

"A SCHOOLBOY'S TEMPTATION!" This Week's Special
Yarn of St. Jim's.

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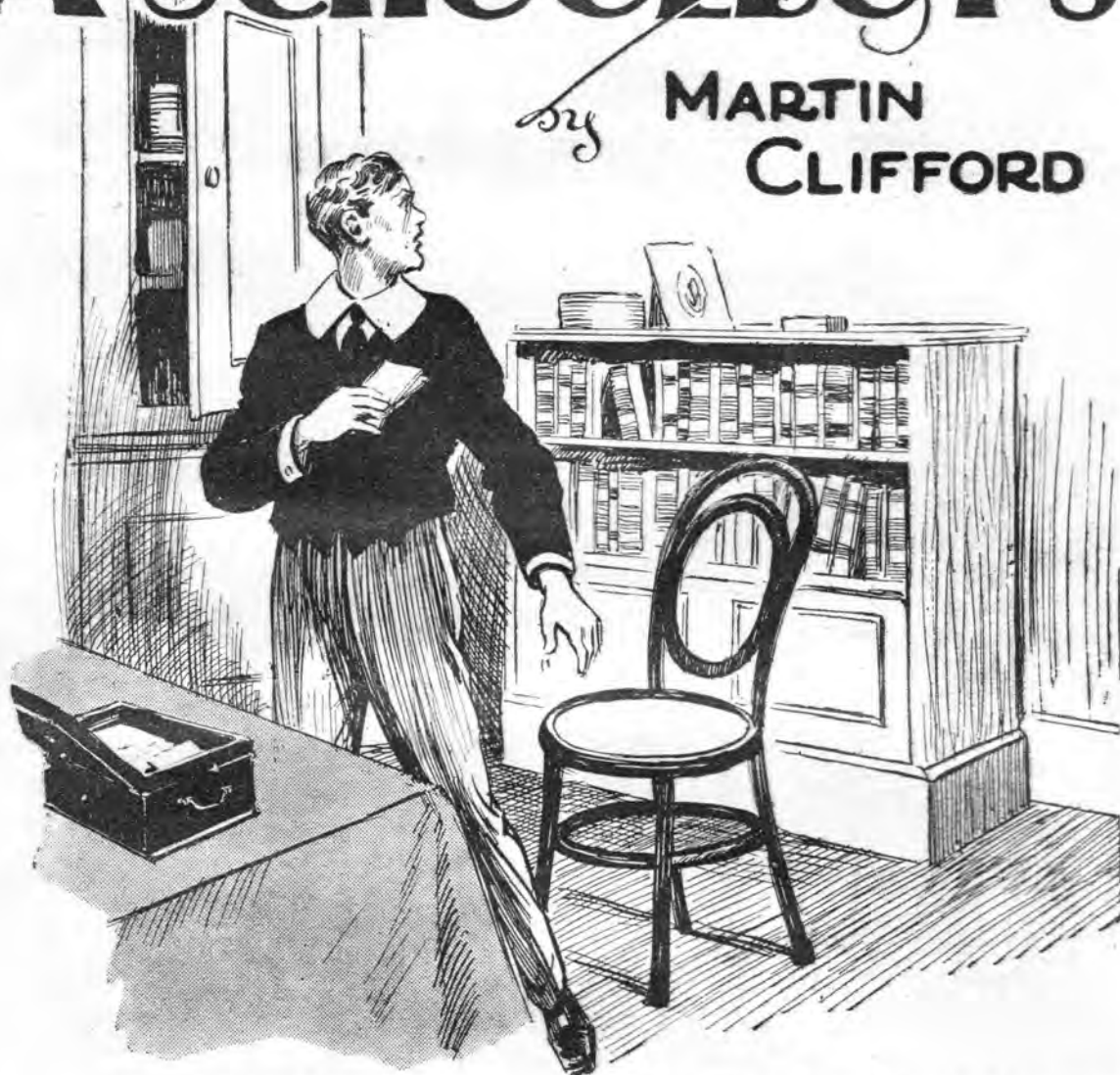
**"We're Not Going to
Play Those Kids!"**

*A "leg-pulling" incident from the
rousing school story of Tom Merry &
Co. inside.*

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

A SCHOOLBOY'S

by **MARTIN
CLIFFORD**



CHAPTER 1.

Captain—and Sneak!

"UP you get, Baggy!"
 "Shan't!"
 "Rising-bell's gone long ago, you fat slacker!"
 "Blow rising-bell! Go away and lemme alone!"
 "But you'll be late, you fat slug!" said Blake warmly.
 "Don't care!" mumbled Baggy Trimble, opening his eyes and blinking wrathfully at Jack Blake of the Fourth.
 "Will you go away and lemme alone, you beast?"
 Jack Blake snorted.

True enough, Baggy Trimble never did care—while lying comfortably in bed. At such times the fat Fourth-Former seemed blissfully oblivious of the painful consequences that inevitably followed as a result of ignoring rising-bell. Owing to his carelessness in that respect Baggy often got lined, and sometimes got caned by Mr. Lathom, his Form master.

But linings and canings had no lasting effect on Baggy; he seemed determined not to learn from experience. Snuggling drowsily beneath the warm bedclothes, the possibility of punishment for rising late seemed vague and

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remote to Baggy. By a curious process of auto-suggestion Baggy was wont to persuade himself dreamily that retribution would not follow his refusal to face unpleasant facts.

Yet it always did. And knowing this, Blake, in the kindness of his heart, often attempted to point out his danger to Baggy Trimble.

True, it did not concern Blake in the slightest; though the leading light in the Fourth, it was none of his business to see that his fellow Fourth-Formers rose at rising-bell. Nevertheless, Blake often interfered in Trimble's business—for Trimble's own good!

He did so now.

"You fat ass!" he snorted. "It was only yesterday you got licked for being late. D'you want to be licked again?"

"Yah! Shurrup and lemme alone, you beast! 'Tain't time to get up yet, and I'm jolly well not getting up! Yah! I'll get up when I like!" hooted Trimble.

He buried himself under the sheets again. Blake grabbed at them.

"Will you?" he grinned. "Out you come, or I'll yank you out, sheets and all, Trimble!"

"Yah! Lemme—Ow! Leggo! Stoppit, you rotter!"
 Trimble clutched at the bedclothes, and a tug-of-war

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—FEATURING PERCY MELLISH, THE SNEAK OF THE FOURTH!

TEMPTATION!



From the position of sneak and toadying hanger-on to that of junior captain of the school is an amazing change for Percy Mellish, and he begins at once with the determination to make his authority felt. But there is trouble ahead for the new skipper as a result of both his sneaking ways and "sporting" propensities, and no one is more relieved when his brief reign is over than Captain Mellish, himself!

"I'm going to!" said Mellish, a dogged expression on his pasty face. "I've told you to clear out and leave Trimble alone, Blake. It's my job to see to discipline in the Form, and not yours."

"Oh, my hat! Your job?"

"Of course! I'm junior captain, aren't I? If it's anybody's job to see to Trimble it's mine, not yours!"

"Oh, I—I see!"

Blake did see now—every boy in the room saw, in fact.

They remembered now that it was Mellish's first day as junior captain of St. Jim's! They also realised that Mellish intended to lose no time in reminding them of the fact.

The sudden change in Mellish struck them as very funny, and a chorus of chuckles went round the dormitory. Blake stared at him.

"You burbling chump!" he said, half laughing. "My hat! You're jolly soon starting to throw your giddy weight about!"

"I'm going to do my job, anyway!" said Mellish, flushing again. "You'd better mind what you're doing, Blake. I've told you to leave Trimble alone!"

"Have you?" said Blake pleasantly. "Well, you can go and eat coke, my noble skipper! I've set myself to get dear old Baggy out of bed and I'm going to do it, and blow you!"

Blake was a Yorkshireman, and he could be very dogged himself when he liked. He had set himself the job of getting Trimble out of bed—for Trimble's own good—and he meant to do it. He grabbed the bedclothes again. Trimble immediately howled to Mellish again.

"Let him alone, Blake!" rapped out Mellish, his eye glinting unpleasantly. "If you don't I shall report you to Kildare."

"Report and be hanged to you, you silly ass!" snorted Blake. "Come on, out of that, Baggy! Herries, pitch that sponge over here!"

"Certainly, old man!" said Herries.

He "pitched" the sponge at once. It happened to be full of cold water, and it whizzed across the dormitory. Unfortunately, it missed both Trimble and Blake by yards, and splashed full in the face of Percy Mellish, the new junior-skipper.

Splosh!

"Groooogh!" spluttered Mellish.

He staggered back, water steaming from his crimson features.

"Sorry!" murmured Herries, quite untruthfully. "Accidents will happen—even to junior captains, you know!"

"It wasn't an accident at all!" spluttered Mellish furiously. "You rotter, Herries! You threw that at me on purpose!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—your rotten cad!" spluttered Mellish. "I—I'll report you for that, Herries!"

"Bai Jove! If you weally intend to sneak, Mellish—"

"I thought we'd cured the little toad of sneaking," said Digby. "If he's going to start that game again—"

"I don't call it sneaking!" said Mellish angrily. "As junior captain I shall report Herries. It's my job to keep order in the dormitory, I suppose. You know Railton's plan—he's appointed six fellows to be temporary junior captain for a week each in turn. Grundy, D'Arcy, and Skimpole have had their turns, and made a muck of the job. I'm not going to make a muck of things. It's my turn this week, and I'm going to do my duty and make a success of the job."

"Your duty?" gasped Levison. "Oh, my hat! If this is

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followed, Trimble yelling furiously as he hung on with might and main.

Most of the Fourth-Formers who were dressing looked on laughingly. But suddenly an interruption occurred.

"Stop that, Blake—d'you hear? Leave Trimble alone!"

Jack Blake jumped. The sharp order came from Percy Mellish, who was standing by his bed fastening his collar. As Mellish was, in addition to being a sneak and a toady, one of the biggest funks in the Lower School, Blake was naturally astonished.

"Eh?" he ejaculated. "You speaking to me, Mellish?"

"Yes," said Mellish, his face colouring a little. "I told you to leave Trimble alone, Blake. If you've finished dressing you'd better clear downstairs. There's enough row in the dorm without you skylarking."

"Oh, bai Jove!"

"Oh crumbs!"

Every fellow in the room stared at Percy Mellish.

This was not the Mellish they knew—the humble, fawning toady, more used to kicks and contemptuous slights than giving orders!

"Well, my hat!" exclaimed Blake. "Trying to be funny, Mellish?"

"No, I'm not! But—"

"Then cheese it, old scout!" said Blake good-humouredly.

"I don't want to start punching heads so early in the morning. Now, Trimble, old nut, are you getting up, or shall I have to yank you out?"

"Yow! Leggo! I say, Mellish, stop him—"

how you're going to do your giddy duty, Mellish, then you're in for a rough time this week!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, shaking his head seriously at the furious Mellish. "You are wathah overdoin' it, deah boy! Blake was only dealin' with that faithful slackah Twimble, for Twimble's own good, y'know!"

"He should leave things like that to me!" snapped Mellish. "He's only——"

"But he isn't going to!" said Blake, with a chuckle. "Now, Trimble, old chap, are you coming out or not?"

"No, I'm jolly well not, you beast——"

"Then here goes!"

And Blake wrenched the clothes from Trimble's bed with a sudden unexpected jerk. Then he grabbed Trimble's leg.

"Out you come!"

"Ow! Look here!" roared Trimble. "I say, Mellish—— Yow! Oh crumbs! Yow——"

Bump!

"Yaroooooooooooooh!"

Trimble's fat form landed with a terrific bump on the floor amid an avalanche of sheets and blankets. His howl was loud enough to awaken the celebrated Seven Sleepers. At all events, it proved loud enough to reach Kildare's ears as that worthy was passing the dormitory on his way downstairs. And he looked in to investigate.

"Hallo, what the dickens is going on here?" he demanded, staring in astonishment at the heap of bed-clothes in which the roaring Trimble was entangled. "Trimble, what's this game? Stop that row at once!"

"Yow! Oh, you beast, Blake! Yow-ow! I'm hurt! My back's broken!"

"Is it?" said Kildare grimly. "Well, perhaps a few licks from my cane will put it right. D'Arcy, run and get—— Oh, he's up already!"

Trimble was up; apparently his back was not broken after all. He scrambled up in great alarm, and hastily began to put the blankets and sheets back on to his bed.

"You fat slacker!" said Kildare. "You ought to have been up and dressed before this! I suppose Blake shifted you out, and it serves you right, my lad! If you're late for chapel you'll get it hot—I'll see to that!"

"Ow! Oh crumbs!"

Trimble started to dress at express speed. "Getting it hot" from the captain of St. Jim's did not appeal to him in the slightest. Kildare started towards the door. Mellish, his face flushed and spiteful, stood in his path. The sneak of the Fourth, in his new capacity as junior captain, had no intention of letting well alone.

"Hold on, Kildare!" he said. "It wasn't Trimble's fault; at least, I should have got him up without all this disturbance."

"Oh, you would?"

"Yes," returned Mellish, with an unpleasant look at Blake and Herries. "The—the fact is——"

Mellish paused. In the ordinary way he knew better than to "sneak" openly. In this case, he had a good excuse; at least, he fondly imagined he had. That excuse was that he was not sneaking, but doing his duty by reporting the matter.

None the less, Mellish could not help feeling some doubts as to the wisdom of such a proceeding; he had no little fear that the rest of the Fourth might not call it "reporting."

"Well?" demanded Kildare, eyeing Mellish curiously. "What is the fact, Mellish?"

"It—it's my duty to report the matter, Kildare!" said Mellish hesitatingly. "Blake started the disturbance by interfering with my duty—he dragged Trimble out of bed."

"I'd already guessed that!" said Kildare, eyeing Mellish fixedly now. "But——"

"Then, just because I objected," said Mellish, "Herries chucked a wet sponge at me—hit me right in the face with it!"

"Did he?" said Kildare, with heavy sarcasm. "What a great pity some of you kids don't bring your nurses to school with you to guard you from such things! But why the dickens should you suppose it was your duty to report this footling affair to me, Mellish?"

Mellish went crimson at the chuckles that went up.

"It—it's my duty to keep order in the dorm, I suppose?" he said sulkily.

"Eh? Yours? Why on earth——"

"Because I'm junior skipper, of course," said Mellish. "I always understood it was the junior skipper's job to see that order was kept in school hours."

"Oh!" gasped Kildare. He understood now, and he fairly blinked at the dutiful Percy. "I'd forgotten you were the giddy junior skipper for this week, Mellish. Well, yes; to some extent it is a skipper's job to keep order in the dorm!" he added grimly. "Still, you don't want to overdo things, Mellish. You should be able to deal with a

trifling matter like this yourself, without reporting it to me."

"Oh!"

"However," continued Kildare, with a grim glance at Blake and Herries who were grinning openly like the rest, "now you have reported it, I suppose I shall have to deal with the matter. Blake!"

"Yes, Kildare," said Blake meekly.

"You'll take fifty lines for kicking up a disturbance when you should have been dressed and downstairs. Herries, you'll also do me fifty lines for chucking wet sponges about. Satisfied, Mellish?"

"Y-yes, Kildare!"

"Right! If you aren't all downstairs in three minutes from now I'll come in with my ashplant."

With that Kildare departed, with another curious glance at the new junior skipper.

A deep silence followed his going. All eyes were fixed upon the crimson features of the sneak of the Fourth. Then Cardew broke the silence.

"Dear old dutiful Mellish," he remarked, with a chuckle. "What an excitin' time he's booked for if he's goin' on like this. Well, we've just three minutes to get out of the dorm, you men. But that gives us ample time to show our appreciation of dear old Mellish's dutifulness in a suitable manner. I suggest a little dip in a wash-basin—just to cool his dutiful ardour a little—what?"

"Hear, hear!"

"The sneaking little worm!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Look here——" gasped Mellish in sudden alarm. "I—I never meant—— Here, leggo!"

But they did not let go. What followed was the first ceremony Mellish had attended during his period as junior skipper of St. Jim's. It was not a pleasant ceremony, and the new skipper did not enjoy it. The water in the wash basin was cold, and it was also decidedly wet. Mellish gurgled, gulped, and gasped as his head and shoulders were ducked in the basin again and again until it was empty—half having been absorbed by Mellish's person, and half slopped over the washstand and floor.

"There!" gasped Blake at last. "Perhaps that'll teach you, as a start, not to be so jolly eager to report chaps, Mellish. It's a chap's duty to back his skipper up. Well, that's how we'll back you up this week if you go on as you've started!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"And now we'll duck Trimble for being the cause of it in the first place!" said Blake, with a chuckle. "I——"

Hallo! He's gone!

Trimble had gone! His fat form shot through the dorm doorway like a streak of lightning. And, with many chuckles, the juniors followed him out—leaving Mellish furiously rubbing himself down.

Mellish's first act as junior skipper had been rather unfortunate, to say the least of it, and as he changed at express speed, in a desperate effort to get downstairs before the three minutes were up, he realised that his scheme of "reporting" fellows he disliked would only result in trouble for himself.

At all events, it was noticed that Mellish did not report his ducking to Kildare.

CHAPTER 2.

Racke's Little Joke!

"I AM wathah sowwy for Mellish!" remarked Arthur Augustus, shaking his noble head seriously.

It was after dinner that day, and Blake & Co. were lounging in their study—Study No. 6 in the Fourth. They were discussing the new skipper, and the remarks they were making regarding him were far from complimentary.

Perhaps it was no wonder, for Mellish, apparently, had failed to learn his lesson that morning. Being sent for by Mr. Railton, Mr. Lathom had left Mellish in charge of the Form. As might be expected, nobody had any respect for a fellow like Mellish, and they did just as they liked, despite his commands. In fact, far from obeying the over-officious Mellish, several of the lighter-hearted members of the Form had pelted the new skipper with blotting-paper. The result was that Mellish, on Mr. Lathom's return, had reported them one and all. Either Mellish had forgotten the incident of the morning—which was scarcely likely—or else, being a born sneak, he simply could not help himself.

At all events, he had reported six members of the Fourth, with the result that all six had been caned for their offence. The result of that had been that after lessons the over-zealous new skipper had been ragged by the unfortunate six. He had been soundly bumped, ink and glue had been rubbed in his hair, and it had been made abundantly clear

to him that, in the view of the Form, reporting and sneaking were one and the same thing—whether done by the junior captain, or just a common or garden member of the Fourth.

"I am wathah sowwy for Mellish," repeated Arthur Augustus. "The fellow is a feahful worm, y'know, but he weally cannot help himself."

"Well, it's up to us to make him help himself," sniffed Blake. "Dash it all, life won't be worth living in the Fourth if the cad keeps on all the week like this!"

"It won't be worth living for Mellish!" grinned Digby.

"That is vewy twue, Dig!" agreed Arthur Augustus, shaking his noble head again. "That is why I weally feel sowwy for the worm. The fellow can't help himself, y'know—"

"You're repeating yourself, old chap—"

"Pway do not intewwupt, Dig! I mean that it is Mellish's natuah to be a sneak and a worm," said Gussy.

toady and hanger-on to cads like Racke of the Shell. Let him rip!"

"I wefuse to let him wip! I feel vewy sowwy for Mellish, and I wefuse to see him takin' the w'ong word without speakin' a word in season to the thoughtless wottah. I am goin' to see him at once, Blake."

"But, look here, you fathead—"

"Wats!"

Arthur Augustus ended the discussion by walking out with his aristocratic nose in the air. He kept to his word by walking along to the study Mellish shared with Wildrake and Trimble.

Wildrake and Trimble were at home, but Mellish was not.

"Gone to order his crown!" replied Wildrake humorously, in answer to Gussy's question. "He's also gone to order some new hats, as his own have suddenly become much too small for his cabeza."

"Bai Jove!"



Whiz! The wet sponge flew from the hand of George Herries and whizzed across the dormitory. Unfortunately, it missed its object by yards and splashed full in the face of Percy Mellish, the new junior skipper. **Splosh!** "Grooooooh!" The sneak of the Fourth staggered back, water streaming from his crimson features. (See Chapter 1.)

"The w'etched duffah is so used to bein' kicked and sat upon that now he feels he is somebody of importance he is goin' to the othah extweme and misusin' his powah and authority. In othah words, he has got a badly swelled head, and I weally believe he thinks he is doin' his dutay by weportin' chaps like this."

"Rot! He's a born sneak, and now he thinks he sees a chance to get his own back on some of us he's making the most of it," sniffed Blake. "I believe he's been bragging that he means to make a success of the job so that Railson will make him permanent skipper."

"What hopes!" chuckled Digby. "He'll be a permanent wreck if he keeps on like this!"

"Yaas, wathah! I weally feel I ought to speak to the duffah!" remarked Arthur Augustus reflectively. "Fwom my own expewience, I know that the job of juniah skippah is a vewy twyin' and difficult job. I shall point out to him that he will have twoubles enough to face this week without addin' to them by bein' so widiculously ovah-officious and bossy."

"But, you ass—"

"I wefuse to be called an ass, Blake!"

"You can refuse, but you can't help being one. You were born an ass, Gussy, just as Mellish was born a crawling worm and a spying sneak—besides being a shady, smoky

"You'll find him in Rylcombe, I fancy—if he hasn't already returned," grinned Wildrake. "He went off some time ago. We see very little of him since he's been elevated to his position of authority."

