


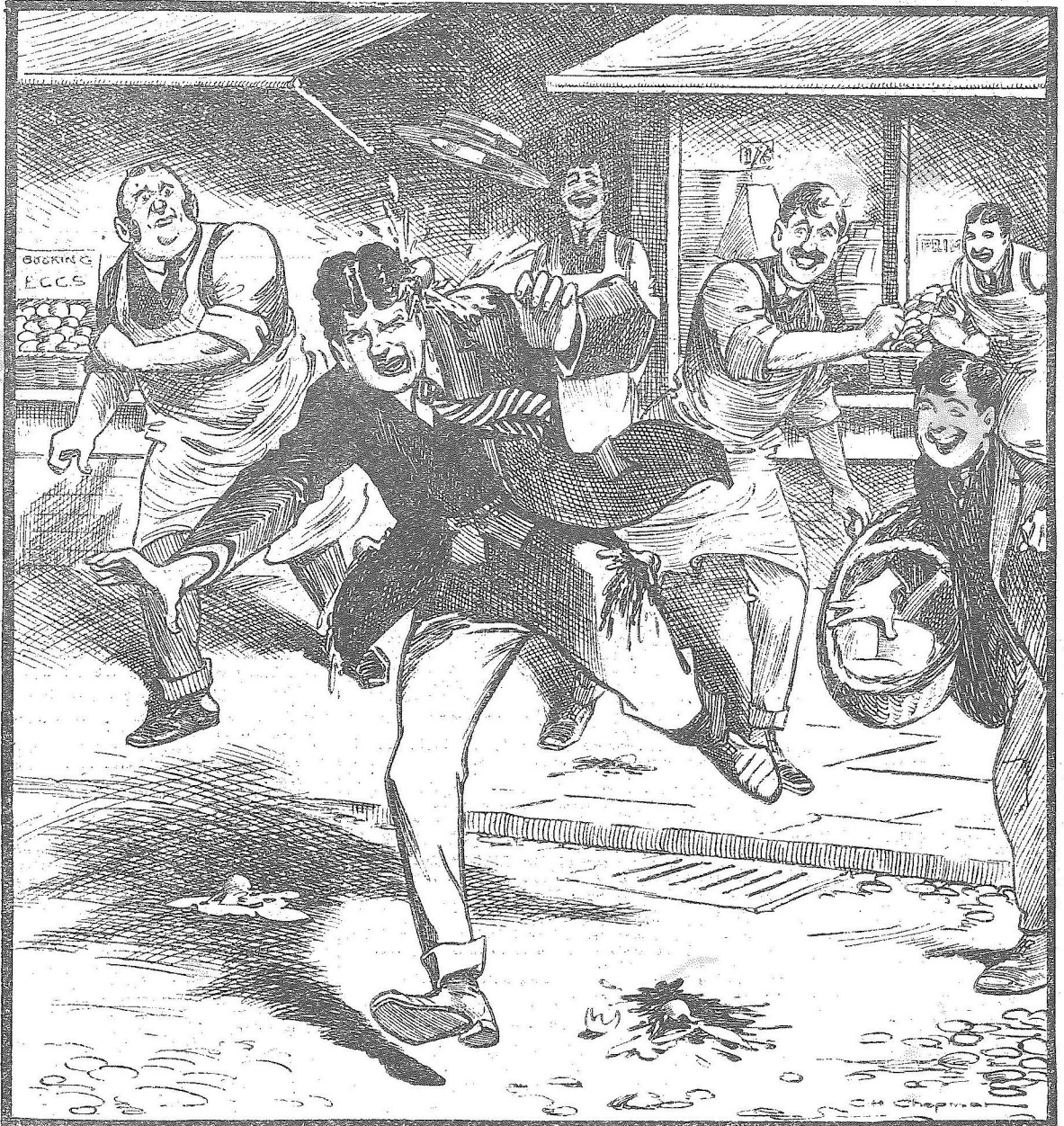
**THREE NEW STORIES INSIDE!**

*The*  
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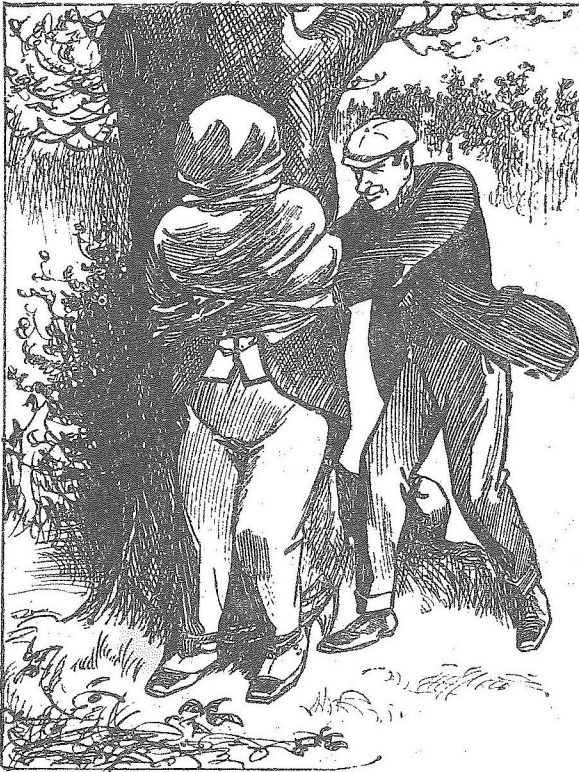
No. 30.  
New Series.

Three Complete Stories of—  
**HARRY WHARTON & CO.—JIMMY SILVER & CO.—TOM MERRY & CO.**



**GETTING RID OF COKER!**

(An Exciting Scene in the Magnificent Long, Complete School Tale of the Chums of Greyfriars.)



# The Vanished Umpire!

A Splendid New Story, dealing with the Adventures of HARRY WHARTON & Co. of Greyfriars.  
By FRANK RICHARDS.

## THE FIRST CHAPTER.

### Coker's Reward.

"**H**A! What a good thing it is to be young!"  
Mr. Prout, the master of the Fifth, made that remark to himself as he strolled out into the summer sunshine.

On Little Side at Greyfriars a cricket-match was in progress between those near and dear rivals, Harry Wharton & Co. of the Remove, and Temple & Co. of the Upper Fourth.

Harry Wharton's touring-party was travelling to Bedford next day, and this was their last chance of getting in some practice.

Mr. Prout knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and stood gazing at the flannelled figures for some moments.

The Upper Fourth were batting, and their wickets were falling like ninepins before the bowling of Frank Nugent and Hurree Singh.

Cecil Reginald Temple seemed to be the only fellow who could make anything of a stand.

Temple was still batting, and after a few moments' deliberation Mr. Prout walked towards him.

"My hat!" ejaculated Frank Nugent, pausing in the act of delivering his next ball. "What's old Prout barging in for, I wonder?"  
"Temple!" exclaimed Mr. Prout.

The captain of the Upper Fourth looked round in some annoyance.

Interruptions just when he was getting set were unwelcome.

"Yes, sir?" said Temple.

Mr. Prout smiled good-humouredly.

"I see that your wickets are emulating the shades of night—" he began.

"What do you mean, sir?"

"They are falling fast!"

And Mr. Prout laughed heartily at his feeble joke.

The Remove fieldsmen did not laugh. They stared at the master of the Fifth in astonishment, wondering if the heat of the sun had affected him.

"I think, Temple," continued Mr. Prout, "that your side needs strengthening. You require an additional player, preferably one who is seasoned and experienced."

"Oh, my hat!"

"Do you not agree with me, Temple?"

"The Remove wouldn't like it if we played twelve men, sir," said Temple.

"Nonsense! The Remove would not be consulted in the matter at all! I do not like

to see a one-sided cricket-match, and I will endeavour to level the teams up a little."

Temple gasped. So did Harry Wharton & Co. Likewise Horace Coker, who was seated on the umpire's stool.

"What on earth is Prout driving at?" murmured Bob Cherry.

Mr. Prout's intentions were made clear the next moment.

"I think I will—er—take a knock, Temple."

"Ye gods!"

"When the next wicket falls I will come in and stop the rot."

Temple darted an almost homicidal look at the master of the Fifth. Fortunately, Mr. Prout was too short-sighted to notice it.

This was not the first occasion on which Mr. Prout had taken part in a cricket-match.

In the dim and distant part he had captained a Greyfriars team against the Old Boys, and the latter had won the match with consummate ease.

The very fact that Mr. Prout was captain of a side was a sure indication that the side in question was doomed to defeat.

"Oh, help!" gasped Temple, as Mr. Prout stalked away. "Fancy old Prout playing the giddy goat like this! It's good-bye to our chances of victory!"

"You never had any, to begin with!" grinned Bob Cherry.

"Rats!"

"We're sure of a handsome victory with Prout playing for the opposition," remarked Squiff. "If Prout be for us, who can be against us?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The master of the Fifth retired to his study, where he changed into a very ancient suit of flannels.

In a few moments he reappeared on the cricket-ground.

Fry's wicket fell at this juncture, and Mr. Prout calmly walked in to take his place.

"My only aunt!"

"See, the Conquering hero comes!" chanted Monty Newland.

"Look here, Wharton," said Bolsover major, "aren't you going to appeal against Prout playing?"

Harry Wharton shook his head.

"You're not funky of speaking straight out to a Form-master, I suppose?"

Wharton flushed.

"Of course I'm not!" he said. "But Prout won't spoil our chances. Inky will settle his hash with the first ball!"

Hurree Singh grinned.

"The wreckful damage impartially administered to the esteemed wicket will be

"Terrific!" chuckled Bob Cherry.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Prout approached the wicket with ponderous steps.

He nodded amiably to Coker of the Fifth, and then took his stand.

Judging by Mr. Prout's attitude, one would have imagined that cricket was a very grim game.

The batsman crouched low to meet the ball, and glared defiance at Hurree Singh.

Although getting on in years, the master of the Fifth intended to show these juniors that there was life in the old dog yet.

"Play!" murmured Hurree Singh.

And, taking a quick, short run, he delivered the first ball.

Mr. Prout swiped at it blindly. In fact, he waddled half-way up the pitch to meet it, so that, if he had not been clean-bowled, he would certainly have been stumped.

As it was he missed the ball completely.

The bat swept through the air and met with no resistance.

Mr. Prout spun round after it, and completed his merry antics by sitting down violently on the turf.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the fieldsmen. And Cecil Reginald Temple joined in the general laughter.

Mr. Prout blinked round him in a dazed fashion.

"Bless my soul!" he gasped. "What has happened?"

And then Mr. Prout caught sight of his wicket, which presented a woeful spectacle.

The three stumps lay on top of each other in the form of a pyramid.

As for the balls, they were nowhere to be seen. They had been scattered by Hurree Singh's ball like chaff before the reaper.

Mr. Prout struggled to his feet.

"What boy has had the effrontery to pull up those stumps?" he demanded.

"My only aunt!" gasped Nugent.

"Really, Nugent," said Mr. Prout, blinking round, "I fail to see the lady in question!"

"You were clean bowled, sir!" said Frank Nugent, who would have been more tactful to break the news gently.

"Clean bowled!" thundered Mr. Prout. "Nonsense, Nugent! Calamities of that sort only befall the young and inexperienced."

"The honoured sahib was whackfully beaten by the esteemed ball!" said Hurree Singh.

"Absurd!" snapped Mr. Prout. "I was not out—was I, Temple?"

"That's for the umpire to say, sir," said Temple.

Horace Coker was appealed to. "How was that, umpire?" asked Harry Wharton.

And then, to the unbounded astonishment and disgust of the Removites, Coker exclaimed:—

"Not out!"

As a matter of fact, Coker's attention had wandered from the game, and he had not seen Mr. Prout bowled. Therefore he decided to give his Form-master the benefit of the doubt. That, in Coker's opinion, was the safest way to treat Form-masters.

Mr. Prout smiled triumphantly, and walked back to the batting-crease.

"Polish him off, Inky!" came in a stage-whisper from Bob Cherry.

Hurree Singh sent down a deadly ball, and Mr. Prout stood his ground with the cool courage he had shown many years before in the Rocky Mountains.

Whack!

It was not the sound of bat meeting ball. It was the sound of the ball coming into violent contact with Mr. Prout's shin.

The Form-master uttered a yelp of pain, and commenced to dance about on one foot.

"Jazzing up to date!" murmured Bob Cherry.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He's out!" grunted Johnny Bull. "His leg was right in front of the wicket!"

"That's so," agreed Wharton. "How was that, umpire?"

Mr. Prout stopped dancing, and looked fixedly at Horace Coker. His expression seemed to say:

"Don't you dare to give me out!"

And Coker didn't!

"Not out!" he said.

And there was a chorus of dissent from the Remove fieldsmen.

Looks of deadly animosity were levelled at Coker, but the umpire discreetly ignored them.

Hurree Singh's third ball was just as deadly as the two previous ones.

More by accident than design, Mr. Prout succeeded in smiting it, and it travelled to the boundary, amid ironical cheers from the pavilion.

"Ah!" murmured Mr. Prout. "I am fast getting into my stride!"

The next ball he sent into the waiting hands of Bob Cherry, at point.

"How's that?" demanded Bob.

"Out!" said Coker.

"I could then act as umpire in the cricket-match at Bedford, sir," said Coker.

Had such a request been made at any other time, Mr. Prout would probably have regarded it as a piece of unparalleled "cheek" on Coker's part.

But in the moment of his cricketing triumph Mr. Prout felt magnanimous.

"I think it might be arranged, Coker," he said. "I will mention the matter to Dr. Locke."

"Thanks awfully, sir!"

Coker walked away in high feather.

A week's immunity from lessons—a week in the role of dictator to the Remove—would suit him to the ground.

Coker's pleasant reflections were rudely cut short as the Famous Five sprang out upon him.

They had been lying in ambush, waiting for an opportunity of getting even with Coker.

"Hands off, you fags!" began Coker, in alarm.

The Famous Five did not heed. They seized the burly Fifth-Former, and imparted a bumping, which left Coker considerably sore and shaken.

"Ow!" gasped Coker. "Ah! Yah! Groooh!"

"How does the chorus go?" inquired Bob Cherry.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You wait!" stuttered Coker, shaking a furious fist after the Famous Five as they strolled away. "I'm coming along to Bedford to-morrow, to keep an eye on you—and I won't stand any nonsense!"

And the famous Five's retort was wafted back to Horace Coker on the summer breeze.

"Rats!"

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Wingate Hits Out!

EARLY next morning the tourists started.

Coker of the Fifth accompanied them.

Mr. Prout had chanted Coker's praises to the Head, who had readily consented for the Fifth-Former to go to Bedford.

Harry Wharton & Co. would cheerfully have kicked Coker out of the railway-carriage but for the fact that Wingate of the Sixth was present.

Had the juniors but known it, Wingate would not have been at all sorry to see Coker ejected. There was no love lost between the captain of Greyfriars and the conceited Fifth-Former.

On one point Harry Wharton & Co. were firmly agreed.

Come what may, Coker must not be allowed to umpire in the cricket-match between the Greyfriars Remove and the boys of Bedford.

"Just before the match comes off," whispered Frank Nugent to Harry Wharton, "we must get Coker out of the way, somehow!"

And the captain of the Remove nodded assent.

The journey to Bedford via London occupied all the morning; but the Greyfriars juniors felt in the pink of condition as they stepped from the train. They had tackled journeys three times as lengthy as this one.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" ejaculated Bob Cherry, as his eye roved along the platform. "Just look at that merchant, you fellows!"

The rest of the tourists followed Bob's gaze.

A slim-looking youth, attired in spotless flannel trousers and a many-coloured blazer, was lounging on the platform.

He wore no cap, and his hair, long and thin and shiny, was brushed neatly back on his head. In the collar of his snow-white cricket-shirt was a tie, the hues of which seemed to have been borrowed from Joseph's celebrated coat of many colours.

Nor was this all.

The elegantly-attired youth sported a monocle, which was screwed firmly into one of his pale-blue eyes.

"He's got up like Gussy of St. Jim!" said Mark Linley.

He lounged up to the Fifth-Former.

"Say!" he drawled. "Were you alludin' to me?"

"I was!" said Coker, with a grin.

But the grin died away immediately, as the slim youth shot out a small but strenuous fist, which caught Coker fairly and squarely on the nose.

"Caroooooh!" roared Coker.

The Greyfriars juniors chuckled. They urged the dandy to give Coker a further dose.

And the dandy did!

He followed up with a blow on the chest, which caused Coker to sit down suddenly and with great violence.

"Hurrah!"

"Well hit, sir!"

Coker staggered to his feet, ripe for revenge.

