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The

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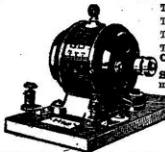
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TOM MERRY & CO'S VICTORY

A Grand Long Complete Story of the Chums of St. Jim's.
By Martin Clifford.

CHAPTER 1.

Figgy's Little Joke.

"D ONE at last!"

Tom Merry yawned.

It was a Wednesday afternoon; and all St. Jim's, or nearly all, was out of doors. On Big Side, a senior football match was in progress between School House and the New House. Nearly every junior of both Houses had gathered there, to watch and cheer their champions.

But Tom Merry was rather down on his luck that day.

A hundred lines from Virgil, imposed by his Housemaster, kept him in his study. Manners and Lowther had kindly offered to stay in with him; but Tom had declined the offer. It was bad enough to have to stay in and do lines himself; and he did not want to spoil the half-holiday for his chums. So he ground out Virgil at the study-table, while on the football-ground his comrades were cheering Kildare's mighty kicks, and chipping the New House fellows.

But everything comes to an end at last; and the hundredth line was duly written, and Tom Merry yawned and rose, and pitched Virgil across the study by way of relieving his feelings.

P. Virgilus Marco crashed into the wastepaper-basket—which, in the opinion of Tom Merry, was a very proper place for the classical gentleman.

Then Tom Merry strode to his study window.

From that window he had a good view of the quadrangle and a strip of a view of the playing-fields.

In the distance he could see a portion of the crowd gathered on Big Side, watching the senior House match. The echo of a roar of cheering rolled to his ears.

"Bravo, Kildare!"

"Well kicked, sir!"

"Goal!"

"School House is going ahead, anyway," murmured Tom Merry, with satisfaction.

To Tom, of course, junior matches were of more consequence than senior matches; but he was glad to hear that his House was going strong.

"Hallo; there's Figgy!" murmured Tom Merry, as his glance fell on a single figure in the quadrangle.

He looked down curiously at Figgins.

That youth, the great chief and leader of the New House juniors in their warfare with the School House, was alone. Generally, Figgins and Kerr and Wynn were inseparable. Kerr and Wynn were now, doubtless, on the football-ground, watching the game; and George Figgins was on his own, and coming towards the School House.

Tom Merry smiled.

There was evident caution in Figgy's manner as he came on; he looked this way and that, like Moses of old, and when he came close up to the porch of the School House he darted in quickly suddenly.

It was evident that George Figgins, of the New House, was "up" to something.

Taking advantage of the fact that everybody was on the football-ground and keenly interested in the play there, Figgins was penetrating into the enemy's country; and Tom Merry did not need telling that Figgy had some "jape" on the rival House in view.

He chuckled softly.

Figgins, of course, did not know that Tom was detained in his study that afternoon with lines to do; he probably supposed that Tom Merry was on the football-ground with Manners and Lowther and Blake & Co. and the rest.

The coast was not quite so clear as George Figgins supposed.

Tom Merry took up his finished imposition, and went downstairs with it. He went quietly and cautiously.

The School House was almost deserted; even Mr. Railton, the Housemaster had gone down to watch the House-match. Tom Merry's business was to leave his lines on the Housemaster's table; and, after that, he intended to send down to Big Side as fast as he could go, to see the finish of the game. But the sight of Figgins' cautious entry into the School House had quite changed his intentions. His business now was to ascertain what George Figgins was "up" to.

He lingered on the staircase, and cast a cautious glance over the banisters.

He was in time to see Figgins disappear into Mr. Railton's study.

Tom was puzzled for a moment.

If Figgy was planning a jape on the School House, it was rather odd for him to penetrate into the Housemaster's quarters; a Housemaster was certainly not a proper subject for japes.

Tom Merry descended the stairs, and trod along softly to Mr. Railton's door. That the Housemaster was not there he knew, and undoubtedly Figgy knew it, too.

The door was ajar, and Tom peered in.

Figgins was standing at the Housemaster's telephone, with the receiver in his hand, his back to the door. It was obvious that Figgy had seen the Housemaster on Big Side, and did not expect to be interrupted.

Apparently the New House junior had "sneaked" into the School House simply to borrow Mr. Railton's telephone during his absence. But as Tom looked in, Figgy's voice came to his ears.

"Merry! Yes—Merry, that's the name!"

Tom started.

Figgins had rung up some party or parties unknown, and he was giving Tom Merry's name on the telephone! It was, after all, a "jape" of some kind, and Tom was more interested than ever. He stood quiet, while Figgins' voice went on:

"Got that? Tom Merry, School House, St. Jim's! Right! You're Mr. Fildgett? Right!"

Tom Merry listened, entertained but a little perplexed. He knew the name; Mr. Fildgett was a dog-fancier in Wayland, and reputed to be a gentleman of a rough-and-ready character. Why on earth Figgy was telephoning was soon explained.

"You've still got that bulldog—Toothy, you know—the one that was returned to you because he was so savage—eh?" Figgins listened on the receiver, and chuckled. "Yes, I've heard about that—you punched the man for not paying for the dog. Quite right, too! Fine dog; I've seen him in your shop. Splendid dog; plenty of spirit. That's why I—I want him. Can you send him over here—St. Jim's, you know—the school? Tom Merry—that's the name. Four pounds; that's quite cheap. I'm satisfied with that. Say at twelve to-morrow. Lessons will be off then. Right! Don't forget the name—Tom Merry, School House, St. Jim's, and your man is to wait for the money. Right!"

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Figgins put up the receiver.

There was a soft chuckle in Mr. Railton's study; it proceeded from George Figgins, who was evidently well satisfied with the result of his talk on the telephone.

"Good man!" Figgins murmured aloud. "Rather a surprise for dear old simple Tommy when Flidgett walks in with a ferocious bulldog and a demand for four quids or a punch on the nose! Ha, ha! Jolly useful invention, the telephone. Jolly convenient for old Railton to walk down to the footer, our Housemaster never does! Ha, ha!"

Figgins turned towards the door.

Tom Merry backed away silently, and slipped into the next study. With the door ajar, he heard Figgins quit Mr. Railton's room.

Tom's first impulse had been to fall upon the New House junior in the passage, and smite him hip-and-thigh. But he had very quickly thought of a better scheme than that for dealing with the practical joker. He remained in cover in Mr. Lathom's study until Figgins had walked down the passage and disappeared.

Then Tom strolled into Mr. Railton's study.

He laid his lines upon the Housemaster's table to greet Mr. Railton's eyes when he returned. Then he picked up the receiver, and rang up Mr. Flidgett of Wayland town.

"Allo!" came a deep, husky voice.

"That Mr. Flidgett?" asked Tom Merry.

"It are."

"You were rung up a few minutes ago, from St. Jim's—"

"Yes, Master Merry."

"There's a mistake about the name. It should be Figgins—George Figgins, New House, St. Jim's. Got that?"

"Hay!"

"The wrong name was given," Tom Merry explained patiently. "It's Figgins who's ordering the dog—George Figgins, New House, St. Jim's. The bulldog is to be delivered to Figgins, and the man is to wait for the money. You will not make any mistake about the animal—that fine, spirited bulldog that was returned to you—Toothy, you know."

"I know," said Mr. Flidgett. "Look 'ere, I'm a busy man. Are you sure you've got the name right this time?"

"Quite sure. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" grunted Mr. Flidgett.

Tom Merry rang off, and walked out of the Housemaster's study with a contented smile on his face. He was not very sorry now that he had been detained that afternoon, after all. Figgins was satisfied, and Tom Merry was satisfied, which was really a happy result of the affair, for it was seldom that the rivals of St. Jim's were both satisfied at once. There was one person who was likely to be dissatisfied, and that was Mr. Railton, when he should receive the bill from the Telephone Department for a number of calls he certainly never had had; but no doubt Mr. Railton would find consolation in making caustic remarks about Government departments that never could send in correct accounts.

CHAPTER 2.

Bill Flidgett Delivers the Goods.

"B Al Jove!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, uttered that surprised ejaculation.

It was the following day, and morning lessons were over at St. Jim's. Blake and Herries and Digby and D'Arcy, of the Fourth, were sauntering in the quadrangle, chatting on the subject of yesterday's House match, which had ended in a win for their House—the School House. Blake & Co. agreed that that result had been a foregone conclusion; though Figgins & Co., of the New House, looked upon it as a most remarkable and unexpected fluke. Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther, of the Shell, were loafing about the school gates, occasionally glancing into the road, as if in expectation of some arrival.

It was an arrival that caused D'Arcy's surprised ejaculation.

A short, bull-necked man, with a red-spotted handkerchief in the place of a collar, and a rather battered bowler-hat on the side of his bullet head, stopped at the gates. He came into the gateway, leading a bulldog on a chain. That bulldog was not a beautiful animal. Even at a distance his red eyes had a ferocious gleam in them. Herries celebrated bulldog, Towser, was a quiet and peaceable-looking animal in comparison.

"Bai Jove! What does that merchant want, I wonder?" Arthur Augustus remarked, turning his eyeglass on the man and the dog. "I wathin think I shall give that fearful-lookin' beast a wide berth."

"Looks a bit of a hooligan, and no mistake," remarked Jack Blake.

"Worse than your brute, Herries!"

Herries grunted.

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"Yes, rather!" observed Digby. "Towser ought to be drowned, but that brute ought to be boiled in oil, from his looks."

"Fathead!" said Herries.

"Bai Jove! I quite agree with Dig," said Arthur Augustus. "Towser has no respect whatever for a fellow's twosha, but that brute—"

"He's coming in!" said Blake. "What the thump can he want here? Nobody at St. Jim's is buying that dog, surely!"

"Bai Jove! I twust not!"

Mr. Flidgett walked in, looking round him. Taggles, the porter, looked out of his lodge, and called to him.

"'Ere, my man, out o' that!"

"Torkin' to me?" he inquired.

"I ham!" said Taggles emphatically. "You 'ook it, my man, and take that there dorg away with you. Sharp's the word!"

"I reckon," said Mr. Flidgett, "that you don't know who you're torkin' to. I'm 'ere on business, my man, to see a young cove name of Figgins. He's buying this 'ere dorg. Got anything to say?"

Mr. Flidgett walked towards Taggles while he was making these remarks, and Toothy strained at the chain, with an evident desire to sample the old porter's ancient calves.

Taggles withdrew promptly into his lodge and closed the door. Mr. Flidgett did not look like a gentleman to be argued with, and Toothy was plainly beyond the reach of any kind of argument. Taggles felt safer behind a closed door.

"Put your silly 'ead hout, and tell me where to find Master Figgins," said the dog-fancier.

But the lodge door remained shut. Mr. Flidgett glanced round at the Terrible Three, who were looking on with smiling faces.

"'Appen to know a young cove name of Figgins?" he inquired.

"Certainly," said Tom Merry. "Is that dog for him?"

"Yes, Hordered yesterday afternoon by telephone," said Mr. Flidgett. "I've walked him over from Wayland. Wouldn't trust him in any 'ands but my own. Sperrited dorg, he is."

"He looks it!" agreed Monty Lowther.

"He does!" murmured Manners. "He do!"

"Figgins is a New House chap, Mr. Flidgett," explained Tom Merry. "You'll find him in the New House yonder. I'll show you the way. Why, there he is!"

Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn, the Co. of the New House, were just coming out, as Tom Merry kindly guided Mr. Flidgett. The three New House juniors grinned at the sight of Mr. Flidgett and the bulldog. Knowing nothing of the second telephone message the dog-fancier had received, Figgins was under the blissful impression that his little scheme for "taking a rise" out of the School House was working well.

"That's the chap," said Tom Merry kindly. "The long-legged fellow, with a face like a kite."

"Thanky!" said Mr. Flidgett.

And he stumped on towards the New House with Toothy at his heels.

Tom Merry rejoined his chums.

"Dear old Figg is going to have a surprise," he murmured. "He won't find it so easy to disp. the Shell as Study No. 6—what?"

"Ha, ha! Not quite."

Figgins & Co. were grinning in anticipation; but their grins died away, giving place to perplexed expressions, as Mr. Flidgett marched up to them. He had no business with them—that they knew of, at least—and they wondered what he wanted.

"You Master Figgins?" asked the dog-fancier.

"That's my name," said Figgins.

"I've brought the dorg."

"I can see you've brought the dog," said Figgins, puzzled.

"But—"

"Four p'un!" said Mr. Flidgett. "Take the chain, sir! I'm giving you this 'ere chain with 'im. It's a very strong one—and he needs it!"

"But the dog isn't for me," said Figgins, with a stare.

"Your name's Figgins, ain't it?"

"Yes; but—"

"Then the dorg's for you," said Mr. Flidgett decidedly.

"Four p'un!"

"But I—I—"

"I got to get back to my dinner," said Mr. Flidgett. "I don't usually walk three miles this time o' day, even to oblige a customer. But I wouldn't trust this 'ere dorg in any other man's 'ands—not till he was delivered and paid for. Now I got to get back. I got the receipt made out 'ere, and I'll trouble you for four p'un, sir!"

"But—but I—I—" stammered Figgins.

"'Ere's the receipt, tuppenny stamp and all," said Mr. Flidgett impatiently. "I told you I'd wait for the money, didn't I?"

