

TOM MERRY & CO. ARE HERE!

**LONG COMPLETE SCHOOL
YARN INSIDE.**

The **GEM**

2^D



**TURNING
an HONEST
COPPER!**

SKIMPOLE'S GOT ANOTHER SPASM—THIS TIME IT'S MUSIC!

CHAPTER 1.

Skimpole Stands Sam!

"TUPPENCE!"

Tom Merry of the Shell at St. Jim's gave utterance to that word. He produced two pennies and placed them on the table as he spoke.

Lowther and Manners and Handcock, his study-mates in Study No. 10, looked at Tom Merry, then looked at the copper coins. They did not seem to be overjoyed.

"That all?" asked Manners.

"Sure you haven't lost a pound note in the lining of your jacket?" demanded Lowther anxiously. "It has been known to happen before, you know."

Tom Merry chuckled.

"Not with me, though! What about you, Handcock? You're usually rolling in it. Got any stray hundred-dollar bills you've overlooked?"

"Search me!" grinned the American junior. "I guess you're welcome to all I own over sixpence."

"So much for our afternoon on the razzle, then!" remarked Lowther, lugubriously. "Tuppence between us and a blank half-holiday! Think of it!"

"Doesn't bear thinking of," said Tom Merry, with a shake of his curly head. "Something's got to be done. Or someone!"

"Make it 'someone'!" suggested Lowther. "Who's it to be? There's Bernard Glyn."

"N. G.!" said Manners. "He left for his home before dinner. What about Noble?"

"Gone with Glyn! Ditto, Clifton Dane. Now, if we hadn't ragged old Grundy this morning—"

"We might have raised the wind from him. Exactly!" smiled Tom Merry. "But we did, so we can't. Now, that leaves Blake and his crowd—"

"I guess their stock's slumped, too!" said Handcock ruefully. "They tried to touch me before dinner."

"Then who the thump's left?" demanded Tom. "Levison's doubtful, Cardew's in sammy with a cold, Talbot—"

"My hat! Talbot!" interrupted Manners excitedly. "The very man, of course!"

"Why, of course," said Lowther, thumping the table.

"Didn't he say after we licked Rookwood the other day that he'd stand us a spread at Wayland to celebrate it?"

"So he did!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Gentlemen, chaps and fellows! His opportunity's right here! Let's go!"

They went.

It was Wednesday—a half-holiday at St. Jim's. There being no important game to take him to Little Side, Tom Merry had decided to take a rest from cricket for once. Lowther's suggestion of a little jaunt into Wayland, and tea out, had been received with acclamation by the rest of the Co. Then they had discovered that money had most inconveniently run short all round, and the prospect of that

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SKIMPOLE'S



happy little outing had receded into the region of improbability.

Manners' recollection of the circumstance of Talbot's promising them a spread at Wayland to celebrate a recent cricket victory over Rookwood came at just the right moment. Their hopes rose again as they quitted their apartment and went along to Study No. 9.

Then they fell again as Tom Merry knocked on the door of the study and led in his troops. Talbot was out.

Talbot's study-mate, Herbert Skimpole—the weedy genius of the Shell—was in. He looked up from an arm-chair as the invaders entered, and greeted them with a nod of his massive head.

"Good-afternoon, my good youths!" he observed gravely.

"Hallo, Skimmy! Where's Talbot?" asked Tom Merry anxiously.

Skimpole blinked round the study.

"It would seem, my dear Merry, that Talbot is out."

"Fathead! I can see that!" grinned Tom. "Where is he?"

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MUSICAL

By Martin Clifford.

SPASM!



Skimpole pondered.

"I distinctly remember his being here—"

"Don't waste time, old bean! If you know where he is—"

"In point of fact, my good youth, I feel that I must be cognisant of his present whereabouts; but I fear that the knowledge is for the moment relegated to my subconscious mind. Nevertheless—"

"Oh crikey! Does that mean you've forgotten for the moment where he is?"

"Precisely!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I fail to appreciate the reason of your risibility, my dear fellows!" said Skimpole, blinking at his visitors in some surprise. "However, I hope to be of assistance to you."

"Then hurry up, chump! We want someone to take us to Wayland and stand tea. And Talbot's the honoured one!"

"Very well. Pray give me time, my good youths, and I will endeavour to elevate the knowledge I undoubtedly possess from the subconscious to the fully conscious! Professor Balmycrumpet says—"

"Blow Professor Balmycrumpet—"

"Really, my dear Manners—"

"Put some pep in it, Skimmy, for the love of Mike!" entreated Handcock. "We're four desperate hoboes without a Continental red cent between us, and if we don't find someone to bash us a meal in Wayland—"

"Dear me!" exclaimed Skimpole suddenly.

"Got it?" asked Tom Merry hopefully.

Skimpole permitted himself to smile.

"If I understand your peculiar colloquialism correctly, my dear Merry, the answer is 'yes'!"

"Good! Where is he, then?"

"You are referring, my dear fellow, to Talbot? I'm afraid that temporarily, as I have already explained, I am unable to recollect. What I was about to say was—"

"He's off again!" groaned Lowther. "What can a chap do with a case like this?"

"Bump him!" was Manners' suggestion.

"You've said it!" grinned Handcock. "I guess we'll bump him till he remembers where Talbot went!"

"Good egg!"

"My good youths—" gasped Skimpole, starting to his feet in alarm.

"Collar him!"

Tom Merry and his followers surrounded the long-winded genius and laid hands on him. In the ordinary way they would not have countenanced bumping the mild and inoffensive Skimpole; but something was needed to keep him to the point and ginger up his memory a little, and a bumping seemed to fit the bill.

"Keep it up till he tells us," said Lowther. "Bump his subconscious into consciousness, in fact!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bump!

"Ow-wow!" roared Skimpole. "My dear fellows—"

"Remember yet?"

"No; but I was about to say— Whoop!"

"Now, where's Talbot?"

"Ow! I fear I cannot say, but if you will listen to me for a moment or two— Ow, wow! Yoooop!" finished Skimpole.

"Think again, old bean!"

"I have already thought, without result; and now— Yahoooo! Listen to me, my good fellows, I entreat you!" roared the genius of the Shell. "I was about to say—"

"Give him a hearing, then!" grinned Tom Merry. "You were about to say, Skimmy—"

"Ow!" gasped Skimpole, rubbing himself tenderly where the juniors had bumped him. "I was about to say, my good youths, if only you had had the patience to listen, that although I still cannot recollect Talbot's present whereabouts, I can offer you an excellent way out of your predicament!"

"Oh!"

"Dashed if I can see one, but if there is one—"

"Indubitably there is a way out, my dear Lowther. I gather that pecuniary difficulties prevent your taking an excursion to Wayland for the purpose of tea in a restaurant?"

"Well, we're stony, if you understand that!" smiled Manners.

Skimpole nodded gravely.

"Precisely. I believe I can suggest an excellent way of meeting the dilemma. On numerous occasions in the past you fellows have assisted me financially, and entertained me. So far, I do not recollect having returned your generosity."

"All serene, old bean!" said Tom Merry, who knew that Skimpole did not receive much in the way of pocket-money.

"Probably so, my dear Merry. The fact remains that I have never previously had the opportunity of entertaining you. To-day, however, I am able to remedy the omission."

"What!" yelled Tom Merry & Co., in astonishment. Skimpole smiled his lean and ghostly smile.

"By a stroke of fortune, my good youths, a relative of mine has just remitted me two pounds in cash."

"My hat!"

"When you entered, my dear fellows," said Skimpole, beaming, "I was pondering on the problem of how best to utilise the money. Now I know!"

"You mean you'll take us to Wayland and stand tea out instead of Talbot?"

"Precisely."

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Skimmy!" said Monty Lowther affectionately. "We didn't know you were going to stand Sam when we bumped you, old scout. Now that we do know we withdraw the bumping! Don't we, chaps?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I take it, then, that my invitation is accepted?"

"What-ho!" replied Tom Merry & Co., with unanimity. "In that case, my good youths, I will prepare for the excursion. Before leaving the House I have to deliver to Mr. Pilbeam an imposition he thought fit to inflict on me yesterday. After that, I shall be ready."

"Finished the impost, then?" asked Lowther.

"Indubitably; here it is!"

"Kim on, then! Bring his cap, Tommy!"

"My good youth—ow! Very well, then—I'm coming!" gasped Skimpole, as he felt himself seized by the arms and yanked out of the study.

And the genius of the Shell, who would probably have dithered about for hours had they left it to him, marched off with his guests without further protest.

CHAPTER 2.

Facing the Music!

SQUEAK!

Tom Merry & Co. smiled.

Reinforced by Herbert Skimpole; they had trotted along to the study of Mr. Pilbeam, the new master of the Shell. A squeak smote on their ears as they turned the

corner of the passage leading to his room, and after that a squawk, and after that a succession of squeaks and squawks sufficient to have alarmed the entire House a few weeks before.

But the School House at St. Jim's was becoming accustomed to those weird noises now. The fellows knew that they emanated from Mr. Pilbeam's violin, and they passed them by like the idle wind, which they regarded not.

"He's going it!" remarked Tom Merry, coming to a stop outside the door of the Shell master's study.

"Hot and strong," grinned Manners. "Just listen, you chaps!"

Squeak! Squawk! Squook! Squonk! with sundry other variations, came from Mr. Pilbeam's room, and the juniors shuddered.

"Sounds like that opera he spends all his spare time composing!" said Lowther. "We'd better all go in together; if Skimpie goes in alone he'll never get out again!"

"My good youth—" protested Skimpole, mildly; but Lowther had knocked on the door and led the way in before he could finish.

"Good-afternoon, sir!" observed Lowther cheerily. "Skimpole was afraid to interrupt you, so we've come with him to bring his impot."

Mr. Pilbeam looked up from the music-stand before which he had been playing the instrument which was the joy of his life and bestowed a somewhat absent nod on the newcomers.

"You are not interrupting, my boys—pray come in!"

"Hem!"

"Matter of fact, sir—"

"You are troubled at the thought of disturbing me," said Mr. Pilbeam, with a dreamy smile. "Your consideration does you credit, boys, but I assure you you are welcome. Come in!"

"Yes, sir, but—"

"I insist!"

There was nothing else for it. The juniors filed into the study, eyeing the musical master and his violin quite apprehensively, and Skimpole placed his impot on the table.

"The imposition you thought fit to inflict on me!" he explained; and Mr. Pilbeam nodded.

"That is right, Skimpole; I will look to it later. Don't go yet, my boys. I want you to listen to something."

"I guess we'd best not take up your valuable time, sir—" began Hancock; but Mr. Pilbeam cut him short with a gesture.

"Nonsense, Hancock! Every musician is better with an audience. Besides, I should rather like to observe your various reactions to this piece I have been composing. You may have heard that I am engaged in the task of composing an opera?"

The juniors smiled.

"Well, we have heard whispers, sir," said Lowther. "Just a word here and there, you know."

"Exactly. These things get about," smiled Mr. Pilbeam. "I am at present working on an opening chorus for the second act. Make yourselves comfortable, boys, and listen to what I have done. Now!"

He rested his chin on his celebrated violin and raised the bow, and a moment later the study was filled with a succession of squeaks and squawks representing his brand-new opening chorus.

"My hat!" breathed Tom Merry.

"Fan me, someone!" muttered Lowther.

Squeak! Squawk! Squeak! Squonk!

"Oh crikey!"

"Observe the martial strain that runs through the piece, boys!" said Mr. Pilbeam, without ceasing his endeavours. "One gets, I fancy, the impression of the ordered movements of masses of men, with a suggestion of the din and clash of war!"

"Great pip!"

"It certainly does remind me of a battle!" remarked Hancock, suppressing a shudder with difficulty. "Is that all, sir?"

"Certainly not, Hancock. The chorus takes more than half an hour to play completely. From this point, the volume of sound grows greater and greater," explained the musical genius of St. Jim's, taking up his violin again. "Imagine it, boys, played by a full orchestra, growing louder and louder on a crescendo of sound which eventually fills the air with its thunderous clamour! Listen!"

"Oh dear!"

The juniors listened.

They didn't enjoy the process.

The opening chorus to the second act of Mr. Pilbeam's opera may have been a work of supreme genius. But it sounded to Tom Merry & Co. very much like a cat-fight.

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They almost groaned aloud as Mr. Pilbeam relentlessly played on.

Squeak-squeak-squeak! Squonk! Squawk!

"Help!" moaned Manners.

"For the love of Mike!" was the only way Hancock found of expressing his feelings.

"Crescendo, my boys!" said Mr. Pilbeam enthusiastically.

It was a crescendo of despair to Tom Merry & Co. They looked at each other in helpless dismay.

Then Cyrus K. Hancock had an inspiration.

"Ow! Eugh! Ow!" he said suddenly.

"What the thump—"

"Oooooooh! Ow! Mmmmmmmmmmm!"

"My dear Hancock—" said Mr. Pilbeam, abandoning his frantic exertions for a moment and turning his attention to the American junior.

"I believe I feel queer, sir!" gasped Hancock, rolling his eyes as though in agony. "It must have been something I had for dinner!"

"My dear boy—"

"Ow! I feel it, too!" said Lowther, with a heartrending groan, as he realised the move. "Awful pains, sir! Ow! Oh! Ooooooh!"

"Mmmmmmm!" said Tom Merry, joining in.

"Me, too!" moaned Manners, clapping both hands to his chest. "Ow! Oh! Grooooh!"

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mr. Pilbeam, putting his implements of war aside and regarding the juniors in no little alarm. "It would appear that you are all affected with similar symptoms. I trust you have not been regaling yourselves with indigestible edibles at the school shop."

"Nunno! I guess it's just lack of air, sir," said Hancock. "I was thinking just before we came in how stuffy it seemed indoors this afternoon. Ow! Grooooooh!"

"Can it be possible?" asked the musical master.

"Quite likely, sir!" groaned Lowther. "We've been indoors all day—probably just lack of oxygen!"

"In that case, you must go into the open with a minimum of delay," said Mr. Pilbeam, quite anxiously. "It is a great pity, just when you were beginning to enjoy my chorus—"

"Awful pity, isn't it, sir?" groaned Manners. "We shall have to hear it another time. Ow!"

"We'll come again when we feel in better trim for it, sir," said Lowther. "Impossible to enjoy it while we're like this, though. Oooooh!"

"Really, it is quite alarming!" declared Mr. Pilbeam. "Perhaps I had better summon the doctor."

"All serene, sir; we'll be all right when we get out into the air," said Tom Merry. "May we go now, sir?"

"It certainly seems advisable! Skimpole, you will accompany these boys and inform me immediately if they display any signs of becoming worse. Perhaps you will do me the favour of posting this letter while you are out?"

"Certainly, sir," said Skimpole, taking the bulky foolscap envelope which was handed to him.

"Be sure to catch the afternoon collection, my boy," said Mr. Pilbeam. "It is one of my pamphlets on counterpoint. I am addressing it to an unemployed musician, who was advertising in the newspaper for work. A perusal of it should undoubtedly enhance his prospects."

"Your intention is certainly benevolent, my good sir," said Skimpole, blinking solemnly at the envelope. "If I might say so, however, it seems to me—"

"Mmmmmmm! Come on, Skimpie!" gasped Lowther, foreseeing further delay unless Skimpole was nipped in the bud.

And Skimpole reluctantly left unsaid all the things he intended to say and quitted the room with Tom Merry & Co., while Mr. Pilbeam turned once more to his squeaking and squawking—without an audience!

CHAPTER 3.

Out of Pawn!

"RIPPING!"

Thus Tom Merry, as he and his companions cycled at a leisurely pace through Rylcombe Lane. And Hancock and Manners and Lowther responded cordially:

"What-ho!"

It was a perfect afternoon—warm and almost cloudless; just the day for a cycle run, in fact. Tom Merry & Co. felt very cheerful.

They talked cricket as they bowled along. Skimpole, whose mighty brain did not descend to such trivialities, did not, of course, join in.

"Thinking, old bean?" asked Tom Merry, after a time.

Skimpole woke up from his dream with a start and nodded.

"I confess that I was, my good youth. I was thinking of the new master, Mr. Pilbeam."

"Good old Pilbeam!" chuckled Monty Lowther. "After that little turn of ours in his study, he'll be inquiring after our health for weeks!"

"Ha, ha ha!"

"Lucky you thought of that wheeze for making a get-away, Handcock," remarked Tom Merry. "We'd have been there for the rest of the afternoon but for that happening. What music, though! Phew!"

"I protest," said Skimpole at that moment.

Tom Merry & Co looked at the genius of the Shell.

"Eh, what?" exclaimed Manners.

"I protest that the musical efforts of Mr. Pilbeam should be made the subject of youthful risibility," said Skimpole, as he pedalled slowly and thoughtfully along. "Professor Balmycrumpet says—"

"Drop him, Skimmy!"

"Give him a rest for the afternoon, old bean!"

"Really, Lowther! Professor Balmycrumpet says that in music man reaches the highest point in his soul-development—"

"Can it, old chap?"

"Talk cricket for a change!"

"And while I have hitherto taken no interest in music, I begin to appreciate the professor's point," said Skimpole, unheeding. "Can you deny, my good youths, the importance of the part that music has played in the history of the development of culture?"

"Is that a conundrum?"

"Certainly not, my dear fellow; I am asking you a plain question," said Skimpole, obviously surprised at the suggestion that he should be wasting his time asking riddles. "I think you will find that the answer is, you cannot. Professor Balmycrumpet says—"

"Oh crikey!"

"This is as bad as old Pilbeam himself," grinned Manners. "But carry on, Skimmy!"

Skimpole needed no encouragement.

He was already carrying on with great energy.

"Music, as Professor Balmycrumpet truly observes, carries us up to the greatest heights of feeling," he said, the far-away look in his lean face becoming more far-away every moment. "I would ask you, my good youths, to consider the works of Boshski,"

"Great pip!"

"I guess I've heard of Irving Berlin and George Gershwin," grinned Handcock. "But Boshski gets me guessing."

"Boshski, the celebrated Russian composer, sublimates the sounds of machinery and motors. In his already-famous composition, 'Zonk,' this leader of the modernist movement—"

"Oh help! Drop back a bit, chaps!" murmured Lowther. "Skimmy's too far gone to notice whether we're with him or not!"

