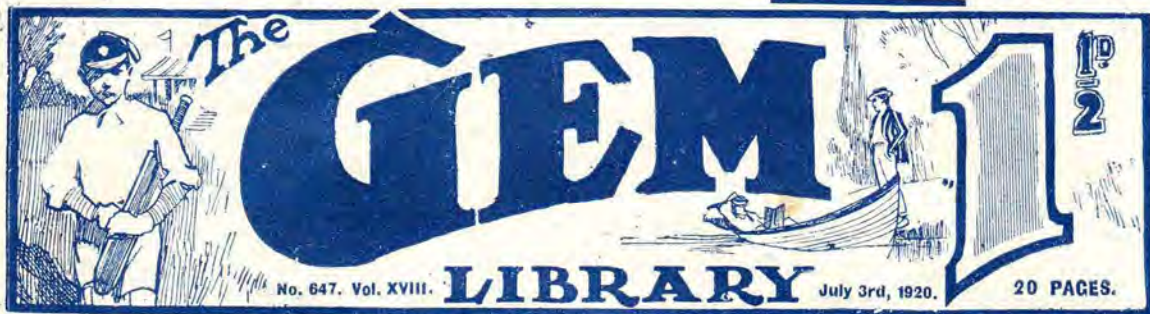


MAKE THE CHUMS OF ST. JIM'S YOUR CHUMS!

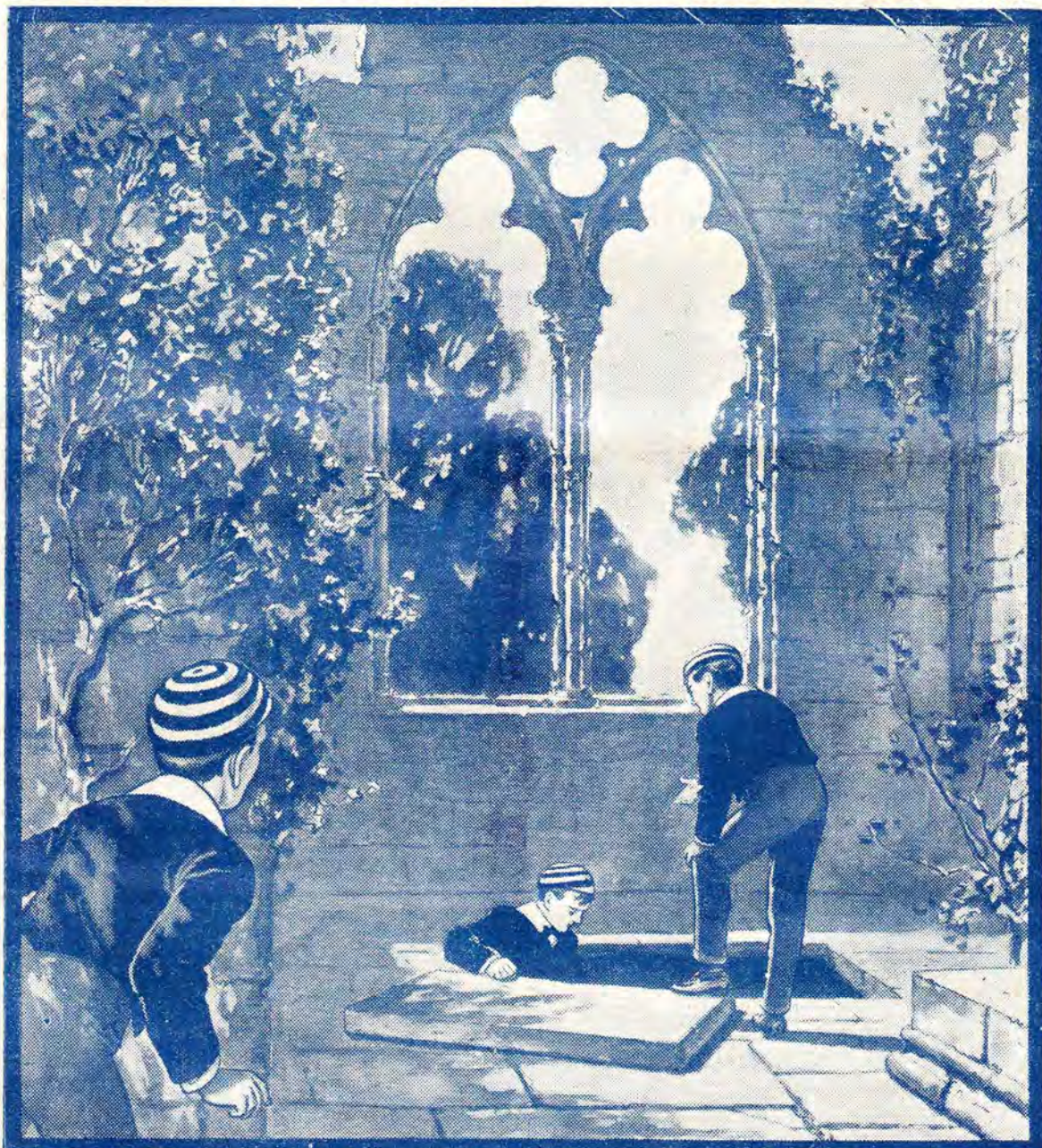
The **GEM** *1*

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"DICK BROOKE'S TRIAL!" & "KIDNAPPED!" IN THIS ISSUE.



THE SILENT WATCHER IN THE RUINED CHAPEL!

(A Thrilling Incident in the Grand School Story in this Number.)

A Chance for You to Win Half-a-Crown! DO NOT MISS IT!



NOTE.—Half-a-crown will be awarded to the sender of every paragraph published on this page.

Aunt's Last Day Out.

A young man resolved to take his aunt to town for a day's holiday. When there his aunt felt tired, and said she would like a rest. The young man saw a notice over a shop, and he asked a stranger what the words meant. "Restaurant," was the reply. "Rest your aunt! The very thing!" said the young fellow. In they went. The aunt and nephew were escorted to a private room, and a man with coat-tails read out a list of foods. The yokel stared. "Well, I never!" he cried. "They give you a rest and eatables, all in!" He ordered beef, plum-pudding, and a bottle of wine for two. But presently the waiter came in with a bill for 15s. 6d. "What's this for?" asked the nephew. But he paid up, with sorrowful looks, vowing it should be aunt's last day out.—James Downie, 28, High Street, Newburgh, Fife, N.B.

A Visit to Cornwall.

I spent a few delightful months in Cornwall once, and visited Helston, Port-hallow, St. Keverne, and many other places. In England I have visited Cornwall, Devon, Wilts, Somerset, Hants, Kent, Leicestershire, Lancashire, and Yorks, and I have also been to France, Italy, Greece, Macedonia, Turkey, Serbia, the Canary Isles, and South Africa, but I reckon that the Pastie County comes first for scenery and hospitality. By the way, I found that Levison was still a bad character in a book I bought the other day. Can this be avoided?—J. H. Williams, Burton Hill, Malmesbury, Wilts.

A Simple Barometer.

Get two bottles—a pickle-bottle and a sauce-bottle—put the neck of the sauce-bottle into the pickle-bottle, and notice how far it goes. Then fill the pickle-bottle with water up to the neck. If it is going to be wet the water rises a little to the neck of the small bottle. If fair, the water sinks.—C. Haddon, 117, Exeter Road, Sherwood Rise, Nottingham.

Only a Snack!

The millionaire had a frugal lunch at an hotel in the country, and then called for his bill. "Four sandwiches, and a glass of cider," said the waiter. "But there is my chauffeur," said the millionaire. "Oh, he's just had a snack, sir,"

said the waiter—"an omelette, grilled trout, lamb cutlets and peas, a half-crown cigar, and a bottle of claret."—F. Broad-bent, 3, North Street, Dewsbury.

The Swanee River.

Here is the origin of a famous song. Just over the bar at the entrance to the Gulf, this river holds its way with a current in places of forty feet a minute. It courses through forests of the best hard pine. The Swanee River has plenty of romance. Its song has won fame all over the world. A French family settled on the banks in the days of King Louis the Fourteenth. They made a plantation, and passed many happy days there. But at last the father and mother died, and only one daughter was left. This lady returned to France, where she wrote the words of the song, using the negro dialect.—David Day, Easter Highgate, Beith, Ayrshire.

John Bull.

The name "John Bull" dates back to Queen Anne. John Arbuthnot, the satirist, wrote "The History of John Bull," which was a gibe at the Duke of Marlborough. The various countries of Europe were represented by the names of animals. France was called Lewis Baboon, and Nicholas Frog stood for Holland. Two famous caricaturists, Gilbray and Rowlandson, depicted John Bull as a portly coachman. The French comic artist showed John Bull with prominent teeth. This is pure invention. In Germany John Bull was given far too much cunning. In Hungary he is a sailor, in Austria a dwarf, in Italy tall and slim.—John H. Hughes, 22, Kirkdale Vale, Liverpool.

Tall!

Some men were arguing together about tall buildings, and at last one of them proposed that the one who told the biggest story should be treated to a dinner. This was agreed. An American won. "Waal," he said, "I kinder sorter guess that I've seen the tallest outfit in the world. It's in New York City, in 167th Street, and, do you know, the top ten miles had to be placed on a hinge to let the moon pass by."—P. Pigg, 10, Stuart Road, Grays, Essex.

A Strange Angler.

The queerest angler in the world is a spider which is found in South Africa. This spider, which is three inches across, stations itself at the edge of the water, with two legs on a pebble and the six others spread out on the water. When, after some minutes, a fish comes under the outstretched legs, the spider at once throws them round it, and then makes a plunge, driving its fangs into its prey, and, climbing out of the water on to the rocks, sets about its meal. Sometimes the captured fish is four times its own weight. You can see this spider in the Durban Museum.—Miss Winnie Perkins, 14, Clevedon Road, Balsall Heath, Birmingham.

Salisbury.

The right name for Salisbury is New Sarum, which was first built in 1220. Old Sarum is three miles away, and is composed of three rings of mounds, with a ditch sixty feet deep between the rings. The inner ring forms the castle. The Ancient Britons lived at Old Sarum. The modern edition of the old city had a Member of Parliament up to the last century. At one time there was only one voter, and he voted for himself. In 1220 Old Sarum was the scene of a grievous struggle between the Church and the soldiers. There is a fine legend about an arrow fixing the site of the cathedral, which took twenty years to build.—Frank Fry, jun., 67, Wain-a-long Road, Salisbury.

The Isle of Man.

Many years ago, before there was an Isle of Man, there lived a giant in Scotland. This giant was full of pride, and considered himself the strongest man on earth, but an Irish giant challenged him. The two met at Lough Neagh. There was a terrific struggle of more rounds than could be counted, and the fight went against the Scottish giant, who swam for his life. As he was swimming, the victor hurled a mass of rock at him, but missed. The lump stuck out of the sea and became Man. Later on, the father of King Lear took up his residence there, owing to the house shortage. Its emblem is three legs, and its motto runs—"Which ever way you throw me I stand."—E. Kerruish, 5, North Shore Road, Ramsey, Isle of Man.

Contributions are invited from readers of the "GEM" for publication on this page. Anything will do, so long as it is interesting, short, and concise—a good joke, a description of a holiday, a bright idea for increasing the popularity of the "Gem," a good anecdote. "Pars" should not be more than three hundred words long—the shorter the better. They can be sent in on a postcard. Address all contributions to The Editor, The "Gem" Library, Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4, and mark them "Readers' Own Corner."



DICK BROOKE'S TRIAL!

A Magnificent Long Complete Story dealing with the Adventures of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's.
By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1. Brooke Refuses.

"**H**OLD on, Brooke!" Jack Blake uttered these words cheerfully, and strode forward to catch Dick Brooke, the day boy of St. Jim's, as the Fourth Form trooped out of the class-room.

It was Wednesday morning, and lessons were over for the day. The sun was shining gloriously from a blue sky, bathing the old, ivy-clad walls of the school in radiance.

The juniors heralded the sun with acclamation, for it was an ideal day for cricket, and, moreover, a Form match was taking place that afternoon between Tom Merry & Co. of the Shell, and Jack Blake & Co. of the Fourth.

Blake linked his arm affectionately in Brooke's, and led him down the Fourth Form passage.

"Got you, old son!" he chuckled. "You're not going home this afternoon. You've got to play cricket for the Fourth, you know."

Dick Brooke's handsome face clouded, and he endeavoured to disengage his arm.

"Hold on, Blake!" he exclaimed. "I have—"

"Well, I am holding on!" responded Jack Blake cheerfully. "You've got to come along with me to Study No. 6, and stay there till dinner-time. We're not giving you a chance to swot this afternoon. Besides, you promised to play in our team, didn't you?"

"Ye-es," said Dick Brooke uneasily. "But—"

Jack Blake looked quickly at him. "But what?" he demanded warmly.

"Don't you want to play?"

"Yes, of course," replied Brooke. "But—"

"Oh, blow your butts!" said the captain of the Fourth breezily. "Only giddy goats butt, you know. Here we are at Study No. 6, and here's old Gussy waiting to welcome you, old son! Herries and Digby are inside, too, simply craving to entertain you. You are to be our guest for this afternoon, you see."

"Yas, wathah!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, as Blake and his unwilling captive came up. "It's wippin' weathah for ewicket, an' we'll play up like anythin' this aftahnoon. Come in,

Bwooke, deah boy, and make yourself at home!"

Blake persuaded Brooke into Study No. 6, where Herries and Digby were waiting. They looked curiously at Brooke's troubled face.

"I'm afraid I shall have to ask you fellows to let me off this afternoon," said the day boy quietly. "I—I have another engagement."

"Bai Jove!"

The chums of the Fourth stared at Dick Brooke in amazement. They could hardly believe their ears.

"You—you've got another engagement!" gasped Blake. "Do you mean to say, Brooke, that you've fixed up something else after promising to play for us this afternoon?"

Dick Brooke bit his lip, and did not reply.

Jack Blake & Co. looked at each other in bewilderment.

Brooke was the only day-boy at St. Jim's. His home was in a snug little cottage on the outskirts of Rylcombe Wood, whither he came every day to the school for lessons, and returned when work was over.

Dick was a scholarship boy, and regarded as something of a "swot." He would often spend his half-holidays at home working. But Dick Brooke was one of the best, and popular among his schoolfellows. Although he had a bent towards "swotting," he was also a good sportsman, and could hold his own with anybody on the athletic field.

When Jack Blake had been making up his team for the Form match, Dick Brooke had willingly assented to stay at St. Jim's and play. But, now the time had come, Brooke was evidently trying to back out of it!

"Look here, Brooke!" said Jack Blake. "This is hardly playing the game, you know. Do you want to go back on your promise?"

Dick Brooke flushed to the roots of his hair.

"No," he said tensely. "I don't want to go back on my promise, but, under the circumstances, I'm afraid I must."

"Gweat Scott!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, regarding Brooke severely through his monocle. "I sincerely twust, deah boy, that you do not intend goin' home to swot?"

Dick Brooke made no reply. "That's it!" said Herries gruffly. "The silly duffer wants to grind Latin or Euclid at home, instead of playing cricket. Blessed if I can understand a fellow always wanting to mug lessons. I, for one, get quite enough in the Form-room. Brooke's a dotty ass!"

Blake looked grim.

"We'll soon knock some of the dottiness out of him!" he said. "Now, look here, Brooke, old chap, will you, or will you not, play for us this afternoon, as you promised?"

"I can't!" said Dick Brooke quietly.

"Why not?"

No reply.

"Are you going home to swot?" demanded Blake.

"N-no," said Brooke, "not exactly."

"Then where are you going?"

Brooke looked uneasy, but he vouchsafed no reply to this.

Jack Blake & Co. looked meaningfully at each other.

"The silly chump!" exclaimed Blake, in exasperation. "Let's bump him, and make him see sense. Nab the boulder!"

"Heah, heah!"

"Yarooogh!" roared Brooke, as the chums of Study No. 6 advanced, grasped him, and bowled him over.

"Leggo, you chumps! I— Yooowp!"

Bump, bump, bump!

The dust rose from the study carpet as Brooke's anatomy smote it violently.

Bump, bump, bump!

"Half-time!" said Blake cheerfully.

"Now, you beggar, will you give in?"

"No!" panted Brooke, glaring up at his Form-fellows. "Let me go, you awful idiots! You don't understand!"

"Don't we!" said Blake. "We understand that we want you to play cricket for us, Brooke, and we also understand that you want to back out of it. Now we're going to make you understand that you can't back out of it—see?"

"No, I don't see!" retorted Brooke.

"Let me get up, and— Yooowp!"

Bump, bump, bump!

Jack Blake & Co. evidently thought that a good bumping was much better than moral persuasion. They bumped the luckless junior well and truly, and the resounding thuds attracted fellows from other studies, who crowded round

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the doorway and gazed upon the scene with great interest.

"Go it, ye cripples!" grinned Ralph Reckness Cardew. "What's Brooke been doin', anyway, Blake?"