“But the dog isn’t for me, it’s for Tom Merry!” shouted Figgins, amazed at this extraordinary wrong turn of the affair.

“Merry? That was the name first mentioned, and then you rung me up ag’in, and said there was a mistake, and it was Figgins,” said Mr. Flidgett.

“I—I didn’t!” ejaculated the bewildered Figgins. “Certainly not!”

“Look ‘ere—”

“The dog’s for Tom Merry!” exclaimed Figgins warmly. “That fellow you were talking to just now.”

“Blow me tight!” exclaimed Mr. Flidgett. He turned and bawled to Tom Merry in the distance: “‘Ere, young ‘un, it’s this ‘ere dog for you?”

“Me?” exclaimed the captain of the Shell.

“Yes, you! Sharp!”

“Certainly not. I’m not buying a dog,” said Tom Merry, in mild surprise.

Mr. Flidgett gave a snort. He was rather puzzled; but there was one point he was quite clear upon, and that was that he had not walked three miles with a dog for nothing. He was very glad of a chance of getting rid of that unsaleable animal, and he intended to collect four pounds for Toothy before he walked home to his dinner. On that point, in Mr. Flidgett’s mind, there was no doubt—no possible, probable shadow of doubt, as the song says—no possible doubt whatever.

“Look ‘ere!” he exclaimed. “This ‘ere dog was hordered by telephone, price four p’un, name of Figgins. I’ve brought this ‘ere dog. Did you telephone to me, or did you not, young shaver?”

“I—I—” stuttered Figgins. Certainly he had telephoned to Mr. Flidgett; there was no denying that. It was the mysterious second telephone call and the change of names that perplexed Figgins.

“Yes or no?” shouted Mr. Flidgett, showing very plain signs of a rising temper. “I’ve walked three mile, and I want my dinner. You telephoned to me and hordered this dog—what?”

“Oh, my hat!” murmured Kerr. Fatty Wynn looked on in dismay.

“You see, I—I—” gasped Figgins.

“He has never expected to be accused of telephoning to Mr. Flidgett. He had supposed this visit to Mr. Railton’s study to be a dead secret, save to his two chums. He was quite taken aback.

“Well, you did telephone!” said Mr. Flidgett aggressively.

The Terrible Three strolled nearer, smiling, and Blake & Co. came to look on, and several other fellows. The scene was, indeed, attracting attention on all sides now. Mr. Flidgett and his bulldog were rather unusual and remarkable figures in the quadrangle of St. Jim’s.

“What on earth do you want with a dog like that, Figgins?” asked Tom Merry.

“I—I don’t—I—I didn’t—”

“Didn’t telephone for him?” asked Lowther. “Could you possibly have given Tommy’s name by mistake?”

Figgins glared at the Terrible Three. He began to understand now that somehow the School House chums had turned the tables on him.

“I—I—”

“You must be an ass, Figgy!” commented Tom Merry. “You telephoned an order for a dog you don’t want, and you give a wrong name by mistake. Have you been wandering in your mind?”

“You School House rotter!” roared Figgins, in great exasperation. “You’ve vangled this somehow!”

“Little us?” exclaimed Tom Merry, raising his eyebrows. “My dear chap, you ought to know whether you telephoned to Flidgett or not!”

“Yaas, wathah!” grinned Arthur Augustus D’Arcy. “It appears to me, Figgins, that you have been twyin’ to play a twick on Tom Mewwy, and that the twick has come home to woost. Ha, ha, ha!”

“Ha, ha, ha!” roared Blake. “Where are you going to keep your dog, Figgy? What will your Housemaster say? Mr. Ratcliff doesn’t like dogs!”

“Look ‘ere!” roared Mr. Flidgett, whose impatience had been growing by leaps and bounds. “I’ve ‘ad enough of this ‘ere! I’m waitin’ for my four p’un, and ‘ere’s the receipt, and I’ve got to get ‘ome to my dinner! ‘Ere’s the dog, Master Figgins!”

“I don’t want him!” howled Figgins. “What the thump do you think I want with a brute like that!”

“You don’t want this ‘ere sperrited dog?” gasped Mr. Flidgett.

“No, I don’t!”

“Arter hordering ‘im?”

“There—there’s a mistake,” said Figgins haltingly. “The fact is, I—I—” Figgins stammered. Certainly he couldn’t explain to the irate dog-merchant that he had ordered that spirited animal for a practical joke on the School House. Mr. Flidgett did not look like a gentleman to accept that explanation quietly. “You—you see—I—”

“I don’t see!” said Mr. Flidgett. “That’s jest wot’s the matter. I’ve mentioned already that I’m waitin’ for this ‘ere bill to be paid.”

Figgins cast a hopeless glance at his chums. The plot had worked out the wrong way, somehow; and it was Figgy, and not Tom Merry, who had to meet Mr. Flidgett’s demands. Four pounds was a sum beyond the combined resources of the New House Co. just then, even if they had been inclined to take that way out of the difficulty.

“G-g-g-g-et rid of him somehow, Figgy,” murmured Fatty Wynn. Which advice was easier to give than to act upon.

Quite a crowd of juniors had gathered round now, most of them laughing. Kildare of the Sixth came across from the School House, and the juniors made way for the captain of the school.

“What does this mean?” demanded Kildare brusquely. “What are you doing here with that dog?”

Mr. Flidgett turned an aggressive glare upon the St. Jim’s captain.

“This ‘ere dog was hordered yesterday by that there young cove, and I’m delivering the goods,” he snorted, “and now the young hass don’t seem to ‘ave made up his mind whether he wants the dog or whether he don’t! I know I want the money, arter walking three mile!”

“Figgins, you young ass, did you order this dog?” exclaimed Kildare in astonishment.



Mr. Ratcliff jumped on the table whilst Figgins mounted the bookcase. Toothy ambled round the table, snapping at the Housemaster, who palpitated with terror. The mottled visage of Mr. Flidgett looked in at the doorway, grinning. “Seize him, Toothy!” he shouted.

"I—I—"

"Did you or not?" snapped Kildare.

"Not exactly." You—see— stammered Figgins.

If the dog had been delivered to Tom Merry, as per programme, Tom certainly would have denied having ordered it, as he certainly hadn't done so. But Figgins was in a different position. He had ordered the dog; there was no getting out of that.

"Yes or no?" snapped Kildare. "If you ordered it you will have to pay for it, though certainly you will not be allowed to keep such an animal in the school."

"Bai Jove! Poor old Figgzy!"

"I—I—" stammered Figgins. "I—I certainly telephoned, but—but it was a lark!" gasped Figgins desperately. "I ordered it for Tom Merry, to pull his leg."

"And wot about me?" roared Mr. Flidgett in just indignation. "Wot about a bloke walking three miles with a dog?"

"I—I'll stand you five bob for your trouble," said Figgins, feeling that this was the unhappiest practical joke that had ever been heard of in the history of practical joking.

"Five bob!" Mr. Flidgett snorted contemptuously. "I'm waiting for four p'un! That's wot I'm waiting for!"

"I tell you—"

"Four p'un," roared Mr. Flidgett, "or I'll set the dog on to yer!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Look here, my man—" began Kildare.

"Who're you a-torkin' to?"

"I'm talking to you," said the captain of St. Jim's quietly. "The boy has played a foolish trick, but he doesn't want the dog. He will pay you proper compensation for your trouble, and you can take the dog away."

"I wouldn't take that dog away at a gift! He's nearly 'ad a lump out of me walking 'im over 'ere!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You can't expect a junior schoolboy to take charge of a dog like that!" ejaculated Kildare.

"He knows what he was about when he hordered him, I 'spose? Asked for him special, he did—Toothy, what was sent back 'cause he was a bit sperrited, and I punched a man's nose for not paying. I'm open to punch any gentleman 'ere if I'm not paid!" added Mr. Flidgett aggressively.

"Hallo, here comes old Ratty!" murmured Blake.

The long, thin figure of Mr. Ratcliff, Housemaster of the New House, appeared on the steps. Mr. Ratcliff's attention had been called at last to the altercation proceeding almost under his windows.

"What is all this?" he exclaimed harshly. "What is this man doing here? You should know better, Kildare, than to enter into conversation with rough characters, in the very quadrangle!"

Kildare flushed.

"The man has a claim on Figgins," he said. "I was trying to settle it as amicably as possible."

Mr. Ratcliff raised a thin hand.

"Such an affair is not your business, Kildare. You are a School House prefect, and I decline to allow you to interfere in affairs of my House."

"But, sir—"

"That will do, Kildare. Leave this affair in my hands."

"Oh, very well, sir!" exclaimed Kildare; and he turned on his heel and strode away.

Mr. Ratcliff was left to deal with the aggressive Mr. Flidgett. And if he had reflected a little before he gave full play to his bitter tongue, Mr. Ratcliff would probably have been extremely glad to keep Kildare on the scene. Mr. Flidgett was not an easy or a pleasant character to deal with, as Ratty was to discover.

CHAPTER 3. Rough on Ratty.

MR. RATCLIFF turned to the dog-fancier, with a lofty and dignified frown on his brow. He had no doubt that he was going to crush the rough-looking man with his dignity and authority; and never had Horace Ratcliff made a greater mistake. It was probable that Kildare would have succeeded in bringing Mr. Flidgett to reason; but Mr. Ratcliff's method was to ride the high horse, and that was the very last method that was likely to succeed with Bill Flidgett.

"Now, kindly explain your presence here, my man," said Mr. Ratcliff acidly.

Tom Merry & Co. looked on with breathless interest. There was hardly a junior in the crowd who did not realise that Ratty had bitten off more than he could chew, so to speak, in taking Mr. Flidgett on his hands.

"I'm 'ere to deliver 'is 'ere dog to that there young cove, wot hordered 'im by telephone!" bawled Mr. Flidgett. "Don't shout at me, my good man. I am not deaf!"

"Who you calling your good man?" bawled Mr. Flidgett.

"Silence, sir!"

"Silence yourself, old skinny ribs!"

"Wha-a-a!"

"Take yer face away and bury it, or sell it to a farmer for a scorecrown!" said Mr. Flidgett. "That's about its mark, old bony chops!"

"Bless my soul!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff.

He could scarcely believe that he, Mr. Horace Ratcliff, Master of Arts, Housemaster at a celebrated public school, had actually been addressed as "bony chops" by a low, common person.

But he had!

There was a roar of laughter from the St. Jim's crowd. They were beginning to like Mr. Flidgett!

"Fellow!" stammered the Housemaster.

"Fellow yourself!" retorted Mr. Flidgett. "I'm 'ere to claim my cash! Four p'un—that young bloke owes me for this 'ere dog!"

"Figgins," gasped the Housemaster, "is it possible that you actually ordered this—this person to bring that—that animal here?"

Figgins suppressed a groan. His practical joke was losing more and more of its humour every moment.

"It was a lark, sir," he mumbled. "I had a lark—"

"You had a what?"

"A—a—a lark, sir."

"I do not understand you, Figgins. We are discussing this dog, not any kind of a bird, lark or otherwise."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence!"

"Him a schoolmaster, and don't know wot a lark is!" said Mr. Flidgett, in incredulous scorn.

"I—I mean a joke, sir!" stammered the unhappy Figgins.

"Just a—a joke, sir. I—I—I—"

"You ordered this man to bring that ferocious-looking animal here for a joke?" thundered the New House master.

"Yes, sir!" groaned Figgins.

"You will be severely punished for this, Figgins. The dog, of course, cannot remain in the school. My good man, kindly take the dog away at once, and take yourself off the premises."

"What about my four p'un?"

"The boy will not be allowed to purchase the dog, even if he wishes to do so. So kindly take him away at once."

"I ain't going without my money," said Mr. Flidgett, "and if I don't get it, I'll set the dog on yer!"

"Go!" thundered Mr. Ratcliff.

"Rats to you, old bony face!" retorted Mr. Flidgett. "Think I'm afraid of you, in your gown like an old woman? Yah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Upon my word! Ruffian, if you do not leave these premises instantly, I will have you ejected by force."

"Like to see the cove what'd do it!" said Mr. Flidgett disdainfully. "His own father wouldn't know his face arter."

"I say, Mr. Flidgett—" began Figgins appealingly.

"Silence, Figgins! Go into my study at once, and wait for me there!" snapped Mr. Ratcliff.

"But I say, sir, I'm willing to compensate—"

"Silence, and obey me at once!"

George Figgins went into the New House glumly. Mr. Ratcliff raised a bony hand, and pointed a thin forefinger at the dog-merchant.

"Go!" he said commandingly.

"Not without my money!"

"You will not receive a shilling here—not one shilling!" said Mr. Ratcliff angrily. "I command you to go!"

Bill Flidgett laughed derisively.

"Four p'un, or I set the dog loose!" he snapped.

"Not a shilling—"

"Then 'ere goes!"

Mr. Flidgett stooped to unfasten the chain from Toothy's collar. There was a surging back of the juniors at once. Nobody wanted to be near Toothy when he was loose.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus. "Give him a wide berth, dear boys! Wun for it!"

"Merry!" shouted Mr. Ratcliff, in great alarm. "Call Taggles—call Kildare—request Kildare to come back immediately—"

"Yes, sir."

Tom Merry dashed away towards the School House, where he saw Kildare with Darrel of the Sixth. He came back in less than a minute, with a grin on his face—alone.

