

SCHOOL YARNS WITH A PUNCH—EVERY WEEK !

EVERY WEDNESDAY.

The GEM 2^D

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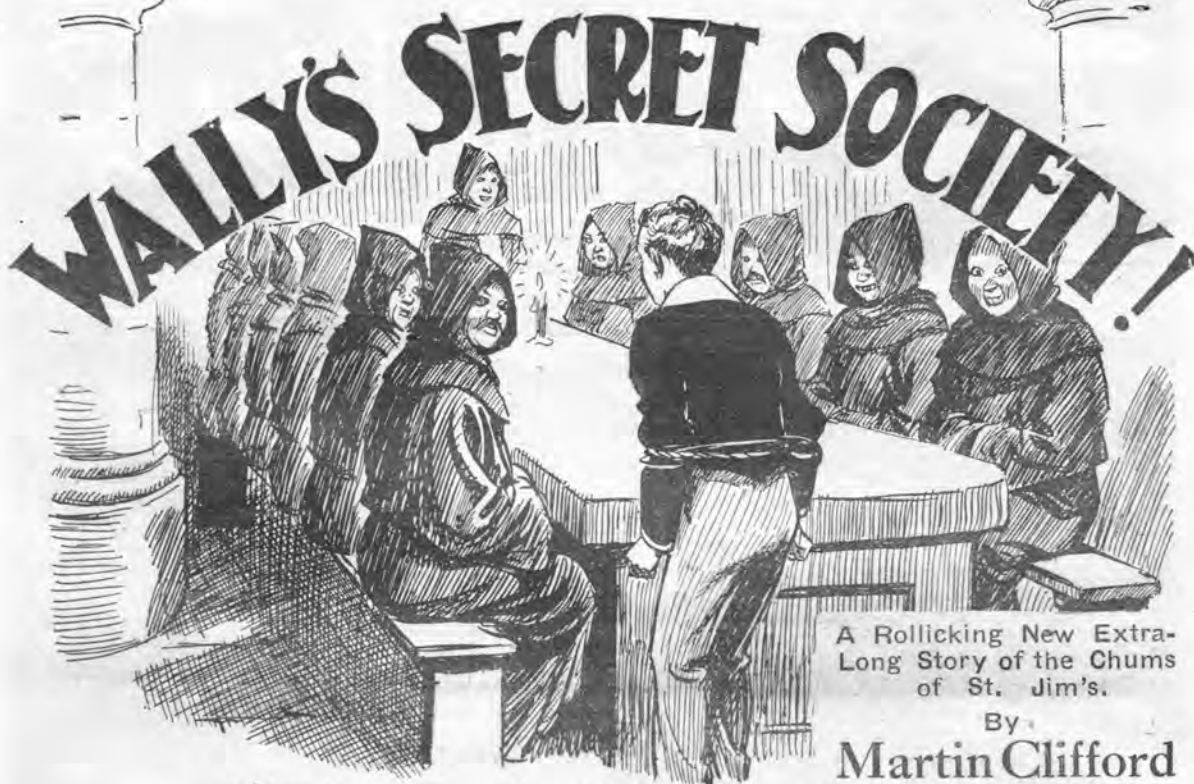
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THE FIRST VICTIM OF WALLY'S
SECRET SOCIETY !

An Amusing Incident in this Week's
Splendid School Story.

TWELVE GOOD MEN AND TRUE! For a long time now the young scamps of the Third Form at St. Jim's have tried, unsuccessfully, to put a stop to what they consider the high-handed and bullying treatment of members of higher Forms. And it is left to Wally D'Arcy to form his "avenging" society of twelve . . . whose emblem is a crimson dagger, made of cardboard!



CHAPTER 1.
Wally is Indignant!

"WIPPIN'!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of the Fourth at St. Jim's, made that exclamation in tones of the deepest satisfaction. He was standing by the sunny window of Study No. 6, and in his hand he held an envelope from which he had just extracted a letter, also a slip of printed paper that rustled crisply.

Standing by him were Jack Blake, Digby, and Herries, his three study-mates, and their looks of agonised suspense changed suddenly to beaming satisfaction on hearing that musical rustle of paper, followed by D'Arcy's reassuring remark.

"Wippin'!" repeated Arthur Augustus, holding up the slip of printed paper. "All sewene, deah boys! The patah has turned up twumps again!"

"Oh, good!" said Digby.

"Top-hole!" said Herries.

"What is it, old man?" asked Blake breathlessly. "A fiver?"

"Yaas; a mewwy old fivah, deah boy!" rejoined Arthur Augustus, with a beaming smile. "The famine in the land is ended, bai Jove!"

"Thank goodness! Corn in Egypt!" remarked Blake.

"Before the face of that fiver," said Digby solemnly, "the gaunt spectre of starvation flees, and the land shall henceforth flow with milk and honey."

"Gweat Scott!" said Arthur Augustus, staring. "Where on earth did you ewib that quotation, Dig?"

"Nowhere," said Digby modestly. "It's my own—at least, I sort of assembled it, you know. There was once a poet in our family, and—"

"Dry up! Never mind that tosh now!" interrupted Jack Blake crisply. "I must say your pater's jolly slack, keeping us waiting like this—"

"Bai Jove! Weally, Blake—"

"But it's come, and we'll have to forgive him!" said Blake kindly. "He needs to be taught to answer requests for remittances more promptly. Still, as I say, it's come, and it really couldn't have come at a better time than noon on a giddy half-holiday. We'll forgive him, Gussy!"

"Yes, rather!" grinned Herries.

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"Carried nem con!" chuckled Digby.

"Weally, Blake—"

"Don't bother to apologise for your noble pater, Gussy. After all, one doesn't expect efficiency from the bloated aristocrats in the House of Lords," said Blake kindly. "We'll overlook his slackness this time. Now, the question is—"

"Weally, Blake, you wottah!" said Arthur Augustus, giving his chum a frigid look. "I object most strongly to my patah bein' chawactahwise as a—"

"Do dry up, Gussy! You wag your chin too much!" said Blake severely. "I know plenty of chin-wag makes a chap eligible for a seat in the giddy House of Lords, but it's rather a nuisance here. Now the question is, what's to be done with that fiver now it's come?"

"Spend it!" suggested Herries brightly.

"Blue it on tuck!" added Digby.

"Weally, you fellows—"

"We'll spend most of it on tuck, certainly," agreed Jack Blake. "But it's a half-holiday, remember, and there's no cricket on. My idea is to train it to Wayland, visit the giddy cinema, and then have a jolly good tuck-in at a cafe. After that—"

"Weally, Blake—"

"There you go again, Gussy!" groaned Blake. "Can't let a chap get a word in edgeways! Don't worry, old chap. We'll let you come if you promise to be good and not wag your chin too much!"

"You—you wottah, Blake!" gasped Arthur Augustus in great indignation. "I am not wowwyin' about not comin' at all. I wegard you as a cheeky wottah! You appawvently ovahlook the fact that the fivah belongs to me, bai Jove, and that it is for me to decide what is to be done with it!"

"Well, and don't you belong to us?" snorted Blake, winking at the grinning Digby and Herries. "Don't we own you, and don't folks return you to us when you get lost, and all that?"

"Bai Jove! No, they do nothin' of the kind, Blake!" said Arthur Augustus hotly. "I should uttably wefuse to get lost—I mean to say—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove!" snorted Arthur Augustus, glaring at Blake. "I believe you were pullin' my leg, you wottah!"

"Go hon!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You cacklin' duffahs!" shouted the swell of the Fourth,

his last vestige of repose gone. "I wefuse to allow my patah to be alluded to as a bloated awistocwat, and I wefuse to allow my leg to be pulled, and I wefuse to remain a moment longah with you wotten, wibald asses!"

And with that Arthur Augustus jammed his eyeglass more firmly into place, stuffed the letter and the fiver into his pocket, and started to march out.

But Blake, his expression suddenly changing to one of alarm, grabbed his arm.

"Here, hold on, Gussy, old man——"

"Gussy, old fellow——" said Digby.

"Gussy, old chap——" gasped Herries.

"Pway welsease my arm, Jack Blake!" said Arthur Augustus crushingly. "You have had the pleasure of pullin' my leg, bai Jove, and now I will leave you in ordah to have the pleasure of spendin' my fivah in my own way and without your aid!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Oh, Gussy——"

"So ungenerous!" said Herries.

"I apologise, Gussy!" said Blake, humbly and contritely. "Apologise most abjectly, old fellow! Pray forgive me! As one gentleman to another, I apologise!"

"As three gentlemen to another!" added Herries gravely. "We all apologise!"

"Consider all we said as unsaid!" urged Blake meekly. "We can't afford to be out of friends with a fellow who has a fiver, Gussy!"

Arthur Augustus eyed his study-mates very suspiciously. But he was an extremely—not to say excessively—generous and forgiving youth, and an apology always brought him tumbling from his "high horse." Moreover, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was not the fellow who would have enjoyed spending his "fiver" alone—far from it!

"Vewy well, deah boys," he replied, melting visibly. "I considah you are cacklin' duffahs; but I will accept your apology. I insist, howevah, upon spendin' my fivah in my own way."

"Oh, but, Gussy——"

"As my way coincides with yours, howevah, Blake," went on Arthur Augustus, smiling. "I agwee to the twip to Wayland this aftahnoon, deah boys."

"Oh, good!"

"Good man, Gussy!"

"There is one addition to your ideah I should like to make, howevah," resumed Gussy, shaking his head. "I undahstand that Tom Mewwy and his fwiends have been, like ourselves, stony for some days; and I suggest that we invite them to join us in the outin'!"

"We will!" said Blake heartily. "Good wheeze, Gussy! Let's trot round and tell 'em now—sooner we get off the better, old scout!"

"Yaas, wathah! There is one othah point I was forgettin', though," remarked Arthur Augustus, pausing suddenly. "Before we go I weally must see young Wally and tip the young wascal somethin' out of this fivah. He appeals to be wathah hard up—wequested me to lend him a bob only this mornin', and though he was wude and ill-mannahd when I had to wefuse, I feel I ought to tip him a few shillings. Aftah all, though he is a cheekay young wascal, he is my minor——"

"Bother your minor!" snorted Blake. "We're not wasting time looking for him. What the thump——"

Jack Blake jumped as the study door crashed back at that moment, and into the study marched a youngster in untidy Etons, and with untidy hair and a cheeky, inky face. Behind him were two more youngsters, equally untidy.

"Talk of angels!" murmured Herries.

It was Walter Adolphus D'Arcy of the Third, and the two behind him were Curly Gibson and Jameson, also of the Third.

"Come in, you men!" said Wally grimly.

Curly Gibson and Jameson came into the study—keeping a wary eye on Blake & Co., however. Blake, Herries, and Digby glared at them and at Wally. That cheery young gentleman ignored them, and faced his major.

"Here, outside, you scrubby young rascals!" gasped Blake. "Well, of all the nerve! Fancy fags marching in here as if they owned the blessed place! Outside!"

"Oh, you ring off, Blake!" said Wally independently.

"I've come here to see old Gus—not you!"

"Why, you—you——"

"Chuck it!" snorted Wally. "Look here, Gus, I want to know—— Yooop! Ow! Leggo, you rotter, or I'll hack your shins, Blake! Yow!"

"Not much!" said Blake grimly, increasing his grip on Wally's right ear, and planting a boot gently behind the yelping youngster. "The Third must be taught to knock at doors before entering—especially the door of gentlemen in the Fourth. Out you go!"

"Yow! I jolly well won't go!" howled Wally, struggling furiously, as Blake started to propel him towards the door.

"Ow! Oh crikey! Rescue, chap! Rescue, Third! Yaroooooooh!"

"Bai Jove! Hold on, Blake, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus quickly. "Let us hear what the young wascal wants."

"Oh, all right!" snorted Blake. "If he gives us any more cheek, though, he goes out on his neck. Understand that, young D'Arcy!"

"Yah!" gasped Wally, rubbing his ear and glowering at Blake. "Ow! Wow! If I was a head taller I'd jolly well smash you, Blake!"

"My dear little cherub——"

"You needn't cackle!" snorted Wally, scowling darkly at the grinning juniors. "You'd better mind your eye, you Fourth chaps! The Third's getting fed-up, and we ain't jolly well standing it much longer! We're fed-up with being down-trodden and bullied."

"You look down-trodden, anyway!" chuckled Blake.

"Who's been treading on your collar?"

"Great Scott!" gasped Digby. "Is that—a collar—I thought it was a dark muffler; my aged eyes must have deceived me!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You cackling dummies!" shouted Walter Adolphus. "You mind your eyes, that's all! You can laugh! We're fed-up with tyranny—fed-up to the blessed chin! I tell you——"

"Weally, Wally——"

"You dry up, Gus——"

"I wefuse to dwy up, Wally!" said Arthur Augustus sternly, with a glance of strong disfavour at his youthful minor. "You are a weckless, impudent young wascal, and an untidy, disreputable young scamp!"

"Go hon!"

"I am disgusted with you!" said Arthur Augustus, frowning severely. "You are not only ill-mannahd, but you are a disgwaceful sight! Your clobber is dusty and wumpled, and your collah is covahed with inky-fingahmarks, and your face is vewy inky and gwubby!"

"Oh, ring off, for goodness' sake, Gus!" snorted Wally. "Isn't it bad enough for me having a blessed major in the Fourth without having him jawing me all the time?"

"Bai Jove!"

"And isn't it bad enough having Selby always jawing a chap about his chivvy and his clobber and his collar without you shoving your silly oar in, too?" demanded Wally warmly. "Cheese it, for goodness' sake, and give your chin a rest! Look here, Gus—have you had a blessed letter from home this morning?"

"Yaas, I have, you——"

"Was there any tin in it?" demanded Wally.

"Yaas—a fivah!" said Arthur Augustus coldly. "But——"

"Then, that's what I've come about!" snorted Wally.

"Nice thing and no mistake—you getting some tin from home and not me! Look here, I want half of it, Gus!"

"Bai Jove! Do you, indeed?"

"Yes, I jolly well do!" snapped Wally indignantly. "Why should you have all the tin and me nothing! You've jolly well got to hand over at least half. That's two-ten each!"

"Well, of all the nerve!" gasped Blake. "Why, I'd jolly well——"

"Pway leave this mattah to me, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "I shall certainly do nothin' of the kind, Wally, you cheekay young wascal! I had intended to give you somethin' out of the tip; but I shall certainly not do so unless you ask in a pwoppah mannah. Wathah not!"

"Yah! Think I'm jolly well going down on my bended knees?" roared Wally. "Look here——"

"If you wear at me like that, Wally, I shall wequest these fellows to sling you out!"

"Yah! Let 'em try, that's all!"

"Right! We will, ray young friend!" said Blake. "I warned you what would happen to you if you went on being cheeky——"

"Rats! You dry up, Blake! Look here—— Yooooop! Oh, my hat! Here, wharrer—— Rescue, Gibson! Rescue, Jameson! Why, I'll—— Oh crikey!"

Bump!

Yaroooooooh!"

With Blake's boot behind him, Wally of the Third fairly flew through the study doorway. He dropped in the passage with a bump and a howl. The next moment—before they could think of "rescue," much less attempt it—Curly Gibson and Jameson had followed and joined him. The three howling fags rolled and struggled together on the passage floor.

"That's settled those down-trodden young gentlemen," grinned Blake. "Now let's go and see those Shell chaps—we've wasted enough time on these grubby little fags."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Ha, ha! Yes!"
And with that Blake & Co. marched out towards Study No. 10, carefully wiping their boots on the three struggling fags as they passed them. For once the young heroes of the Third were certainly "down-trodden"!

CHAPTER 2.

Tragedy of a Topper!

"GROOOOGH!"
"Gerroff me chest!"
"Oh crikey! Groooogh!"
"Oh, the rotters!"

With various cries of woe and wrath the three Third-Formers sorted themselves out and scrambled to their feet. They were red in the face with fury, and if they had been dishevelled and untidy before, they were doubly so now.

"Oh, the—bullying rotters!" gasped Wally D'Arcy, as he made a pretence of dusting himself down. "Oh crumbs! Why didn't you two chumps back me up? We'd have wiped the study with the rotters if you had!"
"Hem!" panted Carly Gibson. "Four chaps in the Fourth—eh? I don't think! Don't be a silly ass!"

"Well, we'd have backed their beastly shins and made the cads squirm!" snorted Wally, who was fairly seething with rage. "Now we've been booted out, and we haven't managed to squeeze a penny out of my major. B-r-r-r-r-r!"

"Well, you asked for it, you burbling ass!" snorted Jameson, struggling with a twisted collar. "You fairly asked for it, and got it! Think Fourth chaps are going to stand your lip, blow you! Why the thump couldn't you have used dip—diplomats, or whatever it's jolly well called?"

"Oh, rats!"

"Why the thump didn't you ask nicely?" went on Jameson, with a snort. "We could have checked the cads as much as we wanted afterwards, when we'd got the cash!"

"Because I'm jolly well fed-up with the rotters, that's why!" said young Wally, scowling blackly. "That's the third time a chap in the Fourth has kicked me to-day, and only this morning that cad Lowther stuffed my cap down the back of my blessed neck and sat me down in a puddle. I tell you I'm not jolly well standing it any longer!"

"Let's rag their blessed study!" snapped Carly Gibson, glaring into the deserted Study No. 6.

"Serve 'em jolly well right if we did!" scowled Jameson.

"Jingo!" said Wally, his eyes suddenly gleaming. "That's a jolly good idea, young Gibson. You fellows know my idea—a campaign against bullying and injustice. Well, we'll make a start now."

And after a swift glance about him, Wally led the way into Study No. 6.

"Sharp's the giddy word!" murmured Wally. "Those cads may be back any second. Here goes to begin with!"

As he spoke, the young rascal gathered up the coal-scuttle and emptied the contents in a flood of coal and coal-dust over the study carpet. At the same time, Carly Gibson tipped over the bookshelves, sending a shower of volumes over the carpet among the coal and coal-dust.

Jameson added his bit by emptying the contents of the table drawer over the scattered books. A fancy waistcoat belonging to D'Arcy, and a few new, fancy ties found in a box, added a bit of colouring to the pile.

"That'll do to be going on with," chuckled Wally. "Pity we've no time to do more just now. We'll just rig a booby-trap over the door, and then we'll scoot while the scooting's good."

"What about your major's topper?" asked Carly Gibson. "Let's bust it in!"

Wally shook his head.

"Mustn't do any real damage!" he observed. "We're such good little chaps, you know! We'll leave the damaging to somebody else. I know!"

Wally grabbed the glimmering silk hat that stood on the window-ledge, and, after a moment's reflection, he filled the silk hat to the brim with pieces of coal selected from the carpet.

Then, having made sure the coast was clear, he hurried out into the passage with the filled hat. Holding the coal in with one hand he knelt down on the linoleum and carefully turned the hat brim downwards on the floor in the centre of the passage.

"There!" he exclaimed, with a soft chuckle. "I bet the Head himself couldn't resist kicking that hat if he happened to come along! What d'you fellows think?"

Jameson and Gibson showed what they thought in an explosive chuckle as they understood. It was doubtful if the august headmaster of St. Jim's would succumb to the temptation to kick that tempting hat; it was a practical certainty that somebody would, however.

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Still chuckling at their thoughts, the three young rascals re-entered the study. Swiftly mounting a chair, young Wally delicately piled half a dozen books on the top of the partly-opened door as his two chums handed them up to him. Then the fags slipped carefully out into the passage again, their fell work done.

"Now we'll hide and see what happens, you men!" remarked Wally D'Arcy. "Come on!"

The three fags hurried along to the bend in the passage, and there they waited breathlessly. They had not long to wait. There came the tramp of feet, and seven juniors came along from the direction of the Shell passage.

They were Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy, of the Fourth, and Tom Merry, Monty Lowther and Manners of the Shell.

It was Arthur Augustus who sighted that tempting hat first, and he gave a gasp of great alarm as he recognised it.

"Gweat Scott!" he ejaculated. "My toppah! What weekless wuffian has— Bai Jove! Lowthah, you— Stop!"

The voice of Arthur Augustus ended in a shriek of horror, for at that moment Monty Lowther sighted the hat, and the humorist of the Shell gave a whoop and went for the bait like a hungry dog after a bone.

Biff!

It was a beautiful kick—or should have been! But, instead of sailing along the corridor, the hat just flopped over, scattering coal to right and left, whilst Lowther grabbed his right foot in both hands and started to execute a wild war-dance to the accompaniment of a terrific howl.

"Yarooooogh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Three cheeky and inky faces peered round the corner of the corridor, and from them came a shriek of laughter. It was followed by another shriek of laughter from Tom Merry & Co. when they grasped what had happened—from all, that is, with the exception of Arthur Augustus and Lowther.

The latter unfortunate youth was still hopping about on one foot, clutching the other frantically, his face twisted with anguish. Having only tennis-shoes on at the moment, Lowther had found that terrific kick against the chunks of coal exceedingly painful.

