

1 2 3
Special School Tale by Chas. Hamilton.

PLUCK

MISSING!

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

ON THE TRACK OF
MARTIN STERN.

A Thrilling Detective Tale.

1^d



THE SWELL OF ST. JIM'S WAS A PITIABLE OBJECT TO LOOK AT. "MY HAT!" EXCLAIMED BLAKE. "NOBODY WOULD TAKE YOU FOR A HOWLING SWELL NOW." (See page 15.)

NO. 123. VOL. 5. NEW SERIES.

A TALE OF SPECS, THE TWINS, & CO. NEXT SATURDAY.



[VOL. 5, No. 123, NEW SERIES.]

The First Long, Complete Story.

MISSING!



A Splendid

School Tale

By

CHAS. HAMILTON.



"Ye-es."

Arthur Augustus did not speak very enthusiastically. He had an ambition to figure in the house sports, and in an unlucky moment he had asked Jack Blake, captain of the School House Junior Eleven, to help him on.

Blake was his chum, and D'Arcy's deficiencies in the athletic line had sometimes chafed him. He had taken the swell of St. Jim's at his word promptly enough, and more than once since then D'Arcy had felt sorry he had spoken.

Blake certainly never did things by halves, and Arthur Augustus, as the chief of the School House juniors declared, was all the better for it; but the process was at times a painfully exciting one to D'Arcy, who was slow and drawing by nature.

"You see," explained Blake, "you're such a giddy ass, Adolphus, and such a dawdling donkey, and such a fussy nincompoop, that if I go easy with you, you'll never get fit. I'm going to make you a sportsman, or perish in the attempt."

"I think it's more likely I shall perish!" murmured D'Arcy.

"You're getting much better already," said Blake patronisingly. "What you want is something to buck you up. When you're sprinting you always want to stop and take a rest. That won't do, you know. I can't keep on stopping to kick you; it takes too much time."

D'Arcy grimaced. He would not have objected if Blake had left those little attentions out of the course of instruction altogether.

"I've thought of a way to buck you up," continued Blake, as they walked across the quadrangle. They were in their running-clothes. "See old Figgy over there?"

"Yes. What about Figgy?"

Figgins, the chief of the juniors of the New House at St. Jim's, was standing by the big gates talking to Wynn and Kerr, his special chums. The three looked up suspiciously as Blake and D'Arcy came towards them. When Blake was around, Figgins & Co. were usually prepared for war.

"We shall pass them going out," said Blake. "Now, I'll tell you what you've got to do. You've got to snatch Figgins' cap off his head and run for it."

"But, I say," exclaimed D'Arcy in dismay, "Figgins will be cross, Blake!"

CHAPTER 1. The Education of Arthur Augustus—A Startling Adventure.

"READY, D'Arcy?"
"Just a moment, deah boy, while I get my eyeglass."

Jack Blake made a gesture of menace.

"If you stick that blessed eyeglass on, Aubrey, I'll ram it down your throat, as sure as you're a silly ass!" he exclaimed. "So look out!"

"But weally," protested Arthur Augustus—"weally, deah boy—"

"You are coming for a sprint now. You can take the eyeglass for a walk another time. Are you coming, slow-coach? Kick him, Herries!"

Herries promptly raised his foot, and the swell of St. Jim's hastened to get out of reach. He joined Blake, who seized him by the neck and ran him down the stairs at a headlong pace, and across the hall, out of the School House into the quadrangle.

D'Arcy arrived there gasping, and not quite knowing whether he was on his head or his heels.

"Weally," he gasped—"weally—"

"Shut up!" said Blake imperatively.

"You've asked me to help you on in the sports, and make an athlete of you, haven't you?"

"Yes, that is twue, but—"

"Well, I'm going to do it. I'm not the kind of fellow to do things by halves. You want to get into the Junior House Eleven, don't you?"

"Ye-es," said D'Arcy, rather doubtfully. "It would be vevy nice, but—"

"Well, I'm going to make you fit. I've taken you for some nice long runs, haven't I? Don't you feel all the better for them?"

A LONG,
COMPLETE
DETECTIVE STORY
STARTS ON
PAGE 19.

"Yes, I fancy he will be cross," grinned Blake. "That's my idea, you see. He'll chase you to get his cap back, and to give you a pasting for snatching it. That'll make you back up, you see. Isn't it a ripping idea?"

"Nunno; I don't think it wipping at all, and—"

"Are you going to obey orders, Adolphus Aubrey, or are you not?"

"I'll—I'll do it if you like, Blake," said D'Arcy meekly.

"That's right. I'll make a man of you in time. Figgy will give you a run for your money. I promise you."

"But suppose he collars me before I can get away?"

"If he does, I'll buff him."

The two School House boys strolled on past the New House juniors. Blake nodded to Figgins & Co.

"Hallo, Figgy!" he exclaimed. "I hear there's to be new rules in the New House."

"Oh," said Figgins suspiciously; "I've heard nothing of it."

"Ah, I suppose they're going to break it to you gently. It'll be a shock to your system. They're going to make you all wash at least once a week, and change your collars before they get as black as ink. Bravo, Aubrey!"

Figgins had turned fiercely towards Blake, and at the same moment D'Arcy snatched his cap off and bolted through the gates.

Kerr tried to intercept him, but Blake put out his foot, and Kerr sat down. Then Blake dived after Arthur Augustus.

"Good-bye!" he said, waving his hand. "If you want that cap back again, old Figgy, you can chase us; not that you'd have much chance. Yah, New House cad!"

But Figgins was already chasing the School House comrades. D'Arcy's action had enraged him beyond measure. That the swell of the School House should dare to lay hands upon him—the great Figgins—was too much. Figgins was bursting with wrath as he sped in pursuit, intent upon recovering his cap, and administering the drubbing of his life to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

D'Arcy knew what he had to expect if he was caught, and he sprinted along beside Blake as he had never sprinted before. The cap was still clutched in his hand. Blake was grinning.

"Jolly well done, D'Arcy!" he exclaimed. "Only I advise you to put your beef into it, for Figgy will flay you if he gets his hands on you. We'll keep the cap for a trophy, unless he recaptures it. If he sticks it out, we'll give him a run as far as the ruined castle."

They left the lane, and turned into the footpath, through the wood. Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn were pelting on their track. Fatty Wynn, the Falstaff of the New House, was dropping behind, but Figgins and Kerr were running strongly.

Figgins was the champion forward of the New House junior team, and had been in running garb he would probably have overhauled the School House chums, for Blake had to slack down to keep D'Arcy company. Blake looked back over his shoulder.

"I fancy we're gaining," he remarked. "Lucky for you Figgy isn't in flannels, Adolphus Algernon; but he'll stick it out, I'm sure of that."

The footpath wound through the wood, and right and round of the pursuers were lost. Both the juniors, however, felt pretty certain that Figgins & Co. were still hot on the track. D'Arcy was getting "hellows to mend."

"Buck up, chappy!" said Blake encouragingly. "I don't want to hurry you, you know, but Figgy will about paralyse you if he gets his paws on you!"

"I—I—I—I'm all right," gasped D'Arcy.

"Hallo! Get out of the way there!" called out Jack Blake suddenly, as a burly figure came out of the wood into the path ahead.

The footpath was narrow in this spot, and the stranger, standing in the centre of it, completely blocked the way. The man did not move. He was a burly, thick-set fellow, with a dark skin and black eyes, and a ragged, black beard. He looked like a gipsy. There was a short, thick cudgel in his right hand, and a black pipe between his teeth.

"Do you hear me, there?" bawled Blake.

Still, the gipsy did not stir. The two runners perforce came to a halt. D'Arcy was not sorry, but Blake was wild.

"What the dickens do you mean by blocking the way?" he exclaimed. "Stand aside, confound you! Get out of the way!"

The gipsy grinned evilly, and twirled his cudgel. His swarthy face was reddened and his eyes bleared by drink. For the first time it struck Blake that the man had an object in stopping them. The wood was a lonely one, and he looked a ruffian capable of any ill-deed.

"Don't be in a hurry!" he sneered. "You will not pass till I choose."

Blake made a movement to brush past, and the gipsy swung up the cudgel threateningly. Jack jumped back.

"Look here, you ruffian!" he began.

"Burn me! If you attempt to pass I will strike you down! Take warning. Give me what money you have about you. Quick! I am not to be fooled with!"

The man looked dangerous, and the two boys certainly had no chance against the cudgel. Blake wondered how far off Figgins & Co. were. He would have been very glad just then to hear their footsteps in the silence of the wood.

"Quick!" snarled the footpad.

"Haven't a stiver about me," said Blake coolly. "You see, I don't generally carry around all my vast wealth when I'm in flannels. You've come to the wrong chap, my giddy highwayman. So now you can clear."

The gipsy scowled savagely.

"Then take that, you young hound!"

The cudgel jerked up for a blow. Blake's eyes were flashing, his fists were clenched, but D'Arcy dragged him back.

"Here, I have a sovereign!" he exclaimed. "I will give—"

The ruffian lowered the cudgel, and turned to him savagely.

"Quick, then, or—"

"No, you won't!" exclaimed Blake. "You'll give the brute nothing, Algernon. If you do I'll punch your head. Get out, you hulking brute! You'll get nothing out of us!"

The gipsy, with a curse, sprang at him, lashing out with the cudgel. But he had to do with a lad trained to rapid dodging on the football field. Blake moved like lightning, and his weapon jerked down and missed him by inches, and the next second both his fists were planted in the swarthy face.

The gipsy reeled back. D'Arcy, springing forward, snatched the cudgel from his hand, and sent it flying among the trees. The ruffian, recovering himself, leaped at Blake like a tiger. One, two—one, two, came Blake's fists, crashing in the brutal face; but he was, of course, no match for the burly footpad. A heavy fist crashed between his eyes, and he fell half-stunned in the grass.

Down upon him went the ruffian, raining savage blows. D'Arcy clutched at him and strove to drag him off. Leaving Blake for a moment, the footpad dealt him a stunning blow, which sent him headlong into the bushes. Then he recommenced on Blake.

"Hallo! Hallo!"

Two running figures came in sight far down the path.

"Help!" yelled Blake.

Figgins and Kerr needed only a single glance to show them what was the matter. Right on they came at full speed, and almost before the gipsy realised that they were coming, they were upon him. They gripped him and dragged him off Blake, and he went down under them, and they jumped on him.

He struggled fiercely, but they had him at a disadvantage, and they pinned him down; and Blake, though dazed and hurt, was quickly on his feet and coming to their help. And Arthur Augustus extricated himself from the bushes and came to lend a hand. Under the four juniors the gipsy was helpless. They did not spare him, and each attempt to free himself brought him a dose of pomelling that at last quieted him. He lay helpless under his captors, a stream of savage curses flowing from his lips.

"Here, shut up, you pig!" said Figgins. "Stick something into his beastly mouth, Kerr!"

Kerr dragged the coloured neckerchief from the ruffian's neck, and rammed it into his mouth, driving it well in with his fist. The gipsy cussed and choked into silence. Then he lay almost quiescent under the quartette, only his black eyes burning with rage, like the eyes of a captured rat.

"You beauty!" said Jack Blake, rubbing his forehead where the ruffian's fist had struck him. "I shouldn't wonder if I got a beautiful pair of black eyes. What shall we do with the beast, chaps?"

"Take him into Rylcombe, and shove him into the police-station," said Figgins promptly. "I've seen this beast before, and he's a rotten bad lot. He's a rotten thief, and the gipsies have kicked him out. His name's Barengro. He's been in prison before, and the sooner he goes there the better. There's enough of us to take him to Rylcombe."

"That's a jolly good idea. If he won't go quietly we'll frog's-march him," said Blake. "Are you coming quietly, chappy?"

The gipsy scowled like a demon. They dragged him to his feet. He began to struggle fiercely, but they hung upon him like limpets, and he could not shake himself loose. Blake twisted his collar till he was almost throttled, and he gave in.

"Now, forward!" said Blake. "March!"

They moved forward. Just at this time Fatty Wynn came



Crash! A stone, whizzing from the darkness, crashed upon the lantern in Blake's hand and dashed it from his grip to the ground. (See page 9.)

puffing up. He grinned and took a hand in the proceedings. With five guardians the gipsy certainly hadn't much chance of getting loose. But his black eyes were rolling like those of a wild animal, watchful for a chance.

"March!" said Blake, prodding him with a pin; and the ruffian gurgled and moved forward. "Quicker, my boy! You've done us out of a run, but we'll give you one free, gratis, and for nothing. And we shall catch cold if we hang about. Get along, do!"

They bundled him along. Whenever he tried to struggle Blake twisted his collar and half-throttled him. The five juniors were in high good-humour now. They expected to make a sensation when they marched their prisoner into the village.

"You can give Figgy his cap back, Adolphus," said Blake. "He deserves it for chipping in like that. We were going to keep it, and stick it up in our study as a trophy, Figgy."

"That you weren't," said Figgy promptly. "I should have had it back in a few more minutes."

"Rats!" Why, you were dropping right out of the race."
 "Nothing of the sort. I was gaining every second."
 "Pooh!" said Blake loftily. "You're dreaming, Figgy. You couldn't have caught us in a month of Sundays. You were simply not in it."

"Not in it! Wasn't I!" exclaimed Figgins wrathfully. "Why, I'd have had you in another minute. You had no chance. Yah, School House cads; you can't run for toffee!"

"Who can't run?" demanded Blake, looking warlike. "You can't, except when a New House chap is chasing you to give you a licking; then, I admit, you put on the pace a bit."

"That's all rot, Figgy, and you know it! If you're looking for trouble, you New House wasters, you won't have to look far."

Blake and Figgins were both getting wrathful, and they almost forgot their prisoner. The gipsy was not slow to take advantage of the dispute. Blake had released him, and Figgy's hold had relaxed as he glared defiance at the School House chief. With a sudden, desperate effort Barengro broke loose, and bounded away into the wood. Blake clutched at him too late.

"After him!" yelled Blake. The five juniors dashed among the trees, but the gipsy disappeared almost in the twinkling of an eye. Pursuit was hopeless. They came back into the path, looking rather foolish.

"The bouncer's gone!" said Blake crossly. "All your fault, Figgy."

"All your fault, you mean, ass!"
 "What did you want to start quarrelling for while we had that brute to look after?"

"Why, it was you started it. Anyway, he's gone now. Look here, Blake, if you think you can get away from me, I'll give you a run back to the school."

NEXT SATURDAY:

"DR. SPECS,"
 A Tale of Specie, the Twins & Co., AND
 by H. Clarke Howk.

"UNDER THE ENGLISH CHANNEL,"

A Stirring Tale
 By Ernest Bennett

IN "PLUCK" 12.

"Right you are," said Blake promptly. "Mind, Aubrey is counted out. It's me you've got to catch."

"That's agreed. One minute start; so off with you." Blake started off with D'Arcy by his side. The disdainful manner in which he had been left out of the contest rather nettled Arthur Augustus, and he was determined to show that he could run. But Blake, as he heard Figgins & Co. whooping on his track, put his best foot foremost, and shot ahead. Figgins & Co. soon overtook D'Arcy, and Figgy gave him a gentle shove in passing, which laid him in a respectful attitude in the midst of a thicket. Then the New House trio fore on in the track of Blake.

CHAPTER 2. Missing!

BLAKE dashed in at the gates of St. Jim's. He flew across the quadrangle, and darted into the School House. He had made a lightning run of it, and now he rubbed himself down and changed his clothes in record time. Then he put his head into Study No. 6 and called to Herries and Digby, and the three strolled down to the gates together.

When Figgins & Co. arrived, hot and dusty and perspiring, there was Blake awaiting them at the gates, cool and clean, in a nice Eton suit, with a sweet smile on his face.

"Hallo, you dusty rats!" exclaimed Blake cheerfully. "Where have you been all this time? Have you been walking or crawling?"

Figgins glared at the cool junior wrathfully. Blake had had the advantage of being in fannels, but he had really made a record run, and the New House juniors had certainly been "not in it."

"Perhaps they stopped to take a rest," remarked Herries. "Figgy looks tired."

"And Fatty Wynn looks as if he was going to melt," observed Digby sympathetically. "Poor old Fatty! Why don't you try the simple life, Fatty, and not eat more than twelve or fourteen meals a day?"

"Oh, let 'em cackle!" said Figgins. "Anyway, there's one of your kids still in the wood. I left him in a thicket, and you had better go and collect him."

"And the New House trio marched off to their own house. "Good-bye, Figgy!" said Blake. "When you want a run again, let me know, and I'll give you one. Now go and have a wash, old dear."

"But when Figgins & Co. were gone Blake looked rather anxious.

"I hope D'Arcy will come in all right," he said. "He doesn't know the wood much, and when I left him behind I had just taken a short cut through it, and he was some distance from the footpath. I hope he'll get back in time for calling over."

"Let's go down the road and meet him," suggested Digby. "That's a good idea. Come on!"

They sauntered down the road towards Rylcombe. They came to the spot where the footpath turned off into the wood, but there was no sign of Arthur Augustus. Blake looked at his watch and whistled.

"I say, it's calling over at the school. Where can the bouncer be? He can't have gone back another way, can he? What's become of him?"

"He may have come out of the wood at a different point, if he lost his way and wandered about," Herries suggested. "He may be back at St. Jim's now."

"We'd better go and see. It's too dark to start hunting in the wood."

They sprang pretty quickly back to the school. The gates were closed, and Blake had to ring up Taggles, the porter. The countenance of Taggles was very foreboding as he let the juniors in.

"You'll catch it, lot!" he said, shaking his head. "Calling hover 'as been finished ten minutes ago, young gens."

"Can't be helped!" said Blake. They marched into the School House, and the first person they met was Kildare, head of the School House, and captain of all St. Jim's. Kildare stopped them.

"Where have you been? What do you mean by coming in late for call-over?" he asked, frowning.

"We've been looking for a lost donkey!" said Blake cheerfully.

