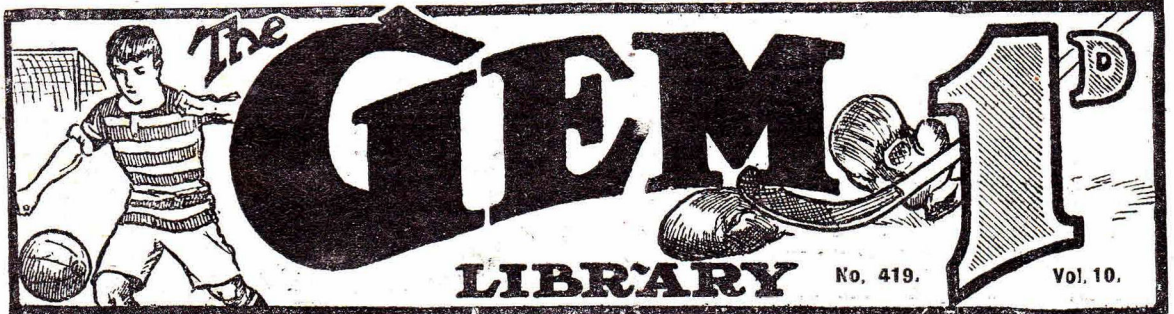


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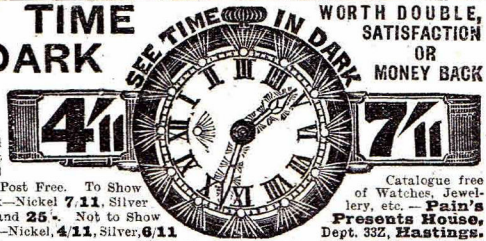
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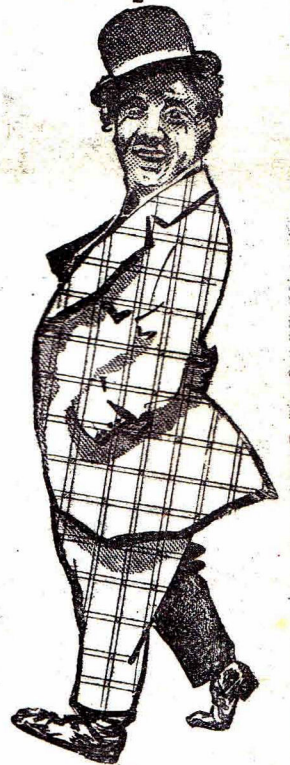
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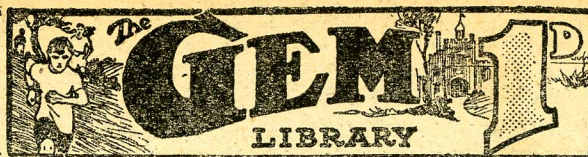
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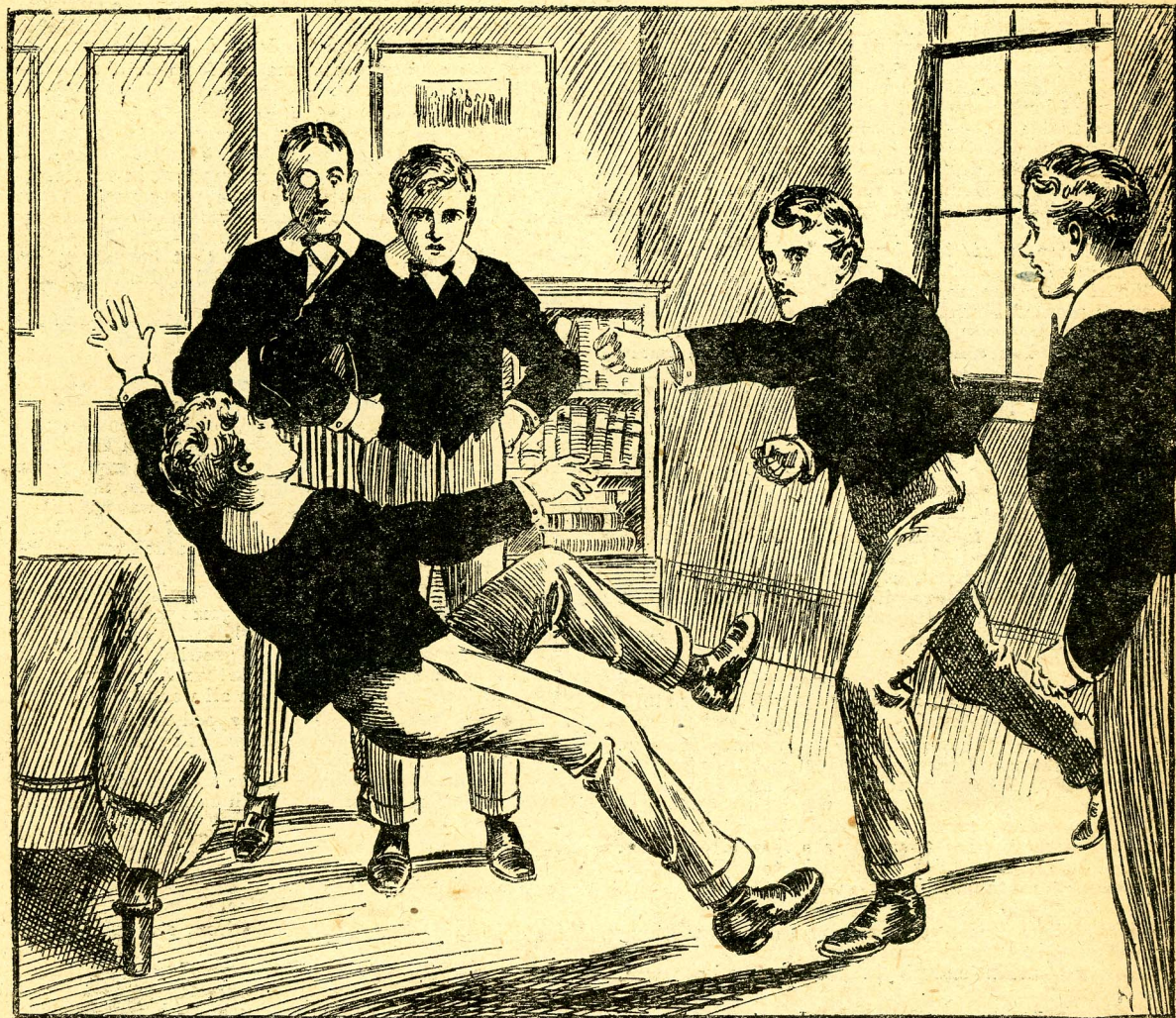
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THE STUDY WRECKERS!

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By MARTIN CLIFFORD.



Bump! A left-hander laid Piggott on the study carpet at last, and he stayed there, groaning dismally, "Bwavo, Wally!" chirruped Arthur Augustus. (See Chapter 13.)

CHAPTER 1.

Rally Round.

WALLY wound, deah boys!" D'Arcy of the Fourth looked excited. His eye gleamed with the light of battle behind his eyeglass. He rushed into the junior common-room in the School House in a tremendous hurry.

Tom Merry & Co. were talking footer. Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther of the Shell sat in a row on the table, laying down the law. Blake and Herries and

Digby of the Fourth were arguing with them. The subject under dispute was a certain goal taken by Figgins of the New House in the last House match. The Shell fellows were of opinion that Figgins would never have taken that goal if Herries, between the posts, hadn't been half asleep at the time. The three Fourth-Formers maintained that the goal was due wholly and solely to the utterly rotten defence put up by Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther. Jack Blake in particular wanted to know what chance a goalie had when the School House team played a chump like Tom Merry in the front line, a muff

Next Wednesday,

"THE SPORTSMEN OF ST. JIM'S!" AND "THE PRIDE OF THE FILM!"

No. 419. (New Series.) Vol. 10.

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like Lowther in the second line, and a mug like Manners in the third line.

The argument was growing warm, and the Fourth-Formers, by way of proving that Herries had been first-rate in goal, were about to yank the Terrible Three off the table and bump them on the floor, when Arthur Augustus D'Arcy rushed in, and called upon the whole party to rally round.

The disputants gave no sign whatever of rallying round. They did not even hear D'Arcy of the Fourth. They were all speaking at once.

"What I say is, that that goal——"

"You fatheaded Shellfish——"

"If Herries hadn't——"

"The way Lowther passed——"

"Why, you fathead——"

"And Tom Merry lying on his back star-gazing——"

"Weally, you fellahs!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy impatiently. "You might give a chap a little attention. I have requested you to wally wound."

"As for that goal——" went on Herries.

"That goal was really a School House goal, though the New House claimed it," said Monty Lowther. "The credit of that goal is entirely due to Herries."

"Oh, have 'em off that table and wallop 'em!" shouted Herries.

"Pway listen to me, deah boys——"

"Gerrouf of the way!"

"Wats! I wufese to get out of the way!" Arthur Augustus planted himself between the disputants firmly. "Stand back, Hewwies, you ass! Pway don't waste time arguin' now. You can wefer the mattah to me, latah, and I will decide it for you."

"Why, you silly ass——" began six voices at once. For a moment, concord reigned among the whole six.

"Weally, you fellahs, pway keep the peace, deah boys! I have requested you to wally wound!"

"How do you wally?" asked Monty Lowther innocently. "Is it a new game?"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"What's the row, fathead?" growled Blake.

"I wufese to be called a fathead, Blake. I wequiah your assistance, all of you, and I wepeat my request to you to wally wound. I have just been thwashin' Cwooke and Mellish and Levison and Piggott——"

"All at once?" grinned Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Terrible Three and the chums of Study No. 6 seemed quite restored to good humour by D'Arcy's statement. Arthur Augustus, however, did not smile.

"Yaas, wathah! They are in the box-woom, you know. I have been thwashin' them all wound, and they had the fearful cheek to thwow me out, and woll me downstairs."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I fail to see any reason for wibald laughtah. I was considewably hurt. My twousahs are feahfully dustay. Undah the cires, I wequiah you fellahs to wally wound, and come with me to mop up those wascals."

"Hold on!" said Tom Merry, laughing. "What have they been doing? Were you thrashing them for anything in particular, or only on general principles?"

"They are smokin' and playin' cards in the box-woom, Tom Mewwy."

"Well, we're not their grandfathers!" yawned Blake. "Let 'em smoke till they turn their tummies. Now, speaking of that goal——"

"They are gamblin', Blake!"

"Let 'em rip, I'm not a prefect. That goal——"

"Yes, that goal——" said Herries.

"You fail to compwehend me, deah boys. They have got young Wobinson of the Second Form there, and are teachin' him to play cards."

"Oh!" said Tom Merry, slipping off the table.

"I wegarded it as bein' up to me to chip in!" said Arthur Augustus. "Young Wobinson is a young ass, and doesn't know any better, and I chipped in as his eldah, you know. I started thwashin' them all wound, and they collahed me and woll me downstairs——"

"Come on!" said Tom Merry. "Crooke's rotten games don't matter to us personally, but he's not going to teach them to fags in the Second. This is where we go on the warpath."

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GORGEOUS TUCK HAMPERS FOR READERS OF THE "GREYFRIARS HERALD," 1/2

"Yaas, wathah! Wally wound!"

The seven juniors hurried from the common-room. Arthur Augustus had succeeded in rallying them round, and the question of the goal in the House match was indefinitely postponed. Arthur Augustus led the way upstairs, past the Shell passage, to the upper staircase. They reached the landing outside the top box-room, a secluded spot where the merry "blades" of the School House sometimes retired for a "little game" unknown to masters and prefects.

With their dingy folly Tom Merry & Co., as a rule, had nothing to do. But on this occasion there was a difference. If Gerald Crooke, the cad of the Shell, was initiating a fag of the Second Form into his own rascally ways, Tom Merry & Co. felt that it was time to put their foot down—heavy.

Tom Merry kicked open the door of the box-room.

There was an angry exclamation from within as the seven juniors crowded in.

Five fellows were seated there on empty boxes, using a big trunk—the property of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy—as a card-table. Crooke and Mellish and Levison and Piggott were frequently together, engaged in such occupations. The fifth member of the party was a little fellow with flaxen hair and blue eyes, who was making exceedingly wry faces over a cigarette—though nothing would have induced him to admit that he didn't like smoking. Robinson of the Second had had a remittance that afternoon from a kind uncle, and the cads of the School House were kindly proceeding to relieve him of the trouble of taking care of it.

Robinson of the Second was experiencing the pleasures—or otherwise—of gambling. He did not look as if it were pleasant. Half an hour before he had been the happy possessor of a whole pound—and a great man in the eyes of the Second-Form fags. Since then his pound had dwindled to three shillings, and he had nothing in return for his cash but a sickly feeling inside, the result of the cigarette Crooke had given him. It was not really a paying game from Robinson's point of view, and the unhappy victim of Crooke & Co.'s wiles looked very nearly on the point of "blubbing."

"Your deal, Levison," Crooke was saying, when Tom Merry & Co. burst in, and the little game was interrupted. Crooke looked round with a scowl.

"What do you fellows want?" he growled.

"Wush the wottahs!" shouted Arthur Augustus, pushing back his cuffs. "Thwash them all wound!"

"Clear off, you silly idiot!" snapped Levison. "Do you want to be pitched down the stairs again?"

"Wally wound, deah boys!"

And Arthur Augustus opened the ball, so to speak, by rushing upon Levison of the Fourth and getting his head into chancery.

CHAPTER 2.

Rough Justice.

"YOW-whoop!" roared Levison, struggling frantically. "Leggo! Gerrof!"

"Go for them, deah boys!"

Pommel, pommel, pommel!

Mellish jumped up and made a rush for the door. Mellish wasn't a fighting-man. But Jack Blake gripped him by the collar and swung him back.

"Not just yet," he said pleasantly.

"Let me pass!" roared Crooke, clenching his fists.

"Pass away!" said Tom Merry, stepping in front of him, with his hands up. "You've only got to walk over me!"

Crooke did not attempt to walk over the captain of the Shell. Two or three Crookes would have found that difficult.

Piggott sat where he was, shrugging his shoulders.

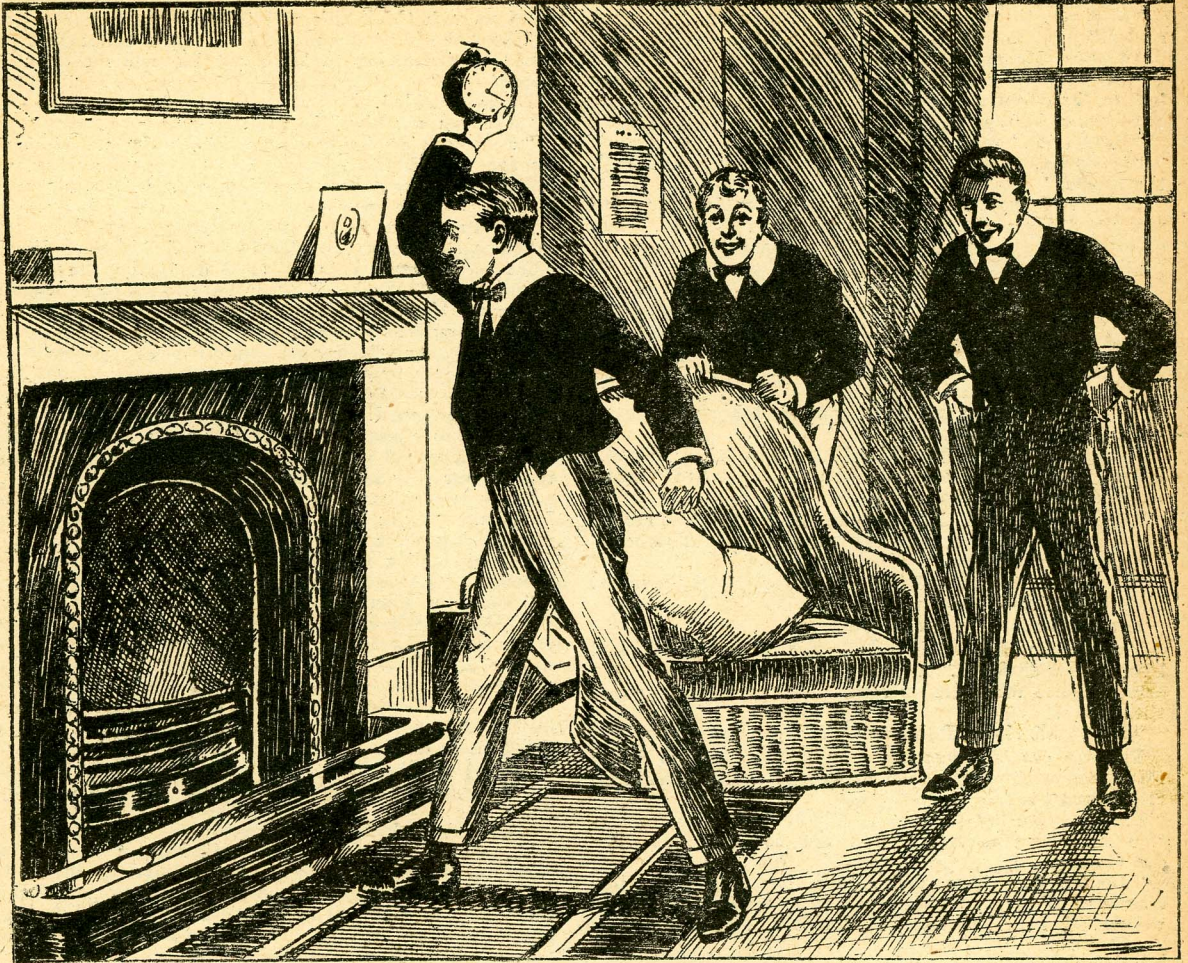
"Leave a bit for me, Gussy!" urged Monty Lowther, as the swell of St. Jim's pommelled the yelling Levison.

"Wats! Have you had enough, you wottah?"

"Yarooooh! Yes! Leggo!" roared Levison.

"Certainly, deah boy, if you have had enough!" said Arthur Augustus politely.

He let go, and Levison of the Fourth sat on the floor



Levison took the clock from the mantelpiece, and hurled it into the grate. It was smashed into a score of pieces. Meliish gave a jump. "Levison, you ass! That's too thick." (See Chapter 3.)

with a bump. He sat there and caressed his nose, scowling like a demon.

"What are you interfering here for, you cads?" said Crooke, between his teeth.

"Stopping your little game," said Tom Merry cheerfully. "Robinson!"

"Ye-es!" stammered the little fag.

"You beastly little blackguard! What are you playing cards for money for?"

"I—I—I know I've lost nearly all my tin," whimpered the fag.

"How much have you rotters taken from that kid?" demanded Tom Merry.

"Find out!"

"How much have you lost, Robinson?"

"Sus-sus-seventeen shillings!" mumbled Robinson.

"Very good! Give that kid back his seventeen shillings, you swindling rotters!"

"I—I say, Merry, I don't want it back! I've lost it!"

"You're going to have it back whether you want it or not, and if I catch you playing cards again I'll comb your hair!" said Tom Merry sternly. "I'm waiting for you to return that kid his money, you mongrels!"

"Go and eat coke!"

"Monty, will you buzz off and get a stump?"

"Certainly!" smiled Lowther.

Monty Lowther quitted the box-room. Crooke made a motion to follow, and Tom Merry shoved him back without ceremony.

"You rotters!" hissed Crooke. "Wha-a-at are you going to do?"

"Lick you with a stump till you hand back the money you've had from that kid."

"You—your interfering beast!"

Piggott of the Third sidled towards the door. Jack Blake raised his boot, and Piggott hastily sidled back again. The four young rascals exchanged furious glances. They were fairly caught, and there was no rest for the wicked in their case.

Monty Lowther came back with a stump under his arm, and closed the box-room door.

"Here you are, O King."

"Put Crooke across that box. We'll begin with Crooke."

"Hold on!" exclaimed Crooke, as the juniors advanced on him. "I—I'll hand the little beast back his tin! Do you think I care for a few bob?"

"Well, I suppose you do, or you wouldn't have taken the trouble to welsh it from a fag. Buck up!"

Crooke snarled, and threw seven shillings on the trunk. Levison handed out six, following his example. Two each came from Meliish and Piggott.

"Take up that money, Robinson."

"I—I don't want—" mumbled the fag.

"Take it up!" thundered Tom Merry, in a voice that made the youthful disciple of Crooke & Co. jump.

The fag slipped the money into his pocket.

"Now listen to me, Robinson. You've been acting like a young blackguard, and if you do it again, you'll get whopped. If you give that money back to these rotters, you'll get whopped. In fact, if you ever speak to them again, you'll get whopped!"

"Ye-e-es, Merry!"

"Now put them over the boxes. Robinson, take that stump."

"Ye-e-es, Merry!"

"Give them six each—well laid on! If you don't lay 'em on hard enough, you'll get some yourself!"

"Ye-e-es, Merry!"

"Hands off!" roared Crooke fiercely.

"Back up!" yelled Levison. "All together, and rush the beasts!"

Levison of the Fourth made a rush for the door. He was promptly collared by Manners and Herries. The other three held off; but they were collared with equal promptness. With a couple of juniors grasping each of them by the neck and ankles, the merry blades of the School House were laid face down across the boxes and held there, wriggling and yelling in anticipation.

"Now pile in, Robinson," said Tom Merry.

"I—I say, Merry, I—I'd rather not!"

"Then we'll begin with you!"

"I—I'll do as you tell me!" gasped Robinson.

"Back up, then!"

Whack! Whack! Whack! Whack! Whack! Whack! Whack! Robinson started with Crooke, and Crooke writhed and roared and yelled.

"Oh, you rotters! I'll pay you out for this! Yaroooh! Stoppit! Help! Oh, crumbs! Oh, crikey! Yaroooh!"

"Levison next, kid!"

"If you touch me—" yelled Levison. "Oh, crumbs! Keep off! I'll—I'll—yooop!"

Levison went through it, yelling.

Then came Mellish's turn. Mellish wriggled and howled and shrieked. Piggott came last, and he made enough noise for three or four. Then Tom Merry took the stump.

"That's all right, Robinson! You can cut off!"

The fag cut off promptly enough. He had no desire to remain within the reach of Crooke & Co. when Tom Merry and his friends were gone.

Crooke & Co. lay on the boxes, groaning. The castigation had been severe, though not so severe as they deserved.

"Justice has been done, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Thank you vewy much for wallyin' wound! I twust, Cwooke, that this will be a lesson to you!"

"Yow-ow-ow!" moaned Crooke.

"You rotters! If you weren't two to one—" howled Levison.

"You can pick out your man, if you want any more!" grinned Blake. "If you're spoiling for a fight, I'm your man!"

"Yaas, wathah! Same heah!"

"And here!" grinned Digby.

"Hear, hear!" said Monty Lowther.

There was quite a shower of offers, but Levison did not accept any of them. He sat on the trunk and scowled.

"We're done!" said Tom Merry. "Keep your black-guardism to yourself, Crooke, and you can keep it up till you're found out and sacked from St. Jim's. But don't try that game on with kids in the Second Form again, or you'll hear from us!"

"The Great Chief has spoken!" said Monty Lowther solemnly.

"Yow-ow-ow-wow!"

Tom Merry & Co. retired from the scene with a satisfied feeling of having done their duty, and done it well. To Crooke & Co. it seemed that they had done it a little too well. For a considerable time afterwards the only remarks heard in the box-room were

"Yow-ow-ow! Wow! Grooh! Oh, crumbs! Groooocogh!"

