

"THE LOST LEGION!" A GRIPPING NEW ADVENTURE
YARN STARTS IN THIS ISSUE!

CONTINUOUS
VARIETY!
YOUR FAVOURITE
STARS—
TOM MERRY & Co
INSIDE!

The GEM

2^d



TOPPING STORY OF SCHOOL AND ADVENTURE FEATURING—

The SIXTH-FORMER'S



Why does Darrell cut footer practice? What was Darrell doing at the Wayland Theatre? Read this ripping yarn—and you will find out!

CHAPTER 1.

Tom Merry Takes a Note!

DARRELL of the Sixth came to the door of his study in the School House at St. Jim's and glanced up and down the passage.

"Fag!"

There was no fag in sight. At the call of "fag!" every youngster within hearing was supposed to hurry up to see what was wanted. As a matter of fact, they frequently hurried in the opposite direction.

"Fa-ag!"

Darrell called again, but no fag appeared.

Tom Merry, who happened to be going downstairs, looked round as he heard Darrell call a second time. Tom Merry, being in the Shell, was not called upon to fag for anyone. That was the duty of Fourth-Formers and Forms below the Fourth. But Tom was an obliging fellow, and Darrell of the Sixth was very popular with the juniors. Tom Merry turned back and ran towards Darrell's study.

"Anything I can do, Darrell?"

"Yes, Merry; I want a note taken to Kildare. Do you know where he is?"

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"He went into his study ten minutes ago."

"Good! Wait a minute here and I'll write the note."

"Right you are, Darrell!"

Tom Merry leaned against the doorpost and waited. Darrell bent at the table and scribbled a brief note. Tom Merry watched him, and he could not quite keep an expression of surprise off his face. Darrell of the Sixth looked strangely disturbed. He was one of the quietest fellows in the Sixth at St. Jim's—a fine athlete, a splendid footballer, and one of the most popular of the House prefects. His usually quiet face was alive with suppressed excitement now. He had his hat on, and his coat was lying on the table, showing that he was just going out. To leave the School House he would have to pass the door of Kildare's study, and why he could not stop there a minute to speak to the captain of St. Jim's, instead of writing a note for a fag to take, was a mystery to Tom Merry.

The pen scratched swiftly, and Darrell hastily blotted the sheet, jammed it into an envelope, and threw it to Tom Merry. In his haste he had forgotten to fasten the envelope. Tom Merry caught it.

"Take that to Kildare, Merry! Stay a minute—don't take it till I've gone out!"

—YOUR OLD FAVOURITES, TOM MERRY & CO. OF ST. JIM'S!

SECRET !

By
Martin Clifford.

"Right-ho!" said Tom Merry, trying not to look astonished. "How long shall I wait?"

"Oh, five minutes!"

And Darrell snatched up his cap, jammed it on his thick, curly hair, and strode out of the study. His rapid stride rang along the passage, and he was gone. Tom Merry stared after him, and then stared at the letter in his hand.

"Well, my word!" murmured the hero of the Shell.

He closed Darrell's door, which the Sixth-Former had left wide open in his haste, and went slowly down the passage. His chums, Manners and Lowther, were on the staircase.

They waited while Tom Merry went on to Kildare's study with the note in his hand.

Kildare had just changed into his football things, and was putting a long coat round him to go down to the ground, when Tom Merry knocked. Kildare opened the door himself.

"That you, Darrell? Hallo, Merry! What do you want? I'm afraid I can't spare a minute now—I'm just going down to the footer!"

"Note from Darrell," said Tom Merry, holding it out.

Kildare stared at it.

"From Darrell?"

"Yes."

"But—but what in goodness' name does he want to send me a note for when we're both just going down to the ground?" grunted the captain of St. Jim's. "Hallo, this is open!"

"He didn't fasten it."

"When did he give you this?"

"A few minutes ago, in his study—five or six minutes."

"Then why didn't you bring it before?" said Kildare, and, without waiting for an answer, he jerked open the letter and read the hastily scribbled note, and an expression of blank amazement appeared upon his handsome face. He stared from the letter to Tom Merry. "Hold on a minute, Merry! Where's Darrell?"

"I think he's gone out."

"Gone out! And we kick off in ten minutes!" Kildare looked through the letter again. "You are sure he has gone out already?"

"I know he left the School House five minutes back, and he had his coat and cap on."

"That settles it! You can cut!"

Tom Merry walked away. Kildare looked at the letter again, an expression of anger mingling with the amazement in his face. Darrell was his closest chum, but Kildare was football captain at St. Jim's, and he thought more of his school's reputation in the football field than of anything else. There was a stiff match coming off on Saturday, and on the present Wednesday afternoon—a half-holiday at St. Jim's—he was arranging a practice match in which to put St. Jim's First to a final test. To be suddenly deprived of his best winger at a moment's notice was a hard strain upon his patience and his friendship.

And Darrell's note was not very explicit. It ran as follows:

"Dear Kildare,—I am very sorry I cannot play this afternoon. I will put in all the practice I can between this and Saturday. I have to go out this afternoon."

"R. DARRELL."

Kildare pursed his lips. Darrell had never been known to fail like this before—he was the keenest of footballers, and the honour of St. Jim's First was as dear to him as to the captain. Kildare could not understand it. He thrust the brief note into the pocket of his coat and left the study. Rushden and Drake of the Sixth joined him in the passage.

"Where's Darrell?" asked Rushden.

"Gone out," said Kildare shortly.

"Eh? Gone out?"

"Yes; he's had to cut the practice for some reason."

Kildare's brow was sombre, and the others did not speak

again as they went down to the football ground. Most of the team were there, including Monteith and Baker of the New House, who were members of the First Eleven. Monteith came over to Kildare at once.

"I say, Darrell's just gone out," he said.

"I know," said Kildare. "He had to cut it this afternoon."

"Nothing wrong, I hope? He was looking rather queer."

"I don't know. He hasn't told me anything except that he had to go out. We shall have to find a substitute for this afternoon."

And it was not till the two teams were playing that the frown left Kildare's brow. He was annoyed by Darrell's desertion, and at the same time anxious about his chum. He felt that there must be something wrong to make Darrell act as he had done—though why the winger should not have explained was a mystery. But in the keen excitement of the game Kildare's face brightened, and he dismissed the matter from his mind.

Darrell's absence from the First Eleven was, of course, noticed by the fellows, who came round the ground to watch the scratch match. Among them three juniors of the Fourth Form commented upon it freely. Blake & Co., the chums of Study No. 6 in the School House, were in the habit of commenting freely upon everything, and the doings even of the high-and-mighty Sixth did not escape their criticisms.

"Darrell's not playing," said Blake, wagging his head in a reproving way at the team as they came into the field. "They've put in Lefevre of the Fifth as a substitute. He won't be any good for Saturday if there's anything wrong with Darrell."

"Darrell's all right," said Digby. "I saw him not an hour ago, and he was quite fit."

"Then why isn't he playing?"

"That's queer."

"The Redclyffe lot will take a lot of beating," said Blake seriously. "I don't take much interest in First Eleven football as a rule—but I like to see St. Jim's keep its head above water. Of course, junior football is the backbone of the college."

"Of course," grinned Digby.

"And we keep that going very well. Still, I was thinking of cutting footer next Saturday and going over to Redclyffe to see the First Eleven play."

"Not a bad wheeze," said Herries. "If it's a fine day we can go on our jiggers. I'll take my dog Towser along for a little run at the same time."

"If you do I'll run over him," said Jack Blake. "I'm getting fed-up with your dog Towser, and dogs generally. There's that horrid mongrel Figgins brought in the other day, and now D'Arcy minor has come to school and brought a savage beast with him. D'Arcy ought to order his young brother to kick that brute out, or have it drowned or something. Hallo! Here's Gus—dressed as if he were going to the draper's in Rycombe to talk to the blue-eyed maiden over the counter."

The last remark was made purposely for Arthur Augustus to hear as he came by. The swell of St. Jim's turned his head and fixed his eyeglass on Blake with a withering expression.

"Blake, I utterly refuse to allow you to pass these remarks on my appearance—"

"Rats!" said Blake cheerfully. "Give my kindest regards to the sweet charmer in the draper's shop and tell her I want a new pair of socks, and she can put them down to your account."

"Weally, Blake—"

"And I'll have a new necktie," said Digby. "I like them dark with red spots; but, really, anything will do as long as it's tasty and expensive."

"Mine's a sweater," said Herries. "My sweater has never looked the same since Towser had it and worried it. If you like—"

"I refuse to listen to these wibald remarks," said Arthur

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Augustus with dignity. "As a mattah of fact, I am not goin' to do any shoppin' in the village."

"Then wherefore this thushness?" demanded Blake, surveying the spick-and-span appearance of his elegant chum with great admiration.

"I am goin' ovah to Wayland, and I should be quite willin' to take you chaps—"

"Go hon!"

"There is an opewah company performin' at Wayland," explained Arthur Augustus. "As you know, I am vewy fond of music—"

"Rats!" said Herries warmly. "Whenever I begin practising my cornet you make a fearful row."

"I said music, Hewwies."

"Look here—"

"They are givin' a matinee performance this aftahnoon," explained Arthur Augustus. "I am goin' ovah from Wylcombe in the tawn. Would you chaps like to come? It would improve your minds, and I would explain the whole thing to you."

"Thanks awfully!" said Blake. "We're watching the footer."

"Weally, Blake, there will be plenty of footer matches, but the opewah company are there for a week only, and I weally think—"

"You can go as my representative, Gussy, and cheer for me," said Blake. "I'm going to see this match out. Hurry, Kildare! Look at that, my sons!"

Kildare was making a break through the enemy's lines with the ball at his feet. Blake, Herries, and Digby yelled and waved their caps. Arthur Augustus could not make his voice heard, and he turned away in disgust and walked to the gates. A trap had drawn up, and the swell of St. Jim's stepped in. He didn't wish to make his elegant attire dusty by a walk up to Rylcombe, and he had hired Brown's trap to convey him to the station.

"Pway, buck up, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, consulting his watch as he settled himself in the trap. "We haven't much time to catch the tawn."

"Yes, sir," said the driver, touching his cap.

The trap bowled along the green lane at a good speed. Half-way to Rylcombe a stalwart figure came in sight, tramping along steadily over the thickly fallen leaves beside the road. It was Darrell of the Sixth. Arthur Augustus immediately hailed him.

"Hallo, Dawwell!"

The big Sixth-Former glanced round.

"Are you goin' to Wylcombe, Dawwell?"

"Yes," said Darrell briefly.

"Then I should be vewy pleased to give you a lift, deah boy."

Darrell smiled faintly, and swung himself into the trap without stopping it.

"Thank you," he said quietly. "I haven't too much time to catch my train, and I shall be glad of a lift."

"Extremely pleased, deah boy," said D'Arcy gracefully.

The trap drove up to the little station. Darrell thanked the junior again and jumped down, and disappeared into the station. D'Arcy settled with the driver, and followed the senior in more slowly. Arthur Augustus was seldom known to hurry himself. He purchased his ticket, and sauntered along the platform just in time to see the guard waving his flag. Then the swell of St. Jim's made a desperate break.

He crossed the platform in two bounds and dragged open the door.

"Stand back!" yelled the guard.

But Arthur Augustus dragged at the door.

The train was already in motion. A strong hand from within the carriage grasped him by the collar and dragged him bodily in.

Arthur Augustus collapsed upon the dusty floor, gasping—the door slammed, and the train shot out of the station.

"Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

"You young ass!"

D'Arcy started, and stared at his rescuer. It was Darrell of the Sixth.

CHAPTER 2. A Pit Crowd!

DARRELL looked frowningly at the junior. D'Arcy slowly rose, set his collar as straight as possible—which was not very straight after the senior's strong grip on it. He put his necktie back into its place and dusted his trousers with a cambric handkerchief. Then he absently wiped his perspiring forehead with the handkerchief, with rather an unfortunate result as far as appearances went. He took his silk hat off, placed it upside down on the seat, and gasped.

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"Bai Jove! What a nawwow escape!"

"You young ass!" said Darrell. "Lucky for you I yanked you in."

"Oh, I wasn't thinking of that! My hat nearly fell off when I was dwaggin' at the door," explained D'Arcy. "I should certainly have lost it if it had quite fallen off then. It was a feahfully nawwow escape. I might have had to go to Wayland without a hat, you know. And, as a matter of fact, that is my vewy best toppah."

And he took up the topper and smoothed the nap affectionately, as if he were stroking a kitten.

"I feel wathah bweathless," he remarked. "I wasn't aware that you were goin' to Wayland, Dawwell. I am goin' to see the opewah company there."

Darrell started.

"What!"

"Nothin' surpwisin' in that, suahly, deah boy?" said D'Arcy. "My taste for music is well known, I believe. I took up the violin at one time, and if I had practised I should have been a remarkably good player by this time. Hewwies thinks he is musical, you know—he makes a feahful wow on a cornet, and he gets quite excited when I explain to him that he doesn't know F flat from a football boot. It was weally good news to me when I heard that the Carlo Fiore Opewah Company were at Wayland. I immediately determined to patwonise the show."

"Oh, you did, did you?" said Darrell, with a peculiar grimness in his tone.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"And you are going there now?"

"Yaas, there's a matinee," explained D'Arcy. "It commences at three o'clock. I am particularly anxious to heah the signowina."

"The what?"

"Signowina Colonna, the famous sopwano," said D'Arcy.

"I am wathah a judge of voices, you know, and I am wathah anxious to heah her. I heard some musical people talkin' about her when I was home last, and they said she had weceived an offah from Covent Garden to sing in gwand opewah. Bai Jove!" D'Arcy broke off. "Perhaps you are goin' to the opewah, too, Dawwell?"

Darrell coloured.

"Perhaps I am," he assented.

"Good! You can come in with me, if you like, and I will explain the thing to you as we go along."

"Are you looking for a hiding, D'Arcy?"

"Certainly not! I wegard that as a wathah widiculous question. I should uttably wefuse, undah any cires, to weceive a hidin'."

"You might not have the chance of refusing," said Darrell grimly. "You had better shut up."

"If my conversation is not agweeable to you, Dawwell, I shall be vewy pleased to shut up," said Arthur Augustus, with a great deal of dignity. "There might have been a more polite way of expvessin' your wish on the subject, howevah."

Darrell did not reply. He leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes as if going to sleep. He did not sleep, however. Arthur Augustus, in the intervals of polishing his silk hat, looked at Darrell two or three times. The face of the Sixth-Former was troubled, and sometimes a curious expression came over it that D'Arcy did not understand. The train stopped at last at Wayland, and Darrell sprang out of the carriage and walked quickly away.

It was pretty evident that he was not yearning for the society of a Fourth Form junior, even when that junior was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

D'Arcy's movements were more leisurely. He strolled off the platform in his usually graceful way, and out into the station entrance. Three youths were wheeling bicycles into the station to put them up there. Arthur Augustus gave a yelp as a muddy wheel jammed against the beautifully creased leg of his immaculate trousers.

"Oh, you howwid beast, get away!"

"My only hat! It's Gussy!"

"Bai Jove, Tom Mewwy! Fancy meetin' you! I weally wish you would not wun your filthy bike against my twousahs!"

"I wish you wouldn't run your trousers against my bike."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Shove that bike in here!" said Monty Lowther. "No time to jaw. We've got just time to walk down to the theatre before the doors open."

"Bai Jove! Are you goin' to the theatre, deah boys?"

"There's a matinee," explained Tom Merry, as he gave Lowther his machine to wheel in. "It's an opera company giving a performance at the local theatre. They're here for a week. Blessed if I remember their name!"

"The Carlo Fiore Opewah Company, deah boy."

"Yes, that's it—grand opera in English, you know. We thought we'd run over and see them," said Tom Merry.

"It was a fine afternoon for a spin. If we don't like it we can come out and ride round Wayland Hill House."

"Wats! If you have any taste you are bound to like it. I am goin' there," explained D'Arcy, "and if you like I'll take you along, and explain the whole thing to you."

"Thank you!" said Tom Merry gratefully. "You're always kind, Gussy. You're always making these generous offers to people."

"As a mattah of fact, deah boy, it is my intention to be kind."

"Always trying to be kind, and always succeeding in being asinine."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"You can come along with us if you like," said Tom Merry. "But I shall insist upon your cleaning your face a little first."

can have a wash and a brush up. Will you wait for me, deah boys? I shall not be more than twenty minutes."

"Yes, I think I can see myself waiting twenty minutes," said Manners, "when the theatre opens in five."

"It weally doesn't mattah if you miss some of the best act, as I will tell you all about it goin' along."

"Rats!" said the Terrible Three, with singular unanimity.

"Weally, deah boys—"

"We're going. Good-bye!"

"Hold on! I could get through in a quartah of an hour if I huvwied."

"More rats!"

And the chums of the Shell walked out of the station. Arthur Augustus hesitated, but a glance in the automatic machine's mirror decided him. He would rather have



"Who will shift me?" snapped the gentleman without a hat aggressively. "I will!" answered Tom Merry, parrying the blow that the man aimed at him. Then three pairs of boyish hands fastened on him, and before he knew what was happening the obstreperous gentleman found himself on his back!

"Weally—" Arthur Augustus rushed to an automatic machine in which glimmered a square of looking-glass. His face was streaked with dust where he had wiped it with the dusty handkerchief in the train. "Bai Jove! I was quite unaware of this, Tom Mewwy."

"Oh, I don't suppose you care much about it. You Fourth Form kids never will wash, I hear, unless there's a prefect standing over you with a cane."

"I dusted my trousahs with my handkerchief—"

"But you can't expect to go out with chaps in a higher Form with a face that colour."

"And unconsciously wiped my beastly face without thinking."

"We'll take you along if you look respectable—not otherwise."

"That's it," said Lowther. "Rub it off on your sleeve, Gussy."

"I am afraid it would wumple my sleeve, and pprobably make it shiny. There is a place in this station where you

missed the whole opera than have gone out without a wash. A careful wiping of the face with a handkerchief would have sufficed for any other fellow. But not for the swell of St. Jim's.

The chums of the Shell hurried down the quaint old-fashioned High Street of the market town, and turned into the side street where the theatre stood. There was only one theatre in Wayland, and the pieces there were usually of the most thrilling and blood-curdling description. Wicked baronets and heavy fathers and persecuted heroines flourished on the Thespian boards in the little town, as in most provincial towns. But sometimes there was a change. A somewhat different class of theatre-goers welcomed the appearance of a travelling opera company.