"Good egg!" grinned Tom Merry. "We'll carry on with cricket in the rear and Skimmy can tell his handlebars all about Boshski!"

The juniors chuckled and slowed down, allowing Skimpole to get some distance ahead of them.

Skimpole, his eyes fixed on the road ahead, didn't notice their disappearance and continued to talk with great enthusiasm of the modern Russian movement in music. The

genius of the Shell, like the little brook in the poem, ran on for ever, and barring accidents, he was pretty sure to continue his argument until Wayland was reached.

So the genius of the Shell carried on, and twenty yards behind him his guests continued from where they had left off at cricket.

All would no doubt have gone well but for the sudden appearance of a trio of juniors from Rylcombe Grammar School at the side of the road.

The trio in question consisted of Gordon Gay, the cheery leader of the Grammarians, and his colleagues, Frank Monk and Carboy.

Gordon Gay & Co. were out for larks that afternoon. They had been practising lassoing in a field near by, and had returned to the road with the idea of putting their skill to the test on something more exciting than a stump of a tree.

The St. Jim's juniors came bowling along at precisely the right moment. At the sight of them the Grammarians uttered a war-whoop.



The rope coiled neatly over Tom Merry's shoulders, and next moment he was yanked off his bike!

"St. Jim's bounders!" said Gordon Gay, with great satisfaction. "See me get Skimpole!"

And the Grammar School leader loosened his rope and sent it whizzing through the air. Fortunately, perhaps, his aim was not true, and the loop of the rope landed in the road yards behind the Shell genius, leaving

Skimpole to pedal on, still addressing the desert air at a great rate on the subject of modern music.

"Me for Merry!" said Frank Monk, when he had noted his leader's failure to hit the mark, and he, too, sent a lasso skimming lightly through the air.

His aim was better and the rope coiled neatly over Tom Merry's shoulders, bringing a yell of alarm from the St. Jim's junior.

"What the thump—" gasped Tom Merry.

"Grammar cads!" roared Manners. "Why, the cheeky rotters—"

"Dismount!" said Lowther.

He and Manners and Handcock applied their brakes and dismounted. The injunction was unnecessary in Tom Merry's case, for he had no option about it.

Another length of rope sailed across the road and descended over Manners' shoulders, and Carboy gave a triumphant yell.

"Bagged him! See if you can get a third, Gay!"

But Gordon Gay was not given the chance of a second try. Handcock and Lowther were already rushing to close with their aggressors, and within a couple of seconds a wild and whirling tussle was going on at the side of the road.

And, meanwhile, Herbert Skimpole, blissfully innocent of the trouble that had descended, like a bolt from the blue, on his companions, pedalled on towards Wayland without once suspecting that Tom Merry & Co. were no longer with him.

Only when he reached the town and concluded his peroration concerning Professor Balmcrumpet and Mr. Boshski did Skimpole discover for the first time that something was amiss. He almost ran into a motor-car in his surprise at finding himself alone.

"Dear me!" exclaimed the genius of the Shell.

He dismounted and looked back. There was no sign of the missing St Jim's juniors.

"Extraordinary!" muttered Skimpole.

His first thought was to cycle back over the ground he had covered. Then the sight of a passing postman reminded him that he had not yet posted Mr. Pilbeam's letter, and he decided, before doing anything else, to post it at the town post office.

Next door to the post office was a musical instrument shop. Skimpole's mind having been so recently on the subject of music, it was, perhaps, only natural that, after posting his letter, he should stop for a moment to look at the display in the window.

What happened immediately afterwards happened so quickly that the slow-moving genius of the Shell was left almost breathless.

A rather seedy young man suddenly tapped him on the arm.

"Interested in playing?" he asked.

Skimpole blinked.

"I confess to an interest in music, my good sir, but—"

"Like a trombone worth a tanner for a couple of pounds?" asked the seedy young man. "Here's the pawn-ticket. You can have it for a pound, and get out the trombone from 'uncle's' down the road for another. Is it a go?"

"M-my good sir—"

"I'm on my beam ends or you wouldn't have the chance," explained the young man. "Snap it up; you're on a good thing!"

Probably it was the somewhat pathetic look in the young man's eyes that overcame the soft-hearted Skimpole. He found it difficult to explain afterwards just why he did it.

But he did. He handed over a pound, and received in exchange a little pink ticket.

A moment afterwards the young man had departed, leaving Skimpole staring after him, open-mouthed.

When he had pulled himself together again Skimpole wheeled his bike down the street to the premises of the pawnbroker whose name was given on the ticket. A pawn-ticket was of no earthly use to him; but a trombone to a fellow interested in music had possibilities.

Skimpole hesitated outside, and glanced up somewhat dubiously at the sign of the three brass balls. He had never been inside a pawnbroker's shop, and he felt an instinctive hesitancy in doing so now.

While he hesitated, a small body of Boy Scouts came marching, two abreast, along the High Street. Skimpole recognised Oliver, of Rylcombe Grammar School, at the head of them, and knew them at once to be Grammarians.

The Grammar School Scouts grinned as they saw Skimpole.

"Squad, halt!" ordered Oliver. "Stand at ease!"

Then he came up to the St. Jim's junior and saluted.

"Be of any help, old chap?" he asked. "We're out to do good turns, you know. If you want to pop your ticker, or something—"

"Really, my good youth!" said Skimpole, turning quite pink. "In point of fact, I was just about to redeem a pledge—not my own, of course."

"Of course not!" said Oliver agreeably. "Dodge in, then, old bean. We'll hang about outside so you won't be noticed coming out."

"Dear me! Quite an excellent suggestion!" exclaimed the genius of St. Jim's. "To be quite frank, I hardly care to be observed—"

"Quite!" nodded Oliver. "Leave it to us!"

"Thank you, my good youth!"

And Skimpole innocently trotted in.

Oliver's method of making sure that Skimpole would not be observed coming out was rather peculiar. He had a quick conference with his grinning followers and then ranged them in two rows from the door of the pawnbroker's shop to the edge of the pavement where Skimpole's bike was resting. After that he gave an order, and the Grammar School Scouts crossed their poles above their heads, thus forming a triumphal arch of the kind usually associated with wedding ceremonies.

"Good!" remarked Oliver, surveying his handiwork with satisfaction. "I fancy this ought to screen him effectively!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

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Skimpole was soon out. He appeared in the doorway, carrying under his arm a glittering trombone. He blinked as he saw the elaborate preparations.

"M-m-my good youths—" he gasped.

"See the Conquering Hero Comes!" ordered Oliver, getting another brain-wave. "Altogether! Da, da-da-da, da, da, da!"

"Da, da-da-da, da, da, da!" sang the Grammarians, with great gusto. "Da, da-da-da, da, da, da!"

"Thank you, my dear fellows!" said Skimpole. "You screened me most effectively. Thank you, indeed!"

"Oh crikey!"

"Well, if you're happy, we are!" gasped Oliver, with a sideways glance at the interested crowd which had begun to assemble. "What are you going to do now—play it?"

"I should certainly like to try the instrument," replied Skimpole, regarding his new acquisition with pardonable pride. "I admit to knowing very little about it at the moment; but doubtless I shall soon learn to play it properly. Pray listen, my good fellows!"

"My hat! Sorry, but we'll have to go!" said Oliver hurriedly. "Fall in, chaps! March!"

"One moment!" begged Skimpole, applying the mouth-piece to his lips.

But the Grammarians were evidently of opinion that they had had enough publicity for one afternoon. They marched off hurriedly.

Skimpole watched them go regretfully. But even without their friendly support he felt impelled to give the trombone a trial.

Oblivious to the fact that curious sightseers were drifting up from all directions, he blew down the trombone.

A strange, unmusical sound suddenly assailed the air of Wayland High Street.

Bla-a-are!

CHAPTER 4.

Tea for None!

"WHAT the thump—"

"What the merry dickens—"

"Is it? Can it be?" yelled Monty Lowther.

"It is! It's Skimpole!"

"Great pip!"

Tom Merry & Co. fairly blinked.

After an exciting ten minutes at the side of the road with Gordon Gay & Co. they had succeeded in overpowering their Grammar School assailants.

They had spent another ten minutes roping them together and driving them down the lane towards the Grammar School, and then, well satisfied with their handiwork, they had continued their interrupted ride into Wayland.

They had anticipated finding Skimpole in Wayland High Street without much difficulty.

But the most imaginative of the quartette had not for a moment anticipated finding him so easily as they did.

Skimpole was usually an unobtrusive youth. But now he stood out a mile, so to speak.

He could be heard, too, as well as seen. The St. Jim's juniors heard and saw him simultaneously.

Skimpole was on the pavement outside a shop which displayed a sign consisting of three brass balls. His bicycle, unheeded, was standing against the kerb. Skimpole was too much occupied with another matter to attend any longer to the bike.

The other matter was what made him so conspicuous. It was a trombone.

Skimpole was holding it to his lips, and blowing as though his life depended on it. At the same time he was moving the movable portion of the instrument up and down, with results that were, to put it mildly, distressing to the listeners.

A hideous medley of discordant sounds rent the peaceful air of Wayland High Street. Skimpole was responsible.

Bla-a-a-are!

"Ye gods!" gasped Tom Merry.

Blare! Toot-toot! Blare!

"What's happened?" asked Manners, staring at the amazing spectacle almost incredulously. "It—it really is Skimmy, I suppose?"

"Surest thing you know!" chuckled Handcock. "I'll hand it to Skimmy after this! He beats Barney!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Having recovered from their first shock of surprise, the juniors yelled. The sight of Herbert Skimpole of St. Jim's playing a trombone outside a pawnbroker's shop in Wayland was irresistible.

"Ha, ha ha!"

"But—but what on earth's the explanation?" gasped Tom Merry, wiping the tears of merriment from his eyes. "He didn't have a trombone when we last saw him!"

"Perhaps he's won it at the hoop-la stall at the circus!"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 "He'll have to be stopped, anyway," grinned Manners.
 "Can't have St. Jim's men trotting round Wayland busking!"

"Someone'll soon stop him, anyway," remarked Lowther.
 "Look at the crowd he's collecting!"
 "Kim on!" said Tom Merry. And the Co. wheeled their bikes across to the spot where Skimpole was performing.

The crowd which had begun to collect at Skimpole's first note had already swollen to quite considerable proportions. Most of them were content to stand round and gape, but others looked resentful, and were beginning to pass extremely uncomplimentary remarks. One or two benevolent old ladies, after surveying Skimpole compassionately, dropped pennies on to the pavement, under the impression that he was doing it for a living.

Skimpole, his eyes fixed in space, continued to puff and blow at his new acquisition, completely unaware of the sensation he was causing. Only when the heavy tramp of a police-constable's foot sounded on the pavement and a stern official asked the question, "Now then, wot's all this 'ere?" did Skimpole wake up to the fact that he had an audience.

He swung round to see the speaker. Simultaneously, he extended the slide of the trombone to its greatest length.

The result was disastrous. The U-shaped end of the slide collided violently with the police-constable's nose, and from the officer of the law came a wild and agonised howl.

"Whoooooosh!"
 "Oh dear!" gasped Skimpole, coming back to earth with a jump. "D-d-dear me!"
 "Ow! Oh! Ow! Assaultin' an officer in the execution of his dooty!" roared the indignant constable. "I'll arrest you! I'll—"

"M-my good fellow—" stuttered the alarmed and trembling genius of the Shell.
 "And I ain't your good fellow, neither!" snorted the limb of the law. "Bashin' an officer's nose! You'll come along of me, young shaver!"

"M-my good sir, you can't! I refuse! Let me explain— Oh! Ah! Oh!" concluded Skimpole, as the heavy hand of the officer descended on his shoulder as a preliminary to his being led away to durance vile.

Skimpole was in a state of considerable apprehension. Fortunately for him there was help at hand. Before the constable could march him off, four juniors wearing St. Jim's caps burst through the crowd, and stopped breathlessly in front of the outraged police officer and his prisoner.

"Merry! Handcock!" gasped Skimpole. "Thank goodness you have come, my good youths! This foolish officer is trying to arrest me!"

"What has he done, constable?" asked Tom Merry respectfully. "It can't be much, I'm sure. We know him; he's from our school—St. Jim's, you know."

The officer continued to frown, but he was visibly impressed by the mention of St. Jim's.

"The young rascal bashed my nose with the end of that trumpet of 'is!" he growled. "I thought he intended it, but if I've made a mistake—"

"Dear me! I assure you you are labouring from an utter misapprehension," Skimpole hastened to say. "I entertain, my dear sir, the greatest respect for the law. I always bear in mind what Professor Balmcrumpet said in his famous work, 'Mass-consciousness and the Theory of the State'—"

"Ere, 'old on, young 'un!" gasped the constable, staring at Skimpole quite dizzily. "If you're tryin' to sidetrack me—"

"I fail to comprehend your meaning, my good man; but let me tell you what Professor Balmcrumpet—"

"Bother Professor Wot's-'is-name!" snorted the officer, regaining his authority with an effort. "Wot I want to know is, wot were you doing playin' a musical instrument in the street, which is agin the local by-laws?"

"Dear me! I assure you, my good fellow, I had no intention whatever of violating the local by-laws!" gasped

Skimpole. "In point of fact, I had just redeemed the trombone from pawn—"

"What!" yelled Tom Merry & Co., in incredulous chorus. "After purchasing the pawnticket from a gentleman I met down the road," continued Skimpole. "And, rather naturally, not having had the chance of playing on the instrument before, I was eager to essay the feat!"

"M-m-my hat!" stuttered Manners. "Mean to say you've actually bought the thing, then?"
 "Indubitably, my good youth!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "I fail to observe the reason for risibility, my dear fellows!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Tom Merry & Co., who evidently did see a reason for risibility.

The police-constable, whose good-humour was apparently returning now, released his grip of Skimpole's shoulder and contented himself by raising an admonishing forefinger.

"All right, then; seem' your friends have spoke on your be'alf, I'll overlook it this time. But you take my tip, young shaver, and don't start playin' that thing in a public street again—see?"

"I comprehend completely, officer, and I shall take care not to offend in future. Thank you for your kind consideration!" said Skimpole solemnly. "Now, reverting to that book of Professor Balmcrumpet—"

"Come on, Skimmy!" said Tom Merry hurriedly. And he grabbed him gently, but firmly, by the arm, while Handcock took the other arm. Lowther seized him by the

scruff of the neck, and Manners brought up in the rear, to assist if necessary. In which formation the chums of the Shell marched the loquacious genius of St. Jim's back to his bike.

"And now for tea!" said Tom, when all five had once more mounted their bicycles and left the grinning crowd behind. "I think we deserve it by this time!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Do you think we might find a place where I could play the trombone for a few minutes after we had eaten?" asked Skimpole anxiously. "There is a quiet-looking restaurant over there, my dear Merry!"

"Not so quiet that they want waking up with a trombone!" smiled Tom. "But we can have tea there, if you like. Lead on, Macduff!"

Skimpole dismounted. Then he uttered a sudden exclamation.

"Good gracious!"

"What's biting you now?" asked Handcock.

"Dear me! I have just remembered!" said Skimpole, in dismay.

"Remembered what?"

"I'm afraid, my good youths, that the tea to which I had invited you will have to be cancelled!"

"What?"

"In purchasing the trombone, I am very much afraid that I have exhausted my entire pecuniary assets—"

"You mean you've spent all your money?"

"Precisely!"

"Well, my hat!"

"In the circumstances, there is nothing else for it, my dear fellows, but to cycle back to St. Jim's and partake of tea in Hall. I can only express my regret!"

Tom Merry & Co. looked at each other.

"You—you mean to say you've dragged us all the way to Wayland for tea, landed us in a scrap with Gram-marians, and got us mixed up with the police, only to tell us the tea's off?" asked Manners, in measured tones.

"I'm afraid that that is what it amounts to!"

"You—you dummy!"

"My dear Manners—"

"You foozling, fooling fathead!"

"You prize idiot!"

"My good youths—"

"Squash him!" said Lowther.

They didn't go as far as that. Instead, they contented themselves with stewing the genius of the Shell on the

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pavement, walking over him and piling his bike and his trombone over his prostrate body.

After which, feeling a little mollified, they returned to St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 5. Pilbeam's Loss!

CRASH!

"Hallo, hallo! Earthquakes about?" asked Tom Merry.

The Shell leader and his study-mates, having finished their journey and filled in an hour watching the First Eleven on Big Side, had returned to the School House for tea in Hall. A terrific noise from the floor above caused them to stop and listen.

Crash! Bang! Crash!

"Sounds like someone smashing up the home!" remarked Manners. "Haven't heard that the builders were coming in, either!"

"Same here! Must be something pretty important on, though, judging by the din," Lowther opined.

Crash!

"Let's trot up and see," suggested Tom Merry. And the Co. proceeded to put the suggestion into effect.

They quickly found the place from which all the noise was emanating. To their surprise, it proved to be Mr. Pilbeam's study.

"My hat! Is it possible that Pilbeam's gone balmy?" asked Manners.

"Quite possible!" grinned Monty Lowther. "He hadn't far to go, anyway."

Looking quite concerned, Tom Merry opened the door of the study.

In his concern, he pushed rather hurriedly and with considerable force.

That circumstance had an unfortunate sequel. By an unlucky mischance, Mr. Pilbeam happened to be bending over to turn out the contents of a suitcase on the floor, and as his anatomy was in a direct line with the door, it was not surprising that the collision that followed resulted in the musical master of the Shell pitching forward.

There was the sound of yet another crash in Mr. Pilbeam's study, and a yell followed it.

"Ow! Oh! Ow!"

"Sorry, sir!" gasped Tom Merry, hastily going to the rescue. Then, as his eyes took in the study, he jumped. "My hat!"

"For the love of Mike!" ejaculated Handcock. "I guess it must have been a cyclone—nothing else could have done it!"

The juniors fairly blinked round the study.

Pilbeam was not a very tidy gentleman; that was hardly to be expected of a musical genius. But the study which the juniors remembered seeing earlier in the afternoon had been a model of tidiness compared with the scene of desolation that confronted them now.

"M-m-my hat!" stuttered Tom Merry.

It was easy to see now how the noise had arisen. Mr. Pilbeam's desk was standing on its back, his table was upside down, his bookcases had been moved from their usual positions and their books scattered far and wide. As Handcock had suggested, the study looked as if it had been struck by a cyclone.

