

CRANKLEY BY NAME AND CRANKY BY NATURE!

(Meet this amazing character in the extra-long school story inside.)

EVERY WEDNESDAY.

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CRICKET—OR THIS?

THE SLACKERS WISHED THEY'D SAID "CRICKET!"
(An unusual spectacle at St. Jim's! Read this week's
topping school story:—"ST. JIM'S IN A QUANDARY!"
—inside.)

THE LIKEABLE FADDIST! Although it is agreed on all sides that Dr. Crankley, the temporary Headmaster, is a good sort, that doesn't alter the fact that his weird and wonderful reforms are distinctly unpopular! But how to abolish these unpopular reforms is a question that sorely worries Tom Merry & Co.

ST. JIM'S IN A QUANDARY!



A Grand New Long Complete Story of Tom Merry & Co., the Chums of St. Jim's, dealing with their adventures and misadventures under the faddist rule of Dr. Crankley.

By Martin Clifford.

CHAPTER 1. Very Alarming!

THUMP!

It was a thump that fairly shook the floor of the Fourth Form-room at St. Jim's.

"What—what—"

"Great Scott! What—"

"Bai Jove! It's Trimble!"

It was Trimble! Baggy Trimble, the fattest and laziest and greediest member of the Fourth, lay quiet on the floor of the Form-room. Apparently he had fallen from his desk. At all events, there he lay, like a fat whale in Etons, on the floor of the Form-room.

It was most alarming.

Fellows near left their seats and rushed to him; fellows farther away jumped on their forms or craned their heads for a sight of the unusual happening.

Little, kindly Mr. Lathom came rustling away from the blackboard towards the spot, his face full of alarm.

"What—what— Bless my soul! It is Trimble! Trimble, what ever is the matter, my boy?"

Trimble did not reply—he did not even open his eyes. He lay still, with a very white face.

Mr. Lathom was seriously alarmed now. Very few of the members of the Fourth were, however. Some of them were even grinning.

They had been quite startled at first—quite alarmed. But on discovering it was Trimble, their alarm had given way to suspicion, and their alarmed looks had changed to knowing grins.

They knew their Trimble of old! He was shifty and very tricky, and he had been known to sham illness more than once in the past in order, either to escape lessons, or to carry out some questionable and nefarious scheme while the rest of the Form were at lessons and he wasn't!

"My hat!" mumbled Blake.

He happened to be the first to reach Baggy Trimble, and he stooped over him rather anxiously. His anxiety fled, however, as a nearer inspection showed him that Trimble's pallor was caused by a liberal application of flour rubbed on his fat face.

"You—you fat spoofer!" breathed Blake. "Get up, you awful ass!"

Groan!

If Trimble was spoofing—and Blake did not doubt it now—he was evidently determined to keep it up.

"The boy is really ill!" exclaimed Mr. Lathom, raising

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Trimble's head gently. "Trimble—my dear boy! You are ill. What—what—"

He glanced about him in no little distress. Nobody else looked distressed. Unlike his Form, little Mr. Lathom did not possess very good eyesight—an unfortunate failing for him, but very fortunate for his Form at times. He quite failed to see that Trimble's ghastly face was not caused by illness.

Blake was still stooping over Trimble. Blake did not like Trimble, and he did not approve of malingering at all. As Mr. Lathom glanced about him, Blake took a firm grip of Trimble's flabby arm and gave it a pinch.

"Yaroooooh!"

It was not a gentle pinch, and Trimble's howl of genuine pain this time rang through the Form-room. It made Mr. Lathom fairly jump.

"Good—good gracious! Trimble—"

"Yow! Some beast pinched me!" yelled Trimble, glaring about him. "Some rotter—Yow! Grooooooh!"

Remembering his sad state of illness, the fat junior ceased his yelling, and groaned instead.

"This is most distressing!" murmured Mr. Lathom. "The foolish boy has evidently been over-eating—gorging himself on indigestible pastries."

"I haven't, sir!" said Trimble, with more sorrow than indignation. "It isn't that that's caused it at all. It's being starved—forced to eat rotten grub that isn't fit for starving cats!"

"Trimble!"

"I don't care!" exclaimed Baggy, his voice rising in his indignation. "It's this new grub and these rotten food restrictions that's brought me to this. I knew it was bringing me down fast. I'm half-starved, and weak from lack of nourishing food."

"Wha-a-at!"

"My con-constitution won't stand it any longer!" continued Trimble. "This—this is the third time I've fainted this morning. I've suffered in silence through these past few awful days, but I've reached the limit of my endurance! Flesh and blood won't stand it any longer, sir!"

"Bless my soul!"

"As for over-eating and pastries and all that," said Trimble, with bitter indignation, "who gets the chance to over-eat at this school since the new Head started this food reform? Who gets the chance to eat any pastries? Tuckshop closed; village tuckshops out of bounds; study teas stopped; and the only grub we get is rotten, hygienic stuff. It's awful! And now you see what it's all brought me to. Grooooooh!"

And Trimble groaned—a deep, heartrending groan.

The Fourth Form master stared at him like one transfixed. Trimble's amazing outburst had left him dumbfounded. The rest of the Fourth Form also stared at Trimble. They were likewise dumbfounded. What Trimble had so indignantly stated was true enough—at least, it was true that the tuckshop was closed, that the village tuckshop had been placed out of bounds, and that study teas were a thing of the past; moreover, it was only too true that the ordinary diet had been replaced by quack foods. The old beef and Yorkshire pudding was a thing of the past, replaced by a strictly vegetable and more "hygienic" diet.

At every meal it was the same; all the ordinary articles of diet had been replaced by "patent" foods of weird appearance and still weirder taste. Dr. Crankley, the new Head of St. Jim's, who was in charge of the school while Dr. Holmes was taking a health holiday, had introduced the reforms, and he had claimed that the new diet was far more healthy and nourishing than the old. Of that the fellows knew nothing—and, it is feared—cared nothing. They only knew that the new diet was scanty and distasteful, and since its introduction the whole school had been seething with discontent.

So that the Fourth could, and did, sympathise with Trimble now in his outburst. They agreed with all Trimble had stated. Yet they were amazed that the fat and fatuous Trimble, of all fellows, should dare to make such an outburst to a master. It was only too clear that Baggy Trimble had reached the limit of his endurance—as he put it himself.

"Trimble!" stuttered Mr. Lathom, getting his breath back at last. "How dare you, boy—how dare you refer in such terms to the food supplied at this school! And how dare you speak to me, your Form master, in such terms!"

"I can't help it, sir!" groaned Trimble. "I've reached the end of my tether! I'm starving—growing weaker and weaker every day! I sha'n't last much longer at this rate!"

"Nonsense!" snapped Mr. Lathom. "A reduction in diet would be very much to your advantage, Trimble. Yes, indeed! I am well aware that the new diet has not met with general approval. None the less, it is, I believe, scientifically sound, and supplies ample nourishment without any attendant poisons and—ahem—toxins."

Trimble gave vent to something between a snort and a groan.

"It's rotten grub, all the same, sir!" he mumbled. "All the fellows think the same. And now this is the result," added Trimble, with bitter indignation. "I'm suffering from general weakness and debility—can scarcely keep an eyelid open, much less sit and grind Latin. I'm gradually sinking away—"

"Be silent, you stupid boy!" said Mr. Lathom impatiently. "And do not be so utterly absurd! You are merely suffering from your disgusting habits of gluttony, Trimble, and from lack of exercise. If you are not up to Form work, however, you may go and lie down for an hour or so. You may return to the Form-room when you feel better."

"What hopes!" murmured Blake.

Groan!

Trimble staggered to his feet, giving vent to a heartrending groan as he did so. His eyes were glimmering at the success of his little "dodge"; but he knew better than to drop his artistic touches until he was well out of the room.

"Oh, thank you, sir!" he said, with a pathetic sniff. "I knew I should get sympathy from you, sir."

With that, Baggy Trimble tottered towards the door. The Fourth watched him go with grins on their faces. The entertainment had made quite a nice break in the Latin lesson, and they felt quite grateful to Trimble, and they only regretted that he had not kept it going longer.

But the lesson was not fated to be resumed yet, for scarcely had Trimble vanished when a tap came at the door. It opened to reveal a short and rather plump lady, with a very kind face and gold-rimmed spectacles.

It was Mrs. Crankley, the new Head's wife, and the juniors' faces brightened as she came in. Mrs. Crankley was a lady with queer ideas, and, like Dr. Crankley, was a "faddist" of the first water. Yet, though their reforms in diet and other matters were far from being popular, the school as a whole could not help liking the old couple.

Their earnestness and their kindly interest in the health and comfort and general well-being of the St. Jim's fellows was so obviously well-intentioned and sincere, that though smarting and chafing under the unpopular "reforms," the victims of them could not bring themselves to look upon the reformers as tyrants.

Mrs. Crankley was exceptionally kind-hearted, and none of the decent fellows would have said or done anything to hurt her feelings for the world. Moreover, her entry into a Form-room usually meant a nice little rest from lessons!

So now the Fourth brightened up, and smiled as she entered.

Mr. Lathom, however, did not smile. He frowned. Unlike his pupils, he did not like interruptions. Mrs. Holmes had scarcely ever been known to "butt into" a Form-room; but Mrs. Crankley, the new Head's wife, was always "butting in." Doubtless she meant well; but that did not make her frequent visits of inspection any the more welcome.

So now, while the juniors brightened up, Mr. Lathom frowned his annoyance.

Mrs. Crankley did not seem to notice it. She smiled round at the Form, and, laying a brown-paper parcel on the desk, she started to unwrap it, revealing at length a small cardboard box.

"Pray excuse this intrusion, Mr. Lathom," she smiled, touching the rim of her spectacles with a forefinger. "May I take up a few moments of your time this morning?"

"Very well, madam!" said Mr. Lathom, trying not to show his exasperation. "You may resume your seats, boys."

The juniors, who had risen to their feet on the entrance of the Head's wife, sat down again with a shuffling of feet.

Mrs. Crankley took the lid off the box.

"You will remember, Mr. Lathom, that a week ago I announced my intention of offering a prize every week to the boy in each Form who had earned the highest marks for good conduct and progress in class?" she said, beaming round at the Form.

Mr. Lathom nodded, and his frown gave place to a rather forced smile.

"I do remember, Mrs. Crankley," he said. "Your kind offer to present a prize to the boy who earns the highest marks each week is an excellent idea, and will be much appreciated by the boys and myself. I have kept a careful note, and the boy who has earned the honour this week is Blake. Blake, will you kindly step out in front of the class?"

Blake stepped out, blushing furiously.

Mrs. Crankley took up the box with one hand and patted Blake kindly on the shoulder with the other.

"Good boy!" she said approvingly. "I trust your good example will be followed by the rest of the little boys here. Here is your prize—please hold it up so that the rest of your schoolfellows can see it, and, I hope, be encouraged to attempt to win another prize like it."

Blake took the box. He almost collapsed in sheer horror as he saw what was inside it. The box contained a small tin clockwork train, a tin tender, and a couple of tin carriages with sections of tin rails to match!

"Hold it up, Blake!" remarked Mr. Lathom, smiling.

"What—Oh! It is a box of—ahem—trains, I see!"

Blake held up the box so that the Form could see it—he could do nothing less. There was a gasp. Somebody—it sounded like Mellish—laughed aloud. Several others chuckled quietly; the remainder almost choked in their manifold efforts to stifle a howl of laughter.

Blake's face was scarlet. From the bottom of his heart he wished he had not been the best boy in the Form that week. He had certainly earned the prize; but he realised now that he had also earned weeks of endless chipping.

For a "man" in the Fourth to be presented with a box of trains was humorous, to say the least of it. It would certainly strike the rest of the school as humorous.

Yet, not for worlds would Blake have allowed the kindly Mrs. Crankley to see his utter dismay. He also realised that his best plan in the sad circumstances was to take it smiling. He pulled himself together and smiled cheerily.

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Crankley!" he said quite cheerfully. "It's a top-hole present, and I know I'll get heaps of fun out of it. May I try it so that the fellows can see how it works, sir?" he added, turning to his Form master.

"Bless my soul!" gasped Mr. Lathom. "Blake, how—"

"That is an excellent suggestion!" chimed in Mrs. Crankley brightly. "I am sure Mr. Lathom will be very pleased to agree, my dear boy!"

"Thank you, ma'am!" murmured Blake; and, without waiting for the almost flabbergasted master's approval, he hurriedly took out the contents of the box and began to fix the rails. That done, Blake proceeded to wind the clockwork spring.

Then he fixed the "rolling-stock" together, watched by the staring Mr. Lathom and the grinning juniors of the Fourth, some of whom left their seats in order to see better.

There was a breathless silence as Blake started off his train on its circular trip. There was a series of hilarious chuckles as the engine left the rails half-way round and crashed over.

"Ah! A train-smash!" laughed Mrs. Crankley. "Try again, my dear boy."

"Certainly, ma'am!"

Blake tried again. Even playing with a clockwork train was to be preferred to Latin any time! Blake felt that instead of chipping him the Form ought to give him a vote of thanks for the entertainment. The second time the trip was a huge success, and as the engine rattled to a stop at last the juniors gave vent to a cheer.

"Hurrah!"

"Silence!" articulated Mr. Lathom, getting back speech then. "Blake, that will do! Really, madam, I trust that will do, so that we can now proceed with lessons. Blake—ahem!—kindly put away that toy now!"

"Oh, certainly, sir."

There was an imperious note in Mr. Lathom's voice that stopped Blake from asking for another "trial."

"An excellent little toy!" said Mrs. Crankley, beaming upon the grinning Form. "Thank you so much for allowing the boys to see it work, Mr. Lathom. I am sure it will be a great encouragement to them to do their best during the coming week. I must now hurry away to present my prize to the Third Form."

And with a smiling nod to Mr. Lathom the Head's wife sailed out of the room.

"Shall I take my puff-puff to my study, sir?" asked Blake meekly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Somebody chuckled, and the next moment the Form was howling with laughter. Mr. Lathom's usually good-tempered face went pink with wrath.

"Silence!" he thundered. "This—this is too much! Every boy in this room will take fifty lines! Blake, you will take one hundred for studied impertinence! Place that—that toy on my desk and go to your place this instant!"

"Oh, yes, sir!"

Blake laid the box of trains on the master's desk and went to his desk. The rest of the juniors subsided into their places.

"There has been quite enough time wasted!" snapped Mr. Lathom in a grinding voice. "The next boy who speaks or laughs will have his imposition doubled! We will now proceed with the lesson!"

After that nobody did speak or laugh; they did not want their imposition doubled.

CHAPTER 2.

Grub!

"HE, he, he!"

That unmusical cachinnation came from Baggy Trimble the moment the door of the Fourth Form-room had closed behind him.

Considering the fact that only a moment before the fat youth had been emitting the most appalling and agonising groans, this was surprising to say the least of it.

But there was no sign whatever of illness in Baggy Trimble's podgy features now. He seemed to be suffering only from an excessive supply of suppressed glee.

The fact of the matter was, as Blake had quickly suspected, the crafty fat youth had been "spoofing."

"He, he, he!" he chuckled. "Old Lathom's soft—soft as they make 'em! Fancy being taken in by a bit of flour rubbed on a chap's chivy! Catch me going back to the Form-room this morning, anyway! And now for those giddy biscuits!"

With that Baggy Trimble rolled away cheerfully towards the Fourth Form studies. From his mumbled remarks it was very clear that to escape lessons was not the only reason for the fat youth's little "spoof."

This fact became clearer still as Trimble stopped before the door of Study No. 6 and entered, closing the door carefully behind him. That study was the home of Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy, and Trimble had no right there at all.

"Here we are!" murmured the fat junior, blinking quickly about the room. "I distinctly heard Herries saying he was expecting a box of biscuits, and I spotted old Taggles carting a box up here last night. It must be—Oh, good!"

Baggy's sharp eyes alighted on a tin box on the floor by the bookshelves, and he went to it and carried it to the table.

"Fancy those asses leaving the thing there for anyone to see!" he mumbled. "Silly asses! Serves 'em right to lose the lot! My hat! It's heavier than I expected."

The box was certainly fairly heavy. On the outside were stencilled words—some of them worn away—but Trimble made out the word biscuits easily. Moreover, there was a card tacked to the lid with the printed warning, "keep these biscuits in a cool, dry place."

"Oh, the awful rotters!" breathed Trimble, his eyes gleaming greedily. "There's more than biscuits in here. I bet

Herries has written home complaining about the grub, and his people have had this sent on to him—a blessed tuck-box! Breaking rules like this after the Head saying no grub was to be allowed from home or anywhere! This lot ought to be con-confiscated—that's the word! I'll confiscate it to teach the rotters a lesson!"

And feeling quite virtuous at the thought, Baggy Trimble picked up a pocket-knife that happened to be lying on the table. It was D'Arcy's knife—quite a neat little pearl-handled affair. After cutting the cord round the box, Trimble tried to prise open the lid with the big blade. It snapped off short, and Trimble tried with the small blade. That also snapped off short.

But Trimble wasn't disheartened. The knife was not his property, so it scarcely mattered. He threw it into the fender—or what was left of it—and tried with the poker.

A part of the lid suddenly splintered and flew up, catching Trimble rather a nasty jab on his podgy nose.

"Yooop!"

Despite himself, a sharp yelp escaped the fat youth—a yelp that reached the ears of somebody who just happened to be passing the study door at that identical moment.

Trimble heard the footsteps suddenly stop, but before he could think of hiding the door was flung open and a senior entered.

It was Gerald Knox of the Sixth, and a prefect!

He glared at Baggy Trimble in amazement, and Trimble blinked at him in great alarm. Knox was the most officious and disliked senior in all St. Jim's, and Trimble realised that he was "for it."

"Oh!" said Knox, eyeing Trimble as a cat might eye a mouse. "What are you doing out of your Form-room, Trimble?"

"It—it's all right, Knox," said Trimble hopefully. "You—see, I was taken ill in class—fainted, you know—and Lathom gave me leave to lie down for an hour or so."

"Oh, did he?" said Knox, grinning unpleasantly. "I don't see much of the lying down, but you're certainly lying, Trimble! What—Oh, I see!"

What Knox's hawk-like eyes had seen was the word "Biscuits" stencilled on the box. All things became clear to the prefect then.

He stepped to the table and looked at the label. Then he pulled out some straw at the top of the box. Underneath were some white cardboard cartons containing biscuits.

"So this is it!" said Knox, in a grinding voice.

"Biscuits—what? Grub-raiding as usual!"

"Nunno! You—you see—"

"Whose box is it?" demanded Knox harshly. "I know it isn't likely to be yours, Trimble. Does it belong to Blake?"

Without waiting for Trimble's answer, Knox read the label tied to the box. On it was the name of George Herries.

"Herries!" he said briefly. "Right, Trimble! I expect Blake and the other two are in it, though, as well as Herries. They know perfectly well it's against the rules. I shall report this to Mr. Railton at morning break. You cut off, you fat thief!"

"Oh, really, Knox!" mumbled Trimble, casting longing eyes at the box. "I—I say, I've got an idea. I know you Sixth Form chaps like the new grub no better than we do. I bet you must be pining for a decent feed like me, Knox. Why not keep mum about it, and you and me can share and share—Yow! Yooop! Here, wharrer you doing? Oh, crumbs!"

Crash!

With a strong grip on his ear, Baggy Trimble was rushed to the door, and Knox's boot lifted him through the doorway. It was quite clear that Trimble's idea did not appeal to the Sixth-Former.

Knox returned to the study and soon forgot Trimble's existence. Trimble was not Knox's "game." He was not, in the prefect's view, worth the trouble of reporting.

But Blake & Co. were. Knox was always, more or less, "up against" Blake and his chums. He saw a good chance to get those luckless juniors into serious trouble now. Dr. Crankley was determined to raise the standard of health at St. Jim's in his own way, and the rule against being in possession of foodstuffs was a very strict one.

Without troubling to examine the box further, Knox lifted it and carried it to Mr. Railton's study. He laid it on the table and went out again, smiling. Knox always did smile when he saw a chance of getting anyone into trouble. Then Knox went along to the Sixth Form-room, whither he was bound with a message for Mr. Rateliff.

Meanwhile, Baggy Trimble had picked himself up and scuttled out of the Fourth passage, sore in mind and body. His hopes—hopes that he had fondly cherished since the previous evening—of getting a really decent feed had fallen to zero. He was almost on the verge of tears as he got his cap and rolled miserably out into the quad.

