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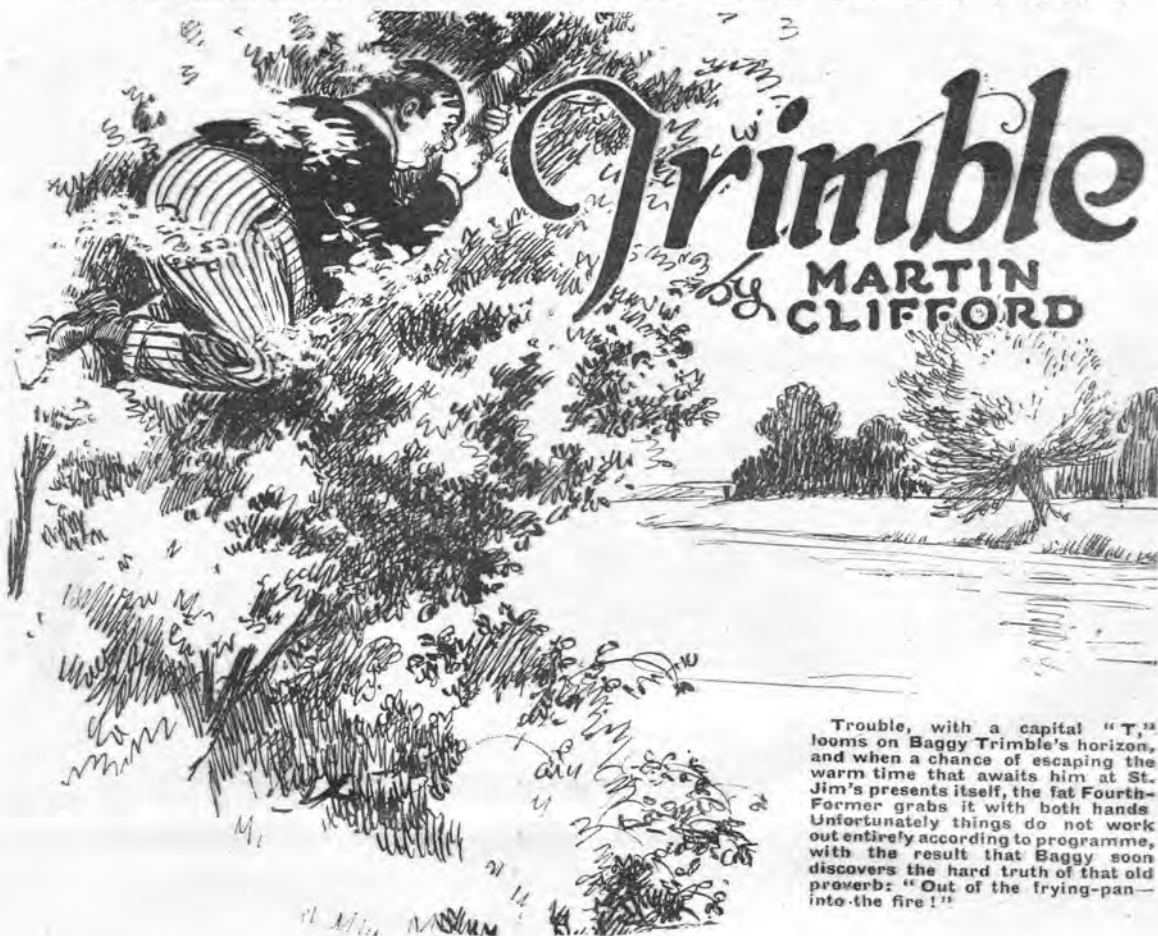
EVERY
WEDNESDAY.



**A HAM IN THE HAND
IS WORTH TWO IN THE SHOP !**

*So thinks Baggy Trimble, the Truant !
(See the topping school yarn inside.)*

A ROLICKING LONG STORY OF TOM MERRY & CO.—



Trouble, with a capital "T," looms on Baggy Trimble's horizon, and when a chance of escaping the warm time that awaits him at St. Jim's presents itself, the fat Fourth-Former grabs it with both hands. Unfortunately things do not work out entirely according to programme, with the result that Baggy soon discovers the hard truth of that old proverb: "Out of the frying-pan—into the fire!"

CHAPTER 1. Trimble is Unlucky!

"WILDRAKE, old chap!" Baggy Trimble spoke half-morosely, half-pleadingly. Kit Wildrake, who was busy cleaning a pair of white tennis-shoes, looked up with a grin as his fat study-mate rolled into the study.

It was a half-holiday at St. Jim's, and for once the English weather was on its best behaviour. The sun shone down from a cloudless blue sky, seeming to invite everybody out of doors. The call of that bright spring afternoon was irresistible, and masters, seniors, and juniors were joining in the general exodus.

Kit Wildrake was anxious to get out of gates as quickly as possible that half-holiday, but he was good-naturedly prepared to listen to his study-mate—for a few minutes, at any rate.

"Well, old fat man," he asked cheerfully, "what's the trouble this time? I guess you must be feeling pretty bad after the way you stuffed at dinner!"

"Don't talk rot!" snorted Trimble, with withering scorn. "As if a chap gets a blessed chance to stuff at a place like this, where they don't give a fellow half enough to eat! Yah! It's only ten minutes since dinner, and I'm hungry again already. Nobody cares if a fellow jolly well starves here!"

"I guess you look as if you're starving, tubby!" remarked Wildrake, looking Trimble's plump form over with a chuckle. "It wouldn't be a bad thing, though, if you did lose a few hundredweight, old lard-tub!"

"Why, you rotter—"

"I guess we'd have more room to move about in this study, then," said Wildrake heartlessly.

"Beast!" grunted Trimble. "Look here, Wildrake, old chap! About this afternoon. It's a ripping afternoon—"

"That's right!" agreed Wildrake. "Top-hole, old bean!"

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If there weren't objects like you on the landscape everything in the garden would be lovely!"

"Oh, cheese it!" grunted Trimble. "Look here, you're going with Noble and Dane to play tennis at Glyn House this afternoon?"

"That's so, old fat man!"

"There'll be tennis and a jolly good tea on the lawn to follow," said Trimble.

"I suppose so!" chuckled Wildrake.

"Well, why hasn't Glyn asked me to go?" asked Trimble warmly. "I'm a dab hand at tennis, and his sister and me are great pals. Why hasn't he invited me?"

"Perhaps he's had you there before," suggested Wildrake.

"Beast—I mean, don't rot, old fellow. The fact is, old Glyn must have forgotten to ask me, you know. He's overlooked inviting me. Now, if you'd ask him for me—"

"Ask him yourself and see what happens!" grinned Wildrake.

"I've asked him!" grunted Trimble. "The beast happened to be in a bad temper, though. I explained what a dab at tennis I am, and I told him his sister Edith liked me—was spoons on me, in fact. And the beast fairly got waxy—goodness knows why—and kicked me out!"

"Good!"

"It's my belief he's jealous," said Trimble, with a sniff. "Jealous of my tennis form. He doesn't want his sister to know any St. Jim's chap can play better than he does. Well, I'm quite agreeable to stand out of the tennis if that's it. You can explain that to him."

"Oh, can I?"

"Yes; make that point clear, old chap, then it will be all right, you know. My idea is for you to take me along: tell him you refuse to join the party unless I'm included—see? You've got influence with him, old chap. Well, is it a go?"

"Not much!" grinned Wildrake. "You see, I'm a friend of Glyn's, and I guess it wouldn't be a friendly act to take you along there, Baggy."

"Look here, don't be mean!" urged Baggy, almost tear-

—OF ST. JIM'S, FEATURING BAGGY TRIMBLE OF THE FOURTH.

the Jruant!



fully. "Everybody seems to be going out enjoying themselves but me. You fellows are going to a tennis-party; Cardew and his lot are going up river; Racke and his pals have cleared off to Wayland on the spree; Grundy and his pals are having a blessed picnic up river; everybody else out enjoying themselves. It's rotten!"

"Sorry, fatty!" said the Canadian junior. "But it's your own fault, you know. I guess that if you weren't such a scrubby, thieving, snivelling, prying, and lying little worm lots of fellows might make a pal of you. As it is, they won't, and I don't blame 'em!"

"Oh, really, Wildrake—"

"If you'll take my advice," went on Wildrake more seriously, stopping the lacing up of his shoe to wag a finger at Trimble, "you'll stay in and swot this afternoon, my lad

—swot like billy-ho! It's the general knowledge exam to-morrow, remember, and you know what the Head said would happen to the chap who failed. He's already got his peepers on you, Baggy!"

"Oh dear! I know that!" groaned Trimble. "I say, d'you think I could dodge the blessed exam by going sick, Wildrake?"

"No, I jolly well don't!" chuckled Wildrake. "I guess the best thing you can do is to stay in here this afternoon and swot hard. It's your only chance of scraping through to-morrow, Baggy."

"Catch me!" grunted Baggy. "What's the good, anyway? The Head's got a down on me, I think. Perhaps he'll be taken ill, or something, and won't be able to hold the exam. I'm risking it, anyway."

"You fat ass!"

"Well, am I coming to Glyn House or not?"

"Not, old tub!"

"If you're going to be mean and selfish—"

"I am," said Wildrake grimly, getting a bit tired of the conversation. "Now clear, you pesky galoot! I guess—"

"Yah! Mean beast!" snorted Trimble. Now he saw it was "no go." Trimble decided to be unpleasant. "Blessed if I know how I stand a rotten, clod-hopping cowboy off a blessed ranch in this study! You're out of place here, Wildrake, if you don't mind my saying so. Pushing outsider, I consider! Yarrooogh!"

Trimble sprang for the door as Wildrake grabbed his tennis-racket from the table and made a terrific swipe at him with it. It missed Trimble by inches—fortunately for Trimble. But it was unfortunate for Wildrake, who happened to be standing on one foot at the moment, his other foot being up on a chair while he tied his boot-lace.

Meeting with no resistance, the racket swept round, and Wildrake overbalanced and fell in the fireplace with a fearful crash and clatter.

Crash!

"He, he, he!"

At the doorway Trimble turned to bestow a gleeful glance at his hapless study-mate sprawling among the fireirons, and then he departed hurriedly, slamming the door after him.

"You pesky galoot!" roared Wildrake.

He scrambled up and rushed to the door, only to find that Baggy had made himself scarce. Mentally promising his study-mate

the licking of his life, Wildrake turned back into the study and closed the door.

Trimble had hidden in a doorway higher up the passage, but he emerged on making sure Wildrake was not on his track. The fat junior was more dismal than ever now. Wildrake's words having reminded him of the exam on the morrow, which was a nightmare to the lazy, fat youth. As a matter of fact, Trimble had very good reason to fear that exam, having been warned plainly enough by Mr. Lathom what to expect if he failed in it.

And Trimble had a dismal feeling that he was bound to do that.

But though he knew that Wildrake's advice to stay in that

afternoon and "swot" was wise advice. Trimble had no intention of taking it. Trimble did not like work—especially on a half-holiday—and though he had little hopes that the Head would be "taken ill," he cherished a dim and fatuous hope that somehow he would find a way to dodge the special exam.

At all events, Trimble wasn't going to worry his head about the danger now, serious as it was. Trimble was hungry—a much more important matter to worry about.

"Beast!" he mumbled dismally. "Catch me swotting on a half! Not likely! Like his cheek—Hallo! Here's that cad, Racke! I say, Aubrey, old man, I was just looking for you, old chap!"

"Well, here I am," said Racke unpleasantly as he came along the Fourth Form passage with Crooke and Scrope. "And here's my boot for having the dashed cheek to call me Aubrey, you fat, sponging toad!"

"Yaroooooh!" Trimble leaped away with a howl as Racke's elegantly-shod foot clumped home on his person. Racke, Crooke, and Scrope walked on, laughing. Trimble stood and rubbed himself and glared after them. There was evidently no chance of "wedging in" for the afternoon with Racke & Co.

But though hurt, Trimble had not lost hope. "The rotten cads!" he spluttered wrathfully. "I think I'll give Cardew's crowd a look-in. Not much good; but you never know, and I'm not jolly well being left out in the cold like this."

And Trimble rolled along to Study No. 9 and looked in. "I say, you fellows!" he exclaimed. "I hear you're going up river this afternoon. If you are—"

Trimble got no further than that. A cushion flew through the half-opened door, and, catching Trimble full in the face, sent him staggering backwards into the passage. He sat down on the linoleum with a heavy bump.

"Come back for another, dear man!" called Cardew from within.

Trimble did not go back for another. He scrambled up wrathfully, grabbed the cushion, and, without troubling to take aim, sent it whizzing back into the study.

There followed the crash of breaking glass, and three separate howls of wrath in the voices of Cardew, Clive, and Levison.

Trimble bolted for his life, scared now at what he had done. He stopped at length in the Shell passage, realising he was not pursued.

"Oh crumbs!" he groaned. "What rotten luck! Those three beasts will be after my blood now as well as Wildrake! I'm fed-up—absolutely fed-up! I wish—Hallo!"

Trimble paused. He was passing Grundy's study at the moment, and a casual glance through the open door showed him that the room was empty. It also showed him several paper bags and packages on the study table.

The sight of them brought a greedy gleam into Trimble's eyes. One of the paper bags had burst open, revealing a glimpse of jam-tarts inside, and Trimble had no doubt that the other bags and packages were crammed with tuck.

He gave a hasty glance about him, and then he entered the study stealthily. It really began to look as if his luck had changed at last!

And a swift examination of the bags and packages soon confirmed his suspicions. There were cream-buns and chocolate eclairs, custard-tarts, a whacking great cake, and several cakes of chocolate.

Trimble's eyes glistened. But the next moment he jumped in alarm as footsteps sounded outside, and then sounded a voice—Grundy's voice.

What he was saying Trimble neither knew nor cared.

He knew what to expect if he were found in the study by the heavy-handed George Alfred. He looked desperately about him. There was no cloth on the table, so he could not hide beneath it. But there was a couch across the corner of the room, and, grabbing a bag of tarts and a handful of cakes of chocolate, Trimble dived behind the couch and hoped for the best.

CHAPTER 2.

Trouble for Grundy & Co.!

GEORGE ALFRED GRUNDY marched into his study with his chum Wilkins at his heels. Like his study-mate, Grundy was looking in the best of health and spirits, and his rugged features wore a satisfied smile.

He had good reason to be cheery that bright afternoon, as it happened. That morning he had received a substantial remittance from his Uncle Grundy, and in his usual generous way, Grundy had decided to spend most of it on a really decent treat, and this was to take the form of a picnic up the river.

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Accordingly, he had not only ordered a specially prepared picnic-basket from a Rylcombe caterer, but he had supplemented this by extensive purchases from Mrs. Taggles at the school tuckshop.

Grundy was never a fellow to do things by halves. As was his usual wont when in funds, he had purchased recklessly and with a lofty disregard for expense. Indeed, the picnic-basket alone was likely to contain enough tuck to feed a dozen hungry youths.

Not being greedy fellows, Wilkins and Gunn had pointed this out to Grundy, and on their suggestion Grundy had agreed to ask other fellows to join them.

Leaving Gunn to take care of the stuff on the table, Grundy and Wilkins had paid a visit to Glyn's study with the kindly intention of inviting Glyn & Co. to join them. But Glyn and his chums were not at home, having just started off for Glyn House. The would-be benefactors had then looked in at Study No. 10—only to find the Terrible Three also conspicuous by their absence.

Not being a very patient fellow, Grundy had, after looking in at two more Shell studies and finding their occupants gone, dropped his philanthropic intentions for the moment and had returned with his chum to his own study, eager to be off.

"Ought to have thought of those other chaps earlier," Grundy remarked, as he entered the study. "Never mind, we'll bring what grub's left back and have a supper to-night with it. I—Hallo, where's that ass Gunny?"

And Grundy frowned. "The burbling idiot!" he snorted, glowering round the study. "Fancy the chump leaving the study with this lot on the table! Just like that careless ass! Why, that thieving rotter Trimble might easily have come and boned the lot of it!"

"Well, he hasn't, so what's it matter!" said Wilkins. "I expect—here he is!"

William Cuthbert Gunn entered the study at that moment. "Hallo!" he remarked. "Where's Glyn and the others—not coming?"

"Gone out," said Wilkins. "I fancy Glyn's gone home for the afternoon. But you were an ass to leave this stuff, Gunny!"

"A born idiot!" snorted Grundy, glaring at his chum. "Didn't I tell you to stop and look after it?"

"Sorry, Grundy, old chap!" said Gunn quite humbly. "But I had to run up to the dorm. Why, anybody been at it?"

"No, but somebody jolly well might have done!" grunted Grundy. "Supposing that fat scrounger Trimble had come along, you careless dummy! Anyway, shove this stuff in a cricket-bag or something and let's get off. Thompson's boy will be tired of waiting."

"Will he be waiting?" said Gunn.

"Of course he will," said Grundy. "Think he's ass enough to drop the blessed basket on the towpath and leave it there? Besides, he'll expect a tip. I told Thompson to tell his boy to be at the boathouse at two-fifteen; it's nearly that now. Jove, I could eat some of that ripping potted tongue now!"

"Is there potted tongue?" asked Wilkins eagerly.

"Yes—and boiled ham, and bloater-paste sandwiches, and a rabbit-pie—besides a fifteen-bob cake," grinned Grundy, consulting a tradesman's bill he held in his hand. "And there's three kinds of jam, some jellies, plenty of lemonade, and heaps of other things. I tell you it's going to be a record spread!"

"Oh, good!"

"Ripping!"

"We really shan't need this little lot," remarked Grundy with satisfaction, his eye running over the foodstuffs on the table. "Still, we may see some of the chaps up river and we'll ask 'em to join us."

"Good man!" agreed Wilkins, giving his burly chum a glance almost of affection. "You're a good sort, Grundy. Let's get off, then. Chuck over that cricket-bag, Gunny—it's in the corner there!"

"Right-ho!"

The cricket-bag stood on end against the wall in the corner—just behind the couch.

Gunn went behind the couch to get it, and the next moment his yell of amazement startled Grundy and Wilkins.

"What—what the—"

"Trimble!" howled Gunn.

"Oh dear!"

It was all up—Baggy Trimble saw that only too clearly. He jumped up from behind the couch and, dodging desperately, made a wild leap for the door.

"After him!" roared Grundy in a wild bellow.

Grundy wasn't very quick-witted—far from it; but the sudden sight of Baggy Trimble popping up, a bag of pastries under one fat arm, a cake of chocolate in another

fat hand, and a mouth smeared with jam and chocolates, was more than enough for him.

He made a jump to stop the fat raider. Trimble dodged his outstretched hand, eluded Gunn's clutching fingers by inches, and the next second he was through the door.

With him went the bag of tarts, and the chocolate; even in that desperate moment Trimble had no intention of losing

as he did so, however, he recognised Mr. Linton, his own Form master—who was scarcely likely to stop Trimble just to please him.

Yet Mr. Linton did stop the fleeing Trimble, though he obviously had not the slightest intention of doing so.

Half-way down the stairs the unlucky Trimble caught his foot in the carpet, tripped, and fell headlong, with a wild howl, tarts and chocolate accompanying him in a shower.

At that moment Mr. Linton was mounting the stairs slowly, his head bent, and apparently deep in thought. But at Trimble's wild howl he started and looked up, just as Trimble came hurtling down like an avalanche.

With remarkable agility for his years, Mr. Linton skipped aside, just avoiding the hurtling Trimble by a miracle. But



Baggy Trimble sprang for the door as Wildrake grabbed his tennis-racket from the table and made a terrific swipe. It missed Trimble by inches, and meeting with no resistance, swept round. Wildrake overbalanced, and fell in the fire-place with a fearful clatter. Crash! "He, he, he!" chuckled Baggy. (See Chapter 1.)

those good things. Whether he scoffed the tuck or not, he knew he was booked for a licking from Grundy & Co., and he did not intend to take a licking for nothing.

"After the fat rotter!" roared Grundy furiously. "My hat! He's got some of the grub after all. We'll teach the sweep to sneak our grub! After him!"

Grundy went out of the study like a thunderbolt, and Wilkins and Gunn went after him quickly enough. A few tarts and a few packets of chocolate scarcely mattered in view of the pile on the study table; but they knew better than to disobey their leader.

So they exchanged a grin and pelted after Grundy, while Grundy dashed after Trimble, his rugged features red with wrath. To George Alfred the tarts and chocolate were trifles light as air; but Trimble's nerve in daring to raid his study was a thing that could not possibly be overlooked.

Meanwhile, Trimble was running—running hard. And as he ran his fat brain worked overtime in a desperate effort to think of a suitable haven of refuge in his dire extremity. Baggy already had bellows to mend, and he knew that capture was certain—unless he found a place of safety.

He would have made for his own study had he been sure that Wildrake was not there. But he wasn't sure, and so he scudded right along the Fourth passage without stopping, and, reaching the head of the staircase, he fairly flew down the stairs.

"Stop, you fat villain!" roared Grundy. "Hi, stop that fat rascal! Oh, crikey!"

Grundy, just reaching the head of the staircase, had sighted somebody mounting the stairs, and gave a yell. Even

the sudden leap caused him to overbalance, and the next moment he sat down violently on the edge of a stair, and then he slid down after Trimble.

Crash! Crash!

Bump!

"Yarrooogh!"

Trimble howled fiendishly as he reached the mat at the bottom of the stairs, and he howled again as Mr. Linton arrived there, a fraction of a second later, and sprawled over him. It was extremely lucky that Trimble happened to be there—for Mr. Linton.

The next moment they were mixed up in a struggling heap on the mat, Trimble fairly roaring with anguish.

"Oh, my hat!"

"Great Scott! That's done it!"