"Has—has something happened, sir?" asked Manners, as Mr. Pilbeam stood upright again.

Mr. Pilbeam mopped his perspiring brow.

"Something has indeed happened, Manners!" he said in quavering tones, and the juniors were amazed to see a tear roll down his cheek as he spoke. "Something that can be described as nothing less than a catastrophe—a tragedy, in fact!"

"Someone's ragged your study, sir?" asked Lowther sympathetically.

Mr. Pilbeam blew his nose to hide the emotion which he evidently felt.

"No, Lowther. In any case, I could hardly call that a tragedy. The disorder you see I have caused myself in searching for what I have lost."

"You've lost some cash, sir?" suggested Handcock.

"Well, that's real bad, and if we can help you find it—"

"I have lost no cash, Handcock."

"Then what—"

"What I have lost, my boys, cannot be valued in filthy lucre," said Mr. Pilbeam. "From a pecuniary point of view it is doubtless extremely valuable; but to me it is priceless. It is the score of the first act of my great opera."

"Oh!"

"Oh crikey!"

The juniors found it hard not to grin. From what they had heard of Mr. Pilbeam's great opera, their private

conviction was that the best thing that could have happened was for it to be lost. Mr. Pilbeam, naturally, looked on it altogether differently; to him the loss probably did appear in the light of a tragedy.

"It is terrible, boys," he muttered. "I distinctly remember having it just before you called this afternoon, but on looking for it half an hour ago, I could find no trace of it. I suppose none of you took it away with you for a joke?"

Tom Merry & Co. shook their heads.

"We don't go in for jokes of that kind, sir," Tom said. "There's Skimpole, of course, but he didn't, either, anyway. Hallo, here he is!"

Herbert Skimpole, just back from Wayland, was passing the study, his trombone tucked under his arm. At the sound of his name, he stopped and blinked into the room.

"Did you want me, my good sir?"

"Come in, Skimpole," bade Mr. Pilbeam. "I suppose you did not, by any chance, take away from this study the score of the first act of my opera?"

"Most certainly not, sir!" responded Skimpole solemnly. "As you will see from this musical instrument which I have just purchased, I intend taking up musical studies."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mr. Pilbeam, as he noted the trombone.

"But I make it my practice never to appropriate to my own use music which is the undoubted personal property of another," explained the genius of the Shell. "I gather, then, that the score in question is lost?"

"Unquestionably, I am afraid!"

"Then it is fortunate that you have informed me of the matter, my dear sir. I have occasionally indulged as a hobby in detective work, and I have recently been perusing the reminiscences of the Scotland Yard fingerprint specialist, Sir William Fumble—"

"Nonsense, Skimpole!" snapped Mr. Pilbeam. "Pray allow me to pass. I must acquaint the Head with my loss at once. Kindly make inquiries among your friends as to whether they have seen the missing score!"

"But, my good sir, you have not heard—"

Apparently Mr. Pilbeam did not want to hear, for he removed Skimpole from his path and walked off. Skimpole, after blinking surprisedly after him for a moment, produced a magnifying-glass from his pocket and went on his knees by the door, examining the handle with great intencness.

"Looking for clues, Skimmy?" chuckled Tom Merry.

"Precisely, my dear fellow; I anticipate obtaining one without any difficulty."

"Skimmy in a new role!" grinned Lowther. "As an optimist!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But Skimpole carried on, regardless of sceptical laughter. After blinking solemnly at the door-handle for a few moments, he suddenly uttered an excited exclamation.

"Here you are, my dear fellows; I have found it!"

"What; the score?" asked Tom Merry in surprise.

"No; a clue. There is a finger-print on this door-handle, my good youths. I venture to prophesy that it will be found to be the finger-print of the person who has appropriated the missing music."

"Great pip!"

Tom Merry & Co. didn't quite see why the first fingerprint seen through Skimpole's magnifying-glass should be assumed to belong to the hypothetical thief, but they crowded round to see.

Tom Merry grinned as he surveyed it. It had suddenly occurred to him that, with the exception of Mr. Pilbeam himself, the last person to touch the door-handle had been Herbert Skimpole.

"So you think that that finger-print belongs to the chap that boned old Pilbeam's music?" he asked.

"Indubitably!"

"What about this one?"

"That is a fresh mark which I have inadvertently made myself."

"Notice any resemblance?"

Skimpole surveyed them both through his glass; then he jumped.

"Goodness gracious!"

"What's on, Skimmy?"

Skimpole gasped.

"There—there must be a mistake, my good youths; the two are identical!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My good youths—"

"Gratters, old bean!" roared Lowther. "Never saw such a quick solution to a mystery before! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My—my dear fellows—" stuttered Skimpole.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Manners. "All you've got to do now, Skimmy, is to arrest yourself and hand over the music to Pilbeam."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Skimpole decided that the time had come for him to give up the case. He went off, shaking his head sadly, and Tom Merry & Co., chuckling at intervals at the recollection of Skimpole's finger-print methods, went about their inquiries.

The inquiries, as was perhaps to be expected, proved to be fruitless. When tea-time came, Mr. Pilbeam's missing score was still missing. And the musical master of the Shell, like Rachel of old, mourned for that which was lost, and would not be comforted.



Skimpole, the genius of the Shell, collided with a tradesman's van and shot across the handlebars of his bicycle into the stage door!

CHAPTER 6.

Awful!

BLA-A-A-ARE!

"What the thump—"

Blare! Tootle-toot! Blare!

"What in the name of goodness—"

Blare!

"Who the, thunder—"

"Skimpole!" ejaculated Tom Merry, rising from the table in Study No. 10, where he had been trying to finish off prep. "Skimpole and his trombone!"

"Oh crikey!"

"That's it!"

"You've said it!" grinned Handcock. "Skimmey's practising! I guess there'll be fire and slaughter if he keeps on! Oh help!"

Blare! Toot-toot! Blare!

"My hat!"

"Something'll have to be done about it," said Manners, quite seriously. "It's—it's painful!"

"Painful ain't the word," opined Handcock. "It's the worst thing that's happened since the Civil War!"

"We'll have to chip in," said Tom Merry, with a frown. "Life won't be worth living if this is allowed to go on. What with Pilbeam's blessed fiddle—"

"And Herries' cornet," put in Lowther. "Don't forget old Herries!"

"And now Skimpole's trombone. Bedlam won't be in it with St. Jim's before long!" finished up Tom, shuddering, as a particularly strong note blared forth from the passage.

"Let's stop it!"

The leader of the Shell made a move for the door. The rest fell in very willingly behind him.

Doors were opening all down the passage as the four tenants of Study No. 10 trooped out, and startled faces were looking in the direction from which the din was emanating.

"What's the row, Tom Merry?" called out Grundy from the doorway of Study No. 3. "Wilkins and Gunn here can't hear me speak!"

Tom Merry grinned.

"It is an ill wind that blows nobody good!"

"Why, you silly ass—" roared the indignant Grundy. Bla-a-are!

"Oh, my hat!"

"Worse than ever!"

"Sounds like 'somebody in agony,'" remarked Bernard Glyn, appearing out of Study No. 11 with his study-mates,

Kangaroo and Clifton Dane. "What's the meaning of it, Merry?"

"It means that someone else has joined in the St. Jim's musical festival," replied Tom.

"Then for goodness' sake can him, whoever he is!"

"Just what I'm going to do!"

And Tom Merry, without troubling about the preliminary of knocking, opened the door of Study No. 9 and walked in.

As he had anticipated, Skimpole was alone; it was a moral certainty that Talbot and Gore would not have tolerated that trombone so long.

The genius of the Shell was seated at the table, blowing away as though for a wager. From the rapt expression on his lean face it was evident that Skimpole was taking trombone practice seriously, and that he was quite satisfied with his progress.

"Stop!" yelled Tom, trying to make his voice heard above the din.

But Skimpole was deaf to the voice of the charmer.

Blare! Toot-toot! Blare!

There was a roar from the crowd in the doorway.

"Skimmey, you ass—"

"Can it!"

"Chuck it!"

"For pity's sake—"
 "Skimpole!" shrieked Tom Merry, using his hands as a megaphone—and Skimpole heard at last.
 "Dear me!" he exclaimed, a little breathlessly, abandoning his efforts and placing the brass instrument of torture reverently on the table.
 "You utter ass—"
 "You slabsided loony—"
 "Goodness gracious! Is there a fire or something?"
 "Worse than that, you dummy!" said Grundy sulphurously, from the front of the invading crowd. "What the thunder do you think you're doing?"
 "If you are referring to my most recent activities—"
 "I'm referring to the fearful row you've been kicking up!"

Skimpole looked mildly surprised.

"Really, my dear Grundy! I repudiate the suggestion that I was making any kind of a row. In point of fact, I was playing the trombone. I am afraid, my good youth, that you have no ear for music!"

"Music!" howled Grundy. "Music, you know! Ye gods!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I assure you, my good youths, there is no occasion whatever for risibility," said Skimpole solemnly. "The piece I was endeavouring to play a moment ago was an air from one of the most celebrated pieces of the day—Boshski's 'Zonk'!"

"Oh crikey!"

"The fact that some of you appear to dislike it is merely an indication of what I might term your Philistine tastes. I am afraid, therefore," said the genius of the Shell, picking up the trombone again, "that I shall have to ignore your misguided protests and continue to play the masterpiece!"



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And Skimpole applied the mouthpiece to his lips and started off again.

That was enough for the crowd. With a united howl of indignation the juniors invaded the study and fell upon the offender.

What would have happened to Skimpole had the matter been left to them can only be conjectured. For before they could so much as deprive him of his proud possession there came a sudden cry of warning from the passage.

"Cave!"

"Pilbeam, you chaps!"

"Ware, beaks!"

As if by magic the invaders melted away from Skimpole again, looking as innocent as they could.

Mr. Pilbeam entered, gnawing his sandy moustache in a way that showed very clearly that his loss was not improving his temper.

"Disgraceful! What is the meaning of this riot?" he snapped; then, without waiting for an answer, he turned to Tom Merry and went on: "Has anything resulted yet from the inquiries you were to make concerning my missing music score?"

Tom shook his head regretfully.

"I'm sorry, sir; we've not been able to find out a thing. I suppose it's not possible—"

"Well?"

The leader of the Shell coloured a little.

"I'm not doubting that you've searched already, of course, sir, but I was going to suggest that it's possible it became mislaid in your study among other papers."

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Pilbeam irritably. "If that is the most sensible advice you have to offer, Merry, you had best remain silent."

"Sir!"

"I am sorry, my boy," said the new Shell master, changing his tone as he observed Tom flush up. "I should not have said that, of course. I'm afraid this affair is beginning to fray my nerves!"

Tom Merry's brow cleared again.

"All serene, sir! We're all only too sorry to know you've lost something you value so highly. Wish we could do more!"

Mr. Pilbeam shrugged.

"I can only hope for the best. Now, about this disturbance—what are you all doing in this study?"

"Trying to put a stop to the fearful row that was going on, sir," snorted Grundy, answering for the rest. "Five minutes ago—"

"You need not tell me, Grundy—I heard for myself. What on earth do you imagine you were doing with that instrument, Skimpole?"

Skimpole started.

"Really, sir, I should have thought that you, as an authority on music, would have recognised Boshski's 'Zonk'!"

The mention of that celebrated work seemed to electrify Mr. Pilbeam.

"Boshski's 'Zonk'! So you have acquired a trombone, Skimpole, with the idea of playing the inane discords of that Russian half-wit!" he said quite savagely. "I forbid you to do so again!"

"Oh, good!" murmured half a dozen juniors; but their happiness was short-lived, for immediately afterwards Mr. Pilbeam added:

"Instead of attempting to play the crazy outpourings of Boshski's demented brain, Skimpole, you will, until I tell you otherwise, confine your activities to scales and exercises!"

There was an audible groan from the crowd in the doorway.

"Oh dear!"

"Does that mean he's going to carry on, sir?"

"Most decidedly!" snapped Mr. Pilbeam. "Far be it from me to discourage any junior's musical ambitions. You quite understand, Skimpole? Scales and exercises—and no more Boshski!"

"Yes, sir," answered Skimpole meekly.

The genius of the Shell was not very quick on the uptake, but it was clear even to him that Mr. Pilbeam was not to be argued with on the subject of the celebrated Boshski.

"That is all, then!" said Mr. Pilbeam, turning to go.

"But—" gasped Tom Merry.

"Surely, sir—" moaned Bernard Glyn.

Mr. Pilbeam paused, and fixed them with quite a menacing look.

"Have you any quarrel with my decision?"

"Oh, no, sir!" chorused Tom Merry and Bernard Glyn together, and Mr. Pilbeam nodded grimly and departed.

So Skimpole was able to carry on, after all, and within

five minutes the Shell passage was filled with his blaring and tootling. And awful as it was, the Shell could only suffer in silence.

CHAPTER 7. Desperate Measures!

"WHY not?" George Figgins, the leader of the New House juniors at St. Jim's, asked that question.

Kerr and Fatty Wynn, his study-mates and supporters, looked round lazily from the deckchairs from which they were watching midday net practice.

"If you mean, why not stay where we are till dinner-time, this hot day, I'm with you!" yawned Fatty Wynn.

"Hear, hear!" agreed Kerr.

Figgins, who had been reading a local newspaper, got up from the grass on which he had been reclining. There was a lurking grin on the face of the New House leader.

"Rats to that, anyway!" he said cheerfully. "It's never too hot to jape the School House crowd!"

"Oh!"

Wynn and Kerr looked more interested.

"Got a wheeze, then?" asked Kerr.

Figgins nodded.

"It just occurred to me while I was looking through the ads. in this paper—the 'Wayland Gazette.' There's a vaudeville competition held at the Wayland Cinema next Saturday afternoon."

"A whatter?"

"A vaudeville competition—singing, clog-dancing, knock-about, or any old thing, you know, for amateurs. They're offering a prize of twenty pounds for the best turn."

"Dashed if I see—"

"You wouldn't, old fat bean!" agreed Figgins. "But you soon will. Heard about Skimpole's latest?"

Figgins' colleagues grinned.

"Who hasn't?" chuckled Kerr. "That trombone of his is threatening to cause a riot in the School House!"

"Exactly. They don't know good music when they hear it," grinned Figgins. "That's where the New House comes in. We do, and it's up to us to give Skimpole all the encouragement we can!"

"What the thump—"

"So why not egg Skimmy into entering for the competition, and thus winning fame for himself and his House at the Wayland Cinema?" asked Figgins gravely.

For a moment Kerr and Wynn stared.

Then they chuckled, and the chuckle quickly became a roar.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Not a bad wheeze, eh?" asked Figgins.

"Oh, my hat! If only we can—"

"He'll make a fearful hash of it—bound to!" chortled Fatty Wynn. "Might even get his name in the papers. Merry and his crowd'll go green at the disgrace!"

"Just possible!" nodded Figgins. "But, of course, we're not doing it for that; we're only out to help on old Skimmy and trombone-playing and music generally!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, what do you think of it?"

"O.K. and A1 at Lloyd's!" grinned Kerr. "I vote we scout round and find Skimpole as soon as we can. Coming, Fatty?"

"What-ho!"

And Fatty Wynn joined Figgins and Kerr, and strolled with them towards the School House.

"There he is!" grinned Figgins, as they reached the quad. "Looks as if we're on an easy job; he's so keen he's even playing music now!"

"Great pip! And if he's not careful he'll walk right into the old pond!" gasped Kerr. "Hi, Skimmy!"

"Skimmy!" howled Figgins and Fatty Wynn, in unison, breaking into a run.

But Skimpole was miles away in his thoughts. He was strolling serenely along, blowing furiously on his trombone, and since he was making straight for the lily pond, he looked like being soon immersed in something a good deal more tangible.

Figgins & Co. fairly streaked across the quad to avert Skimpole's threatened misfortune.

They were too late. A moment before Figgins reached the pond Skimpole took the last and fatal step.

Splash!

"Ouch!" yelled Skimpole, waking up suddenly to find himself standing up to his middle in water and lilies.

"What—what— Ooosh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh crikey! Doesn't he walk off with the whole giddy biscuit factory?" asked Kerr. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"Dear me!" gasped Skimpole, as they helped him out again. "Remarkable that I should not have observed the water! Presumably I was concentrating too much on practising on my trombone!"

"Oh, my hat! Shouldn't be surprised!" grinned Figgins. "You'd better concentrate on getting a change of clothing now, old son. Before you go, though—going in for the competition?"

Skimpole blinked.

"I'm afraid, my dear fellow, that I do not quite comprehend—"

"Mean to say you haven't heard about it?" asked Figgins, in tones of shocked surprise. "Fancy that, you men! Skimmy hasn't heard about it!"

"Great Scott! Thought everybody had!" said Kerr.

"Amazing!" exclaimed Fatty Wynn, almost incredulously. "We took it for granted you were going in for it!"

Skimpole began to sit up and take notice.

"If the matter to which you are alluding concerns me in any way—"

"I should jolly well think it does concern you!" said Figgins warmly. "You play the trombone, don't you?"

Skimpole's eyes gleamed.

"That is perfectly correct, my dear Figgins. Do I understand you to imply, then, that a trombone-playing competition is being held?"

"Not quite that; but the next best thing. It's a contest for amateur artistes of all kinds—singers, instrumentalists, or any old thing, you know. It's at the Wayland Cinema next Saturday, and the prize is twenty pounds."

Skimpole jumped.

"Twenty pounds?"

"Twenty jimmy-o-goblins!" said Figgins. "Useful sort of sum!"

"Decidedly useful, my good youth!" concurred Skimpole, his eyes fairly shining behind his big spectacles. "The Wayland Cinema, you say?"

Figgins nodded.

"Here you are! I've finished with the paper; take it!"

He handed over the "Wayland Gazette," and Skimpole read the advertisement he indicated with avidity. Having done so, he folded up the newspaper, put it under his arm, and waved a hurried farewell to the New House juniors.

"Changing?" asked Figgins.

Skimpole nodded.

"Pray excuse me, my good youths. I must do so quickly so that I shall have time to send in my entry by the one o'clock collection!"

"Oh, my hat! Good luck, then!"

"Thank you, my dear fellow! And thank you very much indeed for calling my attention to the matter!"

And Skimpole fairly sprinted off towards the School House, leaving the New House japers on the verge of a collapse.