The biscuits were off—that much was quite clear! And the fact that Knox seemingly had no intention of reporting



"This is your prize," said Mrs. Crankley. "Please hold it up so that the rest of your school-fellows can see it and, I hope, be encouraged to attempt to win another prize like it." Jack Blake, his face scarlet, held up the box containing the clockwork train, so that the rest of the Form could see it. (See Chapter 1.)

him was of little comfort to Baggy Trimble just then. As he had stated in the Form-room, Trimble was actually at the end of his tether—or he believed he was. He was hungry—famished, in fact! It was a sort of hunger that had been growing and intensifying for days and days, and Trimble was really getting desperate.

"Oh, the awful beast!" he groaned, jamming on his cap. "It's no good trying any study cupboards now! Fellows aren't allowed to stock grub, and they're all empty! I've already made sure of that! It's too awful for words! I shall write home and ask the pater to take me away if this goes on much longer! Knox is a beast, and old Cranky's a beast—they're all beasts, in fact!"

Musing thus, Trimble reflected a moment and then he started off for the chapel. Trimble had been told to go and lie down, but had no intention of doing that. He had no intention of being anywhere for the rest of that morning where he would be likely to be found and ordered back to the Form-room. Trimble had been given leave of absence for "an hour or so," and Trimble was determined it should be an hour or two. After all, though the biscuits were beyond reach now, he had not done so badly in escaping from the Form-room. Latin and maths were worth while escaping at any time!

At the thought Trimble brightened up a little, and after a careful glance round he quickened his footsteps.

But suddenly he stopped and sniffed. He sniffed hard again, and a most agonised expression spread over his face.

There was no doubt about it. What came to his nostrils was a most delicious aroma of frying bacon and sausages.

It was wafted on the keen morning breeze from somewhere across the quad, and Trimble groaned. It was almost more than he could bear to smell it. It made his mouth water and his little eyes glisten.

Sausages and bacon! Who could be frying sausages and bacon at a school where such delicious foodstuffs were banned? The answer came suddenly to Trimble.

Taggles! That was it! Old Taggles, the porter, always had his breakfast late. Unlike the rest of the school staff, Taggles had his meals at his own expense with his good wife, Dame Taggles. Taggles was the school porter, and he lived in the old lodge by the gateway. And as he was responsible for his own food supplies, neither he nor his wife came under the school rules in regard to diet. He could eat just what he liked to buy.

And at this moment he was doubtless cooking bacon and sausages for himself and his—No. Trimble remembered suddenly that Dame Taggles had taken advantage of the school tuckshop being closed to go away for a short holiday.

Taggles would therefore be alone. And at that moment Trimble felt that he could have cheerfully brained the old porter with a poker in order to "pinch" his breakfast.

"It's no good!" groaned Trimble, sniffing again. "I can't bear it! I'll go and try to get round the old beast! He's a crusty old hunk, but if I spin him a yarn—Here goes, anyway!"

And Baggy Trimble rolled across the quad towards the lodge. The front door was closed, and the fat junior rolled round to the back.

The delicious aroma was stronger now. It brought a throb to the heart of Baggy Trimble. As Trimble came in sight of the back door it opened suddenly, and Taggles came out with a small fire-shovel in his gnarled fist. He did not see Baggy. He crossed the little yard and entered the little coal-store, apparently going for fresh coal for his kitchen fire.

As the old porter entered the dark coal-store, the wind caught the door and crashed it to behind him.

As a general rule Trimble's brain worked very slowly indeed, but just then it worked with remarkable swiftness. Scarcely had the door crashed behind the porter when Trimble made a rush for it, and as it swung slightly open again on the rebound, as it were, the fat junior sent it crashing to.

Click!

By great good luck—for Trimble—the key was in the lock, and a sudden twist sent it clicking home.

There followed a startled grunt from within the coal-shed, and from Trimble came a fat chuckle in response. The next moment the latch of the door rattled, and, finding it wouldn't open, Taggles seemed to understand.

"Ere, what—what— You young varmint! Open this 'ere door!" came in a hollow bellow from within. "I seed you, you little raskil! Open this 'ere door, blow you!"

This was quite untrue, for Taggles hadn't seen anybody. Trimble knew this quite well, and with another soft chuckle he crossed the yard and entered the warm kitchen. A bright, cheerful fire glowed in the range, and on the fire a kettle sang merrily. On the hob was a frying-pan containing bacon and several crisp sausages. On the table was a clean white tablecloth, set with a cup-and-saucer and other crockery, and a jar of marmalade, and bread-and-butter. It was clear that Taggles believed in doing himself well.

"Oh, good!" murmured Trimble. "Good old Taggy! This is a bit of luck, and no mistake! Here goes!"

And drawing a chair up to the table, Baggy Trimble got down to business with a will.

CHAPTER 3.

Not for Baggy's Ears!

"GEE-WHIZ! This is prime, and no mistake!"

Thus Baggy Trimble, as he finished the last scrap of hot sausage on his plate.

To the unmusical accompaniment of a terrific hammering on the door of the coal-store and the sound of Taggles' irate bellows, Baggy Trimble devoured his breakfast—or, rather, Taggles' breakfast—with the keenest relish. Indeed, relish was scarcely the word to describe Trimble's enjoyment of that meal. The right word was more like rapture.

It was the first really decent breakfast Trimble had had since the new food reform had been in operation, and Trimble was making the most of it.

There was plenty of delicious gravy in the frying-pan, and with plenty of bread, Baggy made the bacon and sausages go a long way.

They went very quickly, however, and then Trimble started on the bread-and-butter and marmalade. He emptied the whole pot of marmalade, and then he rose to his feet and began, like Alexander of old, to look round for fresh worlds to conquer.

He had already eaten enough for three or four ordinary fellows. But Trimble was—or had been—famished, and he felt he had plenty of room for more yet.

In the little pantry he found the remains of a cold rabbit-pie, and in a very few seconds those remains were transferred from the dish to Trimble's ample interior.

From the coal-store came sounds of thudding blows on the door—apparently Taggles was attacking the door with the coal-hammer; it certainly sounded like it to Trimble.

"Hope the old idiot doesn't break the lock!" mused Trimble, his greedy eyes roaming the pantry. "He'll have to pay for it if he does; it's school property. Hallo, what's this?"

On the lower shelves of the pantry was little that appealed to Trimble's appetite at the moment. But just above his head was another pie-dish.

Whether it held anything good to eat Trimble did not know; it certainly looked promising, and he determined to find out.

He reached up and, getting his fingers on the rim of the dish, he tipped it up, hoping to see pastry on the top. There was no pastry on the top, however. Yet there was something inside.

It happened to be treacle, and it swept over the edge of the dish and streamed down on the head and face of Baggy Trimble.

Swoooooosh!

"Gurrooooooh!" choked Baggy. "Oh, my—Grrrrroooh! Mum-mum-mum-mum!"

Why Dame Taggles should keep treacle in a pie-dish was a problem that only she could answer, possibly. But it was most unfortunate for Baggy Trimble. He staggered back, choking and gasping, streaming with the sticky, shimmering treacle.

It was certainly careless of Dame Taggles to keep treacle

in a pie-dish on a top shelf like that. Trimble thought it was criminal as he tottered out into the kitchen, gouging at his eyes with a pair of treacle fat fists.

"Grooogh! Oh crumbs! Oh dear! Grooogh! Mum-m-m-mum!"

The fat youth grabbed desperately at a table-napkin and dabbed away at his face frantically. He was just doing so when from the coal-store came one last terrific bang, and next instant Trimble jumped as he heard the door crash back, and then the clump of Taggles' boots on the cobblestones of the yard.

Taggles had broken the lock, after all—school property or no school property.

Even as Trimble grasped the fact, the irate old porter appeared suddenly in the doorway of the kitchen, his face red with wrath and his ancient whiskers fairly bristling.

"Well," he gasped, sighting Trimble—"well, you little varmint! What in thunder—'Ere, you—you've eaten my breakfast! Why, you darin' young villin!"

As he sighted the state of the table Taggles wound up his remarks with a roar of wrath, and then he charged at Baggy Trimble.

"Oh—oh crumbs!" gasped Baggy.

For a single second he awaited Taggles' furious onslaught, and then he gave a startled yelp and darted round the table. The school porter followed, bellowing.

"Ere, 'old on, you little varmint!"

But Trimble had no intention of "holding on"—Taggles was looking far too dangerous just then. He fairly flew round the table. There was a crash of breaking crockery as he caught the tablecloth, dragging most of the things to the floor. Then Trimble dived for the door and rushed out, with the irate porter in hot pursuit.

Reaching the yard, Taggles grabbed a broom and caught the unlucky junior a fearful clump on the back with it.

"Yooooooop!"

Trimble roared in dire anguish; but he did not stop running—nor did Taggles. Never a good-tempered old gentleman at any time, the ancient porter was roused to fury now.

Thump, thump, thump!

Three more thumps caught the frantically dodging Trimble, and even then Taggles wasn't satisfied by any means. Taggles was known to suffer "mortal cruel" from rheumatism; but he showed no signs of rheumatism now or old age, either. He went after Trimble like a champion on the cinder-path, making lunges and swipes at Trimble with his broom whenever opportunity presented itself.

Pursued and pursuer had passed under the ancient archway into the quad now, and Taggles' roars of wrath and Trimble's howls awakened the echoes of the quiet, green-clad square.

Naturally, with several of the Form-room windows opening on to the quadrangle, such a rumpus was scarcely likely to pass unnoticed.

It didn't. Startled faces lined the windows of the various Form-rooms, and suddenly Mr. Railton's amazed voice rang out:

"Trimble— Bless my soul! Taggles—stop at once! How dare you! Are you mad, Taggles? Stop at once, I command you!"

Taggles stopped at that. He might not have stopped for Mr. Ratcliff, or Mr. Lathom, or certain other masters; but he had a great and wholesome respect for the efficient young Housemaster of the School House. He stopped, panting and wheezing frantically from the effects of his unaccustomed exertions.

But Trimble did not stop. He had been making for the School House steps; but now he changed his direction, and, dodging round the fountain, he made a bee-line for the opposite archway which led into the Close.

There, having made quite certain the old porter was not still on his trail, Trimble stopped running.

"Ow-wow!" he panted. "Oh crikey! Oh dud-dear! Oh, I'm killed! My back's broken! Grooogh! Oh, the awful old villain! Grooooooh!"

Trimble groaned and groaned in dire dismay and anguish. He had had his breakfast, and had thoroughly enjoyed it. But he had paid dearly for it. His back was stinging from the blows of the broom; his heart was thumping like a steam-hammer from its unusual exertions; and he felt as if he had been bathing in treacle. It was down his neck and in his eyes and over his clothes, and everything seemed to be sticking to him.

Nor was that all—unfortunately. Trimble bitterly regretted his folly in making for the School House now. Mr. Railton had seen him, and doubtless he was at that very moment demanding an explanation from Taggles.

"It's no good telling Railton that the old fool was mistaken, and that it wasn't me!" groaned the fat youth miserably. "All the fellows saw me—I heard the beasts laughing even from the quad! Oh dear! What shall I do?"

It really was a problem. To return was more than Baggy dare think of—he felt certain that even Mr. Railton would not save him from the wrath of the old porter if once he fell into his hands.

Nor was it safe to stay in the Close, and so, after a moment's reflection, the fat youth rolled away dismally towards the woodshed. Then, after making sure he had been unobserved, he dived inside and closed the door after him.

He would be safe there, at all events.

Once inside, Trimble searched about until he found a piece of old sacking, and with this he started to remove some of the sticky mess of treacle from his clothes. He had already removed most of the mess from his fat features with a grubby handkerchief.

It was not an easy or pleasant job under such circumstances, and Trimble's hair, at least, looked a most weird and fearful mop when he had finished rubbing it.

But sheer exhaustion made Trimble give up at last, and then he flung away the treacle-covered sacking and sat down wearily and dismally on a bundle of faggots.

The world seemed a sad, cold, and sticky place to Baggy Trimble just then, and he was still musing bitterly on his wrongs when the sound of footsteps outside the woodshed made him clamber cautiously to his feet and look out of the little, grubby window.

Then he grunted. Approaching the old woodshed were three seniors—Cutts, St. Leger, and Gilmore of the Fifth. It was apparently morning break, and the three had come for a stroll round the chapel.

The next moment Trimble saw that they had come for something else beside a stroll. In the shade of the woodshed the three stopped, and, taking out his cigarette-case, Cutts passed it round. In a couple of seconds, with their backs against the woodshed, the three "nuts" of the Fifth were smoking and chatting cheerfully.

It was quite plain to Trimble now that Cutts & Co. were in the habit of visiting that lonely spot for a quiet smoke. And a moment later Trimble realised that Cutts & Co. were not the only bold law-breakers in that respect.

There came more footsteps, and then Gerald Knox of the Sixth appeared. Cutts & Co. had slipped their cigarettes behind them, but now as they sighted the prefect they replaced them again, and nodded to Knox.

"Here you are, old chap!" said Cutts genially. "Have a cig?"

"Thanks!"

The rascally prefect took a cigarette and lit up. Then he spoke.

"Everything fixed up, Cutts?"

"All serene!" grinned Cutts. "The grub and stuff's all safe in Pepper's Barn—heaps of it, and a nice little stock of smokes. I've had a couple of tables shoved in there, and young Racke and his pals cleaned the whole place out yesterday—at least, they've cleaned up the cobwebs and rubbish and made it tolerably tidy."

Knox grunted and frowned.

"What in thunder did you let those little sweeps into it for, Cutts?" he said grumpily. "We don't want scrubby little fags hanging about us; besides, it isn't safe."

"My dear man, it's as safe as houses," smiled Gerald Cutts. "I had my reasons for bringing Racke and his pals into the scheme. For one thing, Racke's rolling in giddy oof, and he'll be dashed useful that way. And—well, the little beasts have already proved useful, haven't they—by cleaning the place out for us. We're going to make good use of them, never fear!"

"Well, I suppose you're right!" granted Knox, blowing out a cloud of smoke. "Anyway, they won't dare to chatter about it. I must say it was a jolly good scheme of yours, Cutts. Kildare says we ought to take these new reforms quietly and make the best of it. Well, we're going to do that, aren't we?"

"Ha, ha! Yes, rather!"

"I vote we have a supper at the barn every night," said Knox, squinting down his nose reflectively. "Once a week isn't enough with this filthy grub we're having now. A whip-round every week, say, and we'll make it a special figure in the case of our young friend young Money-bags. Racke must pay for the honour of consorting with little us, what?"

There was a chuckle, and Knox smiled.

"We might even allow them to take a hand at cards with us," he mused. "I've always held the opinion that young Racke has far more cash to handle than is good for him. I think we should be doing him a real service by relieving him of some of it, what?"

"Better leave him out of the cards, Knox!" said St. Leger uneasily. "Hang it all—"

"Bosh! You're too squeamish, old bean!" grinned Cutts. "Well, it's understood we all meet there at eleven, then. I've already passed the word to the rest. Phew! Time's up!"

Cutts' eye had alighted on the chapel clock, and the three

dingy Fifth-Formers and Knox threw away their cigarettes and hurried off.

And in the woodshed, his little round eyes fairly ablaze with excitement, stood Baggy Trimble.

Every word that had passed between the four conspirators had reached his keen ears, and the conversation had filled Trimble with utter amazement and triumph.

He had heard something this time, and no mistake!

"Well!" he gasped. "Well, I'm jiggered! Fancy that! Fancy those awful cads up to a game like that! Going to have feeds on the sly—blessed banquets and card-parties! Oh, the awful rotters! And Knox a prefect. Nice prefect, I must say! Oh, the awful beasts!"

And Trimble fairly snorted in his righteous indignation. But then, as the full import of what he had heard dawned in upon his fat mind, Baggy Trimble grinned gleefully.

Racke was a wealthy fellow, and Cutts & Co. were comparatively wealthy fellows. If they were arranging secret suppers—and Trimble could not doubt it, after what he had heard—then the suppers would be feasts for the gods! And with the present unwelcome and unsatisfactory diet at St. Jim's—

"Mum-my hat!" murmured Trimble, his eyes fairly dancing. "I'm on to this! What-ho! Pepper's Barn, eh? We'll see about that! Now, I wonder—"

And Trimble seated himself on the pile of faggots again. But his features were bright and cheery now, despite the dirt and treacle upon them. All his dismal thoughts were gone, and his pains and aches had vanished. Trimble had a problem to solve, and that was how to make the most of his recently acquired knowledge—the most, that is, that would bring the greatest advantage to Baggy himself!

CHAPTER 4.

Not Guilty!

"H A, ha, ha!"

As the Fourth Form swarmed out from the Form-room after morning lessons, the passage rang with laughter.

Blake, so to speak, bore his blushing honours thick upon him. He also bore his box of trains under his arm.

"Goody little boy!" chortled Mellish. "This comes of being a goody-goody, Blake. Catch me being the best boy next week! Ha, ha, ha!"

"No chance of you being anything else but a lazy slacker and a sneaky sweep!" remarked Herries, with a chuckle. "You took it jolly well, Blake, old chap!"

"Yaas, wathah! It was weally quite an entertainment, bai Jove!"

"Yank the puff-puff out of the giddy box, and let's have some fun with it!" suggested Levison, with a chuckle.

"Hear, hear!"

"Good wheeze!" said Blake cheerfully. "Never mind the rails—we'll run it along the passage."

"Clear the line!" called Sidney Clive. "I vote—Hullo! Oh, my hat! Merry must have got a present, too."

There seemed no doubt of that. Just then the Shell swarmed from their Form-room, laughing uproariously. In their midst was Tom Merry, with a cardboard box under his arm.

Tom was blushing furiously.

"You got a prize, too, Tommy?" chuckled Blake.

"Yes—a blessed toy clockwork motor-car!" mumbled Tom. "Oh, crumbs! I never expected this!"

"Take it smiling!" grinned Blake. "Mine's a clockwork train! The old girl's a good sort; but—but I don't think I'll be top boy next week!"

"Ha, ha! No fear!"

"This comes of crawling round masters!" remarked Racke, with a sneer. "What dinky lickie prizes for the dear ickle boys!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, cheese it!" said Tom, with a rueful grin.

"That sloppy old fool makes me sick!" went on Racke. "Catch me trying for one of her silly old prizes! She's potty, and I for—Yoooop!"

Aubrey Racke staggered back with a startled yelp as Tom Merry's knuckles rapped on his nose.

"Enough of that!" snapped Tom, his blue eyes blazing.

"Say another word about Mrs. Crankley, Racke, and I'll give you a thundering good hiding. She's a jolly decent old lady, and I'm proud to have earned her approval, anyway. So put that in your pipe and smoke it, you cad!"

"Hear, hear!"

Though they saw the humour in the situation, most of the fellows fully approved of Tom's remarks. Racke moved away, hugging his nose and scowling like a fiend.

"Good for you, Tommy!" grinned Blake. "I'm having

some fun out of my prize, anyhow. What about a race along the passage between your motor and my engine?"

"Good wheeze!"

"Two to one on the puffer!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Nothing loth, Tom took his prize from the box, and, amidst a roar of laughter, the toys were wound up and started off along the passage.

The motor-car immediately ran into the wall and turned over, but the engine went full speed ahead along the passage. At that moment Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, turned the corner, and he only just avoided a collision by jumping with his legs astride.

He almost fell down as he sighted the toy train.

"Great Scott! What the thunder——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, I'm blowed!" ejaculated Kildare, staring after the rattling train. "What's this game, Merry? Is this a dashed infant school?"

"It's my prize, Kildare," said Blake innocently. "The prize for being a good boy! Don't you like it?"

"Oh!" gasped Kildare, smiling. "That's it, is it? Well, you kids have done better than I. I only got a box of lead soldiers!"

"Lead soldiers?"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Oh, crumbs!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Smith major, in the Fifth, came off best!" chuckled Kildare. "He got a pair of woollen mitts."

"And young D'Arcy, in the Third, came off worst!" remarked Cardew, strolling up just then. "I've just heard he got a pop-gun. He cut off the merry old string and hit dear old Selby on the boko with the cork. It got him five hundred lines!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's enough row, kids!" said Kildare. "This isn't the place for breaking speed records, either. Blake, take your train out of this. You and Herries, and Digby, and D'Arcy are wanted in Mr. Railton's study at once."

"Oh dear!"

"What's the trouble now?"

"You'll know soon enough," said Kildare briskly. "Sharp, now!"

In puzzled dismay, Blake took his prize to Study No. 6, and then he accompanied his study-mates to the House-master's study. What Mr. Railton wanted them for was rather a mystery; none of them could remember having broken any serious rules of late.

They soon knew, however. The first thing Herries' eyes fell upon was the box of biscuits standing on the House-master's desk.

Mr. Railton looked at the four juniors very grimly as they stood before his desk, and Knox of the Sixth treated them to a triumphant glare.