"He, he, he!" chortled Trimble. "I say, he's come back from Rylcombe, Gussy—I've seen him. I bet he's smoking fags in Racke's study. Go and see, Gussy; only mind he doesn't report you for wearing an eyeglass, old chap. He, he, he!"

And Trimble sniggered again at his little joke.

Arthur Augustus frowned and drifted along to Racke's study in the Shell passage. Gussy knocked and marched in gracefully. Only Racke and Crooke were there, however, and the swell of St. Jim's was just in time to see Racke snatch a cardboard box from the table and hide it under his jacket.

He scowled as he saw who the visitor was, and replaced the box on the table. He also stooped and retrieved a half-burnt cigarette from beneath the table, where he had flung it in alarm on the door opening.

"You silly tailor's dummy!" he said furiously. "What the dickens do you want, hang you?"

Arthur Augustus sniffed disdainfully. The atmosphere of

the study was alone enough to tell what Racke and Crooke were doing, without sighting the cigarettes.

"Bai Jove!" he exclaimed, in disgust. "You feahful, smoky wottahs! This studay fairly weeks—"

"Any bizney of yours?" asked Racke unpleasantly.

"What the dickens d'you want here, anyway? Clear out!"

"I wefuse to cleah out, you wottah!" said Arthur Augustus warmly.

"I have come heah with the intention of speakin' to Mellish—"

"Oh, Captain Mellish, what?" said Racke, with a grin. "Our giddy old captain, eh? What d'you want with Mellish, Gussy?"

"That is my business, Wacke! And kindlay do not address me as Gussy; I weserve that name for my fwends."

"Oh, my hat! What a pity you're not so thumping keen about not mindin' other fellows' bizney!" sneered Racke.

"I wefuse to discuss that point with you, Wacke!" said Arthur Augustus, in his most stately manner. "I have come heah to speak to Mellish. I was told he was heah, Wacke!"

Racke looked carefully under the table; then he looked into the coal-box, in the fender, and took a glance up the chimney. Evidently Racke was in a humorous mood.

"He was here a few secs ago," he remarked, shaking his head. "But he seems to have gone now. Can you see Mellish anywhere, Crooke? He's such an insignificant little bouncer that it's difficult to see him at all."

"He, he, he!" cackled Crooke.

"I remember now, though," said Racke blandly. "He's just run along to borrow 'Racing Bits' from Scrope. Sit down and wait, old chap. Have a fag while you're waitin'?"

Racke tendered his cigarette-case solemnly. Arthur Augustus frowned disdainfully.

"You are well awah that I do not smoke, Wacke!"

"Well, it's never too late to mend, you know!" said Racke, still holding out his case. "Have one, old chap? Another box of a hundred unopened on the table there when these are done."

Crooke grinned. Pulling Gussy's noble leg was always an entertaining pastime—though sometimes a dangerous one if Arthur Augustus happened to be in a suspicious mood. In this case the innocent Gussy was not.

"I do not desiah to smoke, Wacke, thank you!" he said coldly. "And I think you would be bettah in ewevy way if you did not smoke, Wacke."

"You think so?" said Racke, in pretended surprise.

"Yaas, I certainly do, Wacke. It is a wotten, shady game for juniors, and it is vevy bad for a fellow's wind, you know."

"You don't say!" said Racke, winking at Crooke. "You really think I ought to chuck it, Gussy?"

"I weally do, Wacke!" said Arthur Augustus, quite pleased that Racke was taking him seriously. "It is a w'etched habit for juniors to begin. I suppose it is all wight for eldah persons—my own patah smokes cigars, you know. But it is vevy diffeent for youngstahs like you, Wacke. It spoils one's wind, and makes one unfitted for games. It is also against the wules of the school."

"Well, I've often thought that," admitted Racke gravely. "And if you say it is so, Gussy—"

The swell of St. Jim's unbent at once. Here, at all events, was a splendid chance to speak a word in season to the dingy black sheep of the Shell.

"I am vevy glad indeed, Wacke, that you are p'pared to discuss the mattah sewiously and sensibly," he said earnestly. "It pwoves that you are not weally such a hopeless blackguard as I had suspected, deah boy."

"Oh!"

"As you weminded me wathah absurdly a moment ago,"

said Gussy earnestly, "it is nevah too late to mend. Though I have always known you as a smokay blackguard, Wacke, I have no doubt theah is a germ of decency in you somewheah, deah boy."

"Oh!" gasped Racke. "Oh, gad!"

"In that case," went on Gussy kindly, "it is quite possible for you to mend your ways, you know. Yaas, wathah! I stwongly advise you to stop this w'etched smokin' without delay. Cut it wight out!"

"Why you—ahem! Just so, old chap!" gasped Racke.

"You—you think I really ought to chuck it?"

"I certainly do, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head at Racke in quite a fatherly way. "You will be evah so much fittah, and you will benefit in othah ways. The decent fellows will not despise you anythin' like so much as they do, then."

"Oh, gad! Why, you—you—"

"Cut it wight out!" advised Arthur Augustus firmly.

"Thwow all your beastlay cigawettes into the fire, Wacke, and wenvounce the w'etched habit once and for all. That is my advice to you, deah boy."

Racke choked with emotion, so did Crooke.

"Well," articulated Racke at last. "I've often thought of chuckin' it. And if you really think I ought to—"

"Most emphatically, deah boy!"

"Well, that settles it, then!" said Racke, as if his mind was made up at last. "There it goes!" he added, snatching the nearly-burnt cigarette from his lips and throwing it viciously into the fire. "Crooke, chuck that box of cigarettes into the fire, will you?"

"But—but—" Crooke looked at Racke, his grinning face changing abruptly.

Racke winked at him.

"I simply couldn't do it myself!" said Racke, with a groan. "They cost ten bob. It seems awful waste. Still, perhaps Gussy—"

"Yes, let Gussy do it!" said Crooke, tumbling to the game. "Don't ask me, Racke! I couldn't!"

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, delighted at this splendid result of his few words in season. "If you weally are in earnest, Wacke—"

"Certainly, old chap! Your sermon—I mean, your splendid help and advice has moved me no end! Chuck 'em into the fire, if you like. No good havin' 'em about to tempt a chap!"

"Bai Jove! Wathah not, deah boy! Vevy well, if you weally wish me to destwoy the wubbish, I will gladly do so, Wacke. I think you are vevy wise indeed to insist upon the temptation bein' wemoved at once. I will certainly burn them for you."

"Do!" gasped Racke.

"Yes, do!" agreed Crooke. "We've no objections, Gussy."

"Vevy well!"

Arthur Augustus was only too delighted to oblige the two black sheep of the Shell. Gussy was a fellow who loved doing good, and the thought of making converts of two fellows like Racke and Crooke was a pleasing one. It spoke well of his tact and judgment and his words in season.

Grasping the box of cigarettes on the table, Arthur Augustus walked to the fire and deliberately dropped it amid the leaping flames.

"There!" he exclaimed, turning round and beaming at Racke and Crooke. "You will be vevy glad indeed for my intervention, Wacke. I—"

"Perhaps so!" yawned Racke, eyeing the box, on which the flames had already obtained a grip reflectively. "But I hardly think old Cutts will, Gussy."

"Bai Jove! Cutts—"

"You see, that box of cigs cost Cutts ten bob!" explained Racke blandly. "And Cutts is rather a mean chap. He won't be thankful to you for burning his cigs, I'm certain, Gussy!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Crooke.

"Bai Jove!" repeated Arthur Augustus, a sudden glimmer of suspicion entering his noble mind. "P'way, what-evah do you mean, Wacke? Those cigawettes—"

"Belong to Cutts!" finished Racke calmly. "They cost ten bob! Ten bob gone up in smoke! Won't Cutts be pleased, Crooke?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

CHAPTER 3.

Gerald Cutts is Not Pleased!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS stood as if transfixed. Slowly—very, very slowly, for Gussy's mind did not move swiftly—it was dawning in upon him that his noble and aristocratic leg had been pulled. Racke and Crooke had been pulling his leg—they had not been in earnest at all. They were not remorseful for their wicked ways. They had no desire for improvement, nor

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were they willing to give up smoking. They had merely been willing to let him burn Cutts' box of a hundred cigarettes for the entertainment his act provided. Their gravity and earnestness had been but a snare and a delusion—for his undoing.

Arthur Augustus slowly went pink with indignation and wrath.

He had been tricked and spoofed into destroying a ten-shilling box of cigarettes belonging to Gerald Cutts of the Fifth—a fellow who was not at all likely to be thankful to him for doing so.

"Bai Jove!" gasped Gussy in great agitation. "Oh, gweat Scott! Do you weally mean to tell me that those wotten cigawettes belonged to Cutts, Wacke?"

"Just so, old bean!" grinned Racke.

"But—but you said I could burn them—they belonged to you, Wacke, you feahful wascal!"

"I didn't say they belonged to me," said Racke coolly. "I said I'd no objection to you burnin' them. Bein' a fellow who likes to mind his own bisney, I'd no objection to seein' a footlin' idiot who can't keep his nose out of other people's concerns burn his dashed fingers a bit—see?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Crooke was thoroughly enjoying the little joke. Gussy was not.

"You—you feahful wascal!" he shrieked. "How could I possibly know that the w'etched things belonged to Cutts?"

"If that's a conundrum, I give it up!" yawned Racke, opening his gold case and selecting another cigarette. "Better blame Mellish and not me. He's just fetched the fags from Rylcombe, and he should have taken them straight along to dear old Cutts instead of leaving them on the table here."

"Oh, you—you—" Gussy spluttered, with rage.

"Yes, it is rather awkward," agreed Racke. "Cutts is bound to be waxy. You see, he's givin' a little tea this evenin' to his pals, and he wants the smokes for them. I expect he'll be fearfully waxy at your burnin' them—especially as there won't be time to fetch more from the village before tea. It was most inconsiderate of you, Gussy."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you—you—"

"Gad, what a fellow for repeatin' yourself, Gussy! But trot out now, there's a good fellow!" yawned Racke. "Run away and chop chips! Fade away, old bean! Go and—Here, what—"

But Arthur Augustus did not "fade away." He turned back his cuffs and rushed at the grinning Racke. Racke gasped and started to jump up, but, before he could do so, Gussy's fist smote him on his nose.

Biff!

"Yooooooooop!"

Aubrey Racke yelped fiendishly and toppled backwards over his chair, landing in the fireplace with a terrific crash.

"There, you wottah!" gasped the swell of St. Jim's, his noble face red with wrath. "Get up, and I will give you the thwashin' of your life!"

But Aubrey Racke did not get up. One tap on the nose was usually more than enough for the cad of the Shell. He lay and hugged his nose, and glowered up at Arthur Augustus.

"Ow! Ow-ow-yow!" he gasped. "Oh, you rotter! I'll pay you back for this, you cad!"

"Get up!" roared Gussy. "Get on your feet, Wacke! I am goin' to give you a feahful thwashin', you feahful wottah!"

"Get out!" hissed Racke, his eyes glinting with fury. "Get out of my study! Oh, here's Cutts!" added Racke swiftly, and in sudden triumph. "Now you're for it, you cad!"

Arthur Augustus turned, to behold Gerald Cutts in the doorway. Many fellows would, doubtless enough, have made themselves scarce in the circumstances—or tried to do so. But that was not Gussy's way. He eyed Cutts calmly.

"Hallo!" grinned Cutts. "What's going on here, kids? Come on, Racke, get up and let him have it!"

Cutts was a fellow who enjoyed trouble—so long as the trouble was for someone else. Racke didn't take his advice—at least, though he staggered to his feet, his eyes fixed warily on Arthur Augustus, he did not let that youth "have it." Perhaps this was just as well for Racke.

"Nothing doin'!" grinned Cutts. "Good gad! What a funky worm you are, Racke! Where's that little sweep, Mellish? Has he brought my cigs yet?"

"He's brought them," answered Crooke, hiding a grin. "But they're in the fire, Cutts. D'Arcy objects to smoking, and he pitched 'em into the fire."

"What!" yelled Cutts.

The Fifth-Former's grin faded abruptly. Racke's eyes gleamed with malice.

"That's true, Cutts!" he snapped. "D'Arcy's just pitched your box of cigs into the fire, the cheeky cad! Ask him!"

"There is no need for Cutts to ask me," said Arthur Augustus disdainfully. "I have thrown a box of cigawettes into the fire, and I am not afraid to admit it."

"You—you've destroyed my ten bob box of fags?" gasped Cutts, hardly able to believe his ears.

"I was not awah that they were yours, Cutts," said Gussy calmly. "That feahful wascal, Wacke, has twicked me! He led me to suppose that they belonged to him, and he gave me permission to destroy them."

"Do you believe that yarn, Cutts?" sneered Racke. "Am I the fellow likely to tell that born idiot to burn my property?"

"Of course, I don't! But—but—" Cutts scarcely seemed to grasp it really yet. "But—but is that a solid fact, Racke? Has this young sweep burned my box of cigs?"

"Yes," said Racke, giving the hapless Arthur Augustus a vicious glare. "You can see what's left of them in the fire now. Can't you smell them?"

Cutts could, and there could be no mistaking the glowing mass in the heart of the study fire. The Fifth-Former took one look at the fire, and then he rushed at Arthur Augustus and grabbed him.

"You—you cheeky, raving young lunatic!" he spluttered. "Ten bob's worth! I'll smash you! Why, I'll—I'll—"

"Bai Jove! Welease me, you wottah!" gasped Gussy, his noble eye gleaming. "If you attempt to thwash me, Cutts, I shall hit out, big as you are! If those w'etched cigs were your p'perty, then—Ow! Oh, gweat Scott!"

Gussy yelped as Cutts started to box his ears soundly. He did more than yell, however. He kept his word instantly, and his fist struck the big Fifth-Former full on the nose. Arthur Augustus was not the fellow to submit to having his ears boxed—not by Cutts of the Fifth, at all events.

It was not a wise move, however. Cutts was nearly a head taller; and he wasn't a pleasant-tempered fellow at any time.

"You—you little fiend!" he choked, holding Gussy with one hand, and his injured nasal organ with the other. "Why, I—I'll give you the licking of your life for that!"

"Bai Jove! Don't you dare—"

But Cutts did dare. He released his nose suddenly, and Arthur Augustus howled as he was grasped bodily and slung across a chair. He struggled furiously, but in vain.

It was Racke who brought the fives' bat. He fetched it from the cupboard with a rush. Racke's nose still ached, and he wanted compensation, or satisfaction.

He got it quickly enough. The next moment Cutts, in a right royal rage now, was bringing the bat into play with a will.

Whack, whack, whack, whack!

Cutts wielded the fives bat with terrific vim, and Arthur Augustus yelled with anguish, and struggled desperately. But Racke and Crooke came to Cutts' aid, and between them they held the hapless swell of the Fourth fast.

But pride came to Gussy's aid, and, after those first few vicious strokes, he set his teeth and bore his punishment without a sound.

It was a terrific punishment. Whether he ever got his ten shillings refunded or not, Cutts wasn't troubling at the moment. All he thought about was to take it out of the unfortunate Arthur Augustus.

And he did. Arthur Augustus wriggled and squirmed in vain as the bat rose and fell with all the force of Cutts' arm, backed by Cutts' savage temper.

But even Cutts tired at last. He threw aside the bat, gasping for breath. Arthur Augustus fairly collapsed on the floor, white with anger and humiliation.

"Yow! Ow-ow! Grooooh!" he gasped. "Oh, you feahful wuffians! Bai Jove! I—I—"

Having recovered himself somewhat, Arthur Augustus staggered to his feet and made a rush at the bullying Fifth-Former. Cutts grasped him instantly.

"Out with him!" he snapped. "Perhaps this'll teach the young fool not to destroy other people's property. Lend a hand, you kids."

Racke and Crooke lent a hand quickly enough—though the latter was looking a trifle apprehensive now. Arthur Augustus was not the fellow to take such a thrashing lying down!

But even Crooke lent a hand again, and despite his furious struggles Arthur Augustus went flying out of the room.

He bumped against the opposite wall of the passage and dropped to the floor with another bump.

That settled even the valiant Arthur Augustus—for the time being. He staggered up, gave one glance at the closed door of the study, and then tottered away to the nearest bathroom, looking and feeling a wreck. Gussy's few words in season had cost him dear. But he hadn't finished yet. As Crooke feared, Arthur Augustus was not the fellow to take such a thrashing lying down.

CHAPTER 4. Mellish Agrees!

PERCY MELLISH came into Racke's study slowly and listlessly. His pasty features looked curiously strained and harassed. In fact, Mellish looked quite ill.

"Oh, here you are, Mellish!" said Racke, with a grin. "Did you see dear old Cutts as you came along?"

Mellish shook his head and scowled.

"No, I didn't!" he said. "My hat! I'd forgotten his rotten cigs. Has he taken them, Racke?"

Racke chuckled.

"Hardly," he said, with another chuckle. "You've had your little trip into Rylcombe for nothing, Mellish."

"Look here, what's the joke, Racke?" demanded Mellish, looking round the room. "Where are those cigs— I'd better take them along before Cutts comes here kicking up a row. I ought to have taken them along before this."

"You jolly well ought!" agreed Racke. "I expect Cutts will boot you hard for not doing so, too, my lad! You see, D'Arcy's been here, and chucked the whole box in the fire."

"Wha-at?"

Racke nodded, and chuckled again.

"Something else for you to report, old chap!" he grinned. And Racke told Mellish what had happened in his absence. Mellish scowled more than ever as he listened.

"You fool, Racke!" he said gloomily. "Cutts will lick me now for not taking them along sooner. I'm in trouble enough all round, I can tell you, as it is. Look here, Racke, I—"

Mellish paused and licked his lips. Racke eyed him curiously.

"What the dickens is the matter with you, Mellish?" he demanded. "You look fairly pipped."

"You asked for trouble, reporting those chaps to Lathom!" grinned Crooke. "You were an ass, Mellish! Blessed if I know why you put up for skipper? You wouldn't catch me!"

"Mellish is no end ambitious!" grinned Racke, with a sneer. "But it can't be that raggin' that's upsettin' you, Mellish. You were all right when you started out for Rylcombe! What's the matter? Have you seen dear old Joe Banks, or what?"

Mellish nodded, and licked his dry lips again.

"Yes, I have," he muttered with a groan, slumping down into a chair. "Look here, Racke, I'm in an awful hole. You've got to help me out!"

"Oh, have I?" sneered Racke, staring. "I thought it was something like that. So you've seen Joe Banks? Is the rotter threatening you again?"

"Yes."

"What does he say—usual rot, I suppose? Pay up or I'll tell the beaks, what? My dear chap, take no notice! He daren't expose you!"

Mellish groaned.

"The cad really means it this time," he muttered. "He was on the high horse—wouldn't listen to me. He's given me until Friday morning to pay that five quid I owe him. If it isn't paid by then, he's going to write to the Head! It's thundering serious, Racke. He means it this time."

"Rot! He's frightening you, old bean!" scoffed Racke. "He isn't—I know he isn't!" groaned Mellish wretchedly.

"In any case, I daren't risk it. Oh, I wish I hadn't had anything to do with the rotter. It was all your fault, Racke, and you've got to help me out!"

"My fault?" ejaculated Racke. "Well, my hat!"

"You told me about the rotten horse!" said Mellish. "You said it was a cert, and I backed it because you did!"

"Well, you silly fool, didn't I lose my money, too?" scowled Racke. "Banks spoofed us as he's done before, the swindler! I believed him, and I've paid for it. Why can't you take it smiling instead of snivelling, you worm!"

"You've paid up, and I haven't!" said Mellish. "And you've helped Crooke to pay up, too—I know that! Why can't you help me—you've plenty of money, Racke?"

"Why should I?" asked Racke coolly, arching his eyebrows. "You must pay your own giddy debts, my pippin! Besides, I happen to be hard up at the moment. The pater was waxy in his last letter—refused to send me another cent for a fortnight!"

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"You've got plenty now—I know you have!"

"I've none to give away, though," said Racke, with a sneer. "Let Joe Banks lose it, the swindling sweep. I'm not, anyway; that's flat!"

"But it's the sack for me—"

"Rubbish!" sniffed Racke. "Banks daren't kick up a row! Just sit tight! He's only trying to put the wind up you, you snivelling little worm!"

"He isn't!" gulped Mellish wildly. "I tell you he means it, Racke! You should have seen him. I met him just outside the village. I thought he was going to wait for a week or so. But now he says he won't—he's lost some money himself, or something, and he's hard up. Besides, two out of the five quid I've owed him for a long time. He says he'll wait no longer, whatever happens. I tell you I'm done!"

"Well, that's your look out!" said Racke harshly. "You shouldn't be such a fool as to chuck about money you haven't got!"

"Look here, Racke, I—I was depending on you!" said Mellish pleadingly. "I didn't worry much about it until now—I thought Banks would wait. But he won't. And now—"

"Now you want me to stomp up, eh?"

"You could help me, Racke—a quid or so to keep that swindling cad quiet!"

"Nothin' doin', old chap!"

"You mean that?" groaned Mellish. "You really won't, Racke?"

"No. You can stew in your own giddy juice, you little worm!" said Racke, his lip curling. "Have you brought that paper I sent you for?"

"No. I've been—"

"Then clear out!" said Racke coolly.

"Look here, you've helped Crooke—"

"Crooke's my pal! You're not, Mellish!" said Racke curtly. "You're only a hanger on—if you are the giddy junior skipper! My hat! Fancy Mellish junior skipper of St. Jim's, Crooke! A scream, what?"

