

PLUCK

The Mystery of the Housemaster.

A SCHOOL STORY.
BY CHARLES HAMILTON.

The Fugitives.

A TALE OF ADVENTURE.
BY ERNEST BRINDLE.

1⁰



The long, lean figure of Mr. Ratcliff stopped at an opening in the fragment of wall, and remained still, with shoulders bent and head craned forward to listen. (See page 72.)



ONE PENNY.

EVERY SATURDAY.

PUCK

[VOL. 5, No. 118, NEW SERIES.]

The First Long, Complete School Story.



The MYSTERY of the HOUSE-MASTER

A Tale of Jack Blake, Augustus, and Jiggins & Co.

By CHAS. HAMILTON.

CHAPTER I.
A LITTLE FUN IN THE SCHOOL HOUSE.

THE School House at St. Jim's was enjoying itself. It was the hour of seven—a time supposed to be devoted to preparation by the boys of St. Jim's. But just now nothing was further from the minds of the School House than "prep."

Around the quadrangle the other houses at St. Jim's—the New House—was quiet and orderly, even the usually excitable Figgins & Co. being soberly at work in their study there. But in the School House reigned a jolly din.

It is an odd usage that when the cat takes her departure the mice will proceed to improve the occasion; and this was what happened in the School House.

By a curious coincidence, the boxes had been left for the time uncontrolled by either master or prefects, and the inmates were not slow to learn that fact, and to take the fullest advantage of it.

Jack Blake—generally the leader of all mischief in his house—had been the first to discover how matters stood, and he at once saw all the possibilities of the new situation. He made a dash for Study No. 5 to reason out his scheme.

"Jump on my giddy knees!" he exclaimed, putting his head in at the door. "Check those heavenly books away! This is where we have a leg up time!"

"What's happened?" yawned Horrie.

"Mr. Kidd, our respected housemaster, is gone out."

"Well!"

"And Kilbuck, our equally respected captain, has gone to see some friends, and won't be home all late."

"Suppose he has?"

"And I have just seen Darrel, Bushden, and Beaker, our other never-to-be-sufficiently-respected prefects, take themselves off."

"Where are they gone?"

"Can't say. But I fancy they didn't know Mr. Kidd was going out, and he didn't know they were going. But the result is, that we are free, my non-free as the giddy say!"

"Then's Kees, the other prefect," said Digby. "What price Kees?"

"Kees doesn't count. He's a weak-kneed chap, and wouldn't matter much, anyway. But, for the sake of making

arrangements quickly sure, I've shoved a wedge under his desk. You know it opens outward, so he can't get out if he wants to."

"The chimes of Study No. 5 were on their feet now. They resolved at once the grand possibilities opening out before them.

"My hat!" said Horrie. "Now for a high old time!"

"Now to make the far fly!" exclaimed Digby, sending his Greek lexicon flying for a start.

"But Jove, we can have a giddy treat now!" exclaimed Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of the School House.

Blake executed a war-dance.

"Follow your leads!" he ejaculated. "Your Uncle Blake is a mighty chief. Pull up your socks, you cripples, and keep along!"

And the four chimes rushed downstairs. They went sliding down the banisters of the great staircase one after the other, alighting actively at the bottom, the only accident being that D'Arcy tumbled into Perry Mellish, who promptly knocked him over and set upon him.

"Mind my waistcoat!" howled the swell of St. Jim's, in terror. "You great house, you are spoiling my waistcoat!"

"I'll spoil your dial, too, if you run into me!" growled Mellish.

"Blake, pull the beastish off! He's wadding my hair!"

Blake, grinning, leapt down upon Mellish and jerked him away from D'Arcy. He wagged his forefinger reprovingly at Mellish, who was looking wretched.

"Peace, peace!" exclaimed Blake. "Peace, my children. This is no time for rowing each other. We're free, my infants, and now for a lark!"

The word ran through the School House.

"Blimey, the cat's away," growled Blake, "the mice will play. And so're the giddy mice!"

And the School House boys proceeded to make the most of their chance while it lasted.

In the junior common-room a great boxing match started between four pairs of doughy champions, and as their friends stood round and cheered every clump to the echo, the resulting noise can easily be imagined.

Blake, whose inventive genius was seldom found wanting,

inspired a rebuff on the big staircase, and for three short seconds lost and started.

Then racing was started in the big corridor, and proceeded in the midst of a din worthy of Babal in its primeval state.

Now had the House let itself go so completely. The little fact that they had promised themselves at first was nothing to what they went in for as they grew more excited.

Fifth Form boys came out of their studies and looked on grinning. They were not perfects, and it was no business of theirs to stop the row; nor is it likely that the janitor would have paid them much heed now that they were fairly on the war-path.

And the housemaster was far away, the captain was gone, and the prefects had abandoned their charge, with the solitary exception of Kees, a prisoner in his own study.

As the noise increased, and Kees realized that possibilities had looked brown in the house, he at first took no notice, leaving the matter to the other prefects.

It was some time before it dawned upon the Head-Formor that he was the only person of authority left in the School House. When he realized that, he tried to open his door to go out and do his best to quell the mob, but owing to Blake's excellent provision, the door would not budge.

Kees made one or two attempts to force the doors but, upon the whole, he was not wiser to be prevented from venturing out to face such a storm; and so, as the door would not move, he went back to his chair, with a string of the shoulder. And the din continued without cessation, and increased from moment to moment.

The School House was fairly wringing itself.

The Fifth Form boys began hitting lockers and soon mingled in the general and joined their voices to the din and their weight to the subsiding, and then the uproar was terrific.

The janitor was now excited to reflect that the noise might be heard in another house, and being strange customs upon the scene.

It was a rule at St. Jim's that a master belonging to one house should never interfere with the other, and the Head himself seldom stepped in between a housemaster and his boys.

Whether the riot was proceeding within the walls of the School House would partly interpose on the part of the New House master was a question the paragraph never tried to ask themselves. They did not know that Mr. Kidd, the Head of the New House, was sitting at his desk looking across the daily yard, and debating within himself whether he should interfere.

The rivalry between the two houses at St. Jim's was an old story, and dated from the foundation of the New House; but of late something of that rivalry had crept in between the two housemasters as well.

Mr. Kidd, of the School House, was a great athlete and strong on sports, and not widely awake to the house rivalry, which, he considered, made the boys "back up" in many ways, especially on the football and cricket field. Mr. Rastoff was his opposite—this, with sharp-tongued, and heavily down upon the contending factions.

Mr. Rastoff was the soul of order and conscience, and he considered that Mr. Kidd managed his house badly, but he had never yet attempted to interfere. He was of a somewhat indolent nature, and sometimes gave advice, which his fellow-housemaster received with much gratitude.

Now, as he stood at the door of the New House, looking across the yard at the lighted windows of the building nearly opposite, Mr. Rastoff thought that his chance had come. Mr. Kidd was evidently awed, and his house had looked less from all restraint in his absence. What were the prospects doing? Perhaps they were awed, too. Clearly Mr. Rastoff would be fully justified in interfering here.

He smiled slyly at the thought.

Mr. Rastoff was so sensitive about the government of his house that his rival had a chance now to give him a deep dip in a tender spot.

The housemaster of the New House left his door and walked towards Mr. Kidd's house. Shadows were dancing on the blinds of the lighted windows, and even at this distance he could hear the din, which showed how terrific it must be upon the spot.

"I cannot understand Mr. Kidd lately," Mr. Rastoff said to himself. "He always, in my opinion, neglected his duties, but of late he seems more careless than ever. He really seems like a man with a weight upon his mind. If I were Head of St. James's I should certainly not consider him a proper person for a housemaster here."

The fun was at its height when Mr. Rastoff reached the School House. The door was open, and Mr. Rastoff pushed in quietly half open, and stood for some moments unnoticed, looking on as one of the crowd within.

The din had grown deafening. The rebuffing had come to grief on the big staircase, and a heap of boys had been

deposited at the bottom, and were struggling to their feet, while the rest shouted with laughter.

"Here, get off my neck, Lighty!" gasped Jack Blake. "What the dickens do you mean by sitting on me? I ain't a blasting idiot! And, how dare you sit on me? I ain't quite so much now. We shall have old Rein grapping you from the New House if he hears us. He'd just like to shove his long nose in here to worry us."

"About!"

"That 'about' was quite a quiet one, but it had more effect upon the School House boys than the explosion of a bomb-shell would have had.

The noise stopped as if by magic in the hall, though from other parts of the house it continued unabated.

Jack Blake, for once taken aback, stared at the best figure of the housemaster at the door, for the first time aware of Mr. Rastoff's presence.

Blake was the premier boy in the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, but when he looked at Mr. Rastoff, he must have perceived his growth or turned him off.

The School House boys looked at one another, and at Mr. Rastoff, and a dead silence fell upon them. The housemaster advanced from the door.

"This is a disgraceful scene!" he said, in his thin, cutting voice. "Where is your housemaster?"

The boys looked at one another, and it fell to Jack Blake to act as spokesman.

"Mr. Kidd is out, sir."

"I suppose he left prefects in charge of the house?"

"The prefects are out also, sir."

"Disgraceful! Do you mean to tell me that there is not a single prefect in the house?"

"None, sir, Kees."

"Where is he?"

"In his room, sir."

"Has he made no attempt to keep order here?"

"He can't get out of his room, sir," said Blake, not wishing to put the unfortunate prefect into hot water. "His door's got fixed, and he can't open it."

"How could his door get fixed? What foremen are you talking?"

"I believe there's a wedge of wood or something, under it," said Blake demurely.

"Ah, I see, some of you have deliberately fastened him in his room with a wedge of wood. Only one prefect is left in charge of the house, and he—"

"Mr. Kidd did not know they were going out."

"How do you know?"

"Well, I suppose—"

"I do not wish to listen to your suppositions, Blake. This riot is positively disgraceful."

"We didn't mean any harm, sir. It was only a little fun."

"Only a little fun to turn the house into a hot-bed? I am sorry to see that Fifth Form boys have so far forgotten the dignity of their Form as to engage in the foolish game of the janitor."

Whereas the Fifth Form boys turned red, and looked daggers at the Fourth-Formers.

"Mr. Kidd has abandoned his charge, it is my duty to keep order until he returns. Some of the boys do not appear to know yet that I am here. They had better be told."

The news of the housemaster's presence soon spread, and the din died away. Mr. Rastoff stood cold and full of chilly dignity; but the School House boys were in a rebellious mood. They loudly resented any kind of interference from the New House, and for the New House master to come over and give orders was intolerable. Yet to disobey his orders was not equally feasible.

"And now," said Mr. Rastoff, when silence was restored. "I desire to know who was the originator of this disturbance."

"I don't know."

"Blake, you will kindly enlighten me upon that point."

"I have nothing to tell you, sir."

"Indeed, I do not think it would be necessary to look farther than yourself," said Mr. Rastoff dryly. "I have very little doubt that you are at the bottom of it. If it is not so, tell me at once who is guilty."

Blake's face set obstinately, and he did not speak.

He had, indeed, been the leader in the uproar, but, of course, all were equally to blame, so far as any were to blame at all.

But in any case, Blake was too strong upon the dignity of his house to submit to being catechized by the New House master.

"Answer me, Blake."

"I have nothing to say, sir."

"Then I can only conclude that you are the author of this outrageous infraction of all the laws of the school."

"We were all in it, sir," ventured Herbert.

"Ahem!" That "ahem" was quite a quiet one, but it had more effect upon the school house boys than the explosion of a bomb would have had.



"Every one of us," added Digby.

"I did not ask your opinion. Bluke, stop forward."

Bluke reluctantly advanced.

Mr. Ratcliff had a case in his hand, which he had thought

fully justified himself with before leaving the New House.

"Hold out your hand, sir."

Bluke's hands remained down at his sides.

A thrill ran through the crowd of School House boys.

Was Bluke going to defy the interloping intruder?

What courage would the whole School House have been to

defy the enemy, last, after all, Mr. Ratcliff was a master,

and direct disobedience to a master was a terrible serious

thing.

"Bluke!" A dull red flush came into Mr. Ratcliff's white

cheeks. "Bluke, I told you to hold out your hand."

"Yes, sir, I heard you."

"Okey ray, then, instantly!"

"You ought not to punish us, sir," said Bluke. His face

was pale now, but his voice rang firm. "It's for Mr. Kidd

to punish us, if we deserve it."

"Bluke!"

"We belong to Mr. Kidd's house, sir, and he wishes"

it."

"Hold out your hand as once."

Bluke's eyes flashed fire.

"I'll do it, sir, if you order me, but I shall complain to

Mr. Kidd."

He held out his hand.

There was a slight doubt even in Mr. Ratcliff's mind. He knew that he was over-stepping the bounds of his duty in inflicting corporal punishment on a School House boy. He knew that Mr. Kidd would be seriously angry when he heard of it. That was chiefly why he intended to do it. But he had never looked for this cool opposition from a junior. Bluke knew that Mr. Ratcliff was in the wrong, and he had had the courage to say so. But the housemaster had gone too far now to retreat.

He brought the case down upon Bluke's hand with a savage dash that made the boy utter a cry of pain.

"The other hand, Bluke."

Bluke held it out, and received another dash. Mr. Ratcliff's little eyes were glittering cruelly.

"Now the other again."

Bluke set his teeth.

He had gone through a good many littings in his career at St. Jim's, but he had never had such terrible stingers as Mr. Ratcliff was giving him now. That, added to the knowledge that Mr. Ratcliff had no right to punish him, was the cause of his next action.

Down came the case towards the already seething pain and Bluke withdrew it suddenly.

The case swept through the air, and, coming down with great force, and meeting with no resistance, it crashed

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against Mr. Ratcliff's right leg with a sound that rang like metal about.

The chemistry master gave a yell of anguish, and, dropping the cane, he leaped on one leg, clasping the injured limb with both hands.

A gasp ran through the crowd of boys, followed by an irresistible roar of laughter. The aspect of the housemaster was indeed comical, as he leaped in agony on one foot, and his unexpressed painfulness was so well-demonstrated that no one could feel sorry for him.

"Oh!—ah!—ow!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff. "You wicked wretched, brutal, villainous beg! Oh!—ah!—ow! Owl!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" called the School House, in chorus. Mr. Ratcliff, realising what a ridiculous figure he was making, sat his injured leg down and ceased the hopping, but he still twisted painfully, for the cut had been a really severe one.

His face was distorted with pain and rage. He picked up the cane.

"Blake!" He almost choked over the word. "Blake! This impudence—this unparalleled impudence shall not escape unpunished! I will—ah—"

He broke off, too enraged to say more, and seized Blake by the collar.

Twisting the boy round, he began to thrash him in the most savage way, and Blake, pained in good earnest.

The School House boys looked on with lowering brows, and many voices were raised in angry protest.

"Blame!"

Mr. Ratcliff glared furiously round. He had quite lost his temper now. The protests only made him lash at the junior more savagely.

"Blame!"

The murmur became a shout. But suddenly it died away.

A stalwart, athletic figure stepped in at the open door of the School House.

Mr. Kidd had returned.

The housemaster of the School House looked on at the scene in dumb amazement for a moment, then, with flashing eyes, he sprang forward.

