

'THE FIGHTING PREFECT!'

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No.
345.

Vol.
8.



"HOLD OUT YOUR HAND!" Mr. Ratcliff gazed, as if mesmerised, at the swishing cane, as Mr. Stoker advanced upon him. "If you do not hold out your hand, Ratcliff, I shall thrash you most severely!" said Stoker in quite Mr. Ratcliff's own tone when addressing a recalcitrant junior. (An amazing incident in the magnificent school tale in this issue.)

THIS WEEK'S CHAT.

The Editor's Personal Column.

For Next Wednesday—

"THE SECRET COMMITTEE!"

By Martin Clifford.

In our next splendid long, complete story, entitled as above, and dealing with the adventures of the chums of St. Jim's, Tom Merry & Co. come in for a very warm time, owing to certain changes that have come about at the old school. The stars of Knox, Levison, and Mellish, and all bullies and sneaks, seem to be in the ascendant.

The smarting juniors, therefore, form their own plans for dealing with the situation, and some very lively times indeed follow the formation of

"THE SECRET COMMITTEE!"

OUR SPECIAL WAR PICTURES.

During the progress of the great European War, on which all our thoughts are centred in these times, a number of thrilling and accurately-drawn pictures, executed by our special artists, will appear in "The Gem" Library and its companion papers. There is nothing so effective as a really good picture to stir the imagination and to help the understanding to realise what modern warfare really is like, terrible, relentless, cruel, yet bringing out all the noblest qualities of the human race. The spirit of devotion, of valour, of self-sacrifice, and of fortitude is called forth by war in every citizen, high-born or lowly, in the land.

* And from well-drawn pictures, illustrating incidents where these noble qualities are brought into play, as well as from illustrations of deeds of heroism on the battlefield, valuable lessons may be learnt. At the present time, when many hopelessly inaccurate and wildly-exaggerated pictures are being offered to the public as "special war drawings," your Editor

is confident that our carefully-drawn and accurate illustrations will meet with general appreciation.

REPLIES IN BRIEF.

Will Master Douglas Jones, late of France, communicate with his former chum, Cyril Brown, 3, School Terrace, Parton, near Whitehaven?

B. Carter (Western Australia).—Many thanks for your letter and appreciative remarks concerning this paper and "The Magnet" Library. Your notice will appear in the Exchange in its turn.

HEROES OF THE LIFEBOAT.

The usual quietude of Runswick, a small fishing-village to the north of Whitby, was roused to a great deed in the early hours of March 8th, 1905. The ss. Aynthia, of London, was desecrated stranded on the rocks, locally known as the North Steel. She lay there like a mortally wounded, but living thing, making signals of distress. Splendidly the villagers responded. Away went the lifeboat like a gallant hound released from the leash.

The rough sea, the close proximity of rocks, with their sharp, steel-like teeth ready to rend anything that touched them, the danger of being thrown violently on top of the steamer, combined to make the enterprise deadly in its risks. But the tough Yorkshiremen never faltered. They realised their dangers, and coolly pitted their seamanship against them all.

Twenty men were taken off, and with this load the boat fought her way to the shore. Suddenly a heavy sea struck the lifeboat, and she broached to, being completely buried for the moment. Oars were smashed, men hurled right and left, a number lay broken and bleeding, but the remainder fought the fight, and all were landed in safety.

Undaunted, they set out again to rescue the remainder; another desperate struggle and another magnificent victory. The number saved was thirty-six, including the captain's wife. A gallant deed. May the memory of it live for ever!

Brave deeds like these emphasise the brotherhood of the race, and do more for peace than the cheap utterances of our politicians. And this is the race that mans our Navy, and will give a good account of themselves in England's dark hour, which sooner or later is bound to come.

THE EDITOR.

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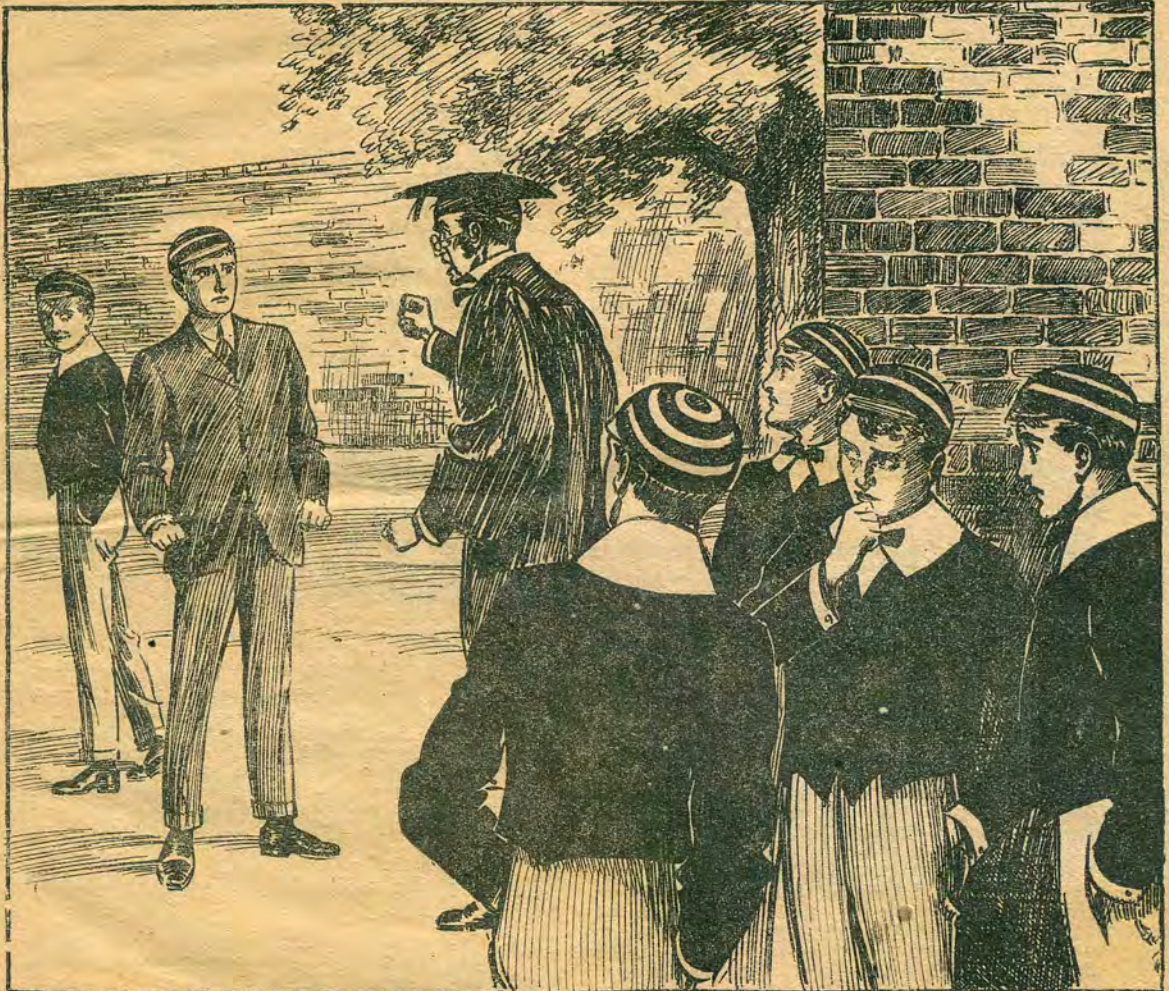


COMPLETE STORIES
FOR ALL, AND EVERY
STORY A GEM!

THE FIGHTING PREFECT!

A Grand Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's.

By **MARTIN CLIFFORD.**



Mr. Rateliff made one stride after Monty Lowther, and Darrel made a stride, too, and planted himself directly in the Form-master's path. "Darrel!" snapped Mr. Rateliff. "Stand aside!" "Excuse me, sir," said Darrel calmly. "The juniors of my House are under my authority, not yours. I refuse to stand aside!" (See Chapter 1.)

CHAPTER 1.

Mr. Rateliff is Very Ratty.

"H!"
"Ow!"
"Wow!"

Those seemingly unintelligible, but extremely expressive remarks were made by Figgins & Co.—Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn of the New House at St. Jim's.

Figgins & Co. were under the elms in the old quadrangle; and while they made those expressive remarks, they were squeezing their hands under their arms, and apparently trying to fold themselves up like pocket-knives.

Three juniors who came out of the School House paused to regard them with sympathy and surprise.

Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther, as leaders of the School House juniors, were commonly on terms of deadly warfare with Figgins & Co., their rivals of the New House.

But just now they were all sympathy. Figgins and Kerr and Wynn had evidently been "through" it. Figgins, who could generally take a licking with equanimity, was wriggling with pain. Kerr, the Scottish junior, was as hard as nails; but this time he was suffering severely. As for Fatty Wynn, his plump face was quite pale with anguish.

"Hallo!" said Tom Merry. "Been catching it?"

"Ow!" said Figgins.

Next Wednesday:

"THE SECRET COMMITTEE!" AND "A BID FOR A THRONE!"

No. 345. (New Series), Vol. 8.

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"Ow—yow!" said Kerr.
 "Groooh!" groaned Fatty Wynn.
 "Seems to be a severe case," remarked Monty Lowther.
 "Who has been and gone and done this, my unfortunate infants?"

"Ratty!" grunted Figgins. "The beast! All for nothing, too! Ow! Ow!"

Monty Lowther nodded sympathetically.

"We're always catching it for nothing," he agreed.
 "There never were such nice, innocent kids as we are. Yet we're always catching it, and always for nothing. Nothing at all. It's a hard world for really nice boys."

"Oh, don't be funny!" growled Figgins. "It was really for nothing this time. Ratty has been in a frightful temper ever since brekker."

"Something's gone wrong," groaned Kerr, "and he's taking it out of us! He's taking it out of the Fifth, too!"

"Somebody rung him up on the telephone this morning," mumbled Fatty Wynn. "He came out of his study in a ramping temper. He cuffed Reddy in the passage for nothing at all. He gave Lawrence a hundred lines—all for nothing."

"And now he's picked on us," said Figgins. "We hadn't done anything—hadn't said a word. He was rung up a second time on the 'phone, and we happened to be in the passage when he came out of the study. That's all. We didn't even look at the beast; but he said we were making a noise, and caned us."

"We might have been making a bit of a row," admitted Kerr reflectively. "You can't play leap-frog in a passage without a slight noise. But he gave us four each—four corks."

"And he's been ragging the Fifth all the morning," said Figgins. "I saw Cutts looking like a regular demon when he came out of the Form-room. I know what I'm going to do when I grow up. I'm going to come back here when I'm a man and give Ratty the kicking of his life."

"Same here!" said Kerr. "I wonder no old boy has done it! There must be lots who owe Ratty a grudge."

"Let him wait till I'm a man!" said Fatty Wynn ferociously. "I'm coming back then, and I'll simply jump on him!"

"My hat, that will crush him, and no mistake!" said Monty Lowther. "If he gets your weight dropped on him, Fatty, it will be all U P with Ratty! But what is the matter with him?"

"Blessed if I know. Only somebody was ringing him up on the 'phone. Somebody bothering him, perhaps," said Figgins. "But 'tain't our fault, is it?"

"There's Cutts," murmured Manners. "Look at his face!"

Cutts of the Fifth strode by, and the Terrible Three glanced at him. Cutts' face was pale, and his teeth were hard set, and his eyes gleamed under his contracted brows. The dandy of the Fifth was evidently in a furious temper, which he found hard to control.

Tom Merry whistled softly. Mr. Ratcliff, the Housemaster of the New House at St. Jim's, was also Form-master of the Fifth Form. As senior boys, the Fifth Form could not be caned; but when Mr. Ratcliff was in a bad temper—as was frequently the case—he could make his tongue quite as stinging as a cane. Cutts and the rest of the Fifth had been through an extremely unpleasant time that morning.

"Here comes Ratty!" murmured Kerr viciously.

The tall, angular form of the New House master came out of the New House, and strode towards the gates. He had to pass very near to the spot where the juniors were standing. He glanced grimly at Figgins & Co. as he came up.

The three juniors avoided his glance. They did not want any more. But Tom Merry & Co., being School House boys, were not under the jurisdiction of Mr. Ratcliff, so they treated the Housemaster to a steady stare as he approached. They would very willingly have collared Horace Ratcliff and bumped him in the quadrangle, but that was, of course, out of the question.

Mr. Ratcliff was plainly in an extremely bad temper. He was a very severe and sharp-tempered master at the best of times. Now he was at one of the worst of times. His thin lips were tightly set, his brow was dark, and his eyes glinted with a greenish light. What had happened to disturb him so, the juniors could not guess; but whatever it was, it had painful results for the boys in his Form and in his House.

Apparently, the cool and independent manner of the Terrible Three had an irritating effect upon Mr. Ratcliff, for he flushed and paused, and fixed a bitter look upon the three Shell fellows. They raised their caps in a perfunctory way. They were bound to "cap" a Housemaster, but they put as little respect as possible into the salute.

"What are you doing here?" said Mr. Ratcliff harshly. "The less you three boys have to do with the boys of my House the better I shall be pleased."

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"Yes, sir," said Lowther demurely. "Of course, we want to please you, sir. You are always so kind."

"Don't be impertinent, Lowther!"

"Impertinent, sir! To you, sir!" said Lowther, looking greatly astonished. "Of course not, sir. I'd rather be impertinent to my own grandfather, sir."

Mr. Ratcliff frowned. Monty Lowther's words were certainly not impertinent, but he contrived to utter them in a manner that was very impertinent indeed. But Lowther's view was that if Mr. Ratcliff was looking for trouble, there was no reason why he shouldn't find some.

"Your remarks are impertinent, Lowther! If you belonged to my House, I should cane you!"

"Yes, sir. Rather lucky for me I don't belong to your House, sir, ain't it?" said Lowther cheerfully.

"Mr. Railton may approve of this insolence!" said Mr. Ratcliff bitterly. He disliked the Housemaster of the School House as much as he disliked the Terrible Three. It was decidedly not good form for a master to utter detracting remarks concerning another in the presence of the boys; but Horace Ratcliff did not observe that wholesome rule. "You three boys are a very good specimen of the results of Mr. Railton's system. I should deal with you very differently."

"Thank you, sir. We are quite satisfied with Mr. Railton, sir," said Tom Merry, entering into Lowther's little scheme of pulling the Housemaster's leg. "We don't want to change, sir, thanking you all the same."

"I don't think," said Manners seriously, "that Mr. Railton would like us discussing his methods with Mr. Ratcliff. He might think it sheer cheek."

"He might!" agreed Lowther.

And the Terrible Three nodded their heads solemnly. Mr. Ratcliff understood their meaning very clearly—that it was "sheer cheek" on his part to make remarks about Mr. Railton.

"You insolent young rascals!" said the Housemaster, between his teeth. "Although you do not belong to my House, I shall take it upon myself to punish your impertinence. Hand me that cane, Lowther!"

Monty Lowther had a light walking-cane under his arm. He did not move. Mr. Ratcliff repeated his command, and held out his hand for the cane. Lowther hesitated, and then passed him the cane. Although he was really only under the orders of his own Housemaster, he could not very well refuse directly to obey Mr. Ratcliff. Also, he had an idea that the angry master was about to put his foot in it, and he was not unwilling to help him do so.

"Now hold out your hand, Lowther!" said Mr. Ratcliff, as he grasped the walking-cane.

"My hand, sir?"

"Yes, at once."

"What for, sir?"

"I am going to cane you."

Monty Lowther deliberately put his hands behind him. Mr. Ratcliff was so outrageously overstepping the limits of his authority now that Lowther knew he was quite within his rights in refusing to obey. And it was extremely pleasing to him to take down the overbearing man a peg or two in the presence of the suffering Figgins & Co. Figgins and Kerr and Wynn were beginning to enjoy the scene.

"Do you hear me, Lowther?" said Mr. Ratcliff, in a grinding voice.

"I hear you, sir."

"Will you obey me?"

"No, sir."

"Wha-a-at!"

"My Housemaster would not approve of your caning me, sir," said Lowther, with the utmost calmness. "I am willing to be taken to him, if you choose, sir."

Mr. Ratcliff turned almost purple with rage.

"If you do not hold out your hand at once, Lowther, I shall thrash you severely!" he exclaimed, making a step towards the Shell fellow.

"Sorry, sir, but it can't be done."

Mr. Ratcliff said no more, but made a jump towards the junior, with the cane upraised in the air.

Lowther backed away.

A big Sixth-former of the School House, who was passing under the elms, had paused to look on at the scene, with a frown upon his face. It was Darrel the prefect. Lowther had seen him, and now he called to him.

"Darrel! I say, Darrel!"

Darrel came striding up.

"I appeal to my prefect, sir," said Monty Lowther sweetly. "If Darrel says I'm to be caned, I'll be caned."

"Really, sir—" began Darrel, quietly, but with a gleam in his eyes. Darrel, as a School House prefect, naturally resented Mr. Ratcliff's assumption of authority over the juniors of his House.

"Don't interfere here, Darrel! I shall not allow it," exclaimed Mr. Ratcliff passionately.

"Excuse me, sir, I am bound to interfere," said Darrel. "If you have any complaint to make against Lowther, Mr. Ratliff is the proper person to take it to. You have no right to touch a boy belonging to the School House, sir."

"Hold your tongue!" rapped out the angry Housemaster.

Darrel's eyes glinted.

"Lowther!" he said.

"Yes, Darrel," said Monty Lowther, with sweet sweetness.

"Go to your House at once!"

"Very well, Darrel."

Lowther turned to walk away, closing one eye at Figgins & Co. as he did so. Mr. Ratliff made a stride after him—and Darrel made a stride, too, and planted himself directly in the Housemaster's path.

Mr. Ratliff had to stop—he could not go on without running into the big prefect. And Darrel evidently did not intend to give ground. There was a pause—the two looking at one another—Darrel cool and determined, and Mr. Ratliff in a flaming and most undignified rage.

CHAPTER 2.

The Housemaster's Predicament.

"DARREL! Stand aside!"

"Excuse me, sir! The juniors of my House are under my authority, not yours," said the prefect calmly.

"I order you to get aside!"

"So that you may cane Lowther?"

"Yes."

"Then I refuse, sir."

The Terrible Three were walking slowly away towards the School House. But they contrived to keep an eye on the scene behind them. Mr. Ratliff had "bitten off more than he could chew," as he sometimes did when he allowed his temper to outrun his discretion. Darrel of the Sixth stood like a rock in his path, without the slightest intention of giving way.

Figgins & Co. moved off too. They had an idea that Mr. Ratliff's fury would probably turn upon them, as soon as he found that he could not bully Darrel.

The angry Housemaster was left face to face with the School House prefect.

There was a long pause.

Mr. Ratliff looked for a moment as if he would use the cane upon Darrel himself, but a shred of common-sense remaining to him, prevented him from doing that. The Housemaster of the New House was nothing like a match for the big prefect, who was a champion athlete in his House, and one of the best boxers at St. Jim's. Mr. Ratliff could not possibly have removed Darrel by force, and such an encounter would be too terribly undignified, as Mr. Ratliff realised in spite of his fury.

In fact, there was nothing for Horace Ratliff to do but to retreat as gracefully as he could. He had overstepped his authority, and he had been brought up sharply. That was all there was about it. He could go no further.

His hand clenched with rage upon the cane, till his bony knuckles showed white.

"Darrel—This insolence!" he muttered.

"I don't mean to be insolent, sir," said Darrel. "But I cannot allow my proper authority to be taken out of my hands, even by a master. I am quite willing to refer the matter to the Head."

Mr. Ratliff bit his thin lips. That was the last thing in the world he would have wished.

The Head could certainly not have approved of his interference with School House boys. In fact, Dr. Holmes would have spoken to him very plainly, if the matter had been brought to his notice.

Already fellows were gathering round to look on at the strange scene. Cutts and Lefevre of the Fifth had sauntered up, and their smiles showed how they enjoyed the discomfiture of the master who had been ragging them in the class all the morning. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth Form paused under the elms, and screwed his famous monocle into his eye to gaze upon the scene. Blake and Herries and Digby came out of the tuck-shop, and lined up to look on. Mr. Ratliff felt that it would not do. He was beginning to look utterly ridiculous.

He gave Darrel a bitter look.

"Very well, Darrel, rather than make a scene, I will allow this matter to drop for the present," he said, in a low voice that trembled with rage. "I shall not, however, forget this insolence."

"As you please, sir!"

Mr. Ratliff flung Lowther's cane to the ground, and turned away, his gown rustling as he strode from the spot.

Darrel turned away quietly.

There was nothing like triumph in the prefect's handsome face. He had done what he believed to be his duty, and he was sorry there had been a scene that was calculated to lower a master in the eyes of his juniors. His look was very grave as he walked towards the School House.

But the juniors who had been looking on exchanged joyful smiles. Old Ratty had had a fall, that was how they looked at it, and they rejoiced accordingly. The discomfiture of the unpopular master was pleasing enough to them.

"Bai Jove!" remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Watty was lookin' awfully waxy, dear boys. I quite approve of old Darrel puttin' him in his place."

"What-ho!" chuckled Blake.

"Good old Darrel," said Herries. "Ratty was up against too big an order that time. But what is the matter with the beast? I've just seen young Jameson blubbing—Ratty has been going for him. He's been going for Figgins & Co—and I hear he's been going for all the Fifth in the Form-room this morning. What's happened, I wonder?"

"Something more serious than dyspepsia this time, I imagine," chuckled Blake. "Anyway, Ratty has been downed this time, and I vote that we celebrate the victory with ginger-beer."

"Hear, hear!"

And the juniors adjourned to the tuck-shop to drink Darrel's health and eternal confusion to Ratty and all his works in flowing ginger-pop.

Meanwhile, Mr. Ratliff had gone on his way to the porter's lodge. Taggles the porter looked at him curiously as he came in. The Housemaster's angry face showed how deeply he was disturbed, and Mr. Ratliff was not an adept at hiding his feelings.

"Taggles," said the New House master, "I—ahem!—"

"Yes, sir," said Taggles, wonderingly.

Mr. Ratliff cleared his throat.

"The fact is Taggles that a visitor will probably arrive in the course of the afternoon—a man—ahem!—who I do not wish to see."

"Yes, sir," said the school porter, with increasing surprise. He, too, had noticed Mr. Ratliff's extraordinary state of disturbance that morning, and he wondered whether the unwished-for visitor had anything to do with it.

"You will probably know the man by sight—it is quite possible," pursued Mr. Ratliff. "His name is Stoker."

"Stoker!" repeated Taggles, reflectively. "I've known that name afore, sir."

"He used to be at this school."

"Oh, I remember now—there was a young gentleman named Stoker in the New House, but that was a long time ago," said Taggles. "He must be quite an old boy by now, sir."

"Quite so. He was in my House ten years ago," said Mr. Ratliff. "A most unruly, disobedient, and worthless boy, whom I had occasion to correct many times."