"The burbling chump!" said Blake, breathing hard through his nose, and regarding the juniors in the doorway. "He promised to play for us this afternoon, and now says he's made another appointment. We're trying to persuade him to give up his other appointment—that's all!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Brooke struggled out of the grasp of Jack Blake & Co., and jumped to his feet. His face was crimson with wrath, and he looked rather the worse for his bumping. His jacket was rumpled and dusty, his collar burst from its stud, and his necktie half-way round his neck.

"You—you thundering lunatics!" he exclaimed furiously. "Haven't I told you that I'd play if I could? I'd like to, but I simply can't. That's plain enough, isn't it?"

The Fourth-Formers looked curiously at Brooke, who seemed deeply indignant at the rough treatment he had received.

Baggy Trimble, who had wriggled to the front of the crowd at the doorway, suddenly darted forward and pounced upon a letter that had fallen from Brooke's pocket whilst he was being bumped.

"I say, Brooke, you've dropped something!" he cried. "You—Oh crumbs! Mum-my hat!"

Baggy Trimble blinked in great bewilderment at the envelope. Then he opened it and dragged forth the enclosure.

"The Green Man, Tuesday—" he read, and then broke off with a howl of terror, as Brooke darted at him and wrenched the letter from his grasp.

But the fellows in the study could not help seeing the untidy, illiterate scrawl upon the envelope, written in a hand many of them knew well.

"It's from Joliffe, the landlord of the Green Man public-house!" hooted Baggy Trimble. "No wonder Brooke can't stop in this afternoon—he's going pub-haunting at the Green Man!"

An awkward silence settled over the study. Dick Brooke, whose face had gone suddenly white, set his teeth and faced his Form-fellows dauntlessly.

"It's a lie!" he cried. "I am not going to the Green Man. Trimble, you spying little toad!"

"Yah!" hooted Trimble, darting behind Jack Blake for safety. "Don't tell whoppers, Brooke. That letter was from the Green Man, and addressed to you at your home. My word, I didn't know you were such a gay dog, Brooke! He, he, he!"

"Shut up, you worm!" snapped Blake, turning abruptly to Trimble. "Whoever that letter came from, it was none of your business. Brooke, old man—"

"I suppose you think I'm a pretty sort of a rotter," said Dick Brooke bitterly. "You can believe me or believe me not, you fellows, but I tell you—honour bright—that I'm not having any dealings with the Green Man this afternoon, if that's what you suspect."

Jack Blake's heart smote him at once.

"We don't think you're a rotter; we know you're not that sort, Brooke," he said. "But, hang it all, can't you explain why you can't stay and play for us this afternoon? There must be some explanation."

Dick Brooke shook his head, a troubled expression on his handsome face.

"I can't play this afternoon," he said quietly. "I'm sorry, Blake, but I cannot."

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explain why. Let me go now—I'm in a hurry to get home."

The juniors made way for Brooke, and, his face white and set, his hands clenched, he strode from the study. Dark, suspicious looks were cast at him as, with head erect and cap in hand, he walked down the passage. He turned the corner and disappeared, leaving the Fourth Form passage in a buzz of excitement.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, in deep distress. "I weally am in quite a fluttah, deah boys. Bwooke's conduct is vewy stwange, but I am certain he is not goin' to act the wottah this aftahnoon, deah boys."

There was an oppressive silence, broken at length by a giggle from Baggy Trimble.

"He, he, he!" sniggered the Peeping Tom of the Fourth. "Brooke's deep, he is! All these scholarship rotters are shady, you know. He's mixed up with Joliffe and his gang at the Green Man, and—Yow-ow-ow!"

Trimble broke off as Blake's hand descended heavily on his shoulder, and he was spun round.

"You little cad!" exclaimed Blake. "You're going to get what you deserve for spying! Bump him, boys!"

"What-ho!"

Many hands grasped Trimble. He was swept from the floor and bumped upon the carpet with such force that the windows of the study fairly rattled.

"Yarooooogh!" wailed Trimble.

"Stoppit, you beasts. Yooooop! I'll tell Mr. Raiton! I—I—Yarooooogh!"

"There!" panted Blake, flinging Trimble away at last. "Let that teach you to mind your own business. If you spout to any of the prefects about this you'll catch it hot, I promise you that. Boot him down the passage, you fellows!"

Trimble was accordingly booted down the passage, and he escaped at last, howling like a very dervish, and heartily wishing that he had let Dick Brooke's letter alone.

Jack Blake & Co. turned the other fellows away from Study No. 6, and closed the door. In silence they put their books away and oiled their bats. Each was thinking of the mysterious behaviour of Dick Brooke, but neither cared to discuss the subject.

Among the other members of the Fourth, however, dark suspicions were rife. Mellish, the sneak of the Fourth, and Baggy Trimble soon spread the news. Tom Merry & Co. of the Shell heard it in amazement, and wondered what had come over Dick Brooke, a fellow they had always liked and esteemed.

When Mellish told Aubrey Racke and Crooke, the two black sheep of the Shell, they gloried in the news.

"So Brooke's havin' dealings with Joliffe, eh?" grinned Racke. "My hat! What a show-up for the cad it would be if we could only find out what sort of shady business he's up to! He'd get kicked out of St. Jim's in no time, eh?"

"He, he, he!" grinned Mellish. "Good job, too. We don't want scholarship rotters here. Besides, Brooke's always been such a goody-goody; it would serve him right to be shown up in his true colours!"

"Exactly!" grinned Racke, a cunning gleam entering his eyes. "Let's keep our eyes on Brooke this afternoon—we have nothing else of any importance to do. He won't venture near the Green Man after that letter being shown in public, but it's ten to one he'll be seeing Joliffe in Rylcombe Woods somewhere. I'll borrow Manners' camera, and we'll go on a hunt for Brooke this afternoon. If we find the cad in any compromising

situations, we'll photograph him, and thus have evidence to show the other fellows. They wouldn't believe us otherwise."

And thus it was agreed between the rotters' brigade, who had always been down on Dick Brooke; and they looked forward eagerly to finding him out in some dishonourable business, which would lead to his expulsion from St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 2.

Dick Brooke's Secret.

DICK BROOKE'S heart was heavy, and a multitude of depressing thoughts tortured his brain as he turned from the Rylcombe Lane and took the footpath through the woods which would lead him home.

"Oh, if they only knew—if they only knew!" he muttered to himself. "But then, I suppose, they—they wouldn't understand."

He tramped on, and presently reached the clearing in the woods where stood the humble little cottage he called home.

A pretty, sweet-faced girl stood at the wicket gate, waving to Dick as he approached. His face lit up, and there was a glad, tender light in his eyes as he strode up to his sister and kissed her.

"Hallo, Dick!" she said. And then looked in surprise at his dishevelled appearance. "You are later than you said, and—and you are all untidy. What's happened, Dick?"

Dick Brooke forced a laugh in a gallant effort to be cheerful.

"Nothing, sis," he said. "Just a little rag with some of the fellows at the school, that's all. How's dad?"

The girl's pretty face clouded.

"He—he's worse, Dick! The doctor came this morning, and said that dad must not be worried, and a sudden shock might turn his brain or kill him. And—and Joliffe sent Joe Lodgey this morning, to—"

"What!" exclaimed Dick, clenching his fists. "That scoundrel been here, pestering dad?"

"No, Dick," replied his sister quietly. "I met Lodgey outside, and told him he could not see dad, as he was very ill. So Lodgey gave me a message to give him, which I haven't done."

"Yes?" asked Dick eagerly. "What was the message?"

"Joliffe can't wait any longer for the twenty pounds dad still owes him, and must have the money to-night, otherwise it will be a police-court job."

"Oh, my Heaven!"

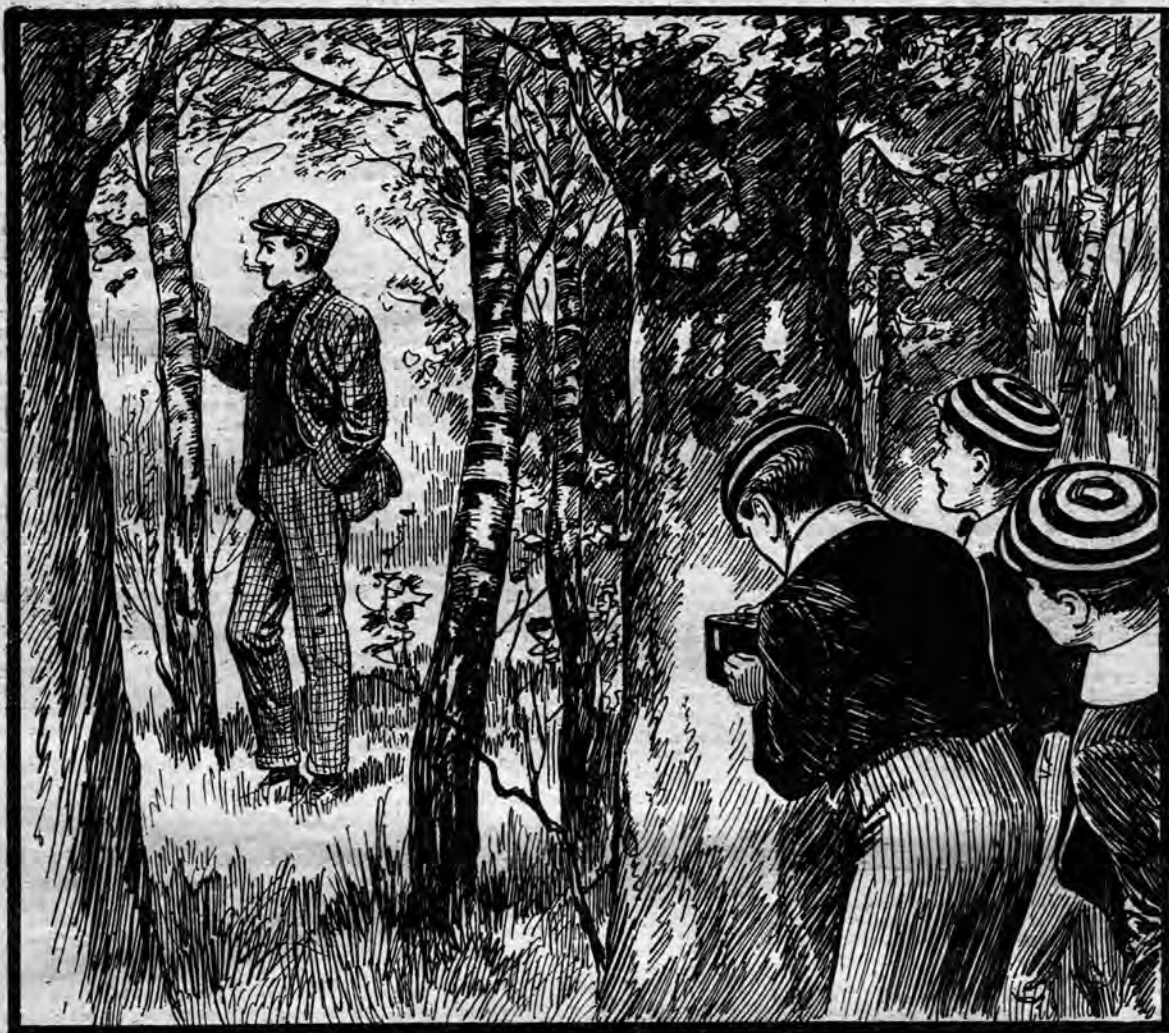
Dick Brooke's face was haggard as he looked at his sister.

"Oh, Dick!" she burst out suddenly. "I wish dad hadn't done it—hadn't gambled his money away, thinking it was for our good!"

Dick nodded dully. His father was the best a fellow could have, but his fatal weakness was for gambling. Not that he always gambled, because his humble means would not allow of that. But lately Mr. Brooke had won a considerable amount of money, and, intoxicated with success, had staked still more until the crash had come, and he was plunged into the clutches of Joliffe.

Mr. Brooke had striven hard to repay the debt, and what with the striving and the worry of it all, his uncertain health had given way. Dick and his sister were now left alone to struggle for their father's sake, to save him from ruin and disgrace.

"Never mind, sis," said Dick bravely. "We've got our cinema pay to draw this afternoon, remember. Acting for the films is easy work, although for me



In spite of his disguise the youth was easily recognisable as Dick Brooke, the day-boy at St. Jim's. "It's him!" ejaculated Racke ungrammatically, blinking through the trees. "And smoking too, by hokey! Here, I must take a photo of him—this is too good to miss!" (See chapter 4.)

it is risky, because if it got known at St. Jim's that I was working for money, I should forfeit my scholarship. But the work pays well, and five pounds a week for spare-time work is handy. Why, with your five pounds, that will make ten. I'll pay that to Joliffe to-night, and perhaps he will be satisfied for another week."

His sister's face brightened. She and Dick were working hard to raise money in order to pay off their father's debt to Joliffe. A film company had commenced operations in the neighbourhood, and they had both obtained spare-time employment. Dick, however, had to preserve his secret, for he would have had to leave St. Jim's if it became known that he was pursuing a paid occupation out of school hours.

Dick and his sister were about to enter the front door of the cottage when a tall, dark man emerged from the wood and came striding over to them.

Dick turned, and recognised Vincent Myers, one of the "stars" in the Tru-life Film Company, for which he worked.

"One moment, Brooke," said Myers, darting a leering look at Dick's sister. "I've come to tell you that the wood scene, which the producer arranged to be rehearsed in the Abbey Woods, can't be done there, and arrangements have

now been made for the rehearsal to take place in Rylcombe Woods this afternoon."

"Oh!" muttered Dick Brooke, a cloud settling on his brow.

Vincent Myers looked curiously at him, and his dark eyes gleamed when he saw the St. Jim's school cap on Dick's head. Nobody in the Tru-life Film Company knew that Dick Brooke was a schoolboy, otherwise he would certainly not have been given employment.

Myers drew a deep breath. He and Brooke had never been friends. Dick had taken an instinctive dislike to him the first time they had met.

"You seem rather upset over the news, laddie," chuckled Myers. "Don't you like the idea of acting so—ahem!—near home?"

Dick flushed.

"It's not my business where we act," he said. "If Mr. Parsons wishes us to be in Rylcombe Wood this afternoon, he may rely upon us being there. What time do we assemble?"

"Three o'clock, at the wooden bridge," replied Myers suavely. Then he turned to Dick's sister, who was standing on the doorstep, and leered at her.

"Well, my little fairy is looking un-

happy, too," he remarked ingratiatingly. "I wonder if I might console her?"

He strode forward, and would have entered the gate, but Dick slammed it, and faced him with flashing eyes.

"My sister would rather not cultivate your acquaintance, Myers, thank you," he said curtly. "We have told you that before, many times. You need not stop. We shall be at the place appointed at three."

Myers' dark, scintillating eyes flashed malevolently at Dick, and he stepped back, biting his lip and scowling.

"Very well, Master High and Mighty!" he said. "I suppose I am not good enough—eh? But we shall see—we shall see. Good-morning!"

And, raising his hat very politely, the handsome film actor turned on his heel and strode away, a peculiar look on his features.

Dick, placed an arm round his sister, and together they went indoors. Dick read the meaning of her anxious looks, and he smiled heroically.

"Cheer up, sis, and don't think of that cad Myers," he said. "If he doesn't stop pestering you with his attentions I'll give him a licking he won't forget in a hurry! There's no need to worry, either, about me being spotted by any

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of the fellows. Most of them will be on the river. Everything will be all right."

But, in spite of his efforts to appear cheerful, Dick was very restless. Film-acting was a perfectly honourable pursuit, but for his secret to be discovered by any of the boys at St. Jim's would spell ruin to Dick's plans and disaster to his whole future. Suppose he were seen by a prefect, or by a fellow like Baggy Trimble or Mellish, who would carry the news back to the masters?

Dick banished that thought from his mind. His father needed help, and, for his sake, he could not dream of backing out now.

CHAPTER 3.

Startling Discoveries!

AUBREY RACKE, CROOKE, and Mellish were on the track.

Directly dinner was over at St. Jim's, Racke had surreptitiously borrowed Manners' camera from Study No. 10, and he and his two disciples had sallied forth into Ryleemhe Woods in search of Dick Brooke.

Brooke's behaviour that morning had been mysterious, to say the least of it, and the black-sheep of the school were determined to sift the matter to the bottom, and probe it to its very roots.

Dick Brooke had always been "up against" them, because they were rotters and he was not. And now, if Racke & Co. could discover that Brooke himself was engaged in nefarious practices and pursuing the path of wickedness, they would have revelled and shouted their discoveries from the housetops.

For half-an-hour they plodded through the woods, silently and stealthily, on the alert to discover Dick Brooke clandestinely meeting some shady character, and photograph him for future reference.

Suddenly, from a small footpath in front of them, a tall, dark man emerged. He stopped short in amazement when he saw Racke & Co. prowling among the undergrowth.