It undoubtedly had. Had they had their wits about them Grundy, Wilkins, and Gunn might possibly have made themselves scarce just then and have escaped.

But they were too scared at the sudden tragedy even to think. They blinked down over the banisters for a brief moment, and then Grundy led the way down hurriedly to the master's aid.

"Now for it!" murmured Wilkins, in dismay. "Oh, dear!"

Between them they helped the gasping and dazed master to his feet. Trimble still sprawled, groaning.

"Are—are you hurt, sir?" mumbled Gunn.

It was really a superfluous question—an absurd question, in the circumstances. Undoubtedly the master of the Shell was hurt; his feelings at that moment were little short of homicidal.

"Oh!" he gasped. "Ow! Good heavens! Ow!"

He stood, panting and gasping, his gown torn and rumpled, with a squashed cake of chocolate and two jam-tarts adhering to it like decorations.

"Of course I am—Pouf!—hurt, boy!" he gasped, at last, his voice rising in his wrath and indignation. "I am very much hurt—"

"Ow! Oh, dear!" groaned Trimble. "I'm nearly killed! Groooogh! Ow-wow!"

"You utterly careless boy!" gasped Mr. Linton angrily. "How dare you descend the stairs in that dangerous manner?"

Trimble gave a breathless and indignant snort.

"How could I help it?" he groaned, staggering to his feet and rubbing himself dismally. "Those beasts were after me, and then I tripped, and fell down the stairs!"

"It—it seems to have been an accident, sir!" murmured Gunn meekly.

"It was nothing of the kind, Gunn!" hooted Mr. Linton, bestowing a glare on Grundy & Co. "I think I understand now. Your outrageous behaviour has resulted in an accident, which might have resulted in serious injury to myself. Do you deny that you were chasing Trimble?"

"Ahem! You—you see, sir—"

"Were you chasing Trimble?" almost bellowed Mr. Linton.

"Ye-e-es, sir. You see, sir—"

"I refuse to listen to any excuses!" stormed the master of the Shell. "You admit that you were chasing this wretched junior, and I hold you responsible for the accident. I—I am very much shaken and hurt, and your punishment will be severe."

"Oh, sir!"

"You had no right to rush about the school in that manner," snapped Mr. Linton. "It is against the rules, and is most dangerous to others. You will go to your Form-room and remain there until four o'clock!"

"Oh! Oh, dear!"

"But, sir—"

"Oh, really, sir—"

"It's a half-holiday, sir—"

"Silence! That should have occurred to you before," snorted Mr. Linton, waving his hand. "Go to your Form-room at once. Presently I will come to you and set you tasks to occupy you for the afternoon."

"But, sir—"

"Really, sir—"

"Not a word! Go!"

"But, dash it all, sir—" gasped Grundy warmly.

"You hear me?" thundered Mr. Linton, pointing along the passage. "Go! Go to your Form-room this instant!"

"But, sir—"

"Go!"

It was a roar, and, with ferocious glares at Trimble, Grundy & Co. went. There was nothing else for it. On occasion the master of the Shell could be a regular Hun; and this was obviously one of the occasions.

Grundy & Co. groaned, and almost tottered away, seething with dismay. The afternoon was mucked up completely. No pleasant pull up the sunlit river, with a gorgeous feed to follow. Only an afternoon's grind in a stuffy Form-room, and, possibly, a licking in addition!

For Mr. Linton was undoubtedly waxy—very waxy indeed! And it was hardly to be wondered at. Mr. Linton was not a young man, and for a gentleman of his years even a simple slide downstairs was no light matter.

Moreover, his dignity had suffered severely. It was no wonder he was waxy, and Grundy & Co. could scarcely blame him.

But they blamed Baggy Trimble, and their remarks, as they wended their weary way to the Shell Form-room were ferocious towards the fat youth.

Trimble read the threats of the wrath to come in their glares, and he shivered. Wildrake, Cardew & Co., and now Grundy & Co.! His luck was certainly out that afternoon.

A licking from Wildrake was bad enough, and a licking from Cardew, Levison, and Clive was much worse.

And now he was booked for another licking from Grundy & Co.—an even more terrifying prospect.

But he hadn't finished with Mr. Linton yet.

As Grundy & Co. departed Mr. Linton gave Trimble a look—a look that made Trimble quake.

"I intend to punish those three boys for their outrageous behaviour, Trimble," he snapped.

"Oh! Ye-e-es, sir!" mumbled Trimble. "I'm really badly hurt, sir. They—they might have killed both of us, sir. You—you can see it wasn't my fault, sir."

"I see nothing of the kind, Trimble. I have no doubt you were the prime cause of the accident in the first place."

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I am well aware of your disgusting habit of purloining foodstuffs, and I strongly suspect that Grundy, Wilkins, and Gunn were pursuing you with good reason."

"Oh, sir!" Trimble spoke reproachfully.

"Yes, indeed!" snapped the master. "I intend to investigate the matter, and if you are in any way to blame I shall request Mr. Lathom, your Form master, to cane you most severely."

With that Mr. Linton limped away. Trimble glared after him and groaned.

"Old beast!" he mumbled. "Can't take a fellow's word that it wasn't my fault. Oh, crumbs! He's bound to find out, and that means a certain licking for me. It's rotten!"

And Trimble groaned in bitterness of spirit. But the sight of the tarts and chocolate on the stairs had a cheering effect. Moreover, his aches and pains were growing less acute now, and he realised his back wasn't broken, after all.

"Beasts!" he mumbled. "They're all beasts! Anyway, as I'm booked for a licking for pinching these rotten tarts and things, I may as well have 'em!"

And, gathering up what was left of the tarts and chocolate scattered about the stairs, Trimble stuffed his pockets and hurried back to the Shell passage. His worried look was gone now and he was looking quite cheery, whilst his little eyes gleamed greedily. It had suddenly dawned on Trimble that Fate, whilst dealing Grundy & Co. a knock-down blow, had placed the chance of a lifetime in his hands.

Grundy & Co. were prisoners in their Form-room, and they would never dare to leave it without permission—especially with Mr. Linton in such a terrific rage. Baggy had the grub in Study No. 3 at his mercy.

Nor was that all.

There was the picnic-basket to be considered—the basket containing the potted tongue and ham and three kinds of jam, etc. The thought of it all almost took Trimble's breath away.

Thompson's boy—the caterer's errand-boy—would be waiting with the basket at the boathouse. Should he wait in vain?

Consideration for others was not one of Trimble's good points; but he could not bear the thought of Mr. Thompson's errand-boy waiting with that heavy basket for hours on the river-bank in vain.

It must not be—Trimble had already decided upon that. It was a daring, dazzling project. Trimble often did amazingly daring things where grub was concerned. The solid fact was that Trimble never allowed himself to see the risky side—or to dwell upon it, at all events. He rarely troubled to look ahead into the future, preferring to make the most of the present and leaving unpleasant possibilities to take care of themselves.

That Grundy & Co. would most certainly hold him responsible if anything happened to the grub was a dimly seen possibility to Trimble. But he wasn't going to dwell on that. Besides, if he was booked for a licking from Grundy & Co.—and he undoubtedly was—he might just as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb. "In for a penny, in for a pound," was Trimble's motto—and one that very often got him into serious trouble.

But he was determined to act up to the motto now. Rarely had such a gorgeous chance come Trimble's way, and he was determined to make the most of it.

None the less, he could not entirely ignore that uncomfortable feeling that Grundy & Co. would know he was the culprit if anything happened to their grub. And as Trimble was determined that something should happen to it, he could not help seeing the risk.

"They'll be out at about four o'clock," mused Trimble: "and I'd better take precautions, I think. They're bound to go after the basket, and then after me. They're such suspicious rotters! I—I think I'd better get somebody else in on this. But I'll make sure of that stuff in the study first."

With this intention uppermost, Baggy hurried along to his own study and peeped cautiously inside. Then he grinned. The study was empty. Mellish, he had known, was out; now Wildrake had gone.

Clucking at his luck, Baggy scudded along to Grundy's study and hurriedly packed the bags and packages of tuck into the cricket bag. Then, after making quite sure the coast was clear, he carried the bag hastily along to his own study in the Fourth.

Here, behind a locked door, Baggy started operations on a selection of the good things, the while he thought his problem out. He ate and thought at express speed. By the time he had eaten half the grub Baggy had reached a satisfactory decision.

"That's it!" he muttered at length, wiping his jammy face with a dingy handkerchief. "I'll get those chaps from Study No. 6 to join in the spread. I know they're stony; they'll jump at it. And after they've had the feed they'll jolly well see Grundy doesn't start any games. They're bound to

back a chap in their own Form up—especially after he's stood them such a really decent spread. That's it! Blake's lot will jolly soon put that beast Grundy in his place. Besides, if Grundy's right, that basket will be too jolly heavy for me to shift alone. My hat! That's the dodge! Blake and his lot often raid grub from those New House chaps. So why shouldn't they raid it from Grundy?"

And, coming to the conclusion that enough time had passed, Trimble stopped his inroads on the tuck, and took from his pocket a crumpled scrap of paper. It was Grundy's receipted bill from the Rylcombe caterer's—a bill that Grundy had left on his study table and that Trimble had taken charge of for reasons of his own.

With a piece of indiarubber from his desk Baggy rapidly erased Grundy's name at the head of the bill, and scribbled down his own, copying the handwriting on the bill. This done, he pocketed the account again and hurried along to Study No. 6 in the Fourth passage.

Baggy's programme was quite settled now. If trouble followed—as it undoubtedly would—he would not be blamed alone. Moreover, Blake & Co. were not the fellows to stand any nonsense from Grundy. They would soon put the mighty George Alfred in his place—and, incidentally, guard the precious skin of Baggy Trimble.

Baggy fondly imagined so, at all events.

CHAPTER 3. Generous Trimble!

"WELL," asked Blake anxiously, "how much does that come to? Not much, I'll bet!"

"Wathah not! About two shillin's, at most," said Arthur Augustus dismally. "Bai Jove! It is vewy styng and unforch, that we should all be so vewy hard-up at the same time, you know."

"It comes to just one-and-elevenpence!" grunted Tom Merry, after a brief calculation. "That's not counting Digby's bad penny, of course."

"Wotten!" said Arthur Augustus. "It is rotten!" agreed Tom Merry, with a rueful grin. "We came along hoping Gussy had had a fiver or something from home."

"No such luck!" grunted Jack Blake. "As usual, Gussy's let us down badly."

"Bai Jove! Weally, Blake, I fail to see how I can be held responsible for my patah havin' failed to send along a wemittance, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus warmly.

"Well, it can't be helped," said Tom Merry. "It's just bad luck that we should all be stony just at once. So the picnic at the old castle at Wayland is off, chaps. You can't have much of a picnic on one-and-elevenpence."

"Hardly!" chuckled Herries. "Why not take old Towser out for a run?"

"And I'll bring my camera," said Manners.

"Rats! It means tea in Hall, whatever we do!" grunted Blake. "I vote we go for a stroll in Rylcombe woods and get back in time for tea."

"I plump for a row on the river," said Lowther.

"What about a footer practice?" suggested the captain of the Shell.

"Grooh!" snorted Blake. "Great Scott! Who wants footer practice on a day like this? Rot!"

"Heah, heah! I wathah fancy Lowthah's suggestion is the best, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus. "A boat on the vivah, bai Jove! That's the pwogwamme!"

"Well, it's not a bad way of spending the afternoon, after all," said Tom, trying to speak cheerfully. "But—Hallo! Outside, Trimble!"

Baggy Trimble grinned and rolled into the study. His fat face was shiny and cheery.

"Trimble's come to invite us to a feed somewhere," remarked Lowther humorously. "Good man, Trimble! Where is it—at Trimble Hall, or Trimble Towers, or the Tower of London?"

There was a chuckle, but Trimble did not seem to mind. He grinned round him cheerfully.

"You're right on the nail, Lowther, old man!" he said calmly. "You chaps got anything on?"

"We've all got our boots on, or shoes," said Blake, showing the toe of his right shoe suggestively. "When I say, 'Three!' let Trimble have 'em, chaps!"

"Yes, rather!"

"Here, hold on!" gasped Trimble, in alarm, as Blake made a move towards him. "I mean what I say, you silly ass! I've come to ask you fellows to my picnic up-river."

"Eh? You've whatter?"

"Come to ask you fellows to my picnic," repeated Trimble, with lofty dignity. "The fact is I'm in funds, you fellows. My uncle—my Uncle George, the vice-admiral, you know—sent me a whacking remittance this morning, and I've decided to let my chief pals join me in a jolly old picnic up-river."

"Bai Jove!"

"Thompson's chap's waiting with the basket down at the boathouse," said Trimble; "so buck up if you're coming! It's a whacking great basket—heaps of ripping grub in it. My Uncle Henry always turns up trumps, and his cheque was a bit bigger than usual."

"My hat! I thought it was your Uncle George?"

"My Uncle George Henry; we sometimes call him George and sometimes Henry, you see," explained Trimble calmly. "In the Army he's known as G. H. T. He's no end popular, you know."

"Is he in both the Navy and Army?" chuckled Lowther. "Go it, Baggy, let's have some more whoppers!"

"D-did I say Army?" said Trimble. "I mean Navy, of course. What does that matter, anyway?" went on Trimble temptingly. "Wait till you see that picnic-basket, you fellows—enough to make your mouths water, I can tell you!"

"You awful fibber—"

"Potted tongue," said Trimble, "ham galore, three kinds of jam, and jellies, custard-tarts, and jam-tarts, chocolate eclairs, and cream-buns, sausage-rolls, and rabbit-pie, besides a whacking fifteen-bob cake; ginger-pop and lemonade—oceans of it! Well, what about it?"

Tom Merry & Co. stared at Trimble. Trimble certainly had succeeded in making their mouths water. But that was all. How Trimble, the most impetuous and selfish fellow in the School House, could expect them to swallow such a yarn was beyond them. Why he was making such a startling offer was a mystery.

"You—you fat ass!" roared Blake. "Don't come here with your silly fibs! What's the game?"

"Yaas, wathah! I considah the aggwavatin' wotfah deserves a thowough bumpin'!" said Arthur Augustus.

"He's made me feel hungrier than ever," groaned Herries, glaring at the grinning fat youth. "Bump him!"

"Here, hold on, you fellows," gasped Trimble. "It's the truth, I tell you. Look at that. It's the receipt for the grub that's waiting for us now at the boathouse."

And Trimble displayed to view Grundy's receipt. Tom Merry stared at it and gasped aloud as he ran his eye down the list of good things, and then saw the name of Trimble at the top of the bill-head.

"Well, I'm blowed!" he gasped. "Blessed if the fat ass isn't speaking the truth!"

The rest of the juniors crowded round and looked at the bill. Trimble chuckled.

"Well, what about it now?" he grinned. "Blessed if I can see why you fellows couldn't believe a chap in the first place. And I might tell you that ain't all the grub, either. I've got a cricket-bag crammed full of tuck in my study."

"He—he must have been robbing the tuckshop," said Lowther faintly.

"But this is genuine enough," said Tom Merry, frowning as he looked at Trimble's cheery, jammy face. "It beats me."

"Time's going," said Trimble. "I've asked you chaps first, because you're my chief pals. If you don't want to come, just say so, though, and I'll soon get somebody else to join me. It's all the same to me—plenty of chaps will be jolly glad to come, I can tell you."

"Let's see the stuff in the cricket-bag first, Baggy," said Tom Merry, eyeing the fat youth grimly and curiously. "If you're really standing a spread, then we're ready to join in, old fat man. After all, you've had many a feed at our expense, generally without our permission."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus, with a chuckle.

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IF YOU MISS IT YOU'LL
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"Twimble owes us more feeds than any other fellow at St. Jim's."

"I don't like Trimble personally," said Blake. "I think he's a greedy little toad and a sneaking little worm. But if he's seriously offering us a chance to join in a picnic, and if it's his picnic, then I'm willing to be kind to him and come."

There was a chuckle, and Trimble glared.

"You silly ass!" he hooted. "I'm serious about this, and we're wasting time. Grundy might—I mean—"

"Eh! What's that?" asked Tom Merry sharply.

"Nothing. I was just going to say that Grundy and his pals would be jolly glad to come if you fellows won't," said Trimble. "Thompson's man will be waiting. I ordered the stuff to be at the boathouse at two-fifteen. It's jolly near that now! Are you on or not, you silly asses?"

"Yes, we're on," grinned Tom Merry. "It seems genuine enough this time, chaps. Wonders will never cease. Trimble is being generous for once, and who are we, fellows without a bean between us, to turn his kind offer down?"

"Good old Trimble!" said Blake. "We'll overlook his faults for this afternoon only, and we'll accept his invitation. Lead on, Baggy."

"And if it turns out to be a spoof," remarked Lowther grimly, "we'll give him the licking of his life."

Trimble failed to hear that remark, for he was already walking out, his fat little nose in the air. It was a new experience for Baggy Trimble to be the founder of a feed of any kind, and, like the frog in the fable, he was swelling almost visibly with importance. He led the way to his own study, and Tom Merry & Co. followed. In the present state of financial shortage they could not afford to pick and choose their hosts.

But even yet they were a bit suspicious, and it was not until they reached Study No. 2 and saw the contents of the cricket-bag that they were at last convinced that Baggy's invitation was genuine.

"Well, that's good enough," remarked Tom Merry, cheering up wonderfully at sight of the tuck. "Good man, Trimble! I think we ought to take back all we've said. Hallo!" Tom Merry broke off, his eyes fixed on the bag. "My hat, d'you know you've got Grundy's cricket-bag, Trimble? It's got his initials on, anyway."

"That's all right!" said Trimble hastily. "I borrowed it from him."

"Without his knowledge, I bet," chuckled Lowther.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I did," said Trimble, feeling it wiser to admit that. Even Trimble realised that Grundy was the last fellow in the world to loan him a cricket-bag. "You—you see, it was in here; he must have lent it to Wil Drake at some time or other."

"Oh!"

The explanation was reasonable and quite satisfied Tom Merry & Co. Their sudden suspicion disappeared. Once again Baggy's fertile imagination had saved him. And three minutes later Baggy Trimble, his fat features beaming with satisfaction and anticipation, was leading the way down to the boathouse, with Tom Merry and Blake carrying the cricket-bag between them. It was going to be a jolly afternoon, after all, and the juniors had regained their usually bright and cheery expressions. As the founder of the feed, Baggy Trimble had risen considerably in Tom Merry & Co.'s estimation, though whether he was likely to remain so was a question that only the future could answer.

CHAPTER 4.

Trouble!

"THERE'S one thing—"

Baggy Trimble paused as the party came in sight of the boathouse. As a matter of fact, Trimble was beginning to get rather thoughtful.

He was fairly "booked" for the adventure now, and, despite his cheery optimism, he could not help feeling qualms as he thought of Grundy & Co. Moreover, it was quite possible that Grundy, on discovering his loss, might report the matter to Mr. Linton or Mr. Railton. And as Trimble was the only fellow to know about the basket, it was rather a disturbing thought in the circumstances.

But at the moment Trimble was thinking chiefly of the danger of Grundy & Co. following at four o'clock.

"Well?" demanded Tom Merry, eyeing Trimble curiously and a trifle suspiciously.

"There's one thing," said Trimble. "I hope you fellows understand that I shall expect you to back me up if—if we happen to be raided, you know."

"Raided!" ejaculated Tom. "Who the thump's likely to raid us, you fat ass?"

"You never know," said Trimble, shaking his head. "There's those New House rotters, you know, and the Grammarians. If they've got to know somehow of my whacking great picnic-basket, they might easily try to raid it mightn't they?"

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"Well, that's possible," laughed Tom Merry. "But you needn't worry about that, old fat man. We'll see they don't get it."

"Yaas, wathah! Don't wowwy, Twimble, deah boy!"

"And there's other fellows, you know," went on Trimble cautiously. "Plenty of fellows would want the grub if they knew about it, wouldn't they? Supposing now that that beast Grundy came along and tried to raid it?"

"He'd jolly well get it in the neck if he did," said Blake, all unsuspiciously. "My hat! We'd watch it!"

"Grundy wouldn't try, in any case," grinned Tom.

"Still, you never know," said Baggy. "If such a thing did happen I should expect you fellows to back me up, of course. If Grundy should happen to come along after my grub, sling the cad in the river, you fellows. Don't put up with any nonsense, you know."

"Not much!" chuckled Tom Merry.

"Bai Jove. Wathah not, Twimble! Don't wowwy about Gwunday, deah boy!"

Trimble chuckled inwardly, knowing that his guests did not dream of the truth. It was only natural, they thought, that a fellow who rarely—if ever—was in funds or possessed a supply of grub of his own should be a bit nervous about it.

And if Tom Merry & Co. had had any trace of suspicion it went as they arrived at the boathouse and found a youth there with a truck and a huge hamper on it.

Trimble hurried over to him, and the youth touched his cap.

"Hallo," said Trimble, before the youth could speak, "that my picnic-basket from Thompson's? Dump it down here, kid."

He showed the villager the receipted bill, with his thumb carefully covering the name, and then turned hastily to Tom Merry & Co.

"Any of you chaps got a bob?" he asked. "I want to tip this chap. I'll square when we get in to-night."

The juniors fumbled in their pockets. Tom Merry produced a sixpence, Blake a threepenny-bit, and the rest made the ninnence up to a shilling. Trimble handed the tip to the youth, who touched his cap again and went off whistling, wheeling his truck over the cinders.

Trimble drew a deep breath of relief. The last danger—for the time being—was past.

"Don't forget to remind me about that bob, you fellows!" he said firmly. "I insist that all expenses on this little outing shall be put down to little me!"

"Bai Jove! Weally, you are quite impwovin', Twimble!"