The captain of St. Jim's made a motion with his hand which Blake anticipated. He jumped out of Kildare's reach.

"It's a fact!" he exclaimed. "I suppose Adolphus has come in?"

"Adolphus! Do you mean D'Arcy?"

"That's the very identical individual I do mean."

"He has not come in."

Blake's face fell.

"Not come in, Kildare?" he exclaimed, in dismay. "Are you sure?"

"Of course. There were four missing at call-over—D'Arcy and you three. I imagined, of course, that you had him with you, as you are always together."

Blake explained how he had parted company with D'Arcy. The captain of St. Jim's looked very grave.

"Then the lad is lost in the wood," he said. "He certainly has not returned to the school. He would never find his way out of the wood after dark if he had left the footpath. He must be still there."

The chums were silent with dismay. Although they were never tired of "crying" the swell of the School House, they liked him well enough, and the thought of his passing the cold night in the wood was most disturbing.

Kildare was looking worried, too. He had had a cane ready for the chums when they came in, but he did not think of that now. The matter was serious.

"Poor old Gussy!" exclaimed Blake at last. "He'll have a cold time of it. Do you think the doctor would let us go and hunt for him, Kildare?"

"He will certainly be searched for," said Kildare drily; "but I don't suppose any of the juniors will be asked to assist. I must go and speak to the Head."

Kildare turned away. It was at that moment that a thought came into Digby's mind which made him change colour. Blake had told his chums all about the adventure with the gipsy.

"I say, Blake," said Digby nervously, "it isn't possible, is it, that—that Barenegro—"

Blake turned pale. In the excitement of the race with Figgins he had given little thought to the gipsy. He imagined that Barenegro had cleared out of the vicinity as quickly as possible, in case the police should be set on his track. He had not yet thought of a possible connection between the ruffian and the absence of Arthur Augustus.

"My hat!" he exclaimed. "Kildare—I say, Kildare!"

He ran after the captain of St. Jim's. Kildare looked back inquiringly. Blake blurted out hastily the story of the adventure in the wood. Kildare's face grew longer as he listened.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "It is quite possible that the brute may have hung about and found D'Arcy alone, and—!" He broke off. "Come with me to the Head, Blake."

He hurried Blake off to Dr. Holmes's study. The doctor's face grew as anxious as Kildare's as he listened to Blake's account.

"D'Arcy must be searched for immediately!" he said. "Please call Mr. Kidd. I will telephone to the police-station in Rylcombe and warn them to look for this ruffian Barenegro."

The Head promptly rang up Rylcombe Police-station. He had finished a concise talk with the inspector there, when Mr. Kidd came into the study. The Head rang off. In a few words he explained the matter to Mr. Kidd. The master of the School House showed by his look that he shared the Head's anxiety.

"I have heard of this Barenegro before," he said. "He bears a bad reputation in the neighbourhood of Castlewood. He has been cast out by the gipsies, and seems to live by poaching and any rascality that comes his way. He has been in prison in Rylcombe. I believe he is capable of anything."

"You will take some of the senior boys, Mr. Kidd, and search for the lad," said Dr. Holmes. "You had better take Blake, too, to point out where he left D'Arcy."

"Hadm't Figgins better come, too, sir?" suggested Blake. "He saw D'Arcy last."

"Certainly, take Figgins, Mr. Kidd!"

In a couple of minutes—for Mr. Kidd was swift—the search-party were ready. Figgins, called out of the New House, was glad to go. Monteith, the head prefect of the New House, came with him to join Mr. Kidd and Kildare. Monteith was not particularly anxious about the fate of Arthur Augustus, whom he rather disliked as being a chum of Jack Blake, the prefect's special aversion; but for appearance sake he felt that he had better show some concern. The five seekers passed out of the school gates and hurried down the road.

"This is beastly, Blake!" muttered Figgins. "I shall be awfully sorry if anything has happened to poor old Gussy."

"It's my fault!" said Blake miserably. "I oughtn't to have left him in the wood. I forgot all about that brute of a footpad. It was my fault!"

"No, it wasn't," said Figgins stoutly. "You couldn't guess he'd lose his way. Hang it! I wish I hadn't shoved him into that bush now. But it can't be helped. I dare say we shall find him all right."

They crossed the stile to the footpath. There they lighted their lanterns. Mr. Kidd had an electric lamp, and Kildare

and Monteith had acetylene bicycle-lamps, so there was plenty of light. They passed along the footpath, calling loudly to D'Arcy.

Fierce and grim was the wood in the black shadows of night. The shouts of the searchers echoed and re-echoed among the dark trees.

But no reply came to their shouting. Only the echoing of their own voices came booming back from the gloomy aisles of the wood.

They followed the track Blake had taken in his run. They reached the spot where he remembered D'Arcy had fallen behind. Soon afterwards they came to the bush in which D'Arcy had tumbled from Figgins's push when the New House juniors overtook him in the race.

"And that was the last you saw of him?" asked Mr Kidd.

"Yes, sir," said Figgins, with downcast eyes. "If I had thought—"
"You were not to blame," said the housemaster, kindly enough.

They hunted for traces of D'Arcy. The lights gleamed under the shadowy trees. Searching for footprints was almost hopeless. The grass was trampled here and there, but the tracks were confused and indistinct.

The search had lasted an hour. It was extended, the searchers separating to cover more ground. Blake went with Kildare, who was flashing his light on all sides. Suddenly the junior uttered an exclamation:

"Look here, Kildare!"

He was pointing to the ground. Kildare turned his light full upon the spot. It was a clear space, and there had been a puddle there when it had rained last. The soil was still soft and spongy, and there was a clearly-defined footprint in the soft soil.

"You think D'Arcy made that track, Blake?"

"Certain!" said Blake emphatically. "He wears awfully little shoes, you know. His feet are much smaller than any others in the Fourth Form. I'd know that track anywhere."

Kildare whistled, and the others soon joined him. He pointed out Blake's discovery, and the party took up the trail from that spot. The next discovery was made by Figgins. In another soft spot were the clear prints of two pairs of feet.

D'Arcy's tracks were easily recognised. The others were large and clumsy, and were evidently made by large and ill-formed boots. Blake and Figgins looked at one another. The same thought came to both of them at once.

"Barengro!"

"You think those tracks were made by the footpad?" asked Mr. Kidd quietly.

"Well, they look like it, sir," said Blake. "Of course, we can't be certain."

"Whoever it is," said Monteith, "D'Arcy appears to have been walking by his side. That does not look as if he had been hurt."

"Quite so," assented the housemaster. "This is quite half a mile from the spot where Figgins saw D'Arcy last. He must have walked here."

"Perhaps the other tracks belong to someone who was guiding him out of the wood, sir."

"But they are not leading out of the wood," said Blake quickly. "They are pointing towards the thickest part of it. Whoever the chap was, he was taking D'Arcy right into the heart of the wood."

This was conclusive. It seemed to all there that Barengro had fallen in with the boy, and taken him away into the depths of the wood. For what purpose? Surely he could not have intended to do him injury? Yet why had he taken the trouble to remove him at all?

"Let us search on!" said Mr. Kidd abruptly.

They searched on, but it was in vain. Another hour glided by, but not a single trace was discovered of D'Arcy. It was evidently useless to prolong the search. He was not within sound of their shouting, and they had covered every path and track in the wood. Where could he be?

With heavy hearts the searchers turned back to the school. They had a faint hope that during their absence D'Arcy might have turned up there. But when they arrived that hope—such as it was—was dispelled. Nothing had been seen of the missing boy.

There was little sleep that night for the chums of Study No. 6, or for Figgins & Co. over in the New House. Their hearts were heavy with vague fears and forebodings. What had become of D'Arcy?

CHAPTER 3: Kidnapped.

ST. JIM'S was in a state of suppressed excitement the next morning. The whole school knew now that D'Arcy was missing, and wild speculation was rife as to what had become of him.

During the morning Inspector Skeet came over from Rylcombe to see the Head, and many curious eyes watched his red face and portly form crossing the quadrangle. The inspector brought little news. The police had searched the wood, aided by a number of villagers whose interest was excited, but they had found nothing but D'Arcy's cap. This was picked up in a village lad in the densest part of the wood. Of the boy himself nothing had been seen. Only one thing was certain, and that was that he was no longer in the wood.

Dr. Holmes's face was dark with anxiety. He had hardly slept during the night, and through the morning he had waited in keen anxiety for news of the missing lad. The inspector's report was a bitter disappointment.

"It is certain that he is not in the wood, sir," declared the portly inspector. "I had some expectation of learning here that he had turned up at last."

"Certainly not," said the doctor. "We have heard nothing of him."

"It is very strange," said the inspector, shaking his head solemnly. "Very strange indeed."

"Have you discovered anything of the gipsy?"

"He has not been seen, sir. If found, he will be arrested on a charge of attempted robbery. Nothing has been seen of him as yet."

"Then does it not look as if he had kidnapped the boy?" asked Mr. Kidd, who was present at the interview.

The inspector gave a fat smile.

"My dear sir, kidnapping is entirely out of date!" he exclaimed. "I assure you that nothing of the kind has occurred. If you wish to have my candid opinion, gentlemen, it is that this unfortunate boy has wandered away."

"How could he wander away?" asked the housemaster, a little tartly. "You say he is not in the wood. Once out of it, he would know his way back to St. James's."

"And he has certainly not returned," said the doctor.

"He may have a reason for that, gentlemen."

"You mean that he may be staying away of his own accord?"

"Yes. Boys have run away from school before now."

"Absurd! D'Arcy was not in the least likely to do anything of the kind."

"Oh, very well, sir!" said the inspector, swelling with indignation. He was not used to hearing the opinions of George Henry Skeet characterised as absurd. "Very well, sir!"

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Kidd. "But the idea cannot be entertained for a moment. You agree with me, Dr. Holmes?"

"Certainly, D'Arcy has been prevented by force from returning to the school."

"It seems to me clear," continued the housemaster. "His cap was found in the densest part of the wood. That looks as if the gipsy had taken him there, to keep him secure until after dark, when he would be able to take him away unseen. His motive, in the first place, was spite against the boy, but he certainly had another object."

"And that object?" inquired the inspector, with a superior smile.

"Probably to extort money for the release of the boy," said Mr. Kidd instantly. "That, at least, is my idea. D'Arcy's people are very rich, and he had an unusual amount of pocket-money for a schoolboy. Barengro may know something of this, hence his seizing the opportunity which fell in his way last night."

"Quite a romance," said Inspector Skeet, with ponderous sarcasm. "But it is my belief that Barengro has cleared out to avoid being arrested for attempted robbery, and that he had nothing whatever to do with Master D'Arcy being missing."

The inspector delivered this opinion with due solemnity, and the doctor was somewhat impressed. But Mr. Kidd, who had a very keen idea that the portly inspector was a lunatic, wasn't impressed in the least.

The conference was interrupted just then by a letter being brought in to the doctor. It was marked "Urgent," and addressed to "Dr. Holmes, St. James's Collidge, near Rylcombe." It had just been delivered by the local post-man.

The doctor looked at the letter in amazement. The envelope was rough and coarse and dirty, and the writing a mere scrawl, as bad as the spelling. The postmark was the local one of Rylcombe.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," said the doctor,

"DAILY MAIL."

NEXT SATURDAY: "DR. SPEGS,"
A Tale of Spess, the Teins & Co., AND
By H. Clarke Hook.

"UNDER THE ENGLISH CHANNEL,"
A Stirring Tale,
By Ernest Brindle.

IN "PLUCK" ID.

He opened the letter. A look of blank amazement came over his face as he glanced at the contents.

"Dear me! This refers to the missing boy, D'Arcy."

Inspector Skeet pricked up his ears, and Mr. Kidd looked interested. The doctor passed the letter to them, and they read it together. It was a villainous scrawl upon a dirty half-sheet of paper.

"Sir,—Your boy Darcy is in my hands. He is safe, so far, and will not be hurt if you agree to my terms. Are you willing to pay fifty pounds for him? If you are not, you will never see him again."

"That was all, and there was no signature."

"That is confirmation of your theory, Mr. Kidd," said the doctor quietly. "There is no doubt now that D'Arcy has been kidnapped with the object of extorting money."

Inspector Skeet looked decidedly crestfallen.

"We have no proof that this letter was written by the gipsy Barenegro, though," he said.

"There cannot be much doubt upon that point," replied Mr. Kidd. "D'Arcy is evidently in that ruffian's hands. You will not comply with this impudent demand, sir?"

"Certainly not," said the doctor. "The matter is in Mr. Skeet's hands, and you will retain that letter, inspector. Whether the rascal is Barenegro or not, D'Arcy is undoubtedly in the hands of a kidnapper, who must be discovered as quickly as possible."

"We shall leave no stone unturned, sir," declared the inspector, putting the letter in his pocket-book and rising to his feet. "I expect to have news for you very soon."

And Mr. Skeet took his leave.

"I cannot say I have much faith in Mr. Skeet," said the housemaster, when the door closed behind the inspector.

"He was sure there was no kidnapping, and now he has no idea where to look for the rascal. I do not believe they will find D'Arcy."

The doctor looked worried.

"I would rather pay the money than have the boy harmed," he exclaimed. "But the wretch does not say in his letter how the money is to be paid, nor have we any guarantee that he will release D'Arcy on receiving it."

"That is the difficulty. We shall hear from him again, of course. This letter is simply to prepare you for paying the ransom. It looks as if he feels certain that the police will never be able to unearth him."

"I shall give Mr. Skeet a little longer before I communicate with the boy's parents," said the doctor. "It is a great comfort to know that he is as yet unharmed. The school had better be informed of that, Mr. Kidd. I understand that his friends in Study No. 6 are very anxious about him."

"Certainly, sir."

And the housemaster left the doctor's study, and the announcement was made in the School House that news had been received of D'Arcy; that he was well, but would not yet return to St. Jim's. The boys, naturally, were intensely curious.

But the masters did not deem it wise to allow the story of the kidnapping to be known. There would be time for that when D'Arcy was safe and sound back at the school. Already all sorts of rumours and suspicions were afloat, but that could not be helped.

Mr. Kidd went directly to Kildare's study. He had great confidence in the captain of St. Jim's, and he had resolved to take him into his confidence. Kildare listened quietly to what the housemaster had to tell him of the letter.

"Undoubtedly it was from Barenegro," he said.

"So I believe. Now, Kildare, Inspector Skeet means well, but I have little faith in him. If we want to find D'Arcy we must do it ourselves. Are you willing to help me in this?"

"Willing and quite ready, sir."

"Good! The gipsy evidently has the boy hidden in some place in the neighbourhood. That letter was posted this morning in Rycombe, by the postmark. We both know this district well, and we ought to be able to find where the scoundrel is lurking. Don't you think so?"

"We can try, sir."

The afternoon's post brought a second letter to Dr. Holmes. It was like the first in appearance; but the contents were more to the point.

"Are you going to pay the fifty? If you are, chalk a white cross on the dead oak in Rycombe Wood. Then I will rite again."

Head and housemaster consulted over the letter, which was then sent to Inspector Skeet. The fat inspector came up to St. Jim's in high good-humour.

"I was waiting for something like this," he declared. "Now we will have him, sir. He'll have to come to see whether the mark is made on the tree, and then we'll nab him."

"He will be on his guard, I suppose, for a trap."

"Oh, we'll have him, never fear!"

"If he escapes you, may he not in revenge do the poor boy some injury?" said the doctor, with many misgivings.

"He wouldn't dare," said Mr. Skeet confidently; "and, besides, he won't escape. We shall take good care of that." And off went the inspector to lay his trap. Mr. Kidd had read the letter very thoughtfully, and he consulted with Kildare.

"What has struck you about that letter, Kildare?" he asked.

"That the dead oak is very near the ruins of the old castle, sir," replied the captain of St. Jim's instantly.

The housemaster gave a nod.

"Yes, and that struck me, Kildare. That is a very likely place for the ruffian to keep his prisoner in."

"I don't know the ruins very well, sir; but I believe there are a good many recesses there where a prisoner might be kept."

"Exactly; and I think you and I, Kildare, could not spend an hour better than in searching the ruined castle. I know the ruins very well." Mr. Kidd coloured slightly as he spoke. There was an unpleasant episode in his life connected with the ruined castle, but of that Kildare knew nothing. "We may as well go at once," he added.

Meanwhile, an important council of war was being held in Study No. 6.

CHAPTER 4. The Expedition.

IN the famous apartment where the chums of the School House lived and moved and had their being an unusual gloom reigned.

Study No. 6 was generally about the noisiest and jolliest in the School House at St. Jim's, and more than once a wrathful prefect had thumped at the door with the warning that if the inmates did not keep quieter they would be turned out of their quarters and condemned to work in the Form-room like the Third Form youngsters, which warning sometimes kept the chums of Study No. 6 quiet for five or six minutes at a time.

But now the most highly-strung prefect in the School House had no fault to find with Study No. 6. The study was quiet—very quiet—and a shade of gloom hung over it. The faces of the three chums were long and dismal.

They had chipped D'Arcy freely enough when he was with them. His eyeglass, his draw and his lip, his patent-leather shoes and fancy waistcoats had formed inexhaustible topics for their jokes. But now that he was gone all his little weaknesses were forgotten. They remembered only that he was a true chum, and that he was missing.

"Poor old Gussy!" said Blake. Blake was sitting on the table. He hadn't touched his preparation; he was in no mood for work. "Poor old Adolphus! I'd give—I'd give my new cricket-bat to have him back here safe and sound. He's a jolly good sct."

"So he is," agreed Herries. "If that brute Barenegro does him any damage, we'll make him smart for it somehow."

"We'll serag him!" said Digby. "What a pity we let the house get away!"

"That was all Figgins' fault!" exclaimed Blake. "He would quarrel, wouldn't he? If he'd only been as reasonable and peaceable as I was— Look here, Dig, this isn't a time for grinning! The question is, what's going to be done?"