"I say, my lads!" he called. "Who are you looking for?"

Racke & Co. gasped and blinked at the stranger in astonishment.

"Ahem!" coughed Racke. "We're looking for a schoolfellow of ours, that's all."

Vincent Myers lit a cigarette, and regarded them curiously.

"Looking for a schoolfellow—eh?" he asked. "What school do you belong to?"

"St. Jim's," replied Racke readily. "Have you see one of our chaps anywhere in this wood?"

"I might have done," said Myers suavely. "Does his name happen to be Brooke?"

Aubrey Racke & Co. drew deep breaths and their hearts beat wildly. Here was a stranger lurking in the woods who evidently knew Brooke, and this might prove to be a thread for the web which they meant to weave round the unfortunate day boy.

"That's him—Dick Brooke," said Racke swiftly. "Do you know him?"

Myers blew out a dense cloud of cigarette smoke, and smiled.

"I might do—a little," he said. "By the way, is he a—er—regular scholar at your school?"

"No," replied Racke. "He's only a day boy—a scholarship rotter, whose people are as poor as church mice. He's not in our set, you know. A mere outsider, so to speak."

Myers looked hard at Racke, and then burst into a laugh.

"You don't seem very friendly towards

Brooke, my lad," he remarked. "Is it simply because he is a day boy and a scholarship lad?"

Racke growled. "No, not exactly," he replied. "He's a rotter, and mixed up in some shady business, I believe. As a matter of fact, we're tracking him this afternoon, as we have reason to believe that he's keeping bad company. For the—ahem!—honour of St. Jim's we want to find him out, you know. Can you tell me where he is, and what he's up to?"

Myers shook his head. "Have you seen him this afternoon, then?" demanded Racke eagerly.

The film actor shrugged his shoulders. "That's my business, young 'un," he said. "All the same, thanks for the information about Dick Brooke. I hope you bowl him out! Good-afternoon!"

And, chuckling cynically, Vincent Myers strode away, leaving the three amateur detectives gazing after him in deep perplexity.

"Well, this is a rummy go, and no mistake!" gasped Aubrey Racke, turning to his companions. "There's something fishy in the wind, that's certain. Brooke's up to something, and he's up to no good. I don't like the look of that fellow we've just met. Perhaps he's a pub companion of Brooke's."

"That's it," exclaimed Mellish, his thin features breaking into a smile of inspiration. "He's been pub-haunting, and mixing up with shady people who don't know he's a schoolboy. My word, what goes on! If we could only catch the rotter at the game—"

"Come on!" said Racke abruptly. "We'll make our way to Brooke's cottage and see what we can discover there. I'll make out I've ricked my ankle, and gain admittance. I'll make the cad sit up at St. Jim's if I do find anything out!"

And, thus charitably inclined, the three black sheep of St. Jim's tramped on through the woods, emerging at length outside the humble cottage where Dick Brooke lived.

"Hide behind those trees and wait for me," said Racke to Mellish and Crooke. "I shan't be long."

Limping, as though in pain, Aubrey Racke went up to the front door of the cottage and knocked.

He received no reply at first, so he knocked again. At length a window above opened, and the gaunt face of Dick Brooke's father peered out.

"Who is there?" he asked, in a quavering voice. "What do you want?"

Racke, as he looked up, put an expression of suffering upon his face.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, sir," he said respectfully, raising his cap. "I am one of Dick's schoolfellows. I've just ricked my ankle in the wood, and knocked to see if Dick could give me some water and a bandage for it."

An expression of relief crossed Mr. Brooke's careworn features.

"Wait a minute," he said. "I'll come down and let you in."

Five minutes later, the door of the cottage opened, and Racke was admitted by Brooke's father.

Racke glanced curiously at him, and saw the unmistakable signs of worry and suffering on his pallid face. His eyes were dull and sunken, his cheeks hollow and lined with care. Mr. Brooke was a middle-aged man, but now he seemed quite old and haggard.

"Wait in the sitting-room," he said. "I'll get you some water and a bandage. Dick is out."

When Mr. Brooke was gone, Racke stood up in the neat little sitting-room and looked about him. He saw nothing there to excite his suspicion, so he went

farther afield. He opened the door of a room leading off from the sitting-room and peered within. It was Dick Brooke's little work-room, where in the evening he sat and worked.

A school-cap lay on the table, and on a rack on the wall hung an Eton jacket, collar, vest, and trousers.

Aubrey Racke drew a deep breath when he saw these.

"So he changed before he went out!" he muttered. "Wherever the rotter is, then, he's not dressed in school clobber!"

Brooke's father was now returning, so Racke hastily shut the door, and resumed his seat.

Mr. Brooke came into the sitting-room, and set down a basin of water and cotton bandage. His demeanour was furtive and abstracted.

"It's only one of Dick's school chums," Racke heard him mutter to himself. "It's nobody else—yet. Only a schoolboy. He won't hurt!"

Racke's heart thumped wildly when he heard these words, and saw how nervous Mr. Brooke appeared to be. He made a pretence of bathing his ankle, hastily tied it up, then replaced his sock and boot.

"Thank you very much, sir!" he said, rising. "I feel much better now. Can you tell me where to find Dick?"

Mr. Brooke darted at him a quick look of suspicion.

"No, I can't!" he said fiercely. "Dick's out—he's at the school, I expect. He's not here, my boy. I shouldn't look for him. I don't know where he is."

Racke left the cottage, and rejoined his chums in the wood, suffused with excitement. Breathlessly he told them what he had discovered.

"Something's wrong!" he said. "The old boy's worked up to concert-pitch—by what he said. I shouldn't be surprised if he was expecting the police. Now, being in a state of blue funk as he is, it's quite apparent that either he or Dick have been doing something. I reckon it's Dick Brooke, and his pater's jolly anxious about him. Brooke's gone out in disguise, leaving his school clobber indoors. That looks fishy, on the face of it."

"Rather!" agreed Crooke. "Perhaps the old man is on his beam ends, and Brooke has taken to burglary to raise the wind. That chap we met in the woods looked like a gentleman cracksmen, didn't he? And possibly Brooke's in league with him."

Racke nodded, and took up the camera. "We'll hunt the cad down," he said between his teeth as he led the way through the woods again. "Even if we don't find him now, we'll keep an eye on his cottage and cop him when he returns. We'll get him somehow."

The trio of young scamps trudged stealthily through the woods, straining every nerve to catch sight of Dick Brooke, against whom they entertained such grave suspicions.

CHAPTER 4.

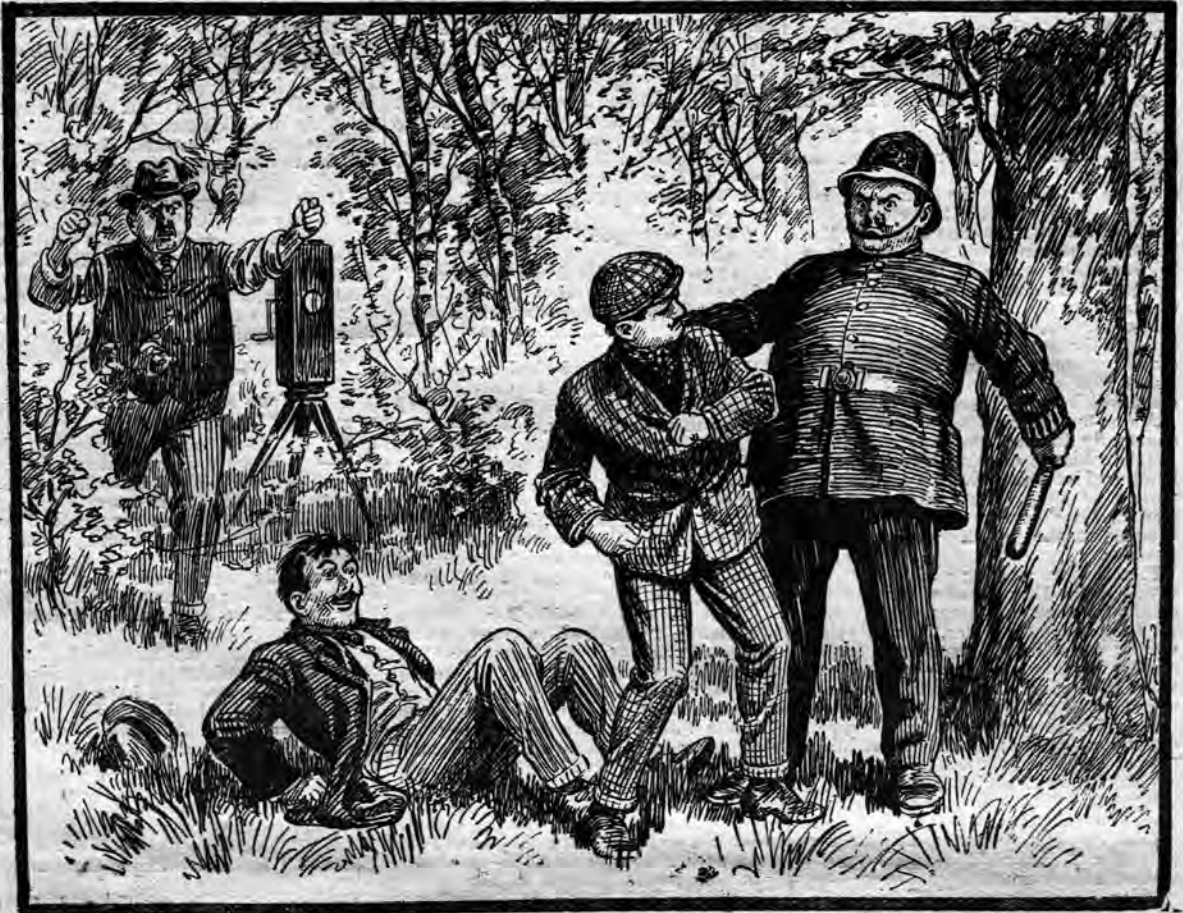
A Horrible Tragedy!

SUDDENLY Mellish stopped short and uttered a warning hiss.

"Shush-sh!" he muttered. "I see him! Look—between those bushes!"

He pointed, and his companions followed the direction indicated.

They gasped with amazement when they beheld a youth, attired in rough tweed garments, with a cap on his head and a muffer round his neck, a small moustache adorning his upper lip, standing in a small glade, calmly smoking a cigarette.



P.-c. Crump, swelling with importance strode up to Dick Brooke, grasped him by the shoulder, and dragged him up. "Hi say, young feller," he rumbled, "I arrest you for the murder of this 'ere man!" Then, to the constable's surprise, the "murdered" man sat up and emitted a deep chuckle. (See chapter 4.)

In spite of the moustache, the youth was easily recognisable as Dick Brooke, the day boy at St. Jim's.

"It's him!" ejaculated Racke ungrammatically, blinking through the trees. "And smoking, by hokey! Here, this is too good to miss! I'll take a photo of him!"

Brooke was looking straight before him, and did not move. Really, he was posing for the cinematograph camera, which was hidden amongst the foliage at the further end of the glade, screened from view to Racke & Co.

Snap!

"Got him!" chuckled Racke. "That's the first picture, and it's a dandy. Now, if we wait, I reckon we'll see something else worth photographing!"

"I—I say!" exclaimed Mellish, peering closely at Brooke. "What's that yellow stuff he's got on his chivvy?"

"Blessed if I know!" said Racke carelessly. "Perhaps it's part of his disguise. Anyway, that fellow is Brooke right enough, and we've caught him properly. Good heavens! He's got a revolver, and is going to attack somebody!"

A well-dressed man, attired in fashionable clothes, smoking a fat cigar, had stepped into view through the trees, and confronted Dick Brooke. Dick Brooke uttered the word "You!" and on the instant whipped out a revolver and covered the man with it.

The stranger stopped, and gazed at the youth in apparent horror and dismay. Snap!

Racke took a second photograph, depicting Brooke holding up the well-dressed stranger with a revolver.

"Good!" chuckled Racke. "Now I think we'll chip in and nab the rotter before— Oh, my hat! Look out, you chaps—the madman's shooting!"

Crack! Crack! went the revolver in Brooke's hands, as the man before him dashed at his throat.

Brooke and his assailant struggled desperately, and meanwhile the revolver spat viciously, inspiring fear into the craven hearts of Aubrey Racke & Co.

Wild-eyed with terror, they dashed through the trees the way they had come, vaguely aware that a man in the distance was shouting something at the top of his voice. So bent on getting out of the revolver's range were they to save their skins, Racke and his two disciples did not catch what the words were. Had they heard them they would probably have realised that it was the cinema producer shouting instructions to the two actors now engaged in a "death struggle" amidst the seclusion of the woods.

Crack! Crack!

The revolver-shots and the voice were distant now, for Racke & Co. had put a considerable distance between themselves and that glade in a remarkably short space of time. When they considered they were safe, they halted breathlessly, and gazed in terror at each other.

"Gug-good heavens!" stuttered Mellish, shivering. "Brooke must be mad! Did you hear that shouting? He must have an accomplice somewhere. Oh dear! We might have caught a bullet from that revolver. I wonder how it will all end!"

"Goodness only knows!" muttered Racke. "Brooke ought to be sent to prison for this!"

"I—I say," said Crooke, his face pallid. "We'd better fetch the police. Brooke may commit murder, you know."

Racke nodded, and together the three scared detectives stumbled through the trees.

At length they reached Rylcombe Lane, and the first person they saw was P.-c. Crump, the village constable.

"Crump!" exclaimed Racke, dashing up to the worthy arm of the law. "There's a horrible tragedy taking place in the wood. A man's struggling for his life, with a chap who's firing a revolver. Go and stop 'em, quick, before murder is committed! Straight up that path—you can't miss it!"

"Ho!" rumbled P.-c. Crump, staring at the three St. Jim's boys in amazement. "Which you young rips is pullin' my leg—"

"We're not—honour bright!" shrieked Mellish. "We've nearly been murdered ourselves! Oh, it was awful!"

P.-c. Crump looked hard at the trio, but it was apparent, even to his sluggish brain, that they were thoroughly frightened. So P.-c. Crump bethought himself to execute his bounden duty, and investigate.

His portly bosom swelling, and claspings his truncheon firmly in his right palm, the Rylcombe village constable sallied forth into the wood in search of the desperate footpad who was firing indiscriminately with a revolver at the law-abiding citizen.

Racke would have followed, but Mellish and Crooke hung back.

"I'm not going!" said Mellish, white to the lips. "Brooke's got a revolver, and when he starts firing at random through the trees I reckon I'd rather be where I am!"

"Same here!" said Crooke. "I don't want a bullet through me, if you do, Racke."

Racke considered the situation, and finally agreed with his two cronies. So they waited in Rylcombe Lane for P.-c. Crump to return—if he ever did return. It was quite probable, Racke & Co. thought, that Brooke would shoot the constable at sight, and make his escape.

P.-c. Crump, meanwhile, was crashing through the trees, and presently, hearing sounds of many voices, and making towards that direction, he came upon a scene which caused his eyes to open wide.

A well-dressed man lay on the ground, apparently lifeless. A youth was bending over him, a smoking revolver in one hand, and with the other he searched the pockets of his prostrate victim. A fat man in his shirt-sleeves stood afar off, howling at the youth who held the revolver.

P.-c. Crump, swelling with importance, strode up to Dick Brooke, grasped him by the shoulder, and dragged him up.

"Hi say, young feller," rumbled the worthy constable, "I arrest you for the murder of this 'ere man—robbery with violence, I calls it. Everythin' you say will be used as evidence against yer!"

Dick Brooke stared at P.-c. Crump in amazement at first, then he burst into a roar of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked the schoolboy film actor. "You've made a slight mistake, Crump! Ha, ha, ha!"

Then, to P.-c. Crump's further surprise, the "murdered" man sat up and emitted a deep chuckle.

"You idiot, constable!" he said. "You'd better run away, or—"

"Wot I says is this 'ere—" began the flabbergasted constable; and then violent hands were laid upon him, and he was dragged back by the fat man in his shirt-sleeves.

"You confounded jackass!" hooted the enraged cinema producer, his florid face red with indignation. "You've spoiled the whole scene—just as we'd got the effect perfect! Oh, you—you—you—"

P.-c. Crump gazed around him with staring eyes, and saw a whole bevy of

men and women emerging from behind the trees, some smiling, others looking indignant.

Dick Brooke grinned good-humouredly. "It's all right, Crump," he said. "There's nothing the matter, really. This is only a film-play. We're acting for the pictures, you know!"

"Ho!" gasped P.-c. Crump. "Well, my 'at! I've been done! Wot I says is this 'ere, them young rascals wot sent me—"

"Who sent you?" demanded Dick Brooke quickly.

"Three young rips from the school!" spluttered P.-c. Crump indignantly. "Which they told me a 'orrible murder was 'ein' committed—the little varmint!"

Dick Brooke's face looked troubled.

