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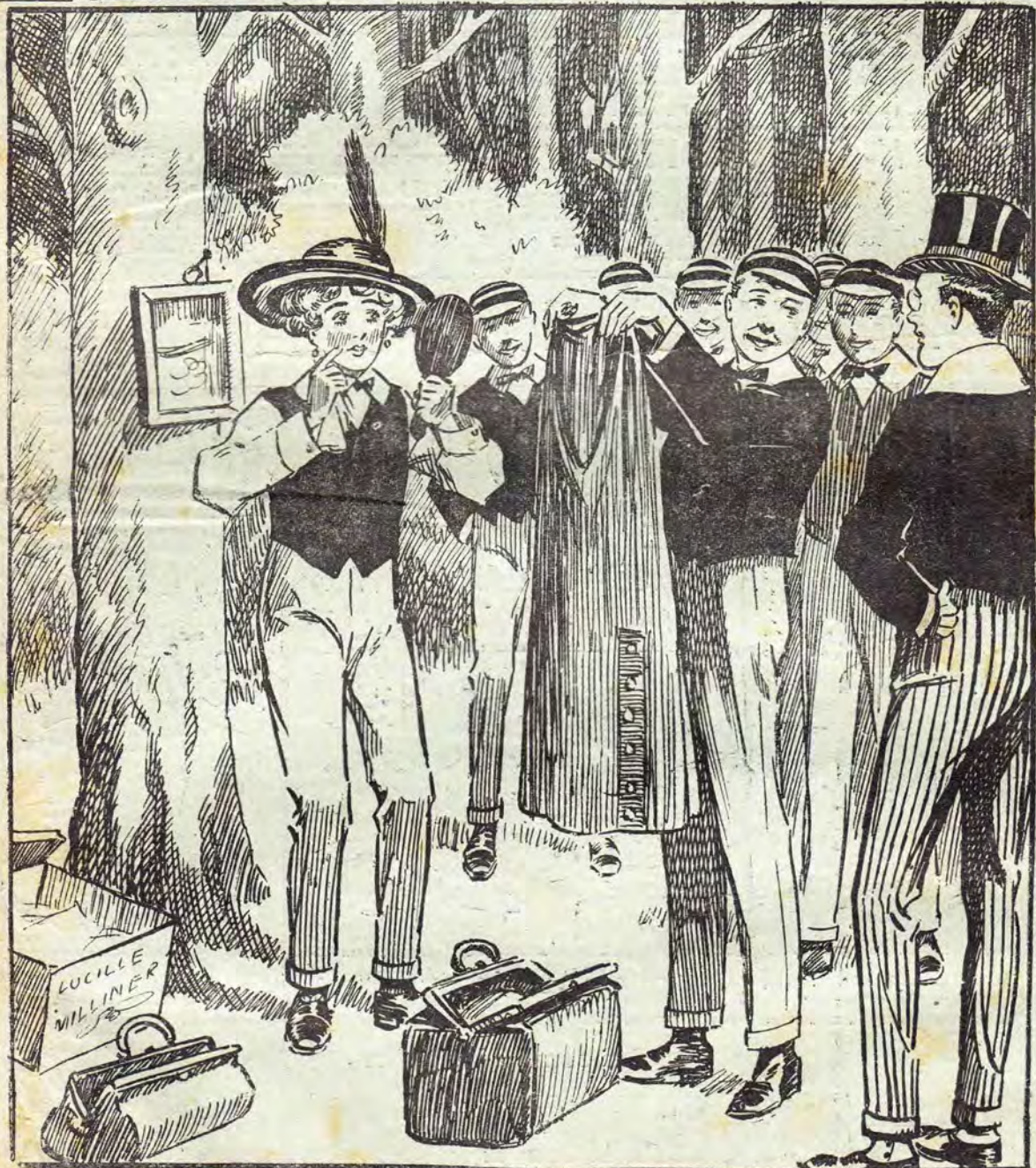
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"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I must say you look wathah wemarkable, Kerr!" "Ha, Ha! Now hand me the skirt!" said Kerr. Tom Merry held up the skirt and surveyed it dubiously. "You ought to have put this on before you put on the hat," he remarked. "You'll never get it over your head now!" "Bosh!" replied Kerr, with a sniff. "I'm going to jump into it, of course!"

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ROUGH ON RATCLIFF!



A Splendid, New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & CO. at St. Jim's.
By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1. Very Ratty!

MR. RATCLIFF frowned. Mr. Ratcliff, the Housemaster of the New House at St. Jim's, was much more addicted to frowning than to smiling. He was not a cheerful person. He had a weak digestion and a strong temper. He looked with a sour eye upon everyone who was more cheerful than himself, and if he could have had his own way entirely, the New House at St. Jim's would have enjoyed the silence and solemnity of a mausoleum. Indeed, as Figgins of the Fourth had remarked, a mausoleum was a cheerful place in comparison with the New House when Ratty was on the warpath.

Mr. Ratcliff's frown, on the present occasion, was caused by the sounds of merriment proceeding from Figgins's study in the Fourth Form passage in the New House. It must be admitted

that the sounds of merriment were somewhat uproarious. Figgins was evidently entertaining a little party in his study; and as the Housemaster was supposed to be out, perhaps the guests allowed themselves to "go" a little. Mr. Ratcliff, who had just come in, could hear the sound of a chorus from above, and he ascended the stairs and entered the Fourth Form passage with his brows knitted, and a very unpleasant glitter in his eyes. Over in the School House, Mr. Railton would have taken no notice of a harmless celebration in a junior study on a half-holiday; but that was not Mr. Ratcliff's way. Mr. Ratcliff had a perfect genius for interfering. And the noise Figgins & Co. were making afforded him a sufficient excuse.

As Mr. Ratcliff approached Figgins's study, the passage echoed with the noise from that famous apartment. It was really not an unpleasant noise—a dozen merry young voices joined in chorus. But it was extremely irritating to the ears of the fussy, faddy Housemaster.

Next Thursday:

"THE SENTENCE OF THE HOUSE!" AND "THE SCHOOL UNDER CANVAS!"

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The chorus finished just as he reached Figgins's door. Mr. Ratcliff paused outside the door for a few moments, in the stealthy way he had, and he was rewarded as listeners generally are, by hearing no good about himself.

Figgins's deep voice came quite clearly through the door to his ears.

"Jolly lucky Ratty's out!"

There was a laugh.

"Yaas, wathah!" It was the voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form, a School House boy. "Yaas, wathah, Figgay, deah boy. 'I am afraid Watty would go on the rampage if he heard that fearful wow.'"

"While the cat's away, you know," said the voice of Tom Merry of the Shell. "It's really kind and obliging of Ratty to get out."

"Hear, hear!"

"Chorus, gentlemen!" said Figgins.

Mr. Ratcliff opened the door.

He opened it quite suddenly, and stood looking into the crowded study, with a grim, sour expression upon his thin face.

Instead of a chorus, there was a gasp of alarm from the juniors in the study.

The study was crammed.

Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn, otherwise known as Figgins & Co., were there, of course. Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther, the Terrible Three of the School House, were there. Blake, Digby, D'Arcy, and Herries were there. Kangaroo of the Shell, and Reilly of the Fourth, were there. So were Redfern and Owen and Lawrence, the three scholarship boys of the New House. It was a wonderful thing that the confined space of the junior study could hold so many; but the juniors were adepts in the art of making the most of a little space.

Some of them sat on chairs, and some on the coal locker, and some on the window-sill. Some of them were standing up. All of them were very merry and very happy. The table was loaded with good things, showing that Figgins & Co. were in great funds. The juniors were enjoying themselves. But all enjoyment vanished at the sight of Mr. Ratcliff's sour countenance, and a grim silence fell upon the merry party.

The juniors stared at Mr. Ratcliff, and Mr. Ratcliff stared at the juniors. And there was a silence that could be felt.

"G-g-good-afternoon, sir," said Figgins at last, in a hesitating voice. "C-c-can we offer you a cup of tea, sir?"

"No, Figgins, you cannot!" said Mr. Ratcliff, acidly.

"I—I hope we haven't been making too much noise, sir," ventured Tom Merry.

"Indeed! Your hope is very ill-founded, Merry. You have been making a most disgraceful noise. I presume that it is your object to turn this House into a bear garden like the School House," snapped Mr. Ratcliff. "That may be permitted by Mr. Railton. I do not permit it here."

Tom Merry set his lips. Mr. Ratcliff's sneer at the School House master made him very angry, but he could not very well retort. He was silent.

Mr. Ratcliff's unpleasant eye roved over the assembly.

"I will not have this disgraceful uproar in this House!" he said.

"I—I'm sorry, sir," stammered Figgins, turning very red. "I—I was only standing a bit of a feed to the fellows, sir; and as it's a half-holiday, sir—"

"A half-holiday is no excuse for hooliganism," rapped out Mr. Ratcliff.

Figgins's eyes gleamed.

"I don't think we've been guilty of any hooliganism, sir," he said with spirit. "I think the Head would not object to fellows singing a chorus in their study if they wanted to."

It was rather an unfortunate remark of Figgins's. It implied that Mr. Ratcliff was fussy and unreasonable; as he undoubtedly was.

The Housemaster frowned more darkly.

"I don't want any of your impertinence, Figgins," he said angrily.

"If you please, sir—"

"Silence!"

"But, sir—"

"Hold your tongue, Figgins!"

Figgins bit his lip and was silent.

"You School House boys will leave this House immediately," said Mr. Ratcliff. "You are not under my jurisdiction, or I should punish you. The New House boys here will write out a hundred lines each."

"Oh, sir!"

"And this orgy," said Mr. Ratcliff, dwelling upon the word "orgy," which seemed to please him, "this orgy must not be continued in the other House. The School House boys may act as their Housemaster chooses to permit, but I forbid any New House boys to enter the School House this day. You hear me?"

"Yes, sir," said Figgins.

"That is all! If there is any more clamour here, I shall cane you all."

And Mr. Ratcliff strode out of the study, feeling that he had put an effectual damper upon the spirits of Figgins and his friends—as indeed he had.

The juniors stood in silence as the Housemaster's footsteps died away down the passage.

It was not till he was safely out of hearing that any one of them spoke. Figgins broke the uncomfortable silence.

"I—I'm sorry for this, you fellows," he said awkwardly. "Ratty is a beast!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Augustus D'Arcy, sympathetically. "I must say that I do not regard Watty as playing the game, you know."

"Rotter!" said Kerr.

"Cad!" said Tom Merry.

"Beast!"

"Worm!"

"Outsider!"

All the fellows had opinions to give, and their opinions were very unflattering to Mr. Ratcliff.

"We'd better buzz," said Tom Merry ruefully. "It's all right, Figg; it can't be helped. You could bring the stuff over to the School House, and we could finish the feed in my study, but—"

"But Ratty's up to that!" growled Figgins. "That's why he won't let us into the School House to day. He wants scragging!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"But we're jolly well not going to have the feed spoiled," said Fatty Wynn, in alarm. "We shall have to get round it somehow. And Kerr was going to do some of his impersonations after tea. It's a shame!"

"Rotten!"

"Beastly!"

The School House fellows moved towards the door. Redfern, of the Fourth, held up his hand.

"It's all right!" he exclaimed.

"How is it all right?" demanded Figgins. "I think it is all wrong."

"I've got an idea," said Redfern. "Look here, we've been stopped, here, and we can't have the feed in the School House. Let's get down to Bunn's shop in Rylcombe and have it there."

"Bai Jove, that's a wippin' ideal!"

Figgins brightened up.

"Good egg!" he exclaimed. "You're a giddy genius, Reddy. Good! Will you fellows come down to Bunn's, and we can do as we like?"

"Hear, hear!"

"Yes; rather!"

"Bravo!"

"Shush!" said Monty Lowther, cautiously. "Don't let Ratty suspect, or he'd be after us like a shot!"

"Yaas, wathah."

"Mun's the word!" said Figgins. "You fellows meet us at the gates, and we'll walk down to Rylcombe together. We'll do old Ratty, somehow."

"Good egg!"

And the prospect of "doing old Ratty" cheered the juniors up wonderfully. Tom Merry & Co. looked quite cheerful as they went downstairs. But at the sight of Mr. Ratcliff in the hall, with his sour eye upon them, they became solemn at once, and drew long faces, and walked out of the New House as if they were going to a funeral.

CHAPTER 2.

A Feed at the Bun-Shop.

"READY?"

"We're ready," said Blake; "Gussy isn't. He wants to change his necktie, so we shall have to wait a couple of hours or so."

"Weally, Blake, twenty minutes will be quite enough—"

The Terrible Three chuckled. The School House fellows had gone into their own House, to get ready for the walk down to Rylcombe, and also to get out of Mr. Ratcliff's sight in case he had a suspicious eye upon them. Tom Merry & Co. had no great preparations to make, only some of them exchanged their caps for toppers, in order to do full justice to the occasion. But

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READ "THE TUCK-SHOP RAIDERS!" IN "THE MAGNET" LIBRARY. Now on Sale. PRICE 1^d.



"I wefuse to return to the school, Mr. Watcliff!" said Arthur Augustus, firmly. "I wegard your intah-fewence as uttably gwoundless and impertinent, and I must we remark, sir, that your mannah's pwove that you are no gentleman." (See Chapter 4.)

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was an exception. He was only prevented by force from rushing up to the dormitory to change his clothes, and he insisted upon a clean collar and a new necktie and another waistcoat.

Digby and Herries and Blake stood round in the study, snorting. The Terrible Three looked in at the door, and saw an open box on the floor, and five or six waistcoats of the most striking colours on the table.

Waistcoats and neckties were there galore, and the swell of St. Jim's was making his selection with a critical eye.

"Figgy will be waiting," Manners remarked.

"I'm waiting," said Kangaroo. "Buck up, Gussy!"

"Undah the cires., Kangy, it is imposa. to buck up. The question is, which of these neckties goes best with this waistcoat?"

"Any old thing will do," remarked Blake.

"Any old thing will not do, deah boy. On an occasion like this, a chap must dwess in somethin' like taste."

"Blessed if I see that a feed is to be dressed for," said Kangaroo, staring. "You're not going to an evening party or the opera, Gussy."

"No; but—"

Monty Lowther burst into a roar.

"Ha, ha, ha! Gussy is thinking of Miss Bunn."

The juniors yelled, and Arthur Augustus turned very pi nk.

"Weally, you fellows——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wegard——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I considah——"

"Oh, Gussy, Gussy!" exclaimed Tom Merry, wiping away his tears. "You'll be the death of me. Is this fancy waistcoat for Miss Bunn's eyes, or the pink necktie?"

"Put on your gold studs, Gussy."

"And the tie with spots."

"And the signet ring."

"And don't forget your white spats, old man."

"Miss Bunn is a little particular about the way you do your hair, you know."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus, with a heightened colour, turned to the glass again. He evidently disdained to reply to the jesting remarks of the School House fellows. He donned a waistcoat, and found a tie that contrasted with it, and yet harmonised with the colour of his eyes—a most important detail. Then he slipped on the elegant Eton jacket, and gave his handsome topper a final polish.

"I'm weady!" he said, with dignity.

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NEXT
THURSDAY:

"THE SENTENCE OF THE HOUSE!"

A Splendid, New, Long, Complete School Tale of the
Chums of St. Jim's. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

"Come on!" said Tom Merry. "Oh, Gussy!"

"You uttah ass!"

"Doesn't he look a picture!" said Blake admiringly. "My Aunt Selina fell in love with him when she came down here last time, and if she hadn't been fifty years older than Gussy——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I refuse to listen to these wifald jokes, Blake!"

"Buck up!" said Reilly. "I can see the New House boundaries outside the gates. Sure they've been waiting long enough while Gussy was changing his waistcoat for Miss Bunn."

"I was not changin' it for Miss Bunn, you ass! A fellow wants to look respectable. I have to keep up appearances for the whole study," said D'Arcy loftily.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The School House party reached the gates. Figgins & Co., and Redfern and his comrades, were waiting outside.

"You've been a jolly long time," said Fatty Wynn, who was exceedingly anxious to resume the interrupted feed.

"It's Gussy!" explained Blake. "He remembered that he hadn't washed his neck this morning, and——"

"Blake, you uttah ass!"

Figgins chuckled.

"Well, better late than never," he said cheerily. "Come on, before old Ratty gets an eye on us. He would be quite capable of following up to Bunn's and ordering us off, if he knew."

"Bai Jove!"

"He's rotter enough for anything!" said Kerr. "Blessed if I wouldn't change into the School House, only a fellow naturally wants to belong to the cock-house of the school."

"The what?" demanded the School-House juniors, in one breath.

"The cock-house of St. Jim's," said Kerr innocently. "Naturally, we can't join the secondary show, or else we should really give Ratty the sack."

"Ass!"

"Pathhead!"

"Duffer!"

"Yaas, wathah, Kerr, I wegard you as a feahful ass! You are perfectly well aware of the fact that the School House is cock-house at St. Jim's, and if I were not Figgy's guest at the pwsent moment, I should give you a feahful thwashin' for your awful cheek, you know."

"If we had a Housemaster like Ratty," said Blake, "we'd boil him! We wouldn't stand it in the School House."

"Oh, rats!"

"Order! order!" exclaimed Figgins. "Shut up; we don't want a House row when we're going to have a feed. Order!"

"Yaas, wathah! I agree with my friend Figgins. Ordah!" Tom Merry laughed.

"Shut up, and let's have a race to the village," he suggested.

"Good egg!"

"Pway don't wun, deah boys!" protested Arthur Augustus. "The woad is covahed with dust. I do not wish to get my bags dustay."

"Oh, blow your bags!" said Lowther.

"I refuse to do anythin' of the sort!"

The juniors broke into a run. But Arthur Augustus allowed himself to drop behind. He was, as Blake expressed it, in his best bib and tucker, and he did not intend to spoil the effect by exerting himself upon a dusty road.

He walked on in an exceedingly stately manner, and reached Mr. Bunn's establishment some time after the rest of the fellows had gone in.

Mr. Bunn's shop was a very handsome establishment. Mr. Bunn was an enterprising confectioner, who was introducing London manners and customs into Rylcombe.

The Bun-shop, as the St. Jim's juniors called it, was the only place in Rylcombe where there were little tables, and imitation marble walls, electric lights, and indigestible pastries in variegated colours. Naturally, it was very much patronised by the St. Jim's fellows; and among the attractions must be reckoned Miss Bunn; a very charming young lady, who had sweet smiles for all. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, to whom every member of the gentle sex was a duchess at least, always treated Miss Bunn with the most profound courtesy, and Miss Bunn was certainly very nice to Arthur Augustus.

Miss Bunn was hovering about the St. Jim's party as D'Arcy entered. Tom Merry & Co. had four little tables ranged together to provide for their wants, and Figgins was giving orders in the most lavish way. It was not very often that Figgins was in great funds; but when he was, he proceeded to make the surly. Miss Bunn was much impressed by Figgy's reckless orders; but as soon as the elegant form of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy came down the middle of the shop, Miss Bunn's eyes wandered.

"And two dozen jam tarts," said Figgins.

"I will get another chair," said Miss Bunn.

Figgins stared.

"I don't want another chair," he said. "I said jam tarts."

"Yes. On this side, please, there is room here."

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"Eh!" ejaculated Figgins.

He whirled his head round, and saw D'Arcy, and understood. He grinned. Miss Bunn brought another chair, and room was made for Arthur Augustus.

"Thank you vewy much, Miss Bunn," said D'Arcy. "You are vewy kind."

And he sat down.

Figgins finished giving his orders, and the tables were soon, as a novelist would say, groaning under the goodly viands.

"Gentlemen!" said Figgins. "I am sorry that the feed in my study was interrupted; but I think we shall be all right here. Fill up your glasses, and drink a toast."

"Good egg!"

Lemonade and ginger-beer foamed into the tumblers.

"Here's confusion to Ratty, and all his works!" said Figgins.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hear, hear!"

And the toast was drunk with enthusiasm.

CHAPTER 3.

Tom Merry Declines!

TOM MERRY & CO. were enjoying themselves.

True, they could not venture to make quite so much noise in the bun-shop as in a junior study at St. Jim's; but Mr. Bunn himself looked upon such good customers with a very kindly eye, and Miss Bunn was all smiles. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, instead of touching the bell when anything was wanted, had a way of strolling up to the bar near the door, and asking Miss Bunn for it, in his most gracious way, and sometimes he remained there many minutes in conversation with Miss Bunn. These little excursions on the part of Arthur Augustus excited a considerable amount of risibility among his comrades. Arthur Augustus was a ladies' man, there was no doubt about that, and he liked to sun himself in the smiles of the gentle sex, though he would never have dreamed of being flirtatious. And it was impossible for the youthful Miss Bunn to avoid liking a junior whose manners were so elegant, and whose courtesy was so unailing.

"More ginger-beer, waiter!" said Redfern presently.

Arthur Augustus looked at the New House junior.

"Did you address me, Wedfern?" he asked.

Redfern nodded.

"Yes. More ginger-beer."

"You uttah ass!"

"You've constituted yourself waiter, haven't you?" asked Redfern innocently.

"Weally, Weddy——"

"Well, I'll ring if you like——"

"Not at all," said D'Arcy hastily. "I will wequest Miss Bunn to send along some more gingah-beer."

And Arthur Augustus sauntered away elegantly.

He remained in conversation with Miss Bunn for five minutes over the dishes of pastry and bottles of sweets, and then came back to the table. Redfern looked at him inquiringly.

"Where's the ginger-beer?" he asked.

"Eh?"

"Ginger-beer!" roared Redfern. "Where is it?"

"Bai Jove! I forgot all about it!"

"Well, you ass!" said Blake. "If you haven't ordered the ginger-beer, what have you been talking to Miss Bunn about?"

"I could tell you," said Monty Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah, I don't think you could."

"Two to one I could name the subject."

"Wats!"

"Engagement rings!" said Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus rose to his feet, jammed his monocle into his eye, and took a withering survey of Lowther.

"Montague Lowthah!" he said, in an awful voice. "I wegard you as a wotten beast!"