Arthur Augustus was also dancing—dancing with wrath and dismay.

He stooped suddenly, however, and swooping upon the hat, he examined it with a groan. A huge gap had been driven in the side, and the silk lining was smothered with coal-dust. Never again would that once-beautiful silk-hat adorn the noble head of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Gweat Scott!" wailed the swell of the Fourth. "It is absolutely, utterly ruined! Oh, you—you frightful wottah, Lowthah! You—you—"

Arthur Augustus broke off, speechless with wrath, to seek consolation in action. He went for Lowther like a mad bull, and Lowther's groans ended in a howl as he crashed down with Arthur Augustus on top of him.

The next moment they were punching each other, often and hard.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Chuck it, Gussy, you ass!" laughed Tom Merry. "Can't you see it was those fags! Separate the fatheads, chaps!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Right-ho!"

Between them the laughing juniors managed to drag the two struggling juniors apart.

"Let me get at the wuffian!" shouted Arthur Augustus, who was trembling with wrath. "I am goin' to administah a fwightful thwashin' for this outrage! I—"

"No, you won't!" chuckled Blake, dragging D'Arcy back by main force. "You silly dummy, who could have resisted kicking the blessed hat? I should have kicked it if Lowther hadn't got there first. Go and lick those cheeky fags—they stuck the hat there, fathead!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Another shriek of laughter came from the fags along the corridor.

"Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus, seeming to become aware of the fags at last. "So—so it was those young wascals! Bai Jove, I will teach them a lastin' lesson!"

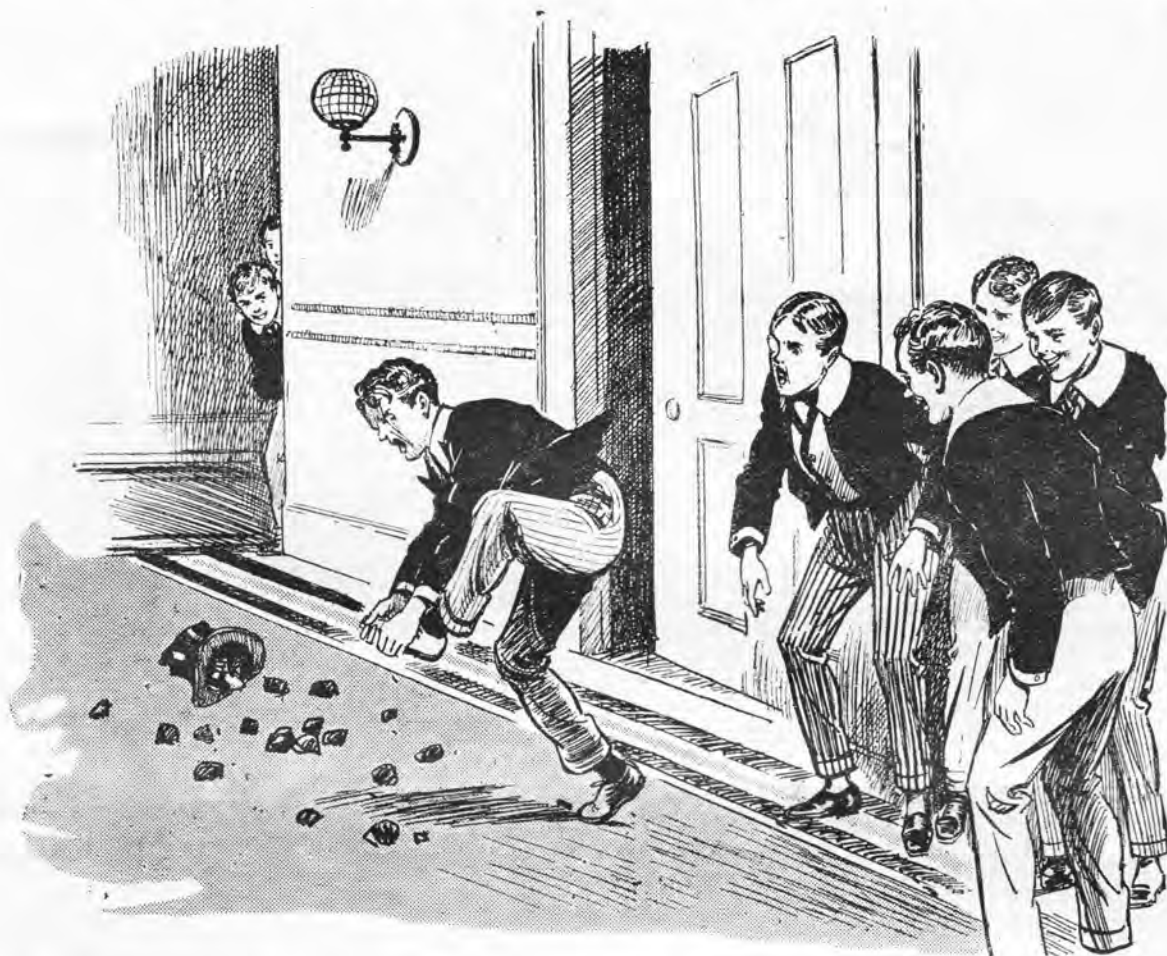
For a brief instant Arthur Augustus glared along the passage at the hilarious fags, and then he wrenched himself free and started for them at a rush.

Wally & Co. immediately scattered and flew, roaring with laughter, with the irate Gussy tearing in pursuit.

"Lemme go!" raved Lowther, struggling furiously in Tom Merry's grasp. "I'm going to smash the little sweeps, too! Lemme go!"

"Certainly, old chap! Smash the cheeky little ribs by all means!"

And Tom released his chum, who went pelting along the passage, his face red with rage. A roar of laughter followed him.



Monty Lowther went for the hat like a hungry dog after a bone. Biff! It was a beautiful kick, but instead of sailing away along the corridor the hat just flopped over, scattering coal to right and left, whilst Lowther grabbed his foot in both hands and started to execute a war dance. "Yaroooooh!" he roared. (See Chapter 2.)

"What a scream!" laughed Blake, wiping away tears of mirth. "Those fags are the limit! They must have sneaked in and collared Gussy's hat after we cleared off!"

"Shall we go after them and see what goes on?" chuckled Tom Merry. "Those cheeky fags are bound to lead 'em into the faggery, and if there's a crowd of the young rascals there, Gussy and Lowther will be rushing into a hornet's nest."

"Leave the fatheads to it!" grinned Blake. "If they don't come back soon, though, we'd better go and see. I fancy there'll be few of the fags indoors now, though. Let's get ready to go to Wayland."

Blake grabbed the damaged hat, and turned to enter Study No. 6. In his good-natured way, Tom Merry stopped to help Digby, who was picking the pieces of coal from the linoleum.

Like Digby, he was thankful he had stopped to pick the coal up the next moment.

With the damaged hat in his hands, the chuckling Blake pushed open the door and marched into the study.

Swish!

Biff! Bump, bump, bump! Biff! Bump!

"Oh, my—Yooooop!"

The series of hearty thumps and bangs as the falling volumes rattled downwards was followed by a series of howls from Blake, and from Manners and Herries, who were at his heels. Blake escaped with a hearty whack on the head from a hefty Latin dictionary; but Manners and Herries got the rest of the booby-trap between them, and their howls were earsplitting.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry and Digby; they could not help it.

"Grooogh!" groaned Manners, who had been sent to the

floor, as had Herries. "Ow-wow! What was it? Oh, my napper!"

"And mine!" panted Herries, hugging his head as he grovelled in the doorway. "Ow-wow! Oh, my hat! What the dickens—"

"Great Scott!" gasped Tom Merry, looking in and noting the wrecked study.

The faces of Herries, Blake, and Manners went crimson with wrath, and their eyes nearly popped out of their sockets, as they saw the havoc that had been wrought in their study.

"Well, the—the little sweeps!" gasped Blake, rubbing his aching head. "Why, I'll—I'll smash 'em for this! Come on—we'll teach the little sweeps a lesson!"

"Well, they need it certainly," agreed Tom Merry, with a chuckle. "We can't allow the little fellows to get too uppish and start treating Fourth and Shell chaps like this. I'm with you, Blake!"

"Back up, then!" gasped Blake. "I—I'll—"

And without finishing his dire threats, Blake led the way towards the fags' quarters on vengeance bent. It looked as if the young heroes of the Third were booked for a warm time that afternoon.

CHAPTER 3.

Up Against It!

"H A, ha, ha!"
Roaring with hilarity, Wally D'Arcy & Co. scudded along the passage with the incensed Arthur Augustus and Monty Lowther hard on their heels.

Though they were almost speechless with laughter, the fags ran hard, knowing there was a hot time before them—if they failed to reach sanctuary in time—sanctuary for them being the Third Form-room where other members of the fag tribe would be foregathered.

And Lowther and Arthur Augustus, knowing this, ran hard also to prevent them reaching that haven of safety.

But Wally & Co. had not counted on accidents—and an accident came swift and sure.

Rounding the corner of the Third Form passage, Wally, who was leading the stampede, charged full into an unexpected obstruction—in the august form of Mr. Selby, their Form master.

As Wally was going at terrific speed the result was just what might have been expected.

Mr. Selby sat down with a terrific thump on the linoleum, and over him piled Wally, and Jameson, and Curly Gibson, their startled yelps drowning Mr. Selby's own.

"Oh, my hat!"

"Oh crumbs!"

"Oh dear!"

"Poof!" said Mr. Selby—he was so badly winded it was all he could say. He sat and gasped and panted as if for a wager. Just then Lowther and Arthur Augustus scudded up, and only just by a miracle did they escape joining the struggling forms on the floor.

"Oh, my giddy aunt!" exclaimed Lowther, in great alarm. "That's torn it!"

It undoubtedly had!

Mr. Selby's face was a sight as he staggered to his feet. He was undoubtedly very much hurt; but he was far more angry than hurt—indeed, anger was scarcely the word to describe his state of mind; he was positively raging.

"You—you young rascals!" he articulated. "You—you reckless young rascals! I—I shall—poof!—punish you with the utmost severity for this! Poof!"

Wally D'Arcy, Jameson, and Curly Gibson eyed each other dismally. They had very good reason to know the extent of Mr. Selby's ideas on severity in regard to punishments. Mr. Selby, at the very best of times, was a very severe gentleman. Indeed, he was a very sour-tempered master, and at his worst he was little less than tyrannical.

"We—we're very sorry, sir!" gasped Wally. "It—it was a pure accident, sir!"

"Accident!" stuttered the master of the Third. "You had no right to go stampeding about the place in that dangerous and scandalous manner, boy! Ow! I—I am very much hurt and distressed!"

"Pway allow me to explain this wegwettable affair, Mr. Selby!" chipped in Arthur Augustus hurriedly. "Pway do not punish these young wascals, as it was entirely our fault, sir!"

"That's right, sir!" admitted Lowther, not very cheerfully. "It—it was really our fault. We were chasing these young swee—I mean fags, sir!"

Really it was the only decent thing to do in the circumstances; but if the juniors imagined their intervention would save the hapless fags from the wrath of Mr. Selby they were very speedily disillusioned.

"Ah!" snarled the irate master, glaring at the juniors. "Were you, indeed! Very well! I shall report you for punishment to your respective Form masters! Poof! D'Arcy minor!"

"Y-e-es, sir?"

"You, Gibson and Jameson will take three hundred lines each! You will also report to me at six o'clock for a caning!"

"Oh!"

Mr. Selby glared at the fags and at the juniors, and then he tottered away, still gasping, to seek his study. He was obviously feeling the need of a rest after that unfortunate encounter.

"Well!" breathed Wally D'Arcy as he disappeared. "Well, I'm blown! Three hundred lines and a licking! The rotten old Hun!"

"Oh, dear!"

It was certainly a terrific punishment, and no wonder the luckless fags looked as if all the worries and cares in the world had suddenly descended on their youthful shoulders.

"Weally, Wally," interposed Arthur Augustus, shaking an admonishing finger at his minor. "It weally serves you wight, y'know! And if this had not happened you would have weceived a feafuh thwashin' f'rom me. In fact, I have a vewy good mind even now to—"

"And I'm going to lick the little rotters all the same!" snorted Lowther, taking a swift look about him. "Come on, Gussy, you ass! Go for 'em!"

As he spoke Lowther made a jump for Wally D'Arcy; but that young scamp was a trifle too quick for him, and so were Gibson and Jameson.

Dodging the humorist of the Shell, Wally bolted for the

Third Form-room several yards away along the passage. As Monty jumped forward to follow, Jameson slipped out a foot quick as lightning, and Lowther took a header over it, sprawling with a crash on the linoleum.

The next moment all three of the fags had reached the doorway of the Form-room and dashed inside. Lowther scrambled up, though badly shaken, and went after them, breathing out threatenings and slaughter.

Lowther's toes were still aching from that unfortunate kick, and that last fall had settled the matter for Lowther. In the ordinary way he might have thought twice at venturing alone into the faggery; but all he was thinking of now was vengeance.

The door was slammed in his face as he reached it, but before the key could be turned Lowther's desperate charge sent the door flying inwards.

"Now, you little sweeps," he gasped, "I'm going to give you the licking of your dashed lives!"

He made a blind rush at D'Arcy minor, who gave a yell:

"Back up, you men! Ow! Leggo, you rotter! Rescue!"

Wally struggled and kicked in the grasp of the irate Lowther, but only for a brief instant. There were seven or eight other fags in the Form-room, and they one and all rallied to Wally's cry of "Rescue!"

Too late did Monty Lowther realise his folly in venturing into the fags' quarters alone.

The next moment he went down, with a swarm of Third-Formers clinging to him. At the same moment Arthur Augustus hurried into the room.

Whether Arthur Augustus intended to seek trouble as Lowther had done was doubtful, but he certainly found it.

Four of the fags detached themselves from Lowther on the instant, and Arthur Augustus gave a howl as they attacked him.

"Shove that dashed door to, somebody!" gasped Wally D'Arcy. "We'll soon show these worms what's what!"

"What—ho!"

It was eleven against two, and the hapless Arthur Augustus and Lowther stood no chance whatever. In less than three minutes both were flat on their backs, gasping and panting and dishevelled, with the triumphant fags holding them down.

"That's the ticket!" panted Wally D'Arcy, clambering to his feet. "Now we'll teach them better than to come barging in here! Fetch some ink and some cinders, young Manners, and you, Joe Frayne. Look lively!"

In the faggery Wally's word was more or less law, and the two fags jumped to obey. Joe Frayne came rushing up from the fireplace with a shovelful of cinders, whilst Reggie Manners carried a couple of ink-wells brimful of ink.

"Now, my pippins!" grinned Wally. "You got us a licking and a lining, and we're going to make you squirm for that! You're going to learn soon that the Third mean business! They're fed-up with being kicked and bullied by everybody. You sat me down in a puddle this morning, Lowther!"

"Yes, and I'll sit you down on my boot when I get hold of you!" gasped Lowther. "Just you wait!"

"Right!" said Wally cheerfully. "Well, I think I'd better make sure of paying you out first before you do it, old son! Hand me those cinders, young Frayne!"

"Look here!" panted Lowther. "Don't you dare—Whoop! Oh, crikey!"

Wally had dared and done. As Joe Frayne handed him the shovel of cinders, Wally took a handful and rubbed them well into Lowther's hair. Some of the cinders went down Lowther's neck also, and he howled.

"Now the ink!" ordered Wally. "Hold on, though! My hat! What a jolly good wheeze! A giddy brain-wave, in fact! We'll deal with old Gus first after all, in case we get interrupted!"

And leaving the squirming Lowther in safe hands, Wally seated himself on the heaving chest of his noble major, and held the brimming ink-well over his upturned face.

"Take it away!" shrieked Arthur Augustus. "You—you feafuh young wascal!"

"We'll make a bargain first!" grinned Wally. "Now, Gus, old man, you had a fiver this morning. Half of that is mine by rights, of course! Am I to have my rights or not, old nut?"

"No, you feafuh young wascal!"

"Oh, all right. Here goes, then!"

Wally tilted the ink-well, and a tiny trickle dripped on the upturned and horrified features of Arthur Augustus.

"Yoooop!"

"Your beautiful tie gets it next," warned Wally, "and then I'm going to swamp your waistcoat of many colours, and rub cinders in your hair and clobber afterwards!"

"Grooogh! Oh, you—you—"

"Well, is it a go?" demanded Wally.

"No—yaas!" shrieked Arthur Augustus.

"Two-ten for me—what?"

"No, you young—Yawwoooogh! Gweat Scott! Yaas,

"I agree undab compulsion, you feahful young scamp!" shrieked Arthur Augustus, as a drip of ink fell on his collar.

"That's good enough, then!" grinned Wally, handing back the ink-well to Reggie Manners. "Sorry to have to help myself, Gus!"

And Wally helped himself by shoving an inky hand into his brother's breast pocket. He soon found the precious letter from Lord Eastwood, and he grinned as he recognised his pater's handwriting. In a moment he had taken out the fiver and crammed it into his own pocket, returning the letter to the jacket pocket of his major.

"Only borrowing it, of course, Gus!" he observed reassuringly. "I'll get it changed at the tuckshop, and send you your two-ten by special messenger."

"You unwincipled young scamp!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

"Go it, Gus!" said Wally cheerfully. "Let your giddy chin wag and get your money's worth, old bean! Now it's Lowther's turn again. We'll— Oh, my hat! Look out!"

Wally's voice ended in a note of great alarm as there came a tramp of many feet in the passage without, and then the door flew back.

Tom Merry & Co. had arrived.

It was too late for Wally to regret his carelessness in omitting to lock the door. The enemy had come and caught him unprepared. And they were in force!

Tom Merry knew from bitter experience that it was a big mistake to enter the fags' quarters unprepared—on an unfriendly visit, at all events. On the way the chums of the School House had collected several other fellows—Levison, Clive, Glyn, and Talbot, who were only too ready to help in putting the troublesome fags in "their place."

"Back up!" yelled Wally. "Oh crumbs!"

"Wescue!" shrieked Arthur Augustus, as he recognised the newcomers. "Wescue, deah boys!"

"Rescue it is, Gussy!" grinned Tom Merry, as his eyes took in the scene. "Shut the door, Dig. We're going to show these troublesome little fellows that it doesn't pay to handle Fourth and Shell chaps, and it doesn't pay to wreck their studies and to shove booby-traps over the sacred doors of gentlemen older and wiser than themselves. Mop 'em up, chaps!"

"What-ho!"

What happened next seemed like a horrid nightmare to the hapless fags of the Third at St. Jim's. The tables were turned with a vengeance, and against nine juniors they stood no chance whatever. But they struggled gallantly and desperately enough for all that.

It could have only one ending, however, and that ending came swiftly, for soon the yelling fags were helpless. Then Tom Merry & Co. dealt with them.

In their view, what was sauce for the goose should be sauce for the gander, so to speak, and after rubbing cinders and chalk in their hair, the triumphant juniors poured ink over their heads and faces. They finished up by rolling each individual fag over and over in the dust of the Form-room.

By that time Wally & Co. were almost on the verge of hysterics, and they looked shocking sights.

"Oh! Ow-wow!" groaned Wally, glowering up at Tom Merry, who sat on his chest. "Oh, won't we just—Grooooooh!—pay you back for this!"

"Discipline must be maintained!" quoted Tom Merry severely. "Even inky fags must be taught not to be cheeky, and not to play tricks on their elders and betters. When you get to our age, my infants, you'll realise that what we've done has been all for your good."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, you—you—"

"Ta-ta!" said Tom Merry. "Remember that the next time you forget you're only grubby little fags we'll call again. As Lathom says, it hurts us just as much as it hurts you to punish you! Come on, chaps!"

And Tom Merry led the way out of the Form-room with his band of avengers. Not until the sounds of their parting footsteps and laughter died away did any of the fags move, and then Wally D'Arcy sat up dazedly.

"Ow!" he gasped. "Oh, erieky! M-mum-my hat! I feel as if I'd been through a mangle! Oh, the awful bullies!"

"Ow! Ow-wow!" replied Curly Gibson. "This is all your silly fault, young D'Arcy!"

"Well—well, I'm—I'm—" Wally broke off, speechless with indignation at that remark.

"Of course it is!" snorted Gibson, wiping ink from his features with a grubby handkerchief. "If you'd taken my advice and used dip-diplomatics in the first place, this wouldn't have happened!"

"That's right!" groaned Jameson, clawing cinders from his hair. "You fairly asked for trouble, Wally. You might have known the beasts would make you sit up afterwards!"

Wally fairly glowered at his groaning and grumbling chums.

"Well, I like that!" he gasped. "You silly owls! You—you burbling— Oh, you asses! Didn't you chaps help to wreck their rotten study? Didn't you help me to put that booby trap up?" he roared. "Why, if you blame me, I'll dot you on the boko, young Gibson—and you, too, young Jameson."

"Well, why didn't you—" began Jameson.

