

6-9-68

"A GANGSTER AT ST. JIM'S!" Thrilling Complete School Mystery Yarn Within!

The GEM 2^D



Night Prowlers!

A GANGSTER



CHAPTER 1. A Midnight Alarm.

"HUSH!"

Tom Merry spoke in a low, cautious whisper. Still and silent lay the vast pile of St. Jim's. Upon the wide green quadrangle the moon glimmered faintly, and the old elms cast ghostly shadows. Within the School House the corridors were dark and gloomy, only from under one or two doors came a gleam of light, showing where some "swotting" student still burned the midnight oil.

"Hush, you chaps! I believe I heard something!"

The three juniors stopped in the dark passage, still as mice, listening. Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther—known in St. Jim's as the Terrible Three—were on the warpath. The Fourth Form dormitory was the object of their midnight raid.

There the chums of Study No. 6 were sleeping the sleep of the just, little dreaming that their rivals for the leadership of the School House juniors were up and doing.

The Terrible Three had left their sleeping quarters as the clock boomed out the hour from the tower of St. Jim's, and, as the last stroke died away, they stole silently down the shadowy passage towards the head of the stairs. It was then that Tom Merry suddenly called a halt.

The three chums listened breathlessly. The raid had been planned in the sunny afternoon, under the elm trees in the quadrangle, and then it had seemed a ripping good idea to

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Tom Merry & Co. chance the risk of catching a cold when they raid a rival dormitory at midnight. But the chance of catching a burglar never entered into their calculations!

the Terrible Three. Now, in the still hour of night, in the midst of a silent, sleeping building, it did not seem quite so ripping. They had hardly thought that the old, familiar House could seem so strange and ghostly and eerie. And Tom's whispering warning sent the hearts of his comrades beating and thumping like hammers.

"Wh-wh-what was it?" murmured Manners.

"I didn't hear anything," muttered Monty Lowther. "You're getting nervous, Tom."

"Shut up! I believe it's the new master moving about."

"Oh crumbs! Mr. Keene?"

"Yes. And if he catches us it will mean a warming, I can tell you. He's down on us. Curious thing that so many people should be down on nice, harmless chaps like us."

Manners and Lowther gave a silent chuckle. They listened intently for a repetition of the sound that had alarmed Tom Merry. It would certainly have been no joke to be caught by Amos Keene,

the new master; but, at the same time, they did not want to give up the raid upon the Fourth Form dormitory if they could help it.

The master's door was farther down the long passage towards the stairs, and they could see a glimmer of light under it, showing that Mr. Keene was still up. But the door did not open, and the sound was not repeated, and at last even Tom began to think that he had been mistaken.

"What did you think you heard?" whispered Manners.

"A footstep."

"You must have been mistaken."

—IN THIS GRIPPING LONG COMPLETE STORY OF ST. JIM'S!

AT ST JIM'S! By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

"I suppose so, for it seemed to come from the stairs. Come on!"

"I say," muttered Lowther, as a new thought struck him. "I suppose it isn't possible that there's any other party raiding to-night? That would account for it. It would be a good joke to run into Blake and Study No. 6 in the dark."

"Not likely!" said Tom Merry. "Anyway, we've got to risk that. We're not going to give up the raid for nothing."

And the Terrible Three stole on softly, to pass the master's door and reached the stairs. They passed the door safely, with beating hearts, and Tom led the way down the stairs. He was less than half-way down when he stopped, catching his comrades by the arms.

"Silence!" he whispered. "Look!"

There was a glimmer of light in the Hall below. The juniors did not need telling whence it came. It was evidently a glimmer from a partly enclosed electric torch. The three chums stopped still, their hearts beating hard. Who could be moving about in the school in the middle of the night with a torch?

"Wh-wh-who can it be?" muttered Lowther.

Tom pressed his arm.

"It's a burglar!"

Manners and Lowther shivered.

"A b-b-burglar!" muttered Manners. "Let's get back. We don't want to meet a b-b-burglar!"

Tom held him fast as he would have retreated up the stairs.

"Not a sound!" he murmured, in the faintest of whispers. "He's heard us already. Keep still; don't move!"

They did keep still, crouching against the wall at the side of the staircase, scarcely daring to breathe. They were no eowards, but this sudden and unexpected encounter, in so strange a time and place, was enough to shake any nerve. And what followed was not calculated to reassure them.

The ray of light from the torch travelled slowly up the stairs, as if the unseen man below had heard some slight sound, and intended to ascertain whether the coast was clear before he ventured upon the stairs.

The chums hardly breathed. If the ray fell upon them and revealed their presence there, what would be the result? They clenched their hands hard. It might mean a desperate struggle with some dangerous ruffian.

The ray of light did not reach them. It passed carelessly over the stairs, and missed the three boys crouching against the banisters. Apparently satisfied, the unseen man shut off the light, and darkness reigned. Then a faint foot-fall told that he was ascending the stairs.

The boys had no time to think. The man was close upon them before they quite knew that he was coming, and they could only hope that he would pass them and fail to discover their presence.

They held their breath. Unfortunately Monty Lowther had been holding his already, and he was beginning to feel suffocated. He held on as long as he could, as long as flesh and blood could stand the strain, and then gave vent to an involuntary, but exceedingly noisy, gasp. There was a muttered exclamation in the darkness.

"Diablo!"

It was a foreigner with whom they had to deal. The next moment a groping hand in the gloom struck against them, and Tom Merry, realising that all was up, took his courage in both hands, as it were, and sprang at the unseen enemy.

The result was disastrous to the midnight intruder, and to Tom Merry himself. The impact sent the burglar reeling down the stairs, and Tom Merry went with him, and, clutching each other, they rolled to the bottom of the staircase. Tom was dazed and breathless when he reached the bottom, but he was still clinging to his foe.

"Help!" he muttered. "Help—help!"

"Help!" roared Manners and Lowther; and, caring nothing for danger now, they raced down the stairs to the assistance of their chum.

Their shouts rang through the School House.

"Diablo!"

The burglar was struggling furiously with Tom Merry. Tom—strong and athletic as he was for his age—was, of

course, a child in the hands of a grown man. He would have fared badly had not Lowther and Manners come tearing to the rescue.

Manners groped for the burglar and found him, and threw an arm round his neck from behind, and tried to drag him off Tom. Lowther picked up the electric torch the burglar had dropped on the stairs, and switched on the light. Then, placing the torch quickly on the bottom stair, he sprang to the aid of Tom and Manners.

The burglar had dashed Tom Merry to the floor, and was turning on Manners like a tiger. Lowther had hold of him in a moment, and he struggled between the two. Tom Merry, gasping and dazed, but still game, jumped up, and laid hold of the ruffian again.

The light was streaming on the dark stairs now from Mr. Keene's door in the corridor above. The new master of the Shell, aroused by the disturbance, had come hastily out of his room, and was looking down the stairs in amazement.

"Help!" shouted the Terrible Three in unison, as they grappled with the burglar.

Mr. Keene came running downstairs. Other doors were opening now, lights were flashing, and voices calling. The whole School House was roused by the terrible uproar in the middle of the night.

The burglar, with a powerful effort, wrenched himself loose from the chums, and staggered a few paces away. Encouraged by the help near at hand, the heroes of the Shell were springing upon him again, when he whipped an iron jemmy from his pocket, and his hand went up savagely to strike.

Tom Merry jumped back, dragging back his chums with him.

"Hold on, chaps!"

They could not face a weapon like that. The burglar, exhausted by the struggle, reeled panting against the wall, his hand still upraised. Mr. Keene had reached the bottom of the stairs, and Mr. Kidd, the master of the School House, was upon the spot at the same moment.

Lights were gleaming on all sides, and the midnight intruder was cut off from escape by the window in the rear of the house by which he had entered. He stood like a wild animal at bay—gasping, defiant, desperate. He was not a pleasant object to look at. His face had been blackened with soot from forehead to chin, for purposes of disguise, and from the sooty blackness of his countenance his white teeth gleamed, bared like a savage dog's, and his eyes glittered with ferocity. Escape was cut off. He stood at bay.

On the stairs stood Mr. Keene, the master of the Shell, with a poker in his hand; and behind him were a score of fellows in nightshirts and pyjamas.

Mr. Kidd, whose bed-room was a floor lower than Mr. Keene's, had come upon the scene even more quickly, with a dressing-gown hastily thrown round his athletic form. Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, was only a few moments behind him, and Kildare had caught up a cricket bat before leaving his room. After Kildare came Darrell, Rushden, and a dozen School House seniors, and from the Fourth Form dormitory, which was on the same floor, came a crowd of juniors; and, needless to say, Jack Blake and his chums of Study No. 6 were in the lead.

Like a wild beast surrounded by hounds and hunted to a corner, the grim-visaged ruffian stood glaring upon his foes, still with the weapon raised to strike any who should approach close to him, and there was a pause.

"You had better give in, my man," said Mr. Kidd, the Housemaster, holding up the torch he carried, and surveying the blackened face of the burglar. "If you hurt anybody with that weapon it will be all the worse for you."

The ruffian snarled savagely and gripped the jemmy tighter.

"Keep back!" He spoke in English with a nasal accent.

"You will not be allowed to escape," said the Housemaster calmly. "If you do not immediately surrender yourself you will be seized by force."

"I will kill whoever approaches me."

"We shall see. Kildare, give me that bat, please! Mr. Keene, you and I between us can manage this rascal, I fancy. Boys, stand back!"

"I—I— Yes, certainly!" said Mr. Keene, in a strange, halting voice.

For the first time the burglar looked towards the master of the Shell. Amos Keene was pale as death, and there was a strange light in his eyes, and his lips were twitching.

Those around him who noticed it put it down to "funk," and certainly the master of the Shell looked as if he were a prey to deadly fear. The man with the blackened face stared at Mr. Keene, and his eyes blazed.

"You," he exclaimed—"you will lay a hand upon me!" Mr. Keene made a step towards him.

"My good man," he said, in halting tones, "it will be better for you if you surrender quietly. Don't be a fool. Give in. I advise you, and you will be all the better for it in the long run."

A strange look came into the ruffian's eyes.

"Come," said the Housemaster testily, "we have no time to waste, fellow. Make up your mind."

He took a grip on the cane handle of the bat. Jemmy or no jemmy, the burglar did not look as if he would have much chance against the athletic Mr. Kidd.

The jemmy went with a clang to the floor.

"I give in!" growled the ruffian. "Diable! I am your prisoner!"

"You are wise."

The next moment the man was pinioned by the Housemaster and Mr. Keene, one on each side. Mr. Kidd called for a rope, which was promptly brought by Jack Blake.

The Housemaster secured the ruffian's wrists.

"Shall I telephone for the police to come from Rylcombe, sir?" asked Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's.

Mr. Keene looked round hastily.

"It would be better to lock the man up in the box-room till morning, would it not, Mr. Kidd?" he asked quickly. "The police would not be here under an hour, and we do not wish to remain up for them."

The Housemaster nodded.

"Yes, he will be safe enough in the box-room. Show a light, Kildare, and we will take him there."

The burglar walked between the Housemaster and the master of the Shell without a word, a crowd following them. The man with the blackened face did not seem to be down-cast by his capture. On the contrary, there was a jauntiness in his step, and an assured impudence in his look, which seemed strange enough in one in his situation.

The key of the box-room was turned upon him, and he was left to consider himself there till morning. The excitement was over, and the boys prepared to go back to bed to discuss the startling happening rather than return to the arms of Morpheus. Mr. Kidd signed to Tom Merry to stop.

"You were the one to give the alarm, I believe, Merry?" he said.

"Yes, sir!" said Tom.

He felt an inward uneasiness. He had hoped in the excitement to escape question as to how he happened to be out of the Shell dormitory at that particular time of night. But the Housemaster evidently wanted to know all about it.

"Did the burglar wake you up, Merry?"

"N-no, sir!"

"How did you come to be awake, then?"

"Manners woke me up, sir."

"Ah! Did you hear the burglar, Manners?"

"N-no, sir! Monty Lowther woke me up."

The Housemaster turned to Lowther.

"Then you were the one who first heard the burglar, Lowther?"

"No, sir!" stammered Monty. "I—I woke up because—because—"

"Well, what did you wake up for?"

"The alarm clock went off, sir."

"Indeed! Does your alarm clock usually go off in the middle of the night?"

"No, sir, not exactly; but—"

"But you had timed it to do so, I suppose, on this occasion?"

Monty Lowther had to admit the soft impeachment.

"You may as well be frank," said the Housemaster calmly. "You were out of your dormitory at forbidden hours, you three! Is it not so?"

The Terrible Three looked at one another.

"Come, Merry! In the circumstances, as you have certainly been instrumental in preventing a robbery from taking place, I shall inflict no punishment. I simply desire to know exactly what happened. Can you remember clearly now?"

"Quite clearly, sir," said Tom promptly. "We were out

of the dormitory, sir, and coming down the stairs when we came upon the giddy burglar. Then the rumpus started."

"And what were you coming downstairs for?"

"Er—because the Fourth Form dormitory is a floor lower than ours, sir."

"So you were going to pay a visit to the Fourth Form dormitory?"

"Yes, sir."

"You bouncer!" exclaimed Jack Blake. "You were, were you?"

"Silence, Blake! What was your object in planning a visit to the Fourth Form room at such an hour, Merry?"

"We were going to work off a surprise on Study No. 6, sir," said Tom Merry regretfully. "The game's up now, of course."

"I am glad to hear that," said Mr. Kidd grimly. "I shall excuse you upon this occasion, Merry, as the matter has turned out so fortunately. The next time you will not escape so easily. You may go back to your room."

"Thank you, sir!"

The chums of the Shell went upstairs again. They were disappointed, it is true, but still, they were in a satisfied mood upon the whole. They had captured a burglar, and greatly distinguished themselves, and it was certain that their exploits would throw Study No. 6 in the shade.

Ere long silence and slumber reigned in the great school; but there were some who were wakeful. The captured burglar, shut up in the locked box-room; the master of the Shell, pacing his room with a white, haggard face and burning eyes; and four juniors in the Fourth Form dormitory, sitting on their beds and talking in low tones. Study No. 6 were wide awake as the school clock chimed out again. One good turn deserves another; and Jack Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy thought so. The happenings of that eventful night were not yet over.

CHAPTER 2.

A Startling Discovery.

BLAKE slipped off his bed as the clock chimed out.

"Are you ready, you chaps?"

"Rather!" said Herries and Digby together.

"Excuse me, I am not quite weady," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I cannot find my monocle. Pwaw wait for me, deah boys!"

"Monocles are barred, ass!" said Blake. "You may get a fist in your eye this journey, and then your giddy monocle will give you a pain. Don't be a sillier cuckoo than you can help, Adolphus!"

"You are vewy wude, Blake, an'—"

"Shut up! Now, chaps, ready for the raid? I'm going to take a wet sponge with some red ink on it. I think that's what Tom Merry needs to improve his countenance, and that's what he's going to get, anyway. Perhaps he'll wish he hadn't started on the warpath, and started us innocent chaps retaliating."

"Ha, ha, ha! I shall take a stuffed stocking," said Herries.

"I've got a pillow," said Dig. "What have you got, Gussy?"

"I'm lookin' for my monocle," said D'Arcy, who was groping on the floor in the dark. "I am vewy wegwetful to diswegard your opinion, Blake, deah boy, but weally I cannot start on this expedition without my—"

"Then we'll leave you here," said Blake. "I'm getting fed-up with you and your monocle. You are going on exactly the right road to get a prize thick ear, Gussy. I'm warning you for your own good."

"Thanks vewy much, Blake! But I weally—"

The chums did not wait to hear D'Arcy finish.

They left the dormitory, leaving Arthur Augustus still groping hopelessly in the dark for his beloved monocle.

Blake led the way with a light step.

The three juniors were grinning hugely in the dark. The Terrible Three had started out to raid them, and the unexpected incident of the burglar had sent them bootless home. But Blake could see no reason why the compliment should not be returned.

It would be a surprise for Tom Merry to be attacked in his own stronghold, and it would be one up to Study No. 6 if they carried out the scheme successfully.

The School House was very dark and silent. To reach the stairs the chums had to pass the box-room where the captured burglar was locked in. As they drew near it Blake suddenly stopped, and his companions halted.

"Hold on!" whispered Jack.

The juniors "held on," wondering what was the matter.

"What is it?" whispered Dig. "Not another giddy burglar?"

"There's someone on the stairs!"

"I didn't hear anything."
 "But I did, my son," said Blake, in a low voice. "I tell you there's someone coming down."
 "It can't be another burglar."
 "No; but it's very likely Tom Merry on the warpath again. He may only have waited till the House quietened down."

The chums chuckled silently.
 "If it is, we'll get the Terrible Three in a beautiful ambush," murmured Herries. "Let's get into the recess near the box-room, and swipe 'em as they pass."
 "Good enough!"

The School House at St. Jim's was an ancient building, full of strange twists and turns. Near the door of the room that was used as a box-room was a deep recess, in which mischievous juniors had many a time lain in ambush for boys coming down the passage. It did not take the juniors long to get into it silently in their stocking feet.
 "Here he comes!" murmured Blake. "Can't you hear his footprints, chaps?"

All three of the chums could hear the sound now of faint, cautious footfalls.

Whoever the mysterious individual was, he was evidently there to visit the burglar.

It was mystery piled on mystery, and the chums were lost in wonder.

They dared not move lest their presence should become known to the unseen man; but they could only remain still, breathless, expectant.

There was a faint creak as the box-room door opened. Then a whispering voice in the gloom:

"Lasalle!"

Blake gave a jump.

He knew that voice, though it spoke in a faint and trembling whisper.

It was the voice of Amos Keene!

The new master of the Shell—the mysterious new master at St. Jim's, whom, before this, the boys had been puzzled about by more than one strange circumstance.

Blake, in his excitement, gripped Digby's arm, so hard that Dig was hard put to it not to gasp aloud. He gave Blake, as he supposed, a punch in the ribs as a hint to let go; but in the dark the punch alighted upon Herries' back, and the astonished Herries staggered against the wall.



While Manners threw an arm round the burglar's neck and dragged him off Tom, Lowther, having put the torch on the stairs, came rushing to their assistance.

Someone had come downstairs from the upper floor, and turned into the passage leading to the box-room, and the Fourth Form dormitory.

"He's alone," muttered Herries.

Blake nudged his companions:

"Don't act till I give you the word. Mind your eye! It may not be Tom Merry at all."

The warning held the chums mute and still as the foot-steps came nearer.

A form, dimly seen, loomed up in the darkness of the passage.

Faintly as the hidden juniors discerned it they could see that it was not the form of a boy, but of a grown-up man.

Who could it be?

That it was a second burglar was extremely unlikely. But why should anybody belonging to St. Jim's go about the House at such an hour with such cautious tread, and without carrying a light?

The footsteps passed them and stopped. The hearts of the juniors were beating with excitement as they realised that the unseen man had stopped at the door of the box-room.

Click!

It was the faintest of sounds, but sufficient to tell the breathless three that the door of the box-room had been unlocked from the outside.

"You silly cuckoo!" gasped Herries.

It was very injudicious at such a moment, but Herries had caught his head a crack against the wall, and he was surprised and hurt.

There was a gasp from the doorway of the box-room.

In the still silence of the night, Herries' words might have been heard half across the School House, and the new master was not much more than six or seven paces distant!

