



Purple with rage, and with his collar and tie streaming loose, the house-master sprang out of the cab and dashed up the steps towards the Head

"**B**AI JOVE! There's somethin' wadically wrong, deah boys!"

Thus Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of the Fourth.

Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther—the Terrible Three of the Shell—who had been chatting with D'Arcy in the quadrangle, looked very grave.

There certainly appeared to be something radically wrong.

A telegraph boy had just arrived at St. Jim's. He had a telegram for the Head, and Dr. Holmes had leaned from his study window and taken the wire. The juniors saw him open the telegram at the study window, and then give a violent start and turn pale. The flimsy message had fluttered from his hand, and it lay on the flagstones, within a few yards of where the juniors were standing.

A FALSE ALARM!

An Amusing Story of
St. Jim's

By **DICK REDFERN**

The Head made no effort to retrieve the telegram. He withdrew into his study, and closed the window.

"Bad news for the Head!" muttered Manners.

"Looks like it," assented Tom Merry.

"The old bird seemed very cut up," said Monty Lowther. "He was so jolly agitated that he dropped the telegram."

"Better pick it up and take it into his study, I suppose," said Tom Merry. And he stepped forward and picked up the wire.

Tom had no intention of reading the message. It was no business of his. And yet, as he picked up the wire, the written words seemed to leap at him.

It was a terse, dramatic message, and it made Tom Merry jump.

"Dr. Holmes, St. James's College, Rylcombe.—I die this evening at Burchester.—Ratchiff."

No wonder the Head had been startled. No wonder the telegram had fallen from his nerveless fingers.

Tom Merry was startled also. He stood rooted to the ground in amazement.

"What's up, Tommy?" asked Manners breathlessly.

"I—I've seen the message," was the muttered reply. "I couldn't help seeing it. The telegram is from old Ratty. And what do you think it says? 'I die this evening at Burchester!'"

"Great Scott!"

"Bai Jove!"

The juniors exchanged startled glances.

It looked as if a tragedy were about to be enacted.

Mr. Horace Ratcliff, the senior house-master at St. Jim's, had gone over to Burchester for the day. His aged aunt had recently died, and Mr. Ratcliff had gone to her solicitors in order to hear the will read. It was rumoured that the house-master had great expectations of inheriting a small fortune. And now came this tragic telegram—a message, it seemed, of despair and determination.

"I die this evening at Burchester!"

Arthur Augustus broke the long pause which followed.

"Good gwacious!" he gasped. "This—this is tewwible, deah boys! Looks as if Watty is contemplatin' suicide."

Tom Merry nodded.

"It would seem as if he had been cut out of his aunt's will, and terribly upset in consequence," he said. "And he's wired to the Head, saying that he intends to—to take his life."

This seemed to be the only satisfactory explanation of Mr. Ratcliff's amazing telegram. Furious and embittered at having been cut out of the will, he had resolved to commit suicide.

Tom Merry & Co. were alarmed and distressed. They had no love for Mr. Horace Ratcliff. He was a tyrant of the worst type. They had often said that St. Jim's would be well rid of him. But they recoiled from the thought of suicide, which was a grim and ghastly business. They pictured to themselves what a terrible sensation there would be at St. Jim's, when the news came through that Mr. Ratcliff had shot himself in Burchester, or thrown himself under a train, or taken a fatal dose of poison.

But it was not too late to save the house-master from his mad folly. He did not propose to make away with himself until the evening; and it was now early afternoon. Surely the Head would send someone to Burchester, to prevent Mr. Ratcliff from carrying out his insane resolve?

Tom Merry took the telegram to the Head's study. He tapped on the door and entered.

"Excuse me, sir," said Tom, "but you dropped this telegram just now."

The Head was looking very troubled.

"Thank you, Merry," he said, taking the telegram.

The captain of the Shell paused in the doorway.

"I—I didn't mean to pry, sir," he said, "but I couldn't help seeing that message from Ratty—I mean, Mr. Ratcliff. Do—do you really think he intends to take his life, sir?"

"I scarcely know what to think, Merry," said the Head. "It is not possible that the telegram is a hoax, sent by some stupid practical joker. No boy would play a jest of such a grim nature. On the other hand, it seems inconceivable that Mr. Ratcliff should intend to take his life. He has never shown the slightest suicidal tendencies."

"Is there anything we can do, sir?" asked Tom Merry.

Dr. Holmes shook his head.

"Fortunately, there is time to save Mr. Ratcliff, if indeed he contemplates suicide. I will send Mr. Railton to Burchester at once."