"Nice goin's hon, I must say!" growled P.-c. Crump. "Which, if I catches them young rips, I'll—"

The fat producer slipped a silver coin into the constable's horny palm.

P.-c. Crump's face immediately cleared.

"That will be all right, constable—eh?" asked Mr. Parsons, now having regained his good humour. "If you find anybody prowling about here, clear them off, will you?"

"That I will!" said P.-c. Crump heartily.

"Which I'm very much obliged to you, sir. If I sets eyes on them little varmint again, I'll throw 'em out of the wood!"

And, leaving the members of the Truelife Film Company to proceed with their interrupted rehearsal, P.-c. Crump rolled laboriously away.

He came upon Racke, Crooke, and Mellish ten minutes later in the Rylcombe Lane. These youths seemed quite disappointed when they saw P.-c. Crump without a prisoner.

In response to Racke's inquiry as to whether he had found the murderer, P.-c. Crump emitted a roar like that of an infuriated bull, and charged upon the trio of amateur detectives.

Racke & Co. scattered, and beat a hasty retreat down the Rylcombe Lane. They saw no reason for P.-c. Crump's warlike attitude. They did not know that they had set him upon the track of a mare's nest, and that the "murder" was a snare and a delusion.

They made one or two unsuccessful attempts to regain the footpath leading into the woods, but P.-c. Crump planted

himself there, and steadfastly refused to let them by.

Racke & Co. gave it up at last, deeming it useless to enter the woods again, even if the village constable allowed them. By this time Dick Brooke had probably made his escape.

"Never mind," growled Racke, as he and his companions made their way back to St. Jim's. "We have sufficient evidence in this camera to prove the cad's guilt! My word, we'll hold Dick Brooke in the hollow of our hand after this! We know enough now to get him kicked out of St. Jim's—eh, what?"

And, comforted by this thought, the three black sheep of St. Jim's wended their footsteps homewards.

CHAPTER 5.

Tom Merry Chips In!

"LICKED, by gum!"

Jack Blake spoke these words dolefully as he and his chums strolled off Little Side, their bats tucked under their arms.

The Form-match was over, and Tom Merry & Co. had beaten them by twenty-five runs.

"It's jolly hard luck, bai Jove!" observed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy ruefully. "If we had had a stwongah side—"

Blake gave an emphatic short.

"If Brooke hadn't played the giddy ox, and played for us, we'd have pulled off a victory!" he added savagely. "He might have scored the odd twenty-six runs, whereas young Mulvaney got bowled for a duck's-egg. Oh, I—I could scrag Dick Brooke!"

Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther came up, looking very cheerful. The Terrible Three were feeling considerably "bucked" by their victory that afternoon.

"Cheer up, old sons!" said Tom Merry, slapping Blake so heartily on the back that the Fourth-Former gasped. "Better luck next time, you know. There's no need to grouse."

"Who's grouching?" demanded Blake. "I was just remarking, Tom Merry, that if Brooke had played for us this afternoon, you might not be looking so jolly cheerful as you are now."

Tom Merry nodded thoughtfully. "Brooke's a good man, certainly," he said. "It's jolly queer where he hopped off to this afternoon, isn't it? I'm blessed if I understand it at all. Brooke's as straight as a die, but—"

"Oh, ring off, Tommy!" said Blake, with a manful effort to be more cheerful. "He's a silly, swotty-ass, that's all. Next time we play you, the laugh will be on the other side—mark my words!"

"Rats!" responded the captain of the Shell warmly. "But I say, we've a jolly good spread waiting up in our study, you fellows. Would you care to join us at tea?"

The faces of Jack Blake & Co. brightened considerably.

"Like a shot, old son!" replied Blake. "Your offer is as welcome as the flowers in May. Gussy's pater has been rather backward with his tips lately, and we're all on the rocks. Blessed if I'd stand it, if I was Gussy!"

"Weally, Blake, you fwabjous chump, I—"

"Oh, stop jawing!" grinned Monty Lowther. "Trot along upstairs, old sons, and help us get tea ready!"

The chums of the Lower School went indoors and ascended to the Shell passage. At the door of Study No. 10 they halted, and were surprised to hear sounds of a scuffle within.

"My hat!" exclaimed Monty

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Lowther. "There's somebody in our den, Tommy. Don't let the beggar out!"

Tom Merry & Co. crowded round the doorway, and Tom Merry opened the door. They beheld Mellish inside the study, standing by the table, a scared look on his pasty features.

"Mellish!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "What the thump are you doing in here?"

"I—I—I—" stammered Mellish, in confusion.

Manners emitted a roar of anger and indignation as he saw that the top of his desk was open.

"He's been nosing in my desk!" roared the amateur photographer of St. Jim's, striding over to his desk and peering inside. "Why, he—he's pinched a packet of developer!"

The juniors looked curiously at the sneak of the Fourth.

Mellish smiled a sickly smile, and fidgeted uneasily.

"Ye-es, I came for some developer, Manners," he said. "Racke sent me. He's got some plates to develop, and didn't want to run down to the village for developing-mixture. He—he'll pay you for it."

"Yes, and I'll pay him!" Manners said grimly. "Photography is not much in Racke's line, is it? Smoking and banker are more his mark. Whose camera did he use?"

"Ahem!" coughed Mellish. "I—I believe—"

"Mine!" exclaimed Manners suddenly, looking in his desk and discovering that his camera was missing. "Why, the—the cheeky swab! He's pinched my camera! Goodness knows whether he's busted it or not! Oh, I—I—I'll murder him! I—"

"Hold on, old son!" interposed Tom Merry, laying a restraining hand on his excited chum's arm. "Let's inquire into this. It's not usual for Racke to spend an afternoon taking photographs unless he had some axe to grind. Look here, Mellish, what's Racke's little game? Do you know?"

Mellish smiled knowingly. He was a sneak and a scandalmonger, and could not keep a secret long.

"Racke and Crooke and I have been foxing Brooke this afternoon," said the sneak of the Fourth, with an air of importance. "And, my word, we've made some startling discoveries, I can tell you! He, he, he!"

The other juniors gazed at Mellish in amazement.

"You—you've been foxing Brooke this afternoon?" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Why, you—you rotter, what the dickens for?"

Mellish chuckled.

"Racke had his suspicions that Brooke was up to something shady," he replied, "so we borrowed Manners' camera and went out in search of him this afternoon—to track him, you know. He had a letter from the Green Man, you remember, and we thought, perhaps, we'd catch him keeping an appointment with Joliffe, and show him up! He, he, he!"

Tom Merry & Co. looked scornfully at Mellish. That youth, revelling in the sensational news he was about to break, did not notice the dark looks cast at him, and went on gleefully.

"We caught Brooke red-handed—right in the act of holding up a man in the woods with a revolver!"

Tom Merry & Co. jumped convulsively.

"Wha-a-at?" gasped Blake. "You—you saw Brooke—with a revolver—holding up a man in the woods?"

"What-ho!" chortled Mellish, with re-

lish. "He was disguised in old tweed clobber, wore a false moustache, and was smoking. But we saw him and recognised him all right, and we photographed him. He, he, he!"

Blake tapped his forehead significantly.

"Dotty!" he said. "It must be the heat affected his brain, I suppose. Go and have a lie down, Mellish. You might feel better afterwards."

Mellish glowered at Blake.

"D'ye think I'm telling lies, you idiot?" he demanded. "I tell you we caught Brooke holding a man up with a revolver. He fired the awful thing, too, and if we hadn't bunked, we'd have been shot. Honest injun, you fellows!"

Silence settled on the study. Tom Merry & Co. looked first at each other, and then at Mellish bewilderedly. They could hardly believe Mellish, for he was noted for his "whoppers." And yet—

"It—it can't be true!" exclaimed Tom Merry savagely. "You're suffering from delusions, Mellish. It couldn't have been Brooke—"

"I tell you it was!" hooted Mellish. "You set of Doubting Thomases, wait till those photographs are developed. Seeing's believing, you know! Then, my word, Brooke will be shown up properly. He's always been such a goody-goody, and now he'll be shown up in his true colours. He'll be kicked out of St. Jim's, that's a cert! He, he, he!"

"And you're going to be kicked out of this study!" said Tom Merry, grimly, advancing upon Mellish. "You spying little toad, Brooke's true blue, and I won't believe otherwise. Boot him out, you fellows, then we'll go along and interview Racke!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Mellish was grasped in many hands, wriggling and struggling desperately. His body rose and fell upon the hard floor many times, with a series of loud bumps, accompanied by fiendish howls from the luckless sneak. When the bumping was over, Tom Merry & Co. hurled Mellish through the study door and kicked him down the passage.

Then they turned towards Study No. 7, the room occupied by Aubrey Racke and his precious companion Crooke.

Without the preliminary ceremony of knocking, Tom Merry kicked the door open, and he and his chums went inside.

Racke and Crooke were indulging in the luxury of a cigarette. They looked up in alarm when Tom Merry & Co. came in.

"What the deuce do you want?" demanded Racke uneasily. "If you've come for your camera, Manners—"

"Yes, I have!" exclaimed Manners hotly. "I'll smash you, you cad, for borrowing it without my permission!"

Tom Merry held his chum back from hurling himself upon Racke and committing instant assault and battery.

"Look here, Racke," he said curtly, "what's this yarn that Mellish has been telling us about Brooke? Is it true you tracked him in the Rylecombe Woods this afternoon, and—"

"And caught him workin' the footpad stunt—correct!" sneered Racke. "The cad was disguised, and wore a false moustache, but we easily recognised him, and what's more, took a couple of photos of him that will bear our statements out, I reckon. When they are developed and printed—well, I reckon Brooke won't stay long at St. Jim's after that!"

Tom Merry clenched his fists hard.

"You spying cads!" he exclaimed furiously. "I don't care what you say, I don't believe Brooke is a rotter—not half such a rotter as you, Racke! And as for those photos, they're not going to be developed."

"Eh?"

"You'll kindly hand 'em over to me," said Tom Merry grimly. "I'll nip your precious little game in the bud, Racke. Where's that camera?"

Aubrey Racke scowled, and there was a curious gleam in his eyes as he reached down and picked up Manners' borrowed camera.

Tom Merry took the camera and deliberately opened the back. He withdrew half a dozen metal sheaths, in which reposed glass plates. The plates, immediately the light reached them, turned yellow, and became utterly useless.

"There!" said Tom Merry grimly. "The plates are done in now, and you can develop 'em as much as you like, Racke. Whatever Dick Brooke was up to this afternoon, you'll have no proof, anyhow. And now, you rotters, we're going to give you a jolly good ragging for prying into another fellow's business!"

"What-ho!" said Jack Blake heartily. "Rag the cads bald-headed, chaps!"

Racke and Crooke jumped to their feet in alarm as Tom Merry & Co., pushing back their cuffs, advanced upon them. They made a bolt for the door, but found escape impossible. Tom Merry & Co. grasped them, whirled them back, and proceeded to rag them unmercifully.

Soot was shovelled down from the chimney and plastered all over their heads and faces. A jar of pickles and a pot of liquid glue were taken from the study cupboard and the contents emptied down their necks. A packet of cigarettes fell from Racke's pocket, and Monty Lowther quickly seized upon them. He stuffed them into the mouths of Racke and Crooke, and forced those unhappy youths to chew them whole. Then, after having bumped them severely, Tom Merry & Co. left the two rotters spluttering and breathing all manner of dire threats.

Tom Merry's face was grim as, with his companions, he slammed the door of Study No. 7 and walked down to his own room.

"If those cads persecute old Brooke any more, they'll catch it hotter!" he said. "Brooke's all right, and I believe he's straight, in spite of what they say."

"Ye-es," said Herries. "But I say, you chaps, I wonder what the explanation is? There—there must be something in what those rotters say. They wouldn't have the nerve to make up lies like that!"

Tom Merry bit his lip and frowned.

"I don't know, and I can't imagine what it all means," he said quietly.

"But, before the yarn is spread all over St. Jim's, and Brooke has been given a black character, I'd better see him. As soon as tea is over I'll run over to his place and have a word with him. It's the best way, I think."

The chums of the School House nodded. They were very thoughtful and subdued over the tea-table, wondering whether Racke & Co. had any grounds for their suspicions against Dick Brooke.

CHAPTER 6.

Dick Brooke's Dilemma.

IN the little cottage on the outskirts of Rylcombe Wood Dick Brooke and his father and sister were seated.

Dick had removed the yellow preparation from his face, which gave it the right tint for film-work, and had taken off his cinema apparel. Work was over for the day, and he and his sister had returned home, each with five pounds.

A great surprise had awaited them on arriving home. An envelope had been pushed through the letterbox, and, on opening it, Dick was amazed to find two

five-pound notes, enclosed within a piece of paper on which were written these words:

"From a Friend."

Mr. Brooke's wan face had lit up with happiness at the sight of the two rustling notes. Those, with the ten pounds which Dick and his sister had earned by their cinema acting, would pay off his debt to Joliffe.

But Dick Brooke was dubious.

"I—I can't make it out," he muttered. "Who could have known that—that we wanted this money? Surely it couldn't have been a St. Jim's fellow, although somebody called this afternoon. It's a pity, dad, you can't remember what he looked like, for I might know him. It's jolly mysterious."

"It's a turn of the wheel of fortune, Dick," said his father brokenly. "Whoever sent it has my blessing. It will mean that I shall be able to pay Joliffe the money I owe him, and then be out of his clutches—he can persecute me no more. And he won't have the opportunity again, believe me, Dick. I'm finished with gambling after this. I've learned my lesson only too well."

Dick looked uneasily at his father, and then at his sister.

"Dick," she faltered, looking at him with appeal in her large eyes, "you won't—won't refuse it, will you? Somebody has given it to us, and when you find out who it is you can pay the money back afterwards. Remember, Joliffe won't wait after to-night. He must be paid this evening."

"Yes, Dick, my boy," said Mr. Brooke eagerly. "You'll take it down to him now? It is almost dark, and none of your schoolfellows would see you."

Dick Brooke rose from the table and placed the notes in his breast-pocket.

"Yes, dad, I'll take the money and pay Joliffe now," he said, smiling bravely, and reaching for his cap.

Dick's heart, however, was full of foreboding as he left the cottage and took the path through the wood which would lead him out to the Green Man public-house.

Who this unknown benefactor was he could not imagine, but for his father's sake he dare not refuse the money. Joliffe must be paid immediately, otherwise disgrace and ruin would fall on Dick's father and on his family. It would mean Dick leaving St. Jim's with the burden of shame upon him.

Dick looked furtively round him as, emerging from the wood, he came upon the Green Man public-house. Trees and bushes loomed all round, looking gaunt and mysterious in the gathering dusk.

Suddenly he gave a start as a figure stepped out from the shadows and approached him.

"Brooke!" It was Tom Merry's voice. "Brooke, old man, where are you going?"

Brooke stood still, and stared at the captain of the Shell like one in a dream. He did not utter a word.

Tom grasped his arm, and drew him into the shadow of some trees.

"Brooke, what is the matter?" he asked, grave concern in his voice.

Dick Brooke panted.

"Nothing—nothing!" he stammered. "You have been following me, Tom Merry? You—"

"No, I saw you accidentally," replied Tom Merry quietly, peering anxiously into his schoolfellow's white, stricken face. "I was on my way to your place to see you, but—"

"Let me go!" muttered Brooke hoarsely, struggling to disengage his

arm from Tom Merry's grip. "Let me go, Tom Merry—I must go!"

"Dick! You—you're not going inside the Green Man?"

"Yes, yes, I—I must!" muttered the day boy miserably. "Tom, I'm sorry I cannot explain. Believe me, I'm doing nothing wrong. Please let me go!"

He wrenched his arm free, and before Tom Merry could stop him he was speeding across the lane to the little gate which gave entrance to the back parlour of the public-house.

Tom Merry strode forward, his arms outstretched, and would have followed Brooke, but it was too late. Dick was already entering the side door of the public-house.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Tom Merry, pausing in the shadow, and passing a hand bewilderedly across his brow. "What's the matter with Brooke? I—I— Oh, there must be some explanation. He's not a rotter, I know that. I'll wait for him, and when he comes out he—he'll have to explain!"

Meanwhile, inside the back parlour of the Green Man public-house Dick Brooke stood confronted by Joliffe, the landlord, and Joe Lodgey, his rascally confederate and hanger-on.

The room reeked with the smell of spirits and tobacco. Both Joliffe and Lodgey were smoking cigars, the aroma of which was strong and penetrating to the schoolboy's nostrils.

"Well, my buck," said Joliffe, leering at Dick, whose handsome face was pale. "Have you come to stump up your father's debt?"

"Yes," replied Dick quietly. "Twenty pounds is the amount, I believe."

"That's correct!" chuckled Joliffe. "Plank down the rhino, my lad, and all will be well!"

The St. Jim's junior withdrew two five-pound notes from his pocket, together with ten Treasury notes for one pound each.

These he laid on the stained table, and Joliffe seized upon them quickly with a huge, grimy paw.