Taggles coughed. He knew Mr. Ratliff's methods pretty well, and he knew that the Housemaster frequently "corrected" fellows most severely, without their being unruly, disobedient, or worthless.

"This person Stoker has telephoned me that he was coming here to-day," said Mr. Ratliff. "He has rung me up twice on the telephone to tell me so. It may be simply a piece of insolence, but it is possible that he may come, and if he does, you are not to admit him, Taggles."

"No, sir! Not admit an old boy!" said Taggles, in astonishment.

"Certainly not!"

"But—but s'pose he asks to see the 'Ead, sir?"

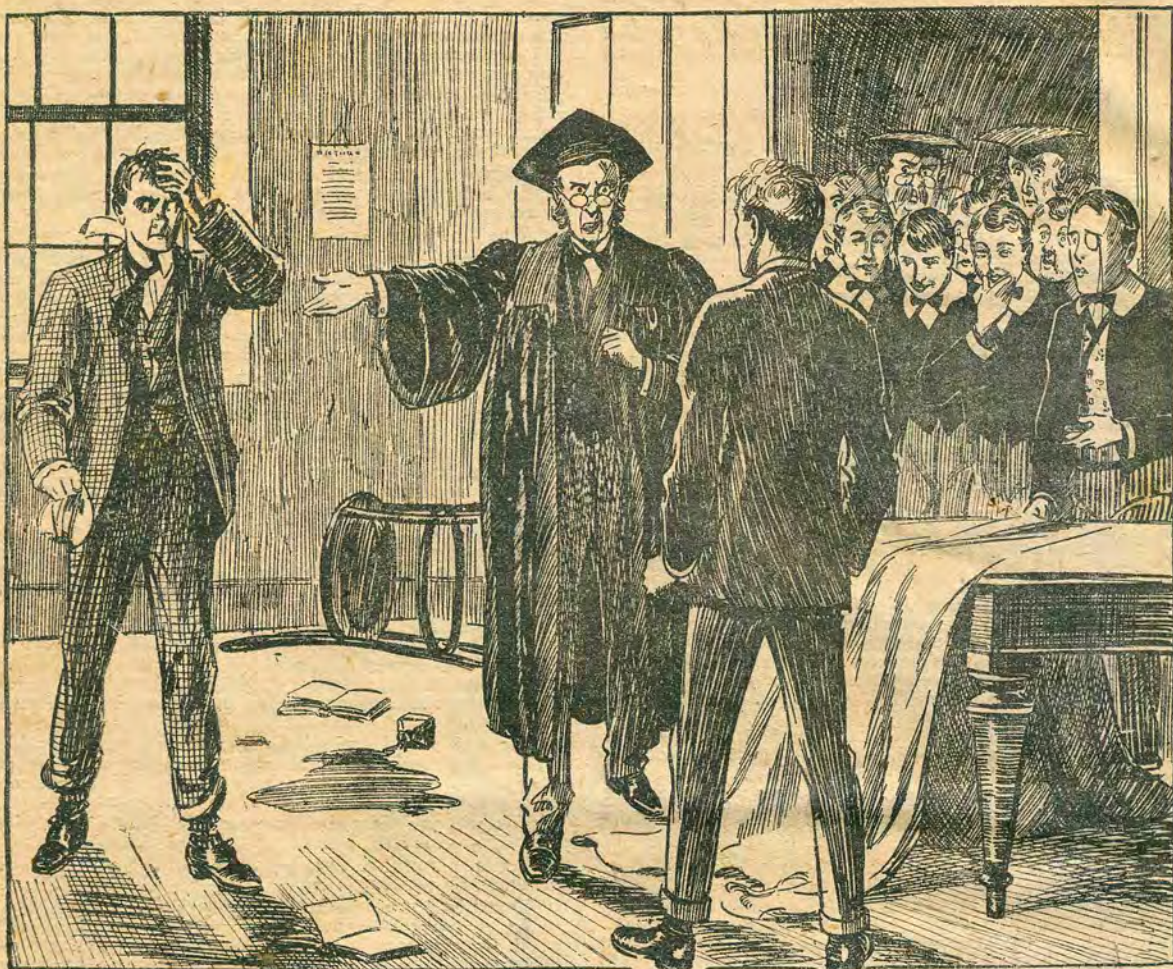
"He will ask to see me," said Mr. Ratliff. "The fact is—I may as well tell you, in order that you will know how to deal with the man—the fact is, this person appears to owe me a grudge for correction administered while he was a schoolboy here, and he intends to—ahem!—to make a scene."

Taggles passed his hand over his mouth to hide a grin. He began to understand. More than one fellow had left St. Jim's with the fixed determination of coming back, when he was grown up, and giving Horace Ratliff a terrific licking. Such intention, of course, faded away as the fellows grew older, and they forgot all about the old grudges of their schooldays.

But Stoker of the New House was evidently a person who had a long memory for injuries. It was ten years since he had shaken the dust of St. Jim's from his feet, and he still remembered his old grudge against his Housemaster.

Stoker would be about twenty-five or twenty-six now, Taggles reflected, and there was no doubt that he would be able to give the Housemaster the long-promised licking, if he could get at him.

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Mr. Ratcliff gave the juniors a withering glare. "You juniors go at once—go, I say! I will be obeyed! Darrel, detain that man here while I telephone for the police." Darrel looked at the House-master fixedly. "I will do nothing of the sort!" he replied; and the juniors gave a howl of delight. "Good old Darrel!" (See Chapter 9.)

"What are you laughing at, Taggles?" demanded Mr. Ratcliff savagely.

"Larling, sir! I wasn't larling!"

"Pray take this matter seriously."

"Suttlingly, sir!"

"I do not want a disgraceful scene in my House," said Mr. Ratcliff. "Kindly remember that this person, when he arrives, is not to be admitted."

"Werry well, sir."

Thompson of the Shell, a New House boy, came hurrying down to the lodge.

"If you please, sir—" he began.

"What do you want, Thompson?" snapped Mr. Ratcliff.

"The telephone-bell's ringing in your study, sir," said Thompson.

Mr. Ratcliff's brow became as black as a thundercloud. To Thompson's utter astonishment, he gave him a cuff that sent him staggering, and then strode away towards the New House.

Thompson put his hand to his ear and stared after him blankly.

"My heye!" murmured Taggles.

"Ow!" gasped Thompson of the Shell. "Yow! Wh-what's the matter with him, Taggles? What did he biff me for?"

Taggles grinned.

"Which you'd better ask him, Master Thompson," he replied.

"Oh, the beast!" muttered Thompson, rubbing his ear. "The utter beast! When I'm grown up I'll make him suffer for that!"

"Haw, haw, haw!"

"What are you cackling at, you old ass?" snorted Thompson.

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"Haw, haw, haw! That was jest vot Master Stoker said!" grinned Taggles. "I can 'ear 'im now, jest as if it was yesterday. The day he went he says to me, says he, 'I'm coming back in a few years' time, Taggles,' says he—'coming back to give Ratty a thundering good hiding!' says he."

"Who's Stoker?" asked Thompson.

"He was afore your time, Master Thompson. A werry independent young gent was Master Stoker of the Fifth," said Taggles. "He'll be quite a man now. Haw, haw, haw!"

Thompson looked at him breathlessly.

"You don't mean to say an old boy is coming back to whop Ratty, Taggles?" he exclaimed.

"Which I've got horders not to admit him!" said Taggles.

"But he's coming!"

Taggles nodded.

"Oh, my eye!" gasped Thompson, forgetting all about his smarting ear now. "Oh, my only Aunt Mary Jane! What larks!"

And Thompson rushed off breathlessly to spread the glorious news.

CHAPTER 3. Great Expectations.

"A, ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, gorgeous!"

"Ripping!"

"Top-hole!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry & Co. were in great spirits. Figgins & Co. were rejoicing. School House and New House juniors joined in happy anticipation.

Thompson of the Shell had imparted the information he had extracted from Taggles.

An old boy, who had suffered under Mr. Ratcliff's tyranny ten years before, was coming back to St. Jim's to "whop" the Housemaster!

It was simply glorious news!

The juniors were delighted. All their sympathies were with the old boy. If Mr. Ratcliff had treated him as he had treated Figgins & Co. and other fellows in the New House there was no doubt that he deserved a "whopping." The juniors hoped that Stoker of the Fifth was a good boxer. They would have given a term's pocket-money cheerfully to see Mr. Ratcliff soundly trounced.

"Bai Jovel!" grinned Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "As a wile, I should not approve of this. It cannot be regarded as respectful. But considewin' what an awful beast Watty is, I must say I wish good luck to Stokah!"

"Yes, rather!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"So that's why the beast has been so ratty all day!" said Figgins, rubbing his hands. "That's why he was ragging the Fifth in class, and whacking us all round in the New House. Old Stoker has got on his nerves. Ha, ha, ha!"

"How jolly lucky it's a half-holiday to-day!" said Tom Merry. "We can be on the scene and see all the fun!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I'll hold his coat for him," said Kangaroo of the Shell. "Ratty won't be able to put up much of a fight though. He's not in condition."

"He won't put up a fight at all if he can help it!" grinned Figgins. "He ain't got the pluck of a bunny-rabbit! He will try to dodge out of it."

"Well, it would be wathah infiva dig for a Housemastah to fight with an old boy," Arthur Augustus remarked. "The Head would be wathah shocked, too."

"It may make Ratty a bit more careful," said Kerr. "If once an old boy goes for him and wallops him it will be a lesson to him. We shall all be old boys in time, and then we may go and do the same."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I'm jolly well going to!" said Fatty Wynn. "The horrible beast has confiscated a whole bag of my jam-tarts. Says I overeat myself!"

"Which, of course, you wouldn't dream of doing!" said Tom Merry, laughing.

"He's caned us for nothing, anyway!" said Figgins.

"And given us lines for nothing!" growled Redfern of the Fourth.

"And interfered with our noble selves," said Monty Lowther. "Why, he would have had the thundering nerve to cane me if old Darrel hadn't chipped in, like the brick he is!"

"Good old Darrel!"

"I wonder when old Stoker is coming?" said Manners. "Better keep a watch at the gate, like Sister Anne. We simply mustn't miss it!"

"No jolly fear!"

"This chap Stoker seems to be a bit of a joker," Tom Merry remarked. "He's rung Ratty up on the telephone several times, it appears, in order to give him all the pleasures of anticipation."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Nobody here knows him," said Lowther. "He was gone before the oldest inhabitant came here—excepting the Head and Ratty and Taggles, and the House-dame. I dare say he was quite a nice chap, and Ratty was down on him."

"He always is down on nice chaps," said Fatty Wynn.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The dinner-bell rang, and the excited crowd of juniors broke up. New House and School House fellows streamed off towards their own Houses for dinner. But even Fatty Wynn did not think so much of dinner as of the possible happenings of that afternoon. An old boy coming back to whack Ratty! No wonder the Housemaster was disturbed and angry, no wonder his bad temper was blacker and more bitter than ever! And no wonder the juniors were unusually and remarkably cheerful!

Figgins & Co. looked very curiously at Mr. Ratcliff in the dining-room in the New House. Mr. Ratcliff's face was like thunder. During dinner a maid looked in, to say that the telephone-bell was ringing in Mr. Ratcliff's study. The Housemaster snapped out that it did not matter, and the maid retired wonderingly. Mr. Ratcliff had evidently had enough of talking to Stoker of the Fifth on the telephone.

After dinner Mr. Ratcliff left the New House and crossed to the other House. Figgins & Co. watched him, with grinning faces. They guessed that he had gone to consult the Head concerning that threat of the old boy.

It certainly placed the Housemaster in a ridiculous and uncomfortable position.

Owing to the instructions he had given Taggles, the secret was already out; but in any case it would have been out when that truculent old boy arrived.

Beyond instructing the school porter to keep Herbert Stoker from entering the precincts of the school Mr. Ratcliff could do little or nothing. He had to wait in a state of great uneasiness and apprehension for the arrival of the old boy.

"Poor old Ratty is in a blue funk!" chuckled Figgins. "He doesn't like the posish, not a little bit. Hallo! There's that blessed telephone-bell again."

The sharp buzz of the bell came from Mr. Ratcliff's study. Figgins winked at the Co.

"Ratty won't answer him," he said. "Now, it ain't polite to leave an old boy unanswered when he's phoning to his beloved old Housemaster. I think we ought to answer that bell for Ratty, and give Stoker of the Fifth our kindest regards."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

As Mr. Ratcliff was safe in the School House it was easy enough for Figgins & Co. to slip into his study and answer the telephone. Kerr kept an eye on the study window to watch for the return of the Housemaster, while Figgins took up the receiver.

"Hallo!"

"Hallo! Is that St. Jim's?"

"Yes."

"New House—Mr. Ratcliff?"

"You've got the right number," said Figgins.

"I'm coming to-day."

"Who are you?"

"You know well enough who I am, you old rascal!" said the voice. "I'm Herbert Stoker—Stoker of the Fifth that was. And I'm coming back to St. Jim's to give you that hiding I promised you."

Figgins chuckled. The one-time Stoker of the Fifth was evidently under the impression that he was talking to Mr. Ratcliff.

"You remember when I left St. Jim's," went on the voice. "You caned me for fighting with Snooks, who was a sneak and your favourite. You were always down on me because I wouldn't knuckle under. You were a beastly tyrant and a cad."

"Seems to know Ratty awfully well!" murmured Figgins. "He hasn't changed a bit since Stoker of the Fifth left."

"I promised you a hiding when I was grown up," went on the voice. "I haven't had time to attend to you yet. I've been abroad a long time. Now I'm in the neighbourhood, and I'm going to pay you that call."

Figgins was glad to hear it.

"It may interest you to hear that I'm a boxer now, Ratty—a professional boxer. It will show you what to expect when I come."

"Good egg!" murmured Figgins.

"This is the fourth time I've rung you up, Ratty. The last time you didn't answer me. I want you to understand thoroughly what's in store."

"I'll bet Ratty understands well enough," murmured Figgins.

"Why don't you speak, Ratty?"

"Tain't Ratty!" said Figgins, speaking into the receiver at last. "I'm a New House chap. Ratty doesn't mean to answer the 'phone any more. I say, you are really an old St. Jim's chap, and you're coming to whop Ratty?"

"Yes."

"Good luck to you. He's a beast. He's been caning and cuffing everybody since you first rung him up this morning."

"Same old Ratty!" came from Mr. Stoker.

"Yes, rather! Look here, Stoker, I'll give you a tip. We all want you to come and whop Ratty. We'd give a term's pocket-money to see you do it. The Head's going out this afternoon—he goes over to a local meeting at the vicarage at four. Come after four, and there won't be any trouble with the Head."

"Thanks; I will!"

"The Head would chip in, you know; and you couldn't go for the Head, he's a brick. All the fellows would pile on you if you checked the Head. I would myself. That's a straight tip. Nobody allowed to check the Head."

"Quite right. I remember he was a good sort," replied Mr. Stoker. "I'm much obliged for the tip. I'll come after four."

"Mr. Railton goes out with the Head; so you'll have Ratty all to yourself," pursued Figgins. "The other masters won't be able to help him; they're not all fighting-men, but Railton's an athlete. Come after four, and everything in the garden will be lovely."

"Right!"

"Here comes Ratty!" murmured Kerr.

Figgins promptly rang off, and the three young rascals

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scuttled out of the study. They were at a safe distance when Mr. Ratcliff came in; and the Housemaster sat down in his study without a suspicion of the peculiar conversation that had been carried on there during his absence.

CHAPTER 4. Darrel's Difficulty.

KILDARE of the Sixth came into Darrel's study in the School House with a smile upon his face. Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, and Darrel were great chums. The St. Jim's skipper had just heard the talk among the fellows concerning Mr. Ratcliff and his truculent old boy; hence his smile. Mr. Ratcliff was no more popular with the seniors than with the juniors; and if he was "whopped" by the redoubtable Stoker, Kildare for one would not be sorry for it. But the captain of St. Jim's felt that such a scene ought to be prevented; for the good name of the school. It was pretty certain to give rise to a great deal of unpleasant talk.

Darrel was seated at his table, with his head leaning on his hand, and a worried look on his brow. He looked up as Kildare came in, but with the frown still on his brow. The captain of St. Jim's gave him an inquiring look.

"Anything wrong, Darrel?" he asked, forgetting Mr. Ratcliff for the moment.

Darrel shook his head.

"Look here," said Kildare, "you've been looking jolly down in the month for the last two or three days, Darrel, old man. What is it? Get it off your chest. Two heads are better than one, you know!"

"It's nothing," said Darrel slowly. "I want to raise some cash if I can, that's all—and I don't quite see how to do it."

"Is that all? If a couple of quid would be any good—"

"It wouldn't!"

"Dash it all, Darrel," said Kildare, a little uneasily, "what do you want a sum of money for? You don't mean to say that you've been getting into debt? Old Langton played the fool once like that—but you've got too much sense."

Darrel smiled.

"It isn't that," he said. "I'm not in debt. And my allowance is quite enough for my wants. But all the same, I want twenty quid."

Kildare whistled.

"Twenty quid! That's a good round sum."

"It isn't for myself," explained Darrel. "It's—it's for somebody else—somebody who's had bad luck—somebody I used to know." A shade crossed his handsome face. "I don't mind telling you, Kildare. You remember—once—there was a girl—an actress I knew—she was older than I—but I thought an awful lot of her. I've never forgotten her. I—I was rather inclined to make a fool of myself—I suppose that's what it would be called—and she talked to me sensibly, and—after that she went to America."

"I remember," said Kildare.

"I've heard from her once or twice," said Darrel, in a low voice. "She—she married. Well, I haven't heard from her lately. But I've had news from another quarter—news of her, and it's bad news. She's had bad luck. They—she and her husband, you know—started a touring theatrical company, and they've been done in. There was a fire, and they lost everything. They were almost on their uppers, and there's a subscription being raised among the people who knew them, to help them on their feet again. They don't know that I know anything about it. But—but I wanted to help. You see, I could send a subscription to the fund without their knowing that it came from me—lots of the subscriptions will be anonymous. I'm going to whack out what I can, anyway; but if I could raise a lump sum, it would be ripping. I don't see any prospect of it, though."

Kildare nodded sympathetically. He remembered that old story, and he knew that Darrel had been hard hit, though he never said anything about it. It had been, perhaps, a boyish folly; but the woman had been sweet and kind and noble, and Darrel had never forgotten. And the misfortune that had happened to her naturally weighed upon his mind, and Kildare understood very well his desire to lend a helping hand now, in the hour of need, unknown, of course, to the recipient.

"But it's no good talking," said Darrel abruptly. "Quids are not so easily found when they're wanted. I can't help thinking of her being hard up, though. I didn't know I'd been looking down in the mouth."

"I understand," said Kildare quietly. "I wish I could help you out, old chap. I knew there was something amiss when you wanted to be left out of the match to-day. You still don't want to come over to Abbotsford for the last match of the season?"

"Not if you can do without me."

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"Oh, that's all right! I'll put in Cutts of the Fifth. He's a jolly good player when he chooses to be. But if you're staying here this afternoon, Darrel, I thought I'd mention to you about Ratty."

"Mr. Ratcliff!" Darrel coloured a little. "I had a bit of a row with him this morning. Meddling with School House kids as usual. I had to stand up to him."

"Well, he's in hot water this time," said Kildare, the smile returning to his face. "Have you ever heard of a chap named Stoker—Herbert Stoker—who used to be here? He was in the Fifth Form when he left, after a row with Ratty, I hear."

"Never heard of him!"

"Well, the fellows are saying that he's telephoned to Ratty, threatening him. It seems that he promised to come back to St. Jim's when he was grown up, and give Ratty a hiding."

Darrel laughed.

"I've heard that kind of thing before," he remarked. "They never do it, though."

"This chap seems to be an obstinate bounder, and it seems that he's going to do it. I don't know how it got out, but all the juniors are cackling over it. They don't see how serious it is. Between ourselves, Darrel, a good hiding wouldn't do Ratty a bit of harm."

"I quite agree with you."

"Only it would be too awfully awful," pursued Kildare. "An old boy coming back and thrashing his Housemaster—it would make too fearful a scandal! Why, it would very likely get into the papers, and the Head would be awfully cut up, and the Governors would hear of it, and there would be no end of talk. At the same time, I can't help sympathising with this chap Stoker a bit. I haven't the slightest doubt that Ratty was an unjust brute to him."

"Quite probable."

"So far as Ratty is concerned, I don't care twopence if Stoker licks him hollow, and mops up the ground with him," said Kildare. "Only, of course, you see, it wouldn't do!"

"I suppose it wouldn't," said Darrel, with a nod. "It would certainly cause a lot of talk, and get Stoker into some trouble too, very likely."

"We don't want such an awful scene here, you know. If you're staying in this afternoon, Darrel, I was going to suggest to you to keep an eye open, and interview this chap Stoker when he comes. The Head and Railton will be out, and all the prefects will be over at Abbotsford with the first eleven, excepting you. Talk to the chap nicely, and make him see that it won't do. And if that isn't any good, for goodness' sake make him keep his hands off Ratty. You're about the best boxer in the school, and I've no doubt you could handle him. It would be too utterly rotten to have the police called in here, to chip in between a master and an old boy, don't you think so?"

"I should say so," said Darrel, with a laugh. "All right, I'll keep my eyes open, and if Stoker comes, I'll see to him."

"Thanks, old man. I've got to be off with the eleven now, or I shall be late."

And Kildare quitted the study. Darrel's head sank upon his hand again. He was quite willing to do as Kildare asked, but the thoughts in his mind were not of Mr. Ratcliff and his old enemy. He was thinking of a grave, sweet face he had not seen for a very long time, and of his desire to help that old friend in the hour of need.

Kildare and the rest of the First Eleven rolled away in a brake from the gates of St. Jim's. They were going over to Abbotsford School to play the last cricket match of the season. As a rule, a good many fellows accompanied the First Eleven to watch their performances, but on this special afternoon the following was very few in numbers. The news of Mr. Ratcliff's predicament had spread through the school, and most of the fellows preferred to stay in the school to see what happened—to "see the fun," as the juniors regarded it.

Tom Merry & Co. gave the First Eleven a cheer as they rolled away, and then turned back into the quadrangle. They went down to the nets to while away the time till Mr. Stoker should arrive. Figgins had told them of that talk on the telephone, and they knew that the redoubtable old boy would not arrive until after four o'clock.

About four, the Head and Mr. Railton crossed the Close to the gates, and walked away down the road to Rylcombe. The fellows were glad to see them go. The presence of the Head would have spoiled all the fun; and as for the School Housemaster, he was an athlete and a boxer, and he would certainly have interfered to prevent Mr. Stoker from carrying out his intention, if he had been present. And the juniors did not want Mr. Stoker to be prevented. They wanted Ratty to be thoroughly "whopped."

"The coast is clear now," grinned Jack Blake, as the two masters disappeared. "Now Ratty can look out for squalls."