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"Hear, hear!" said Lowther.
 "And an unspeakable wottah!"
 "Good!"
 "And a wank outsidah!"
 "Bravo!"
 "And if we were not in the presence of a lady, I would give you a faithful thrashin' for makin' wibald jokes."
 "Good!" said Lowther. "Now pass the cake!"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 "What price that ginger beer?" said Redfern. "I think it's a bit thick for Gussy to leave us beerless, while he talks about engagement rings."
 "You feahful ass! I wasn't talkin' about engagement wings."
 "Well, wedding rings, then," said Lowther, "I'm not particular."
 "You uttah duffah! I was not talkin' about wings at all."
 "I suppose Miss Bunn is an angel without wings," suggested Lowther, imitating Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's beautiful accent, and thereby creating a pun.
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Lowthah, you are a wottah. I decline to continue a ridiculous discuss with you."
 "Good! Order the ginger beer," said Redfern; "or I'll order it if you like. I darsay Miss Bunn would like me to go up to the counter for a change."
 "Weally, Weddy—!"
 "Why, she's gone!" said Redfern, looking round. "Never mind, Bunn pere will do. Some more ginger beer, please, Mr. Bunn."
 "Certainly," said Mr. Bunn.
 And the ginger beer was forthcoming. Arthur Augustus was beginning to put on his gloves. The other fellows watched that proceeding with surprise.
 "Not going?" exclaimed Figgins. "You mustn't mind Reddy. He can't help it."
 "Sowwy, deah boy, but I have to go," said D'Arcy.
 "Miss Bunn's gone already!" murmured Lowther. "Meet me round the bandstand! Kiss me and call me Charley!"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 Arthur Augustus glared at the humorous Lowther.
 "I regard you as a beast, Lowthah. Miss Bunn is goin' to do a little shoppin', and she has kindly accepted my escort as fah as the dwapah's."
 "Hear, hear!"
 Blake shook his finger at his elegant chum. Arthur Augustus was giving his silk hat a little polish with his gloved hand.
 "Gussy! Gussy! Why do you do these things?"
 "Blake, you ass—!"
 "You're not going before the feed's finished?" exclaimed Fatty Wynn, in astonishment. "We haven't had the meringues yet."
 "I do not want any mewingues, thank you."
 "You've had only one cup of tea."
 "That is quite sufficient, thanks."
 "Remember us to Miss Bunn's young man, if you meet him," said Lowther, as Arthur Augustus turned away from the table.
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 The swell of St. Jim's did not deign to reply. He walked down the shop with his aristocratic nose held very high in the air. The juniors chuckled.
 "Blessed if I can make D'Arcy out," said Fatty Wynn.
 "Fancy going before we've had the meringues—and the cake, too. Is he dotty?"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 The juniors watched the elegant figure of Arthur Augustus disappear through the doorway into the street. Then they resumed the feed without him. Fatty Wynn had not paused. The fat Fourth-Former had no time to waste. The supply of tuck was unlimited, and Fatty Wynn had an appetite to match.
 But everything comes to an end at last; and the time came when even Fatty Wynn of the Fourth could eat no more.
 He sat back in his chair with a sigh of contentment.
 "That's something like," he remarked.
 "Another cake?" asked Lowther, with solicitude.
 "No, thanks!"
 "A couple of dozen tarts?"
 "No, I've had enough."
 "One more health before we break up," said Tom Merry.
 "Here's to the founder of the feast."
 "Good old Figgins!"
 "Hurrah!"
 And the toast was drunk with stamping of feet and clinking of glasses. It was unfortunate that just as the juniors were making the most noise, Mr. Ratcliff should walk into Mr. Bunn's establishment.
 His sour eye wandered towards the juniors at once, and he frowned.
 Perhaps Mr. Ratcliff had come in for some slight refreshment, but if so, he forgot all about it as soon as he caught sight of the merry party.
 He strode towards them with knitted brows.

"Ah!" he ejaculated.
 Figgins groaned.
 "Old Ratty!" he murmured under his breath. "Oh, what luck!"
 "So you are repeating this disgraceful orgy in public, and making enough noise in Mr. Bunn's shop to disgrace the shop, and the school you belong to," said Mr. Ratcliff, acidly.
 "We're not disgracing anything or anybody, sir," said Tom Merry, flushing. "Mr. Bunn is satisfied with our conduct."
 "Certainly, sir," said Mr. Bunn, coming forward. "I don't mind the young gentlemen making a little noise, sir. Boys will be boys."
 "You may not mind," said Mr. Ratcliff, tartly. "But as I happen to be their Housemaster, I do mind—and I object very strongly."
 Mr. Bunn discreetly retired. He did not wish to enter into an argument with a master from St. Jim's.
 Mr. Ratcliff's sharp, beady eye roved over the exasperated juniors.
 "Leave this place at once, and return to St. Jim's," he said. "You are detained for the remainder of the afternoon."
 Figgins & Co., and Redfern, and Owen and Lawrence rose to their feet. They were New House boys, and had to obey Mr. Ratcliff.
 But a quick glance passed among the School House fellows and they sat still.
 The New House juniors passed slowly down the shop, enraged but obedient. Figgins settled his bill with Mr. Bunn, the Housemaster watching him sourly. Then the New House juniors left the bun-shop.
 Mr. Ratcliff stared at Tom Merry & Co., still seated at the table.
 "Did you hear me?" he said, coldly.
 "Yes, sir," said Tom Merry, quietly.
 "You will leave this place at once."
 "Excuse me, sir," said Tom Merry, very firmly. "You are not our Housemaster, sir. If Mr. Railton tells us we must not come here, we will obey him."
 Mr. Ratcliff's eyes glittered.
 "Does that mean that you will not obey me, Merry?" he rapped out.
 "You have no right to order us back to the school, sir."
 "Hear, hear!" murmured Monty Lowther.
 Mr. Ratcliff paused.
 He was exceeding his authority, and he knew it. Mr. Ratcliff was Housemaster to the New House, and Form-master of the Fifth Form at St. Jim's. But boys in other Forms, who belonged to the School House, were not under his authority. He knew it, and the juniors knew it, but he had not expected resistance.
 "Then you refuse to obey me, Merry?" the New House master said, at last.
 "If you put it like that, yes, sir."
 "Very well," said Mr. Ratcliff, between his teeth, "I shall report your conduct to the Head."
 "Yes, sir!"
 Tom Merry's manner was very respectful, but very determined. The Housemaster was red with anger. Mr. Bunn and several customers in the shop were listening to the altercation with smiles. The Housemaster had placed himself in a ridiculous position, and only the instant obedience of the juniors could have saved his dignity. But Tom Merry & Co. evidently did not mean to obey. They were standing upon their rights.
 Mr. Ratcliff gave them a bitter look, and turned and strode out of the shop.
 Monty Lowther grinned.
 "Done fairly in the eye!" he murmured.
 "The cheeky rotter!" growled Blake. "Fancy getting up on his hind legs and giving orders to the School House! Br-r-r-r-r!"
 And the School House fellows, to make it quite clear that they were victorious, ordered more ginger beer, and did not leave the bun-shop for another ten minutes.

CHAPTER 4.

A Very Awkward Position!

MR. RATCLIFF left the bun-shop, and walked down the old High Street of Rylcombe with such an expression of concentrated rage upon his sour face that several passers-by turned to look at him. The Housemaster did not observe it. He had carried his tyranny, and his genius for meddlesome interference, too far, and he had been snubbed in the most direct way, in public, by junior schoolboys. It was not surprising that Mr. Horace Ratcliff was in a towering rage.
 He strode on savagely, and almost ran into an elegant junior outside the draper's shop some distance down the street. It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. The swell of St. Jim's was just raising his silk hat to a young lady who had stepped out of the shop, with several parcels. Mr. Ratcliff paused, and his eyes glinted. He was yearning for some victim upon whom

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NEXT
THURSDAY:

"THE SENTENCE OF THE HOUSE!"

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to expend his anger, and it really seemed as if Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had been specially sent for the purpose.

D'Arcy was too preoccupied to notice the Housemaster.

"Pway allow me to cawwy the parcels, Miss Bunn," he said, gallantly.

"D'Arcy!"

Mr. Ratcliff rapped out the word.

Arthur Augustus looked round, and raised his hat once more.

"Good afternoon, sir," he said.

Miss Bunn looked dismayed. She read the anger in Mr. Ratcliff's sour countenance, though she did not know the cause. She was concerned for Arthur Augustus, who was evidently looked for trouble.

"What does this mean, D'Arcy?" rapped out Mr. Ratcliff.

D'Arcy looked puzzled.

"I fail to undahstand you, sir," he answered.

Mr. Ratcliff compressed his thin lips.

"Junior schoolboys are not allowed to go about with young women," said Mr. Ratcliff. "You are perfectly well aware of that, D'Arcy."

D'Arcy turned crimson.

"If you speak of Miss Bunn, sir, I wequest you to allude to that young lady more respectfully," he said.

"Oh, dear!" murmured Miss Bunn.

"That is not the way to speak to your master, D'Arcy," said Mr. Ratcliff, sourly. "I shall report your conduct to the Head."

"My conduct is all wight, sir," said D'Arcy. "You can weport it if you like. I should not mind the Head knowin' that I have escorted Miss Bunn to do some shoppin'."

"Don't be impertinent, D'Arcy."

"I am not bein' impertinent, sir. It is you who are bein' impertinent."

Mr. Ratcliff gasped.

"What! What!"

"I wegard your intahfence here as most impertinent, Mr. Watchiff," said Arthur Augustus, calmly. "Your mannah is diswespectful to Miss Bunn, and impertinent to me. I am vewy sowwy to see such conduct in a mastah of the school I belong to."

Mr. Ratcliff almost choked.

"D'Arcy! You insolent young rascal——!"

"Weally, Mr. Watchiff——!"

"Return to the school at once," said the Housemaster, harshly; "I shall deal with you there."

"I wufuse to weturn to the school, sir."

"What!"

"I belong to the School House, and you have no wight to ordah me to weturn to the school," said the swell of St. Jim's sternly. "I wegard your intahfence with me as uttably gwoundless and impertinent."

"Wh-what!"

"And I must wemark, sir, that your mannahs pprove that you are no gentleman," said Arthur Augustus crushingly.

Mr. Ratcliff stood rooted to the ground.

"Oh, don't make the old gentleman angry!" murmured Miss Bunn. "You had better leave me. I'm sure I did not know I was doing any harm."

"You were not doin' any harm, my deah young lady. Watty is a wathah cwusty old chap, that is all," said D'Arcy.

And he relieved Miss Bunn of her parcels and walked up the street by her side, leaving Mr. Ratcliff staring dazedly after him.

Mr. Ratcliff stood for a full minute, apparently rooted to the pavement. Then he strode away towards St. Jim's at a great pace.

Arthur Augustus escorted Miss Bunn back to the bun-shop, when Tom Merry & Co came out.

"Hullo, here's Gussy!" said Blake. "Finished the shopping, Gussy?"

"Yaas, deah boy."

"Anything gone wrong?" asked Lowther. "You look as if you'd been having a row with the shopman."

"Wally, Lowthah——"

"What's happened?" asked Tom Merry.

"I have just met old Watty."

"Oh! He's been here, and ordered Figgins & Co. home," said Tom Merry. "He's fairly on the warpath this afternoon. I suppose it's his liver."

"I wegard him as an impertinent fellow."

"Hear, hear! I hope you told him so," grinned Kangaroo.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"What!" yelled the Cornstalk. "You told him so."

"Certainly."

"My hat!"

"He had the feahful cheek to ordah me to leave Miss Bunn and return to the coll," said Arthur Augustus, frowning. "He was diswespectful towards Miss Bunn."

"The cad!"

"The rotter!"

"Yaas, wathah! Of course, I wasn't goin' to stand that. I

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was placed in a vewy awkward posish," said D'Arcy. "If any othah fellow had been diswespectful to Miss Bunn while she was undah my escort, I should have wegarded it as my duty to give him a feahful thwashin'. But it would be bad form to give a Housemastah a feahful thwashing, wouldn't it?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I do not see anythin' to laugh at, deah boys. I wegard it as a most sewious matter, and a vewy awkward posish for a fellow."

"The posish would be more awkward still if you had punched Ratty," said Blake, with a chuckle. "You had better draw a line at punching a Housemaster."

"But I could not allow him to be wude to Miss Bunn."

"Ahem! Housemasters have the privilege of being rude if they like," said Kangaroo. "It's best to give a Housemaster his head."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Howevah, I think I ought to speak to him when I get back to St. Jim's, and point out to him that his conduct was most unjustifiable, and in the worst of taste," Arthur Augustus remarked thoughtfully.

"I expect he'll speak to you, without waiting for you to speak to him, if you told him he was impertinent," grinned Manners.

"I have a gweat mind to weport him to the Head."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There's going to be trouble," said Tom Merry as the juniors walked back to the school. "We shall find that Ratty has been to the Head by the time we get in."

"Sneaking rotter," said Herries.

"Yaas, wathah! Howevah, I shall not be sowwy to face him, in the pwesence of the Head, in ordah to have an opportunity of sayin' what I think of his conduct."

"Faith, and you'll have the chance, intirely," said Reilly.

"All the bettah, dear boy."

And Arthur Augustus certainly did have the chance as soon as the Co. arrived at St. Jim's. Toby, the house page, met them as they entered the School House.

"The 'Ead wants to see Master D'Arcy in his study, Immeget," announced Toby, with a commiserating glance at the swell of St. Jim's.

"Vewy well, deah boy."

"Is Mr. Ratcliff with the Head?" asked Tom Merry.

"Yes, Master Merry."

"Mind what you say, Gussy," urged Blake. "You mustn't slang a Housemaster, you know. Go easy."

"A fellow must consider his dig, Blake, deah boy."

"Ye-es, but go easy."

But Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's expression as he started for the Head's study did not seem to indicate that he would "go easy," and the chums of the School House waited for him in the passage with considerable anxiety.

CHAPTER 5.

Unpleasant for Gussy.

DR. HOLMES was frowning as Arthur Augustus entered his study. Mr. Ratcliff was standing by the Head's desk, and he had evidently taken full advantage of the opportunity of making his statement first. Dr. Holmes turned a very severe glance upon D'Arcy.

"D'Arcy!" he said, with unusual sternness.

"Yaas, sir," said Arthur Augustus respectfully.

"I have heard a most serious complaint against you from Mr. Ratcliff."

"Yaas, sir. I have a vewy sewious complaint to make against Mr. Watchiff, also, sir."

"What!"

"Mr. Watchiff has acted in a most unjustifiable and ungentlemanly way, sir."

"D'Arcy!"

"He has treated a most respectable and estimable young lady with gwoss diswespect, sir, as well as myself."

"Boy!"

"I wegard it as uttably wotten of Mr. Watchiff, sir, and I wely upon you to wepwmand him."

Mr. Ratcliff appeared to be on the point of going into a fit.

"Sir!" he gasped. "Dr. Holmes! Will you allow this—this unheard-of insolence to pass unpunished?"

"Pray be patient, Mr. Ratcliff. D'Arcy is a most extraordinary boy. I did not send for you, D'Arcy, to hear complaints against Mr. Ratcliff."

"It's only ewicket, sir, to hear both sides, isn't it?"

"Ahem! This is not a contest between the junior school-boys, D'Arcy, but a report of misconduct by a master," said the Head sternly.

"The only misconduct has been fwom Mr. Watchiff, sir," said D'Arcy firmly.

"Dr. Holmes——"

"Silence, D'Arcy! Mr. Ratcliff informs me that he dis-

covered you in the streets of Rylcombe acting as gallant towards a young woman——"

"It is false, sir!"

"What!"

"I can only chawactowise Mr. Watcliff's remarks as unworthy, sir," said the swell of St. Jim's fearlessly. "I was actin' as escort to Miss Bunn, a most estimable young lady. I had the honah of cawwyin' her parcels when she went shoppin', sir, that is all."

"I understand from Mr. Ratcliff that you were walking in the company of a female, not a relative," said the Head severely. "You know that such things are not allowed."

"Weally, sir——"

"He was acting in a most disgraceful manner," said Mr. Ratcliff venomously. "He was keeping company with a young woman."

D'Arcy's eyes flashed.

"That is not true, sir."

"D'Arcy!"

"I wofuse to allow Mr. Watcliff to asperse my chawactah, sir. If I acted as he has stated, I should deserve to be punished. But escortin' a young lady to do some shoppin' is not keepin' company. I thwow Mr. Watcliff's accusation back into his teeth, sir!" said D'Arcy, with a dramatic gesture.

"Silence!"

"Yaas, sir. But——"

"I acquit you of having knowingly done wrong, D'Arcy, but there is no doubt that your conduct has been most injudicious."

"Weally, sir——"

"Above all, you refused to leave this young person when Mr. Ratcliff commanded you to do so."

"I could not leave her without bein' guilty of discourtesy, sir."

"You should have obeyed Mr. Ratcliff."

"Mr. Wailton should not have intahfered with me, sir. Mr. Wailton is my Housemaster."

"I cannot allow you to speak in this manner, D'Arcy. You have acted very thoughtfully and very foolishly, and you are impertinent to Mr. Ratcliff in addition."

"Mr. Watcliff was impertinent to me, sir."

The Head repressed a smile.

"You are a very extraordinary boy, D'Arcy. Mr. Ratcliff has convinced me that he was quite right in commanding you to leave the company of that young person."

"Miss Bunn is a young lady, sir."

"Ahem! Yes, I should not think of speaking disrespectfully of Miss Bunn," said the Head. "I am sure you would not speak to any young woman who was not a perfectly estimable character. But such conduct is extremely injudicious, D'Arcy, and I must forbid the recurrence of anything of the sort."

"I shall obey you, of course," said D'Arcy, his tone very plainly implying that he would not obey Mr. Ratcliff, however.

"You should have quitted this young lady when Mr. Ratcliff ordered you to do so. Instead of that, you spoke to him disrespectfully, and refused."

"I could not possibly desert him with respect, sir, when he showed that he was not deservin' of respect."

Mr. Ratcliff made a gesture of rage.

"You are making matters worse, D'Arcy, by taking this line," said the Head. "I insist now upon your immediately apologising to Mr. Ratcliff."

"Imposs, sir."

"D'Arcy!"

"An apology is an admission of bein' in the w'ong, sir. I was not in the w'ong. Mr. Watcliff was in the w'ong, sir."

"Will you apologise to Mr. Ratcliff or not?"

"I cannot, sir."

"Then I shall cane you."

"Vewy well, sir," said D'Arcy, with resignation.

"Come, D'Arcy! I do not wish to punish you," said the Head kindly. "But you must tell Mr. Ratcliff you are sorry, or I must punish you."

"I am not sowwy for havin' waseisted the impertinent intahference of Mr. Watcliff, sir," said Arthur Augustus.

"Very well, I shall cane you."

"I am weady, sir."

Dr. Holmes rose from his seat, and took up a cane from his desk.

Mr. Ratcliff's eyes glittered green.

Arthur Augustus held out his hand, and the cane came down upon it, and he gave a gasp.

"Ow!"

"The other hand, D'Arcy."

Swish!

"Ow!"

The Head laid down the cane.

"That will do," he said. "You may go, D'Arcy. But mind, this injudicious conduct must not be repeated, and if you are impertinent to Mr. Ratcliff again I shall punish you more severely."

Arthur Augustus left the study. He went down the passage with his cheeks burning red and his eyes gleaming. It was

not often that the swell of St. Jim's was in a bad temper, but he was in a decidedly bad temper now.

Tom Merry & Co. met him at the end of the passage. The sight of D'Arcy tucking his hands under his arms was a sufficient proof that he had been punished.

"Had it bad?" asked Tom Merry sympathetically.

Arthur Augustus gritted his teeth.

"One on each hand, and vewy hard," he said. "It is all Watty's fault. He had made the Head take his side before I came in, and, of course, I could not apologise. A fellow must considah his dig."

"The old boulder!" said Blake. "It's rotten. If he had any decency, he'd let School House chaps alone. Mr. Railton never interferes with New House fellows."

"Yaas, wathah! He is a feahful wottah! He has wewp-wesented to the Head that I was keepin' company with a young person, instead of escortin' a young lady to do shoppin'. That is what annoys me more than anythin' else, his makin' the Head believe that I was actin' the giddy goat, you know, and goin' out mashin'."

The juniors grinned.

"I see nothin' whatevah to gwin at," said Arthur Augustus. "I wargard you fellows as a set of asses."

And the swell of St. Jim's walked away to his own study.

"Ratty is getting his ears up a bit too much," said Blake. "We shall have to take him down a peg or two, and show him that he can't bully the School House."

"Yes, rather."

"Here he comes," said Manners.

"Give him a hiss!"

Mr. Ratcliff frowned as he passed the group of juniors, who gave him dark looks. As he went towards the door of the School House there was a perceptible hiss.

The New House master swung round furiously.

"Who was that?" he demanded.

The School House juniors did not reply.

"Some of you," said Mr. Ratcliff venomously, "hissed as I passed you. I shall show you that you cannot insult a master with impunity."

He turned to the door of Mr. Railton's study, and opened it. The Housemaster of the School House looked up from his table, where he was writing, and regarded the excited and angry countenance of his colleague with surprise.

"What is the matter, Mr. Ratcliff?" he asked.

"The matter, sir!" stormed Mr. Ratcliff. "The matter is that these juniors have taken advantage, sir, of the want of discipline in this House."

Mr. Railton knitted his brows.

"I do not need your opinion on the discipline of my House, Mr. Ratcliff," he said tartly. "I am quite able to manage my House without your assistance."

"You had better keep these juniors in order, then."

"Have you any complaint to make of them?" asked Mr. Railton, keeping his temper with more regard for the proprieties than the angry New House master showed. "If you have, I am quite prepared to hear it."

"These boys hissed me as I passed them."

"Indeed! Have you been disrespectful to Mr. Ratcliff?" demanded the School House master, coming to the door of his study, and frowning at the group of juniors.

"Well, we hissed, sir," said Tom Merry reluctantly. "Mr. Ratcliff has——"

Mr. Railton interrupted him.

"You were very wrong and very impertinent to do anything of the sort. You will take a hundred lines each, and stay in immediately to write them."

"Yes, sir."

"They should be caned," snapped Mr. Ratcliff.

"I have punished them, and the matter is now closed," said Mr. Railton, and he went back into his study and closed the door. His colleague of the New House frequently tried his temper.

Mr. Ratcliff, thus answered, quitted the School House, and crossed the quad, to his own House. He passed Figgins & Co. as he entered, and paused to speak to them. Figgins & Co. had the misfortune of belonging to the New House, and of being at his mercy.

"You will take two hundred lines each for your conduct to-day," he said. "And you will not leave this House again till you have written them out."

And Mr. Ratcliff went into his study feeling satisfied. He had spoiled the half-holiday for a dozen or so of juniors, and that was a great solace to him.

CHAPTER 6.

Monty Lowther on the Warpath.

THERE was much angry excitement among the juniors of both Houses at St. Jim's that evening.

Lines occupied Tom Merry and Figgins & Co. till all the remainder of the daylight was gone, and the half-holiday was, as Figgins expressed it, hopelessly mucked up.

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NEXT THURSDAY: "THE SENTENCE OF THE HOUSE!"

It was not to be expected that the juniors would bear their injuries with patience. Mr. Ratcliff's captious and interfering temper had made him generally disliked at St. Jim's, as much in the School House as in his own House.

Even the masters found it difficult to get on with Mr. Ratcliff, and Mr. Railton frequently had to concede little disputed points to his colleague in order to avoid unseemly bickering, from which Mr. Ratcliff never shrank.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was the most exasperated of all. The usually sunny and equable temper of the swell of St. Jim's had been severely tried. D'Arcy was extremely sensitive upon the subject of his personal dignity. It had leaked out—as such things were bound to leak out—that Arthur Augustus had been caned for taking a young lady for a walk, and the whole House seemed to make it a special business to chip him upon the subject.

His old enemies, Mellish and Levison of the Fourth, and Crooke of the Shell, made the very most of it. There was a rumour in the House that Arthur Augustus had been discovered kissing a young lady who presided over the bar at the Green Man. Another version was that he had become engaged to the barmaid at the Red Cow. Some of the fellows laughed over the stories, and some of them jeered. A humorous youth pinned a card upon the door of Study No. 6 bearing a quotation from Shakespeare, "Here dwells Benedict, the married man!"

Even Blake & Co. chuckled over that, as Arthur Augustus tore it indignantly down, and jammed it into the study fire.