Racke and Crooke looked at the white-faced Fourth-Former, and chuckled.

Mellish's humble attitude changed, and his crafty face grew suddenly spiteful.

"You needn't laugh, Racke!" he said huskily. "I've been a fool, I know. But so have you! If I go under—if Banks keeps his word—I may not be the only one. If I'm expelled, the beaks will dashed well learn a few things before I go!"

There was no mistaking the threat in Mellish's words. Racke looked startled for a moment, and then he laughed uneasily.

"You sneakin' little worm!" he snarled. "You'll drag us into it, you mean, I suppose? But you won't frighten me. old top—any more than Banks does. You silly young fool! Can't you see Banks is only trying it on? He daren't go to the beaks—his goose would be cooked for good if he does."

"He will—he means it! He's desperately hard up, he says. Oh, I know he means it, Racke!"

"Rats! Get out!"

"You—you really won't—"

"No! Buzz off! Your face worries me! Hallo! That the bell for afternoon classes, Crooke? Come on!"

It wasn't the bell for classes, but Mellish saw it was hopeless to plead with Racke longer. He gave it up and slunk out, hands in pockets and shoulders hunched dejectedly. Mellish had looked forward eagerly to his turn as junior skipper of St. Jim's. But his first day looked like being full of trouble, in more ways than one.

He made his way slowly along the passage. But suddenly an idea came to him, and, with a hard-set face, he hastened his steps and made his way to the Fifth Form studies.

Why not try Cutts? Cutts was supposed to be a wealthy fellow. And Cutts wouldn't ask why he wanted the money; he'd know well enough without asking, for that matter! They had a great deal in common where shady pursuits were concerned. And Mellish had been very useful to the Fifth-Former more than once. He did all his risky errands, for one thing—both by way of smuggling in cigarettes and sporting papers, and in taking messages to shady acquaintances in the village.

With sudden decision Mellish knocked on Cutts' study door and entered. To his relief Cutts was alone. He was sprawling in an easy chair, scowling at the carpet. The sight of his face did not give Mellish over-much confidence.

"Hallo? What d'you want, Mellish?" snapped Cutts. "Oh, that reminds me, you young rotter! What about those dashed cigs?"

"It wasn't my fault, Cutts!" stammered Mellish. "It was that cad D'Arcy—"

"I know he burned them, the cheeky young sweep!"

snapped Cutts. "But you should have brought them straight here."

"I know! I'm awfully sorry, Cutts!" muttered Mellish. "But D'Arcy will pay up—he'll have to! And, if you like, I'll run over on my bike before tea for a fresh box."

"No good doing that!" said Cutts roughly. "There's scarcely time before tea, anyway. Is that what you've come about?"

"Nun-no, Cutts! You—you see—"

Mellish paused, and Cutts eyed his white, strained face curiously.

"Well, what the dickens is the matter, kid? You weren't spotted going in for the cigs?" he added, in some alarm.

"No. The—the fact is I'm in an awful hole, Cutts!" groaned Mellish. "That brute Banks—"

sweep! I like your dashed impudence to come here botherin' me with your footlin' troubles! Get out! And think yourself dashed lucky I don't give you a hidin' over those cigs, by gad!"

"But, Cutts, you might be decent, and listen—"

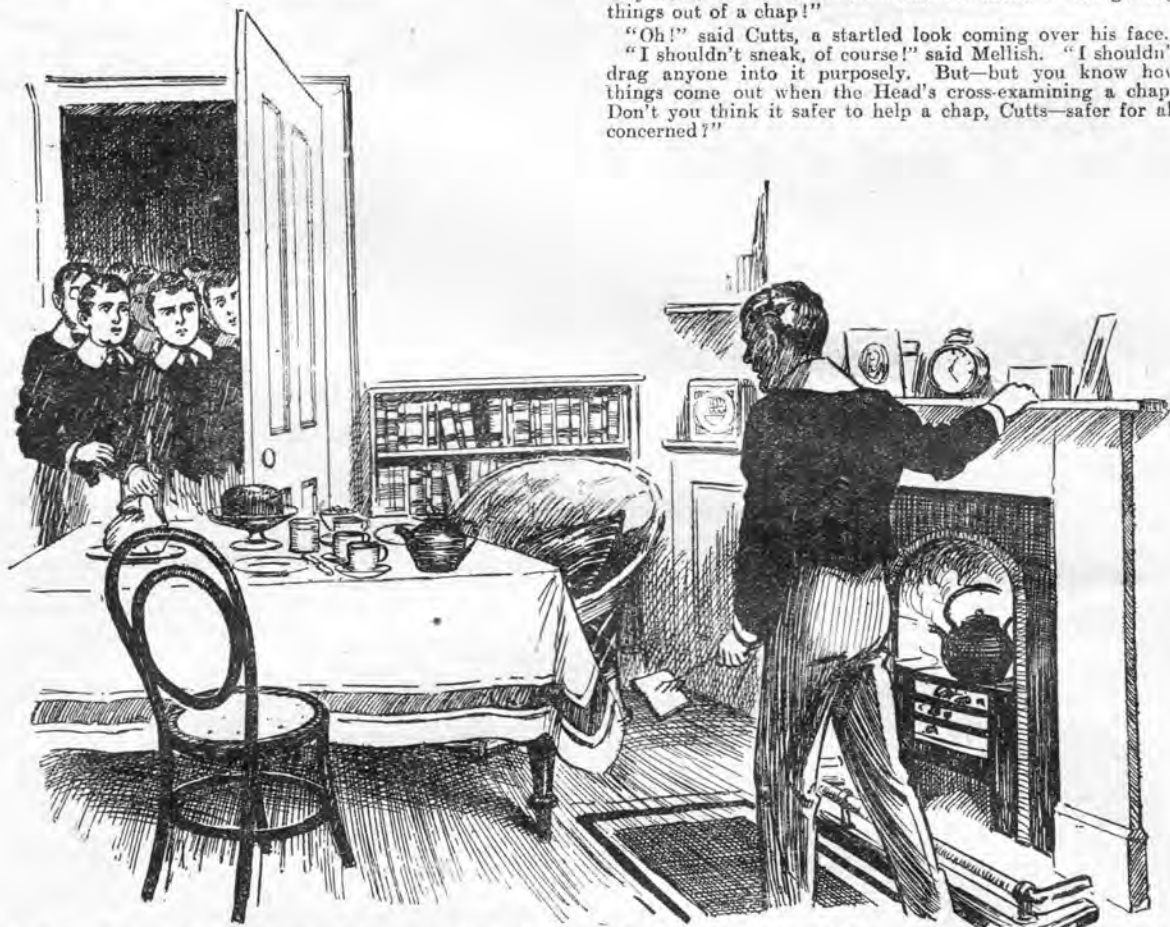
"Get out!" roared Cutts.

Mellish shrank back before the senior's glare. But he did not get out. His eyes glinted a little. As in his interview with Racke he had a final card to play. In Racke's case it had failed; but that was because Racke hadn't the sense to see his own danger!

"Look here, Cutts!" said Mellish, in a low voice. "This means the sack for me! I've let Banks down again and again, and he's really in earnest this time. I shall be taken before the Head, and—and, well, there's no knowing what may come out. You know what the Head is—for getting things out of a chap!"

"Oh!" said Cutts, a startled look coming over his face.

"I shouldn't sneak, of course!" said Mellish. "I shouldn't drag anyone into it purposely. But—but you know how things come out when the Head's cross-examining a chap! Don't you think it safer to help a chap, Cutts—safer for all concerned?"



Tom Merry & Co. stared blankly as they stood in the doorway of Cutts' study. The table was laden with good things, and a kettle steamed merrily on the fire. Before it a junior was busy making toast, and as he turned towards the door with a start, the juniors gasped: "My only hat! Mellish!" (See Chapter 5.)

"Oh, it's Banks, is it?" said Cutts, with a short laugh. "Dunnin' you—what?"

"Yes," breathed Mellish, feeling hopeful at Cutts' tone now. "I—I say, Cutts, the brute's threatening to show me up. I'm in an awful hole!"

"Gee-gees—eh?" said Cutts, grinning cynically. "You went down on the same race that I did, I bet, kid! Well, Banks has been dunnin' me, too; so if it's money you're after—"

"I—I was hoping you might be able to help me, Cutts!" stammered Mellish, his hopes fading again. "Banks means it this time; he won't treat me like he does you and Racke. He swears to show me up unless I pay up by Friday."

"Bosh!" Cutts laughed sneeringly. "My dear kid, he's just frightenin' you."

"But he isn't!" said Mellish wildly. "He's hard up himself—"

"He's got some cash of mine, anyway!"

"Oh, but he's been hard hit since then!" said Mellish tremulously. "I tell you he means it, Cutts! For goodness' sake help a chap, Cutts! Racke won't, the mean rotter!"

"And so you've come to me—eh?" snapped Cutts, his manner changing suddenly. "You cheeky, snivelling little

Cutts breathed hard, his eyes glowering at Percy Mellish. He knew perfectly well that Mellish was threatening him, and the sneak of the Fourth little knew how near he was to getting the hiding of his life just then.

But Gerald Cutts controlled himself. He had heard a whisper that Banks, the local bookie, was in low water, and he couldn't help feeling, unlike Aubrey Racke, that Banks was possibly in deadly earnest. Banks, though he might hesitate in a case of a wealthy chap like Racke, or like Cutts himself, would care nothing about exposing an insignificant fellow like Mellish. Nor had Cutts any doubts that the mean-spirited Mellish would not hesitate to drag others into trouble if he were faced with expulsion.

He put his hand slowly into his pocket.

"You rotten little toad!" he said thickly. "I've a jolly good mind to give you the lickin' of your dashed life, Mellish! Still, I don't like the idea of seein' any fellow sacked—even a young rotter like you!"

"You—you'll help me, then?" said Mellish, a triumphant gleam in his close-set eyes.

"Yes, I'll help you, kid!" said Cutts. A sudden idea had struck him. "How much do you owe?"

"Five quid," said Mellish, his voice husky with relief. "But if—"

"Two quid should keep him quiet for a bit, then," said Cutts, with a careless laugh. "Not that I'm afraid of what the brute will do, Mellish, mind you! I'll give you the two quid—on one condition."

"What's that?" asked Mellish, with sudden uneasiness.

"You needn't be afraid," grinned Cutts. "It's quite simple! It's on condition that you'll fag for me!"

"Oh!" gasped Mellish, his face falling.

"No reason why you shouldn't," said Cutts airily. "You already run errands for me, don't you? And I may be able to shell out a bit more later on. Well, is it a go?"

Mellish hesitated, astonishment and fear showing in his face. Cutts was not entitled to a fag, but he could easily have got one from the Third by paying for one. But—

The junior suddenly understood—or imagined he did. There were many shady things Cutts did that he was unlikely to want any fag to discover. Whereas he knew that Mellish was aware of all there was to know. Moreover, Mellish was far too sharp not to see that Cutts was not a little disturbed by his scarcely veiled threat.

"But—but I'm in the Fourth!" stammered Mellish, after a pause. "The Fourth aren't supposed to fag for the Fifth. If our fellows knew, they—they'd rag me; they'd be wild. I'm sure they would!"

"Better than the sack!" remarked Cutts blandly. "Well, take your choice—two quid on account and be my fag, or the sack! You've two seconds to decide."

Mellish did not take two seconds to decide. He was desperate. Moreover, Cutts was a wealthy chap, and, though his temper was somewhat uncertain, there were many good points in fagging for him. He kept a good "table," and Mellish saw there would be plenty of pickings for Cutts' fag!

"Yes, I—I'll agree, of course, Cutts!" he said hurriedly. "You mean, to be your regular fag—get tea ready, and all that?"

"Exactly!" smiled Cutts. "So it's a go, then?"

"Yes—oh, yes, Cutts! And thanks ever so much!" said Mellish, in deep, overwhelming relief. "Two quid should keep that brute Banks quiet for some time. I—I'll send it to him at once, Cutts!"

Cutts smiled, and withdrew his hand from his pocket—empty.

"No need to be in a hurry, my young friend!" he remarked blandly. "I'll give you the two quid before Friday. We'll see how you shape first. I'm givin' a little tea to-day to some friends, kid. I'll want you at four! Now cut off sharp! And there goes the giddy bell."

Cutts rose; the interview was ended. Mellish, not a little disappointed at not getting the cash right away, left the study. But his face was brighter now. For the time being his troubles were over—as regards Mr. Joseph Banks! He felt not a little uneasy, though, at the thought of fagging for Cutts. He wasn't at all sure the Fourth would like it—in fact, he was certain they wouldn't. And he was right!

Gerald Cutts was also certain of that—had Mellish only known it. It was Cutts' main reason, in fact, for making the condition on which he agreed to help the Fourth-Former.

CHAPTER 5.

Gussy Insists!

"I INSIST upon thwashin' Cutts!"

Arthur Augustus spoke emphatically, and he meant what he said.

Gussy's voice, in fact, fairly thrilled with deep determination. His face as he spoke was pink with righteous wrath and indignation. Afternoon classes were ended. By the time Gussy had washed and changed after his unpleasant adventure in Racke's study, there was no time for him to deal with the matter before classes commenced. So he had postponed the matter, pressing as it was, until now.

Now he meant to deal with it without further delay.

All through classes Gussy had seethed with inward wrath and indignation. Usually the swell of the Fourth was easily appeased, and he soon forgot and forgave. But in this case he had not done so. As the afternoon wore on, indeed, his wrath and indignation had increased.

Really it was no wonder! Gussy had been tricked in a scandalous manner. He had been licked, and, worst of all, subjected to humiliations that made the blood of all the D'Arcy's boil in his veins. Good-natured and forgiving as he usually was, Gussy could not forgive and forget now.

"I insist upon thwashin' Cutts!" he repeated. "I have been twicked and tweeked in a wuffianly mannah, you

fellows. I insist upon thwashin' Wacke first, and aftah that I am goin' to thwash that feahful wuffian, Cutts!"

"But, look here, you ass—"

"I wufuse to look heah—"

"But you'll get smashed, you fathead!"

"I should uttably wufuse to get smashed, Blake!"

"But go easy, old man!" laughed Tom Merry. "Thrash that cad Racke, by all means, and I'll hold your jacket. But Cutts—"

"Leave him out, old chap!" advised Herries, shaking his head. "At least, leave him for us to deal with. We've got a few scores to settle with Cutts as it is."

"That's it!" said Tom Merry. "We'll deal with dear old Gerald, Gussy! We're simply yearning to deal with him! We'll teach the cad to handle one of our fellows like he seems to have handled you, Gussy!"

Arthur Augustus eyed his chums calmly.

"I wufuse uttably and finally to leave the mattah to you, deah boys!" he said firmly. "It is an affaih of honah between that wuffian Cutts and myself! He has thwashed me in a wuffianly mannah; he has wumped my clobber and tweeked me with gweat indignity."

"Well, we advised you not to go!" said Blake. "We told you so—at least, we advised you to leave Mellish alone. We knew you'd barge into trouble of some sort!"

"Bai Jove! Weally, Blake—"

"Oh, don't argue about it now," said Tom Merry peaceably. "Look here, Gussy, be sensible. Cutts is a Fifth-Former, and a pretty hefty chap. He's far above your weight, old man. Thrash Racke by all means. But leave Cutts to us. We'll get Levison, Clive, and a few more to help us, and we'll go and raid Cutts and his pals. I'll take a fives-bat, and you can give Cutts what he gave you—when we've finished with him."

"Wats! I am goin' to thwash Cutts—aftah I have thwashed that feahful twickstah Wacke. We have wasted enough time discussin' the mattah!"

With that Arthur Augustus marched out, his noble eye gleaming with the light of battle.

Tom Merry groaned.

"Better give him his head!" he suggested. "We'll go along, though, and we'll chip in when the time comes. Monty, you trot along and root out Levison, Talbot, Clive, and Noble. They should be enough."

"Right-ho!" grinned Lowther.

He hurried out, and Tom Merry, Manners, Blake, Herries, and Digby followed him out of the study and went after Arthur Augustus. They caught him up just as he was marching into Racke's study.

The cad of the Shell was there with Crooke. Both jumped to their feet as Gussy marched in; they looked alarmed as Blake and the rest followed the swell of St. Jim's.

"Here, what's this game?" demanded Racke, with an uneasy look at Arthur Augustus. "Outside! Who asked you fellows here?"

"Nobody!" said Tom Merry cheerfully. "We've only come to see the fun. Go it, Gussy!"

"Get it over quickly, old chap!" urged Blake. "We shall need time to deal with dear old Cutts!"

"Look here—" blustered Racke. "I—I—"

"Keep your wind for scrapping, Racke," advised Digby. "You'll need it! You holding his jacket, Crooke?"

Arthur Augustus had already peeled off his elegant jacket. He folded it neatly and placed it carefully on a chair. Racke watched these proceedings in great and growing alarm.

"Look here," he gasped. "I—I'm not fightin' D'Arcy, if that's what you're thinking, you cads!"

"Your mistake, you are!" said Blake coolly. "If you don't fight Gussy, you'll have to stand up to me, I'm afraid!"

"But what for?" hooted Racke.

"My dear man, what a question to ask!" said Blake. "You didn't play a dirty trick on D'Arcy, of course. And you didn't afterwards help to hold him while a Fifth Form chap licked him, did you?"

"Oh, that!" stammered Racke. "It—it was only a joke. That fool D'Arcy asked and begged to have his leg pulled!"

"You rotter!" said Tom Merry, his lip curling. "You landed Gussy into trouble with Cutts, and you're going to learn that that sort of thing doesn't pay. Ready, Gussy?"

"I am weady! Wacke, I'll give you two seconds to get your jacket off!"

"I—I— Oh, you cads!" hissed Racke, going quite pale. "Look here, it was only a joke! I didn't think— Ow!"

He looked desperately round the study for a way of escape—but there was none.

The two seconds were up apparently. Arthur Augustus finished turning his elegant cuffs back, and he came on with a rush. Racke sprang aside, tearing off his jacket as he did so.

There was no help for it—Racke saw that! Arthur Augustus just gave him time to roll back his own sleeves, and then he came on again.

Biff!

Racke ducked—but he was a second too late! A fist of iron caught him on the corner of his chin. It was not a hard blow at all. But as Racke was not firmly set on his feet at the moment of delivery, he over-balanced and went down.

Crash!

"Man down!" sang out Blake. "That's a beginning, Gussy! Go it, old chap!"

But it was the end as well as the beginning. Aubrey Racke was no hero. His warlike spirit—if it could be called that—had evaporated. That little tap had done it.

He lay where he had crashed and made no attempt to get up.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Gussy, looking down at him. "Pway get up, Wacke, you feafuhl funk! I scarcely touched you! I have weally not started yet."

"You—you rotter!" panted Racke, glowering up at him.

"You rotten bully! You know you're too good for me—you know I'm not up to your dashed weight. Let me alone, hang you!"

"Bai Jove!" gasped Gussy, blinking down at him. "Weally, Wacke, you are the limit! Do you mean that you wufuse to fight me?"

"Yes, you cad!"

"Then I shall be obliged to administrah the thwashin' in anothah way, Wacke," said Gussy firmly. "I am sowwy, but it is only what you deserve for your twickewy and caddishness. Pway hand me that fives-bat fwom the cornah, Blake, deah boy. It is the one Cutts used on me."

"Certainly, old chap!" grinned Blake.

He handed Gussy the fives-bat.

"Thank you, deah boy. Now, Wacke, pway get up!"

"I—I won't!" panted Racke, his eyes glinting with fury. "You dare to touch me with that—Ow! Yarooop!"

Whack, whack, whack, whack!

Arthur Augustus did not wait any longer for Racke to get to his feet. It was clear that Racke did not intend to get

(Continued on next page.)



have been the matter with Michael's nose if he couldn't have discovered that the sign S.P. and O. was attached in each case to a sausage, potato, and onion shop.

Q. What is an appoggiatura?

A. My aunt!—as Tom Merry would say—you did me a bad turn, Elsie Clark, when you asked me this question, for in an ill-advised moment, I tried to pronounce it for the benefit of the office boy. I am having my jaw re-set by a bone-setter, to-night! Fortunately, I can still write, and before I go down to the taxi

which is waiting to remove me to the surgery, I will inform you that an appoggiatura is a note inserted between others, to effect an easy movement in music.

Q. What is a bandoleer?

A. A shoulder belt with loops for carrying cartridges.

Q. What is the difference between stalactites and stalagmites?

A. A stalactite, K. A., is a deposit of carbonate of lime which often looks in appearance like an icicle hanging from the roof of a cave. A stalagmite is the same sort of formation, but rising from the



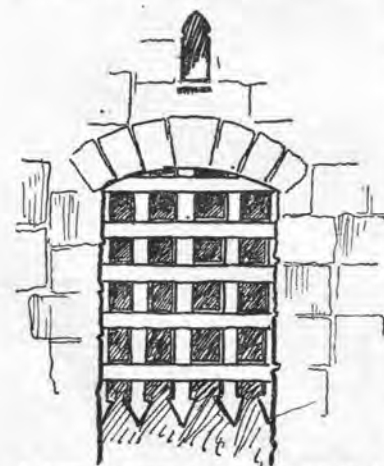
A bandoleer—used by Artillerymen for carrying cartridges.