"Grand Opera in English," was popular enough to fill the theatre for a week. And though, as a rule, the performances of "grand opera in English" were very far from perfect, there was no doubt that they did a good work in helping to educate the public taste.

And sometimes in such a company would be found a singer not yet known to the world, but with a voice equal to that of a celebrity whose name was sufficient to cram the Covent Garden Opera House to the ceiling.

Tom Merry had musical tastes. Manners was something of a pianist. Lowther's knowledge of music was mainly confined to the sweet sounds he could extract from a tin whistle. But all three were keen to hear the opera given that afternoon at the Wayland Theatre. As the funds did not run to expensive seats, they joined the crowd at the door of the pit. The crowd was very considerable, and the chums of the Shell could not get near the door. The pit price was a shilling, which fell within their means, but it was pretty certain that they would be in the last row, or standing.

"Can't be helped," said Tom Merry philosophically. "There's one comfort—it's a jolly small theatre, and we shall be able to hear, if not to see."

"But I want to see," said Manners. "There's that what's her name—signorina something or other. They say she's awfully sweet, and I want to see her."

"Signorina Colonna."

"That's it. Italian name. But I hear she's an English woman. Hallo! Who's that shoving?"

A gentleman without a hat was shoving. He had come late, but, like many late-comers at a theatre, he thought he was entitled to a front place, if he could get it by force of impudence and elbows. He dug an elbow into Manners' ribs, and another into Tom Merry's back, and, by the surprise of the attack, he passed between them, and jammed himself in front.

Tom Merry's eyes glittered. He always played the game himself, and anything like meanness made him wrathful at once. And he certainly did not intend to give up the place he had waited for to someone else who had not waited.

"I say, my friend," he remarked, tapping the gentleman without a hat on the shoulder. "I don't think you're entitled to stand there."

The man looked round. He saw that he had only a boy to deal with, and he assumed a threatening expression at once.

"Who are you talking to?" he demanded. It was a superfluous question, as he knew that Tom Merry's remark was addressed to himself.

"I was speaking to you," said Tom Merry quietly. "You had no right to shove by me. Get back into your place."

"I don't think."

"I don't think you do," assented Tom Merry. "But you had better think about getting out sharp, or you will be shifted."

"Who will shift me?"

"I will!"

The gentleman without a hat did not reply in words. He hit out, and Tom Merry parried the blow easily. Then three pairs of hands fastened upon the obstreperous gentleman, and before he knew what was happening he was on the ground, and the chums of the Shell calmly stepped over him.

A shove from three feet simultaneously sent him rolling, and he brought up on the edge of the pavement. There he sat up looking bewildered.

"Door's open!" said somebody. The throng swayed and pushed forward, and began to pour into the theatre. The gentleman without a hat picked himself up and followed, but a dozen newcomers were in front of him now, and he was separated from the chums of the Shell.

CHAPTER 3.

D'Arcy is Indignant!

TOM MERRY took three tickets at the pay-box, and the chums of the Shell followed the crowd into the theatre.

It was a little dark entrance, and it led into a little dark passage, which gave admittance to a little dusky pit. The pit was almost full, and the Terrible Three looked in vain for seats.

"Never mind, let's stand," said Tom Merry cheerfully. "We can get behind the middle of the back row, and that's better for hearing, anyway, than any side seat."

They secured standing places in the middle, behind the last row of seats. The people were still thronging in, and a gentleman in a fur cap shoved behind the Terrible Three. Three or four rows of people standing were soon behind them.

"By Jove, this is a crush!" said Manners. "It's not often you get a crush like this in the daytime at a theatre in a local town."

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"The signorina's the attraction," said Lowther. "Everybody seems to be talking about her. Her name's been in the papers a lot lately, too."

The name of Signorina Colonna was indeed on many lips. The opera to be given was "Il Trovatore," and Signorina Colonna was taking the part of Leonora. The fact that the opera was given in English was rather gratifying than otherwise to most of the audience. What it lost by the translation was compensated for by the fact that they would be able to understand better.

The pit of the theatre was small, stuffy, and hot; the stalls in front were not much better, but they were less thickly filled, and the chums of the Shell, looking over many heads and hats, wished they were there.

"The stalls are jolly cheap here, too," Tom Merry remarked. "Three bob, I think. I suppose it wouldn't run to it. They'd let us change."

"I've got one-and-sixpence," said Manners.

"And I've got a tanner!" said Lowther.

"Then it's no good getting out my nippence," said Tom Merry, laughing. "We shall have to stick it. Can't be helped! Hallo!"

"What's the matter?"

"Look at that chap going into the stalls!"

"Darrell!" ejaculated Lowther.

The chums of the Shell could plainly see the sturdy figure of the Sixth-Former. He was entering the front row of the stalls, and evidently had a booked seat. He sat down in the middle of the front row, without troubling himself to look back at the crowd in the rear, and quite unconscious of the fact that three pairs of eyes were upon him. Monty Lowther gave a sniff.

"So this is what he's cut the practice match for," he said. "I believe in a chap hearing any decent music when he gets the chance, but fancy cutting a match to come here! Kildare would be wild if he knew."

"It's curious," said Tom Merry thoughtfully. "I know Darrell is rather musical, as far as that goes. I remember he had permission to practice the organ in the chapel, and he often goes in there and plays. I've seen some scores in his study, too. But I really shouldn't have thought he had disappointed Kildare for the sake of coming here. It doesn't seem like Darrell."

"Something curious about it," said Manners, with a shake of the head. "Perhaps he knows somebody in the company!"

"H'm! He might!"

"Great Scott! Look at that cheeky young bounder!" exclaimed Lowther indignantly.

A familiar form had just entered a box, and there was no mistaking the elegant figure of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"What-ho, St. Jim's!" shouted Lowther.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy looked round at the familiar call, and caught sight of the chums of the Shell at the back of the pit. He waved a lavender glove at them gracefully, and placed his silk hat upside down on a seat. Then he sat down, and proceeded languidly to survey the audience through his eyeglass.

It was close upon time for the curtain to rise now. Tom Merry looked over a programme. The name of Signorina Colonna was opposite that of Leonora in the list of characters, but the other names he did not know. The orchestra was filling the theatre with sound. The performance was good in its way, but with the diminutive orchestra of a provincial theatre, the result, of course, was very thin. When the curtain went up, every eye was fastened upon the stage.

The Terrible Three watched and listened with great interest. The simple melodies of "Il Trovatore" were easy to follow, and many of them, of course, already familiar to the boys. The singing, as was to be expected, was not of a high class—with two exceptions, Signorina Colonna, as Leonora, and the tenor, who took the part of Manrico. The latter, whose name Tom Merry saw by the programme, was Robert Armitage, had a full, rich voice, which sounded all the finer by contrast with the poorer performances of the rest. The first act finished amid loud clapping. The crowd behind the Terrible Three was very thick. The gentleman without a hat was pressing close behind Tom Merry, and as he seemed to have had fried fish for one of his most recent meals, his proximity was not gratifying to the hero of the Shell.

"I say, I'm getting tired in the legs," said Lowther, with a grimace. "Blessed if I like standing about like a stork."

"I've got an idea," Tom Merry remarked, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Are you going to squat down for me to sit on your head?"

"Well, no, not exactly. I was thinking that Gussy has a box with some vacant seats in it, and we might pay him a visit."

"By Jove! Rather!"

"Let's see, anyway."

The chums withdrew into the passage behind the pit, and Tom Merry explained to an attendant that they wished to visit a friend in a box. The man explained in turn that communication between the different parts of the house was not allowed. But a shilling in his palm convinced him that the rules might be safely neglected upon a single occasion, and the Terrible Three were led by a circuitous route to D'Arcy's box.

They entered the little door, and D'Arcy looked round.

"Tom Mewwy!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, rather! Shall we come in?"

"Bai Jove, yaas!"

The attendant was satisfied, and he departed, shutting the door. The box was not a large one, and four juniors pretty well filled it. Arthur Augustus had risen to stretch his legs, and was leaning in a graceful attitude against the wall. Monty Lowther dropped into his chair.

"Good!" he said. "This is very comfy!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Cheeky young boulder, having a box all to yourself."

"Well, I paid for it!" said D'Arcy mildly.

"That's not the point," said Manners. "It's a rot for a Fourth Form kid to have a box, and fellows in the Shell to stand in the pit!"

"I am weally sowwy for you."

"Oh, don't waste any sorrow on us!" said Manners. "We shall be quite comfy. Can you make a little more room, Lowther? The orchestra are coming in again."

"Bai Jove—"

"Certainly!" said Lowther. "Pull that other chair beside mine, and keep your head back of my shoulder, and you'll see rippingly."

"Good! You're right!"

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"Tom Merry can stand behind my chair," said Lowther. "I'll change with him at the end of the next act."

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"That's all right," said Tom Merry heartily. "I can lean on the back of your chair. But we must give Gussy a chance, as he's so generously invited us into his box."

"But—but I haven't—"

"Certainly!" said Lowther. "Nothing mean about me—Gussy shall have the side of the box nearest the stage, and keep it to himself."

As the side of the box nearest the stage was blocked off from all view, unless D'Arcy put his head out like a tortoise, Lowther's generosity was not quite so generous as it sounded. Arthur Augustus was growing pink with suppressed indignation. But the chums of the Shell were so serious that it was clear that they believed he had invited them to appropriate his box.

At all events, it seemed so. And D'Arcy, who was the pink of politeness, felt a natural hesitation about undeceiving them. He half-thought that the Terrible Three were "rotting," but he could not be sure.

The orchestra were recommencing, and the chums of the Shell settled themselves comfortably to look and listen.

"All right over there, Gussy?" asked Tom Merry, with solicitude.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Can you see perfectly?"

"I can see nothin'. I—"

"Hear all right as well?"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Good! I'm glad you're comfy. Sh, now! They're starting."

"I must weally observe—"

"Don't talk now, Gussy," whispered Lowther. "You mustn't talk while the music's going on, you know—it's bad form."

Arthur Augustus simply glared. To be lectured on good form, under the circumstances, was insult added to injury.

"Bai Jove, Lowthah—"

"Hush!"

"I insist upon speaking! I insist upon—"

"Silence! Shut up!" came an audible buzz from the audience—and Arthur Augustus reluctantly shut up.

But the indignation of the swell of St. Jim's during the second act of "Il Trovatore" was too deep for speech.

CHAPTER 4.

Darrell's Secret.

BY the time the curtain fell Tom Merry was pretty tired of standing, and D'Arcy seemed to be a little fatigued, too.

He changed from one leg to another continually. He had come round to stand beside Tom Merry, so he

did not miss much, and in the interest of the opera and the sweet melodies he had forgotten his indignation. At the end of the act he was beaming.

"Bai Jove! 'This is wathah wip-pin', deah boys, isn't it?" he exclaimed. "What a fearful wascal that count is, isn't he?"

"Awful!" said Lowther. "But the tenor—Manrico the Troubadour—I like him. He has a ripping voice, too! The count hasn't!"

"Leonora is wonderful," said Tom Merry. "I haven't heard a voice like hers but once, and that was when Uncle Frank took me to Covent Garden in the opera season. Signorina Colonna is wonderful."

"Yaas, wathah! I should like to present her with a bouquet," said D'Arcy thoughtfully. "Do you think she would care for a bouquet, Tom Mewwy?"

"Certainly! Go out and get one, and bring in some lemon-squash with you. On second thoughts, bring in the lemon-squash first!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"I say, doesn't Darrell take it in, too?" said Tom Merry, with a glance at the Sixth-Former sitting in the stalls. "He didn't take his eyes off Leonora once."

"I noticed that," grinned Lowther, "and I rather think I've hit on the explanation of the giddy mystery."

"Bai Jove! What is it? I didn't know there was any mystery, deah boys. If you like I will take it up as an amateur detective and unravel it!"

"Rats! It is the mystery of Darrell cutting the match to come and see a travelling opera company. It's Leonora!"

"Eh?"

"Darrell's moonie!"

"Bosh!" said Tom Merry incredulously.

"Fact! I've been looking at his chivvy, and I tell you it's so. He's come here to see the signorina, and for no other reason."

"My hat!" said Tom Merry. "There might be something in it. You know it was his turn to put lights out in the Shell dormitory this week, and Rushden has been doing it. I asked Rushden last night where Darrell was, and he said he had gone out."

"Here, very likely. These people came to Wayland on Monday."

"My word! But she must be years older than Darrell."

"What does that matter?" said Lowther, with the air of an oracle. "When young fellows fall in love for the first time it often is with girls older than themselves."

"Bai Jove! You seem to know all about it, Lowthah!"

"I know all about it by observing Gussy. All the girls he has fallen in love with were older than himself."

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Darrell is following in Gussy's footsteps. The question is whether we ought to take the matter in hand and show him that it won't do."

"You'd better, if you want a particularly fine specimen of a thick ear."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Well, you know, we can't have him neglecting the footer like this," said Lowther, shaking his head. "What I think is that Gussy ought to point out to him how the matter stands. Gussy has a delicate way of doing these things, and he could make Darrell see reason where we might only put him into a temper."

"Bai Jove! There's somethin' in that, too! What do you think, Tom Mewwy?"

"I think you'd better not be an ass, and that Lowther had better find some safer subject for rotting," said Tom Merry, laughing.

"Well, you know I'm an awfully tactful chap, and a few words from one who knows about these things might be very valuable to a young fellow like Dawwell."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I weally do not see anythin' to cackle at. I think—"

"Think how we're going to get some lemon-squashes, kid," said Tom Merry.

"That is easy enough. I will ordah them of the attendant."

And Arthur Augustus did. By the time the juniors had finished their lemon-squashes the curtain was going up again. Lowther rose from the chair and pushed Arthur Augustus into it.

"It's all wright, Lowthah, deah boy! You can have the chair."

"Rats!" grinned Lowther. "Sit down!"

"Well if you insist—"

The swell of St. Jim's, in spite of his politeness, was glad to sit down. The chums of the Shell could see very well behind him. The interest of the opera took all their attention, and they soon forgot Darrell of the Sixth. Darrell was not even aware of their presence in the theatre. The handsome young Sixth-Former was gazing only at Leonora.

and when the signorina was not on the stage he was quiet and expressionless; when she appeared his whole face lighted up.

The whole house was silent with ecstasy when the famous "Miserere" scene came on. The singing of Leonora had never been so sweet, so rich, and the answering voice of the tenor from within the tower thrilled every heart.

The words, though a very inadequate rendering of the original Italian, were touching enough:

"Ah, now death slowly nearing,
Brings me at last relief,
Here in this dungeon lone in this dungeon pining,
Farewell! Leonora, farewell!"

Full and rich came the tenor, and the chums of the Shell felt the tears rolling down their cheeks as they heard it, and heard the reply of Leonora. The signorina, for the time, was Leonora herself; there was no doubt that she was an accomplished actress as well as a marvellous singer, and she was living the part.

"Bai-bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, when the scene was over. "I-I feel wathah queeah about the throat, you know, deah boys."

Even Lowther, the mocker, was silent and touched. If the whole thing was melodramatic, the boys did not notice it. They were thrilled through and through by the sweetness of the music and the wonderful power of the singing in that splendid duet.

The last scenes were soon over now, and the crowd poured out of the theatre. The Terrible Three and Arthur Augustus went out together, and almost ran into Darrell. He did not notice them. He was walking along like one in a dream, carrying a large bouquet, and the juniors glanced after him curiously.

Darrell was not going homeward. He went round to the theatre, and Lowther, glancing after him, saw him stop at the stage door, just as a girl came out. Darrell waited till she had passed, and then entered the door.

"Not much doubt about it!" said Lowther. But he was not smiling now; the sweet and wonderful soprano was still in his ears.

"Poor chap!" said Tom Merry softly.

Then they strolled on to the station in silence. Sadness was the reigning feeling in their breasts. They did not know why, yet they were glad—very glad—that they had spent the afternoon as they had spent it.

The chums of the Shell fetched out their bicycles, and Arthur Augustus took the train for Rylcombe. The three were silent as they rode homeward.

The October dusk was deepening as they reached the gates of St. Jim's.

Blake, Herries, and Digby were lounging at the gates, looking down the road, and they at once hailed the Terrible Three.

"Where have you been, instead of keeping up your footer practice?" demanded Blake severely. "We've been getting instruction by watching the scratch match of the seniors, and then getting up one of our own with Figgins & Co."

"Well, we don't need so much practice as you Fourth Form kids—"

"Oh, cheese it! Where have you been?"

"Been to the opera."

"Rats! Have you seen Gussy?"

"Yes; he was in Wayland, and he's coming home by train. I say, how did the Sixth Form match go?" asked Tom Merry. "Kildare did it, I suppose?"

"Yes; the First Eleven did it—two goals to one—though they were playing Lefevre of the Fifth in the place of Darrell," said Blake. "Darrell wasn't playing."

"Old news, my son."

"How the deuce did you know?"

"Because we saw him in Wayland. Come on, kids, I'm hungry, and the fire's got to be lighted in the study. You'll see Gussy soon, Blake."

And the Terrible Three went on towards the School House. Jack Blake cast a puzzled look after them, and then shook his head. It seemed to him as if the chums of the Shell Form were keeping something back. As a matter of fact, they were.

"No need to spread the yarn about Darrell," Tom Merry remarked. "It's no business of ours!"

"Right you are—but I expect Gussy will."

"Well, we can't help that," said Tom Merry. "It would be rough on old Darrell if it became a joke of the Junior Forms. He's a good sort."

"One of the best!" said Lowther heartily. "And, speaking of Darrell, as he's out we may as well borrow his methylated spirit stove to boil the kettle and save lighting the fire. We can get some methylated spirit from Knox's study."

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CHAPTER 5.

The Signorina!

"THE signorina will see you, sir."

"Thank you!"

Darrell of the Sixth followed the man along a dusky passage. He had entered at the stage door and sent in his name to Signorina Colonna. The passage was dim, uncarpeted, with bare walls and dusty windows. At the foot of the staircase a gas-jet, enclosed by nothing but a bare wire netting, flickered and flared. It showed uncarpeted stairs winding up into dusky dimness.

"This way, sir."

The attendant was shabby, and there was an odour of recent gin-and-water about him.