Tom Merry quitted the Head's study, and rejoined his chums in the quad.

"The Head's sending Railton over to Burchester, to bring Ratty to reason," he said.

"But I don't see why we shouldn't go over ourselves. Burchester's a fairly big place, and Railton might have a job to find Ratty. If we come across him ourselves, we'll collar him, and force him into a taxi, and bring him straight to St. Jim's. We won't give him a chance to do himself any harm."

"That seems quite an excellent wheeze, deah boy, said Arthur Augustus. "If I wemembah wightly, there is a twain to Burchestah at thwice o'clock. We've no time to lose."

The four juniors hurried down to the railway station. As they clambered into the train, they noticed Mr. Railton boarding it a few carriages along. But he failed to see the juniors.

It was a fairly long run to Burchester, and the train crawled along like a tortoise on wheels. But at last it drew up at the station of the market town.

Mr. Railton was among the first to alight.



The juniors gripped the arms of the spluttering and protesting Mr. Ratcliff and urged him towards the door. "We don't want to make a scene if we can avoid it, sir," said Tom Merry.

The juniors saw him give up his ticket and hurry with rapid strides through the booking hall.

Tom Merry & Co. left the station at a more leisurely pace. And then the hunt for Mr. Ratcliff began.

The juniors went first of all to the solicitor's office where the will had been read. They were informed that Mr. Ratcliff had called there that morning, and had departed some time since.

They then called at the house of Mr. Ratcliff's deceased aunt. But the house-master was not there.

"We shall have to comb the streets," said Tom Merry. "Come on!"

The St. Jim's juniors made an exhaustive tour of the narrow cobbled streets. They went through Cheap Street, which was in reality the dearest shopping thoroughfare in

the town. They went through Market Street, where there was no market; and through Broad Street, which was so narrow that two motor vehicles could not pass. They scoured the side turnings and the alley-ways; but there was no sign of Mr. Horace Ratcliff.

The policeman on point duty could give the juniors no assistance. He had not seen a person answering to the description of the St. Jim's house-master.

Tom Merry & Co. were both hungry and footsore by the time seven o'clock came. And their quest had proved unsuccessful. Whether Mr. Railton had had any luck they did not know.

Was it possible that Mr. Ratcliff had already carried out his intention?

The juniors shuddered uneasily at the thought.

But the "Burchester Evening Mail" was on

sale in the streets, and there were no raucous shouts of, "Sensational Suicide in Burchester! Paper!" Everything seemed perfectly normal.

"We'd better get some grub, I think," said Tom Merry, at length.

"The Cafe Royal's the best place," said Manners. "Here we are!"

And he led the way to a brilliantly lighted restaurant.

No sooner had the juniors entered, than Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gave a sudden shout. "Watty!"

Mr. Ratcliff had been run to earth at last. He was seated at one of the little tables and partaking of dinner. He did not look like a man who was about to take his own life. Indeed, he seemed very much in love with life at the moment. He was eating a savoury omelette, and there was a goblet of wine at his elbow.

But the juniors remembered the telegram. "Fetch a taxi—quickly!" muttered Tom Merry, in Monty Lowther's ear.

Lowther hurried away, and then, at Tom Merry's signal, the others approached Mr. Ratcliff. The house-master looked up from his plate in astonishment.

"Are you comin' quietly, Mr. Watchif?" asked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"W-w-what?"

"We don't want to make a scene if it can be avoided, sir," said Tom Merry. "We are going to take you back to St. Jim's."

Mr. Ratcliff sprang to his feet.

"Merry!" he thundered. "How dare you address me in that manner? Have you suddenly taken leave of your senses?"

"This way, sir!" said Tom, firmly. And he grasped one of Mr. Ratcliff's arms, while Manners seized the other. Arthur Augustus settled the bill, with the intention of collecting the money from Mr. Ratcliff later.

Spitting and protesting, the house-master was hustled out of the restaurant, and bundled into the taxi which had drawn up outside.

Mr. Ratcliff was almost inarticulate with rage. He threatened the juniors with all sorts of pains and penalties, but they took no heed. They were bent on getting him back to St. Jim's before he could do himself any harm.

The Terrible Three guarded Mr. Ratcliff inside the vehicle, and Arthur Augustus rode in front with the driver.

Mr. Ratcliff proved a tiresome prisoner, and Tom Merry & Co. had all their work cut out to hold him down. He was extremely violent; and the juniors were not sorry when the taxi-cab drew up in the dusky quadrangle of St. Jim's.

The Head was standing in the school gateway, chatting with Mr. Railton, who had returned from Burchester without being able to find Mr. Ratcliff.