"Oh, shut up!" snorted the scamp of the Third in deep disgust. "You funky owls make me tired! Every time things go wrong you blame me! The fact is we oughtn't to have started our campaign against injustice yet—not until all my plans are cut and dried."

"We oughtn't!" agreed Levison minor feelingly. "We ought to have waited a few years!"

"You silly ass!" hooted Wally.

"If this is what your thumping secret society's going to do for us," began Reggie Manners wrathfully, "you'd better bury it!"

"Yes, rather!"

"You—you burbling owls!" roared Wally D'Arcy, jumping up wrathfully. "Don't I tell you it hasn't started yet? This—this affair has nothing to do with it. I tell you that, when we get going, we'll make things hum all round!"

"My head's fairly humming now, anyway!" groaned Gibson. "If that is what it's going to let us in for—"

"I tell you it isn't!" shrieked Wally. "I'll punch the head of any fellow who wants to back out now. You fellows have already sworn to join and back me up, and you can't back out now!"

"We don't want to back out!" snorted Hobbs.

"Then dry up and listen to me!" said Wally, his eyes gleaming with determination. "We arranged to have our first meeting in the old, empty box-room this very afternoon, and we're going to. You chaps know the programme, and why we've formed the secret society? It's to right our many wrongs and look after the interests of the giddy Third in general. We're fed-up with being down-trodden worms; we're made to work like niggers for the blessed Sixth, and sometimes by the Fifth, and we're booted and badgered about by everyone. It's got to stop!"

"Hear, hear!"

Wally's eloquent remarks were rousing the flagging enthusiasms of his followers! They ceased groaning and

(Continued overleaf.)

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grumbling, and scrambled up, dusting themselves down and cleaning themselves as best they could.

"Too long have we groaned beneath the heels of tyrants," misquoted Wally indignantly. "Too long have we been battered about from pillar to post, and forced to work like galley slaves. The worms have turned at last, and the 'Society of the Crimson Dagger' is going to avenge our wrongs!"

"The—the whatter?" gasped Reggie Manners. "Is that what we're going to be? Oh, my hat!"

"Just that!" said Wally grimly. "It's a jolly good name for us, and it'll strike terror into the hearts of our giddy enemies. We're going to cut out some cardboard daggers, and we'll dip 'em in red ink and send 'em to the chaps we've marked out for vengeance. And the first victims of the society are going to be those rotters who've just downed us!"

"Oh, good!"

"Ripping!"

"But what about that fiver, Wally!" warned Curly Gibson. "It's a wonder your major and his lot haven't been back after it before this."

"Oh, my hat! I'd forgotten all about that!" snapped Wally excitedly. "Old Gus must have forgotten; but he's bound to remember soon. Let's clear sharp! We'll have to have a feed later on, as it ain't safe to risk going to the tuckshop this afternoon. Don't forget the spirit-stove and things, and mind you slip up to the box-room one by one or somebody will spot us. Now we'd better go and get cleaned up a bit."

And with that the young scamps of the Third departed for a very much needed clean-up, their recent troubles forgotten, only eager and excited to back up their leader in his great scheme. If Tom Merry & Co. imagined they had effectually "cured" the young gentlemen of the Third Form at St. Jim's they were sadly mistaken. Wally & Co. were still out for trouble—whether it was fated to be trouble for themselves or for other people remained to be seen.

CHAPTER 4.

Astonishing!

TOM MERRY & CO. left the Third Form-room feeling well satisfied at having effectually put the scamps of the Third in their places—as they imagined they had.

It was not the first time they had done so by any means. Every now and again they found this necessary, for the cheeky youngsters of the Third very soon forgot reverses, and very soon became, as Tom Merry was wont to describe it, "uppish" again. Then the process of putting them in their rightful places had to be carried through again.

Certainly the little band of Third-Formers, known as Wally & Co., were notorious young scamps, always up to some mischief or other. But, naturally enough, their views as to their rightful places in the scheme of things differed from those of their elders. Hence the constant trouble.

"Well, that's squashed the little men for a bit, anyway," chuckled Tom Merry, as they tramped away towards their own quarters. "I fancy they won't try any more monkey tricks for a time after this, chaps."

"Wathah not!" groaned Arthur Augustus dismally. "It was weally a vewy good thing indeed that you chaps came along to the rescue! But bai Jove! I am in a feahful mess!"

"We all are, more or less!" grunted Jack Blake. "And so is the study. The sooner we get things cleaned up the better. We'll not land at Wayland before tea-time at this rate!"

"And I'd better clean up before going home," grunted Glyn.

"And we're going to Rylcombe," grinned Levison. "We left old Cardew waiting at the gates for us. Oh crumbs!"

The juniors hurried away to get a much-needed wash and change, Blake & Co. first setting about the uncongenial task of putting their study to rights. And, as usual, Arthur Augustus was the last by a long way, and his chums were waiting on the School House steps in growing exasperation when at last he did turn up.

He was resplendent in spotless Etons, natty patent leather shoes, and a glimmering silk-hat when he turned up at last, and his chums glowered at him.

"Come on, you burbling duffer!" hooted Blake. "Think we're going to wait here for you all day! If it wasn't that you had all the blessed cash we should have gone without you!"

"Oh, bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus jumped.

It was only in that moment that the remembrance of what

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had happened to his precious "fivah" came back to him. The excitement of the scrap with the fags had quite swept that happening away from his noble mind.

"Oh, bai Jove!" he repeated blankly, his face full of dismay. "How extremely unfortunate!"

"What's the matter now, dummy?" snorted Blake.

"I object to bein' called a dummy, Blake!" said Arthur Augustus coldly. "Howevah—"

"What's the matter?" hooted Blake, in sudden alarm.

"Pway do not wear at me, Blake—I stwongly object to bein' woreard at, as you know well enough. The fact is," said Arthur Augustus, eyeing his chums rather uncertainly, "those young wascals have got my fivah!"

"What!" It was a howl.

"Yaas, deah boys!" said Arthur Augustus indignantly. "That young scamp Wally took it fwom my pocket—forced me to agwee to givin' him halves by holdin' a wotten iuk-well ovah my clobber. Of course—"

"Well!" gasped Blake. "You—you—well, upon my word! Oh, you awful ass! And have they got it now?"

"Yaas! Young Wally has it, the young scamp! I have only just wemembahed—"

"You—you burbling duffer!" roared Blake.

"Weally, Blake—"

"Oh, bump him, and let's go after it!" shouted Herries.

"Yes, rather!"

"Weally, deah boys— Here—what— Gweat Scott! Welease me, you wuff— Yooop! Oh cwumbs!"

Bump!

The noble form of the astonished Arthur Augustus smote the hard steps several times, and then his irate chums rolled him over the edge, and he rolled down the steps, his monocle flying one way and his silk-hat another. He arrived at the bottom of the School House steps in a dishevelled heap, filling the air with his howls. Then his chums tore indoors in search of Wally D'Arcy.

They had little hope that he would be found in the Form-room; what little hope they had was not realised! The Third Form-room was deserted.

"Well, this is the outside edge!" breathed Tom Merry. "Fancy that awful ass, Gussy, not thinking about it until now! We're absolutely done—our afternoon's a wash-out! That young villain Wally has made himself scarce, of course, knowing we'd come back for the dashed fiver. Oh, that awful ass!"

"Did you know young Wally had taken it, Lowther?" asked Blake suddenly.

"Ahem!" Lowther coughed uneasily. As a matter of fact, Lowther knew well enough, of course; but, like the hapless Arthur Augustus, he had quite forgotten about it until D'Arcy himself had made the dread discovery. But, being wise in his generation, he had felt it better not to mention the fact. It was really unfortunate for him that Blake asked that question. "Ahem!" he coughed again.

"You—you see—"

"Did you know about it?" insisted Blake suspiciously.

"Ahem! Well, yes! I saw Wally take it, of course. But—but the fact is, it quite slipped my memory until now!"

"Well, you—you awful idiot!" yelled Tom Merry.

"He's as bad as that dummy Gussy!" shouted Blake excitedly. "Bump him—bump him just as we bumped Gussy!"

"Only more so!" snorted Digby.

"Look here—I tell you— Oh crikey!"

Lowther began to struggle; but it was in vain, and he was bumped again and again on the linoleum. It was a trifle softer than the top of the stone steps; but it was a painful proceeding for all that, and when Tom Merry and the others streamed away to continue the search for Wally, Lowther sat on the floor and roared with anguish.

"Come on!" gasped Tom Merry. "We've got to find that young rascal before he blues it all on his pals."

"Yes, rather!"

But it was more easily said than done. Several fellows had seen young Wally during the last few minutes; but the clues when followed up seemed to lead to nothing. To make sure that the fags had not sneaked out unseen, Digby ran down to the gates to interview Taggles, the porter. From him he learned that neither Wally nor any of his personal chums had gone out of gates during the last hour.

"Well, it beats the band!" said Tom Merry, frowning. "Where can the young ribs be? They're hiding, of course, knowing we'd be on their trail sooner or later. Oh, blow! I— Hallo, here's Trimble! He'll know if anyone does!"

"What's the matter with the fat man?" ejaculated Blake.

Something was undoubtedly the matter with Baggy Trimble, the fattest and laziest junior in St. Jim's. He came limping along the corridor, and he was dusty and dishevelled, and scowling.

"Seen young D'Arcy minor anywhere, Trimble?" exclaimed Tom Merry, eyeing the fat youth curiously.



Blake pushed open the door and marched into the study, accompanied by Manners and Herries. Biff! Bump! Biff! "Oh, my—yoooop!" "What the— Yaroooooh!" The series of hearty thumps and bangs as the volumes rattled downwards was closely followed by a series of howls from the trio who had walked so unsuspectingly into the booby trap! (See Chapter 2.)

Trimble stopped, and his little eyes gleamed with malice. "Yes, I jolly well have!" he snorted, rubbing his head. "The little beasts rolled me down the stairs! I've a jolly good mind to report them—breaking bounds like that! They're up to no good, I bet!"

"Eh? What stairs?" demanded Tom Merry, his eyes gleaming with interest. "You mean—"

"Those back stairs up to the old box-rooms, of course!" groaned Trimble, rubbing himself tenderly. "The beasts

"But those stairs are out of bounds!" said Blake.

"I know they are!" grunted Trimble. "That's why I knew they were up to something. You see, it was like this—"

"Now for a whopper!" murmured Digby. "When he's going to tell a fib Trimble always starts like that."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, really, Digby—"

"Go on!" hooted Blake. "They went upstairs, you say?"

"Yes! Ain't I telling you? I just happened to go up on that second landing to—to have a look round, you know—"

"Sure it was only that?" grinned Digby.

"Of course it was!" said Trimble warmly. "I'm not

jolly well afraid of Grundy, and if you think I was hiding from him just because his cake happened to be missing, you're jolly well mistaken!"

"Go on!" snapped Tom Merry. "We quite understand. You pinched Grundy's cake, and went up on that landing to scoff it, knowing Grundy wouldn't follow you there."

"Nothing of the kind! I never touched his blessed cake—it wasn't worth touching, anyway!" said Trimble. "Stale, and hardly any raisins in it! Anyway, I was up there—looking round, you know—when I heard somebody coming, and hid, thinking it was Grundy—I mean, a beak! But it was young Wally and Jameson and Gibson. He, he, he!"

"Go on, fatty! Buck up!"

"They sneaked past me without spotting me—you know how dark it is in that blind passage just off the landing? Well, they sneaked upstairs, and after they'd gone some more fags went up—I counted twelve altogether," grinned Trimble. "I followed 'em, knowing something was on. But the beasts must have heard me—I stumbled, you know. They came rushing downstairs when they spotted me over the banisters, and before I could give them all a good licking they rolled me downstairs—the little beasts!"

"And they're up there still?" demanded Tom.

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"Yes, of course. I say, you fellows, go and give 'em rocks—handling a Fourth chap, you know! Here—"

But Tom Merry and his chums did not wait for more. They had wasted enough time. They fairly flew towards the back staircase Trimble had mentioned. It was a narrow, winding staircase at the extreme end of the ancient part of the School House, and the rooms above, though once having been used as box-rooms, were empty and unused now, for the floors were unsafe in parts, being rotten with age. For this reason—if for no other—that part of the school had been placed strictly out of bounds.

But Wally & Co.—with the five—were there, and that was enough for Tom Merry & Co. They did not doubt Trimble's story—at least, they did not doubt that Trimble had purloined Grundy's cake, and, having been chased by Grundy, had taken refuge on that landing on the forbidden staircase, knowing Grundy would not think of hunting for him there. And while there Trimble had seen the Third Form scamps go up those stairs, evidently to the deserted rooms.

That much was very clear, and very soon, having made quite sure they were unobserved—though that part of the school was always deserted—they hurried up the stairs. They went cautiously, however, for the stairs were uncarpeted, and they did not wish to give warning of their approach.

Tom Merry was the first to reach the top landing. There were three rooms there—dark, dingy rooms—their oak-panelled walls, blackened with age, dusty and grimy. Two were empty, but Tom chuckled as he found the third door closed.

From within came a murmur of youthful voices.

With a chuckle, Tom Merry tiptoed to the banisters and waved a warning hand to his chums, who were creeping cautiously up after him.

Next moment they had joined him outside the closed door.

"They're in there, right enough!" he murmured. "Wait. I'll try the giddy door. Wonder what the young rascals are up to?"

Tom gently tried the handle, but gently as he tried it the rusty mechanism gave a loud, rasping click.

From inside the room came a startled exclamation, and then silence.

"Blow!" breathed Tom Merry. "Makes little difference, though. The blessed door's fastened somehow, though it isn't likely to be locked. Here goes!"

As he spoke Tom stepped back a pace, and then he flung his whole weight at the closed door. It gave fully six inches, showing it was wedged with something from inside.

"Who's that?" came a startled voice—Wally D'Arcy's voice. "My hat! It's those Fourth and Shell chaps! Quick!"

The startled voice reached the ears of those outside, and Tom Merry chuckled.

"Altogether, chaps!" he called, not troubling now to lower his voice. "Now!"

Blake, Herries, and Manners joined him swiftly, and together they made a desperate charge at the door. It moved another inch and stuck again.

But it filled the fags inside with great alarm. Wally D'Arcy looked round the dingy room with a groan. Only a broken, rickety chair placed under the handle held the door shut, the lock being broken, and he knew it was only a matter of moments before it would give way. The Third-Formers were hopelessly trapped.

"Get these dashed things hidden—sharp!" snapped Wally. "Shove that old carpet over the hole, Reggie!"

"Right-ho!"

Evidently the fags had been very busy. As a matter of fact, they had been busy getting their quarters ready for the first meeting of the secret society. They had brought upstairs an old broom with which they had swept out the dusty room, and they had brought crockery, a spirit-stove, and various other articles, intending to have secret "feeds" up there. And to make a safe hiding-place for these things they had taken up several of the rotting floorboards, intending to hide the articles there in case anyone came prowling round.

Now they were trapped, and unless they were quick the things would be found and their intentions discovered—or some of them at least.

In a flash the fags jumped to obey their leader. Though the door was slightly open now, the hole in the floor could not yet be seen from outside, and soon all the small articles had been rammed out of sight in the hollow beneath the boards.

But before they could replace the boards the door bent inwards perilously, and swift as a flash Wally flung over the hole a stretch of ragged carpet they had found in the room.

He had just done so when the broken chair flew away

from the door, and next instant Tom Merry charged into the room with Blake, Herries, Digby, and Manners at his heels.

What happened next was scarcely clear—certainly not to Tom Merry & Co.

Tom Merry's third step took him right over the hole where the boards had been removed, and as his foot touched the loose carpet it naturally sank down, and Tom's foot went with it.

Crash!

"Yarrooooooh!"

"Oh, my hat! Look out!"

Blake yelled the warning—too late either to save himself or those behind. The next instant, as Tom Merry crashed downwards, Blake also trod on the carpet-covered hole, and he was flung sprawling over Tom Merry.

And over him went Herries, Digby, and Manners. They sprawled there, struggling desperately and filling the air with startled howls.

For an instant the fags stared thunderstruck—as startled at what had happened as were the hapless-Shell and Fourth juniors themselves. And then Wally & Co. roared.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But not for long did they stay. Wally suddenly saw a chance of escape.

"Quick! Run for it, chaps!" he yelled.

"What-ho!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The fags fairly flung themselves for the door, carefully avoiding the struggling forms, and leaping over the hole. They went through the open door and swarmed out on to the landing, roaring with laughter.

Then they flew downstairs, taking the stairs two at a time.

But they did not reach the lower floor without accident. As Jameson, who happened to be leading, turned the corner of the dark landing of the second flight, he charged full tilt into two juniors who were just coming hastily upstairs.

They were Arthur Augustus and Monty Lowther. Arthur Augustus had, on entering the School House in search of his chums, found Baggy Trimble talking to Monty Lowther, and from Baggy both juniors had learned where their chums were quickly enough.

They had not expected to meet the fags so early, however. There was a yell of alarm, a swift collision, and next moment the fags and the two juniors were mixed up in a sprawling heap on the stairs.

Hobbs and Joe Frayne were sent rolling clean down the stairs; but luckily the lower flight only consisted of a dozen steps, and they reached the bottom unhurt save for sundry bumps and bruises.

From upstairs came the clatter of boots as Tom Merry & Co. came rushing down, seething with wrath, and hearing that, Wally & Co. did not wait any longer. They sorted themselves out and fairly leaped down the stairs—both Lowther and Arthur Augustus being far too startled to attempt to stop them—only Wally himself being unlucky.

At that moment Wally was yelling, with his noble major lying across him on the top step of the stairs, and as he squirmed to regain his feet, Lowther made a grab at him.

To dodge the grab, Wally lost his head in his excitement, and sprang back on to the landing.

"Collar him!" gasped Lowther. "Quick!"

He made a desperate grab again at the fag, and Wally jumped back into the little passage of the landing to avoid him. The passage was a blind one—indeed, it was merely a sort of alcove, some four feet long, darker than the stairs themselves, which were dark enough. And Wally saw his mistake too late—he was trapped!

"Got you!" panted Lowther. "Here he is, chaps!"

As he spoke, Monty made a rush at the fag, and Wally, not beaten yet, sprang back and tried to dodge him.

But his move was not quick enough, for Lowther grabbed him, and the two went crashing against the panelled wall with a thud that made the unlucky fag see stars as his head struck the wall behind.

It was not a light crack by any means, and Wally, half-stunned, slid down to the bare floor with a low gasp of pain.

"Hurt, kid?" gasped Lowther, in great alarm. "Oh—Here, chaps!"

At that moment Tom Merry, followed by Blake, Herries, Digby, and Manners, appeared on the landing.

"Got the young imp?" panted Tom. "Oh, good! Why—"

"He's hurt, I think!" said Lowther contritely. "I knocked him spinning against the panelling. Hold up, youngster!"

"I'm all right, you fathead!" gasped Wally with a rueful grin, sitting up gasping. "I knocked my napper against the wall, that's all!"

He staggered up and stumbled out on to the landing. His

eyes were gleaming rather queerly, though the juniors little knew why.

"Sure you're all right, Wally?" said Tom, rather anxiously. "That fathead Lowther—"

"It was an accident—nothing to make a song about!" growled the fag, rubbing his head. "Look here—lemme go now! You've handled me enough this afternoon, blow you!"

"Not yet, my little man!" said Tom grimly, satisfied now that the fag wasn't really hurt. "You young villain! We might have broken our legs over that dashed hole in the floor."

"Your own silly faults!" snorted Wally independently. "Who asked you to come barging in like that?"

"What were you up to, anyway?" demanded Tom Merry.

"Yah! Find out!"

"We're going to!" grinned Tom. "But, first, we want that merry old fiver, my lad. Out with it!"

"Look here—"

"Yaas, wathah!" interposed Arthur Augustus, greatly relieved to find his minor was not damaged. "I ordah you to hand ovah that fivah at once, Wally!"

"What about my share—my two-ten?" snorted Wally.

"You jolly well agreed—you know you did!"

"I agweed undah compulsion, bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus indignantly. "Howevah, as I gave my word I will keep it. You shall have your two pounds ten, you young wascal! But—"

"But you'll jolly well wait for it!" said Blake wrathfully. "And after leading us this dance and making us sit up like you've done you'll thundering well wait a long time. Yank him over and go through his pockets, you men!"

"Yes, rather!"

"Look here—" roared Wally.

He roared furiously as the juniors collared him, but they were in no mood to be trifled with, and after a brief struggle the five-pound note was discovered crumpled up in the fag's trousers' pocket.

"I'll take charge of this," said Blake grimly. "Now clear off and think yourself jolly lucky we don't put you through it again."

"You rotten bullies!" hooted Wally. "Why, I'll jolly well—"

Wally did not stay to finish, for Blake had jumped forward with his boot raised. Wally took the first three stairs in one wild leap and went tumbling down them. He reached the bottom, only stopping to place his fingers outstretched before his nose and to shout a derisive "Yah!" upstairs. Then he took to his heels along the deserted corridor below and vanished.