Darrell followed him quietly up the stairs. On the hard, bare wood, their footsteps rang with a hollow sound. Darrell's face was pale—pale with excitement. He hardly noticed his surroundings. The man stopped on a landing where three doors opened. One of them was wide open, and a glare of unobscured gas came from it. Darrell caught a glimpse of a man in the room. He was sitting on a chair in a state of shabby deshabille. The lower half of him was clad in the apparel of the Count of Luna in the opera—not quite so impressive at close quarters. Around the upper part an old Norfolk jacket was buttoned and belted. His face was a mass of half-removed grease-paint. A glass of warm whisky-and-water stood by his elbow, and he had just taken a sip as Darrell saw him. He looked the most curious "heavy villain" it was possible to imagine.

The other doors on the landing were closed. The attendant stopped at one of them and looked round at Darrell.

"This is the signorina's dressing-room," he said.

Darrell nodded.

"Long way up, sir," said the man suggestively. "I find them stairs 'arder and 'arder hevery day, sir."

Darrell understood. He slipped a shilling into the man's hand, and he departed.

Darrell tapped at the door, and a sweet voice bade him enter.

He entered.

Signorina Colonna's dressing-room was the best in the Wayland Theatre, for she was the star of the company at present there. But the dressing-rooms of a provincial theatre are seldom comfortable. The room was somewhat large, and that was the best that could be said of it. The walls were bare, the windows dusty, the furniture of the plainest and of a cheap manufacture—of a design that might have made anyone of the slightest artistic feeling weep. And there was not much of it. The properties of Leonora, and of half a dozen other operatic characters, were disposed about in the most convenient places. But there was a neatness, a propriety in the tawdry room that showed the least keen observer that a woman of true womanly feeling was there.

The sordid surroundings were as refined as a refined nature could make them under such difficulties.

Sordid the surroundings were without a doubt, yet the room might have been Aladdin's palace—to Darrell. He had eyes for nothing but a sweet, oval face and a pair of large, dark, caressing eyes—a sweet face from which the make-up of the stage had been removed, and which glowed with a healthy colour of its own. "Signorina Colonna" was the name by which the singer went—but her name was all that there was of Italian about her. She was an English-woman—or, rather, girl—young, though older than Darrell by years. There was a sweet seriousness in her manner as of one who had found the path of life thorny and yet faced its difficulties with a brave heart.

She rose as Darrell entered, and gave him her hand.

The boy pressed it, with a throbbing heart—and then instinctively raised it to his lips. The signorina laughed a little and drew it away, and Darrell sat down. He looked at the signorina, his heart in his eyes. Words would not come to his lips.

"So you have come again," she said—"after what I told you."

"I could not help it."

"But—"

"You are not glad to see me?" he said.

"I am glad to see you. But—"

"But I am a fool!" said Darrell, his eyes falling before hers. "I know it. But—but—Pauline—you told me I might call you Pauline—"

"Why not?"

"You have not called me Dick!"

The signorina laughed softly.

"My dear boy—"

"I am not such a boy," said Darrell. "I—I suppose I seem a boy to you. I am over seventeen, and I am a prefect at St. Jim's—but I suppose you wouldn't know much about

that. But—but I am not a boy now. You cannot be much older than I am."

The signorina only smiled.

"Do you remember the night I first saw you in London?" said Darrell, in a low voice. "In the vacation? I came into the theatre quite by chance. You were singing 'Marguerite' in 'Faust.' I did not take my eyes off you once. The opera was a dream to me. When it was over, I went round to the stage door and waited there in the hope of catching sight of you. I did—after a long time. I went home in a dream. Since then—"

"Foolish boy—"

"Since then I have thought of nothing else. Oh, Pauline! And I shall never know how I ever found the courage to tell you that—that I loved you! But I told you—did I not?"

"You told me, and—"

"And you said it must be farewell at once, and for ever. You had looked upon me as a boy. You were amused by my admiration—"

simple heart. I like you—I like you now. I did not think what would come of it. I was thoughtless, and you, my dear boy, were reckless. When you spoke out, I told you we must never see each other again. I did not expect to see you. Now—"

"I heard that the Carlo Fiore Company were in Wayland, and I had to come."

She shook her head.

"You should not have come, Dick."

"You did not wish to see me?" he said bitterly. "I am a trouble to you. Then—"

She laid her hand softly on his arm as he was rising.

"You know it is not that, Dick. I like you, and I am glad to see you. After the kind of men I sometimes meet, I am doubly glad to see you. You do not understand, Dick. You will understand some day, when you are older, what the friendship of a brave and true heart must mean to one in my surroundings. But it was for your own sake that I said that we must part. You must forget this folly."

"But I cannot forget, and I do not want to."



"Collar him!" shouted Blake. Lowther was promptly collared. He struggled desperately, but he was down in a moment. He opened his mouth to yell, but Blake, who had snatched up the jam spoon, thrust it into Lowther's open mouth, and the yell died away!

"Not only amused, Dick, but touched—deeply touched. But—"

"But you said it was impossible."

She laughed slightly.

"Surely you must see for yourself that anything of the kind is impossible. You are a boy at school—"

"I am not a boy, and I shall soon be leaving for Oxford. I shall never change."

"So you think now."

"I shall never change," said Darrell quietly. "What I feel now, I shall always feel. I—I only want to be with you, to see you sometimes, to hear you speak. That is not asking much, and in the future—"

"My dear boy—"

"You are not much older than I am," said Darrell. "You are not much more than twenty."

The signorina did not reply.

"Besides, that is nothing. I do not care—"

"My dear lad—"

"Let me wait five years, ten years, any time," said Darrell. "You shall see whether I shall change."

"Dick. Yes, I will call you Dick, if you wish. Why not? But listen to me. I allowed you to make my acquaintance in London. I saw you many times. I liked you, and I like your friendship. I liked your honest,

"You must. It will be better for us never to meet again."

"Pauline!"

The misery in the boy's face touched the signorina strangely. She laid her hand softly upon his.

"My dear Dick, you must not think about me. But—but if you wish you shall see me again, while I am staying in Wayland. We are here till Saturday."

"You sometimes allowed me to walk with you in London," said Darrell. "I—I had so much to tell you. Will you—"

"Perhaps. I will think."

"This afternoon?"

The signorina laughed.

"There is an evening performance," she said. "We have to begin to prepare for it almost as soon as the matinee is over."

"But I shall see you to-morrow?"

"Perhaps."

"May I call, then? I can get here by five if you—"

"But have you nothing to detain you at the school?"

Darrell coloured. For a moment he thought of Kildare, and the most important football fixture of the season that was coming off on Saturday. But he shook his head.

"There is nothing that I cannot put off."

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"Then you may come."

Darrell rose. He bent over the signorina's hand.

"You are very kind to me," said the boy huskily. "You — you don't know how much this means to me."

"Perhaps I do," she said softly. "But remember, if you see me again, it is only as a friend, Dick. You must not think of anything else."

"I will not speak of anything else, at all events," he said. "How gloriously you sang this afternoon!"

"You liked it?"

"It was wonderful. I have heard that you have been asked to sing at Covent Garden," said Darrell. "I shall hear you there."

"There have been negotiations; I cannot say. I may go to America instead."

Darrell's face fell.

"You—to America?"

"It might be better for you, Dick. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" said the boy, in a choked voice.

The girl stood silent, pensive, after he had left her. A few minutes later there was a tap at the door. The signorina evidently knew the tap, for her expression changed, and a brightness came into her beautiful face.

"Come in Bob!"

The door opened. It was Armitage, the tenor who had sung the part of the Troubadour in the opera, who looked in. He was a handsome fellow in his own proper person, with a cheery English face and laughing eyes.

"We haven't too much time for tea," he said. "You have had a visitor?"

"Yes, Bob."

"The boy I saw in London?"

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"Yes. He belongs to a school near this town, and so he came over."

The tenor shook his finger at her.

"Pauline!"

"I wish he had never seen me," she said, as she joined him. "I like him very much."

And the signorina's fair face was very thoughtful for a long time, till the need to prepare for the evening's opera banished every thought from her mind but that of the new role she was to take.

CHAPTER 6.

Called to Account.

KILDARE, the captain of St. Jim's, was standing at the door of the School House, looking out into the dusky quadrangle.

The captain of the school had his hands in his pockets, and a sombre look on his face. He was evidently waiting at the door for someone, and had been waiting there nearly an hour.

A form loomed up in the dusk at last, and Kildare made a movement.

"Is that you, Darrell?"

"Yes, Kildare."

"I've been waiting for you."

Darrell came up the steps into the porch. His face clouded over as he saw Kildare. He gave the captain of St. Jim's a short nod.

"How did the match go, Kildare?"

"We beat the scratch team."

"Whom did you play instead of me?"

"Lefevre of the Fifth."

"He is a good winger."

"Not much to play against the Redclyffe lot, though."

Darrell started.

"Well, you won't want to play him against the Redclyffe lot," he said. "I shall be in the match on Saturday."

"Come up to my study," said Kildare abruptly. "I want to speak to you."

Darrell hesitated a moment.

It was pretty plain that an unpleasant interview was coming, but he followed the captain of St. Jim's upstairs and into his study.

Kildare turned up the gas, and the light fell upon Darrell's troubled face.

The captain looked at him curiously.

"Is anything wrong, old chap?" he asked suddenly.

"Your note explained nothing."

"No," said Darrell.

"Nothing wrong? No bad news from home?"

"Oh, no."

"Then why did you leave us in the lurch this afternoon?"

"I—I had to."

"You had an important matter to attend to?"

"Ye-es."

"I want this matter to be settled quite frankly," said Kildare, after a pause. "I've heard some chatter from the juniors about your having been seen in the theatre in Wayland this afternoon."

Darrell coloured uncomfortably.

"I suppose it was only jaw," said the captain of St. Jim's, looking at him.

"No, it was true."

Kildare's brows contracted.

"You have been to the theatre?"

"Yes."

"And that was why you cut the match?"

"Yes."

"And that was the important business?" asked Kildare, with a ring of scorn in his voice.

"You don't understand," said Darrell awkwardly. "You don't think I'd cut the footer to go to a theatre in the ordinary way, do you?"

"I should hope not; but you appear to have done it to-day."

"I had to go."

"Why?"

Darrell did not reply to the direct question. His face was scarlet, then pale, and his eyes remained fixed upon the floor.

Kildare's glance never wavered.

"I don't want to inquire into your private affairs," said the captain of St. Jim's, after a pause, "but I think that as captain of the football team you belong to I am entitled to some explanation."

"I know you are; but I cannot explain. It's not exactly a secret, but I don't want to talk about it."

"Very well," said Kildare dryly, "we won't talk about it. I think you've treated the First Eleven rather shabbily; but if you had good reasons, let bygones be bygones. I

suppose nothing of the sort is likely to happen again? That's the chief point."

"Certainly not."

Kildare's face cleared.

"That's all right, then. I don't want you to look upon me as an inquisitor; but you know how a football captain is placed. You are best winger, and you simply must be in form for the Redclyffe match on Saturday. If you fail us, I don't know any fellow in either the Sixth or the Fifth who will be able to take your place—any fellow half your form. But you know that as well as I do."

"But why should you think I might fail you?" said Darrell, with a touch of irritation. "I should think you knew me well enough by this time to depend on me."

"I depended on you to-day."

"Well, it was only a scratch match to-day."

"It was important enough. I was trying how the First Eleven worked together, and putting them to a final test against the best Eleven the Fifth and Sixth could muster. It was very important for all the eleven to be there."

"I am sorry."

"Well, it can't be helped now. You can put in some practice every evening, anyway. It is light enough after afternoon school for a bit of practice still."

Darrell flushed again.

"I—I cannot do any practice after school to-morrow!" he stammered.

Kildare looked hard at him.

"Why not?"

"I—I have an engagement."

"At Wayland, I suppose?"

"Ye-es."

"And you can't put it off?"

"Impossible."

Kildare's face set hard. He looked directly at Darrell, who did not meet his eyes. The winger's glance was on the floor, and his face was red and pale by turns.

"I don't understand you, Darrell."

"And I can't explain; but—but you can rely on me. I shall put in enough practice to be quite fit for Saturday. You can be sure of that."

"But—"

Kildare was interrupted. There came a terrific crash upstairs, followed by a yell of excited voices.

The captain of St. Jim's gave a start.

"Very well," he said hastily. "Leave it at that. I rely upon you."

And the captain of St. Jim's hurried from the study, and went up the stairs three at a time.

Darrell went slowly down the passage to his own room and shut himself in.

CHAPTER 7.

Chucked Out!

MONTY LOWTHER was alone in Tom Merry's study when four juniors came quietly along to the study and looked in.

Lowther was extracting the remnants of the contents of a jam-pot, and lading it out into a soap-dish, newly washed. Tom Merry and Manners were not to be seen.

"Ahem!" coughed Jack Blake.

Lowther looked round. Four faces smiled at him agreeably from the door.

Blake came into the study, and D'Arcy followed him. Digby and Herries remained leaning against the doorposts.

Lowther resumed scraping out the jam-pot.

"You fellows want anything?" he asked. "If you do, you can't have it. If you don't, bunk! In either case, take your faces away."

"I utterly refuse to take my face away—"

"Dry up a minute, Gussy, while I explain to Lowther—"

"I refuse to dwy up!"

"Oh, do ring off! Lowther, old man, this is how the case stands. We've come to have tea with you on condition you don't tell funny stories—"

"Or ask conundrums," said Digby.

"Especially those you've made up yourself," added Herries.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Is it a go?" asked Blake.

Lowther ladled out the last relic of the jam, and scraped the spoon into the soap-dish.

"No," he said, "it isn't a go! Get!"

"We have come to tea—"

"On condition you don't tell any funny stories—"

"Or ask conundrums—"

"Especially those of your own make, deah boy!"

"Are you going," roared Lowther, "or do you want this jam slung at you?"

"Now, young fellow," said Blake severely, "don't you

forget that you're addressing the top study in the School House."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Oh, get back into the monkey-house!" said Lowther. "Take your faces away. Fellows oughtn't to go round with such features. It's a marvel to me how you stand one another. Clear out! I can't stand cheeky Fourth Form fags here!"

"We are the top study."

"Rats!"

"We are the top study in the School House—"

"Are you going?" exclaimed Lowther, holding up the jam spoon with a threatening gesture. "I tell you your features worry me!"

"Bai Jove, I wathah considah that that wottah ought to have a feahful thwashin'!"

"My opinion, too," said Blake. "The chap seems to have a jolly good feed ready here. Where are the other two asses, Lowther, old man?"

"Gone to look for methylated spirit," grunted Lowther. "We've borrowed Darrell's little stove. There wasn't any spirit in Knox's study. Get out, will you! We're going to talk business over tea, and we can't be bothered by a lot of fags!"

Blake made a sign to his comrades.

The four heroes of the Fourth entered the study quickly and closed the door. Lowther whisked the jam spoon through the air, and a lump of plum jam flew forward, and, of course, impinged upon the aristocratic countenance of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

D'Arcy gave a wail of anguish.

"Ow! Bai Jove, I am howwibly stickay! You wottah!"

"Collar him!" shouted Blake.

Blake, Herries, and Digby promptly collared Lowther. He struggled desperately, but he was down in a moment. He opened his mouth to yell, but Blake, who had snatched away the jam spoon, thrust it into the opened mouth promptly, and the yell died away in a quaver.

"Sling him out!" said Blake hurriedly. "Quick—before Tom Merry comes back!"

Lowther struggled frantically, but three pairs of strong arms were round him. He was dragged to the door, and D'Arcy threw it open. Lowther went rolling along the passage, the door was slammed, and Blake turned the key in the lock. The next moment Lowther hurled himself against the door. But it was too late.

Jack Blake chuckled.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "I call this a victory. Lowther wouldn't ask us to tea—"

"He might have if you had put it a little more politely, deah boy."

"Perhaps, my excellent Gus; but, you see, I had observed the supply on the table, and saw at a glance that there wasn't enough for seven," said Blake coolly.

"Bai Jove, I nevah thought of that!"

"You wouldn't! Blessed if I know who would think of things for you youngsters if I wasn't with you!" said Blake.

"Oh, wats! Undah the cires, we are justified in waidin' the feed. The Tewwible Thwee waided my box at the opewah and collared my chair, you know!"

"Of course! One good turn deserves another. Hallo! That sounds like someone knocking at the door."

It certainly did. Monty Lowther was bumping on the door with all his strength. But the stout oak and the strong lock would have resisted ten times the force he could bring to bear on it.

"Anybody there?" called out Blake.

"You rotters! Open this door!"

"Rats!"

"We'll pulverise you!"

"Not just yet, anyway," chuckled Blake. "Keep your hair on. You'll have a prefect up soon at that rate!"

"I don't care! Open this door!"

"Go and eat dog biscuits."

Lowther continued to thump furiously. The Fourth-Formers chuckled. The old rivalry between the Fourth Form and the Shell—between Study No. 6 and the Terrible Three—never slept for long. The two parties, it is true, would make common cause in rows with the New House; but when there was not a House row on they were always ready for a Form row.

"Looks comfy, doesn't it?" said Blake, with a glance round the study. "Only needs a fire to make it complete."

"Let's have one, deah boy."

"Yes, rather!"

Jack Blake opened the coal locker. It was empty—or nearly so. A few sticks reposed there, with a lump or two of coal. There was not sufficient fuel for a fire.

"Lazy young bounders, those Shell-fish," said Blake, shaking his head. "They were going to use methylated spirit to save the trouble of making a fire, and you see

what trouble it has got them into. Let this be a warning to you, Gussy."

"Weally, Blake—"

"We haven't any methylated spirit, so we shall have to light a fire," said Jack Blake. "There doesn't seem to be much coal here. Still, a wood fire is very cheerful."

"Blessed if I see where we're going to get any wood from, unless we behead Gussy," Digby remarked.

"Weally, Dig—"

"We must find something," said Blake. "I should be sorry to chop up the bookcase or the easy-chair, but if those Shell-fish run out of fuel they must take the consequences. I don't hold with carelessness in young people. What a row that chap is making at the door! Go away, little boy, and be quiet."

"Open this door!"

"Go and eat pink pills!"

Jack Blake looked round the study for fuel. Lowther hammered at the door in a fury.

Tom Merry and Manners came dashing up from different directions. Lowther turned a red and fiery face towards the chums.

"What's the row?" gasped Tom Merry.

