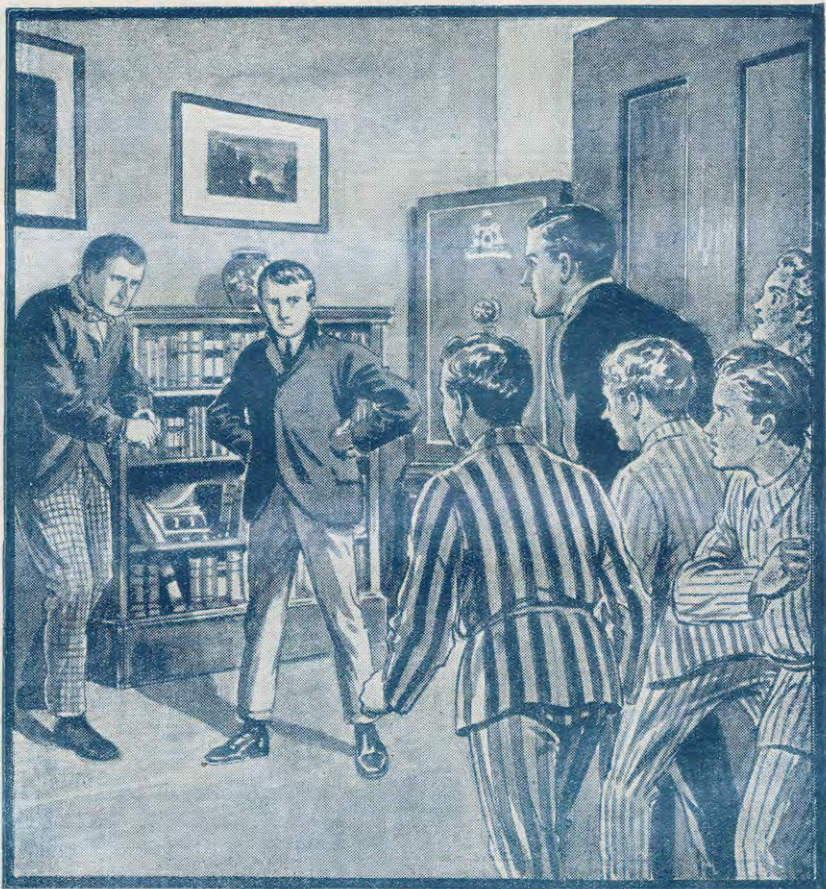


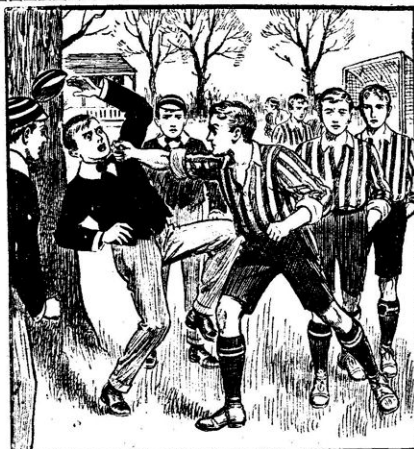


PLAYING A PART!



CAPTURED BY THE NEW BOOT-BOY!

A Dramatic Incident in the Splendid, Long, Complete School Tale in this Number 1-11-18



PLAYING A PART!

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

A Magnificent Long Complete Story dealing with the Adventures of Tom Merry and Co. at St. Jim's.

CHAPTER I. The Warning!

"LICKED!"

"Whacked by the wide, bai Jove!"

"This is where the New House bounders score!"

The rival Houses at St. Jim's had been trying conclusions on the football field, and Figgins & Co. of the New House, had won a hard-fought game by the odd goal in three.

Tom Merry & Co. felt their disappointment keenly as they trooped off the field.

"We ought to have won!" growled Jack Blake.

"And we should have won," said Manners, "but for a weakness in the forward line."

Talbot of the Shell flushed.

He had been responsible for the weakness to which Manners referred.

As a rule, Talbot played as well as any junior in his House. He was alert and active, besides being a sure and deadly shot.

But he had just given a sorry exhibition. He had been slow and hesitating; he had missed several gilt-edged chances of scoring. In a nutshell, he had let his side down.

"This is what comes of not including me in the team, Merry!" said George Alfred Grundy.

"Rats!"

"I may not be a Steve Bloomer," said Grundy, "but I could have put up a better show than Talbot!"

"I believe you, old chap," said Jack Blake.

"I dry up, Jacky!" said Tom Merry crossly. "It's only natural that a fellow should strike a bad patch now and again. You can't expect Talbot to do miracles in every match. He failed this afternoon, but he'll make up for it next time!"

"Thanks, Tom!" said Talbot quietly.

At this point, Racke, Crooke, and Mellish, who were standing on the touch-line, gave their views on the game.

"I should advise you fellows to chuck footer," said Aubrey Racke, "an' take up hopscotch!"

"Or marbles!" suggested Mellish.

"When are you going to learn to shoot straight, Talbot?" sneered Crooke.

"Now!" said Talbot.

And with unexpected promptness he shot out his right, and Gerald Crooke was knocked backwards into a puddle.

"Yaroooooh!" roared Crooke.

Talbot—who, as a rule had an excellent command of his temper—seemed to be unusually exasperated. He stood waiting for Crooke to rise, doubtless with the intention of giving him another dose; but at that moment he caught sight of his girl chum, Marie Rivers, advancing towards him.

Talbot turned crimson.

He expected a rebuke from Marie, but the girl pretended not to have noticed the incident. She did not even glance in Crooke's direction.

"Would you care for a stroll, Toff?" she asked pleasantly.

Talbot nodded. He walked away in the company of the school nurse, while Tom Merry & Co. passed on towards the building, to drown their sorrows by means of a hot bath.

"I've been watching the match, Toff," explained Marie.

"Then you must feel pretty sick, Marie."

"Your play was certainly disappointing. Tom Merry gave you heaps of chances to score, and you bungled them every time. I've never seen you give such a sorry exhibition, Toff."

"I was off-colour," said Talbot.

"Yes, but why? Are you ill?"

"No such luck."

"Why do you say that?"

Talbot mustered a smile.

"Because if I were ill I should have the satisfaction of being well looked after in the sanmy!" he said.

Marie blushed.

"You are very complimentary, Toff. But if you are not ill, what is worrying you? You have something on your mind?"

"Yes," admitted Talbot.

"I thought so. Tell me what is wrong."

Talbot glanced around him. The football field was deserted, save for those

two. In the distance, Crooke, of the Shell could be seen limping away towards the School House.

"You remember Jim Dawlish, Marie?"

Marie Rivers started at the suddenness of the question.

"Of course!" she said. "I am not likely to forget that precious scoundrel—how he got me into his clutches, and took me away in a caravan, keeping me a prisoner for days." The girl shivered a little. "I am not likely to forget, either, how you came to my rescue, Toff, and saved my life at the expense of your own."

Talbot was silent for some moments.

"The pity of it is, Marie," he said at length, "that Dawlish was allowed to go scot-free. It could not be helped, of course. But ever since that affair, I've been worried."

Marie nodded.

"You think that Jim Dawlish will molest us again?"

"I don't think, Marie—I know!"

"How, Toff?"

"Just before the match started this afternoon I had a letter from him."

"Oh!"

"That was why I played so rottenly. I couldn't keep my mind off the letter. I'm not afraid—not for myself. But I can't help thinking, Marie, that if Dawlish happened to kidnap you a second time, you wouldn't get away so easily."

"Does he threaten to kidnap me again?"

Talbot produced the letter for his girl chum to see. It was addressed in an illiterate scrawl, and ran as follows:

"To the Toff.—You may think you have seen the last of me, but you haven't. You and Marie scarily got the better of me last time; but we shall meet again, Toff, and before long! I give you fare warning. JIM DAWLISH."

Marie looked grave.

"He doesn't mean to give us much rest, Toff," she said. "What do you think he means by this letter?"

"He may mean anything," said Talbot. "He may have another shot at

kidnapping you. On the other hand, he may try to induce both of us to join his precious gang. Anyway, there's trouble brewing, and I feel anything but comfortable."

"Where is Jim Dawlish now?"
"He's in the neighbourhood already," Marie gave a start.

"Then he is losing no time. How do you know he is here?"

"His letter bears the Wayland postmark."

"So it does! Really, Toff, this is getting exciting!"

Talbot turned gravely to his girl chum.

"You will have to be very careful, Marie. Whatever you do, don't let yourself be lured into keeping an appointment with Dawlish. He means mischief, and he would have no scruples about carrying you off like he did before. You will need to be very guarded in your movements, Marie. I shouldn't advise you to go outside the school gates, except in the company of a fellow."

"Promise me, Marie—promise me that you will not expose yourself to risk?"

"Marie smiled."

"You are taking this very seriously, Toff."

"It's a serious matter. Will you promise, Marie, not to venture out of the gates alone?"

"I promise," said Marie.

Talbot looked relieved.

"And what about yourself, Toff?"

said the girl. "You, too, will need to be careful."

"Oh, I shall be all right!" said Talbot. "Jim Dawlish will find me a hot handful, if he tries to take me unawares!"

"What are you going to do with this letter?"

For answer, Talbot took the letter from Marie Rivers, and tore it into a score of fragments, which were thrown to the winds.

"You will not put yourself under the Head's protection, Toff?" said Marie.

Talbot laughed.

"The Head's a dead old chap!" he said, "but I'm afraid his protection wouldn't be of much use to either of us."

"Then we must take our chances?"

"Exactly."

Talbot and Marie walked on in silence for some moments.

It was anything but pleasant to reflect that Jim Dawlish was in the locality.

Dawlish was not exactly a clever scoundrel. He lacked the skill and cunning which had been displayed by Marie's father in the days when the Angel Alley-gang had flourished.

John Rivers, "The Professor," had possessed education and polish. Jim Dawlish possessed neither. But that did not alter the fact that he was a dangerous man—a man who would stop at nothing to gain his dishonourable ends.

"So long as we keep our eyes open, Marie," said Talbot, presently, "we ought to be able to checkmate Dawlish. I'll explain to the fellows who can be trusted—Tom Merry and the rest—that Dawlish is hanging around, and they'll give him a rousing reception if they come across him—rather more rousing than he bargains for!"

"Marie laughed. Although she well knew what an unscrupulous ruffian they had to deal with, she was less anxious than Talbot.

"Cheer up, Toff!" said the girl, as they parted. "After all, that may be merely an empty threat on Jim Dawlish's part."

But Talbot of the Shell thought otherwise.

CHAPTER 2.

D'Arcy Finds a Friend!

"WERE waiting for you, dear boy!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy encountered Talbot in the

Shell passage.

Talbot had had a bath and changed into Etons, and he became conscious of the fact that he was very hungry.

"Waiting?" he exclaimed. "What for?"

"Too," said Arthur Augustus.

"There's a spread in Tom Merry's study. It was to have been in celebration of the School House victory."

"But the victory didn't come off—"

"That doesn't alter the fact that the spread will!"

Talbot laughed, and accompanied the swell of St. Jim's to Tom Merry's study. That famous apartment was full. The Terrible Three were there, likewise Jack Blake & Co., of the Fourth.

"Trot right in, Talbot," said Monty Lowther, "and share the festive kipper!"

The juniors no longer felt sore at their recent reverse on the football field. They consoled themselves with the reflection that the rival Houses would soon meet again, and in that occasion the School House intended to avenge their defeat.

Even Jack Blake, who had felt very annoyed with Talbot at first, now beamed at him as the Shell fellow took his place at the table.

"We laid in supplies," explained Tom Merry, "in order to celebrate the School House triumph. Unfortunately, we came a cropper against the New House—"

"But we'll celebrate our future triumph!" said Manners.

"Precisely!"

There were plenty of tempting delicacies on the table, and Talbot did full justice to them. But his school-fellows could not help remarking that he seemed less light-hearted than usual.

"What's wrong, dear boy?" inquired Arthur Augustus. "Aren't the cream buns to your liking?"

"They're ripping!" said Talbot.

"Then why are you lookin' so down in the mouth?"

"Am I?" said Talbot, smiling.

"Yes," said Monty Lowther. "You look like a fellow who's been in for a competition and shared the first prize with nine hundred and ninety-nine others!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You've got something on your mind. I can see," said Tom Merry. "Tell your uncles all about it!"

Talbot took his chums into his confidence.

"I'm worried about that fellow Dawlish," he began.

"Dawlish?" ejaculated Tom Merry.

And there was a buzz from the rest of the juniors.

"Dawlish is the highwayman Johnny, isn't he?" said Monty Lowther. "The merchant who captured Miss Marie?"

Talbot nodded.

"Why the dickens are you worried about him?" asked Jack Blake. "Has he just received a life-sentence?"

"I should feel much more comfortable if he had," said Talbot. "The trouble is, he's still at large. I had a letter from him by the midday post, containing a vague sort of threat."

"Bai Jove!"

"Now we can understand why you didn't do yourself justice in the footer match," said Tom Merry. "You couldn't be expected to bag goals while you were thinking of Dawlish."

"I regard Jim Dawlish as an utter scoundrel!" said Arthur Augustus. "I could make allowances for his being a

cowardsman. Pewwaps that's the only way he can make a livin'. But I have nothin' but resentment for a man who kidnaps a defenceless gal. I regard him with the utmost contempt and despicion!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What were we up against," said Talbot, "is this?"

He may try to kidnap Marie again. I've warned her not to go outside the school gates unless she's accompanied; but, even so, I can't help feeling rather anxious."

"Do you happen to know where Dawlish is at the moment?" asked Manners.

"I don't know his exact whereabouts, but I know he's in the district."

"My hat!"

"Why not put the police on his track?" suggested Tom Merry thoughtfully.

Talbot smiled.

"The police in this part of the world are a set of wooden-headed chumps!" he said.

"That's so," agreed Monty Lowther. "Take old Crump, for instance. If a crime were committed under his very nose, he wouldn't smell a rat."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Looks as if we shall have to take up the case ourselves," said Jack Blake. "You've no objection to Dawlish going to prison, I suppose, Talbot?"

"Not in the least!" said Talbot. "I didn't want him arrested at first, because I thought he'd make things unpleasant for Marie."

"How?"

"By raking up the past. He'd tell the magistrate all about the old Angel Alley days, and Marie doesn't want the past resurrected any more than I do. But we shall have to put up with that. The sooner Dawlish is stowed away in a safe place, the better."

"If he's hanging around the school," said Tom Merry, "it ought not to be difficult to collar him."

Arthur Augustus jumped up from the table. He was very excited.

"I think, dear boys, that we ought to start searchin' for the scoundrel at once!"

"It'll be getting dark soon," said Digby.

"All the more reason why we should start now!" said Arthur Augustus.

"I agree!" said Tom Merry.

"Look here!" said Talbot. "I don't want to drag you fellows into my troubles against your will—"

"Rats!" said the captain of the Shell. "We're only too willing to give you a hand!"

"Yes, rather!"

The juniors hurriedly finished their repast, and put on their caps and coats.

Most of them seemed quite sanguine of their chances of running Jim Dawlish to earth.

Talbot, however, knew that it would be no easy matter.

In all probability, Jim Dawlish would be armed; and it was possible that he was accompanied by other members of the gang, in which case his capture would be difficult of accomplishment.

"Come along, dear boys!" said Arthur Augustus, briskly.

Kildare of the Sixth encountered the juniors as they crossed the quadrangle.

"Where are you kids going?" he inquired.

"We're simply taking a constitutional, Kildare," said Monty Lowther wearily.