It was clear that Amos Keene had instantly taken the alarm.

There was not a second to lose.

What the consequences might be if the master of the Shell discovered their presence there, Blake did not know; but he knew they could not be pleasant.

He seized Herries and Digby each by the arm, and dashed away, dragging them with him, in a hurried, frantic flight.

"Who—who is there? Stop!"

It was the panting, frightened voice of the master of the Shell.

The juniors took no heed.

Their only thought was to get back to their dormitory, and scuttle into bed before their identity could be discovered.

But as they fled a groping hand caught Blake's head and fastened upon his hair, and he was dragged to a halt.

Although he was hurt, he had presence of mind enough not to call out and betray himself by the sound of his voice.

He released Dig and Herries and turned round, setting his teeth to keep back a cry of pain. He still had the wet sponge, daubed with red ink, in his hand, and he brought it into play in a flash.

The master of the Shell was clutching at him, as if determined to know who had discovered him at such an inopportune moment. Blake dashed the wet sponge into his face, squeezing it as hard as he could.

There was a gasp, and the grip on his head relaxed.

Blake tore himself away in a twinkling.

The master was gasping, and trying to rub the ink out of his eyes. The three juniors bolted on, and dashed into the Fourth Form dormitory.

There was a howl in the darkness as Blake collided with somebody, and they went in a scrambling heap to the floor together. As they did so, there was a crack as of a breaking piece of glass.

"Wh-wh-what is it?" gasped Blake, startled out of his wits by such an encounter in that moment of wild and thrilling excitement.

Dig had closed the door, and he and Herries were already bolting into bed. Blake staggered to his feet as he heard the voice of D'Arcy beneath him.

"You wuff bwute, you have bwoken my eyeglass!"

"Blow your old eyeglass!" growled Blake. "Nip into bed, sharp!"

"You have hurt me!"

"Ass! Into bed!"

Blake threw his sponge under the nearest bed, and then seized D'Arcy by the shoulders and ran him towards his. D'Arcy wriggled protestingly. He wasn't accustomed to hurried movements. But every second Blake was dreading to see the master of the Shell put his head into the dormitory.

"Blake, I insist upon you weleasin' me. I am not accustomed to such wuffness."

Blake slammed him upon his bed.

"Ass!" he whispered fiercely. "Cave! Old Keene's coming!"

"Theah is no weason why you should act so wuffly, Blake, an' I tell you——"

"Into bed, cuckoo! Into bed, ass!" hissed Blake. And he thumped Arthur Augustus into bed and jammed down the bedclothes over him. "Keep quiet, idiot! Don't make a sound, lunatic! If you so much as breathe, I'll break you into little pieces, maniac!"

"I weally pwotest——"

Blake stuffed the bedclothes over Arthur Augustus' head, and choked off his protests. He heard a sound in the passage without, and bolted into his own bed and drew the clothes over him. His innocent face rested on the pillow with the eyes closed, but his heart was beating excitedly.

To his horror the voice of Arthur Augustus was audible again. The swell of St. Jim's had sat up in bed in a state of extreme indignation, popping up a good deal like a Jack-in-the-box as soon as he found himself no longer held down.

"Blake, I am afraid that our friendship will have to cease," said Arthur Augustus. "It is all vewy well to tell me that Mr. Keene is comin', but nothin' can excuse such wuffness and violence. I—— Oh!"

A boot, hurtling through the darkness, caught the complaining swell of St. Jim's on the side of the head, and cut short the flow of his eloquence.

"Blake, you are not longer my friend——"

"Shut up! He's coming!" whispered Blake, in agony. "Gussy, old chap, this is serious! Do you hear? For mercy's sake shut up!"

The door of the dormitory opened.

Fortunately, even Arthur Augustus realised from Blake's tone that something unusual was afoot, and to the immense relief of the chums he said no more, but lay down and covered himself up.

A second later Mr. Keene was looking into the dormitory. He heard nothing but the steady breathing of sleepers, and the faint snores of some of the juniors. But they did not satisfy so old a bird as Amos Keene.

"Boys!"

It was a faint whisper, but clearly audible to the wakeful ones. Mr. Keene was in a difficult position, which might have troubled a man of stronger nerve. He had given himself away to somebody, he did not know whom. He did not know whether the boys he had almost captured were juniors or seniors, but he had come to the Fourth Form dormitory because most of the mischief on that floor proceeded from the Fourth. If the delinquents were there, he wished to know it. If they were not there he did not want to awaken any of the juniors, and start them wondering what Mr. Keene was doing, wandering about the house in the middle of the night.

"Boys!"

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If any of the juniors were awake, they might answer the voice of authority. If they had sufficient presence of mind to pretend to be asleep, he knew that he could do nothing without making matters, that were already bad, worse.

"Boys, are any of you awake?"

Still silence.

No sound, but a businesslike snore from Herries.

The master of the Shell waited a full minute, holding the handle of the door, straining his eyes into the gloom of the dormitory.

Then, baffled, he withdrew, and the door silently closed.

There was a faint creak as the master of the Shell stole quietly away down the passage.

For fully five minutes the dormitory remained silent, the chums not moving or speaking, in order to make assurance doubly sure.

Blake was the first who sat up in bed and spoke.

"That was a narrow shave, chaps!"

And even Blake's voice was a little shaky.

"A blessed mystery about this," said Herries. "What could Amos Keene want paying a visit to the burglar in the night?"

"Did you hear him call him by name?" said Blake.

"Yes. Shows that he knew him."

"It's a giddy mystery," said Digby. "How could a master at St. Jim's know a burglar—and a French chap, too? Looks queer."

"Very queer," said Blake dryly—"very queer indeed!"

"We always knew there was a bit of a mystery about Amos Keene. You remember how he started to be down on Tom Merry the very day he came here; and what Merry told us about his having a letter from India, written to him by Merry's cousin out there? He's a funny animal altogether. And now we find that he has an extensive acquaintance among the criminal classes——"

"Oh, I say, one man ain't an extensive acquaintance!"

"My dear chap, if he knows one he knows others. I don't know what we ought to do about the matter; but a still tongue shows a wise head."

"You mean we are not to give him away?"

"It's a strange tale to tell, kids, and it's possible we might not be believed. And he may have innocent intentions all the time. A man isn't bound to be a bad 'un because we can't understand what his little game is," said Blake sagely. "Anyway, one thing's a dead cert; if he discovers that we were the parties who found him visiting the burglar, he will be down on us like a hundred-weight of bricks. And he's down on Study No. 6 as it is."

"Right-ho!"

"So mum's the word."

And this important point settled, the chums went to sleep, without troubling to answer the curious inquiries of Arthur Augustus. As Blake said, the swell of the School House had been bother enough for one night. And they slept like tops till the unwelcome clang of the rising-bell called them up to a new day.

CHAPTER 3

Tom Merry's Little Joke!

TOM MERRY seized Blake by the shoulder as he came down that morning.

"Have you heard?"

Blake stared at him.

"Heard what?"

"The news."

"What news?"

"The burglar's escaped!"

Blake gave a jump.

"Escaped! The chap in the box-room?"

"Yes!"

"Is this a little game?" asked Blake suspiciously. "Has he really hooked it?"

"Honour bright!" said Tom Merry. "All the fellows who are down are talking about it. I've looked into the box-room myself. Kiddlets is looking quite worried."

"My hat!" said Blake. "So the man's gone, has he?"

"Yes, I tell you. And Kiddlets phoned to the station before he knew, and the police are coming from Rylcombe to fetch him, and he isn't here!"

"That accounts——"

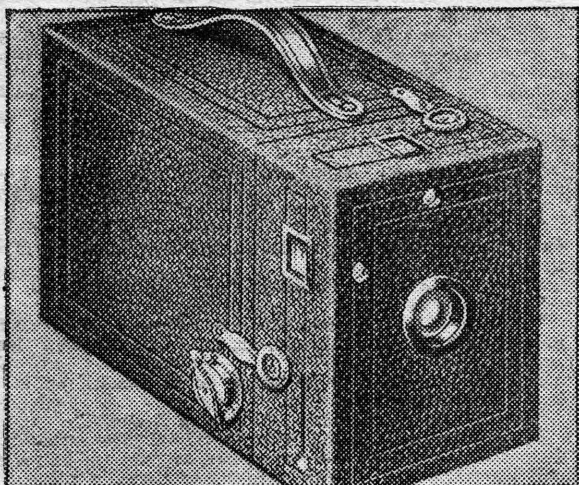
"Eh? What accounts? And for what?" asked Tom Merry.

"Nothing," said Blake. "I'm going to have a squint at the box-room. I want to see with my own peepers how the boulder bounded."

Jack Blake hurried off to the box-room with Tom Merry.

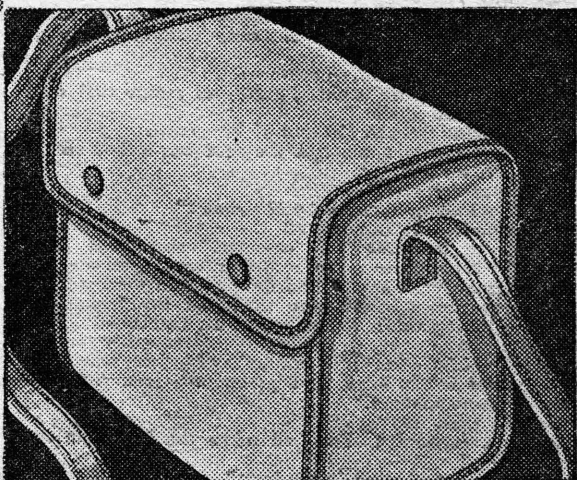
(Continued on page 8.)

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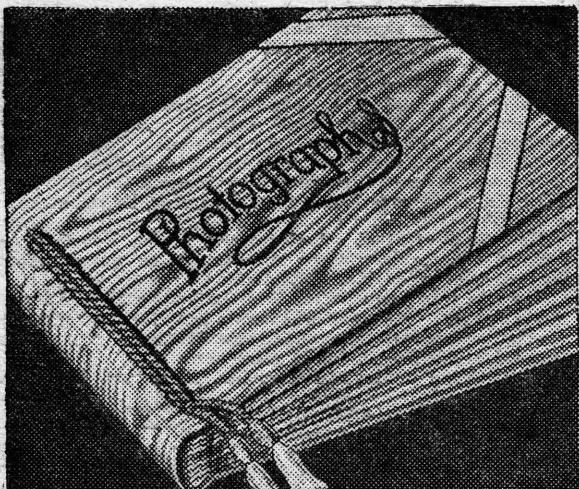
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"A Gangster at St. Jim's!"

(Continued from page 6.)

The news was certainly true. The room was vacant—so far as the burglar was concerned.

Two forms could be seen in it—those of Mr. Kidd and Inspector Skeat, the fat, pompous police official from Rylcombe.

The inspector had just arrived, and was listening to the Housemaster's explanation that the captured burglar had made his disappearance. A policeman was waiting below.

"The man is gone," said Mr. Kidd, looking very worried, as Blake peeped in at the open door. He had his back to the door, and did not notice the juniors in the passage. "I had not, of course, the faintest idea that such was the case when I telephoned to the station. It appeared impossible for him to get away."

The fat inspector wagged his head wisely.

"There's no telling what tricks these rascals will get up to!" he exclaimed. "I see that the window is open. Inference that he escaped that way."

"There is a blank wall below, and no means of descent," said Mr. Kidd testily. "He certainly wasn't able to do anything of the kind."

And Blake murmured, *sotto voce*:

"Then the inference is that he did not escape that way. Good old Sexton Blake!"

The inspector gnawed the end of his pencil.

"But I thought you said that the door was locked on the outside, Mr. Kidd?"

"That was the case."

"Yet the burglar escaped by the door?"

"Evidently, as he did not use the window."

"Unless he went up the chimney," murmured Tom Merry. "Why doesn't the inspector track him up the giddy chimney? He might find footprints in the soot."

"And the man's hands were tied, you say?" said the inspector, jotting down something in his notebook.

"Yes."

"Then," said the inspector triumphantly, "the man must have got his hands loose, and picked the lock from the inside in some manner."

"Do you think so?"

"Oh, yes, certainly! You had taken the key from the lock, and—"

"No, I had left the key in the lock."

The inspector looked crestfallen for a moment.

"Ah, yes, of course, it is easy to turn a key from the other side, to an accomplished cracksmen provided with his tools," he said. "You had not searched him?"

"No. As his hands were tied, I did not think of doing so."

"Then all is clear. He wriggled his hands loose, and with some instrument he unlocked the door from the inside. You agree with me that it is clear?"

"I am quite willing to trust to your experience, inspector. You should know more about these matters than I should," said the Housemaster.

The inspector purred; and Tom Merry whispered to Blake in the passage:

"Kiddlets doesn't believe him. He's got a theory of his own."

The inspector was busy making notes in his fat notebook, though what he wanted to make notes for was a mystery. Perhaps he did not know himself; but it looked impressive and businesslike. Then he laid notebook and pencil on one of the trunks in the box-room, and began to make an examination of the apartment.

Mr. Kidd watched him with ill-concealed impatience.

"As you seem likely to be detained, inspector, I think I will leave you, if you will excuse me," he said. "I have duties to attend to."

"Certainly, sir!" said the inspector. "I also have my duty to do, and you can trust George Frederick Skeat to do it. I hope we shall soon be on the track of the rascal."

Mr. Kidd, whose face expressed a decided unbelief, strode from the room. The two juniors had nipped into the recess near at hand in time, and the Housemaster passed without noticing that they were there.

Blake was grinning.

"Let's watch Sexton Blake," he murmured. "It's really too funny! I wouldn't miss it for worlds!"

They crept back to the door. The fat inspector was evidently bent upon rivalling the famous Sexton, for he was examining every corner of the box-room with a critical eye.

What he expected to find was a mystery; but, doubtless,

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material for some more notes in the fat pocket-book lying on the trunk.

He came towards the door at last, and the two juniors stepped quickly back into the recess. Mr. Skeat examined the lock and the key, and gave a grunt of satisfaction.

"Ah, the key has evidently been turned from the inside with a pair of pliers!" he muttered, loud enough for the juniors to hear. "I can distinctly see the traces."

Blake double up with mirth.

"Here, shut up!" whispered Tom Merry. "You'll give us away!"

"Oh, my only maiden Aunt Matilda!"

"What's the matter, ass? There's nothing funny in his finding traces on the key if the burglar chap turned it from the inside."

"No, if he did; but he didn't!"

"How do you know?"

"Because—he, he!—I was here—he, he!—and the door was unlocked from the outside—he, he, he!—and I saw it. He, he, he!"

And Blake seemed to be trying to tie himself up in a knot. Tom Merry shook him.

"Quiet! He'll hear you! Don't give it away!"

Blake controlled himself with an effort. The inspector's deductions as to what had—or, rather, had not—taken place, and his triumphant discovery of traces that did not exist, proving the occurrence of something that had never happened, was excruciating, from the juniors' point of view, and Blake deserved great credit for not exploding on the spot.

Having finished his examination of lock and key, the inspector passed down the passage, his eyes bent carefully on the linoleum.

Tom Merry waited till he had turned a corner, and then he darted out of the recess and into the box-room. Blake was after him like a shot.

"Here, I say, what's the game, Tom?"

Tom Merry had opened the inspector's notebook, which lay on top of a trunk. He was busy with the inspector's official pencil. Blake glanced over his shoulder, and nearly gave a yell, for at the end of the important notes made by Mr. Skeat, Tom Merry had written, in big letters, the following sentence:

"GEORGE FREDERICK SKEAT IS THE CHAMPION ASS!"

Tom closed the book again, and left it as he found it.

"Oh, you bouncer!" gasped Blake. "Come on; we shall have to prove a fearfully strong alibi over this!"

They hurried from the box-room. In the alcove they hugged each other with silent mirth.

"Oh, my only panama hat!" sobbed Blake. "I only want to see George Frederick's face when he opens his pocket-book again!"

"Shut up! Here they come!"

There was a rustle of a gown in the passage. Dr. Holmes, the revered Head of St. Jim's, and Mr. Railton, his second master, were coming towards the box-room. They evidently expected to find the inspector there. Mr. Railton had once been headmaster of Clavering, Tom Merry's old school, and after the failure and closing up of Clavering, he had accepted a position at St. Jim's.

He was a great object of interest to the School House juniors, because there was a rumour that he was to become Housemaster when Mr. Kidd left.

The two gentlemen passed into the box-room, and looked around them. The room was empty save for the boxes and the fat pocket-book lying upon one of them. Dr. Holmes glanced round over his gold pince-nez.

"I certainly understood from Mr. Kidd that Mr. Skeat was here."

"Here he is!" said Mr. Railton.

The fat inspector entered the room. The knees of his trousers looked rather dusty, as if he had been down on them looking for clues. No doubt he had.

"Good-morning, gentlemen! This is a bad business! I hope to lay the rascal by the heels shortly, however."

Dr. Holmes, who had had a previous experience of the inspector's ability in laying rascals by the heels, did not look too hopeful.

"I trust so, inspector. It is very unfortunate that he escaped, in a sense, as such a dangerous ruffian ought certainly to be in prison. But if his narrow escape is a warning to him to abandon his evil ways, I shall not be sorry."

The inspector smiled.

"That is hardly likely in the case of such a skilled and desperate criminal," he remarked. "I have worked out exactly what happened here last night. Perhaps you would care to hear the details. The rascal was placed here with his hands tied behind him. He got loose from the bonds by rubbing them against the bars of the fire-grate."

"Indeed!"

"Yes; you see, the remains of the rope are here, and these traces of soot."

"The man's face was blackened with soot for the purposes of disguise," Mr. Railton remarked. "Perhaps that would more easily account for the traces of soot."

The inspector gave him a frigid look.

"I suppose you will admit, sir, that the man got loose somehow," he said, "otherwise he could hardly have picked the lock from the inside and opened the door."

"Yes, it seems undoubted that he got loose somehow."

"Then," said the inspector pompously, "he opened the door from the inside with a pair of pliers, the key being in the lock, as you may observe for yourself by looking at these traces upon the end of the key."

Mr. Railton examined the key.

"What are the traces you refer to, Mr. Skeat?"

"They are perfectly plain to a trained eye, sir," said the fat inspector, with a wave of the hand. "To an amateur, of course, they may be a little obscure—decidedly obscure," repeated the inspector, rather pleased with the word. "Extremely obscure, I may say."

"There is nothing like having a trained intellect brought to bear upon these matters," said Mr. Railton, handing the key back to the inspector.

"My unpractised eye would never have detected the traces you mention upon that key."

"I can quite believe it, sir; otherwise, what would be the use of us detectives?" said the inspector. "We are expected to see what others do not see."

"Blessed are those who don't expect!" murmured Blake.

"Have you discovered anything more, inspector?" asked Mr. Railton, with a blandness which would have seemed suspicious to anyone less absolutely self-satisfied than George Frederick Skeat.

"Certainly!" said the inspector. "After leaving this room the villain went down the passage, descended the lower stairs, and let himself out in the Hall in the usual way. A trace of clay, evidently from his boots, I found here, and again in the Hall just inside the front door."

"Splendid, inspector!" said Mr. Railton. "Few would have discovered that clue, especially as the Hall has been swept this morning. To an untrained intellect it might have appeared that the fragment of clay was deposited there since the Hall was swept, and, as you say, it shows the use of a detective force. You think, then, that you will find the man?"