Arthur Augustus poked the offending card into the fire with the poker, and stirred it till all was consumed, and then turned an indignant face upon his grinning chums.

"I do not regard this as a laughin' mattah," he exclaimed. "Certainly not!" said Blake seriously. "Besides, it's not true. You're not a married man yet."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Only engaged!" remarked Monty Lowther, looking in at the door.

And the juniors chuckled.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy pushed back his cuffs in a very warlike way, and advanced towards the humorist of the Shell.

"Pway put up your hands, Lowthah!" he exclaimed.

Monty Lowther elevated his hands above his head.

"I do not mean that, you ass! I am goin' to lick you."

"Pax!"

"I wufuse to pax. I mean——"

"Pax!" said Tom Merry, looking over Lowther's shoulder into the study. "We've come here to back you up, Gussy."

"Yes, rather," said Manners.

"Oh, vewy well, you may come in," said Arthur Augustus, more amicably. "But I wufuse to have any of Lowthah's unmay remarks."

"Order, Lowther!" said Tom Merry severely. "You can keep your funny remarks for the next number of the 'Weekly.' Gentlemen, this is a council of war. We have declared war against Ratty and all his works."

"Hear, hear!" said Jack Blake.

"Yes, here, there, and everywhere else," said Lowther.

"Ass!"

"Order!" said Tom Merry. "We've got a wheeze. I put it to you that we can't, as properly independent and self-respecting members of the School House, put up with Ratty and his rotten cheek."

"No fear!"

"He has been jolly rough on Figgins & Co., but they can't help themselves, as they're in his House. But we're not going to stand it."

"Rather not!"

"I uttably wufuse to stand it!"

"Therefore, we have declared war," said Tom Merry.

"Have you told Ratty so?" asked Herries, with a grin. Tom Merry coughed.

"Well, no. You can't very well say a thing like that to a Housemaster. But he'll jolly soon find out."

"What's the little game?"

"We've got a wheeze—it's really Lowther's wheeze," said Tom Merry. "Go ahead, Monty."

The juniors all fixed their eyes expectantly upon the humorist of the Shell. There was no doubt that they were all keen enough to join in any scheme for the discomfiture of Mr. Horace Ratcliff.

"Gentlemen," said Lowther gravely, "Mr. Ratcliff has pressed the limit. I think we're all agreed on that."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Not only has he interrupted a feed, mucked up a half-holiday, and made himself generally obnoxious, but he has attacked Gussy in the tenderest spot—his reputation," said Lowther solemnly. "He has held up Gussy to ridicule as a flirtatious person."

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"He has made the Head believe that Gussy spends his spare time and his spare cash in running after young persons."

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"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wufuse——"

"He has started all sorts of yarns about Gussy. Some of the fellows say that he is engaged to a barnmaid."

"Bai Jove!"

"Others declare that he has asked the vicar's sister to slop—I mean elope——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Lowthah, you ass——"

"In fact, all sorts of yarns are going the rounds about Gussy, and it will take him a long time to live them down. The whole school looks upon him as a precocious Don Juan, and a very flirtatious person."

"I wegard——"

"I suggest, therefore, that the proper way of punishing Mr. Ratcliff is to fix the same thing on him," said Lowther.

The juniors gasped.

"Ratty! Nobody would believe the crusty old boulder was flirtatious," ejaculated Blake. "No woman would ever look at him."

"No fear," said Digby. "He was spoons on Glyn's sister, you know, but she wouldn't look at him. No fear!"

"I don't believe the House-dame would even," said Herries.

"Wathah not!"

"My dear chaps, I've thought it out," said Lowther cheerfully.

"My idea is to get into the telephone call-office at Rylcombe and ring him up. As I have a specially sweet voice I can talk like a woman—near enough for the telephone, anyway. I'm going to ring Ratty up, and make an appointment with him."

"My hat!"

"When Ratty isn't in his study, one of the New House prefects goes to the telephone, to see what's wanted," said Lowther. "I shall pick a moment when he can't be in his study. You know how regular he is in his habits—he always takes a walk round the quad for ten minutes at exactly seven o'clock. If I ring him up at a couple of minutes past seven, he will be well out of the house, and one of the prefects will answer the telephone."

"Bai Jove!"

"And that prefect will make a discovery," grinned Lowther.

"Ratty will be shown up as a flirtatious old person."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What's sauce for the goose, is sauce for the gander," said Lowther.

"If you are alludin' to me as a goose, Lowthah——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake. "What a stunning wheeze! Come on! We'll all go."

Monty Lowther shook his head.

"Better not all go," he said. "We don't want to give any room for suspicion. Kildare has asked me to go down to Rylcombe and fetch a parcel for him from the railway station, and he's given me a pass out. I'd better go alone; you chaps can show yourselves in public, and be able to prove an alibi."

"Pewwaps I had bettah go, Lowthah! I should like to wag old Watty on the telephone."

"Your lovely accent would give you away," grinned Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"I'm off," said Lowther. "If you fellows hang round the New House, you may hear something."

"Ha, ha, ha! We'll go over and see Figgins."

And Monty Lowther departed, and Tom Merry & Co. walked over to the New House to pay Figgins a visit.

CHAPTER 7.

Told on the Telephone.

BUZZ-Z-Z-Z-Z-Z-Z!

Buzz-z-z-z-z-z-z!

Monteith, the head prefect of the New House, yawned. He was in his study in the Sixth-Form passage, with Baker, of the Sixth, talking football. He could hear the buzz of the telephone-bell from Mr. Ratcliff's study, but he was not in a hurry to answer it.

Buzz-z-z-z-z-z!

"Ratty can't be there," remarked Baker.

Monteith sniffed.

"No; he's taking his trot round the quad. I suppose it's only his giddy chemist in Rylcombe, about his pills or something. They call him up nearly every day about his patent medicines."

Baker grinned. Mr. Ratcliff was the best customer of the local chemist, and the amount of medicine and pills he consumed was really surprising. Perhaps his ill-health was partly due to the number of remedies he took for it.

Buzzzzzzzzzzzz!

"I suppose I'd better go," growled Monteith. "I wish he'd get somebody else to look after his blessed telephone, or else tell them to ring him up when he's there. Come and hear the latest thing in liver pills."

Baker laughed, and accompanied the head prefect to Mr. Ratcliff's study. The bell was buzzing away merrily, and Monteith grunted and took up the receiver.

"Hallo!"

"Hallo! Is that New House, St. Jim's?"

Monteith started. It was certainly not the voice of the Rylcombe chemist. It was a high-pitched voice, and sounded to Monteith like a feminine one. He could not guess whom the lady might be who was ringing up the New-House master, and he was curious.

"Yes," he replied, and he motioned to Baker to take up the second receiver. Baker did so.

"Mr. Ratcliff?"

"This is Mr. Ratcliff's study."

"My darling Horace!"

Monteith jumped.

"Eh?"

"My sweet Horace."

"Oh!"

"Dearest!"

Baker had his ear to the second receiver, and he blinked at Monteith. Monteith, after a gasp of astonishment, grinned.

"My only hat!" he murmured. "Fancy old Ratty!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Are you there, my love?" came the voice over the wires.

"Speak, darling!"

"Ahem!"

"Dearest Horace!"

"Excuse me," said Monteith into the telephone, "Mr. Ratcliff isn't here, and I'm taking the call for him. What is wanted?"

"Ah! You are jesting, my dearest Horace! I know your sweet voice."

Baker roared, and dropped his receiver.

"I say, we oughtn't to listen to this," he exclaimed. "I never knew that Ratty was such a giddy old goat, but we've no right—"

"Rot!" said Monteith. "He's asked me to see to the telephone whenever he isn't here, hasn't he? I'm doing him a favour."

"Ye-e-es," said Baker, doubtfully, "but—"

"Shut up, she's talking!"

Monteith listened.

"Dearest, dearest Horace! How I long to see you once more! Do you think I am bold for ringing you up in this way? Speak, dear Horace."

"Let her know you ain't Ratcliff," said Baker.

"I've told her once."

"Tell her again."

"All right. I'm not Mr. Ratcliff," said Monteith. "I'm taking the message for him. Shall I send for Mr. Ratcliff?"

"Ah! You were always a merry boy, Horace. You are having a little joke with your poor little Trixie!"

"Trixie!" gasped Monteith. "Old Ratty—and Trixie! By gosh!"

Baker doubled up in the armchair.

"Will you meet me at the Picture Palace in Wayland, ducky?" asked the voice.

"She's calling me ducky!" said Monteith.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Why do you not speak, Horace? Why are you so cold to your little Trixie?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Horace, my love!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Shall I call for you at the school, Horace, darling? Or would you prefer that our sweet friendship should still remain a secret?"

"Oh, crumbs!"

"What did you say, Horace?"

"I'm not Horace," said Monteith. "Shall I send for Mr. Ratcliff?"

"Oh, dear! Are you sure you are not Horace?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Is he ill?"

"Oh, no."

"Are you sure my darling Horace is not ill? I know he suffers very much from indigestion, the dear boy."

"She's calling old Ratty a dear boy!" moaned Monteith.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a sound outside the open doorway of the study. Figgins & Co. appeared there, with a crowd of School House fellows. They were smiling.

"Anything wrong with the telephone?" asked Tom Merry.

"No!" gasped Monteith.

He listened again.

"Tell my darling Horace that I am here."

"What name shall I say, ma'am?"

"Say his little Trixie."

"Goo!" Figgins, run out and look for Mr. Ratcliff, will you? You'll find him in the quad. Somebody wants him on the 'phone. She says you're to say it's his little Trixie!" Monteith gasped.

Figgins yelled.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Buzz off and land him! Oh, dear, I've got a pain in my ribs!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors rushed away. Monteith spoke into the telephone again.

"I've sent for him, ma'am."

"Thank you. You are sure Horace is well?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Please do not mention that I have called him up on the telephone," went on the voice. "His wife might be angry."

Monteith almost fell down.

"His what?" he gasped.

"His wife!"

"I—I say, I'd better ring off!" gasped the prefect. "I'm discovering secrets! Hang on a minute, ma'am, and Mr. Ratcliff will be here."

And he laid down the receiver.

Then he held his sides and roared. Baker regarded him curiously.

"What did she say?" he asked.

"Did you know Ratty was married?" demanded Monteith.

Baker jumped.

"No! Surely he isn't!"

"He is!" yelled Monteith. "Ha, ha! He's been married secretly. This lady has asked me not to mention that she called him up on the telephone, because his wife wouldn't like it."

Baker yelled.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Keep it dark," said Monteith. "My hat! I——"

"Yes, keep it dark," said three or four voices at the door.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Monteith glared at the juniors who were grinning into the study. There was not much chance of keeping it dark.

"Shut up, you kids," said Baker. "Don't say a word——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You'd better clear off before Mr. Ratcliff comes," said Monteith.

"So we will!" gasped Redfern, who was among the juniors in the passage. "So Ratty's married, is he? Ha, ha, ha!"

Monteith and Baker left the study. The juniors scuttled away, as Mr. Ratcliff came up the passage. Figgins had found him in the quadrangle, and brought him in. Mr. Ratcliff was looking angry and excited.

"Monteith!" he exclaimed, meeting the prefect in the passage, "Figgins states that you sent him to me with a ridiculous message!"

"I, sir!"

"Yes; that a person called Trixie required me on the telephone!" shouted Mr. Ratcliff. "Is it possible that you sent such a message?"

"Yes, sir, it's true."

"What!"

"She's still on the telephone, sir, waiting for you."

Mr. Ratcliff gave him a furious stare, and rushed into his study and took up the receiver.

Monteith staggered into his own study, and collapsed into hysterics.

CHAPTER 8.

Scandalous!

"HALLO!" breathed Mr. Ratcliff into the receiver. "What is it?"

"Are you Mr. Ratcliff?"

"Yes."

"Darling!"

"What!"

"Love!"

"Eh?"

"I sigh for thee!" went on the voice. "Sleeping and waking my eyes behold the fair face of my beloved Horace."

Mr. Ratcliff staggered.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "It must be some lunatic! Has she been talking this nonsense to Monteith! It is enough to create a scandal!"

"Horace, speak to your little girl!"

"Madam!" gasped the Housemaster. "How dare you!"

"Horace!"

"How dare you speak to me with this odious familiarity, madam? I am shocked and disgusted. How dare you?"

"Horry!"

"Madam! Unless you are mad——"

"Oh, Horace, who could resist thine eyes?" sighed the voice over the telephone.

Mr. Ratcliff, with a furious gesture, rang off.

He sat down and wiped the perspiration from his brow. He was utterly amazed and alarmed by the scandalous conduct of the lady at the other end of the wire.

"This is—infamous!" he gasped. "It will cause a scandal! Good heavens! The woman must be mad—perfectly insane! Good gracious!"

He rose to his feet and paced the study in great agitation.

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NEXT THURSDAY: "THE SENTENCE OF THE HOUSE!" A Splendid, New, Long, Complete School Tale of the Chums of St. Jim's. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

That Monteith would keep such a secret he could hardly hope. It was evident that the prefect believed in the genuineness of the lady's claim. Mr. Ratcliff left his study to see Monteith before he should have time to disclose the scandalous matter to anybody else. He met Figgins in the passage and boxed his ears. Figgins had not given offence, but it relieved Mr. Ratcliff's feelings somewhat to box somebody's ears. Figgins staggered against the wall, and Mr. Ratcliff hurried on. Figgins glared after him, rubbing his ears.

"Oh, you rotter!" he murmured.

Mr. Ratcliff rushed into Monteith's study with flaming eyes and rustling gown.

Monteith was leaning back in his arm-chair, yelling with laughter. Baker was holding on to the table while he roared.

"Monteith! Baker!" shrieked Mr. Ratcliff. "How dare you!"

"Ha, ha, ha! I mean I'm sorry, sir," gasped Monteith.

"What is there to laugh at?" yelled the angry Housemaster.

"N-n-nothing, sir! Ha, ha! Sorry, sir."

"I have been called up on the telephone by a madwoman," said Mr. Ratcliff. "I am utterly unacquainted with any person of the name of Trixie. It is scandalous. The woman ought to be put in prison."

Monteith tried to become serious.

"Yes, sir, it—it is certainly very unfortunate," he said.

"I cannot account for it. The person knows my Christian name, too!"

"Perhaps you mentioned it to her, sir—when—when—"

"I tell you I do not know the person!" shrieked Mr. Ratcliff.

"Oh! Yes, sir! Quite so, sir. Of course."

"Do you not believe my statement, Monteith?" thundered Mr. Ratcliff, almost beside himself with rage.

"Oh, yes, sir! Of course I'm bound to believe you, sir," stammered Monteith, his expression at the same time showing plainly enough that he didn't believe Mr. Ratcliff in the least.

"I am an utter stranger to this scandalous person," said Mr. Ratcliff, wiping his brow. "She is an utter stranger to me."

"Yet she knows your Christian name, sir."

"It is amazing. However, she may have seen it on some school paper!"

"And she knows you've got a telephone in your study, sir."

"Yes, it is—is unaccountable."

"Very unaccountable, sir," said Monteith.

Mr. Ratcliff passed his hand over his fevered brow. The fact that the unknown female knew his Christian name, and that he had a telephone in his study, showed that she must have some acquaintance with him. It was useless for Mr. Ratcliff to deny evident facts.

"It is some—some wretched adventuress," panted the Housemaster. "I cannot understand why I have been selected as the victim of this wretched trick. The woman is mad."

"Of course we won't say anything, sir," said Monteith. "I can quite understand that it would distress Mrs. Ratcliff."

The Housemaster glared at him.

"Distress whom, Monteith?"

"Mrs. Ratcliff, sir."

"Are you mad, Monteith? There is no Mrs. Ratcliff!"

"Isn't there, sir?"

"What do you mean? You know perfectly well that there is not," shrieked the New Housemaster, almost in a frenzy.

"But the lady said—"

"What! What did she say?"

"She asked me to keep it dark, sir, in case your wife should know that she had rung you up on the telephone," said the prefect.

Mr. Ratcliff seemed about to suffocate.

"M-m-my wife!" he stammered.

"That's what she said, sir."

"She is mad—completely mad! You know perfectly well that I am a single man, Monteith."

"I've always supposed so, sir."

"Supposed so! It is a fact!"

"Yes, sir, I'm sure it is, if you say so, sir."

"You must not mention a word of that ridiculous statement in the house, Monteith, and you, too, Baker. It would be unendurable."

"I—I'm sorry, sir—"

"What! Do you refuse to obey me?"

"Oh, no, sir! But—I was so surprised—I spoke of it in the hearing of some of the juniors, and—and—"

"The juniors!" Mr. Ratcliff groaned. "Then it is all over the house by this time! It will be all over the school! Good heavens!"

"I'm sorry, sir! It would be a good idea to communicate with the police, sir, and ask them to look for that insane person."

Mr. Ratcliff did not reply. He left the study without another word. Monteith closed the door after him, and gazed at Baker. Then the two of them broke into a simultaneous yell.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's too good!" gasped Monteith. "I can understand old THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 240.

Ratty wanting to keep it dark! Fancy his being a married man all the time!"

"It mayn't be true!" said Baker.

"Oh, it's true enough. Why should a woman ring him up on the telephone, and call him ducky darling names, if she's a stranger to him? There's no reason. It's jolly certain that Ratty often has a talk with Trixie on the telephone. Lots of times when the bell's rung, and we've thought he was talking to the chemist about pills and medicines and things, he's been really talking to her!" said Monteith with conviction.

"My hat! It looks like it!" said Baker. "Awfully deep old beggar. I hope, for Ratty's sake, this won't get to the Head! Chap like that isn't fit to be a master at a school. Fancy a dissipated old beggar like that teaching the young idea how to shoot!"

"I'll bet all St. Jim's knows it by this time," said Monteith.

The prefect was right.

In the quadrangle, in the dusk, sounds of laughter could be heard, as groups of juniors discussed the amazing news that had spread from the New House.

Some of the fellows were in the secret, and some were not. But all agreed in regarding the matter in a comic light. The fact that Mr. Ratcliff was married, and had hitherto kept his marriage a secret, amazed all the fellows, and interested them greatly. Many of the St. Jim's fellows averred that the lady must be blind; on no other hypothesis could they account for her having accepted Mr. Ratcliff.

When Monty Lowther returned from Rylcombe, with Kildare's parcel from the railway station, he found the whole school in possession of the news.

In the common-room of the School House it was the one topic of conversation. It had quite superseded D'Arcy's supposed affair with a Rylcombe barmaid as an item of interest. Arthur Augustus—much to his own satisfaction—was completely forgotten, and Mr. Ratcliff reigned supreme.

"Heard the news?" yelled Gore of the Shell, as Lowther came in.

Monty Lowther looked interested.

"News?" he said. "What news?"

"About Ratty of the New House."

"Ratty! What about Ratty?"

"He's married!"

"Go hon!" said Lowther.

"It's true!" yelled a dozen voices. "He's a giddy benedict! Somebody told Monteith, and he let it out before a lot of fellows!"

"Great Scott!"

"Ratty, you know, old Ratty! Ha, ha, ha!"

And Lowther joined heartily in the laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

CHAPTER 9.

Rough on Figgins—And on Ratty.

THE next day Mr. Ratcliff appeared in the Fifth-Form room with a deep frown upon his brow.

The Fifth met their Form-master with suppressed smiles.

But they soon had reason not to smile. Mr. Ratcliff's temper was never good. But this morning it was vile.

He knew that he was an object of ridicule. Everybody believed, or pretended to believe, the absurd rumour about him. Mr. Ratcliff was so excessively unpopular, in his Form and out of it, that all the fellows were glad to believe anything against him. Had it been Mr. Railton, the absurd story would have been pool-pooed. But the fellows were willing to believe anything of Horace Ratcliff. He had never taken the trouble to conciliate their good opinion. And now that he needed it it was not to be had. All the fellows who had smarted under his bad temper were overjoyed to have a handle against him.

Mr. Ratcliff was keenly sensitive to ridicule. He had a great idea of his own dignity, and he often suspected disrespect where none was meant, and taken offence on the slightest grounds. Now he had reason to imagine that the most respectful manner concealed mockery and derision. He suspected the other masters of smiling, he suspected the boys, he suspected everybody. And that morning the Fifth Form felt the full weight of his rabid temper.

Lines fell as thick as the leaves in Vallombrosa upon the unfortunate Fifth.

The Fifth, as seniors, were not supposed to be caned. But Mr. Ratcliff broke through the rule that morning and caned Lefevre, and slanged the rest of the Form right and left. By the time morning lessons were over, the Fifth Form were almost in a state of mutiny.

Mr. Ratcliff left the Form-room with a frowning brow.

In the crowded Form-room passage he passed swarms of juniors, the Shell and the Fourth and the Third all being out.

Some of the juniors were laughing and talking; and to Mr. Ratcliff it seemed that all the laughter and all the talk must inevitably be upon the subject of himself.



Mrs. Mimble was clinging to the counter, shrieking. "Oh, Master Wharton, thank goodness you've come!" she gasped, ceasing to shriek at the sight of the familiar face of the Remove Form captain.

(An incident from the splendid complete school tale of Harry Wharton & Co., entitled "THE TUCK-SHOP RAIDERS," by Frank Richards, which is contained in this week's issue of our popular companion paper, "THE MAGNET" Library. Now on Sale. Price One Penny.)

He strode across the quadrangle to his own house, consumed with rage.

He longed for a victim upon whom to wreak the anger that burned within his breast, and the New House fellows, guessing his amiable thoughts, gave him a wide berth as long as they could.

But at the hour of dinner, all the New House had to meet in the dining-room, and Mr. Ratcliff came in with a brow like thunder. The New House fellows were very much on their guard. Even Figgins & Co. were exceedingly and amazingly circumspect, determined not to give their Housemaster an opportunity of selecting them as victims.

But it was like the story of the wolf and the lamb over again—when the Housemaster was determined to find fault, faults could be found.

Mr. Ratcliff knew perfectly well that Figgins & Co. were inwardly chuckling over his discomfiture, though their outward demeanour was solemnity itself.

And upon Figgins & Co. the vials of his wrath were poured out.

"Figgins!" he rapped out, suddenly, looking across to the Fourth-Form table.

"Yes, sir?" said Figgins, meekly.

"I will not allow chattering at the table!"

"I was not chattering, sir," said Figgins, who had not opened his mouth, excepting to put his dinner into it.

"Don't contradict me, Figgins!" thundered Mr. Ratcliff.

"You are the worst boy in the house. Leave your dinner, and go to my study, and wait for me there."

Figgins gritted his teeth.

"Very well, sir," he said, quietly.

And he left his dinner unfinished.

A quarter of an hour later, Mr. Ratcliff strode into his study. Figgins was sitting in the armchair, waiting for him, and he rose as the Housemaster came in.

Mr. Ratcliff fixed him with glittering eyes.

"How dare you sit in my armchair, Figgins?" he demanded.

"Have you no manners, sir?"

"I'm sorry, sir," said Figgins.

"I shall teach you respect," said Mr. Ratcliff, taking up his cane. "Hold out your hand."

Figgins held out his hand, and then the other, in turn, and Mr. Ratcliff caned him severely. Figgins received six cuts on

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each hand, laid on very hard, and he had to shut his teeth tight to keep back a cry of pain. But he did not utter a sound, though his face went very white.