"Mind you're back in time for locking-up, that's all," said the captain of St. Jim's.

And he passed on into the building.

"Where shall we make a start?" asked Tom Merry.

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"I suggest the village," said Talbot. "We can make inquiries there, and find out if a fellow answering to Jim Dawlish's description has been seen in the neighbourhood."

"Good!" The juniors entered into the search with zest.

They were nothing if not thorough in their investigations.

Inquiries were made of all the tradespeople, and of chance pedestrians, but no clues were forthcoming. Jim Dawlish had not been seen in Rylocombe.

"Nothing doing," said Jack Blake.

"We'd better try the railway station," said Arthur Augustus. "Probably Dawlish came by train, in which case one of the portals might have seen him."

"It's far more likely that he came by road," said Talbot. "Still, there's no harm in inquiring at the station."

Rylocombe station presented a very sleepy appearance.

There was only one more train expected in that evening—the London train.

The platform was deserted, save for a burly porter, who was seated at the foot of a weighing machine, slumbering placidly.

"Tired out, poor chap, after his long day's work," murmured Monty Lowther. "Railway porters have a terrible time. This fellow's probably just finished his three-hour day."

"Ha, ha, ha!" Arthur Augustus approached the slumbering porter.

"Worse yourself, my man!" he exclaimed.

"Snore!" The juniors chuckled.

"Worse yourself, I repeat!" said Arthur Augustus.

But the porter showed no sign of emerging from the arms of Morpheus.

"Weally, this is too bad!" said Arthur Augustus.

"Give him a gentle prod in the ribs, Gussy!" said Monty Lowther.

The swell of St. Jim's, who carried a swagger cane, started to tickle the slumbering porter.

"Wake up, you lazy slackah!" he exclaimed.

The porter obliged. He opened his eyes, and at the same instant emitted a roar, which would have done credit to half a dozen bulls.

"You—you—" he spluttered, scrambling to his feet in a frenzy.

Arthur Augustus stood his ground, and surveyed the man calmly.

"Do you happen to have seen a despoilate-lookin' wuffian—" he began.

"No, but I can see a cheeky young cove what's going to get a good hidin'!" snarled the porter.

And he advanced towards the elegant Gussy, with clenched fists.

Arthur Augustus backed away towards the edge of the platform.

"Look out, Gussy!" shouted Tom Merry. "The London train's coming in!"

The swell of St. Jim's halted in the nick of time, or he would have fallen on to the metals, in front of the approaching train.

The porter, who was in a royal rage at having been rudely awakened from his slumbers, continued to advance. He was a powerfully-built man, and had Arthur Augustus got in the way of his fist, an ambulance would have been required.

Tom Merry & Co. would have gone to their chum's assistance, but they were too convulsed with merriment to do so. They stood holding their sides as Arthur Augustus, with the agility of a monkey, dodged and ducked to avoid his burly antagonist.

"Oh dear!" gasped the swell of St. Jim's, clutching at his monocle. "This is awful! The man's mad! D'vagineff, dear boys!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The London train had rambled to a standstill at this time.

Only one passenger alighted. He was a neatly-dressed youth, with a pleasant face, and keen, grey eyes.

"Porter!" he shouted.

The porter continued to chase Arthur Augustus, who had bellows to mend by this time.

"Porter!" repeated the youth. "I say, porter!"

"He's otherwise engaged, old chap," chuckled Monty Lowther.

The neatly-dressed youth looked annoyed. He strode up to the porter.

"Go and see to my luggage!" he said.

"See to it yourself!" growled the porter.

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than a startling thing happened.

The youth rushed at the porter, and to the amazement of the spectators,

started to frog-march him along the platform.

"My only hat!" gasped Tom Merry. "That kid must be as strong as a horse!"

"Yes, rather. Just look at him!" gasped Jack Blake.

The youth was evidently accustomed to having his own way. He continued to frog-march the porter until they reached the luggage-van.

"Now, p'laps you'll do as I tell you!" he exclaimed.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "Did you evah?"

"No, never!" said Monty Lowther solemnly. "That kid's a marvel!"

"The porter's given in to him, too!" said Talbot.

The juniors looked on in astonishment as the railway servant, now thoroughly cowed, staggered along the platform with a trunk on his shoulder.

"See that it's sent up to St. Jim's!" said the youth.

"Very good, sir," grunted the porter. The juniors exchanged glances.

"A new kid, by Jove!" said Tom Merry.

"And something new in new kids, too!" said Jack Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!" agreed Arthur Augustus. "I weally think, dear boys, that if he hadn't chipped in at that precise moment, that porter would have smitten me with great violence!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The new kid's certainly got off the mark in style," said Monty Lowther.

"He saved Gussy's life!"

Arthur Augustus stepped up to the youth who had—unconsciously, perhaps—rendered him such a great service.

"I might as well meet you, dear boy," he said. "I trust you will do me the honah of shakin' hands?"

The youth smiled. He took Gussy's slim hand in a grip that made Arthur Augustus yelp.

"Yow!"

"Did I hurt you, sir?"

"Yaas, dear boy!" gasped Arthur Augustus, surveying his limp hand.

"I'm very sorry, sir."

The juniors wondered why the new arrival persisted in addressing Gussy as "sir."

"Must be pulling Gussy's noble leg," murmured Digby.

"You need not apologise, dear boy," said Arthur Augustus. "Your handshake was certainly a bit wuff, but I've got ova it now. I'm weally very much obliged to you for chippin' in when you did. Might I inquiah your name?"

"Wiggins."

"Eh?"

"William Wemyss Wilberforce Wiggins."

"Bai Jove!"

"What a collection!" gasped Tom Merry.

"Must be hard cheese to go through life with that little lot!" said Jack Blake.

"What's in a name, sir?" asked Wiggins.

Jack Blake looked grim.

"Are you trying to pull my leg?" he asked.

"Wiggins shook his head.

"Then why the thump do you want to call me 'sir'?"

"I'm always in the habit, sir, of calling young gentlemen 'sir,' sir," explained Wiggins.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But if you only say 'sir' to young gentlemen, why say to Blake?" asked Monty Lowther.

And there was a fresh roar of laughter at Jack Blake's expense.

"Are you looking for a thick ear, Lowther?" demanded the leader of Study No. 6 warmly.

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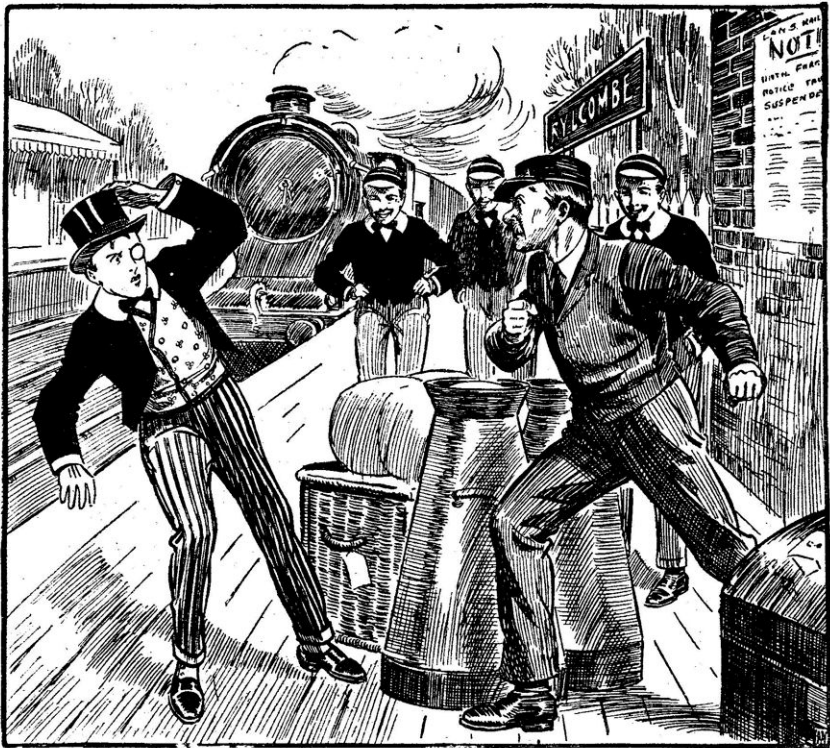
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Tom Merry & Co. stood holding their sides as Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with the agility of a monkey, dodged and ducked to avoid his burly antagonist. "Oh dear!" gasped the swell of St. Jim's. "This is awful! The man's mad! Dwagimoff, dear boys!" "Ha, ha, ha!" (See Chapter 2.)

"Oh, cut the cackle," interposed Tom Merry, "and let's get back to the school. It's getting dark now, and we can't find any trace of Dawlish!"

Arthur Augustus linked his arm affectionately in that of Wiggins, and the juniors trooped up to St. Jim's in the gathering dusk.

CHAPTER 3.

A Startling Confession!

JUST in time, you young rips!" Taggles, the porter, was in the act of closing the gates as the juniors strolled up.

"Hard lines, Taggy!" said Monty Lowther soothingly. "So sorry you can't march us into Railton. Better luck next time!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Racke, Crooke, and Mellish were lounging in the quadrangle as Tom Merry & Co. came in.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Racke, catching sight of Wiggins. "Who's this new froak?"

"Weasly, Wacke—" protested Arthur Augustus.

"Is the Terrible Three going to become the Fearful Four?" asked Crooke. And there was a snigger from Racke and Mellish.

Wiggins paused, and surveyed the trio with a critical stare.

"I didn't use to believe," he said, "in the theory that men were descended from monkeys, but when I look at you three fellows I feel that it must be so!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Racke flushed angrily.

"You cheeky young upstart!" he exclaimed. "Do you want a thick ear?"

"No, thanks! I'd prefer that you had one."

"You mean to say—"

"That I can give you one? Certainly!"

And Wiggins, disengaging himself from Gussy's arm, took a step in the direction of Aubrey Racke.

Tom Merry & Co. chuckled. They knew that if it came to a fight Racke would get decidedly the worst of it.

Racke scowled as Wiggins approached him.

"Do you know who I am?" he asked haughtily.

"I can make a good guess," said Wiggins. "I should say you are the son of a puffed-up war-profitteer!"

"Right on the wicket, first time!" chuckled Monty Lowther.

Racke fairly snorted with fury.

"Why, you—you—" he spluttered. "You're not fit to clean my boots!"

"I'll remember that," said Wiggins quietly. "Meanwhile, I think a little correction is necessary. Take that!"

Racke took it. He had no choice in the matter, for Wiggins shot out his fist on the instant, catching the cad of the School on the side of the head with an impact which dazed him.

"Yaroooh!" roared Racke.

And he sat down with great violence in the quadrangle.

A chorus of approval arose.

"Well hit, sir!"

"Good old Wiggins!"

"Give him some more!"

"With pleasure, gentlemen!" said Wiggins, standing over Aubrey Racke with clenched fists.

But Racke had had enough. He had a fair amount of pluck, in spite of his shady ways; but he preferred not to renew his acquaintance with Wiggins' fist.

"I'm waiting!" said Wiggins.

"Hang you!"

"Won't you let me give you a punch on the other side, to make it equal?"

"I'm dashed if I will!"

Racke remained on the ground, resolved not to resume his feet until Wiggins had gone.

"Ring down the curtain!" said Monty Lowther. "The performance is now

closed. There will be no second house. Come along, William Wemyss Wilberforce!"

And Tom Merry & Co. passed on, leaving Crooke and Mellish to render first-aid to the battered Racke.

"Feein' hungwy, deah boy?" inquired Arthur Augustus, as he piloted Wiggins along the passage.

"More or less, sir."

"Then I'll twent you to a good feed

"With the remainder of Tom Merry's grub!" chuckled Jack Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally Blake! I feel suah Tom Merry will waise no objection!"

"Not a bit, old chap!" said Tom Merry. "Go ahead! We'll all sit round and watch the lion feed."

The juniors did not quite know what to make of the new arrival. Of two things they were certain—firstly, that he was a decent fellow; and, secondly, that he had pluck in plenty. But, instead of regarding them as fellows on the same plane as himself, he persisted in calling them "sir," and behaving as if he were far beneath them. True, he had not stood on ceremony with Racke; but, as he explained, Racke did not come in the category of "young gentlemen."

There was plenty of food left in Tom Merry's study.

Wiggins was told to pile in, and the fellows sat round and chatted to him while he ate.

"Think you'll like St. Jim's?" asked Manners.

"I'm sure I shall, sir!"

"Oh, cut out the 'sir,' for goodness' sake! It's beginning to get on my nerves!"

"As you wish, sir."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You're a queer beggar, Wiggins," said Talbot. "Do you happen to know which Form you're going into the Shell or the Fourth?"

"Neither," said Wiggins. He omitted the "sir" this time—with an effort, it seemed.

"Not the Shell!" ejaculated Tom Merry.

"Not the Fourth!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus.

Wiggins shook his head.

"You—you don't mean to say you've got hopes of getting into the Fifth?" gasped Herries.

"Or the Sixth?" said Digby.

"No such luck!" said Wiggins.

The juniors looked mystified.

Wiggins was a sturdy fellow, and it was preposterous to think of him as a Second Form lad, or even as a member of the Third. His build entitled him to be in the Shell; but perhaps his scholastic attainments were limited.

"You—you're not going into one of the infants' Forms?" inquired Monty Lowther.

"I sincerely hope not!"

"Then what on earth—" began Tom Merry.

"Of course, Waiton hasn't seen him yet," said Arthur Augustus, "so it's quite impos- to say which Form he will be in. More cake, Wiggy, deah boy?"

"Thanks!"

"What with a Figgins and a Wiggins," said Monty Lowther, "I can see some lively mix-ups in store!"

"Yes, rather!"

"Can you play footer, Wiggins?" asked Tom Merry.

"Can a duck swim?"

"By the way, who taught you how to use your fists?" inquired Jack Blake.

"I taught myself."

"My hat!"

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"You seem to be able to look after yourself, Wiggins," said Talbot.

"It's necessary for a fellow in my profession—"

Wiggins broke off abruptly, and changed colour.

"Your profession?" echoed Tom Merry. "Why, what do you mean?"

"I was speaking of the boxing profession," said Wiggins. "I may enter it when I'm older."

"Oh!"

"Twy another cake, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus.

"No, thanks! I've done very well. It's awfully good of you young gents to stand treat to me, like this."

"Don't mench, Wiggy!"

Wiggins sat back in his chair, and glanced round the crowded study.

"I feel quite envious of you fellows," he said.

"Envious?" said Digby. "Why?"

"Because you've got such nice, comfortable studies, and all the rest of it."

"But, you'll have a study, too," said Talbot.

Wiggins shook his head.

"Afraid not," he said.

"Oh, don't be an ass!" said Jack Blake, in tones of exasperation. "Of course you'll have a study, like everybody else!"

"It would be something new," said Wiggins, "for boot-boys to have studies."

"Eh?"

"What?"

"Bub-nub-boot-boys?" stuttered Jack Blake. "You—you don't mean to say—"

"Yes, I do," said Wiggins, smiling at the astonished faces around him. "I'm the new boot-boy."

CHAPTER 4.

Worthy of His Hire!

TOM MERRY & Co. stared blankly at their guest.

Digby was the first to find his voice.

"Of course, this is a leg-pulling stunt?" he said.

"Of course!"

"I wish it was!" said Wiggins. "I'd love to live on the fat of the land, like you fellows—ahem—I mean, young gentlemen!"

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "Your startlin' news, Wiggins, has thown me into quite a flub!"