The sight of the box of biscuits amazed them all; but Knox's triumphant face filled them with apprehension. It certainly indicated trouble of some sort.

"Boys!" said Mr. Railton sternly. "Knox has brought to my notice a serious breach of rules. According to the label on this box it is your property, Herries?"

"Y-yes, sir!"

"The box contains biscuits, Herries?"

"Oh, yes, sir! Quite so, sir!" murmured Herries meekly.

"Very well!" snapped Mr. Railton. "You are aware of the new rule in regard to foodstuffs—no article of food whatever is to be brought into the school without the knowledge and approval of the authorities?"

"Oh, certainly, sir!"

"Yet you have apparently ignored that rule! Knox states that he found this box of biscuits on your study table."

"I believe it contains more than biscuits, sir," said Knox. "I believe these juniors have clubbed together to buy this box of biscuits and things in order to eat them secretly."

"Blake!" said Mr. Railton sternly. "Were you and D'Arcy and Digby aware that Herries had ordered any foodstuffs?"

"Oh, certainly, sir!" said Blake promptly. "You see——"

"Oh, quite so, sir!" admitted Digby.

"Yaas, wathah!" agreed Arthur Augustus, smiling at Knox.

"You have dared to defy your headmaster!" thundered Mr. Railton. "And, in addition to that, you stand before me and admit your fault without the slightest regret. Very well; you will be punished most severely, and these biscuits will, of course, be confiscated."

"Oh, really, sir!" protested Herries mildly. "That's rather hard lines on old Towser!"

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,002.

"On—on whatter?"

"On Towser, sir!"

"Towser?" stuttered Mr. Railton.

"Yes, sir. We knew the rule, of course, sir. But old Towser didn't. And, in any case, he wouldn't understand if he was told. It would be hard lines on him to lose his grub, sir."

"Herries——"

"You see, sir," said Herries innocently. "these are dog-biscuits. I ordered them a week ago for Towser, my pet bull-dog. Knox is quite mistaken in thinking that I bought them for us to eat."

"Bless my soul!"

Mr. Railton went pink. Knox looked as if he longed for the floor to open and swallow him up. The four juniors looked very meek, although they were inwardly enjoying the joke.

"Bless my soul!" repeated Mr. Railton faintly. "Then—then—the contents of this—this box are merely dog-biscuits, Herries?"

"Yes, sir!" assented Herries cheerfully. "They're patent biscuits from a London firm. Those you buy in Wayland are no good; Towser won't look at 'em, you see, sir! But he likes these! Ahem! Perhaps Knox would like to see them, to make quite sure!"

And, stepping forward, Herries tugged at the loose piece of broken lid, and, after a bit of tugging, dragged out one of the cartons. He opened it, and drew out a biscuit—undoubtedly a dog-biscuit. In fact, the cartons themselves bore the words: "Bratt's Patent Dog Biscuits."

The officious and over-zealous prefect's face was a study.

Had he only taken the trouble to look properly he would soon have seen what the biscuits were, and thus saved himself this humiliation.

"They—they are undoubtedly dog-biscuits!" snapped Mr. Railton, turning a decidedly wrathful glare upon the blushing Knox. "This—this is utterly absurd! You have been very careless and impulsive indeed, Knox! You should have made quite certain of your case before bothering me like this. I am surprised at your carelessness!"

"I—I——" stammered Knox, in hopeless confusion.

"That will do!" snapped Mr. Railton. "This farce has gone far enough! In future I trust you will make quite certain of your facts before wasting my time in this ridiculous manner! Herries!"

"Yes, sir!" said Herries gravely.

"I suspect that you could have shortened this useless interview much earlier had you chosen!" snapped Mr. Railton. "Your innocent expressions do not deceive me for one moment."

"Oh, sir!"

"In the circumstances I cannot punish you, however! Kindly take your box away with you."

"Yes, sir."

The Housemaster nodded towards the door grimly, and Herries grabbed his box of dog-biscuits and led his chums out. But once outside the closed door of the study the grave faces of the juniors relaxed. They spluttered and choked with long-suppressed mirth.

"Oh, great pip!" choked Blake, stuffing his handkerchief into his mouth. "What a—what a scream! What price Knox? I bet he gets it hotter from Railton now they're alone!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

They were well away from the study now, and the four doubled up and howled with laughter.

"Poor old Knoxy-woxy!" chortled Blake. "Got it in the neck fairly that time! He takes the giddy biscuit for putting his hoof into it every time! Come on, let's go and tell the fellows!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

And Blake & Co. went gleefully to "tell the fellows." If Gerald Knox wasn't the laughing-stock of St. Jim's before noon, it would certainly not be their fault!

CHAPTER 5.

Interesting News!

"BLAKE!"

"Yes, Kildare?"

Blake & Co., with Tom Merry, Lowther, and Manners were strolling in the quad just before dinner when Kildare called to Blake. Blake answered cheerily.

Kildare crossed to the juniors. He was looking exceedingly exasperated.

"You kids seen anything of that fat young rascal Trimble?" he demanded.

Blake chuckled. The story of how Trimble had raided old Taggles' breakfast was all over the school by this time. And though Blake had not actually seen Trimble being chased by the irate porter, he had heard all about it.

"Not guilty, me lord!" chuckled Jack Blake. "Last I saw of him was just after lessons started this morning. Lathom told him to go and lie down for an hour or so."

"Well, he's wolfed Taggles' brekker, and he's wanted!" grunted Kildare. "I've hunted the whole dashed school for him, and can't find him anywhere."

"Bound to turn up soon," said Tom Merry, smiling. "Dinner bell will be going soon; he won't miss that, even if it is shredded sawdust and saltless vegetables! Remember he has a giddy waistcoat to fill out!"

Kildare grunted.

"Railton wants him at once!" he snapped. "He's got to be found! I hope he gets the tanning of his life when he is found. You kids can cut along and look for him—sharp!"

"Oh!"

Kildare walked away.

"Oh blow!" grunted Blake. "Blow that fat ass!"

"You fat villain!" snorted Blake. "We'll give you dinner-time, blow you! Come on! Yank the fat ass along!"

"Here, hold on!" gasped Trimble, blinking apprehensively at the juniors. "Lemme explain! It wasn't my fault at all about the biscuits; besides, I didn't even know there were any biscuits in the box. Honour bright!"

The juniors looked at each other and grinned. Trimble very clearly imagined they were on his track in regard to the box of dog-biscuits! It came as surprising news to them that the fat junior knew anything at all about those biscuits. They had naturally imagined that Knox had been poking about their study and had found them.

They knew differently now.

"Why, you—you fat villain!" gasped Blake. "So that was why you spoofed old Lathom; it wasn't only to dodge lessons, you fat thief!"

"Nothing of the kind!" said Trimble. "The—the fact is I know nothing about any biscuits at all. And if Knox

CAMEOS OF SCHOOL LIFE.

THE WALKING MATCH!



IN a white row the walkers stand,
Filling the old school gateway;
Kildare, a whistle in his hand,
Sets them in action straightway.
Then off they go, with swinging strides,
Eager and keen and nimble;
Merry and Blake, and Glyn besides,
And fat, ungainly Trimble!

A five-mile walk is just the boon
That Baggy Trimble's needing;
For he is like a stuffed balloon,
Due to his overfeeding.
But Baggy cannot stay the pace,
Far in the rear he straggles;
"The way you walks is a disgrace!"
Growls the old porter, Taggles.

Baggy collapses in the road,
And there he'll lie and languish
Like some exhausted, worn-out toad,
Emitting yelps of anguish.
"Yow-ow! I'm feeling ill!" he moans,
"So rush to me with quickness:
I've stitch, and cramp in all my bones,
And also sleepy sickness!"

The portly youth is left for dead.
His rivals still continue;
Merry contrives to forge ahead,
Exerting nerve and sinew.
Talbot is hard upon his track,
And Blake is in attendance;
Gussy, however, hangs well back,
To show his independence.

Their arms and legs like clockwork swing,
The poetry of motion!
On cycles their supporters bring
Such things as lint and lotion:
In case some mishap should betide
Requiring ministrations;
Meanwhile, the walkers swing and stride
With grim determination!

The journey's end is reached at last,
There is a breathless finish!
A final spurt—the tape is passed.
Will the cheers ne'er diminish?
Talbot beats Merry on the post,
He's happy as a pierrot;
But Trimble, who gave up the ghost,
Won't cheer the Conquering Hero!



"Better go and hunt him up!" said Tom Merry.
"And we'll tan him if nobody else does!" said Herries grimly.

The juniors started out to look for the missing Trimble—there was no disobeying Eric Kildare! As the fat junior had been last seen vanishing round by the Close they went there first and hunted round the old elms and bushes, and then went hunting round the chapel.

But they saw nothing of Trimble.

"The woodshed!" said Tom Merry suddenly. "Just the place where the fat ass would hide!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The juniors hurried along to the woodshed, pretty certain that Tom had hit on the most likely hiding-place. They soon saw that he was right, for as they approached the shed the door opened cautiously, and the fat figure of Trimble sneaked out.

He suddenly sighted the seven juniors, and he started.
"I—I say, you chaps," he mumbled, "is it dinner-time yet? My watch——"

told you he found me opening the box in your study he's telling an awful whopper! You know what a fibber he is, don't you?"

"Bai Jove! Weally Twimble——"

"I'll tell you just how it happened," said Trimble, eyeing the juniors hopefully. "I—I happened to be passing Study No. 6 on my way upstairs to the dorm, and I heard a curious creaking noise inside. I peeped in, and—and I caught Knox just opening the box. That was it!"

"Bai Jove!"

"That was how it happened," said Trimble. "Of course, Knox feared I should tell about him, and so he's told you that it was he who caught me opening the box. Isn't— isn't he an awful fibber, you fellows? No principle at all, you know! I expect he's told Railton the—— Yarrooogh! Leggo! Wharrer you at?"

Bump!

"Yarroooooop!" howled Trimble, as he smote the earth.

"Now again!" panted Blake. "We'll teach the fat rotter to raid studies these hard times! Give him another for

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,002.

having put us to all this trouble. Then we'll boot him along to Railton!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Yoop! Leggo!" roared Trimble desperately. "I say, lemme go and I'll tell you fellows some news! I'll tell you—"

"Up with him!"

"Wait!" yelled Trimble. "It's about that beast Knox, and will make you open your eyes—honour bright! Lemme down and I'll tell you! Tom Merry—"

"Hold on!" said Tom Merry, looking curiously at the fat junior, who was desperately in earnest. "Let's hear what the fat idiot has to say first!"

"More fibs!" grunted Herries.

But the juniors released Trimble, and he scrambled up, breathless.

"You silly dummies!" he hooted. "Haven't I explained all about those rotten biscuits? I tell you, I've got news that'll open your eyes about that awful beast Knox."

And Trimble's eyes gleamed as he dusted himself down. For one thing, Trimble felt he had suffered quite enough that morning without suffering more at the hands of Tom Merry & Co. Moreover, after thinking his problem out in regard to the secret banquets, he had arrived at the conclusion that his best policy was to get help on the job.

In the first place, Pepper's Barn had the reputation of being haunted, and even in daytime it would have taken more than the best "feed" going to induce Trimble to enter it. In addition, he had no doubt there was more grub there than he could possibly remove on his own.

He must let someone else into the secret, and it had just occurred to him that Tom Merry & Co. would do as well as anyone—better, in fact. Some fellows would collar all for themselves and kick him for the information. He knew Tom Merry & Co. would deal with him fairly in the matter.

So now Trimble forgot his hurts and grinned a little as he met the inquiring looks of Tom Merry & Co.

"I'm going to tell you fellows something that'll make you sit up!" he grinned. "It's something I happened to overhear while I was in the woodshed this morning."

"Then we don't want to hear it!" snapped Tom Merry. "You eavesdropping little worm!"

"I couldn't help overhearing it!" said Trimble earnestly. "I was in there and couldn't help it. It was old Knox and Cutts and his pals. They came along behind the woodshed here for a quiet snack. I believe they're in the habit of doing it, you know!"

"No concern of yours if they do!" rapped Tom. "Look here—"

"Hold on!" said Trimble hurriedly. "Listen! What do you think about it? Those beasts have a whole stock of grub and stuff hidden in Pepper's Barn. They're going to have secret suppers—and Racke and his pals are in it, too. Suppers and card-parties! Fancy that!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Is—that a fact, Trimble?" gasped Tom Merry, interested at last.

"Honest Ijun!" grinned Trimble. "I heard it all! Racke and his pals have been cleaning the place out—getting it ready, you know! The first supper's to be to-night, after eleven. I say, wouldn't it be a ripping idea to raid the grub—serve 'em right, you know! Fancy that beast Knox being in it after kicking up such a shine about your biscuits!"

The startled juniors looked at each other. As a general rule they took Trimble's yarns with more than a pinch of salt. But this time they all felt convinced that the fat junior was speaking the truth for once.

As a matter of fact, Tom Merry was scarcely surprised at the news. He had anticipated something of the sort—from Racke & Co., at all events. It came as something of a surprise, however, to hear that Cutts & Co. and Knox were "in it."

But Tom had been rather surprised and suspicious of Racke's conduct of late. Up to a few days ago Racke had been loud in his condemnation of the new reforms at St. Jim's. He had written home, and he had called upon Tom Merry, as junior captain, to start a rebellion against the new regime.

The last few days, however, Aubrey Racke had seemed to be taking things more quietly. Moreover, Tom and his chums had wondered what was "on" between the black-sheep of St. Jim's.

Now they knew—if Trimble's information was correct!

They did not doubt it, however! Trimble's eager face and greedy, glistening eyes were enough for them.

"Tell us all about it, Trimble!" suggested Blake, setting his lips. "I think this should interest us, you fellows."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"What-ho!" grinned Monty Lowther. "Knox confiscated Herries' biscuits, and we may be interested enough to confiscate his grub. One good turn deserves another, you know."

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,002.

"That's the spirit!" chuckled Trimble, his face brightening. "I thought you fellows would be willing—"

"To pick the chestnuts out of the fire for you, what?" said Lowther blandly.

Trimble did not answer that. He started to tell them all about it, instead. The juniors listened attentively.

"Well, that seems clear enough!" said Tom Merry, shaking his curly head and grinning. "Knox is breaking rules—a prefect, you know! We can't allow it!"

"Certainly not!" agreed Blake, with a chuckle. "We ought not, as good little boys who win prizes, to allow those gay birds to eat unlawfully—ahem—unlawfully acquired grub. It would encourage them to go on breaking rules. I vote we take charge of the grub, as Lowther suggests—confiscate it and scoff it so that they can't break rules, you know. As a senior and a prefect, Knox really ought to know better. We'll teach him better."

"Besides, we're hungry for some decent grub," said Herries. "And, after all, we've got one or two scores to settle with friend Knox and friend Cutts & Company. We'll do it!"

"If we can!" grinned Tom Merry, wrinkling his brows. "Mustn't count our chickens before they're hatched. I vote we slip out right away after dinner and have a look round Pepper's Barn, you know—just to make sure. Our old friend, Trimble, has been known to depart from the truth before, mind you!"

"Oh, I say, Merry!"

"But we'll find out first," said Tom. "Now, let's yank Trimble along to Railton."

"Oh, dear!"

"Nothing to wail about, old fat man!" said Tom consolingly. "Don't forget that canings are barred at St. Jim's now—that's one reform that should please you, anyway. They can only line or gate you, old chap!"

It certainly was a consoling reflection to Baggy Trimble. Since Dr. Crankley had taken charge, corporal punishment had been abolished at St. Jim's as being brutal and demoralising! And Baggy did not like corporal punishment at all. He brightened up visibly at the reflection, and accompanied the juniors more or less willingly after that.

The juniors saw him to the door of Mr. Railton's study, and then they went in to dinner. A few minutes later Trimble came rolling in, looking quite bright.

"It's all serene!" he confided to Blake. "Only five hundred lines!"

"That all?" ejaculated Blake.

"Yes. That means only less than a hundred between the eight of us—doesn't it, old chap?"

"Eh?"

"We're all pals now—your lot and Merry's lot and me!" said Trimble brightly. "Eight of us, you know. I shall expect you all to do your whack of these lines after what I've put you all in for. Worth a thumping good feed, what? Railton jawed me no end, but that doesn't hurt a fellow!"

"You cheeky fat ass!" snorted Blake. "I'll be blown if I help you with 'em! Go and eat coke!"

"Oh, I say, Blake—"

"Stop talking, Trimble!"

It was Mr. Lathom's voice, and Trimble stopped talking and went on with his dinner. It was neither an enjoyable nor satisfying meal for fellows with hearty appetites, and when the juniors left the dining-hall the air fairly hummed with groans and grumbles against the new diet.

Blake & Co. and the Terrible Three joined forces and hurried out of gates. It was only a short distance to Pepper's Barn, and they soon reached it.

"Now for proving Trimble's yarn!" grinned Tom Merry. "But I'm pretty certain we shall find things as he said."

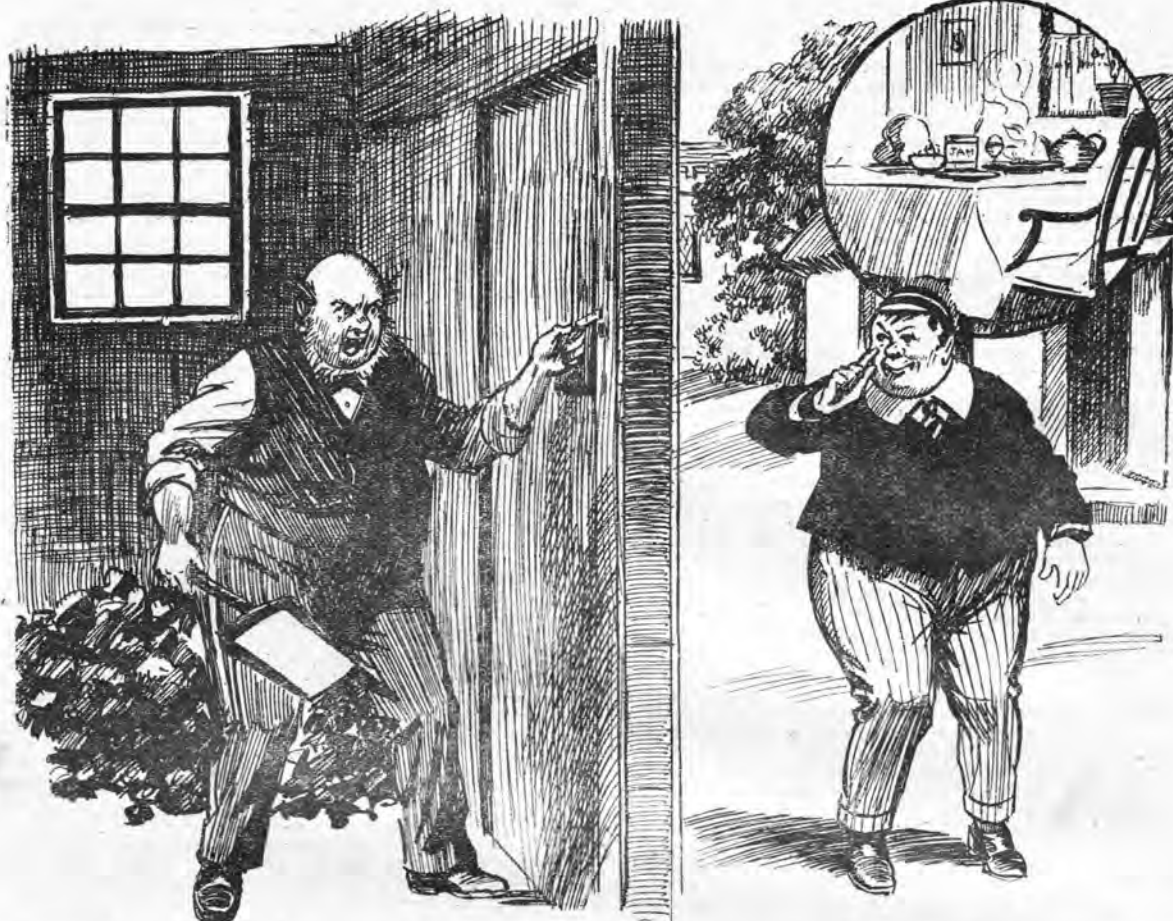
And Trimble's yarn was soon proved to be correct. The barn was not locked, and a glance about the bare interior showed no sign of boxes or stores of any kind. But Tom Merry knew it was scarcely likely that Knox & Co. would hide the stuff in the barn itself. Below the barn was a store-room, dark and dismal enough, but just suitable for the law-breakers' plans. Tom had already found the door locked, but he knew how to enter it for all that.

