Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Tom Mewwy, deah boy—" murmured Arthur Augustus.

"Don't stop me. I'm in a hurry!"

"Pway calm yourself, old chap. Pway allow me to advise you—"

"What do you mean?"

"It is bettah not to make a wov about this howwid affair," murmured Arthur Augustus, in distress. "Least said soonest mended, you know."

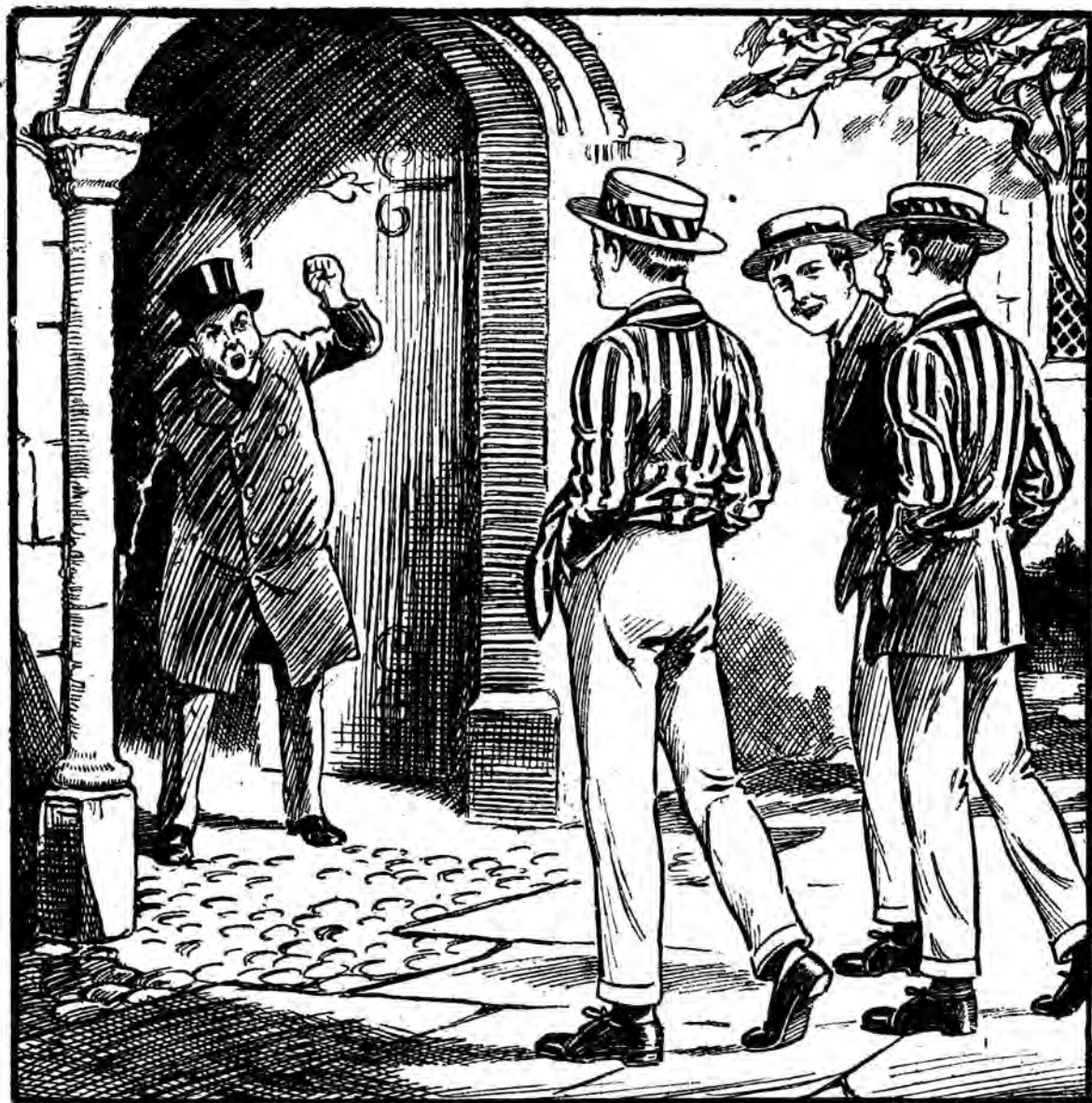
Tom Merry stared at him.

"Do you mean to say that you believe the yarn?" he shouted.

"Ahem!"

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"Just in time!" remarked Monty Lowther, as Taggles the porter shuffled out of his lodge to lock the gates. "Another minute, Taggy, and you would have locked us out!" (See Chapter 6).

"Do you or not?"

"Weally Tom Mewwy——"

"Then you're a silly fool!" snapped Tom. "You're not worth licking, or I'd punch your silly head!"

"Bai Jove!"

Tom Merry strode on to the staircase. He fell in with Tompkins of the Fourth on the first landing, and caught him by the shoulder. He did not suspect the simple Tompkins of having originated the story. He was only in search of information from him.

"Who told you the yarn about my uncle?" he demanded.

Tompkins blinked at him.

"Trimble!" he answered.

"Thanks!"

Tom Merry turned back to Study No. 2 in the Fourth. He felt that he was tracking the affair home at last. Baggy Trimble was in No. 2 when Tom hurled the door open. He jumped at the sight of the Shell fellow's flushed and angry face.

"It wasn't me!" yelled Trimble.

"You've been spinning a yarn about me, Trimble," said Tom, as quietly as he could. "Did you make it up?"

"No, I didn't!"

"Who did, then?"

"Ain't it true?" grinned Trimble.

"No!" Tom made a stride towards him. "If you can't give me the name of the fellow you heard it from, I shall conclude——"

Trimble jumped back.

"It was D'Arcy!" he howled. "Keep off, you beast! 'Tain't my fault if D'Arcy spins yarns about you, is it?"

"D'Arcy! You mean you heard him speaking of it—he heard it from somebody else?" asked Tom.

"No fear! He told Blake and Herries and Dig in their study; and he said it was true!" grinned Trimble.

"Were you present?"

"Nunno!"

"Then how do you know?"

"I happened to be passing the door,

and I'd stopped to—to pick up a—a pin, and—and——"

"You were listening at the keyhole, you mean, you worm!" said Tom Merry contemptuously. "But I don't believe you! I've got as far as you now, and if D'Arcy denies what you say I shall know it was you. Look out, in that case!"

"I—I say, you know——"

Tom Merry strode out of the study. Manners and Lowther and Talbot gathered round him in the passage.

"Keep cool, Tom!" said Talbot, in his quiet way. "You know well enough that D'Arcy is quite incapable——"

"I know that! I'm only going to ask him who told him."

The four Shell fellows arrived at No. 6. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had returned there, and his chums were present. It was time to begin prep; but Blake & Co. had not started. They were feeling worried now.

"Hallo! Hero he is!" murmured Dig as the captain of the Shell appeared in the doorway.

"D'Arcy!"

"Yaas, deah boy?"

"Trimble tells me that he heard the yarn about my supposed uncle from you. I suppose he was listening at the door. I want you to tell me who told you the yarn!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Don't be an ass!" said Tom. "I know you wouldn't make it up! You heard it from somebody, and I want to know who it was! What are you stammering about? That's a reasonable enough thing to ask, isn't it?"

"Ya-a-a! But—"

"But what?"

"I—I—I—"

Arthur Augustus looked helplessly at his chums. Blake and Herries and Digby looked grim. They could not help him out.

Tom Merry's brow grew darker.

"Can't you give me the name, D'Arcy?" he asked.

"N-n-no!"

"Why not?"

"I—I should like to speak to you in private, Tom Mewwy!"

Tom made an angry gesture.

"No need to speak to me in private!" he said. "I've got no secrets from my friends here; and there's nothing in my family history that all St. Jim's isn't welcome to know! Who spun you that yarn?"