A cunning leer crossed the innkeeper's face as he examined the five-pound notes.

"See here, young shaver," he said, turning abruptly on Dick. "You don't palm these 'ere notes off on me. They've been stolen!"

Dick Brooke fell back as if he had been struck.

"Stolen?" he cried. "Impossible! I did not steal them!"

Joliffe uttered a scoffing laugh and turned to Lodgey, who was grinning evilly.

"Joe," he said, "call in the cinema gent, will you? Not the fat bloke, but the dark one!"

Joe Lodgey left the room, and next minute returned, followed by Vincent Myers, whose dark eyes glinted at the sight of Dick Brooke.

"See these 'ere notes?" asked Joliffe, waving the two five-pound notes towards Myers. "Look at 'em, Myers, and tell me what you think about 'em!"

Myers took the notes, and looked critically at them. Suddenly he emitted a swift whistle of surprise.

"These are stolen notes!" he exclaimed. "They were stolen from the coat-pocket of Mr. Parsons, our producer, this afternoon in Rylcombe Wood. He took his coat off and hung it on a tree. When the members of the company had been paid their salaries, and most of them had gone home, Mr. Parsons put his coat on again, and discovered that two five-pound notes were missing from his breast-pocket. He circulated the numbers—I remember them.

And these are the missing notes. Where did you get them from, Joliffe?"

The landlord of the Green Man indicated Dick Brooke with a dirty thumb.

"Master Brooke tried to palm 'em off on me!" he said. "Good job your Mr. Parsons happens to be in the 'ouse to-night, and gave me the numbers of them notes. I recognised 'em as soon as that young whelp gave 'em to me. I reckon this does for you, Master Brooke—eh? You're properly copped, ain't yer?"

Dick Brooke clenched his fists hard, and his heart thumped wildly.

"I didn't steal those notes!" he exclaimed furiously. "I know nothing about them. I—"

Vincent Myers interrupted him with a sneering laugh, whilst Joliffe, puffing deeply at his evil-smelling cigar, showed his yellow teeth in a sardonic grin.

"Where did you get those notes from, young Brooke?" he demanded coolly.

"I—I—I—," stammered Dick. "They were left at my home this afternoon—I don't know by whom. I presumed a friend who knew of our trouble left the money anonymously. I swear before Heaven I did not steal them!"

"Haw, haw, haw!" scoffed Joliffe. "A likely story—eh, Myers?"

Vincent Myers nodded.

"He's the thief, right enough," he said. "He belongs to our company, and it was only by accident to-day that I found out he is only a school kid. He had plenty of opportunity to steal the notes from Parsons' pocket, and being in—ahem!—difficulties as he is, it would be just the thing he would do, under the circumstances."

Dick Brooke strode quickly forward, breathing hard, his fists tightly clenched.

"You unspeakable cad, Myers!" he cried in ringing tones. "You dare accuse me of picking Mr. Parsons' pocket! I—"

"Haw, haw, haw!" chortled Joe Lodgey. "Strikes me, guv'nor, this kid's as big a blackguard as 'is father!"

"What—what?" panted Dick, turning fiercely on Lodgey. "You call my father a blackguard! Why, you hound, I'll smash you! I—"

He dashed at the evil-visaged ruffian, goaded to fury by the cruel taunt against his father. Lodgey, with a yell of fear, darted round the table, and next minute Dick was grasped by Myers and Joliffe, struggling fiercely.

"Let me go—let me get at the cad!" panted the St. Jim's junior. "I'll smash him—"

"Steady, sonny!" grinned Joliffe, gripping the schoolboy firmly. "You can't resort to violence 'ere, you know. I might inform you that Mr. Parsons is in the billiard-room at this moment, and if I liked to call 'im in you could be locked up within 'alf an hour!"

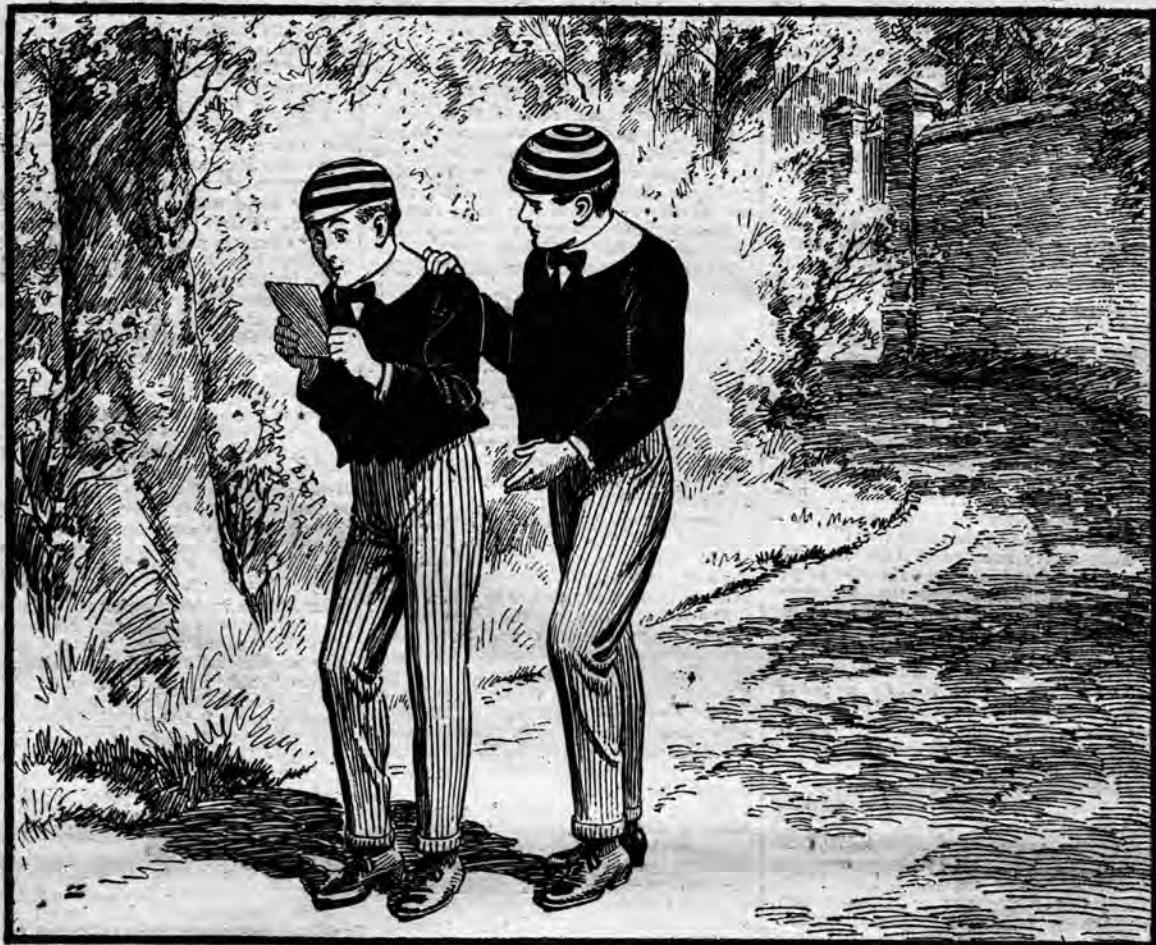
Dick's face went haggard, and he looked desperately around him.

"I did not steal the notes, I tell you!" he cried. "They've been planted on me by the real thief! It's a trick, a cruel trick—"

Myers chuckled, and, releasing his grip on Dick, turned round to face him.

"Now, look here, young Brooke," he said coolly, lighting a cigarette. "I've got a proposition to make to you. Between us, Joliffe and I know enough to send both you and your father to gaol. A word from me and you'd be locked up for picking our producer's pocket this afternoon. Also, as you are a scholarship boy at St. Jim's, a word in the right quarter would get you kicked out of the school for taking employment, wouldn't it?"

Dick ground his teeth, but did not reply.



"Look at the photo very closely!" said Tom Merry. "Can you see anything wonderful?" Dick looked wonderingly. Then suddenly his eyes opened wide, and he emitted a swift whistle of surprise. "Good heavens! It's Myers himself—picking Mr. Parsons' pocket!" (See chapter 8.)

"So, you see," went on Myers, "you're in a pretty pickle, one way and another. But I'm going to give you a chance to get out of it. It will be easy, and not at all risky. If you do as I ask nothing will be said about the stolen money. I'll see that Parsons gets it back all right. I will also keep my mouth shut about you being a schoolboy, and, moreover, Joliffe will cancel your father's debt—eh, Joliffe?"

"Quite so!" assented Joliffe, with a chuckle.

Dick Brooke looked bewilderedly, first at Joliffe, then at Myers.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked tensely.

"Just get me a specimen of your headmaster's signature, that's all!" replied Myers carelessly. "That will be simple enough—eh?"

Dick Brooke drew a deep breath.

"Why do you want Dr. Holmes' signature, you rascals?" he demanded. "What's your game?"

"That's our business!" replied Myers. "All you have to do is to obtain us a specimen of your headmaster's signature, see? Never mind what our game is. If you just do as I ask all this trouble of yours will blow over. If not—well, you can guess the consequences!"

The unhappy schoolboy's face went ashen pale, and he breathed heavily as a multitude of torturing thoughts raced through his brain.

"You—you want my headmaster's

signature?" he muttered, at length. "I can guess why. You're going to forge his signature to a cheque, and rob him. You confounded villains!"

"Hark at the pretty names he's calling us!" grinned Joliffe. "I wonder whether he intends to agree to our terms?"

"He'll have to!" snarled Myers savagely. "Unless he'd rather put himself and his father in prison."

Dick Brooke groaned in the depth of his misery.

"I—I can't do it!" he cried brokenly. "I dare not be a traitor to my school! I cannot—I cannot!"

"I guess you'll have to!" growled Myers. "Now, young Brooke, you've got to decide at once. Which is it to be? Shall I call Parsons in, and have him give you in charge for pocket-picking, or will you consent to get us that signature?"

Brooke's face was white and strained as he looked at Myers.

"I dare not refuse, you rascal," he said, "although I am innocent of what you accuse me of. Give me until to-morrow. I'll try and get the signature for you."

"Well and good!" said Joliffe heartily. "You'd better not attempt to trick us, Master Brooke, or you'll find yourself in Queer Street mighty quick, I can tell you!"

"All right!" said the St. Jim's junior dully. "Give me a receipt for the ten pounds, and let me go!"

Joliffe cheerfully did as Dick asked him, and then he and his two rascally companions drew aside, grinning sardonically as, with head bent and teeth clenched, Dick Brooke strode out of the door and stumbled into the night.

The cool, sweet air from the woods and the river cleared his brain somewhat, but even then he seemed dazed and bewildered as he walked out of the garden and gained the road.

Suddenly he became aware of a strong grip laid on his arm, and a familiar voice spoke his name.

"Dick!" whispered Tom Merry, drawing his schoolfellow into the shadow of some trees. "Dick, old chap, something terrible is the matter. What is it?"

Dick Brooke raised a white, troubled face to Tom's, and stared at him with haggard eyes.

"Tom," he muttered brokenly, "I—I don't know what to do. My brain is all in a whirl. I dare not do as they ask and yet—I dare not refuse! Oh, Heaven!"

The unhappy schoolboy, overwhelmed with his misery, staggered and might have fallen had not Tom Merry placed a strong arm round him.

"Don't give way, old chap," said Tom anxiously. "What's the matter, Dick? It isn't that I want to pry into your affairs, but—but you're in some terrible fix, and I—I want to help you, if I can."

Dick Brooke shook his head dully.

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"You can't help me, Tom, I'm afraid," he said. "But I—I'll tell you. It will be some relief to have somebody know. My father owes that villain Joliffe some money, and in order to raise enough to pay off the debt I have been working in my spare time for a cinema company—acting, you know."

"My hat!" breathed Tom Merry, a new light dawning on him.

"We were acting this afternoon in Rylcombe Wood," pursued Dick Brooke quietly. "When I arrived home, somebody signing himself 'A Friend' had left two five-pound-notes at my place, and, thinking that it was all right, I—I took the money down to Joliffe to-night to pay him off. But now he tells me that the notes were stolen from the coat-pocket of Mr. Parsons, our producer, this afternoon. I have no proof that I didn't take them, and—and they threaten me with exposure unless I obtain for them a specimen of the Head's signature by to-morrow. What can I do? For father's sake I dare not refuse them. The shame, the disgrace would kill dad, if those rascals do as they threaten!"

Tom Merry listened to Dick Brooke's story in amazed silence. He was beginning to see light through the dark cloud of suspicion cast round Brooke by Aubrey Racke & Co.

"Poor old man!" he muttered, at length. "You're in a bad way, and no mistake. Of course, it's all a put-up job. Those notes were foisted upon you by the real thief so that you could be falsely accused, or frightened into doing as Joliffe asks."

Dick nodded his head miserably.

"Myers, the fellow who is working hand-in-glove with Joliffe, may have taken the money for all I know," he muttered. "He's always been down on me, and he's a rotter, I know! Oh, Tom, I've either got to go to prison, and let my father go to prison as well, or else play traitor to St. Jim's, and be a party to robbing the Head!"

Tom Merry's teeth came together with a click.

"You won't do that, Dick," he said grimly. "I'll see to that!"

Dick Brooke was silent.

"Dick, old man," said Tom Merry, gripping the Fourth-Former's arm, "something must happen to get you out of this scrape. You cannot be punished for what you didn't do. Anyway, you're all right until to-morrow, so cut off home now, and don't worry. I'll see you again to-morrow at St. Jim's. But cheer up, old chap. I'm sure everything will come out all right. You won't act the traitor to St. Jim's, will you?"

Dick Brooke shook his head.

"No, Tom," he muttered slowly; "I—I could not! But—"

"Think no more about it till to-morrow, if you can," said Tom Merry, with an effort to be cheerful. "I'll see what I can do, Dick. Rely on me."

The two chums gripped hands; then, with a muttered word of thanks, Dick Brooke strode away into the wood, to make his way homeward.

Tom Merry's face was stern and set as he turned again towards St. Jim's.

"Poor old Brooke!" he murmured, in deep concern. "He's got a nice set of villains against him, and things look pretty black. But it will come out all right, I'm certain. Something generally turns up at the last moment. Brooke and his pater sha'n't suffer, not if I can help it."

And, cudgelling his brains to think of some means of helping Dick Brooke out of his terrible predicament, the loyal

captain of the Shell walked up the Rylcombe Lane, back to St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 7. Unexpected Developments!

TOM MERRY arrived at St. Jim's just as Taggles was about to lock the gates. Duak had now gathered over the countryside, and the massive pile of St. Jim's stood out gaunt and majestic in the gloom.

Tom walked across the darkened Close towards the School House.

Suddenly he paused and peered before him.

Walking swiftly beneath the old elms in the Close he could discern three shadowy figures, easily recognisable as Racke, Crooke, and Mellish. Each carried a small parcel.

"My hat!" muttered Tom Merry, in amazement. "Racke & Co., by Jove! I wonder what the rotters are up to?"

Racke and his confederates had evidently a bent purpose, for they made straight towards the cloisters.

Tom Merry, wondering what further mischief was afoot, determined to follow them. So, keeping well within the shadow, he crept after Racke & Co., and tracked them through the cloisters.

The three young scamps lifted the old stone in the ruined chapel, and crept down into the vaults, leaving the stone up. When they had disappeared into the gloomy depths of the vaults, Tom Merry approached and peered through the aperture made by the stone. The footsteps of Racke & Co. echoed hollowly as they walked between the stone arches of the deserted vaults.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" was Tom Merry's silent comment. "They're up to something, that's a cert! They were kind enough to track poor old Brooke this afternoon, so now I think I'll keep an eye on them."

Tom climbed through the aperture, and landed softly on the stone flags below. He peered round him. All was inky blackness; but a little way ahead he could see a fitful light, round which three shadowy figures moved.

Creeping swiftly yet noiselessly, Tom Merry gained an arch behind which he could hide, and at the same time watch all that Racke & Co. were doing.

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Racke. "We've done that cad Merry in the eye properly, haven't we? Little did he dream when he opened that blessed camera this afternoon that I had already changed the first two plates! The idiot spoiled half a dozen brand-new plates! Ha, ha, ha!"

"He, he, he!" chortled Mellish and Crooke.

The trio of cads chuckled mightily, and Tom Merry, hiding behind the arch, frowned as he realised how Racke had hoodwinked him. Racke & Co. still had the two plates, and were now about to develop them.

"Never mind!" thought Tom, as he watched Racke & Co. open their parcels and withdraw the materials and apparatus required for developing the plates. "I'll let 'em get on with the washing. After all, they've only photographed a cinema scene."

Racke & Co., utterly oblivious to the watcher hidden behind the arch in their rear, placed the developer, hypo, and water in their separate dishes, affixed the red slide in the dark-room lamp, and commenced to develop the plates they fondly imagined would incriminate Dick Brooke.

