

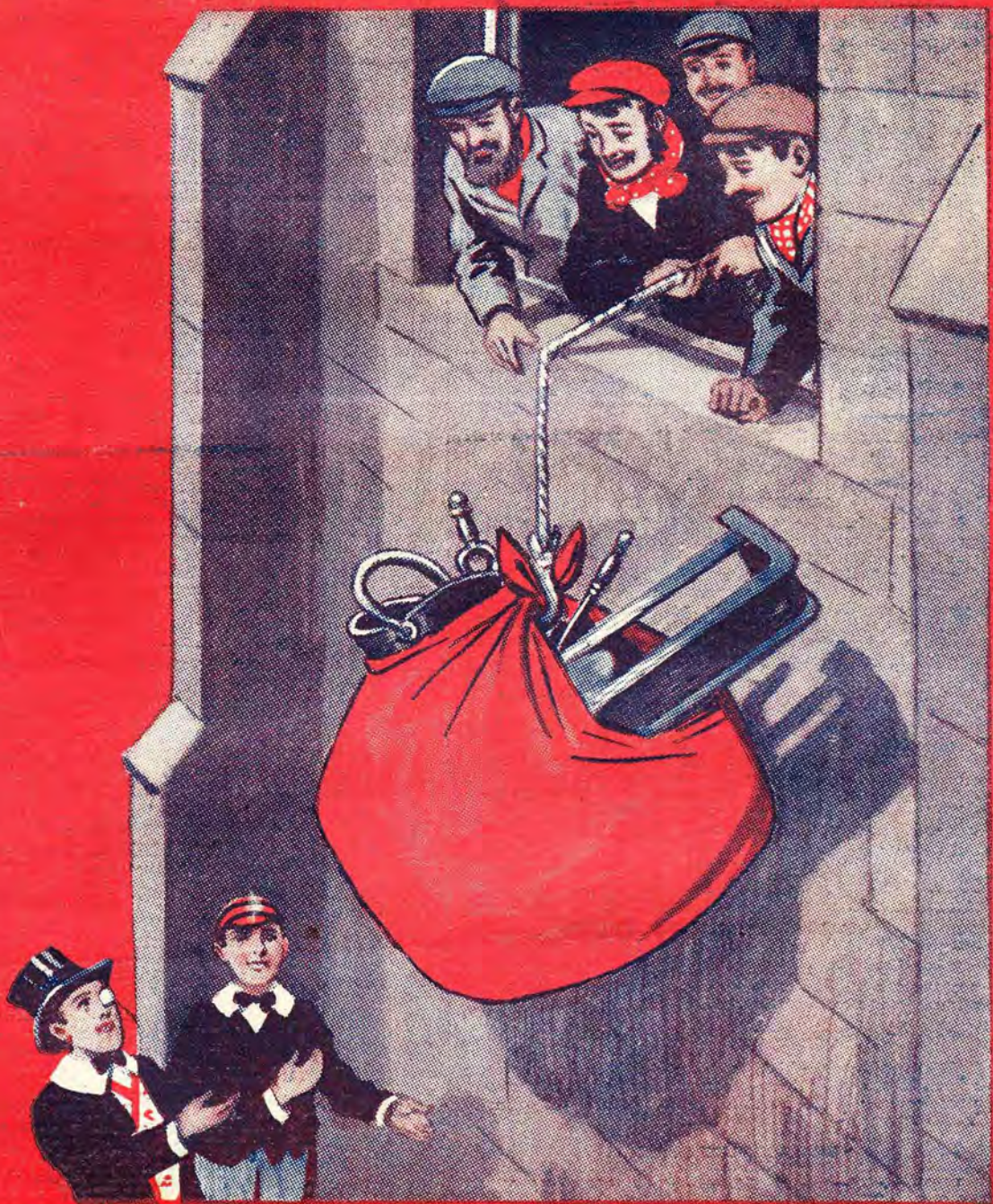
"APRIL FOOLS ALL!" THIS WEEK'S SPECIAL SCHOOL STORY.

The GEM 2^D

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SCHOOL AND SPORTING STORIES

EVERY WEDNESDAY.

No. 947.
Vol. XXIX.
April 3rd,
1926.



APRIL THE FIRST—"MOVING MEN!"

(A diverting incident from the school story inside, showing the School House juniors putting a jape across their rivals of the New House.)



Address all letters: *The Editor, The "Gem" Library, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.*
Write me, you can be sure of an answer in return.

FEATURING THE DEATH RAY!

NEXT week's issue of the GEM will contain the opening chapters of the amazing serial story which is based upon the wonderful invention known as the Death Ray. The story pulsates with life and movement from the word go, and carries one along on a tide of expectancy and impatient interest. I have made mention in this weekly chat between us of the unique experience given to Gemites of reading

"THE SCARLET STREAK!"

in their favourite paper and of seeing it shown on the screen at the cinema. That's something out of the ordinary, isn't it? But wait a bit. I'm going to show why it will pay you to take advantage of this double treat. In connection with this thrilling story I am running a simple picture-puzzle competition which carries with it the handsome total of

£10 A WEEK

in prize money. By reading the story in the GEM and seeing it "lickered" at the cinema, Gemites will stand a better chance than ever of handling the quidlets offered every week. Don't run away with the idea that the competition is difficult—not a bit of it. But you can see for yourselves that, by following this thrilling serial story in the GEM and seeing it on the screen the chances of success are doubled. Stand by then, boys, for next week's GEM and the opening chapters of

"THE SCARLET STREAK!"

not forgetting, too, the £10 a week prize money which *must* be won!

ALWAYS ATTRACTING!

A suitable headline, that, for a few words on our grand companion paper, the "Magnet." You all know about the wonderful school stories, featuring Harry Wharton & Co. of Greyfriars, that appear in it every week, but I have an item of news concerning a great new serial that is well worth mentioning. Right then; in next week's issue of the "Magnet" you will find the opening chapters of a powerful detective serial introducing Ferrers Locke, the famous criminologist, entitled "The Phantom of the Dogger Bank!" The story is staged in the North Sea, and the author really does know what he is talking about when he refers to the hardy fellows who make their livelihood at fishing; when he describes the conditions aboard a fishing trawler, and the perils which these bluff, hearty fellows smile through, for he's served a pretty lengthy apprenticeship, as it were, aboard a trawler, with the idea of chronicling his story in a true-to-life fashion. And believe me, he's got right there with his story. If you are interested you'll make certain of getting next week's "Magnet."

NEXT WEDNESDAY'S PROGRAMME!

"TRIMBLE THE TRICKSTER!"

By Martin Clifford.

Baggy—the one and only—is the principal character in next week's St. Jim's story, and his latest adventure will set you in roars of laughter. Don't miss it, chums.

"EASTER HOLIDAY" SUPPLEMENT.

This supplement, which, to make room for the extra-long school story, was held over from the issue you now have in your hands, will be included in next week's programme. You'll enjoy it.

"THE SCARLET STREAK!"

Little need for me to chin-wag about this treat. You'll go for it baldheaded, I'll wager. But don't forget, my lads, the simple competition and the £10. Cheerio, chums!

YOUR EDITOR.

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WIRE IN NOW!

TUCK HAMPER AND MONEY PRIZES AWARDED FOR WIT.

All Efforts in this Competition should be Addressed to: "My Readers' Own Corner," Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C.4

BRAVO, BIRMINGHAM!

A VERY LONG RUN!

"Your show is the worst we have had here!" remarked the principal manager as he handed a share of the receipts to the company's agent. "That's strange," replied the agent. "When we were at Hunslet we had the longest run the place had ever known." "I'm very sorry indeed," replied the manager. "Sorry about what?" "That the audience abandoned the chase!"—A Tuck Hamper, filled with delicious Tuck, has been awarded to Harold Rooke, 81, Summer Hill Road, Birmingham.

PITY THE POOR POSTMASTER!

Village Postmaster (to postman): "You might take this parcel up to Puddlescombe Farm and see if it's for them. The name on the label's obliterated." Postman: "Tain't for them, then, for certain. Their name's Reilly!"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to H. Fairweather, 6, Daleston Avenue, Linthorpe, Middlesbrough.

ONE FOR THE WITNESS!

One day a counsel of the old, hectoring type was cross-examining a hostile witness who was rather plainly dressed. "I presume, my good fellow, that you are a labourer," he began. "You're right; I am a workman, sir," replied the witness, who was a civil engineer. "Familiar with the use of pick and shovel, I presume?" "To some extent. But those are not the principal instruments in my trade." "Perhaps you will enlighten me as to your principal instruments?" "It's hardly worth while. You'll not understand their nature or use." "Probably not; but I insist on knowing what they are." "Brains!" said the witness quietly, and the court roared.—Half-a-crown has been awarded to G. B. Wray, 94, Lucerne Road, Remuera, Auckland, New Zealand.

ARTFUL SCOTTY!

A Scotsman, just arrived on a golfing tour, went up to a taxi-driver and inquired the fare to the local golf course. "Half-a-crown, sir," answered the driver. "And the luggage goes for nothing." "Oh, well," returned the Scot, "take the luggage and I'll walk it!"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to I. G. Chivers, 4, Adelaide Street, Crindau, Newport, Mon.

WHAT DID SHE MEAN?

Little Tommy (tearfully): "Mother, they call me 'big head' at school." Mother: "Never you mind, sonny, there's nothing in it!"—Half-a-crown has been awarded to M. Harrison, 36, Carlton Road, East Sheen, S.W. 14.

HARD LINES!

A tourist had lost his way along the road, and, being very dark, he couldn't make up his mind what to do. He walked on a little farther and eventually reached a sign-post. With great difficulty he climbed the post, then striking a match, he read to his surprise and horror the words: "Wet Paint."—Half-a-crown has been awarded to W. J. Thomas, 6, Taliesyn Road, Town Hill, Swansea.

TUCK HAMPER COUPON.

THE GEM LIBRARY.

No attempt will be considered unless accompanied by one of these Coupons.

"EVER BEEN HAD?" That's the phrase running throughout St. Jim's on the morning of April 1st, and as a natural consequence japes are the order of the day. Even such august personages as Form masters are not immune from the gentle arts of the "leg puller!"



APRIL FOOLS ALL!

A screamingly funny story of
Tom Merry & Co., at St.
Jim's, describing their activities
on the FIRST.

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By Martin Clifford.

## CHAPTER 1. Too Bad!

"HALLO! What are you up to now, Monty?" Tom Merry asked the question curiously as he entered Study No. 10 with Manners.

Monty Lowther, who was busily engaged tying up a big, square cardboard box with string, looked round with a chuckle.

"I'm just preparing a little surprise-packet for dear old Gussy and those asses in No. 6," he remarked cheerily.

Tom Merry and Manners came into the study and blinked from the box to Lowther.

"But what for?" demanded Tom Merry. "What's the giddy idea, Monty?"

"You'll see in the morning if it comes off," grinned Lowther.

"If what comes off?"

"Don't you know what day it is to-morrow?" asked Lowther witheringly. "To-morrow is the day of days—the giddy day on which this study's got to come out on top. To-morrow this study's got to keep its end up against all comers—including those giddy Fourth Form duffers!"

Tom Merry looked mystified.

"To-morrow's Thursday," he said, wrinkling his brows. "It isn't even a half. Blessed if I can see anything unusual about it."

"Look at the calendar, old nut," grinned Lowther, "and then you'll see why I call it the day of days."

Tom Merry, still mystified, crossed to the calendar on the study wall and looked at it. Then he started and smiled.

"Oh! It's April the First, of course, Monty!" he said affably. "I'm glad you reminded us, old chap. Well, we won't forget you."

"Eh? What d'you mean?"

"We won't forget a little present for you, old chap," said Tom blandly. "I couldn't understand at first why you called it the day of days. Of course, it's your birthday, isn't it? Well, I hope you have plenty of presents, Monty. We must remember to buy you a little one to-morrow, mustn't we, Manners?"

"Ha, ha! Yes."

"And in case we forget in the morning," added Tom kindly, "allow us to wish you many happy returns of the day, old fellow. May your jokes never grow stale, and your puns never grow whiskers."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Manners roared at the expression on Lowther's face.

"You—you ass!" snorted Lowther. "Don't be a silly goat!"

"I've no intention of trying to be one. One silly goat is quite enough in this study without either Manners or I trying to understudy you, old fellow."

Lowther breathed hard. It is said that a prophet never finds honour in his own country, and certainly Lowther, who was a born humorist, never found much encouragement for his humour in his own study.

"Oh, dry up!" he said quite crossly. "You know jolly well what I mean. It's All Fools' Day to-morrow, and Blake and his lot will be trying their little games on us as usual. Well, we've got to be prepared and wide-awake. This study's got to keep its end up."

"Well, that's so," agreed Tom Merry, nodding.

"Time you did see it!" said Lowther in an aggrieved tone. "I'm blessed if I see why I should be the only one to try to keep our end up!"

"All serene, old man!" said Tom Merry, laughing. "I'm as keen as you are to put the kybosh on those Fourth chaps, of course. Go ahead! What's in the box, anyhow?"

"Gussy's best topper!"

"What?"

"Gussy's best silk hat!" grinned Lowther, mollified now his chum showed signs of interest. "The fact is, you fellows, I've got quite a good few little japes ready for to-morrow. This is one of them. I'm going to make Gussy look an awful ass, and of course it'll make Blake and the others feel sick, too."

"But what the thump are you doing with Gussy's best topper? He'll slaughter you—"

"That's the jape," grinned Lowther. "I'm going to get Gussy to give himself this hat for a birthday present to-morrow morning. See?"

Tom Merry and Manners quite failed to see. They eyed their chum blankly. Then Manners tapped his forehead and looked meaningfully at Tom Merry.

"Batty!" he said sadly. "I've seen this coming on for a long time."

"Oh, don't rot!" sniffed Lowther. "Can't you see? The idea's this. I tackle Gussy this evening, and stuff him up that we want to make a birthday presentation to a certain chap in the morning. I shall suggest that we're too shy to make the presentation ourselves, and that, as a fellow of tact and judgment, he's just the man for the job."

"Yes, but—"

"Let me finish," grinned Lowther. "You know how Gussy swanks about his tact and judgment. Well, he'll jump at the bait. If he asks for the chap's name I shall say it's a secret and we don't want it to get out as we want it to be a complete surprise to him. I shall ask him to come

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to the Shell dorm to make the presentation at rising-bell to-morrow morning. Now do you see?"

"Yes, but why at rising-bell?"

"In case someone else japes him first," grinned Lowther. "Lots of chaps will be trying it on old Gussy in the morning. I want to be the first. If he knows it's the First of April he'll spot something, perhaps."

"Oh!"

"See the wheeze?" chuckled Lowther. "Gussy comes along to our dorm in the morning to make the presentation. We hand him this box, and when he asks who the fellow is we tell him it's himself, and wish him many happy returns of the day. Ha, ha, ha!"

And Lowther roared with laughter at the thought. But his chums did not laugh. Tom Merry winked slyly at Manners.

"Yes," he said, "I see the idea now, of course, old chap; but where does the jape come in?"

Lowther's hilarity ceased.

"Well, you burbling dummy!" he said witheringly. "Can't you see it now? Think of old Gussy's face when he hears that he's the chap, and when he sees that it's his own best topper! Why, you silly dummies—"

"Oh, all right!" said Tom Merry, with a chuckle. "If you assure us that it is a jape, well, it must be, I suppose. What do you want us to do, then?"

"Just back me up, that's all!" grunted Lowther. "Now I saw Gussy pass the door a few minutes ago. My idea is to wait for him coming back, and engage him in conversation. Then I'll gently hint what we want him to do. See?"

"Oh, yes! Ha, ha, ha!" Tom Merry roared, with obviously forced mirth.

Lowther glared at him.

"I suppose you think you're funny?" he snorted.

"Eh? Not at all! Weren't you being funny? I thought you always liked us to laugh at your jokes, Monty?"

"You—you—you—"

"If you didn't make a joke then, of course, I'm sorry," went on Tom blandly. "But it's your own fault. You ought to tell us beforehand just when you're about to make a joke, and then we should know just when to laugh, old chap."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Manners.

"Why, you—you burbling idiots!" spluttered Lowther wrathfully. "You—you—"

He seemed about to rush at his laughing chums, when Tom Merry held his hand up.

"Pax, old chap!" he laughed. "It's all right, Monty—it's a jolly good jape. Only pulling your leg, you know. Let's get out and collar Gussy before he comes back. Come on!"

And taking Monty Lowther's arm soothingly, Tom led him from the study, and Manners followed, grinning. They were just as keen as Lowther to "take a rise" out of Study No. 6, but they could not resist pulling the leg of the humorist of the Shell for all that. And as they emerged on the Shell passage an elegant figure came strolling leisurely towards them along the passage. It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy—Lowther's intended victim.

## CHAPTER 2.

### Blake Takes a Hand!

"HERE he comes!" breathed Monty Lowther. "Look as solemn as boiled owls, and leave it to me."

The indignant wrath of Monty Lowther had faded like the morning mist before the sun at sight of Gussy's elegant form, and his eyes were gleaming eagerly now. The moment for laying the ground-work of his April the First jape had arrived.

All unconscious of the dark plot against him, Arthur Augustus sailed serenely up to the Shell juniors. He was about to pass on with a genial nod, when he caught sight of their glum faces and he halted.

"Bai Jove!" he remarked, turning a glimmering monocle on the Terrible Three curiously. "What is the mattah, deah boys? You look as if something tewwible has happened."

"Oh, it's nothing much, Gussy," murmured Tom Merry, shaking his head sadly. "I suppose we do look a bit worried. In any case, I'm afraid you can't help us, old chap."

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus, his curiosity aroused now. "You nevah know, deah boys. Pway tell me what the twouble is. I wathah flattah myself—"

"Well, perhaps you could help with advice, at all events, Gussy," said Monty Lowther, looking at his chums rather doubtfully. "Shall—shall we tell him, chaps? After all, Gussy is a useful chap in an emergency—"

"Well, I see no reason why we shouldn't," said Tom Merry solemnly.

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"None whatever!" agreed Manners gravely.

"It's rather a delicate matter, Gussy, though," said Lowther warningly. "You see, it's like this. We want to make a certain chap a birthday present to-morrow morning. We've already got the present ready, but the trouble is to find a really tactful fellow to make the presentation."

Lowther paused, eyeing Arthur Augustus rather narrowly. If Gussy remembered that the following day was April 1st, then the game was up at once.

But Monty need not have been anxious on that score. Arthur Augustus merely eyed the three jokers in innocent surprise. Arthur Augustus was as unsuspicious as he was kind-hearted.

"Bai Jove!" he remarked. "Is that all, deah boys? I fail to see why that should wowwy you. Weally—"

"Oh, but you don't understand, Gussy," said Lowther, shaking his head. "You see the fellow is rather a touchy chap, though quite a decent fellow really. Our trouble is to find the right fellow to make the presentation. He must be a chap of tact and judgment, who knows just what is the proper thing to do. And you know what tactless, blundering chaps we are, Gussy."

"Yaas, wathah! I am wathah afwaid you fellows are wathah thoughtless youngstahs," said Arthur Augustus, smiling. "Howevah, I fancy I know just the wight fellow for a job like this, deah boys."

"You—you do?"

"Yaas, wathah! Myself, deah boys! If you leave it to me, you know, I fancy I can promise you that the presentation will be a success—a great success!"

"You—you mean that you would do it, Gussy?" gasped Lowther, in pretended astonishment.

"Yaas!" said Arthur Augustus, smiling modestly. "As I was about to wemark just now, I wathah flattah myself on being a fellow of gweat tact and judgment, y' know! Yaas, wathah! Pway do not wowwy a moment longah ovah the mattah. I am vewy glad you confided in me, deah boys. You have come to the wight place."

The three Shell fellows looked at each other, and their sad looks departed with really wonderful celerity.

"My hat!" breathed Tom Merry. "What luck, you chaps! We might have known old Gussy would do it. He couldn't possibly muck it up."

"Not with his tact and judgment," remarked Manners.

"Just the very man!" agreed Lowther enthusiastically. "Jove! How lucky we told him!"

"And—and you really would do it, Gussy?" asked Tom Merry anxiously.

"Yaas, wathah! I shall be vewy happy indeed to make the presentation, deah boys," assented Arthur Augustus. "Pway tell me who the fellow is, deah boys—Kildare?"

"Well, I'm afraid it would hardly do to tell you that," said Lowther, shaking his head seriously. "You see, we want to keep the whole scheme a close secret until morning. We don't want a word of it to get about, as we want it to be a really pleasant surprise to the chap in question. I'm sure you won't mind if we prefer not to risk—"

"Bai Jove! Not at all, if you weally would pwefer it, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus, though he looked surprised. "Howevah, where do you wish me to make the presentation?"

"We were thinking of the Shell dorm at rising-bell," explained Lowther. "All the Shell fellows will be there then, and you could easily slip in in your pyjamas. We don't expect you to make a long speech, of course—just say a few well-chosen words, hand him the present, and wish him many happy returns of the day. Understand?"

"Yaas, wathah! Wely on me, deah boys!"

"Then we'll hand you the present now," said Lowther, winking his eyes at his chums. "Come on, Gussy! You must excuse us not telling you what the present is, as we want it to be a real surprise for everyone. You don't mind—"

"Not at all, deah boys!"

And Arthur Augustus followed the Terrible Three into Study No. 10. Lowther picked up a large square cardboard box, and handed it carefully over to him.

"There you are, Gussy, old fellow," he said anxiously. "Take care of it for goodness' sake, and mind nobody breaks the sealing-wax on the string! Remember—rising-bell in the Shell dorm!"

"Wely on me," smiled Arthur Augustus gracefully. "I wathah fancy you will not wegwet havin' entwisted such a mission to me, deah boys!"

"You won't breathe a word to Blake about it, of course?"

"Not a word! Wely on me, deah boys!"

And Arthur Augustus sailed out of the study gracefully, the cardboard box in his hand, and a beaming smile on his face.