"I suppose there's no doubt Barenegro's got him?" observed Digby.

"None at all," Blake promptly declared. "This is how the case stands. Somebody has kidnapped him. That's as clear as daylight, as he has not come back, and as we found those hoof-tracks next to his in the wood. That somebody is Barenegro, the gipsy. He had a motive, and he was in the wood at the time."

"It seems clear enough. But his motive? He might have laid into Gussy with his cudgel, but kidnapping him is another matter."

"He didn't do it for nothing; and his only possible object must have been to extort money for setting him free—sort of holding him to ransom, you know. You see, D'Arcy is such a swell, and everybody knows his people are rich. Then he would have given that brute a sovereign if I hadn't stopped him. Precious few Lower Form kids have sovereigns to give away. That may have put the idea into Barenegro's head."

"But if Barenegro wants money for releasing him, he'll have to write to the doctor."

"Oh, of course."

"Well, he hasn't done so."

"How do you know? The doctor would send the letter to old Skeet, but he wouldn't be likely to take the junior Forms into his confidence over the matter."

"I suppose not," said Digby, after some reflection. "He

may have had a message from the gipsy, and said nothing about it."

"My dear kid, it's as plain as a pikestaff. Mr. Kidd announced to-day that D'Arcy was safe, and would return later. We know that something must have been heard. What was it? If it wa'n't a message from Barengro, I'll eat my hat!"

"I think you're about right, Blake," said Herries. "But what are we going to do? The doctor won't tell us anything, and we ain't allowed to search for D'Arcy."

"This is my opinion," said Blake. "If we want D'Arcy found, we've got to find him. We are the chaps who can do it. Masters and seniors are all very well in their way, but when it comes to a difficult job it requires three chaps about our size."

Herries and Digby nodded assent. "Now, Barengro's got him, and is holding him to ransom," continued Blake. "We're going to nip his game in the bud by rescuing D'Arcy."

"But how are we going to do it?"

"That's a mere detail," replied Blake loftily. "We're agreed about what we're going to do, that's the main point. I've got an idea in my head, too. Listen to your Uncle Blake. Barengro shoved D'Arcy into the thickest part of the wood, where we found those tracks. Of course, that was to hide till after dark, when he marched him off somewhere. The question is, where? Now, although he didn't leave the wood till after dark, I fancy he'd have found it hard to march D'Arcy off very far without the poor kid being able to get away or call to somebody or other for help. In other words, my infants, he had a hiding-place for Gussy not so very far away. Guess where it is?"

"A hollow tree, perhaps," suggested Herries.

"Rats!"

"A cave," ventured Digby.

"Rats again!"

"Well, out with your idea, if you're so beastly clever!" said Herries.

"Well, you know that Castle Hill is just on the other side of the wood, and that the ruined castle is there, within easy reach," said Blake.

"Jolly cold place this weather!" said Digby, with a shiver. "But the ruins are quite open, Blake, and if the gipsy haven't there he'd be seen."

"I haven't finished yet. There are vaults under the old castle, and nobody ever goes into them. There may be secret passages, and so on, for all we know. Just the place for Barengro. He's had to hide from the police more than once, you see, and the ruins would just suit him, and by hanging about there he may have found out some giddy secret chamber, or something."

"There may be something in it," said Herries thoughtfully. "Anyway, we may as well go and search the old castle. I suppose that's your idea?"

"That's it; only it's out of bounds, and the doctor certainly wouldn't allow us to go there and risk meeting that ruffian. But duty calls, my infants, so there's no alternative but to take French leave."

"That means that we shall have to go after lights are out."

"Precisely. Just as I did that time when Figgy and I stalked Ratchiff there, and snowballed him," said Blake, grinning at the recollection.

"Well, it will be cold work, and jolly risky if the gipsy's there," said Herries; "but I don't mind that, for one, if we can do poor old Adolphus any good."

"Then it's settled; but keep it dark."

The chums carefully kept it dark. They knew that if a hint of their intention got out their expedition would speedily be nipped in the bud; and they were determined that they would find their lost chum.

Not a word was said outside Study No. 6; but they made their preparations, and did not forget to arm themselves for a possible fray.

"If we meet Barengro," said Blake, "there will be a rumpus. Even if he doesn't go for us, we shall be bound to go for him, so there's certain to be a row. Cricket-stumps are first-rate things to rap a chap's napper. We mustn't forget to take them."

They did not forget. Three stumps were smuggled into the dormitory and hidden in their beds ready. The trio looked as innocent as lambs when they went up to bed with the Fourth. Kildare came to see lights out, and saw nothing suspicious.

The captain of St. Jim's was looking very grave. During the afternoon he and Mr. Kidd had paid a visit to the ruined castle, and searched it well. They discovered nothing. They explored the ruins and the vaults beneath.

No trace was discovered of the gipsy, and they were forced to the conclusion that the old castle was not the hiding-place of Barengro and his prisoner.

They had not the least suspicion that the same idea had come to Study No. 6, and that the chums were planning a similar expedition. Neither had Blake any idea of where the housemaster and the captain had been.

The door of the dormitory closed. Blake and his chums did not move. They intended to allow the rest of the dormitory to fall asleep before rising; but the juniors, deeply interested in the disappearance of D'Arcy, were in no hurry to go to sleep. They remained awake talking for a long time.

The school clock had boomed out half-past ten before silence was unbroken in the dormitory. Shortly afterwards Blake stepped quietly out of bed. A whisper roused out Herries and Digby. It was a cold night, and they shivered as they rose. But there was no hesitation. The matter was serious.

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IN "PLUCK," P.

They dressed quickly. There was a certain window in the School House by which Blake had left the house before on a certain occasion. The chums went downstairs as quietly as they could, and reached that window.

They had donned their overcoats, and the cricket-stumps were hidden under them. Blake opened the window, and they dropped out one by one. Then it was closed, but it had to be left unfastened. At a well-known spot they climbed the ivy, and dropped over the wall into the Rylcombe Road.

It was a dark, cold night. The wind was sharp, and they muffled themselves up against it as they set out down the road. They said little as they proceeded. They knew that there was danger in their expedition, and though it did not make them hesitate, it caused them to be unusually grave.

Dark and gloomy was the wood as they entered it. From the grim shadows they faced the swarthy face of the gipsy looking out at them, and the stumps were now taken out and gripped in their right hands.

There was no sound in the wood save the rustling of the trees in the wintry wind. They traversed the footpath, and drew near to the further border of the wood. Suddenly Blake halted.

"Stop!" he whispered. "Did you hear anything?"

"Yes," said Dig, between his chattering teeth. "There's somebody in the trees."

"I heard 'em," murmured Herries.

The three boys stood still and silent in the darkness, their hearts beating hard and straining their ears to listen. There was certainly a sound, as of someone moving, among the thickets beside the footpath, at a short distance ahead. It ceased abruptly, and silence reigned.

"Somebody's there," said Blake, in the faintest of whispers. "Somebody skulking about the end of the path, near the dead oak. We can't go on to the castle without passing him."

"There's more than one," murmured Dig. "Hark!"

They listened again. The keen wind was blowing towards them, and it bore to them a faint sound of whispering. They could not distinguish the voices, but they felt sure upon one point—that Barenegro was not one of the speakers. That discovery relieved them somewhat.

"Who can they be?" Blake muttered, in perplexity. "What can they want, skulking round here on such a cold night? We've got to get on, you know."

"We may be able to slip past in the dark," suggested Herries. "If we go round through the wood we shall lose time, and, besides, we shall make a noise brushing through, and if Barenegro happens to be around—"

"Right!" said Blake. "Come on; but be quiet!"

They stole on tiptoe up the path. The whispering voices grew clearer as they proceeded.

"You're right, Simms. It looks as if the brute can't be coming to-night."

Blake started, and nudged his companions.

"Skeet!" he murmured.

He knew the voice. It was Inspector Skeet, of Rylcombe, who was ambushed by the dead oak at the end of the footpath. What on earth was he doing there? The chums knew nothing, of course, of the kidnapper's letter to the doctor, or of the plan the inspector had based upon it.

"But we must stick it out, Simms," went on the whisper.

"If the scoundrel comes, we must nab him. He'll find me a match for him."

"He ain't likely to come at this time of night, though, sir."

"I don't know. He might not dare to come in daylight. Anyway, he made the condition that if Dr. Holmes agreed to pay five ransons for the boy, he was to make the chalk-mark on the dead tree, and so he must come some time to see if it is here. He hasn't come yet."

"Maybe he guesses we're watching."

"Not likely. But shut up now."

Dead silence. The whispered words had enlightened the chums upon many points. They had a very far idea now of how matters stood. The dead oak stood beside the path just where it ended, at the border of the wood on the slope of Castlehill. The two ambushed men were evidently watching the path. The chums were not likely to pass undiscovered. They retreated the way they had come, to discuss the matter.

"It's Skeet and a policeman," said Blake, in a low voice. "They're watching for the kidnapper. You heard what they said. The rascal has asked a ransom for D'Arcy, just as we suspected. He's coming some time to see if there's a chalk-mark on the dead oak. If we go past, Skeet will pounce on us, thinking we're the kidnappers. Nobody uses this path of a night, you know."

"That will be a show-up for us," said Herries. "Skeet doesn't like us, and he'd tell the doctor like a bird."

"Certain. Besides, we don't want to spoil the trap. Any row here would warn Barenegro off, if he's coming.

Not that I believe for a moment that Skeet has the least chance of catching him. He's too big a donkey to catch a mouse."

"But he'll have to come some time, if—"

"He'll discover that the place is watched. Then he won't come. The real trouble is, that when he's disappointed about getting the money, he may hurt D'Arcy. He's brute enough for anything, I believe. All the more reason why we should find the poor chap. Hallo! What's that thundering row?"

There was a sudden disturbance of the silence of the wood. It sounded like a man falling and crashing through a thicket, and it came from within the wood some little distance from the path. A sharp cry, as of pain, followed, and a rustling of twigs. What could it mean?

The chums heard Inspector Skeet and his companion dash through the wood towards the sound. A dark figure came out of the trees quite near the boys, and hurried to the dead oak, now deserted by the watchers. A match flared out, and the stranger hurriedly scanned the riven trunk. Then a muttered oath was heard as the match flickered out. But in that moment the boys had recognised Barenegro!

The gipsy lingered only a few seconds. Then he strode away swiftly from the spot, in the direction of the ruined castle on the hill. Skeet and his companion came blundering back through the wood. They had caught the glimmer of light as the match flared out, and knew how they had been tricked.

"Did you see him, Simms? Collar him!"

"He ain't here, sir."

"What do you mean by letting him escape? You utter fool!"

"But I didn't see nobody, sir."

"Idiot! You saw the match lighted. Why didn't you rush upon him and seize him at once!" demanded the inspector heatedly.

"Well, if it comes to that, sir, why didn't you?"

"Don't be insolent, Simms. You are an utter fool!"

"I don't see—"

"A cross, stupid idiot," snarled Mr. Skeet; "letting the scoundrel slip through your fingers like that! You ought to be in a lunatic asylum!"

Mr. Skeet was angry, and not in a mood to be reasonable. As a matter of fact, he had been to blame, and he knew it. All was clear enough to him now that it was too late. He had heard the fall and the cry, and had jumped to the conclusion that the kidnapper was at his mercy. He had left his post in the haste of the moment. As a matter of fact, the fall, the cry, were mere trickery; instead of finding a man who had fallen and hurt himself, he had found nothing. The kidnapper had simply drawn him away from his post, and had then slipped round to the dead oak and looked for the sign by the light of a match. The rascal had either known or suspected that the place was watched, and had cunningly laid his plan accordingly. Now he was gone, and the inspector had had his vigil for nothing. He was cross, and his subordinate reaped the benefit of it.

"Silly ass!" murmured Blake. "He's wild at being fooled, and now he's bullying that poor chap. He ought to be shut up. It's he that's the fool of the two. He's lost the gipsy, and he ought to be punished. Lucky I've got my peashooter with me."

It was dark, but the sound of the inspector's angry voice was a sufficient guide to so deadly a marksman as Blake. Mr. Skeet gave a sudden yelp.

"What's that? How dare you, Simms!"

"I didn't do anything, sir!" exclaimed the constable, in amazement. "What's the matter?"

"You—you must—ow—there it is again! Something hit me. It felt like—like a bullet. Ow, there it is again! Ow!"

The inspector clapped his hands to his fat face. He was amazed and hurt. A sudden thought flashed into his mind.

"It's the kidnapper! He's pelting us. We'll have him yet."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake.

The inspector was petrified for a moment. Then, as he realised that some irreverent person was daring to laugh at him, George Henry Skeet, he puffed with rage, and made a rush in the direction of the sound. The chums bolted into the wood. The crashing of the twigs was clearly audible to Skeet and Simms, and they dashed in pursuit. They had not the slightest doubt that they had to deal with a gang of kidnappers.

"We'll have 'em, sir!" panted Simms.

"After them!" yelled the inspector.

They crashed through the thickets in pursuit. The chums were not laughing now. It would not be a laughing matter for them if they were caught. Blake swung himself into the low branches of a tree, and Herries and Dig followed.

Clinging there in the darkness, still as mice, they saw Skeet and Simms go blundering by. The sounds of flight having ceased, the pursuers lost the track and ran on at random. Inspector Skeet's foot caught in a root, and he went down with a thump. Simms tumbled over his sprawling legs, and came down on his knees, and unfortunately his knees were planted in the inspector's back. Skeet gave a grunt as the wind was knocked out of him.

"This is where we mizzle!" murmured Jack Blake. The chums dropped from the tree. In a few moments they were in the foothold again, and speeding on towards the ruined castle. Before Mr. Skeet had quite recovered his breath the three juniors of St. Jim's had arrived at the old castle.

CHAPTER 5.

A Mistake in the Dark.

ONE out of the shadows of the wood, the night was not so dark. Stars were gleaming in the sky, and a dim light lay upon the massive ruins of the castle. Grim and gaunt looked the shattered walls, the gaping casements, the confused masses of tumbled masonry.

Amid the extensive ruins there were hiding-places for a dozen men, and the chums were very wary as they advanced. They kept the cricket-stumps ready for use. They had seen the gipsy hurry towards the ruins, and it confirmed their suspicion that his lurking-place was there. But as they came on they heard no sound, and saw no sign of the ruffian.

They stopped in the old, flagged hall, now roofless and open to all the winds. In the dim light they stared about them uneasily.

"He must be here somewhere," muttered Blake. "We saw him come, didn't we? Of course, he may have gone right on. But I believe he's got a hiding-place here somewhere."

"Let's search!" said Herries.

They searched through the ruins. Nothing rewarded them. There was no trace of D'Arcy, and neither sight nor sound of the gipsy. They stopped at last at the yawning cavity which gave admittance to the vaults, and hesitated.

"Come on!" said Blake resolutely. "We've got to go through with it. The brute is most likely to sneak into there, if he's hiding here at all."

He lighted his lantern, and led the way, the light in his left hand, the cricket-stump gripped in his right. Herries and Digby followed at his heels.

They passed down the stone steps, crumbling with age, and offering none too secure a foothold, and a cold, damp breath from below smote them and made them shiver. They moved quietly, but the slightest sound seemed strangely, eerily loud in the dead silence.

Black and gloomy were the deserted vaults—black and gloomy and damp, with a chill air as of the tomb. The hearts of the three lads were beating hard. They knew there might be danger ahead, but the gloom and eeriness of their surroundings had more effect upon their nerves than the thought of danger.

The dark arches of the vaults seemed to extend indefinitely in endless succession. The lightest footfall rang in weird echoes. Blake halted suddenly. His nostrils were dilated, his eyes were gleaming.

"You notice it?" he muttered.

They were sniffing. A distinct scent had come to them suddenly—a whiff of tobacco-smoke, of a cheap, strong tobacco. It was proof positive that someone had lately been in the vault. The chums looked at each other in silence for a few moments.

Someone had been in the vault, and the scent of the pipe he had smoked still hung in the heavy atmosphere. He had certainly not left the vault again, and so he must be still there—probably near at hand.

They realised that the sounds they made and the light they carried must betray their presence. Their hands tightened on their weapons. Nothing could be seen in the surrounding gloom. Was the gipsy watching them from some shadowy recess? After a few moments of natural hesitation they went on.

A faint sound came from the darkness, like the scuttling of a rat.

Blake sprang in the direction of it, and caught a momentary glimpse of a shadow darting away. There was the clink of a footfall, and silence.

"He's here," muttered Blake, "and we'll make him tell us where D'Arcy is. Come on, chaps! We're not afraid of the brute!"

"Not much!" said Herries.

They hurried on, with teeth set hard. Crash! A stone, whizzing from the darkness, crashed upon the lantern in Blake's hand, and dashed it from his grip to the ground. The light was instantly extinguished. Blackness wrapped the boys round like a cloak.

Blake gave a startled cry; he could not help it. In the sudden darkness something brushed past him, and he clutched at it wildly. A stunning blow sent him reeling, but with indomitable pluck he leaped forward and made a clutch, and seized upon an invisible form, and was seized in return. There was a fierce struggle in the darkness.

Blake exerted himself to throw his adversary, and by a wrestling trick he succeeded, and the two went down together, Blake on top.

"Got him!" panted Blake. "Help, you chaps—quick! I've got him!"

He gripped his prisoner by the throat, and kept him pinned down.

A low, indistinguishable gurgle came from the helpless one. He struggled furiously, but Blake had him fast.

"Herries! Dig! Strike a light! I've got him!" yelled Blake. "Quick, or he'll throw me off! Get a light and bash the brute! Quick! Lie still, you beast, or I'll crack your head on the floor!"

"Gr-r-rh!" came from his captive.

"Keep still! Quick, chaps!"

A light flared out. Digby had struck a match. The flare showed Blake on top of his prisoner, pinning him down; but the prisoner, unfortunately, was Herries, whom he had seized by mistake in the darkness. Blake stared at his victim in utter amazement.