"I won't believe it," said Tom Merry flatly.

"Nor I!" said Manners.

Wiggins fumbled in his pocket and produced a telegram.

"This will convince you, young gentlemen!" he said.

There was no disputing the authenticity of the wire. It ran thus:

"Come at once in the capacity of boot-boy. HOLMES."

"That's from the Head!" said Jack Blake.

"Exactly!"

"Well, I'm jiggered!"

The astonishment of the juniors increased. They were aware that an additional boot-boy was required at St. Jim's to cope with the growing amount of work, but they had not supposed that Wiggins, with his good appearance and address, was the chosen candidate for the post.

Arthur Augustus looked not only astonished, but distressed.

"I feel awfully cut up about this, deah boy!" he said.

"Why?"

"I was hopin' you were comin' into the Fourth. But nevah mind! We shall still be fiwends, I twust?"

Wiggins smiled gratefully at the swell of St. Jim's.

He had hardly expected this. He had feared that the juniors, on discovering that he was to be the "boots" of the establishment, would want nothing more to do with him. But Tom Merry & Co. were not snobs, and they did not allow the recent startling revelation to make any difference in their attitude towards Wiggins.

"I only wish you were coming into the Shell, Wiggins!" said Tom Merry. "You're a jolly useful man with your fists, and I don't doubt that you're worth your weight in sugar on the footer-field!"

Talbot glanced curiously at Wiggins.

"Blessed if I can understand why you should come here as boot-boy!" he said.

"You're worth a better job than that!"

"Oh, I'm not ashamed of my job!" said Wiggins. "There's an art even in cleaning, boots, you know."

"I quite agree," said Arthur Augustus. "I can nevah get my beastly boots to shine propwally!"

"They'll shine all right to-morrow morning," said Wiggins. "You leave it to me!"

Tom Merry stared.

"You mean to say you're going to clean everybody's boots?"

"Everybody's—barring Racke's!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Won't Racke be pleased?" chuckled Monty Lowther.

Wiggins got up from the table.

"I must be going now," he explained. "I've got to report to the House dame. You might tell all the fellows to leave their boots outside the dormitories over-night."

"You'll never clean three hundred pairs!" said Tom Merry, aglashed.

Wiggins smiled.

"We shall see!" he said. "So-long, young gents! And many thanks for the feed!"

The boot-boy quitted the study.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "What an extraordinary fellow, deah boys!"

"He's something extra-special in boot-boys, and no mistake!" said Herries.

"Sounds all his aitches, and knows his manners," said Digby.

"It's a shame that such an intelligent chap should waste his time cleaning boots and running errands!" remarked Tom Merry.

"Fancy a boot-boy being so dashed intellectual!" said Jack Blake.

"Perhaps it isn't so surprising, after all," said Talbot. "One of our best modern poets is a railway porter; and I once heard of a pork-butcher who wrote novels, and first-rate stuff at that. Some of these fellows like to follow humble occupations."

"That's so," said Monty Lowther. "Besides, a pork-butcher is of far more use to his country than a politician!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors continued to discuss Wiggins until Kildare announced that it was bed-time.

"Mind you leave your boots out to-night, Kildare," said Tom Merry.

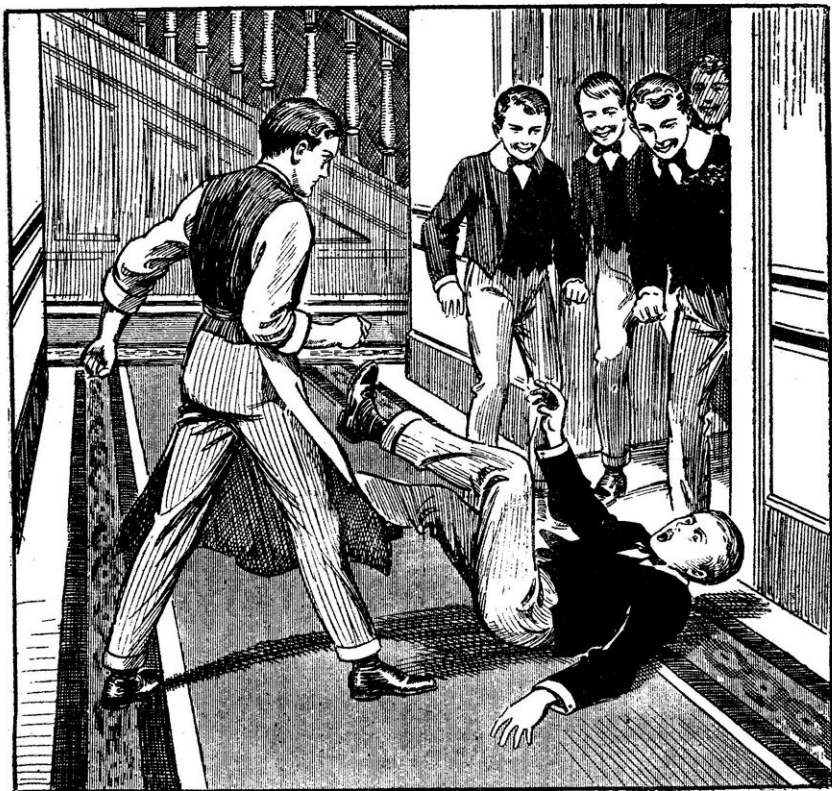
"Eh?"

"There's a new boot-boy here, and he'll clean them for you."

"Do you suggest that I never clean them myself?" demanded Kildare.

"Nunno!" said Tom Merry hastily. "I thought it would save you trouble, that was all."

"All right!" said the captain of St.



Aubrey Racke went to the floor in a sprawling heap. "Good shot, air!" Wiggins, who was not so calm as usual, glared down at Racke. "You've got to get up and have some more this time, whether you like it or not!" he exclaimed. (See chapter 4.)

Jim's. "I've got about a dozen pairs of boots in my study cupboard. I'll put out the lot!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Poor old Wiggins!" said Jack Blake. And the juniors trooped up to their dormitory.

Before he turned in that night Tom Merry conveyed messages to the other Forms, to the effect that they should put their boots out. Most of the fellows were only too glad to avail themselves of this labour-saving device.

Meanwhile, the new boot-boy had made himself quite at home in the domestic regions.

Toby Marsh, the school page, chummed up with him at once, and Mrs. Mimms the House dame, was favourably impressed by his appearance.

"What did you say your name was, my boy?" she asked.

"Oh, call me William, ma'am!" said Wiggins.

"Very well. Will you have some supper, William?"

"I've had some, thanks!"

"Then you would like to go to bed, I expect? No doubt you are tired after

your journey. Your room is ready upstairs, in the servants' quarters."

"I don't want a room, thanks all the same!" said Wiggins.

Mrs. Mimms stared.

"Bless the boy!" she exclaimed.

"Where do you think you are going to sleep?"

"Here."

"Gracious me! In the kitchen?"

"No: in the store-room, next door.

I notice there's a chair-bedstead there."

"But it will be most uncomfortable."

"Don't you believe it, ma'am. I shall be able to turn out early in the morning without disturbing anybody; and I shall also act as a sort of all-night sentinel, in case anybody tries to raid the kitchen."

Mrs. Mimms was impressed. Occasionally fellows like Baggy Trimble had paid nocturnal visits to the school kitchen to see what they could lay their hands on, and it would be a good thing to have somebody on guard.

"Very well, William," said the House dame. "But I do hope you will be comfortable."

"Don't you worry about me, ma'am.

I shall shake down all right. I've slept in far less attractive places before now. Good-night, ma'am!"

"Good-night, William!"

And the new boot-boy was left to himself in the domestic regions.

Wiggins made a brief entry in his pocket-book before turning in, and he was asleep as soon as his head touched the pillow.

Next morning there was a surprise for St. Jim's.

The boots which had been placed outside the dormitories overnight had been duly cleaned, and they shone with a lustre which they had never known before.

It was a puzzle to the St. Jim's fellows to understand how the boot-boy, single-handed, had managed to cope with such a colossal number of boots. They did not know that Wiggins had got up at four o'clock.

"That fellow's a giddy marvel!" declared Monty Lowther.

"He says there's an art in cleaning boots; and he seems to have mastered

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it, too," said Manners. "Just look! (Clean as a new pin, by Jove!)"

The occupants of the Shell dormitory were delighted, with one exception. The exception was Aubrey Racke.

Racke was very fussy in regard to his personal appearance. He liked his boots to outshine everybody else's, and he put them out overnight, in a prominent position. They had been caked with mud, and Racke had looked forward to seeing a transformation in the morning.

But he was disappointed. His boots had not been touched!

Racke's face was a study.
"That—that cheeky young rotter——" he muttered.

"Why not put him on the Racke?" suggested Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Racke picked up his boots, and hurled them from him in disgust.

"I'll slaughter him!" he shouted.

"Fire away, then!" said a cheery voice.

The cad of the Shell spun round with a start.

The boot-boy, with shining morning face, stood in the doorway.

Racke pulled himself together, and stepped up to Wiggins.

"What do you mean by cleanin' everybody else's boots, an' ignorin' mine?" he demanded.

Wiggins smiled.

"You said yesterday that I wasn't fit to clean your boots," he said. "I've taken you at your word."

"You—you——"

The boot-boy turned on his heel; and Racke, thinking he had him at a disadvantage, prepared to strike him.

Wiggins seemed to have eyes in the back of his head; or perhaps it was intuition which warned him of Racke's cowardly intention. Anyway, he veered round suddenly, and shot out his right.

Aubrey Racke went to the floor in a sprawling heap.

"Good shot, sir!"

Wiggins, who was not so calm as usual, glared down at Racke.

"You've got to get up and leave some more, this time, whether you like it or not," he exclaimed.

"Hang you!" snarled Racke.

And he bounded to his feet and rushed at the boot-boy.

A fierce hand-to-hand fight followed. Although fierce, it was very brief.

Wiggins got in several well-timed blows, and Aubrey Racke hit the floor again. And this time he was in no hurry to rise.

In the commotion which followed Crooke's voice could be heard.

"It says it's a bit tight when a beastly boot-black starts nitching into one of us!"

Wiggins flashed a warlike glance at the speaker.

"It'll be your turn next, if you open that rat-trap of yours again!" he said.

Crooke wisely decided to keep his "rat-trap" closed.

"Thanks very much, Wiggins, for putting such a good shine on our boots," said Tom Merry.

"Yes, rather!"

"Don't mention it, young gentles!" answered the boot-boy. "It's my duty."

And he went quietly from the dormitory, leaving it in a buzz.

CHAPTER 5.

In the Enemy's Hand!
NY developments, Toff!"

Marie Rivers encountered Talbot in the quad, after dinner.

The junior was in running shorts, prior

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to starting on a cross-country run with his chums.

"I've not seen or heard anything of Jim Dawlish since I received his letter," said Talbot.

"I'm beginning to think it was only an empty threat, after all, and that Dawlish isn't anywhere near St. Jim's. But you'd better not venture out of gates just yet, Marie. It's as well to be on the safe side."

Marie nodded.

"I'll continue to lie low, Toff. Going for a run?"

"Yes."

"Mind you take care of yourself."

"We'll look after him, Miss Marie," said Jack Blake, coming up at that moment with the Terrible Three.

"You silly ass!" said Talbot, laughing. "I'm not a two-year-old!"

The runners sprinted down to the gates, where they were joined by Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, Herries and Digby, and Figgins & Co., of the New House.

"You fellows know the route," said Tom Merry. "Through Rylcombe Wood, out into the Barchester Road, and back to St. Jim's across the fields."

The juniors nodded.

"Are you awarding any special consolation prize to the halt, maimed, and blind?" inquired Monty Lowther. "I got my shin damaged in the House match yesterday, so I'm certain to finish a good last."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry gave the word of command, and the runners set off.

Marie Rivers stood watching them as they sped along the road for a good distance, and then plunged into the wood.

Although it was merely a cross-country run, as distinct from a race, there was a certain amount of rivalry among the juniors as to who would finish first.

The long-legged Figgins was resolved to "bag" that honour for the New House, and Tom Merry & Co. were equally resolved that the first man home would be a School House fellow.

Despite Monty Lowther's confession that he was a creak, he was well to the fore, running level with Figgins and Tom Merry.

Behind these three came Manners, plodding away steadily.

Then came Kerr and Fatty Wynn. The latter was in trouble at an early stage, owing to the fact that he had fed not wisely but too well at dinner-time. But Kerr insisted on keeping his plump study-mate up to the mark.

Jack Blake, Herries, and Digby were content to remain in the rear. They were holding their energies in reserve.

The most level with this trio, Arthur Augustus ambled along at a gentle trot, keeping up an animated but rather breathless conversation on the subject of silk topers.

Last of all came Talbot.

The Shell fellow was in difficulties. He had tripped up on a tree-stump, and had damaged his ankle.

However, the pain was not intense, and Talbot decided to carry on, even though it meant coming in last.

For some time he was able to keep his chums in sight; but their pace increased at length, while his own slackened.

When the others had left the wood behind, Talbot was still plodding his way along the leafy, winding path.

After what seemed an age, he reached the Barchester road. A narrow, unimportant road this, leading to the distant market town of Barchester.

There's three miles of ploughed field

to be tackled yet," murmured Talbot. "Think I'll take a rest."

The junior seated himself on the stile near by.

Tom Merry and the others were nearly home by this time, he reflected; and he fell to wondering whether a School House or a New House fellow would be the first to reach the gates of St. Jim's.

A faint rustle sounded in the thicket behind him.

Talbot ignored it. If he thought about the matter at all, he imagined that the sound was caused by a rabbit.

But the rustling sound grew nearer and more ominous, and Talbot spun round.

He had vague recollections of seeing the leering face of Jim Dawlish. Then something was thrust over his nose and mouth, and he struggled vainly for breath. He heard a voice say, "There's no escape this time, Toff!" and then his senses swam, and he remembered no more.

When Talbot came to himself, and glanced dizzily around him, he saw neither the stile, the roadway, nor the face of his adversary.

His head was throbbing wildly.

What had happened?

The junior was obviously a prisoner—but where?

Slowly recovering from his stupor, Talbot saw that he was in a dingy room—a room innocent of furniture, and with masses of cobwebs on its stone walls.

8 mehow, the room seemed familiar.

The windows were barred, like those of a dungeon, and the wind whistled through into the gloomy apartment.

"The tower!" muttered Talbot.

"The old tower on Wayland Moor!"

Talbot was familiar with the place. Here, on one memorable occasion, a German spy had been apprehended. Here, also, the black sheep of St. Jim's had been known to congregate, in order to enjoy a quiet smoke.

The junior experienced a feeling of relief.

He was a prisoner; but his confinement in the old tower could not last long.

If his absence was discovered, and a search ensued, the tower would not be overlooked.

And then it occurred to Talbot that this was only a temporary place of captivity—that Jim Dawlish might shortly remove him elsewhere.

Talbot noted that his hands were tied in front of him, and that was all. It would be a simple, though a tedious task, to gnaw through his bonds.

"Why not make a start now?" he reflected.

He then realised that the heavy door was locked on the outside. There was no escape that way. Neither did the barred windows afford the captive a gleam of hope.

"I'm fairly trapped!" muttered Talbot. "Hang that fellow Dawlish! I warned Marie against him—told her not to expose herself to risk, and I've walked blindly into the trap myself!"

He wondered why Jim Dawlish had gone to the trouble of capturing him. He could only suppose that Dawlish wished him to turn his back upon St. Jim's, and to re-enter a life of crime.