"You—you see—"

"You got it from somebody?"

"Ya-a-a!"

"Who, then?"

No reply.

"Why don't you answer, D'Arcy?" exclaimed Talbot.

"Weally, Talbot—"

Tom Merry made a stride towards the swell of the Fourth.

"I've traced the yarn as far as this study," he said. "I'm ready to go farther—if there's farther to go! Did you hear this lying yarn from somebody else, D'Arcy, or didn't you?"

"Look here—" began Blake, nettled.

"Either D'Arcy heard it or he invented it!" said Tom Merry. "If he heard it, he can tell me whom he heard it from. If he doesn't, I shall point him out to all the House as a lying slanderer!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Give me the name, then!"

"Give it, you fool!" exclaimed Lowther.

Arthur Augustus drew a deep breath.

"It was my desiah to keep the mattah dark," he said. "I could not help Twimble listenin' at the keyhole. I was goin' to warn you in private, Tom Mewwy. But you are forcin' me to speak out in public!"

"That's what I want! Speak out, and have done with it!" exclaimed Tom savagely. "From whom did you hear that I had an uncle who'd been in prison?"

"Fwom your uncle!" answered Arthur Augustus quietly.

"Are you mad? My uncles are both abroad—one in Germany and the other in America!"

"I am not alludin' to those uncles."

"I have no other uncle, you idiot!"

"Explain what you mean, D'Arcy!" exclaimed Monty Lowther angrily. "Both Tom's uncles are out of England. Are you speaking of Miss Fawcett's brother, whom he calls Uncle Frank?"

"No!"

"Whom are you speaking of, then?"

"The uncle who has been in prison."

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And then for a moment or two there was a dead silence.

CHAPTER 8.

The Shadow of Disgrace!

TOM MERRY stared blankly at the swell of the Fourth.

There was so much genuine distress in Arthur Augustus' face that it could not be doubted that he was in earnest—that he believed what he said, and was distressed to believe it. Lowther and Manners and Talbot looked at him, and at Tom Merry, and at one another. They simply did not know what to make of the affair.

Jack Blake broke the silence.

"Gussy's been stuffed up!" he said. "It's all right, Tom Merry. Some rascal has been stuffing Gussy with a yarn!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"I—I suppose that's it!" gasped Tom Merry at last. "I can't suspect D'Arcy of making up a story like this!"

"Bai Jove! I should say not!"

"Some spoofing rascal has fooled him with this yarn!" said Tom. "I want to know who it was. It wasn't a St. Jim's chap, that's clear, as the utter idiot took him for an uncle of mine! Who was it, D'Arcy?"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Who was it, you ass?"

"Your—your other uncle, deah boy!"

"I have no other uncle!" shouted Tom.

"Oh deah! I—I am quite awah that it has been kept from you, old chap, on account of the disgrace! Your uncle told me so, in fact! But—but I think you ought to be prepared now; that is why I wanted to speak to you in private, you know! Your uncle is comin' heah!"

"Here!" yelled Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"It's all bluff—he won't come!" said Blake. "It was some rogue getting money out of Gussy, that was all!"

"I—I believe so!" muttered Herries. But Herries and Dig were looking a little queer. They were not feeling so sure now, somehow, that Gussy had been "stuffed."

"You say the man's coming here!" breathed Tom Merry. "When?"

"To-morrow!"

"Why not to-day?" demanded Manners.

"Because I persuaded him not to!" answered Arthur Augustus. "He was a fearfully disreputable-lookin' person, and I persuaded him to make himself a little more respectable before he came!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"I was thinkin' of Tom Mewwy's feelin's," said Arthur Augustus, with dignity. "I wedged Tom Mewwy as a friend, and feel bound to stand by him in this fearful emergency!"

Tom Merry smiled faintly.

"I suppose you mean well, Gussy," he said.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"But you are a crass ass—"

"Weally, you know—"

"You've been stuffed up by some rascal with a yarn that ought not to have taken in a baby!" snapped Tom Merry. "And the result is you've got this story all over the school. And it's just as bad as if you'd made it up on purpose, as Mellish or Twimble might have done!"

"Oh dear!" said Arthur Augustus in distress. "I was keepin' it dark, you know, only that wottah Twimble listened at—"

"I want to find that man!" said Tom Merry, with a glint in his eyes. "I'll make him own up that he was lying. That's the only way to knock this yarn on the head! I suppose it's no good purchasing your silly nose, Gussy—"

"Bai Jove!"

"If you like to bump him," said Blake, "you're at liberty to bump him, till he howls! We give you full permission!"

"Weally, Blake—"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"Never mind bumping him!" he said.

"It's impossible to bump sense into him. I want to find that rogue who calls himself my uncle. Where is he to be found, D'Arcy?"

"I weally do not know. He is comin' heah to-morrow; that's all I know. I trust you will take my advice, Tom Mewwy—"

"Ass!"

"My advice is to keep him dark," said Arthur Augustus. "Of course, no right-minded fellow will be down on you because your uncle has been in chokcy. It was not your fault—"

"Idiot!"

"But such mattahs are bettah kept secret, for many weasons. I advise you, deah boy, to help the man on his way, and see the last of him. I will lend you some tin, if you like."

"Fathead!"

"Weally, you know—"

"I only hope he'll have the nerve to come here!" said Tom Merry, between his teeth. "Whoever he is, or isn't, I'll simply smash him, if he has the cheek to show up here! I suppose I'd better wait and see, as there's no getting any sense out of you!"

"Bai Jove!"

Tom Merry quitted the study with his chums, leaving worry and concern behind him. Arthur Augustus looked utterly distressed.

"This is a howwid affiah, deah boys!" he murmured. "Tom Mewwy is actin' in a vewy injudicious way. He ought to try to keep the mattah dark. But if he goes for his uncle it will make no end of a scandal!"

"The man's not his uncle," said Blake uneasily. "It's all rot!"

"It has been kept from Tom Mewwy, Blake."

"Oh, rot!"

"If you chawactawise my remarks as wot, Blake—"

"Utter rot!" said Blake.

"Then I can only retire from the study!" said Arthur Augustus, with a great deal of dignity.

And he retired.

That evening the affair of Tom Merry and his supposed uncle who had been in "quod," was the talk of the Lower School, as was to be expected.

Racke & Co. fairly chortled over it.

It spread to the New House, and was a great topic there during the evening in study and Common-room.

Had the story originated with Mellish or Trimble, or Racke or Crooke, the fellows would have known what to think of it. But it was known that the astounding yarn came from D'Arcy of the Fourth in the first place; and everyone knew that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was incapable of falsehood or deception. That he had been deceived was the only alternative to the story being true. True, his simplicity was well known. Yet why, some of the fellows asked, should a stranger turn up and deceive D'Arcy with such a yarn? And Arthur Augustus, feeling that too much had been said already, refused to say another word on the subject to anyone. That was wise in a way, but it prevented the fellows from learning the precise circumstances under which Mr. George Herbert Merry had spun him the yarn.

D'Arcy's distress was evident to all eyes, and it showed his own belief in the story; and nothing is so convincing as belief.

Quite a number of the St. Jim's fellows accepted it as true that Tom Merry had an uncle who had disgraced the family, and of whose existence he had been brought up in ignorance. Fellows who did not exactly believe it, wondered whether it was true.

When Tom Merry came into the Common-room that evening he was the object of general attention. Some fellows stared, and some made it a careful point not to stare, which was nearly as disconcerting.

Tom's handsome face was flushed and cross.

He did not stay long in the Common-room. And when he went to his study Aubrey Racke remarked that he didn't care to face the public eye now that the truth about his uncle was known.

If the story had been traced to anyone but Arthur Augustus, Tom Merry might have found satisfaction in the punching of a nose, or the darkening of an eye. But there was no satisfaction in hammering the swell of the Fourth, who had only acted from friendship—though disastrous.