"Kildare says he declines to interfere in affairs of your House, sir!" said Tom demurely.

"Bless my soul!"

"Bai Jove!" That's a Woland for an Olivah!" murmured Arthur Augustus.

Clunk! The chain dropped from Toothy's collar. Tom Merry scuttled back to the crowd at a safe distance. The look on Toothy's face was really alarming.

Mr. Ratcliff gathered his gown about him, and jumped up the steps of the New House, in alarm and terror.

"Fetch 'im, Toothy!" bawled Mr. Flidgett.

"Oh! Ah! Oooooop! Help!"

Mr. Ratcliff went in at the doorway of the New House at a really remarkable speed, his gown fluttering as he fled. After him, like an arrow from a bow, flew Toothy, intent on business.

Fellows inside the New House scattered far and wide at the sight of Toothy. Mr. Ratcliff ran for the shelter of his study.

He reached it, fortunately, and rushed in; bumping into Figgins, who was waiting there, as instructed. There was a deep growl from Toothy as he came rapidly up the passage.

Mr. Ratcliff reeled against the table.

"Shut the door, Figgins!" he panted.

Figgins jumped at the door. Mr. Ratcliff jumped on the table. Figgins slammed the door desperately, but it slammed on Toothy's nose and rebounded. The next instant Toothy was in the study, enraged by the thump on his Roman nose. Figgins made a bound for the bookcase, and was on the top of it in the twinkling of an eye.

Toothy ambled round the table, snapping up at the Housemaster, who palpitated with terror. The mottled visage of Mr. Flidgett looked in at the doorway, grinning.

"Seize 'im, Toothy!"

Growl!

"Help!" shrieked Mr. Ratcliff, as the bulldog made an attempt to clamber on the table, fortunately without success. "Help! Police! Murder! Oh, dear! Help!"

"Anybody paying me my four p'un?" asked Mr. Flidgett.

"I'm waiting 'ere to be paid."

"Call that dog off!" shrieked Mr. Ratcliff.

"That there dog's staying where he is till I'm paid, old bony mug!"

Monteith of the Sixth looked in at the door.

"What the thump—"

"Help, Monteith!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff. "Get the porter—the gardener—the coachman—the police! Help! Take a—a stick and drive that dog away, Monteith!"

"Try it on!" grinned Mr. Flidgett. "Toothy won't care much for your stick, I reckon, and you'll want a surgeon arter to amputate what's left of your leg."

"Look here!" began Monteith.

"Seize him, Toothy!"

Monteith fled down the passage. He was no funk; but there were few who would have faced that savage animal's rush.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Mr. Flidgett. "Come back, Toothy! 'Ere, dog, this way! Old bony ribs is your game!"

Bill Flidgett, whether in jest or earnest, deliberately placed a chair to help the bulldog scramble to the table-top.

Mr. Ratcliff shrieked:

"Keep him off!"

"Who's payin' my four p'un?"

"I—I—I will pay you!" spluttered Mr. Ratcliff. "For—mercy's sake put the—chain on that dreadful animal! I—I will pay you!"

"Honest?" asked Bill Flidgett suspiciously.

"Yes, yes, yes! Call him away!"

"'Ere, Toothy!"

Toothy reluctantly submitted to the chain. He sat on the study carpet, and eyed the Housemaster hungrily. Toothy seemed to have taken a particular fancy to Mr. Ratcliff's bony limbs, and he felt his disappointment acutely. Bill Flidgett had to keep a strong grip on the chain.

"Where's the cash?" he inquired.

Mr. Ratcliff, with a trembling hand, sorted four currency notes out of his pocket-book.

"Thanky!" said Mr. Flidgett. "'Ere's the receipt! You can settle the matter with that there young cove atop of the bookcase, old tintribs! I've 'ad my money and that's all I want. Am I to leave the dog 'ere?"

"Take it away!" shrieked Mr. Ratcliff.

"It's been bought and paid for," said Mr. Flidgett. "If you don't want your dog, I'll take 'im away for five bob. Is it a go?"

"I—I refuse to submit to extortion! I—"

"Good-morning, then, old bony boko!"

Mr. Flidgett turned to the door. The new Housemaster shrieked after him:

"Take it away! Drag it away! I—I will give you five shillings!"

"Now you're torking!" said Mr. Flidgett genially.

In quite a good-humour now, the dog-merchant pocketed five shillings, and led Toothy out of the study. Mr. Ratcliff descended from the table, and sank, breathless, into his arm-chair. Figgins slipped from the bookcase, and as Mr. Ratcliff was too overcome to deal with him just then, the Fourth-Former scuttled out of the study.

CHAPTER 4.

Sympathising with Figgins!

"H A, ha, ha!" There was a roar of laughter in the quadrangle of St. Jim's as Mr. Flidgett led Toothy down the gates, and disappeared. As soon as he was outside, Taggles whisked out of his lodge, and slammed the gates.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! I wegard that as vewy funnny!" chuckled Arthur Augustus. "Did you felahs see old Watty through his studay window—"

"Ha, ha, ha! Yes, rather!" roared Blake. "Impromptu acrobatic performance on a study table. Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors roared. There was another roar as George Figgins appeared from the New House.

Figgins was not smiling. He was thinking of the reckoning to come with his Housemaster, and that was not a matter to smile about. Never had a practical joker so deeply and sincerely repented of a practical joke.

"Hallo, Figgys!" called out Tom Merry affably. "Jervar get left?"

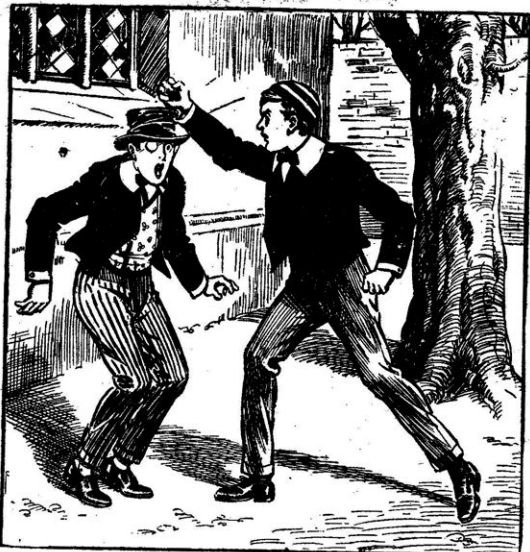
"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Fellows who try to jape the School House are liable to come for wool, and to go home shorn, Figgys!" chuckled Monty Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Next time you use Railton's telephone, mind that there isn't an eye on you, Figgys!" chortled Mannars.

"Otherwise, the tables are likely to be turned, old bean!" said Tom Merry, laughing.



Crash! George Figgins, apparently untouched by Gussy's gentle sympathy, smote Gussy's beautiful hat with a ferocious smite, and it was fairly flattened over Gussy's aristocratic countenance. "Yoop!" he roared. "Oh, crumbs! You howlid wuffian!"

"You awful rotter!" groaned Figgins. "So that was how it was, was it? I-I thought everybody was out of the School House yesterday afternoon for the match—"

"Catch a weasel asleep!" chuckled Tom Merry. "My dear chap, the School House is rather above your weight, you know!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Oh, go and eat coke!" growled Figgins.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry & Co. strolled away to the School House in high good-humour. They were quite satisfied with the result of Figg's practical joke. But they left dissatisfaction behind them. Figgins and Kerr and Wynn looked at one another with feelings that were almost too deep for words.

"A regular frost, and no mistake!" murmured Kerr.

"Awful!" groaned Figgins.

"You must have been rather an ass, Figg, to let them spot you at the 'phone!" said Fatty Wynn with a shake of the head.

"How was I to know—" began Figgins hotly.

"Then, sneaking into the School House to use Railton's 'phone was rather fatheaded," said Fatty Wynn, with another shake of the head. "You ought to have got on to Ratty's 'phone—"

"Ratty was in his study all the afternoon, ass!"

"Well, you've made an awful muck of it, anyhow!"

Figgins gave a snort.

"Got anything more comforting and consoling to say?" he demanded ferociously.

"The School House will cackle no end—"

"Let 'em cackle!" growled Figgins. "We beat 'em all along the line as a rule only this time it happens—"

"They're simply yelling over it!" said Fatty Wynn morosely, with a nod towards the rival House.

"Let 'em yell! We'll make 'em sit up for it, somehow!" grunted Figgins. "The trouble is, that I've got to Ratty when he's got over his fright."

"We'll all go in together," said Kerr; "we're all in it!"

"Rot! No good three being licked! And Ratty's paid that ruffian four pounds five shillings—and it will be sent home for my father to pay!" groaned Figgins. "Jever hear such rotten luck!"

"What I think is," remarked Fatty Wynn thoughtfully, "that it was rather rotten jape! If that brute had got hold of Ratty—"

"I wish he had—"

"Well, if he had—"

"Dry up, Wynn, for goodness' sake! Give your chin a rest!" urged Figgins.

Figg's temper seemed to be suffering a little.

"Look here, Figg—"

"Oh rats!"

Monteith of the Sixth came out of the New House, and beckoned to Figgins.

"Mr. Ratcliff wants you in his study, Figgins!" said the New House prefect grimly.

"Oh dear!" groaned Figgins.

In dismal mood George Figgins repaired once more to his Housemaster's study. As he went in, and the door closed on him, he looked a great deal like a martyr entering the lion's den. And in a few minutes more he was feeling like one!

When he came out of Mr. Ratcliff's study Figgins was rather pale, and he was squeezing his hands together rather hard. Kerr and Wynn were waiting for him in the passage with sympathetic looks. But Figgins passed them without a word. He was not in a mood for sympathy just then; he had gone through it too severely for that.

He went out very quietly into the quadrangle.

He was pacing to and fro, under the old elms, occasionally squeezing his hands and grunting, when Arthur Augustus D'Arcy came along. Figgins would have avoided him, but the swell of St. Jim's was not to be evaded.

He guessed what had happened to Figgins—it was easy enough to guess from his looks—and Arthur Augustus was full of kind sympathy, which he intended to express, and which he hoped Figgins would find grateful and comforting.

"Been through it, dear boy?" he asked gently.

Figgins nodded without speaking.

"Very wough luck, old chap," said Arthur Augustus feelingly. "Of course, you weally asked for it, didn't you, old bean?"

An inarticulate grunt from Figgins.

"You should not have played that wathah widiculous twick, you know!" said Arthur Augustus. "You weally could not expect to take a wise out of the School House, could you, old man?"

Grunt!

"I twust," said Arthur Augustus, still apparently under the impression that he was comforting Figgins—"I twust, dear boy, that this will be a lesson to you. Then you will not have flushed in vain, you know."

Figgins glared.

"If you would only compwehend that the New House plays second fiddle at St. Jim's, it would save you a lot of trouble," explained Arthur Augustus. "I twust, Figg, that you will beat this in mind, and wefwain fwin bwin' off more than you can chew, you know! You see—Yewwooch!"

Crash! George Figgins, apparently quite untouched by Gussy's gentle sympathy, smote Gussy's beautiful hat with a ferocious smite, and it was fairly flattened down over Gussy's aristocratic countenance.

"Yooop!" roared Arthur Augustus. "Oh crumbs! You howwid wuffian, if that is your gwatitude for a little sympathy—gwoooch!"

Figgins grinned, and walked away. Arthur Augustus clutched frantically at his hat to drag it off.

"Bai Jove! The awful wottah!" he gasped.

"Hallo, is that a concertina?" asked Tom Merry, as the Terrible Three came sauntering under the elms.

"Wats! You are verry well awah, Tom Mewwy, that it is not a concertina!" snapped Arthur Augustus. "It is my toppah, and that howwid wuffian Figgins has banged it on my nappah. I was sympathisin' with him, you know, and he banged my hat—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wegard him as an ungwateful bwute. I shall certainly nevah sympathise with Figgins again."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the Terrible Three.

"Oh, wats!"

And Arthur Augustus walked away with his damaged hat—repenting him that, in the kindness of his heart, he had wasted sweet sympathy upon a person so utterly unappreciative as George Figgins of the New House.

CHAPTER 5.

Turning 'th: Tables!

"FOOTBALL first!" remarked Tom Merry. "Oh, yes," assented Manners. "After that, I was thinking of walking out my camera—"

"Bless your old camera!" yawned Monty Lowther. "I was thinking of seeing the new pictures at Wayland Cinema."

"Bother your old cinema!" retorted Manners. "You're too keen on the pictures, Monty! We shall have you cracking safes and things, some day, if you keep on going to the movies like this. You know what it leads to, in the long run, with a weak-minded youth."

"Ass!" said Lowther politely. "Are you coming to the pictures, Tom? Two to one, and Manners will have to give in."

But Tom Merry shook his head.

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"Fed up on films," he said. "Blessed if I want to stick indoors in fine weather. Besides, there's the 'Weekly'—"

"Oh, blow the 'Weekly'!" said Manners and Lowther together.

"We ought to run down to the printer's and see it through," argued Tom Merry.

"Oh, it's all right; chance it!" suggested Lowther. "Editors can't chance it with their papers," said Tom Merry severely. "You don't seem to realise the responsibilities of an editor-in-chief, Monty."