"What silly ass said the age of miracles was past?" asked Monty Lowther. "Can the leopard change his spots? The answer is that he can! It's just been done!"

"Oh, really, Lowther, you don't seem very grateful, I must say!" said Trimble. "But get a move on, you fellows! Time's going, you know! Get the boat out, while I look after the hamper and see all's in order!"

"We ought to have two boats," said Lowther. "One for us and the hamper, and one—a barge would be best—for our honoured host!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But another boat was not really necessary. There were plenty of boats to choose from, and the juniors chose the largest. This was necessary, for eight fellows was rather a cargo without the hamper, especially with a fellow like Trimble aboard.

And though the boat chosen was a very roomy one, there was little space left when the juniors pushed off.

"Sink or swim, we're out now, chaps!" said Blake, with a chuckle. "Think it would be safer to chuck Trimble overboard and tow him behind?"

"It'd be safer," agreed Tom Merry. "Is the grub all correct, Baggy?"

Baggy nodded and chuckled. He had opened the basket whilst the boat was being launched and had a look inside. It was not to look at the grub, but to make quite sure that Grundy's name did not appear in the hamper anywhere. He had already surreptitiously removed the label from it—the label none of the juniors had thought of looking at.

So Trimble chuckled and nodded cheerily. All danger was past now, and everything in the garden was lovely. Tom Merry & Co. had agreed to defend the tuck—and likewise his precious skin—from Grundy & Co. should they turn up, and Trimble knew the juniors would keep their word. True, there were still little worries at the back of his mind—thoughts of the trouble in store for him on his return to St. Jim's—but he was resolved to enjoy the present for all that.

"Well, you look chirpy enough, old fat man!" grinned Tom Merry. "Have you forgotten about the exam to-morrow? You'd have done better by swotting all this afternoon, Baggy."

"Blow the exam!" said Trimble carelessly.

"The Head's got you marked, I believe!" said Tom. "Everybody knows you're for it if you don't pass, old chap!"



The juniors arrived at the boat-house to find a youth waiting there with a truck and a huge hamper. Baggy Trimble hurried over to him. "Hallo," he said, before the youth could speak, "is that my hamper from Thompson's? Dump it down there, kid!" (See Chapter 4.)

"A flogging, at least!" said Blake cheerfully. "The Head said your last papers were a disgrace to a fag in the Third!"

"Oh crumbs!" said Trimble, his cheerfulness deserting him. "I say, d'you think it will be a flogging? I—I'm bound to fail—I know I shall! I've got to wangle out of the exam somehow, you fellows! Think it's any good going sick?" asked Trimble anxiously.

"No good at all!" said Tom Merry. "The beak would spot the game at once! You see, he knows you, Baggy!"

"Oh dear!"

"Bai Jove! Pway don't wowwy the poor chap, deah boys!" said Arthur Augustus considerably. "Twimble's undoubtedly for it to-morrow, so why let him go through the lickin' in imagination to-day as well?"

"Well, there's something in that!" agreed Tom, with a chuckle. "That's the game, Baggy! Now you are here, eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow your giddy number's up!"

"It's nothing to laugh at!" said Trimble. "Not that I mind!" he added carelessly. "Blow the exam, and blow the Head!"

And Baggy commenced operations on a slab of chocolate as if to show how little he cared. On the gleaming river it was very warm, and the chums took things easy, Tom Merry, Arthur Augustus, and Blake being at the sculls. Only Baggy seemed at all in haste to reach a suitable resting-place.

"I say, buck up, you fellows!" he grumbled. "Blessed if I couldn't do better than that rowing backwards!"

"Come and take a hand, then, Fatty!" said Tom Merry, pausing to wipe beads of perspiration from his glistening forehead. "Jove, it's warm!"

"Yaas, wathah! It is wathah hot work, deah boys! Come along, Twimble, and take a hand!"

"Catch me!" snorted Trimble, with his mouth full. "I must say you fellows expect a dashed lot from the fellow who's standing this treat!"

But Trimble grumbled no more, possibly in fear of being made to take a hand at the sculls if he did. The boat slid on upstream between wooded banks and grassy slopes, the rippling stream dancing and splashing musically past the sides of the boat. All the juniors looked hot by this time, while Trimble's face, showing plentiful traces of the chocolate, was rapidly resembling a nigger minstrel's.

Trimble, despite his inward qualms, was enjoying the present as much as he could. The boat glided and rocked onwards past dozens of other craft from the school boat-house that were tied up beneath overhanging willows or hauled high and dry on shelving banks, where fellows passed the afternoon away lazily.

Several times Tom Merry had suggested a suitable stopping-place, but Trimble objected each time. He seemed very anxious to put as big a distance as possible between the boat and St. Jim's.

And his word was law for once, the fat Fourth-Former being, so to speak, the founder of the feast. But he called a halt at last, and pointed to a thickly-wooded bank.

"That's the place for us, you fellows!" he said cheerily. "Get right deep into the woods, you know."

"My hat! But that's Captain Jackson's estate! It belongs to the Priory, you fat ass, and it's out of bounds!"

As he spoke Tom Merry stared curiously at Trimble. Why Baggy Trimble, the biggest funk at St. Jim's, should wish to trespass on forbidden ground when there were plenty of other places to choose from was a mystery to him.

"What rot!" said Trimble airily. "Safer there, you know!"

"Eb? How the thump can it be safer, fathead?"

"I mean, more—more fun, you know," Trimble hastened to explain. "You fellows don't know me yet! I'm a regular goer! No funk about me when I'm out on the spree! Anyway, I'm boss on this outing, and what I say goes! We're having the picnic in the woods there!"

"Oh, all right!" grinned Tom Merry. "Not much risk, really. Captain Jackson's a decent sort, and he's only afraid of fellows scaring his pheasants."

"Won't object to a picnic party, anyway," said Blake. "It's jolly nice and shady in the woods there, and I vote we risk being spotted."

"Yaas, wathah!" agreed Arthur Augustus rather doubtfully. "No good goin' back, and we've come quite far enough."

And as that seemed to be the general feeling, the boat was brought inshore under the overhanging bank, edged with shady willows.

Herries tied the painter to the gnarled trunk of a willow. "Hold on!" said Trimble rather nervously. "Better hide the boat!"

"What rot! Won't be seen here by anybody passing," said Tom Merry. "It's only prefects we've got to look out for, ass!"

"Besides, you're such a daring chap—a regular goer!" grinned Blake. "Just the fellow to take risks!"

"When he's out on the spree!" chuckled Digby.

"I—I say, you fellows, I—I— Oh, all right, then!"

Trimble decided to say no more; he felt it safer. Perhaps even if Grundy did happen to come along, he might fail to see the boat, after all. And, in any case, there were enough at hand to deal with the burly George Alfred, though the fat schemer wondered rather how Tom Merry & Co. would take it when they learned the facts. It was just possible the juniors might not look at things as he did.

But he had to risk that. So he scrambled out of the rocking boat, and the rest followed, landing the tuck hamper as they did so. It was carried well inland into the thick, shady trees until Trimble called a halt in a grassy clearing well hidden from the river.

"Might be expecting the blessed keepers to come from the giddy river!" chuckled Blake, eyeing Trimble's fat face rather keenly. "Blessed if I can understand the fat ass to-day!"

"Oh, really, Blake—"

"Buck up!" said Herries warmly. "I'm hungry!"

They were all hungry, especially Trimble, though he had been scoffing chocolate greedily all the way up, and had already eaten enough for half a dozen teas. The cloth was laid on the grass, and soon the good things were being taken from the basket and placed on the cloth. The juniors' eyes glistened, and their mouths watered as they saw the delicious tuck.

"Ripping!" said Blake.

"Tophole!" said Herries. "Good man, Trimble! If you've chosen this little lot you've got good taste, old fat man!"

"Not bad, is it?" said Trimble carelessly, glancing over the goodly spread. "I see they haven't forgotten the rabbit-pie or the tongue or the ham! I insisted they should send along a good supply of decent stuff! The jellies and jam look good, too! Got the cricket-bag? Good! Put the stuff out and pile in, chaps!"

"What-ho!"

And the chaps were just about to "pile in" when a sudden shout came from the direction of the river—a decidedly wrathful roar in a well-known voice. It was followed by the crashing of approaching footsteps.

Trimble leaped to his feet like a jack-in-a-box. His fat face paled. He had recognised that voice. The next moment three familiar forms crashed out from the trees. The juniors jumped up, fearing a raid. They stared as they recognised three figures racing towards them.

"Grundy!" gasped Tom Merry. "What the thump—"

"Oh—oh dear!" gasped Trimble, his fat knees almost knocking together. "I—I say, it's Grundy, you know. He's after my grub, I believe. I say, remember your promise, back me up!"

And Trimble hurriedly got behind Tom Merry, his fat face full of apprehension. The trouble he had feared had arrived, though it had arrived much sooner than he had anticipated. And Trimble wondered very apprehensively whether that trouble was to be for him or for Grundy & Co.

CHAPTER 5.

Grundy is Wrathful!

"BACK up, chaps!" called Tom Merry cheerily.

"Stand by to repel boarders!" chuckled Lowther.

"I've got a sort of an idea that dear old Grundy is going to explain the full meaning of Baggy's sudden affluence and generosity."

"My hat!"

Tom Merry jumped. Lowther's meaning dawned upon his mind in an illuminating flash. His suspicions regarding the whole surprising affair returned with a rush, and he gave Trimble's fat, scared face a sudden glance.

"Trimble, you worm—"

"I—I say, you fellows!" gasped Trimble. "Remember your promise, you know. I keep you to your promise. You said if Grundy tried to raid us you'd back me up—you know you did!"

"Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus, with a start.

"Weally, Twimble—"

"Back up!" gasped Trimble desperately. "He'll be here in a sec, and he's bound to go for me, being the founder of the feast, you know. He may say the grub belongs to him. Don't listen to him, you fellows. Just collar him and sling him into the river!"

"Ha, ha ha!" roared Lowther. "Can't you fellows see it now? Oh crumbs! Look out!"

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Deeply suspicious of Trimble as they were now, Tom Merry & Co. were taking no risks. They lined up as Grundy came pounding up. Had the feast been over, with most of the good things inside him, Baggy Trimble would doubtless have bolted for his life just then, so ferocious was Grundy's aspect. But the grub was still there to be eaten, and Trimble did not mean to lose it after all the trouble he had taken. He had great hopes that Tom Merry & Co. would still "back up," though their looks now made him very uneasy indeed.

"Here he comes!" called Lowther.

Grundy came up, his red and perspiring face showing his feelings only too plainly.

"You beastly, sneaking cads!" he roared. "Trimble, you fat burglar, I'm going to smash you into mince meat, and then I'm going to lick you all round."

"Oh dear! I say, you fellows, he's after the grub. Don't let him pass!"

"Mop 'em up, you chaps!" bellowed Grundy.

Then Grundy charged, but he charged alone. Wilkins and Gunn, angry as they undoubtedly were, had no intention of leading a forlorn hope against redoubtable fighting-men who outnumbered them by more than two to one.

They halted, panting and breathless, as they came up. But Grundy was a fellow who never counted numbers, or asked for explanations first. He charged like a mad bull for Trimble.

But Trimble was safe enough for the present, hiding, as he was, behind Tom Merry and Blake and Herries. In a flash Grundy was collared, and he came down to earth with a bump in the grasp of Tom Merry & Co.

The next moment Grundy and Tom Merry were rolling over and over, with Blake and the others trying in vain to get a look in, as it were.

"Oh dear!" gasped Trimble. "Hold him, chaps—hold the rotter! Collar him and sling him into the river!"

Trimble was like a cat on hot bricks in his anxiety to save Grundy & Co. off the scene before his precious scheme collapsed like a pack of cards.

The fact that Tom Merry & Co. had collared Grundy was a very comforting start to the proceedings, at all events. It was nothing like four o'clock yet, and how Grundy had arrived so early was as surprising as it was unfortunate.

The explanation was simple enough had he only known it. Mr. Linton, though somewhat quick-tempered, was not a bad-hearted little gentleman. And, after having changed his gown and removed all signs of his encounter with Baggy Trimble, he had felt better and had cooled down considerably. And when he made his way to the Shell Form room and saw the dismal, dispirited faces of Grundy & Co. his heart smote him.

It was a glorious day, far too sunny and bright for three of his pupils to spend the afternoon in a dusty, gloomy Form-room. That much Mr. Linton could not help feeling. And when Grundy & Co. explained why they had been chasing Baggy Trimble his wrath evaporated still more.

Their explanation had been just what he had suspected, knowing Trimble's character as he did. And, after lecturing the three juniors severely on the crime of rushing about corridors, Mr. Linton had given them a mild imposition to do for him before morning, and then dismissed them.

Naturally, Grundy & Co. were delighted at the turn of events, but their joy was tempered by the fear that Trimble had made the most of his opportunity, and with one accord they had rushed to their study, fearing the worst.

Their fears were soon proved to be only too well-founded. Every scrap of the grub purchased from Mrs. Taggles had vanished. And a hasty search had soon shown them that Trimble had likewise disappeared.

In his towering wrath George Alfred had felt inclined to turn St. Jim's upside-down in a search for the fat Fourth-Former; but his chums' counsels prevailed, for once. As Wilkins pointed out, it was pretty useless hunting now; and, in any case, Trimble would have wolfed the grub by that time.

Besides, Wilkins and Gunn were hungry, and there was still the picnic-basket containing the main part of the picnic.

A reminder about the basket had persuaded Grundy to leave Trimble to it, and they had hurried down to the boathouse, only Grundy himself being still wrathful.

But when they reached the boathouse, and made the startling discovery that the basket was missing, even Wilkins and Gunn lost their indifference on the subject of Trimble. From the school boatman they learned that the basket had been there, and that "Master Trimble" and several other juniors had gone up-river with it.

The news was staggering. Knowing Trimble as they did, they had scarcely dreamed of such a thing. The sheer "cheek" of such a daring raid took their combined breath away.

That Tom Merry & Co. had aided and abetted the fat youth in purloining the hamper was amazing, also. It was

the last thing they had expected of Tom Merry & Co. But it filled Grundy & Co. with burning rage, and they had rushed out a boat and gone up-stream fairly seething with fury and indignation.

With Wilkins and Gunn wrenching at the sculls, and Grundy steering, the boat fairly whizzed along, Grundy's eyes on the look-out for Tom Merry & Co.'s boat, the name of which the boatman had given him.

Craft after craft Grundy's glittering eyes had scanned, and the three were just beginning to fear they had missed it somehow when Grundy sighted it under the shade of the willow-tree.

As Tom Merry had said, it was scarcely likely to be seen by anyone going casually past, but it was easily visible to anyone on the look-out for it.

And Grundy saw it, and the next minute their boat was rushing at the bank. There it was hastily fastened, and the three furious Shell fellows leaped ashore and started the hunt.

That hunt had been brief but successful, and now here they were with the purloined hamper under their very nose.

It was really no wonder that Grundy did not stop to count the odds or ask for explanations.

"I'll teach you to pinch my hamper, you rotten cads!" he bellowed, struggling furiously. "Leggo! Lemme get at that fat thief first, you rotters, then I'll smash the lot of you! Take that!"

"Yarroogh!"

Tom Merry took it—on his nose; and it hurt, and he howled.

"Hold on!" he roared. "Hold on, Grundy, you mad idiot! Give us a chance to explain."

"Explain!" roared Grundy, his fists flaying about him. "Why, you rotters— Oh, crikey!"

Blake, Herries, Digby, and Lowther took a hand just then, and Grundy, still fighting gamely, was fairly hidden under them the next moment, his voice bellowing with rage.

"Hold the mad ass!" gasped Tom Merry, staggering to his feet, with his hands clutching his damaged nose. "Hold him! Where's that fat rogue, Trimble? I suspected all along—"

"I say, don't you believe the rotter!" howled Trimble in great alarm. "Don't listen to him. Chuck him in the river, you fellows! He only wants my tuck, I tell you!"

"You lying little worm!" booted Grundy from beneath the struggling figures. "You've pinched my grub and got these cads to back you up! Wilkins, Gunn, you footling funks, come and help me! Are you going to let these cads bone our grub, you idiots?"

"Look here—" began Wilkins.

"Rescue!" roared Grundy, almost foaming at the mouth with rage. "Rescue, you footling funks! I'll smash every bone in your bodies if you don't chip in and help! Rescue!"

Wilkins and Gunn hesitated no longer. A few knocks from the enemy were better by far than being smashed by their heavy-fisted study-mate and leader. Besides, they were hungry, and they were nearly as furious as was Grundy.

They piled in, and the next moment a furious but hopeless struggle was in progress.

"Stop, you idiots!" roared Tom Merry, as Wilkins went down with Blake and Herries on top of him. "Stop! Let's have it out with that fat rotter Trimble. I suspected all along there was something fishy about the business. Stop!"

"Look out! The fat rotter's bolting!" roared Blake suddenly. "Stop him, Gussy!"

"Bai Jove! Yaas, wathah! Twimble"

But Trimble was going while the going was good. He wondered no longer if the trouble was to be for him or Grundy & Co. Tom Merry's desire to "have it out" with him was quite enough for Trimble. It was no easy matter to tear himself away from that array of good things on the grass; but he had a good idea now that, whether he stayed or went he would never get the chance to sample any.

So Trimble suddenly remembered an urgent appointment elsewhere. He fairly flew.

"After him!" roared Blake.

At the moment only Arthur Augustus was disengaged, and he went in pursuit of Baggy Trimble like the wind.

Trimble scudded over the grass like a champion on the cinder-path, and he made a bee-line for the boats. To cast them adrift with himself safe in one of them was his one thought at that moment of dread danger.

But, though he ran hard, Arthur Augustus, not having Trimble's weight to carry, sprinted harder. Half-way through the belt of trees lining the banks of the shining Rhyl, Arthur Augustus was scarcely a yard behind the panting Trimble. As Trimble emerged on the grassy bank of the river he felt D'Arcy's hand clutch his shoulder.

Trimble, his mind rendered acute by sheer danger, flung himself flat. The manoeuvre took the swell of St. Jim's completely by surprise, sending him headlong over Trimble's prostrate form with a crash and a wild howl.

D'Arcy lay there half-stunned by the terrific jar, and while he did so Baggy Trimble scrambled up and jumped towards the bank.

Unfortunately for him he misjudged the distance in his terrified haste, and the next moment, before he could pull up, his feet slithered over the edge of the bank. Then—

Splash!

Trimble missed Grundy's boat by inches; but, for all his desperate efforts, he could not miss the river, and the next moment he was in.

CHAPTER 6.

Alarming!

SPLASH!

The splash Trimble made as he entered the shimmering Rhyl was tremendous, and a huge fountain of water spouted upwards. Then Trimble went under, and the waters of the river closed over his hapless head.

But only for a brief moment. Then he rose again, spluttering and yelling in terror, and splashing like a grampus. Trimble was fond of boasting of his prowess in the water, but it was certainly not much in evidence at that moment.

"Help!" he shrieked. "Help, help!"

But there was little danger of Trimble drowning at that spot. Scarcely had he given voice to his terror when his floundering feet touched bottom, and the next second he was scrambling ashore, gasping and panting, shakily.

"Ow!" he gulped. "Ow! Oh dear! I thought I was a goner that time! Oh dear!"

For another second Trimble stood trembling, water streaming from his fat person, and then an alarmed shout

(Continued on next page.)

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close by made him leap for cover. He recognised D'Arcy's voice, though he could not see him through a belt of bushes and willows. To scramble ashore Trimble had been obliged to splash along for some yards under the overhanging bank before finding a spot where he could scramble out.

But though he could not see D'Arcy, Baggy Trimble remembered his danger, and he trod softly away through the trees. The fact that Arthur Augustus had not followed along the bank was enough to tell him that the swell of the Fourth was ignorant of his whereabouts.

"The awful beast!" groaned Baggy. "I might have been drowned! Oh dear! Here come those other beasts!"

The crashing of heavy feet and angry voices sounded, and Trimble looked about him desperately. He knew he could never outdistance the other juniors, especially now he was drenched through, and he knew they would be only too soon on his trail. His only chance was to dodge them, and at the thought Trimble jumped to the nearest tree and started to scramble up the trunk.

It was a willow, an ancient tree, easy enough even for a clumsy fellow like Trimble to scale, and a few moments later he was safely seated among the foliage, well hidden from below.

At least, Trimble devoutly hoped he was well hidden. For his part he had a fairly clear view of what was happening a few yards along the bank. And what he saw made him gasp.

"M-mum-my hat! What the thump—"

While scrambling up the tree Trimble had heard a splash, and he had hoped Arthur Augustus had fallen in the river like himself.

And now he saw that Gussy was indeed in the river. Even as Trimble peered through the leaves he saw the face of Arthur Augustus, curiously white and scared, appear above the dancing surface of the river some yards out.

At the same moment he saw Tom Merry, followed instantly by Blake, Herries, and Lowther, appear on the river-bank just by the two boats.

Arthur Augustus seemed to sight them at the same moment, and he raised his voice in a spluttering yell.

"Wescue! Help, deah boys! Help!"

"What the thump!" gasped Blake. "Gussy—"

"Help!" yelled Arthur Augustus frantically. "Twimble has gone in! He must be drowned! Wescue! Wescue!"

With that, Arthur Augustus dived again and vanished, only a series of ripples showing where he had gone. Tom Merry and the others stared transfixed. But only for a second. Then Tom Merry's startled eyes caught sight of a cap floating down-stream. It was obviously Trimble's cap. Gussy's "straw" lay on the grassy bank.

Not another second did Tom Merry hesitate. His hands went up, and the next moment he was in the water.

Splash!

The next instant came three more splashes as Blake, Herries, and Lowther followed the captain of the Shell. The absence of Trimble, the sight of that slowly drifting cap, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's frantic shout was more than enough for them.