"Herries!" he gasped. He released his unhappy prisoner as suddenly as if he had all at once become red-hot.

"Herries! My giddy Aunt Matilda! Herries!"

"You silly ass!" howled Herries. "What do you mean by grabbing me by the throat and pitching me over?"

"Well, that's cool! You grabbed me, too."

"I took you for the gipsy."

"I took you for him, too!" growled Blake. "You don't think I did it for fun, do you?"

"You've nearly throttled me!"

"Never mind," said Blake; "it might have been worse."

"I don't see it," said Herries crossly.

"Well, it's lucky Dig struck a match before he started on you with a cricket-stump," Blake remarked. "Don't growl; it's all in the day's work, you know. The trouble is, that while we've been wasting time the gipsy has got away. Of course, it was the gipsy."

"Of course. Is the lantern smashed?"

"To smithereens!" said Blake, examining the lantern in the light of another match struck by Dig. "Can't light it again. What asses we were not to bring another, in case of accidents! We'll bring an extra one next time."

"Then, we shall have to give it up for the night?"

"I'm afraid so. But wait a bit. Let's shout, and if D'Arcy is hidden anywhere about here, he may hear us and yell back, even if he can't get out."

"That's a good idea."

They shouted till the vaults rang and rang again. Echoes rolled back like thunder from the subterranean depths. At intervals they stopped to listen for a reply, but no reply came.

Save when their shouting made the vaults ring with sound, there was a dead silence. Either D'Arcy was not within hearing, or he was unable to reply. Blake's spirits were considerably damped.

After ascertaining that the outcast gipsy haunted the ruins, he had become confirmed in his belief that the missing junior was kept there somewhere. Now he could not help doubting again.

Without a light it was, of course, impossible to continue the search. The chums gave it up, and in a rather gloomy mood made their way back to the upper earth.

"I fancy you were off the track, after all, Blake," Herries remarked, as they set their faces towards the school. "If D'Arcy was there, he ought to have heard us yelling; then he would have yelled back. But if he isn't there, where the dickens can he be?"

"I can't help thinking that he is there," replied Blake. "He might be gagged, you know. Barongro is a brute. We're not going to give in yet. To-morrow's a half, and we'll come again and have a jolly good hunt."

The school clock was booming out midnight when they arrived at St. Jim's. Five minutes later they were in bed in the dormitory; and it seemed to all three of them that they had only just closed their eyes when the rising-bell began to ring the next morning.

NEXT SATURDAY:

"DR. SPECS,"
A Tale of Two of the Tents & Co., AND
By H. CLARKE HOOK.

"UNDER THE ENGLISH CHANNEL,"

A Stirring Tale,
By BERTY BAINBRIDGE.

IN "PLUCK," 1st.

CHAPTER 6.
Blake is Called In.

"**D**EAR me!" said Dr. Holmes, passing his hand across his brow, with a worried look. "This grows worse and worse."

"I was afraid the inspector would blunder," observed Mr. Kidd.

The doctor held a letter in his hand. It was in the same scrawl as the letters he had received the previous day. It ran as follows:

"Sir—Are you going to pay, or ain't you? I knew the rascal would be watched last night. If the same game is tried again you will never see the boy alive. If you want him back, this is what you have got to do. Send a boy to put the money on the steps leading down under the castle. If you send a man, or if you don't send, you will never hear from me again. If the money ain't put there at three o'clock, you won't see Darcy alive again."

"That is an empty threat," said Mr. Kidd. "He would never dare to hurt the boy, though undoubtedly D'Arcy must be having a most uncomfortable time. Ah, here is Mr. Skeet."

The inspector entered, looking a little bit dubious. He knew that he had made a blunder of the affair, though he was not at all inclined to admit it. The doctor handed him the letter. He read it through, and shook his head solemnly.

"Of course, you won't pay the money," he said. "We'll have them soon, sir."

"Them!" said the doctor. "You think there is more than one, then?"

"Certain, sir. There's a whole gang of them. I watched last night with Constable Simms, and they attacked us."

"Did you succeed in making a capture?"

"No, sir," said the inspector, with a blush. "They were too many for us. We wasn't expecting such odds to tackle. We chased them through the wood, but they gave us the slip in the dark. Both of us was pretty well knocked about."

"Did you discover the identity of any of them?"

"No, not for certain; but I think Barenegro, the gipsy, was one. There were four, at least. It's a regular gang of the rascals."

The doctor looked worried. Mr. Kidd's face expressed something like incredulity.

"Well, what is to be done?" asked the housemaster abruptly.

"That's clear enough, sir," said the inspector, tapping the letter on the table. "He won't get away from us a second time. Send someone to pretend to take the money, and I'll have my men on the watch round the ruins."

"And you think he will come to fetch it, and fall into the trap?"

"I'll answer for it, sir."

"He is certain to be on his guard."

"I'll find me a match for him," said the fat inspector confidently.

Mr. Kidd did not look so sure of it.

"There seems to be nothing else to be done," said the doctor; and after some further discussion as to details, the inspector took his leave.

"Now about sending the money, Mr. Kidd," said the doctor. "It is, of course, impossible to comply with the ruffian's demand for a boy to be sent with it."

"I don't know, sir. Nothing could happen to the boy, and Barenegro may not turn up unless his conditions are fulfilled."

"You think, then, that he will be on the watch to see who comes to the rendezvous?"

"I think that is certain."

"But in that case the police will see him."

"I think not. It occurred to me yesterday that the ruffian's hiding-place might be in the old castle. Kildare and I searched the ruins thoroughly. We found nothing, and were compelled to give it up. It has since occurred to me that I have heard stories of secret chambers and passages under the old castle."

"I have heard such stories, but never attached any importance to them."

"There may be truth in them. That would account for this appointment made by the kidnapper. He has some secret way of getting there to take the money. He evidently intends to watch for whoever brings it."

"Then if the police surround the ruins he will see them, Mr. Kidd."

"I think it very probable. It was no use suggesting that to Mr. Skeet, who has a most profound faith in himself—a faith not quite justified, in my opinion," the housemaster remarked drily. "I do not believe there is more than one man in the matter, in spite of the inspector. And I believe he is too cunning ever to be captured by Inspector Skeet."

"But if he escapes again the rascal may wreak his rage

upon the unfortunate boy!" exclaimed the doctor, deeply distressed.

"I hardly think he will dare; but it is, of course, possible if I may make a suggestion—"

"That is what I wish you to do."

"Very well. I should send the money as he demands. If the police make a capture, it will be recovered, and no harm will be done. If they fail, as I am afraid they will fail, the rascal may keep his promise and release D'Arcy; or, at all events, the boy will be safe from injury. In short, carry out the inspector's own plans, but let the money be really there in case of accidents."

"It is a considerable sum to risk, but I would gladly pay twice as much to assure myself of the boy's safety," said Dr. Holmes. "I will take your advice. But we must not lose sight of the fact that, if he gains this sum, the scoundrel is almost certain to keep the boy still a prisoner in the hope of obtaining more."

"Quite possibly; but we shall have time to work in. Now, the question is, whom shall we send? I should suggest Blake, who is cool and courageous, and much attached to the missing boy."

The doctor hesitated.

"It is a terrible responsibility, Mr. Kidd."

"I do not see what harm can come to him, sir. He will not even see the gipsy. Suppose I tell Blake, and let him decide for himself."

"Yes; that will be best."

When the Fourth Form came out of their class-room that morning, Blake received a summons to Mr. Kidd's study.

The disappearance of Arthur Augustus was still the reigning topic at St. Jim's. School House and New House forgot to "row" one another in the common interest it excited.

For once Study No. 6 could meet Figgius & Co. without mutual chipping and defiance, for both parties were equally concerned for Arthur Augustus.

Blake drew a long face when a fag came to tell him that Mr. Kidd wanted him.

"What's the row now?" he exclaimed. "We've been blown up by the Latham-bird for not doing our prep. last evening, so it can't be that. And he can't know anything about that giddy expedition last night."

"It can't be that," said Herries; "or he'd want all three of us."

"I suppose I'd better go. Wish I had an exercise-book about me," sighed Blake.

"Rats! It may not be a licking."

"Oh, no! He may only want me to pat me on the back, and tell me what a good little boy I am," grinned Blake.

"But I have my doubts. But it won't get better for keeping, so here goes."

And he hurried away to the housemaster's quarters in the School House.

"Come in, Blake," said Mr. Kidd, in a tone so genial that Blake's uneasiness vanished at once. It was evident that, whatever the housemaster wanted him for, canings were "off" at present. "Come in. You may sit down."

Blake sat down.

"I want to speak to you, Blake. It is about the missing boy D'Arcy."

"Have you had news, sir?" asked Blake eagerly.

"Yes. I am speaking to you now in confidence, Blake."

"Yes, sir," said Blake rather wonderingly.

"D'Arcy has been taken away by a ruffian, as we suspected, whom we believe to be Barenegro, the gipsy," resumed Mr. Kidd. "This wretch demands a ransom for his release."

Blake smiled to himself. The housemaster was far from guessing that the junior knew almost as much about that as he did himself. Blake, of course, was careful not to betray his knowledge.

"He demands," went on Mr. Kidd, "that the money be taken to the steps leading down into the vaults under the old castle and left there by a boy."

Blake understood now why he had been sent for.

"The money is to be taken, Blake; but only as a bait to catch the kidnapper. There is not, so far as I am aware, any danger in the matter. Would you like to go? If you would rather not, say so plainly, and I will make another arrangement."

"I should be glad to be of use, sir."

"Good! The money has been sent for from the bank in Rylcombe. You will take the packet containing it, and leave it on the steps of the vault. That is all you have to do. Of course, you will then leave the spot immediately. The rest is in the hands of the police."

"Yes, sir."

"You will, of course, mention what I have said to no one."

"Certainly not, sir."

"Then come here at half-past two, Blake, and the packet will be ready."

"Yes, sir."

Blake left the housemaster in a thoughtful mood. He had been inclined to tell Mr. Kidd of the happening of the previous night, but he knew that if he did, whether he was punished or not, an end would be put to any further searching for D'Arcy. And, after all, he had made no definite discovery; his theory of a secret passage was only a theory.

When he rejoined his chums they questioned him. They could see that he had not been licked, and they wondered what he had been wanting for.

"Private business," said Blake, with a lofty wave of the hand. "Private business between Mr. Kidd and myself."

Herries and Digby gasped.

"He's off his rocker," said Digby. "Clean off it."

"Private business?" said Herries wrathfully. "Spout it out instantly, you bounder, or we'll scrag you!"

The two chums looked warlike. Blake backed away.

"Pax!" exclaimed he. "It's just as I tell you. Mr. Kidd just wanted to consult me on a matter of importance, and—"

They did not wait for him to finish. They rushed at him and pinned him against the wall. Thrice they solemnly knocked his head there.

"Now, then," said Herries, "have you had enough? Out with it!"

Blake gasped in the clutch of the outliners.

"Leggo!" he exclaimed. "It's solid fact! Honest Injun! I can't tell you; I've promised Kiddlets. Leggo, you maniacs, or I shall hit out, and then there will be somebody hurt."

"You're not rotting, then?" asked Herries, only half-satisfied.

"Not a little bit."

"So they let him go. Blake smoothed out his ruffled collar and brushed his hair. The chums eyed him curiously.

"I'd tell you all about it if I could, honour bright!" exclaimed Blake. "But it's a personal matter between Kidd and myself, you see."

"Oh, all right, keep it dark!" said Herries. "I don't see where the mystery comes in. But keep it dark, and be hauged!"

"That'll happen, anyway," said Dig darkly.

Blake grinned.

"Don't you be so curious," he said. "You can't expect Kidd and me to tell you everything. Still, I'll let you into it as soon as I can."

"Are you coming up to the castle to-day?"

"Castles are off. I've got an engagement with Kidd till about half-past three. Then I shall be at your service."

"Oh, go and eat coconuts! Come on, Dig, and have a kick at the footer."

But the chums did not go down to the football field. They simply went out of Blake's view to hold a discussion. They were puzzled and aggrieved by this new attitude taken up by their leader.

"There's something on," said Herries sagely. "What the dickens does he mean by trying to keep us in the dark, Dig?"

"Like his cheek!" said Dig.

"I should say so! Now, what is the little game? That is the question."

"He's up to something," said Dig, after some reflection. "He thinks he can carry it out, whatever it is, without our assistance."

"But he can't, of course."

"Of course he can't," said Digby emphatically. "He'll make a ghastly frost of it if he goes it alone. We shall have to take a hand, of course, and help him out."

"Only we don't know what he's up to."

"We must find out, that's all."

"How?" asked Herries. "He won't tell us."

"Easy enough. We'll keep an eye on him—shadow the bounder, you know—and see what he does and where he goes."

"Yes, that's a jolly good idea," said Herries.

They carried it out. Their shadowing, perhaps, was not exactly so skilful as that of a Sexton Blake or a Martin Stern, but it was thorough.

When Blake came out of Study No. 6 Digby disappeared down a passage, and Blake stared after him in a astonishment. He went downstairs, and Herries whisked back behind a corner.

Considerably puzzled, Blake went out into the quadrangle. He happened to glance round, and there were Herries and Digby marching along behind him at a short distance. As he turned his head, they became suddenly deeply interested in the movements of some pigeons on a neighbouring roof.

"Hallo, there's two kids off their nappers!" murmured Blake.

He strolled on to while away the time before he had to go to Mr. Kidd's study. He went into the gymnasium, and was not surprised a couple of minutes later to see Herries looking in at one door and Digby at the other.

The situation had dawned upon Blake now. He grinned to himself. His chums, resenting his secrecy, were shadowing him. It was very funny so far, but it would be a bother as soon as the time came for him to start for the old castle.

But Blake was seldom at a loss. Figgins & Co. were in the gymnasium, and Blake stopped and spoke to the New House leader. There was a tacitly understood armistice between the rivals of St. Jim's while Arthur Augustus was missing.

Figgins nodded genially. Blake drew him aside from the Co.

"I say, old Figgy, will you do me a favour?"

"Millions of 'em!" said Figgy, with great liberality. "What do you want? Anything to do with poor old Aubrey Adolphus?"

"Well, yes, in a way."

"Then go ahead, I'm your man!"

"I've had a difference of opinion with Herries and Dig"

Figgins whistled.

"You don't mean to say you've had a row?"

"Oh, no," said Blake hastily. "We never row in Study No. 6. It's a misunderstanding really. They're on my track, and they're going to track me like bloodhounds when I go out. I want you to stop them. Don't kill 'em if you can help it; but if you make it warm for them it will be a lesson to the bounders to keep better discipline next time."

Figgins grinned hugely.

"I'll do it, Blake! All right; must's the word!"

A little later Blake made his way to the housemaster's study. He was satisfied that Figgins would keep his word. His usually faithful followers had kicked over the traces, and they deserved some punishment, in the opinion of the leader of Study No. 6. They would probably get it when Figgins started on them.

Mr. Kidd was ready. He handed Blake a small, heavy parcel, fastened with sealing-wax and string. His face was very serious.

"You fully understand what you are to do, Blake?"

"Yes, sir. Go to the ruined castle, and shove this packet on the steps leading down to the vaults, and then bunk."

The housemaster coughed.

"Yes, certainly. You will be careful to come away directly you have placed it there. If you see any sign of men watching the ruins, you will take no notice. Inspector Skeet and his men will doubtless be there."

"I will be careful, sir."

And Blake departed with the packet in his possession. As he left the gates of St. Jim's, Herries and Digby came hurriedly across the quadrangle. They passed out into the road and stared after Blake's retreating figure.

"There he goes!" muttered Herries.

"He's carrying something," said Digby. "Ah, he's looking round!"

Blake turned his head. The two shadowers dived into the cover of a roadside tree, but not before Blake had seen them quite plainly. And, indeed, after taking cover, the two shadowers still left a couple of good-sized feet in full view. Blake smiled as he observed them. He observed something else, too. Figgins & Co. had just come out of the gates.

Figgins evidently meant to keep his promise. A moment more, and Herries and Digby were down on their backs in the road, with Figgins & Co. sprawling over them.

Blake gave a shout of laughter. Figgins did nothing by halves. He had taken the simplest and most effective way of carrying out Blake's instructions. Leaving his rebellious followers to the tender mercies of Figgins & Co., Blake went on his way, still chuckling.

CHAPTER 7. Blake Has Bad Luck.

IT was a fine, spring afternoon. Last night the ruins had looked grim and eerie, but now their aspect was very different. The sun glistened on the shattered walls and the broken arches of the windows. Blake strode up the hill-path and entered the ruined castle. In more than one spot he had caught a glimpse of a man in cover, watching. The gipsy was being looked for, and if he came openly to the ruins he could not escape.

But Blake did not believe for a moment that he would do anything of the kind. He thought it would take someone far keener than Inspector Skeet to catch Barenego. With his usual modesty, he fancied himself equal to the task.

He was certain that the gipsy had a lurking-place somewhere beneath the ruins, and that he would come to take

the packet from the steps without showing himself in the open air at all. Probably he had a secret way of entering and leaving the vaults, too.

Blake crept up at the yawning opening where the crumbling steps led downwards. The uppermost steps were visible, but the lower ones were lost in shadow. He stooped and placed the packet on the top step.

His work for which he had come there was done; but he did not leave the ruins. His brow was very thoughtful.

"It's as plain as anything," he murmured, "that the gipsy has some secret hiding-place, and he'll take the packet without showing himself for the inspector and his men to see, and he won't do it till I am gone. But how will he know I am gone?"

He gave a quick look around him. The thought came into his mind that even at that moment he was watched. Several massive fragments of the old buildings overlooked the spot. Some of the walls were ten or twelve feet thick, and crevices opened in them here and there.

It was easy to guess that they might contain recesses, from which the gipsy could watch for the messenger to come with the ransom.