"I hope so, sir. I haven't his description at present, but Mr. Kidd will give me that. I have made a few notes on the matter," continued the inspector. "Perhaps you would like to see them."

He picked up the pocket-book. Dr. Holmes was thinking of his breakfast, but he was nothing if not polite.

"Certainly, Mr. Skeat."

The inspector opened the pocket-book where the pencil marked the place, and handed it to the doctor.

"These notes relate to the circumstances of the happening last night," he explained. "I shall be glad if you will look at what is written there, and tell me if it is correct."

Dr. Holmes' face was amazed for a moment; then he burst into an involuntary laugh. He was reading—not the notes made by the official, but the concluding note made by Tom Merry, and it struck him as funny.

Mr. Railton, who saw it at the same moment, could not help breaking into a chuckle.

The inspector looked very still and dignified. He knew

that he was not admired at St. Jim's so much as he deserved, but he had never expected the two masters actually to smile when he presented his notes for inspection.

"I fail to see what can excite your risibility there, gentlemen," he said stiffly. "I only wish to know whether what is written there is correct."

"Indeed," said the doctor, "I hope not!"

"I hope not, certainly!" echoed Mr. Railton.

The inspector looked at them in amazement.

"You hope not, gentlemen? I fail to understand you!"

"Do you know what is written here, Mr. Skeat?"

"As I wrote it myself, sir, I can hardly fail to know."

"You wrote this yourself?" ejaculated Mr. Railton.

"Certainly!"

"Then I can only conclude that it is correct," said Mr. Railton, handing the inspector back the book.

Inspector Skeat, puzzled, glanced at the line written there under his notes:

"GEORGE FREDERICK SKEAT IS THE CHAMPION ASS!"



Without a moment's hesitation Blake pushed the ink-soaked sponge straight into the new master's face, squeezing out the ink as he did so. There was a gasp and the master's grip relaxed.

He turned pale with wrath.

"What—who—which— My notebook has been tampered with!"

"Indeed!" said Mr. Railton.

"I never wrote that, sir."

"It is some trick of a junior, I suppose?" said Dr. Holmes, trying to smile. "You must forgive it, inspector. Boys will be boys."

Mr. Skeat, with a countenance of a really beautiful crimson colour, was scratching away at the offending line with his pencil to obliterate it. He was bubbling over with wrath.

"It is a serious thing to tamper with the law!" he almost shouted. "I demand to know who—"

Tom Merry seized Blake by the arm and dragged him away.

"This is where we hook it," he murmured. "There's sure to be a row if we're seen. Some people don't like the truth being told 'em all of a sudden."

And the grinning juniors hurried away.

How Dr. Holmes succeeded in pacifying the angry inspector they did not know; but a little later he left St.

Jim's, with the constable and the unused handcuffs—doubtless on the track of the escaped burglar.

CHAPTER 4. The Secret.

"HA, ha, ha!"
Tom Merry and Jack Blake sat themselves down in the passage and laughed till their ribs ached. The idea of Inspector Skeat showing Dr. Holmes what was written in his notebook, and asking him if it was correct, seemed too funny for words.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake. "Hear us smile!"

"Ho, ho, ho!" echoed Tom Merry. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"Did you see old Skeat's face?"

"Yes. I spotted him through the crack behind the door."

"The champion ass! Ha, ha!"

"He wanted to know if it was correct."

"Ho, ho, ho!"

"When you are quite finished, boys," said a quiet voice.

Blake and Tom jumped up as if they had been electrified. Mr. Kidd, the Housemaster, was looking down at them with an expression he vainly tried to make severe.

"Well, Merry—well, Blake," said the Housemaster calmly, "you seemed to have been immensely amused by something. May I share the joke?"

Tom Merry looked at Blake, and Blake looked at Tom Merry, but they could not find a word to say.

"Come," went on the Housemaster genially, "what is the joke, Merry?"

"The joke, sir?" stammered Tom Merry.

"Yes. I think I spoke plainly. Can it possibly have any relation to the incident Mr. Railton has just described to me concerning Mr. Skeat's pocket-book?"

Tom Merry looked solemnly at Blake.

"Can it, Blake?" he asked.

"I was just about to ask you the question," replied Blake.

"It is very wrong," said Mr. Kidd, "to show impertinence to an officer of the law engaged in the zealous execution of his duty."

"Yes, sir," said Tom; "but—but we couldn't help laughing, sir. His clues are so funny!"

"Indeed! What do you know about his clues?"

Tom turned red; he had given himself away.

"We happened to be in the passage, sir," he murmured.

"Quite by chance, of course?" said Mr. Kidd. "I am afraid I can't allow these chances to go unpunished. You will take fifty lines each for happening to be in the passage when Mr. Skeat was working out his—er—clues."

"Yes, sir."

"And were it not for the fact that I overheard your words by accident I should punish you for the trick upon Mr. Skeat's pocket-book," said the Housemaster. "Of course, as it is I can take no notice of the matter. Go and have your breakfast, or there will be no time for you to have any before school."

"Yes, sir," said the delighted scamps; and they hurried away.

"Well out of that," said Tom Merry, thumping Blake on the back; "but you were a giddy goat to give yourself away!"

"I?" exclaimed Blake indignantly. "Why, it was you!"

"Oh rats!" said Tom Merry, changing the subject. "I say, I want you to tell me how you know the box-room door was unlocked from outside."

"All right; I'll tell you after school. Grub now!"

"There you are, then; go to the other kids," said Tom. And he passed on to the Shell table, leaving Blake speechless with wrath.

Blake went to the Fourth Form table. He was two months younger than Tom, which was a sufficient reason for the scapegrace of the Shell to allude to him disrespectfully as a "kid." Half the rows between Study No. 6 and the Terrible Three were caused by that. The Shell could always put the Fourth Form's back up by treating them as "kids," and they were rather fond of doing it.

Breakfast was nearly over. Tom Merry dropped into his seat beside Manners and Lowther, and expected a reprimand from the master of the Shell, who was in charge of the table. Mr. Amos Keene was usually only too ready to be down on Tom Merry, but on this occasion he let the opportunity slip.

Mr. Keene did not seem himself that morning. Perhaps the happenings over night had disturbed him. He was very pale and wan, and he hardly tasted his breakfast. The boys of the Shell chattered freely in undertones, and more than one master glanced from another table towards them, but Mr. Keene did not appear to notice it. He was evidently distraught.

When the Shell went into their Form-room it was the same. Mr. Keene was absent-minded, and he passed over the most palpable blunders in construing without remark.

It was evident that something was the matter with him. But, disturbed as he was, he had not forgotten to be down on Tom Merry, and when it came to Tom's turn he began to pick faults with him, although Tom's construing was very good. Tom, though certainly a scamp in some respects, was by no means a slacker, and when he worked he worked hard, and his Latin was the best of any in the Form.

That made no difference to Mr. Keene. His unreasonable dislike of Tom, which he had shown from the day of his first coming to St. Jim's, seemed to break out more than ever now that he was in a troubled and worried mood, and, although Tom tried not to displease him, he could not succeed. It was, as Manners said, a case of the wolf and the lamb over again.

"Your Latin is a disgrace to the class, Merry!" said Mr. Keene, after picking faults at almost every other word. "You will remain in this afternoon, and write out the whole of the first book of the *Aeneid*!"

Tom's eyes flashed rebelliously. But he was a sensible lad, and he knew that he had to obey orders, so he took his act of rank injustice in silence. Then the master left him in peace. His chums were full of sympathy when the class was dismissed.

"Horrid rotter!" said Manners. "Never mind, Tom. We'll take it out of him somehow. Every time he's been down on us we have found some means of pulling his august leg in return." I wish I could guess why he was so down on you, though.

Tom shook his head dolefully.

"It's no good trying to guess," he replied. "I've got a feeling that it is something to do with my cousin, Philip Phipps. I know that Phipps and Keene are friends, and correspond, and Philip Phipps never liked me. But why Keene should have such a down on me because of that is a mystery."

"The brute ought to be shown up!" said Manners wrathfully. "I wish we could get Mr. Kidd or Mr. Railton to see him in his true colours; but he's such a soapy brute to the other masters!"

"Hallo, Merry!" said Blake, coming up the passage. "What do you say to a little run this afternoon? I hear that Figgins and the New House fellows are going to have a horse and trap out in Rylcombe, and it would be rather a good wheeze to raid it. We can join forces, you know, and leave our own rows till afterwards."

Tom laughed.

"A jolly good idea, Blake," he said. "Only I happen to be detained for the afternoon."

Blake whistled.

"I say, that's rotten! Who's the beast?"

"Keene!"

"Why, he's always detaining you! Of course, you don't deserve it?"

"No, I don't."

"Of course not. We never do—any of us. A more undeserving set of chaps it would be hard to find—No; I don't mean exactly that, either."

"Seriously, I don't deserve it," said Tom. "The chap has a down on me for something. There's a lot of things we can't understand about old Keene. He's not the kind of man that ought to be a master in a school."

Blake nodded.

"You're right there, my pippin! Do you remember the way he carried on when we handled him that day in the railway carriage, coming to Rylcombe, before we knew that he was a new master here? And now—well, my aunt, I hardly expected it of even him!"

"Hardly expected what?" demanded the Terrible Three together, interested at once by Blake's mysterious tone.

Blake looked round cautiously.

"It's a great secret," he said. "Of course, you chaps won't let it go any farther?"

"Honour bright!"

"I don't know whether I ought to tell you, you know; but it's such a queer business. I'd like to have your opinion on it."

"Is it anything to do with our Form master?"

"Yes, of course it is. But, on second thoughts, perhaps I ought not to mention—"

Tom Merry seized Blake by the shoulders and ran him against the wall.

"Then you'd better tell us upon third thoughts!" said Tom. "For I'm going to knock your head against the wall until you do!"

Blake gave a wriggle, but the Terrible Three pinioned him in a moment.

"Now," said Tom, with a sweet smile, "are you going to unbosom yourself of the dread tale, kid, or shall I knock your head against the wall?"

"Pax!" exclaimed Blake. "I meant to tell you all

along! Look here"—he lowered his voice very mysteriously—"you know the burglar escaped from the box-room last night—"

"All the school knows that."

"Yes; but the door was unlocked from the outside."

"So you said before; but I don't see how—"

"Merry! Blake!"

It was Kildare's voice. The captain of St. Jim's came along the passage.

"Halló, Kildare!" said Tom. "What do you want, kid? Like me to coach you a bit in your cricket for the Redcliffe match?"

Kildare laughed.

"You and Blake are wanted in the Head's study at once."

The two leaders of all the mischief that ever happened in the School House looked at each other in dismay.

"I say, Kildare," exclaimed Blake, "I'm sure you're joking!"

"You won't find it a joke if you don't hurry up!"

"Is the Head alone?"

"No; Mr. Kidd and Mr. Railton are with him."

"Have they—have they got any canes knocking about?" asked Blake diffidently.

"No," said the captain, laughing, "I don't think it's a punishment. Cut along!"

Considerably brightened up by this intelligence, the two juniors cut off as bidden, leaving Lowther and Manners wondering what the secret was which Blake had so nearly confided to them.

CHAPTER 5.

Mr. Keene Makes a Discovery.

INSPECTOR SKEAT was perfectly satisfied that he had discovered the true ways and means of the burglar's mysterious escape from the box-room; but Dr. Holmes was not so sure about it.

The Head of St. Jim's turned the matter over in his mind, and after morning school, when he was at leisure, he asked Mr. Kidd and Mr. Railton into his study to compare notes with them on the subject.

"The inspector believes that the man got his hands loose and then opened the door from inside by means of some instrument," the Head remarked. "What is your opinion, Mr. Kidd?"

"That he did nothing of the kind," replied the House-master immediately.

"And yours, Railton?"

"The same as Mr. Kidd's."

"Then I agree with you both," said the Head, with a nod.

"The traces which Inspector Skeat found upon the key he was determined to find there, because they were necessary to bear out the theory he had formed in his mind. It is pretty clear to me that the door was unlocked from outside in the usual way."

"My opinion exactly, sir," the Housemaster agreed. "Mr. Skeat is too wise to see what is under his very nose. I did not suggest this thought to him, however, doubtless for the same reason that you remained silent."

"My reason," said the Head, "was that the inspector is too fond of fanciful theories, and if it had been suggested that someone belonging to St. Jim's opened the door of the box-room, he might have begun theorising that the burglar had a confederate in the house."

"Exactly! It was our duty to call in the police, but not to furnish them with theories," the Housemaster remarked. "I was glad to see Mr. Skeat too occupied to notice the staring facts of the case."

"And I, also," said Mr. Railton. "But I take it, Dr. Holmes, that the matter is not to rest here. It is a serious matter, and though Inspector Skeat is happily out of it, the party who released the burglar ought to be discovered and punished in a fitting way."

Dr. Holmes nodded.

"I think so. I am certain that the door was opened for the burglar by somebody within St. Jim's; but after that I can say no more. The only possible explanation is that one of the boys was curious to see the burglar, and ventured into the box-room, or else was touched with compassion for him, and went there deliberately to release him. In either case, it is necessary to get at the truth. I have sent for the two boys who are likeliest to know something in the matter."

The other two masters smiled.

"Tom Merry is one of them, I presume," Mr. Railton remarked.

"And Jack Blake the other," said Mr. Kidd.

"You are right."

Tap!

"Come in!" called out the doctor.

The two juniors entered the study. They were looking very innocent, Tom Merry especially, really seeming as if

butter could not possibly melt in his mouth. But the masters knew them too well to take much heed of that.

"Merry," said Dr. Holmes, "did you last night unlock the box-room door, and release the ruffian who was confined there?"

Tom's look showed his utter astonishment at the question.

"No, sir," he said immediately.

"Do you know any boy who did?"

"No, sir."

"Blake, was it you?"

"Certainly not, sir!"

"And do you not know what boy was concerned in the matter?"

"No, sir," said Blake, with an inward sigh of relief at the form the question took.

Of course, he did not know for certain that the master of the Shell had released the imprisoned burglar; but everything pointed to that, and the junior could not help suspecting Mr. Keene. But he was far from wishing to give the master away on a suspicion, however strong and well founded.

But the Head of St. Jim's, of course, never dreamed that a master of the school could have done what he suspected the juniors of doing. Dr. Holmes looked puzzled. He knew both Merry and Blake too well to think that either of them would tell him a deliberate lie, yet he had fixed upon them first of all as the probable culprits.

"Understand me, boys," he said. "I think that the burglar did not escape without assistance, and I can only conclude that some very foolish boy released him, probably from a merciful motive. But I believe your word."

"Thank you, sir!" said Tom. "It certainly never crossed my mind to set the man loose. He was too much of a ruffian for that."

"Very well; you may go."

And the two juniors departed.

"I don't understand this, gentlemen," said the Head, with a shake of the head. "If a Lower Form boy of the School House had done as I suspect, it is not likely that it would long escape the knowledge, at least, of Merry and Blake, even if they had no hand in it. It must have been a junior who performed this foolish action; a senior would be more reflective. I am afraid we must give the matter up for the present."

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And Mr. Railton and the Housemaster nodded assent.

Blake's face was very grave as he left the Head's study. He wondered whether he ought to have told Dr. Holmes of the strange happening of the night. Yet to make such a serious accusation against a man in Mr. Keene's position, and with such shadowy proofs to advance, would be a dangerous step. For although he was certain that it was the master of the Shell who had passed him in the darkness, and whose voice he had heard whisper the name of "Lasalle" at the door of the box-room, he might not find it so easy to convince others on that point.

Mr. Keene would undoubtedly deny it all from beginning to end, and the possibility of a mistake in the dark, in a moment of high excitement, was great. In fact, it was possible that the Head would think that he had dreamed it all, rather than believe that a master at St. Jim's could be on terms of acquaintanceship with a member of the criminal classes, and the evidence of Manners and Lowther would be worth no more than his own.

It was undoubtedly wisest to keep silent, to say nothing of a boy's natural feeling against telling tales about anyone which would get the party told about into trouble. Yet Blake was not quite easy in his mind.

Tom Merry was not long in noticing that. He gave Blake more than one curious glance, but the junior did not speak.

"I say, Blake," exclaimed Tom, who was never long in coming to the point, "what have you got on your chest? It isn't possible that—that—"

"That what?" said Blake, stopping in the passage and looking at him.

They were standing close to the corner of the corridor which led back into the School House, the Head's house at St. Jim's being only an adjunct of the more ancient building.

Tom hesitated for a moment.

"Well," he said, "you are a cheeky kid, Blake, and you haven't a proper respect for a fellow in the Shell two months and seven days older than yourself—quite your senior, in fact; but I know you ain't the sort to tell a lie to the Head."

Blake placed his hand upon his heart and bowed.

"Many thanks, Master Merry! Your perspicacity does you credit," he said solemnly.

Tom grinned.

"All the same," he went on, "you know something about this matter, and you feel that perhaps you ought to have told the Head. Now, I know that you wouldn't tell a whopper, so I'm sure that it wasn't a junior who let the burglar out of the box-room."

"Quite right."

"But you know who it was. That's what you were going to tell us, I suppose, when Kildare called us to come to the Head."

"Right again; but—"

"But you don't mean to say that it was a senior did such a silly trick? And—and what did you mean by mentioning Mr. Keene's name to us in connection with the matter?"

"There's no harm in telling you about it," said Blake thoughtfully. "It's a curious business altogether, and I can't get the hang of it, somehow. The Head asked me if I knew if any boy was mixed up in setting the burglar loose, and I told him I didn't. That was quite true. There wasn't any boy concerned in it. It was a man."

"My hat!" exclaimed Tom, deeply interested. "Go on!"

"It happened this way. After the alarm we heard you

say that you were coming to raid us, and we made up our minds to return the compliment—see?"

"Oh, you did, did you?" said Tom Merry, rather grimly.

"That's how it was. Herries and Dig and myself were coming towards the stairs when we heard somebody coming, and dodged into the alcove near the box-room. The chap came down and unlocked the box-room door."

Here Blake paused for effect.

Both the juniors were deeply interested in the mystery, under discussion, and neither heard a footfall from the direction of the corridor leading into the School House.

"I couldn't see his face in the dark," went on Blake, "and I could only just make out his figure. But I knew that he was a man, and not a boy. He unlocked the box-room door, and called out in a whisper to the man inside—the burglar."

"Then he knew him?"

"Rather! He called him by his name—a French name—Lasalle. You remember the rascal swore in French when he was nabbed. He was a Froggie."

"Yes, I remember that. But you haven't told me who the chap was."

Blake lowered his voice mysteriously.

"Then I'll tell you. But, mind, it's a dead secret. It's no good telling tales, you know. The man who let the burglar escape from the box-room was—"

"Blake!"

It was a sharp, rasping voice. The two juniors started violently as Mr. Amos Keene, the master of the Shell, came from the side corridor, his face pale, and his eyes blazing. He knew that the master of the Shell must have overheard his last words, and had purposely interrupted him in time to prevent the secret being told to Tom Merry.

He knew that Mr. Keene was now aware of the identity of the boy he had seized last night in the corridor, and who had escaped after drenching him with ink water. And Blake, in spite of his nerve, felt a thrill of uneasiness as he caught the savage blaze in the eyes of the master of the Shell. For a moment there was a tense pause. Mr. Keene looked as though he would spring upon the junior, and both Blake and Tom Merry instinctively placed themselves in an attitude of defence. But the master of the Shell controlled himself.