"Those Fourth Form rotters are in our study."

"We'll jolly soon have them out!"

"The door's locked!"

"Phew!"

"There's the four of them. They're going to wolf our tea. We must get this beastly door open somehow."

"What did you let them get you out of the study for?" asked Manners innocently.

"You shrieking ass, what could I do against four?" demanded Lowther heatedly.

"You could have yelled."

"How could I yell with a beastly jam spoon jammed into my beastly mouth?"

"Oh, don't ask me conundrums!" said Manners. "They're going to scoff our tea, and we can't get at them. They've done it before."

"I'm going to get at them!" growled Lowther.

And he resumed thumping on the door. There was a swift footstep on the stairs, and Kildare dashed up. He did not stop to ask questions. He went for Lowther.

"Oh!" roared Monty, as the big Sixth-Former seized him by the ear. "Leggo!"

"What are you making this confounded row for?" demanded Kildare angrily. "Get along! Go down into the Common-room, all three of you!"

"I say—" began Tom Merry.

"Do as I tell you!"

There was no arguing with Kildare. The chums of the Shell exchanged glances and went downstairs. And Kildare, with a grim countenance, followed them as far as his own study, where he went in. Within Tom Merry's room Blake & Co. had heard all, and the chums of the Fourth hugged themselves with glee.

CHAPTER 8.

Outside!

JACK BLAKE found the remains of a packing-case in a corner, and a chopper in the cupboard. He chopped up the case, and Digby started a fire. The remnants of a packing-case were enough for a start. Blake looked round for more fuel.

"I'm sorry," he remarked. "It's their own carelessness. The stool will have to go."

The stool went. With powerful chops Blake divided it into logs, and the fire was liberally fed. The blaze roared up round the kettle, which was soon singing. Herries found the tea-caddy, and Blake warmed the teapot.

"This is all right," Digby remarked. "Anybody know where there is a tin-opener? That's the worst of dining out like this—you don't know where to find the things."

"I'll wun to Study No. 6 and get a tin-openah, Dig," said D'Arcy, putting his hand on the lock of the door.

Blake jerked him back.

"Ass! Don't open that door!"

"I wefuse to be called an ass. And how am I to go out without openin' the door, deah boy? Don't be widiculous."

"That door's not going to be opened till after tea," said Blake, taking the key from the lock and putting it in his pocket. "We don't know whether those Shell-fish may be hanging about outside."

"I heard Kildare tell them to go down to the Common-room."

"What about that?"

"Well, I should pwesume they went, deah boy."

"And how long do you think they'll stop there?" snorted Blake. "Just as long as Kildare keeps his eyes on them, and not a tick longer."

"Bai Jove, I nevah thought of that!"

"I've got a tin-opener in my pocket-knife," said Herries. "I'll have that salmon open in a jiffy. I wish I had my dog Towser here. He's awfully fond of salmon."

"Blow your dog Towser!"

Blake made the tea. The salmon tin was opened, bread-and-butter was cut, and the cold pork pies and saveloys served out. The Terrible Three had laid in a sufficient supply for themselves, and there was quite enough for four at a pinch. But, as Blake had remarked, it would have been short commons for seven.

Blake sat down at the head of the table with a scraphic smile. It is said that stolen fruits are sweetest, and certainly that raided feed was very agreeable.

"Yaas, I wogard this as wathah wippin'," remarked Arthur Augustus, as he took up the teapot to pour out the tea. It's about time those Shell boundahs were put in their place I—Ow! Wooh!"

D'Arcy was standing at the table exactly opposite the door, which he was facing. A sudden jet of water came through the keyhole, and it caught the swell of the School House exactly under the chin.

Crash!

The teapot went down on the table and splintered into fragments, the hot tea splashing in all directions.

There was a wild chorus of yells.

All four of the juniors had received splashes. Blake was dancing on one leg and clapping the other. Digby sprang backwards so quickly that he knocked his chair over and sprawled across it. Herries clapped his hand to his knees and yelled. D'Arcy had had the worst of it. His beautiful waistcoat was smothered with hot tea, and the heat was penetrating through it.

"Bai Jove! Ow, I am howwibly scalded!"

"Oh, you young ass!"

"You shrieking idiot!"

"How could I help it, deah boys? The wotten teapot bwoke of its own accord. My beastlay waistcoat is spoiled!"

"What did you drop it for?" roared Blake. "It was

Potts, the Office Boy!



only some water from a squirt through the keyhole that hit you."

"I was extremely startled, and, in fact, thrown into quite a fluttah."

"You ass, we're all scalded!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was a laugh from the passage outside. It was evident that the Terrible Three were there again, though this time they did not venture to thump on the panels of the door.

"You rotters!" shouted Blake. "Why can't you run away and let us have our tea in peace?"

"Yaas, wathah! I wegard these continual intewwptions as bein' in the worst of taste."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, stop your cackling, ass! I suppose there won't be any tea for us now, now that Gussy has smashed the teapot. Blessed if I know what makes him so clumsy!"

"Weally, Blake, I must wemark—"

"Oh, don't! Shove round the milk as far as it will go, and we'll have milk-and-water."

"Well, that's better for you than tea, you know," said Digby philosophically. "Silver lining to every cloud, you know. Let's have milk-and-water."

And they had milk-and-water. The teapot lay in fragments, and the tea was soaking into the cloth. But that, as Blake remarked, was Tom Merry's look-out. If he liked to smash teapots on his own table he must take the consequences. The juniors shifted the table out of the line of fire from the keyhole, and the feed proceeded merrily.

The Terrible Three chuckled over the success of their attack, but their chuckles died away as they heard the merry clinking of knives and forks in the study. An odour of salmon, very appetising to hungry juniors, came faintly to their nostrils.

"Blessed if I know what we can do," said Tom Merry. "The worst of it is, that they're scoffing our grub while we're thinking about it."

"That's because we've got such a jolly good leader," said Lowther.

"Oh, don't grouse! You let them into the study, anyway."

"What could I do against—"

"Oh, we've had all that!" said Manners. "The question is, how are we to get them out? We can't burst in the door; and if we try Kildara will get his wool off and come up again. It's a bit rough to be shut out of one's own study."

"Some more salmon, D'Arcy?" came a voice, purposely loud, from the study.

"Yaas, wathah, deah boy."

"Another saveloy, please, Herries."

"Right-ho! Here you are!"

The Terrible Three exchanged glances. They were very hungry. Tom Merry tapped at the door, and Blake halloed from within.

"Anybody there?"

"Yes, you worm!" said Tom Merry through the keyhole.

"Do you call it playing the game to scoff a fellow's grub?"

"Yes, rather!" said Blake. "You've scoffed ours often enough, I think."

"That's different. You're only fags—"

"Go and eat tin-tacks!"

"Yaas, wathah! This is wathah wuff on you, Tom Mewwy—almost as wuff as collawin' my box at the opewah and takin' my chair, you know. Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry laughed.

"He's got us there," he remarked. "What the dickens are we to do? Hallo, who's that coming along the passage? Hallo, Skimpole!"

A junior with a big forehead and a very large pair of spectacles was coming along the passage. It was Skimpole of the Shell, who shared Gore's study, next door to Tom Merry's. He stopped and looked at the Terrible Three, and blinked.

"Anything wrong?" he asked.

"Yes, rather. We can't open the door."

"Dear me, is it locked?"

"If it wasn't we might be able to open it!" snapped Lowther.

"Very true. What you say is quite correct, Lowther. In all probability it would be quite easy to open the door if it were not locked," agreed Skimpole. "If it is locked the simplest way to open it would be to get the key."

"The key is inside in Blake's pocket."

"Oh, I understand!"

"Sure?" asked Lowther sarcastically. "Can you understand anything, Skimmy?"

"Certainly, Lowther. I understand many matters that are far beyond your comprehension. I am now writing the three hundred and fiftieth chapter of my great book, and it contains a disquisition upon persons who sneer at those they have not the mental powers to appraise at their proper value—"

"Oh, get along, Skimmy! You make me tired!"

"If you wish this door opened I have no doubt I can devise some method," said Skimpole. "Why not manufacture a skeleton key and pick the lock?"

"That's a good wheeze. Can you make a skeleton key?" asked Tom Merry.

"Well, no, I cannot say that I can make one—that is merely a suggestion. There are other ways of opening the door. You can tie a small bag of gunpowder to the handle, and light it from a distance by means of a fuse or an electric wire—"

"Have you any gunpowder?"

"Oh, no! I never keep such stuff in my study."

"How are we to attach a bag of gunpowder to the handle of the door if we haven't any gunpowder?" asked Tom Merry patiently.

"I am afraid it would be impossible. Of course, the value of my suggestion depended entirely upon your having a supply of gunpowder close at hand. It is a very useful thing to keep about, and I have already been thinking of suggesting to the science master that a keg or two should be kept in the laboratory for the use of the juniors. But if there is a lack of gunpowder I suppose that suggestion is impracticable. Let me see!" Skimpole rubbed his bumpy forehead, apparently to assist his brain to work. "Yes, I have another idea. I was speaking of an electric wire. If a sufficient current of electricity be applied to any object it will be burnt up. Suppose you were to run a current to this door, burn a hole in the panel, and put your hand through and unlock the door."

"Where is the electriciv' to come from?"

"The electricity is easily produced. You could generate a sufficient quantity by turning a wheel two feet in circumference at the rate of thirty thousand revolutions a minute—"

"Good!" said Tom Merry. "Run along and fetch the necessary apparatus, Skimmy, and we'll get to work at once."



BIG BEN!



Skimpole blinked at him.

"I could obtain the necessary apparatus in a few days, Merry, at the cost of a few pounds," he said. "If you are willing—"

"And will that enable us to open this door now?" said Lowther pleasantly.

Skimpole scratched his head.

"Well, no. But I have another suggestion to make—"

"Nuff said!" remarked Tom Merry. "We're getting fed-up with your suggestions—they are so practicable—so sensible, you know. Get along, Skimpy!"

Three pairs of hands grasped the genius of the Shell, marched him into his study, and plumped him down breathless there. Tom Merry slammed the door. The chums of the Shell resumed their anxious discussion outside their own door.

"We're done in!" said Lowther. "We may as well cut it!"

Skimpole's door opened. The brainy man of the School House blinked out at them.

"I say, Tom Merry, I have another idea. If you happen to have an old garden-roller anywhere—"

"I haven't," said Tom Merry. "I dropped the one I usually wear on my watch-chain, and it's lost."

"Really, Merry! But I have another suggestion to make—"

Lowther made a rush at the brilliant propounder of new ideas, and he looked so dangerous that Skimpole hastily popped back into the study and locked the door. An inky-fingered youngster of the Third Form came along the passage and nodded coolly to the Terrible Three, apparently quite unimpressed by the fact that they were members of the Shell, the next Form below the Fifth.

It was D'Arey minor, younger brother to Arthur Augustus, and as unlike the swell of St. Jim's as could possibly be imagined.

"Hallo, kids!" he said.

"Hallo, young shaver!" growled Lowther. "Have you come up this passage to look for a thick ear?"

"No; I came to look for you three bounders," said Wally D'Arey cheerfully. "You stood me a feed the day I came to St. Jim's. I told you I'd stand you one."

"Like your cheek."

"Run away, little boy!" said Manners. "Members of the Shell don't feed in a Form-room with inky little ruffians in the Third Form."

"Oh, rats!" said Wally. "There's a good spread. I've got Jameson and Curly Gibson coming, and I'd like you three. There's saveloys, and pork pies, and jam-rolls, and marmalade pudding, and heaps of tarts."

The chums of the Shell thawed visibly. They were very hungry, and tea in Hall was over long ago. It was pretty certain that Blake & Co. would not leave much that was eatable when they had finished. Wally's offer, as a matter of fact, came in the nick of time—like corn in Egypt in the lean years!

"It's a bit below the dignity of the Form," said Manners meditatively.

"Terribly," said Tom Merry. "Still, we ought to give our protection to this interesting youth."

"Rats!" said the interesting youth.

"We might look in," said Lowther, in a thoughtful sort of way.

"Oh, cheese it!" said D'Arey minor. "If you're coming, come; if you're not, I'll go and ask some other fellows. My feed won't go begging."

"You've got such a charming way of putting it," said Tom Merry. "We couldn't resist it if we wanted to. Lead the way!"

"Right-ho! Follow your leader."

And D'Arey minor—secretly not a little proud of having three members of the Shell! to tea—led the way, and the Terrible Three followed. It was a triumph for D'Arey minor, and a great relief to the chums of the Shell.

CHAPTER 9.

Pauline!

DARRELL came out of his study with his coat on at a quarter to five on the following afternoon, and walked quickly down the Sixth Form passage. Kildare's door was open, and the captain of St. Jim's was standing just inside his study, talking to Rushden and Drake of the Sixth. All three of them looked at Darrell as he passed.

The prefect gave a quick, awkward nod and hastened past. He did not stop to speak, and his face was very

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red as he hurried away. Rushden and Drake looked at Kildare, who had a sombre cloud on his brow.

"What does that mean, Kildare?" asked Rushden. "Isn't Darrell coming to the footer?"

"No."

"I suppose he's going to play on Saturday?"

"Yes; he has some engagement this evening."

"And an engagement yesterday afternoon," said Drake. "Seems to me that Darrell has too many engagements for a member of the First Eleven."

"I was thinking so, too," Rushden remarked. "We've got the toughest fight of the season before us on Saturday, and to-day's Thursday."



There was a frantic rush, but it came too late, for Tom Merry had escaped the tips of his fingers. There was

"Well, I suppose it can't be helped," Kildare said easily. "It isn't because he's my chum that I stand it. But Darrell at his worst form is the best winger we can find, and we must have him on Saturday whether he keeps in form or not."

"I know that, and that only makes it the worse of him to fool us about like this."

"It will be all right," said Kildare.

But Rushden and Drake were looking gloomy as they went down to the football ground. The First Eleven needed to strain every nerve on Saturday to win the match against their old rivals. It was too bad for one of the best players in the team to be neglecting the game like this! Darrell was thinking, too, of the looks they had given him as he strode along the lane to Rylcombe, and took the train there for the market town. Darrell had a keen sense of duty, but it was the old conflict—love and duty—pulling the boy different ways.

He knew that he ought to be at this moment with the other fellows. Yet in a few days' time the signorina would be gone—gone too far for him to see her again—perhaps for years! Was he called upon to give up everything? He would play on Saturday—he would play his best. Surely that was as much as his school had a right to expect of him! So he argued with himself; but while the inward argument was proceeding the train was bearing him swiftly towards the signorina. Love was stronger than duty!

Darrell's heart was beating hard as he knocked at the little stage door of the Wayland Theatre Royal.

Young as he was, boyish in many ways, he was yet a man in others, and in truth and depth of feeling quite a man.



Goal. The goalkeeper made a terrific leap at the ball, and it just "Goal!" Then the final whistle blew.

The signorina was the first woman upon whom he had bestowed a thought in this way, and she, with her beauty and grace, had won him at a glance. Foolish he might be, blind to obvious impossibilities, yet he was sincere and true, and there was something noble in the boy's love for the beautiful singer—a love founded as much upon his instinctive knowledge of her goodness and true womanliness, as upon anything else, as the signorina knew.

Darrell was shown into a small and barely furnished room, to wait for the signorina. He had not long to wait.

Pauline came in in a few minutes, dressed for walking. She had looked lovely on the stage in the glare of the footlights. She seemed lovelier to the boy in the garb of everyday life. She was dressed plainly, but in the best taste, and Darrell, whose boyish eye naturally noted nothing of detail, only felt that the total effect was sweet and charming. She shook hands with the boy in her frank and candid way.

"I am glad to see you, Dick. You are punctual."

"I was not likely to be late, Pauline."

He laughed.

"Let us go, then. But it was scarcely worth your while to come. I shall only be free for half an hour."

"I shall see you this evening before the scenes."

"You are staying the evening in Wayland?"

"Yes."

She looked at him curiously.

"But are you able to get away so easily from your school? Dick, you must not leave St. Jim's when you are not allowed to do so."

Darrell smiled.

"A prefect is allowed out whenever he chooses," he said. "The Head doesn't make a fellow a prefect unless he can rely upon him in every way."

They left the stage door, and walked down to the High Street. On the other side a road, soon becoming a lane, led into the deep of the country. Pauline was silent until they were under the overhanging branches of the trees, with the leaves falling about them with a gentle rustle in the autumn breeze.

"But a prefect has duties to do," she said.

"Oh, yes, and plenty of them!"

"How then—"

"My evening duties have been taken over by another prefect for this evening," Darrell explained. "That is all right. We can do each other turns like that. As a matter of fact, I took over his work for a week when he was swotting for an exam."

"I see. And what about the football?"

"You don't care about football news," said Darrell, with a smile.

"But I do. I care about all that interests you," said Pauline seriously. "You shall tell me all about your sports. You keep up a good deal of practice, I suppose."

Darrell coloured a little as he thought of Kildare.

"Yes. We are playing Redclyffe in a few days. I wish you could come and see the match, Pauline."

The signorina nodded.

"I wish I could, Dick. I should like it above everything. But a member of a travelling opera company has little time for excursions."

"You work too hard," said Darrell.

"We all have to work hard," she said. "Too hard for our voices especially. Yesterday was market day here, and the greatest day of the week for the box office. I sang both in the afternoon and the evening. If I were to sing to-night I should be hoarse for days. I cannot be so careful of my voice as I wish."

"Then you will not appear to-night?"

The signorina laughed.

"Yes, I shall appear. The company is too small for a single member to be spared from the stage. But I shall be in a small role that exacts nothing from me, and my name will not be on the programme."

"It will be better for you when you are at Covent Garden."

"Yes, when! Then three or four performances in the week will be the utmost."

"You will be very rich, then?"

"Yes; if I am successful."

Darrell's brow clouded a little.

"And then—then—"

"It would make no difference to our friendship, Dick, and we shall never be anything but friends."

"Oh, Pauline!"

"Come—come, remember our compact!"

"I remember; but it is hard for me. You don't know what this means to me, Pauline."

"I think I do, and for that reason it would be better for us to meet no more."

"Oh, no, no!"

Pauline was silent. They walked under the old trees, and Darrell told her much of his school life, a topic interesting enough to the girl who had lived in an atmosphere so totally different. With a word here and there she drew from him the description of his life at St. Jim's, the school-boy aims and ambitions, hopes, and fears. The time passed all too quickly, and Pauline gave a start at last as the church clock chimed out over the woods.