"Bai Jove! Weally, Jack Blake—"

"You dry up, Gussy; we'll see to this!" snapped Blake, shoving Gussy's fiver into his pocket. "We'll see you don't lose it again. Now, what about Wayland? Great pip! Half the afternoon's gone!"

"Hold on!" said Tom Merry. "I'm keen to know what those young rips were up to. Just a sec!"

And Tom raced back up the rickety stairs to find out if he could. Nobody else followed him; they were not interested in the doings of mere fags, though they were fated to be before very long.

But Tom found nothing upstairs save the broom and a few pieces of crockery. He glanced under the floorboards, but the stove and other things had been pushed well under, and his glance failed to find them. In some perplexity Tom returned to his chums waiting impatiently below.

"Blessed if I can understand what the young rascals are up to," he said, frowning. "They've got a few crocks there, and the beggars have lifted the floorboards for some reason or other. I suppose they meant to use that giddy room for a secret den to have sly feeds in. Silly young idiots!"

"Blow them!" snorted Blake. "Come on—let's be off!"

And Tom Merry grinned and nodded, and the juniors cautiously made their way out of the deserted part of the School House. And ten minutes later they had dismissed Wally & Co. from their minds and were hurrying towards Rylcombe Station en route for Wayland town.

CHAPTER 5. The Explorers!

"HERE he comes!"

"Well? What happened, Wally?"

"What about the fiver, young D'Arcy?"

A chorus of anxious inquiries greeted Walter Adolphus D'Arcy as he hurried into the Third Form-room, panting and gasping. He found Curly Gibson, Jameson, Levison minor, Manners minor, Joe Frayne, Hobbs, Dicky Harvey, Butt, Phelim Hooley, Watson, and Kent—all the members of his newly formed "secret society"—waiting him there in no little anxiety.

They gathered round him eagerly, as Wally closed the door—carefully locking it this time. Wally's eyes were still gleaming, and there was an air of suppressed excitement about him.

"They collared me!" he panted. "Glad you kids got away!"

"We were in two minds to jolly well come back and try to rescue you," said Jameson. "But—"

"Wouldn't have been any good—the others are a bit too hefty for us," said Wally. "I say—"

"Did they collar the fiver?" breathed Curly Gibson.

"Yes—yanked it out of my pocket, the beasts!"

"Oh crumbs!"

"What awful luck!"

"Done in the eye, after all!"

A chorus of dismayed groans went up at the sad news. The visions of glorious free feeds faded suddenly from the youthful minds of Wally's select band of heroes.

"But never mind the rotten fiver—in any case, Gussy's bound to keep his giddy word and stump up the two-ten sooner or later," said Wally crisply. "Trust old Cus for that, though he is an awful ass and a nuisance! But never mind that. I say, you chaps, I've discovered something—or I believe I have!"

"But that fiver—"

"Blow the fiver!" snapped Wally. "Look here! Something jolly queer happened just after you'd gone. You know that little passage on the first landing of those stairs—the blind passage like a blessed cupboard without a door?"

"Yes," grunted Jameson. "What about it? That fiver—"

"Blow the dashed fiver!" hooted Wally. "I tell you I think I've discovered something more interesting than a blessed fiver! Lowther was after me, and he sent me spinning against the panelled wall in that alcove—I biffed my napper a tidy old bang against the dashed panel!"

"Well?" demanded Curly. "What about it? What does that matter? It was only a matter of wood meeting wood!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Funny, aren't you?" snorted Wally, rubbing the back of his head tenderly. "Oh, no, it didn't matter at all—even though it nearly busted my head! I'll give you a thick ear, young Gibson, if you—"

(Continued overleaf.)



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"Oh, cheese it!" said Jameson crossly. "What the thump is it, Wally? What have you found? I hope it's something as good as a fiver, anyway!"

"It wasn't—though it may be something jolly useful and interesting, you chaps," said Wally, his eyes gleaming again. "Well, when my head biffed against the panelling I distinctly heard a funny sort of click and felt the giddy panel move!"

"What?"

"It's a fact!" said Wally, grinning at the sensation his words had caused. "The thing moved—I felt it. But I wasn't going to give the game away, though I was jolly near stunned. I just gave a sly squint at that blessed panel, and there was a dark gap right down one side of it—about three or four inches wide. It's a wonder those Fourth and Shell rotters didn't spot it, too!"

"Phew!"

"You know what that means?" said Wally excitedly. "A giddy secret sliding panel! They've already found more than one jolly old secret panel at this school, and Railton thinks there are more not discovered yet. You know what a whale he is for mugging up old documents, and he ought to know. Well, I believe I've found one by accident."

"Looks like it," breathed Levison minor. "Let's go and have a squint, chaps."

"We're going to!" grinned Wally. "You bet! But we'll give those old fogies a chance to clear first. Let's hope they haven't found the things we shored under the floor in the box-room—though it scarcely matters if they have."

"Doesn't it?" grunted Reggie Manners. "What good will that box-room be for a meeting-place if they know, eh? Tell me that?"

"Not much!" said Wally. "But—but—well, if I'm not mistaken that giddy sliding panel may lead to something better. That's why I'm so keen on exploring it, chaps."

"Phew! Yes, rather!"

"We'll get a bike-lantern or something," said Wally. "You cut off, young Manners, and fetch yours, and I'll get my electric torch. It's in my desk."

"Right-ho!"

Reggie Manners, excited now, hurried out for his bike-lantern, and Wally got out from his desk a small pocket torch. He tried it and found it in good working order. Curly Gibson also remembered he possessed one, and he rushed off to find it. He came back with it just as Reggie turned up with his lantern.

"Good!" said Wally. "I think we can risk it now—those Fourth and Shell cads want to get to Wayland, I believe, so they won't hang about long, thank goodness! Come on, young Gibson! We'll start first, and you fellows follow in pairs. Mind that prying fat cad Trimble doesn't spot you. It was that worm who must have told Tom Merry where we were."

"My hat, yes!"

Wally and Stanley Gibson hurried out and made their way with due caution to the old staircase. They reached it without adventure, and, after making sure that Tom Merry & Co. had indeed gone, they slipped up to the landing above and entered the dark little alcove.

A moment's examination of the black panelling with the aid of the torch soon proved that Wally's suspicion was well founded.

There was a slit at the side of one panel—a dark slit that went from top to bottom of the panel, which was about two feet wide by five feet high.

A cold draught came through the slit, and Wally, trembling with excitement, shone the light through it. The blackness beyond was lit up, showing heavy stonework across a dank passage.

By this time other fags had arrived, and soon all the members of the secret society were gathered in the alcove, their eyes open with excitement.

"Hold the light, Curly!" breathed Wally.

The next moment he was tugging sideways at the sliding panel—for it was undoubtedly that. It moved a few more inches, and then stuck again.

But, as Curly got his nimble fingers to help, the panel slid back to its full extent with a creaking, harsh, rasping sound.

"It wants oiling," said Levison minor, with a qucer, hysterical giggle. "Oh, my hat! What a find!"

"Going through, Wally?" whispered Jameson breathlessly.

"I should think we jolly well are!" said Wally, in a voice that thrilled. "Come on! Go carefully, mind! The floor inside seems to be wood, and it's bound to be rotten!"

He climbed through the secret panel, and one by one—
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some of them hesitatingly and very gingerly, it must be confessed—they followed Wally.

"Shall I close it?" whispered Hobbs, who came last.

"Hold on!" said Wally hurriedly. "We don't want to be buried alive, you know."

With the aid of his torch Wally began to examine the mechanism of the sliding panel. He found it was just the same as the mechanism of the panel that had been found in the wall of Study No. 6 on the Fourth passage some time before. The panel seemed to be supported on a pair of black, oaken wheels, while on one side of the panel was a cumbersome arrangement of rusted springs that obviously worked the panel, or had worked it before it had rusted.

"Lend me your bike lamp, young Manners!" said Wally.

Reggie obediently handed over the lamp. It was a smelly, old-fashioned oil-lamp which Reggie had just lit. And, blowing out the light, Wally opened the reservoir and tipped some oil from it over the rusted springs and wheels in turn. Then he worked the panel backwards and forwards, with greater ease each time he did it.

"Safe enough to close it now," he murmured. "Now mind you keep your peepers skinned so that we'll find our way back easily. I shouldn't like to get lost and trapped in here!"

And Wally shivered. And it was no wonder. For in the narrow passage, scarcely two feet wide, it was dank and dark and smelly with the must of ages. Moreover, as they stood there, it was most eerie and still as the tomb. The thought that they were probably the first to set foot there for hundreds of years made the fags' hearts thump faster.

"Phew! What a ghastly hole!" breathed Jameson, shuddering. "I—I say, let's get out!"

"Rot! No jolly fear!" muttered Wally, his usually cheery face quite serious for once. "We're going on, my lads! This is great!"

"It's jolly smelly!" said Levison minor.

"Well, what the thump do you expect—after being shut up for thousands of years perhaps," said Wally vaguely. "Expect the air to be like it is in the quad, fathead?"

"Smells like rotten bones, anyway!" mumbled Jameson, with a shiver. "Go ahead, then!"

And Wally went ahead, stopping with a sudden gasp the next minute, however. It was lucky he did so, for the passage suddenly ended in a steep flight of wooden steps that went down into deep blackness.

"Phew! That was a near thing!" gasped Wally, who had only just saved himself from being pushed down headlong by those behind. "Go slow, you chaps, for goodness' sake! I'd rather break my giddy neck somewhere else than here. Mind these rotten steps!"

The warning was necessary, for the steps were crumbling in parts. But the fags, their hands on the damp walls, got down them safely, finding themselves in another passage that seemed to run between the walls of the ancient building.

This, for the most part, was also about two feet wide; but in parts it was barely wide enough for them to scrape through sideways.

Suddenly, after traversing the passage for some yards, Wally stopped and shone the light from his torch on the wall. It showed up more blackened panelling, and then the light rested on something else—another sliding door obviously, with the same rusted mechanism.

"Where the thump are we now, I wonder?" breathed Wally. "Quiet, chaps!" he added. "I'm going to see where this giddy one leads to."

Handing his torch to Curly, Wally listened a moment, and then he gently tried the panel. It did not stir, though he increased the pressure until he was pushing hard.

But after allowing some oil to run on the wheels and springs, Wally succeeded in moving it at last. It moved jerkily at first, and then, with startling suddenness, it shot sideways to its full extent.

"Oh—oh crumbs!" breathed Wally.

He fairly jumped at what was before them. His chums at his shoulder gave startled gasps.

They were staring into a room—a study, and it was a very well-known study. It had a desk scarcely a yard away from them, and on the desk, in addition to many other things, reposed a cane—a very familiar cane. More than once quite recently had the fags received that cane across their youthful hands.

The study was Mr. Selby's study.

Moreover, their respected Form master was in it at that moment. He lay stretched out on his cosy couch, his sour face still, his eyes closed. From his open mouth came a gentle snore.

"Oh!" gasped Wally faintly. "Oh—oh crumbs! Who'd have expected this?"

The fags stared and stared. And yet it was nothing astonishing, after all. The masters' corridor was, like most of the studies, situated in the ancient part of the School House, and one wall that ran the whole length of the masters' studies was oak panelled, the interior walls being for the most part of more recent build and of brick and plaster.

Considering what had already been found, there was nothing surprising in a secret panel being found there.

At all events, there it was. Through the secret panel the fags found themselves looking into their Form master's study. And all the fags grinned now; they could not help it. Since entering that amazing passage above the fags had been strangely quiet and subdued, feeling they were cut off from the world, exploring the unknown.

But the sight of that cosy study—the sunny window looking out on to the quad outside, the familiar desk and cane, and, lastly, the familiar form snoring on the couch—swept away their fears and they grinned.

"Shut the blessed thing!" murmured Jameson. "Shut it before the old buffer wakes up and cops us!"

"Shut it, be blowed!" breathed Wally. "Quiet! Here's the chance of a lifetime! Get ready to slam it shut if I have to bolt through, chaps!"

"But—you're not—"
"Rats!"

With that whispered word, the daring young scamp of the Third slipped through into the warm, cosy study.

He glanced swiftly about him for a brief second, and then he stepped swiftly on tiptoe to the fireplace, and shoved his hand up the chimney. He brought it back covered with soot.

Watched by his breathless chums, he stepped over to the sleeping Mr. Selby. The next moment the daring fag was drawing a ring of soot gently round each of Mr. Selby's closed eyes. This done he drew another ring round the master's open mouth.

Mr. Selby stirred slightly, and Wally's heart leaped to his mouth. But the master went on snoring again. Wally grinned, and with a very gentle forefinger he traced another circle round Mr. Selby's bald pate.

This time Mr. Selby stirred visibly, and Wally, realising he was tempting Providence, hurriedly made for the panel and slipped through.

"You awful ass!" gurgled Jameson, almost helpless with laughter. "Quick!"

Wally himself slid back the panel, leaving a narrow slit of less than an inch to peer through. He saw that he had got clear only just in time, for Mr. Selby was sitting up on the couch, yawning sleepily and loudly.

Then he rolled drowsily off the couch, and stood up, still yawning.

CHAPTER 6.

Another Discovery!

"**B**LESS my soul!" muttered the master of the Third. "I must have fallen asleep! I must get on with those wretched exercises! Those young rascals—"

Muttering things far from complimentary about his youthful charges, the master came across towards the panelled wall behind which the fags were standing breathless. It took all Wally's nerve to keep still and not risk closing the panel.

But Mr. Selby saw nothing wrong—indeed, he would have needed keen eyesight to notice that slit in the dark wood. He seated himself at his desk, still grumbling audibly.

"Quiet!" breathed Wally, under his breath.

He waited a brief instant, and then, with a daring that almost made his chums' hair stand on end, he started to move the panel fraction by fraction. Luckily—very luckily indeed—it moved soundlessly, the oil having done its work well. It came open wider and wider.

What Wally's intention was his chum hardly dared to guess. What he actually did was certainly not what he had intended to do.

At that moment Mr. Selby rose from his chair to reach for the ink, evidently in order to bring it nearer to hand. And as he did so Wally acted swiftly.

His hand and arm shot through the narrow opening, and his finger closed on the chair and drew it backwards.

At the same moment Mr. Selby, unconscious of what had happened, sat down again, the inkstand—a silver-plated affair, holding red and black ink—in his hand.

As the chair wasn't where he had left it, he missed it and sat down on the floor hard!

Crash!

"Yoooop!"

With a fearful crash and a still more fearful howl, the astonished master sat down, the ink swishing over his person in showers of red and black. But his wild howl

came muffled to the ears of Wally and Co., for Wally had swiftly closed the panel the moment he had pulled away the chair.

But they heard that crash and the howl all right, and safely behind the thick panelling the young rascals doubled up and choked and choked with desperately suppressed mirth.

They heard gasps and groans and the sound of the unfortunate master clambering to his feet, and then they heard the chair crash over again. It sounded to them as if the master had kicked it over in a rage, apparently blaming the innocent chair for the "accident."

"Oh, crumbs!" wept Jameson, tears of mirth running down his grubby cheeks. "What a scream! Hark to him!"

From beyond the closed panel came Mr. Selby's muttered voice. Mr. Selby was known to commune with himself when he was angry, and he was undoubtedly angry now—and undoubtedly hurt. Though what his anger would be like when he discovered the state of his face and head the fags could only surmise.

But they had no sympathy for Mr. Selby—only hilarity and joy. Mr. Selby was a tyrant of tyrants—there was no two questions about that. He ruled his Form with a rod of iron—and not always with justice—and his pupils had no sympathy for him whatever.

But Wally had no intention of seeing what happened after that—he had already risked more than was wise or healthy.

Not being able to speak for bottled-up mirth, he clutched Curly's arm and started off, his chums, nearly helpless with laughter, following.

They staggered along the dingy, narrow passage, shaking with inward laughter.

"Oh, you—you giddy scream, Wally!" gasped Levison minor at last. "You daring idiot! If you'd been copped—"

"But I wasn't—so what's the odds?" chuckled Wally, wiping his eyes. "I think we can call that the first real score for the giddy Tribune of the Red Dagger! I'd already got old Selby down to be dealt with, of course. Well, we've dealt with the old hunks!"

"Ha, ha! Yes, rather!"

"We must keep that giddy panel well-oiled, you men," remarked Wally, "so that we can keep old Selby in order. Now, what's going to be the next bit of excitement, I wonder?"

"Here's another sliding panel, anyway!" said Hobbs suddenly. "Look!"

It was another one undoubtedly. Wally's excitement grew as he examined it in the light of the torch and bike-lamp. Once again the oil from the lamp was useful, and after a few attempts the panel was slid aside cautiously. It showed a bare, linoleum-covered passage, some twenty yards long, with no doors along its length, though at either end the passage turned off out of sight of the fags.

But they recognised that passage at a glance.

"Oh, good!" breathed Wally. "What a find! This is the giddy passage that leads from the stairs to the Fourth passage. My hat! Shush!"

He gently drew the sliding panel to, for footsteps had sounded along the corridors. The next moment, through the slit, Wally saw a senior striding along from the direction of the staircase.

It was Gerald Knox, of the Sixth, the bullying prefect of the School House. Wally watched him pass, his eyes glimmering. Then he opened the panel wider—it moved easily enough, having been flooded with oil—and in a flash Wally's hand had entered his jacket-pocket and come out again.

There was an apple in his hand now, and, quick as a flash, it left his hand and went whizzing after the departing prefect.

Wally's aim was excellent. The apple took Gerald Knox at the back of the neck, and Knox yelped and almost sprawled on his hands and knees.

But he recovered himself swiftly, and turned round, his face red with sudden fury.

"Who in thunder—" he was beginning. Then he jumped as he saw the passage was empty—nor was there a door through which anyone could have slipped. To Knox it must have been amazing, for Wally had taken care to close the panel the moment the apple left his fist.

"Who—" gasped the furious prefect. "Ah! Well, you—you little sweep!"

It was just sheer bad luck for the two juniors who came along from the Fourth passage at that moment. The two were Racke and Mellish, and they naturally stared on sighting Knox standing there, his face flushed with passion and his eyes glowering at them.

"So it was you, was it?" snarled Knox. "You infernal

young sweeps! I'll show you whether it pays to sling apples at a prefect, by gad!"

And with that Gerald Knox gave both Racke and Mellish a sound box across their respective ears. It sent them spinning against each other with startled, angry yells. Then Knox gave them each a couple more, and ended by planting his boot behind both of them in turn.

"That's to be going on with!" hissed Knox, rubbing the back of his neck savagely. "I'll teach you to sling rubbish at me! You'll also do me a hundred lines each!"

"But what for?" roared Racke in a rage. "You rotten bully, we haven't done anything!"

But Knox was already striding away in a towering rage. And he left both Racke and Mellish also in a towering rage. What Knox had turned on them like that for they could not imagine.

Almost in tears, the pair of shady juniors tottered away, but scarcely had they moved a couple of yards when something whizzed through the air, and caught Aubrey Racke a stinging flick on the ear as it passed him.

It was another apple, and Racke yelled and jumped a foot in the air. The apple whizzed away along the passage, but Racke did not even notice it. He turned on Percy Mellish in a fury. As he had not seen the apple, and as it had struck him a glancing blow on the ear on Mellish's side, Racke immediately jumped to the conclusion that Mellish had struck him for some unknown reason.

"Why, you—your beastly cad!" he shouted furiously. "You cheeky, confounded worm! Why, I'll—I'll smash you for that!"

"What the—?" Percy Mellish jumped at the look of fury on his chum's face. But he did more than jump when Racke's fist clumped home on his long nose. "Yarrooooooh!"

Mellish's wild howl echoed along the passage. But a tap on the nose—even a light one—is a painful thing; and this was no light one. It brought the tears to Mellish's eyes, and it roused him to sudden rage at the sheer injustice of it.

Usually a disgraceful funk, Mellish suddenly became warlike in his ungovernable rage, and he went for Aubrey Racke with puny fists whirling.

But Racke was ready for him, and the next moment both of them were fighting furiously. Through a slit in the panel Wally D'Arcy and those of his chums who could see the tragedy watched, gurgling with mirth. Then, as Racke got Mellish's hapless head in chancery, Wally chuckled deeply and closed the panel to completely.

Interesting as it was to watch Racke with his chum's head in chancery, Wally was eager to continue his explorations. So far they had done exceedingly well—in their view. Not only was Gerald Knox one of their bitterest enemies, but Racke and Mellish were also old enemies. It was rare that either Racke or Mellish dared to tackle Wally & Co., juniors as they were; but they had more than once recently bullied certain tender youngsters of the Third, and Wally had marked them down as future subjects for the attentions of the Tribune!

So all the fags were feeling very satisfied as well as very hilarious as Wally led them on again.