"Mr. Ratcliff! Release that boy instantly!"

CHAPTER II.

The Two Housemasters.

MR. KIDD'S voice rang out imperatively, and Mr. Ratcliff started, and let go Blake as if he had suddenly become red-hot.

The junior promptly retorted out of his reach.

Mr. Kidd advanced quickly towards Ratcliff, his eyes blazing, and for a moment the School House thrilled with the delightful anticipation that their chief intended to take hold of the monster and pitch him nose and crop out of the house.

It is quite possible that some such thought was in Mr. Ratcliff's mind for a second, but it so, however asserted itself in time.

He stepped, facing Mr. Ratcliff, who had quickly recovered his composure.

For a moment or two the two housemasters looked at each other, a slight smooze upon Mr. Ratcliff's caliginous face, an angry flush upon Mr. Kidd's.

Mr. Kidd was the first to speak, and he tried to control his voice and speak calmly; but, in spite of himself, it trembled with anger.

"Mr. Ratcliff, I demand an explanation! You have been guilty of an unwarrantable intrusion and interference."

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Ratcliff, civilly. "Unless you can moderate your language, Mr. Kidd, I can scarcely agree to discuss the matter before the boys."

Mr. Kidd bit his lip.

His impulsive, quick nature was always at a disadvantage in dealing with the slow, cold, self-contained master of the New House.

"Perhaps you are right," said Mr. Kidd. "But I think my surprise and amazement are quite natural under the circumstances. However, I have no doubt you have an explanation to give, and if you will kindly step into my study."

"With pleasure," said Mr. Ratcliff blandly.

Mr. Kidd turned to the boys.

"Go to your rooms at once. You ought to be doing your preparation. Whose are the prefects?"

Mr. Ratcliff smiled maliciously.

"The prefects, I do yourself, were always," he said.

"The house was in a riot, and that is why—"

"The master of the School House flushed red.

"Please step into my study."

"Certainly."

The boys dispersed, and the two masters went into Mr. Kidd's study, and the door closed. The New House master was quite cool and collected.

"Now for your explanation, Mr. Ratcliff. I could not speak you before the boys, who, I admit, ought not to see discussion among the masters. But I do not withdraw my words. I consider you have been guilty of an interference with my House that is wholly inadmissible."

"Will you allow me to explain?"

"I am waiting for you to do so."

"The house was, as I have said, in a state of riot. This did me so terrific that I could hear it across the quadrangle at the New House."

"But! That is very surprising."

"If you should my word, a good many more heard it besides myself," said Mr. Ratcliff calmly. "That is why I came over. I guessed, of course, that you were absent, and that the prefects were not doing their duty."

"I cannot understand how—"

"How they are all absent? Yes, it is very unfortunate. Really, my intention was to do you a service, Mr. Kidd. Had the disturbance reached the master's ears, the results might have been very unpleasant for you."

The School House master bit his lip.

What Mr. Ratcliff said was quite correct, and had he interferred in a friendly and cordial manner, he would have been entitled to gratitude. But there was nothing friendly or cordial about Mr. Ratcliff.

"If my House was the head and front of the disturbance," continued Mr. Ratcliff, "I called him, therefore, and he was guilty of the greatest impudence to me personally."

"You had no right to punish a boy of my house. You should have mentioned the matter to me if you thought it deserved chastisement."

"I did not think so, and I was upon the spot, and you were not. If a housemaster goes wandering off instead of attending to his duties, he ought to be thankful there is someone on the spot to attend to these duties for him."

"Mr. Ratcliff!"

"You force me to speak plainly," said the New House master, although he still smiled. "I had no desire to interfere at all, but I could not do so, as I was absent ever and my house in a state of uproar, I should expect at least of you. But I do not think that is ever likely to happen."

"I do not choose to listen to your criticism of the discipline of my house, sir," said Mr. Kidd, with heat. "Your explanation is specious, but I cannot credit that you interferred with the best intentions. That is plain English."

"Very plain," said Mr. Ratcliff, smiling. "It is clear that we cannot agree; but, if you like, I am willing to place the matter before the Head and let him decide between us."

"I have no doubt that you would be glad to require the Head to give the details of this unfortunate occurrence," said Mr. Kidd laconically.

"You do not injure. Now that you have returned, I leave the matter in your hands, having, as I believe, done my bounden duty. I think you should punish Blake for deliberate impudence to a master; but if you choose not to do so I shall not complain."

"I will inquire into the matter at once."

And the master of the School House went for Blake.

Jack Blake looked very dubious as he entered the housemaster's study. He was feeling very hurt, for Mr. Ratcliff had hit hard. He wondered whether there was some more to come.

"Blake," said Mr. Kidd. "Mr. Ratcliff complains that you have been impudent to him."

"Now, Blake knew well enough that Mr. Ratcliff was referring to the fact that he had withdrawn his hand from the cane, and caused the master to hurt himself. But he chose to misrepresent."

"I am sorry, sir. I did not know Mr. Ratcliff was listening when I spoke."

"But! I do not understand."

"Mr. Ratcliff referring to what I said when he came into the house?" asked Blake innocently. "He came so quietly that I didn't know he was there, sir. And how was I to guess that he was listening?"

Mr. Ratcliff smiled grimly.

The master of the School House concealed a smile. No one ever got much change out of Jack Blake.

"And what did you say, Blake, that Mr. Ratcliff heard?"

"The master of the New House struck in kindly."

"That is not what I was referring to. I—"

But Blake did not mean to spare him.

"I just happened to say to the kids that they needn't make such a noise, sir, because if old Ratcliff heard, he would like to poke his long nose into the house."

Blake made this statement with perfect gravity.

Mr. Kidd almost exploded. The expression upon Mr. Ratcliff's face was indescribable.

"Is that what you were complaining of, Mr. Ratcliff?"

But Mr. Ratcliff did not trust himself to reply. He could not have opened his mouth just then without saying something far stronger than would have been worthy on the lips of a housemaster.

He gave Blake one black look, and marched out of the study without a word.

Mr. Kidd could not help chuckling as the door closed behind him. But he became grave again at once.

"Blake, that was a very improper remark to make; but as Mr. Ratcliff has already noted you severely, I do not feel called upon to indulge further punishment."

"Thank you, sir."

"Is it a fact, Blake, that all the prefects are absent?" asked Mr. Kidd, with a rather worried look.

"Yes, sir, all except Knox; and he's listened in his room."

"Does not Howard come that?"

"Somebody showed a wedge of wood under his door, sir."

"Do you know who it was?"

"I'm not sure at all, sir. Whoever it was is primarily responsible for what has happened. Tell me who it was, Blake."

Blake hesitated.

"I—I'm afraid to, sir."

"Nonsense! I shall hold you blameless, and you will be under my protection. You need have no fear in speaking."

"Yes, sir, in that case I suppose I ought to speak."

"Obviously you ought, and must. Who was it?"

"Myself, sir," said Blake decorously.

Mr. Kidd started.

He looked hard at Blake, whose expression was perfectly innocent and unfeigning.

"What! It was you?"

"Yes, sir, I thought I ought to tell you, after you promised that I should not be punished."

The housemaster breathed hard.

"You may go, Blake."

"Thank you, sir."

And the scamp of the School House quitted the room. Mr. Kidd looked after him longingly for some moments, and then burst into a laugh. It was impossible to be angry for long with Jack Blake.

CHAPTER 3.

Some Fun for Figgins.

MR. KIDD was alone in his study. He was waiting for the return of the prefects; but, as a matter of fact, he was not thinking of the recent row in the School House, nor even of the unpleasant incident of Mr. Ratcliff's interference. It was some valuable matter which brought a dark shade to Mr. Kidd's face and lined his brow with care.

Mr. Ratcliff, who took a deep interest in everybody's affairs, and seldom allowed anything to escape his attention, had observed that of late the master of the School House seemed to have something weighing upon his mind, and had wondered what it was. With a characteristically sane suspicion, he had decided that Mr. Kidd was in trouble of some kind, which would not be to his credit if the facts came out.

He would have been confirmed in his suspicion if he could have seen Mr. Kidd now. The latter gentleman was pacing his study with restless steps, and more than once a deep sigh escaped his lips.

There could be no doubt that Mr. Kidd was in some deep trouble, which he did not know how to deal with. The expression of his face showed how gloomy his thoughts were.

His painful reverie was interrupted by a tap at the door. It is a concern the housemaster pulled himself together.

"Come in!" he called out.

Kildare and Darrel came in. The housemaster smiled pleasantly. There was hardly a trace now in his features of the gloom that had previously been there.

Kildare was looking rather disquieted. He had heard all about the disturbance in the house during his absence, and Mr. Ratcliff's interference.

"This is a bad business, sir," he said. "It was unfortunately we happened to be all away at the same time. It gave Mr. Ratcliff an excuse which I cannot help thinking he has been looking for."

"Yes, it was very unfortunate," said Mr. Kidd. "Naturally, when I left the house I imagined that the prefects were with you, Jim."

"They did not know you were gone, sir," said the captain of the Fifth.

"If you had mentioned to one of us that you were going, sir," began Darrel.

Mr. Kidd flushed slightly.

"Really, I should have done so," he admitted. "But I

did not, so I was to blame. The whole affair is very unfortunate."

"Then Knox was fastened in his room, it appears," said Kildare. "The fellow who did that wants a big licking."

Mr. Kidd smiled slightly.

"It was Blake, and he has already been sufficiently punished. You know, I suppose, that when I returned I found Mr. Ratcliff punishing him?"

"Yes, sir," said Kildare. "And I want to speak about that to you. It is simply rotten that Mr. Ratcliff should take so much upon himself in our house. He had no right at all to punish Blake."

"Don't," said Darrel emphatically. "Whatever Blake had done, it was for you to punish him, sir, or one of his own prefects. Why didn't Mr. Ratcliff get Knox out of his study, and leave the matter in his hands, if he was so anxious to be friendly?"

"He does not appear to have thought of that."

"No; he wanted to meddle in our house," said Darrel hotly. "Are we going to stand it, sir?"

"I am afraid we are in an unfortunate position," said the housemaster. "Certainly the house got out of hand, and as Mr. Ratcliff, technically, had a right to interfere. We must see that it does not happen again, that is all."

"Not much chance of that, sir," said Kildare cheerfully.

"Then we will let the matter rest here," said Mr. Kidd.

"The prefects acted thoughtlessly, and I shall not punish them. You might speak to the ring-leader, perhaps, Kildare."

"I will do so, sir, I have no doubt that they were No. 6 Study. But they didn't mean any harm, I am sure of that."

"I agree with you."

And Mr. Kidd smiled, and the prefects retired. They were in a far better amiable mood, for they felt quite as deeply as Mr. Kidd the insult that had been put upon their house.

Kildare repaired at once to No. 6 Study. He found the famous four hard at work at their neglected "prep." Blake looked up wearily as the captain of the school came in, and stood surveying them critically.

"Hallo, Kildare!" he said affably. "Glad to see you! Have you come to tea with us? This is an honour, it is, really, old chap. Big drink, will you, and we'll have the bottle boiling in a jiffy."

And Blake jumped up industriously. Kildare tried not to smile.

"I have not come to take tea with you," he said. "I've come to show you up, you young rascals, and for two piggies I'd like you all roasted."

"Oh, come," remonstrated Blake. "Don't be such a bear. Old fellow! What harm we done?"

"Made a tremendous row, and given Ratcliff the excuse he's been waiting for to show his nose into our house again."

"How should we know he was coming?" protested Blake.

"Besides, I stood up for the honour of the house, didn't I, chap, and caught it pretty hot, too!"

"You were at the bottom of the row, of course?"

"Well, I started the toboggan."

"You young rascals!"

"But, of course, I didn't mean any harm, and I didn't force—"

"No, of course not. Perhaps next time you will think before you act."

"Of course I will," said Blake heartily. "Sure you won't have a cup of tea, Kildare?"

The captain turned to the door.

"No."

"I say, it's jolly good tea, and—"

But Kildare was gone. Blake smiled as he sat down.

"We're out of that pretty well," he said goodly. "Considering what a glassy row we made, I think we have come off all right. I'm sorry we gave old Batty a chance to score off Mr. Kidd. But that couldn't be foreseen, could it?"

"Of course not," said Kildare; "and it was a jolly jape, so long as it hasn't. It will be a long time before we have a treat like that again."

"The better it," said Digby thoughtfully. "That when it all gets out, the New Capital Club will skip us about it. They're sure to make a royal capital out of it."

Blake whistled.

"Yes, very likely. Figgins & Co. will—"

Blake was interrupted by a sudden click at the window. He glanced towards it in surprise.

"Hill, what was that?"

"Sounded like a stone clucked at the window," said Herries.

"Some ruddy donkey in the quadrangle amusing his jolly self, I suppose."

Clunk!

It was another pebble on the glass. Blake rose and went

to the window, and threw it up. Outside, the dusk was thick in the quadrangle.

"Look here, you see," he called out, "if you break this glass there will be a row, do you hear? Chuck it!"

"All right," came back the well-known voice of Figgins, chief of the New House Juniors. "We ain't going to break the glass, Kid."

"What do you boyskins want, anyway?"

There was a chuckle in the dusk below. Blake, peering down, could now make out the lanky forms of the great Figgins, and the less lengthy figures of his two companions, Herri and Fatty Byrne, the inseparable "Co."

"What do you want, Bats?"

"Nothing."

"Then take it and go."

Figgins chuckled again.

"Who turns the blowing house into a lactic system when the master's away?" he demanded, addressing his two companions.

And the Co. replied together:

"The School House Kids do."

"Who has to keep 'em in order?"

"The New House."

"Who's the rock house at St. Jier's?"

"New House! New House!"

Blake's eyes glauced.

He had expected something on that score, but hardly so much. He whispered to Digby behind him:

"Take the condenser out of the basin, Dig, and hand it to me. Show the old top leaves into it to give it a flavor."

Digby grinned, and obeyed.

Unconscious of the impending punishment, Figgins & Co. continued their pleasantly.

"Who looks up a shine when he's not being looked after?"

"Blake does."

"Who has to smack him and teach him to be a good boy?"

"Rattlin' does."

"Who— Great pip?"

Figgins looks off with a peep as a flood of water descended from above, from a basin suddenly inverted overhead by Blake.

All those of the New House juniors came in for a share of the water, and they yelled in chorus. The water soaked over their heads, ran down their collars, and the rest-water stuck in their hair, and on their faces.

"He, ha, ha!" yelled Blake. "Who gets a wash when he's trying to be fancy?"

And his comrades chimed in:

"Figgins does!"

"Oh, you horrid brats!" gasped Figgins; and he halted, in case there should be more water to come, and the Co. followed him promptly.

And the laughter of Study No. 4 followed them across the dusty quad.

CHAPTER 4.

A SIBBE, a Scolding, and a Lost Letter.

KIDDY is looking worried this morning," said Blake, as the juniors of the School House sat at breakfast a couple of days later.

His companions glanced towards Mr. Kidd.

The housemaster did, indeed, wear a worried look, and he answered absently to several remarks that were addressed to him by the senior boys.

"Still thinking about that happening the other night, I suppose," remarked Dig.