They dived in, to join Arthur Augustus in his desperate attempt to save Trimble.

Up in his hiding-place Trimble stared and stared, the truth slowly penetrating his thick skull.

"Mum-my hat!" he mumbled, almost falling from his perch in his amazement. "Gussy must think I've gone under—and those awful asses, too! He, he, he! What a scream!"

And, greatly amused, Trimble settled himself more securely in the fork of the tree to watch the fun—or what was evidently fun to him.

He saw Arthur Augustus come up again, puffing and spluttering, and then the other heads bobbed up, one after another, gasping as if for a wager.

"Where did he go in, Gussy?" gasped Tom Merry. "Quick!"

"Gwoogh! I weally do not know, Tom Mewwy!" panted Arthur Augustus. "He twipped me up, and I fell half-stunned. I could not wise for some moments, but I heard him splash in, and I heard him shoutin' for help. Pway twy again, deah boys. It is tewwible!"

And Gussy dived again. Tom Merry and the others, exchanging startled glances, followed his example without any further loss of time. Trimble watched them, highly entertained. He had almost forgotten his danger in this new development.

"He, he, he!" he chuckled. "The awful asses! Fancy thinking I'm drowned! Silly duffers! Hallo, here's Grundy!"

Grundy rushed out from the woods, his face red with rage, his clothes and hair rumpled and dishevelled. Behind him were Wilkins and Gunn and the rest of the juniors. All of them looking the reverse of amiable.

But their wrath vanished and gave place to amazement

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as they saw the juniors in the water, diving and searching frantically.

"What the thump—" began Grundy.

"Come on, Grundy!" called Blake desperately, sighting the newcomers just then. "Trimble's in—"

"What?"

"He fell in!" gasped Blake, showing a red and streaming face shorewards. "Quick! Help us, though I'm afraid we're too late! He went under some minutes ago, Gussy says."

"Oh, great Scott!"

Grundy's rugged features changed as if by a miracle. His wrath gave place to alarm, and the next moment came another splash as he dived in. At that moment even Grundy forgot and forgave Baggy Trimble. His one desire was to save the fat grub-raider then.

Wilkins, Gunn, and the others followed him like a shot. Really the sight should have brought far different feelings into the fat breast of the watcher. But Baggy Trimble was Baggy Trimble, and he saw nothing but humour in the affair.

"He, he, he!" chortled the fat Fourth-Former. "What a blessed scream! The awful asses! I think I'd better clear now while they're so busy. Besides—"

A new thought occurred to Baggy Trimble just then. All the fellows were in the river now, diving and diving again and again.

And the grub was left unguarded!

It was the chance of a lifetime. Ever an opportunist, Baggy Trimble resolved thereupon to leave the entertainment, interesting as it was, and to go after the main chance.

He scrambled cautiously down the tree and trod silently away, diving into the deep undergrowth and trees. Then he made his way swiftly inland towards the spot where the picnic was set.

His clothes were soaked through and clung to his fat person uncomfortably, but he scarcely noticed that in his greedy eagerness. Presently the shouts and splashes from the river died away, and very soon Trimble was on the spot with Grundy's picnic at his mercy.

"I've done 'em, after all!" chuckled Baggy. "I'll show 'em! I think I'd better pick the best and scoot. Those chaps may tumble to it that I'm not drowned at any minute, and come back here."

With that Baggy hastily gathered together the pickings of the feast, stuffing bottles of lemonade into his pockets as best he could. The cricket-bag had been emptied, but Baggy soon had it full again, and then he crept away.

Baggy did not like exertion as a rule, but he exerted himself now. The bag was weighty, and his clothes hung heavily upon him. But he staggered on through the woods, seeking a place of safety.

He stopped at length in a little sunlit glade, and then opening the cricket-bag and unloading his pockets, he seated himself on the grass and got busy.

Sandwiches and tongue, jam-tarts and cake, and other delicious confections disappeared by magic into Baggy's capacious mouth. His well-exercised jaws worked like clockwork, but he kept his ears cocked for sounds despite his concentration on the job of getting outside the grub as fast as possible.

But nothing alarming happened, and at last Baggy's appetite was satisfied, though only when the last crumb had gone and the last bottle drained. Then, with a grunt of satisfaction, Baggy sank on the warm grass, feeling blissfully happy and contented.

CHAPTER 7.

A Stunning Scheme!

UNFORTUNATELY, Trimble's happy state did not last long. Now he had finished exercising his jaws, Baggy had time to exercise his mind, and he began to reflect on the happenings of the afternoon and how they were likely to affect him.

They were not happy reflections. Really, it was too bad! Why couldn't a fellow laze and enjoy the present without being worried by forebodings and dismal reflections of trouble to come?

But the reflections persisted. Despite his determination to ignore the somewhat hazy future, Baggy could not help his mind going over the past and the list of his latest sins.

It was a long list, and a most depressing one. There was his study-mate, Wildrake, to begin with, and there were Cardew, Levison, and Clive, besides Grundy, Wilkins, and Gunn; and there was Mr. Linton to be reckoned with also. His investigations into the prime cause of that unlucky accident on the stairs would undoubtedly result in trouble for Trimble; the fat youth felt certain of that.

And now—now Tom Merry & Co. would require a reckoning. They would think he had tricked them over the picnic—some fellows were so suspicious! As for Grundy—Trimble shuddered to contemplate what the heavy-handed George Alfred was likely to do.

"Oh dear!" groaned Trimble. "I—I wish I'd never

ouched that grub now! I was an ass to risk it. Grundy's bound to jump to the conclusion that I've taken it when he finds it gone."

But it was too late for regrets now—Trimble realised that clearly enough as he glanced round at the crumbs and empty bags and other remnants of the stolen feast.

"My luck's dead out!" groaned Trimble. "Everybody's up against me, and I almost wish I was drowned. They'd be sorry they treated me so rottenly. They couldn't lick me, then, anyway. Besides, I'd miss that awful exam to-morrow."

To be drowned was certainly a certain way of escaping the lickings and the exam; but it was not a way that appealed to Baggy Trimble—in practice if it did in theory.

"I think I'd better clear out of this in case they do come to look for me," groaned the fat Fourth-Former, clambering to his feet with difficulty.

He stood a moment reflecting on his programme. He had a fairly clear idea where he was, and after thinking it out, he turned his back on the river and plunged deeper into the woods, deciding to make his way out into Rycombe Lane.

Though the sun was drying his clothes rapidly, he was still feeling stiff, and clammy, and uncomfortable. He had also lost his cap, and he looked a sight with his wet, untidy hair hanging over his forehead, his sticky, grubby face, and his bedraggled clothes.

In his dismal state of mind he had quite forgotten the fact that he was trespassing; but he was suddenly reminded of this as he stopped suddenly on the edge of a clearing.

The clearing was occupied. It was quite a large clearing in the deep woods, with a grass-grown, rusty cart-track winding away through it into the heart of the woods beyond. And in the clearing a smart holiday caravan was at rest. Close by, under the shady trees, a horse was tethered to a tree-trunk, the while it contentedly cropped the short grass. In the centre of the encampment a camp-fire burned cheerfully, with a large iron pot hung, gipsy fashion, on three sticks over the flames. And not far away two young fellows, clad in elegant and spotless flannels, sprawled on a grassy bank lazily, their hands behind their heads.

It was a picturesque scene—peaceful and alluring. But the beauty of the scene did not appeal to Baggy, though he eyed the youths anxiously. They, obviously, had not a care in the world at that moment.

Baggy recognised them at once as being the nephews of Captain Jackson, from the Priory, the owner of the estate and woods. The Jacksons were friends of the Glyn's, at Glyn House, and only the day before the two young fellows had had tea with Bernard Glyn at St. Jim's. Baggy had good reason to know that, having tried to wedge into the tea-party, and having been kicked out by Glyn in great wrath, Baggy knew that the two were staying for some days in the Priory woods before continuing their caravan tour.

"Lucky beggars!" grunted Trimble. "I'd better not let 'em spot me, or—Oh crumbs!"

A heavy tread sounded right behind the fat junior.

It was a brisk, firm tread that trod the ferns and bracken, and Trimble knew instinctively who it was that approached. Baggy was already crouching down in hiding, for he had advanced well out of the trees before he had discovered that the clearing was occupied. Indeed, it was a marvel that the young fellows had neither heard nor seen him. In the sparse shelter of a clump of brambles Trimble crouched lower, his heart palpitating.

As he had guessed, the newcomer was Captain Jackson himself—a grim, upright gentleman in shooting clothes, with ruddy, healthy features and a white, short moustache.

As the captain stepped into the clearing his two nephews jumped up, and came to meet him quickly. Trimble saw the reason for their haste as he noted a buff-coloured envelope in the old gentleman's hand.

"That for us, uncle?" called the elder of the two.

"Yes; a telegram from home, I think," said Captain Jackson. "I sincerely hope it is not bad news, my boys. It is addressed to you, Philip."

He handed the telegram to the elder youth, who tore it open rather anxiously. The next moment it was only too clear that the telegram did contain bad news.

Philip started back with a cry of dismay.

"The pater!" he gasped. "He's worse, and the mater wants us to return home at once."

"I was afraid so," said the captain, gnawing his moustache as he scanned the wire handed to him. "You must go, of course, and I think I had better come with you. Indeed, I was to have gone to-morrow in any case."

"What are the train times?" asked the younger of the two fellows.

"If we are quick we shall catch the five o'clock at Wayland," snapped the military gentleman. "Hurry, boys! You can be changing whilst I get the car out to run us over to Wayland."

"But our horse, sir?"

"I will send a man to take him to the stables," said the captain. "You only need to lock the van. Everything will be safe here. Hurry, boys! I do not think the matter can be serious. Your mother is rather nervous of your father's condition, as you know. But we must risk nothing, of course."

With rather pale faces the young caravanners hurried to the van as their uncle strode away through the trees and vanished, passing within a yard of Trimble without seeing him. The fat youth did not move—he hardly dared to breathe yet. Now the caravanners were alert it was risky to move, for he would have been spotted at once.

But that was not the only reason why Trimble crouched down without a movement.

An amazing and staggering idea had occurred to the fat youth.

It was such a daring, wonderful brainwave that Baggy fairly trembled with excitement as he watched the preparations for departure, his fat brain working at express speed.

Scarcely daring to breathe, the fat junior watched as the nephews of Captain Jackson hastily washed in a bucket and vanished into the van to change. They were very soon out again, and then, looking different fellows in their smart lounge suits, the two stopped a moment to kick the fire out, and then the elder one locked the van door and slipped the key in a locker on the driving seat of the caravan.

It was obviously the place where the key was usually concealed, and Trimble's eyes gleamed as he noted it.

The next moment the two young fellows were hurrying away, and only then did Trimble show himself, taking a deep breath as he did so.

"M-my hat!" he murmured, trembling with excitement. "What—a wheeze! It's the chance of a blessed lifetime! Why not? Those beasts think I'm drowned—they'll be certain if I don't turn up at St. Jim's. And those chaps will be away for days, I expect. And there's bound to be plenty of grub in the van. And I shall miss lessons and miss that rotten exam to-morrow and the lickings and everything. And I shall have a jolly good time—nothing to do but sleep and eat; no dashed lessons and no nothing. Phew! What a brain-wave!"

It was a wonderful idea—to Trimble!

"I'll do it!" he breathed. "Blowed if I won't! Nobody ever comes here. Nobody will ever dream I'm here—they'll think I'm drowned, the beasts! I'll hope they'll all be sorry for the way they've treated me. And when I do turn up they'll all be so relieved and delighted that they won't dream of licking me. I shall be a blessed hero—the fellows will be so relieved they'll stand me feeds and goodness knows what. And I shall miss that blessed exam—that's the beauty of the whole wheeze! When I do turn up I can easily spin a yarn—tell the Head I've been kidnapped or something, or lost my memory and been wandering about the countryside ever since. Jove, it's great—simple as scoffing jam-tarts and safe as houses!"

For some moments Trimble remained where he was, turning the great idea over and over in his mind. But he could see no flaws in the wheeze anywhere. In fact, Trimble did not concentrate on the task of looking for flaws—he never did! Trimble was a youth who disliked facing unpleasant facts and possibilities. He preferred to ignore them and to treat them as if they did not exist—especially if they conflicted with his immediate desires. It was a little failing that had very often landed him into trouble.

But there it was—one of Trimble's many little failings. Besides, he argued, wasn't he booked for a terrible time in any case? The Head had warned him after the last exam—warned him very clearly—what to expect if he disgraced himself again. But Trimble had blissfully ignored it, preferring to slack and hope for the best. He had slacked, hoping to the very last that something would turn up to save him.

And now, here it was—something had turned up; a really stunning scheme that would save him, not only from the dreaded exam, but from the wrath of almost every fellow he had come into contact with that day.

Not only that, it was a gorgeous opportunity to indulge his lazy habits to his heart's content. He would live the simple life alone and undisturbed. No stuffy Form-room, no lessons, no canings and impots, no kickings and cuffs! It was, indeed, a gorgeous chance.

There and then Trimble made his fat mind up. Feeling it would be safer to be locked inside the van when the man came to fetch the horse than to be hiding outside, Baggy gave a careful glance about him. Then he hurried to the locker on the driving seat of the caravan, unlocked the door, and let himself in. This done, he locked it on the inside, and began to explore.

His first look was in the store-cupboard, and there he chuckled at the sight of the supply of foodstuffs. There was enough there to last any ordinary fellow several days. But Baggy was no ordinary fellow, and it was doubtful if

that stock would last Baggy long. But the sight of it made Baggy chuckle, for all that. Though it was scarcely twenty minutes since he had eaten a gigantic feed, Baggy decided to sample a steak-and-kidney pie that was there. He polished that off, and then tackled half of a huge plum cake.

That satisfied Baggy for the time being, and, leisurely taking off his wet clobber, Baggy changed into clean under-clothing from a locker, donned a suit of flannels and tennis shoes, and then, feeling comfortable once again, lay on one of the cosy bunks and was soon deep in blissful slumber.

CHAPTER 8.

Poor Old Trimble!

"IT'S no good, chaps! Hopeless trying any longer! The current must have carried him downstream long ago! Might as well give it up now."

As Tom Merry spoke he staggered ashore and flung himself down, exhausted with his continued diving and searching. He lay there dripping and panting, completely spent.

One or two of the others had already given up in sheer exhaustion. Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy were still at it, but as Tom Merry painted out the words they staggered ashore and collapsed there.

There was no doubting the hopelessness of their efforts. They had dived and dived, and had searched doggedly, but without avail. If Trimble had gone under, as Arthur Augustus had vowed, he was not to be found anywhere near that spot.

Grundy was the last to give up the hopeless quest, and his rugged features were white when he tottered ashore at last.

"No go!" he panted. "We can't do more!"

"No good at all!"

"Bai Jove! It is weally tewwible! Poor old Twimble!"

It was indeed a case of "poor old Trimble" this time! The exhausted juniors looked out at the murmuring, gently-rippling stream, and then they eyed each other. Trimble had never been a popular fellow—indeed, he had been very unpopular, which was no wonder, considering his greed, his ill-manners, his untruthfulness, and his incurable habit of helping himself to other people's property.

But the juniors forgot all that now; they forgot and forgave all his manifold shortcomings in that sad moment. Trimble was gone—drowned! They could scarcely believe it even yet. Even Grundy, despite his feelings towards the fat Fourth-Former a short time before, forgot everything now. Overbearing and domineering as he was, the great George Alfred was remarkably generous and soft-hearted, and he looked now on the point of blubbing.

In strained silence the juniors lay panting as they recovered their wind and strength. But that state of affairs did not last long. Tom Merry suddenly spoke, his voice grave.

"It's—it's awful, you fellows," he said. "I think I'll go in again and have another try. I can't do nothing like this. Gussy, did you mark the spot where he actually went down?"

Arthur Augustus gave a groan of deep distress. He had been chasing Trimble, and he could not help thinking himself, to a great extent, responsible for the tragedy.

"No, deah boy!" he stammered. "I weally didn't see him in the watah at all, you know."

"Wha-at?" Tom Merry and Blake yelled the word together. Gussy had already told them that he had not seen where Trimble had gone in, but in the excitement of the moment they had scarcely grasped that fact, and had been under the impression that Arthur Augustus must have actually seen Trimble in the water.

They jumped to their feet now in excitement.

If the swell of St. Jim's had not really seen Trimble in the water, then—

Tom Merry & Co. did not like to entertain suspicions of Baggy Trimble just then; but really they could not help sudden suspicion rising, knowing the crafty fat youth as they did.

"You—you really didn't see him in the water, Gussy?" ejaculated Tom Merry.

"No, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus, his voice very subdued. "But I heard the splash, and I saw his cap floatin' away. You see, I was just makin' a gwab at him when he twipped me ovah. I went ewashin' down, and was quite stunned for some moments. And when I had weecorahed my scattahed senses the poor fellow had vanished. There was no twace to be seen of him. He—he must have gone in, of course, deah boys. And—and you know Twimble couldn't swim a stwoké."

"Well, I'm blowed!" gasped Tom Merry.

The juniors looked at Arthur Augustus with feelings too deep for words. Certainly the matter was by no means completely changed by Gussy's announcement. But if nobody

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had actually seen Trimble in the water there was certainly hope. And though the juniors felt hope and relief, they looked volumes at Arthur Augustus. For ten minutes they had been trying to rescue Trimble—for ten minutes they had strained every nerve to find the fat Fourth-Former; and now there was a possibility that Trimble was not in the river at all. He had not been seen—only his cap had been discovered floating along. Indeed, there was a possibility that he had never been in the water. The splash Gussy had heard might have been caused in other ways than by Trimble falling in. The juniors could not forget that they were dealing with a crafty, scheming youth who would never hesitate at any trick to escape the punishment he had earned.

"Well, I'm blowed!" repeated Tom Merry. "Why, Trimble may never have gone in, then?"

"I am quite convinced he did, though I did not see him actually go in!" said Arthur Augustus. "Dazed as I was, I distinctly wemembah heavin' a splash and a most fearful howl. And when I succeeded in scwamblin' to my feet Twimble had vanished completely."

In terrified haste, Baggy Trimble jumped for the river bank. Unfortunately for him, he misjudged the distance, and the next moment, before he could pull up, his feet alighted over the edge. Then—splash! Trimble entered the shimmering Rhyl, and a huge fountain of water spouted upwards.

(See Chapter 5.)



"But that doesn't mean he—he's drowned!" said Blake. "If you lay half-stunned for several seconds even, he had plenty of chance to scramble ashore and bolt into the woods—just the thing he would do."

"My hat, yes!"

The thought raised the hopes of the juniors. Arthur Augustus shook his head; he had little hope himself.

"We'll search again!" snapped Tom Merry, his face grim. "I vote we examine the bank right along to see if there are traces of him. He may—Hullo!"

A shout came from the river, and, looking out, the juniors were startled to see Kildare, the St. Jim's skipper, pulling in towards them in a light skiff. He was followed by his chum Darrell in a second skiff.

"Fairly caught!" murmured Tom Merry. "This means a licking! We're out of bounds!"

Kildare's face was grim as he brought alongside the bank and stepped out.

"You kids aware that you're out of bounds?" he snapped. "Hullo! Why, you're like a lot of drowned rats! What's happened?"

Tom Merry nodded, and decided to explain matters, in case the worst had really happened. He told the story to

Kildare, who listened in amazement and alarm. Then, after cross-examining Gussy, the captain of St. Jim's smiled grimly.

"Then, knowing Trimble as I do, I fancy he's done you kids!" he said. "Have you searched along the bank to see if he scrambled out anywhere, supposing he did actually fall in?"

"No. We were just going to do so."

"Then carry on with it!" said Kildare.

And Kildare got back into his boat, and together he and Darrell edged alongside the bank, searching for traces. Despite his words, Kildare's face was a trifle anxious. But his anxiety soon fled.

From Tom Merry came a sudden triumphant shout. They all hurried up, Kildare and Darrell leaving their skiffs.



Tom had stopped a few yards higher up from where the boats were tied to the willows, and he was pointing to some footprints in the soft mud at the edge of the stream.

"If those aren't Trimble's hoofprints I'm a Dutchman!" he said excitedly. "Look! They're fresh and going towards the bank! They're made by shoes, and we're all wearing rubber-soled tennis-shoes. Trimble scrambled out here—see?"

Tom pointed to other proofs—clear traces of broken soil and turf where Trimble had scrambled up the steep bank.

Blake jumped up on to the bank and followed the trail—a trail easy enough to follow to fellows who were keen scouts. The trail of wet footprints led to the tree where Trimble had hidden. The marks of his scraping shoes were clear and unmistakable where he had scrambled up.

"That settles it, then!" said Kildare, with a grim laugh. "The little sweep did go in, but he climbed out here and shinned up this tree. Not here now, I suppose—no! He's cleared off, right enough!"

"Oh, bai Jove!"

The relief of the juniors turned to overwhelming wrath as they thought of the fat youth seated in the tree watching the frantic rescue operations.

"Oh, the—the rotter!" gasped Blake.

"The—the awful little villain!" said Grundy. "And me—me nearly drowning myself to save him! Oh, won't I just—"

"You'd better get back!" snapped Kildare. "I shall have to report you to Railton, of course. I'll keep an eye open for Trimble. If you fellows see him, tell him he's to report at once to me."

"Oh crumbs! Right, Kildare!"

Kildare and Darrell boarded their boats again, and the next moment they were pulling downstream. Kildare seemed quite satisfied, at all events, that Trimble was still alive and kicking.

And the juniors were satisfied now, though Arthur Augustus looked as if he still had lingering doubts on the subject.