"This is better than a giddy fiver—what?" chorled Wally, as he shone the light from his torch ahead. "You'll see—Hullo, steps again! Careful!"

They had reached the top of another flight of wooden steps, steep like the others, but leading much farther downwards. The fags went down in single file, the dancing light from the torch lighting the way.

On both sides now the walls were of stone, and presently they began to get exceedingly damp and moss-grown and slimy.

"Grooogh!" gasped Wally, with a shiver. "Looks as if we're going underground. Phew! I bet this leads to the old vaults under St. Jim's!"

"That's it!" said Curly Gibson. "Hullo! Here we are! No; it ain't the vaults! Oh!"

The steps had suddenly stopped, and, turning a corner abruptly, the fags found themselves standing in the arched doorway of a vaulted chamber of stone.

It was not large, and in some ways it resembled the vaults below St. Jim's with which the fags were familiar. But it was more elaborate, with richly carved pillars and ceiling. And in the centre of the strange apartment was a long, stone table, with stone benches on either side.

Save for that the room was empty.

But the sight filled the fags with awe, knowing as they did that ages long ago cowed monks had once sat at that queer stone table—probably when in hiding from their enemies.

Gone was the hilarity of the fags now. They stared at the strange scene in silence. Indeed, more than one of the youngsters was trembling. It was strangely eerie and disquieting in that silent place.

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"Let's clear!" whispered Kent. "I—I don't like this, you chaps!"

"Yes, let's clear!" mumbled Watson.

"Don't talk rot!" said Wally, pulling himself together with an effort. "There's nothing here to be afraid of, fat-heads! Here, let's hunt round! I expect those monkey johnnies used to come down here when danger threatened, you know. Cute place, eh?"

"Beastly place!" shivered Reggie Manners.

"Rot!" said Wally, his own courage returning swiftly now. "Drivelling rot! My hat! This is just the very place for us, chaps. We'll bring all our things down here, and we'll have feeds—"

"Catch me having a feed in this hole!" said Jameson, with emphasis. "No jolly fear! Grooogh! I should choke!"



Wally's hand and arm shot through the narrow opening, and in the moment Mr. Selby, unconscious of what had happened, sat down had left it the hapless master sat on the floor, with the result that "Yooooop!" roared M.

"Rats!" sniffed Wally scornfully. "Nothing to be afraid of here! It's a bit chilly now, I'll admit, but we'll soon get used to it. I think it's ripping!" he added, with enthusiasm. "Just the very place for us, chaps. We'll clean it out well, and soon make it comfy."

"It's dry enough, at all events!" said Curly Gibson, going up to the table. "Look, the blessed table's inches thick in dust!"

This was true enough. In strange contrast to that last bit of tunnelling the stone apartment was dry as a bone, and everywhere was thick with the dust of ages.

Wally's cheery coolness soon restored his chums' good spirits, and they examined the room closely, becoming more and more amenable to Wally's enthusiastic plan.

"It is a ripping place," admitted Jameson; "though it gave me the creeps at first. I say, we can fairly do the giddy secret tribunal wheeze in here. We'll shove our giddy prisoners at the end there, and we'll all sit round the table and try 'em."

"Good wheeze!" breathed Curly Gibson. "It's great!" Young Wally chuckled a deep chuckle. "That's just my idea!" he said modestly. "It would have been rather a washout in that box-room. Besides, we couldn't have kept it up long. The chaps would have tumbled to the place at once, and we should have been bowled out."

"We'll never be found out here!" grinned Levison minor gleefully. "We can slip through one of those secret panels just when we like, and nobody will ever know where the dickens we are."

"That's just it!" agreed Wally, with great satisfaction. "We'll bring candles and lanterns and things, and we'll bring an old curtain or something to shove over this arched doorway."



fingers closed on the chair and drew it backwards. At the same again—or rather tried to. Crash! As the chair wasn't where he the red and blue ink shot over his head and shoulders in a stream. (See Chapter 6.)

"We'll have to be masked, of course!" said Kent. "Fathead!" said Wally. "I've already thought all that out. I was going to have masks, of course. But now we've found this place I've thought of something more suitable. What about cloaks and cowls like the giddy monks used to wear. Talk about the Spanish Inquisition and giddy secret tribunals! I tell you, we'll be the real goods, chaps!"

"They'll tumble to us because of our size!" said Reggie Manners, with a grunt.

Wally snorted.

"Go on—start raising all sorts of objections!" he said witheringly. "You leave that to me, young Manners; I've thought all that out. We'll soon rig some sort of gadget up inside the cowls that'll make us look taller. Savvy?"

"Good man, Wally!"

"And now let's get back!" grinned Wally, giving another glance round the queer apartment. "Our first job is to give those sliding panels a jolly good oiling, so that they'll work in a jiffy without a sound. Then we'll bring that old brush

along and give this giddy show a jolly good cleaning out. We've got to be busy!"

"Hold on!" said Curly Gibson, with some sarcasm. "What about the giddy cowls, Wally? You can't buy monks' cowls and things at the tuckshop!"

"Oh, don't you start, young Gibson!" chuckled Wally. "I've thought all that out, too, my lad! What about all the old brown curtain stuff that was used to curtain off the big stained windows in Big Hall, eh? It's all rolled up in bundles in one of the downstairs box-rooms, and we're collaring that. We won't trouble to ask permission in case the Head wouldn't give it!"

"Ha, ha! No!"

"Good wheeze!"

"And now, you men, come on!" said Wally briskly. "I herewith take over this ancient apartment as the meeting chamber and court of the Tribunal of the Secret Society of the Red Dagger. Let strangers defy and trespass at their peril! On the ball!"

"Hear, hear!"

And with that the president of the new secret society—the society that was going to strike terror into the hearts of the enemies of the fags of St. Jim's—led the way out of the secret apartment amidst a chorus of gleeful chuckles.

CHAPTER 7.

"Beware—Vengeance Is at Hand!"

"WHAT about my two-ten, Gus?"

It was Walter Adolphus D'Arcy, of course, who asked that cheeky question, and he asked it of his elder brother, the Honourable Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Two days had passed since the trouble between the Third Form fags and Tom Merry & Co., and Arthur Augustus had scarcely seen his minor at all in the interval.

This fact, indeed, had rather puzzled Arthur Augustus, especially on being reminded now about the half-share in the "fiver" he had promised to his minor. It was really rather surprising that young Wally had not asked for the two pounds ten before this.

But at the moment Arthur Augustus was not thinking much about the money in question. He jammed his monocle more firmly into place and looked his minor over with strong disfavour. It was a frigid survey that Wally had learned to look upon as being unavoidable whenever he met his major, and he knew what to expect next.

"Now, don't go and start a blessed silly lecture, Gus!" snorted the young scamp. "I jolly well know there's ink on my chivvy and my collar, and I know my tie's like a giddy rag. And I know I'm a disgrace to the family, and that I shall end up in the gutter, and that I ought to be a giddy walking fashion-plate like you. Don't start that, for goodness' sake! I want to know about my share of that fiver? You know you promised me it—"

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus, frowning. "You cheeky young wascal! As it happens, I was just about to give you a severe lecture on your disgraceful and disreputable appearance, Wally. You are—"

"Oh, ring off!" groaned Wally. "Cheese it! Cut all that out! The worst of you is, Gus, you never buy any giddy new records to put on. Give your chin a rest and a change! I want my two-ten—see?"

"Bai Jove!"

"Hand it over!" snorted the fag. "I've been looking for you all the morning. If you've jolly well spent it—"

"I have not spent it, Wally—at least, not all of the fiver!"

"Good! Good job for you you haven't!" said Wally darkly. "Hand over my whack, then!"

"I am quite unable to hand ovah your share of the fiver, you cheeky young wascal!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus coldly. "You obtained my promise by compulsion, and, though I intend to keep my word, I am takin' Blake's advice and am goin' to make you wait for it."

"Oh, you—you rotter!"

"I wefuse to be called a wottah by a youngah bwothah!" said Arthur Augustus indignantly. "I have a vevy good mind to administah to you a thorough and well-deserved thwashin', you scamp!"

"You awful rotter!" howled Wally. "Why—"

"Pwaw do not waise your voice in that vulgah mannah!" said Arthur Augustus icily. "In any case, I am quite unable to give you the two-ten, Wally. I have spent neahly half, and I have lent a pound to Hewvies, and ten shillings to Lowthah! But you shall have your two-ten out of my next remittance."

"But I shall have some myself by then, and I want it now!" howled Wally furiously. "Oh, you—you mingy rotter!"

"Wats!"

"Oh, all right!" gasped Wally, seething with wrath. "I

promised my men I'd stand them a whacking feed days ago, and they'll jolly well rag me bald-headed! Oh, all right, we'll make you sit up for this! You're a marked man, I can tell you! You don't know what's coming to you, my lad! I tell you—"

"Wats! Weally, Wally— Here—"

Biff!

"Yawwoooooogh!"

Arthur Augustus broke off with a gasping howl of alarm as the scamp of the Third jumped forward in great wrath and struck the crown of his silk hat with his clenched fist, sending it down over his eyes.

Then Wally flew for his life, leaving his major struggling madly to disengage his head from his hat.

There was a sound of cheery voices, and next moment Blake, Herries, and Digby, with the Terrible Three, came strolling under the ancient archway leading into the quadrangle.

They stopped and stared in great astonishment at the sight of Arthur Augustus struggling with his headgear and dancing in rage.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake. "What's the matter, Gussy? Trying to do the Charleston blind-folded?"

"Gwoooooogh! Oh, cwikey!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry kindly came to the aid of the unfortunate Gussy, and after a struggle the silk hat was tugged from over his eyes. D'Arcy turned a red and furious face to his chums.

"Oh, the—the wascally young villain!" he articulated.

"That's young Wally, I bet!" grinned Blake. "Was it Wally? He came scudding past us a minute ago?"

"Yaas—the little wuffian!" raved Arthur Augustus. "He was vewy angwy because I could not hand him that two pounds ten, and he tweeked my hat in this wuffianly mannah!"

"Awful!" said Blake solemnly. "A fellow who would treat a topper like that deserves to be lynched, Gussy! I must say I don't admire the way you've brought up your minor, old chap."

"Weally, Blake—"

"He gets worse and worse!" said Blake, shaking his head. "You really must take him in hand, Gussy. I believe he's going rapidly to the bad myself. I've scarcely seen him two whole days, and that means he's up to mischief somewhere."

"Just what I thought," agreed Tom Merry, nodding. "Those fags are up to something or other. I had occasion to cuff young Gibson only this morning, and he made all sorts of blood-curdling threats. The fags have got some scheme on, and I bet it's up against us!"

"Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "You are wight, Tom Mewwy! Those young scamps have been vewy mysterious of late, and my wascally minah made vewy strange threats! It is weally vewy disturbin', you know!"

"Rot!" chuckled Lowther. "Kids always get theatrical like that. Let's get indoors—going to rain, chaps!"

The juniors turned their steps towards the School House entrance and went indoors. They made for their studies, the Terrible Three parting from Blake & Co. outside the door of Study No. 6.

Blake & Co. marched into their study, and Blake gave a sudden startled gasp as he sighted four curious articles on the study table.

They were pieces of cardboard cut in the shape of daggers, and they were painted—or inked—a vivid crimson.

"What the thump—"

Blake gasped as he picked up the nearest and examined it. On the back were printed words in small letters in black ink. On the haft of the "dagger" was his own name—Blake! On the blade of the cardboard dagger were the printed words:

"BEWARE!"

Vengeance is at Hand!"

"What the merry dickens—" gasped Blake. "Here, what silly jape's this?"

By this time the other astonished juniors had grasped one of the daggers each, and they proved to bear the names of D'Arcy, Herries, and Digby respectively.

"This is a silly New House jape," chuckled Herries. "The awful fatheads! As if that sort of tosh would frighten us. They must be potty!"

"More like those silly fags!" said Blake, with a chuckle. "This comes of youngsters going to the films, you know. Ha, ha, ha!"

"The Crimson Dagger!" laughed Digby. "There was a film called that at the Wayland Cinema only last week. What a scream! I— Hallo, here's Tommy! Great pip! You fellows got one each, too!"

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Tom Merry, who had just appeared in the doorway with Lowther and Manners behind him, nodded and chuckled as he held up one of the cardboard daggers.

"We all got one," he chuckled. "I wondered if you fellows had got one. It's those silly fags, of course. I'm going to ram mine down the back of young Wally's neck when I see him!"

"Sure it isn't a New House jape?" said Herries.

"Think Figgy would do a footling thing like this?" laughed Tom. "What rot! It must be those kids! I guess— Hallo, there goes the giddy dinner-bell! Cheerio, chaps!"

The Terrible Three quitted Study No. 6, chuckling, and Blake & Co. also left their study and made for the dining-hall. Arthur Augustus was frowning, and he appeared to be very thoughtful all through dinner.

As a matter of fact, Arthur Augustus was worrying about his minor, not on account of the warning of the Crimson Dagger, however. Blake's view that he should take his scapegrace of a brother "in hand" found full agreement in the breast of Arthur Augustus.

As Blake had said, young Wally was getting worse and worse. And, as his major, Arthur Augustus had come to the conclusion that it was "up to him" to take him in hand for his own good.

It was not the first time Arthur Augustus had reached that conclusion by any means. Periodically, Arthur Augustus came to that kindly conclusion that he had a duty towards his minor, and periodically he had tried to take his minor in hand. But it had always ended in trouble—for Arthur Augustus. Wally objected strongly to being "dry-nursed," as he expressed it with scorn. In Wally's view, it was Arthur Augustus who needed to be taken care of, a view which Arthur Augustus' own chums fully but secretly shared.

When Arthur Augustus came out of the dining-hall his mind was fully made up on the point, and he told his chums so.

"You silly dummy!" snorted Blake. "You know what happens when you start the dry-nursing stunt with that young imp. You always get it in the neck! Leave him alone and come and have half an hour in the gym."

"Impossible, Blake! I have my duty to considah, and I wufuse to be turned fwom it, deah boy. I am goin' now to speak to Wally, and— Bai Jove, there he is!"

Just then Wally D'Arcy and Curly Gibson came hurrying past, and Arthur Augustus called to his minor.

"Wally!"

"Rats!"

Wally hurried on after returning that monosyllable. "Wally, come here!" shouted Arthur Augustus. "I wish to speak— Bai Jove! The wude young wuffian!"

And Arthur Augustus hurried after his minor. Over his shoulder the fag saw him coming in pursuit, and, with a whispered word to Curly, Wally broke into a trot, and Curly did likewise.

The sight made Arthur Augustus exceedingly wrathful, and he also broke into a trot, determined that his minor should not escape the fatherly lecture he intended to give him.

Along the passage and up the stairs Arthur Augustus rushed in pursuit, and then along the Shell passage and along the Fourth passage, and Arthur Augustus only stopped running when he reached the bottom of the old staircase in the disused wing of the School House.

He had lost sight of the running fags, and he frowned as he stood undecided.

"Bai Jove!" he murmured. "They must have dodged into a woom, and I missed them, or else— Bai Jove! That is it. They were up these stairs the othah day, and no doubt they are hidin' up in those wotten box-wooms."

For a moment Arthur Augustus hesitated, and then he set his noble lips and started up the old staircase. Arthur Augustus prided himself on his determination, though his chums called it stubbornness, and he was resolved not to be beaten. He had determined to lecture his minor, and he meant to do it without further delay.

He ran lightly up the stairs, and, reaching the box-rooms, looked into each room. To his surprise, they were empty, as they had been two days before, excepting that the floor-boards had been replaced.

It seemed clear now that the fags had given him the slip somewhere, and Arthur Augustus, breathing with wrath, turned and hurried downstairs.

And then the amazing thing happened.

Arthur Augustus had just reached the second landing, and was setting foot on the first step, when he heard a movement behind him. But before he could turn his head something was whipped round his eyes.

Next instant, to his utter amazement, something else was dropped over his bewildered head, and pulled swiftly downwards to his waist.

It was a sack, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's startled howl was smothered in it.

Nor was that all. Before he could stir a finger a cord or rope was whipped round his waist and made fast, and then another round his legs. As he felt it Arthur Augustus started to struggle, but it was too late then.

In another brief ten seconds or so he was rendered helpless, and the most startled fellow in all St. Jim's.

"Bai Jove!" he gasped, in a smothered voice. "Welease me, you wufians! Who—what— Gweat Scott!"

No answer came. The whole thing had been done swift and sure and without a sound scarcely. It was positively uncanny.

Gussy had scarcely realised he was a prisoner when he felt himself lifted and taken downstairs—at least, Arthur Augustus, in his great bewilderment, imagined that he was being taken downstairs.

Actually nothing of the sort happened. The crafty

Then came the return journey, and the next moment he knew he was being carried down some stairs again. He knew it from the painful bangs and bumps he received.

The hapless junior was absolutely flabbergasted by this time. Being in utter darkness, and unaware of his captors' craftiness, Gussy naturally imagined he had been carried into the busy precincts of the inhabited School House, and that he was now being carried down the stairs to the Hall.

How his captors dare do such a thing as to carry him openly through the busiest part of the school in such a manner astounded him, just as it astounded him that nobody came to his rescue, or even stopped his captors. Masters and seniors and scores of juniors would be about the passages, and yet nothing seemed to happen.

It really was astounding—to Arthur Augustus.

By the time his captors called a halt finally the hapless swell of the Fourth was in a state bordering on the hysterical.

CAMEOS OF SCHOOL LIFE.

THE RIVERSIDE PICNIC!



THE day is warm, the sun rides high;
The turf could not be firmer;
The River Rhyl goes gurgling by
With many a merry murmur.
And here's a spot that's not too bad—
We dump our weighty hamper;
And every heart is gay and glad—
With joy we fairly scamper!

The full-moon face of Fatty Wynn
Is beaming with enjoyment;
Our Falstaff never fails to grin
When jaws obtain employment!
"Open the hamper, boys!" he cries
(A favourite cry of Fatty's).
"Our provender includes mince-pies,
And perfect, priceless patties!"

The plates are laid upon the sward,
While faces glow with pleasure;
We sprawl around the festive board
In attitudes of leisure.
Then tongues are silent for awhile,
And jaws are busy champing;
A pleasant hour we thus beguile,
No cares our ardour damping.

The corks are popping left and right,
The ginger-pop flows merrily;
The dainties disappear from sight
In record time—yea, verily!
Till even Fatty Wynn admits
Surfeit and satisfaction;
In comfort and content he sits,
Quite disinclined for action!

Ah, happy, happy hours we spend
Where the Rhyl goes madly racing!
But all good things must have an end,
Our steps we're soon retracing
Back to St. Jim's, and evening prep,
And schoolboy woes and worries;
We saunter with reluctant step,
And not a fellow hurries.

Here's to the founder of the feast,
The noble, generous Gussy!
We sometimes call him "Ass!" or
"Beast!"
When he is vain or fussy.
But picnics by the river's brim,
Are a divine suggestion;
So now we hail and honour him,
Despite our indigestion!



Wally & Co.—for it was those young rascals, of course—knew better than to give their prisoner any clue to ponder over later. Certainly, Gussy's brain was not very powerful, but, then, the Third-Formers were taking no chances.

They turned the swell of the Fourth up until his legs were in the air, and they stamped their feet to give Arthur Augustus the impression they were ascending. Then they carried him along across the landing and back again, twisting the hapless Gussy about until his head reeled.

Then they carried him through the secret doorway, though Arthur Augustus little dreamed what was happening to him. He only knew he was beginning to get badly bumped, and then he felt himself carried on again, his howls being smothered in the sack.

For some little distance—to the top of the steps in the secret passage—he was carried, and then he was dropped and twisted round half a dozen times, and then carried on again, or so it seemed to him. He did not suspect the fags had merely carried him back to confuse him.

But he was put on his feet at last, and, finding himself suddenly released he stood motionless, not daring to move lest he fell over.

Then, quite swiftly, he felt the cords round his arms and waist loosened, and at the same moment the sacking was raised and the cords tightened again, before he could even think of moving a hand.

Next instant the sacking was swept from his head, and he was blinking about him dazedly.

What he saw made him almost faint.

CHAPTER 8.

By Whose Hand?

"O H, bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus wondered for the first few seconds if he were dreaming, so unreal, so weird and bizarre was the scene before him. He felt his hair beginning to rise on his scalp as he blinked about him.

Where he was he hadn't the faintest idea; he knew—if he was not indeed in a dream—that he must be underground. The stone walls and the arched, vaulted ceiling, with its elaborate carving, told him that.

Yet he was not in the school vaults—not the vaults with which he was familiar, at all events.

The apartment he was in was strange to him—as strange as the weird, terrifying figures that sat round the great stone table in the centre of the room in the dim, flickering light from a solitary candle that stood on the table.

They sat, six on either side of the table, immovable and dreadfully silent. And they were extraordinary in appearance, to say the least of it.