Blake shook his head.

"I ain't that."

"What is it, then, if you know all about it?"

"I don't know; but I hope it's nothing the matter. I like old Kiddies."

"I can tell you what it is," said Fatty Mellich.

Mellich was the Peeping-Tom of the School House, and generally knew everything.

"Not as much talk there, kids," said the prefect in charge of the junior table.

"All right, Darrel," said Blake, under his breath.

"Keep your whiskers on."

"Did you speak, Blake?"

"None of your business, Darrel," replied Blake.

"What did you say?"

"None! It's a jolly fine morning, isn't it?"

"Was that what you said?"

"Well, no," admitted Blake cautiously, "that wasn't exactly what I said. No—"

"Well, what up, or I shall congregate and warm you," said Darrel, laughing.

And there was silence for about half a minute.

But the boys were anxious to know what Mellich knew about Mr. Kidd's evident preoccupation, and Mellich was

equally anxious to impart information, and so it was not long before there was a subdued buzz again.

"What do you know about it, Mellich?"

"Kiddy did a letter the morning."

"Nothing wonder till he opened it," said Blake.

"He was all right till he opened it," said Mellich. "I saw him. Then he has come over black, and he muttered something. And he's been looking worried ever since."

"And what do you conclude from that, Sherlock Holmes?"

"That it is the letter that's worrying him," replied Mellich. "Very likely some beautiful poor relation writing to him to ask for money, or something of that kind."

"I suppose that would worry you, Mellich; but it might not worry old Kiddies. He's not such a champion mean man as you are, you know."

"Dry up, there," said Darrel.

And the juniors at last dried up.

Blake, like most of the School House boys, was strongly attached to his housemaster, and he gave more than one glance in the direction of Mr. Kidd.

The master's preoccupation was certainly noticeable. Kiddies who sat with him, had made several remarks, and received answers almost at random, and had relaxed into silence, his look showing how surprised he was.

Mr. Kidd caught the expression upon the captain's face, and coloured slightly, and, as if reflecting himself, began to talk in his usual cheery way.

But he left the table quickly when breakfast was over, and went down the steps into the quadrangle. The juniors passed out into the quad before going in to morning school. Blake caught a glimpse of Mr. Kidd under the leaden sky, intent upon reading a letter he held in his hand. Evidently he was reading over again the message which Mellich had declared had had such a gloomy effect upon him when he received it that morning.

But Blake was not the kind of boy to trouble himself about affairs that did not concern him. He was not at all curious.

And, as it happened, his attention was wanted elsewhere.

The morning was hard, and cold, and clear. There had lately been a fall of snow, which was frozen as hard as iron in the quadrangle, so that the ground was as slippery as glass. The boys rejoiced in it. Outside the New House Figgins & Co. had made a slide, which was gradually lengthened until it extended well within School House territory. Much more than that was required to send Study No. 5 on the water-pipe.

"Look at those lurching boarders," said Blake, horrified by the presumption of Figgins & Co. "Actually stacking their old slide into our ground! Fancy such cheek! This is where we stack our own too-headed!"

"Let's collar their slide," suggested Herrie.

"Barrage!" cried Dig.

"What a waddy whipping idea!" said D'Acry.

Blake chuckled.

"Come on, ye rippers! We'll have their slide!"

And a crowd of School House juniors rushed to the fray. A long line of New House boys, with Figgins at their head, had just crossed, one after another, on the slide, and were passing at a whirling speed towards the School House.

Blake, starting from the other end of the slide, went whirling to meet them, and after him at lightning speed came his followers.

Figgins gave a yell.

"Get down, you brats!"

But Blake had the faintest intimation of getting clean. He knew that there would be a terrific collision, but he didn't mind that.

"Clear the course, you rippers!" howled Figgins.

It was impossible for the lanky New House junior to stop himself. He was going at an express rate, and Blake was coming with almost equal impetus to meet him. And, in fact, only a few seconds elapsed before the rivals met at the centre of the slide.

As never a rush a thousand waves,

So burst it on Lockbin!

Blake gave the push that meeting was simply nowhere compared to the meeting of Figgins and Blake in the centre of that lurching slide.

With a terrific bill the two rivals met, chest to chest, and in an instant the followers of each were rushing against them from behind.

"Oh, oh, oh!" gasped Figgins, every corner of his mouth

broken out of his body. He felt like a porcupine between the School House juniors in front, and his own followers behind.

But he, too, went the sliding, unable to stop himself, crushing each into the one in advance of him.

Figgins gasped and collapsed, and rolled over, and Blake went down with him, and over them sprang and scrambled a heap of intricately-mingled juniors.

And belated slides coming up, fell over the heap, and added themselves to it, until a successful ball St. Jerry had piled itself up there in the quadrangle.

Blake and Figgins, who were undrugged, were nearly suffocated.

"Covered me neck!" gasped Blake.

"Louise's gorge!" gasped Figgins.

But it was some time before the mixed-up juniors could see themselves out, and after the breathless leaders to rise. Blake and Figgins staggered to their feet at last, and Figgins, helplessly stepping on the slide as he did so, sat down again, with surprising suddenness.

"Oh, earth!"

"Now, that was not, Figgie," said Blake. "I should like to see you do that again."

Figgins scrambled to his feet, taking care this time to avoid the dangerous spot.

"Clear out, you kids!" he exclaimed. "What do you mean by coming on our slide?"

"Oh, that's all right," said Blake, in his gentle way. "Fair play's a jewel." You made the slide, and water going down it—that's an equal division of labor. What have you got to grumble about?"

"You ain't coming on our slide, you School House boys."

"Your mistake, Figgie. We're gone."

And Blake went among the slide cheerfully, laughing several New House juniors out of the way as he proceeded.

Horvick and Day and the rest followed last, right up to the New House, laughing and cheering.

That was a good deal more than Figgins & Co. could stand.

"Back into 'em!" he shouted. "Back up, New House!"

And the New House juniors, laughing with words, rushed to the attack, to drive the intruders away by main force.

A glorious melee followed, and as the fighting on the frozen ground was extremely uncertain, falls were frequent—indeed, there were more of the combatsants on the ground than on their feet most of the time.

"What ever is this disturbance about?"

Mr. Kidd came hurrying towards the scene of action. The masses still held the letter in his hand that he had been reading since the terrific din of the departing parties had driven him away from its perusal.

"What is the matter here?"

Mr. Kidd came within twenty yards—two actually, in fact, for he ran upon the slide without seeing that it was there.

The next moment the solid earth seemed to have swung away from underneath him. He was flying along at lightning speed, with one leg in the air and his mouth wide open with astonishment, and his arms waving frantically like the sails of a windmill.

"Oh!" gasped Mr. Kidd. "Oh! Ah! Uh! What—Oh, oh, Ah!"

Right into the junipers he went, spinning about the slide, and careering into Blake and Figgins, leveling them both down and falling on top of them.

"Ah!" gasped the housemaster. "Oh, dear me! What ever has happened?"

He tried to scramble up. But at that moment came another of the lawless chapter of accidents. Monteith, the head prefect of the New House, had called one, came in to get an end to the disturbance. Monteith had an old grudge against Jack Blake, and he thought that this would be an excellent opportunity of paying it out. He came up of the New House with a run, stopped on the slide as Mr. Kidd had done, and came upon the same track quicker than he had intended.

The New House prefect whirled up as Mr. Kidd rose, and ran straight into the housemaster and Bear-d-his as if he had been shot. With a desperate effort, Monteith managed to keep his own feet.

"I—I'm sorry!" he gasped. "I beg your pardon, sir!"

"I should think you do!" gasped Mr. Kidd, as Blake helped him up. "How could you be so absurdly clumsy, Monteith?"

"I dropped on the slide, sir, without noticing it. You did the same yourself!"

"Well, so I did," said Mr. Kidd, between his gnaws for Monteith; "so I suppose I must not blame you. Really, the slide should never have been made here. It is too dangerous."

"Oh, no, sir, I have no doubt Blake was at the bottom of it, and—"

"It wasn't Blake!" said Figgins steadily. "We made our slide, Monteith."

"Then take that!" said Monteith, giving him a cut with the cane, supported at Figgins's contemporaneous. "And, remember—"

"Monteith, that is brutal!" said Mr. Kidd sharply. "I

do not like interfering with a prefect, but you have no right to strike the lad like that. It was very commendable and mostly of him to come up so promptly."

Monteith recoiled.

"I do not mean, sir, that Mr. Bartlett would approve of your interfering with one of his house prefects!" he exclaimed.

"Mr. Bartlett has set an example for me to follow," retorted Mr. Kidd firmly. "At all events, I order you not to touch that junior again."

"Very well. But I shall certainly file a complaint on Mr. Bartlett."

"Do so, if you please!" said Mr. Kidd contemptuously.

The bell began to ring at this moment, and the boys hurried away, and Mr. Kidd, who had to take the Fifth at first lesson, hurried to reach the Fifth classroom.

Monteith scowled after him.

The head prefect of the New House shared Mr. Bartlett's dislike of Mr. Kidd, and this public rebuke had not improved his feelings.

"Confounded cheek!" he muttered. "If he thinks he's going to interfere with our house, just because Bartlett did in his class he was out for a jolly well warranted! As for William—"

He looks off, a sheet of paper lying on the frozen snow attracted his attention. It was a letter, and had evidently been dropped there by someone a few minutes ago.

Monteith picked it up. A line had caught his eye, quite sufficient to attract his curiosity.

"I must have the money on Thursday night, or—"

The prefect put the letter into his pocket and walked back quickly into the New House. His curiosity was strongly excited. He had no scruples about reading another fellow's letter; he had done wiser things even than that to his mind. But the thought was in his mind that the letter had not belonged to a boy, but to Mr. Kidd. Before coming out of the New House he had seen the housemaster hurrying towards the scene of the disturbance with what looked like a letter held in his hand. Was this the letter? It was very probable, in that case, he was on the track of something.

Inside the New House, Monteith turned and looked out of the high hall window without shortening himself. In a couple of minutes he was gratified by seeing Mr. Kidd reappear in the quadrangle, hurrying towards the scene of the late disturbance, with an anxious expression upon his face.

Monteith grinned.

The School House master stopped and began to search in all directions, evidently looking for something he had dropped there.

There was no longer any doubt as to whom the letter belonged to.

But Monteith had no intention of recovering it to its owner. He walked away in his own stride, leaving Mr. Kidd still searching in the quadrangle for the letter that was not there. Undoubtedly the housemaster had miscollected the letter, and indeed it, as soon as he had reached the Fifth Form-room, and had returned at once to look for it—at once, but too late.

In his own study, Monteith calmly unfolded the letter and read it. But as he read it he gave a low, grinding whistle of amazement, and his eyes opened wide. He read it again, the same astonished expression still upon his face.

"My last!" he muttered. "I thought, from the little bit I saw, that it was something against the house; but this—well, that is never covered anything like that! My last!"

Monteith whistled again, and glancing the letter in an inside pocket, walked away slowly and thoughtfully towards the Sixth Form-room. The letter had given the New House prefect food for reflection.

CHAPTER 5.

MR. BARTLETT ON THE TRACK.

"CAN I speak to you for a few minutes, sir?"

"Certainly, Monteith. Is anything the matter?"

asked Mr. Bartlett, looking in surprise at his head prefect's serious face.

"I am afraid so, sir. I am not quite sure whether it concerns our house or the School House. But perhaps you will decide what is best to be done?"

"Come into my study," said Mr. Bartlett, his interest excited.

Monteith had followed him to his door after leaving school.

They entered the room. Monteith took the letter he had picked up in the quadrangle from his pocket.

"I picked this letter up in the quad this morning, sir. It was dropped there by someone who was mixed up in a scramble over the slide, and I looked at it, to discover whom it belonged, with a view to restoring it to its owner. But you will see that it bears no name; and the contents are

of such a serious nature that I think a master ought to see them, and decide what is to be done."

"Quite right, Monsooth."

Mr. Ratcliff took the letter and read it through at once. His face expressed amazement, not unmingled with satisfaction, as he did so.

"This is how the letter ran:

"My dear Cousin,—I hoped to hear from you, but you have not written. I told you plainly that a hundred pounds would be needed to enable me to leave this neighbourhood. What do you mean by not letting me know your decision? It is not safe for me to linger here much longer. I need not get into details; you know as well as I do that it would be better for me to go. Now, to put it plainly, I must have the money by Thursday night, or the consequences will be serious."

"Are you going to let me have it? Do you want to get rid of me? In any case, must we to-morrow—Monday—night as before in the Castlehill room, and we can talk it over. I was to come to an arrangement if possible. I shall be there at ten o'clock."

Mr. Ratcliff read the letter through twice, and then laid it down upon the table. His face eyes were glittering.

"Have you any idea, Monsooth, as whom that letter belongs?"

"Well, sir, it was dropped by one of the persons mixed up in the case in the quest."

"They were money-jesters, I believe, of both houses?"

"Yes; nearly all Fourth-Formers."

"You must see that it is quite impossible for this letter to have been addressed to a junior, or, in fact, a boy of all ranks or senior."

"Well, it would be a bit queer to ask a boy for a hundred pounds," said Monsooth, with a nod. "It struck me in that way."

Mr. Ratcliff picked up his thin lips.

"The letter evidently belongs to some grown-up person, Monsooth. The question is, was there any grown-up person who was about at the time, who might be supposed to have dropped the letter there?"

Mr. Ratcliff knew very well that the master of the School House had been there. Monsooth knew that he knew it; but he answered gravely:

"Mr. Kidd was there, sir; but, of course, it would be absurd to suppose that he could have received such a letter as this."

"Indeed, indeed!" agreed Mr. Ratcliff. "The letter is evidently written by a blackmailer, and certainly reeked through of what will become if the money is not paid."

"It looks as if the letter might bring disgrace upon the school, sir," said Monsooth diffidently. "Don't you think it ought to be looked into, sir?"

"Unquestionably!" said Mr. Ratcliff, with a snap of the teeth.

"If there's a man here being blackmailed by some accursed, sir, it shows that he must be a pretty bad lot himself," the prefect went on. "His name to be exposed and got rid of before he brings St. James into disgrace. The difficulty is, that we don't know to whom the letter belongs."

"That is unfortunate."

"But I think that possibly Mr. Kidd could tell us, sir."

"Is that? What makes you think that, Monsooth?"

"Just after I picked the letter up, I saw Mr. Kidd looking round in the quad as if he had not something. Of course, I could not learn him by supposing that such a letter belonged to him. But he may know something about it."

The eyes of prefect and housemaster met. They understood each other perfectly.

Each of them knew perfectly well that the letter belonged to Mr. Kidd, and there was no need of words. Without speaking, they had agreed that the letter must be used to Mr. Kidd's disadvantage if possible. It was a weapon in their hands against the enemy, and they did not mean to spare him.

"It is possible," said Mr. Ratcliff, with an air of judicial reflection. "However, I could hardly approach Mr. Kidd on the subject. I think it would be better for me to look into the matter myself. For the credit of the school it ought to be cleared up."

"You could go to the ruins at ten o'clock, sir, and then you would see who sent this man who signs himself 'R. T.'," suggested Monsooth. "That would be proof positive, and he would not be able to quarrel with it."