"We must return," she said.

They walked back to the theatre and parted at the door. It was eleven o'clock that night when Darrell let himself in at the side gate at St. Jim's with his key.

CHAPTER 10.

A Word in Season!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY had a thoughtful frown upon his brow. He was polishing a silk hat in Study No. 6, and his hand holding the pad was arrested in midair, showing that he was deep in reflection. Jack Blake, who was roasting and eating chestnuts, glanced at him. Finally Jack spun a chestnut from his finger and thumb, and caught D'Arcy on the chin with it.

The swell of the School House started up with a gasp, thus suddenly roused from his deep meditations. The silk hat went one way, and the pad another.

"Bai Jove! Blake, you uttah ass!"

"Thought you were going into a trance or something," explained Blake. "Pick up that chestnut and throw it back to me, will you?"

"Certainly not! I wegard the wequest as insult added to injury."

"It's a pity to waste it."

"You have caused me to drop my silk hat, and it is dented," said D'Arcy, picking up his valuable headgear and brushing it tenderly.

"Sorry! What were you thinking about? How to get another feed on the cheap, same as we did Wednesday evening?"

"I was not thinkin' anythin' so gwoss."

"Gross," said Blake meditatively. "I believe I remember that you kept your end up pretty well in clearing Tom Merry's table, anyway."

"I was thinkin' of a more important mattah. Do you know that Dawwell went out last night, and did not return till a vewy late hour?"

"Shouldn't wonder."

"It is a fact. He was not in when we went to bed. I haven't the slightest doubt that he went ovah to Wayland."

"No business of yours, my son."

"That is quite a mistake. As a fellow who has been through these things, don't you think I ought to speak a word in season to Dawwell?"

"Yes, if you want your silly head knocked off."

"I wegard that expression as wude and oppwobwious. You see, the Wedcliffyfe match is on Saturday. We can't have Dawwell playin' the giddy ox like this, and failin' us, then. The honah of St. Jim's is at stake. There is a matinee of 'Faust' on Saturday. It would be just like Dawwell to cut ovah to Wayland to see the signowinah, and forget all about the footah match."

"Oh, I don't know about that! He's several sorts of an ass, but not such an ass as that. Have some of these chestnuts?"

"I don't mind if I do, deah boy. But, look here, to-day is Fwiday, and if anythin' is to be done, I think it ought to be done at once."

"There's nothing to be done, ass!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"If you want to exercise your thinker, think of some way of getting a feed," said Blake. "I'm stony, Dig's stony, Herries is stony—we're all stony."

"The footah match-to-mowwow is of more importance. The question is, would it have any result if I spoke a word in season to Dawwell?"

"Yes, I am pretty sure it would—a rather painful result for you."

"Of course, I should be willin' to wisk that for the sake of the coll. But I hardly see how Dawwell could fail to weceive me with the politeness due fwom one gentleman to another."

"Oh, you can't rely on those Sixth Form chaps!" grinned Blake. "My advice to you is, keep off the grass."

"Undah the cirs, I am afwaid that it would not be consistent with my duty to the coll to keep off the gwass. I must welect upon the mattah."

And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy walked out of the study, his brow corrugated with thought.

Blake chuckled. He had done his best, and if D'Arcy spoke a word in season to Darrell now, it would be his own look-out. It unfortunately happened that Monty Lowther was coming from the Shell passage, and he met Arthur Augustus a minute after he had left Study No. 6. Monty Lowther looked a little warlike. He had not forgotten the raid of the Fourth-Formers. But D'Arcy, with his mind full of another matter, was oblivious of the looks of Monty Lowther. He stopped the Shell fellow and tapped him on the arm.

"I want to speak to you, Lowthah. It's about Dawwell."

"Oh, is it?" said Lowther.

"Yaas. What do you think of the ideah of speakin' a word in season to him?"

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"A word in what?"

"A word in season. He was ovah in Wayland last night again. Now, I do not appwove of young fellows fallin' in love with opewah singahs as a wule, but, apart fwom that, there is the Wedcliffyfe match on Saturday. I weally think somebody ought to speak to Dawwell for his own good, in case he should think of buzzin' off on Saturday and leaving the coll in the lurch, you know."

Monty Lowther nodded, with a face as grave as that of a judge about to pass a heavy sentence. He seemed to fully comprehend the importance of the matter.

"Good!" he said. "It takes a fellow like you to think of these things, Gussy. Suppose you were to speak to Darrell, and point out to him that it won't do. Point out to him that it's not what the Fourth Form expect of him."

"Yaas, I was thinkin' of somethin' of that sort."

"A tactful chap like you might do a lot of good in a delicate matter like this."

"Yaas; Blake seems to think that Dawwell would be waxy."

"Why should he be waxy? And if he were, I suppose a chap like Darrell would be hardly likely to fail in the courtesy due from one gentleman to another," said Lowther solemnly.

"Yaas, that has occurred to me before, Lowthah. You weally think, then, that it's a good ideah for me to speak a word in season to Dawwell?"

"My dear chap, there's nothing I'd rather see you do."

"Will you come and back me up, then?"

Lowther started a little.

"Well, I'm afraid I should only muck it up," he said. "A delicate matter like this ought to be left wholly in the hands of a really tactful sort of chap."

"Yaas, pewwaps you are wight."

"Darrell's in his study now. He's going to play footer. Better catch him at once."

"Wight you are."

And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy walked away to Darrell's study. Monty Lowther nearly exploded. He hurried back the way he had come, and looked into Tom Merry's study.

"Come out, you bounders!" he gasped.

"What's up?"

"Gussy's going to speak a word in season to Darrell!"

Tom Merry and Manners jumped up.

"About the signorina?"

"Yes, Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Come on! We can watch from the stairs to see him come out of Darrell's study."

"I say, he will get slain!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "It's too bad, Monty."

"Not so bad as scoffing our tea the other night."

"Is it too late to stop him?"

"Much too late," chuckled Lowther. "He's at Darrell's door before this. Come on—I'm not going to miss seeing him come out!"

The Terrible Three hurried towards the stairs. Tom Merry looked over the lower banisters and saw D'Arcy tapping at Darrell's door. The next moment the swell of the School House had entered Darrell's study and closed the door behind him. The prefect was changing into his football things, and he had called out to D'Arcy to come in, expecting to see Kildare. He glanced hastily at the swell of St. Jim's as his head emerged from the football shirt he was pulling on.

"What do you want, D'Arcy?"

"I want to speak a word to you, Dawwell—"

"Buck up, then! I'm expecting Kildare every moment, and I'm just going down to the footer."

Arthur Augustus hesitated. It certainly was not a favourable opportunity for speaking a word in season. But D'Arcy felt that he had set his hand to the plough and could not turn back.

"It's about the football, Dawwell—"

"Buck up!"

Darrell sat on the edge of his bed and shoved his football boots on. D'Arcy took his courage in both hands and went ahead.

"I was in Wayland the othah day, Dawwell—the day of the matinee of the theatre there—"

Darrell looked up quickly.

"Were you? What about it?"

"I saw you fwom my box. I am wathah expewienced in these mattahs, deah boy, and so I may as well tell you at once that I know all about it."

Darrell breathed hard.

"All about what, D'Arcy?"

"All about the opewah singah. A most charmin' young lady, I admit, but it won't do, Dawwell."

Darrell was too amazed to be angry—for the moment. He remained with one leg crossed over the other, a half-fastened boot in the air, and stared at D'Arcy.

"What won't do?" he said.

"I have seen with great regret that you are neglecting the football," said D'Arcy. "I have thought it my duty to speak a word in season. I have been through these experiences myself, and so I can speak with authority. It won't do, Dawwell. My advice to you—"

Darrell turned scarlet for the moment. Then he deliberately finished putting on his boots. Arthur Augustus, deceived by his composure, went on with more confidence.

"My advice to you, Dawwell, is to make a clean break of it—chuck the whole thing out of your mind! A word in season—"

Darrell rose. The glint in his eyes rather alarmed D'Arcy. "Thank you very much, D'Arcy," said the prefect quietly. "It is very kind of you to come and give me advice, especially as it is not common for Fourth Form juniors to advise prefects on delicate matters. You impudent little rascal, get out of my study."

"Bai Jove!"

Darrell seized the swell of St. Jim's by the collar before he could say any more, and slung him round. He tore the door open, and swung D'Arcy into the passage. Then the football boots came into play.

Arthur Augustus reached the end of the passage in record time. Darrell went back to his study with a grim smile on his face. D'Arcy sat up on the mat in blank amazement. He was aching all over, and feeling very confused and shaken up. From the stairs came a formidable roar of laughter. The Terrible Three were clinging to the banisters and simply yelling.

"Bai Jove!" gasped D'Arcy. "I—I have been used with gross disrespect. I regard Dawwell as an ungrateful wretch, and I shall let him go to the dogs in his own way!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The swell of the School House limped away, leaving the chums of the Shell sitting on the stairs and almost weeping with merriment.

CHAPTER 11.

Off to Redclyffe!

SATURDAY dawned a bright, cold, keen October day. The weather was excellent for football, and the ground in good condition. And everyone at St. Jim's was accordingly glad.

There was to be football galore that afternoon. The First Eleven were going over to Redclyffe to play their old rivals. At home at St. Jim's there was a House match between two Fifth Form teams. Another House match, with two teams belonging to the Fourth Form was to take place on the junior ground. Added to that, a scratch team from the Sixth was meeting a visiting eleven from Wayland. And the Third Form, not to be out of it, had fixed up a Form match between two mky-fingered elevens captained respectively by Jameson and D'Arcy minor.

After morning school and dinner there was a general break for the playing-ground. The First Eleven were to go to the station in a motor-bus. Redclyffe was the farthest of St. Jim's outmatches, and it was a good journey by rail. After dinner most of the members packed their bags and waited about for the bus.

Tom Merry, Manners and Lowther were holding a discussion in the Hall, and Darrell was standing on the steps of the School House, looking at a local paper that had lately come in. Tom Merry saw what he was doing and smiled quietly. He knew that Darrell would be looking up the reports of the opera performances at the Wayland Theatre.

"We seem to be a bit out of it," said Lowther. "There's no Shell match on this afternoon. We'd better get one up, I think."

"Or shall we go over to Redclyffe to see the First Team play?" Manners suggested.

"It's a jolly long way—and there are the fares."

"We could manage it on our jiggers."

"Well, yes, we could. What do you think, Merry?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'd rather play, I think. Hallo, Blake, are you playing to-day?"

Jack Blake had just come by with his coat on. He shook his head.

"No; we're going over to Redclyffe to see Kildare's lot play."

"But there's a Fourth Form match on."

"That's all right. Reilly is captaining in my place, and they'll get on all right for once without me. Nothing like giving the other fellows a chance sometimes, you know."

"Yes; when you want to be off somewhere else," agreed Lowther.

"Well, I think some of us ought to be on the ground to encourage the Sixth," said Blake. "I shouldn't like them to think we didn't back them up, you know."

"No, it would worry them fearfully."

"Oh, don't be funny! Are you fellows going over?"

"No; I think we shall play."

"So long, then!"

The chums of Study No. 6 went round to the bicycle-sheds for their machines. They could not afford the fares to Redclyffe, and it was a fine afternoon for a long spin. The four of them rode away together, and they were joined on the road by Figgins & Co. of the New House. Figgins & Co. did not consider the Fourth Form match up to their weight with Blake and his chums away, and Figgins had resigned the captaincy for the day to Pratt, and the Co. had determined to see the Redclyffe match.

Several New House seniors were in the First Eleven, and Figgins felt that somebody ought to be on the spot to cheer.

Tom Merry and his chums discussed the matter, and decided to get up a scratch match. They had no fixture for the afternoon, but the weather was too good to be wasted.

"Good heavens!"

The sharp, low exclamation from Darrell came plainly to the ears of the chums of the Shell, and they glanced at him quickly.

The paper had fluttered from Darrell's hands, and lay on the stone steps of the School House, and the prefect's face had become deathly pale.

"Good heavens!"

The senior leaned on the school balustrade. His face was white, his brow lined with care. It was evident that he had learned some bad news from the paper. The chums exchanged glances, and Lowther quietly stepped to the hall-stand, where lay a copy of the "Wayland Weekly."

"There's something up," he muttered.

He glanced through the paper and knew that it was the column dealing with the visit of the opera company that he should look at. He quickly found the paragraph that Darrell had been reading—at all events, there was little doubt about it.

"We regret to learn that" during the performance of 'La Boheme' last night at the Theatre Royal there was an accident to some of the scenery, and Signorina Colonna was injured. Whether the injury was serious we are not yet informed."

That was all.

But it was clear that this was the paragraph that had wrung those startled words from Darrell.

Tom Merry looked out from the Hall window. Darrell was standing there, leaning on the stone balustrade, his face very white. There was an almost wild look in his eyes. The buzz of a motor rang in the old quadrangle, and the bus from Rylcombe drew up. Kildare came out of the House with a bag under his arm. He tapped Darrell on the shoulder.

"Car's here, old fellow. Scott! What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"You are looking fearfully seedy," said Kildare anxiously. "Don't you feel fit?"

"Yes, yes. Leave me alone for a minute."

Kildare looked at him curiously and turned away. He tossed his bag into the bus.

The fellows came out and mounted into the vehicle. Darrell picked up the paper again and looked at the fatal paragraph.

"We are waiting for you, Darrell," said Kildare quietly. "We have our train to catch."

Darrell started.

How could he go—how could he play football when the woman he worshipped was lying injured—perhaps even to the death?

Yet perhaps—more likely than not—it was but a trifling injury, and his anxiety was for nothing. He could not fail his captain for a triff! But how could he know?

The Terrible Three came out of the House, and Darrell's face brightened up as he caught sight of Tom Merry. He signed to him, and Tom came up at once.

(Continued on page 19.)

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SEE WHAT'S IN—



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HALLO, chums! Have you enjoyed this week's long complete St. Jim's story? Are you eager, also, to read more of our grand new serial? Both questions call for the same answer, I know, and that is an affirmative "YES!" That's the stuff! Well, next week's yarn of Tom Merry & Co. is a regular corker. Here's the title:

"BOY SCOUTS OF ST. JIM'S!"

so be certain to get your copy of the GEM in good time. This story by Martin Clifford is the best yet. There's no need for me to urge you to read the next thrill-packed chapters of

"THE LOST LEGION!"

You will do that of your own accord, I'll wager! Potts the Office Boy obliges with another quick-tonic laugh, and there will be some more news pears on this page. Don't forget Wednesday is GEM Day—the BEST day of the week!

FREE GIFTS!

I expect the majority of GEM readers have already sampled the wonderful Free Gifts now being presented with our companion papers, "Modern Boy," "Magnet," and "Ranger." For the benefit of those who have so far missed these gifts, however, I take this opportunity of mentioning that each paper presents EACH WEEK SIX SUPER PICTURE STAMPS depicting Rough-riders, Ships, Locos, Aeroplanes, Dogs, and the Art of Self-Defence. The stamps are printed in full colour and they make a fine collection. Get a copy of this week's issue of the above papers and see for yourselves what a splendid Gift Scheme this is.

BELIEVE IT OR NOT.

"A" was very upset when he heard that his friend "B" had been given a month's imprisonment, so he represented himself to be "B" and served the sentence for him. The deception was only discovered when "B" was given another sentence, and "A" endeavoured to take his place "behind the bars" for the second time. Well, well!

A NEW RECORD FOR BRITAIN!

Few people have ever sailed into the blue to a height of eight miles—they can be counted on the fingers of one hand: Professor Picard and his assistant; Lieutenant Soucek, of the U.S. Navy; and now Captain Cyril F. Uwins. The latter brings to Britain a new aeroplane height record of 43,976 feet—795 feet higher than the record set up by Lieutenant Soucek. Captain Uwins is naturally proud of his feat, for it was his fifth attempt to set up a record. But the surprising bit of news about the flight is that the

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aeroplane he used was a "five year old," and for two months had been up to its wings in water!

A PRIZED SOUVENIR!

Biff! The taxi-driver was naturally inquisitive when his stationary cab outside a famous London hotel was biffed by a posh-looking private car which was travelling backwards. When he got down from his seat, however, he discovered that the Prince of Wales had been responsible for that unexpected biff. It transpired that Prince George had asked his brother to have a look at his new car. The Prince of Wales started the engine and then discovered that the gears had been left in reverse. The only damage done to the taxicab was a smashed headlamp, and the Prince of Wales offered to pay compensation. The taxi-driver, recognising his Royal Highness, intimated that he could smash up the cab, so far as he cared. The Prince, however, insisted that the taxicabman should take a pound note for the damage done. The taxicabman replied that he would never spend that pound. His intention was to frame it, so that his children could see it, whereupon the Prince of Wales remarked: "If that's the case, give it back to me and I'll give you a cheque!"

THE GHOST THAT WASN'T!

The inhabitants of Warsaw had been talking about a ghostly visitant in the local cemetery. People declared they had seen it walking at dead of night, etc. Then the police investigated. What they found was an unemployed man who had made his home in a tomb! His bed was a coffin and around it were a lamp, chair, bookcase, and other necessary articles to a one-roomed flat!

"THE HOLIDAY ANNUAL"—

Don't forget to buy the best book when you are looking at the latest display of Annuals—and don't forget that the BEST is the "HOLIDAY ANNUAL." For years this wonder volume has delighted thousands of boys and girls all over the world. This year's edition is better than ever. Wonderful stories of Tom Merry & Co., Harry Wharton & Co., and Jimmy Silver & Co. are to be found in its colourful pages, besides gripping stories of adventure on land, at sea, and in the air. Four gorgeous colour plates and four striking photogravure plates give this grand six-shilling volume a finishing touch of quality it is impossible to equal elsewhere. When you're visiting your newsagent next time, ask him to show you a copy. Better still, tell him you would like to purchase the "Holiday Annual" through a Christmas Club. Your newsagent has all the details of this scheme, and he will be pleased to pass them on to you.

THE GO-GETTER!