"Bow-wow!" was Monty Lowther's disrespectful reply to the editor-in-chief. "Cut the swank!"

The Terrible Three were discussing what was to be done with that particular half-holiday. It was some little time since the affair of Figgins and Mr. Flidgett; and since that affair, Figgins & Co. seemed to have been lying rather low. So the heroes of the School House were not honouring their old rivals with any attention just at present. It was a fine afternoon, and they wanted to make the most of it.

An hour on the footer ground came first, of course; and after that, there were three separate opinions as to what ought to be done.

Monty Lowther was for the pictures, Manners for a walk with the camera, and Tom Merry for doing his duty manfully as editor-in-chief of "Tom Merry's Weekly."

But the matter was settled amicably as they strolled down to Little Side. After footer, they went in and changed, and then the three took separate roads—Manners rambling off into the woods with his camera, Lowther taking his bike across to Wayland, and Tom Merry sauntering down the lane to the village. They agreed to meet at tea in the study; and until that time they agreed that they could survive without one another's company.

Tom Merry strolled into the old High Street of Rylcombe, and stopped at the office of Mr. Tipper, the publisher of the "Rylcombe Gazette," and printer of circulars and handbills for the village shopkeepers. He was also the printer of Tom Merry's "Weekly"—that enterprising journal having long passed beyond the handwriting stage. Instead of having the proofs sent up to the school, Tom Merry sometimes dropped into Mr. Tipper's office to correct them in type—being rather proud of his ability to do so.

He found Mr. Tipper at work at the compositor's frame; Mr. Tipper being his own compositor, with the aid of his boy. The rather grubby village printer gave him a cheery nod.

"Walk in, Master Merry! Good-afternoon, sir." "The 'Weekly' set up?" asked Tom.

"Every bit, to the last comma," answered Mr. Tipper. "Show the gentleman where the formes are, Teddy. I'm just putting that extra ad into the 'Gazette' for you, Master Merry."

"The what?" "It's all right," said Mr. Tipper. "It'll come out in this week's issue of our local paper. Just in time, in fact."

Tom Merry stared a little. "I don't quite follow," he said. "What advertisement are you talking about, Mr. Tipper?"

"The advert. for the frogs," answered Mr. Tipper.

"Frogs?" "Which it's 'ard to say what you want them frogs for, Master Merry," said the printer, with a rather curious glance at the Shell fellow of St. Jim's. "No business of mine, of course. P'raps you're taking to eating frogs, like they do, I've heard, in France, arter your holiday there, sir?"

"I'm blessed if I understand you, Mr. Tipper," said the perplexed junior. "I've not sent you any advertisement that I know of."

"Master Figgins—" "Eh?"

"Master Figgins brought it to me this afternoon," said Mr. Tipper. "You was busy at the football, and couldn't come."

"My only hat!"

Tom Merry began to understand now. Figgins & Co. of the New House were not, after all, lying so low as he had supposed. Evidently he had fallen, by sheer accident, upon a new jape of the rival house. He felt rather glad that he had called at Mr. Tipper's office that afternoon.

"Let's see the advertisement, will you?" he said. "Cert'nly. Here it is."

Mr. Tipper tossed a rather crumpled sheet of notepaper across to the St. Jim's junior. Tom looked at it with great interest. The following advertisement was written out on it:

FROGS! FROGS! FROGS! Any number required! Two shillings per dozen paid for frogs, ready cash. Must be full-grown specimens, all alive and kicking. Deliver to T. Merry, School House, St. Jim's.

Tom Merry chuckled.

"So that's the game is it?" he said. "Have you wedged this precious advertisement in yet, Mr. Tipper?"

"Just setting it up, sir," answered Mr. Tipper. "I've found room for it at the bottom of the 'Matrimonial Column'—too late to put it in the reg'lar 'Wanted Column.'"

"Don't put it in at all," said Tom, laughing. "It's only a jape—that ass Figgins trying to pull my leg."

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

"Jolly lucky I ejaculated, I think," said Tom. "Why, that advertisement would be enough to start every kid in Rylcombe and Wayland catching frogs, and bringing bags of them to the school for me. A pretty ass I should look!"

Mr. Tipper gave a chuckle.

"Course, I'll leave it out, if you say it ain't genuine, Master Merry," he said. "But Master Figgins has paid two shillings for that ad, and I understood the money came from you."

"Never heard of it before."

"Then I'll have to give Master Figgins back his two bob," said Mr. Tipper. "Too bad of him to come 'ere wasting a busy man's time with his little jokes."

"I'll take it back to him, if you like," said Tom. "It will be rather funny to see his face when I hand it over."

"Right you are, sir; save me a penny on the postal-order, and tuppence on the letter, which I should have took out of the two bob."

Mr. Tipper handed a two-shilling-piece to the captain of the Shell. Then he wrinkled his brow over the type.

"I'll 'ave to put in something to fill up," he remarked.

"There's a hinch left now at the bottom of the 'Matrimonial Column,' and we're taking off the copies to-night. Nothing you want to advertise, Master Merry—second-hand and football to sell, or anything?"

Tom laughed.

"Yes, I'll 'ave two bobs' worth!" he answered. "Put in a message from me to Figgins. 'Dear Figgins,—Try again! Signed, Tom Merry!' That will be worth the bobs; and I won't mention the matter to Figgins till after the paper comes out!"

Mr. Tipper chuckled, and proceeded to set up that paragraph—for which Tom Merry paid on the spot. Then the editor of "Tom Merry's Weekly" turned his attention to his own business. Reading over the type backwards, and picking out a letter here and there with his tongue, he was rather an entertainment to the schoolboy editor, though Mr. Tipper, in the way of business, had too much of it to find it entertaining.

Tom Merry was still busy when Mr. Tipper remarked that he was going to his tea. And he went, taking his boy with him. Tom Merry was left alone in the printing office. He went on with his task sedulously, and was finished soon after the printer left.

But he did not leave the office at once.

While he was proof-reading, Tom Merry's mind was busy; and when his task was done he sat down on Mr. Tipper's bench to think a bit. A sunny smile appeared on his face—a smile that would have warmed Figgins, if he could have seen it. That trouble for the New House was coming. Tom Merry broke into a chuckle, and slipped from the bench at last, and approached the spot where Mr. Tipper had been working at the "Rylcombe Gazette." That valuable publication, all in type, lay before him, quite ready now to be turned off the machine when Mr. Tipper resumed work after tea.

It was the mention of the "Matrimonial Column" by the printer that had started the germ of an idea in Tom Merry's active brain. That germ had germinated, as it were, and now was a full-blown wheeze. Tom Merry grinned as he bent over the type, and read down the advertisements in the "Matrimonial Column."

There were half a dozen of them in the usual style. "Wealthy widow desires to meet single gentleman of irreproachable social position"; "Widower with a little capital desires to meet middle-aged lady with same, with a view to matrimony"; "Gentleman, widower, with eleven children, would be glad to exchange photographs with lady, widow or spinster, fond of children. Genuine!"

As a rule, advertisements of that kind would not have interested Tom Merry; but now he seemed quite taken with them.

After reading down the column, the junior carefully extracted the last paragraph, which contained his message to Figgins, and which had cost him two shillings.

That inch of space belonged to Tom Merry, as he had paid for it; and as it occurred at the bottom of the "Matrimonial Column," it was exactly what he required for the "stunt" that had come into his active mind.

He helped himself with type and proceeded to set up a new advertisement in its place.

"YOUNG MAN, considered handsome, son of a well-known Bristol banker, desires to hear of sympathetic lady of poetic temperament, with a view to matrimony. Blonde preferred, but brunette not objected to. No letters or photographs; THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 715.

personal interview only. Any Saturday afternoon, from 2 to 4.30. G. Figgins, New House, St. James' School, Sussex."

Tom Merry chuckled softly over that advertisement. It was certainly a great improvement on the previous one. And it was quite certain to bring a good many answers. There were plenty of single ladies and widows in Rylcombe, Wayland, and Woodend who would be very happy to meet a handsome young man, the son of a well-known banker, with a view to matrimony. Certainly, they were not likely to guess that G. Figgins was only fifteen years old; their natural conclusion would be that he was a master at the school. Such an advertisement from a master in a public school was undoubtedly something out of the common. But there it was, in plain print! Seeing is believing!

Tom Merry had finished before Mr. Tiper returned. He loathed about the office for a time, watching the printer and his boy "taking off" copies of the "Rylcombe Gazette." He did not mention his little joke to Mr. Tiper, and he was relieved to observe that that gentleman did not think of looking over the type again. Having concluded that task before tea, the printer was not likely to do it over again; and he turned off the copies of the local paper without a suspicion of the little alteration the St. Jim's junior had made.

Tom said "good-evening" to Mr. Tiper at last, and strolled out of the office.

He was feeling quite pleased with himself and with things generally as he sauntered back to St. Jim's. And he chuckled when he thought of Saturday afternoon and the strange experiences that were in store for George Figgins.

CHAPTER 6. Not Nice for Figgins I

"**B**AI JOVE! You are lookin' mewwy and bwright!" Blake & Co. met Tom Merry as he came into the quad at St. Jim's, and they did not fail to notice that he looked very cheery. Tom smiled.

"That's just how I'm feeling," he explained.

"What have you been up to?" asked Jack Blake.

Tom Merry looked thoughtful.

"Can you little boys keep a secret?" he asked.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy."

"Asking for a shill'pence?" inquired Herries.

"Bump him!" growled Diver.

Tom Merry stepped back and held up his hand.

"Pax, my dear infants," he said. "It's too good to keep, so I'll tell you. But it's got to be kept awfully, fearfully, dark, or the best jape of the term will be wasted."

"Jape on the New House?" asked Blake with interest.

"That's it!"

"I wathah think you are overwatin' it, dear boy," remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I do not think very much of Shell japes, as a wule. But we will keep it dark."

"Get it off your chest!" said Blake.

And Tom Merry proceeded to explain. Study No. 6 listened in surprise at first, and then there was a yell of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus. "Poor old Figgay! Suppose a gang of feahful females come along with a view to matrimony—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Herries.

"If it comes off, it will be the jape of the term!" gasped Blake. "Keep it dark my infants—deadly dark! Oh, my hat! To think of Figgins interviewing spinsters and widders with—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hold on, though," said Blake. "If Figgins gets a copy of the local rag, to see whether his advertisement is in it, he will spot it perhape, and then—"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Good thought!" assented Tom Merry. "I'll mention to him that I've spotted his little game, and then he won't trouble to get a copy of the "Gazette" on Friday. He'll know that his froggy advertisement isn't in it. But I sha'n't mention the merry paragraph in the 'Matrimonial Column.' That can dawn on Figgay later!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins & Co. were on the football-ground, and Tom Merry strolled in that direction to look for them. When the New House trio came off, and put on their coats and mufflers to cross over to the New House, Tom joined them, with a smiling face.

"Two bob for you, Figgay," he remarked.

George Figgins looked surprised.

"Two bob!" he repeated. "What are you driving at?"

"Dear little infant, you shouldn't try to take a rike out of your Uncle Thomas," said the captain of the Shell chidingly. "You see, I saw Mr. Tiper in the village this afternoon—"

"Oh!" ejaculated Figgins.

"He mentioned the advertisement—"

Figgins' face was a study.

"And it's not going in," said Tom Merry sweetly. "All the rising generation of the district will not start hunting frogs and bringing them to me in bags. Mr. Tiper's sent you two bob back, as the ad. isn't going in. Catch on, Figgay?"

Figgins mechanically took the two-shilling piece.

"Think of something better," suggested Tom Merry, "or don't think at all, old bean. Your brain really won't stand it, you know."

"You cheeky School House bounder!" roared Figgins.

"Try again, old top!" said Tom, laughing. And he walked away to the School House, leaving Figgins with a very extraordinary expression on his rugged face. Kerr and Wynn looked at one another, and smiled slightly. Figgins noted the smile, and frowned.

"What are you grinning at?" he demanded.

"Ahem! Was I grinning?" murmured Kerr.

"Was I?" murmured Fatty Wynn.

"Yes, you were!" growled Figgins. "Nothing to grin at that I can see, in that School House bounder's cheek. It was a jolly good stunt, if—if it had come off!"

"If!" murmured Kerr.

"You thought it was a good stunt when I took in the advertisement," said Figgins warmly.

"So it was, old chap, so it was!" said Kerr soothingly.

"But it hasn't come off, and it can't be helped."

"Try again!" suggested Fatty Wynn.

Figgins snorted.

"Not much good trying that wheeze again. Tiper jolly well won't take an advertisement in Tom Merry's name from me any more," he said. "We shall have to think of something fresh."

"I've got an idea," said Fatty Wynn thoughtfully.

"Well?" inquired Figgins.

"You've got the two bob back?"

"So it was, old chap, so it was!" said Kerr.

"Yes. What about that?"

"Well, it's two bob saved," said Fatty Wynn. "My idea is this—as we've unexpectedly got two bob, let's have something extra for tea."

Figgins glared at his plump chum.

"Something extra for tea!" he exclaimed.

"That's it! As there's two extra bobs—"

"So that's your idea, is it?" howled Figgins.

"Certainly; and I think it's a jolly good idea, too!" said Fatty Wynn. "We can have sosses and chips—"

"You gormless blunderer, I believe you'd sell the New House, lock, stock, and barrel, for sosses and chips!" growled Figgins. "Go and eat coke!"