There was nothing Arthur Augustus prided himself on more than his celebrated tact and judgment—a fact Lowther had been well aware of—and here was a splendid oppor-

tunity of showing it in public! Arthur Augustus felt very proud and pleased at having been entrusted with such a delicate task. It was certainly rather strange that it should be so necessary to keep the name of the lucky fellow secret, but Arthur Augustus realised that it would quite spoil the "surprise" if it did get about.

That was how Arthur Augustus himself looked at it. He might have looked at things in a different light had he only realised that the next day was the first of April, and that Monty Lowther was the biggest practical joker at St. Jim's.

But the calendar—except when holidays were drawing nigh—was of little interest to Arthur Augustus. He did not suspect anything, and he was smiling genially as he entered Study No. 6 on the Fourth passage.

Blake, Herries, and Digby had just finished prep, and they eyed Arthur Augustus in some surprise as he carefully mounted a chair and placed the big cardboard box on the top of the cupboard.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Jack Blake. "What the thump have you got there, Gussy—grub, or more dashed clobber?"

"It is neither, deah boy!"

"Then what is it, ass?"

"I wegwet that I cannot tell you that, Blake," said Arthur Augustus, jumping down. "It is wathah a secwet, and I am not at libahty to mention a word about it."

"Oh, is it?" snorted Blake. "Well, you'd better speak up, old scout; we don't allow secrets in this study—you know that."

"I gweatly wegwet that I am uttably unable to speak, deah boy. Sowwy!" said Arthur Augustus.

"He's been murdering somebody, and that's the body in that box, if you ask me!" said Herries severely.

"Weally, Hewwies!"

"Well, he was dressed to kill when he went to Rylcombe this afternoon," said Blake, shaking his head. "I expect he's slaughtered the girl from the bunshop with one of his killing glances, you know."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Is there a body in that box, Gussy?" demanded Blake sternly.

"Wot! I wefuse to answah such a wediculous question, Blake!"

"You won't tell your dear pals what's in that box?"

"Nevah! I have given my word to Tom Mewwy and his chums not to mention the mattah at all," said Gussy firmly.

"As a mattah of fact, I do not know what is in the box myself. Lowthah felt I had bettah not know, in case it got out that they were makin' the fellow a birthday pwesent to-mowwow."

"Oh!" said Blake suspiciously. "So Lowther's in it, is he?"

"Bai Jove! How have you guessed that, Blake?" asked Arthur Augustus innocently.

"And it's a birthday present for someone—eh?" went on Blake grimly.

"Bai Jove! You seem to know all about it, Blake?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The manner in which Arthur Augustus was keeping the "secwet" made his chums roar.

"Bai Jove!" went on Gussy blankly. "I uttably fail to see where the joke comes in, deah boys!"

"You're the giddy joke, Gussy!" laughed Blake. "So the Shell are making some fellow a birthday present to-morrow, and they don't want it to get out, eh?"

"Bai Jove! Howevah did you get to know, Jack Blake? Lowthah expwessly asked me not to mention it to you fellows."

"Ha ha! We do get to know these things, Gussy—having a fellow like you in the study, you know. Now, what's the game, Gussy? Somebody's been pulling your giddy leg, it strikes me."

"Bai Jove! What wot! I would like to see the fellow who could pull my leg."

"My dear man, you see thousands who could every day of your life, old nut. But the point is—why the thump did



"Now we're going to see what's inside that box," said Blake. "Bai Jove! If you fellows dare touch that box—" Arthur Augustus broke off with a yell as Blake jumped up on the chair and reached for the box. As his fingers touched it, Arthur Augustus reached him and clasped him round the legs. "Look out, you'll have me off—Yooooop!" Crash! (See chapter 2.)

Lowther tell you about it at all if it was to be kept a secret? And why have they given you the giddy present to take care of?"

"I wefuse to answah that question, Blake. I have already told you that I have been sworn to secwecy ovah the mattah. I cannot undahstand how you can have got to know what you seem to know. It is vewy stwange. When I undahtook to make the pwesentation I pwomised not to bweathe one word about it to a soul," explained Arthur Augustus, looking in astonishment at his laughing chums. "Who told you about it all?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Wats! I see nothin' whatevah to cackle about!"

"That's because you're not standing in front of the looking-glass," explained Blake, with a gurgle. "But who's the fellow to get the birthday present, Gussy?"

"I do not know myself, Blake. And, in any case I should nevah tell you," said Gussy rather frigidly. "Tom Mewwy and his friends wish it to be a complete surprise to the fellow when I pwesent the birthday pwesent to him in the Shell dorm at wisin'-bell to-mowwow."

"So you are to make the presentation—what?"

"I wefuse to tell you that."

"And it's to be in the Shell dorm at rising-bell, eh?"

"You are apparently makin' guesses, or else you have heard somethin', Blake," said Arthur Augustus coldly. "In any case I uttably wefuse to confirm your guesses or suspicions."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Wats! You are a set of cacklin' wottahs! I wefuse to discuss the mattah furthah."

And Arthur Augustus seated himself at the table and opened his writing-case. His intention was to make a few notes in readiness for the speech he intended making at the presentation ceremony the next morning.

But Blake had not finished with the matter yet. The suspicions of Study No. 6 were aroused now.

"Hold on, Gussy!" said Blake, becoming suddenly serious. "We want to know a bit more about this."

"I shall tell you nothin', bai Jove! Wathah not!"

"But can't you see," snorted Blake, "that they must be pulling your leg?"

"Wubbish!"

"The very fact that they did not want you to tell your keepers about it proves that," snorted Herries.

"My keepers! Bai Jove! Who?"

"Yes, your keepers—little us, you know!" said Blake warmly. "Aren't we your keepers?"

"Bai Jove! Weally, Blake, if you dare——"

"Now, look here, Gussy," said Blake grimly, "can't you see that it's all spoof? It's something up against you and this study, of course—a rotten jape of Lowther's, I suspect. Why should they refuse to tell you the chap's name? And why should they refuse to tell you what's in the box? And also why should they ask a silly owl like you to make the dashed presentation, in any case?"

"Bai Jove! Blake, you cheeky wottah!" snorted Gussy, jumping up from the table. "If you call me a silly owl——"

"You are a silly owl—worse than a silly owl," said Blake, "if you can't see that those Shell fatheads are pulling your leg——"

"They're not pullin' my leg!" shrieked Arthur Augustus. "Of course they are—or trying to," snapped Blake. "But we're going to see that they don't. Anything up against any fellow in this study is up against us. We don't care how big a fool they make of you, personally, Gussy, but——"

"Bai Jove! If you——"

"They can't make you a much bigger fool than you already are, of course," went on Blake. "But we don't intend to allow those Shell fish to put it across this study. Now we're going to see what's inside that box."

"Yes, rather!" said Digby and Herries together.

"Bai Jove! If you fellows dare to touch that box——"

Arthur Augustus broke off with a yell as Blake jumped up on the chair and reached for the box. As his fingers touched it, Arthur Augustus reached him, and Blake yelled in his turn as D'Arcy clasped him round the legs.

"Look out! You'll have me off! Yoooop!"

Crash!

Blake was off. The chair wobbled, and, losing his balance, Blake toppled over with a wild howl. He gave a wilder howl as he struck the carpet with Arthur Augustus on top of him. The box remained where it had been, while Blake and Arthur Augustus rolled over on the carpet locked in a deadly embrace.

"Help me chuck the silly fathead out, you fellows!" panted Blake from the floor. "Buck up! We want to see what's inside that box."

"What-ho!"

"Bai Jove! Blake—Hewwies— Yawoooooh!"

The struggles of Arthur Augustus, gallant as they were, proved to be of no avail against odds of three to one. There was a brief struggle on the floor, and then Arthur Augustus was whirled over, and his three chums staggered up and rushed him to the door. Blake kicked it open, and then the hapless swell of the Fourth, dishevelled and in a state of towering wrath, was slung out into the passage like a sack of potatoes.

Click!

As D'Arcy crashed into the passage, the door slammed, and Blake turned the key in the lock.

"That's about settled the blithering dummy," panted Jack Blake. "Now, about that giddy box, chaps!"

"It's spoof, of course," said Herries. "Some jape against us."

"Of course it is!" snorted Blake, mopping his nose, which had come into violent contact with D'Arcy's noble fist. "I fancy I see what it means, too."

"You do? Well——"

"It's just struck me, as we were chucking Gussy out," grinned Blake, rubbing his nose ruefully. "It's the thirty-first of March to-day, isn't it?"

"Yes. But—— Oh! I—I see!"

"I should think you did," grinned Blake. "To-morrow is the first of April, my lads—the day of japes and jokes. I'm more than curious to see just what's in that box now. Shush, though! We won't enlighten dear old Gussy. He deserves to be made an April fool for allowing himself to be diddled by those Shell fish."

"Ha, ha! Yes."

Blake placed the chair into position again, and got down the cardboard box. He grunted as he saw it was tied and the string sealed with sealing-wax—a little precaution taken by the Terrible Three. That fact made Blake & Co. more suspicious than ever.

"But it's only tied in the middle," grinned Blake, after a swift examination. "Easily slip the string off and replace it, I fancy. Wonder what's in it? Can't be bricks, or anything like that—much too light."

"Hardly a football, either," grinned Herries. "My hat! Listen to poor old Gussy!"

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Thump, thump, thump!

Arthur Augustus, out in the passage, was thundering on the door with his fists.

"Let me in, you fidgetful wottahs!" he hissed through the keyhole.

"Go and eat coke and chop chips, old top," called Blake. Then in an undertone he said: "Here goes! Better be quick, or old Gussy will be bringing a crowd round."

He strained gently at the string, and, after a bit of struggling, slipped one of the ends off. The rest was easy. The string had not been twisted, and a moment later Blake lifted off the lid of the box.

Then all three jumped. Exposed to view was a glossy silk hat. Blake chuckled.

"Gussy's best topper, for a pension!" he murmured. "I see the wheeze now. They wouldn't tell Gussy the name of the lucky chap, because it's to be Gussy himself. See? They're getting poor old Gussy to give himself a birthday present of his own Sunday topper!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Herries and Digby.

The jape was plain enough to Blake & Co. now, excepting the innocent and trusting Arthur Augustus.

"Well, it serves Gussy right for being such an awful ass as to be taken in," murmured Blake. "But, of course, we can't allow those Shell fish to diddle this study."

"Rather not!"

"We'll put it back for the present," said Blake, glancing at the inside of the hat to make sure. "Yes, it's Gussy's right enough. A. A. D'Arcy, see?" He pointed to a name inside the hat. "That settles it. We'll pretend to Gussy we haven't opened it, but we'll change the programme a little some time this evening. Those Shell fish go down to the Common-room every night after prep. We'll get our chance to alter their programme then. Leave it to me."

With a soft chuckle Blake replaced the hat carefully, also the written ticket inside which wished Arthur Augustus D'Arcy a happy birthday on the morrow. Then, just as carefully, he replaced the string, and put the box back on the top of the cupboard.

"You chaps be finishing your prep," he murmured. "Mustn't let dear old Gussy suspect."

Herries and Digby seated themselves at the table again, and Blake crossed to the door, which was still rattling under a violent shaking from outside.

He gently turned the key and slipped swiftly back to his seat at the table. For another minute the door shook under the wrathful Gussy's onslaught, and then quite suddenly it flew open, and Arthur Augustus dashed in, his face red with wrath.

He stopped dead at sight of his chums peacefully writing at the table, and his fists dropped.

"Bai Jove!" he panted, his glance going up to the box on the cupboard. "You—you fidgetful wottahs!"

"Hallo!" exclaimed Blake, looking up. "Back again, Gussy?"

"Wats!"

Arthur Augustus dragged the chair over to the cupboard, and reached for the box. His face showed his great relief as he noted that the sealing-wax was untouched.

"Bai Jove! Then you were pullin' my leg, you wottahs!" he gasped. "I thought you were goin' to open that box, it is vewy lucky that you did not do so."

"For us, or for you, old man?"

"Wats!" said Gussy, a trifle less wrathfully. "That box has been entrusted to my care, and I should have been vewy angwy indeed if you had tampered with it, you wottahs! I should have felt obliged to give all three of you a feahful thwashin'."

"Go hon!"

"As it is, you have treated me with wuffianly diswespct, and I wufuse to speak another word to any of you for the wemainder of this evenin'!" said Arthur Augustus, quite crossly.

"Peace and tranquillity at last!" murmured Blake.

"Wats!"

And with that final retort Arthur Augustus settled down to finish his own prep.

## CHAPTER 3.

### The First!

**M**ONTY LOWTHER was the first fellow awake in the Shell dormitory at rising-bell the following morning. Perhaps that was because Monty had fully intended being up bright and early on that particular morning.

April the First was a great day in the life of the humorist of the Shell, in fact. On that day of days Monty Lowther could be relied upon to live, move, and breathe in an atmosphere of japes and jokes. Even the tradesmen who visited the school were not safe from Lowther's attentions on that day—far from it.

And now the great day had dawned, and Lowther awoke bright and cheery, and enthusiastic to commence operations.

He smiled across at Talbot, who opened his eyes and yawned just then.

"Top of the morning, Talbot, old chap!" he called out affably. "Is that a spider on your chivvy, or a wart?"

"My hat!"

Talbot sat up quickly and ran his hand over his face.

"Nothing on my face!" he said, in surprise. "Trying to be funny, fathead?"

"Just reminding you that it's the first of April, old chap," said Lowther blandly. "Hallo. There's old Grundy!"

The sight of Grundy, still fast asleep, caused Lowther to slip from his bed. Grundy had announced on the previous evening that nobody would catch him out, and Lowther meant to prove his statement false.

Stepping to the dormitory fireplace, Lowther scraped some soot from the chimney in his fingers and gently decorated the sleeping Grundy's face. Then he slipped back into bed just as Grundy stirred and opened his eyes.

"Cheerio, Grundy!" called Lowther cheerily. "Many happy returns of the day, old fellow!"

"Oh, don't come that rot with me!" sniffed Grundy, yawning. "It'll take a smarter man than you to do me down, Lowther!"

"No need to get huffy," said Lowther. "I was only going to tell you that there's some black on your chivvy, Grundy."

"Rats!"

"It's a fact, Grundy. Better wipe it off before it gets on the pillow, old chap."

"Chuck it!" jeered Grundy. "Think I was born yesterday, Lowther?"

"No—to-day," replied Lowther. "Haven't I just wished you many happy returns?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Several fellows were awake now, and the sight of Grundy's face, covered with soot, entertained them vastly.

"I appeal to the dormitory," said Lowther. "Isn't there some black on Grundy's face, chaps?"

"Ha, ha! Yes, rather!"

"Chuck it!" said Grundy disdainfully. "Think you can catch me out with your silly first-of-April japes, Lowther? Try some other mug, old chap!"

"But the black's on your mug, old man."

"Oh, don't try to keep it up! Can't you see when you're licked?" sniffed Grundy.

And Grundy dropped his face on the pillow again, amid a chorus of chuckles. The next moment he lifted his head abruptly and stared in astonishment at his pillow, which was smudged with black.

"M-my hat!" he gasped. "What—what—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a roar of laughter, and Grundy rubbed his hand over his face and looked at it hurriedly. He fairly gaped as he saw the soot on it.

"I warned you, you know," said Lowther seriously.

"You—you—" Grundy spluttered wrathfully; but he had been fairly caught after all, and he scowled round at the chuckling juniors, and, slipping out of bed, he made a dive for the washstand.

He was just washing off the soot, when the dormitory door opened and a form clad in elegant pyjamas and carrying a large, square cardboard box entered the room.

It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, and the Shell juniors



Arthur Augustus made a wild rush for the scrimmage, hitting out right and left, and the "footballers" scattered, howling with merriment. "My toppah!" shrieked D'Arcy. "My best toppah! Oh, you feahful wottahs!" "Ha, ha, ha!" roared Lowther. "You started kicking it yourself, Gussy—you can't deny that!" (See Chapter 3.)

chuckled as he walked into the room, his aristocratic features beaming.

"Hallo! So you've turned up in good time, Gussy?" said Lowther affably. "Good man! Ready for the business?"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus, rather puzzled at the grinning faces about him. "I am quite weady to make the presentation, deah boys. But hasn't the lucky fellow awwived yet?"

"Oh, yes!" said Lowther, smiling round at the grinning Shell fellows. "Gentlemen, our esteemed schoolfellow, the Honourable Arthur Augustus Plantagenet D'Arcy will now make his presentation to the fellow whose birthday we are honouring to-day. Go ahead, Gussy, old chap!"

"But I fail to see the fellow, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, looking about him blankly. "Is he one of you chaps?"

"Not at all."

"But—but, weally, is he heah?"

"Yes, of course."

"Then, pway, who is he, Lowthah?"

"Yourself, old chap!"

"Mu-mum-myself?"

"Yes; it's your birthday to-day, isn't it?" asked Lowther innocently. "April the first, you know!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a howl of laughter at the extraordinary expression on D'Arcy's features. His face went pinker and pinker as the dreadful truth soaked slowly in.

"Bai Jove!" he gasped. "Then—then you were pullin' my leg all the time, you awful wottahs! Bai Jove! Gveat Scott! Why, you feahful spoofah, Lowthah! You have actually twied to make me into an Apwil fool, you wottah!"

"And succeeded, old chap! But, go on—why don't you make the presentation to yourself, old chap? Open the box and let the fellows see what a splendid present you're giving yourself on your birthday."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you wottahs!" D'Arcy fairly spluttered with wrath. "You fwightful spoofahs, bai Jove! I shall certainly not do anythin' of the kind, Lowthah! Heah is your wotten box!"

And with that Arthur Augustus, almost speechless with wrath, flung the box at the laughing Lowther. It caught that junior amidstships, so to speak, and, as he had not

expected it, Lowther sat down on the dormitory floor with a bump. And as he sat there, Arthur Augustus took a running kick at the box and sent it sailing across the room.

It dropped at the feet of Gore, and that junior kicked it back with some vim.

"On the ball!" roared Bernard Glyn.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A general rush was made for the cardboard box, and the next moment it was being punted about the dormitory floor. And though most of the fellows were in slippers, the box soon began to look like anything but a box.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry, almost helpless with laughter. "Better rescue it, Gussy—quickly! Your giddy best topper's in that box!"

"Wha-a-at?"

Arthur Augustus fairly shrieked the word.

"Yes, you'd better rescue it, Gussy," chuckled Lowther, who was on his feet again now. "You see, we thought it would be a good idea to let you present yourself with your own best topper. I'm afraid it won't be a topper now, though."

"Oh, you frightful wuffians!" shrieked Arthur Augustus.

He made a wild rush for the scrimmage, hitting out right and left, and the "footballers" scattered, howling with merriment. Arthur Augustus grabbed up the battered box, and as he saw the crumpled silk hat through the burst-open cardboard box he gave a wail of despair.

"My toppah—my best toppah!" he wailed. "Oh, you fearful wottahs!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" choked Lowther, almost helpless with laughter. "You started kicking it yourself, Gussy—you can't deny that."

"Oh, you—you—you—"

"Hold on, Gussy! Don't get excited, old chap!"

It was Blake's cheery voice from the doorway. Behind Blake was Herries, Digby, and quite a swarm of Fourth Form chaps. All of them were grinning.

"Excited!" howled Arthur Augustus. "Wouldn't you get excited if some fearful wuffians had uttably ruined your new toppah?"

"I should," agreed Blake blandly. "But there's no need for you to get excited now, Gussy. That isn't your topper in that box."

"Bai Jove! What—what—"

"You see," explained Blake, "we happened to spot the little game last night, so we changed your topper for another one. See?"

"Bai Jove!"

"You—you changed it for another one?" ejaculated Lowther. "Then who's is—"

"Yours, old chap," said Blake affably.

"Wha-a-at?"

It was Lowther's turn to shriek. He glared at Blake, and then he snatched the box from Gussy's hands. Tearing open the cardboard still more, he snatched out the silk hat—or what had once been a silk hat. As he did so something fell out on the floor, breaking up into pieces as it did so.

It was a large plum cake—or what must have been a really ripping plum-cake, but which was now a mess of crumbs and lumps on the dormitory floor.

Tom Merry, Monty Lowther, and Manners stared at it with eyes that almost started from their heads.

"What—what—what—" Tom Merry babbled, and stopped, speechlessly.

"We found that cake in your cupboard, Merry, when we got Lowther's best topper," explained Blake cheerfully.

"We hope you don't mind. But we thought that, as you were going to be so kind as to make Gussy a present of the hat, it would be nice for Herries and Digby and me to have something, too. What a pity the cake's broken, though."

"Well, you—you—you—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was a perfect howl of laughter this time from every fellow in the room, with the exception of Tom Merry, Lowther, and Manners. They did not laugh, or even smile. Lowther looked anxiously inside the hat, and as he saw his own name therein he gave a wail of woe.

"Oh, great pip! My best topper—utterly ruined!" he choked.

"And our cake! It was only sent me by last night's post!" groaned Tom Merry. "Oh, my only hat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Even Arthur Augustus was laughing. He could afford to laugh now.

"You cackling dummies!" howled Lowther. "Think it's something to laugh at? Why, I'll—I'll—"

He seemed about to make a rush at Jack Blake, but Tom Merry dragged him back.

"Chuck it, Monty!" he said, grinning ruefully. "We've been diddled, dished, and done brown! No good making

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matters worse by losing your wool! We ought to have had more sense than to let Gussy take that box—"

"Boys!"

It was a deep voice from the doorway, and every boy in the room wheeled round with a startled gasp. In the doorway stood a familiar figure in cap and gown, and with a cane in his hand.

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Tom Merry. "Linton!"

## CHAPTER 4.

### Painful!

"BOYS! Cease that disgraceful uproar this instant!" The uproar had already ceased, however.

The startled juniors stared with suddenly glum looks at the spare form and gleaming spectacles of Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell. They did not like the businesslike way in which the master gripped his cane at all.

"Boys!" repeated Mr. Linton in a scandalised voice. "How dare you turn this dormitory into a bear-garden—at this early hour, too! I am astonished and disgusted! The rising-bell has been gone some minutes, and none of you are dressed yet! Merry, what does this uproar mean?"