CHAPTER 3.

The Wreckers.

LEVISON of the Fourth looked out of his study an hour or two later. Blake & Co. were coming along the passage, heading for Tom Merry's study. Arthur Augustus had a roll of manuscript in his hand, and was speaking.

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"I wathah think this will take up an extwah column in the 'Weekly,' deah boys! Do you think Lowthah could be persuaded to leave out his comic column for once?"

Blake chuckled.

"You can ask him," he said.

"Yaas, I think I will wequest him to do so. Aftah all, we are wathah fed up with Lowthah's liddle jokes, you know, and if he takes more time ovah them, he may be able to pwduce some good ones—you nevah can tell!"

Levison scowled at the juniors as they passed.

Study No. 6 were evidently bound for the editorial office to perform their editorial duties on the staff of "Tom Merry's Weekly." They were likely to be engaged for some time. Levison turned back into the study where Percy Mellish was squirming in the armchair, still suffering from the recent infliction in the box-room. Levison's eyes were gleaming.

"I want you!" he said.

Mellish groaned:

"Oh, lemme alone! I don't feel up to any little game now! Fatheaded idea to skin that young prig Robinson, too! Your silly idea, wasn't it? Yow-ow!"

"You were keen enough after his cash!" sneered Levison. "Look here! We're going to make those rotters sit up for this!"

"Going to lick Tom Merry?" asked Mellish, with deep sarcasm. "I think I can see you doing it!"

"Not Tom Merry—yet."

"Taking Blake on?" sneered Mellish. "Don't talk out of your neck, Levison! Blake would mop up the ground with you, and be glad of the chance!"

"They've gone to Tom Merry's study, all four of them," said Levison, in a low voice. "There's nobody in No. 6 now. They'll be busy a long time. They're doing their editing rot! Come on!"

"What for?"

"We're going to rag their study. I'll call Crooke to help."

Mellish looked alarmed.

"You silly ass!—And what will happen to us if we rag their study? You can jolly well leave me out of it!"

"Nothing will happen to us," said Levison. "I shall work it so that they'll think it's a New House raid and put it down to Figgins. If Blake goes for Figgins, all the better—Figgins could lick him!"

Mellish brightened up. He was as keen to revenge his injuries as Levison was, but he lacked the nerve of the cad of the Fourth.

"Come on!" repeated Levison impatiently.

And Mellish rose, groaning, and followed him from the study. The two Fourth-Formers called for Crooke in the Shell passage. Gerald Crooke was tramping about his study, muttering and mumbling. He wasn't feeling inclined to sit down. He scowled at his two precious comrades as they entered.

His scowl relaxed, however, as Levison explained his idea.

"Good wheeze," he said. "Sure they're safe, though?"

"They're editing in Tom Merry's study. You can hear their voices in the passage."

Crooke stepped quietly along the passage and listened. From Tom Merry's study proceeded the dulcet tones of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Weally, Lowthah, I think you might leave out your wotten jokes for once, to make woom for my new sewial. You don't see a sewial like this evewy day!"

"Thank goodness for that!" came Lowther's reply.

"Weally, you duffah—"

Crooke came back, grinning.

"It's all serene," he said. "Let's get to work."

The three young rascals hurried along to Study No. 6. That famous apartment was empty, and Blake and Herries, Digby and D'Arcy, were deep in editorial duties, little dreaming of the danger that threatened their quarters.

"This isn't simply a rag," said Levison, as he closed the door and locked it. "We're going to make a real wreck of the study. Don't make too much row, but smash everything. The chaps in the next studiés are out; I've looked. Here goes for a beginning."

Crash! Levison took the clock from the mantelpiece

and hurled it into the grate. It was smashed into a score of pieces.

Mellish gave a jump.

"Levison, you ass, that's too thick!"

"Rot! We're going to wreck the place. We can put it all on the New House fellows. It isn't a rag—it's revenge!" said Levison between his teeth. "I won't leave two rags sticking together in the room!"

"Pile in!" said Crooke, his eyes glistening. "So long as they don't bowl us out, it's all right."

Levison piled in, ably seconded by Crooke; and Mellish, though hesitatingly, followed suit. The time had been well chosen. Nearly all the studies in the passage were deserted, and Blake & Co. were distant, and busily occupied. And the work was quick—and very effective.

Levison acted like a born wrecker. Fellows sometimes "ragged" a study, by way of a practical joke—mixing up things, and spilling and tumbling all kinds of articles. But Levison was not bent on a rag; he was bent upon wanton destruction. Crash went the looking-glass under a blow from the poker, and crash went the glass in the bookcase under another blow. The curtains were torn down from the window and ripped into rags. The study cupboard was turned out next—every article of crockery sedulously broken into several pieces and piled in the grate. The fender—a brass fender, of which Study No. 6 were inordinately proud—was bent and twisted out of all shape, and broken wherever it would break. The poker was bent, the tongs broken into two, the shovel twisted out of all resemblance to a shovel.

Mellish looked on almost in terror. If such wanton destruction had come to the knowledge of the House-master, the destroyers would have been flogged in Hiall. There was no doubt about that.

"I—I say, it—it's too thick!" stammered Mellish.

"Rats!" said Levison.

He turned the table over.

"Take the legs, Crooke."

"What-ho!" chuckled Crooke.

The legs were wrenched off the study table. Levison turned out Blake's tool-chest, and selected a saw. With perfect coolness he proceeded to saw across the table-top.

"I—I'm not going to have a hand in this," gasped Mellish. "It means a flogging if it comes out—or the sack, you silly idiots."

"Get out, then, you funk, and hold your tongue!" snapped Levison.

Mellish unlocked the door and scuttled away. He was glad enough for destruction to fall upon Study No. 6, but he was terrified at the recklessness of the wreckers. Crooke re-locked the door after him. Crooke's eyes were blazing. He was as reckless as Levison now.

"My hat, this is ripping!" he said. "Get that table-top into three pieces, Levison. There's a tenon-saw here. I'll saw up the legs."

"Good man!" grinned Levison.

For ten minutes nothing was heard in the study but the grinding of the saws. By that time, the table-top was in three separate pieces, and each of the legs had been sawn in half. Crooke and Levison grinned delightedly at the pile of ruins. But they were not finished yet.

"The chairs!" said Levison.

"What-ho, the chairs!" chortled Crooke.

There were five chairs in the study—one each for the occupants and one with a damaged leg for visitors. In a few minutes all five of them were damaged seriously. The legs were torn off with powerful wrenches, the rails broken under foot, and the backs dislocated. Then the armchair was taken in hand. All four legs were sawn off, as they were too strong for breaking, and Levison ripped the seat into rags with the study carving-knife, and wrenched out the stuffing, and then snapped the knife short under his heel.

Books and papers were slashed and torn; the stamp-covered jam-jars on the mantelpiece, which served as vases, were broken; the carpet was dragged up, and slashed into a dozen pieces; the screen was reduced to tatters; the curtain-pole sawn into three. Arthur Augustus' special hat-box was squashed, and the silk topper it contained jumped upon. A box of handsome neckties belonging to the swell of St. Jim's was turned

into the grate, and Blake's cycle oil-can poured over them and a match applied.

Levison looked round the study with a grin of savage satisfaction. Study No. 6 looked as if a cyclone had struck it—or worse. Crooke was beginning to feel uneasy.

"My hat, if they should spot us, after this!" he breathed.

"They won't!" grinned Levison.

He dipped his finger into the inkpot, and daubed on the wall, in large capital letters:

"SCHOOL HOUSE CADS, GO AND EAT COKE!
FIGGINS."

Crooke chuckled.

"That's plain enough," he grinned. "They'll be so ratty, they won't stop to ask Figgins many questions before they hammer him. Let's get off!"

Crooke stepped towards the door. Then he paused, the colour wavering in his cheeks. There was a hasty step in the passage.

Then the door-handle was seized, and turned from outside. Crooke and Levison stood rooted to the floor, in the midst of the wreck they had made. They had finished their dastardly work, and escape was cut off from the study they had wrecked.

CHAPTER 4.

Editing under Difficulties.

LITTLE dreaming of what was happening in Study No. 6, the schoolboy editors were hard at work in Tom Merry's study. Seven cheery juniors sat round the table, with pens in their hands, ink on their fingers, and thoughtful frowns on their faces. The question of D'Arcy's serial had been settled—it was to be cut down. Lowther declared that that would be easy enough, if Arthur Augustus cut the rubbish out of it, while Manners opined that in that case the instalment would vanish altogether.

Arthur Augustus acknowledged these remarks with disdainful sniffs, and set to work to cut the instalment down. It was really too bad for Gussy had expended a great deal of time and trouble on that instalment. It was chiefly taken up with a full and glowing description of the clothes worn by his hero, Adolphus de Vere. But there was no help for it. Monty Lowther was adamant; his column had to go into the "Weekly," though the skies fell.

The smiles upon Monty Lowther's face indicated that the comic column was even more comical than usual, and occasionally he broke into chuckles. Blake, who was doing a war story—full of battle, murder, and sudden death—looked up rather morosely as an unusually loud cackination escaped the humorist of the Shell.

"Something specially good from 'Chuckles'?" he asked.

Monty Lowther ceased to chuckle, and glared instead. There was a fixed conviction among his colleagues on the editorial staff that most of his best things came from "Chuckles"—a conviction that Monty sometimes combated with almost frantic energy, but without avail.

"You silly ass!" he said witheringly. "There's never been anything like this even in 'Chuckles.' I'll read it out."

"Oh, don't!" said Blake hastily. "Sorry I spoke!"

"Yaas, wathah! As you are stwong, be merciful, Lowthah."

"There's something about you chaps in it," said Lowther. "I'd better read it out. You'll see whether it's like 'Chuckles.'"

"Oh, I don't say all your jokes are from 'Chuckles,'" said Blake considerably. "I was referring to the good ones."

"This is a new version of the 'Ten Little Nigger Boys'!" said Lowther, unheeding. "Lend me your ears!"

"I'll lend you a thick ear if you interrupt my photographic article," growled Manners.

"Look here, Manners, you ass—"

"There, that's done," said Tom Merry. "Not easy to write a good leader with you kids jawing all the time!"

"Just listen to this," said Lowther. "Ten Little Nigger Boys, you know. This is better than the original, really—and quite topical.

"Ten little nigger boys, walking in a line,
One saw Gussy's face, and then there were nine!"

"You uttah ass!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus, turning his eyeglass witheringly upon the humorist. "I wegard that as uttally wotten! Personal jokes are in vevy bad taste, Lowthah, and I insist—"

"Nine little nigger boys, sitting on a gate,
Herries played his cornet, and then there were eight."

"You thundering chump!" said Herries. "Why should there be only eight after I'd played my cornet?"

"That one had a musical ear," explained Lowther.

"Why, you silly fathead—"

"Eight little nigger boys, sailing on Loch Leven,
One ate a haggis, and then there were seven."

"That's put in specially for Kerr!" said Lowther. "I don't know what a haggis is, but I know Kerr gets waxy when you ask him if it's fatal."

"Seven little nigger boys, watched behind the sticks,
One saw Blake get a goal, and then there were six."

Jack Blake rose to his feet.

"And why?" he asked, his hand resting on the inkpot.

"Shock to the system; sudden, surprising occurrence, you know," said Monty Lowther. "Yaroooh—stoppim!"

Tom Merry caught the inkpot and jerked it downward.

"Peace, peace, my children," said the captain of the Shell chidingly.

"Look here—" roared Blake.

"Let's hear the rest and get it over," said Digby.

"Lowther won't leave off until he's finished. But look here, Lowther, if we laugh now, will you leave off?"

Monty Lowther did not deign to reply to that question. He went on with his new version of an ancient rhyme:

"Six little nigger boys, very much alive,
One heard Gussy sing, and then there were five."

"Weally, Lowthah, if you persist in these wotten personal jokes, I warn you that you are askin' for a feahful thwashin'."

"Five little nigger boys met a fearful bore,
Who talked about cameras, and then there were four."

"Why, you silly cuckoo," said Manners, in measured tones. "Of all the idiotic piffle you ever perpetrated, that takes the biscuit! What the fellows can see to grin at in it, beats me!"

"Four little nigger boys came along to tea,
One ate what Dig cooked, and then there were three."

Digby glowered wrathfully at the humorist of the Shell. Dig had lately tried his hand at cake-making. This was evidently a topical allusion.

"Three little nigger boys read the 'Weekly' through,
One read Merry's article, and then there were two!"

"That's about enough," said Tom Merry. "That utter rot can't go into the 'Weekly.' We've got to keep up a certain standard of quality."

"Two little nigger boys—" went on Lowther, unheeding.

"Rats!"

"Chuck it!"

"Never mind the two little nigger boys," said Blake.

"We've had enough little nigger boys. That piffle can't go into the 'Weekly.'"

"Look here, you ass—"

"Stick to 'Chuckles,'" said Blake. "Then your little jokes come in all right for fellows who happen to miss the paper one week. But—"

"Have you ever seen anything like that in 'Chuckles'?" demanded Monty Lowther wrathfully.

"No jolly fear! It wouldn't sell. Somebody would get sacked if anything like that got in."

"Why, you silly ass—"

"Hands up for blue-pencilling Lowther's rot," said Blake, looking round.

Every hand but Monty Lowther's went up.

"You silly chumps, you can't see good jokes. A chap ought to be able to take a joke against himself."

"Then I'll suggest a wind-up for the giddy poem," said Tom Merry:

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"Two little nigger boys read Lowther's comic rot,
Both lay down and died on the spot."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Monty Lowther snorted.

"I'd rather leave the poem out than finish it with piffle like that," he said.

"Wats! Tom Mewwy's lines are the best of the lot."

"Fathead!"

"I wefuse to be called a fathead, Lowthah—"

"Look here, I'll revise it, and put in New House names," said Lowther. "After all, it's as surprising for Figgins to get a goal as for Blake—"

"Look here!" roared Blake.

"Unless Herries was in goal, I mean, of course," said Lowther. "If Herries was between the posts, there would be nothing surprising in it."

"Well, that's so, considering the way Figgins scored last time," remarked Manners. "I must really say—"

"Shush!" roared Tom Merry. "Don't begin a football argument; we're editing now. Cheese it!"

"That goal was due to Manners going to sleep at back!" bellowed Herries.

"Asleep!" exclaimed Manners indignantly. "I like that! Why, you were dozing between the sticks; I distinctly heard you snore."

That statement was too much for Herries. He whirled round the table, and grasped his fellow-editor by the neck. Manners came over the back of his chair like a sack of coke.

"Heard me snore, did you?" bawled Herries. "Well, now we'll hear you roar."

"Yaroooh! Leggo! Why, I'll—"

Bump! Crash!

The table rocked, as Herries and Manners crashed into it, struggling furiously. There was a terrific yell from Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, as the inkpot rolled off on his knees.

"Gweat Scott! Oh, deah! My twousahs! Look at my twousahs!"

"Order!" yelled Tom Merry.

"Take that, you cheeky Shellfish! Snoring, was I?"

"Yes, you were! Fast asleep and snoring like a grampus!" roared Manners. "Take that, you cheeky fag! Snoring, I say—snoring—snoring!"

"Drag 'em apart!" yelled Tom Merry.

"Pooh, let Herries lick him," said Blake. "He wants licking. And I'm ready to lick anybody who says that goal wasn't due to Shell fatheads bungling."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Eh! Herries is getting licked, you duffer—"

"Rats! Herries could lick anybody in the Shell. As for that goal—"

"Snoring!" roared Manners. "Yes, snoring in goal!"

"You cheeky worm!"

"Hewwies was not snorwin'. Tom Mewwy was goin' to sleep on the ground—"

"Why, you ass—"

"And Lowthah was playin' the giddy ox—"

"And what were you doing?" hooted Lowther. "Stopping to smooch your hair?"

"Nothin' of the sort! I wegard you as a sillay ass!"

"Fathead!"

"Now, then!" roared Herries, as he crashed down on the floor on top of Manners. "Was I snoring?"

"Yes, you were!" roared Manners defiantly. "Snoring like billy-ho! You could have been heard from here to Rylcombe."

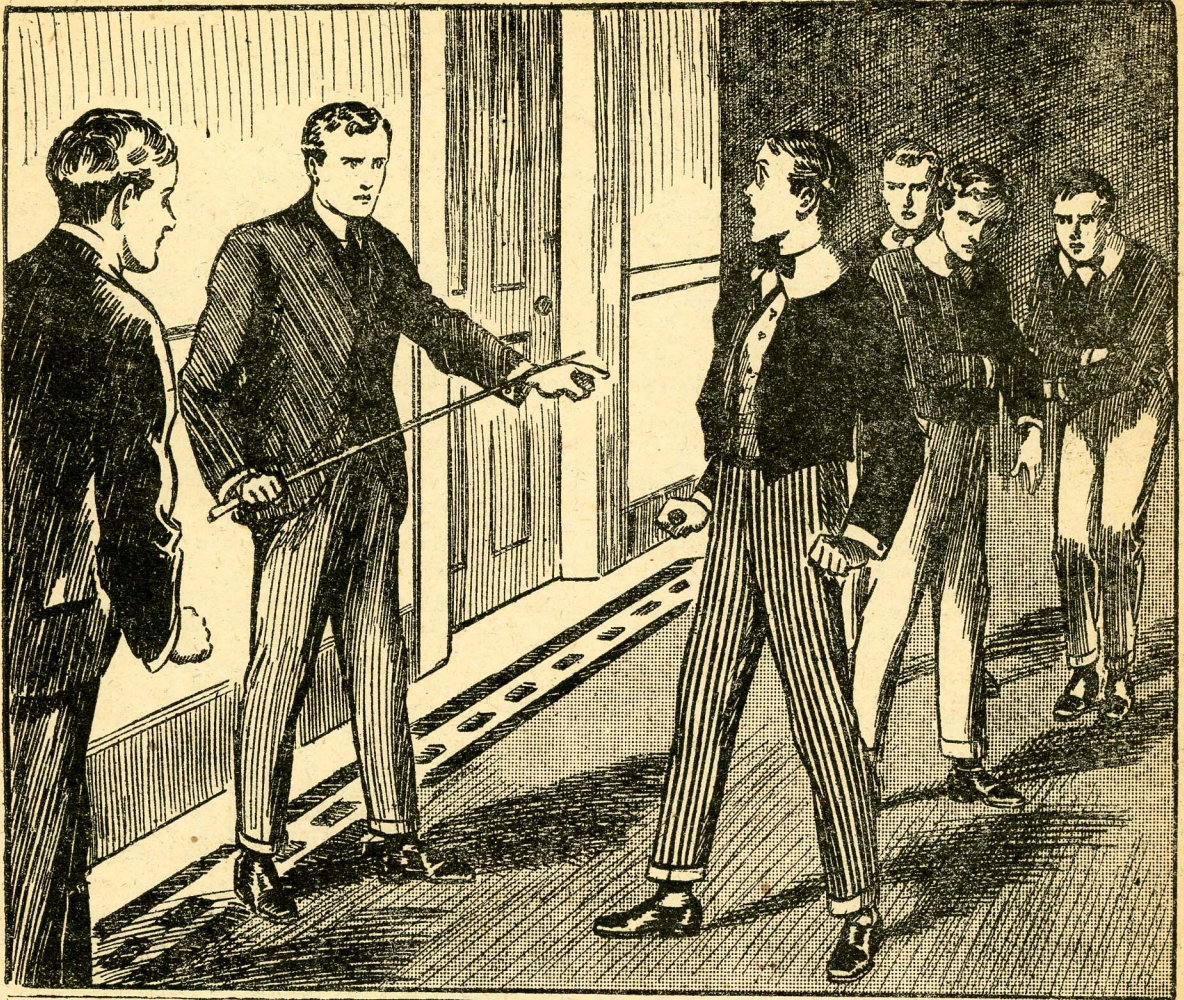
Bang! Manners' head collided with the floor, and he bellowed. Lowther grasped Herries to drag him off, and Blake immediately grasped Lowther. Tom Merry rushed to the rescue, and was promptly collared by Digby. In a moment more, six juniors were mixed up on the floor, amid contributions for the "Weekly," overturned chairs, an inkpot, pens, and blotting-paper, and other articles. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy looked on. Fair play was a jewel, and D'Arcy remained a spectator. He was also fully occupied with the ruinous state of his trousers.

"What the merry thunder's the row?" exclaimed a voice at the door, and the handsome face of Talbot of the Shell looked in, with an expression of great astonishment.

"We are editin' the papah, deah boy."

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"D'Arcy—" "Weally, Kildare—!" "Hold out your hand." "I pwotest—" "Twice!" said Kildare, grimly. Swish! Swish! (See Chapter 6.)

"It looks like it," grinned Talbot. "You'll have the Housemaster here to help you edit, if you don't chuck that awful row!"

"Yah! Shell rotters! Go for 'em!"

"Cheeky fags! Kick 'em out!"

"For goodness' sake chuck it!" exclaimed Talbot. "I tell you, you'll have the Housemaster here. What's the row about?"

The combatants separated at last, very dusty and dishevelled and damaged.

"That goal!" gasped Herries. "That idiot Manners says I was snoring in goal—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What are you cackling at, you ass?"

"Bai Jove, you look wathah dustay, deah boys. Pway do not wov; some sillay ass has twodden on my wippin' sewial already!"

Editing was over for that afternoon. Blake & Co. shook the dust of Tom Merry's study from their feet; but they carried away a good deal of dust on their clothes. Manners had the last word; he yelled "Snoring!" as the Fourth-Formers departed. But, fortunately, Talbot slammed the door at the same moment, and Herries did not hear.

CHAPTER 5.

An Alibi Required!

"WHAT the merry dickens is the matter with this door?"

Jack Blake shook the door of Study No. 6 angrily.

He was feeling a little cross already. That afternoon's editing was to have produced the finished copy for the "Weekly," but, owing to the "Ten Little Nigger Boys" and the football argument, most of the work had to be done over again. And the chums of the Fourth were feeling very dusty and rumpled and wrathful. It was the last straw to find their own study door fastened against them.

Blake shook the handle angrily, and kicked on the lower panels.

"Pway what's the mattah, deah boy?"

"Some silly ass has locked us out of the study!" hooted Blake. "Here, let us in, you fathead! Open this blessed door!"

Kick! Kick! Kick!

Within the study Crooke was looking quite ghastly, and Levison's brow was wrinkled. The wrecking had been done, the false notice daubed on the wall to give the chums a false impression, but at the last moment retreat was cut off. Crooke fairly shivered as he looked round at the wreck. If Blake & Co. found the perpetrators red-handed, so to speak, their vengeance would be something terrific. They would not betray the rascals to punishment at the Housemaster's hands, certainly—that kind

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ANSWERS

NEXT WEDNESDAY:

"THE SPORTSMEN OF ST. JIM'S!"

of thing was not in their line; but they would undoubtedly thrash them within an inch of their lives, and they would wreck Croke and Levison's property in the same way, by way of reprisals. Blake & Co. were nothing at all like our modern milk-and-water politicians, and they were not in the least shocked at the idea of reprisals upon a base enemy. All they would worry about would be making the reprisals as hard and heavy as possible.

Croke wished that the floor would open and let him through into the room below; he would have given a term's pocket-money for such a favour. But the floor wasn't likely to oblige him in that way. The rascals were caught; only the locked door stood between them and vengeance. And Blake and Herries and Digby were hammering savagely on the door. Croke turned a scared look on his accomplice.

Kick! Kick! Kick! Bang! Bang!