Q. What are the "Ashes"?

A. This name, "Sporty Fred," of Seven Dials, is applied to the "kudos" of winning the cricket Test matches between England and Australia. The term originated because of a cartoon that appeared in an English paper at the beginning of the famous series many years ago, with which was an epitaph for English cricket, stating that the remains had been cremated and the ashes taken to Australia. From that day the expression has been popular, and when we win after a previous victory of Australia, it is said that "England has got back the Ashes."

Q. What is a portcullis?

A. A reader who signs himself "Butter-scotch," has just been reading "Ivanhoe," and he has sent in a list of 200 words that he can't understand. I am sorry, my chum, that I can't take up two or three pages of the GEM to explain all the things you don't know, and will have to deal with



A strong, heavy grating which is used to close a passage in case of assault, is known as a portcullis.

one word only. A portcullis is a strong, heavy grating made to slide up and down in a vertical groove at the sides of a gateway. It was much used in the old-time kind of fortress and castle, and there are still many good specimens in this country.

Q. What is a mud-skipper?

A. This is not the sort of fish, Henry Birch, who lives near the Caledonian Canal, that you are likely to catch in your home waters. The mud-skipper is a curious finny species that inhabits the coasts and estuaries of the Indo-Pacific Ocean, and the shores of West Africa. It is an ugly-looking thing with its protruding eyes—in appearance rather like a very large tadpole—and it has some of the most remarkable habits of any fish in the world. It is quite a common sight in Burma to see numbers of these mud-skipper come out of the river and snap at flies and other insects and then go off with a hop, skip and a jump back into the water or into the jungle. You will hardly believe it, I expect, but they can actually climb trees which they hold on to by means of their pectoral fins, which they use for gripping just like hands. But the traveller who came back and said he saw a number of them dancing the hornpipe on some dry mud near Rangoon, was telling a whopper!

Q. Where are the pampas?

A. In South America to the south of the great Amazon River. They are large, treeless plains covered with grass and used for cattle.

Q. What is S.P. and O.?

A. Shure, Sean Mulligan of Ballymacuddy Reeks, yer friend, Michael Riordan, who's just come back from a visit to London, has been havin' ye on a bit of toast, me bhoy, or else 'tis a poor soft creature he is himself entirely. Seriously, Sean, he was wrong when he told you in the course of your argument that the S.P. and O. was a line of steamships and that he had seen their sign up in many parts of London. There is, of course, the P. and O. (Peninsular and Oriental), but something must

floor of a cave. It is caused by water that contains lime, dripping through the earth above the cave and the water afterwards evaporating and leaving the carbonate of lime. These formations are found in caves in many parts of the world, and the vast system of Jenolan Caves in the Blue Mountains of Australia contains thousands of them in the most wonderful formations.

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up of his own free will. So Gussy waded in with a will, the memory of his own "batting" lending him strength and vigour. Unlike the swell of the Fourth, Racke did not take his licking in silence. He fairly squirmed and howled. But Gussy did not pause. He whacked and whacked while Racke vainly strove to avoid the blows by rolling and squirming. But Gussy tired at last—though Racke was tired much sooner.

"Theah!" panted Arthur Augustus, throwing down the bat. "Let that be a lesson to you, Wacke! I twust you will not attempt to play wotten twicks on me again. You took advantage of my good intentions and played a wotten twick on me by leadin' me to suppose that w'etched box of cigawettes was yours. Afterwards, you helped that wuffian Cutts to thwash me. Now, you fellows, you can come and watch me thwash Cutts!"

"We'll come, old nut!" chuckled Tom Merry. "Lead on, Macduff! Hallo, here's Lowther with the reinforcements! Good!"

They streamed out of Racke's study, Racke watching them go with baleful eyes as he sprawled and rubbed himself. Crooke had already vanished, having slipped out unnoticed in the excitement. Lowther, Levison, Clive, and Noble joined the party, and they proceeded to the study occupied by Cutts of the Fifth.

"Quick work's the game!" warned Tom Merry. "We'll have to get the giddy raid over before Cutts has the chance to get a crowd of Fifth chaps to his aid! Leave this to us, Gussy, there's a sensible chap!"

"I uttably wefuse to leave it to you, Tom Mewwy!"

Arthur Augustus was still determined. He knocked firmly on the door and marched into Cutts' study. Then he stopped short.

"Bai Jove!" he ejaculated. "Mellish!"

It was Mellish. Only Mellish was in the study. And the new junior captain of St. Jim's was obviously busy getting Cutts' tea ready. On the cheerfully glowing fire a kettle steamed merrily. A spotless cloth adorned the table, laden with good things—foodstuffs that made the raiders' mouths water. Before the fire Mellish was crouching, his usually pasty face ruddy with the heat from the fire. He was busy making toast. There was an appetising aroma of buttered toast and scones.

The crowd in the doorway gazed blankly at the scene. At the sound of the swell of St. Jim's voice, Mellish turned with a start. His face went quite white as he faced the taring crowd.

"Mellish!"

"Well, my only hat!"

CHAPTER 6.

Dealing With Cutts!

"MELLISH!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Fagging for that cad Cutts!"

"Looks like it! Well, I'm blowed!"

"Come inside, you fellows!" said Tom Merry grimly.

"I fancy this needs looking into."

"Phew! Yes, rather!"

They crowded into the study. Tom Merry closed the door and locked it, his face very grim. If Mellish was fagging for a Fifth-Former, then it was a very serious matter. On more than one occasion Cutts & Co. had tried to force Fourth and Shell fellows to fag for them. But they had failed. The juniors had fought stoutly for their rights, and they had won the battle—won it finally. No Fifth-Former had dared to risk serious trouble with the Lower School by fagging a Fourth or Shell chap—until now.

There always had been more or less rivalry and trouble between the Fifth and the Lower School fellows. But between Cutts and his pals and Tom Merry & Co. that rivalry had assumed more deadly forms. They were deadly enemies. So that it was, perhaps, little wonder that Tom Merry looked at the shrinking Mellish very seriously now. If Mellish was actually fagging for Cutts, then he was worse than a traitor. He was throwing away all they had fought for; he was setting a precedent that would very soon be taken advantage of by other Fifth-Formers.

"What the dickens does this mean, Mellish?" demanded Tom, staring at the new skipper. "Is this how you start your first day as junior skipper—by fagging for a Fifth-Former—and Cutts at that?"

"Bai Jove! This is vewy wemarkable, deah boys!" said Arthur Augustus. "I weally cannot believe that Mellish is faggin' for Cutts, you know! In the ordinawy way one might have expected it fwom Mellish. But since he's been skippah it's given him a feahfully swelled head—"

"That's the rum part about it!" agreed Blake. "Mellish, what's it mean? Are you really fagging for that sweep Cutts?"

Mellish licked his dry lips. Suddenly realising the toast-fork was still in his hands, he dropped it hurriedly.

"I—I—I—" he faltered, and then he stopped; really it was difficult to deny it in the circumstances.

"Of course he is!" snorted Herries. "Well, the little worm! Letting the Lower School down like this! The blessed junior skipper, too! Well, this beats the band!"

"I—I wasn't!" panted Mellish, his face turning a vivid crimson now. "You—you chaps are mistaken! Look here! You chaps clear out of this!" he added, in a sudden flush of rage. "Like your cheek to come spying on a chap!"

"I'll report you!" mimicked Lowther; and there was a grim laugh.

Mellish coloured still more.

"Well, I jolly well will!" he snapped.

"You've no right in this study at all. Clear out! D'you hear? You forget that I'm junior skipper now, Tom Merry—not you! Clear out, or it'll be the worse for you!"

The threat did not frighten the raiders—far from it.

Tom Merry pointed to the door, his face set grimly.

"Get out, you little worm!" he said.

"No good denying that you were fagging for Cutts—it's plain as a pikestaff, you rotter!"

"I—I'm just helping him as a—a friend."

"Bosh! You're helping him, fagging for him, for what you can get out of him—for money, I bet! Just what you would do, you sponger! Now get out! If you ever dare to fag for a Fifth-Former again, you'll get a ragging you won't forget in a hurry! Out you get!"

"I—I won't!" spluttered Mellish.

"Oh, won't you?" said Blake. "Then we'll have to pitch you out, my pippin! On the ball, chaps!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The juniors obeyed promptly enough. The thought of the junior skipper humbling himself by fagging for their bitterest enemy filled them with wrath. Mellish yelped as numerous hands

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grasped him. He went down on the carpet with a bump. Lowther grabbed a couple of jam-tarts from the loaded table, and crammed them down between his collar and his neck. Herries emptied the contents of the milk-jug over his head. Noble plastered a cream-horn over his features.

Then the door was unlocked, and Mellish went flying out, all arms and legs.

Bump!

"Good gad! What the deuce—"

It was the voice of Cutts of the Fifth. He came along with Prye and Gilmore, and Mellish dropped in the passage at the feet of the startled Fifth-Formers.

"Oh, my hat!" ejaculated Tom Merry. "Now for it, chaps! Get ready for trouble!"

"Bai Jove! Yaas, wathah!"

The trouble came quickly enough. Scarcely had Tom Merry given the warning when Cutts came rushing into the study, his face crimson with anger.

He gave a shout of rage as he saw who the intruders were.

"Great Scott! Back up, you men!" he shouted furiously. "It's those Lower School sweeps! Here, what's this game? What the dickens do you mean by kicking my dashed fag out, Merry?"

"Fag!" snorted Tom Merry wrathfully. "What the dickens are you doing with a Fourth chap as a fag, Cutts? You've no right to fag a Fourth man—whether he's willing or not!"

Cutts gave an unpleasant grin at that. True he had wanted a fag, and Mellish was a very useful fellow to Cutts. But his main reason for having Mellish was simply to score over Tom Merry & Co. He knew perfectly well that they would rave at the thought of the junior skipper, of all fellows, fagging for him! And he was right. And he felt he really was having his money's worth.

"Oh, Mellish!" he grinned. "Well, why shouldn't he fag for me? It's only right that you young sweeps should realise your place in the dashed school! Mellish is my fag, and he's going to remain my fag! And now we're going to put you kids through the mill for handling my fag, and for bargain' into this study without permission. Shut the door, Prye!"

Prye hesitated. Cutts evidently felt quite equal to dealing with ten juniors with the aid of Prye and Gilmore. Or possibly Cutts felt quite safe with plenty of Fifth-Formers within hearing.

But Prye did not feel so safe. He looked uneasily at the grim faces of Tom Merry & Co. And while he hesitated Tom Merry coolly stepped to the door, closed it, and turned the key in the lock. The key he slipped into his pocket.

Cutts fairly stared.

"Here," he hooted, "what d'you mean by that, you young sweep?"

"We've come specially to interview you, old chap—in private," explained Tom Merry, smiling cheerily. "You licked a Fourth chap with a fives bat, I believe, Cutts?"

Cutts glared at Tom Merry, and then he glared at D'Arcy. "Pway leave this to me, Tom Mewwy!" said Arthur Augustus, calmly peeling off his jacket. "Cutts, you fearful wuffian, I am about to administrah to you a fearful thwashin', in return for your wascally treamtent of me!"

"You—you're whatter?" yelled Cutts. "Give me a thrashing, you young fool! Why, I could lick you with one finger!"

Suddenly Cutts' scowl vanished, and he roared with laughter.

"My dear young infant," he grinned, "how really kind of you to come along like this—and to bring your pals! Well, I've thought since that I didn't give you anything like ten-bobs' worth. So I'll let you have it now with interest. I'll pitch these other young fools out first, though. On the ball, you two!"

"Here, hold on!" gasped Gilmore. "Call some of our chaps in! Oh, my hat!"

Cutts did not heed. He made a blind rush at Tom Merry, but was instantly collared by Blake, Manners, and Lowther, and he went down with a crash and a howl.

"Back up, Prye! Back up, Gilly, you idiots!" he bel-lowed. "Chuck 'em out! Chuck—Yow-ow! Groogh!"

A jam-tart, hurriedly snatched from the table and crammed into his open mouth, brought his warlike yell to a choking gurgle.

But Prye and Gilmore did not need a call to battle—they had no choice in the matter, in fact. The next moment they were struggling furiously themselves, with juniors swarming over them.

What followed was brief, but very exciting.

The Fifth-Formers were quite big chaps, but they were neither heroes nor terrific fighting-men. Against ten determined juniors who preferred healthy exercise to dingy, unhealthy pursuits they stood no chance whatever.

Prye and Gilmore managed to get a few savage blows home, but that was all. In two or three minutes they were

flat on their backs, with triumphant juniors seated on their chests and limbs, pinning them down.

"Fetch some string or something to tie 'em up!" ordered Tom Merry, with a chuckle. "Their hankies will have to do if there's nothing—Oh, good!"

There was something better, as it happened. Digby found a ball of thick string in the cupboard, and swiftly the raving Cutts and his two chums were bound and rendered helpless.

"Oh, you young rotters!" hissed Cutts, almost beside himself with fury. "You—you little sweeps! I'll—I'll smash you for this! Help! Rescue, St. Leger! Rescue, Fifth! Help!"

"Better gag 'em!" suggested Lowther, with a chuckle.

"Too late now!" grinned Tom, as a loud hammering sounded on the door.

It was too late. St. Leger was already hammering on the door and demanding what was the matter. Really, St. Leger might have guessed what the matter was. He was soon joined by others, and the hammering increased on the door.

"Better buck up!" said Tom Merry, with a rueful grin. "We're fairly trapped, I'm afraid. Still, we'll take our money's worth out of Cutts. May as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb!"

CHAPTER 7.

Getting Clear!

"Y AAS, wathah! Pway release Cutts, Tom Mewwy, so that I can go ahead with my thwashin'!" said Arthur Augustus, his noble eye gleaming with the light of battle.

"Not much!" laughed Tom. "This is now a Lower School matter, not a private one, Gussy. Cutts has offended by whacking you, and he's made things still worse by fagging a Lower School man. We'll give him the fives bat on your account, and then we'll have our tea at his expense. After that we'll take our chances of getting clear."

"Good wheeze!" said Blake. "There's going to be trouble, but we may as well enjoy ourselves until it comes."

"Weally, you fellows—"

"Sit on Gussy, someone!" said Tom. "Now, where's that fives bat?"

"Look here—" shrieked Cutts. "Don't you dare to touch me, you cheeky young sweeps! If you do—"

"My dear man, why shouldn't we dare?" inquired Tom. "We've touched you often enough before, haven't we? Turn him over!"

Cutts, despite his glares and terrific threats, was turned over into a suitable position for punishment. Tom took the fives bat and began to use it with a will.

Gilmore and Prye looked on apprehensively. They feared that their turn was coming soon. But it wasn't! Cutts was the fellow the juniors intended to deal with, and Cutts alone. The end of the Fifth howled and wriggled and squirmed as the bat whacked home again and again.

But Tom's arm grew tired at last, and he threw the bat down. Blake promptly picked it up again, to take his turn as executioner.

"No; he's had enough!" grinned Tom. "Let this be a lesson to you, you rotter!" he added, looking down at the raging Cutts severely. "Keep your paws off Fourth and Shell chaps, and don't ever dare to fag one again, either!"

"Yow! Groooogh! Oh, you—you little fiends!" choked Cutts. "Oh, you—you—I'll smash you for this!"

"No words of regret nor signs of remorse!" sighed Tom. "Well, perhaps he'll learn some day! My hat! They'll have that door down in a minute at this rate! Better buck up!"

"Yes, rather!"

Prye and Gilmore drew deep breaths of relief as they realised that their turn was not coming. But they fairly glowered as the juniors now turned their attention to the table.

"Quite a decent spread!" commented Tom, his eyes running approvingly over the good things. "Pity that toast will be cold. Still, mustn't grumble at trifles like that. You do things in style, and no mistake, Cutts, old man!"

"You—you—you—" Words failed Gerald Cutts. He looked on in a state of simmering fury as the grinning juniors turned their attention in real earnest to the tea he had arranged for himself and his friends. The little scrap had evidently sharpened the appetites of the raiders, and the thumping and hammering on the door didn't disturb them at all.

"Pile in, you chaps!" said Tom Merry, helping himself to a sausage-roll. "It isn't often we have a feed like this at Cutts' expense. We must make the most of it."

"Oh, you—you cheeky young rotters!" gasped Gilmore. "You're forgetting that you've got to get out of this study

yet, though! Leave that grub alone, or it'll be the worse for you!"

Deep chuckles were all the answer Gilmore got to his dark threat. True, the juniors did not know how they were to get clear. They could hear from the voices outside that the Fifth were in force—that they knew who the raiders were now. It would be practically impossible for them to escape.

Still, as Tom Merry pointed out, they might just as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb. It was a case of in for a penny, in for a pound. They intended to enjoy themselves now they were on the job. They had a good few scores to settle with Cutts & Co., and they were making the most of things now.

The cakes and the tarts and the sausage-rolls and the eggs, to say nothing of the chocolate-biscuits and other dainties too numerous to mention, disappeared at a great rate. Arthur Augustus, now Cutts had been "thwashed," was quite satisfied, and he piled in with the rest. Cutts had arranged a tea for four fellows—himself, Prye, Gilmore, and St. Leger—but the supplies he had laid in were quite enough for ten, for all that. When they had finished the ten juniors had almost cleared the festive board.

Then they looked at each other.

After the feast came the reckoning.

"Well, what's to be done now?" grinned Noble. "Open the door and take our chances, I suppose! Some of us may get clear!"

"Only thing to do!" said Blake.

"What about shoving the poker in the fire and getting it red-hot?" suggested Lowther. "Then we could rush out—"

"The chap with the poker would get clear, and perhaps one or two of us," said Tom, shaking his head; "but the rest wouldn't. No; I've a better wheeze than that, I think! I'll need the poker, though. Start getting it hot, Lowther. The rest of you chaps gag these three beauties, in case they give the game away."

"What—ho!"

Realising it was not a time for asking questions, Lowther shoved the poker in the glowing coals of the fire, while the rest gagged Cutts & Co. with their own handkerchiefs. By the time they had finished the poker was red-hot.

Cutts & Co. looked on with eyes nearly starting from their heads with fury.

"When I say the word, unlock the door and let me out," said Tom grimly; "then lock it swiftly again before St. Leger and the others can rush in!"

"But what's the wheeze?" demanded Blake.

"Simple enough!" said Tom. "There's a ladder in the quad outside, left by the window-cleaning man; I spotted it just before tea. If it's there still I'll soon grab it. If it isn't, I'll get another from somewhere. Your job is to open the window and hold the giddy fort until I can get back with the ladder—if I do get back. Then we can all make good our escape by means of the ladder."

"Bai Jove!"

The juniors grasped the idea at once. It was really a very good plan—if Tom Merry could get clear. All depended upon that. And Tom was grimly determined to get clear.

He wrapped his handkerchief round the handle of the poker, and withdrew the red-hot iron from the glowing coals.

"Now—quick!" he said.

Blake acted on the instant. He twisted the key in the lock and swiftly opened the door, standing aside as he did so.

There came a roar outside, which became a chorus of startled yells as Tom Merry rushed out armed with his red-hot poker!

It was really amazing how quickly St. Leger and his fellow Fifth-Formers hopped and skipped out of Tom Merry's way.

"Yow! Oh crumbs!"

"Look out! Oh, my hat!"

"Back!" yelled Tom Merry.

The door slammed to behind him, and the key clicked home in the lock. Tom Merry rushed forward, and, amid another chorus of startled yells, the assembled Fifth-Formers scattered to right and left.

"Collar him!" yelled St. Leger, making no attempt to do so himself, however. "Collar the young rotter!"

Nobody took St. Leger's advice. Tom Merry was brandishing the glowing poker in a determined manner, and though one or two Fifth-Formers stepped forward grimly, they instantly sprang back again as the red-hot poker threatened them.

Tom Merry went through the crowd of seniors like a knife through melted butter, and bolted for the staircase.

At the head of the stairs, on the landing, was a row of fire-buckets. Tom plunged the rapidly-cooling poker into the nearest. There was a sizzling hiss, and then, leaving the poker steaming there, he leaped on the banisters and slid down them like greased lightning.

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In a few seconds he was out of the School House, and rushing round the quad to where he had seen the ladder. It was still there. Cleaning the windows of St. Jim's was a big job, and took more than one day. The ladder was a light, adjustable one, and Tom rushed it to a spot right underneath the open window of Cutts' study.

He scrambled up it, and his delighted chums helped him into the room.

"All serene!" grinned Tom, looking around the room. "Well, now we'd better hop— Oh, my hat! What the—"

Tom stared blankly at Cutts, Prye, and Gilmore. Those three worthies looked weird and wonderful sights. Jam was plastered on their hair and on their faces. Crushed egg-shell was mixed with jam, giving Cutts & Co. a peculiarly piebald appearance. As a finishing touch, apparently, milk had been poured over each of their heads.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom. "You've been busy, chaps!" "Yes, we thought we'd give them what was left of the feed while we waited!" grinned Blake. "Don't they look sights! But hadn't we better be moving now?"



"Oh crumbs!" "Look out!" "Oh, my hat!" There was a chorus of yells in the Fifth Form passage as the door of Cutts' study opened, and Tom Merry rushed out, armed with a red-hot poker. "Back!" Tom Merry brandished the poker in a determined manner, and the crowd of seniors scattered to right and left. (See Chapter 7.)

"My hat! Yes, rather!"

