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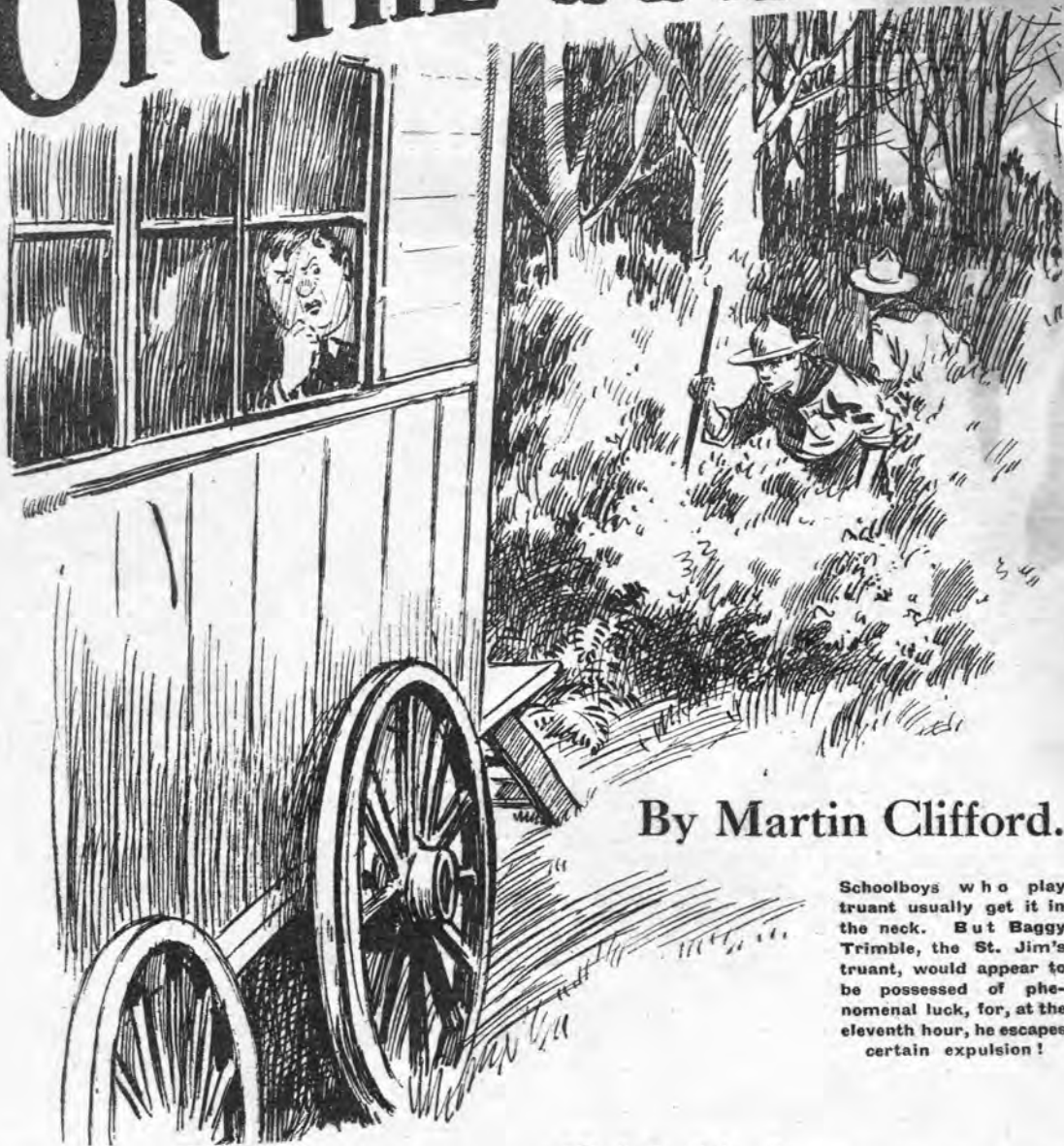


GRUNDY'S "GOOD TURN" FOR THE DAY!

*A lively incident from the special school story of
Tom Merry & Co.—inside.*

A LONG STORY OF TOM MERRY & CO., OF ST. JIM'S—

ON THE TRAIL



By Martin Clifford.

Schoolboys who play truant usually get it in the neck. But Baggy Trimble, the St. Jim's truant, would appear to be possessed of phenomenal luck, for, at the eleventh hour, he escapes certain expulsion!

CHAPTER 1. Grundy Knows!

"TWIMBLE——"
"Blow Trimble!"
"Poor old Twimble——"
"Rats to Trimble!"

"Weally, Blake——"
"We've had enough of Trimble!" snorted Jack Blake.
"Too much!" said Lowther. "Blessed if I know why we should spend our giddy leisure searching for the fat bouncer!"

"Weally, Lowthah——"
"Life's worth living without Trimble," said Lowther. "and as Trimble doesn't seem to want to be found, why search for the fat rotter? He'll be satisfied if we don't find him, and we'll be satisfied to let him remain unfound—more than satisfied, in fact."

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"Weally, Lowthah——"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gave Lowther and the rest of his chums a severe and reproachful look through his gleaming monocle.

"Weally, Lowthah," he proceeded, "I am vewy surprised indeed at heavin' you talk of Twimble like that. If the worst has happened and Twimble is drowned——"

"Trimble isn't drowned, fathead!" said Tom Merry emphatically. "Trimble wasn't born to be drowned. He's funkng the exam that should have been held to-day, and he's hiding somewhere until he thinks it's over."

"And until he thinks we've all forgotten and forgiven," grinned Digby. "He knows at least a dozen fellows are waiting to give him a warm time when he does turn up."

"I am, anyway," said Blake grimly. "I'm going to give the fat toad the licking of his life."

"Weally, Blake, that is vewy heartless of you," said Arthur Augustus. "Twimble is a vewy unpleasant chap I will admit; I do not like him myself. But if he is weally drowned——"

—DEALING WITH THE ESCAPADES OF BAGGY TRIMBLE!

OF THE TRUANT!



"But he isn't drowned!" hooted Blake. "I should think you could see that now, you idiot!"

"Pway do not woah at me, Blake," said Arthur Augustus stiffly. "You are well awah that I stwongly object to bein' woahed at."

"Fathead!"

"I agwee," said Arthur Augustus, looking round at his chums, "that the evidence seems to show that Twimble was not drowned when he fell into the wivah; but so long as any doubt wemains I shall not disweguard the possibility. I am not forgettin'," went on Arthur Augustus in some distress, "that I was chasin' him when he went into the wivah, and if he is drowned I shall always have that on my conscience."

"But we know the fat ass isn't drowned," said Tom Merry earnestly. "Hasn't Wildrake found his footprints, you ass—clear proof that he's knocking about somewhere! Wildrake's too old a hand at tracking to make a mistake. He found the spot where Trimble climbed out, and he followed up the trail until he lost it in the woods. The Head and Railton both believe he's hiding somewhere, too!"

"Wubbish!"

"What?"

"Wubbish!" said Arthur Augustus calmly. "Twimble is the last fellow to remain away from school; to suppose that he is in hidin' in the woods is uttably absurd. If Twimble is not drowned, then he must be lyin' injured somewhere."

"Wherever he is he's bound to be lyin'," said Lowther, nodding, "and when he does turn up he'll be rolling out whoppers by the dozen to explain why he disappeared."

"Wats! The mattah is too sewious for jokes, Lowthah!"

I wepeat that Twimble may be lyin' injured, possibly in the Pwiowy woods, or in Wylcombe woods. He may have bwoken a limb or somethin' like that, and be unable to move. At all events, I am determined to continue the search myself this evenin' until call-ovah."

"What rot!" snorted Blake. "Haven't we been searching all the afternoon?"

"Yaas. But I am goin' on with the search, Blake."

"You silly ass!"

"I wefuse to be called a sillay ass, Blake!"

"But look here—"

"Hallo! Trouble in the family?" inquired Bernard Glyn, joining the group just then. "What's the trouble?"

"Only Gussy," explained Blake, with a grunt. "He wants to go searching for Trimble again."

"Oh!" chuckled Glyn. "I hear some chap pinched Gussy's watch this afternoon and tried to pop it in Rylcombe. Is it a fact?"

"Not quite," grinned Tom Merry. "Gussy lost his watch when we were scouting in the Priory woods, and some chap must have found it and tried to pawn it with old Firestone. But Firestone spotted something was wrong and brought Crump on the job. We turned up just as the chap was bolting with the bobby after him."

"And the chap was Trimble, or I'm a Dutchman," said Digby grimly. "He was a fat, tubby little chap, anyway."

"But you'd have recognised him if it had been Trimble," said Glyn, staring.

Tom Merry chuckled.

"This chap wore fannels and horn-rimmed specs," he

explained. "And we only got a bare glimpse of him. But it looked to me jolly like dear old Baggy."

"Well, it sounds like Baggy, anyway," grinned Bernard Glyn. "If the fat rotter didn't want to be caught he'd rig himself up, of course, though goodness knows how he got the things if he was toggled up like that. He wasn't collared, then?"

"No; he slung the bike over a hedge in Rylcombe Lane and got clear," said Herries. "It was Trimble, though—just the sort of thing Trimble would do if he was hungry and hard up. He's lying low somewhere."

"Wubbish!" said Arthur Augustus. "Where could Twimble lie low?"

"That's the problem," said Tom Merry. "I suppose he hasn't found a haven of refuge at Glyn House?"

"Hardly," chuckled Glyn. "They'd set the dogs on him if he turned up there. There's only about three places I can think of where the beggar might be hiding, though. What about Pepper's Barn, or the Priory ruins, or that woodman's hut in Rylcombe woods?"

Tom Merry gave a start, then he shook his head.

"Not likely," he said, frowning. "He funks the ruins even in daytime, and neither the barn nor the hut are comfortable enough for Baggy. Still, now you mention those places, it strikes me we ought to try 'em sometime, chaps."

"Why not now?" said Glyn. "I was just going to ask you fellows to come with me for a walk—to the Priory woods."

"You going there now, Glyn?" ejaculated Tom.

"Yes," said Glyn, with a grimace. "I've just had a letter from Philip Jackson, asking me to trot over to their camp in the woods."

"Oh!" said Tom Merry. "You mean those chaps who're caravanning—nephews of Captain Jackson from the Priory?"

"Yes; the Jacksons are rather friendly with my people at home. That's how I got to know them," explained Glyn. "Philip's the elder of the two, and he wants me to get an important letter from his jacket pocket in the van."

"But aren't they camping in the Priory woods now?" said Blake. "I saw the caravan there only this afternoon."

"The van's there right enough," said Glyn. "But they've gone home—their pater's ill, and they were wired for on Wednesday. The letter's just come and I'm off now. If you chaps would care for a run we could have a look round for dear old Trimble at the same time."

"Well, that's rather a good wheeze," said Tom Merry, looking round at his chums. "I vote we go, chaps, and have a squint round Pepper's Barn first, and then try the ruins and the hut. We aren't likely to find the fat ass, but you never know."

"I'm on," said Blake. "Just pass the time away until look-up."

"Yaas, wathah!" agreed Arthur Augustus. "I am vewy much afwaid Twimble will not be found in any of those places, deah boys. Howevah, we shall be doin' our duty by searchin' for him, and we may stumble on him in the woods."

"No harm done, anyway," said Digby.

"Only if we do happen to find Trimble," said Lowther, "it will be bad luck for us and for everybody."

"Weally, Lowthah, you heartless wottah—"

"Cheese it!" grinned Glyn. "If you're coming, let's get off! We've none too much time if we mean to do the job properly."

"Vewy well! Onlay I must wemark—"

"No time for remarks—kim on, fathead!"

"One moment, Blake. If you will wait while I change my toppah—"

"Collar him, chaps, and let's get off!" said Blake. "Kim on, Gussy—"

"Bai Jove! Hold on!" gasped Arthur Augustus in alarm. "It is uttally imposs for me to go out of gates in this. Stop, you frightful wottahs!"

Arthur Augustus shouted wrathfully as Blake and Digby, taking an arm each, rushed him away towards the gates. Changing even a hat was rather a lengthy operation for Arthur Augustus, and his chums did not intend to wait.

As the party swept towards the gates, Grundy of the Shell sighted them and cut across to them. Behind Grundy were Wilkins and Gunn, and they were looking bored.

"Hold on!" said Grundy, in his usual high-handed way. "Hold on! I want you fellows!"

"Go on wanting, then!" said Blake. "Out of the way, fathead!"

"You cheeky ass!" snorted Grundy. "Stop!"

"Go and eat coke! Walk over him and wipe your boots on him, chaps!"

"Right-ho!"

The party started on again. Grundy jumped back and grabbed wrathfully at Tom Merry.

"You silly chumps!" he roared. "Hold on! It's important! I've just discovered what's happened to Trimble!"

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"What?"

Tom Merry & Co. stopped at that. They stopped and stared.

"You—you've what?" said Tom Merry eagerly. "You've discovered what's happened to Trimble?"

Grundy nodded grimly.

"Yes, I have!" he exclaimed. "He's been kidnapped!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Is that a fact?" said Tom Merry, in astonishment. "Who told you, Grundy? Does the Head know?"

"Eh? The Head? Of course not!" said Grundy impatiently. "Nobody told me, either. I've just discovered it myself. It came to me in a flash a few minutes ago. Trimble must have been kidnapped!"

"Oh! Then—then you've no proof? Only your silly guesswork?" snorted Tom Merry.

"Of course I've no proof! It's theory; but I'm jolly well certain I'm right! Trimble's been kidnapped—held to ransom!"

"You silly chump!"

"You burbling duffer!" hooted Tom Merry. "I thought you meant it was fact, not your own silly fancy, you raving idiot!"

"Look here, you cheeky rotters—"

"Oh, run the ass down and come on!" snapped Glyn.

"Here, hold on!" bawled Grundy wrathfully. "I tell you I've hit the mark this time! Trimble's been kidnapped by gipsies!"

"Rats! Get out of the way!"

"But I mean it!" said Grundy excitedly. "There's some gipsies camping on Wayland Common. They look regular ruffians, and I bet they're the villains. I want you fellows to come and help me raid their camp now."

"You—you want us to raid their camp?" stuttered Tom Merry. "Well, you—"

"Oh, bump the idiot, and let's get on!" snorted Blake.

"Haven't I said I want you chaps?" howled Grundy, in exasperation. "I'll mop up the quad with the first fellow who says he won't come! I'll—Here, hold on!"

Grundy roared as many hands grasped him. But they did not "hold on," except to hold on to Grundy. They swept him up in the air and strewed his burly person on the gravel path. Then they wiped their feet on him and swept on through the gates, leaving Grundy sprawling and roaring.

By the time George Alfred had regained his feet Tom Merry & Co. had vanished. His own chums, Wilkins and Gunn, had also disappeared. For the last hour they had been trying to give Grundy the slip, and now they had seen their chance and taken it. And after glaring about him speechlessly, Grundy tottered indoors, breathing hard. Evidently the raiding of the gipsies' camp on Wayland Moor had been postponed.

CHAPTER 2.

Desperate Trimble!

"O H dear!"

Baggy Trimble of the Fourth groaned dismally. He was lying on one of the bunks in the caravan, deep in the heart of the Priory woods. It was a very nice caravan, and it belonged to Philip and Harold Jackson, who, whilst touring the Southern counties, had halted for a few days on their uncle's estate. It was roomy, and it was convenient, and it was neat and tidy—or, at least, it had been before Trimble had taken charge of it.

Now there were crumbs and empty tins and jars lying about, and the two bunks were jumbles of bedclothes and wearing apparel. Trimble was not a tidy person, and could Captain Jackson's nephews have seen their caravan now they would have been very astonished, and possibly very much annoyed.

They could not see it, however, and they certainly did not dream that a fat youth from St. Jim's was now in sole possession of their caravan. On receiving that wire calling them home they had hurried off with their uncle, little dreaming that Baggy Trimble had been hiding close by, and had not only overheard them discussing their plans, but had watched them hide the key of the caravan and depart.

Thereupon the great idea had entered into Trimble's mind, and he had taken charge of the caravan, intending to make it his home for a day or two.

It was an amazing scheme, and in the ordinary way Trimble would not have dreamed of carrying it through.

But at the time Trimble was desperate and in the mood for anything. In the first place, there was the exam—the exam he had been dreading for weeks—to take place on the morrow, and if only to escape that Trimble was prepared to take almost any risk.

That was not all, however. There was a licking due to him from Mr. Lathom, and lickings also from at least a

dozen other fellows, all of whom he had managed to fall foul of that afternoon. He had dreaded to return to St. Jim's to face the trouble into which his own misdeeds had landed him.

At the time it had all seemed beautifully simple and safe. Simple because the caravan spelt food and shelter, and safe because he had known that he was supposed to be drowned, and would therefore never be searched for. From his hiding-place in a tree Baggy himself had watched Tom Merry & Co. diving again and again in search of his "body," and had derived much entertainment therefrom.

But now Trimble knew that the authorities and the fellows at St. Jim's did not believe he was drowned, and he also knew that the dreaded exam had been postponed until his return—all of which was far from comforting news for the truant.

In fact, things had not quite panned out as Baggy had fondly imagined. True, he had escaped lessons, and had slacked to his heart's content. But the thought of another lonely night in the heart of the black woods terrified the fat youth. Nor was that the worst. The supply of food had given out, and as since that morning Trimble had scarcely touched food, he was now desperate and famished.

It was no wonder that Baggy Trimble groaned deeply, and wished from the bottom of his heart that the precious scheme had never entered his head.

"Oh dear!" he groaned again. "It's too awful for words! I'm starving, but I daren't go back yet! I—I think I'd better get that note to the Head written, though, to pave the way. I'll tell him I'm a prisoner—kidnapped! Then after a bit I'll turn up and tell him I've escaped. He can't prove anything else, anyway."

And after reflecting a little while longer, Trimble rolled from the bunk, and finding paper and pen and ink, he set to work to compose the note.

It was a brief note, and it did not take long. Trimble sealed it up and addressed the envelope to Dr. Holmes at St. Jim's.

This done, Trimble started to change his clothes—a very necessary operation after his experiences in Rylcombe that afternoon. Though Trimble felt pretty confident he had not been recognised, he knew that Police-constable Crump and others would be on the look out for a fellow of his build wearing flannels and horn-rimmed spectacles.

Baggy had already shed his spectacles, so now he discarded his flannels—or, rather, Philip Jackson's flannels, and donned a lounge suit he found in one of the lockers.

He was changed at last, though the trousers fitted him tightly, and the jacket split up the back in the process of donning it.

Then Baggy groaned again at the prospect before him. He had now to get that note into the Head's hands somehow, and, more important still, he had to get some grub from somewhere.

That was the problem of problems. For the last hour and more Baggy had debated the problem, and at last he had reached a decision. And that was to wait until dark, and then go on a grub raid to St. Jim's.

It was a desperate decision, fraught with danger. But then Baggy was desperate now. He had had practically no dinner, and he had had no tea at all. Something obviously had to be done, dangerous or not.

Moreover, the thought of another night spent in the lonely woods with no sound but the sigh of the wind in the trees and the eerie screech of owls and other night birds, was more than Trimble dared to contemplate.

So he had determined not to spend another night there. Trimble knew how other fellows got in and out of the School House in the night, and his plan was to raid the studies for grub, or, failing them, the kitchen; then he would spend the rest of the night in the woodshed, and leave the school precincts again in the early hours before anyone was up and about.

It seemed a very simple scheme, though risky enough. But Trimble was not accustomed to looking ahead, and he saw no flaws in it.

"I'll do it," he mumbled. "I've got to get some grub from somewhere, anyhow. I can easily leave the blessed school again before it's light, and then I'll turn up afterwards and tell 'em I've just escaped from the thumping kidnappers. I'm jolly well fed-up with this game. I'll hide near the school until dark, and then—Oh crumbs!"

Trimble stopped suddenly and trembled. To his ears had come the sound of approaching footsteps.

Stepping to the little window of the van the fat junior peeped out cautiously. Then he jumped.

Across the clearing, lit up by the crimson and gold of the setting sun, several figures were visible—familiar figures. Trimble groaned as he recognised Tom Merry & Co. and Bernard Glyn.

"Oh dear!" he groaned. "M-mum-my hat! They must be after me!"