Stooping down, Tom got his fingers in a crack in the floor and lifted. One of the planks came up in his hand, and he laid it aside. The next moment another plank had been removed, and then the investigators followed each other through the hole and dropped on to the stone floor below.

Then Tom chuckled—a chuckle echoed by his chums.

There was every sign that the place had been used recently. It had been swept and tidied up, and there was even a piece of carpet on the floor. There was also a couple of small card-tables, and various new boxes that were doubtless to serve as chairs. There was also a heating-lamp and a small spirit-stove, in addition to a paraffin lamp.

But that was not all. Other boxes were tucked away in one corner, and an examination of these proved them to contain foodstuffs; there were tinned and packed goods; chocolates and cakes; potted meat; bags of tarts, and various



Click! Trimble gave a sudden twist of the key and the lock of the coal-shed was sent clicking home. The next moment the latch rattled and the voice of Taggles sounded from within. "Ere, what—what—You young varmint! Open this 'ere door, blow you!" But Trimble had no intention of doing that—not while the school porter's breakfast remained to be eaten, at anyrate! (See Chapter 3.)

other articles of confectionery. Tucked away in another box were cards and cigarettes.

"Phew!" gasped Blake. "There's enough stuff here for a giddy regiment, chaps. Somebody's been splashing his money about, anyway. What—what a find!"

"What's the programme now?" grinned Digby. "We've proved old Trimble right, after all."

Tom Merry rubbed his nose reflectively.

"All's fair in love and war!" he remarked, with a chuckle. "There's enough here for twenty chaps, I should think. My idea is to get a few more of the Fourth and Shell into this—not too many, or it'll leak out. We'll return at dusk and raid this little lot and take it to the woodshed. Then we'll have a banquet in the woodshed after lights out. How's that?"

"Ripping!"

"Top-hole, bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus. "Weally, we are justified in teachin' those wottahs a weal lesson!"

"And we owe Knox and Cutts & Co. a good bit one way and another," said Tom. "After all, war's war."

"Of course!"

"We'll do it, then!" chuckled Tom. "We'll come here at dusk and carry the stuff over in bags or something. We'll drop the wink to Levison, and Glyn and Cardew, and a few more chaps like them. So that's that, chaps! Now, let's be getting back!"

And, greatly cheered at the prospect of dishing Knox and his precious pals, Tom Merry & Co. left the barn and hurried back to the school.

CHAPTER 8.

Wheels Within Wheels!

"THERE'S something on, you fellows!"

George Figgins, the lanky leader of the New House juniors at St. Jim's, spoke emphatically.

Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn were taking a stroll in the dusky Close. Fatty Wynn, woeful of countenance,

had been discussing the subject of grub, and he had waxed most eloquent on the subject. And Kerr had been sympathizing with his podgy chum. But George Figgins had been unusually silent during the discussion.

Now he broke out unexpectedly with that abrupt remark, and his chums almost jumped.

"Eh? What's on?" demanded Fatty Wynn. "I was talking about this rotten grub question, Figgy; you might listen to a chap. Something's got to be done or I shall be reduced to a shadow. You know what happened to the donkey when his diet was reduced to a wisp of straw—he pegged out!"

"But you're not a donkey, Fatty," said Figgins. "You're more like a camel, old chap. You've got a hefty hump in front under your waistcoat, and you'll be able to exist on that for weeks yet."

"Why you—you—" Fatty Wynn almost spluttered in his wrath. "You—you ass, Figgy!" he went on, his voice becoming pathetic. "You might try to be helpful. I've never felt so hungry in my life. This beastly patent diet is reducing my strength more and more every day. I feel I could murder old Crankley for a nice, juicy steak, or a jam-tart even! Something must be done!"

"My dear man, what can I do?" said Figgy. "We're all in the same boat. There's something on—something jolly queer!"

"If it's a feed—" began Fatty Wynn hopefully.

"Well, it may even be a feed!" grinned Figgins. "In fact, it's quite possible it is a feed. But what I mean is I believe those School House worms have got something on!"

"Oh!"

"I noticed it first at noon!" said Figgins grimly. "Did you spot how Merry and Blake and their pals rushed off after dinner? They went out of gates somewhere—I watched 'em go, you know."

"Well?"

"It looked rather queer to me," said Figgins. "And that's

why I wanted to hang about the gates—just afterwards—I wanted to see them come in again. Well, they did, looking jolly excited, I thought. But that's not all. I kept my eyes open afterwards, and I spotted Blake passing notes to Levison and Cardew, and several other Fourth chaps in class."

"Rather queer!" agreed Kerr thoughtfully. "That reminds me, I spotted a whole lot of them hurry out of gates just after tea in Hall!"

"That's just why I dragged you out—to see them go," smiled Figgins. "Well, doesn't that look as if they'd something on? It may be a feed or anything; I shouldn't be surprised if it wasn't a secret feed. I almost wish we'd followed 'em now."

"We're going to!" chuckled Figgins. "Come on! 'Shush! Not a word!"

As he spoke the whispered warning, George Figgins grabbed his two chums and dragged them back against the shadowy trunk of an old elm. As he did so several shadowy forms loomed up on the school wall in the thick dusk.

Next minute these shadowy figures had dropped inside the school grounds.

There were eight or ten of them, and all seemed to be carrying packages or bags. They were also moving in rather a stealthy manner, and from their size they were juniors.

"It's them, right enough!" breathed Figgins. "Let 'em go, and we'll follow. Not a sound, mind!"

"Yes, rather!" breathed Fatty Wynn, his voice almost breaking in sudden excitement. "By James, Figgy, I do believe it is a feed!"

"Shush—shush!"

"But if all that stuff's grub—"

"Dry up!" hissed Figgins. "Come on!"

He started after the shadowy forms, and his two chums followed, Fatty Wynn trembling with eagerness. If it was a feed—

As stealthily as Red Indians on the war-path, Figgins & Co. trod after the forms ahead, who were moving round in the deep shadows of the old elms lining the Close. Their very caution was suspicious, to say the least of it.

It was soon clear where they were making for.

"Woodshed!" chuckled Figgins. "I thought it was something up against us at first; now I'm pretty certain it's a feed."

"Oh, good!" murmured Fatty Wynn, his eyes glistening in the gloom.

"There they go!" murmured Figgy. "Carefully now! Keep behind me, chaps!"

Figgins crept forward, keeping in the shadow of the wall until he was between that and the old woodshed. His chums joined him at the little, dusty window, and the three stood there breathlessly, ears and eyes open.

They could hear voices and suppressed chuckles, and then they heard Tom Merry's voice, and the striking of a match. Peeping cautiously through the glass, Figgy saw several juniors—Tom Merry & Co., Blake & Co., and Levison, Glyn, and Clive—in the woodshed. They seemed to be piling their packages in one corner by the light of the match Tom Merry held up.

"All serene!" Tom Merry was saying. "Cover the stuff over with plenty of faggots, chaps! There's really enough there for two jolly good feeds, and I vote we have one to-night, and then another one later on. Now, remember, not a word to be spoken about it to anyone. Just turn up here at eleven to-night, and don't forget to bring your giddy appetites with you."

"I've got mine with me now," said Herries, with a chuckle. "Why not try a few jam-tarts now?"

"Not a scrap!" said Tom Merry. "Best get back now, before somebody nusses us and suspects something. I noticed that New House worm, Figgy, looking at me rather queerly at tea-time. If those merchants tumble to something the fat will be in the fire."

"Hear, hear!" murmured Figgins, with a soft chuckle. "The giddy fat is in the fire if you only knew it, old dear!"

Not having ears gifted sufficiently to hear Figgins' murmured remarks, Tom Merry & Co. did not "know it." In blissful ignorance of the fact that their deadly rivals had already "tumbled" Tom Merry & Co. left the woodshed and departed, vanishing into the dusk.

Figgins & Co. waited patiently until their footsteps had died away round the chapel, and then they chuckled, and entered the woodshed. While Kerr struck matches, Figgy and Fatty Wynn dragged away the faggots and examined the parcels and packages and bags.

Then they almost danced with glee at their find. It was only too blissfully true. It was grub—glorious grub, and plenty of it.

"Corn in Egypt, with a vengeance!" exclaimed Figgins, whilst Fatty Wynn almost went into raptures of delight. "Here's where we score over our giddy enemies, chaps."

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,002.

Now, what's the programme? We daren't stay here and scoff it now, and we daren't risk it here until after lights out; that would be too late."

"Shift it from here, and take it somewhere else," suggested Kerr. "What about a dormitory feed to-night? My hat! It would be rather too risky, though."

"Much too risky!" agreed Figgins, shaking his head. "Somebody's bound to spot us carting the stuff up to the dorm. But it would have to be after lights out, and the question is, where? Lemme see? Where the thump is there? Blessed if I can think of a suitable place!"

"What about the vaults?" ventured Fatty Wynn, with longing eyes on the foodstuffs.

"Too jolly cold, and far too jolly smelly, fathead!" said Kerr. "I say, what about old Pepper's barn? That's near the school, and it's been kept clean and tidy since we started using it for the St. Jim's Parliament."

Figgins gave a muffled whoop! He thumped his chum on the back.

"The very place!" he exclaimed, with enthusiasm. "Good man, Kerr! Trust you to think of things! We'll yank this stuff along there now, and then we'll sneak out there after light's out. I vote we have it about eleven o'clock; quite early enough, and not too late!"

"Ripping!" said Fatty Wynn gleefully. "I say, Figgy, I think I'll tackle some of those tarts now; they look ripping!"

"You greedy cormorant!" grinned Figgins. "All right; but only two or three, mind! Well, that's settled. Pepper's Barn at eleven to-night, chaps. Now, what about carting this stuff there? We'll need help on the job. Kerr, you cut off and fetch Reddy and one or two more. Just give them the tip quietly, and bring 'em along!"

"Right-ho!" said Kerr.

Kerr hurried out into the dusky Close. He was scarcely away five minutes, and when he returned he had Redfern, Lawrence, and Owen with him. The three New House juniors almost danced when they heard the glad news and saw the foodstuffs.

"What ripping luck!" chortled Redfern. "A gorgeous free feed, and a score over those School House worms! This is where we smile, Figgy!"

"No time for smiling!" said Figgins grimly. "Now, Fatty, leave those dashed tarts alone, and let's get off, or we sha'n't be back before lock-up!"

"Better go carefully through the gates," said Reddy. "If old Taggy, or someone, spots us—"

"Fathead! Think those School House worms came through the gates?" snorted Figgins witheringly. "They carted the stuff from the village, across the fields, I bet, and got over the school wall with it. It's over the wall for us, too! Ready?"

"What-ho!"

"Lead on, Macduff!"

And, amidst a chorus of chuckles, Figgins led the way. With the packages of good things under their arms the New House raiders filed out into the deepening dusk of the Close, and were swallowed up, en route for Pepper's Barn. There was every likelihood of there being some surprises for various people at eleven o'clock that night in Pepper's Barn. There was also a surprise in store for Tom Merry & Co.

CHAPTER 7.

Startling!

"QUIET, now! No noise, for goodness' sake, and no talking! Not a word! If anyone—"

"Who's talking?" inquired Redfern. "Aren't you doing all the blessed talking, Figgy?"

"Dry up!" hissed George Figgins. "I've got to give orders, haven't I?"

"Yes, but isn't that talking, old chap?"

"Dry up!"

"Oh, all right! Though I don't see why we should be silent when you—"

"Will you dry up?" almost exploded Figgins wrathfully.

"It's only ten to eleven, remember; and it's quite likely a prefect or master may be roaming about yet. Fatty, stop that row!"

"Who's making a row?"

"You are—like a blessed horse whinnying for his grub!"

"Well, I am whinnying for mine!" chuckled Fatty Wynn.

"I've been counting the seconds as well as the blessed minutes ever since we found the stuff. Are we going to stand here all night, Figgy?"

George Figgins breathed hard.

"Come on!" he snapped. "No good trying to stop you chaps gassing, I suppose. You're like a lot of old women—once started, you go on and on—"

"Hadn't we better have the lecture when we get to the

barn, Figgy?" chuckled Kerr. "It's cold standing here, too. Here goes, anyway!"

And Kerr swarmed up the old tree that leaned slant-wise over the school wall. He reached the top, and, after a swift glance about him, leaned down to help the next fellow up. In a few minutes all the juniors had joined Kerr in the lane beyond the wall.

There were ten of them—Figgins & Co., Redfern & Co., and Koumi Rao, French, Pratt, and Robinson—all of the New House.

"All serene!" said Figgins, with a grunt. "Then come on! You got the candles, Kerr?"

"Yes—and a torch!"

"Good!"

The ten juniors started off along the lane, it being light enough for them to see where they were going. A footpath across a couple of fields brought them to the barn, and Figgins unfastened the door and led the way into the dingy interior. Then the juniors got busy.

Candles were lighted, and the door was closed, and the window covered over carefully to prevent the light being seen from outside. It never occurred to the juniors to look inside the basement-room: they believed it to be dirty and cobwebby and unsuitable for their purpose, in any case. In the room above were plenty of boxes, and soon a sort of table had been fixed up, boxes doing duty as chairs.

Then the good things were unpacked and spread on the table and on the boxes round about. The eyes of the New House juniors glistened as they roamed over the array of good things.

"This is a bit of all right, and no mistake!" chuckled Figgins, who had soon recovered his usual good-humour. "But it beats me how those School House worms managed to get such a pile of stuff. I hardly like to deprive 'em of it all, in fact."

"Old Gussy must have had a fiver, or a tenner, sent him!" grinned Owen. "Don't pity the poor little dears, anyway, Figgy. They don't need it."

"They'd have left us nothing, anyway!" remarked Fatty Wynn, starting on a chunk of plum-cake. "Pile in, you fellows; you're wasting time!"

There was a chuckle, and the New House fellows seated themselves and began to pile in. It was quite a cheery scene, and there was a cheery smile on the face of every fellow in the barn. Certainly it was a trifle chilly in the barn, but the flickering candles gave them all the light they wanted.

"This is top-hole, you fellows!" said Figgins, as he started on a cream-bun. "This is the first bit of decent grub I've had this week. I'm going to make the most of it. I can't help feeling sorry for those School House fellows, though. Poor little lads! Fancy their disappointment when they discover the grub's gone! It—it makes my heart miss a beat with sadness when I think of it!"

"Still, we've stopped them breaking rules!" said Owen gravely, helping himself to a sausage-roll. "It was very wrong of them to do it, you know; and I feel so glad that we've saved them from doing wrong! Besides, they might have over-eaten themselves and made themselves ill. Think of that!"

"Ha, ha! Yes!" chuckled Figgins. "We've done them a good turn really, though I don't suppose they'll thank us. Such is life! But I would like to know where they got this ripping grub from. Village people wouldn't dare go against Head's orders—and—'Shush! What's that?'"

Figgins' voice tailed off suddenly. All the juniors stopped eating and listened intently, startled expressions on their faces.

To the ears of the startled juniors came a harsh sound—the sound of a key grating in a rusty lock. Then followed the creak of a door opening.

"Quiet!" breathed Figgins.

The juniors needed no telling to be quiet. They could not help remembering stories they had heard of the barn being haunted.

The next moment these thoughts vanished, however, as footsteps sounded and also muttered voices. And they came from below—from the basement store-room beneath the barn.

"Tramps, or something!" breathed Figgins. "Not a sound! I'll have a squirt."

Figgins seemed suddenly to remember something, and, after scanning the floor for a moment, he knelt down and peered through a hole in the planking. A dim light came through it.

What he saw almost made him yell out.

In the flickering light of a match he caught a glimpse of four figures below—youthful figures. One of them was just putting the match to a lamp standing on an improvised table.

As Figgins gazed blankly at the astonishing scene the lamp burned up and lit up the room. It also lit up the faces of Aubrey Racke, Crooke, Scrope, and Leslie Clampe of the New House. But the state of the apartment itself was

almost as astonishing to Figgins as the sight of the St. Jim's black sheep.

What were the cads doing there at that hour of the night?

The answer came almost at once.

"Well, here we are, chaps!" said Aubrey Racke, yawning. "I hope the other chaps won't be long, for I'm dashed hungry. Better get the spirit-stove going and shove some water on, Scrope. The rest of us can be getting the grub out. I hope—What the thunder—"

Racke's voice ended in a gasp—a gasp of amazed alarm—as he looked at the corner where the food had been stored. His gasp was echoed by startled expressions from the others.

"Where's the grub?" exclaimed Crooke blankly. "It was in the corner there, wasn't it? I hope to goodness—"

"Hunt round, you fools!" snapped Racke, in sudden, savage alarm. "Somebody's been here—I can see that!"

In growing alarm, the juniors did hunt—though it scarcely needed a hunt in that small apartment to prove that the grub had indeed gone.

And, up above, Figgins watched, just as much amazed as Racke & Co. were alarmed.

"What is it, Figgy?" breathed Kerr. "That's Racke, isn't it?"

Figgins put his finger to his lips and nodded.

"Fear of 'em!" he murmured under his breath. "This beats me! They seem to—Hullo! 'Shush!'"

Footsteps had sounded outside—they could hear them clearly this time. The next moment Figgy's eyes grew wide as through the crack he saw four Fifth-Formers appear in the doorway down below. They were Cutts, Gilmore, Prye, and St. Leger.

"Hullo! Not ready yet, Racke?" snapped Cutts. "I say, who the thump's up above—Knox? There's a light there! Spotted it under the door as we came along."

"What?" Racke gave a gasp. "Look here, Cutts," he stammered, "the grub's gone—every scrap of it! There's only the cigs and cards left. If there's somebody above, then—"

It was Cutts' turn to stare; but he did not stare long. He turned and vanished from the doorway.

Figgins did not need to be told the reason. He jumped up in alarm.

"Quick! The thumping door!" he hissed. "Cutts is here—coming now!"

And Figgins, careless of being heard, made a rush for the door of the barn.

His intention was to fasten it if he could; but even as he reached it the latch was jerked up and the door flew open.

On the threshold stood Cutts, with his three Fifth Form chums at his heels. They almost fell down as they sighted Figgins and the juniors standing in the candle-lit barn. Cutts' face was a sight as his eyes took in the whole scene.

"Well!" he ejaculated. "Well, I'm dashed! You—you cheeky, thieving little sweeps! Here, back up, chaps! Don't let the little cads get out!"

Cutts' voice ended in a yell as Figgins, with a glance at his chums behind, made as if to start a desperate rush to escape. Bewildered as Figgy had been, he saw it was a time for swift action.

But now it was too late for that seemingly. St. Leger, Prye, Gilmore, and Cutts would take some getting past. Moreover, Racke & Co. were behind them.

"Racke, you little toad!" said Cutts furiously. "What's this mean? If you've sold us a pup—"

"I—I know nothing about those cads being here!" gasped Racke. "We'd only just got here and discovered the grub was gone. These New House cads must have found it. Look at the stuff! The rotters—"

"What the thump's the matter, Cutts?"

It was another voice behind Cutts & Co.—the well-known and equally detested voice of Gerald Knox of the Sixth. The next moment the dimly-seen form of the prefect appeared behind the startled Racke & Co.

Knox pushed his way roughly past the juniors, and Gilmore and Prye made way for him. He gave a violent jump as he saw the interior.

"What—what—Cutts, you fool! What are these young hounds doing here? Why—Good gad! Isn't that our grub they've got?"

"Looks like it!" fumed Cutts, his eyes glowering at the hapless Figgins & Co. "It beats me how—"

"Leave this to me, Cutts!" snarled Knox, his face dark with rage. "Now, you little thieves!" he added, glaring at the bewildered Figgins & Co. "Out with it! Who put you up to this? Who told you there was grub here? Did you find it, or what?"

"Find out!" said Figgins coolly.

He spoke coolly, though he was almost dazed. It was startling enough to find Racke & Co. there, but to discover that seniors like Cutts & Co., and even Knox, a

perfect, were visiting there at that hour of the night, was still more startling.

He could not understand it at all. They had raided the grub from Tom Merry & Co., and yet Racke & Co., and Cutts & Co., and Knox seemed to jump to the conclusion that the grub was theirs—that it had been raided from them!

And then the only possible explanation came to Figgins in a flash, and he could not help grinning, tense as the situation was.

Did the grub actually belong to the black sheep, and had Tom Merry & Co. raided it from them, just as they had raided it from Tom Merry & Co.?

It certainly began to look like it. Their rivals had not, after all, been fetching the stuff from the village, but had been fetching it from Pepper's Barn!

And they, in their blissful ignorance, had raided it from the woodshed, and taken it back to the barn again!