The drawn, tense look passed from his face, his hands unclenched. With a great effort he regained his calmness.

"Blake, what are you dawdling about the passages here for?" he exclaimed harshly. "You two boys—Merry and Blake—are always in mischief of some kind. Merry, I have given you an imposition for the afternoon. Go to your Form-room at once!"

"Mustn't I have any dinner, sir?" said Tom innocently.

He had been startled by the sudden appearance of his Form master, but Merry was never long in recovering his coolness.

Mr. Keene bit his lip. In his confusion of mind he had forgotten that.

"You may go to the dining-hall, Merry. Remember that you are detained for the whole afternoon, and if you finish the first book of Virgil before tea, you will commence on the second. Not a word. Go!"

Tom Merry, with a comical grimace at Blake, went. The master of the Shell fixed his eyes upon Blake with a strange expression in them. He had been thinking rapidly.



Potts, the Office Boy!



"Blake, do you happen to be much occupied this afternoon?"

The change in his voice and manner astounded Blake. He had expected a punishment of some kind, for Mr. Keene was never at a loss to find an excuse for one. He would not have been surprised if the master had ordered him to remain in for the half-holiday and set him some endless imposition to do.

"Occupied, sir?" repeated Blake. "There's the cricket practice, sir."

"Ah, and you do not want to miss that, Blake?"

"The School House will be meeting the New House soon, sir, in the junior House match," said Blake. "I'm in the School House Junior Eleven. A chap wants to keep fit."

"Then you would have no time to go over to Wayland for me?" said Mr. Keene. "I wanted someone to take a message there for me."

"Oh, yes, sir!" said Blake. "I'll have a go at the nets after tea. I don't mind going a bit, sir."

Blake was always willing to oblige, and he had no objection to taking a stroll through the woods and along the leafy lanes to the country town.

"Thank you!" said Mr. Keene. "I will give you a pass to allow you to go out of bounds, Blake. Come to my study, and I will give you the message."

Blake followed the master of the Shell to his study. A suspicion had glimmered into the junior's mind. Mr. Keene had stopped him just when he was going to tell Tom Merry who had released the captured burglar the previous night. Mr. Keene knew that Blake had seen him in the act. Yet his manner was quiet and almost cordial.

What was this sudden message to Wayland invented for? Blake could not help thinking that it was an excuse to get him away from the school, so that the secret would yet remain untold.

When he came back it might be told, certainly; but this was just the device of a scared and startled man, weak of nerve, to gain time.

If Amos Keene had made a frank appeal to Blake then to say nothing about the occurrence, the junior would have given his word cheerfully, and kept it; but that was not Amos Keene's way.

He had never been kind to Blake, and the junior had only too much cause to dislike him. It would, therefore, have been difficult for Mr. Keene to ask a favour of the boy he had often bullied and punished, and he was of too unscrupulous a nature himself to have much faith in the honour of others. If Blake had given his word he would have kept it through thick and thin; but Amos Keene would not have believed that.

The master of the Shell sat down at his table and wrote a note. He sealed it, and handed it to Blake. The juniors' dinner-bell was beginning to ring.

"You will take that to Wayland, Blake. Here is your pass. Give the note to Mr. Short, at the White Lion Hotel. Mr. Short is to make the catering arrangements on the day of the school sports," he added, in a tone of explanation. "And the Head has asked me to see to it."

"Yes, sir," said Blake, looking as stupid and wooden as he could.

Inwardly, he was more convinced than ever that the message was designed simply to get him away from the school for the afternoon.

"You will deliver it as quickly as possible," said Mr. Keene. "It is important. You need not get back to the school before tea. Come in by then, and it will be all right. You may go."

"The dinner-bell is ringing, sir," Blake ventured.

"You can dine at the hotel, Blake. I have mentioned it in my letter to Mr. Short."

"Certainly, sir."

"Now you may go. Stay! I will walk down to the gates with you."

"Yes, sir."

The master of the Shell put on his cap, and walked across the quadrangle with Blake. He stood at the gates, and watched the junior disappear into the wood down the lane. Then with slow steps he returned to the School House. Up the stairs he went, and into his study, where he locked the door, and as soon as the key was turned he seemed to break loose in an instant from the restraint he had been imposing upon himself.

The expression of calmness vanished from his face like a mask that is torn off, and his features seemed to grow old and thin and haggard in a moment. He paced his room with irregular strides.

"So it was Blake!" he murmured out the words. "I was sure of it when I went into the Fourth Form dormitory this morning, and found traces of red ink on the sponge on his washstand. I felt that it must be Blake. Now I know for certain."

He ground his teeth together.

"Was he alone? Seemed to me that there were others with him, but I could not see them in the dark. Now I know for certain. He has evidently not told the secret yet; but I was only just in time to stop him from telling it—and to Tom Merry!"

Amos Keene's face grew more lined and haggard. There was a weight upon his mind—a weight of fear and guilt.

"Blake knows enough to get me kicked out of St. Jim's—to ruin me at this school, and to prevent me from doing the work I came here to do. Then what have I to expect from Philip Phipps? I came here to carry out his plan in regard to his cousin, Tom Merry; and if I fail, it is not only that I lose the price of success, but I am at his mercy, and he will show me none. Only flight—the loss of everything—could save me."

He muttered the words feverishly.

"What shall I do? What can I do? Blake must be silenced; but how? I have put off the telling of the secret. I am safe for a few hours, but then he will speak; it will spread over the school, and I am ruined!"

The school clock chimed out and interrupted the meditations of the miserable, guilty man, restlessly pacing the room. He started.

"It is time I was gone!" A blaze came into his eyes. "I must see Lasalle. He has brought this danger upon me. Perhaps he can save me from it."

CHAPTER 6.

The Plot Overheard!

"ARMA virumque cano," groaned Tom Merry, opening his Virgil at the old, familiar lines. "Rats!" Tom Merry was in for it. He sat in the deserted class-room, with the summer sunlight streaming in at the high windows on the empty desks. Lowther and



"How'zat?"



Manners were on the cricket field. They had offered, in the true spirit of friendship, to stay in with him; but, as Tom said, it was no good to spoil three half-holidays instead of one, and he would not let them stay.

"Go and knock yourselves into form for the cricket match with the New House," said Tom. "We've got to beat Figgins & Co. hollow, you know, and we three have got to be in the School House eleven. Keep up your practice, and never mind me. I'm going to spend the afternoon with our old Roman friend Virgil. Oh, I wish I had been the Emperor Augustus!"

"Why?" said Lowther.

"Oh, I'd have chucked Virgil into the Tiber!" said Tom. "Now cut off!"

"Well, keep your pecker up!" said the chums; and so they left him.

Tom was the only boy in the Shell detained that afternoon. He sat at his desk, opened his Virgil, took pen and paper, dipped the pen into the ink, but did not write a word. He couldn't.

The bright sunlight, the whispering breezes fluttering the old elms in the quadrangle, the distant shouts from the cricket pitches seemed to be calling to him.

"Arma virumque cano!" he groaned. "The number of times I've been through that! Oh, my hat! Arms and the man, I sing. I'd rather sing legs and the boy. Ha, ha, ha!"

He laughed as he wrote down the improvement upon the Latin poet.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Even Tom Merry's merry laugh sounded hollow in the deserted class-room.

"You seem to be in high spirits, Merry!"

It was Mr. Amos Keene's sour voice in the doorway. Tom looked up. The master had on his hat and coat for going out. He came over to Tom's desk and glanced at the almost blank sheet of paper before the boy.

"You have not made much progress with your imposition, Merry," he said sarcastically. "Why, what—what is this?"

Tom coloured. He had not intended to let the Form master see that little pun in Latin; but Mr. Keene was reading it out.

"Crura puerumque cano. Legs and the boy! What does this mean, Merry?"

"It's—it's only a pun, sir. It means, I'd like to use my legs just now, sir, and do—do a bunk, sir!" said Tom diffidently. "It's—it's an improvement upon Virgil, sir—a little bit more up to date."

Mr. Keene, apparently, did not see the humour of the joke. He took the sheet and tore it across.

"You will write out the whole of the first two books of Virgil, Merry, instead of only one!" he said grimly.

"Hadn't you better set me the whole giddy 'Æneid,' sir?" said Tom recklessly.

He could afford to be reckless, for the imposition was an impossible one, and if Mr. Keene added to it, it would make no difference, as, in any case, a great deal would have to remain undone. It was evidently only the master's intention to deprive him of the whole of his half-holiday. Mr. Keene frowned darkly.

"Take care, Merry, or you will have a caning as well. I shall return shortly, and I shall expect you to have made good progress."

"You can expect what you like!" murmured Tom.

The master of the Shell went out. Tom stepped on a desk near one of the windows and looked out over the sunny quadrangle. He saw the form of Amos Keene cross to the gates and disappear.

"The bouncer's gone out," muttered Tom. "Why shouldn't I go out, too? I've got an impot for nothing, and as I can't possibly finish it, what's the good of beginning?" He returned to his desk and looked dubiously at his book. "He knew I couldn't do half of it, for that matter. It's only a mean excuse for rowing me. I may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, so here goes!"

He slung the foolscap one way, and Virgil another. Then he put on his cap and walked out of the class-room.

As it was quite possible that Mr. Keene had asked some prefect to keep an eye on the detained boy, Tom Merry did not venture to linger in the quadrangle. And as Lowther and Manners were busy on the cricket pitch with a crowd, he could not very well call upon them without the risk of being spotted by some unpleasant person in authority and sent back to his task.

And so he passed out of the gates of St. Jim's, and crossed the stile down the lane into the wood before he stopped to reflect what he should do with himself for the afternoon.

He had noticed in passing that Figgins & Co. were not to be seen in the school grounds, and he remembered what

Blake had said about the excursion planned by the New House juniors for that afternoon.

Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn—the famous trio of the New House, and the deadly rivals of the School House juniors—were doing things in style that afternoon.

They were having out a trap in Rylcombe for an afternoon's drive, and the thought crossed Tom Merry's mind of going down to the village and looking for a chance of taking a rise out of the ancient enemies of the School House at St. Jim's.

But he shook his head.

Figgins & Co. had doubtless started on their drive before this; and, anyway, it was not much use for a single fellow to go on the warpath against three, and one of those three the great Figgins!

"Where shall I go?" murmured Tom. "There's the old castle; I haven't explored that thoroughly yet, and Blake was telling me a thrilling yarn the other day about a St. Jim's chap being kidnapped by a gypsy and kept a prisoner there once upon a time. Suppose I go and have a look at the place? I've got to keep off the grass round the school, that's certain, and it's no good hunting for Figgins & Co. I've got plenty of matches, and I could explore the vaults there all right."

It seemed about the best idea, and Tom Merry was not long in acting upon it.

He followed the footpath to the castle through the wood,



Figgins came rushing out of the wood and hurled himself

upon the slopes of which the ruins of the ancient castle stood.

Suddenly he halted, with a muttered exclamation.

He had caught sight of a figure on the path before him—a figure he knew. It was that of Mr. Amos Keene, the master of the Shell!

"Oh, my Aunt Maria!" murmured Tom. "What an awfully narrow shave! I might have run right into him! I'll go through the trees."

And the scamp of the Shell left the footpath and plunged into the wood. It was a pleasant walk under the old elms and beeches, amid the wood ferns that grew waist high. Tom came out of the wood close to the old castle, at a considerable distance from the spot where the footpath entered the lane at the foot of the hill.

The ruins of the old castle were before him, and in a minute more the boy was inside the remains of the ancient building, and picking his way among huge masses of fallen masonry and fragments of the ancient walls and windows, now open to the four winds of heaven.

"Jolly old place!" murmured Tom, looking round him. "I'd like to explore every inch of it. But awfully lonely! I wish old Manners and Lowther were here."

He stopped at the yawning gap in the stone flags which gave entrance to the stone stairs leading down to the vaults below the castle.

"Ugh! Anyone who was shut up down there must have had a high old time!" Tom exclaimed. "Well, here goes!"

He stepped into the opening and descended the stair. The first turn of it plunged him into darkness, and he struck a wax vesta.

He had a box full of them, and did not spare the matches. Dark and gloomy looked the vaults, damp and eerie. Tom, remembering Blake's description, soon found the various chambers, and looked into each of them.

His last match went out, and, having had quite enough of the vaults, Tom turned back to the stairs leading to the upper regions.

He groped his way to them and ascended. As he did so he paused in alarm.

He had cause to be astonished.

"Diable! It is safe enough to meet here, I should think. Who could possibly see us? Besides, I could not be recognised now. Mon ami, you allow your fears to run away with you!"

Tom Merry knew that voice.

It was the voice of the Frenchman with whom he had struggled the night before—the voice of the burglar who had broken into the school in the still, small hours!

The voice of the man who had so mysteriously escaped from the box-room in which the Housemaster had locked him for security.

What was the meaning of this meeting—evidently a secret one—between the master of the Shell and this escaped criminal in the lonely ruins of the old castle?

CHAPTER 7.

Two Rascals!

TOM MERRY remained silent, lost in amazement and alarm.

The sharp, rapping voice of the master of the Shell replied to the remark made by the Frenchman.

"You should not have remained in this vicinity. You should never have come at all."

The other laughed slightly.

"My dear fellow, my appearance is so changed that I tell you no one would recognise me. You forget that my face was blacked last night—a complete disguise."

"I know it; but—"

"As for the rest, I did not know that you were at the school when I came. How was I to know that my old friend had turned over a new leaf, and—"

"Confound you!" muttered Mr. Keene. "Leave all that unsaid. I am in no mood to be mocked. The mischief is done now, anyway."

"True, and it is useless to recriminate. I had no idea that you were a master at St. Jim's; but had I known, I tell you frankly that it would have made no difference. I am in want of money, and this is my profession. It was different in the old days. My position was as good as yours is now, or better. We both made false steps; but the difference is that I was found out and lost all, while you, somehow, bought the silence of the man who could have ruined you."

"And have been under his thumb ever since!" exclaimed Mr. Keene hoarsely. "The slave of his will, to do as he chooses to order!"

"That is better than penal servitude, which was my fate," said the Frenchman. "You fared better than I did, though I acknowledge you, almost any fate would be preferable to being under the thumb of a man like Philip Phipps."

Tom Merry gave a jump.

His cousin's name—on this man's lips! What did it mean? He knew that his cousin was in communication with Mr. Keene. The mystery was deepening.

"Hark!" exclaimed Amos Keene. "Did you hear anything?"

"No."

"I thought I heard a sound."

Tom Merry scarcely breathed.

He had made a slight sound involuntarily at the mention of his cousin's name—a sound that would have hardly alarmed a rat; but Mr. Keene's ears were those of a man in ceaseless fear, which nothing could escape.

The boy remained still as stone. He dared not venture to go down the steps again, for he knew that he would be heard. He almost held his breath, his heart beating hard.

To his relief the Frenchman broke into a mocking laugh.

"You are as nervous as an old woman, Keene! It was nothing!"

The master of the Shell drew a deep, quivering breath.

"I have been in terror since yesterday. As you know, I was seen to open the door of the box-room and release you. I did not know then by whom; I have heard since. It was a boy named Blake, and to-day I stopped him in the very act of telling the secret to Tom Merry."

"Ma foi!"

"Listen to me, Lasalle," the master of the Shell went on feverishly. "You can see that my career at the school hangs upon a thread. You insisted upon my meeting you again, though I urged you to leave the neighbourhood at once—"

"That did not suit me," said Lasalle coolly. "I did not break into the school last night for a joke. I want money. If you can help me with cash, I will leave you in peace and go away. If you choose to help me another way, it will suit me better, and will be cheaper to you. Let me enter the school to-night, and—"

"And help you to commit a robbery?" panted Mr. Keene.

"Why not? In the past—"



of the Frenchman.

"Keene! My word, that chap is haunting me!" murmured Tom, in dismay.

For, close by the top of the stair, amid the ruins of the old castle, someone was talking, and Tom recognised the sour tones of Mr. Amos Keene, the master of the Shell!

Tom stood quite silent in dismay.

To be caught by Mr. Keene, when the Form master imagined him to be writing out his endless imposition in the class-room at St. Jim's, would have painful results for the truant junior.

It was evidently his best plan to lie low, and remain hidden where he was until the coast was clear.

"Confound that man!" murmured Tom. "He seems to haunt me. I suppose he was coming to the castle when I saw him in the woods. What on earth can he want here? He isn't the kind of chap to want to explore any old ruin, and— My only aunt! Who's that he's talking to?"

Tom gave a violent start as he heard a second voice above him.

"The past is dead and gone. I am a master at St. Jim's. I dare not risk it, even if I had no conscience—and I have one. Besides, I—I have not the nerve."

"No," said the Frenchman, with a contemptuous laugh, "I do not think you have."

Amos Keene ground his teeth.

"You need not taunt me with that, Lasalle. I had nerve enough in the old days, when I was a lawless scoundrel as you are now. Now I have a position to keep up, and it is different. I cannot do as you suggest. It is impossible!"

"The other way will suit me as well, but I must have money. But, from what you say, I should hardly think your position would be kept up in any case," said the Frenchman carelessly. "If this boy—Blake, did you call him?—if he knows your secret, I suppose it will not be long before the whole school knows it."

"That is what I wish to speak to you about," said Mr. Keene, lowering his voice involuntarily, though he did not think there was anyone to hear. "You have insisted upon meeting me here, Lasalle, and I knew what you wanted, and I am willing to pay you if you help me."

"Good! But what can I do? Nothing will still the boy's chattering tongue."

"Listen! I stopped the boy, as I told you, before he had time to tell the secret, and I have sent him away upon an excuse which will keep him from St. Jim's all the rest of the afternoon. The secret is safe for a few hours."

"But then?"

"He has gone from St. Jim's," went on the master unheeding. "He has gone to Wayland, a town near here, and will come back by a footpath through the wood, the loneliest in the country."

Lasalle started.

And Tom Merry, crouching on the stone steps below, felt a sickness of horror creep into his heart at something he detected in the tones of the master of the Shell.

"And what then?" said the Frenchman.

"Upon his silence hangs my safety," said the master of the Shell, in low tones. "It is not only that I shall be ruined, but I am at St. Jim's to do the work of Philip Phipps. I need not explain how, but I shall suffer if I fail. Do you understand? If I go he will think it is a trick to escape doing his bidding, and he will not spare me. I dare not leave the school, yet if this boy tells his secret I shall have no choice. He must not tell it, Lasalle."

"But you do not wish me to—"

"Fool! That will not be necessary!" muttered the master of the Shell, understanding the Frenchman's unspoken thought. "You remember what you did once—a blow behind the ear, and there was no memory left. Nothing more serious than that."

"You have called me a scoundrel! What am I to do?"

"I am not here to guess riddles," said the master of the Shell coldly. "Blake has brought this upon himself; it was not my fault that he learned my secret, and he must pay for the knowledge. But I have no desire to discuss that with you. Do my work, and I will pay you; refuse to do it, and I defy you, for I shall have nothing to lose."

The Frenchman wrinkled his brows thoughtfully.

The master of the Shell waited coldly for him to reply. Hidden upon the stone steps, Tom Merry remained half frozen with horror.