"You—you—" he spluttered, advancing towards the dandy. "I—I'll scalp you!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Coker clenched his massive fists; but before he could do any damage Wingate gripped him by the collar and swung him back.

"That's enough!" he said sternly.

"Leggo!" gasped Coker. "I'll knock him into the middle of next week! Did you see what he did? He hit me—me, Horace Coker!"

"Serve you jolly well right!" growled Wingate.

"Do you think I'm going to take this lying down?" hooted Coker.

"You've no choice in the matter!" said Wingate.

And he maintained a tight grip on Coker's collar.

Meanwhile, the slim youth addressed himself to Harry Wharton & Co.

"You are the Greyfriars fellows—what?" he said.

Harry Wharton nodded.

"Good! My name's Cobb—Clarence Cobb—and I'm the skipper of the Bedford team."

"My hat!"

"Will you shake?" asked Cobb.

And Wharton shook. He had expected his hand to be taken in a flabby, lifeless manner; but Master Cobb was a believer in hearty handshakes.

He gripped Wharton's hand with an intensity which was painful.

"Ow!" gasped Wharton.

"I trust," said Cobb, smiling at the Greyfriars juniors, "that the sports will prove a thumping success. My pater—Colonel Cobb, J.P., O.B.E., et cetera, et cetera—has consented not only to act as one of the judges, but as umpire in the cricket match!"

"He's not going to queer my pitch!" howled Coker. "I don't care if he's won every blessed Order under the sun! I'm the official umpire!"

"I fancy there's room for two," said Cobb, smiling at his recent victim. "My pater will umpire at one end, and you at the other."

Wingate looked grim.

"I don't care to entrust the job to Coker," he said. "I heard how he let the Remove down yesterday."

Coker gave a snort.

"You can't help yourself!" he said. "Both Prout and the Head have agreed to let me umpire."

"Then they've shown very feeble powers of discrimination," said Wingate. "Anyway, you can keep off the grass. I'm going to umpire myself."

"You—you—"

"Steady on," warned Wingate, "or I shall ask our friend Cobb to give you another dose of the same medicine!"

Clarence Cobb smiled again. In fact, his smooth face seemed to be wreathed in an everlasting smile.

"Where did you fellows intend to stay?" he asked.

"We were putting up at an hotel," said Wingate.

"Well, you can cut it out. My pater wishes me to invite you to stay at our place. It's a toppin' house, standin' in its own grounds, an' I'm sure you'll be jolly comfortable."

"This is awfully decent of you—" began Wingate.

"Don't thank me. Thank the pater. You'll come, won't you?"

"I hardly care to trespass upon your pater's hospitality to such an extent. You see, there are fourteen of us."

"Oh, that's all rot, don't you know! My pater's entertained six times that number before now. Come along! I'll take you to our little grey home in the west."

And Clarence Cobb led the way along the main street of Bedford.

"What an awfully decent sort!" said Squiff.

Harry Wharton nodded.

"There's more in him than meets the eye," he said. "That swell clobber and almost girlish manner hides some very sound stuff."

"Hear, hear!" said Bob Cherry. "Our friend Clarence is a dark horse. He doesn't look as if he could say 'Bo!' to a goose, but the way he bowled Coker over shows that he's not a weakling."

"In fact, he may turn out to be a Jessop or a Ranji," said Nugent.

And the others regarded it as extremely probable. It was unsafe to judge by appearances.

The tourists were emerging into the outskirts of the town, when a man with a face like a ferret stepped across the road and nodded genially to them.

"Any relation of yours, Bolsover?" inquired Johnny Bull.

"Of course not, fathead! I don't know the fellow from Adam!"

The ferret-faced man stepped up to Wingate, and drew him aside, while the rest of the party passed on.

"What do you want with me?" demanded Wingate.

"You're the king of the castle, ain't you?"

"I don't understand you."

"You're the head cook an' bottle-washer at Greyfriars?"

"I'm captain of the school, if that's what you mean."

Wingate glanced at the man with extreme disavour. He expected the ferret-faced person to come out with a story to the effect that he was an old boy of Greyfriars, in the hope that he might raise a lean on the strength of it.

Further conversation, however, showed that the man had an entirely different object.

"That's a very smart-lookin' set o' youngsters," he said, jerking his thumb in the direction of the tourists.

"They're keen sportsmen, if that's what you mean," said Wingate.

The man nodded.

"My name's Bill Mooney," he said. "I'm no relation to the Viscount Mooney, of Hanwell Castle. I keep the Pig an' Whistle, a few miles from 'ere."

"Look here," said Wingate. "I don't want to hear your family history. Say what you've got to say, and look sharp!"

Billy Mooney chuckled.

"He will 'ave 'is little joke, bless 'im!" he said. And then he added:

"Would you care to back your smart-lookin' youngsters to beat the local kids? A quid on each event, say?"

Wingate glared.

"You've stopped me because you want to make a series of bets with me?" he exclaimed.

"That's the ticket! You ought to rope in quite a little nest-egg. If your kids win every event—an' they look quite capable of doin' it—you'll make twenty quid!"

"Oh!"

"I'm not askin' you to bet against your own school," continued Bill Mooney. "I'm too much of a sport for that. I'll back the locals, an' you can back your own kids!"

"Oh, can I?" said Wingate grimly.

"Yes. You can put a quid on every event, except the cricket-match. That bein' an important item, we'll make it a fiver. Now, what do you say?"

What Wingate said was not expressed in words.

The captain of Greyfriars shot out his left, straight from the shoulder, and Bill Mooney went sprawling. He landed on his back in the roadway, wondering what strange perversity of Nature had caused the stars to suddenly appear in the daytime.

"There's your answer!" said Wingate shortly.

And he strode after the retreating figures of the tourists.

As for Billy Mooney, he sorted himself out with some difficulty, and limped sadly away.

"I might 'ave known there was nothin' doin'!" he growled. "I woke up the wrong passenger!"

But Bill Mooney was still very keen on backing the Bedford boys. He had seen them at practice, and he knew they would take some beating.

Shortly afterwards he had his heart's desire.

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One of his customers at the Pig and Whistle, who had heard of the success of the Greyfriars juniors in other counties, cheerfully took on the series of wagers which Wingate had so forcibly declined.

And this little transaction was destined to have an important bearing on the events to follow.

### THE THIRD CHAPTER.

#### The Sports.

COLONEL COBB was, in every sense, a fine old English gentleman. He placed his house and grounds at the disposal of the Greyfriars fellows, and he gave them such a splendid lunch that Harry Wharton began to fear that they would not do themselves justice in the running races.

Coker, of course, was in his element. He chatted away to Colonel Cobb, representing himself as a great man when he was at home.

"Of course," said Coker, "I should be captain of Greyfriars, only—"

"Only what?" asked the colonel.

"Well, I've got so many important jobs to do that I thought I'd let Wingate hold the reins."

"Why, you—you—" stammered Wingate.

"Dry up, Wingate!" said Coker, frowning. "Don't you know that it's very rude to interrupt a conversation?"

Wingate dried up. But he made a mental resolve to deal with Coker as soon as opportunity permitted.

After lunch Clarence Cobb introduced Harry Wharton & Co. to the other members of the Bedfordshire team. For the most part they were sturdy, stocky fellows, totally unlike Clarence himself.

There was quite a sprinkling of spectators in the field where the running races were due to take place.

Bill Mooney was there. He took care to keep at a safe distance from Wingate, who would not need much provocation to repeat his straight left.

There was some excitement as Colonel Cobb rounded up the entrants for the hundred yards race.

"I've got a feeling in my bones," said Bob Cherry, "that these merry tours won't last much longer. Therefore it's up to us to score all the wins we can."

Harry Wharton stared.

"What makes you think the tours are coming to a full stop, Bob?" he exclaimed.

"I've got a premonition—"

"That's a good word," said Squiff. "I'll back it both ways!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I've got a premonition," repeated Bob firmly, "that something's going to happen very shortly which will put the stopper on all future tours. I may be wrong, of course."

"I hope you are!" said Frank Nugent. "These tours make life worth living."

"Without them life would be a dreary and a wasteful desert!" said Hurree Singh, in his quaint English.

"Yes, rather!"

The Greyfriars juniors were crouching low during this conversation, waiting for Colonel Cobb's pistol to start them.

Crack!

The pistol went, and the runners followed suit.

A short, sharp sprint, a breathless group of fellows breasting the tape, and the race was over.

Colonel Cobb's eyes glowed with paternal pride as he announced the result.

"Clarence Cobb wins!" he exclaimed.

"Hurrah!"

"First blood to Bedford!"

Bill Mooney chortled at the result. He had won a pound.

"That fellow Cobb's a corker!" said Frank Nugent. "He looks like a blessed tailor's dummy, and yet he can sprint like the dickens!"

"He's not going to win the quarter-mile!" said Squiff, with emphasis.

And Clarence didn't, for the simple reason that Squiff won it.

The Australian junior finished in style, several yards ahead of the Bedfordshire boy, who finished second.

Billy Mooney muttered a word not to be found in the dictionary. He had won a pound, only to lose it again within ten minutes!

Bill's peace of mind was still further disturbed a little later, when Bob Cherry, with a mighty leap, won the high jump.

"These Greyfriars' fellows are 'ot stuff!" murmured Billy Mooney morosely.

As a matter of fact Harry Wharton & Co. were throwing themselves heart and soul into the task of winning as many events as possible.

Bob Cherry's remarks that the sports tours might be drawing to a close stimulated the efforts of his comrades.

Clarence Cobb, slim and agile, wriggled home first in the obstacle race, but both the long jump and the mile went to Greyfriars. Then came the tug-of-war.

As the two teams lined up on the rope, Coker of the Fifth strolled up to give the Greyfriars juniors the doubtful benefit of his advice.

"You kids aren't shaping badly," he began. "In fact, you're doing quite well."

"That's because you're not taking part in the sports, Coker!" said Bob Cherry.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Coker frowned.

"I don't want any cheek," he said. "I came along to give you a few hints on how to win the tug-of-war."

"We sha'n't win if you're hanging around!" growled Squiff. "Your face will put everybody off their stroke!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"In the first place—" said Coker.

"Buzz off!"

"You want to throw your united weight in—"

"We'll throw something else if you don't vamoose!" grunted Johnny Bull.

"Look here—"

"Stand aside, Coker!" said Wingate sharply.

Coker refused to comply, whereupon Bob Cherry promptly made a noose at the end of the rope.

"Good old Broncho Bill!" grinned Nugent. "Now see if you can catch the giddy buffalo!"

The rest of the fellows stood clear of the rope, while Bob Cherry hurled it towards Coker.

At the first attempt the rope failed to achieve its object. But the end of it caught Coker full in the face, causing him to splutter wildly.

"Yooooop! You cheeky cub—"

Bob Cherry drew in the rope, and launched it for the second time. And this time the noose encircled Coker's head, and was drawn tight.

"Steady on, kid!" said Wingate, laughing. "You'll strangle him!"

"Thereby rendering a valuable service to the community!" said Squiff.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Coker was almost purple in the face as he struggled in the noose. And the more he struggled the tighter the noose became.

The Bedfordshire boys were yelling with laughter. So were the Greyfriars juniors. And a smile hovered on the lips of Colonel Cobb.

"Get me out of this!" gasped Coker.

Frank Nugent stepped up to the spluttering Fifth-former.

"Will you promise to be a good little boy?" he said.

"Yes."

"And you won't molest us again?"

"Yes. I—I mean, no!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And you admit you're a pudding-headed chump?"

"Ow! Yes."

"All serene, then! I'll release you," said Nugent. "You're bound over to keep the peace for the remainder of the afternoon. You understand?"

"Yes. Buck up!" gasped the unfortunate Horace.

Frank Nugent set Coker free, and no further advice was given on the subject of how to win a tug-of-war.

Indeed, the Greyfriars juniors did not seem to stand in need of any advice, for they won two pulls out of three with consummate ease.

Bill Mooney was ramping and raving by this time.

He had expected to make a rich haul as a result of his wagers, but his great expectations were not realised. He was five or six pounds out of pocket already.

And there was worse to come. Bill Mooney was convinced of that. He summed up the Greyfriars fellows as being a set of fine all-round sportsmen, and it was more than probable that they would win the boxing contest and the cricket-match.

And a five-pound note was at stake, so far as the latter event was concerned!



Wingate gripped Coker by the collar and swung him round. "Leggo!" gasped Coker. "I'll scalp him! He hit me—Horace Coker!" (See page 3.)

Bill Mooney began furiously to think. "Somethin' will 'ave to be done about it!" he told himself. "That cricket-match is a sure snip for Greyfriars. I shall 'ave to prevent it comin' off somehow."

But how? That was a problem which loomed very largely in Bill's mind.

Although pretty much of a rascal, he knew where to draw the line, and even the idea of causing injury to any of the Remove players did not even occur to him.

"Somethin' will 'ave to be done!" he repeated. "I'll safeguard meself against losin' that fiver, anyway!"

Whilst Bill Mooney was casting about for ways and means, the Greyfriars juniors were adding to their triumphs.

Squiff won the sack-race, and Bolsover major threw the cricket-ball farther than any other competitor.

The last item on the day's programme was a five-mile race.

The conditions were not ideal for such an event. The sun blazed down fiercely, and the motors and Army lorries on the main road sent clouds of dust into the faces of the runners.

Harry Wharton led at the outset, and his lead was maintained right up to the last lap. Then he heard a patter of feet behind him, and knew he was being overhauled.

"This won't do!" he muttered. He dared not look round, or valuable seconds would be lost.

Clenching his hands tightly, the captain of the Remove ran on. Colonel Cobb and George Wingate were holding a tape across the roadway at the spot where the race would finish.

Wharton saw the tape, and he redoubled his efforts.

But the patter of feet behind him came closer and closer.

"It's that fellow Clarence!" thought Wharton. "I musn't let him overtake me!"

But, although the spirit was willing, the flesh was weak. Wharton had covered the first four miles at practically top speed, and the heat and burden of the day was beginning to tell upon him. He stumbled towards the tape, and was about to breast it, when the fellow who had been running in his wake suddenly shot past him, to finish first in fine style.

"Licked!" gasped Wharton breathlessly. "Well run, Clarence!"

"My name is not Clarence, my worthy and esteemed chum."

Wharton stared. "Why, my hat, it's Inky!"

So Greyfriars had won, after all. Hurree Singh's victory in the five-mile race was the crowning achievement of the afternoon.

Clarence Cobb was still smiling, however, as he conducted the Greyfriars fellows back to his father's house.

"There's still time for us to turn the tables," he said. "The boxin' comes off to-morrow mornin', an' the cricket-match in the afternoon."

"Who are you putting up as your boxing representative?" asked Wharton.

"Myself!"

The Greyfriars juniors stared at first. And then they recalled the manner in which Clarence had dealt with Coker on the station platform. A fellow who could bowl Coker over was not to be despised when it came to fighting a six-round boxing contest.

The juniors spent a very pleasant evening at Colonel Cobb's house, the Gables.

The afternoon's sport had terminated very satisfactorily, and Harry Wharton & Co. were keenly looking forward to a continuation of their triumphs on the morrow.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Very Mysterious.

HARRY WHARTON made a big mistake next morning.

Bob Cherry was usually the chosen candidate of the Greyfriars juniors so far as boxing was concerned, but Wharton considered that Bob would prove much too good for Clarence Cobb, despite the latter's display against Coker.

Consequently, Squiff was selected to do battle against the Bedfordshire skipper. And Squiff, although a very good boxer, fell a long way short of Bob Cherry's standard.

The couple met under the branches of a shady oak-tree in one of the outlying meadows.

Although the boxing contest had not been advertised, over a hundred people had filtered into the meadow, and among them was Bill Mooney, who had passed a very troubled night. Bill was already heavily in debt, and what was worse, he lacked the wherewithal with which to pay.

Clarence Cobb and Squiff removed their coats and donned the gloves. Then they came face to face in a ring formed of Greyfriars juniors and local boys.

Colonel Cobb was unable to be present, and Wingate was acting as referee.

"Time!" said the Greyfriars captain.

And then Harry Wharton realised his mistake.

Clarence Cobb was a little bundle of concentrated energy. He went for Squiff as if it were his avowed intention to wipe him off the face of the earth.

Bob Cherry might have resisted the shock of this lightning attack, but not so Squiff.

The Australian junior seemed all at sea. He had no time in which to combat the fierce rushes of his opponent.

But for his capacity for taking plenty of punishment, Squiff would have been down and out in the first round.

"Buck up, old son!" shouted Johnny Bull. Squiff rallied towards the end of the round, but all the honours rested with his opponent so far.

"Kick me, somebody!" said Harry Wharton. "It isn't often I underrate a fellow, but I've fairly put my foot in it this time!"