For a couple of seconds Trimble blinked through the

curtains of the little window, and then he jumped for one of the bunks, and, scrambling in, pulled the blankets over his head.

The next moment he heard the juniors' cheery voices, as they halted outside the van.

"Well, here we are, Glyn," said Tom Merry. "Buck up and get that letter! We'll be late for call-over as it is."

"You can blame dear old Trimble for that," said Glyn, with a chuckle. "You can take it out of his hide when he turns up."

"We're going to do that in any case!" snorted Jack Blake. "Hallo, isn't the blessed key there, Glyn?"

Glyn, who was fumbling in the locker of the driving-seat, shook his head.

"No, it isn't," he said. "Jackson said I'd find it in this locker, anyway. It's queer! Try the door at the back, Gussy."

"Wight-ho, deah boy!"

Arthur Augustus jumped up the steps of the van and tried the door. Trimble, though he knew the door was locked on the inside, fairly trembled as he heard the door rattling and shaking. Then he heard Gussy's voice.

"Locked, deah boys! I'm afraid you will have to do without that lettah, Glyn."

"Blow!" said Glyn in great exasperation. "But I don't like letting those chaps down—especially under the circumstances, you fellows. Jackson said the letter was important. Look here, the key may have been left up at the Priory, after all. Let's trot up for it."

"Oh, my hat!"

Tom Merry & Co. did not seem at all pleased. As a matter of fact, having searched Pepper's Barn, the Priory ruins, and the woodman's hut, and found no trace of Trimble, they were now tired and disappointed. And now it looked as if they had had the long tramp all for nothing.

"What rotten luck!" said Tom Merry. "Well, we might as well try it now we've come so far. Come on, chaps!"

"Bai Jove! It is weally impossible for me to visit the Pwiowy!" said Arthur Augustus emphatically.

"Why, ass?"

"My clobber, of course!" said Gussy. "I would not dream of callin' on the Jacksons in this disreputable state!"

"Fathead!" snorted Blake.

"It is your fault, Blake," said Arthur Augustus coldly. "If you had only allowed me to change my clobber—"

"Blow your clobber!" said Blake. "If you don't want to come, then stay behind, you silly dummy!"

"Vewy well. I will wemain behind and wait for you heah," said Arthur Augustus with dignity. "But I must remark that I considah—"

"Oh, rats!"

Tom Merry & Co. and Bernard Glyn tramped away towards the Priory, leaving the swell of the Fourth to waste his remarks on the desert air. Trimble grunted as he heard them tramp away, and felt that he would like to kick the over-particular Gussy. He had hoped to get clear whilst the juniors were away, but now Arthur Augustus was staying—

Then a new thought occurred to Trimble, and he sat up in the bunk in sudden alarm.

Supposing the juniors managed to get a key that would fit, or supposing they even broke the lock of the door. They might easily do that if the letter was, as Glyn had stated, very important!

"Oh crumbs!" said Trimble under his breath. "I've got to get out of this somehow."

He ventured a peep through the window of the van. Arthur Augustus was strolling about outside with a frown on his noble brow.

"The—silly ass!" snorted Trimble to himself. "I've got to get out of this before they come back, though. Besides, there's my own clobber—they'd spot it in a tick!"

There was no time to lose, and Baggy made up his mind quickly. His own clothes, crumpled and shrunk a little from the drenching in the river, but dry enough now, were lying on the other bunk, and, rolling them up as best he could, he crammed the bundle out of sight under the bottom bunk.

This done, he ventured another peep out. He chuckled, as he saw that Arthur Augustus had seated himself on a fallen tree-trunk twenty yards away with his back to the van.

"Oh, good!" murmured Trimble. "Now's my chance!"

Having already made quite certain he was leaving none of his own belongings behind to give him away, Baggy gently turned the key in the lock and pocketed it. Then he slipped out of the van, closed the door gently after him, and made a dash for the shelter of the trees.

They were only a few yards away, and Trimble covered the distance in a flash. In the shelter of the trees he stopped and looked back. Arthur Augustus had obviously

heard nothing, for he was still seated, waiting for his chums' return.

"Silly ass!" grinned Trimble. "Now I'll leave this note on the stile in Rylcombe Lane; they're bound to go home that way and find it. Then I'll hang about until dark, and when it's safe I'll make for Taggy's woodshed, and wait there until all the lights are out."

With that Baggy Trimble grinned again and stole away, the note for the Head of St. Jim's clutched in his fat fist.

CHAPTER 3.

Kidnapped!

"DID you get it, deah boys?"

Arthur Augustus rose leisurely from the log as his chums tramped back into the clearing. The expression on the faces of his chums, however, told him that they had not got it.

"No!" grunted Blake. "The dashed key hasn't been left there. But the butler's lent us a bunch of old keys, and we're hoping one will fit. Buck up, Glyn!"

Bernard Glyn mounted the steps of the caravan and tried one of the keys. It wouldn't even fit the keyhole.

"No go," he said. "I'll— Why, what— Well, I'm blowed! Why, the door isn't locked at all!"

"Wha-at?"

"It isn't locked!" yelled Glyn. "Look!"

And he turned the handle and swung the door open.

"Well, my hat!" exclaimed Blake wrathfully. "And we've tramped up to the house and worried those people all for nothing! Gussy, you ass—"

"Gussy, you born idiot!"

"You fearful chump!"

"Weally, deah boys—" Arthur Augustus adjusted his monocle and blinked at the open door. "Weally, deah boys, how vewy stwange! I am absolutely certain that it was locked when I tried it!"

"Locked he blowed!" snorted Blake. "Oh, you—you chump! Made us tramp all that way for nothing!"

"Bump the fathead!" said Herries.

"Yes, bump him!"

"Wats! I should absolutely wefuse to be bump— Yawooooogh!"

Despite his emphatic refusal to be bumped, Arthur Augustus was bumped—soundly. He was grasped in many hands and deposited on the grass again and again. Then, leaving him seated there roaring with wrath and anguish, his irate chums entered the caravan.

"Now, where's that jacket?" said Glyn, looking round. "Jingo, I never thought those chaps were such untidy beggars! Left in such a hurry, I suppose. Hallo, this looks like it! Jackson said it was hanging behind the door."

And Glyn lifted down a sports jacket that hung behind the caravan door. Sure enough, there was a letter in the inside pocket, a sealed and rather important-looking letter.

"So that's that!" said Glyn as he pocketed it. "Now I've got to catch the last post with this, so let's get back sharp!"

The juniors left the van, Glyn closing the door after them. He left the bunch of keys on the steps, the butler having promised to send for them later on. Then the juniors left the clearing—little dreaming how near they had been to finding the missing Trimble.

But the possibility that Trimble had ever been near the van never even crossed their minds, and they hurried back, anxious to get in before lock-up. Arthur Augustus had already vanished. Evidently his noble back was "up."

As the chums came out of the wood by the stile leading on to the lane they met the swell of St. Jim's, however. He was seated on the stile, apparently waiting for them. In his hand he held an envelope, rather crumpled and grubby.

Arthur Augustus eyed them eagerly, excitedly, as they came up to him. Something had evidently happened to make him forget his recent bumping.

"Cheerio, Gussy!" chuckled Blake. "Feeling better now, old chap?"

"I am feelin' much bettah, Blake," was the surprising answer. "In fact, I have never felt so welieved in my life! Look what I have found on this stile. It is a lettah addressed to Dr. Holmes."

"Well, what about that?" said Blake, staring.

"The envelope," said Arthur Augustus impressively, "is in Trimble's handwritin'."

"My hat!"

Tom Merry almost snatched the letter from Gussy's hand and looked at it closely. Then he nodded.

"It is, by Jove!" he gasped. "That's Trimble's fist for a pension. You say you found it on the stile, Gussy?"

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"Yaas, deah boy. I saw it at once, and as we crossoed this stile when comin' it must have been placed heah since we passed."

"Phew! That's so," agreed Tom Merry. "If it had been there we couldn't have helped seeing it. So—so Trimble is knocking about here somewhere."

"That is obvious, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus. "It is a great relief. Despite the evidence that Twimble is not drownded, I could not help wowwyin' so long as the possibility remained. Now I need wowwy no longah, for this pwoves he is alive."

"You ass!" said Tom Merry. "Of course he is. Trimble's all right somewhere, you bet, and he'll turn up when it suits him."

"But it's queer," said Blake. "That's for the Head, and it's from Trimble. What can he be writing to the Head about?"

"Goodness knows!" said Tom Merry, frowning. "We'll take it to Railton, chaps."

"May save us lines for missing call-over," grinned Digby.

Tom Merry took charge of the letter, and the juniors hurried in the direction of the school. Like Arthur Augustus, they could not help feeling relieved, though they had never really seriously worried as to Trimble's safety since Wildrake had found his tracks by the river bank.

Still, they knew now for a certainty that Trimble was in the vicinity, and that he was able to write letters.

Reaching the School House, Glyn left them to see to the posting of the sealed letter, whilst Tom Merry & Co., excited and curious, hurried to Mr. Railton's study.

It was some minutes since call-over, and the House-master eyed them grimly.

"Have you come to explain why you are late for call-over?" he demanded.

Tom Merry soon explained their errand to the woods, and ended by handing over Trimble's letter.

"Bless my soul!" said Mr. Railton. "This certainly does appear to be from that wretched boy Trimble. Merry, you had better come with me to Dr. Holmes at once. The rest may go."

Not a little disappointed, Blake and the others departed, and Tom Merry accompanied Mr. Railton to the Head's study. Dr. Holmes was looking very worried; but his grave expression vanished as he opened the grubby letter. As he read the enclosed sheet of notepaper he started and frowned freely.

"G-good gracious!" he exclaimed. "This is amazing! Trimble kidnapped—impossible!"

The Head handed the letter to Mr. Railton, who fairly jumped as he read it. But he frowned grimly as he handed back the letter.

"You—you think that it can possibly be genuine?" asked Dr. Holmes.

"I do not think so, sir," said Mr. Railton. "It is an impudent trick; but it is undoubtedly from Trimble himself. There seems to be no limit to that wretched boy's absurd scheming."

"I am of the same opinion, Mr. Railton," said the Head, his brow stern. "Though where the young rascal can be, or why he has sent such an extraordinary message, is beyond my comprehension. Merry, as you found the note you had better read it."

"Oh, yes, sir!"

Tom Merry was only too eager to read it. He took the note and read it through. It was brief and to the point—very much to the point. It read as follows:

"Dear Sir,—Help! I have been kidnapped, and am a prisoner in the hands of desperate kidnappers. They are holding me to ransom! Help! Don't attempt to serch for me or my life will pay the forefeet.

"(Sined) BAGLEY TRIMBLE."

Tom Merry could not help grinning as he read the absurd note. It had undoubtedly been written by Baggy, for no other fellow spelt quite like that—unless it was Grundy. And only a fellow like Trimble would expect people to find and help him without "serching."

"It—it's Trimble's handwriting all right, sir," said Tom.

"And you found the envelope on the stile, you say?"

"Yes, sir. It must have been placed there since we crossoed the stile half an hour before," said Tom.

"You saw nobody in the vicinity?" asked the Head.

"No, sir. But we didn't think of looking. It looks as if the note was placed there for us to find, sir," said Tom.

The Head nodded.

"We now know the wretched young rascal is in the vicinity," he said. "He must be searched for and found. Kindly instruct Kildare to form a party of seniors to search Rylcombe woods until dark this evening, Mr. Railton. If he is not found to-night the most rigorous search must be continued to-morrow."

"Very good, sir," said the Housemaster. "I feel confident, however, that the foolish boy will give himself up this evening, and that the note is merely a trick to pave the way for his return."

"That is possible," said Dr. Holmes, his face becoming stern. "And when he does return I shall punish him with the utmost severity for the trouble and anxiety he has caused."

He nodded to Tom Merry, and the junior left the study. In the passage outside he found his chums waiting eagerly.

"Well?" demanded Blake. "What was it?"

Tom Merry chuckled and told them.

"Well, my hat!" gasped Blake. "The—the fat idiot!"

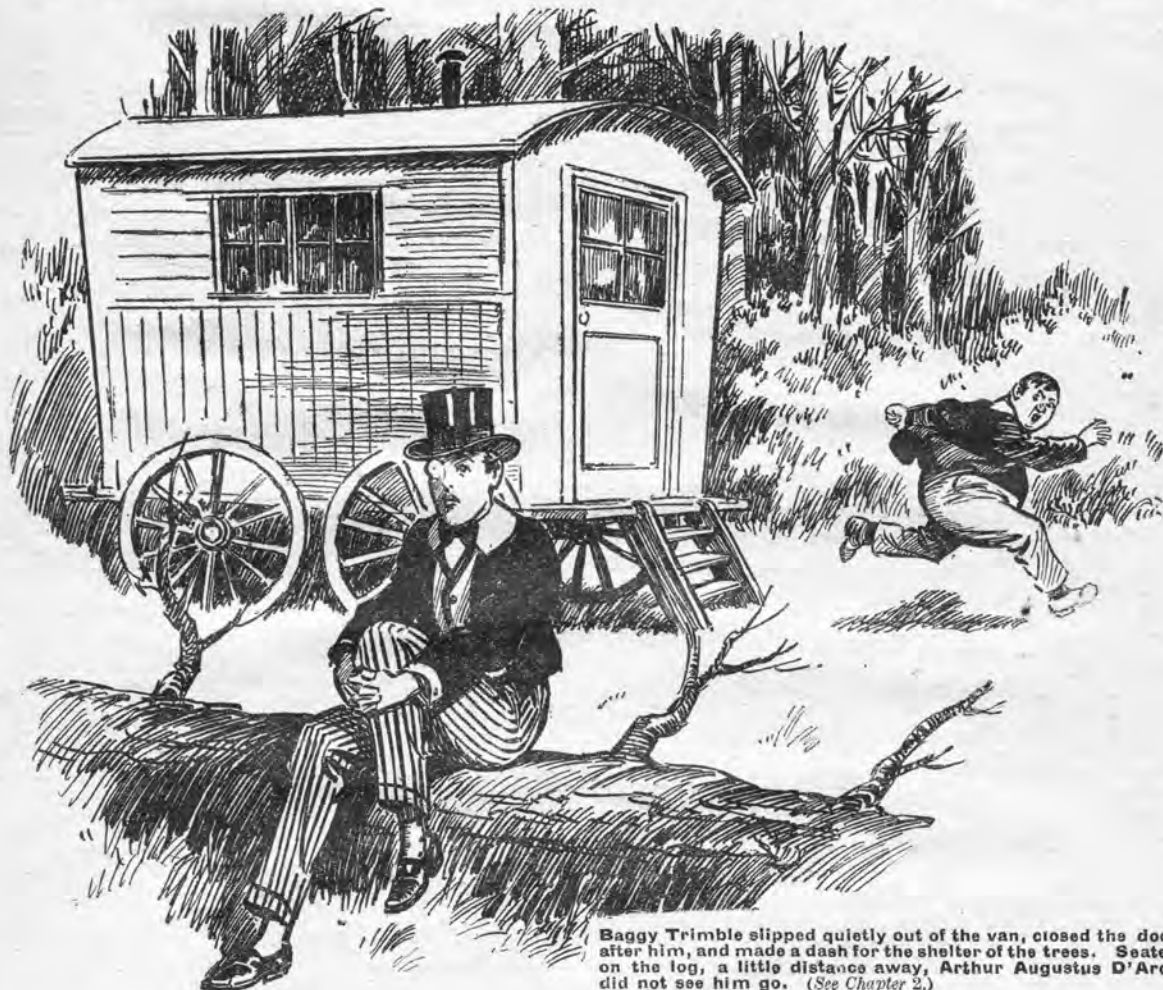
"But can't you see it's a twick?" howled Blake. "Trimble's fed-up with staying away—he's short of grub and money, I bet, and he's desperate. He wants to return, and he's sent that note to pave the way. Then he'll calmly turn up and tell some yarn about having been kidnapped."

"That's just what I think!" agreed Tom Merry. "You've hit it, Blake—"

"Right on the nail!" chuckled Lowther.

"I think so, too," agreed Herries.

All the juniors thought so—excepting the noble Arthur Augustus. Gussy was a very generous and unsuspicious youth, and it was his nature not to suspect others of ulterior motives in their dealings, being straight and inno-



Baggy Trimble slipped quietly out of the van, closed the door after him, and made a dash for the shelter of the trees. Seated on the log, a little distance away, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy did not see him go. (See Chapter 2.)

Fancy him having the nerve to send a note like that and expect it to be swallowed."

"It's a bit steep, even for Trimble!" said Herries.

"I don't know," grinned Lowther. "It's a case of fools venturing where angels fear to tread. Dear old Trimble! What a lad he is!"

"But it's jolly serious for him," said Tom grimly. "The Head's in a fearful wax about it!"

"Weally, you fellows," said Arthur Augustus very seriously. "I twist that you do not weally suspect twickewy in that note?"

"What a trusting nature!" murmured Lowther.

"What else can we suspect, fathead?" said Tom Merry, staring.

"I object to bein' called a fathead!" said Arthur Augustus frigidly. "I know Twimble is a spoofin' little wottah; but weally we must not be too hard on him, and it is wotten to suspect him ewevy time of twickewy!"

"Fathead! Dummy! Frabjous ass!" snorted Jack Blake witheringly. "Can't you see it's all spoof?"

"I can see nothin' of the kind, Blake. I think it is vewy w'ong and unjust to suspect Twimble of undahhand motives on ewevy occasion," said Arthur Augustus, with some indignation. "Twimble is no fwiend of mine; but I insist upon tweating him with fairness and justice."

cent of guile himself. The mere fact that everybody's hand seemed to be against the absent Trimble seemed to Arthur Augustus a good enough reason to take his part.

Whether Trimble was likely to feel any gratitude towards the champion of his cause, however, was quite another matter.

CHAPTER 4.

The Amateur Burglar!

"ROTTEN!" grunted Trimble.

And to Baggy Trimble just then it was indeed rotten; in fact, rotten was scarcely the word to describe the state of affairs into which Trimble's trickery had landed him. More than ever did Baggy Trimble regret embarking upon his amazing adventure.

Yet he had to go through with it now—for a little longer, at all events. He wished now that he had remained in hiding near the stile to make sure his note had been found by Tom Merry & Co. It would have been some comfort, and it might even have been safe to turn up that very night with his story of the kidnapping—the fertile product of his own imagination.

But he did not know if the Head had received it yet, and

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it was certainly not safe to turn up until he knew he had. Trimble was far from being unaware that his reputation for telling "whoppers" and for inventing wonderful yarns was known to the authorities at St. Jim's. Indeed, he had good reason to believe that both Dr. Holmes and his House-master would treat his story now with very keen suspicion—unless it was backed up with proof of some sort. And in his fatuous obtuseness, Baggy fondly imagined that his note would "do it."

Moreover, there was the exam to be considered. While in hiding Baggy had overheard the juniors discussing it, and he knew it had been postponed on his account. If he could only hold out a little longer, though, he might even yet escape it.

The question of grub was the one serious drawback. Grub he simply had to have from somewhere, and he was not particular how or from where he should get it so long as he got it. It had been a great relief to Baggy to know the reason of Glyn's visit to the caravan that evening. As the owners of the van had written to Glyn asking him to get the letter or whatever it was, then it was pretty certain they did not intend to return to the caravan yet.

That worry was gone for the time being. The haven of refuge was still there, though it had its drawbacks. The only trouble was the acute shortage of food.

Trimble was determined to remedy that somehow.

Since dusk Baggy had haunted the precincts of St. Jim's like a hungry tiger, and when darkness had fallen he had hidden in the woodshed to wait until the last light had vanished from the School House.

It was a long and dreary wait—especially in Baggy's hungry state. Never had the hours passed so slowly for the fat Fourth-Former. But just as he murmured the undoubted fact that things were "rotten," he heard half-past eleven chime from the school clock-tower.

"Oh, good!" he grunted. "I—I think I'll make a move now."

And after a cautious blink out into the darkness Baggy left the shed and crept cautiously round by the dark chapel. Baggy was not of the stuff of which heroes are made, and he hated the dark. But hunger overcame his fears that night.

It was a quiet, warm, and still night, and only the soft rustle of the breeze in the old elms broke the silence. Round the chapel, Trimble sighted the School House buildings, and he grunted his relief as he noted that no light twinkled in any of the windows.