"Well," said Tom Merry—"well, the fat rotter's done us this time, and no mistake! Grooogh! I feel like a drowned rat! Let's get a move on!"

"What about the grub?" said Herries suddenly.

"Oh, bai Jove!"

"Great Scott, I'd forgotten that!" ejaculated Grundy.

"My hat! I wonder—"

All the juniors wondered, too, as they thought of Trimble. Anything was possible where Baggy Trimble of the Fourth was concerned. The excitement of the last few minutes had swept all thought of food from their minds.

"Come on!" yelled Grundy.

They followed Grundy with a rush, their drenched trousers flapping round their legs, their clothes steaming. They soon reached the picnic-basket, and they were not long in discovering that Baggy Trimble had, indeed, been on the spot.

"The cricket bag's gone!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"And the best part of the spread with it!" said Blake grimly. "If we wanted definite proof that Trimble isn't drowned, here it is. Trimble's been here. While we've been ruining our clothes and fagging ourselves out in trying to rescue the fat worm, he's been here and cleared off with the best of the grub!"

"Bai Jove! The—the scabful wascal!"

"The rotten toad!"

"The fat sweep!"

Tom Merry & Co. and Grundy & Co. grew eloquent on the subject of Trimble's character. Grundy almost foamed at the mouth with rage. To think that while he—George Alfred Grundy—the great man of the Shell, had been wasting his valuable time and energies in trying to save Trimble, that fat youth had been making the most of his opportunities by raiding the grub—Grundy's grub!

Grundy danced with rage.

"I'll smash him!" he choked. "I'll pulverise him to a jelly, the fat little worm! I'll smash him to little bits! I'm glad he isn't drowned, but, by jingo, he'll die a sudden death when I get my hands on him!"

The rest of the juniors were little less enraged than Grundy. Their clothes were in a fearful state, and they had the humiliating reflection that Trimble had done them brown. All thoughts that he was drowned had gone completely by the board at this last discovery. On the clean, white tablecloth, too, were wet footprints—shoe-prints that were undoubtedly Trimble's. Trimble never was a particular fellow, and if a tablecloth came into his line of march it was just like him to walk over it.

But it was the last and most final and convincing proof that Baggy Trimble was not drowned. He was undoubtedly wet, but not drowned.

"Let's get back!" said Tom Merry savagely. "We'll make the fat sweep sit up for this! He's tricked us, lied to us, and spoofed us! And now— Oh, won't we paste him for this!"

"Paste him!" roared Grundy. "I'll make him wish he had been drowned, the little toad! I'll teach him to trick me! I'll teach him to pinch my grub and muck up my picnic! I'll teach him to get me into trouble with the beaks and make me ruin my clobber diving into the beastly river after him! I'll—I'll—"

Words completely failed George Alfred Grundy. He spluttered and danced and punched ferociously at an imaginary Trimble.

Tom Merry & Co. left Grundy & Co. to it, George Alfred still raging and Wilkins and Gunn hurriedly packing the good things—or what was left of them—back into the basket. All thoughts of the picnic had been abandoned; none of the juniors felt any appetite or desire for a picnic now. They were wet through, and clammy and dismal—certainly far too uncomfortable to sit on the grass and eat and drink. Tom Merry & Co. had already explained how they had come to be there with the grub to Grundy, and they did not stay any longer.

They went back to the boats and started back for St. Jim's. It was not a cheery voyage by any means, and the

sole topic of conversation during the trip was what they intended to do to Baggy Trimble when they got hold of him.

CHAPTER 9.

The Mystery of Baggy!

"THAT fat worm come in yet?"

George Alfred Grundy asked the question as he looked in at the doorway of Study No. 2 in the Fourth passage. Teatime was past, and call-over had come and gone. Wildrake had got back from Glyn House after a very pleasant afternoon's sport and a jolly tea.

But he had not forgotten Trimble, and he had looked for his study-mate, and waited for him for hours in vain. Mellish had not seen him; nobody seemed to have seen him come in at all. Nor had he answered call-over.

This in itself was very strange indeed. Baggy might miss call-over, but it was strange he had not returned in time for tea. For once in a way it had been quite a decent tea in Study No. 2, as Mellish remarked, with plenty of grub to go round. Usually there wasn't in that study—when Trimble was at home. If there was anything good "going," Baggy Trimble usually contrived, by fair means or unfair, to get most, if not all of it.

For once Wildrake was quite keen to see Trimble. The Canadian junior was looking forward to giving his fat study-mate the "durned" licking of his life, as he expressed it.

Each time the door had opened Wildrake had jumped up expectantly—expecting to see the wanderer roll in. Instead it always proved to be either Grundy, Wilkins, and Gunn, or Cardew, Levison, and Clive, or Blake & Co., or Tom Merry & Co., or somebody else inquiring if Trimble had returned. Grundy, indeed, had been looking in every three minutes or so with that question, and Wildrake was getting more than a little tired of it.

He had no objection whatever to Trimble getting a sound licking from each and all of the anxious inquirers. But he was tired of the constant questions and visits.

It was most exasperating—more, it was getting a nuisance. For others also were looking in to know if Trimble had returned. Somehow or other—probably Kildare or Darrell had told the story in the Sixth—the story had got round and the school in general seemed to see plenty of humour in it—especially in the story of how Tom Merry & Co. and Grundy & Co. had plumbed the depths of the Rhyl in search of Trimble's body.

It looked like being the joke of the term, and lots of fellows were very keen to see what happened to Trimble when he did come in.

Naturally, the grins and chuckles and humorous remarks gave added fuel to the fire of wrath that consumed the victims of Trimble's trickery. Undoubtedly Trimble was booked for a high old time on his return.

But he hadn't returned yet, and meanwhile Wildrake was having an annoying and exasperating time answering questions about him.

As Grundy asked the question now Wildrake glared at him.

"Will you clear off, you footling galoot!" he roared. "I'm fed-up with Trimble! I guess I'll make mincemeat of the next chap who comes pushing his nose in here! Sheer off, you mugwump!"

"Look here!" bawled Grundy. "I want Trimble, and if you talk to me like that, Wildrake—"

"Get out!" roared Wildrake. "Here, I'll jolly soon clear you out, I guess!"

And jumping to the corner of the study the Canadian junior grabbed his riding-whip that stood there. Wildrake was an expert in the use of a whip—a fact Grundy was well aware, and the Shell fellow leaped a foot into the air as Wildrake cracked the whip like a pistol-shot.

The lash came within an inch of Grundy's nose, and Grundy yelled and jumped back into the passage. He could certainly have made "mincemeat" of Wildrake with his big fists. But he wasn't risking that whip.

"You dangerous madman!" roared Grundy, backing into the passage. "Why, I'll jolly well—Yarroogh!"

Grundy howled and ran for it as Wildrake rushed at him, the whip cracking. Wildrake chuckled and went back into his study. It seemed safe to assume that George Alfred Grundy would not be seen in the vicinity of Study No. 2 again that evening.

Meanwhile, the disappearance of Trimble was being anxiously discussed in Study No. 10 in the Shell passage, where Blake & Co. had joined the Terrible Three.

"It's jolly queer," said Tom Merry, frowning. "Trimble hasn't turned up yet. We're pretty certain he turned up afterwards and pinched the grub. But—but it's queer!"

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"Yaas, wathah! I was weally forgettin' about that," said Arthur Augustus.

"It is queer, Tommy," agreed Blake, looking serious. "Dash it all, we can't be mistaken about those clues—we saw where the fat ass climbed ashore, and—and there's the missing grub, and his hoof-marks."

"No getting beyond that," said Herries. "But—"

There certainly was a "but"! Where was Trimble? It was not like him to miss call-over—even though he must have funk'd returning to St. Jim's after what had happened.

"He's for it all round," said Tom. "The fat ass smashed some things in Study No. 9—Cardew's clock and a photo-frame of Levison's, besides a vase. He chucked a blessed cushion in and fairly cleared the mantelpiece. Those chaps are simply thirsting for his gore."

"And Wildrake himself's wanting to lick him," said Digby. "And there's Grundy waiting to boil him in oil, and then he must know we'll want a reckoning with him. He's bound to funk coming home—"

"But it's queer!" said Tom, his face more than a little anxious. "He's only making things worse by missing call-over."

"It's funk!" said Blake emphatically. "Don't worry about the fat worm! He'll turn up when he thinks things have blown over. I'm not worrying any—"

Blake was interrupted just then, as Kildare looked into the study.

"Housemaster's study at once, Merry!" he snapped.

"You'd better go, too, Blake!"

"Oh dear! Is it about—"

"Trimble!" said Kildare, whose face was serious. "You know he hasn't come in yet?"

"He didn't answer at call-over," said Tom.

"I've had fellows hunting high and low for him," said Kildare grimly. "It's queer! You'd better make a clean breast of all that happened this afternoon, Merry. I've told Railton all I know!"

"Right, Kildare!"

The captain's seriousness added to Tom's own alarm, and he nodded to Blake, and the two hurried along to the Housemaster's study. They were standing before Mr. Railton a moment later.

Mr. Railton's face was as anxious as Kildare's, and he eyed the juniors almost eagerly.

"You are aware that Trimble has not returned, boys?" he said briefly.

"Yes, sir."

"Kildare has told me the story of what took place on Captain Jackson's estate this afternoon," said Mr. Railton. "You had no right to have been where you were at all; but the matter is too serious for me to deal with that point now. It has occurred to you, I suppose, that in view of what happened Trimble's strange absence now is very significant and gravely disturbing?"

"I—I don't think anything serious has happened to him," said Tom. "The—the fact is he caused a lot of trouble this afternoon in one way and another. He knows several fellows would be waiting for him to—to lick him, sir. I think he's afraid to return—putting it off till as late as he dare."

"Kildare has told me how you discovered traces on the river bank where you think he climbed from the water," said Mr. Railton. "But I fear that evidence is not conclusive. I wish I could believe that it is. I cannot overlook the possibility that something terrible has happened to the boy."

"We discovered something more after Kildare had gone," said Blake eagerly. "We have good reason to know he was safe enough."

And between them Tom and Blake told of the missing food, and of the traces Trimble had left behind him.

Mr. Railton's face lightened as he listened.

"That alters the case," he said. "You did not tell Kildare this on your return. You should have done."

"We didn't think it necessary, sir. We expected to find Trimble here when we got back," said Tom.

"Very well," said the Housemaster. "Is that all you know—you have no idea where Trimble can be?"

"No, sir. But I believe he will turn up soon."

Mr. Railton nodded and dismissed them. It was clear that their further evidence had lessened his alarm considerably.

"He will turn up!" said Tom Merry, as they got outside.

"Of course he will!" snorted Blake. "Let's get on with prep, and forget the fat chump!"

But Blake's voice lacked conviction.

And when prep ended and it became known that Trimble had not returned, and that a search by prefects had brought nothing to light, there were many serious faces in the School House at St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 10.

The Fly in the Ointment!

"THIS is prime, and no mistake!" Baggy Trimble opened his eyes to a new world, as it were, on the following morning. The first thing he saw before his drowsy eyes was woodwork, and he fairly blinked at it, wondering where on earth he was. The usual thing he saw on opening his eyes at rising-bell was the ceiling of the Fourth Form dormitory, or more often than not a wet sponge, by means of which Jack Blake usually persuaded the fat Fourth-Former to get up.

But he saw no sponge now, and no white ceiling. And then it all came to him in a flash, and he understood. Above his head were the bottom boards of another bunk. He understood, and grinned as he looked round the cosy interior of the caravan. Through the little curtained window, which Trimble had very carefully closed and fastened the night before, streamed the morning sunshine.

"Oh, good!" grunted Trimble.

He did not move. Why should he? He was delightfully comfortable, and he saw no reason why he should move yet. It was delicious to lie there and feel there was no need to get up; no beast—like that beast Blake—to squeeze a rotten sponge over a fellow's chivvy!

Blake was a beast; they were all beasts. Trimble felt a thrill of thankfulness that he was done with them all for a while. He wondered what they were thinking about his absence at St. Jim's. What a stew the Head would be in! Serve him right; serve 'em all right! He hoped they'd all realise how badly they'd all treated him at St. Jim's now. Trimble grinned as he thought of the sensation at the old school. Trimble drowned! How the fellows would talk in whispers about it! What a scream! Wildrake and Mellish would feel jolly sorry they'd been such mean beasts now! Why, only a day or two before at tea-time Mellish had kicked up a fearful fuss just because he had helped himself to one of his sardines!

Thus Trimble reflected, chuckling gleefully at the thought of the stew everybody would be in.

To do the fat youth justice, he was far too obtuse to realise the meanness—to use a mild term—of his actions. It did not occur to his weird mental processes that by leaving people to suppose that he was drowned he was causing the Head and many others acute anxiety and distress—not to mention the effect on his own people at home. Indeed, Trimble never gave them a thought; they did not come into the scheme at all. It was sheer thoughtlessness, rather than heartlessness, on the fat junior's part.

But his reflections came to an abrupt termination as he suddenly realised that he was hungry.

The realisation proved more efficacious than a wet sponge. In a flash Trimble had one leg out of the bunk and then the other. He was already half dressed, for Trimble had deemed it safer to be ready for anything in the peculiar position he was in.

A glance out of the van window showed him that the morning sun was already high in the heavens, and his watch told him that it was close on ten o'clock. He had more than slept the clock round.

"My hat!" murmured the fat junior. "I must have slept like a top! This sort of life suits me, and no mistake! Now, what about a feed?"

Any other fellow might have used the word "wash," instead of feed, at that juncture; but not so Trimble. Trimble and soap and water were not on intimate terms—and never had been. Trimble had let himself in for the simple life, and he had already decided to dispense with the luxury of washing.

"No water!" grunted Trimble, rummaging about the larder. "I shall have to drink milk. Oh crumbs! It's gone sour! Oh, blow!"

The milk was undoubtedly sour. Trimble frowned as he sniffed the jug. It was a snag—though hardly the first snag he had struck. His first snag had appeared the previous night when darkness had fallen.

Trimble was not a brave youth, and a dark night had terrors for him—even in the quad at St. Jim's.

But here—out in the deep blackness of the ghostly woods, with the wind sighing eerily in the branches, and the hoots of owls, and cries of night-birds breaking the brooding silence—Trimble had not enjoyed himself, far from it. He had never considered what it would be like alone in the woods when darkness came.

He knew what it was like now, however. But he had dropped off to sleep at last, with his head buried under the blankets, comforted somewhat in the knowledge that the window was securely fastened and the door safely locked.

Now the night had passed, and Trimble was feeling bright and cheery in the warm morning sunshine. The discovery that there was no water in the van, and that the milk had gone sour, rather damped his spirits a little, however.

And as he rummaged again in the larder Trimble began

to realise what he had refused to acknowledge before—that there really was not much food left in the larder. He had done himself very well for tea—his second tea—the evening before, and he had done himself better for supper. He had not intended to do so, but his appetite over-ruled his good intentions.

Now he blinked into the larder rather uneasily.

"Oh dear!" he murmured. "That little lot won't last me long. Let's see how many eggs are in this old basket."

And Trimble reached up for the basket on a little shelf just by the larder. Unfortunately, the handle of the basket was broken—a fact Captain Jackson's nephews were aware of, doubtless enough, but a fact that was a new discovery to Trimble just then.

As he lifted the basket by the broken handle the basket just tipped up and deposited its contents on the caravan floor.

Smash, smash, smash, smash!

"Oh!" gasped Trimble. "Oh crikey!"

Every egg in the basket was smashed—smashed so completely and finally that all the king's horses and all the king's men could never put them together again.

It was another nasty snag for Trimble, and he gave the treacherous basket a savage kick, and looked for something

(Continued on next page.)

ATHLETES TRAIN ON IT.



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else for breakfast. There was really little else left. Trimble had certainly been very unwise in making such greedy inroads on his supplies. There was a tin of pressed beef, a tin of condensed milk, a tin of mustard, and several other items, including half a loaf of bread and one or two plain biscuits that Trimble had not fancied; and there were several rashers of bacon.

"I'll have the bacon, I think," grunted Trimble. "This is rather a nuisance. I thought I'd left more than this. Anyway, something will turn up. The tinned beef will do for dinner. Blow it! Those beasts must be half-starved if they live on grub like this; though I suppose the bounders get some of their blessed meals at the Priory."

There was an oil cooking-stove in the van—a fact Trimble was thankful for—and soon he had it going; and presently the van fairly hummed with the smell of oil and frying bacon. But Trimble dared not open the window or door yet. When the frying was done, however, he risked it; and, taking an enamelled jug, he hurried out in search of water.

He had already seen the glimmer of a stream through the trees, and soon the fat youth had filled the jug with crystal-clear water and was hurrying back with it. It was a glorious morning, the dew sparkling on trees and bushes, and birds chirruped joyously all about him. But Trimble had neither eyes nor ears for Nature.

The fact was he was beginning to feel rather worried over the food problem. He regretted dismally now that he had gorged so recklessly the night before. But it was too late for regrets now. It was not the first time by any means that his greed had got him into a hole, and, following his usual procedure, Trimble relied on his wits to get himself out again.

"I'll soon get some grub from somewhere," he murmured. "Nothing to worry about, anyway! I—I think I'll have four rashers, after all, instead of three; that'll leave three for to-morrow."

Ever an optimist, Baggy had the other three rashers, finishing his meal with bread-and-butter and marmalade, and washing it down with cocoa. Luckily, there was plenty of tea and coffee and cocoa, besides a jar of strawberry jam and a jar of marmalade left.

And, though Trimble missed the milk, he quite enjoyed his breakfast, for all that. And he finished off the half-loaf of bread.

"Rather a nuisance having no bread left," mumbled the fat junior, breathing a trifle heavily, after his meal. "In fact, this grub question's going to muck everything up. Still, it's worth it. No exam, no licking, and no lessons. He, he, he! If the fellows only could see me now! That beast Grundy—My hat! Now, I wonder—"

Trimble paused as a sudden thought came to him. It was the thought of Grundy's picnic-basket. Why, it was possible the blessed thing was there yet—where he had left it. It was scarcely probable, but it was certainly possible.

"By jingo!" murmured Trimble.

It was possible that, excited and cut-up as the juniors were on finding Trimble was drowned, they would forget all about the basket. Indeed, from what he knew of Tom Merry & Co. and Grundy & Co., he felt fairly convinced that they would never trouble about it at such a time, even if they did remember it.

Certainly Trimble would never have forgotten or ignored it in such circumstances had the positions been reversed. But Trimble felt that as matters had stood the previous afternoon they were scarcely likely to trouble about it. Doubtless enough when they got tired of diving for his body they would rush with the sad news to St. Jim's.

"My hat!" murmured Trimble. "It's worth going to have a squint, anyway! Yes, I'll do it!"

After a brief rest following the exertions of eating breakfast, Trimble locked up the caravan and started off, shoving the key in his pocket.

He went very cautiously, eyes and ears alert for sight or sound of danger. Since he had watched the captain's man from the Priory untether the horse and tramp away with it, Baggy had seen nobody whatever. But he was not taking any risks of running up against a gamekeeper.

Trimble tramped away in the direction which he believed the river to lie, and it was only after tramping for ten minutes that he realised in alarm that he had lost his bearings. A minute later he stopped suddenly as the trees ended, merging on to the grassy bank of a drive. Through the trees, a hundred yards further along, he glimpsed the ancient chimneys of the Priory.

"Oh crumbs!" groaned Trimble. "I'm fairly lost! I might have to wander about for days before finding that blessed basket. Besides—"

A sudden cheery whistling reached Trimble's ears, and it was accompanied by the crunch of cycle wheels on

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gravel. Trimble jumped back into shelter, and then he grunted as he recognised the cyclist approaching leisurely along the drive.

It was Grimes, the errand boy from Sands', the village grocer. On the carrier at the front of the bicycle was a big basket, piled high with groceries, evidently for the Priory.

Trimble eyed them enviously, and just then Grimes seemed to see something that interested him. Just opposite to where Trimble hid he slowed down gently and dropped just as stealthily from his machine. Then, leaning his machine against a post, he dropped on all-fours and started to creep across the grass beyond the gravel drive.

Trimble stared, but he very soon saw what Grimes was after. Fifty yards across the grass a couple of rabbits were gambolling in the sunshine.

"Oh, the rotter!" murmured Trimble.

Grimes was not a rotter; he was a very decent fellow, really. But he also had a fair share of mischief in his make-up, and evidently the rabbits had proved too tempting a sight for him to resist. Certainly Grimes was not after the rabbits themselves; all that he cared for was the thrill of the "chase."

It was rather an unwise proceeding; but Grimes was not old enough to be blessed with overmuch wisdom.

Whether he was successful or not Trimble did not wait to see, however.

As Grimes crept towards the rabbits Trimble crept towards the basket. He did the last three or four yards with a rush, and, finding the basket tied to the carrier, he snatched two of the biggest articles in the basket and darted back for the trees.

He had almost reached their shelter when Grimes happened to turn his head, and he just caught a glimpse of the fat youth racing away from the basket with his plunder.

Grimes gave a terrific yell.

"Hi! Stop! Come back, you rotten sneak-thief! Hi! Stop, dang you!" he howled.

But Trimble did not stop—he flew. He had acted on the spur of the moment, tempted just as Grimes had been tempted, and now there was nothing else for it but flight.

"Oh crumbs!" panted Trimble. "What rotten luck! Calling me a sneak-thief, too, the low cad! I've got to have some grub from somewhere, and I'm only borrowing it—at least, I'm going to pay old Sands for it later on. Oh crumbs! The cheeky cad's after me!"

Grimes was yelling with wrath and indignation. And, with a thrill of fright, Baggy Trimble remembered that the grocer's boy was a useful fellow with his fists, and that he was just as useful when it came to running.