"I—I say——" muttered Croke, between his chattering teeth.

Levison made him a quick sign to be silent.

"Not a word!" he whispered. "Not a syllable! They don't know it's us. There's the window."

Croke glanced at the window, and shuddered. Blake had climbed down the ivy to the quad more than once, but the cad of the Shell did not possess Blake's nerve.

"I—I can't!" he murmured.

Levison shrugged his shoulders.

"They'll get that door open soon. Then——"

"Oh, you rotter, to get me into this!" groaned Croke.

Levison gave him a look of fierce contempt, and crossed to the window. Cautiously, with hardly a sound, he opened it. Croke followed him, with dragging steps. The risk of the descent was better than falling into the hands of Blake & Co. when they discovered what had been done to their quarters.

"Will you let us in?" bawled Blake through the keyhole.

"Yaas, wathah, you uttah wottahs! It's some pwactical-jokin' beast! Open this door at once, you sillay duffahs!"

"It's all right, Figgins," said Levison, just loudly enough to be heard in the passage. "They can't get in."

Croke caught his idea at once.

"Let 'em knock, Kerr," he said.

"Figgins and Kerr!" shouted Blake, catching the words. "Those New House bounders! It's a raid! We'll raid 'em!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Let us in, you New House rotters!" roared Blake, shaking the door-handle. "What are you up to in our study?"

Levison grinned, and climbed cautiously out of the window. He had plenty of nerve, but his companion watched him, shivering. Croke was a little reassured, however, by the ease with which Ernest Levison swung himself down the ivy. Levison dropped on the ground. It was already growing dusk in the quadrangle, and there was not much danger of being observed.

The cad of the Fourth looked up at Croke's white face in the window. Then he shrugged his shoulders, and walked away. If the Shell fellow did not choose to follow where he had led that was his own look-out.

"Get a chisel from somewhere!" Blake's voice could be heard in the passage. "We'll have this open jolly soon, and we'll snatch the rotters baldheaded!"

That was enough for Croke. He squeezed himself desperately through the window, and clutched on the ivy. Not daring to look below, he swung himself down by the thick tendrils. It was not so difficult as it looked. But Croke was out of condition, and he was panting and gasping, and his arms were aching, by the time he set his feet on the ground.

He did not linger there. He scuttled off at once, and disappeared across the dusky quadrangle. Levison was waiting for him under the elms. He caught Croke by the arm, and stopped him in the shadow of the trees.

"So you did it?" he sneered.

"Yes," panted Croke; "I did it! I could do it as well as you could, I suppose? I—I say, we went a bit too far. There'll be an awful row about this. It might mean the sack if the Head heard about it!"

"Rather too late to think of that!" said Levison, with

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a sneer. "We're safe enough. They think it was the New House fellows."

"But they'll find out it wasn't."

"Perhaps. Then we've got to prove an alibi." Levison looked at his watch. "It's just six. Now, where were we between five and six?"

"In Blake's study, of course."

"Idiot! I mean, where can we prove we were when they start making inquiries?" growled Levison.

"Oh, I see!"

Levison thought hard. He understood, even more than Croke did, the deadly seriousness of what had been done. The first wrath of the School House chums would be turned upon Figgins & Co. But suppose Figgins & Co. succeeded in proving their innocence? Then indubitably it would be guessed that the wreck of Study No. 6 was revenge for the licking in the box-room.

Levison & Co. had to prove an alibi. It was likely enough that Blake & Co., though not inclined to sneak, might be unable to conceal the damage in their study from the powers. In that case there would be an inquiry by the Housemaster, and a flogging to follow. Indeed, it was quite on the cards that the ruthless wreckers might be expelled from the school. Certainly they would be required to pay for the damage done, and it ran into a good many pounds.

Croke could have borne his share in that easily enough, but Levison was hard up, as usual. An alibi had to be proved.

Croke watched his companion's face eagerly. He depended on Levison's well-known cunning to cover up their tracks.

Levison's eyes brightened suddenly.

"I've got it!" he muttered.

"What's the wheeze?"

"Young Piggott."

"What's the good?"

"Come with me, and don't jaw!" muttered Levison.

"Piggott's in the tuckshop. It's all serene."

Croke followed the cad of the Fourth as he hurried towards the tuckshop. Piggott of the Third was coming out, with a parcel under his arm. He looked at the two juniors and grinned.

"Nothing doing!" he said at once.

"What do you mean, confound you?" growled Croke.

"This grub is for Knox," said Piggott. "I'm having tea in Hall."

"Never mind Knox, and never mind tea," said Levison.

"You've got to help us, Piggott. You're a cunning little beast, and you can do it. We've wrecked Study No. 6, to pay those cads out for meddling with us this afternoon."

"Good for you!" said the Third-Former. "Why didn't you ask me to take a hand? I'd have done it."

"We've done it pretty thoroughly," said Levison. "We haven't left two rags holding together."

"Phew! There'll be a row!"

"That's where you come in. We want to prove an alibi, and you're the chap to prove it. Croke will stand you a spread in his study afterwards."

Croke nodded assent. Croke was not generous, even to his pals; but it was no time for meanness. If the worthy Piggott's evidence could save him from what he deserved, it was worth a spread in the study.

"I'm on," said Piggott at once, "but they won't believe what I say. They know I'm thick with you."

"You're going to quarrel with us."

"Eh?"

"And ask Tom Merry to interfere."

"My hat!"

"You'll appeal to him to make us give you back some money we've won from you, playing in the box-room."

"Oh, crumbs!"

"Ten bob each," said Levison. "We've been playing with you there—between five and six. See?"

"Merry will be down on us. We'll make a fuss, and hand you the money. You will hand it back to us afterwards, of course——"

Piggott nodded, though his eyes glimmered curiously for a moment.

"Then when they come to inquire where we were at the time, it's all cut and dried—we were in the box-room playing cards. If we said we'd been to a Bible meeting

they wouldn't swallow it, but they'll swallow the other fast enough."

"My only hat!" said Crooke. "What a criminal you'll make when you grow up, Levison. You'd beat 'em at the Old Bailey."

"Oh, cheese it! You savvy, Piggott?"

"I'm on!" said Piggott. "I'll get this to Knox, and then spin my yarn to Tom Merry. Rely on me."

And Piggott cut off, grinning.

"That will work," said Levison. "What do you think, Crooke?"

"Right as rain!" grinned Crooke. "And when they know for certain it wasn't us, they'll think it was the New House bounders, whatever they say. It may lead to a regular split."

"All the better."

"What-ho!" said Crooke heartily.

And in his exuberance of spirits at that pleasant prospect, Crooke marched his worthy comrade into the tuckshop, and stood him a ginger-pop.

CHAPTER 6. Baffled Wrath!

C R E A K !

Crack!

The door was giving.

Blake & Co. were taking drastic measures. The door of their study was locked against them, and they had no doubt whatever that Figgins & Co. of the New House were within. That it was a raid seemed clear, and they were anxious to catch the New House raiders in the act. It was tea-time, too, and they knew that if Fatty Wynn was in the study there wouldn't be much left in the cupboard for tea.

Crack! Crack! Groan!

Blake had jammed in the chisel between the lock and the doorpost. He forced it back hard. The lock was not designed to stand that kind of pressure. It gave way under the strain.

"It's goin', deah boys!"

"Stick together, in case they make a rush!" said Blake. "Don't let any of the rotters get through! We're going to make an example of them!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

With a final groan, the lock parted, and the door dashed open. Blake strode in at the doorway, his chums lining up behind him, to cut off the escape of the enemy.

But there was no enemy. The study was deserted. And the state of the study struck upon the eyes of the Fourth-Formers like a blow.

Blake could not speak for some moments.

He gazed speechlessly at the scene of destruction. It simply took his breath away.

A study rag he could understand; he had ragged Figgins' quarters in the New House, in his time. Study No. 6 had been the scene of many a rag. But the wanton destruction of property astounded him, as well as enraged him. It was not like Figgins & Co. to act like that.

"Good heavens!" gasped Blake, at last.

"The rotters!" roared Herries.

"The cads!" howled Digby.

"Bai Jove! The feahful beasts!"

Blake looked round him, hardly able to believe his eyes. Everything that could be broken was broken; what could not be broken was sawn in pieces. Hardly an article remained whole. The study needed refurnishing throughout, to the last article. And as the juniors furnished their studies themselves out of their own pockets, the bill was likely to be a serious one.

"They're gone," said Blake, between his teeth. He nodded towards the open window. "They cleared out of the window while we were getting the door open. We'll make them pay for this!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Look at the armchair," said Dig, almost tearfully—"the armchair my aunt sent us when the old one went to pot."

"Look at my neckties!" shrieked Arthur Augustus, gazing in horror at the smouldering mass in the grate.

"Look at the fender—the glass—the bookcase!" said

Blake, in a helpless rage. "Why a gang of drunken hooligans couldn't have done worse."

"Look here, the Housemaster ought to see this!" shouted Herries. "This isn't a jape—this is rotten blackguardism!"

"Look at the inscription, too!" said Blake. "'School House cads! Go and eat coke! Figgins!' He wasn't ashamed to put his name to it!"

"The disgustin' cad! Look at my toppah—squashed!"

"Everything smashed up!" said Blake. "Well, we won't let the Housemaster see it if we can help it. But we'll make Figgins & Co. sorry for it. I never dreamed they could be such utter cads as this."

"If we hadn't heard 'em talking, I shouldn't believe they'd done it," said Dig. "But we heard 'em."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Come on!" said Blake, his eyes glinting. "We're going over to the New House. We'll serve their study the same, and smash them into the bargain."

"Yes, come on!" said Herries. "I know I won't leave a thing standing in their rotten study, the cads!"

The four chums rushed down the passage.

They wanted vengeance, and they wanted it at once, and they wanted it hot and strong. Venturing into the enemy's quarters was risky, but the risk did not matter to them now. They only thought of getting to close quarters with Figgins & Co., and visiting dire punishment upon their devoted heads.

They fairly flew across the dusky quadrangle.

A light was burning in the window of Figgins' study, showing that the New House Co. were at home. Doubtless they were chuckling over the raid. Blake & Co., with set savage faces, came up to the House steps at top speed. They were going to raid in their turn—not the good-humoured raid, such as the rivals of St. Jim's often indulged in, when little real damage was done. This time it was bitter earnest. The "destructive wrath" of Achilles, of which the poet sings, was as nothing to the destructive wrath of Blake & Co. just then.

To collar Figgins & Co., hammer them till they couldn't crawl, and then serve their study as No. 6 had been served—that was the programme.

There was a hitch in the programme, however. They dashed into the New House, and rushed up the stairs. Even Arthur Augustus had forgotten that there was ink on his trousers. With gleaming eyes and clenched fists they rushed up—and nearly rushed into Monteith of the Sixth, who was coming down. One glance at them was enough for the prefect, and he barred the way.

"Stop!" he rapped out.

"Let us pass!" said Blake furiously.

"Stop!" repeated Monteith. "Have you got the nerve to come over here for a House row—"

"Let us pass, I tell you!" roared Herries. "We're going to see Figgins!"

"You're jolly well not—"

"Gewwout of the way, you New House boundah!"

"What?"

"Shove him out of the way!" shouted Herries. "He's only a New House rotter, anyway!"

"What's that?" said a sharp voice, and Kildare came out of Monteith's study and looked over the banisters.

"You young rascals! Are you cheeking Monteith?"

Blake & Co. paused. They were so excited that they were very near to charging the New House prefect and walking over him. But Kildare was their own prefect—head prefect of the School House and captain of St. Jim's.

"You cheeky young sweeps!" said Kildare sternly. "How dare you speak to Monteith like that! Go back to your own House at once, and take two hundred lines each!"

"Weally, Kildare—"

"And if you're more than three seconds going, I'll borrow a cane of Monteith, and give you a thumping licking all round."

"Bai Jove!"

Monteith was frowning; but he could not complain that the captain of St. Jim's was not backing him up. Kildare was coming down the stairs, evidently quite as angry as the New House prefect. Several juniors

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gathered round, surprised by the scene, and Figgins of the Fourth looked down from the landing.

"There's the rotter!" shouted Herries.

Figgins jumped.

"Hallo! Whom are you calling a rotter?" he demanded.

"You, you cad!" howled Blake. "And if you weren't skulking behind prefects, we'd wipe up the floor with you!"

"I'll jolly soon show you whether I'm skulking behind prefects!" yelled Figgins wrathfully, as he bounded down the stairs.

Monteith caught him by the collar, and swung him back.

"Go into your study at once, Figgins, and stay there!"

"Look here, Monteith—"

"And take a hundred lines!" snapped Monteith.

Figgins grunted, and went to his study. The School House four looked after him with burning eyes. But two prefects were in the way.

"I gave you three seconds!" said Kildare grimly. "Might I ask you to lend me a cane, Monteith? It's needed, I think."

"I think it is, rather!" said Monteith, and he went to his study.

"I—I say, we—we're going!" stammered Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! We have no desiah whatevah to remain in this wotten House!"

"You'll wait another minaute or two now," said Kildare. "You can't cheek prefects, my infants—especially a New House prefect in his own House. You seem to have forgotten your manners. What did you come here for?"

"To—to see Figgins."

"To row with him, I suppose?"

"Well, ye-es!"

"You cheeky young rascals!"

"You don't know what he's done!" howled Herries.

"Well, what has he done?"

"Shut up, Herries."

Herries bit his lip hard. He had no intention of "sneaking."

"Well?" said Kildare.

"N-n-nothing!" stammered Herries.

"One of your usual House rows, I suppose," said Kildare. "But there's a limit, you know. You've insulted Monteith."

"Yaas, but—"

"Thanks, old chap!" Kildare took the cane from the New House prefect. "Now, hold out your hands. You first, Blake!" Swish! "Now, Herries!" Swish! "D'Arcy—"

"Weally, Kildare—"

"Hold out your hand!"

"I pwotest—"

"Twice!" said Kildare grimly.

Swish! Swish!

"Oh, cwikey!"

"Now you, Digby!" Swish! "Now clear off, and let me have the lines to-morrow, or they'll be doubled. I'm ashamed of you. Get out!"

The four juniors stumbled away down the stairs, with feelings too deep for words. Vengeance upon Figgins & Co., evidently, had to be postponed.

CHAPTER 7.

A Little Profit for Piggott!

"CAN I speak to you, T-om M-M-Merry?"

The Terrible Three, in no very good humour, had been putting their study to rights, and sorting out the "copy" for the "Weekly." The unfortunate ending of the afternoon's editing had made them a little cross.

Tom Merry did not look very genial as Piggott of the Third came in. He did not like Piggott of the Third.

Piggott had been one of the rascals in the box-room, concerned in the welshing of Robinson of the Second Form. And he was by no means the least rascally of the party there. Fag of the Third as he was, Piggott was a thorough-going young scamp, and he was employed on all kinds of shady errands by older fellows like Cutts and St. Leger of the Fifth, and Knox of the Sixth, and he had thus an insight into a way of life that was decidedly bad for him. Tom did not like the unscrupulous young rascal. But he melted a little as he saw that Piggott was "blubbing." At all events, Piggott was screwing his grubby knuckles into his eyes, and his eyes looked very red.

"Well, what's the matter, kid?" asked Tom, not kindly.

"Ca-a-an I speak to you?"

"Of course you can. Wire in!"

"I—I've lost my m-money!" mumbled Piggott. "As you're captain of the Shell, you ought to interfere."

Tom Merry stared at him. He had believed Piggott of the Third to be a hardy young rascal, not at all given to complaining or whining. The worst nature has its good points, and Piggott had at least plenty of cheek and hardihood.

"You've been gambling again?" growled Tom.

"Please I didn't want to!" said Piggott eagerly. "After—after what happened in the box-room, I—I told Levison and Crooke I wouldn't play any more."

"Well, that was sensible!"

"I meant it, too. But—but they made me go into the box-room and—and play!" whined Piggott. "I didn't want to—I tell you I didn't. But they kept me there nearly an hour, up to five minutes ago, and—and they've won my money. I told them I didn't want to play, but they made me, because you made them give young Robinson his money back."

Tom Merry's brow darkened.

"My hat! This is getting too thick!" he exclaimed. "I'm beginning to think I ought to let Kildare know about Crooke."

"Hold on," said Monty Lowther quietly. "Piggott is the biggest liar at St. Jim's, not excepting even Trimble of the Fourth. Better hear what Crooke has to say. I never thought Crooke was such a beast as that."

"Oh, he'll deny it, of course!" said Piggott. "But—"

"Well, if he denies it—" said Tom doubtfully.

He looked hard at Piggott. The fag was so utter a young rascal that it was quite impossible to take his word, even against a "rotter" like Crooke.

"Let's see Crooke," said Manners. "If Piggott's telling the truth, Crooke ought to be scragged."

"I—I don't want him hurt," said Piggott. "Tain't that. Only I didn't want to play, so they ought to give me the money back, don't you think so?"

"Certainly they ought, and shall, if they've taken it," said Tom Merry. "Where are they now?"

"Levison's with Crooke in his study."

"Come on, you fellows," said Tom. "We'll see into this."

The Terrible Three made their way at once to Crooke's study, followed by Piggott, who was still knuckling his eyes. Tom Merry threw Crooke's door open without ceremony, and strode in.

Crooke was seated in the armchair, with a cigarette between his lips. Levison was leaning against the mantelpiece. Both of them looked scowlingly at the Terrible Three.

"Well, what do you want?" growled Crooke.

"Have you been swindling young Piggott?" asked Tom Merry directly.

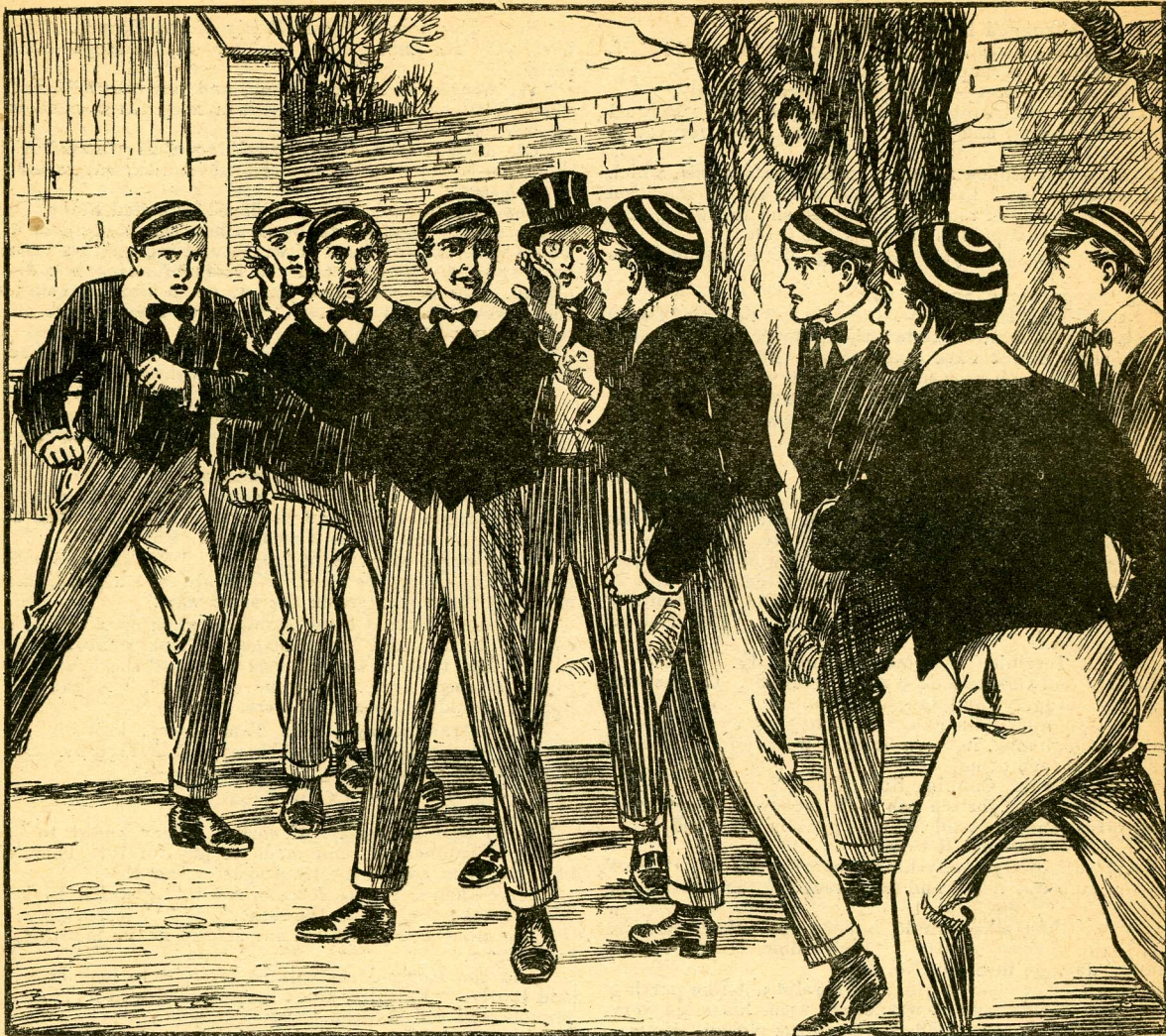
"I don't choose to answer such a question."

"If young Piggott says—" began Levison.

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"Come on, then!" said Figgins, pushing back his cuffs. "I'll undertake to wipe up the ground with any School House idiot present!" Monty Lowther jumped between the two parties. "Hold on!" he said.
(See Chapter 9.)

"He says you got him into the box-room and forced him to play, and won his money," said Tom Merry.

"It's a lie."

"Awful whopper," said Crooke.

Tom Merry was nonplussed. Neither accuser nor accused had any right to be believed on his word.

"I can prove it!" howled Piggott.

"Go ahead, then," said Tom.

"I've just thought of it. Levison won ten bob from me, and I gave him a red currency note."

"Well?"

"I've got the number."

"Oh, good! Trot it out!"

Piggott extracted a sheet of paper from his pocket, upon which a number was written.

"My pater told me always to take numbers," he said.

"I always do, it's safer. That currency note was 00468."

"Have you got a note with that number about you, Levison?"

"Find out."

"We'll find out fast enough," said Tom Merry. "You'll own up, or we shall search you—unless you prefer it to go to the Housemaster."

Levison, with a snarl, snatched a ten-shilling note from his pocket and flung it on the table.

"There's the young rotter's money. I don't want to keep it."

"So you admit it?"

"There's the note," said Levison sullenly.

"Take your money, Piggott. How much did Crooke win from you?"

"Thirty shillings," said Piggott.

Crooke gave a violent start, and fixed a deadly look upon the fag.

"It's a lie," he said thickly. "It—it was ten shillings, same as Levison."

"Yes, ten shillings," said Levison, with a look at Piggott, which the fag did not appear to see.

"Thirty shillings, and that ten—that's two pounds," said Tom Merry. "That's a lot of money for a kid like you, Piggott."

"It was all I had in my money-box," said Piggott tearfully. "I've been saving up my tips all this term to buy a camera. They made me open the money-box and take it out."

"Well, on my word!" said Manners, with a deep breath.

"Tain't true!" yelled Crooke furiously. "I don't believe the young rotter ever had a money-box at all!"

"Cheese it, Crooke!" said Levison hastily, as he caught a mocking gleam in Piggott's eye. "Pay up and look pleasant."

"I won't! I——"

"Do you say that Piggott is right, Levison?"

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Levison shrugged his shoulders.