"Yaas, wathah," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, polishing

his eyeglass. "I am gettin' vewy anxious to see Mr. Stokah. Old Watty is in a blue funk. I wondah that he does not go out for the aftahnoon."

"Probably expects to find Stoker waiting for him on the road, if he does," grinned Figgins. "Stoker says he's in the neighbourhood, you know."

"Yaas, I suppose Watty is safah heah," agreed Arthur Augustus. "But there is nothin' now to pwevent Stokah frowm whoppin' him. The Head and Mr. Wailton are out, and all the pwefects are gone—all exceptin' Dawwel."

"Darrel won't interfere, I should think," said Tom Merry. "Ratty was going for him this morning. Besides, I think Darrel's off colour, anyway. He's sticking in his study instead of going over with the First Eleven to Abbotsford."

"And the other masters can't chip in," said Manners. "Little Lathom ain't a fighting-man—what? Selby of the Third isn't a giddy hero, either. And our respected Form-master, Mr. Linton, has gone out."

"And Herr Schneider won't take up the cudgels for Ratty, and I'm sure Monsieur Morny won't!" chuckled Kerr.

"Not likely."

"Everything in the garden is lovely," said Tom Merry. "It's well past four now. Let's get down to the gates and wait for him."

"Yaas, wathah!"

And the juniors streamed down to the school gates in an excited crowd to wait and watch for Mr. Stoker. Meanwhile, Darrel of the Sixth remained in his study, turning his problem over in his mind, and utterly forgetting all about Mr. Ratcliff and the old boy.

CHAPTER 5.

The Old Boy!

"**H**EAH he comes!"

It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy who spotted him first.

The swell of St. Jim's was in the road, his eyeglass gleaming down the lane, when the figure of the old boy came in sight. There was a rush out of the juniors to look.

Of course, they could not be sure that the young man who was striding up the road from the direction of Rylcombe was indeed the old boy, the one-time Stoker of the Fifth.

But they felt pretty certain that he was, and they hoped he was, anyway.

He was a young man, about twenty-five or twenty-six, of a somewhat short but heavily-built figure, and evidently very strong. His stocky form was full of muscular power. He walked with a firm and heavy stride. He was dressed in lounge clothes, not of a fashionable cut, and wore a black bowler hat with a very wide brim.

His face was clean-shaven, his features sharp and clear-cut. His nose had been very straight—quite a Greek nose—but apparently a heavy punch had alighted on it at some period in his career, which had changed it almost into a nose of the Roman variety. This gave his face a somewhat striking appearance, and hinted at the profession of which he had spoken on the telephone—that of a boxer.

Certainly, the young man looked thoroughly fit from head to foot, and quite in a condition to give a licking to five or six Mr. Ratcliffs taken altogether.

"I wonder if that is the merchant!" exclaimed Blake, eyeing the stranger as he advanced. "I hope it is. He looks like a hard nut to crack."

"He could make rings round Ratty with one hand," agreed Tom Merry.

"Looks as if he's been through the mill already," said Lowther. "Where did he dig up that Romo-Greco boko?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The young man came on steadily, quite aware of the fact that the crowd of juniors were staring at him, but apparently not in the least discomposed by it. In their intense interest in the stranger, indeed, Tom Merry & Co. had quite forgotten their manners, and their fixed gaze would have caused considerable discomfort to anyone who was troubled at all with bashfulness. But the young man with the Roman nose was not troubled in that way—not in the least.

He halted outside the gateway of St. Jim's, and looked at the juniors with an amused smile, raising his bowler hat half an inch.

"Hullo," he said, "you'll know me again next time you see me—what?"

"Ahem!"

"Do you generally stare at a visitor in this way?" the young man went on, quite good-humouredly.

Arthur Augustus coloured, and the other fellows coughed. D'Arcy raised his silk hat in a graceful manner.

"Pway excuse us, my deah sir," said the swell of the Fourth. "We are weally vewy sowwy if we have appeahed

wude; but we are twemendously intewested in you. May I inquiah whethah you are Stokah of the Fifth?"

The young man laughed.

"I was Stoker of the Fifth when I left here ten years ago," he replied. "Now I'm Stoker of Stoker's Flying Ring."

"Bai Jove, what's that?"

"You are Stoker, anyway—Herbert Stoker?" asked Tom Merry.

"You bet!"

"You used to be in our House here?" asked Figgins.

"If your House is the New House, yes."

"Oh, good! Ratty's still here, and he's the same old Ratty. It was I who talked to you on the 'phone," explained Figgins. "Of course, don't mention that to Ratty. He would scalp me if he knew."

"Mum's the word," said Stoker. "I've come here to see Mr. Ratcliff. I want to see him very particularly. Is he at home?"

"Yes, in the New House."

"Good. I've rung him up several times to-day from Wayland."

"You're staying in Wayland, Mr. Stoker?" asked Tom Merry.

"Yes, this week Wayland, next week Bunchester, week after that Luxford," said Mr. Stoker. "The Flying Ring stays only a few days in any place. I was glad to be doing Sussex with the Flying Ring, as it enabled me to pay a call on my old friend and kind master, Mr. Ratcliff. I've been in Australia for years, and couldn't pay him that call; but I never forgot him. There are some things a fellow doesn't forget. When I brought the Ring to England, I thought of Ratty at once."

"Bai Jove, whatevah is a flyin' wing?" asked Arthur Augustus. "I have heard of all sorts of wings—weddin' wings, and battin' wings, and Wagnah's wings. But what on earth is a flyin' wing? Somethin' to do with aeroplanes?"

Mr. Stoker laughed.

"No. It's a boxing ring."

"Oh, bai Jove!"

"Might do a little business with you young fellows," said Mr. Stoker briskly, taking some cards from his pocket.

"Take these—read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest. If you want to see a good show—a really good boxing show—come over to the Wayland Hall any evening this week. When I was at St. Jim's I was a mug at lessons, but first-chop in the gym, and I could box any fellow in the school. I never found a market for Latin or mathematics; but I turned my boxing to good account—see?"

The juniors read the cards with interest. They ran:

"THE FLYING RING!"

"The Finest Travelling Boxing Show in the Kingdom and the Colonies."

"The Manly Art at its Best."

"H. Stoker is open to box all comers, and to forfeit a Purse of Twenty Guineas to any amateur who stands up to him for Ten Rounds."

"Come and see H. Stoker, the Champion Light-Weight, and Wallaby Bill, the Celebrated Cornstalk Boxer!"

"WAYLAND HALL! EVERY EVENING! ADMIS-
SION 1s."

"THE FLYING RING!"

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus. "So you are a champion boxah, deah boy?"

"You bet!"

"Champion of where?" asked Blake, with a grin.

"Everywhere," said Mr. Stoker cheerfully.

"Bai Jove, we'll get leave, and go ovah and see this!" remarked Arthur Augustus. "I'm wathah a boxah myself, you know, and I'm awfly intewested in this!"

"Yes, rather."

"St. Jim's fellows especially welcome," said Mr. Stoker.

"The free list is unfortunately suspended, owing to the rush of the public to see our celebrated show. Otherwise, I should ask you all to drop in on the nod. But you can't afford to miss the Flying Ring, anyway—greatest show on earth of its kind. When you've seen me box Wallaby Bill, you'll learn something about boxing. However, to get to business, I've got to call on Mr. Ratcliff now. If you kids care to look on, you'll see a good entertainment free of charge."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What ho!"

The juniors made way for Mr. Stoker, and he swung in at the gates. He found Taggles the porter planted in his path.

"Hallo, you still here?" said Mr. Stoker, looking at him with a grin. "Same old Taggles. You haven't changed a bit."

Taggles stared at him.

"And you ain't changed much, Master Stoker," he said.

"You've growed, that's all. Otherwise, the same cheeky

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young himp that you always was. Which it's my dooty to ask you wot you want 'ere this afternoon?"

"I've come to pay a call on my old master," explained Mr. Stoker, with an agreeable smile. "Finding myself in the neighbourhood, Taggles, I felt bound to call and pay my respects, Mr. Ratcliff."

Taggles grinned.

"Which Mr. Ratcliff has spoke to me about that," he said. "And his horders is that you ain't to be admitted."

Mr. Stoker looked pained.

"Doesn't Mr. Ratcliff want to see an old boy, who has made a special point of calling on him after being away for years in the Colonies?" he asked.

"No," said Taggles gruffly; "he don't! And, what's more, I know your little game, Master Stoker, and you can't come in. So I asks you to get off."

"Same old Taggles," smiled Mr. Stoker. "So you want me to get off?"

"Yes, I does."

"And suppose," said Mr. Stoker, as gently as the cooing dove—"suppose I decline to get off, Taggles?"

"Then I'll call the 'Ead to speak to you."

"Is the Head at home?" asked Mr. Stoker sweetly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, anyway, you ain't coming in," said Taggles, realising that the unwelcome visitor knew that the Head was absent. "Mr. Ratcliff don't want to see you, and his horders is that you ain't to be admitted. So you git off!"

Mr. Stoker shook his head.

"Can't be done, Taggles," he said cheerfully. "I've come here specially to see Mr. Ratcliff, and I can't be kept away from my kind old master. Pray let me pass!"

"I ain't letting you pass," said Taggles. "Not if I knows it, Master Stoker. There ain't going to be no row 'ere, I can tell you. You 'ook it!"

"I should be sorry," said Mr. Stoker gently, "to lay hands on a respectable gentleman a hundred years of age—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I ain't a 'undred," roared Taggles angrily, "and well you knows it!"

"Oh, come! You were ninety when I was here," said Mr. Stoker humorously, "and that's ten years ago. You're losing your memory, Taggles."

"Which I was fifty-six then," said Taggles, "so it follers as I'm sixty-six now, and well you knows it, you young himp!"

"I repeat, I should be grieved to have to chuck a gentleman of a hundred years of age into his lodge on his neck," said Mr. Stoker; "but if you don't let me pass, my dear Taggles, that is exactly what I shall do!"

Taggles brought out his right hand from behind him, and a thick oaken stick was revealed. Probably Taggles remembered the exploits of Stoker of the Fifth as a boxer in the old days, and so he prepared himself for emergencies.

"You lay a 'and on me," said Taggles, "and you'll get hurt! I don't want any trouble with a hold boy. But you ain't coming in. Horders is horders, and—Yow-ow-ow!"

Before Taggles could finish Mr. Stoker made a lightning-like movement, and the old porter found his arm grasped by a muscular hand, while a sinewy arm was thrown around his body. The oak cudgel dropped to the ground, and Taggles was swept off his feet. Taggles was too dazed to know what was happening, but the juniors roared as they looked on. Taggles was rushed to the open doorway of his lodge. Mr. Stoker did not "chuck" him in, he carried him in, and set him down in his armchair. Perhaps it was simply absent-mindedness that made him place Taggles there on his head, with his legs dangling over the back of the chair.

Then he walked calmly out of the lodge.

Taggles remained upside down for a few moments, gasping and spluttering, and then rolled off the chair and sat on the floor, still gasping wildly.

"Oh, my heye! Oh, my 'at! Why, the young willain is as strong as a 'orse!" spluttered Taggles. "Which I ain't going to 'ave nothing more to do with 'im. I knows that, and Mr. Ratcliff can look arter 'im 'imself. Which he gives a man a job like this, and never thinks of asking him if he's got a mouth, neither. Which I'm done with it!"

And Taggles, who, if not quite a hundred years old, was at least old enough to know that discretion was the better part of valour, remained in his lodge, and left that truculent old boy to his own devices.

CHAPTER 6.

"Hold Out Your Hand!"

"HE—he is coming, then!"

Mr. Ratcliff muttered those words as he looked out of his study window in the New House. His eyes were fixed upon a stocky figure that was advancing across the quad, followed by a grinning crowd of juniors of both Houses.

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OUR COMPANION PAPERS: "THE MAGNET" LIBRARY, Every Monday. "THE PENNY POPULAR," Every Friday. "CHUCKLES," 1D. Every Saturday, 2

Although ten years had passed since he had seen Stoker of the Fifth, and though Stoker had changed somewhat—especially about the nose—Mr. Ratcliff knew him at once.

It was the old boy—the boy he had cuffed and bullied and caned when he was in the New House at St. Jim's, and who had remembered his old grudges after he had grown up, and had come back to square accounts.

He had come!

Taggles had evidently failed to keep him out, and Mr. Stoker was marching on the New House—advancing to the attack.

Mr. Ratcliff turned quite white.

For a gentleman of nearly fifty years of age, in a far from fit condition of health, to encounter that muscular young man was impossible. Even if Mr. Ratcliff had been of the stuff of which heroes are made he would not have stood much chance against Mr. Stoker of the Flying Ring. If they came to close quarters it would not be a fight—nothing like it. It would be a licking! The Housemaster who had so often licked Stoker of the Fifth would be helplessly licked in his turn.

Perhaps at that moment Mr. Ratcliff regretted and repented him of the draconic methods that made him so unpopular in the school.

After all, he had been very hard on young Stoker. There had been a breezy independence about that young gentleman which made the stiff, precise, irritable Housemaster take a special dislike to him. He could remember Stoker's progress through the Third and the Fourth and the Shell as a series of earnings and impositions. Even in the Fifth Stoker had felt the heavy hand of his Housemaster. It was a rule at St. Jim's that seniors could not be caned, unless, under special circumstances, by the Head himself; but in Stoker's case Mr. Ratcliff had broken that rule. He had disliked the boy so much that he never would leave off persecuting him. And Stoker, when he was in the Fifth, had been doubly at Mr. Ratcliff's mercy, being both in his Form and in his House. Mr. Ratcliff had known what the boy's feelings were like when he left St. Jim's. But he had never dreamed that this would come of it. He knew that it was not uncommon for a lad to leave school with a deadly determination of coming back when he was grown up and licking his master; but such a thing had never happened in his experience.

But it had happened now. Here was Stoker of the Fifth, grown up into a powerful fellow who could handle the Housemaster as easily as an infant!

It was an exceedingly awkward predicament for Mr. Ratcliff. As a matter of fact he was in a funk—in a blue funk.

What was to be done?

He thought wildly of telephoning for the police; but certainly Mr. Stoker would have finished with him long before P.-c. Crump could arrive from Rylcombe. He regretted now that he had not had a constable on the spot to deal with the old boy when he came. Yet it would have been scarcely feasible to keep a policeman stationed in the New House on the chances of the old boy turning up there.

Mr. Ratcliff had hoped and believed up to the last moment that Herbert Stoker's threat was merely a threat, and that he would never have the astounding nerve to carry it out. But here he was.

If Mr. Ratcliff had been a popular master he would have been in no danger. He realised bitterly that if Mr. Railton of the School House had been in a similar predicament the redoubtable old boy would never have been able to get at him. The School House fellows would have risen as one man to "chuck out" anybody who dared to affront their popular Housemaster.

But Mr. Ratcliff knew only too well that the boys of his House would not interfere. They would be only too glad to see him "put through it."

The unhappy Housemaster had not much time to think about the matter. Stoker was coming along with big strides, with a crowd at his heels, and in a few minutes he would be knocking at the study door. To lock his door, and refuse to let the man in, that would be a ridiculous situation, and would lower him in the eyes of everyone in the House. But it was better than being licked by that terrible old boy, and Mr. Ratcliff made up his mind. He whisked across his study to the door and slammed it, and felt for the key.

Then he trembled.

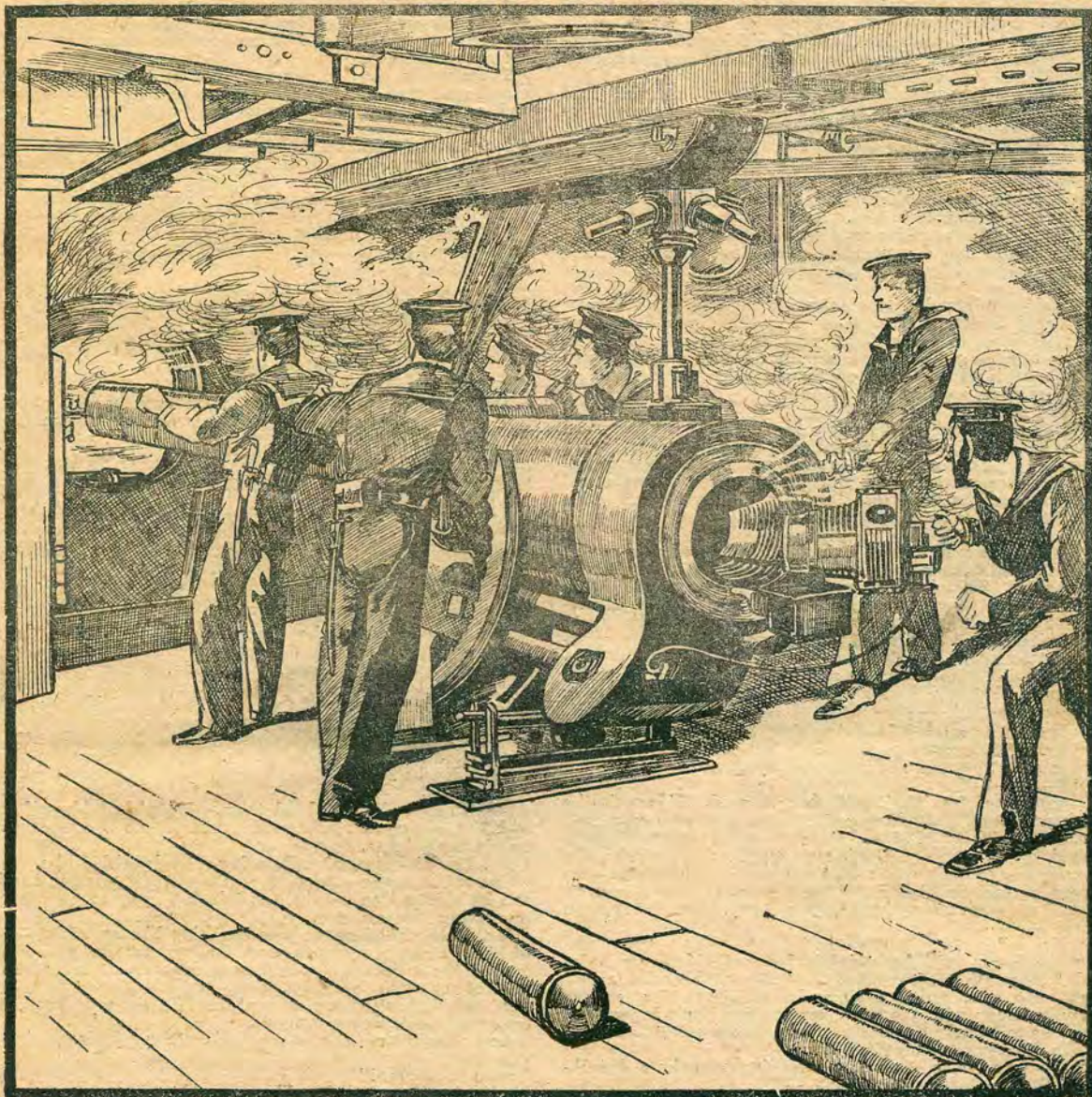
The key was not there!

The key should have been in the lock—it always was in the lock—but on this occasion, when Mr. Ratcliff wanted so very badly to lock his door, the key was missing. He ground his teeth with fury. He knew that some boy of his House must have removed that key deliberately, so that he could not lock himself in when Stoker came.

The Housemaster glanced wildly about the study.

He thought in a terrified way of piling up furniture against the door—the table, the chairs, the bookcase. But there was little time. He thought of jumping out of the open

THIS WEEK'S WAR PICTURE.—By Our Special Artist.



A big gun in action on board a British battleship. The petty officer in charge of the gun-crew is just opening the breech after firing a shell.

window, and escaping across the quadrangle. But there was a crowd outside, and he shrank, very naturally, from such an extremely undignified and ignominious flight. He would never hear the end of it, that was certain.

There were steps in the passage. Stoker was coming! Mr. Ratcliff pulled himself together with a tremendous effort. He had heard that wild beasts could be quelled by the power of the human eye, and he hoped that the calm dignity of a Housemaster might have some effect upon even that disrespectful and obnoxious rascal Stoker. He drew himself to his full height, mustered all his dignity, and awaited the entrance of the old boy, outwardly calm, but inwardly in a state of the bluest funk.

"Knock!"

"Come in!" said Mr. Ratcliff, in a voice that he vainly endeavoured to render firm.

The door opened.

Herbert Stoker, once of the Fifth Form at St. Jim's, entered the study.

He took off his bowler hat, and laid it upon the table.

Then he looked round the study, as if in search of something. He found what he was in search of—a cane. He picked it up, and swished it in the air. That deliberate preparation made the Housemaster turn cold all over. Stoker of the Fifth was going to cane him!

"Sir!" stuttered the Housemaster.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Ratcliff!" said Stoker, with deadly politeness.

"G-g-good-afternoon!"

"I dare say you recognise me?"

"You are—are Stoker!"

"Exactly. I rang you up this morning—several times, in fact. I trust I made it quite clear to you that I was going to call this afternoon."

"I—I—I am glad to see you, Stoker," faltered the wretched Mr. Ratcliff. "It—it is always a pleasure to see an old boy, and to—to renew old acquaintance. I—I trust you will stay to tea, and—and we can talk pleasantly over old times."

Mr. Stoker smiled.

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NEXT
WEDNESDAY—

"THE SECRET COMMITTEE!"

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of
Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

"I'm afraid I sha'n't be able to stay to tea, Mr. Ratcliff; but we will talk pleasantly over old times—very pleasantly, I hope. You remember me well?"

"Quite well," said Mr. Ratcliff, licking his dry lips—"very well indeed! You—you were a credit to your House, Stoker."

"You must have found that out after I left, sir," said Stoker, with a shake of the head. "You didn't seem to think so while I was here. But after I had left, I suppose, all my splendid qualities dawned upon you all of a sudden."

"I—I always had an extremely good opinion of you, Stoker."

"You took a remarkably queer way of showing it then, sir—very remarkable indeed. As the man says in the poem—'Perhaps it was right to dissemble your love; but why did you kick me downstairs?' You have heard of those expressive lines?"

"I—I—I—"

"I always intended to give you a look in when I grew up," said Stoker pleasantly. "I couldn't possibly forget your kindness to me while I was here. I've been in the Colonies a long time, or I should have called upon you before. I hope you will excuse my apparent neglect. I really came as soon as I could."

"I—I certainly—I—"

"You remember when I was a fag in the Third," pursued Stoker cheerfully, "you licked me, on an average, every other day. In the Fourth, you kept on the same game. When I was in the Shell, you got me seven separate and distinct floggings from the Head, by making reports which were, to say the least, exaggerations."

"Ahem! I—"

"I was the only fellow in the Fifth who was ever caned. You devoted quite a lot of attention to me, Mr. Ratcliff."

"Ahem! That is all over now. I—I trust, Stoker, that you bear no ill-will for what is long past. A—A House-master has painful duties sometimes, and—"

"Quite so. And an old boy has painful duties sometimes," assented Mr. Stoker.