They wore long, flowing robes of a darkish material and cowls of the same material, through which showed masks—dreadful-looking Guy Fawkes' masks, grotesque and terrifying, half hidden by the folds of the cowls.

For a full minute they sat without the slightest movement, and in that ancient, tomb-like place the silence was intense and awe-inspiring.

Though the hapless Gussy could see no eyes he knew that twelve pairs were fixed upon him, and the feeling was horrid in the extreme. He could hear his own watch ticking, and but for the fact that his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth the scared Arthur Augustus could have shrieked aloud.

He was not a nervous youth by any means, but the bizarre scene before him greeting his eyes so suddenly was uncanny in the extreme—the stillness alone being nerve-racking. While the ghastly, expressionless faces of the hooded figures was enough to scare anybody.

Until then Arthur Augustus had been too bewildered to think clearly; but in a dazed sort of way he had suspected his captors were Wally & Co.

That suspicion vanished now in a flash, for the very size of the robed and hooded forms indicated that they were full-grown men at least—or so it seemed to Arthur Augustus!

Tick, tick, tick, tick!

His own heart-beats seemed to be racing the ticking of his watch; but quite suddenly the silence was shattered by a voice—a curiously gruff, deep voice.

"Rise, Brothers of the Crimson Dagger!" said the voice.

With a simultaneous rustle, the twelve forms rose slowly as if worked by the same spring, and stood motionless and silent again.

"Oh, bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus, licking his dry lips. "Gweat Scott!"

In a flash he remembered the strange cardboard daggers he and his chums had found on the table in Study No. 6. "Bwothers of the Cwimson Dagger—"

The thought brought sudden courage to Arthur Augustus, and he gasped aloud in sudden relief. His common sense was returning to him, and, despite the extraordinary affair, even Arthur Augustus could not help realising that it must be a jape of some sort—amazing as the scene was.

Yet who could the japers be? The robes hung down shapelessly, from what seemed like broad shoulders, and the cowls almost hid the dreadful masks. They could not be fags, and they could scarcely be even Figgins & Co. of the New House.

And it was too much to suspect seniors of playing such an extraordinary and apparently senseless trick.

Besides, where was he?

The noble brain of Arthur Augustus reeled as he tried to puzzle it out. He forced himself to speak, though his voice was more than a trifle shaky.

"You—you dweadful wottahs!" he panted. "I know this is onlay a wotten jape! Welsee me at once, bai Jove!"

As if Arthur Augustus had not spoken, the deep voice went on in a slow, impressive tone, and it addressed him this time.

"Wretched prisoner before the Tribunal of the Crimson Dagger," it went on. "Scion of a noble House which you have disgraced, you have been found guilty by this Tribunal, first of bullying those weaker than yourself—"

"Oh, bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus involuntarily; to be charged with bullying was a dreadful insult to Arthur Augustus.

"Secondly," went on the voice droningly, "you have been found guilty of breaking your word and of failing to pay your debts!"

"Gweat Scott!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus indignantly. "I have done nothin' of the sort, bai Jove!"

"If you will cast your feeble mind over the events of the past few days, you will remember, wretched prisoner," said the voice, deeply. "I herewith and hereby warn you now that unless you settle your debts in full within three

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days, your punishment by the Tribunal of the Crimson Dagger will be terrible!"

"Bai Jove!"

"This Tribunal," went on the voice, in the same droning tone, "has been brought into being for the purpose of guarding and avenging the youthful and weaker members of this ancient seat of learning. In time the members of this old, grey pile, named St. Jim's, will come to know and dread the avenging hand of the Society of the Crimson Dagger, and in time bullying and injustice will cease. Until then, this Tribunal will guard and avenge all such acts. You, prisoner before the Tribunal, are guilty of bullying fellows weaker than yourself! For that your punishment will be meted-out here and now! Executioner, do your duty!"

One of the cowed and masked forms stretched out a hand and took hold of a cord that hung from the vaulted ceiling, though how it was fastened Arthur Augustus could not see in the deep gloom above.

But he soon knew what it was for!

Swoooosh!

Flop!

As the executioner pulled on the cord Arthur Augustus heard a sound like the rattle of a bucket above his head, and as he looked up swiftly he was just in time to get the full force of a deluge of white flour that swooped down upon him.

The swell of the Fourth almost disappeared from sight under the blinding cloud of flour that swirled about him.

"Gug-gug-grooooooh!"

Gasping and choking, Arthur Augustus staggered about, desperately attempting to keep his balance, his bound legs only allowing him to move his feet in inches.

Then from the hooded figures came curious sounds—sounds that strangely resembled muffled laughter. But Arthur Augustus was far too busy to hear, much less heed. And as he staggered and gasped and gurgled and shook, four of the hooded forms approached him, and before he knew what was happening the sack was flung over his hapless head again and made secure.

Then he was borne away; apparently the ceremony was ended.

Of the journey which followed Arthur Augustus remembered little save the sundry bumps and jars his hapless body received on the way. But suddenly he felt himself lowered to the ground, and the hands that had held him suddenly let go.

He heard the patter of feet faintly and then silence.

The silence that followed was of short duration, for suddenly Arthur Augustus heard vaguely the sound of louder footsteps and then a gasping yell.

"What the dickens—what—who—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There followed a roar of laughter, and the heart of Arthur Augustus leaped with joy as he recognised several familiar voices.

"Wescue!" he wailed desperately. "Wescue, deah boys! Wescue!"

His muffled voice rose to a shriek.

The next moment willing hands were fumbling with the cords round his waist, and then the sack was lifted over his floury, bedraggled head.

"Gussy!"

It was a howl!

As he blinked dazedly about him Arthur Augustus got the shock of his life.

He was seated on the linoleum of the passage scarcely a dozen yards from the Fourth Form passage, and less than thirty yards from his own study.

And standing round him, roaring with laughter, were his own chums, Blake & Co., and several other Fourth-Formers.

"Oh, bai Jove!" he gasped in great relief. "Pway welsee me, you fellows. I have had a most feahful expawience—a twuly tewwible expawience!"

He blinked about him as if expecting to see the dreadful cowed figures of the Inquisition.

But they were conspicuous only by their absence.

Indeed, a moment's reflection told Arthur Augustus that they were scarcely likely to be conspicuous in that public spot.

"For goodness' sake get the awful ass inside!" gasped Jack Blake. "Trust Gussy to go and get himself in a mess like this. I suppose this is those New House worms on the warpath! Kim on, old flour-bag!"

Quickly he cut the cords round the legs of Arthur Augustus, and swiftly his chums hustled him into Study No. 6, scattering flour as he went. At least a score of fellows followed him into the study, their grinning faces showing great curiosity.

"Now," said Blake, just as he was closing the door, "what's this—Hallo! Come in, fatheads! Come to see our walking flour-bag!"

It was the Terrible Three, and Tom Merry chuckled as he entered the study. He jumped as he sighted Gussy, however.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated. "Trimble said— It's true, then?"

"Looks like it," chuckled Blake. "Now, Gussy, who did this? Those New House bounders, I suppose?"

"Ow!" gasped Arthur Augustus, collapsing into a chair and spreading a shower of flour over the chair in the process. "Ow! Oh, great Scott! I weally do not know. I feel as if I have dreamed it all. It is weally vewy, vewy extwaordinawy! I have had a most dweadful expewience!"

"Was it those New House cads?"

"I weally do not think so!" groaned Arthur Augustus. "Nor could it have been those w'etched fags! It is weally most remarkable. I—"

"Hallo! What's this?" exclaimed Blake suddenly; and he snatched something that had been pinned to the back of Gussy's floury coat. "Phew!"

He held it up. It was a strip of cardboard shaped like a dagger, and crimson red. On it was the single word:

"AVENGED!"

"Oh crumbs!"

"Bai Jove! I did not know that was there!" gasped Gussy. "Pway listen, deah boys, and I will tell you all about it."

And he did, his listeners opening their eyes wide as he told the alarming story. And though they grinned it was an uneasy grin.

There was certainly a great deal that was mysterious about the affair. How had Gussy been spirited away in broad daylight, and where had he been taken to? And still more mysterious, how had he come to find himself suddenly in the passage—a passage along which people were continually passing?

And who could the mysterious members of the secret Society of the Crimson Dagger be?

That the whole thing was really serious nobody imagined for one moment. It was a jape, of course, and in view of recent happenings it began to look as if the young rascals of the Third were responsible.

Yet, according to Arthur Augustus, it could not be the fags. The figures were too tall and broad for fags. Moreover, Arthur Augustus was most emphatic that the voice was very deep.

"Young Kent has a funny voice, you know," said Tom Merry, frowning in perplexity. "It's as deep as a man's nearly. Sure you couldn't recognise it, Gussy?"

"Wathah not! It was disguised vewy cleavahly, y'know!"

"And you've no idea where they took you?"

"Bai Jove, no! Not the vewy slightest, deah boy. I imagined they were takin' me along those passages and down to the Hall," mumbled Arthur Augustus. "But the bell for classes will be goin' soon, and I must wush away and get these howwid things changed! Oh ewikey! I am in a feahful mess!"

And Arthur Augustus hurried out amidst many chuckles, leaving a floury trail behind him.

"Well, this beats the band!" breathed Tom Merry.

"If it wasn't for the giddy flour I'd think he dreamed it all," grinned Blake. "My hat! We had one of those blessed warning daggers, too; we'd better look out!"

"Ha, ha! Yes!" chuckled Lowther. "And Grundy's had one, and I believe Knox found one in his study. Things look like being lively!"

The bell for afternoon school rang just then, and the juniors hurried out of the study, excitedly discussing the strange adventure that had befallen Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

They had just swarmed out into the passage when a yell of laughter reached their ears from lower down the Fourth passage.

"Hallo! What's the matter now?" chuckled Blake. "More excitement!"

It was. As the juniors hurried along towards the scene they suddenly came upon a group of laughing juniors. In the midst of them was somebody seated on the linoleum, his head and half his body enveloped in a dusty-looking sack, his feet tied together.

On his body and legs and scattered about the floor around him was soot.

"Great Scott!" yelled Herries. "Another of 'em! Oh, my hat!"

It was another victim, without a doubt, and the juniors soon learned who it was. From the interior of the sack came a familiar voice raised in a bellow.

"Grundy!" gasped Tom Merry. "They've collared Grundy, then!"

"Lemme out!" Grundy was bellowing. "I'll smash you! I'll break every dashed bone in your thumping bodies for this, you see if I don't. I know who you are! I—I— Atish-ooo!"

Grundy's muffled, bellowing voice ended in a terrific sneeze within the sack.

But Tom Merry was cutting at the cords with his knife now, and a moment later Grundy's legs were freed, and then the sack was wrenched from over his head.

It revealed a face and figure covered in soot, and through the layer of soot that encumbered the face two furious eyes glared.

But the juniors scarcely had time to glimpse Grundy, for, finding himself free, he jumped up in a terrific rage and made a blind rush at the fellows around him.

"I'll smash you!" he roared.

The juniors scattered with yells of alarm. It was very plain that Grundy was under the impression that they were responsible for the sad calamity which had befallen him, whatever it was.

"Hold on!" yelled Tom Merry. "Stop, you born idiot! It wasn't us."

Grundy seemed suddenly to become aware of that plain fact, and, as he pulled himself up, a stern, scandalised voice rang out.

"What—what— Bless my soul! Who—who is this?"

It was Mr. Railton, the Housemaster of the School House, and he glared angrily at the extraordinary figure George Alfred Grundy presented. With his sooty hair, his sooty face, his red lips, and white teeth, Grundy looked like a Christy minstrel, only more so, as Lowther put it.

"It—it's Grundy, sir," put in Tom Merry. "Something's happened to him!"

"Gr-Grundy!" gasped Mr. Railton. "You utterly stupid fellow! How came you to be in this disgusting state?"

"How do I know?" hooted Grundy, careless or heedless in his rage that he was speaking to his Housemaster. "I jolly well wish I did know! The rotters collared me, and after licking me with a cane they did this to me. They took me to a rotten place, and after a lot of silly rot they did this, and then they brought me back and dumped me down here."

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed Mr. Railton, his brow darkening. "This is meant for an idiotic joke, I presume. Did any of you boys see it done?"

"No, sir," said Levison, who was looking alarmed. "We came along just now and found this fathead—I mean, Grundy—seated on the floor here."

"Very well. Ah!" Mr. Railton stepped forward and plucked something from Grundy's coat. It was a cardboard dagger, and it bore the legend "Avenged!" "Bless my soul! What absurd nonsense is this?" gasped the master.

"I say, sir!" gasped Trimble excitedly. "Old Gussy—I mean, D'Arcy—was collared just the same, and flour was bunged all over him. He said some men in Monks' dress and cowls did it."

"That was it!" snorted Grundy. "Some chaps in robes and cowls did it to me. I'm jolly sure I know who they were, though," added Grundy darkly.

"Good gracious!" gasped Mr. Railton. Then he frowned. "How utterly absurd!" he went on angrily. "This is some foolish buffoonery! Go and clean yourself at once, Grundy. I will inquire into this disgraceful affair after classes. Go!"

Grundy went, muttering to himself, and scattering soot about him as he wended his weary way towards the bathroom. Mr. Railton looked again at the cardboard dagger, then he placed it in his pocket and rustled away.

Tom Merry & Co. followed on their way to their Form-room. If they had doubted any part of Gussy's strange story they did not do so now. A sudden, startled exclamation from ahead of them reached their ears, and the next moment they came upon Mr. Railton again, who had stopped in the passage.

Then they saw why.

They were passing the masters' corridor at the moment, and just in front of Mr. Railton a master had left his study. It was Mr. Selby, and the master of the Third looked very strange indeed.

His face was as black as a nigger's, just as black as Grundy's, and for the same reason—soot!

Mr. Railton was gazing at the master as though he could scarcely believe the evidence of his own eyes.

"Selby!" he articulated. "Mr. Selby!"

"What is the matter, Mr. Railton?" said Mr. Selby.

He was evidently in an irritable mood, and he was obviously quite unaware of the strange state of his face.

"Your—your face, Mr. Selby!" ejaculated the Housemaster. "Good heavens! Are you not aware of the fact that your face is covered with soot?"

Mr. Selby gave a violent start, and his hand went to his sour-tempered features. It came away very sooty.

He started back with a cry of sudden rage, and under its covering of soot his face seemed to go suddenly red.

"I—I—" he gasped. "I—I was certainly not aware of the fact, Mr. Railton. This—is this is too much! I am amazed—horried, Mr. Railton!"

"I do not doubt it, Mr. Selby," said Mr. Railton dryly. "It is obvious to me that you are the victim of a disgraceful outrage. Nor is this the first time I think. Two days ago you reported to me that you had been treated in a somewhat similar manner whilst sleeping on your couch. Can it be—"

"That—that," stuttered Mr. Selby, his voice choking with rage, "is exactly what has happened again. I make it a practice to lie down for a short time after dinner, and I must have fallen asleep again. And this—is this is what has happened. I did not know—I did not dream that the miscreants would dare to play such a trick a second time."

"The miscreants must be discovered and severely punished!" said Mr. Railton.

"That is what you stated on the first occasion," said Mr. Selby bitterly, wiping his face with his handkerchief. "But though you assured me that the persons responsible would be discovered, they have not been discovered. I have my own suspicions, however. It is perfectly clear to me that they are members of my own Form. Not only did they soothe my face, but they must have been concealed in my room, for, in some strange manner, they caused my chair to move from under me, and I had a painful fall, and also smothered myself with ink. It is scandalous—perfectly scandalous!"

"I can understand your anger!" said Mr. Railton, setting his lips. "This sort of thing is beyond all reason. The strictest investigation shall be made. I suggest that you—ahem—visit the bath-room before proceeding to your Form-room, Mr. Selby. I will make inquiries without delay."

Mr. Selby scowled. He did not seem much impressed by Mr. Railton's remarks. He bounced away in a towering rage, rubbing his features with the handkerchief, which very soon became blacker than his face.

Tom Merry & Co. proceeded to their Form-rooms, their faces showing their amazed alarm. Japing juniors was one thing, but japing a master was another thing altogether. It was generally agreed that the japers, whoever they were, were seeking serious trouble, and would find it.

All that afternoon Tom Merry was very serious indeed, and he was worried. The rest of the juniors were excited at the happenings, but they looked upon the whole thing as a great joke for the most part. But Tom could not help seeing the serious side, and what had happened to Mr. Selby had increased his fear that the young rascals of the Third were responsible, despite the evidence of Arthur Augustus and Grundy.

He simply couldn't understand it, excepting on the supposition that Wally & Co. were the Crimson Dagger "gang." Yet even then the circumstances were puzzling in the extreme. And when Tom had heard from Grundy that the cowed figures were the size of seniors at least, and that, in his view, it was the work of Cutts & Co., doubts assailed him again, and he could not help thinking that it was more than possible Grundy was right. Cutts & Co. of the Fifth were always "up against" the juniors, and it was possible they had a grudge against Selby. Yet how Cutts could get a dozen out of the Fifth who would be likely to aid him was beyond Tom Merry's comprehension.

CHAPTER 9.

The Crimson Dagger!

GEORGE FIGGINS, the leader of the New House juniors, was grinning when he came out of the Fourth Form-room with his chums, Kerr and Wynn, when classes finished that afternoon.

Not a few of the School House fellows believed the strange happenings were in some queer way japes engineered by the New House juniors, and the thought entertained Figgins highly. Actually, George Figgins was just as mystified as anyone else. But it pleased the humorous Figgy to pretend to "know something," and as he merely chuckled when questioned about it, his attitude made the School House fellows more suspicious still.

As he emerged from the Form-room now he felt a tap on his shoulder. It was Blake, and with him were his chums.

"Hallo!" smiled Figgins cheerfully. "Feeling funky, my little men? Afraid you may be the next victims to be dragged before the giddy inquisition, what?"

"Look here," said Blake, eyeing him with growing suspicion. "I believe you jolly well know something about what happened to Gussy and Grundy, Figgy! It's just like one of your japes! You've found some queer place somewhere—"

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"My dear kid, what an idea!" chuckled Figgins. "Hallo, here's Thomas! Thomas, old chap, Blake actually thinks I know something about these goings on. Quite a compliment, what?"

"I was going to ask you that myself," said Tom Merry grimly.

Figgins took something from his pocket. It was one of the now-familiar cardboard daggers. It had his name on. Kerr took another from his pocket, and showed it, with a grin. That had Kerr's name on.

"Looks as if we had a hand in it, eh?" grinned Figgins. "My dear kiddlets, we're marked men, too!"

"That proves nothing!" said Tom Merry, eyeing Figgins' grinning face with some suspicion. "Anyway, we mean to find out who the silly asses are. So if it is you—look out, that's all! Come on, chaps—let's take a stroll in the quad before tea!"

"I'm going to sort some films in the study, Tom," said Manners.

"Right-ho!"

Tom Merry walked away with Lowther and Blake & Co., while Manners hurried off to Study No. 10 to sort out his precious films. Figgins grinned broadly as they departed, and a mischievous gleam came into his eyes.

"I've got an idea, you fellows!" he whispered. "Those silly asses suspect we did it, don't they? It's wrong to harbour base suspicions, ain't it?"

"It are! It am!" grinned Kerr.

"They should have taken our word for it," resumed Figgins. "And as they suspect us of japing why not give them something to be suspicious about?"

"What about tea, Figgy?" asked Fatty Wynn. "I'm hungry!"

"Go and eat coke, then!" said Figgy heartlessly. "You're dead in this act in any case. Now listen, Kerr, old chap. There's only Manners in Study No. 10. Why not sneak along there and give him a warm five minutes? We could easily slip in, and we'll cover our chivvies with our hankies. Get me?"

"Good enough!" said Kerr, with a chuckle. "We'll have to mind nobody sees us, though!"

"We'll watch that. Most of the chaps are out of doors by this time, and there ain't likely to be anybody mouching round. We'll risk it, anyway."

"Look here, Figgy, I'm hungry!"

"I know—go and eat coke, Fatty! You're too fat for this game, anyway—you'd be spotted at once. Come on, Kerr!"

And Figgins hurried away with Kerr, leaving the wrathful Fatty Wynn staring after them. Actually Figgins and Kerr were running no little risk; but they were used to risks and gloried in them. As it happened they reached the Shell passage safely enough without being challenged by a School House fellow, and to their delight they found the passage deserted.

"Quick! the word!" murmured Figgins, snatching out his handkerchief.

In a flash the two daring New House jokers had torn holes in their handkerchiefs. This done, they swiftly tied the rough masks over their faces, knotting them at the back.

"Now for it!" chuckled Figgy.

He pushed open the door and they dashed in, slamming the door after them.

Manners was seated at the table, just beginning work on his films, and he jumped up in alarm when he saw the masked forms.

"Here, what's this game?" he demanded, staring. "Look here! Leggo, you rotters! Why—Res—Mum-mum-mum—"

Manners' sudden call for help ended in a gurgling as Figgins clapped a hand over his mouth. Then Kerr snatched Manners' own handkerchief out, and between them they managed to tie it across the Shell fellow's mouth.