"You are right, Monsooth; that is what I was thinking of. I cannot say I like the task." But Mr. Ratcliff smiled as he spoke in a way that hinted that he really did like it.

"But I cannot consult my personal inclinations when it is a question of the good name of the school that is at stake."

"I agree with you, sir."

"You may safely leave the matter in my hands, Monsooth."

I will certainly see to it. You may leave the letter with me."

"Certainly, sir."

And Monsooth quitted his housemaster's study in a mood of the most professed satisfaction. In spite of the solemn manner Mr. Ratcliff had seen fit to keep up in talking with the prefect, Monsooth knew that he would do his worst. There were breakers ahead for the master of the School House. Monsooth had realized, when he first read the letter, what a weapon it would be against the School House master. But he could hardly venture to make use of it himself. His nerve was not quite good enough for that. To leave it in the hands of Mr. Ratcliff was safer, and just as sure as the arrangement suited the occasion, approval professed admirably.

When Monsooth was gone, Mr. Ratcliff read the letter through once more.

"I was afraid Mr. Kidd is mixed up in this matter," said he, with a smile. "I am really afraid this is the case; but clearly I have not time to ascertain that the letter belongs to him. I must visit the ruins and ascertain the truth before I take any action in the matter."

And several times, as Mr. Ratcliff went about his work that afternoon, smiling looks met over his face, as if he had some very pleasant thoughts in his mind. And he had been wondering what made old Ratcy so unusually good-humoured.

More pleased than ever grew his smile when he looked from a window, he saw Mr. Kidd walking round the school-grounds, his eyes bent upon the ground, as if still hoping to come across the lost letter.

"This, sir," murmured Mr. Ratcliff. "It really looks as if Monsooth's surmise is correct, and Mr. Kidd does know something about the letter. It is quite possible that it is that letter he is looking for in this garden. However, I shall ascertain the facts to-night, and I sincerely hope they will be to the credit of Mr. Kidd."

And Mr. Ratcliff gave a slight laugh.

And those who heard him, and saw him at the window, wondered what an odd he saw in the questioning to credit about.

CHAPTER 8.

A Night Expedition - And a Deep Mystery.

BLARK looked out of the window of Study No. 8. The quadrangle was dark, save for the glimmering of the moon, and a keen wind whistled and whined among the old oaks.

"Lo! the pretty party, doesn't it?" said Horrie. "I believe it's going to snow."

"Sober's wonder."

"You're going, I suppose?"

"My dear kid, have you ever known your uncle look out when he had made up his little mind to do a thing? Besides, what would Figgins say?"

"How Figgins? Do you think he'll be there?"

"Of course he will! He'd turn up if it rained cats and dogs, and snowed elephants and blackberries. Wouldn't he just like to have the grin of me, if I didn't turn up, too?"

"I suppose so. But you were a golden old to agree to it?"

"Well, if I hadn't accepted his challenge, I shouldn't be worth much as a commender-in-chief of the School House parson, should I? Wouldn't the New House have crowed over you?"

"You bet!" said Digby. "But I don't like you going alone, Blake. Let one of us come with you."

"Hain't Fiddy in going alone?"

"E —"

"I'd like to have one of you," said Blake. "But it can't be had. I've got to go alone, but one of you can stay awake to let me in."

"We'll turn up for that," said Horrie.

"Right you are!"

And Blake turned away from the window.

"Come, let us set, dig, dig, dig," he exclaimed. "I shall have it written with some tummy and hot-soles inside me. Guess those conspirators."

And he put a frying-pan on the study fire, and Horrie handed him the butter and sage, and he set to work as usual. Blake was a great hand at cooking, and some of the boys in Study No. 8 were really sitting. The practical colour of frying sage was soon filled the study.

Although Blake seemed as cool and unconcerned as ever, the prospect before him was not exactly retiring. He had accepted a challenge from Figgins without the slightest hesitation, and had no intention of backing out of it. But what he had to do was neither easy nor pleasant.

Some distance from St. James, an easy walk in summer, but a few hours' easy tramp in winter, was the old ruined castle on the slopes of Castle Hill. Local opinion held it that the ruins were haunted, and that on black nights convicts could be seen gliding to and fro amid the masses of fallen

secretary. Whether the agencies really kept such late hours was not certain; but it was certain that after dark the rains were shaken by all the dwellers round about Wycombe and Leicester.

On the day-time, the partners of St. Jim's liked to explore the rains, not greatly troubled by the fact that they were out of boards. Blake knew his way about in them pretty well, but he had never been there after dark. But that was what he had to do now. There had been a heated discussion among some of the Fourth Partners of the new houses, which had led to a challenge from Figgins, which Blake had not seen slow to accept. Figgins having expressed an opinion that the Fourth House leader would look going to the stairs after dark, Blake had offered to fight Figgins on the spot, as Figgins were pertinently pointed out, that would have served nothing either one way or the other. Figgins thereupon dared Blake to prove, by going to the rained castle that very night, that he did not funk it, or which Blake instantly accepted that he would go if Figgins would meet him there. The New House leader had not expected that, but he was not the last to back down. And in order to go one better than the School House, he said that he would get there first, and wait for Blake.

Probably both the jokers wished they had not been quite so argumentative when the night set in with bitter wind and a biting cold, and with a few flakes falling to give a taste of what it was like.

But the challenge had been given and accepted, and there was no getting out of it, and neither Blake nor Figgins was the fellow to admit to himself that he had the remotest desire to get out of it.

"When will you start, Blake?" asked Dig, who was laying the cloth.

"About half-past nine," replied Blake. "It's no good trying to get away till after eight-ten. Then, after the prefect has gone his rounds, I'll nip out of the dormitory, and get me into the quad. So long as I get there by ten o'clock, it will be all right. Figgs has agreed to wait till the church clock strikes ten. You can hear it from the rains."

"Suppose you meet the ghost?" said Harris.

Blake grinned.

"Well, as Figgs has to get there first, he'll interview the ghost first, if there is one. I suppose he'll have explained matters before I arrive. But it isn't the ghost that will bother me so much as the snow. Never mind, let's turn into three cigarettes. They're really first-class, and haven't been near Chicago. Go ahead."

The chess stopped the "feed." Then they roasted chestnuts, and ate three till bedtime.

The talk ran on to a story which was not exactly gratified and comforting to Blake, with the night expedition before him.

Harris related a ghost story, in which a fellow visiting a rained castle had been seized from behind by a grim goblin, and had disappeared from human ken.

"Blake knew a tale of a dog who had seen a queer white being through a holey wood at midnight, and had died the next morning."

"D'Arcy recalled harrowing years of people who had been lost in the snow, and had died there before they could be found by their surviving relatives."

Blake was rather glad when bedtime came, and the Fourth went up to their dormitory. Darnel came along to see lights out, and he closed all the jokers locked up in bed.

He glanced along the row of white beds, said good-night, and turned the light out. The door closed, and the prefect's footsteps died away along the corridor.

Then Blake yawned and set up.

He had removed only his outer clothes, but the dormitory was cold, and he shivered.

"My hat! It's a cold night!" he said.

"Nothing like what it will be at the old castle," said Percy Mollish. "Did you notice how it was snowing, Blake?"

"No, I didn't."

"Regular blizzard. Shouldn't like to be out to-night. Not much chance of getting back again—not alive, at any rate."

"Oh, shut up, you beastly old's confounder!" said Blake.

He leaped out of bed, and was now fully dressed again. He went to the big window and looked out. The snow was sparkling-falling, but not so thickly as Mollish imagined.

"Oh, it isn't that," said Blake. "Anyway, I'm going. Now, which of you kids is going to keep awake?"

"Excuse me," purred Mollish. "I mustn't miss my beauty sleep."

"I wasn't talking to you, pig. Now, Harris, Dig, D'Arcy, who's all speak at once."

This caution was given rather sarcastically, for, as a matter of fact, none of the three seemed eager to speak at all.

"Better shut up," said Harris. "Blake's a blessed match. We've got a candle-end under my pillow. That's right."

In the flicker of the candle Harris tossed a coin.

"Now, what is it, Adolphus-head or tail?"

"Head," said Arthur Augustine.

"That's it's tail. You're wrong. It's between you and Dig."

Harris sharked the penny to Digby, who tossed.

"Head or tail, Cassio?"

"Tail," said D'Arcy this time.

"That's it," he cried. "You've got to get up."

"I really don't mind at all. I shall walk about the dormitory to keep myself warm, and if I feel lonely, I shall make some of you up to talk to."

"If you wake me up," said Harris, "I'll make you eat your blooming egg-sauce, so look out!"

"I think I'd better take D'Arcy's hardened coat," remarked Blake. "It fits me very well, and it will be warm. Besides, that coat is a dirty old plane, and I might spoil my coat. And I'll have your sweater, Harris. Now I'm ready."

"Mind some giddy ass's ass's! What you going out, too?"

"Who's ready, Arthur?"

"Quite ready," said D'Arcy.

The two jokers quietly left the dormitory. As Blake had said, there was not likely to be anyone about. Some of the seniors were in the common-room, and the others in their warm studies. The jokers opened down the stairs, and reached a little window at the end of a deserted passage, and Blake quietly opened it.

The air was white with snow.

"It looks cold," murmured D'Arcy, with chattering teeth.

"Yes, by George! Well, Figgs will be just as tipped as I shall, that's no comfort. Now, Augustine, don't forget to keep awake."

"You can trust me, Blake."

"Yes, I'll trust you. When can hear a pebble click on the dormitory window, it will be time to come down and let me in."

"I'll remember."

Blake pulled himself out of the window. The did to the ground, wiping off most of the snow from the sill with D'Arcy's coat. The ground was slippery, and he sat down suddenly under the window. D'Arcy leaned out anxiously.

"Have you been yourself, Blake?"

"None. Only sat down. My own giddy fault. An' that's all."

Blake rose, and picked his way carefully across the snow-shedded ground. D'Arcy fastened the window and crept back to the dormitory.

Blake left a trail of deep footprints behind him, but he made for a point in the wall where the mass of ice made scaling an easy task. He had crossed the wall in that place more than once.

But as he arrived there, he gave a low whistle of dismay. The ice was heavy with masses of snow, and the climb was likely to be an exceedingly difficult one.

Blake stood for some moments in reflection.

"Well, it's got to be done!" he said to himself at last.

"Figgs must have got me somewhere, and what a New House bender can do, I can do, that's a good one."

The next instant Blake dodged with surprising swiftness into the shadow of the ivy.

He had caught a sound near at hand—a sound faint but unmistakable, quite sufficient to alarm a jester in the act of breaking boards. And he took cover with great promptness.

"Who's that?" he murmured.

A figure loomed up out of the darkness and the falling snow—a sturdy form in a long overcoat, with a cap pulled down over his ears. Blake, peeping out cautiously, saw the form, and knew it at once.

"Kilroy, by George!"

For a moment he thought that the housemaster had discovered him. But his fears were soon relieved. Mr. Kilroy passed on, and stopped at the little window he into the high wall. This gate was used by the masters at St. Jim's when they wished to go in or out after Taggles had closed the big gates for the night.

Blake heard the click of a key, and the housemaster disappeared. He had evidently gained the precincts of St. Jim's.

"My hat," murmured Blake, "what a right to take a walk in! How lucky he didn't run against me! I wonder if there's any more giddy wanderers out to-night?"

It did not seem likely, but he was very much on the alert now.

A slight cough came to his ears. He lay low in the black shadow of the ivy.

"That's old Mollish's bark if I know it!"

Mr. Bantiff it was. The master of the New House, his

long thin form well wrapped up, and a soft hat crushed down on his head, came quickly towards the little gate, unlocked it, and passed out. It closed again, and Blake rubbed his eyes.

"Is everybody on the giddy bench to-night?" he muttered. "I suppose I shall see the head coming along next." But no one else appeared, and after waiting five minutes, the janitor ventured to leave his post. He was considerably surprised.

"The head always, as if Ratcliff was following old Kiddie," he muttered. "He ran so close behind him, and got never showed himself till Kiddie was gone. But I suppose he couldn't have been. It's funny, though."

He tapped the ivy again. His first attempt brought a shower of snow down upon him, and he plumped back upon the ground. The snow was salt to fall upon there, however, and he was not hurt. He returned to the attack indomitably, and succeeded in reaching the summit of the wall. To drop down outside was easy enough.

The wind was blowing hard on the road, whirling snow-balls to and fro. Blake set his legs against it, and started out. There was no sign of either housemaster, and he could not see their tracks, which were already hidden. He had no suspicion that either of them was going in the same direction as himself. He followed the road at a swinging pace, and turned into the footpath through the wood.

Under the trees the snow was thinner, but the darkness was like pitch. Blake remembered Digby's tale of a spectre in a wood, and shivered uncomfortably. He wondered where Figgins was. The thought of the New House chief, perhaps already at the reins awaiting him, made him back up. He tramped on swiftly.

He came out of the shadow of the wood on the slopes of Castle Hill. Had it been daylight, the old castle would now have been visible. He could see nothing but whirling flakes; but he knew the way blindfold. Without a pause he strode on.

A figure loomed up before him. It was white with snow, but Blake knew it. The long, ungainly figure of Mr. Ratcliff was not easily mistaken.

Blake passed in dismay.

What on earth was Ratcliff doing there? What could possibly be his object in going to the ruined castle on such a stormy night?

The janitor was utterly bewildered.

Mr. Ratcliff might have discovered that Figgins had broken through, but that would hardly be enough to take him out so far. It wasn't that. His visit to the castle had nothing to do with the juniors, Blake felt sure.

But it made things very awkward. If he found Figgins there, there would be a row. And if Figgie was already on the spot, he would show himself as soon as he heard someone coming, throwing it into Blake. He could never dream that Ratcliff could be coming there.

The thought of giving up the expedition had crossed Blake's mind at the sight of the New House master. He discovered it now. He had to get to the reins before Ratcliff, and warn Figgins.

To get ahead of the housemaster was not difficult. Blake made a detour, crossing the path Ratcliff was following.

Mr. Ratcliff, with a wincy wincy in his face, was going slowly. Blake easily got ahead, and came back into the path again some distance in advance of the housemaster. Then he ran on as fast as he could through the snow. The thick snow beneath him deadened his footsteps, and what slight sound he made was lost in the wind. It was fortunate for him, for all of a sudden he caught sight of a figure ahead, and stopped in time to avoid running into it.

He knew whose it was. He would have guessed, even if he had not recognized Mr. Kidd's square shoulders, and his coat and cap with the flags over the ears.

"Kiddy, by all that's funny!" Blake was simply accosted.

It was surprising enough to find Mr. Ratcliff heading for the ruined castle, but to find the other housemaster there also!

The vague suspicion that had come into his mind when he saw the two housemasters leaving the quad, now recurred with the force of certainty.

Mr. Ratcliff was following Mr. Kidd, with the intention of seeing upon.

It was plain clear now, and so Ratcliff's presence there was explained. Now, the question was, what on earth did Kidd want at the ruins of such an hour?

"This is getting a bit thick," murmured Blake. "I've dedged one, now I've got to dedge the other. What in the name of goodness does it all mean, anyway?"