"It's right enough," he said. "About thirty shillings—twenty-nine, perhaps."

"Why, you rotter——" began Crooke furiously.

"Oh, pay up!" said Levison impatiently. "Piggott wants his money, and it will be all the worse for you if you don't pay."

There was a hidden meaning in Levison's words, which had its effect upon Crooke. With a savage exclamation the cad of the Shell took out his purse and threw a pound note and ten shillings in silver on the table.

"There you are, you swindling little hound!" he snarled.

Piggott gathered up the money.

"Thank you, Tom Merry!" he said. "You see, I said they'd deny it, and if I hadn't thought about the number of the note they'd have stuck to it. They kept me in the box-room from soon after five right up to six o'clock playing cards, and wouldn't let me get out, though I asked them, and told them I'd tell a prefect."

"You needn't sneak to a prefect, but you can tell me if they do it again," said Tom Merry. "I'll see there's a stopper put on it."

"Thank you, Merry!"

Piggott scuttled out of the study, and he paused at the end of the passage to chuckle gleefully.

"Now, Crooke," said Tom Merry, "I won't handle you because you've been licked once this afternoon. But if this happens again, I'll see that you get a dormitory ragging that you won't forget in a hurry. The same to you, Levison."

And the Terrible Three quitted the study.

Levison and Crooke looked at one another. Crooke was scowling savagely, and Levison grinning.

"That young villain don't mean to give us the money back!" said Crooke, in a low voice of intense rage. "He's taken advantage of us!"

"Looks like it. Cunning little beast!"

"We fixed it up for ten bob each, money to be returned afterwards, and a spread for that grubby little cad!"

"It was worth what it's cost."

"It hasn't cost you anything!" snarled Crooke. "That ten-bob note was mine, and he's stuck me for thirty bob, too!"

"Better than what would happen if Blake found us out," said Levison quietly. "We've done ten or twelve pounds' damage in Study No. 6."

Crooke's brow cleared a little. He did not like parting with two pounds, and it was borne upon his mind very clearly that Piggott intended to keep the money. He was playing with edge tools in dealing with the rascal of the Third, but in the extensive damage done to Study No. 6 and security from discovery there was comfort.

CHAPTER 8.

Dismal Quarters.

"HALLO! Not ratty, surely?"

Monty Lowther asked that question cheerily as Blake & Co. came into the common-room in the School House.

The four Fourth-Formers were looking moody and furious.

"Don't keep it up like that," said Tom Merry, in some surprise. "Bless your little hearts, we've often had a scrap in the study before!"

"Br-r-r-r!" said Blake.

"And now I come to think of it," said Manners, in his blandest tone, "Herries wasn't snoring in goal. He couldn't have been heard as far as Rylcombe."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, come off!" growled Herries. "Do you think we're ratty about a silly scrap with silly asses in a silly study? It's those New House cads!"

"Oh, not little us!" said Lowther. "What's happened? Has Figgins dared to suggest that Gussy's necktie is not the very latest?"

"Weally, Lowthah, you ass——"

"Has Fatty Wynn laid a sacrilegious hand on Gussy's best topper?"

"Oh, don't rot!" growled Blake. "Have you seen our study, and what those villains have done with it?"

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"Sure, I've seen it!" said Reilly of the Fourth. "It's bastely! I'd make 'em pay for the damage—every shilling!"

"We went over to scrag them, and ran into Kildare!" growled Digby. "I suppose it will keep till to-morrow. The rotten cads——"

"Oh, draw it mild, if you're talking of Figgins & Co.!" said Tom Merry. "They're cheeky bounders, but nothing of that sort!"

"Come and see what they've done!" growled Blake.

A crowd of fellows followed Blake to Study No. 6. There were exclamations of wrath and indignation when he turned on the gas, and the scene of havoc was displayed. The School House juniors could scarcely believe their eyes. No House "rag" had ever been carried out to anything like that extent before.

"Figgins couldn't have done that!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "He wouldn't be such an awful rotter!"

"Look what's written on the wall!" hooted Digby.

"Anyone might have written that."

"We heard them talking in the study before they skulked out of the window."

"Oh, that alters the case, of course!"

"Yaas, wathah! And that wottah Monteith stopped us frowm scwaggin' them, and that duffah Kildare caned us for makin' a wov in the New House! Oh, deah!"

"What awful cads!" said Lowther. "We shall have to make them sit up for this! We'll all take a hand, and muck up their quarters in the same way!"

"We won't leave a thing standing when once we get a chance at the cads!" said Blake. "Look what they've done! The table sawn up, legs sawn off the armchair, glass smashed, even the frame smashed! A gang of lunatics couldn't have done worse!"

"It's extraordinary!" said Tom Merry, knitting his brows. "I should never have thought it of Figgins. But if you heard them talking in the study——"

"Of course we did."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Well, that settles it, of course. They ought to be scragged baldheaded, and made to pay for it! There'd be a frightful row if the Housemaster saw this!"

"Serve them right to let him see it!" grunted Blake. "We're not going to, all the same."

"The maid will jaw when she sees it in the morning," said Digby.

"And the House-dame will be brought to look at it," said Reilly. "Faith, ye can't keep it dark intirely! Mrs. Mimms will tell Raitton."

"Blessed if I know what's to be done about it!" said Blake. "If it comes out, the New House cads will say we've sneaked. But it's a bit thick to have to cover up their dashed hooliganism for them!"

"Better do it, all the same," said Tom Merry. "It's a dirty trick, but we don't want the masters to take a hand in it. We can take care of ourselves, and give the New House as good as they send."

"Yaas, wathah! But what's goin' to be done?"

"Get all this rubbish stacked away in the box-room this evening and out of sight," said Tom.

"That's easy enough, I suppose," said Blake. "But what about furnishing the study? There's not a thing here can be used again? If the maid finds the study empty in the morning she's certain to jaw."

"Contributions," said Tom. "You'll have to get the study furnished again some time, but until then we'll all lend something. There's a gammy old table in the box-room you can have, and we'll all contribute chairs, and we can stick up some shelves for the books, and we'll all whack out crockery and things. You can tell the maid you've had some alterations. And, by Jove, you have, you know!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I suppose that's all right," said Blake. "The rotters ought to be flogged for this, but we can't give them away. Any fellow who wants a job can lend us a hand carting away these crocks!"

"Sure, we'll all help, Blake darling!"

"Many hands make light work," said Monty Lowther. "Pile in, and just imagine you're the broker's man."

A crowd of fellows lent a willing hand. The Terrible Three, and Talbot and Kangaroo, and Dane and Glyn, and

Gore and Skimpole, joined in, as well as Reilly and Kerruish and Julian and several more of the Fourth.

The wreckage was carried away in instalments, as it were, to the upper box-room and stacked away.

To be taking all that trouble to shield the wreckers from their just punishment was irritating, but there was really no choice about it. Blake would not put it in the enemy's power to say that they had "sneaked."

It was with bitter feelings that the chums of Study No. 6 saw that famous apartment stripped of its goods and chattels and household gods.

The refurnishing was likely to be an extensive task, and would take time. And, meanwhile, the study would not be very comfortable, furnished with odds and ends borrowed up and down the passage.

The desire for vengeance upon the perpetrators of the cruel raid grew keener and keener.

Levison of the Fourth strolled along the passage while the work was going on. He paused to look into Study No. 6, with an expression of great astonishment.

"What on earth's the matter?" he exclaimed.

"New House raid!" growled Blake.

"My hat! They've done it pretty thoroughly. I'd tell the Housemaster about this if I were you."

"I dare say I might, too, if I were you," said Blake. "But I don't happen to be you, Levison, so I sha'n't do anything of the sort."

Levison shrugged his shoulders, and sauntered on, without offering to lend a hand. Study No. 6 was stripped bare at last, even to the carpet and the curtains. Blake & Co. looked round the empty room disconsolately enough.

"Looks cheery, don't it?" said Blake.

"Howwid, deah boy! But we'll make those wottahs sorry for it!"

Tom Merry & Co. were bringing in contributions of furniture. The "gammy" table from the box-room was better than nothing, though it rocked when it was touched. An ancient, discarded pair of curtains from Kerruish's study at least covered the window, if they did not adorn it. Four chairs, all more or less rocky, were lent by the owners, and a shelf was provided for the books. As for D'Arcy's topper and neckties, they were irreplaceable.

In dismal quarters the four chums sat down at last to do their preparation. But they were thinking less of preparation than of the dire vengeance that was to fall upon Figgins & Co. on the morrow.

CHAPTER 9.

Figgins is Wrathful.

S EVEN juniors in the School House jumped out of bed at the first clang of the rising-bell in the morning.

They were Blake & Co. in the Fourth Form dormitory and the Terrible Three in the Shell.

The seven were down before any of the other fellows. They were aware that Figgins & Co. were early risers, and they were anxious to "stalk" them. If they had an opportunity of coming to close quarters with Figgins & Co. before "brekker," that opportunity was not to be lost.

Luck favoured the avengers. As they came out of the School House into the misty quadrangle, three figures could be seen sprinting round the quad with their scarves flying behind them. They were Figgins, Kerr, and Fatty Wynn taking a run before breakfast.

"There are the wottahs, deah boys!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus. "Come on!"

Blake knitted his brows. The sun had gone down on the wrath of Study No. 6. But vengeance was at hand.

"Cut the rotters off from the New House," said Blake, "then you Shell bounders can pin them down while we get into the New House and start on their study! We can get it done before brekker."

"Right you are!" said Tom Merry.

Figgins & Co., quite unsuspecting, were trotting away round the quadrangle. They passed round the School House and kept on their way towards the old chapel, a deserted spot at that early hour. Fast on their track went the School House party.

Figgins & Co. turned back at the ruins, and trotted back to the New House. Then they came face to face with the School House seven.

"Hallo!" said Figgins cheerily. "Out early?"

"Yaas, you wottah!"

"What!"

"Wottah!"

Figgins' eyes glistened.

"You silly asses came over to our House last night calling us names!" he said. "If it hadn't been for the prefects, we'd have pitched you out, neck and crop! What's the matter with you?"

"Collah the wottahs, deah boys!"

Figgins & Co. put up their hands promptly as the School House juniors rushed upon them.

But they had not much chance against seven.

There was a brief but terrific struggle, and Figgins and Kerr and Wynn went bumping to the ground, and the Terrible Three sat on them.

"Fair play, you rotters!" roared Figgins, struggling furiously under Monty Lowther. "We'll lick you, man to man!"

"Fair play, you worms!" gasped Kerr.

"Sit on the cads!" said Blake grimly. "It may interest you to know what you're going to get, Figgins. We're going to your study now."

"To my study?" said Figgins.

"Yes! We're going to smash every blessed thing there, same as you did in our study yesterday! Then we're going to lick you till you can't crawl—see?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Figgins snorted.

"As for the licking, you're welcome to give us all you can, man for man!" he said. "I'll undertake to mop up any School House duffer you put forward. As for smashing up my study, I don't see what you're driving at; but we'll jolly well give you as good as you send! And as for what may have happened in your study yesterday, I don't know anything about it, as I wasn't there!"

"Oh, don't tell whoppers, you know!"

"You rotten worm! If this Shell idiot wasn't sitting on my chest, I'd show you whether I'm telling whoppers or not!" bellowed Figgins.

"Come on, deah boys!" said Arthur Augustus. "You three boundahs keep those wottahs heah while we are weekin' the studay!"

"Rely on us!"

"Lemme up!" roared Figgins.

"Quiet, dear boy!" said Lowther soothingly. "We'll let you up when the time comes for the licking!"

"Will you hold on a minute?" said Kerr quietly.

"Before you start wrecking our study, you might as well tell us what you're going to play such a dirty trick for."

Blake snorted.

"You know well enough! It's tit for tat!"

"Yaas, wathah! One good turn deserves another!"

"We jolly well won't leave a thing whole!" said Herries savagely. "We'll give you just the same as you gave us!"

"But what have we done?"

"More whoppers—what?"

Kerr's eyes gleamed.

"Very well; go ahead!" he said. "I see it's no good talking to a silly idiot! Go ahead! We'll make you squirm for it later!"

"Rats!"

"Yaas, wathah! Wats!"

"Hold on!" said Tom Merry. "Cheese it a minute, Blake! If the bounders have got anything to say, let them say it! Figgins says he wasn't there."

"We know he was."

"Let 'em explain, though, if they've got anything to explain. Go ahead, Figgins! Do you deny that you wrecked Study No. 6 yesterday?"

Figgins snorted angrily.

"I'm not going to say anything!" he snapped. "If my word can't be taken, you can go and eat coke! Rats to all of you!"

"Of course, he's got nothing to say!" growled Digby.

"Come on! We're wasting time!"

"Hold on, I tell you!" said Tom Merry. "Figgins,

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you're an ass! Kerr, you explain—you're a Scotchman, and you've got more sense!"

"Suppose you let us know what we're accused of first?" suggested Kerr blandly. "It's a big advantage to know what you're accused of when you have to explain anything."

"Oh, don't be funny! Somebody mucked up Study No. 6 yesterday afternoon—sawed the furniture to pieces, smashed the glass, and made havoc of everything!"

"And you think we played a dirty trick like that?" hooted Figgins.

"Well, your name was written on the wall," said Blake, somewhat impressed by Figgy's evident indignation.

"Anybody but a School House idiot would know that a cad who would do such a thing would try to put it on somebody else!" snorted Figgins.

"But you were there!" hooted Herries. "We heard you speak to Kerr!"

"What! You heard me speak to Kerr in your study yesterday afternoon?"

"Yes."

"Does it run in your family?" asked Figgins.

"What!"

"Madness, you know!"

"You cheeky rotter!"

"I heard you, too," said Blake. "So did Dig and Gussy. We were all outside the door."

"What time was it?" asked Kerr quietly.

"Between five and six."

"Any New House chap will tell you that we were at footer practice up to a quarter to six."

"Eh?"

The Terrible Three exchanged glances, and rose. Figgins & Co. were released, and they scrambled to their feet.

"You are lettin' the wottahs go—"

"There's a mistake," said Tom Merry quietly. "I said at the time that I didn't think Figgy would do such a rotten thing!"

"But we heard 'em talking in the study!" bellowed Herries.

"You heard somebody talking, perhaps," said Kerr. "If you weren't an inmate of a home for idiots, you'd have guessed it was a trick."

"Look here, you New House worm—"

"What did you hear us saying in the study?" asked Kerr.

Blake reflected. He was feeling a little uncomfortable now.

"Well, one rotter said, 'It's all right, Figgins, they can't get in,' and the other rotter said, 'Let 'em knock, Kerr!' We heard it quite plainly through the door."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"And did you recognise our voices?"

"Well, not specially—you can't recognise a whisper. But we heard the names quite distinctly."

"Of course you did! They were whispered distinctly specially for you to hear!" said Kerr scornfully.

"Bai Jove! I nevah thought of that!"

"You can ask any New House chap where we were between five and six yesterday if you're cads enough to doubt our word," said Figgins.

"Weally, Figgins—"

"Oh, draw it mild!" said Blake uneasily. "We—we didn't know you were going to deny it."

"If you say you didn't do it—"

"We can take your word," said Herries, after a pause. "But it's jolly queer."

"Of course, you can take Figgy's word," said Tom Merry rather sharply. "It was somebody else, and whoever it was wanted you to think it was Figgins."

"Well, it looks like it now," admitted Blake. "I—I say, if it wasn't you, Figgins, I'm sorry."

"If!" snorted Figgins. "You silly idiot, you ought to have known it wasn't us. If you think we'd play a dirty trick like that, it only shows you're a silly dummy!"

"Yes, and rather a rotter, too," said Fatty Wynn; "and if you're spoiling for a fight, you can come on, and these Shell bounders can see fair play."

Blake flushed angrily.

"Well, if you put it like that, we'll lick you, anyway!" he exclaimed.

THE "GREYFRIARS HERALD," 1D.

Edited by the Chums of the Remove Form.



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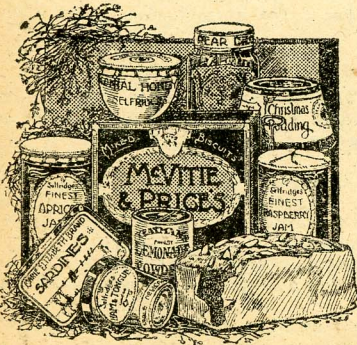
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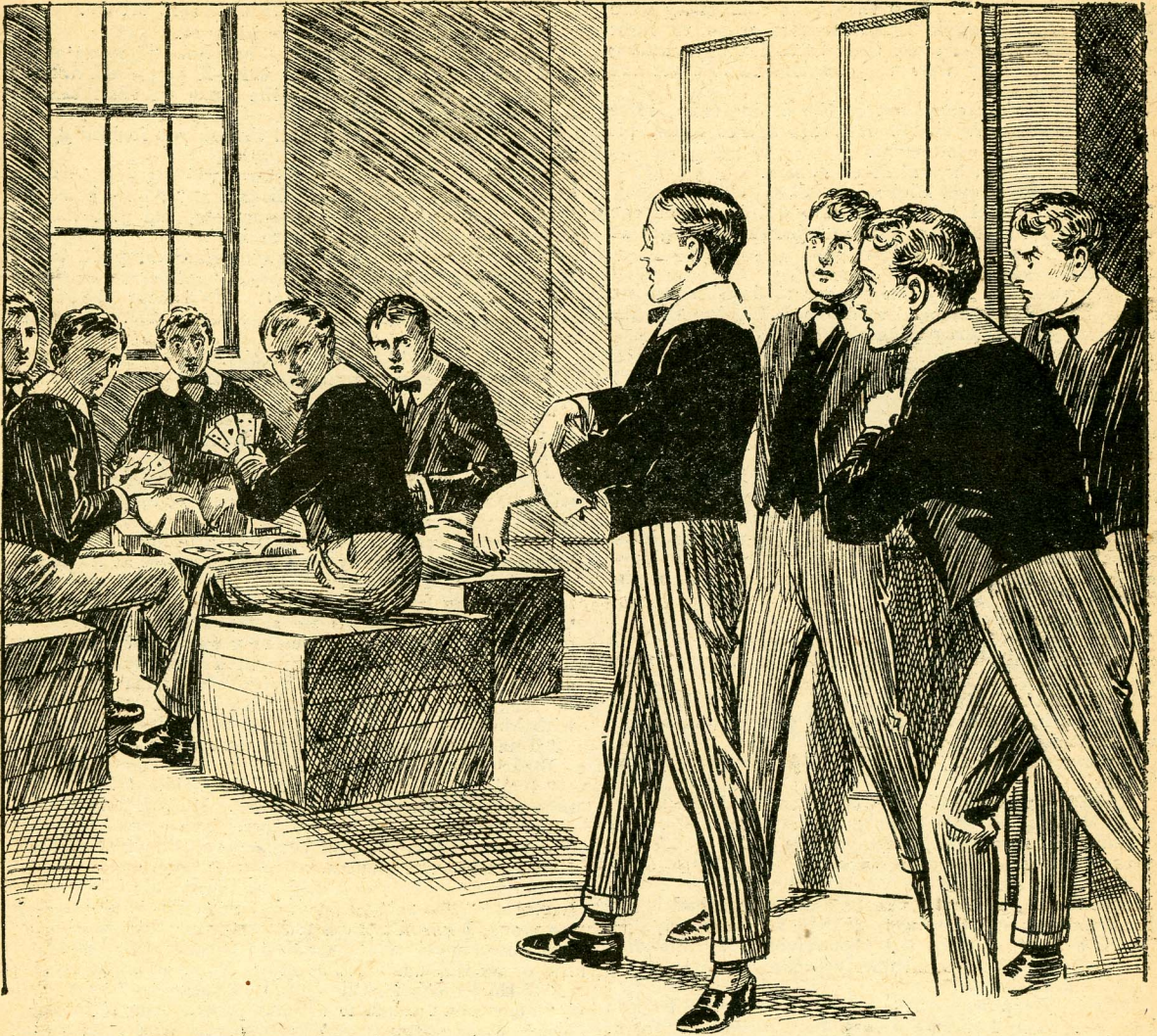
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"Wash the wottahs!" shouted Arthur Augustus, pushing back his cuffs. "Thwash them all wound!" "Clear off, you silly idiot!" snapped Levison. "Do you want to be pitched down the stairs again?" (See Chapter 1.)

"Yaas, wathah!"
 "Come on, then," said Figgins, pushing back his cuffs. "I'll undertake to wipe up the ground with any School House idiot present!"

Monty Lowther jumped between the two parties. "Hold on!" he said.

"Get out of the way, Lowther!"
 "One moment," said Lowther calmly. "Look here! Whatever cads they were in Study No. 6 yesterday, they wanted to set you by the ears, and start you hammering one another. There's no need to let them gain their point, that I can see. They'll only cackle at you."

"Well, that's so," said Blake, dropping his hands.
 "Yaas, I nevah thought of that. I'll let you off, Figgins."

"Let yourself off, you mean!" hooted Figgins.
 "Weally, you cheeky wottah—"

"Oh, cheese it!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "We don't want a House row now, and play into the hands of those cads, whoever they were. Let's try and find out who it was, and hammer them."

Figgins shrugged his shoulders.
 "You can please yourselves about that," he said. "But you needn't trouble to speak to us again. I suppose you don't know any better, being silly idiots; but I don't like silly idiots who make rotten accusations, myself. Come on, you chaps; these silly fools make me ill!"

Figgins & Co. walked away, with their noses in the air. "Are you going to stand that?" demanded Herries sulphurously. "Let's mop up the ground with them."

"Of course, you're going to stand it," said Tom Merry. "You deserve it. Figgy's ratty at being suspected of a dirty trick, and it's natural enough, too. Let 'em go. What we've got to do is to find out who did it."

And Study No. 6, though with a growl or two, assented.

CHAPTER 10.

Arthur Augustus on the Track!

"**B**AI Jove! I've got it!"
 Arthur Augustus D'Arcy uttered that exclamation suddenly at the breakfast-table.

Mr. Lathom, the master of the Fourth, glanced along from the head of the table, and Arthur Augustus coloured.

"Really, D'Arcy!" said Mr. Lathom reprovingly.
 And the swell of St. Jim's finished his breakfast in silence. But his eyes were gleaming. His chums looked at him curiously. During breakfast, Blake & Co. were thinking of the mystery of the study. They were satisfied, on reflection, that Figgins & Co. had had

nothing to do with it. Now they were calm, they were glad, too, that Figgy's innocence had come to light before they had carried out their intention of wrecking his study. But they were very anxious to discover the real delinquents.

When the juniors came out of the dining-room, after breakfast, Arthur Augustus drew his chums aside, his eyes gleaming with excitement.

"I've got it, deah boys!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, bow-wow!" said Blake.

"Weally, Blake, I tell you I have got it. You can always wely on a fellah of tact and judgment to get at the twuth. It was Cwooke."

"Crooke!" said Herries.

"Yaas, wathah! They wuined our studay because we thwashed them for gamblin' with young Wobinson in the box-woom!" said D'Arcy triumphantly.

Blake shook his head.

"Whoever was in the study, shinned down by the ivy from the window," he said. "Crooke would funk that."

And Herries and Digby nodded assent to that observation.

"I have thought it out, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus cheerfully. "I have worked it out in my bwoin. You see, the wottahs must have known we were workin' on the 'Weekly' in Tom Mewwy's studay, and didn't expect to be caught there. We came back wathah suddenly, and they were cornahed. I know Cwooke is a funk, but if we had caught him in the studay——"

"We'd have pulverised him," said Herries.