"Gurgle, gurgle, gurgle!" came from the three gagged figures

Tom Merry & Co. roared with laughter. But the din on the door was now something terrific, and they waited no longer. At any moment the furious and baffled Fifth-Formers outside might "tumble" to the game and rush into the quad.

So the triumphant juniors did not tempt providence. They climbed, one after the other, over the sill, and swarmed down the ladder to the quad. Tom Merry was last, and as he left he blew a kiss at the three almost hysterical black sheep.

"By-bye, Cutts dear!" he called. "We'll send round the key presently, and your pals can let you out. Let this be a severe lesson to you, my young friend! Leave the Lower School chaps alone, and they'll leave you alone."

"Gurgle, gurgle, gurgle!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry slid down the ladder and joined his chums

below. The ladder was replaced where Tom had found it, and the juniors drifted cheerily indoors. They had had a free tea, besides squaring matters with Cutts & Co., and they felt very satisfied with themselves. Even Arthur Augustus, though baulked of the pleasure of personally "thwashin'" Cutts, was satisfied now; and he had to admit, upon reflection, that it was perhaps just as well that he had not been allowed to thrash Cutts on his own. He confided his opinion to Blake that things might not have ended quite so happily, and Blake agreed that they mightn't!



CHAPTER 8. Racke Bargains!

"Oh, it's you, is it?" Gerald Cutts made the remark, and Percy Mellish really might have taken warning from the grim way in which the Fifth-Former made it.

It was just before dinner, on the day following the exciting events in the Fifth Form passage. Percy Mellish, since being kicked out of Cutts' study by Tom Merry & Co., had not dared to venture back again that evening. The story of how Tom Merry & Co. had squared matters with Cutts & Co. was common knowledge, and had supplied the Lower School with much entertainment and joy. Mellish, on the arrival of Cutts and his two chums the previous afternoon, had not stopped to see what happened. He had made himself scarce while he had the chance, his face pale with apprehension and worry.

He had heard later what had happened, and he had not dared to visit Gerald Cutts that evening.

Sheer desperation brought him to the Fifth-Former's study now, though.

He looked at Gerald Cutts furtively and with many inward qualms. Percy Mellish had gone through a great deal since promising to fag for Cutts of the Fifth—in more ways than one. Tom Merry & Co. had already dealt with him, and had warned him what to expect if he dared to go on fagging for Cutts. But the story had leaked out, and being the junior skipper did not save Mellish from cuffs and kicks from indignant and disgusted fellows in the Shell and Fourth.

It looked like being a very trying week indeed for the new junior skipper.

That was not all, however. Mellish had the worry of Banks to face once again—or he feared he had. He dare not fag for Cutts—his life would not have been worth living had he defied public opinion in that respect. And it was extremely unlikely that Gerald Cutts would help him unless he did.

It was this that had brought Mellish to Cutts now. "Yes, it's me, Cutts!" he faltered, in answer to the Fifth-Former's snarling remark. "I—I— Look here, it wasn't my fault about what happened last night!"

"Oh, wasn't it?" "No-no!" stammered Mellish. "It was those cads—they kicked me out. I'd just finished getting tea ready when they came in. The cads ragged me and threw me out of the study. You—you saw me go out yourself, Cutts."

"I did!" agreed Cutts. "Have you come now to explain this, or to continue your faggin' duties, Mellish?"

"I—I— Look here, I daren't come again, Cutts!" said Mellish, licking his lips. "They've threatened to half kill me if I fag for you again."

"They have, have they?" "Yes. It isn't my fault, you can see that, Cutts! And I'll still run your errands for you—on the quiet as before. But I daren't do anything openly."

"Then our little arrangement falls through. Is that what you've come to explain, Mellish?" asked Cutts.

"I—I can't fag in the ordinary way, as I've said, Cutts," muttered Mellish. "But—but I can perhaps keep my part of the arrangement in some other way. I can be jolly useful—"

"I see. You want me to keep to my part of the bargain—to still give you the two quid—eh?" smiled Cutts. "That it?"

"Yes. If you only would, please, Cutts!" stammered Mellish eagerly. "It isn't my fault—you can see that!"

Cutts changed his tone with startling suddenness.

"You—you little toad!" he hissed. "You sneakin', spongin' little worm!"

"Oh!" gasped Mellish. "You little snivelling sweep," went on Cutts savagely.

"I'll see you sacked before I hand you a penny! I've just been waitin' for you to turn up, Mellish. I've you to thank for what happened last night! You must have let it out that I was giving a little party! Those little hounds wouldn't have known otherwise, and wouldn't have raided me. I'm going to give you the lickin' of your life, Mellish!"

Cutts jumped for his walking-stick in the corner of the study. He grabbed it, and made another jump for Percy Mellish.

But Mellish did not wait for the walking-stick.

He promptly jumped for the door. Cutts rushed round the table, tripped over the hearthrug, and went down with a fearful crash.

Mellish shot through the open doorway, with Cutts' yell ringing in his frightened ears. He didn't stop to defend himself against the unfounded charge that he had "let anything out." It was quite untrue; he had done nothing of the kind—a fact Cutts was probably well aware of. But Mellish did not stay to discuss the matter, he flew. Nor did he stop running until he had reached the juniors' quarters. Then he stopped, panting, and utterly dismayed.

It was all up now. Quite obviously Cutts of the Fifth had no intention of keeping to his part of the bargain.

Mellish groaned aloud in his deep dejection. What was to be done now? There was nobody else—nobody who might possibly help him to pay a shady betting debt, even to save him from the sack. Unless Racke—

The wretched junior gritted his teeth and hurried along to Racke's study. Racke would have to help him—he'd force the cad to do so, somehow. Friday seemed perilously near, and, in any case, the suspense was more than he could stand.

Racke gave him a sneering grin as he slunk into No. 7 Study. The look of hopeless dejection on Mellish's white, pasty face seemed to give Aubrey Racke pleasure.

"Hallo, here's our giddy captain, Crookey!" he observed, with a chuckle. "Looks as if he's enjoyin' life, doesn't he?"

"Look—look here, Racke—"

"How's the skipper job goin', Mellish?" grinned Racke. "Reported anybody else this mornin', or have you got a bit fed-up with that enjoyable pastime?"

"He's weighed down with the cares of office," chuckled Crooke. "I say, Mellish, old man, you'll put me in the team for the Grammar School match to-morrow, of course? As a pal—"

"Mellish will, of course—as a pal," grinned Racke. "But the pal will have to stomp up in cash. What are you sellin' places in the team at, Mellish, old man?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, I wouldn't mind paying for a giddy place myself," said Racke reflectively. "It's a ripplin' chance to play in a school match. And I bet my pater would shell out with a tenner if I could send him proof that I'd been chosen for the eleven. It's his one sad sorrow that I don't shine in sports. Yes, I do believe the old chap would stomp up handsomely for the rest of the term if I could get in the team—even for once. That's an idea, Crooke!"

"Ripplin'!" grinned Crooke. "What about it, Mellish?"

"Don't talk rot!" said Mellish uneasily, looking in some alarm at Racke. "I—I— You know I daren't do that! The fellows wouldn't have it. I'm going to make no blunders like that. I'm just going to play the usual team."

"With yourself included?" asked Racke blandly.

"Well, yes," stammered Mellish, flushing crimson. "As the skipper I've a right to play myself, haven't I? You can't expect me to stand down. I'm skipper of footer as well as junior captain."

"Oh, my hat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Racke.

The idea of Mellish, the weedy and fumbling slacker of the Fourth, playing in a school match, struck the cad of the Shell as screamingly funny.

Mellish flushed crimson again, and scowled.

"Nothing to laugh at, Racke," he said, biting his lips. "But, look here, I've—I've not come to talk about footer!"

"No," smiled Racke. "You've come to discuss a little loan, I suppose—to pay dear old Banks. I can see it in your chivvy, Mellish. But you're wastin' breath, old chap. There's nothin' doin'!"

"Look—look here!" panted Mellish desperately. "You'll have to help me, Racke. If you don't, you'll be sorry. If I'm expelled, I'll not go alone!" he added viciously. "I mean what I say! You could help me, if you would."

"So that's your tune now!" said Racke, his face changing abruptly. "Threats, eh?"

"Yes," snarled Mellish, showing his teeth. "And I mean them, Racke. You've led me into this hole. You taunted me because I funk'd putting my last penny on that rotten horse! You've got to stand by me now, you cad!"

"Got to, eh?" said Racke, his eyes gleaming dangerously.

"Yes," said Mellish desperately. "I can't stand this worry much longer. I shan't wait for Banks to act, either, if I see no way out by Friday, I shall go straight to Railton or the Head and own up. That's flat!"

"You sneakin' worm!" said Racke thickly, getting to his feet threateningly. "Why, you blackmailing cad, I'll—"

"Hold on!" said Crooke, eyeing the haggard-faced Mellish in some alarm. "Can't you see the silly fool means it, Racke. No need to ask for trouble, you fool!"

Racke sat down again. As a matter of fact he really was not a little uneasy himself now. Mellish's face showed that he was in a state of panic, and might do anything in his desperation.

Aubrey Racke gave a short laugh.

"My dear Crookey," he sneered, "don't worry. Mellish won't need to do that. Anythin' might happen before Friday. In fact," said Racke coolly, "I might even help him out myself, for that matter."

"Racke," panted Mellish, "if—if you only would—"

"On conditions, though," said Racke calmly and reflectively. "I've just been thinkin' about this footer stunt. I believe it would be money well spent to pay our dear footer skipper to include us in the team, Crookey."

"Oh!" faltered Mellish, his heart sinking again.

"What about it, Mellish, old sport?" asked Racke. "I rather fancy myself playin' footer in a school match. I'd be able to swank about it no end, and my people would be bucked no end, too. A tenner's the least I can expect from the giddy pater as a reward for blossoming out into a footballer."

"Look here—" stammered Mellish.

"Is it a go?" smiled Racke. "It'll be no end of a score over those rotters, Tom Merry, and the rest of them. I shall particularly insist that that cad D'Arcy's dropped to make room for me, and that Tom Merry, the rotten sweep, is dropped to make room for Crookey here! I shall also insist that you pitch Blake out to make room for

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you, old chap. I don't at all approve of a fumbling dud like you in a team I'm playin' in, Mellish. But it'll be worth it to do Blake down, eh, Crookey?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Crooke. "Good man, Racke! I'm game! What about it, Mellish?"

"A quid for me to play, and a quid for Crookey," said Racke. "And I might go to another two quid if you play us on Saturday, too, Mellish. There's your chance. Two quid should keep dear old Banks quiet for a bit."

"I—I—I—" Mellish stammered and stopped.

"By gad! I should have thought you'd have jumped at it, Mellish!" snapped Racke, staring.

"You—you know why I don't," mumbled Mellish wretchedly. "The fellows will rave—they'll perhaps mob me. I'm only temporary skipper, remember, and I can't just do as I like. Look how they treated me just for helping Cutts yesterday."

Racke laughed.

"Rubbish! You're skipper, and it's your job to choose the team. Railton's given all six of you your chance to see what you can do as skipper. Even Kildare can't very well interfere unless things go very badly. He can't interfere with the team you pick, anyway. Take it or leave it, Mellish! Those are my terms for helpin' to save you from the sack. Well?"

"You—you know I'll have to agree," groaned Mellish. "There's nothing else for it. But—but it'll mean trouble."

"Let it!"

"If—if we get licked badly, I shall be ragged by the fellows!"

"Do you good, old chap! Take some of the swank out of you, Mellish! You've had plenty, goodness knows, since you started your job as skipper!"

Mellish gritted his teeth.

"All right," he muttered, "I'll do it! Give me the two quid now, Racke!"

"Not much!" said Racke, with a sneering laugh. "My dear man, you might change your mind afterwards! Or someone may chip in and muck the game up. You'll have the dubs after the match to-morrow, Mellish."

"If—if you could oblige me now, Racke, I'd—"

"But I won't, old chap! New get out! Your face gives me no end of pain, Mellish!" smiled Racke. "Ta-ta! And don't forget. My name goes on the list in place of D'Arcy's. Write down D'Arcy's name first, and then cross it out so that all can see I've pushed him off, see? That should make that sweep squirm! I'll teach the brute to punch me!"

Mellish said nothing. He slouched out of the study, Racke and Crooke's chuckles ringing in his ears as he went. Mellish was finding the way of the transgressor hard. He was also finding the job of junior skipper not without its hard points, too.

CHAPTER 9.

A Chance for the Grammarians!

"HALLO! List's up, chaps! Oh, good! Blessed if Mellish isn't an improvement in some ways on the giddy duffers who've been skipper lately—especially Gussy!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Only pulling your noble leg, Gussy," chuckled Blake. "Anyway, let's see Mellish's list. I expect it's the usual team. The ass knows better than to monkey about with the team, if he is skipper."

"That's so," agreed Tom Merry, with a grim smile. "Talbot's already given him a plain tip to that effect. Hallo! Why, what the dickens— Oh, great pip!"

The juniors had stopped before the notice board in Big Hall. Quite a number of fellows were before it, and it was a few seconds before Tom Merry & Co. could get near enough to see the list pinned there. But they saw it now, and Tom Merry jumped as his eyes scanned it.

"I'm out!" he said grimly. "And—and my only hat! You're out, too, Blake, and so's Gussy!"

"And Racke, Crooke, and Mellish himself, are in our places," gasped Blake, frowning darkly. "Well, I'm blowed! I thought the team was going to be the same as the last one, Tommy."

"So did I!" grunted Tom, looking rather blank. "Talbot told me Mellish didn't intend to make any changes—excepting that he was dropping Kangaroo to make room for his noble self! We could expect that from Mellish, of course. But—"

"Beats the band, doesn't it?" said Levison, turning round from the board. "He's been kind enough to leave me on the list, though. But if he thinks I'm going to play in a team with hopeless duds and slackers like Racke, Crooke, and himself, he's jolly well mistaken."

With that, Ernest Levison took a pencil from his waistcoat pocket and crossed his name off the list. Then he walked away.

He was not the only one who objected. Talbot quietly followed his example.

"Hold on, Talbot," said Tom Merry uneasily. "Don't make matters worse, old chap! The team's bad enough with three duds in without good men dropping out."

"That's Mellish's look out," said Talbot. "He's broken his word to me. He said you three were playing as usual. I don't see the fun of taking part in a fiasco, or being made a fool of."

Talbot also walked away. Lowther chuckled and ran a pencil through his own name, which was on the list. But he did more, being of a humorous turn of mind. He substituted the name of Baggy Trimble.

There was a chorus of chuckles at that. "Might as well make a job of it," said Lowther. "Any more going to scratch? Hallo, here's Mellish now! My hat! Notice the giddy strut!"

Mellish certainly was strutting a trifle as he came along with Racke and Crooke. As a matter of fact, now he felt sure he was out of danger, Mellish was feeling more confident and reckless. During afternoon classes he had thought matters over, and he had come to the conclusion that Racke was right, and that he had nothing to fear by changing the team. After all, he was skipper, and it was his job. If the fellows didn't like his choice then they could lump it.

He knew Kildare had seen the list—he had been present when Kildare glanced carefully down it. But beyond giving him a curious look, Kildare had walked away without saying anything.

Kildare was not going to interfere, and he felt safe. He felt a trifle uneasy, however, as he glanced furtively at Tom Merry & Co. It was Grundy who addressed him, however.

"Here, what's this mean, Mellish?" he demanded in some wrath. "What the dickens d'you mean by putting duds like Racke and Crooke in and leaving me out?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I can see anything to laugh at!" snorted Grundy, glaring at Mellish. "I've nothing to say against you dropping Tom Merry, or Blake and D'Arcy. They can play after a fashion, I suppose, but they're not up to my style. But I want to know why you've left me out, and shoved in your own dashed pals, Racke and Crooke?"

"What's the matter with us, Grundy?" snapped Racke. "It's no business of yours what Mellish does. He's skipper, and he can please himself."

"Can he?" hooted Grundy. "We'll jolly well see about that, letting the dashed school down like this. If you don't alter that list, Mellish, you're booked for trouble, my lad!"

"Look—look here!" spluttered Mellish. "Kildare's seen that list, and he's approved of it—at least, he's not objected. If it's good enough for him, it's good enough for you, Grundy! It stays as it is."

"With three men short?" inquired Lowther blandly.

"Eh? Why— Oh!" ejaculated Mellish, colouring hotly, as he stared at the notice-board. "Why, what cad's done this?"

"Levison and Talbot and Lowther have crossed their names out themselves," said Tom Merry grimly.

"Have they?" snapped Mellish. "Well, let them! I'll soon find other men to fill their dashed places. You'll play, Grundy?"

"Eh? Me?" gasped Grundy. "Oh, my hat! Yes, rather!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mellish wrote Grundy's name over the crossed out name of Levison. It was really a brilliant move of Mellish's, for Grundy was the fellow most likely to cause trouble; Grundy was always making rows over something or other!

But it quite settled the indecision of Figgins, Kerr, and Fatty Wynn, who had come over from the New House to see the list.

With a chuckle, Figgins crossed his name out, and Fatty Wynn followed suit on the instant.

"No room for anybody else with a fellow like Grundy in a footer team!" murmured George Figgins. "He needs the field to himself! Ta-ta, you School House duffers!"

Figgins and Wynn walked out of the Hall. Kerr hesitated a moment, and then he also crossed his name out of the list and followed his chums. There was now no New House name on the list.

Mellish stared blankly, the expression on his face growing blacker and blacker. This was a contingency he had not bargained for at all. He had expected opposition. But he had not expected this, against which he had no power whatever. If the fellows refused to play he could not make them.

"Let them go to pot!" snarled Racke. "You'll easy make a team up!"

"What hopes!" murmured Lowther. "I fancy there won't be a rush to play for Mellish's team now, though!"

"Ha, ha! Not much!"

That was certain now. No sensible fellow would wish to make a fool of himself by playing in a team with such hopeless duffers as Mellish & Co. and Grundy—especially Grundy. When playing footer, George Alfred Grundy had a remarkable faculty of not only making himself look ridiculous, but every other fellow playing with him as well.

"You'll have to fall back on Trimble and Tompkins, and fellows like that, I'm afraid, Mellish!" grinned Blake.

"Well, I'll jolly well do that before I'll be beaten by you cads!" hissed Mellish in a rage; and he instantly wrote several names in the vacant places on the list. One was the name of Clarence York Tompkins, and he also left in Trimble's name. He knew, at all events, that he could rely on Trimble agreeing to play!

There were some grim looks on the faces of the juniors when he had finished. But he eyed them all defiantly. Tom Merry gave a short laugh. He felt no sympathy for Mellish—not knowing the true facts. A fellow who would muck up his school's chances by putting his own pals in just to spite fellows he hated deserved no sympathy.

(Continued on next page.)

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"Come on, chaps!" said Tom to his chums. "Let's get down to the village, and blow Mellish!"

And Tom Merry & Co. walked out into the quad and started out for Rylcombe, leaving Mellish to his own devices. Lowther and most of them were grinning, but Tom was looking uneasy. He was thinking of the terrific licking the Grammar School would give Mellish's team of duffers on the following afternoon.

The chums did their shopping in the village, and afterwards repaired to Mrs. Murphy's little shop for lemonade and tarts before returning home. It was as they were leaving the shop that they almost collided with three juniors wearing Grammar School caps.

They proved to be Gordon Gay, Frank Monk, and Carboy.

"Hallo, you cripples!" grinned Gordon Gay, by way of greeting. "Not been taken away yet, then?"

"Eh? Taken away? What?"

"To the home for incurables!" said Gay blandly. "Not having seen you lately, we wondered—"

"You silly chumps!" snorted Tom Merry. "Look here, you chaps, mop these cheeky Grammarian rotters up!"

"Yaas, wathah! Pway woll them ovah, deah boys—"

"Here, hold on!" laughed Gay, a trifle alarmed. "Only my fun, kids—"

"If you call us kids—"

"Young men, then!" chuckled Gay. "Make it pax, young men! Seven to three is rather a large order even for little us! I say, who's skipper at your giddy school this week? We're rather interested in this game of having a dud skipper every week."

"Mellish!" said Tom Merry shortly.

"Oh, my hat! But what's it all mean?" asked Gay, with some curiosity. "We've heard something about it, of course. But—what's the idea?"

"It was Railton's idea!" grunted Tom.

"And it was all Tom Merry's fault!" grinned Blake. "Just because he'd been ragged a bit by Kildare and Railton, he got his back up and resigned his job as skipper—the silly chump!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I don't see it!" said Tom Merry, a trifle doggedly. "Everybody seemed to be fed up with me. I thought they'd better have a change of skipper, and I still think so. If you'd only put up for the job, Blake, or some other decent chap—"

"We weren't going to take your job over!" snorted Blake. "We imagined you'd give way eventually. Then Railton mucked things up with his wonderful scheme."

"He appointed the six, what?" grinned Gay.

"Not exactly!" grinned Blake. "He asked for fellows to apply for the job. But the only fellows who did apply were Gussy here, and Fatty Wynn, and duds like Skimpole, Grundy, Mellish, and Tompkins. Fatty Wynn and Tompkins have still to take their turn after Mellish!"

"By that time the footer and everything else will be about mucked up at this rate!" grunted Digby.

"Well, not much harm has been done so far!" said Tom Merry, frowning. "We've been amazingly lucky over it all. But to-morrow— Oh, my hat!"

Rather unguardedly Tom Merry told the grinning Grammarians what had happened, and the composition of the team they would meet the following afternoon.