"You have!" agreed Bob Cherry. "I'm not so certain that I could put our friend Clarence on his back. He's had a professional trainer. Anyone can see that."

Mark Linley, who was acting as Squiff's second, gave him one valuable advice.

"There's only one game to play," he said. "You must put yourself on the defensive the whole time, and gradually wear him down. When he gets impatient, and begins to fight wildly, it's your cue to go in and win!"

"Good!" gasped Squiff. "Talk about a human earthquake! That beggar's punctured my ribs, and my nose seems to be swelling up like a toy balloon!"

"Never mind," said the Lancashire lad reassuringly. "If you play your cards carefully, you'll come out on top."

"Time!" said Wingate. Squiff stepped into the ring, threw himself into a defensive attitude, and remained thus. He made no attempt to hit. He simply put up a dogged resistance to the attacks of his nimble opponent.

Clarence Cobb buzzed round the Greysfriars junior like a moth round a candle. He could do everything but break through. Squiff's defence was rocklike.

"Well played!" said Mark Linley approvingly at the end of the second round. "Keep that up for a round or two, and then it'll be your turn to attack. He's bound to get tired before long."

All through the third and fourth rounds Squiff was busy parrying blows. Not once did he attempt to attack; and the spectators, not tumbling to his little game, were frankly disgusted.

"Is this a boxing-match, or a howling farce?" inquired Bolsover major. "You ought to have selected me, Wharton. I should have made mince-meat of that fellow Cobb by now!"

"Rats!" "Squiff's certainly very feeble," said Monty Newland. "He's all defence, and no attack."

A few of the spectators began to leave the field in disgust. They had expected to see an exhibition of fireworks, and—except in the first round—they had been disappointed.

Shortly afterwards Bill Mooney left the ground—not because he shared the disgust of the others, but because he had just hit upon a little scheme whereby he might prevent the cricket match being played that afternoon. And Bill, although he was not familiar with the writings of a much more famous Bill—Shakespeare, to wit—decided that "conspiracies no sooner should be formed than executed."

With quick but furtive footsteps Bill Mooney left the field.

Only one person saw him go, and that person was Bob Cherry.

Bob's suspicions were aroused at once, but he kept them to himself. In any case, no one was interested in Bill Mooney at the moment.

Meanwhile, the boxing contest had taken a startling turn.

Clarence Cobb, as Mark Linley had predicted, became impatient.

To attack incessantly for round after round, without getting a single blow, is always a sore trial to a boxer.

Besides, Clarence was getting hot and tired, and he considered the fight had gone on long enough. His one desire, at the present juncture, was to end it.

He rained blow after blow at his opponent. And then, at a totally unexpected moment, Squiff retaliated.

Clarence was considerably taken aback. And when Squiff's right took him on the chin, and Squiff's left landed between the eyes, sending Clarence to the grass, there was a chorus of delight from the Greysfriars fellows.

"Hurrah!"

"That's the way, Squiff!"

"On the ball!"

Clarence bounded to his feet as if he were made of indiarubber; but Squiff was upon him again like a tiger.

Right and left, left and right, the Australian junior's fists shot out; and at the end of that round he got home an upper-cut

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which completely finished his opponent's chances.

Clarence Cobb went down again; and this time he made no motion to rise.

Wingate counted out the beaten boxer; and there was a rush of juniors to congratulate Squiff.

"Linley's the man to applaud—not me!" said Squiff. "He directed the merry campaign, or I should have been knocked out of time in a couple of rounds!"

"Good old Marky!" said Bob Cherry. "He'll be a general one of these days!"

A few moments later Clarence Cobb, whose face looked a little less picturesque than usual, came forward to shake hands with his recent opponent.

"You licked me fair an' square!" he said. "I'm glad the pater wasn't here. He'd have had a blue fit if he'd seen me knocked out!"

"What's your pater doing this morning?" inquired Harry Wharton.

"He's busy writing out a speech which he's goin' to deliver at the next meetin' of the Town Council," said Clarence. "He's the chairman, you see."

"He must be an awfully busy chap!" remarked Nugent. "What did he get his O.B.E. for?"

"He was a Staff officer at the War Office—Director of Movements, or something."

"Did he find enough movements to direct," asked Bob Cherry, "or did he spend all his time polishing his buttons?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Clarence smiled sadly.

"He had to give up his appointment at the War Office," he said.

"Why?" asked Wharton.

"Because he suffered from insomnia, dear boy. He found he could only get about two hours' sleep in the daytime!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We've got plenty of time to kill before lunch is ready," said Clarence. "If you fellows are willin', I'll show you the sights an' scenes of Bedford."

"A mouldy, one-eyed show!" growled Coker of the Fifth.

Clarence fixed a monocle into an eye which had been slightly damaged, and stared at Coker.

"If you don't behave yourself, Coker," he said, "I shall be compelled to give you a thunderin' good hidin'!"

"And we'll crown it with a bumpin'!" said Bob Cherry.

At these dire threats Coker subsided.

Clarence Cobb then led the way through his native town, which proved to be anything but "a one-eyed show."

The Greysfriars juniors saw much to interest them; and then, with keen appetites, they returned to the Gables for lunch.

A startling-looking footman encountered Clarence Cobb in the hall.

"What's up, John?" inquired Clarence. "You look as if you've seen a collection of spooks!"

"The master—" began John.

"Eh! What's the matter with the master?" exclaimed Clarence, in alarm.

"Which he ain't 'ere, Master Clarence!"

"Not here! What do you mean?"

"He told me this mornin'," said the footman, "that he would be in 'is study, writin', up to lunch-time. And in the middle of the mornin' he disappeared!"

"He was probably called out on business," suggested Clarence.

"It seems very strange, Master Clarence. He left no message to say where he was goin'."

"Oh, he'll turn up all serene, John! Don't worry!"

And Clarence bounded up the stairs three at a time, and went into his father's study. Colonel Cobb had been in the act of writing a vigorous speech, strongly advocating Sunday sport.

He had evidently been called away in a hurry, for a sentence was left unfinished.

"Must have been an urgent message for him," thought Clarence.

He was not unduly alarmed. His father was often called away in the middle of his work.

But when luncheon was half-way through the son of the house began to look worried.

His father was usually the soul of punctuality at meal-times. If he was transacting business of any sort, he generally postponed it at lunch-time, and returned to it afterwards.

"Wherefore that worried brow, Clarence?" inquired Bob Cherry.

"I can't think where the pater has got to. He appears to have gone out in the middle of the mornin', an' he hasn't been seen since. It isn't like the pater, to give lunch a miss."

"You're not alarmed on his account, surely?" said Wingate.

"I wasn't at first," said Clarence. "But I'm beginning to feel that something must have happened."

"My hat! You don't suggest that your pater has been kidnapped, or anything of that sort?"

"Well, he isn't exactly popular in the neighbourhood. He's the local magistrate, you see, besides being the chairman of the Town Council, and I know for a fact that he's made more enemies than friends."

"Oh!"

"His absence won't make any difference to the cricket match, will it?" asked Wharton anxiously.

"I'm afraid so," said Clarence. "My pater was goin' to umpire, an' I shouldn't dream of startin' the match without him."

"Oh crumbs!"

"He may turn up at any minute," said Squiff hopefully.

But the minutes passed, and the colored did not come.

Clarence grew restless and uneasy. He went to the telephone, and inquired of several people in the town if they had seen his father that morning. In every case the answer was in the negative.

"No luck!" said Clarence, when he returned to the dining-room. "I'm pretty certain, now, that there's somethin' fishy about this business!"

"We'll make investigations after lunch," said Wingate. "Cheer up!"

But Clarence Cobb refused to be comforted. And the meal ended in a gloomy silence.

## THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

### To Play or Not to Play?

ONLY one person could have satisfactorily accounted for the colonel's prolonged absence from home. And that person was William Mooney, mine host of the Pig and Whistle.

Bill Mooney's brain—such as it was—had been very busy whilst the boxing contest was in progress.

Finally, he had hit upon a scheme whereby he might prevent the cricket match from taking place.

It was a scheme which rendered its author liable to a term of imprisonment. At the same time it did not entail injury to any of the players.

"If only I can get the old man out of the way," murmured Bill Mooney, "the match won't come off. The colonel was goin' to umpire, an' if he doesn't turn up, 'is son will cry off."

Bill's plan for "getting the old man out of the way" was simple, although risky.

There were three things needful: (a) a written message, (b) a sack, and (c) a length of rope. And Bill set to work without delay.

In the middle of the morning, the following quaint message was handed to Colonel Cobb in his study at the Gables:

"Dear Sir,—this is to inform you as how major kent is took very ill and he wants you to come and see him at wunce."

This message was signed, apparently, by one of the servants at Major Kent's house.

Colonel Cobb was considerably agitated by the news.

The major was a very old friend of his. They had been through stirring campaigns together. They had faced death in strange forms and in strange places; and their comradeship would endure for life.

Only yesterday, when these two old friends had met, Major Kent had been in perfect health.

"I must go to him at once!" said the colonel.

And, leaving everything just as it was, he quitted the house.

The approach to Major Kent's house lay through a path in the wood.

Colonel Cobb took this path, little dreaming that he was walking into a trap.

Behind a convenient tree crouched Bill Mooney.

He heard the colonel's heavy tread on the path, and prepared to put his little scheme into execution.

The colonel came on with ponderous steps. When he was on a level with the tree, Bill Mooney suddenly sprang out upon him.

Despite his years, the colonel was an active man; but he had no chance whatever of making any resistance.

A sack was thrust over his head, and drawn tight by means of a noose.

After which the victim was dragged

towards the tree, and securely bound to it by means of a coil of rope.

Bill Mooney chuckled softly. His little plot had succeeded beyond his wildest expectations.

From inside the sack came a frantic gurgle. The colonel was endeavouring to tell his unknown assailant what he thought of him.

Having completed his task, Bill Mooney withdrew.

"That's saved me five quid, anyway!" he told himself.

Glancing back over his shoulder, he saw that the colonel was wriggling and twisting frantically in his bonds. But he could not escape. He was too securely bound for that.

Bill Mooney went back to his own quarters, satisfied that the cricket match would not be played.

Clarence Cobb would be too loyal to his father, and too anxious concerning him, to wish to play.

Great consternation prevailed at Colonel Cobb's house.

Harry Wharton & Co., naturally, did not wish to be deprived of the cricket match. They felt confident that they could trounce the Bedfordshire boys at cricket, and an unplayed match would give no satisfaction to either side.

"The colonel must be found!" said Frank Nugent.

"Sounds all right!" growled Johnny Bull. "But how are we going to find him?"

"Search-parties must be sent out," said Wingate. "Dash it all, the colonel must be somewhere in the neighbourhood! If we split up into parties, and search, we shall probably find him—or at least hear of him."

"I think the search-parties had better get busy," said Clarence Cobb.

Wingate nodded, and he began to detail the various parties.

The Famous Five went off together; and Squiff and Mark Linley and Monty Newland formed another party.

The remainder of the Removites, with Wingate at their head, went off in another direction.

As for Coker, he had no desire to co-operate with anybody else. He boasted to the others before they started that he could clear up the mystery of his own bat.

Coker's method of going to work was a rather drastic one. He poked his head in the doorway of every shop in the main-street, jerking out the question as if he were asking a conundrum:

"Have you seen the colonel?"

Some of the shopkeepers voted Coker insane. Others thought he was playing a practical joke, and they pelted Coker from their establishments.

The amateur detective became so flustered and hurried that he happened to visit the same shop twice.

It was a grocer's shop, and the grocer did not feel in the mood to humour a tame lunatic.

"I say!" said Coker breathlessly. "Have you seen the colonel?"

The grocer glared.

"Have you seen him?" repeated Coker. "No; but I've seen an escaped lunatic!"

Saying which, the incensed shopkeeper snatched up a number of very ancient eggs from a box near-by, and started to pelt the unfortunate Coker for all he was worth.

"Yecoooop!" spluttered Coker, as a shower of eggs rained upon his face and clothing. "Oh! Stop it!"

That was exactly what the grocer did not do. He continued to keep up a perfect bombardment; and Coker rushed wildly from the shop.

"Oh dear! Oh crumbs! Oh, help!" gasped Coker, as he sped on his way. "If this is what comes of amateur-detective work, I'm jolly well going to chuck it!"

With all the speed at his disposal, Horace Coker rushed to the Gables.

Once safely indoors, he made tracks for the bath-room, to erase, as far as possible, the traces of the afternoon's misadventure.

Meanwhile, Clarence Cobb had gone along to his father's study, hoping to find something in the nature of a clue.

There was nothing on the colonel's desk to suggest where he had gone; but on the floor lay a scrap of paper. It had evidently been blown off the desk.

Clarence stooped and picked it up.

"Hallo!" he ejaculated. "Major Kent III! By Jove! This explains everything! The pater's gone over to see him!"

Clarence was greatly relieved in mind to know that nothing serious had happened to his father.

At the same time, the illness of Major Kent was serious enough. The major had been a great friend to Clarence as well as to the boy's father.

"I think I'll go over an' see him!" murmured Clarence.

And a few moments later he was striding along the path in the wood.

He had proceeded about half a mile when a queer, gurgling sound came to his ears.

"Great Scott!" gasped Clarence.

And he stopped short in astonishment. The gurgling sound continued.

Clarence glanced round him, and then an extraordinary sight met his gaze.

A man—Clarence presumed it was a man—stood bound to a tree. His head and shoulders were immersed in a sack, and from the interior of the sack came the gurgling noise which had attracted the boy's attention.

"Poor beggar!" murmured Clarence. "Somebody's played a practical joke on him!"

And then he whipped out his penknife, and started to sever the prisoner's bonds.

The cord fell to the ground, and then Clarence wrenched the sack from the victim's head.

"G-g-goodness!" he exclaimed.

For the victim was his own father!

Colonel Cobb drank in great gulps of fresh air. There had been ventilation-holes in the sack, but not sufficient to ensure the colonel's comfort.

"What ever has happened, pater?" gasped Clarence.

The colonel's mottled expression slowly assumed its normal hue.

"Some villain," he said—"some impertinent scoundrel lured me into a trap! I received a message to the effect that Major Kent was ill. That was the bait. And like a dashed idiot, I walked right into the trap!"

"How long have you been here?"

"About three hours!" grunted the colonel.

"Hardly anyone uses this footpath, or I might have been released long ago."

Clarence nodded.

"I'm jolly glad I've found you, anyway!" he said. "We were all jolly anxious about you, pater. Come back to the house and have some lunch, and then we'll adjourn to the cricket."

"My dear boy, surely you have not postponed the match on my account?"

"I refused to play until you were found!" said Clarence. "By the way, have you any idea who played this trick?"

"Not the foggiest notion!" said the colonel.

Clarence clenched his hands.

"It will go hard with him if I find him!" he said.

Father and son returned to the Gables, and Colonel Cobb, who was feeling ravenous, went at once to the dining-room to make up for lost time.

Shortly afterwards the various search-parties returned.

"Nothing doing!" was the verdict on all sides.

"It's all serene, you fellows!" said Clarence.

"The pater's found!"

"Hurrah!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "Then the merry cricket-match will take place after all!"

"And may the best team win!" said Clarence.

## THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

### Saving His Side.

"HEADS!"

Clarence Cobb, elegantly attired once more in his spotless flannel trousers and gorgeous blazer, won the toss. It did not take him long to make up his mind what to do.

"We'll bat first!" he said.

The colonel and George Wingate, clad in their white coats, walked out to umpire.

Bedfordshire's first innings yielded 70 runs, of which Clarence Cobb carried his bat for 40.

"Without wishing to set myself up as a giddy prophet," said Squiff, "I think we shall win hands down!"

But Squiff was too premature.

The boys of Bedfordshire, although uneven in the batting department, bowled and fielded superbly.

The Greyfriars' wickets fell with almost monotonous regularity.

Harry Wharton was sent back to the pavilion at an early stage, and Bob Cherry and Frank Nugent followed.

Mark Linley, who could usually be relied upon to stop the rot, was clean bowled before he had scored. And but for a dogged display by Bolsover major, who hit four boundaries, the Remove would have been in a woeful plight. As it was, they managed to muster

50 runs, and were 20 in arrears on the first innings.

In their second venture Bedfordshire batted finely.

Runs were hard to get when Hurree Singh was bowling, but the batsmen scored freely off Frank Nugent.

Greyfriars found themselves confronted with the task of getting 120 to win.

The match had started late, and not a great deal of time remained for play.

Only by fast, vigorous batting could Harry Wharton & Co. hope to achieve their object.

Wharton's advice to his team was summed up in two words:

"Hit out!" he said.

And Harry himself set the example by scoring a couple of boundaries.