Baggy crept on and was just nearing the outhouse beneath the box-room window, when he heard a faint sound—the sound of a window being softly raised.

Baggy jumped back into the shadows, trembling.

Then, to his surprise, he saw that it was the box-room window that was being opened—slowly and stealthily. The next moment a dark form dropped out from the window on to the leads, and from thence to the ground.

It was a tall figure—the figure of a senior, and Baggy grunted as he recognised the figure as that of Sefton of the Sixth. Sefton was a senior and a prefect, and he certainly should not have been abroad at that hour. But Sefton was also a sportive "blade" who often did what he ought not to have done. Had the authorities any suspicion that the Sixth-Former was in the habit of visiting the Green Man in Rylecombe in the still hours occasionally, Sefton would not have remained a prefect for long.

"The—the rotter!" breathed Baggy. "He's going out on the razzle again! Oh, good! He's left the window open!"

Sefton was gone now—melting away into the shadows like a guilty ghost. Trimble grinned faintly. He had feared that the box-room window might be locked, in which case he would have been done.

But Sefton had very kindly left it open for him. Trimble, in that moment, almost felt a liking for the rascally Sixth-Former, despite his liberality with his boot and his ashplant. And a moment later the fat youth was at the window and clambering cautiously through.

After gaining the box-room Baggy lost no time in making for the junior studies, and he very soon found himself in a land of plenty. Most of the study cupboards were open. Many of them were usually kept locked by the careful owners, but since Trimble's disappearance there had been no reason to take precautions.

They were likely to be roused from their false sense of security with a shock.

Trimble started with Grundy's cupboard in the Shell—always a well-stocked one. He finished off a whole two-pound cake, some tarts, a tin of salmon, half a tin of biscuits, and several other items. Then, his appetite scarcely affected, he went next door.

Here he found some potted meat, more biscuits, some chocolate, and a huge meat-pie, and he polished off the lot in a very few minutes.

He was feeling much better now, and was fairly warmed

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up to his task—a delightful task for Baggy. The edge of his ferocious appetite was taken off now, and Baggy started to pick and choose—and he had plenty to pick and choose from. Visiting every study cupboard in turn, he helped himself to anything he fancied. He had borrowed Grundy's pocket torch from his table drawer, and he had no difficulty after that.

But he satisfied his hunger at last, though not before he was loaded up well above the Plimsoll line. Then he began to think of the future, and, taking the cover from a cushion in Tom Merry's study, he started to fill it with foodstuffs—anything and everything he fancied.

He finished at last, and took the loaded cushion cover along to the box-room.

Then Baggy paused as a sudden thought struck him.

After all, why spend the night on a rotten heap of faggots in the woodshed? The faggots were hard, and there were horrid spiders and insects there in thousands—millions it had seemed to Baggy whilst waiting there, and he fancied he had heard rats as well.

Now he was face to face with the proposition the thought of it filled the fat junior with dread.

And also another idea had occurred to him—a startling and daring idea. The thought of Sefton, still out on the "razzle," had set his fat brain working.

"Why not?" he murmured. "Sefton's a beast—he's always kicking and licking me. It would serve the beast right to be locked out. And he daren't say anything—in fact, he wouldn't know. He, he, he!"

The thought of his great brainwave made Baggy's beady eyes gleam. It was a brainwave that could only have seemed safe to a fellow like Baggy Trimble. It was yet another case of fools stepping in where angels feared to tread. Sefton was a senior—an unpleasant fellow whose path it was very unwise for a junior to cross.

But Baggy Trimble meant to cross it.

"I'll jolly well do it," he breathed. "My hat! Won't the fellows just stare later on when I tell 'em I've actually slept in Sefton's bed, leaving him out all night. He, he, he! What a scream!"

Hurriedly the fat youth hid the cushion cover with its bulging contents behind a stack of boxes, and then he closed the window and fastened the catch securely. This done, he chuckled and stole away to the senior quarters. He entered Sefton's study, and switched on the torch, carefully shading it with his hand.

The blinds were drawn, and, placing the torch on a chair, Trimble carefully closed the door. There was no key in the lock, though Trimble would scarcely have thought of locking the door if there had been.

"Here goes!" he muttered, with some satisfaction. "My hat! This is better than the rotten old woodshed! Wonder what old Sefton will do? Sleep in the woodshed most likely. Well, I'm sorry for him, in a way, though he is a beast. Still, a fellow has a duty to himself. Besides, Sefton ought to be punished for breaking rules. Gone to play billiards in a pub, I suppose! Silly ass!"

With that reflection Baggy Trimble dismissed Sefton from his fat mind and climbed into the Sixth-Former's bed, only bothering to remove his shoes and jacket before doing so—Trimble never being a very particular fellow. Had he been more particular—in another way—he might have thought of making the door secure. But he did not bother or think about it, and two minutes later an unmusical snore was rumbling through the study of Sefton of the Sixth.

CHAPTER 5.

Caught Out!

"CONFOUND the thing!"

Sefton of the Sixth gave vent to that exclamation savagely. The prefect was in a very bad temper—no unusual state of affairs. And he always was, more or less, in a bad temper when he returned from his nocturnal visits to the Green Man.

On this particular night Sefton had returned with three pounds less in his pockets, a splitting headache, and a savage temper. And his temper was not improved by barking his knuckles as he reached the box-room window. Then he had found the window closed.

"Confound the thing!"

And yet Sefton was not alarmed—only savage. The window-sash had slipped down, and he would only have to raise it with a knife-blade.

He took his pocket-knife out, opened the large blade, and slipped it between the sash and the frame of the window. Then he lifted.

Nothing happened, excepting that the blade of the knife snapped off short.

"Oh, hang!" snarled the Sixth-Former.

He tried the second blade, and the same thing happened after he had been straining and lifting for some moments.

Sefton stared at the box-room window in alarm.

After all, he was absolutely certain he had left the window open slightly, and it scarcely could have dropped of its own accord. Moreover, why didn't it give to his knife-blade?

Was it fastened on the inside? Sefton broke out into perspiration at the bare thought of such a catastrophe. If it was, then he was done.

He clutched the window, and strove to raise it again and again; but after numerous desperate attempts he gave it up at last, realising the worst.

The window was fastened. A servant or a prowling prefect or master had found it open and closed it. Or possibly some fellow who had his knife in him had fastened it, knowing he was out.

Sefton gritted his teeth at the thought.

He knew he had many enemies. A fellow like Sefton was not likely to miss making them. Possibly, in that dread moment Sefton of the Sixth regretted that he had ever made any enemies at St. Jim's.

"Oh gad!" he breathed. "I'm done!"

His face was white; he felt almost sick with fear. To be out all night was not a cheerful prospect of itself. But to be found locked out, fully dressed, the next morning, was a prospect full of terror for the prefect.

He had no hopes of finding ingress elsewhere. The box-room window was the only way; he was done. He was under no delusion as to his fate at the Head's hands in the morning. It would be the sack for him—Sefton could have no doubts on that point.

In sheer terror the rascally Sixth-Former tried the window again and again. The blade of his knife being broken, he had no means of trying to get at the catch, which was obviously securely fastened.

He desisted at last, panting and utterly dismayed. The minutes passed as he stood there, a prey to black and bitter thoughts. Then he pulled himself together as a possible way out of his predicament came to him.

"Cutts!" he breathed. "I shall have to risk waking others. Cutts will let me in and keep his mouth shut. I must try it—risk it!"

Sefton left the window, and clambered down from the leads on to the ground. Then he hurried away in the shadow of the wall, stopping at length below the windows of the Fifth Form dormitory.

He knew which was the window nearest to Cutts' bed, and a moment later a handful of gravel rattled against the panes.

Nothing happened for some minutes, though the windows of the dormitory were open to the night. Suddenly a head showed at a window; but, to Sefton's dismay, it was not at the Fifth Form window, but one of the windows of the Shell dormitory near to it.

"Hallo! Who the thump's that?"

Sefton drew a deep breath, and stepped back into the shadow of the wall hastily. But even as he did so he realised the folly of doing so. Moreover, he had recognised the voice. It was the voice of Tom Merry, the captain of the Shell.

Sefton's heart beat fast. There was a chance yet—a chance that Merry would aid him. He knew that the junior would never sneak, whether he aided him or not.

"Quiet!" he called up in a tremulous whisper. "It's Sefton of the Sixth! Look here, Merry! Listen, for goodness' sake! I'm locked out—some cad's fastened the box-room window, and I can't get in!"

"Oh!" Tom Merry understood. "You want me—"

"Let me in, Merry; I shan't forget it if you will!" called Sefton, in an agony of fear. "Come down and open that window. You're a decent kid and won't split, I know."

"All right! I'll be down in a tick!" whispered Tom.

The junior did not hesitate. If the many injuries and injustices he had received at Sefton's hands crossed his mind at all he dismissed them instantly. He could not leave the rascally Sixth-Former to his fate.

As he turned away from the window Monty Lowther sat up in bed and blinked through the gloom towards the window.

"Who—That you, Tom?"

"Yes. Quiet!"

"What's the matter, fathead? Get into bed!"

"I'm just going down," said Tom, in a whisper. "Sefton's outside—locked out! Some cad's fastened the box-room window, and he can't get in."

"Well, he shouldn't have gone out!" said Lowther. "Let the cad rip! He's been out on the razzle, I suppose."

"I suppose he has," said Tom, hurriedly donning his trousers and jacket and slippers. "But we can't leave him out, Monty."

"He'll only lick you to-morrow for doing it," grunted Monty. "Oh all right! I'll come along, too."

And Lowther, despite his growls, was soon out of bed, shoving some things on. Then he left the dormitory with his chum. They hurried downstairs to the box-room, and while Lowther struck a match Tom fumbled with the catch of the window.

They could see Sefton's white face pressed against the window, and his expression of fear and anxiety.

The next moment the sash was raised and Sefton clambered inside with feverish haste.

"Thanks, you chaps!" he panted, peering at them in the gloom. "I—I shan't forget this, kids! You—you'll keep quiet about this?"

"Yes," said Tom, rather contemptuously. "But I should think it ought to be a lesson to you, Sefton, not to play the fool like this again. You're risking the sack every time."

"I know," muttered Sefton. "It—it's a mug's game. I've finished after this. But—but if I get my hands on the cad who locked me out I'll make him wish he'd never been born!"

And Sefton gritted his teeth with rage. Tom Merry's lip curled.

"Come on, Monty," he said shortly.

The two juniors left the box-room.

Sefton followed them after fastening the window, and made for his study, his brow black with rage and humiliation. To be under such an obligation to two juniors was not a pleasing reflection to the Sixth-Former. He had escaped; he was safe enough. But his thoughts were black, and he was seething with rage against the midnight prowler who had locked him out.

"I'll find out!" he hissed to himself as he reached his door. "I'll find out, and I'll— Good gad! What the deuce—"

Sefton stopped short, his hand on the knob of his door. From inside his study came a curious, rumbling noise—a noise that resembled a dozen ordinary snores rolled into one.

"Good gad!" gasped the Sixth-Former again.

He opened the door of his study and blinked inside. He

(Continued on next page.)



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could see little, but he did not need to see much to know that his bed was occupied. From the corner where it stood came that rumbling snore.

Utterly bewildered, Sefton came further into the room, striking a match as he did so. The match showed him the form of a fat figure under the bedclothes. It also showed a fat, grimy face from the nose of which proceeded that awful snore.

The Sixth-Former stared at it transfixed.

CHAPTER 6.

The Whip-Hand!

SEFTON recognised Baggy Trimble in a flash, he recognised him with a wrath and amazement that grew and grew. Then, as the match burned Sefton's fingers, he flung it down and smote hard at that fat face—savagely, in sudden, overwhelming rage.

Smack!

"Yarroooooogh!"

Baggy Trimble's howl was, fortunately, smothered somewhat by the bedclothes—fortunately for Sefton as well as for Baggy. For even as he smote, the prefect realised what he was doing, and he regretted his folly.

But it was done then. And, really, Sefton could have been forgiven, perhaps, for that hasty smite. To find a junior—and the greasy and unwashed Trimble at that—sleeping in his bed, and to realise the possibility—probability—that it was Baggy Trimble who had locked him out, had proved too much for the Sixth-Former.

He had smacked hard at Baggy's sleeping face, and in smiting he had realised that he was harming himself more than Baggy. If that howl had wakened anybody—

Sefton shuddered, and in frantic haste he closed the door. Then he jumped across to the bed, and as Baggy sat up in the gloom he clapped a hand over the fat junior's mouth.

"Quiet!" he panted. "Quiet, you young idiot!"

"Mum-mum-mum!" choked Trimble.

Sefton released Baggy's spluttering mouth, ready to clap his hand over it again in a flash, if necessary. But Baggy—wide awake now—made no sound save a terrified gurgle.

"Quiet!" breathed Sefton.

He listened intently, and then he struck another match and lit the candle. This done, he grasped Baggy Trimble and fairly wrenched him out of bed.

"You—you little rat!" he gritted, his face showing his fury. "It was you who locked me out, you little sweep! And now—now you've had the dashed impudence to shove your fat carcass in my bed!"

"Ow!" gurgled Baggy. "Oh dear! I say, it wasn't mum-me, Sefton. And I wasn't—I mean, I didn't even know this—grooogh!—was your bed!"

"You—you young—"

"I—I say!" gasped Trimble, backing against the bed. "You—you'd better be careful, you know! If the Head knew—Ow! Keep off!"

Sefton raised his hand, his face convulsed with passion; but just as abruptly he changed his intention, pointing to the door.

"Get out!" he hissed. "Get out—sharp, before I smash you!"

"Oh crumbs! But—"

"Get out!"

Sefton's expression was terrifying, and as he took a step towards the junior, Baggy grabbed his belongings and got out, like a bolting rabbit. The prefect closed the door after him.

"Oh crumbs!" gasped Trimble, rubbing his singing head out in the dark passage. "I shall have to go now. How did the beast get in, I wonder? I'd go back and face the beast—make him help me—only—he looked jolly dangerous. Oh dear! Now I shall have to—"

Baggy broke off suddenly. He had just reached the end of the passage, and was turning the corner, when a light flashed just at the bottom of the staircase leading to the junior dormitories. Behind the light he glimpsed two pyjama-clad forms.

"Oh crumbs!" groaned Baggy.

He heard a voice—Tom Merry's voice—and knew he had been seen. For a brief instant he hesitated, and then he turned and dashed back to Sefton's room. He flung open the door and blundered in, closing the door after him.

Sefton was just taking off his jacket, and he jumped round. His face went red with rage as he saw the fat youth.

"You—you little sweep!" he hissed. "You—"

"Quick! Hide me!" panted Baggy. "You'd better, Sefton. If you don't, I'll give you away. I'll split if I'm caught, mind! I— Oh crikey!"

There was a step outside the door, and like a flash Baggy darted past the prefect and scrambled under the bed. The

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next moment a knock came to the door, and Tom Merry's voice spoke cautiously.

"You there, Sefton? I say, open the door, will you?"

The Sixth-Former gritted his teeth. But he did not hesitate long. A glance showed him that Trimble was well out of sight under the bed, and, opening the door a little, he looked out.

"What is it?" he snapped.

"We heard someone yelling just as we were getting into bed," said Tom in an excited whisper. "It seemed to come from here."

And Tom Merry glanced quickly into the study, seeming surprised to find it empty save for Sefton.

"Rubbish!" said Sefton thickly. "I heard nothing."

"You—you didn't?" exclaimed Lowther in amazement. "But it came from down here."

"And that isn't all," said Tom Merry, looking hard at Sefton's strained face. "There's somebody prowling about. We spotted someone in the corridor just now. He disappeared into this study, or seemed to. I—I believe it was that fat idiot Trimble."

"It jolly well looked like him, anyway," said Lowther.

"Rubbish!" grunted the prefect. "You—you must be dreaming, you young fools!"

"But listen—"

"Get back to bed!" said Sefton in savage tones. "You hear? Get back to bed at once. You must be mad!"

"But—"

"Cut off!" hissed Sefton. "You'll have the whole school roused soon."

And with that Sefton shut the door in the juniors' faces.

"Well, my hat!" breathed Tom Merry.

The two juniors looked at each other. They were certain they had seen a fat figure in the corridor, just as they were certain they had heard a howl from downstairs. But—

Sefton evidently hadn't. And, obviously, nobody had vanished into the prefect's room, after all. Tom Merry and Lowther went back to bed in a very puzzled state of mind. They were beginning to think they must have dreamed it.

Meanwhile, Sefton, after making sure the juniors had gone, had turned to face Trimble as that youth rolled out from under the bed. He had had nothing to fear from Tom Merry and Lowther, but he had feared what Trimble might do. Capture for Trimble would undoubtedly be exposure for him.

"You—you little rat!" he hissed, glowering at the fat youth. "Now clear—clear before I start on you!"

Trimble chuckled.

"Not much," he said calmly. "I'm staying here, Sefton. I think I'll sleep in your bed again for the rest of the night, old chap!"

Sefton stared at him, his eyes nearly starting from his head. Trimble grinned back at him. As a matter of fact, in those moments under the bed Baggy Trimble had been thinking hard. The mere fact that Sefton had "backed him up" was clear proof that Sefton was in a fearful stew lest the junior should be caught, with unpleasant results for himself.

That knowledge made Baggy Trimble feel master of the situation. He grinned in the prefect's furious face.

"You—you—what do you mean?" articulated Sefton, quivering with rage.

"What I say," grinned Trimble. "If I can't, I'm afraid I shall have to tell the Head about you. I don't see why I should screen you after the way you've kicked and licked me, old chap."

"You—you little worm! And you think your word will be taken before mine?"

"Yes," said Trimble calmly. "You see, I shall feel bound to call Tom Merry and Lowther as witnesses. I can see it was them who let you in, old chap. Besides, as they spotted me come in here they'll know you shielded me. They're bound to say what they know."

Sefton drew a deep breath. He knew well enough that Trimble was right. Alone his word would have weighed against Trimble's, of course. But the other two juniors would be bound to speak the truth if called upon. There was no getting away from that. Trimble held the whip-hand.

"Well?" asked Trimble cheerily. "Is it a go? I'll sleep in the bed, and you can snooze in the armchair there. But mind you wake me well before rising-bell. If I'm caught, of course, I shall be sorry to see you sacked, old chap. I don't mind the sack myself; in fact, I'm fed-up with St. Jim's and shall be glad to go," lied Trimble cheerfully. "Is it a go?"

"I—I—I'll see you hanged first, you little toad!" hissed the prefect, through his teeth.

"Oh, all right! May as well get it over now," said Trimble, rolling towards the door.

"Stop!"

Sefton jumped to the door.

"Back up!" said Trimble. "It must be getting on for

one, and I'm jolly tired. I shall be glad enough to sleep even in the blessed detention-room. I—Here, hold on! I shall yell if you touch me."

But Sefton had no intention of touching Trimble, much as he was yearning to break every bone in his fat body. He left the door, his face fiendish.

"Oh, all — all right, Trimble!" he gasped. "You—you can sleep in the bed. I—I think I'd rather sleep in the chair; in fact, after you've been sleeping in my bed, you—that is, I don't feel like sleeping at all. I'll sit and smoke."

"Good! Do!" said Trimble cordially. "I'd have a fag myself, only I'm tired. Well, night-night, old chap! Mind you wake me in good time in the morning. I want to get clear before rising-bell."

And Trimble rolled into the prefect's bed and pulled the clothes over him. Sefton watched him like a tiger, clenching and unclenching his fists. Trimble eyed him a little apprehensively, but as the Sixth-Former turned away he chuckled and composed himself to slumber.

Two minutes later Trimble's snore was rumbling through the apartment again. Trembling with rage, Sefton flung himself into the armchair, and, taking out a cigarette, he lit it, his eyes glinting as they rested on Trimble's fat, sleeping face. But he could do nothing—nothing. And, far too agitated and furious for sleep, Sefton sat and smoked, while Trimble snored on, and the long hours passed.

But morning dawned at last, and, waking from a doze, Sefton sat up, shivering and heavy-eyed. His eyes lit on the fat, sleeping features of Baggy, and he gritted his teeth with rage.

Then Sefton consulted his watch, for the early morning sunlight was streaming in through the blinds and curtains. He rose stiffly then and shook the sleeping Trimble—his hands itching to smite the fat Fourth-Former instead.