The express thundered into view with its usual accompaniment of hissing steam. Suddenly the driver saw a man jump down into the track, right in the path of the pounding loco. Brakes were applied frenziedly, and eventually the express clattered to a standstill. No one was hurt. It wasn't even a case of suicide. It was the desperate measure of a business man who particularly wanted to board the train in order to complete a big contract worth thousands of pounds. The man in question had been told that the express did not stop at the station; the signalman, even though it meant something like two thousand pounds to the railway company if the contract was "landed" from freightage fees, etc., naturally refused to stop the train. Would you have done the same as the business man? Well, no matter! He risked his life, boarded the train, and—got the contract!

A NEW DEPTH RECORD!

Close atop of Captain Unwin's height record comes news of an American who has set up a new "depth" record. In other words he has been lowered into the ocean blue to something like two thousand five hundred feet. No man, before this, has ever "dived so deep." Dr. William Beebe is the American in question, and he has the distinction of also broadcasting his experiences to American listeners what time the steel ball in which he was sealed, and which was fitted with portholes of quartz panes, was slowly lowered into the depths. The steel ball, by the way, is named a "bathysphere," and through its portholes the doctor took many photographs of underwater creatures hitherto unknown to man. The darkness of the depths didn't worry the doctor—his bathysphere was fitted out with a powerful searchlight. You can imagine Dr. William Beebe at the microphone. "Hallo, listeners! This is Doctor William Beebe speaking—speaking from a depth of umpteen feet below sea level off the coast of Nonsuch Island, in the Bermudas. I'm enjoying this trip immensely, etc."

CONQUERING EVEREST BY AIR.

Mount Everest—the highest mountain in the world—has reared its proud head 29,000 feet above sea level long enough without the world knowing what exactly is on the top of its "thatch." So now an expedition is being organised on modern lines to put a stop to all that. A special British aeroplane, piloted by the "Boxing Marquis" of Clydesdale, and carrying an expert photographer, is to attempt to "get" the necessary height over this tricky, Indian country and survey the giant mountain in comfort. Special oxygen apparatus will be carried, and all precautions are being taken against forced landings, engine failure, and other contingencies likely to arise. It is a British enterprise in every department, and "Gemites" will wish it good luck.

THIS WEEK'S HOWLER!

Examiner: "And who was Dr. Johnson?"

Bright Youth: "Father of Miss Amy Johnson, the famous airwoman, sir!"

YOUR EDITOR.

THE SIXTH-FORMER'S SECRET!

(Continued from page 17.)

"Merry"—the senior spoke quickly and nervously—"will you do me a favour?"

"Anything," said Tom Merry quietly.

"Are you fixed up for this afternoon?"

It was like Darrell, even at such a moment, to remember to be considerate towards others. But it only needed that very consideration to make Tom Merry willing to do anything for him.

The junior shook his head.

"No," he said. "We were going to get up a scratch-match, but it's nothing."

"Will you go to the post office for me, then, and send a wire to Wayland, wait there for a reply, and—"

The prefect hesitated.

"Willingly. That is easy enough."

"Wait at the post office for a reply, and bring it to me at Redclyffe?"

"Yes, rather!"

"It's a long way."

"That's nothing. I can do it on my bike in less than the time you'd take by train," said Tom Merry. "Scorching a bit, you know."

"Good! Thank you, lad! I'll write out the wire. Here's some tin."

Darrell scrawled a message on the leaf of his pocket-book and handed it to Merry.

"Better read it, Merry, but don't jaw afterwards—you understand?"

"I understand, Darrell."

Tom Merry read the message. It was addressed to the manager of the Wayland Theatre, with whom Darrell was acquainted, and contained a brief inquiry as to the state of the signorina.

"You will pre-pay the reply and wait for it, Merry. Then scorch over to Redclyffe. If you go down to the village on your bike you can get the wire off before we reach the station. Cut along!"

"Right-ho, Darrell!"

Two minutes later Tom Merry was on his bike, dashing down to the village. He had not waited to give a word of explanation to Manners and Lowther, but his chums did not need it. They simply fetched out their machines and scorched after him. Darrell stepped into the bus and sat silent and troubled during the drive to the station.

Kildare looked at him once or twice, but did not speak. He saw that his chum had some trouble on his mind, and he did not want to worry him with questions. Darrell was still silent and anxious when the team alighted from the train at Redclyffe and entered the brake that was waiting to convey them to the school.

CHAPTER 12.

Bad News!

TOM MERRY jumped from his bicycle in the High Street of Rylcombe, and let the machine slide against a lamp-post.

He dashed into the post office and jammed the scribbled message down at the telegraphist's desk.

The telegraphist at Rylcombe was a pretty girl, and she was enjoying a conversation with another charming young lady, whose duty it was to attend to stamps and parcels.

Tom Merry rapped on the counter, but the conversation was on the subject of hats. Needless to say, it had to finish before the telegraphist had time to attend to the boy from St. Jim's. Having settled what type of autumn headgear would best suit her complexion, the young lady condescended to take the note and tick it off.

Tom Merry paid for the reply, which was to come to Rylcombe Post Office, and strolled out into the street.

Lowther and Manners had arrived, and were standing on the kerb, holding their bicycles. Tom Merry mopped the perspiration from his forehead with his handkerchief.

"And now," said Monty Lowther, "if it won't bother you too much, you might give us an inkling as to what the fuss is about?"

Tom Merry explained.

"My hat!" said Lowther. "That means waiting half an hour, at least. We'd better get along to the tuckshop and have a feed if we're going along to Redclyffe."

"Are you fellows coming?"

"Well, you're not worth it; but as we've come so far we may as well stick it out."

"Good!" said Tom Merry, laughing.

It was not long since the juniors' dinner, but it was a

good idea to take in a fresh supply in case the next meal was postponed. The visit to the village tuckshop filled in the half-hour pleasantly enough, and the chums of the Shell were looking satisfied as they strolled back to the post office. The reply from Wayland had not yet come. It ticked in a few minutes later, however, and the message was handed out to Tom Merry.

He did not feel justified in reading it, though he would have given a great deal to know whether the signorina was seriously hurt or not.

"Got it?" asked Manners, as Tom came out of the post office.

"Yes," said Tom Merry, tapping his pocket. "Now for a scorch to Redclyffe."

"Good! It's ripping weather for a scorch."

And scorch the Terrible Three did.

Through village streets, along wide country roads and rutty lanes they went, as fast as their machines would carry them, riding in a row at a dead level, the pace hardly ever slackening.

Tom Merry glanced at his watch as a grey old tower rose above the distant trees.

"What is it?" panted Lowther.

"Quarter to three."

"My hat! They kick-off at three!"

"That's all right. We shall catch Darrell before he goes on."

They dashed on in silence up a hill at a hot pace, and then free-wheeling down the slope at a rate that made the wind sing in their ears, and made them draw their jackets tighter over their chests. Manners broke the silence.

"I say, Tom, suppose it's bad news about the signorina?"

"It may be."

"Do you think Darrell will play then?"

Tom Merry started. He had not thought of that.

"I suppose so," he said.

"If it's good news he'll be relieved in his mind and play all right," said Lowther. "But if there's anything seriously wrong with the signorina—"

"He'll bolt!" said Manners.

"I fancy so."

Tom Merry looked worried.

"Well, it can't be helped now," he remarked. "I've given Darrell my word, or I should be tempted not to take him the wire. But then it would be rotten for the poor chap to be in suspense."

"It would muck up the play."

"Most likely."

Down the hill, and then along a smooth slope right up to Redclyffe. With the impetus of the rush down the hill, the chums free-wheeled at a terrific pace along the level. The gates of Redclyffe, wide open, came into view. Right on the Terrible Three dashed. They could see the clock over the trees, and the hand was pointing to five minutes to three.

"It's rotten!" muttered Lowther. "There's precious few fellows gone with the First Eleven, you see, and it won't be easy for Kildare to get a substitute if Darrell were to bolt."

"There's the secretary, Crabbe of the Sixth."

"He's a linesman, and he can't play for toffee!"

"Can't be helped now!"

Tom Merry sprang off his machine and dashed forward. Outside the pavilion of the match ground a group of fellows were standing. It wanted four minutes to the kick-off, and the footballers were about to go on the ground. Tom Merry sighted Darrell, who was chatting with Kildare, but with a cloud on his brow that told that his thoughts were far away. He caught sight of Tom Merry panting up, and his face flushed. He strode towards the junior and held out his hand.

"Have you the telegram?"

"Here it is!"

Tom Merry handed it over. Darrell tore it open and read. A cry broke from his lips, and he staggered back. His face was white as a sheet. Kildare sprang towards him.

"Darrell, what is it—bad news?"

"Yes."

The telegram fluttered from Darrell's hand. The fellows were crowding round him. North, the Redclyffe captain, came up, looking concerned.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

"Darrell's had bad news," said Kildare, with a worried look.

"I'm sorry! I hope—"

North broke off as Darrell turned hurriedly towards Kildare and grasped him by the arm.

"Kildare, I'm sorry—I can't play!"

Kildare's face set hard.

"I suppose you've had bad news, Darrell, by your looks."

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But it would have to be very bad to justify a desertion like this."

"Read for yourself."

Lowther picked up the telegram and handed it to Kildare. The captain of St. Jim's glanced over it moodily. It ran as follows:

"Injury to head. Doctors uncertain so far.—PLATT."

"Well, what does it mean?" asked Kildare. "An injury to a relation of yours?"

"No. A—a friend. Good heavens, she may be dying! I must go!"

"If you feel like that, I suppose you had better go."

"Kildare, you can see I shouldn't be fit to play like this."

"I suppose so."

Darrell looked round him quickly. He was in his football things, but he could not go to Wayland like that. His face was working.

"Merry, will you lend me your machine?"

"Of course, Darrell."

"Then put up the saddle for me while I'm changing."

"Right-ho!"

Darrell disappeared into the pavilion. Tom Merry set to work on his bicycle. Kildare's face was a study. He was sorry for Darrell, but he was left in the lurch. There was only one Sixth-Former on the ground outside the team, and his football left much to be desired. Where was a substitute to come from? To play Redclyffe a man short was to court defeat.

Kildare's eyes fell upon the sturdy figure of Tom Merry, and his face lighted up. Once before, on a similar occasion, he had played Merry of the Shell in the First Eleven, and he had pulled through. The same thought was in his mind now. The match, of course, was far above a player of Tom Merry's age and weight. But any port in a storm!

"What are you going to do?" asked North, catching the brightening expression on the worried face of the St. Jim's captain.

"Can you lend me some footer things?" asked Kildare. "Things that will fit Merry—the lad with the bicycle there?"

"Easily done! My young brother's things will suit him to a 't.' But—"

"I am going to play him."

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"I'll send for the things," said the Redclyffe captain concisely.

Darrell came out of the pavilion, dressed in a remarkably short space of time. He jumped on Tom Merry's bicycle and dashed away without a glance behind. What was a football match to him now—what was anything to him—when the woman he adored—with a boyish, yet a deep and earnest adoration—lay at Wayland injured, perhaps dying?

He disappeared in a cloud of dust. Kildare called on Tom Merry. His face was so hard that Tom feared the captain of St. Jim's was angry with him.

"I'm sorry about this, Kildare," he said quietly. "But—but—"

"It's not your fault, youngster," said the captain kindly enough. "Nor Darrell's either, I dare say, though he's left us in a rotten hole. Are you in good form?"

"Yes; why?"

"Fagged after your ride?"

"Oh, that's nothing!"

"Then get into the dressing-room and get your things off."

"Get my things off!" said Tom Merry, staring at the captain of St. Jim's.

"Yes; they're bringing you some footer things. I want you to play."

"You want me to play!" said Tom Merry, his eyes dancing.

"Yes."

"Good egg! I'll be ready in half a jiffy!"

And Tom Merry plunged into the pavilion, and was stripped in record time; and when North's young brother brought the football things he jumped into them. The kick-off had been postponed five minutes; no more was needed. Tom Merry lined up with the First Eleven of St. Jim's, and Monty Lowther and Manners, Figgins & Co., and the chums of Study No. 6 gave him a wild yell of encouragement. Redclyffe won the toss, and Kildare kicked off, and the game commenced; and the lithe, sturdy figure of Tom Merry of the Shell was seen, ever to the fore, among the mighty men of the Fifth and Sixth.

CHAPTER 13.

A Noble Heart!

DARRELL hardly remembered anything of that ride afterwards—it was a nightmare to him. He rode as he had never ridden before, even when winning the bicycle race at St. Jim's sports. He sat hard on the saddle, his grip on the centre of the handles, his feet working as if by machinery. He looked neither to the right nor to the left. His eyes were fixed sternly ahead—yet they saw nothing. Nothing but the vision of a beautiful face and two dark brown eyes.

Twice Darrell had narrow escapes. Once in turning a corner, when he almost crashed into a lumbering market-cart that nearly filled the lane from side to side. A wrench on the handlebars saved him, and he went spinning, machine and all, into a ditch filled with fern—fortunately dry. He was up again in a second and dashing on, without even a glance to see whether the bicycle had been damaged. He left Tom Merry's pump lying in the dry fern, but that was all. As he drew near to Wayland a motor-car came snorting round on the wrong side of the road and all but ran him down. His calf grazed a wheel as he wrenched aside and dashed on.

Darrell did not stop; but the motorist did, with a face like chalk. But the boy was out of sight in a few seconds.

The incidents made no impression on Darrell's mind; he hardly recalled them afterwards. Wayland came in sight at last. He had ridden long miles at a furious rate, but he had no feeling of fatigue. He rode into the town, and the first thing to catch his eye was an announcement bill of the afternoon's matinee at the Wayland Theatre, with a slip pasted over the name of Signorina Colonna.

He dashed on to the theatre. The machine went reeling against the wall as Darrell sprang off, and crashed down on the pavement. He did not know it. Trembling in every limb, he knocked at the stage door. The matinee was in full swing, and he could hear the strains of music from within the theatre. The opera was "La Boheme," and the boy knew, from the strains from the orchestra that reached his ears, faint and afar, that the scene was the one in which Mimi tells her name to Rudolf.

The door was opened, and the strains came nearer to his ears. As he stepped within the building he could even hear the soprano in the distance—but it was not the voice of Signorina Colonna. Someone else was taking the role of Mimi for the matinee.

"They call me Mimi,
My story is brief—"



A sudden jet of water came through the keyhole, and it caught the swell of St. Jim's exactly under the chin. Crash! The teapot went down on the table and splintered into fragments, the hot tea splashing in all directions. There was a chorus of yells. "Bai Jove! I am howwibly scalded!" gasped D'Arcy.

Darrell was not listening. The man who had opened the door—whom he had seen several times before—looked at him curiously. Darrell grasped him by the shoulder.

"The signorina! How is she?"

"Signorina Colonna?"

"Yes! Yes! Is she—well?"

"She is better, sir. It turns out that it wasn't so serious as they feared at first."

"Heaven be thanked!"

"It was a heap of scenery fell down, sir, and some of it struck her—she was stunned. But the doctors say it will be all right now, though she won't be able to sing again for a week or two, sir."

Darrell almost sobbed in his relief.

"Can she see anyone?"

"I—I don't know, sir."

"Is she conscious?"

"I can't tell you, sir. I could inquire."

Darrell groped in his pocket, and pressed five shillings into the man's hand.

"Do the best you can for me," he whispered huskily.

The man nodded and disappeared. Darrell waited in the grimy passage, his heart throbbing. It was not so bad as he feared. But he felt that he must see her—that he must know from the evidence of his own eyes that the signorina was not in danger. The strain of the terrible exertion he had undergone, and the anxiety, was telling on him. The boy leaned against the wall, panting, pale as death.

From the direction of the stage came the soprano—feeble and poor compared with that of the signorina. Darrell listened mechanically.

The man came quietly back. Darrell's eyes fixed on him with a mute question.

"She is asleep, sir."

"I—I can wait here, I suppose?"

"The signorina may sleep for hours, sir."

"I must wait."

"I suppose there's no objection to that, sir. I'll get you a chair."

"Thank you."

Darrell sat down. His cap, wet with perspiration, fell to the floor from his hand. He was feeling cold now, and a slight shiver ran through him. He drew his jacket closer. The strains from the orchestra fell dully upon his ears. A loud sound of clapping broke upon his attention. The first act of "La Boheme" was over, and the audience were testifying their appreciation. They knew that Signorina Colonna's understudy had taken her part, and, with the chivalry always found in an English audience, they were giving the timid artiste a good reception, though her efforts were very poor compared with the singing of the signorina. But doubtless the singing of the tenor in the part of Rudolf gained a great deal of the applause.

Darrell, in spite of his preoccupation, had noticed the tenor voice, and he knew that it was the same that had sung the part of the Troubadour in "Il Travatore" on Wednesday.

There was a step near Darrell, and a man came by—a man clad still in the shabby attire worn by Rudolf in the opera. He looked curiously at Darrell, and dropped a hand on his shoulder. Darrell started and looked up.

"I think I've seen you before," said the tenor.

Darrell nodded.

"Why are you here?"

"I have come to inquire about Signorina Colonna."

"She cannot be seen now."

"I know it."

"Why are you waiting?"

"To see her as soon as I can."

"It may be hours."

"Let it be hours."

The tenor looked at him with a gleam of compassion in his eyes, and passed on without another word. Ten minutes later he came downstairs.

"Would you care to see the signorina, young man?" he said, in a quiet voice.

Darrell started eagerly.

"Can I see her?" he breathed.

"Yes; she is awake now, and she can talk for a few minutes to you."

"Did you—did you tell her I was here?"

"Yes. Follow me!"

Darrell followed the tenor up the uncarpeted stairs. Armitage led the way into a shaded room. The signorina was lying on a couch, with cushions and pillows round her, in the dim glow of a wood fire. Her face was pale, and a bandage was over her forehead. A woman, evidently a nurse, sat quietly by the window.

Armitage showed Darrell into the room, and then withdrew without a word, closing the door gently behind him. It was time for him to prepare for the second act.

The signorina looked up, and her glance met Darrell's. The boy, red and pale by turns, advanced towards her, and dropped on his knees beside the couch.

"Dick! Don't—don't!"

The signorina's voice was low and sweet. Darrell choked back a sob. His lashes were wet with tears, but he would not let them fall now. It was only a moment of weakness, the outcome of long anxiety, long misery of heart and mind.

"Pauline! You are better?"

"Much better, Dick. It is nothing like what the doctors at first feared. But you—how did you know?"

"I saw it in the paper that there had been an accident. I wired to the manager here. His reply alarmed me terribly. Oh, Pauline!"

"And you came from St. Jim's?"