"Ahem! Only a little—little joke, sir," gasped Tom.

"It is a joke for which you will pay dearly, then!" snapped the little Form master. "I am determined to put an end to these—these childish and disgraceful disturbances in the dormitory. I shall punish you all severely."

"Oh, sir!"

"What are you Fourth Form juniors doing in the Shell dormitory, Blake?" demanded Mr. Linton, turning to that junior.

"We—we just—just came in, sir," explained Blake rather vaguely. "That—that was all!"

"Very well. I shall not report you to your own Form-master, but in this case I shall punish you myself," said Mr. Linton, who seemed to be in a particularly irate mood that morning. "I will deal with you first, Merry. Come here, boy!"

"Oh, ye-es, sir."

Tom stepped forward, his eyes on the cane. He had need to be apprehensive, as it happened.

"Touch your toes, Merry."

"M-mum-my-toes?"

"That is what I said, Merry."

"Oh dear!"

Tom Merry, looking rather astonished as well as apprehensive now, touched his toes.

Swish!

Tom Merry leaped upright with a muffled yelp as the cane came down over his tightly-stretched pyjamas.

"Now you next, Lowther!" snapped Mr. Linton. "And after Lowther each boy will take his turn, not excluding these Fourth Form boys! Now, Lowther!"

"Oh crumbs!"

Lowther bent down, and again the cane swished, and a yelp escaped the hapless Lowther. There was a plentiful lack of enthusiasm for the honour or otherwise of coming next, but Mr. Linton pointed with his cane to Manners, and he groaned and stepped forward. He was followed by Glyn, and Kangaroo, and every Shell fellow in his turn. Racke came the last, and by that time Mr. Linton was a trifle breathless—at least, he seemed to be gasping strangely, and his face was curiously contorted, as if with emotion.

But he did not stop then—he pointed to Blake, and Blake, after a moment's hesitation, groaned and took his place. Mr. Linton should have reported him to his own Form master for punishment, of course. But then Blake remembered that one's own Form master usually licked one much harder than a master who was not his Form master would do.

So Blake took his "gruel," and after him came D'Arcy, Herries, Digby, and those of the Fourth who had not managed to slip out through the doorway in time.

It was a wholesale licking, and by the time Mr. Linton had finished, the dormitory was full of gasping, rubbing juniors. All of them were looking astonished as well as pained, while the Fourth Formers were looking rebellious in addition. Such a wholesale licking was certainly unusual—especially from Mr. Linton.

"There," gasped the master, giving Herries an extra little swish as if "for luck." "I trust that will be a lesson to you all. But in case you may forget, you will impress it on your memory by writing out the sentence 'I am a fool' fifty times. You will bring me this imposition before breakfast. That will do."

And with that Mr. Linton marched quickly out, his face curiously contorted.

He left behind him some very astonished—and dismayed—juniors.

"Well—well, upon my word!" gasped Tom Merry, rubbing himself dismally. "If that doesn't take the bun, you fellows. What on earth's come over Linton?"

"He seemed queer to me," granted Blake.  
 "Must be absolutely potty," groaned Bernard Glyn.  
 "Great pip! Fancy fifty lines before brekker! We shall have to be moving, chaps."

And in a state of great astonishment and still greater disgust the Shell fellows started to dress with feverish haste. Fifty lines before breakfast—even such a line as had been given them to do—was something new in impositions. And all felt it was adding insult to injury to be forced to write. "I am a fool!" on that day of all days. They almost suspected that Mr. Linton knew what day it was, and had made his punishment fit the crime, as it were.

But there was little time to wonder over matters, and while Blake and his fellow Fourth Formers rushed back to their own dormitory, the Shell fellows finished their dressing at express speed. Mr. Linton was rather a stickler in regard to imposts, and they did not want it to be doubled or trebled—which he was very likely to do in his present extraordinary mood.

Tom Merry & Co. were among the first dressed, and they

Tom Merry opened the missive and he gave a violent jump as he scanned the familiar writing. It ran as follows:  
 "Dear old top—Many happy returns of the day to you and to all the silly asses in the Shell dorm this morning. What a pity you didn't remember when Linton came in this morning that it is the First of April! Hope you enjoyed your lines, and that the writing of them impressed the fact on your little minds that you are really fools! Don't trouble to hand in your lines—but if you wish to it will be safer to bring them across to me at the New House—which you'll admit, after this, is top house! What price the cane? Hear us smiling."

"Francis Kerr (alias Mr. Linton)."

That was all.

As the dreadful truth dawned upon him, Tom Merry forgot where he was and he gave vent to a howl of wrath and utter disgust.

It was all so oof—a first of April jape planned by their rivals of the New House—Figgins & Co., and carried out by Kerr, who was a genius at impersonating people. It



# St Jim's Jingles!



## No. 30—HARRY NOBLE

### OF THE SHELL.

**T**HE SHELL has many shining lights,  
 Envied by cads and bounders;

Supreme in sport, and brave in fights,

And rattling good "all-rounders,"  
 Fellows who love to dare and do,

And will not hear of failure;  
 In the front rank is Kangaroo,

The junior from Australia.

This far-off land may well be proud  
 Of all its stalwart Trumplers;

Sportsmen who thrill a cricket crowd,

Terrific leather-thumpers!  
 And Harry Noble bats and bowls

In brilliant style at cricket;  
 While loud applause like thunder rolls

When "Kangy's" at the wicket.

With Clifton Dane and Bernard Glyn

He shares his junior quarters;  
 This trio never fails to win

The hearts of GEM supporters.  
 Dane is a sound and solid sort,

And Glyn is wondrous clever;  
 While Noble joins in every sport

With honest, keen endeavour.



He has no lack of loyal chums

To make his schooldays jolly;

He smiles at everything that comes,

No use for melancholy!

Whether the skies are grey or blue,

Whether life's gay or dreary,

You'll always get from Kangaroo

A friendly smile and cheery!

I often wish St. Jim's possessed

More boys of Noble's quality;

Never disheartened nor depressed,

But always full of jollity!

And yet, if Nobles were the rule,

There would be no variety;

It takes all sorts to make a school

And leaven its society.

Noble by name, and nature, too,

And fearless to temerity,

I raise my cap to Kangaroo,

And wish him all prosperity.

Australia's loss is England's gain,

We realise it well, boys;

Then "three times three," and

thrice again,

For Noble of the Shell, boys!

## NEXT WEEK:—GEORGE FRANCIS KERR OF THE NEW HOUSE

rushed down to their studies and were soon busy with ink and paper writing their rather humiliating imposition. It was not a pleasant task, and the faces of the Terrible Three were glum as they went along with their lines to Mr. Linton's study. Several fellows were already outside in the passage, and they gave the Terrible Three dismal glances as they hurried up and joined the group.

"Not in yet?" asked Tom Merry.

"No; I've just squinted inside," grunted Wilkins. "I've a good mind just to chuck it on his table and clear—blow him!"

"Better not do that," said Tom, shaking his head. "No good getting his back up more. We've got to meet him in class, remember, and he likes 'em handed in personally. Hallo, here's some more."

The fellows were arriving in twos and threes now, and soon there was quite a long queue outside Mr. Linton's study door. Blake & Co. of the Fourth had just joined the long line when a fag came hurrying up and handed a note to Tom Merry—greatly to that youth's surprise. The fag was from the New House, and he just handed over the note and cleared.

had not been Mr. Linton at all who had caned them and given them those awful lines to do. It had been Kerr—Kerr impersonating Mr. Linton.

"What—what the thump—" began Lowther.

"Look at it!" hooted Tom Merry, almost beside himself with towering wrath and dismay. "Look at it! We've been dishd, diddled and done to the wide. Come on—let's get away from here, for goodness' sake! Oh crumbs! We'll never hear the last of this."

Lowther glared at the note, and then he passed it round in speechless dismay and wrath. And for some seconds afterwards the passage resounded with exclamations of fury and amazement.

But there was no doubting it—none of them doubted the truth now. They remembered "Mr. Linton's" rather nervous haste to get away when once his work was done, and they understood the why and wherefore of his rather strange behaviour now.

They could imagine how the New House fellows would be roaring over the story now. For some moments the crowd of fellows in the passage fairly danced with rage.

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But it was done now, and as the bell rang just then the crowd dispersed, passing remarks on Figgins & Co. which would have made the hair of those cheery jokers curl could they have heard it.

"Well, it serves us right," groaned Tom Merry as they walked dismally away. "We ought to have guessed Figgy would be up to his games this morning. But—but the day isn't ended yet. We'll pay them back before it is, never fear."

"Yes, rather!"

"We'll talk to Blake and get him to combine with us, and we'll make those New House worms sit up for this," vowed Tom Merry. "We've got to do some hard thinking, you fellows."

"Leave it to me," said Lowther. "I'll find a wheeze or bust."

"I'd rather you bust than try," said Tom Merry unkindly. "We've had quite enough of your thumping wheezes for one day, Lowther. You've already lost your best topper, and you've lost our dashed cake, and you've made us look awful asses—"

"Look here—"

"I'm looking, and I see a silly, burling, blundering ass!" said Tom Merry crossly. "You keep your blessed japes to yourself after this, Lowther."

"Yes, rather," grunted Manners. "It was a rotten jape, anyway, and we might have known Gussy would muck the thing up."

"Oh, rats!" said Lowther.

And Monty Lowther frowned glumly. So far April the First—the day of days!—was not turning out quite the success he had expected. But the day was not ended yet, and Lowther was still hopeful of turning the tide.

## CHAPTER 5.

### Keeping It Up!

"HALLO! Something fresh, I wonder? Let's have a squirt, chaps!"

Tom Merry was the speaker. It was just after breakfast, and the Terrible Three were crossing the hall when Tom's attention had been drawn to a little crowd of fellows before the notice-board.

Standing immediately below the green-baize-covered board was Cardew of the Fourth, and behind him were several Fourth and Shell chaps.

Cardew was gazing up at the board with a look of rapt attention on his face. The rest of the fellows were looking rather puzzled as they followed his steady gaze. Cardew seemed to be deeply interested in a sheet of paper that was pinned high up on the board, but the writing on it—if it was writing—was too small for the juniors to read.

"What the thump is it, Cardew?" demanded Clifton Dane impatiently. "Blessed if I can read what it says, anyway."

"Nor can I," said Dick Julian, wrinkling his brows. "What's on it, Cardew?"

Cardew seemed far too engrossed in the mysterious notice to hear, much less reply. The Terrible Three joined the group, and a moment later Grundy, Wilkins, and Gunn joined it. Blake & Co. came along, and they also stopped and eyed the notice-board.

"Bai Jove!" remarked Arthur Augustus. "What's the latest, deah boys? What is it, Cardew?"

Cardew looked round at last.

"You really want to know?" he inquired.

"Of course, ass!"

Cardew reached up, and, taking hold of the sheet of paper with the tips of his fingers, he tore it down, and handed it to Jack Blake. Then he strolled airily away.

Blake looked at the paper in wonder. On one side was a meaningless jumble of scribbling, and on the other side was the legend, "April the First."

"Oh!"

"Oh dear!"

"Done again!"

"Silly ass!" grunted Levison.

And the crowd dispersed rather hurriedly and grinning rather feebly. It really was astonishing how soon one forgot the dangers that beset one at every turn on April the First!

At the bottom of the stairs Tom Merry & Co. came upon Baggy Trimble of the Fourth. He was on his hands and knees, and his fat face was crimson with exertion. He had one corner of the linoleum up, and was feverishly searching for something, apparently.

The Terrible Three stopped and blinked at him.

"What's this game, Trimble, you fat ass?" ejaculated Tom.

"You chaps shove on," he grinned. "Cardew's just dropped a two-bob piece somewhere here, and he says I can have it if I find it."

The Terrible Three chuckled and passed on, leaving Baggy Trimble to his enthusiastic labours. With the date, April

the First, so fresh in their minds, they were not likely to stop to help Baggy in the search for that florin.

A little further along they came upon Mellish of the Fourth. He was standing outside Mr. Railton's door, and he was looking up and down the corridor in rather a stealthy manner.

"Hallo! What's the game, Mellish?" inquired Tom Merry, staring.

Mellish grinned, and jerked his head at Mr. Railton's study door, which was closed.

"Cardew's in there," he grinned. "He's up to some April the First jape, I expect. He's promised me a bob for keeping cave."

"Oh!" exclaimed Tom Merry in alarm. "The awful ass!"

"Fancy japing a Housemaster!" breathed Manners.

Tom Merry hesitated, and then he stepped up to the door. Opening it quietly, he peered inside. He was surprised to find the study empty, and the window wide open at the bottom. At the sight of the window, however, Tom understood.

Cardew was obviously japing Percy Mellish and not Mr. Railton. He had obviously simply walked across the Housemaster's study and slipped through the open window into the quad outside.

Tom winked at his chums and passed on with a chuckle. They were not likely to stop to help Mellish earn that "bob," either. Out of earshot of Mellish, Tom explained the matter, and the Terrible Three roared with laughter then. They wondered how long Percy Mellish would be keeping cave before he discovered that the room was empty and that it was April the First.

"Rather neat of Cardew, that?" grinned Tom Merry at last. "Beats some of your silly ass japes, Lowther."

"Don't talk rot!" snorted Lowther. "I might tell you that I've got several little wheezes ready—in fact, I'm going to work one now—a real corker!"

"Bottle it, then," advised Manners.

"Rats! It's to make Blake and his pals look silly asses, you know. Now I want you fellows to get hold of those chaps and keep them talking somewhere—Oh, good!"

The juniors had mounted the stairs, and were walking along the passage towards their study, when Lowther broke off on sighting Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy standing chatting to Noble, Dane, and Glyn.

"Couldn't be a better chance," he said eagerly, with a chuckle. "You chaps join those fellows, and keep 'em talking until I come up. Don't give the game away if you see anything strange and, alarming about me—just pretend to be alarmed, and that's all."

"But what—"

"You'll see presently."

And, with another soft chuckle, Lowther hurried away to his own study. Tom Merry and Manners grinned, and joined the other juniors talking in the passage. They were still chatting some moments later when Lowther came strolling along and joined them.

"Have a date, Gussy?" he asked affably, holding out his hand, in which was a twisted paper bag.

"Bai Jove! Yaas, wathah, Lowthah," said Arthur Augustus, smiling as he took the bag. "That is vewy good of you, Lowthah."

He opened the bag, and was surprised to find inside another paper bag. He opened this, and found yet another bag inside that. On opening this he found a twisted piece of paper.

By this time the rest of the juniors were smiling. Arthur Augustus was looking mildly surprised, but not at all suspicious. He opened out the piece of paper, and then he jumped.

On it was written the words, "April the First!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the rest of the juniors, while the noble face of Arthur Augustus went pink.

"Bai Jove, you awful spoofah, Lowthah!" he gasped.

"Well, that's a date, isn't it?" said Lowther, raising his eyebrows. "What more do you want, old chap?"

"You—you sillay—"

Arthur Augustus was suddenly interrupted by Blake, who gave a sudden sniff.

"Jolly funny smell, you chaps!" he exclaimed hurriedly. "Just like burning rags or something. Phew!"

All the juniors detected the smell of burning now, and they looked quickly about them, sniffing in a sort of chorus. Then Herries gave a sudden yell, and pointed at Lowther's trousers.

"Look out, Lowther!" he yelled in alarm. "Your trousers—look at them! They're on fire!"

"Oh, great pip!"

"Bai Jove!"

Exclamations of alarm arose as Lowther jumped back, pulling his jacket aside. Sure enough, coils of pungent smoke were issuing from his trousers-pocket. The smell was stronger now.

"Must be a box of matches!" gasped Clifton Dane. "Snatch it out—quick, you awful duffer!"

But Lowther seemed to have quite lost his head in the alarming emergency. He pranced about the passage, slamming at his pocket, and yelling for help.

"Help! Help! Great pip! I shall be burned to death! Don't stand there staring—do something to help, you heartless brutes! Yarooooop!"

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus. "He'll be frightfully burned. We must do somethin'. Wush up to the dorm, and wench your trowsers off, Lowthah! Pway keep calm! Come on, and I will help you!"

He grabbed the yelling Lowther and started to drag him away. Lowther resisted, still yelling. Tom Merry and Manners were grinning now—they could not help it. They had been alarmed at first, until they suddenly remembered Lowther's warning.

"Bai Jove! You stupid duffah, come on!" gasped Arthur Augustus, struggling desperately to rush Lowther away.

"All right, Gussy, leave him to me!" roared Blake suddenly.

Blake was also grinning now. He had seen the faces of Merry and Manners, and though mystified, he guessed it was a jape at once.

A quick dash took Blake to the end of the passage, where a row of small fire-buckets hung. Blake grabbed one, and rushed back with it.

"Stand aside, Gussy!" he yelled.

"Oh, bai Jove!"

Swish! Swoosh!

"Yooooop! Ow! Gug-gug-gug!" yelled Lowther.

Too late, he realised Blake's intention. The contents of the fire-bucket caught him full amidships, and Lowther staggered back and sat down with a fearful bump and a truly ferocious howl.

He sat there with water streaming from him, and the expression of his face would have done credit to a heathen gargoye.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry and Manners simply howled with laughter.

"How's that?" panted Blake, putting down the empty bucket, and looking eagerly at Lowther. "Has that put it out? Have I saved your life, Lowther?"

"Gug-gug-gug! Mum-mum-mum! Ow-ow! Oh, you—you—you—"

Lowther's spluttering, gasping remarks ended in a choking sort of gurgle. He just sat and gasped and gasped.

He was still sitting thus when Mr. Railton came hastily along the passage.

"Bless my soul!" he exclaimed, staring blankly at Lowther's drenched form. "What—what does this mean? Lowther! Boy! How did you get in that state?"

Lowther gasped again, and staggered to his feet, giving Blake a ferocious glare as he did so. But before he could say anything, Mr. Railton gave a sudden gasp, his eyes fixed on the pocket of Lowther's trousers. Smoke was still coming from it, and the smell was atrocious.

"Go-good gracious!" ejaculated the Housemaster, in great alarm. "Lowther, my boy, your trousers are on fire. What—what—"

"It—it's all right, sir!" gasped Lowther, realising the truth would have to come out now. "It—it was only a—a joke—an April the First joke, you know. Ow! Oh crumbs!"

He groaned hollowly.

"But—but your trousers, boy! Look—"

"It's all right, sir," groaned Lowther, his face crimson. "It's only a tin with some burning waste soaked with oil in it."

After a struggle Lowther dragged from his pocket a large cocoa-tin with holes in the lid. From the holes came the pungent smoke and the fearful smell. He lifted the lid, showing that the tin was full of smouldering, oily cotton-waste.

"Bless my soul!" gasped Mr. Railton.

But Blake and the others understood now. They chuckled, and then they laughed, and then, despite the presence of Mr. Railton, they roared—they could not help it.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence!" thundered Mr. Railton, though his own eyes were twinkling a little now. "Well, upon my word! You placed that—horrible thing in your pocket in order to alarm your friends, I suppose, Lowther? But what does this water—this fire-bucket—"

"That was my doing, sir," said Blake innocently. "I threw it at Lowther to put the—the fire out, sir."

"Bless my soul!" gasped Mr. Railton, placing a hand quickly over his mouth. "I—I hardly know what to say to you, Lowther. You have acted very foolishly, and—ahem!—wrongly. But for the fact that your present predicament seems to be punishment enough, I myself would punish you

most severely. As it is, you had better go to your dormitory at once and change your clothes."

"Oh, yes, sir!" groaned Lowther.

"You, Blake," said Mr. Railton, turning sternly to Jack Blake, "will do me two hundred lines for interfering with that fire-bucket!"

"But—but, sir!"

"That will do, Blake," said Mr. Railton, his mouth twitching. "It is fairly obvious to me that your action in making use of the fire-bucket was not quite so innocent and praiseworthy as you would like me to believe. Let us have no more of this nonsense, boys."

And with that the Housemaster rustled away, his mouth still twitching strangely.

The juniors allowed him to vanish round the corner of the passage, and then they doubled up and simply yelled with hilarious mirth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Lowther glared at them, his face crimson with wrath and humiliation. Blake, who was replacing the fire-bucket, grinned at him cheerily.

"What price the First of April now, Lowther?" he inquired sweetly. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you—you—"

Lowther spluttered and made a blind rush at the laughing juniors, and they scattered, roaring. Lowther limped away upstairs to the dormitory. It was most unfortunate that his ripping japes seemed to go wrong that morning, and so far he was not enjoying the day of days as he had expected to do.

## CHAPTER 6. Not a Success!

TOM MERRY and Manners smiled as Monty Lowther joined them as they were going into the Shell Form-room that morning. To their great surprise, Lowther smiled back at them quite cheerily.

Tom Merry and Manners blinked at him. Lowther had changed his clothes and looked little the worse for his luckless misadventure. Yet they had expected him to look very dispirited and glum after what had happened.

But instead of that, Monty Lowther looked quite bright and cheery.

"Feeling a bit better, old scout?" asked Tom Merry, with a grin.

"Much better," said Lowther, nodding. "You needn't rub it in, you fellows. I know that last wheeze turned out a bit of a swizz. I suppose you silly dummies let Blake see you laughing, or something. Anyway, I'm not finished yet, by a long chalk!"

"Still looking for trouble, then?" chuckled Tom. "Better chuck it, Monty—your luck's out to-day."

Lowther, the irrepressible, chuckled in his turn.

"Not much!" he said. "I've scarcely started yet, you fellows. Now, just listen a minute—I've got hold of the jape of the term. You know that warming-tin—the tin with the burning waste in, I mean?"

"Ha, ha! Yes, rather!"

"Well," grinned Lowther, opening his jacket and disclosing to view a small square parcel. "I've got it here. I've taken out the other burning waste and put some fresh oily waste in. I've also got that old alarm clock from our study in this parcel. Can't you hear it ticking?"