But he dared not. Trimble had boasted that he was not afraid of capture, but Sefton knew better than to risk allowing him to be captured. What Trimble was doing at school, and why he had returned and where he had been did not trouble Sefton, prefect as he was. But what might happen to Trimble now troubled him very much.

"Wake up, Trimble!" he muttered huskily. "Wake up, you fat fool!"

Trimble woke up. He opened his eyes and blinked up at the prefect. Then he seemed to understand, and he sat up, grinning.

"Oh!" he gasped, rubbing his eyes. "I was forgetting, old chap. Is it—"

"Time to clear out, unless you want to be seen," said the Sixth-Former thickly. "Hurry up and clear, you young fool! Rising-bell will go in fifteen minutes, or less."

"Oh—oh, all right!"

Trimble was much averse to leaving the comfortable bed.



Sefton looked up at the open window with relief as he recognised Tom Merry. "Hallo! Who the thump's that?" called down the junior. "Quiet!" whispered the senior. "It's Sefton. Look here, Merry, I'm locked out—some cad's fastened the box-room window. Come down and let me in, there's a good kid!" (See Chapter 5.)

But he was wide awake now—awake also to his danger. He scrambled out of bed and donned his jacket, his shoes, and his cap.

"Get out!" hissed Sefton. "And—and mind you don't get collared, for—for your own sake."

"And yours, old chap," finished Trimble.

"Get out!" roared Sefton. "The servants will be about soon."

Trimble chuckled and got out, making his way cautiously to the box-room. There he got the cushion-cover, packed with food, and with some difficulty he scrambled through the window on to the leads and from thence to the ground outside. With eyes and ears on the alert he made his way from the school precincts, keeping away from windows—though at that hour no one was likely to see him. He went round the chapel, thence to the playing-fields, and from there to the lane and Rylcombe Woods.

Trimble dropped his caution after that, and for the rest of the way to the caravan he took it easy, there being no need for haste. He was feeling quite cheery now.

After all, things were not so bad. He had plenty of grub now, and he would soon have plenty more when a certain chap had received a letter Trimble meant to send him. Baggy actually whistled as he tramped through the dewy grass of the woods in the bright, warm sunshine. No lessons again for him that day, and he could slack and sleep to his heart's content. Moreover, he had now made a "friend"—an unwilling one, but a powerful one, none the less—in Sefton. Trimble began to wonder if he could not make further use of the rascally Sixth-Former. Sefton was a prefect and a person of importance, and if Sefton

backed his yarn up with some sort of evidence it might be quite easy and safe to return to St. Jim's.

Trimble decided to think that matter out very seriously. The caravan looked very peaceful and pleasant nestling in the shade of the trees in the clearing, and Trimble eyed it cheerily as he tramped up to it and let himself in. Everything seemed as he had left it, and Trimble locked the door and took out writing materials from a locker. Then he started to compose a letter—a letter he afterwards addressed to the Honourable Arthur Augustus D'Arcy at St. Jim's.

This done to his satisfaction Trimble stamped the letter—with stamps he found in a writing-case—and left the van, locking it carefully after him. Trimble was tired and sleepy still; but business came first, for once, with Baggy Trimble.

"Gussy's soft," he murmured, as he tramped through the woods. "He'll swallow this like a lamb, and he'll play up and pay up like a good 'un! If he doesn't show the letter to the other beasts it'll be all right. Now to get this posted."

Trimble found this an easy matter. At the end of the path, where it joined Rylcombe Lane, Baggy found a pillar-box, and he dropped the letter inside, knowing it would reach its destination by the evening post. Then he strolled back to the caravan, and after a good breakfast he turned into the bunk and slept, his fat face shiny and contented. Things were not so serious, after all. And if the future did still look a trifle murky, Baggy Trimble wasn't going to worry about it.

CHAPTER 7.

Searching for the Truant!

"WELL, my hat!"

Tom Merry fairly jumped.

It was the following morning, and Tom was standing in front of the study cupboard. Chapel and breakfast were over, and, with his study-mates, he had repaired to Study No. 10 for his books for morning lessons. And Tom's eyes had fallen at once on the open cupboard door. A second glance had shown him the litter of crumbs scattered about the floor, and he gave a startled exclamation as he saw the state of the cupboard.

"What's the matter?" asked Monty Lowther. Then Lowther stared as he noted the significant signs. "Why—My hat!"

"Someone's been here—raiding!" said Tom, setting his lips. "Just look! Fairly cleared out! There was a cake, and some sardines, and some bloater-paste, besides the jam and biscuits! They've all gone!"

"Phew!"

"Well, my only hat!" exclaimed Manners, staring blankly into the cupboard. "But Trimble—Trimble's not here! And it can't have been those New House worms. They might raid a spread, but they wouldn't pinch a few things like that!"

"It wasn't the New House chaps!" said Tom, his eyes gleaming. "What about last night, Monty?"

"Trimble!" breathed Lowther. "Then it must have been that fat burglar we saw last night, Tommy, after all!"

"I was certain it was," said Tom. "But now I'm more certain than ever. It's the queerest thing out! I wonder if—"

Tom broke off short as a sudden yell rang out from along the passage outside. It was Grundy's voice, and Grundy sounded exceedingly wrathful.

"Come on!" said Tom quickly.

He seemed to guess at once what that yell meant, and he hurried out and made for Grundy's study. They found the great George Alfred standing before his study cupboard, glaring inside as if he could scarcely believe his own eyes. Behind him were Wilkins and Gunn, also looking amazed and wrathful.

"Hallo!" said Tom. "You chaps been raided, too?"

Grundy gasped.

"Well, I'm blowed!" he said. "Nearly every dashed scrap of grub gone—gone! It beats me! It can't be Trimble. Trimble's kidnapped. I know that. But—but I—"

"It's Trimble's ghost!" said Wilkins.

"A jolly hungry ghost, then," grinned Lowther. "He's about cleared our cupboard out, too!"

"Great Scott!"

Talbot of the Shell looked into the study.

"You fellows—" he began; then he stopped and grinned as he noted the juniors before the cupboard. "Hallo! You chaps suffered, too? Somebody's boned some chocolate biscuits, and some apricots, and a whole jelly from our cupboard."

"I bet we're not the only ones!" said Manners.

"You're not!" said Talbot grimly. "Racke's lost a heap

of stuff, and he's raving. And I believe the Fourth have had a visit, too."

"Phew!"

Leaving Grundy & Co. still looking dazed, the Terrible Three went out and hurried along to Study No. 6 in the Fourth. Sure enough that celebrated apartment had also been visited and raided in the night. Blake & Co. were astonished when they learned they were not the only sufferers.

"It's Trimble, of course," said Blake, when Tom and his chums had related their night's adventure. "If you actually spotted him—"

"We only saw a dim form," said Tom. "But it was jolly like Trimble, and that yell, though faint, sounded jolly like dear old Baggy's voice. But the queerest thing out is that I'm certain he vanished into Sefton's study!"

"I am, too," said Lowther. "But—but Sefton denied it and swore he'd heard nothing. It—it's no end queer!"

"Bai Jove! I do not think so," said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head. "It must have been your imagination, dear boys. Twimble has been kidnapped; he's in the hands of despicable scoundwels who are twyin' to wansom him! Twimble said so in his note to the Head."

"You burbling duffer!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Trimble raided the dashed studies last night! Can't you see it now?" hooted Blake.

"Certainly not!" said Gussy calmly. "Somebody waided us all last night, and it is vewy, vewy stwange. But it is uttably impossible that it could have been Twimble!"

"You—you—"

"Wats!"

Arthur Augustus walked out with his books under his arm. When the noble Gussy got an idea into his head it took a great deal to shift it. Like Grundy, he believed that Trimble had been kidnapped, but unlike the Shell fellow, Gussy felt very sorry for Trimble, and was resolved to defend him in his absence.

"It's no good, Blake," grinned Tom. "You'll need an axe, and a saw, and a hammer and chisel to get that idea out of Gussy's head once it's there."

"Dynamite might shift it," said Lowther. "But—"

"It's thundering queer!" said Manners. "You say Sefton scarcely opened his bed-room door to you last night."

"Yes. He seemed jolly anxious we shouldn't see or go inside," said Tom, frowning. "It is queer, and no mistake."

"Almost seems as if Trimble was in his room," said Manners. "Why should he shield Trimble, though—if it was Trimble?"

"Goodness knows, unless—" Tom started. It suddenly struck him that it might easily have been Trimble who had locked the Sixth-Former out. "My hat! Trimble must have known Sefton had been out. I wonder if the little worm forced Sefton to shield him—threatened to give him away if he didn't!"

"By jingo! That sounds possible, anyway," said Lowther, with a chuckle. "Sefton may have stumbled on him, and that's why the fat rotter howled. Then Sefton, realising his danger, shut his mouth and lay low with the fat cad!"

It seemed a very probable theory to account for the strange affair, and Tom Merry & Co.—with the exception of Arthur Augustus—felt certain that the midnight raider had been the starving Baggy, and that their theory was a correct one. They went into class, and very soon learned that nearly every study had been visited in the night. And the general theory was that the culprit was the truant Trimble.

Tom Merry & Co., however, kept their own counsel about what they knew or guessed. They had no reason to love Sefton—rather the reverse; but they had no intention of giving him away.

Lessons were gone through very casually that morning, Form masters having a trying time with the excited fellows.

After dinner that day Tom Merry got a surprise—quite a pleasant surprise. He was sent for by Mr. Railton, who told him that the Head wished the Scouts to make another thorough search for Trimble that afternoon.

"No stone must be left unturned in your search," said Mr. Railton. "You must not look upon this as a scouting game, but as a duty and grave task. That wretched boy must be found and brought back at the earliest possible moment. You will start at once, and all of you must be in by call-over."

"Very good, sir!"

Tom Merry left the Housemaster's study feeling very "bucked." And all the members of the St. Jim's Scouts felt very cheery also, when they were given their orders. Scouting was much better than lessons on a sunny afternoon.

"Good old Trimble!" grinned Lowther. "It's to be hoped we don't find him, anyway!"

"It's our job to find him, if it's possible" said Tom Merry grimly.

"I think I'll take my camera," said Manners thoughtfully. "And I think I'll take old Towser," said Herries, with satisfaction. "He'll jolly soon get on Trimble's trail."

"You jolly well won't!" said Tom emphatically. "Wathah not!" said Arthur Augustus in alarm. "Bai Jove! Pway leave that wotten beast at home, Hewwies!"

"If you call old Towser a rotten beast——" "Chuck it, Herries!" said Tom Merry. "I draw the line at Towser. That's an order! Now I'll trot over and see if Figgy's got his men ready."

Just then Grundy came up, looking burlier than ever in his Scout's rig.

"Hold on, Merry!" he said. "What about your plans? Got some sort of plan out, I suppose? Nice sort of leader if you haven't."

"I have," said Tom. "We're searching the Rylcombe woods first, then the Priory woods, the meadows by the river, and after that Wayland Common. That suit you, O chief?"

"No, it thumping well doesn't!" said Grundy, snorting at the general chuckle. "Why, you're leaving the most likely place until last, you footling dummy! What about Wayland Common first? I vote we make a start by raiding those dashed gipsies if they're there still. I suppose you don't deny now that Trimble has been kidnapped, after that note sent to the Head?"

"Rats!"

"If you ask me——"

"I'm not asking you, old chap," said Tom blandly. "When I want to take my men on a wild-geese chase I'll ask you, though. You're just one of the rank and file, old chap—and very rank!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry walked away towards the New House, Grundy glaring after him. Then after another glare at the laughing band of Scouts, the mighty George Alfred rejoined his chums, his rugged features showing his disgust and wrath.

Soon afterwards all was in readiness, and at a blast of a bugle Blake carried, the start was made, the Scouts marching in formation until they reached the stile leading on to the footpath through the woods. Then the order was given, and the patrols broke up, and, spreading out, began to comb the thick woods and broken ground.

Tom was feeling determined, but not very hopeful. The woods had been searched before without result—indeed, Tom could not help feeling how unlikely it was that Trimble's haven of refuge could be in the woods. In the daytime it was likely enough, but knowing Trimble's funky nature, he could not imagine him staying out in the woods all night. It seemed impossible, and yet where could he be? Pepper's Barn, the Priory ruins, the old windmill on the Common, and even Wayland Castle ruins had been thoroughly searched already to no avail. It really was most mysterious!

That Trimble could be hiding in a cottage, or in the village somewhere seemed out of the question, as it was known that he was entirely without funds. And where else he could be Tom could not imagine.

But they had the job to do, and the captain of the Shell meant to do his best to carry it through. Trimble had to be found.

Everyone was determined to find him, with the exception of Grundy, who was not taking the search seriously. Grundy thought it a footling waste of time searching the woods, and he told his chums, Wilkins and Gunn, so many times and oft as they tramped on amid the ferns and bracken. And though Grundy was the only fellow who slacked at the job, it was Grundy who first found anything exciting.

With a warning hiss, he suddenly stopped dead and crouched down in the bracken, ordering his henchmen to do likewise.

CHAPTER 8.

Not Kidnappers!

"WHAT the thump——" began Wilkins.

"Quiet!" hissed Grundy. "Get down!"

Wilkins and Gunn obeyed. They were very mystified at Grundy's excitement, but they obeyed and crouched down amid the thick grass and ferns.

"What is it?" whispered Gunn.

"Look!" said Grundy.

Wilkins and Gunn looked, following their leader's pointing finger. Then they saw what was exciting Grundy, though they could not understand why. Through the trees they glimpsed two men—men in rough gaiters, obviously workmen of some sort on the estate. They were tramping along, carrying a long, bulky sack between them. They vanished through the trees.

"Well, what about them?" sniffed Gunn. "Nothing to get excited about."

"Nothing to get excited about!" repeated Grundy scornfully. "Oh, you thick-headed dummies! Can't you see? Those scoundrels—you saw them? I want to know what's in that bundle."

"But, you awful idiot——"

"Quiet! Come on! Follow me!"

"But, you silly ass——" began Gunn.

"Quick! Follow me! Not a sound!"

With his staff parting the foliage before him, George Alfred began to creep ahead cautiously, his rugged features ablaze with excitement. What he saw to be excited about was really a mystery to his chums. But then Grundy's mighty brain was not of the common or garden variety, and the workings of it were often weird and wonderful.

"Come on!" murmured Wilkins, winking at the mystified Gunn.

Wilkins saw that Grundy had found a mare's nest—not an unusual thing with Grundy—and he wanted to see what it was. He already fancied he could guess.

They followed Grundy cautiously, cheery grins on their faces. Fortunately George Alfred did not look back. Grundy was not a fellow to look back when once he had put his burly hand to the plough! He pressed on cautiously, as became a Scout on the trail.

He stopped at last, waving his hand behind him for caution.

"Look!" said Grundy, in a stealthy, thrilling whisper.

Once again they looked. This time they saw that the two men had lowered their burden to the ground, and were just opening the door of a low shed in a clearing in the woods.

The door swung open, and then the men, lifted the sack again with some difficulty and carried it into the shed.

"Now!" said Grundy.

What Grundy did next astounded his chums. Always a fellow of action, he acted now swiftly.

He jumped to his feet and made a mad rush for the shed.

Crash!

The door of the shed was crashed shut, and madly Grundy fastened the catch. Then he grabbed up a peg that lay on the grass and rammed it into place, securing the door.

"Oh crumbs!" gasped Wilkins.

"Oh, my hat!" choked Gunn. "Of all the born idiots!"

A yell of triumph came from Grundy.

"Quick, you fellows! I've got 'em! Where's Tom Merry?"

"You silly dummy!" shouted Wilkins, jumping up. "Let——"

"Hallo!" Grundy shouted again excitedly as Blake appeared through the trees just then with Arthur Augustus and Herries. "Oh, good!"

Grundy rushed at Blake, and, to that worthy's great astonishment and wrath, grabbed his bugle. The next moment a resounding blast was echoing and re-echoing through the deep woods.

"T-rah! Trah-r-r-rah!"

"What the merry dickens!" gasped Blake. "Why, you footling idiot, I'll dot you on the boko, Grundy!"

"Shut up!"

"Why, you—you——"

"Shut up!" snapped Grundy. "I've no time to fuss with Fourth Form youngsters now. Tom Merry—— Oh, good! Here he is!"

Tom Merry came rushing through the trees while the other fellows came tearing up from all sides, the call from the bugle being a signal. Tom Merry stared—they all stared—wondering what had happened. They also stared at the woodman's hut, whence came angry bellows and terrific thumps on the door.

"What's the matter?" demanded Tom Merry. "You sounded the call, Blake?"

(Continued on page 17.)

TWENTY-ONE TO-DAY!



Scene: Tom Merry's study at St. Jim's.
Date: The Twenty-first Birthday of the Gem.

TOM MERRY:

Dear friends, upon this happy date
We gather to commemorate
The birthday of the good old Gem.
And all our readers—swarms of them—
In every corner of the world
Where'er the British flag's unfurled,
From north and south, and east and
west,
Will join with us, with equal zest,
Though we, like Peter Pan, in sooth,
Possess the gift of endless youth.
The Gem, in which we all appear,
Grows older with each passing year.
To-day the Gem is twenty-one,
And still its course is far from run.
It comes of age this happy day,
Long may it wave!

ALL:

Hip, hip, hurray!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY:

Upon this great, auspicious day,
I have a few brief words to say.

BLAKE:

Excuse my interrupting you,
But don't forget to make them few.

D'ARCY:

Deah boy, I wish you would not shout,
You weally wathah put me out.
I had my speech wight in my head,
And now I feah I've lost the thwead.
Howevah, I—

MANNERS:

Now D'Arcy's done,
Lend me your ears.

D'ARCY:

I've just begun.
My fiwends, I was about to say,
That on this great, auspicious day—
We—I—that is—don't play the goat,
Just wait while I consult a note.

TOM MERRY:

Hear, hear! Bravo! Now, next man
in!

D'ARCY:

I wish you'd let a chap begin.
I had the whole thing in my head—
THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,049.

CARDEW:

I vote we take that speech as read!

ALL:

Hear, hear!

D'ARCY:

Bai Jove!

BLAKE:

Ring off, and cease!
It's Manners' turn to say his piece.

MANNERS:

Beloved hearers, now a score
Of years have passed, and one year more,
Since first the good old Gem was seen,
A Gem of purest ray serene.
How many millions, in that time,
In every land, in every clime,
How many millions—think of them!—
Have read the pages of the Gem?
How many follow, week by week,
The deeds we do, the words we speak?
To all those readers, staunch and true,
Spread out from China to Peru,
We send our greetings heartily,
And thank them for their loyalty.

ALL:

Hip, hip, hurray! Hip, hip, hurray!

D'ARCY:

Deah boys, I weally wish to say—

MONTY LOWTHER:

Friends, Romans, countrymen, and
gents!
Lend me your ears, and I'll commence.
Long years ago, when war's alarms
Called all the British race to arms,
To face the Bosches' Hunnish rage,
The times were hard, the grub was
spare,
But happily the Gem was there!
It grew a little thin, perhaps,
But there it was, without a lapse.
The Bosches? No one cared for them,
So long as he could get the Gem.
In trenches on the Flanders front
It helped the boys to bear the brunt,
They read the doings of Tom Merry,
And smiled at Fritz, and laughed at
Jerry!
I had a cousin on the Somme,
It saved his life.

D'ARCY:

Bai Jove! What fwom?

LOWTHER:

I'll tell you. On a deep, dark night,
Deep in a funk-hole, out of sight,
He lay at rest, and took his ease,
Amid the mud, and slush, and fleas.
There, by a glimmering candle-end,
He read his old familiar friend.
He heard, but heeded not, the guns.
The word was passed to charge the
Huns.

The other fellows did not stop,
But went like tigers o'er the top.
Deep in the Gem, he never heard
The order—not a single word.
The Gem still reading, there he stayed,
And never knew the charge was made.
He read the Gem till break of day,
And so escaped the fearful fray.

D'ARCY:

You uttah ass!

TOM MERRY:

You silly chump!

FIGGINS:

You footling ass!

FATTY WYNN:

Give him a bump!

LOWTHER:

Yaroo! Leggo! I'll slaughter you!
Yow-ow! My hat! Leggo! Yarooooh!