It was really rather funny. Even then Figgins couldn't help seeing the funny side. A sudden chuckle from Kerr told him that Kerr had seen it all, too.

"Well?" snapped Knox, his look dangerous. "I'm waiting to know what it means, you young sweeps! Come out here—at once!"

"Certainly!" said Figgins coolly,

And with that Figgins swept three of the four candles out, while Kerr swept the fourth out, and then he led the way in a rush for the door.

"Rush them!"

But it was easier said than done. Knox stood well in the room, and the Fifth-Formers jammed the doorway behind. There was to be no escape for the luckless Figgins & Co.

In a flash Knox's long arms swept round Figgins, and he was held fast though he struggled madly.

"Fetch a light!" gasped Knox. "Don't let the little hounds get clear! Oh, good gad!"

There was a furious melee in the darkness, friend and foe being mixed up in a scrambling crowd just inside the doorway of the barn. Then suddenly Racke appeared bearing the lighted lamp from the storehouse below.

As he held it up, Crooke squeezed inside and hurriedly lit the candles again.

All could be seen now, and Racke, Crooke, Scrope, and Clampe joined the struggle. But the seniors scarcely needed help—even the half-hearted help of the St. Jim's slackers. Against the five seniors even the heroic Figgins & Co. stood little chance.

Several of them had more than one chance to get clear, but they stuck it, preferring to go down fighting than to seek their own escape and leave their chums in the lurch.

The issue was never in doubt, however, and the addition of Racke & Co. settled it for good. The New House fellows were down at last—beaten, but still defiant.

"Now, you little sweeps!" panted Knox, digging a knee into Figgins' chest. "You're going to go through it for this. Bring some of that string and stuff, Scrope, and we'll fix these beauties up all right!"

Scrope hurriedly got the string and rope, plenty of which lay about in the barn. It took a very short time to tie the hands of Figgins & Co. behind them, though they struggled to the last. They knew what was in store for them.

Gerald Knox stood up gasping when the last New House junior was tied, and glared down at them.

"And that's that!" he said. "Now bring them down below, and if they resist, plank your boots behind them. They can sit and watch us feed, and after the feed we'll set 'em cock-fighting each other. It will be as entertaining as cards any day!"

"Good wheeze!" grinned Cutts, planting a boot behind Kerr. "Up you get, my lad! You've asked for trouble, you cheeky little sweeps, and you've found it! Get a move on!"

And Figgins & Co. did get a move on. They knew it could only make matters worse to resist further. Looking complete wrecks—clothes rumpled and dusty, hair ruffled and likewise dusty, and faces bearing vivid marks of that terrific but brief fight—they filed down into the store-room below, whilst Racke & Co., grinning now, took charge of the foodstuffs, and carried them back to their original quarters. It seemed a very sad ending to Figgins' great raid!

CHAPTER 8.

The Raiders Raided!

"JOVE! I'm hungry!"

"Same here!"

"Yaas, wathah! We must weally make the most of to-night, deah boys!"

"I say, you chaps," grinned Baggy Trimble, "don't for-

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get that this is my feed really—my treat, you know! There's a ripping lot of stuff, and I think you all ought to fork out a bob a head at least."

"Dry up, you fat ass!"

"Oh, really, you know. Merry, it's little enough I'm asking. You wouldn't feel under such a deep obligation to me then. I tell you what—"

"Will you cheese it, you fat porker?" muttered Tom Merry wrathfully. "Want to waken the whole House? This isn't the time for gassing, Trimble. And as for a bob a time, you get a boot a time if you don't dry up! You chaps ready?"

"What-ho!"

"Then follow me!" murmured Tom. "Trimble ought



"Well?" snapped Knox, from the doorway, a dangerous gleam in his eyes. "Come out here—at once!" "Certainly," said Figgins, coolly, giving a nod to the others, who rushed to blow out the candles preparatory to leading

really to go first—there'd be something big and soft to fall on then if any of us slipped."

There was a chuckle in the gloom. But Trimble only grinned. Like the rest of the adventurers he was in high spirits at the thought of the great "feed" awaiting them in the woodshed. In single file, and moving cautiously, the juniors slipped through the box-room window and out on to the leads of the outhouse, and then to the ground.

There were twelve of the juniors—the Terrible Three, Blake & Co., and Trimble, Cardew, Levison, Glyn, and Clive. Tom Merry would have invited more, but for the added danger of such a proceeding. It was certainly dangerous enough as it was.

But the juniors didn't think of the danger of discovery just then in their gleeful anticipation of the feast awaiting them in the old woodshed. They were all hungry—very hungry.

Working round in the shadows of the school buildings—from the windows of which more than one light twinkled—they moved in single file towards the woodshed.

"Railton's up still, and so's Lathom, and Kildare seems to be working late," murmured Tom Merry. "Let's hope none of them thinks of looking in at our little dorms. We're rather too early, you know. Still, it isn't likely anything will go wrong. Here we are. No lights, mind, until the giddy window's covered up!"

"Yaas, wathah! Mustn't take any wisks, deah boys!"

"Then, don't yell, you silly ass!" grinned Blake. "Quiet!"

They were in the dark woodshed now. Blake struck a match, and cupped it carefully with his hands, whilst Tom



is eyes. "I'm waiting to know what this means, you young sweeps!" he chums a significant glance. "We'll come now!" And he ising the way in a dash for the door. (See Chapter 7.)

Merry covered up the little window with some sacking, and also covered over the whole of the doorway with more sacking, to prevent the light penetrating through the cracks.

Then all was in readiness—candles were lighted and stuck up, throwing a ruddy, flickering glow on the cheery faces of the hungry juniors.

"Now for the grub!" grinned Tom Merry. "It was really kind of Knox's lambs to provide us with—with—with—Great pip! Why, where is the—the grub?"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Gone!"

The juniors stared as if transfixed as Tom Merry kicked aside the faggots—the faggots that should have covered up the grub, but didn't.

The grub—the ripping, tophole supply of delicious tuck—was gone, clean gone!

The startled juniors glared and glared at the spot, and then they began to search the shed with ever-growing apprehension and utter dismay.

They gave it up at last, and looked at each other in stony despair.

"Well," inquired Cardew, "what about the gorgeous feed? Is this your idea of a joke, Tommy, or what?"

Tom Merry passed his hand over his curly head.

"This—this," he mumbled, "is the giddy outside edge. The grub was here at tea-time, right enough. But—but it's gone!"

"Gone!" groaned Blake. "This beats the band!"

"Oh dear!" Trimble looked on the verge of tears. "Oh, dear! I say, you chaps, it must be here somewhere!"

"Look here," said Blake, fixing a sudden, terrifying glance on the fat junior. "If this is one of your tricks, Trimble—"

"Bai Jove! If Twimble has been here and scoffed it all!"

"Oh dear! Of course I haven't!" wailed Trimble earnestly. "I know no more about it than you do! Oh crikey, this is awful! And I went without any rotten tea to leave plenty of room! Oh crumbs!"

"It wasn't Trimble this time!" said Tom Merry grimly. "That's pretty clear. Even Trimble couldn't make away with all the stuff that was here. It—it's the giddy limit! I—I wonder—"

A sudden startling thought seemed to occur to Tom.

"Figgins!" he gasped. "I wonder if those New House worms have pinched it? Oh, my hat!"

"Goodness knows how they could know about it!" said Blake. "Though—though I remember now that Figgy grinned at me rather queerly at call-over."

"Bai Jove!"

"It's possible!" said Tom Merry. "Those New House chaps are jolly keen, you know! It's just what they would do. But—but what's to be done, chaps?"

"Goodness knows—unless we raid their dorm!" said Blake hopefully. "They'd take it there to have a dorm feed, I suppose."

"I hardly think so!" said Levison, shaking his head. "Even Figgy wouldn't risk being spotted carting the stuff upstairs, if there was as much tuck as you fellows say."

"That's so!" agreed Tom Merry gloomily. "Oh, my hat, what a giddy sell! Somebody's done us brown, and no mistake! I—I can't think it can be those New House chaps, though. I think Racke & Co. have got to know somehow—especially if Trimble's been gassing about it!"

"I tell you I haven't!" wailed Trimble. "I haven't breathed a single word, you idiot!"

"Then, they've seen us, or something!" grunted Blake. "What about trotting over to the barn to make sure, chaps? We'll soon prove it, and if they've got the stuff we may get a chance to do them down again and recover it."

"Well, we can do that," grunted Tom. "It's not far, anyway, and if they haven't got it, then we'll know Figgy's got it. And if he has—"

"We'll go after it—even if we have to raid their blessed dorm!" snorted Herries.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Hear, hear!"

"That's the programme, then!" said Tom, his eyes gleaming with determination. "We're not going to all this trouble for nothing! Not likely! We've raided Figgins & Co. in their dorm before, and we'll do it again. Come on—no time to be lost!"

In a moment lights were extinguished, and, removing the obstruction from the door, Tom Merry led the way out into the starlit night again. The good spirits of the party had vanished utterly now, and they followed Tom in gloomy silence as he led the way to the school wall. They knew their hope of recovering the good things was a slim one whoever had the stuff. As Monty Lowther lugubriously remarked, they had been "done brown" by someone.

It was not a cheering thought, and scarcely anyone spoke until Pepper's Barn loomed up ahead of them. Tom Merry gave a whispered warning, and the juniors halted.

There was no light in the upper part of the barn, but from the little window of the basement room came a gleam of light.

"Not a sound, mind!" breathed Tom Merry. "Now for it!"

He crept up to the little window. It was partly covered by a sack, or something, from within. The window was only a sheet of glass, and one corner of that was broken, leaving a gap through which a hand could be put.

As he peeped through Tom Merry could have yelled with astonishment. But luckily he didn't.

The lamp inside was close to the window, and it was a good lamp, shedding a clear light on every corner of the little room. It showed two card-tables, piled high with

things good to eat, and one or two boxes likewise piled with the same. It also showed Knox, and Cutts & Co., and Racke & Co., seated on other boxes. A pleasant and appetising scent of freshly-made coffee floated out to the juniors.

All this was, after all, not so very surprising to Tom Merry & Co. The general opinion among them had been that Racke & Co. had somehow discovered their plot, and had "raided the raiders," so to speak. What was surprising to them, however, was the sight of ten juniors ranged along the opposite wall, seated on the floor, with their hands tied behind them, and with wrath and disgust in their faces.

"Figgy!" breathed Tom Merry. "Well—well, upon my word! This beats cock-fighting! Just look, you fellows!"

He moved cautiously aside, and his chums, one after the other, peeped in at the amazing scene.

What did it mean? It was really a most remarkable affair to Tom Merry & Co.

"What—what can it mean?" breathed Lowther.

"Quiet—come over here!" whispered Tom Merry.

He led the way away from the window.

"Now listen!" he said. "Goodness knows what old Figgy and his pals are doing there, though I've got a vague idea. But never mind it now. The point is we've got to do something."

"What can we do?" growled Herries. "Knox and those other brutes are too good for us to tackle."

"I know that!" said Tom Merry, his eyes gleaming in the gloom. "We've got to use strategy, my lads! We're not going to lose that feed after all the trouble we've been put to. I've got an idea. We've got to free Figgins and his lot first."

"Bai Jove! But why—"

"To help us, of course!" said Tom. "They'll help us jolly quickly against those cads. And there's enough to go round for the lot of us—if my idea comes off. With Figgy and us joining forces, we'll easily deal with Knox's lot—if it happens to prove necessary. But I don't think it will. Now, listen! I want one of you to be ready by the window here—you'll do, Lowther! I'm going in the barn up above with these chaps. When you hear me give a yell, shove your arm through this window and turn the lamp out. You'll have to be pretty slippery, mind!"

"But what's the idea?"

"This!" grinned Tom. "Those chaps are funks—every man of them! I'm going to play ghost. Everybody at St. Jim's knows this old show's supposed to be haunted. Well, I'm going to drop through into the cellar right amongst them the moment you turn the lamp out, Lowther. It's pretty certain Cutts & Co. know nothing about those loose floorboards, though Figgy may. See the wheeze? There's an old piece of white sheeting in the barn that will just do for the job."

"Bai Jove! Wippin'!"

"Just think what a shock they'll get when I drop down among them from nowhere!" chuckled Tom. "They'll fairly howl and bolt for their lives—Racke and his lot will, anyway."

"They certainly will!" chuckled Blake. "But what if things go wrong, Tommy?"

"If they do, then we'll cut Figgy & Co. loose and rush 'em!" grinned Tom. "We're not going to lose that feed, in any case! Now come on!"

With great caution Tom led them to the barn, Lowther returning to his post at the basement window.

In a moment the door was opened and the juniors crept cautiously inside. Carefully and noiselessly Tom struck a match, while Arthur Augustus switched on his pocket-torch.

"Here we are!" grinned Tom. "This'll do the trick!"

He picked up a bundle of linen—linen that had once been white and clean, but now was anything but white and clean. It would, however, be white enough in the dark for the purpose.

"This has been here since last term when Glyn gave his cinema show here," murmured Tom Merry. "A bit of luck and no mistake! Here goes!"

Tom draped the sheet about him carefully.

"Ready, chaps!" he murmured, with a quiet chuckle. "Now, when I give the signal, watch for the light to go out below; when it does, whip these two loose boards up like lightning. Understand?"

"Quite!"

CHAPTER 9.

Peace and Plenty!

"O OOOOOH!"

That wailing note echoed and re-echoed in the quiet, lonely barn.

It had scarcely died away when the slit of light showing through the floorboards vanished, which told the juniors that Monty Lowther had done his part of the plot.

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As the light abruptly vanished there came from below startled, frightened gasps. At the same moment Blake and Levison swiftly and deftly raised the loose floorboards.

Only blackness, save for the dim glow of the wick of the lamp below, showed, and in a flash Tom Merry dropped through, making scarcely a sound as he landed on the stone floor below in his rubber shoes.

And as he landed he groaned—a deep, bloodcurdling groan.

The effect was just what Tom Merry & Co. had expected and anticipated.

The gay blades of St. Jim's were slackers and funks to a man, more or less, and that first terrifying howl from above had already terrified them. Then the sudden inexpressible snuffing out of the lamp had added to that terror. And then, as they sat, dumbfounded and scared, had come that terrifying white, shrouded form in their midst, from which the bloodcurdling groan had proceeded.

It was certainly no wonder Knox & Co. were scared—indeed, the gallant Figgins & Co. themselves were scared. They sat still, their mouths suddenly dry, and queer prickly feelings under their scalps.

But Knox & Co. were far more scared. There was a dead silence in which they could hear each other's watches ticking.

It did not last long, however. The shadowy white form moved, and again came a deep, agonised groan. And as it rang out, Racke gave vent to a queer, choking gasp. Then he leaped to his feet and jumped for the door.

His action seemed to break the spell that bound the party, and in a flash, Crooke, Scrope, and Clampe were struggling madly round the door. The door was torn open and they swarmed out, yelling with fright, and vanished into the night.

Scarcely two seconds later Cutts, Gilmore, and St. Leger and Prye had followed, and as they went, Knox seemed to wake up, and he followed them, his long legs taking him out of the room in two enormous strides.

From the shrouded form came a deep chuckle. Then the sheet was wrenched off, and Tom Merry called out:

"All serene, you chaps! Come down here, quick! What price the ghost, Figgy?"

"Oh! M-my hat! It—it's Tom Merry!" came Figgins' rather feeble voice in the gloom.

"Yes, it's little me!" chuckled Tom, striking a match and lighting the lamp again. "I think it's safe enough now. Those merchants will be half-way back to the school by this time, I should think. Here you are, Lowther! Good man! You managed it, then?"

Lowther came through the door just then, grinning cheerfully.

"Easy as winking!" he said. "They were all too busy feeding to spot me. What about the giddy ghost, Figgy? What? Why, you're as white as a sheet, old chap!"

The triumphant School House juniors swarmed down into the lower room and looked at the amazed New House juniors with cheery grins. Figgins & Co. certainly did look white.

"Oh! It—it's you rotters!" gasped Figgins, licking his lips. "You—you silly asses! We—we did get a start, I'll admit. It was so utterly unexpected. And—and you know the yarn about this place being haunted."

He shivered even yet!

"Sorry to frighten you!" murmured Tom Merry blandly. "But it was necessary, my little men! I think we can call this a School House score after all. I fancy I can guess how you got here, Figgy."

"How the thump were we to know you chaps had raided the grub from those cads?" snorted Figgins, pulling himself together. "We nearly did you, anyway!"

"But not quite!" grinned Tom. "So you did raid our grub, then?"

"Of course we did!" grunted Kerr. "We brought it here, thinking this would be a ripping place to have it. Then those cads turned up and bowled us over."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

As the School House juniors understood fully they doubled up and roared with laughter.

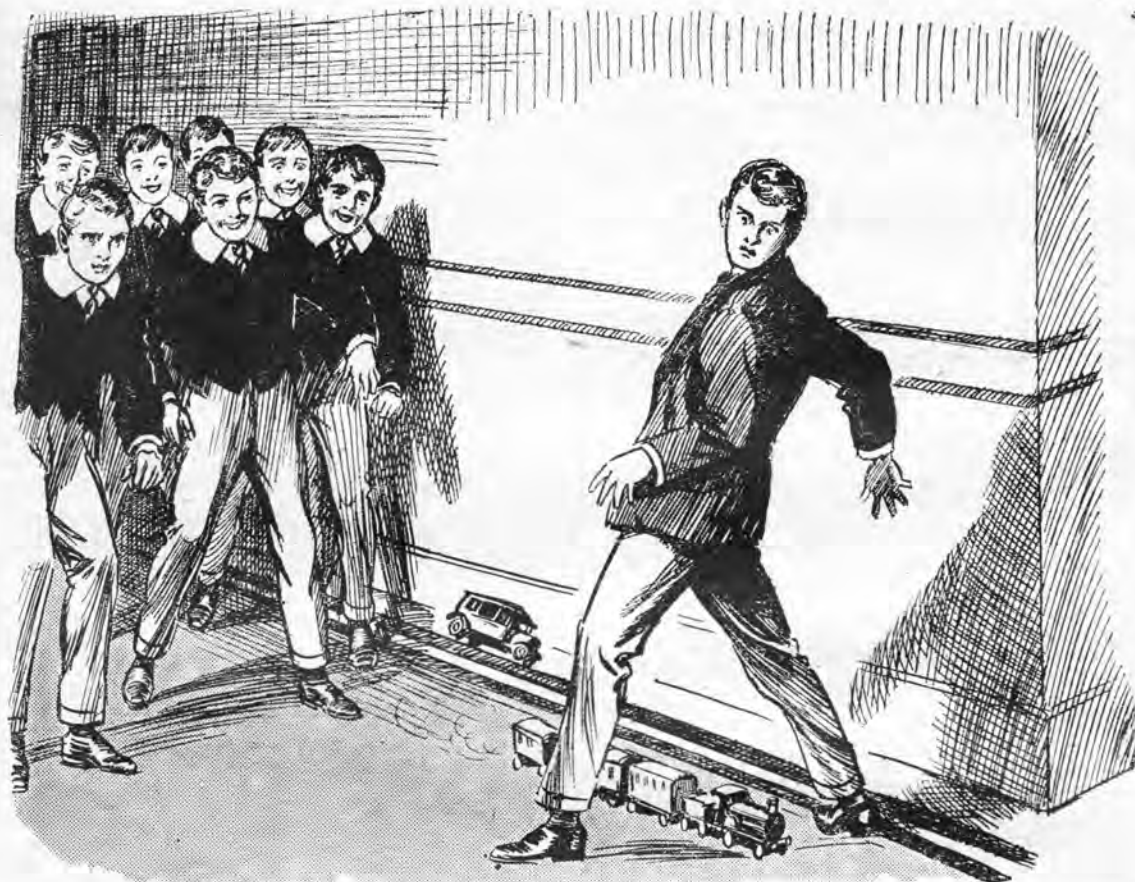
"Oh, my hat!" chorled Tom Merry. "What a giddy scream! We raided Knox's lot, and brought the grub to the woodshed, and you raided us and brought the stuff back here again! Then Knox's lot raided you, and—and—Oh, my hat! Here we are again!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I can see so much fun in it," said Figgy, though he was grinning ruefully. "Look here, why not cut us loose, and we'll whack out the grub between us!"

"Why, you cheeky ass—" Tom was beginning, when he paused, holding up a warning hand. And as he did so, foot-steps sounded, and then a voice—Knox's voice.

"Come back, you silly fools!" the Sixth-Former was yelling furiously. "Didn't I tell you it was a trick? Couldn't



Tom Merry and Blake took their prizes from the boxes, wound them up, and started them off along the passage. The motor-car ran into the wall and turned over, but the engine went full speed ahead. At that moment Kildare turned the corner, and he only just avoided a collision by jumping with his legs astride. (See Chapter 4.)

you hear the little scoundrels laughing, hang 'em! Come on!"