The first-wicket partnership between Wharton and Nugent yielded 30 runs. And then the captain of the Remove was run out in attempting to run 3 where 2 would have sufficed.

Following this, a chapter of accidents befell the Remove batsmen.

Frank Nugent injured his wrist, and had to retire.

Johnny Bull and Mark Linley and Hurree Singh were clean bowled in the course of one over.

All hopes of winning the match had evaporated by this time.

But Bob Cherry was still batting, and Bob was not the sort of fellow to go under without a struggle. He hit out at anything and everything, and his luck held good.

"If I can only get somebody to stay with me," murmured Bob, "we may pull it off yet!"

It was Bolsover major who eventually came to the rescue.

Bolsover was not a brilliant batsman, but he was a very difficult man to get out—from the bowlers' point of view.

On this occasion the burly Removite stood his ground, and was content to keep his end up while Bob Cherry hit.

And Bob did not fail in that direction. He attacked the bowling as if he bore it a grudge.

Once Bob was very nearly caught on the boundary-line; but, having survived this peril, he continued to go great guns.

The score rose by leaps and bounds.

The elegant Clarence called to his men in desperation.

"Get the beggar out!" he exclaimed.

Bob Cherry grinned.

"Excuse me, but I've come to stay!" he said.

And he had.

The 100 was hoisted, and there was a chorus of applause from the pavilion.

"Only 20 more!" said Squiff in great excitement. "Good old Bob! He hasn't played a better game this season!"

Bob's "premonition" that this would be the last match of the tour spurred him on. And the fact that it was nearly time to draw stumps spurred him on still more.

A few more vigorous hits to the boundary and the scores were level!

It fell to Bolsover major to make the winning hit; and Bolsover put plenty of power behind the stroke.

But it was Bob Cherry who had won the match.

Bob's score was 88, not out, and the ovation he received as he came off would live long in his memory.

The Bedfordshire boys, beaten though they were, joined in the cheering; and Colonel Cobb heartily congratulated the triumphant batsman.

It was at this moment that Bill Mooney arrived on the ground.

Bill's eye nearly started out of their sockets when he caught sight of the colonel's familiar figure. He had supposed that the colonel was still a prisoner in the wood.

The fact that Greyfriars had won the match almost paralysed the unhappy kidnapper.

He was a further five pounds out of pocket. And he would have to pay up, or his reputation would suffer, and there would be a falling-off in the quantity of refreshment sold at the Pig and Whistle.

With feelings too deep for words Bill Mooney slunk from the ground.

Next morning the victorious Greyfriars team took their departure.

Their campaign against the boys of Bedfordshire had finished strongly in their favour, and their victory in the belated cricket-match was the biggest success of all, thanks to the discovery in the nick of time of the Vanished Umpire!

THE END.



## The Form-Master's Secret!

A New Long, Complete Story of JIMMY SILVER & Co., the Chums of Rookwood.

BY OWEN CONQUEST.



### THE FIRST CHAPTER.

#### Mr. Bootles' Strange Behaviour.

**A**RE we all here—yes!" It was a very noisy crowd of juniors that sang that in a roaring chorus in the little tuckshop at Coombe.

Jimmy Silver & Co. were there with Tommy Dodd & Co., and Morington was with Teddy Grace. All wore caps bearing the famous Rookwood crest.

When Tommy Dodd & Co. and Jimmy Silver & Co. met in the village tuckshop, there was usually trouble. But on this particular afternoon they had apparently joined forces.

The Rookwoodites sat in one corner of the shop, and on the tables before them stood huge glasses of ginger-beer and plates of pastries.

The plates were very nearly empty, for the juniors had partaken of many of the pastries they originally held.

After the meal the Rookwoodites sat back in their chairs, and sang the latest songs in noisy chorus.

"Steady!" shouted Jimmy Silver. He had to shout to make himself heard. Tommy Dodd & Co. were singing lustily.

"Are we all here—yes!" "Shurrup!" roared Jimmy Silver.

The noise ceased suddenly, and the leader of the Modern House Co. looked at Jimmy Silver in surprise.

"What's the matter with you, Jimmy Silver?" he demanded wrathfully.

"There's too much row," said Jimmy Silver. "They'll hear us at Rookwood if we go on much longer!"

"Let 'em all come!" chuckled Newcome. "No harm in a little song, Jimmy!"

"Little!" snorted Jimmy Silver. "I can shout with the best of them, but I draw the line when we wake all the village up!"

Tommy Dodd started. "Why, you dunnym," he said warmly, "you were shouting harder than anybody a minute ago!"

"My conscience pricks me!" said Jimmy Silver. "Half the village might be taking a nap; I believe they generally do on a Saturday afternoon!"

"My hat!" ejaculated Tommy Cook. The rest of the juniors turned their heads in his direction.

"What's troubling you—more consciences being pricked?" demanded Tommy Dodd.

"Ha, ha, ha!" "Rats!" said Tommy Cook warmly. "I only said 'My hat!'"

"Well, what about your hat?" "Nothing, you ass! I was only surprised to find Jimmy Silver had got a conscience!"

Jimmy Silver jumped to his feet excitedly. "My stars, young Cook! I'll jolly well—"

"No, you won't—you'll jolly well sit down!" said Arthur Edward Lovell quietly.

Jimmy Silver turned to his chum wrathfully. "But that Modern House Ass—"

"Who's a Modern House ass?" "You are, and—"

"Sit down!" roared Lovell.

He caught Jimmy Silver's coat, and pulled him down to his seat. But the trouble had started.

Tommy Cook nudged Tommy Dodd. "Are we going to let those fatheads call us Modern House asses?" he asked.

"Not us!" said Tommy Cook and Tommy Dodd emphatically.

Better withdraw that remark, James Silver!" said Tommy Cook severely.

Jimmy Silver jumped to his feet again. "Withdraw my giddy grandmother!" he shouted.

"You shouldn't have started to speak about giddy consciences—"

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"I didn't, you Classic duffer! You said—" "My hat! Classic duffer!" ejaculated Jimmy Silver.

He turned to the Classical juniors. There were six of them, counting himself—Raby, Newcome, Lovell, Morington, and Teddy Grace. They outnumbered the Modern House juniors by two to one.

But little matters like that never troubled Tommy Dodd & Co. when they felt affronted.

"Are we going to let those asses call us duffers?" demanded Jimmy Silver wrathfully.

There was a roar from the Classical fellows. "No!"

Tommy Dodd & Co. pushed back their chairs, and Jimmy Silver and the Classical juniors did likewise.

It was not at all improbable that Tommy Dodd & Co., outnumbered as they were, would have had a rough five minutes had there not come an interruption.

"Stop thief!" The Rookwoodites, their domestic troubles forgotten for the moment, turned round suddenly.

An elderly gentleman, holding a paper bag evidently containing recently-purchased pastries, was literally dancing in the centre of the little shop.

"Hi! Stop him!" he cried, in a thin, shaky voice. "He's got my purse!"

Jimmy Silver rushed to the door, followed by the remainder of the juniors.

Looking quickly to right and left, Jimmy Silver saw the rapidly disappearing form of a young man far up the street.

He turned to his chums excitedly. "A giddy man-bunt!" he said quickly.

"Come on, you chaps, we'll chase the rotter!" "Hurrah!"

"After him!" Leaving the old gentleman still dancing excitedly in the shop, the Rookwoodites dashed down the road.

"Stop him!" roared Jimmy Silver. "Thief! Police!" hooted Raby.

The young man was a good runner. The distance between him and the juniors did not become any less.

"The bouncer can hep it!" growled Jimmy Silver.

The Classical leader was in front of the rushing juniors. He could see that the runaway was wearing well-fitting clothes, and his shoes were clean. There was a neat crease in his trousers, and his head was adorned with a bowler.

Thief or not, he could run! Jimmy Silver set his lips obstinately, and settled down determined to run the man off his feet.

Right through the village and well on the way to Rookwood, the crowd of juniors pursued the thief. And as they ran the crowd grew larger and larger.

"Stop him!" "Hold him up!"

But there was nobody in front to hold the fugitive up.

Jimmy Silver did not shout—he saved his breath. And slowly but surely he overhauled the man.

The young man cast an anxious glance over his shoulder, and his eyes gleamed wildly as he saw Jimmy Silver was not twenty yards away.

He put on a spurt, and drew away, but Jimmy kept doggedly to the same pace. Slow and sure was the pace the Classical junior believed in.

Suddenly the young man stopped, and faced round. Jimmy Silver could see the white face dripping with perspiration.

"Got you, you rotter!" he said, triumphant. "Where's the giddy purse?"

The thief, panting for breath, dived his

hand into his pocket, and held it towards Jimmy Silver.

The Rookwoodite took it quickly. "Now you're going to get it where the chicken got the battleaxe," he said shortly.

"What the dickens did you want to rob that poor old chap for?"

The thief shrugged his shoulders. "When a man is hungry he will do many a mad thing," he said slowly.

Jimmy Silver started. The young man spoke in tones that told of a good education.

"You don't speak like a rotten thief," he said.

"I repeat, when a man is hungry—"

"Stick to him, Jimmy!" The young man turned as he heard Tommy Dodd shout that remark. The juniors were pouring round the corner in the lane, and gave a whoop of delight as they saw that Jimmy Silver had caught the thief.

Tommy Dodd dashed up, closely followed by Raby and Lovell. Newcome and Cook appeared with Tommy Doyle a few moments later.

"Now take the rotter back!" panted Tommy Dodd.

Jimmy Silver looked distressed. The white face, quivering lips, and downcast eyes of the young man affected him deeply. But he was a thief—a thief who robbed old men.

There was only one place for such as he. Jimmy Silver held up his hand.

"No need to make a giddy fuss," he said quickly. "The rotter's caught—let sleeping dogs lie!"

"What's sleeping—" "Rats!" said Jimmy Silver warmly. "I caught the johnnie, and I'm going to take him back. Savvy?"

Tommy Dodd started. "What, alone?" he asked.

"Yes; but Newcome and Raby and Lovell can come, of course," said Jimmy Silver hastily. "This is a Classic House business, my son, and we can look after him."

The young man stood silent whilst his captors discussed who should take him back to Coomb and to prison.

"Don't rub it in!" said Newcome, who had caught a glimpse of the downcast eyes of the thief. "The beggar's caught; don't make a crowd of it!"

Tommy Dodd nodded. "Right-ho!" he said. "You chaps take him back. We'll get in to tea."

And Jimmy Silver, signing to the thief to follow, led the way back towards Coomb.

Newcome and Raby and Lovell edged him along until he was in between the four juniors, and it was in that formation they encountered Mr. Bootles, the Fourth Form-master at Rookwood.

Mr. Bootles stopped as he saw the four juniors with their prisoner.

"Dear me, aren't you boys going to tea?" he asked.

Jimmy Silver shook his head. "Not yet, sir," he said, and pointed to the young man. "This chap pinched—I mean, stole an old gentleman's purse in the tuckshop, but I—we caught him, sir."

Mr. Bootles started. "Dear me! A thief!" he ejaculated. "Bless my soul!"

He looked intently at the young man, and suddenly he stepped back a pace.

"Bless my soul! A thief!" he repeated dully. "Silver!"

"Yes, sir?" "A thief—did you say a thief, Silver?"

"Yes; we're taking him back, and we're going to hand him over to the police, sir."

"The police! Really! Oh, goodness gracious me!"

Mr. Bootles was simply gasping. He seemed



to be strangely affected by the sudden appearance of the thief, and Jimmy Silver's reference to the police fairly took the Form-master's breath away.

"Ahem! Silver!"  
"Yes, sir?"  
"Ahem! I'll—I'll— Would you mind—ahem!" stammered Mr. Bootles.

The juniors stared at their Form-master as he broke off confusedly.

Mr. Bootles was naturally a very nervous man, but the juniors had never seen him in such a nervous state as this.

"Excuse me, sir—" began Jimmy Silver.  
"Indeed I will, Silver!" said Mr. Bootles eagerly. "I'm sure—I'm sure that you must want your tea—"

"Not at all, sir. I meant—"  
"It is very—very—ahem!—noble of you to wish to relieve the unfortunate gentleman's distress, Silver—"

"But, sir—"  
"But I think it is unnecessary for you to go without your tea, so I will take the—the person along myself!"

Mr. Bootles spoke very quickly, and there was no stopping him. Jimmy Silver & Co. stood looking at him, too surprised to utter a word.

And, before they could speak, Mr. Bootles had grasped the thief's arm, and was walking him quickly towards the village.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.  
Jimmy Silver's Promise.

"MY only hat!"  
"Gee-whiz!"  
Jimmy Silver & Co. stood in the middle of the road that led to Coomb, staring at each other.

Mr. Bootles had left them no time in which to say if they cared about his taking the young man to Coomb Police Station, but had hastened away with him whilst the juniors looked on, dumbfounded.

"Well, of all the blessed cheek!" ejaculated Jimmy Silver. "He's taken our blessed prisoner!"

"I'm blown!" said Raby.  
"What did the silly fathead want to act like a giddy goody-goody all at once?" demanded Newcome.

Mr. Bootles had disappeared with the thief, and the juniors turned towards Rookwood, and the juniors turned towards Rookwood, getting anxious as to whether we get tea or not!"

said Lovell. "What's the giddy game?"  
Jimmy Silver & Co. shook their heads.

It was all very surprising. Mr. Bootles had certainly appeared very distressed at the appearance of the young man—a prisoner in the hands of four juniors belonging to his Form.

"He seemed quite upset about the johnnie having been caught," said Jimmy Silver, as they walked along. "I'm blessed if I can make it out!"

Raby shook his head emphatically.  
"There's something deep in this!" he declared. "I'll bet old Bootles is his father!"

The other juniors laughed.  
"Rats!" said Jimmy Silver shortly. "Don't talk bosh!"

"Well, he's a cousin or uncle—"  
"Or grandmother?" interrupted Newcome.  
"Look here—"

"Rats! Talk sense, if you must talk!"  
Raby glared, but did not reply.

The chums remained deep in thought during the short walk to Rookwood, but neither of them could think of any just cause or reason for Mr. Bootles' sudden concern for their tea.

Tommy Dodd & Co. were waiting for them when they entered the gates of the school.  
"All serene?" asked Tommy Dodd.

Jimmy Silver & Co. stopped.  
"That ass Bootles—"  
"Better let him hear you calling him an ass!" chuckled Tommy Cook.

"Well, the silly dummy, if you like that better—"  
"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bootles collared the thief, and took him off to Coomb himself," explained Jimmy Silver. "I'm blessed if I know what's come over old Bootles! Said he would be sorry we missed our tea, and he'd take the rotter to Coomb himself."

Tommy Dodd whistled.  
Jimmy Silver & Co. nodded.  
"That's what we thought," said Raby.

"But we can't think of any reason why he should do it. I'll bet he wasn't worrying himself about our missing tea!"

Mr. Bootles was not so bad as Raby's remark would seem to make him. The Fourth Form master was a good-natured man, very

nervous at times, and occasionally very severe.

But the juniors did not dislike him. He had always treated them well.

"Then, what's up with him?" demanded Tommy Cook.

"How do we know?" retorted Newcome. "I'm jolly well going to have some tea!"

And Jimmy Silver & Co. left the Modern House juniors, and walked towards the Classical House.

But Jimmy Silver hesitated as he was about to enter the House.  
"Here, hold on!" he said suddenly.

He turned, and ran up to Tommy Dodd & Co., spoke a few words, and then hurried back to his chums.

"Just asked Tommy Dodd & Co. to keep the matter dark, in case there's anything wrong," he explained. "Come on, up to tea!"

Raby chuckled.  
"Got a funny sort of feeling that I'm right," he said, as they mounted the stairs.

Jimmy Silver shook his head.  
"Not exactly as you put it, old top," he said slowly. "But—but one never knows, and it's just as well to keep one's mouth shut. What is done can never be undone, as the song has it."

Quite so!" assented the juniors.  
But behind the closed door of their study the Fistical Four tried to find some excuse for Mr. Bootles' strange behaviour. But they could not fathom the mystery.

Mr. Bootles had not been concerned about the juniors' tea; they were sure of that. Then why had he taken the thief off himself?

"Blessed if I can make it out!" said Jimmy Silver.  
Nor could the other juniors.

Jimmy Silver uttered a sudden exclamation.  
"My only stars!"  
"What's the matter?" asked Newcome quickly. "Tumbled to it?"

"No. But I'd forgotten this!"  
And Jimmy Silver laid the purse, which he had taken from the thief, on the table before his amazed chums.

"The moment I put my hand in my pocket I remembered it," said Jimmy Silver. "Old Bootles will find himself in a funny sort of a pickle without this!"