"Good!" exclaimed Racke at length, holding up the two negatives which had been developed and fixed. "They've

both turned out a treat! Look at this first one, chaps! It shows Brooke in disguise standing in the wood, smoking a fag. That ought to make people stare—ah, what!"

"He, he, he!"

"This second one shows him holdin' the other man up with a revolver!" went on Racke enthusiastically. "My hat, we've got old Brooke in the hollow of our hand now. He'd do anythin', I reckon, rather than have these photos made common property at St. Jim's!"

"He, he, he!" sniggered Mellish. "We might make a good thing out of this, Racke. Why not force the rotter to share the spoils of his burglaries, on condition that we keep these photos and the secret to ourselves?"

Aubrey Racke shook his head.

"Too risky!" he said. "No, chaps: I've got a better wheeze than that. I'll make prints of these negatives to-night—they'll soon dry in some methylated spirit—and enclose a couple in a letter to Brooke, which I shall place in his desk so that he'll find it in the morning. I've had one or two good tips concerning the Hadley Park Races on Saturday, and I want to let Joliffe, at the Green Man, have a bettin'-slip or so. It's too jolly risky for me to deliver those slips myself, or send 'em by post, but Brooke can work the trick for me. I'll enclose the slips in that letter with the prints, and inform Brooke that I want 'em delivered to Joliffe, at the Green Man. If he doesn't do as he's told, I'll threaten to show the Head copies of those prints. And then Brooke will have to face some music!"

Mellish and Crooke gazed admiringly at their leader.

"Good idea, Racke!" said Crooke. "We'll make him our lackey—eh? And he dare not kick over the traces, for fear of the consequences."

Tom Merry drew a deep breath as he realised the young scamps' rascally plot to get the unfortunate day boy in their toils and blackmail him. He did not reveal his presence, however, but crept quietly away, leaving the three cads down in the vaults to dry the negatives and make prints.

Tom Merry smiled grimly to himself as he crossed the quadrangle to the School House steps.

"I'll put the stopper on Racke's little game!" he muttered. "He can make prints of those negatives, and place his precious letter in Brooke's desk. But Dick sha'n't find it; I'll have it instead. Then, my hat, I'll nip the rotter's little game in the bud!"

And, feeling satisfied that he would at least be able to do Dick Brooke one good turn, Tom Merry went indoors to do his prep.

CHAPTER 8.

The Shadow Lifted!

CLANG, clang, clang! The rising-bell at St. Jim's rang out loud and clear next morning, rousing the boys from their beds.

Tom Merry was already awake, and at the first toll of the bell he jumped out of bed and proceeded to dress himself with great expedition.

He glanced at Racke & Co., and perceived that those youths seemed considerably "bucked." Tom chuckled to himself when he thought of what a damper their spirits would receive later on.

He was the first dressed, and, telling Monty Lowther and Manners that he would see them downstairs, Tom hurried from the dormitory.

He descended to the Fourth Form-

room and entered. The room was deserted. Tom went over to the desk occupied by Dick Brooke and raised the flap. He uttered an exclamation of satisfaction as he saw an envelope reposing on top of the books inside.

Tom took up the envelope and, ripped it open. He withdrew two sheets of paper and two photographs.

The photographs occupied Tom's attention first, for, naturally, he was interested to see how Dick Brooke appeared in his new role as a schoolboy film actor.

The first photograph showed Dick Brooke, looking quite sportive in his tweed garments and moustache, placidly smoking in the wooded glade. Tom Merry drew a deep breath. Had he not been aware that Dick was only acting for the "pictures," he would have regarded that photograph as sufficient proof that Brooke was engaged in shady practices.

The second picture depicted Dick in the act of confronting a well-dressed gentleman with a revolver. There was a look of grim determination on Brooke's features, and his "victim" looked terrified.

Tom Merry looked critically at this photograph, and suddenly, as his gaze became riveted upon the background, he gave a violent start.

"Mum-my only sainted Aunt Maria!" ejaculated the captain of the Shell, gazing at the photograph in amazement, hardly able to believe the evidence of his own eyes. "There—there's somebody else in this picture—a man in the trees behind, tampering with a coat hanging from one of the branches!"

The features of the man in the background showed plainly. He was in the act of extracting something from the inner pocket of a coat hanging from a tree. Compared with the two men in the foreground, he looked small; and probably Racke & Co., in their eagerness, had not noticed him. Neither could he have noticed them when they took the photograph, for they were hidden in the trees opposite.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" gasped Tom Merry exuberantly. "Here's a giddy go! Why, it will prove Dick's innocence of the theft right up to the hilt. When I show him this photo no doubt he'll recognise the thief, and everything will be all right. My hat! How jolly lucky I didn't destroy those negatives, after all! Ha, ha, ha! Racke & Co. have done Brooke a good turn, if they only knew it!"

Tom opened the letter addressed to Dick Brooke, and read the following, written in Aubrey Racke's neat but crabbed handwriting:

"Dear Brooke," the letter ran—"Enclosed you will find some photographs taken of you in Rylcombe Wood yesterday. If you don't wish them shown to the other fellows, please deliver the slips enclosed herewith to Joliffe at the Green Man to-night. It will be an easy matter for you, and the best course, too; for if these photos are made public things would go pretty bad with you, I'm thinking.—Yours truly,

"AUBREY RACKE."

"Well," exclaimed Tom Merry, thrusting the letter, the betting-slips, and the photographs into his pocket, "this is a stroke of good fortune for Dick and no mistake! As for Racke & Co.—well, they're going to get it where the chicken gets the chopper, or I'm a Dutchman!"

Tom Merry's face was radiant and cheerful as he left the Fourth Form-room. Downstairs in the hall he passed Racke, Crooke, and Mellish, and grinned

as he saw how excited they seemed to be. Then he rejoined his chums, and they went out into the quadrangle until breakfast-bell rang.

Tom waited eagerly for breakfast to be over, for he wished to tell Dick Brooke the good news.

Leaving Monty Lowther and Manners upstairs in Study No. 10, to procure their books for the morning lessons, Tom Merry went down to the gates to wait for Dick Brooke.

Tom ran forward to meet him as the day boy appeared in the lane, walking slowly, his head bent down.

"Dick!" exclaimed Tom Merry, gripping his arm eagerly. "Cheer up, old son! Give your face a treat! I've got good news for you!"

Dick Brooke darted a quick, inquiring glance at Tom.

"Good news?" he asked a trifle wearily. "How can there be good news?"

For reply, Tom Merry took the photographs out of his pocket, and handed the all-important one to Dick.

"Look at that very closely, old chap!" he said. "Can you see anything wonderful?"

Dick looked wonderingly. Then suddenly his eyes opened wide, and he emitted a swift whistle of surprise.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, in an awed voice. "It's Myers himself—picking Mr. Parsons' pocket!"

Tom Merry chuckled.

"That about clears you from all blame—eh?" he said cheerfully. "Racke took that photo. He and Crooke and Mellish tracked you in the woods yesterday, and spotted you acting for the films. The silly chumps thought they'd struck a real tragedy, and have been simply glorying in the news ever since! They've done you a bit of good, haven't they?"

Dick's face, which had suddenly become so happy, clouded.

"I—I say, Tom," he exclaimed anxiously, "suppose that Racke & Co. tell—"

Tom Merry gave a merry, ringing laugh.

"They won't dare—not after I've interviewed 'em!" he said. "I've got a letter here that Racke wrote to you, intending you to find it with those photographs this morning when you came into the Form-room. Racke enclosed betting-slips he thought he'd blackmail you into delivering to Joliffe at the Green Man. I reckon, old son, that Racke will be only

too pleased to hold his tongue now I've got hold of that letter and the betting-slips. What's sauce for the goose is good enough for the gander, you know, and I'll blackmail Racke!"

Dick Brooke burst into a happy laugh.

"Then I shall be safe!" he exclaimed brightly. "Myers and Joliffe are coming to my place to see me to-night. They reckon on me having a specimen of the Head's signature for them, but they'll get a rude shock instead. Oh, Tom, this puts new life into me! I've been worrying my head off all night."

Tom linked his arm in Brooke's, and together they walked across the quadrangle towards the School House.

On the steps Jack Blake, D'Arcy, Herries, and Digby were chatting with Monty Lowther and Manners. They looked in surprise as Tom Merry came up arm-in-arm with Brooke.

"Hallo, Brooke!" said Blake coldly. "You might be interested to know that we were licked yesterday, and we blame you!"

"It was weally wotten of you, Bwooke, deah boy!" said Gussy severely. "We welied on you, you know, and you disappointed us, bai Jove!"

Tom Merry chuckled.

"Now, don't pile on the agony, you fellows!" he said cheerfully. "Brooke's explained to me, and, under the circumstances, I reckon you ought to apologise to him for being such silly, suspicious bounders. You see, his pater was ill, and Dick had to spend the afternoon working for him. Isn't that true, old chap?"

Dick Brooke nodded, darting a grateful look at Tom Merry.

"Yes, I was working for my father all the afternoon," he said. "I was very sorry I couldn't play for you, Blake, but I—I considered that my first duty was to my father."

"Yaas, wathah!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, beaming upon Brooke. "Undah the cirs, deah boy, you could not have done othahwise."

"Quite so!" said Blake. "But why the dickens didn't you tell us at first, Brooke, you burbling ass?"

Dick Brooke coloured.

"Well," he said slowly, "I—I didn't think to tell you, as—as it was so private. I'm sorry, you fellows. That letter which fell from my pocket when you—you were bumping me was not mine at all, but a business letter to my father. As he was ill, I attended to his business for him, you see."

"I see," said Blake heartily, his face clearing at once. "Well, old son, we apologise for the bumping and all that, you know. I hope your pater will soon be better. Next time we play those Shell bounders you'll play for us, and then, by gum, we'll make the giddy fur fly!"

Just then the bell for classes rang, and the juniors went indoors, all feeling extremely cheerful.

Dick Brooke entered the Fourth Form-room with Jack Blake & Co.

Percy Mellish gave Dick a peculiar look when he went to his desk and opened it to get out his books. Mellish's look was more peculiar still when he saw Brooke close the lid of his desk again as cheerful as ever. Brooke had not found the letter Racke had placed inside the desk last night. Mellish wondered vaguely who could have taken it, and what would happen to both Brooke and Racke if the contents of that envelope were made public.

After lessons, Dick Brooke left the Form-room in Jack Blake & Co.'s company. Mellish hurried to the Shell Form-room, and, meeting Racke and Crooke in

(Continued on page 19.)

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Awkward for the
bather! HARRY
WHARTON, of
Greyfriars School
loses his clothes.

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KIDNAPPED!



A Splendid Long Tale of Jimmy Curtis & Dickie Dexter & Co., the Popular Chums of St. Katie's

:::

By MICHAEL POOLE.

:::

CHAPTER 1.

Speech Day at Katie's.

"BUT what is Speech Day exactly?" Curtis, the Kangaroo, inquired. Bill Strong, Dobbie, and the Kid had all been telling him everything they thought he ought to know about the greatest and most important social event of the year at Katie's.

By the time they had each rattled out their ideas of what it really was, Curtis was more confused than ever.

From Dobbie he grasped that it was an outdoor function with heaps of opportunities for taking photographs. Dobbie was convinced that quite a number of people thought he was a professional Press photographer, and that cheered up old Dobbie terrifically. He was looking forward to Speech Day.

Bill Strong gave Curtis the impression that it was entirely an indoor affair. Everybody in the school had to sit and listen for hours and hours to speeches by the Head and by the Governors and by lots of people, while some of the fellows in the Sixth went up and got prizes.

"And then we all sing," Bill explained. "We'll have one or two practice nights first of all, and when you come to 'Follow up, follow up,' you've just got to yell for all you're worth. That part's rather jolly, but they're bound to collar you for the tea stunt, and you'll have to hand tea and cakes round to the visitors, Kangaroo. All the Sixth and the big fellows in the Fifth and the Trans. get legged in for that job."

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"It's a silly idea," said the Kid. "Bore me stiff! You just hang round and smile, and bald-headed old burlers come round and pat you on the head and ask whether you've won any prizes. 'Tisn't like Sports Day—that's different altogether. Speech Day is a wash-out!"

"The Kid generally manages to make several kinds of an ass of himself on Speech Day," Bill Strong explained calmly. "Tell him about the time when you were in the Third, Kid! Remember it, Dobbie? Funniest thing you ever saw, Kangy! The Kid doing an Indian war-dance, and streams of fire coming out of his pockets, and rip-raps going off somewhere inside him! Oh, my hat! That was the giddy limit!"

Both Bill and Dobbie began to laugh uproariously at the memory of that amazing day.

"Shut up!" the Kid told them. "That's finished and forgotten now, and anyway—"

They wouldn't let him finish, but insisted on telling Curtis what had happened.

As a matter of fact, the Kid had sound reasons for disliking Speech Day. He had been present at five up to date, and each one had ended in some little calamity, so far as he was concerned.

Perhaps the worst had been the one to which Bill Strong made such unfeeling allusion. It was the year when Romilly had been captain of the school, and there never had been a more wonderful fellow than Romilly.

Everybody in the school, from the Sixth down to the Second, had decided to give old Romilly a regal reception when he went on the platform to make

the captain's speech. Some chaps got rattles and others bought whistles, and one bright lad even took a bugle with him, all for the purpose of making a real din when Romilly went up.

The Kid went in for something entirely on his own, as usual. He bought a few fireworks, principally of the cracker and rip-rap variety. He was very young then, and felt sure that everyone would appreciate his thoughtfulness.

Just as he was lighting the first cracker, one of the masters, catching sight of a match, had turned his eyes upon him. Hastily the Kid had stowed away the cracker in his pocket, but was under the impression that he had put the light completely out.

He hadn't! And in about three seconds that cracker went off. All the other fireworks in his pocket started on the same job, and that particular Speech Day was distinguished from its predecessors by the spectacle of a small boy, enveloped in smoke, jumping about and apparently exploding in patches.

Other Speech Days had each some unhappy memory for the Kid, and it was this sort of thing which had given him a reputation throughout the school. He didn't like Speech Day.

Curtis never really got to know what Speech Day was like until the great day dawned. And when—well, anybody who attempts the job of describing in detail everything that happens at Katie's on Speech Day has got his hands full!

Up till about eleven in the morning things are quiet. There are no lessons on that day, of course, and the job of making oneself look really pretty takes

a long time. The big fellows of the Sixth are arrayed absolutely regardless, with the starchiest of starch collars and swallow-tail coats, while the prefects wear their hats like the masters, and have on queer little gowns, just to distinguish them from the common herd.

The masters themselves come strolling round in their full-dress gowns, with red lining or fringe of white fur, and big sleeves, and caps with great silky tassels, and nice, kind smiles on their faces, and they say "Good-morning" in a sweet and gentle manner to every boy they meet.

The Head himself was in evidence, wondrously arrayed, and looking years younger. Boys who didn't know that he really knew they were in the school found themselves called by name, and gasped that the Beak knew all about them from the way in which he passed some casual remark.

Blott, the porter, had on a bright and shining uniform, and Mr. Dalton, the Recorder, otherwise known as the Wrecker, was wearing gold eye-glasses and a tall hat, and was hurrying discreetly to and fro with lists in his hand.

From about eleven onwards the motor-cars began to roll up, and the main court of Katie's took on a new note. All the masters' wives or sisters began to emerge, and play the part of hostess to the ladies who descended from the cars, while the masters took off the men to show them what a wonderful place the school was.

At two o'clock everybody took their places in the Big Hall. The platform and the front rows were filled with visitors, while the boys ranged behind.

The Head stood up and said how glad he was to see everybody, and how glad everybody was to see everybody else. It was a glad day for St. Katherine's School, and the boys would show their gladness vocally by singing the old song which would recall to the minds of the elders the glad days of their own youth.

As the Head sat down, old Lillywhite at the grand piano struck a chord, and then, before you really grasped what was happening, every glad youth was yelling, for all he was worth at, "Forty Years On."

They made the welkin ring and the rafters resound. I don't know why they did, but they always have done it at Katie's, and when they struck the chords they really extended themselves. "Follow up, follow up, follow up!

Till the Field ring again and again, With the tramp of the twenty-two men. Follow up! Follow up!"

They banged and crashed and shrieked in their efforts to give a lifelike imitation of the tramp of twenty-two men. It was a great performance, and everybody felt better for it. The Head beamed, and the elderly monuments of goodness and seriousness who sat on the platform near him began to smile and joke with each other, and everybody really looked as happy as the Beak had said they were.

Then came the speeches and the prize-giving. There were lots of cheers for Big Hallam, and the chairman of the proceedings—who was a duke in private life—shook hands with him for quite a long time; while Hallam stood like a real, genuine, noble hero till the cheering and shouting died.

A lot of other things happened before four o'clock, but at this hour the meeting broke up, and the visitors wandered to the drawing-hall, tastefully arranged for the occasion, as they say in the papers.