There was no guessing that. The situation was growing rather thrilling. There was a deep mystery somewhere, and Blake seemed likely to get mixed up in it. He had no time to waste. He left the path, as he had done before, and

made a detour. Mr. Kidd was going on at a steady tramp, and Blake was easily able to catch up so as to get ahead of him. He came back into the path some before the castle, and passed through the ruined arch of the great gateway. The snow was falling more thickly than ever, and he hoped it would cover up his tracks before Mr. Kidd arrived. So that was a risk that had to be run.

The ruins of the ancient castle covered a wide space of ground. Only a portion of the old hall still stood, and there were some fragments of the wall which still afforded a partial shelter from the snow. This was where Figgins was to wait for Blake, and where the School House janitor expected to find him.

Blake, hurrying through the ruins, among masses of masonry and fragments of walls, reached the spot where he expected to find his rival. A dim light came out of the gloom.

"That you, Blake?" It was the voice of Figgins. It came jinkily through chattering teeth.

"Yes, my son. Seen any giddy ghosts?"

"Oh, don't talk," said Figgins sharply. "I've been here an hour, I reckon."

"Well, five minutes, you mean?"

"Well, it seemed a long time. Let's get back to the school."

"Don't be in a hurry. I suppose it's rather frosty being alone here; but now you've got the head cook and bottle-washer of the cook house at St. Jim's to keep you company."

"It's too cold to punch your head, Blake. Let's get going."

"Can't! There's a giddy fan in the park."

"What the dickens are you talking about?" asked Figgins crossly.

"I mean that we've got to the low bit of the coast's shore. I don't know what's up, Figgie, but something is, with a vengeance. Did you see anybody on the road here?"

"No, I don't."

"Well, if you had been a little later, you'd have seen Kiddie and old Ratty."

"You're guessing?"

"Honest before, and Blake seriously. "I passed 'em both, and had to dodge 'em. Kiddy is coming here for something, and Ratty is following on his track like a giddy Chalkie Holee spring on him. Hooow!"

Figgins gave a gasp of astonishment.

"I don't know what it means," said Blake, "but it will mean a tremendous thing if either of them spots us before. So this is where we lie low."

"Rather," said Figgie fervently. "If we were caught out of bounds this time of night, we'd be taken up before the head! My giddy son! What can it all mean?"

"Don't know, and don't care much, only we've got to keep out of sight."

"Hillo, there comes somebody!"

There was a sound of tramping in the ruined hall. From over the wall in the distance came chiming bells, and then the heavy steady druck. Ten strokes boomed through the stormy night.

As the old stroke died away, the new-come halted within a dozen paces of the boys, and a light glowed out. Blake and Figgins shrunk back into the shadows. The light gleamed upon the snow from a lantern, and in its light they saw the man plainly. He was a stranger to them—a somewhat broad-shouldered man, with a reddish moustache and wisp of beard. He was wrapped in a greatcoat, and wore a Hamburg hat.

"Who on earth's that?" whispered Figgins.

Blake gave a hapless shrug.

"Can't say. It seems as if all the giddy neighborhood is going to gather in these heavy rains to-night, just because we're here for a lark."

"I say, do you think Kidd is coming to meet that chap?"

The thought occurred in Blake at the same moment.

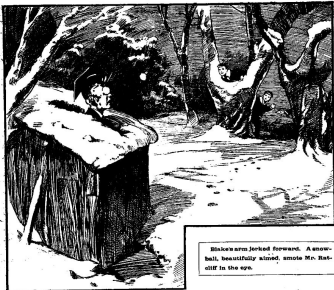
"I shouldn't wonder, Figgie. And old Rats wants to know what it's all about. You, I fancy, that's the giddy explanation."

"Loo! There's Kidd!"

The figure of the housemaster came into the circle of light cast by the lantern. His face was decidedly gloomy, but the waiting man turned to him with a grin.

"Hallo! You're here on time, my dear cousin!"

ANSWERS
ONE PENNY.
Every Tuesday.



Blake's arm jerked forward. A snowball, beautifully aimed, smote Mr. Haddock in the eye.

CHAPTER 7.

The Woes of an Snowdrifter.

BLAKE and Figgins exchanged a look of mute amazement. The two juniors, crouching among the masses of brickwork, a dozen paces from the men, were quite invisible, and they did not venture to move. But even if occurred to both of them that if they remained where they were, they would be compelled to play the unpleasant and disagreeable part of snowdrifters.

"Yes, I am here in time." It was Mr. Kidd's voice, loud and cold. The juniors had never heard him speak like that before. "A pleasant sight to be brought to such a place as this, Clyde."

Clyde laughed.

"How was I to know that there would be a snowstorm? It was fine enough last night, when I wrote the letter to you."

"That letter may cause trouble yet," said the housemaster sharply.

"Why? I suppose you haven't left it lying about, have you?"

"I have lost it."
"Well, you must be a— I won't say what," said the other, in tones of deep disgust. "Fancy losing a letter like that!"

"It was not my fault. I was reading it over again when I was interrupted. I met with an accident over a slide, and the letter somehow must have fallen from my hand, and I was too shaken up to notice it at the time. Then, I had to hurry off to a class, and when I remembered the letter and came back to look for it, it had disappeared. 'Twasn't two minutes, but the letter was gone."

"That looks very much as if someone had picked it up."

"Yes, though it may have blown away. But I shall not be easy in my mind till I know what has become of it. If it

fell into certain hands, at St. Jim's, it might cause me a great deal of trouble. I have enemies there."

"I don't suppose it will ever turn up, though. Very likely it was trampled in the snow."

"Perhaps, I hope so. But look here, Clyde, if you write to me at the school again, I will wash my hands of you entirely, whatever the consequences."

"Oh, stuff! I couldn't know that you would be so careless. Besides, you hadn't communicated with me, so what was I to do?"

"I hadn't made up my mind."

"Have you made it up yet?"

"I suppose I may yield to your demand, if I have some guarantee that it will really be the end of our dealings."

"I give you my word, Kidd."

Mr. Kidd made no reply, but the expression of his face showed that he was not inclined to place much reliance upon the word of his cousin.

Clyde read his expression, and gave a shrug of the shoulders.

"You can trust me!" he exclaimed. "I have reason as great for getting away from this country, as you can have for wishing me away."

"Yes, I suppose so. But put that lantern out, Clyde. We can talk as dark, and we don't want to attract attention here."

"Right you are?"

Clyde extinguished the lantern.

Blake drew a deep breath, and nudged Figgins.

"This is where we look at," he whispered. "They're going to talk, and we mustn't hear, it may be something awfully important and secret."

Figgins returned his nod.

"Right-ho! Let's rat."

While the lantern burned, there had been some danger of

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revealing themselves if they moved, for the gleam of the snow on their coats and caps would have caught the light in the dim shadow of the ruins. And, more for the sake of Mr. Kidd himself than for their own sakes, the boys would not have let him know of their presence there for weeks. They had heard him, but they knew that Mr. Kidd must have some powerful motive for meeting his relatives in so secret a manner. There was some shadow over the housemaster, which he evidently wished to keep from common knowledge.

Blake rose and glided away, treading softly, and Figgins followed.

The soft snow under their feet deadened the sound of their shoes, and in a minute or two they had placed a portion of the old wall between themselves and the two men.

The murmur of voices came still to their ears. Mr. Kidd and Clyve were talking again, but now the juniors could not hear what they said.

Blake stopped in the thick shadow of the wall, and gripped Figgins's arm.

"Warn him!" he muttered.

A dim figure was stealing softly through the snow, making for the opening in the ruins from which the juniors had emerged a minute before.

Figgins drew a deep breath.

"Mr. Ratcliff, by George!"

The long, lean figure of the housemaster passed within six paces of the crouching juniors, and stopped at an opening in the fragment of wall, and bent down there, and remained still, with shoulders craned forward, and head bent to listen.

Blake and Figgins knew at once what that meant.

The master had reached a cogné of passage from which he could hear what was said in the ruins, without any risk of showing himself to the speaker.

The opening in the old wall at which he sat crouching was about midway between the juniors and the spot where Mr. Kidd and Clyve were standing conversing. The words which came in an unmistakable manner to the juniors, would be clear and distinct enough to the housemaster.

Blake put his mouth close to Figgins's ear to whisper:

"You see what the housemaster's up to, Figg?"

Figgins nodded.

Mr. Ratcliff was his own housemaster, and as any other time he would have strongly resisted any approach east upon him; but the logical Hatchiffite could hardly speak up for a man in the act of listening to a private conversation. So far from feeling inclined to stand up for his housemaster just then, Figg was hot with anger at his lowering the dignity of his house in such a way, in sight of the School House leader.

"The best is listening," whispered Blake. "He's followed Kiddy here to listen. Very likely he picked up that letter Kiddy was speaking of, and read it. He's got it up against Kidd, and you can't say he's playing the game, Figg, old boy."

"The best?" muttered Figg. "Shall we stop him, Blake? There's plenty of snow here, and if we gave him a surprise, it would shut up his little game, and he'd never know who did it. Got the nerve?"

Blake checked himself.

"That's exactly what I was thinking of, Figg. He ought to be stopped. He may learn all sorts of private things that don't concern him."

"I'm on," said Figg, and chip in.

The two juniors, grinning gleefully, leapt down and gathered up handfuls of the thick snow, and each quickly powdered himself with three or four snowballs.

"You can have first shot if you like, Figg," said Blake, with much consideration. "He's your housemaster, you know."

The occasion quite reached Figgins.

He nodded, and, with glancing eyes took aim at the dim form crouching in the opening of the wall. His hand jerked forward, and the snowball flew. It caught Mr. Ratcliff in the small of the back, and broke there.

The blow was not a severe one, but the unexpectedness of it made the housemaster jump and utter a sudden startled exclamation.

The sound of voices in the ruins ceased instantly. The noise made by the housemaster had reached the ears of the others there.

Mr. Ratcliff stared round behind in amazement, wondering what had hit him. Then Blake's snowball flew, and caught him under the chin. He gave a jump and a yelp.

"Good shot!" muttered Figg, and the next instant his second ball smacked on Mr. Ratcliff's prominent nose.

The housemaster grunted and staggered; his foot slipped on the snow, and he fell with a thump. As he struggled to rise, the two juniors pelted him with hearty good will, and

ball after ball smacked and crashed on every part of the unhappy egg.

"Who is there?"

It was Mr. Kidd's sharp, ringing voice.

Mr. Ratcliff, realising the peril of being caught there, in the act of playing the egg, by the man he had followed, leaped desperately to his feet and went plunging away into the snow and darkness. Mr. Kidd and Clyve came scrambling through the opening of the wall to discover what the unexpected disturbance meant. Blake nudged Figgins, and the two juniors bent a happy retreat.

They were gone long before the two men were through the wall. They hurried away on the path down the hill, the snowflakes whirling round them thickly. Blake was shaking with suppressed laughter.

"Good pip!" he murmured. "I should like to know exactly what old Hatty thinks about it. He'll put it down to the species, I suppose! I don't know whether species, as a rule, go in for snowballing. But look out, Figg, or we shall run into the border. He'll be on the other road."

"Yes, and there he is."

A lean figure was plunging through the snow a short distance ahead of the boys. Mr. Ratcliff was going away from the scene of his unexpected adventure as quickly as he could.

"We've got to pass him," muttered Blake. "We must get in first. Now, then!"

Figgins grinned, and they gathered a fresh supply of snowballs.

"Give the bearer a volley!"

The chance did not often come to a junior to assault a housemaster with impunity, and so both Blake and Figgins wanted to make the most of the present opportunity. And the master of the New House certainly deserved some punishment.

Which! Smash! Through went the snowballs, and the sudden attack from behind sent Mr. Ratcliff staggering forward and meeting his feet on the slippery slope of the hill, he fell on his hands and knees.

Like lightning the juniors dashed past him, and disappeared almost long before the startled and confounded housemaster could catch a glimpse of them.

"Well, we're clear of that, Figg!" panted Blake, as they entered the footpath through the wood. "And a jolly narrow escape. I reckon this is the last time I shall write about an old castle in the middle of the night, my son."

"Well, it was a narrow shave, but it was exciting," grinned Figgins. "But I say, I should like to know what the giddy mystery is. What does your blooming housemaster mean by visiting his giddy relations in a ruined castle in a snowstorm?"

"That's his business, Figg. I suppose there's some mystery at the bottom of it, but it don't matter to me. I'll race you through the wood. If you fall and break your leg, that doesn't count."

"Right you are!"

And the juniors made a record back to St. Just's. Three Figgins helped Blake over the wall, and Blake pulled him up from above, and then they gave to their respective houses.

"Good-night, Figg," said Blake, as they parted in the white-crowned quadrangle. "There's the rotten old castle wall you call a house, and you'd better back up and get back to the other wastes. Bam along."

Figgins breathed hard, and "bammed" along; but in a moment he stopped, and then turned back.

"I say, Blake, wait a moment."

He turned back.

"What is it?"

"I've got something for you."

"Hand it over, then, Figg—oh, ooh!"

Figg's arm jerked forward, and a snowball smacked right in Blake's elastic consciousness. It was followed by another from Figg's left hand, which broke on his ear.

"That's all," said Figgins, with a double "Good-night!"

He was gone before Blake could get the snow out of his eyes. The last sound of a chuckle floated back from the direction of the New House.

"Oh, the best!" gasped Blake. And he made a few steps in pursuit. But Figgins was a gone, and he'll see it up, and turned back to his own quarters.

The pebble struck on the dormitory window, and a couple of minutes later D'Arcy opened the little window downstairs for Blake. There minutes more, and Blake was between the sheets, and answering by a succession of snore to D'Arcy's inquiries as to how he had got on at the ruined castle.

CHAPTER 2.

An Anonymous Letter.

"GOOD-MORNING, sir!"
 "Good-morning, Mr. Ratoff!"
 Horrie looked at his housemaster in surprise. There he greeted him, Mr. Ratoff's soon was red, and his eyes were watery. He was sniffing and snuffling.
 "Have you caught a cold, sir?"
 "Yes, Mr. Ratoff, I have caught cold," said Mr. Ratoff.
 "May I ask, sir, if—"
 "No, you may not."

And Mr. Ratoff passed on. Mr. Ratoff looked after him with a puzzled expression. The housemaster was evidently not in the secret of the matter.

"He's been to the clinic, I know, because I listened and heard him go out last night," the prefect muttered to himself. "Has he caught anything besides a cold, I wonder, or was it all a giddy man's trick? Whatever happened, it hasn't improved his temper."

It had improved neither Ratoff's temper nor his health. He certainly had a cold in the head, and he did not attend regularly at his duties that day. He kept to his own room most of the time, and was frequently heard to sneeze loud and long.

There was one fellow in the New House who could have explained how Mr. Ratoff had caught his cold, and that was Figgins. But, with the exception of the Co. Figgins kept his own counsel.

To the Co. he, of course, detailed the adventures of the night.

What was the measurement of the Co. at the start, and great their clamor at not having been at the spot when the snoring was going forward.

But, like Figgins, they could make nothing of the matter, and they soon gave up trying to get the business of them.