The Grammarians' grins changed to chuckles and then to roars of laughter.

"It's nothing to laugh about!" snorted Blake. "They'll disgrace us, of course! But it won't be much of a score for you chaps, anyway. It'll just be a fiasco—nothing else. You'll win by about twenty goals, but it won't have been a footer match. It'll have been a giddy pantomime!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Gay & Co.

"You cackling duffers!" said Tom Merry wrathfully. "I'd hoped you might be decent and back out of the game—postpone it until we've got a decent team to meet you!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Gay. "We'll see about that! Oh, this is rich!"

"You mean to bring your team over, then," said Tom, "though you know you'll be up against a crowd of hopeless duffers?"

"Yes, I do!" choked Gordon Gay, a glimmer in his eyes. "Twenty goals to none, eh? What a score it would be for us! It just shows how your mouldy old casual ward is going from bad to worse!"

"Does it?" snapped Tom, a warlike gleam in his eyes. "Hear that, chaps? Mop the cads up!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Hold on— Oh crumbs! Run for it!"

Gordon Gay just stayed a brief second to knock Tom Merry's cap off, and then he bolted after his chums. The exasperated St. Jim's juniors followed for a few yards, and then they gave it up.

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"Well, that's done it!" growled Blake dispiritedly. "I knew they'd take it like that. What the dickens did you tell 'em for, Tommy? They would have found out soon enough."

"I'd hoped they'd have backed out of the match, knowing what a footling lot they were up against," said Tom dimly. "I imagined Gordon Gay was a chap who wanted a stiff game of footer, not to take part in a blessed fiasco! Anyway, let's get back. It can't be helped. Gay means to make St. Jim's look small. I bet they lick Mellish's team of freaks by nearer thirty goals than twenty! Then they'll cackle and chortle over us for terms! Oh, my hat!"

"Rotten!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

And Tom Merry & Co. returned home in a very unenviable frame of mind. They saw now that their rivals meant to make the most of their chance to score over St. Jim's in more ways than one—or, at least, they imagined they did!

CHAPTER 10.

The Match That Didn't Come Off!

"KICK off at two-thirty!" said Tom Merry. "Time to be going down if we're going to see the match, chaps!"

"Slaughter, you mean!" grunted Manners.

"Fiasco," amended Lowther, with a chuckle; "or else a menagerie of performing monkeys! That about fills the giddy bill this afternoon."

"We'd better turn up, though," said Tom Merry, shaking his head glumly. "It won't be pleasant to see those silly Grammar School chaps shoving the pill through again and again. But—well, it will look bad if we don't turn up. We expect the chaps to rally round when we play, you know. Must go!"

"My dear man, I mean to go!" said Lowther. "It'll be no end entertainin', as Cardew says. Cardew says he's going to turn up early to get a front seat!"

"Cardew's an ass!" grunted Tom. "Hallo, here are those fourth kids!"

"Who the dickens are you calling kids?"

Blake came into Study No. 10 with Arthur Augustus, Herries, and Digby behind him.

"Yaas, wathah! I considah it wathah cheeky to wefer to us as kids, y'know!" said Arthur Augustus, giving the Terrible Three a severe look through his monocle. "Howevah, if we wefer to them as infants that will be quite all wight, deah boys."

"Quite all right!" agreed Blake, with a chuckle. "Good for you, Gussy. Well, my infants, are you ready for the match?"

Tom Merry laughed.

"Quite ready! Lead on, kids—I mean, Blake!"

Tom Merry & Co. left the study and made their way downstairs. They were feeling none too cheery, but they were determined to make the best of a bad job. Blake agreed with Tom that it would be the thing for them to turn up to see the match with the Grammar School—much as they dreaded the spectacle. At least, everyone but Lowther did. That humorous youth was looking forward to seeing some fun, and he refused to see the serious side.

Crowds of fellows were making their way to Little Side that sunny winter's afternoon. Most of them were going, like Lowther, hoping to be highly entertained by seeing Mellish and his team play football.

For Mellish had stuck to his guns—indeed, he had no choice. He dared not give way in regard to Racke and Crooke playing, and as he refused to drop the two black sheep from the team, the usual members of the eleven were equally determined not to allow their names to remain. There had been plenty of trouble since the previous evening for Mellish. But he had not given way.

Not a single member of the original team remained on his list. It was now composed of Mellish himself as captain, Racke, Crooke, Grundy, Gore, Clampe, Scrope, Tompkins, Chowle, Lennox, and Trimble. As Levison said, Mellish had shown remarkable skill in getting together such a list of hopeless duds and lazy slackers.

But it was all Mellish could get together—nobody else would play for him; not even the glory of being "down" to play in a School fixture would tempt them. Most of the fellows were surprised to see even a fellow like Gore agreeing to play.

The fellows swarmed round the ropes and waited for the team to appear. It came at last, and an ironical cheer went round, followed by a chorus of chipping.

"Go it, Mellish!"

"Where's your showman's clobber, old chap?"

"Great Scott! What a gang!"

"Shove Trimble in goal, Mellish—he'll fill it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Most of Mellish's team, not being used to the limelight, were obviously very nervous indeed. Tompkins was so nervous that he tripped over his own feet as he trotted on the field and came a cropper. Trimble was just behind him, and he went headlong over him with a wild yell before he could stop himself. This little incident roused fresh laughter—making Mellish's team all the more nervous.

The eyes of Racke and Crooke were glinting with rage. Racke especially was a proud and haughty youth, and he had certainly not expected this.

"Oh, the cads!" he hissed to Crooke. "This is Tom Merry's doing, of course. He's put the fellows up to chippin' us like this!"

"Hang them!" breathed Crooke. "I wish to goodness I'd never agreed to play, Racke! I feel like clearing off now!"

"Don't talk rot!" snapped Racke. "We've got to face it now, and we've got to play up. We can take it out of Mellish's hide afterwards for lettin' us in for this! If—

Mellish's eyes blazed with fury as he saw the look of malicious triumph on Aubrey Racke's face. Crash! Without warning, his fist shot out, and the cad of the Shell went down, with a howl. Mellish stood over him, panting. (See Chapter 13.)



Hallo! Here's the Grammar School lot. I— No, my hat! It isn't. It's— What the thump—"

Racke nearly fell down—as did more than one of the St. Jim's team. At that moment eleven fellows in footer attire came trotting on to the field. They were a Grammarian team right enough.

But they were most emphatically not the Grammarian team they expected to meet. Gordon Gay was not amongst them—not a single member of the Grammarian Fourth Form was amongst them.

Racke knew most of them by sight. Not one of them, however, came up to Racke's shoulder. They were all members of the Third Form of Rylcombe Grammar School; Third Form fags, in fact.

They were grinning cheerfully as they trotted on to the field in a businesslike manner.

A sudden silence went round the touch-line—a silence followed instantly by a hysterical howl of laughter as the crowd recognised the visiting team.

"What the merry dickens—" gasped Blake. "Oh, my hat! Look at 'em! They—they're Grammar School fags; the very youngest kids in their school at that. What—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Lowther. "Can't you see? This is a jape of Gay's, of course! He never meant his own team to play—that was why he went off laughing so much. I wondered then if he had some game on."

"Oh, bai Jove!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Here's Gordon Gay now!" gasped Tom Merry, a relieved grin spreading over his face. "Good old Gay! I thought somehow it wasn't like Gay to take a rotten advantage of us! You bounder! What's this game mean?"

Gordon Gay came up, accompanied by his chums, Monk,

Carboy, and the two Wootton brothers. All were grinning cheerily, and none were in footer togs.

"Game?" he exclaimed cheerfully. "Footer, of course! I said last night that I'd bring a team along, and I have done! There it is. It should be about the weight of Trimble, taking it all together, if not of the rest."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You bounder!" laughed Tom Merry. "You were pulling our legs last night!"

"Your innocent legs are so easy to pull!" sighed Gay.

"There really isn't much pleasure in pulling 'em, you know! Still, I hope we're going to see a good game. I fancy our team somehow, on seeing your lot."

But Gay's hope was a vain one. At that moment Aubrey Racke, followed by Percy Mellish and the rest of the St. Jim's footballers, came rushing up, their faces red with wrath.

"Gay, you—you rotter!" shouted Racke, almost inarticulate with rage. "What's this mean? What are these scrubby kids doing here, you rotter? They say they've come to play us!"

"So they have, old chap! Be quick and get going, there's good chaps. I'm no end keen to see this match!"

"You—you rotters!"

"Is this how you greet a visiting team in the ordinary way?" asked Gay, raising his eyebrows. "My dear man, what shocking manners you St. Jim's chaps have, to be sure!"

"But this isn't a Fourth Form team?" shrieked Mellish.

"My dear man, we never claimed that it was. The challenge, in the first place, was for a Grammarian junior team. That's a junior team. It's very much junior, I must admit. Still, they'll play up all right, and they'll give you a good game, I fancy!"

The Grammarian fag team looked as if they would, too! They were out in the field now, punting the ball about. And they certainly looked very businesslike indeed. Racke gritted his teeth as he eyed them over. Then he gave a savage snarl.

"You—you cheeky, insolent rotters!" he hissed, glowering at Gay furiously. "This is a dashed insult—nothing

else! Think we're going to play that crowd of scrubby fags?"

"It's the Grammar School team—the only team you'll get the chance of playing this afternoon, my friend!" said Gay blandly.

"We're jolly well not playin' them!" hissed Crooke. "This is a plant, Racke! I'm off. You don't catch me playin'. I'm not makin' a dashed fool of myself to please a crowd like this!"

"Neither am I!" scowled Gore, his face crimson. "You and your dashed team can go and eat coke, Mellish!"

He walked off. Racke and Crooke, giving the laughing crowd a bitter look, marched after him. In turn, the rest followed, Trimble coming last, and looking rather surprised and disappointed. Trimble actually was very much relieved to find he was to be up against only fags. Trimble had had fears of damage to his fat person! In single file the weird and wonderful football eleven climbed through the ropes and trooped sheepishly away.

A howl of laughter and a terrific outcry of catcalls and yells followed them.

"Hallo! My hat! They're funkng it!"

"Mellish, come back, and face it like a man! They won't hurt you!"

"Yah! Funks! Afraid of a crowd of fags!"

"Come back!" It was a howl. "Come back, you funks! Don't disgrace the school!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Only on one fellow did the cry of "funks" have any effect, however. That fellow, as might be expected, was Grundy. The rest of the St. Jim's team of duds did actually funk a game with the fags. And this was simply because they feared, and not without good reason, that the fags, who looked such a business-like crowd, would lick them. Shameless as Racke and his friends were, though they did not mind the prospect of a terrific licking from Gordon Gay & Co., they certainly could not face the possibility of being trounced by Grammar School fags!

It would be too much of a fiasco, even for them. They would never be able to hold up their heads again.

But Grundy did not funk the game—simply because to Grundy it was quite impossible, quite beyond the limits of reason, that a team that included him could be licked, by fags or anyone else. The rest were, Grundy had admitted to all and sundry, hopeless duds. But he—George Alfred Grundy—would save the situation. With him in the team there could be no possibility of defeat.

That cry of "funks" was enough for Grundy. He had followed for a few yards, not quite knowing what else to do. But now he hurried ahead, stopped in front of the departing footballers, and barred their path.

"Hold on!" he bawled. "Mellish, we're going back to fight it out! Funks, eh? We'll see about that! Back, you claps! My hat! As if we're afraid of a swarm of fags! Stop!"

"Out of the way, Grundy, you fool!" hissed Racke.

He hurried to pass that burly youth. Grundy gave a growl, caught him by the arm, and sent him spinning back. Racke recovered himself, and, nearly mad with rage and humiliation, he rushed forward again.

"Would you?" gasped Grundy excitedly. "Disgrace us, would you, Racke, you hopeless funk! Here, back—Ow!"

Grundy staggered back as Racke, hardly knowing what he was doing now, struck out at him.

That was enough for George Alfred—more than enough, in fact. The next moment a wild and whirling scrap was in progress. But it did not last long—scarcely a minute, in fact, greatly to the disappointment of the hilarious crowd. Two or three hefty smacks from Grundy's huge fists proved more than enough for Racke, and he crumpled up and went down, yelling for mercy. Grundy frowned disdainfully, and, leaving him lying there, he tramped off towards St. Jim's, snorting his disgust. There was nothing else for him to do now, for the rest of the team had seen their chance and had bolted for the school buildings.

That ended the Grammar School match—before it had begun, as it were. At least, it ended the proposed match so far as Mellish's team was concerned. The Grammar School fags were not disappointed, however. For, at Tom Merry's suggestion, Wally D'Arcy and his chums quickly made up a team to play them. And the crowd stayed to watch the Third Form match—and a good game it proved.

The Grammar School fags found in Wally & Co. foemen worthy of their steel, and when the match ended there was nothing much for either side to crow about, the score ending at three all—certainly a more satisfactory state of affairs than was likely to have resulted for St. Jim's had Mellish's team played!

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CHAPTER 11.

Mellish's Temptation!

"RACKE, old chap!"

"Hallo! Come in, Mellish!" said Aubrey Racke.

Percy Mellish slunk into Study No. 7.

His face was white and wore a haggard and anxious expression. He eyed Aubrey Racke furtively. But he quite failed to note the glitter in Racke's eyes, or the dangerous note in his voice.

The cad of the Shell had invited Mellish to enter, and Mellish had entered—like a lamb to the slaughter, as Crooke put it.

Racke and Crooke wanted to see Percy Mellish. Racke's nose was sore, his chin ached, and his eye was swollen—tender spots that had suffered through coming into violent contact with George Alfred's fists! And—with Crooke—he had been humiliated before practically the whole of the Lower School.

Since the fiasco on the footer field the two black sheep of the Shell had been anxious to see Mellish. But though they had glimpsed him they had had no chance to speak to him. Somehow Mellish had seemed to realise that it wasn't an opportune time to speak to Racke and Crooke.

All the school were laughing over what had happened on Little Side. And the members of Mellish's famous—or infamous—team met grins and sarcastically humorous queries wherever they went that evening. The fact that they had run away rather than face a team of fags was something that the fellows were not likely to allow them to forget.

Mellish himself, naturally enough, got it worse than anyone. Many fellows quite failed to see the humour in the position, and Mellish came in for many a disdainful kick that evening. Moreover Kildare had visited him, and had given him a scathing "ticking off" regarding his choice of a team—and other matters. Not only that, but he had told Mellish that his career as footie skipper was ended—at least, so far as his power to pick the team was concerned. There was a match on with Abbotsford on the Saturday, and Kildare was not chancing another fiasco. He placed the choosing of the team in the more capable hands of Reginald Talbot, the vice-captain.

Naturally, Mellish was feeling subdued, and very wretched indeed. He had a terrible fear that Racke would now back out of his agreement. Really, he could scarcely hope that Racke would do anything else! Wednesday had proved a failure as regards Racke's ambitions as a footballer, and now Saturday was also "off"—very much off! Talbot was as likely to choose Aubrey Racke as to play old Taggles, the school porter! But he had not dared to tackle Racke until now.

It was now Thursday noon, and Mellish hoped Racke had got over his disappointment somewhat, though it was a forlorn hope.

"Racke, old chap," he repeated rather tremulously. "I—I—Look here! You know what happened yesterday wasn't my fault."

"Wasn't it?" asked Racke. "I had a sort of idea that it was!"

"It—it wasn't!" panted Mellish. "You know that! I did my best for you—to stick to our agreement. I put you down to play. It was that sweep Gay who mucked things up. I expect that cad Merry and his crowd were behind it all. But that doesn't alter the fact that I couldn't help it. I did my best!"

"That's what you've come to tell us?" sneered Racke.

"I—I want to know what you're going to do about—about that two quid you promised!" breathed Mellish. "I must know! I did my part! What happened wasn't my fault! You—you've got to be decent and keep to your bargain, Racke!"

"Oh, I've got to, have I?" said Racke, his eyes glittering. "You hear that, Crooke? I've got to! Our skipper's givin' us his orders! I've got to hand him two quids to pay a blessed bookie! Nice, ain't it?"

"Look here—"

"That's enough!" you snivelling little cad!" said Racke. "You don't get a farthing from me! Not a stiver! I wonder you've got the confounded cheek to expect it after yesterday. Anyway, it's off. But you're going to get something from us—the lickin' of your miserable life, for makin' us look fools before the whole dashed school!"

"Racke, listen to me!" panted Mellish. "If you don't, I'm done. You know what that means?"

"You're not done!" said Racke, with a sneer. "You're the young chap to allow yourself to be sacked! You'll either burgle somebody's desk, or pinch the giddy footer funds or something. Gad! That's a way out for you, Mellish! The footer funds are in your hands, ain't they? Why not borrow them?"

And Racke laughed sneeringly at his little joke, Mellish went white.

"You—you cad, Racke!" he gritted. "You howling cad! It's like you to taunt a fellow when he's down and out! You lead a fellow on, sneering at a fellow because he funks doing the caddish things you do! I've done things for you—risked things, fagged and sneaked for you! Now you turn me down—laugh and sneer at my position! But—but you've not done with me yet. If I go down—"

"That's enough!" hissed Racke, his eyes glinting with fury. "Crooke, collar the little toad! We'll teach him to threaten us! Collar him!"

Crooke hesitated; he saw the danger of driving the hapless Mellish to desperation much more clearly than the cynical Racke did. But as Racke rushed at Mellish he remembered the chipping and sneers over the footer affair, and gritted his teeth and ran to Racke's aid. Mellish jumped for the door like a frightened rabbit—too late! He went crashing down with Racke and Crooke on top of him.

"Hammer the little toad!" hissed Racke.

Racke and Crooke rarely ragged anyone—unless it was someone weaker than themselves—and when they did they did it thoroughly. And their methods of ragging were not ordinary methods. They were methods peculiar to themselves, and brutal.

They punched and pummelled the luckless Mellish as he sprawled yelping on the carpet. They were in the midst of this operation when Talbot of the Shell looked in.

"Mellish here?" he began. "Kildare—Oh!"

Talbot's face set grimly as he realised what was on. He strode into the study and grasped Racke by the collar. With a powerful swing of his arm he sent Racke reeling away. With his other hand Talbot grasped Crooke, and

blurt out the truth. But it was the truth concerning Racke that he wanted to blurt out, and he knew it. His hatred was almost driving him to end the matter there and then—but not quite! Mellish hadn't the courage to do that.

Yet what could he do? It was Thursday now. Tomorrow Banks would come up to the school—Mellish was quite certain that he would. Mellish knew only too well that the rascally bookie had little use for a poverty-stricken fellow like him, that he wouldn't hesitate to ruin him. Racke was different—he was wealthy, and Banks was far too crafty to kill the goose that laid his golden eggs.

Mellish groaned and hid his face in his hands.

And then, quite suddenly, he sat up straight in his chair, and a startled, frightened look came to his face.

What was that Racke had said about the footer funds?

The sudden thought brought a hot flush to Mellish's pasty cheeks. He tried to dismiss it from his mind, but it came back again and again.

Racke, of course, was trying to be funny in his sneering, brutal way. But was he? Mellish wondered at that, knowing

"NO GOOD AS CAPTAIN!"

Fatty Wynn, the Falstaff of the New House, would be the last to admit that, for Fatty, like many other juniors, fancies himself as junior skipper. He's given his chance next week, chums, and he makes a rare hash of it, as you will discover when you read Martin Clifford's latest gem of a "GEM" yarn.

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that youth was treated likewise, going over and backwards with a startled yell.

"Enough of that!" snapped Talbot, his eyes gleaming. "Fair play, you cads!"

"You—you interfering rotter!" panted Racke, staggering to his feet. "Get out! Can't we rag a chap without—"

"You call that ragging!" said Talbot disdainfully. "I call it rotten bullying, Racke! Leave Mellish alone! If you touch him like that again you'll have me to deal with!" He turned to the shaking Percy Mellish. "Mellish, Kildare wants you. In any case, you'd better clear now! If those beauties start this game again, tell me!"

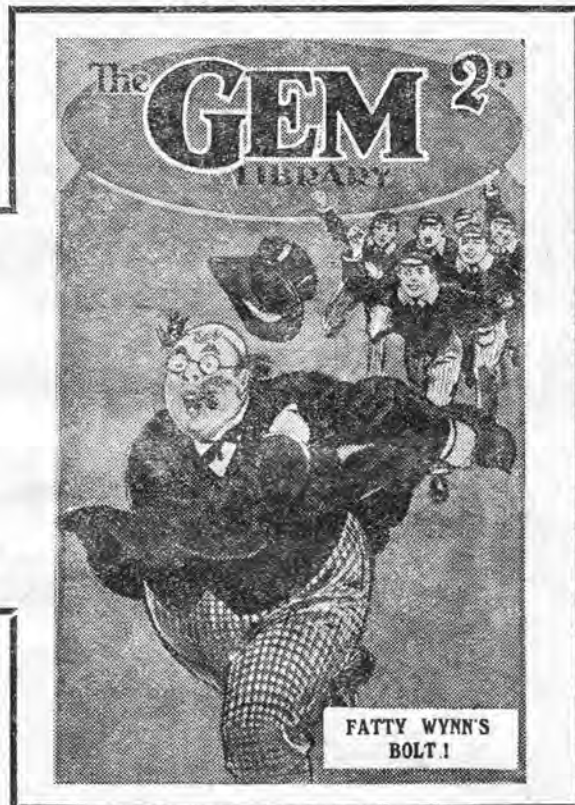
Talbot waited while Mellish stumbled to his feet. Then he went out. He knew that his warning would have its effect on Racke and Crooke. Mellish stumbled to the door. He glanced out and saw that Talbot was out of earshot. Then he turned a flushed and quivering face to Racke in the study.