Dawlish was only too well aware of Talbot's peculiar talents. In the old days, Talbot had been the brains of the gang; and Dawlish probably wanted him to act in a similar capacity now.

This surmise of Talbot's proved correct.

After a time a key grated in the lock,

and the heavy door swung open, admitting Jim Dawlish.

"The scoundrel closed the door carefully behind him."

"So you've come round, Toff?"

Talbot glared at his captor. "You'll be made to answer for this, Jim Dawlish!" he exclaimed.

Dawlish laughed harshly.

"I told you we should meet again, Toff, and here we are! I hope you are in good health an' spirits, as it leaves me at present. You thwarted me before, Toff—you helped to take Marie out of my hands. An' now it's my turn to be top dog—see?"

Talbot tried to scramble to his feet, but he had not yet fully recovered from the effects of the chloroform.

"Don't get excited, Toff!" said Dawlish. "Sit back quietly in your corner, an' we'll talk things over."

"You scoundrel!"

Dawlish rained some tobacco into his pipe.

"Be calm, Toff. Temper won't help you. You're my prisoner, an' the sooner you make up your mind to the fact, the better it will be for both of us."

"What do you want with me?" flashed Talbot.

Jim Dawlish remained standing with his back to the door.

"I've got a suggestion to make to you, Toff," he said.

And Talbot knew only too well what was coming.

CHAPTER 6.

A Fight for Freedom!

TALBOT glanced at the hard, unrelenting face of Jim Dawlish, and his heart sank.

He was completely at the mercy of this scoundrel.

Dawlish would employ every art and artifice to induce the junior to join his gang, and refusal would mean an indefinite period of captivity, hardship and discomfort.

And yet there was no alternative but to refuse.

To yield to this rascal's demands would be to undo all the good which had been done. St. Jim's, with all its delightful associations, would be left behind, and the shadow of disgrace would descend once more upon Talbot—and not upon him alone, but upon Marie Rivers. And that was unthinkable.

Talbot nerved himself to say "No," and to stick to it, no matter whether Jim Dawlish blustered or threatened, entreated or cajoled.

Never again could Talbot lead the life of a criminal, with his hand against every man's, and with every man's hand against him. The old existence in Angel Alley was over and done with. And it should never be repeated.

Talbot spoke at last.

"I know what you're going to ask me, Jim Dawlish," he said, "and you may as well have my answer at once. Not for any consideration—even that of life itself—will I join your precious gang!"

Dawlish sneered.

"You're talkin' like the hero of a play, Toff!"

"I mean what I say, anyhow."

"Isn't it time you chucked all your goody-goody notions overboard, an' took a hand at the old game?"

"It is useless," said Talbot. "I will you I've done with the old life!"

"But it hasn't done with you!" Jim Dawlish's tone grew suddenly fierce. "If you won't join us of your own free will, Toff, I shall use force!"

"You cannot force me to turn cracksmann again."

"I can make your life so uncomfortable

able that you'll be only too glad to give in!"

"You're welcome to try!"

A long silence ensued.

"Now, do be reasonable, Toff," said Dawlish at length. "Where's the sense in remainin' at that swell school? You get a certain amount of pleasure out of the life, I dare say; but the only thing that really matters—money—is denied you. When you come out into the world—a world of profiteerin' an' high prices—you'll find it impossible to make your way honestly. Housat lands a fellow nowhere these days, except p'raps in the workhouse! That notion about it bein' the best policy might have held good once, but it's out of date now."

Talbot was not in the least impressed.

"Look round at all the people who have made good," continued Jim Dawlish. "Have they come by their money honestly. Not a bit of it! Have they seen to their present positions by the sweat of their brow? Of course not! They've got comfortable homes, an' fat bank balances—through honest work? Don't you believe it! Through sweated labour an' profiteerin'—through sharp practice! There are two classes of people in the world to-day, Toff—the swindlers and the swindled. An' if you're an ounce of savvy left, you'll choose to be a swindler—a looter—a fellow who prefers to make his pile quickly an' easily."

Talbot was hardly listening. His mind was already occupied with thoughts of escape.

"I'm speakin' from bitter experience," Dawlish went on. "When I came out of the Army, I had a shot at goin' straight. I kept my hands from pickin' an' stealin'. I told myself that honesty was the best policy. An' I discovered that it was nothin' more or less than a short cut to starvation!"

Talbot looked up at this. He smiled slightly.

"You're a poor orator, Jim Dawlish," he said. "What you say doesn't convince me in the least. I, too, am speaking from experience. I've led a crooked life, and I've led a straight one; and I know that the only way to really succeed in life is to play with a straight bat. It may be a bit of a struggle at first, but the honest man wins in the long run."

Dawlish shrugged his shoulders.

"P'raps you will change your mind when you're in London," he said.

Talbot started.

"You intend to take me to London?"

"Yes."

"You'll find it rather difficult, I'm afraid."

Dawlish grinned.

"Since we last met, Toff, I've been able to net a small fortune at crackin' cribs. Among other things, I've bought a car—a real beauty! She's in a garage in Bournemouth at the present moment."

"How long are you going to keep me here?"

"That depends, Toff."

"On what?"

"Whether I'm successful or not in carryin' out a little burglary this evenin'. If it comes off all right, we shall start away practically at once. If not, I must have another shot to-morrow night."

"I sincerely hope you get collared!"

"Thanks, Toff! The good wishes of old pals are always appreciated."

Talbot's contempt of Jim Dawlish increased. Evidently, the precious scoundrel intended to carry out a burglary at one of the big country houses in the district.

Jim Dawlish turned to the door.

"I'm just goin' to spy out the land," he said. "Shan't be long!"

And he went out, slamming and locking the door behind him.

Talbot allowed a short interval to elapse; then he devoted his attention to getting his hands free.

It was a very laborious business, even though the rope which bound his wrists together was not very strong.

There was nothing sharp on which Talbot could rub his bonds, so he had to resort to biting them.

Nearly an hour had elapsed by the time he had freed himself.

"That's better!" he muttered.

Although his hands were free, however, Talbot was still a prisoner, and so far as he could see, he was likely to remain one.

The heavy door refused to budge, and Talbot had no file by means of which he could sever the bars of the window, as Charles the First had attempted to do when a prisoner in Carisbrooke Castle.

Even had Talbot possessed a file, the task would have occupied him so long that Dawlish would have returned in the middle of it.

"Might as well explore upstairs," murmured Talbot, though he knew in advance that the room up above afforded no loophole of escape.

The junior ascended the stone spiral staircase, and entered the room at the top of the tower. Like the room below, it was bare, and the two small windows were securely barred.

"Nothing doing!" muttered Talbot.

And he ascended into the room in which he had first found himself after falling into the hands of Jim Dawlish.

Talbot was able, by standing on tip-toe, to peer through the bars of the window.

Wayhand Moor lay still and silent under the early winter stars.

No help was likely to be forthcoming yet. The St. Jim's fellows would not be unduly anxious concerning Talbot, for, although dusk had fallen, the hour was still early. It would not be until bed-time that serious alarm would be felt at Talbot's absence.

There was only one chance of escape, and Talbot resolved to seize it.

When Jim Dawlish opened the door on his return, the junior intended to spring past him, and escape into the darkness.

It was not so simple as it sounded; but it was the only way.

Talbot posted himself at the door, and waited.

He did not have long to wait. He heard the sound of approaching footsteps, and crouched low, ready to spring.

But Talbot's luck was out.

Jim Dawlish seemed to suspect what was afoot, for he only opened the door a little way, with the object of stepping inside quickly and closing it again.

Nevertheless, Talbot sprang; but a drive from Dawlish's fist sent him reeling back.

Then the door slammed, and the junior knew that his chance had gone.

Scarcely knowing why he did it, Talbot rushed up the stairs and into the room above.

Dawlish gave chase, but by the time he reached the top of the stairs Talbot had closed and bolted the door. Then, panting for breath, the junior staggered against the wall.

With a muttered imprecation, Dawlish flung his body against the door, but with no effect.

"Very well, Toff," he growled. "If you prefer to stow yourself in there like a mouse in a trap, go ahead! You can stay there till you come to your senses! I'll starve you out!"

Talbot heard his captor descending the stairs.

His heart was heavy. He guessed that Jim Dawlish would remain on the alert, and that when he went out, eventually, to commit his burglary, he would lock the door behind him, leaving Talbot alone in the tower.

The time dragged on slowly. Presently the sound of singing came to the ears of the imprisoned junior.

Talbot concluded—rightly, as it happened—that Dawlish had been drinking. He was not intoxicated, but he was on the border-line.

For upwards of half an hour the singing continued, and then silence.

Talbot groined his way to the door. He was trembling with excitement.

What had happened down below?

Had Jim Dawlish gone out, or—happy thought!—had he relapsed into slumber?

Very cautiously, Talbot drew back the bolts and opened the door. Then, with equal caution, he descended the stone staircase.

In the darkness of the room below he paused.

To his ears came the deep, heavy breathing of a man.

Talbot's heart jumped with joy. Jim Dawlish was asleep.

Peering through the gloom, the junior discerned him, lying on an overcoat which had been spread out on the floor.

At any moment the a.c.p. might wake. Talbot could not afford to waste time.

He advanced stealthily towards the door. For the first time he noticed that it had been fitted with a new lock, requiring a special key.

A chilling thought came to Talbot. Was the door locked on the inside?

He tried it, and his worst fears were confirmed.

Evidently the key was concealed on Jim Dawlish's person. There was nothing else for it but to rifle his pockets as he lay asleep. A difficult and delicate proceeding this; but it was Talbot's one chance of escape.

Moving with infinite caution, he advanced towards the sleeper, and with skilful fingers, groped in his coat pockets.

His hand closed over a bunch of keys, and he withdrew them, and went again to the door.

But luck seemed to have utterly forsaken Talbot that night.

Not one of the keys would fit.

Nothing daunted, Talbot replaced the bunch of keys in Dawlish's coat pocket, and continued to search.

He went through the trouser pockets, but drew back.

Dawlish stirred restlessly, and Talbot paused, his heart thumping against his ribs.

But the sleeper did not wake.

"The key must be in one of the pockets of his overcoat," Talbot reflected.

It was difficult, almost impossible, to gain access to the overcoat pockets without rousing Dawlish.

But, having gone so far, Talbot did not mean to give up.

He plunged his hand boldly into one of the pockets, and fortune smiled on him at last. He came upon a key which, judging from its shape, was obviously the one he wanted.

But he had to push the slumbering form of Dawlish aside before he could withdraw his hand; and the movement fully awakened the sleeper.

Dawlish started to his feet with an imprecation.

In a flash Talbot sprang to the door and inserted the key in the lock.

The key turned in the lock, the door was thrown open, and Talbot rushed out into the friendly night—and freedom!

The wind rushed into his face as he

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paced across the moor. He heard the sound of running footsteps behind him, and knew that he was being pursued. But, even though his ankle was slightly sprained, he was more than a match for Jim Dawlish when it came to straight-forward running.

On and on he went, and the footsteps of his pursuer died slowly away.

Talbot slackened his pace with a great gasp of relief.

"Jove, that was hot while it lasted!" he panted. "Thank goodness I've got clear of Dawlish's clutches!"

The junior dropped into a walk, throwing an occasional glance over his shoulder to make sure he was not being pursued.

Then he debated in his mind whether he should report to the local police that a burglary had been planned for that evening.

"Suppose I'd better," he murmured. "Not that the local police will be able to protect anybody's property, though!"

Talbot wended his way to the police station, and warned Inspector Skeat of Jim Dawlish's intentions. He recounted his recent experiences, but the inspector was inclined to regard the whole thing as an absurd fairy-tale.

"Very well," said Talbot, shrugging his shoulders. "Don't say that I didn't warn you. If one of your local war-profiters wakes up and finds that all his silver's been pinched in the night, don't blame me!"

And Talbot strode out of the police station, leaving the worthy inspector in a state of blank bewilderment.

CHAPTER 7.

Marie is Suspicious!

TAGGLES was in the act of closing the gates when Talbot arrived back at St. Jim's.

"Young rip!" snorted Taggles, as the junior brushed past him. "Wot I says is this 'ere—"

Talbot was not interested in what Taggles had to say. He passed on through the dusky quadrangle.

As he ran up the school house steps, voices hailed him.

"Talbot!"

"Here he is!"

"Where on earth have you been hiding yourself, you duffer?"

Tom Merry & Co. took Talbot in tow, and marched him along the Shell passage.

"Steady on, you asses!" panted Talbot.

"March him in, and make him explain!" said Monty Lowther.

"Yes, rather!"

And the procession—which included Jack Blake & Co., of the Fourth—trooped into Tom Merry's study.

"Now," said the captain of the Shell, wagging a reproving forefinger at his elbow, "tell us where you've been!"

"Talbot looked wathah a weck, dear boys," observed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I trust he hasn't been japed by the Gwanmah School boundahs!"

Talbot explained.

"I've spent a pleasant evening in the tower," he said.

"The tower?" echoed Tom Merry.

"Do you mean the school tower?"

"No—the one on Wayland Moor."

"My hat!" exclaimed Jack Blake. "That's a rummy place to spend an evening at!"

Talbot smiled.

"I didn't go there from choice," he said.

"Weally, Talbot," protested Arthur Augustus, "you are talkin' in widdles. Pway be more explicit, doah boy!"

"I was kidnapped during the cross-country run this afternoon," said Talbot.

There was a buzz of excitement.

"Kidnapped!"

"My only aunt!"

"By when?" gasped Tom Merry.

"Can't you guess? By Jim Dawlish, of course!"

"Great Scott! You mean to say he collared you, and took you along to the tower?"

Talbot nodded.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" gasped Monty Lowther. "That fellow Dawlish seems to have a mania for kidnapping people. First it was Miss Marie, and now it's Talbot. Why does he do it? This isn't the Wild and Woolly West, where the inhabitants eke out a precarious existence by kidnapping each other!"

"I suppose Dawlish wanted you to join forces with him, Talbot?" said Tom Merry.

"Yes. He pointed out to me that honesty wasn't worth while, and pressed me to go back to the old life."

"And what did you say?" asked Manners.

"Gave him a point-blank refusal, of course!"

"Bravo!" said Jack Blake. "How did you manage to bunk from the Tower?"

Talbot described in detail the exciting events of the evening.

Unlike Inspector Skeat, his listeners had no doubts as to the truth of his narrative.

"You've had a jolly rough time, old chap," said Tom Merry.

"Yas, bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus. "Did I undahstand you to

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Tom Merry flashed his electric torch, and its rays shone full upon the huddled form of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Good heavens!" gasped Jack Blake, turning pale. "He must have fallen down the stairs!" Talbot shook his head. "It's my opinion there's been foul play!" he said. (See Chapt. 9.)

say that Dawlish is plannin' a burglary for to-night, Talbot?"

"That's so."

"Then I vote, deah boys, that we go along to the towan an' awrest him!"

"Hear, hear!"

Talbot laughed.

"We shouldn't be likely to find Jim Dawlish at the Tower, after what's happened," he said. "Now that I've escaped, he'll have to make an immediate change of quarters."

"Whose house is he going to burgle?" inquired Digby.

"I haven't the foggiest notion! Naturally, he didn't confide all his plans to me."

"The police ought to be warned," said Jack Blake.

"I've already warned them."

"Oh!"

"Then there's nothing we can do," said Tom Merry.

"It would be sheer waste of time to search for Dawlish on a night like this. Hunting for a needle in a haystack would be a picnic to it!"