The master was not so easily dismissed by Blake. After entering school the change of the School House met in Study No. 6 and talked the matter over.

At first Blake's ideas were inclined to think that he was snoozing; but they were soon overturned that he was in earnest. Then they put their heads together over the affair.

"What's a giddy mystery," said Blake, "but that has nothing to do with us. Kidlets can make a giddy conclusion at the ruined castle, or at the top of the North Pole, for all it matters to Study No. 6. It ain't our business. But there's that boundary that watches him, you see. Would it be fair of us to leave poor old Kidlets off his guard, not knowing what the Ratoff bird was up to, and let Raty nose out all his little secrets?"

"Certainly not," said Dig. "Kidlets ought to be kept on his guard, somehow, or the other boundary ought to be stopped."

"I have an idea," said D'Arcy.

"Get it off your chest, then, Coney."

"Suppose you go to Mr. Wattle, and point out to him that such conduct is dishonourable, and extremely suggestive, and then perhaps he will—"

"Perhaps he will whet! Knock me into the middle of next century, I expect," said Blake. "You see a giddy one, D'Arcy."

"Well, we could warn Kidlets that he's being watched," said Horrie, after a pause.

"That he'd know we know something, and that'd make him feel uneasy," said Blake. "Besides, we wouldn't forget that if we let out that Figgins and I were out of bounds last night, it would mean a second licking for both of us. I see that."

"I know," rejoined Dig suddenly.

"Expound, then, kid."

"Let's send Mr. Kidd an anonymous letter."

"Dig, old kid, you're a howling genius! That idea is simply ripping! That gets us out of the difficulty first stop."

"But Kidlets knows our sets," said Horrie, anxiously.
 "Oh, I am changing my mind," said Blake confidently.
 "I'll write it backwards, and—"
 "Then Kidly won't be able to read it."
 "And I mean I'll slope the writing backwards, and that will disguise it. Obtain some impot. paper, and I'll practice a bit first."

"Here you are."

Blake proceeded to scrawl on the paper, sloping his writing the reverse of his usual style, and scribbled the result with a great deal of satisfaction.

"There, nobody would ever recognize that as my hand!" he exclaimed. "It doesn't look like my writing, does it, Dig?"

"Well, no; it doesn't look much like writing at all," said the second Dig. "Are they wags?"

"Of course they are!" said Blake indignantly. "Don't you try to be funny! Look there, that is 'Dear sir,' and—"

"Is it really? I thought it was a spider. You'd better practice a bit more, Blake, or the letter will be either less anonymous, Kidly won't know what it's about, any more than when it's from."

Blake agreed, but he took Dig's advice, and got in some more practice. At last the critical night pronounced that it would do, and then they proceeded to the composition of the letter.

This was a matter of more difficulty.

With a rare regard for Mr. Kidd's peace of mind, they wanted to spare him the knowledge that anything was wrong. The letter was to appear to come from an outsider, and was to be posted in the village. Hence to word it was the question, and a difficult one to answer.

"Well, we must word it somehow," said Blake at last.

"That blessed bell will be going soon, and we shall have no chance of it. We mustn't put in any local colour, or he won't guess it's written at St. Jim's, that's all. Suppose we use the third person?"

"I don't think we ought to let any third person into the matter at all," said Horrie, with a shake of the head.

"There's the matter in the secret now."

"Oh on his head, some body!" said Blake at last.

"Yes, that's what you said, and I don't think—"

"No, you don't. That's a giddy lot. You never have."

"Look here," said Horrie, solemnly, "you can do as you like, but if you let any third person into the secret, you're a silly—"

"Give him a lesson in grammar, somebody, do, for mercy's sake! Why isn't there some Third Form kid here to tell him what pronouns have three persons—first, second, and third?" said Blake. "I, thou, he, she, it, Horrie. Do you hear? I, thou, he, she, it."

"Oh, I understand!" rejoined Horrie. "Why couldn't you say what you meant? Yes, it's a jolly good idea to write it in the third person. Give it a better official sound. Something like this: 'It has come to the knowledge of the writer that old Raty—'"

"Check him! If we call him Raty, Kidly will know it's a St. Jim's cheap writing."

"If so I suppose he will."

"That's what I meant by local colour. Now, how will this do?"

Blake scrawled upon a sheet of paper, and read it out.

"When a chap visits an old castle in the middle of the night, he should take care that he isn't followed and watched by a long lean bouncer with a knife-made nose."

"Now, I think that's all right," said Blake, with an air of satisfaction. "He'll know Ratoff by the description, and he'll get out of mistaking noses. The letter might come from the nearest stranger who happened to see Raty up to his little gaiter. It doesn't give us away, and it will put Kidlets on his guard."



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"I think it will do," agreed Horrie; and the others said the same.

Blake put the letter into an envelope, and sealed it. He addressed it in the same hand, and put it into his pocket. "I'll not cover to the village after school, and post it there," he explained. "Now, that's a good thing done! We've done our workably duty—and there goes that blamed bell!"

And the four hurried away to their class-rooms very well satisfied with themselves.

After school Blake found an opportunity of slipping away unnoticed, and by posted the letter at the pillar-box in the lane near Ryburn.

He returned on St. Jim's extremely well satisfied. The letter would be delivered that evening to Mr. Kidd, and it could not fail to warn him of what he had to expect from the real housebreaker.

When the local postman appeared in the quadrangle that evening, the chains of Study No. 2 observed him with considerable interest. The anonymous letter was undoubtedly in his bag, and had anyone been watching the chains just then, their elaborate precautions might have awakened suspicion.

Taggles, the porter, took a letter up to Mr. Kidd's study. The chains had a glimpse of it as he passed there, and it was their own misfortune.

"So that's all right," said Blake. "The master of the School House was in his study. Taggles delivered the letter, and when the door closed after him, Mr. Kidd sat in open daylight. He did not know the writing, and attached no importance to it.

But as he read the next communication, his face changed. He stared at it as if he could hardly believe his eyes.

"My word!" exclaimed Mr. Kidd. "What can it mean? A long, long boaster! What an expression! A long, long boaster! It is possible that it is Mr. Ratcliff who is being alluded to? Can he possibly have been seen and spoken enough to have followed me last night?"

The housebreaker passed his study in some agitation, his brow dark and thoughtful. The happening of the previous night, which had interrupted his talk with Clyde, had remained a profound mystery to him.

That someone else had been at the raised candle was all he knew; he could not guess who, or why.

This letter led to a flood of light upon the matter.

Someone had followed him; someone else had discovered the spy, and sent this letter as a warning. Mr. Ratcliff was evidently the person alluded to. Anonymous letters are not generally worthy of much attention, but this was evidently written in a friendly spirit. There was a smack of benevolence about it, too. A good-natured person would hardly use such an expression as a "long, long boaster." Was it possible that the letter was written by someone of St. Jim's? The post-mark on the envelope was Ryburn, and that proved nothing.

Also Mr. Ratcliff's elaborate structure is less than five minutes after receiving the letter, Mr. Kidd knew perfectly well that it had been written at the school!

"It must be so," he muttered. "Whoever wrote this letter saw Ratcliff following me, and knew him by sight, too! The writer is evidently disposed to serve me; undoubtedly it is a boy of my own house! But what boy could possibly have broken boards and ventured as far as the raised candle on such a stormy night as last night?" Mr. Kidd nodded his head as the inevitable answer to that question came into it. "The writer of this letter belongs to Study No. 2, unless I am much mistaken."

Then his thoughts took a different turn. He threw the letter into the fire, and his brow contracted, his eyes gleamed.

"I am glad of the warning. Undoubtedly Ratcliff took it upon himself to follow me. That led to light upon the disappearance of my letter. Ratcliff may have done it. The letter itself will have told him that, only that I am in trouble. Now, what may he see have overheard last night?"

The housebreaker bit his lip.

Mr. Kidd was a man of action. He put on his hat, went downstairs, and walked across the quadrangle to the New House, to inquire Mr. Ratcliff.

CHAPTER 6. A Peculiar Interview.

MR. RATCLIFF'S jaw dropped when, in response to his "Good day!" the door of his study opened, and the tall, dark, stern of the master of the School House appeared.

The two housebreakers were not upon visiting terms, and they seldom met to speak except at the periodical masters' meetings. The visit of the School House master to Mr. Ratcliff's quarters portended something, and Mr. Ratcliff guessed that it would prove to be something unpleasant.

The moment he saw Mr. Kidd he guessed that the latter had discovered something of the truth, and he felt extremely uneasy. But he tried to remain calm and collected, and came to his feet with as much dignity as he could assume. Dignity, however, is not easy to attain when one is suffering from a cold in the nose and a bad conscience simultaneously, and so Mr. Ratcliff's effort could hardly be described as a success. In fact, he looked unconsciously like a defendant facing a judge as he stood up and met Mr. Kidd's gaze.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," he said coldly.

"I have taken the liberty of calling," said Mr. Kidd quietly. "I never properly thanked you for the deep interest you took in my business the other night, when you assumed the control of my house during my absence. Now I find that I am still further indebted to you for a still greater proof of your regard, and so I can thank you as you deserve for both favours at once."

"I do not understand you."

"I regret to see that you have a cold, Mr. Ratcliff. You must have been out in the snow last night."

"Yes, I was out."

"I thought so. I was also out; but we never met, which is quite singular, for I think we must have been very near together."

Mr. Ratcliff's eyes winked.

"I do not understand your allusion, Mr. Kidd."

"Never mind. If my meaning is not clear to you now, it may dawn upon you later," said Mr. Kidd seriously.

"Meanwhile, will you kindly venture to use the property of mine which you have so kindly taken charge of?"

"I—what?"

"I am alluding to the letter."

Mr. Kidd spoke so calmly and directly that Mr. Ratcliff had not the faintest doubt that he knew about the letter and his possession. His quick thought was that Mr. Ratcliff must have been chattering, and he instantly resolved to make it warm for his protest.

"The letter!" he exclaimed, to gain time.

"Yes, the letter, just. I should be glad if you would hand it over to me. Of course, I understand that you did not know I was the rightful owner," said Mr. Kidd, "otherwise you would have given it to me at once. But now that I am here to claim it, you can have no further doubt upon the subject. Kindly return it to me."

Too embarrassed by the housebreaker's position to utter a word, Mr. Ratcliff drew the letter from his pocket-book and handed it to Mr. Kidd.

The letter remained in carefully, and they stepped towards the fireplace and dropped it into the glowing coals.

It was scorching out of existence in a moment.

"Thank you," he said quietly. "I really don't know how to thank you for your many kindnesses to me, Mr. Ratcliff, so I will just say—"

"Mr. Kidd!"

"I hope your cold will soon be better. You must have caught a chill last night. Did you happen to go as far as the raised candle?"

"I—"

"The weather was shocking, wasn't it? Goodnight, my dear Mr. Ratcliff."

And, with a wave, the master of the School House quitted the room.

Mr. Ratcliff stared after him, with blank brow and gritting teeth. Never had he been so humiliated in his life.

The School House master plainly knew all about it, and had some idea as to how it was, and he had been weak enough to give up the letter.

"What a fool I was!" murmured Mr. Ratcliff. "I ought to have let the letter, to be produced against him, in case I have to account the Head with this disgraceful business. But I was really so much taken by surprise. Dear me, I wish I had not parted with the letter!" He snapped his teeth viciously. "I will make him smart for all these insults!" he muttered, with glittering eyes. "I have a very fair idea of his relations with that despicable fellow he called Clyde. The man is blackmailing him, as clear as daylight. There is certainly something shady in Mr. Kidd's part, and it is my duty to the Head to find out what it is, and expose him before the Head. I will take care next time that he discovers nothing until I am ready to have him up in the doctor's study, and call upon him to answer the charge I bring against him."

And the thought of that approaching triumph flattered Mr. Ratcliff's good-humour somewhat, and a sour smile broke out over his face.

Mr. Kidd, too, smiled as he went back to his own house.

"I don't think he'll care to follow me again," he said to himself. "Neither do I think he has discovered anything material. Fortunately, Clyde will soon be gone; and even Mr. Ratcliff will hardly be able to use his peculiar gifts in

the detective like any man, when my unfortunate cousin is safe across the water."

He passed Blake as he went into the School House. He looked hard at the junior, but Blake's face was absolutely unresponsive.

Mr. Kidd hesitated for a moment as if about to speak; but he changed his mind and went into the study. And Blake grinned.

CHAPTER 10.

Caught!

STUDY No. 8 was very quiet. The chairs were all work—at all events, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy were. Jack Blake laid down his pen, and was thinking.

Suddenly a prolonged squeak broke the silence of the study. Three heads were raised at once; three pairs of eyes fixed in mute inquiry upon Blake. He was pressing his pen.

"Well, what's the wheeze, lumpy?" asked Dig.

"The cheese knew that something was coming."

"The boys thinking," said Blake ironically, "was our anonymous billet-doux to Kilders quite fair on the Hatched side?"

"The lads looked puzzled."

"I don't see what you're driving at, Blake."

"Well, Ratty is no head of affairs, and poking his head in between the affairs of others, that it doesn't seem quite well-considered to stop him. Now we have got Kilders on his guard, Ratty won't be able to watch his any more."

"And a good thing, too."

"Yes, in a way. But can't you deal with the Hatched side? Just imagine him, with all his clanking blades, invents himself apparently dumb, for a chance to find something out in your study. It's a pathetic picture, to say the least."

"Look here, now, what's the jugs—quite, before we say anything—concerning Herries, picking up a letter."

"Pardon, lad—pardon. I've been thinking that it's hard on Ratty, and that we ought to give him a treat. He seems to be a good hand at finding people's letters and reading them, and then holding them in a good room."

"Why shouldn't we write a nice little letter, and put it where he's bound to find it, and then—"

"The cheese shrieked as the possibilities of the job rolled upon them."

"Good old Jack!" said Herries. "Oh, it will be ripping—something blood-rotting, that will make Ratty think he's on his hind legs, especially if you—"

"Bring in a squarer," suggested Dig. "That will make him—"

"Blowing," said Arthur Augustus—"really ripping!"

"Blake grinned scornfully."

"That's the opinion," he said, "if we could get old Ratty to a convenient room, we could put him through a regular course of surprise, and teach him a little lesson about playing the picky amateur detective."

"Yes, if he doesn't spit us."

"We shall have to take care that he doesn't, of course. He's on Kilders' track like a howling mad dog, and so he'll be bound to sniff us out. Now, this is what I was planning to my little head, boys."

Blake looked up a letter. He read it aloud to be finished:

"Sir,—Our meeting at the cafe having been interrupted, I will see you again as quickly as possible. Unless you send me the book-money I shall denounce you to the police, and you will be arrested at once. You know that when your fearful crime becomes known you will have to escape from your penitentiary. If you dare to disregard this letter, meantime, meet me at eleven o'clock tonight outside the door in the Acry Field, or take the consequences."

"Ox Who Knows Your Striver."

The cheese simply gelled.

"How's that for high?" exclaimed Blake. "Now that old Ratty's on the spot, a denunciation like that ought to please him. You see, I haven't mentioned any names, so if the letter should fall into the wrong hands it won't do any harm. The allusion to the meeting at the cafe is enough to show Ratty that it's addressed to Mr. Kidd."