"You—you beastly bully, Racke!" he choked, almost weeping with pain and rage. "I'll pay you back for this—you see if I don't. I don't care what happens to me now! I've stood enough. But I'll make you pay, you sweep!"

He went out, banging the door after him. With shoulders hunched, the wretched junior stumbled along to his own study. He had already forgotten Talbot's message. Indeed, he had scarcely heard it. With bitter hatred in his heart against the purse-proud Racke—the fellow who had tempted and taunted him, who had treated him always worse than a dog, and who could easily help him if he wished—Mellish entered his own study and flung himself down in a chair at the table.

It was all up now! Cutts had failed him, and Racke had failed him. Bitterly he regretted his association with the rascally cad of the Shell now. Toudy and sponger as he undoubtedly was, Mellish had a certain amount of good in him, and his weakness was his undoing.

More than once as he sat there alone he started up with the sudden impulse to go straight to the Housemaster and



Aubrey Racke as he did. And it was a way out—a way he had not dreamed of taking.

Half-seriously at first, Mellish pondered the suggestion. The more he dallied with the thought the stronger the temptation became. The thought startled and frightened him less and less.

Why not? He could pay it back—he would do that, of course. He had no intention of stealing—that was too thick! He could sell his bike—an idea he had not thought of until now. It would only fetch a couple of pounds at most. But that, with what he could raise in other ways—

After all, it was only borrowing the money for a short time! And if he failed to pay it back before the money in the cashbox was examined, who was to know? There was no proof that he was the thief. In the ordinary way the junior skipper was not saddled with the job of treasurer of the footer funds. A fellow was usually chosen by the committee for that unpaid and thankless job. But latterly Tom Merry had held the jobs of both footer skipper and treasurer, and since he resigned the funds had been passed on first to Grundy, then Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, then to Skimpole, and finally into Mellish's charge.

And he was fairly certain that none of the temporary skippers had troubled to check it; he was absolutely certain that Skimpole had never troubled to do so! If any was missing, then who could prove who had taken it? If the responsibility had rested upon anyone it would be probably Tom Merry, or most likely Skimpole. Nobody had paid

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him a single subscription, and he could vow he hadn't even opened the box.

Mellish rose to his feet at last, a deep flush on his sallow cheeks. His eyes wore a hunted look. He stepped across the room to the cupboard, his heart throbbing painfully, a strange sensation of dryness in his throat.

He opened the cupboard and drew out a tin cashbox. From his pocket he drew a key after fumbling for some seconds. Placing the cashbox softly on the table, Mellish inserted the key, twisted it, and lifted the lid. Then he lifted out an account-book, after that one of the tin compartments of the cashbox.

The rattle of money came from the tin as he opened it. Inside was some loose silver, a few coppers, and—a little bundle of notes, bound with elastic.

Slowly Mellish opened out the notes. Eight pounds odd, and he needed five pounds! He would borrow them, and return them later—a foolish, vague self-deception that had ruined many fellows stronger-minded than the weak and cowardly Mellish.

He counted out five pound-notes, trembling as he did so. He had just done so, and had replaced the rest when a step sounded in the passage outside.

Mellish's heart almost stopped beating. He stood, helpless to move, with sheer terror as the footstep stopped outside the door. The sudden realisation that he had forgotten to lock the door struck him like a blow. And as he stood thus, the door swung open, and a junior entered.

It was not Wildrake and it was not Trimble. It was Aubrey Racke of the Shell! With scarlet cheeks and a guilty, terrified expression on his haggard face, Mellish stood and stared at the fellow he hated.

CHAPTER 12. Racke Tumbles!

AUBREY RACKE stopped just inside the doorway. His own face was pale, and for the moment he saw nothing out of the way in Mellish's attitude. His face was pale because he was frightened—badly frightened.

He had attacked Mellish in a rage, and Crooke had gone to his aid in a rage. Racke felt he knew Banks, and he felt he knew Mellish. He did not believe that the rascally bookie would move in the matter, and he did not believe that Mellish would have any need to carry out his threat—until now.

But after Mellish had gone Crooke had pointed out the real danger to him.

Realising it at last, Racke had hurried out after Mellish. His idle, foolish suggestion regarding the footer funds, Racke had forgotten; he scarcely remembered that he had said it. Such a thing was certainly far from his thoughts as he opened Mellish's door and went into the study.

"Oh, you're here, Mellish!" he said in deep relief, striving hard to make his tone agreeable. "Look here—Why, what on earth's the matter? You—you look—"

Racke's eyes fell on the open cashbox, on the notes in Mellish's hands. He gave a startled jump.

"Mellish—" he gasped.

Mellish eyed him with glittering eyes.

It was the most awful luck—a bitter stroke of Fate that Racke, of all people, should have blundered in on him just then. The thought came into Mellish's tortured mind that Racke had guessed he would do as he had done—that he had come along solely to spy on him. The thought brought a savage, unreasonable fury to the new junior captain. He eyed Racke with a savage fierceness.

"You—you hound, Racke! You've come here spying, you sweep! You made the suggestion—it was you who—" He pulled himself up short, realising he was giving himself away. "Get out, you cad!" he gasped. "Outside! Get out of my study!"

Racke fell back.

"You—you silly fool!" he gasped. "What on earth are you gassing about, Mellish? Look here—"

"Get out!" hissed Mellish. "I've stood enough from you, you sweep! If you don't get out of my study I'll—I'll go for you and chance it!"

The cad of the Shell saw that Mellish meant it, and he gave a sneering laugh.

"I'll go—certainly!" he snapped. "Right! I was coming to say— But it doesn't matter! I'll go, you silly fool!"

"Get out!" gritted Mellish again.

Racke went out, giving another sneering laugh as he did so. He had gone there to try to make peace with Mellish—to offer him money if necessary. But somehow Racke felt that it would not be necessary now. He went out, slamming the door as he went.

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The door crashed to, but the catch did not slip home. It was a faulty catch, and, after banging, the door slipped open a couple of inches again and remained thus. Racke noticed it casually as he started to walk away, and then quite abruptly an idea came to Racke.

His eyes were gleaming strangely. He remembered now well enough that spiteful suggestion he had made to Mellish about the footer funds. He imagined he understood that strange look of guilt, that expression of terror in Mellish's eyes.

Was it possible the young fool had taken him seriously and had made up his mind to steal the money from the footer funds?

Why was he handling the money just then—a few minutes after he had realised that he could expect no help from elsewhere? There could be only one explanation, and it would give reason enough for Mellish's agitation and terror. Mellish had blurted out that he—Racke—had made the suggestion. What other suggestion could it have been?

"Good gad!" breathed Racke.

Racke walked on, stopped some few yards along the passage, and retraced his steps—on tiptoe. Then he cautiously applied his eye to the crack in the door. Spying did not come amiss to Aubrey Racke when he felt it necessary.

Mellish was still standing at the cashbox. He had put the notes back into the box and closed it while Racke was in the study. Now Racke saw that he had taken the notes out again, and was staring at them with eyes full of agonised indecision.

As a matter of fact, Mellish had realised now that Racke had not been spying. What he had visited the study for Mellish could not think. But he realised from Racke's blank stare and question as to what he was "gassing" about that Racke had not come for that.

But had Racke suspected anything? He had certainly given a start on sighting the cashbox, but there was nothing suspicious in that.

As footer captain, Mellish was treasurer of the funds, and he had a perfect right to open the box if he wished. Any fellow coming in and finding him handling the money would think nothing about it. He would just imagine he was going through the accounts. In his tortured state of mind Mellish quite forgot that Racke was sharp as a razor and as crafty as a fox. In any case, if Racke did suspect, he would never dare to speak out. To do so would be to ruin him, but it would also ruin Racke himself as well. Racke would not fail to see that.

Mellish's indecision did not last long, unfortunately. He suddenly set his teeth hard, and with a swift movement he took out the five pound-notes from the tin. Then he closed the cashbox and put it back in the cupboard, shoving the key in his pocket again. Next he addressed an envelope, placed the money inside it, and put it in his pocket, with a deep sigh that reached the crouching Racke outside.

Then Mellish got his cap and came towards the door.

Just in time Racke rushed away on tiptoe. He was round the corner in a flash, and when Mellish came hurrying round it Racke was standing by the landing window looking out into the quad below.

Mellish scarcely seemed to see him; he did not speak. He hurried past; and two minutes later Racke's eyes gleamed as he saw him hurrying across the quadrangle, pushing his bicycle.

"Cad!" breathed Racke. "I knew it! The fool! Oh, the silly fool! He—he'll be bowled out! He'll never get clear with it! He'll never be able to repay it, and then—"

The possibility of the unpleasant developments that might ensue if Mellish did get bowled out made Racke shiver. Mellish would be sacked, of course! But that did not matter; the prospect of Mellish's expulsion did not trouble Racke in the slightest. But he was haunted by the fear that Mellish, expelled and disgraced, would not hesitate to "split" on others—and especially the fellow who could easily have saved him—Aubrey Racke!

"Oh, the fool!" breathed Racke. "Why—why didn't I help the snivelling little sweep? I might have known he'd do something mad and desperate! Something must be done!"

In a fever of impatience and fear, Racke paced up and down the passage by the landing window, his brow wrinkled in deep, anxious thought. Several times he thought of rushing off after Mellish, but the realisation that he might miss him on the road made him change his mind again. For twenty minutes Racke paced up and down. Fellows passed him there and they stared at his white, anxious face wonderingly.

But Mellish returned at last. Racke watched with gleaming eyes as he crossed the quad and housed his machine. Then Mellish came tramping in and up the stairs.

Before Racke could accost him, however, someone else

came striding along the corridor. It was Kildare, and that worthy snorted as he sighted Mellish.

"Oh, here you are, you cheeky young ass!" he snapped. "What the thump d'you mean by this, Mellish? I suppose you've got some sort of an idea that now you're the thumping junior skipper you can defy me and do as you like!"

"I—I—" stammered Mellish. "Cut along and get the footer funds cashbox at once!" rapped out Kildare, eyeing Mellish's white face curiously. "And see that everything's in order, my lad, or there'll be ructions! Mind that!"

Kildare strode on with a frowning brow. As a matter of fact, there was nothing at all surprising or suspicious in Kildare's wrath or words. He had sent Talbot to tell Mellish he wanted him—a fact that Mellish had completely forgotten. The Fourth-Former even did not remember it now.

There was only one explanation. Kildare knew of the theft. It was all up. The money was gone—had been paid

None the less he was startled. The situation was bad enough. Kildare wanted to see the money—to check it for some reason or other. And Racke felt quite certain that all the money would not be there.

The wretched Mellish had been out to pay Joey Banks, of course, and he had paid—out of the footer funds. He had, not to mince words, stolen the money!

That much Racke felt pretty certain.

And now the money was wanted!

At that moment Racke forgot his own danger. He forgot that Mellish's danger was, more likely than not, his own danger also. Mellish would be sacked for a certainty for theft. The realisation that Mellish, in his desire for revenge, would not hesitate to reveal all the shady secrets of the fellow he hated, did not enter Racke's mind. Racke forgot this as he gazed on Mellish's terror-stricken face. He forgot many things just then, but he did not forget his recent enmity with his former toady and hanger-



There was not a sound in the study as Kildare unlocked the cashbox and lifted the lid. He took out the money and spread it on the table. Then he looked at Aubrey Racke. "There is eight pounds odd here," he said grimly. "Darrell, just check it by the accounts, will you?" (See Chapter 14.)

into the grasping, greedy hand of Joey Banks scarcely ten minutes ago. That Kildare merely meant that the accounts had to be in order, made up to date, did not occur to the wretched, guilty junior. In any case, the money was gone.

He stood like one turned to stone, staring after Kildare with ashen face and terrified eyes. Then suddenly he turned to find Aubrey Racke eyeing him fixedly.

CHAPTER 13. Just in Time!

AUBREY RACKE was startled—startled beyond measure. Why Kildare wanted to see the funds he did not know. He could only suppose that it was for some simple reason or other. He could not believe that Kildare would have spoken as he did had he known or suspected anything. There was some reason for Kildare's action, of course. Not possessing Mellish's guilty, tortured mind, Racke was not so apt to jump to hasty conclusions.

on. In that moment Racke laughed—a low, sneering laugh, while his eyes glittered with malicious triumph.

Mellish heard the laugh, and saw the malicious gleam of triumph in Racke's eyes. His face suddenly flushed crimson with rage and hate. He understood all now, or imagined he did. In his present agitated state he was ready to jump to any conclusion.

That was it. Racke had split—had told Kildare what he suspected. He must have done. How else could Kildare have known? Racke must have known what his game was, after all. He knew why he had been handling the money in the cash-box, and now he had given him away.

Like most weak fellows Mellish was given to gusts of ungovernable passion when his temper was aroused. He jumped forward now without warning, his eyes blazing with fury, and his fist crashed into Racke's startled face.

Crash!

Racke went down, with a crash and a howl of pain. Mellish stood over him, panting. Racke was far from being a fighting man, but in the ordinary way Mellish would as soon have attacked Kildare as Racke. But he

had done go now, and Racke lay on his back, hugging his chin and glaring up at him in amazed rage.

But not for long. His face became suddenly convulsed, and he jumped up and went for Mellish like a tiger.

They were fighting the next moment, prudence and everything else but mutual hatred forgotten now. Darrell of the Sixth came up the stairs, stared at them blankly, and then rushed between them. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, strolling idly along the passage, heard the sudden commotion, and also hurried to the scene.

"Oh, bai Jove! Gweat Scott!"

"Stop that!" shouted Darrell. "Racke—Mellish! You little sweeps! Stop!"

He grasped both juniors, and, by sheer force, wrenched them apart.

"Let me get at the sweep!" shouted Racke furiously. "Let me get at the thief!"

"The what?" ejaculated Darrell. "What the thump—"

"That's what he is!" yelled Racke, almost beside himself with rage. "A dashed thief! Ask him what he's done with the footer funds! He's stolen money from the funds to pay a betting debt! Ask him! He can't deny it!" Mellish shivered.

"You—you liar, Racke!" he panted. "You—"

"That's enough, Racke!" snapped Darrell angrily. "You little cad! You dare to charge a St. Jim's fellow with theft? Are you mad?"

"No, I'm not! I tell you he's a rotten thief! I saw him take the money—money belonging to the footer funds! I saw him take it from the cash-box! Tell Kildare—fetch Kildare! Kildare's asking for the cash now! Mellish daren't take the cash-box to him! He daren't! Ask him! Ask—"

"Will you dry up, you mad young fool?" snapped Darrell, shaking the raving cad of the Shell angrily. "You must be potty to make such a charge against a St. Jim's chap! Here, come with me! This wants looking into! Come—"

"I'll come—I'll come!" panted Racke. "But make Mellish bring the footer funds along! Make him!"

"I'll soon do that!" said Darrell. "Mellish, you'll get the cash-box and bring it to Kildare's study. I expect Racke's talking out of his silly hat! But it's got to be inquired into now. Understand?"

"Yes!" It was scarcely a whisper.

Darrell strode away, almost dragging the glowering Racke, though the cad of the Shell was actually eager to go! Mellish gazed after the two, his face ashen.

"Oh, bai Jove! Gweat Scott!"

Arthur Augustus stood and stared at Mellish blankly. The noble swell of the Fourth had rarely been so astonished, so utterly distressed at the unpleasant scene he had witnessed.

"Mellish!" he gasped. "Mellish, deah boy, that wottah—"

"Shut up!" panted Mellish, giving Gussy a bitter, savage look. "Shut up! Leave me alone!"

He stood for another moment, motionless, and then he stumbled away, his legs seemingly scarcely able to hold him up. Arthur Augustus was quite shocked at the look of hopeless misery on his face.

"Oh, bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

He stared after Mellish. The swell of St. Jim's was a kind-hearted youth—too kind-hearted, perhaps. He could not bear to see that look on Mellish's tortured face. Mellish vanished round the corner, but Arthur Augustus did not hesitate long. He hurried after him, and followed Mellish into his study.

It was still empty—Wildrake and Trimble were out. But Mellish made no attempt to get the cashbox and take it along to Kildare's study as he had been ordered. He slumped into the chair by the table, lowered his arms before him, and his head sank upon them.

"Mellish, deah boy, whatever is the mattah?"

Arthur Augustus stepped softly into the room and laid a kindly hand on Mellish's shoulder—a shoulder that heaved suspiciously.

"I'll tell you quickly enough," said Mellish, with a bitter, mirthless laugh. "I'm a thief! You heard what Racke was shouting? It's quite true. I've stolen five pounds from the footer funds. Racke saw me take the money from the cashbox in the cupboard there. He knows what I wanted it for. It was to pay a betting debt—though I swear I meant to put the money back. It's gone to that brute Banks now, and—Racke's gone to tell Kildare. Kildare will be here soon to check the money—to find out if Racke's story is true. He'll soon discover it is. I'm done!"

"Oh, bai Jove!"

Gussy was staggered. But only for a moment. For once

Arthur Augustus showed himself capable of swift thought and swift action.

"Oh, bai Jove! How feahfully wotten! But—but you're not done yet, Mellish. We'll beat that feahful wottah Wacke yet! Pull yourself togethah, deah boy, and wait heah for me. I'll be back vewy soon, I hope!"

Arthur Augustus fairly dashed from the study. There was obviously not a moment to be lost. Arthur Augustus did not like Mellish—far less, in fact, than Mellish liked him. But the swell of St. Jim's was always ready to help a fellow down on his luck, and he was resolutely determined that Racke's rascally scheme should be frustrated, if that was possible.

He reached Tom Merry's study, where he succeeded in borrowing two pounds from the Terrible Three.

In a matter of seconds the swell of St. Jim's was back in Mellish's study, and he gasped with relief to find Mellish still alone. That hapless junior sprang to his feet as Gussy rushed in, slamming the door shut after him.

"Quick—get that cashbox open, deah boy! It is all wight! Quick!"

Mellish stared, uncomprehending until Arthur Augustus flung the two pound notes on the table. Then snatching out his own wallet, Gussy—always fairly well supplied with money—drew out three pound-notes. He added these to the two on the table.

By this time Mellish had grasped the position, and he had the cashbox out and was opening it with trembling fingers.

It was done in a flash; the five pound-notes were added to the money already in the box, the box locked again and shoved back in the cupboard.

"Thank goodness!" panted Gussy. "Now you are all wight, I should imagine, Mellish! Just pull yourself togethah, you know! You need not tell any fibs—just leave it to Kildare, and I fancy— Bai Jove! Here he comes now!"

There sounded the tramp of feet in the passage. The next moment the door opened and Kildare, his face grim, strode in. He was followed by Darrell, and then Racke. The cad of the Shell was looking white and shaken. As a matter of fact, now he was a bit cooler, Racke was regretting his hasty action bitterly.

But it was too late to draw back now. In any case, whatever happened, he could swear black was blue, and he would have the satisfaction of seeing Mellish bowled out!

"Mellish," said Kildare coldly, "I've already asked you for the cashbox containing the footer funds. You don't seem keen to bring it, so I've come myself. Where is it?"

Mellish pulled himself together with a desperate effort. Without a word he went to the cupboard and took out the box, placing it on the table. He took out the key from his pocket and handed it to Kildare. There was not a sound in the study as the captain of St. Jim's turned the key in the lock and opened the cashbox.

CHAPTER 14.

Racke's Reward!

HE took out the money and spread it on the table. Then he looked at Racke.

"There is eight pounds odd here, Racke!" he said grimly. "As far as I can see, that sum should be about right. Darrell, just check it by the accounts, will you?"

Darrell nodded, and picked up the book with the names and payments in, and other financial particulars. There was a dead silence as he went through it. Mellish was feeling cooler and more master of himself with every second that passed. Racke was feeling less and less sure of himself. Somehow he did not like the look on Darrell's face. The senior looked up at last, after running through the loose cash.

"Exactly right!" he announced. "Merry has initialled the book before handing it over to Grundy, and Grundy, D'Arcy, and Skimpole have done the same. Apparently Talbot has seen to that, for his initials are also added to each. The accounts are quite correct, Kildare—to a half-penny! Eight pounds seventeen and six, to be exact!"

"Sure of that!" said Kildare grimly.

"Quite sure!"

Kildare looked at Racke. That astounded youth looked as if the whole world was falling about his ears. He was staggered—utterly taken aback. He had been so certain—so sure of himself! He had seen Mellish take the money, with his own eyes; he had seen him ride away towards Rylcombe, and he had seen his ashen face and staring eyes when Kildare had mentioned the funds. But the money was all here—safe!

"Oh!" gasped Racke.

"I'll leave you to explain the matter to Mellish, Racke!" said Kildare, his voice hard. "I don't pretend to know if

(Continued on page 28.)

250 MILES PER HOUR! That's the terrifying, breathless speed Skid Kennedy's called upon to do in his latest job with racing cars!

'Skid' Kennedy—Speed King!



A roaring yarn of Motor Racing and Breathless Adventure, "starring" "SKID" KENNEDY, the boy who can't travel fast enough!

By
**ALFRED
EDGAR.**

(Introduction on page 26.)

Trapped!