"Yaas, and so he sewewed up his couwage to climb down from the window. He funked a waggin' more than he funked a climb."

"Well, that's likely enough," said Blake. "He would have had a high old time if we had caught him on the spot. But somebody was with him."

"Levison or Mellish, of course. Or pewwaps young Piggott."

"I don't suppose that fag would have had the nerve. As for Mellish, he wasn't there; I saw him look out of his study while we were banging at the door."

"Then it was Levison and Cwooke."

"We'll jolly soon find out," said Blake.

It was a clue, at least. Crooke and Levison had had a strong motive; and they were fellows who were capable of such a deed, if they felt themselves safe from discovery. Study No. 6 immediately proceeded to look for Crooke and Levison.

The precious pair were chatting in the quadrangle when the four Fourth-Formers bore down on them. Crooke looked a little uneasy as they came up, but Levison nodded to them coolly.

"You know about our study being wrecked yesterday?" said Blake abruptly.

"Yes. A New House raid, wasn't it?" said Levison.

"It turns out that it wasn't."

"No?" said Levison, in surprise. "But I heard you say last night that you heard Figgins & Co. talking through the door."

"Yes, I remember that," said Crooke, with a nod.

"That was a trick; the cads who were there wanted to make us believe it was a House raid."

"Oh, how do you know?"

"Figgins says he wasn't there."

"Of course, he'd say so," said Levison, with a sneer.

"He wouldn't say so if it wasn't true. Besides, he was at footer practice, and a lot of fellows saw him there."

"Looks to me like a got-up story," said Levison, shaking his head. "Figgins thought you might report it to Railton, so he had his witnesses all ready. That's how it looks to me."

"Well, it doesn't look like it to me," said Blake.

"I want to know whether it was you two."

"Thanks!"

"Well, was it?" demanded the four juniors together.

Levison laughed.

"No, it wasn't."

"Where were you at the time?"

"I don't quite see that you've got any right to catechise us," drawled Levison.

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"Like your rotten cheek, I think!" said Crooke.

Blake nodded, with a glint in his eyes.

"We mayn't have any right," he said. "I won't argue that with you. But I know this—if you can't tell us you were somewhere else at the time, we shall take it for granted that you did it."

"Yaas, wathah, and we shall thwash you feahfully, and wag your studies."

"When we find out the rotters, we're going to serve them just the same," said Blake. "We're going to break up everything in their quarters, and give them a thundering hiding into the bargain!"

"If you meddle with my study, I shall complain to the Housemaster," said Crooke.

"Please yourself about that. He'll hear the whole story then, and we're ready to face the music. Now, was it you?"

"No, it wasn't!" snapped Crooke.

"Where were you at the time, then?"

"Find out!"

"Collar them!" said Blake. "Perhaps a little bumping will freshen their memories, and knock a little truth out of them."

"Hold on," said Levison coolly. "Suppose you tell us what time you're speaking about, and we may be able to tell you where we were."

"Between five and six yesterday afternoon. We were hammering at the study for twenty minutes at least, and we got in soon after six. But the raggers must have been there an hour, from the damage they had done."

"Rather lucky for us we can prove an alibi, then," grinned Levison. "Mind, you've got no right to question us, but as we happen to have been somewhere else, we don't mind telling you. We refer you to Tom Merry."

"Tom Merry! You weren't with Tom Merry—we were with him."

"Tom Merry knows where we were up to six o'clock."

Blake looked hard at Levison.

"Well, I'll ask Tom Merry," he said. "I wouldn't take your word against the Kaiser. I'll ask Tom."

Levison shrugged his shoulders. The chums of Study No. 6 hurried away, and the two rascals of the School House exchanged glances.

"Rather lucky we fixed up that alibi," drawled Levison. "The rotters mean business. It wouldn't hurt me much, I haven't much to be smashed; but your study cost you a good many pounds to furnish, Crooke—about five or six times as much as Study No. 6, I should say."

"If they touch it, I'll speak to Railton——"

"They won't touch it without proof. And if they get proof, the less you say to Railton, the better. It would certainly mean a flogging, and it might mean the sack," said Levison drily. "But they can't get proof. Piggott's evidence clears us."

"It cost a pretty penny," growled Crooke.

"The little cad hasn't given you the two pounds back?" grinned Levison.

"No. I asked him last night, and he said he understood he was to keep it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yes, you can cackle! It wasn't your money!" snarled Crooke. "I'd have hammered him, and taken it, only——"

"Better not," said Levison.

"I know that, hang you! He knows he's got us in a cleft stick! And that isn't all! He's asked me to lend him half-a-quad this afternoon!"

"My hat! What did you say?"

"I said no, of course!" growled Crooke. "He's not going to blackmail me! He's had two pounds of my money, and he's not going to touch another penny of it!"

And Crooke stalked away savagely. The chapel-bell rang, and Levison moved off; but his face was very thoughtful now, and somewhat less confident. The game Piggott of the Third was playing was a game after his own heart; but he had not thought of attributing his own cunning and unscrupulousness to the fag. Piggott's utter rascality did not shock Levison; he was not easily shocked. But it gave him an inward feeling of apprehension. The secret was not quite so safe, after all, as he had supposed.

CHAPTER 11.

The Way of the Transgressor!

BLAKE did not have an opportunity of speaking to Tom Merry till after morning lessons. Study No. 6 were waiting for the Terrible Three, when the latter came out of the Shell class-room.

"Found the giddy wreckers?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah! I am suah it was Cwooke & Co.," said Arthur Augustus.

"We've tackled Croke and Levison about it," said Blake. "But Levison says you know where they were at the time, Tom."

The captain of the Shell looked surprised.

"Blessed if I know anything about them!" he said. "Oh! Hold on a minute! Let me see! When was it we saw them in Croke's study, you fellows?"

"Soon after six," said Manners. "About half-past."

"That doesn't prove anything," said Blake. "They got out of the study window before six."

"Yes. But we happen to know they were in the box-room before that," said Tom.

"You saw them there?"

"No. But we know they were there. They were bullying young Piggott into playing cards, and welshing him."

"Piggott? Why, he's one of their set!"

"They've fallen out. Piggott came to me to complain," said Tom Merry. "They'd done him out of two pounds. I suppose because we made them hand back the plunder from young Robinson. They denied it at first, but it was proved by the number of a currency note, and we made them shell out."

"But are you sure they were in the box-room just at that time?" asked Blake, disappointed.

"Yes. Piggott came to complain as soon as he got away from them, and he said they'd forced him to stay there more than half an hour, I think. I should have thought of Levison myself, but for that."

"Hallo! What's the row?" exclaimed Manners suddenly.

There was a howl from the end of the passage.

"Croke and Piggott!" said Tom Merry, compressing his lips.

The cad of the Shell had been talking to Piggott, and he had suddenly changed from words to actions. His finger and thumb closed on Piggott's ear, and the fag uttered a loud howl.

Tom Merry ran along the passage, his brow very dark.

"Let him go, Croke!"

Croke, his face black with rage, released the rascal of the Third. Piggott rubbed his ear, giving Croke a venomous and threatening look.

"Mind your own business, Tom Merry!" said Croke, in a choking voice. He seemed almost beside himself with rage.

"You are ragging that kid because he told me of your welshing yesterday, I suppose!" said Tom.

"You fool!"

"What?"

"You don't know anything about it! Mind your own business!"

"I'll jolly well tell him!" said Piggott.

"If it isn't that, what is it?" demanded Tom Merry.

"Find out!"

"We chipped in to stop your rascally games, Croke! You won't take it out of Piggott, either! You won't touch him again! If he does, Piggott, let me know!"

"I will!" said Piggott, with a curious glimmer in his eyes.

He gave Croke an expressive look, and scudded off. Croke gritted his teeth. With a look of hatred at the Co., he scuttled off.

"I've a jolly good mind to hammer him, anyway!" growled Tom Merry. "Of course, he's down on the kid for giving him away to us!"

"It's rather lucky for him Piggott gave him away to you, all the same!" said Blake grimly.

"How do you mean?"

"Because, if we didn't know those rotters had been in the box-room welshing Piggott, we should feel jolly sure they were the rotters who wrecked our study."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"But if it wasn't Croke and Levison, who the thunder was it?" demanded Herries. "We've got to find out who it was!"

"What about Mellish?"

"Well, I don't believe he'd have had the nerve, anyway; but it wasn't Mellish. He was looking on while we were trying to get into No. 6."

"Then it beats me," said Tom Merry. "Excepting Croke and Levison and Mellish, I can't think of a chap in the House who'd do such a rotten, mean thing!"

"Must have been a New House crowd, after all—though not Figgins," said Digby.

"It certainly wasn't Figgins," said Tom Merry decidedly. "Figgy's word is as good as gold. It beats me hollow!"

"Well, we're going to find out who it was," said Blake. "He's got to be found."

"We'll all do our best," said Tom. "It would be rotten if such beastly cads got off scot-free!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Tom Merry & Co. proceeded to make investigations, and a good many more fellows joined in to help them. But the result was nil.

The finger of suspicion pointed, naturally, to Croke and Levison; but their alibi was complete, and they were considered cleared.

Whom else to suspect was a puzzle.

The juniors came round to the conclusion that it was, after all, a House rag, though Figgins & Co. had not been concerned in it. Redfern & Co. of the New House disclaimed all knowledge of the matter, though they were not suspected. Reddy was quite incapable of such a wanton outrage. How to "nail" the delinquents was a problem it was not easy to solve.

That evening Tom Merry & Co. held council in the common-room, discussing the problem. Nothing had come to light. Even if Blake & Co. had been inclined to forget and forgive—which they were not—the discomfort of their study would have kept the matter alive. The refurnishing was likely to hang fire for some time, funds being decidedly low with the Co.

While the council of war was held in the common-room Levison was paying a call in Gerald Croke's study. Croke received him with a glum brow.

"I've seen young Piggott," said Levison, coming in and shutting the door, and speaking in a low voice.

"Hang young Piggott!" said Croke savagely.

"He told me you'd pulled his ear this morning when he asked you for a loan of half-a-quid."

"I'll pull it again, too!" said Croke.

"Better let him have the half-quad!"

"You can let him have one, if you like!" sneered Croke. "He's dished me out of two pounds already! He's not touching any more of my money!"

"He says if he don't get that half-quad, he's going to make a clean breast of it to Tom Merry," said Levison uneasily.

"He would get a licking for his pains! He lied like a German to Tom Merry, and took him in!"

"I believe he means business!"

"The awful young rotter! And we've been his pals, too!" said Croke. "Now he's got us under his thumb all he thinks of is screwing money out of us! Well, he won't get any more out of me!"

"He's coming here to speak to you," said Levison. "I told him I'd see you, and—"

"If he does, I'll boot him out. Is he going snacks with you?" sneered Croke.

Levison flushed.

"I don't know what you mean, Croke."

"You might be taking a whack in what he gets out of me—it would be like you. He's not getting any more, anyway. You can pay him to hold his tongue, if you like."

"I'm stony."

"I should be stony jolly soon, if I went on being black-mailed by that young scoundrel. It's not good enough."

Levison knitted his brows. The door opened, and Piggott sidled into the study. Croke rose to his feet with a savage look.

"What do you want?" he asked.

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Piggott kept close to the door, his hand upon it.

"I want you to lend me a quid, Crokee."

"A quid! It was half-a-quid this morning."

"The price has gone up," said the fag, with cool self-possession. "The fact is, I've had bad luck. I've been playing with Clampe, and Clampe cleared me out of every cent."

"More fool you!"

"But I knew you'd make me a loan, Crokee, and wouldn't bother me for the money again in a hurry, either."

"Your mistake!" said Crokee. "Get out of this study."

Piggott's eyes glittered.

"If I go out of this study without that quid, I go straight to Tom Merry," he said. "They're talking it over now. They'll be glad to hear what I could tell them, Crokee."

Crokee made a furious movement towards him, and the fag whipped into the passage warily.

"Hands off!" he said. "I came jolly near telling Tom Merry this morning. If you touch me again, I swear I'll go to him!"

"Don't be a fool, Crokee," said Levison uneasily. "Let him have the quid."

"Simply must have it," said Piggott from the doorway. "I'm quite stony. Sorry, old pal, but necessity knows no law, you know, as the Huns say."

"You won't get anything out of me," said Crokee.

"Good-bye, then!"

Piggott went down the passage. Levison drove his hands deep into his pockets, his face black and sullen. Crokee stood for a moment undecided; then he ran to the door.

"Piggott!" he called out, in a stifled voice.

The fag looked back.

"Well?" he said.

"Come here."

Piggott came back, keeping out of reach of the infuriated Shell fellow, however. Crokee fumbled in his pocket.

"I'll make it ten bob," he muttered.

"Thanks. That's no use to me. A quid or nothing!" said Piggott coolly.

"Oh, you young villain!"

"Not much worse than smashing up a chap's study, so far as I can see!" said Piggott. "Anyway, that's the figure."

Crokee hesitated a moment, but the evil glitter in the young rascal's eyes decided him. He handed a pound note to the fag, who took it and walked away, without a word of thanks. Crokee stepped back into his study, pale with rage.

"How long is this going on?" he muttered thickly. "As soon as that young scoundrel is hard up again, he'll come to me for more."

"I shouldn't wonder," said Levison moodily. "I—I never thought he'd turn out like that."

"Your fault, for trusting a rotten rascal like that."

"Oh, cheese it! If he weren't a rotten rascal, he wouldn't tell lies for us," said Levison irritably. "I couldn't have gone to a decent chap, I suppose, and asked him to swear that black was white."

"Well, I'm not going to stand much more of it," snarled Crokee. "I'd rather have the whole affair come out than be bled like this."

Levison shrugged his shoulders and quitted the study. Crokee remained alone, in an unenviable mood. He knew that he dared not resist the fag's demands; he knew that Piggott knew it, too. He dared not allow the young rascal to betray him, and he knew that he had to pay. As soon as Piggott wanted money again, he would come for it, and Crokee would have to hand it over. It was not a pleasant prospect. The way of the transgressor was hard!

CHAPTER 12.

Kerr is Called In!

F IGGINS & CO. were at tea in their study in the New House.

They were not looking quite so cheerful as usual.

As a matter of fact, the row with the School House fellows weighed a little on their minds.

Rows, certainly, were of common enough occurrence between the rivals of St. Jim's, but they were generally good-natured, and which ever party might get the best of it, the little "scraps" left no sting behind, even if they resulted in thick ears or swollen noses.

But the present trouble was on a different footing. Figgins & Co. had been suspected of a rotten, mean action, and it ruffled them very considerably. And there had been some hesitation in taking their word, which ruffled them still more. They had resolved not to continue on speaking terms with Tom Merry & Co., and that was a decidedly unpleasant change from the old cheery footing. It was more especially unpleasant for George Figgins, because D'Arcy's Cousin Ethel was expected to visit the school shortly, and on the occasion of Cousin Ethel's visits, the entree into Study No. 6 was a thing greatly desired on the part of Figgins.

So Figgins & Co. looked a little ruffled and glum, though it did not affect their appetites. Fatty Wynn was piling in, in his well-known way, and deriving considerable consolation from the cake.

Tap!

"Oh, come in!" growled Figgins.

Figgins started to his feet the next moment, as the door opened and disclosed a crowd of School House fellows. Tom Merry & Co. came in—seven of them.

The New House chums eyed them grimly.

"Well, what the dickens do you want?" said Figgins gruffly.

"Weally, Figgins, that is not vewy polite," remonstrated Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"I've no politeness to waste on a set of silly owls."

"I wefuse to be called a sillay owl!"

"Look here, Figgins—"

"We've come—"

"I can see you've come," said Figgins, "and the sooner you go again, the better I shall like it. I don't like fellows of your sort over here!"

The School House party turned very red. The usually genial and good-natured Figgins was decidedly ratty, and he was not mincing his words.

"Well, there's no need to be a pig about it," snapped Jack Blake. "Let's get out, you fellows. We were fools to come!"

"Well, you are fools, ain't you?" said Fatty Wynn.

"Weally, Wynn—"

"Good-bye!" said Figgins grimly. "Don't trouble to call again."

"We won't, you New House rotter!" growled Herries.

"Hold on!" said Tom Merry quietly. "It was my idea to come here, Figgins. There's no need to get your back up."

"Not when a set of silly idiots suspect this study of playing a rotten trick, and lying about it afterwards?" said Figgins sarcastically. "I suppose that wouldn't hurt School House feelings. We're rather more particular on this side."

"You don't give a chap much chance to speak," said Tom. "It's true we thought it was you fellows mucked up Study No. 6, owing to the trick some rotters played there, but that was a mistake. A chap can't do more than own up to a mistake."

"Between gentlemen, an apology covahs everythin'," said D'Arcy stiffly.

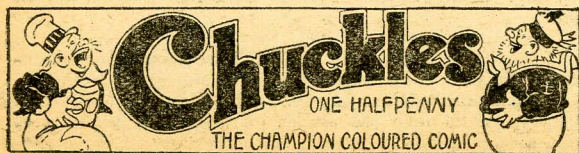
"Oh, if you've come to apologise—"

"We haven't!" growled Blake. "I was going to say I was sorry, but blessed if I will now. You can go and eat coke, you New House worm."

"Yaas, wathah! I shall certainly wefuse to cawwy out my intention of sayin' that I am sowwy. I am sowwy, as a mattah of fact, but I uttably wefuse to admit anythin' of the sort to you, Figgins!"

Figgins grinned.

"Perhaps I was rather rusty," he said. "But it isn't



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nice to be suspected of rotten things, even if you think you've got evidence against a chap. You wouldn't like it, I suppose. But I don't want to bear grudges about it. You must admit that you ought to have had more sense."

"That'll do, Figgins," said Kerr. "Don't rub it in. It's jolly decent of them to own up that they've been silly asses!"

"We don't!" howled Blake. "We admit it was a mistake, that's all."

"We shouldn't have made such a mistake," said Figgins loftily. "We should have suspected at once that it was a trick."

"Rats!"

"Look here——"

"Oh, don't row about nothing!" said Kerr. "If you School House duffers want something to do, why don't you look for the wreckers, and make an example of them?"

"That's partly what we've come about," said Tom Merry indignantly. "We thought you'd be willing to help us, only Figgins starts ragging the minute we get into the study——"

"Oh, if you want us to help you, that's a different matter!" said Figgins amicably. "I take back what I said."

"Certainly," said Fatty Wynn. "As cock-house of St. Jim's, it's up to us to help you School House kids!"

"If Wynn is going to be funny——" began Dig.

"Have some of this cake, and don't jaw!" said Fatty Wynn. "Sit down and start on the cake, and tell us your little troubles. We'll see you through."

"You wouldn't be any use, fathead! It's Kerr we want," said Tom Merry. "The fact is, Figgy, we can't work out who did that trick in No. 6, and we've come to borrow your Scotsmen."

Kerr chuckled.

"Go ahead!" he said.

"We admit that Kerr's got rather a brain, though he's a New House idiot," said Blake. "If he can help us——"

"I'll do my best," said Kerr. "I think I can give you a tip already. I've heard about you fellows ragging Crooke & Co. yesterday—in the box-room, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but——"

"Well, it looks to me as if they did it—tit for tat."

"We've thought of them," said Blake. "But they've proved an alibi."

"They've proved they were somewhere else at the time?"

"Yes."

"Oh! That alters the case, of course."

"And we simply can't get on to it," said Tom Merry.

"We think it must have been some New House chaps—not you fellows, of course. We can't think of anybody in the School House who could have done it."

"Rot!" said Figgins promptly.

"Utter rot!" said Fatty Wynn.

"Look here, Figgins——"

"Hold on!" said Kerr. "Let's settle about Crooke & Co. first. What did you do to them yesterday?"

"Made them give young Robinson back his money, and then made Robinson thrash 'em with a cricket-stump."

"I suppose they were wild?"

"Yes; like a set of Huns."

"But they've proved that they weren't in Study No. 6?"

"Yes. Blake got into the study at six, by forcing the door. The ragers had just cleared out of the window. Well, up to six o'clock Crooke and Levison's time is accounted for."

"Let's hear all about the alibi."

Tom Merry explained Piggott's visit to his study, and the subsequent scene with Crooke and Levison. The Scottish junior listened attentively.

"That settles it, you see," concluded the captain of the Shell.

"Not quite, I think," said Kerr.

"My dear chap, if Crooke and Levison were in the box-room, welshing Piggott, they couldn't have been in Study No. 6, breaking up the happy home."

"Yes; but were they? Piggott's their pal——"

"They've quarrelled, you see."

"How do you know?"

"Why, you see, Piggott told us, and—and——"

"Piggott's the biggest whopper-merchant in the school. Didn't it occur to you that the three of them had fixed up this alibi in advance, brand-new, and all ready for the time when you started making inquiries?"

"Oh!"

Tom Merry & Co. looked at each other sheepishly. Certainly that had never occurred to them.

"Suppose Crooke and Levison and Piggott were hand-in-glove, and got up the whole story together to throw dust in your eyes?" said Kerr.

"Bai Jove!"

"But—but Crooke and Levison denied it," said Tom. "They said at first Piggott was lying, and it was only by the number of a currency note that it was settled."

"Yaas, wathah! That wathah knocks your ideah on the head, Kerr, deah boy."

Kerr shook his head.

"That might have been part of the game," he said. "If Crooke and Levison had backed up Piggott's statement at once, even you duffers might have guessed that it was a plant. By having a dispute with him, and letting him prove his point, they gave the impression that the whole thing was genuine."

"My hat!" said Tom Merry.

"But—but Crooke was pitching into him to-day," said Manners. "We thought it was because Piggott told us about him. If they're hand-in-glove, Piggott wouldn't let Crooke pitch into him."

"I don't know about that. Rogues fall out sometimes, you know; or it might have been a scene for your benefit."

The School House juniors were silent.

"Anyway," went on Kerr's quiet voice, "it's jolly curious that if those cads have really quarrelled among themselves, and Levison and Crooke were really skinning their pal in the box-room, it should have happened just at the time that ragging was going on in No. 6, and that Piggott should have come to you with the yarn, in time to prove an alibi for Levison and Crooke. Of course, coincidences do happen. But that one looks suspicious to me."

"My hat!" said Blake, with a deep breath. "Those Shell bounders have been taken in, of course. Piggott fooled them and spoofed them."

"Bai Jove! But how are we goin' to pprove it?" said D'Arcy dubiously. "The young wascal is not likely to own up."

"There are ways and means," said Kerr.

"I'd be glad to hear of 'em," said Tom Merry. "We could lick him, but—but we don't want to do that if he's been telling the truth."

"Piggott claimed to have lost two pounds in the box-room?"

"Yes; and it was handed back—we saw to that."

"Two pounds is a big sum for a fag in the Third to have."

"Yes; I remarked on that. Piggott said he'd had a ten-shilling note from his pater, and had thirty shillings saved up in his money-box," said Tom. "It was the number on the note proved it was his, and made Levison own up—unless it was all a plant, of course."

"If Piggott was saving money up in a money-box, you can find that out from some of the Third—and make him show the money-box, too. If he had that note from his pater, let him tell you when the letter came with it in. Mention to him that you're going to ask his pater if he sent him a note with that particular number——"

"Bai Jove!"

"It was a clever dodge, that currency-note bizney, but it works both ways," said Kerr. "If his pater really sent it to him, that clears Piggott. You can find out from his pater. If it's all genuine, Piggott has nothing to fear from your writing to his father. By the way, how did Piggott come to have the number of the note? Fags are not usually so jolly careful with their money."