"I suppose you're right, old chap. Never mind. We'll get on the track of Dawlish to-morrow."

"If he hasn't decamped with the loot by then!" said Monty Lowther.

"I expect you're hungwy, Talbot?" said Arthur Augustus.

"Hungry isn't the word for it, Gussy. I'm ravenous!"

Tom Merry fished the remnants of a rabbit pie out of the cupboard, and Talbot fell to with an avidity worthy of Fatty Wynn.

"By the way, who finished first in the cross-country run?" he inquired.

"Our Tommy, of course!" said Lowther. "He beat Figgins by the width of an eyebrow."

"Good!"

At that moment there was a tap on the door of the study.

"Come in, fathead!" sang out Jack Blake.

The "fathead" proved to be Wiggins, the new boot-boy.

"Hallo, Wiggy, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus. "Twot wight in!"

"I won't come in, thanks," said Wiggins. "I just wanted to ask if you young gentlemen required anything?"

"My hat!" said Tom Merry. "You're a model boot-boy, and no error! You seem to wait on us hand and foot!"

"I do my best, sir," said Wiggins.

"And a bit over," said Jack Blake.

"You've shifted mountains of work to-day!"

Blake was quite right.

Ever since four o'clock that morning, Wiggins had been busy.

The boot-boy at St. Jim's was a person of many parts. Besides the actual boot-cleaning, there was a lot of scrubbing to do and numero s errands to run.

Wiggins had performed these duties, and a good many more, to the entire satisfaction of Mrs. Mims. That good lady regarded him as a "find." She heped Wiggins had come to stay.

"Then there's nothing more I can do for you, young gents!" said Wiggins.

"Gussy wants his twelve best toppers polished," said Monty Lowther.

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"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Weally, Lowthah—"
 "It's all right, Wiggins," said Tom Merry laughing. "There's nothing we want. Going to take an evening out?"

"Yes, sir."
 "It's rather late. You're not allowed out after locking-up time, are you?"
 "Not knowing the rules of the school with regard to boot-boys, I can't say," said Wiggins.

"You'll have to nip over the school wall," said Jack Blake. "Tagglos has closed the gates."

Wiggins grinned.

"I'm an old hand at nipping over walls—," he began.
 And then he suddenly checked himself, as he had done on a previous occasion.
 "Weally, Wiggy, you are a vewy curious chap!" said Arthur August. "I trust you are not about to go courtin' with the sculleyw-maid!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "No such luck, sir!" said Wiggins.

"Good-night, gents all!"
 And the boot-boys withdrew.

Out in the daisy quad, where the branches of the old elms creaked and swayed in the wind, a girlish figure was walking to and fro.

Wiggins raised his cap as he passed.
 "Good-evening, Wiggins," said Mario Rivers. "I suppose you have seen nothing of Talbot?"

Wiggins raised his cap to Marie, and disappeared in the direction of the school wall.

"A rum beggar, that!" said Talbot. Marie nodded.

"He's quite the last boy in the world who ought to be doing menial duties," she said. "I can't make him out at all. I wonder—I wonder if he's playing a part?"

Talbot started.
 Are you suggesting, Marie, that he's sailing under false colours?"

"It looks very much like it," said Marie. "He's a nice boy, and a perfect glutton for work; but I can't help thinking that he is at St. Jim's with other motives than to clean boots."

Talbot looked thoughtful.
 "I shall have to keep an eye on the kid," he said. "Good-night, Marie!"

"Good-night, Toff; and—thank heaven you're safe!"

CHAPTER 8.

Racke takes a Hand!

"COME back!"
 Wiggins was in the act of clambering over the school wall, when a voice hailed him through the darkness.

Had it been the voice of a master, the boot-boy might have complied with the command. But he recognised it as being the voice of Racke of the Shell.

he naturally assumed that he was master of the situation.

"There's a law against breakin' bounds," said Racke, "an' it applies to a guttersnipe of a boot-boy just as much as it does to the sons of gentlemen."

Wiggins peered intently through the gloom.

"Dashed if I can see any sons of gentlemen about!" he said, in puzzled tones.

"Oh, bluff him!" growled Mellish, in exasperation.

And the three juniors made a combined rush at the boot-boy.

But it was Wiggins who did the "bluffing." He stood with his back to the wall, hitting out right and left. And his blows seemed to be those of a fully-developed man rather than those of a boy.

"Xaroooooh!" roared Crooke, as the boot-boy's fist took him on the point of the jaw, causing him to topple backwards.

"The beast knows how to hit!" grunted Racke. "But we'll soon settle him."

Wiggins, however, refused to be settled.

He continued to hit out, and such was his strength and determination that in a very short space of time Racke and Crooke and Mellish were hopelessly mixed up on the ground.

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"Master Talbot, miss, is in Master Merry's study."

A look of intense relief came over Marie's face.

"I am so glad!" she said. "I was getting dreadfully anxious about him. Why did he not tell me he was back. I wonder!"

"I had no chance," interposed a quiet voice. "Tom Merry and the others waited me to the study."

Talbot had followed Wiggins out into the quadrangle.

"How was it you were delayed all those hours, Toff?" asked Marie. "I expected to see you among the first runners to return. But you never came, and I was beginning to suspect that you had fallen into Jim Dawlish's hands."

"I did," said Talbot.

"Toff!"
 "But I soon got away, as you see," added Talbot, with a smile.

"Tell me all about it," urged Marie. And Talbot related all that had happened, from the time he was overpowered on the Burchester Road to the fight with the tower.

Marie listened breathlessly to the recital. Both she and Talbot had quite forgotten the existence of Wiggins, until Marie happened to glance round, when she saw that he was still standing there.

"I am not waiting for you for anything, Wiggins," said the school nurse.

"Very good, miss!"
 "Cut off, kid!" said Talbot.

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"Come back!" repeated Racke.

"Rats!" retorted Wiggins.
 And he drew himself up on to the top of the wall.

Racke, Crooke, and Mellish had been taking advantage of the darkness in order to have a quiet smoke under the elms. They had recognised Wiggins as he approached the school wall, and they considered it their duty to interfere.

"He's going out on the razzle, you bet!" said Crooke.

"And it's up to us to stop him!" said Mellish.

Whereupon, Aubrey Racke had shouted twice in succession.

Wiggins, however, cheerfully went ahead.

"Rush him!" muttered Racke.

And the three juniors dashed towards the wall, just in time to haul the boot-boy down by his coat-tails.

"Where are you goin', you young sweep?" demanded Racke.

"What's that got to do with you?"

"It's our duty to bring you up in the way you should go," said Crooke. "To keep you in the straight and narrow path, and all that sort of thing."

Wiggins wrenched himself away from the trio.

"I'm going out!" he said. "And if you attempt to interfere, you'll get hurt!"

Racke chuckled. He would not have cared to face Wiggins single-handed. He had done so twice, with disastrous results. But with two fellows at hand to help him,

The boot-boy stood over them for a moment, but they made no effort to rise.

"I warned you!" he said.

And then he turned, surmounted the school wall, and dropped lightly into the roadway.

By the time Racke & Co. regained their feet Wiggins had completely disappeared.

A chorus of groans went up from the baffled trio.

"Ow! My nose!"

"Groo! My jaw!"

"I'm booked for a black eye!"

Racke & Co. staggered away, nursing their injuries.

It seemed difficult to realise that three had been floored by one—and by a boot-boy. That, yet such was the case.

"That's the third time I've come a cropper against that young cad!" muttered Racke. "But I'll get my own back on him somehow!"

"I vote we go to the Head, and tell him that the rotter's gone out on the razzle," said Crooke.

"Hear, hear!" said Mellish. "He'll be sacked then—and serve him jolly well right!"

"Come on!" said Racke.

And the three juniors went along to the Head's study.

Dr. Holmes was seated in his arm-chair, deep in a volume of classic lore. He looked up in surprise as the trio entered after a preliminary knock.

"Well?" said the Head sharply.

Racke assumed the task of spokesman.

"We have a complaint to make to you, sir," he said, in smooth tones. "Complaints should be made to me through the medium of your House-master, Racke!"

"Ahem! Mr. Raitton doesn't happen to be in at the moment, sir. And it's such a serious matter that we thought we'd better inform you at once."

"Bless my soul! What is wrong, boy?"

"It's about Wiggins, sir—"

"Wiggins!" repeated the Head, in perplexity.

"Yes—the new boot-boy, sir."

"Well?"

"He's bringin' disgrace on the school, sir, by breakin' bounds at night."

"That's so, sir," said Crooke, feeling that he ought to say something. "He's probably in league with a set of card-sharps in the village, sir."

"We've just spotted him in the act of shining over the school wall, sir," chimed in Mellish.

The Head frowned.

The juniors thought that the frown was directed against Wiggins. But they were soon to be disillusioned.

"The new boot-boy appears to be very unpopular," observed Dr. Holmes.

"He's a young cad, sir!"

"And a rank outsider!"

"Not fit to associate with the sons of gentlemen—like ourselves, sir!"

Racke & Co. fully believed that they were making things warm for the absent Wiggins.

The Head's frown grew more portentous. He rose from the armchair, and crossed over to the bookcase.

The trio watched him in some alarm. On the ledge of the bookcase was a formidable-looking cane.

The alarm of the juniors increased as Dr. Holmes picked up the cane and confronted them.

"Hold out your hand, Racke!"

Aubrey Racke gave a gasp.

"Mum-mum-my hand, sir?"

"Yes—at once!"

"But—but what for, sir?"

"For attempting to defame the character of a boy with whom you are not fit to associate!" said the Head sternly.

"Oh crumbs!"

"I am waiting, Racke!"

Racke gingerly extended his hand, and withdrew it with a yelp of pain as the cane bit into his palm.

"You will oblige me by keeping your hand extended, Racke!"

"Ow!"

The Head laid on the cane with great vigour, and the cad of the Shell fairly curled up.

"Now, Crooke!"

Crooke went through a similar ordeal, and then Mellish took his turn.

The three young rascals were surprised as well as pained.

They had anticipated being commended by the Head for playing the part of informers, instead of which the boot was on the other foot. Dr. Holmes did not seem to disapprove, in the least, of the fact that the boot-boy had broken bounds.

When he had finished the Head addressed the squirming trio.

"You may go!" he said. "And let there be no repetition of your ungenerous conduct towards Wiggins!"

Racke & Co. hipped out of the study, utterly bewildered.

"This is what comes of actin' from a sense of duty," groaned Racke.

"It's all the fault of that beast Wiggins!" growled Crooke. "My hat! We'll make him smart for this!"

Mellish turned to his companions.

"I vote we lie in wait for him with cricket-stumps!" he said.

"Good idea!" said Crooke.

"Cut off and get them, Mellish!" said Racke.

Mellish scuttled away, returning in a few moments with three cricket-stumps.

Then the juniors waited in the shadow of the school wall, prepared to launch a cowardly attack on Wiggins when he returned.

But the time passed, and there was no sign of the boot-boy.

"Bedtime!" said Racke, at length.

"We shall have to go in now, an' take our revenge another time."

And the baffled trio disappeared into the building.

It was not until after lights out that Wiggins returned from his mysterious mission.

There was rather a grim expression on the boot-boy's face as he clambered over the school wall, and dropped into the quadrangle.

He went along to the little room adjoining the kitchen, where his chair-bedstead was in readiness. But he showed no signs of retiring for the night. Seating himself on the bed, he made a few rapid entries in his notebook, after which he remained where he was, fully dressed, as if with the intention of keeping an all-night vigil.

Occasionally Wiggins strained his ears to listen.

The room he occupied was conveniently near to the quadrangle; but no sound came to his ears, save the moaning of the wind in the elms.

Ten o'clock boomed out at length from the old clock-tower.

Wiggins made no movement to undress.

The quarters chimed in succession, and eventually the first stroke of eleven reverberated through the building.

And still Wiggins sat motionless, with his head resting between his hands. He had extinguished the light long ago, and he remained thus, watchful and alert, peering into the darkness.

CHAPTER 9.

In the Night Watches!

"O H deah! This is too awful for words!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy sat up in his bed in the Fourth Form dormitory.

He was the victim of a raging toothache.

On several previous nights the swell of St. Jim's had been kept awake through the same cause. He had made an appointment with the dentist in Wayland, but the appointment was not due to be kept until the morrow.

Meanwhile, the tooth was behaving very badly. Sleep was an impossibility.

"Gwoooogh!" gasped Arthur Augustus, as he experienced a violent spasm of pain.

"I shall go mad if this goes on much longer!"

There was a drowsy murmur from Jack Blake.

"That you, Gussy?"

"Ow! Yaas, deah boy?"

"What's the trouble?"

"My beastly molah—"

"Bust your molar!"

"I wish I could!" groaned Arthur Augustus.

"Yow!"

"Dry up! Do you want to wake the whole dorm, fathead?"

"Well, Blake, you ought to sympathise with a fellow in his anguish—"

"Who's that jabbering?" came in sleepy tones from Herries.

"My wotten tooth—"

"Oh, is it? Well, tell it to shut up!"

Arthur Augustus had plenty of pluck, but the pluckiest fellow in the world would have found it difficult to suppress an occasional yelp in these circumstances.

Finally, Arthur Augustus could endure it no longer. He slipped out of bed in his pyjamas.

"Whither bound, Gussy?" inquired Jack Blake.

"I'm goin' down to the studay to see if I can find somethin' to stop this beastly toothache."

"There's some stuff on the mantel-piece," said Digby, who had also been awakened.

"Thanks, Dig!"

Arthur Augustus quitted the dormitory, and groped his way down the dark staircase.

He wished he had brought his electric torch with him, for the blackness was almost impenetrable.

Gussy was too familiar with his surroundings, however, to go wrong. He reached Study No. 6 at length, and groped for the bottle of toothache balm which Digby had mentioned.

"Good!" he murmured.

He rubbed some of the balm on his cheek, and the pain was checked almost instantly.

"That's bettal!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, in tones of satisfaction. "Now powpaws I shall be able to get some west."

As he retraced his steps along the Fourth Form passage, the swell of St. Jim's fancied he heard a stealthy movement behind him.

Gussy shivered a little.

It was very dark and very cold, and it was an uncanny experience going along the deserted passage in the middle of the night.

Boom!

It was the first muffled clime of midnight.

"Gwoo!" murmured Arthur Augustus, with a shudder.

Araïn he fancied he heard a rustling sound behind him. Having no matches, he could not stop to investigate, so he quickened his pace.

Just as he was about to ascend the staircase a startling thing happened. Something struck him from behind with great force, and the swell of St. Jim's collapsed in a heap at the foot of the stairs.

In the Fourth Form dormitory, Jack Blake, Herries, and Digby were awaiting their chum's return.

The minutes passed, and Arthur Augustus did not come.

"What's happened to the silly ass?" ejaculated Herries.

"He's lost his way in the dark, I suppose," grunted Blake.

"Or p'raps he can't find the toothache balm," said Digby.

"I expect he's forgotten what he went for," said Herries. "and he's sat down on the stairs to Pelmanis!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

When the first quarter after midnight rang out, and Arthur Augustus was still missing, the juniors grew alarmed.

"We'd better go and hunt for the silly duffer!" grumbled Jack Blake, getting out of bed.

Herries and Digby followed their leader's example, and the three juniors started on their errand.

As they passed the open door of the Shell dormitory a voice hailed them.

"Anything wrong, you fellows?"

It was Tom Merry who spoke.

"Gussy's lost himself!" explained Jack Blake, advancing into the dormitory.