The junior struggled desperately; but sheer surprise robbed him of power, and before he hardly knew what was happening he had been trussed up with the tablecloth wound round and round his arms, pinning them to his sides.

Then, with a chuckle, Figgins and Kerr rooted out a piece of string and made their prisoner more helpless still.

Seating their victim on the hearthrug the New House raiders grabbed handfuls of cinders from the hearth and rammed them down the back of the hapless Manners' neck, and rubbed them in his hair. Then, after pouring the contents of an inkwell over the helpless and writhing Shell fellow's head, the New House jokers slipped out into the passage after a cautious peep out.

The passage was still deserted, and, whipping off their masks, the raiders pocketed them and started away. But just then a form appeared in sight round the far corner of the Shell passage.

It was Skimpole, the short-sighted genius of the Shell, and Skimpole was ambling slowly along, his eyes almost glued to a big volume nearly as big as himself.

"Oh, blow!" said Figgins. "Let's cut along and hide higher along somewhere until he goes into his giddy study."

The New House fellows could very easily have dealt with the weedy Skimpole, but they saw no reason why they should be recognised unnecessarily. So they faded away and hid just round the corner of the Fourth Form passage.

But their luck was out, for just then Talbot emerged from his study and came towards the Fourth Form passage, where the New House juniors waited.

"Sharp!" breathed Figgy, with a grunt.

He fairly scudded higher up until the further corner hid them from Talbot if he entered the Fourth quarters, as he obviously intended doing. The New House fellows now stood in the quiet, panel-walled passage where Arthur Augustus and Grundy had been found "bagged" and bound.

Not a soul was in sight here—yet Figgins and Kerr were observed for all that. From a slit down the side of one of the black oak panels sharp eyes watched Figgy and Kerr as they stood peering round the corner.

They belonged to Wally D'Arcy, who was ensconced with half a dozen of his chums behind the secret sliding panel they had discovered.

For the Secret Society of the Crimson Dagger had not finished their work for the day by any means—or they hoped not! And at sight of Figgins and Kerr Wally's eyes gleamed with joy. Like Grundy, Figgins had rather a short way with cheeky fags, and both he and Kerr were marked down for vengeance by the Tribunal.

But Figgins and Kerr did not dream that danger and vengeance was at hand, so that when the attack came it caught them just as unprepared as D'Arcy and Grundy had been.

With their shoes off the fags made no sound on the linoleum, and before Figgins and Kerr could cry out, much less struggle, scarves were whipped round their faces and then sacks were slipped over their startled heads and dragged swiftly downwards.

Figgins and Kerr began to grasp what was happening then; but it was too late! With their arms pinned to their sides they were soon helpless and trussed up like parcels

and bundled through the secret entrance, blinded, bewildered, and half suffocated.

Then the last of their captors slipped through after them, and the sliding panel closed without a sound.

It was ten minutes later when Tom Merry & Co. came in from their "breather" in the quad, and they went straight to Study No. 10, Tom Merry having asked Blake & Co. to tea in return for the Wayland outing.

They were still discussing the mystery of the Crimson Dagger when they reached the door of the study.

"I don't think for one moment it was really those New House cads!" Tom Merry was saying. "It was just spoof on— Mum-my hat!"

Tom Merry had sighted the trussed-up form of Manners on the hearthrug.

"Great pip!"

"Bai Jove!"

The juniors gave startled exclamations as they crowded into the study. Manners' eyes were almost starting from his head. In a couple of seconds Tom Merry had freed him from the tablecloth and removed his gag.

"What the dickens does this mean, Manners?" gasped Tom. "Who—"

"Mum-mum-mum!" gurgled Manners, getting his breath back in gasps. "Groooh! Oh crumbs! Phew!"

For a moment the junior gasped, and then he started to scatter ashes and ink from his hair and gouge cinders from between his collar and his neck.

"It—it was those New House cads, I believe!" he panted at length. "I was sitting at the table and they rushed me."

"Figgy, you mean?" ejaculated Tom.

"Figgy and Kerr, I think!" gasped Manners. "But the rotters wore handkerchiefs over their eyes. Ow! Wow! Won't I just make 'em sit up for this!"

"Then—then," gasped Tom, bewildered, "it's those New House worms, after all!"

"Phew! It looks like it!"

"Yaas, wathah!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus. "But—but I can hardly believe it, deah boys. It did not appeah to me as if— Bai Jove! What is that?"

From somewhere in the corridor outside had come a sudden yell, followed by a howl of laughter.

"Come on!" gasped Tom. "More giddy trouble!"

It was. It came in the form of two extraordinary figures

(Continued overleaf.)

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who hobbled along the Fourth Form passage, their legs tied together, their upper quarters encased in sacks. Several laughing Fourth and Shell chaps were escorting them.

From within the sacks came muffled roars for help. "Help, you cackling rotters! Get us out of this! Groooogh! Attish-ooo!"

"Attishoooo!"

From both sacks came terrific sneezes.

"Who the thump are they?" chuckled Blake. "My hat, I know those voices. I do believe—"

"Figgins!" yelled Tom. "That's his voice!"

There was no doubting it now. The laughing juniors recognised both voices, muffled as they were.

Laughingly Tom Merry cut the cord, and the sacks were wrenched from the unlucky victims of the Secret Society of the Crimson Dagger.

They proved to be George Figgins and Francis Kerr, right enough; and they were sights. And they were nearly weeping with rage.

Their heads and shoulders were smothered in a mixture of soot and flour, and their hair stood up in stiff tufts as if it had been glued—as it actually had!

"Mum-my hat!" gasped Jack Blake. "Then—then it isn't Figgys and his lot after all!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

That much was very, very clear! Figgins and Kerr were certainly not members of the dreaded tribunal of avengers, whoever else were. They were victims only.

"Well, I'm blowed!" gasped Tom Merry, staring at Figgins' fearful face. "But—but was it you two who trussed up Manners and—"

"Groooogh!" replied Figgins, without waiting for Tom to finish his question. "Mum-mum-mum! Ow! Oh, my giddy aunt! Oh dear! Run for it, Kerr!"

Without warning, Figgins and Kerr, finding themselves free, dodged through the crowd and dashed away at top speed. A roar of laughter followed them. Whether Figgins and Kerr were guilty of that assault on Manners they certainly did not want to stay to discuss the matter. They vanished in the distance and their running feet died away.

Almost weeping with laughter the chums of the School House re-entered their study and started tea. But they were more mystified than ever now. The strange attack on Manners had complicated affairs not a little. Manners was certain it had been Figgins and Kerr, and yet—

The sad fate that had befallen them seemed to throw strong doubts on that theory.

Excitedly discussing the turn of affairs the juniors sat down to tea, and soon they were also discussing something more to their liking; to wit, boiled eggs and buttered toast and scones and cakes and jam-tarts.

They had scarcely started, however, when the door flew back and a senior marched into the study. It was Gerald Cutts of the Fifth, and Cutts' face was angry and sneering.

With a savage gesture he flung something on the table in front of Tom Merry.

Tom blinked down at it. It was another of the familiar crimson daggers, and a glance showed him that it bore Cutts' name.

CHAPTER 10.

The Mystery Deepens!

"My hat!"

"Bai Jove!"

"What the thump's this game, Cutts?" demanded Tom, with some anger. "What's that for?"

Cutts glared at him.

"I've brought it back to the silly fool who sent it, Merry!" he sneered. "You cheeky young idiot—think I don't know who's at the bottom of this fooling foolery! I found that dashed thing on my desk this afternoon, and Knox tells me he's had one, too!"

"Well, is that any concern of ours?"

"Yes, it jolly well is!" blared Cutts. "Knox thinks just as I think, and that is that you young villains are working this stunt!"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Tom Merry, staring.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus blankly. "Does the boundah imagine I had a hand in kidnappin' myself and allowing myself to be covahed with flour and knocked about as I was? How uttably wedie! Weatly, Cutts—"

"I don't care!" said Cutts savagely. "I don't suppose you were in it, D'Arcy. But these other young villains were, I'm certain. I suppose this dashed silly dagger thing means that I'm marked to be tackled next. Well, if you've got that idea in your heads I'd advise you to drop it. Understand?"

The juniors could not help grinning. They understood well enough. Having received that cardboard dagger, The Gem Library.—No. 1,004.

Gerald Cutts evidently imagined he was to be the next victim, and he had, to use Lowther's expression, "got the breeze up."

But it was clear that he genuinely imagined they were the guilty miscreants.

"You silly fool!" laughed Tom Merry. "Don't talk rot! We know nothing about the silly things. We've had one each ourselves, in fact."

"All a blind!" snapped Cutts. "You can't throw dust in my eyes, Merry. I've come to warn you not to come your games with me, anyhow. You'll regret it if you do. You've always been up against me, and Knox and I are watching you, my pippins. So look out!"

"We will," said Tom Merry cheerily. "Good-bye!"

"And don't forget your giddy dagger!" chuckled Lowther.

For answer Gerald Knox snatched up the cardboard dagger, tore it into bits, and flung the pieces into Tom Merry's face. Then he strode out, banging the door after him.

It was just as well he did go then, for Tom Merry & Co. would have made him regret his visit had he stayed a moment longer.

"Oh, the rotter!" gasped Tom Merry, his face red with wrath. "I hope that silly idiot gets it next, anyway, though— My hat! I wonder if that was just spoof? You know what a crafty cad he is. He may be just doing this sort of thing to throw dust in the fellows' eyes."

"You mean you think it may be those Fifth Form rotters, after all?"

"More likely to be them than anyone else, I should think," said Tom thoughtfully. "It's such a queer affair altogether, though."

And Tom cracked his second egg and frowned.

Tea was a lengthy meal in Study No. 10 that afternoon, the juniors doing more arguing and discussing than eating for once. But it ended at last, and just as the juniors were rising there came another interruption.

It was Gerald Cutts again, but a different Gerald Cutts. As the door crashed back and he rushed into the study the startled juniors almost yelled.

For Cutts was a sight, more of a sight, in fact, than either Figgins or Kerr had presented.

His trousers were inside-out, likewise his jacket. His hair was covered in mingled flour and soot. And rings of vivid crimson paint showed on his face, round eyes and nose and mouth. It was a most weird and extraordinary face, and they scarcely recognised the black sheep of the Fifth. It needed only the sight of a torn half of a sack round the senior's waist to tell them what had happened.

"Oh, mum-my hat!" gasped Tom Merry.

"My giddy aunt!" murmured Lowther. "Cutts has copped it!"

There was no doubt about that sad fact.

The startled juniors stared at Cutts, and Cutts stood motionless, staring at them. He was panting and breathless. But he seemed quite taken aback at sight of them all.

They knew the reason next moment.

"Oh!" he panted. "So—you're all here!"

"Yes, we're all here!" grinned Tom Merry.

"Adsum, sir," murmured Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was a sudden howl of laughter from the passage, and Tom Merry & Co. joined in the yell. Behind Cutts outside the door was a laughing crowd of fellows who had followed the Fifth-Former.

"You—you little fiends!" hissed Cutts. "I—I believe it was you, after all—it must have been! You've sneaked back here before me somehow, confound you!"

This was quite untrue. Cutts realised, mad with rage as he was, that Tom Merry & Co. could not be the culprits. A glance at the empty dishes on the table told him that. But in his blind passion he stuck to his charge. He had to vent his rage on someone.

"Don't be an idiot, Cutts!" said Tom Merry, trying hard not to laugh. "We've never left the room. Can't you see?"

"You must have done!" blared Cutts furiously. "You followed me when I left, and downed me in that dark passage. You covered my head with a sack and carted me to that dashed vault and did this to me. And licked me with a cane, too!"

"The unkindest cut of all, Cutts!" murmured Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you—you—" stuttered Cutts. "Why, I—I—"

Dropping words for actions, Gerald Cutts made a blind rush at the laughing juniors.

"Back up!" gasped Tom Merry. "Oh, my hat!"

The juniors "backed up." Much as they disliked the task they had no other course in the matter. In a flash the



"Y-your—your face, Mr. Selby!" gasped Mr. Railton. "Good heavens! Are you not aware of the fact that your face is covered with soot?" Mr. Selby gave a violent start, and his hand went to his sour-tempered features. It came away black! (See Chapter 3.)

raging Gerald was grasped on all sides, and the crowd in the passage parted as he went flying through the doorway, all arms and legs.

Then Tom Merry jumped to the door and closed and locked it.

Almost immediately afterwards came a hammering at the door—a hammering that ceased abruptly as a stern voice sounded.

"What is this commotion, boys? Good—good gracious! What—what—"

"Railton!" panted Blake, with a chuckle. "Now the band will play!"

In startled silence the juniors stood listening. They heard Cutts' hysterical voice, and they heard Mr. Railton's deeper voice as he questioned the senior. Then, after a little pause, an authoritative knock sounded on the door.

"Open this door, boys!"

"Yes, sir."

Tom Merry called out cheerfully and unlocked the door. Mr. Railton walked in with Cutts at his heels. Though Cutts knew perfectly well that the juniors were not his attackers he had not scrupled to stick to his charge.

"Merry!" said Mr. Railton, whose face was set and stern. "I have heard a most amazing story from Cutts of the Fifth. I understand also that certain other boys can tell a somewhat similar story."

"Yes, sir," said Tom calmly.

"Cutts," said Mr. Railton, his stern glance resting on the face of each boy in turn, "states that you seven boys, or, at least, six of you," he added, with a glance at D'Arcy, "attacked him within the school this evening and took him to some unknown place—a secret vault apparently—and treated him in this scandalous manner."

"It's totally untrue, sir," said Tom Merry quietly. "Cutts is lying, and he knows it well enough. We haven't left this room for half an hour, and we've only just finished our tea. Cutts was in here twenty minutes ago, and we were just starting then."

"Is that true, Cutts?"

"It—it's right that I found them in here having tea," stammered Cutts. "But I'm almost certain they did it."

"Almost!" echoed Mr. Railton. "You stated a moment

ago that they had done it. You made a deliberate charge against them."

"I—I'm certain it was them, sir!"

"Have you any vestige of proof, Cutts?"

"I know they're up against me, and I know it must be they who downed me, sir!" gasped Cutts.

"Then you haven't an atom of proof?"

Cutts said nothing.

"Have I your word that you know nothing of this matter, or of the attack on Mr. Selby and those other boys?" asked Mr. Railton.

"Yes, sir."

"Certainly, sir!"

"Yaas, wathah, sir!"

"Absurd!" snapped the Housemaster. "You had no right to make such a charge against these boys without an atom of proof, Cutts. Go and get yourself made respectable at once! I will make the strictest inquiry into this astounding series of outrages. Disperse, boys!"

Cutts tottered away, scowling like a fiend. Mr. Railton walked away, and the juniors closed the door again as the crowd of grinning fellows outside dispersed. Then Tom Merry & Co. doubled up and roared.

CHAPTER 11.

Not a Clue!

"WELL, that settles it, chaps!"

Tom Merry made that remark emphatically to his own personal chums in Study No. 10 a few minutes later.

Blake & Co. had just departed for their own study, and as he spoke Tom sat down in the easy-chair, his face set in a serious frown.

Funny as the affair had been, Tom Merry could not help seeing the serious side of it, and he saw it clearly now.

It was certainly getting rather serious. Not only had several juniors been dealt with by the mysterious secret

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society that was filling St. Jim's with a buzz of excited conjecture and amazed discussion, but a master and a senior had been "handled."

That was a very grave matter, and Tom Merry could see serious trouble ahead if the mysterious Tribunal was allowed to continue.

Not that Tom was troubling about himself. He was a "marked" man, so to speak, and it was quite possible his turn would come very quickly.

But he did not worry him in the slightest. He was thinking of the safety of the members of the secret society and not of his own skin.

"That settles it, chaps!" he repeated grimly. "I fancy we know now where we stand."

"Eh?" said Lowther, looking up with a chuckle. "You mean settles old Cutts?"

"Not at all, I mean, it settles who the merchants are," said Tom grimly. "It isn't Figgy and his pals, and it isn't Cutts & Co."

"What about Racke and his lot?" put in Manners.

"Rubbish!" said Tom. "Racke hasn't the pluck to carry through such risky games, and his pals certainly haven't."

"Then who—"

"Those young rascals in the Third, of course!" snapped Tom. "It's as plain as a pikestaff to me now. Don't you remember how young Wally was threatening and gassing the other day? I knew they had some game on. This is it!"

"But both Gussy and Grundy swore they were tall chaps—"

"I know. They could easily be mistaken in the gloom, though. I'm convinced it is Wally and his chums—the little fools! I—I don't like it, chaps!"

"Rot! Let the little beggars rip if it is them!" said Monty Lowther, with a chuckle. "They'll keep us smiling, anyway."

"It's no joking matter now," said Tom sharply. "You know what those reckless young idiots are; they'll not know

many twists and turns were done purposely to confuse him as to the length of the journey.

Like Arthur Augustus, he had good reason to be thankful when he was dropped on to his feet at last, bruised and aching. Then the cord was loosened, and the sack dragged swiftly from him, the cord being instantly tightened again.

Tom's smarting eyes took in the scene.

It was just as the other victims had related.

The robed and cowed forms sat round the table now, silent and motionless, and Tom eyed them keenly. But to his amazement he saw that Grundy and Gussy had been right. They were obviously too tall for fags. The possibility of the crafty fags wearing a kind of framework on their shoulders to raise their cowls and robes high never occurred to the junior, then; though the queer fact that no eyes gleamed in the grotesque masks should have made him suspect the truth.

But he did not suspect—his certainty that they were Wally & Co. vanished. And, despite his common sense, Tom felt his scalp prickling as he stared at those still forms in the ghastly silence.

It was positively uncanny.

Then Tom Merry's common sense overcame his nerves, and he laughed, though a trifle huskily.

"You silly asses!" he called out. "Get a move on and get on with the job! I've my prep to do to-night! Buck up with the proceedings!"

Tom heard something that sounded suspiciously like a smothered laugh, and then a deep voice spoke. Try how he could Tom was unable to place it.

"Thomas Merry," said the voice solemnly, "you have been found guilty by the Tribunal of the Crimson Dagger of bullying persons of tender age and of defying us, Executioner, do your duty!"

Swoosh!

Tom knew what was going to happen, but it happened far quicker than he had expected, and, like Arthur

EXTRA SPECIAL FOR NEXT WEEK—

"THE HIDDEN HAND!" By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

DON'T MISS IT—WHATEVER YOU DO, CHUMS!

when and where to stop, and they're heading for the high jump already at this rate. If it is them they want stopping for their own sakes. I didn't want to say much before old Gussy; but in my view it's up to us to do something to stop the young scamps getting themselves sacked."

"You're taking it for granted that it is them?"

"Yes," said Tom, getting to his feet suddenly. "And as they're decent little kids I'm not going to see them get themselves sacked if I can help it."

"Here, where are you off to?" said Lowther quickly.

Tom did not answer. He walked quickly out, closing the door after him. His mind was made up, and he did not hesitate. At all costs he meant to find out if young Wally and his band were indeed the Secret Tribunal.

During the last few minutes since Cutts had gone, Tom had been thinking hard. He remembered that each kidnapping, excepting Gussy's, had taken place in the passage somewhere beyond the Fourth passage, and this struck him as very queer.

He reached the passage in less than a minute, and there he hung about, coolly inviting capture—if his theory was correct!

But for all his preparedness, Tom Merry was taken at a disadvantage when the rush did come.

Hearing a faint shuffle in the gloom of the passage behind him, he turned swiftly—an instant too late!

The next moment his eyes and mouth were covered, and before he could move again a sack was jammed over his head and dragged quickly downwards.

Save for a swift glimpse of a masked face, he had seen nothing. He understood now why the others had been captured so easily.

He did not resist at all. He allowed himself to be tied up like a chicken, and then he felt himself lifted and carried. There was a momentary pause, and it seemed to him that he was turned and twisted and handed over to somebody else before being carried on again.

But the horrid sack blinded and half suffocated him, and he was far from guessing that he had been lifted through the secret panel through the wall, as was the case. Nor, try as he would, could he make head or tail of the journey which followed. He only knew he was being carried now on level ground and then down steps, and he guessed the

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Augustus, he got the full force of what was coming from above in his face as he glanced upwards.

It was mingled soot and flour, and it was followed by a tiny paper bag full of pepper.

Luckily, it missed him by an inch or so, and burst on the stone flags at his feet. But it made him sneeze, and added to his troubles as he staggered about, eyes, ears, and mouth full of flour and soot.

"Groooogh! Oh crumbs! Groooogh! Oh, you awful rotters, whoever you are! Groooogh! Attish-oooo!"

There was smothered laughter, and then Tom was grabbed and swiftly bonneted again with the sack, and the cord was tightened. Then, without further ceremony, he was lifted and carried by many hands back the way he had come.