Mr. Ratcliff tossed the cane upon the table.

"There," he said, "I trust that lesson may restrain your impertinence in the future, Figgins! Go!"

Figgins went without a word.

His chums met him in the hall, with sympathetic looks. Figgins showed them his hands without speaking.

"The rotten cad!" said Kerr, between his teeth.

"Poor old Figgy!" said Fatty Wynn.

Figgins ground his teeth. He could not speak; it was all he could do to keep back the tears from his eyes. Figgins was made of hard stuff, and he would not "blub," but he had seldom been so near to it.

The utterly uncalled-for punishment of Figgins made the Co. furious. The caning had been so severe that Figgy's palms had swollen, and the pain they gave him was intense. When he took his place in the Fourth-Form room that afternoon, Mr. Lathom, the master of the Fourth, glanced at him, noticing how white he looked.

"Are you ill, Figgins?" asked the kindly little Form-master, peering at the junior over his spectacles.

"No, sir!" said Figgins.

"You do not look well."

"I'm all right, sir."

But when Figgins had to write an exercise that afternoon, he could hardly hold the pen. Mr. Lathom came over to his desk.

"What is the matter with your hands, Figgins?" he asked quietly.

"They're a bit swollen, sir," stammered Figgins.

"Show them to me."

Figgins showed his swollen hands. Mr. Lathom's brows darkened as he looked at them. He could see at a glance that the junior had been caned very cruelly.

"You have been caned, Figgins?"

"Yes, sir."

"By a prefect?"

"No, sir; by my Housemaster."

"Oh," said Mr. Lathom. "Very well."

And he dropped the subject. The juniors knew what was in his mind. If Figgins had been caned in such a manner by a prefect, Mr. Lathom would have taken the matter before the Head. But he did not feel that he could interfere with Figgins's own Housemaster. In such a case, interference would have made matters only the worse.

Mr. Lathom passed over Figgins for the remainder of the afternoon, giving him a rest from lessons.

When the Fourth Form were dismissed, Blake & Co. gathered round Figgins in the passage. The Shell had just come out, and the Terrible Three joined them.

"What's the trouble?" asked Tom Merry.

"Look at Figgy's paws!" said Blake.

"My hat!"

"Ratty, I suppose?" said Manners.

Figgins nodded.

"The awful cad!" said Monty Lowther. "Poor old Figgins! You're getting what he'd like to give the whole giddy school!"

"Yaas, wathah! I wegard Watty as an awful beast."

"The rotten outsider!" said Kerr. "Figgy didn't do anything, either. Ratty said he was talking at dinner-time, but he wasn't. And even if he had been, fancy caning a chap like that for talking!"

"The cad!"

"The brute!"

"It would serve him right if Figgy went up to the Head about it!" said Kangaroo.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Figgins shook his head.

"I won't do that!" he said. "But I'll make Ratty sit up for it, somehow. The rotter! He's done this because he was japed on the telephone! He doesn't know it was a jape, and I didn't have anything to do with it, anyway. But he picked on me. We've got to make him wriggle for it, somehow."

Tom Merry whistled.

"It's safer to let him alone, Figgy, if he goes for you like that whenever we twist his mane!" he remarked.

Figgins's eyes gleamed.

"I don't care; I can stand it. Besides, letting him alone wouldn't do any good. He's just as much a beast whether he's let alone or not."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"He ought to be ragged bald-headed," said Blake. "If Figgy's willing to run the risk of making him ratty, I think we ought to put our heads together over it."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I'm willing," said Figgins. "I'd do anything to make the brute sorry he lathered me like this! We've got to comb his hair for him, somehow."

"I've got an idea," said Kerr, quietly. "I was thinking

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it out this morning. Lowther's bizney on the telephone put it into my head."

"Come up into the study," said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah; it's safah to talk there, deah boy."

"Safer than in the New House, too," said Fatty Wynn. "Ratty's got awfully long ears, and he isn't above listening at a door."

The juniors went up to study No. 6. They were all looking very grim. It was agreed on all hands that Ratty was to be punished, and it only remained to decide on the form of punishment. And the juniors gathered round Kerr very eagerly to hear what his idea was. Kerr never spoke without having thought first, and his opinion was very much respected. Although Figgins was the leader of the Co., and of the New House juniors generally, it was well known that Kerr's active brain was the real directing power in their warfare against the School House fellows. House rows were forgotten now, however, in the general desire to punish Ratty. Kerr was acknowledged to be the cleverest fellow in the Fourth. He knew Latin and Greek as if they were his native tongue, almost; he was the cleverest actor in the Junior Dramatic Society, and could impersonate almost anybody with perfect success; he could play the violin, and he was a great man at chess. Indeed, as Figgins sometimes said admiringly, it was rather difficult to name anything that Kerr could not do.

"Now, then, what's the wheeze?" demanded Tom Merry.

Kerr coughed.

"Of course, I don't know for certain that it will work," he said. "But I shall take all the risk, anyway."

"Wats! We'll all take the wisk together!"

"Hear, hear!"

Kerr shook his head.

"No; only one fellow's wanted for the biznai," he said, "and I'm that fellow. You chaps think I can act a bit, don't you?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Yes, certainly!" said Tom Merry, puzzled. "But——"

"You've seen me impersonate people?"

The juniors grinned. Kerr's impersonations were marvellous, and he had made himself up as D'Arcy, and as Skimpole of the Shell, and even as Mr. Lathom, the master of the Fourth, in such a way as to deceive completely those who knew him best.

"Well," said Kerr, "I don't know that I should care to impersonate anybody that Ratty knew, because he's so jolly sharp. But I think I could impersonate somebody he doesn't know."

"Eh?"

"Whom?" demanded Blake.

"Mrs. Ratcliff."

"Eh?"

"What?"

"Bai Jove!"

"Mrs. Ratcliff!" yelled Tom Merry. "But there isn't any Mrs. Ratcliff! That was only a little joke of Lowther's on the telephone."

Kerr chuckled.

"I know there isn't any Mrs. Ratcliff," he replied. "That's why I should be able to impersonate her all right."

"Great Scott!"

"You've seen me make up as a girl?" said Kerr. "Reddy made up as one once, and Gussy fell in love with him——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Kerr——"

"You can do it better than I can," said Redfern, cheerfully. "But Ratty will be a bit harder to take in than Gussy."

"Weally, Weddy——"

"I think I can do it," said Kerr, confidently. "Anyway, I'm willing to take the risk, and to face the music if it's a frost. What do you think Ratty will feel like if an indignant female arrives at St. Jim's and claims him as her husband?"

The juniors yelled.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! That would be awfully funny!"

"The fellows would be quite prepared for a Mrs. Ratcliff to appear," grinned Kerr. "Half the school believes already that Ratty is really a married man."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And so, if he denies her before the school, that will be supposed to be some more of his meanness."

"If his wife arrives and claims him, the whole school will back her up, I should think. Ratty's already known to have deserted her——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors shrieked.

"We've got all the necessary things, among our dramatic props," said Kerr. "I'll guarantee to take the school in, as Mrs. Ratcliff. Of course, Ratty himself won't believe that I'm the genuine article——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But the rest of St. Jim's will," said Kerr. "What do you think of the wheeze?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry. "It's something like a wheeze! If you've got the nerve—"
 "Oh, I've got the nerve!" said Kerr.
 "Then it's a go!"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Hurray!"
 And so the plot was plotted.

CHAPTER 10.

A Little Transformation.

SATURDAY afternoon, the next half-holiday, was fixed for the carrying out of the great plot. In the meantime, there were several rehearsals in Tom Merry's study, with the door locked. The chums of St. Jim's kept the secret well. Fellows who heard explosions of laughter from Tom Merry's study guessed that something was going on, but they did not know what it was. The plot was a daring one, and in case of discovery the consequences might have been very serious for Kerr; and it was necessary to keep it very dark indeed.

Meanwhile, Mr. Ratcliff seemed to be growing more obnoxious than ever. His temper, never good, had become much worse—and the Fifth Form had the chief benefit of it. But all the fellows in the New House growled among themselves. Even the prefects did not escape. Monteith himself, the head prefect of the house, discovered the keenest edge of Mr. Ratcliff's tongue. But for Monteith's indiscretion, the strange story of the telephone would not have been spread over the school, and Mr. Ratcliff, who was always suspicious, suspected that Monteith had done it deliberately. He was extremely rough on the prefect, and he seemed to take an unpleasant pleasure in setting him down before the juniors. As Monteith's own temper was by no means sweet, he became almost as intolerable as Mr. Ratcliff himself. As he could not retort upon Mr. Ratcliff, he visited his wrath upon the juniors of the New House. As Figgins remarked to Tom Merry, it was growing altogether too thick, and it was high time Ratty was taken down. The youthful plotters looked forward with eagerness to Saturday, the "dies ira" they had planned for the obnoxious House-master.

After dinner on Saturday, a numerous party of juniors left the school, some of them carrying bags. Tom Merry & Co. had deserted the playing-fields for once. They had something more important on for that afternoon.

They walked sedately down the lane as far as the stile, and then entered Rylecombe Woods, and did not stop till they had reached a secluded glade.

That was where the transformation scene was to take place.

The bags were set down in the grass, and a couple of the juniors posted themselves to keep a look-out in case of interruption.

Then Kerr set to work.

It had been arranged for the station cab from Rylecombe to wait in the lane at half-past two, to pick up a fare, the driver only being informed that he was to take a lady to the school. Of the identity of the lady he knew nothing.

The bags were opened, and the "props" unpacked. Kerr removed his jacket and vest, and started. A looking-glass was set up on a tree-trunk, and the Scottish junior began making up his face before the glass. The juniors stood round watching him with grinning faces.

Kerr was a past master in the art of making up. He had a fresh, fair complexion, and delicate features, which formed a good groundwork. He added a bloom to his cheeks, and darkened his eyebrows and lashes, and reddened his lips, with a skilful hand, and then carefully fastened on a wig. His own dark hair disappeared under the flaxen curls. He did his hair very fashionably, and added the hat—a special purchase that had been made at the milliner's in Wayland. The juniors burst into a roar at the sight of a feminine face and hair and hat surmounting the body of a schoolboy in his shirt-sleeves.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I must say you look wathah remarkable, Kerr."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hand me the skirt," said Kerr.

Tom Merry handed out the skirt. It was a skirt of the hobble variety, and Tom Merry held it up and surveyed it dubiously.

"You ought to have put this on before you put on the hat," he said. "You'll never get this over your head now."

"Wathah not?"

Kerr sniffed.

"Bosh! I'm going to jump into it."

"Will it go on from that end?" asked Manners doubtfully.

"Of course, it will."

Kerr rolled his trousers above his knees, and donned a pair of stockings with very prominent clocks. Then he insinuated his lower limbs into the skirt, and fastened it round his waist.

The juniors shrieked at the peculiar sight he presented.

"You want something more than that," said Figgins. "Look here, you oughtn't to have started at the ends, Kerr. How are

you going to get the blouse on? It won't go over the skirt and it certainly can't be shoved over the hat."

Kerr gave him a pitying look.

"You're an ass, Figgy. You don't understand these things."

"Blessed if I do!" said Figgins. "It's a very surprising thing how women get their things on, or how they manage to move about in 'em after they've got 'em on."

"Yass, wathah! That has stuwck me."

"The blouse fastens up at the back," said Kerr, condescending to explain. "It's just the reverse of a sensible jacket."

"Oh, I see."

Kerr took up the blouse, and put his arms through the sleeves. "Now pull it tight at the back, and button it, Figgy," he said.

"There ain't any buttons," said Figgins helplessly.

"Well, hook it, then," shouted Kerr.

"Oh!" said Figgins. "Yes, there are some hooks. There's a row of hooks on one side, and a row of eyes on the other, Kerr, old man."

"Did you expect to see hooks on both sides?" snorted Kerr.

"Well, no," said Figgins. "I suppose I hook a hook into the eye opposite to it, don't I?"

"Of course you do, you fathead."

"There isn't a hook at the top, though. Do you have it left open at the top?"

"No!" shrieked Kerr. "If there isn't a hook, there must be a button."

"No, there isn't."

"There's a tape or something, then."

"Yes," said Figgins. "There's a piece of tape on both sides. Do I tie them?"

"Yes, ass!"

"In a knot?"

"No, you fathead. In a bow."

"Shall I pull it tight?"

"Of course."

"Good!" said Figgins. "I understand now."

He pulled it tight. There was a gurgling gasp from Kerr, "Groo! You ass! You're chook-chook-choking me!"

"Is it too tight?"

"Gerrrorororoooh!"

"Loosen it out a bit, Figgy," said Tom Merry, laughing.

"Grooh!"

Figgins loosened the tape.

"Is that all right, Kerr?"

"Groo! Let Lowther do it," said Kerr sulphurously.

"Oh, I can do it all right," said Figgins confidently. "You only want to get used to these things. How do girls fasten them?"

"They get another gal to do it," said D'Arcy.

"My hat! That must be ripping if they've got to dress in a hurry to get off to a match," said Figgins.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Let Lowther do it," growled Kerr. "You're an ass, Figgy."

"Look here, Kerr—"

Kerr jerked himself away, and backed up to Monty Lowther.

"Fasten the blessed thing, Lowther."

"Right-ho," grinned Lowther.

The Shell fellow fastened the tape successfully in a little bow. Then another tape at the waist was fastened, and Kerr put on a belt.

Then the juniors stood round and admired.

The figure before them bore not the slightest resemblance to Kerr, nor to a boy at all. Kerr had transformed himself into a young lady who looked about twenty-five. Perhaps his figure was a little robust for a lady, and his feet a size large. But those were only details.

"My only Aunt Maria!" said Figgins. "It's ripping! I—

I say, are you really Kerr, you know?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Certainly not," said Kerr in a high-pitched voice. "I am Mrs. Ratcliff."

There was not a trace of Kerr's own tones in that voice. The juniors yelled.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Where is Horace?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I have come to see my dear husband," said Kerr plaintively.

"Where is my dear Horace?"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I say, you look a lot too young and good-looking to be Mrs. Ratty," said Fatty Wynn. "If old Ratty were married, he wouldn't make such a match as that."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That will make the fellows all the more sympathetic," said Kerr, with a grin. "They will be shocked at Ratty having deserted such a nice girl."

"Bai Jove!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The old boulder won't be able to hold his head up again after

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this," said Figgins grimly. "He'll have to take a holiday, at least, to give the school time to get over it."

"Yaas, wathah."

"I think I'm ready now," said Kerr. "You fellows had better get back to the school, to be on the scene ready. Mind you have a good audience."

"What-ho!"

"Good-bye, my dear children. I'm off."

Kerr took a parcel under his arm, and tripped away down the footpath. The juniors leaned against the trees and roared.

"My hat!" said Tom Merry at last, wiping his eyes. "There never was such a jape! I only hope Kerr won't lose his nerve and give it away."

"Oh, he won't do that!" grinned Figgins. "I only want to see how Ratty takes it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Come on," said Blake, "we've got to be at the school first." The bags were concealed in the thicket, and the juniors started for St. Jim's at a run. But they had to leave off running several times in order to laugh.

CHAPTER 11.

More Trouble with Ratty.

"LOOK out!"

"Goak, by Jove!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Biff!

A crowd of Third Form fags were punting a footer about inside the school gates, when Tom Merry & Co. arrived there. Wally, of the Third, had just delivered a kick, and the footer came sailing through the air, and landed upon Tom Merry's chest. The captain of the Shell sat down.

"Oh!" he ejaculated.

"Bai Jove, Wally, you young, wascal!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, as D'Arcy minor ran up to recover the ball. "That ball might have struck me, and it is howwibly mudday. Pway be more careful."

"You young ass!" roared Tom Merry.

"Oh, accidents will happen, when there are clumsy asses about," said Wally cheerfully. "It's all right. I wanted some of the mud wiped off the ball."

Tom Merry jumped up.

He kicked the ball just before Wally reached it; and Wally, with great presence of mind, ducked his head just in time, and the footer flew over him.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a gasp of consternation the next moment. Mr. Ratcliff, who was always to be relied upon to turn up where he was least expected and least wanted, came past the corner of the porter's lodge just in time to stop the ball—with his head! Crash!

Mr. Ratcliff received the muddy ball on his ear, and gave an affrighted gasp.

"Oh, what is that? Oh, dear!"

He reeled, and almost fell. He put his hand up to his ear, and brought it away daubed with mud.

The juniors stood rooted to the ground. It was rather rough on Mr. Ratcliff, but it was a pure accident, and a good-tempered master would have passed the matter over with a rebuke. Not so Mr. Ratcliff. He swung round towards the juniors, his face inflamed with rage.

"Who kicked that ball at me?" he shouted.

No one replied.

"I demand to know which of you young ruffians kicked that ball at me!"

"I kicked it, sir," faltered Tom Merry. "I did not kick it at you, sir. I did not know you were there."

"That is false, Merry!"

Tom Merry flushed crimson.

"It is not false," he exclaimed; "and you have no right to say so!"

"Hear, hear!" growled Monty Lowther.

Mr. Ratcliff clenched his hands.

"Come with me, Merry," he said. "Come with me to the Head at once."

"Very well, sir."

Mr. Ratcliff marched off with long strides towards the School House, and Tom Merry reluctantly followed in his footsteps.

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"Oh, crumbs!" said Blake disconsolately. "Troubles will never cease! It's all your fault, you blessed fags!"

"My only Aunt Jane!" exclaimed Wally. "I like that! We didn't know the rotter was there. He's always turning up in the wrong place."

"Yaas, wathah."

Tom Merry followed Mr. Ratcliff into the Head's study. Dr. Holmes gazed in surprise at the daubs of mud upon the side of Mr. Ratcliff's head.

"Good gracious! Whatever has happened?" he exclaimed.

"This boy has kicked a muddy football at me, sir!" said Mr. Ratcliff, in a suffocating voice. Mr. Railton was in the Head's study, and for his benefit the New House master went on. "I bring him before you, sir, because I cannot depend upon Mr. Railton to keep his juniors from insulting me."

"Mr. Ratcliff!" exclaimed the School House master.

Dr. Holmes raised his hand.

"Pray be more guarded in your language, Mr. Ratcliff," said the Head. "This is a matter that should have been placed before Merry's Housemaster, and I leave it in his hands."

Mr. Ratcliff almost choked. He fully deserved the snub, but he did not like it any the better because he deserved it.

"Very well," he said, "I must bow to your decision, Dr. Holmes. But I should like to know what punishment Mr. Railton thinks of inflicting for an outrage like this."

"I must first be satisfied that it is an outrage, and not an accident," said the School House master tartly. "Merry is very unlikely to do such a thing on purpose."

"It was a deliberate assault, sir!"

"What have you to say, Merry?"

"Does that mean that you intend to take Merry's assurance in preference to mine, Mr. Railton?" demanded the New House master passionately.

"I must hear what Merry has to say."

"Quite so, quite so," said the Head. "I must really request you to be a little more calm, Mr. Ratcliff."

Mr. Ratcliff set his lips.

"Now, Merry," said Mr. Railton, "how did this happen?"

"It was quite an accident, sir," said Tom Merry, dismayed. "I kicked the ball towards D'Arcy minor, and—and he dodged it, and just then Mr. Ratcliff came round the corner."

"Did you see him before you kicked the ball?"

"No, sir."

"Did you know he was there?"

"Certainly not, sir."

"Then it was an accident?"

"Entirely, sir."

"As I thought," said Mr. Railton. "Merry should not have been kicking the football about in the quadrangle, but at most he was only guilty of carelessness."

"I say that it was done deliberately!" said Mr. Ratcliff.

"I cannot doubt Merry's word, and surely he must know his own motives, sir."

"He would say anything to avoid punishment!"

"I would not tell an untruth, sir!" said Tom Merry hotly.

"I believe you, Merry," said Mr. Railton quietly. "I think that a hundred lines for such a careless action will be punishment sufficient, and you will tell Mr. Ratcliff you are sorry."

"I am very sorry it happened, sir. I had no idea—"

"I do not believe you, Merry!" said Mr. Ratcliff.

And he left the study. But for the presence of the Head, he would have said very much more.

"You may go," said Mr. Railton. "You will do a hundred lines, Merry."

"Yes, sir."

Tom Merry left the study. It had been a fortunate circumstance for him that his Housemaster was present. But he had not escaped yet.

At the end of the passage Mr. Ratcliff was waiting, his face pale with rage. He made a gesture to Tom Merry to stop as he came by. The Shell fellow halted.

"You have assaulted me, and have escaped punishment, Merry!" said Mr. Ratcliff, in a grinding voice. "By the favouritism of your Housemaster—"

"Nothing of the kind, sir!" said Tom Merry indignantly. "Mr. Railton is just, and if he thought I had done that on purpose he would have caned me. It was an accident."

"I do not believe you! This is in accordance with your usual

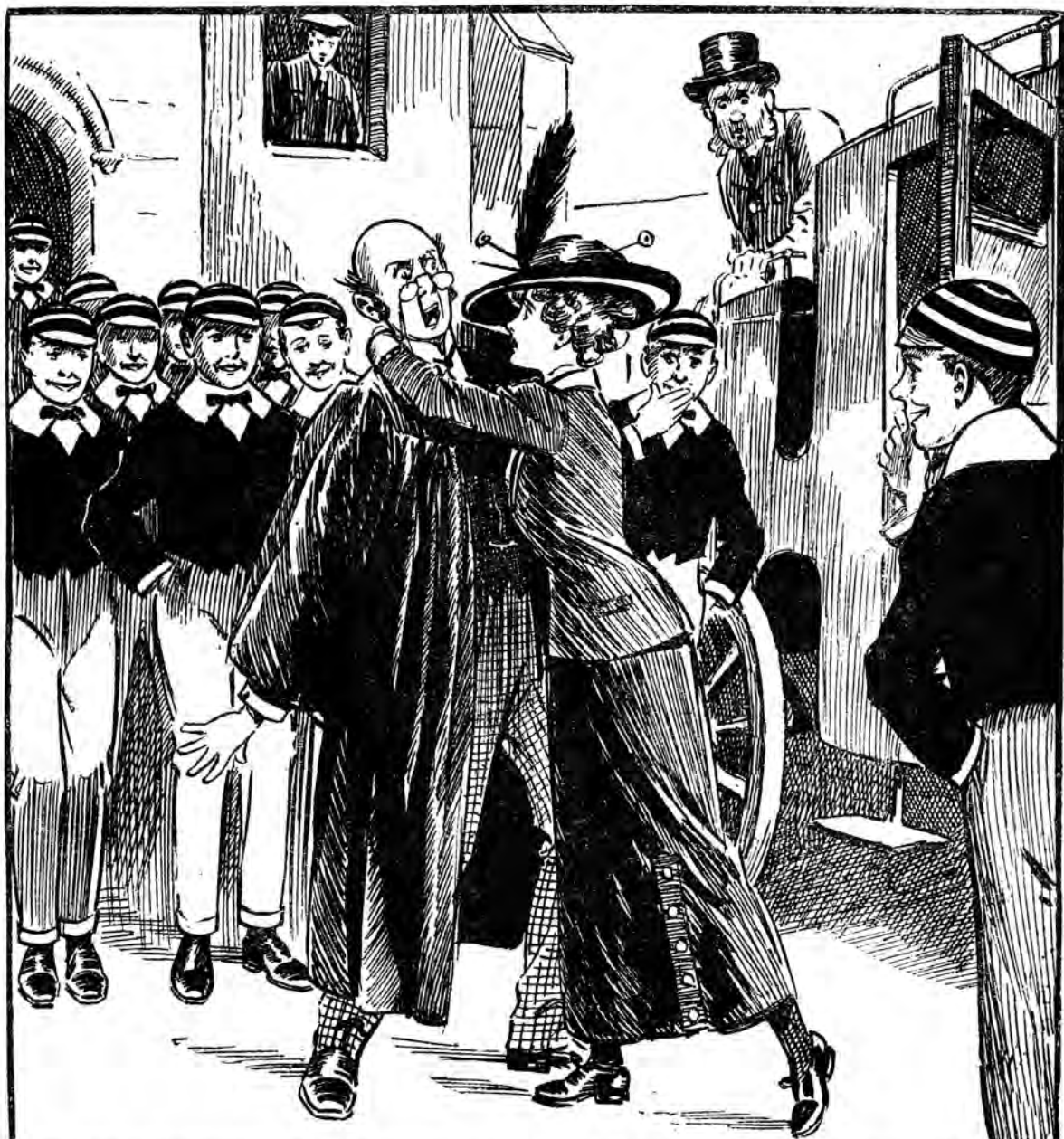
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The lady—otherwise Kerr, of the Fourth—made a sudden rush, and before the amazed Housemaster could dodge her she threw her arms round his neck. "Oh, Horace, haven't you a kind word for your poor little wifey?" she sobbed. The Housemaster struggled furiously to release himself. "Madam! Let me go! You are mad, or—or else intoxicated! You are not my wife! I am not a married man! Release me instantly!" (See Chapter 12.)

conduct, Merry! But you shall not insult a Housemaster with impunity!"