Tom only hoped that the impostor would have the effrontery to turn up at the school on the morrow. That would certainly lead to the clearing up of the affair. But—precisely for that reason—it was pretty certain that the man had no intention of coming.

Meanwhile, the story was going the rounds, and Tom could only wonder what would be the end of it.

CHAPTER 9.

D'Arcy Does His Best!

"MASTER D'ARCY!"
"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus.

Morning lessons were over on the following day, and Arthur Augustus was out of gates.

The swell of St. Jim's had left immediately after lessons, in the hope of coming across Mr. George Herbert Merry.

Tom Merry's intention of "smashing" that gentleman, if he turned up at St. Jim's, worried and alarmed Arthur Augustus. Such an action was certain to have the effect of making the scandal more prominent than ever, D'Arcy considered; and it was certain to exasperate Tom's "uncle," and make him revengeful and more determined than ever to "show up" his nephew! Arthur Augustus, having reflected upon the matter with his usual tact and judgment, felt that such a disaster must be avoided if possible. Somehow or other, George Herbert Merry must be kept away from the school.

During lessons that morning Arthur Augustus had sat in trepidation, in fear of Mr. Merry arriving before he could be prevented.

But lessons passed off without a visit from the dingy rascal, and then Arthur Augustus breathed more freely.

He started out at once, in the hope of falling in with Mr. Merry, and persuading him, at any cost, to keep away from the school, and leave his unhappy nephew in peace.

It seemed to Arthur Augustus sheer good luck when the dusty gentleman dawned upon him in Rylcombe Lane.

Never had Arthur Augustus been so pleased to see anyone as he was to see Mr. George Herbert Merry, leaning on the stile in the lane.

Yet George Herbert was not a pleasant person to look upon.

He was in the same dingy, dusty clothes and down-at-heel boots, and, in addition, he was evidently recovering slowly from a "drunk." It was easy to guess, by looking at him, where Gussy's few shillings had gone.

"Bai Jove! I'm glad to see you!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, in great relief. "I was lookin' for you, Mr. Mewwy."

The tramp eyed him curiously and shiftily.

Having "touched" the simple junior for ten shillings the day before, Mr. Merry had been hanging about the school in the hope of seeing Arthur Augustus again, and extracting further cash from him. He thought it was a faint hope; but anything better than work, from the point of view of George Herbert.

Finding Arthur Augustus glad to see him was a surprise to Mr. Merry, but a very agreeable surprise. He thought he saw more cash in prospect.

So he touched his ragged hat very respectfully.

"I 'oped I'd see you agin, sir," he said. "I was jest coming up to the school to—see my nephew, sir."

"Pway do nothin' of the kind, Mr. Mewwy," said Arthur Augustus hastily. "I hope you will wefwain frowm visitin' the school."

Mr. Merry blinked.

He was about as likely to drop in at Buckingham Palace to see King George as to call at St. Jim's to see Tom Merry. But Arthur Augustus was not aware of that important fact, and his eagerness to keep the rascal away from the school, which he did not think of disguising, gave George Herbert his cue.

"Why shouldn't I call and see young Tom?" demanded Mr. Merry. "He's my nephew, ain't he?"

He rubbed his stubby chin, where his "nephew's" knuckles had left a mark the day before.

"Yaas—yaas; but—but he does not know it, and he is vewy angry and annoyed about the affair," said Arthur Augustus.

"You—you've told him?"

"Yaas."

"Oh, my eye!"

"Owin' to a wottah listenin' at the door the stow is all ovah the school, and Tom Mewwy is feashfully upset," explained Arthur Augustus.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

George Herbert chortled. He could not help that. The lump on his stubby chin did not make him feel amiable towards Tom Merry, and he would gladly have made that cheery young gentleman "sit up" if he could. But that Arthur Augustus should do it for him, as it were, seemed extremely funny to Mr. Merry.

Arthur Augustus screwed in his eye-glass, and surveyed the dingy man very severely.

"You appeah to be amused!" he said stiffly.

George Herbert became serious again. But he felt a natural difficulty in being serious with Master D'Arcy.

"Skuse me, sir," he answered. "I'm sorry, of course. But I've got to go up to the school. I've got to see my—my nephew."

"It will injah Tom Mewwy vewy much if you do."

"A man must 'ave money!" said George Herbert.

"You have no wight to ask your nephew for money!"

"Nuff said, Master D'Arcy! I'm going up to the school," said Mr. Merry, detaching himself from the stile.

"Pway hold on! How much money do you think you will be able to get frowm Tom Mewwy?"

Mr. Merry eyed him.

"Arf-a-quid, at least!" he answered.

"Vewy good! I pwesume it makes no difference to you where the half-sovereign comes frowm, so long as you get it?"

"Not at all!"

"Will you wemain away frowm the school if I hand you that money?"

"Oh, my eye!"

"Pway ansawah my question, sir!" said Arthur Augustus stiffly. "I have no personal interest in the matter. My only desiah is to save Tom Mewwy, a friend of mine, frowm an unpleasant and disgwaceful scene. Will you wemain away frowm St. Jim's if I give you ten shillin's?"

As Mr. Merry hadn't the remotest intention of going anywhere near St. Jim's, the offer was really a good one. But he seemed to consider.

"Make it a quid!" he said at last.

"The fact is, Mr. Mewwy, I have only one soverewain at the pwesent moment," said Arthur Augustus slowly.

"Make it a quid, and I'll clear off. Otherwise, I'm comin' up to the bloomin' school now!"

"Vewy well!" said Arthur Augustus at last. "You give me your word to clear off, and not to twouble Tom Mewwy in any way."

"Cert'nly, sir!"

Arthur Augustus passed his last pound note to the tramp.

George Herbert Merry took it with dirty fingers that trembled with eagerness. He could hardly believe in his good luck.

"And now, good-bye!" said Arthur Augustus.

"Good-bye, sir!"

George Herbert started down the lane towards the village at once. He was thirsty; he always was thirsty!

Arthur Augustus, much relieved in his mind, walked back to the school.

Blake & Co. met him in the quad when he came in.

"It's all wight, deah boys!" Arthur Augustus told them.

"What's all right?" demanded Blake.

"What have you been up to now?"

"I have met Tom Mewwy's uncle, and persuaded him not to come to the school."

"Oh crumbs!"

"Tom Mewwy will not be twoubled by him now, and I twust the howwid affair will be forgotten in time," said Arthur Augustus. "Bai Jove! What is that?"

"That" was a howl from under the elms. The chums of the Fourth looked round. Leslie Champe, a Shell fellow of the New House, was leaning on his back on the grass, and Tom Merry was standing over him.

"Have some more?" Tom Merry asked.

"Yow-ow-ow!"

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "I suppose that wottah has been chippin' poor old Tom Mewwy!"

"All your fault!" grunted Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies—"

Tom Merry came towards the chums of Study No. 6 with a knitted brow. Leslie Champe was sitting up in the grass rubbing his nose. Apparently he did not want any more.

"You've been out, D'Arcy?" asked the captain of the Shell.

"Yaas, deah boy!"

"Have you seen anything more of that rascal who claimed to be my uncle?" D'Arcy coughed.

"Answer me, you duram!" snapped Tom Merry. Tom's sunny temper seemed to be failing him, which was not surprising under the peculiar circumstances.

"Weally, old fellow—"

"Have you seen him? Do you know where I can find him?"

"I pwefer not to ansawah that question, Tom Mewwy!"

Tom clenched his hands.

"You'll answer it, or I'll alter some of your features, you silly idiot!" he

exclaimed savagely. "You've done harm enough with your foolery already!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Gussy's seen him and persuaded him to keep away, he says," said Blake.