"Great pip! I thought I heard a clock ticking when you came up!" gasped Tom Merry. "But what on earth are—"

"Don't you guess the wheeze?" grinned Monty Lowther gleefully. "I've put them in this parcel together. The clock will only go for an hour or so, so it's no good, and we can afford to chuck it away for a ripping jape like this. Now my idea is to shove this in Linton's wastepaper basket, and—"

"Oh, you awful ass!"

"Now, don't sit on the wheeze," said Lowther, with a sniff. "I tell you it's the wheeze of a lifetime. I was just about to chuck the dashed tin away when the idea flashed into my mind, you know."

"Lighting up vacancy," murmured Manners.

"Oh, rats! Don't you fellows see the idea?" went on Lowther eagerly. "I shall shove this parcel in my desk, and when Linton isn't looking I'm going to open it and set the waste alight. Then I shall pack the parcel up again, and watch my chance to chuck it into the wastepaper basket."

"But, you awful—"

"See the wheeze?" grinned Lowther. "Linton and all the fellows will see the smoke coming from the wastepaper basket, and then they'll hear the clock ticking. Well, what will they think?"

"You're a burbling, raving lunatic, I expect!"

"Oh, don't talk rot! Don't you see? They'll all get the

wind up, of course. Seeing the smoke, and then hearing a strange ticking sound, they'll jump to the conclusion that it's a bomb."

"Oh, my hat!"

"It's a fair corker," grinned Lowther, eyeing his chums' blank faces gleefully. "I've made a hole in the paper for the smoke to come out, and the whole thing's bound to be a ripping success. Well, what d'you think of the idea?"

Tom Merry drew a deep breath.

"You—you awful idiot!" he gasped. "You can't play a joke like that on a master, you ass!"

"I'm going to, old nut!"

"But Raiton knows you had that tin," said Tom, in alarm. "If he hears about it, he'll guess you worked the wheeze straight away."

"Rot! He won't hear about it. Besides, he can't prove anything, and I shall take care I'm not spotted."

"Don't do it, you lunatic!" said Tom earnestly. "It's a jolly good wheeze, I'll admit. But don't try it on Linton."

Lowther chuckled and marched into the Form-room. In his own way Lowther was rather a stubborn youth, and when engaged upon a "jape," he usually ignored warnings and advice.

He did so now.

As he passed between the double rows of desks, Bernard Glyn called out to him.

"Mind that piece of string, Lowther—don't trip over it, you ass!"

"Rats! You don't catch me!" grinned Lowther.

And he carefully avoided looking down in case he should be "caught."

But he was caught for all that. There was actually a piece of string stretched across the aisle between the desks, and the too-clever Monty tripped over it and measured his length on the Form-room floor. And before he could pull up, Tom Merry tripped over him, while Manners, who was just close behind, sprawled over both his chums.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a yell of laughter as the Terrible Three scrambled up, crimson with wrath and dismay. They had been "caught" undoubtedly.

"You—you burbling idiots!" shouted Lowther. "Why, I'll smash you, Glyn, you raving ass! You've barked my nose, and—"

"Now, take it smiling, old chap—that's what you always advise your victims to do, you know. What's the good of being a born humorist if you can't take a joke yourself?"

"Oh, rats!"

The Terrible Three—Tom Merry and Manners grinning ruefully, and Lowther snorting—seated themselves, while Glyn waited for more victims. But just then Mr. Linton rustled in, and Glyn swiftly—and wisely—removed his little trap.

The lesson started in an atmosphere of sly grins, and Lowther very soon forgot his wrath at the thought of his own proposed jape. Luckily the fall had not damaged the clock, apparently, for it was still ticking—Lowther had shoved the parcel quickly into his desk—and he could hear it faintly ticking now.

The chance to carry out his dark plot very soon came. Mr. Linton turned his back to work out some equations on the blackboard, and, lifting his desk, Monty Lowther got busy with his parcel.

"Chuck it, you awful ass!" breathed Tom Merry, in alarm. "Don't do it, Monty."

But Lowther disregarded the voice of wisdom. He opened the parcel and took out the tin, one eye fixed on Mr. Linton's back. He soon had the lid off, and then—very, very cautiously—he scraped a match on his box.

It was a safety match, and it burst into flame soundlessly, and Lowther applied the flame to the wad of oil-soaked waste in the cocoa-tin. Then as it began to smoulder he put the lid on, and cautiously wrapped the parcel up again.

Then, still eyeing Mr. Linton's back, Lowther slipped from his desk, which was at the end of the row, and quite close to the basket. A couple of steps on tiptoe took him within reach, and he dropped in the parcel and slipped back to his desk.

Only one or two fellows noticed his action, and Mr.

Linton, though the parcel had rustled the papers in the basket, both failed to see or hear.

"Now for it!" murmured Tom Merry, who was one of the few who had seen it. "Oh, you madman, Monty!"

Lowther grinned and waited. The alarm was not long in coming. Quite suddenly Mr. Linton, who possessed a very keen nose, turned from the blackboard sniffing and gazing about him.

"What is burning in the room, boys?" he exclaimed in some surprise. "Sniff, sniff, sniff! It smells like rags burning. Has any boy dared to—"

"Oh, look, sir!" almost yelled Grundy excitedly. "Look at your basket—it's on fire!"

And Grundy was about to jump from his seat towards it, when Mr. Linton's voice checked him.

"Grundy, how dare you? Resume your seat at once. What did you— Good gracious!"

Mr. Linton saw the wastepaper basket then, and his eyes almost started from his head as he noted a thin wisp of smoke curling up from it.

He stared at it as if transfixed. Half the Form were on their feet now, their faces showing their alarm. A dozen voices excitedly acquainted him with the fact that the basket was on fire now—though he had already seen the smoke himself.

"Silence, boys!" he thundered angrily. "Resume your seats at once. I will see to this—this extraordinary matter."

He hurried towards the basket and peered inside it. Then he sprang back as though he had been shot. At the same moment every fellow in the room heard a faint sound from the basket—a ticking sound!

But it was not faint to Mr. Linton as he had stooped over the basket. Moreover he had seen the strange, square parcel.

"What—what—" Mr. Linton went suddenly pale. The sight was enough for the juniors.

"Look out, sir," yelled Grundy, almost beside himself with sudden excitement and alarm. "It's a bomb—I can hear it ticking!"

"A bomb!"

"Great Scott!"

Mr. Linton's sudden alarm was obvious to all. In the sudden silence that followed Grundy's yell, the ticking of the cheap alarm clock in the parcel seemed to fill the room. And the smoke from the basket was alarming enough in itself.

Grundy broke the silence.

"Run for it!" he shouted almost hysterically. "Oh, great Scott!"

He leaped from his form, and there was a hurried scrambling of feet as half the Form followed his example, and rushed in a mad stampede for the door.

"Stop!" almost shrieked Mr. Linton. "Come back at once! Have you all taken leave of your senses? Stop! Any boy who leaves this room will be punished severely! Do you hear me?"

The stampeding juniors stopped—even in that moment of dread alarm Mr. Linton's voice had not lost its power to quell. They hesitated fearfully, and Mr. Linton's voice went on angrily.

"This is some foolish joke!" he stormed, glowering at the waste-paper basket. "The boy who is responsible for this disgraceful happening shall suffer dearly when discovered. Resume your seats this instant."

It was a bellow, and the juniors who had left their places gingerly seated themselves, with one fearful eye on the smoking, ticking basket. They, like George Alfred Grundy, expected a terrific explosion every second almost.

Mr. Linton set his mouth hard and started towards the basket, very gingerly, however. As a matter of fact, his first thought on connecting the ticking with the smoke was of the infernal instrument Grundy had mentioned—a bomb. But the next instant the utter absurdity of such a supposition dawned in upon him, and he realised it must be a practical joke.

Yet he seemed none too keen on approaching the basket, for all that. And before he reached it Tom Merry acted swiftly. He realised that discovery was almost certain now, and he was shivering for his chum's safety.

"All right, sir, I'll see to it!" he gasped swiftly.

He left his place with a rush, and, reaching the basket, snatched out the parcel. Then he dashed to the open window and flung it out.

There was a loud gasp of relief. But Mr. Linton did not seem relieved.

"Merry," he gasped, "how—how dare you take upon yourself to do that? Your action is very suspicious—very suspicious indeed! I was about to take that parcel out and examine it. It is perfectly obvious to me that you acted thus in order to defeat my intention."

"You—you see, sir—" stammered Tom.

# ANSWERS

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"I do see!" thundered Mr. Linton. "You will go out of doors at once and find that parcel. You will bring it here for my inspection. I am determined to get to the bottom of this disgraceful affair. Go!"

But Tom had no need to go, for at that moment footsteps sounded outside the window on the gravel, and a head appeared above the sill. It was the head of old Blunt, the Head's under gardener.

"Which this 'ere parcel came flyin' outter this winder a minute ago, sir," he said, sighting Mr. Linton near the window. "I thought as I'd better bring it back, sir."

The gardener brought his gnarled hands into view, and placed on the sill a brown-paper parcel—the parcel! It was still smoking, but no sound came from it now. It was also torn open, and only Blunt's hands prevented the alarm-clock falling out with the tin.

"Ah!" exclaimed Mr. Linton in a gleady tone. "Thank you very much, Blunt. I will take charge of it."

"Yessir."

Blunt vanished from the window, and Mr. Linton brought the parcel into the room and placed it on his desk. As he did so the alarm-clock was revealed, while the smoking tin rolled off the desk and dropped on the floor, the lid coming off.

Out of the tin at the same moment came the wad of burning waste. It lay scattered over the floor, smoking and smouldering furiously as the draft caught it.

"Ah!" said Mr. Linton. "So—so this explains the mystery, boys. It is certainly no infernal machine."

With goggling eyes the Shell stared at the sight, and then Manners broke the silence—first with a loud chuckle, and then with an irrepressible splutter of laughter. The next moment other fellows had joined in, and a perfect howl of mirth rang through the Form-room. Even those timid fellows who had wanted to bolt joined in it.

"Silence!" shouted Mr. Linton. "The next boy who laughs will pay dearly for his misguided mirth."

There was silence then, and Mr. Linton got the fire-shovel, and, scraping up the smoking mass of cotton-waste, shovelled it into the fire. Then he turned a grim face to Tom Merry. "I am amazed, disgusted with you, Merry!" he snapped. "I did not think you capable of such idiotic buffoonery. Stand out before the Form!"

"But—but, sir—"

"Stand out!" thundered Mr. Linton, snatching his cane from his desk. "Now hold out your hand. I will teach you that the Form-room is not the place for such practical jokes, nor your master a safe person upon whom to play them. Hold out your hand!"

"But—but—"

"Do as you are told!" snapped Mr. Linton wrathfully. "It is perfectly plain to me that you are the culprit, or you would not have acted as you did. You attempted to—"

"One moment, sir!"

Monty Lowther stood up in his place, his face crimson.



"But your trousers!" exclaimed Mr. Railton. "Look—they are on fire!" "It's all right, sir," said Lowther dismally. "It's only a tin with some burning cotton-waste soaked with oil in it." "Bless my soul!" gasped the Housemaster as the humorist of the Shell dragged the tin from his pocket. "It—it was only a joke, sir," groaned Lowther. "An April the First joke, you know!" (See chapter 5.)

There was a chuckle as he did so. Practically every fellow in the room had guessed Lowther was the culprit.

"Well, Lowther?"

"It—it wasn't Merry, sir!" gasped Lowther. "He had nothing whatever to do with it. It—it's all my doing, sir!"

"Ah! You claim to be the author of this outrage, Lowther?"

"Ye-es, sir!"

"Did Merry or anyone else aid you?"

"No, sir. I did it on my own," groaned Lowther.

"Very well," snapped the irate master. "Merry, you will resume your seat. Lowther, come here!"

Lowther left his place, and the next moment he was paying the price of his reckless practical joking. And it was a very stiff price.

Swish, swish, swish, swish!

Four times on each hand Mr. Linton brought his cane down hard, and Lowther was almost doubled up in two.

"There!" panted Mr. Linton, when he had finished. "In addition, Lowther, you will also do me five hundred lines of Virgil, to be handed in before six to-morrow evening. And I hope this will be a lasting lesson to you, wretched boy. In future you will, perhaps, reserve your humour for other times, other places, and other persons. You may go."

And Lowther ambled to his place, his face twisted in an expression of great anguish, and with his burning hands tucked convulsively under his arm-pits. His great wheeze had certainly not been a success from his point of view. Lowther's luck was out, undoubtedly.

There were no more April the First japes in the Shell Form-room for the rest of that lesson.

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### CHAPTER 7. Poor Old Gussy!

**D**URING morning break the Lower School at St. Jim's—and part of the Upper School, for that matter—was in a roar over the story of Lowther's great wheeze. Naturally the Shell fellows did not see any reason why they should not tell the story, and they told it to the Fourth and other Forms.

It was undoubtedly funny, and it caused a great deal of hilarity.

Lowther escaped a great deal of chipping, however, by disappearing from the public eye the moment first lesson ended.

"Hiding his diminished head, I suppose," grinned Jack Blake, as he met Tom Merry and Manners in the passage during break. "What a scream! Poor old Lowther."

"Serves the ass right, really," grunted Tom Merry. "I warned him, but he went his own silly way. Perhaps he'll listen another time. I'm sorry for him, for all that. After all, the joke came off all right—some of the fellows were in a regular blue funk, and Linton himself didn't look any too happy. It was just hard lines that Monty was bowled out."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The chums of the Fourth roared.

"I wish I'd seen it," gurgled Blake. "Fancy the ass trying it on with that smoking tin stunt after Railton catching him. Must have been potty to risk it!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The Fourth Formers were still laughing when Figgins, Kerr and Fatty Wynn came along arm in arm. They slowed down and grinned cheerfully at the School House juniors.

"Cheerio, chaps," remarked Figgins. "I hear you fellows are going in for physical exercises in the morning."

"Eh? Don't talk rot. What do—"

"I heard you were touching your toes in the dorm," said Figgins, while his chums chuckled. "Fancy being taken in like that so early in the morning! I really hope Kerr didn't hurt your pyjamas."

Kerr and Wynn chuckled explosively, and the School House juniors glared—especially at Kerr.

"Oh, you can cackle," snorted Tom Merry. "I'll admit Kerr took us all in fairly. But the day isn't ended yet. We'll get our own back, never fear, you rotters!"

Figgins chuckled, and was passing on when he paused.

"Is that mud on your trousers, Gussy?" he exclaimed in sudden alarm. "My dear man, fancy a giddy nob like you walking about with mud on his bags. Oh, Gussy!"

Arthur Augustus smiled. He was not to be caught this time.

"Twy again, Figgins!" he chuckled. "I am not to be caught so easily as that, deah boy."

"But the mud—"

"Let it remain there, deah boy."

"You don't mind mud on your bags then?" ejaculated Figgins.

"Not at all, deah boy," chuckled Gussy, without looking round.

"Oh!" said Figgins. "Then you won't mind if I wipe my boots on you, old chap."

And with that George Figgins wiped his boot on the back of Gussy's elegant trousers. Then he fled, with his chums at his heels, and all of them roaring with laughter.

Tom Merry, Blake and the others also laughed. But Arthur Augustus didn't. He glowered, speechless with wrath, after the cheery New House jokers, and then with a yell of fury, he went in chase. Figgins & Co, however, vanished round the corner of the passage, and as the bell rang for second lesson just then, the juniors went to their respective form-rooms, chuckling at Figgins' little joke on Arthur Augustus.

Mr. Lathom, the master of the Fourth, was rather late in joining his Form in the form-room at second lesson, and Arthur Augustus, Figgins, Kerr and Wynn were safely in the room in good-time. From the fact that Arthur Augustus came in first and seemed in a fearful wax, it was fairly plain he had not succeeded in catching his tormentors—luckily for himself, perhaps. Figgins was grinning cheerfully, and in fine fettle obviously. April the First was proving a great success so far for the New House jokers—and Figgins hadn't finished yet.

As he seated himself and grinned across at the glowering Arthur Augustus, Figgins happened to hear the noise of wheels on the gravel path outside the open window, and he stood up and glanced carelessly out. He saw Blunt, the gardener, wheeling a wheel-barrow past the window. As Figgins looked out, Blunt dropped the barrow, and, walking across to a flower-bed some yards away, he started to work with his hoe.

The sight gave Figgins an idea, and he chuckled. The

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New House leader was in the mood for any sort of a joke that morning. He had been very successful in japing dozens of fellow juniors so far, two or three of whom had been walking about with "Please kick me" labels pinned to their backs. Now, like the hapless Lowther, Figgins thought he would have a change by japing a master.

The fact that Lowther had come to inglorious grief whilst so doing did not trouble Figgins. Because Lowther had come to grief was no reason why he should.

So the moment the idea occurred to Figgins he left his place and clambered up on to the window-sill. There was a general gasp.

"Figgins, you ass!"

"Come back, Figgy," gasped Kerr in great alarm.

But Figgins did not heed. He vaulted through the window on to the gravel path outside. Blunt was working with his back to him, and he was also very deaf. Apparently he did not hear anything, at all events, for he did not look round.

Figgins acted swiftly.

There was a length of rope wrapped round one handle of the wheel-barrow, and Figgins slung it off, and tied one end to one of the legs of the barrow. Then he slipped back over the sill into the Form-room again with the other loose end of the rope in his hand.

To his relief Mr. Lathom was still absent, and ignoring a chorus of questions and warnings, Figgins tied the loose end of the rope to the back stay of the easel.

"Figgins, you burbling ass!" called Kerr excitedly. "Are you potty? Don't play any games here, for goodness' sake!"

Figgins grinned and finished tying the rope, and he had just done so when a well-known step sounded outside the door of the Form-room.

Figgins reached his place in one wild leap, and had just sat down when the door opened and Mr. Lathom marched in. He looked rather suspiciously at the grinning faces, and the grins faded away abruptly.

In another moment second lesson was in full swing in the Fourth Form-room. But Mr. Lathom did not fail to see the air of suppressed excitement.

Most of the juniors had seen Figgins' little trick with the rope, and they wondered just what was going to happen when old Blunt started to walk away with his barrow.

"You've done it now, Figgins," groaned Fatty Wynn in dismay. "There'll be an awful rumpus. You are a silly ass! I told you you'd be overdoing it."

"Not at all," answered Figgins airily. "You watch out for some fun presently."

"Silence!" snapped Mr. Lathom, looking round from the blackboard. "Figgins, take a hundred lines for talking."

"Oh crumbs!" groaned Figgins.

It was rather a slashing iniput for speaking in class, and Figgins felt just a twingo of apprehension. Evidently Mr. Lathom suspected that something was afoot, and was determined to let the Form see that he was standing no nonsense that morning.

The lesson proceeded, Figgins and most of the expectant Form straining their ears for sounds on the gravel outside.

The sounds came at last.

At the moment Mr. Lathom had just turned away from the blackboard to propound a problem in algebra to his Form. And suddenly there sounded heavy footsteps on the gravel outside, and then the noise of a wheel-barrow on the path.

And just then Mr. Lathom turned to write on the blackboard again.

Then the—to him—astonishing thing happened.

Even as he raised the chalk to write, the easel and blackboard started to recede from him.

It was really most astonishing.

To the expectant juniors, who had seen the rope tighten, however, it was nothing like so astonishing.

They waited breathlessly as Mr. Lathom stood with up-raised hand like a statue turned suddenly to stone. His face was a picture as he stared, petrified, at the receding blackboard.

Wobble, wobble, wobble, wobble!

With a curious, jerky wobble, the easel and blackboard staggered backwards until it brought up against the lower part of the wall under the window. Then—

Crash! Clatter, clatter! Crash!

The easel closed up like a pocket-knife, and the blackboard lurched over and went crashing to the floor, while the easel overbalanced and fell on top of it with a fearful crash.

At the same moment there came a sudden growling exclamation from outside, followed instantly by another crash.

"Oh, my hat!" gurgled Jack Blake.

Almost every fellow in the room leaped to his feet and strained up to look out of the window. They were entertained to see the figure of Blunt, the under-gardener, sprawling across his upturned barrow on the gravel path.

"Oh, great pip!"

Somebody chuckled, and then somebody burst into a spluttering laugh. The temptation to do likewise was

irresistible, and the next moment the whole Form was roaring.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The roar of laughter brought the petrified Form master to himself with a jerk, and he realised that it was no miracle that had happened, and that he was not dreaming after all.

"Silence!" he thundered. "Boys—boys! Bless my soul! This—is this too much! What—what—what— Silence, I say!"

In the ordinary way Mr. Lathom was an easy-going and good-natured little gentleman, but it was plain to all that he was in a towering state of wrath now. His angry voice quelled the uproar instantly.

"This—is this beyond all reason!" gasped the master. "What—what has happened? I—I—"

He hurried to the window and looked out. He jumped as he saw Blunt just scrambling off his barrow, and he jumped still more as he saw the rope stretching from the leg of the upturned barrow across the window-sill and into the Form-room to the back stay of the easel.

"G-good gracious!" he gasped, his eyes glinting rather ominously behind his glasses. "So—so that is the meaning of this—this disgraceful happening! Out—outrageous!"

His face pink with wrath now, Mr. Lathom stooped and tore at the rope round the easel-leg with fingers that trembled with angry emotion. He wrenched the knot apart and flung the rope through the window. Then he slammed down the sash with a hearty slam. Apparently he did not want any risk of an argument with the justly irate Blunt.

Then Mr. Lathom turned to the Form, who were rather scared now—as well they might be.

"Boys," he mumbled, controlling his voice with an effort, "who—what wretched miscreant is responsible for this idiotic outrage? Stand up the boy, or boys, who tied that rope to the easel and the barrow outside!"

Nobody stood up. No one was scarcely likely to do so in the circumstances.

"Do you hear me?" thundered Mr. Lathom, his spectacles fairly dancing on his nose. "I demand that the boy responsible for this disgraceful practical joke stands up without delay!"