"I was not at St. Jim's. I had gone over to Redclyffe. I rode over from there."

"It was a long ride."

"Not much for me, on a good machine. Oh, Pauline, I feared—I feared—"

"My poor boy!"

"And you are not much hurt—it will be all right?"

"I shall not be able to sing again for some time, that is all. It is a bad bruise. I am very fortunate to escape so lightly."

"Heaven be praised that it is no worse!"

He was still holding her hand. Pauline drew it away gently. Her face was very tender, yet there was regret in her dark eyes.

"Dick! So you came over at once?"

"As soon as I had the wire."

"But what were you doing at Redclyffe? Was not that

the match you told me about—the football match you were to play in to-day?"

"Yes."

"Then you have not played?"

Darrell coloured.

"No; I came away before the match started."

"Can they do without you?"

"They must."

The signorina's face was very grave.

"That is not right, Dick. Your comrades—your captain—have a right to expect you to play. You may have left them in a difficulty."

"What is that, compared with— Oh, Pauline, do you think I could have played with the thought in my mind that you were perhaps—perhaps—oh, Heaven!"

She touched his curly hair softly.

"My poor Dick! I understand."

His cheeks were wet. For some time he was silent, his heart throbbing. Suffering such as his young life had never known before had been compressed into the last few hours. It seemed to him a lifetime of suffering. The nurse at the window made a movement.

"Dick, I am glad to have seen you; but you must leave me now."

Darrell rose to his feet.

"Now I have seen you," he said, "I can go. Pauline, you did not mind my coming?"

"It was kind and sweet of you, my dear boy!"

"I can go now that I know you are—" He broke off. "Good-bye, Pauline!"

"Good-bye, Dick!"

He pressed her hand and left the room. A few minutes later he was riding through the lanes towards St. Jim's—slowly, with a throbbing heart and a heavy brow. But the terrible weight was gone from his mind. He left the girl with a shade on her fair face. She lay silent, resting, till at last a gentle tap came at the door, and the tenor entered. He came quietly towards the couch, and caught Pauline's glance.

"Still awake, Pauline?"

"Yes, Bob."

He sat down beside her and took her hand. His glance was tenderly fixed upon the sweet and troubled face of the signorina.

"What is it?" asked Armitage. "You are thinking of the boy?"

"Yes."

"A fine lad. I like him."

The signorina's face lighted up.

"I am glad to hear you say that, Bob. I haven't kept anything a secret from you. Tell me what I am to do?"

"You cannot do more than you have done—tell him that he must not see you again."

Her face was sad and clouded.

"If I could only pass out of his life in every way—somewhere where he could never hear of or see me again, where he would never even hear my name!"

The tenor smiled.

"That is impossible, Pauline. You have the offer from Covent Garden. You will be singing there next season, rivalling the fame of Melba and Tetrazzini, and your name will be known in every corner of the kingdom."

She nodded slowly.

"Yes, if I accept."

He looked at her in amazement.

"Pauline, it is the chance of a lifetime; you could not think of refusing."

"I have had an offer from America."

"Yes, and it is a good one; but it does not mean a tithe of what the offer from the Grand Opera Syndicate means. Think, Pauline! You have a chance that every singer would give years of her life to obtain. Think!"

"I am thinking, Bob. I have thought!"

"You have not decided?"

"Yes, I have decided."

"To accept the offer?"

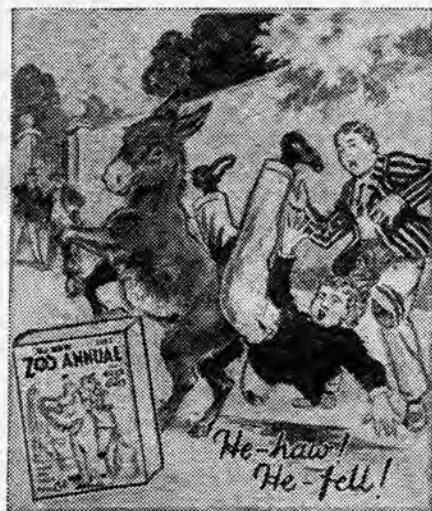
"No; to refuse it."

The tenor pressed her hand.

"As you choose, Pauline. Then it is America for us."

And the signorina bowed her head.

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CHAPTER 14.

Goal!

"P LAY up, St. Jim's!"

"On the ball!"

A hard fight was proceeding on the Redclyffe ground. First half of the football match was over, and though the St. Jim's eleven had fought hard, it had ended in favour of the home team.

Redclyffe were one goal to nil when the whistle blew for the interval.



"Bai Jove!" Darrell seized the swell of St. Jim's by the collar before he could say any more, and slung him round. Then the football boots came into play. D'Arcy reached the end of the passage in record time—Darrell had given him a flying start.

The second half was well advanced, and as yet the score had not been altered. St. Jim's were making strenuous efforts to equalise, but the Redclyffians were making equally strenuous efforts to get farther ahead.

The result was a desperate struggle, in which the play on both sides was sometimes not worthy of a league match.

Sorely enough the St. Jim's first missed Darrell from their ranks. The steady, but brilliant winger would have made much difference. But it had to be admitted that Tom Merry filled his place splendidly—though, of course, nothing like Darrell himself.

Kildare had given the junior more than one pat on the shoulder and word of encouragement during the progress of the game. Lowther and Manners had already cheered themselves hoarse and husky. Figgins & Co. and the chums of Study No. 6, forgetting Form rivalry and House rivalry, cheered Tom Merry at every step he took. If cheering could help the hero of the Shell to put up a good game, he would not lack that.

And Tom was indeed putting up a splendid game. He had a turn of speed that was wonderful for a junior, and all that was to be known about the grand old game Tom Merry knew.

The juniors of St. Jim's who were watching the game were delighted, and it was no wonder they waved their caps and yelled at the sight of the junior streaking among the big Sixth-Formers.

"My hat!" ejaculated Lowther, as Tom Merry captured the ball from a burly Redclyffe half and escaped with it. "Look at that."

"Bai Jove! That was wathah neat! I could not have done it bettah than that myself, deah boys!"

"You couldn't have done it at all, Gussy."

"Weally, Figgins—"

"Ripping!" said Fatty Wynn. "We ought to stand Tom

Merry a feed if they pull off the match. He's ripping. If you think it's a good idea I'll do the shopping for you when we get back to St. Jim's—and the cooking into the bargain."

"Hurrah!" roared Manners. "Good!"

"Yes, it is a good idea, isn't it?"

"Eh?"

"It is a good idea."

"What is?"

"Well, you must be a howling duffer to say it was good if you don't know what it was!" ejaculated the Falstaff of the New House at St. Jim's.

"Blessed if I know what you are talking about. I said it was good, the way Tom Merry let Kildare have the ball just then."

"Oh, I thought you were referring to the feed! We are thinking of standing Tom Merry a feed in honour of the occasion. It is a good idea too, from our own point of view. I get awfully hungry in this October weather."

"Hurrah! Hurrah!" roared Lowther

Tom Merry had the ball again, and he passed to Kildare in the neatest possible way, giving his captain the ball just at the psychological moment, and Kildare slammed it into the net with a shot that gave the goalie no earthly chance.

St. Jim's had equalised.

The juniors roared.

"Goal! Goal! Hurrah!"

"Ten minutes more to play," said Blake, looking at his watch. "Our men won't let the Redclyffe lot get ahead again—you can bet your socks on that, my pippins!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Rather!" chuckled Manners. "It will be a draw at the

worst now. "Good old Kildare—and good old Tommy! Half that goal belongs to Tom Merry!"

"Bai Jove, it is weally wippin'!"

Five minutes passed, and both sides were playing hard and fast. The players were almost all showing traces of fatigue after the hard struggle, but they were playing up splendidly. Kildare and Monteith looked fresh enough, and Tom Merry seemed to be very fit. Five minutes more to play—four minutes!

"Three minutes!" said Jack Blake anxiously. "Where's that goal?"

"What goal?" asked Herries.

"The winning goal, aye! St. Jim's is going to win this match, but the duffers haven't left themselves much time!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"There they go!" shouted Digby. "Go it—go it, St. Jim's!"

"On the ball!" shrieked Figgins.

St. Jim's were on the ball with a vengeance now. The forwards had broken away in line, and with a splendid exhibition of passing they brought the leather right up the field. The Redclyffe forwards were scattered, the halves were nowhere. A desperate back rushed in and drove out the ball, but a lithe figure leaped into the air, a curly head biffed the ball back again. The juniors yelled frantically.

"Merry—Tom Merry! Hurrah!"

North strove to clear, but he rolled on the turf, and Monteith had the ball. He passed to Rushden as he was charged, and Rushden let Kildare have it. The St. Jim's captain brought it right in and kicked for goal. The spectators—Redclyffians and Saints alike—held their breath for a moment. But the goalie was all there. The ball came out, fisted by the goalkeeper, and a Redclyffe back kicked to clear. But a foot was there in time, and the ball was taken from the very toe of the Redclyffian, and dribbled onward. There was a frantic rush, but it came too late—Tom Merry kicked for goal. The goalkeeper made a frantic dive at the ball, and it just escaped the tips of his fingers. Then it was in the net. There was a shriek.

"Goal!"

Then the whistle blew.

Lowther and Manners were the first over the ropes. The match was over, and St. Jim's had won. The field was invaded by the crowd, but the chums of the Shell were the first to reach Tom Merry. They seized him and bore him off the field in triumph. And the juniors gathered round him, yelling and shouting and shrieking, thumping him on the back and the shoulders till the object of their enthusiasm wondered whether he was on his head or his heels.

"Hold on!" gasped Tom Merry. "Chuck it!"

And he wrenched himself away and rushed into the pavilion. But they followed him, and eager hands rubbed him down with rough towels and helped him to dress. It was an honour to put his shirt over his head and to lace up his boots. Had he not kicked the winning goal in a First Eleven match?

And as the visiting eleven prepared to take their departure, very pleased with themselves, North shook Tom Merry cordially by the hand, and Kildare helped him into the coach and gripped his hand, too.

"You played up wonderfully," he said. "There was luck in it, but your play was splendid! We're all proud of you!"

And the words from the football captain of St. Jim's brought a glow of pride to the junior's cheeks.

It was a merry drive to the station. The footballers sang a football song at the top of their voices, and the cyclists following the brake joined in heartily. Tom Merry had the honour of returning by train with the First Eleven, while the others rode home.

The cyclists arrived at St. Jim's first and spread the good news, and nearly all the school were waiting at the gates of St. Jim's when the victorious footballers came in sight.

Wild cheering greeted them, and the Shell to a man roared for Tom Merry. They carried him on their shoulders into the School House, and when Mr. Railton came out with a cane to investigate the cause of the uproar, and learned what had happened, he threw the cane into his study and shook hands with Tom Merry.

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CHAPTER 15.

Farewell.

DARRELL came in later, when the excitement had subsided. He glanced into the seniors' room in the School House, and as Kildare was not there he went direct to the study of the captain of St. Jim's.

Kildare looked at him rather grimly as he entered.

"I am sorry about this afternoon, Kildare," said Darrell awkwardly. "I—I couldn't act otherwise than as I did."

"As it happens, it did not matter."

"What do you mean? How did the match go?"

"We won—two goals to one!"

Darrell drew a deep breath.

"I am glad!" he said simply.

"I played Tom Merry in your place. Of course, he was not up to your form, or anything like it, but he is a splendid player for his age—and we had luck, too! We beat them!"

"I'm jolly glad. I—I would explain if I could, Kildare, but—"

"I don't want to question you, Darrell, but I shall have to think over whether you can remain in the First Eleven," said Kildare bluntly. "As for the cause of what's happened to-day I don't think that much explanation is required—half the school knows it."

Darrell started.

"What do you mean? What do you know?"

"Lefevre of the Fifth has told me that there is a letter for you in the rack, in a woman's hand, postmarked Wayland. It came in by the evening post. A dozen fellows have seen it; everybody knows about your going over to Wayland so often. I'm afraid that you've been making a fool of yourself, Darrell."

"Perhaps I have," said Darrell quietly.

He left the study.

The letter was in the rack, sure enough, and several fellows grinned as Darrell took it down. He hardly noticed them. He took the letter to his study and opened it there. It was from the signorina, and she must have written it very soon after he had left her for the letter to reach St. Jim's by the evening post.

The boy glanced eagerly over the letter. It was the first he had had from the signorina, and it made his heart beat as he read it. But as he read the colour faded from his cheeks, and a cry broke from him. One sentence danced before his eyes—one sentence that went to his heart like a dagger.

"I have accepted an engagement in America, and shall be leaving England next week for two years."

The letter fell from Darrell's hand. He flung himself into a chair. There was a tap at the door, but Darrell did not notice it. The door opened and Kildare's anxious face looked in. The captain of St. Jim's was troubled about his chum, but he had been far from expecting to see what he saw now. The letter lay on the floor, Darrell's elbows were on the table, his face was in his hands, and his whole frame was shaken by heavy sobs.

Kildare looked at him in amazement for a moment. He made a step forward and stopped. Darrell was not aware of his presence. That some terrible sorrow had stricken down his chum Kildare knew, and he felt that Darrell was best left alone at that moment. He quietly left the study and closed the door without a sound.

The next day Darrell was very pale and quiet, but quite himself. He had a sorrow in his heart, but he had a courage there, too; he had his battle to fight, but he had the pluck to face it. Kildare looked at him questioningly when he saw him in the morning. Darrell smiled faintly.

"It's all over, old chap," he said. "The letter was the finish. I shall never see her again. Perhaps I may tell you about it some day—not now!"

That was all Darrell said on the subject.

It was enough for Kildare. The matter was indeed over. And if Darrell's heart ached when he read in the papers that Signorina Colonna had sailed for America, to enter upon her new engagement there, he said nothing about it. If he suffered he knew how to suffer in silence. And time, as Pauline well knew, had power to heal the wound—in time nothing would remain of the boyish love but a memory tinged with sadness.

THE END.

(Ferrers Locke organises a grand detective competition in next week's ripping yarn "BOY SCOUTS OF ST. JIM'S!" by Martin Clifford. Order your copy now—and make sure of it!)

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CHAPTER 1.

Off Round the World!

JIM NELSON turned over in bed with a drowsy grunt, and pulled the clothes higher up to his ears in an effort to shut out an imperative rapping that was sounding on the door.

"Five-thirty, gentlemen! Time to get up!" called a voice with a strong Welsh accent.

"Five-thirty!" muttered Jim sleepily. "What the dickens does Llewelyn mean by calling us at five-thirty?"

"Oh, you owl!" shouted the occupant of the other bed, a big handsome boy of perhaps sixteen, leaping briskly out and proceeding to remove the coverings neatly from his friend's recumbent form. "Come on out of it! Have you forgotten that we start in half an hour?"

"Start?" demanded the shorter, fairer Jim, sitting bolt upright with a jerk. "Start? Great pip! Then it wasn't a dream?"

"It most certainly was not!" replied Phil Harris, laughing, as he began to dress. "Walk up! Walk up! The good ship Albatross leaves at six a.m. on a genuine round-the-world air cruise! Better buck up, sleepy-head, or we'll go without you!"

"You just try, that's all!" was the retort, as Jim followed his chum's example, and commenced to struggle into his clothes.

The two boys had returned home from Foxhurst School for the holidays only the previous night. And they had hardly set foot in the house before their amazing guardian, the world-famous explorer, Colonel K, had announced in matter-of-fact tones that he had bought a monoplane, and proposed to take them on a world tour. It was small wonder that even the sleep-loving Jim found early rising no hardship that morning.

Twenty minutes later, with a cup of steaming coffee in one hand and a buttered roll in the other, the two were making their way across the grounds of Brampton Manor, Colonel K's stately home, towards the vast hangar which housed the Albatross. The great monoplane, ghostly white, with scarlet wing-tips, had already been wheeled out on to the smooth field before it, and half a dozen mechanics were busy about her. In the faint, cold light of dawn there was

certainly something in her lovely lines which recalled the great, graceful bird after which she was named, and both boys were conscious of a thrill when they saw her.

As they came up, the spluttering roar of the huge engines, which had been warming up, sank to a steady purr, and Colonel K himself appeared in the hangar doorway. He was a yellow-bearded Colossus of a man, well over six feet in height, with keen, blue eyes and a bronzed skin. His real name was Kay, but someone had once written of him using only the bare initial, and the idea had met with instant success. Now he was never known by any other name.

In more ways than one he was a mystery, even to friends, for though he was clearly fabulously rich, the source of his wealth remained a complete secret. Often he would vanish for months at a stretch, accompanied only by his servant, a wizened and totally invaluable little Welshman called Llewelyn, returning as unexpectedly as he had disappeared, and with as little explanation. These strange habits had once led someone to suggest that the colonel had located the lost mines of Ophir, and was deriving his fortune from them.

Be that as it may—and to those who knew the colonel it was far less unlikely than it sounds—the intrepid explorer had certainly penetrated to all the remotest corners of the earth, and made many weird and wonderful discoveries. The newspapers called him "the man who is as much at home in the Congo Basin as the average Londoner is in the Strand."

"Good-morning, lads!" he boomed cheerfully, as he caught sight of his wards. "Glad to see you've had a snack before starting. Llewelyn will cook us all a proper breakfast on board in an hour or two. Are you ready?"

"Rather!" said Phil, gulping the last of his coffee, and setting down the cup on a convenient bench.

"Same here!" added Jim, following suit.

"Then come along!"

Colonel K strode swiftly towards the Albatross with the boys at his heels. The mechanics came crowding round the cabin door to shake hands and wish them luck, and the explorer said good-bye with a genial smile.

"If all goes well, our first stop will be Tokio," he told them. "We'll be back here in about a month's time. I'll wireless the exact hour of our arrival later. Good-bye, men!"

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"Good-bye, sir!" replied the mechanics in chorus. Then the door closed, and they ran back to their places.

"All clear, Rex?" called the colonel to his young secretary and assistant, who was in the cockpit.

"All clear, sir!" replied Rex Bruce.

Phil and Jim, gazing eagerly out of the cabin windows, saw the lazily spinning propeller whirr into invisibility, then the chocks knocked from the wheels. The great monoplane began to taxi across the field, gathering speed as she went. Faster and faster, nearer and nearer to the trees at the far end. Then abruptly the ground seemed to fall away beneath them, and they cleared the treetops with yards to spare. Rex had made a perfect take-off.