He realised now that it would not only mean a punishment, but danger if he showed himself. The villain who was capable of the cowardly plot against Blake was capable of anything.

"I will do as you wish," said Lasalle. "I am in desperate need of money, and the task is not difficult. But, mark you, I must have fifty pounds!"

"Then the sooner you get to the place the better," said the master of the Shell coldly. "I do not know exactly when the boy will return to the school, but it may be at any time. You must wait for him on the footpath from Wayland. Do you know the country about here at all?"

"Yes; I have visited it—er—professionally before."

"Then I will tell you of a spot which will be the best for your purpose, and leave you there. I must be at St. Jim's when it happens, to have an alibi ready proved in case of any suspicion. There is a quiet spot where a plank crosses a pool, and if you remove the plank Blake will have to stop, and then you can deal with him. Lose no time."

There was a sound of retreating footsteps, and then silence. Tom Merry remained in suspense.

He knew that the Frenchman had gone, but was Mr. Keene still there? Silence reigned in the ruins. After a lapse of five minutes Tom cautiously ascended to the top of the stair and ventured to peep out.

He popped back again in a moment.

The master of the Shell was within a dozen paces, leaning against a fragment of wall and smoking a cigar. His back was towards Tom.

The boy's heart beat painfully.

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What was he to do? Already Lasalle was on his way to his dastardly work, and here was Tom cooped up, unable to fly to Blake's aid or to warn him. If he showed himself now he would have to deal with a desperate man, and that would not help Blake.

Would the villain never go? He looked out again. To his joy he saw that the master of the Shell had thrown away the stump of his cigar, and was walking out of the ruins. Tom barely waited till he was gone before he came up from the stone stairway.

Then, taking a different course from that followed by Mr. Keene, the boy quitted the ruins, and in a few minutes more found himself in the lane at the foot of the hill which led to Woodford and Wayland. There he paused in painful doubt and indecision.

He could race off to Wayland to warn Blake, but he might—possibly would—miss him. He could cut off to the scene of the ambush to help the junior when he was attacked and doubtless arrive in time. Which should he do? What was the use of the two juniors meeting the attack of an armed and desperate ruffian? Yet that was better than leaving Blake to his fate. If there was only help to be had! But the place was lonely, and the minutes were precious.

"Hallo, there! Get out of the way! Hallo, hallo!"

Tom Merry started and looked up. A trap was coming down the lane at full tilt, and the reins of the pony were held by the great Figgins, the chief of the New House juniors. Fatty Wynn and Kerr were with him in the trap, munching oranges.

"Hallo!" roared Figgins. "That you, Merry? Going to sleep standing up, like a giddy horse? What do you want to take a nap in the middle of a road for, fathead?"

Tom waved his hand.

"Stop!" he shouted. "Stop, Figgins! I want to speak to you!"

"That's likely, you School House waster! Get out of the road, or we'll run over you!"

"Stop!"

Tom stood in the centre of the lane, so that Figgins could not drive on without going over him. Figgins, whose threat, of course, was an empty one, dragged the pony to a halt.

"Here, hold these reins, Kerr!" he said wrathfully. "I'll teach this School House cad to stop me like this!"

And Figgins jumped out of the trap, looking very warlike.

"Now, then, School House cad, come on!"

"Pax, Figgins! I—"

"Pax, be blowed! I'm going to punch your head!"

"Figgins, for goodness' sake listen to me! It's terribly important!"

Figgins, for the first time, noted the junior's strained, white face. His hands unclenched themselves immediately. The rival Houses of St. Jim's were always on the warpath against one another, but at a serious time they could forget their little differences and pull together in a true, loyal British way.

"What is it, Merry?" asked Figgins quickly. "Anything gone wrong? I was only rotting, old chap! What's the row?"

"It's Blake!" gasped Tom Merry. "He's in danger—horrible danger! Will you chaps help me to save him?"

"Will we?" said Figgins. "Well, rather! Where is he? What's the matter?"

"You know the plank over the pool, on the footpath through the woods from Wayland?"

"Yes; I gave Blake a ducking there once."

"There's a scoundrel waiting there for him, to hurt him. It's the burglar who broke into the School House the other night. He's going to injure Blake; perhaps kill him. Never mind how I know. I am going to save him, or get served the same myself. Will you come?"

"I—I say, Merry, you're not romancing, are you?"

"Do I look as if I'm romancing?" cried Tom, in an agony of anxiety.

"No, you don't. Let me see." Figgins thought rapidly. "The trap will take us more than half the distance, and then we'll cut through the woods on foot. Jump in!"

Tom Merry nimbly followed Figgins into the trap.

Figgins took the reins again, and turned the vehicle in the lane, and set off at a spanking speed. And as they went, Tom hurried explained what he had overheard in the ruins.

The trap fairly flew, and the distance was covered in good time, and then the four juniors dismounted, and tied the pony to a tree beside the lane.

Then they plunged into the woods, led by Figgins, who knew every inch of the ground for miles around St. Jim's.

With Figgins and Tom Merry, two of the best junior sprinters at the school, in the lead, the rescuers dashed through the wood, Kerr close behind the leaders, and Fatty,

Wynn panting desperately in the rear. There was a sudden ringing shout through the wood:

"Help, help!"

Blake's voice!

Tom Merry and Figgins dashed madly on.

CHAPTER 8.

Figgins & Co. to the Rescue!

JACK BLAKE came along the footpath from Wayland whistling cheerily.

The chief of Study No. 6 had delivered his message in the little country town, and hung about looking at the shops for some time, and after a pleasant afternoon he was returning to St. Jim's to arrive in time for tea.

He came down the footpath without a thought of danger.

He had been puzzled at Mr. Keene's sending him off, knowing well that the master's object was to gain time before the secret was told. What else might be in Mr. Keene's mind he did not guess; and he would never have dreamed of suspecting Mr. Keene of the black treachery of which he was really guilty.

In his little excursion, in fact, the junior had almost forgotten the matter, and he was thinking of anything but the master of the Shell and his secret as he came along whistling under the old beeches.

Even in broad daylight this footpath was dusky, overshadowed by the huge branches that interlaced above. Blake arrived at the pool which, spreading far under the trees, blocked the path, and was usually crossed by a long, wide plank.

"Hallo, hallo!" muttered Blake, stopping in dismay on the margin of the pool. "Some silly ass has shoved the plank into the water!"

He looked across the pool in dismay.

The end of the plank, which should have rested on the margin, was plunged into the water, sunk deep in the mud below, five or six feet from the shore.

Blake was calculating the width of the pool, and wondering whether he could venture to attempt a clear jump of fifteen or sixteen feet, when there was a rustle in the foliage near him.

He looked round. For an instant he remained petrified. A man was springing at him from the trees with a cudgel upraised to strike him down.

A moment more, and the blow fell, and few lads would have been quick enough to escape it. But Blake did not put in continual practice on the cricket field without learning to be quick and wary. He instinctively dodged, and darted away, and the cudgel swept the empty air a couple of feet from his head.

Lasalle—for, of course, the ruffian was he—turned upon the junior again with a snarl.

Blake, his heart beating like a hammer—for he could only imagine that he had a dangerous madman to deal with—fled at top speed back the way he had come.

"Help, help!" he shouted.

The next moment he caught his foot in a root trailing over the path, and went heavily down. Dazed by the fall, he struggled blindly to regain his feet, but before he could do so the Frenchman was upon him.

"Diable!" hissed Lasalle. "Did you think to escape me?"

He flung himself upon the junior, and Blake went down heavily again, with the ruffian's weight upon him.

"Help, help!" he shrieked.

There came a crash in the wood—a crash of parting thickets.

"Buck up!" yelled Figgins. "St. Jim's to the rescue!"

He came out of the wood like a shot, and, without a thought of hesitation, hurled himself upon the Frenchman.

Lasalle went over backwards with a clutch upon his collar.

He struggled furiously, but before he could use his weapon Tom Merry had hold of his arm, and, twisting it savagely, forced him to drop the cudgel.

"Diable!"

The man fought like a wild-cat. But Kerr came panting up, and piled himself upon him, and Blake, dazed and dizzy as he was, was not the fellow to be left out of a fight. He soon had a grip on the scoundrel.

Last, but not least, Fatty Wynn arrived, panting and breathless, his fat figure quivering with his exertions, but as plucky as anybody. He plumped himself down on the Frenchman's head, and that settled it!

Fatty's weight would have settled almost anybody. The suffocating ruffian ceased to struggle, only wriggling painfully.

Figgins giggled.

"That's right, Fatty! Sit on his head, the brute! We've got him!"

"Gr-r-r-r!" came from the Frenchman.

"Hold him tight! Give me your belt, Kerr, to fasten his wrists. Hurrah!"

Lasalle's wrists were soon secured. Powerful ruffian as he was, he had no chance against five determined and plucky juniors. His hands were fastened, and then his legs were shackled. Then they dragged him to his feet.

A torrent of curses in his native tongue poured from his lips, but Figgins soon stopped that by picking a wet turf from the margin of the pool, and ramming it into his mouth, sending it well home with a thump. Lasalle stammered and spluttered frantically.

"Got him!" exclaimed Figgins jubilantly. "This is one for the New House, kids!"

"School House, you mean!" said Tom Merry quickly. "Why— But never mind; we won't row about that now. You've done jolly well this time, Figgy, and you're a decent sort."

"Thank you," said Figgy, with a bow. "We needn't quarrel about the glory. We've got the brute, anyway. Let's march him off to the trap, and drive him to Rylcombe to the police station. They'll be glad to see him."

"Ripping idea!"

Blake drew a deep breath.

"I believe I've had an awfully narrow escape," he said. "That chap's the burglar of last night, I can see; but why he should go for me is a mystery. Chaps, I ain't a fellow of many words, but you know just how I feel now."

"That's all right," said Figgins. "Shoulder to shoulder against outsiders whatever rows we have at home. That's the idea. Let's get the brute along!"

The prisoner's legs were left loose enough for him to shamble along in the grasp of the juniors. He was forced through the wood, and out into the lane, where the trap was waiting. He was bundled into it, and then the jubilant boys drove off in triumph to Rylcombe.

It was rather a close fit in the trap, with the ruffian and the five juniors, but they managed it. Figgins drove, and they entered Rylcombe in great state, Kerr performing a selection upon his mouth-organ to attract the attention of the public.

Needless to say, they attracted attention, a crowd following the trap to the police station, where the prisoner was delivered into the charge of the astounded Inspector Skeat, who was glad enough to get him, though amazed by the capture.

"Now for St. Jim's!" said Tom Merry. "And for Amos Keene!"

"We had better tell Mr. Kidd first, and leave it to him whether Keene is arrested or not. We don't want to bring any disgrace upon St. Jim's if we can help it. But, in any case, our Form master will have to go—and a jolly good riddance!"

It was dusk when the juniors arrived at St. Jim's. They entered the School House quietly, not wishing to give the alarm to the master of the Shell, and went straight to Mr. Kidd's study. The Housemaster was there, and he looked rather astonished when, in response to his cheery "Come in," five juniors marched into his study.

He looked more astonished still when he heard what they had to tell him. He was at first inclined to be incredulous, but when he learned that Lasalle was a prisoner at Rylcombe Police Station he could no longer doubt.

"You may go back to the New House—Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn. You have done very well, my lads—very well indeed. I am proud of you. Merry and Blake will come with me."

The New House juniors, pleased as Punch with the Housemaster's words of commendation, went back to their own house. Mr. Kidd, with a dark brow, signed to Tom and Blake to follow him, and went direct to the study of the master of the Shell.

"There's a high old time in store for the Keene bird, Tom," whispered Blake. "He deserves all he gets; but I don't envy him facing Kiddlets just now, do you?"

Tom grinned.

"Rather not, Blake."

Mr. Kidd tapped at Mr. Keene's door, and entered. The juniors, at a sign from him, followed him into the room. The master of the Shell was there, apparently busily at work. The "alibi" would certainly have been an excellent one had the cowardly deed in the wood turned out as the schemer had designed.

Mr. Keene looked up as the Housemaster came in. His glance was simply inquiring at first; but when it passed Mr. Kidd, and fell upon the two boys, a hideous greyness overpread his face.

There was Blake, well and strong, evidently none the worse for the ambushade in the wood. He had escaped.

And what did this visit to the study portend? Ruin, for all must be known now.

"I have a few words to say to you, Mr. Keene," said the Housemaster. "I have just learned a story that has amazed me, but which I cannot doubt. Were you the one who released the burglar from the box-room last night?"

"A very strange question to put to a man in my position, Mr. Kidd," said the master of the Shell, trying to speak calmly. "I presume you are jesting."

"Did you meet him at the ruined castle this afternoon?"

Amos Keene started violently.

"Did you plot with him to waylay Jack Blake in the wood and injure him so that he would be unable to bear witness against you?" went on the Housemaster remorselessly.

"Good heavens!"

"If you did, the best thing you can do is to make a clean breast of it, for your accomplice, the Frenchman, Lasalle, is arrested, and all is known."

"Lasalle arrested?"

"Yes," said Mr. Kidd sternly. "Coward! Villain! Your plot was overheard by Tom Merry, and he, with the assistance of some juniors belonging to the New House, rescued Blake from the hands of your dastardly confederate. Lasalle is now in prison, to take his trial for burglary and murderous assault. I need not ask you if the tale is true. Your face tells me enough."

The master of the Shell groaned as he let his head fall into his hand.

"Then I am lost."

Mr. Kidd's look was unpitiful.

"Yes, you are lost. This night you will join your accomplice in prison. Till the police arrive, you will remain locked in your room."

The master of the Shell started to his feet. For a moment the two juniors thought he was going to attack Mr. Kidd and attempt to escape, and they exchanged a glance and clenched their fists ready to rush to the aid of the Housemaster. But the miserable, guilty, cowardly schemer had no such intention. He knew that it would be useless. He clasped his hands appealingly.

"For mercy's sake let me go!" he said huskily. "I am ruined, disgraced for ever! Be satisfied with that, and let me go!"

Mr. Kidd shook his head.

"You ask an impossibility. You must take the punishment of your crime."

The master of the Shell gave a hunted look round. His glance fell upon Tom Merry again, and his eyes flashed.

"Listen!" he cried. "I came to St. Jim's with an object—a secret motive—and it concerns the safety of that boy. I can tell you what may save him from disaster—perhaps from death—at the price of my liberty."

"I have no right to grant your liberty."

"Then Tom Merry is doomed! What I came here to achieve others can achieve, if I am sent to prison. Spare me, and I will tell all."

The Housemaster hesitated.

"Come with me," he said briefly. "Merry, you may come, also. It is for the Head to decide what shall be done. Blake, I trust you to say nothing."

"Certainly, sir."

The Housemaster and Mr. Keene left the study. The latter walked with a dragging step, like a man upon whom old age had suddenly descended. The blow had crushed him. Tom Merry followed. The boy was amazed. Was the strange mystery which had surrounded the new master to be cleared up at last—that mysterious communication between Philip Phipps and the master of the Shell to be explained?

Dr. Holmes looked in surprise at the visitors. He looked amazed when the Housemaster, in a few clear, crisp sentences, explained his errand.

"Impossible!" gasped the Head. "Have the walls of St. Jim's sheltered such a scoundrel? The law must take its course. I would not interfere for the sake of such an utter villain, even if I had the power."

"You have the power!" muttered Amos Keene huskily. "I ask only to be allowed an hour's interval to make my escape; and I can save Tom Merry."

"What danger threatens this boy?"

"A danger I came here to bring upon him, which will threaten him till it overwhelms him unless I give you the warning, which is the price of my liberty."

There was a long pause, during which the face of the exposed villain seemed to grow older, more haggard, as if years instead of minutes were passing.

"Speak!" said the doctor, at length. "Speak! And if you are telling the truth, I will grant you what you ask. And Heaven forgive me if I do wrong! It will be in a good cause."

The master of the Shell huskily cleared his throat.

"I was forced to come here by Philip Phipps, Tom Merry's cousin. I am in his power. It is years since I was concerned in a crime with Lasalle. The Frenchman went to penal servitude. It lay in Philip Phipps' power to send me also, but he forbore. He knew that he could make use of me. I need not tell you all I have done at his bidding. I may be a villain. I am an angel of light beside him."

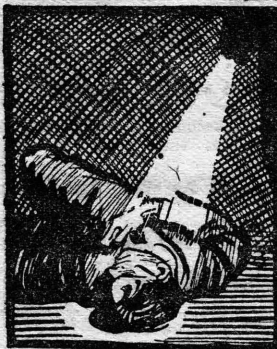
"My cousin!" murmured Tom Merry, pale to the lips.

"He made me come here. I was to plot against Tom Merry—to ill-use him as much as I could, to drive him into rebellion, if possible, and obtain him a bad name in the school, then to fix upon him some disgraceful charge, and as soon as he was disgraced, driven in shame from the school, I was to have my reward."

"And why," said the Head, horror-stricken—"why was this cowardly, this dastardly plot formed against an innocent lad?"

"Because he is Philip Phipps' rival for a fortune; because General Merry, his uncle, in India, intends to leave him the bulk of his wealth, and would cross his name out of his will to-morrow if he were convicted of being a coward or a thief. A fortune is at stake, and Philip Phipps has no scruples. He is supposed to be in India, but he is in England, and I have been under his thumb ever since I came to St. Jim's, acting under his orders. When I am gone, Tom Merry will still have him to fear. I swear that I have told you the truth! Have I earned my freedom?"

(Continued on page 24.)



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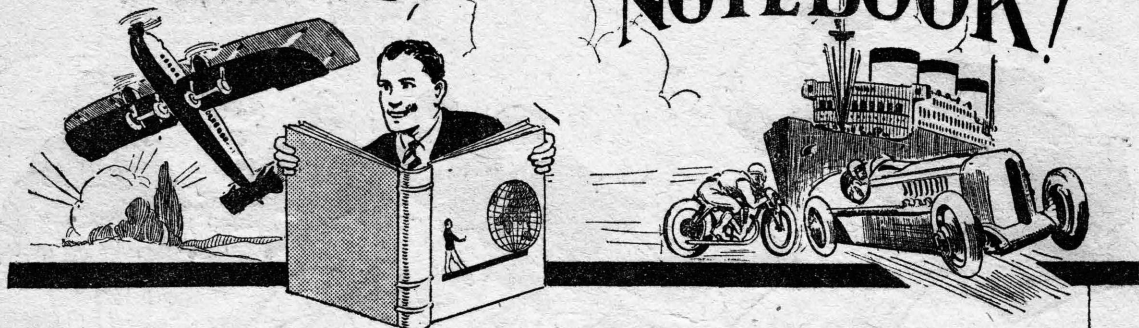
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NOTE-BOOK!



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THE best news of the week naturally comes first, and the best news equally naturally concerns next week's fine long yarn of Tom Merry & Co. Every day letters are pouring in congratulating me on the BIG PLAN I put into operation some weeks ago. Now all of you know just how Tom Merry made his first appearance in the pages of the GEM. There's still a "mouthful," as the Americans say, to come. There will be another item to add to your "best story" list when you read

"THE SCHOOLBOY 'TECS!"

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BEST SCHOOL STORY OF THE WEEK

is to be found, to recommend the GEM. The complete story of Rookwood School runs the Tom Merry & Co. yarn very close. Jimmy Silver and his merry band prove they are very much alive in

"STICKING UP FOR DALTON!"

which appears in next week's sparkling issue. In addition there will be another stirring instalment of our cricket serial and another "spasm" featuring Potts, the Office-boy. Good stories, good pictures—Good Value—that's next week's GEM.