There was a silence. Figgins was looking rather uneasy now. Carrying out practical jokes was one thing, but paying for them was another; and he saw that someone was going to pay for this one. Figgins felt quite annoyed at the thought that Mr. Lathom looked like spoiling the whole thing by insisting upon investigating the matter. Why couldn't he let the joke go at that?

"Very well," said the Fourth Form master with deadly grimness. "If the person responsible will not own up, then I have no other course but to punish the Form as a whole. I am determined that such an outrage as this shall not go unpunished. Every boy in this Form will stay in for an hour extra every day for the rest of this week."

"Oh!"

It was a groan of dismay. Deadly glances were shot at Figgins. That practical joker groaned himself, and then he stood up. There was nothing else for him to do in the sad circumstances.

"Ah! You have something to say, Figgins!" exclaimed Mr. Lathom grimly.

"Ye-es, sir," gasped Figgins. "The—the fact is it was I who did it, sir. The other fellows had nothing at all to do with it. It—it was only a little joke, sir."

"Only a joke!" repeated Mr. Lathom angrily.

"Ye-e-es, sir. You see, sir, it—it is April the First to-day, and I did it to make the fellows laugh. Only a joke, sir!"

Mr. Lathom glowered at him.

"Oh, indeed!" he said in icy accents. "You regard it as only a joke to cause a disgraceful disturbance, to play a

(Continued overleaf.)

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worse than foolish prank on the gardener, and to attempt to make fun of me, your Form master. Oh, indeed, Figgins! Then I will endeavour to show you that I do not approve of such jokes!"

And Mr. Lathom took up his cane. George Figgins watched this action apprehensively. There were no signs of mirth on his features now—none whatever.

He had good reason to be apprehensive.

"Hold out your hand, Figgins!" said Mr. Lathom. Figgins held out his hand.

Swish!

"Now the other, boy!"

Swish!

It was an unusually tough licking from little Mr. Lathom. Three times on each hand the cane swished viciously, and then Mr. Lathom flung the cane on to his desk, greatly to the heartfelt relief of George Figgins.

He turned to totter away, but Mr. Lathom called him back.

"One moment, Figgins! I have not finished with you yet."

"Oh!" gasped Figgins. "Ow-wow!"

Leaving Figgins rocking himself over his folded hands, the Form master walked to the cupboard. From a shelf he took a large sheet of tough drawing-paper. This he twisted into a cone, and secured the cone in place with a few paper-fasteners.

Figgins scarcely saw the operation—he was too busy. But the rest of the Form watched with grinning faces. They fancied they could guess what was coming.

"There, Figgins," remarked Mr. Lathom, eyeing his handiwork with satisfaction. "This is what is called a fool's cap, I believe. The cap will fit you, I think, and I wish you to wear it for the remainder of morning lessons. If the effects of the caning should wear off before lessons end, you will still have the cap to remind you that it does not pay to play jokes upon your Form master—even on April the First. You may resume your seat."

With that Mr. Lathom jammed the fool's cap over Figgins' hapless head, and Figgins tottered to his place, his features red as a turkey. His one longing as he ambled between the rows of grinning faces was that the floor would open and swallow him up.

But it did not do so, and Figgins reached his seat and sat down, his face burning like his hands now. Nor did the soft chuckles about him tend to increase his comfort.

After that the lesson proceeded uneventfully, and for the rest of that morning Figgins had the pleasure—or otherwise—of being the centre of attention in the Fourth Form. He longed with an intense longing to be able to tear off the terrible cap, but he dare not do so, and so he contented himself with longing for lessons to end so that he could hide his blushes and nurse his injuries in secret.

It was a sad ending to Figgins' great jape, and, like Lowther, he had discovered at last that the life of a humorist is not all roses.

## CHAPTER 8.

### Lowther Again!

"HALLO! What's that ass Lowther up to now?"

Tom Merry asked the question with a chuckle as he came upon Lowther in the quad. Lowther was hurrying in rather a stealthy manner towards the gates, and he was pushing a bicycle before him. It was not Lowther's own machine—Tom saw that at a glance—hence Tom's surprised question.

Dinner was just over, and Tom Merry and Manners were almost the first fellows out in the quadrangle. Both Tom and Manners were looking very cheery. They had just been laughing over the story of Figgins' dismal adventures in the Fourth Form-room, Blake & Co. having gleefully detailed it to them.

The School House fellows were not the chaps to laugh at another's misfortunes in the ordinary way, but they had laughed loud and long over the sad ending to Figgins' great wheeze. They felt it was some compensation for the swipe Kerr had given them each that morning with Mr. Linton's cane.

And to Lowther the story had come as a godsend, so to speak. It quite took the attention of the fellows off his own luckless adventures in the Form-room, and Lowther had a bit of peace at last, Figgins coming in for the endless chipping instead of him now.

By the time dinner had ended, Lowther was quite himself again, and so Tom Merry chuckled now as he saw him hurrying across the quad with that bicycle. He guessed that Lowther was "at it" again.

"He's up to his games again, of course," grinned Manners. "I wondered why he slipped away without wait-

ing for us. The burbling chump! I should think he'd had enough of April Fools' Day by this!"

"Not he!" chuckled Tom Merry. "It takes a lot to give old Monty the count when he's on the giddy warpath. Come on—let's see what the ass is up to!"

And Tom Merry led the way across the quad at a run. They found Lowther behind Taggles' lodge, and the juniors stared at what he was doing.

He was just placing the bike against three or four other bikes that leaned against the wall.

He stared rather guiltily as his two chums rushed round the corner.

"Oh, it's you!" he gasped in relief.

"What the thump are you up to, Lowther?" exclaimed Tom, eyeing the bikes in great astonishment. "That's Grundy's bike, and that's Blake's, and that—"

"I know who they all belong to," grinned Lowther. "You'll see some fun in a minute, you fellows. I've hit on the jape of a lifetime. It all depends on whether the chaps who own these bikes happen to come out into the quad, though. I'm banking on that. Now—"

"But what is the jape?"

"You'll see!" grinned Lowther. "Now, you chaps, keep a straight face and follow me."

With that Lowther grabbed a machine—it was Bernard Glyn's new jigger—and walked away with it. Tom Merry and Manners followed him, greatly mystified, but quite ready to be entertained.

Lowther stopped when he got near the gates, and leaned carelessly on the machine.

By this time the fellows were beginning to come out into the open air, as they mostly did after dinner on fine days, for a stroll round.

"Good!" exclaimed Lowther, his eyes gleaming as he scanned the fellows coming from the School House. "Here's Grundy—the very chap I want. Now, back me up, chaps."

Lowther and his chums chatted carelessly as Grundy approached, laying down the law, as usual, to his chums, Wilkins and Gunn, who were looking, as usual, when Grundy talked, bored to death.

As the three came up, Lowther looked round rather carelessly, and called to Grundy.

"Hallo, Grundy, old chap!" he called out. "I say, have you lent your jigger to Trimble to ride to Rylcombe on, by any chance?"

"Eh? My jigger? Lent it to Trimble? Great Scott! No, I jolly well haven't!" snorted Grundy, growing suddenly excited. "You don't mean to say—"

"Better go after him," said Lowther, shaking his head. "You know what the fat ass is on a bike. Besides, they're laying tar down on the lane between here and Rylcombe. Better—"

"Well, the cheeky fat worm!" howled Grundy ferociously. "Take my dashed bike without permission, would he—that fat thief? Why, I'll—I'll—"

"Go after him," suggested Lowther swiftly. "Here, you can have this bike if you like. Quick—before he reaches the tar!"

"I'll smash him!" roared Grundy.

And, without a glance at the machine Lowther held out to him, Grundy snatched at it, and, running at along, he leaped into the saddle.

He vanished through the gates like a shot from a cannon.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry and Manners.

"What the thump—" began Wilkins, in bewilderment.

But Lowther did not enlighten either Wilkins or Gunn. He winked at Tom and Manners, and led them back to Taggles' lodge. Lowther vanished behind the lodge, to reappear a moment later with another bike—Jack Blake's this time.

"That's one done!" chuckled Lowther. "Now for another mug! Come and look for Glyn now, you chaps. I really hope Grundy won't go on and on after Trimble, or he'll not be back in time for afternoon class—especially if he doesn't give up, and goes on riding round the world!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry and Manners saw the game now, and they howled with mirth. They followed Lowther as he walked about, wheeling Blake's machine and on the look out for Bernard Glyn.

Tom Merry spotted him at last. He was standing near the tuckshop, chatting with Levison and Noble.

The Terrible Three approached them leisurely. As they were passing, Lowther stopped suddenly and called to Glyn.

"Do you happen to have lent your jigger to Grundy, Glyn?" he asked.

"Eh? Of course not. I'm not likely to lend my new jigger to anyone, much less that ass!" sniffed Glyn.

"Well," said Lowther. "He's just gone out of gates on it, anyway. I know it was yours, Glyn. I think he's off to Rylcombe. The dummy was riding like mad, too. I

shouldn't be surprised if he doesn't go dashing over that tar stuff they've got on the lane. If he does it will muck up your tyres, old chap. You were a silly owl to lend it him."

"But I didn't lend it him!" shrieked Glyn. "Are you certain it was my new jigger?"

"Yes, old chap."

"Fact," agreed Tom Merry. "We couldn't mistake it, Glyn."

"Well, I—I—I—" Glyn spluttered with rage.

"Go after him," suggested Lowther. "He's only been gone a sec or so. Here, take this machine—I sha'n't want it. Quick—if you want to catch him up!"

"Catch him up, eh?" snorted Glyn. "I'll jolly well show the cheeky rotter!"

And, snatching the bike from Lowther's hands, he leaped into the saddle and went away towards the gates with a rush, driving at the pedals for all he was worth.

Like Grundy, he vanished through the gates in a flash.

"Ha, ha ha!" roared Tom Merry and Manners again.

"Oh!" said Levison. "So—so it was a jape? Grundy hasn't taken—"

"Yes, he has," said Lowther. "It's perfectly true, old chap."

"But—but—"

"Think it out," advised Lowther blandly, "and by the time April the First comes round again you may have worked it out."

And once more Lowther led his gurgling chums round to the back of the lodge for another bike.

"We can go on with this ad lib," remarked Lowther, chuckling. "You see what it is to have a reputation for telling the truth. They just accept your word without question. Now we must find dear old Blake. I fancy I spotted him going in the tuckshop just now. Hallo! This is Cutts' machine. It's rather cheek lending Blake a Fifth-Former's bike. But I expect Blake won't even look at it. How lucky they are laying tar in Rylcombe Lane! If it wasn't for that they might not trouble to go after the chaps who've had the awful cheek to borrow their bikes. But the thought of the tar makes them do it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry and Manners were warming up to the jape in earnest now, and they followed Lowther with enthusiasm as he led the way towards the tuckshop, wheeling Cutts' bike. And, as they expected, the wheeze worked again like a charm. Lowther called Blake out of the tuckshop; and, once Tom Merry had added his assurance to Lowther's claim—which was perfectly true—that Glyn had dashed off towards Rylcombe on his—Blake's—bike, he did not wait to be offered Cutts' bike. He snatched it from Lowther and went spinning towards the gates.

He vanished through the gates, and again the Terrible Three yelled with laughter, and, ignoring the excited questions of Blake's chums, they hurried back for another bike.

And once again the scheme worked like a charm.

This time it was Micky Mulvaney's bike they selected, and after some wandering about they ran Cutts down, lounging on the School House steps.

When the Fifth-Former learned that Blake had gone out of gates on his bike Cutts of the Fifth fairly "went off at the deep end," as Lowther expressed it. He vowed to break every bone in Blake's hapless body, and then he accepted Lowther's meek offer of a bike, and, without troubling to raise the saddle, he departed, in a towering rage, on the track of Jack Blake.

"Too bad!" murmured Tom Merry, as they watched him disappear through the gates. "Hard lines on Blake if he does kick up a shine."

"The other fellows will back Blake up," chuckled Lowther. "Don't worry about him, chaps. Well, there's only one bike left ready now. I think we'll just put Micky Mulvaney on the long, long trail, and then we'll get a crowd together to await their return. It ought to be rather funny to see them come home—what?"

"Ha, ha, ha! Yes, rather!"

And, taking the last machine—which happened to be D'Arcy's—they went in search of Mulvaney minor. They found him at last and broke the news to him of Cutts' wickedness. But, though excited at the news, Mulvaney minor made no effort to go in chase—at first.

The Terrible Three had scarcely expected him to, however. Micky was afraid of nothing on earth; but it was hardly to be expected that he would rush off in chase of a burly Fifth-Former, thirsting for his "gore."

But when Lowther gently hinted about the tar in Rylcombe Lane, Mulvaney's attitude changed, and, vowing to tell "that spalpeen Cutts" what he thought of him, Micky accepted D'Arcy's bike and went off with a rush, hoping to stop Cutts before he reached the belt of tar.

"Pity there's not much time to get a few more bikes out," remarked Lowther to his hilarious chums. "We could keep this up all day, you know. We could almost empty

the school. I wonder what's happening in Rylcombe Lane now? Let's get the crowd together now to welcome the dear asses home again."

And Lowther and the almost weeping Tom Merry and Manners started to get a crowd together to wait at the gates in order to welcome home the victims of their little joke.

Lowther's latest April the First jape was certainly turning out a great success.

## CHAPTER 9.

### Blake Learns Something!

**G**EORGE ALFRED GRUNDY rode hard. He was almost bursting with suppressed wrath and indignation. In his eyes it was a fearful crime for any fellow to borrow his machine without his august permission, much less a fat, clumsy individual like Baggy Trimble.

Baggy Trimble was known to be notoriously careless with other people's property, and if he did not succeed in smashing the bike up, he was certain to ride over the tar in the lane—Grundy was quite sure of that.

So Grundy pedalled furiously, trembling for the safety of his machine, and especially of his tyres. And as he pedalled he promised Trimble a very warm time for his terrific cheek.

He was rather surprised to see nothing of Trimble ahead of him—which really wasn't surprising in the circumstances.

At last the smell of boiling tar came to Grundy's snorting nostrils, and on reaching the spot where the council men were working on the roadway Grundy jumped off, just at the edge of the tar-strewn lane. There was still no sign of Baggy's fat form ahead in the lane, and Grundy was beginning to get puzzled.

He called to a workman who was spraying the road with tar.

"Hey! Has a fat young rotter passed you during the last few minutes on a bike?" he asked wrathfully. "A podgy, fat villain like a barrel of greasy lard?"

The man ceased working and grinned.

"I ain't seen nobody as carries that description," he exclaimed. "In fact, nobody's passed over this 'ere road for the last 'alf hower."

"Is that a fact?" gasped Grundy.

The man nodded, grinning. Grundy turned his bike round, with a snort. He wrinkled his brows, and, mounting his machine, started to ride slowly back. He couldn't understand it at all—unless Trimble had gone on the other way past the school.

"Blow the fat villain!" growled Grundy to himself. "I'll bust—Hallo! What the—"

Grundy's musings ended as Bernard Glyn came whirling up on Blake's bicycle. He jumped off, and Grundy gave a yell as Glyn barred his way, his face set grimly.

"Out of the way, ass!" shouted Grundy magisterially. "I'm after that fat rotter Trim— Yoop! Look-out, you'll have me off! What? Yaroooooh!"

Crash!

Grundy was off. He tumbled over, and Glyn yelled—not having intended to cause Grundy to fall over and thus damage his machine.

But Grundy had not expected Glyn to stop him, and he did tumble off.

"You raving chump!" howled Glyn. "My new bike! Oh, you awful— Yoop!"

It was Glyn's turn to howl as Grundy's clenched fist clumped on his nose—and he did howl fiendishly.

"I'll thumping well teach you to barge me off a bike!" roared Grundy. "Why, you cheeky, dangerous maniac, I'll—I'll—"

"And I'll thundering well teach you to bag my bike, you cheeky owl!" yelled Glyn, clutching his nose; and with that he rushed at Grundy, hitting out wildly. They waltzed about the roadway for a moment, and then, tripping backwards over his own bike, Bernard Glyn took Grundy with him, and they rolled over across the bike, struggling and yelling, in a deadly embrace.

They were hard at it when again there came the whirl of cycle wheels, and Jack Blake came whizzing up, clapping on his brakes—or, rather, Cutts' brakes—as he did so. He leaped off the machine, and stared in amazement at the struggling pair, his own anger forgotten for the moment.

"What the thump— Great pip! What's Grundy been up to, Glyn?"

"He collared my bike, the cheeky rotter!" howled Glyn. "Help me, Blake, you—"

"Not likely!" snorted Blake warmly. "What about my bike—eh? Who the thump told you you could borrow it? If you've been on that tar—"

He hurriedly jumped to his own machine and looked it over, heedless of Glyn's yells for aid, for Grundy was pummelling him soundly. He was just gasping his relief at

seeing there was no sign of tar on the tyres, when he looked up on hearing the sudden whir of bike wheels, and then, as he recognised Cutts' furious face, he jumped up in alarm.

"Got you, you young hound!" shouted Cutts, jumping from his machine—or, rather, Mulvaney's machine. "I'll teach you to help your dashed self to my dashed machine!"

And, sending Mulvaney's machine spinning away, Cutts of the Fifth made a rush at the astonished Jack Blake. The next moment Fifth-Former and Fourth-Former were struggling in the roadway.

Cutts had not anticipated a struggle at all. He had just intended to collar Blake and give him a good hiding.

But Blake wasn't the sort to take a hiding lying down—not even from Cutts. He hit out with vigour, and the next moment two pairs of St. Jim's fellows were struggling in the roadway.

They were doing so when Micky Mulvaney came riding furiously along a few seconds later. Micky jumped off and blinked at the scene in amazement.

"Help!" roared Blake, who was having a rather punishing time of it. "Lend a hand, Micky, you fathead! Go for the rotter! Back your own Form up!"

"Be jabbers!" gasped Micky. "Faith, an' I will, old top!"

And he did. The fact that Cutts had borrowed his bike without permission was sufficient inducement, without an appeal to patriotism, so to speak.

At the same moment Bernard Glyn grasped the state of affairs between Cutts, Blake, and Micky, and he gave a gasp.

"Chuck it, Grundy!" he panted. "Can't you see that rotter Cutts is lamming our chaps? We can settle this again. Let's help to down Cutts!"

"Eh—what? Oh!"

Glyn had ceased to struggle; and, looking round, Grundy saw Cutts struggling furiously with Blake and Micky Mulvaney.

The sight was more than enough for George Alfred. It was always the rule at St. Jim's for Lower-School chaps to back each other up against seniors—or, at least, against Fifth-Formers, and especially against bullying Fifth-Formers like Cutts—and Grundy did not hesitate.

He jumped up, and, followed by Bernard Glyn, he went into action again like a bull at a gate, but this time against the detested Gerald Cutts.

"Come on, Glyn!" he roared to his late enemy. "We'll soon settle this rotter's hash!"

And between them they did!

Under the four Lower School fellows Cutts went down with a crash, and against the odds he hadn't the ghost of a chance. Yelling with rage, he struggled furiously for several brief, whirling seconds, and then they got a good grip of him and held him fast.

"Into the ditch with the rotter!" roared Grundy. "We'll teach him better than to handle Lower School chaps!"

And Cutts went into the ditch with flying arms and legs. Luckily for him, the ditch was dry, and he scrambled out again, fairly panting with fury.

"You—little fiends!" he panted. "I'll—I'll—"

He seemed to contemplate another struggle; but, changing his mind, he glowered at the juniors, and, vowing to have his own back, he grabbed his bike and mounted it.

He vanished up the lane towards St. Jim's, and then the dishevelled and panting juniors looked at each other.

"Pax! No more scuffling, for goodness' sake!" gasped Blake breathlessly. "M-mum-my hat! This beats the band! I fancy there's something jolly queer about this business!"

"Yes, rather!" snorted Bernard Glyn, a sudden gleam coming into his eyes. "Look here, Grundy, why did you take my bike?"

"I didn't know it was your bike" growled George Alfred crossly. "Lowther gave it me. He said Trimble had taken mine, and I simply jumped on it and rode off, hoping to catch that fat rascal up."

"Trimble!" ejaculated Blake. "Why, Trimble was in the tuckshop when I left it. He'd been there since dinner, I believe."

"But—but—" gasped Grundy.

"It's all a thumping spoof, of course," snorted Glyn. "Oh, my hat! I see it now. It's that a—er—er—er. Lowther."

"Lowther!" ejaculated Blake. "Oh, my hat! That's it! It's one of his dashed April the First japes. Oh, great pip! We shall never hear the last of this. I suppose Lowther told Cutts I had taken his bike, just as he told me you'd taken mine, Glyn!"

"And he told me Cutts had taken mine," snorted Micky. "Faith! The thief of the world!"

"It's plain enough," went on Blake dismally. "He sent Grundy on a wild-goose chase for his bike, and Glyn after Grundy, and me after you, Glyn, and Cutts after me, and Micky here after Cutts! Oh, the awful rotter! We—we'll snatch him bald-headed, after this!"

"Yes, rather!"

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"Come on!" howled Grundy, the truth dawning in upon his rather dull mind at last. "Why, I'll smash the funny ass! I'll make him wish he'd never made a rotten joke in his life! I'll—I'll—I'll—"

"Come on," groaned Blake. "I can see a rotten time before us when the fellows all hear about it. Oh crumbs! Let's get back, for goodness' sake! You'd better ride behind me, Grundy."

The juniors mounted their bikes dismally, Grundy taking his stand on Blake's back step. They rode back to St. Jim's almost in silence. As they dismounted at last at the gates, Blake gave a gasp as he sighted a crowd of grinning fellows congregated there.

He guessed at once why.

"Oh, my only hat!" he groaned. "Now for it!"

As the hapless victims of Lowther's humour filed through the gateway they were greeted with a perfect howl of laughter.

"What price the First of April?" roared Manners. "Oh, look at the little dears, how they're blushing! Did you catch Trimble, Grundy?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you—you—"

Grundy spluttered and made a blind rush at Monty Lowther, who was grinning gleefully in the forefront of the crowd. But a dozen fellows grasped him, and he was seated on the hard ground with a thump. Lowther, Manners, and Tom Merry discreetly retired into the background.