D'ARCY:

Now Lowthah's done, I twust that you
Will lend your yahs—

LEVIRON:

The toasts are due.
Tom Merry, as the merry host,
Of all Gem readers, gives the toast.

TOM MERRY:

To every reader, young and old,
The sailor brave, the soldier bold,
The airman in his giddy plane,
The seaman on the roaring main,
The City clerk who reads of us,
And smiles upon his morning bus,
The schoolboy with his shining face,
His Cousin Jane, and sister Grace,
His dad, who read the Gem before,
And still remembers days of yore,
To readers here in England mild,
And Caledonia stern and wild,
In Ireland green, and happy Wales,
In Manxland's coves and pleasant vales,
In Channel Islands fair and free,
And great Dominions o'er the sea,
To every reader of the Gem,
I give this toast: Long life to them!
To readers north, south, east, and west,
Long life and luck—the very best!

ALL:

A ripping toast! Bravo!

BLAKE:

That's fine. We'll drink it deep.

KERR:

In ginger wine.

D'ARCY:

Bwavo! But now I must wemark
That, in the cires, I weally—

TOM MERRY:

Hark!
There's someone tapping at the door!
Come in! There's room for just one
more.

ENTER MARTIN CLIFFORD:
My friends, I fear I'm rather late,
The railway's really out of date.

TOM MERRY:
Trot in!

D'ARCY:
Yaas, wathah! This is gweat!

LOWTHER:
You're just the man we wanted, you!

CARDEW:
So trickle in, and take a pew.

ALL:
Speech! Speech! Dry up! Now, silence
each!
While Martin Clifford makes a speech!

D'ARCY:
Yaas, wathah! But I'd like to say
Upon this most auspicious day—

ALL:
Ring off! Dry up!

WALLY OF THE THIRD:
Now, chuck it, Gus!
While Martin Clifford talks to us.

D'ARCY:
You cheekay fag—

TOM MERRY:
Now, order, there!
I move that Martin takes the chair.

D'ARCY:
Yaas, wathah! But I'm bound to state,
Upon this most auspicious date—
Bai Jove! I quite forget the west—

ALL:
Ring off, and give your chin a rest!

D'ARCY:
Yawoooh! Yow-ow! What howwid
bwute
Is stampin' hard upon my boot?
I weally think— Yawoooh! Yow-
ow—

ALL:
Oh, cheese it! Martin's talking now!

MARTIN CLIFFORD:
My friends, I'm jolly glad I'm here.
Not interrupting, what?

ALL:
No fear!

MARTIN CLIFFORD:
The way was long, the wind was cold,
The railway was infirm and old.

D'ARCY:
Bai Jove! I've heard those lines befoah,
Or somethin' vewy like, I'm suah.

MARTIN CLIFFORD:
Like all old things, it had its whims,
I thought I'd never reach St. Jim's.
But here I am, though rather late,
Upon this most auspicious date.

D'ARCY:
Bai Jove! He's bowowed that fwom
me.

DIGBY:
Dry up, you frabjous ass, or we
Will bump you hard upon the floor.

HERRIES:
Or bang your napper on the door.

MARTIN CLIFFORD:
The good old Gem has gaily run,
For years that number twenty-one,
It gathers readers, more and more,
As thick as sands upon the shore.
No trouble clouds, no shadow dims,
The fame and glory of St. Jim's!
The readers grow, on every hand,
As countless as the grains of sand,

Because the Gem's—in sober speech—
The only pebble on the beach.
A priceless Gem, both rich and rare,
A sparkling Gem, beyond compare.
I speak with knowledge, for, you know,
I write the Gem.

ALL:
Hear, hear! That's so!

MARTIN CLIFFORD:
The Gem, to-day just twenty-one,
Has really only just begun.
I hope again to call on you,
The day the Gem is forty-two,
And then to see you all once more,
The day the Gem is eighty-four.
But never mind that distant date,
We're gathered here to celebrate
The day the Gem is twenty-one!
Long may it wave! Long may it run!
Just twenty-one long years to-day,
The Gem was started on its way,
It seems a distant day—since then
The boys who read it first are men,
And still the good old paper runs,
Read by their daughters and their sons.
Some readers now are growing grey,
And still do not forget the day
When first the good old Gem was seen
But keep the memory fresh and green.
Should auld acquaintance be forgot?
And auld lang syne?

ALL:
No fear! What rot!

MARTIN CLIFFORD:
We'll drink a cup of ginger wine,
To the good old Gem, and auld lang
syne.

ALL:
Hear, hear! Bravo! That's ripping!
Fine!
Here's to the Gem, and auld lang syne.

THE STUFF TO GIVE 'EM!



CHEERS for the good old Gem, my boys,
With a rollicking, rousing swing!
Come, join with me! Give three times three,
Let the welkin fairly ring!
Through fair and foul, through storm and sun,
Our Gem has travelled to Twenty-one!

Time flies! and it seems but yesterday
When the paper sprang to birth:
With its yarns so bright, to give delight
And gladden the sons of earth.
Old Father Time, I do declare,
Gallops along like Turpin's mare!

You need no physic to cure the blues,
Try a dose of Gem instead!
There's miles and miles of sunny smiles
Wherever the Gem is read!
And the Imps of Care flee every one,
Like a flock of rooks at a farmer's gun!

What schoolboy characters can compare
With the heroes of St. Jim's?
Tom Merry and Glyn, and Fatty Wynn,
And Gussy with all his whims!
Cardew and Clive, and all the crew,
They are sportsmen tried, and sportsmen true!

And where will you find a funnier youth
Than the fat and fatuous Trimble?
Whose brains (if any) he can't have many,
Would scarcely fill a thimble!
And where will you find in fiction a finer
And loyaller lad than Levison Minor?

Long may their exploits sparkle and shine
In the pages of the Gem!
And we mustn't forget that we owe a debt
To the brain that created them.
Step forward, Martin Clifford! and hear
From a million throats a mighty cheer!

When every Wednesday morning dawns
We are blithe and gay as pierrots;
For the Gem's on sale; and we never fail
To meet once more our heroes,
Whose fights and feuds, and japes and joys,
Are dear to the hearts of British boys!

Cheers for the good old Gem, my boys!
We've loved it from the nursery!
In our mustered might we now unite
To hail its Anniversary!
May it proudly reign, through the years to be,
In its rightful place—at the top of the tree!

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LOOKING BACK!



An interesting survey of the successful career of our favourite paper.

By a Reader from No. 1.

THE first number of the GEM appeared in 1907, bearing the date March 23rd. I wonder how many of the vast army of loyal readers to-day saw that first number issued?

Strange to relate, No. 1 of the GEM did not contain "Tom Merry's arrival at St. Jim's." The first few yarns in this favourite periodical were adventure tales of fierce, savage animals in some equally strange country.

The earliest narratives of St. Jim's were published in a paper that is now discontinued. They contained but a few thousand words, and occupied about five pages of the weekly.

These yarns of the Fourth at St. Jim's appeared fortnightly for about five months, when in the eleventh number of the new paper, the "GEM" Library, Tom Merry, the most famous of all schoolboy characters, made his debut at St. Jim's.

This week in March 1923, the GEM Library comes of age. It is 21. The GEM has attained its majority. Quite a number of weekly papers were in existence in 1907. A few, like the GEM, have attained their majority, but the years have taken a heavy toll—infantile mortality in periodicals has been much higher than many would have wished.

Throughout its infancy and its teens, the GEM has always maintained a steady average of regular readers. Of course, there are and always will be, occasional readers, and those who like to get the good stories passed on to them. But it is the regular army with their standing order, who know best the weekly delight they have in store for them.

Now let us cast our minds back along the shelves of memory into the distant past—to conjure into vision St. Jim's and the juniors, as the stories depicted them in the early volumes of the GEM.

Jack Blake was the central figure of the first series. The boys who were at St. Jim's before him now form the background of the yarns. Most of the favourites have come along term by term.

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term as time went on. George Figgins, George Kerr, and Fatty Wynn, of the New House Fourth, met Jack Blake on his arrival. This famous trio were well to the front at the start, and have been well to the front ever since. Kildare, Darrell, and Monteith, of the Sixth were there. Mr. Ratcliff had the New House, but it was a Mr. Kidd who ran the School House. Mr. Railton came along later.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy flattered and startled St. Jim's by his honourable appearance next. Gussy took the Housemaster for the porter, and Figgins for the pageboy. The arrival of every junior fades into oblivion beside the sensation D'Arcy caused. George Herries was leader of the School House Fourth before Blake came. Thus Study No. 6 containing Blake, D'Arcy, Herries, and Digby, was complete in a very early issue. They are the oldest quartette in the Companion Papers.

In Number 11 of the GEM, Tom Merry, in velveteens and a lace collar—the good work of Aunt Priscilla—came along to St. Jim's. Like D'Arcy, he made a sensation, but of a different nature. Later, Tom became the leader of the Terrible Three, and then captain of the Shell, after a few rows with Gore. Finally, he blossomed out as the central figure of all the stories of the GEM. Yet these early stories seem very incomplete, lacking as they did all the favourite characters that feature in modern yarns. After Tom Merry, Manners, Lowther, Gore and Mr. Railton came over from Clavering, when that school closed down.

Among the early ones of importance to arrive were Dick Redfern, with Owen and Lawrence—three scholarship boys who styled themselves, "The New Firm." They developed the New House Fourth a great deal, and after a row with Figgy for the leadership of the Fourth, joined his party as rivals of the School House.

Then the Colonials began to arrive. Harry Noble, the "Kangaroo," from Australia, made a profound impression

on the Shell, both with the cricket bat and his cheery personality. Sidney Clive from South Africa went into the School House Fourth after winning a good name for himself, and Clifton Dane came over from Canada to settle in the Shell. Koumi Rao, the Indian, arrived at St. Jim's with Eastern ideas of using a knife too freely, but when his temper had been checked, he settled down quietly enough in the New House Fourth.

Jerrold Lumley-Lumley, Dick Julian, the Jewish boy, Eric Kerruish from the Isle of Man, Patrick Reilly from Belfast, Giacomo Contarini the Italian, followed, and settled into quiet studies in the School House Fourth.

At this stage the GEM still lacked the half dozen characters which have made it the successful schoolboy magazine it is to-day.

True, a couple of them came before the Colonials, but they did not settle down as decent chaps for a long time after the boys from overseas had done. Levison is one and Talbot the other. Ernest Levison, a no-good bouncer, and a highly unpopular fellow, was a creation of Mr. Frank Richards in the early yarns of Greyfriars in the "Magnet" Library. Ernest Levison—the same name—but this time a sportsman and a favourite character, is one of the popular developments in the modern "GEM" Library.

Talbot's story is a trifle sad. He was "The Toff" in his old days—a very clever cracksmen, who, as a youth, was leader of a gang after his father was killed. Burglary was the motive of his first appearance at the famous school, and it was a long while before he could successfully shake off his associations with the old gang.

Grundy and Trimble were the next precious pair. They arrived fairly close to each other. Neither requires much introduction. George Alfred Grundy descended upon St. Jim's like a thunderbolt. The old school never quite recovered from the shock—the Shell did not, at any rate.

Bagley Trimble imposed on the other boys right from the time he entered the gates. Baggy soon ate out his welcome—not to mention the study cupboards. His tall yarns of the imaginary Trimble Hall soon fell on deaf ears, and to-day he couldn't impress a Third Form fag.

Racke and Cardew are the most recent of the leading characters in the St. Jim's series. Both are powerful characters, and the GEM would hardly be the same paper without them now. Racke made his place steadily with the aid of his filthy lucre. Cardew won his by his whimsical character and recklessness.

Wally D'Arcy, Franky Levison, and that other troublesome fag, Reggie Manners, constitute "The Three Minors." They arrived at St. Jim's in that order. Dick Roylance and George Durrance both went into the Fourth. Roylance came from New Zealand, and arrived in a snowstorm. Durrance was at first taken for the son of a German, but the mistake was soon rectified. Space does not permit of a more detailed survey of the twenty-one years of life through which the GEM has passed, but the foregoing gives some slight idea of how Tom Merry & Co. came into being. Long may they reign, long may that prince of authors, Martin Clifford, live, and, finally, may it be my very good fortune to read these clean wholesome tales of school life for many years to come.

"A READER FROM No. 1."

"ON THE TRAIL OF THE TRUANT!"

(Continued from page 13.)

"It wasn't me! It was this cheeky idiot!" said Blake, pointing angrily at Grundy.

"That's it!" smiled Grundy, keen as ever. "I fetched you all along, and you'll jolly soon see why! I've caught the scoundrels red-handed!"

"You've what?"

"Caught them!" yelled Grundy excitedly. "Can't you understand? They're in there!"

"Who are?" hooted Tom Merry.

"The kidnappers, of course!"

"The whatters?" shouted Tom.

"Kidnappers!" snorted Grundy, his eyes gleaming. "I spotted them in the woods some distance back, and Wilky and Gunny and me tracked 'em down. They're in there now, and they've got Trimble!"

"Great Scott!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Wilkins and Gunn.

"You born idiots!" shouted Grundy furiously. "Is it anything to laugh at? They've got Trimble—tied up in a dashed sack! I thought it was those gipsies at Wayland at first. I know better now—unless these brutes are gipsies! Hark to the brutes! Now, you fellows, get round the doorway with your staffs and go for them the moment they rush out!"

"Oh, bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus gasped in great alarm, but he joined Grundy by the door quickly enough. The rest did not join Grundy—they were warned what to expect by the grins of Wilkins and Gunn. But Grundy was too excited to notice their lack of enthusiasm, and in a flash he had wrenched the peg out and lifted the catch.

"Look out!"

It was very necessary to "look out," for as the door swung open the two men rushed out, snorting with wrath. They both snorted still more as Grundy brought his staff down with a fearful crack on the head of the first. The staff of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy missed its aim—fortunately for the second woodman, and possibly very fortunately for Arthur Augustus.

But neither of the men even looked at Arthur Augustus. They had glimpsed Grundy as he crashed the door shut, and it was Grundy they made for.

"Yarrooooooh!" roared the first, as the staff cracked on his head. "Why, you durned little rip, I'll tan your hide for that."

"Back up!" yelled Grundy.

But nobody backed up; Arthur Augustus would have done so, but Blake dragged him back by main force. There was a plentiful lack of keenness to back up George Alfred.

But George Alfred did not mind. He twisted in the woodman's grasp, and his fist took the man under the chin.

"Chuck it, Grundy, you ass!" shouted Tom Merry, half-laughing. "You chump—"

"Back up!" yelled Grundy desperately. "Why, you rotten funks! Oh crumbs!"

Grundy was a hefty chap for his age, but the burly woodman handled him with ease and twisted him round.

"And me that stick, Jim!" he snorted angrily. "Scout, is he? I'll teach 'im to play tricks like that there."

Jim handed the stick over quickly enough, and the woodman was about to bring it down across Grundy's trousers when Tom Merry interferred.

"Hold on!" he said grimly. "Grundy, you silly fool—"

"Go for them, you rotten funks!" raved Grundy, almost beside himself with rage at his schoolfellows' amazing disregard. "Don't you understand, you fools! They've got Trimble—or his body—in that sack inside there!"

"Eh?" The woodman almost released Grundy in his astonishment. "Us got a—a body in there? You silly young idjut! There's only wood in that there sack—wood chippin's, you young fool!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was a howl of laughter from the Scouts, started by Wilkins and Gunn. But Tom Merry and the others understood clearly now that Grundy had made one of his little mistakes.

"You rotters!" howled Grundy. "Fetch the sack out. Look inside, and you'll see."

But the other man, grinning a little now, dragged out the sack and opened it. It was full to the brim with wood axe-chippings—no body, or Trimble, or anything else.

"Mum-my hat!" stuttered Grundy. "Then—then—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Then—then these chaps aren't kidnappers!" gasped Grundy, his face showing his deep disappointment. "M-my hat! And—and I was sure it was—was Trimble in that sack!"

"You born idiot!" laughed Tom Merry. "Can't you see

these chaps work on the estate? Ha, ha, ha! You'd better tell 'em you've made a mistake and apologise!"

"And think that'll satisfy me," bellowed the first woodman wrathfully. "I'm goin' to take it outer the young imp's 'ide!"

And with that, despite Grundy's frantic struggles and howls, the man dragged Grundy across his knees and started in with the stick in right good will.

Whack, whack, whack, whack!

"Yarrooooooh! Yooooop! Oh, my hat! Help! Rescue!" roared Grundy.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But there was no rescue for Grundy. The juniors were laughing too much at his absurd mistake for one thing, and it is doubtful if they would have interfered in any case. The general view was that Grundy had asked for it for being such an ass.

And he got it. The stick rose and fell with terrific swipes, and Grundy's howls awakened the echoes of the woodland glade.

Whack, whack, whack, whack!

"Yarroooooooooooh!"

The woodman tired at last, but not before Grundy did, and flung the stick one way and the howling Grundy another. Then, with his grinning mate he marched away, still snorting with anger.

"Ow!" Grundy sat on the grass and roared with anguish.

"Ow, ow! Oh, my hat! Oh crikey! Oh crumbs! The awful beast! Grooooooh! Ow-wow! I—I'll smash him! I'll—I'll—"

Though obviously very weary, Grundy was not done by any means, and he scrambled up and blinked about him for the woodman. Though Grundy had been like a child in the man's grasp, Grundy was not beaten yet, and he looked round him, evidently seeking more.

"He's gone!" laughed Tom Merry. "Better take it smiling, old chap. You asked for it, you know!"

"Ow!" gasped Grundy. "Oh, the awful cad! I'm not done yet, by Jingo. I'm going after the cad to smash him!"

And Grundy made as if to rush in pursuit of the two woodmen just disappearing through the trees. But evidently he had second thoughts on the matter, for he stopped and rubbed himself instead, his face still red with wrath.

"Go on, after him!" called Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you laughing idiots!" panted Grundy. "Why didn't you back a fellow up?"

"My kind teachers always told me never to back up fools in their folly," explained Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Grundy looked as if he was about to rush at the laughing Scouts, but Tom Merry interposed.

"Enough of this, you fellows," he said sharply, controlling his own merriment with an effort. "We've wasted enough time already."

"Look here—" roared Grundy.

"That's enough," said Tom. "Any more fuss, Grundy, and I shall report you to the Scoutmaster. Now, chaps, get a move on."

And the Scouts got a move on. The entertainment for the moment was over—more serious business lay ahead for the St. Jim's Scouts. They scattered obediently, and resumed the search for the missing Trimble, chuckling at the sad result of Grundy's little mistake.

But, as before, the search proved fruitless as far as the finding of Trimble was concerned. And at tea-time most of the Scouts returned to St. Jim's for tea, tired, hungry, and disappointed. Tom Merry made his way to Mr. Railton's study, and reported the Scouts' lack of success to the Housemaster. Only Manners seemed quite satisfied with his

(Continued on next page.)



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afternoon's work; but that was because Manners had combined pleasure with business, and he had quite a decent collection of "snaps" to show for his afternoon's work.

Where the truant Trimble was hiding himself was certainly a deep mystery as yet, though the Scouts little dreamed that they had practically been within a hundred yards of his hiding-place all that afternoon.

CHAPTER 9.

The Mysterious Gussy!

THE things that were said in the various studies at the School House concerning Bagley Trimble of the Fourth, would have made that fat youth's hair curl had he heard them.

For when the juniors came in to tea, very hungry, they remembered suddenly that Baggy's depredations the night before—presuming it was Baggy—had left them very little for tea at all. It was all right, to some extent, for the fellows who happened to be in funds, but for the fellows who weren't it was decidedly annoying.

The Terrible Three were in the latter category. But in Study No. 6 in the Fourth the matter was not so serious. Arthur Augustus, fortunately, had three pounds in hand, and Blake and Digby had several shillings between them.

So in the kindness of their hearts the Fourth fellows invited Tom Merry, Monty Lowther, and Manners to tea. This important matter was arranged as the Scouts were returning to St. Jim's.

Arriving at the school, the juniors hurried up to change, and, as usual, the noble and aristocratic Arthur Augustus was the very last to finish. Indeed, he was a good ten minutes after his chums in changing, greatly to the exasperation of the six juniors who were waiting in Study No. 6 for him. At least, they were waiting for the three pounds—they were not so particular as to the arrival of Gussy himself.