Figgins & Co. returned to the New House to spread the glad tidings of the jape among their clansmen. And the innocent victim of their wiles raced into the House, leaving a trail of water in his wake.

A shock was awaiting Skimpole at the end of his drying and changing operations.

Desperate diseases are said to need desperate remedies, and the Shell had taken that old adage literally during Skimpole's absence from the House.

While the genius of the Shell had been in the dormitory removing traces of the lily-pond half a dozen juniors had entered his study and laid sacrilegious hands upon the musical instrument which, in the space of twenty-four hours, had become the apple of his eye.

The conspirators had carried off their prize in triumph to the Common-room, and there held a solemn debate on the problem of how best to dispose of the famous trombone.

For a time the problem had been rather puzzling. A trombone was an awkward thing to hide, and nobody felt that there was justification for depriving Skimpole of it for all time; the rest of the term would have met the bill all right.

Clifton Dane had provided the solution eventually by suggesting the Common-room chimney.

It seemed an ideal place. It was a pretty safe bet that Skimpole would never think of looking up the Common-room chimney, and as nobody had any intention of giving the secret away, there was no reason why the trombone should not remain hidden until the holidays gave Skimpole the opportunity of taking it home. In the meantime, peace would dwell in the Shell passage, which was all the juniors asked.

The result was that when Skimpole burst into his study to write his application to the proprietors of the Wayland Cinema, he received a staggering shock.

The instrument with which he already saw himself, in his mind's eye, gaining the glittering prize of twenty pounds had gone.

Skimpole jumped as he noticed the emptiness of the corner where he had left it.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed.

He stood staring at the empty corner for several seconds. Then he looked under the table; and after that, in the cupboard, behind the curtained-off recess under the window-seat, and also at the back of the bookshelf.

Talbot and Gore came in as he was concluding his little tour of exploration. Skimpole's study-mates, while not taking an active part in the plot, had rather naturally given it their warmest approval.

"Lost something?" asked Gore.

"I'm afraid I have, my dear Gore. Have you, by any chance, seen my trombone?"

"Certainly!" answered Gore readily.

Skimpole gave a gasp of relief.

"Thank goodness! Where did you see it?"

"In the corner over there!"

Skimpole blinked.

"But—but, my good youth, there is no sign of it in the corner!"

"Didn't say there was!"

"When, then, did you see it?"

"When you yourself put it there before classes this morning, old bean!" replied Gore, with a heartless chuckle.

And that was all the change Skimpole got from that quarter.

CHAPTER 8.

Most Un-"soot"-able!

DESPAIR was writ large on Skimpole's lean countenance during the succeeding ten minutes. He walked round and round the study, examining nooks and crannies hardly big enough to hold a mouth-organ, let alone a trombone.

Several juniors looked in during that period, anxious to know how Skimpole was taking his loss, and the doorway was soon crowded with grinning Shellites, giving out facetious pieces of advice which the unsophisticated Skimpole took with great seriousness.

"Look behind the pictures, Skimmy!"

"What about searching the jampot?"

"Take up the lino, old bean—might find it under the floor-boards!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Skimpole rushed innocently from place to place, as directed, for some time; but in the end, even he realised that further searching in the study was futile.

"I'm afraid it has gone!" he remarked sadly. "Some ill-disposed person has taken it."

"Half a mo'!" said Lowther brightly. "You haven't taken down the ceiling yet. If you'd like me to help you—"

"Really, Lowther. Do you seriously consider it may be hidden behind the plaster?"

"Indubitably, my good youth!" said Lowther, in quite a lifelike imitation of Skimpole's voice, and there was a fresh roar from the crowd.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Skimpole looked surprised at the laughter, and continued to stare up at the ceiling with suspicious eyes.

"Perhaps it would be as well to make sure—" he said, rubbing his chin reflectively.

"Fathead!" snorted Gore. "If you start smashing up the ceiling, I'm going to start smashing up you! Savvy?"

"My dear Gore—"

"Chuck it, Skimmy!" said Talbot, giving the perturbed genius of the Shell a friendly thump on the back. "I dare say someone has taken it for a lark with the idea of giving it back to you when we break up. Best forget it!"

"Impossible, my dear Talbot!" gasped Skimpole. "It is of the utmost importance that I should have it to-day so that I may begin practising for a forthcoming competition."

"Wha-a-at!"

"Kik-kik-competition?" stuttered Lowther. "You're going to play your trombone in a competition?"

"Precisely!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You appear to be surprised, my good youths; but I thought everybody had heard of the contest. Figgins said—"

"Figgins in it, then?" remarked Tom Merry. "What's his little game?"

"I failed to observe him playing any game, my dear Merry! It was he who told me of the competition that is being held next Saturday afternoon at the Wayland Cinema."

"Oh!"

"Come to think about it, I read something about it in the local rag," remarked Manners. "And you mean to say Figgins tried to get you to go in for it with that trombone of yours?"

"He merely suggested—"

"Good enough!" said Tom Merry promptly. "It's a New House rag; Figgie thinks it'll be a score for them if a School House man makes an ass of himself in this Wayland Cinema stunt. Well, you consider it off, Skimmy."

"Yes, rather!"

"Pardon me, my good youths, but I have every intention of winning the first prize in the contest," said Skimpole, with quite unusual determination. "But first, of course, I must find the missing trombone."

"Well, there is that," assented Monty Lowther gravely.

"Unless you give an exhibition of trombone-playing without the trombone, Skimmy; that ought to be rather a novelty."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I see that I shall have to employ the finger-print method of detection for tracing it," said the genius of the Shell, getting out his magnifying-glass as he spoke. "Pray move out of the way, Gore, so that I can see more clearly."

"Br-r-r!" said Gore; but he moved out of the way, as requested, and Skimpole dived down into the corner and started peering at the wall and skirting-board through his glass.

Apparently a first glance was sufficient to provide him with a clue, for the interested crowd heard him utter a triumphant exclamation.

"On the track?" asked Lowther.

Skimpole rose to his feet, his eyes gleaming.

"I have every reason to believe so, my dear Lowther. Indubitably there are finger-prints near the spot where I left the missing instrument standing. The immediate question is: whose finger-prints are they?"

Tom Merry grinned.

"Well, judging by what happened last time, they're yours!"

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"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Once I find the owner of the finger-prints, the mystery is as good as solved," said Skimpole, ignoring that ribald suggestion. "Would you fellows mind giving me specimens of your finger-prints, I wonder?"
 "Pleasure!" said Lowther promptly. "Where would you like mine—on your collar or your shirt-cuff?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Really, Lowther, both those suggested situations would be most inconvenient. My own suggestion is that we hold a parade of as many fellows as possible in the Common-room, so that I can obtain impressions with a minimum of delay. What do you think?"

"Great idea!" said Lowther, who was always in favour of any suggestion containing a possibility of fun. "Fall in, you men; burglars and ticket-of-leave men specially invited!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 The juniors entered into the spirit of the thing and started lining up in the passage. Lowther got Skimpole to fall in at the head of the procession, carrying his magnifying-glass prominently, and with Clifton Dane following at his heels, playing a marching tune on his mouth-organ, the entire procession moved off.

They attracted no little attention on their way down to the Common-room, and long before they had reached their objective they had doubled and even trebled their original strength.

Blake and Herries and Digby and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth were the first to reinforce the ranks, and after them came Grundy and Wilkins and Gunn of the Shell, Kerruish and Julian and Hammond of the Fourth, and many others from both Forms, and even from the Third.

Little dreaming that the parade was to end in Skimpole's discovery of the very thing they had hidden from him, the hilarious juniors tramped into the Common-room.

Skimpole surveyed the grinning throng with much satisfaction.

"This is excellent!" he remarked. "Surely the culprit should be among this assembly!"

"Bound to be!" agreed Lowther. "Now then, gentlemen! Walk up and give us your finger-prints! Toe-prints or nose-prints don't count!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"One moment!" said Skimpole. "Before we start, I should like to obtain some suitable medium for clarifying the prints. If you will kindly wait a moment—"

"Where are you going, then?"

"Merely to obtain some soot, my good youth!" replied Skimpole, and he made a move in the direction of the chimney!

Somehow, the unexpectedness of it seemed to deprive everyone of the ability to act for a moment. Then there was a frantic rush to stop the genius of the Shell.

"Half a mo'!" yelled Lowther, making a grab at him.

Too late! Before he could pull him back, Skimpole had bent down by the fireplace and put his hand up the chimney.

An instant later there was an excited yell from the amateur detective.

"Good gracious!"

"Come back, Skimmy!" groaned Manners. "I'll get the soot for you!"

"Thank you, Manners, but there is no longer any need

to obtain the soot. By an extraordinary chance, I have found the trombone itself!"

A groan went up from the Shellites, while from the Fourth, whose quarters were out of range of Skimpole's practice, came a yell.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Blake. "The japers japed! This is funny! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"This is indeed fortunate!" remarked Skimpole, fairly beaming as he drew out the famous trombone into the light of day. "It would have been a tragedy had I been precluded from entering the competition through losing the instrument; but now I shall have time for plenty of practice before next Saturday!"

"You—you—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I trust that it has suffered no damage as a result of its misadventure," said Skimpole, wiping off the soot that was clinging to the mouthpiece. "Perhaps it would be as well to test it to see!"

With that intention, the genius of the Shell raised the trombone to his lips.

It was unfortunate that Mr. Pilbeam should have chosen that very moment for entering the Common-room. But Skimpole had a peculiar knack of doing things at the wrong moment.

Mr. Pilbeam rustled in, unnoticed by the crowd. Skimpole drew a deep breath.

Then he blew.

The only audible result of his great blow was a throttled sound that indicated quite clearly that the soot of the chimney had got well into the works.

But there was another result of a visual character which was as disastrous as it was unexpected. As Skimpole blew, a thick black cloud flew out of the trombone.

It consisted of soot.

Mr. Pilbeam was in a direct line with that cloud. He seemed almost to rush to meet it, in fact.

Puff!

"Ouch!" said Mr. Pilbeam.

"What the thump—"

"It's Pilbeam!" almost sobbed Blake. "Oh, ye gods!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was a shriek from the spectators. Whatever the consequences of the dreadful accident might be, laughter at that moment was irresistible.

"Dear me!" said Skimpole.

And he lowered the cause of all the trouble, blinking at his victim almost dazedly. Even Skimpole, for once, was overwhelmed.

CHAPTER 9.

Skimpole Insists!

"OUCH! Whoooooosh! Atishoo! Ashooo!"

Mr. Pilbeam was going it!

"D-dear me!" stuttered Skimpole. Then he caught the infection. "Ouch! Atishooo!"

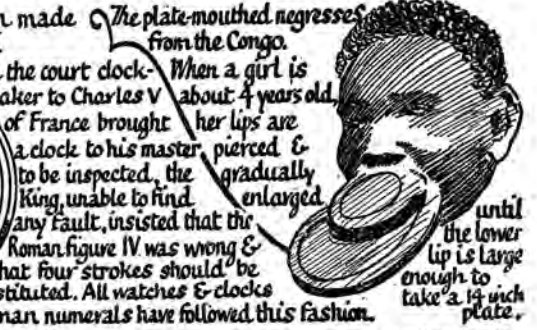
"Oh crikey!"

"Look out! It's spreading! 'Shoo!"

"Grooogh! Atishoo!"

Soot seemed to be floating about in all directions now, and the epidemic of choking and sneezing increased in direct ratio to the extent to which it spread.

"Skimpole!" Mr. Pilbeam managed to roar; then he was overcome again. "Arrooooooh! 'Shooo! Owtechoo!"



Facts from Far and Near.

"My good sir— Ouch! Ooocosh! 'Tishoooo!" sneezed Skimpole. "If I might explain, sir— Atishoooo!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Ever see anything like it?" asked Monty Lowther, who had dodged out of range of the deadly cloud, and there was an answering chorus of:

"Never!"

Certainly the scene in the Common-room at that moment was one not easily forgotten. Mr. Pilbeam, bearing a striking resemblance to a member of a troupe of nigger minstrels, was staggering about, sneezing and coughing and choking on a terrific scale. Skimpole was supporting himself against the mantelpiece and following his example, and at least a dozen others were similarly affected.

Those who had dodged it were ranged round the Common-room fairly yelling with uncontrolled laughter. A few had left in anticipation of trouble to come, but the majority, feeling perhaps that the Form master could hardly bring them all in, stayed on to see it out.

The soot began to settle down at last, and it became possible to see across the room again. Mr. Pilbeam, tears streaming down his coal-black face, collapsed into a chair and tried to recover his breath.

"Ouch! Oh! Ah! Oh! Disgraceful!" he spluttered at last.

"Ooch! Oh dear! My good sir—"

"Disgraceful! Disgusting!" gasped Mr. Pilbeam. "How dare you assault me in this disgusting fashion, Skimpole? Answer me, boy!"

"The explanation, my good sir, is—"

"Bah! There can be no explanation!" snorted the master of the Shell. "The whole thing is a disgraceful practical joke, and—"

"Perhaps I ought to explain, sir," said Tom Merry, feeling that something ought to be done to help the unhappy genius of the Shell. "The fact is, we hid the trombone up the chimney so that Skimpole couldn't find it."

The glare which Mr. Pilbeam had been directing on Skimpole turned on to Tom Merry.

"Indeed, Merry! This particular instrument seems to be causing an unusual amount of trouble?"

"Hem! It isn't the instrument, sir, so much as the way it's played!"

"That, then, is the fault of the player!" snapped Mr. Pilbeam. "Skimpole! How dare you annoy your neighbours by bad playing?"

"I—I—" stammered Skimpole.

Considering he had owned a trombone for not quite twenty-four hours, that question was a little unreasonable.

But Mr. Pilbeam was in an unreasonable mood, and, judging by his expression, he was not inclined to accept the repetition of the first person singular as a satisfactory answer.

"I do not wonder that you are lost for an answer!" he stormed. "The trombone, which should be a noble instrument, you have perverted into a medium for giving vent to Russian discords. Not satisfied with that, Skimpole, you now relegate it to the category of an offensive weapon for belching forth soot!"

"But, my good sir—" gasped Skimpole.

"Pah! I am ashamed of you!" said the master of the Shell. "I can hardly wonder at your colleagues desiring to hide the instrument from you. I should have known better than to encourage in music a creature who prates of finger-prints and has ambitions to play the degenerate sounds of Boshski!"

"Really, Mr. Pilbeam, I must protest that Boshski—"

"Silence!" roared Mr. Pilbeam. "I know better now, anyhow; I can see that the most sensible course I can take is to forbid you to play that wretched instrument for the remainder of the term. That, Skimpole, is what I now do!"

Skimpole's eyes widened in sudden alarm.

"My—my good sir, you cannot mean—"

"My meaning, I think, is perfectly clear! For the remainder of the term you are not to play that trombone. You understand?"

"But—but that is impossible!" gasped the genius of the Shell. "Quite impossible, sir, I assure you!"

Mr. Pilbeam's eyes almost started out of his head.

"Boy! Impossible? What do you mean?"

"Why, sir, I have entered my name for the vaudeville competition at the Wayland Cinema next Saturday afternoon—"

"Vaudeville competition?" hooted Mr. Pilbeam.

"Precisely, my dear sir! I am going to give a brief recital on the trombone, with the object of winning the prize of twenty pounds. In the circumstances, I think you

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will see that it will be impossible for me to abandon the instrument before next Saturday, anyhow!"

Mr. Pilbeam seemed to be in need of air. He mopped his sooty brow with a handkerchief, thereby causing a huge black smudge to appear across his face.

"You—you intend playing the trombone in a vaudeville competition?"

"Precisely!"

"In a vulgar, common, plebeian music hall competition?" hooted Mr. Pilbeam. "And you put that up to me as a reason for not placing a ban on your trombone-playing? Are you mad, Skimpole?"

"Really, my good sir, I have no reason to believe so! In any case, I cannot admit that—"

"Silence, sir!" boomed Mr. Pilbeam. "You have given me additional reason, if I needed it, for forbidding you to play! I have read about this competition; the candidates will consist of red-nosed comedians, amateur jugglers, and



As Skimpole blew, a thick, black cloud of soot flew out of the trombone right in Mr. Pilbeam's face!

third-rate clowns. Do you think, sir, that you, a St. Jim's boy, will be allowed to exhibit yourself among this motley crew?"

"I certainly thought—"

"Then pray cease thinking without delay, for you will not! I have never heard of such a thing, Skimpole, and I shall see to it that the headmaster is informed of your intention. You understand what that will mean?"

"My dear Mr. Pilbeam—"

"It will mean that your refusal to obey my order will result in a flogging—possibly your expulsion!" snapped Mr. Pilbeam, whom the soot had most evidently put completely out of joint. "Kindly consider the matter afresh now, Skimpole, in the light of what I have said. In the meantime, you will do me two hundred lines!"

"Oh!"

"Everyone else in the room will do one hundred lines," added the irate master of the Shell. "That is all, I think!" And Mr. Pilbeam swept out of the room to make his way to the nearest bath-room.

There was a gasp of relief as he went. For five minutes Mr. Pilbeam had been almost terrifying in his rage.

"Not to be wondered at, either!" grinned Lowther, as the juniors crowded round Skimpole again. "By the time you'd finished with him, Skimmy, he looked like a moving-picture of 'Don't go down in the mine, dad!'"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Never seen him go off the deep-end so much before," remarked Tom Merry. "I fancy the old bean's lost music-score is making his nerves a bit ragged. Taking it all round, Skimmy, I reckon you've got off lightly."

But Skimpole apparently did not think so. He was still staring almost incredulously after Mr. Pilbeam.

"Lightly, my good Merry?" he gasped. "You call it a light punishment for Mr. Pilbeam to forbid me to play at Wayland next Saturday?"

"Well, it's disappointing to you, old bean, but perhaps it's just as well. Forget all about it!"

Skimpole came as near to snorting as was possible for him.

"Pardon me, my good youth, but I have no intention whatever of forgetting all about it!" he said. "I consider that I have been treated with injustice."

"Never mind, old chap; you'll soon get over it!"



"I beg to differ. Injustice rankles. Professor Balmycrumpet, in a celebrated work, remarks—"

"Well, forget old Balmycrumpet, too!" suggested Tom amiably. "Come over to the tuckshop and have an ice instead!"

But Skimpole shook his head.

"Thank you, my dear Merry; but I must post off my application to the cinema!"