A VARSITY RECORD.

Bang! The starter's pistol awoke the echoes and lean-limbed athletes jumped into their strides for the 120 yards hurdle race. R. M. N. Tisdall, the Cambridge crack, won the event in the inter-Varsity sports this year, and to show what else he could do, promptly won the long jump, weight-putting, and quarter-mile, all in the almost unbelievable space of forty minutes. Four events and four wins in forty minutes. No wonder Cambridge cheered their heads off, for R. M. N. Tisdall's feat has no precedent in inter-Varsity sports. If this young man fulfils the high hopes that are reposed in him, he will be a world-beater in the sphere of athletics.

THE AIREDALE WAS GRATEFUL!

It wasn't notoriety that nineteen-years-old Miss Emily Begley was looking for when she and her sister passed the Barry Dock—it was a job, for she had an

appointment with a prospective employer. But the sight of an airedale dog struggling in the water and in imminent danger of drowning put all thoughts of that much-wanted job out of Emily's mind. She dived into the water, fully dressed, and swam one hundred yards to where the dog, caught up in a rope, was struggling for life, released it, tucked it under her arm, and swam to safety. After which this modest young heroine calmly went home, changed her clothes, and went to keep her interview

A DREAM THAT CAME TRUE.

Whiz! Crash! The messenger-boy, dreaming of film stars, shot round the corner and piled himself and his bike against a large studio car. He was still seeing stars when they carted him off to hospital. But an idea had taken root in his napper. When he came out of hospital he'd pack up the messenger-boy's job and try his luck at the Los Angeles film studios. That's where money and stars were made. Two years of hard graft nearly disillusioned him, but he stuck to the crowd work and small part jobs that came his way, worked hard, and eventually found himself making a hit without experiencing the painful consequences that had attended his first hit with the film world. Richard Arlen, born in 1899, was the name of the messenger-boy, and now he's well on the road to film fame.

ROYALTY AFLOAT!

"That's the Prince of Wales—that was!" Such a comment is pretty certain to be in frequent use when his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales opens the throttle of his 34-m.p.h. outboard motor-boat which has just been built for him, and puts it through its paces. There is hardly a sport in which the perfect blend of eye and judgment is required that the Prince of Wales hasn't tried from motor-car racing to piloting a fast plane. His new boat is driven by a 15-h.p. engine, is 10 ft. long, and, of course, is British made.

RECORDS OF THE AIR!

"Ten days we'll do it in, or bust!" That, in effect, was what the American flyers, Post and Gatty, said before they set out on their memorable flight that encircled the globe. They did it in less than that—a trifle under nine days, thereby establishing a new world's

record that will want some beating. Compatriots of Post and Gatty tried their luck in the same venture as long ago as 1924. Most elaborate arrangements were made by the U.S. Naval authorities to meet all emergencies. Despite it all, the fliers concerned took five months and twenty-two days to girdle the earth—a contrast that prompts all true sportsmen to take off their hats to Messrs. Post and Gatty.

HEARD THIS ONE?

Jones Minor (in confectioner's shop): "Do you know what that big fellow behind the counter weighs?"
Smith Minor (after great deliberation): "No, old chap."
Jones Minor (making for the door): "Sweets!"

HOW IT'S DONE "OVER THERE."

"Forty million pounds? Do you think we can build it for that? Let's say fifty million of the best and be on the safe side." That sort of conversation must have been indulged in by the various "heads" who are planning the building of the Radio City for New York. Radio City is projected on a lavish scale, which makes the splendid headquarters of the British Broadcasting Corporation pale into insignificance beside it. It will form a group of buildings in the heart of New York which will comprise several theatres, the National Broadcasting Company's premises, and an opera house. The total cost is reckoned to be in the region of £50,000,000. We hope that American listeners will get their moneysworth!

A FALLEN CHAMPION.

Wallop! "One—two—three, etc. Out!" Phil Scott has taken the count good and proper, for he has resigned his title of Heavy-weight Boxing Champion of England. At one stage of the ex-fireman's career all England thought that here at last was a world-beater who would bring back the highest fistic honours to this country. Phil failed as everybody knows. The farcical World's Championship bout at Miami, in which Sharkey, the American, badly fouled our British hope, will always be remembered among Scott's dismal failures, while the noteworthy record in his favour of over one hundred fights that he won and but ten that he lost, fought over a period of sixteen years, will probably be forgotten.

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TOPPING COMPLETE NEW ROOKWOOD YARN.

MANDERS' MAD MISTAKE!

By
OWEN CONQUEST.



CHAPTER 1. On the Carpet!

CRASH! Thud!
"Down with the Classics!"
"Pile in, you men! Ow!"
Crash! Thud! Crash!

An exciting scene was taking place in Tommy Dodd's study in the Modern House at Rookwood.

It was Wednesday—a half holiday—and, having time on their hands, Jimmy Silver and Lovell and Newcome and Raby, the Fistical Four of the Classical Fourth, had paid a visit to the quarters of their traditional rivals.

The object of their visit had been to fix up a booby-trap above the door of Tommy Dodd's study, mix some red ink with the jam in the cupboard, and distribute some soot among the other edibles.

It was a somewhat peculiar mission, and Jimmy Silver & Co. had deemed it expedient to time their visit to coincide with the absence of the inmates. They had succeeded in doing that, but, unfortunately, they had not succeeded in getting away before their rivals' return. Hence the battle.

"Give 'em beans!" roared Tommy Dodd. "Rag our study, would they? Ow!"

"Pile in, Classics!" panted Jimmy Silver. "Down with the Moderns! Yow!"

Tramp, tramp, tramp!

Thud, thud, thud!
The combatants were rather evenly matched. Classics represented by four doughty warriors in the shape of the Fistical Four, while the Moderns in Tommy Dodd, Tommy Doyle, Tommy Cook, and James Frederick Towle, had four foemen equally worthy of their steel. The battle looked like lasting for an indefinite period, barring outside interference.

Fortunately, perhaps, outside interference soon occurred. The door opened suddenly. A lean and somewhat sour face looked in. It was the face of Roger Manders, M.A., Housemaster of the Modern House.

"Dear me!" said Mr. Manders. Evidently that ejaculation hardly expressed all that Mr. Manders felt, for a moment later he descended from words to deeds. Taking a single stride into the study he raised the cane he had thoughtfully brought with him, and brought it down into the midst of the struggling juniors.

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Next moment the excited yells of the contestants broke out on a new note.

"Yooooop!"

"Whoop!"

"What the thump——"

Swish, swish, swish!

"Disgraceful! Barbarous! Disgusting!" barked Mr. Manders, as he wielded the deadly weapon of offence.

"How dare you brawl under my very nose!"

"Oh crikey!"

The juniors began to wish very sincerely that they had now brawled under Mr. Manders' very nose. They abandoned the "scrap," and hurriedly retreated from the line of fire.

Mr. Manders lowered his cane, breathing rather hard from his exertions. The juniors eyed him ruefully.

"Monstrous!" said Mr. Manders. "Who began this brutal encounter? I notice that there are four Classical juniors among you. What are you doing in this House?"

"Ahem!"

"Silver!"

"Oh, yes, sir!"

"I call on you to explain your presence in the Modern House!" snapped Mr. Manders. "You came over, I presume, for the purpose of quarrelling with Dodd and these other boys?"

"Hem! Hardly that, sir. You see——"
"Then Dodd and his friends lured you over so that they could quarrel with you?"

"Nunno! Certainly not, sir!"

"Who started the quarrel?"

"There wasn't a quarrel, sir."

Mr. Manders' lip curled.

"You ask me to believe that there was no quarrel when I find you engaged in a brutal and barbarous fight?"

Jimmy Silver frowned. Evidently Manders had made up his mind that the affair in Tommy Dodd's study was a brutal and barbarous fight, and was determined not to regard it otherwise.

"It wasn't really a fight at all, sir—not seriously, anyway," he said. "Just a House rag—a lark, you know."

Mr. Manders smiled sarcastically.

"In that case, Silver, perhaps you will tell me who began the 'lark'? Do you accuse Dodd?"

"Certainly not!"

"Dodd, do you accuse Silver?"

"Not a bit of it, sir!" said Tommy Dodd readily. Mr. Manders' eyes glinted.

When Manders pulled the Inspector's beard, he thought he would pull it off—instead, he pulled the Inspector off—his feet!

"Very well. You leave me with no alternative but to conclude that this brutal encounter took place by common agreement among you. You will all follow me to the Head."

"Oh crikey!"

"Half-a-mo', sir!" said Jimmy Silver quickly. "It was really our fault. We came over for a rag."

Mr. Manders paused.

"That being so, Dodd, I am presumably justified in taking only the Classical boys to the Head's study?"

"Not at all, sir!" answered Tommy Dodd promptly. "We began the scrap!"

Mr. Manders choked. The Housemaster of the Modern House was devoid of sympathy for the schoolboy code of honour, and he found it very exasperating not to be able to get either of the parties to accuse the other.

"Obviously the whole thing was prearranged!" he snapped. "You will all follow me to the Head."

He stamped out of the study.

Tommy Dodd & Co. and the Fistical Four gave each other expressive looks. Then they followed.

CHAPTER 2.

Misleading Manders!

"COME in!" was Dr. Chisholm's response to Manders' sharp tap on the door of his study.

Mr. Manders signed to the juniors to remain in the passage till further orders, then opened the door.

Through the open doorway the juniors saw the Head look up inquiringly, and nod to the newcomer. They also saw Mr. Dalton, the Form master, with whom Dr. Chisholm appeared to be in conference.

"Pardon the intrusion, sir—" Mr. Manders began.

"It happens to be quite a fortunate intrusion, my dear sir," returned the Head. "We were just discussing to-morrow's anticipated visit from Mr. Whittle, the governors' inspector."

"Indeed, sir!"

"That visit has been postponed by a telegram I have just received, till the day after to-morrow. I may say, Mr. Manders, that I am quite pleased to have an additional day in which to consider our attitude at Rookwood to certain views Mr. Whittle is alleged to hold on the subject of corporal punishment."

"Precisely, sir; but—"

"Mr. Whittle, it seems," said the Head, still not noticing the juniors in the passage, "holds that corporal punishment is not justified under any circumstances—" Then he broke off, with a start. "What are those juniors doing outside?"

Mr. Manders coughed.

"In the circumstances, sir, I regret that I should have brought them with me. They are, as a matter of fact, the reason for my call on you."

Dr. Chisholm compressed his lips.

"Quite a number of them, apparently. I trust that they have been committing no misdemeanour—"

"Unhappily, the reverse is the case, sir."

The Head sighed.

"Come in—all of you!" he called out. Then to Manders: "What has occurred, my dear sir?"

Mr. Manders waved his hand in the direction of the juniors who were filing in.

"I regret, sir, to have to report a most serious outbreak of violence on the part of these juniors. I have brought them straight from the Modern House, where the entire crowd of them were indulging in a most brutal fight."

"Bless my soul!"

"I hesitated, naturally, to trouble you in the matter," said Mr. Manders, in the slightly obsequious manner he was in the habit of using to the Head. "But I considered it a little too serious to come under my jurisdiction."

"Dear me! This is quite disturbing," remarked the Head seriously. "You hear what Mr. Manders reports, Silver?"

"Yes, sir."

"You agree that his version of the affair is substantially correct?"

"Not quite, sir," said Jimmy Silver. "It wasn't really a fight, it was just a rag—a House rag."

Mr. Dalton, who had been listening to Mr. Manders' remarks with a portentous frown on his face, looked relieved.

"That would place the matter in a less serious category, sir," he broke in. "You are aware, of course, of the rivalry that exists between the two Houses. For the most part it is quite harmless."

"Quite—quite!" said Dr. Chisholm, with a relieved nod. "Then it seems, Mr. Manders, that you may have been mistaken as to the degree of violence displayed."

Mr. Manders' eyes glittered.

"Naturally, sir, I leave the matter to your judgment. I can only say that what I witnessed was nothing less than a most disgraceful display of hooliganism."

Mr. Dalton half smiled.

"My dear Manders—"

"I am aware that in some quarters the quarrelling which goes on between the two Houses is winked at!" snapped Mr. Manders, with a hostile glance at the master of the Fourth. "I do not, however, countenance ruffianism myself."

"You are sure, then, that the behaviour of these juniors might accurately be described as ruffianly?" asked the Head, with a sigh, reaching for his cane as he spoke.

Mr. Manders nodded.

"Quite positive on the point, sir."

"In that case, of course, they must be punished. Silver! Step forward!"

Jimmy Silver obeyed, and the Head administered two stinging cuts on each hand. After which, the rest stood out one by one and were similarly rewarded.

"You may go," said the Head, after that, and from the mildness of his tone the juniors guessed that he was not without sympathy for them.

They departed.

Outside, they proceeded towards the Hall, rubbing their palms tenderly and looking decidedly restless.

"That's that!" Jimmy Silver said eventually. "Now, if it had been old Dalton—"

"We'd have got off with a hundred lines apiece and nothing more said about it. Exactly!" said Tommy Dodd. "But Manders always was nuts on running a chap to the Head if he'd half a chance. Grin and bear it, I suppose!"

"Just where you're wrong, old bean!" remarked Jimmy Silver. "Modern worms may grin and bear it, perhaps; but Classics never shall be slaves!"

"Hear, hear!"

Tommy Dodd grinned.

"Well, of course, if you've got a magic formula for making Manders sit up—"

"Magic's not needed; it's just a matter of brains," said Jimmy Silver blandly. "I've got a brainwave, anyway!"

"If it's as brilliant as that brainwave you had for ragging our study—"

"Better! Much better, in fact!" said Jimmy Silver cheerfully. "List to the priceless pearls of wisdom from the lips of your Uncle James, you men! You heard what the Head was saying about an inspector coming to the school?"

"Something about a telegram postponing the call till the day after to-morrow, wasn't it?"

"Just that!" agreed Jimmy. "Now, I know something about this Johnny. Cousin of mine who's at Abbotsford told me about him last vac. Apparently it's his stock gag, sending a wire to say he's not coming and then turning up all the same, just to catch 'em on the hop."

"Well?"

"Nothing remarkable in that, is there?" asked Tommy Cook.

Jimmy Silver smiled.

"No. But it's just what's wanted to enable us to work my little wheeze. The inspector chap, Whittle, you see, is going to turn up to-morrow, though he's given them the idea it's the next day. He always does, according to my cousin. Now, suppose we give Manders the impression that one of us is going to dress up as the inspector, by way of a jape—"

"Oh, great pip!"

"Dear old Manders, ten to one, will hug himself with glee and just wait for the impostor to turn up."

"My hat!"

"Along comes Whittle," said Jimmy Silver descriptively. "Manders, thinking it's just one of us, disguised, leads him up the garden, then nabs him and runs him into the Head!"

"D-d-does he?"

"Bound to!" said the leader of the Fistical Four confidently. "Then the fat will be in the fire. Too late, Manders will find out that the Whittle he has been ragging is the genuine article after all. And if that doesn't make him sit up, nothing ever will!"

"Well, my hat!" ejaculated Tommy Dodd admiringly. "It's the maddest, balmiest, craziest wheeze ever; but I must admit that for a Classical fossil, you've got brains!"

"Then it's a go?" asked Jimmy Silver, with a laugh.

"What-ho!"

"Passed nem con!"

"But suppose this Whittle bird turns out to be six feet high?" objected Newcome. "Manders'll know the dif then, I suppose?"

"All serene; I happen to know that Whittle's an under-sized chap, no taller than any of us," replied Jimmy Silver. "Bit of a freak, too, it seems. Doesn't believe in punishment, and all that. It'll work like a charm, I tell you. Only question is, how to give Manders the wheeze?"

"Send him an anonymous note?" suggested Arthur Edward Lovell. "But on second thoughts, he might show that to the Head."

Jimmy Silver shook his head.

"I don't think he will, somehow. Being our one-and-only Manders, he'll prefer to wait to get the giddy culprit red-handed! We'll send that note. But that alone won't be enough. We must also wear the air of conspirators."

"Oh crikey!"

"Quite easy," said Jimmy Silver. "All we've got to do is to start whispering mysteriously whenever Manders passes. Then, perhaps we can hold a confab underneath his study window. Talk loudly enough for him to hear, you know!"

"Well, of all the fatheaded wheezes you ever thought out, this seems the most fatheaded!" declared Raby, with his customary candour. "But if it does come off—"

"It will come off! Let's go and draft out that anonymous letter!"

They did so; and later in the day Mr. Manders received it and read it with considerable surprise, quite a lot of satisfaction, and a certain amount of suspicion.

Eight juniors worked enthusiastically to obliterate that suspicion from Manders' mind during the remainder of the day. Whenever Mr. Manders happened to come across the Fistical Four, or Tommy Dodd & Co., those cheery juniors seemed to be behaving most mysteriously. Whispered conferences seemed to be held in odd corners, voices were hushed at the Housemaster's approach, and guilty glances were turned in his direction.

Mr. Manders noticed everything, and smiled to himself. He did not take the anonymous note to the Head.

He had decided that it was preferable to bide his time and expose the "bogus" Mr. Whittle, if and when he arrived.

CHAPTER 3.

Manders Runs Riot

HERE was a lurking smile on Mr. Manders' lean face when he took the Sixth for morning classes on the following day.

He was anticipating, not without pleasure, that lessons were likely to be interrupted that morning by an announcement that the governors' inspector had arrived.

Mr. Manders was looking forward with keen interest to the arrival of Mr. Whittle. But he seemed in for a disappointment. No interruption occurred that morning. The Housemaster of the Modern House came away from the Sixth Form room thinking to himself that the courage of the intending japer must have failed him at the last moment.

But outside the Form-room he ran into Dr. Chisholm. And Mr. Manders smiled again. For accompanying the Head was a most extraordinary little gentleman. He was short and fat, and wore a goatee beard and had beetling eyebrows. He was the sort of man who had to be seen to be believed, in fact.

Mr. Manders saw him.

And he didn't believe.

Obviously the beard was false. Quite evidently the beetling eyebrows were being held in position with the aid of a gum. The man was false, from the tips of his patent shoes to the crown of his bowler hat.

That was how Roger Manders saw it, anyway.

The Head spotted Mr. Manders while the latter was staring at the stranger, trying to pierce his disguise. Dr. Chisholm appeared to be rather flurried.

"Ah, Mr. Manders!" he exclaimed, in quite a tone of relief. "Pray allow me to introduce you! This gentleman is Mr. Whittle, the inspector appointed by the Board of Governors to visit the school. He has arrived unexpectedly early."

Mr. Manders smiled an acid smile as he bowed.

"So you are Mr. Whittle!" he remarked. "Well, well!"

"How do you do, sir?" the inspector returned, in a somewhat high-pitched voice, which served still further to add to Mr. Manders' impression that the visitor was an impostor. "I understand that you are in charge of the Modern House here?"

Mr. Manders rubbed his hands.

"Precisely. That came as news to you, I suppose?"

"It could hardly be otherwise, since I am a stranger to the school!" retorted the inspector, with a stare, while Dr.

Chisholm blinked at his colleague, considerably surprised by the peculiarly sinister inflexion of his voice.