When the taxi halted, Mr. Ratcliff literally tore himself away from his captors.

Purple with rage, and with his collar and tie streaming loose, he sprang out of the vehicle, and almost ran full tilt into the Head.

"Sir!" shouted Mr. Ratcliff. "I have been grossly assaulted by four boys belonging to the School House! They attacked me in a Burchester restaurant, and brought me here by force in a taxi-cab! It—it is outrageous! Such conduct warrants instant expulsion!"

"Pray control yourself, Mr. Ratcliff," said the Head. "The drastic action of these boys was fully justifiable, in the circumstances. I am astonished, Mr. Ratcliff, that you should for a single moment contemplate such a step as suicide."

Mr. Ratcliff nearly fell down.

"Suicide?" he almost shrieked.

The Head nodded.

"I received your telegram stating that you intended to die in Burchester this evening; and I may say that I have suffered considerable anxiety on your account."

Mr. Ratcliff looked utterly bewildered. It was some time before he found his voice again.

"That telegram, sir, was wrongly transmitted," he said. "I need hardly say that I had not the slightest intention of committing suicide. When I left for Burchester this morning, I told you I should be back at five o'clock. But I found it impossible to return at that hour; so I stayed in the town, and wired you I should dine there this evening."

"Dine?" gasped the Head.

"Yes, sir—dine! In transmitting the telegram some careless post-office official omitted a letter, with the result that the word

'die' appeared in the message, instead of 'dine.'

"Bless my soul!" said the Head, in amazement. "Fancy a stupid error of that sort giving rise to all this worry and trouble. I shall reprimand the post-office authorities severely."

"And so shall I!" snorted Mr. Ratcliff. "My dinner has been rudely interrupted; I have been roughly handled by these young rascals; and, in short, I have suffered great inconvenience and annoyance. I consider that these boys ought to be punished for assaulting me as they did."

"They thought they were handling a would-be suicide, and therefore there is every excuse for their conduct," said the Head. "I should not dream of punishing them."

Mr. Horace Ratcliff gave another furious snort, and stalked away towards the building. And Tom Merry & Co. gazed after his retreating figure with a chuckle.

THE END

Snapped In His Corner!



A glimpse of Tom Merry "between rounds" in the Junior Boxing Finals at St. Jim's.

Famous Fellows in Fiction



Tubby Muffin

You've heard of Bunter, W. G.,
So plump, and far from nimble;
And doubtless you've devoured with glee
The deeds of Wynn and Trimble.
On feasts and banquets they are mad—
In fact, they're always stuffin';
And so is that amazing lad,
The portly Tubby Muffin!

Perched high upon the tuckshop stool
You'll nearly always find him;
With pies and pastries, as a rule,
Before him and behind him.
Large quantities of grub "on tick"
He'll get from Sergeant Kettle,
Unless that veteran is quick
And promptly on his mettle!

He is a member of the staff
Of Billy Bunter's journal;
His stories make a million laugh
And give them pains internal.
He thinks he's equal to such men
As Wells and Rudyard Kipling;
Unconscious humour from his pen
Provokes both roars and rippling!

And yet, for all his quaint displays
Which make us burst our buttons,
He has no mean or vicious ways
Like certain other gluttons.
Although at present very dense,
And quite an ignoramus,
Some day he may acquire some sense,
And find himself quite famous!

MY BLISSFUL DREAM

BY
BAGGY TRIMBLE



To dream of tuck, some people say,
Means that a hamper's on the way.
I dreamed of tuck; but I regret
No hamper has arrived as yet!

Grand visions came before my eyes
Of cherry cakes and rabbit pies.
Then I saw clearly, in my dream,
A dish of strawberries and cream.

I saw a wonderful York ham,
Surrounded by large pots of jam.
A tuckshop window I espied,
With stacks of glorious grub inside!

A fine roast chicken met my gaze,
I blinked at it in great amaze.
A Christmas pudding, huge and steaming,
Confronted me as I lay dreaming.

A knife and fork before me lay,
I pounced upon them right away.
Then I exclaimed, in joy and wonder,
"I'll have a topping feed, by thunder!"

I seemed to fancy I was starving,
The rabbit pie I started carving.
Never was pie so much enjoyed,
It promptly cured my aching void!

The good things vanished in a trice—
It was a gorgers' paradise!
The Christmas pudding, and the chick,
Were both demolished in a tick.

Then suddenly the vision vanished,
And all my blissful dreams were banished.
D'Arcy and Blake my form were shaking:
'Twas rising-bell—a rude awaking!