"My hat! I should say so!"  
"Rather!"  
"Better take it to him, if he's come back!"

Jimmy Silver nodded.  
"Yes, I think I will. Or should I take it to the police, do you think?"

"No. That would only make Bootles look a bigger fathead than he really is!"  
"Then I'll take it to him!"

And Jimmy Silver hurried from the study and made his way to the Form-master's room.

His knock upon the door was immediately answered.  
"Come in!"

Mr. Bootles was in his room, sitting by the table, with a book before him. But he was not reading, for Jimmy Silver noticed at once that the book was upside down.

The Form-master looked up as Jimmy Silver shut the door behind him.  
"Ah, Silver!" said Mr. Bootles. "I was thinking of sending for you, my boy."

Jimmy Silver started.  
"Eh? I mean, I beg your pardon, sir—"  
"It is quite all right, Silver," interrupted Mr. Bootles. "The matter upon which I wished to speak to you has nothing to do with school matters. I suppose you've brought the stolen purse to me?"

"Yes, sir. I'd clean forgotten it! You see, sir, you didn't give us much chance to land it over—we were quite flustered."

Mr. Bootles nodded.  
"You were not the only one who was flustered, Silver," he said laconically. "I was—er—surprised myself."

"So I noticed, sir."  
Mr. Bootles started.  
"Silver! Ahem! There was nothing—er—"  
"No, sir."

Jimmy Silver felt bound to say that, but why he said it he could not have said. Mr. Bootles looked relieved when he was interrupted.

"Then pray give me the purse, Silver!" said Mr. Bootles.

Jimmy Silver handed over the purse and turned to the door. But he went back to the Form-master's table before he reached the door.

"Sir? Might I ask a question, sir?" he asked quietly.  
"You may, Silver."

"Then did you pay the old johnnie—ahem!—I mean, the gentleman in the chop? You

didn't have the purse, sir, and he couldn't have said much about it, or he would have come to Rookwood and asked for me and the other fellows."

Mr. Bootles nodded.  
"The matter—er has been satisfactorily settled, Silver. I purchased a new purse, and placed in it a sum equal to the amount stolen by—the young—young person."

Mr. Bootles would not call the man a thief. His reason for that was known only to himself.

Jimmy Silver turned to the door again.  
"Thank you, sir!" he said quietly. "Then, as far as we are concerned, the affair is ended."

"Wait a moment, Silver!" said Mr. Bootles hastily. "I wish to speak to you. Pray sit down!"

Jimmy Silver felt like dropping through the floor in astonishment. It was not an everyday occurrence for a Form-master to ask one of his pupils to sit down with him in his study.

The junior sat on the extreme edge of one of the chairs, and stared at his Form-master in amazement.

"You appear surprised, my boy," said Mr. Bootles kindly. "I am aware that this is—er—rather unusual, but I regard it as necessary."

Mr. Bootles hesitated, and wiped his spectacles nervously.  
"That young person, Silver," he went on suddenly, "is not what one might call a rogue. He had extenuating circumstances, as I gleaned when I interrogated him on the way to Coomb. But—but I want you to make me a promise, Silver."

"A p-promise, sir?"  
"Yes. If you should happen to meet that young person again I wish you to avoid contact with him. He may approach you, or perhaps some of your chums. I wish you to speak to your friends—in private, of course. Silver—and ask them not to have anything to do with the young man at all!"

Jimmy Silver's face showed his surprise.  
"But nobody is likely to want to speak to him, sir!" he said quickly.

"That is not quite what I mean, Silver. You see, he is—er—free!"

"Didn't you give him in charge, sir?"  
"No. I—er—I gave him another chance, Silver. But if you or any of the juniors should see the young man, I do not wish him to suffer—suffer further humiliation by being—being ragged, I believe you call it."

"You mean he's got to be left alone, sir?"  
"If you please."

"I'll promise that much, sir."  
"Thank you, Silver! That is all, my boy."

Mr. Bootles looked considerably relieved as the Classical junior left his study.

But Jimmy Silver was not feeling relieved. There had been a certain amount of mystery about Mr. Bootles' strange behaviour before he went to the Form-master with the stolen purse, but there was more mystery than ever now.

And he had promised to see that the thief was not ragged by his chums if they should encounter him in Coomb.

Jimmy Silver returned to his study in a state of deep mystification. Raby, Newcome, and Lovell, when he had told them what had happened in the Form-master's room, were as mystified as their leader, but they solemnly stated their intentions of backing Jimmy Silver up in his promise.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.  
The Form-Master's Secret.

"MY hat!"  
It was Jimmy Silver who made that remark.

The Fistical Four were standing in the centre of the quadrangle at Rookwood, chatting sports with Tommy Dodd & Co.

The juniors followed the direction in which Jimmy Silver was looking.  
"My stars! The rogue!"  
"What blessed cheek!"

The young man who had stolen the purse in the village tuckshop was the cause of the juniors' surprise. He was walking into the quad.

He was spic and span, as far as dress went, and his bowler-hat was set at a rakish angle. Jimmy Silver set his teeth grimly.

"Stay here, you chaps!" he said quietly. "I'm going to talk to that rotter!"

The juniors stayed there while the Classical junior hurried towards the young man. He stopped as Jimmy Silver placed himself in front of him.  
"Well?" said Jimmy Silver shortly.

The young man nodded coolly.  
THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 20.

"Where's Bootles, young fellow?" he asked insolently.

Jimmy Silver flushed.

"Look here, my son," he said slowly and emphatically. "Do you know what risk you're running in coming here?"

"Risk? I don't understand!"

"Well, just understand this. If we see you knocking about here, then it's a licking you'll get! We don't want thieves hanging round Rookwood!"

The young man flushed.

"My dear young fellow," he said loftily, "I came to see Bootles, not to be lectured to!"

"I promised Mr. Bootles," said Jimmy Silver, with emphasis on the "Mr.," "that I'd do my best to save you from being ragged and chipped by the fellows here if they say you out. But I won't answer for your safety if you come to Rookwood!"

The young man waved his hand loftily.

"My good boy—"

"Rats!"

"As you like. Might I ask you to show me the way to Mr. Bootles' quarters?" persisted the young man.

Jimmy Silver bit his lip hard. He devoutly wished he had not made that promise to Mr. Bootles. He would have enjoyed wiping up the quid with this insolent young man.

But a promise was a promise, and Jimmy Silver had to content himself with a shrug of the shoulders.

"Find your own blessed way!" he snapped angrily. "Only I warn you—keep away from Rookwood!"

"To use your own beautiful language—rats!" said the young man calmly.

And he went back to the gates and tapped on the door of the porter's cottage.

Jimmy Silver returned to his chums, and he was in no equitable frame of mind.

"The rotter wants Mr. Bootles!" he exclaimed angrily. "The blessed check—after old Bootles saved him from prison, too! I suppose the beast is after cash!"

That Jimmy Silver was perfectly correct in his surmise was proved when the young man eventually found his way into Mr. Bootles' room.

Mr. Bootles looked up as the young man entered the room without the preliminary of a knock.

"Albert!"

"That's me, uncle," said the young man.

"Dear me! What ever have you come here for?" demanded Mr. Bootles.

The young man coolly pulled a chair towards the table, took out a case, and extracted a cigarette. He lighted it before he answered Mr. Bootles' question.

"I'm desperately hard up, uncle," said Albert. "I want some more money, please!"

"You're a fool to come here, Albert!" he snapped. "I got you out of a nasty scrape yesterday, when I ought to have let the law take its course. I'm not disposed to lend—or give—you any money!"

"It would be rather a shock to these high-and-mighty Rookwood people if they knew that a nephew of yours was driven to theft because his uncle, Mr. Bootles, the Form-master, wouldn't lend him any money, wouldn't it?"

Mr. Bootles started.

"You wouldn't dare!" he exclaimed. "You wouldn't be so—so utterly low!"

Albert shrugged his shoulders.

"When one is hard up he does quite a lot of things he wouldn't otherwise think of doing," he said quickly. "Look here, uncle, I've got to have cash!"

Mr. Bootles hesitated. He thought of

giving the young man what he wanted, but he realised that if he once started handing over money, Albert would be coming again for more.

"I shall not give you anything more!" he said suddenly. "I will buy you a ticket to London, and give you two pounds to enable you to live whilst finding employment. But beyond that I refuse to go!"

Albert pushed back his chair and stood up. He faced his uncle with blazing eyes and white face. Jimmy Silver had been affected by the whiteness of that face when he caught the thief in the road after he had stolen the purse.

But he did not know Albert Bootles.

"Then I'm going to take it!" said Albert calmly.

"Indeed!" said Mr. Bootles icily. "And do you think you would succeed in getting away?"

Albert Bootles nodded calmly.

"Yes—because you are coming with me!" he said.

Mr. Bootles laughed—albeit a trifle nervously.

"Indeed!" he repeated. "And you propose carrying me, I suppose?"

By way of reply, Albert Bootles pulled a short, silver-plated revolver from his pocket and displayed it before Mr. Bootles startled eyes.

"I shall have this in my pocket!" he said. "You will walk out of the school with me—down to the bank—"

"It is Sunday—the bank is closed!"

"No matter. You can rouse the cashier out on important business!"

"And if I don't—"

"Then you won't come many more Rookwood boys!" chuckled Albert Bootles.

Mr. Bootles laughed nervously.

"And what of you?" he asked quietly.

"I shall follow you!" said Albert Bootles, his voice sinking to a murmur.

Mr. Bootles was staggered. The proposition before him was one that would stagger the most calm, and Mr. Bootles was seldom very calm.

He reflected for fully five minutes, whilst Albert smoked his cigarette impatiently. Then the Form-master took up his hat, without a word.

"Come!" he said briefly.

Albert Bootles followed with alacrity, putting the revolver in his pocket as they left the study.

Out in the quadrangle Jimmy Silver & Co. were still chatting with their rivals of the Modern House. They looked round as the Form-master appeared with Albert Bootles, and watched them as they walked across the quadrangle towards the gates.

"The rotter's got some hold on old Bootles!" said Jimmy Silver between his teeth. "I'm a jolly good mind—My hat! Did you see that?"

The juniors shook their heads.

"Bootles—see, his hands are behind his back. Watch them!" said Jimmy Silver excitedly.

The juniors watched intently. Mr. Bootles' hands suddenly opened, and the fingers jerked sharply towards Albert Bootles twice.

Then Mr. Bootles closed his fists, and shook them. His meaning was unmistakable. He was asking the juniors to collar the young man at his side.

Jimmy Silver held up his fingers warningly as the juniors prepared to rush forward.

"Don't spoil it!" he said quickly. "Walk up to them, and carry on talking. Then as we pass bump into the rotter and collar him."

The plan worked perfectly. Albert Bootles had no suspicions, as the juniors, laughing and chatting, took the road to Coomb after him.

The juniors were still laughing as Jimmy Silver suddenly bumped into Albert Bootles, and, sticking his foot in between the young man's legs, sent him sprawling to the ground.

The rest was simple. Albert Bootles was collared, and dragged to his feet, furious at having been caught so easily.

"He has a revolver, my boys," said Mr. Bootles quietly. "I'd better take it from him, I think."

He thrust his hand in the young man's pocket, and took out the revolver. Jimmy Silver & Co. asked no questions, but waited for Mr. Bootles to speak.

"Will you please take him along to the police-station?" said Mr. Bootles quietly.

"I'm his nephew!" shouted Albert Bootles furiously. "What do you think of that?"

"Dashed rotten luck!" said Jimmy Silver heartily.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And Albert Bootles was marched along to the police-station.

Mr. Bootles, having received the juniors' word of honour not to mention anything of what he told them, explained that a younger brother, the black sheep of the family, had emigrated years before. Albert Bootles was his son, and it seemed as though he was following in his father's footsteps.

The brother had died, and Bootles had come to England to seek his uncle. But even on his way to Rookwood he had stolen the purse. The Form-master had done his best to help his nephew, but kindness had been rewarded by blackmail.

"He's better in prison, sir," said Jimmy Silver, when the Form-master had finished.

"Yes, I suppose he is," murmured Mr. Bootles, with a sigh. "I can rely on you juniors to remain silent?"

"Trust us, sir!" chorused the juniors.

Albert Bootles troubled the Form-master no more, and only the two Co.'s ever knew the Form-master's secret. And with them it was safe.

THE END.

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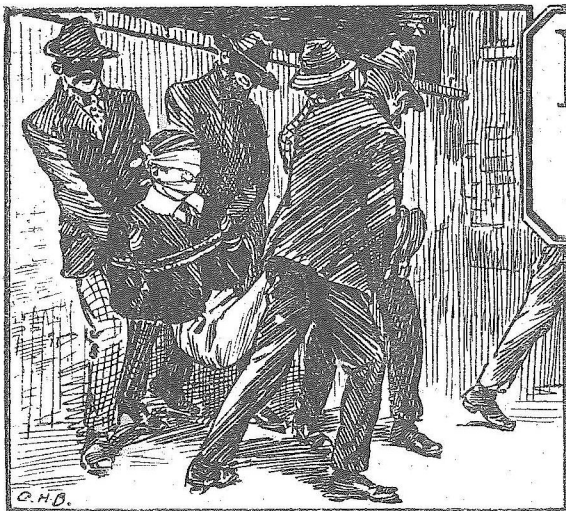
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# RACKE'S RANSOM!

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## THE FIRST CHAPTER. An Alliance of Seven.

**Y**AAS, I've got it in against the dear Aubrey myself," drawled Ralph Reckness Cardew, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's.

Cardew sat in the armchair in Study No. 6. He had dropped into No. 6—and the armchair—while the four who shared that celebrated apartment were at tea. He had not accepted their invitation to share the meal. As a matter of fact, there was not much to share, times being rather hard in No. 6. But he stayed on.

"I'm fed up with the cad!" said Blake hotly. "He tried to be pally with me on the strength of that racing competition gadget—made out it was the same thing as betting. Utter rot, you know!"

Blake paused for confirmation or dissent. But Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and Herries, who had been with him in the competition wheeze, did not hasten to agree that to call it the same thing as betting was utter rot; they had come to the conclusion that the competition itself might be described in those words, anyway. And Digby, who had poured cold water on the scheme all along, and Cardew, who had poked sarcasm at it—as he did at most things—refused to take up the challenge.

"And then, when I pulled his nose," went on Blake, "he—"

"Made a fuss, eh?" Cardew drawled. "Queer chap, Racke, by gad! Ought to have been dashed well pleased by a friendly and polite attention like that!"

"Well, he asked for it!" snapped Blake. "Wanted me to go to the Green Man with him, the cad! And locking me up in Latham's room was the giddy outside edge!"

"That wasn't half as bad as the trick he played on Cardew," remarked Digby.

"Wathah not! Why, Cardew might have been sacked," agreed Gussy.

"That's what he was playin' for, bless him!" Cardew said. "Isn't it a strange thing that we don't love Racke?"

"I don't see that," Herries said, staring at him.

"Herries doesn't see that we ought to love Racke," gibed Cardew. "I begin to have hopes of you fellows."

"Look here, Cardew, let's have it straight!" said Blake. "Are you after anything in particular?"

"My dear old top, can you imagine me after anything in particular?" yawned Cardew.

"Bai Jove, I believe he is, though!" exclaimed Gussy.

"Another sign of intelligence from No. 6!" Cardew said.

"Oh, chuck the mystery, and let's get a notion of what you are driving at, Cardew!" said Blake impatiently.

The dandy of the Fourth sat up, and looked at the quartet of chums searchingly.

"Racke needs to be rounded up," he said. "He's been havin' things too much his own way lately. An' it's really not a nice way, by gad! He meant to get me sacked—I know that. He didn't count on dear old Selby's natural reluctance to own up that he had been tryin' to spoon a Fourth-Former

in girl's clobber. That's where Racke slipped up, dear boys! But the intention was there."

"There's no doubt about that," said Digby. Blake and Herries nodded.

"Sowway as I am to think evil of anybody whatever, I must say that I have no doubt on that point," agreed Arthur Augustus.

"Which, of course, settles it once for all," said Cardew blandly. "The lockin'-in trick didn't amount to much. It was hardly worthy of Racke, in my opinion. But there was somethin' behind that attempt to lure Blake to the Green Man, I fancy. Racke wouldn't have scrupled to let Blake, here, in for any trouble there was goin', while he sneaked out himself."

It is possible that Cardew partly misjudged Racke there. No definite scheme of that kind had entered the head of Young Moneybags. He had merely wanted to draw Blake into his own circle of juvenile blackguards.

But that in itself was a sufficient cause for resentment; and Blake and his chums knew that if he had been so drawn in it was likely enough that he might have been let down in the way Cardew suggested.