"So he's still hanging round the place, is he?" said Tom.

"Looks like it!"

"He has promised to cleah off, and not to twouble you, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus mildly. "If you have enough tact and judgment to let the mattah dwop, Tom Mewwy, and stop gettin' excited about it, I have no doubt the whole affaiah will be forgotten in time. I advise you—"

"Ass!"

Tom Merry walked away towards the gates.

"Bai Jove! Tom Mewwy's mannahs seem to be suffewin' from this," Arthur Augustus remarked.

"He's going to look for the man, I suppose," said Blake. "I hope he'll find him and wallop him!"

Tom Merry did not return to St. Jim's till dinner-time. But his look, when he came in, showed that he had not met the gentleman who claimed to be his "uncle." Whereat Arthur Augustus was greatly relieved.

CHAPTER 10.

Looking for Uncle!

"LETTER for you, Gussy!"

"Good! A wemittance at last, I hope!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, as Blake tossed him the letter from the rack.

Another day had passed, and for twenty-four hours D'Arcy of the Fourth had been in the unpleasant state known as "stony"; owing to Mr. George Herbert Merry having bagged his last pound note. So the swell of St. Jim's was very pleased to find a letter for him after lessons.

"It isn't your pater's fist!" said Blake.

"Bai Jove, wathah not!"

The envelope was addressed in a rough, scrawling hand. Arthur Augustus was rather puzzled by it. He had never seen that handwriting before.

"Well, anything in it?" asked Digby.

"I have not looked yet, Dig!"

"Look, then, fathead!"

"Weally, Dig—"

"Look!" howled Blake. "If there's anything in it, we can have tea in the study; otherwise, there's no time to lose for tea in Hall. Get a move on!"

Arthur Augustus slit the envelope, and drew out a soiled, crumpled half-sheet of newspaper, with beer stains on it.

"Gwep Scott!" he murmured.

His eyeglass dropped from his eye in his astonishment. It was the first communication he had ever received stained with beer and smelling of tobacco.

"Well?" said Blake and Herries and Dig, together.

Arthur Augustus' eyes were glued on the letter. It ran:

"Deer sir,—I have not gone yet, owing to difficulty about railway fair. I shall be waiting at the stile at six o'clock Friday. Shall I come on to the skool?—
"G. H. M."

"Bai Jove! The feshful woguel!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus. "He pwomised me quite distinctly to cleah off if I gave him a sowewign!"

"Eh?"

"The man is an uttah wascel!" said Arthur Augustus, in indignant distress. "But that is all the more reason why he should not be seen heah—the disgrace for poor old Tom Mewwy would be twowble."

"Oh, that man!" said Dig.

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"So that's a letter from Tom Merry's uncle, is it?" said Blake.

Arthur Augustus crumpled it hastily in his hand.

"Pewwaps I had better tell you nothin' about it," he said. "You youngstahs—"

"What?"

"You youngstahs are so lackin' in tact an' judgment that I cannot vewy well confide the circs to you. Pway excuse me!"

"So that man's got a quid out of you, has he?"

"I pwefere not to answer that question, Blake!"

"And now he's asking for more?"

"Weally, you know—"

"Give me that letter, you ass!"

"I am afwaid I must wefuse that wequest, Blake. This is a wathah delicate mattah, and I shall have to deal with it vewy carefully. The man must be kept away from St. Jim's at all costs. I feah that this lettah is in the nature of a thweat. Pewwaps, howevah, it is true about the waylway fair."

"The what?"

"Can you fellows lend me some tin?"

"Ain't we all stony?" growled Blake.

"Not that I'd lend you tin to give that tramp, whoever he is! Better ask Tom Merry, if it's for his uncle!"

"That would be wathah indelicate, Blake. I am actin' in this mattah as Tom Mewwy's fwend, and shieldin' him from contact with that disgwaceful wewpwbate!"

"So that letter is from him?" demanded Herries.

"I pwefere not to say!"

"Oh, you ass!"

"I wefuse to be called an ass. Howwies!" Arthur Augustus looked at his watch. "Bai Jove! It is gettin' on for six now! I shall have to hurwy!"

"Where are you going?" howled Blake.

"Pway excuse me if I do not enlighten you on that point, deah boy! This is a mattah that can only be dealt with by a fellow of tact and judgment. Wely on me, deah boy; I assuah you that I know the pwopah thing to do!"

And Arthur Augustus picked up his straw hat and left the School House.

Blake & Co. blinked after him.

"Well, my only hat!" said Jack Blake, with a deep breath. "It's as plain as anything that that rogue has been stickin' Gussy for money with a yarn about bein' Tom Merry's uncle. Now he's written asking for more, and Gussy is going to see him!"

"Looks like it—the ass!" grunted Herries.

Blake knitted his brows.

"We haven't seen the man yet," he said. "I don't believe his yarn—but if it's true that he's Tom Merry's uncle, Tom's the chap to deal with him. Let's go and see Tommy! You cut after Gussy, Dig, and see where he goes!"

"Right-ho!"

Arthur Augustus was walking down to the gates. It did not occur to him to turn his head; and he was quite unaware that the grinning Dig was following in his wake.

Blake and Herries ran up the stairs to No. 10 in the Shell, where the Terrible Three were making preparations for tea. The chums of the Shell were not wearing their usual cheery looks.

The story of Tom Merry's uncle from "quod" was an incessant worry to them; there seemed no way of stopping it, and all three of the celebrated Co. had been in "scraps" on the subject. All three of them bore signs of conflict—and there were five of six fellows in the school who had been reduced to wreckage owing to injudicious "chipping" on the subject.

At that moment Crooke was nursing a darkened eye in his study, and Aubrey Hacke was bewailing the state of his nose.

"Hallo!" said Monty Lowther gruffly, as Blake and Herries came in. "Has your tame lunatic found another mare's nest?"

"Why don't you keep him on a chain?" demanded Manners.

Tom Merry did not speak, but he frowned. He was not feeling very cordial towards Study No. 6 just then.

Blake could understand that, however, and he could make allowances for it.

"Cheerio!" he said. "Don't be ratty! Gussy's just had a letter—"

"Hang Gussy!" growled Tom Merry. "Gussy means well!" said Herries.

"He always does, the silly ass!"

"Let a chap finish!" implored Blake.

"My belief is that Gussy has gone to meet the man who claims to be your uncle, and Dig's watching where he goes. If you want to see the man yourself—"

Tom Merry jumped.

"Oh, good!" he exclaimed, his face clearing at once. "Take those eggs off, Monty! We'll have tea later!"

"What-ho!" said Lowther.

"Come on, then!" said Blake.

"Gussy's only a few minutes ahead, and Dig's got an eye on him!"

"Good man!"

"I—I—I suppose the man can't be a relation of yours by any chance?" said Blake hesitatingly.

"Fathead!" was Tom's reply to that.

"Gussy believes it—"

"That born idiot would believe anything!"

"I think he's been handing the man money to keep away from the school. He means well."

"Oh, the ass!"

Tom Merry hurried out of the study with Manners and Lowther, and Blake and Herries followed. The five juniors ran down to the gates.

Outside in the road Digby met them.

"Where has he gone?" exclaimed Tom Merry breathlessly.

"Straight along the lane towards Rylcombe."

"Good! Come on, you fellows!"

Tom Merry started down the lane at a run. His chums followed fast. It was a chance of meeting Tom Merry's "uncle" that was not to be lost.

"There he is!" exclaimed Manners suddenly.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy came in sight. He was standing by the stile in the lane. Seated on the stile, with a black pipe in his mouth, was a dingy gentleman in tattered attire. The Terrible Three recognised him at once as the tramp whom Tom Merry had knocked down in the wood by the river two or three days ago.

"That fellow!" ejaculated Lowther.

Tom gasped.

"That man! He told us his name was Merry!" he exclaimed. "You remember?"