"My hat!"

"We'll come and help you look for him," said Talbot, who was also awake.

"All serene!"

And the five juniors trooped down the stairs in their pyjamas.

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When they reached the foot of the stairs a startled exclamation burst from Talbot.

"Show a light here—quick!"
Tom Merry flashed his electric torch, and its rays shone full upon the huddled form of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Good heavens!" gasped Jack Blake, turning pale. "He must have fallen down the stairs!"

Talbot shook his head.

"It's my opinion there's been foul play!" he said.

"My hat!"

The juniors were considerably alarmed; but their alarm lessened when Arthur Augustus came round.

Tom Merry and Talbot assisted the swell of St. Jim's to his feet.

"Feeling groggy, old man?" murmured Talbot.

Arthur Augustus pressed his hand to his throbbing temples.

"I shall be all right soon!" he muttered. "Some fearful wretch caught me a frightful cawak on the head!"

"What with?" asked Tom Merry.

"Couldn't say, dear boy!"

Talbot looked grave.

"Looks as if someone tried to sandbag Gussy," he said. "Luckily, though, the blow didn't take full effect in the dark!"

"But—but who on earth would be likely to do a thing like that?" exclaimed Herries.

"A burglar, perhaps?"

"Pshaw!"

"It's quite possible that he thought Gussy was spying on him," said Talbot. Then he broke off suddenly.

"What's up?" asked Tom Merry.

"It's quite on the cards," said Talbot, his voice trembling with excitement.

"The Jim Dawlish is here!"

"Dawlish?"

"My hat!"

The juniors exchanged startled glances.

"I believe you're right, Talbot," said Tom Merry, at length. "We'll get Gussy up to bed, and then I'll go and wake Railton."

The swell of St. Jim's was assisted into the Fourth Form dormitory, and he got into bed without rousing the others.

"Wait for me on the landing, you fellows," said Tom Merry. "I'll go and get Railton."

The captain of the Shell made his way to the Housemaster's room.

Late though the hour was, Mr. Railton had not yet finally retired for the night. He had been sitting up late in his study, correcting examination-papers; and he had also been disturbed by strange, unaccountable sounds such as Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had heard in the Fourth Form passage.

Tom Merry tapped on the door of Mr. Railton's room.

"Who is there?" ejaculated the Housemaster.

"It's I—Merry, sir!"

"Bless my soul! Why are you absent from your bed at this hour?"

"There's a burglar in the building, sir."

"Nonsense, Merry!"

"It's a fact, sir! D'Arcy was attacked by somebody in the dark—and we're convinced it must have been a burglar."

Mr. Railton was impressed by the junior's eager tone. He had not yet started to undress, and he switched off the light, and joined Tom Merry outside the door.

Mr. Railton and Tom Merry were joined on the landing by the other juniors who were up.

"You had better go back to your respective dormitories, my boys," said the Housemaster.

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There was a chorus of protest at once.

"Can't we help you track down the burglar, sir?" said Herries. "I'll fetch Towser—"

Mr. Railton smiled.

"There is no need to go to that extreme, Herries!" he said. "But you may come."

"Thank you, sir!"

And the five juniors, with their hearts beating faster than usual, followed Mr. Railton down the stairs.

CHAPTER 10.

A Nine Days' Wonder!

"I SUGGEST, sir, that we go to the Head's study first," said Jack Blake.

"That is my intention, Blake."

"Good!"

Of all the places at St. Jim's which could be profitably burgled, the Head's study offered the best chances of a good haul.

There was a great deal of money, besides many valuable documents, in the Head's safe—tempting spoil for a skilful craftsman.

It was to Dr. Holmes' study, therefore, that the Housemaster and his willing assistants wended their way.

A light gleamed underneath the study door.

Mr. Railton hesitated for a moment, listening.

A stifled exclamation came to his ears. It was followed by the sound of a sharp click.

Someone was in the Head's study!

The Housemaster turned the handle of the door, and threw it open.

The scene which met his gaze was very different from the scene he had expected to see.

He had conjured up in his mind the picture of a cracksmen kneeling in front of the Head's safe; and he had associated the click he had heard with the turning of a skeleton key.

Mr. Railton halted on the threshold in blank astonishment. His amazement was shared by the juniors who crowded in at the doorway.

The cracksmen was there, right enough. But he was not kneeling before the safe. He was leaning against the farther wall panting for breath—and handcuffed!

"Dawlish!" muttered Talbot.

And from the rest of the juniors broke another exclamation, no less astonished.

"Wiggins!"

The boot-boy of St. Jim's was present in the study; and it was he who had effected the arrest of Jim Dawlish.

"My only aunt!" gasped Tom Merry.

Mr. Railton slowly recovered from his astonishment.

"Wiggins!" he exclaimed. "What does this mean?"

"It means, sir," said Wiggins, "that I collared this precious rascal when he came here with the object of rifling the Head's safe!"

Jim Dawlish uttered a savage imprecation, and the look he darted at Talbot was one of deadly hatred. But he was securely handcuffed, and escape was impossible.

Mr. Railton's glance was fixed upon the boot-boy.

"This—is this extraordinary!" he exclaimed. "How did you come to be in possession of a pair of handcuffs?"

"I will explain, Railton," said a quiet voice.

And the Head entered the study by means of the connecting door.

"Great Scott!" gasped Tom Merry. "Talk about a night of surprises!"

"Wiggins came to this school at my instigation," said Dr. Holmes. "His name is not really Wiggins, of course."

"Not Wiggins!" ejaculated Mr. Railton.

"No! He is Dalton Hawke, the boy investigator."

"Bless my soul!"

"You may remember," the Head went on, "that this scoundrel"—he indicated Jim Dawlish—"kidnapped Miss Rivers, the school nurse, and sent me a letter, requesting that I should meet him with a sum of money for the girl's ransom."

I placed that letter in the hands of a detective—Dalton Hawke, to wit. He, suspecting that Dawlish would return sooner or later to this neighbourhood, came to the school in the role of boot-boy. He appears to have effected a very smart capture."

"Hang him!" snarled Dawlish.

"How did you manage it, Hawke?" asked Mr. Railton.

"It was easily done," answered the boy-detective. "I met Dawlish in the village after dark, and undertook to admit him into this study. I told him I was the boot-boy, and that I was only too eager to earn a fiver by helping him. The arrangement was that I should signal to him from the study window when it was all clear. Apparently, though, he raided other studies before he came here, for I found over twenty pounds in notes in his possession."

Dalton Hawke pointed to a little pile of notes on the Head's writing-table.

"When Dawlish arrived at this study," he went on, "he said he intended to burgle the Head's safe. I called upon him to surrender, explaining that I had a warrant for his arrest. After a rather heated conversation, I was compelled to handcuff him."

"A very smart piece of work, Hawke!" said the Head approvingly.

Dawlish sneered.

"I don't see where the smartness comes in," he said. "I was forced to walk blindly into the trap. An' now I suppose you're goin' to hand me over to the police?"

"Your supposition is correct!" said the Head, stepping to the telephone.

With glittering eyes, Jim Dawlish surveyed the occupants of the study.

"It's your game," he said. "I give you best, an' I'm not goin' to whine. I shall go to prison for this—but it will only be for a matter of a few months. The law isn't so strict as it was. An' then, when I've done my term, you'll see me again! Make a note of that! I'm down now, but I shall bounce up again, and then you can look out for trouble."

It was to Talbot that the words seemed to be addressed. And it was on Talbot that Dawlish's eyes finally lighted, with a look of bitter animosity.

The cracksmen evidently imagined that Talbot had played a part in his capture; and, though prison walls might surround him for some time to come, he resolved to be revenged upon the handsome Shell fellow at the first opportunity.

Inspector Skeat arrived in due course, with a couple of constables; and Jim Dawlish was taken away from the school in custody.

The adventures of that eventful night being at an end, the St. Jim's juniors returned to their dormitories—but not before they had bidden farewell to Dalton Hawke, detective—alias Wiggins the boot-boy—who had endeared himself to all the decent fellows in the school during the time he was engaged in Playing a Part!

THE END.

Another long, complete School Story or Tom Merry & Co. Next Week, entitled

"GRUNDY'S DELUSION?!"

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THE OPENING CHAPTERS.

Dick Danby, a stalwart lad of sixteen, obtains the promise of partnership from Captain Morgan Kidd, skipper of the auxiliary schooner Foam, and his daughter Stella, in a treasure cruise to the wrecked vessel Pathan. Dick is the sole survivor of the Pathan, which was torpedoed, and is lying, half-submerged, off an island in the South seas. In the strong-room of the ill-fated ship is two million sterling in bar-gold and money; also the Dragon's Eye—a wonderful diamond.

Otto Schwab, posing as a Dutchman—though in reality the commander of the U-boat which sank the Pathan—and Sulah Mendoza, a villainous Malay, are their unscrupulous rivals for the treasure. Harry Fielding and Joe Maddox join the expedition, also Wang Su, a Chinese boy.

Soon after they set sail they have an encounter with the Red Rover. Later they are at a small island, and go ashore for a time. All had returned to the Foam with the exception of Harry Fielding, when the party on board hear a shout from the shore and see Harry running hard towards the water's edge.

Now Read on.

The Typhoon!

"FOAM, ahoy!" Harry shouted, directly he was within earshot. "Get out kedge anchors! Typhoon!"

"Heavens!" grunted the skipper, as he dashed into the cabin.

In less than half a minute he was back on deck. "Glass fallen as though she'd knock the bottom out!" he exclaimed. Then he rapped out a series of stentorian orders, which sent every soul on board swarming up the masts to reef the sails, which had been spread out to dry.

As the Kanakas were all busy bending the sails to the new masts, Dick and Stella swarmed up the mainmast rigging to the fore-top-gallant, and, leaning over the spar, commenced clawing in the flat sail.

There was no need to ask what new peril menaced them.

Already a strange, deep, roaring sound, like the pipes of a mighty organ, was growing louder and louder each moment, and they knew that, sheltered though she was, the schooner would be blown ashore like a wisp of paper if caught with every sail spread.

Despite the peril of their position Dick felt a thrill of admiration and wonder, as he shot a rapid glance at his beautiful companion, and noted the seaman-like manner in which she drew the sail towards her and secured the points.

In less than a minute the sail was as

furled, and they dropped to the one below.

It was already bellying before the hot gusts, like breaths from a furnace, which preceded the storm.

But Captain Kidd himself, and the old Samson boatswain, came to their assistance, and they dropped to the deck breathless, but content with their few minutes work, just as the droning became a roar, and they saw the trees on the top of the bluff bending before the first fierce attack of the coming typhoon.

When Dick and Stella had sprung aloft the sun was shining brightly overhead, but by the time they regained the deck it was so dark they could scarcely see from one end of the schooner to the other.

Whilst the Foam was being made all snug above-board, the Kanakas had returned with the pigs, and had carried out two extra anchors from the bows, and dropped another astern.

They were just in time.

A fiercer gust than any that had preceded it swept over, and was followed by a dead silence that lasted almost a minute.

Then it was as though all the winds of heaven had been pressed into the service of the dread typhoon, to overwhelm the world.

Blinding flashes of lightning tore apart the clouds, rendering everything on the island and the storm-stricken bay visible, whilst repeated rolls of the heaviest thunder Dick had ever heard drowned, for the moment, even the fearful howling of the gale.

It was during one of these flashes of lightning that Stella grasped Dick Danby by the arm, and pointed to the avenue of palms he had seen from the bluff.

Every tree was bending over at a fearful angle, the tufted tops blown outwards like upstanding hair.

Then darkness descended over the scene once more, and when the next flash came they were gone, uprooted by the irresistible power of the gale.

It was well for the Foam that she was sheltered by the highlands that ended in the bluff overlooking the entrance to the bay. Had she been exposed to the full force of the gale her sticks must have been blown out of her, and her cables would have snapped like pack-thread.

But, though she tossed about like some stricken thing, and tugged at her anchors, until it seemed as though no cables made by man could hold, she weathered the storm, and when the typhoon swept by on its course of destruction, as suddenly as it had come, she still rode the waves as

proudly as though conscious of her victory over the storm-fiend.

The island itself presented a fearful spectacle.

Save here and there, where a little dip in the ground provided a little shelter from the storm, not a tree was standing, whilst the higher ground, such as the bluff from which Stella and her companions had watched the Red Rover sail by, had been swept clean of both trees and bushes.

"It was the worst storm I have ever experienced!" declared Captain Kidd, when they sat down to a long-delayed meal that evening. "Thank Heaven the Foam had not left the bay. I've known as stout a craft as she literally thrust under the waves by the force of such a wind as that."

"What of the Red Rover?" asked Dick.

"She may have run before it. With all his faults, Mendoza is a first-class sailor; but, anyhow, she will be carried hundreds of miles out of her course before she shakes it off," was the reply.

"Then, the sooner we resume our journey the better!" cried Joe Maddox.

But the worthy old skipper seemed scarce to hear him. A thoughtful frown creased his brow.

"I'm thinking, my lad," he said at last, turning to Dick Danby, "that if this island of yours lies in the track of the typhoon, there'll be precious little of the old Pathan left."

The Devil Fish!

THE Foam did not leave the bay that night.

The sea, which had been beaten flat by the typhoon, rose as darkness fell over the land, and soon the mighty Pacific rollers were crashing through into the narrow channel with a force that churned the waters of the dog-bay bend into foam, and set the surface of the bay tossing until it was difficult to keep one's footing on the rolling and pitching little schooner.

It was not until midday the following morning that the sea abated sufficiently to allow them to attempt the passage.

Even then it was only her petrol engines that enabled the Foam to navigate the difficult passage with safety.

But at last the open sea was reached, and, under a full press of canvas, the schooner resumed her voyage.

Before dawn on the morning of the third day after leaving the island, Dick

Danby was at the masthead, for the previous night Captain Kidd had picked out their course, and had declared that before sunrise they would have come in sight of their destination.

And, sure enough, when the sun burst, a red ball of flame, from the eastern horizon, there lay a group of atolls, some five miles ahead of the Foam, looking, with their palm-tree covered islands, and the surf breaking on their coral reefs, like so many gorgeous emeralds surrounded by fairy rings of purest snow.

At Dick's stirring shout, his chums slid from their mattresses amicably, and Stella and Captain Kidd hastened up from below.

"Whither away, lad?" hailed the old pirate.

Dick Danby hesitated ere he replied. "Two points over the weather bow, sir!" For there were two large islands in the group amongst a host of others, and he was not sure which was which.

A group of four trees on a height near the rock on which the Pathan had been wrecked, after she was torpedoed, was missing.

The Treasure Seeking!

STELLA swung herself up to the spar by Dick's side.

"Which is Treasure Island, Dick?" she asked eagerly.

The lad pointed to the larger of the two islands.

"That one, I think," he replied. "But I am not sure. A landmark I was looking for is gone. Besides, you must remember I only saw the island from this side on the night of the wreck. I escaped from the other."

Stella nodded, and gazed long and earnestly at the beautiful island, which rose, grand and rugged, from out the surf-covered coral reef that surrounded it.

Then her eyes wandered to a second island that lay a mile or so away, the absence of the customary coral reef showing that deeper water obtained around it.

Most of the islands of the Pacific are of volcanic origin, and it was fairly certain that both the one surrounded by the atoll and its smaller companion were the peaks of volcanoes which, in long-forgotten ages, had brought the islands up from the bottom of the sea.

"That must be your island, Dick, for it is surrounded by a reef," declared Stella, a few minutes later.