And Trimble was burdened with the articles he had "borrowed," as he preferred to call it. As a matter of fact, the fat youth had acted on the spur of the moment, and he certainly had no intention of "pinching" the goods. He was just taking them with the intention of paying for them later—a far different matter, in Trimble's view.

But the articles were beginning to be troublesome now, one being a tin of biscuits tied with string, and the other being a small shoulder of ham wrapped in paper. And Grimes was gaining rapidly.

In and out of the trees, stumbling over creepers and into ditches, Trimble raced on, panting and gasping. After a hundred yards of it, Baggy dropped the tin of biscuits. Grimes stopped to pick it up, and then he tore on again in pursuit, still yelling.

But his brief halt had given Trimble a new lease of life, so to speak. A moment after that a new danger threatened Baggy, however.

Entering a clearing in the woods, Baggy almost ran right into a sturdy form in velveteens, carrying a heavy, double-barrelled gun.

"Ow! Oh crikey!"

Trimble left the keeper staring, and tore on, the ham clutched by the narrow, bony end in his fat fist.

"Stop 'im!" howled Grimes. "Stop that bloke! He's pinched my 'am—some 'am for the 'ouse, Mister Jubb!"

Mr. Jubb seemed to understand then.

"Stop!" roared the keeper. "Stop, you scoundrel!"

But Trimble did not stop. And the keeper thereupon rammed his gun to his shoulder and fired in the air.

Bang, bang!

Both barrels went off, and the terrific reports echoed through the woods. The hapless Trimble fairly shrieked. But he did not stop; he was far too terrified for that. The gun had only been loaded with blank cartridge, and the keeper had merely fired to frighten Baggy into stopping. But of that Trimble was entirely ignorant, and fear lent him wings. He flew!

Grimes went after him again, the keeper lumbering behind and whistling shrilly.

Trimble imagined the whistling was to call other keepers

to the chase, and he shivered. But he still tore on—to drop the ham did not occur to him. Besides, Trimble was thinking of dinner, and he was still an optimist.

It was a forlorn hope, however, though a few seconds later his luck served him well enough. He slowed down suddenly on coming to a stream—the same stream Trimble had drawn water from that morning.

For some moments now the fat youth had been keeping to a well-defined path, and now he saw a narrow plank facing him, crossing the stream.

Trimble risked everything and raced over it; his feet scarcely seemed to touch wood. He was across in a flash, and then the brain-wave struck him.

He stopped suddenly, and grasping the plank, tugged with might and main, dropping the ham to do so.

of pursuit now. Evidently the stream had proved rather a stumbling-block to progress for Grimes and the keeper. At all events, Trimble neither saw nor heard them again, and a couple of minutes later he struck the cart-track.

The slope of the ground showed him the way to follow it, and in another minute he sighted the caravan through the trees.

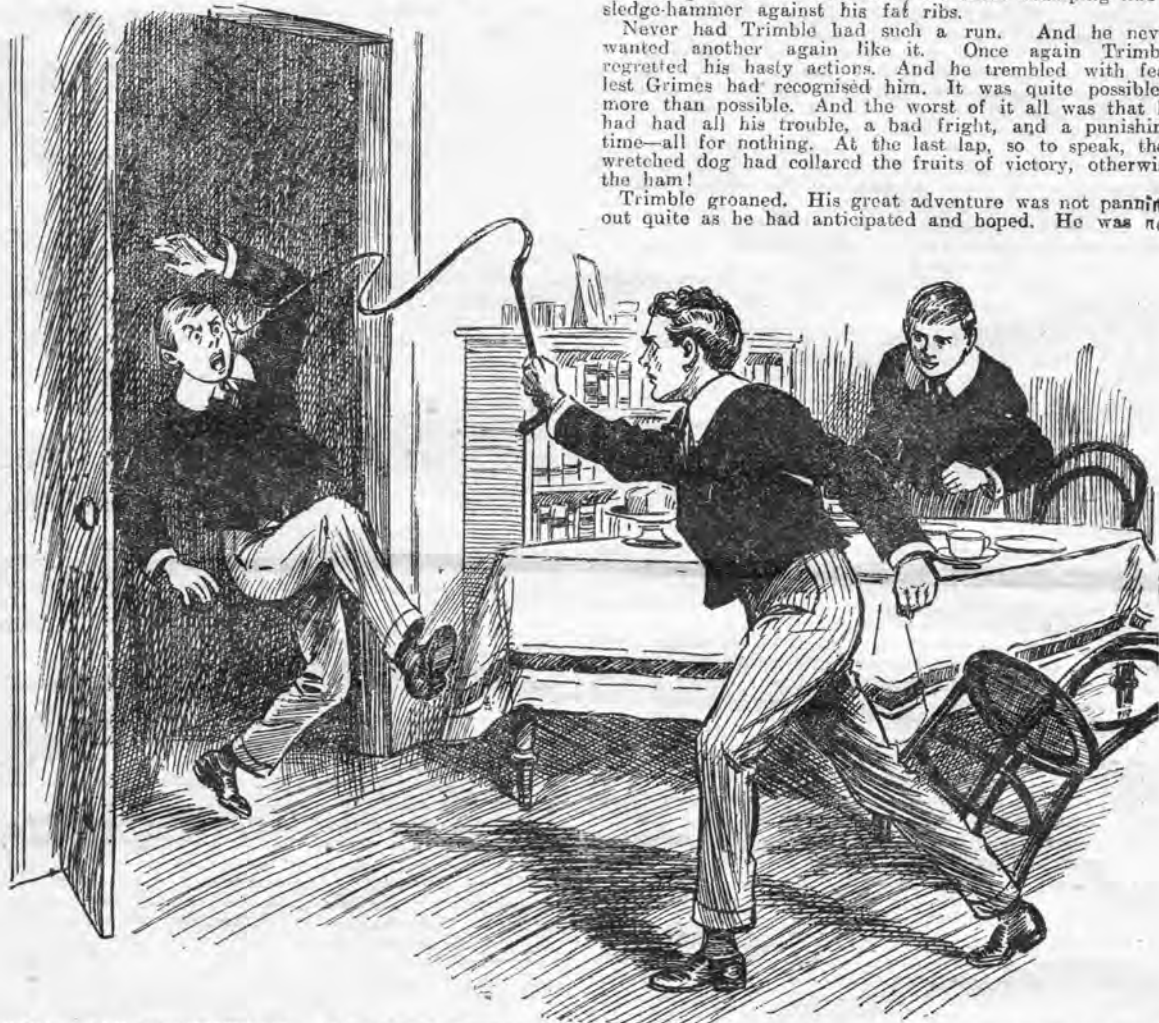
Never had there been a more welcome sight to Baggy Trimble.

He tottered up to the van, unlocked the door, and simply flung himself inside. Then he locked the door again and dropped on the first bunk, panting as if for a wager, and on the verge of collapse with sheer exhaustion.

He lay there and gasped and panted, the perspiration streaming down his fat cheeks, his heart thumping like a sledge-hammer against his fat ribs.

Never had Trimble had such a run. And he never wanted another again like it. Once again Trimble regretted his hasty actions. And he trembled with fear lest Grimes had recognised him. It was quite possible—more than possible. And the worst of it all was that he had had all his trouble, a bad fright, and a punishing time—all for nothing. At the last lap, so to speak, that wretched dog had collared the fruits of victory, otherwise the ham!

Trimble groaned. His great adventure was not panning out quite as he had anticipated and hoped. He was not



"Get out!" roared Wildrake. The Canadian junior grabbed his riding-whip from the corner of the study, and cracked it like a pistol shot. George Alfred Grundy gave a yell, as the lash came within an inch of his nose. "You dangerous madman!" he roared. (See Chapter 9.)

The plank loosened and dropped into the stream with a splash. Trimble grasped his precious ham again and raced on. And it was just at that moment his luck failed him, and he understood why the keeper had been whistling.

He heard a sudden yapping behind him, and, glancing round with a thrill of utter dismay, he glimpsed a patch of black-and-white tearing through the trees after him.

It was a terrier—the keeper's dog—and from the sound it was an irritable, unpleasant animal. Trimble thought so, at all events, and he fairly shook with fright.

"Yarooogh! Keepimoff!!" he shrieked. "Oh crikey!"

The terrier came rushing up, tearing through the ferns and long grass. Trimble gave another glance behind, and then, with a groan, he turned and flung the ham at the dog.

It missed the terrier; but the animal pulled up, undecided whether to go on chasing Trimble or stop and investigate the ham. Then he smelled the ham, and the temptation proved too strong for him.

The yapping and yelping ceased as if by magic, and Trimble tore on desperately. But he could hear no sounds

only getting even less grub than he had got at St. Jim's, but he had, so far, had more exercise as well. That terrific race was enough to last him for terms. Still, as he reflected bitterly, he had escaped the lickings, and he had escaped the exam—or would do! And that, after all, had been his main object in plunging into his great adventure.

So Trimble lay and consoled himself with that thought. But he did not venture to put his nose outside the caravan door again that morning.

CHAPTER 11.

Scouts on the Trail!

"NO news, Tommy?"

Blake asked the question anxiously. Tom Merry shook his head.

"I've just asked Kildare," he said quietly. "They've had the police on the job, and the Head's been on the phone to various places—Wayland Junction and Rylcombe Station. But it's no good! And the Head's ques-

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tioned all the fellows who were on the river yesterday. It's no good! The whole business is a mystery. Trimble's clean vanished!"

"You—you don't think—" Arthur Augustus broke off, leaving the question unspoken.

"No, I don't!" said Tom emphatically. "I don't believe the Head or Railton does, either. But don't start worrying, Gussy, old man! In any case, it wasn't your fault any more than ours."

"That's so," said Blake quietly. "Pull your socks up, Gussy! Trimble will turn up yet—safe and sound, and more troublesome than ever!"

"I wish I could think so, dear boys!" muttered Arthur Augustus. "It is all vewy extraordinary, and feafully wowwyin', bai Jove. I cannot forget that I was chasin' Twimble, and if he did—"

"Cheese it, Gussy!" growled Blake. "That's rot! I tell you Trimble will turn up sooner or later safe and sound!"

"Hear, hear!" came a cool voice. "Allow me to express my complete agreement, Blake! Like me, you appear to know the character of the beast! Trimble will turn up! It's not a cheering reflection, I must admit. But Trimble wasn't born to meet a wet end."

"Weally, Cardew—" said Tom.

Ralph Reckness Cardew chuckled as he joined the group of juniors in the quad. It was just after dinner, and the chums were the first out of the dining-hall.

"You think he's safe enough, then, Cardew?" said Tom Merry, eyeing Cardew's smiling face curiously.

"I'm certain, dear man!"

"What makes you think so?" demanded Blake. "Many of us think he's safe enough somewhere, but you seem jolly sure of it!"

"I am," said Cardew coolly. "He may return to-day, and he may return to-morrow. It all depends."

"Depends on what, ass?" said Tom Merry, irritated by Cardew's smile. "I'm blessed if I can see anything to grin at in the business, Cardew."

"That's because you've such a short memory," remarked Cardew. "But if you want to know what Trimble's return depends on, I should say myself, the general knowledge exam. Trimble will make a speedy return the giddy moment he knows the exam's over. See?"

"Bai Jove!"

"Think it over," yawned Cardew. "The fact that dear old Ernest and Sidney and me and Grundy and Wilkins and Gunn and Wildrake and you little lot and old Linton, are thirsting for Trimble's gore may also affect the time of his giddy return, you know. But I fancy he'll turn up when the exam's over, and when he feels we've all forgiven and forgotten, with a brand new string of wonderful whoppers to account for his giddy disappearing act. Think it over, dear men!"

And Cardew strolled away, whistling.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus. "Weally, Cardew must be potty, you know."

"Silly ass!" grunted Herries.

"Hold on!" breathed Tom Merry. "There—there's something in what Cardew says, after all. You fellows remember what a funk Baggy was in over the exam. He asked us if we thought it was any good going sick, and he's been banking all along on dodging the thing somehow. Supposing he—"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—" said Jack Blake, his eyes gleaming with sudden excitement. "Great pip! Supposing the fat beggar is spoofing everybody all the time—hiding away somewhere? You're right, Tommy. He's been gassing about that exam for long enough! He's fairly had the wind up about it. He's as tricky as they make 'em. But—would the funk dare—"

"He'd dare all right," said Tom Merry frowning. "But I'm blessed if I can see how he'd work it. But we mustn't overlook the possibility for all that."

"Wubbish!" said Arthur Augustus. "I weally do not think it quite decent to be so suspicious about poor old Twimble at a time like this. However, I have been thinkin', dear boys, and I have a suggestion to make."

"Bottle it, old chap," said Blake soothingly. "Keep it until some other time. Your giddy suggestions always improve with keeping—especially with keeping to yourself, old chap."

"Weally, Blake—" said Tom Merry.

"Let's hear it, Gussy," laughed Tom Merry.

"Vewy well, Tom Mewwy," said Arthur Augustus, with a frigid glare at Blake. "My suggestion is this—that we ask the Head to allow us to go on a scoutin' expedition this afternoon in search of Twimble—twy to twack his footprints—if those weally were his footprints."

"Jove! That's a jolly good idea, Gussy!" snapped Tom Merry.

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"Good wheeze!" agreed Manners. "Kildare and the seniors have had a go and failed. Let's show 'em what the St. Jim's Scouts can do!"

"Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings—" murmured Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah, you wottah—" began Gussy hotly.

"Never mind, Gussy, it's a jolly good suggestion," said Lowther. "Better than lessons, anyway. But will the Head give permission?"

"We can only ask!" said Tom. "I'll run in and see Railton now. Goodness knows where Trimble is, but it's quite possible he's lying hurt somewhere—perhaps broken a leg and can't move. The Head can't refuse if I suggest that, and it's quite likely."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Tom Merry hurried away. He was gone ten minutes and more, but when he returned to his chums his face was satisfied.

"All serene!" he said. "Railton backed me up, and the Head agreed after a bit. He thinks it possible Trimble is lying injured somewhere, and he's beginning to get jolly upset about it all."

"It's a go, then?"

"Yes; we're free until call-over," said Tom. "I've given my word to see the job's done properly, and you chaps must back me up. No lessons for the Scouts this afternoon, and the exam's postponed."

The news was received with general satisfaction by the Scouts—with envy by the non-Scouts! They were eager enough to hunt for the missing Trimble, but they were also eager to escape lessons for the afternoon!

Tom Merry quickly got to work, and within half an hour the Scouts were ready and the captain of the Shell led his men in marching order through the gates and out into the lane. Most of them had brought with them sandwiches and lemonade in their haversacks, though many intended to slip into the village for tea.

Tom's idea was to make a start in the search from the spot where Trimble had escaped from Arthur Augustus, and accordingly the juniors cut across country, making for the Priory Woods. The Head had phoned to the Priory for permission to search the woods already, and though Captain Jackson was away, Mrs. Jackson had willingly given the required permission.

"But we've got to keep away from the game preserves, mind!" warned Tom Merry, as they reached the towing-path and marched along four abreast. "Remember that, Grundy. None of your fatheaded tricks!"

"Eh?" snorted Grundy indignantly. "Well, I like that. Why, for two pins—"

"Silence in the ranks!"

There was a chuckle, and Grundy subsided, breathing hard.

A little later the tow-path narrowed to a mere strip of pathway where the Priory Woods came down almost to the water's edge, and soon after that Tom Merry called a halt as he recognised the spot where they had tethered the boats the previous afternoon.

"Here we are, chaps!" he called out. "Now, Wildrake, old chap, this is where you take lead. Hold on, and I'll show you where we believe Trimble climbed ashore."

He led Wildrake to the spot where they had found the wet footprints, and Wildrake took a very few seconds to grasp the facts—and he soon proved they were indeed facts. He took from his pocket a shoe—an old shoe of Trimble's.

"I came prepared, you see," he smiled. "Be prepared, you know. I guess that's a good motto! Now we'll see!"

Some of the footprints were still very clear, and Wildrake gently tried the shoe on them. The sole of the shoe fitted the prints perfectly.

"No need to follow the tracks!" said Blake grimly. "We know where they lead—to the dashed spot where we spread the cloth for the picnic."

The captain of the Shell nodded, and the juniors tramped on through the trees. They reached the spot where the ill-fated picnic should have been held, and there the first real difficulty was struck. The grass was trampled by numerous feet; moreover, it was short; the imprints were scarcely discernible. Even Wildrake was baffled.

"We shall have to spread out, and trust to luck," said Tom Merry. "It's no good trying to follow these tracks any farther."

Under his direction each of the Scouts took a different direction, agreeing to "sing out" if anything was discovered.

Barely had the juniors separated when the silence of the woods was broken by a wild yell in the tones of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Yawwooh!"

"What the—"

Through the trees the startled juniors rushed pell-mell, quickly reaching the scene of the commotion. They found

Arthur Augustus, his noble face a picture of anguish, being helped out of a prickly bramble-bush by a man in velveteens, evidently a keeper.

It was not hard to conjecture what had happened. With his eyes on the ground, and totally oblivious of his surroundings, Gussy had been careering along like a blood-hound on the scent. His collision with the keeper had been unavoidable and terrific, and the swell of St. Jim's found himself sprawling on a sea of prickles.

"Owl! Grooh!" he gasped.

"Sorry, young gent," said the keeper, as he hauled the groaning Gussy on to terra firma once more, "but you should have looked where you was goin'!" He turned to the grinning juniors. "You the Scouts as 'ave been given permission to search these woods?" he demanded.

"Yes. But what the thump—"

"It's all right," grinned the keeper, as he caught the juniors' eyes fixed on his gun.

"There's some darned sneak-thief about these woods, an' I mean to catch 'im."

"By Jingo, I wonder—" began Tom Merry.

"I lost 'im this mornin'," said the keeper grimly. "He'd tried to rob a village kid as was bringing groceries to the house. We chased 'im, but he got away, blow 'im!"

"What—what was he like?" demanded Tom Merry.

"A real desprit character," said Mr. Judd, drawing on his imagination, "and a regular ruffian he looked, too! He pinched a ham and a tin of biscuits, but he dropped the tin o' biscuits and chucked the ham at my dog. But, excuse me, young gents, I wants to catch him."



And Mr. Jubb hurried on, looking very grim.

"And we want to catch Trimble!" said Blake. "Come on."

Tom Merry nodded, and the Scouts started off at a run, spreading out again as they went at Tom's order. They raked the undergrowth swiftly, and suddenly Tom Merry halted as they came out into a clearing—the clearing where the caravan stood.

"What the thump—"

"All right," said Tom. "It must be the caravan belonging to those chaps Glyn knows—nephews of Captain Jackson. We'll give them a call as we come back to see if they've seen anything of Trimble."

And Tom hurried on again, his chums at his heels. But they reached the end of the woods at last, without seeing anything of a figure in white. This was not very surprising considering the fact that the figure in white just then was lying in one of the bunks of the van, with blankets covering his head, his heart palpitating against his fat ribs.

"Doesn't seem much life about the place," remarked Tom, as they came back to the caravan encampment. "I'll make a call, though, and see if those chaps have seen anything of Trimble."

And Tom, followed by half a dozen of the Scouts,

approached the door of the van and knocked sharply. There was no answer. Inside the van the hapless Baggy Trimble shivered and shook under the blankets. He had locked the door safely enough; but the close proximity of the juniors scared him out of his fat wits.

"Nobody at home," said Blake. "Must have gone up to the house. We'll see 'em later perhaps."

"Right-ho!" said Tom. "But now Wildrake's found more proof that the fat spoofer isn't drowned, I fancy we shan't need to do much more searching. The fat spoofer will turn up to-night sure enough."

"When he thinks the exam's over," chuckled Lowther. "What a cheery surprise for him when he does turn up to find it's been postponed."

"That's if the fat idiot is staying away for that reason," said Tom Merry grimly. "But we're certain of nothing yet. Let's get on with the job."



As P.-o. Crump placed a ponderous hand on his shoulder, Baggy Trimble, electrified into sudden action, gave one startled gasp, and then, dodging the arm of the law, made a frantic leap out into the street and fairly flew. (See Chapter 12.)

And the Scouts left the encampment to get on with the search, little dreaming how near they had been to their quarry, and little dreaming that he had overheard every word of their remarks.

But the juniors soon found that picking up the fugitive's trail in the tangled masses of ferns and creepers was a hopeless job. Finally, when Kit Wildrake had confessed himself completely baffled, the St. Jim's Scouts gave it up as a bad job. While most of them returned to the school, tired and hungry, Tom Merry & Co. made for the village tuck-shop, there to dispose of the remittance Arthur Augustus had received that morning.

CHAPTER 12.

Baggy bunks!

"O H dear!"

Baggy Trimble groaned loud and deep.

It had come as a severe shock to him to learn that he was not believed to be drowned after all, and that the juniors were searching for him in the Priory Woods.

But for the hard fact that the exam had been postponed—serious news for Baggy—he felt he would have risked all and gone back to the fold. He could have told the yarn that he had lost his memory and had been wandering about all night. But even then Baggy had a dismal feeling that he would never be believed. Some people were so beastly suspicious!

There seemed nothing left for it but to stick it out—for another night and day, at least. Possibly the exam would take place on the morrow. Also by the morrow he would have evolved in his imaginative mind a suitable and bullet-proof story to tell.

But there was one big trouble—one very serious drawback that no amount of optimistic reflections would banish.

It was the grave and terrific problem of grub.

For the larder was empty—or as good as empty. Before dinner Baggy had heroically resolved to eat only half of the pressed beef, and to keep the rest for another meal.

But his tyrannical appetite had made short work of the resolve—likewise the tin of pressed beef. Every scrap had gone, every morsel of bread likewise. There was nothing left even for Baggy's tea.