"He's going about now saying that I'm a dashed hypocrite to bar betting and yet go in for that competition bizney!" Blake said hotly.

"Why don't you pull his nose again, then?" asked Herries. "I will, if I hear him say anything like that."

"He won't let us hear him say it," answered Blake. "He's too artful for that. But he's keeping the rotten affair alive when the other chaps would forget it but for him."

And Blake's brow darkened. He was very sick of the competition affair, which everybody looked upon as a big blunder on his part. References to Merry Monarch, All My Eye, or Ophelia put up Blake's back at once.

But it was less the chaff that rankled than Racke's spiteful suggestions that Blake was willing enough to make money out of racing, if he could, while looking down on those who helped the bookies to gather in a more or less honest living.

"Racke needs to be rounded up," repeated Cardew. "An' I've a scheme to do it. Are you fellows game to give a hand?"

The four looked at one another.

No one could fairly accuse Blake & Co. of being unduly cautious. They were as ready to risk getting into a scrape as most fellows.

But Cardew's audacity went beyond theirs. It went beyond almost anything else St. Jim's had ever known.

Cardew did not want to be sacked, of course.

He had not forgotten the time when he had been under sentence of expulsion. It had been a very miserable time for him, though he had kept his upper-lip stiff and his head high all through it.

No, he did not want to be sacked. But he was constantly acting as if he did want just that. His chums, Ernest Levison and Sidney Clive, were often worried by his recklessness.

"See here, Cardew," said Digby bluntly, "is your scheme something that's a bit too steep for Clive and Levison? Because, if so, you needn't bring it here. We're not on."

"Wathah not!" agreed Gussy. "We're going a bit slow just now," Herries said.

"Dead-slow—slow as tortoises!" chimed in Digby. "No more racing competitions in school hours! No more scrapping with old Grundy in—"

"Dry up!" snapped Blake.

Digby dried up. But the cheerful grin did not fade from his face, and the inference Cardew drew from that grin was that the four were going slow in intention, but—

"Which was nearly enough what Dig meant."

"I'm bringin' Levison an' the dear Sidney into this," said Cardew. "But three of us wouldn't be enough. Seven's about right. Might manage with six, an' I thought of Merry an' Manners an' Lowther. But I think it's more in the line of you four."

"I suppose you mean that it's some giddy foolery that Tom Merry wouldn't touch?" growled Blake.

"My dear man! Should I propose it to you grave an' reverend seigneurs if it were?"

"I should hope not, weally, Cardew," said Arthur Augustus.

"Yes, you jolly well would!" said Herries, with more acumen than usual.

"Do Clive and Levison know that they're going to be in it?" asked Digby.

"Not at present," admitted Cardew blandly.

"How do you know they'll come in, then?" inquired Blake.

"I know them, dear boy. That is enough."

"It jolly well isn't enough for us, though! Let's hear what they have to say about it before we go any further," Blake retorted.

"They're in No. 9, I believe. Will one of you have the goodness to fetch them?" said Cardew.

"I like your blessed cheek!" Dig said.

But he went. Digby was a very obliging fellow. And he really did like Cardew's cheek. The sheer coolness of it appealed to Dig.

He came back with Clive and Levison.

"What's the wheeze now, Ralph?" asked Levison. "Digby says you've been proposin' something new to them. You haven't said anything about it to us."

"My dear old gun, you an' the eminently virtuous Sidney have so often of late turned a frozen face—one each, of course—to my little schemes that you've made me quite nervous about proposin' anythin'. It's almost as bad as a proposal of marriage—not that I know a lot about that kind of thing. I thought that if I could only obtain the consent of our friends here, whose renown for prudence an' discretion—"

"Fat lot of that!" snorted Levison. "Your eye's got right again before Grundy's, Blake."

It was plain that Levison had no very high opinion of the prudence and discretion of the chums of No. 6. But Blake thought he might have left unspoken that reference to the recent trouble.

"My eye's all right!" he said crossly. "I guessed how it was, Cardew. Talk us over

heat, and get those two into it afterwards by telling them we'd agreed to come in!"

"Pretty rotten scheme, too!" remarked Clive. "Can't say that you chaps having agreed to come in would go a very long way to convince me that the scheme was all right."

"Clive could be almost brutally candid at times."

"One moment, dear Sidney!" said Cardew, holding up his hand. "The wheeze is the roundabout of Racke—the takin' it out of Racke for the offences against Blake, here, against me, against our worthy Ernest, an' in general against the rules of decency an' the peace of our Sovereign Lord the King, that he has lately committed."

"Very quick was the change that came over the faces of both Clive and Levison at that."

"There was no mistaking the feeling of those two for Cardew. Reckless and foolish he might be; but he was their chum, and they counted an injury done to him as one done to themselves."

"Racke tried to get you sacked!" said Clive grimly. "I'm on for anything in a fair way that will take it out of the rotter for that!"

"Racke's left me none just lately," Levison said. "But I haven't forgotten—I'm not exactly a forgetting sort. And he's played it low down on you, Ralph. I'm on—and I'm not too particular whether it's what Clive would call it a fair way or not. When it's a chap like Racke, I don't see the use of being squeamish."

"A touch of the old, hard-bitten, reckless Levison showed there. But he only half-meant what he said. The Levison of to-day was quite incapable of some of the mean and spiteful tricks that the Levison of the past had been ready to play."

"Cardew answered him after his own manner. "Squeamish, dear boy?" he said. "There's never a squeamish about me! If you catch me squeamish, you're welcome to tell me of it! But we shall have to remember that Sidney, here, an' our other young friends, are not the hardened rascals that you an' I are."

"You're both talking out of the back of your necks," Digby said. "I'm on! I feel certain that there won't be anything in Cardew's scheme we shall mind."

"Blake and Herries signified briefly that they also were on. It would not have been Gussy if he had signified anything briefly; but Blake cut him short before he had really signified anything at all—though he was going to, of course—and informed him that his consent could be taken for granted."

"If it's good enough for us it's good enough for you, so that's that!" said Blake.

"Then the alliance of seven may be considered as already in being?" Cardew said.

All agreed that it might be so considered. At least, five agreed, and Gussy was cut short by Blake in what appeared to be the beginning of an oration expressing his agreement—possibly with reservations. As they had no use for his reservations, there was nothing to be gained by his being allowed to state them, and he was not allowed.

## THE SECOND CHAPTER.

### Cardew's Scheme.

"NOW let's hear the scheme," said Blake.

Cardew rose from the armchair, and took his stand on the hearthrug.

He gave a pat to his carefully-brushed hair, and stumbled for an imaginary monocle.

"Oh, cut out all that!" growled Clive.

"I will cut out everythin' immaterial, even at the expense of eloquence," Cardew said. "Gentlemen, I have to remark as a starting-point that Racke is a funk."

"Ye-es," said Blake doubtfully. "Ye-es. He's a funk in some ways. But not all through. Crooke's worse than Racke, and both buck up at times."

"Admitted," Cardew said. "They can buck up when their blood is roused. When they are cornered they will show fight—very much as a rat will, I know. But, settin' Crooke aside, I don't propose to deal with Crooke this time. Is there any two-o'clock-in-the-morning pluck about Racke?"

"Don't know what you mean!" growled Herries.

But the rest understood fairly well what Cardew meant. Courage in cold blood, under depressing conditions—that is two-o'clock-in-the-morning pluck.

"Do you remember when those rascals Crooke was hand-in-glove with got Talbot stuck up in the cellar, and kept him there ever so long, and he wouldn't give in to them

—couldn't be stirred an inch by threats or starvation?" said Levison.

Herries nodded.

"I see now," he said. "There's a lot of difference between any show of pluck Racke ever made and what old Talbot did. If they'd collared Racke like that and held him to ransom, he'd have given in within a couple of hours."

"He simply couldn't have stuck it!" agreed Blake. "The thought of what might happen to him would have cowed him in less than that time."

"I should be inclined to give him a little longer than that if it were a question of ransom," said Cardew. "Racke doesn't like shellin' out. But I think he will give in before mornin'."

"Would give in, you mean, don't you, Cardew, dear boy?" inquired Gussy.

"No, he doesn't!" chuckled Levison, looking at Cardew almost admiringly. "He means 'will,' all serene. I see his wheeze!"

"But weally—suaahly you have no notion of anythin' so vewy much off the walls as holdin' a fellow—even a fellow like Wacke—to wansom, Cardew?" gasped Gussy.

"That's the idea," answered Cardew.

"Then I protest most stwongly against it! I wufuse to soil my hands with any such low pwoceedin's, an' I must say that if you fellows consent—well, I weally must say that—"

"Oh, dry up, Gustavus!" snapped Blake. "You don't understand. It's not your fault, I suppose. You haven't anything to understand with!"

"I undahstand perfectly well, an' I must say that this is a wottenah plan for makin' money than the competition scheme, though Cardew did turn up his nose at that!"

"But we aren't going to take the ransom, stoopid!" said Digby.

"Then what can the wansom have to do with it? Tell me that!"

"Shout a bit louder, fathead, and then everybody along the passage can hear you!" snorted Blake.

"We never ought to have let Gussy into it at all. His silly scruples were bound to make trouble," said Levison.

"I am not goin' to appeal to you, Levison—I have no confidence in your discrimination in matters of this kind, an' you have already said that you would not shy at anythin' unfaiah, as Wacke is to be the victim of the plot. But I appeal to Clive. Weally, Clive, do you feel that you can give this plan your sinceeah approbation?"

"Yes, old top, on the whole I feel that I can," replied Clive, grinning.

Gussy was staggered. There was not a straighter fellow in the Fourth than Sidney Clive, though most of the Fourth were straight.

"I—I— Oh, weally, if Clive considahs that it is all wight, there must be somethin' about it that I have failed to wassp as yet," said Arthur Augustus weakly.

It was really one of the nicest compliments that Clive could have had, though he only acknowledged it by a grin.

"Lots!" said Levison. "There's lots and lots of things in everything that you don't understand, Gussy. But if you'll close your clapper and just do a bit of listening, you may perhaps get some dim notion of what the rest of us have got on to already, in the course of an hour or two."

"I object stwongly to your attempts at sarcasm, Levison, an' I wepudiate with indignation the insinuation cast upon my intelligence, which is assuahedly not in any way infewial to that of any othah fellow heah assembled. But I am willin' to listen."

"We're not goin' to rob Racke, my noble kinsman," Cardew drawled. "If that were the gadget I shouldn't ask anybody here to join me—except, perhaps, Levison, who advertises his complete unscrupulousness where Racke is concerned. Levison referred just now to the occasion when Talbot was shut up. I suspect myself of unconscious plagiarism. I can't remember that I even thought of that incident; but my scheme does involve gettin' Racke into a situation very similar to Talbot's then, an' makin' it clear that he is not to put the case mildly—precisely of the same heroic breed as the dear Reginald."

"I do not like to heah you sneeah at Talbot, Cardew!"

"My dear, good, conscientious ass, who was sneerin' at Talbot? I wasn't. I assure you. I suppose there isn't a fellow here who doesn't admire Talbot; but I'm dead certain that no one here admires him more than I do. I'll freely confess that I couldn't have stuck it as he did."

"Not so sure of that," said Levison.

"Sowway, Cardew!" murmured Gussy.

For once Cardew had spoken earnestly, and there was no doubting that he meant what he said.

"But how are we going to get Racke rounded up for ransom, old chap?" asked Clive.

"I have thought all that out. It will be necessary for one of you to play a somewhat distasteful part."

"Eh?" said Blake, looking hard at Cardew. "Why leave yourself out of it? You say 'one of you' as if—"

"I am not precisely leavin' myself out, old gun. But I am not sure that the collective wisdom of my six fellow-conspirators will allow of my taking on the part."

"What is it?" demanded Herries.

"One of us will have to pull up to Racke, that's all."

They looked at one another then, and all except Levison looked somewhat uncomfortable. Cardew, enjoying the discomfort he had created, leaned against the mantelpiece and winked at Levison.

The brief silence that followed was broken by Arthur Augustus.

"Excuse me, Cardew," he said, "but is not that wathah—"

"You can't deal with a cad like Racke on the dead level," broke in Levison.

"But to pretend friendship for him—"

"He'd do the same for any of us if he saw his profit in it."

"Yaas, that is vewy true. But that would be Wacke, an' this is us."

Gussy was right in a way and to a certain extent, and they all saw it.

Even Cardew and Levison saw it, though they were not prepared to admit that they did. And there was no doubt that Blake and Clive, Digby and Gussy, saw it. If there was any doubt in the case of Herries, it was only because it took Herries longer to see things than most of the others.

"Who's the man for the job, according to your views, Cardew?" asked Blake.

"Better begin by eliminatin' those who aren't," Cardew replied. "There's Herries; he couldn't."

"I'm not keen on it," growled Herries. "But I'm not going to admit that I couldn't. I don't see why I couldn't."

But everyone else saw. George Herries really was quite an impossible person to play such a part.

"There's Clive. The singular ingenuousness of the dear Sidney is such—"

"That be hanged!" snapped Clive. "But I'll admit I can't. If I don't like a chap I can't help showing it. And I bar Racke completely."

"There's my noble kinsman. Can anyone in his senses imagine D'Arcy playin' up to Racke with success?"

"I am not so sure about that, Cardew. I twust that I have as much tact an' judgment as anybody heah. But the part is not one that—"

"Oh, dry up!" snapped Blake. "You couldn't do it if your life depended on it! Go on, Cardew! This is getting interesting. Very soon there will be no one but you and Levison left in."

"Well, I'm simply bound to cut you out, Blake. Recent circumstances are against you. You have had your chance of pullin' up with Racke, instead of which you pulled his nose. It will be quite some time before he could credit you with friendly intentions after that."

"Right-ho! It's not my kind of job, anyway. What about Dig?"

"I am not prepared to say that Digby would necessarily be a failure in the part. But there is against him the fact that he has never, within my knowledge, shown any disposition to enact the roarin' blade. I really think we must rule Digby out."

"Thanks!" said Dig. "I'm not so sure that I should have said 'No' if you could have proved that I was needed for the job. But it isn't one I care about."

"What's the use of all this?" said Levison impatiently. "I knew all along that Ralph, here, wouldn't agree to any of you fellows taking it on. I'll do it!"

"That is noble of you, Ernest!" said Cardew, half-mockingly. "But you lack one essential qualification."

"What's that?"

"You have the wisdom of the serpent. In craft it would be hard to surpass you. You are as cool as an iceberg when coolness is needed. You would not lose your head, although you have a head to lose, unlike— But I will not be personal. But you have not the cool!"

"Oh, I know I'm always hard up! What does that matter?"



"Your last chance!" growled the rough voice. Racke trembled with apprehension. "I—I'll sign," he stammered, and with the help of Cardew's guiding hand he signed the paper. (See page 16.)

Levison spoke without any resentment, which surprised some who heard. But Cardew might say things to Levison that no one else could say with impunity.

"A great deal, dear boy!" answered Cardew. "The fellow who leads Racke on must be sufficiently well-heeled—in the eloquent language of the United States—for Racke to scent immediate profit.

"Then it will have to be you!" said Blake. "And that's what the bounder meant all along!" Clive said.

"I don't see why we need have had so much gas about it then!" growled Herries.

"Never mind that. What I want to know is, what's going to happen after Cardew has made Racke believe that he loves him?" Blake said.

"But that I cannot tell you now," Cardew replied. "I will disclose my further plans at some future meetin' of the Alliance of Seven."

And they had to be satisfied with that. It was Cardew's way of doing things.

### THE THIRD CHAPTER.

#### The Snare.

"HALLO, Racke! How goes it?"

"Hallo, Cardew!"

Cardew's tone was genial. Racke's was not quite so. It was possibly the geniality of Cardew's tones that roused suspicions in the breast of Aubrey Racke.

These two had never been friends. But during Cardew's first term or two at St. Jim's they had seen a good deal of one another, off and on.

Cardew had never made any pretence of liking Racke and his pals. He had gambled with them out of sheer boredom, and had not troubled to disguise the fact from them. They, on their side, had accepted him on a different footing from that on which he had accepted them.

They were snobs, one and all; and Cardew was the grandson of Lord Reckness.

They were money-grubbers; and Cardew had cash to burn.

So they had cringed and toadied to him, until cringing and toadying had ceased to pay. They had also tried to cheat him. The attempt had not been a success, for Cardew was quite as wide-awake as they were, for all his seeming indolence and carelessness.

Then there had come a complete break. Racke's plotting against Levison had had much to do with that.

Now, Racke hated Cardew with a poisonous hatred, and Cardew at heart hated Racke quite as thoroughly as did Sidney Clive or Jack Blake.

But Blake and Clive had no talent for intrigue, and Cardew had.