"Oh, my hat!"

"So that's the man—and he's told Gussy— Oh, the born idiot! Come on!"

And the juniors raced on towards the stile.

CHAPTER 11.

The Rascal's Reward!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY had arrived rather breathlessly at the stile, where Mr. George Herbert Merry had made the appointment with him. He had no suspicion that he was being watched or followed; but he was in a hurry to meet Mr. Merry, and keep him away from the school. All the more because the man

was proving himself an unscrupulous rascal, Gussy was anxious to keep him from visiting Tom Merry, and "showing up" the unfortunate Shell fellow.

Gussy, in his goodness, was prepared to take almost any measures to that end. His pocket-money was gone already; and further bribes to Mr. Merry, at present, were out of the question. He had only his eloquence to depend upon, and he doubted whether it would have much effect upon George Herbert. It was in a worried mood that he arrived at the rendezvous.

"Oh, 'ere you are!" said Mr. Merry, eying him over his black pipe, and exhaling a delightful odour of rum as he spoke.

"Yaas," said Arthur Augustus. "Heah I am, Mr. Mewwy! I have weccived your lettah. Pway do not wite to me at the school again; your lettah might have been opened by my House-mastah!"

"P'raps I'd better call and see my nephew instead!" granted Mr. Merry.

"Pway do nothin' of the kind! You agreed to cleah off and leave Tom Mewwy in peace if I handed you a sovewign!" said Arthur Augustus sternly.

"Wot's a quid?" growled George Herbert. "I'm going to 'ave something better than that from young Tom, so I tell yer!"

"But you agreed——"

"That quid 'as gone!" said Mr. Merry. "I've spent it on——on food!"

"Judgin' by your appeawance," said Arthur Augustus, with great severity, "you 'ave spent at least a part of it on dwink!"

"A man gits thirsty in this 'ot weather! The question is, do you want me to call at the school?"

"Certainly not!"

"Well, then, 'and me my railway-fare, and I'll clear off!" said Mr. Merry. "I can do it on another quid!"

"I am sowwy to say that I am stonay at pwesent! Besides, I cannot twust you!" said Arthur Augustus. "You have already agreed to go, and you are still heah! Do you call that honourable conduct, Mr. Mewwy?"

"Oh, my eye!" murmured Mr. Merry.

"As a man of honah," said Arthur Augustus severely, "you are bound to go, without makin' any furthah wequests for money."

"Oh crimes!"

It was the first time in Mr. Merry's dusty career that he had been addressed as a man of honour, and it seemed to have a peculiar effect on him. He struggled to control his merriment.

"Bai Jove! I see nothing to chortle at in my wemark, Mr. Mewwy," said Arthur Augustus. "You are pleased to be amused, appawently."

"Oh, bust my buttons!" gasped Mr. Merry. "Not at all, sir! But I'm 'ard up, and I want 'elp. Make it another quid, and you're done with me for good. I'll give you my davy not to come up to the school!"

"I am not expectin' any more money till to-morrow," said Arthur Augustus. "If I could twust you, I would stand you another sovewign to go. But——"

"On my davy, sir!"

"I do not know what a davy is, Mr. Mewwy. If you mean your word of honah——"

"Solemn word of honour, sir!" said George Herbert, as gravely as he could.

There was a pattering of running feet in the lane.

Mr. Merry looked up with a start, and Arthur Augustus glanced round.

"Bai Jove! Tom Mewwy!"

"Oh gum!" gasped George Herbert. He blinked at the juniors, as they ran

up, in dismay. He slipped from the stile, with the intention of taking to his heels. But the rum at the Green Man had rendered his legs unsteady, and he rolled over and sat in the lane. He dragged himself up again by grasping at the stile, gasping.

Tom Merry & Co. came racing up, and they surrounded the unfortunate Mr. Merry in a half-circle, enclosing him against the stile. His escape was quite cut off.

"Is that the man who claims to be my uncle?" shouted the captain of the Shell angrily.

"Weally, you know——"

"Answer, you image!" roared Blake.

"I wufuse to be called an image, Blake!"

Tom Merry strode at the dingy ruffian, who was leaning heavily on the stile, and grasped him savagely by the shoulder. Arthur Augustus ran to interpose.

"Tom Mewwy——"

"Stand back, you ass!"

"You must not stwike your uncle, Tom Mewwy. Whatever he is, you must respect his yeahs!"

"Keep quiet, you chump!"

Tom Merry, with a grasp on George Herbert's shoulder, shook him fiercely. Mr. Merry lurched and gasped.

"Now, you rascal!" said Tom, between his teeth. "You're the same brute that wanted to rob us in the wood the other day! I remember you! Have you told that silly idiot that you are my uncle?"

"Groooh!"

"Lend me a hand with him," said Tom, his eyes glittering. "He's a dangerous ruffian, and he's been extorting money from that silly diffier. The police-station is the proper place for him. He can tell the inspector that he is my uncle, if he likes. Lend me a hand, and we'll take him along to Rycombe and give him in charge."

There was a dismal howl from George Herbert. Evidently he did not want an interview with the inspector at the police-station.

"Leggo! Oh, my eye! Leggo!"

"Tom Mewwy," panted Arthur Augustus, "pway do not be hasty! I entweat you to wely on my judgment, deah boy. If your uncle is wun in, there will be a feahful disgwace——"

"He is not my uncle!" roared Tom Merry. "He happens to have the same name, that's all. About a thousand other people have the same name, too. Do you thing they are all my uncle's, you crass chump?"

"Bai Jove! He says——"

The expression on Gussy's aristocratic face was extraordinary. In spite of his alarm, George Herbert could not repress a grin.

"The young gent was so soft," he explained defensively. "I never really expected 'im to swaller the yarn. It was just a try-on. That was all, I swear, gents. Jest a try-on, to see if he would swaller it."

"You told him you were my uncle?" demanded Tom Merry, giving the rascal a shake that made him stagger and cling to the stile convulsively.

"Ow-ow!" Yes!" gasped Mr. Merry.

"It was because my name was the same as yours, sir, that's all. When I met you, sir, that young gent—he nodded at Lowther—that young gent made a joke about your relation turnin' up, sir, and that put it into my 'ead. Then I come on this young feller, sir, and he looked so soft and simple——"

"Bai Jove!"

"I was only trying it on," groaned Mr. Merry, as Tom shook him again. "I jest thought I might squeedje 'arf-a-crown out of 'im with a yarn that I 'ad

a relation at his school. That was all, sir. But when he swallered it all so easy, I thought I could make more'n 'arf-a-crown out of it."

"You uttah wascal!" shouted Arthur Augustus, in burning indignation. "You were pullin' my leg all the time, then?"

Mr. Merry chuckled.

"Yessir," he answered. "That's about the size of it, sir. I was 'ard up, sir."

"You feahful wogue!"

"Oh, sir!" murmured Mr. Merry deprecatingly. "You was such a kind young gent, sir, and so beautiful soft, sir; you reely led me on, sir."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry released the dingy rascal.

Unscrupulous rogue as the man was, there was no doubt that it was the delightful simplicity of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy that was at the bottom of his present rascality. Certainly he would scarcely have ventured to attempt such a trick with anyone but the Honourable Arthur Augustus.

"I wegard you as a wogue and a wascal!" said the swell of St. Jim's sternly. "You have deceived me, and extwacted money from me, in the most unscowpulous mannah. I was undah the impression that I was shieldin' Tom Mewwy from disgwace——"

"You ass!" said Tom ungratefully.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I was undah that impression, Tom Mewwy, and I was actin' as a friend. I am vewy glad to discovah that this wascal is not your uncle, aftah all. It is weally a pleasuah to me to find that you have not had any wrelations in pwison——"

"Ass!"