"He said his father always told him to take the numbers."

"Good; then his pater will know the number. Apply to Piggott senior," smiled Kerr. "Only I've got a strong suspicion that as soon as you tell Piggott you're going to ask his pater, he'll own up."

"We'll jolly soon see!" said Tom Merry. "Thanks awfully for the tip, Kerr!"

"Not at all, dear boy," grinned Figgins. "I'll always lend you my Scotsman when you want anything thought out for you!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And Tom Merry & Co. quitted the study, feeling that they were upon the track at last.

CHAPTER 13. Bowled Out!

WALLY of the Third, the minor of the great Arthur Augustus, came into the Third Form-room and looked round. Then he beckoned to Piggott. There was a feed going on on one of the desks. Piggott was standing treat to some of his friends. Piggott was in great funds of late, and had been making quite a splash in the Third Form, where "quids" were not very common. Piggott was not much liked by his Form-fellows, as a rule; but his jam-tarts were good, his ginger-pop excellent, and so he was enjoying something like a brief popularity.

"This way, Piggy!" called out Wally.

"Can't come, D'Arcy minor!"

"Can't come, can't you?" said D'Arcy minor warmly.

"Throw him over to me, Jameson!"

"Oh, we're feeding, Wally!" said Jameson. "Let him alone, and come and have some tarts."

"I don't want any tarts, I want Piggott!" said Wally truculently. "Piggy's coming for a little trot with me. Come on, Piggy!"

As Wally's finger and thumb closed on Piggott's ear as he spoke, Piggott hadn't much choice about coming on. He rose with a scowl. He did not like the autocratic Wally; indeed, if his run of luck continued, Piggott was already debating in his mind whether he might not be able to set up as D'Arcy minor's rival in the Third.

"Look here, D'Arcy minor, I don't want to come!" he growled. "You're not going to bully me, so there!"

"This way, Piggy!" said Wally unheeding.

He slipped his arm through Piggott's, and led him out of the Form-room. It was only a well-founded fear of Wally's celebrated "left-handers" that made Piggott go quietly. But he went quietly.

"Where are we going, then?" he snapped.

"Don't you ask questions, young shaver. You're coming with me," said Wally.

Piggott felt vaguely uneasy, he hardly knew why, as Wally walked him up to the Shell passage. They stopped at the door of Tom Merry's study, and Wally kicked it open.

Tom Merry & Co. were all there. They were waiting for Piggott. It had been Gussy's idea to make use of his minor to lead the lamb to the slaughter, so to speak, and Wally obliged. Wally had been told the circumstances, and he had agreed that Piggott should be questioned; but, as head of the Third Form, he was going to be present to see fair play.

"Here he is," growled Herries.

"Look here, what's the little game?" demanded Piggott, his uneasiness increasing. "I didn't want to come here."

"It's all serene, Piggy," said Wally, shutting the door. "I'm looking after you. If you're all right, you're as safe as houses. If you've done what these chaps think you've done, I'm going to give you a thundering licking. But they ain't going to touch you; I won't let 'em."

"Bai Jove! Will you thwash us all wound, Wally?" asked Arthur Augustus, with heavy sarcasm.

"Oh, don't you begin, Gus! Now, you fellows, go ahead," said Wally. "Don't waste my time. I've got a mill on in the Form-room this evening."

"We want to ask you a few questions, Piggott," said Tom Merry quietly, with his eyes fixed on the fag's uneasy face.

"You can go ahead," said Piggott.

"You told us that Crooke and Levison were in the box-room with you yesterday, between five and six o'clock."

"Yes. They were."

"We've got an idea that they were in Study No. 6, wrecking the place."

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"They couldn't be in two places at once, could they?" said Piggott.

"They didn't get you to spin that yarn, to spoof us?"

"Hardly."

"We can't help suspecting that it was a put-up game," said Tom. "But we only want to get at the facts. You claimed a note from Levison."

"Yes, it was mine."

"Where did you get it from?"

"My pater sent it as a tip."

"Very good. And you had thirty shillings in a money-box, too."

"Ye-es," said Piggott, with a rather uneasy look at D'Arcy minor. The latter's eyes opened wide, and he whistled.

"This is the first I've heard of it," said Wally. "Where do you keep that money-box, Piggy?"

"Can you produce the box?" asked Tom.

"I—I chucked it away to-day," stammered Piggott.

"It was an old one. I—I had to break it to get the money out, you see—it was that kind—and it wasn't worth keeping."

"Oh, then we'll come back to the note! You say your father sent it to you?"

"Yes, he did."

"When did he send it?"

"Let me see—Tuesday."

"Very good. You don't mind my writing to your father, to have your statement confirmed?"

Piggott staggered.

"Write to my father!" he gasped.

"Yes. Why not? Of course, we shan't say a word about your playing cards. I mean simply to ask him the number of the note he sent you on Tuesday, so that its ownership can be settled."

Piggott's face was pale now. He cast a longing glance towards the door. But D'Arcy minor had his back to the door.

It did not need much more than a glance at Piggott's scared face to see how the matter lay. Tom Merry's brow grew very stern.

"You'd better own up, Piggott," he said quietly.

"Unless you do, I shall certainly write to your father about the note, and then it will come out."

"I—I——" Piggott stammered. "I—I—— The pater didn't send me that note, really. It—it—it——"

"We know he didn't," said Tom. "It was Crooke's, or Levison's, and the whole yarn was got up to make us believe they were in the box-room when they were really wrecking Study No. 6."

"I—I suppose it was!" gasped Piggott. "I—I stood by them. They're my pals, you know, and they were in a blue funk about being found out. Blessed if I know how you got on to it."

The young rascal was not thinking of further denials now. It was useless to wait till a letter to his father proved that he had lied. He sidled towards the door, where he found Wally pushing back his cuffs.

"Look here, I—I own up!" gasped Piggott. "Lemme out, will you? They weren't in the box-room. They—they asked me to spin that yarn, and I did it. They were in Study No. 6. Now lemme go!"

"You can go, as far as we're concerned," said Tom contemptuously.

"But not so far as I'm concerned," grinned Wally.

"Put up your paws, Piggy, and these old fogies can see fair play."

"I won't!" yelled Piggott.

"You're a disgrace to the Third," said Wally severely. "You've been treating the kids with Crooke's tin. You're a little rotter, and I'm going to show these old duffers how I keep rotters in order in the Third. You can suit yourself about putting up your paws; you're going to have it!"

And Wally advanced to the attack. There was no escape for the rascal of the Third, and he put up his hands desperately. The next few minutes were very exciting. Tom Merry & Co. looked on grimly. Piggott put up the best fight he was capable of; but cigarettes and card-playing had not made him a match for D'Arcy minor, who was as hard as nails. For those few minutes

it seemed to the unhappy Piggott that he was caught in a thrashing-machine.

Bump! A left-hander laid him on the study carpet at last, and he stayed there, groaning dismally.

"Bwavo, Wally!" chirruped Arthur Augustus.

Wally sniffed.

"Oh, that fag's nothing!" he said. "I could lick any of you just as easily."

"Weally you cheeky little wascal——"

"Bow-wow!" said Wally independently, and he walked out of the study, and sauntered down the passage with his hands in his pockets, whistling shrilly. Piggott of the Third, clasping his nose in anguish, limped after him.

"And now," said Blake grimly, "we're going to call on Crooke. You Shellfish can come and see fair play, if you like."

"Hear, hear!"

CHAPTER 14

Reprisals!

"YOUR deal!" said Crooke.

Crooke's study-mate was downstairs, but Levison was with him. There was a haze of cigarette-smoke in the study. The "little game" was suddenly interrupted as the door was hurled open.

Crooke and Levison jumped up in alarm. Blake and Herries and Digby and D'Arcy walked in, and the Terrible Three brought up the rear. Then the door was closed, and the three put their backs to it. They were only lookers-on now; as Lowther remarked, they were dead in that act.

"What do you want, confound you?" snarled Crooke.

"Piggott's confessed," said Blake tersely.

Levison changed colour, and retreated round the table. Crooke's jaw dropped.

"Yaas, wathah, you wottah! We have discovahed that you were the wotten weckahs in our studay," said Arthur Augustus. "Now the time has come for wepwisals."

Levison's lip curled.

"I'll bet three to one that you hadn't brains enough to find it out for yourselves," he said bitterly.

Crooke ground his teeth.

"The little beast—after screwing money out of me——" He broke off.

"Oh, he screwed money out of you, did he?" said Blake.

"Serve you right! But he hadn't any choice about confessing; he was bowled out."

"You didn't bowl him out, I'll wager," sneered Levison.

"I don't mind admitting that; it was Kerr," said Blake coolly. "But it's out now, and we know who wrecked our study. We're going to give you a hiding each, and smash up your props in exactly the same way."

"Very courageous—seven to two!" jeered Levison.

"Weally, you wottah——"

"Choose your man," said Blake. "You know you'll get fair play. Pick your man, and you, too, Crooke."

"Hang you! Get out of my study!"

"Pway don't waste any time on the wottahs, deah boys." Arthur Augustus pushed back his immaculate cuffs. "I'm goin' for Cwooke."

"Keep off, hang you!" yelled Crooke.

"I wefuse to keep off, Cwooke!"

"You're my mutton, Levison," said Blake cheerily. "Come on!"

Levison and Crooke had no choice about it. Blake and D'Arcy were attacking hotly. Herries and Dig stood back with the Terrible Three from the combat.

The two rascals of the School House received strict fair play. But it was not of much use to them. In three or four minutes they were beaten to the wide, and lay gasping on the floor, and declined to rise again for any consideration whatever.

"Are you weally finished, Cwooke?" asked Arthur Augustus. "I will wait while you have a west, if you like."

Groan!

"Pewwaps you would like to give me a turn, Levison?"

Groan!

Arthur Augustus sniffed.

"It was weally hardly worth a chap's while makin' himself dustay to lick these funky wottahs," he remarked. "Get on with the waggin'."

Study No. 6 were already getting on with the ragging. The looking-glass crashed as it came down, and the clock joined it in fragments in the grate. Crooke panted with rage.

"I'll tell this to the Housemaster!"

"Just as you like, deah boy. He will heah the whole stow, that is all. Pway be careful only to bweak up Cwooke's things, deah boys, and don't destwoy anythin' belongin' to his study-mate."

"What-ho!"

Crash! Crash! Crash!

It was not difficult to distinguish Crooke's property. Crooke was the wealthiest fellow in the Shell, and his study appointments were luxurious and expensive. In case of doubt, the avengers generously spared the article concerned. But the gilt looking-glass, the marble clock, the pier-glass, the handsome bookcase, the cabinet, the screen—all very expensive articles belonging to George Gerald Crooke—were speedily reduced to worthless fragments. Crooke, kicked out of the way by the ragers, sat panting in a corner, watching. The work of destruction in Study No. 6 had been complete, and Blake & Co. were emulating the example that had been set them.

"Oh, you rotters!" panted Crooke. "I'll pay you for this! Oh, you rotters!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Come along, Levison! You're the next!"

Levison was taken along the passage, with a grip on either arm, to his own study. Crooke was left, groaning, in the midst of the wreck. His desire was strong to report the raid to the Housemaster, but it was too dangerous. Certainly Blake & Co. would have been punished for taking the law into their own hands; but Crooke's own raid would have been punished still more severely, to say nothing of the risk of the card-playing coming to light, which would have meant the "sack." Crooke had to grin and bear it—at all events, he had to bear it. He did not grin.

"Here we are again!" said Blake, marching Levison into his study. Lumley-Lumley, Trimble, and Mellish were there, and they stared.

"What's the game?" asked Lumley-Lumley.

"Sorry to disturb you," said Blake politely. "Levison wrecked our study yesterday, and we've come to smash up his props. Point 'em out, and we sha'n't make any mistake."

"Yaas, I am weally sowwy to twouble you, deah boys; but, you see——"

"No trouble at all!" said Lumley-Lumley. "Go ahead! Precious few things of Levison's here, though; only that desk and the inkstand."

"Bai Jove!"

Crash! Crash! The desk and the inkstand were reduced to fragments, Levison looking on savagely and sullenly.

"That's not enough!" growled Herries.

"I guess it's no good smashing my props!" grinned Lumley-Lumley. "Keep away from that bookcase, you ass! That's mine! So's the clock!"

"I think we're about done here," said Jack Blake. "Come on!"

And the avengers departed, satisfied. Levison sat up in the fender, and blinked through the soot. He was far from satisfied, but most certainly he had had enough.

The wreckers had been discovered and adequately punished. But there still remained a problem before the chums of Study No. 6, and that was the refurbishing of the study. That was a difficult problem to tackle. But there was one consolation—when at last Study No. 6 should resume its pristine glory, there would be no danger of another "wreck." Much as Blake & Co. deplored the wreck of the study, they did not deplore it so deeply and fervently as the wreckers.

THE END.

(Next week's grand, long complete story of the Chums of St. Jim's is entitled, "THE SPORTSMEN OF ST. JIM'S!" by Martin Clifford)

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NEXT WEDNESDAY: "THE SPORTSMEN OF ST. JIM'S!" A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

A Cash Prize for Every Contributor to this Page.



Our Weekly Prize Page.

LOOK OUT FOR YOUR WINNING STORYETTE.

"SOME" STORY.

Sailing southwards, September seventh, Sir Samuel Simpkins, scientist, sociologist, statesman, saw some strange sights.

Seated semi-somnolently, scorning sea-sickness, smoking some scented shag, Sir Samuel seemed sublimely self-satisfied. Suddenly starting, staring southwards, Sir Samuel saw submarine sinking small sailing-ship.

"Shame!" shouted Sir Samuel, snorting stertorously, slyly seizing shot-gun.

Spotting Sir Samuel seizing shot-gun, submarine skipper screamed shrilly:

"Sweinhundt!"

Sir Samuel, smiling scornfully, shouted:

"Surrender!"

"Sha'n't!" snarled submarine skipper, smiling sardonically.

Sir Samuel saw sea surge strangely. Shrapnel-shells surrounded Sir Samuel.

Suddenly Sir Samuel Simpkins' snores stopped.

See?—Sent in by J. Wallis, Watford, Herts.

"THE ONLY WAY."

Prospective Lodger (to landlady): "Is this all the soap I am allowed in my room?"

Landlady (emphatically): "Yes, sir. That is all I can allow you."

Prospective Lodger: "Very well; I'll engage three more rooms. I must wash my face in the morning."—Sent in by Miss M. Goldthorpe, S. Kirkby.

OBLIGING BOTH.

Scene: Tramcar.

First Old Lady: "Conductor, open this window! I shall be smothered to death!"

Second Ditto: "Conductor, leave it closed, or I shall freeze to death!"

Irate Passenger (interrupting): "Conductor, open the window and freeze one of the women to death; then shut it again and smother the other!"—Sent in by Miss K. Movenough, Australia.

A PEEP AT THE FUTURE.

Uncle Fossil (visiting his three-year-old nephew's nursery for the first time): "Hallo, baby! What a fine lot of tin soldiers you have here!"

Nephew: "Tin soldiers, did you say? That's my regiment of metal artillery, with four pieces of modern ordnance, an ambulance-waggon, and all the impedimenta of the commissariat department."

Uncle Fossil (gasping): "Ah, just so! I see you have also a popgun, a puff-puff, and a first-rate gee-gee."

Nephew: "Why don't you call things by their proper names? This is my pneumatic pistol. If you force the piston through the air-chamber the cork will be expelled with a distinctly audible report. My model locomotive is accompanied by all the necessary adjuncts of an ordinary engine—rolling-stock, semaphore signals, and permanent-way complete. That horse is the exact model of the three-year-old colt which won the Derby on—

Hallo! Why, the childish old man has vanished!"—Sent in by F. Read, Lincoln.

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TOO PROUD TO FIGHT.

The shells were bursting overhead

As through the village swiftly sped

A gentle youth, who bore a nice

Star-spangled banner with this device:

"Too Proud to Fight."

His brow was sad, for at his back

There swarmed a most ill-mannered pack.

"Come off your perch!" rude voices cried.

Unmoved, though breathless, he replied:

"Too Proud to Fight."

A well-aimed brickbat caught his ear;

Some ruffians kicked him in the rear;

A turnip blacked his bright blue eye.

He only murmured, with a sigh:

"Too Proud to Fight."

They rolled him in the mud and dirt;

Small boys threw stones and things that hurt.

But when the turmoil died away,

There in the gutter still he lay—

"Too Proud to Fight."

—Sent in by F. A. Barrs, Clapham Junction, S.W.

PROOF POSITIVE.

Traveller: "Will there be time for a drink at this station, guard?"

Guard: "Yes, sir. Plenty of time, sir."

Traveller: "What guarantee have I that the train won't go without me?"

Guard: "I'll go and have one, too, sir."—Sent in by R. Vowles, Flax-Bourton.

CIRCUMSTANCES ALTER CASES.

"Doesn't Cumber believe in healing by faith?"

"He does."

"I thought so. I heard that he refused to call in a doctor to his wife when she was ill."

"Yes, that's so."

"But, look here! I've just seen a doctor entering his house."

"Quite so. It's Cumber who is ill this time, you know!"—Sent in by George Hale, Catford, S.E.

KNEW THEM ALL.

Travelling in a second-class carriage, a gentleman had a slight misunderstanding with a lady in reference to the opening of a window.

"You don't appear to know the difference between the second and third class," said the lady cuttingly.

"Oh, madam," he replied, "I am an old railway traveller, and I know all the class distinctions. First-class passengers are rude to the guard; third-class, the guard is rude to the passengers; second-class passengers are rude to each other."—Sent in by R. Hurley, Bermondsey, S.E.

As the "GEM" Storyette Competition has proved so popular, it has been decided to run this novel feature in conjunction with our new Companion Paper,

THE BOYS' FRIEND, 1d.,

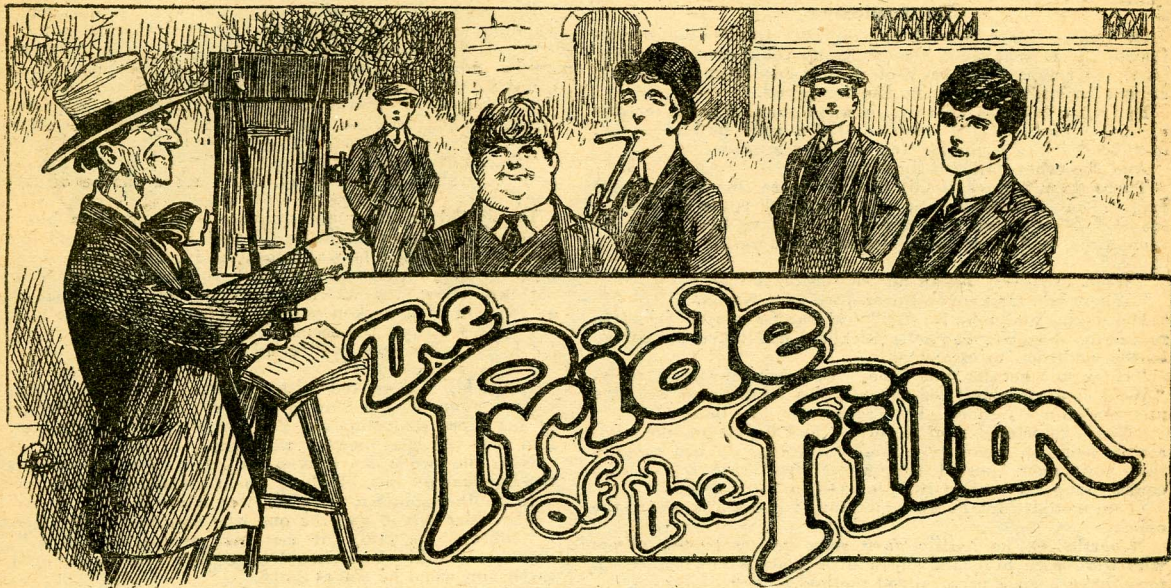
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Look out for YOUR Prize Storyette in next week's GEM or BOYS' FRIEND.

THE FIRST CHAPTERS OF OUR GRAND NEW SERIAL STORY.



The Opening Chapters of a Magnificent New Adventure Story. By VICTOR CROMWELL.

The First Instalments.

REGGIE WHITE, an orphan, is befriended by MR. ANTHONY DELL, a millionaire film-producer, and given a position as actor in his company.

Among others in the company, Reggie makes the acquaintance of RICHARD TURNEY, a boy whom he likes; HUBERT NIXON, a snobbish youth, whom he dislikes; and WILLIE BURR, a jovial, fat boy.

A scene is being filmed in an old mansion, when suddenly an escaped convict dashes from a secret recess in the wall, followed by a policeman and a detective.

Reggie, who has met the escaped man before, and is certain of his innocence, slams the door in the face of his pursuers.

CHARLES RICKFIELD, the escaped convict, is afterwards found by Reggie hiding in one of the film company's caravans. Suddenly Mr. Dell comes on the scene, and, sharing Reggie's belief in Rickfield's innocence, disguises him as a woman. The convict is then given an actress's position, and becomes known as Ma Perkins, a name given to him by Mr. Dell.

One afternoon a rehearsal is suddenly interrupted by the arrival of a party of strangers. Turning to the convict, one of them exclaims:

"Mrs. Perkins, we have reason to believe that you are really called Rickfield. Will you please remove that veil?"
(Now read on.)

Hubert Nixon's Revelations.

Here was a thunderclap. Reggie noticed that while the man had been speaking, his companions had been drawing themselves around the convict so as to be in his way in case he made a run for it.

Rickfield did not lose his self-possession for a moment. Speaking in a voice that was as much like the tones of an astonished and somewhat indignant old lady, as Reggie had ever heard in his life, he boldly faced the man who had addressed him.

"I suppose this is one of Mr. Dell's practical jokes?" he said, "and you are some more moving picture actors. What company have you been acting for?"

The detective—for such he appeared to be—was almost deceived by the convict's convincing tones.

"We are not picture actors," he replied, in rather more cautious tones. "We are the police, and this lady is the wife of the chief inspector for the district. She is here because we heard that you were masquerading as a woman, and it is just as well to have a woman detective in such circumstances."

Rickfield imitated a feminine laugh as he inquired:

"Where is Mr. Dell?" he retorted. "He is the funniest man I have ever met for these practical jokes. But it won't do. Once bitten, twice shy. He tried to make out that I was a disguised duchess once. That was at a Brighton Hotel, and the hotel servants cringed and bowed till I was nearly silly. I can see through the whole joke, although you act it very prettily."

And with that he laughed again in a manner that made the detective more doubtful than before.

"Where is Mr. Dell? I'll throw the joke back on him!" went on Rickfield, as he began to move away.

One of the men barred his path.

"That may be all very well," he said. "Now, if you don't mind lifting your veil a moment, it will help us and not hurt you."

"Oh, be finished with your larking!" retorted the disguised convict, now professing a little anger. "And get out of my way!"

Here the younger Nixon broke in.

"Don't you believe him!" he cried. "He isn't a lady at all! He's the man I saw coming out of the house two days ago when I wrote and warned the police!" (Here was a revelation, and there was more to follow!) "Besides, I was under the caravan, and heard him and the boss, and that young monkey over there"—he pointed vindictively at Reggie—"plan out the whole thing. And I saw the boss fetch the clothes for him to wear."

"There's no need to drag in Mr. Dell's name," said the elder Nixon hastily.

"It is rather a serious case, though, for him, if this is true," put in the first detective. "Harbouring an escaped criminal, and assisting him with food and clothing, is not a light offence even for a millionaire."