Tea was served. That is to say, everybody sat down, or stood up, or got

arranged into a little group, while the big fellows hurried about with cups of tea and little buns.

Curtis and Bill Strong had both been collared for this job. Dobbin had wandered off to hunt for a possible photograph. From a dark corner of the hall the Kid watched the scene hopelessly. He could see Margery Frayne with her sister, and Margery was talking away to Jolly Roger just as though they were the best of pals.

Since about two-fifteen, when the performance of "Forty Years On" had come to a close, the Kid had grown more and more depressed. It really bored him; and now the spectacle of Bill Strong gliding gracefully about, and presenting tea and buns in polite manner, or the picture of Curtis, bright and smiling, telling some dear old lady how happy he was in this beautiful school, and how he hoped one day to be Prime Minister, annoyed the Kid.

This wasn't his day out. He was right in the giddy background, and had to go about trying to look good, and just doing nothing.

It was just at that juncture a funny thing happened. A tall, rather stern-looking lady detached herself from the group and descended upon the Kid.

"Well, my little boy," she said, in the sort of tone most folk use when they're speaking of babies, "you have no relatives here to-day?"

The tall lady smiled kindly on Dickie Dexter, and the Kid shook his head, while his big blue eyes were fixed intently on her.

"You must come and show me your school-rooms, and tell me about yourself," said the tall lady brightly. "I am very fond of small boys, and I should like to be your friend. You will let me be your friend, won't you? What is your name?"

"Dexter," said the Kid thoughtfully. "My full name is Richard Dexter."

"I am very fond of Richard—for boys," the lady said winningly. "And what Form are you in, Richard?"

A few minutes later the Head, passing down a corridor with other guests, saw the two together. He beamed upon them kindly.

CHAPTER 2.

Richard's Fairy Tales.

LADY KINDERTON was a remarkable woman.

The Kid, of course, didn't know that. His impression was that she was very tall and slim and rather stern-looking, and that she treated him as though he were an infant in arms.

When you come to think of it, of course, Dickie Dexter was rather a remarkable youth. But Lady Kinderton didn't know that.

She thought he was a very nice, quiet boy, and his pretty lips and pathetic blue eyes appealed to her. She felt sure that what he lacked was a friend.

So both of them started off on their tour of the school pretty badly handicapped.

Lady Kinderton was one of the leading lights in the world of social reform.

She was one of the kind who get things done. On her own estate she had a first-class school, run on the most modern ideas, for the village children. She took a personal interest in the welfare of every child who went there.

Hitherto she had not interested herself in the question of boys' public schools. It was outside her sphere. But someone had asserted in her presence that they were run on the same lines as fifty years ago, that the education was hope-

less, bullying was rampant, fighting and gambling the common amusements, and that the life of a small boy who was sent to these places was one long torture.

All of which was pure and undiluted hot air. But Lady Kinderton was interested, and determined to inquire.

All that afternoon at the Speech Day she had been looking out for the kind of boy who could tell her what she wanted to know.

And that explains why she dropped on Dickie Dexter, and meant to get him all by himself and hear the truth.

Now, the Kid was a truthful boy, but the truth hasn't got anything to do with drawing the long bow, pulling the leg, and spinning a yarn. The latter game was a hobby of his, and he did it well.

Moreover, he was fed up, and a little amusement would cheer him. He quickly grasped the fact that the kind lady—whose name he didn't know yet—was most anxious to hear stories about bullying, and of little boys like Richard being tossed in blankets, or roasted before blazing fires, and weird things of that sort. He proceeded to oblige her. Lady Kinderton listened in sympathetic amazement.

"My poor boy!" she said gently. "Then you get terribly bullied here?"

"Bullied?" Dickie Dexter put up his hands. "You have no idea of the way in which some of the big fellows here bully—"

He broke off abruptly and listened. He had brought Lady Kinderton to Study No. 10, and as they sat there he could hear the voice of Bill Strong mingling unmelodiously with Jimmy Curtis' in a new version of "Forty Years On."

They were coming down the corridor, and in a few seconds would be inside the room. It was a hundred to one they would behave like good little boys, and if Lady Kinderton asked them questions, they would spot at once that the Kid had been acting the goat, and would tell her the truth about him on the spot.

While they had been talking, Lady Kinderton had abstractedly taken out a hatpin which was inclined to get loose, and had laid it on the table. The sight of it served as an inspiration to the Kid.

He jumped to his feet, and made a show of straightening the table in a nervous hurry. And as he did so he cleverly annexed the hatpin.

"Some of the big fellows are coming now," he explained nervously. "They'll be angry with me."

He rushed to the door just as Bill Strong pushed it open.

"Hallo, Kid!" Bill began, but got no further.

"I am so sorry, Strong!" Dexter murmured, and gave Bill a first-rate jab in the leg with the hatpin. "I—I'm so sorry, Curtis!"

And he jabbed the Kangaroo twice, very swiftly, and slipped the hatpin into his pocket as he stepped back.

What would you have done if you'd been Bill Strong or Curtis? Just imagine being met at the door of your own study by somebody like the Kid, who pretends to apologise, and then sticks something sharp about half an inch into your leg! Would you say, "Thank you, little boy! Try the other leg?"

You wouldn't! Nor did Bill Strong; nor did Curtis!

"You burbling young idiot!" Bill gasped. "What d'you think you're doing? I'll break every bone in your puny body, you cross-eyed little rat! My giddy aunt!"

"Jumping snakes!" said Curtis. "I'll kill you, Kid! Let's bump him, Bill!"

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Twist his neck till he can see round corners! Screw his little arms out of their sockets! Make him wish he'd never been born! Now, you little—"

Crash! Bang! And then: Biff!

In the twinkling of an eye the Kid was seized, rushed swiftly into the room, and bumped on the floor.

"Don't, Strong! Please! I—I promise—" the Kid bleated.

"Promise!" echoed Strong. "I'm going to make you sorry—"

They'd been in such a hurry on the job that they never had a chance to notice the tall lady who now rose majestically.

"Boys," she said, in a horrified sort of voice, "how dare you bully—"

"My hat!" Bill gasped, and stood upright. "Sorry—awfully sorry! Didn't notice—So sorry! Pardon! Very sorry indeed!"

"Awfully sorry!" said Curtis. "Didn't know—Sorry, Kid! Very sorry, madam!"

And they hopped out like young gazelles, still gasping "Sorry!" They didn't wait to hear anything that the lady wanted to tell them about bullying. They were too dazed. But they guessed it was some new stunt of the Kid's.

Lady Kinderton was already expressing her *pay* for the Kid, but he smiled weakly and assured her that it was nothing.

"I should think you feel inclined to run away at times?" she suggested, quite calmly, though inwardly she was making swift decisions.

"Oh, if only I could! Oh, but I daren't!" the Kid said quickly. "You must forget all that I have told you. I must go! They will be back soon. I—You have been very kind to me, and your words of cheer will help and encourage me in the trials that lie before me."

"Yes," said Lady Kinderton, but she wasn't really thinking of what he said. Did I tell you she was one of the women who get things done? This was just the sort of job she was really good at, and there wasn't going to be any patient waiting about the business either!

"I think you had better come with—No!" Lady Kinderton almost snapped the words out, and the Kid began to realise that she wore the same sort of look about the eyes that Jolly Roger had, and that her face was really quite a nice one, despite its sternness. "You will come to see me off, Richard—"

"Of course!" Baxter agreed, and went down with her.

"If you will wait for a few minutes while I say good-bye to the headmaster?"

"Yes, of course," the Kid said quickly. "But you won't—I mean, don't say anything to him!"

"Certainly not!" said Lady Kinderton, and smiled. The Kid began to think that, after all, she hadn't swallowed his fairy stories quite so easily as he'd imagined. On the whole he was very glad.

He had the feeling he generally got after letting himself rip. He wished he hadn't done it, because he really was a silly idiot when he started on that tack.

Lady Kinderton left him for a time, but rejoined him near the drive. She had told her chauffeur to drive a little way down, and had steadfastly refused the offers of Mr. Steed, Mr. Blunt, and one of the two other masters to see her to her car.

There was a footman as well as a chauffeur attached to the wonderful car which awaited Lady Kinderton. She was talking very pleasantly to Dickie as they

went along, but turned for a few moments to give the waiting footman instructions. In turn he whispered to the driver.

Lady Kinderton was in the closed car. The Kid stood back, but she called him again, and he stood by the open door and leaned inside a little way.

Then a strong pair of arms gripped Dexter and lifted him swiftly inside. Almost immediately the door was banged, and Dickie found himself sitting on the seat facing Lady Kinderton, but still securely gripped by the footman. And the car had begun to move quietly down the drive.

"I say!" The Kid wakened up to realities as they flashed past the main entrance gate. "I ought not—I mean, I shall have to get back to school. There'll be a row—"

"Oh, no, there won't!" said Lady Kinderton. "You have nothing whatever to worry about, Richard! You are not running away. You have been kidnapped! And a good many drastic alterations will have been made at St. Katherine's School before you return!"

CHAPTER 3.

Lady Kinderton's Justice.

FOR half an hour Dexter tried to assure Lady Kinderton that he hadn't been bullied, and that he had been joking, and that there really would be a row if he didn't go back.

Lady Kinderton spoke gently and kindly to him, but refused to change her mind. She wasn't that sort. The knowledge that Dexter's parents were away in some outlandish corner of the earth, combined with all that Dexter had told her about bullying, and the spectacle that she herself had witnessed of two big fellows flinging him to the floor and threatening all manner of torture, made her calmly determined on her course.

It was all mapped out in her mind. She had kidnapped Dexter, thus taking all blame on herself, and throwing upon the authorities the necessity of fighting her. Dexter's protests that he wasn't really bullied were simply an added proof to her that the boy was frightened out of his life. She was going right through with this business now!

The footman sat up very stiffly, but kept a firm grip on Dickie.

"You'll be all right!" he assured Dexter from time to time. "You trust her ladyship!"

You see, both the chauffeur and the footman regarded Lady Kinderton as the kindest woman on earth, as well as the most sensible. To be kidnapped by Lady Kinderton was obviously the best thing for this youngster.

Dexter had to settle his fate eventually. There wasn't an earthly chance of a thrilling escape, and both the chauffeur and the footman marched behind him when they entered Lady Kinderton's house.

"You will be quite happy here, Richard," she told him kindly. "I am just going to telephone to Lord Velwood, who is a governor of your school, and a very dear friend of mine, and I shall also let Mr. Bird know that you have been kidnapped. Then we must have dinner, and you shall tell me more about your school life."

Up to that time Dexter had consoled himself with the thought that sooner or later he would be able to make a bolt for it. But if she telephoned to the Beak, it wouldn't be any use. Bolting would only make it worse.

"I'm in the soup fairly," the Kid told himself hopelessly. "Speech Day again! My luck is always out! Why did I act

the giddy goat and tell her all those yarns? I wonder why?"

Meantime, Lady Kinderton had telephoned Lord Velwood and told him that she had kidnapped one small boy from St. Katherine's School, and would he come and see her about it—any time, at his convenience? There was really no hurry, as the boy was quite happy.

"I'll come at once!" said Lord Velwood, in amazement.

The Head of Katie's was even more amazed when he got the message. He sent an urgent call for Mr. Roger Blunt to wait upon him at once.

"What is behind it all I really don't know," Mr. Bird explained. "But Lady Kinderton says she has kidnapped young Dexter, and does not propose to return him until the matter has been thoroughly discussed. She accepts full responsibility, and is prepared to fight the matter in the courts if necessary. I—It's incomprehensible! You had better order a car at once, Blunt, and go over and see her. I'll call on Lady Kinderton myself to-morrow if she wishes it. But it really is extraordinary! Kidnapped! She insists on that fact!"

"I'll go at once," said Roger. "Allow me, sir!"

He rang up for a car to come to the school immediately, and it was just an hour later when he reached Kinderton Manor.

Fifteen minutes before, Lord Velwood had been shown into Lady Kinderton's presence. In wonder and dismay he listened to her story of organised bullying at St. Katherine's School, and the course which Lady Kinderton proposed to take in order to make the place a happy home for little boys.

"It seems incredible!" gasped Lord Velwood. "I assure you, Janet, that the masters are the most kind and considerate of men. My friend Mr. Blunt is—"

"He is Richard's Form-master!" said Lady Kinderton. "He is a man who utterly fails to understand the gentler aspirations of boyhood."

"Ah!" Lord Velwood was still gasping. "What is this boy's name? It's not—it cannot be Dexter?"

If you've read the previous history of Richard Dexter you will recall how Lord Velwood had a little glimpse of the Kid giving the funeral oration of the Wasps. Also, Lord Velwood knew that Dexter had been responsible for the marked improvement in his own nephew, young Brontrux, and he had a great admiration for the Kid. But he didn't regard him as one of the great misunderstood.

"His name is Dexter," said Lady Kinderton. "He is only a small boy, but very intelligent, I should say, and under proper treatment—"

"Oh, my dear Janet!" Lord Velwood began to laugh now. "That boy, he's the most wonderful youth you ever met! But bullied! You know that big, hulking nephew of mine, Aloysius Brontrux? Dexter thrashed him within an inch of his life, and made a man of him. Good gracious! Dexter! No one dare bully Dexter, I am quite sure!"

"My dear Hugh," said Lady Kinderton quite calmly, "I saw it with my own eyes; otherwise I should not have acted as I have done. Two great fellows came into the room and flung him on the floor, uttering the most fearful threats—Yes, Jenks?"

Another visitor had come to see Lady Kinderton—Mr. Roger Blunt, of St. Katherine's School. Jenks was bidden by both Lady Kinderton and Lord Velwood to show him in immediately.

Lady Kinderton explained the position with frigid precision, but Lord Velwood was a trifle excited. He wanted Jolly

Roger to scorn the very idea that Dexter could be bullied.

"I really think there has been some mistake, Lady Kinderton," Roger said gently. "I cannot imagine anyone trying to bully Dexter. Even the big fellows have considerable respect—"

"I saw them myself," said Lady Kinderton calmly. "I heard their names—Strong and Curtis—and I saw poor Richard knocked to the floor while they were threatening him. I made no mistake. One of the big boys said that he would twist Richard's neck until he could see round corners. I heard that myself."

"Yes," said Roger thoughtfully. "But, you see, Strong and Curtis are Dexter's best friends. It must have been arranged beforehand."

"Arranged beforehand!" repeated Lady Kinderton scornfully. "Really, Mr. Blunt, I am not a child. How could they arrange it? Richard did not know that I was going to ask him about bullying. Do you suggest—"

"Couldn't we all see the boy and ask him?" suggested Lord Velwood hopefully.

"On condition that he is not bullied into withdrawing anything," said Lady Kinderton judiciously. "He is already afraid, and has been trying to assure me that the big boys only attacked him in fun. But I saw myself what happened. It was brutal!"

"I promise that I will not bully young Dexter," said Jolly Roger diplomatically.

The three went into the dining-room, and the Kid rose from the table on their entrance. During the past half-hour he had been sampling the fruit thoughtfully provided.

He knew perfectly well that he was in for the high jump. When he saw Lord Velwood and Jolly Roger he knew that the time had come. But there was nothing of the coward in the Kid's make-up, and he meant to go through it bravely. More, he hoped to let Lady Kinderton down lightly. So much ought to be said in Dickie's favour.

"Well, Dexter," Roger began cheerfully, "I hear you have been kidnapped?"

"Yes, sir," said the Kid. And a little smile played about his mouth as he looked at Jolly Roger.

"You need not be afraid, Richard," said Lady Kinderton sweetly. "You will never be bullied again."

The Kid took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry, Lady Kinderton!" he said. "You'll think I'm a frightful little rotter when I tell the truth. I mean—he turned almost appealingly to Roger and Lord Velwood—"it isn't Lady Kinderton's fault at all. She's been jolly decent, and did it all for the best. I was acting the giddy goat and telling her all the old yarns—'Tom Brown,' and 'Eric,' and that bit in 'Stalky' where they tie the chaps' legs."

"Oh!" Lady Kinderton gasped a little, because she had read these books quite recently in order to understand things. Then she pulled herself together again. "But you remember, Richard, that I saw the two big boys who came in and attacked you until they realised that I was present. You didn't arrange that beforehand, did you, Richard?"

"Yes, tell us about that, Dexter," said Roger kindly. "I gather that Strong and Curtis simply flung themselves on you and were about to ill-treat you, when Lady Kinderton intervened?"

"Yes, sir," the Kid admitted. "But I—"

He hesitated, because it really was

rather awkward to explain. Lady Kinderton was smiling now.

"Tell the truth, Richard!" she advised. "Don't be afraid!"

"I'm not," the Kid assured her. And there was something in his eyes which made Lady Kinderton realise suddenly that Richard wasn't quite the sweetly innocent little babe she had imagined. "But I didn't know then that you were so jolly decent, or I wouldn't have done it. I thought you were one of these interfering sort of people who call me 'little boy' and 'sweet child,' and think I'm the sort who's always being bullied. So—well, I just thought it would amuse you and wouldn't harm me if we had a lifelike imitation of the bullies at home."