"Oh, I say, Figgay—"

"Oh, scat!"

Figgins tramped on morosely, evidently rather put out by the failure of his little scheme. Probably he would have been still more irate, if he had known the rest of the story of the advertisement, which Tom Merry had been careful not to tell him.

Tom Merry proceeded cheerily to his study, No. 10, in the Shell, where he found Manners and Lowther. Manners was explaining to Lowther what a series of excellent snaps he had taken. Lowther was selling Manners what a ripping lot of new pictures he had seen at the Wayland Picture Palace. As both were talking at once, neither was acquiring very much information from the other, but that did not matter, as Manners was as little interested in cinemas as Lowther was in snapshooting. Tom Merry held up his hand as he came in.

"Give us a rest!" he said. "I'll take your word for it about the photographs, Manners, and yours about the pictures, Monty. Besides, I've got something to tell you."

"I've got a splendid snap of the silver beeches—"

"You should have seen the Chaplin film—"

"Chuck it! Let's have tea, and I'll tell you something better than all that!"

And over tea in Study No. 10 Tom Merry told again the story of the matrimonial advertisement. Manners and Lowther shrieked as they heard it.

"Jolly lucky you went down to Tiper's!" chorled Monty Lowther. "My hat! I'm looking forward to Saturday!"

"Same here!" grinned Tom Merry.

"But—but if a lot of blessed females come inquiring for Figgins—"

"Ha, ha, ha! Figgay will have no end of a time!" roared Lowther. "Figgay isn't much of a lady's man. He never can look at any girl except Gussy's cousin Ethel. And that won't be the sort that will answer a matrimonial advertisement. Poor old Figgay!"

Study No. 10 were in joyous mood that evening. So were Study No. 6 in the Fourth. But outside that select circle of seven not a word was spoken—even Kangaroo and Talbot and Levison were not taken into the secret. It was a case where a still tongue showed a wise head; and the fewer there were to keep the secret, the more safely it was likely to be kept.

The next day Tom Merry cycled down to Rylcombe after lessons for a copy of the local paper. That copy of the "Rylcombe Gazette" was chuckled over merely in Study No. 10. The matrimonial advertisement was there—and by that time, it had undoubtedly been read by all the readers of the local paper who were interested in the "Matrimonial Column." Tom Merry was careful to burn that copy after it had been duly chuckled over. It was very unlikely that Figgins would see the local paper, having no interest in it since the defeat of his little scheme; and still more unlikely that, if he saw it, he would glance at the "Matrimonial Column." There was little danger of Figgins being placed on his guard—and the morrow was Saturday. And even on the occasion of a Saturday football match, the chums of the School House had seldom looked forward to the morrow more keenly.

CHAPTER 7.

A Visitor for Figgins.

SATURDAY afternoon was fine, and a great many of the St. Jim's fellows were thinking of football. But for once Tom Merry & Co. were giving the great winter game a miss. After dinner, the Terrible Three of the Shell, usually so keen on getting busy, were loafing idly in the quadrangle, in sight of the New House. Blake and Herries, Digby and D'Arcy, lounged near the gateway, keeping an eye on the road like four Sister Annes. Kangaroo of the Shell, and Julian of the Fourth, and Levison and Clive and Cardew, were also on hand—a whisper at the last moment having let them into the secret. And a number of other School House fellows gathered around, suspecting that something was on, though they did not know what it was.

The school gates stood open; fellows were passing in and out every minute or two. There was nothing to bar the way of any enterprising widows or spinsters who should arrive at St. Jim's to interview the young man, considered handsome, who desired to hear of a lady of poetic temperament with a view to matrimony.

It was just after the hour of two had struck from the clock-tower, that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, looking out of the gateway, ejaculated:

"Bal Jove!"

"Sister Anne!" chuckled Monty Lowther. "Do you see anybody coming?"

"Yaas, watah!"

Half a dozen fellows peeped out cautiously. A female figure was advancing up the road. The juniors knew it by sight. They had all seen Miss Seleucia Fitzjones, an elderly lady who dwelt in single blessedness in a villa near Rylcombe, and who gave "book teas," and was the chief support of the local society for supplying blankets and hot-water bottles to the natives of the Congo.

"My only hat!" murmured Manners. "She—she can't be—be coming to—to see Figgins!"

"Impossible!" murmured Tom Merry. "Calling on the Head for a subscription, more likely."

"Yaas, watah! I twust that that is the case," said Arthur Augustus. "It has occurred to me, Tom Mewwy, that this stint of yours, howevah funny, is watah disrespectsful to the faih sex."

"Bow-wow!" said Tom.

"It's all right, Gussy!" said Blake. "Nice girls don't answer matrimonial advertisements."

"To a pwopably constituted mind, Blake, all girls are nice."

"Oh, my hat!"

"And I weally considah—"

"Shut up, Gussy, old pheasant!" said Monty Lowther. "Here she is!"

Arthur Augustus shook his head with some disapproval. He regarded Tom Merry as a very thoughtless youth, though, as a matter of fact, Gussy's misgivings had occurred to him rather late in the day. There was silence as Miss Fitzjones reached the gates. The juniors capped her respectfully; and Monty Lowther, with great politeness, inquired whether he could be of any service.

"I have called to see Mr. Figgins," said Miss Fitzjones; and the juniors almost gasped. "No doubt I shall find him in the New House."

"Oh, yes, ma'am!" said Monty Lowther. "Shall I show you the way, ma'am?"

"Thank you."

Miss Fitzjones' manner was curt and sharp; she was a lady of a rather acid temper. But Monty Lowther beamed with obliging politeness. He conducted Miss Fitzjones to the New House, leaving Tom Merry & Co. blinking at one another.

"Bal Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "She—she's weally come to see Figgins! It—it must be in answah to the advertisement."

"Mister Figgins!" chuckled Blake. "Not Master Figgins! She doesn't know he's in the Fourth!"

"Poor old Figgins!"

"The good soul's lost no time," said Manners. "It's the early bird that catches the worm."

"And Figgys will be feeling like a worm soon."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The School House crowd would have liked to follow Miss Fitzjones into the New House. But that would not have done, so they gathered round as near as they could. They had a glimpse of the angular figure of Miss Seleucia in the hall, as she stopped to speak to Monteith of the Sixth. Monteith was rather surprised to see her there, and still more surprised when she asked for Figgins. He politely showed her into the visitors'-room, and sent a fag to tell Figgins that he was wanted.

Figgins & Co., blissfully unaware of the treat that was in store for their chief, were preparing to go down to the foot-ground. Jameson of the Third came with the news that Miss Fitzjones was waiting in the visitors'-room to see him.

Figgins stared.

"What the thump does she want with me?" he asked. "I've not got any subscription for any of her blessed societies. Are you pulling my leg, young Jameson?"

"Monteith said she wanted you," grinned Jameson. "I say, she's got up no end—in great style!"

"Better go," said Kerr.

"Might be going to ask us to one of her book teas," said Fatty Wynn hopefully. "I don't mind the book part, if the tea's good and there's plenty of it. If she asks you, Figgys, don't forget you've got some pals who'd like to go."

Figgins nodded, and started for the visitors'-room, much



"Look, sir!" thundered Mrs. Stumper, holding up the advertisement under Mr. Ratcliff's beaky nose. "Look, sir! That advertisement amounts to a proposal! I shall consult my solicitors, sir, as to the possibility of suing you for breach of promise, sir!"

puzzled. He found Miss Fitzjones seated by the window there, with her back to the light.

Miss Seleucia rose as he entered, with a pretty blush; but the blush faded, and her lips tightened, as she saw that the newcomer was only a junior schoolboy.

"G-g-g-good-afternoon, ma'am," said Figgins timidly.

Miss Seleucia stared at him. She had, apparently, no politeness to waste on a schoolboy. Her look was freezing.

"Is not Mr. Figgins at home?" she snapped.

"M-m-mister Figgins?"

"Yes. Kindly go to him at once and tell him that I have called, by appointment."

"But I—I'm Figgins."

"What?"

"I—if you've called to see me, ma'am——"

"I have not called to see you!" snapped Miss Fitzjones. "I have called to see Mr. Figgins, who, I understand, is a master at this school."

Figgins looked bewildered, as he felt.

"I—I believe I'm the only Figgins at St. Jim's, ma'am," he stammered. "It's—it's not a common name, you know. There certainly isn't any master of that name."

"What?"

"I'm Figgins, anyhow," said the junior desperately.

Miss Seleucia's look was like a knife now. Her eyes fairly glittered at the bewildered Figgins.

"You are the only person of the name of Figgins at this school?" she demanded.

"Certainly, ma'am!"

"Then there is no Mr. Figgins?"

"Nunno."

"Then it was you—you who—who inserted the advertisement——"

"The—the what?"

"I—I mean——" Miss Seleucia broke off short. "You young rascal!"

"Eh?"

"The whole matter I presume, is a practical joke!" exclaimed Miss Fitzjones, taking a business-like grip on the handle of her umbrella, and advancing a step towards Figgins. The astounded junior blinked at her.

"I—I don't understand——"

"Do not suppose for one moment that I came in answer to such an advertisement!" said Miss Seleucia fiercely. "My eye happened to fall upon it, and I decided to come here to—to punish you for daring to play such a foolish trick. That I am about to do."

And the enraged lady lost no time about it.

She realised that, if there was no Mr. Figgins at St. Jim's, the advertisement in the "Matrimonial Column" must be a practical joke, and she not unnaturally supposed Figgins to be the author of it.

A practical joke at her expense—and such a joke!—moved Miss Seleucia to a wrath compared with which the celebrated wrath of Achilles, sung by Homer, was merely a passing breeze.

Her hopes had been raised, only to be dashed to the ground; her elderly leg had been pulled; and the only possible solace was vengeance—which she proceeded to take.

Her umbrella swept in the air as she darted at Figgins, and before the amazed junior could dodge, it came down on him.

Crash!

Figgins just saved his head, and the umbrella smashed on his shoulders. There was a roar from Figgins.

"Yarooop!"

Whack, whack, whack!

The umbrella was hopelessly ruined by the first hefty smite, and Miss Seleucia belaboured Figgins with the handle and the broken ribs, doubtless on the principle of getting her money's worth.

Figgins dodged and yelled, and yelled and dodged, but Miss Seleucia was an active lady. Whack, whack, whack! Crash! The umbrella rang on Figgins's shoulders and back as he yelled and dodged. He got round the table, and round again, and then darted to the door, with Miss Seleucia close behind, still whacking.

"What the thump——" Monteith of the Sixth appeared in the doorway. "Figgins—Miss Fitzjones—what——"

"She's mad!" yelled Figgins wildly. "Help! Rescue! Mad as a hatter! Oh crumbs!"

He fled for his life.

"Madam——" gasped Monteith.

Miss Seleucia turned on him like a fury. "So you are in it, too!" she shrieked. "You, a Sixth Form boy! You are in this infamous piece of insolence——"

"I—I—what—what—which!" bubbled Monteith. "Yaroooh! Keep off! Oh, Jerusalem!"

Whack!

Miss Fitzjones got in only one whack before Monteith dodged to the stairs, and went up three at a time. Mr. Ratcliff came whisking out of his study.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 715.

"Madam—Miss Fitzjones—what——" stuttered the Housemaster.

Miss Seleucia glared round for Figgins. But Figgins had vanished. And the good lady, without troubling to bestow a word on the Housemaster, stalked out of the New House. And a score of School House juniors—who had been staring in at the window of the visitors' room—grinned gleefully. Miss Fitzjones swept away to the gates, and the juniors did not venture to laugh till she was gone, her grim visage and the broken umbrella looked too dangerous. But when she was gone there was a roar.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

CHAPTER 8.

Mrs. Stumper Means Business.

MR. RATCLIFF blinked. He was astonished. Figgins had disappeared; he was hiding behind a locker in the lobby, palpitating. Monteith of the Sixth peered cautiously over the banisters.

"Is—is—is she gone?" he stuttered.

Mr. Ratcliff looked up.

"What ever does this mean?" he exclaimed.

"I don't know, sir. Miss Fitzjones called to see Figgins, and I found her chasing him out of the visitors' room with her umbrella, and then she went for me!"

"Extraordinary! The boy must have been impertinent, or something. Find him, and send him to me, Monteith."

"Ye-es, sir."

Mr. Ratcliff rustled back to his study, very much irritated. It was ten minutes before Figgins was found and sent to him. The hapless junior came in in great trepidation. Mr. Ratcliff fixed a cold, gleaming eye on him.

"Kindly explain what this extraordinary disturbance means, Figgins!" he snapped.

"I—I don't know, sir," stammered Figgins. "I—I think the lady must be a little bit off the top, sir——"

"What?"

"I—I mean potty, sir——"

"Don't use ridiculous slang in my presence, Figgins. Tell me at once what occurred."