"Better keep Mr. Dell out of it," said the elder Nixon, in what Reggie thought was a nervous manner. "You have got your man—that is the main point, after all. What?"

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As he spoke there was a sudden roar like a thunder-clap, followed by a low, grinding, ripping sound, and one half of the big house seemed to lift and the next moment fall into a pile of dust.

The Explosion.

Of course, for a second or two everything was in confusion. The great cloud that suddenly came over the place, partly of smoke and partly of dust, made it impossible for anyone to know quite what had happened.

But when this cleared away, it was clear that some terrible explosion had rent the mansion, for a good half of it had disappeared in a crumpled and smoking heap.

And the other half was burning.

There wasn't much doubt on that score, for flames were leaping out of the gashed and sundered ruins in such a manner as suggested that the fire must have been going on some time, and that the explosion was a result, and not a cause.

"What ever—" began one of the detectives.

"Where is your man?" interrupted Mr. Nixon.

He might well ask, for the most careful search failed to reveal the disguised convict. Rickfield had taken advantage of the confusion to escape.

"He won't get far this time," was the detective's reply. "We police are about fed-up with this fellow, and we have men posted everywhere. By George, she does blaze!"

"Yes," retorted Nixon sternly; "and if you, on the spot, are so keen on looking at these fireworks, do you suppose that your men 'posted everywhere' will care a rap who comes along the road? Stir yourself, or he'll escape!"

"One would think he was your mother-in-law!" retorted the official.

Nevertheless, he hastily gave some orders to the others who were with him, and did a little whistle-blowing, which must have been a prearranged method of signalling.

The other detective point-blank refused to take any notice of the orders of his superior officer. He was quite wrapped up in the fire.

"I want to know, was anyone in that house?" he asked eagerly. "Is there anyone in there now? It is most important that we should find out."

In this interest the other police-officer seemed to agree, but evidently with a very divided mind. Between his duty to find the escaped convict and a certain sense of responsibility about the fire, the poor man looked utterly bewildered.

By this time several other people had come up, or were hastening in from the road. Mostly they were the boy-actors in the cinema company, but two or three strangers were joining them.

Willie Burr, the fat boy, one of the first to arrive, had heard the detective's question.

"Yes; there is someone in there," he said. "I saw a young lady go in when the door was open at the side, nearly an hour ago, and— Gracious! There she is now—at the top window!"

Everyone looked up, following the direction of Willie's pointing finger. At a window on the highest floor, quite near to the gaping break, where the rest of the building had been burst away by the force of the explosion, they saw a young girl, leaning out through the broken window-frame, as if appealing to them for assistance. Through the window they also saw the blue of the sky, showing that the very room in which she was standing was not complete.

An idea seized Reggie. With a hasty run, he changed the angle from which he was looking at the room, and discovered what he had suddenly feared—the part of the room that had been blown away was the part containing the door, and with it had gone the girl's chance of escape.

Just at this moment another voice broke in. Clearly and unmistakably, the voice of Mrs. Horace Dell, who had joined the group.

"Dolly! Dolly!"

And then, in almost anguished tones, as she pointed up to the window:

"Help! Help! She can't get down! A hundred pounds for anyone who helps her!"

It was not these words that stirred Reggie. He had already seen a way by which he thought that he could help the imprisoned girl. Almost before her stepmother had finished the sentence he was across the lawn to the side-door, forgetting for the moment that it was locked. Subconsciously, he had some kind of idea working in his mind that, because there was someone in the building, this door must be open.

As a matter of fact, Dolly had entered the building before he had gone there to lock up. Indeed, all the time her

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mother had been having one of the greatest joys of her life in rambling about in an old mansion.

The door had been locked, it is true, yet Reggie found it open wide enough. The explosion had wrecked most of the windows and doors in Storm Park House, and this particular door had been flung ten yards out on the grass.

But smoke was pouring out from the passage, for the building was blazing badly near-by. Yet this did not delay him. He darted in, and made for the principal staircase. As he did so he went full crash against someone who was coming out, and a package dropped on the floor.

He thought at first it was a woman. Then a gleam of light enabled him to discover that it was the escaped convict.

"A girl in danger!" he shouted. "She is on the top floor, and the wall is broken away, but I see a chance of saving her!"

He darted up the main staircase. It seemed to him the most natural thing in the world that Rickfield should follow him. Reggie knew he was following, for the convict coughed at every step, for he had got nearly suffocated by the smoke.

Down below, the watchers suddenly saw the two appear at the end of a broken passage where there was as yet no fire. This was on the second highest storey.

"Look! The convict!" cried a policeman.

"What's he doing?"

Rickfield, still racked with coughing, but free of smoke for the moment, was tearing away the skirts and other parts of his dress that impeded his movements. It was not of him that the last question was asked.

Near the two was a broken wall that sloped upwards, and the boy was on this, climbing up to the storey above.

In another moment Rickfield was following him.

The older Nixon was the one who startled the watchers.

"Officer," he said, "if that man escapes now it will be your own fault. You should have your men well posted to catch him when he comes down."

"You cad!" cried Tony Dell.

The Rescue.

Hand-over-hand Reggie climbed up the broken wall. When it had been complete, that wall had been the back partition of the room in which the girl was imprisoned. At the highest part of this wall Reggie could stand and almost reach the floor of the room.

The moment he stood upright on this ledge, the girl seemed to understand the effort he was making on her account, for she disappeared from the window. A second later the watchers saw her standing between Reggie and the convict, both steadying her as they helped her down.

A great cheer went up.

But it was early times for cheering, for the fire, which had died low, now suddenly burst out fiercely again, and to the watchers it seemed as if one great tongue of flame was actually lapping at the three on the broken wall.

After a perilous descent, the three reached the ground floor. Then they disappeared into the smoking passage. Instinctively the watchers, now a goodly number of people, rushed to the side entrance to which they had seen Reggie run. Tony Dell and one or two others did better—they actually penetrated a little way inside the side entrance, till they were driven back by the clouds of smoke.

At last there was another shout as Reggie came tottering out, dragging the girl after him, and Tony Dell made a rush for her, for he had seen that her light dress was actually smouldering, thus proving that in their escape she must have passed very near the actual flames.

"Where's Mr. Rickfield?" cried Reggie, as Mr. Dell hastily dashed the smouldering fire out of Dolly's frock with a vigorous thumping of his gloves. "He was just behind me."

"He has escaped us!" shouted Mr. Nixon. "Oh, you blundering police!"

Silas Shock was standing near, and heard the remark. With a sudden blow he brought his fist down, and drove Mr. Nixon's hat over his eyes.

Tony Dell saw the action.

"Thank you, Silas!" he said. "You have expressed my own thoughts."

And just then, tottering and coughing, out came Mr. Rickfield. He carried a parcel under his arm, a big package of papers. Dell hurried across to support him.

"It's all right," said the convict, between coughs. "I dropped this packet on the floor before I went upstairs, and it was hard to find. Oh, that smoke has got into my lungs!"

"Excuse me, sir," said one of the policemen, stepping forward, as Dell was leading the convict away, "I hope you won't think that I'm taking a hint from that gentleman there." He pointed his thumb towards Nixon. "And I



With a sudden snatch, Nixon grabbed the parcel of papers and ran. But Reggie had guessed the move, and tripped him up as he bolted away. (See below.)

want you to know that I feel jolly well ashamed of myself to be here at all. But you may not know that this gentleman is wanted by the police, spite of what he's just done. You may take him where you like, sir, but I'm afraid that I must come, too."

These words were addressed to Mr. Dell, but Rickfield replied to them.

"Very well," he said, "if you are the police, I surrender to you. I have done the work I wanted to do when I escaped from Dartmoor. You can take me back now. There are things that are more precious than freedom."

Now, it happened that Reggie had been watching Mr. Nixon as that worthy struggled to get out of his damaged hat, and just at this moment he thought his movements suspicious.

He saw that Nixon had only one interest and thought, for the parcel that the convict had brought with him from the burning house was engrossing his whole attention. With a sudden snatch, Nixon grabbed it and ran.

But Reggie had guessed the move, and tripped him as he bolted away. The next moment Rickfield had his package again, while Silas Shock was calmly sitting on the fallen wretch, speaking threatening words, and showing him a knotted fist at very close inspection range.

"You can take me now," said Rickfield, holding up the package. "I think this little lot of papers will soon help me out of prison again. No wonder that man over there wanted them. He will be lucky if they don't send him to Dartmoor in my place."

"Look here," broke in Dell, "I'd better take care of those papers. If they are the ones you told me about, they are safer in my hands than yours. I'll have the best lawyers in England on them before a day is over."

Rickfield passed over the papers with a sigh of relief.

"Thank you, Mr. Dell!" he said.

Just then Mrs. Horace Dell came forward. She had been looking after Dolly.

She caught Reggie by the arms, and, somewhat to his horror, gave him a hearty hug and kiss.

"Oh, you brave boy!" she cried. "How can we ever

repay you? That child is all I have in the world! She isn't my daughter really, but she is more than my own would be. I'll double the reward. Where's that man?"

She saw Rickfield walking between the detective and a policeman. Her brother-in-law explained in a few quick words. Mrs. Horace suddenly became a blazing fury.

"What, Tony?" she cried. "You let the police march off the man who helped to save your own niece from the flames? You? I'm ashamed of you! Where is your manhood? I'd rend those policemen limb from limb rather than let them take him! Oh, you fish-blooded lump of dough!"

"Don't talk rot, Agnes!" said Tony. "The police won't eat the man, I'm looking after him."

"I know what your looking after means. You're my guardian, and you are supposed to look after me, and never let me come near you. Be a man, Tony! Bribe the police if you are afraid to fight them. Don't disgrace my husband's family name by letting that brave hero be taken away!"

"It makes no difference," interrupted Rickfield. "I am very much obliged to you, madam. But if I were free at this moment, I should go and give myself up. I have saved my honour, and Mr. Dell will do the rest."

Just then Nixon, who had wriggled out of captivity, managed to climb to his feet. At the same moment Mrs. Dell saw him. She started, and almost tripped in her agitation, and her face went white.

She caught her brother-in-law's arm.

"Take me away from that viper!" she said, quite weakly.

And Nixon looked after her with an amused smile that faded as his eyes fell on the package that Mr. Dell still carried.

Then he seemed to lose all interest in the whole party, and even the fire, that by this time was blazing near to its end, failed to attract his second glance.

There were many things that had happened during that eventful afternoon that were very mysterious to many of the spectators. But the chief puzzles that were discussed, when the fire burnt low, were as to how the fire had originated, and as to what had caused the explosion.

The last question was answered by the local house-agent,

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who soon came on the scene. It appeared that the last tenant of the house was the famous chemist, Dr. Jabez Dodwold, the discoverer of the powerful explosive nitro-thurmite, a man who had given a great many years to experimenting in the manufacture of explosives.

He had left a cellar full of refuse and rubbish, together with instructions that till this cellar could be properly cleared out it had better be kept securely locked, as there was a good deal of "dangerous stuff" among its contents.

How dangerous this stuff really was, was well proved by the frightful wreck that the explosion had made of the great old house.

As to the origin of the fire, or how the flames reached the cellar, there was no real explanation, but Reggie made a good guess. He had once seen one or two of the boy-actors smoking over a grating at the back of the house, and had called their attention to the fact that the area below was full of straw and waste-paper, and communicated with the rooms of the basement. He did not now like to tell Mr. Dell of this incident, but he was well satisfied in his own mind that this was something like the cause of the fire.

Dolly is Grateful.

Of course, the fire quite spoilt Mr. Dell's plan for making Storm Park the scene of his ghost picture, and with something like regret the boy-actors learned that they would all be moved back to London as speedily as matters could be fixed up.

The arrangement was carried through the very next day. Reggie heard of it first from Ben Wheeler, the chauffeur.

"You'll have a queer trip, I'm thinking," said Ben.

"What trip?" asked Reggie.

"Going back by road on them there gipsy cars. Your little lot will go with all you youngsters in it, but the boys in number three will all have to go back by rail."

"Why's that?"

Ben laughed.

"My word!" he said. "You will have a trip! The lady dragon is going. That Miss Dolly wanted to do it, and they have decided that the deed shall be done. Mr. Dell don't fight against Mrs. Horace more than he can help."

"And will they sleep in the caravans?"

"They may just once, just to swear by; but Mr. Dell has been drawing out the plan for the journey, and he's arranged for the cars to get near a good hotel each evening, so as they can change over to proper lodgings when they want to. You see, you never know what kind of weather you are going to get, and delicate ladies"—he laughed as he said the word delicate, evidently thinking of Mrs. Horace—"aren't quite the ones to go gipsying this time of the year."

It was just after this that Dolly and her stepmother came from the hotel to see Reggie. Dolly was a splendid-looking girl, just his own age. She was all gratitude.

"They've kept me in bed, and made a fuss over me," she protested, "when I ought to have come straight away to thank you. You are the bravest boy I ever met in my life. Isn't it a shame about Mr. Rickfield?"

"Yes," Reggie agreed, a little nervously.

"Uncle Tony has gone up to London by the express about him," she said. "He says that he has been looking at the papers, and they prove clearly that Mr. Rickfield is innocent. The prison people will have to let him out. But, oh, dear, I'm not thanking you as I wanted to, and I really don't know how to do it!"

After that she tried to express her gratitude for quite a long time, till Mrs. Horace Dell interrupted.

"You've got a bank account, young man," she said, "or you will have as soon as you reach London. I have just posted a cheque for two hundred pounds to start it. Tony, that is Mr. Dell, wanted me to invest the money for you, but investing is not my style; the money is yours, and you can invest it yourself, or spend it. And let me tell you this—you will always find a friend in me."

Just then she saw the chauffeur.

"I hope you will always avoid bad company, and unpleasant people," she went on. "There is a quarrelsome, disagreeable man standing over there. I hope you keep out of his way."

"Oh, mother!" broke in Dolly. "You said that you believe Ben is really as honest as the sun."

"So he is, of course," admitted Mrs. Dell; "but he gets on my nerves. He is always sneering at me. Here, Ben!"

Ben Wheeler came across as she shouted the last words.

"I've just been warning this young man against you," she said quite calmly.

"It's very kind of you, ma'am!" retorted the chauffeur.

"Just one of them there little thoughtful actions we look

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for in you, ma'am. And might I make bold to ask is the warning for his good or mine, ma'am?"

"His, of course!" retorted Mrs. Horace.

"You're afraid I'll corrupt his good manners—eh, ma'am? Is that the size of it?"

"I think you have a bad side and a good side, Ben, and you are a nuisance either way. This is a nice, promising boy, and I should feel sorry if he grew up like you."

"People don't always grow up like them they're with," replied Ben slowly. "Look at Miss Dolly now. See what a little lady she is."

Reggie saw in a moment that Mrs. Dell, instead of being angry at Ben's word, thoroughly enjoyed the joke.

"Oh, well, Ben," she said, "you always will have the last word. What I want to say is simple; take care of the boy."

She turned away, but suddenly came sharply back to the chauffeur.

"Is it true that Mr. Nixon has a son in the company?" she asked.

The chauffeur nodded.

"Well, he means mischief by being here," she declared with emphasis. "I expect that man will make his son's presence an excuse for coming rather frequently to see him. I warn you that Mr. Nixon is a dangerous man anywhere. I know him."

With that, Mrs. Dell looked round for her daughter. But Dolly was nowhere in sight. This did not seem to worry her very much, for, with a shrug of her shoulders that was almost French, she walked on, leaving Dolly to follow if she would.

The moment she was gone Dolly appeared from behind some bushes.

"You nice boy," she said frankly to Reggie. "I want to have a chat with you all by myself; so come along. I want to know your name and your age, and what you mean to be when you grow up, and what adventures you have had."

Before he quite knew what was happening, Reggie had answered a dozen questions. At one part Dolly seemed a little disappointed.

"Do you mean that you have never been in the Wild West?" she asked. "Why, I thought that you people who make pictures all go there. And you haven't been on a runaway engine, or hunted lions in Africa? Why the picture-palaces have all these things every time. I was quite excited when I heard that we were coming down to see the people who make the pictures. If you are a fair sample of the rest, Uncle Tony's lot are a poor lot to act for moving pictures."

Of course, these words were spoken merrily, as if they were a joke, and Reggie took them in the same spirit. The two got on splendidly together, as they chatted about all kinds of topics. This was the beginning of a friendship that increased very much during the next few days, in which Reggie and Dolly had many chances of being with each other.

The journey back to London was a slow one, but very pleasant. Mrs. Dell and Dolly rode in the caravan, or walked by its side, quite as if they were old hands at gipsying. Altogether, it took four days to complete the journey, and the two Dells were with them nearly all the time.

Mr. Dell motored down to meet them the second day. He was able to tell some good news.

"I think you ought to know," he said to Reggie, "that your convict friend will almost certainly be a free man in the course of a few days or a week or so at most. It takes time to do these things, but that bundle of papers he found proves his innocence as plainly as it can be proved."

"Does it prove who is guilty?"

Tony Dell frowned.

"You mean what Rickfield said about Nixon?" he asked. "Well, let me tell you that you mustn't set too much on that remark. Men who have been falsely imprisoned often get distorted views. I am very much mixed up with Nixon, and I think he is a cad, but I wouldn't call him a thief."

"The papers that Mr. Rickfield found—" began Reggie.

"They say nothing about him," interrupted Tony Dell, with a shake of his head. "But now about this ghost-picture business. I am arranging to get another house in which to act it. I have had several old places offered. I think that the owners hope that we'll manage to burn them down as well. An old mansion that doesn't let is a bit of a nuisance, and most people would sooner have the money."

Was It a Plot?

It was on the third day of the journey to London that a suspicious incident occurred. The caravans had come to a halt near a village, and the whole party had gone to a refresh-

ment house near by to have lunch. Reggie finished his meal early, as he had an idea that he might meet Dolly, who had gone with her mother to the only other hotel in the place.

On the way he passed the caravans, and saw with surprise that a man was surveying them with considerable interest. It looked to Reggie as if the stranger were waiting for a chance, when the coast should be clear, for making an internal investigation.

He was roughly dressed, and looked like a fairly prosperous working-man, but the method in which he seemed to be lounging about was not very convincing. Somehow he struck the boy as being familiar in some way, and Reggie felt sure that he knew the man, but could not recall where he had seen him before.

Noticing that he was observed, the man walked away. Just at that moment his hat blew off, and as he stooped to regain it Reggie recognised him.

It was Mr. Nixon, the man who had been so busy about the arrest of Rickfield.

Nixon! And dressed as a working-man, and peering around like a spy. What ever did it mean? What had the man in mind?

"I must keep my eye open," thought the boy.

He was half inclined to follow Nixon, when just at that moment he saw Dolly emerge from the hotel. Nixon saw her, too, and walked right over to her, and stopped her.

Reggie stood back behind one of the vehicles, and watched. Nixon seemed to be telling Dolly a very long story; at all events, it took some minutes for him to get it complete. Then, to his amazement, Nixon and the girl began to walk off together.

"There's mischief in the air," thought Reggie. "I'll stop the little game, whatever it is."

He hurried after them.

"Where are you going?" he asked, as the two turned down a narrow lane.

"Oh, I'm so glad you've come!" replied Dolly. "This man has been telling me about his poor daughter, a girl of twelve, who has had an accident, and can't move out of her room. The other children have told her about the caravans and the people in them just as if we were a show, and she is crying herself ill because she can't be out to see us for herself. So her father promised to try to bring one of the caravan people to see her. It's splendid of you being here as well, for now she will have two of us."

"I don't know about that being any good," said Nixon, in a well-acted, gruff voice. "She isn't over-strong. Two may excite her. Better the young lady alone."

He seemed to think that Reggie hadn't recognised him, and he was quite anxious to get Dolly away from him.

"Dolly," said Reggie—she insisted on his calling her by her Christian name—"you mustn't go with him. He isn't a working man at all, and he doesn't live in this village. He means mischief."

"Hold your chin!" said Nixon. "This here young lady is on a mission of mercy. 'Tain't your business to go interfering."

As he was speaking he was trying to lead the girl farther down the quiet lane. At the same moment he waved with his hand.

Then Reggie saw that a little way ahead was a closed motor-brougham. The moment Nixon waved his hand two men, who had been standing beneath a hedge, started running towards them. The boy's quick brain took in the situation in a second.

"Run for your life, Dolly!" he shouted. "It's a plant!"

At the same moment he sprang on Nixon, and nearly threw him.

"Run, run!" he repeated, seeing that Dolly was not inclined to leave him. "I'm all right; they don't want me!"

Dolly is Missing.

Dolly Dell behaved like a sensible girl, and ran.

In consequence, when the two men drew near she was out of sight, and probably in a place of safety. At all events, the men who had tried to entrap her appeared to think that the endeavour had failed, for they slouched away without even trying to punish the girl's rescuer.

Reggie found Dolly with her stepmother. Mrs. Horace Dell was highly indignant, and at the same time strangely mysterious about the affair, for though she talked a little wildly about pursuit, she only did so for a moment or two, and afterwards plainly showed that she wished no pursuit.

She was deeply grateful to Reggie, and praised him warmly for his heroism and forethought.

This day was the end of the caravanning, at all events for the time, and that evening the party concluded the last few miles of the journey by rail.

The next day picture-making began in earnest in the studio at Mitcham. This place was a constant series of revelations to Reggie, for behind the big house that Mr. Dell had taken, and where practically a huge factory had come into being, there was constant variety and change.

Tony Dell was very keen on his haunted house picture, and Reggie found that he was in for three or four very hard days' work. He and some of the other boys had lodgings found for them in a very nice little cottage near by, but most of the other actors and actresses came from the near suburbs, where they had their homes.

Four earnest days of work finished the picture, as far as it could be finished in the home studio. Now there would be a day or two's interval before the company could move to the mansion that had been hired, as the scene of the picture, in place of Storm Park House.

Reggie was somewhat annoyed to find that Hubert Nixon remained as a member of the company, in spite of the treachery he had displayed, and in spite of his father's action. This was a proof of Mr. Dell's largeness of mind.

But Hubert did not live in the place. He came daily from Hampstead; where his father had a house, and he kept out of Reggie's way.

But when the two met Reggie never hesitated to show his feelings, while Hubert irritated him with very unpleasant remarks.

"Still here?" he asked once. "I thought they might have taken you by now to join your convict friend."

And more of this kind of thing. If it had not been for the respect that Reggie had for Mr. Dell's love of peace, he would have resented such words in a very vigorous manner.

It was on the morning of the fifth day at Mitcham, and Reggie was standing talking to Ben Wheeler, who was always good company, when that worthy suddenly winked at him and indicated the entrance-gate.

"The boss don't shake her off," he said. "I was willing to bet this old pair of boots against a new pair that her ladyship would be humming around inside of a brace of shakes."

Reggie knew whom Ben meant without turning his head. He meant Mrs. Horace, of course; and that lady appeared.

She came right across to Reggie.

"I'm glad you are here, at all events!" she said. "I believe you have more wits than the whole shopful, my brother-in-law included. Where is Mr. Dell?"

Reggie thought that the millionaire was in his snugery, a room at the top of the house to which he was fond of retiring, and he took Mrs. Dell there.

"You come in, too," she said, as they reached the door and he turned away. "I feel that I shall want you."

"Agnes!" said Mr. Dell, as she entered.

"For goodness' sake don't be tragic!" she retorted. "Even if I am called Agnes, there is no need to sing it as if you were calling for a taxi-driver in the next street. I have news. Dolly has disappeared—been stolen."