He banked to the left and circled once about the field, climbing steadily the whole time. Then, with the group of waving mechanics as tiny as ants below, he pointed the plane's nose to the east and put on all speed. Within a few moments the field, the hangar, and the ancient pile of Brampton Manor itself were all lost to view. The trip round the world had begun.

CHAPTER 2.

Forced Landing!

THE first instinct of the two boys was to inspect their new quarters, and they were soon looking about them with delighted eyes. Everything was designed to give the maximum of comfort in the minimum of space. The snug cabin boasted four full-size bunks, two on each side, which folded flat into the walls when not in use; while at the pressure of a button the legs of the table in the centre doubled silently under it, and it sank into a special recess in the floor.

Farther aft was the tiny kitchen, run entirely by electricity, from which Llewelyn, who could turn his hand to anything, would produce miracles of cookery during the trip; and in the tail was the store-room. Forward of the main cabin lay what Colonel K called the "chart-house," a little chamber packed with maps, cameras, and all the instruments they might possibly need, not forgetting a complete wireless installation and a rack of guns.

"Gee-whiz!" said Jim Nelson, when he caught sight of the latter. "Do you think we're going to need those, sir?"

The colonel laughed.

"I hope not," he replied; "but you never can tell. On a trip of this description you must be prepared to meet all emergencies, you know. Suppose we had to make a forced landing a thousand miles from anywhere. You wouldn't like to find yourself, armed only with a toothpick, face to face with a charging company of exceedingly ferocious gentlemen, all intent on having your blood, would you?"

"Now you come to mention it, certainly not!" agreed Jim, with emphasis.

Finally they inspected the enclosed cockpit, with its dual controls and imposing array of dials and gauges. There Colonel K revealed to them the tremendous advantage which the Albatross held over all other aircraft.

"It's a little invention of Llewelyn's which reduces the petrol consumption by exactly fifty per cent," he explained. "It means, of course, that we have a cruising range twice as great as any other vessel of our size, and that without any loss of speed or drawbacks of that sort."

"By Jove, sir, that's marvellous!" said Phil eagerly. "Will you teach us to fly her on the trip?"

"Of course, my lads!" was the laughing reply. "You'd better go back into the cabin and decide which is to have the first lesson. I want to have a little talk with Rex."

The rest of the day passed like a dream for the two boys, neither of whom had ever been in the air before. Hour after hour the Albatross reeled off a steady hundred miles, and hour after hour they sat watching the beauty of Europe unfold itself under their fascinated eyes. Over the Alps they encountered a storm, and for a while sleet and blinding rain blotted out the landscape; but the monoplane came out of it, according to Jim, "with flying colours." For which Phil Harris duly sat upon him.

At ten o'clock the colonel had relieved Rex Bruce at the controls, and four hours later Llewelyn, after serving a lunch which would not have disgraced a first-class chef, took over the controls. It was from him that Jim received his initial lesson in the art of flying, and both he and Phil, who took instruction later from Rex, proved apt pupils.

At nine o'clock that evening, Colonel K, who had been resting in his bunk, woke up, and ordered the protesting boys to bed. Neither of them thought that they would ever be able to sleep, but the subdued roar of the engines proved surprisingly soothing, and in a very short time they were in dreamland.

"Am I awake?" was Jim's first question next morning. Then: "How far have we got?"

"Ah-ha!" boomed the colonel's deep voice from the chart-house. THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,288.

house. "So you've come to life again, have you? I thought you were going to spend the day in bed. It's eight o'clock, a glorious morning, breakfast has been ready for two hours, and we're passing over the northern end of the Caspian Sea."

Phil and Jim slid out of their bunks with one accord, and ran to the nearest window. Below them lay a vast expanse of sunlit water, stretching away in every direction as far as the eye could reach. While they slumbered the racing Albatross had carried them through the night to the very borders of Asia.

As silently as possible, so as not to wake Llewelyn, who was sleeping in his bunk after coming off duty, the two boys made their toilet. Then, creeping out to the kitchen, they breakfasted off the eggs and bacon which the little Welshman had thoughtfully cooked and left in the electric heater for them.

"My hat, this is some adventure!" said Phil between mouthfuls. "Won't we just make the other fellows green with envy when we get back? I'd like to see Warren's face when we tell him how it feels to have breakfast over the Caspian!"

Jim chuckled as he reached for the marmalade.

"Marvellous!" he agreed; then, as Phil rose from the table: "I say, where are you off to?"

"Into the cockpit for another lesson," was the reply. "See you later."

It was about four hours afterwards, just after noon, that misfortune overtook the Albatross over Central Asia. Beneath extended a barren waste, hilly, abandoned. Vast rocks and crags, almost innocent of vegetation, were jumbled together in endless confusion, blistering hot under the sun of midday. Nowhere in sight was there any sign of life or movement.

And above this uninviting expanse of desolate country, hundreds of miles from civilisation, the monoplane chose to develop engine trouble.

The first intimation her crew had that anything was amiss came when the steady drone of the engines became suddenly interrupted with a spluttering cough. For several moments it persisted, then, with a final gasp, the familiar roar died away altogether, and there fell a silence broken only by the whistle of the wind.

Colonel K, who was at the controls, gave a grim little laugh as he surveyed the scenery over which they were passing.

"Well, here goes our chance of making a non-stop flight across two continents!" he said. "The trouble now is to find a soft spot to fall on. Do you see anything over your side which looks like a possible landing ground, Jim?"

"Nothing very promising, sir," replied his young ward doubtfully. "Seems rather hilly and bushy. Wait a bit, though! There's a place—a sort of clearing. You might be able to manage it."

"Yes, my boy, I think I can," said his guardian coolly, and the Albatross began to swoop silently down towards the open patch the boy had indicated.

It looked perilously small as the monoplane drew nearer and nearer, and Phil for one held his breath when they touched the ground. But most things that the colonel did he did well, and flying was no exception. He made a splendid landing under difficult conditions, and they bumped to a halt with the propeller just touching a tall shrub at the farther end of the natural aerodrome.

The colonel twisted in his seat to laugh at the other three, who were standing in the chart-house.

"Here we are!" he boomed good-humouredly. "I don't quite know where, but wherever it is we're there! Now, Llewelyn, we'll have a little lunch, and then we'll be in a better condition to find out what repairs are needed."

"Yes, yes, indeed to goodness!" assented the wizened little man, bustling away, and presently they could hear him busy with his pots and pans in the kitchen.

The colonel and Rex Bruce meanwhile sat down to work out their position, and by the time the appetising meal was on the table they knew approximately their whereabouts.

"We're several hundred miles from the nearest civilisation," the explorer informed his wards cheerfully, as he took up his knife and fork. "Let's hope that there's nothing seriously wrong, or we shall have to send out an SOS and wait to be rescued. By the way, you won't all be wanted to help with the engines. You two lads and Rex might go for a little stroll to stretch your legs while Llewelyn and I are at work, if you care to."

"I think I'd rather stay and watch you, sir, if you don't mind," said Jim Nelson, who was notorious for his unwillingness to take any unnecessary exercise, especially soon after meals.

So it happened that Phil and Rex Bruce, who was a tall, good-looking young fellow of twenty-three, a bare six or seven years older than the boys themselves, set out along half an hour later for a brief reconnoitre.

CHAPTER 3.

Captured!

"Be sure not to go too far and get out of earshot," were Colonel K's last words as they left the Albatross. "I admit that the place looks deserted, but you never can tell, and Central Asia is not one of the best spots on earth to be caught napping."

"All right, sir. We'll be careful and keep a good lookout," Rex assured him, and Phil and he swung off down the slope which lay on one side of the clearing.

"Rotten luck, our having to make a forced landing like this," said Phil, as they made their way slowly over the rough ground.

Rex Bruce nodded.

"Never mind, there are plenty of other long hops on our programme!" he said, with a smile, his keen glance darting from side to side in search of any possible danger. Then abruptly he came to a standstill, his hand clutching his companion's arm.

"Look! What's that?" he said in quite a different tone. "I'll swear I saw something move in that bush!"

Phil stared in the direction he indicated.

"I didn't—" he began, then broke off with a gasp of utter amazement, which was echoed by Rex.

From behind a group of stunted shrubs, not half a dozen yards away, had stepped a tall man with a scowling face and fierce dark eyes. His sudden appearance was startling enough, but it was not the stranger himself which riveted the gaze of the two Englishmen and drew from them murmurs of incredulity.

"It can't be! It just simply can't!" said Phil, his eyes round with wonder and bewilderment. "I must be asleep and dreaming."

"No, we're awake all right," returned Rex. "If we're both seeing the same thing we must be. The question is, is seeing believing?"

For the astounding truth was that the man before them wore a costume which dated back at least two thousand years—the complete uniform of a Roman legionnaire! There could be no mistaking the great helmet with its crest of scarlet feathers, the short white tunic under the metal cuirass, the convex wooden shield with its central boss of iron, or the laced leather half-boots.

"Are we in Central Asia, and is this the twentieth century?" demanded Phil in dazed tones. "Or have we made a mistake and flown back into the past?"

"There must be some explanation," said Rex, pulling himself together as the first shock of surprise passed off. "But try some of your Latin on him, anyway, and see what happens."

Phil looked again at the tall legionnaire, who was still examining them with much the same air of amazement as they had regarded him. Then, taking a pace forward, he held up his hand in a sign of peace, palm outward, and opened his mouth to speak. Phil was a whale on Latin at school.

But the sonorous Latin greeting with which he meant to begin was never framed. At that very moment there came a sudden clamour from behind, Colonel K's deep voice shouting some command, and then a sound which neither of the thunderstruck pair could mistake. The remainder of the crew of the Albatross were using their guns.

"Quick!" said Rex urgently, swinging about. "Never mind about this fellow—we must get back to the plane. There's trouble of some sort up there!"

Phil raced after him as he started up the slope, but they had hardly gone ten paces when Rex pulled up short, with an exclamation of dismay. For suddenly every bush in sight was alive with the strange soldiers, and they were closing swiftly up to bar the retreat of the young Englishmen.

"We're cut off!" said Rex, glancing desperately about him. "What fools we were not to have brought revolvers!"

"There's a gap there!" cried Phil, darting forward. "Come on! We might just get through!"

They made a headlong dash for a narrow space in the advancing line, and for a moment it almost seemed as though they would win through. Then abruptly the ranks closed up, and the two fugitives, unable to stop, ran full tilt into the arms of several stalwart legionnaires.

There followed a furious struggle. Spurred on to even greater efforts by the shots which they could still hear from the direction of the plane, Phil and Rex fought like madmen to gain their freedom. The soldiers wore both long and short swords, but they did not make use of their weapons, grappling with the pair unarmed in the evident hope of capturing them without injury.

Time after time the boy and his companion drove back the ring of legionnaires about them by the fierceness of their onslaught, but the numbers against them were overwhelming, and at long last they were forced, beaten and gasping, to the ground. Then, at a word of command from a

centurion who had come hurrying up, their hands were bound behind them, and their captors hustled them to their feet. They were placed in the centre of a strong guard, and the whole party began to beat a hasty retreat down the long slope towards a narrow gap that showed in the ridge of piled rocks beyond.

"Keep smiling, kid!" said Rex, grinning at Phil with a cheerfulness he was far from feeling. "We'll get out of this somehow, never fear!"

"What a whale of an adventure!" replied the boy, his grey eyes blazing with excitement. "Rex, can they really be Romans? Their speech is Latin, and I can follow it quite well. But—Romans!"

"Don't know, laddie. I don't see how they can be, though I've got to admit that they look uncommonly like it. I wonder where they're taking us?"

Twenty minutes later he knew. All at once they came out of the stunted scrub of the hillside beyond the defile, on to the verge of a precipice that fell a sheer hundred feet to the plain below. Had the Albatross topped the rocky spur on the other side of which she had descended she must have come upon it.

And there, spread out like a giant toy before their wondering eyes, was a vast entrenched encampment, four-square, and divided both lengthways and across by wide avenues. Rex drew a deep breath as he gazed.

"Well, Phil, that answers both our questions," he said slowly, nodding his head towards the animated scene at their very feet. "They're Romans all right, though how and why is too much for my simple intelligence. And they're taking us down there."

"And we're going to get a really close-up view of something no living soul of the outside world has ever seen," added Phil—"a Roman camp in full working order!"

The column swung to the right and began to skirt the edge of the precipice, which grew lower and lower as they proceeded, until presently they could descend on to the plain. Half an hour's march brought them to the very gates of the huge camp, and a shout went up from the legionnaires idling within the breastwork as they passed through the Porta Decumana, or rear gate.

"They're saying 'Prisoners! Prisoners!'" Phil told Rex. "I suppose we're going before the commander-in-chief."

He was right. The cohort marched triumphantly straight up the fifty-foot avenue between the skin tents of the soldiers, towards the far side of the camp, where the general's quarters always lay. Soon they could see the prætorium, the commander's tent, a great, white pavilion of some white woven material, set right across the path, and ringed about with legionnaires.

The column came to a smart halt before it, and the centurion in charge went forward alone to salute the captain of the prætorian guard which formed the bodyguard of the general himself. After a short colloquy the captain issued an order, and the curtains covering the tent doorway were drawn aside. Phil and Rex found themselves urged ahead by their captors, and a moment later were entering the prætorium under escort.

"Now for it!" whispered the boy to his companion, as they passed through a small antechamber.

They marched into a large apartment, and the guard fell back silently. The two young Englishmen were left face to face with the general in whose hands lay their fate.

"By jingo!" muttered Rex. "What a villainous-looking ruffian!"

He did not exaggerate. The countenance of the man who occupied the central position in the group before them was certainly not of a type calculated to inspire confidence in the beholder. He had a sneering mouth, cunning little dark eyes, set deep under shaggy brows that were drawn into a permanent scowl, and a prominent chin which Rex and Phil both itched to hit from the first.

For several instants he sat regarding them in silence, with an expression of mingled wonder and ferocity; then he addressed the centurion who had been responsible for their capture.

"Were these in the bird-chariot that descended from the heavens?" he asked, speaking in Latin.

"Lord, they were," replied the centurion. "There were also others; but those we could not take, since they bore strange fire-tubes which slew at a distance like the thunderbolts of Jove. Also, two cohorts were advancing from the camp of the enemy, and as we had orders not to skirmish with them, we retired in good order."

The general waved him aside impatiently, and turned to the prisoners.

"Hail, O strangers!" he said, still in Latin. "I am Gaius Procellus Dolabella, sole ruler and commander of the third and fourth legions of Roma Secunda. What manner of creatures are you that can fly in the clouds and kill as with the lightning?"

Phil translated hurriedly to Rex.

"What shall I say?" he demanded. "Shall I tell him we're gods, or something of the sort?"

Rex shook his head.

"Wouldn't work, I'm afraid, laddie. Old Dolabella looks an unbelieving kind of chap. He'd want to see us work a miracle on the spot. I shouldn't wonder. No; just say that we come from a far country, and that we'd like to be treated with a little more respect in future."

Phil chuckled softly. Then he addressed the general as well as he could in Latin. Fortunately he was far more fluent than the average boy of his age.

"Hail, O Gaius Procellus Dolabella!" he said. "I am Philippus Arrius by name. This is Brutus. We are nobles from a far land who came hither in peace; but your soldiers seized upon us and brought us here, without inquiring whether we were friends or foes."

"Of what far land speak you?" asked the general. "Clearly not of Rome itself, for by your speech you are a barbarian."

"I'll barbarian you, if I get a chance!" murmured Phil under his breath. Aloud he said: "We are of the island of Albion, beyond the sea, O Dolabella. We flew thence in the bird-chariot which you saw descend from the sky."

Despite himself, Dolabella appeared impressed.

"Truly this is a great marvel!" he said. Then, with sudden suspicion, he demanded: "You are not spies of Valerius Martius Donatus?"

"I never heard of him in my life," returned Phil, with perfect truth.

The next moment the curtains covering the doorway into the antechamber were drawn aside hastily, and the captain of the praetorian guard appeared. He saluted his general.

"Lord, you gave orders that any news of Valerius Martius Donatus was to be brought to you instantly," he said.

"Speak!" growled Dolabella, with an uneasy side glance at the two prisoners. "What is it?"

"A spy who was left to watch the bird-chariot has returned, lord," replied the captain. "He reports that the two cohorts sent by the Imperator surrounded it, and that the centurion in charge had speech with the chief of the strangers."

"Good old colonel!" whispered Phil, translating to Rex.

"Proceed!" Dolabella directed the captain, darting a sharp look at the young Englishmen. "What followed?"

"After a short parley one cohort remained behind to

guard the bird-chariot," continued the captain. "The other returned to the camp as an escort to the chief and one of his companions, who doubtless went before Valerius Martius."

"Oh crumbs!" groaned Phil softly. "I bet that's torn it!"

It had, indeed. Dolabella's unprepossessing face was like a thundercloud as he turned his attention to them once more.

"So you lied to me!" he said vindictively. "You are friends and spies of my arch-enemy, Valerius Martius! You need not deny it, since your comrades are known to be in his camp!"

He looked at the centurion, who was still standing there. "Centurion," he said grimly, "take these men away and put them into a tent under strong guard. I hold you responsible for them. See that they do not escape you. I will decide later what is to be done with them!"

Saluting, the centurion issued a brisk order. The legionnaires fell in again around Phil and Rex, and they were marched swiftly out of the praetorium. Three minutes later they were being thrust into one of the skin-tents which formed the greater part of the camp, and to judge from the clatter of arms without a very numerous guard indeed was being posted.

"Well, that's that for the moment!" said Rex, sitting down with a sigh. "What's it all about, kid? Could you make head or tail of it?"

Phil nodded thoughtfully as he sat down beside him. "Yes, I think so. Old Dolabella is a rebel of some sort. I believe, Valerius Martius Donatus, the chap they called the Imperator, is making war on him. And the colonel has made friends with the other fellow, so Dolabella's sure we must be spies."

"H'm! Sounds a bit of a mix-up, but I get your meaning," said Rex. "Well, it's pretty evident we're in the wrong camp, laddie. I wonder how long we'll have to stay here?"

"Not long, I bet!" replied Phil. "The moment the colonel finds out what's happened there'll be trouble—great chunks of it. All we've got to do now is sit still and wait for him to come and get us out."

(Will Colonel K be able to rescue Phil and Rex? Look out for thrills in next week's great instalment!)



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