"I—I— Surely you do not remember old grudges for so long a time, my dear Stoker? It—it is really unworthy of your character."

"Never was a more forgiving chap than I am," said Mr. Stoker. "But, you see, I made a solemn promise to lick you in your turn, and I'm a slave to my word."

"I—I—I—"

"Moreover, I think it will do you good. I haven't the slightest doubt that you rag other kids just as you ragged me. I'm thinking of them. Once you have been thoroughly licked by an old boy, I think you will go easier with the youngsters, as they will all be old boys in time, and they might go and do likewise. It will be a valuable lesson to you, Ratty—excuse my calling you Ratty. Old habits, you know."

"Sir—"

"The lesson will be painful, but valuable—very valuable," said Mr. Stoker calmly. "It will let quite a new light into your mind, I sincerely believe. You are so awfully handy with the cane, because you don't know what it is like to be licked yourself. Now you are going to know."

The Housemaster breathed hard.

"If—if you have come here intending to make a disturbance, Stoker, I—I can only say—"

"Bless your little heart, I'm not going to make a disturbance," said Stoker, in surprise. "You're going to do that. I don't expect you to take it quietly. You can yell as much as you like. I remember you've made me yell often enough in this very study. Now it's your turn."

"I—I shall call for help. I—I shall prosecute you for assault—"

"Yes; it will make quite an amusing case for the papers, won't it?" smiled Mr. Stoker. "An old boy coming back to the school, and caning his Housemaster—the British public will be vastly interested. And it will be a splendid advertisement for Stoker's Flying Ring. My dear sir, you can't do me a bigger favour than by prosecuting me for assault and battery. Not that I'm going to assault and batter you. I'm going to cane you. My hat! I can see the giddy paragraphs in the papers—'Housemaster caned by old boy!' Ha, ha, ha! And there will be a regular rush to see my show. It does a man in my line of business a lot of good to be known to be a public-school man. By George, I shall have all the county cramming my show if this gets into the papers! I really hope, Mr. Ratcliff, that you will make it public—as public as possible."

"You—you blackguard—"

"Nuff said!" said Mr. Stoker. "Hold out your hand!"

"Wha-a-at!"

"I'm going to give you a dozen—six on each hand," said Mr. Stoker calmly. "And they are going to be stingers, The GEN LIBRARY.—No. 345.

tool! Quite the old kind, that you used to give me. Hold out your hand!"

"Mr. Stoker! I—I entreat you—I—"

"Hold out your hand!" thundered Mr. Stoker, swishing the cane in the air.

There was a chuckle down the passage. Many youthful ears heard that thunderous command, which Mr. Ratcliff had so often addressed to his boys, and which was now addressed to himself.

Mr. Ratcliff backed towards the window. He was almost sick with terror.

"Mr. Stoker, calm yourself, I beg! If—if I erred upon the side of severity, I—I express my regret, most sincerely! I—"

"Hold out your hand!"

"I—I beg of you—"

"Hold out your hand!"

CHAPTER 7.

Darrel to the Rescue.

HOLD out your hand!"

Mr. Ratcliff gazed, as if mesmerised, at the swishing cane as Mr. Stoker advanced upon him. He did not hold out his hand. In his terror, most of his dignity had vanished; but he would not hold out his hand, like a junior schoolboy, to be caned. That was a little too much.

"If you do not hold out your hand, Ratcliff, I shall thrash you severely," said Stoker, in quite Mr. Ratcliff's own tone when addressing a recalcitrant junior.

"Stoker, I—I beg—"

"Hold out your hand!" repeated Stoker inexorably.

"I—I will not! I—I—"

"Then—"

The cane sang in the air, and Mr. Ratcliff made a desperate plunge through the open window just in time.

The cane came down, and caught Mr. Stoker across his own leg, and he gave a yelp of pain.

Mr. Ratcliff plumped down breathlessly outside the window. There was a crowd of juniors in the quadrangle, and they gave a yell of delight at the sight of Horace Ratcliff's unexpected acrobatic performance.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bravo!"

Mr. Ratcliff did not heed them. He picked himself up and fled, his gown flying behind him in the breeze caused by his rapid flight.

But Mr. Stoker was hardly a few seconds behind him.

Out of the study window came the old boy, cane in hand, and he alighted on his feet, and dashed away in pursuit of the fleeing Housemaster.

Mr. Ratcliff had never been anything like an athlete—he disliked athletic exercises—but the speed with which he crossed the quadrangle would have done credit to a champion of the cinder-path.

After him went Stoker, once of the Fifth, cane in hand, at top speed, breathing vengeance.

And after Stoker went a crowd of delighted juniors, yelling with laughter.

"Go it, Stoker!"

"Catch him—catch him!"

"Put it on!"

"Pile in!"

"Yaas, wathah! Pile in, deah boy!"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Tom Merry, with tears of laughter running down his cheeks. "Oh, my only summer hat! This is better than a circus! Who'd have thought that old Ratty could put it on like that?"

"Two to one on Ratty!" shrieked Lumley-Lumley of the Fourth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"After them!"

"We've got to be in at the death!" grinned Figgins.

Close behind the ferocious old boy, the juniors rushed on. It was an extraordinary scene—nothing like it had ever occurred at St. Jim's before. Even on the famous occasion when there had been a barring-out at the old school, the excitement had been less intense. It was unprecedented, and yet it was a happening that might have been looked for at any time. Mr. Stoker was the only old boy who had kept his schoolboy resolve, that was all.

Right across the quadrangle went Mr. Ratcliff, with flying gown trailing behind him, his long thin legs going like clockwork.

He had no clear idea of where he was to find safety; his only thought was to reach some refuge where he could lock himself in from the old boy, who was breathing vengeance and reprisals on his track.

He ran up the steps of the School House, and rushed in, nearly knocking over Toby, the House page, who was looking out of the doorway with great interest at the scene.

"Ow!" gasped Toby, as he staggered away from the impact.

Mr. Ratcliff stammered and gasped.

"Toby, keep that ruffian out! I—I will give you a shilling if you keep him out!" And he rushed down the passage.

"Ketch me!" murmured Toby; and he discreetly disappeared before the pursuer made his appearance in the doorway of the School House.

Mr. Ratcliff rushed into the Sixth Form passage. He knew that the First Eleven was away that afternoon, but there was a vague idea in his mind that some of the Sixth-Formers might have stayed in that half-holiday, and might help him in his extremity.

Cutts of the Fifth came along the passage, and stepped aside to allow him to pass. Mr. Ratcliff caught him by the arm.

"Cutts, pray help me—"

Cutts smiled grimly. He had seen the chase from his study window, and he had no intention whatever of helping his Form-master. He had not forgotten the ragging and the bitter, sarcastic tongue of that morning.

"Indeed! What is the matter, sir?" asked Cutts, with the benevolent intention of delaying Mr. Ratcliff until his pursuer could get hold of him.

Perhaps Mr. Ratcliff guessed Cutts's object, or perhaps the heavy footsteps behind freshened his alarm; anyway, he did not stop to answer, but tore on.

Darrel's door opened as he was passing it.

Darrel, the prefect, had seen the chase from his window, and he remembered rather late what Kildare had asked of him. He was coming out to interfere. Mr. Ratcliff ran right into him as he stepped into the passage. Darrel stood the shock like a rock, and put out a strong hand to steady the Housemaster.

"Mr. Ratcliff—"

The Housemaster panted wildly.

"Help me, Darrel! I entreat—"

"Certainly, sir!" said Darrel, with an involuntary curl of the lip, which Mr. Ratcliff remembered bitterly enough afterwards. Darrel was quite ready to defend the New Housemaster, much as he disliked him; but he felt scorn for a coward, and he could not help showing it.

"That—that ruffian is following me! He—he is armed with—with a cane! I—I—"

"Please step into my study, sir," said Darrel as respectfully as he could. It was a little difficult to show respect under the circumstances.

Mr. Ratcliff did not step into the study—he bounded in.

He sank breathlessly into a chair, the perspiration pouring down his face, his hair standing almost on end.

"Lock the door, Darrel!" he panted.

Darrel shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't think that is necessary, sir."

"Lock the door! Lock the door!" Mr. Ratcliff's voice rose to a shriek. "That man—that ruffian is desperate! He is a criminal—a hooligan! Lock the door! He is coming! He is here! Lock the door!"

Darrel did not touch the door. It might suit Horace Ratcliff to cower behind a locked door, but it did not suit the School House prefect. Darrel contented himself with standing between the breathless Housemaster and the doorway, ready to defend him in case of need.

Then Mr. Stoker's stocky form was framed in the doorway. His glance went past Darrel to the miserable figure in the armchair.

"Run to earth!" said Mr. Stoker pleasantly.

"Keep him off!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff.

"Might as well have taken it calmly, Ratcliff," said Mr. Stoker, swishing the cane. "You're going through it, you know. I've come here to cane you, Ratty—and I'm going to cane you, Ratty! And if anybody gets in my way that body will get hurt, Ratty! Stand up and take it like a man! Now then, hold out your hand!"

"You cannot come in here, my man," said Darrel quietly.

Mr. Stoker gave him an amused look. The big Sixth-Former was very nearly as large as Mr. Stoker himself; but he was, after all, only a boy, and Herbert Stoker was an extremely fit and powerful man. It did not seem to Mr. Stoker that it would take him long to rid himself of the School House prefect if he interfered. But Mr. Stoker was good-natured; he did not want to hurt Darrel, and he admired the young fellow's pluck in standing up to him in defence of a master whom he certainly could not like or admire.

"Who's going to stop me?" inquired Stoker.

"I am!"

"Oh, don't be funny!" urged Mr. Stoker. "Run away

and play cricket, and leave me to deal with Ratty! Be a good boy!"

Darrel smiled, but he did not stir. A single glance at Mr. Stoker showed him that the boxer would be a "difficult proposition" to tackle, and certainly Darrel's heart was not in the matter. But he had his duty to do, and he was going to do it.

And he had confidence in himself, too. But Mr. Ratcliff hadn't. He did not think for a moment that Darrel would be able to stand up to the old boy, and he shrieked for help:

"Help! Help!"

"Mein Gott! Vat is all dat, den?" Herr Schneider, the German master at St. Jim's, looked in at the doorway through his large spectacles, in great astonishment. "Mein cootness! Vat is der matter, after?"

"Get out!" said Mr. Stoker, with a swish of the cane; and Herr Schneider jumped back into the passage as if he had received an electric shock.

"Mein Gott!"

"Help!" babbled Mr. Ratcliff. "Help!"

"Dear me! Whatever is the matter?" It was little Mr. Lathom, the master of the Fourth, this time. He looked into the study in great alarm. "My dear sir, who are you? Whatever does this mean? Dear me, I remember you now! You were once in my Form here. Is not your name Stoker?"

"How do you do, Mr. Lathom?" said Stoker genially. "I'm glad to see you!"

"I'm glad to see you, Stoker. But what is the meaning of this scene? What is the matter with Mr. Ratcliff?"

"Help!"

"Nothing, sir, so far—only funk!" said Stoker cheerfully. "I'm going to cane him, that is all, sir."

"Cane him?" gasped Mr. Lathom. "Cane a Housemaster? And you an old St. Jim's boy? Are you out of your senses, Stoker?"

"Not at all, sir."

"Then pray give up such a ridiculous idea, and retire at once," said Mr. Lathom, with a great deal of dignity. "I am surprised at you, Stoker."

"Sorry, sir, but I'm keeping an old promise I made to Ratty. I must request you to step out of this room, sir," said Mr. Stoker respectfully but very firmly.

"I refuse to do so, Stoker. I will not permit violence—"

"Excuse me, sir—"

"Oh dear me! Bless my soul—oh!"

Mr. Lathom found himself lifted by his shoulders and dropped gently into the passage. He staggered against the wall, out of breath, and in a state of great bewilderment.

"Mein Gott!" repeated Herr Schneider. "Dis takes vat you call der gake! Mein Gott!"

The two masters looked on blankly. Herbert Stoker could have knocked either of them into the middle of the next week, if not the whole length of the calendar, with one hand, so it was evidently impossible for them to restrain him. After all, it was up to Mr. Ratcliff to look after himself.

Stoker, once of the Fifth, turned to the shivering Housemaster again, with a grim smile.

"Now, Mr. Ratcliff, if you're ready—"

"Help!"

"Hold out your hand!"

"Keep him off!" moaned the New Housemaster. "Keep him off!"

"For the last time, Ratcliff—"

"Keep him off!"

Stoker strode forward. Darrel of the Sixth stood like a lion in the path. Mr. Stoker had to pause.

"Get aside, my lad!" he said kindly enough.

Darrel shook his head.

"You mustn't touch Mr. Ratcliff!" he said quietly.

"I don't want to hurt you, my boy; and I admire your pluck," said Mr. Stoker slowly and deliberately. "But if you don't stand aside I shall throw you out of the study."

"Throw away!"

"What?"

"You can't touch Mr. Ratcliff!" said Darrel. "I don't say that I don't sympathise with you to some extent, Stoker. But I've got my duty to do as a prefect of the school. You won't lay hands on Mr. Ratcliff!"

Mr. Stoker laid the cane upon the study table, and pushed back his cuffs.

"I'm sorry!" he said. "I don't want to hurt you. But I came here to cane Ratty, and I'm going to cane Ratty! I give you one minute to step out of the way!"

"Don't go, Darrel!" quavered Mr. Ratcliff.

"I don't intend to go, sir."

"Time's up!" exclaimed Mr. Stoker, beginning to get angry. "Now, my lad, out you go! Be sensible! I warn you that I am a boxer by profession, and I shall wipe out the

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floor with you in a few seconds. I'm rather a hard-hitter, but I don't want to hit you. Now, will you go?"

"No!"

"Then here goes!" said Mr. Stoker.

And he advanced upon Darrel in a scientific attitude, in the approved style of the Flying Ring. Evidently he expected to wipe Darrel of the Sixth off the face of the earth at the first onset.

But Darrel was a somewhat tougher customer than Mr. Stoker anticipated. His hands went up like lightning, and Mr. Stoker was met with a left and a right that sent him reeling back towards the doorway.

"My hat!" gasped Mr. Stoker, more surprised than hurt—though he was, as a matter of fact, hurt too.

Outside the study doorway the juniors were crowding, and from fifty fellows came a roar:

"Go it, Darrel!"

"Go it, Stoker!"

And in another moment Darrel and Stoker were "going" it.

CHAPTER 8.

Something Like a Fight.

TOM MERRY & CO. looked on eagerly. There was much crowding and shoving for places in the passage. The show was better, as Monty Lowther remarked, than the best cinematograph. The Terrible Three had good places, almost in the doorway, and Figgins & Co. and the chums of Study No. 6 were close behind. Kangaroo and Clifton Dane and Bernard Glyn, and Redfern and Owen and Lawrence, and Reilly and Lunley-Lumley and Levison, were pressing on behind them, shoving for a view. And behind them, again, were dozens more, all eager for the merest glimpse into the study. Herr Schneider and Mr. Lathom were surrounded and almost overwhelmed by the deluge of juniors.

That Darrel would take up the cudgels for the unpopular Housemaster was quite unexpected, at least, by the juniors. Their sympathies were all with Mr. Stoker against Mr. Ratcliff; but their feelings were divided when Darrel stepped into the matter. Darrel was very popular. So they looked on eagerly, and shouted encouragement to both sides, in the certain and happy prospect of seeing a good "mill."

And a good "mill" it was.

Mr. Stoker was attacking in the best style of the celebrated Flying Ring, and Darrel of the Sixth was standing up to him in a way that showed that he deserved his reputation as the best boxer at St. Jim's.

Hammer-and-tongs they went at it.

Mr. Ratcliff jumped out of the armchair as Darrel was driven back, and Mr. Stoker came close to him. But Mr. Stoker was too busy to think of his old enemy just then. The prefect recovered his ground, attacking hotly, and Mr. Stoker had to recede. Mr. Ratcliff had dodged to the window, which was open, and he remained there, apparently ready to repeat his acrobatic performance in case of need. Leaning on the window, he watched the conflict breathlessly, palpitating.

Crash!

Darrel staggered back from a heavy right-hander that caught him on the jaw, and he bumped into the study table, and sent it flying into the fender. Books and papers were scattered over the floor, and a stream of ink from the inkpot. Mr. Stoker could have delivered a knock-out blow at that moment, but he didn't. He dropped his hands and stepped back, to give Darrel time.

"Good man," said Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah! I told you fellows that Stokah was a sportsman. Bwavo, Stokah!"

Darrel, recovered himself, panting.

"Won't you chuck it now, young 'un?" asked Mr. Stoker appealingly. "Tain't your business, you know. Chuck it! I say it as a friend."

"Can't be done," said Darrel.

"You'll get hurt."

"Very likely. Can't be helped," said Darrel cheerfully. "You're not going to touch a master of St. Jim's while I'm here."

"Then I shall have to finish you," said Mr. Stoker regretfully. "I'm sorry to do it, for you are a good plucked 'un. I'd like to have you in my ring. You'd make a splendid second to Wallaby Bill, and you could go on in his place when he's squiffy, as he often is. Remember, when you leave St. Jim's, if you haven't another opening, remember there's a job waiting for you in the Flying Ring."

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Darrel laughed.

"I'll remember," he said. "But won't you chuck it now, Mr. Stoker? I've no quarrel with you, only I can't let you touch Mr. Ratcliff."

"I've waited ten years for Ratty," said Mr. Stoker, "and I'm not missing this chance. It may be years before I'm in this neighbourhood again, and I'm too busy a man to come here specially for him. If you won't get out, young 'un, come on!"

And they started again. This time Darrel had the advantage. Much to his surprise, Mr. Stoker was treated to a tremendous upper-cut that almost lifted him from the floor, and he staggered back, and sat down upon the study carpet with a heavy bump.

"Ow!" he ejaculated.

"Well hit!" roared Figgins.

"How's that?" chuckled Tom Merry.

"Not out!" snorted Mr. Stoker, scrambling to his feet.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The pugilist rushed at Darrel, hitting out furiously. Darrel had to give ground before the rushing attack, but he guarded well, and Mr. Stoker drove him round the room without getting in a single blow. Then Darrel feinted with his left, and caught Mr. Stoker napping, bringing in his right with a swift and tremendous drive that sent the pugilist to the floor once more.

This time Mr. Stoker was not in such a hurry to rise. He sat and blinked rather dazedly at the prefect of the School House.

"Well, you are a corker, I must say!" he exclaimed, after a breathless pause. "You are a corker, for your years! You'd make a topping bantam-weight; you would indeed. But I'm going to lick you. I'd rather lick you than Ratty now."

Darrel smiled.

The conflict was telling upon him, but he was beginning to enjoy it. He had no match with the gloves on at St. Jim's. Even Kildare was not quite up to his form. Mr. Stoker was the toughest opponent he had ever tackled, and he felt that he was getting the better of the combat, and he was exhilarated. As the poet has expressed it, he felt the "stern joy that warriors feel in foemen worthy of their steel."

Mr. Stoker rose a little heavily, and came on again. His Roman nose looked more Roman than ever, and there was a trickle of red from the corner of his mouth. He was a little unsteady on his "pins," too.

But he was as full of pluck as a bulldog, and he was determined not to be beaten by a boy.

They closed in combat again, the crowd in the passage watching the scene with breathless eagerness. Other fellows were crowding along the passage, shoving wildly for a place, but there was no place to be had. They yelled out to the fellows in front for news of what was going on, and the fellows in front shouted to them at every fresh turn of the conflict.

"Stokah's gettin' it hot, bai Jove! Don't shove, Kewuish! Stokah's just got a feaful cosh on the nose!"

"How's Darrel getting on?" roared Wally D'Arcy of the Third, from behind.

"Dawwel's nose looks twice its size— Bai Jove, that was a stunah!"

"Stoker's down again—no, he ain't! Well done!"

"Go it!"

"My hat, Darrel's down!"

Bump!

"Darrel's finished—no, he's up again! Go it, Darrel!"

"Great Scott, that was a thump!"

"Stoker wants some new teeth, I think. Anyway, he wants a new nose!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Darrel's gaining ground. Stand up to him, Stoker!"

"Go for his nose, Darrel. His nose can't stand much more!"

"Well hit—oh, well hit, sir!"

"He's down!"

"Count—count—count!" yelled Lowther. Arthur Augustus jerked out his famous gold ticker, and began to count as if he were keeping time in the prize-ring.

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven— Up again, bai Jove!"

"Pile in, Stoker. You're not beaten yet!"

"My hat, Darrel's getting it hot!"

"There's goes Stoker's nose again!"

"Is it a nose? It doesn't look like a nose now!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, this is ripping! Go it!"

FOR NEXT WEEK.

The Secret Committee!

Another Splendid, Long, Complete Story of the Chums of St. Jim's.

—By—

MARTIN CLIFFORD.

Order in Advance.

PRICE ONE PENNY.



Mr. Ratcliff had never been an athlete, but the speed with which he crossed the quadrangle would have done credit to a champion on a cinder path. After him went Stoker, came in hand, at top speed, breathing vengeance, and after Stoker went a crowd of delighted juniors, yelling with laughter. "Go it, Stoker! Catch him, and pile in!"

(See Chapter 7.)

Crash!

"Stoker's down again!"

"Down and out! Bravo, Darrel!"

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine—out!"

Mr. Stoker did not rise. He sat dazedly on the floor, with his back against the study wall, gasping. Darrel, looking decidedly groggy, but good for another round or two, stood panting for breath. Tom Merry ran into the study, and bent over Stoker.

"Finished, old chap?"

"Yes," said Mr. Stoker faintly, "I'm finished. I didn't know I was going to run up against a prize-fighter here. Oh, my nose!"

"I'm sorry," gasped Darrel. "You've given me pretty nearly as much as I've given you, Stoker."

"I think I have," said Mr. Stoker, with a painful grin, as Tom Merry helped him to rise. "Ow! I'm done, anyway. You've beaten me fair and square, young 'un, though I'd never have believed there was an amateur who could do it. I wish I could get you into my ring. You'd be worth a bag of golden quids to me. You've won fair and square, and Ratty doesn't get his licking."

"Shame!" came several voices from the passage.

The juniors were delighted with old Darrel's performance as a pugilist, but they were keenly disappointed that Mr.

Ratcliff had not received his licking. They had been looking forward to it nearly all day.

Mr. Stoker grinned faintly.

"Perhaps I'll find another opportunity, Ratcliff," he said. "I sha'n't forget you. But this plucky kid has saved you this time. Master Darrel, you're a good plucked 'un, and I don't bear any malice for a licking fair and square in a fair fight. There's my fist on it."

He held out his hand, and Darrel grasped it with cheerful friendliness. Darrel's face was darkly bruised—his nose was swollen, and his left eye was closing—he was aching all over, and nearly exhausted; but his feelings towards the redoubtable old boy were quite friendly. He shook hands with Mr. Stoker in the most cordial manner.