"Wha-a-at!"

"Draw it mild, Skimmy!" protested Talbot, with a frown. "Pilbeam's taken a serious view of it, and means to report it to the Head. You can't go on now!"

"Nevertheless, my dear Talbot, I intend to go on!"

There was a roar from the crowd.

"Chuck it, Skimmy!"

"Give it a rest!"

"Don't be balmy, old scout!"

But Skimpole remained adamant.

"I am sorry to have to differ from you, my good youths," he said, in tones of finality. "But Mr. Pilbeam's ban is an act of injustice, and I feel that the only logical course for me to take is to ignore it."

"But, my dear fathead—"

"My dear silly ass—"

"I insist!" said Skimpole.

And that was his last word on the subject.

CHAPTER 10.

Chucked Out!

TOM MERRY and a number of other School House juniors spent quite a lot of their spare time from then up to the following Saturday in trying to dissuade Skimpole from his intention.

Their efforts were unavailing. Skimpole still insisted on going in for the Wayland Cinema vaudeville competition.

The genius of the Shell was usually mild and tractable enough, but there was a streak of obstinacy in his character, as was evidenced by his adherence to many weird and wonderful causes which raised nothing but hilarity among the others. That streak of obstinacy came out strong now.

After morning lessons on Saturday a voluntary watch committee followed Skimpole about to see that, if necessary, he was forcibly prevented from going to Wayland.

Skimpole ignored them. As a matter of fact, he didn't even see them, being too much engrossed in the problem of what he should do with the twenty pounds he intended winning from the proprietors of the Wayland Cinema.

After dinner he strapped the trombone over his back and went down to the bike-shed.

The Terrible Three and Handcock followed him.

Some distance behind came Figgins and Kerr and Wynn. Figgins & Co., being members of the other House at St. Jim's, were not always au fait with School House news, and did not, in this instance, know of the somewhat serious aspect of the affair that had arisen as a result of Pilbeam's intervention. But they had rather anticipated that efforts would be made to prevent Skimpole making a start, and they were prepared to deal with those efforts.

Skimpole wheeled out his jigger.

Tom Merry & Co. met him at the door of the shed.

"Sorry, old chap, but it can't be done!" was Tom Merry's greeting.

Skimpole blinked.

"I'm afraid, my good youth, that I fail to comprehend your meaning—"

"Then I'll make it quite clear by saying that you can't go to Wayland this afternoon. Savvy?"

Skimpole nodded.

"I understand, my dear Merry. I'm afraid, however, in spite of your assertion, that I shall have to go to Wayland."

"Can it, Skimmy!" protested Handcock. "I guess you don't want to ask for the bullet, do you?"

"I was not even aware that bullets entered into the matter, my good youth, but even if they do—"

"Oh, help!" groaned Handcock. "Anyway, you can't go, and that's flat!"

"What's more," said Tom Merry, gently but firmly, "we're here to stop you!"

Skimpole began to look a little alarmed.

"I should be sorry to think, my good fellows, that you felt called on to interfere with an individual's liberty of action—"

"Sorry or not, old bean, that's what we're here for," grinned Manners. "That's just what we mean to do, too!"

"In that case, my dear fellows, I'm afraid I must endeavour to evade you," said Skimpole decisively. And he mounted his bike and started off.

But four pairs of hands were on that bike before he had proceeded more than a yard, and the genius of the Shell came to a sudden stop again.

"Not so easy as that, my pippin!" chuckled Tom Merry. "Now do be sensible, Skimmy!"

"Nonsense, my good youth! I insist on my right, as an individual, to liberty of action. Pray release me!"

"Rats!"

"Release me, I say, or I shall— Ow! You are upsetting my balance— Whoop!" roared Skimpole, as his endeavours to escape began to result in a violent rocking motion.

Then came the unexpected interruption. Three grinning juniors in the shape of Figgins and Kerr and Wynn appeared from the rear, and Tom Merry & Co., to their great surprise, found themselves attacked from all sides.

"Wade in, New House!" chortled Figgins. "Can't allow 'em to interfere with what Skimmy said!"

"Ha, ha! No fear!"

Figgins & Co. waded in with a will, and Tom Merry & Co. found themselves forced to release their captive for a moment.

"Buzz off, Skimmy!" roared Figgins. "We'll look after 'em for you!"

"Thank you, my good youth!" gasped Skimpole, remounting his bike, which had toppled over in the scrimmage. "I am indeed indebted to you!"

A moment later he was pedalling down the gravel path that led to the gates. Tom Merry uttered a yell.

"Stop him! You silly asses, leggo—"

"Rats! You're four to our three; stand up and scrap like men!" grinned Figgins. "Bye-bye, Skimmy!"

"You—you howling idiots!" roared Tom Merry furiously. "Do you realise you've put him in the way of getting the sack?"

"Eh?"

Figgins & Co. jumped. They certainly hadn't realised that.

"Pilbeam's put the bar up, you fozzling dummies, and the Head knows all about it!" hooted Tom Merry. "If Skimmy appears at the Wayland Cinema this afternoon, it's a flogging or the sack for him!"

"Oh, my hat! Why didn't you tell us, then?"

"You—you—"

"Sorry and all that; naturally, we didn't know it was serious," said Figgins. "Better fetch him back. Hi, Skimmy!"

But Skimpole was deaf to the voice of the charmer. Tom Merry, after a moment's glance at the retreating figure on the bike, made a rush for the bike-shed.

"Nothing for it but to go after him," he remarked. "If you howling idiots hadn't chipped in—"

"Too late for regrets!" snapped Figgins. "Only thing to do is to buzz after him. We'll come with you!"

"Come on, then."

There was a rush for the bike-shed, and in a matter of seconds seven juniors were mounting their machines and pedalling down the path on Skimpole's track.



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Then came a stern chase. Skimpole of the Shell had never before been known as a racing cyclist; but he seemed to be fairly scorching along on this occasion, and the juniors found it all they could do to gain on him.

But inevitably they did so in time, and long before Wayland was reached they found themselves steadily overtaking him. Only a miracle, it seemed, could save Skimpole from capture.

But strangely enough the miracle happened.

It came along in the shape of a big motor-lorry, which thundered along past Tom Merry and his perspiring followers at a tremendous speed.

The juniors couldn't see much for dust for a second or two after it had passed.

What they saw when the dust had settled down again drew a yell from them.

Skimpole had attached himself to the tailboard of the great vehicle, and was being carried triumphantly along towards Wayland at a speed which they could never hope to attain.

"That's done it!" groaned Tom Merry. "He'll get there in five minutes now—if he doesn't break his silly neck!"

"What's to be done now?"

"Carry on; we'll have to stop him somehow or other!"

And they duly carried on.

As it happened, the lorry branched off before Wayland was reached, and Skimpole therefore did not get a free ride for the whole journey. The start it had given him, however, was a tremendous one, and Tom Merry and the others had to put all they knew into it to lessen the distance between them and their quarry to any appreciable extent.

Wayland came in sight—and with it, Skimpole again.

"Spurt!" panted Tom Merry.

At top speed they raced down the High Street of the old town.

The Wayland Cinema loomed up ahead of them. Skimpole, after a scared glance behind him, spurted desperately.

A car turned the corner. The genius of the Shell missed by inches, shot across the road, collided with a stationary tradesman's van, and fairly flew over his handlebars right through the stage-door of the cinema! He had won the race at the post!

His pursuers were on the scene almost immediately afterwards. Dismounting, they threw their machines against the wall of the building and made a rush for the door through which Skimpole had disappeared.

There they were stopped. A big, broad-shouldered commissioner stood menacingly in their path.

"Business, young gent?" he asked.

"We're after that idiot who just came in—" began Tom Merry.

"Young gent with specs!" nodded the commissioner. "He's got a Competitor's Pass. Got yours?"

"Of course not. We—"

"Then you can't come in! 'Ere, Bert—Bill—Alf!" roared the commissioner, as the juniors made an effort to get past him.

Three burly men in their shirtsleeves appeared out of the dim region at the rear.

"Chuck 'em out!" snorted the offended commissioner.

There was a short, sharp conflict.

The St. Jim's juniors, not unnaturally, emerged second-best. Hancock hit the pavement first. Fatty Wynn followed soon afterwards, and after him, one by one, came the rest.

"Whooooop!" came a united gasp from Tom Merry and his followers.

And they didn't attempt to force their way through the stage-door again!

CHAPTER 11.

Skimpole Makes a Hit!

"THE fathead!"

"The idiot!"

"The loony!"

Thus Tom Merry and Manners and Hancock respectively

It was half an hour later and the seven St. Jim's juniors were seated in stalls inside the Wayland Cinema.

In the intervening period they had done everything possible to avert the threatened tragedy of Skimpole giving a public exhibition of trombone-playing on the stage. They had interviewed attendants, who had referred them to cashiers, who had referred them back to attendants. They had asked various officials for an interview with the manager, only to be told that that gentleman was far too busy to be seen that afternoon.

Eventually they had abandoned their efforts as hopeless, and taken tickets for the show.

An exciting talkie, bristling with villainous Chinamen and gangsters, had been in progress when they entered. The St. Jim's juniors, in their anxiety over Skimpole, had hardly heeded it. An uproarious comedy had followed, and they hardly got a laugh out of it.

Then came the great attraction of the week—the Vaudeville Competition.

Tom Merry and his chums watched with sinking hearts.

A freckled-faced young man, who was evidently well-known to a section of the audience, came on first and gave an exhibition of clog-dancing, which earned quite a lot of applause. After him came a sentimental young lady, who sang a ballad concerning her heart and the swain from whom she was, for obscure reasons, forced to part. This turn drew a good deal of giggling from the audience—considerably more giggling than applause, in fact.

Two youths who were announced to be cross-talk comedians were next on the bill. They indulged in a good deal of cross-talk, but although they themselves seemed to find it very amusing, nobody else did. They left the stage, glaring.

Then came Skimpole.

The genius of the Shell came on with a rush, possibly with the idea that Tom Merry & Co. were waiting in the wings for a final effort at stopping him. He fairly leaped into the glare of the footlights, somehow managed to slip on the polished floor and landed on the rear part of his anatomy with a fearful concussion.

Bump!

Philosophers who have reflected on the subject of laughter have asserted that laughter most frequently arises out of watching the misfortunes of others. Whether that assertion be true or not, the audience at the Wayland Cinema certainly laughed at Skimpole's sudden misfortune.

From the front row of the stalls to the last row of the balcony the house rocked. A great roar of laughter went up.

Skimpole staggered to his feet.

"Silence!" he yelled.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My dear friends—" said Skimpole, holding up his hand in an imploring gesture.

It was no good. The only effect of Skimpole's gesture seemed to be to make them laugh all the louder.

But he obtained silence eventually, and the audience waited expectantly.

"My dear friends!" said Skimpole again. "With your kind permission, I will play you a few brief selections on my trombone. In choosing my items, I have been careful to avoid the works of such overrated classical composers as Wagner, Brahms, Mendelssohn, and so on. I have also steered clear of that vulgar perversion of musical taste known as ragtime or jazz."

There was a chuckle from someone in the front, and the lead was taken up until quite a wave of laughter was rippling across the crowded hall again. Apparently the audience found something decidedly funny in Herbert Skimpole of St. Jim's.

"What I intend to give you, my good people," went on Skimpole, beaming, "will, I am sure, prove a rare musical treat. It will consist of excerpts from a work of the celebrated modern composer, Boshski."

Another roar went up. Wayland, it seemed, had not heard of the famous Boshski, and took him to be merely a humorous invention of Skimpole's.

Skimpole looked astonished at the continued laughter.

"Really, my good friends, I assure you there is nothing whatever over which to indulge the risible faculties!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was a real, full-blooded, spontaneous yell this time. The St. Jim's junior's assertion that there was nothing to laugh at seemed to be the last straw. The audience simply sat back and yelled.

"Silence!" shouted Skimpole desperately. "Ladies and gentlemen! Allow me to give you my first item—a short extract from Boshski's famous work, 'Zonk'!"

Again they roared. Somehow, everything that Skimpole said seemed to add to the general hilarity, and the more seriously he said it, the greater the hilarity grew. The audience of the Wayland Cinema simply refused to take Skimpole seriously.

In a state of great perturbation over his unaccountable reception, Skimpole raised the trombone to his lips.

There was a momentary silence. Skimpole blew down the instrument, and pushed out the slide, with the intention of producing sweet strains of music.

Unfortunately, in his nervousness, he pushed too hard—so hard, in fact, that he somehow let go of the crossbar.

It was a fatal mistake. Out of control, the slide shot away from the rest of the instrument, sailed through the air across the footlights, and caught the conductor of the cinema orchestra quite an appreciable blow on the nose.

"Whooooop!" yelled the conductor.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was a shriek this time. Fat old gentlemen slapped their knees, thin old ladies dropped their lorgnettes, and young men and maidens howled for an encore.

"Dear me! Most unfortunate!" remarked Skimpole, advancing nearer the footlights. "My most sincere apologies to you, sir! Might I trouble you to hand me back the slide?"

The conductor, still rubbing his injured nasal organ, sent the slide whizzing back again, and this time it was Skimpole's nose that caught it and Skimpole who howled. And the audience roared applause.

Skimpole got going at last.

The laughter did not die down. The deadly seriousness with which Skimpole played, and the amazing sequence of discordant sounds which he managed to produce, between them drew enough laughter to delight the heart of the manager, who was watching from the wings.

Whatever Skimpole did his actions seemed funny now, and the long-winded explanations which he interspersed with his selections were even funnier than his actions.

He finished at last, and retired, with a deep, solemn bow. And the audience, quite under the impression that all the fun had been intentional, and that they had witnessed the performance of an exceptionally accomplished comedian, cheered and cheered again.

There was no doubt as to who had won the prize after that. The remaining turns seemed dull beyond endurance after Skimpole's.

The manager came out on the stage eventually to award twenty pounds in cash to the lucky winner. And with him was Herbert Skimpole.

The genius of the Shell, by behaving with his customary solemnity, had won fame and quite a small fortune—as a screamingly funny comedian!

(Continued on the next page.)

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CHAPTER 12.

Duffer's Luck!

"WELL, I guess that beats Barney!"
Cyrus K. Hancock made that remark as he and the Terrible Three and Figgins & Co. trooped out of the Wayland Cinema and made their way round to the stage door again.

The juniors grinned.
"It was funny—no denying that," said Tom Merry.
"Funniest thing I've ever seen or heard of this term!"

"Hear, hear!"
"The drawback is, that there's bound to be trouble. Pilbeam's got his back up."

"'Fraid he has!" nodded Manners. "I fancy it's mostly because he's fed-up with losing that music of his, though."

"Quite likely. Whatever the cause, he's got it in for Skimmy, anyway, and he's bound to get to know about this. Skimmy's booked for trouble with a capital T, I'm afraid."

"Here he is!" said Figgins, as Tom finished speaking.

Skimpole came trotting out of the cinema, his trombone slung over his back and wheeling his bike beside him. He was looking extremely puzzled.

"Good-afternoon, my good youths!" he remarked. "A very surprising thing has happened!"

"Life's full of surprises!" grinned Lowther. "What's the latest, Skimmy?"

"It is really extraordinary!" said Skimpole, with a shake of his head. "I have just concluded a recital of music in this hall. As I anticipated, I won the prize. What I fail entirely to understand is that the manager referred to me in his speech as a comedian. A comedian, you know!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I really cannot see the reason— Oh!" concluded Skimpole suddenly, as somebody from the back of him clapped him on the back. Then, turning round and recognising the newcomer, he added: "Dear me! You!"

"Little me!" smiled the fresh arrival, who was none other than the young man who had sold the pawnticket to

Skimpole a week before. "I've come to ask you if I can buy my trombone back."

"My dear sir—"

"After seeing your performance in the cinema just now," went on the young man, with a laugh, "I've come to the conclusion that it would be much better back with me. And, since seeing you last, I'm glad to say I've secured a good job—in the orchestra at this very hall, as a matter of fact."

"Dear me! I am delighted to hear it, my dear sir!" exclaimed Skimpole, with genuine pleasure. "These are young schoolfriends of mine. Merry and the rest! This is the young man from whom I purchased the trombone!"

Tom Merry and the others nodded amiably. They rather liked the look of the pleasant-faced young musician.

"So you want your trombone back?" remarked Tom Merry. "Well, we shan't be sorry!"

"Really, Merry!" protested Skimpole. "However, in the circumstances, I certainly do not feel that I have any moral right to the instrument. You may have it back for precisely what I paid for it."

"Good man! When I've earned enough to put me on my feet again, there'll be a little present for you to compensate you for your trouble!" said the trombonist. "Well, if you're ready to make the exchange now—"

"I am quite ready, my dear sir!"

"Then I'll settle with you here and now."

With that, the young man dived his hand into his pocket and pulled out a notecase.

Unintentionally, he pulled out with it an envelope, which fell to the pavement, scattering a sheaf of papers which it contained in all directions.

The juniors couldn't help noticing that the papers were all covered with music. Tom Merry bent down to pick up the envelope. As he did so, he uttered an exclamation:

"Great Scott!"

"What's up, Tommy?"

Tom looked up to the trombonist with a startled face.

"I don't want to pry into your business, but—but do you happen to know Mr. Pilbeam?"

The young man shook his head.

"Never heard the name! Who is he?"

"He's a master at the school. I just happened to recognise his writing on this envelope, and I believe—"

"My hat! It's the missing opera!" yelled Manners.

"Exactly! And if I'm not mistaken, this is the very envelope that Skimmy posted for Pilbeam the afternoon when we all came to Wayland!"

"Great pip!"

Skimpole's friend looked surprised.

"Well, you know more about it than I do. All I know is that I received it by post without the name and address of the sender. The music's pretty poor, from what I can make out of it!"

"That's Pilbeam's, right enough!" chuckled Monty Lowther. "Can't you see what happened? Pilbeam told us he was posting a pamphlet on counterpoint to an unemployed musician whose name was advertised in the paper. Instead of doing that, he posted him the opera, by mistake!"

"My hat! That's it, right enough!"

"Well, I certainly advertised for a job in the paper," said the trombonist. "If, as you say, this stuff was posted on to me by mistake, you'd better take it back to the owner. I don't want it!"

"Saved!" yelled Figgins. "With this in your hand, Skimmy, you can face Pilbeam with confidence. It's duffer's luck, and no mistake!"