"Blake, you're a howling genius!"

"The postal service is ripping!" said Dig. "Did you see you make it the subject?"

"No, that would be a bit too strong, and might make Ratty make a mistake. I shall perhaps do good enough, and I'll send it back shortly."

"Mind you disguise your hand," said Herries. "There would be a howling row if we got spotted over this jugs."

"Ratty! I'll put it in the same bag as our billet-doux to Kilders."

And Blake carefully wrote out the precious epistle in the same disguised writing that had once already served his turn.

"Now, the question is, to get it into Ratty's hands without making him suspicious," said Herries.

"Leave that to your uncle," said Blake.

And with the letter in his pocket he quitted Study No. 8.

We have mentioned that Mr. Kidd passed Blake in the hall as he returned from his visit to the New House. Blake had seen him leave the School House a short time before, and knew where he had been.

The junior passed quickly out of the house, and scuttled across the quad in the deep winter dusk. In a couple of minutes he was in the New House, and a glance round showed him no one in sight but a couple of janitors coming downstairs.

They spotted Blake at once, and accelerated their pace to come to close quarters with the bold intruder.

Blake faced them, and placed the thumb of his right hand on his nose, extending the finger, while at the same time with his left he dropped the precious letter behind him on the little rug just outside Mr. Rattiff's study door.

The New House janitors had no time to consider of the hidden action; they saw only Blake's attitude of defiance, and came for him with a run, breathing vengeance.

"Collar the cheeky braggart!" exclaimed Pratt.

They rushed at Blake. Blake dodged quickly out of the way and put out his foot. Pratt went sprawling over it, and crashed against Mr. Rattiff's door. At the same moment Blake seized the other janitor and, with a twist, dropped him on top of Pratt.

In a second afterwards Blake was outside the New House, his face red with anger, and the housemaster appeared.

The two janitors, who were staggering dazedly up, were next coming with heavy cuffs on the ears, and they fled precipitately from the reach of the angry monitor.

Mr. Rattiff had no doubt that they had some crashing against his door in the course of some house-guy, and he had not the remotest idea that a School House janitor had been upon the scene. Herries had favoured Blake.

Mr. Rattiff would not fail to see the white paper lying on his rug. It had been dropped on, but he saw that it was a letter, and he picked it up.

He gave a sudden start as he glanced at it, and stopped back into the study, closing the door swiftly.

He opened the letter, and read the letter. His mouth opened quick and hard, his eyes stared, his fingers twitched. It was clear that he was greatly excited.

"This is indeed a piece of good fortune," he muttered.

"Excellent! Excellent! Mr. Kidd little knew that when he visited my room to clear off his eyebrows, he would have behind him such an incriminating piece of evidence as this. What goes counterfeits on the part of a man with a guilty secret. Yet, after losing one letter, it is not surprising that he should have been so careless again!"

Mr. Rattiff forgot his cold—forgot everything but his coming triumph.

At last he held the man he had so long bitterly detested, in the hollow of his hand. He had only to be at the convenient door night, to ascertain, without the shadow of a doubt, what Mr. Kidd's guilty secret was.

Not for an instant did a doubt cross his mind. Herries showed it. He knew, of course, that a man of Mr. Kidd's character would never be guilty of a practical job of this nature; the thing was inconceivable. And that any jerry at St. Joe's knew anything about the matter at all, he had no idea. There was no room for suspicion in the matter.

Kidd, with characteristic carelessness, had lost the letter, and by a nice piece of good fortune it had fallen into Mr. Rattiff's hands.

That was all! It was enough to make the spiritual man rub his hands with satisfaction.

"I was absolutely lost time," he muttered. "Some friend of this man Clyde was evidently at the old castle, and saw me watching them, and accented me with words. But this time I shall take great care that nothing of the kind happens."

With Blake re-entered Study No. 8 with a beaming smile.

"Well, what luck?" asked three voices in unison.

"First class."

And Blake explained what had occurred.

"But are you sure he had the letter?"

"Rather! I watched him through the hall window, and he picked it up and took it into his study. That's all right."

"Then if he doesn't smell a mouse—"

"I don't believe he will, but we shall have to check it. Now, when's coming with me to the Acry Field to educate him tonight?"

"I am!" said Herries emphatically.

"And I!" exclaimed Dig.

"And I really think I must come," declared D'Arcy.

"All seemed 'We'll all go!' exclaimed Blake. "So that's settled. I'll get Walsh to open the window for us when we come back. We won't let on to him what the others in, of course. That's our giddy secret."

Anxiously enough the lantern bear waited for the appointed hour. Would Ratcliff be there? Would he have a suspicion that the lantern was a "spood" one, and fail to bibe?

There was no telling; but they hoped for the best. When they went up to the dormitory as bedtime, Blake made his arrangement with Walsh. The bribe of a coveted pocket-knife, with the alternative threat of a licking, induced that young gentleman to agree to do what was required.

When half-past ten rang from the clock-tower, Blake rambled out of bed.

"Are you awake, kid?"

"Yes," answered Horrie. "But, I say, Blake."

"Well?"

"It's jolly cold, and—"

Blake jerked his bedclothes off, and he arose, shivering.

"I say, Blake," said Digby, holding his bedclothes round him. "I've thought of a ripping idea. Ha, ha?"

"What is it?"

"Why, let the old bird get there, you know, and not let anybody or anything. He won't know what to think. We don't want to be there, you know. Let him just go, and see that he's been fooled. That will be funny, won't it?"

"Awfully funny," assented Blake, "but not so funny as this, do you think?"

And he snatched a wet sponge over Digby's countenance.

"What's that? Lament about, you brack! Can't you see I'm getting up?"

And came down Digby. Arthur Augustus bounced out too, as he saw Blake coming towards his bed, sponge in hand.

"It's all right, Blake! I'm getting up."

"Now, Walsh, are you sleepy still? I don't mind waking you."

"Keep off!" gasped Walsh. And he left his warm bed, unwillingly it is true, but he knew it would not have remained warm long if he had stayed in it.

Having seen Walsh dress himself, to make sure that he would not return to bed after they were gone, even to his boots, the chums went downstairs, and Walsh let them out and closed the window. The four janitors lost no time in getting to the door, and they wrenched their chilly bodies by a pull on the door-knob.

There was no snow falling, but the ground was thickly carpeted with it. The door-field was close to the college.

The chums did not go in by the gate on the roadside, in case they should leave footprints to alarm the expected victim. They entered the field by a gap in the fence, and approached the shed from the east.

The shed was a half-raised structure, with a good many pegs in the roof. The pegs showed black in the white covering of snow. The door was closed, but it was fastened only by a latch. In the summer the shed sheltered cattle, but in the dead of winter it was never used.

Blake, from behind the shed, took a cautious survey of the field. The stars were glinting in a dark, steady sky, and the night was not dark. The snow under the shed was undisturbed.

"Nobody here yet," said Blake. "It's still a quarter to eleven, and Ratty won't be in a hurry to come and freeze here. But, I say, I expect he'll come creeping behind the shed, for he won't want to leave his giddy trail in the snow across the field. Keep in cover."

The shed was in a corner of the field. Behind it were trees, now leafless and bare, but covering the ground with black shadows, and here the ground, partially sheltered, had very little snow upon it. The chums had left few traces, and these were concealed by the shadow of the trees.

"Why not get into the shed?" suggested Digby. "It would be warmer there."

"Don't you think that that brilliant idea may very likely occur to Ratty?" queried Blake. "It would be a ghastly good joke to be committed in the end by him, wouldn't it?"

"Of course! I didn't think of that!"

"Then thank your lucky stars that you have your Uncle Blake with you to think for you," said Blake severely. "I wonder what horrid trick you kids would get into if I didn't look after you?"

"Dry up, I can hear hoofbeats."

"Cover, kids, cover!"

The chums crouched in black shadows. A tall, thin figure passed in the dim starlight. It went round the shed, reaching softly so as to leave as little trace as possible in the snow, pushed open the door, and entered.

Keeping still as mice, the four janitors exchanged glances.

It was Mr. Ratcliff who had passed there as lightly and quietly as a specter; it was Mr. Ratcliff who was now inside the shed.

The others had worked! The job had come off!

The janitors made not a sound. They hardly breathed lest the housemaster should hear them. They knew what Mr. Ratcliff's plan was as well as the master himself.

There was a small loft over the shed. If the master of the School House and the supposed blackmailer met outside the shed, Ratcliff, inside, would hear every word that was uttered. If they entered the shed, he would be concealed in the loft, and could play the listener with ease and impunity.

Mr. Ratcliff was evidently up to snuff. But the fact that there was to be no redoubtance at all, and that the whole affair was a hoax, made the situation so utterly funny, that the janitors could hardly contain their laughter.

Blake held up his hand as a sign to his companions to keep still, and then cautiously crept round the shed.

Mr. Ratcliff had closed the door after him. Blake drew a strong wire from his pocket, and with deft and silent fingers secured the latch so that it could not be off possibly by unaided means from inside. As the door opened outwards, it was impossible even to burst it open from within.

Mr. Ratcliff was a prisoner!

Blake rejoiced in his comrades. He gave a nod in reply to the three awaiting him.

"He's a giddy prisoner," he said. "You keep on at eight, and we'll wait till he gets tired of marking time in there."

Under the dark trees the janitors waited. They made a pile of snowballs to fill the time, and swapped to keep themselves warm.

Eleven o'clock boomed out from the clock-tower at St. Jan's, distinctly audible across the frozen field.

Blake shuddered. It was the hour of the supposed redoubtance, and he could imagine Mr. Ratcliff's feelings as hearing nothing of the men he was waiting for.

The minutes passed away slowly.

The chums were concealing, and keeping themselves warm, but the housemaster, who stared out, of course, made a second inside the shed, must have found his wretched poverty chilly.

A quarter struck from the tower. There was a slight sound in the shed.

"Getting impatient?" suggested Blake. "Wait till he tries to open the door, that's all. That's where the laugh comes in, people."

Half-past eleven boomed through the town night air.

There was a rattling sound. The frame of the shed was trying to open the door. Doubtless the failure of his efforts surprised him, but he kept on at it. He tugged and dragged, and dragged and tugged, but the door did not budge.

The four janitors listened in silent bliss.

Mr. Ratcliff was getting reckless now. He must have realized that he was trapped, and, of course, he set it down on Mr. Kidd. Evidently Mr. Kidd had discovered that he was watching, and had fastened him maliciously up in the shed. Every effort to open the door having failed, the imprisoned housemaster shows all concealment to the winds. He kicked violently upon the door.

"Open this door instantly! How dare you fasten it! Mr. Kidd, I warn you that you will have to answer for this outrageous conduct!"

Blake fell upon Dig's neck, and hugged him.

"Oh, I shall die if I don't laugh! Let's get a bit further away and smile, for goodness' sake!"

"Open the door!"

Mr. Ratcliff, losing the last vestige of his temper, kicked savagely at the unyielding wood. The unconcerned silence of his supposed captor must have staggered him. He could hardly believe that Mr. Kidd had gone away and left him a prisoner there for the night.

"Will you open this door, Mr. Kidd? I give you one last chance—if the door is not opened at once, I shall go to the Principal to-rectangle morning, and lay the whole of the facts before him!"

Blake gasped.

"That will be a ripping treat for the Head," he murmured.

"Oh, I know I shall burst a boiler if that giddy humorist keeps on like that!"

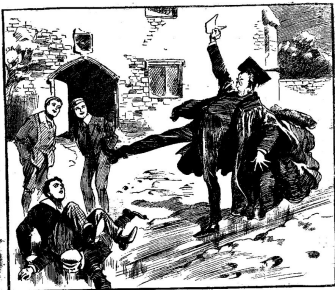
The imprisoned housemaster waited one minute for a reply. As none was forthcoming, he must have realized that his captor had, in fact, gone, leaving him a prisoner in the shed. He did not speak again, but the janitors heard a low, indistinct growling, mingled with which they thought they could distinguish words hardly proper for those youthful men.

"Oh, come away!" said Blake, shocked. "This is no place for innocent youths like us. I am directly warned!"

"Keep your papers open, as I am directly warned!"

"Get out of one of the gaps in the roof before long."

"Yes, that's the only thing he can do, unless he wants to stay there all night," assented Blake. "How lucky for him, kids, that four doubtful youths are here, with an absolutely unlimited supply of snowballs, to give him a warm time on this cold and chilly night! When his head comes out of the



"Oh!" gasped Mr. Kidd. "Oh! Ah! Ugh! What—"

road, mind, I have first shot. If I don't get a halfway, you can jump on my neck."

The crisis was passing. They heard the housemaster rummaging about in a small loft attached to the shed. Then a head came out of a gap in the roof, and a hand followed it. Mr. Barcliff was so tall that when he stood upright in the loft his head and neck were in the open air through the gap.

Blake's arm jerked forward.

A snowball, beautifully aimed, smote the housemaster under the chin, and the head disappeared with surprising suddenness.

Blake threw himself on the ground, and gurgled.

"Oh dear! Oh dear! I know I shall burst a boiler!" he gasped.

The head came out of the gap again.

Mr. Barcliff's face was white with fury. In the cruel star-
lights on the shed his features were clearly visible; but the
jambons, in the black shadow under the trees, could not be
seen, and they knew they were centre.

"I might have expected this," howled Mr. Barcliff. "I might have expected this brutal assault, Mr. Kidd. You may triumph down, sir, but my dove will gab. I repeat, sir, that my time will gab—could!"

The head disappeared again, as Digby, with a really scientific shot, plucked a snowball on the bridge of the nose.

"How's that, captain?" murmured Dig.

"Ripping!" gasped Blake, with the tears rolling down his

cheeks. "The best of it is, that the silly one thinks the Kidds all the time. He'll make a row to-morrow, and when Kidds prove an aitch, he won't know where he air!"

Out came Mr. Barcliff's head again with the persistence of a Jack-in-the-box.

"Continue your brutality, sir!" he shouted. "Yes, sir, I say, continue it! I shall hold you to answer for it, I swear you, Mr. Kidd. You shall answer for that language. I shall leave that shed, sir, in spite of your assaults!"

And he attempted to scramble out of the gap. A volley of snowballs greeted him, and he went in again. Then the punters shook with suppressed laughter, hurried away from the spot. They thought he had had enough, and so doubt he thought so, too. As soon as they were at a safe distance from the shed, they stopped and gave vent to the mirth that oppressed them.

"Oh, ah, ah!" gasped Blake breathlessly, when he had laughed till the tears ran down his cheeks. "What price this for a night out? But back up, kids, we don't want him to spot us going in. I shouldn't wonder if he comes home in a nasty temper."

The punters made all haste to get back within the walls of St. Ron's. Waddy was waked, and let them in.

Next a word did the chums reply to his inquiries as to where they had been—that is, not a word in the way of information.

"It's safer for you not to know, kid," said Blake. "Then you won't be mixed up in the row if it comes off. Run off to your little barn, and don't ask questions. Only keep your mouth shut about it, my son, or you'll be scalped."

And the chains of Study No. 6 turned in.