Mr. Ratcliff seemed to recover from a sort of trance, as he realised that his enemy was defeated, and that he had nothing to fear. He made a stride forward.

"Darrel, I am surprised to see you shaking hands with that ruffian! I forbid you to do anything of the kind!"

Darrel looked at him without troubling to conceal his contempt.

"I shall please myself in that, Mr. Ratcliff!" he said coldly.

Mr. Ratcliff gritted his teeth. He had been saved from a licking, and from being made to look utterly ridiculous in the eyes of the whole school, and he might have been grateful.

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But gratitude did not enter largely into Mr. Horace Ratcliff's composition.

"That man must be detained," he said, as Mr. Stoker turned towards the door. "I will telephone at once for the police, and give him in charge for assault."

CHAPTER 9. Darrel's Defiance!

"SHAME!"

It was a yell from the fellows crowded in the passage. That Mr. Ratcliff, who had fled ignominiously from the old boy, and who, after all, had not been hurt at all, should think of such a mean revenge upon the boxer, disgusted all who heard him. They forgot for the moment that he was a master, and expressed their feelings loudly.

"Shame!"

Mr. Ratcliff gave the juniors a withering glare.

"Silence! You juniors go at once—go, I say! I will be obeyed! Darrel, detain that man here while I telephone for the police!"

Darrel looked at him fixedly.

"I will do nothing of the sort," he replied.

"Good old Darrel!"

"This way, Stoker!"

"Hook it!"

"Darrel!" Mr. Ratcliff almost choked with rage and chagrin. "I—I command you! However, I will detain him myself. Herr Schneider, perhaps you will have the kindness to ring up Rylcombe Police Station, and ask for a constable to be sent."

Herr Schneider blinked at him through his glasses.

"Nein," he said briefly, "I will not do that, Herr Ratcliff! Let *de* man go."

"Mr. Lathom, then—"

"Really, Mr. Ratcliff, Stoker has done you no harm, and he is an old boy of St. Jim's," said Mr. Lathom mildly. "Pray let the matter end here!"

"I refuse to let the matter end here! I will give him in charge, and I will detain him with my own hands!" exclaimed Mr. Ratcliff.

Mr. Ratcliff was brave enough now. The licking Herbert Stoker had received had been so tremendous that he could hardly keep on his feet. One of his eyes was quite closed, the other blinking painfully. A fag in the Third Form could have dealt with him in his present state. Stoker had kept up the fight till his last ounce of strength was gone, and he could hardly see. Mr. Ratcliff would not have had the slightest difficulty in handling him in that condition, as he well knew; hence his sudden outburst of courageous determination.

The old boy gave him a bitter look.

"Same old Ratty!" he remarked. "Bully, tyrant, and coward! Same old Ratty!"

"Silence, you ruffian! I will not allow you to leave this study," said Mr. Ratcliff, planting himself in the pugilist's way. "You will remain here until a constable comes to take you in charge."

"Think of the scandal, Mr. Ratcliff," murmured Mr. Lathom feebly.

"I refuse to consider that for a moment! This ruffian shall suffer for his outrageous conduct!"

Darrel's eyes glinted like cold steel.

"Let Mr. Stoker pass, sir," he said quietly.

"Hold your tongue, Darrel."

"I will not hold my tongue, sir, and I will not hold my hands, if you do not get out of my study immediately," said Darrel, flaming out. "I have protected you when you fled to me like a coward for protection, Mr. Ratcliff."

"Darrel, how dare you!"

"You are forcing me to say what I think, sir. And I repeat that I will not allow Mr. Stoker to be detained here."

"You—you will not allow!" Mr. Ratcliff spluttered with enraged astonishment. "You will not allow! You dare to address me in that manner, Darrel! Are you out of your senses! I will report this to the Head when he returns."

"Report and be hanged!" said Darrel.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's wight, Dawwel. Stand up to the wottah!"

"You shall be expelled from the school, Darrel, if you dare to interfere with me to the slightest degree!" howled Mr. Ratcliff.

Darrel's lip curled scornfully.

"I don't think the Head would expel me for acting like a decent chap, sir," he said. "But I'm quite willing to risk it. I will not have Mr. Stoker interfered with. If you wanted to deal with him yourself you should have done so without calling me into the matter at all. You have placed

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the matter in my hands now, and I shall say the last word. Let Mr. Stoker pass at once."

Darrel's patience was exhausted. He advanced upon Mr. Ratcliff, looking as if he would knock him flying if he refused. The Housemaster weakened at once. Darrel was very nearly "done in" by that tremendous "scrap," but he had plenty of vigour enough left to deal with Mr. Ratcliff. The Housemaster backed away promptly.

"I—I will not enter into a vulgar scene of violence with you, Darrel. But I shall report this to the Head immediately he returns."

"I have told you what I think about that," said Darrel contemptuously.

Mr. Ratcliff, choking with rage, strode from the study. The crowd in the passage gave him a deep groan as he disappeared.

"Coast clear, Stoker," said Darrel, with a smile. "You had better clear before the Head comes back."

Mr. Stoker's bruised and battered countenance wore a look of distress.

"I hope this won't get you into trouble with Dr. Holmes, young 'un," he said.

"I don't think so," said Darrel. "Anyway, you'd better hook it. I think I'll go and bathe my face. It needs it."

Tom Merry gave the exhausted Mr. Stoker an arm, and helped him out of the study. The young pugilist leaned heavily upon Tom Merry as they went down the passage. A crowd accompanied them into the quadrangle.

"Awf'ly sowwy you were licked, Stokah, old chap," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "It was beastly bad luck Dawwel chippin' in like that. Of course, he was bound to do it, as Watty thwew himself undah his pwotection."

"It's all right," groaned Mr. Stoker, "though how I'm going to walk to Wayland in this state is more than I know."

"You're not goin' to walk, deah boy," said D'Arcy promptly. "I'm goin' to dvice you. Taggles will let me have his twap if I tip him. Wait in the wood, and I'll bring the twap out, and dvice you ovah with pleasuah."

"You'll get into trouble."

"Not at all. I'll pick you up outside, and Watty won't know. Anyway, I'd wisk it. I wegard you as a hewo, deah boy, though unfortunately not a conquewin' hewo."

"But—"

"Not a word. I'll go and fix it up with Taggles."

Arthur Augustus rushed away. A crowd of juniors helped Mr. Stoker down to the gates, and out into the road. The pugilist sank down on the grassy bank besides the lane, panting. He was recovering a little, but he was still in a very exhausted state.

Arthur Augustus found it quite easy to arrange with Taggles about the trap. Taggles discreetly did not ask what it was for, and Arthur Augustus' handsome tip of a golden "quid" satisfied Taggles in every way. In a few minutes, D'Arcy drove up in the trap, and Tom Merry and Blake helped Mr. Stoker into it, and mounted with him, to see him home. And the crowd of juniors gave them a cheer as they drove away with a flourish.

"Well, this has been a day," Monty Lowther remarked, as the juniors walked back into the gates. "Beats cricket hollow!"

"But what do you think of Ratty?" said Kangaroo in deep disgust. "He's going to get Darrel into trouble with the Head, after the splendid way old Darrel stood up for him. He's a—a—a—well, there ain't a word!"

And all the fellows agreed that there was no expression in the English language strong enough to describe Mr. Horace Ratcliff and his conduct.

CHAPTER 10.

Mr. Ratcliff is Not Satisfied.

"SHOCKING!" exclaimed the Head.

Mr. Ratcliff had lost no time.

As soon as Dr. Holmes returned to St. Jim's, the New Housemaster presented himself, with his report of the unprecedented happenings of the afternoon.

The Head was greatly shocked. Sometimes he had considered the Housemaster a little too severe, and had, indeed, told him so. But he was far from knowing Mr. Ratcliff as the boys knew him. And, to his mind, it was outrageous that an old boy should ever have dreamed of coming back to the school to "whop" his Housemaster.

The scene in the School House, as Mr. Ratcliff described it, made the Head greatly indignant. But when Mr. Ratcliff went on to report Darrel, and press for his exemplary punishment, Dr. Holmes' expression changed.

"Really, Mr. Ratcliff—" he said.

"The boy defied me openly, in the presence of several masters and a crowd of juniors," said Mr. Ratcliff. "But for him, the ruffian would have been detained, and given into the custody of a constable."

"Which would have caused a terrible scandal," said the Head drily. "I am afraid, Mr. Ratcliff, that in this you allowed your natural indignation to outweigh your good judgment."

Mr. Ratcliff set his thin lips hard.

"But the rascal should be punished, sir—"

"It seems that he has been punished," said the Head. "I think it would be more judicious to let the matter drop. After all, you have received no hurt. As for punishing Darrel, surely it would look a little ungrateful on your part, Mr. Ratcliff, when the boy, on your own showing, defended you from attack."

"But the example of his insolence—"

"I will send for him," said the Head.

He rang, and sent Toby to fetch Darrel.

Darrel of the Sixth was having tea with Kildare and Langton when the house-page came to find him. The cricketers had returned, and Kildare and Langton were listening with keen interest to Darrel's story of the afternoon's happenings. They had noticed the state of his face at once.

"Please, Master Darrel, the Head wants you," said Toby, putting his shock head in at the door.

Darrel smiled quietly as he rose.

"Is Mr. Ratcliff with the Head, Toby?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Very well; cut off."

"Means trouble, I suppose?" said Kildare anxiously.

"Ratty won't forgive me for not letting him jump on Stoker when he was down," said Darrel. "Stoker is a thoroughly decent chap, and I like him. Ratty would have piled on him with pleasure when he couldn't defend himself; and I stopped him."

"And the beast has reported you, after what you did for him?" said Langton.

"Yes; I expected that."

"I hardly think the Head will be down on you," remarked Kildare. "He's a bit more of a sport than Ratty. But if there's trouble, we shall all stand by you. We'll get the whole of the Sixth to go to the Head about it."

Darrel nodded, and quitted the study. He could not help feeling a little uneasy as he made his way to the Head. He had acted rightly, according to his views; and Mr. Ratcliff had certainly been guilty of the blackest ingratitude and meanness. But the prefect could not be sure how the Head would look at the matter.

But he need not have been alarmed. The moment the Sixth-Former entered the Head's study, Dr. Holmes uttered an exclamation of concern.

"Darrel! My dear boy! Your face—"

"It's all right, sir," said Darrel, with a rather twisted smile. "I got rather knocked about this afternoon, but Mr. Ratcliff will tell you I was not to blame for getting into the fight."

"You are terribly, terribly bruised" said the Head. "You received these injuries in defending Mr. Ratcliff?"

"I got them in the fight with Stoker, sir."

Dr. Holmes looked at Mr. Ratcliff. His expression made the mean-souled man feel a little uncomfortable.

"Darrel has been injured in this manner, in your defence, Mr. Ratcliff," said the Head, in a cutting tone. "Yet you report him to me for punishment. I fail to understand this."

"I do not deny that Darrel did his duty, so far as that went," said Mr. Ratcliff. "What I complain of is his insolence to me afterwards."

"I think you might make some allowance for the boy, considering what he had gone through," said the Head tartly. "As for doing his duty, Darrel has done more than that. It is not generally considered a regular part of a prefect's duties to protect a Housemaster from assault, and to face a grown-up man in personal conflict. I think Darrel has acted very bravely and nobly, and I certainly cannot entertain for one moment the idea of punishing him. You may go, Darrel; and I compliment you upon your conduct to-day."

"Thank you, sir!" said Darrel. And, without glancing at the New House master, the prefect left the study.

Mr. Ratcliff's face was almost green. The Head's words had humiliated him, in the presence of the School House prefect; and his feelings towards Darrel were bitter indeed at that moment. But the Head was not finished yet.

"I must add, Mr. Ratcliff, that I consider Darrel showed more judgment than yourself, in not wishing the police to be called into the matter," he said. "I would not say so before the boy; but I must say so to you. And after he had faced such injuries in your defence, when only his own generous nature called upon him to defend you at all, I must say that a complaint of his conduct comes very ungracefully from you. I must ask you to let me hear no more of the matter."

Mr. Ratcliff rose to his feet. He suppressed his feelings with difficulty.

"Very well, sir," he said, in a gasping voice. "It is, of course, for you to decide."

And he left the study, afraid to trust himself to say more.

But his expression, as he crossed the quadrangle to his own House, was observed on all sides, and the fellows exchanged grins of satisfaction. They knew that Ratty had been trying to make trouble for Darrel; and his look showed that he had not succeeded. Whereat there was general rejoicing.

Mr. Ratcliff entered his own House, boxed the ears of Redfern and Lawrence in the passage, and went to his study, in a most unenviable frame of mind.

He had passed through a terrible afternoon, and he was feeling bitter and vengeful. Mr. Stoker's visit, certainly, was not likely to be repeated. He did not feel in any further danger from that quarter. But he had been made to look utterly ridiculous; and he had been defied. He ground his teeth as he recalled his hurried and ignominious flight across the quadrangle, with Stoker of the Fifth at his heels. And Darrel. The prefect had defended him, and saved him from the licking he richly deserved, but his feelings towards Darrel amounted to positive hatred. Even while defending him, Darrel had not disguised his contempt for his pusillanimity; and afterwards he had robbed him of his intended victim, and defied him successfully.

Mr. Ratcliff, as he sat with a black brow and a bitter heart in his study, was thinking chiefly of ways and means of punishing his enemies. And chief among his enemies he counted Herbert Stoker, once of the Fifth, and Darrel the prefect, who had stood up in his defence.

CHAPTER 11.

N.G.!

"WE'VE all got to get leave, somehow!" Tom Merry remarked.

It was the following day; and the chums of the School House were in council.

After making the acquaintance of Mr. Stoker, under such peculiar circumstances, Tom Merry & Co. were naturally anxious to go over to Wayland and see Mr. Stoker's show; the Flying Ring, as he called it.

The show was nothing more or less than a travelling boxing-show; but Mr. Stoker had hit upon "The Flying Ring" as a more striking title. But the juniors were interested in boxing, and especially interested in Mr. Stoker. They were interested in him as a boxer, as an old boy of St. Jim's, and above all as the fellow who had given the whole school such an exciting time.

They wanted very much to see the show; but there was a difficulty in the way. For the school gates were locked at dusk, and after that it was necessary to obtain a special pass from a master or prefect to go out of gates. And the ring in Wayland Hall did not open till eight o'clock.

And Tom Merry & Co. had a strong suspicion that their object would not exactly be approved of by the powers that were.

They themselves quite approved of Mr. Stoker and the intention with which he had visited St. Jim's on the previous day. But they knew that the masters took quite a different view.

The Head and all the masters regarded Mr. Herbert Stoker's conduct as shocking to the last degree. Certainly it had been a little out of the common. And any connection whatever with Mr. Stoker would probably be frowned upon by the Head.

"We shall have to be awfully diplomatic about it," said Monty Lowther thoughtfully. "No good saying we want to see Stoker's show. That would nip it in the bud at once."

"Then what are we going to ask leave for?" said Blake.

"We must think of a jolly good reason."

"Yaas, wathah! At the same time, it is impos to pre-vacate on the mattah in any way," remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

So the matter was a difficult one. Leave had to be obtained somehow, without disclosing its real object, and at the same time without departing from the truth. It was a difficulty that gave the juniors much food for thought.

Monty Lowther was the fellow who hit upon the solution. The thoughtful frown suddenly departed from his face, and he burst into a chuckle.

"I've got it!" he exclaimed. "Brooke!"

"Brooke!" repeated Tom Merry. "What about Brooke?"

"Brooke's the chap to help us."

"Blessed if I see how a Fourth Form kid—a day boy, too—can help us," said Manners, a little peevishly.

"Of course, you don't see it," agreed Lowther. "That's why I've got to point it out to you, old chap. Brooke is, as you sagely remark, a day boy. He goes home to his home near Wayland after lessons. Ergo—that's Latin—"

"Oh, get to the point!"

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NEXT
WEDNESDAY—

"THE SECRET COMMITTEE!"

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of
Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

"Ergo," repeated Monty Lowther calmly; "or therefore, to put it in the vulgar tongue; therefore, Brooke's the chap to help us. It isn't uncommon for a fellow to go home to tea with Brooke, and stay a few hours with him, is it?"

"But half a dozen fellows can't suddenly go home to tea with Brooke, and stay the evening, ass! Brooke doesn't give evening parties."

"One at a time," said Lowther. "It takes a fellow with brains to think these things out, and I've done it. You see, there are a variety of masters and prefects at St. Jim's; and we're not all bound to ask the same one. For instance, I go to my respected and honoured Form-master, Mr. Linton, and ask for leave to go home to tea with Brooke and stay a few hours with him. No reason why he should say no."

"Quite so; but—" Tommy goes to Mr. Railton, and asks leave to go home to tea with Brooke and stay a few hours with him," pursued Lowther. "No reason why he should say no."

"Yes; but—" Manners goes to Kildare, and asks leave to go home to tea with Brooke and stay a few hours with him—" Oh, cheese it!"

"Blake goes to Darrel, and asks for leave to go home to tea with Brooke and stay a few hours—" "Ring off, you ass!"

"Herries goes to Langton, and asks leave—" "Look here—"

"Digby goes to his Form-master, Lathom, and asks leave to—" "Fathead!"

"D'Arcy goes to Rushden, and—" "Shut up!" roared all the juniors together, and Monty Lowther at last kindly consented to ring off."

"It's a jolly good idea!" said Tom Merry thoughtfully, when Lowther had been reduced to silence at last. "If we all go to different masters and prefects, we can all get leave—or nearly all of us. I wonder how such a jolly good idea came into your head, Lowther?"

"Some fellows have brains," explained Lowther modestly. "Yes; but as you're not one of that sort—"

"Look here, you ass—" "Pway wait a moment," said Arthur Augustus. "If we say we are goin' home to tea with Brooke, to stay a few hours with him, how can we go to the Wayland Hall to see Stokah? That would weally amount to pweavacation."

"Ass!" said Monty Lowther politely. "Weally, Lowthah—"

"We're going home to tea with Brooke," said Lowther. "I suppose we can ask Brooke to take us home to tea, can't we?"

"Yaas; but if we say we're goin' to stay with him for the evenin', we shall be bound to stay with him for the evenin'."

"Well, ass, that's what we're going to do!"

"But how are we goin' to see Stokah's show if we stay the evenin' with Brooks of the Fourth?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus excitedly.

"By the simple process of taking Brooke of the Fourth to the show with us," said Lowther.

"Bai Jove! I nevah thought of that!"

"Naturally you didn't! A certain mental apparatus is required for thinking of things, and it's not in your line at all."

"Weally, you ass—"

"Jolly good!" said Blake. "We can get leave and go to the show, and keep it dark, and still stick to the truth like Georgie Washington. It's all serene all along the line. Let's go and see Brooke and put it to him. I don't know whether he's prepared to have an army home to tea with him, but he'll have to stand it for the good of the cause."

"Oh, that's all right. Bwooke is a bwick."

And the Co. hurried out in search of Brooke of the Fourth. They found the day-boy of St. Jim's, and put the matter to him, and Dick Brooke entered into the scheme with great heartiness. As a day-boy, it was not necessary for Brooke himself to ask for leave. The Co. proceeded to carry out the scheme of obtaining passes from different quarters, and they were successful beyond their hopes.

They had all been extremely good that day, in the hope of getting leave after locking-up that evening, and they found masters and prefects in a most amenable mood.

As each fellow went to a different master or prefect for leave, the said master or prefect had no suspicion of the fact that a whole army was going out, and leave was granted to each individual junior to go home to tea with Brooke of the Fourth and stay a few hours in the evening with him.

The Co. met in the tuckshop after their successful round, to celebrate their success with ginger-pop. Figgins & Co. came

in, looking very glum. The chums of the New House seemed to be in a despondent mood.

"Watty been goin' for you again, deah boys?" Arthur Augustus asked sympathetically.

Figgins grunted.

"I believe Ratty's got second-sight, or else deals in black magic, or something of the sort," he said. "How else could the awful rotter have guessed that we meant to go to Stoker's show?"

"Bai Jove! Are you goin', too?"

"No. We were going, but Ratty's knocked it on the head. We were going to think of some dodge for getting leave for the evening; and Ratty must have guessed it somehow, for he's put up a notice in our House that Wayland Hall is out of bounds."

"The awful wottah!"

"Oh, the spoofing beast!" exclaimed Tom Merry indignantly. "I suppose he guessed that some of the fellows would like to go over, and he's dropped on it to stop 'em. Lucky he isn't our Housemaster!"

"We're all going, Figgy," said Blake. "We've all got leave to go home to tea with Brooke—that was our way of putting it—and we're going to take Brooke with us to see the show—see?"

Figgins grinned.

"I'm sorry for you!" he remarked.

"Nothing to be sorry about that I can see," said Blake. "Of course, if they knew we were going to the Flying Ring it would be U P; but they don't know."

"Ratty's gone to see the Head," grunted Kerr. "After posting up that notice in the New House, he went over to your old House, and my belief is that he's gone to see the Head about this very matter. He's just as much down on you chaps as he is on us, and the Head will be twisted round his finger. You see, the old boy doesn't approve of Stoker. He can't see what a jolly good thing it would be for an old boy to come here and give Ratty a whopping!"

"Bai Jove!"

Dismay fell upon the chums of the School House. They had carried out their little scheme so successfully, and all difficulties seemed to be over, and it had not occurred to them that any interference from Mr. Ratcliff was to be looked for.

Yet they might have expected it. It had been only too easy for the New House master to guess that the juniors would want to visit the Flying Ring, and only too easy for him to put the matter to the Head so that Dr. Holmes would come down heavily on the bare idea.

"My hat!" said Blake, breathing hard. "If—if that rotter has chipped in and queered our evening, we—we'll scalp him!"

"I'll bet you that's just what he's done, though," said Fatty Wynn. "Ten to one you'll find a notice up in your House soon, same as we have in ours."

Fatty Wynn's prediction was correct.

Half-an-hour later Tom Merry & Co. were gathered round the notice-board in the School House, upon which was a new paper in the well-known handwriting of Dr. Holmes:

"For the remainder of this week Wayland Hall is out of bounds."

"H. HOLMES (Headmaster)."

The juniors gazed at that notice with feelings too deep for words. They recognised the hand of Ratty in it, of course. Their deep-laid scheme went for nothing. As Monty Lowther dolefully remarked, it was now N.G.—no good; or, as Blake put it more forcibly, it was N.B.G.—no blooming good.

"Oh," said Tom Merry at last, with a deep breath, "this simply beats it! Figgy, old man, don't be surprised if your Housemaster gets lynched some day."

"No such luck!" said Figgy sadly.

"Bai Jove! Are we goin' to stand this, deah boys?"

"We've got to!" growled Blake. "We can't cheek the Head. The place is put out of bounds, and that settles it. The remainder of this week! Of course, Stoker's show is only there for this week—it finishes on Saturday. It'll be at Bunchester next week, and that's fifteen miles away. And I'll wager that next week Bunchester will be out of bounds. There's no keeping one's end up with Ratty."