"Good old Skimmy!" grinned Hancock. "You'll get off with six on each hand, after all. Lucky old man!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And that was that! The juniors took leave of the trombonist who had unwittingly put a fresh complexion on things at St. Jim's, and went off to the place where they had parked their bikes, in a much happier frame of mind than they had previously thought possible.

CHAPTER 13.

Thank You, Skimpole!

"SCANDALOUS!"

Mr. Pilbeam fairly snorted out the word. Having previously discovered that Skimpole was not on the school premises, he had just telephoned through to the Wayland Cinema. There he had been informed that Skimpole was at that moment actually on the stage, performing.

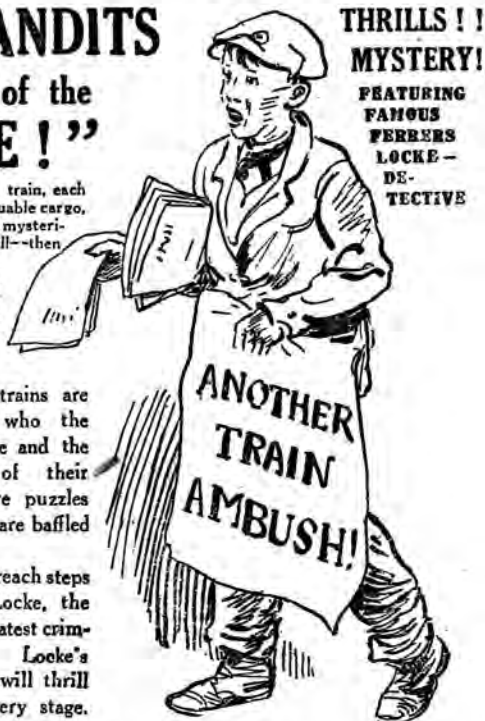
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"MAGNET." 2^D.

Not unnaturally, the musical master of the Shell had slammed down the receiver in a first-class rage.

He quitted the Masters' Common-room where he had been using the phone, and went downstairs.

Blake and a crowd of Fourth-Formers were just leaving the House for a late start at net practice. Mr. Pilbeam held them up with an imperious gesture.

"Blake! Do you happen to know the present whereabouts of Skimpole?"

"Hem! I fancy he's gone out cycling, sir," replied Blake, who had arrived at the bike-shed earlier in the afternoon in time to see the pursuit of Skimpole begin. "Can't say for sure, of course, where he's gone, but—"

"Pewwaps, as this is a mattah wequiwint' tact an' judgment, I had better explain it," suggested Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "The fact is, sir, Tom Mewwy an' his friends have buzzed off to Wayland aftah Skimpole for a—sort of private weason of biznay an'—Ow! Why are you treading on my toes, Blake, you wottah?"

"You—you—"

"Silence!" snapped Mr. Pilbeam. "It is quite clear to me that Skimpole went to Wayland for a forbidden reason, and that Merry and other boys have followed him up with the object of preventing him doing what I forbade him to do!"

"Oh!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Skimpole, at this very moment," said the Shell master bitterly, "is rendering himself and his school ridiculous by futile endeavours to play the trombone at a house of entertainment in Wayland. He is doing so in defiance of my specific instructions in the matter. Very well; he shall pay the penalty!"

"Oh deah!"

"Kindly inform Skimpole as soon as he comes in that I wish to see him without delay. That is all!" snapped Mr. Pilbeam.

And he went off, leaving the Fourth-Formers in no doubt as to what sort of a time Skimpole was booked for when he returned!

In the course of time the genius of the Shell duly returned with his bodyguard of St. Jim's juniors.

Having put his bike away, he listened to Blake's message, and went straight across to the School House and up to Mr. Pilbeam's study, leaving Tom Merry & Co. to tell the amazing story of the afternoon's adventures to a deeply interested crowd.

Mr. Pilbeam was pacing his study like a caged lion when he entered. The master of the Shell greeted him with a basilisk glare.

"So you have chosen to ignore my orders, Skimpole?" he roared. "That being so, my threat to take you before the Head will hold good. Follow me!"

"With pleasure, my dear sir!" said Skimpole, blinking nervously up at the enraged musician of St. Jim's. "There is just one point before we go—"

"Don't bandy words with me, sir!"

"I have been fortunate enough to find your missing musical score," said Skimpole.

Mr. Pilbeam jumped.

"What!"

"Here it is, sir. I found that you had posted it erroneously to your correspondent at Wayland, thinking it to be a pamphlet on counterpoint!"

"What—what—" gasped Mr. Pilbeam.

Then he gave up trying to speak, and snatched the bundle from Skimpole's hand, sorting out the papers and running his eye over them with frantic haste.

"They are all there, I trust, my dear sir?" asked Skimpole.

Mr. Pilbeam placed the bundle with reverent care in a drawer of his desk, then mopped his brow.

"Thank Heaven!" he murmured, quite brokenly. "Yes, my boy, they are all there. Skimpole! You have rendered me a service for which I can never repay you!"

"I confess that I am glad to have been of assistance," said Skimpole mildly. "And now, if you are ready to see the headmaster—"

Mr. Pilbeam smiled—a broad, beaming smile such as had not been seen on his lean face since the loss of his precious music.

"There will be no question of going to the Head now, my boy. I forgive you—freely forgive you—in view of the magnificent thing you have done for me. Furthermore, you may tell your Form-fellows that to celebrate this felicitous happening, I will obtain for them, subject to the Head's confirmation, an extra half-holiday next Monday."

"Thank you, my dear sir!"

"And thank you, Skimpole—thank you a thousand times, my good lad!" beamed Mr. Pilbeam. "Now you may go, Skimpole!"

Skimpole went.

A crowd met him outside with a host of questions.

"What happened?"

"What did the beak say?"

"What's the verdict, Skimmy?"

"Really, my good youths, there is little to tell," said Skimpole. "Mr. Pilbeam thanked me."

"For the music-score, of course!" nodded Tom Merry.

"But what else?"

"Nothing else!"

"But what about the Wayland Cinema stunt, ass?" howled Gore. "Surely he said something about that?"

"Oh, that! He said that, in the circumstances, he freely forgave me."

"What!"

"That, after all, was the only just course he could have taken," said Skimpole simply. "Oh, I forgot to mention also, my dear fellows, that Mr. Pilbeam has decided to commemorate the recovery of his music by granting the Form a half-day's holiday next Monday!"

"An—an extra half!"

"Precisely!"

"Hurrah!" went up a delighted howl from the Shell crowd.

"I was just thinking—" added Skimpole.

"Give it a rest, old bean!"

"On a recent occasion," said the genius of the Shell, unheeding, "I invited Merry and several others to partake of edibles at Wayland at my expense. That proposed party unfortunately, did not take place!"

"No need to remind us!" grinned Lowther.

"Now that I am comparatively affluent," said Skimpole, "there is no reason why I should not act as host at the school shop. Would you all care to accompany me there, my good youths?"

"What-ho!"

Skimpole led the way, and half the Lower School followed him across the quad to Dame Taggles' tuckshop. And there, amid great enthusiasm, was drunk, in glasses of foaming ginger-pop, a toast to an article whose brief, but hectic, career at St. Jim's had certainly added to the gaiety of the old school—namely, Skimpole's Trombone!

THE END.

(Good Old Skimmy, he's given St. Jim's some more amusement! Next week George Alfred Grundy returns to the limelight in "BATTLING GRUNDY!")

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TUBBY MUFFIN—"ALSO RAN"!

By OWEN CONQUEST.

CHAPTER 1.
Wednesday's Winner!

"JOLLY ROGER—"

"Who?"

"Jolly Roger," repeated Tubby Muffin.

Jimmy Silver & Co. had been talking cricket in the end study when Tubby Muffin rolled in. They were discussing an important matter—the match with Manders' House on Wednesday.

But they ceased to talk cricket and stared at Cecil Adolphus Reginald Muffin in surprise.

"Jolly Roger?" repeated Jimmy.

"That's him!" said Tubby eagerly and ungrammatically.

"I say, he's certain to win on Wednesday!"

Surprise in the faces of the Fistical Four changed to astonishment, not to say amazement.

They blinked at Tubby Muffin.

Who was going to win on Wednesday was a rather important matter. Jimmy Silver & Co. were persuaded that the Classics were

going to win, because on the

Classical side at Rookwood

they played cricket, with an

accent on the "played."

Tommy Dodd & Co. were

convinced that the Moderns

were going to win, because

on the Modern side they

played cricket, likewise with

the accent on the "played."

It really was a moot point; not to be settled till the last over was bowled.

The Classical team might win. The Modern team might win. But what Tubby Muffin meant by stating that Jolly Roger was certain to win was a deep mystery.

"There's no doubt about it," pursued Tubby Muffin, "I came here at once to tell you fellows. I heard it from Carthew of the Sixth."

"What does Carthew know about it?" sniffed Arthur Edward Lovell. "He's no cricketer."

"I know he isn't. That's got nothing to do with it, has it?" said Tubby Muffin. "I say, I thought you fellows would like to know."

"You frabjous ass!" said Raby. "What do you mean, if you mean anything at all?"

"I mean what I say. Jolly Roger's going to win on Wednesday," declared Muffin. "You can put your shirt on him."

"Does he mean they've got a new man in the Modern team?" asked Newcome in wonder. "I've not heard of any Modern man named Roger, except old Manders himself."

"Who is this man, anyhow?" asked Jimmy Silver.

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Tubby put his shirt on a "cert"!
The "cert" was last—the shirt was
lost! What did poor Tubby do then?

"It isn't a man, you ass!" gasped Muffin. "How could it be a man, you fathead?"

"Of course he isn't a man, ass; but we call the fellows men, fathead, don't we, chump? What's his name?"

"Eh? His name's Jolly Roger, of course."

"Roger what?" asked Newcome.

"Eh? Nothing!" said Muffin. "You fellows don't seem to understand I'm speaking of Jolly Roger, who's going to win on Wednesday."

"How can he win if they're not playing him, you frabjous fathead?" roared Lovell. "Is he at Rookwood?"

"How could he be at Rookwood? He's in the stable at Latcham."

"In the stable?" ejaculated Jimmy Silver.

"He's a horse!" shrieked Muffin.

"A—a—a horse!"

"Yes, you dummy!"

"Is the fat idiot mad?" gasped Lovell. "What's a horse got to do with the House match on Wednesday?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Jimmy Silver. He caught on at last. "Muffin isn't talking about the House match."

"What is he talking about, then? He said that Jolly Roger, whoever he is, is going to win on Wednesday. There's nothing on on Wednesday except the House match."

"It's the race day at Latcham!" roared Muffin. "Jolly Roger's going to win the Latcham Stakes."

It was out at last!

The Fistical Four had been thinking of cricket, and, to their innocent minds, who would win on Wednesday meant who would win the House match. But other matters were going on in the great county of Hampshire as well as cricket at Rookwood. And Muffin, evidently, was thinking of one of the other matters.

Evidently he had picked up some racing news from Carthew, the sportsman of the Sixth. Equally evidently, he was full of it; in fact, almost bursting with it.

"Race day—Latcham Stakes!" repeated Arthur Edward Lovell. "You fat fooling frump; have you come here to give us Carthew's blackguardism at second-hand? We were talking cricket!"

"Oh, blow cricket!" interrupted Tubby Muffin.

"Blow cricket!" gasped Lovell.

"Yes! Blow it, bother it!" said Tubby. "I came here to tell you fellows: to put you on it, you know. Jolly Roger's going to win on Wednesday. Carthew of the Sixth got it from a man in the stable—practically straight from the horse's mouth—his very words. He told Frampton that you can get three to one against Jolly Roger."

Tubby's eyes sparkled in his fat face.

"I'm telling you fellows, as you're my friends," he said.

"I can tell you, you can put your shirt on Jolly Roger."

You can put your Sunday socks on him. It's the chance of a lifetime."

"And what about it?" demanded Jimmy Silver.

"What about it?" repeated Tubby. "Well, I like that! I've given you the tip—a sure snip! I'm going to back Jolly Roger for Wednesday."

"You are?" gasped Newcome.

"Yes, rather! Why, if you put a pound on Jolly Roger, you get three pounds after the race. Worth a fellow's while, what? The only difficulty at the present moment is that I haven't got the pound."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My idea," pursued Tubby, "is this. I've put you on to a good thing. In return, you lend me a pound."

"We—we—we lend you a pound to back a horse in a race?" stuttered Arthur Edward Lovell.

"Yes, old chap. We shall have to keep it dark, of course. Fellows might be sacked for that sort of thing. The Head's an old frump, you know. He wouldn't understand. Now, a pound will be five bob from each of you," said Tubby. "It's worth that for the tip I've given you, what?"

"Great Christopher Columbus!"

"Besides, I shall square out of my winnings," added Tubby. "It's only a loan till Wednesday, you know."

Jimmy Silver rose to his feet. His comrades followed his

example. Tubby Muffin had made his meaning clear at last. The Fistical Four also had a meaning to make clear.

"So you're going blagging, like that dingy outsider, Carthew of the Sixth," said Jimmy. "You've come to the right shop, Muffin."

"You'll lend me the pound?" asked Muffin eagerly.

"Nunno! Not quite! Collar him!"

"Here, I say—" roared Tubby Muffin, as the chums of the Classical Fourth collared him. "I say— Yarooooh! Wharrer you up to? Leggo! Oooh!"

"Bang his napper on the table!" said Jimmy.

Bang! Bang! There was a fearful yell in the end study.

"Now pour the ink down his neck—"

"Yow—ow—ow! Oh crikey! You rotters! Yow—ow!"

"Now bump him—hard!"

"Yaroooooop!"

"And now," said Jimmy Silver cheerily, "we'll kick you out, Muffin. And if you ever think of backing horses again, and getting yourself sacked from Rookwood, drop into this study and tell us. We'll give you some more of the same."

"Yow-ow-ow!" howled the hapless Muffin.

"All kick together!" said Jimmy Silver.

Four boots were planted on the podgy person of Cecil Adolphus Reginald Muffin. He flew through the study doorway like a stone from a catapult. There was a crash in the passage as he landed, and a roar.

"Let's kick him as far as the stairs!" suggested Lovell.

Tubby Muffin did not wait to be kicked as far as the stairs. He scrambled up and fled for his fat life, leaving the Fistical Four chuckling.

In the end study, cricket "jaw" was resumed. The question of who was going to win on Wednesday interested the Fistical Four; but they were not thinking of Jolly Roger. And Tubby Muffin, for a time at least, had something else to think of.

CHAPTER 2.

Muffin Means Business!

"BUCK up, old bean!"

It was the following afternoon—Saturday.

Games practice was the order of the day; Jimmy Silver & Co. were getting into trim for the coming match with the Moderns. But Arthur Edward Lovell had lines to do for Mr. Dalton. Lovell, that morning in class, had been unable to resist the temptation to give another fellow a playful poke with the business end of a pair of compasses. The fellow, surprised, had yelled, and fifty lines had accrued to Lovell. He had to write them out before he could join up at cricket.

Jimmy and Raby and Newcome saw him started, at the table in the end study, bade him buck up, and left him to it. They walked cheerily down the Fourth-Form passage with their bats under their arms.

By the passage window, a fat figure stood scanning the columns of a newspaper. It was the "Latcham Gazette," a paper of local and limited circulation, and the peruser thereof was Cecil Adolphus Reginald Muffin. Muffin was so keen on his perusal that he did not observe the three juniors coming along, and they glanced at him curiously. Raby playfully twitched the paper as he passed, and Muffin gave a jump.

Jimmy Silver gave a jump, too, as he noticed the big, displayed advertisement on which Tubby's eyes had been glued. In large type, across two columns, ran the thrilling announcement:

"BENNIE ALWAYS PAYS!"

Smaller type gave particulars of Mr. Benjamin Kewte, turf accountant, of Latcham, who was always prepared to do business on fair and honourable terms with any gentleman of sporting tastes. His name, his address, his telephone number, and his photograph, were all given, for the edification of readers of the "Latcham Gazette." Chief among the qualities of Benjamin, it appeared, was the fact that he always paid; which seemed to hint that gentlemen in Benjamin's line did not always pay. Perhaps they didn't. Thrice was repeated, in large type, that reassuring statement—"BENNIE ALWAYS PAYS!"

Jimmy Silver, by that time, had forgotten Jolly Roger. Now he was reminded of that quadruped.

Tubby was in possession of a "sure snip"—a "dead cert"—a piece of information "straight from the horse's mouth." Tubby was not going to lose the chance of a lifetime—not if Tubby could help it. Benjamin Kewte was prepared to accept commissions by telephone, according to his advertisement. Tubby was prepared to give him a commission by telephone. And the fact that Bennie always paid interested Tubby keenly. When Jolly Roger romped home on Wednesday, with Tubby's money on him, Tubby had a natural

desire to be paid his winnings. If Bennie always paid, Bennie obviously was the man with whom Reginald Muffin wanted to get in touch.

Meanwhile, Arthur Edward Lovell, in the end study, was grinding out lines.

He ground them out at quite a considerable rate of speed; at such a rate of speed, in fact, that Mr. Dalton was likely to have some difficulty in discovering what they meant, if he read them over. But Dicky Dalton was a good-natured gentleman, and his cheerful pupils were rather given to relying on his good nature. Lovell finished his lines in record time, and started for Mr. Dalton's study to deliver the goods.

As he tapped at Mr. Dalton's door, in Masters' passage, and opened it, Lovell heard a movement in the study.

A glance into the study, however, showed that it was not Mr. Dalton. Arthur Edward Lovell stared across the room at a fat figure that stood holding the receiver of Mr. Dalton's telephone.

Evidently Dalton was out, and Muffin of the Fourth had taken advantage of the fact to borrow his telephone.

That was no business of Lovell's. He had, in fact, done the same thing himself on occasion. He stepped into the study.

Muffin had his back to the door, and had not heard it open. He was speaking into the transmitter.

"Is that Latcham two-four? Right! I want to speak to Mr. Kewte—Mr. Benjamin Kewte!"

Arthur Edward Lovell jumped.

He knew the name and fame of the gentleman who always paid! Bennie's striking advertisements were well known.

"My hat!" gasped Lovell.