And he was nearly famished! It really was a tragic situation. The fly in the ointment was assuming the size of an elephant.

Something had to be done. At all costs and at all risks he would have to get some grub from somewhere!

"Oh dear!" groaned Baggy again.

For nearly a couple of hours after the voices of the searching Scouts had died away Baggy had remained on the bunk, too scared to move. But now he rolled on to the floor with a groan, and went to the window and peeped cautiously out. Save for a couple of blackbirds squabbling on the grass, the clearing was silent and deserted.

"I'll have to risk it," groaned Baggy. "Those interfering beasts have gone now—they got permission to miss class to search for me, I suppose. Oh crumbs! I am in a hole! But I've got to get grub from somewhere!"

Trimble had long ago come to that conclusion; but it had taken him a long time to reach a decision on the subject. He had reached one now, however, and he set about the preparation of carrying it out. He had no intention of being abroad in those dark, eerie woods after dusk.

So Baggy hurriedly got to work. He found a blazer in a locker, and he put it on, though it would scarcely button round his ample proportions. Then he stuck a Panama hat on his bullet head.

But Baggy had no intention of going out like that. He knew that inquiries must have been made in the village, and he realised he would have to go disguised.

Luck aided the fat youth just then, for he found a pair of huge horn-rimmed spectacles in a locker, and with a faint grin Baggy jammed them on his podgy little nose. Then, looking round the van for further aids to disguise, a brilliant idea struck him. Stooping quickly, he pulled some hairs from the matting on the floor. In a few minutes, with the aid of a mirror and a tube of seccotine, he had assumed a pair of bushy eyebrows and a very creditable beard and moustache.

The result was truly remarkable. Fat and podgy as his cheeks were, and ample and conspicuous as were his proportions, nobody would have recognised Baggy as Baggy unless they looked very closely.

Certainly the disguise was obvious enough from a distance of a yard, but Baggy was satisfied.

He gave a last look at himself in the glass, and then, unable to restrain a chuckle, he left the van and locked it up. Then, making quite sure the coast was clear, he hurried away, making a bee-line for the village.

He made an effort to assume a jaunty air, but it was hardly a success. He hadn't a penny in his pockets, and he had good reason to know the difficulty of trying to get tick—even under his own name. Under a perfect stranger's name he knew he would find it a difficult task indeed.

"I think I'll say the grub's for Tom Merry, or Blake, or Gussy," mused Trimble, as he rolled through the wood. "Gussy would be best, I think; everybody knows he's got plenty of tin, and everybody knows he's a mug. I'll try that dodge, anyway. These beastly tradespeople are so suspicious, though!"

Trimble was not forgetting all that had happened that day, and he kept his eyes open very warily as he made his way through the trees. He found the spectacles little trouble, for he simply looked over them instead of through them.

It was while he was blinking about him warily that his beady, sharp eyes caught the glint of metal by the side of the track. And as Trimble was a fellow always on the look out for something for nothing, he naturally stopped to investigate.

He fairly gasped as he discovered what it was. Caught deep in a bramble-bush was a watch and chain—a beautiful gold watch, and very clearly an expensive one.

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"Mum-my hat!" gasped Trimble. "How the thump did a thing like that get there? Phew! I—I know that watch! It—it's old Gussy's!"

The next moment Trimble realised that it was, indeed, Gussy's celebrated gold hunter. The initials, "A.A.D'A.," were inscribed upon the back of it.

"My hat! He—he must have dropped it when he was searching for me with the other beasts," murmured Trimble. The fat junior drew a deep breath.

"I think I'd better take care of this—nothing else to do," he murmured, his eyes gleaming. "My hat! It might have been left there all night, and perhaps for ever! Or perhaps some dishonest chap might have come along and stolen it. Jolly good job I found it for old Gussy!"

He placed the watch carefully in his pocket. But as he tramped along, Trimble's mind was hard at work.

"Findings are keepings, and some fellows would keep it," he murmured to himself. "But not me! But—but I might easily lose it, and I daren't give it up to anyone but Gussy. It would be safe with old Firestone—safe as houses. If he gave me a little loan on it until I can take it back to Gussy there'd be no harm done. Gussy often lends me money and things, and this would be practically the same—in fact, it would be the same. By Jingo! I'll do it—for dear old Gussy's sake! I should never forgive myself if it got lost!"

It was really most remarkable how Baggy Trimble could accommodate his conscience to his desires. Indeed, by a queer process of mental reasoning Trimble always succeeded in persuading himself that he was doing exactly the right thing at the right moment—for himself. That was really the only thing that mattered to Trimble.

Not that Trimble really understood what he was doing—far from it. More fool than knave, he rarely saw past his nose, especially when it wasn't convenient.

So by the time Baggy had reached Rylcombe—it was not far to the village, and by following the cart-track Trimble knew he couldn't miss it—Baggy had definitely solved the harrowing problem of the serious shortage of grub.

At least, he imagined he had. A small loan of a couple of pounds from the accommodating and obliging Mr. Firestone would put that matter right. And meanwhile Mr. Firestone would take care of the watch for him, giving Baggy a small ticket as a sort of receipt.

Mr. Firestone was not a prepossessing gentleman, and he certainly did not inspire a feeling of trust. But Baggy was quite prepared to trust him now with Gussy's watch. Certainly St. Jim's fellows were not supposed to be seen entering Mr. Firestone's shop; but then Trimble was disguised, so that point was of no consequence.

The shop was in a side street just off the High Street, and Baggy made his way to it by skirting the towing-path and dodging up the side street.

So far he had not seen a soul that he knew, and nobody had taken particular notice of him, though he certainly looked a freak.

"Now for it!" murmured Baggy, reaching the shop at length. "I'll just get the job done, and then I'll cut over to Mother Murphy's for a good supply of grub. Better not risk old Sands, in case young Grimey spots this clobber."

For a couple of seconds Baggy glanced up and down the street rather stealthily, and then he dived into the shop. It was unfortunate he did this to begin with, for Mr. Firestone, who was a very sharp gentleman indeed, happened to be looking out of the window, and he spotted Baggy's caution at once.

It was not unusual for people to enter his shop rather stealthily, for few people care to be seen entering a pawnbroker's establishment. But there was something distinctly strange about Baggy Trimble's appearance altogether.

And when Baggy stood before him a moment later Mr. Firestone's sharp eyes went a trifle sharper as he saw the moustache and eyebrows.

Moreover, Baggy did not look quite the dandy he imagined himself to be. His Panama, though obviously a good one, looked as if it had been slept in—as it actually had. And the flannel bags were rumpled and dirty. Altogether, Baggy looked a decided queer and suspicious character.

"Well?" asked Mr. Firestone.

"The—the fact is," said Trimble, losing his nerve a little, "I happen to be in temporary need of a little ready cash. How much will you give me on this?"

And coming to the point a little sooner than he had intended, Baggy laid the watch on the counter. Mr. Firestone looked at it, and then he looked at Baggy—very keenly.

"How much d'you want?" he asked.

"A couple of quid, I thought," said Baggy, a trifle uneasily. "But—but—"

For a brief instant a greedy look came into Mr. Firestone's eyes; but just as quickly it vanished again, and his eyes became rather hard. In his professional capacity Mr.

Firestone had taken risks before, and it had brought him unpleasant visits from the police.

"These your initials on the case?" he asked. Trimble hesitated. But after all, Gussy would never know; he might just as well give the name—so long as it wasn't his own, of course.

"Er—yes; oh, yes!" said Baggy. "A.A.D.A.—that's me. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, you know."

The pawnbroker gave another glance at the bushy eyebrows, moustache, and beard of the weird figure before him, and his sharp eyes gleamed.

"Old on a minute," he said. "I shall 'ave to examine it." Mr. Firestone passed through into a room at the back. A moment or two later a rather frowsy youth came out, and, strolling to the door, he took his stand there. Baggy thought it strange, and he felt a trifle uneasy. Then Baggy heard the telephone-bell ring slightly within.

Another few moments passed, and then Mr. Firestone emerged into the shop.

"'Ave to wait a few minutes," he said smoothly. "The

CHAPTER 13

Was It Trimble?

"WELL, I feel a bit better now, chaps," remarked Jack Blake, as the chums of the School House left Mother Murphy's little shop. "What's the giddy time, somebody? I left my turnip in my other clobber."

"One moment, deah boy," smiled Arthur Augustus, fumbling in his Scout's shirt. "Luckily I brough't my— Oh, gweat Scott!"

"What the merry dickens—"

"My watch!" gasped Gussy frantically.

"Well, what—"

"It's gone!" shrieked the swell of St. Jim's. "My tickah has gone! I must have lost it!"

"Well, my hat!" exclaimed Blake. "And do you mean to tell me that you were ass enough to bring your twenty guinea gold hunter out scouting?"



CHATTY PARS ABOUT FOOTBALL AND FOOTBALLERS.

IN the search for centre-forwards young lads get their chance. Brown, of Sheffield United, played for England when he was only eighteen. Albert Shepherd, and now Dixie Dean, have both played for England at the age of twenty.

The referee who persists in turning a blind eye to offences committed by footballers may be said to be looking for trouble.

To Charlie Buchan, of the Arsenal, stands a creditable goal-scoring record. He is the only present-day player who has scored twenty or more goals in First Division games for six seasons in succession. Buchan did this when with Sunderland.

Williams, the trainer of Sunderland, was at one time a world's half-mile champion runner. As he has been trainer at Sunderland for twenty-one years, he is clearly a stayer as well as a sprinter.

It is often said that a club which is in danger of losing its place in the League should never try to keep in the Cup competition. Last season Cardiff City had only won two of their previous nine matches when they played the Third Round. After getting through the Cup-tie they did not lose a League match for nearly two months. There's nothing succeeds like success.

At one period this season players of Blackburn Rovers missed eight penalty kicks in succession. As these kicks are supposed to be easy to score from, one of our readers suggests that the players who failed ought to be "shot" on the "spot."

Riley, the Liverpool goalkeeper, is an International water-polo player. He says that some of the pitches on which he has played football this season have enabled him to get good water-polo practice.

Recently the players of South Shields, when appearing at Manchester, went from their hotel to the ground by ordinary tramcar. Yet some folk talk about the professional footballer being wrapped in cotton-wool. Still, they are on the right "lines" for saving money.

Hopkin, the Liverpool outside-left, is the only regular member of the present team who had experience of First Division football before joining the club.

Bury have now two Bradshaws in their side, and the suggestion is that these fellows certainly ought to be able to guide the team to victory. In any event, the players should never miss the train.

Manchester United's goalkeeper, Richardson, has one idea of his own. When his side has a throw-in near to his goal he advances to the edge of the penalty area, for the ball to be thrown to him. It's a risky game, though.

The Derby County team which played in January was different in ten cases from the side which opened the season last August. Evidently some people at Derby believe in "swopping horses" when half-way across the stream.

If Everton win the championship this season their goalkeeper, Ted Taylor, will get his fourth championship medal. He got three with Huddersfield.

Sandy Mutch, who used to keep goal for Huddersfield, was said to possess the biggest hands of any player. They used to be referred to as "Sandy's Shovels." He could pick up a full-sized and tightly blown-up football with one hand.

watch is being examined. Must have cost you a bit," he added.

"Heaps," said Baggy.

"And you want two pounds for it?" said Mr. Firestone.

"I—"

Mr. Firestone paused, and gave a quick nod towards Baggy Trimble as a burly shadow loomed in the doorway to the accompaniment of a heavy tread.

"There he is, Mister Crump!" he said. "Caught red-handed, I reckon!"

"Oh dear!"

Baggy jumped. He wheeled round, and he almost fell down as P.-c. Crump—for it was the village policeman—placed a heavy, ponderous hand on his fat shoulder.

It was just a trifle too slow and ponderous, as it happened.

Baggy was usually very slow-witted, but just then he seemed to be electrified into action by the sudden realisation of his horrid plight.

He gave one startled gasp, and then, dodging the arm of the law, and butting the frowsy assistant in the waistbelt, he made a frantic leap out into the street.

Then he fairly flew.

"Yaas. You—you see—"

"Oh, you awful ass!" gasped Tom Merry.

"You—you see," stammered Gussy, his noble face going pale and then pink, "it is weally the only watch I have that I can absolutely wely on. And now— Oh, gweat Scott! It's gone!"

He hurriedly went through his pockets. It was undoubtedly gone—gone like a beautiful dream!

"Oh dear!" groaned Arthur Augustus. "I must have dropped it out of my shirt when I was bowled ovah in the woods. We must go back and search for it at once, deah boys!"

"Well, you—you idiot!"

"You fathead!"

"You—you chump!" gasped Tom Merry. "First Trimble, and now Gussy's twenty-guinea gold watch. I bet— Hallo! What—what—"

The juniors turned round abruptly, in some alarm, as a sudden outcry sounded along the street. They were just in time to see a strange figure race out into the main street,

with a hatless, greasy-looking gentleman, a frowsy-looking youth, and P.-c. Crump in hot pursuit.

"Stop thief!"

The howl was quite enough for Tom Merry & Co.

"Back up!" yelled Tom.

But the extraordinary, fat form in flannel bags was scud-ding along at a terrific speed, and he was upon Tom Merry & Co. before they could "back up."

"Look out! Stop him!"

Tom Merry at least did his best. He was nearest when the bespectacled youth came pounding up, and he made a frantic jump and a clutch.

The fleeing youth dodged desperately; and Tom Merry overbalanced and fell full-length in the street, with a gasping yell.

The next moment the criminal—if he was that—was past, fleeing for his life.

"Stop thief! After him!"

A dozen voices were yelling now, and Blake and the rest tore in pursuit. Blake was first, and he gained rapidly. But luck was to favour the fugitive.

Fifty yards down the street a tradesman's bicycle stood at the kerb, and the fugitive made a rush for it. He dragged it away, leaped desperately into the saddle, and next instant was driving at the pedals.

Blake raced up and grabbed at the saddle just as the bike shot away, and the leader of the Fourth did as Tom Merry had done—he went down, with a crash and a howl.

The bike fairly whizzed down the street, and before any-one else could attempt to stop it it vanished from sight round the winding village street.

For another twenty yards the juniors raced in pursuit, and then they realised that the chase was hopeless, and they stopped running, panting and breathless.

Just then P.-c. Crump pounded up, and he also followed their example and came to a halt. Running after a whizzing bicycle was not much in P.-c. Crump's line at all.

"Poof!" He panted and blew. "The—the scoundrel! But we'll 'ave him soon as I can get on the telephone, my lads!"

He mopped his perspiring brow.

"What happened?" said Tom Merry, hurrying up, hugging his nose. "What had the chap done? And who—?"

"He gave his name as D'Arcy," explained Mr. Firestone, as he joined the constable. "Likely yarn! But they was the initials on the watch, right enough."

"Oh, bai Jove!"

"Wha-at?"

"Great pip!"

"He—he gave my name?" shrieked Arthur Augustus.

"This young gent's name is D'Arcy, Mister Firestone," grunted P.-c. Crump, indicating the swell of St. Jim's.

"Which I knows 'im well—'im being up at the school."

"Then—then the watch—" stammered the bewildered Mr. Firestone.

"If you'll let this young gent see it, Mister Firestone—" said P.-c. Crump. "That is if so be as Master D'Arcy 'as lost a watch."

"Gweat Scott! I certainly have lost my watch—I lost it in the Pwiowy woods this aftahnoon, and— Bai Jove! That is it!"

Mr. Firestone had produced the watch from his pocket, and he showed it very cautiously.

"That's it!" chuckled Blake. "That's Gussy's giddy ticker right enough! That merchant found it, I suppose, and tried to pop it."

"Bai Jove! What a vewy extwaordinawy and lucky thing! I am vewy much obliged indeed to you, Mr. Firestone," said Gussy gratefully.

"But—but—"

"Ere, 'old on, young gents!" said P.-c. Crump, with dignity. "This 'ere affair wants lookin' into in private. This way!"

And the portly constable led the way into Mr. Sands' shop; and Mr. Sands, at his request, closed the door to keep the gaping crowd out. And there the matter was satisfactorily settled; and a few minutes later Gussy and his chums came out, smiling cheerfully, Gussy with his precious gold hunter restored to him.

"Well, my hat!" said Blake. "Who the thump could that merchant be? He gave your name, so he must have known you, Gussy."

"It was the same chap who pinched Grimey's groceries," said Tom Merry quietly. "While you were gassing to Crump I tackled young Grimes about it. He said the thief was a short, tubby chap in flannel bags. And if this chap's disguised himself and shoved on those specs—"

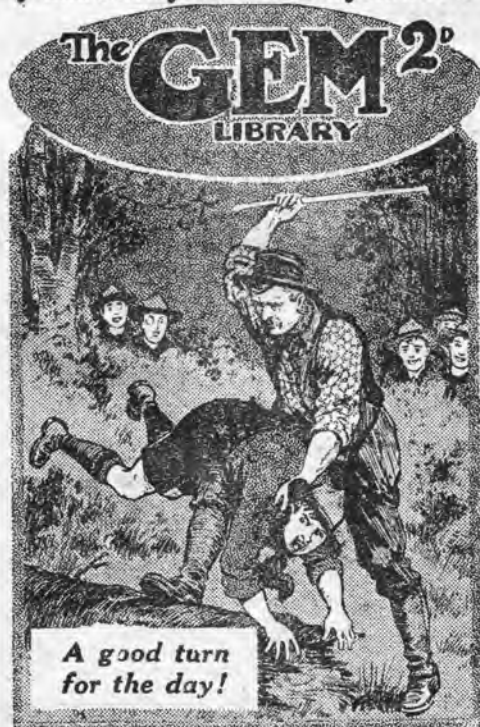
"A—a short, tubby chap," repeated Manners, eyeing Tom Merry's grim face fixedly. "I fancy you've got something in your mind, Tommy, and— My hat! I believe I can guess what it is!"

"What's that?" said Blake, staring.

"Hasn't it occurred to you?" said Tom Merry, his voice trembling with excitement. "Supposing that chap was dear old Baggy?"

(Continued on page 23.)

Grand Twenty-First Birthday Number!



A good turn
for the day!

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"ON THE TRAIL OF THE TRUANT!"

is the next long story of Tom Merry & Co.

"FOR the HONOUR of ROOKWOOD!"

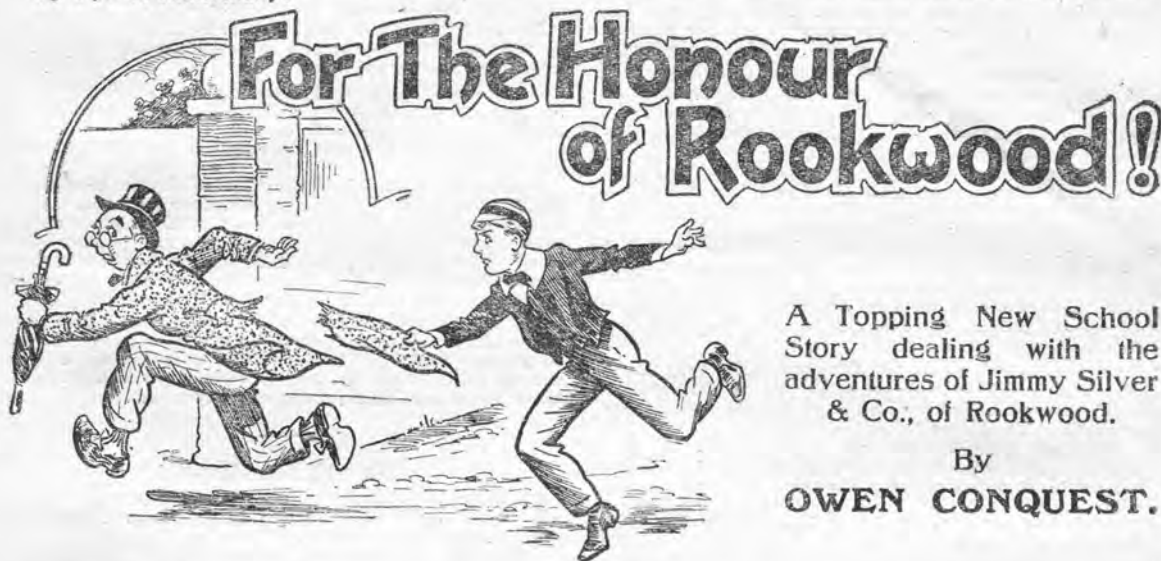
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BEGIN THIS HUMOROUS STORY OF SCHOOL LIFE TO-DAY, BOYS! IT'S THE GOODS!

SOFT AS THEY MAKE 'EM! James Montgomery Babbington's first day at Rookwood won't be forgotten by his schoolfellows for a long time. Babbington looks soft, is soft, and—well, you can bet your sweet life his leg is pulled unmercifully!



A Topping New School
Story dealing with the
adventures of Jimmy Silver
& Co., of Rookwood.

By
OWEN CONQUEST.

WHAT'S GONE BEFORE.

James Montgomery Babbington, a new boy for Rookwood, and a champion duffer, is met at Coombe Station by Pankley & Co., the chums of Bagshot School. With Jimmy Silver & Co., of Rookwood, in pursuit, Babbington is hauled away to Bagshot by the japers and locked in a coat-cupboard. The wrathful Rookwooders are baffled, and the new boy is finally returned from the enemy camp on a wheelbarrow and smothered in coal dust. Jimmy Silver & Co., return to Rookwood, determined to make the Bagshot bounders "sit up," at any cost.

(Now read on)

Two of a Kind!

WHEN the little party of Rookwooders, with James Montgomery Babbington in their midst, got back to school, the news of their defeat at the hands of Bagshot quickly spread.

Fellows swarmed round them as they tramped across the quad, and remarks sarcastic and facetious flew freely.