Figgins did so, and his bewilderment was so evidently genuine that even the suspicious Housemaster could see that he was an innocent party in the affair. The examination had just concluded, when there was a sound of loud chortling outside the New House. Mr. Ratcliff stepped restlessly to his window and looked out. Tom Merry & Co. were in sight, and so was a rather formidable-looking figure that was advancing from the gates. Mr. Ratcliff did not know the newcomer by sight, but some of the juniors did; they recognised Mrs. Stumper, who had been a prominent figure in the days of the "Votes for Women" campaign, and who was still pursuing her political activities in Wayland. Mrs. Stumper was an athletic lady of ample proportions, with a square jaw and a dominating eye. At the sight of that formidable lady, the School House juniors fairly gasped. Surely she was never coming in answer to Figgins' advertisement.

"What is the cause of this unseemly merriment?" grunted Mr. Ratcliff. "Dear me! Another lady is coming here! Is this another visitor for you, Figgins?"

"No, sir—I—I hope not," stammered Figgins.

The New House page appeared in the study doorway.

"Master Figgins, sir. Mrs. Stumper is asking for him, sir. I've shown her into the visitors' room, sir."

"Very good."

The page disappeared, and Mr. Ratcliff turned a glittering eye on George Figgins.

"Did you expect a visit from Mrs. Stumper, Figgins?"

"No, sir," gasped Figgins.

"Then why has she called?"

"I—I don't know, sir."

"It is very extraordinary! Are you playing some ridiculous practical joke on these ladies, Figgins?"

"Certainly not, sir!"

"Very well," said Mr. Ratcliff. "You may go, Figgins. But you will not go to the visitors' room. I will see this lady."

"Oh, thank you, sir!" stuttered Figgins, greatly relieved. Mr. Ratcliff, in a very irritated humour, swept away to the visitors' room to interview Mrs. Stumper.

That dame was seated, waiting for "Mr. Figgins" to appear. She was not aware that outside the window a dozen School House juniors had a good view of the interior of the room. Not that she would have cared. Mrs. Stumper was a determined lady, and used to figuring in the public eye. Evidently she had called to see "Mr. Figgins" in answer to the advertisement in the "Rylcombe Gazette." On many a public platform Mrs. Stumper had proclaimed her scorn and contempt for mere man, denouncing and trouncing him as a weak, miserable creature scarcely worthy of mention. Perhaps it was rather remarkable, therefore, that she was a reader of Mr. Tipper's "Matrimonial Column." Or perhaps it wasn't!

She looked at Mr. Ratcliff as he entered, and her cold, stony eye softened a little. She took it for granted that this was "Mr. Figgins," and no doubt she felt like the spider when the fly walked into his parlour.

"Er—Mrs. Stumper, I believe?" said Mr. Ratcliff, formally.

"Quite so," said Mrs. Stumper. "No doubt you expected a caller this afternoon." She smiled sweetly. "You do not think me bold?"

"Eh—oh, certainly not!" said the Housemaster, puzzled. "I should like to know the reason—"

"The fact is, sir, I saw—by chance—your advertisement in the 'Rylcombe Gazette,'" said Mrs. Stumper.

"My—my what?"

"I have it here," said Mrs. Stumper, tapping a copy of the local paper which she had laid on the table. "Now, sir, before entering into an engagement of any kind, I deem it only sensible to have a frank explanation—perfectly frank on both sides. Have you been married before?"

Mr. Ratcliff jumped.

"Mum-mum-married?"

"Yes, sir. I am a widow. The late Theophilus Stumper was my husband. No doubt you have heard his name in connection with the early suffrage movement. He was a good, obedient man, and I have missed him sorely. For some years past there has been no one to post my letters and fetch and carry my baggage, and warm my slippers, and so forth."

"My dear madam—"

"If you are a widower, sir, I have no objection. I simply require to know the facts."

"Madam," ejaculated Mr. Ratcliff, "I fail to see how the matter concerns you; but as it happens, I am a bachelor! But—"

"The matter concerns me very closely, sir, if I decide to marry you—"

"Mum-mum-marry me?"

"Yes. Now as to means," said Mrs. Stumper, who was evidently a businesslike lady. "May I ask the exact amount of your means?"

"Really—"

"What is your position here, sir?"

"Bless my soul! I am a Housemaster here, but—"

"That is quite satisfactory. No doubt there would be sufficient accommodation here, and that would save my house rent. I could carry on my propaganda here, no doubt."

"Your—your propaganda—" said Mr. Ratcliff faintly.

"You would not expect me to give up my life's work, I suppose, on account of a mere incident like marriage?" snarled Mrs. Stumper. "I should certainly decline to do anything of the sort. We had better settle that point to begin with. Do you expect me to give up my political work?"

"Certainly not, madam! Why—why should I?" gasped Mr. Ratcliff.

"That point is clear, then. May I ask your age?"

"Mum-mum-my age?"

"You are not a young man, as you stated," said Mrs. Stumper, rather severely. "I should put you down at fifty-six or seven."

"Madam, I—I am fifty; but—"

"Very good. I am twenty-nine," said Mrs. Stumper, two whole decades slipping inadvertently from her memory. "I think we shall suit. I have no use for a thoughtless, frivolous youth. I think you will make a very good figure on the platform at my meetings."

"Madam—"

"Shall we consider the matter settled?" asked Mrs. Stumper, bestowing another sweet smile on the New Housemaster.

Mr. Ratcliff gasped. He wondered whether he was dreaming some dreadful dream.

"Madam—I—I—"

"You need not stammer. There is no occasion for shyness between persons of our age and discretion," said Mrs. Stumper calmly. "It is settled, then. You may kiss me."

"Wha-a-a?"

Mr. Ratcliff jumped back as if he had been stung.

"Madam, I—I refuse to do so! I—I regard the suggestion as—as most improper!" he spluttered. "Are you out of

your senses, madam? Bless my soul! Madam, I request you to leave at once!"

Mrs. Stumper's jaw set squarely.

"Does that mean that you do not wish to marry me?" she asked.

"Upon my word! Certainly I do not wish—or intend—to do anything of the kind! This is—is—I—I have no intention of getting married at all, and—and—"

"No intention of getting married at all!" thundered Mrs. Stumper.

"Certainly not! I—"

"Then what does this advertisement mean, Mr. Figgins?"

"M-M-Mr. Figgins!" stammered the Housemaster. "I—I—I am Mr. Figgins, madam. Figgins is a—a—a boy—a junior schoolboy—here. I—I am quite bewildered—I—"

"What is that?"

"Look, sir!" thundered Mrs. Stumper, holding up the matrimonial advertisement under Mr. Ratcliff's beaky nose.

"Look, sir! That advertisement amounts to a proposal! I shall consult my solicitors, sir, as to the possibility of suing you for breach of promise, sir! Your paltry trick, sir, of denying your own name will not serve you!"

"Madam, I—I assure you my—my name is Ratcliff, and—and—" babbled the unhappy Housemaster.

"Nonsense, sir! A trick—a paltry trick! Once and for all, sir, am I to regard you as my fiancé, or am I not?"

"No!" yelled Mr. Ratcliff, in dire terror. "Certainly not! Nothing of the kind! You—you dreadful woman, go at once! Go—go—GO!"

That was too much for Mrs. Stumper.

Smack!

There was a loud report as Mrs. Stumper's large and heavy hand boxed Mr. Ratcliff's ears.

Mr. Ratcliff staggered back, and sat down. Mrs. Stumper glared down at him with scorn and wrath.

"Expect to hear from my solicitors, sir!" she thundered.

"You will receive a communication from them, sir, with regard to damages for breach of promise of marriage!"

And Mrs. Stumper swept out.

A howling mob of School House juniors greeted her eyes as she swept out of the New House. Tom Merry & Co. were almost in hysterics. Mrs. Stumper gave the yelling juniors a glare, and charged through them wielding her umbrella with great effect. The mob of laughter changed to a hiss of anguish as the juniors scattered on all sides.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's topper crunched under Mrs. Stumper's heavy boots as the wrathful lady strode away.

"Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus, when she was gone. "Gwreat Scott! What a perfect tewwah! Look at my hat! Bai Jove, I weally shouldn't like to be Mr. Stumphah!"

Mr. Ratcliff sat on the carpet for a good five minutes before he recovered sufficiently to limp away to his study.

The advertisement in the "Rylcombe Gazette," when he looked at it, enlightened him at last. It enlightened Figgins, too, when he was sent for. Mr. Ratcliff telephoned to the office of the local paper, but Mr. Tipper could only say that he knew nothing of the advertisement, and was astonished to hear about it. If he suspected anything, Mr. Tipper kept his suspicions to himself—fortunately for Tom Merry.

Taggles, the porter, was warned at once not to admit any females who called to see "Mr. Figgins," and during the afternoon Taggles was busy turning away disappointed callers. Which was a disappointment to Tom Merry & Co. too. They regarded Mr. Ratcliff's intervention as quite uncalculated. George Figgins came over to see Tom Merry about tea-time. He shook a furious fist at the captain of the Shell.

"You School House worm, it was you!" spluttered Figgins.

"One good turn deserves another!" grinned Tom Merry.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yaas, wathah!" chuckled Arthur Augustus.

And as Figgins did not seem to see it, and as he seemed afflicted with a yearning to hammer Tom Merry's smiling countenance, he was kindly assisted out of the School House, and several pairs of boots helped him down the steps. And the School House juniors chuckled loud and long over Tom Merry's victory.

(There will be another grand long story of the chums of St. Jim's in next week's issue of the GEM. Do not miss it!)

LOOK OUT!

For the Special Bumper Number of the "BOYS' HERALD" Containing a LONG COMPLETE STORY OF THE CHUMS AFLOAT
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GET A COPY OF THIS WEEK'S "BOYS' HERALD."



Mr. Stanton's Guest.

"YOUR wonderful experiments have made me more than anxious to meet you, Dr. Brutell," remarked Mr. Stanton, when his guest had settled down and made himself quite at home. "You know, I took a degree in electricity myself."

Stanton paused. This subject was a pet hobby of his, and he wondered whether Dr. Brutell would be interested enough in the topic to pursue it. He was soon satisfied upon the point.

"Then you will be interested in my latest discovery, the double X-ray, Mr. Stanton. It penetrates glass, rubber, anything!"

Mr. Stanton raised his eyebrows. He was aware that experiments had been made upon these lines, but he was delighted to know that he had at this moment as his guest the very man who had achieved the great honour of having made such a tremendous discovery.

"Inside my coat I carry a battery for projecting my double X-ray."

Dr. Brutell undid his coat, and showed it to the astonished millionaire.

"I hope next," continued the doctor, "to discover what I shall call the triple X-ray. It is probably an invisible green, and its possibilities are beyond imagination."

Mr. Stanton listened with great interest as Dr. Brutell explained at length some interesting particulars connected with his recent experiments and discoveries.

Later on the conversation turned into other directions, and Mr. Stanton's daughter Madeline joined the circle.

"By the way," remarked the rancher, after a while, "you are an old resident in this district, Dr. Brutell, and I'd like to ask your advice about some threatening letters which I have received."

Mr. Stanton walked over to a cabinet which stood at one side of the room, and, unlocking it, he withdrew a small packet of letters. The millionaire extracted one of the letters, and passed it over to Dr. Brutell.

It was a roughly written note, and in a black circle at the top were the signs of a hammer and pinchers, and above there was a skull. Dr. Brutell glanced at the paper, and commenced to read it half aloud.

"This is your last chance. We demand £100,000!"

The sinister message was particularly brief. Dr. Brutell glanced up as he finished reading the document, and he passed it across to his host.

"I have heard of these scoundrels who call themselves the Black Circle, but know nothing of them," he said. "You should inform the police at once of these letters which they are sending you, and also keep yourself well guarded."

Mr. Stanton placed the bundle of letters back into the cabinet, and locked the door.

"I will do as you suggest, my friend," he replied in a thoughtful mood. "For myself I do not mind very much—I am not afraid of such threats—but my daughter Madeline is naturally very worried over the affair. I must take steps to have these letters stopped."

Dr. Brutell rose from his chair suddenly, and announced his intention of departing.

"You are not going so soon, doctor, are you?" asked Mr. Stanton.

"Yes, I am if I must leave you now," the doctor replied. "I am feeling a little unwell to-night. Perhaps some other night

we shall meet again. It has been very pleasant."

Dr. Brutell shook hands hastily with the members of the small party, and without more ado made his exit.

Mr. Stanton and Mr. Stanley were rather bewildered at the very hasty departure of their interesting guest. Madeline was mystified until they thought the matter over a little. Then they decided that the doctor must have had a sudden attack of illness, and wanted to get home so that he could trust himself to his own laboratory.

Perhaps his strenuous fight during the day had upset him a little. It would certainly be sufficient to upset the majority of men for a lengthy period.

The real reason for Dr. Brutell's rapid resolve to leave, however, had nothing to do with the affair whatever. In the distance he had heard the faint rumbling of thunder again, and his old fear came to him once more.

The weather just now was very unsettled, and Brutell wanted to get home before the crash came. The storm quickly increased in fury, and he felt that he would not be able to get to his laboratory until the evil spell seized him.

He summoned up all the speed he could, but it was of no use. He had far to go, and one vivid flash of lightning was his climax.

Dr. Brutell changed his direction, and instead of going towards his house he made for the headquarters of the Black Circle.

The evil spell was once more upon him, and for some reason he felt a deadly hatred towards his former friend, Mr. Stanton, the millionaire ranch-owner.

He determined to wreak vengeance upon him, and possess himself of the cattle king's valuables and money.