"You may leave that uttah wottah to me," continued Arthur Augustus, pushing back his cuffs. "He is a wascal and a wogue and a wastah, and I am goin' to give him a feahful thwashin'. Pway stand back!"

"Oh, my eye!" ejaculated Mr. Merry.

"Put your hands up, you wottah!"

"I—I say—— Yaroooh!" roared George Herbert.

Arthur Augustus was sailing in with great vim.

Biff, biff! Bang! Crash!

George Herbert, if he had been quite sober, might have given Arthur Augustus some trouble. As it was, there was not much chance of a fearful thrashing being administered, for the hapless rascal collapsed at the first onslaught, and rolled in the dust.

"Get up, you wottah!" shouted Arthur Augustus wrathfully.

"Grooogh!"

"Pewwaps the uttah wottah has had enough," said Arthur Augustus. "Cleah off, you howwid wogue! If I evah see you again, I will make a feahful example of you!"

George Herbert Merry crawled dismally away. He disappeared through a hedge, and was not seen again. Arthur Augustus turned to Tom Merry.

"Tom Mewwy, deah boy, I am vewy sowwy——"

"So you ought to be, you silly ass!"

"I was actin' with the best intentions, you——"

"Fathead!"

The Terrible Three walked home to tea. But after tea Arthur Augustus looked in at Study No. 10 with renewed apologies, and he was forgiven. In fact, now that the unpleasant affair was over and done with, Tom Merry quite recovered his good-humour, and he laughed as merrily as anyone over the amazing story of the Goodness of Gussy!

THE END.

(Next Wednesday: "THE SCHOOL-BOY CARAVANNERS!" By Martin Clifford. Order Early.)

PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS.

A Special New Serial by the Editor of the Companion Papers.

CHAPTER 1.

How I met Martin Clifford.

IT has been suggested to me, many a time and oft, that I should give my readers a personal record of my experiences, humorous and otherwise, during my career as Editor of the Companion Papers.

So here goes!
I shall make no attempt to give anything like a complete record of all that has happened since the "Magnet" and "Gem" came into the world. To do so would take up far more space than I have at my disposal, in addition to boring a good many readers stiff.

I shall just describe, simply and straightforwardly, those happenings which have impressed themselves most vividly upon my memory.

If, by thus giving my readers an insight into the work of the Companion Papers, and letting them peep for a moment behind the veil, I succeeded in strengthening the bond of friendship which exists between us, then I shall feel more than content.

It was in the summer of 1906—Jove, how time flies!—when I first met that brilliant and gifted writer of school stories, Martin Clifford.

I was on a cycling tour in Sussex—a solitary tour, for my chums were unable to get their holidays at the same time.

Scorching along under a blazing sun, and hoping soon to reach a village where I might get a substantial midday meal, I presently espied a slim, good-looking young fellow seated on the bank.

He had been sitting there for hours, for all I knew.

By his side was a bicycle, hopelessly punctured, and on his knee rested a stout exercise-book, in which he was scribbling industriously.

He sang out a cherry "Good-morning!" "Punctured?" I asked, dismounting from my machine.

"The slim youth pointed to his burst tyre. "Looks like it, doesn't it?" he grinned.

"Aren't you going to mend it?"

"No jolly fear! I'm not a mechanic."

"But you'll be stranded!" I protested.

"Who cares? This is a ripping resting-place, and I'm quite enjoying myself!"

I sat down on the bank beside him, and, the ice being fairly broken, we soon became chums.

He told me that he, too, was on a cycling tour—when the state of his bike permitted!

"Are you making notes of your tour?" I asked, glancing at the exercise-book.

He shook his head.

"No; I'm writing a story."

I became interested at once.

At that time I was sub-editor of several well-known boys' papers, and the Editor had instructed me always to be on the look-out for possible talent.

And here, I may mention, that talent sometimes crops up in queer places.

I have stumbled across genius in the slums; and I once unearthed a pork butcher who wrote historical novels.

Was it possible that I was about to make another "find"?

"Is it an adventure story?" I inquired.

"Well, it is, and it isn't," said my companion. "It's not a yarn of the wild and woolly West. There isn't a single murder; and so far I haven't spilt a drop of blood, except at the part where one boy punches another with great violence on the nose. There's plenty of adventure, but it's not the wild sort."

"Then it's a school story?"

"Right on the wicket!"

"If you don't mind my firing questions at you, how many words have you written?"

"Seven thousand."

"Wha-a-at!"

"It's nothing to make a song about," he said lightly.

"But you must have been here hours and hours!"

"I have."

"Great Scott! You must be awfully in love with your hobby to stick at it like this!"

He smiled.

"It's hardly a hobby," he said. "It's my living. I'm not doing it for the benefit of my health."

"You mean to say that story will be published?"

"There will be a dead editor found lying about if it isn't! Look here, if you'll hang on for a bit while I write the last chapter, we'll go along to the next village and get some grub."

"Good!" I said. "I'll mend your puncture while you're scribbling."

And I did. But I was more concerned with the young fellow seated beside me than with the puncture.

Was it possible that this youth—this beardless stripling—was already a successful author?

Youth and genius sometimes went hand in hand, I knew.

But this boy—

And school yarns are not the easiest sort of yarns to write, either.

When the puncture was mended, and the last chapter written, we adjourned to the next village.

Here we found an old-fashioned hostelry, which had weathered the storm for several centuries.

The landlord—a jovial, red-faced man—did us well. By this I do not mean to infer that he swindled us. He gave us an excellent dinner; and over a bottle of cider I read my friend's story.

Now, a sub-editor's job brings him into contact with stories of all kinds—good, bad, indifferent, and outside the pale.

But when I read my friend's story I was convinced that he was a master of his craft.

The clumsy, amateurish touch was not in evidence in his manuscript.

His story—it was entitled "The Honour of the School!" if I remember rightly—was bright, humorous, and arresting. And there was plenty of action in it. The short, incisive sentences were rattled off like bursts from a machine-gun.

"Well," he said, with a smile, when I had finished, "what do you think of it?"

"It's first-rate, Mr. Martin Clifford!" I said.

He started.

"How on earth did you know my name? It's not on the manuscript."

"But it is on your card in the saddle-bag of your bicycle."

"Oh!"

"Are you making a good living at this game?" I asked.

"Well, I'm not doing badly. Why?"

"I was thinking that you might collaborate with me in producing a new book for boys."

His eyes sparkled. It was very evident that my suggestion appealed to him.

"There's nothing I should like better," he said. "I'm fresh from a big public school in Sussex—a few miles from here—and I've kept a record of all the interesting things that happened there. I've got the material for heaps of stories."

"Splendid!"

"The yarn I've just written is about my own school," said Martin Clifford.

"I guessed it was founded on fact," I said.

And then we put our heads together and spoke of the future.

The arrangement we came to was, that as soon as my holiday expired Martin Clifford should join me in London. We would then launch a weekly story-paper, in which we would give publicity to his school and to the exploits of its pupils.

We chatted far into the afternoon, and then I suggested that we resumed our cycling tour.

Neither of us had any fixed objective; and Martin Clifford readily agreed when I suggested that we spent the next few days on the road together, cycling at our own sweet will, and sleeping and feeding at wayside inns.

Dusk was beginning to fall, and we hurried out of the hostelry and continued our ride.

My friend's mended tyre held good, and we had covered quite a dozen miles, chiefly uphill, when Martin Clifford suddenly sprang from his machine.

"Anything wrong?" I asked.

"I should jolly well say so! I've left my manuscript behind!"

"Pshaw!"

"Look here," said Martin Clifford, "you carry on. I'll ride back for the story. I left it on the table in the lounge. It was my fault."

"Nonsense!" I retorted. "I'll ride back with you. We'll spend the night in the hostelry. The landlord is a good sort, and he'll make us comfy."