It was a sad return journey for Tom Merry. He had been "put through it" all for nothing. He had learned nothing, excepting that it seemed impossible for his assailants to be members of the St. Jim's Third. He had been scornful of both Gussy and Grundy at their inability to discover a clue. And he was as bad himself. He had failed. He had not even recognised that deep voice, though something in it had seemed familiar.

The horrid journey ended at last, and no wiser than he had been before, except in a humiliating way, Tom Merry found himself at length seated on linoleum, and after a few moments of silence he heard voices, followed by a yell of laughter.

He knew what it meant. And he was not surprised when his cords were cut and his sack was wrenched from his head, to find himself seated on the passage floor, in the exact spot where he had been captured.

Nor was he surprised to find a dozen or so Fourth and Shell fellows round him. Levison had found him, and had soon brought fellows rushing from their studies. There was another roar as he was recognised.

"Tom Merry!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

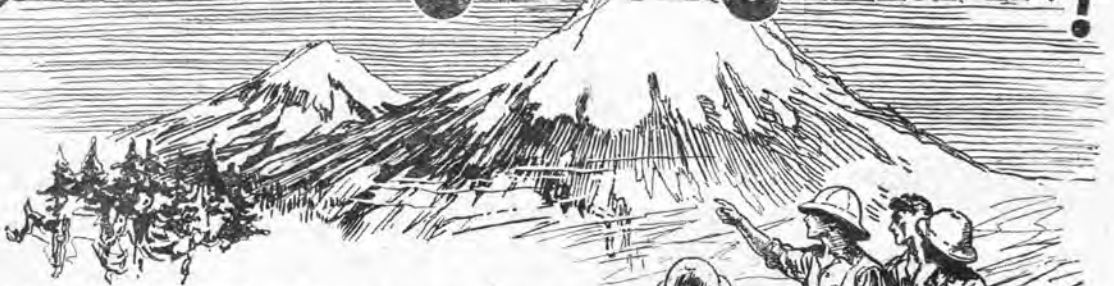
With the aid of Levison and Cardew, Tom staggered to his feet and blinked about him ruefully, blushing under his coating of soot and flour.

"You awful ass!" gasped Lowther, rushing up. "Oh, you idiot!"

(Continued on page 28.)

THE GOAL IN SIGHT! For years now Professor Byrne and his daughter have been held prisoners by an unknown race of people in Central Africa. For the professor's friends to find his place of captivity is almost as difficult a job as hunting for a needle in a haystack. But at last, after a series of perilous adventures, the rescue party sight the Mountain of the Hidden Crest, which is the clue that promises to lead their quest to a successful issue!

BEYOND the SILVER GLACIER!



A Grand Story of Peril and Adventure in
Central Africa.

By **ARTHUR S. HARDY.**

Del Rivo Joins Up!

D ID you say you flew here?" asked Del Rivo.

"Yes."

"In one aeroplane?"

"In two," explained Harry Franklin. "One was burnt after being driven down in a thunderstorm; the other remains, and to-morrow I hope we shall use it."

"I have heard of those things. I have never seen one," said the Portuguese, in honeyed tones. "Would it be possible, then, for you to ascend into the air and fly back from here to civilisation?"

"Yes, if the petrol supply lasted out," answered Harry.

"And could you carry one more passenger with you, say, myself?"

"There is room. The machine would stand it."

"Then I beg of you to do so. My baggage has been stolen by those thieves of Hekebus. All my native bearers have been murdered. I am alone. I could not live here. I should starve or die or be slain if I were left alone."

"Then we will take you with us, Del Rivo," said Adam. "But you will have to go where we go, and we are not bound for civilised parts just yet."

"No matter. We will help one another. I shall be one more to fight the treacherous natives who inhabit the Hekebus Territory and the wild lands around. Mr. Byrne, I would lay down my life to save you if the sacrifice were demanded of me. I owe you that much. And, besides, there is the deep and lasting love I bear towards the memory of your poor dead father—"

A torrent of words flooded to Adam's lips, but he checked their utterance. Once again he wanted to see the expression of Del Rivo's face, and bitterly he regretted that the dawn had not yet come.

"Can you tell me how my father died?" he asked.

"I do not know, I cannot say, Mr. Byrne—but a week or two before he and his train were massacred I was with him, and we talked over our future plans like friends and brothers. I only know that he was slain and buried somewhere within the neighbourhood of Pocotella. You and

your friends, I suppose, have come out here to try and recover his body and bear it home."

"Why, no," answered Adam. "My father is alive, Del Rivo. We have come out here to try and rescue him."

Adam stopped, waiting breathlessly for an answer.

None came. Instead there was a silence so profound that even the faint humming of an insect near by sounded unduly loud.

"May I ask you, please, to tell me the story," said Del Rivo at last. "Forgive my emotion, but the news has affected me profoundly. I loved your father. For years I have mourned him as dead, and he is still alive, you say. Tell me more."

Thus urged, Adam told his story—the others listening intently. The Portuguese did not utter a word until the tale was ended.

"Amazing," he commented. "Mr. Byrne, I am just a simple hunter, traveller, and trader. My life has been spent in wild places, among unknown tribes, and only after long intervals, sometimes of years, have I returned to the haunts of civilisation. When last I left the wilds I heard about this modern miracle of wireless, by which messages are broadcast—I believe that is the correct term to use—incredible distances through the air. And to think that your father is alive and should have sent that message by the hand of a native of an unknown tribe, so that it should be broadcast to you in your home in England, and so bring you out here in the hope of rescue, is a miracle indeed—something that passes my understanding."

He paused, and after a while went on:

"And what did you say were the directions given as to your father's whereabouts?"

"My father is held prisoner by a race called the Hoka-hulas, in the City of Barcoomba, which lies beyond the Silver Glacier, and beneath the Mountain of the Hidden Crest," said Adam.

"I have never heard of such a race, or such a place, or such a mountain," said the Portuguese. "For the last thirty years I have probed the very heart of Africa, and have heard of no such skewbald race of people as you speak about."

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 Barcoomba, which lies north of the Silver Glacier and beneath the Mountain of the Hidden Crest.

Soon after leaving Baruda for the interior, however, one of the planes is wrecked. Next, the party is pursued by a strange race of natives known as the Hekebus, or Skeleton Men, and despite the charm Adam is wearing which, according to a witch's prophecy,

is alleged to bring luck to the wearer, three of Adam's friends are whisked away by the Skeleton Men, whose intention it is to burn them at the stake. A bold plan of rescue is suggested by Muta, a native friend of Adam's, and these two, astride Kiku, a sacred elephant, charge into the Hekebus' camp, and put the warriors to rout. On rushing round to liberate his claims, however, Adam discovers another prisoner—a white-bearded man, who, upon being released, shoots indiscriminately at the warriors, an action of which Adam strongly disapproves. Later, Adam learns to his astonishment that the stranger is **Julian Del Rivo**, an old friend of his father's.

"Fancy!" says Jimmy Brown. "Flown from civilisation into the heart of Africa, and the first person we meet is an old friend of Adam's father!"

(Now read on.)

Even the Skeleton Men with whom I was once on terms of greatest friendship have never spoken of them. Is it not possible, Mr. Byrne, that though your father is alive, his—er—mind may be affected so that he—er—imagines these things?"

"It is possible, but the proofs are overwhelmingly against the theory," answered Adam. "The native who brought the message to Walter Beavan at Baruda was a man of the skewbald race. I have found a chart which proves that the Silver Glacier—whatever it may be—and the Mountain of the Hidden Crest, as well as the skewbald people, do actually exist. Muta, my black friend here, is a descendant of that strange race—his mother, the witch O-Kama, whose body we buried, was of the same people, the Hokahulas. So we shall fly north-west when we resume our journey in the air and take a chance. I am hoping before our supply of petrol and oil gives out, that we may come within sight of our objective. And I honestly believe there is more than an outside chance."

Julian Del Rivo laughed, and there was a note of mockery in it.

"It is like a fantastic and amazing dream," he said at length. "I have met and heard of the woman O-Kama. What you tell me about her is news indeed. If you have the proofs you say, well and good—but had you relied merely upon the word of the drunken Beavan, I should have discredited everything."

"You know him?" said Adam.

"Yes, I know him, and I disapprove of him."

"For what reasons?" asked Adam.

"Once we travelled together, he and I and a friend of Beavan's. We shot big game, we traded, and we shared. But he was a drunkard, a liar, and a thief. If I had done my duty I would have put a bullet through him."

"You seem fond of shooting, Del Rivo," put in Harry Franklin dryly.

"There are some men better dead," Del Rivo replied. "And Walter Beavan is one of them. Ask yourselves, why it is he lives alone at Baruda, outcast from men of his own race, content to remain there far from the haunts of civilisation. It is because he dare not show his face among white men."

"And yet I liked him," said Adam.

"He has a pleasant manner. It is his way. If, my friend, you succeed in your quest and rescue your father, Professor George Willis Byrne will tell you all about Walter Beavan."

Just then the birds of the forest burst into song. Swiftly the dawn came, so that the trees took shape, and the party were able to make out a track made by native footsteps, and the tread of wild beasts curving onward and away from their resting-place.

Instantly Adam and his companions arose, the Portuguese stretching himself and forcing a smile.

"We march?" he asked inquiringly.

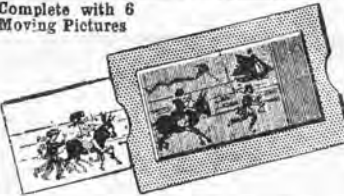
"Why, yes! Mutt," ordered Adam, "show us the way!"

The Mountain of the Hidden Crest!

THEY started off, welcoming the day, and ignoring the buzzing flies.

"Soon," said the Portuguese, with a gay laugh. "I shall see one of the wonders of the world—an aeroplane."

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Led by Muta, they made the journey in rapid time—and so came upon the clearing, where Adam's natives were busy hacking down the trees and levelling the ground.

The natives welcomed them with shouts of joy, running to them, and waving their arms above their heads in greeting. Then the party of jaded adventurers ate and slept, the tireless Muta remaining on guard.

Half the day had gone before they roused themselves, and after eating, once more, they began to help at the work of making good the clearing.

Trees were hacked down and sawn through, their stumps uprooted, the ground levelled, the lumber cleared away.

All next day they laboured, and the third morning after their return to the aeroplane the machine was prepared for the next stage of its flight.

Julian Del Rivo had done the work of ten men.

During these days he had been amiable, interesting, and interested.

He stared upon the aeroplane in wonderment, asking hundreds of questions about it. He could hardly bring himself to believe that the great heavy flying machine, stacked with its weighty supplies, could rise into the air and fly onward, bearing with it also the natives and five white men besides.

But when Adam set the engine roaring in a test out before starting upon the fateful journey, he watched in awe-stricken silence.

Now heavy rain fell, so that they decided to wait until the morrow before attempting the flight.

All these days they had neither seen nor heard anything of the Hekebus, although they had someone on watch and held their arms ready for defence.

Always the ladder was set against the fuselage of the aeroplane, so that they could enter it and defend themselves in it if an attack were made.

They began to believe that the Skeleton men would leave them unmolested now. But they were destined to meet once again before they started away.

In the morning the sun shone brilliantly. Breakfast was hastily eaten and the last of their things packed into the plane. Once again Adam tried out the engine, Jimmy Brown and Sandy McTavish supervising.

Then the natives took their places in the back of the plane, and Julian Del Rivo joined the others. The great air bus was literally packed now.

Adam took the pilot's seat. Next him Harry Franklin settled down.

And then out of the forest came striding a pink elephant—Kitu, the sacred one—and behind it a swarm of armed warriors in skeleton war-paint, brandishing their spears.

"Let her go!" yelled Harry.

The engine roared. The aeroplane began to move, and in a few seconds was racing right at the warriors, who scattered in all directions.

Kitu, the sacred elephant, enraged at the sight of the moving plane and the roar of its engine, charged right at it.

"Bless me pale pink!" yelled Jimmy Brown. "If the old bull pup ain't gonna wreck us at the last minute, perish 'im—"

But the charging elephant passed just beneath the aeroplane, which, rocking and swaying as it rose gracefully into the air, cleared the tops of the trees and soared upward towards the sky of unbroken blue.

Harry peered down.

He could see the Skeleton army moving amid the trees, caught the dull beat of those tom-toms, and smiled.

They had not started one moment too soon.

Now up they went, higher, higher, Julian Del Rivo white beneath the bronze of his weather-beaten face, for he was afraid of this flying machine.

"We will not—come—down—in safety," he said; and Harry, casting a glance behind, saw that his teeth were chattering. Julian Del Rivo was terrified.

The natives who sat like statues in the back might be awed, but they were not a prey to terror like this white man.

"It's a million to one against a crash, Del Rivo," Harry said.

"I am afraid. It is unnatural. Why do we go so high?"

His voice shook.

Below them the unknown country lay like a map—forests everywhere, the curving line of a mighty river winding through the trees, showing a glistening ribbon of white.

Up they soared, higher and higher, Adam keeping the ball of the sun to the right of him. If it were the setting sun which the chart showed, then his course must be wrong.

Yet the land behind them was charted, had been explored as far north-west as Baruda, and even beyond. Adam had

never known the aeroplane fly better than it was doing now. He mounted still higher.

Del Rivo swayed as if about to faint.

"Can't we go down—can't we go down?" he pleaded. "I am afraid—afraid—"

Adam's lips curved in boyish contempt. This man, in spite of his giant size and amazing strength and endurance, was a craven at heart.

They had been flying just upon a couple of hours, and now the air became suddenly many degrees cooler. What did that portend?

Adam's eyes searched the sky for signs of danger. Were they threatened by another storm, he wondered.

A glance below showed him that there were landing-places, but he knew well enough that smooth as the earth looked from the air, appearances could be deceptive at such a height. He wanted to cover as much distance as possible before coming down again.

Now his eyes swept to the right, and as he looked his heart almost leaped into his throat.

Suddenly, in the far distance, land which had been draped in mist took shape.

He could see a vast open stretch of blinding white on which the sun beat relentlessly, and to the right of it a mountain reared itself majestically high above the hills which rose from the level of the plain—a great, bare-looking mountain, the top of which was veiled or hidden by a sweep of cloud which seemed to cut its summit off as if it had been cut by a knife.

It looked flatter on the top than Fuji Yama—as flat as a pancake, because of that curtain of cloud; and below, as if swept by the brush of a painter, lay this field of flat and blinding white.

"Look, Harry—look!" cried Adam in an ecstasy. "The Silver Glacier—the Mountain of the Hidden Crest!"

The Land of the Pigmies!

THE passengers in the great aeroplane stared out at the amazing scene which lay like a map before them.

Below them ran the winding silver waters of a river which now flowed in the open where they could see herds of all kinds of wild animals drinking, then it merged with forest trees until it was lost to view, only to reappear far to the right again.

And then, stretching ahead, miles upon miles of unbroken forest above whose tree-tops shimmered a heat haze. They could make out here and there native huts set in a clearing, but no sign of human life was observable.

Up and down, the forest seemed to rise and fall, dense, impenetrable to the eye, at any rate. And beyond, uncountable miles away, barren, broken land with stunted bushes upon it—if those patches and shadows they could make out through powerful glasses were bushes or shrubs—and then a rising, rocky ground which ran to the very edge of that silver sheet which was so remarkable.

The fast-flying aeroplane left the winding river behind it, and sped above the forest trees, but the silver sheet seemed to come no nearer.

There it lay white, blinding to the eyes even at that great distance, and above the foothills beyond it rose the sheer slopes of the mysterious mountain whose crest was veiled from view by the clouds which enveloped it.

Adam caught his breath as he stared at the wonderful panorama.

Somewhere beneath the shadow of that mysterious mountain, somewhere across that silver sheet, lay the strange City of Barcoomba. They were nearing the end of their quest, though they had far to go before that end was reached.

For another hour they sped onward through the air, only to find the mountain and the field of snowy white upon which the sun played as far away as ever.

Every now and then they flew above open ground, mainly grassland, whereon wild beasts were feeding—beasts which stared at the fast-moving plane above them, then scattered and vanished from view.

Once they saw a train of natives moving in single file along a foot-trail. These, dropping the burdens they carried, threw up their arms and fled.

Now the aeroplane was beating into the very teeth of a strong wind, and Adam shivered, because the wind had a bite in it which penetrated the clothing he wore, chilling the blood in his veins.

Harry passed a written message to him.

"Better come down before the petrol gives out. We have our bearings. We know where the mountain lies now. Notice how the ground rises to meet that snow field? Must be ice. Good job we brought some snow-shoes with us." And Adam smiled.

So they sped on, the bunch of natives gathered in the back of the plane exchanging frightened glances, and muttering with teeth that clashed because of the cold.

And at last Adam decided to come down. It would be risky to continue the flight above that endless tract of forest trees with possible danger of the petrol supply giving out. They had sighted the wonder mountain and the silver glacier. They knew where their objective lay. They would obtain whatever extra native aid might be necessary, and march through the forest by ways that must be known until they reached the wild, rocky country that lay on the edge of that field of snow, and so reach the last stage of their journey to Barcoomba.

Adam searched the land below him for a suitable landing-place, and came down so that he could study at closer range the lie of the ground.

Most of the open spaces were covered with thick, tall-growing grass. Often the landing was rocky and uneven.

They flew above a native village, saw strange-looking men emerge from their curious huts of cane and straw, and dive for cover with a celerity that was comical.

At closer range they could see that the forest was not as dense or as forbidding as the forest of the Hekebus had been. There were paths winding through it. Travelling along these would not be so bad.

And at long last open ground near a smallish river provided the landing they needed.

"This looks the goods, Sandy," yelled Jimmy Brown to McTavish, as he studied the ground below them.

"It's no so bad," agreed the Scotsman.

"Make a landing, Adam!" yelled Harry Franklin, making use of the speaking-tube, and for the first time since the flight began the Portuguese, who had looked green beneath the sun tan that dyed his swarthy face, brightened.

Lower and lower the plane descended. Certainly the landing looked all right. Antlered and horned beasts of the antelope tribe scattered and fled, screaming wildly, moving like the wind.

Lower still the plane dropped. The grass, burnt by the sun, was sparse hereabouts, the earth as level as a meadow.

To the right, half a mile away, or less perhaps, lay the fringe of the forest trees, beyond which lay the Mountain of the Hidden Crest.

Very cleverly Adam brought the great aeroplane down and ran it along upon its wheels. Many a bump and jolt they experienced in the landing, but at last the machine came to a standstill, the engine ceased to roar, and, with a light laugh, Adam left his seat and stretched himself.

"Harry," he laughed, "the luck is with us. We know now where Barcoomba lies. If our luck holds we will rescue father and Rosa before many weeks have passed."

The Portuguese, who had suffered so much during the journey, now became his arrogant, haughty self again.

"Let me get out of this horrible machine!" he cried. "I want to set foot on the firm ground. I never thought we would come down alive. Ugh!" And he shuddered nervously.

Now a ladder was thrown over the side, and one after the other the scared and shivering natives descended to the ground below.

Julian Del Rivo was the next to leave the aeroplane. Adam prepared to follow.

"We'll have one of the machine-guns landed straight away, Harry," he said. "After all, we don't know what danger threatens us here. There are bound to be natives about. They must have seen us come down. We must be prepared against attack."

"I'll sling one of the barkers out immediately, sir," grinned Jimmy Brown, as he rubbed his hands together. "And then a bit of grub won't do us any harm."

Adam swung himself over the rim of the fuselage. His keen eyes searched the beauty of their landing place, and as he stared about him a cry of dismay leapt to his lips.

"Great Scotland Yard!" he cried. "We're surrounded! The machine-guns—quick!"

(Whatever you do, chums, don't miss the thrilling follow-on of this splendid adventure serial which will appear in next week's GEM.)

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ANSWERS

Every Saturday....PRICE 2:

WALLY'S SECRET SOCIETY!

(Continued from page 24.)

"Yes, he looks a fair coker, don't he?" said a familiar, cheeky voice. "What price flour and soot, Merry? Great Scott! He's always gassing about us chaps in the Third looking d'arable, but I ask you fellows—what about him? Nice junior skipper, I must say!"

Tom Merry started and turned. Standing in the forefront of the crowd was Wally D'Arcy, his face smudgy and cheeky as ever. And behind him were Curly Gibson, Jamieson, and Levison minor. The three broke into a roar.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh crumbs!" groaned Tom. "All this for nothing. That settles it. It couldn't have been them!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And, followed by roars of laughter, Tom Merry wended his weary way towards the nearest bath-room.

One thing he was convinced of now was that Wally D'Arcy & Co. were not the misguided jaspers who were responsible for his plight.

There was no more excitement at St. Jim's that evening. Even the young scapgraces of the Third felt that they had accomplished quite enough in the avenging line for one day.

But most fellows at St. Jim's had an uneasy feeling that this was only the beginning, and St. Jim's retired to bed, that night pondering deeply over the strange mystery, and wondering whose turn it would be next.

THE END.

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