Were the eyes of the gipsy upon him at that moment, then? Blake scanned the old, grey walls keenly. There was no sign of life.

Blake slowly walked away, as if to leave the ruins and go down the path. He passed behind a massive fragment of an old wall, and stopped. If the approach to the vaults was secretly watched by the gipsy he could not see Blake now.

The junior's face was determined. He knew that Skeet and his men might watch from where they were for a month without ever catching sight of the gipsy. If Barenegro was to be tracked to his lair, it would not be by them.

Blake remained behind the fragment of wall. It completely concealed him from the view of anyone near the opening of the vaults. It was partly grown over by rusty-looking creepers, which afforded him cover, and enabled him to peep out without showing himself. He knelt there, watching.

The gipsy was not likely to leave the packet there long unattended. If he were indeed on the watch he would be satisfied that the boy had gone. Blake was a dozen yards from the spot where the packet lay. He watched and listened.

There was a slight sound in the dead silence of the ruins. Blake started, and strained his ears. The sound came from the gloomy aperture where the stone stair led downwards.

Blake's nerves thrilled as he listened. He knew it was the sound of a cautious foothold. The gipsy knew that the packet was there, and he was coming to take it.

Blake drew a quick, throbbing breath. A head came out of the opening, and turned round, scanning the ruins; and he recognised the swarthy, unshaven face of Barenegro, the gipsy.

The head disappeared the next moment. Blake darted forward to the opening. The stone stair was dark and deserted. With the caution of a cat stalking a mouse, Blake crept up to the stairway. There was a glimmer of light in the dark vaults. Barenegro was not moving about there in the black. Blake stole silently down, and caught the glimmer of a lighted lantern.

The lantern was placed on the ground. Barenegro was kneeling beside it, opening the packet he had taken from the steps. He was evidently too eager to ascertain its contents to wait. He gave a grunt of satisfaction as his eye caught the glimmer of gold.

Blake watched him breathlessly. He knew now for certain that the theory he had formed was correct. The gipsy had a secret hiding-place somewhere there. But where? When it was found, D'Arcy would be found. But where was it? That could only be ascertained by watching the gipsy. Blake thought for a moment of calling in the men, who were watching only fifty yards away. But he dismissed the thought at once.

Long before they could arrive upon the spot, Barenegro would be able to scuttle into his den and evade all pursuit. Blake had only himself to depend upon. While the gipsy eagerly counted the gold, Blake descended the last steps and stole into the gloom of the vault. He knew he was cutting off his own retreat by leaving the stair, but it could not be helped. For if he had remained there a casual glance from Barenegro would have discovered him.

He waited in the darkness with painfully beating heart. With common luck he would be able to follow the gipsy unseen, and discover his secret. His eyes gleamed at the thought of bringing the scoundrel to justice, and taking back Arthur Augustus safe and sound to St. Jim's.

The gipsy finished his counting; the clink of the coins ceased. Barenegro rose to his feet. He had stuffed the money into his pockets. He picked up the lantern. Blake saw the grin of evil exultation on his face; the glitter of the

deep-set, cunning eyes. Barenegro was in high good-humour. He moved away along the vaults, the lantern flashing before him. Blake followed with a cautious step. Was he going to D'Arcy's hiding-place? He must know that the ruins were watched, so he would not venture out unless he had a secret means of egress and ingress where he could do so safely.

Blake scarcely dared to breathe as he followed the gipsy. A puff of strong tobacco came to his nostrils. The ruffian had lighted his pipe at the lantern. Suddenly the light, which had gone on steadily in advance of Blake, halted. Blake stopped, too; his heart thumping against his ribs.

Did that mean that he was discovered? The light swung round. Barenegro glared back with savage suspicion in his eyes. He had evidently heard something; and the faintest sound in the dead silence of the vaults had been sufficient to alarm the outcast gipsy, whose lawless life gave him a keenness of sense akin to that of a wild animal.

"Who's there?"

The gipsy's voice was guttural and harsh. Blake stood quite still. He knew that the slightest movement would betray him now. But Barenegro commenced to retrace his steps hastily, flashing the lantern to and fro.

The boy was compelled to move. He retreated on tiptoe but the gipsy was coming on swiftly, and he uttered a savage exclamation as the light gleamed on the boy's white face. He had been too quick for Blake. He caught sight of the boy and rushed fiercely towards him, his eyes aflame with rage.

"You again!" he hissed. "You?"

Blake turned and ran. Now that he was discovered it was, of course, hopeless to think of any further shadowing of Barenegro. He would be lucky if he escaped from the vaults without falling into the ruffian's clutches.

The gipsy was muttering savage imprecations as he dashed after Blake. The junior made a direct line for the stair. Now he thought only of reaching them, and bolting into the upper air before the savage clutch from behind fastened upon his shoulder. His foot slipped on a stone, and he stumbled. There was a grunt of triumph behind him, and the gipsy, springing forward, gripped the boy as he rose.

Blake gasped with mingled fear and horror as he felt the gipsy's fingers fasten on him, and struck out with both fists with all his strength. Both fists crashed into the swarthy face, and Barenegro staggered backwards with a howl of pain and fury.

Blake made a desperate effort to tear himself loose. But Barenegro, startled and hurt as he was, clung to him savagely. The lantern crashed to the ground and went out. The vault was plunged into darkness. But the tenacious grip of the gipsy never relaxed, and in a few moments he recovered from the blows, and closed upon Blake.

"Help! Help!" yelled Blake.

He had a vague hope that the watching men without might hear. But if they heard there was no time for them to come to his aid. He was down on the stone floor, with the gipsy's weight on him. The hard, strong hands were at his throat.

"Help! Help!"

It was his last cry. The savage clutch choked him into silence. His senses were swimming. He was dragged to his feet, half-senseless, and hurried away into the darkness. He struggled once, but a fierce rain of blows fell upon him, and he fell into a dazed condition.

"You whelp! You meddling whelp!" It was the gipsy's voice muttering in the darkness. "So you must interfere, you whelp!"

Where was the man taking him? Blake was dragged rapidly along in the darkness, whither he could not guess. But suddenly the gipsy stopped. There was a creaking sound, as of a door long unused opening stiffly. Blake was flung headlong forward, and the creak sounded again behind him.

He fell blindly in the blackness. His hands touched something that lay on the ground: something that was warm; something that moved. He gave an involuntary cry. The unseen object moved again. The darkness was intense; he could see nothing. He rose painfully to his feet.

"What is it?" he cried, in a shaking voice. "Is anybody here?"

A thin, weak voice replied from the gloom:

"Bai Jove, Blake old fellah, is that weally you?"

It was the voice of Arthur Augustus. Blake had succeeded in his object; he had found the swell of St. Jim's. But he had found him in a way that he had not expected; a way that was far from agreeable to him. He knew now why he had been hurried there, and what the creak behind him had meant. He was shut in with the missing boy. He had found D'Arcy—only to share his imprisonment in this grim and gloomy recess under the old castle.

CHAPTER 8.

Anxious Moments for Blake's Chums.

M. R. KIDD looked out of his window into the old quadrangle at St. Jim's. He stood with his hands in his pockets, a slightly worried look upon his face. The quad was bright and sunny that fine spring afternoon. The old trees were beginning to show a glimmer of green after their long winter grimmness. From the football ground came the echo of shouting.

The housemaster was worried. He had felt little misgiving in sending Blake on his mission to the ruined castle. There had seemed to be no danger in the work he had to do there. But Blake had not returned, and Mr. Kidd was beginning to feel anxious about him.

He had told the boy to come straight back from the ruins. Blake had intended to do so, but, as we know, he had never left them. Time enough had elapsed now for Blake to have made the journey twice. Why had he not come back? Had he forgotten that the housemaster was awaiting his return? That was hardly possible. Yet where was he? Had something happened to him?

That was the troublesome thought which lurked in the housemaster's mind, and refused to be dismissed. Could any accident—any disaster—have befallen Blake? What if he had encountered the gipsy?

Mr. Kidd compressed his lips and knitted his brows. He had taken the responsibility of sending Blake with the packet. It was not the thought of the responsibility that troubled him, however. It was the fear that something might have happened to Blake. He felt that he would never forgive himself if harm should have come to the boy.

He caught sight of Herries and Digby in the quadrangle. He leaned from the open window and called to them. Herries and Dig were looking disconsolate. They were wondering, too, why Blake had not returned. The time he had mentioned had long passed. They heard the housemaster's voice and looked up.

"Come into my study," said Mr. Kidd.

"The chums were soon in the room. They did not fail to note the anxious shade upon the housemaster's handsome, clear-cut face.

"Have you seen Blake?" asked Mr. Kidd.

"Not for some time, sir," replied Herries.

"When did you last see him?"

"Not long after two o'clock, sir."

The housemaster's heart sank. He had had a slight hope that Blake had returned from the castle, and had been called away by some other interest, and so failed to report himself to the master. It was not likely, but it was possible. Now he had to give up the idea. If Blake had come back, Herries and Digby would have seen something of him.

"You do not know where he went, Herries?"

"No, sir. I thought—" He paused. Mr. Kidd gave him a look of inquiry. "I thought you knew, sir," said Herries. "I—I thought he was gone on a message, or something, for you."

"Yes, that is the case. He carried a message for me. But I mean, do you know whether he had any idea of going anywhere else after that while he was out?"

"Not that I know of, sir."

"He has not returned," said Mr. Kidd slowly. "He should have been back more than an hour ago, allowing for all delays. That is why I asked you."

Herries and Digby exchanged looks of alarm.

"I say," ejaculated Digby, "perhaps something has happened. Poor old Blake! He was so jolly mysterious about it that I knew he was up to something."

"He wouldn't tell us anything," added Herries. "We would have bowled him out, though, but for Figgins. Perhaps Figgins knows something about it, sir. Blake put him up to collaring us because we were going after him."

"Fetch Figgins here!"

The chief of the New House juniors received the summons to the School House master's room with some astonishment. However, he came quickly enough under Herries's convoy.

"Do you know where Blake is, Figgins?"

"No, sir; I haven't seen him since he left the school about half-past two."

"I am afraid something may have happened to him," said the housemaster gravely. "You do not know anything of his movements, then?"

"No, sir." Figgins thought he had better speak out, so he went on: "He was off somewhere, and didn't want anybody with him, so Kerr and Wynn and I scragged these boundaries—I mean, we collared these two kids, sir, and that's all I know about it."

"Thank you, Figgins!" said Mr. Kidd. "You may go, boys."

The juniors quitted the study. In the hall Figgins stared questioningly at the chums of Study No. 6.

"What's the row?" he asked. "Where can Blake have

got to, Kids? What can have happened to him? Has he been looking for D'Arcy?"

"I don't know," said Herries gloomily. "I hope nothing's happened. He wouldn't tell us where he was going."

"There goes Kidd!" muttered Digby.

The housemaster had come out in coat and hat. He went quickly down the steps of the School House, and strode across the quadrangle. The juniors, standing on the House steps, watched him pass out at the gates.

"Where's he off to?" muttered Digby.

"Gone to look for Blake," said Figgins confidently. "I don't see what can have happened. Wish I knew where Blake had gone to."

"You see, we don't know anything," said Digby. "Where could Kidd have sent him? It's a beastly mystery. If Blake doesn't come in, I shall ask Kidd to explain when he comes back. He's no right to keep us in the dark."

"Right-ho!" agreed Figgins. "And if Blake's missing, like poor old Adolphus, we'll hunt for him, chaps. This is getting a bit too thick!"

Figgins had been correct in guessing that the master of the School House was gone to look for Blake. Now that it was too late, the housemaster regretted having sent the junior on this errand; but he had done so for the sake of the kidnapped boy. Whatever had happened, it was something that could not be foreseen.

Mr. Kidd strode rapidly down the road, and in the foot-path through the wood he broke into a run. He came out of the wood, and entered upon the path up the hill to the ruined castle. He stopped at the thicket where the patient inspector was still on the watch. Mr. Skeet made him a sign to be cautious.

"Better take cover, sir!" he whispered. "The gipsy can't be long now. It's a couple of hours since the packet was taken there. He can't intend to leave it lying there long, in case somebody should happen to come along and collar it. Don't you think so?"

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NEXT SATURDAY:

"DR. SPECS." A Tale of Specie, the Twins & Co., AND By H. Clarke Hook.

"UNDER THE ENGLISH CHANNEL,"

By Ernest Bramah.

IN "PLUCK" 10.

"Did you see the boy I sent here?"

"Yes; it was Blake."

"You saw him go into the ruins?"

"Yes."

"Did you see him come out again?" asked the house-master quickly.

The inspector shook his head.

"No, he didn't come out this way."

"Then he is still there?"

"I don't suppose so," replied the inspector. "There are a dozen ways he might leave the place without passing me. I dare say he scrambled out somewhere where I didn't see him. What should he have stayed there for?"

"He has not returned to the school."

"Well, and it's a half-holiday."

"I gave him instructions to come straight back."

"Which don't amount to much to that imp," said the inspector. "I know him. He's the most cheeky and mischievous kid at the school, sir, and you've got some regular coughdrops there, and no mistake. He's gone off somewhere."

"I cannot think so. I fear that something has happened to him."

Mr. Skeet looked impatient.

"What can have happened, sir? We've been on the watch, and the gipsy hasn't shown up."

"Barengro may have a secret way of entering and leaving the ruins. I am convinced that he did not intend to come here openly and risk capture. He is far too cunning a rascal for that."

"Secret grandmother!" muttered the inspector disdainfully.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. It's all right about the boy, I'm certain of that."

"I wish I were certain," said Mr. Kidd. "I think I had better go on and look for him."

"You'll give the game away if you do, if the gipsy should come."

"I do not believe he will come openly, as I have said. In any case, I am too anxious about Blake to delay."

Mr. Kidd strode away. The inspector expostulated, but the house-master did not stay to listen. He was growing more and more alarmed.

He entered the ruins, and looked about him. A glance showed him that Blake was not there, and another that the packet was not on the steps.

Had Blake placed it there? He would certainly not have failed to do so. Then it had been taken by the gipsy. But where was Blake?

If he had left the ruins he would have returned to the school. He had not left them. Then where was he? There was only one conclusion to come to, and Mr. Kidd was forced to come to it. The boy had ventured into the vaults, and had fallen into the hands of the kidnapper.

The house-master called to the inspector. Mr. Skeet, angry at having his carefully-laid trap upset, came sulkily to join him. His expression changed when Mr. Kidd pointed out that the packet had been taken.

"Do you think Master Blake really put it there?" he said dubiously.

"Of course!" exclaimed Mr. Kidd. "Why should he neglect to do so, when he was sent here for that special purpose?"

"That looks reasonable," admitted Mr. Skeet. "Then it looks as if the gipsy had been and taken it, and we haven't seen him. There may be something in what you said about an underground passage."

"There is certainly something in it," said the house-master drily. "Fortunately I thought of bringing my electric lantern. I shall now search the vaults for Blake, and you can follow if you think fit."

The inspector apparently thought fit, for he followed the house-master down the stone stair. Mr. Kidd advanced into the vaults with the lantern held high.

He uttered a sudden exclamation, and, stooping, picked up something from the stone flags of the floor. It was a schoolboy's cap.

"The boy's cap!" exclaimed the inspector, convinced at last. "Then Blake has certainly been down here, Mr. Kidd."

"I never doubted it. This is certainly Blake's cap. It is that of a School House boy, by the colour."

"I wonder how he came to lose it?"

"He could only have dropped it in a struggle. He has been seized by the gipsy, and now, in all probability, is sharing D'Arcy's imprisonment," said Mr. Kidd. "What can have made him venture into the vaults at all, the unfortunate boy?"

They continued the search further, but without result. Mr. Kidd shouted Blake's name till the subterranean depths rang with sound, but there came no reply to his calling.

The searching and the shouting were alike useless. Beyond the cap, no sign was discovered of Blake; and to the shouting there came back only hollow echoes. At last the house-master was compelled to give up the search.

Whatever the secret of that gloomy place, it was too well hidden for him to discover it. His heart was heavy as he ascended the stone stair. During the long and futile quest evening had fallen, and it was in the dusk that Mr. Kidd took his way back to St. Jim's.

The chums were watching for his return. They saw him come in and go to the doctor's quarters. They read his expression, and the gloom in his face was reflected in their own. Blake had not returned, and they knew now that something had happened to him.

CHAPTER 9.

In Durance Ville—A Bid for Liberty.

"BLAKE! Is it weally you?"

The voice of Arthur Augustus was weak and faint, but he had not forgotten to draw or to lisp. These little peculiarities had become second nature to the swell of St. Jim's.

Blake stood up in the darkness. He was both annoyed and angered by the ill-luck that had befallen him, and ready to kick himself for having fallen into the clutches of the gipsy.

Still, he was glad to have found Arthur Augustus. His usual coolness very quickly returned to him. His situation was a perilous and unpleasant one, but he tried to take it in a humorous mood.

"Yes, Gussy," he said, "it is weally me! Here I am, dear boy, as large as life and twice as natural."

"I'm jolly glad to hear your voice again, Blake!" said Arthur Augustus; "or any voice for that matter. It's been beastly lonely here."

"Yes; these ain't the quarters I should choose if I had to make my choice," remarked Blake. "They'll seem a bit dark in the long run. I'm sorry I can't see you, Adolphus, but your voice sounds like that of a sick chicken!"

"Don't joke about it, dear boy! It's no joke to be shut up here for a week," said Arthur Augustus dolefully.

"Well, you haven't been here a week or anything like it," said Blake. "I dare say it has seemed as long as that to you though. We've been hunting for you high and low."

"Have you been looking for me, then?"

"Of course I have, and that's how I got here."

"Barengro just pitched you in, didn't he?"

"Yes; he found me on his track. I came to discover his secret, and I've discovered it, and this is the result," said Blake, in disgust. "However, we're going to get out of this soon, Gussy."