But Arthur Augustus did not hurry over such an important matter as dressing. But he was satisfied with his toilet and appearance at last, and he descended the stairs sedately. He was making for Study No. 6 when Toby, the page, stopped him and handed him a letter.

"Jest come by the post, Master D'Arcy," said Toby, eyeing Gussy hopefully. "Which I thought I'd bring it up—"

"Thank you vewy much, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus.

He took the letter, handing Toby a shilling in return. Toby departed, his hopefulness realised to the extent of a shilling. Arthur Augustus stood and stared at the letter.

It was rather an unusual-looking missive. Gussy's letters usually bore a crest, and this one did not—unless numerous dirty finger-marks could be regarded as such. The envelope was addressed in printed capitals, not very carefully or skillfully executed.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "The post-mark is Wylcombe. But it cannot be from my tailah, or a bill. I wondah who—"

Arthur Augustus opened the letter with a delicate hand and drew out the enclosure. It was just a sheet of notepaper—quite good paper—written on in ordinary writing—writing that was decidedly familiar, and decidedly ill-written and ill-spelt.

Arthur Augustus jumped.

"Bai Jove!" he gasped. "It's—it's from Twimble!"

It undoubtedly was. And as Arthur Augustus read the epistle his eyes opened wider and wider. Then he jammed his monocle more firmly into his noble eye and read it again, distress and alarm in his face.

For the letter was as follows:

"Dear D'Arcy,—I am a prisonner—starved and illtreated in the hands of desperit kidnappers. I am writing to you as an old pal, and becouse I know you're so kindhearted and wont see me starved to death and murdered in cold blood, I imploer your aid in my extremety, knowing you're too kind and desent to leave me to my fait. If you would save your old pal from being starved to death and murdered in cold blood, kindly plase five pounds on the fallen oak-tree just by the Priory ruins, at seven o'clock to-nite. That is the ransom my kidnappers denmand. Plase it there and then walk quickly away. Don't try to see what hapens, as they are suspicious, and my chause of regaining my liberty will be gone for ever. And don't, I imploer you, mention this to a single sole—not even to Blake, or anny-boddy. If you do my life will be forefeeted, and you will never see your old pal again.

"Your starving pal,
"BAGLEY TRIMBLE.

"P.S.—Don't forget—plase the five pounds on the oak-tree and then walk quickly away.

"P.P.S.—Don't forget about not mentioning this to a single sole—espeeshally Blake."

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"Oh, bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus.

He was both amazed and deeply touched by the pathetic letter. Other fellows might not have found that letter pathetic. Blake, Digby, and Herries, for instance, would certainly not have found it so. That was possibly why Baggy Trimble seemed so anxious that Arthur Augustus should not tell his chums.

But Arthur Augustus, in the innocence of his kindly, unsuspicious nature, found it only pathetic and distressing. Arthur Augustus had known the crafty Baggy for a long time, and he might have been expected to look upon such a letter with suspicion. He did not, however—far from it! Arthur Augustus was sorry for Trimble, and he was determined the fat youth should have fair play and justice from him.

Certainly five pounds seemed rather a small sum for a ransom. Also, why had Baggy appealed to him instead of to the authorities? There were several little points about the letter which Arthur Augustus did not quite understand.

Of course, as Arthur Augustus admitted to himself, it was possibly because he was so kind and "desent" that Trimble had called upon him.

"Yaas, wathah!" murmured the swell of the Fourth, walking slowly on. "And it's quite possible the feahful wuffians dare not allow him to appeal to the Head. So Twimble has thought of me. Poor old Twimble! But weally five pounds is wathah a small sum for a wansom. Still, the kidnappers may only be twamps, or gipsies, and it is pwobably all they wequiah. Five pounds, aftah all, may be quite a big sum of money to them."

Musing thus Arthur Augustus proceeded to his study, his mind in a whirl. But his mind was quite settled upon one point, for all that.

"I would wathah have enlisted Blake's aid in the mattah," murmured Arthur Augustus. "I can quite undahstand Twimble bein' afwaid of Blake knowin', howevah, for Blake is wathah a thoughtless youngstah, and might easily wuin the whole thing and jeopardise Twimble's safety. I suppose Twimble has thought of that. He was vewy wise to twist to my tact and judgment. Yaas, wathah!"

And with that Arthur Augustus pushed open the door of Study No. 6 and walked in. Blake, Digby, and Herries were there, as were the honoured guests, Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther. They jumped up and glared at Gussy.

"You footling dummy!" snorted Blake. "We've been waiting for you. Buck up and shell out that cash. We're hungry, and the dashed stuff has to be got from the tuck-shop yet."

"Yes, buck up, Gussy," grinned Tom Merry. "Scouting makes chaps hungry."

"I'm surprised at you, Gussy," said Lowther, shaking his head severely. "It isn't manners to keep your guests waiting like this."

"Oh, bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus had forgotten all about the arrangement for tea.

His noble features went a delicate pink. It was really most awkward. The fellows were relying upon his three pounds for tea. But that was quite out of the question now. It was impossible to spend any of that on a mere tea when it was wanted for Baggy's ransom! Gussy say that in a flash.

But the really unfortunate part was that he could not explain the position. It was a matter of life or death; but for Trimble's sake he dare not explain, dare not breathe a word. He wondered what his chums would say if they only knew the vital necessity of his sticking to that three pounds; that the three, with another two added to it, was to save Trimble's liberty, if not his very life.

"Weally!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "Weally—weally, deah boys! I am vewy sowwy—"

"Never mind your giddy sorrow," grunted Blake. "Shell out, or else come along yourself and buy the grub!"

"But, weally—"

Arthur Augustus paused again, baffled to know just what to say. Blake & Co. glared at him.

"What the thump's the matter with the ass?" asked Herries wonderingly.

"Buck up!" roared Blake.

"Bai Jove! Weally, deah boys, I am vewy sowwy—"

"Blow your sorrow!"

"Weally, Blake, I wish you would not woah at me—you know how I hate bein' woahed at. You put me in quite a fluttah. Howevah, I—I am vewy sowwy—"

"He's starting again!" groaned Blake. "For goodness' sake ring off and shell out, Gussy!"

"That is uttally impos, Blake!"

"Eh?"

"Quite out of the question," said Arthur Augustus, in great distress. "I am vewy, vewy sowwy, but it is quite impos for me to expend my thwee pounds on food for

tea. I wegwet it vewy much; but I need the money for another purpose, deah boys."

"Well, my hat!"

The juniors were quite overcome. They were so accustomed to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's generosity in the matter of "shelling out" that they just took it for granted. And now his refusal to stand the spread—especially after it had been arranged that he should—was simply staggering.

"You—you want it for yourself?" ejaculated Blake. "But why? What for?"

"I cannot tell you that, Blake!"

"He's been backing gee-gees," chuckled Lowther. "Oh, Gussy, how could you?"

"Wats! Pway do not be wedic, Lowthah! I wegwet that I cannot explain why I wequiah the money," said Arthur Augustus, with dignity. "And I twust that you will not suspect that I wequiah it for any selfish purpose of my own."

"Of course not!" laughed Tom Merry, seeing Arthur Augustus was really upset. "Don't worry, old nut! We'll manage!"

"But what does the fathead want the money for?" said

"Would you?" said Blake. "Collar him, chaps!"

"Oh, bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus jumped back in alarm. It was certainly a high-handed action on the part of his chums, but then the chums of No. 6 were, as a rule, such a happy family that the ordinary rules of life simply did not apply to them. And Arthur Augustus knew that Blake would think nothing of carrying out his threat in the circumstances.

So Arthur Augustus jumped back. Then he dragged the door open and bolted—the only thing to do in the circum-



Baggy Trimble reached the fallen oak, and just as his hand was stretched out for the pound notes Gussy had put on the trunk, Tom Merry gave the word. "Now, chaps!" "Varoooop!" Baggy howled with sheer fright, and jumped round, as the hidden juniors sprang from cover at him! (See Chapter 10.)

Blake wrathfully. "That's all very well. But we're hungry! And what's that letter you've got in your fist, Gussy?"

"Oh, bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus started, and hurriedly placed the letter in his pocket. The hasty action was not lost on his chums. They fairly blinked at his crimson features.

"Well, I'm blowed!" said Herries. "What's the blessed mystery? Is that a giddy tailor's bill, and you've got to stump up? Is that it?"

"That is not the weason, Hewwies, and this is not a bill at all. I am, howevah, not at libahity to explain what it is. The mattah is a secwet, and I am not at libahity to divulge it. Pway do not ask me to."

"You—you awful ass!" stuttered Blake. "That means nothing scarcely for tea, and we've asked these fellows. Can't you see we've let them down, and you're letting this study down?"

"Oh deah! I am vewy sowwy indeed, but that cannot weally be avoided."

"Oh, bowl the fathead over, and take the blessed cash from him!" snorted Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"If you don't either shell out or explain, we jolly well will!" snorted Blake, jumping up. "We're having no giddy secrets or mystery in this study, you know that. We share and share alike, and we have no secrets from each other. Stump up, or we'll jolly well—"

"Impossible, Blake! And I should certainly wefuse to allow you wottahs to take it by force!"

stances. He dropped to a walk, however, as he found that Blake & Co. had not followed. The swell of St. Jim's noble features were flushed, and he wore a very disturbed expression. None the less, there was no thought of weakening in the mind of Arthur Augustus.

He considered the matter for some moments, and then, anxious to get the money problem settled, he went along to see Cardew. Borrowing money was not in Gussy's line at all, unless it was from his own personal chums. But Cardew was a relation, though a distant one, and Gussy felt that was excusable.

As it happened, Cardew was in funds, and he handed the two pounds needed over with a chuckle, and rather a keen look at Arthur Augustus. The swell of the Fourth thanked him, and, refusing an invitation to tea, he pocketed the two Treasury notes, and went down to tea in Hall. To have tea in another study, after refusing to "stand his whack" in his own study, would have looked very strange, to say the least of it.

And meanwhile, in Study No. 6 wonder and curiosity were rife as to the strange behaviour of Arthur Augustus.

"We'll have to keep an eye on the ass!" snorted Blake at last, after discussing the matter. "He's got some little game on, or some rotter's rooking him. What's to be done now about tea? I've just got two bob."

"We'll whack out what we've got, and make the best of that, then," grinned Tom Merry cheerfully. "I can spring ninenpence, and I believe Manners and Lowther have about fourpence between them."

"Oh crumbs!"

Fortunately, Digby had three shillings and Herries one; and, after pooling their resources, Blake and Tom Merry went to the tuckshop and got in supplies. Tea in Study No. 6 that evening was not a sumptuous spread by any means, but it was better than tea in Hall, which was what the unfortunate Arthur Augustus had to put up with.

CHAPTER 10.

Tracking Gussy!

"HES cutting prep," said Blake. "What the dickens is the ass thinking of?"

Jack Blake asked that question in Study No. 6.

There had been silence for some time in that celebrated apartment. Blake, Herries, and Digby were busy with their prep. Arthur Augustus was not present, his chums not having seen him since he had departed from the study in such a hurry before tea.

It was really very strange and disturbing.

It was possible, of course, that the swell of the Fourth still feared for the safety of his three pounds, or that he was kept away by thoughts of the bumping that might be waiting for him in Study No. 6.

Blake did not think so, however. From Gussy's agitated manner he had seen that something serious and unusual had happened to disturb the lofty serenity of Arthur Augustus.

That it had something to do with the mysterious letter he had received, Blake, Herries, and Digby were convinced. Yet Gussy had practically denied that anybody was dunning him for money. Moreover, Blake had learned that Gussy had borrowed two pounds from Cardew, Cardew having mentioned it humorously, not dreaming that Gussy's chums were unaware of the loan.

It was all very strange.

And now Arthur Augustus was cutting prep, or else he was doing his prep in some other study. Blake, Digby, and Herries had been at work some time when Blake broke the silence with that remark, proving that Blake's thoughts were not concentrated on prep as they should have been.

"He's cutting prep," repeated Blake. "I'm blessed—Oh, here he is!"

An eyeglass gleamed in the doorway, and Arthur Augustus came in. He crossed at once to his locker, and, after rummaging a moment, took out his cap, an article of attire Gussy rarely wore. In the winter he invariably wore a "topper," and in the summer a straw or Panama.

But he was after his cap now. Why, at that time in the evening, was rather surprising.

"Hallo! Here you are, Gussy!" exclaimed Blake, trying to speak carelessly. "What about prep?"

"I have done all the pwp I intend to do this evenin', Blake."

"You're not going out?" gasped Herries.

"This is my affair, Hewwies," said Arthur Augustus stiffly.

"But look here, you dummy——" began Blake.

"Wats!"

With that Arthur Augustus walked out, closing the door after him, the cap folded up in his trouser pocket.

"Well, my hat!" breathed Blake. "He's going out, that's clear. Wonder what he's got on?"

"Going for a run in the quad, perhaps," suggested Digby.

"We'd better see and make sure, I think, chaps," said Blake. "Come on. Mind the ass doesn't spot you."

The three Fourth-Formers grabbed their caps and hurried out, cautiously following on the trail of Arthur Augustus. They followed the swell of the Fourth out of the House into the dusky quad, easily keeping him in view.

He was making for the old elms, but even yet Blake scarcely suspected that Gussy intended to break bounds, or he would certainly have kept closer behind him. As it was, the trackers were some distance behind when Arthur Augustus suddenly dived among the bushes and trees that lined the gravel path.

"Phew! That means he is breaking bounds," snapped Blake. "Quick! We must stop the awful ass!"

But they were much too late. As they darted into the bushes they were just in time to catch a glimpse of the swell of the Fourth on the top of the school wall; then he had disappeared, dropping into the lane beyond.

Blake quickly shinned up a tree in pursuit. He reached the wall and stared up the lane. There was no sign of Arthur Augustus. He had obviously heard them and flown at top speed.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Blake, breathing hard. "We'll give the ass socks for this!"

"No good going after him now," said Herries. "Let's get back."

"Blow it!" said Blake, in extreme exasperation.

As Herries had said, it was certainly no good following

Arthur Augustus now he was out of sight, for he might have taken any direction. So the mystified and wrathful juniors returned to their study. They had scarcely done so when Blake gave an exclamation and picked something up from the floor.

It was a letter, and in a flash Blake recognised Trimble's handwriting. It was unaddressed, and the envelope was missing. But the letter had obviously dropped from Gussy's pocket as he stooped to rummage in his locker.

Yet Blake read it; he did not hesitate, in the circumstances. The very sight of Trimble's handwriting was enough to arouse suspicions. Blake began to have a good suspicion why Arthur Augustus wanted five pounds so badly.

As he read the amazing letter Blake saw that his suspicion was only too true, and he handed the letter for his chums to read.

"Read it!" he gasped wrathfully. "Well, the—the born idiot! Grundy's bad enough, but that—that dummy!"

"That's what he wanted the five quid for, then?" snorted Herries. "Well, my only hat! Fancy being taken in by that!"

"It's not coming off!" snapped Blake. "We'll do that fat spoofer yet! Great Scott, he's the—the outside edge for nerve! As for Gussy——"

"We'll give him socks for this!" snorted Herries. "Done us out of a spread—for Trimble, for that fat worm! Br-r-r-r-r!"

"Come on!" said Blake. "We'll let Merry and the others in on this, and if we don't collar that fat fraud I'm a Dutchman! It's the chance of a lifetime!"

He fairly rushed out of the study, his chums at his heels. Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther were at prep, but they jumped up as the Fourth-Formers rushed in.

"Read it!" articulated Blake. "Gussy's just gone out of the gates—gone to give that fat trickster his fiver! See the game? If you're on, we'll jolly well stop it, and perhaps catch the crafty spoofer!"

"Phew! We jolly well will!" said Tom, his eyes gleaming. "We'll collar him and yank him back by the scruff of his fat neck!"

"Yes, rather!" said Lowther, jumping up eagerly.

"Count me out!" said Manners, with a chuckle. "There's enough of you to tackle dear old Baggy without me. Anyway, I've got my films to see to after prep. You'll find me in the dark-room when you get back, chaps!"

Two minutes later the five juniors were cautiously leaving the School House, their caps in their pockets. Once outside the school wall they put them on, and raced hard along the lane. The fallen oak near the ruins was a familiar spot to most of St. Jim's, and they made straight for it, leaving the woodland path where it branched off for Rylcombe.

Dusk was falling, and it was gloomy under the thick trees, but the juniors knew their way well enough, and very soon the ruins came in sight, silent and still in the dusk. Skirting them, the chums soon came in sight of the fallen oak, and then they became doubly cautious, nearing the spot with the stealth of Red Indians.

Then quite suddenly they saw Arthur Augustus.

The village clock struck seven just then, and as it did so the swell of St. Jim's emerged from the trees. He stepped rather gingerly out from the shelter, and reaching the fallen oak he placed upon it something that, from a distance, looked like slips of paper, but which the juniors knew to be Treasury notes. On the notes Arthur Augustus placed a stone to keep them from being wafted away by the breeze.

Then Arthur Augustus, with a look about him, came back into shelter. He seemed to hesitate for a moment, and then he came striding towards the hidden watchers, his "duty" done.

"Let him come up," breathed Tom Merry, "then collar him! See he doesn't get the chance to yell."

"What-ho!"

Arthur Augustus came nearer. He loomed above where the juniors were crouching, and then——

"Now!"

"Oh! Oh, bai Jove! What— Gwoooogh!"

That was all the astonished and startled Arthur Augustus had the chance to utter. He went down, gurgling and strgling. He was flat on his back in a flash, with Tom Merry on his chest, one hand clapped over his aristocratic mouth. Blake sat on his legs and Lowther and Herries held his arms. Digby stood grinning, in readiness to lend a hand if necessary.

"Quiet, you idiot!" breathed Blake. "Quiet, Gussy, or we'll rub mud on your waistcoat and over your chivy."

The terrible threat to his clobber was enough for Arthur Augustus. His gurgles died away into silence. He was astounded as he recognised his captors.

"Give your word that you won't struggle or make a row, and we'll let you loose," said Tom Merry, in a whisper. "Quick!"

"Groooogh!"

Arthur Augustus gurgled. But he nodded. It was

"I'll jolly soon wake him," snorted Jackson. And taking a grasp of Trimble and the bedclothes, he hauled both bodily from the bunk. Baggy came to the floor of the van with a crash, and a loud roar. (See Chapter 12.)



decidedly uncomfortable, indeed painful, with Blake on his feet and Tom Merry on his chest.

He nodded, and just then Tom gave a warning hiss.

The crack of a twig breaking underfoot was heard, and then the juniors sighted a fat, familiar figure creeping cautiously into the clearing ahead from the trees.

It was Baggy Trimble. He was dressed in a lounge suit that seemed to be bursting fore and aft about him. But it was Baggy in the flesh.

Arthur Augustus stared and stared, his eyes almost starting out of his head in his astonishment. For Trimble was making for the fallen oak and the notes. The significance of it all could not fail to penetrate even the noble brain of Arthur Augustus. Baggy was not a prisoner, starving, in the hands of desperate kidnappers. He was free, and he was after Gussy's five pounds—his "ransom"!

"Bai Jove!" breathed Arthur Augustus involuntarily. "The—the frightful, spoofer! wottah!"

His chums said nothing—they were watching Baggy. That fat youth took several steps forward, halted, blinking about him, and then he went on again. He reached the fallen oak, and just as his hand was stretched out for the notes Tom Merry gave the word.

"Now, chaps!"

"Yarrooooooh!"

Baggy howled in sheer fright as he jumped round. Then he sighted the juniors, and, without stopping to grab his plunder, he turned and bolted for dear life, going like the wind.

"After him!" yelled Tom Merry.

The juniors jumped forward, but even as they did so a shrill whistle rang out, and several burly figures burst from the trees.

They were keepers, and they surrounded the juniors in a flash, cutting them off from Baggy completely.

"Let us pass!" shouted Blake furiously. "You silly idiots, we're after that fat chap!"

"Not much!" said one of the men, grabbing Blake as he spoke. "I reckon— Why, these are young gents from the school, Jem!"

"Of course we are, you idiots!" howled Tom Merry, in great exasperation. "We've Captain Jackson's permission to be here. Come on—after Trimble, chaps!"