And Racke could not disguise his hatred if he believed that it was to his profit to do so.

Moreover, Cardew had earned such a reputation at St. Jim's for eccentricity that no one ever knew what he would do next. More than once Racke and Crooke had speculated on the possibility of his getting tired of going straight and returning to his sportive ways. He had gone the pace pretty well at Wodehouse, they knew; and he had come to St. Jim's still inclined to go the pace.

The influence of Clive and Levison had done much to keep him straight.

But who could say when that influence would fail?

Racke was ripe to fall into the snare set for him. And if Cardew felt any compunction about setting that snare—but it is hardly likely he did—he could justify himself by the reflection that his assumed pallidness with Racke had just the same amount of genuineness in it as any show of friendship Racke might make towards him.

"I'm fed-up!" yawned Cardew.

"Same here, by gad!" replied Racke, stifling his suspicions.

Cardew had been lounging against the gates when Racke came up, alone for once.

Now Racke planted himself against the gates, too, and took a gold cigarette-case out of his breast-pocket.

"Have one?" he said.

"Just a little too public here, don't you think, dear boy?" returned Cardew.

It was exactly what Racke had thought. "Let's go along Rylcombe Lane an' have a whiff there," he said. "You seem to be in the dashed same position as I am—nothin' to do, an' nobody to help you to do it."

"Oh, I'll come!" Cardew said, detaching himself from the gate.

But he saw nothing in Cardew's face to confirm his suspicions. Nothing showed there but sheer boredom.

And Racke knew that the time when Cardew was really bored was the time for leading him into mischief that he would have let alone otherwise.

They strolled along together, apparently on the best of terms.

"What's become of Levison an' Clive this afternoon?" asked Racke.

"Playin' cricket. Dashed silly game in this weather—eh, Racke? When I want a giddy Turkish bath, I prefer to take it without any clothes on."

"Dashed silly game in any weather!" Racke said. "Makes a fellow perspire. What's the use of that, by gad? All very well for eags who have to earn a livin', but no sense for us."

"We toil not, neither do we spin," returned Cardew. "Somethin' to be proud of—what!"

"It's nothin' to be ashamed of, anyway, dash it all!" said Racke.

There was silence for a few minutes after that. Cardew broke it when they had found a shady and secluded spot in Rylcombe Lane, and had lighted up.

"Ever get fed up—right up to the neck—with bein' virtuous, Racke?" he asked.

The eyes of Aubrey Racke, set rather too close together for either beauty or honesty, glistened at that.

"Never tried it long enough," he replied. "Whatever I may be, I'm no dashed Pharisee, like Blake an' Merry an' that crew. Is that how you're feelin' just now?"

"Fed up? Yaas, I'm feelin' horribly fed up!"

And Cardew was—with Racke's company. But it had to be endured, if he was to carry out his scheme.

He did not care even for the cigarette. It was only once in a way that he put the thing to his lips, and he flung it from him before it was more than half consumed.

It came to him then with the shock of a revelation that he would really rather have been playing cricket, hot as the day was, than lounging there with Racke.

Was the game worth the candle?

He could take Racke in, he was sure. He would have Racke's help in doing that, for the son of the war profiteer had all the paternal greed, and that greed would assist in closing his eyes to Cardew's real motive in enduring his society again.

But was it worth while?

"Care for a little flutter to liven things up?" asked Racke insinuatingly.

Yes, it was worth while!

Cardew made up his mind to that on the instant that those words were spoken.

Racke hated him, as he well knew. Racke had planned to get him expelled. Yet the fellow was already on the look-out for a chance to lift some of his cash, after the interchange of barely a hundred civil words.

If Racke could put all that behind him in his greed, Cardew could put behind him, for the sake of revenge upon this gambling sweep, any distaste he felt to playing a part that he knew to be beneath him.

"I don't know that, there's any two-man game that amounts to much, Racke," he answered.

"Oh, any game's a game, as long as there's somethin' on it," said Young Moneybags. "See here!"

He plucked a few blades of grass, those two of them, and, holding all but an inch or so of each blade concealed in his hand, extended the hand to Cardew.

"If you draw the longest it's five bob to you. If you draw the shortest it's five bob to me," he said. "Simple enough, an' yet it's a game as soon as you put the dibs on—what!"

That was in the true spirit of the gambler, and there was still something of that spirit left in Cardew. As long as he lived there would be something of it—a good deal of it, indeed.

But it was less petty than Racke's. Racke's was greed gambling. Cardew knew other counters than gold and silver. Many of the strange things he did had behind them the lust for gambling—gambling with circumstances—pitting his luck against the risk of discovery—taking chances for the love of taking them. That was Cardew's way.

Racke's gambling left him cold—or as cold as one could be with the thermometer at somewhere near ninety in the shade.

But he drew a blade of grass from the outstretched hand.

"You win!" said Racke. And he fished out a couple of half-crowns from his pocket.

Cardew let them lie, and plucked grass to offer to Racke.

"Mitee again, I think," he said, as he showed a blade at least two inches longer than Racke's. Racke grunted, and threw two florins and a shilling upon the half-crowns.

Racke held the grass, and Cardew drew, and again his blade was the longer.

"You're in luck!" growled Racke.

"Comes of bein' off the game so long," answered Cardew lightly. "You never give your luck a rest, y'know."

"Hurry up!" said Racke.

He drew again, and extracted a ten-shilling note from his pocket-book.

"Four in succession," he said. "Now it's four to one that I score."

"Evens only," replied Cardew.

"Raaa! It's a matter of mathematics that the chance must be in my favour after four failures."

"Didn't know you were so keen on mathematics. Don't believe in them myself. S'pose two an' two do make four, as everyone seems to be agreed on that point, but I can't, for the life of me, see why they shouldn't just as well make five, or nine, or twenty-seven."

Cardew spoke in his most languid tones, and Racke held out the two new blades without showing the least haste about drawing. He was luring Racke on; and he had a mischievous delight in seeing the flush deepen on the young gambler's face, and his cunning eyes glistened.

It was to his worst side that that sight appeared. But his worst side was uppermost just then. He had made up his mind to go

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through with this thing, and he would shirk nothing in going through with it.

"You say it's an even chance which of us wins," said Racke; and his voice was shaky with excitement. "I'm so sure that it can't be, after you've won four times like that, that I'm game to give you heavy odds against your pullin' it off this draw."

"Very well," replied Cardew. "Give me five to two, in quids. The usual five bob on the result of the draw, of course."

"Done!" said Racke.

His hand was shaking.

Cardew took his time. He looked critically at the two blades before he drew one. But at last he selected one of the two.

Racke opened his hand. Then he swore.

"Shush!" said Cardew reprovingly.

"Well, did anyone ever see such dashed luck?" gritted Racke.

He had lost again. A fiver and a couple more half-crowns were added to the ten-shilling note and the silver.

Cardew let them lie.

"What are the odds in your favour this time?" he drawled. "Or has your simple faith in the mathematicians deserted you?"

"I'm not going" to give odds like that again!" Racke said sulkily. "There seems some rotten magic in it."

"Oh, by gad, I'll give you the odds this time! I feel that my luck's in. Two to one—in fivers—that I pull it off for the sixth time!"

Racke hesitated.

But it seemed almost impossible to him that that should happen.

The chances were all against it, of course. But Racke had not really studied the mathematical theory of chances, or he would have been aware of the fact that it was based upon a number of risks far beyond five or six. In a thousand draws each player would probably score somewhere about five hundred; but out of only ten one might quite possibly score nine.

"Done!" said Racke.

Again Cardew tried his patience hard.

He discarded several blades before he found two that seemed to suit him. And he knew his selecting with his back turned, well knowing that by doing so he made his opponent in the foolish game suspicious and fidgety.

But at last he was ready, and Racke drew in haste.

Cardew opened his hand. The blade he held, doubled up within it, was more than twice the length of that which Racke showed!

"Another fiver, and five bob thrown in!" said Cardew coolly.

What Racke said would blister the paper if it were printed.

"Been takin' lessons in language from a bargee, Racke?" drawled the Fourth-Former.

"Oh, well, y'know, such beastly rotten luck! It would have made you say things, Cardew, cool as you are."

Cardew shook his head.

"Not things quite like that, old top! Defect in my education. Never learned that language."

"Don't sneer, dash you! Let's get on with the game."

"As you like. But I think I'll sit on my winnin's while Linton toddles past."

Racke looked up in haste and alarm, and flung away his cigarette.

"Why didn't you tell me he was comin'?" he snarled.

"Only just observed him, dear boy. Does Linton matter?"

"Of course he does! He's my Form-master, an' he isn't so easy-goin' as Lathom. He's been down on me lately, too."

"Too shockin' of him!" Cardew replied gravely. "Man of ill-regulated mind, evidently."

Mr. Linton passed, and both juniors rose. Cardew doffed his straw politely, and Racke took off his sullenly. The master cast a glance at them, as if rather surprised to see them together.

"No, I won't play again," mumbled Racke, when Cardew inquired whether he really wanted to go on. "It's a rotten silly game, this! Look here, will you give me my revenge at somethin' with more in it?"

"At anythin' you like, dear boy, anywhere you like, an' anywhen you please, as the yokels round here say."

"You mean that?"

Racke's tone was full of eagerness.

"Oh, yaas!"

"I sha'n't forget!" And Racke passed on towards Rylcombe, leaving Cardew to himself.

"The dear Aubrey's manners don't grow any more polished," murmured Cardew. "But that's no odds. He's fallen into the snare!"

## THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

### A Risky Game.

"WHAT in the world are you doing with all that oof, Ralph?" asked Clive a day or two later.

Cardew had quite a small pile of notes on the table before him, and Clive could see that there were two or three fivers in the pile.

"Been rookin' Racke for the benefit of the Wayland Cottage Hospital," Cardew answered lightly. "You are so very straight-laced, Sidney dear, that I won't ask you to believe that doin' evil that good may come of it is the correct card. But you surely can't help but admit that this oof is much better in the exchequer of the hospital than in the pockets of Peter—I beg his pardon—I should have said of Aubrey."

"I don't like it a bit," said Clive. "Do you mean to say that you have won all that from Racke? Why, there must be twenty or thirty pounds there!"

"Twenty-seven ten, by my reckonin'," answered Cardew lightly. "I was just about to ask you to check it. An' more than half of it won in ten minutes or so by guessin' which was the longer of two blades of grass. Easy, eh? You could have played that game, Sidney—even you, with your little bit of intelligence!"

Clive let the gibe go past him. He was used to that kind of thing from Cardew, and knew how little it really meant. His face was troubled.

"I don't like it," he repeated. "I never thought of anything at all like this. And the worst of it is that I believe you do like it, Ralph!"

"Well, I can't say that I am wholly without joy when I skin Racke."

"But gambling to that extent—pounds and pounds! And you might have lost as easily as won, you know."

"Of course. What would it have mattered, old bean? I did think at the outset that I should have to lose in order to lure Racke on an' make him really keen. But I found that nothin' made him keener than the notion of winnin' back what he had lost, so I didn't trouble to lose to him. He's a loathsome creature, Sidney! I have to watch out that he doesn't swindle me. He's watchin' out for the chance to do it, on his side."

"I wish you'd stop it, Ralph! I'm sure the other fellows would say the same."

"Stop what, Clive?" asked Levison, entering No. 9 just at that moment.

"This Racke scheme," replied Clive gloomily.

Levison opened his eyes widely.

"But why stop it?" he inquired. "I thought everything was going on swimmingly."

"Look at that!" said Clive, pointing to the notes. "He's won all that from Racke, and he's going to send it to the Wayland Cottage Hospital."

"If Racke had won that from him it wouldn't have got to the hospital, you bet!" returned Levison.

"But can't you see? It's all wrong. There's the risk, and it's all wrong, anyway! And Ralph likes it!"

Clive was genuinely distressed, and at the bottom of his trouble lay the dread he felt of Cardew's gambling spirit.

Levison, in whom there was much of the same spirit, understood. He was not without sympathy for Clive; but he only shrugged his shoulders and said:

"This going on long, Ralph?"

"No, dear boy. In fact, I anticipate that it will end to-night. An' I'm sendin' my winnin's along now, in case the winnin's may be Racke's this time, an' so if I waited there might be nothin' to send."

"I should think there's been about enough of it," Levison said. "You fancy you've got Racke on a string. Other people might think he had you if they knew about all this."

"They would hardly think he had found it profitable, though—what?" Cardew replied, his face hardening.

"Perhaps not," Levison said, with another shrug of the shoulders. "But all that's nothing. You may lose to-night more than you've won so far. An' Racke won't hand over anything he wins to any hospital. Isn't it rather a case of 'Heads, Racke wins; tails, Cardew loses'?"

Clive's remonstrances had not made much impression upon Cardew; but Levison's sardonic way of looking at the affair nettled him.

"I'm goin' to see Racke now," he said. "If you an' the rest want to back out, Levison, well an' good! I can carry through the

game I had intended quite on my own. But I dare say I can think out something else."

"Who wants to back out, ass? I don't. But I can tell you those other chaps are getting impatient. They don't cotton to your mysterious ways. And they wouldn't like all this gambling for high stakes any better than Clive does if they knew of it."

"Or any better than you do, Ernest?"

Again that shrug of the shoulders that Clive never liked to see.

"Oh, leave me out!" said Levison. "If I'd the cash I dare say I'd do the same as you're doing, and like it just as well as you like it. After all, you can't get a much neater revenge on a fellow like Racke than by winning his money."

"I mean to have a neater one, by gad!" said Cardew as he went out.

"You needn't look as if you'd just lost your grandmother, Clive!" said Levison irritably.

"I don't like this. I don't like it a bit!" muttered Clive.

"Shouldn't wonder if you like it less than ever when you hear what Ralph's plan really is." Levison returned.

"What is it? Do you know?"

"No, I don't. But it's jolly sure to be something wild."

And when Cardew came back from his visit to Racke Clive gave Levison credit for prophesying truly.

"It's all fixed up, dear boys!" said Cardew, with a beaming smile. "Shut the door behind me, Sidney, old gun. No one must hear the 'orrid details. To-night I go where I have never yet been. I accompany the festive Racke an' the sportive Crooke to the Green Man!"

"I say, that's too tick!" protested Clive.

"Suppose you're caught?"

"I do not intend to be caught, my infant! But Racke will be. On the way back, Racke will fall into the hands of rascals, an' be carried away to be held to ransom!"

"You're forgetting Crooke," said Levison.

"I am not. Crooke will do a bunk. He will be given the chance, an' he will take it."

"Well, yes, that's so. If Crooke gets the chance to bolt, he won't stop to scrap with the rascals. But who are the rascals to be?"

"That is where you an' Sidney, here, an' our little friend from No. 6 come in. You—or some of you—are to be the rascals. It will be fairly dark to-night—there's no moon. With overcoats, slouch hats, an' crape masks, two or three of you will make quite effective rascals—especially as Racke will not see much of you. He will, of course, be blindfolded, gagged, an' trussed up without delay. Any objection to the scheme, Sidney?"

"Not as far as collaring Racke's concerned," answered Clive. "That's in line all right, and I don't mind the risk hanging to it. But I'm bliest if I cotton to the notion of your going to the Green Man to gamble with those cads!"

"I'm not keen on it myself," confessed Cardew. "It may surprise you, or it may not, Sidney; but I do not hanker after the amenities of the Green Man."

"There's an easy way out of that," said Levison thoughtfully. "You needn't be there five minutes. I know my way about that show, though I'm not specially proud of my knowledge. I'll come along and give the alarm—Railton and Kildare on the track, or something of the kind."

"Good! Excellent!" returned Cardew. "That will hurry Racke an' Crooke worse than ever! I always said you had brains, Ernest."

"It's a risky game," Clive said. "But except for you two going to the Green Man—and that's not so bad if you don't stay there—we shall all be in it. Let's go and see what Blake and the rest think of it."

## THE FIFTH CHAPTER. Rounding Up Racke.

"HERE we are! I hope you've come with plenty of the needful. Cardew, for we're not goin' to play for nuts or counters to-night," said Racke, as he and Crooke and Cardew halted in the gloom beside the Green Man Inn.

"My dear man, what play I go in for tonight shall be for any stakes you like!" replied Cardew coolly.

Crooke grunted, wondering whether he had done well to come. Both Racke and Cardew had more cash to waste than Crooke, though he had more than was good for him.

Ernest Levison, hidden not five yards away,

heard both the words and the grunt, and smiled sardonically.

Racke tapped twice at the side-door, waited a second or two, then tapped twice more.

The door was opened cautiously, and the beery and leery face of Banks, the bookie, showed. Mr. Banks was very much at home at the Green Man.