So we rode back.

I don't think I ever enjoyed a cycle-ride so much.

Darkness had descended over the Sussex countryside; but the journey was downhill

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nearly all the way, and we chatted gaily as we whizzed along.

When we re-entered the lounge of the hostelry we found a stranger seated there—a stranger to me, at any rate. But Martin Clifford hailed him as an old familiar friend. "Good-evening, Mr. Belton!" he exclaimed. Then, introducing me, he explained that Mr. Belton was an assistant-master at his old school.

"I knew you were in the vicinity, Clifford," said the young master, shaking hands. "I spotted your manuscript on the table. What's more, I took the liberty of reading it. It's a capital yarn. Of course, it's for private circulation only?"

"I had intended to publish it," said Martin Clifford.

"In that case, don't you think it would be advisable to change the name of the school, also the names of the characters?"

"By Jove!" Curiously enough, that never occurred to me.

"I think it would be wise," said Mr. Belton. "Of course, there are a good many real names in the stories of Rugby and Charterhouse. But in this case, I think it would be a good plan, too, to obtain the Head's sanction for the story to be published."

Martin Clifford looked remorseful. "Kick me, somebody!" he exclaimed. "I ought to have thought of these things before. But I was so absorbed in writing the story that I quite overlooked them."

"If you like," said Mr. Belton, "I'll speak to the Head myself this evening, and let you know in the morning if he approves of the publication of such stories, provided the names are changed."

"That would be very decent of you," said Martin Clifford.

Mr. Belton, with a cheerful nod, walked out, leaving Martin Clifford and I alone together.

I am afraid there was very little sleep for either of us that night.

We were concerned with the headmaster's verdict.

Was it possible that he would forbid us to publish stories concerning his school?

If so, our scheme was doomed to disaster; for, as my friend pointed out, it would be impossible to produce a finer set of characters.

However, our suspense was at an end early next morning.

Mr. Belton called, and informed us that the Head had no objection to such stories being published provided the name of the school and the names of the characters were changed.

"That's a big feather in our cap!" I said delightedly. "Now we can get busy."

"What shall you call your new paper?" asked Martin Clifford.

I reflected for a few moments.

"Something short and sweet," prompted my companion.

"Why not the 'Gem'?" I said at length.

"Excellent! It doesn't convey a great deal, but it comes easier when going into a newsagent's shop than asking for a copy of the 'Boys' Own Weekly Illustrated School Story Paper'!"

"Not many boys would care to do that," I said, laughing.

"Precisely! That's where the 'Gem' scores."

We continued to discuss our scheme over breakfast.

"If I am allowed to edit the paper," I said, "I shall run adventure stories for the first few weeks. That will give you the chance to get well ahead with the stories of St. Jim's. I believe that's what you intend calling your school, isn't it?"

Martin Clifford nodded.

"I shall put my best work into these stories," he said.

Even now, after the lapse of years, I can vividly recall that memorable morning.

The comfortable inn, the jovial landlord, the earnest and enthusiastic expression on the face of Martin Clifford—all are indelibly stamped upon my memory.

We were youngsters, both of us. Some would have said that we were building castles in Spain.

But we made up our minds there and then that we would overcome all obstacles, and win for the 'Gem' a leading place in boys' literature.

Have we succeeded?

That is a question which my thousands of readers can readily answer.

(Continued on page 16.)

The Editor's Chat.

The Companion Papers are:

THE MAGNET.
Every Monday.

THE BOYS' FRIEND.
Every Monday.

THE GEM.
Every Wed.

THE PENNY POPULAR.
Every Friday.

CHUCKLES.
Every Friday.

YOUR EDITOR IS ALWAYS GLAD TO HEAR FROM HIS READERS.

MARTIN CLIFFORD'S MASTERPIECE

This week's issue of the "Penny Popular" contains a powerful and vigorous story of St. Jim's, by Martin Clifford.

Not since the famous GEM author gave us the Talbot series—I refer to the three stories entitled "The Call of the Past," "Cast Out from the School," and "Loyal to the Last!"—have I read such fine, gripping stories as those concerning Levison minor which are now appearing in the "Penny Popular."

Comparisons are odious; but I really think Martin Clifford has, on this occasion, excelled his friend and colleague, Frank Richards.

Get this week's issue of the "Penny Popular," and see if you think so, too!

ONWARD AND UPWARD!

The Result of My "Straight Talk" to My Readers!

Since my little lecture on the subject of loyalty appeared on this page the circulation of the GEM Library has put on flesh.

I knew that this would be so. I knew that I could count upon my loyal army of supporters to put their shoulders to the wheel; and I sincerely trust that, now that we are on the up-grade, my chums will not relax their efforts.

But let me again impress this fact upon my readers. I do not expect miracles from boys who possess only a very limited allowance of pocket-money.

One Birmingham boy devoted his entire week's pocket-money to purchasing copies of the GEM. Result—he was unable to indulge in any of the little pleasures to which he had been accustomed.

Devotion to one's favourite paper can sometimes be carried too far. I do not wish my chums to deprive themselves of their pleasures by making sacrifices of this sort. I want every reader to help the GEM Library according to his means. The fellow who has unlimited pocket-money can buy a dozen copies and distribute them; but his less fortunate comrade, who receives only a few pence per week, is not expected to purchase more than his usual copy.

I hope I have made myself quite clear, and, in conclusion, let me heartily thank those readers who are strenuously engaged in lifting the circulation of the GEM Library to heights which it has never reached before.

CLOTHES AND THE BOY!

A short time ago a certain London newspaper published the following paragraph—a paragraph which would have made Arthur Augustus D'Arcy shed tears:

"The Headmaster of Eton, on the recommendation of the economy committee, has made new dress restrictions."

"Silk scarves and cox-ing-caps are abolished, and the wearing of fur gloves is prohibited."

"Fancy waistcoats will be forbidden, and several other restrictions are to be enforced."

"Two Etonians" have since written to assure me that there is no foundation for these statements.

The fancy waistcoat will continue to flourish; and cox-ing-caps will still adorn the heads of the young Etonians in their exploits on the Thames.

FIGGINS AND COUSIN ETHEL!

Miss Cherry Haley writes as follows:

"Is George Figgins too nervous to 'pop the question' to Cousin Ethel? Or has he already done so, and met with a refusal?"

"Will you please give me the answer in the Editorial Chat? I am aged nine."

I am sorry to throw a damper on the romantic dreams of this young lady; but I must assure her that the attachment between Figgins and Cousin Ethel is purely one of friendship. When these dear people have grown up there is no knowing what may happen; but the present time is far too early a stage for wedding-bells.

Miss Madisia Towers has asked me a similar question with regard to Harry Wharton and Marjorie Hazeldene, and also Bob Cherry and Phyllis Howell. "Have these boys and girls yet become engaged?" asks Madisia.

The answer, as the photographer said, is in the negative!

YOUR EDITOR'S SERIAL!

This, as you will observe, is commenced in this issue of the GEM Library.

Whether the serial will prove successful or not remains to be seen. It is not written with the style and vigour of a Martin Clifford; but I think many of you will find it interesting; and if you don't, then the remedy is simple! The Personal Recollections will have to come to an untimely end!

ST. JIM'S v. ROOKWOOD!

This great cricket-match, which takes place on the St. Jim's ground, is described with brilliance and skill by Owen Conquest, in this Monday's issue of the "Boys' Friend."

No lover of healthy sport should miss the story in question, which is one of many brilliant features in our splendid companion paper.

NOTICES.

Correspondence, etc., Wanted.

Correspondents interested in postage-stamps—beginners and medium collectors preferred—mineral specimens, coins, or curios. W. C. H. Zipp, Box 1173, Johannesburg, Transvaal, South Africa.

Miss E. Atkins, 135, Kennington Park Road, S.E. 11—with readers anywhere, 15-16.