As he spoke Tom flashed past the keepers, and in a moment the others were following him, only the bewildered Gussy remaining behind.

But the pursuit was useless—Tom Merry soon saw that. The crashing of Trimble's flight had already died away. And after searching for some minutes the baffled juniors gave it up as a bad job, and returned in a disappointed group to the fallen oak. To continue the search for the fat runaway with dusk coming on would be worse than hunting for a needle in a haystack.

They found Gussy dismally explaining to the keepers.

"I'm sorry, young sir," said the head-keeper. "We didn't even see the young gent you were after. We was hunting some young himps from the villag as 'as bin damaging the young trees in the plantation over yonder, and when we came suddenly on you, like—"

"It can't be helped," said Tom, grinning, despite himself. "It's just bad luck! We jolly nearly had the fat rascal! You've got those notes, Gussy?"

"Oh, yaas!" Gussy's voice was quite feeble. He was not feeling very happy. He felt less happy a few seconds later when the keepers, after promising to keep an eye open for Baggy Trimble, had continued their hunt for the village "himps."

"Now, you—you born idiot!" said Blake.

"Weally, Blake—"

"You crass ass!" said Tom Merry. "You burbling duffer! Fancy being taken in by that fat spoofer! Haven't you known him long enough to see through that silly trick?"

"Weally, you fellows—"

"Oh, bump the silly owl, and let's get back!" said Digby. "If we've been missed we're for it, remember!"

"My hat, yes! We'll bump this fathead right enough, though—teach him to have a bit more sense."

"Bai Jove! Weally, Tom Mewwy, I should uttably wewfuse— Oh, gweat Scott! Wewlease me, or— Yawwoogh!"

CHAPTER 11.
Light at Last!**B**UMP!

Arthur Augustus howled as he was grasped by his irate chums, and bumped again and again. Certainly Gussy's trusting innocence had brought them to within an ace of capturing the truant. But a miss was as good as a mile, and they had not caught Trimble.

Tom Merry & Co. were exasperated, and made the fact very plain to Arthur Augustus.

Then, leaving him sprawling and groaning on the grass, they started back for St. Jim's, disappointed and apprehensive. But, as it happened, they had not been missed, and they managed to sneak into the School House unobserved.

The two Shell fellows parted with Blake & Co. outside the door of Study No. 6 and went along to their own study. They found Manners seated at the table cutting films; but he jumped up as his chums marched in, his face excited and gleeful.

"Oh, here you are!" he exclaimed. "Well, how did you get on?"

"Rotten!"

"Was it a frost, then? I thought that fat spoofer would do you somehow!"

"It was bad luck and not Trimble that did us!" grunted Tom, and he told what happened.

Manners chuckled.

"Dear old Baggy!" he grinned. "But his race is nearly run—his star is setting. I've been busy while you chaps have been away, and I've managed to print off one of the snaps!"

"Blow your silly snaps!"

"It's a snap of that caravan camp in the woods," went on Manners, unheeding. "And it's come out jolly good. I knew it would make a jolly good picture with the trees and all that—and it has. Care to look at it?"

He passed the print to Tom Merry. The Shell captain picked it up, with a grunt, and glanced carelessly at it.

"Not bad!" he growled. "But—hold on!"

Just as he was about to hand it back, Tom Merry's face suddenly underwent a startling transformation, and he stared at the print again, Manners watching him, chuckling.

"See it?" grinned Manners. "Interesting, ain't it?"

"Well, my hat!" gasped Tom Merry. "Well, I'm blowed! So—so that's it! And—and we never even dreamed of it! Oh, good man, Manners!"

"What the thump—" Lowther took the print and looked at it, mystified. He was not mystified for long. Almost at once he spotted the cause of the excitement. The print was undoubtedly promising well, and it was very clear. It showed the caravan nestling under the shade of the foliage, the sun glinting on the little window.

And there was something at the window—a fat, scared face, peering over the top of the little curtain that was half across the window. It was the face of Baggy Trimble, the truant.

"Oh, great Scott!" ejaculated Lowther. "Baggy!"

"Dear old Baggy!" said Manners coolly. "I spotted it at once. The fat rotter must have heard me come along, and he peeped out just as I snapped. Now we can understand a lot. That fat spoofer must have known the Jacksons had gone away, and he's calmly taken charge of the van. That's his giddy haven of refuge."

"Oh, the—the boulder!" gasped Tom, "And—and we never dreamed of the truth!"

"But—but we've been there!" gasped Lowther blankly. "We went there, with Glyn—we went inside the van."

"That's right enough," grinned Manners. "But Trimble's tricky. You may bet he's been keeping a pretty sharp look-out, and he could easily have made himself scarce. Besides, he might even have been hiding in the van in one of the bunks, for all we know."

"Pshaw! I see it now. You remember the key?" said Tom. "We bumped dear old Gussy for saying it was locked when it wasn't. I bet it was locked, and while we were away Trimble sneaked out and cleared. Remember, Gussy was sitting with his back to the van when we came back from the Priory."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Manners. "What a scream—what a dashed scream! That fat spoofer deserves to get off, I'm blowed if he doesn't!"

"Well, I could jolly well kick myself for not tumbling," said Tom Merry, too astounded to laugh. "Why, it might have dawned on us when Glyn told us those caravanners had gone. Well, the cheeky, fat spoofer!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Come on!" snorted Lowther. "Let's go and tell Blake!"

"Yes, rather!"

The three hurried out and made their way to Study No. 6, Manners carrying the tell-tale print. Blake & Co. were staggered when they saw the print. Then they roared as they understood.

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"B-bai Jove!" stuttered Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, his wrath vanishing at this new and overwhelming discovery. "I weally cannot undastand how I failed to think of such a possibility, deah boys."

"Go hon!"

"The young wottah!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "I feah Twimble will come to a vewy bad end, you fellows."

"I'm thumping certain he will," said Blake, becoming serious. "What about it now, Tommy? Shall we take this right away to the Head?"

"I'm blessed if I know what to do!" said Tom, shaking his curly head. "I suppose we ought to; but—but I feel sorry for that fat worm now. It means the sack, sure as fate."

"He's fairly begged for it," said Lowther.

"That's so. But—but I think we ought to try to make things lighter for him, you fellows," said the captain of the Shell slowly. "After all, the silly duffer is scarcely responsible for his actions. If he gave himself up now it might save him from the sack. But if he's captured, it's the long jump for a cert."

"Bai Jove! I feel vewy sowwy for the weckless young ass," said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head. "Cannot we do something?"

"Yes, we can," said Tom. "But it's risky. The only chance is for us to sneak out after lights out, and go and root the fat ass out. Tell him the game's up, and his only chance is to own up. I vote we do it, chaps!"

There was a silence. But all the juniors, more or less, were feeling sorry for Baggy—now his number was plainly "up." They saw Tom's idea, and they realised that it was the only thing to save Baggy from the sack. Sooner or later he was bound to be caught, and the later the worse for Baggy.

"I'm on!" said Blake. "It's a bit more adventure and excitement, anyway. But supposing he's not there? He was in the school last night."

"But I bet he won't risk it again!" said Tom grimly. "No; our only chance is to go now and catch him asleep."

"We'll do it, then," said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

And so it was arranged. Much as they felt Baggy did not deserve any consideration, the juniors felt he should have his chance to give himself up, and thus make things easier for himself. And when Tom Merry & Co. went up to their dormitories that night they did not undress completely, nor did any of them go to sleep. And when eleven-thirty chimed out seven juniors slipped quietly from their beds, finished dressing, and made their way out into the starlit night.

CHAPTER 12.

Kicked Out!

"O H dear! That was a jolly near squeak!"

Thus the hapless Baggy Trimble.

He reached the safety of the caravan after that mad dash for liberty, panting and breathless. Then he flung himself on one of the bunks, exhausted.

Baggy felt he had never run so fast in his life before. But he had got away, and that was the main thing. He had been within an ace of grabbing the five pounds—just as Tom Merry & Co. had been within an ace of grabbing him.

"The awful beasts!" groaned Baggy Trimble. "Why can't they leave a fellow alone? I'm done again now. And I shan't be able to try it on again after this with old Gussy. Oh crumbs! What awful luck!"

Baggy really was furious with Tom Merry & Co. In his view they had robbed him—robbed him of five pounds, the loan between Arthur Augustus and himself. He fully intended that it should be paid back—sometime. But there was no loan now. The fiver that was to have kept him going a bit longer was gone from his gaze like a beautiful dream.

"What the thump am I to do now?" groaned Baggy. "I've got just a little grub left, but not much. I suppose I shall have to give myself up to-morrow if nothing turns up. Oh dear! I wonder if it will be a flogging?"

Apparently such a thing as the sack was not being taken into Baggy's calculations at all.

"And I daren't try St. Jim's again, after what happened last night," he groaned. "Besides, those beasts will be on the watch, I bet! It's awful the way I'm treated. I shall have to sleep here again. Groooh! I think I'd better turn in now and get to sleep before it gets really dark."

And after reflecting on his troubles a little longer, Baggy had a snack from his remaining food and then turned in, taking his shoes and jacket off.

In ten minutes' time his snore was reverberating through the caravan.

The dusk quickly gave place to darkness, and Baggy slept on heavily, his mouth open, his snore fairly rumbling. A

shaft of moonlight came through the little window, and presently it lit up Baggy's face. An hour and more passed, and Baggy slept on. Out in the moonlight the caravan showed up clearly, and suddenly the light of an electric torch flashed, and two figures emerged from the trees and approached the van. They stopped at the steps, and, mounting them, one of the forms felt in the locker on the driving-seat.

"Got it, Phil?" asked the other. "Buck up! I'm jolly tired!"

"Great Scott! The key isn't here," said Philip Jackson. He rummaged about in the locker in the light of the torch. But undoubtedly the key had gone. "Well, I'm hanged!"

"We'll have to get in, somehow!" grunted the other. "I wish we'd accepted uncle's invitation to sleep at the house for to-night."

"We were asses not to," said Philip. "But it would have meant waking the servants and a big fuss. I say, what about that bit of wire we opened the door with before—when we lost the key? Here it is."

"Oh, good!"

Philip Jackson took from the locker a piece of bent wire—a method of unlocking the door they had used before. It was inserted in the lock—fortunately, Trimble had taken the key out on locking it, and had pocketed it—and after a bit of patient wangling with the wire the lock clicked back.

"Oh, good!"

The next moment the door was open, and on the threshold the two brothers stopped—abruptly and very startled. Baggy's terrific snore had come out to them in full force with the opening of the door.

"My only aunt! What's that?"

"Sounds like a pig," said Philip, a trifle nervously. "Here goes, anyway."

He stepped boldly into the van, and flashed the light round. The light revealed the untidy, dirty state of the van first, and at the sight the brothers jumped.

"What the dickens—Somebody's been here!" gasped the elder.

"Some dashed tramp! Well, what a rotten—Great Scott! Look!"

It was Trimble's face they sighted then—indeed, that snore might have drawn their instant attention to it had not the state of the place so taken their attention. But they saw Trimble now, and the sight made them gape. Trimble did not look a sleeping beauty by any means. There being no compulsion about washing for the truant, Baggy Trimble had not washed. And his fat face was smeared with jam, not to mention dirt.

The two brothers stared at it transfixed. Then they noted that he was wearing a suit that belonged to Philip, and that youth went red with wrath.

"The—awful cad!" he cried. "Sleeping in my dashed clothes! Why, it looks as if the brute's been living here. His dashed face seems familiar to me somehow."

"A dashed tramp or a loungee from the village!" sniffed the other. "Great Scott! Wake him up and kick him out!"

"I'll jolly soon wake him up!" snorted Philip Jackson. "Here, out you come! See if this will wake you up, my sleeping beauty!"

Crash!

"Yaroooooh!"

Taking a grasp of Trimble and the bedclothes, he hauled both bodily from the bunk, and Trimble howled as he crashed to the floor of the van.

It had awakened him right enough, and he sat on the floor amid a sea of bedclothes and roared, blinking up in amazement at the two young caravanners. Then Trimble seemed to grasp the position and he ceased to howl.

"Oh dear!" he groaned, blinking in sheer fright. "Oh dud-dear!"

One of the caravanners had lighted the lamp now, and together they glared down at the hapless truant.

"You—you little sweep!" gasped Philip. "Here out of this you go. Hold on, though. Off with those dashed clothes first. Have you got your own here, you rotten outsider?"

"Ow! Yes! They're under the bunk there. Oh d-dud-dear! I s-say! Please don't kick me out at this time of night!" groaned Baggy. "It wasn't my fault, you know. I—I've lost my memory."

"What?"

"I don't know who I am!" groaned Baggy, his fertile imagination already at work. "I must have wandered in here. Oh dear! Lemme stay here until morning, and I'll sleep on the floor!"

"You jolly well won't!" snapped Philip Jackson. "You'll clear out the moment you've got those clothes changed. Get on with it before I put my boot about you!"

"Ow!"

Trimble got on with it. The two youths were really looking dangerous—which could hardly be wondered at. Baggy rapidly took the suit off, and donned his Etons. They were in a fearfully dusty and rumpled state, and Baggy looked a sight when he was dressed again.

"Now clear!" snapped Philip Jackson, opening the door wide. "Get out!"

"Oh crumbs! You might be decent and—"

"Get out!"

It was a roar, and Trimble jumped for the door, catching a hefty boot as he went. He all but fell down the steps outside.

The next moment he was blinking round him, alone in the moonlight, in the heart of the Priory woods. Really, Baggy had got off very lucky to escape with a whole skin. But he did not think himself lucky at all in that dreadful moment. The thought of tramping through those dark woods to St. Jim's filled him with dread. He had a wild idea of creeping under the van and sleeping there until morning, but just then the younger Jackson appeared at the top of the caravan steps.

"Not gone yet?" he asked. "Here, I'll help you off with my boot, you cheeky rotter!"

And he jumped down the steps. Baggy gasped and bolted, scudding across the moonlit glade with the speed of the wind. He stopped some distance along the cart-track, however. Never in his life had Baggy felt so hopeless and forlorn and terrified.

He stood blinking fearfully about him, and then, realising there was nothing else for it he started off on his tramp. It was really fearfully bad luck that the caravanners had returned at that time of night.

"Oh dear!" groaned Baggy for the hundredth time since he had made that fatal decision. "Oh crumbs! I've got an awful way to go yet!"

He tramped on, looking fearfully about him as he went. It was almost as light as day out in the open, but the woods looked fearfully dark and eerie. Trimble did not dream of venturing into them. He intended to keep to the cart-track until it joined the path that led into Rycombe Lane. It was not the shortest way by any means. But it was the only way Baggy dare take.

Owls hooted about him, making him jump with fright, and he started back every time a rabbit ran across his path. That journey was a nightmare to Baggy Trimble. But the worst was to come.

He stopped suddenly, his hair rising on his scalp with fright.

To his straining ears had come a strange sound—the unmistakable sound of a spade striking a stone.

Who on earth could be digging in the woods at that time of night?

Trimble stood where he was, his heart thumping madly against his ribs, and his knees knocking together with fear.

He listened intently, and then again came the sound. Then he located it and trembled.

It came from a spot scarcely twenty yards away from him, just behind a gate which stood open. Two dark forms were there, just within the deep shadows of the trees. One was stooping, obviously digging, and the other stood watching him.

As Trimble watched he saw the digger straighten himself, and then he saw the other grasp something bulky—it looked like a sack—and drop it into the hole that had been dug. The next moment the earth was being shovelled back again with some speed.

Then the two men tramped down the soil, and after throwing bracken over the spot they tramped quickly away, speaking in low tones and taking the spade with them.

"M-mum-my hat!" breathed Trimble.

He was astounded as well as terrified at what he had seen. Who were the men, and what had they been burying? Trimble shuddered at a terrifying thought came to him. But he did not give the matter much thought—his one anxiety was to get away from the spot as soon as possible. And when the footsteps of the departing men had died away, Baggy pulled himself together, and hurried on. For minutes—though they seemed like hours—Baggy trudged on, jumping and starting at every slight sound. And then, just as he was nearing the end of the path, something else happened to the hatless Baggy—something swift and utterly unexpected.

From the shadows of the trees lining the path a burly form suddenly stepped, and before Baggy could even yelp, a heavy grasp closed on him like a vice.

"Hold on, young 'un!"

"Wow!"

Trimble gave a gurgling yelp, all but fainting in sheer fright. He shook and shook in the man's iron grasp. A far braver fellow than Baggy might have been startled. But Baggy was more than startled—much more.

"Here, 'old up, young 'un!" said the voice—a not unkindly voice. "I ain't goin' to hurt you—I ain't a bogie-man! I'm jest a keeper, and I wants to know what the thunder you're doin' prowling about these here woods at this time o' night!"

"Oh!" gasped Baggy, finding his voice at that. "Oh, thank goodness!"

Never had the fat youth felt so thankful. It was only a keeper, after all—not a poacher, or anything so dreadful.

"Blow me," went on the keeper, peering down into the junior's face. "I believe you're the young gent as is missin' from the school. Blow me if you ain't! Those other young gents said you was fat, and you're fat enough, I reckon."

"Oh dear! I—I say, I'm the chap right enough!" groaned Trimble. "But lemme go! Or come with me to the end of the path, I mean. I'm going back to school now—honour bright!"

It was "honour bright" for Baggy this time. He was going back to St. Jim's this time. He was going back to St. Jim's come what might. He had had enough of his liberty, and his one longing just then was for his warm bed in the Fourth Form dormitory.

But the keeper had other ideas on the subject. He remembered hearing what a young rascal the runaway was, and he had no intention of letting him go.

"Not much! I ain't letting you go to lose yourself again," said the keeper grimly. "You're goin' to come along with me, and in the morning I'll take you along to the school myself arter I've reported to the boss. I reckon he's due back in the morning. I promised those young gents as I'd keep an eye open for you, and take you back home if I caught you. You'll come along wi' me to my cottage for the rest of the night, my lad!"

And Baggy—despite his desperate protestations—went. He had no choice in the matter.

CHAPTER 13.

Done Again!

"HERE we are! Quiet now!"
"Yaas, wathah! Quiet, deah boys!"
"Shurrup, you ass!"
"Weally, Tom Mewwy, I was onlay—"

"Quiet!"

Tom's tone was almost ferocious.

Arthur Augustus relapsed into indignant silence, and Tom looked out from the trees to see how the land lay. They had traversed the woods without incident, and now, here they were, with the caravan before them, glimmering in the moonlight. But it was not only the moonlight that glimmered. From the window of the van came a glimmer of lamplight.

"He's awake!" breathed Tom in astonishment. "I should have thought the fat funk would be asleep with his head buried under the blankets. But the van's lighted up. Well, all the better. Come on! Follow me. And don't make a sound in case the tricky rotter gives us the slip again."

"Wight-ho! Go ahead, Tom Mewwy. I wathah fancy

"Will you shurrup!" hissed Tom.

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus made no more remarks. The juniors crossed the clearing stealthily, in single file behind the captain of the Shell. He reached the steps of the van, and he climbed up them cautiously. Then he suddenly stopped short.

To his ears had sounded voices from within the van—wrathy voices. And Trimble's voice was not one of them.

"Mum-my hat!" murmured Tom, under his breath. "It—it doesn't sound as if Trimble's in there. Great Scott! Supposing we've been done again!"

He hesitated a brief moment, and then gave a knock on the door of the van. There followed an angry exclamation from within.

"Clear off! Clear off, you little sweep, or I'll boot you half-way through the dashed woods!"

Apparently the fellows within imagined it was Trimble returning—though Tom Merry & Co. could not guess that, of course. Tom knocked again and called out. The words from within were significant, at all events.

"Can we speak with you a moment? Open the door!"

"Hallo! What in thunder—"

The door opened, and the light from the lamp streamed out on the faces of Tom Merry & Co. The two caravanners fairly blinked at them.

"Well, if this doesn't beat the band!" said the eldest. "What—what the dickens are you St. Jim's chaps doing here at this time of night?"

"Sorry to disturb you!" gasped Tom. "But we're search-

ing for one of our chaps—a fat freak who's playing truant from school. We had reason to believe he was hiding in here—living in here, in fact, while you chaps have been away."

"Glory! Then—then it must have been that fat merchant. You—you said a fat chap?"

"Yes!"