And Mr. Rateliff stepped suddenly towards the junior, and, before Tom Merry could guess what he intended, he dealt him a sounding blow with his open hand.

Tom Merry reeled under the blow.

"Oh!" he gasped.

"There," said Mr. Rateliff, "let that teach you!" He clenched his hand as if to strike again.

Tom Merry did not recede. He faced the Housemaster with blazing eyes, and his fists clenched.

"Don't touch me again, sir!" he said. "You will regret it if you do!"

Mr. Rateliff gave him a glare. But he did not venture to carry the matter further. If Mr. Railton had come out and found him boxing the ears of a School House boy, there would have been serious trouble; Mr. Railton's patience was not inexhaustible. Indeed, Tom Merry had only to complain to

his Housemaster, to make matters very uncomfortable for Mr. Rateliff. He did not think of doing that; he had no desire to make trouble between two masters. But his looks showed that he would not stand any more; and Mr. Rateliff, with a savage look at him, strode away.

Tom Merry left the house more slowly, his ear burning, and his face still red with anger and indignation.

"I sha'n't be able to stand much more of Ratty," he said, as he rejoined his chums. "He has just biffed me on the head; after Railton had given me lines."

"Bai Jove! The cheeky wottah!"

Monty Lowther, who had remained near the school gates, came up breathlessly at a run.

"The hack's in sight!" he exclaimed.

And the juniors chuckled. Even Tom Merry forgot his indignation, and grinned. The punishment of the tyrannical Housemaster was at hand.

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CHAPTER 12.

Mrs. Ratcliff.

THE station-cab stopped at the gates of St. Jim's. A feminine face looked out of the window.

There were half a dozen St. Jim's fellows at the gates, and they looked with interest at the visitor.

"Is this St. Jim's?" asked a soft voice.

"Yaas, ma'am," said D'Arcy minor, raising his cap.

"Thank you so much. Will you show the man where Mr. Ratcliff's house is?"

"Certainly, ma'am," said Wally, wondering what such a charming lady could want with the crusty master of the New House.

The lady smiled.

"Perhaps you are one of Mr. Ratcliff's boys?" she said sweetly.

"No fear!" answered Wally promptly. "I'm in the School House. Jameson here is one of the New House lounders—ahem, I mean boys."

Jameson of the Third pulled off his cap sheepishly.

"Ah! You are one of my husband's boys?" asked the lady, looking at him from the window of the cab with a sweet smile. Jameson almost fell down.

"Oh!" he stuttered. "Eh! Which?"

"I am Mrs. Ratcliff, my dear children," said the lady. "Please let the man drive to Mr. Ratcliff's house."

Wally staggered.

"Mrs. Ratcliff!" he murmured.

"Yes, my dear child."

"Oh! My only Aunt Jane!"

"Great Scott!"

The lady looked surprised.

"Please excuse us, ma'am," said Wally gaspingly. "We—we didn't know that Ratty—I mean Mr. Ratcliff—was—was married!"

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Ratcliff.

"This way, driver!" exclaimed Wally. "Drive to the New House."

"Yessir," said the driver.

The hack rolled in at the gates.

The group of juniors stood there astounded.

Wally was the first to find his voice.

"Mrs. Ratcliff! My only respected Aunt Janet Mrs. Batty! Oh!"

"Then it's true!" exclaimed Mellish of the Fourth. "Ratty is married! And his wife's come home! Good heavens!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's rough on rats!" said Jameson

"Rough on Ratty! Ha, ha, ha!"

"What a giddy surprise for Ratty!" chuckled Wally. "I say, we must let the fellows know this. Come on!"

The fags rushed across the quadrangle.

"Tom Merry! Blake! Figgy!" yelled Wally.

"Hallo! What's the row?"

"She's come!"

"Eh?"

"She's come!" yelled Wally frantically.

"Who's come?"

"Mrs. Ratty!"

"Oh, draw it mild!" exclaimed Kildare of the Sixth, the captain of St. Jim's, stopping as he heard Wally's excited yell.

"Don't be an ass, D'Arcy minor."

"It's true!"

"Nonsense!"

"It's true!" shrieked Wally. "She's come! She's here!"

"Impossible!"

"She's in that giddy hack!" yelled Wally, pointing excitedly towards the station cab, which had turned into the gravel drive towards the New House.

Kildare gasped.

"Then it's true! He's a married man!" he ejaculated.

"Yes, rather. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Must have deserted his wife, and she's found him out!" said Gore of the Shell. "Oh, what a surprise for Ratty!"

"Gee-lorious!" yelled Bishop of the Fourth. "I say, you chaps, Ratty's wife's come home!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And there goes Ratty!" gasped Tom Merry. "He'll meet him—I mean her! Here, I say, come on! We're on in this scene!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"You bet!" grinned Blake. "We're going to back up beauty in distress! We're going to see her righted!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Let's see what Ratty says!"

"Oh, he can't have the cheek to deny it, when she's here, face to face with him!" said Lefevre of the Fifth. "That's what I say! Anyway, we'll stand by her in case he should cut up rusty. He's rotter enough for anything!"

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Quite a crowd rushed after the hack. The news had spread like wildfire.

Tom Merry & Co. and Figgins & Co. were well to the front, but fellows of all Forms and both Houses followed them fast.

The vague rumour—due to the telephone story—that Mr. Ratcliff was really a married gentleman, and had a wife somewhere, was confirmed now with a vengeance! No proof could be more convincing than the arrival of the lady!

Mr. Ratcliff, all unconscious of the storm that was about to burst upon him, was crossing to the New House, somewhat solaced in his mind by the sweet satisfaction of having boxed Tom Merry's ears in the School House.

He caught sight of the hack and of a woman's hat within it, and wondered who the visitor might be. He did not guess.

The lady leaned out of the window as she caught sight of the Housemaster.

"Stop!" she called to the driver.

"Yes, ma'am."

The hack halted on the drive, just as Mr. Ratcliff was passing it. The door was thrown open, and the lady stepped out.

"Horace!"

Mr. Ratcliff jumped.

He had been surprised by a lady, a perfect stranger to him, alighting from the hack for the evident purpose of greeting him. He fancied for a moment that it was some female relative of one of his boys. But her greeting him by his Christian name took his breath away.

"Madam!" he ejaculated.

"Horace!"

"Madam!"

The lady advanced towards him with outstretched arms.

"Dear Horace! Aren't you glad to see me?" she exclaimed, in a voice as soft as the cooing of a dove.

"Madam!" gasped the Housemaster.

"My dearest Horace!"

The Housemaster backed away, and avoided the eager embrace of the lady. He wondered for a moment whether he was dreaming.

"Madam!" he panted. "I—I—I—I am amazed! How—how can you act in this scandalous manner? I do not know who you are, but I insist that you shall not address me by my Christian name! I—I——"

"Horace!"

"Madam!"

"Dearest Horace! Are you angry with me?" The lady produced a handkerchief, and dabbed her eyes. "Oh, Horace, are you sorry to see your poor wife?"

"Wh-a-a-at?"

"My dear husband——"

"What?"

"Horace!"

"Madam!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff. "Either you are mad, or I am! What do you mean by this conduct? How dare you address me as your husband?"

"Horace!" The lady sobbed softly. "Horace! After all these years! Have I reproached you for deserting me? Horace!"

"Madam!" stuttered Mr. Ratcliff.

"Oh, Horace!"

Mrs. Ratcliff made a sudden rush, and before the Housemaster could dodge her, she threw her arms around his neck.

"Oh, Horace, haven't you a kind word for your poor little wifey?" she sobbed.

The Housemaster struggled furiously to release himself.

"Madam! Let me go! You are mad, or—or else intoxicated! You are not my wife! I am not a married man! Release me instantly!"

"Horace!"

"Woman!"

Mrs. Ratcliff sobbed bitterly, still clinging to the Housemaster. There was a murmur of compassion and indignation from the gathering crowd. Half St. Jim's had gathered already on the spot, and the other half seemed to be coming. Fellows were staring from the playing-fields, and deserting their game to run towards the New House. Masters were looking out of their study windows.

Mr. Ratcliff was almost fainting with horror.

"Release me!" he panted. "Woman, I command you to release me!"

But she only sobbed.

The murmur of the sympathetic crowd became a shout.

"Shame!"

Mr. Ratcliff glared round helplessly, dodging the hatpins in the lady's hat, which was resting on his shoulder.

"It is not true!" he exclaimed wildly. "I do not know this woman! She is a complete stranger to me! She must be mad!"

"Shame!"

"His own wife!"

"Poor Mrs. Ratcliff!"

"Shame!"

The Housemaster, with a terrific effort, wrenched himself away from the lady's embrace. He gazed round him wildly at the agonized faces of the crowd.

"It is false!" he stammered thickly. "I am not married! This woman is a madwoman, or an adventuress! I swear——"

"Shame!"

"Horace!" shrieked the lady.

She made another rush at the unhappy Housemaster. Mr. Ratcliff dodged round the cab, and then fairly took to his heels, and bolted into the New House.

CHAPTER 13. A Very Heartless Husband!

MRS. RATCLIFF sobbed bitterly. Some of the juniors were laughing. But the majority of the fellows looked sympathetic and concerned. To doubt the word of such a charming lady was impossible. Besides, why should a perfect stranger come to St. Jim's claiming to be Mr. Ratcliff's better half if there was no foundation for the claim? It was all only too clear. And the soft sobbing of the injured lady went straight to the simple hearts of the St. Jim's fellows.

"Oh, Horace!" sobbed the lady. "My husband! He repudiates his own Amelia! Oh!"

"Poor thing!"

"She looks as if she's going to faint," said Glyn, of the Shell. "What an awful rotter Ratty must be!"

The lady was, indeed, swaying, as if about to fall. Kildare, of the Sixth, ran forward to give her his arm. Kildare's honest face was red with indignation. He had never thought much of Mr. Ratcliff; but he had never expected even Ratty to act like this.

"Please take my arm, ma'am," said Kildare respectfully.

"Thank you, my dear boy!" sobbed Mrs. Ratcliff. "Oh, to be treated so by my husband! Oh, dear! Horace!"

"I—I suppose there isn't any mistake, ma'am?" said Monteith doubtfully. "Are you quite sure that Mr. Ratcliff is your husband?"

"As if I should not know my own Horace!" sobbed the lady. "Of course she knows him!" said Gore, of the Shell. "I suppose a woman wouldn't be likely to get her husband mixed up with somebody else?"

"Wathah not!"

"Besides, we all know Ratty's married," said Levison. "Didn't the woman on the telephone say so the other day?"

"Yes, rather."

"It's true enough."

"And he's disowned his own wife!" said Lefevre, of the Fifth. "It's shameful! That's what I say—shameful!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Shame!"

"He ought to be forced to look after her," exclaimed Figgins. "It's his duty!"

"I dare say he's a wife-beater," said Mellish.

"I shouldn't wonder!"

"But are you sure, ma'am?" asked Monteith. "Mr. Ratcliff has always been supposed to be an unmarried man here. Perhaps there is another Mr. Ratcliff."

"Yes, perhaps there is a mistake," said the bewildered Kildare. "But it's odd that both of them should be named Horace."

"Oh, it's the same man," said Gore.

"Yaas, wathah."

"He ought to be made to do her justice!"

"Take her to the Head!"

"Take her into the New House!"

"Make Ratty come out!"

"Shame!"

"You are quite sure you have found the right man, ma'am?" asked Monteith.

"He has a scar on his left arm," said Mrs. Ratcliff faintly; "a scar above the elbow."

There was a general exclamation from the crowd.

"That settles it!"

"That proves it!"

"We all know Ratty's got a scar on his arm!" exclaimed Redfern. "I've seen it!"

"Yes, rather! So have I!"

The St. Jim's fellows were convinced—if they needed convincing. Mr. Ratcliff sometimes took charge of the younger boys sailing in the Ryll, and the scar on his left arm was perfectly well known to dozens of them.

The lady could have produced no more convincing evidence. "By Jove!" exclaimed Monteith. "That does settle it, Kildare!"

The St. Jim's captain nodded.

"You're right," he said. "This is an awful thing for Ratty to do! I never thought much of him, but deserting a wife, that's too thick!"

"And denying her when she comes home to him!" said Kangaroo.

"Shame!"

The lady sobbed.

"Take me to Horace!" she moaned. "I forgive him! I love him, in spite of all! Take me to Horace!"

"Poor thing!"

"She's too good for him!"

"Take her into the New House, Kildare," exclaimed Tom Merry. "A wife has a right to be wherever her husband is! Take her in!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Make Ratty own up!"

"Take me to Horace!" sobbed Mrs. Ratcliff.

"I—I suppose we'd better," said Kildare, with a bewildered look at Monteith. "It's no business of ours to help a man dodge his own wife."

"No fear!" said Monteith. "Come in, ma'am. This way."

And the two prefects supported the sobbing lady into the New House. They left the crowd in a buzz in the quadrangle.

Mr. Railton came striding across the quad, and he came up just as Mrs. Ratcliff disappeared into the New House.

"What is the disturbance?" he exclaimed. "Who is that lady?"

"Mr. Ratcliff's wife, sir."

"What!"

"It's Mrs. Ratcliff, sir."

"What do you mean? What——?"

"It's true enough, sir," said Baker of the Sixth. "Mr. Ratcliff has deserted her, and she's come here to find him. She knows him."

The School House master looked utterly astounded.

"Does Mr. Ratcliff admit her claim?" he demanded.

"Oh, no, sir; you can't expect him to, as he deserted her!" said Baker indignantly. "But it's true enough. She knows he's got a scar on his arm, above the elbow."

"Dear me! Bless my soul!"

"It's all right, sir; she's genuine enough," said Baker. "Besides, why should she come and claim him if it isn't true? He would easily be able to prove whether it was true or not, and then she would have to go."

"Yes, that—that certainly seems so," ejaculated Mr. Railton.

"This is most extraordinary. I think I had better see Mr. Ratcliff about it. The Head is very much disturbed by what he has seen from his window."

And Mr. Railton strode into the New House. Kildare and Monteith had just arrived at Mr. Ratcliff's study door with the lady, who was leaning heavily upon their arms. Mr. Ratcliff was in his study. He had retreated there, in dismay and amazement, hardly knowing whether he was upon his head or his heels. As he heard footsteps in the passage he sprang to his study door to lock it, but to his utter dismay he found that the key was gone. Figgins had taken care of that. He slammed the door, and as he slammed it there came a knock on the outside.

"Go away!" shrieked Mr. Ratcliff. "I refuse to see you! You are an impostor! You are an adventuress! You——"

"Mr. Ratcliff!"

"Oh! Is that you, Mr. Railton? Pray come in!" The School House master entered, with a grim brow. "Mr. Railton, I am being persecuted—persecuted, sir, by an unknown female——"

"The Head wishes to know what is the matter," said the School House master coldly. "It appears that this lady claims to be your wife."

"It is false—false—an impudent concoction, sir!" shrieked Mr. Ratcliff. "I am not a married man! All my acquaintances know that I am not a married man! It is infamous!"

"It seems that the lady knows your name, at least, and has stated that she knows you have a scar on your left arm, above the elbow."

Mr. Ratcliff gasped.

"That is—extraordinary," he gasped. "I—I do not know how she can possibly be aware of that circumstance, when she is a total stranger to me."

"Certainly it is very odd if she is a total stranger to you, Mr. Ratcliff," said the School House master coldly.

"Do you doubt my word, Mr. Railton? Do you dare——"

"I pass no opinion whatever on the subject, sir," said Mr. Railton icily. "The Head has asked me to ascertain what the matter is. Am I to tell him that an unknown lady has come here claiming to be your deserted wife, and that you deny it?"

"Yes, yes. I certainly do deny it! Good heavens, man, I suppose I ought to know whether I am married or not!" shrieked Mr. Ratcliff.

"I will tell the Head what you say, then."

"But you—you believe——"

"What I believe is of no moment, as the matter is no business of mine," said the master of the School House.

"It is a plot!" shrieked Mr. Ratcliff. "It is a plot to disgrace me. Someone has hired this impudent and scandalous female to come here to ruin me."

"That would be very extraordinary. The lady looks perfectly respectable, and is evidently in a state of great grief," said Mr. Railton. "If there is no foundation for her claim, it is a mistake—a very extraordinary mistake."

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"If—if! I tell you there is no foundation for it. I am a bachelor, sir. I have never been married in my life. It is infamous! It is a plot—a wicked plot! I suspect you, sir, of having a hand in this disgraceful scheme!" yelled Mr. Ratcliff. The School House master started.

"I! What do you mean?"
"Yes, sir; you, sir!" roared Mr. Ratcliff. "I am not blind to your secret dislike and rivalry towards me, Mr. Railton! You have contrived this plot to bring me into disgrace!"

Mr. Railton flushed.
"I think you will be sorry for such a wild accusation when you are calmer," he said. "But I shall certainly not stay here to listen to such words."

And he strode from the study.
A picture hat and flaxen curls and a woe-stricken face were framed in the doorway the next moment.

"Horace!"
Mr. Ratcliff shrieked:
"Woman! Go!"

But the woman did not go. She came into the study with outstretched arms.

"Horace! My husband! I forgive everything!"
"Oh, this is too much! Go, go, go! I will send for the police. Madam, if you dare to touch me I shall strike you! I will not be embraced. I will not be touched. You are making an absurd mistake. I am not your husband!"

"Horace!"
"Go!"
"Horace darling!"
"Woman!"

Mr. Ratcliff dodged round the study table, and fled from the study. Mrs. Ratcliff sat down in the armchair, and wept bitterly.

CHAPTER 14. A Hot Chase.

SYMPATHETIC faces looked into the study. Mrs. Ratcliff's sobs could be heard the length of the passage, and the New House fellows were deeply touched. Comment upon Mr. Ratcliff's conduct were passed freely. It is probable that the New House fellows, while they really sympathised with the afflicted lady, also felt a very considerable satisfaction in being able to back up against Mr. Ratcliff in so

good a cause. The tyranny and harsh temper of the House-master, exercised without limit for the past few days, was to be avenged now. The New House rose as one man to back up the cause of the injured lady.

"Please don't cry, ma'am," said Baker, quite softly. "It's a shame. It's a beastly shame. But he'll have to give in."

"Certainly," said Monteith. "There's the law, ma'am."

Mrs. Ratcliff sobbed.
"His own Amelia," she murmured.

"We're all very sorry, ma'am," said Thompson, of the Shell.

"Where is he?" asked Amelia, rising to her feet. "I shall go. I will not remain where my husband does not want me. I will fling back his wedding-ring, and go!"

"No, don't do that, ma'am!" exclaimed Redfern. "Don't go. Stick to him!"

"Yes, stick to him, Mrs. Ratcliff!" cried a dozen voices from the passage. "The Head will make him do what is right."

"Take him before the Head, ma'am!"

"You can rely on the Head. He's an old sport!"

"Take me to my husband!" said the lady faintly. "You are very, very kind. But I cannot remain if he disowns me. I must go. I must tell him that I will not be a burden upon him. Take me to him."

"Certainly, ma'am!" said Monteith, alarmed at symptoms of hysterics. "Certainly. I'll take you to him with pleasure, ma'am!"

There was no doubt about that. All who had suffered from Mr. Ratcliff's harsh temper—and their name was legion—were deriving considerable pleasure from the blow which had so unexpectedly fallen upon the Housemaster.

Monteith gave the lady his arm, and led her from the study. The fellows gathered round, to escort beauty in distress, as eagerly as knights-errant of old. Some of them hurried on in advance to scout, and find out where Mr. Ratcliff was. As Figgins remarked, he was not going to escape; there was no rest for the wicked.

In the quadrangle there were surging, excited crowds.

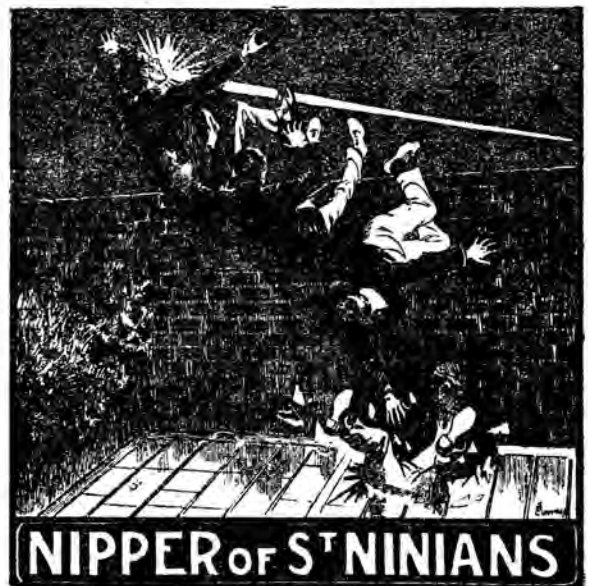
All St. Jim's was gathered now, at the astounding news that Mr. Ratcliff's deserted wife had come to claim him, and had been repudiated by the hard-hearted Housemaster.

The playing-fields, the gym, the studies, all were deserted; fellows had come from far and near to assist in the scene.

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"Where is he?"
 "Where's Ratty?"
 "Where's he hiding?"
 "This way!" shouted Blake. "He's gone to the School House!"
 "Come on, ma'am."
 "We'll see you righted!"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"

A surging crowd gathered round the weeping lady, and escorted her across the quadrangle towards the School House. Amelia had allowed her veil to fall, to hide her tears, perhaps. But she was still sobbing softly.