"The awful wottah!"

"He's a blessed thought-reader," groaned Digby, "and he's done us—done us brown! Brooke, old man, you won't have an army home to tea this evening after all."

The great scheme was off—very much off—and the feelings of Tom Merry & Co. towards the New House master were simply indescribable.

CHAPTER 12.

A Surprising Proposition.

BUZZ-ZZZ!

phone-bell in the prefects' room in the School House was buzzing. It was Saturday afternoon, and nearly everybody was out of doors. The prefects' room—that apartment sacred to members of the Sixth Form who had attained the rank of school prefects—was empty.

The telephone-bell buzzed in vain. Tom Merry heard it as he came along the passage, and paused to look in. The juniors sometimes used that telephone by special permission. As there was no one in the room, Tom Merry felt bound to answer the telephone, and ascertain who was wanted, with the good-natured intention of calling that person in. So he took the receiver off the hook.

"Hallo!" came a voice along the wires, which Tom Merry recognised at once as the voice of Herbert Stoker, once of the Fifth Form at St. Jim's.

"My hat! Is that you, Stoker?"

"Stoker it is!" came the reply.

"Then you're on the wrong number," said Tom Merry.

"This is the School House, not the New House, Stoker. And Ratty's not here. I'm Tom Merry."

"That's all right. It's the School House I want this time," replied Mr. Stoker, and Tom Merry thought he detected a chuckle.

"Right-ho!" said Tom. "Who do you want? By the way, I want to tell you, now I've got a chance, that we were coming over to see your show, only we've been stopped. Ratty persuaded the Head to put Wayland Hall out of bounds the other day."

"Sorry!" said Mr. Stoker. "I should have been glad to see you and your pals. Though, perhaps, it's all the better, as matters have turned out. I want to speak to that chap who whopped me the other day—Darrel. Is he there?"

"There's nobody here at present," said Tom, "but if you'll hang on a few minutes I'll call Darrel as quickly as I can."

"Thanks! I'll hold on."

Tom Merry hurried out of the prefects' room and looked for Darrel. He found the prefect under the elms in the quadrangle. Darrel of the Sixth was seated on one of the old oak benches, his hands in his pockets, and a thoughtful frown upon his brow. Probably he was thinking out the little problem he had confided to Kildare, being no nearer now to the solution of it.

"You're wanted, Darrel," said Tom Merry. "There's a chap ringing you up on the telephone. I answered the call as there was no one in the prefects' room, and the chap says he wants to speak to you."

Tom Merry did not mention that the "chap" was Mr. Stoker. He was not sure whether Darrel would want to speak to the proprietor of the celebrated Flying Ring, and he did not want Stoker of the Fifth to be disappointed.

"Thank you," said Darrel, rising. "I'll go at once."

Tom Merry could not help wondering what Mr. Stoker wanted with Darrel of the Sixth. But it was no business of his, and he dismissed the matter from his mind, and went to join his chums on the cricket-ground. Darrel hurried to the prefects' room, and found the caller still waiting on the telephone.

"Hallo! Are you there?" he asked into the receiver.

"Yes, I'm here. Is that Darrel?"

"I'm Darrel. I think I know your voice."

"I'm Stoker."

"I thought so. What's wanted?"

"In the first place, how are you? Got over the scrap?"

"Pretty well," said Darrel good-humouredly. "My eye is still a little off colour. How is your nose?"

"Still like an overripe strawberry," said Mr. Stoker cheerfully. "I suppose nobody can hear what I'm saying to you?"

"No. There's another receiver, but I'm alone here."

"Good! Now I'm going to make a business proposition to you."

"Indeed?"

"You don't bear any malice, of course, for that scrap the other day? You had the best of it, anyway."

"Not in the least," said Darrel. "Whether I had had the best or the worst of it wouldn't make any difference. I assure you I feel quite friendly."

"Good enough! I suppose you wouldn't mind helping an old St. Jim's fellow out of a hole?"

"I'd be glad to, if there's anything I could do."

Darrel wondered for a moment whether Mr. Stoker was hard up, and wanted to borrow something. Under the present circumstances, Darrel was the last person in the world to be able to help him in that case.

"You could if you would," said Mr. Stoker. "You're the

only chap who could, too. To come to business, would twenty pounds be any good to you?"

Darrel started.

Twenty pounds! It was the sum he wanted—the precise sum he had mentioned to Kildare. Certainly twenty pounds would be of the greatest "good" to him. But what Mr. Stoker was driving at was a mystery beyond his powers to fathom.

"Well?" came Mr. Darrel's inquiring voice.

"Yes," said Darrel. "I don't understand what you're driving at, but certainly twenty pounds would come in very handy to me just now. As a matter of fact, I'm in bad want of it. But what do you mean?"

"Would you like to earn twenty pounds?"

"Yes, rather!"

"And do an old St. Jim's boy a good turn at the same time—what?"

"Certainly, if possible."

"Bravo!" said Mr. Stoker. "Then it's all plain sailing. Lemme see. You're in the Sixth, ain't you, and a prefect?"

"Yes."

"Then it would be quite easy for you to walk out of the school this evening, and no questions asked?"

"Quite easy," said Darrel, his wonder increasing. "No difficulty at all about that. As a prefect, I have a key of the side gate, and I keep what hours I like—within reason, of course."

"You could get out this evening, then?"

"Yes. I could ask Langton to see lights out in the Fourth. It's my turn this week, but I could arrange that all right. But what—"

"Then I'll put it to you. You are a first-class boxer. You knocked me out once, and you could do it again."

"I don't know," said Darrel, laughing. "I'd try, if necessary. I hope you're not thinking of coming here to see Mr. Ratcliffe again. Enough is as good as a feast, you know."

Mr. Stoker's chuckle was quite audible on the telephone.

"No," he said. "I'm not a hog, and I know when I've had enough. I'm going to see Ratty some other time—when a fellow about your size isn't knocking about, you know. But never mind Ratty now. This has nothing to do with Ratty. I'm in a hole, and you can help me out. You know I'm giving a show here—a boxing show?"

"Yes. I'm sorry to say that it has been put out of bounds for the school."

"Not out of bounds for you, I hope?"

"No; that doesn't apply to prefects," said Darrel.

"But—"

"Then it's all serene. I'm in a hole, as I said. My boxing partner, Wallaby Bill—you've heard of Wallaby Bill?"

"No," said Darrel, with a smile.

"Well, Wallaby Bill is a good man, but he's got one weakness—he goes on the flowing bowl a lot. And now he's been nailed."

"Nailed!" repeated Darrel, puzzled.

"Yes. Last night, after the show, some friends of his took him on a spree, and the silly chump finished up by fighting a policeman. Result—they yanked him off to the stone jug, and he's there for three days, and I'm in a hole. Of course, it serves him right; but it doesn't serve me right, you see. I've got the whole house booked up for this evening. Every seat taken. Saturday night's our great night, you know. The place will be crammed, and if the show don't come off I shall have to hand the money back—a good round sum—at the box-office, and the loss will be awful. Besides that, some of the audience are a tough lot from the river—barges and so on—and they may wreck the place if they think they're spoofed out of the show after paying their money. You see what an awful hole it is."

"It does seem pretty bad," agreed Darrel.

"I tell you, I was tearing my hair this morning when I heard about Wallaby Bill making a fool of himself like that. I've been trying to bail him out, but it's no go. They won't let him go for love or money. He blacked the bobby's eye, and the man seems spiteful about it."

"No wonder!"

"Well, you see, I couldn't help it; but I'm completely done in. Even if the audience don't get ratty and wreck the place, I shall have to give the money back. I've no time to get any other man to take his place—not a man who's good enough—in a Sleepy Hollow place like this. I've telephoned far and wide, but I've had no luck. I simply can't get a boxer good enough in the time. I'm landed."

"Sorry!"

"Well, will you help me out?" demanded Mr. Stoker.

"I?" said Darrel. "I can't help you."

"Yes, you can, if you will. You put up a topping fight when I tackled you the other day, and you could do the

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NEXT
WEDNESDAY—

"THE SECRET COMMITTEE!"

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of
Tom Merry & Co. by MARTIN CLIFFORD.

same again. You don't mind a hard knock or two. And, you see, the fight in my show has to be the real thing—no brutality, of course; that's not allowed by law." Darrel thought he heard a chuckle again. "Gloves on, and everything in order. But it has to be a real show to give the audience their money's worth. I want you to come over here this evening and take Wallaby Bill's place."

Darrel gasped.

"I! My hat!"

"You could do it," urged Mr. Stoker. "You're the only chap who can help me out of this awful fix. I shall lose sixty solid quids if I have to give the money back at the box-office, and if I put on a 'dud' and a rotten show the audience will scalp me. And if I don't give a show, and give the money back, they may scalp me all the same. You can do it if you like. Twenty quid for the evening! Not a bad screw, eh, for an hour or so with the gloves on?"

"By George!"

"Nobody need know," went on Mr. Stoker. "The place has been put out of bounds, you tell me, for your school, so there's no danger of any St. Jim's fellow seeing you there. Masters don't go to boxing shows, so there's no danger in that quarter. It will be as safe as houses."

"Safe enough," admitted Darrel.

"And there's no harm in it. A bit against school rules, I admit, but there's no harm—not a scrap of harm. You'll help me out of a fearful hole; and one St. Jim's fellow ought to stand by another—what?"

"Ye-es."

"It's a fair fight with the gloves on—nothing disgraceful about it. You'll come on in fighting trim. I've got all the things ready for you, and nobody will suspect for a minute that you're a schoolboy. I'll present you to the audience as the Bunchester Bantam, or something like that—see? You'll save me sixty quid and a scalp, and you'll pouch twenty of the best. You needn't mind taking it. You'll have earned it fair and square when you've stood up to me for fifteen rounds."

Darrel drew a deep breath.

"Well, what do you say?" asked Stoker.

"I—I hardly know what to say!" stammered Darrel. "To tell you the truth, I'm in great need just now of a sum of money—twenty pounds would do nicely. I want it very specially. And I'd like to do you a good turn. But—but—the Head— Well, it's against all the rules, you know, and I should run the risk of being sacked from the school if it came out. Not that I'm thinking only of that; but—but it isn't exactly in keeping with my duties as a prefect, you know."

"I understand, my boy; but it's doing a good turn to an old boy of St. Jim's, and that will be a sort of make-weight—what?"

Darrel laughed.

"Yes; in a way."

"And the risk's nil. Nobody will know you—not a soul. And you'll look a good bit different, too, in boxing rig. And I'll put a touch of make-up on your chivvy, to alter you a bit. Safe as houses."

"Looks like it," agreed Darrel. "I'll run the risk, I think. What I'm thinking of is the breach of rules—being a prefect, you know—"

"Yes, I know; there's the rub," admitted Stoker. "Still, there's no harm in it; and you'll be doing an old boy a good turn."

"Give me some time to think it over," said Darrel, after a pause. "I suppose I needn't answer at once?"

"Right! Ring me up in an hour's time," said Mr. Stoker. "Wayland one-nought-one—that's my number. I'll wait."

"Good enough. In an hour, then."

Darrel rang off, and walked out of the prefects' room. His brain was almost in a whirl. The matter required thinking out, and as yet he could not decide what he would do.

Twenty pounds—the sum he wanted, for a kind and friendly purpose! Twenty pounds—fairly earned by his own efforts! It was a great temptation. And then—to help an old boy out of a desperate difficulty—an old boy whom he had handled severely, and to whom he owed some reparation for that. From one point of view, Mr. Stoker's sudden offer came like manna in the desert. But—there was his duty as a prefect of the school!

That he could get permission for such an escapade was, of course, out of the question. And the Head, if he came to hear of it, would be angry—justly angry. It was quite on the cards that Darrel would be "sacked" for it, though his excellent record would stand him in good stead. Yet, there was no real harm in it. It was breaking the school rules, certainly; but no harm could be done to a single soul. After all, it would be only a technical fault. And a good

turn would be done for a man to whom he owed some reparation, and—

Darrel thought it out, shut up in his study, for an hour.

At the end of that hour the rights and wrongs of the matter seemed to be still equally balanced. But the prefect felt that he would be justified in doing as Mr. Stoker asked him. He could not expect the Head to think so, but the Head would not know. Least said soonest mended! And he thought of the sweet, kind-faced friend he had not seen for so long, who was now in the grip of undeserved poverty, to whom the fund meant so much; and however generously that fund was subscribed to, there would not be many contributions of twenty pounds. That decided him.

He returned to the telephone, rang up Mr. Stoker, and accepted the offer; and if he had any inward misgivings they were driven away by the warm gratitude and thanks of the old boy. It was settled now; he had given his word, and Mr. Stoker depended on him, and there was no further room for debate.

CHAPTER 13.

Mr. Ratcliff Means Mischief,

"**H** ALLO, Darrel's going it again!"

Tom Merry made the remark as the Terrible Three entered the gymnasium later in the afternoon.

A ring of fellows had gathered round to see Darrel and Kildare with the gloves on. Though several days had elapsed since the encounter with Mr. Stoker, Darrel's face still showed very plain traces of it. But physically he was perfectly fit, as he showed now that he stood up to the captain of St. Jim's.

Kildare, big and athletic and good boxer as he was, found it extremely difficult to keep his end up against Darrel.

The chums of the Shell joined the crowd of onlookers. A mill with the gloves on, between Kildare and Darrel, was always worth watching. Darrel seemed to be putting more keenness than usual into the contest. As a matter of fact, he was testing his form for the boxing match that night in the ring at Wayland Hall.

He was glad to realise that he was in first-class form. He had never boxed better, and had seldom felt more fit. He would do justice to Mr. Stoker's selection of him, and he would fairly earn his twenty pounds.

Now that the matter was decided, Darrel had given up pondering over it; but he felt no misgivings now. Without the twenty pounds to come, he knew that he would have decided in exactly the same manner, for the sake of helping Mr. Stoker out of a hole. And knowing that his motives were disinterested, he was satisfied with what he was going to do.

"Bai Jove, Dawwel's in toppin' form!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, watching the contest with great interest through his eyeglass. "He could make wings wound Mr. Stokah now! I should weally like to see Dawwel matched against Carpentiah—what?"

"Carpontgeay, you mean, I suppose?" remarked Digby, who was keen on French, and very careful indeed with his 'ongs' and 'bongs'.

"I mean Carpentiah!" said Arthur Augustus stiffly.

"Carpontgeay!"

"Carpentiah!"

"My hat! Kildare's down!" exclaimed Tom Merry, interrupting that discussion on the name of the famous French boxer. "By Jove!"

Kildare grinned rather ruefully as he jumped up.

"I'm sorry!" said Darrel. "I didn't mean to drive out like that! I—I was thinking—"

"Thinking you were tackling Stoker again—what?" said Kildare, laughing, as he peeled off the gloves. "I'm rather sorry for Stoker that you hadn't the mittens on the other day. Thanks, I'm done; you're too good for me!"

And the two prefects strolled away out of the gym.

The Terrible Three called in at the tuckshop for supplies for tea, and found Figgins & Co. there. They were also laying in supplies—Fatty Wynn laying them in thoroughly on the spot, in the safest place.

"Anything new from Ratty?" asked Tom Merry, as Dame Taggles filled his somewhat extensive orders.

"Not so far as we're concerned," said Figgins. "But there's something deadly in store for somebody."

"How do you know?" asked Tom, with interest.

"Ratty has been quite good-tempered this afternoon, and I saw him smiling," said Figgins, with a shake of the head. "That means bad business for somebody. I can't quite understand him. He came into the school library while I was there, and, of course, I thought he was after me; but he didn't even look at me. Took out a big law book, and marched out with it under his arm."

"A law book!" said Tom Merry, puzzled. "What the

"dickens does Ratty want with a law book? He ain't studying law, I suppose?"

"And he was poring over it when I took some lines into his study," said Kerr. "And he's told Monteith to be careful to keep order in the House this evening, as he's going out, and may be back late."

"Something's on," said Figgins. "Luckily, it ain't our poor little selves this time. Even Ratty can't go to law with us."

"Trying to work up a case against Stoker, perhaps," said Monty Lowther. "But he can't charge him with assault and battery, for he didn't assault and batter him. There isn't any legal punishment for an old boy making a Housemaster hop out of his study window."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Besides, I don't believe the Head would allow him to make the matter public, and make a scandal of it," said Tom Merry. "If anything had been going to be done against Stoker, it would have been done already. I suppose Ratty's up to something, but—"

"Oh, he's deep," said Kerr—"very deep! But he can't hurt us with his blessed law books. And I don't see how he can hurt Stoker. I only hope Stoker catches him out some evening, and gives him a jolly good hiding, that's all!"

And the Terrible Three heartily concurred in that pious wish.

Figgins & Co. returned to their House with their supply of provisions. Figgins had some lines to do—lines had been plentiful in the New House of late. While the Co. were getting the tea Figgins did his lines, and took them to Mr. Ratcliff's study. He tapped at the door, but the Housemaster was apparently deeply occupied, for he did not answer. Figgins rapped again, and then Mr. Ratcliff's acid voice snapped out "Come in!"

Figgins went in. Mr. Ratcliff was seated at the table, with a huge and musty volume before him. It was the big legal book Kerr had seen him poring over an hour before. He was still busy with it.

"My lines, sir!" said Figgins meekly.

"Put them on the table, and go!" said Mr. Ratcliff irritably.

And Figgins did so, and left the study, greatly wondering. Why Mr. Ratcliff should be taking legal studies at his time of life was a mystery.

Mr. Ratcliff pored over the volume for some time longer, and then paced up and down the study, his lips set tight and his eyes glinting.

"It is possible," he murmured—"quite possible! These prize-fighting shows—for they are nothing less, whatever they may be called—frequently pass the limits imposed by the law, and nothing is said or done. This man Stoker is a barbarous ruffian—an utter brute and hooligan. I have every reason to believe that his show consists of a mere prize-fight, thinly disguised under the forms of a boxing match. The police do not move in such matters unless the flouting of the law is very flagrant indeed; but if an information is laid by a gentleman in a responsible position, they will have no choice but to act."

Mr. Ratcliff gritted his teeth.

"I will visit that brutal show to-night—I will see it with my own eyes. I will watch it from beginning to end. And if Herbert Stoker transgresses the law in a single particular, he is open to prosecution, and I will see that information is laid in the right quarter, and that prompt action is taken. I shall not appear in the matter at all, excepting as the person giving information." Mr. Ratcliff did not use the word "informer": it had an unpleasant sound, even to his ears. "Let his disgraceful exhibition of brute force and hooliganism pass the legal limit for such displays, and he is in my power, and he shall suffer!"

And Mr. Ratcliff smiled—that same smile that Figgins had seen upon his face, and which the sapient Figgy guessed to mean mischief for somebody.

It did mean mischief!

Mr. Ratcliff expected—and hoped—that Herbert Stoker's display in the Flying Ring at Wayland Hall would exceed the legal sanction for such shows. In that he was extremely likely to be disappointed, for Herbert Stoker was a business man, and not at all likely to get himself and his ring into trouble with the law. But, all unknown to himself, Mr. Ratcliff was in a fair way to make a discovery dangerous enough to one whom he disliked more than he disliked Herbert Stoker. For that evening Darrel of the Sixth was to appear in the boxing-ring at Wayland Hall, never dreaming that Horace Ratcliff, who detested boxing and boxing-men and athletics of every sort, would pay a visit to such a place.

From a quarter whence he could not possibly have expected it, there was danger ahead for Darrel of the Sixth, and, all unconscious of it, the School House prefect was making his preparations for the evening show in the Flying Ring.

CHAPTER 14.

The Fighting Prefect.

"GOOD man!" said Mr. Stoker, as he gripped Darrel's hand at the stage-door of the Wayland Hall.

The prefect of St. Jim's, in a long overcoat, with his cap pulled down over his brows, had arrived. Mr. Stoker met him at the door with an irradiated face. He was evidently extremely glad and relieved to see Darrel.

"I was afraid something might turn up to stop you," he explained, as he drew Darrel into the house. "But it's all serene."

"Right as rain!" said Darrel cheerfully. "If you're sure I'll do—"

"You'll do all right. And you're in good time, too. Feeling fit?"

"Fit as a fiddle!"

"Good! The people are coming in already," said Mr. Stoker. "Nearly every seat in the house taken—all excepting a box or two—and a big crowd waiting for the unreserved seats. There will be a record cram to-night. I don't dare to think of what would have happened if I'd had to tell the people that the show was off. They're a pretty tough crowd in the pit and gallery here, you know; good men enough, but liable to break things if they think they've been spoofed. Give 'em what they've paid for, and they're all right; but if they think they're being spoofed then the band begins to play. But you're far and away better than Wallaby Bill at his best."

Darrel smiled.

"Glad to hear it," he said. "When do we go on?"

"An hour's time," said Mr. Stoker. "The show ain't all boxing, you know. That's the piece de resistance; but I have to give them trimmings. I've got a trick cyclist, and a conjurer, and a funny man, and they all do your little bit before the boxing begins. Come along. I'll take you to your dressing-room and show you your outfit. I've got everything ready. And mind, I'll never forget this, Master Darrel. You've done me a thumping good turn by coming here, and if I can ever do the like for you, I'm yours to command."

"Oh, that's all right!"

"The twenty quid is as good as in the bank," said Mr. Stoker. "But I know very well that that ain't your reason for coming—not half! Far as that goes, I'd willingly make it thirty if you asked for it."

The St. Jim's prefect shook his head.

"Twenty is the figure," he said. "I wouldn't take a shilling, only I happen to want the money, and I was hard put to it to raise it. But if you really think that I shall have earned it fairly, I'll take it with pleasure, not otherwise."

"Earned it," said Mr. Stoker, with a grin. "I should say so. You've saved me sixty solid quids for a start, and if I went halves with you it would be no more than fair."

"Then I'll take the twenty after the show," said Darrel.

"Good enough."

They reached the dressing-room, and Mr. Stoker looked after Darrel there with anxious care. The Sixth-Former of St. Jim's changed into boxing garb, and certainly his appearance was very different when he had changed. Then Mr. Stoker opened a make-up box.

"Tain't in the least likely that anybody will be in front who's seen you before," he observed; "and nobody would guess that the Bunchester Bantam was a public schoolboy. But my maxim is, you can't be too careful."

"Quite right."

Mr. Stoker gave a few artistic touches to the prefect's face, which made a considerable difference. The touches were few and light, but Herbert Stoker had a skilled hand. Darrel, looking in the glass, smiled at the result. He looked as if he had an incipient beard and moustache, badly shaved. And his eyebrows and eyelashes were darker than was natural.

"I think I shall pass," he remarked. "Nobody would know me now, unless he was very well acquainted with me indeed. And as nobody from St. Jim's can be here, I sha'n't have any acquaintances in the place, only people who may have seen me casually at the most."

"That's so," agreed Mr. Stoker. "Safe as houses."