"Been havin' a pretty rough time, what?" said Adolphus Smythe, the elegant nut of the Shell, gazing at the dusty little party through his eyeglass with considerable disdain. "Let that chap Pankley put it across you again, I suppose? Blessed if I know what Rookwood's coming to, by gad! Ow-w-w!"

Adolphus Smythe had not meant to add this last exclamation. What made him do so was the fact that Lovell and Raby, as if moved by the same spring, grasped him and set him down on the hard quad with a considerable bump.

"Ow! Yow!" gasped Adolphus. "Hands off, you ruffians!"

"If you want us to wipe our boots on you, you've only got to make a few more funny remarks!" hissed Lovell.

"Good gad! Ow! Yow!"

The party passed on, leaving Adolphus gasping, but despite his fate, remarks continued to be frequent, and painful, and free.

"You ought to have taken me with you, Jimmy," drawled Valentine Mornington. "That chap Pankley's hot stuff, you know. A bit above your weight, evidently."

"Chuck it!" growled Jimmy Silver. "We couldn't help it. We—"

"Some leader—I don't think!" said Peele, of the Modern House, dodging out of the way just in time to escape a lunge from Tommy Dodd's fist.

"By the way, who is your new friend?" remarked Mornington, gazing at Babbington through his eyeglass.

"Oh, he's the new chump!" grunted Tommy Dodd.

"What's his name?" inquired Mornington, eyeing Babbington with languid interest.

"Blowed if I know," growled Tommy Dodd, "or care! He's a freak!"

"Oh!"

"And a fathead!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And a silly chump!"

"Quite a character!" grinned Mornington. "I suppose he is going into the Modern House?"

"I s'pose so, worse luck!" snorted Tommy Dodd. "He's that chump, Cuffy's cousin."

"Cuffy's cousin!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Two of 'em!"

"What a lark!"

There was a shout of laughter at once. Clarence Cuffy was the joke of Rookwood, and the thought that the new boy was his cousin struck the whole crowd of juniors as comic in the extreme.

During all this extremely personal conversation Babbington had not spoken a word. He gazed round upon the grinning company in mild surprise.

"Really, my dear fellows!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Just like that ass, Cuffy!"

"Really, I fail to see—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Babbington gave it up. Apparently the Rookwooders were determined to see something comic in him, so he wisely subsided. Blinking round through his spectacles, he suddenly espied his Cousin Clarence approaching.

"Here's Cuffy!" sang out Peele, with a grin. "Take him away, Cuffy! I suppose you can find him a spare strait-waistcoat somewhere?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Really, my dear Peele," said Clarence Cuffy reproachfully. "What will my Cousin Babbington think! He is not used to your rude manners, you know."

Peele turned pink.

"You silly ass!"

"Pray don't take any notice of Peele, my dear fellow!" said Cuffy, holding out his hand to Babbington, who grasped it. "Welcome to Rookwood, my dear fellow! Judging from your appearance, you seem to have been having a somewhat rough experience."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Babbington blinked at his cousin, who blinked back. Standing together, the two cousins looked almost exactly alike, and there was a fresh laugh from the juniors as they noted it.

"Yes, indeed! I really am somewhat confused," said Babbington. "It appears that I was conducted to the wrong scholastic establishment in error. But, however, it is all right now."

Amid a loud cackle of laughter from the hilarious juniors, the two cousins walked off together in the direction of the Modern House.

James Montgomery Babbington had arrived at last, and was safely under the wing of his Rookwood cousin. And, judging by their merriment, the Rookwooders had made up

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their minds in advance that James Montgomery would add appreciably to the gaiety of the old school.

Cuffy had already been informed that Babbington was to share his study, so it was to that little apartment in the Modern House that he took his cousin. They had been there but a few moments when the door opened and the head of Leggett, of the Modern Fourth, was projected into the study.

Leggett was a somewhat unpleasant and rather unpopular youth, who was always ready to lend money to impecunious juniors at an exorbitant rate of interest. Such fellows, though they undoubtedly have their uses, are usually not popular in public schools.

Leggett's face wore a grin as he looked into the study.

"Better cut along to see Bulkeley, Cuffy," he remarked, "and quick, too!"

Cuffy opened his eyes.

"Bulkeley, my dear Leggett! Why should you say that I should go in search of the estimable captain of the school?"

Leggett's grin became wider.

"Well, he was asking for you, that's all! I should buck up or you will catch it hot, young Cuffy! I am just telling you for your good, you know."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Clarence, quite distressed. "This is the first I have heard of it! I should be most reluctant to keep Bulkeley waiting. I will go at once, my dear Leggett. Thank you for telling me."

Leggett nodded, and disappeared.

"I must hasten off, James," said Clarence. "Doubtless Bulkeley will not detain me long, though I have no idea why he wishes to see me."

Clarence bustled off, and almost immediately Leggett's head reappeared round the door.

"Aren't you going down to have your tea?" he said, twisting his features into what he hoped was a pleasant expression. "You're the new fellow, aren't you?"

"Yes. My name is Babbington. I was thinking of waiting for my Cousin Cuffy."

Leggett grinned.

"Oh, I shouldn't do that. He may be a long time. Go down now. I will show you your sitting-room."

Babbington's eyes opened wide.

"My sitting-room! But I thought I was sharing this study with Cuffy."

"Oh, yes!" said Leggett hastily. "But you will have a private sitting-room at first as well. All new boys do."

"Dear me! I was not aware of that!" said Babbington.

"Ah, you have not been to school before," said Leggett, grinning. "Your tea will be in your room now. I will show you the way if you like."

"Thank you so much. I shall be glad of some tea," said Babbington eagerly.

"Follow me, then."

Leggett, trying to look serious, led the new boy down the passage and down the stairs.

Through a baize door they went, and then Leggett boldly led the way into a cosy room furnished as a study. It was empty, but on the polished table was set a tray containing a dainty tea reinforced by a dish of steaming poached eggs.

"Ah, here's your tea! They have put it ready," said Leggett airily; "so you'd better wire in right away!"

Babbington stood on the threshold of the cosy room and looked round appreciatively.

"Is this really my sitting-room?"

"Well, for the present," said Leggett hastily.

"And my tea?"

"Certainly."

"You will join me, then," said Babbington, advancing rather gingerly into the apartment.

"No, I'm afraid I can't," said Leggett quickly. "I've got some work to do. See you later, perhaps."

"Very well, then. Many thanks for showing me here!"

"Not at all! I hope you will have a good tea," said Leggett, keeping his gravity by a great effort. "Cheerio!" And he tripped out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Once outside, his face broke into a somewhat ill-natured grin, and he executed a sort of war-dance on the mat. Then he took the way he had come, and in five minutes had confided to half the juniors in the Modern House that Babbington, the new fellow, was in Mr. Manders' study, wolfing his Housemaster's tea!

Leggett had, naturally, found out something about Mr. Manders' movements before attempting to carry out this little joke. He was, as a matter of fact, going to the Housemaster's study with some lines, when he heard the tele-

phone-bell ring in the study. Immediately after, Mr. Manders had appeared and hurried out, evidently on his way to see the Head, or one of the other masters.

As Leggett had turned away he had observed the housemaid take Mr. Manders' tea into the study.

He knew, therefore, that the study was occupied only by the tea, so to speak, and this had led him to plan his scheme for pulling the new boy's leg.

He had had to lure Cuffy away by a false message at the beginning, but Leggett's conscience was very elastic in the matter of an untruth or two, and it gave him no qualms to think that he had sent the innocent Clarence on a wild-goose chase.

The Moderns roared at the idea of James Montgomery Babbington coolly demolishing Mr. Manders' tea. At the same time, some of the more thoughtful fellows wondered rather anxiously how the new junior would get out of the scrape he was in, for Mr. Manders was by no means a pleasant gentleman, and was cordially disliked by most of his House—and, indeed, by Rookwood in general.

His temper was uncertain and crusty at the best of times. When he suffered from indigestion—as he often did—he was, as Tommy Dodd put it, more like a Hun than a public schoolmaster. What Mr. Manders would say on this occasion when he returned to his study was a question!

Tea with Mr. Manders!

THE experiences he had been through on this, his first day at Rookwood, had made James Montgomery Babbington hungry.

He was, therefore, able to do full justice to the excellent tea so thoughtfully provided in Mr. Manders' study. He polished off the poached eggs in no time, and then started on the bread-and-butter and cake, and finished them, too. He was just toying with his third cup of tea and feeling more at peace with the world than he had leisure to feel for some time, when there was a hasty step in the passage outside, and an elderly, angular gentleman, with not too good-tempered a face, came unceremoniously into the study.

Mr. Manders—although James Montgomery Babbington did not know it was Mr. Manders—had returned!

At the sight of Babbington lying comfortably back in his own armchair, with the remnants of the tea on the table before him, Mr. Manders stopped and stared, transfixed. Over his somewhat harsh face came an expression which the fabled gorgon might have envied. For a moment Mr. Manders seemed bereft of speech.

There was a terrific silence.

Babbington stared back at the elderly gentleman somewhat uneasily. He had a feeling that something was wrong somewhere. Mr. Manders' expression was enough to tell him that. But what exactly was wrong James had no idea. All he knew was that this gentleman with the extraordinary expression had walked straight into his—Babbington's—sitting-room, and, in Babbington's opinion, it was up to him to welcome him politely.

He, therefore, rose from the chair with an ingratiating smile.

"Please come in, sir!" he remarked, in a mild voice.

"Won't you sit down?"

Mr. Manders, standing as if glued to the mat, struggling for breath, found his voice at last.

"Boy!" he gasped. "Boy! How dare you! Who—what—who are you?"

Babbington's eyes opened widely. He could see that the gentleman was apparently suffering from a state of suppressed excitement, and, though he had no idea of the cause of it, he sensed that it behoved him to walk warily. At that moment Mr. Manders looked decidedly dangerous.

"P-p-p-p-please, sir, my name is Babbington," he stutered—"James Montgomery Babbington!"

"Babbington!" roared Mr. Manders, in a voice which made Babbington jump almost clear of the floor. "Babbington! Then you are the new boy?"

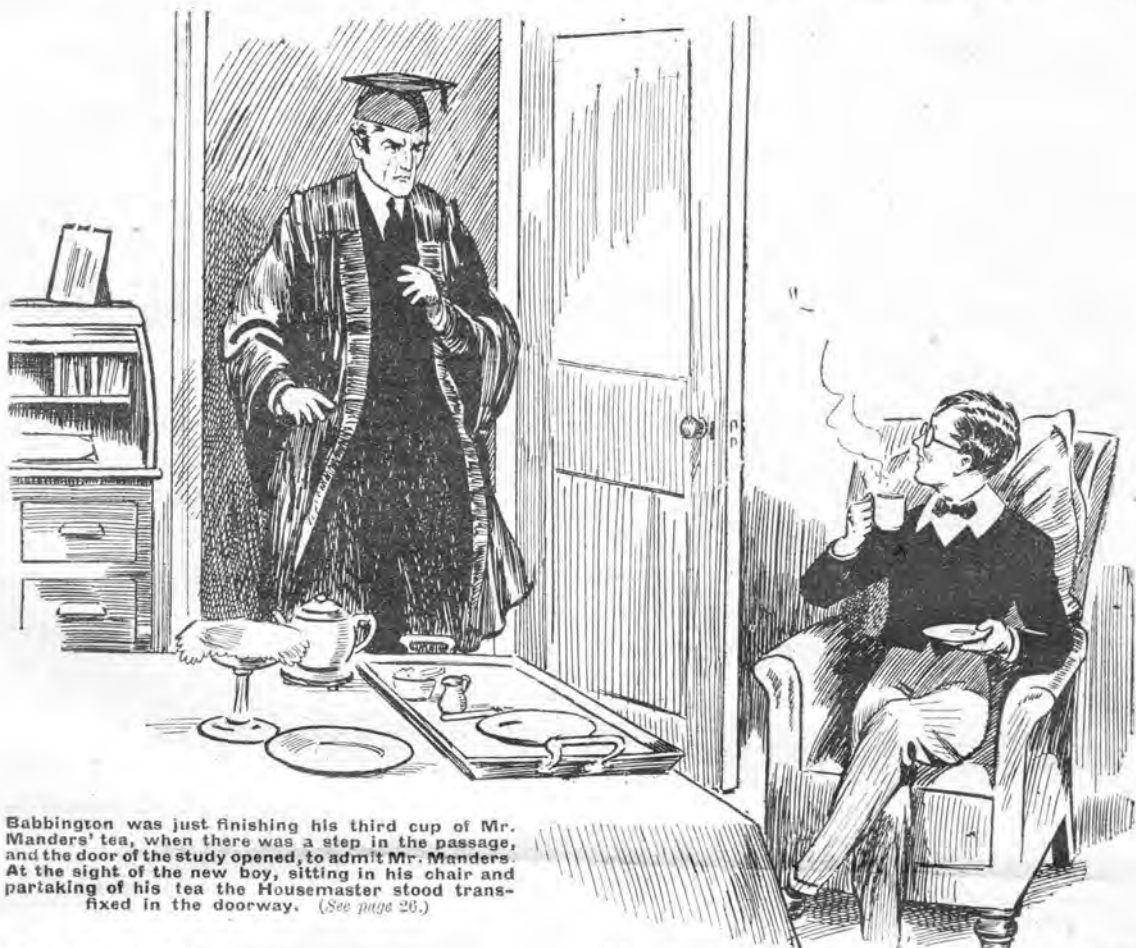
"Yes, sir, please! May I ask who you are?" said Babbington, with a timid smile.

Mr. Manders struggled for breath, and appeared to be on the verge of an apoplectic fit.

"Boy!" he roared. "I am Mr. Manders, your Housemaster! What are you doing here in my study?"

"Your study!" gasped Babbington. "But—but—but—"

"My study, sir!" raved Mr. Manders. "And my tea, sir! You have eaten it! Don't dare to deny it!"



Babbington was just finishing his third cup of Mr. Manders' tea, when there was a step in the passage, and the door of the study opened, to admit Mr. Manders. At the sight of the new boy, sitting in his chair and partaking of his tea the Housemaster stood transfixed in the doorway. (See page 26.)

"But—but—but—"

"Wretched boy, how dare you!"

"I—I—I—"

"Outrageous young ruffian!"

"But—but—but—"

Mr. Manders made a tiger-like spring at the now thoroughly alarmed Babbington, who skipped nimbly back so as to put the chair between him and the angry master.

"You shall pay dearly for this outrage!" gasped Mr. Manders. "Come here, boy!"

James Montgomery Babbington was not too bright, but no was bright enough to see that this was an invitation that it might be unwise to accept. He did not "come here." On the contrary, he edged a little farther away from the infuriated Mr. Manders.

"I—I—I assure you, sir," he managed to gasp, "I had no idea that this was your room!"

"What!" hooted Mr. Manders.

"I—I—I understood that it was my sitting-room."

"Your sitting-room!" raved Mr. Manders. "Ridiculous! Outrageous! I do not believe a word of it!"

He made another step towards Babbington, who dodged away again with amazing speed.

"But—but really, sir, I was told so," stammered James Babbington. "I—I thought it was my tea, too."

"Your tea!" shrieked Mr. Manders. "You thought that your tea would be placed in my study!"

"I did not know it was your study!" wailed Babbington.

"I thought—I was told—that is to say, I understood—"

"Stop!" cried Mr. Manders. "I will get to the bottom of this outrage."

"Oh!"

"Before expelling you—"

"Ow!"

"I shall expect you to tell me exactly what happened."

Mr. Manders was more master of himself now, but his frowning brow and grim mouth boded little good to the unfortunate Babbington.

Fortunately, Mr. Manders did not hear a slight shuffling of feet and whispering outside his door. Had he thrown the door open suddenly he would have seen quite a crowd of Modern House juniors who were listening outside with bated breath in an endeavour to glean something of what was going on inside the room.

"Boy!" said Mr. Manders, in a grinding voice, addressing Babbington again. "In your first hour at Rookwood you have entered your Housemaster's study in his absence and consumed his tea, the act of an impertinent, unprincipled young reprobate!"

"B—but, sir—"

"You will find, sir," thundered Mr. Manders, "that I am not the man to put up with such outrageous insolence! You will find, sir, that you have made a great mistake if you have come to Rookwood with the idea that you can play fast and loose with your Housemaster."

"But—but, sir, it was all a mistake!" exclaimed Babbington, in great distress and now thoroughly frightened. "I would not do that for the world. I did not know—"

"Then how came you here at all?" hooted Mr. Manders.

"I—I—I—I was told—that is, somebody—" Babbington trailed off lamely.

Mr. Manders' eyes gleamed with the light of comprehension.

"Ah! Is it possible that someone—some boy—had the unparalleled impertinence to suggest to you this outrageous course of action, Babbington?"

"Ye-ees, sir," stammered Babbington.

"Indeed!" barked Mr. Manders. "Kindly give me that boy's name at once."

"If you pip-please, sir, I don't know it," said Babbington.

"Then describe him. What was he like?" Babbington hesitated.

Had he known it, a dozen fellows on the outside of the door were holding their breath and hanging on his words.

Now was the test for Babbington, and he did not fail under it. Babbington was quite bright enough to have been able to give a fairly accurate description of Leggett of the Fourth, and his first instinct was to do so and thus save his skin, if he could, by transferring the blame to Leggett's shoulders, where, in truth, it properly belonged. But although Babbington had never before been to a public school, or to any English school, he knew how to play the game.

He made up his mind in a moment that to give Leggett's description would not be the sporting thing to do.

"I—I—I—really don't know exactly what he looked like, sir," he stammered.

"Perhaps not exactly, but tell me approximately," said Mr. Manders impatiently. "Come on, boy! Out with it, if you want to save your skin!"

"I really could not say," said Babbington. "I—I think he had red hair."

"Think!" stormed Mr. Manders. "Did he have red hair or not?"

"I—I—I—I think so—or else it was black," said Babbington.

Mr. Manders gave a furious snort. Turning to a corner, he selected a stout and extremely unpleasant-looking cane.

"Now, Babbington," he said harshly, "I have decided that I will not report your outrageous conduct to Dr. Chisholm, the Head of Rookwood, in view of this being your first day here. It is impossible, however, to overlook such unparalleled insolence. Either you are a knave—"

"Or a fool!"

"Or a dot!"

"Oh!"

"Or an imbecile!"

"Really, sir?"

"But, in any case," boomed Mr. Manders viciously, swishing the cane in the air, "I intend to give you a lesson you will remember. Bend over that chair."

It was quite evident that Mr. Manders, having failed to extract from Babbington the name of the boy who had led him into such a plight, was determined to take it out of the victim at hand. Babbington felt, with a sigh, that the unpleasant experiences of his first day at Rookwood were by no means over. In fact, positively the most unpleasant experience of all was about to be added to the others!

Reluctantly, however, he bent over the chair as directed. Swish, swish, swish!

Mr. Manders laid it on with vim, and Babbington's howls awoke the echoes.

Swish, swish, swish!

To the juniors outside it sounded as if Mr. Manders was beating a carpet. There was no doubt Babbington was going through it. But as the juniors trod gently away from Mr. Manders' door they agreed among themselves that Babbington, though a duffer and a mug and several sorts of an idiot, was, at any rate, true blue. He could have given Leggett away if he had wanted, but he had not done so.

Mr. Manders gave Babbington ten hefty lashes, by which time the Housemaster felt quite tired, but not as tired as Babbington. That youth limped out of Mr. Manders' study a few minutes later, a sadder and wiser Babbington.

He had bagged Mr. Manders' tea, but he had also bagged a record licking, and on the whole he decided that it would be a long time before he again attempted to take tea with Mr. Manders!

(A ripping serial this, chums—what? Well, why not get your chums to read it? Next week's instalment is better than ever. Be sure you order your GEM well in advance.)

TRIMBLE, THE TRUANT!

(Continued from page 24.)

"Gwreat Scott!"

"Phew!"

Now Tom had mentioned it, the force of his suggestion took them by storm. A short, tubby chap who raided grub and played little games with other people's property sounded very much like Baggy Trimble. Indeed, as they pondered and discussed the possibility the suspicion grew and grew.

"We must say nothing about this when we get in," said Tom grimly. "We don't want the fat idiot sacked—supposing it was Baggy. In any case, he's booked for a high old time when he does turn up! But—but it's amazing!"

And Tom Merry & Co. agreed that it was. And they had plenty to talk about on their way back to St. Jim's. And, though they reported Wildrake's discoveries, they did not breathe a word of the strange and significant happenings in Rylcombe to a soul. Little as Baggy deserved it, they felt it up to them to save him from the sack. But they wondered rather uneasily how the matter was going to end.

Baggy Trimble was wondering that also, in a state of mind that was almost frantic. Bitterly did he regret his folly now. Feeling ready to collapse, the hapless schemer had reached the safety of his caravan at last, after slinging the bike into a ditch in Rylcombe Lane. For P. C. Crump had been an optimist when he had stated that he would "have" the mysterious stranger in flannel bags and horn-rimmed specs.

How it was going to end he did not know. He only wished he did. He was back again, safe and comparatively sound—but empty-handed. His expedition had been in vain—worse than in vain. And he was famished—starving—and with no prospect of anything to eat for tea or for supper, unless he did something drastic, like robbing a hen-roost. Baggy reflected dismally that he might even have to come to that.

Bitterly did the St. Jim's junior regret his truancy in that dismal moment. And as he lay and panted on the bunk in the "borrowed" caravan Baggy Trimble groaned from the bottom of his fat heart.

THE END.

(Whatever you do, chums, don't miss the sequel to this story, entitled: "ON THE TRAIL OF THE TRUANT!" which will appear in next week's GRAND TWENTY-FIRST BIRTHDAY NUMBER of the "GEM.")

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