Mr. Dell slowly shook his head.

"I don't believe it," he said. "You've missed the girl somewhere, and you are working yourself into one of your usual fevers. Go home and have lunch, and I expect Dolly will be waiting for you. She isn't a fool, and most girls of her age can get about London by themselves all right."

"But I tell you she is stolen!" retorted Mrs. Horace Dell. "I am not a fool, and I know what I am talking about. Read this."

She passed Mr. Dell a letter. The millionaire opened the epistle, and began to read it in a rather casual manner. But in a second or two all this changed, and he finished reading with a good deal of excitement in his manner.

"Do you mean that the girl is really gone?" he asked

"Yes," replied Mrs. Dell; "that is what I've been trying to tell you. She has gone, and that man has got her!"

"What man? There is no signature. Do you know who he is?"

Mrs. Horace Dell's reply was surprising.

"I know who he is, and I know where that girl has been taken. That is why I have come to you for help."

Tony Dell began to show that he understood.

"I see," he remarked thoughtfully. "You have come to me so that I can request the police to act."

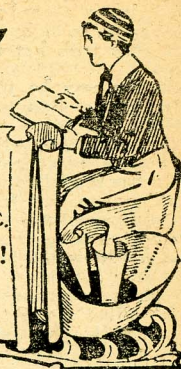
The lady retorted scornfully.

"Don't be a fool, Tony," she said. "Do you think I would come to you to ask you to go to the police? I am not afraid of talking to a policeman. If the work was as simple as all that, I could ring up a police-station on the telephone and raid the man's house without the trouble of coming near you. But it isn't as simple as that. I want your assistance because the police are no use in this affair."

(Another long instalment of this splendid new serial story next Wednesday. Order your copy early.)



THIS WEEK'S CHAT



Whom to Write to
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For Next Wednesday:

"THE SPORTSMEN OF ST. JIM'S!"

By Martin Clifford.

All lovers of healthy sport—and what British boy is not?—will fairly revel in next Wednesday's thrilling, long, complete story of the famous chums of St. Jim's. Permission is accorded the junior football team to tour several big towns in the South of England, with a view to raising money for the Red Cross Fund; and George Alfred Grundy, who tries his hand at many things and succeeds in none, is very eager to wrest the tour from Tom Merry & Co. The story teems with thrilling incidents, among the best scenes being an historic fight between Tom Merry and Figgins and a wonderful match against the rivals of Greyfriars. Wally D'Arcy and Joe Frayne, the irrepressible young rascals of the Third, play truant in order to witness one of the matches many miles away, and their fate is graphically recorded in

"THE SPORTSMEN OF ST. JIM'S!"

which is emphatically a story that none should miss.

GREAT GOOD NEWS FOR EVERYBODY!

Those of my chums who wish to be transferred straightway to the seventh heaven of delight should purchase the "Magnet" Library now on sale, and read the stirring announcement which appears on the Chat Page. A wonderful surprise is in store.

FROM DRUMMER BILLY BRACKLEY.

I am pleased to be able to publish the following letter, indited in the British trenches:

"Somewhere in France.
 "Dear Mr. Editor,—Just a line to let you know I've just finished reading 'School and Sport.' It was grand! I enjoyed it no end, and there's only one fault to find with it. It's too short!

"I dare say you remember my appeal for copies of the companion papers, some months ago? Well, I was simply rolling in books for a while, and am still receiving copies from certain readers, to say nothing of very nice letters from some of the gentler sex.

"I can honestly say that Mr. Richards' fine yarn is the best ever put into a threepenny library. When I started reading it—in the firing-line, by the way—I absolutely couldn't leave it, it was so intensely absorbing.

"Now I must conclude, wishing you and your splendid papers the best of luck, and many future successes.—Believe me, yours very truly,
 (DRUMMER) BILLY BRACKLEY.

"P.S.—Shall we hear more of Miss Phyllis Howell in the future?"

In thanking my soldier chum for his fine tribute, I should like to inform him that the vivacious heroine of Cliff House is now a permanent character in our popular companion paper, the "Magnet" Library.

Drummer Billy Brackley has my heartiest good wishes that he may come through the turmoil of the fighting with flying colours.

A YANKEE YOUTH'S SLASHING STATEMENTS.

The following precious epistle has come to hand from a disreputable cad of New York:

"Sir,—I guess I have been wanting to write to you for a long time concerning your childish paper, the 'Gem,' which is so keenly sought after by the denuded and demented boys on t'other side of the herring-pond.

"The doings of Tom Merry & Co. are so much tommy-rot. They scorn to smoke a fag, they shudder at the bare idea of letting off steam by reverting to good round oaths; and, in short, they are the goody-goody chumps typical of the British nation.

"Instead of fitting themselves for high posts in commercial houses, the kids in your country devote all their spare time to greedily devouring the companion papers—tosh that would make any sane chap seasick.

"Wishing your paltry rags the worst of luck, yours contemptuously,
 CYRUS P. CRAKE."

It is a matter for regret that Master Meddling Crake has given no address beyond the somewhat vague one of New York. Possibly he realised that by so doing he would be heaping coals of fire on his head, and, being a Yankee, he is, of course, much too proud to fight.

Thank Heaven that real British boys are manly, and would scorn to strike below the belt in this blackguardly manner!

I will waste no more time on an outsider who compares Britons to Yankees. Cyrus Crake is typical of his precious sit-tight-and-do-nothing race, while their own women and children are murdered by Huns.

REPLIES IN BRIEF.

S. W. O. (St. George's, E.).—Contarini came to St. Jim's a few months ago. How? Well, much as other new boys do, I suppose. By train to Rylcombe, and thence by road.

F. H. G. (Portsmouth).—These little mistakes will happen, and there is really no telling what a fellow of Crooke's type might do. Glad he had not his overcoat on, however, for nobody would believe he went to bed in that!

A. E. B. (Islington).—Thanks for your interesting letter. Yes; deafness is a heavy affliction, but as you are not stone-deaf you escape the worst of it. How do you like Tom Dutton in the "Magnet"?

L. B. (Gainsborough).—You want to know how many copies of the "Gem" and "Magnet" are sold each week? Well, think of a good high number, then double it, then add 100,000 more or less to it, and you may get somewhere near the mark. But this is a dead secret—like anything that Bunter hears, you know.

"Loyal Pompey."—If you want to send cigarettes to the men in the trenches, get a copy of next Sunday's "Weekly Dispatch," and you will find out the best way to do so.

J. D. (Dalston).—To become an engineer, you will have to be apprenticed at some works. Joke not quite up to the mark.

H. J. J. (Boscombe).—Gymnastic exercises would increase your chest measurement.

L. G. (Mumbles).—Probably the reason why you did not get a reply before was because your letters, like this one, contained no questions to be answered. It is scarcely possible to reply to every letter received.

R. L. (Ballarat).—You say the companion papers are not read much in Australia. This is a mistake; we have lots of readers there. Then you suggest a competition for Colonial readers only. But if there are so few, this could scarcely be expected, I think. I will see what can be done, however.

J. W. (Woollahra, Sydney).—Competitions cannot be kept open long enough for Australian readers. See reply above.

(Continued on page iii of cover.)

REPLIES IN BRIEF—continued.

G. C. P. (Rosewater, South Australia).—Correspondence Exchange closed, so I cannot do as you wish.

F. O'M. (Melbourne).—See last reply. You will find in the stories what you want to know about the Remove cricket team, etc.

"Mac" (Norwich).—I certainly don't think smoking will do you any good.

"Loyal Gemites" (Nantwich).—You don't like Talbot, but others do. You say the stories are not as good as they used to be; others say they are heaps better. You are sure you know best; and they are sure they know best. There seems no way of settling it. I note that you don't mean to desert; you only ask me to "buck up." With a little more genial encouragement, I hope to do so.

H. A. B. (Kingston).—I do not propose to print your letter; and I am not in the habit of calling people scoundrels and hypocrites because their opinion differs from mine. But I fail to see why I should be expected to discuss an entirely personal matter with everybody who chooses to write abusive letters to me.

"A Camberley Reader."—Brownie cameras are certainly all right.

A. T. (Tufnell Park).—Sorry I cannot help you in the matter of finding someone with a complete set of "G." and "M." I do not think that we are likely to reprint the earlier numbers. But you will find some of the earlier Tom Merry yarns in the "Penny Popular."

F. C. (Glasgow) would set the Grundy Volunteers loose on Malpas. Quite a bright idea.

A. H. (Euston).—I don't care much for the picture-postcard idea. We give full value in the papers themselves.

D. N. (Cork).—So, after your father and brother have done with the copies of the "Gem" you send to them at the Front, the whole company reads them? Good! I hope your people will come through it all without a scratch.

A. C. T. (Highbury).—Thanks for your letter, with its description of your school, and the rivalry between the girls' and boys' side.

A. S. (Melbourne).—We have not the caddish letter to which you refer. It went into the w.p.b. But I am quite satisfied that you did not write it, and I don't think there is any need for you to worry about it.

J. V. (Highbury).—Will see what can be done to put Manners in the front row. But it's going to get crowded before long if Mr. Clifford accepts every suggestion made. I rather fancy he won't, though.

N. M. (Strathpeffer).—Two new readers. Good!

J. O'C. (Carlingford).—Yes; the Third Form has its cricket and footer teams.

"A Loyal Scottish Lassie."—Cannot say I ever feel inclined to throw up the sponge. The complaining correspondents are only as one in ten thousand or so, and I do not worry about them.

"Gaby."—The only way to get the "Gem" in Sumatra or Borneo would be through a subscription (payable in advance) to this office. Afraid I cannot tell you—or, rather, must not tell you—where Messrs. Richards and Clifford live.

"A Beverlonian."—Thanks! By this time you will be enjoying "Cousin Ethel's Schooldays."

H. L. H.—Glad to know you have found a good example in Tom Merry. Verses not quite good enough. What are your difficulties about school magazine? Will help if I can.

"A Very Loyal Reader" (Falkirk).—Crooke is about the oldest of the St. Jim's juniors. The supplement given with the Christmas Number will answer your query as to the masters.

J. C. (Fulham).—The numbers you want are quite out of print now.

M. and H. (St. George's, E.).—No room for letter. Glad to hear from you, and about the L.G.R.A.

"A Girl Gemite" (Hastings).—The place you name is imaginary, so I cannot give you the distance between it and Hastings. Crooke's reformation is very doubtful.

N. R. (Liverpool).—I do not know whether there is a "Gem" or "Magnet" League near you. Why not form one?

E. N. G. (Dublin).—When "Tom Merry's Weekly" appears, it will certainly be on sale in Dublin.

A. W. G. A. (Deal).—There is no certain way to increase height. Plenty of exercise may help.

W. D. (Waste).—When "Tom Merry's Weekly" appears, you will be quite at liberty to send along original jokes. We don't want copied ones.

E. P. and O. H. (Coventry).—See first part of reply to "A Girl Gemite" (Hastings).

"Irish and Proud of It."—Quite right, too! Will ask Mr. Clifford to shove Reilly forward a bit. Your brother is a lucky man—fourteen months at the Front without a scratch! I hope his luck still holds good.

R. G. B. (Huddersfield).—Kildare is about the oldest fellow at St. Jim's; and also the best boxer.

"A Lover of the Fair Sex."—Correspondence Exchange closed.

"True Friend."—Don't worry about the cads. We don't!

P. J. P.—Tom Merry is somewhat ahead of Figgins as a boxer.

N. M. (Wakefield).—Quite a good idea. You might do many worse things than take Tom Merry as your standard.

J. K. S. (Glasgow).—There is no New House at Greyfriars, and no Remove Form at St. Jim's. There are boys from the New House at St. Jim's who are in the Shell; the fellows from both Houses share the same classes. Crooke and Grundy are about the biggest fellows in the Shell.

"A Chum" (Colchester).—You ask for a reply at once, but don't say to what, and your card contains no questions.

"A Loyal Boltonian."—Stephens would be very small potatoes indeed, after you had finished with him I am sure!

M. W. (Longsight).—Thanks for efforts to get new readers. Glad to hear Malta supports the "Gem."

G. E. T. (Camberwell).—Thanks for your very loyal letter.

H. A. H. (Lancaster).—There are a few day-boys both at St. Jim's and Greyfriars.

N. J. (Weston Coyney).—Many thanks!

O. L. (Balham).—There would not be a great deal of material for stories in an O.T.C. at St. Jim's, I think. That sort of thing is taken in dead earnest, and something that can be treated humorously is more suitable.

T. M. (Whitefield).—Your drawings are quite good, and, if original, show distinct promise. I have already given all the explanation I consider necessary of my attitude, and I do not propose to repeat it. Our Correspondence Exchange is closed, and it would not do for us to make exceptions. No; I should not say it is very harmful for a boy to be in love with a girl—it will happen sometimes. But it's not much use, as a rule. The characters you mention are quite imaginary. Herries still has Towser; I think you are right about the cornet. Probably Herries borrowed it.

A. B. B. (Sheffield).—Thanks for suggestions. But we get so many that, if all were carried out, Mr. Clifford would never get the chance to write a story entirely on his own.

"A Tomboy" (Birmingham).—Afraid your desire cannot be gratified, as the people you want to correspond with are quite imaginary characters. So glad your friends and home circle like the companion papers.

Will any reader who has books to spare ("B. F." 3d. Library, etc.) send them to Driver J. G. Whirter (80706), R.F.A., 3rd Section, Ammunition Column, 7th Division, B.E.F., France?

C. S. K. C. (Pollokshields).—With letters coming in by the sackful, there is no need to write spoof replies. The difficulty is to get them answered. Probably your earlier letter did not call for an answer. Passing the time of the day is all very well, but a busy editor has other things to do—see? Cannot tell you what precise locality Kerr hails from. Grundy's spelling is pretty bad, but I have seen some to equal it.

C. P. (Ashton-under-Lyne).—See reply to W. J. (Plymouth).

P. D. (South Hackney).—Good! There is no better way of backing up the companion papers than by getting new readers.

R. S. and C. N. (Balham).—Quite a good notion to keep the public school arms, and mount them for future reference. Glad to hear from you.

"Tommy" (Beckenham).—I am afraid I did not notice that our artist slipped up by making Mr. Railton an officer on the cover of "The Housemaster's Homecoming," when he should have been a sergeant. You are evidently observant. Delighted to hear that both your father and your mother enjoy the "Gem." Forgive delay in replying.

"Loyal Supporter" (Withernsea).—Yours is quite an amusing yarn. A workmate nicknamed you "Penny Blood," because you read the "Gem" at dinner-time. You lent him a copy. He is now a staunch reader himself. Good!

"Devoted Reader" (Berwick).—"Jiu-jitsu" (price 1s., by post 1s. 2d.). L. Upcott-Gill, Bazaar Buildings, Drury Lane, London, W.C., will serve your purpose, I think.

"Two Sisters" (Walthamstow).—Thanks for your sympathy, but I feel rather as if I were getting it under false pretences, for I really don't a bit mind being an editor—even with Anti-Gemites roaming around seeking whom they may devour.

"A Regular" (Leytonstone).—Sorry I have been so long in replying to your letter. But I am not at all sure the fellow you wanted to convince is worth the trouble you have taken.

N. M. (Muswell Hill).—Seniors are not always bigger than juniors, you know. But I see what you mean. Many thanks for what you say about the "Gem."

J. H. and B. H. (Croydon, S. Australia).—Very pleased to hear from you!

"Boronia" (Blue Mountains, Australia).—Ditto!

L. G. (Armada, Victoria).—None of your jokes are quite good enough.

Has any reader a copy of the "Gem" story entitled "Figg's Fig Pudding," which he could let us have to oblige another reader who particularly wants it?

(Continued on the next page.)

REPLIES IN BRIEF—continued.

H. C. (Sheffield).—Glad to hear the companion papers are so popular in the Navy.

C. W. T. (Oxford).—Good thing for Malpas he did not give his address—eh?

Harold Leese (Sefton Park).—The type of rotter who wrote to you, running down the papers, never does give his proper address. Very pleased to hear of the letter received from a man at the Front, and also that you were able to send him a parcel of back numbers.

A. B. (Leamington Spa).—As to the letter-opening question, I should say "No." But is it worth making a fuss about? Possibly, at some future date, we may be able to give a plan of the school's interior, but not just yet.

L. E. A. (Liverpool).—Thanks for your good work in getting new readers.

Y. Z. (Plymouth).—You say you never hear of Talbot. Other readers complain that the stories are full of him. And I don't think either you or they are quite right.

"A True Reader" (Mon.) asks who was junior captain at St. Jim's before Tom Merry. Does any old reader remember those prehistoric days, and if so, will he earn my blessing by letting me know? I cannot remember everything. At the same time, he may be able to send along the name of the mother-in-law of Moses.

G. M. D. (Tooting).—We have no Sale and Exchange column.

A. C. T. (Liverpool).—(1) Ask them to read a story for themselves, and see whether it is a "blood." (2) No. (3) Write to the Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C. (4) Imaginary.

"Twenty Loyal Chums (Poulton).—Many thanks for letter, even though it did not contain all that the other nineteen fellows wanted it to. Will consider your suggestion.

R. C. (Sydenham).—The results are now appearing weekly in the "Herald" five weeks after the date of the number containing the competition.

"Fifer" (Kirkcaldy).—Glad to hear our papers are so popular in the ancient "Kingdom of Fife." If the readers never use any worse language than "Rats!" etc., nobody ought to complain much.

"Tomboy" (Parkstone).—Seven in your family, and keen on the companion papers. Good, indeed! If only you could do as you do, get two copies of the "Herald" every week, and use the spare one to advantage, "Tom Merry's Weekly" would come along all right, and very soon, too. I should like to see you all standing on chairs to look over your mother's shoulders at the illustrations. "Quid pro quo" means "giving as good as one got," "getting one's own back," or anything in that way.

"Llewellyn ap Rees" advises everybody to get "School and Sport" (but I think nearly everybody has now), and wants another yarn about that capital chap, Fatty Wynn. Very likely Mr. Clifford will oblige; I think he has a soft spot in his heart for David.

H. H. (Portsmouth) writes on behalf of himself and seven chums to ask for more Talbot. At this the anti-Talbotites will groan loudly, no doubt. But they are not a big crowd.

"A Loyal Gemite of Hull."—I knew that query would not be long in coming. "How old is Baggy Trimble?" Add the ages of Tom Merry, Talbot, Figgins, and D'Arcy together. Multiply by eight. Divide by sixteen. Deduct twenty-two, and add seven. The answer is—well, what is it?

W. H. (Hulme).—(1) The Terrible Three have been at St. Jim's ever since the "Gem" started in 1907, and Manners and Lowther were there before that. Yet they are only fifteen! Queer, isn't it? (2) The Shell is higher than the Fourth, but there is not a great difference. (3) Mauleverer probably gets bigger supplies of money than Gussy. Baggy is a second Bunter, you say. Are you a second Herlock Sholmes?

"Once Loyal 'M.' and 'G.' Readers."—Since become disloyal, I gather. A pity, but it cannot be helped. Stories written to the wishes of those who can't bear the slightest exaggeration, and who seem to read simply for the sake of cavilling, would be dull stuff.

H. S. (Worthing).—You are a real true-blue supporter. Thanks!

"Three Loyal Australian Readers."—Places and characters quite imaginary.

"A Squeaker."—Just as pleased to hear from new readers as old ones. You will be an old reader some day, I hope.

V. W. S. L. (Plymouth).—A serial for the "Herald" would be accepted, if good enough, and of the right kind; but the chances of an amateur doing just what we require are not great. Our readers generally do not appear to care for articles. Afraid I cannot do as you suggest re Anti-German League pledge.

"Two Loyal Manx Readers."—It would be impossible to arrange the stories so that some two dozen characters each got a prominent place about twice a year. The interest

would be less. Still, I will see if it is practicable to give Kerruish something more than a mere walking-on part before long.

"Two Admiring Carlow Girls."—In reply to your queries: (1) No; only friendship. (2) I don't know. Gussy's affections are unstable. (3) I can only say—wait and see! Re "Boys' Friend 3d. Library," there will be four numbers each month, commencing in March.

"A Scottish Reader."—Jimmy Silver & Co. won't always be at the bottom of the list. I note you want Wally D'Arcy and Bernard Glyn in the front row. But it's getting terribly crowded!

C. T. K. (Manchester).—Glad to hear from so old a reader. Suggestions noted.

A. H. (Leeds).—Place imaginary. There is not much to choose between Tom and Talbot as all-round athletes. You would like the stories better if Gussy were made more sensible, you say. But other people would not!

T. C. L. (Snodland).—Glad to hear you are better. I do not edit the "Marvel," but the editorial office is only a couple of doors from mine in the same corridor. The Jack, Sam, and Pete yarns in the "P. P." are earlier than those in the "Marvel"—hence Algy's non-appearance in them. Thanks for promise of help in getting new readers.

"A Gem Lover" (Hessle).—I don't think D'Arcy can help it now. He might have done, perhaps, if he had tried earlier. Storyette will be considered for the "Gem"—cannot tell you its fate.

H. E. S. (Salford).—Quite a fair copy. But artistic ability is best judged from original work.

A. T. (Barnsley).—Portraits of the authors named are not to be had. Probably the cave is the same. Relationship suggested unlikely. All the boys you mention are quite minor characters, and I cannot give you the information desired because I have not got it.

Miss G. O.—Pleased to hear that you think our stories get more interesting each week.

P. W. (Pirton).—We get hundreds of storyettes each week, and only a few can have prizes. As yours were on post-cards, they were sent in all right, but were not good enough, I suppose.

J. A. (Brixton Hill).—Thanks for all the nice things you say.

D. G. (Swansea) would be glad to see you, and would like to join a "Gem" League to be formed in that town.

"Cheery Bob" (Glasgow).—Depends so much on what the boy is worth, doesn't it?

A. C. (Sutton).—I feel sure you will like the "Boys' Friend," especially the Jimmy Silver yarns.

"Norbury Flapper."—You are not the only one who asks for the regeneration of Levison, who really seems to have made more friends than he deserves.

H. E. S. (Salford).—Sketch quite fair, but, of course, copying is easy for anyone who can draw at all.

"Bunny" (Glasgow).—Why should I be angry? I don't get my wool off even when the papers are slanged, and you write quite nicely about them.

F. E. (Newton Abbot) thinks "Cousin Ethel's Schooldays" the best serial the "Gem" has ever had. And he is not a girl, either; or, if he is, he has deceived me in anything but a "Frank" manner.

E. B. (Newton Heath), who is a girl reader, does not agree at all with those who think decent slang low and demoralising.

D. G. (Hawke's Bay, N.Z.).—Very glad to hear from you, old chap! I will see what can be done about a Colonial readers' competition.

"A Reader" (Leeds).—Quite a new reader—one week old—but already sure you are going to be an old reader some day! Good!

W. B. F. (Sheffield).—Plenty of thin people are quite strong. Get a cheap book of physical exercises—there are plenty of them—and try some.

"A Sheffield Reader."—Your notions of fairness seem queer. Do you think it was fair that Yorkshire should win—as Yorkshire did—the County Cricket Championship in several successive years? If so, why grumble at the Greyfriars victories?

W. E. (Saltley).—Glad to hear from you. Joke not quite good enough.

A. N. O. N. (West Hampstead).—"Tosh" is not quite the word. Stories of school life which did not exaggerate at all would be dull reading.

C. V. (Nelson).—There is no "Magnet" League, except the local ones formed by members. Twenty-six numbers go to a volume.

Your Editor