Blake, Glyn, and Micky Mulvaney made no effort to reach Monty Lowther after that. They were much too dispirited, and they knew it was useless, in any case. They had been done "brown," and it was no good taking it crossly, even if they could not take it smiling.

They wheeled their bikes towards the cycle-shed, followed by laughter and ironical cheers.

Blake was the last to house his machine, and Glyn and Micky Mulvaney had already hurried indoors when he came away from the cycle-shed—apparently to hide their "diminished heads," which Blake himself was longing to do.

But just as he was passing the chapel, Blake halted, and slipped quickly back behind a buttress of the chapel wall.

On turning the corner of the chapel he had just been in time to spot four fellows slip stealthily into the woodshed, one after the other.

The fact that their very attitude was suspicious, and that he recognised them in a flash as Figgins, Kerr, Wynn, and Redfern, his deadly rivals of the New House, was quite enough to make Blake very suspicious indeed.

He waited until they had been inside the woodshed a few seconds, and then he tiptoed towards it. Reaching the back, he applied his eye to a crack in the planked wall. He expected to see and hear something very interesting. He was not disappointed.

Figgins & Co., the cheery leaders of the rival House at St. Jim's, were on the warpath once again.

## CHAPTER 10.

### Very Queer!

JACK BLAKE was a fellow who would have shuddered at the thought of eavesdropping. Yet such a thought never even crossed his mind now. It was war to the knife between New House and School House, and in his view all was fair in war—whatever it might be in love. He was simply scouting.

So he stood at the crack in the woodwork, and listened with all his ears, and stared with all his eyes, as it were.

He could see little, however, for there was little to see in the dingy shed. The door was closed, but the small, single-paned window gave what light there was, and in it Blake saw Figgins & Co.

They were just placing bundles—obviously containing clothing—on the earthen floor of the woodshed.

Figgins was speaking, and his words reached Blake's ears very clearly.

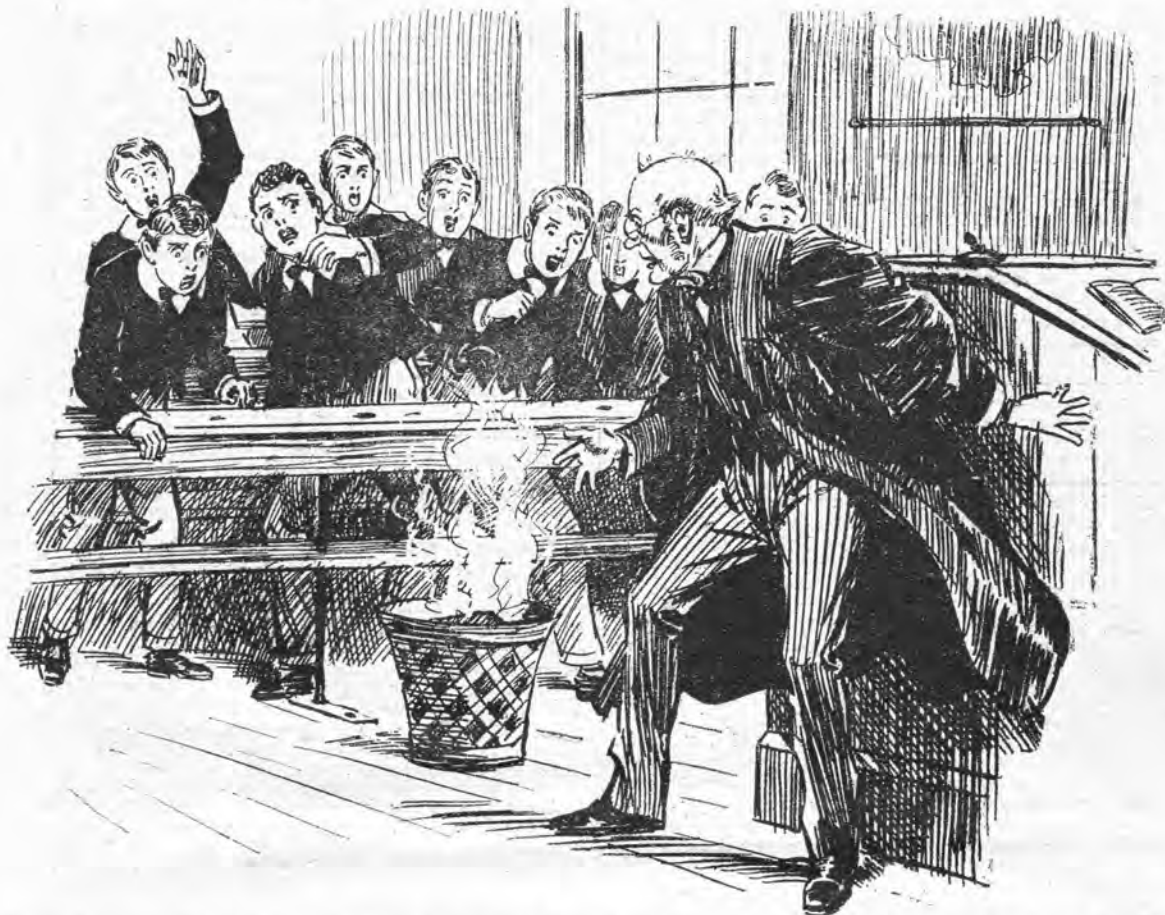
"All serene!" he was saying. "Nobody spotted us, thank goodness! My hat! We'll make those School House dummies squirm this time, and no mistake!"

"You've not forgotten the grease-paints and the rest of the make-up, Figg?" asked Kerr, rather anxiously.

"Not likely!" chuckled Figg. "I tell you it'll be as easy as falling off a form—though a bit risky, I'll admit. But one has to take risks in war, you know. I'll bet those silly School House worms will remember April 1st as long as they live."

"They'll have got the bills by now—you posted them last night, Figg?" asked Fatty Wynn.

"Oh, yes! Just fancy dear old Gussy's face when he opens the letter and finds a bill from Bankley's inside for ten quids—just for socks and hats and ties he's never had—what? It was a real stroke of luck Bankley's shoving those



"It's a bomb!" roared Grundy, leaping to his feet. "Run for it!" "Oh, Great Scott!" Mr. Linton's sudden alarm was obvious to all. In the sudden hush that followed Grundy's yell, the ticking of the alarm clock could be heard, and smoke was seen to be issuing from the basket. Immediately there was a scramble to get out of the Form-room.

(See Chapter 6.)

billheads in the parcel with your giddy collars, Kerr. I suppose they just shoved them in the parcel for padding, or else they got in by accident. Anyhow, it was luck for us, and gave me the idea."

"The wheeze of the term!" grinned Fatty Wynn.

"Yes, rather! Now you all know what to do—I've told old Owen the wheeze. We come here first after lessons, and then we change into these togs and slip round to the back of the School House, sneak up those back stairs, and get to work. Merry and Blake and the rest of the silly asses will be bound to have gone down for a bit of footer before tea, and the coast will be clear. And I've told a lot of our chaps to hang round there in case anyone does interfere."

"Good man!"

"Yes, I've thought it all out, chaps," grinned Figgins modestly. "It's a real corker of a wheeze. It won't take us long to yank all the stuff out of Study No. 6, and Study No. 10, and bundle it down that back staircase. Of course we shan't be able to manage the big furniture—tables and couch, and things like that. But we'll clear out both studies as clean as we can, carpets and everything. Won't the fellows just howl when they hear the brokers have been and taken away the giddy household effects from those chaps for debts!"

And Figgins chuckled explosively, and his chums joined him.

Blake was absolutely dumbfounded. He could scarcely believe his own ears. Much of what Figgins said was scarcely plain, but he understood the drift of his remarks only too well.

So that was the wheeze! Figgins & Co. had caused spoof bills to be sent to D'Arcy—and possibly Merry & Co.—and that afternoon the New House jokers intended to dress up as brokers' men and take away their furniture and stuff, in their absence on the playing fields.

It was an amazing scheme, and it almost took Blake's breath away.

He heard little more after that, for just then Figgins

gave the word, and the four New House fellows, after hiding the bundles of clothing behind some faggots, left the shed, closing and fastening the door behind them.

Jack Blake, almost trembling with excited amazement, waited a good few minutes, and then he took a careful look about him, and made his way by a round-about way to the School House. There were plenty of fellows still about, and Blake's appearance was greeted with chuckles.

Blake ignored them, and, smiling cheerily now, he hurried to Study No. 6. He found Herries and Digby standing with D'Arcy, who was blinking through his monocle at a sheet of paper in his aristocratic fist.

"Bai Jove!" he was remarking in utter amazement. "This is the most extraordinary thing I have evah come across, bai Jove! Yaas, wathah! I have most emphatically nevah had these things frowm Bankley's, and I always pay my bills pwomptly in any case. And, weally, this note at the bottom is most wude, and certainly alarmin', deah boys!"

"It's queer," grunted Herries. "Hallo, here's Blake now!"

Blake almost snatched the sheet from D'Arcy's hand. It was a billhead from Bankley's, the draper's store in Wayland—as Blake had guessed. And below a list of articles—which came to over ten pounds—was a brief note. It was to the effect that, unless the bill was paid by four o'clock that same afternoon, prompt and severe measures would be taken by Messrs. Bankleys.

"H'm! I thought as much!" smiled Blake cheerfully.

"But what does it mean?" shrieked Arthur Augustus wildly. "Can't you see that it is vewy, vewy serious, Blake? I have nevah wun up that bill, and I do not owe them one penny, bai Jove!"

"Keep cool, Gussy," remarked Blake, with a chuckle. "Don't you worry your little head about this. Leave it to your Uncle Jack, my lad. If— Hallo, there's the bell at last. Come on! We'll discuss this little matter with

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Tom Merry at afternoon break. I've got something to tell you."

And Blake marched out cheerfully, after pocketing the remarkable bill from "Bankley's."

In the Fourth Form-room Blake's appearance was greeted by a general chuckle, but Blake ignored it—indeed, he had forgotten—all about Lowther's absurd little jape with the bicycles. And the chuckles were silenced as Mr. Lathom strode in.

There was no practical joking in the Fourth Form-room that afternoon at all. The fate that had befallen Figgins did not encourage any further attempts. And at last afternoon break came, and Blake hurried his chums out of the room. Then he sought Tom Merry & Co. and rushed those surprised juniors along to Study No. 6.

"I've got something to tell you chaps!" chuckled Blake. "Anything about bicycles?" inquired Lowther affably. "Oh, dry up about that, Lowther! Now, have you chaps had a bill from Bankley's this noon?"

"Yes, I should jolly well think we have!" snorted Manners. "Show him, Tommy!"

Tom Merry handed over a billhead almost similar to D'Arcy's, and Blake chuckled as he read it. He passed it back to Tom Merry.

"Nothing to cackle about that I can see!" sniffed Tom. "If you chaps—"

"We've had one, too—at least Gussy has," grinned Blake. "You see, I happen to know they didn't come from Bankley's—at least, only the bare billheads did."

"Then—then—"

"Allow me to remind you that it is the first of April to-day," said Blake blandly. "Those cheery old bills were sent to you by our old friend and enemy George Figgins, of the New House."

"Wha-wha-what?"

"Fact!" chuckled Blake. "You see, I happened to overhear them discussing the cheery old plot. It's a scorcher! I'll tell you about it."

And he did. Tom Merry and the rest of them listened in absolute amazement. They blinked in petrified amazement at Blake when he had finished.

"Well," ejaculated Tom Merry. "Well, upon my word! What a—what a wheeze!"

"Good job I overheard it—what?" smiled Blake. "We can now take measures accordingly, gentlemen. Forewarned is forearmed, you know. Now, my idea is this."

And Jack Blake, who had been doing a lot of thinking during lesson—but not about the lesson—told his chums his idea.

Tom Merry's face beamed with delight as he did so. "Good man!" he breathed. "Oh, good man, Blake! This will pay those funny asses out for that business in the dorm this morning—and a good deal also besides. Jove, you're right! What's good for the goose is good for the gander! Let's get down to things."

And for some minutes, until the bell rang, they got down to things, and when the Terrible Three entered their Form-room again that afternoon, they were smiling quite cheerily. So also was Blake & Co., in their Form-room. Figgins grinned across at them, and winked at Kerr, and he was rather surprised when Blake and his chums smiled cheerily back again.

But he did not dream of the truth.

At the end of the afternoon classes Blake & Co. were the first out of the room, and without hesitating at all they snatched their caps from their pockets, and rushed outside, making their way to the woodshed.

Scarcely a couple of seconds later the Terrible Three joined them there.

"Look lively now!" warned Tom Merry.

He wrenched the peg from the fastening of the door, and swung the iron bar away. Then as the door was dragged open they slipped inside. They soon found the five bundles—evidently one was for Owen, who had been absent from the woodshed—and grabbing them the School House juniors rushed round to the rear of the shed, and hid themselves behind a thick clump of laurels there, Tom staying behind a moment to fasten the door again.

They were only just in time.

Footsteps sounded, and then voices were heard—the voices of Figgins & Co.

"Here we are!" chortled Figgins gleefully. "Everything's going to go off like a charm—I can see that. Those awful School House dummies have rushed down to the playing-fields, I expect, so we're safe as houses. In you get, chaps!"

There was the tramp of feet within the shed, and, touching Blake's arm, Tom slipped softly on tiptoe round to the front of the shed. In a flash he had dragged the door to, and in another flash he had swung the iron bar across.

## CHAPTER 11.

### The Final Jape!

**C**RASH!

The iron bar slammed home, and swiftly Tom Merry rammed the peg of wood into place, while Blake joined him, and rammed a wedge of wood under the door.

And as he did so from within the shed sounded startled exclamations, followed by a howl from Figgins.

"Great Scott, we're done, chaps! I believe it's those School House worms! Oh, great pip!"

There followed a tremendous banging on the door, but Merry and Blake only chuckled softly and rejoined their grinning chums at the rear of the shed.

"Get down to it!" ordered Tom Merry briskly.

And the grinning School House warriors "got down to it" swiftly enough. They wrenched the bundles open, and disclosed to view five suits of clothing. They were rough clothing, being rather dingy, with cloth caps to match, and with red-and-white striped scarves.

"From the theatrical costumiers in Wayland, I'll bet!" grinned Tom Merry. "Jove, we'll soon be fixed up! Figgys must have planned this yesterday!"

While Merry, Blake, Lowther, Herries, and Digby hurriedly changed behind the screen of laurels Arthur Augustus and Manners watched them, lending a hand when necessary. Then, having found the grease-paint and make-up in one of the bundles, they got to work making-up. There were two beards and three varied-hued moustaches, and under Lowther's supervision—Lowther being a remarkable clever impersonator—the making-up was very soon done to his satisfaction.

The result was startling in the extreme. Certainly the five juniors looked rather short men, but they were men to the life.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus, raising his monocle to his noble eye. "Weally, you are bwoker's men to the life, though I must confess that I have nevah seen any. It would be wathah a good ideah to let Figgys & Co. see you. It would give the deah boys somethin' to be thinkin' about while impwisoned in the shed."

"Good wheeze!" chuckled Tom Merry. "We will!"

And, marching round to the side of the shed, Tom rapped on the window. The uproar of muffled thumping inside the shed ceased abruptly, and the next instant the flushed and wrathful faces of Figgins, Kerr, Wynn, Redfern, and Owen appeared at the little window.

They fairly howled with rage as they sighted the School House impersonators lined up for their inspection.

"Good-bye, bluebells!" called Tom Merry, kissing his hand to them cheerfully. "So sorry to do you out of your jobs, but in these hard times it's every man for himself."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Why, you—you—you—"

Tom Merry led his men away with a rush, without waiting to hear Figgins' remarks. They guessed they would scarcely be complimentary, anyhow. Round by the back of the chapel Tom led the way, and then he stopped.

"Now we'll leave you other chaps," he said to D'Arcy and Manners. "You know what to do, don't you? Stand under the window of Figgys' study, and wait until we drop the stuff down to you. Then collar as much as you can carry, and rush it round to the cloisters. Luckily there's a blank wall opposite, and with luck nobody will spot you at this hour. We'll join you, and help you to finish the job."



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"Wight, deah boys!" chuckled D'Arcy.

Tom Merry hurried away, and approached the New House from the rear. They looked remarkably like ordinary workmen, and they felt certain that if they were spotted by any of the New House fellows they would only imagine them to be men working about the school—not an unusual happening at all at a school like St. Jim's.

There was a back staircase, as in the School House, but this was only used by members of the domestic staff, and the daring juniors did not fear meeting anyone who mattered at all.

Nor did they. They soon mounted the stairs, and in a very few seconds they had reached Figgins' study. On the way they met one or two New House fellows, who glanced rather curiously at them.

But the five "men" were carrying their caps, and looked very much on business bent, as indeed they were. Reaching Figgins' study door, Tom Merry took a hasty glance round him, and whipped into the room with his chums at his heels.

Then Blake closed the door quietly, and turned the key in the lock.

"Done it!" he chuckled. "My hat! What luck!"

It was luck, undoubtedly, so far. Blake chuckled as he remembered Figgins' remarks about having told the New House fellows to "hang round" over at the School House in case of danger. Had the passages been swarming with fellows—as they might otherwise have been—things might have been very risky indeed.

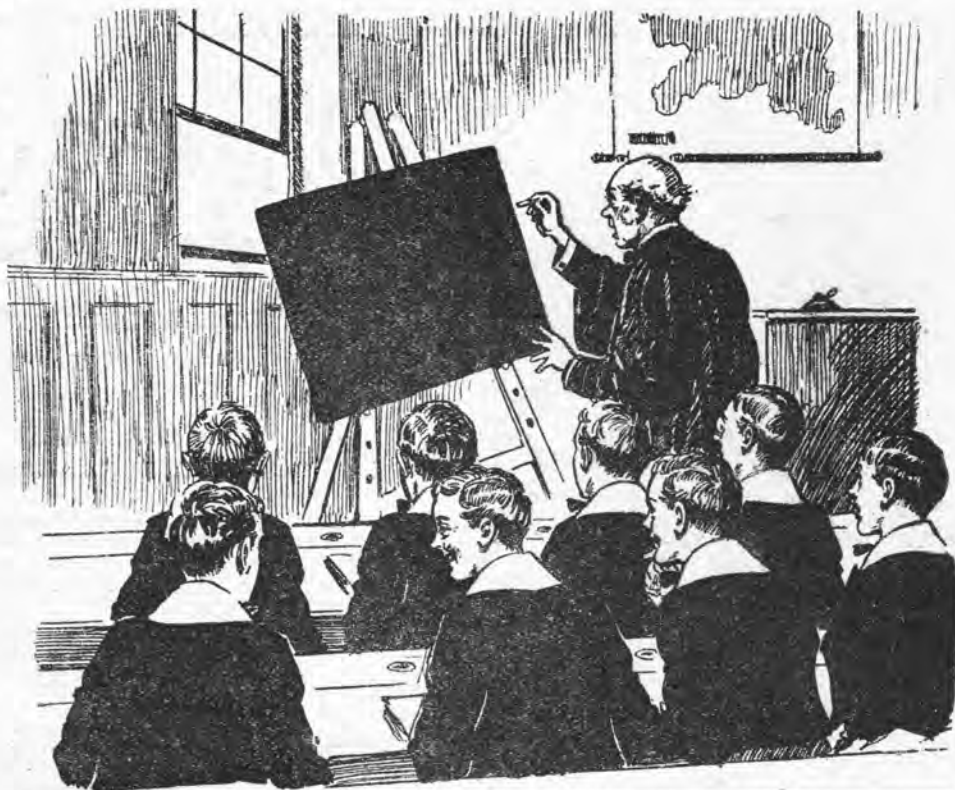
The next moment Tom Merry and his fellow-conspirators were busy—very busy indeed. They took off their coats and settled down to the work in hand with a will. First Tom opened the window, and uncoiled a rope with a hook on the end from around his waist. A glance into the patch of lawn below had shown him that D'Arcy and Manners were on the spot, and after that things moved swiftly.

Working at top speed, the grinning "brokers' men" filled the tablecloth full of articles—photo-frames, books, study clock, fender, pictures, and ornaments, and other small articles too numerous to mention. This done, the table-cloth was tied in a huge bundle, and lowered by the hooked rope to the waiting juniors below.

And so the good work went on—smaller chairs, the study carpet, rolled up and tied, the coal-scuttle, the fire-irons, rolled up inside the hearthrug—all were carefully lowered to the quad below. Then they gave the signal, and as Tom Merry hauled up the rope for the last time, Arthur Augustus and Manners started to carry what they could round the rear of the New House to the Cloisters.

Meanwhile, inside Figgins' study, the "brokers' men" were still busy. The room was empty now, save for the table, the bookcase, the cupboard, and the heavy couch and easy-chair. It did not look at all like the home, sweet home it had formerly been.

But even then they had not finished. From the study cupboard the juniors brought pots of jam, a huge cake, some smaller cakes, a tin of biscuits, a tin of sardines, and some bloater paste. These Tom carefully packed into a loose cushion cover he had retained for the purpose. Then, while his chums busied themselves mixing the butter with the mustard, and the pepper with the salt and sugar, and



Mr. Latham's face was a study in petrified horror as the blackboard began to wobble away from his upraised hand. Wobble, wobble, wobble! With a curious jerky movement the easel and the blackboard staggered backwards until it brought up against the lower part of the window. "Oh, my hat!" gurgled Jack Blake. (See Chapter 8.)

tea, and cocoa, Tom wrote the date in chalk on the mirror over the fireplace.

"The first of April," he murmured. "I rather fancy Figgy and his dear pals will remember the date. Don't you fellows think so?"

"Ha, ha! Yes, rather!"

And as his chums echoed their agreement, Tom led the way out, after a cautious look round. But not a soul was about now—evidently the fellows who were not on the playing-fields were still "hanging about" the School House—and the five juniors reached the staircase and descended in safety, Tom Merry himself carrying the cushion-cover full of foodstuffs.