"It's a rotten shame!" said Kildare wrathfully. "She's quite a nice girl, too. Wonder what she could have seen in old Ratty!"

"I wonder if he beats her," said Darrel indignantly. "The poor thing seems to forgive him all his bad conduct."

"What will the Head say?" murmured Rushden.

"He'll make Ratty do the right thing!"

"There he is!" shouted Redfern.

Mr. Ratcliff was seen looking out of the doorway of the School House. He had a hunted look upon his face, which was not surprising, under the circumstances.

He glared at the lady, and disappeared into the house. Some of the juniors ran towards the house to see whither he went.

"Buck up, ma'am!" yelled Gore.

"Chase me!" murmured Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Pway don't laugh, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "This is a vewy serious mattah—for Watty!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mrs. Ratcliff was escorted into the School House. A swarming crowd followed her, filling the hall and the passages.

"Where is my husband?"

"Where's Ratty?"

Mr. Railton came out of his study, looking flushed and worried. The unhappy master of the New House had taken refuge there, throwing himself upon the mercy of the School House master. Mr. Railton did not know what to believe, but his sympathies were with the afflicted lady. Mr. Ratcliff was never frank, or anything but secretive, and he did not inspire confidence. If the matter was due to a mistake, it was a most extraordinary mistake, and it was far more probable that Horace Ratcliff had acted badly.

"Pray, madam," said Mr. Railton. "Pray—er—pause a moment. I—I beg you to be calm. Mr. Ratcliff declares that you are labouring under a misapprehension—" Sob. "He desires me to explain to you—"

Sob.

"He does not wish to see you—"

Sob!

"He—he—"

Sob!

Mr. Railton felt like a brute. The fellows were all looking indignant. They respected Mr. Railton, but who was he to stand between a wife and her husband?

"She wants to see her husband, sir," said Monteith.

"But—but—" stammered Mr. Railton.

"They can settle it together, sir. Surely Mr. Ratcliff ought to be willing to face his own wife."

"Yes. But—but he declares—"

Mrs. Ratcliff moved forward, and the School House master had either to give way, or to stop her by force. The latter was not to be thought of. Quite bewildered and undecided, Mr. Railton stepped aside, and Monteith opened the study door. Amelia passed in.

There was a shriek of dismay and rage from the unfortunate Mr. Ratcliff.

He backed away to the window, holding up his hands as if to ward off the importunate female.

"Go away!" he shrieked. "I will not be persecuted. Woman, you are mistaken! I am not your husband—nothing of the kind!"

"Horace!"

"Go away! Take her away! Send for the police!"

"Horace!"

Amelia made an affectionate rush at the Housemaster.

Mr. Ratcliff ran round the table and made for the doorway. But an innumerable crowd blocked up the way of escape, and nobody budged. The fellows were not inclined to facilitate the escape of the wicked man. Mr. Ratcliff had to stop, and he backed away from the lady, and dodged round the table again. There was a chuckle from the crowded passage.

"Here we go round the mulberry bush!" yelled Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Madam—"

"Horace!"

"Woman!"

"Horry!"

Mr. Ratcliff was cornered at the window. The window was

open, and it was an easy drop into the quadrangle, though at any other time Mr. Ratcliff, who was not given to gymnastic performances, would not have left the study that way. But on this occasion he had no choice. It was either that, or the embraces of an objectionable female, and he twisted his thin and lanky form out of the window, and dropped into the quad. He lost his footing, and rolled over there, and yelled.

The afflicted lady looked out of the window after him.

"Horace!"

"Ow!"

"My hat!" yelled Lefevre. "She's going after him! Holy smoke!"

It was true!

Amelia placed her hands upon the window sill, and jumped out after the Housemaster, alighting much more actively than Mr. Ratcliff had done. The Housemaster had just time to spring up and take to his heels.

The fellows crowded into the study, and looked out of the window after them, and yelled:

"Ha, ha, ha!"

CHAPTER 15.

Face to Face.

DR. HOLMES, the revered Head of St. Jim's, was in his study, listening to the yells from the quadrangle in great distress, in a very disturbed frame of mind.

He had learned that a lady, claiming to be Mr. Ratcliff's deserted wife, had arrived at the school, and that the New House master repudiated her, and was seeking to escape from her. Such an occurrence shocked the Head terribly. Such a scene outraged all his ideas of propriety. Whether to interfere or not, he hardly knew, and he remained in his study in a state of considerable agitation, hoping that the dreadful happening would end somehow.

His study door was suddenly thrown open, and a hatless fugitive rushed in.

It was Mr. Ratcliff.

Dr. Holmes jumped up in alarm.

"Mr. Ratcliff!" he exclaimed.

"Save me!" gasped the affrighted New House master. "A fearful woman—a fury—is pursuing me! She will not leave me! Keep her off!"

"Mr. Ratcliff!"

Mr. Ratcliff sank exhausted into a chair.

Dr. Holmes eyed him sternly.

"Is that woman your wife, Mr. Ratcliff?" he demanded.

Mr. Ratcliff yelled:

"No, no! NO!"

"Then it is very extraordinary—"

"It is some fearful, some ghastly mistake. Or else she is an adventuress, and has been hired to persecute me in this way!" wailed the unhappy Housemaster.

"That is nonsense!" said the Head decidedly. "If the claim is unfounded, it is a mistake. Certainly her conduct is most unbecoming in pursuing you in this way. But if she is your wife—"

"She is not!" screamed the maddened Housemaster. "Do you doubt my word, Dr. Holmes? I tell you I have never been married. You know I have not."

"I know you have been supposed to be a single man, certainly," said Dr. Holmes. "But if you have, in a thoughtless moment, contracted an ill-advised marriage, Mr. Ratcliff—"

"I tell you—"

"In such a case, it would be better to face the consequences, and not wrong your wife by a denial, sir."

"Will you not believe me, sir? I have never seen the woman before!" raved Mr. Ratcliff, beating the air with his hands. "Oh, this is enough to drive a man crazy! I have never seen that awful woman! We are perfect strangers!"

"I have been told that she knows your Christian name, and the fact that you have a certain scar upon your arm."

"Yes; it is very—very extraordinary!"

"Most extraordinary!" said the Head drily.

"Sir, I tell you—"

"Once more, Mr. Ratcliff, if there is any truth in this astounding claim, I urge you to admit it to me, and—"

"There is no truth in it!" screamed Mr. Ratcliff. "None whatever! The woman is a stranger to me!"

"She cannot be a stranger to you since she knows of the scar on your arm," said the Head. "You must see that that is impossible."

"I cannot account for that!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff. "It is extraordinary! But I repeat, I swear, that I do not know her. I have never seen her before."

There was a trampling of feet and a buzz of voices in the passage outside the Head's study. The claimant was coming, evidently, and most of the school seemed to be coming with her.

"She—she is coming here!" said the Head apprehensively. "This is a most unpleasant scene you have brought upon me, Mr. Ratcliff."

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"It is not my fault. I do not know the woman. It is a plot—it is a conspiracy! I will not face the woman. Keep her away!"

"It seems impossible to keep her away. And the matter must be settled," said the Head severely. "There was a knock at the door. 'Come in!'"

The door opened, and the lady appeared, with Monteith and a crowd of fellows. The Head faced the newcomers, and Mr. Ratcliff dodged behind the Head's desk, his last rampart.

"Monteith—" began the Head.

"Please, sir, it is Mrs. Ratcliff," said the New House prefect.

"She wants her husband, sir."

"It is not Mrs. Ratcliff!" yelled Mr. Ratcliff. "There is no Mrs. Ratcliff! She is an impostor—a wicked adventuress!"

Amelia sobbed.

"My dear lady," said the Head gently, "pray calm yourself. I am sure that this is a terrible mistake."

Sob!

"Mr. Ratcliff assures me that it is a mistake!"

Sob!

"If you have any papers to prove your claim, madam," said the Head.

"She has not!" shrieked Mr. Ratcliff. "She cannot have! How can she prove her claim when it is false? I tell you—"

"Please leave me to deal with this matter, Mr. Ratcliff," said the Head sharply. "Mere denial is not sufficient."

"Sir! I tell you—I repeat—"

"Enough! Leave it to me. Now, madam, what proof can you offer that you have a claim upon Mr. Ratcliff?" asked the Head, handing the lady a chair. "Pray, sit down, and be calm."

"Thank you, sir," said the lady faintly.

"Now, pray be calm, and—and we shall get this matter settled quite—quite satisfactorily," said the Head. "In the place, have you any—any marriage certificate?"

"I did not bring a marriage certificate with me, sir!" sobbed the lady. "How was I to guess that such a thing would be wanted?"

"Quite right!" said Monteith. "Ladies don't generally take their marriage certificates about in their pockets, sir."

"No; I—I suppose not," said the Head. "But—since Mr. Ratcliff has not acknowledged you, madam, you must have been prepared for denial on his part. It would therefore have been more judicious to bring proof with you."

"I suppose I know my own husband," sobbed the lady. "I could not foresee that he would be so cruel. But if you care to send to my hotel in Wayland, sir, they will give you a packet containing all the proofs. I will wait here while you send."

"That's fair enough!" said Monteith.

"Dear me!" said the Head. "That—that certainly does sound quite fair. What do you say to that, Mr. Ratcliff?"

Mr. Ratcliff looked as if he were on the verge of an attack of apoplexy. So convincing was the woman's manner, that for one dizzy moment Mr. Ratcliff wondered whether he was really married or not.

"There are no papers—no proofs!" he gurgled. "It is an impudent claim. The woman is an impostor!"

"Oh, Horace!"

"Please moderate your language, Mr. Ratcliff," said the Head sharply. "The lady may be mistaken. But I am sure it is nothing worse than that. Madam, are you quite sure that you can identify this gentleman?"

"He has a scar on his left arm, above the elbow," sobbed Amelia.

"Yes. Can you describe the scar?"

"About an inch long, sir. It was made by Mr. Ratcliff cutting his arm on broken glass," said the lady. "It happened to him last year, when a window was broken in his house."

"Quite true," said Monteith. "I remember it happening."

"That—that is true!" panted Mr. Ratcliff. "But someone must have told her. I tell you this is a plot—it is a conspiracy!"

"It is certainly amazing," said the Head, passing his hand over his brow. "It is very extraordinary if there are two Mr. Ratcliffs with the same scar, on the same arm. Do you declare that your husband was a Housemaster at this school, madam?"

"Certainly, sir!"

"Dear me! Then it is certainly not a case of mistaken identity," said the Head bewildered. "Is anyone else at this school acquainted with you, madam?"

"Yes, sir; the witness of our marriage—a master here."

"What! That should settle the matter. What is the name of the master?" asked the Head eagerly. And Mr. Ratcliff looked simply dazed. If a master at St. Jim's was produced as a witness against him, he would have had no alternative but to believe that he had really got married in a moment of mental aberration, and forgotten all about it afterwards.

"Mr. Kidd, sir, the other Housemaster here."

The Head looked disappointed.

"Mr. Kidd! Ah! I am sorry to say that Mr. Kidd is no longer here," he said. "Mr. Railton is now Housemaster in the School House. I can, however, communicate with Mr. Kidd by telegram. Are you willing that I should do so?"

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"Yes, Dr. Holmes, more than willing."

"Then I will send the telegram at once."

"Please do so, sir."

Dr. Holmes wrote out a telegram, and handed it to Monteith.

"Please send that at once, Monteith," he said.

"Yes, sir."

The prefect hurried away with the telegram. Mrs. Ratcliff sat in the chair, sobbing. She did not display the slightest nervousness as to the result of the telegraphic inquiry, though as a matter of fact some of the juniors in the passage looked rather alarmed. But their looks were not noticed at such a time.

"I shall receive a reply in an hour," said the Head. "Mr. Ratcliff, if Mr. Kidd's reply bears out this lady's statement, I shall have no alternative but to believe that she really is what she claims to be. In that case, sir, your conduct has been such that I shall request you immediately to leave this school!"

Mr. Ratcliff passed his hand over his perspiring brow.

"In that case, sir, I should certainly leave this school, and enter a lunatic asylum," he said dazedly. "I cannot understand this woman! If I am married to her, I am not in my right senses."

"Horace!"

"Perhaps—perhaps you will retire to another apartment, madam," said the Head gently. "And in the meantime, I will also send to your hotel for the papers you mention. Pray give me the name of the hotel?"

"The Railway Hotel, sir."

"And the name—"

"Mrs. Ratcliff. I will write a note, sir."

"Here are pen and paper."

Amelia calmed herself sufficiently to write the note, in a delicate feminine handwriting. It was placed in an envelope and sealed.

"Send the page with that, please, Baker."

"Yes, sir."

Mrs. Ratcliff rose.

"Horace!" she said softly.

"Madam—woman—"

"Will you not speak to me, Horace? Can you any longer deny the truth, when in a short time the proofs will be in the hands of Dr. Holmes? Oh, Horace, how can you treat me so?"

"I deny—I assert—I—I—"

"Horace! I will not ask you again to take me to your heart!" said the sobbing lady. "If you repudiate your wife, she has too much pride to force herself upon you. Horace, I ask you for the last time, will you take back your own Amelia?"

"No!" shrieked Mr. Ratcliff. "I will not! I do not know you! I refuse to admit anything of the sort! I—I—"

"Then take back your ring, your wicked man!" cried Amelia, tearing the wedding-ring from her finger, and flinging it at the feet of Mr. Ratcliff. "Take it back! I will never look upon your face again!"

"Madam!" said the Head soothingly.

Mrs. Ratcliff held out her hands blindly, evidently on the verge of hysterics. Kildare sprang forward to support her.

"Take me away!" said the lady faintly. "Take me away—anywhere away from that wicked, heartless man!"

And Kildare led her sobbing from the Head's study.

CHAPTER 16.

Exit Mrs. Ratcliff!

A CROWD of sympathetic fellows followed Mrs. Ratcliff from the School House. Mr. Ratcliff remained in a dazed condition in the Head's study. The sobbing lady clung to Kildare's strong arm, and the captain of St. Jim's did his best to comfort her.

"Take me away!" sobbed Amelia. "I will never see him again! The proofs that I am his lawful wife shall be shown, but I will never see him again! Take me to the cab!"

Kildare placed the lady in that vehicle. She was sobbing violently behind her veil, and Kildare felt a lump in his own throat from sheer sympathy.

"Go on, driver!" called out Tom Merry.

The driver set the hack in motion. A sympathetic crowd followed it to the gates of St. Jim's, and watched it roll down the road towards Kylecombe.

"It's a shame!" said Kildare.

"A rotten shame!"

"What an awful bounder Ratty is!"

"A rotten outsider, treating his wife like that!"

"Poor thing! She seemed quite broken-hearted!"

"Ratty will get the sack, anyway," said Bishop. "The Head won't stand him, when it's proved that she is really his wife."

"Yes, rather!"

"Blessed if I'd have let him off, if I'd been she," said Levison. "She should have stuck to him, whether he liked it or not. He's bound to keep her!"

"Well, it's a proper pride, not to stay with him if he doesn't."

want her," remarked Bernard Glyn. "Perhaps she never expected him to own her, but just wanted to show him up, to punish him for deserting her."

"Well, she's done that!"

The hack disappeared down the road. The St. Jim's fellows turned back into the quadrangle, excitedly discussing the strange incidents of the afternoon. When Mr. Ratcliff, looking very white and dazed, came out of the School House, he was greeted with loud groans and hisses. But he did not take any notice of them. He crossed over to the New House with an unsteady step, and withdrew to the seclusion of his study. He was strangely subdued. Even his violent temper seemed to have been broken by what he had gone through that afternoon.

It was about half an hour later that Kerr, of the Fourth, came in at the school-gates, with a cheery smile on his face.

He was greeted with the surprising news.

"You've missed all the fun!" exclaimed Thompson, of the Shell, as Kerr came in. "Ratty's wife has been here!"

"Not really!" said Kerr.

"Yes, rather! She hasn't been gone more than half an hour. Ratty wouldn't have anything to say to her. He disowned her, the cad!"

"What a rotten thing to do!" said Kerr blandly. "I wish I'd been here. Did you see her, Figgins?"

Figgins went off into a yell.

"Yes, rather! Ha, ha, ha!"

"So did I," said Fatty Wynn. "Ha, ha, ha!"

Thompson stared at them.

"I don't think it's anything to laugh at," he said. "She was awfully cut up. As for Ratty, it's simply put the extinguisher on him."

"Well, that's a good thing, at any rate," said Kerr, laughing.

And Kerr linked arms with Figgins and Fatty Wynn, and walked away with them, all three of the famous Co. laughing heartily. They met Tom Merry and Blake, and the rest, outside the School-House. Blake fell upon Kerr's neck and hugged him.

"Oh, you boulder! Ha, ha, ha!"

"It was ripping!"

"Yaas, wathah! Bai Jove! I began to believe it was weally Mrs. Watcliff myself, you know."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Shush!" said Tom Merry. "Not a word! Not a syllable! If it were to get out——"

"I fancy I should have to get out, too!" said Kerr, grinning.

"It's all serene; mum's the word. I left the hack in the lane, and took the footpath, and the things are packed in the bags, ready to be fetched back some time. The driver was very sympathetic when I left him, and said it was a shame."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"How's Ratty?"

"Squashed!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hullo!" said Monty Lowther. "Here comes the telegraph boy! It's the answer from Mr. Kidd."

"And here comes Toby back from Wayland," said Tom Merry. "The Head will have the proofs now!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The telegraph boy and Toby arrived together at the Head's study. Five minutes later, Toby was seen dashing across to the New House, evidently to fetch Mr. Ratcliff. Mr. Ratcliff soon appeared, and raced over to the School House, followed by a storm of yells and groans and hisses from the fellows in the quadrangle.

The Head was looking amazed and excited when Mr. Ratcliff entered his study.

"Mr. Ratcliff! I must apologise for having doubted you!"

he exclaimed. "I have some very welcome information for you. The woman was undoubtedly an impostor. It seems that she was utterly unknown at the Railway Hotel at Wayland; and Mr. Kidd replies to me that he knows nothing about her, and certainly knows nothing of your supposed marriage. The whole story was a fabrication."

Mr. Ratcliff drew a deep, deep breath of relief.

"Thank Heaven!" he gasped. "I—I was almost beginning to doubt my own senses, sir. Will you make this known to the school, sir? I have been placed in a very unpleasant position by the conduct of that—that extraordinary female."

"At once, Mr. Ratcliff. The whole thing is very extraordinary. Perhaps the woman was mad—I think that very probable. At all events, I am very glad that the matter has been satisfactorily cleared up."

The news was made known to the school.

St. Jim's heard it with amazement and doubt; but the Head's word was enough, and the telegram from Mr. Kidd was shown. It was evident that the claim of the sobbing lady had no foundation; that the whole thing was a stupendous jape upon Mr. Ratcliff.

When St. Jim's realised that, the comic side of the matter struck them; and they roared.

Mr. Ratcliff retired to his own quarters, but there he was followed by the incessant sound of laughter.

St. Jim's, New House and School House, seniors and juniors, roared over it.

It was likely to be a very long time before Mr. Horace Ratcliff was allowed to forget the pursuit of the affectionate Amelia.

As to who the importunate female was, that was not discovered. Mr. Ratcliff, feeling very vengeful, tried to discover, in the hope of getting the impostor punished. But she seemed to have vanished without leaving a trace behind. The driver of the hack gave the information that she had left his vehicle in the lane, and gone by the footpath through Rylcombe Wood towards Wayland. But that was the last that human eyes saw of her; she had disappeared as completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed her up.

There were some fellows at St. Jim's who could have explained the mystery. But they took excellent care not to do so.

And Mr. Ratcliff, though he was cleared of the suspicion of being a heartless husband, found himself in a hardly less painful position, as the object of the laughter and jests of the whole school; and it was not surprising that he requested permission of the Head to retire from St. Jim's for a time upon a holiday. The Head very gladly accorded permission; and Mr. Ratcliff took his departure at once; and his ears burned as he heard the yells of laughter that followed him as he started for the station.

In Tom Merry's study that evening a merry party was gathered. All the Co.'s were there, to celebrate their victory over the obnoxious Ratty; and to congratulate one another upon his departure.

"We are victorious!" grinned Figgins. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yaas, wathah! It was wuff on Watty, but he deserved it—and isn't it wippin' for him to have cleahed out for a bit! It will give us a west."

"Hear, hear!"

"Hurray!"

Tom Merry filled his glass.

"Gentlemen, a bumper! Here's to Mrs. Ratcliff, the gentle Amelia!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the toast was drunk, with cheers for Kerr of the Fourth. It was a merry evening for the chums of St. Jim's, and they rejoiced—though undoubtedly it was Rough on Ratcliff!

THE END.

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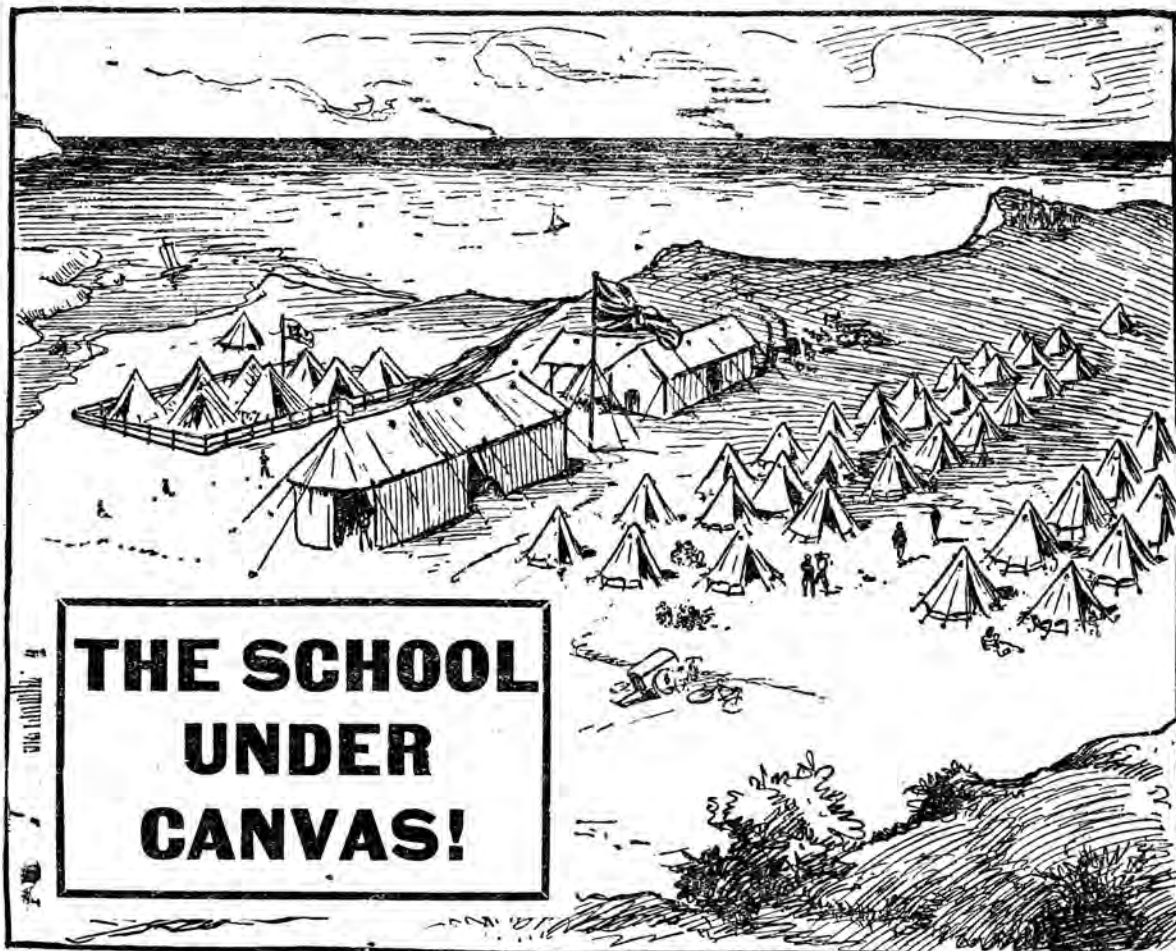
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By PROSPER HOWARD.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED SO FAR.