"We can't," said D'Arcy miserably. "I've searched for any kind of an opening, and there isn't one. I don't even know where the door is that the gipsy uses when he brings me grub. It must be a stone that turns on a pivot, I think. There's no sign of a door. I've hunted for it."

"How did you get here, D'Arcy? I suppose Barengro collared you in the wood?"

"Yes. Figgins shoved me into a bush—it was vewy wude of him—and when I scrambled out of it, I found that bwute Barengro staring at me, and looking vewy unpleasant. He dwaggled me away into the wood, and made me keep there till dark, and then he brought me here. I tried to get away, and he was vewy bwutal. He had the cheek to hit me with a great cudgel, the bwute!"

"And you've been shut up here ever since?"

"Yes," shivered D'Arcy. "He brought me an old coat and a blanket, and he's given me bwud and water to live on. The watah was beastly cold, and the bwud vewy hard and nasty. But I got so hungwy that I had to eat some of it."

"You've been through it, Aubrey, and no mistake," remarked Blake. "You seem to have had a high old time. Perhaps that'll be a lesson to you. If you had bucked up you wouldn't have dropped behind when I was racing old Figgins, and the gipsy wouldn't have collared you. When we get out of this hole, I'll put you through a course of gymnastics that will make your hair curl. See if I don't!"

"I think we shall never get out!" said D'Arcy dolefully.

"I don't know why Barengro is keeping me here. He hasn't spoken one word since he put me here—not a word, the bwute, though every time he brought me a loaf and watah I asked him politely to explain what the little game was."

"He's a pig, and no mistake!" said Blake. "He's been getting a giddy ransom for you, kid. The doctor sent a packet full of tin to pay for your release, and I came to put it on the steps of the vaults. Then I spotted Barengro, and followed him. It's pretty certain he won't keep his word, and release you. The money was really only sent as a trap:

but he has collared it, and Inspector Skeet won't catch him if he goes on trying till his whiskers grow grey. Barendro's too many for him. Now I expect the rascal will try to extort more from the doctor. He has no idea of playing the game. But we're going to get out of this before long, my son.

"I tell you I have tried, and I cannot find the door."
"Very likely; but then, you see, you are a donkey. D'Arcy, and I'm not! You must admit that that makes a difference."

"I am sure that you won't be able to find the door."
"Well, if we can't, we'll go for the gipsy when he comes to bring us grub. He won't let us starve; he dare not! Have you any matches?"

"No; I stung them all in looking for the door long ago."
"Well, I have a box, so we'll have another hunt."

Blake had a box full of wax-vestas in his pocket. He pulled it out, and struck a vesta. In the light he looked curiously at D'Arcy.

The swell of St. Jim's was a pitiable object to look at. His face was white and worn, and he was dirty and muddy. He had donned, for the sake of warmth, the old coat the gipsy had flung in to him, and as it was the garment originally a largely-built man, it hung round D'Arcy in folds, and the tails of it whisked around behind him when he moved. He had the blanket round his head and shoulders for warmth also. Altogether, his aspect was as comical as it was miserable, and Blake broke into an involuntary chuckle.

"My hat, D'Arcy, anybody who saw you wouldn't take you for such a howling swell!" he exclaimed. "You don't really look respectable enough to be chucked on any well-brought-up dust-heap!"

"I feel howdirty dirty and dishevelled," moaned Arthur Augustus. "I feel as if I shall never get quite clean again as long as I live!"

"Yes; you are a beauty! You'll make a sensation when we get back to school. The New House will turn out to the last man to have a look at you!"

D'Arcy shuddered.
"But the thing is to get out just now," said Blake, striking another match. "I wonder where that door is? There seems to be no sign of it."

He made a careful examination of the cell. It was a small apartment, with floor and walls and roof of solid stone, and a chill in it as of the grave.

In the days long past it had probably been used as a punishment-cell. In the wall was a rusty iron ring, and fragments of rusty chain were still on the stone flags. Long centuries ago prisoners had been immured there in darkness and despair.

The boys were not quite so badly off as those old-time prisoners. They had their limbs free, and they had nothing to fear but incarceration till the gipsy should be captured. Still, their lot was an unenviable one.

The walls showed no trace of an opening. Here and there the cracks were deep and wide between the huge square stones of the wall, and Blake was certain that one of these great stones formed the door; but from the inside it was impossible to discover which. He pressed and twisted at each in turn, but there was no sign of yielding.

His last match flickered out, and he had to confess himself beaten.

"Have you found it, dear boy?" asked Arthur Augustus, with just a little spice of malice in his lisping voice.

Blake gave a growl.
"No; I suppose it doesn't open from inside. When you come to think of it, of course, it wouldn't. I wish I had noticed which way I came in; but I entered in rather a hurry, you know, and had no time to take notes. Never mind; the brute must come sooner or later! How often does he bring you grub?"

"He has been here three times in all."
"Hum! Have you any tomy left?"

"No; it has all been gone a long time. I am very hungry now!"

Blake brightened up.
"Then it must be getting near time for him to come and feed the animals!"

"I hope so. I could really eat stale bread without any butter with Welsh!" said D'Arcy plaintively.

"Never mind the grub," said Blake. "It's our giddy liberty we want. When he comes we are going to tackle him. Understand?"

"He's a very big, strong brute!" said D'Arcy dubiously.
"I don't care. We're going to get out of this somehow. When he comes in with the grub we've got to go for him. That's the programme."

"But he doesn't come in; he just shoves it in, and does it so quickly—"

"Then we must be on the watch, and collar him before he can close the door," said Blake, with decision. "Wish I had a cricket-stump with me. Have you any kind of a weapon?"

"There's the jug he brought water in; it's empty."
"Give it to me."

D'Arcy groped for the jug and found it, and handed it to Blake. It was a big, heavy one, of coarse earthenware.

"Good!" said Blake, with satisfaction. "If I smash this on his napper, it is almost certain to hurt him. Mind you collar him when you do."
"I'll do my very best, Blake."

"Mind you do. I wish he'd come!"

The time dragged by heavily. Blake exercised to keep himself warm in the chilly cell, but D'Arcy was too weak from confinement to have the necessary energy. He kept himself wrapped in the coat and blanket.

Blake gave him a description of the search that had been made for him. He was still speaking when a slight sound came from the darkness.

Blake ceased instantly. Was it the gipsy coming? Blake quickly squeezed D'Arcy's arm as a sign to keep quiet. He gripped the heavy jug by the handle in his right hand.

He knew that it was dangerous to attack the ruffian. He knew that the attempt might end very badly for himself. But he was resolved.

And when he had made up his mind, the plucky junior could be very obstinate. Still and silent, the two boys listened.

There was a low creak, as of rusty iron moving stiffly. The secret door was opening. Not a gleam of light broke on the gloom.

But the sound guided Blake. He stole on tiptoe in the direction of it. He heard a faint thud, as of a soft object falling into the cell. Then a growling voice was audible.

"There's your food, you whelps! It's all you'll get! Gimme the jug if you want any more water. I—"

The gipsy broke off suddenly. Blake had sprung like a tiger in the dark. Right at the ruffian he went, striking out desperately with the heavy jug.

Crash! The jug flew to pieces. It had broken on the gipsy's head, and the concussion must have been terrible.

Barendro gave a gasping yell and fell to the ground. In an instant Blake was upon him.

"Help, D'Arcy!" he panted.

Now was his chance. Blake knew it would not recur if it was lost now. It was now or never!

He gripped the gipsy fast as he scrambled over him in the blackness. The ruffian was too dazed to struggle for a few moments. D'Arcy, gathering all his courage, came to Blake's help, and his grip also fastened upon the prostrate ruffian. But it was only for a few seconds that they had matters their own way. Then Barendro began to struggle fiercely.

"Give it him!" hissed Blake. "Give him beans!"

He rained fierce blows upon the gipsy's upturned face. Barendro was uttering wild imprecations. He struck out savagely, and D'Arcy went reeling away from a drive that caught him in the chest. He staggered across the cell, and fell in a heap to the floor.

Blake felt himself gripped in arms that seemed like iron bands. He fought desperately, striving to keep the gipsy down. But the struggle was too unequal, a boy against a man, and, in spite of his initial advantage, Blake slowly but surely got the worst of it.

"Help, D'Arcy!" he gasped.

D'Arcy was dazed by his fall, but he came pluckily to his chum's help. But the gipsy was now on his feet. Blake still clung to him desperately. But Barendro, exerting his strength, tore him loose from his hold and hurled him away. He crashed against D'Arcy, and they fell to the ground together.

"Oh, oh!" gasped Arthur Augustus; and he lay on the stone floor with all the wind knocked out of his body.

But Blake was up in a flash. He heard the voice of the gipsy snarling out curses. But suddenly the sound ceased; shut off, as it were, into abrupt silence. Only a faint creak was heard; the secret door was closed.

The bid for liberty had failed. Barendro was gone, and the boys were still shut up in the cell, and they knew full well that the gipsy would never give them another such chance. Blake had been hurt in the struggle. But it was not that; it was the bitter disappointment that made the tears start to his eyes.

"DR. SPECS."

A Tale of Two, the Twin & Co., AND
By H. Clark-Hook.

"UNDER THE ENGLISH CHANNEL,"

A Striking Tale,
By Ernest Bramah.

IN "PLUCK," 1st.

NEXT SATURDAY:

CHAPTER 10.
The Alliance.

M R. KIDD'S face was very gloomy as he came out of the doctor's study. Dr. Holmes had not blamed him. But the good old doctor was deeply distressed at the disappearance of Jack Blake, and the housemaster himself was very disturbed.

"The boy is certainly in the gipsy's hands," said Dr. Holmes. "Either he discovered something to Barenegro's disadvantage, or else the ruffian intends to do a second stroke of business in the same way. That he does not intend to keep faith is clear; as, although he has received the ransom, D'Arcy has not been released. Even if we had not called in the aid of the police, I am convinced that he would not have kept faith. Now, I suppose, we shall receive a demand for payment for Blake's release, under the threat of ill-usage to the boy. It is very unfortunate."

"Extremely so," said the housemaster, looking very harassed. "I blame myself to some extent."

"Nonsense! The ruffian demanded that a boy should be sent with the money, and had Blake remained out of the vaults he would have been in no danger. The police were too close at hand for that. It was by going down the steps that he placed himself in the ruffian's hands. He acted, of course, with good intentions, doubtless hoping to learn the secret of the kidnapper's hiding-place, but the result is very unfortunate. You say you have searched the vaults thoroughly."

"Yes; Mr. Skeet and myself left not a single spot unsearched."

"And there was no trace of the gipsy or of either boy?"

"None."

"Then I am afraid we are in Barenegro's hands. We shall doubtless hear from him in the morning, and until then we can only wait."

To this the housemaster assented; there was evidently nothing else to be done. He left the doctor, and as he went to his own quarters in the School House, he found Herries and Digby waiting for him at his door. They were both looking very anxious. Mr. Kidd glanced at them kindly enough.

"You wish to speak to me, boys?"

"Yes, sir," said Digby; "if you please, sir."

"Come into my study."

Mr. Kidd opened his door and went in, and the chums followed him. Then they looked at each other dubiously. Neither exactly liked to begin.

"Well, my lads," said the housemaster quietly.

Digby nudged Herries, who blurted out:

"It's about Blake, sir."

Mr. Kidd nodded.

"Would you mind telling us, sir, where you sent him? We're anxious about him. You see, sir," Herries went on, gathering more courage as he proceeded, "that brute Barenegro has collared young D'Arcy, and we know he has a spite against Blake. We are afraid he may have done Blake some harm."

"That's what we are afraid of, sir," said Dig, emboldened by the housemaster's kindly look. "If you wouldn't mind telling us—"

Mr. Kidd's brow wrinkled a little. He understood the anxiety of the boys, and sympathised with it. Although no nothing had been said of the letters from the kidnapper, the whole school had decided that Arthur Augustus had been kidnapped by Barenegro, the gipsy. If Blake failed to return, they would guess what had become of him. There could be no harm in telling my boys, therefore.

"I think it quite possible my boys," said the housemaster gravely, "that Blake has fallen in with the gipsy. I do not believe that he has been hurt, but he is being kept away from the school. That is all. I hope that we shall find him soon; I may say we are certain to do so. You need not be anxious about his personal safety."

Dig and Herries would have liked to ask more, but they could not do so very well; to they thanked Mr. Kidd and left the room. They went to Study No. 6 to consult.

That famous apartment seemed very dull and dreary now that of the four chums two were gone. Herries and Digby sat down and stared at each other gloomily.

"What's to be done?" said Herries desperately. "Kidlets nonsense well, but they won't find Blake. I don't know where Kidd could have sent him, but if the gipsy's got him, he'll be shut up under the old castle somewhere."

"We searched there once, and found nothing."

"We saw the gipsy there," said Herries. "There's not the slightest doubt that he hides there, and that Blake and D'Arcy are there somewhere."

"Suppose we have another hunt?"

"That's my idea. But it's no good us two doing it alone. The gipsy is a ruffian, and he might collar us both and shove

as along with Blake and D'Arcy. That wouldn't improve matters."

"My aunt! No, it wouldn't."

"Two of us wouldn't be enough. But five would make a big handful for Barenegro to tackle, especially if we took cricket-stumps with us. Figgins & Co. would come."

"Let's go and ask them."

"Come on, then," said Herries.

The chums sallied out of the School House, and marched across the quadrangle to the rival house. Usually the New House gave a warm reception to any School House boys venturing within their borders, but now there was peace between the rival factions. The disappearance of Arthur Augustus, and now the discovery that Blake was missing, had cast a shade of gloom over St. Jim's. For some days there had been hardly a single row between the two houses.

Herries and Digby entered the New House, and, un-molested, went up to the study shared by the New House chums, Figgins, Wynn, and Kerr. Figgins & Co. were at home, at tea, and they gave a surprised but cordial welcome to their visitors.

"Hallo, you School House wasters! Any news of Blake?"

"No," said Herries. "He wasn't come back."

"Hope nothing's happened to him. Sit down, Kids, and have some grub. Shove over those sardines, fatty. Now, Kerr, how long are you going to be opening that condensed milk? Make yourselves at home, Kids."

The School House chums accepted Figgins's hospitality. They were anxious, but anxiety had not spoiled their healthy, boyish appetites.

"Thanks, Figgy," said Herries. "You're a good sort. But we didn't really come here to feed, though. We want you to help us."

"To find Blake, do you mean?"

"Yes."

"I'm on," said Figgins instantly. "Wire into those sardines. They're good. Have you any idea where he's got to?"

"I feel certain that Barenegro's got him."

"Phew! What makes you so sure about it?"

"You can keep a secret, Figgy?"

"Of course I can. A dozen, if you like."

Herries explained how the chums had searched the ruined castle by night for the missing Arthur Augustus; how they had seen Barenegro there; and Blake's theory of a secret passage.

"Well, you've been going it!" said Figgins, with a whistle of astonishment. "What a giddy time! Why didn't you ask me to come with you? We might have laid the gipsy by the heels then. You School House chaps couldn't expect to make anything but a bungle of it."

Herries and Digby immediately looked wrathful, but Kerr interposed and poured oil on the troubled waters.

"Shut up, Figgy, can't you? Honour the guest that is within thy walls, or blunder!"

"Sorry," said Figgy; "I'm forgorf. Still, I wish I had been there. What's your idea, Kids? To have another search for Blake and D'Arcy in the castle?"

"Yes. If five of us go we shall be able to handle the gipsy if we fall in with him. What do you say?"

"Jolly good idea! We'll go the minute we've finished tea. We shall be late in for calling-over, but that can't be helped. If we could find Blake and bring him back, that would get us off all right. Wire in and make a good meal, and we'll start."

They laid in a good supply of provisions—internally. Then they prepared for the expedition. Avoiding the watchful eyes of prefects, they slipped away from the school, each with a stump hidden under his coat. They hurried down the road and took the footpath through the wood.

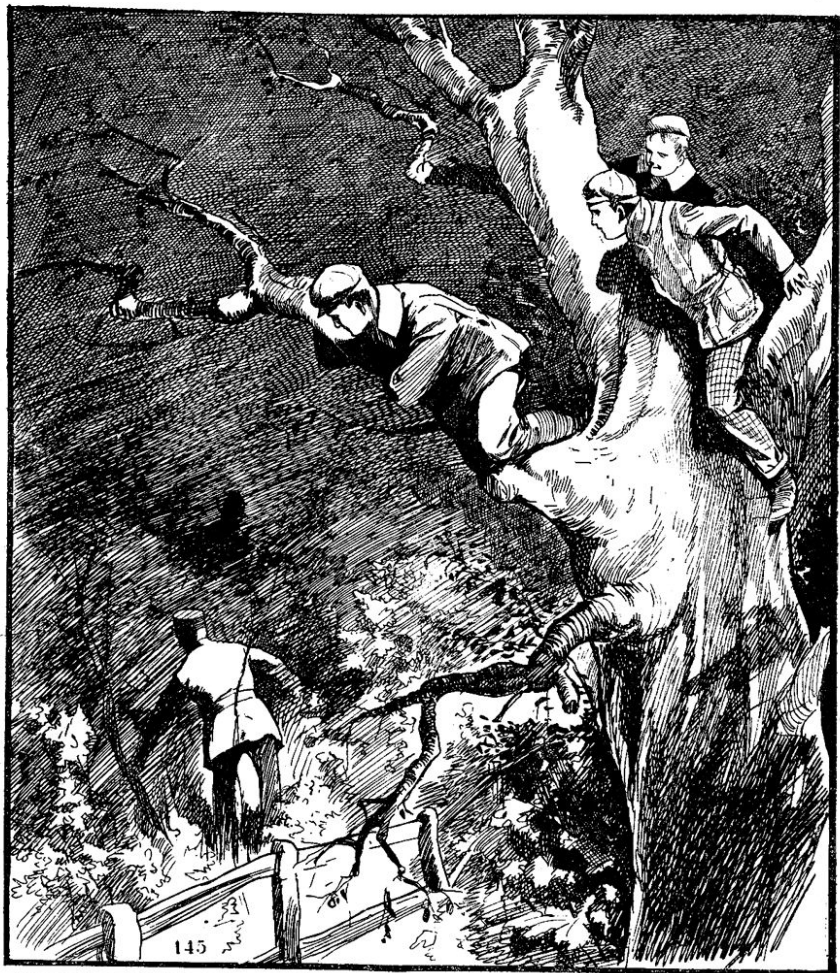
It was a dark, fine evening, with stars glimmering in the sky. A dim, soft light was falling on the grey old ruins as the five juniors entered them. Herries led the way directly towards the opening of the vaults. He stopped there to light his lantern, and Digby started another.