The three slipped into the dimly-lighted passage, smelling of stale drink and tobacco, and Cardew wrinkled his fastidious nose. The door closed in their rear.

Levison gave them barely time to settle down. Then again came the two taps, the interval, and the further two taps.

It was the landlord, Joliffe, who appeared this time.

He peered out suspiciously.

"Quick!" panted Levison. "Let me in!"

"That's all very well; but what might you be wanting?" asked Joliffe.

"You know me! I'm Levison! I—"

"Oh, yes; I know you very well, Master Levison! But that don't go for much, not as things are these days."

"All right, then! If those fellows are caught, and you lose your licence—"

At that Joliffe opened the door wide enough to permit Levison's entry.

"Look here, is there trouble about?" he asked anxiously.

"You bet there is!" replied Levison, pretending to blow hard, as though he had been running.

"Why, they're only just come!" Joliffe said, still seeming a bit inclined to suspicion.

"What's that matter? Do you suppose I should have run all this way to warn them for nothing? Not that I care a hang about Racke and Crooke. But I'm jolly well going to let Cardew know, and you can't stop me!"

Joliffe stood back, and Levison rushed into the room that he remembered from of old.

"Clear out—sharp!" he panted. "Railton—Kildare! If they're not here within a minute or two—"

"What? Oh, I say!" gasped Crooke, white to the lips with fear.

Racke dropped the pack of cards he was shuffling, and stood up, his face also full of dread.

"Eh? Are you quite sure, Levison? This isn't a dashed do, is it?" asked Cardew coolly.

For the moment Levison felt furious with him. But then he realised that Cardew was playing his part as it should be played. Coolness in him would not arouse distrust.

"Do you think I'd have run here if—"

Banks broke in on Levison.

"This way—quick, young gents! We don't want trouble any more'n you do. Out here—through the garden—an' then it's your own fault if you run into 'em!"

Through the garden they went, and halted. Racke and Crooke listened intently for any sound of those whose coming they dreaded. Cardew and Levison, having no particular reason to dread anything, did not bother to listen.

"Better not go back by the lane," said Cardew. "We can keep to the fields, y'know."

"Yes. They're sure to come along the lane," agreed Crooke shakily.

"How did you get in on it, Levison?" inquired Racke.

"No time to talk about that now. Can't you hear Railton's voice?"

Levison himself could not hear Mr. Railton's voice. But it appeared that Crooke could, which was creditable to Crooke's imagination, or discreditably to his pluck, as one looked at it.

"I heard it!" Crooke gasped. "Kildare's, too! Oh, come along, Racke!"

Through the fields they made their way in the gloom, with the scent of growing things and crushed grass all about them, and the blackness of Rylecombe Wood on their right. There was no moon, and the night was dark for the time of year.

Levison and Cardew led, for Racke and Crooke were not adepts at cross-country work at night. They had very little notion where they were; but the two in front knew. And they led the precious pair towards that part of the lane where the trees were thickest.

"Over here!" said Levison; and Racke and Crooke clambered over a stile behind the other two.

"I say, Racke—"

It was Levison who spoke. But he never finished the sentence. Indeed, he had never meant to finish it. It was the signal.

"Racke! That's 'im!" sounded a rough voice out of the gloom.

Someone showed the gleam of an electric torch.

It disclosed to the startled eyes of Racke

and Crooke what seemed to them quite a horde of ruffians—ruffians in slouch-hats and long coats, with their faces concealed by beards and crape masks.

"Seize 'im! That's the one!" cried another ruffian.

Two of them grabbed Racke.

"Help!" he roared. "Cardew—Levison—Crooke—help!"

With a wild yell of alarm Crooke took to his heels and fled down the lane. It was quite by chance that he ran in the direction of St. Jim's. He had covered a couple of hundred yards or so at a good a pace as he had ever attained in his life before. Compelled by shortness of breath to pull up, he realised which way he was going, and felt thankful that luck had served him.

"I— Oh, see here, Racke, this is really no bizness of ours!" said Levison. "I'm not going to interfere!"

"Coward!" snapped Cardew; and, with fine dramatic instinct, he hurled himself at the ruffians. But it was at the other ruffians he hurled himself, not at Blake and Herries, who had grabbed Racke.

Digby and D'Arcy received him in their arms. The torch no longer showed its light. Racke heard a laugh in the gloom. It sounded like Cardew's laugh; but it could hardly have been, as Cardew was struggling desperately.

Racke had no chance to shout again. A gag had been thrust between his teeth. Now they were blindfolding him. That done, they tied up his arms and legs.

Blake gave a low whistle, and the sound of wheels was heard in the gloom.

A market-cart drew up. Clive, disguised like the rest, drove.

Racke was lifted into the cart, and his captors scrambled in, seating themselves somehow and anyhow. Herries and Levison sat on Racke.

The crape masks disappeared, but the beards were retained. There was not much risk as late as this—it was past eleven—of meeting any master or prefect; but it would not have been well that anyone should meet and see masked ruffians.

Levison lifted himself from off Racke, slipped over the tailboard of the cart, and disappeared into the darkness.

The cart had been pulled up near the wall of St. Jim's when he returned to his comrades, who were talking away from the cart.

"What's the idea, Levison?" asked Blake.

"Take him for a nice little drive—another hour or so," replied Levison. "It's safe enough. Nobody about, and everything arranged about returning the cart and putting the horse in the stable. He'll never guess that he's gone all that way and yet got no further than St. Jim's. The cart was no end of a good wheeze, Blake, and it's a pity not to make the most of it."

"No good all of us going, though," said Blake.

"That's true. There really isn't room for the whole crowd. Look here, Cardew, can't you wangle something or other to get us in without having to haul the pig up to the leads and in through the box-room window? That's another thing that might give the game away."

"Of course, dear boy—nothing easier," answered Cardew. "The Form-room windows can always be opened from inside, an' as we've got to make use of that part of the buildin', an' have the necessary keys, why, there you are!"

"Well, you'll have time to faze up the Form-room a bit, so that he should think it's a cellar. You might get something for the sweep to lie on, too. I'm not tender about him; but he's going to suffer enough in his mind before morning, and being tied up like that won't be all jam for him bodily."

"Right-ho! Now, who's going with the pig an' who's comin' over the wall with me?"

There was some argument about that. No one but Cardew seemed very willing to desert the cart and the prisoner. There would not be very much to do indoors, and the waiting would be tedious, they thought.

But it was settled at length that Herries, who refused to get off Racke; Blake, who meant to drive; Gussy, who wanted to, and Levison, should go on with the cart; while Cardew, Digby, and Clive went over the wall to prepare for and await their return.

The horse and cart had been the result of an eleventh hour suggestion. The imprisonment of Racke at St. Jim's was part of Cardew's original scheme. But, owing to the brief time allowed for preparation, that

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scheme had not been elaborated in detail, and Levison's suggestions now certainly improved upon it.

### THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

#### Spoofted!

AUBREY RACKE was suspicious enough in an ordinary way; but Cardew's well-laid scheme had so completely taken him in that he had no doubt whatever that he was in the grip of a gang of conspirators who meant to extort money from him.

And it was a very natural thought for a fellow like Racke. War profiteering had lifted his father from poverty to wealth, and to him and his father, and the whole family of the Rackes, money seemed the only thing that mattered.

The thought of ransom was in Racke's mind almost from the instant in which he was seized.

That did not prevent him from being in a deadly funk. But he comforted himself with the notion that, at worst, he could get out of this scrape at the cost to his father of money that would really never be missed. Racke senior would not like shelling out, of course, and Racke junior did not mean to make him shell out if the kidnapers could be duped. But, at worst, he could pay and go free.

The cart moved on. It seemed to Racke that it was no longer so full, though one of the kidnapers—a heavy one—still sat upon him. Something like a scuffle ensued between two of those left, and the cart gave an alarming lurch or two. Racke could not know it; but that was due to Gussy's trying to collar the reins from Blake.

But for Levison's coolness and presence of mind Gussy might have given the whole game away. It was only Levison's hand, clapped over his mouth in the very nick of time, that stifled an angry "Bai Jove!"

"Better let him drive a bit, Blake," whispered Levison. "No keeping the ass quiet without."

"He'll have us into a ditch!" muttered Blake.

But he resigned the reins to his chum.

It was perhaps twenty minutes later, and by two left turns they were nearing St. Jim's again, when there came another lurch that almost capsized the cart. Racke and Herries were shot from one side to the other, and for a moment Racke entertained a wild notion of escaping.

But he found that his bonds held tightly still, and he had to lie there, very much on the slant, and with his heels higher than his head, while all four of his guards got down and put their shoulders to the wheel.

For Gussy had driven into a ditch!

Muffled reproaches were made, and once or twice Racke had a vague idea that he heard voices familiar to him. But it was quite vague, and soon forgotten in the painfulness of his position.

Ten minutes or so were wasted in getting the cart out of the ditch. Then they made all haste for St. Jim's. But, of course, Racke had not the least notion that the place at which they stopped now was the school. He imagined himself miles away.

The three left behind were waiting under the wall inside. Racke, still bound, gagged, and blindfolded, was lifted out of the cart and received by them, standing inside, from the hands of those above. It was rather a ticklish operation; but it was accomplished with such success that he did not even realise that he had been lifted over a high wall.

Blake and Levison drove off with the cart. The other five carried Racke across the quad, and lifted him in at one of the windows of the Shell Form-room.

Cardew had brought down from one of the studies some horsehair cushions, and upon these Racke was laid.

Then there was a whispered consultation. Racke strained his ears in his efforts to make out what was said, but he could not.

At length a rough voice said:

"We'll take it out. Tain't as if there wasn't gain to be one of us close at 'and all night. Let him shout for 'elp if he dare do it! No one but us is goin' to hear him, anyways."

"He'll be safer with it in," said another voice.

"Yes, an' if he begins to choke the chap on guard is safe to hear him," replied a third.

"If he chokes we don't get no ransom for 'im, an' there's the corpse to be got rid of," spoke the first.

Racke shuddered. They really sounded like most unmitigated ruffians; and that remark about "the corpse" seemed to him in particularly bad taste.

Something that felt like the muzzle of a pistol, but was not, was held against his temple, and the gag was removed, much to his relief.

"You jest shout, that's all!" hissed someone in his ear. "I shall be 'andy, and if I 'ave to use this 'ere shooter—well, it won't be the first time, nor yet the last, I dessay."

"I'll give you ten pounds to let me go!" bawled Racke, now thoroughly frightened.

"Think it over a bit, an' see whether you can't make a rise on that offer," said the hoarse voice sneeringly. "We know all about you, young feller-me-lad! Ain't your guv'nor been robbin' the country all through the war? And wot 'e pay through the nose to get back the son 'e's to be made a gent of out of all 'is profiteerin'? Think it over, an' call 'igher next time. Somewhere nearer ten thou. will be more like the 'ereet figure!"

Then there was the sound of departing feet, and an awful silence after it, and Racke shivered where he lay.

Whether had these ruffians brought him? He had no notion, how far from Rylcombe he was, or in what kind of place.

It smelt like a cellar, he decided after a bit. Damp and earthy. Yes, certainly like a cellar!

Levison's hint had been acted upon by Cardew. It was easy enough to produce something like a cellar atmosphere by dumping dry earth piled on newspapers.

The silence was awful. Racke felt like screaming, but dared not, and the faltering questions he put to the supposed warden somewhere hard by went unanswered.

They had left him alone, of course. And he was so much afraid that he dared not shout. Besides, what would be the use of shouting from a cellar underneath some lonely house, like that to which Talbot had been decoyed?

The thought of Talbot's experience stiffened Racke's back a bit. If he held out, would they dare to do anything? Or would they accept such ransom as he could pay without recourse to his father? Racke senior would not be exactly pleasant if he had to shell out some hundreds—of course; it was utter rot to talk about thousands!—in order to rescue his son from a captivity that would need quite a lot of explaining.

Or could he do them down? Could he promise and wriggle out of it?

He set his wits to work.

But no plan came to him. The silence and the darkness, the cellar-smell, were too much for his nerves. He could not think clearly; he felt that he would shriek if he were left alone there much longer. And he dared not shriek; he might be shot if he did!

It was a pretty bad time for Aubrey Racke. But he deserved it all.

Up in the Fourth-Form dormitory the seven conspirators took counsel together as to their next move. It was quite impossible, they found, to go to bed and sleep; and Blake and Levison, who had not yet seen Racke in his prison, were impatient for a sight of him.

"What's to be the end of it all, Cardew?" asked Digby.

"Well, I'm not dead sure that you fellows will agree, an' it isn't for me to decide on my own; but my notion of it is somethin' like this. Racke will try to bluff us first time, I guess; but if we leave him another hour or two he will come round to anythin' we dashed well require of him. We keep him blindfolded till 'e agrees, an' 'till then we talk in ruffianly voices. But when he agrees we uncover his eyes, so that he may sign, an' then—"

Cardew paused.

"An' then 'e'll find half the Shell an' Fourth standin' round, an' see that 'e's in the old familiar Form-room, an' know that 'e's been utterly spoofted, an'—well, Racke's a thick-skinned specimen, but I really think that will get through his hide!"

"Let's go down and have a shot at him now," suggested Blake.

He and Levison and Cardew went. Arthur Augustus preferred not to go; he still thought it was "wathak wough on Wacke."

That youth had come very near the end of his tether. He was actually glad when the hoarse voice sounded again. The silence

had preyed on his nerves until he was ready to welcome anything that broke it.

Cardew, as speaker for the supposed kidnapers, put his figure high.

"We've talked it over," he said, "an' we reckon a thousand will be about right. Your guv'nor, he won't feel that out of them war profits of his."

"I—Oh, I say, you know, I don't believe my pater will shell out at all!" faltered Racke. "He'll know you daren't do anythin' to me. You'll be bound to let me go!"

"Think so, d'yer? We'll see about that, my lad! You can 'ave another hour or two to think it over. But mind we don't make it two thou, that's all! We may if you get givin' of us too much trouble."

Then again the sound of retreating footsteps, and again the silence which played such havoc with Racke's nerves.

He would never be able to stick it out! He knew that now. Reginald Talbot might do such things, not Aubrey Racke.

But he could surely take them in—promise, and then back out. Once he was out of their clutches no promise would bind him.

It seemed almost an eternity before the rough voice was heard again. As a matter of fact, it was rather less than an hour.

All the seven were there when Cardew spoke. But more were there besides the seven. The Terrible Three, Talbot, Gore, Grundy, Gunn, Dane, Glynn, and Kangaroo, of the Shell, were all present.

Crooke had been hauled from between the sheets, where he had lain cowering ever since he had come in. It might have been expected that Crooke would have told the rest what had happened to his dear chum Racke—would have tried to raise a relief force—would at least have shown some anxiety about Racke's fate. But he had done nothing. He was concerned for nothing but his own worthless hide.

And quite a lot of the Fourth had assembled. Julian & Co. were there, of course, and Koylance and Lumley-Lumley and Durance, and Mulvaney minor and Tompkins, and a dozen others, who exulted at the prospect of seeing Racke put through it.

"Your last chance!" said the rough voice.

"The cops are on our track, an' we can't afford to be messin' about with you. Write us an order on your father for a thousand quid, and give us your bloomin' word of honour that it will be met, an' you can go. Refuse, an' we'll just shut down this place, with you inside it, an'—well, I dessay you may be found before you've pegged out through starvation. But if you ain't it's no fault of ours, is it? You've 'ad your chance."

"I—I'll do it!" faltered Racke. "I—I can't be left here!"

"Give us your word of honour that it'll be paid, then!"

"I give you my word of honour!"

"Sign this!"

Racke's hands were untied, and a fountain-pen was put into the right.

"I can't sign with my eyes blindfolded!" he said peevishly.

"Oh, yes, you can, cocky! You've given your word of honour, an' it don't matter whether your signature's really pretty. I'll guide your hand."

Racke groaned, and signed, his hand guided by Cardew.

Then the handkerchief which had bound his eyes was whipped away, and he saw, in the light of half a dozen electric-torches, the familiar Shell Form-room and the faces of twenty or thirty fellows!

"Spoofted!" yelled Levison, forgetting prudence in his exultation.

"Spoofted!"

"Done to the wide!"

"Racke's ransom! Ha, ha, ha!"

Racke tried to speak; but could only splutter. If a look could have killed them all, they must have died then and there. But there was no sign that they felt that look as being at all deadly.

He glanced down at the paper which bore his straggling and shaky signature. It read:

"I hereby acknowledge that I have been utterly and absolutely spoofted!"

"AUBREY RACKE."

The grinning faces, the exultant countenance of Levison, the smirks on the face of Cardew, they were more than Racke could bear. He bolted from the Form-room and made for his study.

THE END.