CHAPTER II.
The End of the Mystery.

AFTER breakfast on the following morning, Mr. Kidd received a message by a bag from the Head of St. Jan's. The Principal requested the master of the School House to visit him as speedily as possible in his study.

Mr. Kidd's face was somewhat pained as he obeyed. He wondered what the Head wanted. He did not think of Mr. Ratcliff just then.

The School House master entered the Head's study. Mr. Ratcliff was there, his nose red and his eyes more watery than ever. His adventures over night had impressed his cold. Mr. Kidd bowed slightly to the fellow housemaster, and looked at the doctor.

"You want for me, sir?"

"Yes, Mr. Kidd." The doctor's face was very grave. "Mr. Ratcliff has told me an astounding story—a story so absolutely astounding that I cannot credit it, but feel certain that there is some terrible mistake."

Mr. Kidd changed colour slightly for a moment. He knew what was coming next—or, rather, part of what was coming. Of the affair of the previous night, he, of course, knew nothing.

The Head did not fail to mark the slight change in his countenance, and his expression grew a little harder.

"You will repeat your statements, Mr. Ratcliff, to Mr. Kidd's presence," he said. "I only hope that Mr. Kidd will be able to explain them away."

"I certainly hope to be able to fully explain anything that may be considered derogatory to my character," said the housemaster calmly.

"Very good," said the Head. "Go on, Mr. Ratcliff."

Mr. Ratcliff gave the master of the School House a warning glance.

"In the first place," he said, "I wish it to be understood that I have retired solely from a regard for the honour of the school, and not from any personal ill-will towards Mr. Kidd. I felt it duty bound to act as I did do."

"Certainly," said the doctor carelessly. "No one will suspect you, Mr. Ratcliff, of having acted from any other than the very best motives, and I am sure Mr. Kidd will acknowledge this, if fortunately it turns out to be a mistake."

Mr. Kidd did not speak.

"I wish I could go on," said Mr. Ratcliff. "I have told you, sir, how a letter came into my possession, Monday, and my head ached, indeed it ached it up to the quadrangle, and so there was no chance for it, but very properly brought it to me. I felt told me that the contents of that letter made me void the sacred gavel, so necessary when it was at St. Jan's College that was being disgraced."

"Quite so, Mr. Ratcliff."

"There I was surrounded by such persons I did not see. Had I had seen Mr. Kidd meet a person who certainly looked much disreputable—a person called Clypeus."

"Go on."

"Unfortunately I was unable to discover more than that Mr. Kidd had gone there in reply to a demand for money. I reflected upon the matter, and decided that for the honour of the school I ought to keep my eyes open; but I thought it would not do to bring any accusation until I had heard."

"Quite correct."

"Mr. Kidd came to my study and demanded his letter. I gave it to him. I did not stay at the time of keeping it as evidence."

"It was necessary," said Mr. Kidd, interrupting him. "I have an intention of denying the existence of the letter, or any of the facts you have stated."

"Let Mr. Ratcliff finish, please."

"But in guessing to my study," went on Mr. Ratcliff, with a gleam of triumph in his watery eyes, "Mr. Kidd let fall another letter outside my door."

The School House master looked astounded. He was about to speak, but the doctor held up his hand.

"Let Mr. Ratcliff finish first, please."

"Very well, sir."

"I found that letter by accident," said the New House master. "There was no name on it, and I did not guess that it was Mr. Kidd's till I read it. Then a reference to the previous meeting at the gavel challenged me. I have placed that letter in your hands, Dr. Holmes."

"I have it here. You shall see it when Mr. Ratcliff is finished, Mr. Kidd."

"The writing was disguised," went on Mr. Ratcliff. "But I knew it would be from the same person as the other letter. I went to the residence to ascertain. Then I was locked up in the school and treated brutally when I tried to escape from the gate in the night. That is all, Dr. Holmes. I hope you will ask your Mr. Kidd in a proper manner to remain at the school after what I have told you."

"If Mr. Kidd cannot explain, certainly not," replied the Head. "Now, Mr. Kidd, I am waiting for your explanation."

"It is simple," replied the School House master, with quiet dignity. "I do not desire to conceal anything from you, sir, now that Mr. Ratcliff has treated himself so unbecomingly."

"Repeat that letter, Mr. Kidd, before you answer."

Mr. Kidd accepted the letter the Head handed to him. It was James Blake's previous offering. The housemaster noted the writing at once, so the same as that of the anonymous letter. His lips twitched as he read it through. He laid it down on the table when he had finished.

"Now for my explanation, sir. I have the misfortune to have a cousin, by name Rupert Clypeus, who is frequently getting into scrapes, and expending his relations to get him out of them. His latest freak is to get mixed up in a transaction which brings him within the shadow of the law. He is really a gambler, and has been a scamp of a good deal of money; but there is great danger that he may be made the scapegoat, and that instead of losing his debilities, he will get out of us heavily against him, that now his only hope is to get out of the country. To do this, he requires money. That is why he has come to the neighbourhood of the school. He wrote to me, and I met him at the train, as it was not safe for him to be seen in the daylight. He has been living in a shepherd's hut on the moor, at a considerable distance from the school. It was both warm and annoyed by his conduct, but blood is thicker than water, and I resolved to help him. His demand for a hundred pounds, however, was more than I could at once meet. I am happy to say, however, that I have since raised the money, and that Clypeus is gone to Southampton and will this morning for America, when he will certainly not return."

"Very satisfactory so far, Mr. Kidd. But that letter?"

"That letter, sir, is an absolute hoax, and I marvel that it could have deceived you, by its appearance. It was never sent to me, and I see it here this morning for the first time."

"Mr. Ratcliff gasped."

"Mr. Ratcliff," continued the School House master quietly, "seems to have been possessed by the idea that Clypeus was blackmailing me, and that therefore I had some guilty secret in my past. Therefore, he allowed himself to be hoodwinked by this utterly absurd hoax."

"A hoax?" murmured the New House master.

The doctor could only stare.

"What does it mean?" gasped the Head at last. "Who could have written it?"

Mr. Kidd smiled slightly.

"It seems to be a good guess—somebody, evidently, with a turn for practical jokes—has discovered that Mr. Ratcliff was watching me," said the School House master. "That handsome person wrote this absurd letter, and placed it where Mr. Ratcliff found it."

"By—my faith!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff. "It cannot be!"

Mr. Kidd shrugged his shoulders.

"You say you were arrested last night?" he said. "At what hour?"

"About last eleven."

"Ah! Last night I was in my study preparing examination papers; and at eleven o'clock," said Mr. Kidd bluntly.

"Mr. Leithorn came in to smoke a pipe with me. Mr. Leithorn set me out if my word is doubted."

"I don't think it will be necessary to send for Mr. Leithorn," said the Head dryly.

Mr. Ratcliff could only gaze in his dismay. Mr. Kidd looked the doctor full in the eyes.

"I can only say further, sir, that my past is open to the fullest investigation," he said. "There is nothing in it that I desire to conceal. This letter speaks of perjury, perjury. If there were any foundation for it, the police would, of course, be able to establish the fact from their records. I defy Mr. Ratcliff to appeal to them."

The Head bowed.

"Enough!" exclaimed Mr. Kidd. "The thing is too evidently only a hoax. Have you any idea whom the perpetrators may be?"

"I could hazard a guess, sir; but it would be hardly fair to utter a name without a particle of proof," replied the School House master. "I suspect that the hoax was planned by some junior of my own house, who were naturally indignant at seeing the New House master watching their own master about. I can really sympathize with their feelings. Of course, I need not say that I had not the faintest notion that such a hoax was being planned, or I should have stepped in to stop it."

"I am quite satisfied, Mr. Kidd. I should certainly not desire that you should suffer for the sake of your relations, and I can only admire your generosity in giving them a fresh start abroad. The result of the affair is a mere joke. Mr. Ratcliff has been deceived, and I cannot help thinking, Mr. Ratcliff, of your prejudice against Mr. Kidd, what have

(Continued on page 27.)

by them. One after the other entered the vehicle, until only Jack was left outside.

"Stop in, messenger!" said the sergeant sharply. "But, instead of obeying the command, Jack sprang himself out from the grasp of the police who were holding him, and walked across the square.

"Please hear me, your Highness!" shouted Jack, as the guards caught him and started to pull him back to the van. A handsome carriage, drawn by a pair of magnificent chestnut-colored horses, stopped, and a richly-dressed man of pleasant but imperious cast of features stepped to the ground.

"Jack O'Brien!" he said, in a voice of astonishment. "Halt, man!"

The guards holding Jack released their captives, and saluted the stranger.

"What is the meaning of this?" asked Grand Duke Rasloff—for he it was, looking first at Jack, and then at the sergeant of police, who had halted him.

"These men, your Highness," answered the official, "have been arrested by me under orders from the chief of police at Vladivostok."

"What man?" rapped out the Grand Duke impatiently. "I can only see one—my friend, Moscow O'Brien!"

The sergeant explained at some length, being cut short by his questioner.

"And you, O'Brien," he demanded—"what have you to say?"

Quickly Jack told him what had happened since the fight near the wharves. He also related the circumstances attendant on the collision between the cruiser Baltic and the Golden Star.

The laws of the Grand Duke frowned darkly. "Release these men!" he cried to the sergeant. "I will be responsible to the chief of the Vladivostok police for them."

Not daring to disobey an order from such an exalted personage as the Grand Duke Rasloff, the sergeant immediately released the fugitives.

"I am going to Moscow myself," said the Grand Duke, as he and Jack walked side by side into the station. "If you like, you may travel with me in my own car."

He had known Jack for less than a year. It was due to the effort and skill of the young fireman that several thousand acres of his estate, regarded at one time as being entirely unprofitable, had turned out to be one of the richest oil-bearing districts in Russia. The discovery had made him ten times a millionaire, and the Grand Duke was a grateful man.

And in this case he showed his gratitude by bringing about an immediate court of inquiry at Moscow into the circumstances of the loss of the Golden Star. On the journey to the city in the train, Jack and Carre placed him in full possession of the facts of the collision.

The commander of the Baltic, Captain Treloff, was dismissed from the service, and full compensation was paid by the Russian Government to the owners of the Golden Star for the loss of their ship and her cargo, and also to the wives and families of the drowned sailors.

"But I'm still a man without a ship," lamented Carre, as he and Jack were informed by special messenger of the finding of the court of inquiry. "They'll sack old Carre!"

"Not a bit of it!" answered Jack. "I shouldn't be surprised if this telegram doesn't give you the command of another vessel."

The telegram—brought into the room of the hotel where they were staying—was handed to Carre. With trembling fingers he opened it, and read it. Then he put out his hand to Jack, and gave it a worthy grip.

"Didn't I say so how Providence was workin'!" he exclaimed with deliberate dramatic speech. "This you please it!"

The telegram was one from his employers in Liverpool, giving him the command of another vessel, and retaining the services of the two mates—Harvey and Giles—and of the apprentice, Tim O'Brien.

But Tim never went back to the sea. He remained with his brother and from the Coast in Russia, and is still there.

THE END.

(Start reading "The Mists of St. Mira," our new School Serial Story, now. You will be sure to like it.)

"DAILY MAIL."

NEXT SATURDAY:

"MYSTIC DISCOVERY"
A School Serial of "St. Mira," the "Pines" & Co., by M. G. C. C. C.

THE MYSTERY OF THE HOUSEMASTER.

(Continued from page 6.)

less very deep and unreasonable to cause you to be deceived so easily."

"The affair had worked out in the most unexpected manner, and doubly the New House master wished that he had let Mr. Kidd's estate remain alone.

"I suppose you didn't continue the Head kill," that it is all a mistake, Mr. Ratcliff?"

"I—I suppose so."

"I should like a plainer answer than that."

"Yes, sir, it is undoubtedly a mistake," faltered the New House master.

"Very good. Mr. Kidd, I can only apologize for having been induced to force you to acquiesce in your private concerns," said the doctor.

Mr. Kidd bowed.

"Mr. Ratcliff, of course, will apologize," added the Head.

"He has wronged you grievously."

"I am sorry, Mr. Kidd," said the New House master, with averted eyes—"I am very sorry. I beg your pardon most sincerely."

"And I grant it," said Mr. Kidd. "I can only express the hope that you will not be so ready to suspect me, or anyone else, again."

Mr. Ratcliff bowed, with humility in his face and fery in his heart.

The doctor shook hands cordially with the School House master, and Mr. Kidd visited the study. Mr. Ratcliff remained for a private conversation of five minutes' duration with the Head.

Meanwhile, Mr. Kidd had gone to his study, and sat for Jack Blake.

The hero of Study No. 5 left the Fourth Form classroom and repaired to his housemaster's room, with an expression of beautiful innocence upon his face, but rather an uneasy feeling in his heart.

"Ah, good-morning, Blake!" said Mr. Kidd graciously. "Have you ever seen that letter before?"

He held out the letter he had brought from the Head's study. Blake looked at his own address. Then his eyes met the housemaster's expressively.

Study No. 5 absconded with. None of the famous fair had ever been known to get out of a scrape by telling an untruth.

"Whichever that was hardly a fair question," said Mr. Kidd contemptuously. "I should have put it like this. I shall be glad of information, Blake, and I shall hold you quite blameless if you can give it. I think you gave me information once before on these terms."

Blake remembered it perfectly well, and he grinned.

"Tell me everything," said Mr. Kidd coaxingly—"everything, mind."

And Blake did, with perfect frankness.

Mr. Kidd gazed at some part of the story, and at others he was heard to let it not to laugh. At the same time, he was touched by the janitor's evident faith in and devotion to himself.

Then, in spite of all, you did not believe anything against me, Blake?" he asked, when the janitor had finished.

"Certainly not, sir!" said Blake. "We know you too well for that, sir."

"I am glad to know you have so much confidence in me, my boy," said the housemaster, more moved than he cared to show. "I hope I shall always deserve it. I may explain, Blake, that the man I met was an unfortunate relative, who had a reason for keeping his whereabouts a secret, and is now gone to America. The secret, such as it was, was his, not mine."

"Yes, sir. I didn't know what to think, of course; but I knew you were all serious"—Blake coloured—"I mean, true blue, sir!"

Mr. Kidd smiled.

"Blake, I am afraid you have taken outrageous liberties with the master of the New House, and I should advise you to my feelings of the occurrence outside your own study. As you have told me in confidence, of course I can take no action in the matter. Go back to your class, my dear lad."

And Mr. Kidd shook hands with Blake and sent him away.

"A fine lad," murmured the housemaster—"a brave, true, hearty British lad! I am proud to have him in my house."

Blake's cheeks looked at him rather anxiously as he came into the Fourth Form room. But his cheerful grin reassured them.

"All square?" said Blake, in a whisper, as he sat down.

"Kiddy is a trump! And this is what it were to write!"

And he smiled so broadly that Mr. Ledden gave him fifty lines upon the spot.

THE END.

NEXT SATURDAY:

"MYSTIC DISCOVERY"
A School Serial of "St. Mira," the "Pines" & Co., by M. G. C. C. C.

AND "THE GREAT ESCAPE"
A Thrilling Tale of Captain West's
Secrets, Discoveries.

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