"The School will assemble in Big Hall at half-past six o'clock. An important announcement will be made.

"(Signed),

E. MONK, Headmaster."

The appearance of the above brief notice on the school board is the first hint that the Rylcombe Grammar School receives of the great change in its circumstances that is pending—nothing less than the removal of the whole school into temporary quarters under canvas by the sea, on the Essex coast. Just at this time the ranks of the Fourth Form are reinforced by Gustave Blanc—immediately christened Mont Blong—a new boy from across the Channel. Mont Blong, who attaches himself to Gordon Gay & Co., is a slim and elegant youth with a peculiar flow of English, but he quickly shows his worth by holding his own with Carker, the bully of the Fourth. Amidst great excitement the Grammarians travel down to their new abode. During the first few days Gordon Gay discovers that there is more in Mont Blong than at first meets the eye, and that the French junior can speak English

fluently. Gordon Gay and Frank Monk & Co. one day see Herr Hentzel in secret conversation with two German military officers in a cave on the seashore. They are surprised to hear from Mont Blong that the three are spies.

While the Cornstalk Co., with Tadpole and Mont Blong, are out rowing one day, they are overhauled by a tramp steamer, manned by Germans, and forced to come aboard. The German skipper, evidently a confederate of Herr Hentzel, demands from Gordon Gay the whereabouts of some valuable documents which the latter gentleman has lost. The Cornstalk denies all knowledge of the matter, and the juniors are imprisoned in a cabin, without food. They manage to seize the skipper, however, when he enters the cabin to visit them, and he is disarmed and bound in a trice, while Mont Blong locks the cabin door from the inside. Meanwhile Gordon Gay fires the skipper's revolver out of the window, in the hope of attracting the attention of some passing ship.

(Now go on with the story).

The Whip Hand!

Bang!

He pulled the trigger again.

"What are you doing?" exclaimed Wootton major.

"There's an English steamer yonder. I'm trying to attract her attention. I'll keep one bullet for our friend on the floor, in case he asks for it."

Gordon Gay looked anxiously from the porthole.

But the distant steamer kept on her way, without a sign, and passed out of the range of his vision. It had been but a slight hope, and it had come to nothing.

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The German skipper looked up at him with a savage sneer.

"Dey do not hear!" he said.

The Cornstalk nodded.

"Looks not!" he agreed. "But I've got three cartridges left, you beauty, if you give us any trouble. Look here, we're going to be taken back to England."

"Nein!"

"Your men are still outside the door. It sounds like the monkey-house at the Zoo," said Gordon Gay. "You will call out to them, and order them to get back to the Essex coast, where you picked us up, immediately."

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"Never!"

"You've got to," said Gordon Gay grimly. "Do you fellows agree? It looks to me as if it's our only chance."

"If you can make the brute do it," said Wootton major.

"He shall smart if he won't," said Gay, between his teeth.

"He's kidnapped us; may mean to murder us, for all we know. We're not going to stand on ceremony with him. Will you give your men the order I have said, captain?"

"No!" yelled the German.

"Then you're going to be licked until you do."

"Vat!" screamed the German.

"You're going to give that order to your men, or you're going to be licked until you do give it," said Gordon Gay. The Cornstalk took off his belt. "Now, then, turn him over! Now, herr captain, will you order your men outside to make for the coast?"

"No."

"For the last time?"

"No."

"Then you'll smart for it."

Gordon Gay swung up his arm. The belt was a light one, but it was quite heavy enough to inflict a severe licking. Gay's arm swept down, and there was a terrific yell from the German skipper as the belt lashed across his broad back.

"Yarroop!"

Lash! lash! lash!

"Ow! Yow! Oh!"

"Will you do as I want?" asked Gay grimly.

"Ow! Oh! Mein himmel! Ja, ja, you young Englisher fend! Ja, ja!" yelled the enraged and amazed captain. He had never dreamed that the Cornstalk would carry out his threat, but he had discovered his mistake now.

"Give the orders, then."

The German yelled out in his own language. A voice replied from the alley-way outside, and there was a sound of receding feet.

The juniors waited anxiously.

Gordon Gay looked from the porthole. The steamer was changing her course. She swung round, and the change of position brought a new view to the porthole, where Gordon Gay was standing. In the distance the summits of the Essex hills caught his eye, and he knew that he was not far from English land. The steamer had evidently only been marking time during the night, standing off and on near the shore. Probably the skipper did not want to get out of communication with Herr Hentzel.

"Good!" exclaimed Gordon Gay. "I believe we're not ten miles out, you fellows. Hurray!"

The steamer glided on through the water, and the German skipper lay upon the floor of the cabin, regarding the Gramarians with eyes that scintillated with rage.

A Bid for Liberty.

Gordon Gay stood at the porthole, watching the shore as it drew nearer.

The German crew were evidently obeying the orders shouted to them by their imprisoned skipper, and the steamer was drawing rapidly nearer to the shore. It would not be long ere it would glide by the headland near the school camp. And then?

There was a mocking sneer on the face of the German. When the steamer dropped anchor close to the shore, the juniors would have to get out of the state-room, and then the German crew would be able to seize them. Probably the skipper had shouted instructions to them to that effect, along with his orders to steam back to the coast. The German evidently believed that he held the trump card, in spite of the momentary success of the juniors. And his savage look showed how bitterly he would repay the humiliation he had endured at their hands, when his chance came.

But Gordon Gay's brain was busy.

He could read quite easily in the German's face what was passing in the man's mind, but it did not trouble him.

His comrades looked at him anxiously. They had won the game so far, owing to the coolness and courage of their leader. But they, as well as the German, did not quite see how they were to escape from the steamer at the finish.

The steamer glided on, and the coast, as Gay watched it from the porthole, came nearer and nearer, clearer and clearer.

The big headland loomed up on the right, and once or twice he caught a glimpse of white in the sun along the shore, and knew that it was the school under canvas.

His heart beat at the sight.

There were his old friends and comrades, gathered at their lessons at that hour, and short as the time of separation really was, Gordon Gay felt as if he had been long absent.

The sight of the white canvas gleaming in the sun cheered him.

"We're close in now," he remarked.

"Right in the bay," said Wootton major.

There was a tap at the door outside, and a hoarse voice called in German:

"Tell him to anchor!" said Gordon Gay.

The German skipper snapped his teeth, and obeyed.

The steamer throbbed to a stop, and anchored within easy sight of the boats drawn up on the shore. The water was too shallow to allow her to approach nearer, or Gordon Gay would have made them do so. The German skipper watched Gay with blazing eyes.

"You come to the end of your tether now, you Englisher cub!" he hissed.

"Not quite," said Gordon Gay cheerfully. "Now, you fellows, kick your boots off!"

"What for?" demanded Wootton major.

"We've got to swim for it."

"Phew!"

"We're less than three-quarters of a mile out," said Gay, "and we're all first-class swimmers. Taddy can swim, and we can help him if he needs it."

"My dear Gay—"

"It hasn't occurred to our Deutcher friend here that the port-hole is big enough for kids of our size to get through," said Gay, keeping his eyes upon the German. "But you see, Herr Captain, you fat Dutchies couldn't squeeze through it to save your lives; but we shall be able to do it quite easily. Ah, would you!"

The German skipper, his face convulsed with rage, opened his mouth to yell a warning to his men, to warn them of what Gordon Gay intended.

But Gay was ready for him.

As the German's mouth opened, he jammed his handkerchief into it, and rammed it in tight, and the German's attempted yell died away in a feeble spluttering.

Gordon Gay extracted a length of twine from his pocket, and tied it round the German skipper's head, fastening the gag in its place very securely. He had no intention whatever of standing upon ceremony with the man; and if the ruffian was hurt, that was his own look-out, as Gordon Gay regarded it. The German lay wriggling on the floor, spluttering in a choked way, only inarticulate gasps escaping him.

"That keeps you quiet for a bit," said Gay. "Now, you chaps, are you ready?"

"Yes, rather."

"Drop one at a time from the porthole. You can squeeze through all right. Lucky we haven't got Fatty Wynn of St. Jim's in the party. You ready, Taddy?"

Tadpole shivered.

"My dear Gay—"

"Come on! There's no time to lose."

"I—I—"

"Buck up!" roared Gordon Gay.

"But—but I am a very poor swimmer, and—and—"

"You're a pretty poor everything," agreed Gordon Gay. "But you've got to swim this time, and we'll help you. Come on!"

"Suppose—"

"Oh, blow supposing. You go first, Harry, and I'll chuck Taddy after you."

"But—but suppose they fire on us from the deck!" gasped Tadpole.

Gordon Gay laughed.

"They won't!" he said. "We're too close to the shore for that. There are a dozen fishermen watching the steamer at this minute, and wondering what she's doing here. They wouldn't dare to commit murder with half Netherby looking on—and anyway, we've got to risk it. Do you want to stay here?"

"No, no, but—"

"Then, come on."

And Gordon Gay grasped the hesitating Tadpole by the shoulders, and propelled him forcibly towards the porthole.

"Ow!" moaned Tadpole. "Is the water very cold, Gay?"

"You'll see when you get into it."

"Oh! Ow!"

"Shut up, for goodness sake. Go it, Harry."

"I'm off!"

Harry Wootton squeezed himself out of the porthole, and dived head first into the sea. Jack Wootton followed him immediately, and the brothers swam there together, close by the side of the ship. Mont Blong was the third, and he dropped into the sea feet first, squeezing out backwards through the porthole, and hanging on for a moment before he let go. Then Gordon Gay pushed Tadpole through.

The German skipper watched him, choking with rage.

Tadpole hesitated, but he had to make up his mind to it. He dived perforce, with a push behind from Gordon Gay. Fortunately the drop was not great, and the Woottons seized him as he rose, puffing and panting, to the surface.

Gordon Gay turned to the German skipper with a grin.

"Good-bye, uncle," he said cheerfully. "I shall see you

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again, perhaps, if I ever pay a visit to the Old Bailey. Keep your pecker up."

The skipper's eyes spoke volumes of rage, but his tongue was still.

Gordon Gay squeezed himself out of the porthole, and dived, and rose in the water among his comrades. The German skipper's pistol was dropped into the sea. The five juniors swam together away from the side of the steamer, and above, by the rail, three or four of the German seamen stared down at them in amazement.

An officer rushed down, to knock on the cabin door, and demand instructions, which the gagged skipper could not give. Some of the Germans rushed to lower a boat. Gordon Gay had expected that.

"Buck up!" he said. "It may be tough and go now, and if they should get us on board that steamer again, we shall have a fearful time."

"Yes, rather!" gasped Wootton major.

"Leave Taddy to me," said Gay. "I'll shove him along. The rest of you make for the beach as hard as you can go. If one of us gets ashore, it's enough to make those rotters let us all alone. They don't want the police on 'em."

"Good!"

The Grammarian juniors struck out for the shore with all their strength, gliding swiftly through the calm water.

Behind them, the boat plumped down from the German steamer and there was a rattle of oars in rowlocks, and a splash of hurried rowing. But time had been taken to lower the boat, and the swimmers had a start. They were making the best use of it, and the sound of the rowers in pursuit urged them to greater efforts. And now there were people on shore staring towards them, and watching the strange race in amazement.

A Near Thing.

Gordon Gay & Co. swam hard for the shore.

Behind them the German oarsmen were pulling hard, and but for the start the juniors had gained, the pursuers would certainly have been successful.

Gay glanced back over the shining water.

The boat was coming on fast, and a German mate was standing up in the bows with a boat-hook in his hand, and his face set in a grim expression.

"Oh, dear!" gasped Tadpole. "I—I got some water in my mouth then, and—and—"

"Swim, you idiot!"

"I—I can't—I—don't d-drag me along—gr—ooo—"

Tadpole had no chance to speak further.

Gordon Gay was propelling him through the water as fast as he could; and Wootton major and minor, and Mont Blong were already ahead. Harry Wootton paused for his chum.

"Get on!" gasped Gordon Gay. "Get ashore—if I'm collared, you can get help—"

"But—"

"Get on!"

"Right—ho!" said Wootton major.

And he swam on his fastest.

Jack Wootton and Mont Blong were close to the shore now. A fisherman was putting out in his boat to help the juniors. There was a shout from the direction of the school under canvas. Frank Monk, Lane, and Carboy came racing down to the shore. They were coming out for a morning bathe, when they caught sight of the swimmers, the German ship, and the pursuing boat.

Amazed as they were by the strange spectacle, they lost no time. They dashed down to the shingle at top speed.

"Buck up, Gay!" roared Frank Monk.

"We're coming!"

"Oh, quite!" gasped Carboy.

Gordon Gay, burdened with the helpless Tadpole, was lagging far behind his chums now. They would have stopped for him, but for his own order; and it was evidently best for some, at least, to make sure of escape, in order to get help for Gay if he was recaptured.

The German boat was close behind the swimmer, and he had still fifty yards to cover. He pushed on desperately, his teeth set, his eyes gleaming through the spray.

Monk Lane and Carboy halted on the shore.

"The boat's after them!" muttered Monk, setting his teeth. "Some of that gang of German spies, of course. Get up some stones."

"Good!"

Gay swam on his fastest.

The shore was thick with shingles. Frank Monk stooped, and caught up a round stone in his hand, and took aim at the man standing up in the bows of the German boat. He was getting the boat-hook ready to reach at Gordon Gay, evidently intending to fasten on to the Cornstalk and drag

him back, careless if he was hurt. It was no time for tender measures. The stone flew from Frank Monk's hand, unerring as a bullet from a crack rifleman, and struck the German full in the face.

"Ach!"

The unexpected crash in the face sent the German staggering back in the boat, and he fell heavily among the rowers.

In an instant all was confusion.

One of the oarsmen caught a crab, and another lost his oar. The boat swung round, and the German mate scrambled to, his feet with blood on his face.

Whiz, whiz, whiz!

Monk, Lane, and Carboy were hurling the stones fast now. Every missile flew into the boat, and there were yells of pain from the German seamen.

Grash, crash!

"Ach!"

"Mein Gott!"

Jack Wootton and Mont Blong scrambled through the sand to the shore. Without stopping to shake the water from themselves, they grasped up stones and began pelting the German boat.

In a second or two more, Harry Wootton joined them.

The fusillade from six juniors, all of them good shots, told upon the German boat's crew.

They were in utter confusion, and only yells and thumps from the enraged mate made the seamen bend to their oars again, and resume the pursuit of Gordon Gay in the face of the whizzing volleys of stones.

Crash, crash, whiz, crash!

Gay had gained ground during the Germans' confusion, and he was close in shore now. The fisherman, who had put out his boat, dragged Gay into it, with Tadpole, and ran his craft upon the sand. The Grammarians rushed down to it in a crowd, stones in their hands, to defend it in case the Germans came further.

But the Germans were done.

They had no chance against the schoolboys and the fishermen; and already the alarm had spread to the school camp, and a hundred fellows or more were racing towards the spot.

The boat pulled off.

Gordon Gay staggered ashore with Tadpole.

Back to the tramp steamer went the defeated boat, and quickly the steamer turned her stern upon the shore and steamed away into the North Sea. For in a few minutes the telegraph would be at work, and the lawless rascals would be searched for along the coast. They had failed, and only rapid flight could save them now.

"My hat!" gasped Gordon Gay. "That was a near thing! Thank you, Monkey, old man! Jolly lucky for us this was your washing-day."

Monk chuckled. He handed his bathing-towel to Gordon Gay.

"We thought you were drowned when we found the boat," he said.

"Oh, dear," gasped Tadpole, "I have had a most unpleasant experience! You allowed a great deal of water to get into my mouth, Gay."

"Not enough to stop it," remarked Wootton major.

"My dear Wootton—"

"Come on, my infants," said Frank Monk. "The Head will be jolly glad to see you; I can tell you the pater's been fearfully anxious."

And the dripping heroes were marched into camp.

Herr Hentzel is Surprised.

The story Gordon Gay & Co. had to tell amazed the school under canvas.

They had to tell it to the Head, and then to nearly everybody else in the school; and finally to the Netherby police, who came to hear the particulars.

Herr Hentzel was not in the school just then, having gone away on business of his own for a few hours—business the nature of which the juniors could guess.

The German master, therefore, knew nothing of the escape of the kidnapped juniors.

And Gordon Gay & Co. did not mention his name.

They knew that Herr Otto Hentzel had been acting in collusion with the skipper of the German tramp steamer; but they had no proof of it. And such an accusation would have required the clearest and strongest evidence.

They therefore did not mention Herr Hentzel's missing papers as being the cause of their kidnapping by the Germans. They simply stated the fact.

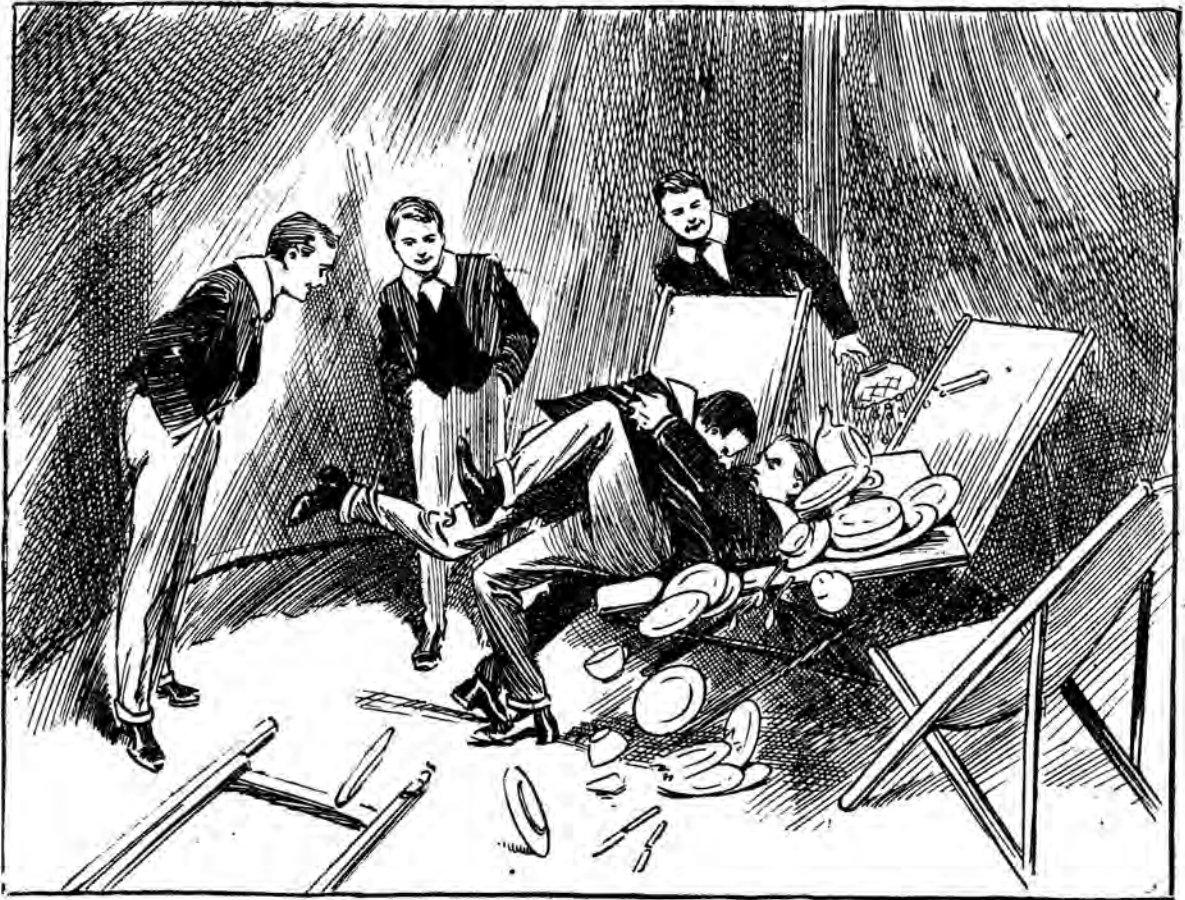
And the police took up the matter with considerable energy, and the description of the tramp steamer was flashed far and wide on the telegraph-lines.

Gordon Gay & Co. were the heroes of the hour.

They had been kidnapped, and they had escaped by a com-

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Mont Blong rushed at his old enemy, and in a moment they had closed, and were struggling in the confined space of the tent. "Look out!" roared Gordon Gay. "Chuck it!" Crash! Mont Blong had succeeded in throwing his burly antagonist, but unfortunately he threw him fairly into the midst of the preparations for tea! There was a crash of crockery, and a crash of Carker! (See page 26.)

combination of luck and pluck; and that day the Grammar School talked of nothing else.

Monk grinned at Gordon Gay as the Fourth went into the big marquee for afternoon lessons. Gordon Gay & Co. were going in with the rest, with the exception of Tadpole, who had caught a cold and was allowed to lie up.

"German this afternoon," Monk remarked.

"What about that?"

"The Herr hasn't come back yet," Monk explained. "He will come in—and find you fellows here! It will be rather a surprise for him."

The Cornstalk Co. chuckled.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Zat will be ferry funny," grinned Mont Blong. "He will zink zat it is a ghost zat he see in ze daylight."

From Monk & Co., of course, Gordon Gay had not kept any secret. They knew that the German master was at the bottom of the kidnapping.

The Cornstalks grinned with anticipation as the time came round for the German lesson. The first lesson in the afternoon was with Mr. Adams, and when it was over it was time for the German master to come into the marquee. The Fourth were therefore all in their places when Herr Hentzel, who had only just returned to the school camp from Netherby, came into the tent. The German master was very careful not to neglect his duties as a teacher, which were so effectual a screen for his other work as a foreign spy. He reached the school camp, therefore, in time for the lesson, and hurried into the tent just as Mr. Adams was preparing to leave.

"Is it tat I am late?" asked Herr Hentzel.

"Just in time," said Mr. Adams cheerily.

"Tat is goot!"

Mr. Adams quitted the tent, and the German master turned towards the class. The Fourth were all in their places, and Gordon Gay & Co. were looking very demure. As the German turned towards them he caught sight of the three Cornstalks and Mont Blong suddenly.

There was nothing to prepare him for the shock.

He stared blankly at the four juniors and uttered a husky, rasping cry.

For a moment it appeared as if he could not believe his eyes, at seeing the juniors, whom he had believed far away in the hands of the kidnappers, sitting in their usual places in the Fourth Form.

He staggered back, his sallow face going quite white.