Mr. Manders had quite made up his mind by this time that the alleged Mr. Whittle was nothing more harmful than a junior, disguised. He began to enjoy himself now, after the manner of a cat playing with a mouse.

"I understand that you are credited with some extraordinary views on the subject of corporal punishment, Mr.—er—Whittle," he remarked. "You believe, I am told, that no circumstances justify the use of the cane or the birch."

"My dear Manders—" murmured the Head, giving his underling a look that was almost beseeching. The topic of corporal punishment had been the very thing the Head had been trying to avoid in his conversation with the visiting inspector; yet here was Mr. Manders rushing in where angels feared to tread—despite the numerous warnings which the Head had given him on the previous day.

Mr. Whittle was looking at the Housemaster of the Modern House fixedly now. Apparently he had been touched on a raw point.

"It is true that I hold certain views on the subject of corporal punishment in schools," he said, in his peculiarly high-pitched voice. "I am not accustomed, however, to hearing them described as extraordinary!"

Mr. Manders smiled.

"You will pardon me for adhering to my opinion. To me, sir, the idea of abolishing corporal punishment is ludicrous."

"Mr. Manders!" exclaimed the shocked Head.

But Mr. Manders did not desist. Knowing what he thought he knew, he felt that for once he was in a position to flout authority. Later, when Dr. Chisholm also knew, he would understand and, naturally, forgive.

So Mr. Manders, instead of lapsing into silence, raised his voice so that all and sundry could hear—"all and sundry" including the Fistical Four and Tommy Dodd & Co., who were just turning out of the Fourth Form room.

"My view of the matter is this, Mr. Whittle," he said, with such strange emphasis on the "Mr. Whittle" that the Head looked at him as though suspecting him of being under the influence of drink: "Without frequent floggings most boys would be nothing more than undisciplined hooligans and ruffians. Moreover, the lives of their elders would be rendered intolerable."

"My dear sir—" murmured Mr. Whittle.

"Pah!" was Mr. Manders' retort. "All boys need corporal punishment—frequent corporal punishment. Most particularly they need it," he added venomously, "when they are in the habit of playing reckless and disrespectful practical jokes on their masters!"

"Go it, Manders!" chortled someone from the back of the crowd which had by this time gathered, and there was a chuckle, which was instantly suppressed by a look from the Head.

"Mr. Manders—" said the Head again.

"If you will pardon me for one minute—"

"But I will not pardon you, sir!" said the outraged Dr. Chisholm. "Your behaviour leads me to suppose either that you are unwell or that you are under the influence of alcohol!"

"My own impression precisely!" remarked Mr. Whittle. "Send the man away!"

Mr. Manders sneered.

"I don't doubt for one moment that you would very much like me to go away now that you are aware of my attitude to you," he remarked. "I do not, however, intend to go. On the contrary, I fully intend to stay with you to the end of your career!"

"The—the end of my career?" stuttered Mr. Whittle blankly. "Are you mad, sir?"

"By no means! Nor am I quite so simple as you supposed me to be," said the Housemaster of the Modern House, acidly. He pointed an accusing finger at the bewildered school inspector, and turned triumphantly to the Head. "This creature, sir, is an impostor!"

"What!"

"He is no more Mr. Whittle than I am Mr. Whittle," said Mr. Manders, fairly exulting in his triumph. "Bulkeley, will you kindly lend me your ashplant?"

"Certainly, sir!" said Bulkeley. "But—"

"Thank you! And now, with your kind indulgence, sir," said Mr. Manders, bowing to the Head. "I will show you what, in my opinion, should be the punishment for undisciplined juniors who play practical jokes on their masters!"

"Mr. Manders!" hooted the Head, taking a step forward. But he was too late!

Before the astonished school inspector realised what was happening, Mr. Manders had seized him by the scruff of the neck and started belabouring the rear portion of his anatomy with Bulkeley's ashplant,

A high-pitched yell rang out across the ancient Hall of Rookwood.

"Help! The man's mad! Stop him! Whooop!"

"Bulkeley! Mr. Dalton!" gasped the Head.

Mr. Dalton and Bulkeley rushed to intervene. But Mr. Manders had left off before they reached him. His act being more in the nature of a gesture than an infliction of punishment, there was no need to prolong the agony.

"Pray stand away, gentlemen!" he said calmly. "I have not, as you may suppose, lost possession of my senses."

"Can't lose what you haven't got!" sang out Tommy Cook from a safe place at the back and this time the emotions of the crowd found expression in a roar.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence!" hooted the scandalised Head. "Mr. Whittle—my dear—sir—how to apologise, I really don't—"

"Scandalous! Outrageous!" exploded the assaulted school inspector. "I shall make it my duty to report everything to the governors. I shall—"

"You will do nothing!" said Mr. Manders calmly. "Dr. Chisholm! I have said that this man is an impostor. So he is. The beard he was wearing is false; likewise the eyebrows. The suit he has on was probably hired from a

of his tug, in fact, had been to jerk the visitor, face downwards, to the floor!

There was a crash and a howl of agony.

"Oh! Ah! Yoooop!"

"B-bless my soul!" stammered Dr. Chisholm, staring almost dazedly at the prostrate figure of Mr. Whittle, while from the junior section of the crowd came an uncontrollable roar; they simply couldn't help it.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

As for Mr. Manders, for some seconds he could do nothing but blink. He could see now that he had made a mistake. Very evidently now the peculiar little gentleman was not, after all, a Rookwood junior, but the genuine Mr. Whittle.

For quite a long time Mr. Manders stood there blinking. Then, overwhelmed by the horror of his position, he turned tail and fled.

CHAPTER 4.

Poor Old Manders!

"MR. MANDERS!"

"Sir!" said Mr. Manders humbly.

It was an hour later. Mr. Whittle had departed. Peace reigned over Rookwood once more. And Mr. Manders felt in a humble mood



Mr. Manders seized the inspector's beard and tugged hard. To his horror, Mr. Manders discovered that the beard did not come away—but the owner fell flat on his face!

theatrical costumier. He is padded so that his real figure may be disguised."

"Mr. Manders!" gasped the Head.

"All this is surprising," said Mr. Manders, with a smile. "But you will no doubt feel even more surprised at the next revelation I am going to make to you. It is this—that this assumed man is not a man at all, but merely a boy, and a junior boy belonging to this school, at that!"

There was a muffled explosion from the rear, where the Fistical Four and Tommy Dodd & Co. were almost hugging themselves at the amazing success of their little jape. Mr. Manders did not heed it. With a sudden movement the Housemaster of the Modern House reached out to the alleged impostor again and grabbed the end of his goatee beard.

Ignoring the shriek that came from his victim, he gave a swift and violent tug.

"There!" he said.

Naturally, he anticipated that the beard which he had supposed to be false would come away.

But, to his horror, Mr. Manders suddenly woke up to the fact that the beard had not come away—that the only result

"This has been a very painful and unpleasant business," said the Head gravely. "Very painful and unpleasant, both for myself and for Mr. Whittle, on whom I had every reason for making a good impression."

Mr. Manders licked his dry lips.

"None realises that better than myself, sir!" he said bitterly. "To say that I am sorry would be to render my feelings utterly inadequately. I am overcome with contrition."

The Head nodded.

"There is no need to repeat what has already been said. You were, it appears, the victim of a practical joke—quite a unique practical joke."

"A monstrous practical joke, sir!" said Manders.

Dr. Chisholm compressed his lips.

"Be that as it may. I do not propose to take any action against the juniors whom you say are responsible. Their plans, as I see it, turned entirely on your behaviour in the false position they created for you."

"Sir—"

"I regret to have to say that your behaviour in that false position was not, in my opinion, entirely blameless," said the Head steadily. "The joke succeeded because of that. I am afraid, in the circumstances, that I can hardly sympathise with you. It is lucky that Mr. Whittle turned out to be the owner of a sense of humour!"

"Very lucky indeed, sir!" almost moaned Mr. Manders. And with that he withdrew.

Jimmy Silver & Co. and Tommy Dodd & Co. were standing in a group at the foot of the steps when the Housemaster came out to cross to his own House. They raised their caps with an air of great respect as he passed.

Mr. Manders paused and bestowed on them a look worthy of the Demon King in a pantomime. Then he passed on, without a word.

"Poor old Manders!" said Newcome. "Was ever a beak japed like it before?"

"Never!" responded Jimmy Silver and Lovell and Raby, in chorus.

Tommy Dodd & Co. didn't join in the chorus. They were staring after Manders' retreating figure rather thoughtfully.

"All very well," said Tommy Dodd. "You chaps aren't in his House; we are. Just occurred to me that he's going to take it out of us for this one of these fine days."

"My hat, yes!" said Tommy Cook. "Come to think of it, it was rather a crackpot idea; just the sort of thing a Classical idiot would think of!"

"Well, talk about base ingratitude!" said Jimmy Silver disgustedly. "You Modern bounders really are the limit! Roll 'em over and tread on 'em, chaps!"

And as the Moderns had by this time lost Towle, the Fistical Four were able to do so.

After which, feeling they had deserved it, they went in to dinner.

THE END.

(That certainly was the jape of the term, wasn't it? Next week Jimmy Silver & Co. turn to Mr. Dalton—and try to help him!)

"A Gangster at St. Jim's!"

(Continued from page 18.)

"Go!" said the Head slowly.

Without another word Amos Keene left the room, and five minutes later he had left the school, never to return.

"Merry," said the Head quietly, when the door had closed behind the departing scoundrel, "you have heard this story. How much truth there is in it I cannot say. I can only say that while you are at St. Jim's I shall watch over you with every care, and see that no harm comes to you from any enemy you may possess."

"Thank you, sir!" said Tom.

And he quietly left the study. His face was very sombre as he went. The master of the Shell's confession cast a cloud even upon his sunny spirits; but in the passage he met Blake.

"Hallo! Down in the dumps?" exclaimed Blake, slapping him on the shoulder. "Buck up! I've come for you!"

"What's on?"

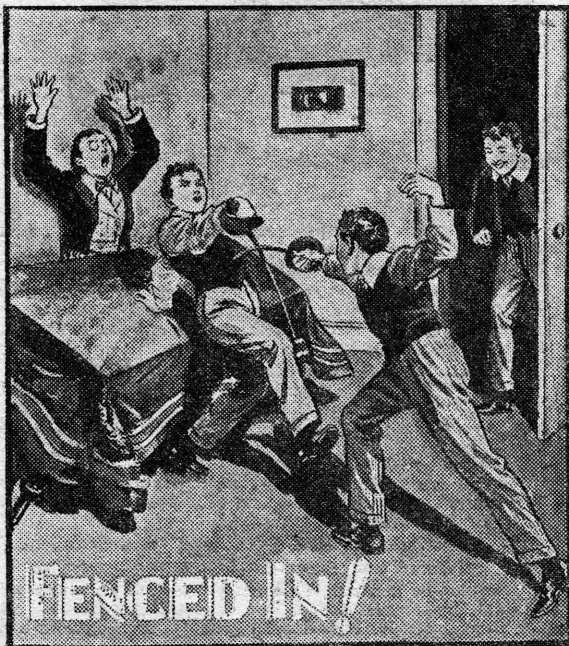
"Figgins & Co. are giving a feast to celebrate the departure of our highly-respected new master, and we're all going. Lowther and Manners are waiting, and so are Study No. 6. So clear your noble countenance and come and eat, drink, and be 'Merry'!"

And Tom laughed, and willingly enough went over the way with the little crowd of School House guests, to be hospitably received by Figgins & Co., and to have what the juniors afterwards described as a real, ripping, high old time.

THE END.

(Tom Merry certainly has luck in getting out of awkward holes, doesn't he, chaps? Next week he and Figgins are after another big thrill in "THE SCHOOLBOY 'TECS!" It's a ripping good yarn, so mind you don't miss it!)

The GEM 2nd



NEXT WEEK'S WINNER!

The GEM Scores Again!

That's poor old Gussy you see squashed up against the wall in the black-and-white reproduction of next week's coloured cover, but you can't squash Gussy for long—nor any of the famous St. Jim's juniors, for that matter. Talking of squashing, Tom and his pals settle the hash of certain very undesirable individuals in next week's fine long yarn. You'll learn all about it from

"THE SCHOOLBOY 'TECS!"

OUT NEXT WEDNESDAY!

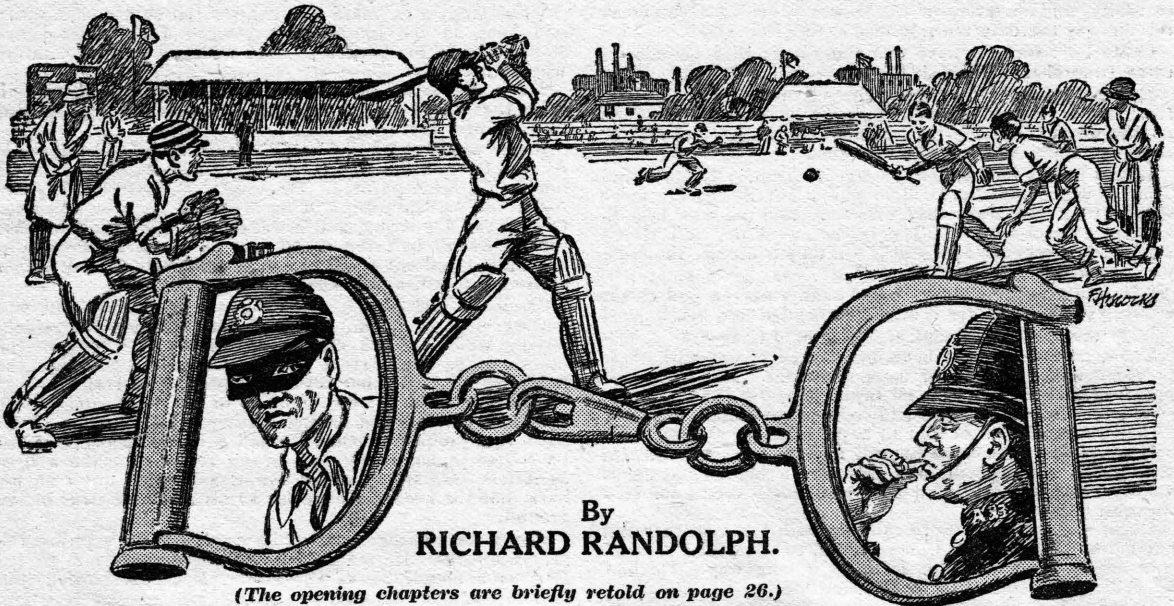
There will also be another ripping Rookwood story by Owen Conquest. Jimmy Silver & Co. decide to come to the assistance of their Housemaster in:

"STICKING UP FOR DALTON!"

Rod Rodney is "framed" in next week's thrilling instalment of our great serial, "The Cricketer Cracksman!" And there will also be the usual bright GEM features!

MORE THRILLS IN OUR RIPPING SERIAL.

THE CRICKETER CRACKSMAN!



By
RICHARD RANDOLPH.

(The opening chapters are briefly retold on page 26.)

The Match With Surrey.

GINGER thought of Beal at once. He was certainly to be counted on.

But it was all so vague. He could not help feeling impatient with Harry Hiam.

Then in a flash he understood. There came to him the memory of the evening when young Green had burst in upon the crowd in the cellar with the news that the Burslake affair had gone wrong, and the cops were on the track of those concerned in it. Nothing more had been heard of that matter; there had not been a word in the newspapers. But, of course, that would be because the police were keeping their own counsel. Ginger was shrewd, and saw that this was the best thing they could do.

And Harry's unwillingness to tell more was understandable, too. His father must be in all this, of course. Harry himself, in a way, but not because he wanted to be, Ginger was certain.

Harry meant well. He had never had a fair show. Ginger's heart warmed to him.

"All right, Harry," he said, squeezing the arm of his old schoolfellow. "I'll be on the watch, and if there's anything else you can let me know you will, I'm sure."

That almost brought the letter from Harry's pocket—not quite, for to produce it meant so many more questions, and already he was afraid he had told too much.

He thought of the pearls that were to be planted upon Rod. But no more than that of the secret of the letter could be told. If the plot failed, their planting would matter nothing, because Rod would not come under suspicion. It was up to Ginger now to see that the plot should fail.

"You're a good chap, Harry!" said Ginger, as they parted.

Harry Hiam went off with a lump in his throat. What would Ginger—what would Rodney—think of him when the truth came to light, as he felt it must come soon? He had known ever since he had left school of the illicit trade his father plied; he had played the spy for his father upon the gang.

Oh, he had been a dirty dog! And even now he did not see how to shake himself clear of the mire in which he had waded.

But he had done his best now, according to his lights. He tried to comfort himself with that thought.

Ginger was full of worry, too. He must not let this interfere with his play—that was the chief thought in his mind. For Rod's sake he would have given up his great ambition,

though with a heavy heart. But if he kept badly it would not help Rod. He must watch out, behind the stumps, all the time.

Surrey came at full strength. Fender and Maurice Allom were the only amateurs in the team. The nine pros were John Hobbs, Andrew Ducat, Andrew Sandham, Tom Shepherd, Allan Peach, Barling, Gregory, Squires, and Brooks. With D. R. Jardine, now seldom available, the side was Surrey's best.

Fender won the toss. The pitch was perfect, and the weather set fair. Fender took first innings.

Rod had seen Hobbs in the dressing-room, genial, smiling, debonair. Now, as he walked out to bat, with dark-haired Sandham, his tried and trusty partner, by his side, he looked all over the man of the mighty deeds he had done—the man whom thousands of other schoolboys besides Rod Rodney had worshipped from afar.

A slight smile still, but with it a look of resolution—a look that seemed to forebode another of those many centuries.

A year since and Rod had been playing for an obscure school. Now he was up against the greatest batsman of the century.

Little wonder he was thrilled, as were Ginger and Conrad Beal. But the ordeal was a less crucial one for the other two colts than for Rod. A chance from the great man's bat was the same as one from that of anyone else; but to bowl against him was another matter.

And Rod had a presentiment as to what would happen. He would be put on first this time. Hyde would hope that Surrey's idol would smash the pretensions of this youngster, who looked like becoming the Norlandshire idol.

The crowd cheered when Hyde threw Rod the ball, and Hyde scowled.

He was doing what an honest captain would have done. Tommy Coote would go on at the other end. With Hebblewhite away, the customary shock attack—the opening with the two most pacey bowlers, in which so many county captains believe, was out of the question, unless young Martin was to be put on. And Hyde knew what the committee and the old hands in the pavilion would think of his putting on that raw youth against Hobbs.

He might have used Rogers in Rod's place, but the veteran had been a complete failure in the Yorkshire game, and seemed none too fit now.

If Rodney scored—well, that would be something to the credit of his captain's judgment. If he failed—as Hyde hoped he would—that would take him down a bit.

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ROD RODNEY IN DANGER

Hyde attempts frame-up as last desperate measure!

Jack Hobbs has not won to his pre-eminence by holding the bowlers opposed to him cheaply. Some he knows by heart. He is wise to every trick they possess. When he meets a new man he sets out to study him.

This boy had done uncommonly well against Yorkshire; worked hard, too, for a mere boy. Hobbs considered him carefully, and an over, in the course of which a couple to the off was the only scoring stroke, did Rod good.

Cootie let Sandham have two short ones, and boundaries came from them. No risk there!