"Looks beastly dark, doesn't it?" said Kerr, with a shiver.

"Hallo!" ejaculated Figgins suddenly. "What's that?"

It was a sudden sound from the grim blackness below. The five juniors stood as if petrified, their ears straining intently to listen. The sound of a voice, raised in a savage imprecation, reached their ears. They looked at each other quickly. It was the voice of Barenegro, the gipsy. Figgins made Herries and Dig a sign to extinguish the lanterns. The lights were promptly put out. Then Figgins stepped on the top stair and bent to listen.

There was a sound as of a man growling with pain, and Figgy caught a gleam of light. He crept silently lower, and stared into the vault. Then he stood quite still, his heart beating hard. Equally silent, equally tense, the others



Clinging there in the darkness, still as mice, they saw Skeet and Simms go blundering by.
(See page 9.)

crowded behind him. Each of them gripped a stump in his hand now. Ruffian as the gipsy was, they did not fear him with such odds on their side. They looked over Figgins's shoulders at the gipsy. He was standing in the vault beside a lantern, which was resting on a stone.

There were streaks of blood on his swarthy face, from a deep cut in the forehead. He was binding a neckerchief about the wound, and the cloth was dyed through in several places. All the time he was muttering curses.

It was evident that Barenegro, the gipsy, had been in the wars. He had received a severe blow on the head, and the blood had flowed freely. His face was unusually pallid under the dusk of the skin.

He had his back partly to them. The pain of his wound had perhaps caused him to forget his usual custom. Figgins glanced round at his followers.

Fortune had favoured the searchers at last. They had come upon the kidnapper, and at a moment when it would be easy to take him by surprise. Herries, Digby, Kerr, and Wynn met Figgy's meaning glance with a nod. They understood, and they gripped their stumps hard.

"Come on!" muttered Figgins.

CHAPTER 11. The Rescue.

BARENEGRO, the gipsy, had but a few minutes before quitted the cell, after the fierce struggle with the kidnapped juniors. He had not the slightest suspicion that foes were at hand, and he was taken completely by surprise.

Figgins's stump crashed upon his head as he swung round

at the sound of footsteps, and he staggered. Before he could recover himself the four juniors were upon him.

Digby and Herries each hit out as hard as they could, and the ruffian reeled under the blows, and Kerr gave a lunge with his stump which knocked a considerable amount of wind out of Barengro, and Fatty Wynn, cutting behind him as he staggered, tripped him up, and he went to the ground with a crash.

He had no chance to rise. Figgins jumped on his chest, and plumped down there in a sitting position, a knee on either side of the prostrate ruffian.

Digby seized his right arm, and hung on to it tenaciously; while Herries took equally good care of his left. The gipsy kicked out wildly, and Kerr staggered from a fierce kick; but he retaliated with his stump, and Barengro was soon glad to keep his legs still, as the stump cracked on his shins.

Then Fatty Wynn sat on them, and his weight was more than sufficient to pin them down to the ground. Kerr came to Figg's help, and fastened his hands in the gipsy's unkempt hair. Barengro was seeking to reach Figg's with his teeth, but the tug on his hair soon stopped that.

The odds were too heavy even for his savage strength. He was a helpless prisoner in the hands of the juniors.

"Got him," said Figgins, with keen satisfaction. "Hear me smile, Barengro! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the juniors in triumph. Barengro cursed wildly. The end of a cricket-stump jammed into his mouth, and speedily cut short the fine flow of his language.

"Now we've got him!" said Figgins. "What have you got to say for yourself, Barengro?"

Barengro had nothing to say, for the end of the stump kept him speechless, but his rolling eyes spoke volumes of hate and rage.

"Nothing to say?" went on Figgins cheerfully. "Well, I don't see what you could have to say. You're a beast, and you couldn't deny that. But the question before the meeting is, what have you done with Blake and Gussy?"

The gipsy's eyes burned.

"You can take that stump out of his mouth now. I want him to answer. My gentle friend, where are Blake and D'Arcy? Where have you put them?"

Barengro was silent.

"You won't answer?"

Still silence.

"Prod him with the sharp end of the stump, Kerr!"

Kerr obeyed with willing promptness. Barengro gave a yell of pain.

"Going to answer my question, kid?" asked Figgins.

"I will tell you nothing!" said the gipsy between his teeth. "You will never find them. If I am arrested I will say nothing, and they will starve to death. No one but me knows the secret."

It was quite possible that Barengro, if arrested, would keep his word; but the juniors did not intend to give him a chance. They meant to take the law into their own hands. They did not intend to let Blake and D'Arcy remain incarcerated for the sake of sparing Barengro. That was not to be thought of.

And Barengro soon found that they were in deadly earnest. He was twisted over on his face, and his hands forced behind him, and secured with his own belt, which was taken off for the purpose. Then his ankles were tied together.

"Now, are you going to speak, Barengro?" asked Figgins patiently.

The gipsy replied with an imprecation.

"All right. This is where we persuade you!"

Figgins took up a stump. He twisted it through the air, and brought it down with a slash on the gipsy's back. Barengro gave a terrific yell. Again the stump descended with slashing force. The victim howled and wriggled.

"Are you going to answer now, chappy?" asked Figgins. "No! Perdition! No!"

Thwack! The third blow nearly cracked the stump. Barengro roared with pain.

"Leave off! Don't! I will tell you!"

"Thought you would in time. Patience and persuasion are good things. Where are your giddy victims, chappy?"

"Release me, and I will show you!"

"You'll have to show us without being released, my dark beauty, unless you want me to break that stump on your back!" said Figgins.

"How can I move, with my feet bound?" snarled the gipsy.

"Well, we'll untie your trotters!" said Figgins.

The ruffian's feet were loosened sufficiently to allow him to walk, but not to kick out. He was dragged upright.

"Now, lead on, Macduff!" said Figgins, prodding him. "No time to waste. You've given us too much trouble already. Back up!"

There was no help for it. The gipsy sullenly stumbled on

amid the juniors along the dim succession of vaults. Herries and Digby lighting the way with lanterns. Barengro stopped at a blank stone wall.

"Feel over the stone," he said. "There is a hollow. Press in it, and the stone rolls back on a pivot."

Figgins followed the directions. The stone rolled away, and a dark aperture was disclosed. There was a shout from within.

"Hallo, Figgins! My Aunt Matilda, but this is luck!"

Jack Blake came into the light. Following him came the swell of St. Jim's. Barengro was shoved aside, and the five juniors surrounded the rescued captives, and the deep, dark vaults rang again with their cheering.

"Hurrah!"

Jack Blake hugged his old enemy, the redoubtable Figgins.

"Never thought I'd be so glad to see your face at any time, Figg!" he exclaimed. "It isn't much to speak of at a face, but I'm jolly glad to see it now. Don't let that brute Barengro get away, chaps!"

"Not much!" said Herries. "We may as well shove him in there till the police can come for him."

"Ha, ha! Yes, give him a taste of his own medicine!"

The gipsy was bundled headlong into the secret cell, and the door closed upon him. The ruffian was cursing furiously, but the stone cut off all sound from within. The report of a cannon would hardly have penetrated the massive wall. The juniors, in gleeful mood, escorted the rescued prisoners up the stone stair, and they started for the school.

Figgins & Co. were missed at calling-over by Monteith, the prefect of the New House, who was taking the roll that evening, and Herries and Digby were also found to be missing. Their absence was reported to the doctor, who selected a nice, strong care for their special behoof when they should come in.

But while the doctor waited for the delinquents there was a sudden shouting in the dusky quadrangle. Dr. Holmes went to his window and looked out.

Seven juniors were marching from the gate, surrounded by a cheering crowd of boys of all Forms. The doctor gazed at them in amazement.

As they came nearer he recognised Figgins & Co. and the chums of Study No. 6. His heart gave a leap at the sight of D'Arcy.

He understood now what the shouting meant. Somehow the juniors had rescued their schoolfellows, and brought them back in triumph to St. Jim's.

Taggles had opened the gate to the returning party, and word had flown like wildfire through St. Jim's that D'Arcy was coming back. Half the school turned out to look at him. Mingled with the cheers were howls of laughter, for the appearance of the erstwhile swell of St. Jim's was decidedly comical.

He still had on the big, ancient coat, for the night was cold. He looked like anything but a swell at present. Mr. Kidd tapped at the doctor's door and entered. The Head turned from the window.

"The missing boys have returned, sir," said the house-master. "The lads who were missing at calling-over seem to have found them and brought them back. I have told them to come here."

The juniors followed the house-master in. D'Arcy looked shamefaced in his scarecrow rig-out. Figgins & Co. and the chums of Study No. 6 looked decidedly pleased with themselves.

"Dear me!" said the doctor. "I am very glad to see you again, D'Arcy, and glad to see that you are not injured; but you are a shocking sight. You must have a hot bath, and go to bed immediately. Now, my boys, I shall be glad to hear what you have to tell me."

Figgins told the story. The doctor and the house-master uttered ejaculations of surprise and satisfaction when they learned that Barengro was a prisoner—left in the cell to "wait till called for," as Figgins put it.

"You have done well and nobly, my lads," said the doctor, in a moved voice, when he had heard all. "I am very proud of you. I could not have consented to your going into danger, but as it has turned out so fortunately, I can only express satisfaction. I do not think, Mr. Kidd," he added, turning to the house-master with a smile, "that these juniors need be punished for missing, call-over. You may give now boys. I am proud of you all!"

And the juniors marched off, well satisfied. Barengro was found in the cell by the police, and most of the money was recovered. The ruffian went to prison, and the boys of St. Jim's saw the last of him; and for nearly a week there was peace between Study No. 6 and Figgins & Co.

THE END.

(Next Saturday, two long, complete stories, "Dr. Specs," a School Tale, by H. Clarke Hook; and, "Under the English Channel," by Ernest Brindle. Order your PLUCK in advance.)

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THE RIVALS OF ST KIT'S

By Charles Hamilton

BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

The day PAT NUGENT, a young Irish boy, arrives at ST. KIT'S, an election is taking place for the captaincy of the school—ELDRÉD LACY and ARTHUR TALBOT being the two candidates. PAT is soon spotted by a crowd of juniors, and to stop him from giving his vote he is thrown into a cupboard in LACY'S study. He goes to sleep, and on waking up he hears voices—the voices of ELDRÉD LACY and his brother, RUPERT LACY, the Squire of LYWOOD: "You must ruin and disgrace ARTHUR TALBOT, and drive him from the school. He is a menace to me—to both of us. But ruined, disgraced, driven forth into poverty and obscurity, I shall no longer fear him!"

PAT is eventually released from the cupboard, and after the election, which is decided in favour of TALBOT, becomes great chums with BLAGDEN and GREENE. These three friends take an instinctive dislike to ELDRÉD LACY, and continually get bullied by him. One day a curious meeting of the two LACYS and a strange tramp, whose name is BLACK, takes place in a lane not far from the school. A serious trick is played on LACY, and as no one owns up to it, the headmaster punishes the whole of the Lower Fourth. PAT is suspected by the boys, and they decide to send him to Coventry.

Now go on with the tale:

Pat stared at the precious document pinned upon the study table.

"Sent to Coventry by the Form," he muttered, "by order—oh? Trimble's orders, I suppose. Faith, this is getting a bit thick!"

He looked up as Blagden and Greene came into the study.

"What have you got there?" asked the former.

Pat held up his finger.

"Hush!" he said mysteriously. "You mustn't speak to me."

Blagden stared.

"Off your rocker?" he asked politely.

"No; I'm sent to Coventry. Read this kind message. Anybody speaking to me will be cut by the Form. Now you know what to expect."

Blagden and Greene read the message.

"That's Trimble's fist," said Blagden. "I'd know his horrid scrawl anywhere. Of course, he's at the bottom of this."

"So I fancied," assented Pat; "but it looks as if the whole Form was in it, too. Do you think they mean it?"

"Well, they've got it firmly into their noddies that you played the firework trick, and got the whole Form punished," said Blagden. "They're wild about it. I expect this message means business."

"They want me to own up to the Head," remarked Pat. "I shouldn't have any objection to doing that, only I don't know anything about the matter. Sure, I like to be obliging, but it would be going too far to own up to a thing I never did."

"Well, rather," grinned Blagden. "Take no notice of 'em. Of course, we believe in you, don't we, Greene?"

"Of course we do!" said Greene heartily.

"So let 'em rip!" advised Blagden. "We sha'n't take any notice of their blooming manifesto! I dare say it'll come out in a few days who really played that game on Lacy."

Pat soon had proof that the manifesto of the Fourth Form was meant in deadly earnest. At breakfast in the morning no one looked at him or spoke to him. A vacant place was left on either side of him. But Mr. Slaney, who was at the head of the table, and was quite ignorant of the internal politics of the Lower Fourth, noticed the new arrangement, and rapped out a sharp comment upon it.

"What are you crowding that end for? There are two vacant seats there, next to Nugent. Percival, Blane, come further up the table!"

The two boys named sulkily sat down on either side of Pat Nugent.

In class it was the same. No one looked at Pat. There was a good deal of whispering going on, when the master's back was turned, but no one whispered to Pat. He was evidently "out of it."

When school was dismissed Pat went out with the rest. Forgetting for the moment that he was "taboo," he spoke to Blane in the passage.

Blane stared at him, and turned on his heel.

Pat flushed hotly. He was greatly inclined to take Blane by the ear and reason with him, but he refrained. He went up to his own room, where Blagden and Greene joined him. Five minutes later Trimble put in his head at the door.

"Hallo, what do you want?" said Pat.

Trimble took no notice.

He looked straight at Blagden and Greene, apparently forgetful of the existence of such an individual as Pat Nugent.

"Did you see the notice on your table?" he demanded.

"What notice?" asked Blagden reflectively.

"A paper, pinned on your table," snapped Trimble.

"There was a message on it."

"Oh, was that writing on the paper?" asked Blagden, with an appearance of deep interest. "I thought it was a spider had got his legs in the ink and walked over it!"

"Look here," scowled Trimble, "I wrote that message—"

"Ah, that accounts for it!"

"And we mean it, every word, I can tell you. Pat Nugent is sent to Coventry until he owns up to the Head about that firework business, and gets the Form off that beastly detention. If you speak to him you'll jolly soon find yourselves in Coventry, too!"

"It's very kind of you to come and tell us all that, Trimble. Now, if you've finished, you can clear out!"

"Are you going to kick that bouncer out?"

"No; I'm going to kick you out!" said Blagden. And he made a dash for Trimble, who promptly retreated into the passage.

"You're in Coventry!" he yelled. "Mind, you're cut by the Form, you cads! Yah! Oh—ooh!"

A Greek lexicon came sailing through the air. Trimble staggered against the wall. Liddell and Scott can never be considered exactly light reading, and, taken as Trimble took them, they may prove decidedly heavy. Blagden hurled the volume with all the force of his arm, and Trimble took it on his nose.

"Yah you beast!" gasped Trimble. And he retreated, with his hand to his nose.

"Settled him!" said Blaggy, with much satisfaction. "I was always considered good shying at cocoanuts. Trimble won't shove his nose in here again in a hurry!"

But Pat was looking serious.

"I say, you chaps had better think it over," he exclaimed. "The truth may never come out about that affair, and this Coventry business may last all the term. You'd better think before you—"

"Rats!" said Blagden.

"But—"

NEXT SATURDAY: "DR. SPEGS,"
A Tale of Spess, the Twina & Co., AND
By H. Clarke Hook.

"UNDER THE ENGLISH CHANNEL,"
A Striving Tale,
By Ernest Brindle

IN "PLUCK" 10

"Bosh!" said Greene.

"What I mean to say is—"

"Stuff!"

"You'll be cut if—"

"Never mind. Come out for a run."

"But—"

"Rot!" said Blagdy and Greene together.

And Pat gave it up.

The three went downstairs together, and into the playground. They were greeted with hoots from some of the Fourth Formers, and stony silence from others. Trimble's nose looked very large and red, and he scowled savagely at the chums.

The three kept to themselves, and did not allow the juniors to see that they were disturbed at all by their treatment. But they found it very painful. It wasn't pleasant to be cut, if in a moment of forgetfulness they spoke to a boy they had always been on familiar terms with. It wasn't pleasant to have all their usual occupations interrupted. The weather, as it happened, was not fit for football, but when it mended, if the Coventry still lasted, the chums would be forced from practising with their Form. And, as Pat said, that was serious.

With a strange feeling of solitude in the midst of a crowd, the three presently went into the gymnasium. There they came across Talbot. The captain of the school came directly towards them. His keen glance rested upon Pat Nugent's face.

"I hear you're in trouble," he said.

"Something of the sort," said Pat. "The Form have sent me to Coventry, because I won't go to the doctor and tell him a pack of lies, to go a linking."

Talbot smiled at this way of putting it.

"You still hold that you don't know anything about the frework business, Nugent?"

"Yes, Talbot. I've told the Head all I know."

"It's a queer business," said Talbot musingly. "You admit that you were in Lacy's study, making things unpleasant for him. It's strange that some other practical joker should have been on the war-path about the same time."

"Yes, I know it is; but I can't help that."