"Ach! Mein Gott!" he exclaimed.

Gordon Gay rose and bowed politely to the German master.

"Good-afternoon, sir!"

"Gay!"

"Yes, sir."

"You are—are here!"

"Yes, sir."

"But—but— Ach! I tink tat you— Ach!" The German checked himself. It would not have been prudent for him to say where he had thought the juniors to be. "I—I tink you have been missing, is it not? I hear tat te post was wreck."

"Yes, sir."

"But you come back—isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. We escaped."

"Escaped?"

"Yes, sir."

"I not understand tat," said the German master. "Is it not tat you was wreck in te post?"

"No, sir; we were kidnapped."

"Ach! Is tat possible?"

"Yes, sir," said Gordon Gay cheerfully. "We were kidnapped by a set of horrible scoundrels, sir—a set of utter rascals, sir!"

"Beastly rotters, sir!" said Wootton major.

"Unspeakable skunks, sir!" said Jack Wootton.

"Zat is so, sir—zey was dirty rascals, sir."

The German master gritted his teeth. He could not very

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well resent openly that complimentary description of his friends and confederates.

"Is tat so?" he gasped.

"Yes, sir."

"And how did you escape, mein poys?"

"Oh, we dished and diddled them, sir!" said Gordon Gay cheerfully. "Of course, they weren't up to our form."

"Ach!"

"If we'd had a dozen of our chaps there we'd have captured the giddy steamer, and brought them all home prisoners, sir," said Wootton major.

"Yes, razzler!"

"What-ho!"

The German master's eyes gleamed.

"I tink tat we go on mit te lesson," he said. "I congratulate you upon tat good fortune, Gay. You are a very fortunate poy."

"Yes, sir."

And the German lesson was taken.

But Herr Hentzel was very much abstracted during the lesson, and frequently he cast uneasy glances at the Cornstalk Co.

The German master knew perfectly well that the kidnappers on the steamer must have revealed to Gordon Gay what they had captured him for—to recover the papers taken from the German master's tent.

And he wondered why the juniors had not said so, and accused him of being a party to the kidnapping.

He left the tent immediately the lesson was over, with a clouded brow.

Anxieties were thickening round Otto Hentzel. His papers—the maps and photographs which he and Franz Pfalz had gathered with so much care, ready to be transmitted to the German War Office—had been taken, and he could not recover them. Every day that elapsed rendered his position more precarious. For, once those papers were in the hands of the authorities in London, his spy work would be known, and his arrest would follow. More than once he had thought of flight; but while a chance remained of recovering the papers he dared not fly. For he knew what would be his reception in Berlin if he went there empty-handed and unsuccessful. For a man who failed the German Spy Bureau had no use!

And Herr Hentzel still hoped that the papers had not been taken out of the camp. He and his confederates had watched so carefully that he was persuaded that the missing papers were still concealed about the camp—indeed, he was not sure that the person who had purloined them knew the full value and significance of them. If he recovered them his work as a spy would be well rewarded, and could continue; if they were lodged in the British War Office he was a ruined man!

No wonder the wrinkles were deepening in the brow of the German master of Rylcombe Grammar School.

Gordon Gay looked thoughtful as the Fourth Form came out after last lesson.

"We've got to keep an eye on Hentzel," he remarked to his chums. "He's failed this time; but he may not fail next."

Mont Blong grinned.

"Perhaps it is zat zere vill be no next time," he remarked.

"He won't give up looking for the papers, Mont Blong."

"It is zat ze papers are out of his reach now, n'est-ce-pas?"

"How so?"

Mont Blong's voice sank to a whisper.

"Ze Shermans vatch ze camp so zat I not able to send zem away," he murmured. "And if it is zat zere is a packet sent by post, I know vell zat somehow zat scoundrel vill find ze means of taking it."

"Then you couldn't have sent it?"

"I have not sent it—but it is gone."

Gordon Gay looked puzzled.

"Blessed if I understand," he said. "If you haven't sent the packet away, how can it have gone?"

The French junior chuckled.

"It is zat I am deep," he said. "I bury him in ze sand—you understand?"

"Yes?"

"Zen I send a lettair to a friend."

"Yes?"

"And zat friend he come in ze night and dig up ze packet and take it away viz him."

"Oh!" said Gordon Gay.

"Since zat ve have been kidnap, I look in ze place, and it is gone," said Mont Blong cheerfully. "And I have receive a letter zat it is all right to-day."

Gordon Gay drew a deep breath.

"Then the papers are—"

"Zey are at ze War Office in London."

"My hat!"

"Then Herr Hentzel—"

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 240.

"I zink zat he may be arrest at any minute," said Mont Blong. "But ve not say a vord. It vill be all right."

"By Jove!"

Gordon Gay caught sight of the German-master as the juniors sauntered upon the beach. Herr Hentzel's brow was deeply contracted; he was walking along slowly, buried in thought. Gordon Gay felt that the man had some idea of his danger, though certainly he did not know how near it was. Herr Hentzel still believed, or at least hoped, that the papers were in the school camp.

And already the hand of justice was stretched out to seize him.

Chucked Out.

"Blong!"

Gordon Gay & Co. were making tea in their tent, when Carker of the Fourth looked in. The juniors were enjoying tea in the tent, as much as tea in the old study at the Grammar School at Rylcombe.

Mont Blong looked round.

"It is zat you address me, Carkair?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Vat is it zat you vant?"

"I don't want anything," grunted the bully of the Fourth. "But Herr Hentzel says you're to take him your lines."

Mont Blong looked puzzled.

"I have no lines," he said. "I have not had ze lines given to me."

Carker shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, that's his message," he said. "You can buzz off, and I'll have that camp-stool."

"Zat is my seat."

"Well, I'm going to have it," said Carker, with a glare of defiance round the tent. "I'm ready for tea."

"I zink—"

"Never mind what you zink," said Carker. "Are you going to old Hentzel?"

"I zink zat zat is a shape."

"A what?" demanded Carker.

"Vat you call a shape."

"Oh, a jape!" growled Carker. "Blessed if I can understand your lingo. Look here, it's not a jape, and you're going to Hentzel, and I'm going to have that camp-stool. I see you've got sardines for tea. I like sardines."

"I zink I sit here."

"Rats!"

Carker jerked the camp-stool from under the French junior, and Mont Blong sprawled upon the ground with a loud yell.

"Ah, mon Dieu!"

"Now, buzz off!" said Carker.

"Ciel!"

Mont Blong jumped up and rushed at his old enemy.

In a moment they had closed, and were struggling in the confined space of the tent.

There was a roar from the Cornstalk Co. The tents in the canvas school were not planned for rough-and-tumble encounters inside them.

"Look out!" roared Gordon Gay.

"Chuck it!"

"My dear Carker!" said Tadpole mildly. "You really have no right—"

Crash!

Mont Blong had succeeded in throwing his burly antagonist. Unfortunately he threw him fairly into the midst of the preparations for tea. There was a crash of crockery, and a crash of Carker.

"Yarook!"

"Mon Dieu!"

"You asses!"

"You fatheads!"

"Gerrouit!"

Mont Blong disengaged himself from Carker and jumped up, gasping.

"Helas! It is zat I am sorry, my shums! But it is all ze fault of zat Carkair."

Carker sat up amid the ruins of the tea-things. There were cakes and tarts and sardines strewn around him like the leaves in Vallombrosa.

"Ow!" he gasped. "Yow!"

"You rotter!" roared Gordon Gay wrathfully. "What do you mean by mucking up our feed like this?"

"Groo! Blow your feed!"

"You—you—you—"

"Well, he's mucked up the feed, so he may as well have what's left!" exclaimed Wootton major, seizing a squashed jam-tart and dabbing it in Carker's face.

"Groo!" gasped Carker. "Oh!"

"Give him the rest!"

"And the sardines!"

"And the jam!"
 "Yaroo!" roared Carker, as he was pelted from all sides.
 "Yow! Stoppit! Geroff! Lemme gerrup! Yowp!"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 Carker staggered to his feet. He was jammy and sticky all over, and jam clung in festoons to his hair. Sardines were dripping down his back. He rubbed the jam out of his eyes, and made a furious rush at Wootton major.

Three strong pairs of hands seized him, and he was whirled off his feet, and hurled forth from the tent.

He went flying out, and landed upon the sand, and sprawled there, followed by a yell of laughter from the Cornstalk Co.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Groo!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Carker jumped up in a fury and charged back into the tent. He stumbled over the broken tea-things, and reeled, and before he could recover himself the Cornstalks seized him again, and he was swung into the air and hurled forth.

But this time he did not fall upon the sand. A burly figure darkened the opening of the tent as he went whirling out, and the juniors—too late—saw Otto Hentzel.

"My hat!" gasped Gordon Gay.

Bump!

Herr Hentzel went over backwards, and Carker rolled over him, smearing him with jam and sardine oil.

"Ach!"

"Oh, dear!"

"Mein Gott!"

"My hat!"

"Hurrah!" roared Gordon Gay & Co.

They could not help it. If it had been the Head himself who had been bowled over by Carker they could not have helped it.

Herr Hentzel staggered to his feet.

He grasped the gasping Carker by the collar with the left hand, and spanked him with the right with tremendous spansks.

Whack, whack, whack!

"Yowp, ow, yowp!"

Carker tore himself loose, yelling, and fled. The German-master gasped.

"Dere!" he panted. "Tat vill teach you! And you poyss—"

"Sorry, sir!" said Gordon Gay demurely. "We didn't see you coming, sir, when we chucked Carker out."

"You take five hundred lines!" roared Herr Hentzel.

"Eh?"

"Five hundred lines!"

"Oh, sir!"

"You jolly well won't stay out of prison long enough to ask for them, anyway," murmured Jack Wootton, under his breath.

"Vat you say, Wootton?"

"I, sir!"

"Ja, ja—you! You say something mit yourself!"

"It's a pleasant evening, sir, for the time of year," said Wootton minor blandly.

"Take five hundred lines, too."

"Thank you, sir."

"Blanc! Is tat French poy here?"

"Oui, oui, ma voiei," said Mont Blong politely.

"I send Carker to fetch you."

"Oui, oui."

"You have not come?"

"I zink zat it is a shape, sir."

"Come mit me at vunce. I cane you tat you have not come ven I send for you."

Mont Blong made a grimace to his chums.

"Very well, sir; I come viz you," he said.

The German master strode away, and Mont Blong followed him to his tent.

The Trap!

Gustave Blanc eyed the German master warily as he stood before him in his tent. The French junior did not know what Herr Hentzel wanted, but he was on the look-out for trouble. Herr Hentzel sat down, with his back to the light, looking at the French junior with his little, keen, light-blue eyes.

"You have not done dose lines, Blanc!" he said.

"It is not zat I have ze lines, monsieur," said Mont Blong very respectfully.

"I giff you feefy lines."

"No, sir; I do not remember zat."

"Perhaps I forget," said the German master. "Ach, it is notting. But it is all right if you do me vun little favoue."

"Yes, sir?"

"I vant you to go into Notherby, to take a message for me."

"Certainly, sir."

"Do you know to photograph shop of Herr Franz Pfalz?"

"Oui, oui."

"You will take tis note dere," said the German master, drawing a sealed envelope from his pocket. "Vait for an answer. Mr. Pfalz vill give you a packet of negatives tat he has developed for me."

Mont Blong's eyes gleamed for a moment.

"Oui, monsieur."

"Take care of dem negatives; dey are ferry valuable."

"Oh, monsieur, certainly!"

"Go at vunce, and hurry pack."

"I will run, monsieur."

Mont Blong took the envelope, and turned to leave the tent. The German master rose.

"Vun moment!" he said. "I will come te part of te vay mit you, mein poy."

"Thank you, sir."

The German master came out of the tent. The dusk was falling on the school camp by the sea. Crowds of fellows were coming in from the seashore and the headland. The German master walked with Mont Blong to the sands outside the school camp, and then stopped. Mont Blong had been looking for an opportunity to speak to his chums before leaving the camp, but under the circumstances he had had no chance. Perhaps that was Herr Hentzel's object.

"Go now," said the German master; "and take care of dem negatives."

"Yes, sir."

The German master stood watching Mont Blong for some moments as the slim figure of the French junior hurried on towards the village of Netherby.

Not till Mont Blong was out of sight in the direction of the village did Herr Hentzel turn back to the camp.

He stopped and chatted with Delamere of the Sixth.

"I have given Blanc leave to stay out of te camp till eight o'clock, Delamere," he said. "He vant to do some pizness in Netherby."

"Very well, sir," said the captain of the school.

"So you know, if he miss call-over."

"Yes, Herr Hentzel."

And the German master, after a remark about the weather, strolled on into the camp. There was a very unpleasant gleam in his eyes.

"I tink tat is all right at last," he murmured. "I tink tat tat young spy vant ferry much to see dem negatives. Ha, ha, ha!"

And Herr Hentzel, in high good-humour, returned to his tent.

(Another long instalment of this exciting school serial story in next Thursday's issue of "The Gem" Library. Price one penny.)

A NEW FREE CORRESPONDENCE EXCHANGE.

The only names and addresses which can be printed in these columns will be from those readers living in any of our Colonies who desire Correspondents in Great Britain and Ireland.

Colonists sending in their names and addresses for insertion in the columns of this popular story-book must state what kind of correspondent is required—boy or girl, English, Scotch, Welsh, or Irish.

Would-be correspondents must send with each notice two coupons. One taken from "The Gem," and one from the same week's issue of its companion paper, "The Magnet" Library. Coupons will always be found on page 2 of both papers, and requests for correspondents not containing these two coupons will be absolutely disregarded.

Readers wishing to reply to advertisements appearing in this column must write to the advertisers direct. No correspondence with advertisers can be undertaken through the medium of this office.

All advertisements for insertion in this Free Exchange should be addressed: "The Editor, 'The Gem' Library, 23, Bouverie Street, London, E.C., England."

Owing to want of space this week's list of names and addresses have been unavoidably held over.

The Editor specially requests Colonial Readers to kindly bring the Free Correspondence Exchange to the notice of their friends.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 240.

NEXT
THURSDAY:

"THE SENTENCE OF THE HOUSE!"

A Splendid, New, Long, Complete School Tale of the Chums of St. Jim's. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

OUR SPECIAL WEEKLY FEATURE



For Next Thursday.

"THE SENTENCE OF THE HOUSE!"

By Martin Clifford.

Next week's splendid, long, complete tale of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's, under the above title, deals chiefly with the doings of a new boy at the school—doings which cause that youth to be sent to Coventry by his schoolfellows.

Cousin Ethel makes a welcome reappearance in this splendid story, and, consequently, as my readers will guess, a leading part is also played by a certain lanky New House junior—to wit, George Figgins! My readers may rely upon thoroughly enjoying this grand story, and I think that after reading it they will agree that

"THE SENTENCE OF THE HOUSE!"

if severe, is thoroughly well deserved.

Some Points of the New Free Correspondence Exchange**Explained.**

Some few of my readers seem to be a little bit hazy upon certain points connected with the new Free Correspondence Exchange, so that I am taking this opportunity of clearing up all doubts upon these points. In the first place, it is a strict rule of the Exchange that only requests for correspondents sent in by

Colonial Readers

can be inserted therein. Readers of the "Gem" and "Magnet" Libraries living in any of our Colonies are invited to send in their requests, which, provided they are accompanied by the two coupons taken from the current issues of the "Gem" and "Magnet" Libraries, will be published free of charge in the Exchange column on page 27 of the "Gem."

Requests for correspondents sent in by readers living in the British Isles cannot be published in the Exchange. Such would-be correspondents should pick out the most suitable advertisements from Colonial readers published in the Exchange, and in all cases,

Write to the Advertisers Direct.

It is no use my readers simply writing to me to say that they wish to correspond with so-and-so, of Canada, or New Zealand, or South Africa, who is advertising in the Exchange for a correspondent. The name and address of the advertiser is published with every request printed in the Exchange, and all that it is necessary for the reader who wishes to reply to any such advertisement to do, is to write to the advertiser direct.

It is impossible, naturally, for me to conduct from this office any correspondence with advertisers in the Exchange on behalf of my readers. To take advantage of the Exchange, readers have only to write to any of the names and addresses of Colonial readers published therein.

In writing to advertisers, my readers must, of course, be sure to explain that they are doing so in answer to the advertisements

Published in the "Gem" Library.

No further explanation or introduction will be necessary. The Colonial readers advertise because they want a chum living at home in the Motherland to write to, and they will be only too delighted to get my English, Scottish, Irish, or Welsh readers' letters.

That Week-end Gap.—Great News For My Readers.

The ways in which my staunch reader friends contrive to help me are many and various, and mightily do I appreciate the loyal support I receive. Below, one of my chums, a Lancashire doctor's son, relates his latest plan to increase the already vast army of Magnetites.

"Dear Mr. Editor,—I feel I must write and tell you a few things I think about 'The Gem' and 'The Magnet.' They are just ripping! I have read many school tales, but none that are up to them. My father is a doctor, and in future when I have read 'The Gem,' I intend to put them in the surgery for the people to read while they are waiting; by this means I hope to gain many readers for both papers. When is Alonzo coming back to Greyfriars? We all miss the Duffer. There is only one thing I complain of about 'The Gem,' and 'Magnet,' and that is—there is such a long time to wait in between the coming out."

My reader, who signs himself "A Loyal Lancashire Reader" (D. R.), goes on to make a suggestion, which I have unfortunately not space to publish in full. Briefly, however, he asks me to publish another paper, to come out on Friday or Saturday, so as to lessen the interval of waiting between Thursday's "Gem" and Tuesday's "Magnet."

Well, D. R., this request of yours is practically identical in substance with those which I have been receiving day after day, week after week, literally by the thousand during the last year or so. The conviction has gradually been forced upon me that what nine out of ten Gemites want is *more Tom Merry stories!* I have gradually come to the conclusion, from the way my readers continually harp on the subject, that there is room for a third companion paper to the world-famous "Gem" and "Magnet" Libraries, which would fill the gap between Thursday and Tuesday, and would be welcomed by thousands of lovers of really good, clean, and wholesome reading matter. Containing a complete tale of Tom Merry & Co., in addition to stories introducing some of the other most popular characters in the world of fiction, such a paper would provide a feast of first-class reading for the week-end, and must therefore appeal to the vast majority of my chums. This is my firm belief, at any rate, and I am determined to back it up, with the help and support of my thousands of loyal chums.

This idea has been in my mind for a long time now, and is now on the eve of fruition, so that my chums may look out for a definite and

MOMENTOUS ANNOUNCEMENT NEXT THURSDAY!

Replies in Brief.

"An Old Reader" (Aberdeen).—Yes. Frank Kingston's first and right name was Philip Graydon.

R. Brown (S.E.).—Thank you for your long and interesting letter, and for the many suggestions you put forward, which I will make a note of. With regard to your query, there were seven complete stories contained in the series you spoke of.

A. E. M. (London).—The latest figures given for the population of London and New York are: Greater London, 7,252,963, and New York, 4,770,000.

Will a Colonial reader kindly write to J. Lewis Astill, 35, Stonehall Road, Ecclestone, Bradford, England, stating the pay received by a butcher's apprentice?

F. L. (Bedford).—You can find out the exact cost of making a copygraph by going to a chemist, and asking him the prices of the necessary ingredients, which vary slightly.

C. Russell (Westcliff-on-Sea).—Thanks for your letter and suggestion.

F. G. A. P. (Clapham).—Thank you, also, for your letter and suggestion, which I will consider.

R. Fielder (Chichester).—Thanks for your letter. You should use Russian tallow for your football, and linseed oil for your cricket bat.

S. G. B. (Ealing).—Thanks for your postcard. The answers to your questions are: 1.—"The Silent Three" (No. 153), is the only one that is still obtainable. 2.—There are something like 200 boys in the School House, and something less than half that number in the New House.

THE EDITOR.

Below is reproduced the cover of this week's issue of our companion paper, "The Magnet" Library, which contains a magnificent, long, complete school tale of the Chums of Greyfriars, entitled "The Tuckshop Raiders!" by Frank Richards, and a grand instalment of Sidney Drew's thrilling adventure serial, "Twice Round the Globe." Buy "The Magnet" Library. Now on Sale. Price One Penny.

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The Complete Story-Book for All.

Vol. 6.



Vernon-Smith opened a large cricket-bag he had brought with him, and the raiders began to pack Mrs. Mimble's good things into it. Bags of tarts and puffs, jars of jam and marmalade, bottles of jelly and preserved fruits were rapidly packed. In spite of their caution, the raiders made some noise; but there was no alarm, and the bag was soon packed to overflowing. "I say, we sha'n't get that away very easily," muttered Stott. (See the Splendid Tale of School Life in this Issue.)

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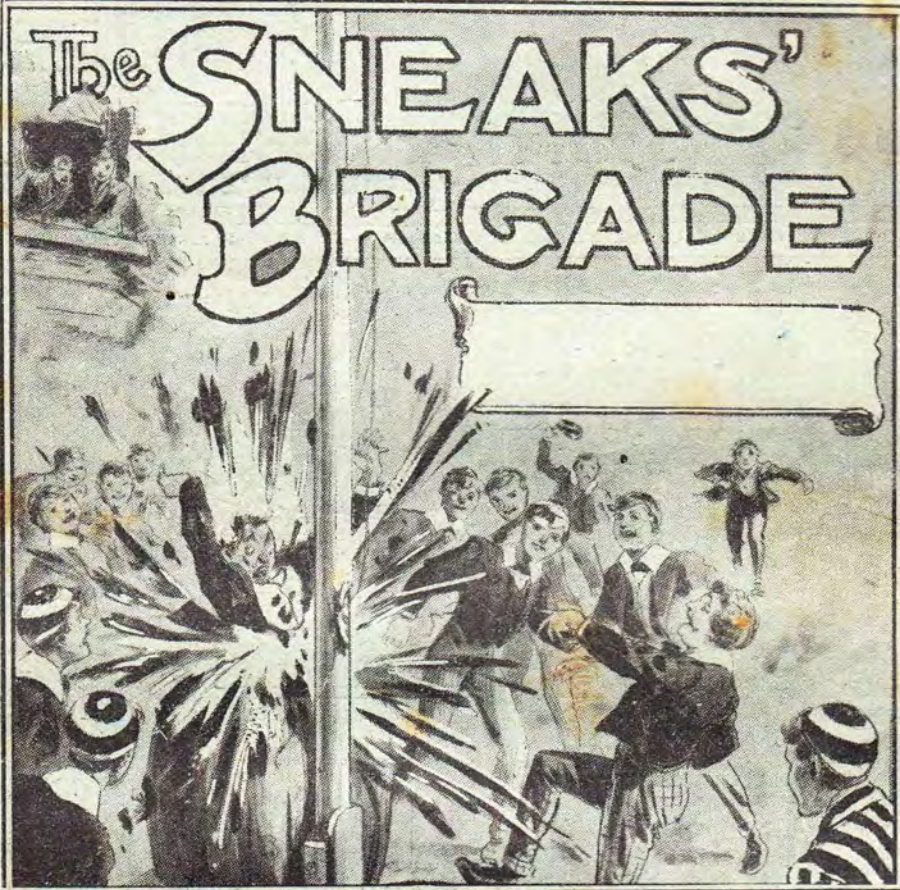
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