The rest was easy. D'Arcy and Manners had already carried the smaller articles to the Cloisters, and now the five of them very soon carried the rest of the "furniture and effects" to that sheltered and lonely spot.

"Good!" remarked Tom Merry, eyeing the pile with satisfaction. "Jolly good, in fact. After all, we've only done what Figgy and his pals intended doing to us. But it's a giddy score for all that. I think we can smile now."

And the chums of the School House did smile, very loudly, as they hurried back to the woodshed. Evidently their footsteps were heard as they approached the shed, for a perfect howl of wrath came from within the shed.

But Tom Merry & Co. ignored it until they had changed into their ordinary attire, and then they presented themselves before the window with cheerful faces.

"Hallo, Figgy!" called Tom Merry cheerily, as Figgins' furious face appeared at the little pane of dusty glass. "You fellows still in there? Is this another April the First jape, or what?"

"You—you awful rotters!" raved Figgins. "Let us out of this, you School House worms!"

"That the way you usually ask favours?" asked Tom in surprise. "But if you really want to come out—"

"Of course we do!" shrieked Figgins, almost hysterical with wrath and apprehension. "What have you rotters been doing?"

"That, as somebody remarks somewhere, is the question," said Tom, shaking his head. "If we let you come out, will you make it pax and be good?"

"You—you—you—"

(Continued on page 28.)

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ONCE QAN WAGA GETS THE BIT BETWEEN HIS TEETH HE TAKES A LOT OF STOPPING. HE PROVES ONE TOO MANY FOR BARRY O'ROONEY & CO., ANYWAY.



# The Wheeze That Wouldn't Work!

The concluding story in this popular series.

By **SIDNEY DREW.**

## CHAPTER 1. Home Sweet Home!

**T**HE steam yacht Lord of the Deep ran into the mist and drizzling rain when she ought to have been well in sight of one of the famous Mystery Towers of the great War, which has now taken the place of the Nab Lightship, and not a gleam of light was visible. The force of the wind was not great, but a heavy sea was still running and it was very dark.

On the bridge Midshipman Hilton saw Mr. Prout wiping his beard. Prout was by no means an ill-tempered person, but he was not in a very gracious mood. He knew he could have brought the yacht into her home port, Porthampton Harbour, quite safely in any kind of weather except dense fog, but the blizzard had beaten him by a few hours.

A new Admiralty Order had been issued that the captain of any vessel over a certain tonnage who had not entered the harbour for a period of three calendar months, must, owing to certain alterations, employ the services of a qualified pilot to take in his ship. So Prout, who was an hour or two outside the time limit on account of the big blow, was slightly ruffled. He loathed the very thought of an outsider being allowed to navigate the beautiful yacht he loved so well.

"I think it's clearing," said Val, peering over the top of the weather screen. "I saw a flash then. That's the Nab, isn't it, Mr. Prout?"

"If it isn't the Nab, by honey, we're in a tidy old-mess, air," grunted Prout, "and what's more, we deserve to be. Yes, I can just make out a blink of her. Listen to 'em! This place is about as full of shipping as Oxford Street, London, England, is full of taxi-cabs and motor buses. There's something astern of us with a mighty bad cough. By the size of the cough it ought to be the Majestic."

Woo-oo-oo-oo-oh! said the invisible vessel astern. Woo-ooo-ooo-ooo-ooch!

Woo-oo-oo-oo-oh! answered the Lord of the Deep.

Whee-ee-ee-eh! shrieked the whistle of the speaking-tube, and Val Hilton attended to it promptly.

"We shall have to hang it out, Mr. Prout," he said. "It's the Lantania behind us. They've got the message, too, though they're luckier than we are, for I expect they've got their pilot aboard. We can't get our pilot till it clears."

"Big as she is, the Lantania wouldn't know which way we went," growled Prout. "If it wasn't for this rotten new regulation, by honey, I'd race her to Porthampton and beat her by streets. Come along, then, you great noisy, floating hotel. Show her our tail-light, sir. The Lord of the Deep is the finest craft afloat, but if that lump of jazz bands and feather-beds and ten-course dinners and rambler-roses and

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swimming-baths was to hit us the insurance money wouldn't be much good to us, for she'd roll us out flat. Let her pass, for she's got the mails."

Woo-oo-oh! Woo-oo-oh! shouted the huge liner astern.

"You great ugly beast," said Val, "get on with you, then! But wouldn't I just love to make a race of it!"

She was one blaze of electric light as she slid past, and she kept on hooting in a fashion that made Val dislike her, for he hated to be beaten even by one of the fastest and most luxurious trans-Atlantic liners afloat. However, she had her pilot, and not being in the same happy position the Lord of the Deep could only crawl along with her syren going. And, after all, though the delay was irritating, Val did not object, for there was a smell of old England in the air that was deliciously sweet.

"Aren't you glad to be getting home, Mr. Prout?" he asked.

"By honey, I suppose I am, sir," answered Prout. "Yes, I think I am, but it's a rampagious outrage that the Lantania should have the pull on us. Well, sir, you've had your taste of it and you'll never get it out of your blood. Old England is home, even if you haven't got a roof to shelter you, but once you've got the bite of it same as we have, you'll feel those wild places calling to you. There's a bunch of us like Barry O'Rooney, Maddock, and Joe Toggle and your humble servant. We ain't exactly young men, but for our ages we might be a lot of boys. We've all got cash, plenty to retire on and live easy lives, but, by honey, could we do it? No, by honey, we couldn't!"

Gan Waga, the Eskimo, waddled up with nothing on except a pair of football shorts, a smile, and an unlighted cigar.

"Hallo, Val, old raspberry juices," he gurgled, "this butterfuls, hunk? Dears, dears! This the jolly old weathers, hunk? I feels all merryfuls and brightness. Yo' gotted a match, Tommy, fo' they forgottot to put any pockets in these trousers?"

"Yes, I've got a match," said Prout, "and now you've come up here, you can light your cigar and stay up here. Except for your eyes, by honey, you're no good to man or beast. Use 'em and look out for Maukin Fort. We don't want to hit that lump of concrete and armour plate. Butterful weather, hunk? I'd like to brain you!"

Val's chum, Master David Ap Rees, was not always allowed on the bridge, or at least, though he had never been actually warned off it, his common sense told him that he was not wanted there in bad weather, and being only a guest he was wise enough to keep away.

The saloon was warm and comfortable, but it was not exciting. Rupert Thurston was using a typewriter, and Prince Ching Lung was asleep in a big easy chair. Dave asked Rupert Thurston if he might put on the wireless, and Thurston smiled and nodded and went on tapping. After a little manipulating, Dave heard a voice announcing that Mr.—zzz!—Fordington—uzz—Odgetts—bizz—the world-famous—goosh—tenor, would sing 'Gloaming—zzzzsh!—in the—blizz—Lane!' Dave took off the headphone and started the loud-speaker. And presently Mr. Fordington Odgetts, the silver-toned tenor, who had a charming voice, began to tell the saloon all about it. He sang:

"When we strolled down the lane in the twilight,  
Dear heart, you remember the time,

When we heard the nightingale singing—"

"Zwooh! Zzzshish! Kraash! Zee! Boomph! Bang! Slash! Cra-ash! Ze-geep! Zzzshoeshxyzbrrsh-kerbump,"

said the nightingale sweetly, and some more like it, only a lot worse.

Ching Lung shuddered in his sleep, and Rupert Thurston's hands stopped in mid-air above the keys of the typewriter. Dave was a bit staggered himself. He had heard a few nightingales, but never one with notes like that. He stared at the loud-speaker as if expecting the bird to fly out of it and peck him, but there was an expectant grin on his face all the same. Pure and clear came the great tenor's voice:

"And we heard the church bells chime," sang the gifted Mr. Fordington Odgetts.

"Bazzung! Kawzzxbkzzstzzzzsppshoozz! Az-oomp! Zzzzsheeshpykzzishwaazzsh! Ker-wallop!" chimed the bells.

Prince Ching Lung fell out of his chair and awoke, and Rupert Thurston pressed both hands over his ears.

"For the sake of Mike, cut it out, Dave," shouted Ching Lung frantically. "Stop it before you drive us to suicide. Stop it, my son, if you love us, and we'll forgive you if you play the bagpipes to us. That's a good lad," he added, as Dave cut off Mr. Odgetts and the nightingale and the village chimed. "We've tried it before, and even Gan Waga couldn't stand it. We're right in the middle of the big wireless stations, and they're all at it, and on a night like this they're doubly at it, and the battleships are wireless and the liners and the atmospheric are twisted into knots. What was the first lot I heard in my dream?"

"That was a nightingale," grinned Dave. "At least, I think it must have been, for he was asking dear heart if she remembered the nightingale singing in the twilight, and the nightingale barged in to jog her memory in case she'd forgotten."

"Some bird," said Ching Lung. "I thought it was about ten brass bands playing, coupled with the collision between a couple of express trains, with one boiler bursting and the other blowing off steam. And what was the second spasm?"

"The chime of the old village bells," said Dave. "I suppose it was, for he asked, dear heart, if she remembered them as well as the bird."

"Then I'm glad I don't live near that village, for I'd assassinate the bell-ringers!" said Rupert Thurston. "I hope we shall get in to-night in time to catch the mail. A nuisance about having to pick up a pilot—Hallo! We're stopping. Ask about it, Dave."

Dave went to the telephone, and Val's voice answered him.

"It's a lot clearer—hardly raining at all," said Val Hilton. "We're stopping for the pilot. I can't see her for nuts, though some craft is signalling to us; but Gan Waga says he can see her, and that she's the pilot boat. And don't I wish it was dinner-time! I've been on this bridge five solid hours, and my ears and nose are frost-bitten. And you, you lucky, lazy—Oh, good gracious whatever indeed, look you, ring off!"

"It's a pity you haven't got your tongue frost-bitten instead of your ears and nose, old sport!" said Dave. "Pilot boat coming up. That's what we're stopping for," he announced, as he put down the receiver. "Gan Waga has spotted her. And I wish that pilot boat was lost for keeps!"

"That's a queer sort of wish, old man," said Ching Lung. "Don't you want to get home, then?"

"Oh, of course I do!" said Dave. "That's just the rot of it. If you can understand, I'm as jolly as a sandboy and as miserable as a minnow in a pickle-bottle. I've had a frabjous time, and I want to see my people awfully and tell them all about it. And after that I shall get the hump. It's all jam and honey for Val, for he's coming back to it. But don't think I'm grouching, sir—I've had the time of my life."

Dave hurried on deck. The pilot vessel, looking very tiny with comparison to the yacht, was alongside only a few cable-lengths away, rolling and pitching on the huge seas. To David, the thing seemed impossible; but in the gloom he saw a boat drop away from her—a frail little thing that was flung up like a cork on the surges and shot down into the gloomy valleys of water between. But it always came up again, with the two rowers pulling hard. And then, by some miracle, a burly man in oilskins was aboard the Lord of the Deep, and the boat was being rowed back.

"Hallo, Tom!" said the pilot. "Glad to see your old dial again. Shake, messmate!"

"Hallo, Dick!" said Mr. Thomas Prout. "By honey, I'm glad to see you, Richard, but I'd sooner have met you ashore at Southampton than on this deck. I could have took her in myself—but regulations being regulations, I've got to abide by them. She's your yacht, my lad, till we're on our moorings, so set about it. You're the boss, and I'll go to the wheel. Tell me how to do it, and I'll do it."

"Maddock aboard?" asked the pilot, with a twinkle in his eye.

"It's just possible, by honey, if you looked in the glue-

pot you might find him, mate," said Prout. "It's his spell below."

"There's new mooring east of the pool, Tom," said the pilot, lowering his voice. "It's fresh since you left. That's where they moor the Government's new aeroplane-carrier. She's a big-uns, and takes up a lot o' room, and on this tide, with the wind gone down, she'll be lying dead north and south. An amusing sort of chap, Maddock. I hope he won't keep me talking too long and make me neglect my duty."

Mr. Thomas Prout and the pilot exchanged winks. The pilot went below, and Prout, all smiles, went back to the bridge. Still smiling, he pushed the engine-room telegraph over to half-speed ahead, and told Gan Waga that he was a naked heathen, by honey, and to go and dress himself.

"What have you done with the pilot, Mr. Prout?" asked Val.

"Bit of luck, sir," answered Prout. "I was expecting a stranger, but he happens to be an old friend. It was rattling me pretty bad that anybody but one of ourselves should have navigated the yacht—especially into a place I know better than I know my own boots. We've got him aboard, and that settles the new regulations; but he's gone below to palaver with the bosun, and he won't show on deck again before we're in."

Val put his hands to his eyes.

"Gee!" he cried. "There's your old floating hotel pulled up, Mr. Prout, or she's only crawling. Shall I give her a chi-ike?"

"Give her an earful of music, sir," grinned Prout, signalling for more speed. "Give 'em a sort of good-evening and good-bye—and some juice."

Val jerked some rousing music out of the Lord of the Deep's syren, and signalled to the electrician to switch on all the lights.

Woo-oo-oo-oo-oo! Woo-oo-oo-oo-oo! Gumph! Gumph! Woo-oo-ooo-ooo-oooh! said the Lord of the Deep.

She slid past the liner, and though she could not display so much light, she could make quite as much noise. Why the huge Lantania had eased up they did not know, but Val was mightily pleased that they had caught her and left her behind. And then out of the dark the myriad lights of the great port began to gleam, and once more the rain commenced to fall.

"You'd better rest for an hour, sir," said Prout. "There's sure to be a big lot of letters, and they ought to be fetched to-night."

"I'll fetch them, Mr. Prout," said Val. "I say, don't let the Lantania beat us! She's wakened up, and is coming after us like a racing motor-car at Brooklands. Can't I stop at the telegraph?"

"If you like," said Prout. "By honey, we'll beat her!"

Prout went to the wheel and dismissed the sailor who had been steering. There was plenty of sea room, but, by the row she made, the Lantania appeared to want it all, and some more. Dave came up, wearing a thick sweater under his overcoat, and as he felt sure that he had had his first and last trip, he ventured on the bridge.

"Good gracious whatever indeed! Yes, is it you, Taffy, look you?" said Val. "Where have you been hiding yourself, my Welsh rabbit?"

"When I get you ashore, you roast-beefer, I'm going to knock your face clean off your neck!" said Dave. "Being a sort of guest of yours, I've stood your 'whatever's' and 'look you' stuff, for I'm a polite chap, and know my manners. If I'd killed you on board the yacht, lots of those old-fashioned, particular people would have called me rude for doing it. I should just hate that, old thing; so the minute I get you ashore, and I'm not your guest, it's you for the long jump! I say, what's that bunch of fireworks behind us?"

"That," said Val, glancing over his shoulder, "is the record-breaker. That's the Lantania, and she's starting to hop it. She's chock full of millionaires, and they mustn't be kept waiting. Gee! I must beat her, if I get the sack for it! Please, Mr. Prout, may I do it?"

Prout looked back, a little stream of sparks blowing out of his pipe. He nodded, and Val signalled full speed to the engine-room. As the yacht began to pull away from the monster, Dave relented.

"Tell you what, Val," he said—"you're such a hefty sort of a sailor-boy that it seems a pity to kill you the minute I get you on shore. We'll go to that restaurant, old bean, and I'll stand you a feed first. I'll kill you about ten minutes after lunch!"

"All right, old sport!" said Val cheerfully. "Try to stretch it a bit and make it a quarter of an hour. You see, I have to square up for Gan Waga's oysters, and he's not likely to be finished by the time we are. It would be a dirty trick to tell him he couldn't have any more oysters because I was dead."

"I never thought of that; but now you've reminded me I'll make it twenty minutes," said Dave generously, "but not a second more."

Evidently the bo'sun's conversation was very entertaining, for Prout had brought the yacht into Porthampton and moored her before the qualified pilot came on deck. He looked at his watch, and Prout pointed down the harbour and grinned.

"Not a word, by honey," he said—"not a word, Richard! There's the Lantania just coming up, and though she did slow for some reason, we whacked her when she was piling on the pace. They'll know to-morrow who the pilot was, and they'll want you for the job for keeps. Not a word, by honey—not a word. They'll think that if you'd been on her instead of us they'd have kept their time-table to the minute."

## CHAPTER 2.

### The Conspirators!

THE day was dismal, and Master David Ap Rees felt a little more dismal than the day. The yacht was paying off, with a couple of tenders lying beside her to take the crew ashore. They were probably all returning; but though the Lord of the Deep was a private yacht, the Board of Trade has its rules with regard to sailormen. At one end of the table sat Mr. Thomas Prout, pen in hand; in the centre was Val Hilton, with an open book in front of him, and at the end of the table stood Rupert Thurston, presiding over a heap of envelopes containing Treasury notes.

"Seaman John Hanbury, sir," growled Prout, taking a blue card from a sailor.

Val consulted the book.

"All excell'd, Mr. Prout," he said, and Prout filled in the card to that effect, and added his signature.

"Pass on and get your dough," he said. "If you're not one of the skeletons, you can shake your legs for fourteen days."

As the cards were signed, the men drew their pay and saluted. The skeletons Prout referred to were those who had been unlucky in the ballot for leave and had to remain aboard. They crowded into the tenders, carrying bundles and knapsacks, and cheered lustily. Then came the turn of the petty officers. Joe Toggle, the tall and bony carpenter advanced to the table.

"What's this weevil's record, sir?" grunted Prout.

"Couldn't be better," said Val, who liked Joe as everybody did. "Mr. Toggle is marked here for a special bonus of twenty-five pounds."

"Bedad," said Barry O'Rooney, "that book must be full of loies unless Oi'm down for fifty pounds!"

"O'Rooney," said Val, turning over a few pages. "Let's see. 'Conduct, scandalous; ability, little or none; discipline, absolutely wanting.' When Mr. O'Rooney has paid for dilapidations, he owes a bit. Fill up his card as rotten all through."

"Souse me, don't fill it up, tear it up!" said the bo'sun, with a grin. "Tear it small and make the lubber eat it. Calls himself a sailor. Gimme a pair of scissors and I'll cut a better sailor out of a sheet of brown paper."

In spite of these disparaging remarks, the envelope Rupert Thurston handed to O'Rooney was a fat one, a good deal fatter than the one Val found on the saloon table later on with his name written on it. Still, there were a few clean, crisp Bank of England notes, and he was counting them when Dave came in with some letters.

"Anything for me, Dave?"

"Only for the prince and Mr. Thurston," said Dave. "Funny thing neither of us get any letters from home. I don't like to clear out till I hear from the chief, and I suppose I ought to write and thank him for the ripping time I've had, but I don't know how to set about it. Mr. Honour has just come aboard, so perhaps he has some orders for us."

As Dave spoke, the big engineer strode in—the everlasting briar pipe in his mouth—and greeted the boys with a nod. He pointed at Val, and jerked his thumb ceilingwards. Understanding the gesture, Val pocketed his banknotes and hurried on deck to see the big anchor hoisted and safely at the cat-head. The tide was at flood, and the yacht began to creep up the harbour towards the dock-gates.

"Are we going to dock, then, Mr. Prout?" he asked, when he reached the bridge.

"We are, by honey, though I didn't know it myself till Mr. Honour told me ten minutes ago," said Prout. "He's on the hustle again, and he's going to rip the engines out of her!"

"Our beautiful engines? Why, they're almost new and nearly better than new."

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"They're not new enough for the chief and Hal Honour, sir," said Prout. "Oil is the gadget now, and that's the fuel they'll run her on. Evidently it's some fresh idea, or else they wouldn't pull the engines out of her, but just alter the furnaces to burn oil instead of coal. And that old gusher in New Guinea has gushed so fast that it filled the old temple sky-high in less than a week. They've had to cap it to deal with the stuff. You'd better fetch Master Ap Rees up, sir, for you'll see something cheerful in a minute."

What Val and Dave and the other lucky shareholders saw when they gathered on deck was a very pleasant sight. From the upper harbour, and heading for the sea, came a procession of brand new oil-tankers, numbered in red from one to ten, and with "New Guinea Oil and Development Company" painted on their bows.

"Bedad, bhoys," said Barry O'Rooney, "Oi can see myself floating around the country in a Rolls-Royce car wid diamond studded toires, and eggs for breakfast, and kippers for tay every day of my loife. They're off to fetch the juice out of that ould temple and make money for us while we slape. Surely that lovely soight is worth a poem, and Oi'll hand wan out."

"Silver knockers on the dure,  
Turkey carpets on the flure,  
Not rotten linoleum,  
Av you own pethroleum,  
You're rich for ever more."

"Oh, tread on the insect for the sake of Mike, Joe," said the bo'sun. "He gets rottener and rottener. I wish you'd go and soak your head in petroleum, Barry, and put a lighted match to it. Not that I expect that would do much good, for you've got such a lot of water on the brain the petrol wouldn't burn. Ahoy, tankers! Don't spill any on the way back."

The crews of the tankers cheered as they steamed past the yacht, and then very slowly the great gates of the dock opened, and the Lord of the Deep, with a tug on each side of her, glided in.

"And here's where I finish, Val, old thing," said Dave. "I could tell some yarns in the dormitory when I get back to school, but I mean to give that a miss, for, not believing me, they'd shy boots and hair-brushes and some of them might not miss. They wouldn't swallow that yarn of playing spooks and chasing those Teledi niggers out of the Cavern of Ghosts. I once got the heel of a boot on my nose in the dark, and I can still remember what I felt like. If the chaps are curious and want to know where I've been all the time, I think I'd better tell them I was at Margate gathering winkles."

"Good gracious, yes, inteed, look you, I think you'd better," said Val. "I know those kids!"

As Honour had brought no message to Val from Ferrers Lord, and Dave did not quite know what to do, Dave thought he might as well inform his people of his safe arrival by telegram.

"I'll come with you, old scout," said Val. "I was thinking of asking Prout, Maddock, O'Rooney, Joe Toggle, and Gan Waga to a bit of a feed, for they've been jolly good to us, and I'm well in funds. I'm a bit doubtful of Gan, for I should have to grub him at a restaurant, and Gan is a bit of a terror when he's let loose at feeding-time."