That idiot, Muffin—that born chump, Muffin—that benighted bandersnatch, Muffin—was telephoning to a racing man—and using his Form master's telephone for the purpose! It almost took Lovell's breath away! Dalton himself might have come into the study and heard what Lovell had heard! A Head's flogging would have been a "dead cert" for Muffin, in that case; a "deader" cert, so to speak, than Jolly Roger!

"You fat idiot!" roared Lovell.

Tubby Muffin started so suddenly that he almost dropped the receiver. He spun round and stared at Lovell.

"Oh! You!" he gasped. For a moment Tubby had feared that it was someone more formidable than another fellow in the Fourth.

Lovell laid his lines on Mr. Dalton's table. Then he crossed over to Muffin, with a grim countenance.

"Drop that receiver, you benighted ass!"

"Shan't! I say, shut up, I'm through!" gasped Muffin, and he turned to the telephone again.

Bennie was not destined to hear from Reginald Muffin, however. Had he heard from him, it was highly improbable that Bennie would have accepted a commission from Tubby—at least, had Tubby told him the facts. But Bennie did not have the chance, anyhow. Lovell grabbed the receiver away from Muffin with his left hand; with his right he grabbed Muffin by the collar. The receiver was jammed back on the hooks, and Tubby Muffin was sent sprawling into the middle of the study with a swing of Arthur Edward's powerful arm.

Bump!

"Ow!" spluttered Tubby.

Lovell gave him a glare.

"You footling ass! You flabby freak! You want to be flogged or sacked? Get out!"

"Ow! Rotter! Yah! Mind your own business! Ow! Wow!" roared Tubby, as Lovell proceeded to kick him.

Lovell had a large size in feet. His leg muscles had been developed on the Soccer field. Tubby had the benefit of it now.

The fat Classical squirmed and rolled and roared and squeaked. He yelled and howled and spluttered. And a Form master who was coming up the passage gave a start of astonishment as he heard the wild weird sounds that proceeded from his study.

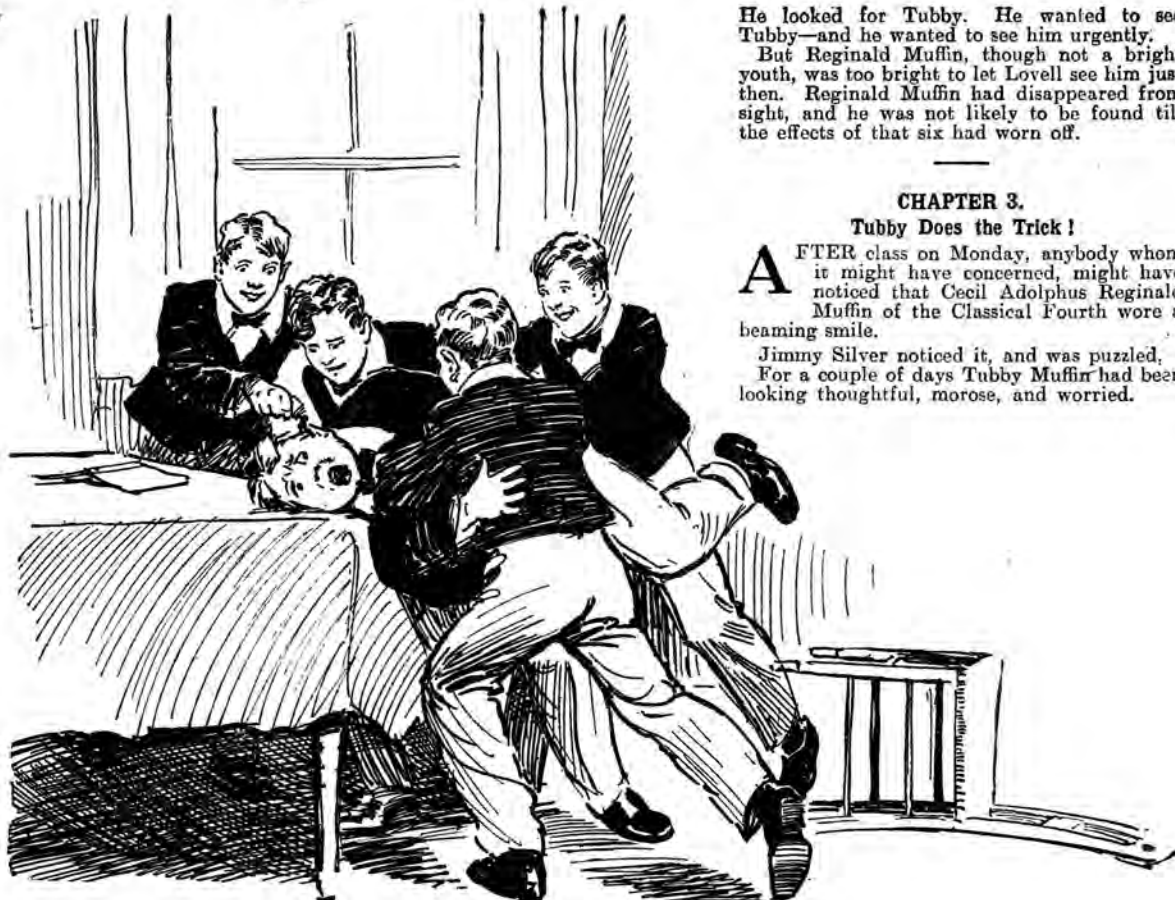
"What the dickens!" exclaimed Mr. Dalton.

He hurried his steps, and arrived at the study doorway. He stared in, with eyes wide open with astonishment. Never had Mr. Dalton, in all his experience as a schoolmaster, beheld such a sight as that of one member of his Form kicking another member of his Form round his study. He almost gaped.

"Yarooooh! Stoppit! Yah! Rotter! Leave-off!" raved Tubby Muffin. "If you kick me again, you beast, I'll— Yaroooooop!"

"Take that, you fat chump—and that—and that!" Lovell

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"Yow—ow—ow! Oh crikey! You rotters! Yow—ow!" yelled the helpless Muffin, as the Fistical Four set about him!

was warming to the work. He felt that Tubby needed a lesson, and he was giving him one. Like Hamlet, he felt that he must be cruel only to be kind. This was better for Muffin than the Head's flogging he was asking for. "Take that—and that—and—oh, my only hat!"

"Lovell!" thundered Mr. Dalton.

Lovell stopped, with a foot suspended in the air like Mohammed's coffin. He stared at his Form master.

"Yaroooh! Oh! Oh dear! Oh crikey! Ow!" roared Muffin. "Ow! Wow! Ooooh!"

"Lovell! Muffin! What does this mean? In my study!" exclaimed Mr. Dalton, in just wrath. "Lovell! Muffin!"

"I—I—I came with my—my lines, sir!" gasped Lovell.

"Oh crumbs!" gasped Muffin. He scrambled up, spluttering for breath, and blinked at Richard Dalton. "I—I—Oh crikey!"

"Why are you in my study, Muffin?"

"I—I didn't come to use the telephone, sir!" gasped Tubby.

"What?" exclaimed Mr. Dalton.

"I—I—I mean—" stammered Tubby.

"Lovell, why were you kicking Muffin in that—that ruffianly manner?"

Lovell was not likely to tell Mr. Dalton that.

"He—he—he wanted kicking, sir," stammered Lovell.

"Muffin, you will take a hundred lines for coming here to use my telephone without permission. You may go. Lovell, I shall cane you for this riotous conduct in my study." Richard Dalton picked up a cane from the table. "Bend over that chair, Lovell!"

Tubby Muffin grinned as he fled. He heard the swishing of the cane as he went down the passage. Lovell was getting "six."

Lovell did not grin. Six from an athletic gentleman like Richard Dalton was not a grinning matter. Lovell was wriggling as he left the study a few minutes after Tubby, and his face was red with wrath. He was overdue on the cricket ground, but he did not proceed there immediately.

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He looked for Tubby. He wanted to see Tubby—and he wanted to see him urgently.

But Reginald Muffin, though not a bright youth, was too bright to let Lovell see him just then. Reginald Muffin had disappeared from sight, and he was not likely to be found till the effects of that six had worn off.

CHAPTER 3.

Tubby Does the Trick!

AFTER class on Monday, anybody whom it might have concerned, might have noticed that Cecil Adolphus Reginald Muffin of the Classical Fourth wore a beaming smile.

Jimmy Silver noticed it, and was puzzled. For a couple of days Tubby Muffin had been looking thoughtful, morose, and worried.

With the surest of sure snips in his possession, Muffin had been unable to back his fancy. He saw the chance of a lifetime passing him by. It was enough to worry any fellow.

Now his worry seemed to have lifted. And Jimmy Silver, noticing the fat and fatuous grin of satisfaction on Tubby's chubby face, wondered uneasily whether the born ass of Rookwood had succeeded in playing the giddy ox—in spite of the kickings that had been given him for his own good.

He tapped Muffin on a fat shoulder.

"What's up?" he asked.

Tubby Muffin grinned at him.

"I've done it!" he said loftily.

"You've done what, you benighted ass?"

"You can't jolly well stop me, too!" grinned Muffin. "Like your cheek to chip in between a sportsman and his fancy. I've written to Bennie."

"Oh, my only hat!" ejaculated Jimmy Silver.

"I've asked him," said Tubby, with dignity, "to put five pounds for me on Jolly Roger. I thought of a pound at first; but, dash it all, a man may as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb. Five pounds means that I get fifteen pounds after the race—if Bennie takes me on."

"You—you've told him you're well off!" gurgled Jimmy. "I've mentioned a few facts," said Tubby, in the same dignified manner. "Of course, he will want to know the sort of man he is dealing with. You can stare, if you like, Jimmy Silver! You'll be jolly envious on Wednesday, when I go over to Latham to collect fifteen pounds."

"Oh, my Aunt Jemima!" gasped Jimmy Silver. "You—you—you— Oh, there ain't a word for you! You've been crass idiot enough to post a letter addressed to Bennie Kewte in the school box? Suppose a beak saw it—"

Tubby chuckled.

"Not such an ass!" he grinned. "I've asked Gunner to post it for me in the village. He's gone down to Coombe. Safe enough in the village post office. Catch me posting it

in the school box!" Tubby laughed derisively. "Not so green as that, Jimmy!"

"You fat frump! Do you know what would happen to you if the Head or Mr. Dalton found that you'd written that letter?" roared Jimmy.

The fat Classical waved a podgy hand at him.

"You leave me alone, Jimmy. You don't understand a sporting chap. You're a soft spooney, you know. A back number. But I'll tell you what; I'm going to stand a ripping spread out of my fifteen pounds on Wednesday! I'll ask you, if you're civil."

Tubby Muffin rolled on, his fat little nose in the air, the beaming smile of satisfaction still irradiating his face.

Jimmy stared after him. His first impulse was to charge after Muffin and kick him across the quad, for his own good. He checked the impulse as another thought came into his mind. He acted on second thoughts, which are proverbially the best. He scudded away to the bike-shed, wheeled out his bike, and started down the road to Coombe as if bent on breaking records, or, alternatively, as the lawyers say, his own neck.

Tubby had said that Gunner of the Fourth had gone down to the village, and had taken that letter to the post. Jimmy scorched along Coombe Lane, with his eyes open for Gunner.

Two-thirds of the way to Coombe, he spotted the burly form of Peter Cuthbert Gunner proceeding at a leisurely pace. With a rush and a whirl, he overtook Gunner, and jumped down.

Gunner glanced round.

"You've got a letter to post for Muffin?" gasped Jimmy.

Gunner nodded.

"You don't know where it's addressed?"

"Think I'd look at it?" grunted Gunner.

"No. old chap; but you might have asked Muffin why he wanted it posted in the village instead of at the school."

"No bizney of mine," said Gunner.

"If you knew it was going to a bookmaker—"

Peter Cuthbert Gunner jumped.

"What?" he roared.

"That's why I came after you," gasped Jimmy. "The fat fool's landing himself in trouble. Trot out that letter."

Gunner drew a letter from his pocket. The two juniors looked at it. It was addressed:

"B. Kewte, Esq., Markett Plaice, Latcham."

in a sprawling hand, and original spelling of Reginald Muffin. Gunner breathed hard.

"Why, I'll smash him!" he exclaimed. "I'll—"

Jimmy had intended to make short work of that precious "commission" for Mr. Kewte. But he was saved the trouble. Gunner tore it across, and across again; tore the fragments into yet smaller fragments, and hurled the remains into the ditch beside Coombe Lane.

"I'll smash him!" he repeated.

"Getting me to post a letter to a bookie! Why, he might be sacked for this—and me, too, for having a hand in it! I'll mop up Rookwood with him!"

Jimmy Silver grinned. Another idea was working in the active brain of Uncle James of Rookwood.

"Keep it dark," he said. "Let the frumpious fathead think that Bennie's got his letter. It will do him good when the gee-gee comes in fifteenth or sixteenth on Wednesday, and he fancies he owes a bookie five pounds."

Gunner stared. Then he grinned.

"Right-ho! I'll kick him when I get back to the school, but I won't tell him what I'm licking him for, see?"

And it was left at that.

Gunner walked on, and Jimmy biked back to Rookwood. He joined his chums in the end study at tea, and there was a sound of laughter in that study. An hour later there was a sound in the Fourth Form passage of woe, indignation, and lamentation. Peter Cuthbert Gunner was kicking Reginald Muffin, for what reason he did not explain—not that any

explanation would have consoled Muffin. It was the kicking that mattered.

CHAPTER 4.

The Winner!

"HOLD on, Muffin!"

"Rats!" said Tubby Muffin.

It was the following day—Tuesday—the day before two great events. One the House match at Rookwood, the other, the race for the Latcham Stakes at Latcham. The former event interested most of the Rookwood juniors. But it was the latter that filled the fat mind of Cecil Adolphus Reginald Muffin.

Muffin rolled down to the gates after classes were over with the intention of heading for Coombe Post Office to collect a letter there. Bennie's reply was due by that time. Muffin had no doubt that Bennie would reply, being in blissful ignorance of the fate of his epistle to Bennie. And he wanted to get the voucher which registered his commission to Bennie, and which would entitle him—perhaps—to draw fifteen pounds from Bennie after the race on Wednesday.

To his surprise, the Fistical Four bore down on him and surrounded him before he reached the gates, and told him to hold on.

Seldom, or never, had the leading spirits of the Classical Fourth shown any desire for Tubby's company. Generally they seemed to want to avoid it. Now, apparently, they yearned for it.

"What about games practice?" asked Jimmy.

"Look here, you rotters, if you think you're going to stop me getting that letter from the post office—"

"This way to cricket!" said Lovell.

"I won't come, you beast!" roared Muffin. "Look here, I'm going to get my letter. It's addressed to the post office to be called for. It's there by this time. It's got my voucher in it."

"Like me to help you along?" asked Lovell.



Tubby Muffin was at the phone as Lovell approached him. "Drop that receiver, you benighted ass!" snapped Lovell.

"Leggo, you beast, or I'll yell to a prefect!" gasped Muffin desperately. "There's Bulkeley over there!"

"And tell him you're going to collect a letter from a bookie!" chuckled Raby.

"Oh, you awful rotter!"

"This way, you podgy, pernicious punter!"

With feelings too deep for words, Tubby Muffin was marched back. He changed for cricket—under the personal supervision of Jimmy Silver & Co., and accompanied those cheery youths to Little Side.

That night, in the Classical Fourth dormitory, Tubby dreamed of wealth. After breakfast next morning he attempted a retreat, which was promptly nipped in the bud by Jimmy Silver. Tubby had no chance of rolling down to Coombe before classes. In morning break he made another attempt. But he was headed off by the Fistical Four.

The afternoon was a half-holiday, and Tubby supposed that, at long last, he would be able to get away and collect that mythical letter from Bennie at Coombe Post Office. But he was mistaken.

Jimmy Silver, Raby, and Lovell were in the Classical eleven that played Tommy Dodd & Co. on Little Side. But Newcome was not playing, and Newcome kindly devoted his attention to Muffin.

Muffin had no desire whatever to watch the House match. But he watched it. Newcome saw to that. There was no escape for Muffin.

He longed to see the evening paper, with the name "JOLLY ROGER," in large type, as the winner of the Latcham Stakes. Evening papers came to Rookwood, but they came rather late. It was not till after prep that Tubby had an opportunity of bagging an evening paper from Masters' Common-room.

Four grinning faces watched Reginald Muffin when he rolled into the Fourth Form passage, with the paper tucked under his jacket. Jimmy Silver & Co. had already seen an evening paper, crumpled and tossed savagely away by

Thrilling Yarn of Mystery and Cricket.

"THE CRICKETER CRACKSMAN!"

By RICHARD RANDOLPH.

Carthew of the Sixth. So they already knew the interesting result of Jolly Roger's race.

"Read it out, old fat bean!" called out Lovell.

Tubby Muffin extracted the paper from under his jacket, and blinked at the Fistical Four, with a lofty and scornful blink.

"I've got it here," he said; "the result's in this paper! Now you can jolly well turn green with envy!"

"I don't think!" chuckled Raby.

Sniff, from Reginald Muffin.

"You've stopped me getting my voucher; but it's at the post office waiting for me, all right!" he sneered. "Bennie can't go back on his own voucher. Besides, Bennie always pays—it says so in the advertisements. If you beasts hadn't meddled, I could have gone over to Latcham this afternoon to collect fifteen pounds. I'm going to-morrow, and I hope you'll have the decency to lend me my fare. That's the least you can do, after meddling with a man's sporting affairs."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You can cackle!" hooted Tubby. "You'll cackle on the other side of your mouths when you see the result in this paper."

Tubby opened the paper. The Fistical Four watched him with interest. So did several other Fourth-Formers who had heard of Tubby's plunge. All of them were grinning.

All of them knew what Tubby did not yet know, but what he was just going to know.

"Where is it?" mumbled Tubby, peering over the stop-press column. "Oh, here it is. 'Latcham Stakes. Bonny Boy, Ace of Spades, Pink Tulip'—they don't seem to mention Jolly Roger—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, stop cackling, when a fellow's trying to find his winner!" exclaimed Tubby irritably. "What do they mean by printing Bonny Boy, Ace of Spades, and Pink Tulip? The winner's name ought to come first—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the juniors.

"You frabjous ass!" roared Lovell. "The winner's name does come first—Bonny Boy's the winner, and Ace of Spades and Pink Tulip are second and third."

Tubby Muffin jumped.