"Oh crumbs! That's done it!" gasped Blake, jumping to the door.

"All serene!" answered Tom Merry swiftly. "Let 'em come! You asked for your whack of the feed just now, Figg. Well, I'll cut you free, and you can earn your whack by helping us put it across Knox!"

"Good man!" said Figgins.

Knox was already wrenching at the door, the light alone telling him that his suspicions were only too true. In a flash Tom Merry, Herries, D'Arcy, and Manners were slashing at the cords that bound Figgins & Co. And just as a charge from without sent the door flying open, Figgins & Co. scrambled up, rubbing their sore wrists, but ready enough for anything.

It soon came. Knox, followed by Cutts, St. Leger, Gilmore, and Prye came rushing into the room. They gasped as they saw and recognised Tom Merry & Co.

"Oh!" panted Knox, his face going red with sudden rage. "It was you, was it? I'll—I'll make you smart for this, you little rotters! Collar them, Cutts!"

With the words, Gerald Knox made a savage rush, and his arms went round Tom Merry. In a flash half a dozen fellows had swarmed over the tall prefect and brought him down, shouting in his amazement and rage.

At the same time Cutts & Co. were surrounded, and next moment they were fighting and scrambling furiously. But their chances were practically nil against twenty odd determined juniors, for Figgins & Co. were among the first to attack.

In the ordinary way, the juniors would have hesitated at attacking a Sixth-Former and a prefect; but they did not hesitate now—far from it. Knox was caught "out." He was breaking rules—indeed, his offence, in consorting with juniors for unlawful purposes was a very serious one indeed. Whatever it would mean to the juniors, it would certainly mean the sack for him if it came to the ears of those in authority.

The juniors knew this. They knew that whatever happened, Gerald Knox would never dare to report them!

So they piled on Gerald Knox, quite enjoying the chance of paying off a few old scores. He rolled on the floor amidst a scrambling swarm of juniors, his voice raised high with threats and furious exclamations.

It was soon over—though the room was like a Bedlam while it lasted. Cutts was the last to go down, but even his resistance gave way when Fatty Wynn and Kerr sat on his chest.

"That's settled 'em!" panted Tom Merry, tenderly stroking an eye that had come into violent contact with Knox's fist. "I shall have a black eye in the morning; but it was worth it. Now line the beauties up along the wall there. I expect Racke, like Charlie's aunt, is still running."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's it!" said Figgins breathlessly. "Treat 'em as they treated us. They can watch us feed!"

"Hear, hear!"

"You—you little fiends!" panted Knox hoarsely. "I'll make you pay for this, you see if I don't! You'll regret this business! You'll see if you can handle a prefect—Grroooogh! Mum-mum-mum-m-m-m!"

Knox's final remarks ended in a choking gurgle as Figgins cheerfully plastered a custard-tart over his face.

"Waste of good stuff!" he remarked. "But that's what you'll get if you keep on chinwagging, Knox. And the same to you, Cutts, old chap! I don't like your language at all! Another word, and you get a jam-tart. Understand?"

Cutts did understand! His remarks after that were made under his breath, as were the remarks of Gerald Knox and the rest.

"And now let's get down to it!" called Tom Merry, casting a hungry eye over the foodstuffs, which had, fortunately, not been touched. "For this night only House rows are off, and School House and New House will bury the hatchet and use the knife and fork of peace instead!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hear, hear!"

"I see that Fatty Wynn and Trimble have already started, gentlemen!" went on Tom Merry grimly. "So, unless

we're willing to allow them to polish off the spoils of victory on their giddy own, I vote we get down to it!"

"Ha, ha! Yes!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

And Tom Merry & Co., and Figgins & Co., did "get down to it" in deadly earnest. They had been hungry before, and the sharp scrap had added to their hunger. Without further loss of time they started work on the good things, and soon hungry jaws were at work what time Knox and his fellow seniors looked on with feelings too deep for words, and with faces black and savage with helpless rage.

It was a feast of the gods, and when the juniors had had enough there was still plenty of tuck left. Trimble, who had started to stuff his pockets, having no more room, apparently, inside him, was stopped by Tom Merry.

"No taking grub to school, you fat pig!" he exclaimed grimly. "It may start inquiries if crumbs are found in your bed, you fat ass! You've had enough, and I think we can afford to leave the founders of this ripping feast a little, what?"

"Just a little!" agreed Figgins, smiling at Knox's glittering glare. "We'll leave them to clear up, too—eh?"

"Ha, ha! Yes, rather!"

And, roaring with laughter, Tom Merry & Co., and Figgins & Co. buttoned up their coats, and bade the fuming seniors good-bye, Tom Merry staying a moment to release St. Leger's hands, so that he could release his companions in distress. And then the happy, well-fed raiders left the barn and started cheerily back to St. Jim's, being agreed amongst themselves that, though St. Jim's was under faddist rule, there were still times when life was worth living.

CHAPTER 10.

The Latest!

"TURN out, you fellows! Cricket practice, you know!" Tom Merry spoke mildly but briefly as he looked in at the doorway of Study No. 7 on the Shell passage.

It was some days after the Pepper's Barn affair, and by that time the affair had almost disappeared from Tom Merry's memory.

But it clearly had not gone from Racke's memory. He gave the junior skipper of St. Jim's a bitter glare. It was the only way that Racke dared to express his feelings towards Tom Merry in the matter.

As Racke did not reply, Tom went on impatiently. He was on his way down to Little Side himself, and he had looked in on Racke & Co. to remind them not to be late—as those dingy slackers usually were, if they were unable to dodge practice at all. But Tom wanted to be getting on. It was his duty, however, as junior skipper to see that the slackers did turn up.

"Come along, Racke!" he snapped. "I can't hang about all the afternoon seeing to you fellows. Compulsory practice to-day and you've got to turn up! Get a move on!"

Racke looked at Crooke and Scrope, who were with him in the study. Crooke and Scrope looked rather uneasy.

"Sorry!" said Racke, his glare giving place suddenly to a sneering grin. "I'm not taking part in practice this afternoon. Call again some other time, and shut the door after you this time."

Tom Merry flushed, and his blue eyes glistened. He wasn't used to being spoken to in that manner by the cad of the Shell. He could not help seeing, however, that there was something behind Racke's bold defiance.

"What d'you mean, Racke?" he asked, in dangerous tones. "I haven't excused you practice, and I'm certain Kildare hasn't. Has Railton? If he has, well and good! But—"

"Railton hasn't!" smiled Racke. "But I'm excused for all that. I explained to Mrs. Crankley that I was not up to the mark to-day, and she's excused me. These other chaps," added Racke, waving airily to Crooke and Scrope, "are also feeling seedy, and they're excused too. That good enough?"

And Racke began to whistle softly, the while he stared insolently and triumphantly at Tom Merry.

"So that's it?" said Tom.

"Just that!"

Tom Merry bit his lip hard. He was amazed and quite taken aback by the information that Mrs. Crankley, the Head's wife, had given fellows permission to "cut" cricket practice. Such an amazing possibility had never entered his wildest dreams. It was a thing that simply wasn't done.

Yet it had been done. And Tom Merry felt quite disconcerted; he also felt very angry. He understood now just how Mr. Linton and the other masters felt when kindly and well-meaning Mrs. Crankley "butted in" on matters that did not concern her—or ought not to have concerned her.

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But it made Tom still more furious to know that Racke and the other slackers had taken advantage of her innocence of school matters and customs in order to further their own lazy ends. Racke & Co. had obviously been to her, knowing full well her dislike of cricket, and that they would easily get her sympathy. It had amazed Tom Merry that they had dared to do it, however.

"So that's your game, is it?" exclaimed Tom again, his face flushing. "You—you snivelling worm, Racke! You know that Mrs. Crankley has no right whatever to excuse you—only Mr. Railton, or Kildare, or myself can do that."

"Better tell the old girl so!" yawned Racke. "Trimble says she was most indignant at the news that poor little fellows like us should be forced to play such a brutal and dangerous game against our wills. She says she's going to speak about it to old Crank."

And Racke chuckled softly.

Tom Merry frowned angrily.

"So Trimble's in it, too?" he said thickly.

"It was dear old Trimble who started it," said Racke. "The crafty fat beggar thought of the wheeze, and it came off. And as we happened to be feeling seedy, too, we tried it on. It came off all right, and several chaps have tried it on. Shut the door after you, old chap; it's draughty!"

And Racke yawned again and sank back into his easy chair. Apparently he was quite certain he was on safe ground.

Tom Merry stood undecided for a couple of seconds, and then he turned abruptly and left the room, slamming the door after him. From behind the closed door he heard a yell of laughter as he walked away, and he gritted his teeth with anger.

Racke & Co. had scored—or they believed they had!

But Tom Merry was not done yet. He did not go down to the changing-room, but went straight along to Kildare's room. Tom did not often—very rarely, indeed—go to Kildare for advice. He knew Kildare expected him to paddle his own canoe. Yet in this case Tom felt such a course was necessary.

Kildare was in his study, as it happened, and he gasped as Tom related the facts to him.

"Well, I'm dashed!" he said, his handsome face growing grim. "The lazy slackers were malingering, of course!"

"I can't say that!" said Tom quietly.

"It's pretty clear!" said Kildare. "I'm glad you came to me, though, Merry. What the thump's the school coming to? This won't do at all. Mrs. Crankley's a dear old soul, but—there's a limit. She'd no right whatever to excuse those fellows."

"I know that!" said Tom. "But she's done it. I want to know if I am to accept her order, or to yank those fellows along to practice, Kildare?"

Kildare frowned, plainly at a loss. But it was not for long. He set his lips suddenly.

"No!" he said firmly. "School laws are school laws, and you are to ignore her rulings, Merry. I'll be responsible. I'll have a talk to Mr. Railton about it. But until he states otherwise we're sticking to our rights. As junior skipper, you can go and yank those slackers along to the cricket field, Merry. If they won't go quietly—well, take 'em forcibly."

"Right, Kildare!"

It was quite enough for Tom Merry, and he left the study abruptly. Much as he liked the Head's wife personally—no decent fellow could help liking and respecting her—he felt she had gone much too far in interfering in cricket matters. He was going to carry through Kildare's orders, come what may.

His face was grim as he looked into his own study. Lowther and Manners were there, just about to go down to the cricket.

"Oh, good!" said Tom. "Come along, chaps! I want your help to cart Racke and his pals to the cricket."

"What ho!" said Lowther.

They listened in amazement to Tom's story; and they were as indignant as he was in the matter. The three hurried from the study, and outside they met Blake & Co. Blake was grinning rather queerly.

"Just coming to see you, old chap!" said Blake. "It's about Trimble and Mellish. They won't come to the cricket—some yarn about Mrs. Crankley giving them permission to be absent. What about it?"

"Nothing about it," snapped Tom, "excepting that Kildare's orders are that they're to turn up for practice. We're going to help them to turn up. Come along!"

And Tom marched to Study No. 7 and flung the door open.

Racke jumped up from his chair as the crowd filed in, their faces determined. The slacker and cad of the Shell looked a little uneasy now.

"Look here, what's this game?" he began.

"Cricket!" said Tom briefly. "Coming quietly, you chaps, or shall we have to boot you down to the ground?"

"Look here!" blustered Racke. "Mrs. Crankley—"

"We've heard all that before," said Tom. "I've seen Kildare, Racke. His orders are that we're to carry you down to practice if you won't go willingly. Ready?"

Racke looked daggers at the junior captain. But he knew Tom Merry was speaking the truth.

"I won't go!" he snapped, setting his teeth. "I've been excused by the Head's wife, and that's good enough for me if it isn't for you, you howling cads! Clear out! I'm not—Here—"

Racke's words ended in a gasp as Blake and Herries grabbed him. They took an arm each and fairly rushed him outside. Tom and D'Arcy went towards Crooke, whilst Manners, Lowther, and Digby went for Scrope.

"It's all right!" almost yelled those two worthies. "We'll come, hang you! But you'll get it hot for this—defying Mrs. Crankley!"

"We'll risk it, old top!" said Tom. "Yank them along!"

But only Racke needed yanking along. Tom led the way to Trimble's study on the Fourth passage. Trimble was lounging in the basket-chair, alone in his glory. He leaped up as the juniors filed in.

"Here, wharrer you fellows want?" he said, staring at Racke, who was still in the grip of Blake and Herries. "Look here, I'm not coming—"

"I think you are!" grinned Tom Merry, grabbing him by the shoulders and placing a boot behind him. "Out you go!"

"Yarroooop! I tell you I'm ill!" howled Trimble, as he was propelled through the doorway into the passage. "I'm jolly well not going to play cricket when I'm ill! Yah!"

With that Baggy Trimble flopped down on the linoleum and refused to budge an inch.

"Better come, you fat ass!" said Tom, unable to resist a laugh. "We know you're only shamming illness, you fat slacker! Come along!"

"I'm not coming!" howled Trimble indignantly. "I'm weak and ill—faint and feeble for want of decent grub! It's bad enough to be in such a state without having to play brutal games on a diet like we get! Yah! I've been excused by the Head's wife, I tell you! Isn't that good enough? Lemme alone!"

"It isn't quite good enough!" snapped Tom. "I've my job to do, and I'm doing it! Up you get!"

"I jolly well won't! Touch me and I'll tell Mrs. Crankley!" howled Trimble. "Yah! You daren't make me go! I tell you—Yooop! Oh, crikey! Yarroooooogh!"

Trimble's howls echoed along the corridor as Blake hauled him upright and planted a hefty boot behind the fat spoofer. But Trimble meant them to echo. His one desire just then was to bring somebody in authority on the scene. Trimble hated exertion of any kind, and he cordially detested cricket.

"Stop that silly row!" hissed Tom Merry. "You burbling idiot, you've got to come, so it's no good—Oh, my hat!"

Tom Merry broke off in dismay, for just at that moment, as Trimble was struggling in the grasp of Lowther and Digby, who should come sailing along the passage but Mrs. Crankley herself! It was well known that she had a genius for coming along at the wrong moment.

"Good gracious!" she exclaimed, raising her hands in alarm. "Whatever are you rough boys doing to that poor child? Let him go, this instant! I am ashamed of you, boys!"

"Oh, bai Jove!" The "rough boys" released the yelling Baggy as if he had become suddenly red-hot. Tom Merry blushed to the roots of his hair.

"Yarroooooogh!" roared Trimble, though nobody was touching him then. "Save me! I've told you I'm too ill to play such an exhausting game as cricket! Stop bullying me, you awful bullies! Ow-wow!"

"Shurrup, you snivelling little worm!" hissed Blake.

But it was too late to shut Trimble up. Indeed, Trimble had no intention of being shut up at all. His little eyes were glinting spitefully. He was hurt, and he meant to make somebody sit up for it.

"I am surprised—shocked at your conduct, boys!" said Mrs. Crankley, patting Trimble's fat shoulder gently, and at the same time eyeing the juniors in warm indignation. "More shocked still as I see that two of you were boys who recently earned my weekly prize for good behaviour. It is very, very wrong to bully weaker boys like this, especially a boy who is weak and ill."

"We—we weren't bullying him, ma'am!" gasped Tom Merry feebly, his face going a rich crimson. "We—we were only—only trying to persuade him to come down to the cricket."

"But I distinctly saw this big, rough boy here kick the

(Continued on next page.)

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CASH

poor little lamb!" said the Head's wife, eyeing the blushing Blake indignantly. "I am sorry—nay, deeply grieved to discover such shocking bullying going on at this school! Kindly release those others boys also!"

Racke was instantly released, as were Crooke and Scrope, who had been held in case they took it into their heads to bolt. Racke grinned openly in Tom Merry's face.

"This is very distressing to me," went on the old lady, giving the sniffling Trimble a sympathetic smile. "You say you were dragging this poor boy down to that terrible cricket game?" she added, turning on Tom Merry.

"Ye-es, ma'am!" gasped Tom. "It's compulsory practice to-day for every fellow, unless—unless he's ill or been excused for some other good reason."

"But I distinctly heard this unhappy boy telling you that he was ill!" protested Mrs. Crankley. "Did he not explain that I had excused him?"

"Of course I did, ma'am!" mumbled Baggy Trimble. "I told them you'd excused me, ma'am!"

"Yes, he did, ma'am," admitted Tom Merry feebly, as Mrs. Crankley looked at him. "But—but you see, I'm junior captain of cricket at St. Jim's, and it's my job to see the fellows turn up. And—and only Mr. Railton or Kildare or myself has the—the power to—to—"

Tom stammered and stopped, covered in confusion and unable to finish. Mrs. Crankley stamped her foot.

"This matter of forcing delicate boys to play such brutal and exhausting games is dreadful and wicked!" she said, with rising indignation. "It must be stopped without delay. I have already discussed the matter with Dr. Crankley, who fully shares my views. Indeed, he is even now contemplating stopping that terrible cricket game altogether."

"Oh!"

"Bai Jove!"

There was a startled gasp of stupefaction at that bit of news. And at that moment Knox of the Sixth came along. He stopped, his sharp eyes scanning the dismayed faces of Tom Merry & Co. It was well known that Knox's opinion of Dr. and Mrs. Crankley was as unflattering as it was unprintable. Yet Knox, in his eagerness to curry favour, never lost an opportunity of pushing himself forward in their presence. He did so now.

"What is the matter here, Mrs. Crankley?" he asked eagerly. "If there is anything I can do, ma'am—"

"Ah! It is you, Knox!" exclaimed Mrs. Crankley, though she eyed the senior in a far from admiring way. "I am just dealing with this matter of compulsory cricket. In my view it is simply scandalous that boys—many of them like this boy, delicate and unhealthy, should be forced against their wills to partake in such rough and brutalising games."

"I quite agree with you, ma'am!" purred Knox. "Cricket is certainly a brutal game and a waste of time. It is a game suitable only for young ruffians and hooligans. Merry and Blake, and several of these boys here now are examples. They are without doubt the worst boys in the school!"

"Indeed!" said Mrs. Crankley. She gave Knox a rather peculiar look. "Indeed!" she repeated a trifle coldly. "I am very sorry to hear you say that, Knox. However, would you be kind enough to ask Dr. Crankley to come here without delay?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am!"

Knox hurried away eagerly enough. He returned some moments later with Dr. Crankley, who was not looking very pleased. Dr. Crankley was known to be firm and strong, despite his mild manner. Yet it was also generally

known that Mrs. Crankley was the real power that ruled the destinies of St. Jim's.

Tom Merry & Co. looked at each other dismally. They felt they were "for it" now. And for bullying! It was too thick!

But they were wrong. Though Mrs. Crankley herself had no power to punish, she knew her husband had, and she was far too good-natured to attempt to get the juniors into trouble.

"I have asked you to come in order to settle this matter of compulsory cricket, Charles!" she said firmly. "The matter really cannot wait, my dear! This boy here," she added, looking at Tom Merry, "claims to be captain of the—er—cricket crew, and states that it is his duty to see that the boys play whether they wish to do so or not. It seems to me a scandalous state of affairs!"

"But I have already dealt with this matter," said Dr. Crankley, peering severely over his glasses at the crimson and unhappy junior skipper. "My order to the effect that compulsion in the matter of games must cease forthwith was placed on the notice board at least ten minutes ago. Did you not see it, boy?"

"No, sir!" gasped Tom.

"Then you had better read it without delay, my boy. On the same notice board was an order to the effect that all boys not wishing to play cricket were to give their names in without delay to the school captain."

"Kildare is down on Little Side at the moment, I believe, sir," said Knox officiously.

"Oh, indeed! Then I think you had better get a list of the boys yourself, if you would kindly do so," said Dr. Crankley. "I should like it at the earliest possible moment."

"Oh, yes, sir! Certainly, sir!"

"Very good! Kindly bring the list to me instead of Mr. Railton, Knox."

"Certainly, sir!"

Dr. Crankley and Mrs. Crankley ambled away, Mrs. Crankley giving Trimble a kindly pat as she went. Trimble grinned after her, and then he grinned at Tom Merry.

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Tom.

Knox took out a folded envelope from his pocket. "Any of you kids want to dodge cricket?" he grinned. Racke returned his grin—gleefully. It was a great moment for the slackers of St. Jim's.

"What-ho!" he chortled. "Put me down, Knox."

"And me!" chimed in the rest of the slackers.

"Come on, chaps!" snapped Tom Merry.