From the dressing-room, Darrel could hear the noise of the "people in front" cheering the trick cyclist. The prefect was not feeling in the least nervous. The affair was easier than he had anticipated. He was going into the ring to do what he could do well, and there was no occasion for nerves. And the risk was nil, so far as he could see.

After the boxing show, he would return to St. Jim's with twenty pounds in his pocket, as if he were returning from an evening saunter; and no questions would be asked of a prefect. Langton of the Sixth had taken on his duty of shepherding the Fourth Form to their dormitory that night, and Langton had asked no questions. It was usual enough for the prefects to do one another those little services.

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Now that he was fairly in for it, indeed, Darrel felt a certain amount of keenness for the task before him. He was a fine boxer, and he was devoted to boxing, and this was the first chance he had had of facing a good-class pugilist in the ring with the "mittens" on. He was feeling extremely satisfied that Mr. Herbert Stoker had had the happy thought of ringing him up, and making that startling proposition to him.

"Only a few minutes now," said Mr. Stoker, as a bell rang. "Feeling pretty fit—what?"

"Quite."

"Pity you ain't in the business," said Stoker regretfully. "There's room for you in my show. Room for a good man anywhere. When you leave St. Jim's, think of me. Nothing to laugh at. I was a St. Jim's fellow once, and I had to live, and I turned to this, and I'm making a good thing of it. Better than competing with a crowd for a rottenly-paid job at tutoring, I think. Well, come on."

Darrel caught his breath as he entered the lighted ring with Mr. Stoker.

The ring had been roped off in professional style, and the seconds were ready at the corners, and the referee was in his place. The house was crowded. Saturday night, as Mr. Stoker had said, was his great night. The expensive seats were all filled, and in the cheaper seats the people were crammed.

Some of the audience, certainly, were rough-looking fellows enough; but quite easy to deal with so long as they were given what they had paid for. But Darrel, as he looked over the sea of faces, realised that Mr. Stoker had been quite right in his fear that, if the audience were disappointed, there would be "trouble." If that rough-and-ready crowd had fancied themselves tricked or bamboozled, there would probably have been very serious trouble indeed.

Mr. Stoker addressed a brief speech to the audience. There was some growling as he explained that Wallaby Bill had met with a slight accident, and was not able to appear as usual that evening. But it quieted down on his further announcement that he had engaged the Bunchester Bantam to take the place of the absent Wallaby, and declared that the Bantam was a better man than Wallaby Bill any day in the week. He added that the proof of the pudding was in the eating, and that ladies and gentlemen had only to watch that exhibition of the great British art of boxing to see for themselves whether the Bantam was a good man or not.

There was a cheer or two, probably from Mr. Stoker's own friends judiciously posted "in front," and for the most part the audience accepted Mr. Stoker's statements in a non-committal way. But they were good-humoured, and evidently resolved to see the fight before they formed an opinion. If they had their money's worth, they would be satisfied; if they hadn't, there would be trouble. That was the attitude of the audience, and Mr. Stoker knew it; and he was more glad than ever that he had captured Darrel of St. Jim's for the show, and had not attempted to pass off a "dud" fight before that critical gathering.

The fat and florid man in evening-dress who acted as referee and timekeeper took out a big gold watch.

Darrel had been a little dazzled at first by the flare of light and the sea of faces; but during Mr. Stoker's speech he had had time to pull himself together. He was quite cool and collected now.

"Seconds out of the ring!"

The audience settled down to watch with keen interest. There were audible and complimentary comments upon Darrel's appearance. He looked splendidly fit and well in the scanty garb which showed off his well-developed form to advantage.

"Time!"

They started.

The first round was quite exciting. The audience were soon in a state of breathless attention. This was no "dud" fight—the blows were real enough, and only the gloves prevented them from being extremely painful. And the boxing was first-class—a joy to the eyes of sporting men.

While the first round was in progress, a thin, angular gentleman entered a box, and sat down, and fixed his eyes upon the figures in the ring.

Darrel was too busy now to have eyes for the audience, and he did not notice the new-comer, but the new-comer noticed him.

For it was Mr. Horace Ratcliff, the Housemaster of the New House at St. Jim's.

Mr. Ratcliff started as his eyes fell upon the young boxer. He had come there specially for Mr. Stoker's benefit, in the hope of seeing something that would enable him to play, with success, the enviable part of the common informer.

But as he watched Darrel he forgot all about his intentions towards Mr. Stoker.

That a prefect of St. Jim's could be there, in the ring, THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 345.

boxing with a pugilist before a rough audience, seemed so utterly impossible, that Mr. Ratcliff's first belief was that it was only a case of a remarkable resemblance.

The changes Mr. Stoker had made in Darrel's appearance, too, puzzled him at first. The appearance of a mottled chin and a budding moustache, and the dark eyebrows, did not disguise Darrel, but they made his aspect very different from what was usual.

Yet Mr. Ratcliff, though he did not actually think that it was Darrel, watched the young boxer with an intent gaze, his eyes glinting. If such a thing had only been possible—if it had only been Darrel, playing so wild a prank—what a complete revenge would have been in his hands. That was his spiteful thought. A report to the Head—and instant expulsion from the school for the unlucky prefect—and Horace Ratcliff would have been very satisfied indeed.

"Time!"

The first round was over. Darrel retired to his corner of the ring, and allowed his second to fan his heated face. He glanced over the sea of faces, over the keenly interested crowd. It was quite by chance that his eyes fell upon a thin, hard face looking from a box, with gaze intent upon him.

He started violently.

For a moment the colour wavered in his cheek, and he stood quite unsteadily. Mr. Stoker made an involuntary step towards him.

"Anything wrong, kid?"

Darrel pulled himself together. In that moment his eyes had met Mr. Ratcliff's, and he knew that the Housemaster recognised him.

But it was evidently not Mr. Ratcliff's intention to interfere with the fight. He had no authority over a School House prefect; and it would have been scarcely safe for him to step between that rough audience and their entertainment. That was not Mr. Ratcliff's idea at all. He settled down in his box to watch with a terrible smile upon his lips. He held the fate of the boy he hated, now, in the hollow of his hand, and there was no mercy in his hard heart.

"All right!" said Darrel, in response to Mr. Stoker's anxious call.

He did not tell the pugilist of his discovery. It was too late to be of any use. He had been seen boxing there in public, and he was at the Housemaster's mercy. And he would not spoil Mr. Stoker's show at the last moment. Matters would not be any worse if he finished the fight. That much good he could do, at all events; and then he could go home to St. Jim's and face the music. There was no need for Stoker to be distressed about the matter. He could do nothing.

And Darrel, holding himself with an iron hand, stepped forward at the call of time, and faced Herbert Stoker for the second round, as coolly and composedly as if he had not been under the gloating eyes of his enemy.

CHAPTER 15.

Mr. Ratcliff Makes Terms.

"BRAVO!"

"Good man!"

"Well done, the Bantam!"

Round after round had been fought out, and the audience were growing enthusiastic. Mr. Ratcliff watched the fight in silence from his box, with a grim smile on his thin lips. He was happy. He had given up the hope of catching Mr. Stoker out on a legal point.

Mr. Ratcliff could regard the boxing contest as a prize-fight if he chose, but the law would not so regard it, and he was helpless in that direction. But he felt that his visit to Wayland Hall was well repaid. One whom he disliked much more than he disliked Stoker of the Fifth—one who had coolly defied him—one who had shown open contempt for him—was at his mercy. That was more than enough to make Mr. Ratcliff feel that his money and his time had been well spent.

Darrel was putting up a splendid fight. As if to show the spying master that he cared nothing for him, he was fighting his very best, with cool disregard of the gloating eyes that watched him. Round after round, and the audience cheered and yelled. They favoured the Bantam now, as they called him, little dreaming that the boyish champion was a prefect of a public school a few miles away.

Ten rounds had been fought out, and a good deal of punishment had been given and received, though the gloves kept down the marks of it. As Darrel's face still wore the marks of his former combat with Mr. Stoker, the punishment he received made little difference to his appearance.

He was still going strong after ten rounds. The fight was to be to fifteen rounds, or to a finish; and it looked as if Mr. Stoker would be finished first.

Not that Mr. Stoker minded. He was only keen on giving his audience a first-class boxing-show; and he was assuredly doing that.

Twelve rounds—thirteen; and Mr. Stoker looked very groggy indeed as he stepped up at the call of time for the fourteenth.

Bump!

Mr. Stoker was down, and the referee began to count. The audience hung breathless on the counting.

"One—two—three—four—five—six—seven—eight—nine—out!"

Mr. Stoker had not risen.

There was a thunderous burst of cheering. Mr. Stoker's second raised him, and helped him out of the ring. Darrel retired, with the cheers of the enthusiastic onlookers ringing in his ears. He had done well. In the dressing-room, Herbert Stoker, looking already somewhat recovered, gripped his hand warily.

"Your fight!" he said. "And a splendid fight, too! I could have got up, but I'd had enough. I've given them good enough value for their money—what? But you'd have knocked me out in the next round. It was your fight. And here's something for you to put in your pocket."

Darrel smiled a little bitterly as he took the four five-pound notes. He had fairly earned them, and now he could send that subscription he longed to send, for the benefit of an old friend in distress. But he had paid dearly for it. He had not the slightest doubt that Mr. Ratcliff would return directly to St. Jim's with a report to the Head; and the prefect pugilist would be called into Dr. Holmes's presence the moment he reached the school.

He did not say so to Mr. Stoker. It was no use distressing him. He rubbed down, and bathed his face, and changed into his own clothes, stuffing the banknotes into his pocket.

Mr. Stoker had changed too. He was feeling extremely cheerful.

"You're not walking back to the school," he remarked. "I'm going to drive you there. I've ordered a taxi, and I'll see you to the gates, or nearly. No good being seen together, of course."

Darrel nodded, and they left by the stage-door together, and stepped into the taxi.

Darrel was silent as the taxicab buzzed away through the night.

His thoughts were very painful ones. He was going back to be "sacked," there was not much doubt about that. Mr. Ratcliff had gone home, doubtless, by train, but he would have to walk from Rylcombe; in the taxi, Darrel would be home first. But the Housemaster would not be long after him. It would be impossible for the prefect to deny an accusation that was true. That night would probably be the last he would ever spend under the old roof of St. Jim's.

"Fagged a bit, I s'pose?" said Mr. Stoker, who was far from understanding the cause of Darrel's silence. "Naturally, old chap! You get used to it in time, of course. I shall be as right as rain to-morrow. Well, here I'd better leave you; no need to let the taximan know where you're going."

The taxicab stopped in Rylcombe Lane, half-way between the village and the school. Darrel stepped out.

He shook hands warmly enough with Mr. Stoker. The old boy had, unintentionally, landed him into fearful trouble; but it was not Stoker's fault. The taxicab turned back, and Darrel, instead of walking on to the school, leaned upon the stile to think. His head was still buzzing from the fight at the Ring, but the cool night air was refreshing, and he leaned on the stile, trying to think over what he should do. What could he do? His fate was in Horace Ratcliff's hands, and Horace Ratcliff would have no mercy.

He had done no wrong. But there was only one view the Head could take of the matter, and he was certain to take it.

"It's all up," muttered Darrel miserably; "all up! It's good-bye to St. Jim's. I suppose I've been a fool—a dashed fool! But who'd have expected to see that cad there? What did he come there for? What utterly rotten luck!"

There was a step in the lane. An angular form loomed up in the starlight. It was Mr. Ratcliff, walking home from the station. He paused as he saw Darrel, upon whose pale and troubled face the clear starlight fell.

"Ah, you are here!" said Mr. Ratcliff, in an acid voice. "I thought I should be in first. However, it does not matter. You may accompany me to the Head, and hear what I have to report to him."

"You intend to report me, sir?" asked Darrell, in a low voice.

"Can you ask?"

"Considering that I have done no harm, and that I defended you the other day when you needed defence, it is not much to ask."

"I cannot allow considerations of that kind to interfere with my duty," said Mr. Ratcliff loftily. "I shall decidedly

report you, and I have not the slightest doubt that you will be expelled from the school. My opinion is that you thoroughly deserve it. Don't ask me to conceal your flagrant wrongdoing. I refuse."

Darrel raised his head proudly.

"I have done no wrong," he said. "I have broken rules, that is all, and not for a bad motive. And I ask no favours at your hands, Mr. Ratcliff."

"Follow me!" said the Housemaster harshly.

"By gum!" exclaimed a voice. "By gum! Ratty! Ratty, by the thumping gum!"

Mr. Ratcliff jumped.

From the shadows came the stocky figure of Mr. Stoker, striding towards him. The Housemaster would have fled, but a hand of iron dropped upon his shoulder.

"No, you don't," said Mr. Stoker pleasantly. "No, you don't, my pippin! Blessed if I didn't think it was you when I passed you in the taxi. And I stopped, my dear sir, and ran back to see whether I was mistaken. And I wasn't mistaken; it's my dear old Housemaster Ratty, all ready to take the licking I owe him!"

And the old boy of St. Jim's grinned gleefully.

Mr. Ratcliff turned almost faint.

"If—if you dare to touch me—" he faltered.

Mr. Stoker glanced at Darrel. He had not expected to see him there.

"Hallo, young 'un!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing out of school this time of night? You buzz off to bed!"

Darrel smiled. He understood Mr. Stoker's intention.

"It's no use, Stoker," he said. "Mr. Ratcliff knows that I was at the Ring to-night, and he's going to report me to the Head and get me sacked. It can't be helped."

Mr. Stoker looked utterly dismayed.

"Oh, by gum!" he muttered.

Darrel turned to go. Mr. Ratcliff uttered a cry.

"Darrel! Darrel! Don't go! Darrel, I forbid you to leave me here alone with this—this ruffian!"

Darrel turned round and faced the New House master with a bitter smile upon his lips.

"I shall not stay," he said. "You are going to report me to Dr. Holmes for fighting with Mr. Stoker at the Wayland Hall. Now you ask me to fight him again, in your defence. I shall not lift a finger for you!"

"Darrel—"

"Good-night, sir!"

Darrel strode away.

"Now, Ratty," said Mr. Stoker between his teeth, his eyes blazing as he looked at the cowering, shrinking Housemaster. "Now, you rat—now, you cur, you're going through it! You dirty spy, you've been spying on a lad who's worth fifty of you, and you're going to get him sacked—same as you'd have got me sacked, if you could, when I was at St. Jim's. By gum, I'll make you wriggle for it! It's a licking this—not a caning, Ratty. You're going through it, and if your Headmaster knows you when I've finished with you it will be surprising!"

And Mr. Stoker clenched his thick fists, evidently fully intending to carry out his threat. Mr. Ratcliff felt sick with fear.

"Darrel!" he shrieked. "Darrel! Come back! Help—help! Darrel, I promise you that I will not make that report. I—I will be silent. Darrel, help me!"

Mr. Stoker paused, stopping his heavy fist just in time from a blow that would have knocked Mr. Ratcliff into a cocked hat. It was only just in time.

"By gum!" said the pugilist. "By gum, you've thought of a way of saving your skin, Ratty, cunning hound that you are, and always were!"

"I—I—I—"

"Darrel," roared Mr. Stoker, "come back!"

The athletic form of the prefect came striding back through the shadows. He had heard the Housemaster's despairing call, and there was a new hope in his breast. Mr. Ratcliff fixed a haggard look upon the prefect's face.

"Darrel, I entreat you—"

Darrel interrupted him.

"You do not deserve that I should raise a finger in your defence, Mr. Ratcliff. You intend to ruin me, who have done you no harm. You seek to be revenged upon me, after I defended you from what was, after all, a just punishment. I will not raise a finger in your defence now. Look after yourself, as I must do when you betray me."

Mr. Ratcliff gasped.

"Darrel, I—I will withhold that report. I shall not speak to the Head. Save me from this brutal ruffian, and I give you my word of honour that the matter shall be buried in oblivion."

Darrel looked at him searchingly.

"You mean that, sir?"

(Continued on col. 2, page iii of cover.)

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NEXT WEDNESDAY—**"THE SECRET COMMITTEE!"**

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

OUR GRAND NEW WAR SERIAL.



READ THIS FIRST.

Paul Satorys, the rightful heir to the throne of Istan, lives quietly in England as a private gentleman until he hears that his place in Istan has been usurped by an adventurer named Jem Stanton, who is the exact double of Satorys. Worse than this, Stanton has deceived Grace Lang, Satorys' fiancée, out to Istan with him. Grace, however, discovers the deception and escapes from the usurper. She falls into the hands of a tribe of natives, who make her their queen, and call her Nada. Satorys himself is subsequently captured by the natives and brought before the queen, who, however, he does not recognise owing to her veil. Nada offers to help him, and Paul leads her native troops against Istan. He is defeated, however, but saves himself by donning the uniform of an Istan officer, and mixing with the Istan Army. With his faithful followers, Peter Mardyke and Anton, he enters the city, and gets into conversation with an Istan officer. He learns that Germany has declared war on England, and that the troops of Istan are going to England to help the German invading forces. Paul Satorys, with Peter Mardyke and Anton, succeed in reaching England with the Istan troops undetected, but immediately they land they escape to warn the English general. But General Sumers, in command of the British forces, decides to push forward, and at Evesham the first great battle takes place. Paul, with his companions, are in the front rank, when the order is given to charge. Despite the raking fire of the invaders, the men succeed in getting at the Germans, and a terrible hand-to-hand fight begins.

(Now go on with the story.)

A Last Hope!

A crash, and the British were through the German lines, bayoneting the gunners as they stood to their guns, bearing all before them, a small force now, decimated, mown down, the slopes behind them thick with dead.

Brilliant it was, a charge which stood out in the long history of the campaign, a proof that Britons were of the same blood, the same grit, as the dauntless heroes of the old past. But it could not prevail, and the thin line of khaki-clad warriors was enveloped in the hordes of the foe, swallowed up, swept aside, as the Germans rushed up their reserves.

Night was falling then. The desperate fight had spread over miles of country; and the enemy, confident in the success of their advance, was drawing in, ready for the morning fight, their scouts and skirmishers bringing word that the main body of the British were reforming behind the town of Evesham.

The charge was magnificent, but it had failed; and Satorys, who had dropped, wounded, amidst a clump of trees, knew that such was the case even before he heard Peter speaking to him.

It was long afterwards.

"I thought I should never find you, sir. Yes, Mr. Anton is here all right, and I have been hearing things from one of these chaps as to the next move. Seems that the Istan fellows are making a forced march on here to help."

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A Bid for a Throne.

A Thrilling War Story.

By CLIVE R. FENN.

Satorys staggered to his feet. It was all dark, but a mile away, through the trees, he saw the gleam of watch-fires—the watch-fires of the enemy. Peter had turned away into the smother of the confused darkness.

There was a sigh, and Satorys realised, in a misty way, that somebody was dying there in the shade of the trees, and that the sailor had spoken, and was now turning away.

Then Anton was at his side. Peter joined them. "Istan is close, sir," he said, "and it means the wiping out of our fellows now, mere weight of numbers."

Satorys drew himself up. His weakness left him, and he hastily bandaged the sabre cut he had received. He was thinking of the houses riddled with shot, of the piteous plight of the women and children of the dear old land. The Istan Army was close, and it came to him as he took a step forward to the edge of the wood that there was still a chance. That which had seemed impossible before was easy now—a supreme appeal to his fellow countrymen, a wild attempt to seize the leadership of the force which had been brought from the south, so that Istan might fight for England and the right.

He held out his hand to Peter and to Anton.

"I am going to try for it," he said. "It seemed impossible before; but it is the only chance, and I am content to go alone."

There was an angry splutter from Peter, and Anton muttered something under his breath.

"You will come with me?"

"I sort of fancy we might," said the sailor.

The three set off into the darkness—three men determined to do something for the distressed country which they loved.

The Istan Rally.

Peter had gathered something which was of the utmost value from the German soldier whom he had helped in his last moments, and the sailor led the way. Their progress was easier than might have been anticipated, for the enemy possessed all the country to the south.

The Istan lines were distant, and two days later Satorys was gliding onward, followed by Peter and Anton, gaining at last the centre of the Istan camp. They still wore the old uniform of the Istan levies, and, mingling with the crowd of soldiers, they were not noticed, and were able to reach the Royal tent.

Never had Satorys been so thankful for something that had happened the night before the departure from Istan City, for he had been instrumental in saving Stanton from an assassin, and the false King had shown the man who was known as Captain Villars special favour. It was for this reason that Satorys managed to gain an interview that night with the pseudo king.

Stanton was seated at his ease when the orderly officer ushered in Satorys, while Anton and Peter stood outside the tent, waiting for their leader's call.

"Ah, Villars, I had been asking for you. All goes well. I shall return to Istan as a conqueror. That will settle the malcontents. Our advance is for the morrow. Our arrival has settled everything, and the British will be swept up to the northern mountains like the rabble that they

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are! But why do you not speak? What's the matter with you?"

Satorys took a step forward, his hand on his sword. He knew but too well that his life hung by a thread, that Stanton would summon the guard, and order him out to instant execution, but he did not hesitate. Stanton looked up once more. There was something in the face of Satorys which caused him fear.

That which might have been read in the look of the rightful King of Istan was sorrow for the condition of the country he loved, even as well as he did his own land far away.

"You have been on patrol duty?"

"Yes, sire."

"Have you any news to impart?" asked Stanton testily.

"Yes, sire, much news."

"It seems that the British were defeated in the engagement of to-day? Is that so?"

"They were checked," said Satorys.

"Checked! I understood it was more than that. England is down, and my army, the firm ally of the great Emperor of Germany, will complete the work. The British Empire is doomed. It will no longer be a menace to the world. Nothing can restore it to its former place. This poor island will be the appanage of Germany, and the vast colonies will become the property of the Emperor, who is the mightiest monarch in the world, he who is my good friend."

Satorys was determined to make a last effort. Outside the tent he heard the guards tramping up and down. The moment was fraught with consequences which he knew would react for many long years to come.

"I wished to ask you, sire," he said, "you who have become King of Istan, whether you do not owe something to Britain, whether it would not be a wise and a good thing to disavow this German alliance while there is yet time, and place the forces of Istan at the disposition of the English King?"

Stanton burst out laughing.

"You are mad, my poor Villars," he said mockingly. "I am here as the ally of the German Emperor, who has honoured me with his friendship, and I hate England. I would see her in the dust, her cities pillaged by her enemies, her sons slaves, her land swept with fire and sword. But, there, I will not argue with you. You are unwise to talk to me like this. My policy is formed."

Satorys advanced a step nearer to the King.

The latter looked up.

"Well, Villars," he said, in a jerky tone, "what's wrong?"

"You do not know me?"

Satorys advanced to within a couple of paces of the King, who started up, and then dropped back, his face blanching as he tried to reach the handbell on the table. Satorys seized the bell, and dropped it on the rug without a sound.

"Move, speak, and you die," he said. "You do not know me. You shall have your ignorance enlightened. I am the King of the Istan!" Satorys' sword-point was within a foot of the King. "I am here to prevent this conspiracy being carried further."