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"You silly ass!" he gasped. "Jolly Roger's the winner; they've got the names wrong. He was a sure snip—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"A—a dead cert—it was straight from the horse's mouth!" gasped Muffin. "He—he had to win—he must have won! Carthew said—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, shut up cackling!" shrieked Muffin. "They've no right to make mistakes like this in racing results. It—it's a shame! They've got the wrong horse down as winner—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Read farther on!" chuckled Jimmy Silver.

Tubby Muffin read farther on. And what he read was!

"ALSO RAN: Trumps, King Cole, Sweetbriar, Lucette, Jolly Roger."

Tubby's jaw dropped.

"Also ran!" he mumbled.

Tubby had heard of "also rans" before! Slowly but surely it dawned upon his podgy brain that Jolly Roger, the sure snip, the dead cert, the dark horse, the gee that had only to romp home, had come in at the tail of the field. His name came last in the "also rans."

"Oh!" gasped Tubby.

The paper fluttered from his fat fingers. He blinked round at hilarious faces.

"He—he—he hasn't won!" he gasped.

"Not quite!" chortled Lovell. "Not exactly! No need to go over to Latcham to collect the winnings in a sack."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, Tubby will have to go over to Latcham, all right!" roared Gunner. "He will have to go over to Latcham to pay Bennie a fiver."

Tubby Muffin jumped again. He had not thought of that ghastly aspect of the case for the moment. But it was indubitable. If he had not won, he had lost; if Bennie did not have to pay him fifteen pounds, he had to pay Bennie five pounds!

"Oh!" gurgled Tubby.

"Three to one, wasn't it?" chortled Lovell. "You owe Bennie a fiver, Muffin! Bennie always pays—and he will want to be paid!"

"Oh!" gurgled Tubby again. "I—I say, Jimmy, c-c-can you lend me five pounds?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I—I say, s-s-somebody lend me five pounds—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

STARTS IN NEXT WEEK'S

GEM!

Watch Out for the Opening Chapters!

Nobody, apparently, was going to lend Reginald Muffin five pounds. Tubby staggered away to his study in a state of collapse. He left the Classical Fourth shrieking.

Tubby Muffin, the next day, looked the picture of woe.

He was free, if he liked, to roll down to Coombe and collect that voucher. But he did not want to now. A voucher registering the fact that he owed Benjamin Kewte five pounds was of no value to Tubby.

But at the end of that awful day of apprehension Jimmy Silver & Co. decided that he had had enough; and they enlightened him as to the fate of his letter to Bennie.

"Oh!" gasped Muffin, when they told him.

His letter had never reached Bennie. It followed that there never had been a voucher waiting for him at Coombe Post Office, and that he did not owe a bookie five pounds, after all!

Tubby Muffin almost wept with relief. He even felt that he could forgive the Fistical Four for having pulled his fat leg. That was his first feeling. But with the sense of safety Tubby's fatuous self-satisfaction revived.

"That's all very well," he said. "But it was jolly cheeky of you to meddle with my sporting affairs—"

"What?" yelled Jimmy Silver & Co.

"Jolly cheeky!" said Muffin. "Don't let it occur again! Sheer cheek, that's what it was, and I can only say—Whoooooow!"

Tubby's remarks concluded suddenly, as four boots were planted on him at the same moment. He roared and retreated, and the Fistical Four ran in pursuit. And Tubby Muffin, like Jolly Roger, also ran!

THE END.

(Tubby gets a lot more luck than he deserves, doesn't he? Don't forget that another new, complete yarn of Rookwood will appear in next week's GEM!)



In the Air!

HUSTLER as Matt Kay Lee, senior, was, and great as was the power of money, he could not do impossibilities. He chartered a ship to sail from 'Frisco with petrol and oil and stores for the yacht, and the ship was to return with any stuff we wanted to take from the island; but it would be ten days before the vessel arrived, and those ten days were certainly the happiest of our stay on Necessity Island.

Matt said he had never seen his father so happy. The millionaire and dad got on well together. They went off shooting together, and the man used to every luxury seemed to take a sheer delight in roughing it on the island.

Matt and I spent a lot of time on the plane, oiling and making adjustments. Mother wasn't a bit keen on me making the flight; but I'd won dad round, so it was all right. The crew of the yacht chummed up with Sunday, and our tame native began to speak the little English he knew with an American accent that one could have cut with a knife.

Then the ship rolled up. She'd left petrol at Hawaii, which was to be our first hop, and whilst stores for the yacht were being unloaded, we were busy filling our petrol-tanks. An air kit had been sent for me. It wasn't a perfect fit, but I know I was frightfully swanky about it—though the wearing of it in the glare of Necessity Island was like being in a Turkish bath.

It had been arranged that all the others, bringing with them the treasure trove and the papers of the wrecked Maglo, should leave on the yacht immediately after we had taken the air, and that the steamer Kay Lee had chartered should bring along the motor-car and any heavier stuff we

desired to preserve. The buildings and furniture and stores we were going to leave behind, and the millionaire said that any future castaway there would find himself in luck.

"But miss an awful lot of fun!" said Dud, and Matt Kay Lee, senior, gave him an approving nod.

Old Dud, who had been such a wash-out before we had left England, seemed a man of whom even millionaires took notice now.

I was all impatience to be off. The charm of the island had gone. I longed to be back in civilisation, and I was tingling with excitement as we wheeled the plane into position for taking off. Jill had old Nigger tied to a piece of rope. He looked so troubled about all these unusual happenings that I wished I could make him understand that it was quite O.K., and that he would soon be scampering over the English countryside.

I shook hands with old Lee, dad, Dudley, and with the grinning Sunday. I kissed mother and Jill, and I noticed that though Matt didn't kiss mother he kissed Jill, and Jill sort of clung to him as though she hated him going, though she hadn't clung to me. Then we climbed up into the plane, and Matt adjusted his goggles, and Dud slowly pulled over the propeller.

"Contact!" called Matt.

Dud swung the propeller smartly and leapt back, the engine roared, and the machine quivered as we moved over the stretch of yellow sand and began to rise in the air.

I looked back. There was the island which had been a home to us, standing on the edge of the sea the little group with poor old Nigger straining at his lead. I thought of the last time I had been in the air, with Matt picking off men in canoes, and me dropping rocks upon them, when we had been faced with a deadly peril, but had won through. As we climbed far above the great stretch of deserted blue sea I wondered whether we should win through on the journey of thousands of miles through the air to New York. I wanted to speak to Matt, but could not, and there was a lump in my throat as Necessity Island disappeared in the heat haze behind us!

We had been flying for three hours against a strong head-wind, which was increasing in force, and we were still,
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BARRY MAYNE FLIES TO NEW YORK! The final stage of a great adventure!

as near as we could judge about five hundred miles from San Francisco. Three hundred feet below was the Pacific Ocean, ahead scurrying clouds, and it was decidedly chilly.

The gale had taken us by surprise, for there had been no sign of it when we had left Hawaii in glorious weather that morning, and in ten hours we had covered a thousand miles; but then our progress had been considerably slowed, and now night was falling—and so was our petrol-gauge—and though there would be few hours of darkness, they promised to be unpleasant ones.

Would the petrol last until we fetched up on the American coast? That was the big question that was worrying me, and I was pretty sure that it was worrying Matt, too. Even in daylight, with shipping in the proximity, the Pacific would be anything but a pleasant landing-place; and to come down at night in the great ocean whipped into one of its most unpleasant moods could only mean one thing, and it was pretty horrible to contemplate.

We ate sandwiches and drank from our thermos flasks. We had to shout to each other to make ourselves heard above the din of the engine and the roar of the wind.

"If we run out of the wind we should just about do it," said Matt; "but I'd give a hundred pounds a gallon for petrol just now."

"If we run out of the wind we should just about do it,"

There was a grimness in that remark that didn't tend to buck me up at all. The light was switched on over the instrument board, but I could not see the petrol gauge, and as we flew on through the night, tired and anxious, I thought what Matt would have given to have had my weight of petrol on board, and what I would have given to be rolled up comfortably in a bunk on the Hudson Star.

Dawn broke at last, and soon afterwards I saw Matt pointing ahead.

"Land!" I gave a feeble cheer and started on my last sandwich.

Matt half turned.

"But we'll be lucky if we reach it!" he shouted. "We're nearly out of petrol!"

I felt a shiver travel down my spine, and my heart was like lead. We had come through a ghastly night. Land was in sight, but descent meant death as certainly now as it would have meant it hours ago. I was peering round in the greyness of dawn to see if there was any vessel in sight, when it struck me that the plane was travelling faster, though Matt had not touched the throttle.

"Wind's veered right round," shouted Matt from the cockpit in front of me, and I saw him open all out. "With a following wind we ought just about do it. That's 'Frisco on our left."

It was one up to him as a navigator. Despite the adverse conditions, and the hours of flying in complete darkness, he had arrived practically dead on the mark, and we were looking for the aerodrome.

The engine spluttered.

We were still over the sea, but it did not worry us. Matt spotted a big field just over the coast line, a few miles out of the city, and headed for it. A quarter of an hour later we alighted safely.

Some rustics, just astir, got some petrol from a farmhouse, and we resumed our journey to 'Frisco, where, despite the early hour, a number of people had gathered to welcome us.

And as I scrambled out of the plane, stiff, tired, and hungry, a man stepped up to me.

"Guess you're Barry Mayne, and I just want your story of life on that little island. The whole world's waiting, son!"

"Well, the whole world can go on waiting until I've had some breakfast and a rest," I said. And then the police rescued us from the reporters and the crowd, and we were driven away to an hotel, where we had a jolly good breakfast and turned in for a few hours before we let the city do its best to turn our heads.

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It seemed that Matt's father had wirelessed enough of the story to set every reporter on our track. To Matt it was no new experience to be interviewed and photographed; to me it was quite a novelty, but one which soon palled. I was thankful, after a lazy day and a good night's rest, to set off on the final hop across the American continent to New York, where we arrived without incident, to receive an even warmer welcome than we had in the great City of the West.

This time we escaped to Matt Kay Lee's house in Fifth Avenue, and settled down to have a good time whilst we waited for the others to join us. Matt fitted me out with decent clothes, and I knew luxury such as I had never known before, and which seemed all the more strange after the life on Necessity Island.

It was on the night before the others were to join us in New York that Matt surprised me. We were driving home, after seeing quite a good show on Broadway, when he turned to me abruptly.

"You like me, don't you, Barry?"

"I should jolly well think I do!" I burst out.

"Do your people?"

"Of course they do!"

"Well enough to make me one of the family?"

I stared at him blankly, and the young man who had flown round the world and faced desperate adventure coolly, looked flushed and nervy.

"The fact is, I'm frightfully in love with your sister, and I want to marry her."

"I should, then," was all I had to say about it.

There was a family party at the Manor House, Malsham, in the pretty little village on the Norfolk coast. I was down there for a few days, after having passed my preliminary examination quite safely, though with not much to spare.

Dad was down, too. He was now assistant manager of a big motor company in which Matt Kay Lee, senior, had a controlling interest, and Matt, junior, had come down with him. Matt was engaged to Jill, and spent more time in England than in America.

The treasure trove had realised more than we had expected, and dad had bought the delightful old manor, with just sufficient ground to keep him and Sunday busily employed. Mother had dropped back into the social round as easily as she had dropped into the unusual life of the island, and being engaged to a prospective millionaire had not spoilt Jill a bit.

There was a job waiting for me with Matt's firm as soon as I was a fully qualified electrical engineer, but just now I wasn't thinking about that. It was a glorious day in June, and I was walking with Nigger at my heels across the fields to the cliff.

Then I heard Nigger bark, and with fluffy tail wagging and his long, pink tongue hanging out, he went dashing back to greet Dud, with an entire disregard for his immaculate and perfectly creased white flannel trousers.

"Thought I'd come after you," said Dud. "Matt's driving mother and Jill into Norwich, dad's pottering about with Sunday in that hush-hush greenhouse, where he's going to raise some tropical plants which are to startle the world, and I feel at a loose end. Let's go down on the sands."

With Nigger jumping about in front of us we descended the cliff path. It was too early yet for the holiday-makers, and we had a great stretch of sand to ourselves. I stood gulping in the bracing air.

"It reminds me of Necessity Island," I said, and I had that funny feeling in my throat again.

Dud lit a cigarette and glanced carelessly round.

"With the advantage that you can be sure of not meeting a crocodile round the corner!" he said, with a grin.

THE END.

(And there we must leave the Island Castaways! But what a story it's been! See the announcement on this page concerning our great new serial, starting Next Week!)

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The Oracle knows everything! His memory's longer than his whiskers—and that's saying something!—ED.

THE old Ed. started hurling questions at me as soon as I stuck my napper in the door of the sanctum this morning, and I had to do some pretty slick dodging in case one of them hit me. Believe me, chums, the questions were so hard that if one of them had happened to catch yours truly on the crumpey, I wouldn't have been able to put my hat on for a fortnight, owing to the bumps. Anyway, I got inside eventually and started answering up in my usual bright manner.

"First of all," said the Editor, "there's a question about volcanoes. Bill Stevens wants to know whether green flames come out of the top of volcanoes when they are in a state of eruption?"

"They do," said I. "The flames that come out of volcanoes are usually green or blue, sometimes yellow. Other things come out of volcanoes as well. Mud, for instance."

"Never heard of mud coming from a volcano," said the Ed.

"Yes," said I, "there are lots of mud volcanoes in the world, but they are not big mountains, like Etna and Vesuvius. Some of them are little mounds only a few feet high, others reach a height of four or five hundred feet, and the mud pours out in a thick stream continuously."

"Here's a query from a Kilburn reader. He wants to know whether a giraffe can laugh."

"No, Ed., a giraffe can't laugh. In fact, the jolly old giraffe is completely dumb. You'd think, listening to a giraffe, that it hadn't got a tongue in its head, but that's a mistake, believe me. The tongue of a dead giraffe will often measure seventeen inches in length."

"I see," said the Ed. "Well, Whiskers, I won't ask you anything about the giraffe's necks, but will pass on to the 'necks' question. Can you tell Harry Bates the difference between a cotter and a crofter?"

"A cotter is a peasant in Scotland who occupies a cottage on a farm and works on the farm for a wage. A crofter is a man who rents or owns a small farm."

"Can you tell Charles Paine how long stirrups have been used in horseback riding?"

"Well, Ed., the old Chinese seem to have been the first to use stirrups. The Greeks and the Romans never used them; they used to vault on to their horses, or climb on to them by using a mounting block. The largest stirrups are those used by the Arabs. They are made to take the entire sole of the foot, and have a projecting heel piece that is used as a spur."

"Did the Chinese have spurs on their stirrups?" asked the Ed.

"I expect so," said I, "but what we call the roset spur, that is, a spur made in the form of a spiked, revolving wheel, did not come into use until the fourteenth century. In the old days, gilded spurs were looked upon as the badge of knighthood, and if a knight was degraded, the spurs were hacked off of the knight's heels by the cook's chopper."

"What's a spring-gun?"

"A gun with a wire fixed to the trigger. Years ago they were used to catch poachers. Anyone tripping over the wire made the gun go off. Nowadays, the use of spring-guns and man-traps is forbidden by law."

"What is attar of roses?"

"Attar of roses is made by distilling roses. The oil obtained is very costly, worth as much as £50 a pound. In order to make an ounce of attar no less than 250 lb. of roses are needed. The manufacture of attar of roses is carried

on mainly in India and Persia, and to a less extent in France and the Balkans. The word attar is a Persian word, and means essence."

"Can you tell Arthur Crofts what an aye-aye is?"

"An aye-aye is a little animal about the size of a cat. The aye-aye lives in the bamboo forests out East, and feeds mainly on the juices of the sugar-cane, or on wood-boring caterpillars. In appearance it is dark brown with a rounded head and a short face."

"A Birchenington reader wants to know what a kham is. Can you tell him, Whiskers?"

"A kham, Ed., is the name given out in Arabia, and other places where caravans and camels are used, to a place like an inn or an hotel, where the merchants can put up for the night and get food and shelter. In Syria and Mesopotamia there are a great number of buildings for the travelling caravans to stop in. The buildings that provide shelter, but do not supply food, are called caravanserais. They are built with a central courtyard, open to the sky, and large enough to admit three or four hundred crouching camels or tethered mules. Above the courtyard there are places for sleeping in."

"Fred Dunn would like us to tell him how they tin peas. He says he reckons it must take a long time to shell the peas before they put them in the tin."

"The peas are shelled by machinery, Ed.," I explained. "In order to preserve the flavour of the peas, they have to be timed within a few hours of being picked, and in order to do this the peas are taken to the factory still on the vine, and dumped into a machine called a 'viner.' This machine saves the labour of about a thousand people, as it would take five hundred people to pick the peas in time and another five hundred to shell them. The viner consists of a cylinder containing revolving paddles. When the peas come from the viner they are passed through a cleanser, which sifts out any waste matter, after which they are washed in fresh hot water. They are put into the cans after that with a certain amount of seasoning brine, then they are sealed, and cooked. After being cooked they are cooled quickly."



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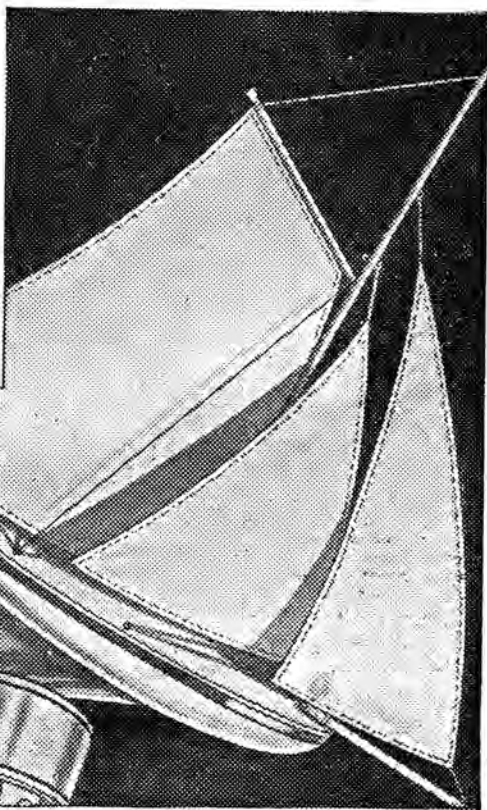
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