He led the chums away, leaving Knox busily engaged writing down the names of Aubrey Racke & Co. The sight was not a pleasing one to the junior skipper of St. Jim's. Half dazed and deep in gloom, Tom Merry led the way down to Little Side, where he related what had taken place to the amazed Kildare. It fairly flattened Kildare—especially the hint that the new Head was actually contemplating stopping cricket altogether! And both Tom Merry and Eric Kildare contemplated the future with dire apprehension.

CHAPTER 11.

Not So Nice After All!

"RACKE!"

"Yes, Knox!"

"You're to get your cap and coat on and report in the quad by the School House in five minutes."

"Wha-at?" Aubrey Racke jumped. "Wha-at the thump do you mean, Knox?"

"What I say!" snapped Knox, who seemed to be as uneasy as he was short-tempered. "You and all the fellows who gave in their names as not wishing to play cricket are to report as I said. Better get a move on!"

And with that Gerald Knox stamped away.

Racke, Crooke, and Scrope looked at each other quite alarmed.

"What the dickens does it mean, Racke?" gasped Crooke. "Caps and coats, eh? Phew! I thundering well hope it doesn't mean a dashed walk for us or something like that," said Scrope.

"How the thump should I know?" snarled Racke. "Oh, hang the luck!"

It was really rather a shock to Racke & Co., and certainly a disappointment. They had only just returned to their study, with delightful anticipations of a nice quiet afternoon behind locked doors, with banker and cigarettes to pass the time away—in their view a much pleasanter occupation than cricket!

And now—what did it mean? When the Head had ordered names to be given in they had not been disturbed—why should they be? They had certainly not expected it

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would mean. The Head had some other occupation in view for them instead of cricket.

"It may be nothing," said Scrope hopefully. "It may just be that the Head insists we should spend the afternoon out of doors—you know what a silly fresh-air faddist he is."

Racke grunted, and a few minutes later all were on their way out of doors in their caps and scarves and coats. Scrope's words had raised Racke's hopes a little. It was quite possible that the Head would suggest that they should spend the time out of doors, taking a gentle walk, for instance.

He devoutly hoped so, at all events. There were plenty of places where one could have a quiet smoke, anyway. To their surprise, they found quite a crowd of fellows waiting in the quad, lined up in two ranks. Trimble was there, and Mellish, and Clampe, and Boulton, and Buck Finn, and Gibbons, and Tompkins, and Skimpole, and Chowle, and nearly a dozen other fellows of both Houses, who did not seem keen on playing cricket that afternoon. And they all wore looks of dismay and apprehension.

"What's the thumping game?" snapped Racke, joining Clampe at the end of the first line. "You know, Clampe?"

"Goodness knows!" said Clampe glumly. "But I don't like the look of it. Old Knox seems savage, too—hope to goodness that bad-tempered rotter ain't booked to take us out for a walk!"

"Confound it!" snarled Racke; and his face grew savage at the thought.

Every fellow in the two lines of slackers was asking the same question, and nobody seemed to know the answer. One or two more joined the ranks, and then suddenly Knox made his appearance. His face was like that of a fiend.

"What—what the dickens is the matter with the chap?" asked Racke apprehensively. "He looks— Oh, good—good gad!"

Racke almost fell down just then. Mrs. Crankley had appeared on the School House steps.

The good lady was dressed in rather ancient walking attire!

The very sight of her standing there was quite enough for the slackers' brigade. They felt instinctively that they knew what it meant.

"Oh, good—good lor!" ejaculated Crooke. "The old girl isn't going to take us out, surely?"

"M-mum-my hat!"

But the "old girl" was!

The slackers' brigade had over-reached themselves for once!

The juniors all understood that look on Knox's face now. Gasps of hopeless dismay ran along the two lines of dumbfounded cricket-dodgers!

Mrs. Crankley smiled down at them, quite oblivious of the dread feelings the sight of her had aroused. She looked rather a queer figure in her ancient walking-skirt, her

ancient gaiters, and her equally ancient bonnet. And she carried a bulky umbrella in her woollen-gloved hands.

"You are all ready, I see!" she exclaimed, beaming down at the juniors. "Excellent! As the doctor and I feared some of you might be tempted to spend the afternoon in your stuffy studies, I suggested that I should take you all out for a walk in the open air. Walking is an excellent exercise. I am sure you will all enjoy the walk, and will look forward with keen delight to our next little jaunt. Knox!"

"Yes, ma'am?" Knox's voice was husky with suppressed emotion.

"I think we will go through the village," smiled the Head's wife. "I will lead the way, and perhaps you will kindly bring up the rear. Thank you, Knox!"

The prefect's reply was inaudible. His face was a sight. Horrified as the slackers were, they felt like grinning at the look on it. It was very clear that Knox, in his sharp desire to curry favour, had let himself in for it this time.

That much was very clear.

By this time quite a crowd of onlookers had arrived—seniors and juniors who had not yet gone down to the cricket. Among them was Cardew. Cardew was something of a slacker at times, and actually he had been on the point of dodging the cricket practice himself—until he had heard that names had to be given in. That had warned off the keen-witted Ralph Reckness. He had guessed there was something behind it.

He saw he was right now, and he thanked his lucky stars that he had been so cautious.

"What a giddy scream!" he murmured to Clive, who was with him. "Oh, joy! Look at Knoxy-woxy's chivvy! Worth a guinea a box, ain't it? And Racke's will take some beating! Dear little fellows! Don't you feel sorry for 'em, Sidney?"

"Serve the sweeps right!" choked Clive, stuffing his handkerchief into his mouth. "I bet— Hallo! They're off!"

They were off!

Tramp, tramp, tramp!

Across the quad and under the old archway went the crocodile, Mrs. Crankley striding ahead, with Knox bringing up the rear, his face crimson with rage and humiliation. Knox would have given pounds at that moment to have been elsewhere. But he was there. He had done his best to get out of going when once he had heard what was "on." But Dr. Crankley had politely but firmly insisted that he should accompany the slackers; possibly the new Head, who was no fool, understood Knox's motives perfectly.

Past grinning faces, amidst stifled laughs and chuckles, went the slackers' brigade, only Mrs. Crankley seeming to be oblivious of the general hilarity her crocodile was arousing. As it filed through the old gateway into Rylcombe Lane, Taggles, the porter, nearly fell down, and all but swallowed his pipe, as he stared at it from the door of his lodge.

The tail of the crocodile—Gerald Knox, to wit—passed through the gates, and as he did so from the crowd behind came a howl:

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Quite entertainin', Sidney!" was Cardew's smiling comment. "I vote we wander down to cricket and tell dear old Tommy about this; it'll gladden his young heart, or I'm a giddy Dutchman!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" choked Sidney Clive. And he followed Cardew, as that youth, gurgling inwardly, led the way towards Little Side.

Meanwhile, the crocodile was wending its weary way towards the village. Walking alone was not at all pleasant, for there had been rain in the night.

But the hapless slackers' brigade gave no thought to weather conditions then. All they thought of was their humiliating plight. To have to walk "in croc" like a girls' school was bad enough; to be in charge of an elderly lady was far, far worse.

And the saddest reflection of all was that they had "asked for it!"

"Oh, good gad! This is frightful!" muttered Aubrey Racke, gritting his teeth. "Through the confounded village, too! I hope no dashed Grammarians are—are—"

Racke's remarks tailed off dismally, for at that moment

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three youths emerged from the stile that gave admittance to the path through Rylcombe woods. And the three were Gordon Gay, Frank Monk, and Harry Wootton, of Rylcombe Grammar School.

A chorus of deep groans passed along the crocodile. Gordon Gay & Co. stood as if petrified as they caught sight of the strange procession.

"G-goo! lor!" ejaculated Gordon Gay. "What—what on earth is it—a funeral procession?"

"It—it's a croc!" gulped Frank Monk. "Oh, my hat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Grammarians fairly howled with laughter.

"That old girl must be the new Head's wife," choked Gordon Gay. "I've heard something about her. I believe they're playing Old Harry at St. Jim's—giving 'em queer grub, and all that. Here, watch me put 'em out of step!"

And the mischievous Grammarian grabbed up a turf from one of the piles that had been dumped there and took quick aim.

Racke had anticipated such a move; but he was scarcely quick enough, for all that.

The turf whizzed within an inch of Crooke's ear and slopped home between Racke's collar and his neck.

"Yooop!" yelled Racke, in dismay.

He staggered backwards and sat down hard on the muddy lane, and over him sprawled Scrope, who was just behind. In a moment the crocodile was in confusion.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Gordon Gay & Co. "Here's some more!"

Whiz! Flop! Smack!

"Yoooop!"

Another whizzing turf found a billet—this time under Trimble's fat chin, and Trimble howled in dismay.

"Here, stop that, you young ruffians!" shouted Knox.

"Go it!" chuckled Gordon Gay. "Let that rotter Knox have one! He's a bullying brute, I believe! I— Oh, my hat! Hold on!"

Gay's sudden warning came just in time, for at that moment Mrs. Crankley came hurrying from the vanguard of the croc, her face showing her great alarm.

"Good gracious! Whatever is the matter, boys?"

"It's those Grammarian School hooligans!" said Knox, glaring at the Grammarians, who withheld their fire now Mrs. Crankley had appeared. "They've bombarded us with turfs."

Mrs. Crankley frowned at the grinning Grammarians and waved her umbrella.

"Go away, you rough boys!" she called indignantly. "If you do not go away I shall call a policeman! Go!"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Gordon Gay.

He was quite overcome at that terrifying threat.

Leaving the Grammarians standing there, the crocodile was formed into line again, and the march towards the village proceeded. Mrs. Crankley seemed quite relieved, but Racke & Co. were far from being relieved. Had they been returning homewards they might have been. But they knew Gordon Gay & Co. of old.

And they had need of their fears, had they known it! For as the crocodile resumed its weary way Gordon Gay gave vent to a deep chuckle.

"This is too rich for words, and far too good to miss, chaps!" he chuckled gleefully. "We haven't had a chance of scoring over those silly Saints for ages. I wish it had been Merry and his lot, though. Still, duffers like Racke and those others are better than nothing. I vote we give 'em it hot and strong when they come back. Hallo! Oh, good! Here's Jack and Tadpole!"

At that moment Jack Wootton and Tadpole emerged into view from the woods, and hurriedly Gordon Gay explained matters. They roared with laughter, and then all of them armed themselves with turfs from the piles by the wayside.

They were satisfied with their supplies of ammunition at last, and then they crouched down behind the hedge to watch and wait.

CHAPTER 12.

The Crowning Blow!

"O H dear!"

"I'm fed-up with this!" groaned Trimble.

"Catch me wanting to cut cricket after this!" groaned Clarence Yorke Tompkins dismally.

"We'll never hear the last of this, Racke!"

Racke muttered something below his breath; it was, perhaps, just as well he did mutter it below his breath. The whole crocodile was seething with groans and grumbles and bitter indignation.

It had proved to be worse than they had feared—far worse. The village urchins had been highly entertained by the queer procession—it was perhaps the first time they had ever seen St. Jim's fellows out "in croc," and it seemed to amuse them highly. They joined on to the tail of the

croc in ever growing numbers, and their remarks, humorous and otherwise, made the faces of the slackers crimson with wrath and humiliation.

But that was not all. The few shopkeepers, and the many villagers in Rylcombe seemed also highly entertained by the sight. At first they had stared, and then they had grinned, and made audible comments one to another—comments that made the slackers writhe.

Nor was that all. Mrs. Crankley had proved to be keenly interested in the village—its ancient church and its equally ancient old cottages and buildings. And she had insisted upon stopping the croc every few yards or so to point out and to expound upon the beauties of the ancient architecture.

The juniors and Knox had never noticed those beauties before, nor had they ever been interested in their ancient history. They were far from being interested now. Indeed, one and all—unless one excepted Herbert Skimpole, of the Shell—muttered remarks that were not loud but very, very, deep and uncomplimentary to Mrs. Crankley as she expounded.

But they were out of the village at last, and on their homeward way, and the village urchins had drifted away one by one as the "croc" left the outskirts behind them and tramped down Rylcombe Lane.

Then Racke had suddenly remembered Gordon Gay & Co. again. And he was thinking of those cheery jokers when Clarence Yorke Tompkins spoke to him so dismally.

So that only Aubrey Racke was not surprised when the attack came—and it came suddenly.

A sudden startled howl came from Baggy Trimble as a lump of turf sent his cap spinning away, and then a perfect volley splashed down amongst the startled slackers.

Flop, flop, flop!

"Yarrooooooh!"

"Oh, my hat! What! Yoooop!"

Smack! Thud! Wallop!

"Look out!" gasped Crooke. "Oh, great pip! It's those Grammarian rotters again!"

Startled yells of dismay and wrath went up, and once again the crocodile broke up in confusion—only more so this time. The hapless members of it danced and ducked and yelled as they tried in vain to dodge the flying missiles.

Luckily, Gordon Gay & Co. were good shots, and they took care that none of the turf went towards Mrs. Crankley. That good lady was transfixed with horrified surprise.

"Good—good gracious!" she gasped. "What—what is happening? Oh, those horrid hooligans again! Dear me, this is terrible!"

The old lady's voice ended in a shriek as Gordon Gay & Co. burst from the hedge and showed themselves, grabbing turfs piled at the side of the lane. Gay had already taken the measure of Racke & Co., and he did not anticipate much of a resistance from them—if any at all.

But he was sadly mistaken there. In the ordinary way, Racke and Co. would have taken it lying down rather than tackle such redoubtable fighters as Gordon Gay & Co. But circumstances alter cases.

Racke & Co. were seething with rage, and they had reached the end of their patience long ago. Knox had more than reached the end of his.

As a damp chunk of turf caught him under the chin, he gave a furious roar of rage.

"Go for 'em, you young fools!" he yelled. "They're only five! Smash 'em!"

And as he yelled, Knox made a furious rush at Gordon Gay. Frank Monk promptly slipped out a deft foot, and Knox went sprawling over it.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look out!" howled Gordon Gay, almost helpless with laughter. "The little fellows are showing fight. My hat! Here's Racke after our giddy blood! Have this one, Aubrey!"

Splosh!

Racke had it—he could not help having it. The turf caught him full in his furious face.

But others were behind Racke—more than a score of furious St. Jim's fellows. Gordon Gay had left their retreat just a trifle too late, and the next moment they were howled over in the muddy lane, with the raging St. Jim's slackers swarming over them.

Mrs. Crankley gazed on aghast at the alarming scene. But Knox and the others had forgotten her in their excitement and fury.

The next few moments were the most exciting Gordon Gay & Co. had ever experienced, possibly. Bitterly did they regret their error in remaining at close quarters. The slackers were showing fight with a vengeance.

But Gordon Gay & Co. soon realised their danger, and once on their feet again they began to use their fists with a right good will.

It was something that funks and slackers like Racke & Co. did not like at all. Turfs they could stand, though they did not like them. But iron-hard fists were different. In a



The shadowy form moved, and there came a deep, agonised groan. As it rang out, Racke gave vent to a queer, choking gasp. Then he leaped to his feet and jumped for the door. His action seemed to break the spell that bound the rest of the party, for in a flash Crooke, Scrope and Clampe were rushing madly for the door. (See Chapter 9.)

couple of seconds Gay and his chums had cleared a circle about them, the yelling swarm jumping back in alarm now, many of them hugging damaged noses and eyes.

"Run for it!" panted Gordon Gay suddenly. "Now!"

As he spoke, Gay butted Knox full in the waistcoat, and dived through the swarm, hitting out right and left, a grin on his heated face. His chums followed him, and the sheer force of their attack broke through the crowd, sending them howling back.

Next moment Gordon Gay & Co. were taking to their heels—going as Gay himself put it, while the going was good. And as they went they yelled with laughter.

They left only groans and lamentations behind them, however.

Knox staggered to his feet, his face black with passion, his clothes drenched through and bedraggled. He looked a shocking sight. They all looked more or less shocking sights—clothes covered with mud, collars torn loose, likewise ties. Aubrey Racke's nose was bleeding; Crooke nursed his eye and groaned; at least a dozen of the gallant band bore signs on their faces of that brief, whirling battle.

"Ow-yow!" panted Racke. "Oh, the cads! Ow-yow!"

"This—this is terrible—outrageous!" gasped Mrs. Crankley, her kindly face full of horror. "My poor boys! Those terrible ruffians shall suffer dearly for this outrage! Dr. Crankley will complain to their headmaster, the wicked boys!"

Nobody replied. Knox, almost beside himself with passion, started to do what he could to clean himself. Then he snarled rather than spoke.

"Get together!" he said. "Let's get back—sharp!"

The hapless slackers were only too glad to do that. Somehow, having recovered caps and scarves and gloves, the juniors formed up into something like order again, and the weary trail was resumed to St. Jim's. It was a sad

and silent home-coming. Mrs. Crankley was still looking dazed.

But the slackers' cup of bitterness was not full yet. It became full—indeed it overflowed—when they reached the gates of St. Jim's.

For round the gateway, obviously awaiting their return, was a crowd of grinning juniors and fags and seniors. Inside the gates were scores more, obviously waiting for the same purpose.

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Racke. "This is awful! Oh, the—the grinning cads!"

Knox said nothing. His face was black with rage, and his eyes glinted. Looking neither to left nor right, he strode on at the end of the crocodile. It wended its way through the gates, and then across the quad, to the steps of the School House, amidst a continuous chorus of splutters and roars of laughter.

With burning faces the luckless slackers vanished inside the School House. Then a certain amount of the restraint made necessary by Mrs. Crankley's presence gave way, and a perfect howl of laughter went up from the fellows in the quad, many of whom were still in cricket attire.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Even Kildare was laughing, and Tom Merry was nearly choking with laughter. In fact, the sad fate that had befallen the slackers of St. Jim's made the rest of the school rock with mirth. And it was generally agreed that it served them right, and that there was likely to be no more fellows eager to "cut" cricket practice after that afternoon!

Until tea-time St. Jim's laughed over the affair. But tea in Hall under faddist rule was not a happy meal, and smiles
THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,002.

faded away when faced by the distasteful and hated malted cocoa, and the equally hated and distasteful hygienic bread and hygienic butter. And when tea was over, St. Jim's got a shock which made laughter and hilarity a thing of the past.

It was a notice that had appeared during tea on the notice-board—or, rather, two notices. One was as follows:

"From to-day onwards the district within one mile of Rylcombe Grammar School is placed strictly out of bounds to the boys of St. Jim's."

"Any boy discovered breaking this rule, or consorting with, or speaking to, any member of the Grammar School will be severely punished."

"(Signed)

CHARLES CRANKLEY, M.A.,

"Headmaster."

The other notice was far, far worse, and read thus:

"Having regard to the accident that took place on the senior cricket ground this afternoon, the headmaster feels it his duty to ban the playing of such a dangerous game as cricket at St. Jim's in future. Accordingly cricket will cease forthwith, and all balls and articles appertaining to the game will be handed in to the school groundsman, who will be held responsible for their safe custody. Any boy playing cricket in defiance of this order will be severely punished."

"(Signed)

CHARLES CRANKLEY, M.A.,

"Headmaster."

As Tom Merry read these notices out to a group of startled juniors he almost fainted.

There was a gasp of utter dismay.

"Cricket banned!" ejaculated Jack Blake. "What—what—"

"It's frightful!" gasped Tom Merry. "Here, Kildare—a minute! Have you seen this?"

Kildare was just passing, and he stopped and nodded, his features red and angry.

"Yes, I've seen it, kid!" he said.

"But—but cricket banned! It's awful!" mumbled Tom. "What's it mean?"

"It means what it says!" said Kildare grimly. "Old Rushden got a nasty biff on the head from a loose ball this afternoon. It was an accident. But Rushden's in saunty, and the Head's got the breeze up about it. He's been wanting an excuse to stop cricket, and now he's got it. Can't be helped. Grin and bear it, kids!"

And Kildare walked on, frowning. If Kildare was bearing it, it was certainly not with a grin!

"Well!" said Tom Merry, taking a deep, deep breath. "Well, upon my word! This is indeed the limit!"

"Yaas, wathah! And it's the Gwammawian match on Wednesday, deah boys!" groaned Arthur Augustus. "This is weally too bad! Banned fwom speakin' to the Gwammawians, bai Jove! And banned even fwom playin' cwicket! I wathah think we ought not to stand that, deah boys!"

"And we're not standing it!" cried Tom Merry, his blue eyes gleaming. "We've stood a lot—we've stood rotten grub, and silly restrictions, and no study teas, and the closing of the tuckshop; but we're not standing that!"

"Rather not!" was an angry chorus.

"We're not worms, and though we like the new Head and respect him, we're not going to be robbed of our cricket!" said Tom Merry, glancing fiercely about him. "Call the fellows together, some of you, and we'll hold a meeting in the Rag to discuss the matter. If they're going to stop cricket, there's going to be trouble!"