"Paul Satorys!" murmured Stanton, as he cowered back.

"Paul Satorys who died!"

"I am Paul Satorys, but I am not back from the dead."

There was a quick step behind. Anton and Peter stood there. Stanton had drawn his sword. He had risen to his feet, but there was no fight in him, and as Satorys drove him back, he sank down again.

The next moment he was seized and disarmed, and Peter had drawn a gag across his face, and was pinioning his arms. From outside came the tramp of the guard. There was a murmur of voices. Satorys gave his orders, and assisted in their carrying out.

"Into that inner room!" he said. "Quick! Now, his sash! No time for the uniform."

Stanton, helpless and trembling, was taken into the inner tent, and thrown on the ground. Satorys darted back into the main tent. He was wearing the Royal insignia, and Peter and Anton were at his side.

It was only a minute—a period which seemed an age.

"That's all right now, sir. There's somebody coming. You say right out that you are the King."

There was the challenge of the guard outside. Peter and Anton, thanks to instructions from their chief, had managed to pass the sentries, and two of the foreign officers entered the tent, to see Satorys standing there in the place of the King.

"Captain Villars, you!" cried one of the new-comers.

Satorys nodded.

"It is so, messieurs," he said. "You have sworn fealty to the King of Istan. Then I am he. You can serve me, for it is I who am the rightful King."

"This is some absurd play-acting!" cried one of the officers angrily. "Where is the King?"

The speaker stepped forward.

"At your peril!" cried Satorys. "I am the King, and I command you to obey me."

"At a time like this, sir, you attempt to joke. Again I ask, where is the King. Answer me. I will know! Then you can consider yourself under arrest. Has his Majesty ridden out? There are important despatches just come. We advance at once."

Satorys stood firm, his sword held ready, and Peter and Anton were on guard.

The officers drew back. It was foul play, they knew now, and one swung about uttering a sharp order, an order which resulted in several more of the foreign officers hurrying into the tent.

"The King! Where is the King?" came furiously.

Satorys saw only strangers to Istan before him, none of the men who belonged to the country, and he remembered then at that second, as the hostile group came towards him sword in hand, that all depended on success, the salvation of England probably. For it was in him, he felt, to turn the army and bring it into action as the staunch ally of Britain.

"Back!" he roared.

His sword flashed, and with a deft turn of his wrist he had sent the weapon of the foremost flying.

"Treachery!" shouted one of the others. "This fool says he is the King."

There was a rush, a savage onslaught, and Peter threw himself into the thick of the fray. It was an affair of seconds. Satorys' opponent was driven to his knees, another lay dead, a third staggered back wounded fatally, and as the guard rushed in, it was to see Paul Satorys, grim of visage, advancing to the entrance of the tent, followed by Peter and Anton.

There were those among the fresh-comers who had no question as to the right of the man who had been received as King. There were others who despised Stanton, and would have been glad to see his downfall.

"Go for them, sir!" cried Peter. "Now's the time."

Satorys needed no urging. Ahead of him, as he stood in the tent doorway, he saw a scene of wild excitement, for the news was flying from mouth to mouth that something sensational had occurred. The guard which had dashed up to discover what was wrong stood with loaded rifles, heedless now of the shouted order from one of the officers to arrest Satorys. Behind the guard were others of the soldiers, men born and bred in Istan, men who had followed Stanton automatically just because their orders were given to them, but who had never seen in him anything else than an interloper, rightful King or no, a leader who did not really lead, an individual who had no magnetic personality to command respect and admiration or the ability to win the liking of his people.

"Arrest the traitor!" sounded now as the crowd increased; and men, stern of mien, were seen gazing at the figure of Satorys, who faced them all.

"If we have to fight our way through, sir, you can rely on its being done all right," said Peter.

Satorys nodded his head. The tumult was momentarily increasing, and he saw hundreds and hundreds of the soldiers pressing forward till the open space in front of the Royal tent was choked with men.

And behind these men lay the country which was already under the yoke of the invader. The thought seemed to be a spur to Satorys.

"Death to the traitor!" rang forth again.

There was an ominous movement on the part of the hemmed-in guardsmen, who alone at that vital time represented discipline.

"No, I am no traitor!" roared out Satorys, as he waved his sword above his head. "Soldiers of Istan," he continued, his voice ringing through the night—"soldiers of Istan, you have been betrayed. I am Paul Satorys, your rightful King. I claim your allegiance here and now."

A low, angry murmur followed.

"Soldiers of Istan," cried Satorys once more, "we have been betrayed by our enemies. You, the warriors of our beloved country, have been brought to England to do work which will revolt the world. For England has in the old past always stood our friend, and now that she lies wounded are the men of Istan to turn against her?"

He paused. There was no low murmur now. The guard had grounded arms. A strange hush had come over the throng of soldiers, and here and there was a whisper of admiration. It was Peter who said "Hear, hear!" and even at that time of poignant crisis, when the fate of the daring venture hung in the balance, Satorys smiled. Peter brought things back to the everyday.

"That man was no King," shouted Satorys, his voice carrying over the heads of his immediate listeners to the tents beyond, from which soldiers were pouring in a ceaseless stream. "He was no King. I am the King. I was tricked, imprisoned by the plottings of that man. It was I who came out to Istan to find myself a stranger, an exile in my own

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land. It was I who tried to destroy the tyrant by leading the blacks against him, and now I ask you to decide."

They were kindly words. The other had never addressed himself to the soldiers like this, never made a strong appeal, and the magnetism of the words ran through the multitude. There was a cheer. This must be the King. He acted like a king, and Satorys realised, as the guard formed up and constituted themselves a protection between him and anyone who might be disposed to oppose him, that the day, or, rather, the night, was won.

He spoke again, advancing a few steps beyond the tent. He was speaking in the musical tongue of Istan now, speaking of the past, of the country which was his and which he loved, and as he uttered words which went to the hearts of his hearers there broke forth a mighty cheer, the soldiers flinging their caps in the air, and sending up a shout which proved to Satorys that he had not waited in vain.

He stood there by the side of Anton, who, ever watchful and vigilant, had kept close.

"Where's Peter?" asked Satorys.

Anton shook his head.

Just then Peter glided forward to the spot where Satorys was standing talking to some of the officers, who were telling their new leader that he had their service and their lives at his disposal.

"It's all very well, sir," said Peter, in a low tone, "but the trouble isn't over yet. That fellow has broken his bonds and gone."

The Escape of Stanton—The Plight of England—The Istan Army to the Rescue.

Satorys knew well enough—none better—that the position was full of peril. The Army had looked to Stanton as its chief. It knew nothing of this new-comer, albeit he bore such a startling likeness to the vanished leader.

Stanton had gone. He saw the game was up, and his coward heart urged him to flee. He felt that all would be against him now, and, accompanied by a few adherents, he got away from the camp, the one idea in his mind being to get back to Istan and try to secure himself there. He was one of those who heard the impassioned words of Satorys to the troops. He saw the wavering on the part of the men, and then he fled.

Peter was standing by Satorys.

"That's fine, sir," he cried. "Give them poor parsleys, sir, and it will be all right, you'll see."

Peter probably meant pour parlers. But Satorys understood, and a minute later he felt that his cause was gained.

An officer in high command hurried up to the new king.

"Is this right, sir?" he asked excitedly. "It is the old story, and I had always doubted it, but you—there can be no mistake."

Before Satorys could reply the new-comer had swung round on the multitude surrounding the Royal tent.

"Soldiers of Istan," he cried, "this gentleman is indeed our king! We have been betrayed, misled! The truth has come at last!"

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It was a strange and moving scene. Satorys advanced, and those who had seemed to be hostile to him drew back.

A wild scene, a brilliant and moving scene. For the moment the fate of Satorys hung in the balance. There were many present ready to doubt, but the commanding words of the rightful ruler of Istan struck home. The guards round the tent began to cheer, and the cheering was taken up by those behind:

"Long live the king!"

The cry rolled up to where Satorys stood, and he struggled to say a few words, but they were lost in the frenzied shouts around.

Meanwhile Stanton, seeing how matters had turned, realising that his cause was lost indeed, had managed to get a horse, and was riding for life to the north, intending to gain the headquarters of the Army of Luthia, which was in full occupation of the country south of the Thames.

Contrary to his fears, he was not pursued. Satorys was taking counsel with the chiefs of the Istan Expeditionary Force at the very moment that the man who usurped the functions of royalty was galloping into the German lines, where he made his story known.

He dismounted, and was led to the headquarters of the commander-in-chief. The latter stared at his visitor. Stanton had collapsed in his seat.

"You tell me that you have left your army, sir—that you are a fugitive? But this cannot be. You are the king?"

Stanton nodded, but he saw doubt in the other's face.

"But the Istan Army will march with us? It is our ally? This revolt against your authority will be put down?"

Stanton rose to his feet.

"Satorys is a friend of England!" he said bitterly.

The Luthian generalissimo gave a start, and his brow darkened.

"Satorys!" he cried. "You give that name to this adventurer who has driven you out? Then you are not the rightful king!"

Stanton drew back, fear in his face. It was lucky for him at that moment that the other turned away to speak to an aide-de-camp who entered the tent. Stanton took advantage of the other's attention being distracted to slip away. He was outside the tent, hastening through the darkness, hoping that he might get away. The game was up—for the time.

It was in Istan only that lay his one hope. There he still had adherents, foreign mercenaries who would stand true to him, and his one chance lay in returning there. England was in trouble, but one day it might recover, and Stanton knew that the law never forgot, that though organised government had for the time being vanished, there was still for him the peril of capture as one who had offended the law.

He managed to glide out of the German lines, and then followed days of hiding, tramping through the ruined country to the coast. Once there, the money he had on him served him in good stead, for he was able to get a passage on a steamer whose captain was taking all risks and making ready to start for the west, despite the danger to shipping on the high seas now that the British Navy had been temporarily dispersed.

At the moment Stanton was hastening out of the German camp Satorys was busy with his commanders forming a plan of campaign.

"We are here to fight for England," he said firmly. "This alliance with Germany is no affair of mine."

In the few hours before the dawn he grasped what had happened, and the pitiful plight of the country, thanks to shortsighted counsels and the misleading impression that Britain was safe from conquest. The Fleet had been sent south under false orders. The country had been taken by surprise.

Peter was permitted to remain at his master's side during the conference, but the old sailor was strangely silent. He nodded his head as he stood stiffly by the door, and the various commanding officers, who were informing their new chief of the exact situation of affairs, ignored Peter entirely. "This is my will," said Satorys firmly. "I am the ally of England, and the army will follow me."

"To a man, sir," said one of the officers.

There was an interruption at that moment. A messenger had ridden in with despatches from the German camp. Satorys took the papers, read them, and then gazed sternly at the bearer.

"You will tell the German commander-in-chief," he said, "that Istan is henceforth the friend of England, and fights for her."

The courier was about to speak, but one of the officers touched him on the shoulder, and the man swung round and hastened away.

"You did it fine, sir," said Peter.

(Continued on page iii. of cover.)

A BID FOR A THRONE.

(Continued from page 24.)

It was an hour later. Broad day now, and the troops were already on the move, friends of England, though as yet the saddened country knew nothing of the volte face in the policy which had brought a strong Army Corps from Istanbul to Great Britain.

"What did I do that was fine, Peter?" asked Satorys, as he lit a cigarette.

"Why, told off that messenger chap, sir. His face was a study. He looked as though the world were coming to an end."

Satorys clapped the sailor on the shoulder, and Peter opened his lips to speak, but evidently thought better of it, for he was silent. Yet he longed to tell his master what was really happening down in Istanbul; but he remembered his solemn word to Nada, and refrained.

And during the time that followed there was but little time for such ideas. Satorys had the benefit of good military advice, and his own knowledge was not insignificant. He found the country a desert, all signs of law and order, of civilisation even, having been swept away, and the German armies shut off the Istanbul host from the north, where the leaders who were left in the land were retreating and forming new levies to meet the invader.

The Istanbul Army advanced to find bridges blown up. These were repaired sufficiently to continue the advance, and the German force was met, the outposts being driven in, and Satorys pressing forward with his legions, to find that the enemy would not give battle, but was only minded to draw him further into the country.

Southward there was nothing. Satorys went forward, his force spreading fanlike across the country, and his officers looking eagerly for the chance to open up communications with the British Army—the new force which had risen, so it was said, from the ashes of the old—and act in concert. But the means of doing this did not exist. Germany had swooped when England was asleep, and the whole country had been swept clean.

"It beats me, sir, it really does," said Peter, as he rode by the side of Satorys into the new camp. "Folks in this country always pretended that it wasn't worth while learning to fight, left the job to better men than themselves, and now look at it. Not worth while fighting for their lives and liberties, and their homes, and now it comes home to them that invasion really means—no more freedom, the soldiers ordering them round, treating them like slaves, or rather like famished dogs who are there to be kicked with muddy boots, everything plundered, and taken away or burnt, and men who thought themselves darned proud made to stand by while their wives and daughters are running round at the order of the foreigners, and all because people were too lazy and ignorant to learn how to fight and manage a rifle."

"Yes; it will wake them up, having their feet put in the fire until they tell where their savings are, flogged if they won't work on the fortifications for a mere ration, if even that; tongues amputated, scragged, tortured if they show fight. That's what it means. Doesn't it make you think, sir?"

There was a nod from Satorys, and he reined in as an orderly trotted up and saluted.

"A man just come in, sir," said the orderly. "Says he comes from the British force, had a struggle to get through."

"I will see him," said Satorys.

A few minutes later Satorys was standing amidst his officers, and the messenger was led forward. The man was a captain of the Lüne, that was evident, though his uniform was in rags.

"You have news, sir?" said Satorys.

The next second he had dashed forward and seized the man's arm, and was holding a flask to his lips.

"Thanks, sir. You are Paul Satorys, King of Istanbul?"

"Thought I shouldn't get through. Wonderful to be here!"

He clapped his hand to his left arm, which hung at his side.

"We heard the news—heard that Istanbul was for us, and it is so, well, there isn't any time to lose. They have been pressing us hard for days now, and the men do their best, but Germany is hemming us in. His Majesty is there—the captain made a gesture towards the north—" taking his chance with the rest, and they talk of the Army from India. Then came your news, and I was told off to get to you and explain."

"We are going to help," said Satorys. "We are going to fight for your King. I have already given the order for advance."

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THE FIGHTING PREFECT!

(Continued from page 21.)

"On my honour!"

"I will take your word, sir," Darrel turned to Stoker. "Stoker, old man, it can't be done. You must let him alone. If he acts like a decent man, it's my duty to defend him, as it was before. Don't let's quarrel."

Mr. Stoker laughed.

"Wasn't he always a cunning hound, by gum?" he said. "He's wriggled out of it, the rat! I've fought you twice, Darrel, my infant, and I'm not looking for a third licking. Take the rotter home! He's safe from me, so long as he keeps his word to you. But let him break his word"—the expression upon Mr. Stoker's face as he said this was simply terrifying, and it made the New House master shrink away from him with a gasp of terror—"let him break his word—and he's none too good to do that—let him break it, and I'll come to him and smash him up, if I have to look for him in his Form-room at St. Jim's, and if I get a stretch of three months' hard afterwards! Mind that, Ratty—mind it! You've learned already that I'm a man of my word. I've remembered you for ten years—to lick you! For that kid's sake I'll let you off, if you keep your word. Break it, and I'll smash you so that you'll never walk on two legs again!"

In his excitement, Mr. Stoker came closer to the Housemaster, shaking his fists, and Mr. Ratcliff dodged behind Darrel, almost out of his wits with terror.

"Keep him off, Darrel—keep him off!" he panted.

"I'm not touching you," said Mr. Stoker, calming down. "But, remember, I shall know if you've broken your word, and if you do look out for squalls, by gum! Good-night, Darrel—good-night and good luck!"

Darrel shook hands with the pugilist, and they parted. Mr. Stoker strode away towards the taxi-cab waiting down the lane, Darrel and Mr. Ratcliff walked towards St. Jim's. They walked on in silence, Mr. Ratcliff's heart full of hatred and all uncharitableness, but terror predominating. He did not feel safe till he was within the walls of St. Jim's, and a locked gate was between him and the old boy. Then, without a word to Darrel, he crossed the dark quadrangle to his own House.

Darrel drew a deep, deep breath. He had feared that Mr. Ratcliff's word of honour was but a rotten reed to lean upon, backed up as it was by Mr. Stoker's truculent threat. But the Housemaster did not go towards the Head's house, and Darrel's heart beat more lightly. Mr. Ratcliff disappeared into the New House, and Darrel went on his way to his quarters with a lighter heart.

Tom Merry & Co. observed the next day that there was a cloud upon Darrel's brow. They were much interested in Darrel, and they wondered what was the matter, but they were far from guessing.

Darrel was wondering whether Mr. Ratcliff would keep his word.

Mr. Ratcliff did keep it. Whether his sense of honour was acute enough to keep him from breaking it—whether he had a natural repugnance to telling the Head that he was disregarding a solemn promise—which would certainly not have increased the Head's good opinion of him—or whether he feared the fulfilment of Mr. Stoker's terrific threats if he betrayed Darrel, whatever his motive, he kept his word. Probably his motives were mixed, and altogether they were strong enough to keep his tongue silent.

The next day the twenty pounds was despatched to the fund anonymously, and Darrel's handsome face wore a smile as he came back very cheerfully from the post-office.

Mr. Stoker rang him up that day to ask whether it was "all O.K.," and Darrel replied cheerfully that it was ripping, much to the satisfaction of the old boy.

"Dawwel's quite his old self again," Arthur Augustus D'Arcy remarked to his chums that evening in the junior Common-room. "I was afraid that that awful wottah Watty had got a down on him somehow; but it seems all right!"

"I wonder if we shall ever see Stoker of the Fifth again," Tom Merry remarked regretfully. "It seems a thousand pities that he didn't get a chance of giving Ratty that licking before he left Wayland. I suppose he'll never come and do it now."

Tom Merry was right, he never did; but the juniors never guessed that Mr. Ratcliff had been let off the long-promised licking because he was keeping Darrel's secret, the secret of the Fighting Prefect.

THE END.

(Another grand, long complete tale of the Chums of St. Jim's next Wednesday, entitled "The Secret Committee," by Martin Clifford. Order in advance. Price One Penny, as usual.)

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Our Weekly Prize Page.

LOOK OUT FOR YOUR WINNING STORYETTE

KNOTTY PROBLEMS.

"Pa," said little Bobby, who had been allowed to stay up a little late, on the grounds that he was not to ask foolish questions, "can you do everything?"

"Yes."

"Can you make a two-foot rule with only one end?"

"Shut up, and let your pa read!"

A short silence, then Bobby piped in:

"Can you make the clock strike less than one, pa?"

"Another question, and off you go to bed!"

Short silence again, then Bobby asked:

"Pa, can a camel go ten days without water?"

"Yes, boy."

"Well, how many days can it go with water?"

That did it.—Sent in by S. Dumont, Middlesbrough.

THEN HE WENT.

Visitor: "Is your clock right?"

Tired Hostess (at the end of her patience and politeness):

"Oh, no! That's the one we call 'The Visitor.'"

Visitor: "What a quaint name! Why?"

Hostess: "Because it doesn't go!"—Sent in by S. Harmston, Manchester.

NO PLACE LIKE HOME.

He was a German, speaking to an Englishman.

"Vrom Potsdammerberg I vos come, sir."

"A very fine place, sir," replied the Englishman.

"Der vos a petter."

"Yes! Berlin?"

"Nein, Ohm."

"Ohm? In—er—Germany, of course?"

"Donner und blitzen, nein! In England!"

"Ohm?" said the Englishman thoughtfully.

"Ja!" growled the German. "I vos come from Potsdammerberg to see Ohm. Der vos no place like Ohm. I vos at der concert in Berlin, and I hear der great English soprano sing dot der vos no place like Ohm, and all der English beebles in der concert gry like der leedle babies. Dot must be der wonderful place, Ohm, to make der English beebles gry, and I tell mineself dot I will go und see dis Ohm vot der vos no place like. Now, sir, vich is der vay to Ohm?"—Sent in by M. Dumont, Middlesbrough.

CAUGHT OUT!

A reporter was once sent to write up a fire which had occurred in a neighbouring village. Knocking at the door, he inquired for the lady of the house. The maid informed him she was out. The reporter then said:

"Are any of the family at home?"

"No, they are all out," came the reply.

"Well, wasn't there a fire here last night?" he inquired.

"Yes; but that's out, too," was the calm reply.—Sent in by S. Herbert, Colchester.

IN THE SAME BOAT.

Tramp: "Excuse me, sir, but I don't know where my next meal is coming from."

Gent: "Neither do I; I'm in a similar predicament. My cook left this morning, too!"—Sent in by W. Purvis, Manchester.

CRUSHED!

A well-dressed, portly man stood for several moments watching a brawny drayman who was laboriously tugging at a large, heavy box which seemed almost as wide as the doorway through which he was trying to move it. Presently the kindly-disposed onlooker approached the drayman, and said, with a patronising air:

"Like a lift, sir?"

"Bet your life!" the other replied.

For the next two minutes the two men on the opposite sides of the box worked, lifted, puffed, and squeezed, but it did not move an inch. Finally the portly man straightened up, and said, between his puffs:

"I don't believe we can get it in there!"

"Get it in there!" the drayman shouted. "Why, you idiot, I'm trying to get it out!"—Sent in by George Adair, Belfast.

"DRY" HUMOUR.

An Englishman was one day seated in a train at a station in Scotland, when a Scotsman rushed into the compartment, and breathlessly exclaimed:

"Ah, mon, Ah've lost ma luggage!"

The Englishman looked surprised.

"How did you happen to do that?" he asked.

"Ah," replied the Scotsman, "the cork came out!"—Sent in by K. E. Stainton, Sheffield.

A VEGETARIAN.

"This," said the showman, "is a fine specimen of a giraffe. Its diet is principally a vegetable one, carrots being a great delicacy."

"For goodness' sake, Bill," exclaimed a youth to a chum whose locks flamed like an Eastern sunset, "stand back a bit, or there's no telling what'll happen!"

"Very good advice, young man," said the showman, turning to the interrupter; "but have a care yourself; for I must tell you the animal is equally fond of greens!"—Sent in by Miss E. Meyer, Norwich.

"MARY HAD A LITTLE LAMB."

French:

La petite Marie had le jeune moutong,

Ze wool was blanc as ze snow,

And everywhere la petite Marie went

Le jeune moutong was zure to go.

Irish:

Begorra Mary had a little shape,

And the wool was white entoirely,

And whurriver Mary wud shtir her shtump,

The young shape wud follow compleatly.

German:

Dat Mary haf got ein leedle schaff,

Mit hair jost like some wool,

And all der place dot girl did vent

Das schaff go like ein fool.

—Sent in by W. G. Cox, Oxford.

MONEY PRIZES OFFERED.

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