"Well, I hope you've no more specimens at St. Jim's like him, anyway!" snorted Philip Jackson wrathfully. "Yes, a little fat merchant with a face like a muddy football was asleep in here when we arrived ten minutes ago. We booted him out jolly sharp, I can tell you."

"Oh, good!" said Tom Merry. "Then that's all right."

"All right, is it?" hooted Jackson major. "You call it all right for a fat little beast to come here and scoff all our grub, and muck up our van, and wear our clobber, and leave a mess like this about! Look at the van!" he roared. "Look at the state it's in! It was as clean and tidy as a new pin when we left it."

"Oh!" gasped Tom. "Sorry! But we couldn't help it you know. We'll bring him along some time so that you can both give the little rotter a good hiding!"

"Will that clean the place up, though?" snorted Jackson minor. "And my dashed suit—covered with jam and crumbs, and rumpled like a rag! If I catch that young sweep I'll—I'll—"

He spluttered with wrath. From the faces of the brothers it was very clear that Baggy Trimble had succeeded in making two more enemies to add to his long list. Tom Merry sympathised with the caravanners—they could do little more—and then they departed and started the tramp homewards.

"All right now, I think," said Tom Merry grimly. "The fat idiot's game's up now, and he's bound to have sneaked back to St. Jim's. We'll find the little rotter snoring in bed, I bet!"

All the juniors felt certain of that now. They hurried back, disappointed in a way, but thankful the wretched business looked like ending at last. But they had a surprise on reaching St. Jim's—two surprises, in fact, neither of them pleasant. One was that Mr. Railton, their Housemaster, was waiting up for them; and the other was that Trimble had not returned.

Mr. Railton met them as they were creeping up to the door of the Fourth Form dormitory. He was just coming out with a lighted candle in his hand.

"Ah, so you have returned!" said Mr. Railton, with no little sarcasm. "Very good! Perhaps you will be good enough to explain."

Tom Merry explained; there was nothing else for it. He imagined that Trimble had returned, and that it was useless to keep anything back.

"Very well," said the Housemaster, showing little surprise. "Your information regarding Trimble is very interesting indeed. The wretched boy, however, has not returned, as you suppose."

"Oh!"

"Bai Jove!"

"I propose to wait up for him, however," said Mr. Railton grimly. "Doubtless, as his place of refuge is no longer open to him, he will return very soon. You boys return to your beds. I will report you to Dr. Holmes in the morning. I realise you acted as you did from motives of kindness towards Trimble. But I am afraid Dr. Holmes will not appreciate them. You may go."

And Tom Merry & Co. groaned and went.

CHAPTER 14.

Back to the Fold!

IT was nine o'clock the following morning, and Tom Merry and his fellow-adventurers and comrades in misfortune were ranged up in a solemn line before Dr. Holmes in the headmaster's study.

They were not looking very happy. They knew they had done wrong—that they ought to have reported the matter the night before and not taken the law into their own hands. They wondered where Baggy Trimble was. They had expected to see him in the Head's study. Possibly, however, he was locked up in the detention-room; possibly already under sentence of expulsion, dimly reflecting on the reward his sins had brought him.

Dr. Holmes looked very stern—very stern indeed. The Head, on the whole, was a very kindly man, but he could be stern and unyielding to wrong-doers.

"I have heard from Mr. Railton what happened last night," he said. "I wish to hear from you, Merry, the story in your own words. Kindly leave no details, however seemingly unimportant, out of your recital."

"Oh ye-es, sir!"

Tom Merry stammered out the story of the photograph, and he left few details out. The Head listened, and then he nodded at length.

"Very good!" he said. "But Trimble has not yet returned."

It was staggering news.

"But," proceeded Dr. Holmes, "I am aware of his present whereabouts. He was caught last night in the woods by a keeper, who very sensibly took charge of him. Captain Jackson rang me up a few moments ago giving me the facts, and he is bringing the wretched young rascal over in his car."

"Oh!"

"We shall very soon have Trimble's own explanation, no doubt," said Dr. Holmes grimly. "You will wait—Ah, I think Captain Jackson is here already."

Footsteps sounded in the passage without. A knock came to the door, and a moment later Captain Jackson was being shown into the apartment. Behind him was a keeper, and—Trimble.

"Well, here is the young rascal!" said Captain Jackson, when greetings were over. "He is—ahem!—in rather a disreputable state I fear!"

"It is exceedingly kind of you to take so much trouble, my dear captain," said Dr. Holmes. "Trimble!"

"Oh dear! Ye-es, sir!"

"So your disgraceful escapade is ended! You have caused a great deal of anxiety and disturbance!" said Dr. Holmes in terrible tones.

"Oh, y-e-es, sir," stammered Trimble, his knees knocking together. "I—I'm so glad to be back at—the old school again, sir! But it—wasn't my fault at all, sir—you can see that, sir, I hope! Having lost my memory—"

"Bless my soul! Trimble—wretched boy! Do not dare to add prevarication to your many misdeeds!"

"Oh, no, sus-sir. I wouldn't, sir!"

"You were discovered in that caravan—the property of Captain Jackson's nephews?" thundered the Head.

"Oh, yes, sir. You—you see, having lost my memory—I mean, having escaped from the caravanners—I mean, gipsies, the kidnappers, you know, I—"

"Trimble!"

"Oh, yes, sir!"

"This farrago of nonsense will not help you, wretched boy! You have absented yourself from school without leave for days—you have acted abominably in leaving the school to suppose you were drowned, and then that you had been kidnapped. Unless you confess at once you will be expelled from St. Jim's!"

"Oh dear!"

Trimble looked at the Head's stern face, and he took the chance. He saw that the stories of his loss of memory and also the kidnapping wheeze were no good! He groaned and told the truth and nothing but the truth. The Head's lips set as he listened.

"Very well," he said, as Trimble ended miserably. "You are the most foolish boy I have ever had to deal with. I really do not know how to deal with you. You will go to the detention-room for the present, and I will consult with your headmaster as to your punishment."

"One moment," interrupted Captain Jackson, his eyes twinkling curiously. "Pray allow me to speak a word on behalf of the young rascal, Dr. Holmes. There is something I have not yet related to you—something which concerns this young man. He has omitted to relate to you an incident he was fortunate enough to witness when making his way out of the woods last night. He evidently did not think it of great interest. It is, however, of very great interest to me."

The Head looked astonished.

"Trimble was making his way along the path on my estate," went on the captain, "when he came upon two men burying something in the ground. He apparently forgot the matter until early this morning when he happened to overhear my keeper and a footman discussing the burglary at my house last night."

"Bless my soul! I was not aware your house had been burgled, captain," said the doctor.

"Such is the case, however. This boy, Trimble, at once remembered what he had seen in the woods. He told Thompson here, who immediately communicated his statement to me. I at once investigated the spot, and I was not surprised to find the stolen property buried there. It is an exceedingly fortunate find for me, for the stolen property was worth some hundreds of pounds. Moreover, the burglars—a rascally former footman and an accomplice—have already been apprehended. So, you see, I have good reason to speak on the young rascal's behalf—to plead with you to be lenient with him."

"Good graces!" said the Head.

He rubbed his chin and eyed Trimble fixedly. Trimble began to feel a bit better—having forgotten all about the affair in his fear of the Head. But Captain Jackson was a magistrate and a very big man—a man whom Dr. Holmes respected highly.

"Really, Captain Jackson, you—you have surprised me. I really do not know what to say," gasped Dr. Holmes. "But for the moment Trimble's punishment will stand over. Will you kindly take him to the punishment-room, Mr. Railton."

"Very well, sir."

"The rest of you may go," said the Head, nodding to Tom Merry & Co.

And Tom Merry & Co. followed Mr. Railton and Trimble out. They were astonished—but they could not help feeling glad, glad for the hapless Trimble's sake. It was pretty certain that the fat junior had escaped the sack at the eleventh hour.

After Captain Jackson had departed Trimble was sent for, and when he emerged from the Head's study later on he was limping and groaning dismally—clear proof that he was to remain at St. Jim's. It was a result that was received with mixed feelings in the School House. Nobody liked to think that Trimble would be sacked, but—Trimble was Trimble, and the fellows realised they would have to, after all, take care to lock their study cupboards again as of old.

Although it was scarcely likely that the Head had forgotten them, Tom Merry & Co. were not sent for. So that they had no reason really to "take it out of" Trimble as they had vowed to do when he did return.

But others were not so forgiving. In an unwise moment Trimble had chortled about how he had commandeered Sefton's bed, making that lofty man pass the night in the armchair, and the story had caused general hilarity. But Trimble's tattling had come to the prefect's ears, and for the next few days—and for many days afterwards—Trimble had good reason to regret playing truant.

THE END.

(There will be another grand story of Tom Merry & Co. in next week's GEM, entitled: "CARDEW THE KNIGHT-ERRANT!" Make sure of reading it, chums, by ordering your copy WELL IN ADVANCE.)

A Record Achievement!

IT is with great pleasure and justifiable pride that I place before you this week, chums, our Twenty-first Birthday Number. Just think of it—twenty-one years old, and still as bright and as fresh as it was in its first year. One can go beyond that and say in all honesty that the GEM is even better than it was in the years gone by; that it makes a wider appeal; that it has travelled to every portion of the globe where the English tongue is known; that Wednesday is a real red letter day in the life of the enthusiastic GEM reader. Small beginnings lead to big things—you've all heard that saying—and nowhere is it more applicable than to the GEM. It was on a Thursday in March, 1907, that your favourite paper first saw the light of day, and its arrival was hailed with delight by school-boys who now have, of course, grown to manhood. Yet hundreds of these old chums still read the paper that brought them so much pleasure in their youth. What is more, their sons and daughters now rank amongst our most loyal and enthusiastic readers. A contribution from "A

Reader from Number One" is to be found on page 16. As he remarks, the first copies of the GEM did not contain stories of Tom Merry & Co. But when Tom did arrive, the success of the GEM was assured. After Tom came a host of other characters, products of the lively imagination of that prince of authors, Martin Clifford. And they made an instantaneous appeal. The chief grouse from GEM readers is that these yarns of schoolboy fun and adventure appear only once a week. If some of my chums could have their way, there would be a new GEM every day of the week. But think of Martin Clifford—I wonder how he would stand the strain? Talking of him reminds me that we ought to pay him a tribute; you're not slow to respond to that, I'm sure. Then get on your hind legs, you men, and give him a cheer. That's splendid! Now another one—and another! Bravo! I wonder if his ears are burning? Long may he reign! Long may you fellows—that includes you, girls, as well—read his inimitable stories of the chums of St. Jim's. Twenty-one to-day! No wonder the GEM is at the top of the tree, for it has stood the gruelling test of time, of change, of fresh generations, of competition with marked success. There's a lot more I could say, but space is very limited, so I'll keep it in mind and say it in March, 1949.

YOUR EDITOR,

"DOWN WITH THE BAGSHOT BOUNDERS!" That, in effect, is the war-cry that goes up from the ranks of the juniors at Rookwood, but the big thing is to hit on a wheeze that will do the trick. That wheeze is speedily forthcoming!

FOR THE HONOUR OF ROOKWOOD!

A New Story of Schoolboy Fun and Frolic, featuring Jimmy Silver & Co., of Rookwood.

By OWEN CONQUEST.

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE.

James Montgomery Babbington, a new boy and a champion duffer, arrives at Rookwood smothered in coal-dust as a result of his encounter with Pankley & Co., the chums of Bagshot, the rival school. Babbington's leg is simply made to be pulled, and during his first evening at the school he polishes off Mr. Manders' tea without the slightest suspicion that he is the victim of a joke. He is soon disillusioned, however, when the House-master appears on the scene, and the new junior leaves Mr. Manders' study a sadder and wiser Babbington.

(Now read on.)



Something Like a Scheme!

"GENTLEMEN—"

"Hear, hear!"

"On the ball, Jimmy!"

"Gentlemen," continued Jimmy Silver, raising his voice, "this meeting has been called—"

"Hear, hear!"

"To consider ways and means of getting our own back on the Bagshot bounders."

"Hurrah!"

The captain of the Fourth Form at Rookwood was standing on a chair and addressing a full house in the famous End Study in the Fourth Form passage at Rookwood.

Besides his own study-mates, Lovell, Raby, and Newcome, there were Tom Rawson and Valentine Mornington, and Conroy the Cornstalk, Tommy Dodd, and his chums, Tommy Cook and Tommy Doyle from the Modern House, and several others, including even Tubby Muffin, the fattest Fourth-Former at Rookwood.

It made a tight squeeze, but the End Study was used to crowds.

"We all know," went on "Uncle James," "that Bagshot gave us socks in the matter of that new ass, Babbington, the other day."

"Shame!"

"Sure, and they did that entirely!"

"Well," continued Jimmy, "something must be done. We're all agreed on that. That's why I called this meeting. We've got to give the Bagshot bounders the kybosh somehow. The question is how."

Jimmy Silver paused dramatically.

"That's it—how are we going to do it?" said Valentine Mornington. "Easy enough to talk, you chaps, but what I say is, how are we going to do it?"

"Better leave it to the Moderns," suggested Tommy Dodd easily.

"That's what I think," said Tommy Cook promptly.

There was a howl at once.

"Rats!"

"Chuck him out!"

But Jimmy Silver held up his hand with a soothing gesture.

"No rags, you chaps! Never mind that Modern ass! He can't help it!"

"Look here—"

"Oh, scat!"

"Let Jimmy get on with the washing," said Lovell. "He's leader."

"Well, that's right enough," drawled Valentine Mornington. "Jimmy Silver's leader. Has he got any suggestion to make, then?"

"That's it. If he's leader, let him lead," said Tommy Cook. "What's it to be, Jimmy? Out with it!"

"Well, I have got a notion," said Jimmy Silver emphatically. "If you chaps will listen to me a minute I'll explain. I have found out that the Bagshot bounders—that is the junior eleven at Bagshot, which includes that blighter Pankley and his pals, have got a footer match on to-morrow afternoon against Lantham Grammar School at Lantham."

"Well, what if they have?"

"Sure and I don't see—" began Tommy Doyle.

Jimmy Silver held up his hand again for silence.

"Never mind what you don't see, Tommy Doyle! Just listen to me a minute. To-morrow's Thursday. It's not a half-holiday at Bagshot or here. Pankley & Co. are leaving Bagshot in a small motor-bus for Lantham about a quarter past two. I suppose there will be eleven or twelve of them in the bus. I thought if we could lie in wait for the bus along the Bagshot Lane and hold them up somehow, we could give them a ragging—just make guys of them and let them go on to Lantham all tied up and whitewashed."

Mornington chuckled.

"It would create a regular sensation at Lantham if we could," he agreed, "but—"

"Yes, but," said Tommy Dodd doubtfully. "It sounds all right, but how are we going to stop the motor-bus?"

"And how—" began Tommy Cook.

"Oh, stop your butts and hows!" broke in Jimmy Silver. "Look here, I've thought it all out, you chaps. The great thing is, of course, how we can be certain of stopping their bus. When we were talking it over before you came Lovell had an idea about that. Tell 'em, Lovell."

"Hear, hear!"

"On the ball, Lovell!"

"Go it!"

Jimmy Silver descended from his perch on the chair, and Arthur Edward Lovell took his place.

"I think the best way would be to lay a regular trap for them, and to have a sort of decoy to lead them into it," he said. "For instance, if two of our chaps were walking up the middle of the lane carrying pails of whitewash and the

Bagshot bus met them, it is ten to one Pankley & Co. would stop the bus and rag them baldheaded."

"Faith, and there's no doubt about it, they would!" said Tommy Doyle, with conviction.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's a good idea," grinned Tommy Dodd, "but the question is, who will be the decoys? It's pretty certain they would have a rough passage, whatever happens!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Lovell was coming out strong, and there was no doubt he was enjoying the limelight. Arthur Edward Lovell always knew better, in his own opinion, than anybody else, and his chums in the End Study well knew how obstinate he could be. It was not often that he was allowed to spread himself in open meeting as at the present juncture, but Arthur Edward rose to the occasion.

"I've thought it out," he said. "The two chaps who carry the whitewash will probably have a bit of a rough house before we can rescue them, but it won't matter."

"It will matter to them," grinned Mornington. "Who are the giddy victims to be?"

"Why, Cuffy and his blessed cousin, Babbington!" said Lovell promptly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Lovell's little scheme certainly appealed to the assembled company as being really rich. It was owing to James Montgomery Babbington, the fatuous cousin of the fatuous Clarence Cuffy, that Rookwood had met with their defeat of the previous week.

"Isn't it possible that young Cuffy and Babbington may have some slight objection?" said Tom Rawson, grinning.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Leave that to me," said Tommy Dodd promptly. "I'll see that Cuffy and his blessed cousin do the trick all right. I'm fed-up with them," he added warmly. "If they get slaughtered by the Bagshot bounders it'll do them good. If they don't do it they'll get it hot. I shall slaughter them myself."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's understood then, Tommy, that we will leave the victims to you," said Jimmy Silver, laughing. "I'll arrange to have a crowd of our fellows behind the hedge on either side of the road, a quarter of a mile from Bagshot, at two o'clock to-morrow afternoon. You had better bring some of your Modern chaps as well, Tommy."

"Right-ho! How many shall we want?"

"Well," said Jimmy thoughtfully, "there will be eleven or twelve of the Bagshot bounders, not more. As it's not a half-holiday, the other fellows won't be going to the match. If we take fifteen or sixteen fellows in all, it would be ample to deal with the rotters. If you bring half a dozen Moderns, I will bring ten or a dozen Classics."

"Right-ho!" said Tommy Dodd. "That's a deal."

"Mind, everyone must be in position and well out of sight by two o'clock," said Jimmy Silver. "Cuffy and Babbington must be walking innocently up the middle of the road towards Bagshot, carrying three pails of whitewash. Pankley & Co. simply won't be able to resist the temptation of

stopping to jam their heads in the buckets, and then we'll have 'em."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good!"

And the Rookwood council-of-war broke up amidst laughter and cheers.

Briefly outlining the scheme, Dodd had communicated to the astonished Clarence and his hopeful cousin precisely the roles which had been allotted to them.

"All you've got to do," explained Tommy Dodd, patiently but firmly, "is to stroll up the road carrying three big pails of whitewash with some brushes in them—see?"

"But, my dear Thomas—"

"Scat! There you go again! All jaw, like a blessed sheep's head. Now just listen to your Uncle Tommy," interrupted the leader of the Modern juniors. "You and Babbington stroll up the road like a pair of innocent idiots, and on comes the bus with Pankley & Co. in it. They spot you, of course. You've got to stay in the middle of the road, so they can't miss you. There's that ditherer Cuffy! Pankley will say, 'And there is his freak of a cousin!'"

"My dear Thomas, I was thinking—"

"You don't have to think at all—see?" said Tommy Dodd. "Do just what you are told. Our chaps will be behind the hedge, and we'll rescue you before you are absolutely slaughtered, so you needn't worry. Is that clear?"

"But, my dear Thomas—"

"If you call me 'my dear Thomas' again I'll slay you!" hooted Tommy Dodd. "Say yes or no?"

"I—"

"Give me that cricket stump, Cook. I can see young Cuffy is going to be obstinate," said Tommy Dodd in a businesslike tone. "As for Babbington, we'll give him a few as well."

"Wait! Pray don't be so hasty, my dear—that is to say, Dodd," said the unfortunate Cuffy hastily. "I think I understand the somewhat perilous role allotted to my Cousin Babbington and myself."

"Good!" said Tommy Dodd grimly. "I thought you would get to understand, somehow. Do you understand, Babbington?"

"Yes—yes; but—but—"

"Never mind butting," said Tommy Dodd. "You fully understand what you have got to do? That's the only thing that matters. I've got the whitewash all ready at old Mack's lodge, so directly after dinner you two scoot off and get it and get on with the job. Savvy?"

"Ye-e-es, my dear Thomas."

"Good! Don't forget, it's for the honour of Rookwood," said Tommy Dodd, a little less grimly. "That blessed ass, Babbington, got us ragged last time. It's up to you and him to help turn the tables on the Bagshot bounders. Now clear off!"

And Clarence Cuffy and James Montgomery Babbington obediently cleared off, but with their heads in a whirl.

(Be sure you read next week's instalment of this grand serial, chums. You'll enjoy every line of it.)

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