Brutell is Puzzled.

WHEN Dr. Brutell reached the headquarters of the Black Circle there was present a fairly large gathering of the members. They were engaged in discussing plans to carry out a big jewel robbery, but they ceased talking when the leader of the club entered the room from him was a matter of great importance.

All the members of this sinister gang feared Dr. Brutell, and no wonder, for the evil spells of which he was a victim turned him into a dangerous fiend. But Dr. Brutell had an extraordinary control over these men, and they dare not go against his wishes, or treat him with anything but the greatest respect.

Brutell informed the gathering that he had recently been inside the house belonging to Mr. Stanton, the millionaire ranch-owner, and that he had seen the secret safe in Stanton's desk.

The members of the Black Circle listened to this information with the greatest of interest, and no doubt they would have been astonished if they knew that their chief had been admitted to the Stanton house as an honoured guest.

Brutell, as it has already been explained, knows all that his better self knows, and so he has intimate knowledge of the interior of Mr. Stanton's house, and he knew just how he could gain admittance when the time came. The doctor, therefore, decided that he would make an attempt to secure the millionaire's valuables single-handed.

This course was likely to prove more fruitful than if he entrusted the robbery to two or three of the gang, who were not familiar with the place. Dr. Brutell gave a careful description of the house, and told the members that if he was not successful in obtaining the jewels they should go and get them the following day. A moment or two later their chief had departed.

The extraordinary founder and leader of the Black Circle appeared and disappeared as will, and none knew whence he came or when he went. And yet there was no miracle about this. The strange powers which Dr. Brutell possessed, and which so puzzled

his followers, were due entirely to his knowledge and use of the double and triple X-rays.

For countless years the force of gravitation has puzzled the human race, and men of science have sought to overcome it. But it was left to the genius of Dr. Brutell to discover that the power of gravitation could be broken for a certain space of time by electricity.

His accomplishment made it possible for a man to float or move through the air like any lighter-than-air object, and so he was able to scale the highest walls, literally to step to the top of the highest buildings, and perform many other things that seemed beyond the power of possibility.

While in his normal self, Dr. Brutell had not yet disclosed these things to the world at large. People knew, of course, that he had discovered the double and triple X-rays, but they were not yet aware of the wonderful possibilities of these things. But, unfortunately, when Brutell was ruled by his evil personality, he eagerly seized hold of them to aid him in his villainous schemes.

And so it was that the leader of the Black Circle gained an entrance to the house of his friend Mr. Stanton with the greatest ease. He stood for a moment hidden behind some heavy curtains which hung in front of the big windows leading to the millionaire's study.

Mr. Stanton was sitting in a comfortable easy-chair in the room, and in his hands he gripped a book. The unfortunate ranch-owner was quite unaware of the presence of the man who had so recently been with him as his guest.

There was a dangerous look upon the face of the doctor as he silently watched his intended victim. Brutell walked forward a pace or two, grasping in his hands the heavy weapon which was to strike down the unhappy millionaire. It was a hammer, symbolic of the criminal organisation of which he was the leader.

Silently Brutell crept towards his friend, then, with crushing force, he brought the hammer down upon the man's head. There was a slight murmur of anguish, and the millionaire fell forward.

The leader of the Black Circle paused a moment, and listened intently. There was no sound of movement in the house. Apparently nobody had heard Mr. Stanton's cry, or was conscious of the presence of the intruder.

Brutell wasted no more time. Delay is always dangerous, so he set about finishing his task as speedily as possible. He went to the millionaire's secret safe, opened it, and collected a big haul of valuable jewellery and money notes. He put these in a bag, and placed it upon the table.

The doctor turned over to the windowed door which led into the conservatory, intending to open it and so make his escape. But Fate intervened once more.

The evil spell which had held Brutell in its grip left him as suddenly as it came, and the man standing beside the body of the unconscious millionaire was Dr. Brutell, the respected scientist and inventor.

The doctor lifted the body of his unconscious friend from the floor and placed it tenderly upon the settee. Later his attention was attracted by the bag upon the table.

He looked inside, and saw that it was filled with jewellery and other valuables.

"As I suspected!" he muttered. "The motive of this murderous attack upon Mr. Stanton was robbery. The perpetrators have not made good their escape!"

Dr. Brutell looked thoughtful; he was endeavouring to recall events of the past. He remembered that he had this evening been the guest of Mr. Stanton, but he could not quite remember how he came to be in the house again after saying good-night to his host.

Possibly he had returned for something he had forgotten.

Little did he realise that it was his own hand which had cruelly struck down his friend.

(To be continued.)

THE VALLEY OF SURPRISE

Read this magnificent story dealing with the adventures of three chums in a strange country.

By REID WHITLEY.



THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Hobby Tarrant and Tony Mathers, with Billy Kettle, a trusted negro servant, are on an expedition in the Andes. On the journey their guides turn traitors, and steal away with most of their baggage. Without the guides, they are lost in this strange country, but they plot on until they come upon an Indian hutment. The owner is dead, but alongside the hut is his canoe, which they make use of. Presently there is an ominous noise, and with a roar, a mile of steeply-sloping lava and rock begins to move down to the waters below. This volcanic eruption causes a tremendous tidal wave, and the seething waters carry the canoe and its occupants along at a terrific speed, until they come to a narrow gorge through the heart of the mountains. The progress of the mad journey in their frail canoe is arrested by a gigantic tree almost submerged. After a while the swollen waters subside, and they see dry land again. The party are in the Valley of Surprise, and here they prepare to make a meal.

The Dangers of the Valley.

BY now the mist had entirely cleared, and they were able to see the nearer part of the valley clearly. In the direction from which they had come it ended abruptly in a tremendous rock wall, a sharp horizon, and more forbidding looking than any they had seen, even in that land of terrible precices.

It swung away, smooth and utterly unscalable, on either hand as far as eye could reach, walling the valley. Only at one spot was there a break, and that was the cleft through which they had been borne by the great wave. From the mouth of this cleft, which seemed nearly a thousand feet above the valley floor, descended a long, very steep and very smooth slope of black rock.

It came down there on the crest of the wave, but I don't think we could ever climb back again. Why, it's absolutely poisoned!

"Yes," agreed Hobby, "I can guess at what happened, millions of years ago, perhaps. There was a tremendous volcanic eruption. All of this valley sunk away down below the surface of the rest of the country. The side of the volcano's crater split, making the gorge we came through. Molten lava poured out and made that slope, then cooled. After that there were no more eruptions on a big scale. The crater filled with water, and overflowed at intervals. The water polished the surface of the lava slope in the course of hundreds of thousands, or millions, of years, and there you are!"

"Looks like it," said Tony. "And what about the beast and perhaps men who happened to be in this tract of country when the land sunk? Were they wiped out?"

"Some of them, perhaps; but there's no reason why a lot should not have survived. I've got a notion. Look at those trees over there."

"More like big ferns, or gigantic bits of moss," replied Tony.

"Just so. They aren't the sort of trees we saw in the other valleys we passed through. They're species that died out ages ago in the rest of the world. They've been sheltered here. The climate must be about the same all the year round, so they have managed to survive; and if trees survived, why not—"

He paused tantalisingly, beaming through his spectacles like a very happy owl.

"Why not the animals that used to roam the earth in the old time? Some of the great beasts whose bones have been dug up all over the world, dinosaurs and thunder lizards, and all that sort of creature. I guess the thing we heard snoring, the thing whose track you found, was something of the sort. Think of it! We may actually see some of the creatures that died out millions of years ago, everywhere else. Won't that be ripping?"

"Frightfully ripping—if it happens to get after us!" exclaimed Tony. "The sooner we set about trying to get out of here the better. What use would a rifle or a shot-gun be against that sort of creature? I've seen pictures that showed what they might have been like, and I don't want to get caught by the reality. Some of 'em were forty or fifty feet long."

"Seventy or eighty!" said Hobby, licking his lips with a queer sort of ecstasy born of his passion for science. "Most of them had tremendous teeth and claws. Some had horns as well. And perhaps there will be mammoths and cave bears, and some of those fellows that were the ancestors of the tiger and lion, fine beasts with teeth six inches long."

Billy Kettle had been listening to the orator with mouth and eyes as wide open as they could possibly be. Now he could stand no more.

"Marce Hobby, you means for to say all dem things in dis yere place?" he demanded, in a hollow voice.

"No, no, not all of them, Billy!" said Tony soothingly. "One or two, perhaps, but no more."

"Stuff! Nonsense! There's plenty of room for quite a number of varieties here," insisted Hobby. "There may be some of those jolly big birds, too, about five times the size of an ostrich—the sort that could kick a horse over a house-top."

Billy uttered a low moan. His staring eyes turned towards the cliffs as though he thought of making a desperate attempt to scale them. Then he noted the height of their perch above the ground, and seemed to take heart.

"Mebbe it ain't so bad as you says, Marce Hobby; but, anyways, till I see sure certain dere ain't none of 'em about, it's me stick to de tall timber."

"We could travel quite a long way without touching the ground if once we got into that wood over yonder," said Tony, pointing to the beginning of a forest that stretched away along the further side of the river, and up to the nearer shore of what appeared to be a fair-sized lake. "The branches interlace,

I propose that we stay here to-night and rest. To-morrow we'll go exploring."

This being agreed to, they settled down to rest. The sun was now sinking. Flocks of ducks, which had probably been feeding along the shore of the lake, appeared, and settled, quacking, in the matted tree-tops. Hobby rubbed his hands with delight at the odd sight.

"There you are! Isn't that proof that the ground, or even the water, is too dangerous a resting-place?" he demanded. "We're going to see some very interesting beasts while we're here. I'm certain. Oh, how I wish I had my camera!"

"Once I went aboard man-o'-war along at Kingston. Dem show me torpeders dat would blow up a big ship. How I wish I had one o' dem torpeders!" groaned Billy.

"Anyhow, we'll keep watch and watch," said Tony; "and we'd best keep the fire going, if only to save matches. You two snore first. I'll rouse you up if I see anything."

Slowly the sun set, and a few minutes later it was dark. With that the valley woke to life. From far, away came a long roar. Nearer at hand something stirred amidst the high reeds by the river, and splashed away towards the lake. The dozing Billy stirred uneasily.

"Me for de tall timber!" he muttered.

Hobby snored softly. The flickering light of the fire fell upon his face, and Tony saw that he was snoring.

"He's perfectly happy!" thought Tony. "He doesn't think of the danger we are in, but only the novelties he is going to see. Well, I guess he'll be satisfied."

The Terrors of the Darkness.

AS the minutes flew, so the noises in the valley increased. At first Tony tried to guess what sort of beasts made them, but the sounds were distant and confused.

Once he thought he heard a long-drawn howl that might have come from the throat of a wolf, and later he heard a weird laugh that certainly sounded like the cackle of a hyena. But for a while none of the suggestions came near the group of trees.

At length, when Tony began to feel sleepy, and was on the point of rousing Hobby to jake his spell, he heard a measured splashing of the shallow water at the river side. Nearer it came, and nearer, changing to a squelching noise as the creature waddled over the mud. Then—silence!

Had the thing caught sight of the fire amongst the tree-tops? Was it staring at the strange portent? Or had it simply lain down to rest? Tony could not tell, for though the stars shone brilliantly, their light was not sufficient to allow him to see out anything more than a few yards from the trees.

A strange odour floated to him, a musky reek like an alligator.

The thing must be close to the foot of the tree in which they rested. He peered down into the deep shadow. Was it imagination;

or was that deeper shade something living—and deadly? Surely it was moving?

Tony raised his rifle, and thought better of it. The day might come when a single cartridge might mean the difference between life and death, so it was foolish to throw one away on a chance shot. He was not even certain whether what he saw was not a clump of bushes. At least, he could make sure before expending a charge.

He had set aside several torches made of twisted, resinous twigs. Lighting one at the fire, he whirled it in a blaze when the light flaring through the air, straight towards the suspected shadow.

It fell, not on the ground, but upon an immense scaly back. A brute, larger than Tony could have imagined possible, heaved its great bulk up from the ground where it appeared to have been crouching. A head like a crocodile's, set upon a long neck, swung back, seized the torch which flared among the spikes that adorned its spine, and dropped it upon the ground.

Then, with a curious whining hiss, it reared up its forepaw against the tree-trunk, clapping it with a pair of strangely powerful legs, and stretched its neck in an attempt to reach the canoe, while a great tail flailed the bushes in its rear.

The tree shook and bent a little under the impact, but held its own nobly. The great brute drew itself nearer; its forefaw clawed the bark; it raised itself higher upon its hind legs, while its neck strained upwards, its huge jaws clashing viciously.

Hobby woke, with a gurgle. Billy Kettle, with a howl, as Tony shouted and dropped another flaming torch full upon one of the brute's bulging eyes. It flung its head back—and the negro, yelling with excited ardor, let drive two bullets from his heavy pistol.

They thudded home in the creature's neck, the head flung back trying to reach the wound, farther and farther, till it lost its balance, and slithered over sideways to fall with a mighty thud.

But it was up again in a moment. They heard its hissing cry, saw the mighty scaly hand sweep round, cutting an opening among the bushes and sending the flaming torches flying far away amidst a shower of sparks. Then out of the deeper darkness beyond flew something large and furry with great gleaming teeth, which, as it leaped on the scaled back, with a thud and a terribly echoing roar.