"Why don't you three set to work to find out who it was?" suggested the captain. "It must have been a junior, of course. If you set your wits to work you ought to be able to unearth him, you know."

The chums looked at one another.

"So we would, if we had a clue," said Blagden.

"I try and find out if anybody else in any of the Lower Form dormitories was out of his bed that night," said Talbot.

Blagden gave a jump.

"Ah, I see, you have thought of somebody already!" exclaimed Talbot, with a smile.

"My hat, yes!" said Blagden. "Cleeve was out! He followed us to see what Nugent was up to in Lacy's study. When he got back to the dormitory he was five minutes after us. I wondered what had kept him."

"Well, look into it," said the captain. "I'm sorry to see you're in Coventry, but it would make matters worse for a senior to interfere for you. But are you two fellows sent to Coventry as well as Nugent?"

"Oh, we're all in it!" said Blagden.

"They've stuck to me like bricks, as they are!" exclaimed Pat. "You see, they know I've told the truth. Still, it's awfully brickish of them."

"Oh, rats!" said Blagden uncomfortably. "Of course, we're not going to let those silly asses dictate to us, are we, Greene?"

"Not if we know it!" said Greene.

"Quite right," said Talbot. "If you believe in Nugent, it's only decent to stand up for him. But you'll find it very unpleasant in Coventry, so the sooner you get at the facts and bring them to light the better."

And with a pleasant nod the captain of St. Kit's left them.

"Talbot's right," exclaimed Blagden. "If we want the truth out, we've got to work it out ourselves. What do you think about Cleeve? Could he have done it?"

"He isn't the kind of chap," said Pat, shaking his head.

"He wouldn't have the nerve."

"He may have calculated that the blame would fall on you."

"Well, that's possible."

"Anyway, if he didn't do it, he was out that night, and he may have seen something of the chap who did do it."

"Let's question the bounder," said Greene.

"That's the idea. Hunt for him."

They hunted for Cleeve, and discovered him in his study. It was alone there, and he looked alarmed when the three chums marched in and closed the door.

He stared at them without speaking.

"I want a few words with you, Cleeve, old fellow," said Pat.

Cleeve did not speak.

"He's dumb," said Blagden. "I'll stick this pin in him, so, and—"

Cleeve yelled furiously.

"Why, he's not dumb, after all!" said Blagdy, looking surprised.

"You're in Coventry, you beast!" exclaimed Cleeve. "What do you mean by coming here? Get out of my study!"

"We've come to ask you some questions, kid."

"I won't answer! Get out!"

"Keep that pin handy, Blagdy, in case he's obstinate!" said Pat.

Cleeve made a bolt for the door. Pat caught him by the collar and swung him back.

"No, you don't!" he said grimly. "We mean business!"

Cleeve began to whine.

"What do you want, Nugent? I haven't done anything to you!"

"Haven't you, you cad?" said Pat savagely. "What about letting the Form believe that I did that frework business the other night, when you knew all the time you really did it?"

It was a shot at venture, but it told. Cleeve started, and looked in blank amazement at the speaker.

"Has—?" he began. He was going to say "Has Trimble let it out?" But he stopped himself in time, and his sentence remained unfinished.

"Well, has what?" demanded Pat.

"Nothing."

"What were you going to say?"

"Nothing—nothing of any consequence."

"Look here, you've as good as admitted that you know all about it. You may as well make a clean breast of it, Cleeve."

"I don't know anything at all about it! How should I?"

"You were out of the dormitory that night. You stayed out five minutes after Blagdy and I came in. You either played that trick on Lacy yourself, or you saw who did. You've given yourself away, you little rat!"

"I—I didn't see anybody. I don't know anything about it."

"What made you stay out so long, then?"

"I told you a master came out, and I dodged into a room."

"Which master was it?"

Cleeve hesitated for a moment.

"It was too dark to see."

"Look here, I know perfectly well that you are not telling the truth. Give him a shaking up, kids, and we'll shake the truth out of him!"

Cleeve began to struggle, but it was of little avail. Pat seized him by the shoulders, and Blagden by the legs, and they gave him a shaking that made his teeth rattle.

They did not shake the truth out of him, but they shook something else. There was a clink of coins, and five or six shillings rolled out on the floor.

"Let me go!" yelled Cleeve. "Let me go, you beastly bullies!"

They set him down. The word "bully" touched Pat in a tender spot. Anything in the nature of bullying he detested with all his heart.

Cleeve, gasping, hastily gathered up the money. The chums watched him, and exchanged looks.

Cleeve was well known in the Fourth for his impenniosity. He never had any money, and was always borrowing small sums of the other boys. Where had he obtained so much ready cash all of a sudden?

"My hat!" said Blagden. "He's been robbing a bank! I say, Cleeve, have any rich relations died and left you a giddy fortune?"

"Mind your own business!" snarled Cleeve. "Get out of my study, Bully!"

"Don't thump him," said Pat, as Blagden flared up at the word. "He ain't worth it, the worm. Let the brute alone. We'll get at the truth somehow. Come on!"

They quitted the study. There was a very thoughtful shade on Pat's face.

"I say, it's queer, Cleeve having all that money all of a sudden," said Blagden.

"Jolly queer!" exclaimed Greene. "And how wild he was at our seeing it."

"It is queer, chaps." Pat looked very serious. "It looks to me as if—as if—"

"What have you got in your head?"

"Well, I don't like thinking such a thing of any fellow," said Pat slowly. "But Cleeve is a sneak, and he's shown plainly enough that he knows who played that trick, and put the blame on me, hasn't he?"

"Yes. But what were you thinking?"

"Well, it looks to me as if Clevee knows all about it, and the fellow, whoever he is, has been making it worth his while to grease my mouth shut."

Greene whistled, but Blagden nodded emphatically.

"The same idea came into my head, Pat," he declared. "It looks awfully like it, and I know that Clevee is mean enough for anything. And he's hard up, too. He owes money to nearly every chap in the Form, and he often does fellows' impositions at threepence or a tanner a time. It looks beastly suspicious, anyhow, his having all that money all of a sudden."

"Well, we're going to find out the truth," said Pat determinedly. "We've got a clue to work on now, and we'll have it out before long."

The Squire's Secret.

Squire Lacy passed quickly into the Dragon Inn. It was late evening, and very cold. The squire was muffled up, with a cap pulled down over his forehead. He went quickly up the stairs and knocked at a door on the first floor.

It was opened as soon as he knocked. A coppery visage with reddened eyes peered out at him in the gloom.

"Thought it was you," said Seth Black. "I saw you coming, squire, but you was so muffled up that I—"

"Let me come in, fool, and don't stand chattering!" said Rupert Lacy sharply.

The man sullenly stepped back, and the Squire of Lynwood stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. He looked round him with an expression of ill-concealed disgust.

A big fire was blazing in the grate. There were the remains of a meal on the table, and several bottles. A half filled tumbler stood close by the chair near the window, where Seth Black had evidently been watching for his visitor. The atmosphere of the room was heavy with the fumes of tobacco and whisky.

Black caught the look on the squire's face, and sneered savagely.

"You don't like my quarters!" he said. "I desay I should be better fixed if I came up to the hall. P'raps I'd ter come."

"Nonsense, Black!" exclaimed the squire, his expression changing. "You seem to me to be very well fixed here, and quite comfortable."

Black drew down the blind, and pulled his chair to the fire.

"You can sit down if you like," he said. "We've got to talk business."

"I'll stand," said the squire. He stood with one hand resting on the table. Black sipped the tumbler of whisky and water, and waited for him to speak.

"There's little to say," resumed the squire, after a short pause. "I've come here to settle the matter. In a nutshell, you know some things—"

"Some little matters that happened when you was abroad, and when you wasn't called Rupert Lacy," grinned Black, over his tumbler. "Of course, you never dreamed I'd turn up here. But I knew, even in them days, that you didn't sail under your real name. I knew more than you guessed, squire, about you, and your father, too. I know that—"

"Never mind all that. You needn't go into details."

"Why not? There's nobody here to listen, I s'pose? I hunted you out, though you thought you had covered your tracks. Though I never expected to find you such a swell. Things have changed with you."

"You knew me before I came into my property. I had displeased my father, and he kept me on a short allowance."

"I see. You had to get money, then, and you got it the easiest way, which wasn't by working honestly. It would surprise the folks round here to learn that Squire Lacy of Lynwood had once—"

"Hold your tongue, confound you. That's all over, long ago, and I haven't come here to rake up old stories out of the past," said the squire angrily.

"No; I desay they ain't agreeable to you!" grinned Black. "Well, to come to business, what have you got to propose?"

"In the first place, you must leave the neighbourhood. Select any place you choose for a residence, excepting this locality, and I will pay you two hundred pounds a year."

"And why mustn't I stay here?"

"Because people will talk. They may find out there is some connection between us. You may babble in your cups. You are certain to do so."

"And that's the only reason why I should go?"

"Of course," said the squire uneasily. "What are you driving at?"

"I'm driving at this—that you lie, Mr. Lacy."

The squire's eyes blazed, and he took a step towards the ruffian. Black met his furious gaze without quailing.

"You don't like that," he sneered. "But it's the truth, and you know it. I desay you'd like to get rid of the sight of me, but that ain't your chief reason."

"Fool! What could my reason be, then?"

"You want to get me away from the neighbourhood, not of your home in partickler, but of St. Kit's College."

The ruffian fastened his eyes upon the squire's face as he spoke, and he chuckled as he saw the wave of pallor that passed over it.

"What do you mean?" demanded Lacy hoarsely. "What have you to do with St. Kit's? You are raving."

"I've seen the chap who is called Arthur Talbot there."

"The squire's hand gripped the table hard.

"Talbot! I think I have heard the name."

"Yes, I think you have!" sneered Black. "When I saw him, do you think I didn't know at once why you wanted to get me out of the place?"

"What can you know about Talbot? What is he to me, or to you?"

"You don't know?" sneered Black.

"Certainly not. You are talking in riddles."

"Bah! Do you think I am blind? You gave yourself away the moment I mentioned the name. You know who Arthur Talbot is as well as I do, and how he could if he knew—"

"Enough!" said the squire savagely. "Supposing there is anything in what you say—which I do not admit—it makes no difference to us."

"Whether you admit it or not makes no difference. I know what I know. But this 'ere is the point. I'm not going away; at least, not till I like it."

"What object have you to serve by staying?"

"Well, I shall be able to keep my eye on you and on the box."

"If you were to speak to him once on this topic, you could say good-bye to the hope of ever getting a penny out of me."

"I might be able to make better terms with him."

Rupert Lacy ground his teeth.

"You had better take care!" he hissed. "You are dealing with a desperate man. You, better than anyone else, should know that I am not to be trifled with, Black."

Black shrugged his shoulders.

"We're not in Africa now," he said, "and you dare not put a bullet through me, much as you'd like to do it. I'm not afraid of you."

"Well, let us finish this discussion," said the squire, changing his tone. "Do you mean that you refuse to accept my terms?"

"Yes, so far as going away from here is concerned. I'm going to suit myself about that. As for the figure you have named, that will suit me."

The squire took out his pocket-book.

"There are ten fivers. In three months' time you shall have the same again."

Black grinned as he gathered up the crisp notes with a grimy hand.

"Good enough, guv'nor! But if I ran short of money, you wouldn't be mean enough to refuse a loan to an old pal, would you?"

"I may consider about that. If we were on the veldt now, I would shoot you like a dog, and you know it. You may drive me too far. Take warning."

And Squire Lacy strode from the room.

His last words had made a considerable impression upon Seth Black. The ruffian's coppery face was thoughtful and serious as he sipped his whisky. Better than anyone else, probably, Seth Black knew of what the squire was capable when his evil nature was roused. He held the whip-hand, but it might be dangerous to push his advantage too far.

Squire Lacy strode from the inn with his teeth set hard, his eyes gleaming under his contracted brows.

"Another danger," he muttered. "What wretched ill-luck that Black should have met Talbot! He was certain to recognise him; but if they had not met he would never have dreamed that he was at St. Kit's." He ground his teeth savagely.

"All the more reason for getting rid of him. I must have the silver box. When that is in my hands, and Arthur Talbot is driven from St. Kit's, I shall be safe!"

The Ragging.

The Fourth Form at St. Kit's was in a furious frame of mind.

Saturday had come, and instead of the usual half-holiday, the doctor's sentence kept the Fourth within doors.

The weather had mended, and football was again possible.

NEXT SATURDAY "DR. SPECS,"
A Tale of Specs, the Trick, and
By H. Clarke Ross.

"UNDER THE ENGLISH CHANNEL,"
A Thrilling Tale,
By Ernest Binns
IN "PLUCK," J.P.

The Fifth and the Sixth were playing on Big Side, and the "infants" of the Third had a game going. But the Fourth Form pined and raged indoors.

Usually there was a want of sympathy between the Upper Fourth and the Lower. The young gentlemen who expected to pass soon into the Fifth were inclined to treat the Lower Fourth with disdain. And Trimble, the Upper Fourth captain, was a bully, as we know, and detested by all the youngsters.

But now there was no want of harmony in the Fourth Form. Upper and Lower, equal sufferers by the doctor's decision, was in complete rapport. Trimble, from being a disliked bully, had become a popular leader. He took the lead in the crusade against Pat Nugent, and the whole Form plumped for him.

For it was Pat's fault, or so the juniors believed, that they had that weary hour of extra "prep." every evening, and Pat's fault that the Saturday afternoon's holiday was taken away.

The fiat had gone forth that until the perpetrator of the firework trick was discovered, the sentence should remain in force, and as all the juniors were satisfied that Pat was the guilty party, they were wild with indignation at his refusing to confess.

Only Blagden and Greene still believed in Pat, and stuck to him; the rest of the Form cut him dead, and they were angry to see how little effect it had on him.

When Saturday came, and the other Forms turned out to the footer, and the Fourth had to stay in, their anger and indignation reached the culminating point.

When school was at last dismissed, there was a meeting in a classroom, attended by almost the whole of the Fourth, for the purpose of discussing the situation.

It was an indignation meeting, and there was so much indignation that for a long time nothing was to be distinguished in the din of voices. Trimble, however, mounting on a form, succeeded in restoring a little silence.

"Shut up!" he bawled. "Silence for the chair! Gentlemen of the Fourth Form—will you shut up, you noisy bouncers?—gentlemen of the Fourth—I'll come and punch your head if you don't stop, young Williams—we are met together to—"

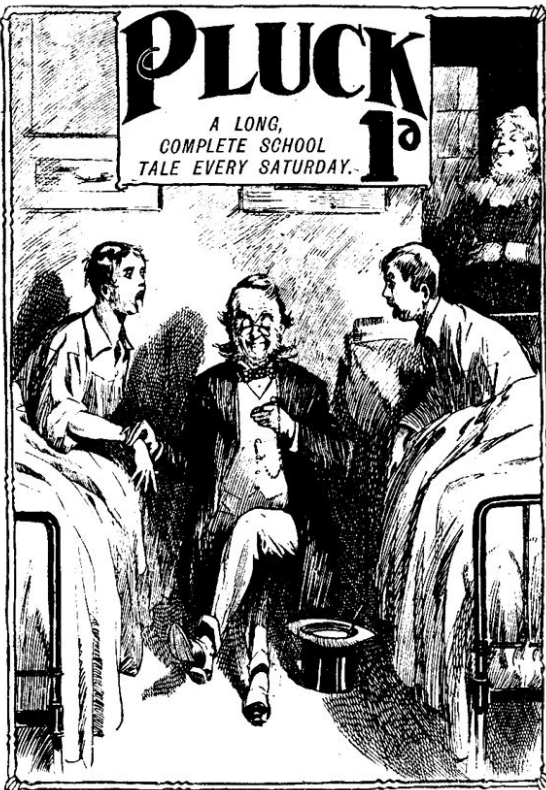
"Hear, hear!" shouted Blane.

"I'll hear, hear," you if you don't be quiet!" said Trimble. "We've got to discuss the situation, I'm chairman. Now, kids, what's to be done?"

There was a babel at once.

"Shut up!" said Trimble. "Now, we are all know that Pat Nugent played that firework trick, don't we? All agreed?"

(Another long instalment of this school tale next Saturday.)



This picture depicts an incident from "Dr. Specs." by H. Clarke Hook, one of the two complete tales for next Saturday's PLUCK. 32 pages. Price 1d.

Your Editor's Corner.



All letters should be addressed, "The Editor, PLUCK, 2, Carmelite House, Carmelite Street, London."

"DR. SPECS."

Our first long, complete school tale for next Saturday's PLUCK will be written by H. Clarke Hook, and will deal with the adventures of Specs, the Twins, & Co. Specs adopts another of his wonderful disguises, and the fun is fast and furious, especially when, as Dr. Specs, he prescribes for his chums Dick and Tim Ross.

The second long story, also complete, is entitled,

"UNDER THE ENGLISH CHANNEL,"

and is a fine tale dealing with the construction and ultimate destruction of the tunnel from Dover to Calais.

Order PLUCK in advance.

On Thursday, March 14th, a new story-book will be on sale. It is called "The Gem," and the editor claims that every complete story it will contain each week is a "gem."

The price of this new paper is only one halfpenny, so I should recommend you to get it and see what you think of it.

The two new additions to "The Boys' Friend Library" are now on sale, price 3d.

No. 13—"ONLY A PITBOY," by Hamilton Edwards.

No. 14—"CAR-NINGO'S LAST CHANCE," a school tale by Henry St. John.

These complete books are splendid value, and you should not fail to secure copies early.

**NEXT
WEDNESDAY'S
COVER.**

A Pocket-knife Winner.

This is to you a begging letter. Tho' I'd wish to write it better. When you, I know, my lines peruse. You must see my little ruse. In point of fact, I want to say how pleased I'd be to have some day. A little gift, let's say a knife, To help me cut my way in life. In praise of Jack and Sam, of Pete and Rory. The best of chums, and best old doggy.
YOUR EDITOR