"Yes, And look! Just in a line with that high cliff, that's the rock on which the poor old Pathan broke her back," replied her chum, focusing his glasses on a tiny black speck just outside the line of surf.

Presently he lowered the binoculars, with a groan of disappointment.

"It's gone! The stern of the Pathan is gone!" he said, in tones of deep dejection.

And so it proved when, less than an hour later, the Foam glided past the rock, which rose, bare and rugged, but destitute of wreckage of any kind.

The schooner having been brought to, a boat, launched and manned by two Kanakas, with Wang Su in the bows and Dick Danby, Captain Kidd, and Stella in the stern, was rowed towards Pathan Rock, as they had named the huge rock.

When within some sixty feet of the rock Wang held up his hand, with a shrill cry to the rowers to check the way on the boat.

"Ships! here alight! Wang see bows!" he cried.

Dick Danby looked quickly up, new-found hope sending the blood rushing tumultuously through his veins.

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"Then the stern cannot be far away," he declared, thrusting a bucket with a glass bottom, such as pearl-fishers use, over the stern, and gazing intently into it.

Huge masses of coral, covered with most gorgeous anemones, swept past his eyes as the boat moved slowly through the water.

Presently a cry, half of delight, half of regret for the gallant ship which German treachery had sent to its doom, burst from his lips.

In the centre of a stretch of golden sand, her bow forced down by the weight of the forward quickfrier, her torn and twisted decks burst open, lay the forepart of the Pathan.

The wreck lay close to what looked like a shape-grey rock, worn to a dome-like shape by the action of the waves.

Dick Danby scarce noticed it at the time. Certainly it did not strike him as peculiar that, whilst every other rock around the wreck was gay with anemones and the vari-coloured weeds of the Southern Seas, its rounded form was free of growth of any kind.

"Mo go see!" said Wang Su, deftly curling his long pigtail into a knot at the back of his head.

The next moment, clad only in a pair of yellow shorts, he dived overboard.

The commotion caused by the Chinaman's plunge into the waves blurred Dick's view of the ocean-bed for a short time, and by the time the watery way quieted down Wang Su had reached the end of the wreck. Keeping himself steady by swift movements of his hands, he was peering into the Pathan's forehold.

"Helpee—helpee! Pool Chinaman drowned!" laughed Stella mischievously. For she was never tired of teasing Dick about the way Wang Su had tricked him at their first meeting.

But Dick Danby did not answer.

His face had turned an ashen grey, and his eyes seemed literally bulging from his head with terror as he gazed, as though turned to stone, through the glass bottom of the bucket.

He had seen Wang Su grasp a twisted piece of ironwork protruding from the wreck and force his feet down on to the sand, evidently intent upon penetrating a short distance into the hull.

His back was to the rounded rock, and he did not see the fearful peril that menaced him.

The rock had moved!

Swelling and contracting for all the world like some fearful monster preparing for a spring, it glided to within six feet of the Chinaman's back. A pair of fearful, horn-like mounds of flesh, at the base of which appeared a pair of enormous, bulging eyes, and beneath them a huge, gaping mouth, armed with enormous saw-like teeth, came into view.

The terrible sight was photographed on Dick Danby's brain in less time than it would take to read a single line. Then the monster darted at its human prey like some fearful submarine projectile, and a cry that was almost a scream of terror burst from Dick's lips as he saw Wang Su disappear beneath the horror's jaws.

"Pull—pull! Pull for your lives!" he screamed.

Then, collapsing on to the stern seat, covered his face with his hands.

The Kanakas needed no second bidding.

Ever since Treasure Island had come in sight they had been restless and uneasy. It had only been with great difficulty that Captain Kidd had induced them to row towards the rock.

Their faces yellow with terror, they

strained at the oars with a frantic vigour that well-nigh deflated their ends.

"Steady, you white-livered cowards!" bellowed the skipper. "Wang Su is below there!"

He gasped. Dick roughly by the shoulder and shook him violently.

"Pull yourself together, boy! It is not like you, Danby, to leave a shipmate in the lurch, even if he is only a Chink!" he roared angrily.

Shamed by the rebuke, Dick sat up.

"He's gone, swallowed as you would swallow a pill by—!" he began; then hesitated, unable to give a name to the nightmare creature that lurked near the wreck.

"By a shark—ch?" interposed Captain Kidd, his hand closing with a warning grip over Dick's wrist, as he gazed significantly at the Kanakas, who had ceased to row, and, trembling in every limb, were drinking in each word that was said.

Too shaken to realise the unwisdom of increasing the evident terror of the superstitious natives, Dick Danby was about to declare that it was no shark he had seen, when all were electrified by hearing a shrill voice cry immediately behind them:

"Stoppee—stoppee! Wait for pool Chinaman!"

The next moment a pair of yellow limbs appeared above the stern, and, turning, with a cry of joy, Dick dragged Wang Su into the boat.

"Thank Heaven, Wang! I thought—!" began Dick.

But the Chinaman interrupted him by shouting in, in terror-stricken tones:

"Puller—puller! One time, quick! Heap big catch eveltying!"

His answer was yells of terror from the Kanakas, who had dropped the oars, and were gazing, with blanched faces, at some fearful object behind the boat.

Nothing is so demoralising as fear in another, and for a fraction of a second even Captain Kidd's stout heart failed, whilst, white to the very lips, Stella buried her face in her hands and sank down in the bottom of the boat.

Rising from the water was a huge, yellowish-white body, surmounted by a pair of fat, fleshy horns, and an enormous half-circle, at least four feet across, which could only be the monster's closed mouth.

The huge brute was a good twenty feet across. And when, a moment later, it had thrust its whole frame from the water, they saw that it was quite fifteen feet in length, not counting its short, whip-like, spear-tipped tail.

As they gazed, paralysed by the fearful sight, the huge ray dropped back into the water, causing the boat to rock again.

"Pull, you dogs—pull! If that brute attacks us we're done for!" cried Captain Kidd.

But the natives, fearless when confronted by man or tempest, were but a whimpering children when assailed by what, to their superstitious minds, appeared a supernatural enemy, and were unable to do anything but clasp their hands before their eyes, and moan with terror.

"Out of the way, you women! Come on, Dick, it is up to us to save Stella!" roared the skipper, thrusting the nearest Kanaka into the bottom of the boat.

Responding to the old sailor's call, Dick followed his example. Soon the boat was flying through the water beneath the frantic strokes of men plugging for their lives.

Again the ray came to the surface. Thrusting its hideous, shapeless head



Rising from the water was a huge, yellowish-white body, surmounted by a pair of small fleshy horns, and an enormous half circle, a least four feet across, which could only be the monster's closed mouth. "Pull, you dog, pull! if that brute attacks us we're done for!" cried Captain Kidd.

above the waves, it turned its big, bulging eyes from side to side, for, like all flat fish, the ox-ray has its eyes at the side; then, catching sight of the boat, followed in pursuit at a speed its clumsy form and huge bulk gave little promise of.

A groan burst from Captain Kidd's lips.

"We might as well try to outslay a destroyer!" he gasped. "Stand by to check her way when I give the word!"

Dick Danby nodded.

He dare not trust himself to speak, for he felt literally sick with horror, as he watched that ponderous mass of solid flesh and bone rapidly overhauling them. Presently he saw its head shoot upwards.

"Now!" thundered the skipper.

Backing water with all his might, Dick Danby saw the white underpart of the ray above his head.

For a moment it was as though the sun had been blotted out; then there came a mighty splash over the bows and the stout boat rocked like a cork in a millrace.

But he breathed more freely once more, for, baffled by the sudden stopping of the boat, the ox-ray had overshot its mark.

"Now, pull for the schooner as though! Morgan Kidd and every rover that ever sailed the sea was after us!" cried the skipper exultantly.

The Attack of the Red Rover!

THE giant ox-ray, or devil fish, as it was more often called, had disappeared beneath the waves, and neither Dick Danby nor his companions dared to hope that it would give up the chase.

Often Dick Danby had listened, half incredulously, to tales of boats crushed to matchwood by these ferocious monsters, and of divers, enveloped in the ray's flexible sides, and stung to death by the poisoned barbs, with which their long, whip-like tails are armed.

Their only chance lay in reaching the schooner ere the monster could regain the surface, and gather sufficient speed to hurl itself upon them from the sea.

But they were yet a hundred cables' lengths from the schooner when the ray shot into view, and, leaving a wake behind it like that of a small steamer, charged towards them once more.

"It will swamp us!" ejaculated Dick. "Thank Heaven the beast never tries that game on! His one idea of fighting, seems to be to fall on his foes," returned the skipper. "And he'll do it this time. The devil fish never misses twice!" he added gravely.

A feeling of despair almost paralysed Dick Danby at these ominous words, but he fought it off, and it was almost with calmness that he saw the monster raise its head above the waves.

Suddenly a loud report came from close at hand, and a shell from the Foam's quick-firer whistled past the boat, to fall, with a sullen plunge, within a foot of the ray's horned head.

Alarmed by this strange missile, the devil-fish swerved aside, and those in the boat breathed a sigh of relief as they saw it glide past them, at a pace which made it seem as though the boat was motionless.

Again they had been saved as though by a miracle.

But it was only for a moment.

Wheeling round, the ray circled to the stern of the boat, then, as though fearful

lest its prey might escape, swooped down upon them faster than ever.

Again and again the quick-firer spoke, but the shooting was atrocious, and, with a tightening of the heart strings, Dick saw the monster within springing distance once more.

Bang!

The giant ray came to an abrupt halt, its spine severed by a lucky shot, in the very nick of time. It stood upright in the water, then, its fearful mouth agape, began slowly to sink, surrounded by blood-stained foam.

From the deck of the Foam Dick Danby, Captain Kidd, and Stella watched the end of their fearful foe.

And a fearful end it was.

Hitherto, they had not seen a shark, but, attracted by the smell of blood, or drawn to the awful feast by instinct, not only sharks, but huge eel-like creatures, threshers, narwals, and many other monsters of the deep, swept up at lightning speed from all directions. Flinging themselves on the dying devil-fish, they literally tore it to pieces.

"I have sailed these seas, man and boy, for forty years, and I've never seen such a sight as that!" declared Captain Kidd. "They are not fish, Barking Dog," said a solemn voice at his elbow.

He turned, to find the old Samcoan boatswain by his side.

"They are ghosts, the spirits of the bad men, who have lived and died on yonder island," he continued with increased earnestness. "Kao is old, and has travelled far, and his years have brought wisdom. Listen to his words, Barking Dog!" As sure as yonder sun shines above us, naught but misfortune, hardship, and death, can come from this

place. Leave it, my loved master, and let the drowned gold lie where the gods have thrown it."

"Kao—" began the skipper, then stopped to gaze with blanched cheek at the Red Rover, with sails set and sweeps, was bearing down upon them at fearful speed.

"Start the engines! Stella to the wheel! Swing round the yards! Bring up rifles and ammunition, and bones for the bull pup!" shouted Captain Kidd with sailor-like promptitude.

Immediately all was bustle on board the Foam, as the Kanakas sprang to the braces, and the boys hastened below to secure their weapons.

And there was need; for, warned by the shots Harry Fielding had fired at the ox-ray that the rival schooner was at hand, Mendoza had slipped his cables in a little bay on the other side of the island, and had sallied forth, hoping to take his foes unprepared.

When, carrying a bundle of rifles, his pockets bulging with ammunition, Dick Danby returned to the deck, he glanced anxiously at the Kanakas, for he feared lest the encounter with the giant ray had sapped their courage.

But he need not have been afraid. With a thousand generations of fighting men behind them, the Samoans' eyes were shining in anticipation of the coming battle, their strong, white teeth bared in a well-pleased grin.

It was only the deeply-instilled fear of the supernatural that could bring terror to their hearts.

From the Kanakas his glance wandered to the lovely mate of the Foam.

Her long, golden hair, flowing in the breeze, her face calm, set, and determined, she looked the living spirit of the great old British stock from which she sprang.

As for Captain Kidd, his red beard bristling, as was its wont when anger or excitement moved him, his blue eyes glittering like highly-tempered steel, he seemed as though longing to lift the little schooner through the waves in his eagerness to get at the foe.

Harry Fielding and Joe Maddox were already settled down behind the bulwarks, their rifles trained on the Malay vessel.

But Dick Danby's ride in the gallant bearing of his comrades received an unpleasant check as he saw Wang Su, a look of the most abject terror on his face, hastening below.

"Come back, you yellow-faced coward!" he cried indignantly, as he brought the Chinaman to a standstill by seizing the end of his pistol, and jerking him backward.

"Lettee go! Me vell frightened Chinaman!" moaned Wang Su struggling to break free.

"All right, go, then, and don't show your face on deck until I call you!" ordered Dick, dismissing him with a kick that sent the unfortunate Chinaman head over heels down the companion-way.

"I can't understand Wang! He faced the octopus without a moment's hesitation, and gets cold feet before the foes are even within shot!" declared Dick.

Captain Kidd's deep, booming laugh echoed through the ship.

"If you can ever begin to understand a Chinaman, Danby, you'll be cleverer than scores of men who have knocked about with Chinks all their lives," he replied.

"Is it the Barking Dog's pleasure that we break the flag?" asked Kao, coming forward at that moment.

"Bend it, but don't break it, until the Bull Pup creaks!" returned Kidd.

"And the Oro Tapu?" asked the old Samoan.

"Yes, Schwab, at least, ought to recognize it!" grinned the skipper.

"It is a mighty Tapu, and my men will fight the better beneath it," returned the old Samoan boatswain solemnly.

"What is the Oro Tapu, captain?" asked Dick.

"You'll see soon enough," laughed the skipper.

"Now, lads, get ready! I needn't tell you to fight well, for I've seen you in mix-ups before and know you love it," he added, turning to the Kanakas, who had taken up favourable positions along the deck.

"I'll just point out that if these Malay cut-throats get on board they'll make cold meat of the lot of us. But they've got to get on board first," he concluded, with a chuckle, as he made his way to the sawn-off quick-firer in the bows.

A Naval Engagement!

BY this time the Red Rover was within half a mile of the Foam, and bearing down upon her as fast as sails and sweeps could force her through the water.

"Hold her steady, Stella!" shouted Captain Kidd, glancing along the sights of the Bull Pup.

"Steady it is!" came back in the clear, calm, musical tones of the beautiful mate. Boom!

The little vessel quivered as the gun sent its message of death hurtling through the waves.

The shell whistled harmlessly through the Red Rover's rigging, and was greeted with a burst of mocking laughter from her crowded decks.

Dick Danby glanced aloft, and a thrill swept through his veins as he saw the grand old Union Jack breaking at her mainmast.

Then his eyes travelled to the mizzen-mast, and he stared in amazement when he saw a black flag, with a white skull and crossbones worked on it, floating overhead.

His eyes met Stella's, and Dick saw that the girl's face was convulsed with merriment.

"We're all pirates now, Dick!" she laughed.

"I never thought I'd fight under the Jolly Roger!" returned Dick; then ducked instinctively, as a number of bullets hummed, like a flight of angry wasps, overhead, or struck the timbers of the Foam, with dull, ominous thuds.

Then the Bull Pup spoke again.

Her report was followed by a chorus of fierce, blood-curdling yells of rage, answered by the explosive shouts of the Samoans, and the stirring, death-defying cheers of the Britishers, as the Red Rover's try-sail came down with a run.

Immediately the attackers' speed was checked, and, as the Malay sailors sprang to clear away the flapping sail, Samoans and white men poured a devastating fire into their closely-packed ranks which soon sent them under cover.