And Tom Merry meant what he said. But it was not Tom Merry who was fated to cause the "trouble." That was to come from another quarter altogether!

THE END.

(Now look out for the concluding story in this fine series entitled: "The Jape of the Term!" It's a winner, chums!



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.

"HOW MANY?"

AN interesting letter reaches us from a loyal reader in Australia, who wants to know how many countries are represented by characters at St. Jim's. Well, here's a list, showing the cosmopolitan mixture there is at St. Jim's: English, Scotch, Irish, Welsh, Manx, French, German, Italian, Australian, Canadian, South African, Indian, and last but not least American. That makes my Australian chum sit up, I'll wager, for his list included only about half of these. This same correspondent wound up his letter with the remark that Australia is going to win back the Ashes "next time." Well, we'll see, my Aussie chum, but there'll be a real tussle for it, you know.

IS IT EASY?

"J. L." of London, is keen to take up typewriting and shorthand because he leaves school next year, to start life in business with his uncle. My correspondent seems an alert fellow if one can judge from his letter, but he's got the idea, I can see, that typing and shorthand writing are terrifying things to learn. In reality, my chum, they are not. With average patience, plus a real desire to get on, you should be able to master these subjects before you start in business with your uncle. There are many training colleges where these subjects are taught, and their fees—you ask about these—are not excessive. Then the evening classes at the school you mention would seem to fill the bill, for your friends are attending there, and doubtless they would give you a helping hand. But you must stick it! It's no good tackling shorthand and typewriting with grit for a week, and then close your books the moment a pal comes round and tempts you to play a game of cricket. I repeat, you will

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have mastered these subjects by the time your uncle is ready for you, providing you tackle them with a will. It's up to you!

HELPING MOTHER!

A Gemite from Rochester tells me that his pals chip him unmercifully because he stays in occasionally to help his mother, who is an invalid. Now, that's not quite fair. It's hard for a boy to give up his leisure time to domestic work when the great outdoors calls him, but it shows the right spirit, and his pals are a little thoughtless in chipping him. Stick to it, my Rochester chum; after all, a little chipping won't hurt you, and you know in your own heart that you're doing the right thing in helping your mother. These thoughtless pals of yours will respect you for what you've done and are now doing one of these days. In the circumstances you can't do too much for mother, and she appreciates your help, I know.

NEXT WEDNESDAY'S PROGRAMME:

"THE JAPE OF THE TERM!"

By Martin Clifford.

This extra long story for next week winds up the "faddist" series, and it winds it up in breezy style, too. Gordon Gay & Co., of the Grammar School, play a very important part in this yarn, and you know these cheery chaps of old. Don't miss this story whatever you do!

"BEYOND THE SILVER GLACIER!"

By Arthur S. Hardy.

Look out, too, for another grand instalment of this popular serial. It's brimful of thrills and exciting situations.

"TRIMBLE GOES FISHING!"

This is another jolly little poem from the pen of the St. Jim's Rhymester, and as you've had a fair sample of his skill, I'll say nothing more. Order this bumper number of the GEM in good time, chums. Cheerio!

Your Editor.

THE SACRED ELEPHANT! The coming of the dawn means to Harry Franklin and his friends a horrible death at the stake, but in the nick of time comes Adam and his native friend Muta, astride the sacred elephant of the Skeleton Men, to save them!



ADAM.

HARRY.

An Amazing Story of Perilous Adventure in the heart of the African Jungle.

By **ARTHUR S. HARDY.**

A Ride on Kitu!

ADAM had to leave himself entirely in the hands of Muta. He could never have found his way anywhere in that forest alone. Every way one turned or looked the place seemed the same. Trees and undergrowth, undergrowth and trees, varying only in type and density—with occasional patches of glorious flowers where the sun could penetrate.

They moved swiftly, for there was no time to waste. And for want of talk, Adam busied himself by wondering about many things. Why the Hekebus had set that trap at the entrance to the witch's cave, for instance.

There had been no reason to believe that they had been spied upon as they bore the body of O-Kama, the witch, to her last resting-place. Even the quick-eared Muta had neither heard nor seen anything suspicious.

And yet those Skeleton men must have seen them, followed them, and placed their warriors on guard outside the cave.

As they tramped on in silence a sudden thought struck Adam, which filled him with dismay.

If these Skeleton men had seen and followed them it was a hundred to one they knew where the aeroplane was resting—and would make mincemeat of the black men who had been left to guard it. The plane very likely had ceased to exist long since, and the men were dead. And if that were so—why—

Adam's spirits sagged at the thought, and he ventured to tell Muta of his fears. To his great joy, Muta laughed.

"Hekebus not touch the ship of air," he told Adam. "They afraid!"

And surely, if they had found and seen it, Muta's surmise was right, for, when at last he and Adam reached the spot,

there lay the plane in the clearing, the natives still busy at work hacking down the trees and levelling the ground.

Adam and Muta approached the spot so quickly that even the man who stood on guard did not hear them until they emerged from the forest.

Then he let forth a bellow of delight. The others came running up. It was plain to see that they had been afraid and lonely.

And after the first greetings had been exchanged one of them, a tall, well-built, grinning fellow, with a comical face, started to tell Muta an item of news in his own tongue, which caused Mutt to wag his ears and jabber also. Round turned Muta when he had done.

"Oh, my master—but the luck is with us! Oyorara, the magic charm, is helping us. White flyer, these black men, your servants, have captured Kitu—the sacred elephant that is worshipped by the Hekebus."

"Eh? What's that?" asked Adam.

Muta led him to a spot beyond the aeroplane, where the strangest-looking elephant Adam had ever seen was chained to a great tree by one of its legs.

It was a huge beast, its shoulders ranging between nine and ten feet from the ground. Its fine tusks, carved at the ends, were unusually long and fine and pointed. But it was the colour of the elephant more than anything else which astonished Adam. It was of a pinkish hue.

Piles of grass had been set in front of the beast, which it was munching with delight as it swayed and nodded like an automaton.

"Whow!" yelled Muta, executing some steps of his grotesque and ludicrous dance. "White flyer, take the tubes that spit fire and death. Muta and him and more, if he so

WHO'S WHO IN THIS STORY!

ADAM BYRNE, accompanied by his three companions, **HARRY FRANKLIN**, **SANDY McTAVISH**, and **JIMMY BROWN**, set out in search of Adam's father and sister, news having been received that the great white explorer, **GEORGE WILLIS BYRNE**, and his daughter, **ROSA**, who left England four years ago to explore the African jungle, are alive and well, but prisoners in the hands of a strange people at Baroomba, which lies north of the Silver Glacier and beneath the Mountain of the Hidden Crest.

Soon after leaving Baroomba for the interior, however, the plane containing Adam and Harry is wrecked in a terrific storm, and the stranded chums find themselves faced by a crowd of hostile Hekebus,

who slay O-Kama, the witch, the mother of Muta, a native whose life the young Britishers have saved. The witch is subsequently buried in a secret cave wherein Adam finds a pendant of peculiar design known as the Oyorara, which, according to the prophecy of O-Kama, will bring good fortune to the wearer. It is not in Adam's possession long, however, before his three white companions are whisked away by the Hekebus, whose intention is to offer them as a sacrifice to the gods. Muta, however, is quite confident of effecting their rescue.

"Fear not," he says, turning to Adam. "Muta show the way, and white flyer save his friends and brothers."

(Now read on.)

wishes, go with the sacred elephant through the forest to the place of sacrifice."

"What?" asked Adam. "Will this—er—animal"—he looked at the elephant in awe—"take us there? You forget we do not know the way."

Muta grinned.

"Kitu take us in the dark," he said. "I have said the luck is with us, thanks to the charm Oyorara."

All very well, but Adam, not being unduly superstitious, could hardly bring himself to believe that things were happening favourably just because he wore that strangely beautiful and fantastic charm round his neck. Yet he was willing to take the luck as he found it.

Now the day was drawing to its close. But what matter? Adam's one and only thought was to try and save the lives of these hapless prisoners whom he had left to their fate because of the strength of Muta. He was afraid that they might already have been sacrificed.

Now he ate and drank his fill. Then, fetching a supply of maroons and fireworks as well as an extra automatic from the aeroplane, he prepared to take his chance with Muta on the elephant.

Muta prepared and shaped a piece of hard wood, one end of which he sharpened to a point. Now the natives, facing them in a stubborn and scared row, refused to have anything to do with the expedition.

"Muta," said Adam, "are you sure that the elephant will go where you want him to take us?"

"Why, yes; it is his home!" answered Muta. "No need to guide him. Sit behind his big ears and prod. Kitu go straight back home!"

Adam shrugged his shoulders.

It might happen that way, it might not; but the great thing was that if the elephant did not take them, even Muta did not know the way. He confessed that he would never find it in the dark. And the prisoners would doubtless be burnt as a sacrifice before the dawn.

Now Adam climbed up on to the back of the elephant, using a ladder from the aeroplane, and sat down across its neck. Muta joined him.

In his native tongue he ordered the black men to set the elephant free. That done, he jabbed the point of the stick hard home.

The effect of the prod was magical. Kitu just flung his trunk up into the air, gave vent to furious trumpeting, turned round twice, and then, moving like a ship in full sail, with a fine driving wind behind it, the beast plunged into the forest.

For good or ill, Muta and Adam had started on their rescue journey, and were swallowed up in the inky blackness!

And what a journey it was! The elephant seemed to know what was expected of him, always choosing a path which could be travelled without trouble or difficulty. He would crash through any light obstruction which barred his way, pushing it aside with his great head.

All very well for Kitu, but not so good for Adam, whose face was struck by the overhanging branches, so that he had to throw himself down flat to avoid being seriously hurt.

And there was the jolting, too, which threatened to throw him off at every other step the beast made. Adam seized its ears, and held on like grim death, though Kitu, the sacred elephant, showed by loud trumpeting that he did not like it.

To Muta the ride was easy. Ten Kitus would never have unshipped him. He rocked and swayed in sympathy with the motions of the great beast, urging it on with prods of the pointed stick whenever it showed signs of slacking.

So they made their strange journey through the darkness of the forest, the elephant never faltering, and always keeping to a path it knew so well. Here and there, where the leafy canopy above opened out, Adam could see stars shining, then darkness would envelope them again.

It was an eerie and amazing experience. All the time Adam's anxiety increased. Where would the journey end? Would they be able to save Harry and his friends?

Kitu, the elephant, alone could answer that question aright. If he failed them, then indeed all would be lost.

Suddenly, vibrating upon their ears, sounding dully in the forest, came the sombre drone of those beating drums—tom, tom, tom, tom!

Adam's heart leapt at the sound. He welcomed it. It showed, at any rate, that Kitu was bearing them towards the headquarters of the Hekebu.

And at last bright lights gleamed amid the foliage; weird and monotonous chanting came to Adam's ears. Kitu, elevating his trunk, emitted a piercing trumpeting in return, which was heard by the Skeleton men.

The elephant increased its pace, crashing heedlessly onward, so that Muta and Adam were obliged to lie flat upon him.

Adam could see figures executing a dance—a kind of waltz—the skeleton markings showing terrifyingly against their black bodies. He saw men dressed fantastically in skins, with horns upon their heads, directing the dance. The clearing in the forest was made as bright as day by hundreds of torches. Seated in a double row were the drum-beaters. But the things that riveted Adam's attention most was the plight of Harry and his friends.

Harry, Sandy McTavish, Jimmy Brown, and a strange white man, with a long beard and tousled hair, whose clothes were in rags, whose breast was bare, showing strange tattooings against the white skin, were ranged in a row tied to stakes which had been driven into the ground.

All around each one of them had been piled dry grass and brushwood, which would burn easily.

Near each of them a Hekebu stood, with a lighted torch ready in his hand.

Each torch was held near to the pile, as if the man who held it was eager to set the light, dry wood on fire.

Even as Kitu brought Adam and Muta near enough to see, the men with the horns upon their heads ceased their screaming and their chanting, the dancers stopped their whirling, the Skeleton men faced the doomed whites, and the drum-beaters ceased their monotonous pounding.

As clear as a whip-crack came the signal, and the executioners stretched their torches to meet the funeral piles.

At that instant Kitu, goaded by an unusually vicious prod from Muta, burst into full view. The bounding elephant assumed gigantic proportions in the glare of a thousand torches.

On he swept, knocking down and trampling upon the Skeleton man whose torch was actually touching the pile of grass and wood which had been heaped round Harry Franklin.

With his trunk the elephant seized the second of the executioners who was about to light the heap which rose to Sandy McTavish's middle, and, taking the native round the middle, hurled him high among the branches of the trees.

Adam shivered.

He felt that it was necessary for him to shoot. So, aiming at another of the executioners, he crashed a bullet from his automatic into the Skeleton man's shoulder.

The Hekebu reeled and fell, whilst the other executioners turned and fled. Then Muta, using that prodding stick with great effect, somehow pulled Kitu up, and the sacred elephant swung round in front of the doomed four, the Skeleton men, uttering loud and piercing cries of alarm, dropped down upon their knees.

Adam blinking, stared around him. The forest formed a solid background against which hundreds of the torch-bearers stood. The whole space was shut in. The drum-beaters sat like images, motionless, their eyes staring. The horned and fantastically-dressed priests—Adam supposed they were priests—taken by surprise, blinked at the sacred elephant.

And then Adam touched Muta on the shoulder.

"Muta, take this knife, set the prisoners free, and let us get out of this safely, while we can!"

Muta, grinning, grasped the knife, and, sliding sideways from the elephant, dropped to the ground.

An instant later he was hacking at the thongs which bound Harry Franklin to the stake.

And then the priests, realising that they were about to be robbed of their victims, gave an order to the Skeleton warriors, who, with one accord, moved forward.

The Rescue!

REGARDLESS of the oncoming Skeleton men, Muta went about his task of setting his white friends free, and Adam thanked his lucky stars that he had prepared a special type of firework for such an emergency as now arose. With feverish haste he set a light to the fuse. There followed a sizzling noise as Adam hurled his giant cracker full into the midst of the hostile natives.

Bang! Plop! Fizz!

The cracker seemed to be endowed with life as it bounded and rebounded amongst the terrified natives.

Loud cries of terror burst from the lips of the warriors. The priests of the Hekebu, though they held their ground and assumed a dignified attitude, were also obviously impressed.



With his trunk the elephant seized the second of the executioners, who was about to light the pile which rose to Sandy's middle, and hurled him high amongst the trees. (See page 26.)

A maroon Adam lit next, waiting until it was firing well, and then slung it with all his strength at the strange looking natives.

They took to their heels with cries of dismay. Kitu, the pink elephant, might be sacred in their eyes, but they had a dread of dancing fire, and when the maroon exploded with a terrifying report, hurling pieces of its shattered case among them, they scattered in all directions.

Kitu swung aloft his trunk, and let forth a loud and distressed trumpeting. He began to paw the ground restlessly. His beady eyes swung in the direction of the executioners, who, flaming torches in their hands, hesitated, trembling, knowing not what to do.

They were slaves to their horned priests, but were not these white men who came with Muta, son of the witch, O-Kama, more powerful than they?

Adam let off a third firework, throwing it haphazardly, and watched its effect. He noticed that the horned priests of the Hekebus stood their ground bravely when the others looked like fleeing in utter rout.

Doubtless their long ascendancy over the ignorant and superstitious tribesmen gave them the courage to resist.

One among them, a tall and dignified man, with hair that was white, and bearded chin, raising his long and withered arms, spread his fingers wide, and in a deep and booming tone issued commands.

His voice was threatening, his demeanour formidable.

What was he saying to the Hekebus? Would they heed him?

It seemed so, for one of the executioners, leaping to the pile of brushwood which was heaped by Jimmy Brown's middle, thrust his flaming torch to the dried wood and set it blazing.

"I'm no Guy Fawkes, son!" Adam heard Jimmy yell, as he tugged at the ropes which bound him so that he could not move. "And it ain't the Fifth of November, either! Mr. Byrne—"

Muta had cut the bearded white giant who had been nearest him, after he had set Harry Franklin free, then he ran to Sandy McTavish, who, rigid with Scottish composure, bravely awaited his turn, although the executioner, who had drawn close to him again, flourished the burning

brand he held above his head, and uttered loud and menacing cries.

The flames began to leap around Jimmy Brown. If the fire were not put out immediately, Jimmy would be so badly burned that he could not survive. The Hekebus had picked their material well. The wood might have been saturated with petroleum, to judge by the way it burned.

Adam knew little about the management of elephants; but he had noticed during their progress through the forest how Muta had used that sharpened piece of wood and the manner in which Kitu had answered to its urging. Muta had mechanically set the stake flat upon Kitu's broad neck as he slid to the ground, and Adam, gripping it now, gave Kitu a dig behind the right ear.

The effect of the prod was magical. Round swung the elephant, and Adam, using his heels as steering gear, and adding a judicious prod here and there, drove the sacred elephant up to the burning pile.

Kitu did not approve of fire. The way in which he tossed that burning rubbish aside with his great feet, and, having rid it of its flame tongues, scattered the rest, using his trunk as a flail, was in the first degree effective.

The executioner, losing for a moment his awe of the sacred one, and driven on by the ravings of the horned priests, swung his torch at Kitu's eyes.

It was an ill-starred move. Without hesitation, Kitu took him round the middle and flung him bodily in the direction of the drum-beaters. The unfortunate man flopped upon some of the tom-toms and put one of the music-makers to sleep.

Then, evidently annoyed with animals of the two-legged race, the elephant pushed his great head hard against the post to which Jimmy Brown was roped.

"Oh!" howled Jimmy, as his shoulder was pinched between the elephant's broad head and the stake; and then, wriggling himself round, he presented only the woodwork of the post to the animal's skull. "Go easy, Jumbo!" he screamed.

Then, with a crack, the post, broken off at its socket, tumbled over, taking Jimmy Brown down with it.

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"Sweet mamma!" gurgled Jimmy, as he flopped upon the earth.

Now Muta was sawing away at McTavish's bonds.

"I'm glad to see you, ye black devil!" said Sandy, whose face was swollen and distorted almost beyond recognition from the stings of the flies which had attacked him as he was bound helpless to the stake. "I had made up my mind that I would never see Sauchiehall Street, Glasgow, again, when you daft beastie came into view! But go easy wi' the knife-blade, chiel, or ye'll be lettin' flow some of the best blood ever sent fra' Bonnie Scotland!"

Muta, grinning at him and strewing the piled brushwood right and left with his great feet, cut through bond after bond, Sandy grinning happily the while in his great relief.

Muta had just cut through the last bond when the bearded giant with the tattooed chest and arms, who had shaken himself to restore his circulation, after being tied up so long, coming up behind Muta, snatched the knife from his hand.

Adam, who saw this, wondered. Who was this man? What did he intend to do?

Whilst Adam was swiftly debating this question in his mind and trying to steady the frantic elephant, the man ran back to the post to which he had been roped. He

began to hack away at some cords which tied a big and ugly-looking weapon to the wood. It was a big and clumsy revolver. In a moment he had it free, and then, with a cry of triumph, he sprang to meet the warriors, who were now rallying under the leadership of the priests.

He began to shoot indiscriminately. First one, then another of the Hekebus tumbled face downwards on the ground.

A shiver of horror ran through Adam's veins.

Perilous though their position was, he did not approve of this indiscriminate killing. And now Kitu faced the Skeleton men, pawing the ground and trumpeting fiercely. The elephant's great sail-like ears were thrust forward. Adam knew that the beast was about to make a rush.

The rush would take him right into the ranks of the Skeleton warriors, who worshipped him. Adam felt such would be no place for him, and so, gripping hold of Kitu's leathery skin, he swung his feet outward and slid swiftly to the ground. As he went down the sharp point of the stake he clutched tightly in his right hand scraped the pink elephant's hide.

With a shrill trumpeting, Kitu charged bodily at the priests, who were rallying their warriors and calling upon them to attack the white men.

Kitu's charge, however, put a stop to that. The elephant had gone mad temporarily. The horned priests, alarmed by its coming, faced him, throwing aloft their arms and shouting to it words which no doubt it would ordinarily have obeyed. Maybe Kitu held many a grudge against them. Certainly, he was no longer obedient. He trampled down and flung aside the horned priests in a reckless orgy of savagery!

(There will be another instalment of this fine serial next week, boys! Don't miss it!)

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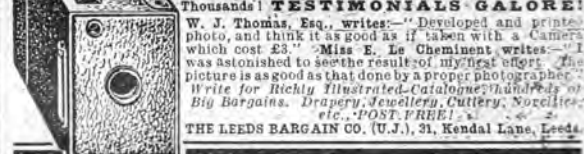
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