Rod gave Ginger the signal agreed upon—hand lifted to forehead, as though he were pushing back his hair. Then he sent down his fastest ball, without any increase of run, or any very appreciable change of action.

It was not as fast as the average of Tommy Cootie's, and Tommy was below Larwood in pace; but it was far more speedy than the crack had expected, and he was late in making contact with it. The leather went up, and Hobbs was already moving away—still within his crease, though—when Ginger's gloves received it.

"He'll do," said Hobbs. "And that wasn't a bad catch, either, young fellow, for it must have squirmed a bit."

"My word, didn't it squirm!" answered Ginger.

The crowd applauded heartily, though mixed with their pleasure was a feeling of disappointment. The early dismissal of such a crack was all to the good for Norlandshire, of course. But many there had come to see Hobbs, and they had not seen enough of him to be satisfied.

Hyde tried to persuade himself that he was pleased. He wanted his side to win, and this was a big step towards victory. But anything that meant enhanced credit for Rod was gall to him.

Ducat and Sandham were cautious with the man they did not know. But Tommy Cootie they knew well, and Tommy was not at the top of his form by a long way. He had never been as dependable as Hebblewhite.

Runs came at about an average pace, sixty or so per hour. Few of them were made off Rod, for both batsmen were watching for the unexpected fast ball, and the colt was keeping a fine length, and always doing a bit off the pitch. But none of the bowlers put on at the other end made any impression.

Ginger had settled well down to his work. It was not really as hard as keeping wicket in a club match, he thought. These bowlers, even Cootie at his worst, were never wild. The old hands in the pavilion watched Red Harman's nephew approvingly. The right stuff there. He never snatched at the ball, but let it come to his hands. And—well, the umpire said "Not out!" but that whisking off of Ducat's bails was smart work, and the decision must have been a difficult one.

Rogers was brought on—a slow left-hander at each end, for Hyde still kept Rod going at one. "Let's see whether the young bouncer can be tired out!" That was the thought in his mind. There was another thought more encouraging. He reckoned he saw his way now to clear Rod out of his path once and for all. That frame-up, of which he had talked with Ralph Redgrave, had taken shape in his mind. If only Ralph had nerve for what was to be done—if only Geering would do his part—it ought to go through.

Over 80 showed on the boards before the second wicket fell.

Rogers was bowling better than in the last game, and Andy Ducat never got really on top of Rogers. Now he hit one hard and high that looked a certain 6, but was not, because long-limbed Beal raced for it, and took a catch that would have been impossible to any other man on the side. He was close up to the ropes when he jumped, and his right hand shot up and held the leather.

How the crowd cheered then! It was the sort of catch that rouses to enthusiasm all who love fine fielding.

Two for 86, Tom Shepherd partnering Sandham, who went on in his usual calm, unfurried way.

Shepherd took ten minutes or so to play himself in, and then levied toll on both bowlers. This was one of his best days, and at such times he scores as fast as some men who have won higher renown than he as hitters. He had no dread of Rogers, and he made more runs off Rod than either Ducat or Sandham had been able to do.

Martin replaced Rogers, but still Rod was kept on. The men who knew best were doubtful of the wisdom of that course. True, the youngster was still bowling well. But he was a youngster, and he ought not to be called upon for so long sustained an effort.

In the half-hour before lunch runs came fast, but not off Rod.

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He was still treated with some respect, even by Shepherd; but both Shepherd and Sandham smote Martin and Cootie and Willey unmercifully.

Sixty odd runs came in that half-hour, and Sandham, though he never lifted a ball, made as many of them as his partner, who four times hit over the ropes for 6.

"The trouble is," said Mr. Allston, the old member who had been in the luncheon-room when Dick Jerrold had smitten Hyde to the floor, "that we have only one bowler worth his salt."

Those who heard were in complete agreement, though all knew that Roger Rogers and Tommy Cootie were good value in their best form.

Roger would never display that form again. The death of Arthur Hereward, and the end of his first-class career, were not to be far separated. He was much nearer fifty than forty, and was growing stiff in the limbs. Yet he still tried to keep the flag flying, and it was he who got Sandham after lunch, though half the credit was Ginger's. Not often is Sandham lured out of his crease to miss the ball; but Roger enticed him out, and Ginger did the rest.

Sandham had passed three figures, and Shepherd was getting close to them. Rod had been given a brief spell, during which he had fielded at slip one end, mid-on the other. Hyde saw that he could not send the colt into the long field again without arousing hostile comment.

Now Shepherd put the hundred to his name, and off the next ball made a bad stroke, getting it on the edge of his bat. Rod jumped, touched the ball with his fingers, arrested its course to boundary, and swung round to make a dive as it fell. He swung round again, and came down on his back, but the leather was in his hands and well clear of the ground.

The Surrey innings went on its way. Fender supplied the only fireworks. He made 45 in twenty minutes, and pasted Rod as unmercifully as the rest. But Rod bowled him middle stump in the end.

That long day in the field ended within a few minutes of time—Surrey, 424. Rod had bowled more than twice as many overs as anyone else, and had taken four for 113. It needed a cricketer to estimate the value of those figures. But there were plenty of cricketers in the Norchester pavilion and around the ground. They knew.

"Tired, old chap?" asked Beal, as he and Rod and Ginger left the middle together.

"A bit," Rod confessed. "Must be getting old, I suppose. Used to think cricket couldn't make me really tired."

"Ah! You didn't know our precious skipper when you thought that," Beal answered.

The Trap!

NORLANDSHIRE fought an uphill fight all the second day of the game, and fought it well.

No one made a big score; but all who did anything—Red Harman, Hyde, Rod, Tommy Cootie, Martin, Stanton—scored their runs in very decent time, not like men who have made up their minds that to avoid defeat is the one thing left. Harman's 55 was the highest contribution to the total of 269. The other five made over 150 among them, and Ginger and Rogers added a useful 20 or so for the last wicket.

Norlandshire followed on, though Fender took anxious thought before he ordained that they should do so. If Surrey batted again, a considerable score would be necessary for declaring. If Norlandshire could be got out again Surrey would know just what must be made, and the time they had to make the runs in, and they had both the men to force the game, and the men to play doggo if the forcing batsmen failed.

Allom and Peach had done good work in Norlandshire's first, getting all the wickets between them. But they had done about enough for one day, and Fender and Shepherd were the bowlers when Red Harman and Beal went in again.

The Surrey skipper gets wickets with all sorts of balls, bowls good batsmen with full pitches, diddles out many a man with what looks like easy stuff. Shepherd is quite another type of bowler. He keeps a length, and does not invite liberties. Yet once in a way he becomes deadly.

He was not deadly that afternoon. Red and Beal played Shepherd easily, and scored apace off the Surrey captain, who gave up the ball to Gregory.

Gregory bowls the sort of stuff that seems to ask for hitting; but, as with Fender, there is a shrewd brain behind all that he does.

He and Shepherd had both to be relieved, and Allom and Peach were on again, and still no wicket had fallen, and

THE OPENING CHAPTERS.

ROD RODNEY, an orphan, who is living at Norchester with relations, falls foul of RALPH REDGRAVE and ALURED HYDE, captain of Norlandshire Cricket Team, at a boxing saloon kept by HARRY HIAM and his son Harry. Later, Rod is asked to play for Norlandshire against Yorkshire, and in the match Hyde purposely runs him out. By stealing a letter Ralph learns that Rod has been left twenty thousand pounds. In a conspiracy with Hyde, Ralph decides to frame him up in order to get him out of the way. Harry Hiam learns of the plot and warns Ginger, a friend of Rod's. He also advises Ginger to get another fellow to help. (Now read on.)

the score was growing fast.

The total was 158 before the first wicket fell—Beal c. Brooks, b. Allom, 81. And with the fall of Conrad's wicket the day's play ended. Norlandshire, with nine to fall, had reached to within a few runs of the Surrey total.

While the home side's first pair were making that fine stand, Ginger Harman tore open in the dressing-room a not over clean envelope brought him by one of the ground-boys.

"Watch out!" he read. "There's something up to-night, and wherever Rodney goes you ought to follow, with a pal if you can find one. Can't tell you more, but Rodney's in danger. They are framing him up. Wish I could do more than this. H. H."

Harry Hiam could do no more because of his loyalty to his father.

Dimly Ginger understood that. He could not get the thing sized up, but from the moment he read that scrawled note he had no doubt but that it was for him to do what Harry urged. Old Horry was nothing to him—he could not care, except for his old schoolfellow's sake, what happened to the ugly scoundrel. But Rod—he would do anything for Rod!

He found that Conrad Beal felt much as he did about that. "You can depend on this chap?" said Beal, taken apart in a corner by Ginger.

"Ab-so-lute-ly!" replied Ginger, with a solemn nod.

"Then why not warn Rod at once?"

Ginger considered that very carefully.

"'Fraid it wouldn't be much use," he answered. "We don't know a bit what it is, and we couldn't persuade him. He can be jolly pigheaded when he chooses. Besides, it's too late. He's cleared out."

Rod had gone the moment play ceased. To him also had come a note—from Mrs. Redgrave.

"I don't know what to do, Rod," Ralph's mother wrote. "John is away, as you know, and I can't deal with our boy. He threatens all sorts of things. I can only lean on you. Come to me the first moment you can."

And Rod had gone within two minutes. Even though he had been next on the batting list and there had been an hour to go he would have answered that call. But as it chanced Beal was out almost directly he got the note, and anyway he was not No. 3.

He found Mrs. Redgrave in tears.

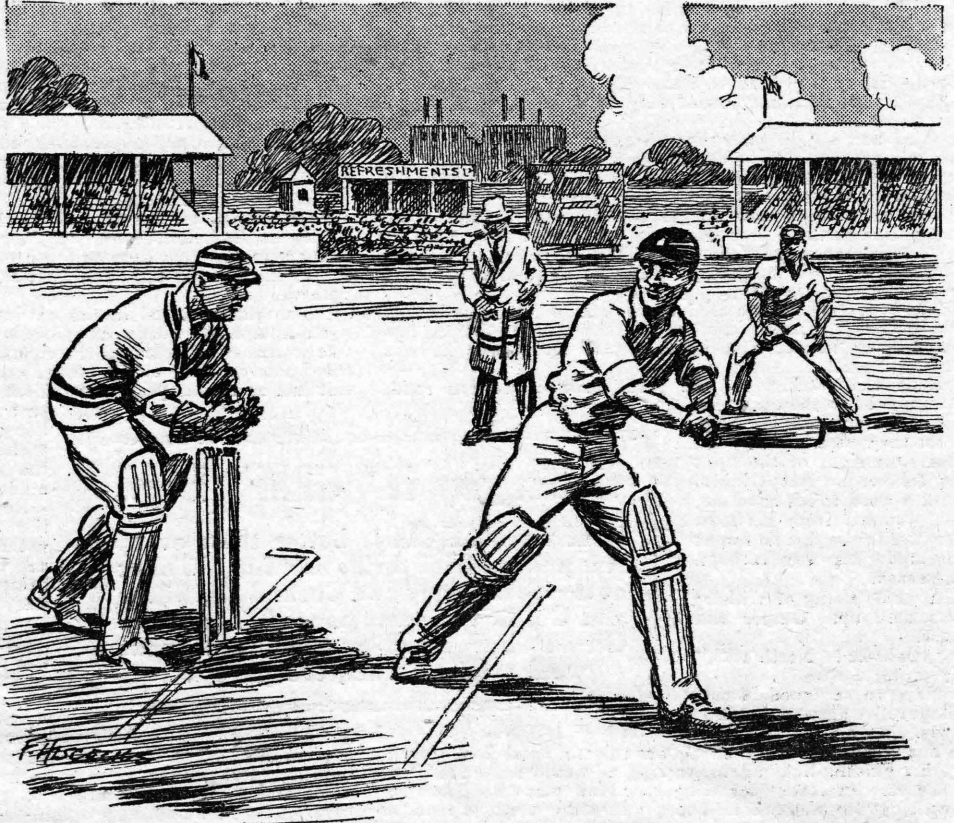
"I've tried to bear up, Rod," she said; "but we have always had trouble with Ralph, and lately it's got worse. I can't understand what's wrong, and if my husband does, he won't say. He hardens his face whenever he speaks of Ralph now—almost as though he had given him up for good and all. But I can't give him up—I can't! He's my boy, though he doesn't seem to care about that. And I don't know what to do—I don't know what to do!"

He was her boy! Rod knew him for an utter rotter, but could not tell his mother that.

He kissed her and wiped away her tears. Then he went upstairs. He had hurried from the ground in his flannels and must change.

On his bed lay an envelope without any address.

He opened it. Some attempt had been made to disguise the writing on the note within, but he knew the writing for Ralph's.



Hobbs nicked the ball, and he was moving away, but still within his crease, when Ginger took the squirming ball in his hands.

"Destroy this as soon as read. I am right up against it. I don't suppose you will care to do any more for me, but for the sake of my mother you may be willing to help. It will not cost you much. Be at Charlton House, Turley, at ten o'clock to-night. You can get there easily by that time. Wait outside for me—it will only be a few minutes."

That was all. Rod tried hard to puzzle it out, but failed.

If he could help Ralph in some such way as he had done before, why could not the help be given at Norchester? What could this place at Turley, nearly forty miles away, have to do with it?

But there was not much time for thinking over matters. Rod had bought a motor-bike within the last week, and it would take him to Turley long before ten if he started at once. Getting there before the time named would not help, however, as far as he could see. But sitting and wondering would not help, either, and he had no inclination to do that, in any case.

For the sake of Ralph's mother and father he must do what he could for Ralph. He did not see what he could do if it came to a question of cash. What he had paid out on the motor-bike had absorbed the balance of his small legacy. But Ralph did not say that it was money; it might be something else.

Rod hesitated before he destroyed the note. But he did what he felt the right thing to do in burning it. He must stand by Ralph. It was not wonderful that he should fail to see in all this a plot to ruin him, that he should not think even Ralph base enough for such a trick.

Half an hour before he left the house, having done his best to make Mrs. Redgrave easier in mind, Ginger and Beal had been on watch.

They saw him go. They followed.

There was no place on the narrow premises of the Redgraves for keeping a motor-cycle. So Rod's machine was still in the garage of the firm from whom he had bought it. Beal had bought one at the same time. They had both had experience in driving. Conrad, as he was not going home at once, had also left his mount at the garage.

Rod turned in at the gate.

"My word! This is luck!" said Beal. "We can follow him all right."

"Good!" answered Ginger heartily.

He waited, alert as if behind the wicket, while Beal slid in through the office door, so as not to run against Rod.

Pushing his machine, Rod emerged. Ginger felt sure that Beal would not be long after him. Anyway, it was of no use his saying anything to Rod. He could not make Harry Hiam's warning clear, could only do what Harry had told him to do.

Beal had the better chance because Rod did not hurry himself greatly. The older fellow wasted no second.

Rod got his engine going and set off. The direction he took made it clear that he was going north.

Out came Beal, and Ginger fairly threw himself upon the pillow as the driver settled in the saddle.

"Let her go, pard!" he yelled into Beal's ear. "It's the North Road he'll be taking. His rear light kind of winks—look out for that!"

The rear light had ceased to wink in a few seconds, but not before Beal had spotted it, thus being enabled, bar accident or interruption by traffic, to make sure he was on Rod's trail.

Near the outskirts of the great town a western road, which went to the coast, led out of the northern highway. Here they were held up, and Beal lost sight of the light he followed. But Ginger, with a word to his comrade, had jumped from his seat, reckless in the risk he ran as he made his way through the crush.

A whole string of vehicles was held up. Ginger slid back.

"Right-ho! North still," he said.

"You're a good scout, Ginger!" answered Beal approvingly.

The northward-bound string was released, and Beal picked up his guiding light again, though he would not have been quite sure of it but for Ginger. Now what both had to watch out for was lest Rod might turn down a side road.

But he held on along the northern highway. Rod knew the village to which he had been summoned; he knew the house. The only time that he and Ralph Redgrave had ever been out of Norchester in company was one Sunday afternoon, when a pal of Ralph's had called with a small car and had offered to take the two for a drive.

Rod had not got much out of it. Ralph's pal was very much of the same kidney as Ralph, and neither was Rod's notion of an agreeable companion. But he remembered Charlton House. They had stopped there. Ralph had gone inside to see the occupier, whom he knew, it appeared; and Rod had remembered the place because of the big monkey puzzle tree in the garden before it.

In fact, Charlton House, after standing empty for a year or two, had been taken by a member of Hyde's gang to serve the gang's purposes. It was now for a time in the occupation of Mr. Joel Geering, the gang's "First Luff," who had taken some pains to get friendly with the village constable.

By doing that, he had been able to find out about the bobby's rounds—a very convenient bit of knowledge—and to make pretty sure that he could have the bobby there or thereabouts at any time which did not interfere with his work. Mr. Huffward—alias Geering—was a trifle nervous about burglars, having a valuable collection of old coins.

To-night Mr. Huffward—alias Geering—had his instructions from the Boss to carry out. He was not in love with the job. He had no special spite against Rod; he thought it risky. On the other hand, it was clever; he did not care a curse about the young cricketer, and he was loyal to the Boss. So he meant to go through with it.

He had been reinforced by two more of the gang—men of decent speech and appearance, unknown to the police, or believing themselves so. These were his visitors for the purposes of the plot, his aides in securing Rod.

But it was a ticklish job!

Easy enough on the face of it. Rod, having been summoned to Charlton House by Ralph, would come unhesitatingly to the front door and ask for him—if he ever got as far as the front door! But he would not if all went well with the scheme.

He would be seized in the garden, with a burglar's kit upon him, and already the window of the room in which was supposed to be stored the collection of valuable coins—there was no such collection, of course, and Geering saw this fact as a weak point, though the rumour of value might be counted enough to entice burglary—had been so dealt with that it looked as though an attempt had been made to force it.

Rod would be seized with the tools upon him—three witnesses to that! He would not be able to account for being there, except by a story that would be denied by anyone involved in it.

Geering was unknown in this part of the county. But inquiries would surely be made at Norchester as to whether anything was known or suspected there

against Rod. The Norchester police had not yet got on to Geering; but among them were men who knew him by name and sight, and he had been passing under an alias here. The Boss and Vice might think this game all very well, but Geering himself had made up his mind that when he had put it through he had finished.

He knew that Yankee was not to be trusted a yard now. Soon the gang's activities would be at an end. Geering saw the end coming, and had determined to clear out with what he had made. But first he would redeem his word to carry out this scheme if he could.

He was a criminal and something of a brute; but he was loyal. Later, honest men found it hard to understand how it was that Hyde had won the confidence of nearly all that hard-bitten crowd. He had never been able to make the cricketers under his rule even like him. But perhaps that was because they were honest men; their minds were out of touch with his.

A ticklish job! But Geering faced it resolutely enough.

Rod got off his bike, and stood it against the stout palings. All the front of the house was dark; but he could see that a ray of light came from a room at the back. He moved up the garden path towards the front door.

(Rod has walked straight into the trap! Will Ginger and Beal arrive in time to see what happens, and to help him? Whatever you do don't miss next week's splendid instalment!)

Wednesday is "GEM" Day!

Next week's GEM is better than ever! It is packed with thrills and fun! Think of it—Tom Merry and Co. and Jim Silver and Co. in the same paper! That's the GEM! For more particulars of next week's programme, see page 24.

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