"Pay off a bit!" ordered Captain Kidd, without looking up, as he rust another cartridge into the breach of his gun.

Clear as a bell above the firing rose the sweet, musical notes of the girl-mate, as she issued her orders. Soon the Foam was edging away from the oncoming foe, as the Kanakas obeyed her orders.

Again the quick-firer spoke. This time the shell pierced her bows just beneath a Hawse hole.

It was followed by an explosion amidships, and the Red Rover immediately fell off.

But the Malays are also an island race and, trusting to their numbers, if once they could get alongside their foe, fought with almost demoniacal courage.

Thick as hail the bullets flew about the Foam, with a quickness and precision that showed the enemy were armed with modern weapons, whilst the little party on the British ship fired until their rifles grew almost too hot to hold.

"Keep her head on to the pirates!" roared Captain Kidd, after slowing his gun round and finding that he could no longer bring it to bear on the Red Rover.

Stella shrugged her shoulders.

But she was far too good a sailor not to obey orders, and shortly afterwards the Foam was heading straight for the enemy.

That the Malays were being heavily punished, not only by the shells of the quick-firer, but also by the rifles of the Britishers, was certain; and they must have received a nasty shock, as another shot sped from the Foam's bows and severed their mainmast, six feet from the deck.

But still they pressed on, the rowers working like giants at the sweeps, as they almost lifted the lighter vessel from the water.

One more shot from the Bull Pup swept away two of the Rover's starboard sweeps when she was within a few yards of the Foam.

But it only served to bring her head round the quicker. Half a minute later she had crashed against the Foam's bows.

That she had not swept alongside was due entirely to Stella's skilful steering. As the vessel collided, she drew an automatic pistol from the cartridge-belt at her hip, and sprang forward in response to her father's stentorian shout:

"All hands to repel boarders! The swabs shall eat dirt before they carry the Foam!"

It was perhaps fortunate for the Britishers that the Malays, following their native instincts, had dropped their rifles, and armed only with the formidable kris, swarmed to with their comrades had made the bows of the two crafts fast with grapnels.

One more shot Captain Kidd got in with the quick-firer.

It ploughed a lane through the closely-packed, battle-maddened Malays, and sent the survivors reeling back.

Drawing his formidable, if old-fashioned, broadsword, the skipper prepared for the last desperate stand which would decide the fate of the Foam and all on board her.

To his right was Dick Danby, Harry Fielding, and Joe Maddox, who had feverishly recharged the magazines of their rifles, on his left Kao and five Samoans for one gallant islander had already paid with his life for his devotion to his white friends.

Immediately behind the gallant old skipper was Stella, and if, perchance, her face was a little paler than usual, the dauntless look in her lovely eyes, and the firm grip in which she held her pistol showed the brave heart within.

Yelling like very fiends, the Malays swept forward.

But their numbers availed them little, for there was scarce three feet of the tightly-pressed bulwarks available for

boar'ing, and that the calm courage and dauntless spirit of the defenders could hold for an almost indefinite period.

"Use your rifles! Your rifles!" roared Mendoza, realising the hopelessness of striving to break down the Britishers' resistance on that narrow front.

As he spoke he aimed his own weapon straight at the defiant form of Captain Kidd.

But even as he pulled the trigger the muzzle of his weapon was thrown upwards by the swaying mass of half-naked figures before him, and the bullet hurtled harmlessly into the air.

At the same time, Otto Schwab, waving a huge cavalry sabre, rushed forward, crying:

"Vorwärts, vile dogs! Death to the—"

The rest of the sentence ended in a choking sob, as, what looked like a cloud of dust, struck him full in the face.

Another alighted on a kris-armed Malay chief, who, his razor-keen weapon drawn back to strike, was about to spring on Dick Danby, as that gallant youngster faced, with clubbed rifle, a brown-skinned native, who was in the act of jumping across the narrow strait of blue water that separated him from the Foam.

But this warrior also became convulsed with strange internal throes, which communicated themselves to his comrades, as missile after missile dropped amongst them.

"Pepper! Great guns! Pop—Atchoo!" cried Captain Kidd, seizing the grapple ropes with his cutlass.

Atchoo! Atchoo! Atchoo! came from the pirates, as they rushed about.

Atchoo Atchoo! Atchoo! echoed the party clustered in the bows of the Foam, though their contortions were not nearly so violent as their foes.

Convulsed with laughter, Stella rushed back to the wheel, and brought round the Foam's head, whilst quick, sharp orders, sent her crew to the running tackle.

Swiftly the two vessels drifted apart, but when they were only a few yards from each other a cry of terror burst from the Malays, as they saw a big brown object descending upon them from the air.

The next moment it struck the deck and burst into a score of fragments, liberating a dense cloud of smoke.

Scarce able to believe the evidence of their senses, even though backed by tickled nostrils and snarling eyes, those in the bows of the British vessel saw their foes scatter like a covey of frightened partridges, then rush below.

(Another long instalment of this thrilling adventure story will appear in next Wednesday's issue of the GEM. Order your copy now, to avoid disappointment.)

NOTICES.

Owing to the great number of Readers' Notices I have on hand, I am devoting extra space for them this week.

BACK NUMBERS

E. Burton, 34, Durban Road, White Hart Lane, Tottenham, wants back numbers dealing with Carbery.

Melanie G. Cook, Goombat, Victoria, Australia, wants the first stories of "The Bounder of Greyfriars," and of "Carbery at St. Jim's," 4d. each offered.

W. M. Mason, 22, Hounsfield Road, Sheffield, has for sale "Magnets," Nos. 3, 32, 63, 86, and 97 (4 edition); 107, 113, 147, 166, 174, 177, 179, 180, 182, 183, 190, 192-204, 206-221, 223, 225-235, 237, 239, 240, 242-245, 247-249, 251-255, 257, 259, 262-271, 273, 275-279, 282-290, 292-295, 297-303, 308-310, 312-320, 322-324, 353-380, 382-417, 419-431, 433-471, 473, 475-483 "Greyfriars' Herald," complete set from 1-18.

I. Howard-Jones, Rose, Perranporth, Cornwall, wants "Gem" No. 570. 1s. offered.

G. W. Onslow, 10, Mills Street, Newport Road, Middlesbrough, wants "Boy Without a Name," "School and Sport," "Rivals and Chums," "Mystery Island," 4d. each offered.

R. Daniel, 3, Rubber Park West, Folkestone, wants "Magnets" Nos. 1-460.

William Hillier, 11, Cumming Street, Pentonville Road, Kings Cross, London, N., wants "Magnets" of Christmas 1915 and 1916. 6d. each offered.

J. Warburton, 22, Wilson Street, Warrington, wants back numbers of the "Magnets" or "Gem."

Ralph Smith, 471, Pape Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, wants "Boys' Friend" 4d. Library, "After Lights Out," "Magnets," "Bob Cherry's Barring Out," "Bob Cherry in Search of His Father," "Carried away," and "The Bounder's Guest," and "Magnets" from 1-400, dealing with Vernon Smith, "Gems," "Cardew of the Fourth," and "The Toff."

William A. Sanders, 5, Elizabeth Street, Leicester, wants the "Boys' Friend" Libraries containing "Frank Richards' Schooldays," "Rivals and Chums," and "School and Sport." Must be clean. Has for sale first ten numbers of the "School Friend," and "Young Britain." What offers?

E. Poole, 34, Hampden Road, Beckenham, Kent, wants "Magnets" Nos. 254, 257, 258, and "Bunter the Boyer." Will exchange for 10 recent numbers of the "Magnets" or "Penny Pops."

E. Downs, 70, Downside Road, Stratford, London, E. 15, has for sale back numbers of the "Magnets," 419-590. Also wants red-covered "Magnets."

James Halsey, 20, Westerham Road, Leyton, E. 10, has for sale "Penny Populars," 1-30 (new series); "Magnets," 414-16 20-67-69-70-71-78 80-81-82-83, 455-490, 492-499, 501-3-5-7-8-9-10, and 513-603. All 1d. each.

Leonard Ingham, 39, Harcourt Road, Alexandra Park, Wood Green, London, N. 22, wants any "Magnets" or "Gems" before 300. 2d. each offered.

J. Yeats, 1, Dent Street, Worcester, wants "Magnets" 1-450. Write first.

R. D. Rushworth, Rectory Cottage, Feltwell, near Brandon, Norfolk, wants "Magnets" or "Gems" 1-100. 2d. each offered. Write first.

G. Workman, Extington, near Stonehouse, Glos. has for sale "Gems," 393-600, also "Boys' Friends," 833-880.

A. C. Bulla, 272, Leam Road, Belfast, wants "Viscount Bunter," "The Postal Order Conspiracy," and "In the Seat of the Mighty," 3d. each offered.

A. McCreiff, 54, Polepark Road, Dundee, wants back numbers of the Companion Papers to exchange for camera.

G. Robinson, 32, Westbourne Street, Flessle Road, Hull, wants "Boys' Friend" before 1916. 2d. each offered.

Miss J. Shanks, Byres Loan, Balgonie, Marikine, Fife, has for sale back numbers of the Companion Papers.

D. C. McKay, 294, South York Street, Glasgow, has for sale back numbers of the Companion Papers.

Miss J. Dumaresq, Eales, Duckingfield Park, Berry House, Morpeth, N.S.W., Australia, wants "Rivals and Chums," "The Boy Without a Name," and "Gems" Nos. 364, 369, and 222.

S. Levy, 50, Umberston Street, Commercial Road, London, E., wants "Magnets," 681-581, "Gems," 463-483, and "Nelson Lees," 68-181. Has for sale "Bob Cherry's Barring Out," 4d., and "School and Sport," 6d.

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For Next Wednesday:

The title of our next grand, long, complete tale of the chums of St. Jim's is entitled:

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In which Captain Kidd keeps his end up against his unscrupulous enemies in his characteristically vigorous style.

PAINTING.

A reader at Leyton wants me to do something about painting. I can see that he has rather a bent that way, and I wish him good luck, for a fellow who has what the French dub a penchant for painting can derive any amount of pleasure from the hobby, even though he never gets a canvas for which he is responsible accepted at the Royal Academy. I am not sure that the taste is very wide. I own to the fact that I scarcely ever meet a youngster who has any great love for oil-painting. Black and white is a different thing, of course. It is a capital thing to be able to sketch. I do not mean doing it professionally. A black-and-white artist has to go through the mill, and live for the work. But painting is interesting enough. It is the higher interpretation of the art. The pity is that some people take it up in the most hopeless way. You remember the would-be artist who showed a work to a friend and said he trusted the picture would keep the wolf from the door. "Then why not hang it outside the door. It will frighten off any wolf," said the friend. At least, one calls him a friend, but it was not a friendly remark, all said and done. I should be glad to deal with painting in the Companion Papers if I felt there was a real demand for such a feature. But is there? As Hamlet said the melancholy Prince of Denmark used up nearly all the good quotations you may have observed—That is the question. Painting implies talent, and should carry genius if it is a matter of imaginative painting. Perhaps my Leyton chum has in his mind the business of mural decoration, and general work of that kind.

THE STREET ARTIST.

A fellow one cannot help but admire is the street artist—the genuine variety, the man who designs his own pictures, and then waits for the commendation of the passing public. It is pretty well impossible to go by without subscribing something to the contents of the cloth cap which is waiting for coppers. Of course, there are merchants who just hire a few dubs, and then sit round them; but they are hardly to be considered. It is the man with ability who is a bit down on his

luck who should be supported. A good many artists make a fair income out of doors. I am thinking at the moment of the seaside brand—the delineator who is prodigal of his talent, and who works in sand, knowing well that the tide will obliterate the result of his craft in a few hours. I have seen wonderful pictures in the firm white sand. Short of giving a special column to the subject I can at least offer my best wishes to the artist who dropped me a line. There is nothing finer than for a fellow—outside his work of bread-winning—to possess a hobby which may lead him to success, but will in any case, supply him with many an hour of keen pleasure. Clay-modelling is admirable, the same as ordinary sketching, while the man who can dabble in oils has an interest good enough to last him his life. It is quaint and appealing to think that an old oil painting, however bad in execution, does more to perpetuate a scene or to make an age live again than any photograph. Look at some of the old canvases one sees in the dusk of curio shops. They were painted years, and then more years since, but the thought of the painter is in them still, and also just that little bit of imagination which links us up with every age and every clime. What a host of droll yarns have been told of canvases—the picture, for instance, that was declared to have been painted to please his Majesty King Philip the Second of Spain, who died at the very end of the Sixteenth Century. Well, an inquiring chap bought it, and was doubtful about it, so he scraped off the top layer of paint, and found a portrait of the Duke of Wellington underneath! There you are, aren't you? Old Philip of Spain was a weird and cunning merchant, but he could never have known the Iron Duke, the man who stood four square to all the winds that blew. It is a rare good thing for the peace of mind of Philip that he never did meet Wellington. He might have heard things he did not quite fancy.

FAR CATHAY.

Why not have a Chinese yarn, with Bunter tucking into some of the strange and wonderful viands he finds in the study of the boy from the Flower Land? I see no reason. A Dartford chum thinks this notion would work up well, but I seem to remember something of the kind having been done. You will notice that at Dartford they have not the least sympathy with Bunter and the pains he might be called upon to endure. But there was interest in China as well as a love of fun in the suggestion, and I thank my correspondent for the idea. It is an odd thing how little even now the majority of us know of the immense empire east beyond the Commercial Road and the Surrey Docks—in fact, quite a long way beyond them. China is always interesting, whether or no you study it from a willow-pattern plate with the noble Chinese busy making a wonderful garden out of the wilderness—garden with plenty of flowers, and a cas-

cade and a bridge and all that sort of thing. We might learn a lot more from China in this respect. Give the representative of the Chinese Republic—I called it an empire just now, but it does not signify—a spade and a bit of ground, with a few packets of seeds, and he will perform miracles.

ONE'S COMPANY.

The other day a chum told me that when he could not possibly find a companion for his walks he whistled as he went along, which is all right in its way, though that way is not long enough, to my thinking. It is good to have a friend on a long tramp, nothing better, except on occasion when the mood is on one for being alone for the fact of the matter is one never is really alone. There are many things knocking about the world to act as cheery companions if one will only let them. They say that two's company and three is none; but if the second man is not in the vein it is far better to trudge off alone! Just imagine having to talk if you do not feel inclined! Personally, I can quite understand the fellow who wants to think out some knotty problem going off alone across country. He may be studying chemistry and be puzzled by the effect of certain ingredients when they get into company, and he has to go into the business on his own, for a friend, who had not been following the same branch, would be only a hindrance.

THAT HARDY ANNUAL.

Why not every year? That is the kind of question I get nowadays from friends who think the "Holiday Annual" is just the thing. I am glad of such reminders of what ought, should, would, and might be, for they show that the belief the "Annual" would win hands down in popularity was well founded. And, between you and me, and the dainty little sketch at the top of this page, I should not half wonder if the "Annual" became a regular feature. Well, you see for yourselves that I called it an Annual!

RECOLLECTIONS.

I am much indebted to "A Flapper" for her encouraging words about the "Personal Recollections" which created such a stir. I see quite plainly that there will have to be some more of these remembrances, and in the history of a paper there can never really be any shortage of such impressions. But my girl chum has one little granular, though not more again Mr. Martin Clifford than any other author. "Why," she asks, "do authors always write of girls in such a funny way?" Personally, I did not know it was so. I believe most writers really try and keep level with the amazing variety of girls. That's all!

Your Editor