Miss Muriel Bishop, 215, Edward Street, Nuneaton, Warwickshire—with readers anywhere, 17-18.

Will F. M. B., formerly of Caterham Valley, Surrey, write once more to A. F., of Parkgate? He would much like to hear.

G. C. Carr, 16, West Street, High Spenn, Durham, wants correspondents for British and African Club. In touch with Gold Coast. Stamped envelope and particulars of age, etc.

Harry Broadbent, 13, Cecil Street, Ryecroft, Ashton-under-Lyne—with readers anywhere, 14-17.

R. Griffin, 10, Mariotti Street, Brown Street, Manchester, wants readers for cyclists' club; 13-15, within five miles of Manchester.

W. J. D'Eresby Murch, 77, the Mall, Newport, Isle of Wight—with readers interested in law; those preparing for the Bachelor of Laws Degree preferred; also with readers keen on criminology and detective work; also with readers in South America and the States.

Fred George, 28, Mount Pleasant, Southville, Bristol, would like to hear from Vouzmann, of 8, Zampa Road, South Bermondsey, London, S.E.

B. Burnage, 483, Chester Road, Old Trafford, Manchester, would like to hear from a reader interested in stamps, as he has a large collection to dispose of.

W. J. D'Eresby Murch, 77, the Mall, Newport, Isle of Wight, will answer questions regarding examinations, and give useful information on subjects, etc., for a small fee.

Wm. Leonard Troy, 9, Burnett Street, Redfern, Sydney, N.S.W., Australia—with readers in British Isles; 14-16.

W. M., of Sheffield, would like to hear again from his chum and correspondent, T. L., of Blyth, as he has received no letters from him since last November.

F. Bottomley, 48, Downhills Park Road, Philip Lane, Tottenham, N. 15, offers a collection of foreign stamps, cheap.

H. A. H. (YOUR EDITOR.)

PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS

(Continued from Page 15.)

CHAPTER 2.

Getting to Business!

SOME people imagine that, next to being a gentleman of leisure, the easiest thing in the world is to run a boys' paper.

These people are offside.

There is no public more critical than the boy public.

A boy will have the best, and nothing but the best. And I don't blame him.

In the days of which I write it was a common fallacy on the part of some editors to suppose that if they published stories of the battle, murder, and sudden death variety their paper would command a ready sale. They imagined that the British boy revelled in blood-and-thunder.

This theory is all wrong.

What the British boy wants is clean, bright, and wholesome fiction, sparkling and brimming over with humour. He prefers the healthy type of story to the unhealthy. He loves to read of stirring tussles in the playing-field, and he likes his heroes to be decent, straightforward fellows without being prigs.

Having served an apprenticeship, so to speak, under a very capable editor, I was in a position to know at the outset the sort of features to include in the "Gem."

We live and learn, and within a few weeks I had added to my store of experience.

I realised that the most popular type of story was the school story.

This was the case twelve years ago, and the school story is as popular to-day as ever it was.

Ask any boy friend of yours to name his favourite modern author.

He will probably award the palm to Martin Clifford, Frank Richards, or Owen Conquest. Or he may have a word to say for Richard Randolph or Prosper Howard.

These men are the best living exponents of school life.

Their stories have been read—and will continue to be read—in every corner of the British Empire. And the popularity of their work, so far from declining, is increasing daily.

The "Gem" Library commenced its prosperous career not at the Fleetway House, but at a small office in Carmelite Street. It is, of course, a much younger paper than the "Boys' Friend," although it is senior to the "Magnet," the "Penny Popular," and "Chuckles."

A great deal of time and thought has to be expended on a new paper before it actually appears; and it was not until March 14, 1907, that the first number of the "Gem" appeared on the bookstalls.

Martin Clifford had no share in the first number. But he had been very busy since the previous summer, and, besides setting me up with a stock of St. Jim's stories, he had contributed some at intervals to "Pluck."

In No. 3 of the "Gem" we were introduced to Tom Merry, but not to St. Jim's.

Tom was at Clavering then, and his headmaster, curiously enough, was Mr. Railton, who is now the School House master at St. Jim's.

The "Gem" showed early promise of fulfilling our expectations. But it was not until No. 11, "Tom Merry at St. Jim's," appeared that the boy public really began to sit up and take notice.

From this number onwards the Tom Merry stories appeared without a break.

Martin Clifford had got fairly into his stride now, and, although practically unknown hitherto, his name rapidly became a household word.

In those dear, dead days the "Gem" was one-third of its present price. But the stories were considerably shorter, and there were no extracts from the "Greyfriars Herald" and "Tom Merry's Weekly." Those bright little journals were not destined to see the light of day for some time to come.

I had one sub-editor then; I have half a dozen now.

Some of you may think that in 1907 we had very little work to do. And this brings me back to the opening sentence of this chapter.

One of the first rules I laid down in connection with the running of the "Gem" was this:

"Every letter from a reader shall be promptly answered, where a stamped-addressed envelope is enclosed for that purpose."

Well, when you consider that we received from two to three hundred letters per day, you will appreciate that we had our hands full!

Talk about midnight oil!

There have been occasions when my sub-editor and I have worked unremittingly in our little sanctum until the first glimmer of dawn!

We have had letters on every conceivable subject, from white mice to matrimony. We have had letters of approval; letters expressing terrible threats; letters asking for advice; letters requesting loans, on the Billy Bunter principle; letters from young men and maidens, old men and children, and from boys of all ages and nationalities.

In the midst of these recollections I hope to reproduce a number of the most amusing letters which have been received at the office of the Companion Papers.

The tremendous task of answering this mass of miscellaneous correspondence represented only a portion of the week's work. There were manuscripts to read, and send to the artists for illustration; there were proof-sheets to correct; there were numerous odd jobs which the average reader wots not of.

What did we do in our spare time? you will ask.

The answer is obvious. We had none!

But we were happy—very happy.

The "Gem" was going great guns.

The stories by Martin Clifford, each one better than the last, were creating a big sensation.

The famous "Gem" author, although twice smitten by illness during this period, kept the home fires burning. His manuscripts arrived with the regularity of the morning postbag.

There was a certain amount of prejudice against the "Gem," of course.

No halfpenny paper has yet been published which has escaped the lash of the critics.

Some called it "trash," and "utter piffle." A certain daily newspaper went further, and described it as "the Boy's Guide to Gore."

Needless to say, the "Gem" easily survived these cheap attacks.

(To be continued next Wednesday.)

Greyfriars Epitaphs.

No. 8. By BOB CHERRY.

WALK UP! WALK UP! WALK UP!

THE FINAL FRAGMENTS

of

FISHER TARLETON FISH

(late of New York City)

lie right here

I KINDER SORT

CALCULATE

that he was the brainiest galeot who ever set foot in this sleepy old island. He would do anything—or anybody—with true Yankee thoroughness. He was some stunter, I guess. Yep! Right from the word go!

HE MET HIS FATE

by experimenting with a new form of dynamite, which exploded, covering the sky with Fish cutlets.

During his career at Greyfriars he worked numerous wheezes, which included a Fan Agency and a pawnbroking business; but there was something so fishy about Fishy that he had to fish for fresh stunts.

JEEVER GET LEFT?

No; but Fishy did! All his plots to amass dollars, spondulics, and greenbacks were, like himself, blown to smithereens; and with his last breath he cursed the sleepy, short-sighted, moss-grown inhabitants of this ancient island.

ALAS, POOR FISHY!

He was a hustler in his manner of living, and likewise in his manner of dying!

TREAD LIGHTLY, TRAVELLER!

lest you crush the matchbox in which are interred his mortal remains!

"The heights, by great men gained and kept,
Were not attained by gradual flight;
But they, whilst their companions slept,
Were fooling round with dynamite!"



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