"WHAT the blazes d'you want here?" Carnaby snarled. His eyes were wide with apprehension, and his fists were bunched as he glared at Jack and Fred.

"We want to have a word wi' you—that's what we want!" Fred ripped at him. "You're the bloke that got at our tyres at Brooklands! You're the bloke what crowned the watchman with a spanner, you are! An' I'm goin' to crown you wi' this bucket of oil!"

As he spoke Fred made a jump for a bucket which stood near one of the engines; but Carnaby was at him long before he could get to it. The man's fist swung. Fred tried to dodge; but he was too late. The bunched knuckles caught him high on the jaw, and he went sliding across the floor of the shed on his back—just as Jack took a hand!

Carnaby saw him coming. The man had had a taste of Jack's fists, and he didn't want another. He snatched from the floor a long crowbar, and flung it with all his strength.

Jack saw the bar come flailing through the air, and he dodged it—to see that Carnaby had followed the crowbar with a massive steel wrench. Jack ducked as it came, slipped on the oily floor, and felt the wrench cannon off his shoulder on to the side of his head.

The blow half-stunned him for the moment. The shed reeled before his eyes, and he went down with a crash. His brain was ringing, but through it he heard Carnaby snarl:

"Got you! That'll teach you to come spyin' here!" Jack, trying to get to his feet, saw Carnaby crouching, his face working and his eyes shining, as he snarled: "Heard we were buildin' a car to break the world's speed record, so you've come to have a look at it, eh?"

The words seared through Jack's brain. Now he saw what was happening! The Falcon people were building a monster machine to restore their prestige. They were out to break the great record which Captain Malcolm Campbell's famous Blue-Bird had once held. They were trying to steal a march on the Saxon firm by keeping their machine a secret!

"Don't know how you found it out!" Carnaby rasped. "But I'll take darned good care you don't!"

Jack missed anything else that the man said. He saw Fred creeping up behind him, the bucket of oil in his hands, his face set.

Jack, his head steadying, gasped. He saw the bucket come up, and then slam over. A deluge of oil swamped Carnaby from head to feet as the bucket was rammed down. "Told 'im I'd crown him with a bucket o' oil!" Fred yelled triumphantly. "Go on, dance, you swab—dance!"

Carnaby splattered oil in every direction as he strove to wrench the bucket from his head. Back of him Fred dodged the flying splodges and doubled up with laughter. Oil—the dirtier the better—was his infallible way of getting his own back, and he was getting it now all right!

Standing by the massive frame of the Falcon record-breaker, Fred grinned as he saw great streaks of oil rolling down Carnaby's immaculate clothes. Then the bucket came off Carnaby's head with a sucking sound, disclosing his hair plastered flat, and his face a furious red where it showed beneath the mask of oil.

Mad with rage, Carnaby gripped the bucket, to rush at Fred and the boy speedman; then stopped dead and stared behind them. Both boys turned!

Full in the doorway, his pallid face hard as chilled steel, his dark eyes blazing, was Slade. He gazed into the shed; and as the boys saw him Fred hissed:

"Rush him and then bunk, Jack—quick!"

Jack bent to leap forward. At his side Fred tensed; then Slade motioned with one hand, and from the shadows behind him there stepped the thick figure of a grim-faced watchman. In his fist he held an automatic, the blued steel catching the light as he covered the pair.

"Don't move!" Slade's eyes narrowed as he looked at the chums. "I've caught you spying, eh? You've been trying to find out what we were doing, and you've discovered our secret. That will be all the worse for you!"

There was cold, controlled menace in his tones. In spite of himself, Jack's heart thumped at the viciousness behind the man's words.

"You can't do anything to us!" he gasped, as he stared down the grim muzzle of the covering weapon. "We haven't done any harm. Come on, Fred; he daren't shoot!" And he started forward, only to stop dead.

Two other men were behind Slade, looking as grim as the Falcon driver, as they barred the exit. For a space there was tense silence, then Slade said:

"You were going to tell your firm that we were after the big record—going to give them a chance to build another car and pinch our idea! But you won't get the chance to tell anybody what you've found."

"Why not?" Fred's voice was husky.

"Because you'll stop here until the day our machine is ready to go for the record," came Slade's cool answer; then his voice changed and his tone became charged with ugly viciousness as he ripped: "Collar 'em and tie 'em up, boys—and tie 'em tight!"

Prisoners!

AS Slade's vicious voice rang through the big shed Jack and Fred glanced at one another. There was not the slightest doubt but that the rival speedman meant what he said. He intended to keep them prisoners until the Falcon record-breaker was completed, so guarding the secret with which he hoped to smash the reputation of the Saxon firm.

Behind Slade the grim-featured watchman covered the boys with the menacing muzzle of his automatic. Near him stood the other two men, shaping to rush and grab the boys.

In the middle of the shed, near the massive bulk of the record-breaker, was Carnaby, oil dripping from his clothes and the bucket which Fred had rammed over his head yet rolling away across the floor.

The dandy was a grotesque figure as he stood gasping there. His face was working beneath its mask of oil. The stuff dripped from his hands as he tried to scrape it from his clothes, and his close-set eyes were glaring at the pair.

Suddenly the two men started their rush, and like lightning Jack and Fred leaped to meet them. One of the two went staggering as Jack's right took him with a crash beside the jaw, all the boy speedman's jumping weight piled behind it.

Next instant Jack himself almost dropped as Slade rushed him, and Fred, trying to dodge his assailant, was tripped by the watchman as the fellow tucked his automatic away. It was a case of four grown men against two boys, and, gamely though the pair battled for their freedom, the scrap could have but one end.

Half stunned, dizzy and dazed, Jack and Fred were crashed to the floor and held spread-eagled there while Slade hunted round the big building for odds and ends of ropes and straps, with which to secure their wrists and ankles. Then they were gagged, dragged to one side of the shed, and dumped there.

"We can't leave them here!" Slade gasped as he glowered down at them. "There'll be mechanics here in the morning."

"Shift 'em over to my place, it's only a couple o' miles away," growled the watchman. "I live alone."

"We'll keep watch on 'em during the day-time," gasped one of the other two, as he dabbed gently at a swelling nose, where Fred's threshing fist had caught him.

"We could get a lorry out o' the big garage," the watchman went on. "We'd have to get in through the window, because the doors are locked, but you can open 'em from the inside."

"All right, we'll all go across," Slade nodded. "Carnaby can look after them until we—" He broke off as he appeared to notice the dandy's condition for the first time. "You've got yourself in a nasty mess!" he gasped. "How did that happen?"

"Been takin' somethin' for y'r complexion?" grinned one of the others.

"They chucked a bucket of gear oil over me!" Carnaby's voice sounded strangled. "I'll look after 'em—leave 'em to me!"

And he glared at the pair as he spoke, his oil-smudged fists bunched.

Slade's eyes narrowed, and he stepped towards him as he said:

"All right, but no rough stuff, Carnaby!" There was a warning in his voice. "There'll be no need for you to lay hands on them, because they're tied hand and foot."

He moved away with the others, and Jack watched him go. Jack knew that the Falcon speedman was a rotter, but he was a different sort of rotter from Carnaby. Slade wasn't the kind to hit a man when he was down, although he would play a lot of dirty tricks to get him down. He seemed to suspect that the oil-soaked dandy might try and get his own back on the boys when he was left alone with them.

The thud of the men's feet died away on the night as they walked hurriedly from the shed. Carnaby stood still, listening to them as they went.

The powerful globes that hung from the room flung brilliant light down on the three mighty engines which were to be fitted to the Falcon record-breaker. The heavy steel frame of the car shone and glimmered in the light.

Half choked by his gag, aching from the bruises he had sustained, Jack could not help admitting that Slade was setting about things in a workmanlike way. Unfinished though the car was, it looked as though it would be capable of shattering the world's speed record, once held by Captain Malcolm Campbell's Blue-Bird.

If the Falcon people got the record it would be a tremendous set-back for Jack's firm, but if a Saxon record-breaker could be got ready, and could beat whatever new figure the Falcon attained it would be the last blow in the battle between the two firms, and would mean victory for the Saxons.

Jack could see that it was vital that he and Fred should get away somehow and carry warning. As it was they were bound and gagged, with the prospect of being borne straightway to some place from which they would have no chance of escape.

His thoughts broke off as the last sound of footsteps died away, to be succeeded by the scuffle of Carnaby's shoes in the oil-pools on the floor as he came towards them. His eyes were glittering and his fists were bunched; gritted teeth showed as his lips twisted in an evil, menacing grin, and he glared down at the helpless boys.

"Chuck oil over me, would you?" he grated. "Now I've got you to myself for five minutes we'll see if I can't get quits with you!"

And from the floor he grabbed a length of tough, heavy belting, which Slade had discarded because it was useless for tying up the boys.

Carnaby was going to find another use for it.

A Bid for Liberty!

IT was Fred who had doused Carnaby with oil, but the fellow made for Jack first. He had always hated Skid Kennedy, and his hatred had been increased by the very fact that Jack had been so successful in speed events.

He crouched above the boy speedman. The belt whistled as it went upwards, and it was as it started to come down that Fred's bound form jerked on the floor. He heaved himself backwards until he was balanced on his shoulders, then he flung his body forward, his bound feet driving straight for Carnaby!

His heels caught the brute just where he kept his wind. Carnaby doubled up with a windy gasp, staggered backwards, and then pitched on the floor, writhing and grunting.

Jack tried to shout, but his gag choked his words, and as he saw Carnaby fall he sent himself rolling over and over to where a box of tools had spilled its contents on the floor near one of the engines.

INTRODUCTION.

JACK KENNEDY gets nicknamed "Skid," because of the daring way in which he can handle a racing car. With his chum—

FRED BISHOP—he works in the showroom of the Saxon Motor Company, while his elder brother, Ben Kennedy, works in the racing department. All three are up against an iron-nerved speedman named—

PHILIP SLADE, the star driver of the Falcon Six firm, who are out to smash up the Saxon people. After many exciting speed events Jack almost puts the Saxon firm on its feet again with a big win at Brooklands, although he is nearly brought to disaster by—

CARNABY, a confederate of Slade. The boys get an idea that the Falcon Six firm has some secret scheme for beating the Saxons. On investigating, Jack and Fred discover that they are building a marvellous car with which they intend to shatter the world's speed record, and thus steal a march on the Saxons. At the moment of this discovery the pair come face to face with Carnaby, on whom they are anxious to have their revenge.

(Now read on.)

He had seen a pair of wire-cutters there, and if they would shear wire, they'd nip through leather straps and rope!

Jack's shoulders struck the tools, and he wriggled furiously, searching with his fingers amongst the files and spanners. He got a grip of the cutters at last, then went rolling across the floor towards Fred.

Fred saw the tool in Jack's hands, and he guessed his intention. When Carnaby struggled shakily to his feet the two were back to back, with Jack digging one jaw of the cutters under his chum's bonds.

Carnaby stood glaring at them, quivering with rage. Suddenly he made a blind rush, watching Fred's feet as he came; but it was Jack's that caught him! In the moment that the cutters nipped through two of the strands of rope which secured Fred's wrists, Jack hunched himself and sent the flat of his shoes thudding against Carnaby's chest.

Feet sliding on a patch of oil, Carnaby went down with a thud, while Fred tore and wrenched at his severed bonds, dragging his hands clear. He snatched the gag from his mouth, then grabbed the wire-cutters and sheared the straps which secured his ankles.

Carnaby, goggle-eyed, saw him suddenly twist to release Jack, and, with a gasp of astonishment, the dandy leaped upright and charged again.

Fred saw him come. He waited until Carnaby was almost on him, then he spun round, his right fist swinging with all his strength packed behind it—and hard work had made Fred pretty strong!

Carnaby collected Fred's bunched knuckles with his ear, and then he took the boy's left just beside the point of the jaw. He buckled at the knees and slid slowly to the ground.

"If that ain't knocked him out, nothin' will!" Fred gasped. "First time I've ever knocked-out anybody, that is!" he added, as he stared at the man's crumpled figure.

Clanking noises from behind Jack's gag reminded him that they had no time to waste. Inside twenty seconds the wire-cutters had done their work, Jack was on his feet again, and both were leaping for the door.

As they shot into the open-air they heard the thudding rumble of a motor-lorry from the darkness ahead.

"That's Slade coming back!" Jack gasped. "Over the fence—quick!"

They vaulted the fence around the shed, and went tearing across to the lane where they had left their super-sports Saxon car.

They heard a shout from behind, and they heard the lorry accelerate fiercely.

Jack took a flying leap into the driving-seat of the waiting car. The powerful engine roared the instant that he crashed his hand on the starter-switch, and a second later the car shot forward.

"I thought they'd got us!" Jack gasped, as the car rocked Londonwards at a mile a minute lick.

"So did I," admitted Fred; and he grinned as he added: "Carnaby ain't half had a night out! He's had an oil-bath, he's had my hoofs in his wind and an earful of fist, and now old Slade'll go back there an' just about knock his head off for lettin' us get away!"

"And it'll serve him right!" Jack commented.

Ben to the Rescue.

IT was close upon midnight when a thunderous knocking sounded on the front door of the house of Mr. Lloyd, general manager of the Saxon Motor Company.

When Mr. Lloyd opened the door he found Jack and Fred on the step, while Ben came running up from the car which stood at the kerb. The boys had dragged Ben out, after telling him what had happened that evening, and all had agreed that the best thing was to interview Mr. Lloyd at once.

The grey-haired man was startled when he saw them, but he knew that they were not knocking him up for nothing. He took them into his library, and in the book-lined room the boys told him what they had discovered.

"So they're building a car to go for the world's speed record—eh?" he said, when they had finished. "And they were trying to keep it from us!" He drummed on the table with his fingers as he looked from the boys to Ben, and then went on: "Well, if they did bring it off, it would just about knock us sideways! As a matter of fact, I've heard a kind of rumour that somebody was making arrangements to try for the record, and they were going to make the attempt in a very queer place—in the desert!"

"Desert?" asked Jack. "What desert?"

"The Syrian desert," answered Mr. Lloyd.

"But there's wild Arabs over there, ain't there?" Fred asked. "Don't they have camels, an' caravans, an' sheikhs—?"

"That's the place," nodded Mr. Lloyd. "But they've got motor-caravans now. And it's an absolutely ideal spot for the attempt. You can be sure that Slade will plan it before the big motor show at the Olympia. If he breaks the record, it will be a terrific advertisement for Falcon Sixes, and it may make all the difference between success and failure for ourselves."

"What's the matter with us building a car and having a smack at it?" Fred wanted to know. "I bet we can beat anything that Slade can do!"

"I can build you a car to break the world's record." Ben leaned across the table, his eyes alight. "It stands at 207 miles an hour now. If we—" He broke off, and his voice was low and tense as he said: "Mr. Lloyd, I could build you a car that would do 250 miles an hour, if somebody could be found to drive it."

"Two hundred and fifty miles an hour!" the motor magnate gasped, as he stared at Ben. "Why, that speed would startle the world as much as when the big Sunbeam did two hundred miles an hour! It's—it's impossible, Ben!"

"It's not impossible," Ben told him. "I could have the car built and ready for tests inside a month. She'd beat the best that any Falcon could do."

"But to build a car like that would cost thousands," Mr. Lloyd said slowly. "The firm can't afford it. Thanks to Jack, we're pulling round. We've got the upper-hand of the Falcon people now, but we can't find the money to build a car for the big record. And think of the expense of getting the machine and mechanics out to Syria, because that's about the only place where you could try for the record at almost a moment's notice. The ground is always in good condition there."

"It wouldn't cost so much," Ben said slowly. "The Falcon machine has three engines in it. I've got an idea in which we would fit four. Two in front, and two in the tail, see? We'd have super-tuned engines, and I know the way I'd design the car. I've often thought about something like this, Mr. Lloyd. We've got the engines, and—"

"Even then it would cost too much money, Ben. The firm can't afford it. We've been too badly hit in the past, and we haven't got a penny to spare. No, we must just hope that the Falcon will go to Syria and fail."

"There ain't much hope o' that," said Fred. "Old Slade's got his nut screwed on the right way. He knows what he's doin', and he'll get the record if he goes for it."

There was silence after that. Jack glanced at Fred; he held his chum's eyes with questioning gaze, and Fred nodded gently. Jack bent across the table.

"Mr. Lloyd, the firm's put a lot of money in the bank for me and Fred—money we've earned in races, and by selling cars for you. I don't know how much is there, but it's a goodish bit. We'd like you to use that, if you think it would help to build a record-breaker."

Mr. Lloyd said nothing. He looked from one boy to the other, then he looked at Ben. He knew that Jack's elder brother was a very clever fellow when it came to building cars. If Ben thought he could construct a record smasher that would travel at the colossal speed of 250 m.p.h., then Ben could do it.

"I've never met a couple of boys like you," Mr. Lloyd said at last; and his voice was quiet. "If you are willing to use your money like this, then I'll use some of my own private fortune. We'll make an arrangement with the firm. We finance the car, but they pay us back if it breaks the record. How will that do?"

"Suits me," said Jack shortly.

"And me," grunted Fred. "Money don't worry me, anyhow. Grub's more to the point." And he grinned cheerfully.

"Then we'll leave it like that, and we'll start work at once," said Mr. Lloyd. "Ben is to be in charge of things. You can have anything there is in the works, Ben, and as much help as you need."

He rose from his chair as he spoke, then stopped suddenly.

"Oh, there's one thing we haven't settled! Who's to drive the car? Who's got the nerve to handle a speed machine that can travel at over four miles a minute?"

"Skid Kennedy has!" exclaimed Fred. "You have, ain't you, Jack?"

"I have, if Ben builds the car," Jack answered.

(And "Skid" Kennedy means every word he says, chums! Make sure of joining him in this record-breaking race by reading next week's instalment of this powerful serial. Every line will grip you!)

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A SCHOOLBOY'S TEMPTATION!

(Continued from page 24.)

you really believed the yarn yourself, or if it was just a case of trying to throw a crime on to an innocent chap's shoulders. In any case, you should have made quite certain of your facts before bringing such a serious charge against any fellow. It was a low-down, caddish trick, in any case."

"Oh!" gasped Racke again. "If I thought it was really serious—that you had tried to do Mellish harm out of sheer spite," said Kildare grimly. "I would take you before the Housemaster. But I prefer to take it as a silly joke—a joke against me, Racke!"

"Oh!" gasped Racke. "But—but listen to me," he went on wildly. "I tell you I saw it—I saw—"

"Never mind what you saw!" said Kildare, pointing to the box. "That speaks for itself, Racke. I'm going to take it that you've tried to play a silly, footling, practical joke on me, a senior, and the captain of St. Jim's. That doesn't pay, Racke. Bend down!"

"But—but listen to me—" almost shrieked Racke. "I tell you—"

"Bend down!" roared Kildare.

Racke bent down—he knew Kildare would bend him down himself in another second if he hesitated longer. Kildare had obviously expected it to be a hoax! He had brought his ashplant with him. And the next moment it was raising the dust from Racke's elegant nether garments. Racke howled, and squirmed, and wriggled.

Kildare tired of it at last—long after Racke had tired of it. He pointed to the door with his ashplant without a word. Racke, quivering with pain and fury, tottered out, giving Mellish a glance of bitter hatred as he went. Racke and Mellish were not likely to be friends again for a long time. Taking charge of the cash-box, Kildare went out with Darrell after a few words with Mellish, who fairly gasped with deep and thankful relief when they had gone.

"He—he never asked me a word about it!" he breathed, hardly able to believe his good fortune. "D'Arcy, I—I don't know how to thank you for this. You—you've saved

me from the sack and worse! I don't know why you should do this for a chap who's always been up against you! But—but I'm grateful! I—I'll pay the money back—I swear I will, as soon as I can!"

"You have no need to thank me or pay me back, Mellish!" said Arthur Augustus quietly. "I shall be quite satisfied if I have your promise not to play the fool like this again. I've got to have to speak plainly, Mellish, but it is for your own good, you know! You have always been a little 'worm,' and you have always been a slacker and a smoky wascal! I have helped you because I hate to see a fellow down on his luck, whether he deserves it or not! I really do trust that this will be a lesson to you, Mellish. I trust that you will drop your shady pursuits and wascally tricks! You have had a vewy nawwow escape, and you may not be so lucky the next time. Take my advice and mend your ways."

Arthur Augustus had lectured Percy Mellish and tendered good advice many times and oft. On previous occasions Mellish had grinned at the lectures and sneered at the advice.

But he did not do so now—his narrow escape was too recent for that! He gulped.

"I—I will, D'Arcy!" he gasped, his white face eager and grateful. "Oh, I will! I give you my word!"

"Vewy well, Mellish!" said Arthur Augustus kindly. "I am vewy glad indeed to hear that. The matiah shall end heah, then!"

And Arthur Augustus sailed out gracefully, very pleased with himself and very pleased and satisfied to know that Percy Mellish sincerely intended to lead a better life.

Fortunately for Mellish, the truth did not leak out. Kildare and Darrell kept their own counsel, and Racke and Crooke took good care that it shouldn't get out from them. On reflection they realised they also had had a narrow escape. Though it was known something queer had happened, the story never leaked out—only Tom Merry & Co. and Mellish himself actually knew the truth, even Racke and Crooke only suspected! And Percy Mellish ended his week of office as junior skipper in peace and quietness. But it was an office he was not likely to seek again!

THE END.

(For particulars of the next magnificent story in this grand series, turn to page 21, boys.)

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