"Ah!" said Roger, and nodded philosophically to Lord Velwood.

"But I saw those two boys!" Lady Kinderton insisted again, as though that settled the argument.

"Yes, I know," Dexter agreed. "But you'd have thumped me just as they did if you'd been in their place!"

"Why?" demanded Lady Kinderton. "You must tell us the truth, Richard!"

"How did you fix up that part of the programme, Dexter?" Roger asked.

"From what I have observed it is much more likely that you would bully them!"

"Yes, sir," agreed the Kid meekly. "That's what I did. I just made them jumping mad, and they fell into the trap."

"But how?" demanded Lady Kinderton.

Dexter looked at her pathetically. He rather wished she would spare him these details.

"You put a hatpin on the table," he explained apologetically. "When I heard them coming I jumped up and pretended to clear the table, but all I did was to collar the pin. Then I went to the door, and just before they came into the room I jabbed both of them in the legs with the hatpin. It made them wild—well, you saw them, didn't you? I think I've still got the pin."

He fished in his pocket and drew out a silver hat-pin.

"Yes. That's mine! I wondered—" Lady Kinderton gasped, and for a brief moment stared at the Kid in open-eyed amazement.

Then she grasped the back of a chair and sank slowly into it.

"I really—I never—" she tried to whisper, and then buried her face in her hands.

Dexter thought she'd collapsed, because you could see her body shaking. But Lord Velwood knew her better than Dickie Dexter, and he stepped forward with a smile.

She was a strong woman, and she had quite a respectable sense of humour, and when she looked up again all the sternness had gone from her face, and she was laughing.

"Oh, Richard, Richard!" she said. "And to think that I kidnapped you!"

Jolly Roger had been silent for a little time, standing in the background and smiling grimly.

"I am sure that if you would care to keep Dexter for a time," he suggested gently, "the headmaster would have no objection whatever! Of course, you wouldn't bully him?"

Lord Velwood laughed joyously.

"Mr. Blunt," said Lady Kinderton, "I feel sure that he could not be in better hands than yours. There must be something of the bully in me, and I feel certain that I should try to—twist his neck until he could see round corners! Oh, those poor boys!"

She dabbed the tears from her face with a tiny handkerchief, and tried to look at Dexter seriously.

"Of course, it serves me right, Mr. Blunt," she said, "because, as Richard says, I did behave like one of those interfering busybodies. I will write to Mr. Bird and apologise for my foolishness. But I think I ought to have the right to prescribe the punishment for Richard."

"Certainly!" said Jolly Roger and Lord Velwood together.

"Very well, Richard," Lady Kinderton said sternly, and, putting her hands on his shoulders, she bent over him.

"Listen, Richard! You are a very—sweet—little—boy!"

She said it slowly, and then—kissed him!

The Kid has never told anyone what he felt like. He was a brave lad, and he stood there, his hips pressed together, his face as red as fire, and his eyes staring straight ahead. Kissed! Called a sweet little child! Before Jolly Roger, too!

"And now," said Lady Kinderton joyfully, "I think Richard has been quite sufficiently punished. May we regard the matter as quite closed, Mr. Blunt?"

"I shall forget it," said Roger. But his eyes were twinkling as they rested on Dickie Dexter, and the Kid knew that Roger would laugh about it later.

And that really was the end of Dexter's kidnapping adventure, though they stayed at Kinderton Manor for quite a long time after that. But the Kid was bored to tears, and he didn't feel that he wanted to apologise to anyone. He felt that Lady Kinderton had got her own back—very thoroughly!

Nor did Roger make much reference to the matter on the way back to Katie's. He merely remarked that he sincerely hoped Strong and Curtis would carry out all their threats, and any more they could think of, when they saw Dexter again.

Also, he conducted the Kid personally to the dormitory, and told Strong the same thing. He said that Bill had full permission to bully Dexter just as much as he wanted in future.

Bill, of course, didn't quite grasp what he meant, and asked the Kid about it when Jolly Roger had gone.

"Oh, dry up!" growled the Kid. "If you and the Kangaroo hadn't come butting into the study when I was entertaining a visitor this wouldn't have happened! It's just my luck on Speech Day! I hate Speech Days!"

"Poor old Kid!" said Bill Strong, and climbed into bed. "You're a nice little boy, and—"

A pillow, handled violently by the Kid, ended the speech. And that particular Speech Day ended as others have done—in a jolly old pillow-fight. And that sweet little child, Richard Dexter, got something of his own back on those big fellows, Strong and Curtis! For Richard was a good lad with the pillows!

THE END.

(Another Grand Long Story of St. Katie's next week, entitled: "The Finger of Fate!" Order your copy EARLY.)

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The Editor's Chat.

Note:—Your Editor is always pleased to hear from his readers. Address: Editor, The "Gem," The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

FOR NEXT WEEK.

A fine array of features is on the programme for Wednesday next, and the issue of the GEM booked to appear that day is of an altogether attractive nature.

The first of the features is a Magnificent Complete Story of the Chums of St. Jim's entitled:

"TROUBLED WATERS!" By Martin Clifford.

dealing with an amazing series of events in which Miss Marie, the school nurse, is implicated.

Although the assistance of Scotland Yard is called in, the mystery deepens, and culminates in a most unlooked-for fashion.

This yarn provides amazing and thrilling reading for my chums, and I strongly advise them not to miss

"TROUBLED WATERS!"

Dickie Dexter, the popular chum of St. Katie's School, is again to the fore in

"THE FINGER OF FATE!" By Michael Poole.

which is certainly one of the most rousing stories of school-life which has fallen from the inspiring pen of Michael Poole.

The amusing way in which Dexter does the "Kangaroo" a good turn will excite my readers' interest from the very first line.

There will also be two other grand features:

"A NEW CHUM IN AUSTRALIA!" By "COO-EE."

a narrative of Jack Thornton's adventures and experiences in the wonderful bush of that far-off Dominion; and

"MY READERS OWN CORNER."

the "Half-crown page," which will complete the make-up of this "bumper" issue.

PUTTING OFF WEIGHT.

A great number of fellows get anxious about their physique. I hear from chums who feel they are getting too fat. What should they do? The answer is that they should avoid greasy, fat-forming foods, live simply, get as much in the open air as possible, and go in for exercise—not extravagant exercise, for they have their work to do, but something regular and easy, like half an hour morning and evening with the dumbbells. I counsel a lad who thinks he ought to be taller to allow Nature to go her way, though he can help to add a few inches by swimming, and following the suggestions given above, while the ordinary athletic exerciser, which can be attached so easily to the door of a bedroom, is of real use.

Your Editor

A NEW CHUM IN AUSTRALIA!

By "COO-EE."

(Continued from last week.)

"THIS afternoon," said Mr. Thornton to Harry, "we'll saddle our horses and ride to the River Yarra. If we're lucky, you'll see the queerest creature on earth. I'll tell you no more just now, for I don't want to spoil your enjoyment. It's no use going early in the day, for the gentleman we're going to visit is never at home till about evening."

Harry was full of curiosity and excitement when, with his gun slung over his shoulder and some cartridges in his pocket, he rode out with his uncle.

They had seven miles to go, most of it on the flat round the foot of the hills; but there was no need to go at a quicker pace than the easy canter which Colonial horses are accustomed to.

Sitting a horse when it goes freely and has been well trained is like sitting in an easy-chair, and Harry, who was now getting quite a good rider, felt as if he could go all day without ever getting tired.

Mr. Thornton turned into a bit of bush to take a short cut, when suddenly his horse shied badly, and had he not been an experienced rider he would certainly have been thrown.

Harry, who was a little behind, pulled up quickly.

"What was it, uncle?" he called. "You come here and see," was the answer.

Just as he came forward an ugly, brown creature, like a giant lizard, and about three feet long, ran up a blue-gum tree, and disappeared.

"Give me your horse's bridle, Harry," said his uncle, "while you get off and shoot that iguana. He will keep the tree between you and himself, so you will need to be very quick when you get the chance."

For a little it was like a game of bo-peep, Harry roaming round one side and the iguana round the other; but at last Harry shot him as he peered round, and the great brute fell with a dull thud on the ground.

The horses would not come near the creature, even when dead. They seem to have an instinctive fear of the iguana, and with reason, for he has been known to run up horses' legs, and his bite is very vicious, even although it is not poisonous.

An iguana has been seen swallowing a hare just as a snake does. They have become famous for their fasting powers in captivity. One of them in the Melbourne Zoo was known to fast for nine months.

Harry slipped another cartridge into his gun, mounted his horse, and off they set again.

After going about a mile, Mr. Thornton stopped under a high tree, looked up, and said:

"Harry, did you ever know we had bears in Australia? How would you like to fight a bear?"

Harry looked up at the tree, but could see nothing.

"Is there really a bear up there?" he said. "I can't see it."

"Well, I do," said his uncle. "Look where those two big branches are joined to the trunk. Don't you see a bit of light fawn fur between them?"

"I do now," said Harry. "Is it a bear? Shall I shoot him?"

Mr. Thornton laughed. "You might waste a good many cartridges on that fellow, and not bring him down. He has a very thick skin and a dense fur, and so is difficult to kill. Those fellows have been known to fall a hundred feet and be none the worse. They are quite harmless, so we will not waste time killing him or trying to. Some day we may get a young one and tame him."

They were now getting near the river, and, dismounting, tied their horses to a fence.

"Now, my boy, we have been hindered a bit by the iguana and the bear, but as the sun is not setting yet we have plenty of time to get what we came for."

Mr. Thornton stood stock still, and beckoned Harry to do the same.

"We must speak only in a whisper, and stand as stiff as trees. Look across the river to where it seems shallow, just below a stretch of muddy bank. When you see something like a piece of wood, about eighteen inches long, floating on the surface, fire at it. The moment you have fired we step nearer the river and farther down, then stand still and stiff again."

After waiting for what seemed hours, and watching the river keenly for anything like a bit of wood, patience was rewarded.

Harry fired promptly, and the thing as promptly disappeared.

"Come!" said Mr. Thornton. And they stepped quickly nearer the bank and a little way down, then came to another dead stop, and stood like statues.

"Missed, I'm afraid!" whispered Mr. Thornton. "Be ready; he'll come up again."

Hardly were the words out of his mouth than the dark object appeared on the surface, and, taking steadier aim, Harry fired again.

A second time they marched forward and downward, but had hardly reached their halting-place when Mr. Thornton said:

"You've done it. He's dead. The trouble now is to get him. He'll float down to that shallow place, and then you must wade in and fetch him ashore."

It did not take Harry a minute to take off his boots and socks, turn up his trousers, and step over the pebbly bed of the river.

With the help of a long stick he brought the dark object within reach of his hand, and could scarcely keep from shuddering when he saw what a strange, weird creature he had shot.

Catching it by the tail, he carried it, dripping, to the bank, and laid it down at his uncle's feet.

Mr. Thornton laughed till he had to hold his sides at Harry's surprised and puzzled expression.

"What on earth is it?" asked Harry. "Is it a duck, or an otter, or a seal that has stolen a duck's bill and some animal's tail? What do you call it?"

"Well, Harry," said Mr. Thornton, "you've come very near the mark with your questions. I told you I would show you the queerest thing on earth, and there it is."

This interesting article by "COO-EE" will be continued in next week's issue of the "GEM" Library.

DICK BROOKE'S TRIAL!

(Continued from page 13.)

the passage, outside, acquainted them with the news that Brooke had apparently not discovered the letter in his desk.

Racke's face went green when he heard this. Just then Tom Merry came out of the Form-room, and, going up to Racke, he gripped that youth by the arm.

"I say, Racke, come out into the quad with me, will you?" he said quietly.

"I've something to say to you!" Racke's pasty face went quite livid, and he trembled as he followed Tom Merry out into the quadrangle.

Underneath the elms, where nobody could disturb them, Tom Merry taxed the black sheep of the Shell with his villainy.

"You were absolutely mistaken about Brooke, you cad," said Tom Merry grimly. "He was taking part in a film being produced by a friend of his. So, you see, you have had your trouble for nothing!"

Aubrey Racke clenched his fists hard, and panted in the excess of his spite.

"I—I don't believe it!" he muttered fiercely. "I'll show those photos to the Head, and then let Brooke prove it!"

"You'll do nothing of the sort, Racke," said Tom Merry quietly. "Suppose I gave him those betting-slips?"

The black sheep of the Shell bit his lip, and glared with hatred at Tom Merry.

"You—you wouldn't dare!" he panted.

"Why shouldn't I?" demanded Tom Merry relentlessly. "Take my word for it, you rotter, I shall place that letter and the betting-slips in Dr. Holmes' hands, unless you first of all hand me over the negatives of those photos, also any prints you have made, and, moreover, promise never to breathe a word of Dick Brooke acting in the film yesterday—either you or Crooke or Mellish!"

"Why is Brooke so anxious to keep it a secret?" sneered Racke.

"It's his business—a private affair," said Tom Merry quietly. "You've got to keep your mouth shut, and see that those other two worms don't spout, either. If they do, those slips and your

blackmailing letter will be produced, I promise you that, Racke."

Racke's eyes gleamed maliciously at Tom Merry, but he realised that Tom held the upper hand.

"All right!" he said sullenly. "Come up with me to my study, and I'll let you have the negatives and the prints. I—I'll square Crooke and Mellish."

Ten minutes later Tom Merry had the negatives and four prints in his possession. The negatives he defaced and broke to atoms, the prints he burned. Then, feeling perfectly satisfied, the captain of the Shell went down to the nets to join his chums at cricket practice.

Later that day an exciting scene was enacted at Dick Brooke's cottage home. Both Joliffe and Myers were there. They demanded of Dick whether he had obtained for them the signature he had undertaken to get them. When Dick calmly told them that he had not, they threatened him, and would have used violence, but Dick flung open the door leading off from the sitting-room, and Mr. Parsons, the producer of the True-life Film Company, strode forth.

Joliffe and Myers fell back at the sight of the producer.

Then Mr. Parsons explained that he had been summoned there by Brooke to find the man who had robbed him the previous afternoon.

Brooke had shown him the photograph, which proved beyond doubt that Vincent Myers was the guilty man. He now intended having Myers arrested for robbery, also with conspiring to defraud Dr. Holmes, the headmaster of St. Jim's.

But Myers, seeing that now the game was up, made a bolt for the door, and, in spite of the efforts of Dick Brooke and Mr. Parsons, succeeded in making his escape.

"Well," said the cinema producer ruefully, as he returned with Dick to the cottage, "the scoundrel's gone, and he's gone for good. He won't venture near this neighbourhood again, I'll be bound. I don't reckon he'll bother you again, my lad. And as for you being a school-boy, working for me under false pretences, that's all bosh and bunkum. I've heard from your sister why you did it, and I admire you, my lad. You're a clever little actor, too, and indispensable to me. You'll stay with me till the film is finished—eh?"

Dick Brooke smiled gratefully.

"Yes, sir, if you wish me to," he said. "It will only be for two more weeks, won't it?"

"That's all!" assented Mr. Parsons. "And as for this villain"—indicating Joliffe, who had remained in the cottage sitting-room—"as for him, he's got the stolen notes, and he can keep 'em, in discharge of your father's debt."

"Oh!" exclaimed Dick Brooke, his face radiant with joy. "You—you'll do that, sir? You really mean it?"

"Of course I do!" chuckled the film producer. "But you'll work it off, my lad—reckon it as a fortnight's wages in advance. Well, Joliffe, I suppose you agree to the bargain—eh? I can make things thundering awkward for you if you don't!"

"I agree—hang you!" snarled Joliffe. "Then write out a full and final receipt."

The rascally landlord of the Green Man public-house did so, and then left the cottage, in a frame of mind that was quite homicidal.

Mr. Parsons left soon after, for he was a busy little man.

Left alone in their home, Dick Brooke, his father and sister felt gratified and happy.

The day-boy of St. Jim's breathed a prayer of thankfulness that his terrible ordeal was over. He had fought against heavy odds, and had almost been blackmailed into becoming a traitor to St. Jim's. He smiled as he realised that it was mainly through the misguided efforts of Racke & Co. that he had won through. He felt deeply grateful to Tom Merry, who had so loyally played his part. His father, now happy that his debt with Joliffe had been paid, showed signs of a quick recovery, and the roses were returning to Dick's sister's pretty cheeks.

And at St. Jim's the cloud of suspicion was lifted from Dick Brooke's name. Four juniors had a secret to hold, and their lips were safely sealed. But it was only Tom Merry who knew the real facts of the case, and realised how terrible had been Dick Brooke's Trial!

THE END.

(Another grand long story of Tom Merry & Co., at St. Jim's, next week, entitled "TROUBLED WATERS!" By Martin Clifford. Avoid disappointment by ordering your copy of the GEM LIBRARY early.)

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