"Oh, chuck it, you can't leave the merry old Eskimo out!" protested Dave. "Bring him along, or else don't do the thing at all."

"Of course I'll bring him, though he's a bit of a handful. I don't object, but the others may. We'd better see about it smartly, for we're sure to get marching orders in the morning."

They picked their way through the narrow lanes behind the docks, and when Dave had sent off his telegram, they interviewed the manager of Porthampton's most select restaurant, where Gan Waga made such hungry raids on the oysters.

"I don't know if they can come yet," Val explained. "There will be seven or eight of us if we can get away. What's the latest time I could let you know?"

"Seven or eight? Oh, that makes no difference at all, sir. Any time, for we are always prepared. From the Lord of the Deep, sir. I see by the flag on your cap. His Highness, the prince, and Mr. Thurston, are two of my most valued and respected customers. And Mr. Gan Waga. Ha, ha! A most amusing gentleman is Mr. Gan Waga, and a most expensive one. Any time, any time, and I assure you of my best attentions, sir."

"I'll leave the dinner to you, then," said Val. "Only please don't forget I'm not a millionaire like Prince Ching Lung, but only a middy."

Val was too lazy to write a lot of invitations, so he wrote one and sent it to Mr. Thomas Prout.



As the eggs fell about them, Barry O'Rooney and his pals made a simultaneous dive under the table. "You pigies!" yelled Gan Waga. "How you likes that, hunk?" Then seeing the eggs would be of no further use to him, he grabbed up the siphon of soda-water and turned it on the unhappy diners. (See Page 27.)

"Dear Mr. Prout,—I should like you to join me and Mr. Ap Rees at a little dinner to-night at the Anchor Restaurant, at eight o'clock. I want this invitation to extend to Mr. Maddock, Mr. O'Rooney, and Mr. Toggle, but, having a bone in my arm, I couldn't write to the whole bunch. Will you kindly pass this along and let me know the result?"

"Yours faithfully,

"VALENTINE HILTON.

"P.S.—I shall break the glad news to Gan Waga myself."

Mr. Thomas Prout liked it till he came to the postscript. He read the note aloud, and Barry O'Rooney and the bo'sun nodded approvingly.

"A foine bhoy, bedad," said Parry. "In fact, two foine bhoyos, for young Ap Rees has no floies on him. We can get away, Oi guess, Tom?"

"Easy enough, by honey!" said Prout, looking glassily at the postscript which he had left out.

"Souise me, I shall enjoy a dinner ashore," said Maddock. "I'm not grousing at the grub we get aboard, but a change is a nice thing."

"And the blubberbiter is to be one of the party," said Prout.

The bo'sun glared, and Mr. Barry O'Rooney put the wrong end of the cigar he was smoking in his mouth and took it out with great speed. When he had recovered from the discomfort caused by this slight error and cleared his mouth of cigar-ash he smote the table with his fist.

"That puts the lid on ut!" he said. "Oi don't want to offend Misther Valentino, but Oi won't disgrace myself to be seen at dinner in a public resthaurant wid that oily Eskimo, woiiping the soup off his fingers on his hair, gnawing bones loike a hungry wolf, and yelling for pickled onions to ate wid roice-pudden! Oi can put up wid ut on the yacht, where they all know him and his haythenish ways, but not for the best dinner ever put afore a king will Oi sit down in public wid the blubberbiter!"

"You won't have to sit long," said Maddock, "for they'd soon fetch in the police and want to fire him out. We couldn't stand that, souise me, and there'd be trouble. It's so long since I hit a policeman that I've almost forgotten

how to do it; and if they started giving Gan a rough house I should have to punch. No; it's too dangerous, souise me! That invitation must be respectfully declined."

"Unless we could fix it so that Gan Waga didn't turn up," said Prout thoughtfully.

Barry and the bo'sun cheered up a little, and then Prout rose and shut the door. Like men hatching some black conspiracy, the three mariners put their heads together and whispered.

"Don't breathe a word to Joe about it," said the bo'sun at last. "He wouldn't hear about it. Now we must get Scobber and McSnort."

### CHAPTER 3.

#### Not According to Programme!

THE old menagerie ship was again in port. Barry O'Rooney hired a waterman to pull him out, only to learn from a freckled, red-headed boy of about thirteen, who was smoking a black clay pipe with great enjoyment, that Captain Scobber and his engineer, Mr. McSnort, were ashore. Knowing the habits of the skipper and McSnort, Barry O'Rooney guessed that they were taking their ease and some refreshment at the sign of the Sailors' Welcome, a little hostelry at the back of the docks.

And there Barry O'Rooney found them, Captain Scobber with his abundant whiskers more vigorous than ever, and Mr. McSnort looking as if he had just dipped his head in a bucket of bright red paint. And the greeting was a cordial one. Barry O'Rooney was introduced to Mr. Carker, landlord of the Sailors' Welcome, and he was glad when Mr. Carker went off to attend to his business.

"And now, bedad," said Barry O'Rooney, "ould Prout, Maddock, and mysilf want you two bould bhoyos to do us a good turn."

"Get on with it, mate—get it off your chest, son!" growled Captain Scobber through a tangle of whiskers.

Barry got it off his chest, and the skipper and Mr. McSnort exchanged doubtful glances.

"Bedad, ut's as aisy as aisy!" said Barry. "Being here and knowing the landlord makes it aisyer. When he foinds out ut's you—a couple of his ould friends—he won't moind a rap. Only give him a good fade, for av he gets the grub he won't care where he ates ut. We'll foind the money for that—plenty of money. We'd do the same for you any toime to kape you from having a jolly evening spoilt entirely. We've got to be aboard at ten o'clock sharp, so the job won't last a couple of hours."

"I'm not sure as I likes it, messmate; but, after all, it's only a bit of a joke, and I've geen him play wuss on you many a time," said the skipper of the menagerie boat after some reflection. "And it's a hard thing if you can't oblige a pal. What say, McSnort?"

Mr. McSnort held out a freckled hand.

"Hoos, mon, stop yer flettering," he said, "and let Mither O'Rooney pass along the siller, and Ah'm wi' ye till the crack o' doom!"

There was a further discussion of minor details, and Barry O'Rooney returned to the yacht and the glue-pot, with a grin on his face.

"Sure, Oi've fixed ut, bhoys!" he said. "But, bedad, av we can't fix Joe Oi shall have to unfix ut, or there'll be murder done!"

The rugged faces of Prout and the bo'sun displayed great satisfaction when Barry O'Rooney described the progress he had made.

"An absolute waste of toime and cash av we can't work Joe out of ut," he added. "He's a good, quiet sort of a gossoun; but, bedad, av he loses his temper and sees red he's got a punch on him worse than a kick from a mule!"

"We've clicked, souse me!" chuckled the bo'sun. "Joe has gone with Hal Honour to look at some timber, for he's a good judge of timber. It's out Apperidge way, so he won't be back on the yacht. He's going to join the happy party at the restaurant."

"And there'll be one vacant chair, by honey!" said Prout. "You didn't forget to tell them to give the blubberbiter lots to eat?"

"Sure Oi didn't, imbecile! But Oi wish Oi'd given Scobber the money, instead of McSnort. However, ould Scobber will see the thing right. And such an aisy stunt; no boat wanted—nothing at all! Ha, ha, ha, ha! Bhoys, we deserve wan back on the blubberbiter and then some, but this will be a little bit back."

It was quite true that Gan Waga had made the three mariners feel very sorry for themselves on frequent occasions. When the Eskimo was out with Prince Ching Lung he was usually on his best behaviour, but if he happened to be out with Prout, Maddock, or Barry O'Rooney he let himself go. And, of course, the mariners were not aware of the fact that Val had arranged to give them dinner in the private room above the restaurant. If they had known that it would have saved a lot of plotting.

Then down came the rain. Ching Lung and Rupert Thurston were ashore, and Val had gone with Dave to do some shopping. Dave could not leave the yacht on which he had received so much kindness without leaving some gifts behind him. And then Gan Waga waddled into the glue-pot, where Prout, Maddock, and O'Rooney, in their nicest uniforms and with their hair tidy—except Prout's, who had none to speak of—were waiting for the time to depart.

"Hello, old dears! How I looks, hunk?" asked Gan Waga. "I not like these togs muchness, and they not comfortable. Only I want to look nices at old Val's party. Yo' think I passes in a crowds, hunk, old dears?"

"By honey, you're just lovely!" said Prout. "Isn't he fine, boys?"

"Ilignant!" said Barry O'Rooney. "Bedad, Gan, you always did look so-and-so, but ilignant is the only word to-night."

"Souse me, you're a marvel!" said the bo'sun. "They'll take you for the Duke of Shovehalpenny, Gan."

Gan Waga had put on his dress-suit, a dress-shirt with frills, a neat white tie, and a silk waistcoat. Over his arm he carried a raincoat, and in his hand an opera-hat. There was an unlighted cigar in the corner of his mouth. On his feet were patent leather boots.

"When we make a moves, Tommy? I know it abouts dinner-times, fo' I jolly emptiness insideness. When the merry old car comings, hunk?"

"Bedad, there's not going to be any car, darlint!" said Barry O'Rooney. "We're walking ut."

"Oh, I not minds!" said Gan Waga. "Only I wish yo' told me sooner I gotted to walks. Now I haves to take off my boots. I not going to spoil these butterfals boots and sockses walking through the rain. They a lot too goodness fo' that."

The three mariners breathed heavily as Gan Waga proceeded to remove his patent leathers and silk socks. He pushed the boots and socks into the pockets of his raincoat, and turned up the bottoms of his dress-trousers. Then he flicked open the hat and donned it.

Barry O'Rooney uttered a stifled groan.

"Troth, Oi'm a careful man myself, Gan," he said, "and Oi know the value of a good pair of boots; but Oi warnn you, bhoys, that av you walk into Porthampton in those swagger togs and widout boots and socks throught the rain, the police will have you for a wandhering lunatic. You'll be in Porthampton Asylum as sure as a gun, and they'll never let you out, for they'll never see your point of view."

"What yo' means my point of views, old chewing-gums!"

Barry O'Rooney shook his head hopelessly.

"Oi dunno," he said, "and Oi'd not loike the job of explaining ut to the magistrate in the morning, bhoys, not me. Rain does not rot boots, and ut's wise of you—Sure, Oi give ut up! Out of friendly curiosity, oily wan, will you tell me and Tom and Ben when and where you intend to resume your foot-stuff?"

"Not till I gets into the merry old restaurants, of courses," said Gan Waga.

If Barry O'Rooney, Prout, and the bo'sun had felt any quaint prickings of conscience, the Eskimo's last remark cured them. In spite of the rain, the High Street, with its brilliant electric lights, would be crowded. And they were pretty certain that, being dressed to kill, Gan Waga would not put on his rain-coat. To have to walk up the High Street in the company of a bare-footed Eskimo in evening-dress and a crush opera-hat, carrying a rain-coat when it was raining, and be with him when he entered the restaurant, was a little too much.

And then an alarming thought came into Mr. Benjamin Maddocks' mind, and he winked furiously at Prout and O'Rooney.

"Phwat is ut?" whispered O'Rooney.

"What is it, souse me?" grunted Maddock. "He's got to put his boots on, or I don't move an inch. He can't run in them tight things, but in his bare feet he'll slither along after us quicker than we can go ourselves."

After a good deal of argument they persuaded Gan Waga to put on his boots. Gan liked their looks, they were so dazlingly shiny, but he hated their feel. Then the conspirators donned their great coats and yachting-caps and went on deck. The electric lights along the dockside were doing their best to shine through the falling rain, but in the narrow streets beyond there were only gas-lamps, and these were few and far between.

"Get ready, bhoys!" said Barry O'Rooney in a low voice. "We're nearly there. When Oi cough, sprint round to the right like mad."

They had purposely been walking quickly, and Gan Waga, suffering from tight boots, short legs, and a good deal of weight, had dropped a little behind.

"For the sake of Moike, Gan, get a move on, or we shall lose you!" cried Barry O'Rooney. "We're late now, so we're hopping it."

Then Prout, Maddock, and O'Rooney broke into a run. As they whisked to the right two people pounced out of the shadows. Both were masked, and from under the mask of the bigger of the two assassins fell a tangle of whiskers nearly as spiky as an old gorse bush. Gan Waga had not even a chance to squeal. Two sinewy arms closed round him from behind, locking his own arms, and a sack was dropped over his head. He kicked out, but his ankles were seized, and a heavy hand pressed down on the sack where the Eskimo's mouth was.

Very much more astonished than alarmed, he found himself lifted and borne away. The distance could not have been very great, for he was quickly set upon his legs again, and the sack was whisked off amid sounds of laughter. Gan Waga blinked his eyes, and recognised Captain Scobber and Mr. Alexander McSnort. Both these gentlemen were bending forward with their hands on their knees, and laughing heartily.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha!" laughed Captain Scobber, his whiskers quivering. "How are you, Gan, old messmate? Fancy that! We took you for the gorilla we'd lost and was watching out for. We're gladder than if it was our gorilla, ain't we, McSnort?"

"Hoch-aye," grinned the engineer. "And that's a compliment, for he's a fine gorilla, and worth stacks of guid money. Whaur are ye gangin, mon, for Ah see ye've got yer glad-rags on? Losh, but ye look grand! Whaur are ye gangin, and who's wi' ye?"

Gan Waga blinked harder still. He was in a cosy little room where a fire was burning. Evidently it had only

recently been lighted, for the poker had been left in it. Vague suspicions began to stir in the Eskimo's mind.

"I say, yo' nots see Prouts and Maddocks and O'Roonneys?" he asked. "Where they hopped to, bunk? We goings to a dinners at the Anchor's Restyongs."

"I don't know anything about restyongs, mess-mate," said Captain Scobber, patting Gan Waga on the shoulder. "but now we've got you, we don't mean to lose you. Never mind about the other crush. Let 'em go to their restyongs. We apologise for mistaking you for a gorilla, old mess-mate, but you must blame the rain and dark for that. You're going to be our guest of honour. How about that lot, my lad?"

Captain Scobber pointed to a sideboard on which stood, in tempting array, a dish of oysters, a veal-and-ham pie, a leg of roast pork, a variety of tarts and small cakes, and several bottles of pickles and sauces, so fresh from the shop that they had not been opened. The door was shut, and McSnort was sitting in a chair very close to it.

"There no silly old gorillas abouts this," thought the Eskimo, who was more shrewd than some people thought him to be. "This a merriness trap, and I got caught. They nots wants me at Val's dinner, and I gotted caughts properness."

"How about starting on the oysters, Gan?" asked Captain Scobber.

"Nothing nicerer, old ducks," said Gan Waga, beaming. "I just as soon have dinners with yo', and I hungry as an old shark."

Gan Waga whisked out a pocket-knife, and quite astonished Mr. McSnort and Captain Scobber with his dexterity in opening oysters and putting them away. Then he attacked the veal-and-ham pie, and after that the roast pork, which he ate with jam tarts and pickled walnuts.

"Thanks, awfulness, old dears!" he said. "I enjoys that, and now I have a smokes."

Gan put a cigar in his mouth, tore a slip of paper from the label of a pickle bottle, and stooped to light it at the fire. Then he whipped out the poker, now red-hot, and pointed that rather nasty weapon at the astonished skipper and his engineer.

"Keep off, old dears," he grinned, "or p'r'aps yo' get yo' whiskers singed. Ho, ho, hoo! I like yo' dinners, but I rumbled yo'. Now I going to the Anchors to say a word-ies about it to Prouts, Maddocks, and O'Roonneys. Good-night, sweethearts!"

Still retaining the red-hot poker, Gan Waga secured his hat and coat and backed out of the door. Captain Scobber, his eyes bulging and his whiskers bristling, rose as if to follow, but McSnort waved him back.

"Ah'm no afther a prod from a red-hot poker, mon, and we've done our best," he said. "The chiel was too canny for us a' the time, and was just wolfing our provocations and pulling our legs. There's still ten shillings o' their sillar left, so we'll gang into the bar and spend it, Scobber, like wise men, for they might ask for it back."

On his way out Gan Waga nearly fell over a pail. Seeing that he was not pursued, he borrowed the pail and left the poker. Next, he waddled into a grocer's shop, and surprised the assistant there by ordering two dozen eggs. These he put into the bucket. Then, draping the rain-coat over the pail to hide it, knowing that a man in evening-dress, carrying a pail, would attract attention, he made his way to the High Street.

The man in livery whisked open the door and touched his hat.

"Hallo, Ching! There's Gan Waga!" said Rupert Thurston.

The band was playing. Gan Waga's quick eyes searched the crowded restaurant. He saw the prince and Rupert Thurston, but not the gentlemen he was looking for. Gan Waga went up the staircase at a waddling run and burst into the private room.

"Yo' pigses!" he yelled. "How yo' likes that, bunk?"

Gan Waga opened fire with the eggs, and Maddock got the first one full in the ear. A second took Mr. Barry O'Roonney on the chin, and a third flattened itself out above Prout's left eye. Then they took cover under the table, and Gan Waga, finding eggs of little use, was going after them with a couple of siphons of soda-water, when Ching Lung appeared on the scene, dragged him out by the heels, and made the peace.

And then Gan Waga had another dinner.

Next day Ching Lung drove Val and Dave up to London, and there the two youngsters parted with hearty good wishes, Val to his Midland home, and Dave to his ancestral castle in the Welsh hills.

THE END.

(Now you can look forward to the start of our magnificent serial—"The Scarlet Streak!"—featuring the Death Ray, which will appear in next week's GEM. Make sure of your copy, boys.)

## GOOD WEEK-END READING!

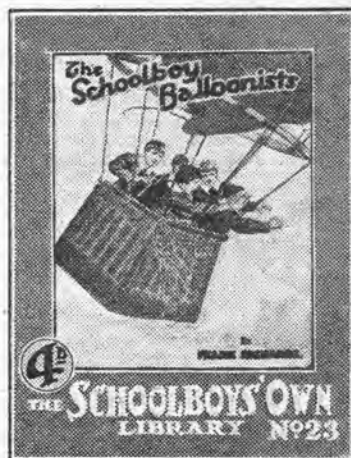
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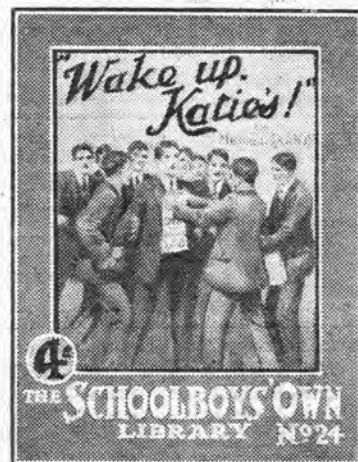
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# APRIL FOOLS ALL!

(Continued from page 21.)

Tom was turning away, but Figgins yelled after him frantically.

"Yes, we'll make it pax, you awful rotters!" he bowed.

"Let us out of this for goodness' sake!"

"Sure you won't try any monkey tricks?"

"Yes, no! No, we'll make it pax!"

"That's good enough, then!" grinned Tom Merry. "Open the door and let the little fellows come out, chaps."

"Yaas, wathah!" chuckled Arthur Augustus.

And next moment Blake and Arthur Augustus had dragged open the door. As they did so Figgins & Co. staggered out, almost speechless with wrath.

They glared ferociously at their triumphant rivals, but they did not attempt to attack them. Figgins' word was his bond.

"Oh, you—you rotters!" gasped Figgins. "What have you been up to while we've been in that awful hole? We know you've been up to something."

"Yes, out with it, you awful rotters!" gasped Kerr.

Tom Merry touched the packed cushion slung over his shoulder.

"We happened to be rather short of grub, so we borrowed a few trifles from your study, Riggy," he remarked candidly. "I'm sure you won't mind that. The fortunes of war, you know."

"Oh, you grub-raiding cads!" wailed Fatty Wynn. "My plum-cake! Have you got my plum-cake?"

"Trot over and see," suggested Tom Merry airily. "We really must be going home to tea now, as we're frightfully hungry. Sorry we can't ask you fellows—we're rather particular, you know."

And with that Tom turned on his heel, and his chums followed him, roaring with laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgy stared after them, his face a picture of helplessness.

emotion. That roar of laughter had increased his apprehension. He knew only too well that the School House juniors had been up to something, else why had they donned the disguises and gone off as they had done? He could not believe that his rivals had known what they had intended doing, yet he was filled with growing apprehension for all that.

"Oh, my hat!" he groined dispiritedly. "Come on, you fellows, let's go and see what the rotters have been up to."

And he dashed away, followed by his equally apprehensive chums. Jack Blake looked round and saw them go.

"Gone to see what we've been up to," he chuckled. "I'd like to see their faces when they find out, but perhaps it would be wiser for us not to be on the spot. It might be rather embarrassing, you know."

"Ha, ha! Just a trifle," agreed Tom Merry. "I think we'll have our spread to celebrate this victory behind locked doors."

And his chums showed their approval of the wise suggestion by another roar of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins & Co. were scarcely seen that evening by any School House fellows. Perhaps they were too busy searching for their furniture and household effects to visit the School House. At all events they were not seen by Tom Merry & Co. But Baggy Trimble claimed to have seen them staggering into the New House at dusk with bulky bundles on their backs, and from this fact Tom Merry & Co. concluded that they had succeeded in their search.

All St. Jim's heard the story before bed-time that night, and April the First ended amidst great rejoicing and mirth in the School House, whatever it did in the New House. But all agreed that School House had come out of the day very much on top, though they had certainly started the day badly. It was a sad ending to the great day for Figgins & Co., however, and they had good reason to remember for a long time that memorable April the First at St. Jim's. Tom Merry & Co. saw to that!

THE END.

(One good laugh deserves another, so look out for next week's mirth-provoking story of Tom Merry & Co., entitled: "TRIMBLE THE TRICKSTER!" By Martin Clifford. This is a real corker, chums—so don't miss it!)

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