It was answered. The brushwood crashed, another shadowy form flickered athwart the last gleam of the dying torches, and the battle of giants had begun. Tony lit and flung another torch. It revealed two enormous furred creatures of tawny hue clinging to the back of the monster, and madly plying tooth and claw to tear away the horny plates that protected its vital parts.

Even as they looked, the huge reptile's head swung round and smote one of the aggressors a fearful blow which sent it tumbling to the ground. Then, from nowhere in particular, a third furry beast appeared, flashed through the air, and landed on the reptile's neck, where it clung.

That seemed to waken the brute's dull mind to a full sense of its peril. It gathered its huge hind legs under it, and leapt like a kangaroo, out of the circle of light. They heard it land with a mighty thud, heard it leap twice more, then the snarling roars rose in a crescendo of awful sound that seemed to split the very heavens. There came a final crashing fall, a falling as though a tornado had broken loose among the brush, and a long, ear-splitting shriek that died into the racket of roaring.

"That fellow's done for!" said Tony. "Did you see him? What a horrible brute! What was he, Hobby?"

"Dunno," replied Hobby. "Some sort of Brontosaurus, perhaps. We'll call it that, anyhow. And those beggars that went for it—we'll call tigers, though they are bigger than any two tigers I ever saw. What an infernal racket they're all making!"

Billy, who had been leaning over the gunwale of the canoe, glaring in the direction of the uproar, turned about with a long, shuddering sigh.

"Marse Tony, was dat dere real? Was dat dere thing I shot at real? Is dem dere noises I hears real? Do you hear 'em, too?" he asked, in a quavering voice.

"Yes, Billy, it's all very real, and you made a very good shot!"

"I breathed the darky. I thought mebbe as I was dreaming. If I ain't scared 'till I go asleep again, I need ter be scared of nightmares, but never no more!"

Dis here's worse than any sorter bad dream."

And, evidently in a hurry to escape from dreadful realities, he coiled himself up and was asleep in a moment.

Not so the two whites. The terrific chorus of snarls and roars, mingled with the continual high, screeching laugh of hyenas, eye till the sky began to lighten, by which time the slayers had satisfied their appetite and slunk away to their dens.

Then Tony awoke Billy, bade him keep a bright look-out, and snuggled into his blankets to snatch a couple of hours' repose.

The sun in his eyes and the savoury smell of roast fish wakened him. He sat up to find Hobby rubbing his eyes and grinning approval of Billy, who was setting breakfast upon platters of bark stripped from a branch.

"Good-morning, Marse Tony! Dem dere fellows all gone home along, I reckon. Ah'n seen nuffin of anything dis morning. Reckon they all had enough to eat off of dat dere fellow that come visitin' us last night," said Billy, with a broad grin that showed his fears had vanished with the darkness.

"Look over yonder away." Tony followed the pointing finger, and gasped. In the clear light of day the thing looked incredible. Not more than three hundred yards away lay what remained of the dinosaur, looking for all the world like a stranded vessel, with the planking torn from its ribs.

The beasts of the night had made a remarkably good job. Hardly any meat remained upon the fore-parts, over which a flock of birds clamoured and fought. On the ground were a number of small animals, little bigger than cats, which gnawed and tugged at remnants, keeping up a continual shrill yapping. They seemed to be some sort of jackal or dog.

"Them big fellows come back here to-night, mebbe!" suggested Billy cheerfully. "Them scent us last night, mebbe. Them climb these here trees, mebbe. Us better scoot ere dat dere river. Them trees over dere are a heap higher."

There was a good deal in this suggestion, for even if the "tigers" had not sighted or

scented the party in the treetop, it was likely enough that they would return to their kill in the hope of finding some pickings. Also, it was certain that the trees on the farther side of the stream were much taller than the one on which the wave had deposited the canoe.

They were, in fact, the very tallest trees Tony had ever seen, shooting up to near a hundred feet before they began to branch. If they could establish themselves among those lofty boughs, which interlaced for miles, they should surely be safe from the terrible brutes which prowled below.

The distance was barely half a mile, the river appeared shallow, and there was nothing formidable in sight. Tony made up his mind. The sooner they made a start the better.

"We'll each carry a torch," he said. "If those little jackal things attack us we can use them and save cartridges."

"Dem!" snorted Billy, with lofty contempt. "Dem's nuffin more than little dogs! Dere ain't no harm in dem. We don't need to worry."

And, laden with a good half of their scanty baggage, the big nigger swung himself nimbly to the ground. The two lads followed the brontosaurus's immense feet, and set off.

As they neared the remains of the huge brute, the small jackals, or dogs, ceased if they snarled and stood at gaze. They showed no fear of the intruders. One of them began to howl, and at once others appeared from the undergrowth, where they had been sleeping, until there were at least a hundred gathered under the shadows of the bronto's ribs.

"I believe they're really dogs of a sort," said Hobby. "In Africa and India there are wild dogs which go about in packs and attack anything. These fellows are very small, but if they took it into their heads to go for us they'd be a nuisance."

The words were still on his lips when, with a chorus of yapping, the whole pack began to move towards the three, swinging out in a long, curved line as they came. The intention was obvious. They meant to surround the party.



The great brute drew itself nearer! Its forefaw clawed the bark; it raised itself higher upon its hind legs, while its neck strained upwards, its huge jaws clashing viciously. Tony shouted and dropped a flaming torch full upon one of the brute's bulging eyes, the negro, yelling with excited ardor, let drive two bullets from his heavy pistol.

"Look, Marse Tony! Dem going to ring us!" exclaimed Billy. "Peaky little varmints! I'll show you!"

With a wild howl, waving his torch about his head, he charged at the nearest of the pack. They gave at his rush; then, circling behind him, leaped in at his legs, their teeth snapping like castanets. He struck right and left with the blazing torch in one hand, his torch in the other, and they fell down, but their howls seemed to serve only as a rallying cry. The outer ends of the line closed in.

Billy turned, and came racing back to the others with half a hundred loaded little cubs at his heels. Tony snatched the shot gun that Hobby carried, dropped on one knee, and let drive both barrels in quick succession to right and left of Billy. The charges of small shot scattered amongst the close, packed ranks, peppering them finely, but probably the sudden roar of the double discharge was even more effective. They halted, stood for an instant in petrified amazement, then, yapping and howling in a dozen different keys, broke and fled.

"Look! Dem pesky little beasts!" gasped Billy, as he pulled up. "I'd never thought there would do dat dere! Gosh! Dem tore my pants!"

"Lucky they didn't tear you!" said Tony, with the beginnings of a laugh that suddenly froze on his lips. "What on earth—no more, said no more, had he left them to the bronzo's hindquarters, part of which still remained intact, the dogs, or jackals, having kept clear of them. One immense leg was missing.

"Him alive!" bubbled Billy. "Half of him clean picked, t'other bit alive!"

Hobby gobbled like an old hen. His eyes behind, his spectacles were round as full moons.

"Reptile t-t-take a lot of killing!" he stammered.

And with that the miracle was explained. The scaly leg was thrust aside from beneath as there heaved into view a huge and hideous shape, black, monstrous, terrible as death. It was a bear—no mere playful little grizzly such as haunts the recesses of the Rockies, but a brute big as a furdad cloud.

Most likely it had taken a leading part in the night's banquet, and, having gorged itself, had gone to sleep. None of the scavengers had dared approach it too closely, since the blackquarters was not to be feared anywhere. The report of the gun had roused it. Now, rising on its hind-legs, it glared at the authors of the disturbance; then, with a

thunderous growl, began to move towards them.

Billy Kettle glanced round. There was nowhere to run to. Before he could have reached either trees or river, the bear would certainly overtake him. That being settled, he drew his big pistol and threw it up.

"Don't shoot!" snapped Tony. "Bullets are only peas to him. Wait a jiffy!"

He snatched Hobby's torch, and, whirling it and his own to a flame, he lit the monster. It was a madly-courageous thing to do, but the only one. He knew that their light weapons were useless against such a might have been effective, but they had neither of these. But it was just possible that, being full fed, the beast might be easily scared.

Indeed, the unusual sight of prey running towards, instead of away from it, alerted the animal. Was this a challenge? It growled. A strange incandescent glare lit in its eyes, and Tony hurried his torches.

One fell squarely on the brute's head between its ears, the other upon its back. Its fur was smeared and soaked with the fat of the reptile on which it had been feeding, and an instant its fur was ablaze.

"Get on!" roared Tony in the biggest voice at his command.

That was the last straw. Perhaps the animal had never heard a human voice before, and it had never been set on fire. With the shake of its head it snatched the flaming brand from its snarling top-knot, wheeled about, and made for the river at a tremendous speed.

In it plunged, amidst showering spray, waded across, throwing the water high above its flaming flanks, and still steaming, reached the other side, where it speedily disappeared, making for a distant cliff.

Tony wiped his moist forehead. The whole action had passed in less than half an hour. It takes to tell of it, but in those few seconds he seemed to have lived for years. Like Billy on the previous night, he was quite prepared to believe that he had been dreaming.

"Old man! I say, old chap, he's gone!" cried Hobby. "Clean gone! Let's be moving before anything else happens!"

They moved on, and, taking up his pack, led the way towards the stream, making for a spot a little below where the bear had crossed. The reeds grew high as their heads, the ground grew soft underfoot, and several birds, disturbed by their passage, flew away with a great clatter of wings.

"Did you see?" cried Hobby, in great

excitement. "I'm certain those birds had teeth in their beaks! What a place! One can't move without making a fresh discovery!"

And, as if the words had been a cue for which the unseen waited, there came a great crashing amongst the reeds on their flank. But for that warning smashing of the reeds, one at least of the three would never have seen another sunrise. That trifling reptile saved them.

"Galore!" howled Billy Kettle, from the rear. Then, his voice rising to a shriek: "Jump high!"

Neither Hobby nor Tony waited to ask questions or reason about the matter. The short time they had been in the valley had taught them the great lesson of the wild. They had either to be quick or dead. They were quick. Like one, they shot into the air, and as they did so a great curved sickle, the scaly tail of an immense alligator swept beneath them, cutting down a swathe of reeds.

Billy's big pistol boomed, the bullet thudded against the reptile's flank as it wheeled and made open-mouthed for Tony. He had barely time to fire down its throat and leap aside as its rush carried it past him into the unbroken bank of reeds beyond.

It was back on the instant, only to meet the blast of lead from both barrels of Hobby's shotgun, and another heavy bullet from Billy. That was enough. Blinded on one side, crippled in a foreleg and with a leak in its lower deck, the brute gave up the contest, and made for the water.

They saw it splash in heavily and swim away.

"Quick, Marse Tony! Now's de time! If dere is more dey will go after dat fellow. Get across now!"

Grabbing their baggage, they hurried to the water's edge. A long trail of blood discoloured the clear stream. At some distance away they heard several heavy splashes, which told that some of the alligator's relatives had marked his plight, and were in pursuit.

With a nasty crawling feeling that ran from toes to neck, they entered the water, holding high the packages of cartridges, and ploughed across. Not an instant did they waste on the passage, nor among the reeds of the bank. Never pausing to look behind, they trotted up the slope. Not until they were at the foot of the first of the forest of giant trees did they halt.

(Another grand instalment of this magnificent adventure serial next week. Look out for it.)

:: EDITORIAL ::

My Dear Chums,—

In answer to a great number of letters I have received, I may explain at once that the preparations for the Special Enlarged Christmas Number of the "Gem" are going ahead. This number will be published on Wednesday, December 21st, so please make sure of your copy, each one of you, as a finer budget of Christmas fiction was not to be found anywhere. The "Gem" for that week will have a magnificent coloured cover, while the seasonable story of St. Jim's from the pen of Mr. Martin Clifford will, I feel sure, surpass in the estimation of all my friends, even the finest Christmas yarns of the bygone—and we have had a few! I shall have more to say on this subject another time, but I should like to emphasize the fact that Mr. Clifford has got right into the heart of things in this wonderful Christmas story. For the rest, there will be the usual popular features, together with some more attractions, for this is to be a real bumper number, with extra pages, as befits the time.

One way and another the St. Jim's yarns are "getting there" more

thoroughly than ever. Such a tale as that in a recent issue about the old underground passages at St. Jim's, has created plenty of keen interest. I am not surprised. There is nothing at all incredible in the amazing incidents, while the perils Tom Murry and his chums encounter, to say nothing of the heroism of the often misjudged Ernest Levison are just about as real as could be conceived. Come to think of it, there are castles, and ancient monastic ruins up and down this country which have never been thoroughly explored. Strange discoveries are made as a rule quite by accident—quaint subterranean passages and so forth, which have been sealed up for centuries. I should not be a bit surprised if we have some "cliffers" concerning the very old foundations of the famous school.

Later on I shall be having further Talbot yarns, reintroducing that charming personage, Marie Rivers, while I hope to arrange for more limelight in the case of a few of the old-time favourites who have been rather pressed out of recent stories. These characters are always being asked for and are yet found a St. Jim's fellow forgotten readers of the "Gem." Our next number will be a splendid one in every way. You will like the grand long story of St. Jim's and the many other fine features.

YOUR EDITOR.



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